

SHORT STORY

Postcards from A Stranger

MAHMUD RAHMAN

**Buffalo, NY**  
Dear Hyacinth,  
You left behind a book at the Firestone service station. I had your address in it.  
While waiting for my car, I read the first few pages. And I got hooked. I left town the next day, so I hope you don't mind that I 'borrowed' the book for my road trip. A 700 page novel, a road novel, should take care of some dead moments on this journey.  
In exchange, let me send you postcards from places I'm stopping along the way. This is the first one. So okay, Buffalo isn't a tourist mecca. You've probably seen a picture of a trolley car before. I promise to do better next time. Regards, Nadeem

**Niagara Falls** (the Canadian side)  
Felt awful about sending you the last card. Figure if I'm borrowing your book, I should at least send you something beautiful to look at. I hadn't planned on it, but I decided to stop at the Falls just so that I could pick up this card for you. Isn't that an awesome sight? You can almost feel the spray. It must still be hot back in New Bedford. Think cool thoughts. Nadeem

**Detroit, Michigan**  
I nearly got you another postcard of an urban streetcar. Here they call it the People Mover. It's an itty bitsy elevated train that just circles downtown. I knew I could do better than that. This one's from the Detroit Institute of Art. Diego Rivera was asked by Henry Ford to paint these murals around a courtyard, depicting scenes from the Rouge plant, once the largest auto factory in the world. They brought in iron ore, coal, sand, rubber, and humans and out the other end came a finished motor car. Don't know where they dumped the slag, but the human wreckage is visible all over this sad city.

**Cincinnati, Ohio**  
Got stuck in Detroit for a while. The car needed more repairs.

Someone told me I'd find a few weeks' work in Cincinnati.  
Fountain Square familiar to you? From how I remember seeing your face at the Firestone station, I think you're old enough to remember the opening scene from the TV show, WKRP in Cincinnati. I'm staying at a rooming house near downtown. I hadn't realized there are hills in the Midwest. I kinda like the feel of this place.

**Cincinnati**  
Still here. King's Island, the amusement park, seems to be a big thing out here. Hope you're enjoying the summer in your own way. Nadeem

**Still in Cincinnati**  
They have more malls here than any other place I've been. I guess there isn't that much to do around here.

**Cincinnati**  
Hey, I'm feeling guilty about taking your book. I should have left it at the service place, in case you came back looking for it. Now I've started writing in the margins, so it's already mutilated.

Tell you what, I'll send you a brand spanking new copy once I get to California. Right now, the money's still tight. Did I mention before that I'm headed for sunny California? You can have the ice and snow up in New England. I've had enough to last me a lifetime.

**Memphis, Tennessee**  
Picked up a traveling companion in Cincinnati. She's offered to share the driving and expenses. Her name's Sarah. She's cool, though she swears too much. But she has decent taste in music. We don't argue about the radio.

So what's the price of this trade? I have to stop in Memphis to visit Graceland. Sarah's an Elvis fan. And we have to go via New Orleans.

In case you're an Elvis fan too, here's a postcard from Graceland. (By the way, I don't care much for Elvis. Even if Johnny Trudell did call him America's Che. You may not know Trudell. He's Native American. Look up his CD

some time. The downtown library has a copy.)

**Natchez, Mississippi**  
It is hotter than Hell here. I don't know why I agreed to drive through the South in July! I hope the radiator doesn't blow. Sarah says we can afford to stop at motels with A/C that works.

We visited one of the riverboat casinos. We agreed to only spend a maximum of \$20 each. Then Sarah got into a winning streak and I got nervous every time she pulled the lever. I made \$40. Sarah lost \$500. She says not to worry, her cousin will put us up in New Orleans, so we won't really have lost anything. Scared, Nadeem

**Shreveport, Louisiana**  
The car overheated. Damn! More \$\$\$ down the drain.  
And Sarah disappeared. Left a goodbye note, saying she's going ahead on her own. Didn't want to burden me with the extra expense of carrying her along.

This place stinks from all the oil refineries. Couldn't get a decent postcard, so I'm sending you another picture of the Mississippi that I picked up in Natchez.  
In that book of yours I notice that you highlighted sections about Marie Laveau, "the voodoo queen of New Orleans." Are you into voodoo or something? Well, send me some good luck then. I sorely need some.

**New Orleans**  
Could have headed west towards Texas. And on to California. But thought to myself, I'm so close to New Orleans. And there were all these signs. Picking up Sarah (despite losing her) who wanted to stop there. The passage in the book that you highlighted about Marie Laveau. A blues tune came on the radio just as I was about to drive west. They all pointed me to New Orleans. So here I am.  
It is hotter than Hades over here. But I'm enjoying this city. It's not tourist season, so I found a cheap room for the week. Sweating, Nadeem.

