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SUMMER 2013



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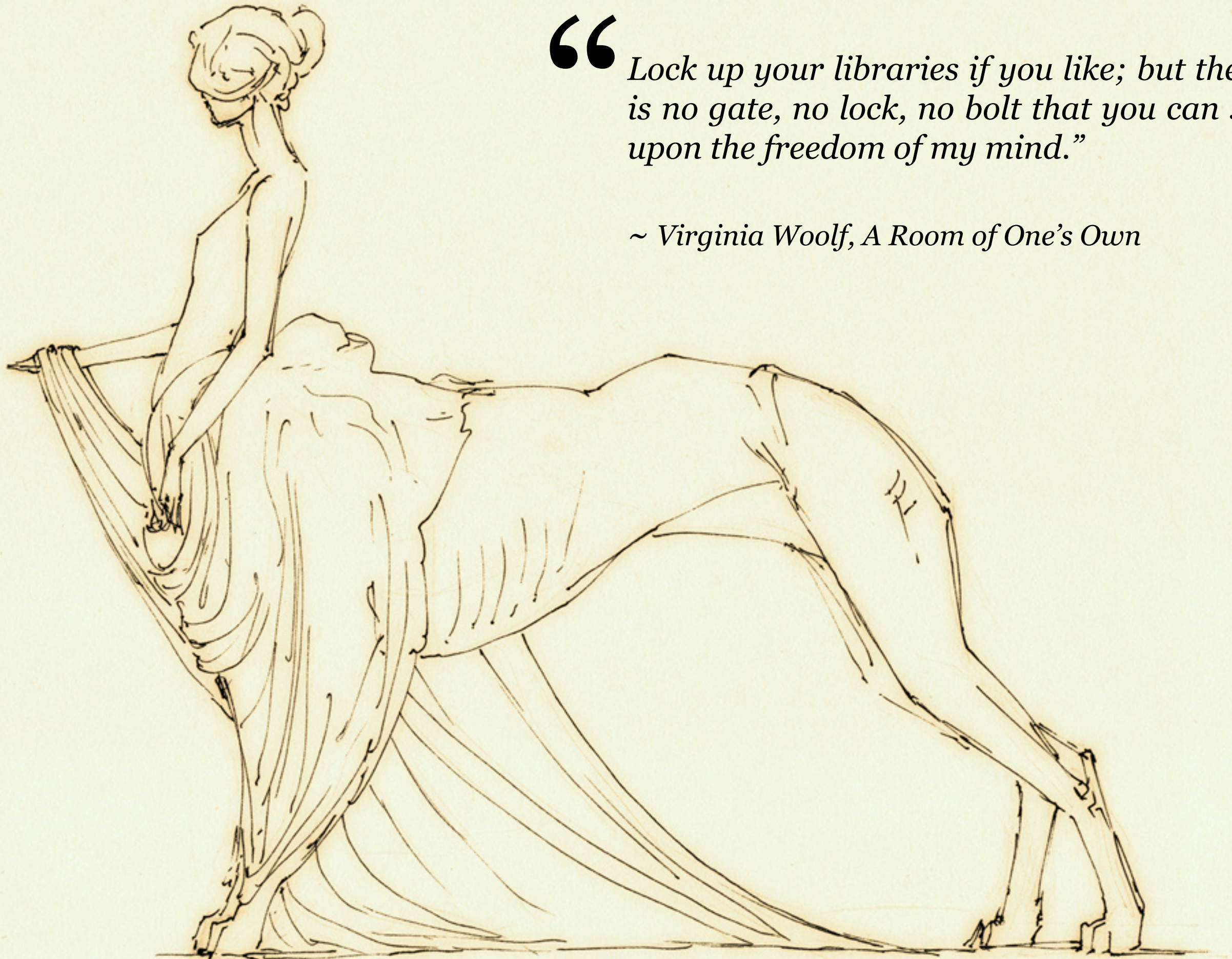
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“Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.”

~ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*



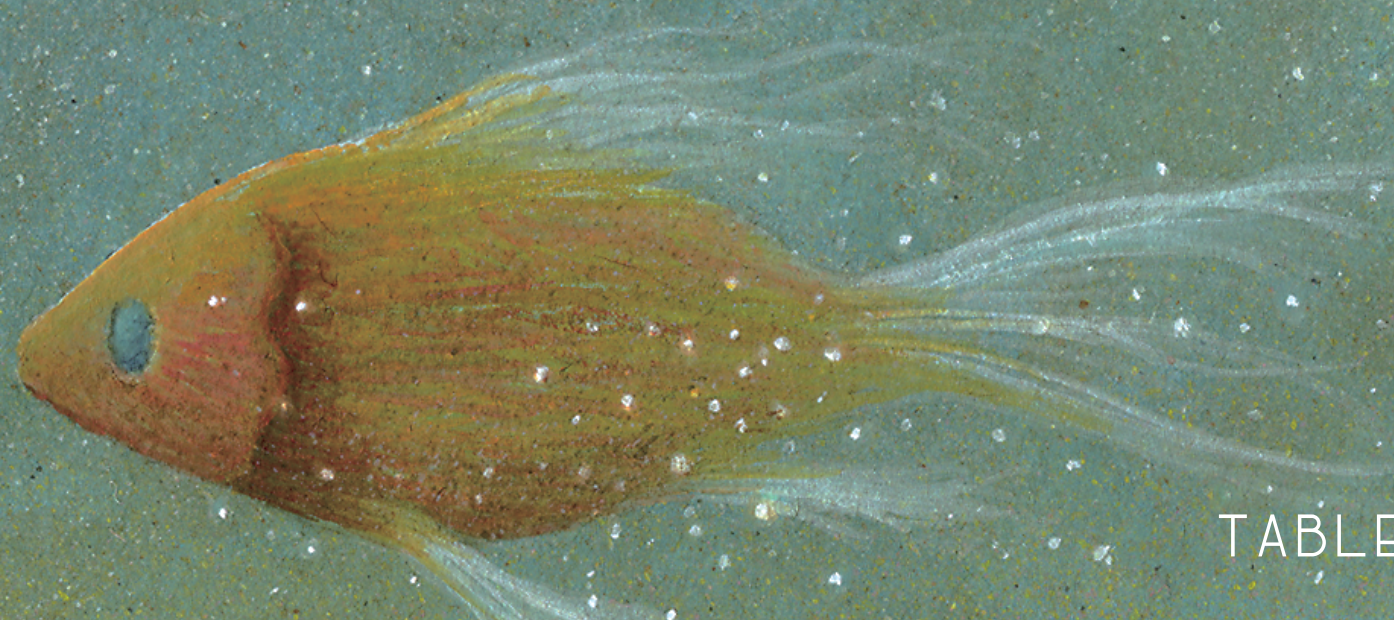


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A WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

During a team meeting and one of our many tangential conversations about the magazine's direction and where we wanted to take it, Moeed Tariq, The Missing Slate's Creative Director narrated a comment he heard often – many tend to do a mental double-take when they see a liberal arts magazine being edited and chaired by a woman with a hijab. The “woman” bit is less unsettling – the hijab or head scarf, typically a sign of Islamic piety, seems to be in direct odds with our content—both written and visual—that can sometimes be perceived sexual or “too liberal”. As though wearing a hijab automatically makes me a nun or forces me into a cloistered mentality.

I haven't stumbled against art and literature with their near infinite iterations on the complexities of everyday existence believing, quite simply, that life's complicated enough without throwing my own external paraphernalia into it. More importantly, I'm a writer who chooses to practice her faith in what may seem to be a very public way, living in a country that is daily torn apart by its seams in its perpetual fight against tolerance and acceptance, only to stitch itself back up and begin again. But I love living in Pakistan, with its consistent spread of conflict and generosity that may exist only in lands that are as bipolar as mine.

Perhaps I did struggle initially against what I once thought were boundaries in the arts, but mine has been a journey that isn't so much tied into religion and its manifestations, as it is with my own “conservative” upbringing. In quotes, because whether my upbringing was conservative or the thoughts and actions that resulted from it (and were a byproduct of a combined personal and social mentality), is still unknown to me. Sometimes, the two—conservatism and religion—seem to blur in social consciousness. It is an unfortunate side effect created by those whose minds are cloistered, sequestered into what is “right” and what is “wrong”, which I believe is largely the culprit behind intolerance, rejection, war and any number of true evils. My right may never be your right, and vice versa; we may never see eye to eye but give me the space and acceptance to live my own life, and I'll do the same for you. It's the least I can do, after all.

I'll end by reiterating Moeed's response to those who asked the question that began this piece: “and your point is?” Grow with us and we'll take you into a realm where idealism is cherished and everything possible.

Happy reading!

Sincerely,



Editor-in-Chief

A WORD FROM THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Readers,

The theme for the issue has been a long time coming. Writing this and knowing what's to follow, I realize how fitting it is that I should address the world at this particular junction. Full disclosure: I have never actually poked and prodded the concept—and myself in relation to it—to gauge how I feel (about it).

Conversations come to mind, opinions unvoiced, gestures restrained and times of exuberance in moderation. I cannot compartmentalize freedom to break it down for myself unlike many other states of being. There is a voice that reiterates, with increasing fervor, that the concept of freedom is meant to be an absolute: one cannot be moderately free. One cannot feel moderately free.

The blacks and whites that come with the territory brought to my mind the rather gray work of Sara Sultan, featured in this issue. Using only ink on paper, her pieces, done always in black and white, bring forth the struggle with the gray in our lives. Her subjects, sometimes lost, at others emerging from what surrounds them, symbolize our relationship with all that is around us; essentially making us who we are.

I began this letter thinking I was about to understand how I felt about this issue's theme. I now realize I have meandered through a few disjointed paragraphs coming full circle to the same place. But what I do know is this: freedom, for me, is not a feeling – it is simply an absence of the feelings that are in opposition to it.

With a lot of love,

Moeed Tariq

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PAKISTANI WRITERS

Literary critic and editor Muneeza Shamsie writes about the talents featured in this issue – a rich tapestry of contemporary Pakistani poets and authors.

Pakistani literature in English dates back to the earliest years of independence but in the last decade, it has grown and developed rapidly and to great critical acclaim. This has coincided with a rich cultural flowering of a new Pakistani music and art. At the same time, the country has become the epicenter of geopolitics and subject to urban violence and religious extremism.

This issue showcases Pakistani English creative writing – including translation from the Urdu – to capture the essence and complexities of Pakistan today.

Mohsin Hamid's haunting and vivid story "Terminator – Attack of the Drone" merges reality and science fiction. He portrays a few survivors hunted by machines which fly overhead in a nameless barren land. In Kamila's Shamsie's "Escape", a Pakistani man's terrifying journey from Afghanistan across Iran to America queries the dividing lines between sanity and insanity, safety and danger.

Several works tackle issues migration and adaptation, identity and belonging in today's mobile world. In Waqas Khwaja's lyrical poem "unclassified I" migration to a foreign land become a metaphor for growing up and journeying into the uncertainties of the future. Aamer Hussein's poetic and intricate story "The Tree at its Limits" interprets the life of the Italian-born artist, Marya Mahmud through her paintings. Her love for Karachi and its sea represent her emotional journey including her marriage to a Pakistani. In marked contrast, Hasan Manzar's "The Poor Dears" translated by Muhammed Umar Memon tells of an expatriate writer, who has lived in London for so long that in Pakistan, he has neither understanding nor sensitivity towards its social mores or the wages of poverty.

Suppressed desires and longing runs through Memon story 'Lucky Vikki' translated by Faruq Hasan, which tells of three young men riveted by a beautiful girl. While Memon's translations of Abdullah Hussein and Azra Abbas capture a woman's perspective and inner turmoil. In Hussein's skillful

story "The Rose" the narrator is confronted by the anger and resentment of his childhood friend, Sarwat for treating with gender-based assumptions, not an individual. In Azra Abbas's elegant poem "Empty Bench" longs for an end to her suffering and pain; in "Alone as I Am" she wishes her lover would think of her emotions, not just her body.

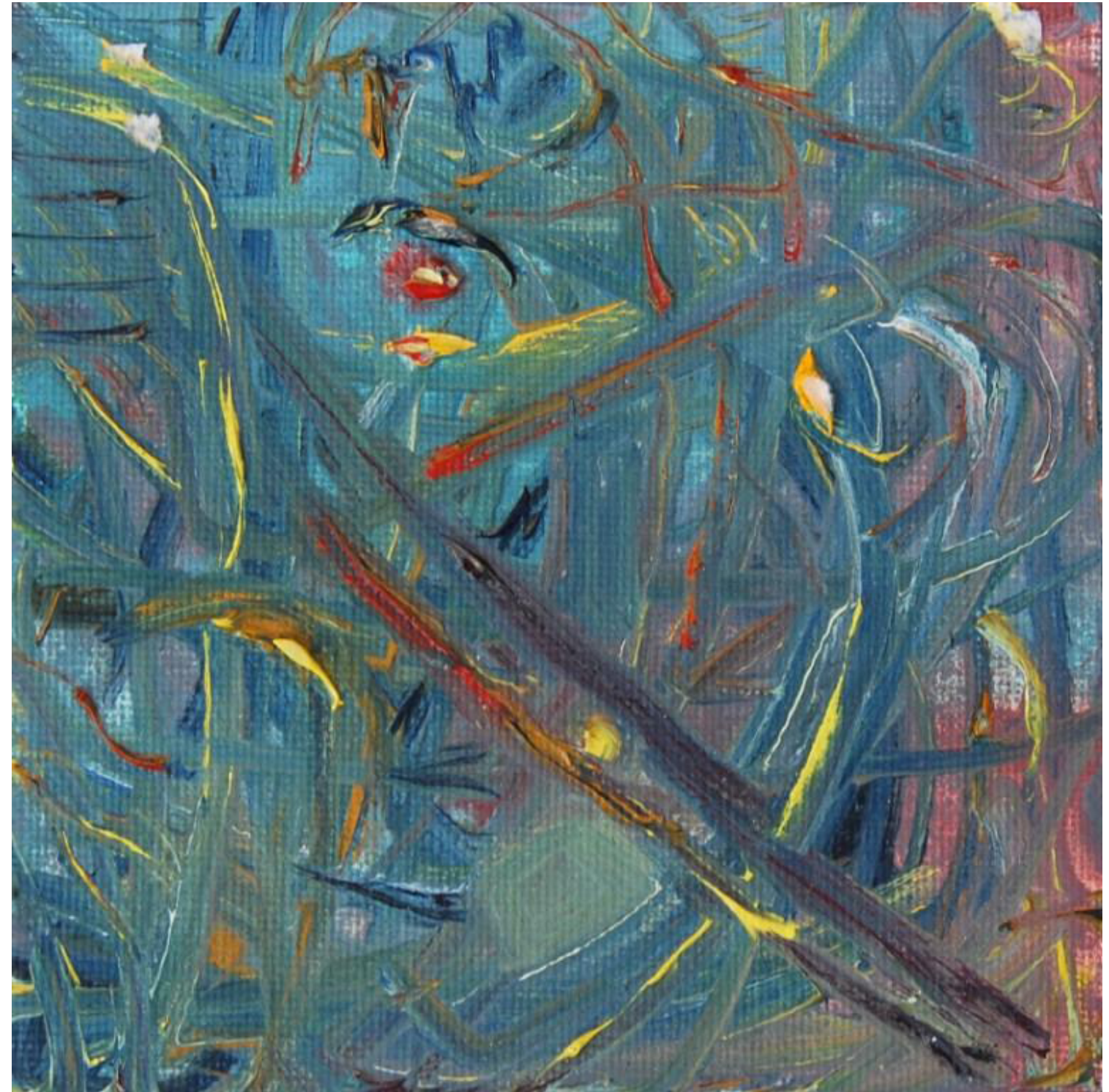
Several poems reflect upon life and death. Afzal Ahmed Syed's spare, sophisticated "What Grave Lies Beyond the Juniper Tree" and "The Skull of a Chief Architect", translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi contemplate mortality and immortality. Mehvash Amin's "Grandfather" portrays the last days of a dying man, but Amin is also one of several women poets to address Pakistan's endemic violence.

“ This issue showcases Pakistani English creative writing – including translation from the Urdu – to capture the essence and complexities of Pakistan today. ”

In "Karachi", Amin writes of the city's urban warfare. Kyla Pasha's "the things" reflects upon change and time and in "Lullabies and Killers" she juxtaposes survival against daily killings and burials. Mavra Rana's "Noor-e-Chashm" interweaves a widow's grief with memories of her late husband and their married life. Rana captures a different mood in the witty "Mr. and Mrs. Agelast", a clever interplay of colloquialisms and clichés. Ilona Yusuf adds to the diversity of the collection with rich vivid images of nomad *powindahs* in "i wait for images to crystallize"; in "untitled", she celebrates the rhythms of life" childhood puberty, marriage and death.

As such, this issue provides an insight into some truly exciting work and engages with the many dimensions of Pakistani life.

Muneeza Shamsie,
Karachi,
June 1, 2013



Sweet Lies by Merlin Flower

UNCLASSIFIED I

unclassified i
neither one nor its other
sea nor sand
river nor land

father, my home
i leave behind
mother, this knot
i now unbind

my days of play
in your backyard over
your threshold strange
like a mountain range

days of laughter
left on stone
a shadow of vanished
flesh and bone

four carriers adorn
my traveling litter
and bear it on
shoulders that glitter

my very own
and those unknown
drift slowly
away from me

man nor woman
beast nor snake
fish nor fowl
real nor fake

take care, this home
was not for me
i leave now for
a far country

~ Waqas Khwaja



Titan by Merlin Flower

Waqas Khwaja is a professor of English at Agnes Scott College where he teaches Postcolonial Literature, British Romanticism, Victorian poetry and fiction, and Creative Writing. He has published three collections of poetry, the latest, "No One Waits for the Train" (Alhambra 2007), and edited several anthologies of Pakistani literature in translation. He was contributing translator and translation editor for "Modern Poetry of Pakistan" (Dalkey 2011), showcasing the work of 44 poets from Pakistan's seven indigenous languages. He also guest edited a special issue on Pakistan for The Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies (Spring 2011).

THE ROSE

By Abdullah Hussein

Translated from the Urdu by Muhammad Umar Memon

More?” The woman asked.

“No.”

“Have another.”

“No thanks.”

“Just one more cup.”

“Stop it,” he said, feeling very irritated. “You know I don’t drink much tea.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You don’t what?”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?”

“Anything about you.”

“What!” He was stunned.

But he had known her for such a long time. In fact, he knew all her family—even her husband—so well that they considered him as one of their own ... and from so far back ... he could hardly remember exactly when. Perhaps since the time when her older brother and he went to school together. One day they had fought over something and were both punished by the teacher: one had to do extra writing drills after school, the other to water the school plants. Later they returned home, school bags dangling from their necks, one walking behind the other, seemingly unaware of each other’s presence. The next day they made up and became friends again. They were second graders then.

Or perhaps from earlier still: the day the strangers had just arrived in the house next door. He had spent practically the whole day glued to their doorway watching them move in: men, women and children scurrying in and out of the house, hauling in baggage, slamming doors and windows, and the clouds of dust swirling up from all their activity. He was so taken up with it that he had gone back home only once to grab a quick lunch, and then dashed back to his place in the doorway to resume his watching. The children’s mother once asked him where he lived, but he did not bother to reply. A while later, when she invited him in, he didn’t stir from his place or utter a word. The woman gave up and went inside. The next few days he contented himself merely with looking at the children from a distance, as if trying to get used to their being around ... God knows from how far back!

“But you do,” he said, emphatically. “You know me very well!”

“No, I don’t.”

This was the very first time she had talked with such headstrong defiance, such chilling certainty. He was absolutely stunned. He blinked his eyes a few times in utter disbelief and then just stared at her, as if he were trying to figure out who she really was.

Evening had crept into the room in the meantime, filling it with darkness. Neither stirred to turn on the lights. The china glimmered before them in the faint, soft twilight.

She was sitting bent over the china, twirling a spoon in the empty teacup with one hand, the other lying curled up in her lap. Her head, with its thick, dark hair, was directly in front of him. There was not even a trace of mascara on her eyes and she was wearing no lipstick.

The thought that this could be happening after he had known this woman all these years pinched his heart with a sadness he could not understand.

“I am Naim,” he said.

“Oh?” She lifted her face, full of mocking scorn.

“And you are Sarwat.”

“Right again.”

“So?”

“So what?”

He was stung by the cold indifference of her tone. A nameless, impotent rage began to curl its way up through his body and into his brain. The room was getting dark fast. Lights from a passing car shot in through the window, flashed on their faces, and disappeared.

“Get up and turn on the light!” he commanded.

“No.”

“Do it!” he persisted.

“Darkness is better.”

So unlike her! If he had half expected that she would act this way, he would not have let her temper get out of hand. As he was getting up to turn on the lights himself, his knee bumped the tea table and knocked it over. Suddenly his anger vanished. Something had calmed his nerves: perhaps it was the sight of the mess on the floor, or the sense of total independence emanating from her face as she sat quietly holding the spoon, or perhaps it was just

the noise of the china as it went crashing down in the darkness.

“This is all your fault,” he said, feeling utterly exhausted.

“Things look,” she began, “different in the darkness.”

“How?”

“You cannot see ... your mind moves faster.”

“What’s got into your head?”

“But there’s an advantage,” she went on, “your eyes manage to get some rest.”

“You’ve gone crazy.”

Returning, he dropped down into his chair. This event was totally unexpected; it left him suddenly very tired. In spite of the passage of time, the presence of this woman—the mere thought of her being somewhere around—still inspired only the deepest feeling of comfort in him; she was a haven where he felt perfectly safe and calm. And oddly, she evoked all this without possessing a trace of the seductiveness he seemed to find in all other women—whether close to him or not, with or without names. This infatuation with women had put him through much unnecessary pain. For much of his life he both feared and yet felt irresistibly drawn toward every woman who came his way. The resulting torment left him exhausted, and there were times when he felt he could not keep himself together any more. The sight of a young woman—the prettiest, most profound and complete creation of God—only made him flee her. Oh, yes, he knew years of that misery very well! And right until he had finally married he knew that no matter how much he ran around, the one place he could find calm, care, and security, the place where he regained his insight, his ebbing confidence, and lived in unbounded freedom, was somewhere around this girl. That was how well he knew her!

