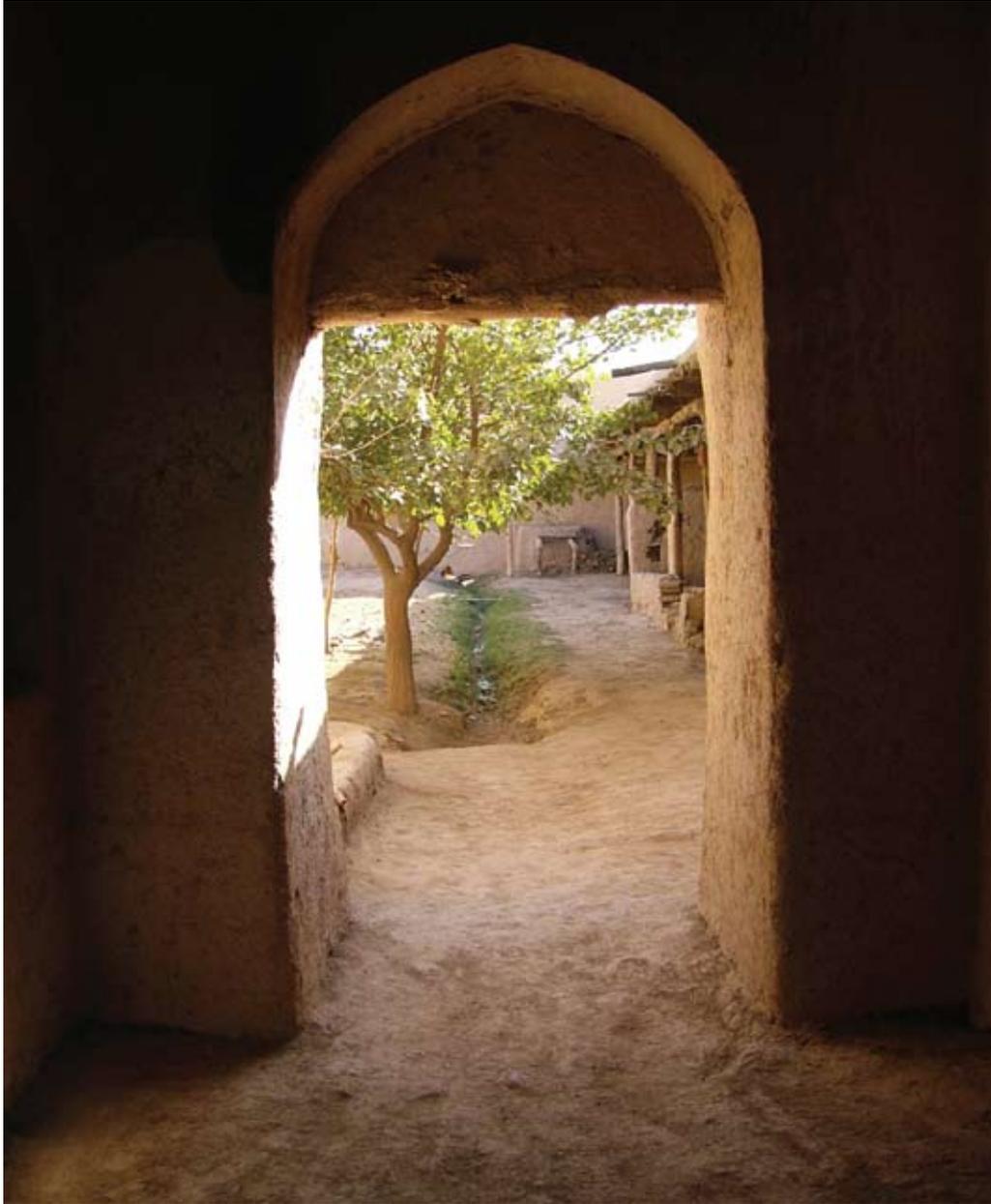


# exiled ink



**Oppressed Coverage • Through the Shadows • Adonis  
Crossing Languages • Hispanoamerican Women's  
Memory Group • Disturbances in Being • Reviews**

Winter 2010/17

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# Editorial

Exiled Writers Ink congratulates Howard Jacobson, one of our patrons, on his great achievement of winning the 2010 Man Booker Prize for his novel 'Finkler's List'.

As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, the number of wars around the world seems to have increased. We do not see the lasting scars to the fabric of societies, the destruction of cultures, the hurt and the birth of hostility of generations to come. However, it is the written word which provides a more lasting and deeper impact on our sensibilities. The main section of this issue, entitled 'Oppressed Coverage', refers to the demonisation of certain countries and groups by the media yet the literary work by writers who have fled Afghanistan, Iran and Yemen provides personal insights, some of which contest the impressions portrayed by the media. Yemen is represented by the courageous writer and poet, Mogib Hassan, whose activism and journalistic writings on human rights and the empowerment of women made him the recent target of an assassination attempt which resulted in serious injury. The section 'Crossing Languages' tells of relationships between exiled writers as strangers in a strange land where displacement of place, language and culture brings challenges and revelations. Translation, interpretation and conveying the nuances of expression and of feelings are complex tasks which were explored in the recent encounter between the Chinese poet, Yang Lian and the Arab poet, Adonis. Both challenge the notion of poets being defined solely on the basis of their country of origin and of their status as exiles, instead suggesting that their poetry transcends these identity categories. The section 'Disturbances in Being' includes 'My Silk Road' by Tania Tamari Nasir, which links the revival of traditional Palestinian embroidery in exile with feelings of longing and nostalgia for the lost homeland. Memory is also fundamental for the members of the HispanoAmerican Women's Memory Group whose aim is to explore and develop their social and historical memory from a literary perspective.

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ENGLAND

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# Oppressed Coverage

This section is entitled 'Oppressed Coverage' because of the media representation of certain countries and of Muslims' beliefs and civilisation. 'Oppressed Coverage' is the title of a poem by Shamshad Khan. Here, we include work by writers from demonised countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Yemen and by those of Muslim heritage.

## AFGHANISTAN

*This section is dedicated to the memory of Berang Kohdamani, the prominent Afghan poet who was exiled in London*

### In the Name of Kabul

*Berang Kohdamani*

*Translated from Dari by Suhaila Ismat and Jennifer Langer*

My presence is here but  
My heart reposes in the alleyways of Kabul

My tongue utters its name  
My lips sing an anthem of Kabul

Trees shrouded in inky-blue  
Years, months, weeks, days, mourning Kabul

Oh traveller! Traverse my town silently  
For in mourning is Kabul

He who is cognisant with its streets, its palaces  
Murmurs 'Where am I?' Kabul

Oh God, you who are both benevolent and wrathful,  
Your munificence is disposed elsewhere, your anger vented on  
Kabul

Mother of Rostam undeserving of this cruelty  
Undeserving of this affliction, Kabul

It groans, screams, shouts, this was not pre-ordained  
Dark days, dark times, sombre days, the destiny and misery of  
Kabul

The plant of sadness alone grows in the deserts of its memories  
Mourning is the morning of Kabul, lamentation is the night of  
Kabul

All ventures are with beginning and end  
A venture without conclusion is Kabul

The hand of God must surely intervene  
The hand of Satan powerless to assuage the agony of Kabul

The living are miserable and wretched  
The sorrowless are the deceased of Kabul

Died before their time, without healer, without remedy  
The sick children and orphans of Kabul

It should be unshackled from destruction and annihilation  
My permanence, your permanence, is the permanence of Kabul

At dawn, the water seller bears his parched goatskin  
He dreams of water, the water-seller of Kabul.

From annihilation, liberate Kabul, may its citizens survive.  
If I live out all my days, so too surely will Kabul.



*All the photographs of Afghanistan are by Suhaila Ismat who took them on a recent trip there.*

# The Generation of War

*Ahmad Masood Wahed*

*The peak of Islam, the heart of Asia  
Forever free the land of Arians*

**T**hese are lines from one of the hundreds of national anthems Afghans have sung throughout the centuries. This poor nation has saluted hundreds of colours and shapes of flags, and danced to thousands of various songs composed by the sound of the gun. During the political history of Afghanistan, this tired nation has witnessed the most horrific and notorious scenes that have shaped the culture of this prosperous land. This nation has been under the command of such brutal powers that civilians were hardly allowed to breathe and speak up against the crimes committed by the hands of religious warlords in their own homeland.

Today the world calls for human rights, the end of slavery, and the promotion of democracy, but what has happened in Afghanistan during the past thirty years can never be justified. It is even more difficult to understand unless you ask an Afghan mother, whose sweetest possession has been killed in front of her eyes, or an Afghan father, sitting side by side with his son, whilst witnessing bullets heaving out of a gun, or an Afghan child, unable to recognise the dead bodies of his or her parents. The stories are countless.

The world has since defended the war in Afghanistan, as an ethical struggle. Some have even branded it a religious war or the war of ideologies managed by the hands of outsiders. Well, they could be right, but whom really should we Afghans blame? Should we point the finger at the so-called 'outsiders' who intervene in our political system in order to fulfil their political and strategic objectives? Should we blame religion as the source of tension? Yet, there is only one religion in Afghanistan, which is Islam, and 99.9% of the population are Muslims. Should we blame our own selfishness?

I was taught, along with all the other children starting school in Afghanistan that the reason for war in our homeland was due to the hands of the West and outsiders. They forced us to fight each other, killing our fathers and brothers, burning each other's homes and lands. We were taught that our belief in Allah and Islam is our beginning and our end. We were told how to hate Pashtuns, who in turn were told to hate Tajiks, who were then told to hate Hazaras. We have always remained in darkness and on the other side of reality. Now, imagine a child who grew up under the laws of a strict Islamic country. Could he or she ever be able to rationalise the concept, "Why have we fought each other then if Islam speaks of brotherhood and friendship? Why have we not defeated those who try to create tensions between two brothers?" It is a matter of belief, not reality. In the early 90s, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was divided into four parts, with many parties claiming their victory over Russia, even though each one of them had fought shoulder to shoulder with the Russians. Every single faction created their own political agenda and beliefs, including national anthems, flags, style of extreme Islamic rule and law and even various Afghani currencies.

In fact, to understand the reality, we should instead look to the hands of outsiders, dividing us apart, so that we fight each other under the name of hatred. Shias fighting Sunnis, Pashtuns fighting Tajiks, Hazaras fighting Uzbeks; it was all about superiority and selfishness. We fought each other but never understood why. We killed each other by the guns of others but never understood why. It was not hard for us to be one and united as we stood against the Soviet Union and not listen to what others were telling us to do, or telling us who was to be killed. It was all our own naivety, particularly our belief in our leaders who throughout the decades claimed to be brave, great warriors or the model of a real Islam. No, they have never been and never will be. These people have always used Islam as a shelter or as an excuse to deceive a nation, a nation that never had the chance to see the reality.

I, as an Afghan from a new generation of war, strongly believe that our leaders who are still, somehow, allowed to walk free in every corner of this unfortunate country are responsible for all the atrocities and bloodshed. It is not the fault of outsiders; our religious leaders have in fact deliberately exiled millions of Afghans, destroyed all aspects of a prosperous society and killed thousands of innocent civilians. Today, we Afghans are still waiting for a chance to see these faces prosecuted at the hands of our own people, and finally brought to justice for all the suffering they have caused, and this innocent nation once again start its new life under the mantle of love, justice and respect, not the yoke of guns and the sound of fire!!





## Sigh of Exile

*Karim Haidari*

A tumbling scrap of paper  
Where destiny is written  
In the confusion of autumn wind

The axe of exile crosses my faith  
One soul shatters to thousand pieces  
Crystal beads scatter on a marble floor

Empty hands stretch to nothingness  
Like a soldier in a battlefield, not armed:  
Common days turned vicious enemy.

The never easing pain of desire  
The never healing bruise of longing  
For the warmth of my lost home

A voice from an untraceable past  
A smile from a promising future  
Bare possession of exile, fading

Exasperated shadow in the air  
Of all those great expectations  
A resonating soul remained

Lacking silence, my head echoes  
The torment of constant noise  
At the cost of sleepless nights

Redemption for sins not committed  
Mercy for wounds not witnessed  
Where is the door for such appealing?

Hey ears of the uppermost  
I wouldn't call you for nothing  
Shambles of faith are repeating

In the crowd of papers my word fails  
Like exile under grey ashes, evaporates  
Oh, this flame of silent exclamation

The step to separation is bitter  
A caravan discontent with two worlds  
Lost, never arriving, never returning

# All the Almond Eyes

*Hasan Bamyani*

All the almond eyes in the world,  
All the sapling limbs, all the lips of wine,  
With one of your shoes you vanquish

In your light like the evening stars,  
In the white flash of your lightning,  
The dark of my night is banished

With your candlelight on my table,  
With your moonlight in my sky,  
All spells and snares shall be vanquished

With you as my muse, my words  
Shall outshine our greatest bards,  
Even Hafiz himself shall be vanquished

By Zuleika's beauty ravished,  
Yussuf's seemly silence vanished:  
So your beauty ravishes me

So I shall proclaim your name  
On each step and stair of my fame  
And the stones on my path shall vanish

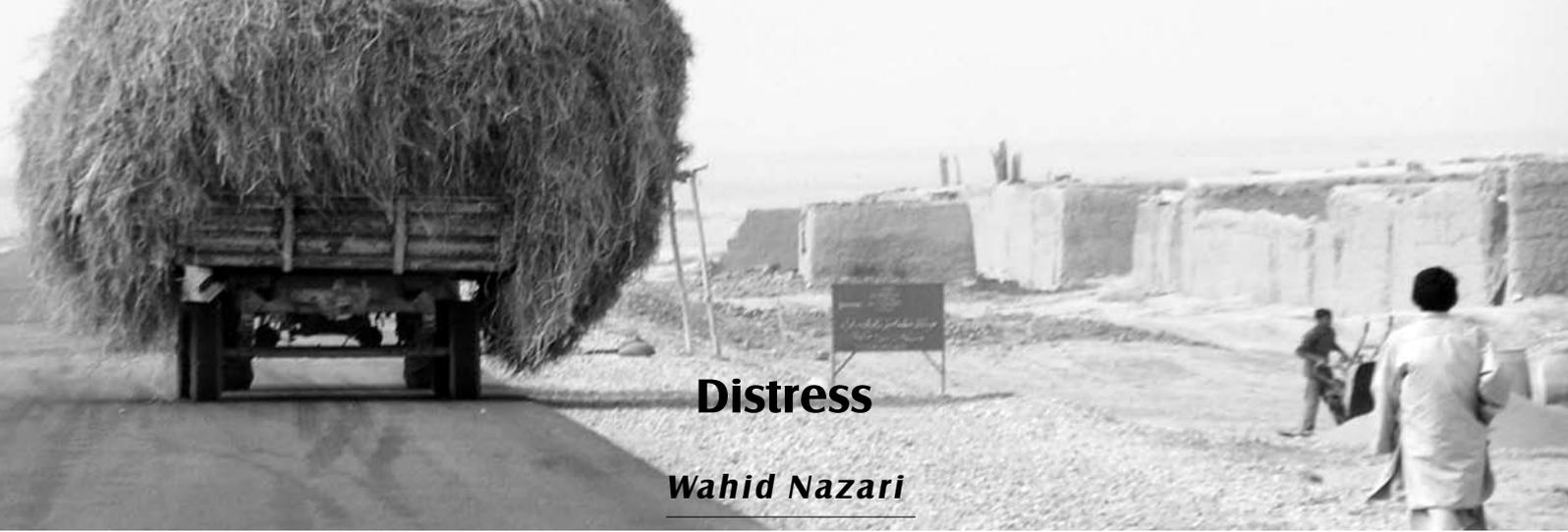
Like a nightingale caged, I languish  
Alone and apart in my anguish,  
But the highest tower I'll vanquish

My empty heart you'll replenish,  
And each of my lines I'll embellish  
With only the M of your name

You are the only goddess I cherish,  
All other religions I banish:  
You are the whole of my law

*The story of Zuleika, Potiphar's wife, and Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, is well known from Genesis. The story also figures in the Koran (Sura 12), where it ends happily, with Joseph many years later forgiving Zuleika and making her his wife. 'Zuleika and Yussuf' is perhaps the most famous of the Haft Awrang (Seven Stories) of Jami, the last great classic Persian poet (1414-1492). In Jami's version Yussuf has always recognised Zuleika's true virtue, and returned her love in a pure form; and when at last she repents of having put him before God she is forgiven, and set beside him as his betrothed.*





## Distress

**Wahid Nazari**

*Translated by Karim Haidari*

“Oh God, what’s going to happen?” I was smoking one cigarette after another. I wished I could meet someone, no matter what tribe or race, someone whose language I can understand. A Pakistani or a Hindi would do just the same. I knew a few words in Urdu from the Indian films; I could put them in practice.

It was my tough luck that they sent me to a village where I didn’t know anyone. I understood no German either. I had neither radio nor television to keep myself busy. Obviously, I was unemployed. I had a small traveller’s chessboard. But I couldn’t checkmate myself all day long. I had no option but to walk about on the streets without a purpose, sometimes kicking empty cans unintentionally.

It was my third day in the village when I noticed a black man walking on the other side of the street. He was walking with an athletic pace; I had to run to catch up with him. He saw me and discovered that I was going to ask him something. I found his smile very welcoming.

“Where are you from?”

I quickly responded, “Afghan.”

That’s all the English I knew. He said something which I didn’t understand. But I repeatedly said ‘yes, yes’. He realised that I didn’t speak English. He smiled; I saw his perfectly shaped white teeth for the first time.

“Schper ken zai Deutch?” He asked.

“No, Farsi yes, Pashto yes, Urdu small small yes.”

He raised his shoulders which I interpreted as “I don’t speak these languages.”

I asked him “Afghan here?” At first, he didn’t understand but he worked it out quickly and smiled again. He explained, with a sign language used between vocal people who don’t understand each other’s language, that there isn’t an Afghan in this village but a few kilometres away there’s one living in a similarly small village. He showed me the bus stop nearby and made me understand that there’s a bus every two hours. He wrote the name of the Afghan and his village on a piece of paper. The black man said goodbye and left. I went to the bus stop and waited there for a few minutes. Then I thought it’s late, so I decided to go there in the morning of the next day.

I could hardly sleep that night. The excitement was making my blood flow faster. I got up early and left the house. I went to the bus stop, an hour passed then another but there was no sign of a bus. There was a couple passing by who said something to me that I didn’t understand. The man came closer and continued his speech to my deaf ears. It took him a while before he retreated to his sign language skill. Eventually, I understood that buses were not operating during weekends.

I started walking towards the direction that the black guy indicated the day before. I showed the paper to every person coming from the opposite direction. They were all saying to go further. I arrived at the village after what seemed like hours of walking. I went to the children playing near the little square and showed them the paper. One of them stretched his arms towards me as if holding a gun and shouted ‘boom, boom, boom’. The second one pulled my sleeve and made me follow him. We stood before a door which barely held any paint. The boy pressed the buzzer. Soon, a man appeared with traditional Afghan clothes in the door with messy hair. It was him, my own Afghan. I could tell from his pale face. I wanted to hug him. But he was staring at me. I greeted him. He returned my greetings, ‘Can I help you?’

I said, ‘Yes, I want to see you.’ I explained where I lived and how I found out about him. He gave me a hug, invited me to his house and brought tea. But it dawned on me that he didn’t like talking. He was yawning after each sentence. We exchanged a few questions asking where we were from and how long have we been here. There was a long silence which I began to find uncomfortable.

‘It has been quite a few days since I listened to the radio. Have you heard anything?’

He was cold and quick to respond: ‘I don’t listen to the radio, and I don’t like politics.’

