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**MINDFUL OF GHOSTS**

**RONA LAYCOCK MA**

**SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF WALES  
IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Swansea University**

**2010**

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Candidate for the Degree of ...PhD.....  
Full title of thesis..... Mindful of Ghosts .....  
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This poetry collection explores the concept of memory as a function of identity and is based on the ten years or so that I spent living and working in Islamic countries during the 1970s and 1980s. It is an attempt to create a record of a life lived in unfamiliar territories where cultural and social norms are very different from those with which I was brought up.

The collection comprises four sections, each having a distinct character, attributable in part to the use of poetic forms chosen to complement specific periods and places. I experimented with haibun, haiku and prose poetry as well as free verse to achieve the desired effect. Themes of memory, place, people and social comment are woven throughout this collection to create a sense of unity within the whole.

The accompanying critical essay, 'Writing Mindful of Ghosts', considers the processes involved in such a venture and refers to some of the poets whose work interests and inspires me, as well as offering information on the places and times that informed the poems.

## DECLARATIONS AND STATEMENTS

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Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my husband, David, for his unfailing support and belief in my work.

## Writing Mindful of Ghosts

Through a fissure in a fading light  
patterning the world freehand ...

### Introduction

The lines of poetry quoted above are from “Swifter than a weaver’s shuttle”, the first poem in this collection, which addresses the experience of embarking on a sequence of autobiographical poems that encapsulate ten years of a life. As contemporary life becomes more clamorous and demanding there seem to be fewer opportunities to give time to considering past events with a view to gaining an understanding of their impact on us. Once the past has faded there is a diminishment of being, a loss of identity: who are we if not the sum of our experiences and memories? The descent of a friend into the muddle and loss that is Alzheimer’s played a role in providing the impetus behind many of the poems in this collection. Watching someone lose the essential core that makes up who they are engendered many questions as to the role of memory in the formation of identity.

Alongside poems of memory are poems exploring cultural differences, political upheaval, travel and religious conflicts, many of which still exist, with the goal of creating a unique record of times and places that have played their part in forming the person I am today.

The collection is made up of fragments: fleeting ever-changing images conjured by looking at photographs, reading news items, hearing chance remarks and talking with people who shared parts of my life. The poems fell naturally into four sections, which may be read out of context but which together form a coherent whole, with the poems carrying echoes and resemblances from one section to another. The first section, “Clamouring Ghosts”, contains a variety of poems whilst “Reflecting on the Nile” consists of a long poem entitled, “In the land of Egypt”. “Rice Pudding at the Ends of the Earth” is a collection of haibun and, finally, “In Conclusion” consists of two poems written in testament and thanks.

The plight of women is addressed in each section, haiku are dispersed throughout to act as punctuation and as foci for specific scenes, and the idea of a journey infuses the whole. The aim is to create an impression of an intimate universe that is thoroughly impinged on by outside events both large and small.

The question I set out to answer, – *Am I the same person today that I was thirty or so years ago?* – was overtaken by more questions. *Where have I been all these years? What have I seen and learned? What responsibilities do we all have to bring the injustices we witness to the notice of others?*

Between 1974 and 1985, I lived in three different Islamic countries: Tunisia, Egypt and Pakistan. It was a time when few people travelled to these countries other than as package tourists to Tunisia, tourists visiting sites of antiquity in Egypt and, in the case of Pakistan, as members of the rag-tag army of hippies travelling overland to India, searching for ‘enlightenment’.

It was a time of political upheavals. In 1977 Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was deposed and Martial Law was imposed in Pakistan; Egypt’s President Anwar al Sadat was assassinated in 1981; and food riots broke out in Tunisia in 1984. These upheavals and the effects on friends in these countries that I had learnt to call home, as well as the things I witnessed, left indelible marks on my consciousness and on my view of the world, and at the end of that period I returned home a changed person. I tried to exorcise the difficulties of coping with the loss of a life I loved and adjusting to life back in the UK by giving talks about the places and reminiscing with friends, but as time passed I ran out of people to talk to and life moved on. Almost twenty years later, the memories resurfaced abruptly. It was a disconcerting moment; I heard the rising and falling cadences of a muezzin whilst my eyes took in the rain scudding across the River Severn. The Welsh hills appeared and disappeared between banks of low cloud but I was feeling the heat of a Pakistani summer. Something in the typical British countryside had triggered a memory of times past and people long forgotten, and I was

unsettled. All those passions, fears, excitements and the confidence of youth pushed aside the detritus that had accumulated over the years.

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust's act of dipping a tiny cake into his tea evoked a brief memory that he struggled to place. Eventually he identified the memory:

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of Madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime flower tea.<sup>1</sup>

I experienced a similar instance of involuntary memory, not through a taste but through a combination of sights and weather. I repeatedly revisited the place where this inciting experience occurred to try to find the origin of the memory that was triggered that day. Try as I might I failed to find what in that moment had worked its magic and opened the door to so much that had been forgotten. I could make no connection between the windblown rain on Rodborough Common and my years of living in warmer climes. But, whatever had caused the slip in time, the genie was out of the bottle and there was no stuffing her back in. I needed to do something with the memories: to make sense of them, create something lasting, something that may be of interest to others, but what?

I examined my motives for wanting to spend years working towards a PhD. Was it just that, as Ryszard Kapuściński says in *Travels with Herodotus*:

Man knows, and in the course of years he comes to know it increasingly well, feeling it ever more acutely, that memory is weak and fleeting, and if he doesn't write down what he has learned and experienced, that which he carries within him will perish when he does.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Proust, M. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2006. p63.

<sup>2</sup>Kapuściński, R. *Travels With Herodotus*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008. p218.

Or was it to devote some time to try to make sense of a life that has raced along, full of encounters and opportunities but that seems to have lacked the time to consider the how and the why of it? Perhaps I was connecting with the imperative that drove prehistoric people to paint scenes of their lives on the walls of caves: to say I was here and this is what I did. One thing I did not want to do was wallow in nostalgia. This was an opportunity to examine what impact my past had had on my present.

It was whilst working towards an MA in Creative and Media Writing at Swansea University that I recognised the possibilities of poetry as a route through which to explore the idea of autobiography. Using poetry, I would be able to work without the imperative of a chronological straightjacket; connections would be made between the memories and emotions of the young me as they arose.

### **The Role of Memory**

Almost immediately I realised that capturing the exact feelings and thoughts of the young me was not as easy as I had imagined it would be. Doris Lessing, in her essay 'Writing Autobiography' writes:

Our own views of our lives change all the time, different at different ages ... While you can put yourself back inside the 10 year old, the 20 year old, any time you want, you are seeing that child, that young woman, as – almost – someone else.<sup>3</sup>

There is a danger, when one is seeing one's younger self as someone else, of fictionalising that person, and there were times when fears of how others would see me or the desire to keep hidden some aspects of my life by creating a fictional narrative inhibited the writing process. This dual perspective offered by some memories created conflicting views of an event or emotion that were so entangled within a poem as to make it unworkable.

I often wondered, during this period, if I was reconstructing the past to fit the facts as I know them today, and to fit the image I wanted to have of

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<sup>3</sup> Lessing, D. *Time Bites*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005. p92.

myself. Daniel L Schacter, in the introduction to *How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, sums this up:

The sin of bias reflects the powerful influences of our current knowledge and beliefs on how we remember the past. We often edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences – unknowingly and unconsciously – in light of what we now know or believe. The result can be a skewed rendering of a specific incident, or even of an extended period in our lives, which says more about how we feel *now* than about what happened *then*.<sup>4</sup>

I imagine that we all wish to see ourselves in a positive light, and that seems to lead inevitably to remembering our actions in a self-enhancing light. It is difficult to be completely objective.

With each poem I felt tugged this way and that, each nugget of memory had to be examined and then dissected to establish its worth. There were times when I had to drag myself back to a poem, so tender were some memories, so tied up with relationships and loss that it became a chore to draft and redraft the poems, and as a result some of them have stayed in the notebook unfinished.

I have tried to write with a watchfulness, to bear witness to my experiences and to those of others whose paths crossed mine, whether geographically, historically, socially or culturally, and to bring issues out into the light for others to see and appraise. One doubt that arose early on was, what right do I have to pass judgement on people living very different lives to mine, with their own unique values and cultures? A chance meeting with the Pakistani poet Imtiaz Dharker whilst on a residential workshop at Tŷ Newydd in July 2008 helped to put the doubt to rest. 'Write as the outsider you were,' she told me. 'You have every right to write what you saw and sometimes it is easier to appraise a society when you look at it from the outside. Write.' Her reassurance was welcome and I returned to my work with renewed determination.

Past emotions are always elusive, especially one's ability to adapt to discomfort and danger when they present themselves daily. With the three poems, "Strikes on Wheels", "The Warden" and "On the Roof", I

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<sup>4</sup> Schacter, D L. *How The Mind Forgets And Remembers*. London: Souvenir Press Ltd, 2007. p5.

endeavour to illustrate how it was impossible to live life in a constant state of fear and panic and how gunfire became a normal noise to hear in the night and was not always accompanied by the expected adrenaline rush.

Stuttering machine guns  
hurry us to the ground.  
We push the door closed  
and lock out the sound.

We sit in candlelight  
for a dinner of contraband  
and lean towards the radio.  
The BBC World Service  
squeezes through static  
echoes of a greater,  
much older upheaval.

Background sounds of fighting  
and a calm voice from London  
tells us tanks are outside our door.

But the ham tastes of home  
and the wine is very fine.

From "On the Roof".

Some memories ambushed me, arriving entirely out of the blue, and if they were left unrecorded for too long they faded away and would not be caught. This phenomenon appeared to be related to the fact that the whole collection demanded deep and tiring concentration on the ten years or so in which I was living abroad. As a result of this effort everything seemed, in one way or another, connected to the memories. This was unlikely and, as a result, many of the poems that arrived unbidden had little or no substance; they came and went unremarked, but the most frustrating thing was that some highly appropriate and intriguing poems came at inopportune moments when they could not be recorded and so they were lost. If I was driving when the ideas started to flow and I had no way of stopping to record them they would flee; no

matter how hard I tried to recapture the words later on, the poems emerged weak and thin or just faded away completely, never to return.

Strange coincidences occurred during the time I was writing the collection; the day Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in December 2007 I was rereading some journal notes about the unrest in Pakistan in 1977. I was thinking about the school in which I taught, which was almost next door to Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's house, and how we had to evacuate it because of the unrest engendered by Bhutto being deposed and the declaration by General Zia ul Haq of martial law. In Feb 2009, whilst working on the lyric sequence "Reflecting on the Nile", a news item on the radio reported that a bomb had exploded in Khan el-Khalili bazaar, a place we knew well and often visited to buy spices and perfumes.

The process of creating the poems was one of entering a meditative state, sinking deeper and deeper into regions that have remained unvisited for years. Each new memory stimulated a horde of others. The process was strange and wonderful, but at one point exhilaration turned almost to despair as I lost control of the horde and something had to be done to regain control of the project. For a month or so, I stopped trying to write coherent poems and just noted the memories as they swirled past; once that was done, calm was restored, for a little while at least, and work on the poems could begin again.

"Swifter than a weaver's shuttle" was written at this time and was an attempt to express the confusion I felt.

How to make sense of the clamouring ghosts  
in the clattering loom of the present.

I am still not sure if this is a question or a statement.

### **Cultural Dilemmas**

From the beginning, I made a conscious decision not to stand between the reader and the subject by colouring the poems with too much angst or indignation. Imagery and language were chosen in such a



way that the emotions elicited in the reader would be in response to the subjects of my poems, rather than to my cultural ideological responses.

The most difficult poems to write with this ideal in mind were the poems dealing with the treatment of women. "Girl in the Dust" references female genital mutilation. Watching children at play is a joy but the moment captured by this poem is tinged with awareness of the horrors to come.

When would they come  
to hold you down to cut away  
part of your body,  
the God-given pleasure  
of a woman?

In the poem, the child's giggles and smiles contrast with the rhetorical question. The little girl is without knowledge of the pain waiting to be visited upon her but the poet is writing with a full awareness of the genital mutilation that is to come. In *Infidel my life*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali recounts her own experience when, as a five-year-old child, she witnesses the circumcision of her brother and sister as well as being circumcised herself, against the wishes of her father. She explains that:

In Somalia, like many countries across Africa and the Middle East, little girls are made "pure" by having their genitals cut out.<sup>5</sup>

She recounts the case of an uncircumcised girl who was bullied unmercifully by other schoolchildren for being a *kinterleey*, "she with the clitoris", even when the children had little or no idea what a clitoris was.

The choice of the word *veil* in the last line of "Girl in the Dust" comes with all the present day connotations the wearing of a burqa carries: impressions of oppression, the lack of freedom and the lack of status for women in some societies.

I moved far away from you,  
forgot the indignities

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<sup>5</sup> Ali, A. H. *Infidel, my life*. London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd., 2008. p31.

waiting to be visited on you.  
Other people and their stories  
buried you.

And yet today, while reading a book,  
the word *veil* revealed your smile.

Dr Nawal el Saadawi has written movingly of her own mutilation and its after effects in *A Daughter of Isis*.

Fifty-six years have gone by, but I still remember it, as though it were only yesterday. I lay in a pool of blood. After a few days the bleeding stopped and the *daya* peered between my thighs and said, 'All is well. The wound has healed, thanks be to God. But the pain was there, like an abscess deep in my flesh.'<sup>6</sup>

She goes on to describe her fear of what else may be cut off.

In "Girl in the Dust", the hope is that the juxtaposition of childish laughter and the coming mutilation will be enough to bring the fact of female genital mutilation to the fore and to give the reader pause for thought.

"A Family Affair" and "Woman Dies of Burns" both address the issue of the murder of women, often referred to in the media as 'honour killings'.

A Family Affair begins:

A trail of broken bangles  
glinting in the sun,  
in time they will be ground to dust.

These lines provided a route into a poem I needed to write about these killings. When we first arrived in Pakistan we read the local English-language papers to try to find out as much as we could about what was happening in our new home. There were many stories about women dying in accidents, particularly in the home. The women were burned to death in their kitchens and when we spoke to Pakistani friends they told us that these were often not accidents. These deaths happened in poor, rural communities where women were seen very much as

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<sup>6</sup> El Saadawi, N. *A Daughter Of Isis*. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999. p63.

possessions and where young women were used to seal bargains between families, appease landlords and atone for the wrongs of their male relatives. Their only crime might be that their families did not come up with the whole of the promised dowry or someone may have whispered that the women were seen talking to men from outside the family or even that a brother had stolen something from a neighbour – any of these perceived transgressions could result in the death penalty; not a penalty handed down after due judicial procedure but a murder carried out by fathers, husbands or brothers.

