

## SHORT STORY

## The Paper-Plane

SHAHAUZZAMAN (Translated by Sonia Amin)

Most likely the bridge is a favorite place to perch for the birds. They come here often, but never for long since they are always in a hurry. It is my favorite spot too, though I am not a bird. And not being in a hurry, I take my time. The night has deepened. The birds have flown away long since. On the other side a lone banyan casts an eerie shadow. The river wind blows in my hair.

I spy a man in the darkness over the bridge walking this way. Unusual for a man to be out here at this late hour. He approaches me and asks for a light. I have no matches. He leans over and whispers: 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed -- whose lines are these?' After waiting a few minutes for a reply, he strides off, whistling. It's been a long time since I heard someone whistling like that. But then the man comes back. 'Listen sir, literature was not born the day a boy ran out crying Wolf! Wolf! with a huge, brown creature in hot pursuit. It was born, when that boy shouted Wolf! Wolf! and there was no wolf behind him!'

I laugh softly. The stranger flings his cigarette into the air, catches it and walks off. Who is he? Some moon-struck poet perhaps?

A passenger bus screeches past on the bridge, making the railing tremble. Then silence again. Somewhere in the distant village a song blares on the loudspeaker. The words reach me indistinctly:

*The fisherman casts his net in the ocean of life! But not a fish in the net gets he.*

The river wind blows on my body.

*The queen is seated to the east, the wind blows hard. The queen is seated to the west. The wind turns to fire.*

Intoxicating lines. Even if here the wind is not fire; in fact, coming off the river it is quite chilly. Fire, water and wind locked in combat: who is the strongest of them all? Arrogant fire says 'I am the strongest, because I can burn everything down to ashes.' Water retorts: 'No, I am strongest because I can put out fire'. At this wind challenges them both: 'I can carry water off on a raft of clouds. Therefore I am the strongest.'

An aimless night on the bridge. A night of mists and visions.

There is a certain sadness in growing up. A B C D. The squirrel in the bush. The scent of a new storybook. The dream of becoming a pilot. Losing yourself in the tresses of the girl sitting next to you in class.

One day that impeccable beauty said to me: 'If ever you experience sorrow -- name it woman. Woman means uterus. An upturned pitcher in the stomach. A crying pitcher because it can never be filled. Menstruation is but the uterus's tears. Men can never gauge this sorrow.'

A cargo truck whizzes past. The air grows heavy with the scent of mangoes.

We do not know the language of others. The story goes like this: Two mangoes on a branch were conversing one day. Said one, 'Look at these contemptible human beings full of their spite and jealousy. How splendid it would be if we were to rule the world instead!' The other replied, 'Charming thought! But, brother, who among us would rule, the ripe or the unripe ones?'

Stray thoughts, our lives lived amidst the restless toss and turn of



artwork by th. lisa

such thoughts. I think of Rafique, the capacity he had for ecstasy, for sorrow. He was always trembling on the edge of some deep wonder, waiting, waiting in the wings for an unknown love. Those were his apartheid days, when he shunned dark damsels. Yet one day a dark beauty sang to him:

*Rein in your wildness*

*That is the way the moon laughs in the sky.*

And then a sharp axe split into two the ice frozen within him. The nuptials took place on a Wednesday. Rafique said one day, 'A woman contains many horizons, gold and silver roots, dark subterranean cities. Unless you get close to a woman it remains unknown. Skin colour is irrelevant. I have not seen a white woman naked, but this one's timid, ash-coloured breasts like a pair of gray doves intoxicate me.'

The dusky-hued woman died giving birth to a dark little baby girl. The other day that dark girl trapped me in a novel game. 'Catch me uncle,' she cried. I caught her, 'Oh! silly, this is not me, it's only my hand,' she broke into laughter. I touched her head, 'Oh! this is only my head, not me.' I admitted defeat in this strange game. I cannot catch my friend's daughter, I can only grasp her limbs.

Rafique in a letter had written to me: 'The joyless days pass like beads on a rosary. When the bard's lines reach my ear. "Will there ever be another incarnation like this human one?" I'm startled into

thinking: what next? One must make haste and set about what needs to be done, but what exactly is that?'

Rafique had further written: 'For me writing was never a means to fame and fortune. It was the reason for living; everything else was laughable. But I realize each day that creation is beyond me. The ineffable wisdom and stillness necessary for it eludes me. There is only deception in its place. I could become a critic of others' writing but of what use is that to the real lover of books? That leaves reading, of which I've done a lot. And now I feel that that has neither added to nor diminished my experience. How futile my life has been....'

And in his last letter he wrote: 'We have not been able to rise above three square meals a day. The ignominy of rice and lentils.'

That was his last letter. I went of my own accord to see Rafique's body, crushed under a train. To cast a dispassionate eye over the mutilated limbs, on death. Three statements may be made of those who commit suicide under the

wheels of a train:

1. They want a grotesque death.
2. They want to die in public.
3. They want to die at another's hands.

Rafique's daughter goes from room to room reciting a rhyme:

*'Twelve little sparrows  
Lay thirteen little eggs,  
One egg goes bad,  
Little sparrow is feeling sad.'*

We are moved by the surreal meaning of these lines.