I thought if he doesn’t like politics, he must be into literature. I asked him, ‘Have you got any new books, magazines or papers’.

‘What books are you referring to? The books being published these days are nonsense.’ He didn’t say anything else. I understood that he doesn’t like talking about literature either. Silence spread across the room again. I remembered my traveller’s chessboard. I took it out of my pocket and set my side of the board. He didn’t move. I set his side of the board too. ‘Would you like to play a game of chess?’ He closed his lips together and shook his head regretfully, ‘It’s a pity, people waste their time on something meaningless like this.’ I left the chessboard as it was and took out the packet of cigarette from my pocket. ‘Would you like a cigarette?’ He wasn’t impressed, ‘I don’t smoke.’ I waited for him to bring me an ashtray, he turned a blind eye and I didn’t light my cigarette.

It had been a couple of hours since I arrived at his house. I wondered what to say or talk about. I started yawning too. Another idea hit me soon, ‘Let’s go for a walk, the weather is nice outside.’ All I needed was an edge, a breakthrough to get things going. But he was cold as ever, ‘There’s nowhere to go.’

## Love Offering

I made a garland  
of tears, of blood,  
like the beads of rubies  
to adorn your beautiful neck.  
This garland, a lovely present,  
an offering of my love  
for your acceptance,  
to embrace me lovely!

## Black Storms

My caravan with colours and fragrances  
was looted completely.  
The spring left me like a lotus with a spot  
on its heart alone in desert.  
The black storms of autumn are all around  
my life.  
So, I couldn't see the difference  
between the spring and autumn.

## The Night Letter (*Shabnaama*)

Ayesha Ali Tarzi

*Extract from her unpublished novel*

*Shabnaama is a tale of love and courage set against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. This was a time when rape, torture, summary executions and other atrocities, such as using the living for target practice or burying them alive, were all commonplace occurrences. It is the story of a young Afghan named Murad and of the girl he loves.*

**D**

inner was a ghastly affair, fraught with tension. My father tried to keep up the conversation, but failed miserably as we, his sons, sat in stony silence, picking at our food. Finally as Fairuza was removing the dishes, my father looked at us: 'Anyone for chess?' Or shall we play backgammon?'

'I'm busy, I'm meeting some friends,' Kassem muttered 'I'll be leaving after I've had a cup of tea.'

'I'll play a game of chess, if you like Father', I grinned, 'provided you let me win'.

We sat peacefully in the soft damp glow – two men, one young, one old, both concentrating on the ebony and ivory chessmen, that stood like guards of honour on the chequered marble table.

The front door slammed.

In answer to my father's unspoken question, I said softly: 'That must be Kassem, I wonder where he is headed. Who else will be there.....?'

Deep in thought, I made a wrong move and laid myself open to attack. 'I suppose these meetings your brother attends so faithfully are of a political nature.'

My father twirled the ivory queen, between his thumb and forefinger. 'It would be much better, if once in a while, he remembered Allah and said his prayers or read the Holy Koran. It would put him on the right path he seems to have lost his bearings.' My father's tone was incisive. He slammed down the queen. 'Enough, I'm sorry, I have a headache. Goodnight Murad Jan.' He rose and left the room.



Much later, lying in bed, I heard voices. I padded softly to the wind in the darkness. A few black shapes huddled in a group were vaguely discernible in the pallid moonlight. A shadow detached itself and I heard a man's voice, faintly through the closed window:

'Next week then. It will be our turn. I'll see you on Wednesday.'

Kassem raised his hand and waved. He crossed the lawn stealthily, a silent shadow and let himself in. I moved quickly away from the window and jumped into bed, feigning sleep. The door opened and Kassem entered. The click of the lamp switch and its faint glow seeping through my eyelids was the last thing I remembered.

The hall light blazed bright and cheerless. The chandeliers and floor lamps glittered like chunks of crystal, as they winked at their dazzling icy counterparts, reflected in the huge silver-framed mirrors. The carpet underfoot was of the purest white. Chairs covered in black leather were scattered at intervals around the hall.

They were all there. My father, Kassem, Shaima, her parents, some of Kassem's friends and other young men dressed in army fatigues, looking strangely incongruous in the splendour of their surroundings. I stared in horror. Shaima was in a pitiful state. Her thick mane of glossy black hair was dishevelled and the sleeve of her emerald blouse was torn. A burly man in fatigues held her arm in a vice-like grip.

'Why are they holding Shaima? What has she done? How can you do that?'

I looked at my brother, a part of my mind registering the strange act that Kassem was also clad in army fatigues and black army boots. He stared at me insolently, idly toying with revolver.

'Kassem, did you hear what I said,' I snapped furiously.

'Shut up you fool!' Kassem lashed out like an enraged scorpion, intent on striking, 'nobody has done anything to her yet.....' He moved angrily and the click of the released safety catch reverberated like a clap of thunder.

'Why?' I was beside myself with anger.

'Be silent Murad! You don't understand. Listen ..... .' he paused. When he spoke again his tone had changed, anger had given way to malevolence. 'Listen,' he hissed, 'remember, our turn has come. Nothing and no one can stop us.... no one. Wednesday is our day, the day of reckoning. You will see rivers of blood flowing through the streets, Murad and you will be sorry, very sorry, but it will be too late.'

His mouth slammed shut.

I stared stricken at the stranger standing in front of me, mouthing threats. This was not Kassem. This was not the brother who had taught me to shoot, fish and climb trees. There was a slight movement behind me and a second later, I heard my father's voice, not raised, but quiet as usual:

'Kassem! Is this what you have come to? Is this my reward for trying to raise you as a decent human being, as a man of honour and integrity? Answer me if you can.' His voice shook

slightly as he addressed his recalcitrant son. 'Is this how you repay me?'

'Be silent old man! Don't interfere in matters of which you know nothing. Go back to your musty books and fancy writing.'

Kassem! The shout was torn from my throat.

'Let him be. Say no more. May Allah forgive him.'

I glanced down at Father's frail hand laid on my arm in warning. The old man's eyes glistened and I felt the tremor, which shook his slight frame.

'We, The People's Court have found Osman son of Karim, guilty and have decreed that Osman the traitor and his dependents be executed in atonement for the offences committed against us,' a young man intoned solemnly. He stopped and peered at the paper he was holding and continued, 'these criminals will be executed in this courtroom, in full view of all those present.' He peered over his steel-rimmed glasses expectantly at Kassem.

'Bring me a knife!' Kassem snapped. A man leapt forward holding a black leather case. As Kassem pressed the lock, the lid flew back to reveal a silver-hilted knife, its cruel blade shining under the bright lights.

The scene was that of an ancient frieze. No one moved, no one spoke. Suddenly Kassem moved. He grabbed Shaima by her sable hair, jerked her head back and in full view of the stricken gathering, he drew the blade across her throat. As the keen blade caressed her creamy skin, a thin red line appeared, heralding the tidal wave to follow. I could hear Shaima's blood pulsing as it gushed out in spurts onto the pristine carpet.

'No, no! Stop in the name of God, stop!' I heard the desperate echoes of grief, as they were torn from my throat.

Shaima lay broken on the snow, surrounded by flowers of flame. I saw everything in slow motion. One of Kassem's henchmen picked up a machine gun, with a graceful fluid gesture and showered the group with bullets. It seemed as though the gathering were practising some macabre dance. They threw up their arms, some jerked, some spun around or clutched at their hearts in an exaggerated manner, dictated no doubt by the gunner. They eventually collapsed on the no longer snowy carpet in untidy heaps. The ground shook, the walls trembled and the ceiling caved in. I fell to the ground, pinned down by a massive lamp. I could feel my mouth filling with grit and dust, choking slowly while all around me, the earthquake roared and tidal waves of blood swept the earth.

Murad, Murad, wake up!!' The nightlight glowed reassuringly, as my eyes flew open.

Kassem stood over me frowning.

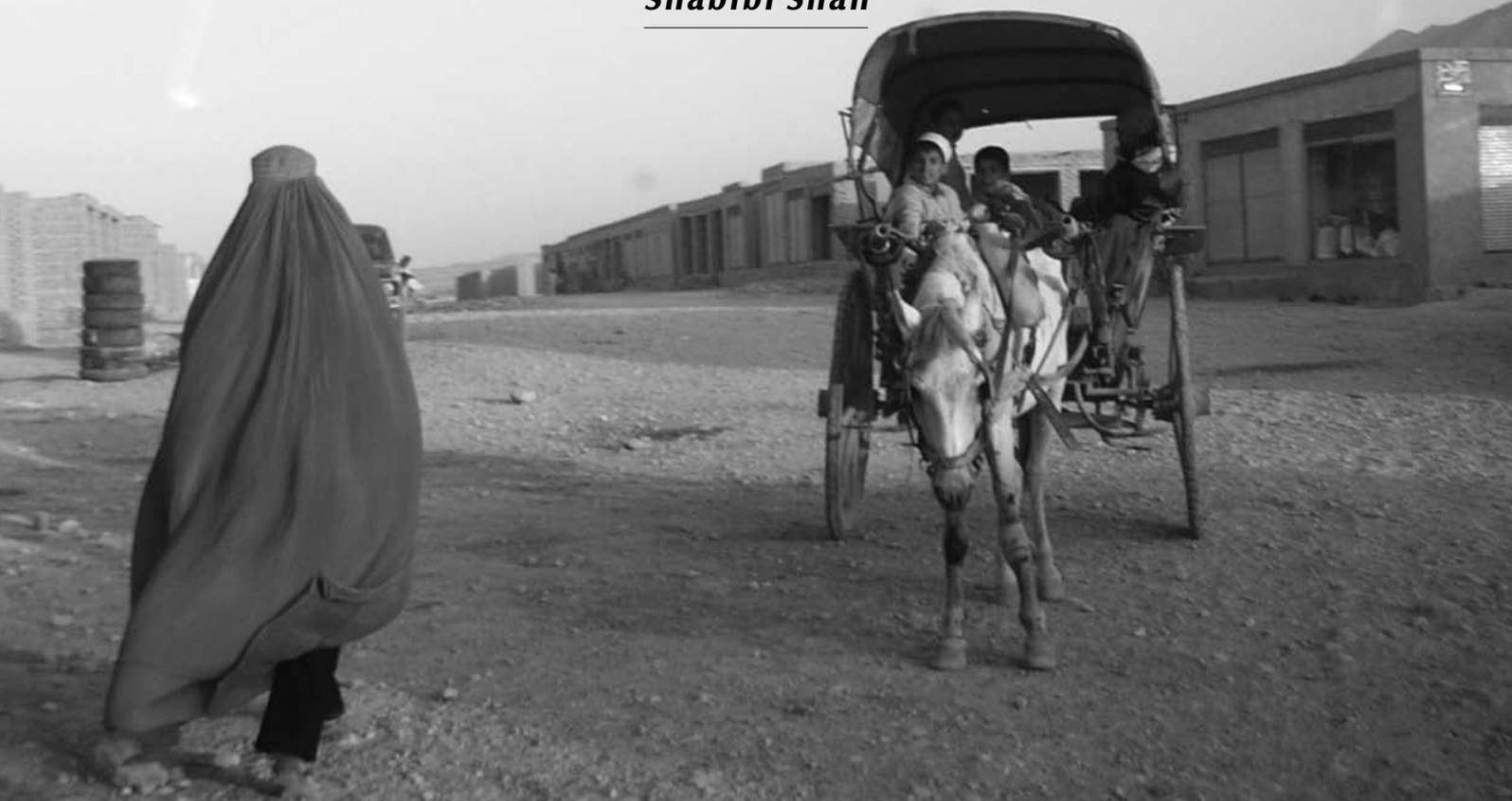
'Kassem, thank God you woke me,' I felt relieved. I was having a terrible dream, a nightmare.

'Honestly Murad, you are the limit! Try to be quiet; I need my sleep even if you don't.' Kassem's tone was dismissive. He got into bed, drew the covers up and turned to face the wall. I stared across the room thoughtfully at his outline under the sheets and switched off the light. After tossing and turning for a long time, I fell into a fitful sleep.

# The hidden face of Afghan women

## War, Afghanistan and Me

*Shabibi Shah*



W

hen I was young and immature I had a way of thinking, dreaming and wishing like all teenagers. One of my dreams was to be a politician in an impossibly man-made land of Afghanistan, in a land where such a thing could happen only in a dream for a woman. So I turned to journalism, another challenging career. I failed to be a journalist although I finished a four-year course and got my degree from Kabul University. I don't know why I had such a passion and admiration for politicians at that time, perhaps it was the way they dressed, talked, lived, convinced people, ran the government and directed people what to do or not to do. "Wow, what a bunch of clever people" I thought. Perhaps I was dreaming of having an upper-class luxurious lifestyle and be respected in society. I was brought up in a working-class family. Whatever the reason, it was definitely based on this childish and unrealistic wish of mine.

Now I am old enough to laugh at my naïve thinking and have also reached the point where I now know that politicians are not clever or ingenious. They are no better than any of us ordinary citizens. In fact, some of them possess less knowledge and wisdom than us. They just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And if they do misuse their power, they can mislead people to the point of no return which would have disastrous consequences. So I am glad that I am not a politician and I can clearly see from the perspective of ordinary human beings what a disaster they have created in the world in the last couple of years in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sometimes my British friends ask me about my opinion about the situation in Afghanistan. Most of the time, I keep quiet or occasionally explain what I think. But sadly it doesn't matter what anyone thinks. The policy makers inside or outside Afghanistan go ahead whatever anyone think. It is frustrating for me to see my beautiful country crumbling and not be able to do anything. Now I try to express my opinion openly in the media for British people to know what an Afghan woman, living in exile thinks. And I am grateful at least for the freedom one gets to voice their opinion in this democratic country. Would I be brave enough to do this in Afghanistan? No I don't think so.

Afghanistan is a mountainous land with over thirty different tribes, many unofficial languages, a complex history, background, culture and geographical independence which has always been hostile to invaders. It needs to be studied properly before any attempt of invasion. It is not a land that one can quickly fix. Afghans fight each other like lions but when it comes to the foreigners under any circumstances they unite against the common enemy.

Let me start with 9/11 and the involvement of America in Afghanistan. 9/11 was an inhumane, cowardly and shameful act of cruelty which placed its scars on the hearts of Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world. It affected so many people's personal lives and views and created more of a division between East and West. President Bush with his passionately hateful speech on TV in which he promised the world that he would not sleep until he had retaliated and found the perpetrator Osama Bin Laden, an Arab fugitive on Afghan soil. He bombed Afghanistan, a country that was burning already. Afghanistan desperately needed water. They got fire instead. All the while Osama was probably sitting in some cave in Pakistan laughing at Bush. Pakistan, who was and is allied with America, was the first to recognise the Taliban as a government, gave them full aid and support as well as trained them in their land. The Taliban butchered Afghan people for years, especially women. They destroyed the education system completely, burned schools, books, TV and radio. The world ignored their crimes and the American government tried to make a deal with Taliban to establish a pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. After the bombings and the overthrowing of the Taliban, suddenly America got fully involved with Afghanistan. I was amazed to see the world rushing to the motherless, under-developed land to help not knowing how. This was a country that was cut off from the rest of the world for so many years.

As far back as I can remember, every time the regime changes in Afghanistan (which has been four times in the last forty years) the first subject to catch people's attention is women. It's always the same pattern and this time is no exception. There is no doubt that women have suffered the most but the publicity was different this time. The Western media covered lots of issues about women's rights according to their own thinking. Rich American ladies rushed to show Afghan women their solidarity and tried hard to introduce an alien-like new culture to them by showing them how to dress and how to use make-up and look beautiful. I saw a documentary on TV at the beginning of the new regime where an American beautician felt sorry for Afghan women and rushed to Kabul to save them, to teach them how to make themselves beautiful, how to colour their hair and how to wear clothes or which outfit needed matching shoes and handbags. The young Afghan women starved of material things, giggling shyly, aware of the camera focusing on their scarless heads, did not know how to handle this unusual situation. They seemed happy. British women had a few meetings with Afghan women in London. I joined in one or two myself. They all talked about women's rights which applied outside Afghanistan. I saw a photo of a young Afghan policewoman on the back of a British magazine. I found all this sudden publicity bizarre and alarming. I am not against women's freedom. In fact I am one of those Af-

ghan women waiting for my dream of equality to come true in my lifetime. But this quick change and superficiality reminded me of our history in the 1920s when King Amanullah Khan wanted to bring about a quick change to the situation of women in a country where not even ten percent of the male population have a proper education. Even the thought or suggestion of women's emancipation was considered a crime at that time. Understandably, the young enthusiastic King failed to bring about any changes in the situation of women but lost his throne and escaped to Italy. Women stepped back into their prison again for the next four decades. The reason was of course lack of education in the whole country about which the young King was unaware or maybe he just took a risk.

In the 1960s Prime Minister Mohammad Davoud cautiously went ahead with plans to change the women's situation once again, of course with the backing of religious leaders. It was a slow process although he concentrated more on women's education rather than superficial and materialistic things. It created minor unsettling which he handled very well. If the latest political movement in the 1980s had not happened, our young democracy - which was far from perfect by any means, may have changed the women's situation. Because the time was right and people were actually educated. Today as the world is a witness to the war, more than three decades and the civilisation collapsed in Afghanistan, we are not very far from 1920. Concentrating just on material things is not freedom for women. The roots of freedom for men and women should have a strong link with education. Why don't we learn from history? This is a history that has repeated itself many times over. I believe a slow and gradual process will have a much more positive result than rushing to an unknown area.

After the bombings in Afghanistan in 2001, the involvement of foreign governments brought about a huge change in people's lives. This sudden change did not give people enough time to adjust to this supposedly new democratic country. Afghanistan is not a democratic society and it will not be for a long time. Democracy without knowledge and education is anarchy and chaos. This is what they are practising right now in Afghanistan. We have to learn a culture of tolerance and shared responsibility first at this crucial time and we as women do not necessarily need to follow in the footsteps of the Western world just to feel equal to men. In most parts of Afghanistan, the interpretation of freedom for women is that of loose women. Afghanistan is a conservative country and we have a different culture and different needs for our society. We want equality in education, a social state, employment, respect and to be able to fit into our own culture rather than following the West. We need to stand up on our own two feet and work alongside our men and yes it will be a long struggle, but all this can happen with a good educational system set up for both men and women and which has been neglected for far too long. Having fashionable clothing, lipstick and make-up is not an Afghan woman's first priority at this particular time. The loss of culture can so quickly bring deep resentment to a situation. Sadly ironic is that after nine years of war they are now thinking of reconciliation with Taliban. Was not America's first step to bring equality to women? What is going to happen to women then?

## Leyla Sarahat Roshani

Translation: Leila Enayat-Seraj

### Estranged

When my famished, ardent gaze  
Halted at the threshold  
Of your frosted, stony eyes  
The brimming garden of my heart,  
Arid in disbelief, believed  
In their immense black loneliness!



### Cluster of Light

The cascade of your tears, Mother!  
Bright with cluster of light,  
Opened a tiny window,  
For my sad and despairing soul,  
To the end of the night's dark lane  
To the brightness of dawn.

## Shakila Azizzada

Translation: David Colmer

### Botanical Pond

It is not the will of gods  
That makes the leaves  
Rustle on this  
Most heavy-footed day  
Of spring  
So that you  
On the bank of Botanical Pond  
Might sing  
The wind  
Divine

It is cold  
The leaves of the banyan  
Are shivering  
From the plague-eaten bones  
Still settling  
Centuries later  
Between its roots

It was not the hand of gods  
No  
Not a single god  
Loved the woman  
Who leant against the trunk  
Of this tree  
Without contractions  
But bearing a daughter  
More delicate than the red lotus  
That has blocked  
Your view  
Of seven seas



### Sunset

The night is  
a sleepless widow  
in her throat  
a river of diamonds  
and a river of rubies  
flow past each other.

