

كَلِمَات

# Kalimat

Number 1 (English), March 2000



**DOURADE LAHAM AND THE CHARM OF  
GAWAR BIN MASHAAL AL-TOWSHE**

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# Kalimat

Number 1 (English), March 2000

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## **Correspondence**

P.O. Box 242, Cherrybrook, NSW 2126, Australia.

Phone/Facsimile: 61 2 9484 3648

Electronic Mail: [raghid@ozemail.com.au](mailto:raghid@ozemail.com.au)

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*From the Editor*

# Kalimat: Creativity, the Joy of the Word and Cultural Access

Welcome to the first issue of *Kalimat*.

'*Kalimat*' is the Arabic for 'words'. It is the plural of '*kalima*'. We believe in the power and the beauty of words. We believe that the word is the gate of cultural heritage, and that writing is the key to its permanence. This is what the Arabic words on the back cover of this issue say.

*Kalimat* seeks to expose the beauty of words and explore their creative dimensions in poetry and prose, in any form or style. *Kalimat* will seek quality, without being too academic.

*Kalimat*, an Australian-Arabic Literary Quarterly, is produced alternately in English and Arabic. It seeks creativity in both languages, and fosters access between English-speaking and Arabic-speaking individuals and the worlds and cultures they represent. In doing so *Kalimat* aims at providing direct enjoyment of the written word in either languages, or in both for those who are bilingual. Those who have one of the languages only, can have access to other ideas through translations and commentary. *Kalimat's* mission is to provide a medium for cultural access and enhanced creative communications between writers from diverse communities, who are united by their quest to have their words read, heard and felt by everyone.

*Kalimat* will focus on Australian-Arab access by being representative of the

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widest possible contemporary writings in each culture. It will also attempt to promote Australian and Arabic writings throughout the migrant communities around the World.

We have already begun establishing links with major literary bodies and individuals in the Middle East and among migrant communities. The fruits of these contacts will start appearing in subsequent issues, ripe for everyone to enjoy.

The present issue gives a general idea of what Kalimat is about. We are, however, hoping that future English issues will contain more material from Arabic-speaking individuals, original or translated. In the same way, we would like the Arabic issues to include more work from English-speaking contributors.

We are very clear about what access means. A very dear friend of mine who comes from a different background, holds some contrasting views to mine. We both believe that 'boundaries' are inevitable, or at least necessary or healthy. We believe that we are such good and close friends because we recognise each other's boundaries. We are also able to cross those boundaries, move freely, enjoy their essence and move out again without undermining the integrity of the core.

This is the type of access Kalimat will establish. The uniqueness and particularity of each work, individual or culture must be preserved. There is more than one way of 'bridge-building'. We see that our part is to provide this medium of access without implying or imposing some hollow grand scheme as happens when someone claims to speak for others or take on their cause under the pretext of 'bridge-building'.

Kalimat is fortunate in its present stage to have the Board members of SyrAus Incorporated willing to sponsor its production and publication. I am gratified that my colleagues at SyrAus have entrusted me with the task of editing and producing Kalimat. Since its conception, we have received enormous moral support from individuals and organisations despite the elements of risk associated with any new venture. I particularly salute those individuals who have accepted to be on Kalimat's Advisory Board. These are prominent individuals who have agreed to voluntarily grant us their reputation, time and effort. In addition, there are a number of other individuals with whom we consult on an *ad hoc* basis. Their advice is particularly needed on specialised literary or cultural aspects. There is nothing in this for all these individuals, other than the enhancement of creativity and

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cultural access.

Contributors who responded to our call are also to be saluted and thanked. The overwhelming response we have received indicates a great interest in the goal Kalimat is pursuing. It also indicates that there is a need for a new outlet for all those talents. Kalimat is very honoured and delighted to serve this purpose.

We would like to see more spontaneous, creative and emerging talents knocking on our door. To this end, we say that Kalimat is *your* words. And my word! Without you and your contributions to this exercise, it becomes null and void.

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*To the Editor*

# Letters

Kalimat would like this section to be a forum for readers to express their opinions on the material published, by forwarding concise letters (maximum 500 words) to the Editor.

We would like to present below excerpts from the first letter we received from overseas in response to the announcement about the production of Kalimat.

Dear Editor,

We welcome the news of the establishment of Kalimat that is going to provide literary access between Syria and Australia. This is a gift from heaven that we receive with happiness here at the Migrants' Friends Association in Homs. The Association has been awaiting such a spark of hope for the past twenty-six years. We hope to see the seeds of cultural exchange germinate in both environments, the Australian and the Arabic, producing a healthy yield that can be added to our priceless human heritage.

We will be awaiting your Kalimat with its letters that will illuminate us here and all migrants around the World. 'In the beginning was the *kalima*', and it will remain for eternity. The 'word' will continue to extend the thread of hope, woven once by Gibran Khalil Gibran and his 'al-Rabita al-Qalamyya' in the North...and al-Qurawi and his 'al-Osba al-Andalussia' in the South. And now, in Australia, the weaving continues by like-minded heirs who value the love of all humans and the World.

*Nihad Shabboh, Homs  
President, Migrants' Friend Association, Syria*

L E T T E R S

**GEORGES JABBOUR**

*Issues*

## Eid al-Fitre and the European Union

The European Union comprises secular countries that separate between religion and the state. Some of its royal regimes, however, still harbour sectarian and religious inclinations. For example, the Queen of Britain is described as the protector of the Anglican faith. In Norway the state's religion is Lutheran. I say religion not sect because the Norwegian Constitution still keeps this expression.

I hasten to note, however, that the actual power of all the royal European regimes resides in the cabinet and parliament, not with the monarch. In addition, the areas of religious or sectarian bias are very limited, and hardly restrict the secular nature of the state. Most of the European monarchies are currently exerting serious efforts to secularise their constitutions, or at least add more secular elements to them.

Secularisation of the state takes several meanings, but the condition of extreme secularisation where the role of religion is completely eliminated from society or the state is rare. The clearest example here is what happened in France on the twenty-second of September 1792, when the revolutionary calendar was announced. The 'week', a religious concept, was abolished. The month now comprised three periods of ten days each. This did not last long, and both state and society returned to the traditional calendar that was full of religious (Christian) symbols. The meaning of secularisation became limited, as

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a consequence, to the separation of religion and the state.

What is the present situation regarding the festivities of religious minorities in any state, whether the state is religious or secular? The situation differs from state to another. I do not know, for example, how do European states deal with Jewish festivities. I note, however, that Yom Kippur in 1999 occupied a good space in the news because it coincided with the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly regularly scheduled on the third Monday of September. Traditionally, the American President attends the opening ceremony in his capacity as the head of the host country. The United States attempted unsuccessfully to change the opening date. Consequently, the American president abandoned his right to be the first speaker, and did not attend in a show of respect to Yom Kippur.

In contrast, it is interesting to note that the American representative to the UN objected in March 1998 to a draft resolution for the UN to take holidays during the Islamic Eid al-Fitre (the Ramadan Feast) and Eid al-Adha (the Hajj Feast). This was because he reasoned that the UN was a secular organisation that should not have holidays for religious occasions. The Americans described their stand between 1998 and 1999 as a progress!

Arab countries generally respect the feelings of religious minorities. A number of Islamic Arab countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Jordan and Iraq have sizeable Christian minorities. I do not know the full extent of their reception of religious festivities. I, however, know that Syria is one of only two countries in the World where all government departments take holidays during two Easters: Easter according to the Western Calendar and Easter according to the Eastern Calendar. The other country being the Lebanon. I would also like to add a notable fact in favour of Syria. Syria's day of independence was chosen to be the 17<sup>th</sup> of April not the 18<sup>th</sup> as was initially planned so that this did not conflict with the Christian celebration of Good Friday at that time.

Let us now go back to the title of the present article. Towards the end of 1996, Dr. Butros Butros Ghali decided that the UN takes holidays during the two feasts of al-Fitre and al-Adha. This came after years of my suggestion to that effect, during a public lecture I delivered in Damascus on 29/10/1990. The Egyptian Ambassador liked the idea and said that he would convey it to his government. Three weeks after Ghali's decision, the White House gave, for the first time, a celebration headed by Mrs. Hillary Clinton, on the occasion of Eid al-Fitre. Since then, this tradition continued. On 7/12/1999, the day the American Secretary of State declared her optimism about the peace talks after meeting with President Assad, President Clinton appeared on television with a message to Moslems in America and around the World congratulating them on

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the occasion of the month of Ramadan. We expect that this interest will continue, particularly that in several of Mrs. Clinton's speeches, Islam was described as the fastest growing religion in the US.

What should the European Union do for Eid al-Fitre?

Some countries of the European Union have large Islamic minorities. In France, the first country of secularisation in Europe, I presume that the Ministry for the Interior presents its congratulations to the Imam of the Paris Mosque. There are similar practices in Germany and the United Kingdom, but the European Union is silent in this regard.

On 30/11/1999, I sent a letter to the European Union President, the President of Finland suggesting to him following the American example in courtesy. I also urged him to go a step beyond that, considering the good relations between Europe and the Arab-Islamic World.

When the present article first appeared in Arabic in the Lebanese newspaper *as-Safeer* on 21/12/1999, I posed the following question: 'Christmas is coming soon, before the blessed Ramadan feast. Will the Islamic Congress Organisation, for example, send a letter congratulating the Christians in the Islamic countries and in the World for the birth of Jesus? I direct this question to the President of the Islamic Congress, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran.'

Up to the time of sending my article to *Kalimat* (5/2/2000), I received no reply from the President of the European Union, but President Khatami issued a letter congratulating the Christians of the World for Christmas.

**Georges Jabbour** is a professor of international relations, and an ex-political adviser to the Syrian President.

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**SOPHIE MASSON**

*Issues*

## Adult, or Young Adult

Something is happening within the state of children's literature in the English-speaking world, or, more particularly, at the borders of that semi-independent fiefdom known as Young Adult Literature. As yet, the changes are not sufficient to warrant that the guides be definitively rewritten, but the travel advice is to approach with caution and the expectation that more momentous changes are still around the corner. So, for the intrepid traveller, I offer the following observations.

In an agrarian world, children were not a separate part of society, and certainly their worldview was not seen as separate from that of their parents, so that fairy and folk tales, for example, were told to all, not just children. With the disappearance of agrarian society in England and the emergence of an industrial world came, first, the exploitation of children, then their protection. And also a yearning for that vanished otherworld which now only children were imagined to inhabit - an earthy world yet also one of effortless, natural fantasy and grace: the world of the agrarian society, that produced not only fairy tales but also Shakespeare. And out of that yearning was born children's literature that embodied the view of childhood as a place of enchantment.

The first books specifically for children were often turgid homilies, but as the nineteenth century advanced and dissolved into the twentieth, and the sense of distance from that agrarian otherworld grew, so, paradoxically, did the beauty

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and freedom and grace and sheer fun of children's literature in English-speaking cultures, culminating in an explosion of talent in our own century. (In other cultures, less distant perhaps from agrarian society, things were different; for instance in my country of origin, France, there are only a very few great children's writers - St Exupery, De Brunhoff, Herge, Goscinny/Uderzo being four who spring to mind, but they are not novelists). In fact, this century has produced so many good children's writers, so many beautiful works of art that one can profitably compare it to the heyday of the novel in the nineteenth century.

Young Adult Literature, in capital letters, is much more recent than the kingdom from which it sprang, first declaring a kind of tentative independence in the post-industrial 60's and 70's, as more adolescents stayed on at school, and the frontier of adulthood receded more and more from them. Of course, adolescents had featured as characters in works since Romeo and Juliet, but in the nineteen sixties youth culture served notice to adults that teenagers were now to be seen not merely as 'overgrown children' or 'immature adults', but a separate tribe, worthy of their own in-books. For the last thirty years, then, that fiefdom has grown and flourished, and has produced some great - and not so great - books. Claims about the legitimacy or otherwise of the fiefdom have surfaced sporadically, at least outside of children's literature, but have had little effect on an expanding territory. But times are changing, yet again, and the teenager looks set to disappear, at least as a myth, if not a reality. Are teenagers once more taking their old place as apprentice adults; or is it rather that adolescence is being extended, so that you can be a 'teenager' far into your twenties? The social trends of the last 5-10 years, that is seeing 60's youth culture and its promoters increasingly challenged, are, as is not surprising, being mirrored in the books written for adolescents.

The books of writers such as Philip Pullman (Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife) and J.K. Rowling (the Harry Potter series) are being published not just for children, but also re-jacketed for adults. Australian children's writers such as Ursula Dubosarsky, Sonya Hartnett, Isobelle Carmody, and John Marsden have also seen their books make the crossing. My own fairytale series of novels - Carabas, Cold Iron, Clementine - is to be reissued and remarketed as both for adults and young adults. Fantasy, once the sole province of children's writing, is now hugely popular for adults as well and, in my opinion, spells in some ways the revitalisation of the novel form.

Writers, of course, write what they want to write. They are often bemused by

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publishers' marketing decisions; but all of these novels, all of these writers, are bordercrossers, and none of these books can be categorised firmly one way or the other, something which would not have happened a few years ago. Once, and not so long ago either, perhaps even as recently as five or ten years ago, if you wrote 'young adult fiction', you were mainly stuck with pimples and rebellion and rock music and above all, realism. It is this new freedom and fluidity which also meant that an idea I'd had for years - the reframing of the French fairytale, Puss in Boots, with all its adult ambivalence and mysteries - finally saw the light of day as Carabas. Of course, there are still many books that cover familiar teenage terrain; but the boundaries have been moved; the gleaming obvious border posts replaced by elusive mountain passes crossed and re-crossed in the dead of night.

So what does this all mean? First and foremost, I think it means that 'young adult literature', as a category, has probably outlived its usefulness. These days, 'young adult literature' appears to be used mainly to mean books for people aged from 16 to well into their twenties. In fact, now books for children of upper primary and lower secondary age appear to be routinely ignored in the 'Older Readers' section of the Children's Book Council of Australia's annual awards, for instance - despite the fact that this age band is the core of the readership. Surely we do not think that young people -older than adolescent - need their own category of books!

Over those thirty years that the Young Adult category has come into its own, general fiction has suffered from the loss of the energy, storytelling sparkle and sheer joy of the best of those writers working in children's literature. A well-nigh impenetrable wall of thorns has grown up between adult and children's books, especially heavily patrolled on the adult side of the wall, so that writers working in children's literature are routinely ignored or denigrated as having the mental age of the characters they create. There is much more knowledge and understanding of general literature within children's literature than the other way round. Writers, like myself, who work in both fields, are well-used to the putdowns dished out by the ignorant within 'general' literature whilst also having to be polite to people who think it would be nice to 'slum it' in the easy little field of children's books. This does not only happen in Australia - witness the incredulity in Britain when a mere children's writer, Jill Paton Walsh, was short-listed for the Booker a few years ago for her first adult novel, *A Knowledge of Angels*. But as more and more authors who have been writing for young adults get taken up within adult literature as well, then the wall will



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come down, at least as far as our fiefdom is concerned. Such a thing could lead to better writing, to a kind of cross-fertilisation that will strengthen and enrich and unite both the 'young adult' and the 'adult' literary worlds. It will lead to a much more flexible situation, where story, character, idea, and style all combine in a felicitous new-old hybrid which offers much greater variety for readers of all ages. It could also signal a new sophistication and awareness of the fact that young people are part of society, not some ghettoised or glamourised Other. Another good result could be to refocus interest within children's literature on the core catchment area - that of readers aged between 8-15, a focus that has become somewhat blurred recently with the untoward concentration on 'Young Adult' books.

But nothing is clear, just yet. On a recent trip to Britain, I noticed that publishers have almost stopped producing 'young adult' fiction, apart from the ubiquitous pulp series; the section in bookshops now barely exists. This was in a country that pioneered the fiefdom; that produced such brilliant writers as Alan Garner, Jan Mark, Janni Howker, Aidan Chambers and dozens of others. Alan Garner's new book, *Strandloper*, had just appeared, and its warm critical reception made no mention of the fact that he had once been categorised as a writer for adolescents. But I could not tell whether this meant a new vitality for literature in general; or a narrowing of territory and a silencing of once-unique voices.

Here in Australia, we no longer follow Mother Country trends slavishly, so the British situation may be no illumination on our own. Only time will tell whether the border crossings were isolated incidents and what they meant for the whole geography of children's literature. But we live in interesting times indeed.

**Sophie Masson** writes for adults and children. Her latest adult novel is *The Lady of the Flowers, Book Two* in the Lay Lines Trilogy (Bantam Books); her latest children's novel is *Clementine* (Hodder Headline Australia).

**ABDULKHALIK HAMWI**

*Issues*

**Take me Back to  
my Homeland\***

A plain of green grass, fuses with a low hill. And trees that butted all hurricanes, arriving with their evergreen beauty, fixing roots in the depth of soil. A shepherd may rest in their shade, unfastening his lunch napkin by untying two knots. There are two loaves inside, each folded twice becoming a triangle. One side of the triangle is a curve. There is also a dried onion and two native red tomatoes, not pregnant with the long-term poisonous hormones of the chemical industry.

His back is resting against the trunk of a cypress tree. He takes out a small plastic bottle, previously used for medicine, out of the pocket of his ragged coat. He removes the cap, and pours out some of its salt content over a nearby yellow stone. He starts to cut a piece of the first loaf, and places it inside his mouth. He bites on that fat tomato. This first bite is without salt. He is too hungry or craving too much to remember. He smashes the onion on his knee – with his fist! He starts to unfold its layers one by one; one for each bite.

He finishes his food with unceasing appetite. He removes from around his neck a strap to which a metallic, linen-covered water container is fastened. He pours half of its content into his gut, and screws back the cap. . .

