

OTHER WORDS

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ILS

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Other Words
An International Journal of Creative Writing
by
Islamic Literary Society
(ILS)

Editor's Note

It was 5 August 2024, and Bangladesh was holding its breath, waiting for the army chief to confirm what they had been anticipating. The nation erupted into cheers with the official announcement that the autocratic prime minister had resigned and fled the country. Within minutes, the streets were filled with overjoyed people celebrating the fall of a regime.

This revolution put an end to 15 years of horrifying tyranny. Yet injustice haunts every nook and corner of society, not only in Bangladesh but across the world. Throughout the globe, the steamroller of suppression and abuse continues to crush people, and sometimes it is difficult not to despair.

Other Words Journal believes that art should serve a higher purpose. With this in mind, it primarily promotes works that inspire meaningful action and reflection. Poets and writers may not be able to fix the world overnight, but they can ignite a spark that leads to significant changes.

This issue features the heart-wrenching fate of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a glaring reminder that the battle against oppression is far from over. The first poem, titled “Agarwood’s Fragrance,” attempts to capture the agony and the unwavering strength of this remarkable lady. At the same time, it calls out Muslim leaders for their betrayal and inaction. Other works include thoughts on life-disrupting battles—ones both internal and external to an individual. The last story in this issue provides an account of hilarious encounters with dogs. Despite being a humorous piece, it encourages the pursuit of knowledge and warns Muslims against the danger of blind faith, aligning perfectly with the values central to the publication.

I sincerely hope that the creative works that await readers in the following pages will serve as a source of encouragement, propelling them forward in their journey of promoting righteousness and opposing evil. May Allah aid the Ummah and every oppressed soul on Earth.

Afifa Alam Raisa
Chief Editor
July 2025

Introduction

In the year 223 AH, a Muslim woman was assaulted by forces under the command of the Byzantine Emperor. In her anguish, she cried out, "Wa Mu'tasima!" Upon hearing her call, the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim Billah responded without hesitation, proclaiming, "Labbaik" (I am here at your call). He immediately ordered a meeting and made an announcement in the mosque, summoning the Muslim community. They gathered and asked, "What is the matter?" He replied, "News has reached me that a Muslim sister has been attacked in a Roman city." He then vowed, "By Allah, I will rescue her."

This was the decisive and honourable response of a Caliph whose sense of justice and duty was stirred by the violation of a single Muslim woman's dignity. When Al-Mu'tasim's army later conquered the targeted Roman territory, he personally demanded that the prison holding the woman be opened. Upon seeing him, she was astonished. He smiled and said, "I heard your call, sister."

Likewise, when the notorious Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi received word that a group of Muslims, including women, had been captured by pirates and that Raja Dahir of Sindh had failed to protect them, he dispatched his nephew, Muhammad bin Qasim al-Thaqafi, with an army of 12,000 men. Muhammad bin Qasim entered Sindh, defeated its ruler, and rescued the Muslim captives.

These are the stories that fill the pages of our history—tales where the soft-hearted wept and the brave responded with unwavering resolve. But such days are now a distant memory.

Today, there is no Al-Mu'tasim Billah, no Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi to answer the cries of our sisters. Tragically, the situation has been reversed: our leaders no longer raise their voices in defense of Muslim women. Instead, they are complicit in their oppression—some even mock their suffering. This betrayal was poignantly captured by the Tunisian poet Aboul-Qacem Echebbi, who wrote:

إلا أيها الظالم المستبد

حبيب الظلام، عدو الحياة

سخرت بأنّات شعبٍ ضعيفٍ

وكفاك مخضبٌ من دماء

Hark! You tyrannous dictator,

Lover of darkness, enemy of life.

You mocked the cries of the weak,

And your palm is stained with their blood.

Within the suffocating silence of prison's walls, our sister Dr. Aafia Siddiqui cries out. Yet her voice falls upon deaf ears. Kidnapped, tortured, and violated by those who claim to represent our faith and by those who preach democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—she has suffered as few women in modern history have. No woman of our era has endured such sustained injustice and suffering as Dr. Aafia Siddiqui.

The burden of this injustice will remain a stain upon the conscience of Muslim leadership for generations. Not only have they failed to secure justice on her behalf—they are complicit in the very oppression she has endured. Her cry should reverberate in the hearts and minds of every conscientious Muslim and be echoed across every form of artistic expression—particularly poetry—as a means of raising awareness. By doing so, we may at least hope to absolve ourselves on the Day of Judgement, having shown concern, rather than indifference.

The current state of the Muslim world and its leadership offers little hope for meaningful change, let alone the rescue of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui. We are ruled by individuals who may possess the form of human beings, but whose hearts

resemble those of devils. The crisis afflicting the Muslim world stems not solely from external pressures but significantly from internal decay—specifically, from leaders who have abandoned their allegiance to Allah, His Messenger, and the ordinary members of the Muslim community and turned, in blind devotion, towards the West, as though they had taken it as their lord in place of Allah.

In such circumstances, it becomes not only necessary but imperative that ordinary Muslims—especially those endowed with artistic gifts and powerful voices—step forward to champion the cause of justice. We must raise awareness about the plight of Dr. Aafia Siddiqui and of all those, Muslim or otherwise, who are subjected to tyranny and abuse.

Art and artistic expression are, without doubt, among the most potent instruments available to humankind in the struggle against injustice and in illuminating the path towards justice. As Professor Mahmudul Hasan contends, art should not be regarded merely as “art for the sake of art.” In line with this perspective, the International Journal of Creative Writing is not simply a platform for poetic or aesthetic expression; rather, it serves as a space for advocacy, ethical engagement, and the unwavering pursuit of justice.

It is in this spirit that the present volume is dedicated to raising awareness of the injustice endured by Dr. Aafia Siddiqui. Her case is not merely a tragedy; it is a plea—a call for justice that cannot be ignored. We earnestly hope that justice for Dr. Aafia Siddiqui will be achieved sooner rather than later.

It is my pleasure to invite readers to engage with the poetry and art contained within this volume, not as mere entertainment, but as a sincere and necessary contribution to the establishment of justice, equity, and the moral responsibilities entrusted to us as stewards of Allah’s Earth.

Abdul Hai
Operations Manager
July 2025

Abdul Hai¹

Agarwood's Fragrance

Walls echo with raw injustice,
Locked in darkness—no ears will hear,
longing for Al-Mu'tasim's roaring call,
only a Hope, now a fading shadow,
motherhood lost in tears of blood
And yet silence remains her only cure.

O Nations of la ilaha illallah,
Where is the fire of Saifullah?
Save your breath, my sister dear—
Your eyes kindling their place aboard.
Spare your sorrow, do not weep.

Let the night bear witness to your pain,
Let the day bow in awe of your patience.
No wall of injustice stands forever,
No throne will outlast time.

And while we burn as hollow ash,
You rise, as the agarwood's fragrance—
Forged by a thousand silent nights.

¹ Abdul Hai; ILS Operations Manager.

Steve Noyes²

A Conversation at the Woking Mosque

1917

The interior of the dome of the Shah Jehan Mosque was brilliantly whitewashed and quaquaversally dipping downwards, so that it seemed to Yusuf Ali, making *du'a* for his many friends that he would see today, that all the painstakingly painted names of Allah up there in the dome, *Latif*, *'Alim*, *Ru'uf*, *'Aziz*, and *Basiir*, were parachuting down towards him, possibly to penetrate him. They left him to wonder how many of those attributes he had truly reflected in his day-to-day life, or whether it was possible for a human to do so. It was a moment balanced between, he knew, the capacious reverence and the anthropomorphic. This was the sort of fuddle that Yusuf often found himself in before prayer. It was still a half hour before Zhur, and so Yusuf made his eyes tour the names of Allah again, and then he asked Allah to give him strength for his work and got up and went out into the courtyard.

It was chilly, and all the sounds seemed tamped down by the overcast sky. Workers were framing the extension to the prayer hall, and yet their hammers sounded blunted, distant. Along the prayer hall wall, there was a lineup of boys waiting to use the ablution taps, all in shalwar kameez and white tarbooshes. Yusuf Ali thought there was a *khatm* ceremony later on today, and his nose confirmed it; from the distant outbuilding he could smell charcoal. The cooks were priming the woodstove to cook for the many relatives and guests. Yusuf drew his coat around him and shivered on the bench. Worshippers were trickling into the mosque compound, fathers with sons, mostly.

The first to come through the gate was Marmaduke Pickthall, a surprise. Yusuf wondered whether there was some special reason for his attendance today. He gave him a wave, and Pickthall adjusted his direction towards Yusuf. Only last week Yusuf had seen him at the Notting Hill mosque, where Pickthall

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had finally declared that he had become a Muslim. Yusuf could not deny that this was moving. He had been asked to officiate at the prayers that day, and he remembered other testimonies of faith he had seen. Everyone who comes to Islam, he thought, comes with different understandings, and he had often wondered how long Marmaduke, with his admirable grasp of Arabic and his considerable eloquence, was going to put off professing Islam. And now he had done it.

He has the responsibility of learning, and we, the responsibility of teaching, thought Yusuf.

There was something bothering Yusuf, though. After Marmaduke's *shahada*, which was a grand occasion, Yusuf had seen how Khawaj ad-Din followed Marmaduke around and introduced him to Baron Headley and how Khawaj did not even thank Yusuf for his own remarks. There was something that Khawaj had said, something about renewal of the faith. Of course, he had made the remark because someone had asked an innocent question, when they were all sipping tea at the reception, about the Ahmadiyya version of Islam. Was it any different from the Islam in Muslim or Arab countries? What did he mean by renewal?

There was that mental bifurcation again, happening in me, thought Yusuf, between being modern and being wary of *bid'a*, innovation that stretches the Sunni soul.

Marmaduke looked natty as usual, and as Yusuf approached, smiled with genuine pleasure at seeing Yusuf, and plonk, he was sitting beside him. The men clasped hands and salaamed.

“You look deep in thought,” said Marmaduke.

“Well, I was. A little. Thinking. Not deep. Well, a little, perhaps. Just a moment.”

“Of course.”

Yusuf went back to the London gathering in his mind. He realized that Khawaj had used the term renewal, *tajdiid*, renewal of Islam, to distinguish the Lahori Ahmadiyyas from the Qadiani Ahmadiyyas. A mere renewal of the faith, in the sense of injecting greater energy and purpose (but surely only Allah could

really be teleological), a modest claim when compared to the Qadiani heresy of a new prophet. Indeed, Khawaj had not strayed from orthodoxy. To Yusuf, ‘renewal’ in itself was problematic. A handful of converts in Britain was renewal? If so, it was paltry and couldn’t be compared with the reformist spirit of the Wahhabis.

“There must be a lot going on in there,” said Pickthall, pointing at Yusuf’s brow.

“Please.”