I have collected Rafique's diary. There is only one entry for each day as if each day was like an apple perfect and smooth.

*Sunday: (What) wonderful rain- fell all day long. Only paper flowers fear the rain.*

*Monday: Haven't seen fireflies in a long time. Must see fireflies.*

*Tuesday: Before emerging all things germinate inside, below, out of sight. Like seed and tree.*

*Wednesday: Intellectuals are often like this - childlike, eccentric, even sadistic.*

*Thursday: When the sun rises, it is hard to believe it was night somewhere, sometime.*



MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

Naeem Murr's first novel *The Boy* was a New York Times Notable Book and won the Lambda Literary Award.

In *The New York Times* review of *The Boy*, Margot Livesey wrote, 'I intently turned the pages, carried along by Murr's dark energy, his sharply intelligent prose, his genius for the unexpected, his keen sense of atmosphere.' Murr has written another novel (*The Genius of the Sea*), novellas called "The Writer" and "Nude," and stories and essays. He was a Stegner Fellow and a Scowcroft Fellow at Stanford University, and has been writer-in-residence at Northwestern University, Western Michigan University, and Lynchburg College. He will be teaching at the University of Missouri in Columbia this coming semester.

He was the visiting writer-in-residence at the English Department at my college in Virginia this past semester, so I caught with him to ask him about his work, and his life as a writer.

Q: What does your name mean? Naeem and Murr are pretty uncommon names.

Murr (M): Naeem means blissful feeling, Murr means bitter, so my essence is "heavenly bitterness" [laughs]. My father was Lebanese and Naeem is a Lebanese name. Q: How was your childhood in London?

M: I had a mixed childhood. I grew up in London but did not feel wonderfully in place there...the misery of the mornings, the gray sky, silly accent. Till 15 years of age, I was at a comprehensive school, then I went to a strict boarding school in Cambridge. That was an interesting, unusual experience. I saw the horrifying, hierarchical cruelties boys perpetrated on each other.

Q: What types of books did you read as a child and what made you decide to be a writer?

M: I read the regular children's books like *Chronicles of Narnia*, Roald Dahl, but there weren't a lot of books in my household. I spent my young life running about in the woods. I was better at math and science. I didn't write anything at all, maybe some lousy poems in English class. But the notion of being a writer wasn't available to me. I came to study Aeronautic

Engineering at Western Michigan University in 1987 and realized that I hated it. While at WMU, I attended a creative writing workshop and that's what I wanted to do. I know now I couldn't have done anything else, I am totally incompetent. Q: Which genre of writing is your favorite?

M: I write fiction. I have written a few stories like "Benjamin," and

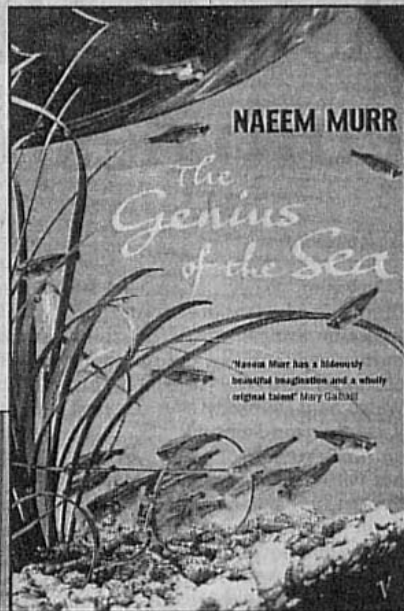


"L'Harmonie des Anges," and essays, but I naturally tend to write longer things. I don't think I've ever written a true short story. I love reading them but they are so contained. Q: How often do you go back to London? Do you want to spend your life in the US?

M: I went back to England for a while, and still go back between things. But I think America suits me pretty well and I feel far more American than English. Q: Your two novels are set in your native country England. Do you have protagonists who are Americans?

M: I am working on a novel that is set in Missouri in the '50s. It is my first novel set in America. I don't feel any sense of restriction in understanding the consciousness of a character. I am half Lebanese and half English, but I don't feel particularly Lebanese or English. You enter whatever kind of characters you are writing about. I don't feel limited by sexes or races. I refuse to engage in that sort of argument. A character is an individual, not a cipher. *The New York Times* reviewer said your work has a "dark energy." Q: Do you feel there is a quality of "darkness" in your work?

M: My notion is not like this is dark, this is tragic. I don't think anything is tragic or negative as long as you can make something of it. The act of creation is positive. At the time I was writing *The Boy* I had this lurid Gothic feeling. It's not a book I would reread now. Q: The reviewer was a bit skeptical about the immense



abilities of the protagonist of *The Boy*. When you were writing the story, did you think some people might find the character unrealistic?

M: *The Boy* is about adolescence,

about coming of age. I was taken by the character of the boy. He is a myth, like the Minotaur. He wanted legitimacy, but none of the adults in the story would see him as a child. He is a thing into which everyone projects their desires.

