



Other Words

Volume 3, Issue 2

An International Journal of Creative Writing

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This journal is published by ILS Press,
part of the Islamic Literary Society.
Website: www.islamicliterarysociety.com
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Published in July 2026,
Volume 3, Issue 2

Published online (in PDF format) in the United Kingdom.

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registered as a Community Interest Company (CIC).
Company Number: 15042791.

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

Editor's Note

"Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?"

Derek Walcott eloquently expresses his dilemma in "A Far Cry From Africa," written in response to the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya. The poem was published in 1962, yet the lines continue to resonate with many among the English-speaking and/or English-educated population, especially those inhabiting or having an ancestral connection to lands that have witnessed the atrocity of British colonization. Even in the era of American imperialism, the agony of those who share Walcott's sentiments is understandable enough, but it represents—as a peer of mine had thoughtfully pointed out—a perspective that is not shared by all. She mentioned the case of Chinua Achebe, who viewed the use of English in a positive light and successfully utilized it as a medium to tell the story of Africa.

At the Islamic Literary Society, we believe in the power of language and literature, and we believe in harnessing this power for the betterment of the Ummah. Despite our continuous attempt to make room for other languages, we publish primarily in English, but this is neither an attempt to privilege one language over the others nor a casual indifference toward the greater part of the Muslim community where English is at best used as a second or foreign language. English, being the global lingua franca, helps us reach a wider audience and enables us to ensure that our stories are heard across the world. The Other Words Journal welcomes submissions from all writers irrespective of nation and faith, but our principal aim remains in line with that of the Islamic

Literary Society—to amplify the voice of the Ummah by providing a platform that celebrates literary and intellectual pursuits.

I sincerely hope that the current issue of the Other Words Journal provides everyone with a valuable reading experience.

Afifa Alam Raisa

Chief Editor

July 2026

Introduction

She wakes up early, her tiny feet not yet fully accustomed to walking, and runs to her mother, gently touching her face as she asks her to pack her little bag for the first day of school. As she walks, perhaps with the earliest rays of sunlight upon her face, her footprints leave a mark of innocence upon the code of humanity. Yet, somewhere in the distant West, her name is written not as a symbol of hope but as a target, marked by the wrong colour. She is not a blue-eyed blonde but a child whose life is deemed expendable. She is killed. The world's response is to call for an independent investigation into her death. Full stop. Nothing more.

We Muslims are living in a world in which our faith has become a target, and our voices are recognised only when they conform to the accepted language of belonging; otherwise, we are relegated to the margins as outsiders. What, then, are we to do? How do we belong when belonging itself no longer wishes to accommodate us? The answer to this question is neither simple nor straightforward. The reality, however, is that the Muslim diaspora has made the West its home despite all its challenges, and there is no meaningful return to an ancestral homeland. Our task, therefore, is not to retreat, but to contribute; not to surrender our identity, but to strengthen it.

The task before us is not to be ashamed of our faith but rather to embrace it in its entirety in accordance with the principles of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition: the middle path. It is neither the path of extremism, in which every "other" becomes an enemy, nor that of withdrawal from society in the name of avoiding fitnah. Equally, it is not the path of assimilation into customs and values that conflict with Islamic principles. Nor should it follow the approach of the neo-traditionalists, which, regrettably, is being promoted by

some self-proclaimed scholars in the West who, through their eloquent English, seek to construct a Europe-centric vision of Islam.

While preserving our Islamic identity, we must employ every available means to establish ourselves within the societies in which our children will live. Every sphere of social development must become our concern. We need institutions that serve the interests of Muslims: think tanks, legal advocacy organisations, media observatories, educational initiatives, literary institutions, and other community-based organisations that enable Muslims to shape public discourse. Our investment must extend beyond bricks and mortar to the cultivation of ideas, culture, literature, and intellectual confidence. Among the many projects required to preserve both Islamic identity and Muslim belonging is the revival of a literary movement capable of reconnecting younger generations with the richness of the Islamic literary heritage.

The Islamic Literary Society is one humble endeavour to fulfil that responsibility. Through the publication of literary works, including *Other Words: An International Journal of Creative Writing*, it seeks to reclaim our narrative and provide a platform through which Muslim voices may speak for themselves. It is hoped that publications such as these, whether produced by the Islamic Literary Society or by others, will encourage Muslims not only to express themselves creatively but also to create spaces in which they can tell their own stories, in their own words, and according to their own experiences.

The poems and short stories collected in this volume differ widely in both theme and style. Yet most of them are united by one enduring quality: the unmistakable voice of Muslims telling their own stories. It is this voice that possesses the power to challenge the lingering structures of colonial thought. It is this voice, spoken as one ummah, that begins to reclaim the narrative.

Perhaps then, one morning, another little girl will wake up early, her tiny feet still learning to walk, and run to her mother with nothing more to fear

than the excitement of her first day at school. Her name will no longer be written as a target because of the colour of her skin or the faith she inherits. Instead, it will be written where every child's name belongs: among the stories of hope, dignity, and humanity. If literature cannot prevent injustice, it can at least refuse to let injustice write the final sentence.

Abdul Hai

Operations Manager

July 2026

Shibin Li
Night in Tehran, Noon in Beijing

For the Persian children who never had time to grow up amid the war in Iran.

Tehran's night—
a thread spun from black veils.
Beijing's noon
tears open a sheet of glass-papered candy.
Someone lights red firecrackers
deep in an old alley,
and the dawn settles
on the frozen rim of a porcelain bowl.
The old wound of the Abadan refinery
is a page torn from the calendar.
Among the rubble, fragments of The Rose Garden
are silently recited by the western wind.
The same light—
touches the salt-white shores of the Caspian,
and kindles the frozen bronze vats of the Forbidden City.
While drones and missiles
cut across the crescent like hawks,
someone bends down
to gather scattered urns of ash.
Deep in an air-raid shelter
hand-copied poems sprout in clay jars,
while giant screens on Chang'an Avenue
count down toward the New Year fireworks—
zero,
then one, then two...

The winding routes of the Persian Gulf
suddenly tighten,
pressing into
voices that never finished their prayers.
May the shells you gather
grow into a dawn
no longitude or latitude can divide.

Silence of Tehran

They say sweet olives grow
in a barren sea of sand,
their roots soaking
in the fissures of oil.

When the dust rises
they once stood like rows of torches.
Now they have shattered
into ten thousand suns
burning the innocent lamps of children.

Drones drop parentheses
into the scripture of the sky,
annotating its silence.

A veiled mother
sifts starlight from the flames,
searching only
for a name
not yet translated into dust.
The desert is rising like a tide.
Grain against grain—
sparks of sirens, borders,
and the delirious prophecies of politicians.

On the negotiation table
the last dates have dried
into scorching shells.

If years must be counted in blood and fire,
let every wound
become a river.

Let roots from the other shore
sprout along its bed
and grow into bridges of shelter,
where the innocent may gather
their shattered hearts.

When sandstorms lift the torn pages
of the scripture again,
there will always be unborn hands
beneath the scorched earth,
stubbornly assembling
a whole, unlit moon—
to recognize
the ruined galaxy under the rubble.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Children of Tehran

Do not teach me my homeland
through satellite maps.

Tehran is the button
that fell from my mother's coat.
It is the hole of light
my father burned in the oilcloth
during nights of blackout.

They measure the sky
with grey pencils.
The drone
is the blue that escaped the drawing.

I learned to finish my milk
before curfew,
fold my prayers into paper airplanes
and send them into the night.

Sirens grow like upside-down plane trees,
roots sinking into the radio,
bearing copper fruit.

I gather the dead shells
and string them with threads from my scarf
into a noisy broken wind chime.

In distant fairy tales
they polish the word “peace”
again and again,
like scrubbing the blood-stained bronze
in a museum.

But my schoolbag grows heavier—

half a loaf of crushed bread,
and a blue crayon
picked from the ruins,
the one that once
cut open every line.

Iron clouds roll along the horizon,
measuring us with the blanks they cast.

I erase, from my homework page,
a word problem
calculated with life.

I hide beneath the bed,
calculating the straight distance
from the floor
to heaven—

separated
by an entire childhood
converted into rubble.

Children of Tehran
do not wish upon shooting stars.

They lie in yesterday's craters
and look up—
discovering that every wounded star
has grown
into the shape of a mother's love.

And when the wind passes
the broken Azadi Tower,
sometimes it lets slip
one pale feather
of a homing pigeon
from 1976.

Tamara Pantović¹
When I am Talking About

When I am talking about the age—
I'm talking about impotence,
crumbled body that is born to live
gifted by curse who thinks and feels,
onerous is to accept the wrinkled hand—
witness of time and personal degradation.

Human speech now I hear differently,
like through the walls,
buzzing like a swarm of the bees,
how far away from them I am
and a million light-years from its inception.

When I am talking about the age—
I speak of wisdom,
the fossil rest of perfect concepts
buried in the rock of mind,
some another world and peace that I wanted to get.

¹ Tamara Pantović is a Montenegrin archaeologist, poet and essayist. She was born in Kotor, grew up in Herceg Novi (Grbić family), and today lives and creates in Berane. Her work represents a combination of scientific discipline and deep, introspective literature.

