

impressions

The First Laugh: Stor(y)ing a Story

by Shamsad Mortuza

LAUGHTER is contagious. One laughs when others laugh; and others laugh when one laughs. The television industry, more than anyone else, understands this philosophy very well. So they supply the audience with canned laughter to guide the audience when and where to laugh. The pre-recorded intermittent laughter in "Seinfeld" or "Perfect Strangers" will gibe at you: Moron! laugh now; laugh your heart out! Ha Ha! Enough. Now stop.

Don't take this as a truism because the reverse is not only a possibility but also a reality. People laugh when they see one crying too. Take a litmus taste: Flip over in any public place. The audience of your accident will turn red in laughter while you turn blue in pain and shame. In one Woody Allen movie, a character used the following formula to define Comedy, the literary form that contains laughter.

Comedy = Tragedy + Time. When you (a tragedy), probably the immediate concern of the audience is/(should be) whether you are all right or not. After a while (Time) when the audience realise that your fall is not as fatal as that of Humpty Dumpty, the whole episode turns comic.

Laughter can be a building block for a community. Shared jokes are signs of a communal bond. However, laughter not

only cements but also fractures the foundation of a community. It can both welcome you as an insider or reject you as an outsider. Think of the Rag tradition on campus. This involves playing pranks with the newcomers. The seniors make fool of the freshers as part of an initiation into their group. The same joke can boomerang on the senior if the shield themselves with a "How-dare-they!" attitude. Social bondage through laughter thus becomes a farcry.

of laughter as a family tradition. Some of the references were very much rooted in the culture that it was hard for me to figure out the meaning of it when I first read the story.

Laughter is also a big part of Native American cultures. The Navajo Nation, living on the largest reservation in the four corner area (bordering New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado) of the United States is known for its keen sense of humour. One of my Navajo classmates, Shelly Lowe, was sharing her story in a creative writing class at the University of Arizona. It was a short story in the true sense of the term. What intrigued me about the story was the use

of laughter as a family tradition. Some of the references were very much rooted in the culture that it was hard for me to figure out the meaning of it when I first read the story.

But when we discussed her story, titled "The First Laugh," in the classroom we got an interesting insight into the Navajo culture. Shelly wrote how she was getting worried when her newborn son's first laugh was delayed. She tried every weapon at her arsenal to make her son laugh. Naythen, as if pledge-bound not to laugh, dodged all his mother's efforts in order to maintain his gravity. There was another reason for Shelly to get upset. Every time, baby Naythen got complemented for his size, the inevitable question that followed by people from the Navajo culture was: "Has he had his first laugh?" Let me put Shelly in her own words:

"We would often time run into Navajo friends who would come up to see him. They would stand over his stroller and

look at him. The first thing they would say how big he was. The second thing they would say, after looking at him at him a little and maybe saying Hi to him, was to ask me if he had laughed yet. I would say no and they would promptly step out of his line of view and act as if he was not even there!" Why?

The question kept the interest alive in the story. Well, baby Naythen finally laughed. But not on the instigation of his mother but when they were visiting a family friend. Naythen was well entertained by the man of the house. His interest in child triggered Shelly and Naythen's father to talk their friends into having a child. The host family shied away with usual excuses ... and guess what! Baby Naythen started laughing his first laugh. As if, what could be more ludicrous than not welcoming a child into the world.

Wait! Wait! Don't put the f-stop so fast. (Let the Notey tree stand upright for

a little further. Remember, the closing couplet in our Bengali storytelling: Amaar Golpo Furolo/ Notey Gacchhti Murolo. [Here ends my story/Uprooted is the Notey tree].

Baby's first laugh calls for celebration, a party. According to the Navajo tradition, the person who calls for that spot of joy should sponsor that party. That means you invite both the families of the child's parent, offer them with token gifts, and pay for the food. No wonder, Shelly's Navajo friends were being so cautious about the baby's first laugh. Since most of them are students, their reaction is understandable.

And what happens, if you don't throw that party. The child will grow up crabby and grouchy. Well, at least that's what Shelly believes. Her first child never had her first laugh party, and subsequently, she complains at everything. In words of Shelly, "Anything that is not done her way, she cries. And

it is not all apparent what her way is. So we always are in the wrong with her."