How to write about these atrocities? “A Family Affair” is short, elliptical and imagistic. The glass bangles that will be crushed to dust in the poem represent the careless way in which women may be disposed of by their families or their in-laws; they are often the forgotten people in any attempts that are made to aid a country. Glass bangles in the Indian sub-continent are closely associated with marriage, and one story I heard from a Pakistani acquaintance has stayed with me for years. She told me that a bride would wear as many glass bangles as possible because when the last bangle was broken the honeymoon was over. The last stanza of the poem is deliberately couched in terms of an invitation that carries, I hope, an ironic weight:

So place your foot on her neck,  
it's a family affair,  
a man without honour is nothing.

When this poem was included in a collection that was published in the form of the audio CD, *Borderlands*, I deliberately chose a man to read it in order to emphasise the point of view of the poem.

“Woman Dies of Burns” is an attempt to capture those news reports we read daily in Karachi’s English-language newspaper, *Dawn*, of many women who seemed to have accidents in the kitchen that resulted in them being burned to death and to make a connection with the wording of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which still

uses 'him', 'his' and 'brotherhood' in its language when addressing the human rights of all people.

*Article 1.*

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights as published on the United Nations website in December 2009.)

The poem ends with the thought that the wording of the Declaration may add to the burden of women already suffering under the yoke of extremely patriarchal societies.

The last line of "Woman Dies of Burns", 'Perhaps that is the problem', which follows the quotation from the Declaration, is intended to capture the weariness and discomfort that comes with realising nothing has changed in the thirty years that have passed since I first became aware of the practice.

Intiaz Dharker also displays a similar feeling of discomfort in her poem about a woman being burnt by her in-laws, "Another Woman", which concludes:

Another torch, blazing in the dark.  
Another woman.  
We shield our faces from the heat.

She refers eloquently to the turning away from a problem that should be addressed with urgency.

## **Themes and Poetics**

The journal I have kept during the period spent writing these poems is full of questions and contradictions that have been thrown up by many of the poems as they were developed, and these uncertainties were due, in no small part, to my initial attempt to impose themes and connections

rather than letting them come in their own good time. Initially, I had thought about using the rivers of the Indus and the Nile as the uniting theme; then the political unrest that had seemed to follow us in our travels in the 1970s and 80s; I had then considered using the travels of Alexander the Great to create a mock-heroic epic about my life. Once I found the courage to stop trying to impose an artificial thematic structure, the themes slowly revealed themselves, much as photographs were revealed by developing fluids in the days before digital cameras. In *Burning the Candle*, which is both a long poem and a meditation on the making of a long poem, Christine Evans describes how she found making decisions about sections and titles to be like passing signposts, and how moving sections around can reveal patterns or emerging themes. However pleasurable it was to watch the themes emerge, eventually a decision had to be made and a framework constructed upon which to build the completed work.

The themes that emerged were those of journey, observations on culture clashes, people without voices, reflection and memory. The collection begins and ends in memory; "Swifter than a Weaver's Shuttle" questions what part memory plays in who we are, and the last two poems, "Thanks" and "Testament", acknowledge the people and places that now exist only in my memory.

The theme of journey, in one form or another, meanders through most of the poems from the first haibun, "Arrival", which addresses the excitement of arriving in a new place and the feeling that this arrival is also the start of a journey of discovery, through "A Dialogue of Errors", with its depiction of a dialogue between two very different women and the slow journey towards a sort of understanding, to the travels that are recorded in "Rice Pudding at the Ends of the Earth" and "In the land of Egypt".

In order to create a context for the poems, I assembled details of the remembered world that, by the processes of metonymy and synecdoche, might give imagistic resonance: cats hissing over offal, Liberty print frocks worn by the wives of ex-pat company directors, regimental badges carved into the rocks of the Khyber Pass and the

cracked heels of an Egyptian woman carrying a gas cylinder on her head.

Most of the people mentioned in the poems come from the lower end of the social scale: sweeper, maid, and butcher. These disregarded menials, collectively viewed as useful non-entities, were yet so much part of my life. I felt they needed to be represented and given voices, as they are in "Gamalat", "Sweeper" and "The boy on the trolley".

The strength of poetry as a vehicle for recording one's life lies in the compactness of the form and the process one goes through to reach that form; it was deeply fascinating to chip away at each draft until only the essence of the subject was left. A poem that began as a poem of place, "Photograph of my mother visiting a seismic crew", became a lament for the way memory can fail, as when one is unable to recall the voice of someone who has died. While my conscious mind mulled over the problems of poetic structure, choice of language and the subject of each poem, my subconscious mind often revealed a more surprising and rewarding emotion underlying the poem. It was as if a constant interrogation was going on in my mind, wearing down resistance until all that was left was the heart of a memory.

The advantage of creating a poem sequence rather than a long poem is that I have been able to use shorter poems within the sequence to focus on specific subjects. Unlike the long poem, there was no demand for a strict narrative or thematic structure, and I feel that the variation in emotional intensity as the sequence moves from one poem to another is effective. Using shorter poems allowed me to shift focus from one subject to another more freely. The long poem, which is rooted in epic, is not best suited to nurturing the feelings of intimacy that I wanted to achieve. Each poem in this sequence has integrity but also gains greater meaning by its place within the sequence .

Writing a collection of poems meant that due importance could be given to the white spaces between the poems, which allowed each poem its own identity within the larger whole. I felt able to vary the narrative form and the dramatic elements to suit each subject and to concentrate on the juxtaposition of the separate poems. There are many places

within the collection where poems echo each other, themes and images leak through the lines to combine and diverge. These come when I am trying to illustrate those moments of stress when the outside world intrudes on mine, as in “Strikes on wheels” and “On the roof”, or when memories impose themselves on the poem as in “Photograph of my mother visiting a seismic crew” and “The boy on the trolley”. The poems of place, for example: “Borderlands”, “Ship Breakers, Gadani Beach” and “Desert camp”, are situated to remind the reader of the context of the poems.

I enjoyed the possibility of improvisation that was offered by the choice of writing a collection rather than one long poem, as in the prose poem, “Moved with Compassion”. This is an attempt to merge my responses to the vast cultural differences I experienced with the imagined and real responses of several people I knew in Pakistan who never came to terms with being in such an alien environment. There were many ex-patriots who could not cope with the heat, the crowds, dust, dirt, the sight of lepers, chain gangs and extreme poverty, and for whom the experience of living in such a place was hell. Many left soon after arriving, others complained bitterly and interminably, whilst others isolated themselves from the real world outside their doors by using their office or domestic staff to deal with traders and beggars. The cultural adjustments we had to make were almost overwhelming but the rewards that came with even the smallest attempts to integrate were worth the effort.

The title of the poem, “Moved with Compassion”, comes from St Mark’s Gospel and refers to the time a leper approached Jesus looking for healing. The biblical images of leprosy had never troubled me until the first time I was confronted with the reality of the disease. I was shocked by experiencing a strong negative response to the sight of those afflicted and, whilst working on this poem, needed to find a way to express those emotions. Choosing a man to be the subject of the poem freed me from any reticence I felt when telling a story that included feelings of which I am not proud.

By the interspersed short snatches of internal and external monologue the poem grew into a narrative prose poem, a form I had never before attempted but which seems to suit the subject well.

– For Christ’s sake, shift you buggers ...

He’s dressed in linen, very upright as he wades through the throng. Some lean against the wall. Some squat in the gutters. Some lie in the shade of a tree and pull a shawl up over their heads to keep out the world. There’s timelessness in their attitude; a sense that they know why they are waiting and that, when the time comes, they will be ready.

– Bloody people, bloody heat, bloody country ...

His brown shoes are polished and have Blakies on the heels. The click-click-click of his feet proves he has no time.

The bodies offend him; he worries that the ones under the trees may already be dead. He compresses himself so that they don’t touch him, even the hem of his trousers he keeps from brushing against them.

The form a poem eventually takes is, for me, governed by its subject and grows out of the many revisions made as each poem evolves. The majority of poems in this collection are in free verse, which allowed me to concentrate on the content; to place emphases and to vary pace and rhythm by the use of line length, stanza length and punctuation. Reading the free verse of poets such as Galway Kinnell, U A Fanthorpe and Imtiaz Dharker helped me to see how effective free verse may be. The way words may chime through a poem with the use of sounds or the crafted lines which cling to each other because of their content, inspired me to use the form time and again to create narratives of events in my life and the lives of others.

### **Using haibun and haiku to tell the story**

Being introduced to the haibun a year or so before this collection was conceived, was a happy accident that needs acknowledging. Without the



haibun, one of the most enjoyable parts, for me at least, would not have happened.

I remember the frisson of pleasure I felt on reading Ken Jones's *The Parsley Bed* and David Cobb's *The Spring Journey to the Saxon Shore*. Here was something new, intriguing, and perplexing. What was this thing called haibun? Could I do it? Could I produce the carefully crafted prose haibun calls for and place those tiny scraps of precious haiku in such a way that they integrated with the prose and yet held their own when taken out of context? I was encouraged by the words on the back cover of Cobb's book:

This is a Haibun  
What is a Haibun?  
This is – probably

If this master of the art in English could be unsure of his ground then why not take my courage in both hands and confront the form. The haibun is a traditional Japanese genre that combines haiku with haiku-like prose, which in Japan, was commonly associated with travel journals. According to Nobuguki Yuasa, in his introduction to *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* by Bashō, haibun evolved from waka, renga, haiku and the fashion for linked poems that arose in 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Japan.

The poet most frequently associated with the haibun, Bashō, was a famous poet living in Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. By his forties, according to Robert Hass in *The Essential Haiku*, Bashō was “sick of literary life and of his own role as a professional poet,” and he began to travel. During his travels he kept journals, comprising a “mixture of verse and prose, that have become classics of Japanese literature”.<sup>7</sup> His haibun often display a great pleasure in place, and this proved attractive to me when I came to writing about my travels; writing a piece where prose and haiku illuminate each other without repetition or explanation presented an enjoyable challenge.

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<sup>7</sup>Hass, R. ed. *The Essential Haiku*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. p3.

William J Higginson, in *The Haiku Handbook*, lists the essential characteristics of haibun, among which are: that it is written in prose with one or more haiku; that there should be no explanation of either the prose or the haiku; that there are few abstractions or generalisations; that the tone is objective and that haibun are usually written with a light, sometimes humorous touch.

In *Spring Journey to the Saxon Shore*, Cobb agrees that, “travel journals suit the purposes of the Haibun writer admirably.”<sup>8</sup> so, I embarked on my account of travels in Afghanistan using the haibun.

It is no exaggeration to say I fell in love with Afghanistan despite its challenges for a Western female, and I wanted to create a record of my experiences.

The title “Rice Pudding at the Ends of the Earth” came immediately to mind. It combines my amusement at seeing the sign – Sigi’s Restaurant – Good Food and Rice Pudding – outside a building in Kabul with Alexander the Great’s attempts to see the ‘Ends of the Earth’ when he journeyed through that land and stood on the mountains in the region that is now the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In his introduction to *The Spring Journey to the Saxon Shore*, Cobb refers to Bashō’s model of haibun as being so full of allusions and quotations that editors have to provide pages of explanatory notes for the modern reader to understand the references to previous works and to history. These allusions appear to be used by poets such as Bashō, Issa and Buson for capturing connections between the present and the past; how echoes run up and down history, in and out of created art and literature and can be woven into something that evinces those connections.

Bashō, in his *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, is able to connect something as everyday as grass to a battlefield in the strikingly economic language that is haiku:

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<sup>8</sup>Cobb, D. *The Spring Journey to the Saxon Shore*. Shalford, Essex: Equinox Press, 1997. p10.

a thicket of summer grass  
is all that remains  
of the dreams and ambitions  
of ancient warriors

Translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa

Even a reader unfamiliar with the development of Japanese poetry is able to find the meaning in this haiku, but a footnote that explains the allusion to the work of the Chinese poet Tu Fu does, perhaps, add another layer of interest.

The haiku comes at the end of a passage where Bashō describes coming across a ruined mansion and writes: "When a country is defeated, there remain only mountains and rivers, and on a ruined castle in the spring only grasses thrive".<sup>9</sup>

The important point here, for me, is the fact that even without the knowledge of the origins of Bashō's allusion I was able to understand his theme that war destroys but nature overcomes the devastation given time.

The American poet Ted Kooser, in his book of advice to budding poets, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, sums up my feelings very well when he writes: "... remind yourself that poetry is communication", and again when he writes: "A poem is meant to be shared with others".<sup>10</sup> By constantly reminding myself that I am sharing and communicating with others experiences and places of which they have little or no knowledge, I have tried to follow Bashō's example by ensuring that when occasions do arise where a footnote is unavoidable the context in which I have placed these allusions means that the reader is free to enjoy the poem as it stands and to refer to footnotes at leisure, perhaps to aid a second or third reading.

"Rice Pudding at the Ends of the Earth" is a travel journal that sits in the middle of the sequence. It is part of the whole but by using the

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<sup>9</sup>Bashō, M. *The Narrow Road To The Deep North And Other Travel Sketches*. Translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966. p118.

<sup>10</sup>Kooser, T. *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. p19.

haibun I have attempted to take the reader on a holiday from the sequence, much as we used Afghanistan as a place of refuge and recreation from everyday life in Pakistan.

I have tried to adopt many of the characteristics I found in reading traditional haibun: the slightly humorous opening connected with friends and acquaintances, as in Bashō's opening to his Record of Rakushisha, a translation found in William J Higginson's *The Haiku Handbook*: "Raku's What's-his-name Kyorai has this cottage in the thicket of Shimo Saga ..."<sup>11</sup> "The Steep Road to Kabul" begins with us careering down the Kabul Gorge in a "rattle-box taxi", our friend Peter losing his nerve and our driver's fatalist response, "Why engine? No need, this way cheaper!"

I endeavoured to keep abstractions and generalisations to a minimum and to ensure the haiku are able to stand alone. It has to be said that one haiku in particular does break the stand alone rule:

into the homeland  
of master horsemen  
the Golden Boy

This haiku is context specific but I have kept it in because the image of Alexander the Great, known in his day as the Golden Boy, entering the exotic lands of the Mongols, haunts me with its massive cultural clash. The way the concise nature of the haiku is at odds with and yet encapsulates a crucial and panoramic moment in history has a pleasing microcosmic and paradoxical resonance.

When weaving Alexander's story with mine, albeit briefly, the green eyes of our Afghani driver serve to represent the thrill I felt when I understood how history echoes down the years through our genes. Blue and green eyes occur occasionally amongst the people of Afghanistan and they will tell you that they are inherited from Alexander the Great's men who invaded their lands. I have alluded to this in the poem "Borderlands", which attempts to explain the many different facial

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<sup>11</sup> Higginson, W. J. *The Haiku Handbook*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1989. p210.

characteristics found in people who live on the borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Their genetic birthmarks shine;  
Aryans and Sassanians  
mixed with Genghis and Alexander.  
They all passed this way  
leaving their tracks in people's faces.