Afifa Alam Raisa²

The Funeral

As we all stand around,
dressed in audacity,
look who's lying, veiled in white rags
of coldness, of brutality.
We walk around with wet feet,
soaked in ignorance, in lunacy.
None holds a flower anymore;
we've machetes in our grip,
shining from the blood
of the one lying in silence.
The greed, the lust,
the hunger and the thirst
of what's not ours:
They all swirl around,
as we watch and beam
and let them chant
the hymn of fallacy.
Soon it ends, and we walk away,
but not as humans anymore;
like beasts, we crawl out
from the funeral of love.

² Afifa Alam Raisa is the chief editor of the Other Words Journal.

Steve Noyes³

A Conversation Aboard The Pacific And Orient Steamer

1920

Steve Noyes comments on his fiction: Archives preserve the past and shape the future. The Qur'an calls itself "Lawh mahfooz", a preserved tablet. Marmaduke Pickthall and Yusuf Ali, who lived in the Edwardian period, became famous, eventually, for translating the Qur'an into English. Marmaduke's and Yusuf's lives may be partially reconstructed from materials found in the East London Mosque Archive in London, in the Shah Jehan Mosque Archive in Woking, and in the African and Orient Reading Room at the British Library, London. These records make possible an alternative Islamic history of conjecture, supposition, play, ventriloquism.

Being on a ship at sea is disconcerting, Marmaduke Pickthall thought, if we take that adjective at its most literal. The concert is about function, what works. Gravity and the fluid dynamics of the restless sea are what matter, or hasn't one noticed all the clever storage bins and ways that things are fastened all over the ship to prevent dislodgement? On top of that, one is on top of the sea, an extra dimension. Deeper than any Theosophist plane of existence. The pitching and yawing upset the equilibrium. The misconstruction of said moaning as the souls of the drowned, and other soggy lore, thought Marmaduke. Shanty-chanting. For those used to cities, the ocean is not an obvious stimulus. The farther one is from land, the less information. One has to be an expert to read the sea's data. There is no one shape to a wave. There are billions, depending on the light. The sea's predominant sign is an unbroken dash—the horizon. The queasiness of the

³ Steve Noyes is a Muslim and the author of ten books in Canada, including his recent poetry chapbook *The Conveyor*, which won the 2024 B. P. Nichol Prize. His novels are *It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away* (Signature Editions, 2010) and *November's Radio* (Oolichan Books, 2015.) His short fiction has appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Wasafiri*, *Critical Muslim*, *Rabbit Hole*, *The Windsor Review*, and *Storgy Magazine*.

surface's great instability becomes outright vomiting. One's hands are constantly shooting out to correct or brace oneself against a surface.

Marmaduke knew that Yusuf was aboard, for he had peered at the ship's manifest and thought it a pleasant surprise. He did not know what he was getting into in India. The invitation to become editor of the Bombay Chronicle had come like a meteorite and landed at Five Chimneys in Surrey. A surprise, and a blessing. For things had come down to chickens and their eggs in the country home. That was what they had. To hang onto to. Extend. Neither was endlessly replaceable. He'd been combing the countryside for windfall that wasn't too damp to use as firewood. Summer was easier. They gardened. They had a few apple trees. Still, India. A welling sense of being drawn forward farther than before, into more intense heat, into rhythms ages old.

Yusuf could supply some perspective.

The first morning out, the guide-tug disengaged and turned back into the Thames, and they were plowing the Channel, France a blue line to port. Their speed increased. Muriel had fussily banished him so she could set their cabin in order. The air on deck was brisk, and he clutched his collar tighter. He found Yusuf, but stopped, because he saw that Yusuf's wife was bent over the rail, Yusuf with a hand on her back, and she was making unladylike sounds. Yusuf saw Marmaduke over his shoulder, and put a finger to his lips, shrugged, and Marmaduke nodded, made a rapid circling with his finger to suggest later. As soon as Yusuf's wife wiped her chin, Yusuf bowed his head to the rail and spewed.

In the Bay of Biscay, the waves grew more forceful and the steamer, though humongous, hippo of the seaways, began to pitch and wallow. As he helped Muriel up to the deck, he had to put his free hand on the tilted walls to steady himself. The deck-rail was lined with puking passengers. Presently, he and Muriel vomited in tandem.

It was on one of these sickly excursions that the two couples passed each other on the quarter-deck and paused to say they must have dinner together.

“Yes,” said Marmaduke, “we’d like that. After this involuntary purge.”

In the meantime, they took advantage of their second-class perquisites and had light meals—soup, eggs—brought to their cabins.

But their conversation, these first days out, kept getting delayed due to queasiness. The two men did meet over supper, but the captain’s seating-arrangement placed them with a red-faced, walrus-whiskered ICS man who went on about how he was going to deal with the bloody Hindus in his district, yes, Sirree, he wasn’t going to take any of their damned nonsense. When Yusuf could get a word in, he suggested, as a former ICS man himself, that Whiskers take the usual palanquin tour of the jungled interior, the mofussil, and get to know the inhabitants, the man stroked his chin and said, “Might be some right decent folk up-country. At least they aren’t Muslims.”

Marmaduke and Yusuf did not retaliate. They listened politely to tales of his shikar expeditions and his quest to find a suitable bibi.

One night, their way smooth again, Marmaduke took a turn on deck once it had grown dark. He found Yusuf near the prow, hands clasped behind his back, craning at the sky.

“Salaam alaykum,” said Marmaduke.

“Wa alaykum salaam.”

“It has been a while.”

“Wartime. In Woking.”

“Well, goodbye to all that,” said Marmaduke. “What a mess. I wonder how it’s all going to work out.”

“It’s not,” said Yusuf. “But we did our best.”

“I suppose.”

“Let’s not get bogged down. I was looking at the stars, a potent reminder of how immense Allah’s creation is, and how small we are.”

When Marmaduke worked himself around to Yusuf’s other side, he saw the cane dangling from his arm.

“A touch of bursitis,” Yusuf said. “Beastly when it’s damp. Do you know the constellations?”

“I think so. Wa as-sama’u dhaat al-buruj. The sky, endowed with the constellations.”

“Wa al-yawm ma’ud. The promised day.”

“Wa shahid wa mashhud. The witness and what is witnessed.”

“We witness the stars. But we are really witnessing the mystery of time.”

“How so? The stars are too remote to whisper verities in our ears.”

“I meant that what we see comes from a remote time due to their distance. We will never see them, precisely.”

“I have often wondered why the constellations do not appear to alter.”

“They have,” said Yusuf dreamily, and by his vacant pupils, Marmaduke could sense all his ken floating into remote zones. “Oh, they have. But because they are so far away, their truly awesome odysseys are unseen by the eye. But train your eyes on Jawza’ in the central south.”

They toed up to the rope restricting them from the prow.

“Why, that’s Orion,” said Marmaduke. “And below, his belt.”

“The Arabs called it a belt as well. But do you see the lower bright star that the descending sword appears to be pointing to? That is part of the Greater Footstool, al-karas al-kubr, and my scientist friends tell me it has shifted considerably.”

They stood in the great silence and felt in their feet the great depths below.

“Look, the Shar’ayn sisters,” said Marmaduke. “Didn’t one of them cross the Milky Way?”

“That’s the story.” Yusuf paused. “All these names, kindling into stories like small astigmatisms. We see everything from our perspective. Our vantage point from the remote corner of a swarm, a milky sarab, our galaxy. And yet we are certain that we have grasped the reality. Orion again, al-Jawza’, we imagine

a head, a belt, a sword, a sort of stellar shorthand, but the Arabs imagined ad-daw'ib, flowing hair, those indistinct stars about the shoulders, al-mirfaq, an elbow, rajilayn, feet, and one hand that was hennaed and the other amputated, yad al-muqata', way down there."

"Are you saying that it's difficult to ascertain what is real?"

"Not exactly. I'm giving you a more complete picture."

"You are more of an abstract thinker than I," said Marmaduke. "And you travel in more learned circles."

"Nonsense. You're friends with the Viceroy of Egypt."

"He is not important. For me, the quiet people, ordinary people, they are important."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to explain."

"And I will. But let me go on. Noble or ignoble, rich or poor, there are those who can see deep into the underlying, and those who only have a firm but completely fixed perspective. And I'm afraid that the older we get, the more time we spend in the latter camp. Our frame is firm."

"It has been, I admit, a long time since I genuinely felt my thoughts expanding. After the Great Conference in Paris, I felt stuck, no matter how peripatetic or involved I may have seemed. I keep—"

"You keep?"

"Ah, let's just enjoy the stars and go to bed, and sleep," said Yusuf. "We'll talk."

"Inshallah."

The next evening, they met again and walked the deck. They were nearing the narrow isthmus at Gibraltar that gave instantly onto the Mediterranean.

"Have you ever wondered," said Yusuf, "why al-buruuj stay the same, when surely they are subject to change just as all the celestial bodies are?"

"Surely if Allah had created the constellations for a purpose, and their appearance is as meaningful as we think—"

“They are not meaningful in the way that astrologers think.”