Having some time to ponder about this story, Woody Allen's formula visits me: Isn't it a tragedy that people will avoid the most precious thing in life, a child's laughter in order to avoid responsibilities of a possible party! It is unfortunate that in a world of commercialization, even laughter has become commercial. A beautiful tradition like the first laugh that takes the child to her/his subsequent step of life is not celebrated because so many concerns of modern mind has got involved into it. Using the above equation, can I, then, deduce:

Tragedy (Comedy - Time) = Money!
Post-script: Shelly threw a party at her place to celebrate the first laugh on the day of the Super Bowl Football game. She regretted that her family was not there and she could not have the party in the traditional way. Her friends, the non-native couple responsible for the laugh, brought a cake. The cake carried the inscription: "Naythen's First Super Bowl!" Not first laugh. My muse revisits me. "Tragedy [Bee Gees' theme song playing!]. Hey kid! You want to be an American; you better laugh about Super Bowl, the annual ritual where armored King Kongs clash over a leather coconut!"

book

The Ground Beneath our Feet

by Jan Dalley

THE ground beneath our feet is our place in the world, the place where we sink our roots. It's what we rely on, where we stand, the grounds on which we make a stand - and so on.

Salman Rushdie can elaborate the capacious metaphor of his magnificent new novel for whole paragraphs, and - since glancing allusions have never been the trademark of this most exuberantly, hedonistically over-explanatory of writers - he does. He links it to India ("that place obsessed by place, belonging-to-your-place, knowing-your-place"), home of the three substantial characters in his teeming cast of vividly drawn caricatures. Moving down into the gut-space of the underworld, he links it to chasms and infernos, grave-spaces, the supernatural, mythological black holes and even pipe-work - anything that gapes horribly beneath us when certainties give way.

And solid ground does give way, repeatedly. Earthquakes rumble through the book, finally (on the first page) swallowing its heroine. The three protagonists each lose their home-ground, choosing to leave India behind: "Disorientation," as the book tells us, seriously-punningly, over and over again, "is losing the east."

Then, because the pivot of the novel is rock music, and Rushdie has larded his huge, roaming, multi-layered text with popular lyrics, there is the echo of another song: "The concrete and the clay beneath my feet / begin to crumble / but love will never die / and we shall see the mountains tumble / before we say goodbye..." For this is a love story, as well as a story of emigration and transformation. The woman at its centre is Vina Aspara, half-Indian, half-American, displaced and abused, a wife who claws her way out of her past and into rock 'n' roll stardom. Hers is one of the main journeys charted in this book full of globe-trottings and shifting ground. When she was still a skinny teenager in Bombay in 1956, Ormus Cama, neglected son of Parsi Anglophiles, and Umeed Merchant, aka Rai, both fell in love with her: instantly and for ever.

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Rai is the novel's acerbic narrator - although master of ceremonies, ring-master might better describe his role as he fills in the details of how these three Bombay kids, one by one, steer themselves into the realms of the internationally successful, reinventing their lives "from the ground up". Rai is a photographer, an observer and snatcher, and the loser in the infernal love-triangle - for although Rai loves Vina, Vina loves Ormus - and Ormus is many-talented, handsome, an inspired songwriter, irresistible to women. (But luckily for Rai, Vina's expansive appetite means she is often to be found sprawled in his bed. She's a woman who wants more than she wants.)

Ormus and Vina together form a band called VTO, and move towards megastardom; in the last part of the book they are to be found, John-and-Yoko-like, trapped by fame in a Central Park apartment block.

Everyone in this book is like someone else, or many other people. Spot the references: it's a rock buff's dream, VTO are Sonny and Cher, the violent lovers, Ormus, the handsome genius and surviving half of a pair of twins (like Elvis), evokes flashes of Bowie, of every dazzling star; Vina in all her irresistible awfulness is Tina Turner, or Joplin, or Madonna, or (listen to her name) Diana - for after her death she, too, becomes the centre of a cult industry.

And Rai the "event-junkie", who lives everywhere and nowhere, who was born like his creator in 1947, forced to leave India by threats on his life - Rai is at least partly Rushdie. This is the best sort of autobiographical fiction, in which the

authorial self is splintered and refracted from several sides. Rai the "invisible" man is Rushdie-in-hiding, while Vina's rock 'n' roll existence is a capable parallel for Rushdie's world stardom - or notoriety. Vina dies in a Mexican earthquake on February 14 1989, the day of Rushdie's fatwa.

