

REFLECTIONS

# A love affair ... of a different kind

AINON N.

"Your books are held at the circulation desk for pick up." Well, so far, I have never failed this love of mine, the Morris Library. So, I turn my car around and head towards this calling. As I walk through the library's rotunda I notice many students deeply engaged in books or their laptops, having coffee and/or a sandwich; a few others are attentive to their companions having hushed conversations. I deeply enjoy this composed world. After checking out the books, I go to the third floor to claim my favorite spot. For those of you who are in love with books, surely you have noticed its subtle fragrance? As I walked through the first floor I could literally smell the distinctive aroma of newly arrived books... exciting, strong, inviting. And then there is the Rare Book Collections room, where the long wall-shelves hold books that have aged physically. The reading area in front of these shelves are for those lovers of knowledge who want to consult a reference, or research a topic, or wish to take a stroll along with history, or be in the antiquated stories, or those who simply want to forget the outside world for a few moments. The fragrance of books there is quite different: patient, confident. I do not know how else to define their unique essence!

Occasionally as I walk through the labyrinth of shelves to pick a particular book I rarely give a second thought to the numbers that help me trace it. Thanks to the decimal system introduced by Melvil Dewey in 1876, which assists me in locating books that have already been coded, sorted and arranged by subject areas. It was Dewey who methodized the classification system and standardized the library card catalog. Of course, both systems have evolved since it was established. Today, I no longer make a trip to the Catalog Room trying frantically to figure out which drawer to sift through to find the referenced author. That function now falls within the purview of computers.

I settle in quite comfortably in the corner catching a view of flaming fall colored woods outside and long lines of bookshelves inside. I confess libraries excite me. There is never a dull moment in those literary, historical, political, philosophical texts, periodicals, correspondence, literary manuscripts, book reviews, photographs, and so much more. I am always in awe of this custodian of facts, thoughts and ideas. To think of it as a passive repository would be an absolute mistake. The vibrancy is in its function of orienting knowledge, through challenging the established --- exploring, rebuilding, reorganizing.

There lies the excitement of this intellectual institution.

I cannot help but reflect on its story that has roots in some 20,000 to 30,000 cuneiform tablets dating as far back as 668 667 B.C. These clay tablets, from King Ashurbanipal's royal library, survived the brunt of time to bring us the narrative of their environment, culture of religion and administration. This first 'organized library' also gave modern times the precious gift of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, perhaps the oldest written piece of literary work in the language of Babylonia and Assyria. Then there was the great Library of Alexandria, the intellectual metropolis of the Ptolemaic center, where the works of such visionaries as Archimedes, Euclid, Catherine of Alexandria and many such others were hosted. Theirs was the fundamental contribution to



geometry, mathematics, philosophy and theology. And of course, who can forget The House of Wisdom, the epicenter of religious and scientific inquiry that reached its zenith during the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mun? These are but a few endorsements from the past. The libraries of the earliest to the medieval and renaissance period, up to the present times, each on its own accord, have shaped the libraries around the world and preserved knowledge. A must add to this list are the Imperial Library of the Han Dynasty, Imperial Library of Constantinople, Central Library of Astan Quds Razavi, the Biblioteca Malatestiana, the Vatican Library, National Library of Poland, British Library, Smithsonian Institution Libraries --- the list goes on and on and on. It is indeed captivating to think that the Library of Congress, give or take, adds some 7,000 books each day to its more than 32,818,014 volumes already housed on its 530 miles of shelves (Library of Congress Annual Report, 2010). The numbers, of course, now are much higher

because of the speed at which its collections are added. In present times, its method of filing system is followed by a majority of libraries around the world.

From the collections of early scriptoria to the Information Age, this sanctuary of culture has also endured numerous calamities. In Tibet after the Chinese invasion, in Sri Lanka, in Afghanistan, the Balkans, everywhere we find incidents of a destruction of books. As recently in 1933 millions of books were ruined by the Nazis in attempts to rewrite their nation's history. And even though the key mandates of the 1954 Hague Convention call for the obligation to protect 'cultural property' in wartime, some twenty million books, documents, Islamic manuscripts in the holdings of Iraq's National Library and Archives and Al-Awqaf Library were robbed, ravaged and set ablaze by incendiaries. In spite of such pillage throughout history libraries have endured; such is the human quest for knowledge and love of books. Perhaps Stéphane Mallarmé was correct in observing, "Everything in the world exists to end up in a book." Sometimes, I wonder whether there is any country in the world that does not have libraries. If there are the likes of Room to Read, a non-profit organization, that has built libraries in a number of Asian and African communities, it would be a rare possibility!