“No, but as an aid to navigation, they are invaluable.”

“Is it not true, though, that some stars die, or fall, so why not these?”

“Did you see Halley’s comet in 16?”

“I heard about it. Wallahi, I heard about it over and over.”

“You missed something, that’s for sure. We will not see it again. It looked like a vivid wriggling cell, like something seen in a microscope. Gone.”

They were silent together.

“The other night you mentioned how important the quiet people were. Who are the quiet people?” Yusuf asked.

“Why, they are the people we see all around us. The people who kiss their spouses goodbye every day and go and do their jobs. Not those whose pronouncements appear in The Times—”

Yusuf laughed.

“—or who ponder maps to plot their campaigns. The ones whose speech is full of pithy pleasantries and repeated stories brought forward into their modest homes from the past. They may farm, they may keep shop. They may crowd into factories in the morning and flow out at the evening whistle. Or they may still work the land, bent behind ox and plow, swishing a scythe. They are involved in the deeper rhythms of the planet.”

“You know, you’re not the only one to have noticed all their joys and problems. I think your mental habits have placed me in some eternal gymkhana. You forget that I was a collector in Saharanpur and I made my rounds through the villages. I’ve seen cholera outbreaks and dead children piled against a clay wall. I’ve seen starvation, bloated stomachs, people’s hair falling out, horrible accidents and little medical relief for it. Your quiet people—they should be the subject of all our grand deliberations.”

“Aren’t they marvellous? When I tire of the shindy and the constantly altering politics of the world, I should like to dissolve back into their mass with my pipe and my racing-form and my blackened hearth.”

“In Kensington, one would think.”

Marmaduke laughed. “But should the quiet people be given the vote?”

“A thorny question. I’m afraid not, or not yet.”

“Why?”

“Because the quiet people are not particularly educated and not up to seeing the big picture, which must, I’m afraid, remain the ambit of those accustomed to managing it. I admit the argument is somewhat circular. It may be that the circle is the perfect shape because it always returns to its origin. This is the root of my conservatism. Again, you underappreciate how my being Indian influences my stance, which you may call undemocratic. Can you imagine an India ruled by the Hindu masses, with their propensity to trample Muslims, and even those of their faith but not their caste? It would be terrible.”

“It seems you dismiss change that comes from the people. Have you forgotten the Bolsheviks?”

“Their ideas are implausible in a country as large and various as Russia and will never last.”

“I received a nasty surprise,” said Marmaduke. “I may have been wrong about something serious.”

“You must be referring to someone else,” said Yusuf. “The Marmaduke I know does not call himself wrong.”

“Someone sent me a copy of a letter that appeared in an Armenian journal,” said Marmaduke. “He was accused of getting the situation in Eastern Turkey completely wrong.”

“Have you ever been to Eastern Turkey?” said Yusuf.

“No.”

“Well...”

“Blast it, man. I knew damn well that the Armenians were killing Turks. I had proof. I had reports from people in the area. Don’t you know that ever since the Balkan wars, the press’s and public opinion of the Turks has been

solidly against them, with Gladstone fulminating in his nasty pamphlet? Didn't you see that? The bloodthirsty Turk? I am well-connected in Turkey."

"Perhaps too well-connected," said Yusuf. "The Turks may have good reasons to lie, and you have reasons to believe them."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"That you may have made a mistake."

The throb of the engines.

"Do you think the Turks would announce it if indeed they were emptying out whole towns and villages of Armenians and force-marching them in winter?" said Yusuf.

"Are they?"

"I don't know. I have heard men talking. Rumours."

Another silence.

"Well, when an ex-Prime Minister publishes an obnoxious pamphlet, perhaps it is best to ignore it. Come now, do you really think the London coffee-houses of Britain are humming with news of the bloodthirsty Turk?" said Yusuf.

Marmaduke was brooding upon the endless progression of the stern at the tip of a widening double-furrow in the ocean. "Are we turning backwards?" he said.

"Sorry?"

"We profess this beautiful religion that teaches all men are equals, and yet... we are turning back towards a world where who you are either raises you or brands you, and the nations are catch-basins for people of one colour and tongue."

"And that," said Yusuf, a little too triumphantly, "is precisely why I have always stood by the concept of the British Empire. It is a political reality that can absorb and mediate difference. It comes with a lingua franca which we are privileged to work in. It—"

“Come on, man. The empire is about power—naked, brutal power, and nothing else.” As a faintly complacent smile vanished in Yusuf, Marmaduke continued. “Perhaps it is also about guns and dungeons, about barb-wire and poison gasses.”

“It is about railways and postal-offices, and courts and schools.”

“It is about Jallianwala Bagh, and you know it,” said Marmaduke.

“The actions of an unsuitable commander under pressure his character could not withstand. It happens. Rarely. It is not the rule.”

“Ah, the rule. Well, if you want to talk about the rule, our English—”

“British.”

“In India, you might consider the Mutiny,” said Marmaduke.

“An exceptional occasion. I doubt it shall be repeated. And you always seem to leave out, when we take these issues up again, as it seems is our kismet to do, you always leave out the communal violence that we Muslims and our friends, the Hindus, are so inclined towards, and without the stern and rebuking presence of the Empire’s servants, would get entirely out of hand. You have not spent time in India.”

“But I am about to.”

“Granted, and at the Chronicle, you will be throwing yourself in at the deep end, but I have lived there and worked there, and I have seen and smelled the corpses and burnt-out ruins that accompany communal riots, out and out hate-fests, murders both initial and revenged, and you have not seen these yet. And I hope that you don’t.”

“What would you call a system,” said Marmaduke, “that extracts wealth from you without giving you a say, no say at all, in fixing your problems? That doesn’t seem to care very much about your problems. That is perfectly okay with widespread poverty, not to say famine, and illiteracy, and lets a minuscule minority benefit from this system, giving the majority no way to change their lot? Would you not call it slavery?”

“The Muslims have practiced slavery, and yet to free a slave is counted as among the greatest goods. Didn’t the Prophet, peace and prayers upon him, say, ‘Whoever frees a Muslim slave, Allah will save all his body from hellfire’? There is nothing inherently Muslim about slavery. The Qur’an deals with it practically, as a result of war, and it enjoins proper treatment and eventual freedom, manumission, if possible. It is counted in the Qur’an the freeing of slaves, as one of the types of al-barra, righteousness, along with good treatment to the poor and the orphans.”

“It is always possible to enjoin something and yet not do it, to live within existing structures, imagining their limits to be inevitable or natural.”

A lascar passed them, coiling rope around a muscled forearm.

“Our tyranny,” said Yusuf, “if you must, comes with some considerable public amenities.”

“A form of help.”

“Yes.”

Marmaduke produced from his pocket paper and pencil and drew for Yusuf a rudimentary line of stick-people, each with an arm around the next stick-person’s shoulder. “This is a line of people helping each other, yes and consequently, they are all bound to each other. I’ll tell you what the matter with this is. These people are supporting each other, yes, but none and all of them can become what they could be on their own.”

Yusuf regarded Pickthall and wondered, where next? “You’re touching on something, all right, maybe on a difference between Western and Muslim culture. Aid to others was something that Allah and Muhammad strove to institute in the early ummah. Why else would the Creator have revealed Surah Al-Ma’un, Neighborly Deeds, if he did not wish us to be charitable—helpful. He did not intend a freedom based on atomic insularity.”

“No, you’re right. He did want a compassionate and egalitarian community. Yet, brother, we have strayed. I’d like to drag us back a bit, should you allow me, to my analogy, my suggestion that this ‘helping’ arrangement of

the British, or any of the stronger Western powers, is truly as helpful as you suggest. Help can be withdrawn when it is inconvenient. And the help is not freely given. It is coerced and costs India a great deal.”

“It is more like a parental arrangement,” said Yusuf. “You don’t begrudge your parents what they did for you, did you?”

“Your parents did not extract from you as a child fungible or salable goods. Nor did they open fire when you bawled.” You know you have a friend, thought Marmaduke, when you’re tired of his arguments but still like him.

“Those conversations in Paris. How futile. Nationality, what an elastic concept, the rights of peoples, self-determination, all these are out the window once power comes into play.”

“And what a pity. But we cannot peer into the womb of time and see which ideas, which causes, passed over, unacted upon, will turn out in the longer term to prevail. But as that Jewish physicist said, nothing is wasted. Once uttered, one idea may change the entire fabric,” Marmaduke said.

“Is that what you’re hoping for? That your words might affect the fabric?”

“Oh no, I shall be quite forgotten, and I should prefer it.”

There weren’t very many married couples on board, though there were many giggling girls hoping to get married in India, and the two couples found themselves seated together at lunch, which was a horribly salty soup with hard biscuits. They were in the middle of the wind-dark Middle Sea.

“Mrs. Pickthall, this is my wife Masuma.” The women touched hands.

“We can introduce ourselves. We’re not at Blenheim. I’m Muriel. Masuma, was it?”

“Yes, it was, is.”

“Have you been to India before?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m looking forward to it, though. I’ve heard how wonderful it is.”

“Oh? What stories are those?”

“You know, the Taj Mahal. I think it’s terribly romantic that Shah Jehan built it for his late wife.”