Because of Yusuf’s interest in all things progressive and modern, he had to admit that reform, so long as it was a sincere search for first principles and then reinterpretation of those principles in the light of these times, was not something to be sniffed at. On balance it was desirable. However, he had heard of the doings of English converts in Liverpool: how they worshipped inside the mosque without taking off their boots and how few of them observed Ramadan. He was juggling Renewal and the Eternal. He realized he wasn’t going to square that circle anytime soon, and he cleared his throat and turned to Marmaduke.

“You know, I didn’t recognize you at first. I just saw this man in a homburg on a bench and thought, well, there’s a man, or something equally banal. Then I thought, that can’t be Yusuf.”

“Heh. You know, as soon as you say something can’t be something, then the likelihood that it is that something approaches certainty.”

“The cant-egorical imperative, as it were. How are you, Yusuf? Salaam alaykum. Am I much changed?”

“And to you. I am tolerably well. Well, we’re all changed these days, aren’t we? War has a way of doing that. Time of stark reassessment. Which I wish General Haig would do. There must be some way to break out of this zugzwang. Enough of the war. Too, too dispiriting. These must be heady days for you. Many, many big occasions for you lately. I was very moved last week to see you finally accept Islam.”

“And yet there is a sense in which I always accepted it.”

“Oh? Well, Wallahi, man, what were you waiting for?”

Marmaduke was silent.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” said Yusuf.

“Yusuf, this is between you and me. My mother died. Had I testified to my beliefs before she passed on, it would have brought her much grief. But I take your point. Even as I was giving my sermons in London and reciting from the Book. A feeling of grave illegitimacy. Well. What a joy it was to feel my Arabic released in me again. Even when all that... I felt somewhat inauthentic. Like the poets in the Qur'an. *Annahum yuquluun ma la yaf'aluun*. Saying what I wasn’t doing. A bit rootless.”

“Blown around, perhaps, without the anchor of your true obligations?”

“*Al-hamdu lillah*,” Marmaduke said. “It’s good to finally profess what I have long thought.”

“I agree. I’m happy that you are my brother now.”

“Well, I always was.”

“It’s difficult to imagine your upbringing,” said Yusuf, “just as you probably have little idea of mine. I try to think of you in one of those draughty English churches, with your father holding on high the chalice, and you genuflecting in the aisle, and tasting the host on your tongue, perhaps wincing a bit at the bitterness of the Anglican grape juice.”

“Father was a Methodist.”

“Well. You see what I mean.”

“As for you, I can imagine a house built by an officer of the Raj. I can see a boy taken by servants to an English school. A boy a bit overwhelmed by the raucous markets your cab passed through. A lonely boy once class got out. I can see a child-sized prayer rug. A brilliant white tarboosh. You’re right. There isn’t much to go on. But such is the world these days where the past does not loom large. Though it may be a prologue, it will be swept away by change. It will be forgotten. Inshallah. Though we may hold it dear.”

“I meant to tell you... ” said Yusuf.

“As I recall, from all our previous conversations, when you back into a statement, that is, use some premonitory construction, as you just did, such as ‘I meant to tell you,’ or ‘funny you should put it that way, or ‘be that as it may’ or ‘which reminds me,’ there is usually some implicit criticism coming.”

“I merely meant to say that I thought you were right to express your tribulations about Palestine at Caxton Hall and ask questions about England’s role in the matter.”

“And...?”

“Well. I know, or I’ve heard, that there’s something else going on which might cause you to be suspicious of a certain gentleman in the Foreign Office, but I would hasten to assure you that under a British protectorate, in my estimation, and under British laws and values, the rights of Palestinian Arabs ought to be guaranteed,” said Yusuf.

“Yes, and their poverty and lack of self-direction in perpetuity are similarly guaranteed. Since we are Muslims, we need to assert a Muslim point of view. We have to stop assuming that our interests are truly being considered.”

“And yet they are.”

“They are being considered only from the lofty point of view of a shepherd in the piedmont, assessing the rocky, twisting path upwards that he has considered for his milling herds below and subsequently deciding to keep them at their current level for at least another season. And the gentleman you mention has been quite rude to me,” Pickthall said.

“I find that hard to believe, since I have spoken many times with Sykes, and though we have disagreed on many a point, his gentle restraint and cultivated manners have always impressed upon me the forthright imprimatur of his character.”

“That gentleman,” Marmaduke said. “Why...why...” He was overcome by an invisible injustice and shook his head violently to throw it off. “Why, mark my words, he will play a key role in determining the shape of things in the Levant after the war, just you wait. But my offence at his hands is far more personal. There are only so many polite ways to call someone a traitor without

actually using the word, and he must have exhausted them before he corresponded with me.”

“And I can see how that must have stung, but it seems to me that you had better shrug that off, dear friend. His response was predictable. He’s a high-ranking official in a government that is prosecuting a difficult war. What did you expect?”

“All I was trying to do—”

“Was to consort with the Ottoman enemy.”

“Who may yet evolve into a friend, once hostilities stop. And you’re offending me in much the same manner. Do you think I relish staying up most of the night and putting out fires in my Home Guard role?” He paused, struck by something. “Heh, funny thing is, I do, you know. I really do.”

“My dear Marmaduke, we all have roles to play. Your mistake is you always refuse the natural, inevitable role that’s just waiting for you to slip on. Instead, you insist on crafting new roles that confound others’ expectations.”

“Long may it be so.”

“Well, I’m interested, since you are obstreperous in this way, what role you think you might play in the *umma*, now that you have joined the great brotherhood of Islam. Here’s Khawaj. Salaam alaykum. Good day, sir.”

“A pleasure,” said Khawaj, shaking Yusuf’s hand and half-clasping Marmaduke to his chest with a back-slap held for one beat. “Thank you for allowing me to reprint your *khutba*, sir. I was wondering. How was it that you gave *khutbahs* when you weren’t yet a Muslim? Isn’t that a tad forward of you? In any case, we are fortunate to have you now. Might I ask what tempted you southward?”

“I heard that there was a small but lively community and wanted to see for myself. The little mosque is beautiful. How is the magazine going?”

“There have been a few bumps along the way. We missed a couple of issues because there was a wartime shortage of paper. But our subscriber base is

growing.” Khawaj toed the ground and pulled on his bottom lip before he continued.

“Listen, man,” he said, addressing Yusuf, “This is difficult, but I don’t understand the general bent of your writing these days.”

“I should have thought that my stances and views are pellucid. Why, Marmaduke and I were just talking about the velleities of action and perception that occur in wartime. But I’m not sure what it is that you don’t understand...”

“Oh, everyone to their trenches,” Marmaduke said. “I’ve got a feeling that what follows is going to be fairly dug in.”

“Yes, well, I suppose. I do hope you won’t be too discomfited by my inquiry, but I really do want to know, and forgive me for putting this so bluntly, what moves you or motivates you to argue so strenuously for Indian Muslims to go and get themselves killed for a non-Muslim Empire? I don’t want to offend, but...”

“Oh-ho!” said Marmaduke, lifting his leg and revolving on the other foot with a fey wave at the sky, “And with a gallant cry he goes over the top!”

Someone who’d been eavesdropping nearby said, “That’s no joke,” and made for the ablution room.

But Yusuf was not in the slightest amused.

“Indian Muslims are subjects of the Sovereign and owe their allegiance to the Empire,” Yusuf said, in a rather pompous tone and with his right hand pressed to his heart.

“If I might,” interceded Marmaduke, “that the prosecution of the war as it stands has meant that a large number of colonial soldiers, Australians, Canadians, have given their lives to offensives with zero chance of succeeding. Instead of gaining ground, they are merely being sacrificed to the rather static status quo. That’s all.”

“It is an honour for an Indian soldier to sanctify this conflict with his blood,” said Yusuf, unhappily.

“Well said, as usual,” said Khawaj, clearly speaking to Marmaduke. Then to Ali: “I suppose it is a function of the sorry arithmetic of Empire. A single small island engaged in hostilities with a much larger country is the lynch-pin of Empire, the single clasp that holds the garment whole across its body. If said island nation is to prevail at all, then manpower must come from the colonies. I do see, sir, that your arguments have, on this particular matter, some cogence.”

“You are laying the stepping stones of a garden path, and I for one cannot wait to see how you connect this path to the lush wilderness of your recent pleadings, nay, impertinent demands, in your publication,” said Yusuf.

Khawaj said, “What you call an impertinent demand, others would call the natural reward that follows a gallant sacrifice. I merely suggest that nations—”

“Dominions. *Land-masses*,” said Marmaduke. “There is too much diversity and no centripetal force inherent to India, whereas the Ottoman—”

“Why must we always talk about the Ottomans when Marmaduke is around?” said Yusuf.

“I merely suggest that *peoples*, like the Muslims and other Indian subjects, deserve to have their efforts rewarded with something other than our ungrateful and unchanging disdain.”

“You are aware,” said Yusuf, “that many of the Indian conscripts have been performing non-combatant roles in the supply-chain and driving ambulances and digging latrine and so forth?”

“Many, but not all,” said Marmaduke. “A friend of a friend talked with Aubrey Herbert—Yusuf, you know him, I believe—and he said that the moaning of the wounded without medical help in the Gallipoli trenches was pitiable indeed. Those were Australians. *And* Turks. He had to negotiate hard to get them relief, and most of them died before he succeeded.”

Yusuf, who knew Herbert better than all of them and had, in fact, a couple of letters from him when he was in Albania, had to allow that this was probably true. He was always getting himself into parlous situations. He wondered if anyone in this group knew how Herbert had snuck aboard a

troop-ship—and the man was almost blind, at that—and presented himself to the field-staff on the other side. Audacious was the word. And honourable.

“Do you really think,” said Yusuf, turning to Khawaj, “that the reward of independence that you posit, which sounded very much to me like some sort of cleaving-off from the Empire—”

“Political independence,” said Khawaj.

“*Independence, then,* is unworkable given that the Raj is stitched together from disparate religious and ethnic communities that only our Sovereign, in his majesty, can unite? And do you really think that our loyal compatriots, such as the Rajahs and Nizams who are *already independent*, given certain conditions, would accede to such a proposition?”

“More to the point, would Winston let it happen without crying havoc and disrupting the Commons?” said Pickthall.

“You know, there are only so many times you can cross the floor,” said Khawaj. “If you exceed that limit, you are wearing the chamber’s floor into a chasm. Here’s my good friend Professor Leon.”

The man who had joined them was squinting through a monocle and wore a morning-coat with shiny elbows and a fez. He imperfectly surveyed them all, before saying Salaam alaykum, which was rejoined.

“How have you been, Quilliam Bey,” said Pickthall.

“Who is Quilliam Bey?” said the man.