I press my breasts  
against her  
whether I want to or not  
whether I come or not.

I ride on the river of rubies.

The diamonds  
fall from my left shoulder  
one after the other.

Perhaps an enlightened hand  
on that river of diamonds  
is craving the curve  
of my breasts  
a hand that can never  
reach me.

I long for it to make love to me  
I turn red  
bead by bead  
I turn into a ruby  
and for miles I listen  
to 'to ba mani'. \*



I ride on the river of rubies.

*"To ba mani" is an Afghan song about a longing for an unreachable love.*

*Exiled Writers Ink is grateful to Ronald Bos of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, for organising the translation of the poems by Shakila Azizzada.*

# Poetry Round Table with Writers of Muslim Heritage

Claire Chambers

Leeds Metropolitan University hosted a public round-table discussion with three acclaimed poets of Muslim heritage in October 2010. These poets, Imtiaz Dharker, Moniza Alvi, and John Siddique, began the evening with readings from their work. The readings were followed by an hour-long discussion (which I chaired) about the writers' poetic output, themes, context, and literary form, and broader issues in relation to the prevalent demonisation and stereotyping of Muslims at this Manichaean political moment.<sup>1</sup> A lively question-and-answer session ensued from a diverse, enthusiastic, and intellectual audience of over forty people, mostly coming from outside the University, including visitors from Manchester, Middlesbrough, Cambridge, and Bradford. A former chair of Exiled Writers Ink, the Kurdish poet Choman Hardi, and the Iranian-British poet Mimi Khalvati, were also invited speakers at the event, but were unable to attend due to other commitments. This lent the event a greater intimacy and the space to discuss ideas with greater detail, but also confined its purview to the South-Asian context, rather than broadening it out to discussion of other parts of 'the Muslim world'.

Now to introduce the three poets who participated. Moniza Alvi is an acclaimed poet who was born in Lahore, Pakistan, the daughter of a Pakistani father and English mother, but moved to Britain aged six months, where she has lived ever since, although she recently moved from London to rural Norfolk. Alvi has published seven poetry collections, including the co-authored work *Peacock Luggage*, which she wrote with Peter Daniels after they shared the Poetry Business Prize in 1991, and *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993), an economical and evocative account of the joys and tribulations of a mixed-heritage childhood. Her most recent collections are *Split World: Poems 1990-2005*, which contains material from these five earlier books, and a new collection, *Europa*, both published in 2008. In the first part of *Europa*, Alvi provides a feminist reworking of mermaid legends; the central sequence, 'Europa and the Bull' reinterprets the founding myth of Europa; while the third section concentrates on migration. Rising British-Asian poetry star Daljit Nagra cites Alvi's *The Country at My Shoulder* alongside Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as one of his most important influences; he writes that reading it 'inspired me to think it was possible for someone to write about "Asians" and be successful in poetry'.<sup>2</sup> One important issue we explored in the round table is this relative lack of a British-Asian poetic canon, especially when compared with the burgeoning British-Asian fiction scene.

Imtiaz Dharker is a poet, artist and film-maker who has connections with and writes about Pakistan, India, and Britain in her five collections to date. Not one to sidestep controversial topics, Dharker is unequivocal in her condemnation of superstitions that attach to Islam, harming many people, particularly women.<sup>3</sup> She is equally frustrated by misrepresentations of Muslims' beliefs and civilization in the media,<sup>4</sup> writing: 'I don't belong inside / your cage of coverage. / I'm not in the news. / Get me out of here' (note too the incongruous, media-savvy nod to reality television programmes such as *I'm a Celebrity...*). This issue of a 'cage of coverage' is a recurring complaint by artists, intellectuals and scholars of Muslim heritage, such as Shamshad Khan, who uses similar language in her poem 'Oppressed Coverage'.<sup>5</sup> As such, media stereotyping was another key in our discussion, and I asked the poets, who are often assumed to be Muslim, how they feel about demands to act as spokespeople on issues relating to Islam and current events. Dharker famously tackles such attempts to pigeonhole her by describing herself, with ironic specificity, as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, brought up in a Lahori household in Glasgow, working in Bombay.<sup>6</sup> She now lives between India, London and Wales.

John Siddique was born in 1960s' Rochdale to an Irish Catholic mother and an Indian Muslim father. He is Salt's bestselling poet, and has written *Recital: An Almanac*, *Poems From A Northern Soul* and *The Prize*. He is the co-author of the story/memoir *Four Fathers*. He has contributed poems, stories, essays and articles to many publications, including *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *Poetry Review*, and *The Rialto*. *The Prize*, published to wide acclaim in 2005, was nominated for the Forward Prize. His children's book *Don't Wear It On Your Head, Don't Stick it Down Your Pants* was shortlisted for the CLPE Poetry Award in 2007. On its publication in 2009, Lauri Ramey of CSULA, called *Recital* 'one of the most important British poetry books of the last twenty years'. Jackie Kay describes Siddique's writ-

ing as 'A brilliant balancing act', a comment that resonates both in aesthetic terms, but also with Siddique's eloquent poetic representations of his mixture of Anglo-Irish and Indian/Pakistani roots. John Siddique was the British Council Writer-in-Residence at California State University, Los Angeles 2009. His recent commissions include pieces for Manchester Literature Festival & Art Gallery, Canterbury Poetry City, Blackpool Council, and Bradford Galleries & Museums/Alchemy/iMove/London 2012. His new book *Full Blood* will be published by Salt in April 2011.

In the round-table discussion, we deliberately used the term 'Muslim heritage' in order to subvert stereotypical reifications of 'Muslimness' as a unitary, unchanging identity. The term 'heritage' is not ideal, because it connotes the heritage industry and a somewhat ossifying sense of history, but on a positive note, it 'touches on a sense of what has come down to us from the past that we value and wish to pass on to the future'.<sup>7</sup> 'Heritage' was preferred to terms such as 'identity' or 'roots' because, as Mai Ghossoub illustrates,

[i]dentity and root presume a settled or pure essence; they thrive in times of trouble, often preceding them [...] 'A carrot is a root,' says my friend to her husband, who keeps nagging her about returning to his country, to his roots. 'I am not a carrot!' she keeps screaming back at him.<sup>8</sup>

The participating poets are certainly not root vegetables, in Ghossoub's sense, and Alvi and Siddique have especially wavy connections to the subcontinent, both of them being of mixed backgrounds and having only visited India and Pakistan for short periods. While all three described themselves as being influenced by Islam, they do not self-identify as Muslims and are interested in other forms of spirituality, including from Buddhist and Anglican traditions. We wanted to complicate the concept of authenticity, which is one that has dogged ethnic minority writers, leading to many feeling that they shoulder a burden of representation.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the lucidity of 'heritage's' associations with valuing the recognition of history's residues, is evident in the fact that each writer spontaneously chose to read a poem on India's Partition (1947). Imtiaz Dharker read 'Gaddi aa Gayi', concerning her family's refusal to discuss the violence of Partition and using words from a Punjabi song about a train coming into the station; an as-yet unpublished long poem was read by Moniza Alvi, about her father's brain-damaged younger brother who disappeared during the Partition exodus; and John Siddique read 'Variola', from his first collection, *The Prize*, a poem centring on his father's traumatic journey to Pakistan on India's Partition, during which his three sisters died of smallpox. It can be seen that even though none of the three poets is a refugee or an exile in the strictest use of the term, each has been shaped by family memories in which '[T]heir country / slipped out of their hands and broke / like a cup or an earthen pot'.<sup>10</sup> In the post-war on terror' world, more even than when Astri Suhrke first identified this,<sup>11</sup> the vast majority of refugees and asylum seekers are Muslims, or refugees in Muslim states. All three poets are even-handed, yet impassioned chroniclers of marginalised subjects, including women, Palestinians, Kashmiris, the working class, refugees, and migrants. While resisting attempts to constrict them in an emerging category of Muslim writing, all are aware of the civil liberties infringements,

material deprivation and social exclusion faced by people of Muslim heritage both in Britain and internationally.

I hope this article has demonstrated that the writers who are often identified by their Muslim heritage are producing some of the most nuanced and politically-engaged writing in the UK today. It has been a privilege to work with them and to learn from their creative works and in dialogue. An excerpt from a recent prose piece, 'Six Snapshots of Partition' by John Siddique, provides an apt conclusion. It dramatises issues relating to his father, Mohammed's, multiple exiles, from his country of birth (India), and the new nation to which his family fled on Partition (West Pakistan), and to the near-impossibility of communicating with his Irish wife (Siddique's mother), an immigrant from another partitioned country, Ireland:

They married in 1963. Her Irish ways didn't fit well into his house: he liked to read the paper, smoke cherry tobacco in his pipe and drink a bottle of Guinness in the evening. She liked to talk; mostly it seemed about the neighbours. They were incapable of making plans and they were hardly able to speak of the landscapes that had made them. They spent a few years having children and not knowing each other. They faced racism whenever they went out: people swore at them, spat at them. 'A Paki and an Irish woman – disgusting.' Norah's own father turned away from her for marrying 'a foreigner', and she grew to blame Mohammed.

<sup>1</sup> On media representations, see Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How we see the Rest of the World*. London: Vintage, 1997; 1981; Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002; and Sara Ahmed *Evaluating the Framing of Islam and Muslims Pre- and Post-9/11: A Contextual Analysis of Articles Published by the New York Times*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.daljitnagra.com/biography.php>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Dharker's first collection, *Purdah and Other Poems*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Imtiaz Dharker, *The Terrorist at my Table*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Shamshad Khan, 'Oppressed Coverage' (1991). *Megalomaniac*. Cambridge: Salt, 2007. 10.

<sup>6</sup> In 1995, Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai as part of a pro-Marathi program instituted by the ruling Shiv Sena party. Given Dharker's dislike of Shiv Senaite chauvinism, which she expressed at the round table, I follow her "Bombay" usage in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/heritage-studies/heritage.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Mai Ghoussoub, *Selected Writings*. London: Saqi, 2008. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> A.M. Sánchez-Arce "'Authenticism", or the Authority of Authenticity.' *Mosaic* 40:3 (2007). 139-55.

<sup>10</sup> Imtiaz Dharker, 'Gaddi aa Gayi'. *Leaving Fingerprints*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2009. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Astri Suhrke, 'Refugees and Asylum in the Muslim World'. Robin Cohen (ed.) *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 457-460.

<sup>12</sup> John Siddique, 'Six Snapshots of Partition.' *Granta* 20 October 2010. <http://www.granta.com/Online-Only/Six-Snapshots-of-Partition>

*The event was kindly supported by a British Academy Small Grant.*

## Variola John Siddique

When I was a child I would study your face  
Lying on your chest, 3 years old, tracing  
the long underside of your jawbone  
I am older than you now in your wedding pictures,  
you are so boyish, that heavy madman's brow  
like Lon Chaney - the wolfman, black eyes.

Your slim body and those massive hands. I don't remember  
being held by them, but I remember your face  
The tender flesh pushed in by my boy fingers  
Moulding your cheek, your nose, round those eyes.

Your skin pockmarked as a golf ball.  
Your face is a story you never told  
me except it was smallpox.  
You never spoke of the road to Pakistan,  
the loss of everything, the journey  
to Europe. I make those journeys but I don't know  
where you go

The gangly boy holding your sister's head.  
The smooth skinned hands holding their heads  
like nursing a baby. A whole family set on the road.  
My father's 3 sisters, my Aunties. Maybe its right  
that your names have been taken by the Punjabi  
night sky. A heavy blanket of constellations.  
Fat full moon watching you fall.

To the future produced by your fall.

No cloth of dreams. The impatient cries of 3 girls,  
11, 12, & 13. The road sweeps by their last breath.  
The cement trucks & the overladen  
buses sweep by where their names were lost  
they are only remembered by the dead now.

Eyes on the road  
Mule loaded backs  
Without thinking  
With burning feet  
Failing hands  
3 girls fall within days of each other

Survived by their parents  
& their brothers  
Mohammed & Rafiq  
Eyes to the North  
Loaded hearts  
Without thinking too much  
Pushing to the sea  
Extinguish the burning  
Becoming legal in Germany  
The lost man in the photos  
Working a way to England  
The lost boy in his face  
Without a permit they cross the borders  
The border of scar tissue  
Of a silent tongue  
Of missing family  
Of divided country  
Of a promise of a common wealth  
Of variola major  
Of language  
Of money  
Of race  
Of fear  
Those eyes like the wolfman  
The gate splintered  
The boundary of scar tissue  
Of silent tongue  
Of 3 lost futures  
3 more stars for the cloth  
Of 3 lost sisters  
Of 3 lost names  
Of lives who would have had families  
Of paths that have been fenced and border patrolled  
Of you & I & the living & the dead & politics  
& war & ideas of nation & a country & a continent,  
and, and, and I want to know something.  
I want to know the stories, before and now, and I see  
the borders in your eyes and it is for you to step into my  
country.

From 'The Prize' (Rialto)



## Better By Far

*Moniza Alvi*

By bus?

Better by far a magic carpet,  
finely knotted, richer

than blood, broad enough  
to keep the family together,

islanded, apart  
from every danger,

journeying swiftly  
across the unsegmented sky –

not in the cauldron of summer,  
but in the fresher feel

of the last of winter,  
the lucid mornings,

the greeny tinge  
of the evening air,

Nehru to wave them on  
and Jinnah to welcome them –

my grandmother, her pots and pans,  
her lamp close by,

her parcels of layered clothes,  
like mattresses,

Ahmed and Athar jostling for space,  
Rahila, Jamila, Shehana,

the 'little' sisters,  
a conspiracy of three,

with names, like mine  
all ending in 'a', young girls,

cross-legged, daydreaming,  
disentangling hello from goodbye.

**Author's note:** This is an extract from a poem-in-progress 'At the Time of Partition', inspired by the story of Athar, my father's younger brother. He suffered brain damage as a result of a childhood accident. Some years later he was one of the hundreds of thousands who disappeared at the time of Partition, never to be found again. My grandmother and her family made the crossing from India to the new country 'Pakistan' by bus.

## Pakistan

*Arsalan Isa*

I have no blood in these veins  
but words that run as coarse  
and dark as when they first  
encounter arteries of secrets  
that burst onto this page.

No mystery surrounds me  
but a Kashmiri shawl around  
my waist, hidden  
from an accusatory state.  
There are tears in my beard  
a twitch in this eye  
a limp in their feet  
as they step all over me  
I am cast again onto the street,  
destitute and delirious.

## White Tongue

*Laila Sumpton*

I hope they listen to my skin  
and stay blind to my white tongue.  
You said to lock it away with my smile,  
tuck it behind these "almost Desi" lips.

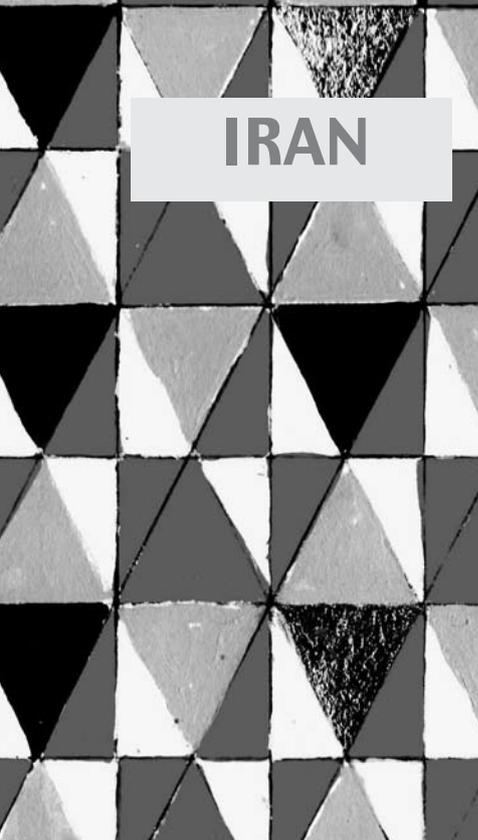
My visas are as true as my teeth  
but we'll hide them all,  
because the white tongue might flash  
and betray the flight path  
we tried to cover with factory blusher

"the shawls we swaddle you in  
are not to hide your pallor from sun,  
but to dye you *our* shade,  
so please unwax your skin."

The patterns puddle around me  
trying to tint my English feet  
and I walk through a palette I can't paint with,  
because each word comes out white.

Even these wrappers,  
that are worn to preserve,  
like frilled jam jar hats,  
slip if I lean at an obtuse angle.  
The mosquitoes aren't fooled,  
and Alsatian hackles rise  
as they sniff out my other half.

I need a new voice box from your Desi mill  
so I can chuff out the sounds you burn  
to fire your words.  
I need a spring coiled into my diaphragm  
so I can jump with your sentence skipping rope,  
make my intonation bhangra,  
so I don't get tangled at the check point  
or muffled back into your shawl.



# IRAN

## O Star

### *Leily Mossini*

*Based on the original by Leily Mossini with the support of Clare Shaw*

Say nothing, star – or they'll take you down.  
We all know the regime is rotten, but if you say  
it,  
they'll have you. In an instant. Dead.  
You know what that means, and it isn't good.  
So keep shining, star, but do not speak.

Keep your thoughts to yourself, little star.  
Don't shine too bright.  
They have you in their sights  
and you know what it is to be marked.  
All that sky - and nowhere to hide.

Not for you. Death waits for us all,  
it's true, but if you speak out,  
it will come. All the quicker. So hush.

Concern yourself only with light,  
with your twinkling.

There are men in their thousands,  
now looking.  
The mist hangs low in the garden.  
The stars are all hidden.  
They call for you, and you answer.

Then a door slams shut  
and the walls are white  
and you cannot lie down.  
There's a roof  
where the sky should be, and a light

that will never (however you scream)  
go out.

*image: Gabriella Hargrave*

## The Blood of Our Fathers

### *Angella Nazarian*

It was the metallic, salty  
smell of blood,  
fear's sweat  
and the staleness of hunger  
that lingered in the air  
the summer of my 10th birthday.

It was their feeble attempts—  
reining in the frightened lamb,  
its sharp thin cries,  
the struggle  
to tear itself from life's grip,  
the splattering of the blood  
on courtyard walls,

the stories I'd heard,  
of the binding of Isaac  
the blood sacrifice  
and the irony of the blaring truth  
that there is no mercy in mercy killing—  
even with a swift cut of the jugular—  
that made me feel oceans away  
from my father's life.

There wasn't a single landmark  
by which I could recognize  
his childhood world—  
a maze of rutted alleyways,  
the cool shade of willow trees  
and the imprint of carriage tracks  
on mud and stench.