**Biloxi, Mississippi**  
1 of 2  
Call me a stupid, stupid Fool. With a capital F. I don't know why I agreed again. But Sarah wanted me to drive her out here. She said more people win over here than anywhere else in the whole USA. She looked at me with those big, beautiful eyes of hers. Damn her eyes. I couldn't say no.  
Why am I writing you this? She had a wad of cash when we showed up at the casino. Where'd she get the cash from? She wouldn't tell me. I walked the



**New Orleans**  
Guess what? I ran into Sarah, and she insisted that I stay at her cousin's. The family's away, so there's plenty of room. She told me what happened. She was feeling awful guilty about how she let me down. (She's Catholic.) She ran into a man who claimed to be a music producer and offered her a ride to New Orleans. She made a trade. It didn't seem to bother her. (She's Catholic?) She went to confession as soon as she got here. (So she's Catholic.) Should it bother me? She doesn't mean anything to me.

Says she wants to go on with me to California.  
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**Dallas, Texas**  
Sarah did come along. Not much to report over here. We stopped at a water slide, just to cool off. We could drive straight out west from here, but Sarah says it might be more picturesque if we drive through Colorado. We have a new radiator, so there's no danger of the car overheating in the mountains. She convinced me.  
At least you ought to get some pretty postcards out of this.

**Kansas City**  
This place was on our way. Close enough. An old girlfriend

lives here. I knew her back east, but she returned home to raise her kids. When I called from the road, she offered to put us up. It wasn't a good idea.

Mindy and Sarah just did not get along. It might have been Sarah's admission, after four beers, that she'd picked up that wad of cash by turning tricks in New Orleans. She never told me that, so why'd she have to go and open up to Mindy? It was all downhill from there.

Why is Mindy acting so uptight now, anyway? It's not like she's had a squeaky clean past. But she's found religion again. (Yeah, Catholic again.)  
I keep reminding myself that Sarah's just a road companion. (In case you were wondering, we are just that, nothing more.)

**Georgetown, Colorado**  
Isn't this place pretty? I wish I'd had more time to spend out here. The air's crisp and cool. We needed the break from the heat. Loving it, Nadeem

**Vale, Colorado**  
Still here in the mountains. Sarah's fallen in love... with this place.  
We're having an argument. She wants us to drive to Vegas, then Los Angeles. San Francisco's more my kind of place. I'm also afraid to stop in Vegas. I might just lose her there. There's a hunger in her that both frightens me (so okay, it excites me too).

Why should I care? Probably because I need her money now to get to San Francisco.  
Whether we go to either end of California, we have to go through Nevada. Vegas or Reno, I know she's gonna blow her money again.

My map tells me that Reno's just a few hours from San Francisco, so what if she loses her cash? As long as I make sure there's enough money for that last day's gas, I am we're okay.

**Reno, Nevada**  
Our second day here. Sarah had a winning streak. I left her at a craps table while I wandered around. I found her at a bar

talking to a very pretty young woman. She didn't see me approach her. Sarah was asking the woman about wages and conditions at some "ranch" nearby. I left them alone and went up to the room.

When she returned, we had a huge fight. She wants to work here "for a while."  
She told me not to act like I'm her father. I said, "I'm not."

What am I to her? Why does it matter to me? Isn't she just a traveling companion? Confused, Nadeem.

**Oakland, California**  
Well, I made it! Sarah stayed behind in Reno.

I miss her. Was it just what they call Stockholm Syndrome? You spend so much time with someone that you get attached to them? Or was it that she had the prettiest eyes I've seen on a woman? Or was it that we had some adventures together and she made me laugh so hard I almost peed while I was driving?

This is a beautiful area. Very different from New England. The weather's strange. Every five miles it seems to be different. It gets cold at night, even in what's supposed to be summer. After the journey, I'm not complaining.

**Oakland**  
Sarah showed up! I'm staying with friends and I'd left her their address.

She says the whole point of coming out west was to start a new life. Reno would have meant staying at an old place in her life.

We're going to look for a place together. From the drive we know each other's habits good and bad and we get along fairly well.

Just roommates, that's what she says we'll be.  
I still can't read if she has any feelings for me. And I'm still confused about how I feel toward her. But I'm happy she's here with me.

**Oakland**  
Here's your book. A brand new copy. I did promise this, didn't I? Thanks for the loaner. Regards, Nadeem

Two weeks later, the book comes back. There is a letter inside the package.

