

## A memory of this

Irfan Master

There is a photograph of a man sitting someplace, maybe a waiting room, maybe a train station, his thumbs touching. It's an image by the British photographer Paul Graham, 'Untitled, Paris, 1988'. I have used this photograph as a story prompt in countless workshops and have even affectionately nicknamed it, 'Thumbs'. What makes this photograph special? Like a lot of things that inspire, it's difficult to say, but it's the quiet tone in the image. Of being in a public place, but still alone. It lends itself to so many possibilities. There is a person waiting for something. Is it good news or bad news? Is he just waiting for a train? Something about the figure suggests pensiveness, maybe a life about to be changed once the figure moves and the frame is cut.

Of all the arts that inspire my writing, photographs have been a constant when I've needed to find that all-important tone or firmly embedded forgotten memory. The art critic and writer, John Berger, has this to say

about a photograph: 'A photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature, refers to what is not seen'.

I remember when I was writing my first novel, about Partition, the central character just wouldn't appear, until I saw a photograph of a boy overlooking a refugee camp on the newly formed India/Pakistan border, and in a blur of memory he materialised in front of me. Not an exact facsimile of the boy in the photograph, but enough of a reflection to inspire me to start writing.

Photographic images are little vignettes themselves. Short stories with only what's in the frame, frozen in time, yet the image still exists in a simultaneous pocket of time. The moment is connected to and stimulated by the flow of events. Photographs represent a means of expression the most closely linked with memory. Our memories also resist being static. They are often unreliable, altered and often see instances of revelation. A photograph, specifically one from the family album, isn't always an honest representation of a memory, often replacing the trace of the original memory with one that is fabricated. For me, this goes to the heart of writing fiction in particular. This creation, conflation of events, memories, images that you construct from your own personal histories to create a narrative.

One of my favourite family photographs depicts a moment I couldn't possibly remember: it is of me when I was a baby, barely a few weeks old, yet this photograph reveals more about how I self-identified as the child of immigrants and speaks to the aspirations of a young British Indian/Pakistani family growing up in the UK in the 1970s. You can see me posed on my back, eyes laced with kohl, as was the fashion then, and wrapped in thick garments. But it's the other objects in the picture that sum up so well our aspirations for the future, such as they were. As I lay looking up at the light, placed around me are three objects. To the right, a Dutch windmill, just above my head, an Eiffel Tower light, and just out of the frame, a very seventies-looking gold lava lamp. So, what is not seen in this photograph? Nobody in my family had been to Paris or Holland at the time. Posing me, the first-born, in front of two European destinations, signals the aspiration of a young, modern family, despite the odds, and optimism for the future. Seventeen years later, I was on the ferry at Dover having hitchhiked my way to the port, and watching the seagulls circle over Calais. A year on, I was sitting on a train crossing into Holland looking up at the iconic windmills slowly spinning, mapping out with each turn, a span of time back to me as a babe staring out at the future. Even the lava lamp, popular in almost every household in the seventies, speaks to wanting to be accepted and to be of the times.

As I sit and write these words, I have scattered around me old family photographs, faded polaroids, photographic postcards and well thumbed photo books. Each image is a window into a memory, both real and imagined. They exist in the now, and remain alive in the past. Photographs are a reminder of what we forgot and what is unknowable, our memories – slippery, ambiguous, an unreliable measure of truth and time and all the more intriguing because of it.

### **Irfan Master**

Irfan Master is an award-winning author of novels, shorts stories, poetry and plays. His debut novel, *A Beautiful Lie*, (Bloomsbury, 2011) was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book prize and the Branford Boase award for debut authors and translated into ten languages. His second novel for young adults, *Out of Heart* (Hot Key, 2017), was long listed for the Carnegie Medal. Irfan's short fiction has also been published in numerous anthologies, most recently, *Resist* (Comma press, 2019), *The Good Journal* (2019) and the award-winning *A Change is Gonna Come* (Stripes, 2017). In 2019 he contributed an article highlighting the importance of greater representation in literature for young people that featured in *Breaking New Ground*, a round-up of British writers of colour produced by BookTrust and Speaking Volumes.

Irfan is a passionate advocate for creative projects in the community and has developed programmes and mentored young people in how to gain access to the creative arts. He has worked with English PEN, the British Council and the Arvon Foundation to deliver writing workshops and has worked as writer-in-residence for the writing charity First Story since 2011. Irfan is currently an Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature at London Metropolitan University.

Before embarking on a writing career, Irfan gained his MA in Library & Information Science from Loughborough University, working initially as a public and school librarian and then as an advocate for libraries and reading as Project Manager at the National Literacy Trust. Irfan lives with his wife and son in London.

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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