There is much more in this rich book, too. Literary and musical references, punning and probing, profound and skittery, are piled and jumbled, seemingly ragbag - cricket and pirate radio, a thickly composted layer of mythological allusion, running jokes, tireless labyrinthine wordplay, cracks at the Pope and the American Soul, joshing hilarity, lurching sentiment, biochemicals.

Controversy is never far away. While critics in the UK are already hailing this as Rushdie's best and deepest yet, in India he has been attacked for bombast, for sneering at his former countrymen, for doing nothing more than to "echo the great noise of the modern world". (He does indeed echo it: that remark could be taken as a compliment.)

The same Indian commentator declared that British and American critics are unable to take a tough line with Rushdie, that we are soft on him for reasons to do with the life, not the art. Perhaps. Maybe we need some writers to be phenomenal, and - love him or loathe him - Rushdie is our best candidate.

But from this side of the "membrane that separates east from west", it feels as though this book is a lament for the sub-continent, not a dismissal of it; a chronicle of Rushdie's own disorientation, his loss of the east.

HEARING the key theme Candia McWilliam investigates Vikram Seth's new novel about deafness and musicians. The cruelty of fiction is that its organs may be in the right place, its complexion excellent, but if it has not breath, it will not move. A Suitable Boy did move. If one believes that works of art can embody the good, it was a virtuous book, of enormous length but also of a blessed kind of quiet. It did not clamour; therefore one paid attention, enjoying the surcease of babble and garishness that had stirred much of the surface of subcontinental literature in English for some time previously.

The Golden Gate, Seth's accomplished homage to Charles Johnson's translation of Eugene Onegin, was smug, but had every right to be. It caught California's freedoms in its disciplined rhythms. Like its huge little brother, it withstands repeated readings.

This new novel addresses itself to what the author, in an afternote, says that he holds "dearer even than speech", that is music. With his understanding of silence, periods, rhythm and tempo and his obvious attention to composition, he would seem a fine candidate for this challenge, to which Proust is one of the few to rise successfully. An Equal Music offers as its hero Michael Holme, who plays second violin in the Maggiore Quartet. A quartet is a good subject for a novel, providing sufficient personalities and a pungent mixture of grind and art. The other players are gay Piers, his disappointed sister Helen, and uxorious Billy who likes chocolate biscuits and is in consequence overweight.

Repeatedly throughout An Equal Mu-

sic this schematic structure of character disappoints the reader who had heretofore relished Seth's stealth and subtlety with human nature. It would be wrong to dignify the imaginative shortfall of this book by ascribing it to the narrator, although it is true that he does seem to be locked in a persona of startling limitations. Some wonderful musicians manifest an almost autistic relation to the world, but surely no novelist as intelligent (and committed to high art) as Seth would choose an apologist so direly undeveloped as Michael.

With an admirable instinct for the exotic, Seth has drawn Michael from the northern working class. His father, a butcher, possesses a cat and a television; there is talk of stodgy foodstuffs. But the whole earnest scene topples perilously when gobbits of r - wholly worthy - politicking intrude. The best-developed theme of the book, anyhow, concerning the generosity of kind Mrs Formby who spots Michael's talent and finds for him not a ukelele, but a violin, would have made the point without unbalancing over-emphasis.

Aged six, Michael was shut in one of his father's meat refrigerators. Judging from the unreflected frozenness of his subsequent self, we must believe this was his primal scene.

Yet An Equal Music presents itself as a novel about love. Michael has loved and lost the half-Austrian pianist, Julia, by whom he is haunted, although when we meet him he is sleeping with the implausible Virginia who has simply been taken off a shelf at Agnes B.

When Julia returns in his life, Michael cannot at once place what is

strange about her. We intuit what it is, but only just, since the clue is given by the woodenness of her speech, which in the context of a novel whose dialogue is distinguished for its board-game literalness, is risky. The pain and irony of a fine musician's encroaching deafness is a great subject. Sadly neither Michael nor Julia is up to conveying it. We accompany the two artists through the misery of adultery, to Vienna, to Venice, even, and we feel little beyond irritation and an unwilled embarrassment at the persistent implausible reminders of Julia's gender to which we are treated, her scent, her hair, her scarves, her unconvicted desirability.

Michael, too, has a gender-specific wardrobe of things to be and do. More mention is made of his shaving than might be required of a neophyte teenage boaster. He buys croissants, seven at a time. He inhabits a London that might have fascinatingly been exposed, the London of not very highly remunerative creativity, while Julia lives in Elgin Crescent. The mighty heart could just as well have given out, for we hear no intimation of its beat.