Dear Mr. Nadeem,  
We are returning the book you sent in the mail to Miss Hyacinth Richards. We are also returning the postcards that you've been sending to her. We think we found all of them, though it is possible we may have misplaced one or two.

Miss Hyacinth doesn't live here anymore. She roomed with us for a few months last year when she first arrived from Jamaica. Unfortunately she left no forwarding address.

We have a confession to make. Although we realize that it is not polite to read other people's mail, we read the postcards you sent her. But we assure you that we only did so after discovering that you didn't know Miss Hyacinth.

We greatly enjoyed reading about your journey. We looked forward to the next episode. It was more interesting than the stories on TV.

Most of us in this rooming house have not traveled much in America. The few among us who did were provoked by your postcards to start telling their own traveling stories. Some were funny, some sad, others scandalous. We laughed, we cried. Thank you for making this an enjoyable summer.

We do not know either you or Sarah. But we feel that you are both good people, and we thank you especially for befriending Sarah. Many of us here, at one time or other, lived like she has. We are neither proud nor ashamed of it. It just happened to be like that. We applaud her courage to make a fresh start. We will pray for both of you.

Sincerely,  
Iris, Rose, Camille, Jasmine, Cinnamon and Precious.  
The residents of 151 Colfax Street, Providence, Rhode Island

Mahmud Rahman, on a sabbatical in Dhaka from Lake Merritt College in California, is at work on a novel.

R. K. Narayan's Centenary Conference (concluding Part)

FAKRUL ALAM  
Wednesday, 11th October, 2006

This morning's proceedings begin with the distinguished English litterateur, Alistair Niven, who reads a paper provocatively titled, "Why Can't the English learn to Write Like Narayan?" Niven declares that Narayan wrote some of the best prose of our time as can be seen in his retelling of *Ramayana*. He comments that the prose can be cadenced and dramatic and that the novelist is a master of "appropriate style". He finds great variety in the novelist's "wonderland of fiction" and yet always a perfect match of "tone and topic" -- "irony without the hardness of iron."

An interesting departure from papers exclusively focused on Narayan's fiction is the expatriate Indian critic Lakshmi Holmstrom's discussion of the Tamil translation of *The Dark Room*. Holmstrom observes something a Narayan reader like me could easily overlook: when his characters talk Narayan occasionally gives their speech Tamil inflexions. In other words, Narayan gives his characters the mode of speech that best fits their personalities. Though his English may appear seamless it is really nuanced and dialogic, as great fictional prose must be.

Another paper on Narayan's style and the way he communicates Indian realities through English is presented by the Delhi academic, Makarand Paranjape. Analyzing the wonderful short story, "A Horse and Two Goats", Paranjape suggests that the writer's success comes from the way he pares down the English language in a strategy that is dramatically opposed to Rushdie's chutneyfication of it. The point is a valid one: surely, Narayan's prose represents "a kind of stylistic minimalism". As Paranjape puts it, one finds in his work "a kind of deculturation of English" so that it becomes a "basic" language which may stand for itself or any other (Indian) language.

The subject of Narayan's Indianness is the exclusive focus of the Oryan poet-critic Subhendu Mund's presentation. Finding him the quintessential Indian writer, Mund traces the novelist's delineation of a changing India in the sixty years or so of his fictional career. This aspect of the writer's work, Mund observes, is not only a matter of his rootedness in South India and appreciation of its value systems but also his deep knowledge of Hindu myths and artful articulation of Hindu beliefs. On the other hand, Mund declares that Narayan chronicles consistently the slow advent of modernity in Malgudi.

Till now, the day's presentations have centered on Narayan's stylistic strategies and his Indianness. Sangeeta Rani, a Malaysian graduate student, continues in the same vein. Although she does not mention Frederic Jameson's well-known thesis that "third world" novelists "narrate the nation," that is, write national allegories (unlike their western counterparts who are obsessively solipsistic), her thesis is very

Jamesonian in that she reads Narayan's wry fable-like novel *A Tiger for Malgudi* as an allegory of India's journey from the precolonial era to colonization to postcolonial nationhood. But her paper is both too reductive and too sweeping in its conclusions. Much more modest, but for that reason quite suggestive, is a paper by S. Sareen and K. Kapoor where they see the same novel in the tradition of *Panchtantra*, a work where deep thoughts are articulated in a simple style.