I had never seen  
those mosaic fountains in courtyards,  
where generations sat on fine, silk rugs,  
listening to the hiss of the samovar

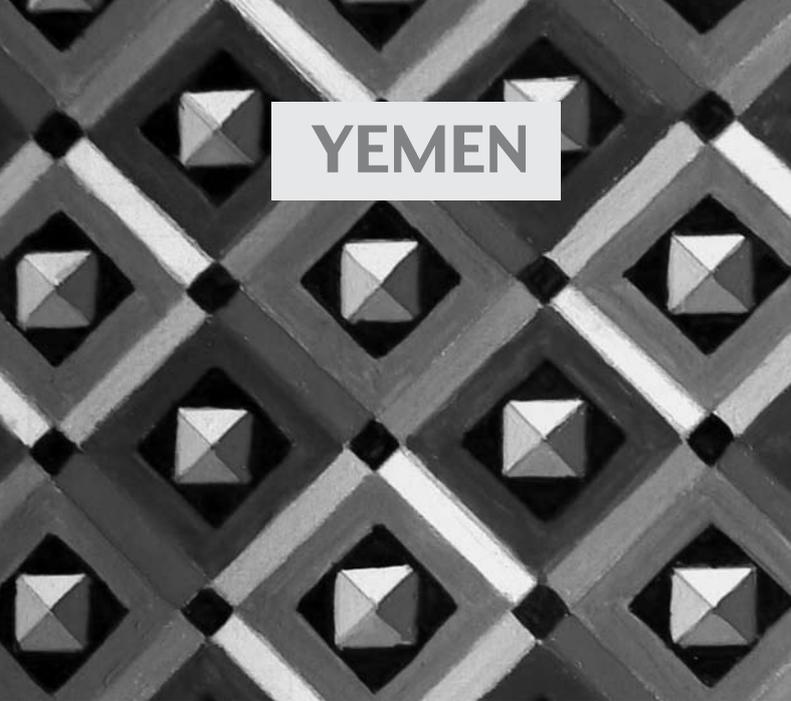
and playing with worry beads,  
sipping steaming cardamom, jasmine tea.

How could I recognize  
the clamouring of Bolshevik boots,  
the thousand people laying waste  
in the streets where my father walked?

It began that summer—  
the roar of tanks,  
sparks of fire in the streets,  
petrified voices, thin as thread,  
the thud of batons hitting flesh.

It began that summer—  
the look of murder on faces,  
the blood flowing in the streets,  
life, real life,  
not the storied tales passed down  
from generations back,  
the blowing of the ram's horn,  
the dry bones of the sacrificial lamb  
buried somewhere  
in the cold, hard earth.

There is a loss  
in knowing that my children, too,  
will never recognize  
the shapes of the world  
I left behind:  
the street peddlers  
hawking trinkets on carts,  
the taste of water-soaked walnuts,  
those bending birch trees lining my home,  
the gold fish swimming in shallow pools on New Year's day,  
and the dark crimson glow  
of the setting Caspian Sun.



# YEMEN

*image: Gabriella Hargrave*

## Suppression of Freedom of Speech, Regional Discrimination and Injustices

*Mogib Hassan*

It is a fact that the more democratic a state is, the more active civil societies are and that also means more press freedom. Sadly press freedom in Yemen since 2002 has shown a rapidly deteriorating trend, especially after the establishment of a special court for the trials of journalists and the closure of several newspapers and websites. There have been continuous arrests of and assaults against journalists, and in some cases journalists were killed. The government is always accused of being behind all this, though some see the Yemeni government as being in a challenged position, having to deal with many fronts - separatists and war in the north and the established presence of Al Qaeda in Yemen.

Yemen, however, remains protective of its international image and is sensitive to accusations of corruption. The regime has continued using the terrorist card after the election to target its political opposition. The Popular Forces Union Party reported the arrest of its party members and leaders. Many violations against non-governmental journalists in Yemen were recorded. Non-governmental journalists were harassed, kidnapped, beaten, stabbed, shot at, and threatened. The Committee to Protect Journalists noted, "The Yemeni government failed to conduct serious investigations or bring perpetrators to justice, and its leaders conspicuously failed to denounce the assaults. Witnesses and evidence point to involvement by government forces and suspected state agents in a number of assaults".

## Ashes of War

*Mogib Hassan*

Oh Lord above, what an ash of death,  
shattered bodies of a captive nation.

Oh Lord we have only you,  
in you we find our support.

The troops came to kill us,  
offering us gifts of grizzly death.

Our bleeding wounds of war never recovered,  
a cry vibrated through the sky,  
clattering the high saddened clouds  
that cried on the thirsty earth,  
sprouting bones.

Oh Lord, where are the crops and harvest?

Landmines are soldiers  
standing on the sidewalks  
grilling the skin of the people,  
setting them on fire.

Shame on the flags of civilised nations  
we relive the time of slavery.

They play their games of trickery  
while men are at the edge of death.

Oh Lord all those slogans of justice  
while the people are in a deep silence.  
Their justice is a sham,  
nations suffocate in its name.

Wake up all nations of the earth,  
stop them, break this silence.

I fear for your encirclement by torture,  
Your burning and burial in a forgotten cemetery.

# Through the Shadows

## ROMANIA

### Adina Tarry

#### Frost

Frozen Moon floating  
Asleep with open eyes searching for  
Blinding spring thaw

#### Father and Child

Father and I  
Holding hands, bouncing steps, golden smiles,  
summer  
Love swelling beneath our feet

#### Invitation

Back in spring I was  
Supple bamboo yielding, with no zest  
Come taste my autumn

#### Loveless

Old family picture  
Bewildered, scared, alone, baby clutching on to  
herself...Love never came.

## A Personal History of a City Called Braila

*Bogdan Tigănov*

*Extract from The Wooden Tongue Speaks*

**I**t bothers me to think that I was being listened to, that my phones were tapped, my walls too, and the neighbours had glasses up to theirs. In fact the walls were so thin there was no need for glasses. As a boy I could hear how my neighbours upstairs chased each other and the woman screamed: "Help!" But nobody stopped her husband.

I couldn't whisper a joke about Ceauescu without being told to "Shh." I realised it even then. I knew I couldn't say everything I wanted or everything that came to mouth, but that was fine. I now know not everything that comes to mouth is useful. Not everything, if anything, is worthwhile.



*photo: Fay Gardner*

But there in my home, and in my grandparents' home, what was there to listen to? Why would it interest anybody else? Do you want to hear how my parents are unbelievably tired and bad-tempered, shouting at each other because they can't understand each other's point of view? You don't want to hear that. You can hear that in your own home. I certainly didn't want to hear it. Do you want to hear what we're screaming at our new colour television? We're screaming: "Bullshit!" because we no longer believe what you're showing us. You're telling us how everything's rosy and how we're the best but I don't see that on the table. My table's empty and I'm hungry. The electricity's gone off. We light some candles. The walls start shaking and so does the floor. Do you want to listen in to our panic as we hold on to what we have so it doesn't smash on the floor and we lose it all? Nature tells us that we're fragile.

At times, during our exile, we wanted to leave the problems of living in a foreign country as refugees and go back home to what we thought we knew. Would you swap isolation and loneliness for love? The love, we felt, would not come simply from our family, but from the very trees and the earth that uprooted them. The expressions on peoples' faces would make us feel like we belonged. Be it poor, sad, heartbroken, happy, delirious. We had these fantasies. I still get flashes of fantastic euphoria though I know that they're as much bullshit as what the Communists were feeding us.

I've learnt to mistrust the easy answer.

Maybe you're so interested in my family because television's not enough for you, your life is not enough, so you start listening and reporting, ratting and spreading lies about us because you are now a fully-grown unshakable demon of a pervert. You're addicted to what we're having for dinner, hooked on to our morning routine, how mama brushes my hair or how tata shaves, how many plops you hear in the toilet. You're in love with our dreams and imagination, how innocent, naïve and terrifying.

Most of all, it bothers me to think that some element of happiness or sadness or honesty was lost because we were hiding it from you. We didn't want you to know how deeply scarred we were, our stomachs slashed inside and our hearts burning slowly on a spit, but all you heard was some hysterical laughter or howled cries. That's all you heard. What we couldn't hide. And mama realised we're alive right now so why waste it? Why give so much and receive so little?

What does it matter now though? You must feel utterly satisfied sitting in your villa in the mountains with the eagles singing to you and a great big pitchfork impaled up through your anus and out of your mouth. Enjoy the horrifying silence you created and upheld.

When people ask me where I'm from originally I say Romania. If they know a bit more they will ask me another question. What town or city? I, in return, gulp to the anticlimax for nobody has ever recognised the city in which I was born. In all the years of living in the UK, or Canada, not one person has said "Oh yes! I know Brila!"

My city (and I prefer the word city to the word town because town implies small and insignificant) is nowhere, lost, hidden, dead. Completely unknown. No tourist would want to go there because no travel guide has more than a paragraph devoted to it and what, after all, is a tourist without his travel guide?

The way I look at it, my parents lived in Brila for thirty-five years therefore it can't be that bad. Geographically speaking, Brila is situated in south-eastern Romania. It's a hundred or so miles away from Bucharest, the capital, near Galai, in a zone called Muntenia although, ironically, considering the name, the county of Brila is mostly flat.

I could say "Brila is near Ukraine" or I could even say "Brila is near Moldova" but it'd be received with a polite nod

and a change of topic. If you really want to know, Brila is close to the Delta, a wetlands famous for its rare species of birds (Bill Oddie should go there) and wild, untamed, vegetation.

I am proud of having been born close to wilderness in a city that nobody's heard of. And you can't say that nobody lives there. There are over two hundred thousand people living in Brila, and over three hundred thousand in the county of Brila. And it's a multi national, multi-cultural place too. Jews lived there (my grandmother's boss was Jewish and so was the great Mihail Sebastian), Gypsies, Greeks and Russians, or Lipoveni as they are known locally (like Tata and his family). It is true, though, I never once saw an African, Oriental or Asian person. Not even on TV. Or perhaps I'm lying. I'm sure I saw Ceausescu's best friend, Arafat.

My grandparents lived in a studio flat in an area of the city called Hipodrom. What I remember was how magical their block seemed. Surrounded by greenery, gardens, trees, flowers, and close to a playground. There were kittens and puppies in the garden, under the stairs, trying to find a safe spot. These were the vagabonds and we were friends. I knew them all. The one under the stair, the black cat and her litter in the garage, the dogs near the swings, the cat near the window and the bats in the night in the hole above the door. Nature and my grandparents were linked and tied up to my levels of expectancy.

The architecture is and was basic and thin. But it's calming and peaceful in its feeling of reassurance. As the Americanised say, "It's ok."

The dogs are barking and I can't sleep.

"It's ok."

The neighbours beat their rugs in the back near where the cars are parked on uneven ground. There is a hospital across the street on the right-hand side. Again, it's rather grey, or a greying cream and grey seemed to neutralise our personal revolutions. Maybe we all said: "It's ok."

The hospital is an imposing block. And next to the hospital there lies the sports centre. Here you can play table tennis, lift weights, go swimming or even grind it out on the clay courts. The sports centre is actually the start of the park which, I like to think, is an extension of my grandparents' garden.

I tried to help Tataia, holding an old rake and digging in. The speckles of earth cascaded over me. He would say that we're letting the Earth breathe.

Then we picked the ripe tomatoes so that Mamaia, who I could see at the window and who's forever in the kitchen, could use them in her stews. Then we watered the rest. We said hello to our peculiar lonely neighbour who was also working on his patch. From there I saw the park that we used to frequent. Walking. Cycling. Playing. Falling over. Crying. Laughing. Begging for sweets and candy floss. In wintertime tobogganing down the snow and ice while being wrapped in layer upon layer of suffocating clothing.

When the circus came, Tataia bought me a harmonica (I still haven't learnt to play it). I watched Tataia cycle and move and I never pitied him. I never thought 'Poor him, he's disabled...' and if I did think it I tried to block it out. Tataia can do with one hand everything that any other man can with two working hands. Not only that, but Tataia can invent, put together a complex circuit and give reality an edge.

"Don't do that!"

"Why not?"

"You're hurting that tree. It's weeping."

I tried to listen to the tree, bringing myself closer so that I could hear its terrible sobs from the pain I had inflicted upon it.



## 3 March 1953

*Mariana Zavati*

**I remember...amongst shelves full of books. One of them strikes me. It is an old book. It has on its cover Stalin's image in the foreground and that of his immediate family in the background. Uneven waves are riding from early memories in my mind when my innocence was shattered all of a sudden.**

A cutting skin chill bathed the month of March. The Orthodox priests' calculations brought the holy Easter before the lambs could be born. The market stalls were shiny from the neuralgic rain. A few peasants with Astrakhan hats were selling cabbages and onions. The economic police were busy setting maximal prices for private produce, which had escaped collectivisation. Old looking grown ups, who had not moved on with the new times, were going about their daily chores.

**I remember... I am told that I am never to repeat what is said inside our home. It is a great burden to keep my mouth shut. My unripe mind cannot comprehend why, but I am learning to be discreet.**

**A Spartan existence is permeating our hours of light and dark. Nobody smiles in my home and the voices are always hushed, as if we fear someone might hear us and inform on what we are saying.**

**I remember I am a witness to slow and heavily loaded trains from - to: Braov - Kiev, Bucureti - Odessa, Bacu - Moscow, Suceava - Leningrad.**

**I remember I am a witness to fast and empty trains from - to: Kiev - Braov, Odessa - Bucureti, Moscow - Bacu, Leningrad - Suceava.**

From her attic, Maruca could see the Sovrom trains. In the distance, she could hear the busy signals of the Sovrom train convoys: Sovrom wood, Sovrom oil, Sovrom wool, Sovrom meat, Sovrom dairy. Mile long trains with Cyrillic labels and locked freight, on the wide especially built Russian railway track! The Sovrom trains were not stopping at Bacu Station. Maruca did not know of their precise destination. At the high attic window, which was level with the heavy morning sky, she was standing on tiptoes, spying in the distance.

I remember...the trains of plenty. I can spy Maruca eyeing them from the silence of her attic, from where no words must escape outside.

Maruca was about to do her homework. There were not enough classrooms and Maruca's form was learning in the afternoon shift. The front cover of her exercise books had a big label each with her name written by her grandpa in neat calligraphy. Maruca looked at her name. She did not like it; all her friends and relatives of the same age had the same name: Mariana, like the French Marianne. She preferred to be called Maruca.

I remember... that my name had been chosen to express my parents' quiet resistance against the compulsory introduction of the Russian language. Historically, Romanians are a proud francophone nation. People had no choice about the Russian impositions. People bend their backs, look the other way, eyes glued to the ground, and keep their thoughts to themselves.

Maruca and her name were no friends, because it sounded clumsy and full of pretence. She would have liked to be given a different name and a new pair of shoes, or a dress. She yearned to have something new. All the nice things came from Mrs. Teja. They had been bought for her daughter Geta before the War. She had grown up and they had been handed down to Maruca. The shoes included. Maruca looked at her shoes. The size did not fit. Her grandma had cut the leather at the back and at the toes.

I remember... that in the town centre, in the High Street, the old private shops, renamed state shops, are selling only leftover cloth, from the old stock. After the War and after the overnight departure of King Mihai on 3 January 1948, nobody has seen any shoes.

Maruca's experience of shopping was from the stall in front of the old Victorian railway station; there she could buy a strange liquid named *limonad*, which did not taste like lemons and packets of two concrete small biscuits with a sort of cream in between called *Eugenia*. They tasted OK, if allowed to melt in the mouth. Slowly and with patience. After the afternoon siesta, Grandma Elisa would give Maruca *1 leu* to go to the stalls in front of the Victorian railway station; 1 leu was enough for one *Eugenia* and a small glass of diluted lemonade.

Maruca was at her desk. She opened her arithmetic textbook. From the inside cover, Marx, Engels and Lenin were

looking wooden dead at her from their photographs. A fourth picture was that of Comrade Stalin. He seemed to smile.

**I remember... the propaganda materials always refer to him as Grandpa Stalin.**

He was made to look a darling. He was smiling from the page, with his eyes and his moustache.

*Comrade Stalin is your future!*

And Comrade apu, Maruca's infant schoolteacher, would proudly point to Comrade Stalin's photograph. Unable to comprehend, Maruca's thoughts would wander once the dear name was mentioned.

Maruca's daydreaming died when Grandpa Ion's voice belled from the kitchen where he was melting wax for his honeycombs.

*Are you doing your homework? I am going to check it.*

Maruca knew he meant business. She got her inkpot and her ink pen ready.

*I cannot find my exercise book, grandpa, she shouted from the top of her voice.*

A door opened and closed. Steps on the wooden stairs were coming towards the attic.

*Your grandma has gone to the shops to see what she can buy! Let's try to find your book, and his fingers started rummaging in her schoolbag. He was turning beetroot colour in his hollow cheeks. His fingers were drumming on her schoolbag and Maruca was sure she could hear him whisper under his breath.*

**I remember... the shops from opposite the Victorian railway station. Day in and day out, there are no deliveries. Long queues of shivering people gather on the off chance since 2 a.m. Some women bring tiny chairs and a shawl or a blanket.**

Comrade Rotaru arrived out of breath to find out what was on sale. An old man recognized her and said,

*You are too late today!*

Comrade Rotaru, who was the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood, lifted her shoulders and shouted in his ear,

*Comrade Stalin is dead!*

*Be quiet, woman! Said the same man through his teeth.*

*They will arrest you!*

Comrade Rotaru opened her mouth with her canines missing.

*The bastard is dead, I tell you. My youngest daughter, who works at the town hall, has just run home to tell me the news! She went with her cheeks flushed,*

*Is Comrade Stalin dead? Some voices repeated, Stalin is dead! Other voices confirmed.*

*Stalin died this morning! Words were like snowballs.*

*Stalin is no more!*

*The bastard died! People were loud now.*

*In Hell with him!*

The news went down the line of queuing people. A wave of heavy breathing turned towards Comrade Rotaru for confirmation. Faint, shy, slight smiles could be

just grasped on people's faces. Then their faces turned motionless, the eyes fixed the ground and the backs bent again.

**I remember one could never be sure about any news.**

From the window of her attic, Maruca spotted her grandma's headscarf and her roomy handbag, a present from her son. She was making her way towards the gate; she walked the short path towards the big house with the Italian façade; Maruca heard her open and close the oak door and walk into the kitchen, but could not grasp what her grandparents were saying to one another. She jumped up and ran downstairs. She saw them stare at her with their words stuck in the air. *What have you bought? I saw the Sovrom trains!* Grandma Elisa pointed to her shiny, empty handbag.

*Have you finished your homework? Time to leave for school soon.*

**I remember ...this day will stay in my mind until I shall be no more. Our form is asked to place each textbook on the desk. We are told to open them at the photographs of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Comrade Stalin. Then Comrade apu asks us, from the top of her voice, to tear out the pages with the photographs of the 'dear' leaders. Comrade apu collects each page and throws them inside the classroom stove and burns the lot. My colleagues and I, we look at each other, some of us, more daring, put our hands up. Comrade apu, who can be harsh, shouts,**

*What now? Get on with it, I told you what to do. Get on with it, in silence.*

Some feeble voices could be heard with weak conviction,

*I cannot do it, Comrade apu. I cannot tear Comrade Stalin's photograph. You told us he loves children. You said he would give us the future. You said he promised that...*



*photo: Fay Gardner*

# ADONIS

## Fathieh Saudi

Every artist is an exile within his own language.



The Other is part of my inner being

London Poetry International 2010 invited Adonis, one of the Arab world's best-known poets, to read his poetry and discuss the themes of cultural "insider" and "outsider" in his work. This was a rare occasion to listen to Adonis, whose work is available to French readers and is now thankfully becoming accessible to English readers.

Marilyn Hacker, introducing his new collection *Adonis: Selected Poems*, writes: 'Adonis is recognised as one of the most important poets and theorists of literature in the Arab world, and one of the most important contemporary poets and poetic thinkers in any language or context. His influence on Arabic poetry can be compared with that of Pound or Eliot on poetry in English, combined, however, with a radical and secular critique of his society.' For Adonis, poetry is not merely a genre or art form but a way of thinking, something akin to mystical revelation. He says 'Poetry cannot be made to fit either religion or ideology. It offers that knowledge which is explosive and surprising.' Throughout the fifties and sixties, Adonis became a symbol not only of modernised and innovative poetry, but also of rebellion, courage, and free thinking for the younger generation in the Arab world. Adonis and his world of language are inseparable with his language is continuously reshaping and creating new forms out of the unknown. He writes 'The language of absence that poetry required is a language that allowed poetry to focus on perennial points of tension and to endure beyond its occasions.'

