

Editor's Note: "Writer's Wilderness Survival Kit" is an occasional column where selected readers' questions on writing will be addressed, so any question can be sent to the Literature Page Editor at <dsliteditor@gmail.com

HOW CAN A WRITER ENSURE SUCCESS? Doesn't the Success of a Writer Depend on the Muse?

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Somerset Maugham famously said, "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." Similarly, there are many ways in which a writer can achieve success — usually through a combination of luck, talent and connections — but the majority of writers struggle to work that combination to their own benefit. Not least because some of the factors affecting

failing to show up at your desk on a regular basis, and doing the work to the best of your abilities. To claim that writers are entirely at the mercy of the muse, and subject to the whims and caprices of the aforementioned muse, is at the very least somewhat disingenuous. At worst, it is borderline delusional.

Most of the time, like other activities, writing is a question of buckling down and getting on with it. Of course, the quality of the work you produce does vary, and that can sometimes be a source of considerable aggravation. But nothing is more designed to ensure failure than procrastination in the name of sitting around and waiting for the muse. The muse is like a cat — neediness turns her off!

Along similar lines, a young writer insisted that he could only work while he was on vacation, because that was the only time he ever felt inspired. Given how little of our lives is spent on holiday, such a precondition is unlikely to bode well for any writer's potential productivity...

As beginners, writers often feel frustrated that their stories are riddled with flaws. Those with more experience know that flawed first drafts are more or less a given. And however dreadful a first draft is, it gives a writer something to work with. With a draft, at least you have the raw material for a story. In order to produce that first draft though, a degree of discipline and the willingness to work when you least feel like it is essential.

Closely related to this issue of discipline, is an understanding of just how much of writing is actually *re-writing*. No matter how well somebody writes, it is

unlikely that their work will be considered fit to present to a reader, a publisher or a reviewer without multiple rounds of editing and re-working. People tend to feel very differently about that process.

Personally, it is an enormous relief for me to actually have a first draft done. So much so, that my subsequent attempts at re-writing seem far less painful. There are even times when I find the delicate work of trimming and polishing quite pleasurable. But judging from the number of people who have told me that they hate editing, not everyone shares my views.

Notwithstanding that, it is almost impossible to get a story to carry its reader along, to ensure that they are seamlessly caught up in the flow of words, until all its rough edges and split ends have been trimmed off. I am often surprised, and always appalled, when I see people eager to share a first draft that has not even been proofed with respect to its spelling and grammatical flaws, let alone substantively revised so that it displays the story to its best advantage. No writer does themselves a favour in attempting such shortcuts.

In fact, I would argue that the success of any writer who approaches their work with a degree of professionalism depends essentially on their own talent and hard work — supported by a hefty dose of luck. Not on the whims of their Muse.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. The author of *Fragments of Riversong* and the editor of *Lifelines*, she has been *Writer in Residence* with the *Commonwealth Writers Website*.



a writer's success are beyond their control e.g. market trends like those that led to the rise of the vampire romance novel, cue *Twilight Saga*. So the simple (and rather unsatisfactory) answer to this question is that there is really no way for a writer to guarantee his or her success!

Having said that, there *are* ways in which writers can improve their odds of success. For a start, there is no excuse for



AT THE TRAIN STATION

JARIN SHOILEE

I saw him. It was no mistake that it was him. No doubt, no confusion. He was there and it was him.

It was that same face, nakedly visible over the pile of luggage surrounded by a number of people here and there, smoking, sipping tea, reading newspaper, or chattering among themselves - only to pass the time while waiting for the train to come. The wrinkles of his face held my attention for a few moments. The face, weighed down with age, did not hold the usual graceful appearance of old age, even though he wore a short white beard and covered his head with a *tupi*. Rather, his face reminded me of an old wolf - a terrible beast who had to surrender to the inevitable cycle of ageing, but unfortunately had its nails and teeth remaining.

Seeing him, my whole existence shattered into pieces.

It all happened fifteen years ago. I used to live in this place with my family. My father's new posting suddenly cut my ties with the town I used to live in, and placed me here much to my despair. Such dislocation affected my sensitive soul. Gradually, a sense of dejection began to engulf me. The sight and smell of the river haunted me constantly. The riverbank in our old abode used to be my playground, my self-proclaimed territory. The absence of the river pained me in the new place. Since the day I moved here, I found I was a butterfly turning back into a tiny, lonely caterpillar.

But one day my mother told me, "Dear, don't be upset. Tell your father to take you to the rail station. You'll love it there."

"Rail station?" I was surprised.

"Where?"
"Very near, about two minutes' walk!" She raised her arm in front of me. "You haven't seen a big train, have you? It's like a snake! It's the longest snake you'll ever see."

I was astonished. I feared snakes. Somebody told me they were poisonous and deadly. Just one bite and



you are dead. But I was impatient to meet this gigantic snake. Would the train be a snake to me? I was curious - I had neither seen a train running towards me before, nor had I taken a journey by train yet. I asked my father to take me to the station. He readily agreed.

From the first day of my visit, the rail station captured my heart. What I liked most about the station was the mobility - the rush of life. With sheer amazement I would jump across the railway lines. The lively bustle of the station began to awe me like nothing else. The whistle of the train thundered in my blood. After school, I picked excuses not to return home right away, so that I could run errands by the railroads with my friends. It felt like I could hear the whistle even from my school! Our favorite game was scaring each other by fake alarms of the train's arrival, and squeaking and pushing each other with feigned fear.