It is, miserably, hearing, in which this book, for all its preoccupation with the cruelty of deafness, is most deficient. Music itself suffers throughout from the exegetic kind of writing that is the bane of any but the best sleeve-notes, and from being discussed by the members of the Maggiore Quartet in a way that reminds one how perilous, if sweetsuckingly pleasurable, is shop-talk. But the great uncatchable elusive thing remains out of reach.

There are felicities, but they may be counted; they do not flow. Surprisingly, beneath the unsatisfactory surface and the declared beautiful themes, this is a book deep in dislike and distaste, of smuggled anger. This suggests that the author simply could not help writing it, for both the best and the worst reasons. I do not doubt that it constitutes a labour of love. No da capo al fine then, uniquely in the work of this much-praised writer; instead one feels sad, but not in the way that art will leave you so, and not bereft but released.

poetry

Bahar in Urdu Poetry

by K K Khullar

SPRING is as popular a theme in Urdu poetry as 'Ishq' (love). And it is as Indian as 'Rogan Josh'.

Urdu poets always welcomed spring, at least in the past, with 'jaam' (cup) and 'saki' (cup-bearer). In the words of Mirza Ghalib:

Phir is andaz se bahar aayi
Ke huye mehn-o-meh tamashai'
(Then the spring came with such abandon
That the sun and the moon became mere spectators).

In another couplet he said:
'Ug raha hai dar-o-diwar pe sabza
Ghalib

Hum rayaban mein hain aur ghar mein bahar aayi hai'
(Wilderness has grown on my walls
While the spring is knocking at my doors).

Ghalib's letters are also full of references to 'Bahar', which brings cool air, pleasant fragrance and joy into life.
During this season he liked to eat the sugar-crystals of Bikaner, the mangoes of Amroha, the 'pedas' of Mathura and the 'petha' of Agra.

In a letter written in 1863 to Majruh, Ghalib said: "We have had several showers of winter rain, there will be a good

crop of wheat and gram, and the spring harvest looks good."

Ghalib loved beauty and enjoyed spring as a gift of god. In his own words, he was not a crow caught in the snare only to be set free. He was a nightingale held in a cage so that the world may hear his melody.

He called his letters 'dastambu' (a posy of flowers).
Faiz Ahmed Faiz had a different view of life, yet he was an ardent lover of spring.

'Dosto bazm sajao ke bahar aayi hai'
(Bring new fellowships into being,

friends
The spring is here)
At another place he says:
'Veeran hain jaam
Pas karo kuch bahar ka'
(The cups are empty, have a heart,

friends
The spring beckons you, be considerate)

Even in autumn we have been searching for spring', says Faiz elsewhere.

Majaz Lucknavi was too love-lorn to enjoy spring. When visiting a friend, he noticed the fallen leaves in the latter's courtyard on opening the window of the friend's melancholy room, and wrote:

'Ab ke bhi din bahar ke yuhin guzar gaye'
(Ah, this year too the spring came and left me forlorn)

For Sahir Ludhianavi, spring brought sadness. But the sadness had a touch of

sweet melancholy.

On the marriage of an old friend, he wrote:
'Bahar aayi khilin kalyian
Tarane goonj' uthe hain
Hua hai itr-e-aageen

Zarra zarra muskarata hai
Magar door ik afsurda makan mein
Ek dil hai ke har aahat pe
Yoonhi chownk jaata hai
(The spring has arrived
The buds have blossomed
The air is filled with fragrance
but in the distance
there is a heart which pulsates on a cold bed

at the sound of every knock on the door).

Sahir concludes the poem by saying: 'My friend, I dare not congratulate you because I shudder at such a prospect. Yet I wish you a happy married life, a happy

home."

Spring no longer brings a message of romance for the Urdu poet, for he is too deeply absorbed in his struggle for existence.

With 'gam-e-rozgar' (grief of livelihood) replacing 'gam-e-Ishq' (grief of love) as his chief concern, there is little spring in his life, a fact reflected in his poetry.

The situation is best described in the words of Mir Taqi Mir, the greatest of Urdu poets whose authority Ghalib acknowledged in no uncertain words:

'Tu to chahi bahar par in ki bhi kuch khabar
Jo sar bajib-e-guncha-l-shagufta san raha'

(You are departing, o spring but have you thought of those whose life is like the bud bent down in despair).