“You’re in a great mood today,” he said. “Spoiling for a fight, aren’t you ... with everybody?”

“Not with everybody,” she snapped, “just with you.” She used the more formal aap, not a familiar tum.

“I can tell you’ve come here straight from a brawl with Mahmud.”

“Mahmud is my husband.”

“So?”

“What goes on between him and me is my personal business.”

“I’m not part of your personal business?”

“No.”

“W w what?”

“You are not part of my personal business.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“No, I am not.”

“Oh, ...” he said, suppressing his anger. “How I wish it were true.”

“But it is true. You have no part in anything that has to do with me.”

“Then do me a favor, will you? Tell everybody else that.”

“A nameless, impotent rage began to curl its way up through his body and into his brain. The room was getting dark fast. Lights from a passing car shot in through the window, flashed on their faces, and disappeared.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sick of trying to keep the peace between you and Mahmud all the time.”

“Well, you can blame yourself for it. After all, you created the mess.”

“I created the mess?”

“You fixed my marriage with Mahmud—didn’t you?”

“So I’m to blame for it—is that it?”

“At least you’re responsible for it.”

“So I’m to blame for it?” he repeated, genuinely shocked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

It was staggering, completely unexpected. The otherwise clear, luminous region of the mind which might have registered the impact of what was happening—and so fast—suddenly went blank. He stopped thinking about everything, concentrating on the floor, now littered with spilled milk, tea and sugar. Then getting up so effortlessly to pick up the scattered cups and saucers a little while later, setting them back upon the tray and straightening the overturned table, the tragedy of the soiled carpet and the shattered teacup suddenly hit him in all

its comic intensity. He could not believe that this woman—so fiercely independent now, unrestrained in her acts and words (come to think of it, when, in all those thirty years, had she ever looked any different?)—had always seemed to him something like an empty teacup—fragile, vulnerable, even dumb! And he thought he had known her for ages, the ages required to know somebody well! Ages—including childhood, when, unaware of the passage of time, one played with friends in far flung spaces nobody else knew existed, and played games so intimate that one even became familiar with the scent of the other’s skin. The time that left its indelible imprint on all the subsequent stages of one’s life, so that later even a casual walk through a spot vaguely resembling a place in childhood evoked warm memories of that rich time, of those places, names, voices, and sometimes, even an unfinished gesture, or a sudden gleam in someone’s eye. Every moment in childhood lasted a whole lifetime. He knew her from back then.

“I’m fed up.”

“With what?”

“Your foolish quarrels.”

“Who asked you to ...”

“To what?”

“... stick your nose into my affairs?”

“But I had to.”

“Had to—how so?”

“How? Well ... because ... because I’m your ... oh, well...”

“Yes, yes, go on, because you’re my what?”

“Well, I mean a member of your family—or almost.”

“But there are other members in my family.”

“Then, I suppose, because I’m responsible for arranging a match for you.”

“Who asked you to?”

“Who? Well ... dammit, your family—who else?”

“But I didn’t! Did I?”

“You ... er r r, well, you ... you knew about it all right.”

“The important thing is, did you ask me?”

“What difference ...”

“... does that make—right?”

“So what do you want me to do now?” he said in a dead voice.

“You just keep out of my affairs, that’s all.” She again used the polite but formal aap.

Even her curt, aggressive manner was new

to him. They both went back a lot of years, and he could swear she had never, absolutely never, talked to anyone like this, at least not on a personal level.

“Aap, aap ...” he said, “cut it out. Stop this litany. Can’t you speak to me in plain language?”

“Aap ... that’s the right word. Yes—aap.”

“Ah h h h!” he emitted a deep, tormented sound.

“All right, tum, if you insist,” she smiled. “Tum—all right.”

This was all so strange, so unforeseen. For he remembered all that time very well. He had lost all sense of direction. In the evening he would wander around alone on deserted streets for hours, and then he would go over to her house and just slump down into a chair. Sometimes, when the desire for company became very oppressive and she happened to be all alone in the house, he would lift his head up and say something to her, just anything, like: “Sarwat, do you have any idea where I was roaming around before I got here?” Or, “Come, talk to me ... I’m tired.” Or, “Why are you always working—crazy?” And still working away in her slow, impersonal manner, she would make some gesture or merely utter something; putting him back into the state of peace he had been desperately seeking. And then there was that time later on, just after his marriage. He asked her, “Sarwat, how do you like Bilqees?” and she had replied, “Bhabi is nice. I like her a lot ...” in a tone which he still remembered vividly, a tone which sent a chill through his body even now when he thought about it, not because it was tinged with envy or sadness, but because it sounded so aloof, so metallic. It was so unexpected. And then there was also the time when his wife—the only person besides his mother he could get close to—had died. The incident

“He could not believe that this woman—so fiercely independent now, unrestrained in her acts and words—had always seemed to him something like an empty teacup[.]”

THE THINGS

all things, all lovers
eventually all friends

all lovers all hearts all
things are forgotten

at the bottom of the trunk down
the back of the couch to be

discovered and aww-ed
over later, to be over-

awed by later, to love again,
later, different, with less fervour

and perhaps a bit more
commitment, but not even,

because eventually
all things, all friends, all lovers

set out to sea
far out to sea
and off the edge

~ *Kyla Pasha*

had left him broken, lost. Sitting by her one day, the words just spilled out of his mouth, “Bibi, you tell me—why?” And she had replied, “Be patient!” Just about everyone had parroted these words to him—these words devoid of meaning and packed with utter indifference. They hurt a lot coming from her, too. Yes, these times and the many others before and after in which he had thought that they had met as equals; they were still alive in his memory.

“These things you say, Bibi, they’re all so shocking.”

“Bibi, Bibi,” she exploded, “Bibi?”

“What?”

“Am I a sheep, goat, or what? Don’t I have a name? Don’t I—”

“Sarwat!”

“That’s better. Sarwat ... that’s my name.”

“Sarwat!”

“All my life you have never called me by my name, or acknowledged my existence, or considered me worth anything ... anything at all...”

“Anything at all?” his mouth hung open in



Lighthouse in the Forest by Ebineyland

mounting disbelief.

“You have gone on pronouncing my name—mechanically, that’s all. But you’ve constantly ignored ...”

“Ignored—what?”

“Me!” she screamed. “Me!”

“I don’t understand.”

“You never gave it a thought, did you, that I, too, am a human being, like you, like everyone else. That I see, think, feel, and have an existence all my own. Just as you have, just as everybody else has.”

“But Sarwat, I have always ...”

“Cared for me? Right? Have been around me—always? Oh yes. Have been familiar and close? Yes, that is also correct. But totally indifferent all the same. How terribly indifferent—have you ever thought about it?”

“Wrong. Absolutely wrong. It’s you who have been indifferent.”

“My misfortune, Naim, is that you know me from the time when I was a mere toddler who ran about barefoot in the alleyways with nothing on but short pants, while you pulled my hair. Oh, yes—you were very familiar with me, but equally unmindful of me. You’ve always been. And if I’ve been indifferent, blame it on that familiarity which drew a curtain between us, making me too shy for words.”

“That was your mistake.”

“Mistake? More like my helplessness.”

“I don’t understand. You draw the wrong conclusion from our childhood friendship.”

“So should I draw one from childhood enmity instead? Enmity means nothing. Enmity is foolishness. Friendship is what hurts. Look at me. Take me in—all of me. There, take a good look at me. You’ve never ever really looked at me. I am a woman, a person ... has that never occurred to you?”

“I’ve never been unmindful of you.”

“Oh, yes. You have always been mindful of me, but in exactly the same manner as you have been mindful of this chair, or that table, or that date palm over there. But have you ever considered me for what I truly am?”

“I have always considered you as Sarwat. Jawed’s sister. A very dear person. A reasonable, decent girl ...”

“Do you even know what ‘reasonable, decent girl’ means?” she said, throwing her hands up in the air indignantly. “Where we live, a ‘reasonable, decent girl’ is another name for a cow—a mere chattel,

counting for nothing, always taken for granted, accepted, and ignored, yes always ignored.”

“Aren’t you over reacting ... a bit? Think with a cool head ...”

“After a lifetime of sheer torture, who can keep her head cool? One cannot even think. You men ... you treat us so badly.”

“We men?”

“Yes—you men.”

“Oh, Sarwat,” he said, feeling utterly tired, “am I really to blame for it?”

“And why not?” she said. “Mahmud was your friend. It was you who fixed my marriage with him. Couldn’t you have asked at least?”

“Ask? But I did ask—your family.”

“Family—who are they? They’re just family.”

“What do you mean?”

“The family wasn’t important. You were.”

“How?”

“For me. You mattered to me. They didn’t.”

“Sarwat ...” now he was truly rattled. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

He got his answer all right; not from her words, but from her bold, silent eyes.

He leaned back in the chair and began looking around, embarrassed.

She got up and began pacing around the room. Then she said, “Naim, women can be incredibly patient and modest. You cannot even imagine how much. In fact, up until recently I wouldn’t have dared to look you in the face and talk to you. But now, after everything I have been through, I have no energy left for patience or modesty. I’m already thirty two years old, and I’ve seen life in most of its forms, however hidden or covered.”

“Sarwat!”

“I’d thought of the world as being very large; its immensity, its problems would help me forget everything. What wouldn’t a woman do to keep her head high? She will deceive everyone, even herself, right up to the end. Don’t ever think that I’m blaming Mahmud for anything. My husband is a very nice person. He has never hurt me....”

He sprang to his feet, but sat back down just as suddenly.

She continued, still pacing, “It’s been a full ten years since we got married but not once in all this time have I been able to talk with him openly. God knows I’ve tried. Every single day and every single night. Believe me, I have ...”

“For God’s sake, shut up!”

“Every single night, in fact at every single instant, I’ve had this terrible feeling that somewhere along the line I’ve lost something—something that is essential for sincerity between two individuals. The loss has been gnawing away at my heart incessantly. Then, well, there comes a day when one begins to choke on one’s breath, when one feels, inexorably, how futile it all is. How terribly futile and pointless it all is.”

“Sarwat Begum,” he interjected, “you cannot turn it all around now, can you?”

“True. But I can at least put an end to that pain.”

“And just how do you propose to do that?”

“Naim,” she said, “something is suffocating me. There is some unfinished business.”

“How can I possibly help?”

“Set me free.”

“How?” he shouted. “How?”

Then, the sight of her silent eyes made bold by longing, and of her lamenting, despairing, but flagrant hands spread out in the air in eloquent entreaty immobilized him completely.

When it was past midnight, he awoke to the thought that love, too, came in a whole spectrum of shades. There was the love that robbed you. But no matter what sort it was, love was love; it had the power, at least, to distance a man from himself and carry him to something far greater.

In the early part of the night he had asked her just one question, “Do you always sleep naked?” “Shh ...” she had merely hissed, as one does to stop a child from being too inquisitive in sacred places or at funerals. That “Shh ...” turned out to be the only thing she uttered during the whole night. There are many kinds of women, he thought, feeling a bit surprised. Take this one: until this evening she had remained utterly sexless and unattractive. But then had turned out to be so spontaneous, so amazingly incandescent, so vibrant with life that she had carried him to the summit of unimaginable bliss in an instant. When love and a woman come together, a miracle is born. One gets to experience a segment of life through this miracle. Be it sublime or base, it is momentous all the same, because of its truly exquisite power to transform and exalt man—even to immortality. And he was discovering all this only now—he who had thought that he knew all there was to know about man from birth to death, who

had a taste of all life’s highs and lows, its pain and comforts; he who had thought that nothing, absolutely nothing, could surprise him any more. He was truly astonished to see how that same moment which he had experienced innumerable times with other women since puberty—the moment which had sometimes left him ashamed, sometimes full of anxiety, and sometimes simply satiated—how that moment, when love and a woman’s perfect willingness blend, could suddenly both give man (in spite of its inherent poverty) the heady experience of power and introduce him to the heights of self absorption where he could melt and permeate the whole universe. When passion has run its course, and the blood has chilled, love is what remains behind—like the memory of a good time, a memory more enduring and pleasant than the time itself. Or like the fugitive scent of a rose: no matter how intangible, it is still more real than its bloom ...

He was discovering all that tonight. But that blissful moment had flitted away. His conqueror’s body, now sated and calm, lay stretched out on the bed as he stared vacantly at the ceiling. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness in the room. A lot was going through his mind, but every now and then he threw a distracted glance at the woman who was staring at the wall, her back turned towards him. Her long, dark body, which she had not even bothered to cover, was tremulous; she was continuously bursting into a series of gentle but deep, muffled and unfamiliar laughs—or perhaps they were sobs. Several times he felt the urge to get up and find out whether she was laughing or crying, but in spite of his best efforts he could not lift himself up, or even move a finger. He just lay there: his body victorious and calm, his heart full of death.

And so, after thirty two years of pleasant and unpleasant experiences, she—who lay with her face to the wall—had finally learned that one didn’t suffer from one’s own fate or deeds in life, but from the chance of birth. Desires—fulfilled or unfulfilled—

“Once two hearts have lost their harmony, they drift apart. Nothing can bring them back together, not even the sacrifice of body.”



Artwork by Sara Sultan

what did they give us? They only made us poorer. We had to suffer them equally. Once two hearts have lost their harmony, they drift apart. Nothing can bring them back together, not even the sacrifice of body. Perhaps she was crying after all.

The next morning he found himself sitting across from her at the breakfast table. He stared at her continuously until her mother came in to clear the table. He tried to say something several times, but could not manage the right words. Finally, he uttered, "Sarwat!"

But she quickly got up and said, "Let's go."

"Sarwat!"

"Let's go," she repeated. "Get up."

He said good-bye to her mother and followed her out of the house.

"There's been a letter from Jawed," she informed him. "He's coming next week. This time he wants to take mother along. You know what that means? The house will be empty. Perhaps we'll lock

it up ... or rent it out.... The sun is so cold this morning!"

"Sarwat!"

"There, look! Those girls have taken a nasty fall from their bicycle. Why must two girls ride on one bicycle?"

"Sarwat ..."

"Shh ..."

"Sarwat!"

"No, Naim, no!" she implored in a drained voice. "Please don't say another word."

He kept quiet, but went on staring at her.

"Shall we walk ... or take the bus?"

"Whatever you like."

"Let's walk then. It isn't all that far."

"No, it isn't."

"Futile!"

"Huh?"

"Absolutely futile."

"What?"

"Futile! Stupid! Worthless!"

"No, it isn't! Sarwat, listen to me ..."

"You men, how shabbily you treat us," she said, feeling miserable. "Well, there's my house."

He started and stopped short. When he proceeded with her towards the front door, she turned quickly around and said in a resolute voice, "You can go now."

"Where?"

"Just go."

"But Sarwat ..."

"No, Naim," she said, "you must go now."

Inside she found Mahmud slouched on the sofa reading the newspaper.

She sat down in a chair, and leaned her head over the back of it, closing her eyes.

A little later, when she was fixing lunch with her husband seated close by, still buried in his newspaper, she smiled with some effort and asked, "What's the matter—you haven't gone to the office today?"

Abdullah Hussein is among the foremost fiction writers of Pakistan. He has published many collections of short stories and three novels. He writes in both Urdu and English. He received the Adamjee Award on his first novel, Udaas Naslen, which he later translated as The Weary Generations, published by UNESCO in its Collection of Representative Works. He is also author of an English novel Emigré Journeys. After living for over twenty years in London, he moved back to Pakistan some years ago.

مینار پاکستان کیوں بنا ؟

۲۳ مارچ ۱۹۴۰ کے دن کیا ہوا؟

لیاقت الی خان کو گولی لگی ساری دنیا کیوں رونے لگی ؟

اقبال پارک میں منٹو کا کیا کام ؟

اگر میرا بھائی احمدی ہوتا تو تمہارا بھائی کیا ہوتا ؟

ایسٹ پاکستان کو کیا ہوا ؟

بنگالی مٹھائی پاکستان میں کون لایا ؟

اقبال نے خواب میں کیا دیکھا ؟

پاکستان کیوں بنا ؟

بابا ے قوم کا پاکستان کیوں نہیں بنا ؟

Manto by Anuje Farhung

NOOR-E-CHASHM

I

It feels like your voice is going to walk in before you do. In seconds I'll have the whole of you back.

I will, in seconds, wont I? I've kept your last letter for myself, you wrote you'll be back with us in exactly a week, three times in a few lines. I run my hand over your words again and again, know its time. Your hair must have grown dry living nowhere. Come soon, saturated, doused I will follow you around, peel away the leathered layers of distance till you shine.

Its been some time, but remember, you used to love to dip into who you were with me. Now when we sit down to eat you can tell me all about where you've been. Tell me people you've met from other corners are like you, kind and hopeful, slowly building their lives brighter. That war doesn't walk heavily on their minds. That they pray for our own God's ears and He has listened every time.

He has to me.
I sit waiting
for you outside our home
swathed in blue. Laugh at
something you had once said;

leaf-like, my lips curl in folding
in the mole that feels so untouched.
And just above, the thin new moon
is on its way to being whole again.

II

Blank eyed, tight lipped. They speak
in thinly sliced words around me.
Your father sits me down, telling
me how they are not sure
but in either case what honour
you have brought. We do this
every day, all the while he rubs
away absent tears. All I can hear is
the screams of his dried eyeballs.
Your mother now talks about me
more than you, has given up the struggle
of speaking of you in the present,
with abandon talks of me in the past.

No hero has been born. Let me
send back their words, and ask
if they know the place where
it will all slowly go away:
your eyes, voice, hands, lips.

III

I'm going mad, it has begun to show.
It protrudes out of me taking your place.
Not even a part of you is here,
To make me stop running
across this winding stretch,
you pour out of me in tears till
silence falls between my lids.
They circle around me, tightly,
whispering, hoping I'll grow quiet
at the name of endurance. But

your absence falls on me like
rain again and again, louder still.
Trembling, they pray only for my ears
so I forget for their sake.

Even in dreams their wizened looks
wash over me and say,
"smile mad woman!
After all he did live once and was
yours for some time. And wait.
Wait for when He calls for
you over seven skies, gold
doors will open for
the young martyr's wife."

IV

Seasons have lost their orbit, or
found a new one. In this
slow wheel of days, rain
is born in winter now,
waterfalls of leaves make summer.
But it's no alien country
one we made in songs and blood, still
we remain adrift, traversing
derelict time. But for me
pain, so much pain, is the
constant dust of my life.

You're everywhere in this house,
halted at different ages.
If we always keep you in our eyes
they become so bright, no room
is left for what could have been in mind.

Today the moon is fat and so near
like the one your little love keeps
plopping in the middle of
his daily drawings. Your people,
this place, all of it has a new
softer rhythm, while in it
I just fall a little deeper

in love with death every day.
Remember when you
found me my life was
so small. For it you were
gold enough, alone.

~ Mavra Rana Tanveer

THE ESCAPE

By Kamila Shamsie

Extract from “Burnt Shadows” – a man in Afghanistan has to find a way into America without being caught by the authorities. This is the story of the route he takes, after paying a large sum of money.

Raza left Kandahar at sunrise in a pick-up truck, squeezed between the driver and an armed guard.

The guard and driver in the pick-up were taciturn, showing no more interest in Raza’s attempts to engage them in conversation than they did in the NATO convoys that hulked past as they made their way out of Kandahar. He slept, and when he woke there was no road, only sand and at least a dozen pick-ups – each one identical in its tinted glass, its gleaming blue paint. More armed guards had appeared from somewhere and had taken position at the back of the pick-up. The vehicles raced across the desert at unnerving speeds – a pack of animals evolved in a world where nothing mattered but chase and escape.

‘All this for me?’ Raza said to the guard beside him.

The men gestured to the back where the other guards sat on gunny-sacks piled on top of each other, and Raza thought of the effete quantities of heroin which he used to personally deliver to the most valued hotel guests in Dubai as part of his duty to give them whatever it took to ensure they returned.

At a certain point, when it seemed to Raza that his eyes would never see anything but sand outside the window something extraordinary happened. The convoy passed a group of nomads, making their way across the desert on foot. And there they were – finally, miraculously: women.

Faces uncovered, arms laden with bangles, clothes bright. He always thought they had to be beautiful – those women of fairy-tale who distracted princes on mythic quests with a single smile. Now he saw it was enough for them to simply be.

‘Stop,’ he said to the driver, but of course no one did, and within seconds the landscape was sand again.

But just that glimpse moved Raza into a pro-



In the Shadow by Merlin Flower

found melancholy – no, not melancholy. It was ul-jhan, he was feeling. His emotions were in Urdu now, melancholy and disquiet abutting each other like the two syllables of a single word.

Raza didn’t know that even as he was thinking this he was nearing the edge of Afghanistan. The pick-up climbed a sand-dune, and on the other side there was a habitation of sand-coloured structures.

‘You’ll get out here,’ the guard said. He pointed to the men who were watching the convoy approach. ‘They’ll take you now.’ The guard had answered all Raza’s questions with monosyllables and shrugs but now he looked at him with compassion. ‘Just re-

member, it will end. And the next stage will end.’

By early morning the next day, Raza was repeating those words to himself as though they were a prayer to ward off insanity.

He was in another pick-up – one with a covered rear compartment – though this one was decades and several evolutionary steps behind the gleaming blue desert racers; it bore a comforting resemblance to the pick-up in which the Pathan driver had ferried Raza and the other neighbourhood boys to and from school. Then he used to laugh at the other boys squeezed together on the two parallel benches that ran the length of the rear

compartment while he was in the front end learning Pashto from the driver, a tiny window between the driver and passenger seat allowing him to look back at the other boys who made obscene gestures in his direction without malice. If he’d only stayed in the back of the pick-up with them, he now thought, he would never have learnt Pashto, never have talked to Abdullah, never set off everything that led him to be sitting in a cardboard box at the back of a pick-up while young Pathan boys bowled cabbages towards him.

