

short  
story

## 'Why do we remember a pair of turquoise earrings?'

Kuwaiti author Mai Al-Nakib knits together narratives of memory, nostalgia and loss, articulated through the sensory evocation of everyday possessions in her debut short story collection, *The Hidden Light of Objects*.

A teacher of postcolonial studies and comparative literature at Kuwait University, Al-Nakib studied English Literature at Brown University in the US. The stories – which were written over nearly ten years – are primarily set in Kuwait and ruminate on the themes of travel and migration, the shifting identity of 'home', and the inevitable collision of East and West following the First Gulf War.

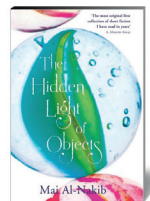
War – its threat, practicalities and reality – is a thick black thread woven through the fabric of each story. From the posthumous musings of a would-be suicide bomber, to an Americanophile's fatal realisation that chili fries and root beer floats

have the same parentage as the bombs that drop across the Middle East, the bruise of war shadows the tranquillity of the everyday moments she captures.

Her characters communicate with each other, the missing and the dead, and they connect to distant places – Paris, Japan, Kuwait, America – through the imprint of memory on the objects they surround themselves with. By focusing on the silent language of possessions and keepsakes, Al-Nakib demonstrates the untouchable beauty that memory paints onto the mundane.

A worn-out pair of leather sandals; a straw hat threaded with a red ribbon; a photograph of young lovers kissing: these items become signposts to the past, to a time before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that triggered the Gulf War and changed the Middle East forever.

Al-Nakib has a metamorphic voice

THE HIDDEN LIGHT  
OF OBJECTS

by Mai Al-Nakib  
(Bloomsbury  
Qatar Foundation  
Publishing, £9.99)

Reviewed and  
interviewed by  
Alice Slater

## How I did it

I knew from the start that the stories were going to be experiments with memory. Why do we remember a pair of turquoise earrings we saw when we were ten? How do such flashes of memory shape our lives, and why? Such questions were my starting point.

Soon I began to realise that I was trying to remember or reimagine a landscape – the Middle East of my youth – that I felt certain had once existed but, especially post 9/11, was nowhere to be found. I wanted to convey shards of a forgotten cosmopolitanism by focusing on overlooked moments of quotidian life. By the third story, I noticed specific elements recurring – words, images, characters, objects. I realised that the stories were connected, which gave me a solid sense of structure early on in the process. MAI AL-NAKIB

that straddles the disillusionment of adulthood, the desperate longing of teenagers and the cheerful naivety of childhood. It's a cohesive voice that binds a collection of diverse stories, stories that segue between moods of melancholia and nostalgia, optimism and lust with the ease of honey gently drizzled over warm almond cake. ■

## poetry

## 'eight Shakuntala poems based on a heroine from Indian myth'

Arundhathi Subramaniam's inclusion on the prestigious TS Eliot Prize shortlist last autumn proves that such prizes do still recognise challenging books from lesser-known authors.

Many of the poems in *When God is a Traveller* are about searching and longing. As the opening poem puts it, they are 'digging / through the stretch / and seam and protest' into 'the world's oldest fabric', the self. They are so pressing that they seem just on the cusp of what they seek, or bristling towards the awareness that the pursuit is the whole point. There is 'unfinished business', 'the germs of need', and finally the recognition in 'Poems matter' that this all matters because of our incompleteness, 'because they have holes'. It is the process, not the end, which makes us wise.

Subramaniam lives in Bombay,

and while this is her second full-length collection to be published in the UK, she has extensive experience as an editor of sacred and love poetry anthologies. The rich bank of Indian mythology is never far away, and in some cases it is tackled head on. 'Eight Poems for Shakuntala', for example, addresses the story of the cursed love between Shakuntala and Dushyanta. This is no simple retelling, but something original that draws on literary traditions such as pastoral scenes, yet is highly sceptical of accepting any grand narrative too swiftly.

There is a spiritual element to the poems in *When God is a Traveller*, and the refrain around this is trust. In 'How some Hindus find their personal gods' there is a need to 'trust / the tug / that draws you to a shadowed alcove', while in 'Quick-fix memos for difficult days' you should 'Trust only

WHEN GOD IS  
A TRAVELLER

by Arundhathi  
Subramaniam  
(Bloodaxe, £8.96)

Reviewed and  
interviewed by  
Alex Pryce

## How I did it

In *When God is a Traveller*, journeying is dominant. For me, image is a kind of magic archaeology that takes me places I would never be able to unlock on my own. It always feels wiser than I am. The other thing that is important to me is tone. I am interested in how myths speak to me, but the tone must remain direct, modern and urgent. Tone and image have always been guiding principles, but in the new book I am also interested in how pause and silence can make a poem into a living, throbbing thing.

I knew I was working towards a new book when I wrote the eight Shakuntala poems based on the heroine from Indian myth. In poetry you need something that feels like it has never been said before; a moment that is green and fresh. It is always a challenge to arrive at that green moment: we are all negotiating with the same old themes. ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

the words that begin / their patter / in the rain-shadow valley / of the mind'. The creative and the spiritual spaces have similar needs. As 'Printer's copy' suggests, it is all about 'The need to believe language / will see us through'. And the promise here is that it can. ■