He stretches his legs one over the other, and puts his hand in the inside pocket of his coat to take out a silver cigarette-box. He rolls some tobacco inside a thin white piece of paper, and uses a lighter with a wheel that brushes against flint stone to introduce fire to a wick. He lights his cigarette. This is the

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ultimate pleasure after a meal. He now contemplates the faraway blue horizon...

The sheep have huddled and surrendered themselves to an afternoon nap. Solitary birds rest on branches of nearby trees. A dog next to the sheep is also taking a nap; front legs stretched fully with its head resting on them. It opens its eyes when it feels any movement, then closes them when silence spreads its attractive transparency again.

The shepherd dozes a little, using a stone to support his head. A few minutes later, he gathers himself together and pulls a flute out of a pocket of his knee-long coat. He puts one side of the flute in the left corner of his mouth, and runs his fingers on the holes along the length of the flute. His left eye contracts as he blows producing a remarkable tune that spills passionately over the slopes. The sheep gather nearer to him, and the dog creeps to the edge of the flock.

I now see two tears coming out of the shepherd's eyes, and feel that they are in harmony with the tune he is playing: 'take me back to my homeland'. . . even though the voice of the great singer *Fairouz*, who made the tune famous, is absent.

The sun starts to depart sluggishly, painting the sky with the redness of its trail. The shepherd puts his stick across his shoulders. His arms hang over it from his elbows. His wide shoes produce a sound on the ground with every tired step he takes. The sheep know the way, accompanied by their husky bleating and the dog. The flute is asleep in the left pocket of the coat, until another day and another sincere tune.

*\*This title is also the title of a famous song by Fairouz. The song is about Palestinian yearning for the return to the homeland.*

*This article was originally published in Arabic in al-Oruba Newspaper, Homs, Syria, 09/06/1999.*

**Abdulhalik Hamwi** is a Syrian journalist.

**RAGHID NAHHAS**

*Landmark*

**Dourade Lahham,  
and the Charm of  
Ghawar Bin Mashaal al-Towshe**

To the Mother Earth, an open-air café located in a nursery in the outer Sydney suburb of Dural, I took the down-to-earth Dourade Lahham for a cup of coffee in the morning of a warm February day, the ninth in the year two thousand. He was on a very private visit to his sister who lives in Sydney. No performances or major official engagements, except that he agreed to meet a number of interested bodies at one location and time in the afternoon of the same day. I, therefore, was able to spend the morning with him.

My first encounter with Dourade was also in an open air café, the Café al-Dowali in Damascus in the mid sixties. I was a schoolboy then, and he was already famous in Syria, Jordan and the Lebanon through only one or two television programmes. A Lebanese cousin of mine was on a one-day visit to Syria with her friends. I volunteered to take them around the city. Halfway through the day, we decided to enter the café for a drink, and there he was. Everyone wanted to talk to him. We did approach his table, and he did talk to us. We were all thrilled. For the Lebanese, this unexpected encounter was worth a million visits to Damascus. I felt very proud particularly that, like Dourade, my father was Syrian and my mother was Lebanese. I was also attending the same school from which Dourade graduated.

L A N D M A R K

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It took some thirty years before I met him again face to face when he visited Sydney a few years ago to perform one of his famous plays.

As with all Syrians, my contact with Dourade has never ceased. We knew him as 'Ghawar Bin Mashaal al-Towshe', the character he created and with him brought unprecedented smiles to the faces of all Syrians and later all Arabs.

Ghawar is a funny but very complex character. Ghawar is a commoner, a poor but exceedingly clever man. He acts humanely with the good, the downtrodden and the poor, but becomes devious and uncompromising with the corrupt, the rich and the tyrant. He denies himself a bite for the sake of the needy but does not mind stealing from the rich, and sometimes from the not so rich, for his own benefit. He is often selfish when he feels threatened, particularly when competing with other men over a woman. He goes at length in organising, plotting and executing his plans to trap his targets and achieve victory over them. By doing so, he often traps himself, and loses. After all, he is only human.

The costume that identifies Ghawar is a shirt worn under baggy black trousers of the type used up to this day in villages in the Syrian and Lebanese country. These trousers have a huge pouch dangling in the middle from behind. They are tied to the waist by a long cloth band wrapped around the waist several times. The coat he wears over this costume is a western style long jacket reaching to a little above the knee. On his head he wears a red *tarboosh* (fez) with its black 'forelock' thrown to the front rather than the back. A simple pair of wide-frame, thick-glass, medical spectacles never leave his face unless he engages in a fight. The most effective feature of his attire is a *qubqab*. This is a shoe made of one piece of wood, including a wide and relatively high sole. (A whole small street of shops in Old Damascus called *al-Qabaqibya* used to specialise in making the *qubqab*.) One wide leather or plastic thong is attached to the wood. The feet are thus mostly exposed from their upper side, but well elevated off the ground. Walking with this *qubqab* produces the noise of wood touching the ground. With some manipulation, this can be very comic. The *qubqab* is also a useful tool for fighting, and clapping. It has been used effectively as part of the musical accompaniment for the comic songs Ghawar adopted in some of his acts. These songs are energetic, dramatic, funny and used appropriately to enhance the effect of the story on the audience. For example, the song *Yamo* (mum), is performed by a group of prisoners who appear behind bars each with a *qubqab* in both hands. They manipulate the

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*qubqabs* and clap with them producing the major rhythm that the whole tune revolves around. The appearance of this group is so funny that you laugh profoundly. The tune and the lyrics are so sad that you cry at the same time. (The prisoners are celebrating mother's day in prison- feeling very lonely and deprived.) Dourade based his song on the Armenian tune *Nona*. He would use another Armenian tune (*Gharon*) for yet another successful song, *Fattoum*.



L A N D M A R K

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The environment that surrounds Ghawar is also mostly that of local Syrian folklore, often from an older era. This adds an element of attractiveness to modern day generations wanting to discover some aspects of the past. It also allows for presenting some scenes with a more satirical emphasis, by introducing exotic clothes for example. Another advantage of reverting to olden times (in some cases times and places that do not exist), is that Ghawar has more freedom of social and political criticism without arousing unnecessary sensitivities. Ghawar wants ideas to reach the masses uncensored. For this he opts for symbolism that can easily be appreciated by the masses. 'The Arab regimes cannot stop this type of work because it does not directly hint at any particular one of them. Everyone would think that it is the other regime,' as Dourade often says.

Ghawar's major aim, however, is entertainment and nothing but. Dourade has an unusual way of accomplishing this. Dourade stresses that he never aims at convincing the audience that he or the material he presents is real. He wants his audience to remain aware of the fact that this is all acting. 'Stage acting is a trick that might present some ideas, but they are not real at all. There might be a lot of pain and hope in any stage performance, and I do not want anyone to build on false feelings.' Dourade tells me that this is why, in almost all his works, sad scenes are followed by happy ones and vice versa. He wants his audience to think about sadness without becoming sad.

I, however, believe that the character of Ghawar is an attempt to reflect some aspects of the human condition in its two extremes: the miserable and the happy. Ghawar is funny either way. In some cases, the show lingers on the verge of black comedy as in his latest television series *The Return of Ghawar* which includes a murder scene on which the plot of the whole series revolves. It is difficult to tell whether this series is a drama or a comedy. In his previous similar attempts to introduce drama and comedy simultaneously, he was almost always successful because things were presented innocently and simply. There was no exaggerated attempt to dramatise when drama was out of place.

In *The Return of Ghawar*, Ghawar is the major victim. He is falsely accused of murdering his wife and thrown in prison for twenty years before he can clarify his name by using his devious tricks. It is almost as if in this series, Ghawar is receiving an overdue punishment for his deviousness and tricks through which he victimised everybody else over a long period of his life, including seven plays, twenty-five movies and seven television series.

Dourade believes that the making of the arts is not subject to any rule. 'If

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arts were subjected to any rules, they lose their creativity. Put ten artists in front of the same tree, you end up with ten different paintings. The real role of the artist is limited to stimulating thinking, not thinking for others. When the arts are influenced by outside pressures, they cease to be artistic and become a propaganda art-form that might convince you or not. I am committed to people and the nation at large, but I do not subject my arts to specific pressures.'

The journey of acting started for Dourade when he was at the University of Damascus undertaking a bachelor degree in chemical and physical sciences:

*I became a university student. 165 cm tall. My measurements across my body, however, were not enough to produce a shadow of me by the mid-day Sun. Despite the heat of the summer, I used to keep my second-hand coat on in order to cover the patches in my trousers. In short, I did not have enough financial and comely qualifications to allow me to dare and declare my love to any lady I admired. I directed my passions towards the arts. My first role was on the University theatre. It was a role of a girl whose father was martyred in Palestine. Female students, few in number at that time, refused to appear on stage. I had to be the only 'girl' to accept to violate the norms back in 1954.*

Dourade graduated in 1958 to teach chemistry at the university and at high-schools in Damascus. He was attracted to the newly established television in 1960 and started performing in his spare time, becoming popularly known as Ghawar. One day he was lecturing at the University when in the previous night he had been performing. A student began a question with, 'Mr. Ghawar...'. Dourade decided to leave his teaching career and work full-time in acting. 'I thought that it could be easy for Dourade to explain about chemical reactions, but difficult for the students to absorb these explanations from Ghawar.'

In those days choosing a career in acting was a lamentable affair. An artist was considered akin to a sinner. Artists and actors used to change their family names so that they do not bring shame onto their families. Parents would pray that their children obtain a respectable safe employment. Dourade already had the type of profession and employment his family wished for. His family was not happy that he opted for the unknown, and for one of the least socially attractive professions. They, however, did not prevent him from pursuing his ambitions and he did not change his name.

His family was not artistic but a lot of his university friends were. They



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encouraged him. He was also helped by two persons: Khaldoun al-Malih who became a prominent television personality and director, and Nihad Qalhi, a fellow actor who accompanied Dourade's rise to fame and wrote a substantial number of his acts.

Dourade is influenced by his hobby more than his academic learning. He tips the balance towards amateurism. I cannot forget his face and the expressions he had when I was in the audience for a play he performed here in Sydney a few years ago. You could see that every now and then, Ghawar the actor would revert to Dourade the spectator and follow his fellow actors with his eyes and emotions, and with the look and urgency of someone wanting everyone else to succeed in performing without a hitch. I could see him completely forgetting his own role and almost mimicking the movements of the others.

Dourade believed in the importance of the arts in the life of people. Acting was not, however, a profession that would generate enough income to live on at the time. By 1969 Dourade became a father of three children. He reflects on those challenging times:

*I suffered a lot from this unknown that I loved. My income was not enough to provide us with our daily bread. Hala, my patient wife, supported me all the way. Thank you Hala. The Ramadan feast arrived. The children needed new clothes. As usual we went to a second-hand shop. The owner used to be courteous to us by closing his door whilst we were inside so that we were not embarrassed when someone passed by and discovered us. When one day someone did discover me there, I had to explain to him that I needed clothes for acting.*

Dourade's own childhood was not any better. He recalls that when he was seven, he and his nine brothers and sisters used to sleep in one room with a roof that dripped water during rain. He often opened his eyes in the early hours of the morning to see that his mother was still working at her sewing machine. She produced garments, supplementing the meagre income his father used to generate from a small shop in a neglected corner of al-Amin Street.

*When I was ten, I decided to help by working at a blacksmith's. I was hardly tall enough to reach and be able to blow through the forge. When I earned my first five piastres, I was the happiest boy on earth. I ran to my mother to show her the golden coloured coin. She smiled as I appeared to her like a negative of a photograph. She spent the coin on buying soap to clean me.*

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The events of his childhood had an obvious influence on his works. For example, Ghawar, in his most recent series, appeared as a peddler toiling around villages with his loaded mule. During winter time, Dourade's father used to go on his mule for days to bring coal from the Lebanon to supply his shop, a very tough journey.

Dourade focuses on critical comedy. He extracts his subject matter from 'the daily pulse of life' within the normal Arab environment. His works have been received well all over the Arab World. He also performed in Canada, the United States, Australia and some European and African countries.

He started his television career with *Damascene Night*, a variety programme with comic sketches and songs. Initially he introduced himself as the character Carlos, a Spanish funny guitarist. This was not received well. He later introduced Ghawar.

This was followed by *Hammam al-Hana* (Happy Bath), perhaps the work that popularised Ghawar as the character we know. It is a story of a treasure hunt. Ghawar, an assistant attendant in a public bath, involves himself in a hunt for hidden money. He enters into a series of rivalries with his bosses for supremacy in running the bath, winning the affection of customers and discovering the treasure. His rival is *Husni al-Borazan* (Husni the trumpet), played by his life-long friend and important acting companion Nihad Qalhi. Nihad is a tall fat man, and the character of Husni does not disguise the original Nihad with any special make-up or clothes. The hidden treasure officially belongs to Husni (he knows that his grandmother left him something hidden within the upholstery of an old lost chair), but everyone volunteers to search for it hoping for some gain.

This is followed by the series *Good Morning*. Ghawar here is a junior assistant in a cheap hotel in the old quarters of the city. It is an old Arabic house with rooms for accommodation. The owner is *Fattoum Heesbees* (Fattoum the Fix), an illiterate formidable local widow who is attracted to Husni al-Borazan, a journalist that uses the hotel for extended periods of stay. Ghawar falls in love with his boss and strives to gain her heart against his more suited rival. Ghawar seems to be more attracted by the fight over the lady's heart and other fights, than by Fattoum herself who is many years older anyway.

The series *Where is the Error* comprises social plays with deliberate errors that the audience will have to find.

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*Wadi al-Misk* (the Valley of the Musk) follows. This is one of Dourade's most comprehensive works in which drama and comedy are successfully entwined. The story is about the struggle for material gain. It depicts a fraud who is the look-alike of a certain young man who emigrated from the village to work years before. The fraud pretends to be the returning Ghawar, and manages to deceive the whole village including Ghawar's fiancé and his sister. Some of these people, however, want to believe that this is the real Ghawar because he convinces them of his excessive riches. This is despite the return of the real Ghawar who finds himself trying to prove his identity and end up defending himself in court. The court members, who are all driven by greed, testify in favour of the false Ghawar. When the real one questions them on the side, he is told that they know that he is the real one, but public interest requires that the other is Ghawar. The imposter successfully exploits the powers that are fighting over money.

This is followed by *al-Doghri* (The Righteous). This is a sarcastic title given to the hero who is able to create organised fear in the people he exploits. He does this by convincing them that he has important connections to higher authorities, and that he is able to do what he wants to do.

*Ahlam Abul Hana* (The Dreams of Abul Hana) is about the suppressed Arab citizen who has tiny dreams, which are nonetheless destroyed. Here *Abul Hana* replaces Ghawar.

His latest series is *Aowdat Ghawar* (The Return of Ghawar) as mentioned above.

Television was the medium through which Ghawar became famous all around the Arab World. Dourade's love, as with many actors, remains the theatre. 'In the theatre, the actor and the audience breath the same air. This is intimacy, and you cannot beat that. Cinema and television cannot provide that.'

The influence of the Rahbani Brothers on his theatrical work is evident in all his plays. He adopts their techniques of mixing the music with the dialogue, the singing with the plain talk and even in setting the village scenes. 'What I love about the Rahbanis is their writing and musical abilities. I love their treatment of the heritage. I was so attracted to their musicals that I strived to follow their methods closely.'

Dourade produced seven plays: *Akd ul-Lolo* (The Pendant of Pearls), *Dayat Tishreen* (The Village of Tishreen), *Ghorba* (a name given to the heroine, meaning migration or exile), *Kasak ya Watan* (Cheers my Homeland), *Shakaik*

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*al-Numan* (Windflowers), *Sanih al-Matar* (The Rainmaker) and *al-Osfoura al-Saida* (The Happy Sparrow). The last one is for children, but all of the rest are about political and social criticism and satire.

His movies number twenty-five. *The Frontiers* is his most important, receiving a special prize from the Association of Egyptian Film Critics in 1985, and the Best Scenario Prize at the Valencia Festival. It deals with the problems of bureaucracy associated with crossing the borders between the different Arab countries.

His movie *The Report* is about an employee who files a report about corruption and various excesses. The hero's work is in vain. This is symbolised by the flying papers of the report when the hero tries to escape being smashed between two feuding football teams, one called East the other West. There is a departure from the Ghawar character in this movie as is the case in several other works.

Dourade obtained the Jordanian Star Medal, his first, back in 1956 when he was still an amateur. This was followed by medals from Syria (1976), Tunisia (1979) and Libya (1991). In 1991 the Arab World Institute in Paris honoured Dourade Lahham with a full week function. In addition, he obtained seventy appreciation certificates from various organisations, consolidating his accolade in the Arab world and among the Arab communities around the World.

In recent times, Dourade has been concentrating on children. His movie *Kafroun*, about childhood, won him the Golden Pyramid Award during the First Childhood Cairo Film Festival in 1991. 'I am bewitched by the realm of childhood. I believe that the future of my greater nation passes through its gates. I realise how important it is for children to live their childhood'. His 'greater nation' is a reference to the Arab World at large. The premier season of *Kafroun* lasted for forty-two consecutive weeks. The success of this movie led Dourade to prepare *al-Osfoura al-Saida*.

The UNICEF, in 1999, named Dourade Lahham a Special Envoy for an agreement on children's rights in the Middle East and North Africa. He then participated in workshops on children's rights in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria. 'I started feeling the way by which I can be helpful to children, and I was able to produce a television programme about children's rights. This was part of the reason that led UNICEF to invite me to undertake a broader mission.'

Dourade was born in 1934 in Damascus, Syria. His life has been that of a continuous contribution to the Syrian and Arab societies. In return, he is loved

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by all. He is respected at all levels for the ideals he has been trying to promote, but remains one of Syria's shining stars and a pan-Arab comedian par excellence.

