

Micro-Fiction: 2022
Dr. Suneel Mehmi

Published by the Mehmi Press
December 2023

Please distribute freely but do not claim ownership
or sell. The moral rights of the author are reserved.

The Jokes that Slayed

27.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

In a fit of nastiness, the cosmic joker had decided to make S. live through the same two hours over and over again. Sadistically, he had chosen a stretch of time that was so bereft of any interest that it was nauseatingly depressing. And the experience was not like some time loop movie where one could choose to alter something here or there. No. S. had to go through the same motions over and over again, without any free will in the matter, all the while knowing and sickening over the dearth of stimulation and novelty. At first, it was mildly annoying. Then it was frustrating. Finally, it was destroying. Yet everything had to happen as it had to happen. No deviation, no digression, despotic plotting from A to B. Yes, the cosmic joker did prefer the jokes that slayed.

The Last Edge of It

26.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

With killing eyes and killing smiles, they pushed me towards the abyss. But the final propulsion was something that they could not give. Facing me, they made an unconvincing demonstration of love, and then begged me to leap into the nothingness. And, even though I felt their duplicity, and, even though I sensed their harm, a magnetic calling came from below. Unthinkingly, I was preparing to fall, fall and smash. But - the big but. While I hovered at the precipice, before the ending, the spirit of resistance also erupted from within. So, there was this waiting game, conducted at the thin edge between life and death, freedom and compulsion, demand and response. My friend, we are still waiting.

The Warmth of a Woman
24.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

Sympathetic, kind and thoroughly lovely, M. really was one of a kind. She radiated a blissful warmth. But, naturally, such a remarkable woman had been claimed by others than myself. I met her when she had advanced into old age at a community event. If experience had taken nothing away from her, it had added to her charms. Immediately, we became fast friends and I basked in her wonderful warmth. It did not matter that it could not be all mine. M. was like the splendour of the sun which irradiated a whole planet, and as munificently. Truly, it is rare in life to feel up close such a warmth of a woman and even for such warmth to exist in our cold, cold climate.

Hearing the War in the Rain
24.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

The rain came, and with it, the news of the war. The drumming of the raindrops against the window cheaply imitated machine gun fire. Yes, absurdly, crazily, a war again in Europe. An unwarranted invasion. My artist friend lived in the invaded country and had abandoned art because of the immense pressures upon her and her people. But, yes, incredibly, shockingly, a war again in Europe. After all the prolonged anxiety of the pandemic, this was the step that humankind was taking in the first few moments of a glimmering freedom. The raindrops collided with the glass again and again. They had found their target. A war again in Europe.

The Target of Anger

23.02.2022 Suneel Mehmi

Some people are just more angry than others. From a young age, the highly irascible S. was forced to bottle up his anger, leaving it with no target in the physical world. This powerful emotion had to expend itself from the inside. If such a force could destroy and transform being and time, then instead, its potential was leached away into a void. When the world pushed him - at work, the public, even family and friends - S. had to swallow down that killing feeling, force it down as far as it went. Yet that gloriously violent anger permeated S.'s writing and research. Yes, in writing, one could have that sublime thing, enmity. An enemy to watch, wound, worry, whip. It didn't matter that few read, because in the writing one could become very, very angry. And one could let it out.

Ignored Letters

22.02.2022 Suneel Mehmi

S. had thoroughly spoilt his life because he did not want to be an absolute idiot. One thing required was to send emails to other people that also did not want to be absolute idiots, the academics. Unfortunately, irritatingly, deflatingly, the academics hardly ever wrote back. S. would carefully compose letters, applications, articles, all of which never received replies. It was like throwing a message in a bottle into the open sea, with only the slightest chance of communication. On the now rare occasion when someone, somewhere did reply, it was in most cases a rejection. This had always happened, S. told himself, recalling the incident in 'Jude the Obscure', where Jude optimistically writes a letter to a scholar, only to be rebuffed. The system of not being an absolute idiot, S. painfully realised, was in some ways worse than the system of the idiots. You did not crash into the barbaric silence of the wise.

