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# An Ode to Love

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

met you many years ago, and while my memory some days plays tricks with me now, I still can see, L even on a very dark night, you standing there demurely when I first said Hello.I saw an old photo of you the other day, clad in a red saree, standing with your eyes cast down and a very sweet mysterious smile on an angelic face. The date on the back told me you were but a teenager then. My heart broke loose, and mywhole body and soul yearned to be with you then.

You have been with me--on some days literally, on others only in my thoughts, and always on a moonlight night--as I breathe, walk, sing, close my eyes, or even doze off. You give me love, inspiration, music, words, and the joyousness to keep writing when my pen can go no further. When I hear a new song, I try to imagine how to sing it to you. A new flower blooms and I conspire to capture it for you. My flight of imagination gets hold of me and I am with you.

I remember on a moonlit night, as I embraced you before I said "Good bye" after an evening of love, songs, talk, on the same rooftop, you held me tight, and I don't know whether you heard my heart beating fast. When I finally released you from the embrace, I know you also felt sad to let me go. Then you looked up, since you could only reach to my shoulder, touched my chin with the back of your palm and said may be in a fit of sorrow, "I can only reach up to here". I held your beautiful loving eyes, and said, "You are always here, right in my heart."

On some days, I travel, or work long hours, and don't get to see you. But I don't fret about it, or let my heart cry out. I know you are there in my heart, in my soul, my motion, my vision, my words, or sitting next to me in the car as I go about my daily business. When I read a nice story, I know you will enjoy it, and have to hold back the urge to run to you to show it to you. When I sing, I feel like singing aloud for you. Alas, you are so far away. You say, "send me an email or text me". You work at a faraway place and I cannot make a plan to stop by unannounced. Actually, I don't call you or meet you at your work. Will your colleagues speak behind your back, I wonder? Will your students smile or even whisper if they see you with a man they haven't seen before? I don't know.

Some days, I wake up and you are sleeping next to me. I can hear you breathe and smell your fragrance. I wonder whether you also have me in your dreams. But, even you didn't I don't mind at all. You are all mine in my dreams. But now as I lie awake next you, suddenly a song comes to me, "Amar raat pohalo sharod pratey, bashi tomay diye jabo kahar hatey?" (English: My night comes to an end, fading into the soft daylight of a gleeful autumn morning. Who would take this flute of mine?) You are often a flute in my dreams, and I wonder whomshould I leave thee with?

Yes, I often dream of you (and not always at night, let me confide.) In my dreamland, we can go places, play games, and say things that we can't do when we are together. You might ask, "Why only in your dreams?"

"Well", I would say, "How do I play soccer with you when we meet?" And if I were to sing aloud when I am with you, might not the onlookers think I am harassing you and come to your rescue, since I sing so passionately with gestures when I sing for you? Or, you might feel embarrassed if I take you to a soccer field and start kicking around a soccer ball. Plus, there wouldn't be enough time to sing all the songs, recite all the poems, and narrate all the wonderful stories I want to share with you! There are only twenty four hours in a day, and sometimes I despair that I will carry with me to the other world many of the poems, songs, and sweet nothings that I gather during my waking hours. I have sometimes considered writing them all down and send them to you, but held back because I wonder whether you will read them. Then I also worry that cold words, handwritten or printed, will not be able to convey to you what I really want to tell you, with the passion and tone, and the fondness that I can muster when I am with you. If I leave a song on your voice mail, will you hear the same tune that you hear I sing to you in person?

I was at work when I called you this morning at home, and I told you, "I love you" and you said in reply, "I know". I feel that was what made my day. I do not mind that you did not say "I love you too" in return. Love is not only about to be loved and to love. But also to let her know how you feel, and then have the acknowledgement that you just gave. When you say "I know", to me it means she understands!

