

THE DAILY STAR SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER

The Meltdown

I might be wrong, I don't know. In another lifetime these sorts of admissions would have been unthinkable...

A lifetime ago, I was not afraid of being daring, crass, disingenuous...you name it! Insensitivity was a part of my arsenal. I was someone before I lost myself.

I am right. I know best. For as long as I can remember that is how I classified myself. Anyway, what's all this about a name, a caste, race, sex or profession? Best to keep it simple... I am right. Descartes might say "I think, therefore I am" but Darwin knew better (You are just in a struggle, flexing your muscles to keep ahead of the creep behind you). I think I have it even better. I am right. I am repelled by class instinct. Or a class interest. As far as I am concerned, I can only exist in exclusion. If I am right, it behoves that everyone else is not. So I do not belong to anything one would call a class, group, community, clan, nation or mankind.

*The world was wide and spacious. For I (a super quiet vet's son) was the only inmate on it. I hummed like a gnat, squeezed *aparajita* petals and savoured their inky velvetyness leaving a bitter strip on my tongue. I prowled fields where *chorakanta* weeds were the thickest and watched my white pyjamas goosebump with its needles. Then I would be sitting under the furious-pink and then blister-purple sky, all itchy-scratching picking the bristles out from my pyjamas, methodically collecting them one by one till it was too dark to see any more. The bristles that remained went home with me, needlelike pricks... reminders that I likened to a sort of an awakening...*

*I grew up a RamRahimAnthony middle-class boy in a middle-class neighbourhood detesting every middle-class, muddled-class view that was to pass me. Not without a price, though. I was in Class III in a tin-roofed, sun-baked school called the *Adarshya Biddyalaya* when I had this stroke of genius: I concluded that I couldn't go on humiliating myself by writing 'The Cow' essay. I had found a new subject: 'Coward'. I did not baulk at calling my fat English teacher, my lame headmaster, my spiritless parents and my toothless classmates cowards. Not without a price. I was shaved instantaneously, had 'donkey' etched on my pate with lime paste and for a month went without tiffin.*

I was set free in a way probably even I had never dreamed of. I never looked back. Till...

For forty-nine years that raw desire to say what had to be said gave me reason to wake up in the morning. I had a life like no one else's. I savoured every moment watching my mother, father and elder brother stare at me in horror, my younger sister burst out in tears. They took it hard, I was a monster in their midst, upsetting their set ways and their decent forms. It was an absurd struggle, them against me. They were more in number and yet I prevailed. Embarrassment was their purgatory, I had put them there.

*I cannot say that I didn't know that I was an egoist with a capital E. But I couldn't see why an egoist would be regarded as anything but charming. For three years on end, I wooed the girl-next-door with a steadieness that I thought no woman with the right mind could resist. D/raping her *orna* round her neck one August dawn, making an unnatural protest of some kind by that silence of hers...she was gone. I was interrogated and dismissed for I was not a typical Eve-teaser. I never ogled at her, never whistled crudely when she made way to school, never threatened her in any way. Temperate persistence was not a crime. I was out. Every time I slapped a mosquito gorging itself on my corpuscles, I was reminded of the GIRL. The thwack against my skin burning with a puny yet brutal rage would remind me of her. She was the sting. That rash girl however, had proved a thing or two: *I was right*. What she had done was deviant. For weeks I walked about the waste heap of Dholai Khal, past the rows of shanties making spurious car parts, dodging children whining to sell me dops as the sun went down. For weeks I swung my legs from a wooden perch sipping bitter tea smelling of stale milk, hearing the racket of being cut and iron being flattened and rickshawallahs hoarsely swearing at slow pedestrians. She was in hell and I was here. Because I am right. She wasn't.*

The conviction I had in my own views was absolute. Nothing I read or was told ever wavered me-- I could defend Copernicus if I wanted to, I could be a Joan of Arc for my cause, I could rustle up a debate and wrench away with the last word. Truth is Polemic, History is a Crutch, Nature abhors Reason, Power is What Power Should Not Be: these were some of my more well-known 'theories' as they happen to be called. Personally, I don't give a fig about theories. Something doesn't need to be the Truth or a Theory in order to be valid. Very few people saw that.