“Oh, everyone knows who he is. I don’t know why you insist on this Professor nonsense. You’re among friends here. Your brothers are not going to take out an advertisement in the *Times* informing the Home Office that someone they’ve forgotten about is not who he claims he is.”

Ignoring Pickthall, the man took the time to remove his monocle and clean it thoroughly with a hankie. “Why, because it is my identity,” he said, who wasn’t perturbed; au contraire, the smoothness of his reply suggested he was used to it.

“Professor of what, then?”

“Why of sundry subjects, not the least of which is Islam. I have followed the law—”

“It is curious,” said Yusuf, “that I’ve never seen you around Lincoln’s Inn.”

“If the man wants to be Professor Leon, well, then let him be Professor Leon,” said Khawaj.

“—and have taken an active interest in various sciences, but my specialism, if you must know, is the elegant and most cultured language, *la francaise*.”

“You’re only saying that because you know that none of us speak it well,” Yusuf said.

“*Au contraire, j’ai entendu que Monsieur, sa langue devient tres longe quand il dit plus des mensonges,*” said Pickthall.

“*Qui dit toujours la verite,*” said Quilliam/Leon. “*Et ma langue n’est que rose, pas longe.*”

“I don’t see why all of you are ragging on the man to this degree,” said Yusuf, “but I’d like to think that it’s ignorance, rather than an ungenerosity most unfitting to the occasion. Here we are, gathered for the jum’ā prayer, a mere week or so before one of our number has taken the giant step of proclaiming the *shahada*—” here he nodded at Marmaduke, who nodded back but did not entirely break his sullen countenance at being contradicted, and then remembered that it was he himself who questioned Leon in the first place, and smiled at Yusuf.

Yusuf continued: “and instead of welcoming the man and talking in a general and inclusive way about conversion to Islam, because he did his part back in the day in Liverpool, oh, yes, some of you might be too young to remember, but I remember reading about those new Muslims in *The Crescent*, that Professor Leon here wrote and published, though all of you have forgotten Professor Leon’s tenure as the Sheikh of the British Isles. Yes, you heard me. The Sheikh here had that title conferred by the Sultan himself. Leon was one of

the first to profess Islam in England, so show him some respect. If he wants to be known by another name, then so be it. Marmaduke here has altered his name and taken on an Abdullah to signify his submission to Allah. Who are we to question our friend?"

Leon/Quilliam was rubbing his monocle and then his lapel with his thumb, a task totally absorbing to him.

An old man with brilliant white hair and a matching moustache came out of the washroom, rolling down his sleeves. His houndstooth jacket and boots rather smacked of the hunt. He saw the group and changed direction to join them. When he was but feet away, he stopped and cried out, "Quilliam! My word, it's been ages!"

Everyone laughed, including Quilliam, and the two men clasped each other. Quilliam/Leon explained how he would like to be called, and then he introduced the rest of them to Baron Headley.

"This is the first time I've seen you here in Woking," said Khawaj. "And you are very welcome."

Headley gave a slight smile, indicating that his welcome could never have been in doubt. The group started to talk, rather inanely, thought Yusuf, about the weather, how typically nasty it was for November and how they were in for a long winter, *inshallah*, but he joined in and said for his part he was glad that the rain had not been incessant, as it had been last year.

Marmaduke excused himself and went to the *wudhu* area and stood before a urinal, unzipped. Someone slipped in beside him, and Marmaduke peripherally made out the buttoned shoulder-flap and the leather-wrapped canteen dangling from his belt and the bill of his officer's cap before the man spoke.

"Mr. Pickthall," he said. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Sergeant Khalid Sheldrake. Salaam to you, and congratulations on your acceptance of Islam."

"Why, thank you very much."

The sound of urine on porcelain.

At a *wudhu* tap, a boy was muttering as he meditatively washed his forearms.

“I wondered,” said Khaled, “if you might help me with a letter that I am drafting concerning my prospects when the war is finally over. You see, I do feel that being a Muslim might afford me a chance to serve the Empire in any of those Muslim lands where a stern hand and an administrative presence is to be desired. I wish to make my case at the Home Office and petition Sir Mark Sykes—or any appropriate officials whom you might recommend—for an appropriate post. Now I know that you are most knowledgeable about the Muslim lands, and I wondered, should I show you this letter, if you might give any advice as to which land, or lands, I might be best suited to, and, well, to just read the letter and tell me what you think.”

Wallahi, not Sykes again, thought Marmaduke. “Don’t you think you’re getting ahead of yourself?” said Marmaduke. “We haven’t won the war yet. I’d wait another year or so. Maybe even two. And place your future in the hands of He who determines all, to Whom all time is as one.”

“Yes, of course. Well said.” Sheldrake buttoned up. Marmaduke had taken his first step away, when Sheldrake said, “The man who makes his case first ...”

Marmaduke turned.

“... is the man who rises.”

Marmaduke paused. At this juncture, though the future may be assembling into a shape, just as the merest visual clue of land, though minuscule at best, a pointillist detail in the shearing walls of fog, is sometimes visible to the experienced sailor, the shape of the future might be evident to the especially gifted, but it was beyond his and nearly everyone else’s ken, and the shapes that currently obtained were parallel and facing and seemingly eternal lines of trenches in France. There was a reason, Marmaduke thought, that we say *inshallah*. It is not just warding us away from over-confident actions or pretentious clairvoyancy. It was giving up our strong belief that we can shape events. We have to act, and we have principles to guide our actions, but there are no guarantees, and everything is either a boon or test. Or both. Not so easy

to tell. Marmaduke realized that he was bedevilled, lost in his own thinking. Sheldrake was waiting for an answer.

Blast that Sykes anyway.

Beyond all that, he wondered if he ought to get involved in this young man's ambition. He decided to poke at him.

"And what would you do for these people in those Muslim lands, your brothers?" said Marmaduke. "What is the way forward for them, after the war? How are you going to help them, or help repair the inevitable damage of war? What do they need?"

"Why, I should think that they need a firm administrative hand, to ensure that the Empire continues to—"

"I ask you about the human benefit of your stewardship and you talk to me about the Empire?"

"Why, naturally, I—"

"Very well, then. How would your leadership differ if you were to be posted in an administrative capacity just north of the Levantine lands, with a sizable Turkish-speaking population nearby, or if, on the other hand, you were posted to Upper Egypt?"

Sheldrake drew himself up. "The administration of British justice, of course, would be my priority."

"And what is British justice? How does it differ from Muslim justice?"

"As you know, British administrators try not to interfere with—"

"Has it occurred to you at all, while you were thinking about soldiers saluting you and the grateful *fellahin* respectfully saying *Ya Ingleezee* when you are on your occasional tours, that the needs of your brothers in many of these lands is likely to be avoiding disease and famine?"

"My dear Mister Pickthall, with all due respect, I didn't think I would have to sit an interview for the position this very minute. All I was asking for was some advice about writing a letter."

Marmaduke softened his tone. "How many men are at your command now, brother?"

"A good twenty-five. Thirty. It fluctuates."

"And how many have you lost to fatalities?"

"Ten."

"Ten."

Sheldrake swallowed hard. "It's too soon," he said, "to think of a number. Of them as a number."

"I understand."

"I still see each one of them laid out in the mud, sir. Boys, they were. Every single one of them cried out for his mother when they were dying. Except the ones who were shot in the head. Merciful, they were, that was. Horrible, the sutler stripping them and distributing the 'bacco and the what-not. And the rats coming around for a nibble."

Sheldrake dipped his eyes and nervously toed the ground. The action, thought Marmaduke, was not unlike that of a horse.

"I take your point," said Sheldrake. "I already have people to look after. That was your point, sir?"

"Task at hand," said Marmaduke. "May Allah guide you. Let us join our brothers." Marmaduke clapped Khaled on the shoulder. "Come now, don't be crestfallen. You can write to me care of *The New Age*, and I will have a look at your letter. You do realize that this letter is likely to be one of several hundred, don't you?"

"Which is why I thought I might benefit from some senior advice."

"Capital, very well, who's this chap?"

A small boy with dark eyes and a brilliant white tarboosh came up to them and put up his hand. He seemed waif-like draped in his kameez. "Sir, I

mean, terribly sorry, sir, I'm ever so sorry to bother you, cor, but are you a real soldier?"

Marmaduke chuckled.

"I am," said Sheldrake. He reached down, and with a solemn seriousness, shook the boy's hand. "Are you the boy whose *khutm* ceremony is later today?"

"No, sir, that's my mate Ali. Mine's a ways off." He ducked his head. "I'm not so good, sir, at reciting Qur'an. Room for improvement, what the *mu'allam* says. I say, are you terribly good at fighting Jerry? It must be dreadful ripping with the bullets flying and cannons banging. Have you killed a whole bunch of Jerries?"

"Yes," Sheldrake said and tousled the boy's hair but was not looking at him; his gaze seemed far off.

"What is the best thing, the most exciting thing about the war, sir, about battling and shooting, and guns, coz if you tell me, my mates in my form, they'll be ever so excited to hear about it, if you don't mind, please, sir."

"The most exciting thing..."

Sheldrake was aware that Marmaduke, too, was looking intently at him. The boy was fairly hopping up and down.

"...are the larks."

"The larks, sir?"

"Why yes, the larks. At dawn. There's a time, a fairly long time, when it's clear that there isn't going to be any fighting that day, you can hear the larks singing and they go on for quite a while. Their singing is very pretty. Now, can you be a good boy and go and tell your mates that?"

"Larks, sir, yes, sir. I will."

"Inshallah."

"Inshallah, sir, and thank you, they'll be super chuffed."

And the boy ran off into the prayer hall.

As the two of them walked towards their group, they saw that the workers who had been framing an extension to the prayer-hall had left off and had abandoned their boots for slippers and were rolling up their sleeves as they went to wash. They also saw that the group they were to rejoin had become animated, with much jabbing of forefingers into palms and sudden frustrated raising of arms to the sky and equally and apparently lunatic sudden pirouettes meant to mean an incredulous swerve away from the claims and counter-claims of this shindy.

“What’s going on?” said Marmaduke.

“Oh, nothing, really,” said Yusuf Ali. “Or nothing consequential.”

Baron Headley huffed and jammed his hands in his pockets. Then they were out again.

“I don’t think,” he said, red in the face, “that this is a particularly propitious time to weaken the national resolve with such negativity, and I take it as a personal affront,” he said, turning towards Khawaj, “that you would insinuate that men of my station are insincere and double-dealing—yes, yes, that was the implication of his remarks—towards His Majesty’s subjects in India.”

“Well, as for all that, I said what I meant to say in my encomium in the journal. Loyalty ought to be rewarded. Think of the families of those Indian soldiers who have perished. Wouldn’t it bear up those grieving mothers and their sons to know their sacrifice has fed the stirrings of an eventually substantiated freedom?”