In recent years Adonis has been listed for the Nobel Prize for Literature and has been recognised internationally since his early work. He has received several awards, including the International Poetry Forum Award, Grand Prix des Biennales Internationales de la Poésie, Prix de la Méditerranée, Owiess Cultural Prize, and the Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Adonis has published twenty volumes of poetry and thirteen of literary criticism and although writing poetry is his main concern, he is also a thinker, philosopher and literary critic. In addition, he has translated Saint-John Perse and George Schehadé, as well as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. From his first collection, *First Poems*, he revealed his rupture with traditional Arabic poetry which is usually written in one of sixteen metres, in balanced lines split by a caesura, and frequently employing a single end rhyme for an entire poem. Adonis's innovation, starting in the sixties, was to introduce unrhymed free verse and even prose poetry and to write in mixed metres. He says: "I wanted to draw on Arab tradition and mythology without being tied to it," adding, "I wanted to break the linearity of poetic text - to mess with it. The poem is meant to be a network rather than a single

rope of thought." His collection *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* empowered Mihyar with a revolutionary fervour and mysticism fused with mythology, epic and history. His volume *Migration and Transformations in the Regions of the Night and Day* is about an Umayyad heir who flees from Damascus to Andalusia to establish an independent dominion. In his collection, *Mihyar and Imagination*, solitude and imagination emerge as powerful forces leading to ecstasy while *This is My Name*, with its two long poems, came out after the shock and bewilderment of the Six-Day War and occupation of further Arab lands by Israel in 1967. A later collection *The Book*, consisting of about 2000 pages, is a long journey through the history and politics of Arab societies, from the death of the prophet Mohammed to the ninth century. Adonis says "I was telling my readers that Arab history is more than a history of the sword; that there were also great men." His more recent work displays an erotic element; in one recent poem the beloved is poetry itself, imagined as a mistress who comes at night in a black dress. "Happiness and sadness are two drops of dew on your forehead," he writes, "and life is an orchard where the seasons stroll." Adonis has often expressed his support for women in Arab and Islamic countries. He says: "Right now we feel Arab culture is paralysed. We suffer from women's sense of their lack of freedom, of being deprived of their individualism. It's impossible for a culture to progress with men alone, without women being involved."

Born in the village of Qassabin in Syria in 1930, his original name at birth was Ali Ahmed Said Esber. As his family could not afford to send him to school, his father became his teacher. At the age of fourteen Adonis managed to recite a poem in front of the Syrian president, who was impressed by him and awarded him a scholarship to go to school. In 1955 Adonis was imprisoned for his political views while still at high school, and on being released went into exile in Lebanon. He obtained a degree in philosophy and a doctoral degree in Arab literature. While in Lebanon Adonis became the editor of *Poetry*, an innovative literary journal, and later founded *Mawakef*, an influential literary magazine. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Adonis chose to go into exile in France where he continues to live.

A poet who never tires of renewal, Adonis still feels that he has much to write about. His poetic inventions are endless and perhaps he was aware from an early age that his journey to know the self and the languages of the self, would take him to many exiles and countries in a Homeric journey of departure, rupture, dreams, and return, without reaching anywhere. The journey is the quest for identity, the questioning of the self and the writing of an unknown poem yet to come to life.

## The Beginning of Speech

That child I was came to me  
once,  
a strange face.

He said nothing-                      We walked,  
each of us glancing at the other in silence, our steps  
a strange river running in between

We were brought together by good manners  
and these sheets now flying in the wind  
then we split,  
a forest written by the earth  
watered by the seasons' change.

Child who once was, come forth-  
What brings us together now,  
and what do we have to say?

## A Mirror for a Question

I asked, and they said, the branch  
swathed in flame is a sparrow.  
They told me my face  
was the waves, the world's face a pile of mirrors,  
a lighthouse, and the sailor's sorrow.

I arrived and the world in my way  
was ink, each gesture, a phrase.  
I did not know that between it and me  
there was a bridge named "Brotherhood"  
Made of steps, prophecy and fire.

I did not know that my face  
was a ship that sails inside a park.

---

## You Are in the Village Then

When he leaves home carrying his axe, he is certain that the sun is waiting for him in the shade of an olive tree, or a willow, and that the moon that crosses the sky tonight over his house will take the road closest to his steps. It is not important to him where the wind goes.

The blueness of the sky, the redness of fruit, the greenness of leaves: These are the colours that his hands spread on the page of day.

He is an artist who cares about his hands' work, not what the hands of art achieve, but the things inside things, and not as they appear, but how he describes them. And because he knows how to listen to things and how to speak to them, he lives on the margin of what people perceive. He believes that "the order that imprisons motion and interrupts the feasts of the imagination will only lead to collapse."

And it collapses without theatrics or noise. He knows "that a bullet now replaces his plough," but he also knows, with growing certainty, that "his plough will go further and that it will reach deeper than any bullet can."

When you see this farmer carrying his plough, you sense that then he is competing with it as if in a war. It proceeds ahead of him toward the weeds and thorns and he remains barefoot following behind. The sound of the plough, as it tears at the thorns and soil, joins you, penetrates you, and it's lovely to hear it become loud like a trumpet with a deep raspy blow filling the sky.

You are in the countryside then. It does not matter where you walk now, near the river or at the foot of a mountain, or a village lost among the rocks, where mud houses mix with cement cellars in a folkloric symphony that combines the tenth and the twentieth centuries. Let your eyes swim in all that's around them, forget the café and the street. Surrender like a leaf flying in the air, like the fuzz coating the branches, like pollen dust. Become a child. Only then will

invisible creatures come toward you. Solitude filled with a treasure of hidden murmurs. Absence that instantly becomes presence. Each tree is a person, each stone a sign.

There are herds of small animals that shine like distant stars, among grasses and plants. And there are stones that have heads and arms and that may walk behind you at night. There are small streams flitting among small trees that become beautiful maidens who appear to tired people heading to their houses before dawn, during the first hours of enchantment.

The village is not a poet, as much as its painter. There is a remarkable ease to its touch as it draws the same pictures every single day maintaining the same beauty. It is a repetition that does not repeat the same motion, something like the waves of the sea, or like a desert renewed endlessly in sand, its only dress.

There is no uniqueness to this touch as if it comes from an absolute neutrality forever positioned at degree zero.

You are in the village then?

I remember now what I almost forgot. To contradict the light in the village, one will end up choosing solitude, sitting on the other side of the mountain, or the square, or among the barefoot children and black goats.

And I remember now that we used to gaze at the stream covered with green grasses, hardly able to determine its course. We thought it was in pain, and moaning.

And I now know why we felt dried up in the memory of the stream.

And the days now inscribed in the dust of the road leading to the stream, I also read what we knew and did not know how to write.

Peace to the sun that always went ahead of us, without ever moving.

# Defiance of Conventional Language: Mourid Barghouti

*Fathieh Saudi*



In my opinion Mourid Barghouti, the Palestinian poet, represents the tragic story of Palestine. Meeting him on several occasions I was always amazed by his political and creative views. I sometimes felt they were not fully connected to reality, but with time I came to realise they were precise and accurate, and represented a collective consciousness.

Mourid's life, since his early childhood, has been full of unexpected departures, exiles, and uprootedness. He was born in 1944 in Deir Ghassana near Ramallah, Palestine. At the age of 4 with the declaration of the Israeli state in 1948 he saw the first Palestinians refugees arriving in his village, recounting narratives of war, exodus and massacre - what the Palestinians call the Nakba (Catastrophe). Many of his family members were among these refugees who settled in miserable camps. At the time of the '67 war when Israel occupied parts of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Mourid was a student at Cairo University. Any Palestinian who was out of the country at that time was considered by the Israelis as a Non-Palestinian with no right to return home. The homeland became the Occupied Territories. Mourid wrote: 'From the summer of '67 I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else.' Mourid went from one exile to another, spending 20 years in Jordan, 15 years in Lebanon, and a further 12 in Budapest. His political avant-garde views gave him trouble in several Arab countries where he was often denied residence or return. After 30 years away from his homeland he received permission to travel to the West Bank. It felt strange and surreal to him to go home under the Israeli occupation: the check-points, the humiliation and the prohibition on visiting Jerusalem, which was only a 15 minute drive away. Furthermore he was forbidden to circulate freely in the West Bank. Even writing became a kind of exile. Mourid wrote: "All writing is a form of displacement."

He has published 12 books of poetry, the last of which was *Midnight*. He was awarded the Palestine Award for Poetry in 2000. His autobiographical narrative, *I Saw Ramallah*, won the Naguib Mahfouz Award for Literature with Edward Said describing the memoir as "one of the finest existential accounts of Palestinian displacement we now have." John Berger wrote that *I Saw Ramallah* was "a book [...] of unforgettable memories, razor insights, stories with eyes closed, no conclusions, only the passionate pain of exile, recounted by a true poet."

Mourid describes his life and poetry saying: Life will not be simplified. Oversimplification is my enemy as a poet. In the last 50 years life in my part of the world has been a braid of the normal and the abnormal. People pursue their everyday life amidst the historical extremities of war, emigration, oppression and uncertainty. In my work, I attempt to defy the conventional language by which this unconventional world is described; I try to see the astonishing in the usual, and the usual in the extreme; the main paradox of Palestine being that bombardment is less news than a family reunion! Formally, too, I am fascinated by this braid of the usual and the unusual. Just as war and peace express themselves in the number of family members present at the breakfast table, I attempt to express the strangeness of my world in words that are not strange at all. I want my language to be physical, precise, visual, concrete, daily and normal, just to reveal how abnormal the condition it describes is. In doing this, I attempt to suggest a new language that defies the fake and flamboyant governmental

grandeur, aimed at belittling complex reality by a flat two-dimensional metaphor. No theory terrorizes me, life is richer than all our ways of writing it and a beautiful poem can turn all literary theories upside down.

Ruth Padel in her preface to the remarkable collection 'Midnight' wrote: "When a poem doesn't work, it's usually because you're not being clear and tough enough with yourself. Mourid Barghouti is clear, tough, and as his new book of poems demonstrates beautifully disciplined in his sparing, sophisticated use of tragedy and loss. She goes on, "his lost heritage is the world's loss, every loss from the beggars at the crossroads to the balcony of the moon". 'Midnight', she ends by saying, "is an affirmation of life in the face of total loss".

The poems in the collection 'Midnight' are haunting and absorbing; it is as though they emanated from the unconscious sea, where all is light and simple truth. They remind me too of James Joyce's writing - that flow of unstoppable thoughts and lines of poetry which diffuse behind the phrase like a monumental sculpture. In this collection, 'On a New Year's Day', the poet sees everything through a window, as if the window were a miraculous mirror conveying past, present, and future, allowing him through intense memories of anger, despair, yearning and tenderness to travel back through time. Through this window the poet identifies with each victim, with lost causes, even with prisoners in Abu Ghraib as well as with massacred civilians in Sabra and Shatila. The window expands, progressively holding the whole world.

## Normal journey

I have not seen any horrors,  
I have not seen a dragon in the lad,  
I have not seen the Kraken in the sea,  
nor a witch or a policeman  
at the outset of my day.  
Pirates have not overtaken my desires,  
thieves have not broken down the door of my life,  
my absence has not been long,  
It only took me one lifetime.  
How come you saw scars  
on my face, sorrow in my eyes,  
and bruises in my bones and in my heart?  
These are only illusions.  
I have not seen any horrors,  
everything was extremely normal.  
Don't worry,  
your son is still in his grave, murdered,  
and he's fine.  
Exception  
All of them arrive:  
river and train  
sound and ship  
light and letters  
the telegrams of consolation  
the invitation to dinner  
the diplomatic bag  
the space ship  
they all arrive  
all but my step towards  
my country.

# Crossing Languages

## Interview with the Poet Moshe Benarroche

*Karen Alkalay-Gut*

Moshe Benarroche, the Israeli-Amazigh poet, born in Tetuan, Morocco, in 1959, is one of the first Jews of North Africa to have publicly acknowledged the Amazigh connection to Sephardic Jews. Benarroche explains that before the Arab conquest of Morocco, there was complete tolerance of any religion in the country. Many Amazigh tribes converted to Judaism and Christianity and probably all the Jews from Morocco and Spain are of Amazigh descent. Kahena was the legendary Amazigh queen who was a Jew and stood off the Arabs for years. Finally, they brought all their soldiers from Byzantium to defeat her.

While researching Moroccan names, Benarroche discovered that more than two-thirds were Amazigh names — including his name, which originally was Benarous or Benaros which means “sour.” So when he found out about the Amazigh he felt he had located the missing link in Sephardic Jewish history. While not considering himself a specialist in Amazigh culture, it is evident that the Spain of the three religions emanates from the Amazigh people as they already had this tradition within them. He finds that many Jews in Morocco have family names in a language they have forgotten. He comments: This is amazing. But more than that is the fact that some Jews from the Atlas and other remote areas in Morocco spoke the Amazigh language; and maybe some old Moroccans in Israel still do. They were called Schleuchs, but Sclouch (Tachlehit) is a version of Amazigh, the closest one to Hebrew. Benarroche raised the issue of Arabisation, which has not only affected North Africa, but Egypt, as well, a country that did not define itself as Arab until Abdul Nasser’s regime.

Benarroche asks: Are the Amazigh a remote people? Is their tradition foreign to me? How could that be? I met them everyday in Morocco; they are everywhere. It is said that, some years ago, it was an offence to call an Amazigh an Arab. But after 1956 and Moroccan independence, there began a complete Arab oppression, at the same time as it began in Egypt under Nasser. This is related in a book by Leila Ahmet, *A Border Passage*, in which she discusses the making of an Arab, or how the Egyptians were convinced to think like Arabs and people stopped speaking about being Amazigh. The Internet is bringing all these injustices to ground. The Amazighs are the natives of the Maghreb. All the Jews in Morocco are descendants of Amazigh tribes, and since these were the same Jews that emigrated to Spain from the 8th century onwards, all the Jews from Spain are Amazigh, too. Benarroche, who usually publishes his poetry in Hebrew, wrote the following in English.

### Tamazgha, My Lost Country

Tamazgha, land of the free people,  
Tihya, my queen mother  
Jew and woman  
who fought the Arab invasion  
in the eighth century  
My Amazigh name, Arous, Benarrous, Benarroch  
lost in centuries of wars  
intolerance

in my country  
where Christians, Jews and pagans  
lived and believed by each other

Rise my Amazigh people  
from the ruins of Rome  
the intolerance of Islam  
the decay of Europe

Rise my Amazigh people  
and teach tolerance to this world  
where the forgotten are the right  
where the lost stone  
leads the light

Rise Tihya, Queen of Jews and Amazighs  
Raise for your memory  
this new world in this new millennium  
demands justice for all that is called past.

Benarroche comments: I couldn’t think of writing this poem in any other language than English. Why? I need a few years to really understand that. But, socially speaking, I don’t think anyone in Israel would understand what I am talking about. This comes after many years of trying to understand the Maghreb and the relation between Jews and Muslims in this country. Here in Israel I have this feeling that I still have to explain that Jews from Arab countries are real Jews, and that they have a history, a culture, and not only exotic food, to offer.

Being both Jewish and Amazigh creates a double non-existence in Arabised and Islamised North Africa. Not only is North Africa not recognised as legitimate Amazigh land, but if a person identifies as anything other than Muslim, that individual is not perceived as being a “real” North African by the official institutions of the respective countries or by many of his/her compatriots. Nevertheless, Benarroche considers that he belongs to more than one group of people, and yet, does not quite fit any. When I say that all the Moroccan Jews are Amazigh, and when I say that I am Sephardi, or a Moroccan, or a Jew, and Israeli, etc., I am not talking about identity. I don’t say: this is my identity. I don’t like the word “identity”; in the languages I know, it comes from the root “identical.” An erroneous concept of history begins, because no one person is like any other person. We should be talking about something else. In Hebrew I would say “Shayakhut,” or “pertenencia” in Spanish; I should find a more precise word in English than “belonging,” “being part of a group.” You can be part of many groups, just as you can have more than one nationality. Multiculturalism should mean people who have more than one culture. I feel that — having been born in the northernmost city of Africa, the last before Europe starts, being a Jew, speaking four languages, and having my history — I belong to one hundred cultures. I fit into all of them; and at the same time, I don’t fit in any of them, because, too often, people try to pigeonhole me, or define me. This happens in Israel, surely; but less often in big cities, in cities with people from many countries — New York, Paris, London, or Barcelona, where I am just one more of those rare people coming from everywhere and from nowhere.

# A Meeting of Two Poets, Yang Lian and Adonis

*Miriam Frank*



Yang Lian, one of the best known of contemporary Chinese poets, and Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber), a pioneer and leading figure of modern Arab poetry, have come together in recent times for an unprecedented exchange of ideas derived from two fundamentally diverse cultures which their poetry distils into images and concepts of universal significance. Incorporated into these poems and musings, are the poets' experience in common of censure, loss of home and country, and – importantly – its transcendence.

Integral to their discussion is the intricate problem of the translation of poetry into another language. Is it possible to capture the distinctive meanings and nuances that one culture's language expresses in its poetry, in another of which words and phrases have a different distinctive flavour and association of their own? What is more, Chinese and Arabic are generally translated into English, and then from English on to Arabic and Chinese: leading to yet another loss along the way, through the mediation of this third language, from the original.

In their most recent encounter organised by the Contemporary China Centre, University of Westminster on 8th November, 2010, Yang Lian and Adonis read each other's poems, both in their original Chinese and Arabic language, and then in the rare, direct translation from one to the other of these two languages. This gave way to a discussion on the paradox of, on the one hand, the reasonable aspect of translation, and, on the other, its effective rendering. Professor Harriet Evans drew attention, in her introduction, to the questions of "how might the poetic image, which is a key characteristic of both Yang Lian's and Adonis's poetry, be translated in inclusive ways of understanding the 'other' that transcend differences of language, culture and politics?" And "what might be a radical politics of poetry when it is not associated with any political position or persuasion?"

These are the two, main, interrelated themes that recur in the Yang Lian and Adonis dialogues. How can one achieve through translation a unity or shared understanding of the poet's images and ideas, and what is the relationship between the poetry's freedom of expression and its underlying culture's, nation's and religion's autocracy? This incompatibility between the poets' free spirits and their culture's repressive politics turns exile and migration into a common feature of their poetic themes, of which 'outsider' and 'insider', or the 'other', form part. Within this context, the discovery or siting of freedom where the self resides, also reaches an expression of universal cognisance. Exile

can be seen as loss and pain, but it can also be seen as freedom, Yang Lian says. And for a poet without a country, a poem is his home.

To Yang Lian's question on the poet's need for real independence and individuality, and to be a thinker, Adonis points to the subjects, in the Arab world, of history, faith and religion embedded in the fabric of society. Here, independence is considered a heresy, and is an impossibility. He suggested there are two kinds of people on this earth, those with reason and no faith, and those with faith and no reason. Poets and poetry have been accepted, but thinkers have been rejected. All radical thought in society has to expect two fates: to be either marginalised or sent into exile. The price for radical independence is life itself, and the crisis of the dilemma is that one can't produce great literature without independence. Yang Lian says we have to make that choice.