As my day progresses, today I just want to hold you, say sweet nothings in your ears, hear you giggle at these silly words. I like the way you crack up at my jokes. I want to feel you, touch you, tickle you, and always to kiss you. I can still taste the first kiss when I kiss you now and I feel the same rush. Sometimes during my silliness you ask, "Are you still a teenager?" I feel like saying to the world I am! Your love keeps me ever green. Do you remember the day when we went to a Meenabazaar at Ladies Club and, for the first time, you were not afraid to be seen with me?And I felt so happy to be standing side by side when Amina, one of the beauty queens of the city, came and said to you, "You have the most beautiful eyes". I was dying to tell you the same thing for some days but could not, and she stole it away from me.

Even now, after all these years, I wantto tell you how feel before the words have been said by others. I still feel jealous when you spend a minute away from me. Why can't I say at the top of my voice, "She has my heart?" But, alas I will never be able to. My friend, Nibaron Chakrobardy, from Tagore's ShesherKobita, might have put it better when he said, "Jey kotha roy praner bhitor ogochorey, gaaney gaaney niye chhiley churi korey' (Translation: All those melody, all those intimate songs of mine, those, you stole secretly from my heart.) Alas, have no way but to quote from Tagore to show you my feelings in its entire panorama. I will copy all his love poems and songs and send themto you by next Valentine's Day.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON, USA

## THE BUTTERFLY'S BURDEN

## The extraordinary in ordinary life: Alice Munro

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

LICE Munro was 37 when her first collection of short stories was published. In the seventies, her acclama-L tion started outside of Canada. Her moving short stories with their distinct effortless style are focused on her native Huron county in South Western Ontario. She studied English and journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

The frolicking waves of the Great Lakes in Canada had extra ripples on that very special day, October 10, 2013. As a Bangladeshi Canadian, I felt extremely proud as the Swedish Academy announced that the Canadian author Alice Munro had become the 13th woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.Close competitors were the Romanian novelist Mircea Cartarescu, Norwegian dramatist John Fosse and Russian documentary writer Svetlana Alexierich. When contacted by the Canadian Press, a surprised Alice Munro said "I knew I was in the running, yes, but I never thought I would win".

That day after work I went to my favourite bookstore, Chapters, located on Rathburn Road in Mississauga, but the usual strong aroma of Starbucks' coffee tucked snuggly on one side of the store did not distract my attention as it usually did. I went straight to the "Best Sellers" fiction section. The pretty salesgirl also had an extra bounce in her footsteps, like me, as she handed me the last copy of "Dear Life", Munro's National Bestseller in Canada. I heaved a sigh of relief. I am not a Kindle person, and I prefer the touch and smell of a good book in my hands.

Munro narrates in her own unique style of lucid honesty and sincerity, using simple expressions, spot-on vocabulary, and basic phrases for expressing everyday thoughts and mundane incidents around the lives of ordinary Canadians. She eloquently highlights the many complex emotions of human relationships, mysteries, happiness, depression, desperation and enchantments of dear life with accessibly beautiful linguistics. If you read any of her short stories, you will most certainly find that you will never require the assistance of a dictionary. The jigsaw of words she uses to help readers comprehend the intriguing mysteries of universal human life, embedded into the backdrop of a Canada many readers know nothing about, have eventually struck gold. The Nobel Prize win was "totally unexpected for me", says Munro. The boundless horizon opened up to her magical writings. She had reached out for the shimmering sapphire blue of the Great Lakes of Ontario. But she landed beyond the blue, past the distant horizon.

Thirty-one years of living in Canada have taught me to find a proper balance between East and West. As a Bangladeshi-Canadian writer, my ecstasy knew no bounds as I walked into my workplace that day. My writing critics say that my poems and short stories are full of nostalgia and love for Bangladesh. Every time I eat apple fritters I think of Bangladeshi "roshogollas" and every time I see the deep blue frothing waves of Lake Ontario, my inward eyes see the Bay of Bengal. Yet today I am proud to be a Canadian, as proud as I was to be a Bangladeshi when Tagore, Yunus, Amartya Sen and Mother

Teresa received their Nobel Prizes.

