

# A wild child with a string of beads

In the world of Aamer Hussein, “a story is as real as the reader makes it” (“What Do You Call Those Birds?”). Truth depends on a point of view, and the external facts of any situation are blandly reductive when compared to the emotions implicit in it. The way that people tell stories, and what those stories tell us about the real world, is at the heart of *Turquoise*, Hussein’s third collection. In the title story, two London-based Asians live with failing relationships. Nusra writes a folk tale for Danny about a wild child who wears a string of turquoise beads. When Nusra’s narrator receives a string of turquoise beads one morning after months of ignoring the wild child in his dreams, he realizes that the child was real. Reading this story, Danny recognizes that he has come to appreciate Nusra too late to escape from his unsatisfactory marriage.

Displacement here is often a metaphor for unrealized desire. Characters move between countries, cities, or districts and find themselves living in strange places or inhabiting folk tales. These changes of place inform the dramas of love and desire that lie at the core of Hussein’s writing, providing an anchor for his observations of the ways in which men and women fall in and out of love, how they cope with emotional longing and physical desire. In “Cactus

Town”, Hussein moves between the suburbs of Karachi, switching between places and accumulating scenes and details to compose a picture of family life that evokes the unspoken desire that distant relatives can have for each other: “One look at Nuria, her brown hair and golden skin and wide hips . . . and longing soaks him in sweat.” Wherever his characters travel, and however much time passes, their feelings, and the consequences of those feelings, remain with them. Facts are not as important as emotions. In “Electric Shadows”, Hussein writes: “My stories . . . are happenstance: electric shadows of chance encounters and changing love.”

Naked fact can be changed by the passage of time, memory, or even the simple longing for an outcome which is different from reality: “stories are about finding the pattern, arranging elements in a shape that makes sense . . . though every word here is as true as I can make it, I’m merely chasing the flickering

JAMES W. WOOD

Aamer Hussein

TURQUOISE

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of light.” In “Electric Shadows”, the war between Pakistan and India forms a backdrop to the schoolyard romance between Aamer and Madeline. After school every day, Aamer plays Indian and Pakistani soldiers – and Pakistan wins every time. Just as he plays at war, so the children are playing at love, and the outcome of their love is as unreal as the outcome of the war games, provoking the realization that “Love fades when you know you are longing for nothing.”

By creating an interplay between perceived fact and the imagination, between the fantastic and the real, the stories evoke the loss felt when desire remains unfulfilled, when dreams are disappointed by reality. Hussein writes with the economy and technical skill of a poet, sometimes employing line-break and line-length to control the narrative, as here in “The City of Longing”:

Its lock is between her thighs  
Place the key in its diamond mouth  
Turn  
Taste bliss  
Then fall.

This control enables him to compose stories from a few scenes of no more than a couple of pages’ length. His prose ranges from rich sensuality – “Her eyes have lights in their

darkness like pieces of jade. Her skin is the colour of sunlight” (“The City of Longing”) – to an imitation of a businessman’s clipped efficiency: “Ring me before you go. We’ll have lunch. I’m in a hurry just now . . .” (“Turquoise”).

Perhaps his philosophy as a writer is best expressed by the heroine of “Adiba: A storyteller’s tale”. In this story, critics make light of Adiba’s writing, seeing her as no more than “a pedlar of romances”. In return, she protests that romance and the imagination, and their capacity to make sense of the world around us, are the most precious gifts a writer can give to his or her readers. These qualities are found in abundance in Aamer Hussein’s work: like Adiba, he has “written about the wars in the world, about the struggle for freedom . . . but that’s only the bloody backdrop to stories of hope: she prefers happy endings. She writes about love.”