People Won't Let You Learn

21.02.2022 Suneel Mehmi

Throughout my life, I couldn't read any Indian languages, although I could speak and comprehend them fairly well. One day, I decided I would learn to read again. I ploughed patiently through the three different scripts of Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi and accomplished my desire. But then, to remove the label of illiterate from my name, I wanted to learn how to write in these alphabets. For this, I needed help I thought. So I phoned the Indian cultural centre in London which had Hindi classes. The gentleman on the phone asked me what my age was and then, finding that I was in my thirties, told me that he wouldn't teach me. So I was alone. Like other people, who are constant distractions and obstructions to learning, this gentleman had decided to thwart my education and connection with my people. And yet, he was sitting in the Indian cultural centre, deriving pay from that institution. Congratulations on the victory of the people that won't let you learn.

Something Caught Within

20.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

At a certain age, S. found that he needed to expel something from his body or his mind. He didn't know what it was, but he suffered lamentably from a spiritual constipation. No matter what he did, the mysterious substance would not exit his frame. It was a perplexing situation. Did it happen to everyone? Did such an experience plague womankind, he wondered? Whatever needed to go was slowly filling S. up and taking the space for everything else inside. He was powerless to impede its dominion. There was something caught within, a monstrous, ungaugable, undefined IT.

The Nightmare That Woke Me Up This Morning 19.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

As in most of my dreams, I'm in school again. Talking to my arch nemesis, the Welsh games teacher. I've been using the field and ask him if I have permission to use the track for running the 400m and the 800m. He says that I have to run the 1800m. I start running but suddenly I'm holding a baby. A very sick baby. Now, I have to get the child to the doctor's before it dies. The scene changes. I'm running down the high street. The baby is dying, I'm running. I'm running, the baby is dying. I'm not good enough, fast enough. I'm near, so near. At the most awful moment of suspense, I wake up. The baby never got there.

The Stolen Voices

18.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

When we are born, they steal our voices and bury them beneath the ocean. What we have instead are tired imitations of the tongues of the powerful and the tongues of slavish conformity. When we say, we follow hollow conventionality and are encompassed by the minds of others. They have been doing this for thousands of years to our people. But every once in a while, a man is born who cannot live without his true voice, a man that cannot live as a parrot. Such a man dives into the deeps and searches. He swims and digs. Such a man breaks the shackles of the tongues of others and he reconnects with what was taken from him. And the voice he finds has ripened beneath the ocean floor, it has extracted music from the earth, glorious, moving, magical notes. It is the voice of integrity.

The Man Who Ate Fire

17.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

Nothing was of any use. S. had performed feats of strength, juggling, acrobatics, everything. The prince was not amused. The vizier came to him and whispered in his ear that the audience wanted to see an artist really suffer for his art. The prince was a sadist in his fibres. 'So,' declared S. 'bring me the fire!' S. faced the prince and choked down the fire in one desperate gulp, artistically, beautifully, tragically. As the inner fire consumed his heart, S. looked with a strained gaze at the prince. The prince yawned.

Two Times His Skin Was Who He Was Not
16.02.2022 Suneel Mehmi

One time, S. walked out of the hospital after a blood test. The white receptionist at the desk started talking to him. At first, S. simply accepted that she was being friendly. It turned out that she thought he was a doctor that had come off duty. Of course, she did not say she had assumed the case because he was brown. Another time, S. was volunteering as an English teacher for refugees and migrants. It was the first day. He stood in the room where he was to teach. His white teaching partner turned up after him and when he tried to say hello, she said it wasn't time yet and walked off promptly to catch up with the management. She thought he was one of the refugees or migrants, because he was brown. And those were just Two Times His Skin Was Who He Was Not.