‘Vegetables can cross the border without paperwork, so you must become a vegetable,’ one of the men from the sand-coloured houses had explained to Raza. So here he was trying to contain his panic as the cabbages piled up in the back of the pick-up reaching his knees, his chest, his eyes...

‘I’ll suffocate in here,’ he called out.

‘You’ll be the first,’ replied a voice that seemed to find this notion intriguing.

For most of the journey he stood, stooped beneath the canopy, hemmed in by chest high cabbages. But as the border approached the driver rapped sharply on the partition that divided them and with long, deep breaths Raza lowered himself into the cardboard box. Within seconds, with the motion of the pick-up, the cabbages had rolled over him, cutting off light and air. And so, in the company of cabbages – breathing in cabbage air, pressed in by cabbage weight – Raza reached Iran.

Time had never moved so slowly as in the dark dankness of cabbages. The pick-up seemed to stop for a long time before the border guards approached. The cabbages muffled all sound except that of his heart.

When the pick-up moved again, Raza still dared not stand up. He had been firmly instructed to wait for the driver to signal an all-clear. But there was so little air.

Finally the driver stopped the pick-up and rapped again on the partition. Raza burst out of the cabbages, displacing the ones that were covering him with such energy they went thud-thudding against the canopy, and gulped in great mouthfuls of air. While the driver watched him, laughing, he clambered into the space between the cabbages and the canopy and, like a swimmer, propelled himself outward.

“It was uljhan, he was feeling. His emotions were in Urdu now, melancholy and disquiet abutting each other like the two syllables of a single word.”

‘Had fun?’ the driver asked, taking Raza’s hand and helping him down to the ground. ‘Cabbage soup for dinner!’

After the guards in the pick-up, Ahmed the Driver was a joy to sit with. His family were nomads, he explained, as he drove Raza south toward the coast. But drought and war had brought an end to the lifestyle his family had known for centuries, and now they had grudgingly settled near the border and become drivers if they were lucky, stone-pickers if they weren’t. ‘The land mines are the worst,’ he said, while Raza was still trying to work out what ‘stone-pickers’ might mean. ‘Once we used to travel in large groups for protection. Then we started to move in groups of three or four so if anyone steps on a powerful mine it can only have so much impact and others following behind will see the bodies – or the birds swarming around – and know to avoid that place.’ He smiled jauntily as he said this, and Raza didn’t know whether to believe him or not, but was glad just for the camaraderie.

He wanted to ask Ahmed the Driver, where – or what – is home for your people? But though he knew how to ask where someone was from, or where they lived, the word for ‘home’ in Pashto eluded him. As he tried to think of ways to explain it, the meaning receded.

He was so caught up in talking to Ahmed that it took him a while to understand why Iran felt so strange, despite its topographic similarity to Afghanistan.

‘No war,’ he said near sunset to Ahmed, when he finally understood.

Ahmed nodded, for once forbearing from jokes. He didn’t need to ask what this statement was doing in the middle of a conversation about poisonous snakes in Dasht-e-Margo – the Desert of Death – which Raza had travelled across in the pick-up truck

without knowing its name.

They stopped for the night in a hotel where Raza amazed Ahmed with his command of Farsi, and set off again the next morning. They’d hardly gone any distance when a car drew up alongside them filled with women wearing head-scarves and dark glasses, calling to Raza’s mind all those Hollywood actresses of the 50’s who Harry had loved. For a few seconds the car and pick-up travelled alongside, Ahmed shouting out questions to the women, which Raza translated with a disarming smile: Which of you will marry me, which will marry my friend? Why are you travelling by road, don’t angels fly?, the women shouting back in response, ‘We don’t want husbands who smell of cabbages. Women are

KARACHI

We must learn to quarter fear,
dice it, serve it on plates
in manageable portions.

Instead, it is etched like
a hologram against the sky,
starting out of the sockets

of buses burnt on the road,
where they root
like indestructible fungi.

The rat-a-tat of gunfire
shatters the silence into pieces
of a stone requiem.

Come now, instead of
allegorising fear,
dare we spell it out?

Dare we name the man
who left his house

never thinking: tonight it’s I,
till the bullets made him
spin and dance? And dare we
name the woman

who will not know
the mess haemorrhaging
into the sewer as her husband?

A yellow moon comes up
and the smell of fish
from the phosphorescent sea

almost cancels out
the smell of fear
and singed hopes.

Almost. For nothing can atone
but the seamless reparation
of fairy tale endings.

~ *Mehvash Amin*

superior to angels, why are you insulting us!’, all the while looking at Raza. All too soon they turned off the road with waves and air-kisses, leaving Ahmed to clutch his heart while Raza mumbled, ‘I think I love Iran.’

He had begun to think the worst part of the journey was over, was already starting to think of the cabbages as his test of fire, and for the first time since Harry died he felt a certain lightening within. They’d left the desert behind by now, and at his first glimpse of the sea Raza hollered in delight. Karachi, Dubai, Miami – all seaside cities, though until he saw the Iran coast he didn’t know that had any meaning for him.

But the closer they drew to the coast, the qui-

eter Ahmed became.

‘Why don’t you just stay here,’ he said, by the time they were close enough to the docks to smell the sea air. ‘If you’re running from the Americans, Iran is a good place to be. You even speak the language. And the women are beautiful – and Shia, like you Hazara.’

He didn’t understand quite what it was that made Ahmed worry so much until nearly an hour after he’d embraced the nomad goodbye and promised that in happier times he’d return and together they would traverse Asia in a pick-up without cabbages. Then the ship’s captain into whose charge Ahmed had delivered him took him to a wooden boat with a tiny motor, and when Raza asked if there was any place in particular he should sit the captain pointed to the wooden planks underfoot and said, ‘Beneath there.’

Raza laughed, but the captain didn’t join in.

‘Have you pissed?’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Go on. Over the side of the boat. You’re not coming out until Muscat. And there’s no room for your bag down there.’

Raza clutched his knapsack. ‘There are holy artefacts in here. I swore to my mother – ‘

The captain made a dismissive gesture. ‘Just hurry up.’ While Raza emptied his bladder into the sea, the captain pulled up a section of the floorboards. Raza could hear voices beneath. How many people were down there?’

Many. Too many. Raza looked into the bowels of the ship and all he saw were prone men looking up at him, more than one crying out – in Farsi and in Pashto – ‘Not another one. There’s no room.’

‘Go on.’ The captain pushed at his shoulder blades. ‘Get in. We’re late already because of you.’

Raza peered down. There was no space between one body and the next, the men laid out like something familiar, but what? What did they remind him of? Something that made him back up, into the ship captain who cursed and pushed him forward, into the hold, onto the bodies which groaned in pain, pushed him this way and that until somehow, he didn’t know how, he was squeezed into the tiny space between one man and the next and his voice was part of the sigh – of hopelessness, of resignation – that rippled through the hold. It was only when

“Time had never moved so slowly as in the dark dankness of cabbages. [...] The cabbages muffled all sound except that of his heart.”

the captain slammed down the hatch, extinguishing all light, that he knew what the line of bodies made him think of – the mass grave in Kosovo.

In the darkness, the man to his left clutched Raza’s hand. ‘How much longer?’ the man said, and his voice revealed him to be a child.

Raza didn’t answer. He was afraid if he opened his mouth he would gag from the stench – of the oil-slicked harbour, of damp wood, of men for whom bathing was a luxury they had long ago left behind. The boards he was resting on were slick, and he didn’t want to know if anything other than sea water might have caused that.

When the boat set off, things got worse. The motion of the sea knocking beneath the men’s head was a minor irritant at first – but when they left the harbour and headed into the open sea, the waves bounced their heads so violently the men all sat up on their elbows. It wasn’t long before they started to suffer sea sickness. Soon the stench of vomit overpowered everything else. The Afghan boy next to Raza was suffering the most, weeping and crying for his mother.

Raza closed his eyes. In all the years he had sat around campfires with the TCN’s listening to their tales of escape from one place to another, in the holds of ships, beneath the floorboards of trucks, it had never occurred to him how much wretchedness they each had known. And Abdullah. Abdullah had made this voyage once, would make it again. Across the Atlantic like this – it wasn’t possible. No one could endure this. What kind of world made men have to endure this?

He placed his knapsack beneath his head and, lying down, lifted up the boy who was weeping and retching next to him and placed him on top of his own body, buffering the boy from the rocking of the waves.

The boy sighed and rested his head on Raza’s

chest.

The hours inched past. No one spoke – conversation belonged to another world. By mid-afternoon, the hold felt like a furnace. Several of the men had fainted, including the boy who was now a dead weight on Raza’s chest. But Raza didn’t attempt to move him. He thought, Harry would have done for me without question what I’m doing for the boy. Then he thought, Harry would have kept me from a place like this.

At a certain point it started to seem inevitable they he would die in the hold. All he could think of was his mother. She’d never know he had died. No one would put a name to the dead piece of human cargo. So she’d keep waiting for news of him. For how long? How long before she understood that she’d lost one more person she loved? He whimpered softly, uncaring of what the other men might think of him.

When the boards lifted up and moonlight streamed in he didn’t understand what it meant until the captain’s head appeared.

‘Quiet!’ the captain warned in response to the ragged cheer that ran through the hold. ‘Raza Hazara, where are you? Come out. The rest of you stay here. We haven’t reached yet.’

Nothing in Raza’s life had felt as shameful, as much of a betrayal, as the moment when he identified himself as the man who was leaving. The boy on his chest, conscious again, clutched his shirt and said, ‘Take me with you’ and Raza could only whisper brokenly, ‘I’m sorry.’ He reached into his knapsack, lifted out wads of hundred dollar bills, and pressed them in the boy’s hand. ‘Don’t let anyone know you have this,’ he said, before crawling over the other men and holding out a hand for the captain to lift him out. For a moment he considered dropping the knapsack in the hold, but he knew there was something else he needed the money for so he looked away from the men in the hold breathing in as much fresh air and moonlight as they could before the boards came down again.

A small rowing boat was alongside the ship, and a voice emerged from it saying, ‘Raza Hazara? Hurry. The plane’s been delayed already for you.’

Raza climbed into the boat, but before he could sit down the man in the rower’s seat swung an oar and knocked him into the water. He had barely enough presence of mind to throw his knapsack into



Artwork by Sara Sultan

the boat as he fell.

He emerged spluttering and bone-cold. The man with the oar held up a bag. ‘Clothes in here. Take those ones off. And use this – ’ he threw a bar of soap at Raza.

Despite the man’s urgency to get going he allowed Raza a few moments to float, naked, in the cold cold water, looking up at the expanse of sky.

I will never be the same again, Raza thought. He watched his vomit-slimed clothes float away, holding on only to Harry’s jacket and changed that to, I want never to be the same again.

On the rowing boat there was water and food and a shalwar-kameez only slightly too big for him. It was as much as he could bear – any further luxury

“It was only when the captain slammed down the hatch, extinguishing all light, that he knew what the line of bodies made him think of – the mass grave in Kosovo.”

would have been repellent.

Near dawn the boat reached shore. There, another blue and gleaming pick-up truck was waiting. This time Raza didn’t attempt to speak to the driver and armed guard inside. He kept thinking of the boy whose head had rested on his chest.

Beautifully paved roads lined with palm trees led to a private air-strip. A plane was on the runway.

One of the guards from the pick-up accompanied Raza up the steps and grinned as he opened the plane door. ‘Welcome to the zoo,’ he said. The sounds issuing from the plane were extraordinary.

Raza stepped in, cautiously.

A blue heron unfurled its wings white peacock snap-closed its fan-tail macaws squawked baby ant-eater fell off its mother’s back and protested shrilly African wild dogs bared their teeth winged things flew about under a black sheet meercats sat up on their hind legs and watched. And to one side, a baby gorilla slept.

The guard pointed to the cage with the gorilla in it. ‘You’ll be travelling inside the monkey,’ he said.

And that’s when Raza realized his mind had definitely broken apart.

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Kamila Shamsie is the author of five novels, including “Burnt Shadows” which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and translated into more than 20 languages. She grew up in Karachi and now lives in London.

TERMINATOR: ATTACK OF THE DRONE

By Mohsin Hamid

Ma doesn't hear it. She's asleep, snorin' like an old brown bear after a dogfight. Don't know how she manages that. 'Cause I can hear it. The whole valley can hear it. The machines are huntin' tonight.

There ain't many of us left. Humans I mean. Most people who could do already escaped. Or tried to escape anyways. I don't know what happened to 'em. But we couldn't. Ma lost her leg to a landmine and can't walk. Sometimes she gets outside the cabin with a stick. Mostly she stays in and crawls. The girls do the work. I'm the man now.

Pa's gone. The machines got him. I didn't see it happen but my uncle came back for me. Took me to see Pa gettin' buried in the ground. There wasn't anythin' of Pa I could see that let me know it was Pa. When the machines get you there ain't much left. Just gristle mixed with rocks, covered in dust.

I slip outside. Omar's there waitin'. "What took ya so long?" he says. He's a boy like me but he's taller so he acts like he's older. "Ya got it?"

"Yeah," I say. I take it out from under my shawl. It's a piece of mirror from the white pickup we found all flattened next to the stream. Truck looked like a giant gone stepped on it. I'd asked Omar how big the machines were and he'd said not that big. Not the ones we had 'round here. But he'd said talk was there be bigger machines out there. Out in the southlands. Machines that could walk. So big each step sound like thunder.

At night I sometimes couldn't sleep 'cause I thought I heard 'em big ones comin'. But they never came. Most likely, there was no such. But my sisters still said if those machines come they surely kill everything. They said you'd better run when you hear those machines comin'. But what do they know. They're just girls. They get so scared sometimes they go pee inside when they're supposed be asleep and Ma has to thrash 'em. I only done gone pee inside once, and 'cause I'm the man now Ma ain't thrashed me much that time.

But there's no thunderin' tonight. Tonight there's that other sound. Sound of the machines that fly. That's the kind of machine we get in these parts. You can't see 'em at night. Sometimes you can't see 'em in the day neither. But you hear 'em all the

time, huntin'. They'll go away for days. Sometimes weeks'll go by and you ain't heard 'em once. Then they'll be back and there'll be a burial. Ain't no-one never killed a machine in our valley. But Omar and I reckon we've got a chance of it when the sun comes up. Only first we got to get ourselves in position.

We stride on up the stream to where there's a shell of an old car in it. Like bones that shell. Orange bones. Split open on top like somethin' reached down from the sky and yanked the driver out with a fist. Stream flows right through this car. Ain't no doors or wheels. There's a way up from this spot people don't take no more. Past rocks and mud that used to be cabins once. I remember visiting those cabins. Boy by the name of Yousuf used to live there. No-one likes to think about what happened to him. Throwin' yourself off a cliff be better than that, even if it do mean goin' to Hell.

Moon's out so we can see. Omar keeps looking back. "Ya see that?" he asks me.

"What?"

"Nothin' most likely."

Truth be told I ain't comfortable bein' out here at night. We get wolves comin' through the valley. Most part they stay well clear a' you. Unless maybe they ain't had a kill in a while and you be alone. When you're small you got to be careful. But Omar's gettin' tall now. Wolves'd likely think he's a man. More dangerous 'n wolves is people. But we're quiet and we got good ears. More dangerous 'n people is machines. If they hunt you at night, ain't nothin' can keep you safe. Not if you're in the open. I pick up a rock fits my hand good. Case there's wolves.

Not far of the ruined cabins we put our weight to a boulder. Move it, though I get a thumb caught. Bleeds a bit. Behind it there's a sack of plastic. Omar found it. Boulder must've shifted after an earthquake. Inside the plastic's some dirty cloth. Inside the cloth's wrapped up what we need. The she-piece's like a Kalashnikov. Black metal 'n brown wood. The he-piece's a black hand on a green arm. Put 'em together and they're like a wasp with no wings. Ain't neither of us fired one, but you've a pair of eyes in this valley you've likely seen enough to know these rockets can fly. And we mean to have ours bite us a

machine.

He-piece's lighter than the she-piece, so we take 'em by turns. Carryin' is a whole lot harder 'n it looks when there's a half-night of steep hikin' to be done. Omar's got one leg not as thick as the other, so he's slow. But he don't never feel no need to stop. Walk a day and a night he can. I seen him do it. The machine's a-huntin' above us. Sound comes and goes. When it comes we sit down and wrap up tight in our shawls like gray rocks. One time it stays, waitin', all angry loud. Stays long enough I start prayin' to myself real quiet. But it ain't seen us. It's gone again.

Moon's still there but sky's gettin' light when we reach atop Blackhill. Stream's just a crack in the valley. Omar takes out most of an onion and a long white radish too. I ain't eat since the day before, 'cept the roots Ma boiled. I'm wantin' to snatch 'em out of his hands. He's got hands like metal, though. And he's my best friend. "Go on 'n take the first bite," he says. I bite 'em each. I try to do like my Pa taught me and take a part less than the part I don't take. But I can't do it with the onion. And I can't do it with the radish neither. Omar don't watch me on purpose. He's hungry as I am, but he don't want to make me feel bad.

We put the he-piece in the she-piece. Sky's light enough now so's we'd maybe see the machine but all's quiet and it ain't about. Nail on my thumb's gone black. Ain't worried 'bout that. Omar's standin' strange though. He's movin' like a bird on one side, not bendin' his bad leg. Must've hurt it on the way up. Seems mighty worrisome to me. But Omar don't talk about that leg ever, so I don't say nothin'. Sun'll be upp'in' soon and I need to get goin' to the cave.

Way down's quicker without Omar and with nothin' to carry. Cave smells bad. Wonder if some's gone and died in there. Nothin' to see from outside though. And no sound neither. Ain't no cloud today and sun's bright. I flash the mirror at Blackhill. Omar's too a-distant for me to spot. He'll see me though.

Settle in to wait for the machine. I want it to show almost as bad as I don't. Now it's real my fear's gettin' the better of me. Every so often I wipe my hands on the mirror 'cause they're wet. Wet like my sisters' hands when they're all scared. I wet the mirror with my hands and polish it with my shawl. Least it'll be as shiny as can be.

Squeeze so hard near cut myself when I hears it. Sound like a man wants to make he shuts his mouth and rumbles behind his nose. A killin' sound. Quiet but gettin' louder. There's black in the sky, but only birds. Then it catches my eye, passin' by the mouth of the valley. More's a moment I think of slippin' into the cave. But I let the mirror catch the light and start to flash. Machine's goin' slow and straight and I think I've not done enough when it starts to turn.

Machine's a mighty thing. Makes you feel small, way it hangs up there. Hits so hard a whole family be gone just like that. But even machines can't yet kill a mountain. Can't fly in no cave neither. Or so's I think. Leastways humans all take to the caves when they's want to be safe. I scrabbles back a step closer mine. Yep, it's seen me alright. Machine brain's all thinkin' about what my flashin' might be. Comin' closer now. Closer to me, an' closer still to Blackhill.

I sees the flame. Rocket flies cross the sky. Omar done fired too late. Ain't but pass behind the machine. Behind and ways low. Ain't no explosion neither. Must been a dud. My heart's a-poundin' somethin' fierce. I'm readyin' to jump in my cave. But it starts to turn. It's turnin' toward Blackhill. That ain't possible. How's it possible it saw behind its own self. Ain't nothin' flies has eyes backside its head.

I flashes more times but it ain't payin' me no heed. Sound's changed now. Like a dog changes its sound it means to go for you. I start jumpin' up n' down, shoutin' loud as I can at the machine. Tightest I push my gaze I can't see Omar atop Blackhill. He's too small an' it's just too far.

Mohsin Hamid is the author of the novels "Moth Smoke", "The Reluctant Fundamentalist", and "How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia". His fiction has been translated into over 30 languages, given several awards, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, featured on bestseller lists, and adapted for the cinema. His essays and short stories have appeared in publications including the New York Times, the Guardian, the New Yorker, Granta, and the New York Review of Books. He was born in 1971 in Lahore, where he has spent about half his life, and he attended Princeton and Harvard. Among the other places he has lived are London, New York, and California.

LULLABIES AND KILLERS

1.

I can't stop to be sad
any longer or I will have to
be sad for longer than I can
realistically stay alive. So tears
are tears and breath is
breath and life moves on just so.

So let the first shot find you.
Let it rip your skin in search
for a liver to pierce, a lung
to puncture, air
to bring into lightening
chambers. Dark and wet

as you are, you are
in need for a holy light –
and it'll wash out your heart,
I swear – just you wait
right there for God.

2.

What is it that holds
up the sky? Mountains,
the tent pegs? Circum-
ambulating the poles?
The daily movement
in grace, standing, bowing,
kneeling, and standing again,
a holy loop and whispered words
caught on the tongue-tip unable
to take off? Do they move
the air? Does anything
move the air to fury
anymore, to floods and ravage?

3.

Not floods, Allah, not floods,
I'm sorry I said floods.

4.

But the song the water sings...
the song the air sings as
death is coming...

5.

If everything worships
then everything mourns.
What dirges killers
sing and whom they bury
in pain, these are mindfucks
arriving by night in rooms
stood alone on cliffs of
sorrow. What holds up
the sky is the smoke rising

from the dead returning
home. What holds down
the earth is the earth
remade from the dead
returning home. What holds us
in our bodies, and we
are sorrow, is the hand
beside, patting down the earth
is the hand beside, smoothing
out the shroud, is the hand
beside, covering a face that
could be its own. If everything
loves, everything worships.
And sings what dirges the tongue
can taste upon the air.

6.

So go home, my loves.
The air sings
your return. It won't
be long now. We're
all headed home.

~ Kyla Pasha



Regurgitated Barricades by Anuje Farhung

Kyla Pasha is a poet and academic from Pakistan who teaches comparative religion and cultural studies in Lahore. She is co-founder and managing editor of Chay Magazine: Sex and Sexuality in Pakistan. Her first book of poems, "High Noon and the Body", was published in 2010 by Yoda Press, and she co-edited "Two Loves: Faiz's Letters from Jail", published in 2011 by Sang-e-Meel Publications. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Religious Studies in the US and working on her second collection of poems.