Later in the haibun, by using concrete images of young children desperate to find grease wherever they can, fat-tailed sheep guarded by enormous mastiffs, animal dung pats dried in the sun on the roofs of houses and the practical difficulties of finding somewhere reasonably private to use as a toilet, I hoped to show rather than tell the reader something of the life led by the people we met on our journeys. Imagistic density and concise narrative were used to indicate the exoticness of the experience.

In "To be present", I moved away from an observational mode into a more reflective stance. The serenity of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, the harshness of men who were driven to kill a young European woman for the sake of their perceived convention, and the everyday life illustrated by the young girl goatherd combined to create a pause in my journey. During that pause I experienced the unusual condition of being totally in the present, nothing that came before or was planned for the future intruded on that moment and I had 'presence of mind'.

As well as the haiku contained within the haibun there are other haiku within the collection. A couple concern an infestation of rats.

Haiku seemed to be an apposite form to record the event. William J Higginson writes, "When we compose a haiku we are saying, 'It is hard to tell you how I am feeling. Perhaps if I share with you the event that made me aware of these feelings, you will have similar feelings of your own.'"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Higginson, W. J. *The Haiku Handbook*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1989. p5.

Bruce Ross, in *How to Haiku*, writes that it is important in haiku “to connect our feelings to nature and the natural seasons.”<sup>13</sup> This is evident in the haiku of Buson:

The two plum trees—  
I love their blooming!  
One early one later.

In the rat haiku I used a simile, a device relatively rare in haiku, to echo the traditional Japanese love of blossom trees, *like petals from a tree* because the rats made no sound as they fell and landed lightly before shooting off to find other hiding places. The rat that dances in the second of the rat haiku reflects my feelings about them.

falling from the cupboards  
like petals from a tree  
a family of rats

in my kitchen  
under the strip lighting  
a rat dances

Each haiku in the desert haiku sequence found in “In the land of Egypt” depends on one clear image to transmit a feeling. Whether it is something as familiar as a picnic or as stark as the ribcage of an animal stripped of flesh, the haiku contains things that can be seen, touched, heard or experienced.

Often, unlike in more traditional haiku, seasons are not mentioned in my haiku, apart from:

looking back  
we leave no footprints  
— it is *Khamseen*

*Khamseen* is a time when hot dry winds bring dense sandstorms to Egypt in March or April. Within a frighteningly short period of time the

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<sup>13</sup> Ross, B. *How To Haiku*. Massachusetts: Tuttle Publishing, 2002. p2.

dust whipped up by the winds can blind a traveller and cover things that would normally be used as landmarks in the desert.

In the haiku:

uncovered by the wind  
once a shield for the heart  
a naked rib cage

I hope to stimulate questions: where would this be? What or whose rib cage? First the reader encounters a wind strong enough to uncover something; this leads to the function of the object before naming the object itself, thus allowing the haiku to maintain a little mystery before revealing the full picture, which is meant to be unsettling. While the reader is unable to see the same rats, piece of petrified wood or bone that I did, as a result of reading these haiku, perhaps his or her next encounter with a rat or fossil may resonate hauntingly with my haiku.

### **Writing the lyric sequence**

“In the land of Egypt” is a lyric sequence within the collection. The form of the poem chosen to represent the length of the Nile as seen on a map was allowed to meander a little on the pages, just as the Nile does through the desert. The sequence is approximately 2,300 words long and is a collage made up of fragments, images that grow out of each other, sometimes complementing and sometimes clashing as memories are wont to do.

The words in the opening lines were chosen to create an acoustic comparison of palm fronds in a breeze with the sound of callused hands being rubbed together:

Fronds, shifted by the wind, part and join,  
rasping like dry skin on dry skin.  
The curve of a trunk, immaculately mirrored,  
is joined by buildings where once there were none.

A dinner cruise passes, ruffling the waters  
with air-conditioned sounds of Simon and Garfunkel  
building their bridges to Scarborough Fair.

How odd and how trite under a desert moon  
and yet, in reflection, how beautiful.

The words *fronds, shifting, rasping*, are attempts to introduce the reader to a desert world that hangs on the edges of the Nile; to look at the river itself, which is often interrupted by the commercial hubbub that plies its trade along the river in the shape of tourists' pleasure cruises. This is the Egypt of posters and travel agents' brochures: trite and yet unexpectedly beautiful.

The next section of the poem moves away from the city into the world of the garbage collectors and their families. The Zabbalin Community of Muqattam is possibly the most studied community in the developing world. From 1981 to 1990, it was the target of a development programme launched by the World Bank. My memories of these people and the place in which they live come from the years immediately prior to this development programme.

I first came across them the night I arrived in Cairo; in order to reach Maadi, the taxi driver drove through the community and my impression was of a stage-set suitable for Dante's inferno. Fires flickered, shadowy figures moved through the gloom, pigs rooted through rubbish and the smell was indescribable.

This section of my poem is not so much concerned with that impression as with the people themselves. Every day the garbage collectors could be seen working their way along the streets, disappearing into blocks of flats and reappearing with bins that they emptied into their donkey carts. Winter nights and early mornings in Cairo can be chilly, and one morning I looked down from my balcony to see a small, bare-footed boy stretched out on the back of a donkey, shivering in his thin *gallabeya*. I took a photograph of him to keep as a reminder of that moment but I need not have bothered as his small figure is burned into my memory.

When I began to incorporate this image into the poem, it demanded more context, so I obtained a copy of two papers on the community that were written by two MA students who were studying at the American



University in Cairo. Their papers, "Community Organization and Development" by Elena Volpi and "Women at the Muqattam Settlement" by Doaa Abdel Motaal, were extremely helpful in filling in the many gaps in my knowledge of the community. I found the young mother in these papers and also found confirmation of knowledge, gained by talking to the people who collected our rubbish, that girls are often discounted in a family, the lack of a son is considered a crisis, and there is enormous relief when a healthy son is born.

The ever-present sound of the muezzin's call, combined with my father's experiences of Egypt, inspired the third section, and this is one of the few poems in which I have included Arabic and have left the phrases untranslated. The English is quite prosaic in order to offer a contrast and to allow the Arabic to sing, thereby increasing the feeling of the exotic and of waking up somewhere without the necessary knowledge of language or custom to understand the new world around one.

Images of the desert, a minaret and the pyramids had haunted me since childhood; my father was in Egypt when I was born and by the time he was able to return I was almost three years old. My earliest memories of him are in black and white photographs taken in a desert and 'domestically framed and perched on our sideboard'. I am drawn to the contrast of those silent photographs with the amplified call of a muezzin shattering the early morning, and chose not to look backward to his role in the political upheavals of the 50s, which would have created a very different poem and would not have been my poem.

The fifth section includes words spoken by the crowds of tourists that are found in Cairo: 'Can we get a postcard of this stuff? The museum's great but I like the bazaar best'. It was, at times, impossible to enjoy anything approaching peace and stillness in Cairo, even in the ancient Coptic churches. Hordes of tourists would wend their way through the buildings; many of them came very reluctantly, having joined the tour to see the churches because it was included in the cost of their holiday. They had no interest in the historical, cultural or religious importance of the buildings and the traditions that surrounded them and did no more

than glance at the icons that glowed softly, almost secretly, from the walls.

Visitors clamour,  
wanting to know so much and so little:  
    “When exactly was electricity installed in here?”  
    “Can we get a postcard of all this stuff?”

Icons draw and hold my attention with their gold  
and strangely proportioned saints  
who gaze out burdened with stylised poses.

No peace though –  
    “Have you been to the museum yet?”  
    “No, that’s after lunch, then the pyramids  
    and back to the boat.”  
    “The museum’s great but I like the bazaar best.”

The chatter and shuffle of feet continues,  
one group replaces another and another  
an endless round of history, religion and novelty.

The words ‘chatter and scuff’ were deliberately chosen to symbolise the disturbance that went on as the groups were herded from one site to another.

Beginning the seventh section with the phrase, “Walk with me to the Pyramids”, I am aiming to pick up on the techniques of storytellers. “Walk with me and see”. The use of repetition is popular and I wanted to slow the pace and quieten the mood. “And we can hear the desert at night, the susurrations of sand as the dunes move”. The longer vowels in the stressed monosyllables, “dunes” and “move” help to achieve a slower, gentler mood that leads into the image of a baby being born and an old man dying, to express the cycle of life that plays out before the stones of the Giza Pyramids year after year.

From the stones carved by man we are taken to the stones, boulders and grit that litter the desert. Using the short couplets to hurry the pace, I have tried to capture the marked contrast between the barren surroundings and the attempts at creating a home away from home that are doomed to failure by something as unsettling and fascinating as a horned viper. He was the serpent in my stony garden.

Living in Egypt, one is constantly reminded of history: pyramids, massive statues and catacombs are found throughout the country and yet the constant noise and movement of people in the cities and their suburbs can overwhelm the visitor. I tried to capture the sights and sound of Khan el-Khalili by using lists of fragrances and sounds: Jasmine, rose, ambergris, myrrh ... shouting, laughing, coughing, spitting.

Whilst I was living in Cairo, President Anwar al-Sadat was assassinated by his own troops. My abiding memory of that day was of sitting by the Nile watching the aircraft flying in formation to display at the parade and of the mixed reactions of Egyptians to his assassination. Some were grief stricken whilst others exulted in his death. The poem then moves through the funeral of one of my neighbours and onto the graves in the war cemeteries at Alamein.

The final two sections evoke memories of home as the natural culmination of a progression through the bustle of the Arabic bazaar, the shock of assassination, the death of a neighbour, which created a longing for home and the familiar.

The last two poems of the collection, "Testament" and "Thanks", provide closure. They acknowledge people places and events that have been important to me.

## **Conclusion**

What of the questions that were posed: 'Am I the same person today that I was thirty or so years ago? Where have I been all these years? What have I seen and learned? What responsibilities do we all have to bring the injustices we witness to the notice of others?' I cannot claim to have answered them in the collection, but perhaps the thought processes involved in creating the poems may be glimpsed when reading them and a hint picked up as to the possible answers.

In a talk given at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in October 2007 the American poet Galway Kinnell said he believed the poet's job is to figure out what is happening within oneself and the world. If that is true,

then this collection is a modest step on that journey towards understanding. He also referred to the poet as the canary in the mineshaft and I may keep that image in mind as I write more about the treatment of women and add my voice to the likes of the poet Imtiaz Dharker and the activist Dr Nawal el Sadaawi in protest at the continued mistreatment of women worldwide.

The ghosts that I began with have not diminished; many of their stories and how they touched my life have not yet been told; there are many poems yet to be written. The force that created these poems, that drew them together and that holds them together is the force of memory. The effort involved in collecting and re-collecting a period of my past life and the perseverance this required has been rewarded by a new wonder at the opportunities that have come my way through travel and living in countries and cultures very different from that in which I was born and brought up.

It would be impossible to encapsulate the whole of my life lived abroad in one collection of poems but I believe *Mindful of Ghosts* offers images, thoughts, voices and observations that create a portal through which a significant part of that narrative may be seen.

## **MINDFUL OF GHOSTS**

the passing hawker  
coughs and spits –  
time to get up

## **CLAMOURING GHOSTS**

## Swifter than a weaver's shuttle<sup>1</sup>

Through a fissure in a fading light,  
patterning the world freehand,  
I am shaken by their appearance.

Dust-drawn ghosts who, shocked  
into existence, peer at me  
in querulous expectation.

Summoned to my mind by flickers  
and spasms of neural correlations,  
they wane and wax,  
now here – now not.

What is this bundle of sensations  
held together by memories?  
Who is it who lives this life?

Hanging between night and day,  
sleep and wakefulness,  
dream and memory,  
the thought becomes the thinker.

Each pass of the shuttle creates and destroys.  
How to make sense of the clamouring ghosts  
in the clattering loom of the present.

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<sup>1</sup> My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle. *Job ch5, v7.*



## So much light

We land with a bump and a hop, the wheels rumble below us and people at the back of the plane begin a round of applause that peters out before it reaches the front. We rock to a stop; the cabin crew open the doors. Hot air, as thick as water, invades the cool aridity to which we have become accustomed.

The first tentative sniffs of a place are always an adventure, and Karachi is no exception.

invading our plane  
dust and spices  
from the real world

The airport building rings with noise, its walls ping the shouts back and fore, back and fore. Confusion reigns around the baggage but out of the turmoil a line forms and meanders towards officialdom.

A doe-eyed immigration officer sits in his cubicle: bang-bang, bang-bang, he stamps the documents. Each passport is perused, each face examined, bang-bang, bang-bang and we're processed.

The confusion of the arrivals hall is replaced by more chaos outside the building. Bodies weave through bodies in a blurred tapestry of many colours. Mostly men; small, dark and wiry with a way of snatching a living perfected over years of poverty and self-reliance.

Crowds consume the creeping taxis; buses bully their way through, but even they have to admit defeat as family after family are reunited and celebrate with ululations, drumming and clapping. Pick-up trucks are laden with people singing and shouting; children slip through the legs of their parents like fish through seaweed. Touts and beggars, whole families down from the country to meet and greet or to say goodbye.

feet scuffing feet  
avoiding  
a fallen pigeon

Sweat trickles down my back and seeps from armpits to waist, the air is too full of moisture to absorb it so the sweat slicks the skin and keeps coming without achieving the cooling effect for which it was created.

Green flags to welcome a Saudi visitor droop from the lampposts that line the long straight road into town. The kerbs have been freshly painted red and white in preparation for the visit, reminding me of stories about the Queen and how she must think the entire country smells of fresh paint when carrying out her official appointments.

Single-storey huts line the road, hole-in-the-wall shops, women in huge tent-like burqas sway their way across the carriageway, donkey carts and camel trains hinder the traffic, domed mosques with the slenderest of minarets shine in the sun, buses decorated in a multitude of colours with as many people stuck to their sides and roofs as are crammed inside pass by at break-neck speeds.

rising from the dust  
minaret and crescent moon  
the sound of prayer

We arrive at not the most salubrious of hotels, but the staff are charming and make us welcome.

As we register I glance to my right and am surprised to see a bar. A sign outside the door of what will be home until we find a house states – *Leave your firearms here.*

Every fabric in our room is a deep dark gold, heavy and glowing in the fabled sunlight of the sub-continent as it pierces the windows. I have read about this light but the real thing is cruel in its intensity, particularly when your eyes have left a grey world behind and spent twelve hours in a metal tube lit by pale cream strips.

The white tiled bathroom is spotlessly clean. I'm desperate for a pee, the toilet rocks slightly when I sit on it.