The State's Time Machine
15.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

In the government meeting, the topic was how to counter the rising unemployment rate. One bright spark suggested a time machine and a time commute. 'The thing with the past,' he said, 'was there was so much of it.' To exploit economically is what he meant. So, the state took a tiny fraction from its immense and unnecessary defence budget and hired highly expensive and highly unintellectual managers to supervise the project, while wholly ignoring the scientific community which said that time machines could not be built. The managers hummed and hawed while devouring millions of tax payer money. They were still deciding what engineers to hire. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate rose again, particularly in the engineering sector (because of the type of managers the state had hired). An official report was launched into the situation and concluded that the Prime Minister deserved a promotion.

Love Mirrors 14.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

S. was brought up to love women for their difference. This would have worked very well in the hot country of his parents, very well indeed. However, S. was born in a cold country. Here, women could only be loved so far as they served as mirrors for the men. Whatever the men did, the women had to copy. Whatever personality the men had, the women had to emulate. No matter what feelings and thoughts resided within, the women had to discard what was perceived as different. For S., this was a nightmare. S. could not love the mirror of the man from the cold country, a being who denied him status as a legitimate human being, nor could his urge for what was apart from himself be satisfied. So, instead, S. watched the men in love with their own mirrors and the women who wanted nothing more in life than to be a mirror reproduce, expand and dominate. And such was the global village today, that he saw it happening even in the hot countries. What a world of love.

The Man That Agreed With No One 13.02.2022

There once was a time when S. thought that people agreed on the important things. Then, life dealt him several blows and he grew up. First, it was everyone else that disagreed with everything he thought. Even tame things that he said were dealt with perplexity, dismissal, scorn or anger. Despite there being many stories about things, whatever story he chose was, evidently, wrong. After a period of this, S. consciously began disagreeing with everyone else's story. He held a profound contempt for the newspaper and the film or the book. S. raged silently, because he was completely and effectively spoken over by his society. Thus it was that S. became the man that agreed with no one.

It's Curtains For Me 12.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

The race began anew every morning. Most often, he would win, as he arose frightfully early. But when the sweet victory was mine, I would have the fresh pleasure of opening all the curtains downstairs. There was the beige set in the living room facing the outside world and then the ones overlooking the garden. Can I describe the earnest joy of hearing the cloth run along the rails as I massaged the pulleys, or the sudden epiphany of reveal as the larger world became clear to me? The task completed, I would win the day-long satisfaction of bringing light and vision to the home, feel a veritable God of Genesis.

By Any Other Name 11.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

S.'s Indian family insisted on never hailing any of its members by their given, official first name. The forename was for outsiders. So, when S. slowly oozed out into the wide, white world of school, this was when he became attached to his own first name. But the white teachers did not know how to say it. So, they gave it an English pronunciation. S., who never heard the word at home, or knew anyone called by it, just accepted that he was a mispronunciation. Imagine living a life when you cannot say your own true name. Only that which the state knows. It was only years later that he realised what had happened, how he had been subject to the linguistic colonisation of the other. But change can happen. Now S. not only pronounced his name correctly, but also knew what it meant and how he had gotten to be called S. Now he knew 'what's in a name'.

The Adventurous Letter 10.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

Living a rather dull life of eternal grasp in the 00s, a round of study, job applications and meaningless, menial work without beguiling women, S. fantasized about a special letter. Such an epistle would be the gateway to a bold, thrilling adventure, a universe apart. A transformation of being and experience. Instead, the letters that came were singularly uninteresting, bills and suchlike. One day, however, S. read Harry Potter and discovered that his daydream was shared. The first Harry Potter book began with a mysterious letter from an exotic foreign environment which gave, precisely, the adventure of our times. And so, S. realised that in fantasy, he was a penniless, solitary, struggling female, a Rowling. But so, apparently, was everyone else.