WRITING IN PERSPECTIVE - A CONVERSATION WITH ILONA YUSUF

Interviewed by Sana Hussain & Maryam Piracha



Pakistani English poetry has not received the kind of accolades that Pakistani journalism and fiction are accustomed to receiving. Perhaps this is because we now live in an age of prose, as a speaker at the Islamabad Literature Festival commented. Whatever the reason for this lack of popularity, it is not due to a dearth of quality or talent. Pakistani Poetry in English is Alive and Well, a session at the Islamabad Literature Festival, discussed this fading presence of English poetry on the literary scene. One of the panelists during this discussion was Ilona Yusuf. A brilliant poet herself, Ilona was also the co-editor of the Poets from Pakistan edition of the Canadian magazine Vallum.

The Missing Slate's Features Editor Sana Hussain and Editor-in-Chief Maryam Piracha were fortunate enough to sit down with Ms. Yusuf and discuss a variety of topics including poetry competitions, jalebis (a South Asian sweetmeat), military dictator Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, bilingualism and a lot more.

Q Pakistani poets writing in English are either very few or not very well known. How did you start writing poetry?

A Poetry comes naturally to me; more naturally than prose. I started writing... I can't remember...I know that I started writing when I was about eight or nine, I think maybe the first poem I wrote and liked was when I was ten or eleven. I don't have any of those poems anymore. But then I went on to enter poetry competitions and I won several of them. Most of them were by British Council but there was also Punjab University...because I'm talking about the seventies, and the seventies were really very vibrant. I didn't realize this till much later in my life and, as I said during the panel, it laid the foundation for a period which came later which was very barren for me because I really had no contact with people who were writing poetry. So I wrote entirely in my imagination, but I had access to libraries and that served as a great help.

So that's how I began writing, and it was in the nineties that I had a lucky break. Then I realized how vibrant that period of the seventies was, because I would constantly look back on it and think about it and I remembered the days when I used to collect big volumes of poetry wherever I could find them. Then OUP [Oxford University Press] published the golden jubilee series so I amassed a collection of poetry by Pakistani poets. [Although] it's not necessarily having a local idiom which matters to me, because I think it mattered to poets more in the fifties, your immediate surroundings always come out in your images. So I was looking for something that would give me reference points, but that's not necessarily something that I would follow. So I tried to read as widely as possible, from poets any and everywhere.

Q Our generation hears about a very wholesome literary culture that existed in Pakistan in the 1970s, a culture that has apparently dwindled since. Apart for the National Library, we can't think of a public institution [in Islamabad] with a wide selection of literature.

“ Young people, when they read and they appreciate the sounds and the music of words, improve their writing skills; plus they develop an appreciation of literature [...] those things contribute to tolerance, which we don't have. **”**

A Well I have to say, I couldn't find Zulfikar Ghose's novels anywhere, and I met him when he came here and had a reading, and then I met him at somebody's house also... he had a book of poems published by OUP and also a volume of essays, so I had those but I wanted to read in particular *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, which is now being republished by OUP. At that time it wasn't available... couldn't find it on the net either. I had gone to the National Library for research and I was taken upstairs where they had this huge, huge room where they have every book under the sun and they're not even properly catalogued, very sadly. I found *The Murder of Aziz Khan* and it was June and there was load shedding and it was on the top story. [Laughs] There were no chairs, the stools were way at the end, and I found the book and I thought I have to read one chapter here, so I read that one chapter.

Q They take you to these huge empty rooms, with enormous tables, and that's where you're supposed to read.

A And nobody seems to be reading! [Laughs]

Q The predictable retort when someone laments the absence of a book culture in Pakistan is that people here don't like to read and are not

“ There are ways of breaking a rock. It may be a rock but there are little cracks from which things will permeate and find their place, and eventually they’ll deepen and then something happens. ”

interested in going to libraries. On the other hand, when you see events like the Karachi Literature Festival, Lahore Literature Festival and now the Islamabad Literature Festival... they’re completely packed.

A First of all, in itself reading outside of your textbooks is not encouraged. When we had the reading for *Vallum*, I hate to have to say this but if I say it maybe it will make a difference... we had a reading at Kuch Khaas – I know some people consider it elitist, so I made a point of sending personal invitations to as many educational institutes as I could. I don’t think anybody came. I think [there were] only two people from NUML (National University of Modern Languages). That really disheartened me, because the only way you can make people appreciate poetry or listen to poetry is when you take it into the schools and colleges – that’s when things start. Because young people, when they read and they appreciate the sounds and the music of words, improve their writing skills; plus they develop an appreciation of literature. And I think those things also contribute to tolerance, in general, which we don’t have.

Q **You experienced the Zia regime firsthand. We constantly hear that literature and the arts in general died out or weren’t encouraged, but how bad was it – really?**

A Actually, it didn’t die out – it was just that it was underground. Like Adrian Husain

in Karachi; he had a group called “Mixed Voices”, and they were a group of poets, all of them were still writing... Shireen Haroon who’s Maki Kureishi’s daughter, Moin Farooqi, Salman Tariq Qureshi – they were all part of this group and they were writing and they were having creative writing workshops; they were also, I think, venturing into translation. And so you can see that all of these poets have a background in Urdu as well as in English. Same in Lahore: Waqas Khwaja was there during the eighties and he had a group and they published two issues of a newsletter called *Cactus*, [which] featured translations from Urdu and probably from Punjabi into English and... I can’t remember offhand the main members of the group. He was very active and this was all in the eighties and a very deliberate attempt to bring together writers, so that they weren’t in total isolation.

So it wasn’t that things weren’t going on – they were. It’s just that there were no public platforms where you could showcase your work and then there was no encouragement for writing in English either. In Urdu, because of the repression, you had no freedom of speech and that’s why you have this poetry of resistance, but in English it took a different line altogether.

Q **Were those forums available for poets before the eighties?**

A Yes, like I said [during the panel], the poetry competitions were under the umbrella of the British Council. Taufiq Rafat was a great mentor. I didn’t personally go to his creative writing workshops but I know people who [did], and he was wonderful – he would actually guide you so that you were able to realize your own potential. It wasn’t like he was trying to propagate his own style. Then, universities like Punjab University were also having poetry competitions.

Q **So why do you think forums like these soon disappeared? Was it fall-out from Zia’s censorship and suppression policies?**

A I think probably there was an agenda, for a particular type of Islam and politics. And anything which was related to freedom of speech was not allowed. During the eighties, they would rough people up in the universities and these were all students ... student factions. So it doesn’t make for a good atmosphere ... I [had] actually left college by that time but I do understand that it was a difficult time. But we carried on – Alamgir Hashmi was writing for newspapers and he said that it was a different experience. I mean, you look at the earth... you look at a rock – there are ways of breaking a rock. Water will make its way through cracks. It may be a rock but there are little cracks from which things will permeate and find their place, and eventually they’ll deepen the cracks and then something happens.

Q **You mentioned poetry of resistance being written in Urdu during the eighties; was there a similar trend in English poetry?**

A You won’t have it in the way that you have it in Urdu, which is a very conscious amalgamation of political and other themes. That’s not the case with English though; I mean, Maki Kureishi has some poems which are very political. She writes about Karachi when there was enormous strife in Karachi. She is an excellent poet... very small output, but an excellent poet. You will find a little bit here and there in Daud Kamal, although Daud Kamal doesn’t do that – he has very short, very deep poems, but only about five to ten line poems, maybe a few here and there.

“ It’s not necessary to be political. If you look at Ghalib, [he] was not a political poet. He lived through the mutiny and wrote poetry through [it all]. But, he’s not a political poet, he’s a philosopher. ”

Q **Why do you think there wasn’t a more overt response to the oppression of the regime in the poetry written in English?**

A I don’t know really... I mean to me it’s not necessary to be political per se. If you look at Ghalib, [he] was not a political poet. He lived through the mutiny and wrote poetry through [it all]. But, he’s not a political poet, he’s a philosopher.

Q **So this brings us to our next question regarding why Pakistani writers generally focus so much on politics. It is understandable that politics is an inherent part of our existence in this country but still, why the fixation?**

A The thing is that all over the world in a way there is a trend towards social political writing. Now, [Gabriel García] Marquez is an amazing writer – I love to read his work – and with writers like that politics is not coming first at all. The craft of being a writer, and being a good writer is the basic thing, everything follows from that, the themes will automatically come because they’re inside you and you can’t escape the reality around you. It is a part of you, so you will reflect it in some way – it may be in the way you describe nature or it may be in the way you describe people and that is how politics comes out. But to take politics as the focal point of your writing, that’s not the right order.

Q **Does it seem to you that the trend is changing?**

A It is changing: I’m not so familiar with Urdu, I read in translation and I do try to read bilingually because I did not grow up speaking Urdu. But I do try to get bilingual editions so that I can read the English and the Urdu. So I know that Faraz is very political, If-tikhar Arif again is political but he’s also not political, both things are there. Faiz of course is political, but there were many love poems as well. You know, you can’t say that they’re all political.

“English medium schools are not making Urdu mandatory, and I think that really is very sad. When you come from Pakistan, why are you not teaching Urdu?”

Q Two of your poems, *9/11* and *From Swat*, when compared to say, *Jalebi*, can be dubbed as being more overtly political.

A I don't usually write political poems. For me, these are my political poems...

Q But they're not exactly political...

A No, they're not. You see when I was writing *Jalebi*...first of all the *jalebi* is a national sweet, right... and I don't like to eat *jalebis* myself but everyone else in the family loves them. And I love to see how they are made. In my house a lot of political talk shows are watched and I close my ears and run out of the room, partly because I'm apolitical, and partly because in some of them the host is trying to goad the guests to bring out the worst in themselves... which they do. [Laughs] And they're all speaking together and none of them are speaking the truth. And in our society... there is so much in our society which is untruthful and conspiracy theories, and I think that poem came out of that. And I used the *jalebi* because it's such a convoluted kind of a thing – it's a beautiful thing, but all convoluted and it's all about evading the truth. And with the dog, we actually had a dog that chased his tail, [laughs] so that's where that came from.

Q During the panel discussion, poet Harris Khalique spoke about how your generation of poets is mostly bilingual, whereas the rising poets or emerging Pakistani poets generally aren't. Do you agree with that?

A Okay... let's clarify that. In a way, he has a point. Poets like Waqas Khwaja, Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, they were also very good translators. Daud Kamal translated Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Taufiq Rafat translated Kazim Yar and Bulleh Shah, Waqas Khawaja has translated various Urdu poets and he's also edited an anthology which came out about two years ago – it's modern poetry of Pakistan but it's [in] all languages, all the vernaculars. So they have a very solid grounding in local poetry. I can't claim that. Some of the new poets, [such as] Shadab Zeest Hashmi, [have] a very good grounding in vernacular poetry; Bilal Tanweer, he has this felicity for being kind of equal in both English and Urdu.

English medium schools are not making Urdu mandatory, and I think that really is very sad. When you come from Pakistan, why are you not teaching Urdu? You must have a connection to your literary heritage because otherwise you are going to divorce yourself totally from it. You can't pretend not to be part of that heritage. It's like when Zia came into power, you can't pretend that Harrapa was not part of your history, or Gandhara wasn't... I mean you should really be over the moon that there was this wonderful civilization called Gandhara which embraced different religions and was so tolerant, and instead you want to negate it.

Q Why do you think we constantly downplay our literary culture, and then wonder if there's a market for Pakistani writers?

A There is a market definitely. Publications abroad are picking up Pakistani poetry and publications here also need to wake up and do something about it, because if you don't recognize your heritage then you're going to lose it.



Artwork by Sara Sultan

Q What would your advice be to young poets?

A Read like anything.

Q Aside from reading...

A [Laughs] Keep going back to your work and edit, try and eliminate any extra detail, because what people very often do is to add detail or overwrite, or state things, you don't state things, poetry is about picture and that picture conjures several things rather than just one. It's the image, it's not saying that this is the city of greens, its evoking that atmosphere of the city of green.

Q Finally, who is your favorite poet or rather, which poet influenced you most?

A You see, I wrote poetry when I was very young. I started with... now this is the sixties... this Penguin book of verse and I read it so much it was in tatters, and this was when I was seven. Poetry came to me very early. And these were a mixture of new poets and older poets. I used to love Hilaire Belloc, because of the rhythm, and then when I was in college I loved Dylan Thomas, Neruda, these are some of my favorite poets. Faiz I've read a lot. And I read a lot of Chinese poetry as well. You know... all kinds of poetry because I think you need to read a lot. And American poetry as well, because they're more modern and because I write open-ended verse, and I guess that's what appealed to me. Rhyme did not appeal to me and over the last few years, I've been a member of a poetry group and that's been amazing because some people only want to read classical poetry and I wouldn't read classical poetry as a conscious decision, but hearing it has actually benefitted me, because then I will go back and read something or reread that same poem later. Those things do matter, you know, because you have to go back to history.

Ilona's poems are included in this issue.

I WAIT FOR IMAGES TO CRYSTALIZE

wait for the moment when
this powindah
sheds her pots and pans
translates herself
stands proud
infant hitched against her hip
with the sideways glance
the triumphant smile
that says
look at me

never mind the plastic lace-ups
that gape open at the toe
the rain that's stained her clothes
she is heiress to the world

ii

all of ten years old
coming from the water pump
she turns her ankle lifts her pink dhoti
and with arched erect back
balances the brass pot on her head
and lilt daintily down
the rubbled pathway

iii

not wantonness
but abandon
unawakened tenderness
two girls leaning
against the posts
of a disused well

a third straddled flat along them
absorbed in prattle
in the evening light
that diffuses all sharp edges

they'll grow one day
into the trio by the hand pump
rocking on haunches
loosened with labour
widened with squatting before the stove
worn hands resting
by the nickel cauldrons
they've come to scour with sand
keepers of movements by the well

iv

child in the doorway
where the half dark recedes
into piled quilts and bedding
tentative eyes

watching her sisters
separate chaff from grain
toss it up toss it down
there is a man in the corner
swinging an infant
you cannot see her face in the picture
but her naked limbs
betray her
the women see it
as i release the shutter
throwing sideways smiling glances
from secret eyes

~ Ilona Yusuf



Photography by Ali Choudry

SPOTLIGHT WRITER: AAMER HUSSEIN

Interviewed by Maryam Piracha & Sana Hussain



Aamer Hussein began writing in the mid-eighties. Since then he has written five collections of short stories, a novella titled Another Gulmohar Tree and a novel, The Cloud Messenger. While technically part of the generation of contemporary Pakistani writers, he distances himself from the labels that are associated with them. He elaborates more on this and his views regarding the craft of writing, Pakistan's literary presence, and the pertinence of online literary journals during an interview with The Missing Slate.

Q So first of all, how has ILF been for you?

A Well, it's really sort of waking up I think. The audiences have decided, perhaps because it's a holiday, to come. The two halls I've been to have been full. I had the morning session about the Urdu short story which was fairly well attended, [despite being] early in the morning. Then I went to another one with Zehra Nigah and Intizar Hussain talking about traditional genres and it was absolutely packed. And you feel with each session it could actually go on longer.

Q Do you feel that festivals like these are helping foster a much needed literary culture in Pakistan?

A I really hope so, because in a way we're surrounded by books, we're surrounded by people who represent the books. We have a chance for debate; we're meeting our readers, which is wonderful.

Q It's the common perception that Pakistanis have very little affinity for books or reading. But when you come to events like these you see that this perception is not actually true.

A I was here in January as well, giving a couple of talks, but because of the strikes and stuff they weren't as well attended as they might have been. But the people who did turn up, who braved the barricades and so on, were very enthusiastic and very well read... in terms of my work, they had read it very carefully and asked interesting good questions. So it was better to have a small audience that was well-versed in what I had done than a general audience that doesn't ask specific questions.

Q So we've read that you're fluent in almost seven languages?

A Listen, I speak about three or four languages. I speak Urdu, English and Italian pretty well; Spanish okay, French okay. I read all of them and I write three or four of them, as well as Hindi and Persian.

Q How does this ability to read and write in more than just Urdu and English come into play in your writings? And do you think being multilingual makes you a better writer?

A First of all, very much so, because it means that unlike other English language writers who know English better than their own language, whichever that might be, I've had all these different cultures nourishing me. Particularly in the case of French, you know a lot of good work from Africa is written in French, North Africa plus West Africa, and I've read a lot of that literature so it has influenced both my cultural outlook and probably the way I use the English language. Italian as well.

Q Apart from writing, you also translate. How is that experience?

A I translate a little bit. I've edited translations and I've written about them.

“ It's not as if the Pakistani writers suddenly decided, “Oh 9/11 has just happened so I have to start writing”. They were there, they were writing, it's just that 9/11 gave them a particular label. **”**

Q Do you feel that in order to be a good translator you have to be a good writer first?

A I think so. Very often you need two translators to perfect one text, one who knows the language well and one who is a good writer.

Q How do you think Pakistani literature in English has evolved since you first started writing?

A You know, it doesn't seem to me such a dramatic evolution. It's just so that we suddenly saw a group of writers converge and I think that, you know the publication of *Granta*, brought together writers and made it all visible. First of all there's continuity between Indian writing in English and Pakistani writing in English, lots of people might have attended the same universities in England or the States. A lot of us in the Diaspora particularly, have interacted with each other over the years. And if you think of Nadeem Aslam, he started in the mid-nineties, '93. We had books out in the same year. Kamila [Shamsie] had her first book out in '98, I think. Mohsin [Hamid], at the end of '99. So there were at least the four of us who emerged in the nineties. After which 2000 and 9/11 created a kind of visibility. But it's not as if the Pakistani writers suddenly decided, "Oh 9/11 has just happened so I have to start writing". They were there, they were writing, it's just that 9/11 gave them a particular label.

Q And drew the attention to them.

A And drew the attention to them. Personally I feel I come from an earlier time. I don't share a trajectory with them, even though some of them might be quite near to me in age. But I think the trajectory I don't share is the task that's been given to them, these are the twenty first century writers, these are the new Pakistani writers, they're the ones who're dealing with the crisis in Pakistan. I feel you know, leave me my own little quiet space.

“ I don't feel a writer has to be a journalist. [...] I don't think that it's my duty as a writer to read every book about Pakistan. **”**

Q TMS: So that brings us to our next question, which is that do writers, particularly writers from Pakistan, have some sort of social responsibility to write about Pakistan?

A You know, responsibility is at the core of one's being. We express responsibility in very different ways. I don't think the responsibility is to be a journalist, because we have good journalists, we have good women journalists, we have good men journalists. I don't feel a writer has to be a journalist. I would rather be reading a book by Hafiz or Shah Abdul Latif Bhatti than reading political analysis. I don't think that it's my duty as a writer to read every book about Pakistan; to know about current events, yes. It informs your work in a kind of oblique way.

Q Do you feel like the writing that's coming out now is more "political analysis" than just good fiction?

A You know I feel that I haven't read enough Pakistani fiction. I have to be very clear about that, one has limited time and as you grow older you tend to want to look back and read books you've missed out on. I haven't read much of Muhammed Hanif, I haven't read Shehryar Fazli's book, I haven't read Uzma Aslam Khan and I was telling someone earlier, three or four of them, (I probably won't name them today) are friends of mine, so obviously I read their books, I know what goes into them, I know they're not trying to manipulate their audience. But they do feel very passionately about their country.

Q Do you think that due to the increased focus on Pakistan following 9/11, young writers feel the need to write about certain socio-political topics?

A I don't think they deliberately start to write about it but I think the publishers who probably buy books are looking for that angle, how it connects with Pakistan, how it connects with the Taliban, how it connects with the violence in the country and so on. And perhaps Mohsin Hamid's new book, in which he refused to name the country, was a reaction to that.

Q As someone who is involved in online literary journals, what do you think about the role they play in furthering literature, specifically online?

A I think they plays a great role; to have literary journals is constructive, and would especially be so if they could do more to bring together literary cultures that have become divorced from each other. I think of Urdu and the regional languages and of English. One seems to have this regional, parochial, provincial label attached to it and the other one seems to be cosmopolitan or international. Actually a lot of Urdu writing is every bit as international as the writing in English.

Q That actually leads to another question we discussed, in your opinion does travelling and exposure play a role in good writing or is it essential for good writing?

A Would you be shocked if I said, not necessarily? Because I think some people have written wonderfully just living in absolutely the core of their own place and they've written about huge issues.

Q So you would say sensitivity and imagination are more important factors?

“ I think the publishers who buy books are looking for that angle, how it connects with Pakistan. And perhaps Mohsin Hamid's new book [...] was a reaction to that. **”**

A Yes, sensitivity and perception. I mean human nature changes according to political context only in its behavior and its manifestations, but [otherwise] it's just pretty much the same.

Q Any advice or words of wisdom for young writers, aside from reading?

A This is what I would say, just read as much as you can. Because I think critics and journalists need to be aware of all the contexts of a book but they also need to be aware of the context from which the writer is emerging. Each individual writer has his/her own trajectory and I think if you read their books carefully you'll understand that, rather than pinning a label on the book, which the book is not going to be able to live up to.

Q And what about advice for new writers and new novelists?

A You know it always sounds like such a cliché but one of them is just write close to your own experience, start from there. Not about yourself but start from what you know. Start from what you love, start from what you believe in.

Sana Hussain is Features Editor and Maryam Piracha is Editor-in-Chief of the magazine.

THE TREE AT THE LIMIT

By Amer Hussein

The woman, brown haired, fine lines around brown eyes in a face that's smiled a lot. Brush in hand, body in a stained painter's smock, turning away from the window. Tree shapes through the glass, branches outlined against a grey afternoon sky. Bare branches of tall trees. At the lower left corner you sense the presence of a canvas you can't see. The colours are mild, like the back of a fallen leaf.

That's the first miniature.

In the second painting, the same scene, with a slight shift to the left. You see the large canvas she's been painting. It's a seascape. Glinting water, platinum on blue; perhaps an estuary. Boats with red and white striped sails.

There's a slight smile on her face.

The third painting is of a window. You see the sea through white gauze curtains.

The first two miniatures are called *Marya, Painting*.

The third is called *Boats in Karachi*.