The evolution of the library is also a tale of remarkable changes: from navigating through the card catalog system to on-line public access catalog, from singular to multi-institutions that function as one library, and the coming of age of the 'virtual library' that provides overwhelming bits of information available through the World Wide Web. Technological advances are on the verge of presenting a different model of operating libraries as well. In fact, at the University of Chicago's Joe and Rika Mansueto Library, a robotic arm retrieves the materials as users enter data into the computer. Such advancements on a massive scale still have some way to go. I, for one, prefer to collect the books myself from the shelves!

Well, for now I am happy to feel the pages of Nicholas A. Basbanes's *A Gentle Madness*. As I read the words my inquisitive imagination takes off with the author to search for books in dusty bookshops and street stalls!

Outside, the twilight draws night in its embrace and I am in no hurry to get home ...

AINON N, ACADEMIC AND AUTHOR, WRITES FROM CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, USA.

MUSINGS

# "Home" --- while travelling

DIBARAH MAHBOOB

A couple of months ago, I went to Jordan to research for my senior thesis on Palestinian refugees and I wanted to come back not only with a wealth of academic information, but also a sharper, more worldly viewpoint. After all, no book, television show or blog quite replaced the lessons on the 3 P's --- people, politics and power --- as stepping foot on to a new land could teach. In my free time, I wandered like a Lion King character around the kingdom of Jordan. I was in love, combing through the homogeneity of Ammani stone buildings, cascading roads and Roman ruins with a heightened sense of feeling and a ready acceptability to all sorts of experience. Despite the high, I realized an unlikely similarity between "home" and abroad/travel. Travel allows a *feeling* that seems similar to the eerie warmth you sense when an old song from childhood starts playing on the radio, or when you smell the whiff of your mother's cooking after a long time. It is the feeling that you feel when you are nostalgic.

Nostalgia is a wistfully positive feeling. But it draws out a sense of gloom shortly afterwards, when through the youth vanished, innocence eroded, positivity clouded, we are reminded of mortality. The past is irretrievable. And so was my Jordanian adventure, a sweet but mortal experience. No matter how delectable each moment was, it would inevitably fade. Like home, it is impossible to clutch at its straws. And just like that, home and travel become so similar. Both promise to exile us from a warm past.

Travel demands that we understand the contrast between complete control over the external self and absence of the regular levers of control you have at "home". But within a short span of time, while travelling alone, I realized there was nothing like the *sweetness of contrast* travel throws upon us. Allow me to explain --- we are very much in control of our lives during travelling, in a way that appears quite arcane while we are immersed in the humdrum of daily existence. We might be on a budget, but we spend on what makes us smile, whether it's a cup of Turkish coffee or a ridiculously expensive entry fee to Petra, Jordan. Yet we cannot boil a pot of *cha* whenever, or frown freely at the annoying landlord, or save transport costs because the directions are still unfamiliar and the local language is still un-mastered. But because of that you begin to grow, in ways that



the fuzziness of home disallows. But realizing this very sweetness of contrast makes the challenge of stepping out of the comfort zone a pleasurable experience.

And that sweetness lies in acknowledging that *there are straws to clutch* in a potentially discomfiting situation.

There's a myriad of ways Murphy's Law can kick in during travels, with or without your local magazine's luminous horoscope predictions. It reminds us of home where we seem to have a better grip over our surroundings. And when we think of "being in control of your life" we tend to associate with a few basic themes that fluctuate, depending on the environmental cues available --- self-confidence from the freedom of time in the bathroom, the people you can choose to be exposed to, the ability to control where you would go depending on moods (yes, for many people it IS an issue!), i.e., controlling the harvests of luck. We associate these themes with short to medium term.