Alice Munro was born in 1931 to a farming family of Scottish and Irish origins in rural Huron County, Ontario. She published her first collection of stories, "Dance of the Happy Shades" in 1968 and last year, her 14th book, "Dear Life", came out with a big bang and became a Canadian national bestseller. The New York Times Book Review commented about her, "One of the great short story writers, not just of our time, but of any time." Britain's "The Independent" says, "This Canadian Chekhov

has won both critical reverence and the loyalty of fans across the world for stories that can encapsulate a life within a dozen pages, and for a tender but unsparing gaze on the ordinary events that assume great dimensions in all our lives". Eminent Canadian writer Margaret Atwood says about Munro, "She writes about the difficulties faced by people who are bigger or smaller than they are expected to be when her protagonists look back." The Independent aptly summarizes by saying that her Nobel accolade counts as a victory for women authors, for Canadian literature and the often marginalised art of the short

At the age of 82, Munro herself says, "What I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every small pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together radiant, everlasting." Upon hearing of her Nobel Prize, she smiled and said, "I would really hope that this would make people see the short story as an important art, not just something that you played around with until you'd got a novel written."

Her short story collections include: Dear Life, Too Much Happiness, The View from Castle Rock, Runaway, "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage," The Love of a Good Woman, Selected Stories, Open Secrets, Friend of My Youth, The Progress of Love, The Moons of Jupiter, Who Do You Think You Are?, Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, Lives of Girls and Women, and Dance of the Happy Shades.

"I wait for material to turn up and it always turns up", says Munro, whose stories always centre around life and living in Canada. The Swedish Academy praised her, "Finely tuned story-telling, which is characterised by clarity and psychological realism." She joins Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Harold Pinter, Jose Saramago, Nadine Godimer, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison and the late Seamus Heaney in being given the accolade since 1901. She has passed through phases of working as a waitress,

tobacco picker and a library clerk. She is still operating "Munro's Books," a quant bookstore in Victoria of West Vancouver. And yes, like many young writers, her collection of short stories was once rejected by publishers. Yet her ordinary stories about ordinary life eventually became extraordinary.

Unlocking doors to the world's imagination, creating stories which have the unique quality of being universal in their resonance, critical acclaim and public appreciation were hers in Canada, even before the Nobel Prize.

> RUMMANA CHOWDHURY, POET-FICTION WRITER LIVES IN TORONTO, CANADA

## Literature Festival Survivor

NIGHAT GANDHI

'M a lit fest survivor. After attending my last lit fest I emerged intact but psychologically bruised. When my ten minutes of self-promotion were over, I came away confused and jaded: is it the business of a writer to systematically advertise herself and her books? To refer to a book as a product offends literary sensibilities, but it's undeniable that we live and write in a global marketplace where books are products and writers are brand names. The more marketable the brand name, longer the shelf life of the product and higher the chances of the brand name's survival in the literary marketplace.

#### Tricks of the trade:

What do profit-driven pressures do to ularly that session on bestsellers feeling writers who are not likely to write fretful and anxious, yet strangely bestsellers? Other than turn them into selfdeprecating narcissists. Not everybody is a Shobhaa De with metres of bookshop wall space devoted to her. I attended a session on bestsellers at the lit fest with Shobhaa De presiding, resplendent in a flowing red and white outfit and looking perennially 40. She pronounced: 'Times have changed. Writers are expected to get much more involved in the marketing of their own books.' Another best-selling author who shared the stage with Ms De shared precious tricks of the trade: the writer should visit bookshops, personally meet the managers to make sure they display

your book prominently. When your book solitude and the pleasures does well, revisit the same bookshops with boxes of sweets for employees who did display your book prominently. Buy your own books online from different sellers to push up the sales figures in the first few crucial weeks after publication. Tweet endlessly about your book on Twitter and constantly update your FB page. Beg your friends or pay people to write favourable tionship a book develops customer reviews on online booksellers' with its reader, that person sites. Hire ad agencies to prepare video who accidentally discovclips of your book for multiplexes: the ers the book, stares at the target audience that goes to watch movies in malls is also the one to buy your book. And, this last tip I added for myself: enroll yourself in an evening MBA programme in something clicks, and she marketing.

