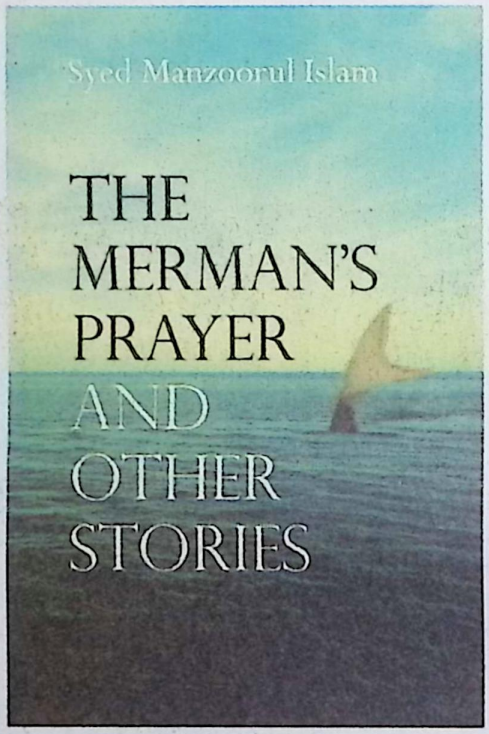
Into the Art of Storytelling

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What if inside certain jackfruits – of the ripe heavy type from Joydevpur – there lived a jackfruit maiden to emerge of an evening and, as readily as the fruit's sweet aroma, tantalise? What if a mermaid invited you into the water at midnight at Cox's Bazar?

"What if there is something else, beyond the common and the uncommon, something in the region of, say, paranormal? What then?"

He knows the value in suspending disbelief in the extraordinary or the miraculous. He knows those childhood gifts of wonder and imagination better not be discarded upon reaching adulthood. Stories can relieve, can help in getting through our sometimes mundane, sometimes painful lives. Stories can inspire. We want to believe.

What master story-teller Syed Manzoorul Islam probably does not know (but we do) is that to dip into his short story collection, "The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories" published by The Daily Star Books in 2013 is to become envious of his children. How many stories, of what unexpected twists and turns, did the English professor of Dhaka University tell them as entertainment on their way to sleep? How many of his stories wandered off into the air as soon as their last words were breathed and are only remembered by an undoubtedly grateful but very select audience? This short story collection leaves you to consider that loss.

Yet it's not solely the childhood harkening appeal of the mysterious which draws the reader in. His stories are an intriguing mixture of wonder and worldlier themes. This is adult writing and in the small space offered by a story Islam has demonstrated the ability to condense a vast array of aspects of modern Bangladeshi existence: politics, crime and justice, gender relations, family and social life. At times it reads like the totality of contemporary Bangladesh in a pressure cooker – a carefully constructed stew of many problem ingredients. It's impressive.

In that context is it a surprise that the paranormal, too, may enter the fray?

"The Living Dead" is about a life support patient who summons the strength to return, of sorts, only to find his family's lives have moved on in his absence. In "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" a faith healer of some renowned faces his most difficult case: a woman tormented by dreams of eating babies. "She" introduces a hard-kicking foetus and a pari or fairy who likes to mysteriously complete the housework each night while the humans sleep.

Yet all of these stories awaken more than the paranormal: contemplations of the line dividing life from non-life, both at birth and at death, family relations, faith, love, loss, health, courage: the very much "this-worldly" themes are many.

Alternatively, the paranormal is the spice or the garnish Islam chooses to add a final touch of intrigue to an already interesting human story.

One exception devoid of paranormal activity, the opening story "Daedelus's Kite" covers everything from kite flying in Old Dhaka to murder, power imbalance, the media and corrupted justice. It's almost a "what's-what" of challenges in a country like Bangladesh, in a city such as Dhaka – in sharp focus. But even there, perhaps by way of substitute, we are given that delightful, almost magical scene of an unscrupulous barrister throwing a packet of food across a courtroom to a starv-