As I wash my hands, the cold water feels like a blessing from another time and place.

The mirror reflects a pale and rumped me.

An air-conditioner sits in the window of the bedroom and thwacks into life at the touch of a button. The racket, as it throws out gelid air, is deafening. There's an array of dials on the front that we never quite get to grips with, so the room either swelters or freezes.

Our cases lie open on the floor but there will be no unpacking, the bed welcomes us and we are soon oblivious to blaring traffic, shuddering air-con and the thin strains of music that seep in under the door.

watching myself  
in dream  
diving through clouds

We walk to the office through parched streets. We are watched. We reach the compound and pass vehicles in various states of repair. Even at this early hour heat is building and the humidity is astounding.

Indoors, the air-conditioners are working overtime to create an arctic environment for computers that demand constant feeding and attention.

Tea is brought to us by a bearer. He is dressed in white, his shirt and trousers pressed with knife-like precision. I'm addressed as 'Memsahib' which makes me feel as though I am in a John Masters novel, *Bowani Junction* perhaps, or *The Nightrunners of Bengal*. I am displaced in time.

Dave finds his office and I wander out into the blinding sun to do some exploring.

There are small shops nearby and a garage advertising the fact that they do 'Accidental Repairs'.

midday heat  
panting – in the shade  
sane dogs

A tiny child waves at me from the doorway of a shop, on her hip an even tinier child gazes placidly at kittens tumbling around in the road.

A woman appears. She is dressed in shalwar kameez, baggy pyjama-like clothes in pink and orange; her dupatta, draped elegantly across her shoulders and head, is lime green.

A scooter putters past. The whole family has been shopping. Father drives, mother perches side-saddle behind him with a baby on her lap. The eldest son sits between the father's knees and 'helps' him steer. A daughter clings on at the back and I can see vegetables stuffed in all the nooks and crannies around the bodies. Two chickens hang, heads down and fluttering, from a rear-view mirror. Just as the family reaches the crossroads a truck roars across their path. No one seems perturbed by the near miss.

with me this morning  
but lost by midday  
my shadow

The sun is frying my brains and I stumble back to the hotel to meet Dave for lunch. We retreat to our room to gather strength and courage.

## Watching the butcher cut meat

He sits at eye level,  
perfect position  
for a squirt of blood in the face.  
Swollen cheeked from chewing *paan*  
he sings tunelessly.

Gripping a knife between his big toe and the next,  
he takes a bloody chunk and slings it  
over the blade  
and saws it with his foot.

Cats hiss over offal at my feet.  
Their eyes narrowed,  
teeth bared,  
claws extended.  
A short sharp spat then  
one limps away.  
The tuneless song continues.

Hell for a vegetarian.  
Ears, eyes, feet and balls,  
recognisable and for sale.  
No coy labelling,  
no polystyrene trays  
or cellophane wraps.

Everything here is edible,  
biodegradable and bloody.

mixed with flour  
and now our breakfast toast  
weevils

## A dialogue of errors

Your world is just a few square feet  
and a minuscule slice of sky;  
do city sounds fly over the walls  
like messages from an old lover?  
As a child, you knew the streets  
and can see them still in your mind.  
But while you served his family  
and gave him the sons he craved,  
new houses were built, new roads and schools,  
and all this passed you by.  
Your daughters learn your domestic skills  
and bend to the will of your men  
so that one day they too may deserve  
a cell and an exercise yard.

\*\*\*

So tell me, Memsahib, are you so free?  
And what do you teach your daughters?  
That it's good to be desired and willing  
to give themselves to all?  
Now you think on ...  
you who are judged  
by your body shape and your youth,  
whose men see love as:  
*"... merely a lust and  
a permission of the will ..."*  
Are you not imprisoned too?

\*\*\*

Monsoon clouds boil all day  
then loose their strobing arcs  
and tadpoles turn, in one night, to frogs

\*\*\*

The burqa covers your life  
your vision dissected by its grill  
you're tied, an unrecognised woman,  
to family and home.  
How can you bear it?  
Why can't you shake it off  
and be yourself? Your real self.  
Not just somebody's wife  
or somebody's mother.

\*\*\*

You hide nothing, your body is available

to be stared at and known by strangers  
and your shameless gaze is a challenge.  
There is no modesty in you.  
Where, in your life, is your family?  
You are so alone, so unregarded  
as you wander here.  
What are you looking for?  
Why did you come?

\*\*\*

The air thickens, plasma  
is mapping a route  
and a tercel quarters the land.

\*\*\*

Seclusion, repression, secrecy;  
that's what your life says to me.  
It seems you're missing so much  
a chance to be anything you want:  
teacher, doctor, pilot, traveller.  
Do you have these thoughts?  
Is that what you're saying  
as I pass and pause to listen?  
From behind the walls  
I hear laughter and music.  
Unexpected.

\*\*\*

When you passed I was laughing;  
my baby had taken her first step.  
When you passed I was singing;  
my son had become a man.  
When you passed I was dancing;  
I have a good man for a husband.  
This is my world, the whole of it.  
It absorbs me and gives me purpose.  
it's not perfect, God knows that.  
A charade? Maybe –  
– but no more than yours.

\*\*\*

A conductive path's complete  
the air explodes  
and snakes are washed away.



## **From a train**

And so you sit and wait  
on the platform,  
your life around you.  
A copper pot,  
a charcoal stove,  
your hand resting  
on your sleeping child.

Our eyes meet,  
yours kohl black  
above the veil.  
We stare at each other  
across a chasm.  
I think you smiled,  
I certainly did.

Eighteen years later  
you come back to me.

Not a year has aged you.

You are still the young mother  
sitting and waiting,  
your future curled beside you.

Do you, I wonder, remember me?

## Sharifan

She kisses the dictionary  
and replaces it carefully,  
I'm embarrassed.  
To her a big book  
is Holy.  
She's a Christian  
in a Muslim land.

So I bring her a cross,  
gold and made in Britain.

The Begum next-door,  
our landlady,  
laughs at me,  
"She will sell it,  
first chance.  
They're so ignorant,  
these people."

But she doesn't sell it.  
It lies next to the breast  
that isn't there.

I think of my mother  
and breast cancer.

At the gate we chat  
Urdu/English  
Urdlish  
and we laugh.

The Begum next door,  
our landlady,  
shoots me with venom  
from eyes like glass beads.

"It is not seemly,  
she is your servant  
not your friend."

So we hide from her  
and giggle like schoolgirls.  
Sharing samosas  
under the flame trees.

## Beckoning ghosts

The woman in my mirror is crumpled:  
she has been beckoning ghosts all night.  
Morphing into her young self to feel  
excitement, fear and joy again.

Surprised by raw gems,  
she cuts them open,  
assesses the spalls.  
Their colours change  
as they move  
from one haunted surface  
to another.

She thinks about that  
and learns  
how memories change  
and the hippocampus sorts,  
files and filters.

## Dream woman

I am startled by a woman  
running towards me,  
her speed is impossible  
but she fails to outrun  
the *khamseen*  
howling in her wake.

She carries a cage  
of women's voices.

Her bloodied feet wear away  
and she runs on stumps;  
she heaves the cage high,  
throws it to me.

– I must catch it,

Turmoil devours the running woman  
and roils across the world to meet me.  
Then pauses as if,  
as if unsure of its power.

I open the cage and out step women  
singing sweet songs of mutilation.  
They face the storm  
and their voices  
pierce its heart.

## Mango mishmash

Urdu for mango is *aam*,  
a word to be spoken  
with a tongue full of gold  
and juice running from lips.

### *Sweet Mango Chutney*

When the cardamom and saffron syrup is thick  
add the cooked green mangoes.  
If Greek gods had tasted this,  
ambrosia and nectar  
would have lost their appeal.

### *Friendship*

A basket of mangoes  
golden and red  
offered in friendship  
no strings attached.

### *Cool*

At the bottom of the pool  
like lost gold  
waiting to be found

### *How to eat a mango.*

Squeeze the fruit,  
nip a small opening  
and suck out the pulp.  
But remember,  
mango juice stains  
so remove clothing.

### *Aam*

tongue  
parting lips  
intoxication  
at sunset.

## Our first monsoon

It begins late at night, a distant infra sound,  
building pressure, booming below our hearing.  
Ghosts appear in the garden, grey shapes  
lit by strobing lights, shuffling  
frangipani boughs come to life.  
A bony-fingered rattle of bamboo,  
first spots peck like fingernails on the shutters;  
the smell of dust.

Static sings around the garden, thickens the air  
and the hair on our arms responds, prickling, tickling.  
Flash-bangs resound through our bodies,  
fists batter the doors, shutters and roof.  
Water burbles beyond the wall.

We make tea and laugh in the safety of our room.  
Who cares what the monsoon gods are up to?

The power goes out so we open the window  
and let the rain in. Watch it creep,  
quicksilver, in the flicker of a torch,  
watch it reach the low points  
where it rests in puddles on the tiles  
waiting for the morning sun  
to reach in to suck it up  
for the cycle to begin again.

The tea is hot and fragrant with cinnamon,  
our bed cooled by the wet night air  
and we sit back, my hand resting in yours,  
to watch the flickering spikes of light.  
Each flash reveals the rattan chairs  
left outside and a small glass jug  
that had once held mint tea.

## Monsoon photographs

the storm hits  
they run –  
suited men  
schoolchildren  
women holding babies

the sky dims  
water rises  
tangles through the streets  
sweeps as it goes  
steals everything it finds  
branches from trees  
today's papers  
drowned chickens

mud thickens the water  
still it hurtles past  
drain covers burst out  
leaving unseen traps  
for the runners

images of destruction  
caught in lightning  
sear onto the retina  
and burn in the mind

it rages on

kohled eyes peer out  
sodden shalwar kameez  
reveal breasts and hips  
young men smile  
her *dupatta* flows  
from head to shoulders  
framing a face  
as delicate and beautiful  
as any mythical princess

## Recollection

I'm resting my head on the window  
watching the rain;  
the dark clouds are frisky,  
after dropping their load  
they will head north west,  
maybe to the Himalayas.

The floodwater turns brown,  
a retaining wall has failed.  
Slurry gushes down the hill  
and into our garden  
slithering across the grass,  
reaching to the window.

Years ago,  
our headmaster wept,  
seven hundred of us watched  
him weep.  
He told us of children,  
some half our age,  
that morning  
killed by slag and slurry.

I picked at my skirt as he spoke,  
that image is startlingly clear,  
the dust motes  
caught in the up draught  
from a metal radiator.

Later, in black and white,  
I watched Cliff Michelmore weep  
when bodies, fragile as sparrows,  
were gently mined from the seam.



from a leaf  
a last slow drop  
monsoon's end

## **Girl in the dust**

Your giggles rippled the air,  
as you played with your brothers  
beneath a tree.  
How old were you? Five? Six?

When would they come  
to hold you down  
to cut away  
that part of your body,  
the God-given pleasure  
of a woman?

And sometime later,  
a man would ensure you bled  
before he took you  
as his wife.

You turned your face up to me  
and smiled, pure happiness.  
Your brothers grinned too,  
for the moment you were equals.

I moved far away from you,  
forgot the indignities  
waiting to be visited on you.  
Other people and their stories  
buried you.

And yet today, while reading a book,  
the word *veil* revealed your smile.

## Towers of silence

Vultures, in perfect dress order,  
contemplate the concentric rings.

One shivers, rising to its own circle,  
to exploit a thermal with broad wings  
and carve lazy Os out of the blue.

Others rise and draw the sun across the sky,  
mesmerised by gold and all that sparkles,  
their eyes search out the smallest drop  
of blood.

Far below them, a procession in white  
its ritualised pattern noted by every eye.

The body leads and stirs within the watchers  
a long awaited excitement.  
They leave their solar contemplation  
and return to their sacred duties  
as voracious, living battlements.

They have no opinion on precedence  
but others need to ensure  
the dead are carefully placed:

                                  men on the outside,  
                                  then the women,  
children rest in the centre.

The stones must be perfect:  
no quartz trails within the granite,  
no sly glint, no place for impurities  
within the tower or its holy rings.

There's a peace to be had,  
under the vulture's watchful eye,  
and a last service to be performed:  
                                  the dead give alms to the living.

## **The chickens that live upstairs**

At night they shuffle across our roof,  
their muffled roosting calls are comforting,  
come daylight they're full of indignation.

Mothers and their chicks  
clucking, scritchling and scratching,  
noisily sorting their pecking order,  
seemingly exclaiming  
over every ant and beetle  
and morsel of corn.

Under a palm thatched lean-to  
on the roof opposite  
a family tends its goats and chickens,  
whilst below another family sits  
on gilded chairs watching television  
beneath scintillating chandeliers  
eating sweetmeats  
from each other's hands.

Chicken-shit and goat droppings  
from the roof fertilise the gardens,  
while a child cuddles a kid not long  
for this world. Their fleeting friendship  
silhouetted against a washed-out sky.

## Rats

falling from the cupboard  
like petals from a tree  
a family of rats

in my kitchen  
under the strip lighting  
a rat dances

in a patch of moonlight  
criss-crossed by mullions  
a dead rat

## Doing the dishes

The washing up liquid says  
'Kiwi fruit and lime. *Concentrated.*'

I don't know why I remember you after all these years  
as I stand, elbows deep in suds, day-dreaming.  
A long straight road lined with palms,  
dust devils dancing in the sun.  
I'm hot, thirsty, dirty and  
driving back to Cairo

You are half asleep  
leading your donkey along the dirt.  
Recognition passes between us;  
in a blink we meet, love, marry, and die  
and now I miss you.  
Is that strange?

I miss your conjured laugh  
your hot untouched skin,  
your black river of hair  
and the ghost of our coupling.

From here I can see the houses  
row upon row.  
Gardens held in check  
with tools that cut and slash.  
It is raining outside -  
dark November rain.

And in my mind you're fading,  
you came unbidden and now  
you leave.  
But somewhere I can smell jasmine  
honeysuckle and hibiscus.

## A year's passing

A *bunder*<sup>14</sup> boat and songs last night,  
friends, food and drink to celebrate  
a year's passing – another birthday,  
a year of new friends becoming old.

But a year is not long enough,  
I still feel uncertain and new.  
Thanks be, I have not succumbed  
to the Liberty print frocks so beloved

of the *Burra Memsahib*<sup>15</sup>; a creature  
as exotic to my eyes as to the locals.  
Nor have I succumbed to the games  
— Bridge, Mah Jong or Whist.

That's not to say there weren't attempts  
by those older, believing themselves wiser.  
I was scooped up in the early days  
and sat appalled at the excitement of ...

— 'A little slam', 'well done', 'a grand slam!'  
and ... 'time for lunch, I think, ladies'.  
I slipped out of their sights, unnoticed,  
unmissed. I couldn't fit in.