I was twenty-something and having my say about the State vs. the Individual. Had not noticed that Super Quiet Vet was writhing on the bed in front of me clutching at what seemed to be his heart. My father never made it back to his house in Ram Mohan Dutta Road, Wari. They took him up the alley and put his death-cot in a lorry and drove past the defeated-looking Sri Sri Mahamaya Ashram that was cleft in the middle by an upstart banyan tree fisting for more room. The last time I had gone back there, the Ashram had dwindled to a few bricks and some crumbly slabs discarded at the foot of the tree. It goes without saying that I did not think I could stay in that house after that.



artwork by apurba

Nor that I had hopes that I would get a job. I didn't, for all that it was worth. I shaved each morning, even though I hadn't a place to go to. Each morning there I was before a mirror watching the lather curl at the razor's edge, watching my innocent skin getting bared by the gliding blade. Not for one puerile second did I doubt myself.

I got a little place shortly afterwards among rows of advertisement-smeared buildings and plaster-less brick boundary walls down Brajmonhini Street. Brajmonhini Street was a haven that nothing could penetrate. Not a peep of sun, or a spell of *Baishakhi* squall. Brajmonhini Street did not care that on CNN the world watched the Soviet state go bust. But for me though what I saw had proved what I had suspected all along: everyone felt that they had to be the same, or not be at all. Homogeneity was the new hegemony every one was reeling in and never before had I more to chew on or more to spew. But Brajmonhini Street was unmoved. As long as the milkman came and the *dhobi* collected the laundry and the housewives flogged curries in their *masala*-encrusted *karhais* and the men spat from the windows, there was no reason to believe the world was any different. Brajmonhini Street was charming, the way the familiar can be charming. Charming -- with its poky boarding-rooms occupied by students, clerks and termites and its faux-colonial houses once erected by the well-to-do. The money of the well-to-do in Brajmonhini Street probably ran out every so often and that is how their front balcony became reduced to a strip and their bedrooms got finished in shabby haste but in most houses the stairs invariably were elaborate affairs of intricate whimsy. Entire rows of these houses huddled together like shaved, toothless Hindu widows of yester-year, eyes glowering in mute remonstration.

I sleep till noon and get my *biryani* lunch at Mohammad Farid's eatery. Then stroll to work. Looking out into claustrophobic alleys were burrows of shops. One of these little heavens belonged to me: Usha Binders, it was called by its previous owner. I retained the name. And some of Usha's old customers kept the place going.

Sitting in my shop, I grew thirty. And then forty. Forty-nine.

At two o' clock girls would return home carrying their school bags and little scraps of missyous and iloveous stashed somewhere on their uniforms. At quarter to three, the middle-aged banker would be back at his seat at the bank after a two-hour long mysterious tête à tête with a mystery client. The beggar with a hunch would stare on in gloom and disconsolate as coins on his neighbour's plate multiplied. Wearing a faded pink *orna* over her sari, strolls out at four-thirty the mother of 42/D (if you think I use the daughter's cup size as a nickname then you are mistaken, no that is not what I am like. I know the girls by the houses they go into). At six Majid would set out to

tutor students, at eight-fifteen the community centre started to play its *shehnai* cassettes as wedding guests began to trickle in.... As Brajmonhini Street went about its business I would sit cross-legged on a chair delivering monologues to itinerant vendors, local power-brokers, *paan* shop owners, local *murrabbi*, newspaper headline scanners, *buas* and nannies, orphans, cable operators, *munshis*, suicidal youngsters, social pundits, amateur models, hindu tv serial buffs, retired folk, the diabetes-afflicted doing their afternoon perambulations, micro-credit clients, truant schoolboys, hucksters, *sowdagars*, petty criminals, cricket squads, the law enforcing agents, squabbling tenant associations, doctors of law, fortune tellers, quacks and traditional healers, *jinn*-busters, ambulance drivers, gender specialists, do-gooders, political evangelists, sweaty matriarchs in sequined saris marriage-brokering, self-published poets, unwashed graffiti artists, *pichchis* who fetched tea, unemployed cell phone-junkies...so on and forth. Huntington, dumtington ... the clash of civilizations hype was the creation of a world syndicate of publishers. I would boom loudly sipping a glass of chilled *lassi*. Extolling my idol Chenghiz Khan's atrocities to an aghast audience, I would check out what was on the tv guide. Getting a trim at Beauty Hair Salon I would relate how the footage of the Man on the Moon that the whole world saw was a college freshman's idea of a prank that landed in the wrong hands. I glowed taking insults, the occasional rotten egg, a stray sandal (when I had suggested that women tended to be by and large more easily corruptible than men), once a casual death threat too (when I had spoken for a nationwide moratorium on sex for twenty years to check the population spiral).