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L A N D M A R K

**WAHID RAZI**

*Study*

## **Islamic Fundamentalism: Western and Non-Western Perceptions**

### THE 'DISCOVERY' OF ISLAMIC RESURGENCE

In recent decades a number of important factors such as the increasing economic influence of the Islamic oil-producing countries, the Iranian revolution, the security of the Persian/Arab Gulf, Muslim hostility and conflicts with Zionism, the rise of the Islamic 'fundamental' groups and the so-called Islamic resurgence, have generated a great degree of interest in Islamic themes amongst academics and in political circles.

As a result, from the second half of 1970 political Islam or, more precisely, Islamism began to influence international relations and regional politics. Western scholars began a serious investigation of the origin and social and political implications of Islamism and Islamic resurgence. Its consequence for the World and western civilisation became the subject of study and debate. If, for the West, Islam and an understanding of Islam suddenly became a source of attraction, for the Muslims and their leaders, Islam has always been recognised as the most important and decisive social and political factor in the life of their communities. In fact, what has been labelled by western scholars as: Islamism, Islamic revivalism, revitalisation, upsurge, reassertion, renewal,

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awakening, fundamentalism and resurgence, is a natural process interwoven with Muslim history in modern times. It is a movement whose objective is to define Muslims' identity in the area of post-modernism. At the same time it is a response to the colonial and post colonial impact on the Islamic world.

Historically Islam has been used by various political groups and governments as a catalyst to achieve certain objectives.

Firstly as an apology, to justify the status quo. This has translated into policies which have been used by modernist liberal governments and the ruling order in most parts of the Islamic countries.

Secondly as an ideology, to reject the status quo, the governments and the ruling order and as a call for the restoration, reintroduction and implementation of Islamic Shariah. This policy has been used by the 'fundamental' and 'activist' Islamic groups.

Thirdly as an ideology to justify the introduction of a foreign theme such as nationalism, socialism and democracy. This policy, has been used by both governments and or their radical opponents.<sup>1</sup>

### WESTERN PERCEPTION OF THE ISLAMIC RESURGENCE

There is a great division between western scholars on the interpretation and perception of the concept of Islamism and the rise of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. The majority have accepted the fact that there is a strong connection between the rise of Islamic activist movements with that of colonial and post-colonial impact of the West on Islamic communities. But there is a disagreement amongst them on the degree, the outcome and the nature of this impact and the importance of other factors such as Islam itself.

On the other hand, the complexity of Islam and Islamic communities, and the diversity of the Muslims' political responses to Western, social and political influence in post-modern times, have made it extremely hard for social scientists to come to an agreeable conclusion about the causes, trends, origin and implication of the 'Islamic resurgence' or 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

Scholarly and informed opinion in the West about the roots and causes of the phenomenon of Islamism has evolved since it was first 'discovered' in the

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<sup>1</sup> Dessouki, Ali E. Hillal 1982. *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, Praeger Publisher, New York, p.9.

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1970s. At the beginning, it was thought that Islamism was mainly a *Shiah* and Persian phenomenon. Later on, the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982, and the powerful resistance of the *Shiah's Hizbulla* group, further strengthened this tendency. Therefore, the attention was focused more on Shiism rather than Islam, because it was thought that 'Certain characteristics of the Shiah Islamist groups with the structure of the Shiah clerical establishment made the Shiah faith, susceptible to extremist Islamist tendencies'.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that in the last three centuries *Shiah* Muslims have been more politically oriented, but the most activist and strong form of resistance against colonial and imperial domination of the Islamic countries has come from the *Sunni* Muslim groups. The occurrence of a number of mushrooming events in most parts of the Islamic countries, with predominantly *Sunni* Muslims such as Afghanistan, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and others, convinced western scholars to accept the invalidity of the first theory. But there is still disagreement amongst them regarding the correct interpretation of the phenomenon. While some have recognised the multiplicity of factors involved in the rise of the post-modern Islamic groups, they have generally viewed the movement to be solely a violent fundamentalist response of a religion and a civilisation which cannot cope with democracy, modernity and the challenge of modern times.

Muslim intellectuals have strongly rejected the labelling of their movement as a 'fundamentalist' or 'militant' Islamic response.<sup>3</sup> They have described the western perception of the phenomenon as a naive, unrealistic misconception of the of modern history.<sup>4</sup>

In general the terms 'fundamentalism' and 'Islamic resurgence' have been loosely used in western political culture and have never been precisely defined. As Akbar S. Ahmad noted: "The word "fundamentalism" has come to mean ugly, intolerant and violent religious fanaticism in the western media; it is also a code, sometimes subliminal, sometimes explicit, for Islam. If a Muslim admits

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<sup>2</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. 1995. The Rise of Islamist Movement and the Western Response: Clash of Civilisations or Clash of Interests? In Laura Guazzone: The Islamist Dilemma. Ithaca Press, UK, p.319.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Sidhamed, Abdel Salam, ed. 1996. Fundamentalism: A Label or a Concept? In Islamic Fundamentalism, Westview Press, United States of America, pp.2-14.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad, Khurshid 1983. The Nature of the Islamic Resurgence, in John L. Esposito: Voices of Resurgent Islam. Oxford University Press, New York, p.218.



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to being a Muslim he is in danger of being labelled a fundamentalist; such is the power of the media.<sup>5</sup>

Historically the word fundamentalism was originally used in western Christian culture to define the activities of some reactionary groups during medieval times. Transferring the same image to all Islamic movements of the twentieth century is an over-simplification of current Islamic communities. Of course the majority of Muslim intellectuals have strongly rejected any connection between the two (the fundamental reactionary Christian groups in medieval times with that of the Islamic activist groups of the twentieth century),<sup>6</sup> or they have tried to modify the term and redefine it: 'Fundamentalism, is the attempt to resolve how to live in a world of radical doubt. It is a dialogue with the times, a response to it. The unsettling contradictions and tensions we note in the major world religions are a result of the transnational moves towards unity; the question of the multiple interpretation of religion is thus also raised.'<sup>7</sup>

Generally speaking, the terms 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'Islamic resurgence' are employed to refer to an increasing political activism in the name of Islam by governments and opposition groups alike.<sup>8</sup>

The Islamic world is quite vast and diverse. It represents some forty-three 'independent' countries, in which Muslims constitute the majority of the population. Muslims also constitute a significant minority in another twenty countries.<sup>9</sup> The Islamic world reflects the diversity of the globe. It is, therefore, logical to assume a great degree of variation among Islamic movements reflecting differences between Muslims in the areas of education, social status and other human phenomena.

Since the eighteenth century, many Islamic movements have worked to revive some past Islamic tradition and to preach a return to the golden age of Islam. But not all Islamic movements of modern times have had the same characteristics. Many Islamic groups, particularly in the twentieth century, are

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, Akbar S. 1992. *Postmodernism and Islam, Predicament and Promise*. Routledge, London and New York, p.15.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Ahmad, Khurshid 1983, in John L. Esposito, pp.225-6.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, Akbar S. 1992. p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Dessouki, Ali E. Hillal 1982. *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, Praeger Publisher, New York, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Esposito, John L. 1983. *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford University Press, p.3.

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not revivalist, but rather

*their ideologies involve reformulating and developing certain aspects of Islamic social teaching to enable them to deal with the new challenges of our times. One striking example is the development of a body of literature on Islamic banking. Another example is Ayatollah Khomeini's modification of Shiite political thinking. No prominent Shiite alim in the twentieth century, before Khomeini, argued that ulama could rule directly. Khomeini condemned traditional Shiite quietism and the practice of taqiya (dissimulation) while equating the return of the hidden imam and proposed, instead, political struggle to create the Islamic state. Finally, he democratized Shiism by emphasizing mass participation as opposed to elitism.*<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the eighteenth century and before western domination, the main form of religious expression in the Muslim world was the Sufi's doctrine of Muslim brotherhood or even to a degree man's brotherhood. Sufi teachings were focused more on the reform of individuals through preaching and worship and were less politically oriented. They believed that by reforming an individual's nature they could reform the entire society. Sufis and their peaceful world of ideas were the main form of religious expression for over six centuries in the Islamic world. In fact one of the main characteristics of the revivalist movements of the eighteenth century were their anti-Sufi slogans. They blamed Sufis for their softness in the implementation of *Shariah*, and for borrowing non-Islamic ideas and practices. But despite all the efforts that have been made by the enemies of Sufis, Sufism remain the most popular and appealing religious order in most parts of the Islamic countries. In Egypt alone there are over 130 religious groups, mostly associated with some form of Sufi orders. The majority are non-activist and anti-violence.<sup>11</sup>

### THE REALITY OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

Despite what has been said, one can hardly ignore the fact that there have been some groups in the Islamic countries in the past and present which have been fanatic, reactionary, fundamental and agents of terror and violence. Some of these groups have committed horrifying crimes, not only against non

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<sup>10</sup> Dessouki, Ali E. Hillal 1982. p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.10.

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Muslims, but equally against Muslims. This should hardly be a source of surprise and a new discovery to Muslims and non-Muslims. What is surprising is that some of these groups have had support from some western governments. They have been utilised to satisfy specific political or economic goals. A major example is the support of western governments, in particular the Americans, for the Afghan Islamic group *Hizb-i Islami* and their leader *Hikmatyar*.

Since 1962, *Hizb-i Islami* has been engaged in a campaign of terror and violence against rival groups and individual citizens in Afghanistan. They have tortured and massacred many innocent Afghans, as well as being accused of drug trafficking and being a part of, or supporting international terrorism. Yet despite all local and international condemnation of the group, for over two decades, the group had the financial and military support of western democratic nations, especially the Americans. Barnett R. Rubin comments on the possibility of the CIA arranging entry to the USA of people trained by groups in Afghanistan in return for services rendered against the Soviet Union there.<sup>12</sup>

After the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union, U.S. aid to the Afghan *Mujahidin* groups, grew from \$30 million in 1980 to over \$600 million per year by 1986-89. Saudi Arabia and other Arab aid matched or slightly exceeded the U.S. share, and amongst the other seven groups of *Mujahidin*, *Hikmatyar's* party *Hizb-i Islami*, was the biggest recipient of the American and Saudi aid.<sup>13</sup> This has also been the case with other fundamental Islamic governments, as long as they remained loyal and protective of western interests. Contrary to the claim of western commentators that the West and the 'Americans have difficulty in supporting a government that flogs alcohol drinkers, cuts off the hands of thieves and stones adulterers...', historical evidence suggests otherwise. The practice of flogging alcohol drinkers, cutting the hands of the thieves and so on, has been implemented only in a small number of Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. These countries have also been accused of breach of many principles of human rights as well. But of all other Islamic countries, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are the closest allies to the West, and the *Taliban* regime of Afghanistan, despite all

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin, Barnett R. 1997. Arab Islamist in Afghanistan in John L. Esposito: Political Islam, Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform, Lynne Rienner Publisher, London, pp.179-80.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.188.

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its atrocities and ethnic cleansing against Afghans, has not been seriously criticised by the western world. In fact after coming to power, a *Taliban's* delegation made its first trip to the U.S.A. for negotiations to investigate the possibility of running an oil pipeline from central Asia that passed through Afghani territories.

During the Cold War, western governments supported and provided a great degree of support to some of these Islamic activist groups, to fight and stand against a national, or a socialist regime. After the occupation of Afghanistan, by the former Soviet Union, the nationalist, modernist and independent socialist groups who were fighting for Afghanistan's freedom scarcely received any degree of support from the western world. On the contrary, all financial and military support was given to groups that were the most dependent on the CIA. Other intelligence services in conservative Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Pakistan were also subsidising. This was regardless of their political and religious orientations. Therefore, it was not surprising that when the *Taliban* captured power and easily defeated their rival groups in Afghanistan, they had the support of many conservative Islamic countries as well as the USA. What is surprising once again is to see that, while the West and the Americans have made such a big fuss about the issue of human rights in countries like China and Burma, they have hardly even condemned the killing of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority groups and the imprisonment of millions of Afghan women in their homes at the hands of the *Taliban* militia. In Islamic countries, dictators and tyrants are as much the product of the West as they are the product of their own societies. A short glance at western newspapers during Iraq's war with Iran will give us different images of Saddam Hussein. As long as he was fighting against the 'fanatic' clergies of Iran, he was seen and described in the West as a hero of Muslims and Arabs. He became a second copy of Hitler only when he turned his back to the West.

To a great degree, knowledge about Islamic activists and Islamic movements (positive or negative) has in the West been depicted by both local and international media. In most Islamic countries, governments control the media. Quite often they view their opponents in the most negative way. In the West, despite limited control of governments of the media, Islamic movements have usually been portrayed as if they all shared certain characteristics such as being extremist, dogmatic, fundamental, against modernity and reactionary.

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The majority of Muslim intellectuals have been suspicious and critical of the western media, claiming that Muslim issues never received an objective and realistic coverage.<sup>14</sup> One can hardly ignore the hostile attitude of western media towards Islam and Muslims. There is no historical evidence to support the assertion that all Muslim movements are necessarily activist, share the same view about politics and have the same political reactions.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Muslim intellectuals and their leaders have a very stereotyped image of the West and its media, which is as hostile and unrealistic, as the image of Islam in western culture. Yet there have been many academics and journalists in the western world, who have written objectively about Islamic issues. They have viewed the Islamic nations' struggle against their puppet governments and Western Imperialism as a part of the Third World nations' struggle for securing justice and freedom.

Furthermore, one has to blame, if not individual Muslims, their leaders for representing Islam in the most corrupt and horrifying way. Today, Islamic societies lack a united front against their enemies. Muslims are fighting more with each other than against their oppressing forces.<sup>16</sup>

### THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE ISLAMISTS' ANTI-WESTERNISM

#### Western Interpretation

Firstly, there are scholars who emphasise the importance of economic factors and the failure of westernised governments to successfully deliver some major economic reforms as a major source of dissatisfaction of Muslims, and a key reason behind their rejection of western style governments- nationalist, liberal or socialist. These scholars insist that with structural economic reforms, poverty and other social problems such as illiteracy and crime will gradually reduce. This will ultimately generate more support for a westernised form of government and consequently will reduce anti-western activities. As the majority of modernist governments one way or another represent foreign imported values, their rejection becomes in essence the rejection of western

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, Akbar S. 1992, preface, pp.2-3 & p.37.

<sup>15</sup> Dessouki, Ali E. Hillal 1982, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, Akbar S. 1992, p.45.

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ideas.

In most Islamic countries there is a great division of power and wealth between different social classes. There are people who are very poor or very rich with only a small number representing a middle class. The majority of Islamic countries have an economy based on an agricultural pastoral system of production. In oil producing and some other countries, there is some degree of technological and industrial development. But their technology is mostly dependent on western nations for its function and survival. There is a constant need for western technicians, supervisors and administrators who usually enjoy a great degree of social and economic privileges. The indigenous population look on them as a source of their oppression and calamities. Furthermore, in a time of political tension, western nations often implement harsh economic boycotts and punishments against rebellious regimes and can paralyse entire industries, as happened in Iran and Libya.

The western economic and political exploitation of the Islamic countries has always played an important role in the formation of anti-western movements in modern times. There have also been many other important historical factors responsible for current anti-western activities in Islamic countries. Above all, there are Islamic communities with lesser economic problems such as Saudi Arabia, Libya and Kuwait where the degree of anti-western feelings is still as high as in other parts of the Islamic world.

The Neo-Third-Worldists are the second category of scholars who have strongly criticised western governments' attitudes and policies in Islamic countries and have described them as a main reason for anti-western activist movements.<sup>17</sup>

The views of this group, reflect a great degree of empathy with current Islamic societies and their predicaments. They have a greater understanding of the Muslim rejection of the legacy of colonial and post-colonial periods. Neo-Third-Worldists, are similar to many Islamic activist groups in their condemnation of western governments policies of imposing corrupt and tyrannical regimes on Islamic countries. They view this as a direct interference halting the 'natural trend of history' in these countries.

Muslims, and Muslim activists, have also rejected the western drive to export and impose western cultural values on the rest of the world. They

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<sup>17</sup> Hunter, Shireen T. 1995. In: Guazzone, Laura. *The Islamist Dilemma*. Ithaca Press, UK, p.320.

## Kalimat 1

oppose the support of the west for oppressive and unpopular puppet leaders. The one-sided support of the west for the state of Israel is another reason for Muslims to view the west as an enemy who wishes to destroy Muslim independence and Islamic religious culture that provides Muslims with their identity. For the same reasons, the Muslim struggle against western imperialism is cultural as much as it is political. As Francois Burgat pointed out: ‘...we are witnessing the third phase of the process of decolonisation. The first phase was political- the independence movements. The second, economic- the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in Egypt, or oil in Algeria. The last phase is cultural.’<sup>18</sup>

The final view has been expressed by the Neo-Orientalists who have rejected any connection between western policies in the Islamic countries and Muslim anti-western feelings. They see the difficulty as a problem between the two cultures and religions, rather than being linked with western attitudes and politics towards Islam. In the words of Bernard Lewis, a neo-orientalist, and a strong believer that Islam by its very nature is anti-West: ‘The Islamists’ antagonism goes beyond specific policies; rather, in the Muslim world, the west is...facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilisation rival against our Judo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both...’<sup>19</sup>

Such a view, which encapsulates the most popular and common expression about Islam in the west, is also the familiar view which is usually expressed in the western media as well. We can also see a powerful link between the ideology of racist groups in our time and the neo-orientalists. They both reject the other groups on the basis of their cultural differences. Since World War II, the most common expression of racist ideology in the west has not been expressed on the basis of rejecting other groups because of their biological inferiority, but rather on the assumption of irreconcilable cultural differences.

Muslim scholars strongly reject the notion that reconciliation between the two cultures is impossible, because they are so different or, more precisely, because Islam is a pre-industrial culture and cannot cope with the challenge of modern time.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.321.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.321.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad, Khurshi 1983. In John L. Esposito, p.228.