Adonis – described by Adam Shatz, of the London Review of Books, as a revolutionary modernist; the most erudite provocative poet; both modern and ancient; and always restlessly searching – speaks of the Arab world's strategic position because of its wealth. The West does not want it to advance; it wishes to keep it stagnant: it is on the same side as the institutions that aid the growth of Al Qaeda, which makes independence a very thorny question. He suggests that the values of independence and freedom of thought are encircled by two forces: the Arab and the West, which do nothing to aid the emergence of a New Dawn. The degree of independence is gauged, Adonis states, not by the number of individuals, but by the number of institutions, who practise it. If you travel in the Gulf, you will find many individuals but not a single institution that practises these aspirations. In answer to this predicament, Adonis refers to the "cage of language". He seeks to free himself in poetry from this cage. And yet, the world outside poetry is so much greater, so much more extensive than language. It cannot be captured in language, which is too small and limited in comparison.

Yang Lian says one is not sent into exile, one actively escapes into it. "You will feel your exile in every line of your poetry, and your lines will be your journey with no end." And, "We are not part of tradition, we *are* tradition, constantly renewing ourselves." But poetry is not a simple way of being independent, the way is to be creative. To create poetry, you need to be extremely aware and extremely true to yourself; in translation, you have to *open* yourself, take it in, become part of it, keeping the self *out* of it. In contrast, or rather, complementarily, Adonis speaks of a poem as a piece of architecture: in translation you must pull down the construction and reconstruct it. For this rebuilding, one needs a high sensibility and a high degree of competence in the two languages: every translator is a creator, he says.

And though translation may be seen as treason, it is necessary. It is equivalent to the subversive; treasonable in a positive sense. Translation can refract certain elements of a poem, but it essentially destroys it, so it becomes a new poem in the new language. Adonis does not oppose this form of destruction: the price of this destruction is necessary so that some things can be transmitted to others. Yang Lian brings up a parallel in relation to exile, which he points out is not only related to loss and pain, but to the positive: to gain and freedom. And both the state of exile, and that of freedom, are internal. They are part of the self of the poet.

# A Whisper of a Linguistic Nomad

*Rahila Khalwa*

In Japanese society, the first question you are asked is “How old are you?” The younger, the better, especially if you’re unfortunate enough to be a woman. They have a strong ‘Lolita complex’. Allow me to generalise, but in good, old Europe including Britain, the first question that confronts me is “Where do you come from?” Many white, Western people seem to understand my entire persona from this single piece of information. Sometimes I challenge them and respond, ‘Why do you want to know?’ Otherwise, I often come from Vietnam or the Philippines, depending on my mood. When, at rare moments, I do come from Japan, people are eager to please: “Oh, I have a very good Japanese friend, her name is so-and-so”, “I’ve been to Tokyo several times on business; I like Japan”, “Japanese cars are the best”, etc. Really? How uninteresting! I sniff, and swear that I won’t come from Japan next time.

Equally baffling is your first language. I see this question more often on paper, such as application forms, than hear it thrown at me verbally. I know they want me to write ‘Japanese’, the language I was born into and brought up in. But I feel as if it does me a gross injustice; if my first language is Japanese: it’s not my means of communication and never has been.

I grew up in an oppressive environment where expressing one-self was actively discouraged. Silence is golden. People are encouraged to pretend everything is fine, on the surface anyway. Such an upbringing is unbelievable to me now. In that highly group-oriented, homogeneous Japanese society, my parents’ main concern was to discipline me to be and do ‘like others’, rather than to help develop my individual values. My father would call me ‘a lost underdog’, according to the Japanese phrase, whenever I asked questions or dropped remotely critical remarks about the status quo of the society ‘howling from afar’ and therefore, not worth listening to. Japanese was one of my favourite subjects at school, but in that repressive atmosphere, I don’t think I ever developed the ability to think and express myself in that language.

It wasn’t until I became a graduate student at Essex that I began those mental activities for the first time, in my mid-twenties, in English. A student of English in Japan, I must have been above average as far as exam results were concerned. In that nation-state, where the media glorified and people envied those who ‘spoke English fluently’, what one might have to speak about was never questioned. Now at Essex, I was a student of feminist history and the English vocabulary of history, sociology, psychology and all the humanities touched the right chord. I found it more appropriate to my thinking than Japanese in which I’d never been trained after all.

Having completed my MA, I became a rootless wanderer. Going adrift on the Continent, I opened up, eager to discuss feminism and crumbling socialism with anyone I could get hold of en route, in English. Hereafter I’d learn the hard way to be assertive, to the degree to which I’d often find myself a much detested boat rocker, in different languages. First I tried my luck in Vienna. It was right after the fall of the Berlin Wall and I was obsessed by what would come to pass next (soon to be bitterly disappointed - the end of the Communist era). I naively believed that speaking German would improve my situation in Vienna and taught myself in earnest. All the business of room-hunting, job-hunting, negotiating my way, I was doing in German; I could communicate well in three months. I’d already learnt at Essex how to think directly in the target lan-

guage, and had some German pen-pals I’d made during my rail travels. The tutor at *Vorstudienlehrgang* (pre-university German class) helped improve my writing. As it turned out, my German wouldn’t improve my situation in Vienna much - I hadn’t reckoned with Austrian xenophobia.

I travelled again, suffocated in Vienna. I enjoyed an endless ride on trains, this time across Scandinavia. In Narvik, the northernmost station in Europe, I came across two Swedish businessmen who helped me out. I could understand perfectly what they said in English, but English wouldn’t come and I stammered in German. They didn’t speak German, but “German, Norwegian, and Swedish, are all of Germanic origin”, one of them comforted me, “we do somehow understand what you say in German”. It was revealing.

A few years on I threw myself into where I’d always wanted to be - the desert, the Algerian Sahara. I went equipped with a little *Harrap’s* French-English dictionary. I didn’t think it’d be of much use. I’d taken French as a compulsory second language in Japan, got a narrow ‘pass’, but I’d long concluded French wasn’t for me, or I wasn’t up to the language. Only I disliked certain native English-speakers’ arrogant attitude that ‘English is the universal language’, so everyone else should speak it, rather than they learn any local tongue. At least I’d demonstrate that I was *trying* French, with *Harrap’s* for show; that was my intention. All I’d wanted was to see the desert, its dwellers didn’t even occur to me. As it turned out, once in Algeria I was so intrigued by the locals and their lives, I plunged into French, if not Arabic just yet. Knowledge of English and German helped. French remains one language I learnt exclusively from and among locals although I’d check each word and every phrase in my *Harrap’s*.

For years, I’ve tried to overcome my past, and slowly begun to revalue certain aspects of Japan: good food, polite people, ubiquitous *onsen* hot springs, variable landscapes, to name a few. My experience as a lone mother in London has been so devastating, my disappointment at those insular people around me so acute, it prompted me to reassess my heavily prejudiced views of that country. I read Japanese well, but to write I translate what occurs in my head to English which remains my first language for thinking and writing. I speak English as I write, stiff and formal to some ears. I probably speak German and French better despite their much shorter history with me. I *feel* in Arabic and French. Algerian people don’t customarily speak standard Arabic, the language of books, which I’ve learnt. Still it does get me around, commanding some respect, my knowledge of Arabic and the Qur’an. Somehow it’s the language of the desert which stirs up inexplicable nostalgia in me. I found myself for the first time, in Algeria, in French. Therefore I feel at home in the mixture of Arabic and French. My point is that none of these languages is truly mine as in any of them I’m an outsider, no less in Japanese, in much the same way I’ve been out of place everywhere physically. This year, I seem to have had particular luck with Japan as I got to know good Japanese people. Let those superficial white people judge me by my origin yet still I find myself more and more frequently refusing to admit to my Japanese origins.

Acquiring languages has brought me joy and opened the door to different cultures. It hasn’t helped me find my place in this world; I remain an outsider in any language and any country.

## – HISPANOAMERICAN WOMEN’S MEMORY GROUP – Taller de la memoria de mujeres hispanoamericanas



This is a group formed by seven women who also happen to be poets, writers, composers and singers. Its members are: Consuelo Rivera Fuentes (Chile), Isabel Ros Lopez (Spain), Mabel Encinas (Mexico), Maria Jose Alba (Spain), Maria Eugenia Bravo (Chile), Sara Maria Cornejo (Chile) and Sofia Buchuck (Peru). We are a group of women who love books, poetry and to tell and hear stories and we also love to write them. In addition, we all speak Spanish. We are part of what is usually called ‘people of the Diaspora’ – that is to say, we belong to that huge number of people who have moved from their country of origin to live in another country. The reasons for doing this are manifold, but in our case we are either immigrants or exiled. For all the reasons mentioned, we got together to try to delve into and develop our social and historic memory from a literary point of view. Because memory is paramount to the setting up of cultural and political identities we wanted to develop such literary memory from a voice and point of view that is both Hispano-American and gendered. Our viewpoint is that of female immigrants who feel the need to create a sort of bridge-home between the main literary stream of the United Kingdom and the collective voice of immigration.

### **If Only** *Sofia Buchuck*

If only I could travel today mother,  
I would fly like an agile bird,  
I would embrace the cloudy skies and  
iced mountains,  
I would regain your dreams and  
make fresh coffee for you.  
My beloved mama,  
I love to sit beside you,  
And hear all your stories,  
The wonderful and funny, the odd, the hilarious and the  
rude ones.  
Mother I will cherish all of them,  
In the memorable box of my heart,  
One by one,  
From your childhood to the end.  
They are never lost mother I promise,  
I will pass them over to our next generations,  
As you did with us,  
Making sure we remember all our victories and defeats.  
My dulce madre,  
You taught me to work hard,  
Hard enough to forget my self,  
To forget what I wanted,  
It was you I always wanted mama,  
Just you beside me forever.  
London 20 Oct 2010



### **Thinking of you** *Consuelo Rivera Fuentes*

*For the women of Bosnia-Herzegovina*

I can feel the touch of frosty songs  
in the warmth of a protected cage  
I can hear the rage of ancient male rituals  
raping girls, their mothers and the mothers of their mothers.

I have not been stabbed by prolonged hunger  
but you have... so, I have.  
I have not seen my sons grabbing dead bodies  
in lust and obedience to the martial law  
But you have... so, I have.

I can still find pleasure in a baby’s  
scent  
and greet my neighbour in a  
friendly ritual  
of smiles and ‘how are you’s’

I can see the unreachable  
mountains dissected  
by screams, shouts, weeping,  
bleeding...  
guns and bombs have cut across  
this poem





## Soledad<sup>1</sup>

### *Mabel Encinas*

Soledad's skin is ice;  
and her heart, polished steel  
that does not beat,  
but rests inside her chest.  
Her eyes are dead,  
which can be inferred  
because they have no depth.

Soledad's womb is an abyss,  
and her breasts, two dry valleys.  
Her feet lack their normal weight  
and her ankles are fragile.

Soledad dresses in black or grey,  
and never wears anything shiny.  
Her straight hair lies heavily  
on her shoulders,  
and her eyebrows are dark.

Soledad comes and goes.  
As she walks down the street,  
she passes all pedestrians  
without looking at them.  
She does not have a mobile,  
or if she has one,  
it never rings.

Soledad seeks without finding.  
However she always finds:  
the drops of rain,  
the crusty brownish leaves  
and all the rotten metals.

When she arrives home,  
she cooks –no salt or pepper–,  
and eats like an automaton  
listening to the silence.  
Then,  
she waits for nothing.

Soledad entertains herself  
(she never plays)  
doing and undoing her hair  
to forget time.  
If she could imagine something  
she would imagine that her hair  
could grow green like a creeper  
quite close to walls and railings.  
But Soledad has never had a goal  
or any image.

Soledad lacks pretexts:  
she lives cause she is alive,  
her doing is only inertia,  
She never does for others.  
There are indeed no others.

Late in the evening,  
Soledad goes to bed.  
She sleeps with open eyes,  
and logically,  
she never dreams.

Today, Soledad woke up  
early morning.  
At passing by the mirror,  
she thought she saw a sparkle.

She stopped and turned,  
only to find herself.  
She saw, for the first time,  
her eyes.

Quickly,  
she moved away.  
A warm drop reached her lip.  
She cleaned it with her tongue:  
it was so salty.

Then, Soledad, for just an instant,  
remembered that once upon a time...  
she could smile.

<sup>1</sup> 'Soledad' is a female name in Spanish that means 'solitude'.

## The Forbidden Corner

### *Marijo Alba*

*Translation: Consuelo Rivera Fuentes*

Do you want to come with me?  
To that forbidden corner  
Where we will play to go into  
Each other's ulcers?  
I will drill into your pain  
I will murder your ideas  
I will transform your body  
Drinking slowly  
And tasting your ideals  
I will rummage in your wounds  
I will sprinkle them with salt  
I will cover them in vinegar  
So they never heal  
I will spit on them  
And I will humiliate you  
Watching how you wriggle in pain  
I will ask you: where have you  
been?  
What is your life like?  
And when I know what I want from you  
I will throw you into the garbage

Afterwards  
You will teach me  
To live and see like you



*Mabel Encinas*

## The People of Orpheus

### *Maria Eugenia Bravo Calderara*

You may not know this: those  
who have gone like Orpheus  
down to the regions of hell  
have a bond between them  
stronger than blood.

Containing past agonies,  
living with present  
misfortunes, they have learned  
to build their own happiness  
little by little.

You will know them: a certain kind  
of tiredness around  
eyes that are smiling;  
the way they laugh, the whole  
of life in their laughter, all  
its terrifying brightness  
on the border with death.

No-one can laugh like them.  
They know they have lived on.

And now listen to me well.

Hear what I say:  
these are the people  
who know the path leading to  
Paradise

# Disturbances in Being

## Round-trip to Ithaca

Gabriella Hargrave

### Shahram Khosravi

A beautiful – uncommonly generous – smile takes shape in front of him:

“Tea or coffee?” asks the flight attendant.

“Tea, please.”

As her right hand lifts the thermos from the cart, she sweeps a lock of her long, dark hair, fallen over her left temple, behind her ear. She uses two fingers, the first and second, of her left hand. She lifts her hand quickly, but when her fingers touch her hair, the rhythm changes and the strand is pushed back in slow motion.

The flight attendant holds a little tray out before him. He takes his teacup and a sugar packet. He has just woken. A glance at his watch tells him he has slept for nearly two hours. He is pleased at the thought the journey is a third of the way over. A few rows ahead, a map of the flight path is shown on a large screen. Countries, in different colors, separated by sharp and clear lines. No breaks, no spaces between them. Like a mosaic, small pieces of colored entities. A white plane moves slowly across the map, showing the journey route. A few minutes later, the map is replaced by flight information on the screen: the aircraft’s speed, altitude, distance to destination, and, at the bottom, the temperature outside.

“It’s fifty below up here,” says a middle-aged man who is sitting to his right. His voice is tense.

He smiles back but says nothing. Just the thought is enough to make him shiver. He thinks he would not survive minus fifty degree for more than a few minutes.

“This is my first visit back in thirty-five years”, the middle-aged man continues. “I have no idea what it’s like there now.”

Thirty-five years! He thinks it is too long to be away. After so many years even if you do go back, you never really get there.

“Is someone picking you up at the airport” he asks the

middle-aged man for just saying something.

“My cousin”, says the man, “But I don’t know if we’ll recognize each other after so long. Maybe we’ll just pass each other by without realizing it.”

“You’ll recognize him”

“Yes I will. How about you? How long have you been gone?”

“Long enough that nobody would recognize me,” he says coldly and brusquely to cut off the conversation, which is getting too personal.

The middle-aged man silently shifts his gaze and looks out the window at the thick, dense layer of cloud under the plane. It obscures the ground.

“Strange. It’s been so cloudy since we took off. I haven’t been able to see the earth at all,” the middle-aged man says without turning his face, as if he did not expect an answer.

Next to the teacup on the tray table in front of him, there is a sugar packet. Two little sugar cubes side by side, wrapped in white paper with blue text and the airline logo. On the other side is a drawing of something, which would resemble the world map. You can barely make out the continents. Maybe not even that. Africa has become a circle and eastern Asia has merged with South America and Alaska is missing.

The little sugar packet takes him back about thirty years. A summer day on a vacation trip with his parents to another city near the desert. He would turn eight at the end of the summer. All that remains of the trip is fuzzy, fragmentary sense pictures. They appear before his eyes involuntarily, disconnected, one at a time. Like slides. As if they were real, down to the smallest detail. The two little sugar cubes, wrapped in white paper, at that moment, at 10,000 meters up in the sky, at fifty degrees below zero, summon that hot day more than thirty years ago at the ruins of an ancient palace.

*They left the hotel early, but it still took most of the morning to get to the palace, which was quite a way outside the*

city. The palace, actually ruins around high pillars, stands there under the burning sun. Daddy explains there are two statues of lions' heads at the top of each pillar. He is blinded by the sun every time he tries to look up and see the lions' heads. Mama and Daddy are staring up; they seem to have almost forgotten he is there. Mama and Daddy take pictures and talk going back and forth among the ruins. He finds a patch of shade to escape the sun. He is hungry and feels dizzy from the heat and the sun. The ruins stand alone in the desert as if they have been there for eternity. Other than the tourist office and a few cafés, there is nothing else as far as the eye can see.

"Can't we go back? I'm hungry."

"Soon," Mama calls as she lifts the camera.

"We can have lunch here," Daddy says. "The guy at the hotel told me about a good restaurant."

A little later, in the restaurant with the vast tinted windows and air conditioning owned by the national airline, the hot and blinding sun is gone. They choose a table next to the big window overlooking the palace. The airline's logo is everywhere, even on the napkins and cutlery. The waiter, who has the logo on his shirt, goes away, their order written down on a little white pad. It is cool and quiet in the restaurant and he gets sleepy.

"Don't fall asleep, Son. The food will be here soon," says Mama, who has leaned toward him, giving him a big smile. He tries to keep eyes open. Mama, with two fingers of her left hand, pushes a lock of her long dark hair, fallen across the left side of her face, behind her ear. He is too tired to smile back. Leans his head back a little in the comfortable chair.

"Come and sit here until the food arrives." Daddy pats his knee and reaches out to him.

He sits in his father's lap and lays his head on his chest, which is still hot and sweaty. He feels the short, thick chest hair under Daddy's summer shirt. It tickles his cheek and he chuckles before closing his eyes.

"Look at this." Trying to keep him awake, his father leans toward the table and the hair under the shirt tickles him even more. He laughs aloud this time and then rubs his cheek with his palm. Daddy picks up a box from the table next to the napkins.

"Let's see what we can find in here," he says and takes off the lid.

The box is full of small, white cubes.

"What's that, Daddy?" he asks curiously. His drowsiness is gone and he looks in the box with wide-awake eyes.

"Sugar cubes," says his father, putting one in his hand.

Two little sugar cubes wrapped in white paper printed with a blue design.

"How chic," says his mother. Now she also plucks one up.

Daddy puts his forefinger on the drawing that depicts the world map and says, "Look. Here's Africa and here is Europe."

"Where are we?" he asks, fascinated by the sugar packet.

Daddy is quiet. His finger moves across the blue design. "Here ...? We should be here, but it ..."

Mama is interested, too. She picks up the sugar packet for a closer look and, disappointed to find where they were on the map, says, "Strange. I can't find it either."

His memory fails and the restaurant and his parents fade away. The pictures stop here. After a few blank seconds, a single picture appears, suddenly and unexpectedly. Like a forgotten slide at the very end of the magazine in a slide projector, a picture that pops up on the screen after you thought the slide show was over. The picture is of his father. It is not that summer and not among the ruins.

His father sits alone on the floor with his back against the wall. The picture shows him from the side. He sees his father's left side. His father is looking straight ahead. As if he is talking to someone sitting across from him. He lifts a small glass in his right hand. He holds the glass with three fingers. His thumb on one side, his first and second fingers on the other. He recognizes the picture even though he cannot place it where or when. But he has seen it many times. He knows that his father lift the glass to his lips, hesitates one second, then drinks the vodka in the glass in one go. Confident and decided. That is the kind of man Daddy was.