I had made it into the weekend magazine of the country's leading English newspaper *The Daily Chronicler*. A sour feature-writer had written with septic seriousness: "There is nothing fantastic about this man's restlessness in his infancy, his disinterest in study, gradual deterioration of his character and also about his flight from the house. Many a subcontinental boys are in the same manner like him, going to dogs and thus spoiling their bright prospect of life. Though this is mortifying and regretting picture, yet this a realistic aspect of the subcontinent's society". My blood boiled for a week. After everything I had done to be 'myself' the witless feature-writer had brought me down to the plane of just about every RamRahimAnthony-With-A-Prospect. For weeks I had to ponder whether 'gone to the dogs' had redeemed me in any way or not!!

I don't know how it began to all unravel. First, my clothes began to look like they belonged to another era. I always took care of my appearance and I knew I looked well for my age. But no matter what I did I wasn't as becoming any more. I was used to crowds, to the heat of their appalled silence. I used to get them to hiss with dismay. Not



The winner of The Daily Star Short Story Contest Nuzhat Amin Mannan being presented with the Taka 5000 prize by Editor Mahfuz Anam for her winning entry 'The Meltdown'. She teaches in the department of English, Dhaka University. Her story was adjudged the best for its stylistic flair and an appealingly perverse view of the world.

Honourable mention must be made of three other submissions: Marzia Rahman for her entry titled 'The Night Sky'. Munize Khasru for 'The Thirty-second day'. Sabreena Ahmed for her short story, 'Tamarind Pickle'.

Many more readers and writers participated in this contest than the one held two years back. We thank each and every one of them for sending in their submissions, and hope that their ranks will swell in the contests to be held in the years to come. Keep writing and sending them in to us -- there's always hope!

any more. The more outrageous my act got, the higher they raised their bar. I rammed away, only I wasn't getting any where with this. They want a circus clown, I cried in desperation.

The nights were getting to be terrible. I couldn't sleep until I had figured out how to be like my old self once again. I felt flabby, flaccid, fatigued. On top of everything, Super Quiet Vet had taken to smirking at me. This was too shocking to even be acknowledged... how was it that I dreaded him... the dead cold, memory of quiet parent? 'Shock' happened only in their domain, not mine... yet there I was dreading confronting him standing on the doorway, small, impatient, mocking me with an insane, judgmental sneer! I kept on summoning Akkas, to make sure that I was awake. My servant kept popping up at regular intervals saying in an unfazed monotone "Go to sleep now *Bhaiya*". After the first couple of nights, I began to doubt if Akkas ever left his bed or ever spoke those words.

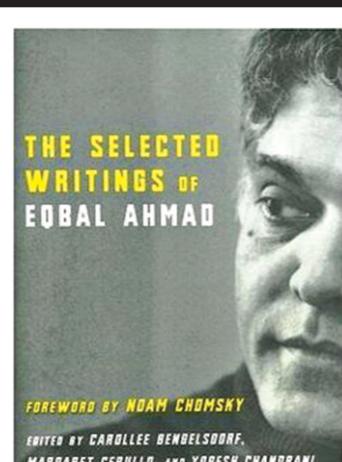
For a week, I stopped going to Usha. I slept through lunch and fidgeted as the music started to whine out of the public speakers at the community center. I was invited by the woman in 42/D to attend the wedding of her daughter; the bride would be one of the many girls I watched every day returning home wearing a school uniform, daydreaming of being in love. I debated if I should go or feign a headache. But I had skipped lunch for a week and was looking forward to the *biryani* fix I could get at the wedding. The crowd was all wrong; the bridegroom hailed from Barisal and his elders were keen on getting on with the rituals as quickly as possible so that they could catch the eleven o' clock launch back to Barisal. The sleepless nights, the missed lunch all compounded into an unpredictable disaster. I had started to nibble on my *shami kabab* and begun to speak on... and what does it matter to any one but me on what. I sensed something was amiss but it was too late to make a retreat. First, I heard muffled groans. Then some brisk yawning. A mother nursed a baby through the best part of my speech...

I usually got it right. I wept myself to sleep that night. What's happening to me?

I panicked like I never panicked in my life. I was used to feeling solid. I had a head full of hair but I fretted like a man watching his hair go. I kept on patting myself. I am all right, I repeated, mumbled, recited, whistled. I had spasms like the kind a fifty-year-old *enfant terrible* can have.

