

Brief encounters in the labyrinth of exile

Published in the Independent, Dec 2002

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"SIT STILL", Aamer Hussein gently admonishes an impatient reader. Turquoise, his collection of seven absorbing stories, must be read slowly to savour its many pleasures. He's an author who takes his time, patiently finding the right words, yet his writing has a confidence and ease that belie painstaking effort. The fluid prose is sometimes simple and pristine, sometimes sinuous and visceral: "Then there is the bitter hard fruit they call caronda, radish red concealing white unripe but it opens to deep red and it bleeds, you can pretend you're wounded, you can cry."

His cosmopolitan cast is made up of people who have spent their lives in "three worlds and three languages," who have fled the Pakistani war and the tyranny of Idi Amin. Their stories tell of migration, repatriation, exile, homes abandoned, families dissipated.

The ghost of Indian partition hovers over everything. Students, writers, journalists and academics meet and part as they wander between London, Beijing, Karachi and Surabaya, with English as their common language. Some cling to early relationships, others restlessly make and break new ties. We grow familiar with these expatriates as if we too had to find our way in a foreign city.

"Cactus Town" and "Electric Shadows" are autobiographical, the first beautifully evoking the author's childhood, the second his teenaged years and the family's flight from Karachi during the war. The narrator is a sensitive boy living in books, yet surrounded by the richness of family life and the natural environment. There are the intrigues of marriages made and broken, wealth won and lost, the dangers and separations of political upheavals. Hussein's gift for the long short story allows a family history to be rendered in a few pages while conveying as much or more than many South Asian novels the size of cinder-blocks.

The stories' imagery is radiant, and their nostalgia never self-indulgent. Hussein's editing is cinematic and his deft cutting makes astute use of the line break, almost like a prolonged blink.

"We will never again have a house in Karachi": substitute just about any city for Karachi, and this bleak statement speaks for millions in the post-colonial world. "Electric Shadows" ends with the mournful revelation that "Childhood pleasures are no armour for future adversity." "A Storyteller's Tale" and "The Needlewoman's Calendar" relate the hardships of two poor women, one destroyed by partition, the other by marriage, whom necessity forces to live by previously undiscovered talents.

"City of Longing" is a sensuous and mystical tale of sexual initiation and stern magic. Though vividly imagined, the subject is less suited to Hussein's style and interrupts the mood of the collection.

In the title story, Nusra and Danny, research scholars at a London university, are on the brink of becoming lovers but are tied to unhappy marriages. First loves and first countries exert too strong a pull, and they are forced apart forever. As a parting gift, Nusra writes Danny a story that must take the place of love. The author wistfully refers to his stories as "happenstance, electric shadows of chance encounters and changing loves". Yet they capture and keep what is fated always to be lost.