The exhibition takes place in an old palace by the sea. From one of the windows, you see a scene similar to one depicted in the painting.

From the exhibition catalogue:

Marya Mahmud was born in Rome in 1917. She studied art privately. She met the historian Mazhar Mahmud in 1937, probably in Paris or Berlin. They were married in a religious ceremony a year later and travelled all over India during the last years of the Raj. Marya began to paint scenes as she saw them. Professor Mahmud was an ardent nationalist and Marya, an anti-Fascist in her native country, matched his fervour in her adopted land. In 1946, a year before Independence, they moved to Lahore where under the influence of Chughtai she began to paint scenes from legends and from history. In 1947, the Mahmuds moved to Karachi where Marya entered the most prolific period of her painting.

The fourth miniature is of a woman's naked back; the canvas cuts her figure off just below her hips. She's lifting her hair off her neck with one

hand; the other hand holds up a mirror. She's obviously balancing on one foot, as the other is raised, its heel grazing a buttock. You can see her profile in shadow. It's the woman from the tree paintings.

Through the window, the sea's a deep blue field, even though it's night. You can see a white waxing moon in the night sky. Stars are reflected in the waves. They look like yellow fish.

In the fifth, again a slight shift in perspective: seascape, window, woman and a canvas in view. It's a painting of the woman taking a pause from painting trees.

The two paintings are called *Missing the Sea 1* and *Missing the Sea 2*.

Between two sequences of paintings there are walls, festooned with photographs. Marya, young, before she changed her name; she was still called Maria Maddalena Serra. Marya on her wedding day with her husband, both in traditional bridal dress. Marya, in some Indian city, in a sari. Marya painting, cooking, on a bicycle, on a march, at a reception, meeting the Shah of Iran, meeting Nasser, Nehru. Marya, older, in Europe. There are photographs of the houses Marya lived in: Karachi, Rome, London, Cambridge.

From a review of the exhibition:

Marya's Oxford-educated husband, the renowned historian Mazhar Mahmud, wrote a controversial book in 1959. It was called Aspects of Myth and Legend in Islamic Society. In it he questioned the literal existence of angels, saying the Quranic word for angels didn't denote supernatural creatures with wings but only spiritual impulses transmitted to man from divine sources. The iconography of angels in later Islam was inherited from the churches and from Zoroastrian sources.

Lucifer, too: in the Holy Book he was a jinn who refused to bow to the newborn Adam, and was exiled from the Kingdom. But as he left he asked God to let him tempt mankind and give them the test of faith. Thus in some medieval legends and poems the Devil becomes God's faithful creature, a fallen angel, banished from heaven for the sin of pride, whose mission is to sift bad men from good and select the



Artwork by Sara Sultan

“ She’s lifting her hair off her neck with one hand; the other hand holds up a mirror. She’s obviously balancing on one foot, as the other is raised, its heel grazing a buttock. ”

best for God. In some of the great poet Iqbal’s poems, Lucifer is both adversary and admirer. But in the Book the Devil is not the Great Enemy. He’s only a whisperer and a tempter, a creature of fire, not of the light that angels are made of; a character with no power of his own and possessed of only the power that men invest in him.

‘Papa left Karachi in 1961 and Mamma went with him,’ their son says, in an Italian documentary made in the artist’s ninetieth year. It’s showing on a monitor, with earphones appended. ‘Papa felt the climate wasn’t right for his book and there were rumblings from the orthodox parties. In those more tolerant times it was only a frisson but he knew he’d overstepped the mark when a critic from the other side accused him of denying the power of angels. He was told he was to be transferred to a ‘hardship’ posting in the Gulf and he thought the time had come to work abroad. He wanted to carry out his research freely. They went together to Rome, where he worked on his book on the martyred mystic Hal-laj, who some called a heretic. When an offer came to teach in Cambridge he left his government job and they set off for England. He would never have called himself an exile, but he thought he couldn’t write the kind of books he wanted to, so he was in a way in self-exile. But he felt at home anywhere near a vast library, a group of intelligent students, a colleague or two to talk to – and in Cambridge he had a Fellowship and his old friend Dr Giles Hollis, with whom he was going to write a book about forgotten heretics and schismatic Sufi sects. Mamma wasn’t happy away from Karachi. She painted rarely and when she started to paint again her work was so bleak.’

The sky through the window is misty. Two treetops rise above the haze, in a violet space of sky: one’s tall, the other shorter. No leaves on either. It’s a winter scene. The frames of the windows are heavy, dark: painted with more detail than the mist, the haze, the treetops, the branches. The miniature is called *The Library Window: Cambridge*. There is no date.

‘Reminds me of a pair of figurines I had on top of my TV in New York,’ someone says. ‘A God and a Goddess. He was really tall and she was little like that tree. I think they were from Bali. Then you know I came back from holiday and found one of them gone? The little one, the lady! Obviously the



Two Shots and More by Merlin Flower

cleaner just dropped it and swept it away.’

Scorpions in the desert sand. Cactus trees in an empty city street. Strange-shaped skulls, bones on empty beaches. A purple-skinned woman with three heads and three star-nippled breasts. An ephebic boy dancing with a dinner-jacketed skeleton. A woman, naked, staring at a long wild cat with a humanoid face.

Charcoal sketches. Paintings blanched of colour.

These are the paintings from England that she’s best known for today.

‘But who has curated the exhibition?’ someone asks in a shrill tone as they move from the stark surreal canvases to jauntily coloured pictures of folk figures from the fifties: ‘Why isn’t it chronological? Surely these are earlier pictures?’

‘It’s thematic and generic,’ her companion says. ‘Can’t you see? These are Marya’s watercolours.’

A deft, lightly-coloured sketch of a man kneeling, his bleeding head held in his hands. In the background, hazy figures of a throng. It’s called *The Stoning of the Heretic, 1960*. You can recognise a

resemblance to her husband's features in the man's, particularly his acquiline nose, but maybe that's just the eye's imaginative licence.

'Papa and Mamma had never officially separated,' her daughter says. 'He just began to grow away from her. He spent time in Iraq and time in the States with Dr Hollis. Mamma would take the ship to Karachi and spend months here. I was teaching art at a girls' school and then I married and got pregnant. My brother Murtaza was working in Canada. The old house in Clifton, with its view of the sea, was rented out and she didn't like PECHS, the suburb where I lived. Too far away from the sea! Then Papa followed Hollis to Columbia on a year's research trip and she just lingered on in the Cambridge flat, painting those desolate scenes. But then when my second child was on the way she said she wanted to move back to Karachi, for at least a year. She said that as she stood on a railway platform waiting for the London train she'd seen a falling leaf whirl by: it fell at her feet, a dead thing, all withered and crumpled – and she knew she couldn't bear another cold season. Though she hated flying, she booked a plane back to Karachi in a matter of days. She took calligraphy lessons and held drawing classes at home. She attended exhibitions but mostly stayed away from Karachi's other painters. Later, she taught art and French at a mixed school and later still she worked at the University. She moved back to the Clifton house and often went for long walks, collected sea shells. My brother moved back to Pakistan in 1963 and Mamma went with cultural delegations to China and Central Asia and Egypt but she never stayed away from Karachi for any length of time.'

Through the library window, you see snowflakes, whirling: but look again and they're interspersed with leaves. Or they might all be leaves. The snow on the ground is a carpet of leaves.

Look again and the leaves seem to be tossed on the waves of a turbulent sea. There's a near-absence of colour that intensifies the greyish-white of sky, the deep brown of trunks, the silver-white of flake and leaf-carpet and sea.

In the catalogue there's a detailed enlargement of a leaf.

The miniature is called *The Tree at the Limit*.

From the exhibition catalogue:

The miniature alludes to a legend of Sidrat ul-Muntaha, the tree in paradise that marks the limit. It is said to bear as many leaves as there are people in the world. Each leaf bears the letters of a name. In the middle of the month of Shaban, the eighth month of the year, the tree shakes and sheds the leaves on which are written the names of those who will die in the coming year.

The exhibition opened on Marya's ninetieth birthday. She will not attend in her wheelchair but there's a message she's recorded on film.

It's November, 2007. There's a slight breeze and the sea is calm.

'The strange thing is, that Mamma made that picture before he died in 1964,' her son says in the documentary. 'He was in Iraq, with Hollis; he'd promised to come to Karachi from Iran after visiting Baghdad, Basra and a couple of places in Azerbaijan. No one knows where they were going, or why the plane crashed in Baluchistan. There were stories of sabotage and spying but there's no likely truth to any of them. The strange thing is, that Mamma made that picture as if she knew...'

The last miniature in the exhibition is also the first example of Marya's new phase: a piece of calligraphy. A leaf seen through glass, framed by a window: a retake of the leaf-detail you saw earlier, but painted in a dense gold. Look carefully and its veins are composed of Arabic letters. The catalogue tells you they spell her husband's name.

The painting is called *A Leaf*. It's on the cover of the catalogue.

"The Tree at the Limit" originally appeared in the anthology Still (Negative Press London, 2012).

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LUCKY VIKKI

by Muhammad Umar Memon

Translated from the Urdu by Faruq Hassan and the author.

"Why are you making all this fuss? Don't you see that the photograph is out of focus? Even a blind man can tell that!" Saeed, the most balanced and centered and calm person among us all, tried to explain as rationally as he possibly could to the ugly photographer who, undisturbed by it all, went busily on retouching some negative. Saeed's words couldn't have fallen on deafer ears. For us this calamity, the ruin of the picture, was far more earth-shaking than, say, the Agadir earthquake, or the fear of the Super Power confrontation in Laos and Cuba, or even the possible outbreak of the Third World War. The monstrous, misshapen photographer, on the other hand, went on calmly retouching the negative—as though God Almighty, the Lord of the heavens and earth, had created nothing besides his pencil with the two-inch-long pointed tip and that damned negative. Not even once did he bother to raise his head and look at us.

His prodigious indifference, his colossal equanimity truly burnt me up. I picked up our group photograph and slammed it down on the glass-top counter and roared: "You think the money we gave you was ill-gotten? Don't you see the picture is so bloody out of focus that none of us is even recognizable? Who allowed you to become a photographer, eh?"

When I slammed the picture down, my hand hit the glass-top of the counter. The slap disrupted the photographer's composure, but only for the briefest moment. Shaken a bit, he paused for a second. Inadvertently, his pencil registered a little more pressure than usual on the negative, but that was all. It was as if he had physically absorbed the shock of my little outburst. But he still didn't bother to look up. He pushed back the thick glasses that had slid down to the tip of his nose. Then he picked up his cigarette from the ashtray, took a couple of drags, coughed a little, shifted a bit and resumed his work.

This threw me into a fit of rage. It was a rare opportunity by all counts, one that we could be rightly proud of. The chairman of our Society had commis-

sioned to have a group photograph taken after the farewell party which the junior grad students had thrown for our graduating M.A. class. He had also agreed to pay for the photograph out of the Society's funds. For my own part, I had managed to persuade Shah Ji, the vice president of the Society, to have the words "B.A. (Hons.), Departmental Representative" printed after my name on the photograph, so that after I was finished with the University I would at least have a memento of my life there—well, you know, something to brag about.

It was not exactly that I was dying to serve the promising sons and daughters of the nation that I had run for D.R. two years in a row. The purpose of this whole exercise simply was to get an insignia for my blazer pocket and a pin for my tie. I was looking forward to wearing the blazer and the tie during the winters. Then I would have proudly walked down the interminable hallways of the University, shrugging my shoulders every now and then, looking busy and important. But what could I do now? That whole purpose had gone down the drain. Success had eluded me at the very last moment. The first time I decided to run for the position of the D.R., the elections were delayed for so long that when I finally got around to asking for the insignia, I found out that all such tokens of self-glorification had already been doled out. The second time, the president of the Students' Union had ended up in jail for his alleged involvement in some political affair. As a result, all the activities of the Union were suspended indefinitely. The prospect of receiving the insignia and the pin had again evaporated. And now that I was about to earn the small honor of having my photograph taken, the wheel of fortune had decisively turned against me. To Saeed the loss was not a serious one. He had many times been captain of soccer teams, both in college and the University; he already had a whole pile of blazer insignias and group photographs. And as for Shah Ji, well he was a typical Pathan from the Frontier for whom the only things that truly mattered were commitment to studies and the display of the typically northern hospitality.

In other words, this was important only for me. That was why after promising Shah Ji and Saeed to meet them at seven o'clock at the photographer's, I had rushed there. I was the first to arrive and had asked this dolt of a photographer to show me our group photograph. One look at the print and I knew I had been exposed to the full fury of a powerful

earthquake; it had leveled everything and dashed to the ground all that was valuable and meaningful in my life. All those rosy dreams of a future were shattered: bottles of soda pop began to explode in my brain. This stupid, ugly photographer had snatched away whatever little glory I had hoped to gain. The photograph was so fuzzy that I felt like smashing his head with the heavy paperweight lying on the pile of memos on his showcase. I could only grind my teeth in anger and wait, restlessly, for the arrival of Saeed and Shah Ji. Three heads, I thought, would be better than one.

They had barely entered the studio when I threw the photograph at them and spoke with bitterness and sarcasm: “See if you can recognize your blessed faces in this! Some photographer huh! Wouldn’t settle for less than fifty rupees! And what have we got here? Have a look!”

They too were just as shocked to see the photograph. Shah Ji was, perhaps, also worried that the chairman might doubt his integrity. He might think that Shah Ji had made a shady deal with some third-rate photographer in order to siphon off the Society’s funds.

“Mister, what kind of a picture is this? It’s so dim ...”

“This print not for you. This only a tesht copy. Still to do re-touching on it. Then you see. It will be thousand times besht—what?”

“What are you talking about, man? Are you trying to rip us off or what? This picture ... and becoming best? Not a chance!” Shah Ji said, astonished. “There’s no way in the world this picture will become any better. Come on, you must be joking!”

“Then is it my fault? Ice-factory wall was casting shadow in cafe. I told you make the photo here in studio. You disagreed. Didn’t listen. Now if there was shadow in cafe lawn, then, my friend, is not my fault.”

“What kind of a photographer are you?” I roared. “Why didn’t you tell us clearly that the photograph would come out this bad?”

“No photographer can doing that. You have to take this picture—what! What will I do with it?”

“Why will we have to take it?” I shouted. “I can’t figure this fellow out. I don’t know what he means by saying we have to take it. Listen, you! Our money wasn’t ill-gotten that we can waste it on a picture

like this. You claim to be a photographer and you don’t even know whether the picture will turn out all right. How long did you say you’ve been doing photography? Thirty years? Twenty?”

Seeing my dreams shattered, I lost patience. I cannot recall how much abuse I must have heaped on the fellow. He however was not perturbed by any of that. Inching forward his pumpkin-like distended belly, he continued retouching the negative. On the other hand, I, like one who suffers a loss in indignance, had been transformed because of my grief into the living image of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

“Listen,” I said to him, “you will have to take another picture. You know damn well we are students. Even normally we are hard up. And look at you—you own such a big studio. If one of your photographs turns out bad, surely you can afford to take another one. But we cannot afford to pay you an extra penny.”

“How you can blame me for bad picture?”

“I don’t know how we can or cannot, but I do know that if you cause us any more trouble, I am going to bring all the students from the University down here. One charge by them and your whole studio will be in shambles. What do you say to that, brother?”

But my threat had no effect on him whatsoever. It was like trying to make an etching on water. Without raising his head he said with perfect serenity, “Mishter, why you making these *khali-peeli* threat? I told you, not my fault. Not take another picture.”

“Why the hell not?” I thundered.

Suddenly it struck me that from his accent he seemed to be a Gujrati. Why not try to reason with him in his native tongue? It might work. So I asked him in Gujrati, “Where are you from, mister?”

He was startled. He readjusted his glasses. The corners of his fat drooping lips, coated with layers of sealing wax like paste from his incessant *pan-chewing*, suddenly fluttered like the flesh of a newly slaughtered goat. He understood my attempt to trick him. Realizing that this community-relationship would cost him dearly, he plainly lied his way out of my trap, and banking on his favorite expletive (“What!”) answered, “I from Karachi—what!”

“Are you ever going to come straight, man?”

“What can I say, mishter? You people using force on me. I told you. Come day after tomorrow.

THE SKULL OF THE CHIEF ARCHITECT

Translated from the Urdu by Musharraf Ali Farooqi

The experts from the Turkish Historical Society detailed on a secret mission dug up his grave and took away the skull. After the inspection and measurement of the frontal, parietal and temporal bones; the zygomatic arch, the nose bridge and other bones, it was proved that he was of Turkic race. Since the Armenian, Greek, and Albanian experts were not part of this exercise, the claim of these races on Sinân remains unrefuted. His faith, which could not be determined by the shape of the skull or any other bone, hangs between the contradictory traditions associated with Sinân. The numerous palaces, infirmaries, bathhouses, kervansarais, the civil and military bridges, and the aqueducts constructed by him are rightfully exempt from identifying his race and faith. But a god’s eighty-four large and fifty-one small temples spread over the length and breadth of the sultanate were also a testament to his craft. He was buried according to the Sultan’s faith. He received a simple cenotaph.

~ Afzal Ahmed Syed

Try other print. Will be thousands times better.”

“But this print is so hazy that nothing except our ties are visible. The next might become a little bit better, but it will never be perfect,” Saeed said, disappointed. “There is hardly any hope!”

“Mishter, give it try. I make it really good—what!”

“Well, it’s the same old story. No shopkeeper ever finds fault with his wares, and the whole world is yellow to a jaundiced person. Come on, man, be reasonable.” Saeed was still intent on bringing the photographer round with politeness, but I was enraged by the continuous cawing of the man.

“Stop this nonsense and return our money. We didn’t give you an advance for this kind of rip-off.”

He didn’t bother to answer me but kept busy with his retouching.

“Well then, what will it be?” I tried to get a final word from him but Saeed pulled me back by the shoulders. He moved forward and said sternly, “Mister, you’ll have to take the picture again!”

The photographer’s petty-mindedness came to the surface. He threw his brush-holding hand in the air, describing a curve with it, and said, “Oh, yes? Why I take the picture again?”

“Because you have spoiled the earlier one.”

“Who says I spoil it? Are you a photographer—

what?” he hissed loudly.

“And are you? You who don’t even know whether a picture will turn out well or fuzzy?”

“In Firdaus Cafeteria no photographer can be taking clearer picture than this.”

“Why not?”

“Because ice-factory wall shadow and because on back wall was a creeper.”

“But was your brain asleep at that time? Why didn’t you warn us?”

“Oh, stop my brain-hammering. Come day after tomorrow and try second print.”

“And who will be responsible if the second one turned out just as awful?”

“I am not. You think that also bad!”

“Are you out of your mind? We haven’t been bitten by a mad dog to go bothering a photographer if he takes a good picture.” I couldn’t take any more of this arguing. I pushed Saeed away and moved near the photographer and said, “You finish your job honestly or you’ll have to deal with the whole University crowd in your studio.” Then I announced my decision as categorically as I could, “You will have to take the picture again and we shall not pay you an extra penny. That’s it.”

Shah Ji, who had been quietly watching all these goings-on, said, “This dolt doesn’t give a

“My body suddenly went numb, as if buried under tons of ice. All the tension and fury flew out of me as air does from a punctured balloon. Helpless, I looked around in embarrassment.”

damn, does he.”

The photographer also gave us his final decision. “I not taking another photograph. Now you leave. Come back day after tomorrow—what! On Sunday.”

Incensed by his refusal I said, “How dare you say no?”

“Well, no second picture. This my decision.”

“The hell with your decision.”

“Watch it, mishter. Watch language. I not your father’s shervant!”

“What?” I stepped forward, bringing my hand in a semicircle to give him a hard one across the jaw when my eyes caught sight of a girl standing in front of a man who sat behind the glass counter near its edge. My body suddenly went numb, as if buried under tons of ice. All the tension and fury flew out of me as air does from a punctured balloon. Helpless, I looked around in embarrassment. Seeing this sudden change in me, Saeed and Shah Ji, like perfect fools, looked around to find the reason. When they saw at the edge of the counter what I had seen, they understood everything. And, like me, they too began looking around, slightly ashamed, pretending that nothing unusual had happened.

She must have been the daughter of one of the well-to-do families who shop at Elphi. Wow! What a shapely figure! Breasts like wine goblets placed upside down! Like two restless doves! So full, so perfect! Eyes that could kill with one look! A thin line of collyrium coming out of the corners of the eyes and arching like a taut bow! And the spell of the eyes themselves—Lord! A sleeveless shirt of Chinese silk sticking to her body, as though it was her very skin! Every contour, all arches, curves—everything fully visible! She was leaning on the counter, her elbows

resting on the glass, holding her doll-like face in her cupped hands, and saying something to the man sitting behind the counter. The man moved the phone forward towards her. When she reached out to dial, we could see a thin layer of fine powder covering the shadow of her clean-shaven underarm. We stared at her, dazed. Our eyes were glued to her body, watching her every move. When she picked up the handset from the cradle, our hearts throbbed fitfully. Lord knows who that lucky fellow was, lucky to be the object of her smiles and good cheer!

She dialed the number. A few minutes later, while staring at us she spoke into the phone, “Hello, Vikki.” We all stood motionless, everyone feeling extremely embarrassed, each one only concerned about what impression he had made on her. Perhaps she thought we were some uncouth, illiterate, uncultured cads, coming to blows with the photographer.

Avoiding each other’s eyes, each one of us was staring at her, each wishing he were that lucky Vikki.

“Yes, mishters,” the photographer spoke, “come two day after tomorrow. Try second print. Will be thousand times besht!”

I turned back and looked at him in utter helplessness. A vague yet very clever smile, the smile of a seasoned man, played on his slightly parted lips. His eyes showed his age, the experience of a whole lifetime, the illumination of a veteran’s business acumen.

“Yes, yes. Try making it good,” we said, almost in unison. And after casting a final, wistful look at the girl, we stepped out of the studio.

On our way back we had an intense talk about her. Our keen imagination had already stripped the last stitch of clothing from her body. We visualized her body with all its sharp lines, in all its glory peering through the fine, transparent silk. Feasting on that image, we gratified all the gargantuan desires of our dissolute minds.