Letter from KARACHI

MUNEEZA SHAMSIE



The summer has set in and electricity failures are worse than ever since the privatization of the Karachi Electric Supply Corporation. The load shedding/breakdowns occur three or four times a day sometimes and for two hours at a time. There are frequent riots in protest. I have been glued to my computer, trying to finish assignments before I head for cooler climes. I have also been catching up on some reading.

Everyone wants to read *Military Inc.* by Ayesha Siddiqua which sold out on the day of its launch! An academic work, the book explores the phenomena of the military as a business enterprise worldwide, but using Pakistan as a case example. Mohsin Hamid's second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been on the New York Times bestseller list and is one of the most fascinating and challenging books I have read for a long while. The very last line not only brings home its cleverness and sophistication but generates discussion. This spare, subtle and lucid, 111-page story consists of a monologue by Changez, a young Pakistani

Reading amid the load-shedding

man with a stranger, an unknown, nameless American in Lahore's Anarkali bazaar. Changez is as verbose as the American is silent. Changez speaks of his infatuation and later, disillusionment with the United States to provide a incisive portrait of the relationship between America and Pakistan, Americans and Pakistanis and indeed the attitudes of citizens belonging to an all-powerful country towards others. The novel moves from Changez's years at Princeton, his high powered job in the New York financial world, to sojourns in Greece, Chile, Philippines and ultimately his decision to return to Pakistan, his homeland. The Afghan and Iraq wars, 9/11, Indo-Pakistani tension are all built into Changez's narrative, as is Changez, rather sad, unfulfilled love for an American girl, which becomes a metaphor for the novel's larger themes.

I greatly enjoyed a lyrical first novel *Passarola Rising* by Azhar Abidi, a Pakistani Australian writer, a finalist for the 2006 Melbourne Prize for Literature. Abidi's assured and sparkling debut revolves around a historical character Father Bartolemeu, an eighteenth century Jesuit priest of Brazilian

origin who made aviation history with his demonstration of his flying ship, 'The Passarola' (Great Bird) a hybrid of a balloon and a glider' before the Portuguese court in 1709. But the Inquisition threatened him with sorcery and he had to flee. Abidi goes to create a wondrous tale, a flight of fantasy which prolongs the life and adventures of Bartolemeu by another thirty years. Narrated by Bartolemeu's brother and flying companion, Alexandre, this sparkling, imaginative novel draws introduces Diderot, Newton, Voltaire to capture the spirit of the Enlightenment and its challenge to religious obscurantism. There is a stimulating debate about individuality and choice based on the religious and scientific beliefs of the time. In Abidi's story Alexandre and Bartolemeu fly away in The Passarola from Portugal to France. There they meet Louis XV of France, rescue the Polish king Stanislaus, participate in a naval battle from the air and embark on a voyage of discovery to the Arctic which provides the book with some of its most poetic writing.

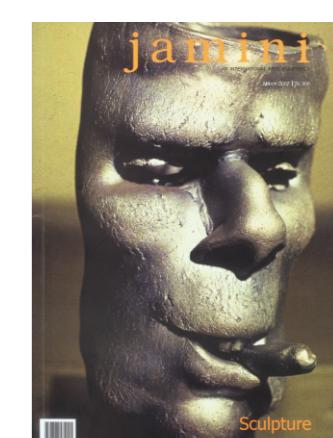
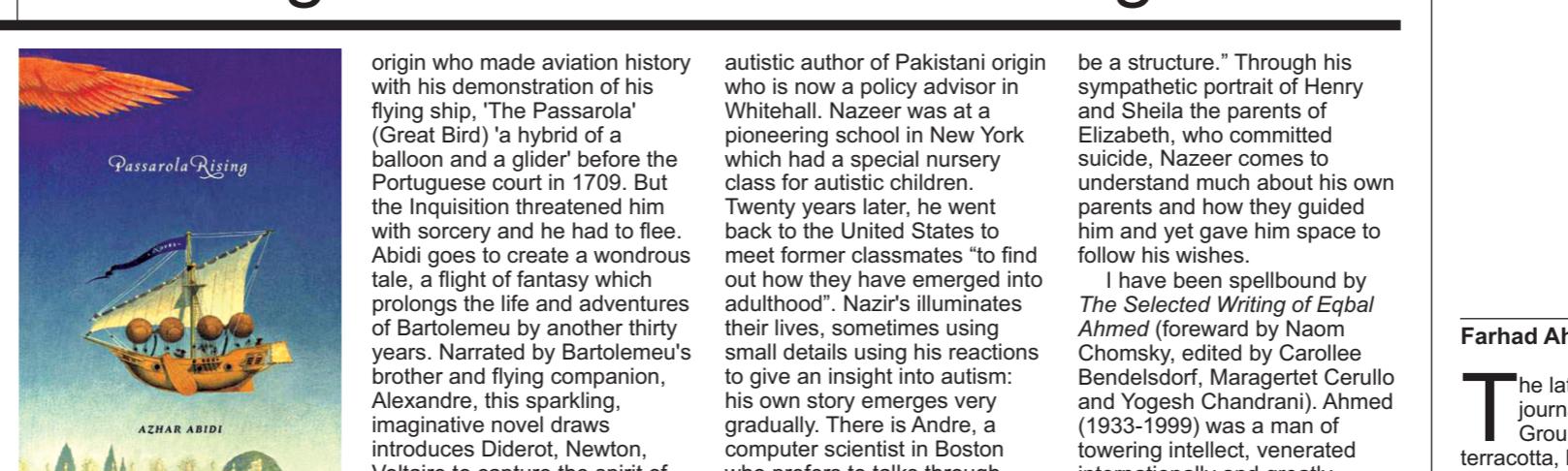
Send in The Idiots Or How We Grew to Understand The World by Kamran Nazeer is a truly remarkable book by an