“And what might you, Yusuf,” said Headley, “have to say about that? After all, you hail from our easternmost dominion.”

Before Yusuf could reply, Sheldrake ignored that the floor, as it were, had shifted to Yusuf, and said directly to Headley, “My brother,” and Headley looked mildly affronted; he drew himself up and said, “Yes?”

“As for the members of your class,” Sheldrake said, “I can relate first-hand that their comportment has been, well, variable. Some officers get

down and minister kindly to their boys, and others eschew the forward trenches and insist on service by their batmen and tarry not an instant beyond the absolute minimum, heading for their London clubs, which, after all, are only a short train-ride and a boat-ride away.”

“Good sir,” Yusuf began, “I don’t understand why this tete-a-tete has become so heated. We are in the middle of a war. The outcome rests with Allah. This is no time, if you’ll forgive the expression, to be dividing up the spoils prospectively. This is a time when the *umma*, though under the leadership of non-Muslims, must pull together and forego these invidious claims.”

“Be that as it may...” began Marmaduke.

“Oh, there’s that phrase again,” said Yusuf.

“There are good reasons to think seriously about what happens after the war. I for one have been vocal about Balfour and Palestine. I do not want to see Arabs displaced who have lived in the area for millennia. And yet such things happen, and they happen quickly, if voices are not raised against them.”

“For all that,” said Khawaj, “they happen quickly enough even when people are howling.”

“All that Balfour intended,” said Headley, “was to ensure a home for the Jews, a people who, as you all know, have been gravely sinned against and grievously mistreated—”

“Not in England, they haven’t,” said Pickthall.

“A homeland, if you will. There is no question of throwing the Arabs out, and there is language in there to prevent that.”

“The language is at best ambiguous,” said Yusuf. “A text that casts intentions forward always needs to be interpreted and implemented, but I maintain that this is not the struggle that confronts us at this moment.”

“I think that the future after the war, well, I think that there is still a huge role to play for the Turks,” said Pickthall.

“Had you gotten into the Arab bureau, you would see the matter differently,” said Headley.

“And how is your Arabic, sir?” Pickthall shot back.

“Oh, for the sake of Allah,” said Khawaj, “Just because you spent four months in Turkey, good sir, doesn’t mean that you’re going to be a Vizier in a renewed Sublime Porte when all is said and done.”

“I never—”

‘This is embarrassing, such squabbling over spoils that are not even won yet! Can’t you gentlemen see that things are changing? That the world is changing? It’s not like before—no, let me finish!—Aubrey Herbert is not going to become the King of Albania because the British and Mr. Herbert think that would be ripping, no matter how swell a fellow he is, and you, Marmaduke, you or an English nineteen-year-old like you, is not going to be offered the governorship of a *vilayet* simply because you happen to be riding through one.’

This was from an animated Leon/Quilliam, which surprised everybody, as he had been silent up until his outburst.

“Oh, ho,” said Sheldrake, and gave Pickthall a pointed look.

“Although I thought it proper to sound a note of caution on this Balfour matter, it was only to ward off the extreme ambitions of Weismann and his lot,” said Pickthall. “Since what has been proposed will in all likelihood be a British protectorate, that measure of stewardship shall probably—”

“Oh-ho, a protectorate, that magical vehicle that comes in boasting of its temporary, provisional nature and winds up staying half a century, just like in Egypt,” said Khawaj.

“For the life of me, I don’t see what the matter is with old Aubrey being the King of Albania,” said Headley. “I happen to know he couldn’t afford it. Yet I would have been happy to lend him the necessary. Though there’s the upkeep on his pile to consider, I suppose.”

“Gentlemen, we are getting ahead of ourselves,” said Yusuf, looking pained, as though he didn’t know where the exchange would go next and didn’t

much want to find out. “Didn’t Allah *subhana wa ta’ala* say in the Noble Book, *Wa law la daf’u an-naas ba’dahum biba’din lifasaadati al-ard*, if Allah did not check one people with another, mischief would spread on the Earth? Well, in this particular historical moment, we have been called on to check the aggression of another people, and that is our test, and that is what we ought to concentrate on!”

Pickthall put up his hand and thought as he did so, what an odd thing to do; it is the sort of thing he did as a schoolboy. Just then, the *muadhdhin* appeared in the doorway of the prayer hall, as though he had heard the argument and was taking steps to quell it and began the call to prayer, whose measured phrases the group of men, chastened somewhat, shuffling their feet, murmured the holy phrases back at the *muadhdhin*.

“Mashallah,” said Yusuf, “we have been called back to worship the Creator, away from our worldly concerns.”

“Yes,” said Khawaj. “I forgot to ask about this earlier, but our discussion strayed far away from the matter, and now the matter is pressing. Who should lead our brothers in prayer? Who should say a few words? I think we should invite our newfound brother to do so.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” said Pickthall. “Enough fuss was made about me last week. Besides, I haven’t prepared a *khutba*.”

“You could do worse than repeat last week’s. In London,” said Yusuf.

“Why don’t you do it, Yusuf? You have the most experience in reciting.” Pickthall turned to Khawaj. “Or do you?” He paused, and then spoke to Professor Leon, “Dear sir, I’m sorry, I’m sure that you must have extensive experience reciting in Liverpool.”

“Some. But not recently. I think I will leave it to more competent hands.”

“I probably have the most experience in reciting, true,” said Khawaj. “But these people are bored with the sort of things I say. Yusuf, you’ve been reciting for a long time.”

“I’m a bit out of practice,” said Yusuf. “*Astaghfirullah*, I’m afraid I will make mistakes. There’s a hadith that says he who has the most experience reciting should lead the congregation. But if that were always the case, no one would gain experience.”

“We should follow the hadith, then. I’ll do it. Unless, dear Pickthall, you insist.”

“As it happens, I just thought of a couple of *ayat* that I could comment on, but as our host, dear Khawaj, I really think you should take precedence.”

“Salaam alaykum.”

They all turned to the voice behind them which they had not heard before. It belonged to a short woman, her hijab knotted under her chin, regarding them with merry bewilderment.

“My, my. A couple of minutes ago, you, my brothers, were at it, cats and dogs, and now they’re exhausting themselves deferring to each other. For a moment, I thought I had wandered onto a playground! You had better make up your minds. *Qad qamitah salah!* Prayer is ready, even if you’re not.”

“Of all the—” began Headley, but Khawaj fended him off. “Quite right, sister... Sister...?”

“Khadija. Khadija Somerset-Bermondeley.”

Yusuf Ali was the only one to extend his hand, expecting it to be shaken.

“I don’t shake hands,” she said. “The *sunna*.”

“Why the—” began Headley, but Yusuf, suppressing a chuckle, clapped Headley on the back and steered him towards the prayer-hall.

“Very well,” said Pickthall, “if it’s all right with everyone, I’ll lead the prayer.”

They removed their shoes, made their ablutions, and entered the hall, where Yusuf thought the back rows of worshippers were eyeing them in an annoyed fashion; he wondered how much the sounds of their argument had

carried inside. But he soon forgot about that, and his attention was captured by the restless heads of the little boys who were fidgeting beside their fathers, anxious to get their own recitations at the *khatm* ceremony over with so they could eat and play. Yusuf thought he might stay on and witness it. It would remind him of his own, so many years ago. Boyhood, he thought—what Sister Khadija had said—how soon we relinquish it, how we want to grow up, and then when we find out what being grown up is, how keenly sometimes we want it back.

They all rose and made their rows straight and stood snugly shoulder to shoulder.

Pickthall did not take a great deal of time. He recited from Surah *Hujurat*, The Inner Apartments, the verses enjoining the Muslims not to laugh at each other, be sarcastic with each other, or be suspicious of each other, and then widened the scope, as the Book so often does, with the next *ayah*, where the Creator said that He made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other. Pickthall told them all that was a powerful reminder—though they were in the midst of a bitter, horrible war, they should remind themselves that a peace wherein that knowledge of others might increase was desirable, and not let their hearts be filled with hatred, for Allah had made different nations for a purpose. Yusuf sensed a restiveness among the seated worshippers—they were not yet ready to know the Germans. They were suffering. They were grieving.

Then there was the lovely confusion of people rising, and greeting each other, and making their way around others who were still praying, and lifting coats off hooks at the back of the hall, and balancing on one foot to tug on shoes, and then outside, where there had been a light frisking of rain, and the leaves and ground had a subtle sheen. Yusuf could smell the earth. On the path there were worms that bulged and extended to propel themselves slowly forward.

Headley, Pickthall, Leon, and Yusuf said their *ma salaams*. Khawaj and Sheldrake were still inside talking to others.

Headley headed for the road and his waiting landau. He turned and beckoned Leon/Quilliam towards him, and Leon hurried towards Headley with difficulty, his hand securing his hat as he speedily waddled with a stiffened gait,

possibly arthritic. Even from here you could see the horses' breaths, Yusuf noticed.

“See you in London,” said Pickthall.

“Yes, see you, inshallah,” said Yusuf. “I want to talk with our host.”

“I’ve got to make a train,” said Pickthall and set out briskly. That was a long walk, thought Yusuf. Well, Pickthall *was* always talking about his Dalesman’s Legs. Yusuf smelled the leaf-rot around him, the fainter *garam masala* emanating from the cook-shack. He waved at Marmaduke, but Marmaduke was already a hundred yards away now, picking up speed. His homburg bobbed along.

Yusuf lingered, as though there was something incomplete about his visit.

Sheldrake was standing beside him. Sheldrake, too, was indeterminate in action.

“Ya salaam, Khaled.”

“Do you hear it?” said Sheldrake. “It’s very clear.”

“I do hear it.”

Yusuf weighed the enormity of the thought.

“In a way, it is a blessing,” said Sheldrake. “Over there, you are so attuned to the dreadful whistle of the shells, the single shots of snipers, the general *ratattat*, then a shell goes *crump*, and what follows, the rain of things pelting down on mud. But this is such a mercy. How large it is...”

“I think I know what...” said Yusuf, but realized that he was interrupting it.

The two men in the gateway stood absolutely still and listened. It was about a mile away. It existed and would continue to exist. It was large and impervious, an eloquent territory. It could not even be bothered to break its own pane in the cold fall air. But what if it did. Oh, what if it did.

Yusuf breathed in the shapely silence.

He sensed Sheldrake breathing beside him.

The silence of the war filling Brookwood Cemetery up.

Samuel Bartlet³

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

وصل على محمد وعلى آله وأصحابه أجمعين

Seeking Solace Amidst the Insolence of the Self

I ask in earnest,

To what have I given my life?

This soul, dazzled by the glitz that envelops it

Dances upon a dancefloor darkened by the decadence of descent

Heedless of the fact that the band has long departed

But echoes of the past and drunken souls remain

How I long to answer eternity's call

To subdue this self's insolence

Who requites the divine invite

Encased in a society laced in deceit, tis not inevitable the soul's final defeat?