But are we really in control of *that* much when we lived with our parents in our first home? And is that something that makes our first home taste different from the second "crib" we arranged for our convenience and age? Somewhere in the cascades of Amman roads --

- the kindness of my supervisor's generosity, the warmth of my new friends' eagerness to help me, the softness of my new friend Hajar's lessons on Middle Eastern cooking and Arabic --- I found the former kind of home in Amman in a most unexpected way. I would not go far enough to say, this is and will be my new home; home is too indefinable and eludes prolonged exposure. But I can define what Amman now means to me. Actually, maybe not.

Perhaps it is simply the place which has taught me how to take a look at the world outside my books, internet, television and conversations with people, whether they were expatriates or whether they were locals. I never realized that in Bangladesh, somewhat did in the USA, found much clarity in Amman.

And the greediness to learn how to learn from places-and-people is finally kicking in. Just like home, my personal evolution harbored here at Amman. It was Amman for me, will be a different place for a different person. So go out, back-pack and see the world. And come back next week to hear a bit more about Jordan.

Cheers!

DIBARAH MAHBOOB WRITES AND LOVES READING AND TRAVELLING.

POETRY

# A new me ...

FARHEEN AHMED

No suicide pill could ease the pain that She had been growing within her bosom.

Even death could not out pass it, or multiple rebirths.

It was the walk she finally thought, a walk

That would change her destiny and set her free.

Two paths lay ahead, one rugged, the other smooth.

She chose the rugged path over the smooth,

Aware of the challenges that it would offer.

She would slip, fall, bleed and cry. Yet she was determined that she would try.

The hope of a new destiny that would Change the course of her life.

That would make her what she ought to have become.

Before the walk she chose a task.

To unzip the "old me" and leave it behind.

Because the new "me" would be taking shape soon.

The rugged path would not be smooth going, she knew.

It made her cry, scream and bleed.

But these tears and this pain were better than the first

Because both the tears and the pain were hers,

And not the pain inflicted by someone else on her.

She had finally zipped "in" her new "me".

They say that caged birds must fly And find their own skies

And that's what the rugged path taught her.

FARHEEN AHMED WRITES POETRY. SHE LIVES AND WORKS IN BAHRAIN.

NON-FICTION

# Shirts, socks and rubber boots ...

JULIAN FRANCIS

"That's a very nice shirt you are wearing", said a friend of mine the other day. "It is a very nice tartan pattern. Where did you get it? England?"

"No", I replied, "A Canadian University Overseas Service colleague of mine gave it to me as a Christmas present in Dhaka in 1985." "So, if anyone says that Bangladesh shirts are not of good quality, you can tell them about my shirt, now 27 years old", I added.

A lot of people throw out or give away clothes each year so that they can always be 'in fashion'. However, I grew up in the years after the Second World War (1939-45) when many things were rationed including clothing. Clothes were handed down from one child to another and between cousins too. I remember my mother forever mending clothes and darning socks in order to extend their usefulness. So I grew up trying to make things last and became a bit of a hoarder.

The day my friend was asking me about my shirt, I was wearing a pair of thick nylon maroon coloured socks on top of a pair of thin cotton ones. I have three pairs maroon, green and brown and they have been with me for fifty years. In the very severe winter of 1962-3 in the UK, I was working on a dairy farm to get practical experience before going to agricultural college. At that time I was wearing woollen socks inside rubber 'Wellington' boots and holes were appearing at the heels of all my socks. One day I saw an advertisement in the weekly 'Farmers Weekly' magazine announcing "Indestructible Socks-3 pairs for the price of 2". All three pairs are still going strong and probably will outlive me! The socks have been used with rubber boots bought in the UK in 1967 when 'Dunlop' still made them and these boots have seen service not only in the UK but in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Indonesia as well.

Of course, as I grow older, it feels good if I can still wear that jacket which was made to measure in New Delhi thirty years ago, or fit into the Dhaka made trousers which were stitched fifteen years ago. Bangladeshis are very good at recycling things and in the last few days I have seen many hanging out second hand clothes and blankets to the homeless who are suffering so badly with this very severe cold wave.

My Bangladeshi friends have told me strongly to clear out my clothes and give them to the poor, which I do every year. But I will certainly not be saying goodbye to my 'vintage' clothes!

JULIAN FRANCIS WAS RECENTLY HONOURED AS A FOREIGN FRIEND OF BANGLADESH FOR HIS ROLE IN THE COUNTRY'S WAR OF LIBERATION IN 1971