

Insomnia

by Aamer Hussein

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This disarming collection of stories manages to feel both original and slightly old-fashioned. These stories just seem less contrived than much contemporary fiction. They sprawl in a way that's impossible to pin down, being profound, but low key; spiritual, but pragmatic; full of longing, but also acceptance.

In "The Crane Girl", a young Pakistani, Murad, falls in love with a beautiful but manipulative Japanese girl, Tsuru. The two are studying in London during the early 1970s - outside class they go to see Mungo Jerry and the Kinks in Hyde Park, and watch hippies smoke hash and make love in the grass while Hare Krishna people hand out rice and lentils. Murad's love is not returned and eventually Tsuru disappears without warning, leaving him to reflect bitterly on the people he calls his friends while yearning for something more.

"The Book of Maryam" describes a controversial Pakistani writer's visit to a London symposium on the role of the writer in troubled times. While reading from her work she's heckled; what do her political, autobiographical stories have to do with art? The event draws to an abrupt close after it over-runs and the author is left reading her work in the overlit refectory, the college's poet-in-residence and a Critical Theory person talking over her.

These stories feel like the work of an outsider - subtle expressions of alienation in which characters are frequently misunderstood, rarely heard and never feel a real sense of belonging.