A society in which souls are sold to shape man in a new mould

Shackles supposedly shattered, breaking free of the strictures of the past

³ Dr. Samuel Bartlet earned his MA from Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre and completed his PhD at Royal Holloway, focusing on the Islamic thought of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. His research connects Pickthall's ideas to a range of fields, including postcolonial literature, Sufism (tasawwuf), translation studies, secularisation, pan-Islamism, British Muslim studies, and broader imperial history. He was also involved in a research project at Cardiff University's Islam-UK Centre, led by Dr. Abdul-Azim Ahmed, which documented the history of Islam in Wales.

Ushering in the momentary mastery of machine men

Themselves mastered by the mechanisms of the self

And what is born of this self of ours?

Whose ascendency ensures the death of selflessness

Selfishness abounds where egos are lavished endlessly

As licentiousness is enlivened, listless souls surrender to this lassitude long secured

Nourished by narcissism, can such a civilisation truly nurture noble ideals?

Is not nobility realised by the transcendence of the self?

Probity perfected in the soul that usurps its desires?

See true intentionality is attained where the will's resolve is enforced

The purity of our pursuit rests upon the clarity of our course

Can such discernment be made amidst the clamour of the self?

For where desire reigns the will remains enslaved

Bound to a master whose noose tightens the more they are granted slack

The soul's excellence necessitates sacrifice,

Sacrifice from all but that which is yearned for in truth

Know that the self will never acquiesce to the soul's needs

See as the soul is served the self is sacrificed

Its suicide secured in service to another

As service emboldens the soul it slays the self

A soul strengthened severs the chains restraining hope

Just as the canary's call is heard through the cage that constrains it

So too is virtue perceived beyond the veil of conceit

While the self sows abasement, dejection, rejection

The soul seeks ennoblement, realisation, perfection

As the self deceives, the soul conceives beauty

As it contrives, the soul arrives at truth

As it cries, the soul listens

As it desires, the soul abstains

As it seizes, the soul surrenders

As it senses, the soul receives

Its design is diversion, the soul's sincerity

Its reality an illusion, the soul's luminosity

Souls absorbed by these truths alone are truly free

Know dear seeker, that the end of virtue, of the soul's ceaseless yearning is love

In search of love the streams of the soul coalesce

Enduring all traces of the self that seek to divert its course

Raging towards both destination and source

For love neither begets nor is it begotten

In love all borders are breached

As beyond lover and beloved
Lies none but love

Grieve not dear child
We shall meet one day upon the banks of that boundless shore

Beyond the borders of thy bated breath
Beyond echoes of the lover's refrain

Where but beauty's reverberations abound
Allow your soul the gift of such sight

Unburden yourself from vain imaginings of a future unrealised
Of a past whose purpose has been served

Meaning lies latent for the soul that is willing to perceive
See you not that all that is, was, and will be

Resides in this moment teeming
To time unbound, but bound to unfold eternally

Treasured are those tears that trace the seeker's cheeks
Signs through which the soul's sincerity speaks

In each drop an ocean of wisdom contained
Knowledge lost in speech in silence regained

For how often words serve the vilest ends
While silence's eloquence

To life's beauty attends

Afifa Alam Raisa⁴

A Prayer for Justice

Lord of Musa, O Lord of mine,
Lord of July's burning sky,
What hymn shall sing your praise on Earth?
What words shall bleed from an ailing heart?

When the air stung with Pharaoh's sins
And demons stomped on Dhaka's ribs,
Your Decree was near, O Al-Muqsit.

When tears mingled with Nahr An-Nil
And the nation of Bengal fell at Your Feet,
You knew it all, O Al-Baseer.

For the children of Yaqub, You parted the sea;
From the fang of tyrants, You set us free.
Glory be to You, O Almighty.

Let Your Mercy dye the ashened streets
And Justice humble the defiant beasts.
In awe of You, let the world bow down;
Your Grace we beseech, O Ar-Rahman.

⁴ Afifa Alam Raisa is the chief editor of Other Words.

Abu Maryam Gous⁵

XYZ

Fearless on the path to success

and the Ambition to be....x, y and zee.

When there's only one place to be...

The destination is set,

so where else will you be....

Contentment at the realisation

of the world that be.....

Calmness on the sea

The path that lead to where peace be within me....

⁵ Abu Maryam Gous. Son of an immigrant. Loves to contribute to world peace and betterment of society. Novice at writing his thoughts and feelings. A conservative muslim with a BSc in Local Government & Public Sector Management. Passionate about education and lives by the motto 'we live and learn, and we learn some more, there is no end to learning.'

Final

Whose country?

Yours, mine?

Ours?

What is the duration of our occupation

An earth deserving ovation

The nomadic shifting in motion

The limbs final destination

What is there?

look carefully, My G.

We occupy a particular space at any given time

as though drifting and hovering until our time comes to an end.

That very same space, will be occupied by another.

The shift in our residency, is like that of the nomads

moving from space to space.

Never remaining in the same place forever.....

Shade of Light

Dormant under the shade of light
Crying out in plain sight
Ambushed in the fright of the night
Dwelling in the dark from the blasts of the past
Engulfed while the past still trails in pursuit
hot on the heels....give it an elbow
To break on through to the other side
Let in the light to glide through the future
Taking the steps yet little do we know
what is in store? not to know will suffice
for the calmness to restore.

Hisham Hauari⁶

To Write

To write is to enter a zone of the mind

Where things are reflected back to us in kind.

Where the essence of things is not hidden from view

But come out of the darkness for whoever is true.

Like sparks from a flint that dazzle and die,

Until a fire is lit and reveals to the eye

What was hidden before and bothered us much.

To write is like what the hand is to touch.

The labours of men whatever they are

Seem from writing to be as far as a star.

In times when great grief and confusion abounds

Words in their silence make such harmonious sounds.

To write is to read with the heart of a child;

To tame all the aspects foreign and wild.

To search once again in that innocent space

For the child we once were inside of God's grace.

⁶ Hisham Hauari is a passionate poet, writer, and devoted reader who draws inspiration and comfort from the world of books. With a deep love for storytelling, he has authored a wide range of works, from engaging short stories to heartfelt poetry. Currently, he is working on a new poetic piece that explores the rich and intricate fabric of human history.

The Student of Cairo

He woke up and found the sun already shining into his room. Nothing unusual, you might think, about that. But for the student who was now rubbing his eyes, it could not have been more unusual. He had slept through the call to the morning prayer. How it had happened he could not tell. He had gone to bed at his usual time and without feeling unwell, even saying the regular supplications to ward off the devils who come to trouble a believer's sleep. No, he could not find a reason for it, and without dwelling upon it, he stood up and walked over to the sink in the corner of his room to make his ablution.

After offering the two units of the missed prayer, he remained seated and sought Allah's help that such lapses would remain few and far between. Moving over to sit on the tired-looking cushion beside him, he reached into a bag that was hanging on the wall. He took from the bag a handful of dates and, without looking at them, began to put one after another into his mouth. As he chewed, he picked up some of the pieces of paper that were on the floor and began to read. Usually, he would be too preoccupied trying to memorize what was written to notice the lack of any satisfaction that he took from this routine and stale repast. But today, however, he felt angry about it for the first time.

Now, the students' parents were both very poor. The small farm on which they lived and worked barely provided for all their needs. The student's mother had long since taken to weaving baskets to sell at market in order to pay her son's fees and send him barely enough to feed him. The only hope that remained was that Allah would reward them for a life spent in devotion and that their son might take up a teaching position in the city.

The student, who ordinarily paid little attention to the other students in his class, found himself absorbed today by the group of well-to-do boys who sat at the back of the classroom in order to better avoid the attention of the tutor. Coming as they invariably did from the most important families, they saw little point in exerting themselves to achieve what their birthright had already vouchsafed them.

The student, suddenly conscious of his old and worn-out clothes, now gazed with unfamiliar envy upon their soft-looking robes and embroidered sashes. His own sleeves had almost reached his elbows, and the hem of his underpants now sat way higher than the mandatory limits of the ankles, which

was the tradition of the Prophet. If that was not sorry enough, the torn soles of his shoes now made his feet recoil from the cold hard floor as he compared them to the felted slippers swinging languorously from those more privileged feet.

As if startled by his envy, the student forced his attention back to the front of the class, where the teacher was elaborating on a matter of jurisprudence.

'Don't you want to be like them?' he heard a voice say.

At first he thought the words had come from one of the students sitting on either side of him. But when he looked at them, he saw that both were diligently copying out what the teacher was writing on the board.

'Go to the market and see what you're missing.' The voice came again.

This time it was clear to the student that the voice either belonged to a devil or that his own mind was somehow responsible. In response to the first possibility, he began at once to supplicate, invoking Allah's help against the evil insinuations that he himself had perhaps foolishly indulged. The voice was no longer heard. He breathed a sigh of relief and began trying to concentrate on the subject being delivered almost mechanically by the tutor. Try as he might, he could not get the event of the voice out of his mind. Little by little, his thoughts drowned out the teacher's voice until all he could hear was his own inner voice prompting questions that he felt had to be answered one way or another. 'What harm would it do,' he whispered to himself, 'to go to the market and just look around?' Perhaps an opportunity awaited him there, an opportunity beyond the same religious instruction day in, day out. 'I will go!' he said to himself, drawing the confused attention of those in the room who watched him as he got up and left.

On the occasions that he ventured into the crowded streets, he would lower his gaze and avoid the various temptations that assailed a believer everywhere. In fact, so rigid was his adherence to this habit that he was constantly rebuked for not looking where he was going. But now his resolve was not so strong, and little by little, his eyes alighted with impish boldness at all manner of sights, permissible and prohibited alike. He came to stop by a tailor's shop, where the proprietor was busy sewing together pieces of fabric.

'Salaam!' The student said, watching the man working away diligently.

'Salaam,' the tailor replied, quickly appraising the student and returning to his work.

'I would like some new clothes,' the student said, rather naively.

'And what will you use to pay for them?' The tailor said, still sewing away as he looked back up at the student.

'Money, of course,' the student said, politely. 'Although I do not have any at the moment. But I will pay you as soon as some comes my way,' he added earnestly.

'And what is it that you do?'

'I am a student at the university.'

'Not much opportunity of making money there,' the tailor said, thinking he was just being realistic.

'Not really,' said the student, 'I only have a small remittance, but I can surely find some work to do here in the market. Perhaps you are in need of some help.'

'What kind of work have you done in the past?'

'I have milked cows and goats and done all manner of farm work.'

'I'm afraid the only cows and goats I have are the ones that end up on my dinner table,' the tailor politely reposed.

'They have you so locked up in that university that you can't see the world has changed. Forget all that religious education,' the tailor said adamantly, putting his needle down and now sounding paternalistic. 'Prayer, fasting... that's all anybody needs to know. You must first make something of yourself in this world.'