About an hour later, when the lights on the Elphi had begun to twinkle and when that lusty agitation in our minds had subsided some, we began arguing. We were blaming each other and asking why, on what basis, really, had we agreed to accept that worthless picture from the photographer.

Then, suddenly, in the shadows of the flashing neon signs, I began thinking: that shrewd photographer—he really knew his business.

MANTO’S NUANCES OF FREEDOM

By Sana Hussain

Freedom lost?

This stained light, this night-bitten dawn - this is not the dawn we yearned for,

this is not the dawn

for which we set out so eagerly.

~ From the Morning of Freedom by Faiz Ahmed Faiz (translated by Daud Kamal)

The pall that stretches over the horizon of a newly liberated country in Faiz’s *Morning of Freedom* is also echoed in Saadat Hasan Manto’s perception of this freedom. Manto lived most of his life in Bombay before migrating to Lahore in 1948. After the move, he described his predicament in the first of a series of letters to Uncle Sam as being like “a bird whose wings had been clipped”, never coming to terms with the inhumanity and bloodshed he witnessed during partition. The brutalities humanity inflicted upon itself were permanently etched onto his consciousness and are communicated vividly in much of his work; lacking a better coping mechanism in dealing with the sadism shown by both countries during partition, for a man as insular as Manto, there was only one way to comprehend the madness: rendering his horror into his work.

As a humanist, Manto’s idea of freedom never quite matched the conventional perception of his contemporaries. Even today, despite their author posthumously being given the highest national award for his contribution to literature by the Government of Pakistan, Manto’s stories continue to be considered salacious and immoral, shocking 21st century readers with their progressiveness. The idea that prevails in Pakistan is that Manto was against independence, and consequently against Pakistan. This, however, is untrue. He was against the damage the War of Independence unleashed: the senseless killings, irrepressible hatred, opportunistic plundering, and brutalities against both women and children. In his short story *For Freedom’s Sake*, Manto, through his protagonist, voices his indignation, saying “To strive for freedom is fine. I can even understand dying for it. But to turn living people into mere vegetables, without passion or drive, is beyond me. To live in poor housing, shun amenities, sing

the Lord’s praises, and shout patriotic slogans—fine! But to stifle the very desire for beauty in humanity! ... Students coming out of these madrasas and ashrams look like the udders of a cow from which every drop of milk has been squeezed.” In retrospect, it is perhaps not completely incomprehensible that the conservative, orthodox citizens of the country declared Manto an anti-state, anti-Islam reactionary.

Manto’s deep-seated humanism extended beyond religion and was of far more importance to him than any ideal of perceived liberation. This is perhaps why his stories do not aggrandize characters of the partition, because he saw no “heroism” in murdering for national glory or raping to preserve honor, and is also probably why his characters are not tethered to a distinct national, religious or ethnic identity. They remain anonymous, and in their anonymity Manto presents his case for humanity. In *Siyah Hashiye*, Manto uses detached irony that captures the absurdity behind most acts of violence while evoking a sickening sensation in the minds of

“The idea that prevails in Pakistan is that Manto was against independence, and consequently against Pakistan. This, however, is untrue. He was against the damage the War of Independence unleashed: the senseless killings, irrepressible hatred, opportunistic plundering, and brutalities against both women and children.”

“Students coming out of these madrasas and ashrams look like the udders of a cow from which every drop of milk has been squeezed.
~ Saadat Hasan Manto,
For Freedom's Sake”

readers, of the mentality and depravity of the time, still not completely absent today. In one of the stories of *Siyaah Hashiye*, titled *Sharing the Loot*, the chaotic looting of a house is underway when a man appears and orders the plunderers to be organized in their endeavor, demonstrating how they could steal more in less time; the man turns out to be the owner of the house being looted. The grotesque vividness of an ice vendor's blood soaking into the melting ice as he lies murdered on the road, a knife slid down a man's groin by someone confirming his religion, or a young girl mistakenly raped by members of her own community because the enemy “pulled a fast one” on them, all recount the tragedies that took place on both sides of the border. Not knowing whether it is the enemy who kills or is killed humanizes the characters, leaving even the most jingoistic of men in doubt.

Perhaps a strong reason why Manto's attitude reflected partial ambivalence towards Pakistan's independence was his affiliation with Bombay. From a material perspective, the city was home to his success and fame, both things lost after his arrival in Lahore. That the graves of his parents were in India could not have made the decision to migrate an easy one –leaving behind family, friends and memories only to be welcomed by an acute sense of longing in post-partition Lahore. He spoke of his predicament, saying, “Despite my best efforts, I could not dissociate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India”¹. But more upsetting than the ache of nostalgia was his disillusionment with the concept of liberation and its gruesome aftermath. For essentially, Manto's contention with freedom was not one of “India versus Pakistan”; he criticized the actions of both equally, condemning them for their hawkish and in-

humane actions. He believed that it was wrong to say that a hundred thousand Hindus and a hundred thousand Muslims died – “say [instead] that two hundred thousand human beings died. But this is not the biggest tragedy. The real tragedy is that both the murderers and the murdered count for nothing at all. By killing a hundred thousand Hindus, Musalmans thought they had killed Hinduism but it is alive and will remain so. By killing a hundred thousand Musalmans, Hindus were happy that they had killed Islam. But those people who think religions can be hunted with guns are stupid...” (*Sahay*)

Manto was never able to make peace with the question of who bore responsibility for the bloodshed during the wars of independence and partition, because after all it wasn't who shouldered the blame, but whether what was gained was worthwhile. His questioning the legitimacy of the “freedom” gained –“has subjugation ceased to exist?”, if not – “who are our slaves?”, “are we even free?” – continued to needle his contemporaries.

Today's Pakistan would not provide Manto with any real answers either, a fact he may already have perceived when he aptly chronicled the fate of both nations decades ago. “Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its inception but man was still [en]slave[d] in both these countries – slave of prejudice ... slave of religious fanaticism ... slave of barbarity and inhumanity.”

Manto's questioning of the sacred concept of freedom is probably what brought him so much ire and condemnation in the country he now claimed as his own. But the questions he asked continue to resonate today when thoughts and actions are still policed and true “freedom” of thought, expression and belief is hard to come by. The government may have given Manto an award, but as long as people run the risk of being censored, or of being branded blasphemers, it will remain at best, a hollow gesture.

(Endnotes)

1. Tracing the Boundaries between Hindi and Urdu: Lost and Added in Translation between 20th Century Short Stories (BRILL, 2010). and Urdu: Lost and Added in Translation between 20th Century Short Stories (BRILL, 2010).

Sana Hussain is Features Editor for the magazine.

ALONE AS I AM/JAISE MAIN TANHA HUN

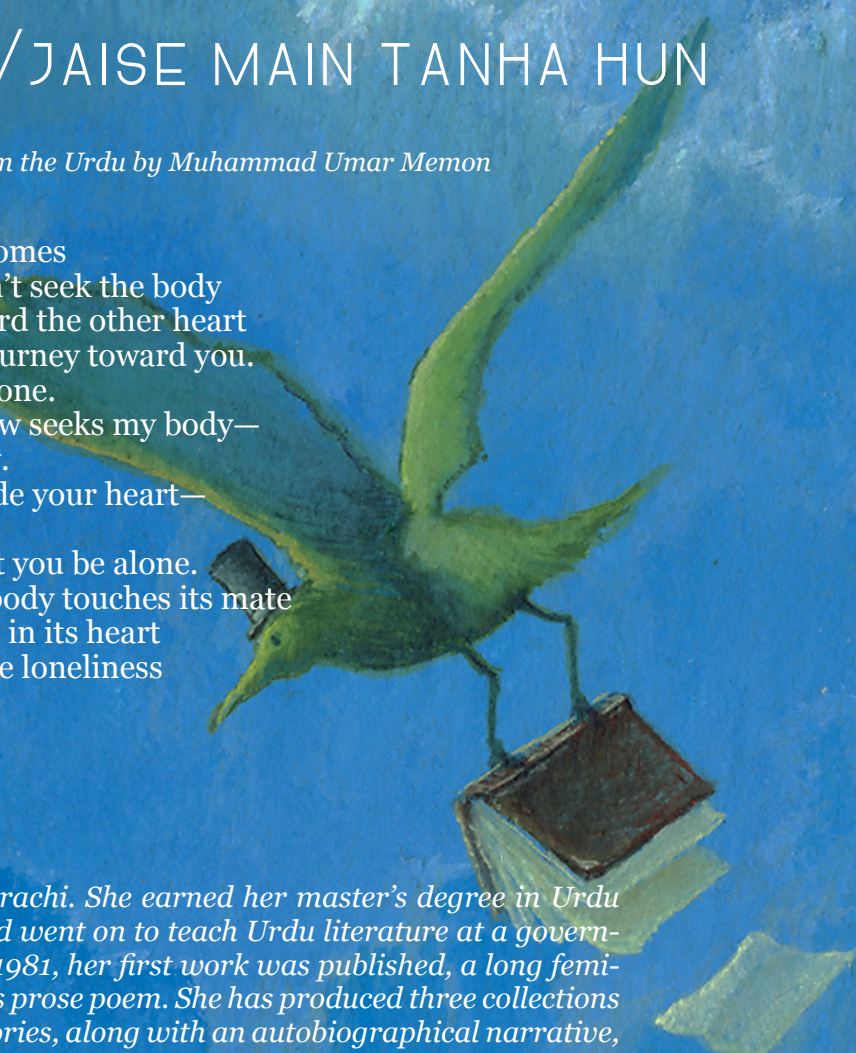
Translated from the Urdu by Muhammad Umar Memon

When love comes
it doesn't seek the body
it flows toward the other heart
so was my journey toward you.
Today I'm alone.
Your love now seeks my body—
just my body.
I search inside your heart—
I see a void.
I shall not let you be alone.
For when a body touches its mate
with nothing in its heart
one can sense loneliness
from afar.

~ Azra Abbas

Azra Abbas was born in Karachi. She earned her master's degree in Urdu from Karachi University and went on to teach Urdu literature at a government college in Karachi. In 1981, her first work was published, a long feminist stream-of-consciousness prose poem. She has produced three collections of poems and one of short stories, along with an autobiographical narrative, and has also completed a novel. She currently resides in the UK.

Translator's bio: Muhammad Umar Memon retired after 38 years of teaching at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and is now Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies and Urdu Literature. He is a scholar, critic, writer and translator. Some of his published Urdu anthologies of fiction include “Tale of the Old Fisherman”, “Domains of Fear and Desire”, and “Color of Nothingness”. Penguin will publish “The Occult” as his translation of Naiyer Masud's “Seemiya” in 2013. He also guest-edited and translated a special issue on Urdu Fiction from India for Words Without Borders.



FREE FALLING

Negotiating with absolutes

By Maria Amir

“Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.” – Jean-Paul Sartre

There are few words in any language that have as many intonations as ‘freedom’. This is perhaps the only word that is taken seriously in equal measure in both an individual and collective capacity, which predictably, also makes it the most problematic word in any given language. The dictionary definition of ‘freedom’ reads: *“the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance of restraint / Absence of subjection to foreign domination or despotic government”*. It does not take much effort to recognize that this concept is utopian and beyond the scope of most mortals. That said, what demands further inspection is whether it remains an ideal worth aspiring to.

Over the years our understanding of the word has altered perceptibly. We have mentally moved from the collective to the individual, from the idea of ‘free people’ to the idea of ‘personal freedoms’. Yet we remain trapped by the need to ensure freedoms for a collective. Historically ‘freedom’ has been qualified, classified and dispersed as seen fit by varied religions, monarchs, governments and / or tyrants. Though this continues to be the case, humanity has cultivated a document laying out the essential freedoms available to each individual that ought to be safeguarded by a State. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹ (UDHR) was adopted in 1948 and, ever since, has propelled an ideal that the 1968 International Conference on Human Rights in Tehran referred to as *“a common understanding of the peoples of the world concerning the inalienable and inviolable rights of all members of the human family... and constitutes an obligation for the members of the international community.”* Twenty years ago, over 150 countries reaffirmed their commitment to the UDHR at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

As an exercise in surreal Cartesian doubt², let us take actor/director Mel Gibson as a premise for testing some of the basic freedoms outlined by the UDHR. We all remember the 1995 historical drama epic *Braveheart*, which explored how far certain people

are willing to go for ‘freedom’. Gibson, who directed the film, employs the word ‘freedom’ throughout. *“It’s all for nothing if you don’t have freedom”*; indeed Wallace’s last words – encapsulated in a figment of cinematic history – as his innards are being scraped out, is an immortalized cry: ‘F-R-E-E-D-O-M’. Gibson obviously appreciates the utopian romanticism of the word. That said, Mel Gibson is also the man who has said *“There is no salvation for those outside the Church... I believe it”*³ and for having denied the Holocaust⁴ as *“mostly a lot of horseshit”*, after having referred to Jews in general as *“oven dodgers”*. Gibson has also been accused of racism, after his July 2010 phone call to Okrana Grigorieva where he said that if she was *“raped by a pack of niggers”*, she would be to blame. As an American, the most he faces for these views is being ostracized from the film fraternity and a notable dip in his star / heartthrob status. Gibson’s freedom to express each one of these views is protected under the UDHR and, while he may be socially condemned for his opinions, he cannot be imprisoned for them. Theoretically speaking, this is a good thing and any liberal worth their salt will defend the right to freedom of thought, speech, expression and belief unequivocally. That is, until we are faced with a Mel Gibson or Hugo Chavez in person, someone who we can appreciate for their work but not for most of what comes out of their mouth.

There are several psychological trenches when it comes to the concept of freedom, and it is not uncommon to hear people saying: *“Of course we should have freedom, but in ‘moderation’”*. This is

“Gibson has been accused of racism [...] As an American, the most he faces for these views is being ostracized from the film fraternity and a notable dip in his star / heartthrob status.”

GRANDFATHER

Peeling back his eyelids
to contest the glistening
tongue of morning
that rose to his memory,
he could not see. And so
he lived another sepia day,
and another grey evening,
with the sage continence of islands.

The flux of voices deadened
by a defaulting ear,
of faces as dim as
far off planets carried him
in a trajectory of motion
denied to his legs. Slowly,
he skinned a tangerine
in the sun, and orchestrated

an unheard symphony
with his voice; at least
his speech had not yet
overshot the alphabet. And
at night, he drew another
dream from his tired repertoire:
fish drifting through splendid
corridors of coral architecture,

the lacteal earth
riotously offering fruit
and wheat and honey. And yet,
from the street below,
not even the ordinary scent

of the Taali tree would reach him
to second his motion
in favour of Paradise.

Then one day he woke up
with the taut urban sky
building visions on the window
of bone-littered clearings
where horses and elephants
come to die, felt time
computing a countdown.
Or perhaps not.

Perhaps half-hearing,
half-sight and immobility
had frozen his intuition,
so that he died thinking
of his dust-laden orchard
and its line of humming poplars,
their wire-drawn branches
lit telescopically by the winter light
like skeletons painted on the sky.

~ *Mehvash Amin*

Mehvash Amin was editor of Libas International, a lifestyle magazine based in Pakistan, for 11 years, and is currently Editor-in-Chief of HELLO! Pakistan. She has written both prose and poetry; her poetry has been published in an anthology, Tangerine in the Sun, as well as other publications, most recently in the Canadian journal Vallum, New International Poetics, Poets from Pakistan (9:1, Winter 2012), and Sugar Mule, a literary magazine. She is currently working on a novel.

an Orwellian trip-up along the lines of *“All freedom is absolute, but some freedoms are more absolute than others”*. Theoretically it makes no sense, but in practice, it is the most reasonable ethical premise available to us.

Many of us recognize the possibility of feeling two contradictory sentiments at once, and of recognizing two opposing positions as valid. Those of us who find ourselves stuck as skeptics of all denominations even take pride in embracing several ide-

ologies simultaneously without adopting any. As a species, we are naturally programmed to enjoy simple answers. We appreciate decision-making words such as *yes, no, do, don't, can* and *can't* as opposed to deflection- or reflection-inducing words such as *if, but, because, either, or, perhaps* and *perhaps both*. In this respect the UDHR is gloriously worded to allow us far too many freedoms simultaneously (if there can be such a thing). It proffers the freedom of choice / from choice; of expectation / from expectation; of anticipation for success / from anticipation from success and an additionally vague freedom to reject freedom.

Negotiating 'freedom' is an intense and self-defeating exercise in absolutes. It means pitching up an idealized utopian free-point and then taking an axe to it bit by bit until it becomes 'acceptable'. Naturally, different societies do this in different ways and this is why as a species, we are nowhere near achieving the freedoms we already allegedly possess. No one can deny the importance of utopias in Philosophy. There can be no progress if one does not place a pinnacle; in some ways, the UDHR is humanity's standard for wellbeing. Victor Hugo put it brilliantly when he said "*Our life dreams the Utopia*", following it with "*Our death achieves the Ideal*". In the negotiation of 'freedom', we find ourselves somewhere in the middle of this equation. We need to decide whether we still value the purist ideals of freedom in their absolute form enough to avoid examining the merits of compromising on definition. Can we still afford to want "*absolute freedoms of thought, speech, expression, belief*", and do we? Or, like Michael Novak, have we come to the understanding that practice makes premise and "*to know oneself is to disbelieve utopia*"? Are ideas and ideals still more important than facts and realisms?

This is a subtle and tenuous dance, the differ-

“Those of us who find ourselves stuck as skeptics of all denominations take pride in embracing several ideologies simultaneously without adopting any.”

ence of wanting and aspiring toward an absolute freedom and the reality of living it. 'Freedom', like 'democracy', is an accepted ideal but its absolute form has never functioned in practice, no matter how politically incorrect it is to entertain this particular factoid. None of the absolutes of the four major freedoms posited in the UDHR hold up on closer inspection. The freedom of belief, if defended to its *nth* degree, would validate human sacrifice and suicide pacts made in lieu of commemorating the Rapture⁵. It also makes for interesting studies in deciding custody cases for children of Mormon parents, where the subject 'freedom of belief' cosmically clashes with the 2005 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Not to mention when the question of the child's own beliefs (or lack thereof) are being addressed, which law takes precedence?

Freedom of expression condones demonstrations by the Ku Klux Klan⁶ as well as films such as 'Innocence of Muslims' released to inflame the religious sentiments of Muslims around the world in July 2012. Salman Rushdie even categorized freedom of expression as the "*freedom to offend. Without which it would cease to exist.*" Similarly 'freedom of speech' could potentially legitimize hate speech, racism, homophobia, and let us never forget apostasy and blasphemy. The latter is especially interesting considering that the concept of blasphemy is both legitimized and denounced by Article 18 of the UDHR (if taken without any qualifiers as an inherent 'freedom'); the same freedom that allows belief in anything allows one to denounce and reject any belief. Kierkegaard said that people demanded freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they seldom used, and he may have had a point. That said, 'freedom of thought' is perhaps the most complicated category as it needs to be coupled with one of the three other branches to take effect, but is always the perpetrating force behind belief, expression and speech. Also, freedom of thought rests on freedom of access to information and it is this divide across developed and underdeveloped nations that gives rise to the patronizing but honest sentiment "they just don't know better" or, biblically put, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."⁷ Many may go on to presume that this canon of lost knowledge or disparate knowledge is the premise for the Huntingtonian 'Clash of Civilizations'. In this cesspool of intense negotiations, which freedom is ethically ranked above another?



Release by Carne Griffiths

There are some of us who rank our belief over our freedom of speech and others who rank our right to information and our thoughts over our right to express them. Such qualifications become especially important when one considers that many of the freedoms we are awarded under the UDHR have a tendency to turn into incitement when manifested in their absolute forms. Does that mean we need to self-moderate our responses or State-moderate them, especially given that not everyone has enough access to information to identify when to self-moderate their opinions? When the entire platter is available, how does one qualify which bite each connoisseur or starving madman is to savor first, and what of the choices they reject altogether?

There is a term in Sanskrit called Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' which denotes that the whole world is one single family. The term extrapolates how worldviews vary among people but this does not diminish the need for respecting differences; if anything, it increases it. Essentially, 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is the premise behind modern multiculturalism and was revived as a contrast to (what was perceived as) Western absolutism. The philosophy also recognizes other ecosystems and organisms as having an 'atma' and thereby being worthy of respect. It is an ethical and rational seesaw – whether 'freedom' and 'respect' go hand in hand or not. This posits a moral mathematics that the UDHR does little to address.

What needs revision is whether both these categories are still equal or whether one needs to be placed above the other. There are those who argue that aspirations are nice and all, but practice is elementary – then again, being perpetually stuck at the elementary level means accepting that we are not built to better ourselves. In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the fallen king as a parable for the absurdity of human life. He concludes by saying "one must imagine Sisyphus as happy. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." Perhaps it is and perhaps it isn't, but when it comes to freedom, it is worth imagining that we are each our own Sisyphus lugging our individual boulders up our personal moral peaks and plateaus...some *freely*, others bound.

(Endnotes)

1 The Universal Declaration has established many of the principles for a number of important international conventions and treaties including the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading treatment or Punishment; the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, proclaimed by the General Assembly in 1981, clearly defines the nature and scope of the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law and the right to freedom

of thought, conscience, religion and belief contained in the Universal Declaration and the International Covenants.

2 Cartesian doubt is a form of methodological skepticism associated with the writings and methodology of René Descartes. It is also referred to as Cartesian skepticism, methodic doubt, methodological skepticism, or hyperbolic doubt. It forms the systematic process of being skeptical about (or doubting) the truth of one's beliefs, which has become a characteristic method in philosophy.

3 Pragmatically speaking, this view is in keeping with UDHR Article 18 which states "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

4 Holocaust denial, the denial of the systematic genocidal killing of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, is illegal in a number of European countries. Many countries also have broader laws that criminalize genocide denial. Of the countries that ban Holocaust denial, a number (Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania) were among the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and many of these also ban other elements associated with Nazism, such as Nazi symbols.

