

A Roman Column

I dedicate today's column to my husband's friend and contemporary, Ambassador S.K. Sharjil Hassan whose unexpected and untimely death due to a heart attack a few weeks ago left all of us within his wide circle of friends in a state of shock and disbelief. He was a youthful and gracious man, physically fit and full of an unbridled enthusiasm for life, and death seems like a cruel mistake, a wrong role for him. It even feels wrong that we should be grieving for this light-hearted, ever-smiling person. Even though we are praying for him as if he were truly gone, in our hearts we do not really believe he is gone.

My last meeting with him was when my family visited Moscow and we were guests at his ambassadorial residence. I mentioned this in my articles from Russia at the time, and I reiterate here that our Russian journey was enriched and made unforgettable due to the friendship and incomparable hospitality of Sharjil.

For Sharjil, an English Literature graduate, I was the 'Bhabi' whose column he professed to be an avid reader of. With the news of his death my column went silent for a while. How else could a columnist register grief for the transition of a special reader? Today in this very column, I send out my prayers to him at his eternal address and offer my deepest condolences to his wife and family. May his soul rest in peace.)

"Time has passed like a courier with urgent news...."
Normally I do not like to read anything in translation, but sometimes it doesn't matter, especially when you are reflecting on the transient nature and passage of Life, and the quality of Time, which encloses it. Life strikes me as being itself a many-layered poem that can never be read in the original, a language that no one speaks fluently, and which has come down to us only in translation. Every day we translate life; we decipher its symbols, images, similes and metaphors; analyse its rhymes and reasons. The poetry of life lifts its folds of meaning in the same way, as do the veils of foreign poetry in translation, revealing and confounding at the same time.

"Time has passed like a courier with urgent news./But that's just our simile...."

I have often read one of my favourite poets Wislawa Szymborska (from whose poem the above line is taken) and yet, I find that the same poem or the same line says different things to me at each reading. This is, of course, true of any good poet, any great poem. Also, actually, this is true of any sensitive reader, who becomes almost a co-writer, a partner in the experience of the poem, its most important translator. The act of reading poetry reveals the reader as much as it does the poet. I can pick up the same poem and read it as a totally new one given the mood and circumstance in which I re-read it. Thus even if the poem is translated, say from its original Polish, the ultimate translation and transformation is the one it



NEEMAN SOBHAN

The Consolation of Poetry

undergoes during its passage through the prism of my sensitivity at that point. A poem, like a grain of sand, exists not in itself but in my reading of it.

And isn't that true of life, too? Until I reflect on it consciously, give it a context and a meaning, does Life have a shape? It's my human eye that views it; my imagination that composes and then translates its incoherent poetry. "We call it a grain of sand,/but it calls itself neither grain nor sand./It does just fine without a name....." But it is in our human nature to give things names, to read and write the poetry of our fragile existence.

I am distracting myself from the confusions of life by reading poetry of the special kind that Szymborska writes----deep as water in a running stream, limpid in meaning, and quenching to the thirsting heart.

"The window has a wonderful view of a lake,/ but the view doesn't view itself./it exists in this world/ colourless, shapeless,/ soundless, odourless, and painless/ The lake's floor exists floorlessly,/ and its shore exists shorelessly/..... And all this beneath a sky by nature skyless."

How convenient and painless for inanimate nature to exist without being aware of its own existence, its own limitations or its untapped poetry, leaving it to us poor mortals who are blessed and tormented by our imagination to give the world of nature its meaning and rhyming scheme. We who are not floorless, shoreless or skyless but full of our own humanity must weep and laugh at not just our own precarious condition but that of other humans and other creatures. We live their lives; die their deaths. We empathise, we versify, we endlessly compose castles of love and compassion from the grains of sand visible hourglass.

around us. We read Time as if it were a man-made, clockwork thing, and not the fine flow of eternity through