## Kalimat 1

### The Muslim interpretation of the impact of colonial rule as expressed by Khurshid Ahmad

*First is secularisation of the state: its political, economic and social institutions. Secularism tried to introduce and 'impose' a new social ethics deriving inspiration from a world view and a policy perspective diametrically opposed to the basis on which a Muslim society is founded. In a Muslim individual morality and social ethics are both derived from the same divine sources: the Quran and the Sunnah. In secularism, divine guidance becomes irrelevant and man's roots in the divine scheme of creation and his destiny in the life beyond physical existence are denied. This produces a unique set of parameters for social-political life, fundamentally different from the ones on which a faith-based society is established. This major change produced catastrophic consequences for Muslim society. The very moral fiber of the society is undermined.*

*Second is a new pattern of western dominance, not merely by virtue of its political rule but through basic institutional changes within the colonised countries and their structural relationship with the outside world, particularly the colonising countries. The result was a pattern of dependence upon the West, institutionalising the dominance of the West.*

*Third, and a logical consequence of both factors cited above, has been the bifurcation of education into two parallel mainstreams of secular and modern education, and religious and traditional education, resulting in the division of society into two groups: the modern secular elites and the traditional leadership. The members of the new secular leadership, who were carefully groomed into power in different walks of life, are looked upon by the masses of Muslim people as mercenaries- as people who have taken the values and life style of the colonial rulers and who would be prepared to act at the behest of a foreign power, or at least as people who identified themselves with western culture and its values and became voluntary instruments for the westernisation of society. This has acted as a divisive force in society. This led to the fourth consequence, a crisis of leadership. The traditional leadership of the Muslim society was systematically destroyed. A foreign political leadership was imposed and in its wake came the imposition of a foreign orientated local leadership, a leadership that held the reins of*



## Kalimat 1

*political and economic power, but did not enjoy the trust and confidence of the people. A leadership alienated from its own people and identified with the alien rulers and their life-style.*<sup>21</sup>

•

**Wahid Razi** is a historian who has recently submitted his Ph.D. thesis to Macquarie University. He has been writing poetry and short stories since his childhood. In Afghanistan he published some of his works in the famous journal, *Pashtoon Jhagh*. He has been writing on Islamic themes in the Afghan publication *Mosaafer* in Australia. He is currently working with Centrelink as a Multicultural Services Officer.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p218.

## AL-MARBID 1999 POETRY FESTIVAL

Jihad Elzein, our Middle East Adviser attended the latest al-Marbid Poetry Festival in Iraq in November, 1999. He obtained copies of the poems from the poets he met. They gave us their consent to publish and translate.

His impression of the poetry he heard was that it was written by the 'blood of exceptional perseverance, no matter what sort of poem it was.' He cautions readers against 'staining their hands with the blood of these poems when reading them.'

Kalimat selected and translated two poems that we present here. The first, by Kazim Alhajjaj, is a prose poem, considered possibly to be leading the way for a new wave of free-style Arabic poetry. Alhajjaj's poem and recitation received the admiration of his audience during the festival, followed by a standing ovation.

The second is a love poem by Reem Qais Kobbe. The original Arabic is written in free-style with abundant musicality.

**KAZIM ALHAJJAJ**

## Come to my Tavern

(What Taha Baquir has not translated from the Tenth Tablet)

Come back to *Uruk*.

And ask your mother *Ninsun*, descendant of gods,  
to open her mouth and speak to the gods of *Uruk* the creators:  
'Don't burden your sacred hands by creating grasshoppers...  
for the plants of *Uruk*, or flies for its dates,  
or lice for the heads of its poor.

But gather the mud with which you want to create  
grasshoppers and lice and flies,  
and make it into legs for those of its children  
whom you disfigured without,  
and eyes for those you delivered eyeless.'

And let their descendant, your mother *Ninsun*, ask them  
not to put their power in water hogs and deny it to a man.

*Uruk* does not need more people without legs or eyes,  
and no more victims of the hogs.

Let your wise mother ask them: not to be more harsh on the villages  
than their chieftains, and more destructive than their tyrants...

And not to be gods of evil and calamities:

amused by their earthquakes,  
turning with them the pots of the poor over their fire,  
not letting a mother finish pulling up the cover  
over the coldness of her young.

Let her ask them: not to rejoice their drought and dryness  
branching with them the land of *Uruk*,  
preventing the sweet water of heaven from falling on its wheat.

Let *Ninsun* talk to them plainly that they return God  
to the chests of the priests of *Uruk*...

## Kalimat 1

even if they have to use whips.  
As they did when they put God inside the chests of people!

*Priestly Footnote: in a remote monastery, a priest died. A black elegiac tablet was hung and read: 'at four hours dawn, brother Pierre left us for heaven. May he have mercy.' At mid-day, a devious passerby arrived, possibly a heretic, who added to the tablet: 'Heaven at one in the afternoon. Pierre has not arrived yet! We are anxious!'*

Do not depart *Uruk*.  
There is no safety for you on horseback,  
even on a horse with a white mane,  
or a horse from pure parents.  
Don't cross the sea;  
the lighthouses of all seas do not guide the ships of strangers.  
On the fringe of its harbours evil is masked with corals.  
Handles of treachery are hidden under the arms.  
There, there are no treaties that shy swords off necks,  
or spare the blood of a prophet.  
Never raise a sail that could shroud the water around you...  
and fill it with false sea-gulls that dissipate with rows.  
Don't cross the sea,  
not even aboard the ship of '*Otto-Nebshatum*' the faraway.  
His ship is painted with tar...his three-hundred-yard ship...

*Footnote: in the library of 'American Atlantic Mutual Maritime Insurance Company' there is some serious information about Noah's Ark as follows: 'It was built in 448 B.C. from gopherwood. It was painted with tar on the inside and outside (this confirms its Iraqi identity - this is a note from the poet.) Three hundred yards in length. Fifty yards in width. Thirty yards in height. It has three stories. Used to transport cattle. Noah and sons, proprietors. The latest news is that it capsized on top of mount Ararat.*

Do not leave *Uruk*!  
You will not need '*Otto-Nebeshatum*' the faraway...  
The plant of eternity you seek is here in the orchards of *Uruk*.  
And under its walls lie the bodies of the ancestors eternal...  
in worms.

## Kalimat 1

Do not raise the walls of *Uruk* any more,  
But lower the walls of your city with your strong hairy hands.  
And raise the stature of its inhabitants, to become your walls.  
A wall of stone is not more invincible than a wall of men.  
Register all the children of *Uruk* as your own.  
If they are not your progeny, you are theirs...  
Its soil, by which you were disposed, is consecrated by you all...  
And build the souks of *Uruk* again.  
And fill them with dates and legumes and fish...  
And fill its wetlands with birds,  
nestling safely on the backs of buffaloes.  
And extract musk from *Uruk's* stray deer,  
and scent yourself with it,  
and scent the clothes of its men and women.  
And pamper its young as if they were your progeny.  
You are the king and the shepherd of *Uruk*.  
Anyone born under your throne is your child...  
But the mothers of these children of yours are forbidden to you.  
If you want a woman to brighten your bed, and dawn your evening,  
seek the daughter of another king from a faraway country,  
and betroth her...  
because the daughters of *Uruk* are your daughters,  
between you and their king is the penalty of adultery!  
Choose for yourself a maid from amongst the faraway women there...  
Let her hair be longer than the night of sorrows,  
and softer than the flattery of kings.  
Her lips honey-guarded by the candles of her cheeks.  
Her flirtation shall not stop the nation from respecting its king.  
Or the modesty of the worshipper to her worshipped.  
You shall brush the softness of her touch with your hairy hands.  
With her white hands she will dilute the darkness of your sorrow  
and the frowning of your manhood  
and sanction the forbidden in your nakedness.  
In the garden of her femininity you shall bless your cultivation,  
and sow your seeds..  
then you shall pick them a child: tender in the cot of your hands,  
lispng your name in your ears...  
giving you the best psalms of his bleating.

## Kalimat 1

*Footnote for children:*

*'every newborn comes with a message saying: ...God has not yet become desperate of humans!...'*

*Tagore*

Don't leave *Uruk*  
But blossom amidst its people  
a king sent from your gods to your subjects...  
never blossom in their midst as a god.  
I do not see you, my child, capable of the loneliness of a god.  
There, the sky does not renew itself...  
you talk to no one and no one talks to you,  
they are in awe of you.  
There you cannot enter the bars,  
nor at will can you slap a pauper in the wilderness.  
You will not be able to borrow the shepherd's flute  
to blow in it the tunes of the shepherds...so that the goats sway around you,  
leaving the wolves confounded!  
...what a sorry burden, my child, a god has to brave.  
He owns all the Earth and all the seas and all the sky,  
distributed among his servants...but not a single sack of money in his hand!  
He is near the black clouds, beside him thunder and storms and lightning....  
Do not choose the aloneness of a god, my child.  
Better for you to be a human among people,  
and not a lonesome god over there!  
Do not let the people of *Uruk* do as did the Greeks.  
Do not let them raise the evils of the Earth to your heaven...  
and attribute to your creator-hands the ugliness of their deformities,  
and the restraint of their women's bellies,  
and the decline in their crops in the face of the locust...  
And losing their wars before your neutrality.

*Military Footnote:*

*An American general, whose name I have forgotten, was renowned for his public speeches, and his ability to spread enthusiasm among his soldiers in the worst of circumstances. During the Korean War, his regiment was besieged.*

## Kalimat 1

*He stood addressing his confused, frightened soldiers: 'My sons, the enemy is surrounding us from the north and the south, and from our back and front... Rest assured, therefore, that this time they cannot run away from us!'*

Do not leave *Uruk!*

And do not seek a plant from '*Otto-Nebstum*' the faraway...

You know that there is no eternity for you except in *Uruk*.

Count your progeny in it: humans and houses and wheat fields and palms with veins strengthened by the crispness of your land.

And buffaloes leaving an eternal mark of their hoofs in the mud.

And dams that keep the water for a day of need, and

protect the houses of *Uruk* and its fields

from the generosity of the Euphrates!

And birds that wipe loneliness off the sky,

and remove embarrassments off the tables of the poor.

...And before you return to *Uruk*, come to my tavern now, and take from it the Wisdom of the kings!

Fill your glass to the brim,

sorrow will evaporate out of your head and descend to your feet...

so that you may tread upon it if you so wish.

...And look at the beggar of *Uruk* roaming its souks,

a peddler hawking his dignity, willing to sell it for a loaf.

Scorned once and given another...

(even when given he is ...scorned!)...

Look at him when he comes to my tavern after sunset...

I ask my waiter to prepare for the beggar my best table,

and to greet him: 'Sir!'

And when the beggar is through with his glass

and about to leave, I secretly indicate to my waiter

to request the beggar to pay the tip drinkers pay to waiters...

Do you know my child how a beggar can regain his dignity?

When he gives.

...A beggar never leaves my tavern without

stumbling over his sudden, newly-acquired dignity...

like a pauper stumbling over the robe of his slave!

...Take a look at the man of *Uruk*

whose wife insults him every morning...

I do not let the waiter serve him, I serve him myself.

## Kalimat 1

I compensate him for his wife's denial.  
And turn my back, for a full hour, on everyone else.  
And when the beggar is through with his glass  
and about to leave... I place on his cheek a kiss  
of a sister to her brother...and  
I leave it to him to see it otherwise.

### *A Final Footnote:*

*When excavators unveiled the Epic of Gilgamesh, revealing the secret of what the Hebrew priests stole from its stories for their Bible, some priests after them reverted to putting it aside, and inventing the Talmud! They, however, made it a secret book among themselves, never to be translated or taken out of a synagogue...lest another universal scandal befalls them...always coming from Mesopotamia!*

Come to my Tavern my child...  
And learn from it how kings can be wise to their subjects!



*REEM Q AIS KOBBE*

The Female of the Words

1

the most beautiful life  
is to steal a life  
when feathers fly out of your palm  
to embrace the feathers of my wing  
and the world is spread:  
eyes. . .  
around  
two wings

2

no one notices  
that your velvet fingers are my glass  
yet they will all whisper:  
she is drunk!

3

When I first loved you  
I became beaming letters  
and knew that  
when you clasped my soul

## Kalimat 1

you clasped the waist of the female of words

4

when we last met  
you said: 'I would die for you'  
I said, 'For me  
I beg of your soul  
that you live'

5

once upon a pure moment  
you planted a kiss on my palm

...

when we argued after a date  
you went too far  
you picked the kiss off my palm  
and went

6

I yearn for you  
I curl. . . I curl. . . I curl  
all of me becomes a lip  
drinking passion  
from a voice  
on your lips

7

I beg your pardon  
I no longer shake hands with a mere friend  
since you understood my madness  
I recite in your name  
the most exalted verses of belief

A L - M A R B I D . 1 9 9 9

## Kalimat 1

8

the splendour of your fragrance is my calamity!  
for there are sparrows in my heart  
that will declare all their passion  
upon the blowing of the scent  
...  
don't come nearer!

9

in love  
remember to commit to two:  
your letter. . . and the other.  
love dies  
without parents

10

don't cut the rope of words  
they are all I possess  
after the heart was unlocked  
and all voices became husky

**MARGARET BRADSTOCK**

*Five Poems*

## Cape Byron Lighthouse

*'A tolerable high point of land bore north-west, distant three miles; this point I named Cape Byron. It may be known by a remarkable high peaked mountain lying inland...' Cook's diary.*

The *Endeavour* running  
    with the south-easterlies,  
bellying in the wind,  
untempted by lush plateaus  
& deep canyons  
sculpted by lava rain,  
Cook named the point of land  
& sailed on.

It was left to  
the frigate *Rainbow*  
    to chart the waters,  
map out the bay  
    & the high, dazzling cliffs,  
its captain dreaming  
    of safe anchorage.

## Kalimat 1

The cape claimed its wrecks,  
    scourging the jade deeps  
& the sea's bright caul -  
the rudder of a boat, a ship's bell  
flung up by Julian Rocks,  
resonant with its story,  
upturned hull of the *Swift*  
a living tomb,  
*Miranda*, the brig *William*,  
schooner *Inglis*, *S.S. Wollongbar*,  
*Tuggerah*, and others,  
disappeared without trace.

The dream endured,  
a beacon, a safe harbour,  
a final launching date.  
The banquet consumed  
without its honoured guests  
(the steamer caught  
    at anchor in the bay),  
they downed the vintage burgundy  
on a Sunday,  
thumbing their noses  
    at propriety,  
instead of dashing it  
against the tower.

*Blades of light*  
*flash & eclipse the dark,*  
*a windmill's sweep*  
    *or aeons passing,*  
*& the old moon hangs in the sky*  
*like a paler, occulting lens.*

Kalimat 1

# The Upturned Ship

(Billunudgel Beach, Brunswick Heads, 1849.)

Blown before the storm  
the *Swift* capsized  
    crossing the Bar,  
dragged southwards by the tide,  
    the breakers riding over.

The upturned hull  
    of a vessel on the sand  
like a mollusc's cast-off shell,  
nautilus, chambered,  
or a time-capsule  
    sealed against change,  
locked into its own past.

Out salvaging,  
the cedar getters, Boyd & King,  
tapped on the side of the ship,  
tentative, just checking,  
like penitents, perhaps,  
    at heaven's gate,  
& heard an answering knock,  
as though St. Peter  
might have lost the key.

Entombed, two men survived,  
only too ready  
to discard the outgrown shell,  
yet hearing, over & again,  
the soft tug of the sea.

## Kalimat 1

# Whale Song

### 1. Byron Whaling Co. 1954-62.

The *Byrond I* was a patrol boat  
with a sharp-eyed gunner,  
the whale an easy mark.  
No *Moby Dick* rowboats  
or hunter harpoons,  
no 'thar she blows'  
or odds-on chance of escape.

Roped to the side of the boat  
away from whaler sharks,  
tail flukes cut off & jettisoned,  
the whale was pumped with air  
like an inflatable toy,  
winched up the jetty ramp  
& onto the flat top railway truck  
hauled by a little engine, the Green Frog,  
as though it was fair-day.  
Whale meat went into the petfood industry,  
packed into zirconeal trays, snap frozen  
& exported to England,  
the baleen dumped,  
no longer needed for whalebone.

### 2. When humpback whales dance, the earth shakes.

Heading north for the winter  
they breach, tail swish,  
roll forward in a dive,  
tail flukes thrown into the air  
fingerprinting them, no two the same.

## Kalimat 1

They have pleated throats with grooves  
expanding like accordions  
as the whale draws in water,  
head & pectoral fins  
encrusted with barnacles,  
& they sing a complex song  
of Antarctica's glassy slopes,  
plankton & krill,  
& the northern breeding grounds.

## Starfish

Wading through tide-pools,  
the bright nets of morning,  
you captured a starfish,  
placed it gently  
    in the red plastic bucket,  
bluish tentacles stretching,  
straining at the rim of water,  
or bunched together  
    like dead men's fingers.

All day you watched it,  
your creature,  
heart tumble-turning  
with each sliding motion,  
head bent  
    to the reflection of sky,  
the great arc of the beach.

Letting it go  
(suckers radiating, testing  
    the grip of black rocks,



## Kalimat 1

furl of the sea)  
teaching you about freedom,  
teaching myself again.

## Cicada drum song

(For Rebecca)

High summer,  
the city's chic disrupted  
by the death of a girl,  
by the beat  
    of white-hot pavements  
when office-workers  
    escape to the park  
& the dog-day cicada  
whirrs out  
    its congregational song.

Eggs laid in woody tissues,  
the newly hatched nymphs burrow  
under the ground, sucking juices  
from the roots of perennials,  
seventeen years  
    to reach maturity.  
Grief has no meaning yet,  
their song no less lovely  
    because it ends.