So I played a musical-chairs of acquaintances  
until, eventually, I found friends.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Bunder boat* – a boat normally used for landing passengers or goods from a larger vessel.

<sup>15</sup> *Burra Memsahib* – the wife of the most senior man in a company or senior officer in the military.

## Mindful of ghosts

I bring them back, those shadow voices,  
growing louder, stronger with each tug  
and nudge of a neuron.

I dig deep, each layer reveals  
more beneath than above.  
I mine memories,  
hold them to the light  
and label them.

Some I offer up to you,  
others are too precious  
or too frightening  
or too sad.

Behind the voices  
come the faces  
and the hands  
and behind them,  
the names.

I chant the names,  
it feels like naming stars  
whose light is the light of their histories  
— they could already be dead.

Those hands and faces have travelled far,  
years in coming they are impossibly young.

In my mind I hear them laughing,  
see them dancing in the heat.



## Moved with compassion

*Moved with compassion, He put forth his hand and touched him. Mark 1:41*

– For Christ's sake, shift you buggers ...

He's dressed in linen, very upright as he wades through the throng. Some lean against the wall. Some squat in the gutters. Some lie in the shade of a tree and pull a shawl up over their heads to keep out the world. There's timelessness in their attitude; a sense that they know why they are waiting and that, when the time comes, they will be ready.

– Bloody people, bloody heat, bloody country ...

His brown shoes are polished and have Blakies on the heels. The click-click of his feet proves he has no time.

The bodies offend him; he worries that the ones under the trees may already be dead. He compresses himself so that they don't touch him, even the hem of his trousers he keeps from brushing against them.

He was not prepared; his past incarnation was spent in the soft undulations of a green country that shed leaves in autumn and grew snowdrops in early spring with a pale woman who mirrored his Anglo-Saxon heritage and who is now wilting in the perpetual swelter of summer. They have not transplanted well.

– Out of the way ...

Sweat sheens his features; he feels as if he's melting. The bodies part imperceptibly and he reaches sanctuary. He glances up to the familiar portrait that welcomes him, nods to the receptionist and security guard. They have the same delicate bone structure, dark eyes and midnight hair. He feels large, ungainly and pale beside them.

In the lift mirror he sees a man adrift.

His desk is cleared of all but essentials. No chaos here. And yet he frets; the morning heat and the journey buzz around his head. He met no one in the corridor but they know he is there; the clicking Blakies communicated his progress.

– No bloody chai again this morning!

He's a busy man, important, with the cares of *his* world on his shoulders. He keeps his eye on the ball, no time for distractions, too easy to let things slide, the secret is not to think too much. His mission is to bring order through systems.

– Every problem has a solution; you just have to look for it ...

Sometimes he sees them in dreams. Not as those peripheral spectres that weave around the living, but as hard edged realities that intrude and demand attention by their very silence.

It had not been a good idea to wear the linen suit; keeping it clean was too stressful, what had he been thinking? His jacket is shouldered onto a hanger and droops from the coat rack; he can see the bulge of his elbows and the creases that mark his expanding belly. It's like looking at his own ghost.

Through the doorjamb, a glimpse of white shirt and trousers, a bearer soft-shoeing his way to the boardroom. The tick-tick-tick of the oak-cased wall clock is the only other sound.

He shivers in the heat and the silence. Longs for the sound of the church bell or lawnmower or the ducks his mother feeds on the dot of nine each morning. He laughs ... Indian Runner ducks. The collie nosing up to them in play and the distant sound of the sea on cobbled shore in the cove he knew as a child.

The wailing cries of a muezzin confuse him, so real was his longing that it had transported him home and now he is reminded of what lurks outside.

– Get the police to shift them ...

His leather briefcase is dark where it has been handled. The straps are soft with age and use. He polishes it each evening; the smell of the leather polish comforts him. The *chota peg*<sup>16</sup> of whisky helps him pretend he is a real *Sahib*. He carries papers in his briefcase. Sheets and sheets of pure white paper. Its spotless perfection is reassuring.

– *Jildi, jildi*<sup>17</sup>, Khalid. I have a meeting at ten ...

His stomach always hurts him. He fears an ulcer or something worse. Full of apprehension, he pushes the thoughts away. He continues to sign papers, draft memos, not raising his eyes to acknowledge the cup, bone china, which is placed beside him with the handle and spoon at the correct angle.

He doesn't like to look outside. The way their arms end in stumps stirs something ancient in his heart disturbing a darkness he never wants to acknowledge.

– Ask Dixon *Sahib* if head office called. And get rid of those ...

He points vaguely at the window. He can't say it. Can't name them. The way they move, so slowly and carefully, conserving their small energies, frightens him. Their voices come to him at night, their disfigurements thrust close to his face and their mouths become black holes in his dreams.

– Oh, for Christ's sake ...

---

<sup>16</sup> A small measure of drink.

<sup>17</sup> Quickly.

### **The ex-pat trap**

There's poverty in the faces around the bar,  
a poverty that's hard to analyse or name.  
Seen in wide-open eyes and forced big grins,  
heard in frantic laughter and flirting games,

as if with noise they may resist the thing they fear.  
They pray and pay their dues to their delusions,  
blinker their eyes to stay forever young,  
but the world intrudes on their frail illusions

as time stamps irresistibly on all of them.  
Each season an old familiar face will disappear,  
its place is taken by the younger generation.  
How sad to be the bar and watch as every year

tolls the passing of another's hopes and plans  
until, again, the laughter grows ever loud  
and the breath grows ever short. A brilliant son  
is lost, sucked dry by the desperate, vampiric crowd.

## Chinese vodka and Russian champagne

The sun screams in through the bamboo chicks  
to lodge in your eyes and, this is the kick,

the hangover you thought you had beaten with water  
has followed you home and the pain gives no quarter.

You struggle awake, through the sweat and the sheets  
and the geckoes laugh, "chich-chack", in the heat.

So you lie in the shallows of unfinished dreams  
and try to believe you could still be redeemed

with the hair of the dog or a morning beer  
and suddenly life becomes all too clear.

It's night after night with your 'circle of friends'  
getting steadily pissed until in the end

you're the lonely old soak that once you had mocked  
and while you weren't looking they altered the clock.

lizard on the wall  
dancing with his shadow  
we smile

## Settling in

the bougainvillea has collapsed  
brought down by monsoon winds  
it lies in the drive  
battered by the rain

in the tangled mess of tendrils  
lizards frogs and beetles  
seem to be adapting  
to their new location

just I suppose like us

## Strikes on wheels

Driving to work, we were surprised by a crowd  
running with sticks and stones.

As if they had lain awake all night waiting,  
people we did not know chased us.

We escaped them then  
but now I constantly see them.

Those were the days before email or texts:

- a sweeper told his neighbour
- a tailor heard it from his wife
- a gardener passed it to a cook
- the shopkeeper told everyone.

That day there was a 'strike on wheels',  
and we were driving by, drawing them  
like a magnet draws iron filings.

A tongue-lolling dog ran ahead of the crowd,  
it seemed to be smiling at our predicament.

The day had started well, the sun gave no hint  
that we should stay at home,  
lock the doors and let events pass over us.

School was calm and tense,  
stories of the morning's journeys, shared.  
What to do? Other people's children  
hung on our every word,  
so we smiled and let them play.

The mobs came and went,  
came and went,  
the decision was made  
to evacuate.  
White-faced parents came and went,  
we were the last to leave.  
Creeping from corner to corner,  
burning tyre-smoke choked us,  
children crouched on the floor of the car  
satchels held over their heads  
and softly sang to themselves and to us.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round,  
round and round, round and round ..."

## The warden

"I'm your warden," he said.  
The handshake is firm,  
almost hard.  
"Should the balloon go up ...  
safe house, convoy,  
usual sort of thing."

I'm fascinated by his Englishness  
pale eyelashes and thin legs,  
thin nose too.

"No need to panic  
little local difficulty  
keep heads down  
best thing."

He shakes hands again  
and leaves.

The power goes off,  
no lights,  
sporadic gunfire,  
so we go back to bed.



## **Sleeplessness**

I love this room  
where we hold on tight  
under spinning blades  
every night

I watch you sleep  
sheet thrown aside  
feel your heat radiating  
to my side of the bed

the moon is part of our room  
cool and pale and watchful  
its whites and greys  
as well known to the insomniac  
as is her own face

## On the roof

It's cool up here in the evening,  
thin smoke hangs on the air  
vibrating with a muezzin's call.

Feet scuff the dust,  
someone is running past,  
running fast.

The sun is a fading  
but still radiant presence.  
As it fades it is joined  
by a crescent moon.

Stuttering machine guns  
hurry us to the ground.  
We push the door closed  
and lock out the sound.

We sit in candlelight  
for a dinner of contraband  
and lean towards the radio.  
The BBC World Service  
squeezes through static  
echoes of a greater,  
much older upheaval.

Background sounds of fighting  
and a calm voice from London  
tells us tanks are outside our door.

But the ham tastes of home  
and the wine is very fine.

## Ship breakers, Gadani Beach

She is condemned; shackled to the shore  
by chains of chanting men who pour

their strength into rope, etching their hands  
as they tauten cables and lean into the land.

Her entrails lie exposed and broken on the beach  
picked over by the poor as the metal breaches

and sparks arc through leaking gas and oil  
residues create a stage set of putrid spoil.

Bellerophon, brought low with age awaits  
the acetylene scalpel's scoring of her nameplate.

Howls as rat-like men scramble within her womb,  
pulling, pushing and straining to exhume

her engines and ingenious man-made heart.  
Voyeurs, we watch as she is pulled apart

and left as carrion by a disempowered man  
with a job for life, however short that span.

## **Dancing bear**

As you dance do you think of your mother,  
her smell and warm milk from her teats?  
Raise your feet one after the other,  
nod your head and smile without teeth.

The hole through your mouth and the rope,  
as you move through your life in dull pain,  
will ensure that for you there's no hope  
and your dancing will drive you insane.

## Dust

I've grown accustomed to the view at dawn,  
acres of brown fields dotted  
with grey and white figures like faint stars at dusk.  
Bending and rising in ancient rhythms;  
They have become as familiar as old friends.

At times the view is eclipsed,  
dust drives in on the wind,  
and I am cast adrift,  
with no compass bearing and no context.

The world turns from sepia to burnt umber,  
a monochromatic place  
where disembodied voices  
hang on tendrils of air.

It's May and at home bluebells and ramsons,  
wood sorrel and celandine  
will be weaving carpets through the trees.  
There will be a foxy smell in the hedgerow  
and bumble bees will be foraging for nectar.  
Badgers chittering under the kitchen window,  
nipping each other in competition  
for the best peanut butter treats.  
Everything will be busy, winter forgotten  
and the air will promise summer.

I miss green, the dangerous magic  
that appears each spring and bloats  
the oaks with buds, insinuates itself  
through the fields and woods, dazzling,  
until the retina adjusts to its vibrations.

I am at odds with this place,  
I'm sick from lack of colour.

I close the windows and doors,  
then watch the fine powder enter,  
to bury everything, living or dead.

## Frogs

in a pond  
two grey-green frogs  
break up the sun

within  
my damp sailing shoe  
a frog

## Tailor

Alone in the doorway, ignoring the never-ending stream,  
you sew. A Singer sewing machine, like my grandmother's.  
You treadle with a steady rhythm that reminds me of her.  
Her hair in a bun, clothes covered with a pinny, she hums  
just as you do now. I watch you both as the thread thrums  
and the metal treadle squeaks and the loaded bobbins whirr.  
You're alike in concentration and had you known one another  
you'd have happily spent hours comparing stitches and seams.

## Sweeper

The road dusts its way through the buildings,  
desiccated trees hang on its edges like skeletons,  
of little use as shade to man or beast.  
The splatters of blood-red *paan*<sup>18</sup> shine.  
Creeping forward inch by inch,  
with the twig broom,  
pendulum-like,  
hypnotic in its regularity.  
On splayed feet,  
his weight evenly balanced,  
he rocks, rocks.  
Blind in one eye with trachoma.

He does not enjoy the sight of feet,  
nor was this his childhood ambition.  
Others pass by in air-conditioned cars,  
and dressed in silk but he is the father  
of many mouths and the gutter  
pays for their food.

Creeping forward, rocking, rocking,  
sifting the dust, wiping his one good eye.

He has no name, to the thousands who pass  
he is 'sweeper'. If they refer to him at all.

---

<sup>18</sup> Betel leaf that is chewed as a mouth freshener.



## The boy on the trolley

If I hadn't chosen that moment to turn  
I would have missed him,  
                  the boy on the trolley.  
Legless, grinning from ear to ear  
he grabs a trailing rope on a passing truck.

The pram wheels of the trolley speed off at fifty,  
he wedges his stumps into a tiny box  
and laughs with the purest joy.

He waves at me and shouts,  
he has abandoned all fear;  
he is living the moment.

\*\*\*

If I had chosen to write about something else  
I would have missed him,  
                  the boy on the trolley.

Where is the seat of this memory?  
The telephone number I was given moments ago  
slips away, while a thirty-year-old memory remains.

Neurons and synapses lie in tangled networks  
decoding sparks and chemical reactions.  
What is this miracle?

Will he always be there? Forever young?  
Or will the day come when those sparks  
swerve and swirl so that, at last,  
he fades and dies?

## Queen of the Shalamar Gardens

Sounds, only sounds intrude  
on this, my precious solitude.  
Eyes closed against the day,  
against affairs of state.

I know they wait  
outside the curtains.  
I hear their shuffling feet  
and their coughing.  
Their old men's breath whistling,  
with their plotting.

What bothers them?  
My face? My voice? My smell?  
Is it the way my clothes rustle as I move?  
The way a bodice curves to my breasts?  
The tinkle of bells on my ankles?  
The soft clinking of bangles?

I pick a mango from the table and consider it.  
Peeled, it is bold and gold and glows in the sun;  
the juices cover my hand and pool in my palm.

My hand, small and pale brown,  
each nail is perfect, each half-moon milky white.  
My arm is covered with tiny hairs that shimmer  
with sandalwood oils and rose attar.

I smell of gardens:  
of tangled jasmine,  
wanton honeysuckle  
sharpened with mint.

My fingers trail through water, still and dark,  
then reach in to take a plum left there to cool.

Nubian in its membrane,  
dark and seductive as a winter night's sky,  
a dew drop clings to its shallow cleft.

I tear flesh with tenderness  
and examine each wound.  
Its essence bleeds through my fingers,  
pale and thin, it anoints me.

I hear their disapproval  
from beyond the curtains,

see their shadows pace back and fore.  
Each wants my power for himself,  
each wants me.

Let them wait!

In the turbulent waters of forty-one fountains  
I have seen my future,  
years confined in opulence, alone,  
building tombs for my father and for me.