“Which reminds me,” said Marmaduke. “At our hotel, we must be sure to get mosquito nets.”

“The Taj,” said Muriel, “is unfortunately a very long way from Hyderabad.”

“Is it? Inshallah I’ll see what I’ll see, then. Closer to hand.”

“You are likely,” said Marmaduke, “to see the bungalows of other memsahibs.”

Masuma sipped her soup and seemed reluctant to talk further. A man appeared in the doorway to the bulkhead and said, inquisitively, “Emily?” Masuma immediately rose, like a sleepwalker, and said, “Yes?” but the man meant another Emily, not her, Masuma, and she sat down, properly abashed.

“She’s not yet used to her new name,” said Yusuf. “She converted to Islam, and much is new to her.”

Really, thought Marmaduke, she was in for many surprises. The memsahibs wouldn’t know what to do with her, wearing her hijab, asking their permission to pray. Ushering her into a far corner of the verandah. Avoiding certain subjects, just as they did when the help was around. He liked that his Muriel had converted too, of course, but she only wore her hijab among Muslims, and she was pretty low-key about it. Marmaduke, knowing Yusuf Ali’s Anglophilia, thought it was going to be pretty hard for Masuma to find other female Muslims, but perhaps Allah would make it easier for her.

“I’m curious,” said Muriel, “Marmaduke has told me that you’ll be a functionary in the Nizam’s government. It seems such a small compensation for leaving London.”

Yusuf Ali said, “I have heard good things about Hyderabad.”

“Hyderabad!” said Masuma. “What a mess we left behind.”

Yusuf Ali lowered his tone. “Masuma...”

“We’ve been having, I mean back in England. We’ve—.”

“Masuma, please.”

“We’ve been having problems.”

“That is our business.”

But she was adamant to tell Marmaduke and Muriel. “It’s his children. They don’t like him much, and they can’t stand me.”

“Not true. The younger ones bade you goodbye in a friendly enough manner.”

“His boy Bloy refuses to talk with me.”

“I’m sure our friends don’t want to hear all about our domestic disarray.”

Marmaduke cocked an eyebrow at Muriel. “We can get along without it, that’s true enough.”

“And discuss what,” said Muriel, “monsoons? Saris?”

“I agree that it can be painful,” said Yusuf in a low voice—and his chin was very near the oilcloth now. “And, dear, it is not how I had wanted to start our marriage, but children must assert themselves. It is the one sure path to their independence.”

“Their independence,” said Masuma. “They can pursue it on top of a mountain, amid blizzards, for all I care.”

Seeing that Marmaduke was frowning, and deliberately not looking at Yusuf, Masuma turned, like a heliotrope, towards Muriel’s poorly-hidden delight in these sparks.

“Children can be a burden as well as a blessing,” Muriel said in belabored scansion.

“My wife—” said Pickthall. “Speaks mostly in the abstract.”

“These children are horrid,” said Masuma. “If you could see them,” daintily clasping Muriel's wrists, “when they met me the first time. Their looks alone were lethal. They wouldn't even talk to Yusuf.”

“On the third day, I did manage a few words with Bloy,” said Yusuf.

“How rude,” said Muriel.

“You are so lucky that you don't have to deal with children like them.”

“Well, for that matter, I do have to deal with that dreadful Fremantle girl,” said Muriel.

“There is really no reason to bring her into it,” said Marmaduke.

“I'm serious,” said Muriel. “The child is a monster and now, thanks to you, she is a religious monster.” ‘

“Anne is a lovely English child. Well-behaved, proper.”

“Sneaking around in the garden and casting her judgmental eyes over at me as she prostrates near the rhododendrons in her prim little hijab.”

“She is a child,” said Marmaduke. “You needn't worry about her.”

“Well, tell the child to go pray in her nursery, then.”

“I've worked hard,” said Yusuf, concerned now that the problem of his own children was being outplayed by this Fremantle girl. “To support them. Surely, they ought to owe me a smidgeon of respect. Despite all their advantages, the best of governesses and schools, they turned out to be narrow-minded, judgmental, and above all ungrateful.”

“It may be,” said Marmaduke, “that this is the folly of youth, black and white, likes and dislikes, without the grey tones of experience...”

“Oh dear,” said Muriel, “Mr. Pickthall metaphoring again.”

“All I mean is that the Fremantle girl is exhibiting the naive extremism of the convert, to whom much is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. She will get over it inshallah. I'll have a talk with her, since you seem to find her rude.”

Yusuf said nothing. He had talked with his own children several times and it didn't seem to do any good. Mealtimes, they glowered, mumbled, and

shuffled away; evenings, they repeated the pattern. They met his efforts at being Father with a studied indifference.

“I think we can all agree that children can be a challenge,” said Marmaduke.

“The expert,” said Muriel. “Shaykh Daddy Fremantle.”

“How very funny,” Marmaduke said. He intended to rebuke her later.

They variously dabbed their chins and lips with their napkins. The captain was coming around with a bottle, and Yusuf put up a hand to refuse, to stop him from pouring.

“No?” said the captain.

“We are Muslims.”

“Funny,” said the captain, eyeing the label, “it never seemed to bother us Presbyterians.”

After the dinner, in the Pickthalls’ stateroom, after Marmaduke had lightly chided her for her remarks, Muriel said that Yusuf’s hand was very light when she shook it, as though some complicated shame had worn him out and left him lesser.

Masuma and Yusuf were out on deck very early one morning when they moored off Aden, hoping to catch the cool air, and no one had told them, for no one was around, that the local regiment was wont mornings to bathe buck-naked on a very visible beach. Masuma seemed annoyed when Yusuf led her away from the rail.

Their last evening aboard the Eastern Star, they were served an insipidly mild chicken curry and saffron rice. A chutney so sugared you could stand an upright fork in it. After cocktails there was to be a dance, a costume-ball with an Arabian Nights theme. Marmaduke met Yusuf in the stateroom, a grand affair with a double staircase connecting the decks. The band had set up and were

ticking along to brushed cymbals with some percolating jazz, all in tuxedos behind black music stands with the gold P & O logos. Neither Marmaduke nor Yusuf wore a costume, just their tuxes. They waited for the ladies just off the parquet dance floor.

“I think Muriel and Masuma went to the powder room together,” said Yusuf.

“Oh? I’m glad they’re rubbing along. There. I’m just adjusting your cummerbund.”

“Allow me, then. Your tie. A little sloppy.”

There was a multipaneled skylight, stars above them. There were many, many young women in flapper-dresses, some with shivering jet beadwork, on the dance floor (their husbands were not soused enough yet), veils decorously drawn over their mouths, which puffed at their exertions, suggesting pleasures withheld, rather than forbidden. As they jitterbugged to the lively music, jazz hands and cross-steps, the band was chugging through standards. The rising and falling of the solo saxophone, the showy sliding of the trombones.

“I dare say this is the largest meeting of shaykhs and bedus in human history,” said Yusuf. “I used to love festivals in India. The kids flew elaborate decorative kites. At Holi, they dusted each other with dyed powders. Lovely.”

“I wonder if there will be a lot of expatriate parties like this in Bombay.”

“It depends on whom you cultivate. The literary crowd is a staid lot. Soldiers are rowdier. But say—have you given any thought to Muriel’s happiness?”

“I expect that she shall look to it herself.”

“Of course, but what I mean is, the company you keep at The Chronicle will not, or may not, endear her to the memsahibs. The ICS wives are a clannish lot. Here they are.”

Masuma and Muriel were both wearing their typical ordinary blouses but with light cotton harem-pants and both wearing hijabs. He recognized the

harem pants, as Muriel had bought them in London, stocking up on native dress for the hot weather in Lahore.

“Ladies, you look marvellous,” said Yusuf.

“Among Islam’s many benefits, it has saved us the bother of costumes!” said Masuma.

A dark-haired singer with a bare belly, little golden cymbals on her fingers, took to the stage and kicked off her Persian slippers. The band welcomed her with a swell overture, a clarinetist stepped forth and serenaded her, and as she swayed before the microphone, the violins replaced the clarinetist with a series of arabesque flourishes, and the singer told them about Old Man River. She reminded them that It Had To Be You. Muriel said, “Some fun!” The drummer left his kit and was going crazy on the tall bongos with his fingertips and palms; some more passengers recognized the beat and joined a line, each swinging the one in front by the hips, and Masuma said “Let’s dance, it’s a conga line!” and though Yusuf hesitated, all four of them joined the conga line and they circled the ballroom to the salsa and songo music. They didn’t do this for long but for long enough.

Their last morning, Marmaduke and Yusuf were in pyjamas reclining on deck-chairs, the sun coming up. They got up, stretched, and went to the rail when they saw a crow wheeling, and Marmaduke pointed out a small branch bobbing alongside, and some frangipani blossoms.

“We must be getting close,” said Yusuf.

But they hardly seemed to be moving. Marmaduke gauged their progress at about eight knots. Ahead, Bombay, but no clarity. He pondered the vast and indistinct smog that lay far ahead, the city, an altar from which the swaddled sun ran crimson ribbons from the pumice pit she had been sacrificed on. Ho-ho, thought Marmaduke, how like some erstwhile purple passages in my early novels.