It was his last vacation with his father. The fall was not ended when he was picked up early one afternoon by four plain-clothes policemen. Small men with big guns in their hands took him as he was about to drink his afternoon tea. They just came in and took him. They asked no questions. Neither did his father. As if he had been waiting for them. His mother might have said something. Like "not now." It all went so fast, silently, like a ritual. "It wasn't even five minutes, from beginning to end," his mother would say over the following weeks when she told others the story. She also said that when she sat down at the table again, after the police had gone with his father, his tea was still hot. Daddy showed up six months later, as unexpectedly as he had disappeared. Gone for half a year without a trace, and suddenly he stood there. At the door. He said "hello" and nothing more. He was never the same again, and never told anyone what had happened to him. No one asked him either. As time went by, he became enveloped in a melancholy silence. A week could pass without a single word from his lips. His constant absent presence, his constant present absence, was unbearable. He was gone, yet not.

"Amazing!" says the middle-aged man in the seat next to him, who is still looking out the window. "Clouds as far as the eye can see. I can't see the Earth."

He leans his head back and looks at the screen showing the flight map. The little white plane is hardly moving. It seems to have stuck and is only making small, almost unnoticeable jerks to the right and the left. Like in a computer game when the main character can no longer move forward. He runs all the time into walls and the player doesn't know the way out.

The Fasten Seatbelt sign lights up. A moment passes and then a voice on the PA system tells them they have run into unexpected bad weather and passengers should remain in their seats until it has passed.

"Excuse me! Can you please put your seat backs forward," the flight attendant with the long dark hair says.

"What kind of bad weather is it?" he asks, just to extend her presence a moment, in hopes of seeing the mysterious interplay of the fingers and the hair.

The straight lock of black hair has slipped forward again and is hanging there proudly on the left side of her face, waiting for the confident hand to push it behind the ear.

"There's nothing to worry about. It will be over soon," she answers and suddenly lifts her left hand.

A trivial detail – invisible to most – but enough to give him a sense of belonging, however short-lived. A sensation like that of the heat at the ruins. A familiar yet remote sensation. Again. This minimal act liberates him of anxiety about the juddering aircraft, about the minus fifty degrees outside the window, about the idea that the earth is still invisible. He opens his hand. The sugar cubes have been crushed by the pressure and are melting in his sweaty palms. The white wrapper showing the map of the world is shredded and grains of sugar fall, one after the other, from his hand, with every shake of the plane.

## Mental Torture

*Tsvegie Mukozho*

---

I watch her in my own silence  
My asylum seeking house-mate  
A woman of many confusing  
and disturbing personalities  
Who plays cat and mouse with the professionals  
Many a time a failed suicide attempt  
She dares them all  
Followed by a stand down with the Old Bill  
They come and go, again and again.

Many a time I watch in the shadows  
As she plays cat and mouse  
With social workers  
Her very favourite of all  
Her son is the pawn in the Chess game.

Many a time I watch in the shadows  
Her own mental state in deterioration  
As they come and go leaving her with no solutions  
Like a pawn in her own Chess game  
She sells herself short  
Like a time bomb, I watch her,  
detonating her own mental explosives  
Unlike a soldier betrayed  
by his own footstep  
on a concealed landmine  
She sets her own mental time bomb.

I watch in silence  
Barricaded in my own room  
Suffering from her chain smoking stinking weed  
Her late night loud piracy music  
Her so often early- bird door slamming  
And many a time,  
The smell of stinking fish, cooking for hours  
I sit in the shadows  
with my own mental state being tortured  
by my inconsiderate asylum seeking house mate.

## We Move

*Emmanuel Jakpa*

---

165 million people in Africa wish to go abroad.  
16.5 per cent of its human size.  
And 700 million of the world's, 16 per cent,  
want to move for good to another country.  
You will hear someone say, all that went had a super blast.  
So I want to go to Europe and have a blast of my own.  
The reasons are everywhere the same.

Another will say, I want to see Cliffs of Moher; another  
Stonehenge,  
another the Great Pyramid of Giza; another Potala Palace.  
Another, I want to go to America for I see  
that my skills can't be used here and no one cares.  
One, I will like to act in a Hollywood movie.  
Someone else, I want to improve my English.  
All these reasons are the same.

A lad sleeping. His teeth sinking deep  
into an apple slipping into his mouth.  
He dreams of making friends.  
There, that girl talks about the books she read  
when she was four. Ladies long hair swept back in ponytails,  
dudes drinking ginger bear and playing in the snow.  
More and more these reasons are the same.

Another in a trance of thinking says,  
I want to work for the foreign company in Bangladesh,  
so they can send me to Canada.  
Another, I want to leave my country  
to live a happy and relaxed life.  
One more, leaving is my only choice. I'm not kidding.  
All of these that are reasons are the same.

These are people who feel akin to a place  
their feet have never stepped on; where the butternut,  
the fig, sycamore and the eucalyptus trees grow.  
These people are you and I. They are you and I  
with our sisters and brothers, and our nieces and cousins,  
and aunts and uncles, and our friends and neighbours, and  
everyone.  
Everyone is them. They and everyone are the same.

Strangers in their own land wander away.  
What is learnt cannot be unlearned.  
What has been cultured will be handed down.  
Out of fear and pain, joy and hope, we move.  
Out of songs and dreams, myth and love we move,  
Bringing from the bowl of the human spirit the genius of being.

# My Silk Road

## Tania Tamari Nasir

---

From the sitting room in our family home in Birzeit, I sit to write this personal memoir - something of my experience with Palestinian embroidery, my own "silk road" so to speak. Exquisite carpets, colourful embroidered cushions, and family portraits and mementos surround me. It is a square room, the high vaulted ceiling, the tall arched windows, from which I can see the rolling terraced hills beyond remind one of a church, and indeed there is a sense of a sacred warmth that envelops the place, and I am touched by it. I am always touched by it, and now it has become my muse, helping me to reflect upon a certain passion that I have developed along the years; the passion and love of crafts and embroidery, especially Palestinian embroidery. How do I trace this love? Where did it all begin? How did it come to enrich and beautify my life to a point where it has become part and parcel of me, my character and my identity?



I close my eyes to better remember, to better concentrate. I am flooded by memories, anecdotes, events. One thing leads me to another, but the order is confused. Closing my eyes is not proving helpful. Frustrated I open them again and the glorious spring light filtering through the windows seems to come to the rescue and as in the fantasy stories of long ago, a magic carpet, a flying carpet now of woven rays, suddenly metamorphosed. It picks me up and effortlessly, breathlessly carries me with the speed of its light to another place, another room, not far away, there to Jaffa by the sea, and I know I have arrived to where it had all begun close to sixty years ago.

Here I was, a little girl in my grandparents' home, in a room - my grandmother's room. The light is quite different from the sharpness of the mountain light that I have just left. It is a damp light, touched by the salty sweetness of the sea breeze of the Mediterranean and open horizons. A large wooden cupboard takes centre place in my vision. It is ivory white with a mirrored door, and right in front of it is a little girl of about five years old - me - squatting and looking into a wide open drawer at its bottom. My hands are buried deep inside the contents, and I remember, I recognise, almost feel, the moment of the beginnings of my "silk road" unravelling right there from my grandmother's drawer. This was the place, the Aladdin cave, where she kept all the paraphernalia and knick-knacks of sewing: threads, pins and needles, buttons and hooks, lace and beads, sequins and ribbon, and most of all, swatches, patches, leftover material that remained and was kept after sewing clothes, lingerie, and household accessories. Materials of various textures and colours; silk, velvets, and lace, floral linen and geometric-patterned cotton, remnants of everything that a woman would wear, everything that a woman would use in her home. It was the mid-forties then, and sewing and dressmaking were part and parcel of one's life, especially of every woman's life. Unlike today, there were few ready-made things to be bought: dresses, coats, pillowcases, sheets, curtains, sofa covers - almost everything had to be custom-made, which provided a certain charming uniqueness to things, far from the boring sameness of factory and mass productions. It was in my grandmother's sewing room that my passion for colour and design, for texture and embroidery began. The details came later, but the seeds were sewn as my little hands delved into that drawer of my grandmother's cupboard, in Jaffa by the sea.

My visits to Jaffa were brutally severed by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. We could no longer go to Jaffa from Ramallah, the mountain summer resort where my family lived and from where we would go to Jaffa to spend the winter months, in the warmth of the city by the sea. My grandparents fled the horrors of war as refugees to Egypt, and my family remained in Ramallah - never to go back to our treasured sojourns in Jaffa, never to see my grandmother's cupboard again, never to be embraced by the magic of her sewing room.

My flying carpet is waiting, and I turn to it now to take me to the small, humble office of Samiha Khalil, "Imm Khalil," the legendary and visionary Palestinian woman, founder of In'ash al Usra Society. It is the time soon after the tragic outcome of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Palestine is totally under occupation. I am a young mother now living in Birzeit after having got married and lived in the U.S. for the previous several years. I had just returned home with my family to settle. Like all those around me, I am stunned by the war, helpless and lost, not knowing how to react or how to continue. I learned about the work of In'ash al Usra and its mission to inject Palestinian society with courage, steadfastness, and hope in the face of the fear, despair, and disillusionment that the perils of occupation had brought upon the society. I go to visit Imm Khalil and offer my services. Many were the venues that the society was involved in. Outright charity was not its goal. The work of the Society concentrated on the positive - creating jobs and teaching vocational skills to women. One specific area of work was the traditional cross-stitch embroidery, and I signed up as a volunteer to help in this field close to my heart. For the first time in my life, my love for embroidery and the aesthetics related to it were going to be put to the service of others. Palestinian embroidery was evolving more and more to become an economic tool to raise the standard of living for the destitute refugee family, and at the same time, it carried within it the symbol of an identity and sense of pride in a cultural heritage.

These were exciting and challenging times for me, and I felt useful and at the same time uplifted, working in fields that I love and being involved in the promotion of the social and economic status of the women around me, all within the framework of safeguarding a threatened identity and cultural heritage. I was happy and energised by working with wonderful, dedicated women - until November 22, 1974, when everything dramatically came to an end. On that date, my husband Hanna Nasir, then president of Birzeit University, was brutally deported from Palestine to the Lebanese borders, together with four other com-

munity leaders. Our lives were turned upside down. The children and I eventually joined him in exile, and in 1975, I left Birzeit to live in Amman, Jordan.

It is there, to Amman, that my magic carpet transports me now. The memories are vivid, painful. Leaving one's family and friends, one's country and home in this unjust, inhuman manner was shattering. Adjustment to a new place was hard, yet friends old and new went out of their way to make us feel at home, away from home. Slowly I started to feel my way around. My interests, always a positive impetus to cheer me up and prod me on, guided me to explore, until I met Widad Kawar, the well-known Palestinian collector of Palestinian traditional costumes and crafts.

Widad and I spoke of the need to document the beautiful motifs of Palestinian embroidery, a thought that I had often dwelt upon while working with In'ash Al Usra. We were both aware, like many of us involved in the field, that the old, authentic patterns and embroidery designs were in danger of being forgotten. Time and the dispersion of the Palestinians from their homes and villages to all four corners of the globe, as a result of several Arab-Israeli wars, have torn traditions apart. Embroidered patterns handed down from one generation to another were being forgotten. So it was important that we attempt to save these designs and others not only for future generations of Palestinian women but also for embroidery lovers and for all those interested in Palestinian culture. The seventies and eighties witnessed the peak of this interest. Palestinian embroidery was "à la mode." An Intifada dress, a tribute to the 1987 Palestinian uprising against occupation, was even designed with motifs of the olive branch, the Palestinian flag, and the Dome of the Rock. Embroidery was making its own statement against the horrors and injustices of occupation in Palestine. Embroidery was speaking "Truth to Power." My involvement with Palestinian embroidery while in exile in Amman helped me to keep in touch with all that was going on in the field in Palestine itself. It was a connection, both physical and moral, that I needed in order to reduce the pain of separation from my family and the landscape that I loved so much.

Close to nineteen years of exile and living outside Palestine had passed. The year 1993 brought with it political changes and new realities that gave us hope of a near-return to the homeland and the end of my husband's years of deportation. Soon enough, we did return - on April 30 of that year. It is this period in my life that I come to now. It is another milestone, and memories and recollections are now vivid and clear. Without realising it, I am once again back in my sitting room, in Birzeit. The port of departure for this memoir has become the scene of return, the magical flying carpet of light has brought me back to memories that are not from far away, realities that are still fresh and clear. For they are part and parcel of this place, this sitting room, my home to which I had returned from exile. And so sadly, I bid my carpet farewell. It has served me well; without it I would not have been able to remember and to write. Somehow it was remembering for me, taking me to wonderful destinations and landmarks of my life. It was made of light, and it brought light into my heart.

The light from the windows is now fading. It is the end of a long day. Memories and recollections have warmed my heart. In the space of a day and on a luminous magic flying carpet of light, I have travelled far and wide, visiting important milestones along my silk road. I feel a bit tired, vulnerable, and sentimental; remembering has a way of doing this to one, yet I strangely feel whole and strong too. I lean on the Palestinian embroidered cushions on the sofa where I am sitting. They hold me tenderly and comfort me in what seems to be an eternal embrace of dazzling colours and designs. Palestinian embroidery remains my passion, my identity, my "silk road."

## That day ... from the middle of the winds

*Shadab Vajdi*

They called me  
from the middle of the winds  
when imagination was filled with night  
and when the road  
was about to lose its way in darkness.

They called me  
when one heard nothing  
but the noise of branches breaking  
and the gentle murmur of leaves falling,  
when clouds provided  
but a weak covering  
for the nakedness of the town.

Behold the reflection of the sun  
in the window panes  
at the moment of saying farewell  
when the spread of sunset  
paints the town in blood  
and when rooftops  
bear the footprints of the last glance.

They called me  
from the middle of the winds  
when the sunset filled the horizon  
and my hands  
were unable to feel  
the last particles of light.

Amidst the winds  
it was the sound of your footsteps  
that disturbed the silence.

You can live under the stars  
as simply as a leaf does,  
but you will always have  
his entreating hands  
with you.  
And one day- one day,  
on the pavement,  
you will see  
big collections of dry leaves being burnt  
after half of them  
have been trodden on  
by the townsfolk.

They called me  
from the middle of the winds  
in the same way that autumn leaves  
are summoned  
and my silent perplexity  
was even devoid of the sound  
of a falling leaf.

I cannot carry on  
but I cannot end this either.  
Whence is the wind blowing?  
In what direction are they carrying my days away?  
From what direction are they summoning me?  
My molten heart  
was dripping on my skirt.  
And the sound of your footsteps  
... from the middle of the winds.

## **The Oak**

*Rizwan Akhatar*

---

Every oak has a history,  
a touch of relationship,  
and a hunger for space.  
Its branches exaggerate  
and lose their identity;  
entangled and embraced  
it has a secret, a map, and a centre  
so I have one with Persian barks  
shedding *ghazals* besides cones  
but from poets' mouths  
stuffed with betel-leaf  
and metaphors.

## **Palestine**

*Chris Gutkind*

---

I planted peace buttons  
in the town of Terezín,  
my own bit of pollution -  
not for the dead, they're dead.

I pushed aside some earth  
so they'd be just below the surface,  
to give them a chance at air -  
not to harm them  
but have them work to fruition.

Perhaps I won't come back  
to see them grown.  
It's impossible anyway -  
some tourist will step on their veins  
or the dead will water  
them too much.

I'll look elsewhere for that bloom.

## **"Sir, I salute your courage, your strength, your indefatigability"**

**George Galloway to  
Saddam Hussein**

*Ali Hosseini*

---

I salute your courage  
Killing people of each age  
In Iran and Kurdistan  
In every town and village

I salute your courage  
For causing so much damage  
To both Iran and Iraq  
Turning both into carnage

I salute your courage  
In the way you take hostage  
Prisoners on both sides  
Giving shocks with high voltage

I salute your courage  
In the way you take revenge  
The way you humiliate  
And for the use of language

I salute your courage  
For the way you do manage  
I like this school of thought  
This school and this college

I salute your courage  
I enjoy this marriage  
A marriage of old foes  
Turning Iran to Wreckage

I salute your courage  
In the way you take revenge  
You carry on like Saddam  
Don't give up the privilege

I salute your courage  
You leave no room for salvage  
don't worry if it does cause  
unhappiness and outrage

I salute your courage  
Treat them all like garbage  
Don't worry if they call you  
A monster or savage

I salute your courage  
For causing anger and rage  
I do like this business  
I enjoy the whole package

**The Wheel of Life by Ruhi Darakhshani**

*Athena Press, 2010. pp 173. Available from Amazon.*

ISBN 978-1-84748-672-1

**Reviewed by David Clark**

This is a collection of short stories. Although Darakhshani was born and brought up in Iran all the stories in this book are set in the West, where she has been living since 1974. Yet, there is an unmistakable quality about many of these stories which are clear reminders of an older tradition of storytelling from her native country, in which suffering and adversity is finally overcome by the goodness within humanity, by overcoming divisiveness and evil impulses. The element of traditional moral tale, transposed to the West and to modernity, is clearly present in many of Darakhshani's stories.

And yet, there is also a darker side to her stories, and here it is that the author really begins to shine. *Deceit and Murder* explores the meticulous planning of the murder of the wife who cheated on him. As with all the stories this collection, the element of suspense is kept going till the last, so that the reader is drawn into the plot. But more tellingly, the story gains credibility as the main character is allowed to tell his own tale, endowing him with emotions, and so acquires a sense of individuality and depth. *Delirium* is another story focusing on one man's descent into hell, with the fear of being persecuted and tortured by an inanimate wall-mounted clock. Some of these stories are whimsical, depicting the idiosyncratic nature of the characters in unexpected ways, as in *I Made Her Smile*, in which three lonely and miserable individuals are brought together in an act of random kindness and for a split second at least the veil and weight of misery is dropped and a smile shines through. All the stories in this collection are well crafted, but this one stands out for the compassion that it portrays. Similarly, *Death of a Dentist* conveys both the dread and the intimacy of being in a dentist's chair. The story is told with real feeling and emotions, managing to convey a sense that the reader is drawn into the lives of "real" people. *Escape* is another dark tale, depicting rape and murder, and several descents into hell, but here too compassion wins out in the end, as the protagonists brood over their unhappy childhoods and manage to find the inner strength to transcend their appalling mistakes.

All of the stories are well crafted, written with consummate skill, keeping the element of surprise and suspense going right to the end. In the best of the stories, the characters are entirely believable, often depicted with a great deal of sensitivity and displaying a depth and range of emotions, with fear, affection and compassion dominating many of these tales. Yet, some of the morality tales lack depth of characterisation, like candy floss, sweet but lacking substance. Even so, there are so many little gems, even more substantial ones, interwoven in this collection, each demonstrating a great deal of originality and delighting in the idiosyncratic nature of characters, even the most horrific ones, that it is well worth the read.

**Undraining Sea by Vahni Capildeo**

*Egg Box Publishing 2009*

ISBN 978-0-9559399-0-7; pp. 90

**Reviewed by Bart Wolffe**

Here is a poet who is both priestess and forensic scientist. Born in Trinidad in 1973, Vahni Capildeo currently holds a Teaching Fellowship in Creative Writing at the University of Leeds and works freelance for the Oxford English Dictionary. This is her second full collection. In approaching her work, it becomes necessary for the reader to absent themselves from preconception of what poetry and prose should be and rather embrace a sense of the mystic potential of language; the purposed disruption of forms in order to discover, albeit intuitively, the experiences and myths that Capildeo explores and internalises from her inner and outward journeyings through the impermanence of a fluid and changeable landscape.