Cypress trees will fill those funerary gardens  
and tulips and roses and jasmine  
and peacocks will keep watch.

I will know isolation then.  
Unable to touch, smell or taste  
in the silence of a fine tomb.

So give me these moments,  
wait a little longer.  
Let me be a woman,  
I will be a queen tomorrow.

## **A woman shopping**

Her children circle her like satellites,  
their erratic orbits swing them  
out to the farthest reaches and back.

Her progress is slow with inspection;  
nothing is bought without being felt  
squeezed, prodded and smelled.

As she raises her voice to bargain  
each stallholder pretends aloofness  
but he needs her recommendation.

She relishes her power and uses it  
because at home it is subsumed  
and she is again the servant.

Don't think that all is right with the world  
simply because, out here, she speaks up.

## **A family affair**

A trail of broken bangles  
glinting in the sun,  
in time they will be ground to dust.

She is a receptacle  
for the family honour;  
her virginity a commodity  
to be sold or exchanged  
as a man decides.

Voiceless and shackled by tradition,  
she lives or dies at a whim.

So place your foot on her neck,  
it's a family affair,  
a man without honour is nothing.

## Woman dies of burns

There it is, not front page,  
they never are,  
'She was cooking,  
her dupatta caught fire.  
It was an accident'.

Another day, we read it out  
from page five, at the bottom.  
'She was cooking.  
the stove exploded.  
It was an accident'.

And another day's paper,  
there on page six.  
'She was insane,  
set herself on fire.  
No one else is to blame'.

They report she was pregnant,  
with no proof of marriage.  
'She was cooking,  
the stove toppled onto her.  
It was an accident'.

"All human beings should act towards each other in a spirit of  
*brotherhood*"<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps that is the problem.

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

## Fading

There are places where I get lost,  
crossroads where, not knowing which way to turn,  
I hesitate.

Cities I once knew so well  
are coming apart  
like elderly patchwork quilts.  
Parts becoming unstitched and  
slipping from the whole.

I am stranded  
in a place without edges.

To turn back feels like failure  
but going forward means  
swimming into a fog.

Without remembrance  
we live in a constant present,  
plodding through today and today,  
hardly aware at all.

I have loved the telling,  
the exploration of remembrance,  
but why did I not do this before?

Now, it seems, I'm writing elegies  
to carelessly discarded people and places.

## A photograph of my mother visiting a seismic crew

You are fanning yourself with a straw hat,  
gazing down into a hole made by dynamite.  
To your left, my father also gazes down.  
Heat comes off the photograph  
fading you.

I remember that day so clearly,  
– I think.

It was hot, dry, silent;  
our feet crunched the salt-sand  
making the only sounds for miles.  
Earlier, oscillating reflections  
drew pictures in seismic waves.  
In time the waves decreased  
until not even a whisper was left.

It is difficult to remember your voice,  
your image is easy, so many reminders,  
but your voice has gone. Although,  
there are times when it flirts,  
skirts around the edges of memory  
but it escapes before it can be caught  
and filed for future reference.

In life you were noisy, ever ready  
to throw back your head in laughter.  
In death I see you everywhere  
but I can't hear you.

I remember you so clearly  
– I think.



## Choices

I flick through the paper.  
Sweat seeps from my hair,  
the hoopoe totters  
through parched grass  
and inspects each insect,  
finicky eater that he is.

Circles of vultures  
float above my head  
on a 'Towers of Silence' crawl.  
Unsophisticated diners  
they grab what they can.

The tailor's daughter has died  
giving birth to a dead baby.  
In a city of millions  
there were no witnesses  
to the deaths, he said.

Sleeping in coils  
under the fragrant frangipani,  
unperturbed by falling blossoms  
a snake has become a living *lei*  
unnoticed by foraging cockroaches  
in chestnut-brown battledress.

Some are of the opinion that  
cockroaches will inherit the Earth.

Dancing over the grass  
a gecko braves the sun's glare  
eyes fixed on a mosquito  
resting on the netting.

For a strange moment  
I'm inclined to warn the insect.  
I, who have swatted hundreds, thousands,  
feel the need to save one. But I don't.

A tiny meal but a good one:  
little lizard eyes wink at me.  
It's quite still in contemplation,  
or so I like to think, of the taste  
and vintage of the blood  
in the mosquito's belly,  
my blood?

Thousands of miles away  
my niece is only months old  
but already a surgeon has seen her heart.  
Under bright lights, his fingers,  
skilled and knowing,  
probed and healed her.

She will grow up to be beautiful,  
wilful, intelligent and happy.  
Her life full of possibilities  
wasted as well as fulfilled.

From the mosque,  
a call to prayer –  
    the tailor will be there  
    devout, believing, grieving.  
Separated from his wife  
by tradition.

If I hold my hand up, just so,  
I can cover the sun,  
contain its nuclear fusion  
with my flesh.  
Four and a half billion years gone  
maybe five billion left.

I took my eye off the snake,  
it is moving.  
Its vertebral column flexes,  
muscles contract and release.

The gecko now is prey.  
Does it know snakes' eyes?

It is caught and swallowed whole.  
So my blood,  
and in my mind it *is* my blood,  
is passed on.

Five billion years  
that's all we have left  
and then what?

I can cover the sun  
with my hand,  
save a life by choice – or not,  
take a life by choice – or not.  
But I don't know what comes next.

## **Watching your arrival at the mausoleum**

*Written for Benazir Bhutto*

Your life has ended,  
violently, as we thought it might.  
For thirty years you haunted  
the margins of my life.

With your dark eyes and brows  
set in a pale face. Your smile  
and upright stance aged  
but the ghost of your youth  
floated like a second skin,  
veiling the signs of years  
until you seemed mythical  
and serenely unchanged.

I watched as your family  
carried your absence  
through the ruins of your country.

What was he thinking,  
that thin young man  
who detonated himself?  
Did he imagine his actions  
were somehow blessed?  
Or was he your Judas;  
burdened with your fate,  
and fulfilling your prophecy?

## Desert camp

Over wind cracked crags the hobby hovers  
holding station as we stretch the canvas,  
and stamp out sandy washboard ripples,  
finding flat space for the thermos.

We stop to watch her and to listen  
to her keening *kee-kee* call,  
see her scythe through desiccation,  
as she holds us all in thrall.

And as we watch she finds her target,  
stooping earthwards, brown and grey,  
soaring skyward prey in talons  
then back down in ricochet.

Late, too late we find our cameras,  
she is long gone, hunting done.  
So we turn to tents and campfire,  
in haste, before we lose the sun.

Later, under brightening galaxies,  
talk has turned to love and death,  
talk that turned to bliss and sorrow  
snatched away on the desert's breath.

## Borderlands

We flinch as an AK47 coughs nearby.  
No one else flinches; we're in Darra,  
home of guns, gun makers and gun fighters.

They smile at us as we hold the M16s,  
they encourage us to try the automatics  
and the James Bond pen guns.

They pose, laughing, for photographs  
as they pack the barrels and stocks,  
oiled, polished and wrapped  
and head out for the mountain passes  
to whichever '-stan' needs them now.

They are young, handsome and strong,  
born fighters, born fighting.

Their genetic birthmarks shine;  
Aryans and Sassanians  
mixed with Genghis and Alexander.  
They all passed this way  
leaving their tracks in people's faces.

Hammers fall, a delicate tap-tap-tap,  
on shell casings filled with explosives.

In labyrinthine lanes  
in the heart of the village  
bullets are made by men  
sitting on mounds of gunpowder.

Massive safes stand open  
bankrolls beckoning  
– rupees, dollars, pounds?  
That will do nicely.

Over a mountain pass or two,  
a bullet made here will find its mark.

We look on, interested and unsettled,  
then head west through the Khyber Pass.

Regimental badges carved into rocks,  
we touch and trace each campaign.

Our history, and theirs, mythologized  
and lampooned until ... what?  
Until it's hard to know the difference.

This is where the Great Game was played  
and the Khyber Rifles stood guard.  
A perpetual round of unrest,  
a place blighted by its position,  
scorched by summer heat  
cracked by winter cold  
but still considered a strategic prize.

Cemeteries bear witness  
to: Private Cook, Bugler Hicks  
and Corporal Evans.  
They 'fell' in battle –  
the words 'shot' and 'stabbed' avoided.

They lie in desolation  
but in dreams I watch  
them wander home  
to Oxford, Mallwyd,  
Peebles and Cork,  
to a softer island air.

The Pass leads us to Torkham  
where, passports stamped,  
we process, like pilgrims,  
across a no-man's-land  
into Afghanistan.

beneath the burqa  
the shine of dark eyes  
weeping

## **RICE PUDDING AT THE ENDS OF THE EARTH**



## The steep road to Kabul

We pause at the top, as on the best roller-coaster, then we are off. The death trap, rattle-box taxi takes the bends wide, a wheel is airborne, hovering above a rusting hulk that did not make the corner last year.

Fear is a metallic tang at the back of the tongue. Another bend, another prayer to whomever may be listening. We are at the mercy of a maniac who puts the car into neutral and switches off the engine for the downhill run.

everlasting journey  
promised by each hairpin  
to the careless traveller

Peter loses his nerve and screams at the driver who rolls his eyes and asks, "Why engine? No need, this way cheaper!"

dust covered Death  
scythes through time  
driving a taxi

Images flash by: burqa clad women, children playing with chicken heads, fat-tailed sheep, Lee Enfield rifles carried with enviable nonchalance and a Liverpool Football Club shirt.

We reach Kabul. A line of hippies waits outside a bank to cable Mom and Dad back home to send more money. Their speech is slurred and dotted with 'Cool man,' 'That's radical, man,' and 'He sells the best shit this side of 'Nam, man'.

We head away from Chicken Street to find a cheap hotel where we revel in being the only non-Afghanis in the place. A welcoming pot of Jasmine tea and the journey is forgotten for a while.

'Sigi's Restaurant:  
Good Food and Rice Pudding'  
surprise in Kabul

A German, old enough to have fought in the war, runs one of the restaurants. We discuss this in muted voices. Someone says it is quite possible, the *Abwehr* had units in Afghanistan during the war to keep an eye on the British in India. We're intrigued but not confident enough to ask the proprietor about his origins. He looks like a Hollywood version of Rommel; white hair and piercing blue eyes.

## Alexander in the mountains

It takes a few days to organise transport to visit the Buddhas of Bamiyan. A slow process but our patience pays off. We find a driver, Jahid, a tall good-looking man with a noble nose and green eyes. Green and blue eyes are said to be the legacy of Alexander the Great's army as it swept through.

Alexander the Great to the Western world but known here as Iskander Gujaste, Alexander the Accursed or the Two Horned One. Mothers still threaten their children with a visit from The Two Horned One if they misbehave.

We are, clichéd as it sounds, following in his footsteps. We see the same mountains, feel the same earth under our feet, walk under the same skies and breathe the same air as he did. We do not feel the same urge to conquer this land-locked jumble of deserts and mountains.

into the homeland  
of master horsemen  
the golden boy

Jahid speaks no English and our Pushtu is scant but we settle into a companionable relationship. He loves his country and wants us to understand and appreciate how important his culture and heritage is to him. All along the route he points out important historical sites, especially places where battles were fought.

When Alexander strode across the land he was only twenty-nine but already he had fought his way across an empire and proved his old tutor, Aristotle, wrong. He could not see the ends of the Earth from the top of the Hindu Kush. That view was tantalising him from further East, or so he thought. I am twenty-six, time yet to conquer an empire, but which one?

After a rough journey along dirt tracks leading through the mountains, we stop for a moment on a small plateau. We can see the snowy summit of Koh-i-Baba to the north; the bone-dry air crackles with static as we wash the dust out of our mouths with bottled water. Nomads' tents are

pitched a mile or so distant and from those black tents tiny dots speed towards us. As they grow closer we see they are children, so out come the sweets and pencils we carry for just such occasions. When they reach us they stop, chests heaving in the thin air and make a request we cannot understand until, eventually, one of them takes grease from the vehicle's axle and rubs it on his arm. Grease – that's what they want. We rummage in backpacks and dig out suntan lotions and hand creams and the children are delighted.

rationing oxygen  
on ancient trade routes  
cobalt skies

The air is so dry that their skin becomes parched and shrivelled in no time; then we realise that many of the elderly people we marvel at toiling on the terraced fields and running sure footedly up and down steps hewn into rock faces are probably no older than us.

Boys play us a farewell tune in thanks and send us on our way.

mountain air —  
boys' flutes  
answer a nightingale

The only other life we meet on the journey is a flock of fat-tailed sheep guarded by the biggest dogs I've ever seen. They hurl themselves at our vehicle and we cower inside as they slaver at the windows without even having to jump on to their hind legs. They do an efficient job of keeping the flock safe from wolves but the sheep have a very nervous air about them.

guarded by carnivores  
on a dust blown road  
fat-tailed sheep

Not far from here Alexander found a village that claimed kinship with Greeks. The inhabitants believed they were the descendents of Dionysus. The invaders saw ivy for the first time since leaving home and were happy to drink the offered wine. They stayed long enough to enjoy the Bacchanalian hospitality, apparently dancing naked in the mountains before moving on. Not a popular pastime in the country today.

We have to part company with Alexander, his story continues elsewhere. It is a strange feeling, almost as if we were saying goodbye to someone we have grown to know on a short journey. Like those people you meet on holiday, exchange addresses with and promise to meet up again. You never do and that is usually for the best. However, I have a feeling we will find Alexander's footprints a little further on in our journey. Paths fork so many times in life that, eventually, they will cross again.

## Buddha in the morning

We strike out for Bamiyan where we find a small group of yurts available to visitors. Dinner, served in the largest yurt, consists of fish we have to catch ourselves from a murky pond that is reluctant to give up its wildlife. Although it takes us an hour to catch enough fish for the five of us, Jahid has no problems and catches a sizable fish in five minutes and disappears with his booty.

I am exhausted and my head feels as if it is going to burst, the guidebook describes this as mild altitude sickness.

I sleep well but not long enough. A hand shakes me just before dawn, I am forced from my bed and search, stumbling and grumbling, around the freezing yurt until I find warm clothes.

Then outside, catching my breath in the sharp, thin air.

It's gloomy, but as we stand on a high bluff the sun climbs slowly into the sky and reveals in the distance ice-covered mountains glowing pink, nearby there are fat-tailed sheep baaing and birds of prey wheel above us, their cries echoing around the rocks.

eagles rise on  
a shiver of thin air  
Buddha smiles

The broad valley is perfect; smoke lies across the fields like early morning mist. I think of our warm beds lying empty in the yurt, the indentations we moulded in the night are still witnesses to our sleep.