The Treachery of the Intellectuals 09.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

S. wanted to be considered an intellectual. He wanted to be a part of an intellectual community instead of the rough milieu he found himself in. Indeed, his identity was bound up in learning. The name 'Sikh' means 'student'. Historically, S.'s people were denied education and a voice by the elites. He was on a mission to change fate. Yet was it so very different now? For S. the climber collided, much to his shock and dismay, with the treachery of the intellectuals. This was a tribe - although with the one or two striking exceptions - that could not give companionship, camaraderie, respect or reward. What particularly shocked S. was that even the academics of his own race treated him like a detestable stranger, despite clamouring publicly about solidarity and identity politics. The individualising and isolating knowledges of the contemporary intellectual were a devastating thing, but only to outsiders like S. For, of course, they kept their community for themselves, for privileged insiders. Despite saying they were better than the rest of humanity (they always said pleasing things), intellectuals actually acted much worse. For us we have to dance with our own shade/for those inside have a fortress made.

The Longest Laugh 09.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

Unfortunately, S. was not born in the main group. So, when he grew up, realising that the world wanted to make his very being into a mockery - and when he retaliated by making mock of everything himself - the results were rather predictable. No one laughed. And everyone got upset. First, the teachers punished him for making jokes in class. Later, women could not bear being roasted and expelled him from their presence. He was unpopular, unloved and shunned. But every night, before bedtime, S. would look into the mirror (it was on his little desk, fixed to the wall by the previous owner of the house) and he would laugh. He would chortle. He would snicker. Titter, giggle, chuckle. Ha ha, hee hee, ho ho! S. had the longest laugh.

The Revenge of the Unrepresentable

08.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

The sickness was upon him. Everywhere he looked, there was no belonging, only difference. He had no voice but his own solitary one, no image but that in the mirror, no truth but his own. To cast a vote was to hand a bounty to an indefensible stranger. He did not fit, not in village, city, India or England, East or West. He ached with loneliness. And what did this unrepresented man yearn for? What was his ultimate desire? One solid, sensational slap. It would be the leader of the country, it would be a fine day. He would saunter up to the man of power and deliver the contemptuous, stinging rebuke, the glorious revenge. He would prove that the man that had no power could inflict his force, that he could give a mouth-breaking answer to the weak conventionality and indifference of the mass. The red blush on the cheek of power would light up the universe with its jest/and society would hum and haw but do the rest.

A Collection of Hurt. 08.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

Neha Kaur had had her heart broken many times. She often asked herself why it was her that such bad things happened to. After a particularly acute disappointment, Neha decided that she was no longer going to be a victim, a passive thing which things were done to. Instead, she was going to collect as many hurts as this fine world gave her. She would create the world's biggest collection of hurts, in her diary. When the white woman insulted her, she wrote it in her diary. When the white man or the Indian man exploited her, she wrote it in her diary. This diary, her voice, her resistance against the suffering of being, became her great treasure. And what did they do with it? They burnt it.

The Cries of the Cave Children

07.03.2022 - Suneel

A scrawled attempt at human figures. Children's footsteps in the tracks of a man, perhaps evidence of an amusing game. Hand prints on cave art. The child's presence in prehistoric life has echoed into the present. Yet it is a mental strain to imagine the circumstances of these children, a generation that learnt hunting, not writing, gathering, not mathematics. The impossible question that peculiarly interests me is how these children cried. Do all children cry across history? Were there silent tears, or loud bawls? Were tears an infrequent circumstance or not? What effect did such tears have on the adults that supervised the children? How did those tears make the children into the adults that they became? The fragile, passable tear does not survive history, neither do sadness and hurt, but if the child is father of the man, perhaps, too, in some sort, the tear is also the father of the man.

The Mountain 07.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

I have been climbing the mountain since I was born. Every day, even though my legs hurt and my back is sore, I stride up its hard face. There is only one way. And that is up. Rain falls, snow, sleet. The capricious, cold wind hammers at me with maximum will. Rarely is there sun or time for rest. In the beginning, there were five of us, like the fingers of a hand. Slowly, they fell away one by one, until only I was left. I journey alone into that night of a mountain, always aching for that unattainable summit. And once, just once, a bird landed on my shoulder, to sing a sweet nothing into my ear.

