

A Piece of Me: An Arrangement of Words to Inspire Reflection

Arif Ahmad

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The autobiographical essays and poems of physician Arif Ahmad's collection *A Piece of Me* ably reveal his personal perspective.

Following the 1947 partition, Ahmad's family moved from India to Pakistan. He attended university and medical school in Pakistan and did his residency in the US, ending up in Wisconsin as a cardiologist and electrophysiologist. His essays and poems variously function as responses to current events, and as reflections on his home, work life, and personal past.

The entries vary in form as well as focus: there are entries written in the form of letters—some sent, others not; some addressed to specific people, and others to a royal “we.” Other entries are called “pleas,” expressing outbursts of anguish and disbelief (though some of the book’s pleas are also pleas of praise); still others end with “amen,” as though they speak on behalf of many people, even having been written in solitude. Most of the entries are succinct, though seeking to address the looming topic of the human condition, if from a particular time and place—as with Ahmad’s coverage of hunting adventures, which is used to address gun control from multiple perspectives.

The book dances between personal pride and disagreements with what it takes pride in, working to establish an expansive point of view. Thus, a poetic entry about Malala Yousafzai praises women while also acknowledging pervasive social discrimination against women. And a poem honoring Pakistan’s Independence Day expresses patriotism as well as dissent, addressing violence within the nation.

This dance between emphases recurs throughout: Ahmad both discusses the rewards of being a doctor, and writes about a disagreement with the Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of North America. The book’s essays about pilgrimage trips to Mecca are moving and self-aware, celebrating the strangers who helped Ahmad overcome claustrophobia, impatience, and disappointment. Still, the egalitarian outlook of the book’s entries is not always consistent, particularly when they deviate from broad musings to deliver health advice, or singular advice on other topics.

But there are compelling entries that are centered in their moments, too, as with those that cover events like September 11, 2001; the 2017 Las Vegas shootings; and speeches given by Pope Francis. Such contributions seek the news behind the news, using their central events to encourage being a proactive citizen of the world. From their perspective, just “showing up is not enough. / This is the time to step it up without apologies or excuses. / With smiling eyes and heads held high, at work or play, crawl if we have to go that extra mile.” Their rhymes and chanting movements are their method of reinforcing positive attitudes, helping to offset the realism of their laments. At their best, the entries move between despair and hope with balance and lyricism.

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MARI CARLSON (April 20, 2022)

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