I came away from the lit fest and partic- I like to imagine that liberated. Since my books are not likely to become best sellers, I consoled myself, I need not panic. Nevertheless, having traces of the self-deprecating narcissist in me, I took a walk through the airport bookshop. I recalled the best-selling writer's warning: jo dikhta hai, wo bikta hai. That which is seen, sells. To be sold, a product must be seen! Where would they display my products? I didn't find any of my books in the bookshop. I couldn't muster courage to walk up to the salesperson and ask if they had any books by Nighat Gandhi. What if he said No?

A friend had forwarded a summary by

Maria Popova of a 1956 Paris Review interview with American novelist, William Faulkner. Faulkner's observations on what it takes to be a good writer resuscitated "Ninety-nine percent talent . . . ninety-nine percent discipline . . . ninety-nine percent work" is how he described the writing process. I suppose he might have attributed the remaining one percent to luck. And what about worrying about the success of one's book? Could lack of security, happiness, and honour be an important factor in the artist's creativity?" Faulkner: "No. They are important only to [her] peace and contentment, and art has no concern with peace and contentment. The only environment the artist needs is whatever peace, whatever solitude, and whatever pleasure [she] can get at not too high a cost."

Thanks, Faulkner, for reminding me that my job as a writer is to seek peace and

of writing. My job is to impregnate myself with the idea of a book, let it gestate, and having given birth to the book, release it to live an independent life according to its destiny.

That mysterious rela-

cover, flips some pages, pauses at some sentence, and in that pause decides to buy the book .... person, and to me the mystery of what impels a reader to buy my book is a mystery I would rather not manipulate. The relationship that develops between a reader and a book is a bond that

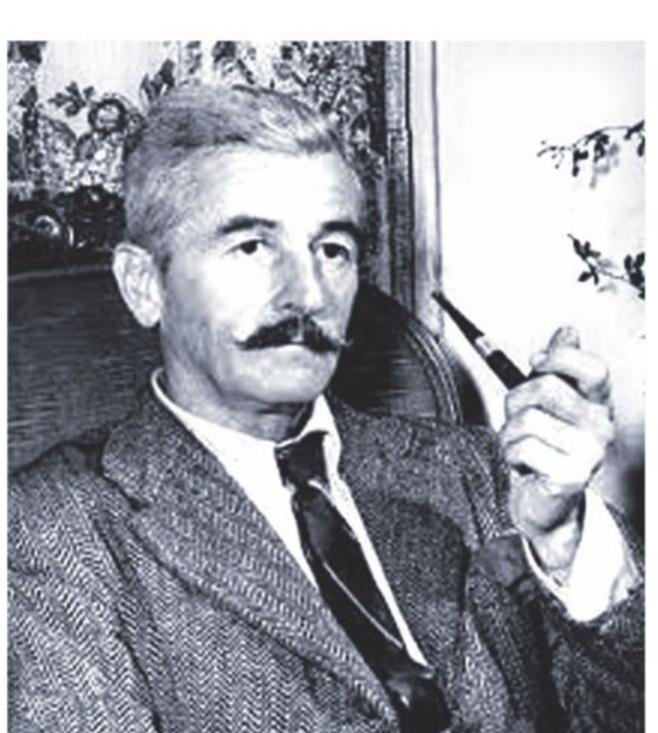
matures over time. A word, a sentence, an image, a character tugs at your inwardness and meets you and helps you transcend yourself. It's a healing moment, a transformative moment, a moment of self-knowledge, and it comes about in the dynamic interaction between

the reader and the writing. So it's the writing, not the writer who produces those magic moments? Or that's how it used to be when a writer was not a brand name. When a writer didn't feel compelled to build brand loyalty to ensure that the next time you, the potential book buyer, comes across that brand name, you buy the book. Brand loyalty means if it's written by XYZ, it must be worth buying. If your friends are liking it on FB (never mind if they're reading it) shouldn't you do the same?