This last remark of the tailor echoed inside the student's mind, suddenly making him reconsider his future.

'To do that, you must become rich,' the tailor went on.

'How long does it take you to become rich?'

'Many years!' The tailor said, basking a little in the influence he was having on the student.

'But I must have money right away.'

'If it's only new clothes you want to buy,' the tailor said, feeling a little sorry for the student, 'you can try the moneylender a few shops down, but you must know that he doesn't give it away and will want something in return.'

A few doors down in the moneylender's shop

'Salaam,' the student said, entering the dreary-looking kiosk where an old man was sitting strangely idle. 'I need money.'

'Everybody needs money,' the old man said, his voice not much more than a whisper and strangely familiar to the student. 'But the real question is, how much money do you need?'

'Oh, I think I will need quite a lot. For I was told it is better to have too much than too little.'

'I can give you as much money as you want,' said the old man, standing up, but still looking rather short. 'But what will you give me in return?'

'I don't have much,' the student replied honestly. 'I am only a poor student living at the university.'

'In that case,' the old moneylender said with an odd sense of relish, 'you won't mind if I take one thing of my choosing from your room, and in return, I will give you more money than you will ever need.'

'But I really don't have much,' the student reiterated. 'Only what you see with me now, and back in my room, there is nothing more than an old pillow, some bedding, and a few utensils.'

'If you accept the terms, then sign here,' said the old man, producing a ledger from the drawer and handing the student a pen. 'Otherwise, you must

excuse me, for I am very busy; you wouldn't believe how many people these days are looking to get their hands quickly on some money.'

'I will sign,' the student said, seeing nothing in the agreement that would be disadvantageous to him.

'Then I will come with you to your lodging at once,' said the moneylender, who quickly closed the ledger before returning it to the drawer. He ushered the student out into the street, where the two of them soon began walking.

'Will you not close your shop first?'

'Oh, I don't keep any money on the premises.'

'That is better, I guess,' said the student, astonished at how fast the moneylender walked for a man of his age and height.

When they arrived at the student's lodging, the moneylender looked around at the sparsely decorated room. The only things one could immediately see for the taking were those things that the student had mentioned. The moneylender looked at the faded leather cushion on the floor, whose shade of red was like a bloodstain on the floor.

'I told you... I do not have much,' the student said, wondering if the loan would still be forthcoming.

'You were honest,' the moneylender said, 'which is more than I can say for most of those I deal with. But a contract is a contract, and I will find something to take with me.'

Just then the moneylender's eyes fell upon an oval piece of wood hanging above the sink.

'What is that?' he asked, curiously excited.

'It's an old mirror given to me by my mother,' replied the student. 'But I prefer not to see my reflection, so I turn it to face the wall.'

'Honest and without vanity too,' the moneylender said almost to himself (as he whispered when he spoke, it was hard to tell whether or not he was

talking to himself all the time). 'I wonder how our paths ever crossed,' he added, turning the mirror around on the rusted nail that kept it on the wall. 'That's more like it!' he said, fixing the mirror so that the student's reflection was neatly framed within it like a photograph. 'Now I have what I came for,' he added, smiling malevolently and pointing with his cane to the pile of gold that now appeared on the floor.

The student, stunned by both the sudden appearance of the gold and his fully grown reflection now standing beside him, stepped back from both in a fit of horror.

'What magic is this!' the student cried out.

'No magic!' The moneylender replied calmly. 'Simply the transaction we agreed to. You have your gold, and I have something from your room. It is only your reflection, which you said you would prefer not to see.'

'Still, it's not what I expected,' said the student, gazing at the gold on the floor as the moneylender left the room with his reflection.

Alone now with the pile of gold, the student quickly began to see things in its seductive light. He told himself that a reflection was not of much use anyway and that it was far better to have the money instead. His thoughts then turned to how he might hide so much gold. It was plainly too much to carry around with him, what with so many robbers roaming the streets.

'The cushion!' he said to himself out loud. 'No one will think of looking in there for anything.'

Poking his finger inside a small hole in the cushion, he made it large enough to put the coins inside, a few at a time. When he had finished, remembering to leave out a few coins for purposes of that day, he sewed up the gap with the needle and thread that his mother had given him to fix the holes in his clothes.

Deciding not to return to his lessons that day, the student made haste back to the market. Arriving at the tailor's shop, he found the same man busy at work on what appeared to be the same piece of cloth.

'Salaam,' the student said.

'Well, salaam,' the tailor responded in kind. 'I presume you found the moneylender yesterday?'

'Yes!' The student said excitedly.

'And he gave you some money?'

'Quite a bit actually,' the student said, with some reservation.

'Good!' The tailor remarked, as though he were pleased both for the student and himself. 'Now, do you see anything that you like?'

'Yes,' the student answered right away. 'That green cloth up there; I would like something in that color.'

'The Prophet's color!' The tailor said, reaching up for the roll and then spreading it out on the counter.

'Yes, I will take this one,' the student said, feeling the softness of the cloth between his fingers and making up his mind.

'You're not going to ask how much?'

'How much?'

'For you,' the tailor said, 'twenty!'

'I will give you eighty if you have it ready by the morning,' the student said, reaching into his bag and producing one of the gold coins.

'I will start work on it immediately!' The tailor said, turning the coin over and over in his hand and wondering what the student, who looked so poor, had given the moneylender in return. 'I just need some measurements.'

The student stood still as the tailor measured him using the tape he took from around his neck. In a few strokes of his hand, the tailor had all the measurements he needed.

'Where can I find a good leathersmith?' the student asked, turning back around as he left the tailor's shop.

'Just keep on going straight,' the tailor shouted back, putting his hand on his heart to indicate a fond farewell to the student.

From the leathersmith, the student picked out a shade of rose-coloured leather and instructed him on the manufacture of a new bag and slippers. As with the tailor, the student was willing to pay above the asking price if the work could be carried out quickly. The realization that money could bend time easily to the purposes of those who possessed enough of it was impressed upon the student. Passing by a perfumery, he was seduced inside by a strong scent that made him quiver with delightful emotions.

All the way back to his lodgings, the student could think of little else but the gold left hidden in his lodgings. With his mind racing between the many things he could now afford to buy, he scarcely paid attention to the call to prayer that echoed across the city. Going against the flow of worshippers who hurried into the various mosques, the student decided instead to return to his room where he could offer the prayer after checking that the gold was still there.

The next morning, the student again woke up to find the sun shining brightly in his room, but instead of taking himself to task for having once more missed the morning prayer, he immediately remembered the gold coins still hidden away in the pillow. Not before offering the morning prayer, however, he sat down on the floor beside the pillow, which had remained securely under his head during the night. Looking out of the window, the student thought about the farm where his parents were at that very moment, toiling under the hot sun. He congratulated himself on the decision to use his new wealth to bring them to live with him in the city. And looking down at the scatter of students in the courtyard below, he already felt like he no longer belonged to them.

Some weeks later

Arriving at the hotel for the first time, the student was met with bows of respect as he walked into the lobby. The bellboy, taking the student's luggage, escorted him to the desk where the student inquired about the best room available. After being told that a suite was available on the top floor of the hotel, the student signed the ledger and continued to follow the bellboy who had been given a key by the desk clerk. When they arrived at the tenth floor, the bellboy led the student down the long corridor until he put the bags down beside a big

set of double doors. He took the key from his pocket and opened the door, carrying the bags inside and putting them down again on the soft carpet.

'I hope you enjoy your stay with us,' the bellboy said, who stood patiently, waiting for a small token of the student's appreciation.

'I think I will,' the student replied, putting a coin into the boy's hand.

The room was magnificently decorated, and to the student at least, it seemed as if he had already died and gone to paradise. In the bedroom, beside the huge bed, he suddenly came to a stop next to the huge dressing mirror that reflected back to him the view from the window. Remembering the events of that day with the moneylender, he wondered if perhaps his reflection had not been permanently removed but only loaned for the moneylender's strange purposes. To his dread, however, he was met with no reflection as he stepped in front of the glass. In order to not be reminded of his predicament, he turned the mirror to the wall. Feeling somewhat tired, he lay down on the bed and fell quickly into a deep sleep.

That evening, the student woke up and had a late supper in the hotel restaurant. Eating much more than he was accustomed to and not feeling particularly sleepy, he decided to go for a walk. Not really knowing his way around the city, he soon found himself lost on a dark and deserted street. Suddenly, he heard the cries of someone who sounded like they were being attacked. The student followed the sounds of the commotion to an alleyway, where he saw two men furiously beating on a third.

'Police! Police!' The student cried out, scaring off one of the assailants.

The other, paying no attention at first, carried on viciously beating the man on the floor until he realized he had been left to face the approaching figure alone. The student, out of breath, looked down and saw a young man whose head was covered by his arms.

'They've gone,' the student said. 'I don't think they will come back now that there are two of us,' he added confidently.

When the young man removed his arms, the student could see that his face was badly bruised and bleeding.

'How badly are you hurt?' the student asked.

'Not so badly,' the young man replied, sitting up against the wall and lifting his knees to rest his arms. 'Just a little shaken up, really. They took me by surprise,' he went on, pressing his hand against the wet patches of blood on his face.

'Try to stand,' the student said, taking hold of the young man carefully by the arm.

'I'll be fine,' the young man said, using the student as support to get up. 'Really.'

'No, not really,' the student demurred. 'I'll make sure you get home safely first. We can share a taxi. In fact, I was lost... Still lost,' the student added, looking around.

'I'm afraid they took all my money,' the young man said.

'Oh, don't worry about that.'

'I'll make sure you get it back,' the young man said adamantly.

After a short ride, the taxi stopped in front of a large gate, where a guard was on duty. The student stepped out of the taxi with the young man but stopped short of following him to the gate.

'Listen,' said the young man, who now had some grip on the shock that he was still suffering from. 'I really appreciate what you did for me tonight. As a way of showing my gratitude, I'd like to invite you for breakfast tomorrow... if you don't have any plans.'

'No, I don't have any plans,' the student replied, happy at the thought.

'Good!' The young man said, equally pleased. 'See you tomorrow.'

'See you tomorrow!' The student said, opening the passenger door and getting back inside the taxi.

The student came back to the house the next morning.

In the light of the day, he saw just how big the house was. The garden's white walls, over which hung the branches of palm trees and an effulgence of variously coloured flowers, concealed all but the roof of the house, which could be seen in the distance. The guard from the night before recognised the student and waved him through the gate, which was now wide open. When the student approached the house, the young man was already standing at the big blue door that revealed a large interior.

'It's good to see you,' the young man said, coming closer and taking the student affectionately by the arm. 'We're having breakfast in the conservatory.'