The deck was now full of men clutching coffees in one hand and their robes in the other hand, to keep them closed.

“Look,” said Yusuf. “More twigs. And there. Coconut husk.”

“We don’t need pigeons to let us know that Bombay is still above water. Did you know that old tale is Babylonian? The one about the birds with their evidence that the Flood was over. When it was told back in Babylon, there were crows. Corvids. Ravens. The scholars all say that story is very old.”

“Who taught you that?” said Yusuf.

“Hanauer taught me. He knew a lot about the Bible, about Bible criticism. And folklore. We did a book together.”

“Did you?” said Yusuf, abstractly; his eyes were focussing ahead. “I was thinking about what you said the other night. About leaving places, and maybe we should savour leaving. But at what point is it clear that leaving is not a choice, it is a habit. Not entirely due to circumstance. Due to disposition.”

“I have always wanted to go places. Perhaps we are like palm spathes off the Spanish coast borne northerly from Africa. Something is carrying us along.”

“It’s not terrible, leaving England behind, is it?”

“Not terrible. Unfortunate, perhaps. A pyrrhic defeat, one might say.”

“I don’t quite...”

“Suppose I had gotten approval to talk through that Swiss fellow to the Ottomans. The chances of changing England’s policy would have probably remained nil. They made a big deal out of that but I remained loyal to my country. If only they had remained loyal to me.”

“I wish I had known. I might have been able to help.”

Marmaduke clapped Yusuf on the shoulder. “Next war, maybe. I truly hope there won’t be a next war.”

“I was reminded of that at those Paris talks that these determinations, war, no war, country, no country, are made far above our station. And the

powers do not think in long historical processes. They think in brisk crises and short-term opportunities.”

“You didn’t try and give them a history lesson, did you? Mister Wilson does not seem the sort.”

“I answered their questions.”

“The important thing is...” He stopped.

“Important?” said Yusuf. “I’ll tell you what’s important. More voices are making their complaints, their indignation, their many types of exotic, nay, foreign knowledge known to the wider world. They are writing it into the corpus of the Empire. People such as Ameer Ali and Abdul Majid.”

“My dear man, nobody reads those Muslim journals except Muslims. The people in power read The Times.”

“Abdul Majid made The Times when he represented those Arabs in the north.”

“I do agree,” said Pickthall, “that Britain has to think a bit more trenchantly about its relationship with all its subjects. You know that damn business with Sykes has cost me. The sales of my novels have plummeted, though previously I stood a good wicket.”

“Nonsense. Nobody knows that Sykes thought you were a traitor except you and he. There is a law of diminishing returns in the literary world. The endorsements you received from Forster and Lawrence have depreciated. Perhaps there are gentlemen out there now who don’t even know who Forster is. You are writing for a small coterie who are interested in the Muslim world.”

“The only journals I can write for now don’t pay very much. Frankly, I’ve had enough of genteel rural poverty. The offer from the Chronicle was a Godsend. And yet you’d think a good story...the foreign thing did not hurt the likes of Pierre Loti!”

“Thank Allah for your getting that Chronicle job. I don’t think I’ve seen more than a few dozen guineas from my books...I share the problem.”

“I don’t think that’s the whole problem. It’s not great to be called a traitor.”

“Dear, dear Marmaduke, you are confusing a wartime exigency with—think! Had you been Sykes, mid-war, and someone wrote in saying he wanted to talk with the enemy, what would you have done?”

“Try to control it and shut it down.” But Marmaduke’s face had a hurt, pillowy weight about it.

Yusuf wanted to shunt him away from his declining fortunes. “In Bombay, you will certainly have a lot to write about. Many excellent, though parlous, opportunities to wield your pen. No doubt you will be approached by all the English sahibs in government, as well as the likes of that irritating fellow Gandhi. Word of advice.”

“Advise away, if you must.”

“I should be very careful of admitting into your sympathies any one group or cause once you start writing leaders. Give yourself time to understand all sides of an issue.”

“Oh, should I pander to those who want to take over Palestine?”

“That is not what I am suggesting. Profit from views from many quarters, not just the agitators for swaraj, or for the Caliphate, and waste their and all and sundry’s time advocating for a centre that will never hold, a Caliphate in Constantinople in an Empire shortly to disintegrate.”

“But that is precisely what I should want,” said Marmaduke. “An Islamic seat of power and the Turks to lead it.”

“I know your opinions too well, but the vainglorious Turkish desires of 1908 and 1913 are far behind us now. Russia shall take some of the east near Diyarbakir; the British shall dominate the Levant and Syria, squeezing out the French, and when Turkey falls—because Britain shall support Greece against it—Germany, ho, Germany with its reparations to pay shall be in no position to claim Anatolia or Syria, railroads or not; the Terms of Versailles have seen to it. So don’t interest yourself overmuch with Pan-Islamic symbols, because the fact

of the Empire, including the French in North Africa, that's what will persist, inshallah."

"Before you start in with quoting the Generous Book in such a way that props up the status quo ante, let me save you the trouble. I had Ayah At-Ta'a in mind, 'obey those among you invested with power.'"

"Precisely."

"But what if that authority has not been won through suffrage, but brutally taken by force? Cruel, arbitrary force. No shura or consensus gave rise to it. What of the aspirations of the millions? You were fortunate to be near that power, and what has it got you?"

"That's an easy one, I'm afraid. About eight hundred pounds a year and a CBE."

"Oh-ho, is that how you managed to arrange that private meal with the captain the other night? Flashing the Commander's four-sided fleur-de-lys, were you?"

"I let it be known. I've given you my advice. Consider India in a large, imperial sense. Weigh the benefits, before you start spilling ink to tear it all down. Tell me, why would you support a British presence in Egypt and kick mightily against it in India? You seem to have much sympathy for Gandhi."

"Gandhi is waking people up, and I say hooray. As for Cromer, his policies are good for Egypt. It may be said that he does not understand the Egyptians at all, but I sense from his earlier books that what he does is for the good of Egypt. Egypt is a comparatively sedate, season-ruled, agricultural nation, ancient, a little silted-up and sleepy, but needful of law and administration. Good God, should naked Egyptian nationalism carry the day, can you imagine the corruption? The alleyways of Cairo would buzz with babble of baksheesh."

Yusuf's mouth got sly. "Yes, better that all the dinari get siphoned off to prevent those Egyptian crooks!"

"A cynical comment."

“A perspicacious comment. You might say the same about India. Corruption, outdated forms of piety, general poverty, but a goldmine of fabrication, tea, and spice. All that productive capacity has developed during the British presence. Far from seeing this as theft, I see it as the British genius for organization contributing to the greater good of world trade,” said Yusuf.

“You know, I have never understood you. I know behind all this Empire boosterism and bluster is a pretty frank fear of an isolated Muslim underclass, picked on and betrayed by the Hindu majority. And yet you disapprove of any manifestation of an international ummah that might support the Indian Muslims.”

“The support Indian Muslims need is already there. We contradict each other, and ourselves. How could we have avoided contradiction? The world has evolved towards greater complication. We—all of us—have failed to balance al-Mizan, the Scales. Where is the telling weight of the greater good? Perhaps it is beyond our ability to discern. Don’t we share the difficulty with everyone who has ever lived? To live in the present and imagine the future. Impossible.”

“How true,” said Marmaduke.

“I had always wanted to make London my home,” said Yusuf. “I could have learned to weather my children’s dislikes and demands and let things grow around me. But I didn’t. I wanted to make Masuma happy. Inshallah, inshallah. And I wanted happiness myself. Like a homing pigeon, back to India I go.”

“You’re going to a good place. The Nizam is a wise ruler. You belong in a Muslim place. They’re lucky to have you.”

“I suppose some repose is necessary before I rejoin the fray.”

“Absolutely. Enjoy it, my man.”

The ship’s horn sounded and Yusuf gave a cowed hop. Marmaduke tried to put his palms in his ears.

Far away, near the shore, there was a sense of illusory movement in the lower smog, as of something assembling.

Marmaduke clapped Yusuf on the arm.

The city had started to reveal its cubic and rectangular forms within the hanging smog. Dhows and other sailboats lay well off the shore.

“We know why I am going to India, Yusuf, but why are you?”

“That should have been evident from—to serve the Nizam of Hyderabad.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“Can I count on your discretion?”

“Of course. You have my word.”

“We just need to get away from my children. For a time.”

“Yes, so it seemed at lunch. That is ironic. Sorry. I mean usually it is the other way around. The children bridle at their parents’ control and flee them. But they’ve got you on the run.”

“They are provided for.”

“I wouldn’t have imagined anything less, my dear fellow, but you deserve to have a peaceful life with your new wife.”

“Inshallah.”

“What are we leaving behind?”

“We are. We are leaving London.” Yusuf looked lost. “Last year. Last year was a wonderful example of how the Empire works. In its multiplicity, its teeming reach, it provides a sort of glorious energy that one sees in the swarms of social insects. The journals and newspapers whereby the busy Empire makes, eventually, all its voices known. The mark of an empire’s excellence is how vigorously it is protested, how tolerantly it can host a barrage of different opinions.”