Arshia Sattar, of the University of Chicago, and translator of the Penguin *Ramayana*, offers a paper where she examines Narayan's version of the same Sanskrit classic and discusses the writer's retellings of Indian epics and *Puranas*. She notes that among Narayan's gift is the ability to make Hindu legends come alive for contemporary readers. To her, he "brings Rama and Ravanna to human proportions" and makes the epics "speak to us". She also offers one more reason for Narayan's success in these works: he uses contemporary realities to "parse the Indian myths." The opposite, of course, is true of the great novels Narayan wrote after reworking his life into fiction in the first few novels.

From *Mr. Sampath* onwards, and in his best novels (*The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and *The Painter of Signs*), it is the Indian mythological tradition that punctuates contemporary realities in Narayan's narratives. It is left to the Czech scholar Ludmila Volna to show in a paper that follows how Narayan makes ingenious use of Indian myths for plot development and characterization in the major novels.

The next session is not part of the published program, but the audience is fortunate to hear from N. Ram, editor of the widely read Indian English daily, *The Hindu*, and co-author with his ex-wife, N. Ram, of the authoritative *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*. No doubt because he is not an academic and is not reading from a written text, Ram's delivery style is anecdotal and lively. We hear from him how "the most important influence" on Narayan was Graham Greene, who had once told him, "Narayan you are a careless writer!" Greene helped him with his novels not only by editing them and getting them published but often also by titling them. Ram remarks that Narayan's journalistic writing is extensive and well worth studying and advises Narayan

scholars to pay attention to his stints as a radio broadcaster, publisher, and writer of film scripts as well as the Greene-Narayan friendship for future projects.

The late afternoon session of the day take us away from analysis of the fiction. The distinguished German student of Indian writing in English Dieter Riemenschneider starts off the session by offering a statistical analysis of Narayan criticism and concludes that the most analyzed works are *The Guide*, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *The Financial Expert*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, *The Dark Room*, and *The Painter of Signs* (in that order). And the least studied text? *The Bachelor of Art!*

The final speaker of the day is Padmavati, writer, actor, and assistant director of the successful Doordarshan television serials, *Malgudi Days* and *Swami and Friends*. She tells us of her interactions with the novelist and her own involvement in the making of these television films. She screens for us a wonderful episode from *Swami and Friends* where the young Swami's school-days are captured with at least something of the simplicity, charm and fidelity to the

world of children of Satyajit Ray's *Panther Panchali*. Padmavati's articulate account of Narayan's interest in the scripting and shooting of the serials is absorbing. By the time her presentation--the last one of the day--ends it is almost seven in the evening. Considering that the first speaker of the day started talking at 9 30 a.m. it is amazing how alert our minds still are!

Thursday, 12th October 2006

Another 9 30 a. m. start but today we will stay indoors for only the morning since we are scheduled to visit Narayan's Mysore habitations in the afternoon. The first panel of the day is on Narayan and education. Karan Singh Yadav, a young Haryana scholar, examines Narayan's autobiographical trilogy, *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher* to make the post-colonial point that in these early works written while the English had still not quit India the writer was boldly critiquing colonial educational institutions. Dr. Yadav's comments reminds one that like Tagore, Narayan resented anything that cramped the soul and believed in a return to an educational system based not on rote learning but on story-telling, games for the

young and appreciation of Indian culture. Complementing Yadav's thesis, Professor Mohan G. Raman of the University of Hyderabad observes that when Narayan was elected to the Rajya Sabha his maiden speech there was on the cruelty inflicted on young children in Indian schools and the importance of freeing the child as much as possible "from the burden of books and examination." Raman points out that Narayan, believed that the role of education is to develop in the student the capacity for wonder and that of educators to put the young on the road to wisdom.

The English academic John Thieme suggests that the novelist's Malgudi is a metonymy for India. Thieme says that he is fascinated by "the cultural geography" of the fiction where places are layered with significance. In Thieme's sophisticated reading of Narayan's works, the novels, taken as a whole, deal with a fluid and fractured world. He observes that if the early novels are located in a traditional world the later works delineate an unsettled India. Not unlike Thieme, the French scholar Evelyne Hanquart-Turner is interested in the topography of the fiction, although she focuses only on the late novel, *The World of Nagaraj* to describe how Narayan is able to use Malgudi to image a changing India.

The last session of the day is devoted to placing Narayan in the context of modernism and postmodernism. Judith Brown, of Indiana University, sees shades of modernity in Narayan's preoccupation with "absence, meaninglessness and anxiety" in *The English Teacher* and in his increasing absorption in alienated individuals in subsequent works. The final speaker of the session, Nandini Saha of the University of Kalyani, on the other hand, projects postmodernity into Narayan's work by focusing on the streak of self-reflexivity in a novel like *The World of Nagaraj*. But a postmodern Narayan? Somehow, it is difficult to consider him from this perspective for even a moment!