Faulkner summed up his own and all writers' worth thus:

"If I had not existed, someone else would have written me, Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, all of us. Proof of that is that there are about three candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. But what is important is Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream, not who wrote them, but that somebody did. The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important, since there is nothing new to be said. Shakespeare, Balzac, Homer have all written about the same things, and if they had lived one thousand or two thousand years longer, the publishers wouldn't have needed anyone since."

A humbling truth: No writer's literary output is indispensable to civilization's progress. As I was leaving the lit fest, a woman approached me. She said she really



William Faulkner

liked what I read of my work. And another young man said: "You know, I could really relate to your pain in the passage you read." This was the magic moment! It didn't matter if they were going to buy my book. I was grateful they had connected with my words.

Chipping Rocks

In that session on bestsellers, Ian Jack, a seasoned editor and columnist who has lived through many seasons of writing and editing, described writing as something hard, slow and painful. "It's chipping rocks and it's not often a joyous experience. Nobody wants to get up and do it first thing in the morning," he said. How right he was! I can seldom think with great joy about writing first thing in the morning though it's the one thing that I enjoy doing the most. And the thing I dread the most.

When the hurly-burly of the lit fest was over, I returned to the solitariness, to the loneliness of my calling and the everlooming laziness of writing. To the silent terror of writing and, worse, the terror of not writing, all of which confronts a writer each time she sits down and stares at the blankness of the page or the screen. Just showing up to write requires plenty of cajoling self-talk. The creative anxiety each writer must live with is bad enough. Do we need to add to it marketing and sales woes? A book may or may not become a best seller, but Ian Jack laid bare the truth about a book's longevity when he said: 'We won't know if [a book] is good literature until 50 years later.'

On the way to the airport from the lit fest, asked the taxi driver to pull up. I was feeling very nauseous. A soft, wedge-like moon gazed at me gloomily as I crouched by the roadside. Each painful spasm was

followed by a sense of relief as my sumptuous, acid-tinged dinner was hauled up. Hummus, pesto, Thai curry, chocolate mousse, wine. Spicy-sweet and laced with stomach acid. It was a strange reversal of reality to taste food first at the back of my throat and then in my mouth. The throwing up was symbolic: I was disgorging myself of the negativity, the constant sizing up, are-you-worth-my-time kind of scrutiny a writer squirms under from other writers, editors, publishers, literary agents, and all of this while sharing the most genial dinner cocktails.

It was drizzling when I entered my room. I wanted to curl up on my bed with the faded green bedcover and soak in the soft, spongy, rainy silence. My desk and chair looked forlorn without me. I took a long nap, comforted by the whirring of the fan and the soft prattling of rain. Never before have I been so grateful for windows. In the plush hotel where the lit fest authors were housed, the ceiling to floor glass windows were unopenable. I couldn't hear the birds or lean out into the city air. As the afternoon wore on, I sat with my cup of tea and watched the honeyed light fade behind the gnarled branches of motherly trees. The lame stray dog I feed came and slumped outside my door. Stroking her back, I apologized for being away.

Slowly, thoughts about this essay started to trickle in. I was on my path to a slow recovery as a lit fest survivor!

NIGHAT GANDHI'S RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOK IS: ALTERNATIVE REALITIES: LOVE IN THE LIVES OF MUSLIM WOMEN

### **POETRY**

# Love Tale

ATIKA CHERRY

Nights are senseless His tent or tongue looks more irresistible This poet denies the outer world, the longing Of get lost in full moon or escape for save this soul.

Sex overwrites the melodrama of each raindrop On my skin, Denying like dying Is the world's best joke.

Love is not lunatic anymore It has voice of pure rhythmic tone It knows logic of all sharp fall ...n when it falls, demon laughs

Love can be a whore Whore is never, nothing like love Checkbox of right or wrong, easy! Who cares?

Valid or void Love is just not love, it's Always hard to define but easier to think Love turns on the long to play Angels come back, demons too.

I'm bringing fairytales back. What about you?

ATIKA CHERRY IS A YOUNG POET



Shobhaa De