“Again, you’re talking about the writers of letters-to-the-editor, the ICS men, the headmasters, MPs. Professors. And I’ve been in a few of those rooms, your Asiatic Society, certainly not with the access that you enjoy—”

“Says the gentleman who stayed at Cromer’s home.”

“Fair enough. I didn’t say I had no access. For you the thrill, or so I think, is an in-rushing-ness that culminates in London; for me it is a sense of

shared fate that obtains from Marrakesh to Aden, and beyond. And each part acknowledging that bond but retaining its special nature. The Muslim world. It is a fantastic way to learn, having that similarity but traversing its vast territories. I've heard the whole Arab world described as welcome islands, the oases, al-waahaat, in the endless ocean of the deserts."

"That may be a good map for a gentleman traveller, but in order for the whole to hold, I'm afraid that interests must be played off against each other. Who should prevail, the Turks or Arabs?"

"Britain. France."

"Of course. There is a game going on. We are not the only nation that desires an empire. We had better hang onto the one with half a chance."

"Isn't it funny?" said Ali, "How arguments shift and darken, like wind through wheat. The very arguments you were fond of using used to portray Ottoman Turkey—nationalism, homogeneity of race and religions, in the Wilsonian universe work most disadvantageously against us Muslims in a Hindustan of creed and caste. The majority is Hindu. There will be only small pockets of Muslims. We will be completely dominated if the push towards democracy goes too far, too fast. The majority will rule and care not a whit about the dominated. That is what I fear."

"Then why do you try to work with those you fear?"

"Because my idea of civilization is about getting along with humanity, not cowering from it."

"I think that is a noble idea. I can see its proud sails in tatters against the grim tide of the century, but never mind. We will get on inshallah. I expect Muriel will want me to help finish packing."

"Pickthall..."

"Yes?"

"We didn't fail, did we?"

"Of course not."

"I mean let down the ummah."

“We have different ideas. The ummah has become very complicated. You are melancholic. That is staining your view. You have made a great contribution. The ummah is facing much because of western foreigners, yes, ha, like us. Or partly like us. Oh, blast, I don’t know what I mean. We hybrids. But I suspect we are not alone. Others are similarly complicated. Let down the ummah? It’s not over yet. Your breadth of spirit will find another cause, bet on it. I mean no, don’t bet on it.”

Yusuf cracked a smile ajar. “My situation shames me.”

“Nonsense. You’re going to work for a very rich and wonderful Nizam.”

“I mean what we talked about. My children. When I think of Badruddin Tayebji and his family—what a marvellous picture of domestic love and contentment. Why can’t I have that?”

Marmaduke thought Yusuf was unnecessarily flagellating himself with this Sunday-roast Papaji fantasy but held his tongue.

“Here we are,” said Yusuf, “seeking Allah’s bounty and His grace in a ship ploughing the sea.”

“Again. Smell that?” said Marmaduke.

“Tar.”

“Garbage.”

The two men in identical pyjamas parted and walked along the rail in different directions to their respective stairways.

Inside, the metallic-sounding Tannoy was announcing they would dock in half an hour. The hubbub travelled from level to level along the narrow steel passageways. Porters on the upper deck were crying “make way, make way” as they hauled loaded wagons of luggage near the gangway.

Muriel handed a telegraph to Marmaduke with a pained expression. Oh, you curdle-puss, thought Marmaduke.

“Wonderful,” she said. “I’ll hardly see you.”

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“It’s nice to be where you’re needed,” said Marmaduke.

“Isn’t it nice to think so?” said Muriel. “Come and help me.”

Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf⁴

You Free to Talk?

6 texts go unanswered

"You free to talk?"

In an age where easy judgments
are made
like monsoon rains pouring
without mercy

A hand reaching out
begging to explain
wanting not to be misread
as the enemy within

But all doors are bolted
and windows find no escape
from the uncertainties outside
Rains continue to pummel the
hard roofs

Amidst the merciless downpour
6 messages remain to be heard

You free to talk?

⁴ Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf is a writer living in Kuala Lumpur. She is now working on translating her Malay short stories (from her collection of Malay short stories, *Dari Jambu Rias ke Conakry/ From Jambu Rias to Conakry*) to English.

Amir Jadwat⁵
A Picture of the Blues

The man looked out at the city: a collection of buildings with mighty steeples; a collection of cars; a collection of slighted people. A mass of people and buildings formed a growling, expanding, hungering beast. And the people lived inside the belly of the beast. The old quivered down the street; the young raced past them. The beautiful and the ugly bumped elbows on the train as it crawled through the body of the city, the tracks and roads being like arteries, and the different sectors like organs: all melded into one substance, one body. Yet, it was stripped of colour.

The weather had turned the city-beast pale. The skies had crowded with clouds, and these clouds had yanked the colour out of the world's hands and hidden it behind their backs. So, the people lived in a grey city. The mean clouds hiding their colour behind them. The clouds quivered, and they unleashed their burdens as drops. The wind was contorted by the rain, and the rain, manoeuvred by the wind.

The wind howled. The rain cracked against the pavements like whips. Yet, the howling of the cars as they raced towards an uncertain prey was not to be dominated. The cars beeped their horns, and the people beeped their voices. The rain and the people and the cars and the wind were competing with one another, each striking and whipping and stealing at the rest.

Such was the man's view. He gained it through observation: observation from his watchtower on the seventieth floor. The room was a cafeteria; its

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cupboards, tools, and furnishings were black, and its counters, a dull grey. The lights were off, but exhausted light fell into the room through the floor-to-ceiling window. Behind this window lay a table and two chairs. And behind the table and two chairs rested the man. He had a cup in his hands, with the heavy whispers of steam rising from it.

“Hey there.”

The man turned his head to the source of the voice.

“Hey,” he said, after recognition faded into him.

“This rain is,” said the newcomer, “not being very kind to us, is it?”

The man grunted twice in the negative.

“So, how is your life?” asked the new man, sitting down at the table after pulling a muffin from a container.

“Eh, so and so.”

“One day at a time my friend,” said the new man—an older man.

“That’s right, that’s right.”

“I always get the blues when it rains. That’s when I know that I need something sweet to eat.”

Upon saying this, the older man grew quiet and began eating. The man nodded and turned his view back to the city. He let out a sigh. He turned his gaze to the heavens and found a thundering mass of grey and water. He looked to the earth and found a stew on boil.

Then the storm entered the man’s mouth, seized his heart, dropped a leaden weight where it used to be, and spun away, and the man was anchored in the present, with a leaden weight constricting his breathing. He felt himself sinking. He wanted to fly away, but the weight would not allow him to.

So, he moved out of the chair, departed from the room, dragged his feet to his desk, and let the weight drop him into his chair.

And the rain thudded the walls; the weight's pressure increased as the colour of the world diminished, and then the world turned greyscale; the pressure had overcome the man. A co-worker walked by and asked of his wellbeing, and the man said:

“Oh, I'm well, thanks, and yourself?”

I Feel Enough for Two

"Thus, the intellect is king," said Nous.

"If you say so," said the stable master.

"Not just say so; I know so. I believe it as well. And you should too," said Nous.

This Nous was a thin, stretched man in a suit that was too tight for him; the legs hardly extended above his ankles, and the shoulders seemed close to tearing. His face was as long and stretched as his body and had a frown pasted across it. His mouth was twisted; this, along with his frown, gave him perennial wrinkles, which made it seem as though his skull was too big for the skin stretched over it. Just like how it seemed as though he was not provided with enough 'lip' for his mouth, so he had to stretch what he had gotten over it. His eyes were focused and bespectacled, and they gave him a learned air.

This was Nous Mind. He was a prude.

"It seems like too much of a stretch," said the stable master.

"Why do you say so?" asked Nous.

"I mean, look at us; one tree on top of us and we're dead. How can you call yourself a king?"

"Observe: the world," said Nous, gesturing around him to the towers and buildings that surrounded the stable yard, "is being conquered day by day. Sometime soon, the whole world will be under man's thumb. The cause? The intellect! The human intellect!"

"But now you're speaking about the total intellect; I thought you were speaking about every individual intellect."

"Your thinking is too Platonic. I've always been more inclined to Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between universal and particular; you see, the total intellect is constituted by the sum of individual intellects. Thus, within the individual intellect is the total intellect as potential, and within

the total intellect is the capacity to subjugate the world. Thus, within the individual is the capacity to subjugate the world,” said Nous. “You follow?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

The two continued walking past the stables. Each one contained a horse, neighing, sleeping, chewing, or performing one of a host of activities. They continued walking until Nous stopped in front of a stable.

“This one is interesting,” said Nous.

The stable master suppressed a laugh and said, “You looking at Hart, Mr. Mind?”

The horse within was the biggest they had come across so far, standing at least a ruler’s length above Nous’s head. He was a white, filthy creature, with hay and dirt strewn across his coat at random. His muscles welled under his skin like waves; his head was high, almost haughty, and his stable looked as though it had not been cleaned for a long time. He was like a savage king in a dump yard.

“Yes. He, or is it a she? In any case it is perfect,” said Nous, his face twisted at the stench that arose when the horse approached him. “It will do.”