The time has come for Haish Trivedi to wrap up the academic part of the seminar. He invites Alistair, Marakand and me to join him for the valedictory session. All of us agree that it has been a very good conference--the setting was right as was the mix of participants and the arrangements made. We are all thankful to Sahitya Akademi, ACLALS and CIIL for creating the right setting for two and a half days of sustained attention to one of the greatest writers of modern India. There has been much to learn and much to reflect on about Narayan the man, Narayan the novelist, and the state of Narayan scholarship in our time. After two and a half days of deliberations, we have come to know him even better and surely all of us will be stimulated by what we have heard to take up newer projects for analyzing Narayan's novels in the future.

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Book Review

A Country Inside A Writer's Head

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

*My Invented Country: A Memoir* by Isabel Allende; Flamingo/HarperCollins Publishers; 2004.

Isabel Allende, like so many of her compatriots, left her native Chile long ago. Unlike many of them, however, she has kept returning to her country, coming away every time with newer insights into the society and politics of the land. As a writer, indeed as a novelist, Allende has known enough about Chile, about herself, to convince herself of her identity. She knows, certainly, that her second marriage, to an American, was guided more by the temptation of making a home abroad than giving expression to romantic passion. For all that practical demonstration of reality at work, though, Isabel Allende has remained the Chilean she has always been. For her, Chile is something more than physical geography. It is an image, an idea she has constantly nurtured and shaped and reshaped in the mind. And that is how she has reinvented the old country.

And well she might. As a cousin of the murdered Salvador Allende, she has watched politics operate at close quarters, has survived the ferocity of Augusto Pinochet's goon squads, much like Michelle Bachelet, the current president of Chile. But what makes *My Invented Country* a proposition different from the general run of memoirs is the light-heartedness which cloaks the seriousness of Allende's thoughts. She resorts to banter, to healthy, self-deprecating humour to portray a people with whom her political umbilical links cannot be severed. Read the beginning of her tale: "Let's begin at the beginning, with Chile, that remote land that few people can locate on the map because it's as far as you can go without falling off the planet." The premise of her narrative is thus laid out and what happens as the story rolls is a fascinating exposition of images that dot the many layers of the work. She has time to glimpse the elongated country, as she calls it, through the poetry of Pablo Neruda besides rushing through descriptions of the frenzied childhood she has been through among a vast train of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, et al. Whatever else you might spot in that narration, boredom is something that will not strike you.

As happens in so many other countries across the globe, bureaucracy impacts on the health of the average citizen. It can, in Chile,

descend to ludicrous depths, even where the point of discussion happens to be the death, or otherwise, of an individual: "Even if (a citizen) throws a tantrum to prove that he hasn't died, he is obliged to present a "certificate of survival"; that "recently, a busload of us tourists crossing the border between Chile and Argentina had to wait an hour and a half while our documents were checked. Getting through the Berlin Wall was easier. Kafka was Chilean." Here one can also see the writer's careful staying away from rancour. If anything, it is the amusing aspects of life, a quality that must come to every writer, that constantly grabs her attention. She advises the foreigner who might be at risk of failing to comprehend the speech of Chileans, who speak, as Allende informs us tongue-in-cheek, at least three official languages (the educated speech of officials, the colloquial

language of ordinary people and the indecipherable and endlessly changing speech of young people): "The visiting foreigner should not despair, because even if he doesn't understand a word, he'll see that people are dying to be of help. We also speak very low and sigh a lot."

For all her seemingly unserious way of observing the world around her, though, memories of 11 September 1973 when Salvador Allende's government was overthrown in a violent military coup run deep. For Allende, for tens of thousands of other Chileans, the coup was a decisive point. It pitted them against organised villainy and then forced them into exile, external as well as internal. "Friends and acquaintances," Allende writes, "began to disappear; some returned after weeks of absence, with the eyes of madmen and signs of torture. Many sought refuge in other countries."

In exile in Caracas, Isabel Allende and other Chileans sought to recreate the old Chile of the happier days. They came together to listen to the music of Violeta Parra and Victor Jara and to give one another posters of Salvador Allende and Che Guevara. Allende turned into part of memory and took rebirth in Isabel Allende as the land of the poetic and the poor. Chile lives, as her grandchildren keep telling her, as a country inside her head. She agrees; she whispers, to no one in particular: "Only the landscape remains true and immutable; I am not a foreigner to the majestic landscape of Chile."

S. Badrul Ahsan is executive editor, The Dhaka Courier.