### **Margaret Bradstock**

is a Sydney writer who recently won the Wesley Michel Wright Poetry Prize.

*LIAT KIRBY*

*Four Poems*

## The Offering

White skin over bones opened to the  
sea, to the sun licking, licking to  
the core, until flesh and frame glow  
with the slow, pale colour of washed  
sand grains, half-dried to coarse  
gold, lying there for the taking.

## Green Eyes

I would like you to reach  
inside me and take what stirs,  
for my eyes are turning  
green and I am ready for love.

the silence is silk.

## Kalimat 1

the rose in the vase  
opens, peach heavy  
onto stillness.  
the room is a frame.

the stillness torments  
for it holds nothing.  
the blood rushes in me  
to nowhere.

I would like you to reach  
inside me and take what stirs,  
hold it with care,  
for it is grave and stark

the wild essence of myrrh  
and my eyes are green.

## the wilderness

the tent is open  
full circle  
to the moon's  
full silver.  
the wind tugs falls away.

the soul washes  
the skin smooth,  
circles the  
belly breasts

slips quicksilver  
between ribs

## Kalimat 1

to anoint  
the body internal.

the sun rises  
on desert stones,  
spills rose gold  
into crevices.

silence hangs  
softly,  
bathing the  
wilderness  
in me.

## Change

How can I  
even in sleep  
avoid the wolf's howl,  
the shape to come.

My spine unknots,  
angles realign to  
take on the round.

A fleeting symmetry  
yields a curve  
that offers

the quick of things,  
an essential sweetness

## Kalimat 1

barbaric in its intensity,

and if I mount  
the curve and ride  
it hard and long

breathe an ancient space  
and inhale  
the desert wind

step upon stony scrub  
the pricks of pain  
heat induced

pinpoints will erupt,  
a shimmer of dew,  
as tears teeter

like rain drops  
that hesitate to fall  
lest the soil  
yield a wild flower.

**Liat Kirby** is a Melbourne poet, freelance reviewer and Director of Lynk Manuscript Assessment Service. Her poetry has been published in many journals, and translated into Chinese and Arabic. Her first book of poetry is to be published by the end of 2000.

*EVA SALLIS*

*Two Poems*

## Bitterness

How will you unbend my bitterness  
When I am your favourite book  
But you no longer read  
I am your favourite dream  
But you no longer sleep

I am your favourite house  
But you've lost the key

The wind sings in the bowstring  
While you hand me arrows  
To shoot you with

How will you unstring the bow?  
How break your arrows?  
How end this song?

## Kalimat 1

# Reflections

In the pond there are two fish  
Beneath the surface, beneath the reflection  
Tandem or in series, coupled, seen, unseen  
Seen in flashes of gold and flame  
Under a collage of waterlilies  
Glowing underneath the rock, unseen

In the twisted airless alleys  
Of intimacy with another, where  
Loneliness is alleviated by the palpation of scars,  
Given meaning by the probing of wounds,  
I am always on this side or on the outside of something

If someone was looking in  
Looking at our pond and their reflection  
Would our togetherness seem serene?

Tandem or in series, coupled, seen, unseen?

**Eva Sallis** is a writer and specialist in comparative literature (Arabic and English). Her first novel *Hiam* won her *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award for 1997 and the Nita May Dobbie literary award for 1999. Her latest book is *Sheherazade through the Looking Glass: the Metamorphosis of the 1001 Nights*, published by Curzon, UK, 1999. She currently lectures on literature and creative writing at the University of Adelaide. She also manages Driftwood Manuscripts, a manuscript assessment service.

**LOUISE WAKELING**

*This Sporting Life*

## Mountaineering

*Hail to the jewel in the lotus.*  
Tibetan chant

*'We will not live  
to settle for less  
We have dreamed of this  
all of our lives'*

Adrienne Rich, 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev'

### 1

because it's there *Sagarmatha Chomolungma*  
*Chu-mu-lang-ma feng* Everest  
sublime obstacle in anybody's language

'Goddess Mother of the World'  
mountain peaks knife-pointed  
breasts diamond-hard and straining at the sky  
her icy flanks and fissures  
crumble into shards beneath you



## Kalimat 1

we're here to climb ourselves our own fear  
white like snow-bridges over crevasses  
beautiful but treacherous to the touch  
floating titanics of ice

knowing we might falter  
on the Khumbu Icefall lose ourselves  
in that tumbled labyrinth (ice-pinnacles  
snowdrift over chasms)

on the mountain's frozen tongue  
stumbling in the footprints of Hillary and Norgay  
we sense the fragile balance of the glacier  
stir beneath us undermining certainties  
desire splinters like cracked lips in cold air

the summit hides herself  
behind a monolith of snow  
sensing ants on rickety ladders  
lashed to each other in the dark

below us black chasms resist  
the need for conquest  
mock the self-sufficient pleasures of the climb

down in the world's cities  
among the thousand evasions of daily life  
we dreamed these mountains  
of voluptuous snow

no frostbitten fingers in this scenario  
snow-blind eyeless on Everest  
ice-crystals blooming in the blood  
though it's worth it we say  
we mountain-mad ones

P O E T R Y

## Kalimat 1

up here the bodies of our predecessors  
lie stiffly in their bier of snow  
dead of that desire  
a moraine of bodies abraded  
by the mountain's secret places

new Ice-men for future ages  
to date and ponder: what drove  
this race of climbers? what sacrificial remains  
in shrivelled stomachs?  
caught in the long axis of the glacier  
strung on the same rope like grey pearls

hopeful like them of purification  
the goal luck on the mountain  
at Thyangboche Monastery  
though it's not our religion  
we take the blessing anyway  
hedging our bets against all that whiteness

remembering summits rinsed  
in a mystic blue light  
our apotheosis waiting  
like icecream melting in the sun  
postcard-perfect for the ascent

## 2

*'the sport of attaining or attempting to attain  
high points in mountainous regions  
mainly for the pleasure of the climb'*

Auden didn't care for mountains  
or the sporty types who clambered up them  
preferring the mountains of his fear

## Kalimat 1

or the impossible lower alps of love

but then he was often wrong the Old Master  
saw no poetry in crags or climbers  
dour mysteries to him  
egoism rampant in funny clothes  
striding tunnel-visioned  
through goitred villages in places  
'points up'

mountains were a human construct  
after all and climbing rather dampened  
his enthusiasm for bucolic emotions  
in high places.

*Dour* says it all - I imagine  
outdoor sheltered workshops  
for the vertically challenged  
breeding-grounds for monsters

these days mountains are crowded places  
adventurers swarming like bees  
credibility strained to breaking point  
in the world below  
bored with corridors and cavities  
they burn to push the envelope further  
assault the Goddess Mother alone  
without oxygen  
and from every conceivable position

he wasn't to know  
climbers are as liable to fall  
for new religions as poets are  
strung together in their mystery  
like prayer-beads  
slipping through a convert's fingers  
their flirtation with falling  
just another way of touching heaven

P O E T R Y

## Kalimat 1

# Soccer mum

these fogged-up mornings  
in the unpolitical suburbs  
she is jiggling up and down  
heart-stopped and breathless  
at the motions of a leather ball

at the linear rationale of it  
    the slab of green  
slash of churned mud mid-field  
becomes the horizon  
that largely gendered space  
where miniature Atlases  
juggle a globe with their feet

winged heels barely earthed  
    she too vaults skywards  
behind plastic bunting  
well and truly sidelined  
barracking for the terrier son  
the Team like she's a believer

high-fives and male sweat  
and the grunting logic of it all  
the way they work their young alchemy  
with the ball the way it ricochets  
between uncertainty and elation  
like a colt finding its feet  
    for the first time

P O E T R Y

## Kalimat 1

she can still savour this  
before testosterone imperatives  
the penalties and shoulderings  
the deadly camaraderie  
hooligans going barmy in the stands  
boys willing themselves to be boys

half-time  
the game a suspended narrative  
dark clouds are rolling  
dramatic as hell  
nothing better to do  
than brood over a wide field  
where boys run helter-skelter  
in the service of their own legend

but she is moved  
by some vague love of perfection  
though bog-ignorant of rules  
dense and arcane as chess  
mystical as rubrics  
the way feet begin to glide  
into a dancing partnership  
with the ball

and her short sharp bird-cries  
as though it means something  
something more  
than suburban loyalties  
or blood-ties and ego swelling  
in a vacuum  
and men running the show again

a kind of heroism here  
she can touch by proxy  
a sense of life lived  
*this* is the thin addictive line



## Kalimat 1

to smoking tyres, the jackhammer sound  
    of spinning wheels  
knows this sport can kill  
in an apotheosis of fireball  
and smoke and spewing debris

the girls in tight white tank tops  
    teeter past with trays of beer  
but it's the car the punters want  
and the trainer not the jockey  
those automotive guys with engine-lust  
and horsepower-stuffed jocks  
just drool over her Top Fuel dragster

wowed by hard figures  
fuel pumps and running costs  
    five second passes and rpm  
those blue and white curves  
stretching all the way to heaven

**Louise Wakeling** is a Sydney poet. She has published poetry, fiction and biography, and has just completed her second novel.





## Kalimat 1

# Return of the Exile

Whose the Jowett Javelin braided in wistaria?  
Whose the yellow-bent trees burdened with apples?

The valley was brimming with mist like cappuccino  
And skies were made of a perfect paleblue china.

The house's backside sloped away into history  
But those evening cocktails underpinned our joie-de-vivre.

A leaked-upon camellia, one bowler hat,  
The roughly upper-palaeolithic drive,

Chill nights for scattered heaters to keep at bay  
And everything glazed with a personal history.

Pointillist foliage patterns the millwheel of life.  
You can't swin into the past.

Oh yes, you can.

**Chris Wallace-Crabbe** is a poet and distinguished academic. He is currently with the Australian Centre, the University of Melbourne.

# *Glebe Point Poets*

*Glebe Point Poets is a group of five writers who have met fortnightly at Glebe after returning to Sydney after attending the Wollongong University Poetry Workshop run by Dr. Ron Pretty of Five Islands Press in January 1999.*

*They share new ideas on poetry and critique the latest poems of one another as preparation for publication in literary journals.*

*They also present their work as a group in public readings.*

Kalimat 1

CAROLYN VAN LANGENBERG

cup

White cup, fine bone, a gift from son to mother  
in forties' war days - a stencilled picture,  
Canberra, under a gold rim,  
the saucer lost, no jug or sugar bowl  
to make a set - and left to me  
when the family sold the old house.

Now cupped in cups, the handle pointing up,  
reserved for lunchtime tea, it is  
a living thing passed down to the one  
brimful with Nanna's dear oh dears,  
a delicacy in her unequal to the put-upons  
sighed high above a long-ago, wide-eyed me.

**Carolyn van Langenberg** has recently been short-listed for the David T. K. Wong Fellowship, East Anglia University, U.K. to write a novel about aspects of life in south east Asia..

**ANN MARTIN**

**Frost**

The space where time spent sweet moments has been left bare

the hard steel blinds that block light  
welded shut  
kept from shining  
hearts small burnings smoulder  
not gone just wrapped  
frosted tight in paddocks where steps don't go

long kisses against your breath have been held secret

maybe to keep  
bundled warm  
a catalogue  
called then, not now.

**Ann Martin** is a poet, artist and cultural planner who lives in Sydney. She previously published poems in *Hobo*, and in two anthologies through Five Island Press.

# FAITH DE SAVIGNÉ

## *Two Poems*

### The Onlooker

This morning  
I wasn't woken by her  
Usually she'd whisper my name,  
my first sight of day, her face  
This time I came to on my own  
in half-light-sleep  
afraid to disturb the seal of warmth  
for without looking,  
I knew the windows would be snow enclosed

As a private eye and all ears,  
I followed her  
tapping down the stairs  
shuffling from gravelly wood floor  
to scratchy linoleum  
I could feel her hunched over  
clutching cold clothes  
squeaking stove open  
stiff hands ripping  
a log from the pile

## Kalimat 1

cracking, snapping flames to life  
It sizzled before clanged shut  
Wooden cabinets whined  
Chilled metal pots pulled  
drawn icy water splattered then submerged  
boiling steam puffed over the stove  
For the first time  
I saw how it was done  
How we peopled her thoughts  
And now I accompanied her  
so she was not alone

## Late in the Day

Promise of morning light, now betrayed  
as my mood mirrors this advanced hour  
For me now, it's too late in the day

Five PM, empty, in this city walkway  
People scurry to their safe holes and cower  
Promise of morning light, now betrayed

Closed up, all plans shelved and delayed  
defeated by these concrete walls of power  
For me now, it's too late in the day

Locked out from what I meant to say  
To you our love lost what was our  
Promise of morning light, now betrayed

## Kalimat 1

Darkness shifts quickly, moments waylaid  
Deserted to dust, all attempts devoured  
For me now, it's too late in the day

End of decade, for this waste I'll pay  
Finished shadows loom from the clock tower  
Promise of morning light, now betrayed  
For me now, it's too late in the day

**Faith de Savigné** holds two masters degrees in literature and writing. Her poems have been published and broadcast in the USA, Australia and on the internet and radio.

*JOHN L. SHEPPARD*

*Two Poems*

Dust

Scales fall from his eyes.  
He has the faltering heart of a deer  
panting with short breaths,  
edging into darkness.

Later in the funeral parlour, drained,  
no spark, no movement.

I stand silent, step forward and place  
my hand on his cheek, drawing in  
the sharp cold of his flesh, surprised  
by the sudden feel of ice where warmth has been.

Later still, beside twin graves  
of man and wife, a straggly elm.

Its sturdy trunk forks up,  
two branches intertwine,  
grafting one another,  
just like the two interred.

I trim a twisted branch for balance.  
With time its wound is healed.



## Kalimat 1

# Night Rain

Spring's first day - petals splatter  
the ground, ejected from nature's nozzle.  
El niño blights the Pacific. Forecasts of droughts.  
Now after weeks of dry, spring brings a shower.

Some say rain spoils the spring, but no:  
the dinging sound on the tin rooftop  
has a comfort in its ring - not violent  
but gentle in its sprinkled pattering.

As a child sleeping on the open verandah  
I would hear the rain peppering the house.  
Should the wind blow the wrong way,  
a drop or two reached the bedclothes.

But that was no concern:  
I huddled under cosy blankets.

**John Sheppard** retired from Sydney University in 1997 as  
an Associate Professor in psychology applied to health.

## HEATHER STEWART

*Two Poems*

### Glebe terrace

There's a Miss Havisham in me,  
coming out. Her kind of nuttiness  
seems okay - making a life-style,  
making a point. She made an artform  
from sour fact - legend, fiction -  
a picked-at sore kept festering  
with its shroud-laid setting,  
the mouldering feast.

I know, I know,  
you can only stand so much drama.  
Friends are getting sick of my house  
and my woe. Me too.

I'll get up soon and wash my hair,  
burnish it - brush down  
those musty hangings,  
throw away the dead bouquet.  
I'll walk out into the night-air  
and see the sky blown free of smog,  
paled by city lights alive and moving,  
fading out that waning star.

## Kalimat 1

# Moon moment

Walking through the high streets of Glebe  
I passed some boys skate-boarding and shouting.  
I was watching the moon rise, huge and growing, orange  
silhouetting city towers. One kid suddenly yelled  
through his mates' loud hurrahs: 'O shit, o shit,  
look at the moon!' I wanted to give him some words.  
But open mouths round as the moon mirrored in wide eyes  
said it all. Again he softly moaned, o shit.

**Heather Stewart** has poetry, stories and articles published in several leading journals. She is completing a biography on Christina Stead.

# A Celebration

*Sydney 2000*

The celebrations that accompanied the dawn of the year 2000 were elaborate and ecstatic in most places around the World. Sydney was on top of the list.

The year 2000 is special for us because it is the year when *Kalimat* became a reality on paper for everyone to enjoy.

On the occasion of these celebrations, Margaret Bradstock earlier published a poem in *four W six* (Charles Sturt University Publications, Wagga Wagga). She has kindly permitted us to present it here to share the spirit of Sydney and the celebrations.

Ann Lumley is also celebrating with us by her article on the Opera House which she prepared for *Kalimat*. Ann Lumley has had many years of experience in Visual Arts Education, in both studying and making artworks. She has taught in universities and schools, and published books on the sculpture and architecture of Sydney. The Opera House photograph is taken by her.

Kalimat 1

# Sydney 2000

by

Margaret Bradstock

Not just a zipcode  
or another millennium,  
the next Olympics  
& the promise  
of a real estate explosion.

It's the last ferries moving wearily  
out from the Quay,  
the Opera House hunched  
on Bennelong Point,  
wings beating at darkness,  
moon caught in its folds  
like a rice-paper lantern,  
& your heart ferris-wheeling  
out over the Harbour.

S Y D N E Y 2 0 0 0

# Sydney Opera House

by

Ann Lumley

Sydney people celebrated the coming of the year 2000 with a fireworks display, shared by millions all over the world, thanks to television coverage. The centre of all the action on New Year's Eve was Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, in their harbour setting.

The Sydney Opera House is one of the most creative, daring and unusual buildings ever constructed. It is also one of the most beautiful, in the eyes of Sydney people, and is always the first place that a visitor to Sydney will be taken to see. The story of the design and construction of this building is an eventful one, with many ups and downs for all involved with it.

The building of the Sydney Opera House was undertaken by the State Government, who selected Bennelong Point (a long finger of land projecting right out into Sydney harbour) as the site during the early 1950s. An international competition for the design of a performing arts complex was held. The winner of the competition in 1957 was the Danish architect Joern Utzon. At that time, Utzon had not visited Sydney, but was fascinated by the photographs of the dramatic site chosen for the new building. He submitted a series of sketches for a building unlike anything built in Australia before, and surpassing by far any of the other entries in its unusual and daring concept. The judges of the competition recognised the genius of these designs and Utzon was the winner.

