

5-1-2008

Iraq

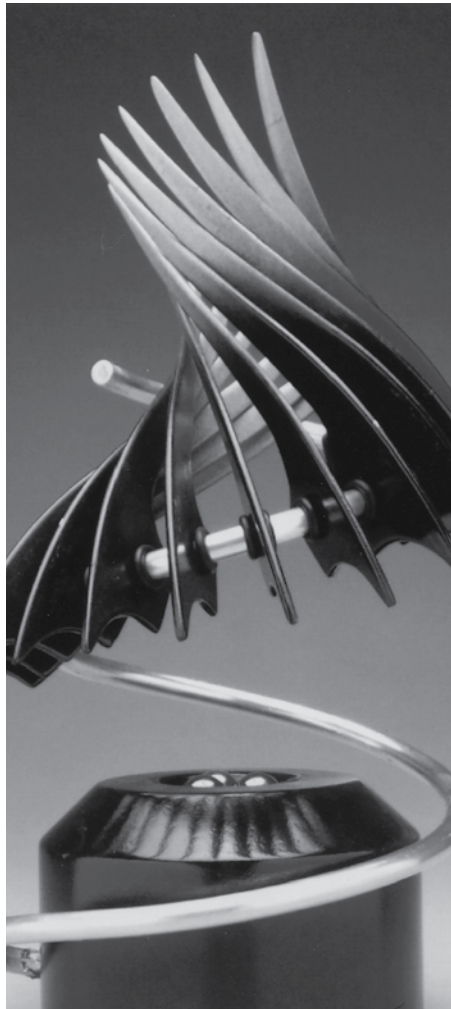
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boy at the time of independence and how his mother stitched a Pakistani flag for him so he could go out and demonstrate with the Muslim League. He had proudly raised it at the demonstration despite being in a city that had seen its fair share of Hindu-Muslim riots. Then, he continued on to teach us what the different colors and the Chaand (Crescent) Sitaara (Star) on the Pakistani flag represented. Finally, my mom followed the tradition and stitched a large flag from green and white cloth for us kids to put up on our house. It was the largest flag at that time in our neighborhood and we proudly raised it on our house every year until I left for the US.

Even now we talk about it and what it meant for the entire family to raise the flag together. Given what is going on in Pakistan, I almost feel I need to be back there again, to raise a giant green and white flag to show that nothing can bind us together more than our common nationality.

One incident that left me devastated shortly before my migration was one that'll remain like a permanent scar on my mind. My neighborhood was going mad. Fireworks, horns, confetti, blaring music, excited screams of people - all the visible signs of a festive night were present. Everyone had been celebrating for twenty-four hours now. My city was going berserk. "Pakistan Zind-a-bad!" (Long live Pakistan!) screamed the jubilant people out in the streets and roads; the sixtieth anniversary of this country: Independence Day.

Screams. Shouts. Tooting and honking. Roars of motorbikes. Flares of fireworks. Background music in every store, mall, and elevator tuned to the patriotic mode. Public buildings glittered with colorful bunting and Pakistan's green and white national flag flew proudly from balconies, bicycles and cars as the country marked its sixtieth birthday.

Everyone was jovial.

I sat uneasily.

Don't get me wrong, the fourteenth of August is one of those few days I like to celebrate...though, of course, I do it in my own quiet way by tracing the wall of the balcony and terrace of my house with little candles. I love the interplay of dark and light it creates, after the sun sets in. And were you to look at my house from a distance, at eight in the night, a merrier sight would not greet your eyes. Some two hundred odd candles glittering and blinking in the dark, their flames glowing bright, reaching higher and higher, casting the glow on the walls, radiating warmth. No music. No loud horns. Just candles for me. My celebrations, be it for anything, were always subtle and quiet.

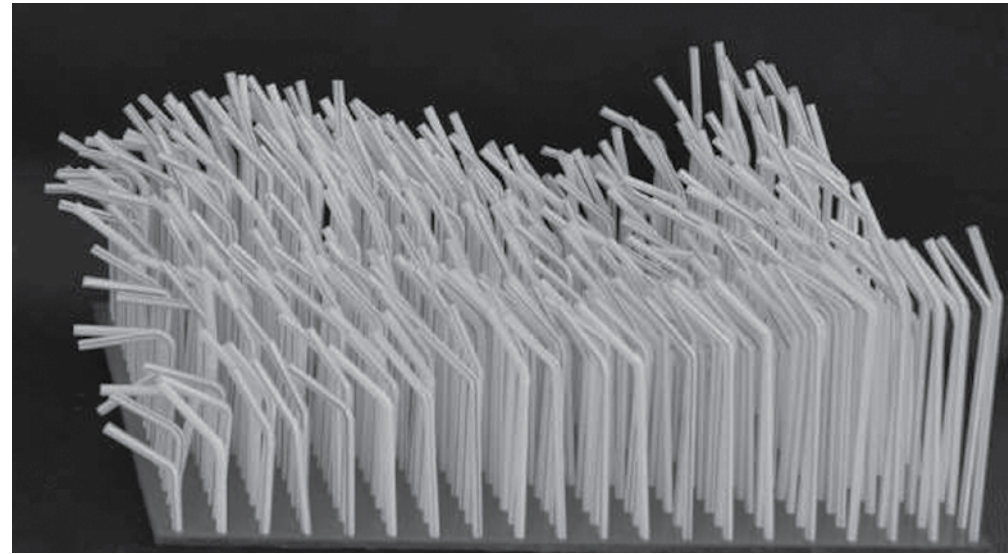
That night, however, my candles did not light. The wind kept on reaching out with its long lithe hands, pinching the flames between its two fingers. No candle burned.

People were celebrating. Raucous laughter seeped in my ears. I sat feeling restless and uneasy.

Why was everyone so unconcerned and wrapped up in themselves? Why were they being so selfish? Did they not see...My candles did not burn?

Would not burn... for they mourn him.

The eleven-year-old boy selling green and white balloons, at the gas-station near my house; I have been seeing him there since last week.



REPETITION Tove Mercer

Iraq

Molly Boyce

Assigned to me
As to make sense of
The insensible

A walk through time
That lacks clarity
Or visual density

Stumbling behind
Dark painted masks
In a sheer gray mist,

As Abraham's lamb
Caught in the thicket,
No instinct to resist,

Only swept up by fear,
And marked for sacrifice
On that pillar of cold stone

The eleven-year-old boy, working to make sure his family manages a meager meal once daily...or perhaps once every two days. I could not tell; he looked skeletal enough. The eleven-year-old boy longingly watching kids marching past holding flags, watching children running to the market to buy flags, badges, bunting and other Independence Day decorations. He must be wondering the meaning of the word "Freedom" and "Independence," I imagine. For him the word freedom only encompasses freedom from hunger and basic needs never fulfilled. Freedom from always struggling to survive, to stay alive.

The eleven-year-old boy I had been seeing daily, on my way back home, the same little boy with his picture in the paper that day, his fragile body bloody and lifeless, run over by a motorbike while the biker was performing an Independence Day stunt...and green and white balloon-skins spewed at his side. Bright red seeping through green and white. Bright red set brilliantly against the dull asphalt.

Green and white and red.

Shouts and laughter outside.

Green and white and red.

Happy Independence.

Green and white and red.

My candles would not burn.

My candles would not
burn