Arriving at the back of the house, the student saw an older man sitting alone at the table. He was large around the middle and wore a dark-coloured three-piece suit, which made him resemble a spider in the latticework of steel and glass that surrounded him like a web.

'Father!' the young man said, waiting patiently for a response from the man who was grossly absorbed in the papers shuffling back and forth in his hands.

'Welcome!' the man replied, looking up, relieved to have an excuse to put the papers down. 'We're so grateful for what you did for my son,' he continued.

'Thank you, sir,' the student said. 'But I really didn't do much.'

'Well, I'm sure my son would be in a much worse state if you hadn't done what you did. Please, sit down,' the man said more jovially. 'I don't know about you, but I am hungry!'

'You have a beautiful house,' the student said, looking around at the endlessly captivating objects on display.

'Perk of the job,' the man said, almost with humility. 'It was built for one of my old British predecessors, and say what we might about them, the British have a taste for fine things that is conspicuous in its moderation. So what is it that you do?'

'At the moment I am looking for somewhere to invest some money I have inherited.'

'What a coincidence,' the man said, coming forward a little across the table. 'I am about to embark on a little venture myself, and I am in need of a partner I can trust.'

'But with all due respect, sir,' the student interrupted, 'you have only just met me.'

'You have saved my son's life. What better credentials can anyone put forward!' he said, convinced, as though he were used to answering his own questions.

'Of course, I would be grateful,' the student said, retreating. 'I know as much about investment as I do about flying an aeroplane.'

'I am the one who should be grateful. Now, I bet you're curious about what the investment is. Well, let me tell you—oranges! Yes, oranges,' the man went on excitedly. 'Egyptian oranges to be precise!'

'Oranges?' The student asked, trying to remember the last time he had tasted one.

'Do you know that Egyptian oranges are the best in the world?' said the man proudly. "And owing to our superb climate, we can grow them all year round.'

'I did not know that,' the student said humbly.

'Yes!' The man went on in the same spirit of enthusiasm. 'In fact, a twenty-acre orchard on which there are two thousand five hundred trees, each producing 100 lbs, will add up to 250,000 lbs of oranges.'

'That's a lot of oranges,' the student remarked.

'Not only that! It's a very tidy profit as well.'

As the student and the man continued their discussion about how huge sums of money could be made from oranges, a young woman came into the conservatory and interrupted them. She threw her long, slender arms around the man and kissed him on the part of his head that was completely bald.

'Father!' the young woman almost purred. 'Do you mind if I take the car this morning?'

'Honey,' the man replied. 'Mahmood will drive you wherever you need to go.'

'But father,' she protested calmly. 'I want to drive myself.'

'I don't see the point in having a driver if everybody insists on driving himself,' the man said, genuinely indignant that the sense of it, if it existed, had continued to elude him.

'Is this the young man who saved my brother's skin?' She said, her victory over her father already assured.

'Yes,' the man said, squeezing the young woman's arm lovingly.

'I was outnumbered!' said the young man in his defence.

'What were you doing there at that time anyway?' The young woman chastised him.

'Mother being away for a few days doesn't mean I need a replacement,' the young man retorted.

'Well, anyway,' she said, looking across the table at the young man who was clearly smitten but incredibly shy.

'I thank you for bringing him safely home to us. And Father, Mother wants you to invite him to dinner, as she is going to be back late from her meeting in Alexandria.'

'Excellent idea!' the man said. 'We can continue our discussion, and you can try our cook's superb stuffed pigeon. But now I must get back to work,' he added, gathering up the papers from the chair beside him and leaving the table, where the young man and student were still eating.

Some months later

'I had a good feeling about you right away,' said the man, leaning over to the student who was seated to his right at the dinner table. 'And now that you're about to become a part of this family, I can say I am a happy man indeed,' he added, squeezing the hand of the elegantly dressed woman to his left.

'Of course, you will live here with us,' the woman said, smiling at her daughter whose face was lit up with joy. 'There's plenty of room, even for grandchildren,' she added cheerfully.

'God willing, there will be plenty of those!' the man said audaciously, showing a full set of teeth as he smiled at his prospective son-in-law.

The student's family was not present at the wedding. From his first day at the house, the student had been reticent about his true background and preferred instead to tell them that he had been raised as an orphan by a rich uncle. As to the matter of his conscience, he believed that a generous sum of money, together with a letter telling his parents of a long passage overseas, would buy him some time to remedy this necessary but temporary fiction.

With the wedding over, the newly married couple retired to their bedroom. As the student sat on the bed watching his bride brush her long black hair, he could not believe how fortunate he had become. His marriage to the governor's daughter and the lucrative investment he had made assured him of an even happier future to come. But just at the moment when his future seemed unassailable, he had not noticed that his wife had turned the mirror she held in her hand in order to look at him. Seeing no reflection of her husband in the glass, she let out a scream of such intensity that it froze the student to the spot. Realising what had happened, he grabbed the clothes from the chair beside him and threw them out of the window before climbing out of it and leaping onto the grass below. He then ran as fast as he could toward the gate, and pushing it open, continued running into the night.

The Mountain of Gold

'It is a strange tale, Captain,' said the man lying on the bed as the sea swayed the ship from side to side. The captain, eager to hear the man's story, poured himself a drink and sat down on the chair behind which, through the large gallery window, the grey clouds loomed heavily. 'The ship I was travelling on was smashed to pieces by a storm. How I managed to survive is a mystery to me, but I woke up to find myself adrift in one of the rescue boats. Having no instruments with me, I tried my best to navigate using the position of the sun during the day and by the stars at night. With little food or water, I had to find land quickly or perish out there all alone.'

The captain listened attentively, without interrupting the mariner as he told his tale with as much veracity as possible.

'On the third day, to my unspeakable joy,' said the mariner, 'I saw the tip of a mountain rising in the distance. As I rowed closer, I cast my eyes over the bleakest and most barren land I have ever seen. If you will allow me a moment to describe it, Captain, it made one think of some carbuncled creature from a mythical age, half-submerged in the sea. What vegetation there was grew sparsely, spread between the rocks of many different shapes and sizes. I secured the boat and ventured further inland, not holding out much hope for any further change in my fortunes. As I walked, the rocky ground grew steep and led me to a craggy plateau. Up ahead, the dark, gloomy mountain rose up with its point aimed like a spike against the sky. Coming closer, I noticed that there was an entrance whose features and size did not look entirely of nature's making. From inside the cavernous darkness, I suddenly heard the sound of jingling growing slowly louder as it echoed outside. I stopped where I was. Having no means of self-defence other than my bare hands, I readied myself for an attack. What came out of the mountain was a sight so strange that I wondered if I had not begun to take leave of my senses. The sound of jingling was just that. But the rest I will describe presently. Walking towards me was a man of old age, completely covered from head to toe in what I can only say were various items made of gold. If I may pause my story here for a while, Captain, and remark that every inch of him was covered in gold. Even his skin shone gold from some lacquer that I could only surmise had been applied to it by some strange manner of art. His closet, including the heavy mantle, was entirely made of gold cloth. Around his neck were loops and loops of gold necklaces that made his breast shine like that of a griffin. Gold rings of every mould decorated his fingers and

thumbs, and on his head sat a band with a gold disc, which seemed to shine in place of the sun that was nowhere to be seen. Around his waist, suspended from a golden girdle, were pouches in which the coins that I had heard were gathered.'

'To my relief,' the mariner said, sitting himself up a little on the bed, 'there was one small part of him that was not covered in gold. The place I speak of, you may well have guessed, Captain, was his eyes; although because of this, their grey, terrified pallor was all the more striking. He appeared to struggle in his efforts to move, carrying such treasure on his person, and it was perhaps to this end that he carried an oversized staff that also appeared to be made from solid gold. When he saw me standing there, he stopped at about the same distance that separates you from me.'

'Are you friend or foe?' He said to me, in a voice that boomed out like a sound made when one strikes an empty vessel.

'Friend,' I replied. 'If you mean me no harm.'

'You imagine on account of my appearance,' he replied imperiously, 'that I possess some awful power?'

'Do you?' I replied, having no belief in such things.

'I once thought so,' he then said, a tone of lamentation creeping into his words.

'Are you some sort of a king?' I asked him.

'A king once raised to a god in my people's eyes,' he said as though some terrible caution now haunted him. 'I was master over all,' he went on. 'My desire only had to be uttered for it to be gratified.'

'But I see nothing here,' I said to him, looking around at the rocks that were so numerous that they resembled waves lifted up by a storm.

'What you cannot see is beneath your very feet,' he replied. Under the rocks lie buried the remains of a magnificent city and the thousands of souls who once walked its streets.'

'How is that possible?' I asked, unable to comprehend such complete destruction.

'First you must promise me,' he said, 'that if I tell you my tale, you will not take so much as a rock with you off this island.' He went on, looking deep into my eyes, as if to see what the true cast of my answer would be. 'Everything here is cursed and will remain so until the end of time.' He went on, seemingly believing every word of it to be true.

'Of course, Captain, being a man like yourself of enlightened education, I believed no word of it, although it was far from concluded by what strange circumstance he had arrived on this inhospitable crater. I assured him that I would comply with his condition, and once hearing his reply, he began immediately to relate his story...'

'There used to be trees as tall as ships everywhere on this island,' he said, looking across the empty sky. We were a people who suffered much persecution and poverty. Having no choice, we fled our lands and committed ourselves to a fate upon the seas in search of a safer place to live. We were guided to this island, and in a short space of time, we built a safe and prosperous city. Such was the spirit of cooperation and humility amongst us that we seemed to have achieved the impossible state of making everybody happy. No hunger or fear visited us, and no one desired anything for himself that he did not wish for others. All that changed the day I found a secret entrance into this mountain. What I discovered there would slowly turn the happiness of our lives into a misery far worse than the one we had fled.'

'What was in the mountain?' I asked, regretting that I had interrupted him and shown a lack of self-discipline.

'Is it so hard to guess?' He asked, almost mockingly.

'Gold!' I answered quickly, as if to amend my standing in his eyes.

'So much gold!' He said, shaking the pouches on his girdle as if to underscore the quantities he meant. 'Before long, we had taken so much gold from the mountain that we paved the streets with it. With this wealth, a few of us soon became distinct from the others, and I, seeing the discovery as mine alone, maneuvered to make myself the master of the mine. With so much gold, we were able to buy anything our hearts desired. Merchants came from far and

wide to sell us their goods, and with them too came others from across the sea with only the clothes upon their backs. Alongside great extravagance, there was poverty, and the more gold that came out of the mine, the more acute this contrast became. People no longer felt safe, and cooperation turned to suspicion until the rich and the poor lived like two armies camped on separate sides of the city.

Some rose up violently, and in defense of our lives, we punished them without mercy. Others took heed and considered it better to suffer rather than risk a similar fate.