Little did any of the people involved know that this was the start of many years of controversy and difficulty as the actual construction took place. The sketches submitted by Utzon were far from detailed working plans from which architects and engineers could proceed. When Utzon requested a two year period in which to draw up such plans, he was given only about six months by his political masters rushing towards an election. They were anxious to claim the commencement of building the Opera House as their own achievement. In addition, the design of the huge sails which make up the distinctive roofline was far in advance of the construction technology of the

## Kalimat 1

time. The actual solution of the exact shapes and construction methods was still to be solved when preparation of the site was already under way. This caused much public debate, along with the fact that as building progressed costs began to soar. Such an unusual design, in itself, was enough to invite opinions of all types from the public. However, the same public supported the costs of the building cheerfully for many years through the Opera House Lottery, which raised huge amounts of money freely gambled by Australians on the chance of a win.

The first level of the Opera House is the podium level, which rests on concrete foundations which sink far under the harbour waters. The material used as a finish on the podium is a warm pink toned aggregate granite, hard wearing and pleasantly contrasting with the gleaming white sails above. The podium is large enough to contain an exhibition hall, drama theatre, playhouse, recording hall, reception hall, five rehearsal studios, two restaurants, six theatre bars, extensive foyer and lounge areas, administrative offices, sixty dressing rooms and suites, the library, the artist's Greenroom, scenery and equipment stores as well as all the electrical and air conditioning plants. All this took from March 1959 to 1963 to complete.

Stage two was the construction of the towering shell roofs or sails, which contain the two great performance spaces. The Opera Theatre, which seats 1547 people, is on the eastern side, and the Concert Hall, seating 2690 people is on the western side. Each of these is contained in a series of huge shell roofs, made from 2194 concrete sections, held together by a total of 350 kilometres of tensioned steel cable. The construction of these shells was part of a new chapter in the history of architecture, using construction devices being invented and pioneered as they were required.

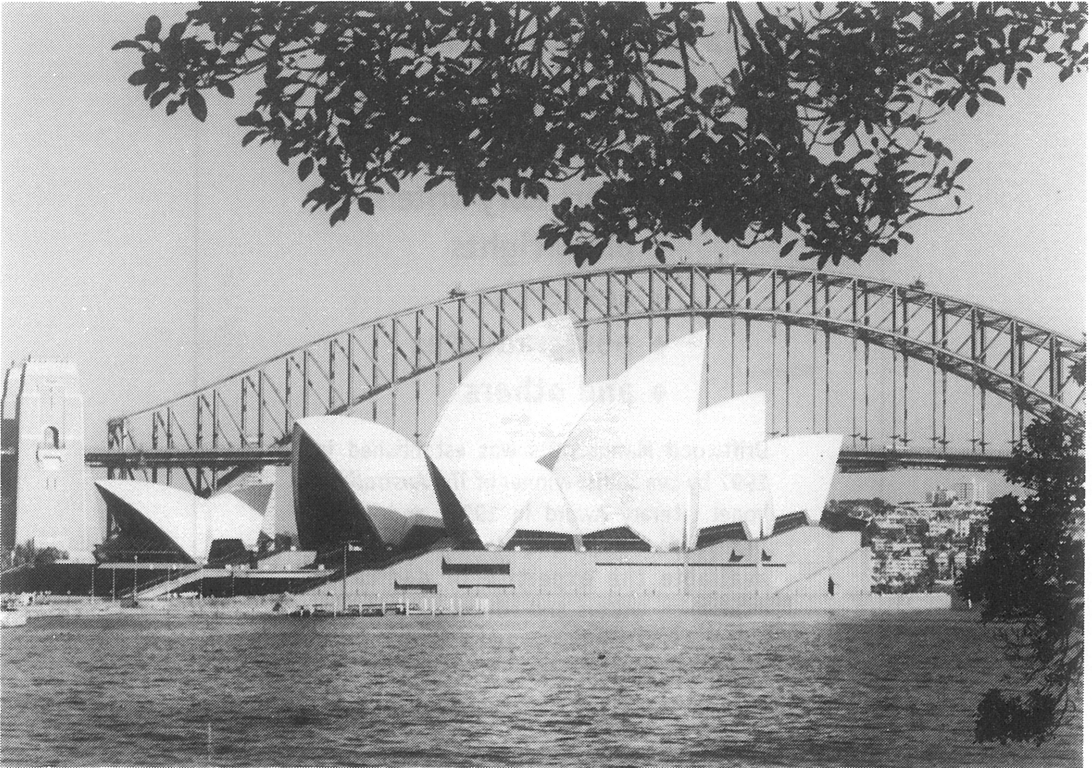
Utzon used a circle as the basic shape which would solve the problem of how to create moulds for the precast roof sections. Once he had established the geometry of the roofing sections, the thousands of concrete units could be mass produced using the same moulds again and again. The concrete units were hoisted into place and literally tied into place by the steel cables. This was Utzon's elegant solution to a complex design problem, with decisions being made as fast as they were needed.

The external finish of the roof is made of over one million gleaming cream and white ceramic tiles, put together in a distinctive textured pattern. Large expanses of glass complete the shells, giving panoramic views of the harbour and the city. Everything in the Opera House is special and unusual, showing the mind of a visionary and inspired architect. Unfortunately, Utzon resigned

## Kalimat 1

form the Opera House in 1966, when the construction of the exterior was almost complete, after many turbulent years of controversy and criticism. He left Sydney, and left his magnificent creation to be completed by others.

Since its opening in 1973, Sydney Opera House has achieved a profound significance in the hearts and minds of the people of Sydney and New South Wales. It has become a symbol of the city and the focus for our most important occasions, such as our Bicentennial celebrations, and of course our annual New Year's Eve party.



S Y D N E Y 2 0 0 0



## **Driftwood Manuscripts**

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**GREG BOGAERTS**

*Short Story*

## The Fish Trap

Harry Breach looked down from his window. Looked down into the water of the drain that ran beside the yard of the tenement he lived in. Had lived in for twenty years since Harry retired from the steel mills. Harry looking down and watching the flush of high tide coming from the harbour. Sweeping in salty green washes and filling the cement sides of the drain. A high tide of salt water that pushed back the fresh water that came from the houses further west and away from the harbour that was the heart of the city.

The harbour where the steel works was still perched on the shores of Port Waratah. But not for long thought Harry Breach. And fucking good riddance to the bastards thought Harry. As he watched the tide from the harbour, the tide from outside the heads of the harbour, rise to the lips of the cement drain. With the fish, the whiting swimming like silver lines of thought and emotion. Bright lines of scale that were after the schools of prawns that sometimes found themselves in the cement drainage system of the town.

Hunter River prawns driven from the estuary by the whiting and sometimes other fish in pursuit. The prawns driven from their spawning saltwater springs and tributaries by the steelworks that dumped the poisons of steel making into the river. The prawns driven to the drains of Newcastle. The labyrinth of cement arteries designed at the turn of the century to take away the storm water and household excess water.

## Kalimat 1

Harry Breach watched the fish stop. Some of them. A giving up of the chase after the prawns. Darts and swirls of whiting in the water. As they smelt and sought out the trap Harry had set in the water of the drain. The trap a bare matrix of shadows in the deep water now. A knitting together of sticks and lengths of rangoon cane with string and twine and cotton. Scrounged by Harry. Who did not have the money to buy a real trap.

The trap with the giant head of the flathead caught by the trawler net way out the back; miles off Newcastle. Harry Breach begging the big head and backbone and tail of the big lizard from the men who cleaned the catch. A bloody mess of bone and scale and gills and glazed eyes but with enough fish flesh left to attract the whiting to the trap.

Harry watched the fish pause at the mouth of the trap. The first stillness in the green scaled bodies. Then the twitch and the fury of the bodies when they smelled the blood coming from the head and backbone in delicate swirls and curls. Blood that looked like the Indian Ink Harry had used at school many years ago. A smattering of school years and then straight to the steelworks. Sent there by a father who said Harry would learn more amongst the molten metal at Port Waratah than he would learn bent over some exercise book.

And perhaps his father had been right. Harry didn't know, wasn't sure even after all of these years. A lifetime at the works amongst the furnaces and the coke ovens. A thousand men he'd met amongst the metal and the dirt. But he didn't know whether he'd learned anything by it all.

The three shifts about and dog tired from years of dog watch. Worn down to a march of fatigue into and out of the plant. A hallucination of work that was not real to Harry Breach in the last years of his time at the works. But became real when he retired and he found he had bad lungs from the shit he'd breathed in through the welter of years on the floors of the mills.

'Should be fucken raised t' th' ground and salt poured over th' foundations,' he muttered angrily to himself. As he watched the fish in a fury of movement amongst the blood of the fish skeleton.

'And it could 'appen too,' he said. 'Salt poured over it once it closes next year. Chop away some of them banks and let the river run its natural course again. Let th' river water and th' salt water clean th' filthy shit they'll leave behind 'em.'

Harry Breach watched the fish enter the trap. Watched the whiting amongst the strands of flesh left on the bones of the body. Long and short tears

## Kalimat 1

of flesh. Strands that shone ghostly beneath the deep green water. A head of bone that was picked clean of skin and flesh as the fish went to work. A head of bone that burned white beneath the water. A pale pearl luminosity that winked up at Harry Breach leaning well out of his window. A window that belonged to someone else. Because Harry was a tenant and not the owner of the house.

The trap full of the writhing bodies of the whiting with the odd bream or two and some taylor and what looked like a flounder to Harry. The man leaning out on the wood of the window ledge; astonished to see the smooth flat flake shape of the flounder flapping around the head and spine of the flathead. A flounder, a species Harry had never seen in the drain before. Not even during the big king tides that brought all manner of fish into the drain.

A meeting of many species in the trap and Harry Breach wondered how he was going to pull so many pounds of fish flesh up the weed-covered sides of the drain. Without the thin rope he'd attached to the trap snapping and the construction breaking apart against the cement and the fish delivered back into the salt water that would take them back to the harbour and the open ocean.

'Christ I wish I had one of Leo Costa's wire ropes on th' end of me trap,' said Harry.

Harry thought about Leo Costa and how the man had come from Italy years before to work in the mills of the steelworks. Big promises of plenty of work that lured Leo to sell his house and move across the oceans to Newcastle. But found the shifts at the works were broken by periods of no work when the orders weren't coming in. Or when the management of the works tried to break the union by systematically laying off men to scare the rest.

Lean pickings for Leo and some of the other men; the Greeks and Yugoslavs and Italians with only intermittent work. At times. The men forced to look for other work to supplement their incomes to keep their families.

Leo Costa perfecting the art of making wire rope he turned into tow ropes for cars. He turned into anything you could imagine thought Harry Breach. And for the first time in his life realised the skill Leo Costa had in turning out the wire rope in his shed in the backyard. Years down the track before Harry found some admiration for the Italian who'd always been just a 'chocolate frog' to Harry and some of the other Australian men at the works.

Leo long gone. A decade before Harry Breach retired from the works. Leo

## Kalimat 1

gone back to Italy with the money he'd saved in the years in the mills. Just enough to get Leo and his wife back home. Leaving behind the works that were already in decline as the orders for steel dwindled and the technology of the plants ground and faltered and spat out steel that was the fossilised backbone of a dinosaur compared to the new designer steel made by small clean mills overseas.

Harry Breach could see the fish squashed closely together now in the trap. Barely room to move and no chance of any fish turning in the trap and making its escape.

'Plenty of fish f' tea t'night and the rest of the week,' said Harry.

But looked closer at the trap. Saw the high tide turning in the enclosure of the drain. Harry seeing the tide turning from high to low and the run out always quick. Much quicker than the rise; the trap soon to be exposed. Harry soon to be down on the edge of the drain to take in his catch before anyone else noticed the cylinder of cane and wood with a dozen different types of fish in it.

Harry looking closer as the water shallowed and the trap came into view beneath the water. The man seeing the fish turning upon each other. Tearing and bighting bits and pieces out of each other.

'Hey stop it!' yelled Harry.

And thought of the time in one of the mills just before he retired when he'd uttered the same words with the same urgency, the same puzzlement. When Mick Malone and Tim Trelaw shaped up to each other in the middle of the mill floor. Mick and Tim best mates and the surprise, the horror in Harry when he walked around a corner and found them trading blows.

Mick and Tim only separated after three other men came and gave Harry a hand to stop the stoush. Mick and Tim standing in the middle of the mill floor with the blood coming from the cuts and abrasions they'd inflicted upon each other. The big black bruises already forming around their eyes. The same black and green as the sky over the swamps of Hexham not that far away. When the weather turned for the worse inland and the thunder clouds rolled down the slopes of The Hunter Valley and it stormed rain and hail and the river broke its banks and flooded.

Mick and Tim at each other's throats because of the overtime. Plenty once upon a time; the mythical times of big orders that belonged in the works during the two big world wars. The demand for munitions and rail steel

## Kalimat 1

through the roof. Plenty of extra work then. Not later. Tim and Mick desperate for the extra shifts and getting shitty with each other when the foreman let it slip that each of them had approached him for more shifts on top of the usual.

The two men, the two best friends, prepared to do battle to save face, to bank a little more money for their wives and family. A few more bills paid. And, perhaps, one day, the chance to sell up and move away from Mayfield East where the turd-shaped and turd-smelling clouds from the works drifted like zeppelins about to burst into flames and burn down upon the tiled roofs of the cottages clustered close to the gates of the works.

The problem settled when Mick and Tim were given their marching orders. Sacked on the spot and paid out. Two more men gone and two fewer to have to pay. A small keyhole into what was to happen on a large scale as the century approached its end. Mass sackings, called downsizing and retrenchment. Thousands of men walking from the gates for the last time. And overtime something from the distant past.

Harry Breach looked at the trap. The tide only a few feet above the trap now and the fish clear in their cage. But some of the bodies not the usual sleek lines of green and silver scale. The bodies marked with red and orange polyp growths. Something Harry had seen more of in the past few years since he'd taken to laying his trap in the drain. Because he'd barely make it through the week for food and rent and the occasional bottle of Penfolds Port Royal Reserve Port.

'Christ more than one or two of th' poor bastards are marked. Jesus more like six or seven with them sores on 'em,' said Harry to himself.

And Harry Breach wondered if he should eat any of the fish. Wondered if the cancer in the flesh of the fish might be in the other fish that seemed unmarked. Harry reading about the cancers in the local catches in the local rag; an unsettling thought to eat the fish that might be carrying the damaged cells hidden below the silver skins.

Harry looked at the growths and he thought of Billy Henderson. Big Billy Henderson he'd been called in the Skelp Mill when Harry worked there a long time ago.

Big Billy Henderson whose muscles went on day trips around his big frame when the man was using the big tongs to guide the hot metal from the rollers into the mouths of the twist shoots. Where the rolled gold was spun at supersonic speed into clock springs that glowered and winked red eyes

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through the grey scale that formed as the metal cooled.

Billy Henderson with Popeye arms and tree trunk legs and a chest to match. With many of the men coming to watch him work when they were on their crib break. The small audience in awe because they knew the big body would be on the football field at the weekend playing first grade. Knocking aside would-be tacklers and heading for the try line or setting up one of the backs for a try. With Billy Henderson standing and off-loading the ball with three or four of the opposition players still hanging onto him.

An invincible body it seemed to the men in the mill. It seemed to Harry Breach. Who even now could not take in, could not comprehend what had happened to Billy all those years ago. The first sign, the first faint indication came one early morning at the end of a dog watch shift. Billy's left leg buckling from under him. Billy down on one knee like some steel-making Atlas with the burden of the mills and the steel on his back. Struggling back to his feet. Only the men in the control box noticing but not paying it much mind.

'Yer gettin' old Billy. That's all,' one of them joked in the shower as they washed twelve hours of smell and dirt from their bodies.

But it was no joke. Not when Billy went down on both knees and could not raise himself to keep on guiding the hot steel with his giant tongs. Billy at the doctor's the next day. Sent to a specialist; xrays and tests. And the tumour found deep down in the folds of Billy's brain. The growth affecting the bodily co-ordination of the big man. The growth too deep for the doctors to operate.

And Billy slipped away quickly; a month and he was dead as the tumour grew and took the body down into the earth of Sandgate Cemetery. And Harry Breach didn't like to remember the final visit he'd paid Billy. Harry trying to do the right thing and give the big man some comfort. But the man was no longer big. Harry seeing the worn-down body like a small flat fish on the sheets of the bed. The big paw of the hand only a slight construction of fragile bones with the skin drawn tightly like a kite over them. The handshake a tremble of lost strength. The big cheeky grin still there as Billy held onto Harry's hand and grinned and ignored the bitter tears of Harry. That fell upon the man. But there was no baptism for Billy Henderson, no rebirth for the man.

Harry Breach got up and went inside. Put away the thought of Billy. For a while. Went to his fridge and took out the butter and the half a lemon. Found his fry pan and put it on the one gas ring of the old Kookaburra stove.

'All ready for a good fry up of fish. Just as soon as that drain's emptied

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enough I'll go down and get them fish,' he said.

Went back to the window sill and watched the trap teeming with fish; the water only a few inches above the fragile construction of sticks and cane.

'Not goin' back in there again before it's time,' said Harry.

Remembered the last time he'd ventured into the drain when he got excited by a big catch and didn't wait until the water had shallowed and made it safe. Harry scrambling down the cement side of the drain. Losing some skin from his hands and leaving finger prints of blood smeared across the drain. Not taking any notice. Not seeing the tide was still on the run out and at a great rate. Harry with the water whirling strong eddies around his knees. Harry leaning forward. Leaning down into the water up to his chest. To take hold of the trap. Finding the rope and pulling hard. But not as hard as the tide that took his footing along with the slippery green weed that grew on the bottom of the drain. Harry down in the water. And not a swimmer.