“Are you sure?” asked the stable master. “Hart is more for experienced riders. He has quite the personality.”

“Within my mind—and yours—is...” said Nous, tapping the papyrus of his temple with his index, “the faculty of subjugation; the ability to rule the world. Ergo, there can be no concern.”

To the stable master’s look, Nous announced, somewhat to himself, somewhat to the horse, somewhat to the stable master, somewhat to the world, “Verily! There is nothing the intellect cannot control!”

The stable master and Nous had reached the utmost boundary of the city, where the plans of men were few indeed, barring some oft-ignored road signs and little-travelled roads. Nous sat atop the horse with his head held high and his body often threatening to slip off.

“Well then, I’m off,” said Nous.

“All the best, Mr. Mind,” said the stable master.

The same master then let go of Hart’s reins, leaving them to Mind, who gave the reins a click. Thus, they set off down the footpath winding through forest over forest, land over land, until the goal was reached. If Nous had looked back, he would have seen the stable master with his eyes disturbed, his brows frowning, and his mouth pinched. But he did not look back, and so the brute lord of horses vanished along with the greatest thinker alive.

They kept at a trot, Nous surveying the landscape around him: much hills, grass, and trees. Little of anything interesting stood for surveying. Then he looked up and saw that the sun had dipped a fair bit since he had set off. Taking his phone out and pulling up a map, one hand on the reins, he looked and let out a gasp. Replacing his phone, only to slap his head, he said to the horse:

“My, our time is quite bad. You’ll pardon me, but we must rush now, Hart.”

Then a whip, a squeeze of the legs, and a resounding ‘yeah!’ came out, and with it, a burst! The horse let out a great neigh and kicked the air with his legs—Nous clutching his neck tight—and shot off like a bullet.

And indeed, the sounds of his hooves against the ground were like bullets; the sound of the wind rushing by screamed in Hart’s ears. How long had the horse been waiting for this! The trees and hills and grass and sky seemed to vanish, and all that was left was the race. Yes, the race. He had suddenly become aware of his body and movement in a way that his daily walking could never match! He knew his speed; he could feel the warmth of the blood within him, could feel the vibrations of the ground reverberate through his body. He knew how much stamina he had available and was delighted to find that there was quite a lot! The horse was in complete control: all his organs, all his limbs, and every motion that came about through those limbs was known to the horse and could be adjusted and readjusted as the horse saw fit. He had become one with himself, and the only thing he knew was the race, and he knew it with an ecstasy

unmatched. With delight, he recognized the command of the rider to gallop faster. He stretched his muscles and body, exercising them to the fullest. This was pure, primal instinct.

With some struggle, Nous positioned himself into a riding position, his hands clutching the reins, spreading a whiteness over his knuckles and imprinting fingernail marks over his palms. Then he smiled. Then he chuckled. He began shaking with merriment as dopamine flooded his body, knowing that the goal was definitely within reach. And you know what? This riding business wasn't so bad! He let out an uncharacteristic 'whoop!' and then gave the horse another click, another squeeze, and another 'yeah!' and was delighted to find that he could get closer. He could get closer to his goal, which seemed to rise up in the distance. But the footpath had stretched out in front of him, and he had become aware of each stone, each depression, each ant creeping across its surface.

Each obstacle in his way—he knew. He knew everything. His mind reached towards the goal and pinned it neatly in place. This was the end and beginning of human rationality.

Indeed, Nous had lost his cool. For after a period of this unity of horse and rider, the horse began slowing down, and Nous should have known what the horse had known when it did so. But he didn't know. He just didn't know. And even if he did know, how could he understand? And even if he did understand, how could he accept it? The goal was within sight, after all!

"Exert yourself but a little more, my dear Hart!" commanded the rider and proceeded to crack the whip. "Yeah!"

This command registered with the horse, but the horse couldn't care less. He continued slowing, as his throat dried, his lungs heaved, and a sheen of sweat covered him. But at that moment, a sharp whistle resounded, and a bolt of scalding heat imprinted itself on his body. He neighed, but then the whistle and heat returned to the same spot, and then came the crack of whip and "yeah!" He ignored it again, but then, at the same spot as before, a bolt of heat! His skin

began to burn, so he obeyed the order and picked up speed, but he was not as fast as before. Nous didn't notice, however—if he did, he wouldn't have returned the whip to his belt.

Nous was lost in humming Mozart to himself but then snapped out of it and decided that the horse must slow down. Reason? He noticed the crossroads that had appeared, ostensibly out of nowhere. The horse gladly slowed to a trot, and then to a walk. Nous pulled out his phone and checked his map: he had to go right, he decided after an examination of the map. He directed his reins to the right, but strangely, the horse didn't comply. In fact, he started taking the left way! Imagine! Nous landed a whip on him, then another, and then another, and then another, but the horse continued walking down the left path. Nous saw nothing of note on this way after checking his phone-map, thus leaving the reins completely.

“Silly Hart! This leads us into the wild. Stop this nonsense, now!” said Nous. “Yeah!”

And then a crash and a sledgehammer landed against Nous's back, then his head. He dropped the phone, which had preoccupied his hands, to grab the reins—a source of security against this unknown assailant—but found the reins empty. And the horse was gone! Nous couldn't think; his head had shut down, but as he stared at the clouds, his intellect returned to him. He lifted himself and saw that the horse was walking in front of him, and his saddle was empty. There was no assailant—not a human one at least—nor was there a sledgehammer. There was just an insolent beast!

As Nous realised the implications of what had happened, fury welled up inside him. Picking himself up, he staggered towards the horse, drew out his whip, and laid out the biggest crack he could muster against the horse's rump. Then the world shut down.

When the insolent beast had noticed the (now familiar) bolt of heat against him, his vision had turned red, but he controlled himself. He just kicked

whatever it was away and continued walking. Walking towards the only thing worth walking to at that moment: the lake in front of him.

When Nous awoke, the first thing he noticed was that his forearm was soaking in a pool of flame. He gasped in pain, shot up like a bullet, and grasped his forearm, which was twisted in an obtuse angle to his elbow, but grasping only seemed to heat up the bowl of flame. He gasped again and contorted his face into a bunch, then lay still. After the heat had diminished somewhat, he looked around: it was night, and he was where he had been when he lost consciousness. In front of him was a lake, and next to the lake was the horse, lying down, his head dipped and his poise serene. Nous's vision turned red, and he lost control of himself.

Nous pulled himself up. He walked over to the face of the horse. He pulled out his whip. Then he struck. Then he struck again. Then again. Then again. And then again, all this before the horse rose to its full height. When it did, however, Nous stepped back and saw the beast rotating.

Fool.

Nous had his intellect.

Horses can't kick what's in front of them, thought Nous. And he responded to the horse by adjusting himself to the thing's face and laid another crack against it. Then the horse began to lower its head. Seeing the charge coming, Nous jumped to the side, missing it in time. Bad mistake! The fire had reached levels close to the surface of the sun! His arm burned, but his eyes burned hotter. He noticed that he was behind the horse and rolled out of the way to get out of kicking range, and then he threw himself up and laid another blow to the horse's lungs. He saw an immensely pleasing red against the horse's white coat. The process repeated until the horse gave itself up.

Nous Mind would have enjoyed continuing to attack Hart, but Mr. Mind had also taken blows. He stopped. His arm was wreathed in fire, and his consciousness threatened to leave him, but before that could happen, he dropped his whip to the ground and picked up the largest rock nearby—about the size of

a brain. He unleashed a primal scream that shook his lungs and the whole of his body and knocked the horse unconscious with it. Then Nous fell to the ground, the pain searing his intellect to ash. But he knew that it would come back.

And before Mr. Nous Mind had knocked him unconscious, Hart swore in his heart that—when he woke up—he would drag the man through hell and back. Satisfied with this resolution and blinded by the pain due to the straps of fire bound around his body, Hart allowed himself to be knocked unconscious.

Horse and man lay on the ground, each prepared to murder the other when they woke up. And then the umbilical cord snapped, and all was lost.

Moham Wang⁶
Night Slit Open by the Crescent

Under a grey vault, red snow is falling.
You sleep upon the grass pillow
of a young pharaoh.
A dream breaks into your silence,
and even disaster keeps silent
as an excuse.

Ancestors content with slumber, since January,
have waited
for permission to be free.
Before anyone knocks at the door,
we can only pray
upon tatami mats.

Like you,
my beard grows wild.
Like you,
I am tired, growing old.
As the imam once said,
I should have died young.

But your mother, lost in memory,
did not return all night.
Every woman in a black hijab

⁶ Moham Wang is a writer, researcher, and visual artist whose work focuses on migration, identity, memory, and cross-cultural encounters. He works across literature and visual practice, with current research in art, media, and transcultural studies.

has never forgiven your betrayal.

You can no longer see

the face of the sun.

Every sun has taken turns

to arrive.

Before the gate of the old king,

when everyone lowered

their gentle heads,

you looked up and happened to see—

the hesitant crescent,

edged with light,

like a sickle,

slitting open the truth:

Revenge

must not exceed the wound.

Tolerance

stands above revenge.