Like most uprooted writers, an underlying sense of myth is to be found in the origins and the references alluding to her personal blood history and geography of displacement. As if sub-textual notes in a work of reference, her 'Blood to Light' juxtaposes language notes side by side with the body of the poem in self-reflection. This often takes the process of an internal dialogue, much like a researcher speaking into a tape-recorder whilst noting observances on their on-going experiment. This device has the quality of offering a seeming authority to her voice and giving her text the stamp of a reference work. This occurs in several of the pieces in the book. Reference is often made to the schema of language as its own horizon. Like her ocean title, *Undraining Sea* or the shifting sands she refers to severally alongside the repeated reference to changing clouds, there is a mutability in the imagery and an instinctive passion to hold the transience of variable meaning, if only for a moment's breath, the blood-beat of the poem or piece of prose concerned.

Yet, there is the etymological scientist at work, the Oxford Dictionary contributor who is dissecting the very bones of language. 'Iron Age, Stone Words' sees the archaeologist disembowelling the earth to examine the rituals of history. Like the stone-

age exhumation here, the poet confesses in this poem to her own transitory state of impermanence and mortality as she assumes the voice for those she comments on, the iron age dwellers of the past.

The country Capildeo inhabits through her pen is one, almost, of the priest's entrails, where life and death and everything in between are inextricably entwined. She organically finds shapes that are fluid and yet unformed. Rather like trying to cup water into a more concrete absolute, her images spill through the fingers of her 'Undraining Sea' as if she were not able to hold them fast in permanence. Her work ebbs and flows, back and forth, like the very oceans in motion, never constant, shape-shifting somehow.

In the extended opening prose poem, "A Book of Hours", Vahni Capildeo creates a scalpel with which she post-mortems the night's corpus and beneath the nakedness of her visceral imagery, divines the forensic authority of her examination of poetry as a process of dreaming. The conscious internalisation is hardened with the sinews of startled reality "recalling what's too deep in flesh – our electrified nerves."

The anima lives side by side with the human persona. First person and third person are often interchangeable like someone looking in a mirror and making commentary on what is viewed there. Her 'Person Animal Figure' poem returns her to the role of priestess exploring the mythical once again as she describes: "The animal who is perfect in its ways is composed of hiding places. Its limbs enfold nooks where shadowy creatures mutter their way to rest."

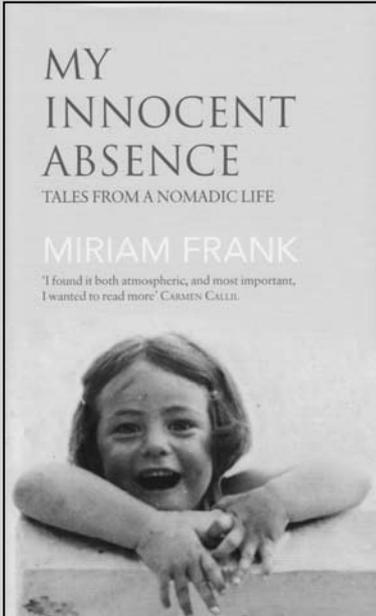
Vahni Capildeo is possibly extraordinary in her approach to her subject as she refuses to be framed by singularities of context and form, rather like a tiger moving through the chiaroscuro of sunlight dancing through leaves and almost invisible but to the dreamer's eye. Be prepared to be startled by this poet's unique exploration of the senses and unexpected juxtapositions of language.

## My Innocent Absence by Miriam Frank

Arcadia Books 2010

ISBN 078-906413-67-5, pp 366

Reviewed by RS



Miriam Frank, anaesthetist, polyglot and translator, from a very early age showed determination and independence of thought and spirit that were to be her constant companions during her ever eventful and unfolding life. Written in poetic elegant prose, the pace continually changes as the reader travels with her through her earliest childhood recollections to the present. The title is a reference to the bravery and resourcefulness of her mother Kate in 1941, when she escaped from Vichy France to Mexico with five year old Miriam. 'Our fate had been deflected...My innocent absence from the tangled pyramids of naked

men women and children mixed with urine shit blood and vomit in the midst of grisly screams choking gasps invocations to God and a string quartet the children crushed underfoot in the scramble for air...' The realisation of what could have happened to her as a Jewish child would cast a dark shadow over her life.

From Mexico to New Zealand, then to England and later in Italy and Argentina, Miriam captures and conveys the colour and vibrancy of each country and their people. Her mother, from the 'constrained lifestyle' of an assimilated middle class German family and her father, from a poor orthodox Lithuanian family, had both rebelled against their upbringing and had opted for the liberalism and idealism of the newly democratised Spain, where Miriam was born.

Backwards and forwards in time she searches to recapture her memories from her 'idyllic' childhood in Mexico, her fraught marriage to the German artist Korkokraks and throughout her life her special and often difficult relationship with her mother. Frequently changing her abode, Miriam never remained in one house for more than two years, until she settled in London in the 1960s. Even though in Israel she had found for the first time she 'had no problem with identity...This was a place I could call home where the earth welcomed me and made me feel at one with it...', she discovered that paradoxically this sense of 'belonging' had given her the strength not to need it, the courage to be herself without attachment to a piece of land.

It is a gripping story told with dignity and honesty of an exceptional woman who studied medicine 'to turn my attention to healing not hurting' and absorbed herself linguistically and emotionally in each country she lived in. In the final chapters of the book she ties up the loose ends and answers unasked questions as the final pieces of the jigsaw of her life are put in place, concluding 'I love and enjoy each place I find myself in, without missing the others, as I learn to come to terms with myself and find contentment within.'

## Dreams That Spell the Light by Shanta Acharya

Arc Publications, UK, 2010

ISBN 978-1904614-61-6 (pb);

978-1906570-05-7 (hb) pp.72

Review by Anita Money

What shapes Shanta Acharya's approach to the world is her search for spiritual equilibrium. The metaphysical nature of belief and those paradoxical truths that draw together visible and invisible are an essential part of her imaginative landscape. She introduces this new collection with quotations from Eliot and Proust which mirror her own understanding of life as a journey of rediscovery and openness to the world, a theme explored in various poems.

The title of the collection comes from 'The Wishing Tree': 'Mother and daughter, hands outstretched/ cast dreams that spell the light'. This image of supplication and vision seems to symbolise our human condition. Our capacity for wishing, praying and dreaming, whether prayer flags at monasteries in the foothills of the Himalayas, candles lit in churches, or individual voices rising in contrapuntal prayer, reveals our deep need to appeal to a power greater than ours. After a humorous list of rituals performed in 'Wishes' Acharya concludes 'I have learnt that wishes are milestones / on our journey back home'.

Our journey back home is the fundamental paradox: our mortality but intimation of immortality. The lament in 'Return of the Exile' with its subtitle from the *Qur'an* *We are all returning* is for childhood but also for that elusive home for which we all yearn. Acharya's ability to handle the abstract and give substance to the negative is shown in her poem 'Black Swans' inspired by Nassim Nicholas Taleb's concept of Black Swans as being both those very rare events of great impact which have shaped the world and those rare occasions when what is highly expected does not happen. A strong sense of irony leavens the serious concerns of Acharya's poetry and her opening poem 'Italian Prayer' compares the temple of Jagannatha and the basilica of San Marco: She visits the once magnificent but now decaying 'Mosque of Wazir Khan' and

Moving from one world into the next;

I enter paradise on earth, I am blessed.

This irony turns its hand to a witty personification in 'Transit of Venus'. There has been a development in the pitch and clarity of voice and longer rhythmic movement of prose within the mode of poetry in some of her later work.

The geographical range of this collection and double perspective (physical and metaphysical), create a sense of space and time. There are different landscapes with different realities: in 'Highgate Wood' squirrels, dogs, joggers and pensioners co-exist in domesticated natural surroundings. In the 'Sundarbans', nature is more extreme and dispossessed men and tigers roam, and all the while The Great Wall of China, exposed to the tourist gaze, outlives the human labour and sorrow of its making: In all these journeys that universal cry persists 'Surely there is somewhere, something/that justifies our coming and going?'

## Which Shade of Blue by Shirin Razavian

Reviewed by Lotfali Khonji

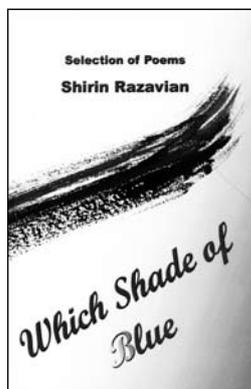
A.S.A. Publications, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-9558643-0-8; pp. 250

This is an impressive dual language collection of poetry by Shirin Razavian who fled Iran because of the censorship and lack of freedom of expression. Robert Chandler, who translated some of the poems into English, writes about Razavian's work: 'Shirin writes with absolute directness and lack of pretension [...] When I read a poem like 'Water Song', the images are so vivid that I almost forget that I am reading in a foreign language [...] Shirin enters wholeheartedly both into the world outside her – as is clear from her political poems – and into the world within her'.

In *Which Shade of Blue* we find a selection of Shirin's Persian poems and their English translations by Robert Chandler. In addition, a number of poems in the second section were composed in English by Shirin herself. These include 'Dying Young', 'Wine, Bread and Blood' and 'Rainbow of Memories'. In some of the poems in the English section, such as 'Trap', the poet depicts the society around her in the manner of a painter. The same holds for poems that refer to the years the poet has spent away from her homeland. In 'Wine, Bread and Blood', we read:

*I have danced in the festival of life  
But it was a gypsy dance!  
I had no land  
I had no home*

There are also nostalgic poems, such as 'Dying Young', fuelled by exile.



Poems in Persian fall into two categories. In the first, we find modern poetry while the second consists of lyrics and other types of classical poetry. Here too, Shirin is sometimes in Britain and sometimes in Iran, in particular in poems in which she refers to Zahra Kazemi and other victims of political oppression.

The translations are quite good. Considering that poetic imagery is not the same in the two languages and that idiomatic expressions are also quite different, there are inevitable cases of difference in meanings. In the poem 'I'm Afraid', we read:

*I'm afraid I won't say;  
I'm afraid I won't  
let my tongue run away with me.*

In the Persian original we find a reference to, literally, fearing that "my head remains green and my tongue colourless". This is an allusion to an idiomatic expression that runs, literally, like this: *a red tongue will lead to the loss of a green head*, meaning "talking boldly or carelessly can lead to one's demise". So, the meaning being conveyed is "I fear that I might become a silent coward, interested only in saving my own skin". A better translation could have been: *I'm afraid I might hold my tongue to save my head*. But perhaps I am only nit-picking!

Classical Persian poetry, from the works of Ferdowsi and Khayyam to those of Sa'di and Hafez, is well represented in the English speaking world. However, the same cannot be said of modern Persian poetry. *Which Shade of Blue* provides a welcome addition to the modest selection of modern Persian poetry accessible in the English speaking world.

## Biographies

**Rizwan Akhtar** His poems have appeared in Poetry Salzburg Review, Poetry NZ, Wasafiri, decanto, tinfoil-dresses, Postcolonial Text, Poesia and in an anthology by Forward Press UK.

**Marijo Alba** is from Spain and studied art in Madrid and in this country. She is a practising artist, a poet and an award winning photographer. She has published comic stories, posters and photographs.

**Karen Alkalay-Gut** Born in London, she grew up in New York, completing a PhD at the University of Rochester. Since 1972 she has lived in Israel, teaching poetry at Tel Aviv University and writing.

**Shakila Azizzadeh**, born in Afghanistan, since 1985 has lived in the Netherlands, where she studied Persian literature at Utrecht University. Her book of poetry *Herinnering aan niets / Memory of nothing* (2004) was published in Dutch and Dari. She works as an interpreter.

**Hasan Bamyani**, born in Afghanistan, lives in Oxford. As a teacher in Afghanistan he was attacked by the Taliban for teaching girls. He fled in 2001, leaving his family in Iran. A prolific poet, his published poetry collection is *Lyla and Majnon* (2009).

**Sofia Buchuck**, Peruvian singer and poet, has been based in London since 1991. She has published a collection of her poems in Mexico, and with Exiled Writers Ink 2008. Sofia is also an oral historian and ethnomusicologist.

**Maria Eugenia Bravo Calderara**, Chilean exiled writer living in London. Her first poetry book is *Prayer in the National Stadium* (1992). In 1993 her book about Pablo Neruda's poetry was published in Chile. Her own poetry collection is *Poems from Exile* (2009).

**Claire Chambers**, Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Leeds Metropolitan University. She is currently writing two books, *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* and a monograph tracing the development of artistic depictions of Muslims in Britain, 1966–present.

**David Clark** is the child of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s. His PhD focused on Jewish museums. He contributes to various cultural magazines in London.

**Mabel Encinas** is a poet and performance artist whose core theme is emotions in human life. She is a PhD student at the Institute of Education, University of London.

**Miriam Frank** born in Barcelona of Lithuanian American and German Jewish parents, she grew up in Mexico and New Zealand, graduated in medicine and settled in the UK, where she worked at a London teaching hospital. Translator of Spanish literature and author of *My Innocent Absence*.

**Consuelo Rivera Fuentes**, a Chilean-British writer and poet. Her most recent publication is a book of short stories: *Lejos de Casa: Memoria de chilenas en Inglaterra* and she is currently working on a fourth poetry book, *Arena en la Garganta* (Sand in the Throat).

**Chris Gutkind** was born in The Hague and was raised mostly in Montreal. Since 1988 he has lived in London where he works as a librarian. His poems have appeared in various magazines and his first book of poems is *Inside to Outside*, 2006, Shearsman.

**Karim Haidari**, born in Afghanistan, came to UK in 1999. Has an MA in Creative Writing from City University, London. He writes poetry, short stories, plays, scripts and radio plays. Excerpts have been published and performed in UK and Afghanistan.

**Mogib Hassan**, born in Yemen, is lecturer in Human Rights at Lebanese International University in Sana'a. Journalist and Yemeni correspondent for Dutch TV station VPRO, his writing and poetry focuses on humanity, freedom and equality, particularly womens' rights in Yemen.

**Ali Hosseini**, born in Iran, left in 1975. He was an active member of the Confederation of Iranian Students, which opposed dictatorship in Iran. After the 1979 Iranian revolution he continued fighting for democracy and human rights. A teacher he has worked in universities and colleges.

**Arsalan Isa**, born in 1990 in Karachi, Pakistan, some garret, somewhere. Observer of dragon flies, urban romantic.

**Emmanuel Jakpa** lives in Ireland. He studied at Lagos and Iowa Universities and has an MA from Waterford Institute of Technology. His poetry has been widely published. In 2008 he received a W.B Yeats' Pierce Loughran Award.

**Rahila Khalwa**, born in Japan, keeps looking for her place in this world, hopefully in the desert. She is now attempting to publish a book about her vagabond existence.

**Lotfali Khonji** is a translator and retired radio journalist. His published works of translation in English and Persian are in the fields of poetry, history, politics and fiction. His Persian translation of Edward Said's *Orientalism* won the best translation award in Iran.

**Shahram Khosravi**, born in Iran, left in 1987 and lives in Sweden. He is Associated Professor at Stockholm University and author of two books: *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (2008) and *The 'Illegal' Traveler: an auto-ethnography of borders*, Palgrave (2010).

**Berang Kohdamani**, born in Afghanistan, taught literature at Kabul University. He lived in London from 1995 until his death. His poetry collections include *Greeting to Corn Poppies*, *The Bitter Chapter of God*, and anthologies of Afghan and Latin American poetry and short stories.

**Leily Mossini** is an actress and poet from Iran. Because she addressed sensitive social issues regarding the Iranian regime, she was forced to leave Iran. She currently lives in Liverpool and is under threat of deportation.

**Anita Money** worked for poetry magazine *Agenda* and since 2001 has worked in an inner city comprehensive. She is currently helping to create an enrichment programme by inviting poets and writers to visit and encourage students to write.

**Tsvegje Mukozho** was born in Zimbabwe. She is a published writer, artist and poet. Author of *Gift of the Past*, she had exhibitions at Matombo and Zimbabwe National Galleries. She left Zimbabwe in 1997 and qualified in Social Work in the UK where she now lives.

**Tania Tamari Nasir**, born in Jerusalem, was exiled in Jordan for two decades and presently resides in Birzeit. She has a long history of involvement in cultural activities and in the arts. She is an author and literary translator as well as a classical singer.

**Wahid Nazari** is an Afghan film writer, director and producer. He is currently the director of Radio Television Afghanistan. He studied Cinema and Television in Bulgaria, gaining a PhD.

**Angella M. Nazarian** teaches psychology in Los Angeles universities. Her book, *Life as a Visitor*, Angella is about her family's escape from Iran to Beverly Hills. She is a contributor to *More Magazine* and the *Huffington Post*.

**Leyla Sarahat Roshani** (1958-2004) studied Dari literature at the University of Kabul and was one of Afghanistan's most respected poetesses. She came to the Netherlands as a refugee in 1998. There she became editor of *Hawa dar Tab'ed / Eva in exile*, a magazine for the Afghan diaspora. She published five books of poetry.

**Fathieh Saudi** was born in Jordan. Her collections of poetry are *The Prophets*, *a poetic journey from childhood to prophecy* and *River Daughter*. She has translated books from English and French into Arabic and 3 poetry collections from Arabic to English.

**Shabibi Shah**, born in Kabul, has a degree in journalism from Kabul University. She came to the UK in 1984 as a refugee and is author of *A Refugee's Life*, 2008. She is an interpreter and is currently working with the Ruth Hayman Trust and the Afghan Paimand Association.

**Laila Sumpton**, a member of the Keats House Poets Forum, has a forthcoming pamphlet with the Red Squirrel Press and performs at numerous poetry events. She is interested in how the arts and NGOs can work together and is currently studying for a Masters in Human Rights.

**Adina Tarry**, born in Romania, left to become a "global expatriate". Now based in London she is an organisational consultant, coach, business psychologist and associate lecturer. In 2000 she first published her writings in Bucharest.

**Ayesha Tarzi** came to England from Kabul in 1980. She is author of the novel *Red Death* (1985) and *The Night Letter*.

**Bogdan Tiganov** is a widely published writer with over ten years of editorial experience. Born in Romania, he has lived most of his life in the United Kingdom and has studied art and design and English literature.

**Dr. Shadab Vajdi** is an Iranian poet, linguist and academician living in London. Translations of her Persian poetic works have been published in English, German and Swedish. Her own works include the Persian translation of Paul Harrison's *Inside the Third World*.

**Ahmad Masood** Wahed is from Afghanistan and is currently studying for a BA in Politics and International Relations at London Metropolitan University.

**Bart Wolffe**, with a background in media and performance, left Zimbabwe in 2003 as freedom of speech became curtailed by the Mugabe regime. Most recently he has been involved in running workshops with refugee children in Croydon. He writes and publishes through Lulu.com.

**Mariana Zavati** an award winning poet born in Romania, has also published essays, reviews, short stories and translations. Published poetry: *Travellers/Calatori* (2001) *Pilgrims/Pelerinii* (2002) *Bequests/Mosteniri* (2003) *Soapte* (2005) *Vise la minuta* (2008) *Poems UK* (2009).

**Mojawer Ahmad Zyar**, born in Afghanistan, has a PhD from Berne University. Professor Zyar, linguist, prolific writer in Pashto, German and English, has compiled over 100 dialects of Pashto and other Afghan languages. Reviving Pashto as a global language, he introduced Pashto free style poetry.

## I CRIED ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

A new book published by Veronica Doubleday featuring images from the Afghanaid archive (1980-2010) with traditional Afghan poetry. His Excellency Homayoun Tandar, Afghan Ambassador to the UK, has written the preface, and calligraphy has been done by Parwiz Latifi. This striking collection is 64 pages and will be a prized addition to any library or coffee table.



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