Harry thrashing out for the lip of the drain but not finding it. Managing to find his feet and splay them wide in the water and place his hands flat to the sides of the drain. Standing there, trembling, for a good fifteen minutes while the water receded and it was safe enough for Harry to take the fish and make it out of the vein of cement.

A memory that haunted Harry Breach with all of the other memories that seemed to set off other thoughts of times passed. The scars on Harry's hands from his mishap enough to remind him of Tommy Smith. One of the first men in the mills. Tommy an old hand from the first days when the mills were still being built in the mud of the estuary. Tommy Smith telling the stories of how the pylons were laid in the mud at low tide and how the bottom of the channel was dredged and the mud and shell fish pumped onto the site of the works to raise the level of the place.

Tommy Smith telling how he'd wade out in the mud to help sink the foundations for the cast house. And wade back with the men scraping mud from each other's hides with bits of wood. Like the men in the trenches at the western front at the time.

Tommy with the story of the blowing of the first furnace and the eruption of fire and smoke and the noise like the big guns in The Great War. And some of the men legging it out of the mill because they'd not heard or seen anything like it. Because they thought they were going to be killed or wounded with the metal that hissed and snaked from the furnace when it was first tapped.



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Tommy Smith almost at the end of his time at the works when Harry came to work there as a kid. Tommy who laboured over the piles of hot slag with Harry; the two of them and others with shovels to clear the floor of the hot dross so the furnace could be fired again. So the furnaceman could take his sledge hammer and crow bar and knock away the clay seal and let the eel of steel shoot forth.

Tommy Smith who was tired with age. Who would fall asleep standing up and leaning on his shovel. With the men careful and kind to Tommy. Covering for him with the foreman; sending Tommy behind one of the sheds outside where he slept an hour or two and came back to make it through the rest of the shift.

But only so much the others could do. And Tommy Smith fell asleep once too often and fell forward into the hot slag just disgorged from the bowels of the furnace. Nothing Harry and the others could do. The body a mummy of blasted bone and melted flesh. They prized from the slag with crossed shovels once the waste had cooled enough to get close enough to Tommy.

The smell of burned flesh and hair that Harry Breach had not forgotten. Could smell it now as he thought about Tommy. The smell coming from the drain as the water dropped and the pans of mud were exposed. The pungent smell of mangrove mud that found its way into the drain with the rise of the tide. And left a muddy taste in some of the fish Harry could not help but notice.

Harry looked at the trap and he saw one of the fish manage to turn itself in the close construction. The small fish willing itself to squirm side on and then backwards and find the opening. Harry Breach watching the whiting find the trickle of water flowing back out under the city, under the main street to the harbour. But only the one fish escaped and Harry going down the stairs to take his catch.

Remembering Jimmy Francis as he trundled down the internal staircase. Jimmy who'd worked for years in the mills with Harry. Jimmy living by himself with no one to support. Jimmy at the pub every day because he had plenty of money to spare. A life of Riley and not a care in the world. Until Jimmy met Meg and married her and had two kids.

Jimmy Francis with bills piling up and working all the overtime he could manage. Labelled 'hungry' by the other men because he couldn't resist the offer of a 'doubla' shift. The other men in the showers mimicking the Italians with thumb and third finger rubbed together in the face of Jimmy Francis.

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‘More doublas Jimmy. Plenty money eh Jimmy?’ they said to him.

And Harry remembered the day it all changed for Jimmy. The day the foreman came and stood at the edge of the shower tiles and said, ‘You’ll never leave ‘ere Jimmy. You’re a lifer boy. Too many bills and kids to escape the jail you’re in.’

Harry still remembered the look on Jimmy Francis’s face when he heard the words; a hardening of the features. The eyes turning a black hard mineral and no reply made to the foreman who laughed and turned away from the men in the showers.

Jimmy Francis enrolled at night school. Ignored the jokes of the men at the mill. Ignored the foreman who still called him a ‘lifer’. Ignored the fatigue and passed his leaving certificate. Went onto teachers’ college and got his ticket to teach. Jimmy leaving the works, escaping the mill and the dirt and finding a half decent wage and clean conditions that meant he didn’t need a second shower when he got home.

Harry could hear the voices of the women before he got to the door; voices laughing and the sound sweet to him. Harry opening the door and standing in the shadow of the hallway. Not venturing out but standing there watching the young women from the tall office building, a block away, on their lunch break. Harry listening to their voices like silver. The sound bringing back the memory of Janice, his wife.

The woman who’d spent the summers with Harry Breach down along the south coast of NSW. The long days of surf and sun and the long nights making love in the sand of the beach. Their bodies rocking with the movement of the tide. The skin of ocean, the mass of ocean pulled out from the rind of the earth. Harry and Janice a mass of healthy and young flesh with the salt dried upon their bodies. The two of them breaking open the cocoon of salt as their bodies moved with the washing water flooding over their forms in the sand. The water a laving wash of clean salt.

The memory of Janice strong in the old man as he watched the young women disappear from view. The memory stronger now as Janice turned the corner of the block. Hobbled on her arthritic legs to the front gate and said:

‘Come on Harry. Haven’t yer got them fish outta th’ drain yet. I’ve got some nice spinach and salad t’ go with ‘em. Come on yer silly old man. I’ll give yer a ‘and.’

Harry grinning. Coming from the house and going down into the trough of

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cement with Janice; the two of them taking hold of the delicate construction of sticks and cane and string. Pulling together. Gently. Raising the trap and the fish with care. Carrying it between them. A silent count of three and the man and woman lifting the trap onto the side of the drain. The trap and fish landing evenly and safely.

Harry helping his wife up the lip of cement. Going indoors where they cooked some of the catch in the fry pan. Sat down at the table and ate their sacred meal of fish.

THE END

**Greg Bogaerts** is a writer who lives in Newcastle, Australia. He has had many short stories published in journals, magazines and anthologies in Australia and America. Many of his stories have been read on radio.

S H O R T   S T O R I E S

MARISA CANO

*Short Story*

## Raimundo

The first I saw were his eyes, his immeasurable eyes. Deep, brown pools where sadness floated like a stagnant mantle. I had seen him through the corner of my eye as he stood in the queue, advancing one customer at a time. His was a small frame, yet well proportioned, with silky tanned limbs, their tautness the result of persistent work-outs in the gym. I didn't see his face until he reached the counter and lifted it to level with mine. I stared at it for a second longer than usual: a handsome face of striking Latin American features. I sank into the muddy waters of his eyes.

He handed me the form for a bridging visa. He only said: 'This, please', with a light accent that didn't disguise the fact that he spoke no English and could not communicate further.

'Habla español?' I ventured.

'Sí!' he answered, revealing excitement. 'Usted también?'

Yes, I spoke Spanish too, I told him. He smiled then, a big broad smile that almost brushed away the sadness in his look. Thirsting for conversation, he had arrived at an oasis and he dived into talk with me, whose only task was to take his form and tell him to wait an indeterminate time for an uncertain reply.

I learned in a matter of seconds that he came from Colombia and was seeking refugee status. Like everyone else in his shoes, his visitor's visa was about to expire and his money was running out. Until his case was processed and he accepted as a refugee, he would need to legally extend his stay in this country, obtain permission to work and access to Medicare in case of illness.

The customers in the queue were getting restless - I was spending slightly longer with this particular one. I had to cut him short. 'I'm sorry, I can't speak to you here, people are waiting.' The sudden sparkle in his eyes faded, and I found myself adding: 'But we can meet later, when I'm finished. In about an

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hour. Outside the building. If you're not busy this afternoon, of course,' aware that I might be intruding on his plans.

He accepted straight away.

That's how I met Raimundo Cárdenas Jiménez. He was at the place and the time suggested, waiting for me to come out into the real world of people instead of papers. We shook hands and introduced ourselves properly. He told me that his few friends here called him Ray, to make things easier for everyone. His handshake was firm and warm, and I felt a tingle run up my spine. He was new to this side of the city, so I led him to my favourite spot, a quiet cafeteria with comfortable seats two blocks away from my place of work.

Raimundo was soft-spoken, a gentleman in manners and a refined speaker. I ordered two black coffees with certain apprehension that he may find the Australian concoction disappointing, considering the country he came from. To my relief, he drank it without complaint.

After the preliminary small-talk, the conversation took up more serious routes, namely those of the reason for his presence in Australia and the predicament he found himself in. When confronted with these questions, he seemed to waver for a second, then resolved to lunge into honest confession.

I was dumbfounded to learn he was homosexual. The first thought to run through my mind was a cliché: 'Why are all good-looking guys gay? What a waste!' Then I took hold of myself, determined to empty my head of senseless blabber. I couldn't allow myself to be deaf to his hunger for understanding, nor blind to the sincerity pouring from his eyes. In a moment I had taken in the advantage of the situation: here was a man I was safe to talk to and be with, no risk of second intentions, sexual interest or potential embarrassment. Under these conditions I felt eager to please him, I was all ears and willing heart.

'I've been persecuted,' he said, 'my kind always is in my country and others close by. I guess it's the myth of the 'Hispanic macho' that's been taken too much to heart. We, faggots, are disliked -no, hated... hated to death.' His eyes, deep wells I almost fell into, stayed fixed on mine till the last three words, thus saving me from drowning.

'There's homophobia everywhere you go, Raimundo, the world has yet to learn to accept -'

He lifted his face and his hand to stop me from finishing my sentence, and his soft fingers slowly fell on mine, next to the cup, his light touch sending a ripple through my veins. 'Yes, but there are degrees of intolerance. You cannot

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compare people's attitude in this country to that in mine. In the short time I've been here I've seen that, at least, we're allowed to exist. Not so in Colombia.'

He told me about the scorn he'd suffered as a child at school, in the neighborhood and at home, about the jobs he held and then lost as soon as his homosexuality was discovered, about the torment of having to live a permanent lie, hiding his true nature that society found so offensive.

He finished his coffee and turned to search in his bag. He brought out a piece of folded paper: a photocopy of a newspaper page. He handed it to me. The photograph of a body sprawled in the middle of a street surrounded by onlookers occupied the centre. The headline read: 'Homosexual gunned down by social cleansing group'. I didn't bother to read the text, I'd got the message.

'You see? Social cleansing. Over there we're not human, we're scum.'

'Did you know him?' I asked to break the silence that had ensued.

He slowly nodded. 'He was my lover.'

The word hit me like a lash. It conjured images of obscenity. The consequent realisation that I may not be the open-minded angel I was setting myself as, but a common bigot, was disappointing.

My guilt increased when he spoke again. 'Imagine the man you love, the person you've spent years with, the one you share your life with, does not return from work one day, and then you hear he's been shot and left to die like a dog in the street.'

That I could imagine, and I strongly berated myself for the obscene images from before. I stared at some invisible spot on the floor somewhere, and my eyes were filled with the same dark, brimming grief as his. We were on common ground.

'I escaped soon afterwards. I have no doubt I would have been the next victim, had I not fled the city the very day I heard of his murder. A friend in Peru managed to get me a visa from Venezuela. I gathered the little money I had and bought a ticket to Australia. Fearing for my life, I hardly had the time to cry his death. It was here, on my first days in this country, completely alone, bereft, isolated, incommunicado, that I was able to give vent to my tears.'

I longed to comfort him, to take him in my arms and soothe his pain. But we were in public, and he was still a man.

'On the third day I left the hotel room and roamed the city streets, looking for a face with familiar features. I found one and lost no time in approaching him. I was not wrong, he was Latin American, and he was the first to open for

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me the gates into my new life. He even offered me a room in his own house, so I stayed with his family for some time... until he found out I was gay. Then he made me pack my bag, took me to Oxford Street, told me 'This is poofers' street' and left me there to my own device. I didn't know where to go, what to do. So I did the same as on my third day in this city: I walked up the street looking for someone with Hispanic features.'

'And were you lucky?' I was keen to know if this was my lifetime chance to help a destitute.

'Oh, yes!' he blew out with satisfaction, his mouth stretching into a smile. 'I found great friends with whom I now share a flat. I am happy. I wish I could stay. I hope I can stay... I can live here, I like this place.'

Time was getting on. I had a train to catch, he a bus in the opposite direction. We picked our respective bags, stood up and walked outside the cafeteria. There was not even a light breeze in this balmy afternoon to bring one back to the coolness of reality.

I turned to him and offered him my hand, which he shook again with firmness and wouldn't let go. Twice I tried to remove it from his grip, and found myself giving an extra squeeze so as to make my position less awkward, while he repeated his 'Thank you' and kept his beautiful, huge eyes fixed on mine.

For a mad instance I thought I couldn't let him go and disappear forever into the crowded streets of Sydney. I felt a bond had been crafted between us during our conversation, too precious, too providential, to be discarded in an eye blink. Instinctively, I reached inside my bag and fumbled for my purse. I brought out a card and handed it to him: 'If you ever need any help, anything...'

He put it in his pocket and thanked me yet again. I wished him good luck with his application and all the best in the meantime. Then we each went our way.

Almost immediately, on my way to the station, I was gripped by uneasiness, hit with the irrationality of what I had done. I had acted so rashly giving this stranger -stranger?- my phone number and address! Could I trust him? And what would he ever want with me, what had we in common, for goodness sake? Our worlds were universes apart, something an hour of soul-pouring talk could never bridge.

But then, the magnitude of the meaning of our encounter began to dawn on

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me, and I began to ponder on the details all the way back home, questioning my own values, beliefs and prejudices that his tragic story had shaken awake like the rattling train was shaking my bones. I had been given the opportunity -or rather, been forced- to see through the homosexual without to meet the person within.

I wanted to know more: of him, of his kind, of his way of life. I felt happy he was carrying my card in his pocket. I hoped he would ring me one day with the good news that his application had been accepted. Perhaps one day we would meet again and I'd be able to bathe in the pools of his eyes made clear.

The next week I found myself browsing through news agencies looking for the Spanish press that I knew existed in this country but had never bothered to buy nor read. I found a couple of weekly newspapers and chose the most recent to take with me. During my lunch break I went to my favourite cafeteria and proceeded to read the headlines while sipping a strong flat white.

Nothing grabbed my attention much until I came upon an article on police corruption in Colombia that occupied a most inconspicuous place on the paper's layout: left bottom corner, even page and only two columns wide. Nevertheless, I forgot my coffee for the time I took to read it. Quite bland, of course, except that among words such as 'narcotics', 'bribery' and 'black market' appeared that of 'homosexuals'. All it said was that this group had also been targeted by corrupt policemen as income providers, together with drug dealers, prostitutes and crime barons.

From that day on, each week I purchased a copy of the Spanish weekly. More often than not, I would find something on the chaotic situation in Colombia, and my interest in this country grew. I also searched for gay literature, but unfortunately only found a couple of magazines of the raunchy kind -not the serious stuff I'd hoped to find- and shrugged away from them.

When the Mardi Gras arrived, I proposed to my friends to go and see it, and for the first time in my life I was an eyewitness to this world-watched event, although my eyes were kept busy roaming amid the clusters of people, gliding over the crowds, tapping over shadows' shoulders, in their search for a particular face. They never found it. Although the following day, in the news report on the previous night's parade, I looked intently and I believe I glimpsed Raimundo for a split second, holding on to another man's arm while jumping joyously in circles. But I wasn't able to see his eyes, so I'm not sure if it was actually him.



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The months passed, the queues at work grew and I wondered if Raimundo's case had been processed and, if so, had he been granted the refugee status that meant the breath of life to him. So many applications, so many sad faces, so many hopes raised high only to fall flat and flounder. The wait... the uncertainty... hovering, in limbo... And at the end of it all, a sentence or an acquittal, formalised with an illegible signature on an impersonal piece of paper.

One morning I thought I saw Raimundo waiting at the end of my queue. I quickly had a second look, but there were only women making up the tail of the line. Again I thought I saw him leaving the place through the glass doors directly opposite my counter; but when I tried to follow his figure with my eyes the shape disintegrated into many passers-by.

At lunch time, as I walked into the cafeteria, I saw Raimundo sitting at a corner table, dressed in a black and white polo shirt and dark jeans, and my heart missed a beat. But as I got closer to it, another man rose from the chair and left the scene. My legs failed me and I slumped on the chair next to the one recently vacated. The man had resembled Raimundo so closely! 'Probably comes from the same part of the world,' I reflected.

'What would you like, Miss?' the waiter's voice startled me.

'Flat white, thank you.'

As I turned my head towards the window, I noticed from the corner of my eye a paper, folded in half, lying on the third chair around my table. I leaned to pick it up. It was not my usual Spanish weekly, but a different one. Nonetheless, I decided to give it a browse, since it was there.

As I opened it to spread it on the table, I was confronted by a large photograph on the front page depicting, at close-up, the corpse of a young man. There was no mistake as to his identity. Now I knew the answer to my query. His eyes were closed, but I knew for sure those deep wells had never regained their once clear water and had perished of stagnation, choked by the putrefied mud others had never ceased to throw in them.

**Marisa Cano** is a journalist, translator and community writer. She facilitates creative writing workshops for non-English speakers. She is active in translating literary work, organising literary events and involved in the publication of multicultural anthologies.

**JUSTIN D'ATH**

*Short Story*

## Five Generalisations about Women and Love

### 1) A man's age doesn't matter to a woman

In and out. That's the way he likes it. If there are more than five or six people waiting he goes away and comes back later. Today he has come and gone three times - a new record - and now, on his fourth visit, there is only one person (not counting the baby in the stroller) in the lane marked 'Pensions only'. He takes his place behind her.

It isn't that he is unduly impatient. Nor that he hasn't the time to stand waiting in queues. It is simply that he feels self conscious, even slightly fraudulent, to be claiming a pension. It would be different, he imagines, if Sam were the age of the toddler in the stroller ahead of him: if she needed a full time parent. But lately it seems to John that he needs his daughter more than she needs him.