—Qur'an 16:126

Nagat M. Elamin⁷
The Last House in Kouri

In my grandfather Hassan Musa Abu Kurog's house, may Allah have mercy on him, in the village of Kouri in Northern Sudan, there was a large room that felt like a world of its own. Along its circular walls stood rows of old metal containers, beside wooden cups and traditional serving dishes worn smooth by years of use. In one corner rested a large wooden chest carrying the lingering scent of mahlab and old perfumes, filled with objects that, to us as children, seemed like mysterious treasures from another age.

Among those belongings were letters my grandfather used to send home from Upper Sudan, where he worked for many years. Before that, he had been a train driver, later moving on to work in the Suki Agricultural Project. I still remember one small letter among them, written by my only uncle, Wadaa, may Allah rest his soul, who died in the bloom of youth sometime during the 1940s. In that letter, he asked his father to bring him an embroidered waistcoat when returning home.

That room was our kingdom as grandchildren. We spent endless hours searching through its forgotten corners, uncovering objects whose purpose we could never understand, yet which ignited our imagination and opened secret doors into worlds far closer to myth than reality. Perhaps the true beauty of childhood lies in its extraordinary ability to transform the ordinary into wonder.

Years passed, decades rolled by, and time eventually swallowed my grandfather's house in Kouri—though not time alone. The Nile, which had

⁷ Dr. Nagat Elamin is a Sudanese writer whose work moves between memory, storytelling, and reflections on society, identity, and belonging. With a background in Arabic literature, theatre criticism, and university teaching, she has spent decades working in education, research, and cultural engagement across Sudan, Malaysia, and Qatar. Her writing is deeply rooted in lived experience, often revisiting childhood landscapes, migration, family histories, and the fragile relationship between people, place, and memory. Through her work, she seeks to preserve the small human stories that time often tries to erase.

nourished the village and sustained generations of life along its banks, had quietly begun redrawing its own boundaries. Season after season, year after year, the powerful current struck against the fragile riverbanks, slowly carving away the earth beneath the village. The destruction came with such cruel patience that no one fully grasped what was happening until it was already too late. Little by little, the river advanced, swallowing fields, trees, homes, and eventually entire pieces of memory itself.

In the end, the people of Kouri were forced to abandon the old village and rebuild farther away toward the desert, fleeing the same river they had loved for generations. My grandfather's house disappeared with it. We stopped going there, yet houses do not truly vanish when they continue living inside memory. The details of that place remain carefully preserved within me, like an old sealed chest protecting a vanished world—the years spent under the warmth of my gentle grandfather who loved us deeply, and my grandmother Nafisa Ahmed Nail, whose quiet presence gave the house its own unique peace.

I also remember my grandmother Raya, the grandmother shared by both my mother and father, and I remember that small village surrounded by endless sands, whose only signs of civilization were a modest primary school and a grain mill. Despite its simplicity, it contained an entire universe. Kouri, with all its smallest details, remains deeply rooted within me, as though it were the first homeland the heart can never truly abandon.

Time turned its wheel, and one day I myself became a grandmother to three grandchildren.

They now come to our own house, yet our home bears little resemblance to the villages of Northern Sudan. It carries none of the scent of mahlab, none of the warmth of Kouri's courtyard. It stands in a chosen exile, far away from that land, resembling it in nothing—except for one strange universal secret that makes children, in every generation, repeat the same rituals.

My grandchildren come and do exactly what we once did long ago. They search through drawers and hidden corners, hunting for forgotten objects

their mother stores with us because her own apartment is too small. Over time, our home became, in their imagination, a magical place where beautiful things mysteriously appear. One day, the youngest said to her mother, “Let’s go to Grandpa’s house so we can buy things.” We laughed when she explained that nothing was being sold there—she had simply left her belongings with us.

During their last holiday visit, they told me very seriously that a ghost lived in the house, and that they refused to go upstairs alone. They then narrated an elaborate story about this mysterious ghost, whom they named Ben—borrowing the name, no doubt, from their uncle, who had planted fear inside their wonderfully fertile imaginations.

This year, my daughter moved with her children to yet another distant land, while I returned home alone. For the first time, we spent Eid without them. It was a strangely silent Eid, emptied of their laughter, their playful chaos, and their endless stories about the ghost supposedly living upstairs.

Yet little Hemo, as always, refused to leave without leaving behind traces of himself—just as we once did in childhood. He dipped his small hands into a forgotten tin of paint and pressed them against the white walls, leaving bright blue handprints that seemed less like stains and more like a child’s quiet rebellion against forgetting—his own innocent way of saying: I existed here. Remember me.

And suddenly I understood that what human beings pass on to future generations is not merely houses or possessions.

We pass on rituals.

We pass on curiosity.

We pass on imagination.

We pass on the quiet desire to leave proof behind that we once existed.

Always remember this truth:

What time takes away is never truly lost.

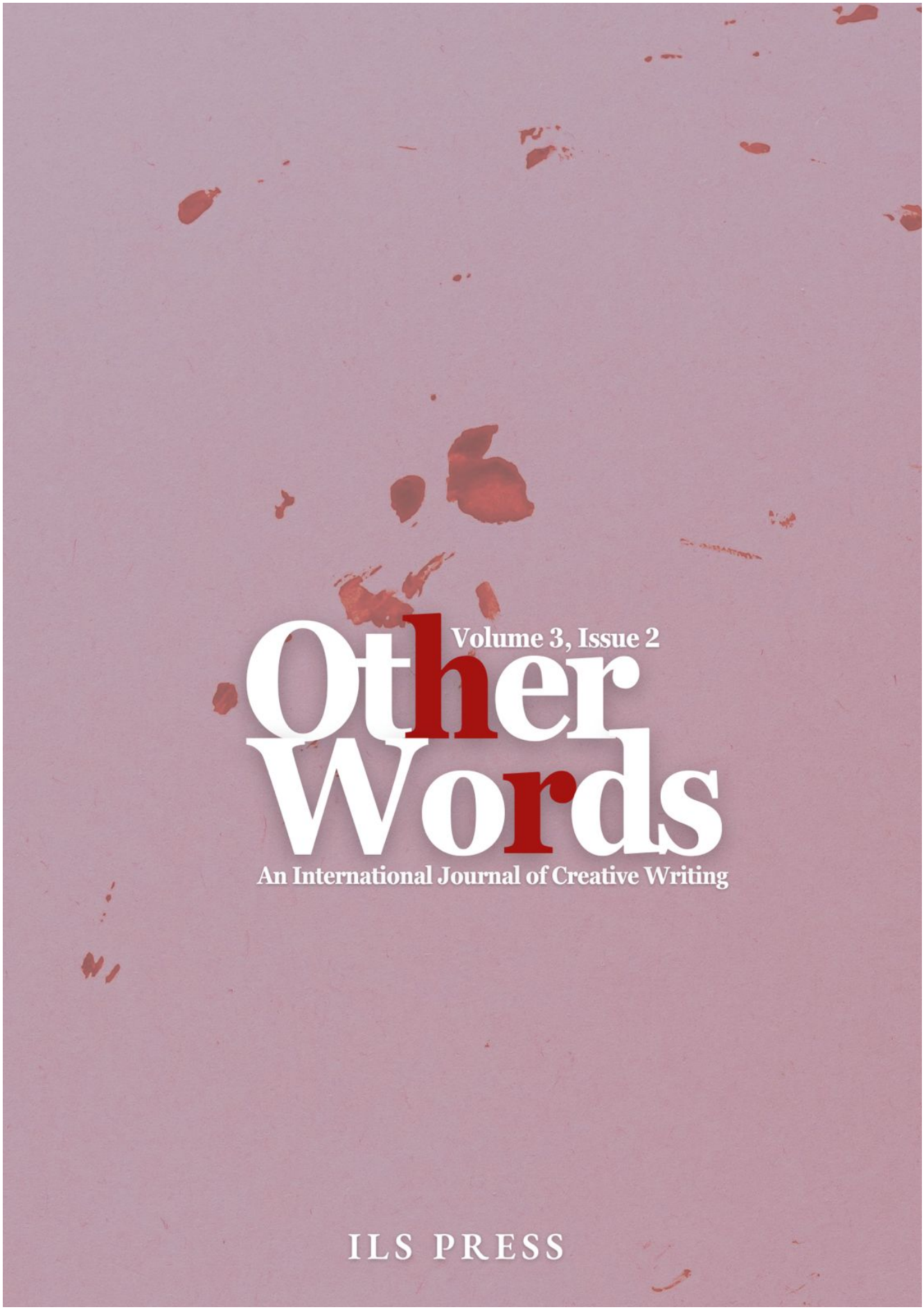
Memory is what remains—the inheritance we carry forward when places disappear, houses collapse, and even rivers rewrite the land beneath our feet.

Perhaps that is what the house in Kaori meant. Perhaps that is what the Nile left behind.

Not walls.

Not houses.

But us.

The background of the cover is a light pink color, decorated with numerous red ink splatters and blotches of varying sizes and shapes, scattered across the entire surface.

Other Words

Volume 3, Issue 2

An International Journal of Creative Writing

ILS PRESS