For me it has the logic of dreams. You have to create a whole world and enter it for the characters to be credible. Then you feel the way he speaks, who he is, his psychic and emotional conflicts. A story has a certain integrity and it's difficult for a writer...

Q: You have been a writer-in-residence at a number of universities and colleges. Does teaching help you as a writer in any way?

M: A writer spends a lot of time alone in a room. I think as a writer you don't think analytically. Teaching makes you think analytically. And I find it emotionally challenging, which is a good thing. I've been teaching for more than 10 years. Now-

days I try to balance teaching and writing.

Q: You said you were working on a new novel. What is it called and when is it coming out?

M: I don't have the title yet. I've been working on it for a year and half, and it should be done by March of next year, at least that is my fervent hope.

Even though Murr's reading at my college was right before the 2004 presidential debates, it drew an unusually large crowd of students and professors. He read excerpts from his second novel *The Genius of the Sea*, and an essay titled "Don Nelson sings Elvis." The latter was about his 'aesthetic awakening.' When he was 13 years old, he wrote a poem called "Death De Profundis" for a schoolwide poetry competition.

'I worked on my poems...as if I was diffusing little bombs...Glide, glide the silver bullet/ Swiftly through the

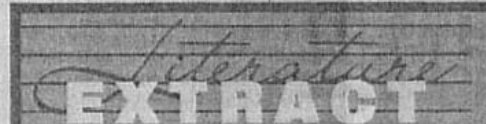
swirling mass,' he read. With a thirteen-year-old's conviction he believed he had already won the competition, even before the results were announced.

'And then, of course, I didn't win,' Murr continued. 'The winning poem was titled "The Black Lung." It was written by a new boy from somewhere up north, from the black stuff, the dark hills, those satanic mills...The boy's name was Devon Wilde. Even his name was better than my poem.' Murr went on to say that when he read that winning poem he understood 'what it means to be good.'

After the reading Murr signed books for the audience. Mekhala Chaubal, a first year who is taking Creative Writing classes at the college, said, 'Even though the writing was intense, his tongue-in-cheek humor displaced that, so it was quite enjoyable.'

Munjulika Rahman is at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Virginia.

## On Naeem Murr, novelist and short story writer



U.K. publisher: Heinemann/Vintage (Random House)  
USA publisher: The Free Press (Simon & Schuster)

(This excerpt is from the middle of the novel. Daniel Mulvaugh, the protagonist, is in an extremely heightened emotional state--verging on a breakdown--and is overcome by an impulse to speak to his long-estranged wife, Sally).

In the street, an impatient breeze, the rain spattering down as if spilling over the edges of the full clouds. Daniel walked quickly to consume his nervous energy. He thought of his wife among the daffodils: if he could have said something then. But he hadn't had it then, had now--or almost--the thing to be said. Daniel knew there was something a little crazy about this, but he'd been filled in these last few hours with the conviction that he mustn't allow it to be too late again.

He joined a nun in full habit at the bus stop. When she turned to smile at him, he was confronted by a pretty face covered in acne. He reached for his cigarettes, but the 33 arrived. It would take him right to his wife.

He sat toward the front. On the seat before him was a man wearing a tiny fawn-coloured cap on his fat, bald head. It made Daniel think, for some reason, of

## The Genius of the Sea

pork in muslin. At the back of the bus, on one of the seats facing the aisle, sat a woman who struck him as an impeccably maintained cul-de-sac of feeling, her beauty as unimpeachable as it was bland.

The bus halted outside the senior centre. A half dozen old men and women staggered on. They seemed to Daniel like the remnants of an army, routed again, bearing their blue-rinse hair and liver-spotted hands, their wounds and their shame.

The bus crossed Richmond Bridge and stopped again. Two women boarded, a young woman with a baby and an older woman carrying the folded stroller. They sat on the vacant seat across the aisle from him. The baby lay jerky and boneless in its mother's arms, vagrant expressions flickering across its face. He noticed the grandmother's hands, fused into the semblance of fins by arthritis.

The mother, who seemed still in a kind of postbirth euphoria, had placed her hand under the baby's downy skull, as if she were learning, with an ecstatic intimacy, the word *skull*, as one could only learn it by feeling one bared to the bone, and one, such as this, so recently filled and fleshed. And somewhere deep in him Daniel felt this, the tiny head in her hand, not as something soft but as an edging spur of his crystalline life.



artwork by amina

## Love and the Void

SHAMMI FARZANA  
(translated by K. G. Ashiq)

I  
Gave you all the love  
in my heart  
because you said  
you'd be mine

You didn't keep your word

Now my empty heart  
is under the hammer  
waiting for the highest bidder

II

I toss away  
a tasty, much-used  
tissue...

If only this  
much-abused heart  
could be tossed away

like that

III

You said love never ends--  
Wrong!  
Love too runs out  
just as the Pole Star  
will be dislodged one day  
leaving only endless void,  
yes, only the void

is inexhaustible.

K.G. Ashiq is a writer/horoscope buff.