5 The Rapture is a term in Christian eschatology which refers to the being "caught up" discussed in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (King James Version), when the "dead in Christ" (4:16) and "we which are alive and remain" will be "caught up together with them in the clouds" to meet "the Lord in the air". The term "Rapture" is used in at least two senses and is commonly used among US Christians who welcome a final resurrection.

6 The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), informally known as the Klan, is the name of three distinct past and present far-right organizations in the United States, which have advocated extremist reactionary currents such as white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-immigration, historically expressed through terrorism. Since the mid-20th century, the KKK has also been anti-communist.

7 Reference to Jesus addressing God in Luke 23:34.

MR. AND MRS. AGELAST

Andy the Agelast sat upright and fat
drinking his shoddy sherbat
writing the usual boondoggle
his grand "enterprising" this that.
Rubbing his bibcock nose
he looks up and says,
"the moment to be seized is here!
If we work together there's nothing to fear!"
His clattering clichés
try hard to climb
and jump on their ears, but they are
too busy in a game of boggle over beer.
Till of course she walks in,
typewriter, glasses and tights.
Lady dear Lady dear,
all mellifluous, spectacular
in watery white. She takes her time
placing herself, lambently divine.
All the while he is dandling
his philosophies up and down,
sifting swiftly for fitting words
that define the beauty of his science.
He is about to clumsily pour them another
one of his explanatory whines,
but it is met with Mrs. Agelast:
small and stiff like a swizzle stick.
Akimbo she stands, then arms fescue-like,
guide him along big words,
eyeing them to dare draggle his visions
in sniggers. So they hold
their hearts, widen their ears and
footle the remaining night
in flummery and hidden stares.

~ Mavra Rana Tanveer

Mavra Rana Tanveer's life and work are based in Lahore. She studies and teaches literatures and cultural studies. Some of her creative and research work can be found in *The Maya Tree Liberal Arts Review*.

THE POOR DEARS

By Hasan Manzar

Translated from the Urdu by Muhammad Umar Memon

A cold, wet wind was blowing outside as my plane landed at Heathrow Airport. In the terminal building I spotted Cathy among the crowd coming to receive their relatives and felt reassured. I was no longer worried about how I would get to my flat.

I dumped my baggage in the boot of Cathy's white Ford and flopped down beside her on the seat. After she pulled the car out of the airport traffic into a calmer street, I lit a cigar and said, "Open the window a bit, or you'll wind up dead behind the wheel in your quiet, cozy world."

"You may keep smoking," she said, without taking her eyes off the road.

I closed my eyes and dozed off. I awakened only when I felt Cathy's hand trying to remove the cigar butt from between my lips.

"How did you know I was asleep?" I asked.

"How? You snore."

We had reached my flat. Standing on the dark, cobbled street, I thanked Cathy, promising to tell her about my travels in the morning, and said goodbye to her. Then I looked around impassively. Empty milk bottles stood outside doors in the dim, grey light. Except for one, all the other flats were dark behind curtains that had been drawn shut.

The same old place. I was home for certain! It is a rare quality of Cathy that she never asks questions unless I am in a mood to talk.

In the morning I went through my mail. There were bills, bank statements—the usual stuff.

The cleaning lady came and started work. At one point she asked, "How did your trip go, Mr. Hasan?"

"It went quite well, thank you," I said, offering her the red box of Benson & Hedges.

She thanked me and picked one. As she put it carefully away in her apron pocket, she said, "I mustn't waste such an expensive cigarette. I'll smoke it after I'm finished with the cleaning."

I gave her the whole box and said, "Come on,

old girl, have a smoke with me first. You can always work later."

"So you felt quite at home there, Mr. Hasan?" she asked blowing a cloud of smoke.

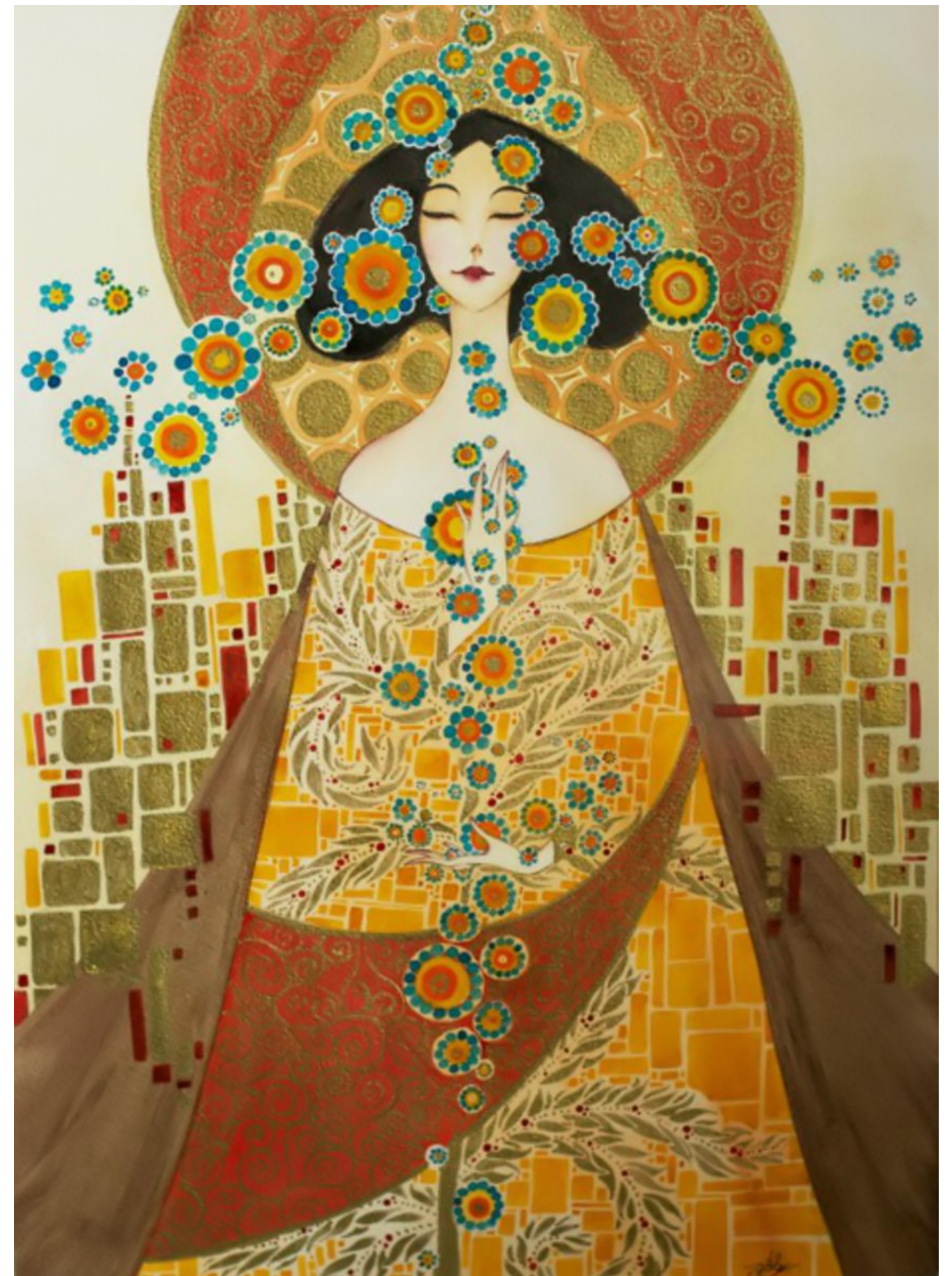
I told her that if by "there" she meant India and Pakistan, she was mistaken. I hardly even knew the names of my relatives in those countries. Or if she meant some other countries, then, until a few months ago, I knew no more about them than did any ordinary Londoner.

I scarcely remember when the cleaning lady left and when Cathy walked in. She had come to take down my travel notes, which she would then type and return to me properly sorted out, so that I could start work on my new book. A number of trifling chores which, like any ordinary traveler, I had foisted upon myself, kept getting in the way, however. I wanted to get them out of the way. For instance, the decrepit old man I had run into at the Angkor Wat ruins—the grand temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu—had asked me through a bout of hacking coughs, "I hear that in England they have come up with a brand new drug for curing bronchial asthma."

Nearly exhausted from my strolls through the myriad pathways and balconies of the temple that sprawled over some five hundred acres, I had just sat down, removed my burning feet from my shoes, and plunged them into the cool, refreshing dirt. The old man sat close by, carefully holding my movie and still cameras in his lap to protect them from the dust. In the tranquil surroundings, I began to make notes.

The sky was crowded with dark, low-hanging rain clouds. The old man panted for breath. "I hear," he said, as if to himself, "*that* drug roots out the disease."

I jotted down the old man's name and address in my notes on the Angkor Wat ruins, setting them apart carefully within parentheses. Even as I did that, I couldn't suppress a smile thinking how Cathy would type out the lines on a separate sheet of paper which she would then hand over to me saying, "Perhaps this gentleman belongs to the present century; we can't possibly include his name and address in the book."



Flora by Gabriela Nuñez

I promised the old man to ask my doctor friends back in England about the drug. If such a drug really existed, I would be sure to send it to him. One of my journalist friends could bring enough of it to last him six to twelve months.

I had been expecting my offer to brighten up the old man—amazing, isn't it, how the East eagerly awaits every new discovery or invention to come from the West!—but his face remained entirely expressionless. With measured politeness, he said, "All right, sir, if you say so."

The old man handed me back my cameras and got busy in his work. He had as little hope of hearing from me again as he had of being able to fall asleep that night; and failure to get the drug would have hurt him as little, I thought, as the realization that his life was coming to an end. He would have accepted them both with the ascetic detachment befitting a Buddhist monk. "Time" and "human dependence" had become meaningless words for him in the ruins of that centuries-old temple, which resembled a veritable town in its vast sweep.

Then there was this other *bhikshu* I had met in a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka. I had mentioned to him a recent publication from New York and London which had color photographs of all the important Buddhist monuments the world over.

This monastery flanked on all sides by king coconut palms was only a short distance from Colombo. I was visiting it for the second time. I had first come here when I was on my way to Kandy and Anuradhapura, and now again as I was leaving Sri Lanka for India. In between, I had managed a trip to

“ [...]Would I ever know anything about the man who had actually picked a particular stone or slab and carried it there, or about him whose dexterous hands had wrought such marvel on that stone? ”

the ruins of Anuradhapura and taken pictures of the brick *maths* erected during the Sinhalese period in honor of Lord Buddha.

The Temple of Buddha's Tooth at Kandy, with the delicate artwork on every stone and beam, was also fresh in my memory. I was terribly disappointed that they would not open for me the room that housed the celebrated relic, so that I could verify for myself whether there really was a tooth or whether the gullible people had just placed their faith in a velvet box.

The ceiling of the balcony outside this room held a painting of an elephant. I would have passed through the balcony almost without noticing it, or would have at most given it a cursory glance, had not one of the temple devotees invited me to look at it carefully. I looked up without enthusiasm, hoping to find a profile of Ganesh, the elephant god, but stopped short, and the devotee let out a short, gentle laugh, which I am sure he must have laughed many times before. The accomplished painter had so skillfully depicted a bevy of young female shrine-devotees that they merged into the figure of a colossal elephant. I asked him about the painter but he chose to ignore my question, thinking, perhaps, that it was insignificant. Instead, he started telling me about some white flowers that lay in front of the statue of the seated Buddha.

I was to ask the same question of my *bhikshu* friend in Colombo during my second meeting with him. The intervening period, which I had spent in different cities of Sri Lanka, had created a sort of closeness between us—a closeness which was obvious from his expression but which he was loath to admit. I guess this was because intimacy bred the very attachment that he had wanted to curb by renouncing the world and adopting the austere, saffron-dyed garb of a *bhikshu*. My single question prompted him to ask a few of his own about India, about Burma. Finally, I gulped down the coconut milk he had offered and got up.

It was to him that I had promised to send the book. I telephoned Foyles. They did have it in stock. Price: two pounds. I placed the order and instructed them to send it directly to the monk in Sri Lanka. This done, I crossed his name off my checklist. I felt a sense of relief slowly coming over me—I couldn't have wanted it more.

A little while later Faiq Ali telephoned from

UNTITLED

your body is already changing
within
a flower begins to court you
raising her head
embroidering her petals
like a malevolent fairy
creating her own universe
within yours

it is as two worlds
turning
turning
as planets within their orbit
willfully spinning clear
then near
magnetized
magnified in one another's
locked eyes

it is those elaborate reconstructions in museums
that show you the beauty of
the cancerous cell as it blooms with equanimity
protruding each nook and crevice
like small parting hands
that feel their way through the
velvet dark
voluntarily blindfolded

that confident surety
insidious certainty

death

~ Ilona Yusuf

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Manchester. He wanted to know about his relatives whom I had met in Karachi. It was strange, wasn't it, that before embarking on my voyage to the East it was I who had asked him, "Well, aren't you going to give me the addresses of all those first and second

cousins you keep telling me about all the time?" and now it was he who was so impatient to find out from me about those same "first" and "second" cousins: "What kind of people are they? Did they treat you well?" So on and so forth, as if Naima and her rela-

“I had been expecting my offer to brighten up the old man—amazing, isn’t it, how the East eagerly awaits every new discovery or invention to come from the West!—but his face remained entirely expressionless.”

tives were in fact mine, not his.

The only reason I had asked Faiq for addresses was so I could see first-hand how people lived in Pakistan, what sort of problems they had, what kind of hopes and dreams they cherished. One rarely gets an accurate idea of a country and its people by putting up in hotels, or reaching out to them through tourist guides and travel books.

The morning after I arrived in Karachi from Colombo I first confirmed my reservations in the hotels where I was to stay during my visit to different cities in West Pakistan, then made a few phone calls regarding my schedule. Finally, I called the European drug manufacturing company where Naima worked. I had thought everybody would know her there. This was not the case. I was told that she was just a packing girl, free to talk on the phone only during the lunch hour. I had not finished talking when the receptionist rudely hung up. I dialed again, this time asking to speak with the General Manager of the company. The man at the other end sounded irritated. Why didn’t I go to Naima’s house and ask her whatever important thing it was that I wanted to ask her? Why was I wasting his time? But when I told him that I was a writer from England on a trip to Pakistan and knew next to nothing about this country, his voice changed noticeably. He asked me courteously for my phone number and instructed someone on the intercom in Urdu, “Look, there is some girl called Naima who works in the packing department. Ask her to come right away to my office and take the phone.” He then politely asked me to wait awhile.

As I waited I could hear faint snatches of some Pakistani music playing in his office and two men talking in one of the regional languages.

When I picked up the phone again I heard the voice of a frightened female at the other end talking in barely audible tones. This was Naima who, I sensed, was quite embarrassed talking to a perfect stranger like myself in the inhibiting presence of her boss, scared that her voice might ruin the decor of his room. I guessed from her voice that she must have been around twenty years old.

“What do you want?” she asked in a whisper.

The rest was more or less a monologue. Had it not been for her faint “yes”es that echoed dimly through the receiver from time to time, I would have thought the line had been disconnected, all the more so as the sound of Pakistani music had meanwhile died out and the other human voices, too, had stopped.

As I talked to her I couldn’t resist imagining a frightfully pretty girl at the other end—all alone, skewered by the lustful stares of the men in the room, trying her best to crawl into the receiver to avoid the piercing intensity of those eyes but did not know how. Even her “yes”es were no longer audible to me.

I told her that I was a friend of her cousin Faiq and had come to spend a few days in Karachi. Then I asked her if I could, perhaps, come and visit her at her house. I asked her for her address and mentioned that I would drop by some evening after my return from Taxila.

“Tell me the day you want to come and give me your address,” she whispered. “I will have my brother come and pick you up.”

This was the second and the last full sentence the girl uttered. I fished through my date book and gave her my address and the date on which I was scheduled to leave for Beirut.

I related the details of my meeting with Naima and her folks to Faiq. All he seemed to be interested in, though, was my comment that if he was looking for an Eastern wife he would not find a better girl than Naima, from east of Suez to Cambodia.

To return to my meeting with Naima and her family: On the appointed day, the hotel receptionist sent to my room a youth whose face was all but covered with pock marks. He looked just as fright-

ened as Naima had sounded over the phone. He had come to escort me to their house. I offered him some refreshments but he declined, adding courteously, “Back home, we are all waiting for you to join us for tea.”

The poor man seemed even more overawed by the hotel than by me. It was probably the first time that he had set foot in it, and was feeling quite out of place in its plush, swank environment. I asked the waiter for a taxi and came out of the hotel with the youth in tow.

Throughout the ride I remained silent. I didn’t wish to embarrass my young companion further. He, on his part, preoccupied himself with giving directions to the cab driver. We passed through different parts of the city, each with its peculiar lifestyle. The faces, bodies, and garb of most of the pedestrians suggested that we were proceeding from affluence to poverty, from a world of plenty to a world of dire need. The women in Naima’s neighborhood flitted about in veils. Children, some barefoot, some with runny noses, romped around. Here and there along the street some people had set up cots on which they sat or lay. There were no foreigners.

Naima’s brother led me into a dull, pale building. We climbed several flights of dark, dank stairs and entered a flat on the third floor. I had to spend some time alone in the living room. In fact I had expected that and was mentally prepared for it. As I sat there waiting for my hosts to appear, I realized my mistake. I should have met these people immediately after my arrival in Pakistan, so that on a second visit around the time of my departure we would have become informal enough for me to gauge their true feelings, and to have some idea of their hopes and aspirations. It is amazing how a first meeting, no matter how protracted, almost never creates the same degree of informality as that generated by the interval between two short meetings.

The first to enter the room was Naima’s mother: middle-aged, sallow-complexioned, tolerably good-looking—I thought. Next came Naima’s sister. She looked more like a younger sister of the middle-aged lady, with nothing striking about her. The last to enter was Naima herself. She was truly stunning.

I had thought I would spend at most an hour with them. But I ended up spending the whole evening. By the time I got up to leave, I had become thoroughly acquainted with the entire family and its

past life.

The hospitality started with fried snacks. Later, the older daughter, succumbing to the old lady’s persistent requests, sang a Mira *bhajan* for me, and Naima, again at her mother’s behest, played a cracked disc on the gramophone, to which I listened with feigned interest. I was also formally introduced to the photographs that hung from the wall. One of these, a picture in copper tones, shot most probably some time between 1930 and 1940 and printed on orthochromatic paper, was of the girls’ father. Like the occupants of the house, I, too, had to pick up the picture and look at it in reverent silence for a while before replacing it on the wall.

I promised to write to them and apologized that I must do so in English as I wasn’t fully conversant with the Urdu script. Throughout the evening I had noticed how my halting Urdu had amused

“One rarely gets an accurate idea of a country and its people by putting up in hotels, or reaching out to them through tourist guides and travel books.”

them. I also promised to have Faiq’s mother write to them as well. However, when I got up to leave, I knew deep in my heart that I was neither happy nor satisfied with this meeting. I noticed that everything which might be even the least bit offensive to look at had been deftly removed from the scene. Soon upon entering the room I had spotted items of laundry left to dry on the clothesline on the balcony. But when I got up to greet the lady, my eyes fell accidentally on the clothesline and I was mildly surprised to find it bare. It was as though somebody had in the meantime crawled to the balcony unnoticed and pulled the laundry off the line without attracting attention.

After talking with Faiq I crossed another item off the checklist.

The pictures had been sent out to be developed. I expected them back within a few days. I would then send Amand the pictures of his family as

well as the baby overall with the zipper which I had promised him.

I had met Amand on a lake in West Pakistan where he worked as an oarsman. He had given me the most detailed information about this region. He had told me how the lake was once the land between two hills and how the waters of the neighboring river had been diverted to fill it. And, there, on the island that I saw, was the shrine of some venerable woman saint. Formerly people walked all the way to it for pious visitation but now, since only a few could afford to pay for the boat ride, most returned from the waterfront after making their votive offerings.

Amand's family had given me coarse reddish bread of rice flour to eat and a single fish to go with it, which he had borrowed from a fellow oarsman and fried for me. Color photos were not the only things I had promised Amand. I was going to send him an overall, too, for his baby who was spending the last trimester in its mother's womb. Bundled up in the overall, the baby would be freed from the danger of catching pneumonia from the lake's cold winds.

Most of Amand's children had suffered from acute bronchial pneumonia—I had guessed as much from the description he gave of their illnesses—but he and his family firmly believed their ailment to be the work of some evil spirit, which, in fact, as they thought, had even claimed a couple of Amand's children's lives.

Even in their wildest dreams, Amand and his family couldn't have imagined such an overall, let alone owning a brand new one. This overall was going to be the expression of my gratitude to them for their hospitality and care.

The list began to shrink—slowly, gradually.

In time I crossed off Amand's name, too; as well as that of the old Catholic lady who taught school in India to whom I had mentioned having seen the first resting place of Saint Francis Xavier at Malacca—that rectangular pit from which his body was later exhumed and carried to Goa and reinterred there. "I'll do anything you want," the old woman had entreated me most solicitously, "if you could, perhaps, send me a photograph of that pit."

And I had promised that indeed I most certainly would.

I did some stocktaking of myself after crossing the old lady's name off the list. I had been back

“Children, some barefoot, some with runny noses, romped around. Here and there along the street some people had set up cots on which they sat or lay. There were no foreigners.”

in London for a good fortnight now and had started work on my new book. My life had swung back to its normal rhythm, the one it had before I began my travels to the East: reading newspapers, writing, other chores, study, visits to the library, afternoon strolls, then TV and sleep.

One day Cathy picked up the packet which had been lying on my table for the whole week and asked, "Aren't you going to mail it?"

I was in the other room, so I asked, "Mail what?"

"This packet, addressed to Miss Naima so-and-so, Karachi?"

I returned to my study and asked her, "Do you know what's in it?"

"Two hundred feet of Scotch magnetic tape ... made of polyester, right?"

"Is that all?"

"Well, the tape is enclosed in a cardboard box which is wrapped in soft padding. You have had the housemaid wrap the whole thing in cloth and sew it up and then enclose it in this manila envelope."