London's Embrace

06.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

What is it like to be a university student in London? The story that sticks out is when I once helped a stranger I had met at a university event. He asked if I could volunteer to help him post some flyers at a block of flats somewhere. We spent most of a weekend morning heaving up steps with the leaflets and dutifully sending them through letter boxes. I never heard from him after that, but then I saw him one day outside the British Library. To use a Victorian phrase, he cut me quite dreadfully when I said hello, and gave the impression that he didn't even know who I was. That, in a tale (there are many more like it), is what it was like to be a student in London and how the city welcomes you if you have brown skin. Your labour is wanted, free of charge, but not you.

The Nightingale's Magic 06.02.2022
Suneel Mehmi

The Rajah was sick at heart. He could not work, he wanted only sleep. They summoned all the doctors in the land but it was of no use. Then, the Rajah's mother suggested a solution, a half-forgotten tale. In a forest, far away, there was a nightingale with a voice so melodious and healing it could soothe being. The birdsong could even bring back those teetering on the brink of death. They searched for the nightingale everywhere, but it seemed as though she had flown. The Rajah grew duller and duller. He lay in bed, dying. His mother prayed for a miracle. In his last breath, as if by magic, the Rajah heard a faint, sweet voice resounding in his ears. It was a magic music that promised life and happiness, he yearned for it, but it was so far, far away!

Envy of the Artist

05.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

Before, K. seemed to have it all. As I struggled through rejection after rejection, she was in demand as an artist. Her Instagram art posts were chock full of admiring comments and likes. Yes, I envied her. I wished my life was like hers. But then, the evil arose. Just a few days ago, on Instagram, I saw the photo K. had taken of a humble pile of suitcases. She had written that this was what it looked like to have to flee your country to preserve your life. She was seeking asylum for herself and her children. Now I no longer envied K. Perhaps - I hesitate to put words in her mouth - she herself envied those of us in safe countries. Time is a tyrant and we have to bend to his force/long is the way and heavy is the course.

Mr Humplebelly and the Dancing Turds
05.02.2022 Suneel Mehmi

Mr Humplebelly was paid by the state to count the number of turds per acre in the city. Every morning, after hastily devouring his breakfast, he would set off on his turd counting trek. How fortunate I am, he would think to himself, that I am not contaminated by the abstruse and pedantic studies of something as worthless as English Literature. Instead, gloriously, I can serve my country with real work! Every turd he came across was an especial treasure. He kept photographs of them in his smartphone, planning to do a definitive work of turd analysis one day. And, in his dreams, every night, the turds danced, danced and danced, a seductive, dirty, dirty dance.

A Sold Voice

04.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

In an act of sheer desperation, C. sold her voice. So, she would hear the words of others spoken in her tones over the radio, listening as mutely as a block of stone. Things that she would never had said were pronounced with the appearance of her identity. Sometimes, she would get calls from friends and family that thought they had recognised her from the speeches, but she was unable to answer and would simply toy with the phone cradled in her hand. Was it a bargain that she regretted? Before she was hungry, now she had food. Before she was cold, now she had heat. And what use was it for one of the little people to have a voice anyway? So she consoled herself as once again she would sit back and listen to the voice which had now become the voice of the other, in a world where we have to sell ourselves over and over again.

Unnamed Perfume 04.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

When I was in university, I dodged and ducked human company as far as I could. I knew the other students only by the faintest of impressions. There was the starrer, the fashion model, and so on. The one that stood out the most there was a young woman with an incredibly heady and devouring perfume. When we stood in line for the class, as she approached, the unmistakable, faint smell would slowly grow until it blossomed into an abundant field of wild flowers. I have never smelt that scent again. It is foreign to these shores. If only I had asked her just once what it was. I would have kept it on my desk, a reminder of youth and striving. Now, this perfume returns to me again and again, flooding my memories with a surging, drowning current, a time in which I know nothing and no one, no name, no self.

The Fall of the Doll House
03.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

When it had become almost an impossibility for the young to own their own homes, a craze swept the generation. They began, ferociously, to buy dolls houses. With a lavish hand, and obsessively, they decked these residences in miniature with carpets, smart lighting, floorboards, granite counters. It grew to be a massive industry. Yet troubling tales soon came to the ear, unaccounted for happenings. For disasters befell the houses. There were raging fires, some houses shook and fell. My own house was swallowed by the ground noiselessly in front of my eyes. Some said it was a curse, others a punishment. And so there began the great international mourning, the copious tears offered for the fall of the imitation homes. A generation separated from a place to dream.