The sun rises through the crags and *they* are drawn into its light and warmth. How to describe them? Vast, silent - of course, and grown out of the rock face.

frostbitten houses  
in the shadow of holy men  
morning voices crackle

Serene, unaffected by the years that have passed since their creation and since Genghis Khan's hordes defaced them, the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Their presence is palpable even at that distance and we stand in silence.

on dun coloured hills  
black goats cry for their kids  
the goatherd sleeps  
only tells them in his dreams  
the hour of their deaths

When Genghis came this way he slaughtered anything that moved, even the mice, in revenge for the death of his grandson. (In March 2001 the Taliban completed the job he had begun. By destroying the Buddha statues they kept up the tradition of victors attempting to wipe out all evidence of previous cultures.)

Hazaras with their Mongol features remind us of the thousand men Genghis left behind to seed the valley. Even as they work the fields of wheat and barley their eyes draw us into history. I read somewhere that almost 17 million people worldwide are direct descendants of Genghis Khan. Seems he was quite the ladies' man!

Animal dung pats are laid out on the roofs of houses, drying in the sun, fuel for the winter. Long irrigation channels cling to the hillsides, mile after mile, bringing water to the fields and trees of the valley. They are small miracles of engineering and a triumph of determination over adversity.

dung on his hands  
the young boy laughs  
thinking of winter

## To be present

Push on. Breathe the dust through freeze-dried nostrils until we reach the lakes. Sapphire, lapis, cobalt and turquoise hurt eyes accustomed to forty shades of beige. Band-e Amir, given brilliance by a sun that is marking time.

Tea at the *chaikhana* and we are the centre of attention. Music blares from a tinny transistor and the talk is of Russians. We reassure them we're British and things look up; God knows why, given our mutual histories. The Russians are on our heels, though, and these hills, gorges and caves will soon be home to the heroic mujahideen, armed by the West and hailed as heroes. Like all heroes they will fall and become the hated Taliban and, eventually, demonised. But for now all is calm. The tea is sweet and hot, served from a samovar. Soup is offered. It bubbles and steams so it is probably safe. We eat, even the blobs of fat that float in the tawny mixture. The dryness of the air means we crave oil, grease and fat.

under corrugated iron  
at the ends of the Earth  
goat tastes good

Let me tell you about the toilets, bane of the fastidious Western traveller. The hole in the floor stinking and rustling with vermin, the bush you think is safe but is in full view of mountain men standing just within the maw of a cave, the hurriedly constructed sarong loo-wall that flaps in the breeze. We tried them all. Clasp each other's hands to prevent a fall into the lowest circle of hell that must lurk under the hole, trying to distract those who may be watching and then weighting the sarong with stones. We learn just how capacious a bladder can be. We also risk dehydration by not drinking enough.

A young girl passes with a herd of goats, when they pause she pelts them with clods of earth or stings one on the back with her stick. She is tiny but they obey her without hesitation - until they find sweet new shoots in a crevice in one of the travertine dams that hold back the lakes.





Now they are oblivious to her tantrums and she gives in and squats in the shade of a thorny bush, one eye on them and the other on us.

Discussion turns to the colour of the waters. A beige lizard scurries past our feet; barely perceptible, so clever is his camouflage. His tiny limbs are a blur as he makes his way from cover to cover. We are distracted by his presence and the little girl has started singing to gain our attention. The water is such striking blues because of the mineral content.

A few weeks before our arrival a European woman was shot dead by local men scandalised by her wanton behaviour and dress as she sunbathed and swam in the lake, too scantily clad for their sensibilities. It's hard to understand how they could be offended by her life but not by her death. We are as far from understanding this mindset as we are from flying to the moon, but struggle to find meaning in her death. There's an echo to be heard in our own society whenever we hear the phrase – *She was asking for it* – from where did this judgemental attitude spring? And will it ever be tempered with reasoned argument?

someone's daughter  
fair hair billowing in blue water  
beyond our reach

The hills and lakes lull me into believing we are timeless. A million sparks flit around my brain as I contemplate my place in this relentless cycle of being. The Buddhas seem completely at ease with the cosmic scale of things. But then again, they're just statues. How to cope with eternity, infinity, the way that everything is rushing to an end, however distant, and then what? A new beginning?

The little girl and her goats are moving on, we are moving on. Sometimes I just want to sit still and listen. You can't listen in the past or the future, I like that. I hear a cicada buzz, the scrape and stumble of a herd of goats or, with eyes closed, those unidentifiable sounds that lurk just on the edge of hearing.

It is a moment when I am present ... I have presence of mind.

looking back  
we leave no footprints  
— it is *khamseen*

## **REFLECTING ON THE NILE**

## In the land of Egypt

Fronds, shifted by the wind, part and join,  
rasping like dry skin on dry skin.  
The curve of a trunk, immaculately mirrored,  
is joined by buildings where once there were none.

A dinner cruise passes, ruffling the waters  
with air-conditioned sounds of Simon and Garfunkel  
building their bridges to Scarborough Fair.  
How odd and how trite under a desert moon  
and yet, in reflection, how beautiful.

\*\*\*\*

Away from the city  
a man shadows irrigation canals  
building and pulling down tiny dams,  
rationing and directing the streams  
like a river god.  
Each strip of land, each crop,  
a recipient of his skill and labour.  
The mud beneath his feet has value,  
it becomes his house, his dovecotes.

From my balcony I see a boy  
lying on the back of a donkey,  
his childhood spent in a blur of garbage.  
Cold morning air snatches at his body,  
his cotton *galabeya* is poor protection;  
the donkey seems not to mind sharing its warmth.  
At night the boy sleeps beneath the Muqattam Hills,  
in an abandoned, still crumbling, quarry  
thoughtfully provided by the municipality.

A man stands alongside the cart,  
he has long since stopped dreaming  
so he watches the scavengers fly overhead  
without trying to imagine their freedom.

In a two room-house, home to twelve,  
a girl from Upper Egypt awaits their return.  
She cooks and cleans, raises their pigs  
and their children and carries water  
bought from the church.  
At sixteen she gave birth to their first son,  
he died so they tried again  
and again,  
discounting the girls, until

another son came and was named Farag,  
meaning for them – the end of a crisis.

\*\*\*\*

An electric pop before it starts  
and a murmuring tone in the sky,

Calling to the compass winds  
as they part the sand into dunes.  
Dawn is greeted, again,  
with God's favourite prayer.

It has drawn me out of the night  
to find I'm in my father's life,  
the one I saw in black and white  
photographs of men in uniform.

With the muezzin I bear witness  
to a dawn that creeps  
through dusty green walls  
of eucalyptus.

The sand is kept at bay  
only encroaching with the wind,  
– the *khamseen*<sup>20</sup> –  
fifty days of threat  
when hot, dry and fierce  
it arrives without warning  
filling lungs with fine grains  
and dismissing closed windows.

There was my father, uniformed,  
moustached, with identical others,  
in a small desert domestically framed  
and perched on our sideboard.  
Behind him three ancient peaks  
that proved people lived  
and died there.

*"Hayya 'ala-s-Salah, hayya 'ala-s-Salah."*<sup>21</sup>

The amplified distortions  
sacrifice the beauty of a language  
for the imperative of the message.  
I'm still weaving dreams,  
resisting the dawn  
but it comes all the same

---

<sup>20</sup> The khamseen is a hot, dusty wind that blows in the spring.

<sup>21</sup> Hasten to worship.

and my day begins as the voice  
is silenced by a static hiss and a pop.

\*\*\*\*

A squall chops the waters  
shattering the palm tree  
breaking up the sky-scrapers and fly-overs.  
Veiled by pollution,  
life is lived in the drone of engines,  
car horns and cries of hawkers  
– but occasionally  
from a mosque in Zamalek, the call to prayer  
– “*Allah-u-Akbar*”<sup>22</sup> hangs on the air.

Some nights a full moon eclipses the stars  
and floods the desert. In one direction  
the city writhes in a hot sodium cacophony,  
in the other, the desert flows  
moon-frosted and silent.

\*\*\*\*

Sixth and last Sunday in Lent;  
as children we held crosses made from palms  
and learnt about the land where they grew  
and here I am in the real thing.  
The land that gave that Family shelter  
and went to war with their homeland  
again and again.

I see a cave beneath a church  
and I’m told it was the place where They hid.  
It is flooded and rings with the voices of workmen.

Visitors clamour,  
wanting to know so much and so little:  
“When exactly was electricity installed in here?”  
“Can we get a postcard of all this stuff?”

Icons draw and hold my attention with their gold  
and strangely proportioned saints  
who gaze out burdened with stylised poses.

No peace though –  
“Have you been to the museum yet?”  
“No, that’s after lunch, then the pyramids  
and back to the boat.”

---

<sup>22</sup> God is the greatest

“The museum’s great but I like the bazaar best.”

The chatter and shuffle of feet continues,  
one group replaces another and another  
an endless round of history, religion and novelty.

\*\*\*\*

If it was possible to think back  
to the furthest reaches of race memory,  
before boundaries and monuments,  
you would see a distant green place.  
Grass covered soil that proves tempting  
to wandering tribes who settle,  
plant crops and learn to be farmers.

Not knowing their world is dying,  
they watch the rains dwindle then cease;  
watch their carefully nurtured land fail  
year on year, watch the desert come,  
then leave to search for another Eden.

Sand herds them towards a river.  
Carrying all they possess, young and old  
fix their eyes on the water and put down roots.

Move on thousands of years,  
they become urbanites  
believing in life after death,  
building monuments,  
recording achievements.  
Traders, craftsmen,  
scholars and scribes  
stand at the waters’ edge  
and look out at the world.

They discover power and yearn for war,  
follow kings in red and white crowns,  
find the one Divine King in Ramses.

But he changes. His name is given to hotels  
and city squares, his body is disinterred  
and claimed by a museum.  
Ozymandias, King of Kings, warrior and god,  
now a tourist attraction,  
a broken skeleton from which hang  
the rags of his pride.

\*\*\*\*

Walk with me to the Pyramids,  
approach them from the desert  
leaving tourists to wonder  
who we are and where we came from.  
Walk with me and see  
where the night sky rests  
on the highest apex.

And we can hear  
the desert at night,  
the susurrations of sand  
as the dunes move,  
the strains of Om Khaltoum<sup>23</sup>  
haunting the coffee houses.  
Tell me what she sings.

Somewhere below us  
in the light of a kerosene lamp  
a child is born, an old man dies.  
And these stones  
have seen it all before.

\*\*\*\*

How strange it is to learn  
the Pharaoh's daughter  
had spina bifida.

If they made a movie of her story  
she would be brave and survive  
"against all the odds".  
Her face, beautiful in repose  
and in close-up,  
would dominate the scenes.

There would be no mention  
of bladder and bowel problems,  
no brain-damaging hydrocephalus  
and she would be courted by a hero.

But this isn't a film;  
she was mummified  
and buried with her father.  
A tiny scrap,  
too small for a funeral mask  
but with eyelashes and eyebrows,  
an umbilical cord  
and her head crowned with baby-down.

---

<sup>23</sup> One of the Egypt's most famous and distinguished singers.



\*\*\*\*

In the museum – canopic jars and gold masks,  
funeral sledges and coffin lids  
and a mummified baby crocodile.

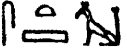
A wooden 'ka' statue, treasured:  
Ka – the very essence of life.

I read that Egyptians treasured the heart,  
threw away the brain, believing it useless.  
Food for thought.

Hearts were weighed against a feather;  
lightness of heart counting for much  
in the morality stakes.

The Eater of the Dead waited,  
hoping for a heavy heart once in a while.

I read voraciously, counting the gods,  
sorting hieroglyphs and stumbling  
on mud *shawabti*<sup>24</sup> figures.  
Take them with you,  
when a god tells you to work, delegate,  
it's what they were created for.

Seth —  God of storms,  
deserts, war and foreign lands;  
he'd love it here,  
it would be his paradise.  
He would squat in the chaos  
and watch us roaming aimlessly.  
He would patiently pass the time,  
calibrating his scales with that feather.

I read each card and read it again.  
Typed, sometimes written  
in an old crabbed hand.

By the door, a sign:  
*On the first floor you will find  
animal palettes and  
more funerary equipment.*

\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>24</sup> Shawabti figures were placed in the tombs of the pharaohs in Egypt in the belief that they would become servants and labourers working for them in the afterlife.

At the side of the road that skirts the mosque  
and ends in the desert Gamelat walks to work.  
Her feet are big and wide with cracked heels,  
her hands are strong and capable;  
one steadies the load on her head,  
the other grips a bundle of clothes.

Dust powders the hem of her black *milaya*<sup>25</sup>  
and highlights the wrinkles around eyes  
and mouth; she is no longer young.  
I hear the slip-slop of her plastic shoes  
as with each step they whip her soles.  
I see the roll of her buttocks  
beneath the robe as she sways  
left-right, left-right over her feet.

She walks in brilliant light  
that bounces to and fro  
between sun and stones  
until it hits her black swathes of cloth  
and is sucked in. She is turning,  
looking back and smiling like a queen,  
her head crowned with a gas cylinder.

\*\*\*\*

Look out! Four pairs of legs  
moving in perfect synchronicity,  
her thick segmented tail  
held high over her back, quivering  
like the sword of Damocles.

I have learnt her name,  
Buthridas  
the white venomous one.

If she struck  
you would feel the poison  
spread through your blood  
and know,  
in that moment,  
you were dead.

Carved into schist palettes  
used to grind malachite and galena  
that adorned the eyes of queens  
and sculpted in precious metals,

---

<sup>25</sup> Black cotton wrap worn by some Egyptian women for modesty and to protect their clothes.

she is the companion of goddesses.

So I should feel honoured  
that she has chosen to join me here,  
dancing over the grains of sand  
to make use of my shadow.

\*\*\*\*

used as a stool  
for a picnic  
a tree trunk - petrified

coaxed by crumbs  
singing        singing  
wheatears and warblers

uncovered by the wind  
once a shield for the heart  
a naked rib cage

\*\*\*\*

Stones and boulders clutter the ground,  
brown, beige and grey,

picked out by harsh sunlight.  
Hot grit between our toes,

holds a promise of midday burning.  
On a trestle-table,

a red gingham cloth,  
champagne flutes,

white teacups, dark fruitcake  
on best plates.

And, from under a nearby rock,  
a horned viper joins the party.

\*\*\*\*

Camels shadow each other's footsteps,  
silent in the twilight as if aware  
of the dark that is to come.

Had we not been resting  
in the evening cool

above the wadi  
we would not have seen them.

Soft-footed they pad past,  
winding up an ancient trail until  
their silhouettes are drawn on the sky,  
black on grey, soon to be black on black,  
soon to be lost to us.

\*\*\*\*

Where does light go?

All those photons bouncing around,  
waving long and short, breaking into rainbows,  
refracting and reflecting at their own speed,  
where do they go?