"But the tape—what's on the tape?"

"Your message for the girl—isn't that rather obvious?" Cathy said, returning the packet on the table.

"No, I wish it were that simple. For then, I would have either mailed it myself or asked you to mail it for me."

"Your friend Faik's message, then," Cathy said, thinking hard, "or maybe Faik's mother's voice ... for that *sallow-complexioned, good-looking, middle-aged woman*?"

After a while she asked jokingly, "Which of these two, the girl or her mother, is likely to be the

central character in one of your future novels?"

I remained silent.

"Still hung up on mothers, eh?" Cathy continued. "When are you going to outgrow this fixation? Why not the young lady ..."

But I remained impassive. My expressionless face prompted her to probe, "Well, aren't you going to answer?"

"Cathy," I began, "every single day for the past week I have thought of mailing this packet but have put off doing so for one reason or another. You have no idea whose voice I have taped on it."

"Well, whose voice?"

I ignored her query and continued, "I have been thinking all week long whether I should send the packet to Naima. I ask myself, now that I have got the tape and have gone through the trouble of having it neatly packed, why not take it to the post office, have it weighed, put the stamps on it, and mail it? But then I think, suppose I later regretted it, nothing would stop the packet from reaching her. I am finding out, for the first time in my life it seems, that whatever you have committed to another ceases to be yours."

"What, for instance?"

"For instance the arrow committed to the wind, the dead body to the earth, and ..."

"There you go again," Cathy interrupted. "It is the Eastern man inside you that makes you say all this."

I continued. "Cathy, I am unable to decide what to do with it. Once or twice I have even run my fingers over the wrapping to see if it has gathered dust and then laughed at the foolishness of my act. There is no dust here. How can there be any in cold countries? Perhaps I am driven to do so by my desire to find out how long it has been lying on my desk. You see, in the East, they judge the length of time passed over a thing by the amount of dust it has collected."

"Hold on, let me grab a pen and notebook," Cathy said in dead earnest. "I guess this must be part of the book you are writing now."

But I went on. "Then again, it is entirely possible that I am no longer quite so anxious to send it off to Naima. The book eats up most of my time. As I work on it, I become completely oblivious of Naima, her dead or living family members. Moreover, a

busy writer, in search of new materials for his book, soon forgets the people he meets and photographs he takes of them during the course of his travels, and the promises he makes to them. There comes a time when these people, uniquely individual and vibrant with life, are transformed into mere characters, and all the places he has visited become the stage on which all the different acts of the cosmic drama of life are enacted all at once."

"I can easily use this material for the Foreword of the book, you know," Cathy said. But I continued in a slow, halting voice: "It is quite possible that Naima and her family have by now become mere characters to me, and that this packet no more than a mere reminder of the time when I had just returned from my travels in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, of a time when I had noted in my diary what I had to do or send to whom."

"You remember I had told you how at my request Naima's brother had come to take me to their house, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Cathy said, putting aside the pen and the notebook on the table.

"Let me go over that scene once again. Then when you have heard the whole story, tell me whether or not I should send the packet on to her."

"Well, every single object in that living room disguised an overwhelming desire to be recognized, to be esteemed. That is why everything that failed to measure up to their standards, that seemed mean or odd or otherwise betrayed poverty, had been spirited away from the scene. Naima's brother, who suffered from some chest ailment, told me that he worked for the railway. But he never did tell me what exactly his job was. Naima, too, was more than a little diffident about the nature of her own work at

“It is amazing how a first meeting, no matter how protracted, almost never creates the same degree of informality as that generated by the interval between two short meetings.”

the drug company. And time and again the mother kept saying, 'You cannot even imagine what their father was and all the things he wanted to do for his children.' But when I asked, 'Well, what was he?' she answered, 'An *artist!*' She also told me that Naima was born after her husband's death. It was at this point that they removed that picture from the wall and showed it to me—the picture of a young man shot on an orthochromatic plate, who couldn't have been more than thirty years old, I thought, when he left her widowed.

"My earlier excitement at meeting the attractive widow had begun to wane in that stuffy, lackluster atmosphere. I was looking at everything without enthusiasm or interest. I was told that it was Naima's elder sister who had inherited all the artistic talent of the girls' father—perhaps because she was fortunate enough to have been raised by him—for she sang very well and was an accomplished vocalist, while Naima, well, let's just say she had been trained for a career job right from the start.

"I was at a loss. I had no idea what they took me for. Had my movie camera led them to believe that I could, perhaps, put the girls in films? The accolades they liberally showered upon the older girl forced me to ask her for a song. Not unexpectedly, she declined. Ultimately, giving into the persistent, urgent pleas of her mother and younger sister, she did sing, a *bhajan*, by Mira Bai, I was later told. I was now beginning to pity them. The girl, or woman if you will, simply couldn't carry the higher notes of the song.

"Next they bragged about their record collection. Some of the discs had been collected by the girls' father and some, after his premature death, by their mother. One by one they showed off every single disc. As I looked at them I couldn't help feeling they were light years away from the age of 33- and 45-rpm records. They were all old 78-rpm discs—bulky and awkward, which you played by changing the gramophone needles every so often. Their center labels—depicting the yellow Gemini Twins, an elephant trunk, a lion, a horse—were a novelty to me and I wanted to buy a few of these relics and bring them along. I had seen them being sold, along with used books, in Sadar, the city's biggest shopping center. Their grooves were all but gone; some didn't even have any grooves left.

"Naima's brother sat silently on one side. Out-

“When I told him that I was a writer from England on a trip to Pakistan and knew next to nothing about this country, his voice changed noticeably.”

side the window daylight had waned. The middle-aged woman handed me a record and said, 'Here, this is their father.' I looked at the record. It had a light blue label with the picture of a pair of spotted deer and the legend: Calcutta Recording Company; Music by: R.C.B.; Orchestra conducted by: P.K. The remainder was in Hindi. The record had a hairline crack running all the way from the center to the outer rim where it had been deftly mended by a piece of copper sheet and minuscule nails.

"I asked them to play the record for me and they were quick to oblige. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. I knew I had heard that song in England at the house of one buff or another of old Indian music, but try hard as I might I failed to recollect exactly where. Just then I heard the lady say, 'Watch, here he comes!' What came was a piece of flute music. Naima and her sister pointed simultaneously at the rotating disc and screamed, 'There he is!'

"The record kept playing, making a click each time the needle hit the crack. Once it even got stuck in a groove so that Naima had to quickly lift the heavy playing head and advance it a couple of grooves. I was trying hard to avoid looking directly into their faces. The flute intermezzo was incorporated several times in the composition and each time it was played they listened to it in hushed reverence, while I wondered, what if the record broke one day ... what would they hang on to, just what?

"On my way back to the hotel I realized with frightening clarity how terribly incomplete all my notes were. The most they could do was tell me the names of the kings who had built those temples at Anuradhapura and Kandy. Granted, the accounts of the monuments at Delhi and Agra were somewhat more detailed; for instance, it was possible to find out who had designed a particular building, who the

EMPTY BENCH / KHAALI BENCH

Translated from the Urdu by Muhammad Umar Memon

A day will come
that I'll forget all this
the severity of the time even
when my heart was rife with pain.
I'll be the white bench
that remains empty
so I may sit on it
and stare into the expanse
where drops of water
like some formless substance wait
to become the apparel of the wind.

~ Azra Abbas

architect was; but could they tell me, would I ever know anything about the man who had actually picked a particular stone or slab and carried it there, or about him whose dexterous hands had wrought such marvel on that stone?"

"Well, let me tell you what to do," Cathy said. "Just let this two hundred feet of magnetic tape sit right where it is. I think I know what it is that you want to send to that family. But are you sure they can afford a tape player to listen to it?"

"I can easily send them one," I said in a choking voice.

"And make them realize that all you noticed about them was their poverty? That besides that snatch of flute music, to which they clung so miserably, they owned absolutely nothing? Surely you don't want to insult them, do you?"

Cathy picked up the packet, played with it for

a few seconds and put it back down. Then she said, "Just let it lie here. With it before your eyes as you write, the individuals you wish to talk about will not turn into mere characters."

After a brief silence I asked, "Care for a walk?"

"Sure, why not. To my place?"

Hasan Manzar is a major fiction writer from Pakistan, with several novels and collections of short stories to his credit. Oxford University Press, in its Pakistan Writers' Series, published "A Requiem for the Earth", a selection of his stories in English translation. He practices Psychiatry and now lives in Karachi, visiting Hyderabad for a couple of days weekly, to take care of his old patients.

WHOSE GRAVE IS IT THAT LIES BY THE JUNIPER TREE

Translated from the Urdu by Musharraf Ali Farooqi

In the profusely green hills spread from Abu Ayyub al-Ansari's mausoleum to Pierre Loti Point, one sees many white tombstones. It is perhaps the world's prettiest cemetery. From here, the cerulean beauty of the Bosphorus and the city of Istanbul appear even more captivating. The occasional olive tree planted between the juniper, Tabrizi, cypress, deal-wood, Sekran, and aspen; the carefully grown flowering plants, along with their wild cousins; the minimalist inscriptions on the commemorative stones. Just the name, the year of birth, and the year of death. How would this marker seem here?

Afzal Ahmed Syed
Pedaish 1946
Wafat 2012

But in the face of annihilation, inscribing even this much is a transgression. Let us strike it out:

~~Afzal Ahmed Syed~~
~~Pedaish 1946~~
~~Wafat 2012~~

~ *Afzal Ahmed Syed*

Afzal Ahmed Syed's selected poetry "Rococo and Other Worlds" was published in Musharraf Ali Farooqi's translation by the Wesleyan University Press Poetry Series in 2010. His collected poetry in translation will be published by Yoda Press in 2013-2014. He has translated works by a number of Eastern European poets, as well as Gabriel García Marquez, Jean Genet, Wil-liam Saroyan, and Jonathan Treitel. Find out more about aasyed.blogspot.com.

Translator's bio: Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a critically-acclaimed author, novelist and translator. His recent works include the novels "Between Clay and Dust", "The Story of a Widow", an illustrated book "Rabbit Rap: A Fable for the 21st Century", and the translations of Indo-Islamic epics "The Adventures of Amir Hamza and Hoshruha". More information about the author is available on his website. www.mafarooqi.com.



Lady of the Castle by Strooitje by Joeri Van Royen

TO REALITY AND BEYOND

The ever-expanding arm of technology...

By Aaron Grierson

Freedom, as we know it, is an ever-expanding concept that has historically been propelled by technological advancement, benefits which have been taken for granted but are equally important as one's right to live as an individual. While the argument can easily be made that technologies, from basic tools to smart phones, have liberated people in a lot of ways, the same can be said for the exact opposite. It may seem odd to think of one's self as bound by technological chains, but this is a very real, if intangible, possibility in our everyday lives.

A brief history of every technology that has, in some way, contributed to the freedom of a group of people, would be excessively grandiose and likely altogether impossible to properly and accurately summarize, but there's no harm in trying. Venturing as far back as is possible, simple tools, like hatchets, or ploughs, were continually refined to aid in the increase of productivity and eventually, from the time freed up, more leisure. While liberty more broadly took centuries to attain, the trend of "free time" is nevertheless evident. A major turning point was the industrial revolution, exemplified by the printing press. While other developments were also immensely important, the spread of literature began by being available only to the financially established and educated, naturally leading to the dissemination of leisure reading.

Literature is an especially important manifestation of spare time. While books are key in educational pursuits as much as they are for the leisurely, they nevertheless require free time to engage with, unless of course, one works in a library. As books became more widely accessible courtesy of the printing press, ideas and ideologies spread across the populace, and, revolutions aside, the primary point is that people (and not just the elite) were given opportunity to learn and engage with public discourse. But, certain genres of reading, especially early novels, became largely about memorizing story arcs and characters archetypes that would become clichés. This practice, centuries old, has expanded at least proportionately in the modern era, but increasingly we seem to be exposed to large quantities of rather

vapid writing hardly worth the designation of "public distraction".

The flip side of technology, the negative aspects, seems to be a more recent phenomenon, but also has its roots in industrialization. Impossible working conditions, long hours, risks, and environmental issues still plague the system on the whole in the modern world. However, given the increasing dispersal of industrial jobs, many have found themselves with a proportionate increase in their leisure time. Not only to pursue good literature (subject to individual and cultural tastes of course), but also for socializing with fine company, and in the leisurely perusals of photographs, films and discussions, all of which have the potential to be the antithesis of any boon.

The contention between a liberating technology, and one that restrains through distraction, is obviously one of moderation. We can spend only two hours enjoying a film, or a game, or a book, or the seemingly endless entertainments of the internet. Or we can, and often do spend hours a day on these things. Perhaps it is merely a matter of the allure of pleasure and the absence of effort or work. The old proverb "*all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*" is certainly out of date in terms of its target audience, but still holds weight. Especially when inverted. All play and no work may become a proverb for posterity. It would not only make us lazy, but potentially draw entire generations into what can effectively be described as an endless loop of production and admiration. What I mean is that we may create things, like blog posts, or videos or even entire stories, not as work but to spread a sense of enjoyment. This too is a more recent phenomenon, being accomplished through particular mediums that are being propped up through technology. Although the internet is obviously implicated in this loop, it is not the only proponent. It is, however a self-sustaining example of the play-all loop, where work is secondary, if existent at all, and pleasure through entertainment, the primary function.

On a broader scope, we are essentially creating a culture of distraction, born out of large quantities



La Vision de Daniel by Gabriela Nuñez

of leisure. And spreading these distractions is a primary way of sustaining this culture. Through word of mouth to social media, the proliferation of quite literally everything under the sun—and a great number of things beyond it—has been ever expanding by ways of technology. A very recent example would be the pending introduction of Google Glass, which is exactly what it sounds like. Imagine non-prescription glasses that can take pictures or videos for you. While such a technology sounds amazing and can allow for reliving experiences like skydiving indefinitely, it can also, through sharing especially, leave to some unfriendly consequences. There is always the worry of one's personal image, particularly as portrayed to potential employers. Any related worries are a form of self restraint. But these concerns are agitated by the widespread use of self-advertising we engage in, through social media.

Another major area of technological distraction that is becoming more popular is virtual reality. Although it would theoretically enable people to escape certain horrors of the everyday, it can also be its own horror, not necessarily because of what a particular reality would depict, but because it is an intentional turning away from the realities of the world around us in place for what is essentially fantasy. In popular culture this is exemplified by the James Cameron film *Avatar*, where even many casual reviewers fell into a blue state, a depression from being disconnected from what they took to be a wonderful world. Virtual reality may be less futuristic than we would like to believe – increasingly, video games allow for a deep immersion of sensual experience that may be the younger brother of virtual reality. This is especially evident through the American military's use of such gaming platforms specifically as training modules. Indeed, academics

are in the midst of a new debate over the end result of enculturation through video games. The social consequences as viewed by scholars are yet to be determined beyond debate.

The Oculus Rift is an example of where virtual reality is headed just as much as where it is coming from. Their website describes it as designed specifically for gaming, to make a more encompassing experience. In doing so, this hardware is crossing a very real line between digital entertainment and physical reality, effectively blurring the line between the two. Although this will no doubt catch on in a few years and even expand to film (the next level of 3D?), it nevertheless raises questions about how far virtual reality will go. This is a question I know is addressed in some science-fiction novels, often very optimistically presented as beneficial augments to our normal life, even as a second, more meaningful and politically subversive life.

Surely our technology will not make us so free that we can simply leave our bodies behind, as

“ On a broader scope, we are essentially creating a culture of distraction, born out of large quantities of leisure. And spreading these distractions is a primary way of sustaining this culture. ”

though they are merely outdated vestiges of a world soon forgotten. This strikes me as impossible, because we need our bodies to live through sustenance and if we all did, true to the ideology of equality, indulge in such an activity, the world, our great machine, would stop. Life as we know it would grind to a halt, and while the Internet is vast it seems impossible to truly replicate the human experience. Regardless, we seem to be leaning in a direction where the ultimate freedom is release from humanity, if only in a temporary and empirical sense. The knoll rings louder too when one thinks about the increasing number of robots being used in workforces, even in tasks as simple as automated telephone receivers.

Robots as a working force might not sound like such a bad thing at first. Optimistically thinking, it may free up enough people to make serious headway on issues like poverty across the globe. Alternatively, it may leave the same people with a justified attitude towards a life of opulence, complete with automatic grape dispensers and leaf-shaped fans. Worse still, we might wind up (in a century or two) in a situation akin to life in the *Terminator* films and be coerced into bending the knee before our new robot overlords. But predictions aren't limited to the cinematic experiences alone; from stories like Isaac Asimov's classic *I, Robot*, or Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, we have been presented with a human freedom that involves the slavery of mechanical counterparts that were designed to be very anthropomorphic. This is all the more poignant when one examines robots that currently exist. Even the basic stair-climbing robot vaguely resembles an astronaut. Many more recent models have been fitted with human features, though they are of varying degrees of realism.

While such books largely focus on the moral complications like whether or not robots have rights, or even a soul, we can safely say that many texts from the science fiction genre have coupled with technology, in ways that make these texts counterparts to our fantasies of techno-liberation. They can perhaps keep us better grounded in potential reality by way of providing us with a thought-provoking pastime. Further, they can be optimistic or pessimistic, horrifying or reassuring. The difference between a medical miracle and a deadly biological attack is a fairly thin line. Something it may not hurt to be reminded of every so often.

Such impulses and ideas must be balanced in their presentation though; one too many horrors and many people may find themselves entering a state of paranoid depression where all they want to do is hide. Conversely, we may find people so enthralled in the fantastic possibilities of the future that they leap from tall buildings in mechanical 'super-hero-suits.' Such role-playing activities – an example of liberty in the first place – are, I think, best left to conventions and living rooms, where creativity flows both safely and freely. To even consider such thoughts is a by-product of freedom, enabled by technology and accumulated over centuries.

All of these factors are leading to new questions that someday soon will need to be addressed. Think of freedom on a whole other scale: from work, from responsibility, even from physics. All very grand ideas, and potentially available at very little cost, by the next decade or so. But can it really be worth it?

Aaron Grierson is Senior Articles Editor for the magazine.



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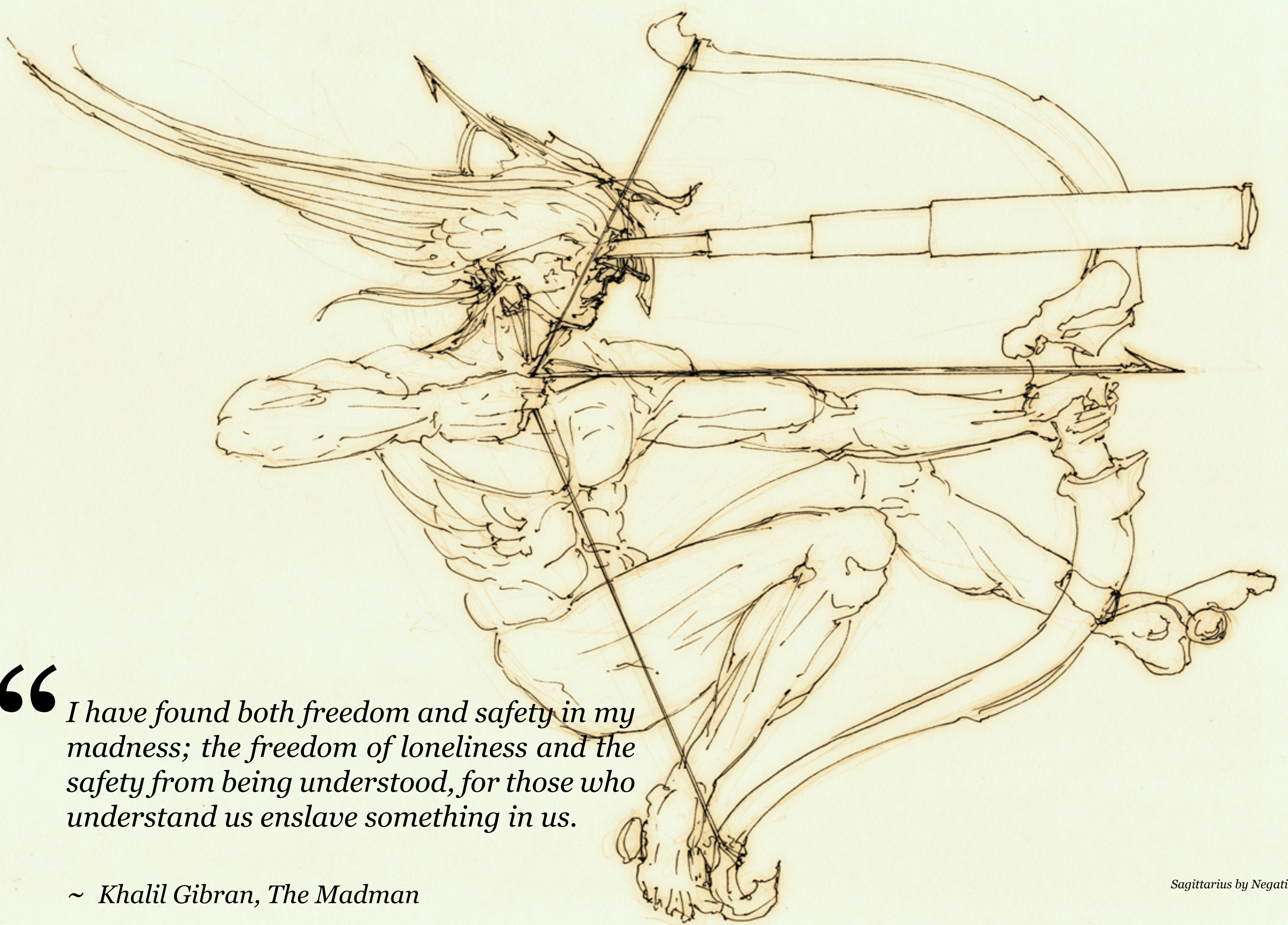
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*I have found both freedom and safety in my
madness; the freedom of loneliness and the
safety from being understood, for those who
understand us enslave something in us.*

~ Khalil Gibran, The Madman



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