Soon the competition between the rich to possess as much as possible drove the value of everything up well beyond the means of many. With despair in the air, it soon entered everybody's heart and slowly made them mad with fear. As for me, the master of the mine, I had grown rich beyond the dreams of even Midas, and I lived like a rare bird in a golden cage, fawned upon and admired by all. I soon began to cast everything in the gold that piled up around me. Every article, from my clothing to my toilette to the utensils I used to eat, was now fashioned from some manner of gold, until matters reached the extent that you see standing before you now. I was worshipped as a god, and my indifference to the suffering around me was worthy of one...'

'He then stopped his tale, Captain, and seemed to look off into the horizon with an almost tearful gaze replacing the terror-stricken stare.'

'Then one day,' he said, picking up the thread of his story, 'the mountain began to shake violently. Those inside the mines were the first to perish, but soon everyone was buried where he tried to flee. Convinced that I had some power over the mountain, I came here and raised my arms, commanding it to stop! And although the stones continued to fall, I managed to make it safely inside, where I have remained ever since...'

'I took this as the end of his tale, and a terrible pity suddenly seized me. I could not leave him to die, although I suspected that he had prepared himself and perhaps desired such a fate. When I insisted that he come with me to the boat, he protested and said that I had broken my promise. I told him that he could not expect me to just leave him there and that in my shoes he would do the same. Then, to my surprise, he acquiesced and followed me back down the path towards the shore. I helped him onto the boat and pushed it out into the

rough waters before jumping onboard. Perhaps owing to his company, I felt confident that we would find a ship travelling nearby. He sat quietly at the front of the boat, having said nothing for the entire time that I rowed us further and further out. And then he suddenly spoke, 'I have not told you the worst part of the story,' he said with his gaze lowered. Had I found another mountain of gold, I would have done the same thing all over again; and yet I ask myself,' he went on, looking up and straight at me, as though expecting no answer to come. 'What makes me think that it would be any different?'

It was then, Captain, that I noticed the pool of water growing around his feet.

'What have you done?' I said to him, realising that we were too far from the shore to make it back inside the boat.

'This time it is what you have done,' he said sternly. 'I told you the island was cursed and everything on it.'

'I had no choice, Captain, but to abandon the boat and him inside it. Swimming back to the shore, I turned around one last time and watched as he sank into the sea, and the band with its gold disc was all that remained, floating like a setting sun upon the waves. It was then that I saw your ship through the mist and swam towards it.'

'We will soon be in port,' the captain said, 'where you will remain my guest on shore. For now, rest and treat my cabin as your home.'

Closing the door to the cabin where the mariner slept, the captain walked over to his large desk and took out a key from his pocket. He turned it slowly in the brass lock and pulled the drawer open. With a smile on his face, he gazed down at the crown with its shiny gold disc reflecting the light. And closing the drawer, he returned the key to his pocket as he listened to the faint sound of thunder.

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf⁷

Thriller Dogs

I grew up fearing dogs. Most Malaysian Malay Muslims grow up fearing dogs. As we lived abroad in a dog-loving country like New Zealand, Kiwis found our behaviour odd—at the sight of a dog, we would be shrieking, “A dog!” Or for no reason, we would start running away from it. Naturally, even the dog would find this peculiar and start chasing us. More shrieks.

This is my dog story. My thriller dog story while living in New Zealand as a young adult, out of Malaysia for the first time. I was 19 (with the mind of a 14-year-old), young and excited to experience new things. Some people might be afraid, but I had my group of girlfriends, on a government scholarship to study and return to Malaysia to change the world. We were brave. We were bold. Until that afternoon stroll by the lake in the city, where we had to spend two months to further refine our English before being placed in high schools all over New Zealand. This was a part of the Malaysian-New Zealand government education pact.

It was a fine day. Still early summer. The air was breezy as it touched our youthful but childlike faces. Ruzy, Azah, Azura, Kamsuri, and I decided to spend our Saturday afternoon going on a walk by the Hamilton Lake, not far from the youth hostel we were at. Hamilton Lake was also known as Rotorua Lake, home to the Hamilton Yacht Club. If we were not playing tennis, we would cook or watch television at our YWCA dorm on Pembroke Street, Hamilton. In the 80s, mobile phones or the internet were not yet common. There was not much to do, and it was still our early days. We missed our families. We missed *roti canai, nasi lemak*.

“Let’s go out for a walk.” Someone more bored than any of us four put together would have randomly said that. Maybe it was me.

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Three of us were wearing *sarongs*. So proud of our local *batik*. Our tops were ‘designers.’ Short-sleeved cotton. Mine was striped. Blue and white. Possibly then from Globe Silk Store. Or Mun Loong. They were considered designers by poor youths like us. The big foreign brands had not made it to Malaysia yet. Expensive malls had not sprawled like they do today. And Singapore felt so distant then. Only for the rich. If we took a trip, it would only be to buy apples or canned lychees in Woodlands.

Azah and Azura could be wearing skirts. Or maxis. Maxis were trending then. So were hot pants. But that afternoon, we were decent. After all, the Malay boys were also in residence at the youth hostel. Our legs were *haram* for boys to see. Our *ustazah* taught us this and reminded us before we left to live in a faraway and foreign land.

So as our gang of five was busy gossiping and laughing, Azah suddenly saw a sinister-looking woman, apparently in her late 40s, dirty and potentially smelly with her dog. She looked like a homeless person. But her dog was unmistakably huge and looked leery. A German Shepherd would be easily excited and nervous if poorly trained. As the lady walked closer to us, our natural instinct was to run. And that was what we did. In our *sarongs*. In our maxis. Our skirts. Whatever. We had to run to save our legs (my thoughts then). And the dog, although on a leash, started chasing us, and the woman indulged herself in letting her dog run after us. Luckily, she never let go of the leash. There was a time when I was left cornered by the dog and the crazy woman. I panicked and froze. Time stood still. And so did my brain till I heard Ruzy (or was it Azura?) yelling at me, “Freda, jump!” I was at someone’s garden, a bit raised from the sidewalk. I jumped and started running like I never did at any school sport events. And the gang was reunited again in that afternoon marathon. We ran across the road. The crazy woman and her crazy dog did too. We took a left turn. The crazy woman with her dog did too. We took right. They took right. Then we saw an emergency door with a glass door. A staircase leading to civilisation where we heard voices. We hid ourselves behind the glass door. We could see the crazy woman’s eyes roaming, looking for us. Her dog continued to be excited. As they came closer to the glass door, we raced up the staircase. It was a maternity ward. A hospital. One of the nurses was surprised to see us, like we had been abused or something. One of us spoke and briefed her about what happened. In tears. And we asked if we could call Mrs. T, our caretaker at the Youth Hostel, a motherly figure to us and the group. I think she

liked Malaysian youths. Always happy, bright, and hungry. She would not mind coming to our rescue.

She picked us up and gave us something warm to drink in the kitchen. By the time we retired to our dorms, we were still much affected by the day's event. It was already dark by the time our caretaker brought us back from the hospital. Thanks to Thriller Dog No. 1.

After the two-month English crash programme in Hamilton, the group dispersed to assigned schools all over New Zealand to sit for the University Entrance Exam, but we had to spend a year at a high school. Each of us was given a foster family to live with during this period. I guess the idea was to get us immersed in the local culture and be exposed to a different way of life. My foster family was a young one with two young children. And an overly friendly dog. It would come sniffing and wanting to be close to me. It was difficult to explain why I disliked dogs, but gradually they understood my fear. But the first night I was there, I woke up to Musky breathing heavily on my bed. I cannot remember if I had shrieked that famous "See dog, I shriek." Thriller Dog No. 2 was not so bad. I managed it.

Bicycling to school was no joke if you kept being chased by a crazy dog every time you passed by this other neighbouring house. I remember the dog was biting my jeans as I kicked and tried to pedal the bicycle at the same time. The things I did for my country! And soon I got over Thriller Dog No. 3. Passed my university entrance exam and moved north. Back in Hamilton again for my tertiary education. Barking dogs were still everywhere. Often with lonely, scary-looking women who would always accuse me of trespassing in their home (one of which I climbed over a fence for a shortcut to my university). One unforgettable elderly, apparently mentally unstable lady would bring her fierce dog and give me a good scolding for trespassing on her path (shared with other people living in a row of apartments). The following semester, I moved to an apartment (we called it a flat in NZ) closer to my university. Dog-free. Hence, the end of any thriller dog story.

Many friends in New Zealand often asked the rationale of us being so afraid of dogs. I mentioned culture earlier, but like cultures, any cultural belief or behaviour would stem from religion. I am a Sunni Muslim, and Sunni Islam is Islam's largest religious denomination. The word *Sunni* came from the word *Sunnah* (the way or the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, *pbu**h*).

Islam's attitude towards dogs depends on the context. In the context of dogs as God's creations, they must be treated kindly and humanely; there are clear hadith on this. Stories of a prostitute whose sins were forgiven by Allah for saving a dying dog from thirst by her giving it water. Stories of the seven virtuous young men seeking refuge in a cave to safeguard their faith from oppressive and cruel rulers—they brought along their dog with them. These narratives are often seen as how it is permissible to own a dog and be kind to it. Yet, there are other hadith that point out dogs are permissible for guarding or hunting purposes, and it is considered dirty to have them indoors. Dogs are also sometimes seen as disease carriers, especially through their saliva. In the Quran, Allah has likened deviant people who rejected guidance and signs from Allah to dogs: if you chase it away, it pants; and if you leave it, it still pants (Quran, al A'raf: 175-6).

With these cultural and religious backgrounds of how Islam sees dogs, most Sunni Muslims choose one version of the dog story: it is bad and dirty. It would take great learning and much reading to know and embrace Islam as a religion of peace and harmony, not only in its relationship with the Creator but with the created as well, including animals and the whole environment.

It was my encounter with the Other that I started to take my religion seriously. My dog encounters in New Zealand had triggered much curiosity from my non-Malaysian, non-Muslim friends about my religion. Growing up as a born Muslim, my Islamicity was more about doing religious rituals (praying five times a day, fasting in Ramadan, giving charity to the poor, etc.) than an in-depth understanding of why things were as instructed by Allah. The five years spent in New Zealand were necessary for my growth, not only my intellectual growth but also my spiritual growth. I found Islam in New Zealand. There were so many questions asked of it that I could not answer. Simple things like, *Why are you afraid of dogs? Why can't you eat pork? What makes your religion right and ours not so?*

If you do not read, reflect, discuss, debate, and seek from those who know, you will be lost. Sucked into the argument that you just follow your faith blindly. And naturally, you would feel embarrassed to be a Muslim or a Muslimah. Some of my friends “fell” into this identity crisis hole. It would be okay if such a crisis made them stronger. Or happier. Are they stronger? And happier?

I often wonder as they totally disappeared from my radar.



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