autistic author of Pakistani origin who is now a policy advisor in Whitehall. Nazeer was at a pioneering school in New York which had a special nursery class for autistic children. Twenty years later, he went back to the United States to meet former classmates "to find out how they have emerged into adulthood". Nazeer illuminates their lives, sometimes using small details using his reactions to give an insight into autism: his own story emerges very gradually. There is Andre, a computer scientist in Boston who prefers to talk through puppets he skillfully manipulates, but has to guard against his temper. In Chicago, Randall who works as a courier and lives with his partner Mike and comes to realize Mike is taking advantage of him. Craig, the echolalic boy who used to say "Send in the Idiots" in nursery class, has become a speech writer for the Democratic party. Nazeer says: "The problem with Craig and me is that we can only do argument. We don't have the wherewithal for creating or sustaining affinity. When we write a speech it's argument that we look for. We need there to be a structure." Through his sympathetic portrait of Henry and Sheila the parents of Elizabeth, who committed suicide, Nazeer comes to understand much about his own parents and how they guided him and yet gave him space to follow his wishes.

I have been spellbound by

The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad (forward by Naomi Chomsky, edited by Carollee Bendelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo and Yogesh Chandrani). Ahmed (1933-1999) was a man of towering intellect, venerated internationally and greatly under-appreciated in Pakistan though he did have a strong faithful following among the many readers of his columns in Dawn. Divided into five sections, each with an introduction by one of the editors, *Selected Writings* covers Ahmed's views on guerrilla warfare, American imperialism, third world fascism, Algeria, Iran, Palestine, Bolivia, South Asia, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. All these makes it apparent that Ahmed's views are as relevant today as they were in his lifetime.

Muniza Shamsie has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing. She is a regular contributor to Dawn newspaper, Newsline and She, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature and www. LitEency.com.



Farhad Ahmed

The latest issue of *Jamiini* (March 2007), the international art journal published by ICL Media Limited of the Bengal Group, has a striking cover: A head smoking a cigar, black terracotta, by Alok Roy, titled *Playing with Innocent Bird*. The material inside is equally striking - the journal continues to effortlessly keep up the standards it set with its first issue - with pieces ranging from an engrossing interview conducted by Kaiser Haq with sculptor Hamiduzzaman Khan to Mahboob Alam's informative 'company drawings: Bengal chapter' to Gina Fairley's fascinating account of Australian artist Tony Twigg, whose installation art was inspired by "barong barong, spontaneous Filipino shanty architecture...made from the seemingly random collections of found wood and metal sheeting, these anonymous shelters have an intuitive, raw aesthetic that appealed to Twigg." Also welcome was the coverage afforded in this issue of *Jamiini* to Dhaka's own Chobi Melia IV - the articles written by Farha Karim ('beyond boundaries') and Hana Shams Ahmed and Nader Rahman ('celebrating photography') emphasize the ideological bases that underlie the photographic North-South divide.

The production qualities of this art magazine published from Dhaka is an object lesson to all those who otherwise despair of producing quality journals from here. Congratulations are in order to the editors for continuing to consistently publish this standard-setting quarterly.

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