My friend clapped and sang,
"Jhikjhikjhikjhikjhikjhikjhikjhikjhik
The train sings as it goes!"
Days turned lovely for a child like me. And the train was nothing like a

snake! My mother was wrong - I thought. The train was the friendliest creature I had ever encountered.

One day, on our way back after some shopping, my father told me he had to go to the station to receive someone arriving by train. I accompanied him happily. While waiting for the guest, he started gossiping with some local person while I engaged myself in observing people.

Right at that moment the man caught my eyes.

He was watching me from some distance with a blatant face, accompanied by an I-don't-have-a-care-in-the-world type of smile hanging from his mouth. He did not intend to say anything. Eventually I sensed there was something wrong in his gaze. He was swallowing me with his eyes, enjoying every bit of the unease I felt. It was unclear how to avoid him or ask him why he looked at me like that. Was I a bad kid? Did he somehow see me accidentally pushing some other child onto the road while playing? Or, was I wearing something too funny? I was confused and glanced at my father who was engrossed in a deep conversation

about politics of the country or something like that. I looked closely - the man was about my father's age. I was getting increasingly afraid. That uncouth man was staring at me in a way nobody ever did before.

At last the train arrived. My father grabbed my hand to look for his guest. That moment it happened. Yes, it happened before I could imagine anything - for I doubted if it really ought to be imagined by a child like me.

I saw the man standing beside me, giving me a transformed, innocent look, as if I resembled his little daughter he was seeing after ages. I was completely startled. How could he manage to come near me within the blink of an eye? I clearly saw him standing far away. When I held my father's hand and started to walk over, he paced even nearer, and what he did next left me with no chance to protest or even scream. My chest burned as his iron fingers clawed at me and he smiled.

For a moment my feet froze on the railroad. It took me minutes to understand what had happened. I cried in sheer pain - but my cry got muffled in the buzzing noise of the crowd.

"Be quick!" my father turned around, feeling me stopping abruptly. "I told you not to pause while crossing the railroad."

I looked around for the man. He had disappeared into the crowd already.

I could not speak. I could not breathe either. A hot flush of tears stung my eyes, blurred my vision and weakened my senses as if I had been thrown into a terrible nightmare. Suddenly, from an innocent little girl I was transformed into a mean, disgusting creature.

The whistle of the train jolted me back from the past days.

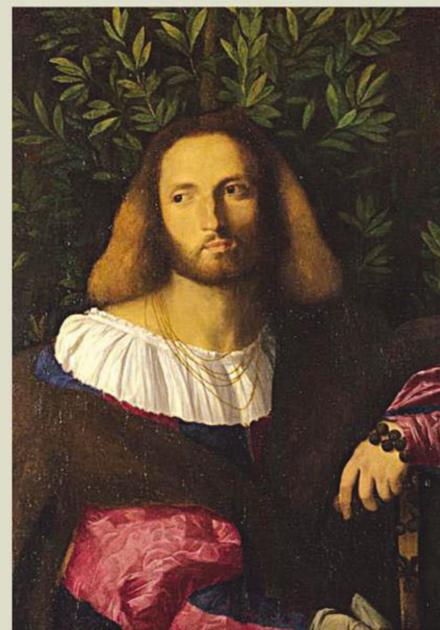
Glancing down at myself I wondered how I had assumed that things changed over the years. Nothing had really changed.

Jarin Shoilee is a student at the Department of English, Jahangirnagar University.

POETRY

The Poet

BIPASHA HAQUE



In his lips was written submission.
His moon shaped beard neatly combed,
deep set eyes seeping into melancholia.
I could smell an earthy bohemian scent
trailing from his musky brown soul,
testifying his attachment to the sun-drenched soil.
Here's the one who's been seasoned through living-
The way it unfolds to a poet only.

Not surprisingly his shirt was modest, though clean
and so was his yellowing lungi.
They say he has a scrapbook of two hundred poems,
Handwritten,
As he couldn't get them typed.

I've heard him reciting his poem,
Stirring a rhapsody of lingering aromas,
and I won't be lying if I tell you,
melancholy oozed out
from each syllable of that rendition.
His droopy eyes averted the audience,
And it upset me. Deeply.

As said, I've seen your lilting voice phoenix like,
regenerating into ripples,
Ripples that curve the order of the universe.

Bipasha Haque is a diaspora writer with particular
interest in life-the way it is. By profession she is a univer-
sity teacher.

Music

MUSHFERA JAHAN

Music is like a bridge,
Between real and unreal
It is the door that opens on the surreal.

You dive into the ocean of emotion,
You bathe, you swim;
You come ashore
Wet, melted feelings dripping from every pore.
You walk on the dune of lyrics
Feeling the warmth of sand,
The wind of rhythm hits you, shakes you
The sweet breeze of melody caresses you gently,
stirring your hair.
You feel one with the tune
You want to melt into water
And dissolve in the sea,
You want to break up into grains of sand
And be sprinkled on the shore;
To stay there...forever.

Mushfera Jahan is an MA student of Department of
English and Humanities, ULAB.