The Man with the Heart of Gold 03.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

Funnily enough, when I was a struggling writer railing against the stupidity, meanness and injustice of the world, no one wanted to hear what I had to say. But then, suddenly one day, my left eye turned into gold. The world was astonished. I was subjected to medical tests and they discovered that my heart had also transformed into a beating gold nugget. Now, there was a media frenzy about 'The Man with the Heart of Gold'. Everyone wanted my story. But as for me, I had changed with the changes in my body. Now I didn't want to communicate with the public at large. Silently, every five minutes, my gold eye cried a big, fat, shiny tear which dropped to the floor all unnoticed. And my gold heart trembled.

Man is an Island

02.03.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

When I was in sixth form, a distinguished so and so came in to give the whole year a philosophy lecture, 'No man is an island'. After an educated drawl, the middle aged man closed the session and then asked for questions. I felt that it fell to me, the clown of the year, the earnest member of the debating club, to put forward an inquiry. I queried whether a man floating in a swimming pool would not literally be an island. No one laughed and I was admonished by the geography teacher afterwards as being the master of the irrelevant question. However, that jest had teeth, which no one appeared to get. For such apparently universal and neutral claims and truths as 'no man is an island', there is always some reply, some criticism. I found it in literalism, in the body of a man, when philosophy would reduce man to a mind. In a language game, in a play of language, in a laugh. Then, as now, I believe in no one truth, in no objective, neutral, apolitical, timeless, unconditional, unqualified knowledge. The joker in me remains the debating champion.

Feeling Hole. 02.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

First the cat died. The budgie shortly after. Then, I slowly began losing all my Twitter followers. One a day, until I had no one left. It was astonishing, but I stood before the mirror when all this had happened and noticed that I had developed a tiny hole in my abdomen. What was it doing there? Why had it appeared? It grew to the size of my thumbnail, then my fist and eventually it became larger and larger, until I could no longer see myself at all. I was left feeling completely hole.

The Bloated Dreamer

01.03.2022

Decidedly, V was a very irregular singularity because all of his dreams had, in effect, come true. He worked in a glamorous, fulfilling, rewarding profession, at the top of the hierarchy (and had with it, power). He had a glamorous wife and children. His social life was full of glamour. He had everything he wanted. However, the problem was evident. There was nothing left to dream for. The Greeks wrote about the tantalisation of Sisyphus, but V. was subject to a much more torturous fate, that of satiation. Like a bloated diner at an all you can eat buffet, V. suffered horribly. The conversion of many coloured fantasy to bleak reality is not a happy process. Verily, the only thing worse than not having all of your dreams come true is to have them all come true.

God and Dog. 01.02.2022

Suneel Mehmi

I scowled at the rejection email as I stood at the top of the stairs. Meanwhile, the dog slunk up, whining at me in an ingratiating tone. 'Fiend!' I cried. I lunged at him and a funny thing happened. I felt that someone had jerked the back of my ankles and it had turned me upside down. I now looked at the smiling, serene, splendid face of GOD. 'You, sir,' he said, 'are absolutely, entirely, unequivocally REJECTED'.

The Cure for Life

28.02.2022 - Suneel Mehmi

The cure for life, a compulsion for the world-weary, has a distinguished pedigree. Alcohol, drugs, escapist literature and film. And, not least, war. War is the ultimate cure for life, since it delivers excitement out of the ordinary, remarkable stimulation of the do or die, and, of course, delivers death. When one contemplates human affairs, can a case be made for war as the product of tiredness, ennui, brute existence without true living? Looking at the present conflict in Europe, one is struck by how it emerged out of lockdown, the prolonged anxiety of the pandemic, an existence of isolation, boredom and banality. Does war only come to those starved of a sweeter fruit of being?