Apparently, sunlight in space never stops,  
it just goes on and infinitely on.

To reflect:

the light that radiated from the dunes,  
shone in my eyes and jetted off  
is still travelling in space and time  
carrying the sand dunes, the pyramids  
and me with it.

\*\*\*\*

Jasmine, rose, ambergris, myrrh  
patchouli, musk, frankincense.  
We sniffed each other's wrists.  
The evening heat echoed and softened the day,  
darkness was kept at bay by gilded lamplight  
reflecting and refracting at every turn  
the glow of beaten brass and copper  
as bright as the second it slipped from the furnace.  
Constant tapping of a thousand hammers  
muffled by stalls of carpets and cloth.  
Windows of gold glisten and beckon  
as yellow as buttercups, necklaces  
never to be held beneath my chin.

Bodies drifting, bustling, pushing,  
gallabeyas, burqas, jeans and t-shirts.  
Whispering, murmuring, singing,  
shouting, laughing, coughing, spitting.  
Coffee, hubble-bubbles, basbousa,  
hummas, fool, tahini, aysh baladi,

gibna ruhmy, kanafa, um ali<sup>26</sup>.

Tourists fluster like a flock of starlings,  
anxious to be near the leader, not at the back  
where danger waits to pick off the weakest.  
They have to be coaxed to move closer  
shuffling in nervous clusters, urging each other  
to have courage in the face of strangers.  
Laughing when invited to taste the unknown,  
lips pursed, noses corrugated.  
The bravest are applauded and they in turn  
spur on the irresolute to "have a go".

A rush of affection fills me, envy too,  
the excitement of a new world has worn off,  
all has become commonplace  
until I see it again through their eyes.  
It is time to stop.  
Look up.  
Breathe.

\*\*\*\*

In my neighbour's house there are many plates,  
plates made to hang on walls.  
"Each a limited edition and very valuable,"  
she says, running a hand over the topmost  
as if to reassure or soothe herself.  
They are kept in the dark, boxed, labelled,  
awaiting the day when they return to Arkansas.

She is lonely, caged by fear of the different.  
Four years in Cairo, never seen a pyramid.  
Spends her days perusing catalogues of plates,  
waiting for her man to come home.  
Cooking burgers with frozen vegetables  
flown over from a PX<sup>27</sup> in Italy.

We hear their voices through the wall,  
the creak of chairs and sounds of feet.  
After dinner they settle down to watch  
a film made in America about a death  
on the Nile. Two miles away from them  
the Nile flows calmly north  
ignoring them too.

---

<sup>26</sup> A list of foodstuffs, mostly cakes and sweetmeats, found in most Arabic markets.

<sup>27</sup> A department store set up for the US military and some overseas US civilian personnel.

\*\*\*

We catch the summer night breezes  
and soundlessly blend with river traffic  
to slip past women washing pots  
and the watchful eyes of minarets.  
Our keel-less craft skims the shallows,  
its mast carves a route through the stars,  
its sail sheds a muted glow of moonlight.

We float amongst the planets,  
slip through the black-on-black palms  
gathering memories:  
    the churring of nightjars,  
    a distant train clacking southwards,  
    the slip-slop of wavelets  
    and hot dry desert air above the water.

Then the bleating of truck horns alerts us  
to the sound of caterpillar tracks on tarmac  
and to the smoke of assassination

No cumulonimbus  
no cirrus  
just flames through blue

above a river running  
like a sword  
through the heart

of a city.  
Trucks creep forward  
crushing desert dust

beneath their wheels.  
They carry hearts  
full of faith and fire.

A last check;  
guns grow hot  
under the sun.

Broken and reassembled  
a thousand times  
now too hot to stop.

Thump-thump of rotors,  
the Nile points the way  
to an unexpected death.

The water flows north  
calmly, felucca strewn,  
it reflects metal bellies

in the sky  
while on the ground  
sweating palms tremble.

Olive drab and khaki,  
burdened with belief,  
looking for the man.

Tarmac shimmers  
in the city,  
hands stroke grenades

and gently touch the pins.  
Their 'Decadent Pharaoh'  
sits forward to see more clearly.

The Unknown Soldier  
sleeps nearby;  
the sky fills with screams

as pale underbellies  
pirouette in formation.  
The truck stops.

The man dies  
"Mish maqool!" ... "Not possible!"  
on his lips.

Hands are raised  
in jubilation  
and grief.

\*\*\*\*\*

In sunlight a coffin is carried along our street;  
the wails are hard to bear.

We didn't know the man  
but his funeral shatters our peace.  
Brothers, sons, grandsons struggle,  
the coffin is heavy and draped,  
bloody handprints stain the cloth  
as each person reaches out to touch.  
Chairs fill the street, people arrive and leave,  
each new arrival greeted with sadness  
in the shade of a palm tree.

\*\*\*\*

Entering through colonnades  
cool and clean underfoot.  
The path leads us under the sun  
to the Cross of Sacrifice.

We walk the white rows,  
careful to mind our feet.  
We read their names,  
it is always their ages that hurt.

Fathers of children never born,  
husbands of wives never wed;  
what could they have been?

A white stone for each boy.  
a white stone engraved  
with a name or –  
“A SOLDIER, AN AIRMAN”,  
and here, three linked stones,  
they met death together  
in the belly of a tank.

The German dead  
are in a fortress.  
Names buried deep in walls  
reminiscent of European castles;  
only the heat reminds us  
we are still in the desert.

Italians lie nearby;  
a filigree of stonework,  
white and fine as lace,  
hides their names  
from the sun.

There's something tribal here,  
I feel it as we process in the dust,  
turning again and again to see  
the names of the dead.

At that very moment,  
in the South Atlantic,  
more graves were being dug,  
prayers were being said,  
hopes being destroyed.

The high-pitched whine  
of the war machine  
begging to be fed



came via short wave radio  
and would not be hushed  
even here amongst the dead.

A thousand kilometres of desert  
– Alexandria to Benghazi :  
the killing ground.  
The names 'Monty', Rommel,  
Eighth Army and Afrika Korps  
are dredged up from school lessons  
and tossed around between the graves.

Then reality hits home  
here are thousands of other names  
unreported in those school days.

And another reality:  
today the innocent  
still trigger mines with their feet  
when crossing the Devil's Garden.

\*\*\*\*\*

Was that an echo of the church bell  
or the call of a cuckoo  
or applause from the village green?  
Like a myth or fairy story told to children,  
home hovers in the margins of our days.

We lust for those misty mornings  
that tell you autumn is on its way;  
the crunch of beech-mast under foot,  
the shy shuffle of deer through woods.

Frost flowers on the windows in winter,  
the promise of snow in a yellow-grey sky.  
Tumbling troops of wrapped up children,  
cheeks and noses pinched poppy-red.

Those days when it drizzles and drizzles,  
the sky remaining obstinately opalescent;  
the milkman's rattle, the postman's whistle  
and the wagging tail of next door's dog.

We are not so blind as to believe  
all is as it was, as we remember it .  
We watched the upheavals,  
the schisms and shifts and yet  
we have to believe in home  
as it was and in our minds still is.

\*\*\*\*

We perched on plastic chairs  
at water's edge and gazed westward,  
birds preparing for migration.  
Something was moving within us, we locked eyes,  
understanding held.  
We were moving on.  
Shaking off a country,  
with its hyperactive population,  
heading west.  
Others were going the same way,  
a tremor ran through our colony.  
Like Willow Warblers we moulted in preparation,  
shed old clothes, shoes and books;  
things that would weigh us down.

*Ma'asalama Misr, shokran habebe.*<sup>28</sup>

You will grow in sweetness in our minds,  
time will grant you a veiled beauty  
and restore your mystery.

We shared our night flight  
in a cargo plane,  
with green beans  
and tiny chicks bound for market.

---

<sup>28</sup> Goodbye Egypt, thank you beloved.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

## Testament

This is the place we saw our first rabid dog, running lopsidedly,  
snapping and growling in a fog of insanity.

This is the butcher who sold us goat meat instead of lamb – we couldn't  
tell, served it with mint sauce and roast potatoes.

This is where we laughed ourselves silly at pimple-pigs and pogo  
dancing.

This is where we saw the road-block. Men squatting, hands on heads.

This is where I hid in the foot-well of our ancient VW during hours of  
curfew. I didn't have a pass.

This is the place we failed to stop at a roadblock and drove into the night  
chased by armed police, and  
this is where we were caught.

This is where we sat and talked to the perfume seller, covered our arms  
in sandalwood oil and frankincense, smoked cigarettes  
spiked with ambergris. "Aphrodisiac," he said. We were too young  
to need any.

This is the house of a man who, after walking the mountains for three  
days, found us in his fields and brought us in to take coffee and  
dates.

This is where those memories appear, in the dark hours of insomnia,  
when the brain cringes at moments best forgotten and struggles to  
linger in days when the sun shone and we sat in its light, fed each  
other pomegranates, turned up the music and danced.

## Thanks ...

... to the stick thin *dhobi* resurrecting  
history from a leather bound volume.  
Offering glimpses of a time and place  
we never knew except through lessons  
and television documentaries.  
He met the colonels and their ladies  
and washed their smalls.

... to the lime-suited taxi-driver  
praying to *his* god for us  
and hiding his disappointment  
when his prayers are unanswered.  
Who speeds through sandstorms  
to meet planes and deadlines,  
who laughs from his belly  
and treats us like his best friends.

... to the office maid who fights,  
mostly with men, and loves us  
with a fierce passion  
and presents us with strange  
and wonderful gifts. Who is loud  
and abandoned in her opinions,  
especially where marriage is concerned.

... to the doctor who likes whisky  
and comes running, even in floods,  
to soothe our fears. Bringing skills  
gained in Dublin and Edinburgh  
and Karachi and a kindness  
that is all his own.

... to the sad-eyed tailor who shares  
grief without embarrassment;  
who knows the pain that comes  
with the death of a child.  
He brings comfort in the rhythms  
of his treadle and song.

... to Aziza and Mohammed,  
Rosie, Gordon and Gene,  
to François, Erich, Marie-Amelie  
Byram and Goshpi, Paul and Trish.  
And many others who inhabit my mind  
and have been dragged out  
to help me remember and fill  
the spaces in my journey  
between there and here.

## **GLOSSARY**

**Allah-u-Akbar**

The Islamic call to prayer.

**Aysh baladi**

Whole wheat pitta bread.

**Begum**

A title given to women of high status in Pakistan and India.

**Bellerophon**

This ship was built in Dundee but ended her life by being broken up on Gadani Beach in September 1978.

**Bunder boat**

A bunder boat is normally used for landing passengers or goods from a larger vessel. In Karachi it was possible to hire them for informal evening parties to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries as well as to go crab fishing.

**Burra memsahib**

The wife of a company director would be referred to as a Burra Memsahib. As a result of her husband's position she would be regarded as an important person in the community.

**Buthridas**

A white scorpion found in the deserts of Egypt.

**Chai**

Tea

**Chaikhana**

Chaikhana are places that cater for travellers; they provide food, tea and, sometimes, a place to stay for the night.

**Chota Peg**

This was the term for a small measure of whisky in Pakistan.

**Dupatta**

A long scarf that is worn by women in Pakistan, often covering the head but sometimes just the shoulders.

**Fool**

A spread made from fava beans, chilli, olive oil, etc and often eaten at breakfast.

**Gadani Beach**

Not far from Karachi, this beach is famous for the ship breaking activities that are carried out there. The ships are run aground and gradually dismantled.

### Galabeya

Called a jellaba in many parts of North Africa, the galabeya is a long traditional cotton robe worn in Egypt.

### Gibna ruhmy

A type of cheese.

### Hayya 'ala-s-Salah

Part of the call of the muezzin exhorting the faithful to come to prayer.

### Hazaras

The Hazaras that live around Bamiyan in Afghanistan are believed to be the descendents of Genghis Khan and their Mongol-like features appear to bear out this theory.

### Hummas

A spread made with mashed chickpeas mixed with lemon, juice, olive oil and garlic.

### Jildi

'Quickly' in Urdu.

### Ka

The ancient Egyptians believed that Ka was the life force that enters the body at birth and leaves it at death.

### Kanafa

A sweet pastry eaten in North Africa.

### Khamseen

Khamseen comes from the Arabic word for fifty and is a hot desert wind that blows in Egypt in the spring for around fifty days. It carries large amounts of dust and sand with it and is disliked by the inhabitants.

### Kohl

A type of eyeliner believed to protect the eyes from the effects of bright sunlight.

### Masalama

'Goodbye' in Arabic

### Memsahib

A term of respect when addressing a woman; in colonial times it was invariably used when speaking to a European woman.

### Milaya

A large black cotton wrap or robe worn by Egyptian women.

### Mish maqool

We were told by acquaintances in Cairo that these were the last words of President Anwar al Sadat as he lay dying and that they meant 'Not possible'.

### Misr

The Egyptian name for Egypt.

### Muqattam Hills

From the top of these hills one can enjoy a spectacular view over the city of Cairo whilst at the bottom live some of the poorest people in Egypt. The Zabbalin community are the garbage collectors of Cairo and they live and sort the rubbish beneath these hills. They endure great hardship which is often compounded by frequent, fatal rock falls.

### Om Khaltoum

One of Egypt's most famous singers.

### Paan

Paan is a mixture of areca nuts, tobacco, fennel seeds or a variety of herbs and spices wrapped in betel leaves and chewed as a mouth freshener in Pakistan.

### Pushto

Sometimes referred to as Pashto, is a language spoken in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan.

### Sahib

A respectful term used when addressing a man in India and Pakistan.

### Seth

Seth or Set, was considered the god of the desert, storms and chaos in ancient Egypt.

### Shalwar Kameez

Traditional dress worn by men and women in Pakistan. The shalwar are loose pyjama-like trousers and the kameez is a long tunic worn over them.

### Shawabti figures

Small figurines placed in the tombs of wealthy ancient Egyptians to act as servants for them in the afterlife.

### Shokran habebe

'Thank you, beloved' in Arabic.

### Sweeper

A sweeper could be employed in a house or on the roads and s/he would be a cleaner. Many employees in Pakistan would be referred to by using the name of the job they did rather than their personal names.



### Tahini

A paste of ground sesame seeds used in North African cooking.

### Towers of Silence

These are raised towers used by people of the Zoroastrian faith as a place to expose their dead. Zoroastrians believe that fire and the earth should not be polluted by contact with the dead and so place the bodies on towers where the sun and birds of prey will remove the flesh. The bones are then placed in an ossuary pit and, by the addition of lime, eventually disintegrate.

### Trachoma

Trachoma is an infectious eye disease that, if left untreated, leads to blindness.

### Um ali

A very rich dessert made on special occasions.

### Zamalek

A district of Cairo which is an island in the Nile.

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