While the pensions officer, a woman in her mid- to late forties, explains the function of a Pharmaceutical Benefit Safety-Net Card, in painstaking and repetitive detail to an elderly couple at the counter, John studies the girl, the toddler's mother, in front of him. There are no rings on her left hand. That's the first thing he checks for nowadays. She's wearing a tight green top with part of its label showing above the neckband (TIGSLKODS), denim jeans and a pair of massage sandals. The jeans are nicely but not over filled and they cleave in attractively at her waist. She's shorter than John, but not by much, and he

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likes how she has her caramel-brown hair wound into a flattened doughnut on top of her head so that the back of her neck is exposed. It's very white, the skin there, as if she normally wears her hair down. Perhaps she's meeting someone after she's finished here - someone special, a boyfriend. John hopes it isn't a boyfriend.

He has a sudden impulse - which of course he resists - to reach out and tuck the label down inside the neckband of her clingy top. He remembers performing this service for Sam in that long-ago time when such small loving acts were allowable; before they indoctrinated her in school (aged five or six) against the dangers inherent in a father's touch.

Finally the old couple moves away and it's the girl's turn at the counter. John notices, as she pushes the stroller forward, that she's slightly bow-legged. He finds this encouraging. After all, what chance would he have if she was perfect?

Although he hasn't seen her face yet, he guesses she's pretty from the way the woman behind the counter (matronly, too much make-up) is regarding her: that rucked look about her eyes and mouth.

'How are you today?'

'Good thanks.' Her voice is pretty too.

As she leans forward to pass her pink Sole Parent Review form across the counter, her vertebrae, perfectly fossilised in green rayon, trace a long, lovely trail down her back. Running crosswise to this, and palely visible through the stretched fabric, the straps of her bra compete for (and win) John's attention. He has to struggle to keep his thoughts pure. But his fingertips, independently promiscuous, greedily recall the little tug-and-twist action it would take to unhook them.

'This is all okay,' the pensions officer says, stamping the form, *thump!*, and giving a matching rubber-stamp smile.

Dismissed, the girl draws the stroller backwards and pivots it around in a single practised movement that brings her and John face to face. He was right about her looks: they more than compensate for her legs. If only, he thinks in that brief instant of eye-contact, I was ten years younger. He moves aside to let her pass.

'Next!' the pensions officer calls.

Standing at the counter, John discovers he's annoyed with himself. A man's age doesn't matter to a woman. He should have seized the moment, gone with

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her to the door and held it open for her. Used that as a pretext to start a conversation.

But he remembers it's an automatic door.

'What are Public Lending Rights?'

The pensions officer has John's form open at the Statement of Income section on Page Three.

'It's a payment I get from the National Library. For a book I wrote.'

'So this Public Lending Right, it's a regular source of income?'

He shrugs. 'I suppose once a year is regular.'

The woman smiles. 'If it was weekly,' she says, 'it might make a difference. And this other work you do, at the prison - is it likely to increase over the next three months?'

'I don't expect so. It's only the one class a week.'

The girl's completed form (he presumes it's hers - it's at the top of the pile) lies in a tray on the narrow desk below the counter. He can't see her name because the woman's elbow obstructs his view. But by edging sideways he is able to make out her address. 24 Buddleia Court. He passes Buddleia Court on his way in to town; it's only three or four blocks away. She probably walked here.

'I've never met an author before,' the pensions officer is saying.

'I'd hardly call myself an author,' he says modestly.

'You've written a book.'

She has moved her arm, revealing part of the girl's surname - *ycomb*.

Honeycomb? John wonders.

'When I make enough to give up my pension,' he tells her, 'then I'll call myself an author.'

The woman stamps his form carefully and places it on top of the pile. She's smiling at him, a smile quite unlike the one she gave Ms *ycomb*.

'Have you thought about writing romances?' she asks. 'There was a woman on television the other night who writes those Mills and Boon paperbacks - just one book a year and she gets by quite nicely. Supports her husband, too.'

John looks past her elbow, at the pile of forms in the tray beside her. Would he be capable, after all that's happened, of writing a *love* story?

## 2) They like you to notice how they look

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Standing on the footpath outside the DSS office, John searches up and down the street but the girl is nowhere in sight. She must have gone to her boyfriend. He pictures them meeting in a lunch-bar, the boyfriend standing to kiss her, then bending to coochy-choo the baby. He wonders if the boyfriend likes her new hairstyle. Whether he will remark on it. If John was her boyfriend he would tell her right away how nice it looks. 'I like how you've done your hair,' he would say. At which (and John can picture this) the girl would lower her eyes, a little embarrassed because the people at the next table might have heard, but unable to hide the small, pleased smile that tugs at the corners of her mouth. They like you to notice how they look. But only the good parts - he would never mention her legs.

A light rain has begun to fall. He glances at his watch, then sets off at a brisk pace around the block to the public car park where he left the stationwagon. He is not sure how long he has been in town. But his three aborted visits to the Pensions queue must have brought him close to the 90 minute parking limit. He can't afford a fine.

He can't afford a wife.

Where did that thought come from? he asks himself as he dashes across Regina Street in the rain. But he knows very well where it came from: it came from being thirty-nine years old and celibate; and from allowing himself to entertain pathetic fantasies about women - *girls* - half his age.

And it's true. He *can't* afford a wife.

There is no parking ticket on the windscreen. He unlocks the door and gets in. But before he starts the engine he glances at himself in the rear-vision mirror. The rain has moulded what's left of his hair to his scalp, which shows pinkly through at the crown. He musses his hair up, then tips his head forward to inspect the result. Much better. He could pass as a thirty-year-old.

Well, maybe thirty-five.

He sees her halfway along the third block. A transparent plastic hood has been draped over the stroller against the rain. But she has nothing to keep herself dry. She's not even wearing a windcheater. He decides, spontaneously, to offer her a lift. Man in car rescues young woman from rain. A pleasing image, even if his intentions are not altogether altruistic. Thirty metres ahead of her there is a gap in the procession of parked cars that line the road on both sides for at least another block and a half. It's a bus stop, he discovers, but he pulls in anyway. Leaning over, he begins winding the passenger-side window

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down. He almost calls out to the girl, then changing his mind he closes the window and gets out. He walks round to the footpath.

‘Would you like a lift?’

She has stopped two metres short of him. ‘I’m almost home,’ she says.

But she’s smiling.

John stands there. He’s very nervous. Two metres of wet asphalt separate them. The pusher is half a metre closer; her hands make small fists on the handle. He realises he is blocking her path, probably committing an act of sexual harassment. But how else in this age of automatic doors are you supposed to meet someone? The inside of his mouth has become dry. It’s nearly twenty years since he’s done anything like this. And even then, despite all that rampant testosterone, he found it difficult.

He takes a breath, speaks: ‘I saw you at the Social Security Office.’

‘I saw you too.’

It’s an acknowledgment, at least.

‘You’re getting wet,’ he says, stating the obvious.

‘So are you.’

An idea. ‘Wait here,’ he says. Hurrying back to the car, he fetches from the glovebox the telescopic umbrella that used to belong to Lucy. ‘This should do the trick,’ he says, snapping it open and thrusting it between her and the sky.

‘You should have it,’ the girl says. She reaches up as if to push his arm away, but stops just short of making physical contact. ‘I’m wet already.’

There are goose-bumps on John’s arm where she nearly touched him.

‘I’ll make a deal with you,’ he says, keeping his arm out so that the umbrella protects her and the stroller from the soft rain. ‘You have it on the way, I’ll have it on the way back.’

‘Then you’ll end up just as wet as I am.’

‘You can’t get any fairer than that.’

She laughs. They are walking now along the footpath, he with the umbrella, she with the stroller. Anyone seeing them might mistake them for a family.

‘I really don’t know why you’re doing this,’ she says.

But John knows. His heart feels huge and unruly inside his chest. It’s too bad he left his car in a bus stop. He steals a look at Ms Ycomb’s profile, at her wonderful high forehead and her small rain-pebbled nose (which he can imagine kissing dry) and he allows that he can, after all, afford a parking fine.

He can afford anything.

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'I like how you've done your hair,' John says.

### 3) If a woman isn't interested she will soon let a man know

Twenty-four Buddleia Court is a drab 1950's weatherboard with an enormous Cootamundra wattle sagging over the front lawn.

'Now it's your turn for the umbrella,' she says as she bends to unlatch the low pipe-and-netting gate.

John is disappointed. She's meant to invite him inside. *Have you got time for a cup of coffee?* she should be asking. This scenario ends with his returning - hours later - to the bus stop to find his car has been towed away.

'Would it be all right,' he asks now, scarcely daring to ask, 'if I came to visit you some time?'

She turns from swinging the gate open. Something he can't quite decipher - annoyance? - *pity?* - briefly narrows her eyes. 'If you want to,' she says noncommittally.

It's hardly an invitation, but it isn't a dismissal either. If a woman isn't interested she will soon let a man know.

'I'd like to. Maybe we could go out for lunch some time?'

She looks down at the stroller. 'It's difficult finding baby-sitters.'

They are both getting wet. He has allowed his right arm, the umbrella arm, to fall down to his side. Despite their agreement, he's too much the gentleman to use the umbrella until she has gone inside.

He says, 'I've got a fourteen year old daughter. She's good with babies.'

He doesn't know if this is true, but Sam is good with animals, which is probably an indication.

'I don't eat out much,' Ms ?ycomb says quickly. A blush has spread across her lightly freckled face and down her neck. 'It's the smell of cooking - sometimes it gives me headaches.'

He wonders if she means all cooking. What does she eat?

'Do you like picnics?'

She rewards him with a smile. 'That would be nice.'

'How about tomorrow?' he says. 'I can pick you up around eleven.'

She glances up at the sky.

'Weather permitting,' he adds.

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Still she seems doubtful. He can see she's having second thoughts. Slow down, he cautions himself. Don't rush her.

'Or some time next week, if that's better for you?'

'No,' she says. 'Tomorrow's okay so long as it isn't still raining.'

'I can bring an extra umbrella.'

She laughs at that. That's twice he's made her laugh.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'I haven't even introduced myself. My name's John - John Ursell.'

'I'm Emma,' she says. Just Emma.

'Pleased to meet you, Emma.' He transfers the umbrella to his left hand in case they are going to shake hands. They don't. 'What's your baby's name, Emma?'

'Caleb.'

John leans down and tries to see through the fogged plastic hood. He can't see much.

'Hullo Caleb.'

Emma is running her hands up and down the outsides of the stroller's chrome handles, splattering fat drops of water on the footpath. She looks apologetic. 'He doesn't like men very much.'

John straightens up. He tells himself it isn't personal. After all, he can't help being a man.

'You'd better go inside, Emma. You're soaking wet.'

Her top has become semi-transparent. He's trying hard to keep his eyes above her neckline. She's smiling.

'So are you.'

He tilts his head back to hide his damped-down hair.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Emma.' He knows he's using her name too much, but he likes it: likes the sound of it. Emma.

John and Emma.

### 4) Women are attracted to caring, responsible men

That evening he takes Sam to the movies.

'You're in a good mood,' she says as they stop off to have McDonald's on their way to the cinema. Normally he won't buy McDonald's, claiming - and



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he knows this is an exaggeration - that any fish and chip shop will sell you a bigger, better hamburger for half the money.

'I met someone today.'

Sam spits out half a french fry. Her table manners have been regressing steadily since she entered puberty. 'You mean a female someone?'

John nods. His mouth is full of Big Mac but he can hardly wait to swallow.

'Her name's Emma.'

'Is she pretty?'

'Yes,' he says. Proudly. And takes another bite.

Sam sits beaming at him across the low plastic table. Ever since her mother left she's been trying to marry him off.

'Tell me about her. What's she like?'

'She's nice.'

'I mean what does she *look* like?'

'Well,' he says, pausing to sip his orange juice, teasing her with the delay, 'she's got brown hair, she's slim, she's -'

'Any kids?'

'One. A boy.'

'How old?' Sam has recently become interested in boys. Obsessed, is the word John would use.

'I'm not sure. A year, fifteen months.'

She wrinkles her nose. 'How old's Anna?'

'Emma,' he corrects her. 'I don't know. That isn't the sort of thing you ask someone on a first date.' He enjoys the irony of calling what he and Emma did today, their walk at extended-arm's-length (and he has long arms) down Larriere Street, a date.

Sam asks: 'Is she, you know, about the same age as you?'

That was tactful. She could have said, would normally have said, as *old* as you. In Sam's eyes anyone over the age of thirty-five is decrepit. She'll approve of Emma.

'She's younger than me.'

'Much younger?'

'Quite a bit younger, yes.' It occurs to him now that Emma is probably a lot closer to Sam's age than to his.

'When can I meet her?' Sam asks.

'I've only just met her myself.'

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'So?'

'So,' John says, 'you'll have to be patient.'

'Why don't we ask her to come to the movies?'

'I don't think she'd want Caleb to see *Terminator*.'

'Caleb,' Sam says. 'That's a cute name. When I have kids I might call one of them Caleb.'

It must be good to be fourteen.

'Your hamburger's getting cold,' John says.

'It's a Cheeseburger.' Using her fingers, Sam breaks off a chunk of bun and pops it into her mouth. 'When are you going to see her again?'

'Tomorrow. We're having a picnic.'

'Can I come?'

'You'll be at school.'

'No I won't. Tomorrow's Report Writing Day - pupil free. Didn't you read the newsletter?'

'What newsletter?'

'The one last week.'

'I haven't seen any newsletters for at least a month,' John says.

Sam pokes a finger down into her french fries, removes it and licks off the salt.

'I could look after Caleb while you two ... you know.'

He pretends he doesn't know. He will take her up later on the matter of the missing school newsletters.

'You're not coming.'

'Please Dad!' It must mean a lot to her. Mostly now, unless she wants something, she calls him by his Christian name. 'I'll be really nice. I won't stuff around or do anything grotty.'

'Like talking with your mouth full?'

She quickly swallows. 'I'll be a credit to you, Dad. What's-her-name will see what a fantastic job you're doing bringing me up; she'll want to marry you straight away.'

'It's a bit early to be thinking about marriage,' John says, thinking about it.

Sam smiles knowingly. 'I see you trimmed your moustache.'

'It needed trimming.'

'Better for kissing.'

He decides he'll ignore that. In his mind he returns to what she said a

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moment ago about his proficiency as a parent: about the impression it would make on Emma. He realises Sam is right: women are attracted to caring, responsible men - men who'll make good fathers for their children. He imagines he would measure up quite favourable against Caleb's father, who has obviously reneged on at least some of his duties as a parent.

'All right,' he says, 'you can come. As long as you don't wear anything too grungy.'

### 5) Women don't need men (like) men need women

'Those are nice earrings,' Sam says.

'Thank you.' Emma twists round and smiles at her in the back seat. 'They're new.'

John, driving, is annoyed with himself for not noticing them. He glances sideways. She has her hair out today, pushed back behind her ears. He liked it better up. He wonders if she bought the earrings herself or whether they were a gift from someone. The boyfriend? Caleb's father? Their black and white design is familiar.

'That's the ying yang symbol isn't it?'

'It's *yin yang*, Dad.'

Shut up, Sam. He catches Emma's eye. 'Chinese always was my worst subject at school.'

Her face lights up. 'You learned Chinese!'

'Not really. I was joking,' he says. And looks back at the road. Shit!

Sam asks: 'How old's Caleb, Em?' The child is beside her, strapped into his own little space-shuttle seat that raises him high enough to scowl at John each time their eyes meet in the rear-vision mirror.

'He'll be eighteen months next Monday.'

'He's got such gorgeous long eyelashes!'

John envies women (and he classes Sam as a woman in this) for their uncanny knack of coming up with the right thing to say. The kid is ugly, anyone can see that. All the same, John acknowledges, he's been disposed to judge Caleb harshly: it's difficult to look kindly on someone who doesn't like you. However, as they drive to their picnic he resolves to win the child over. Win the child, win the mother. It is, after all, a package deal.

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When they arrive at the picnic spot - a small park near the botanical gardens where he and Lucy used to meet sometimes during her lunch hour - John makes a point of unstrapping Caleb himself and holding his sticky little hand as the four of them slowly cross the gravel carpark towards the lawns where the picnic tables are.

And later, when they have finished lunch and Sam has returned with the child from a fifteen minute tour of duty in the nearby adventure playground, John hoists him onto his knee. Where, to his surprise, Caleb settles comfortably and is soon asleep.

Emma is surprised too.

'He's never done that before. Usually he has nothing to do with men.'

Sam, sitting next to her at the rough wooden table that's still puddled with the fall-out from Caleb's orange juice, winks across at him.

'Dad's really good with children.'

'I can see that,' Emma says.

'Even when Mum lived with us he used to do all the housework and cooking and that. He's a really good cook.'

Don't overdo it, Sammy.

'You should come over for tea,' Sam says. She turns to him. 'Dad, why don't we invite Emma and Caleb over for tea tonight? You could make a big lasagne, a double recipe, and I'll do golden syrup dumplings for after.'

He remembers Emma's aversion to cooking smells. Well, he could always put together a salad.

He says, 'Emma might have other plans, Sam.' Someone else to spend the evening with.

'We can still *ask*,' Sam insists. 'What about it Em? Dad makes the best lasagne.'

'Caleb and I don't go out much at night,' she says.

'We could have tea early. Dad, you could drive Emma and Caleb home before it gets dark.'

Because it's already been established that Emma doesn't own a car.

'The thing is,' she says, 'I have to be careful what I eat.'

Sam begins to say, 'You look thin enou-' and cuts herself off. Her face colours. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean -. Oh poop!' she says.

Emma catches her fingers. 'Hey, it's no big deal.' She leans over and whispers into Sam's ear.

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'Okay,' Sam says.

They both stand up.

'Where are you going?' John asks.

His daughter gives him a censoring look.

'It's girls' stuff,' she tells him.

He watches them walk off in the direction of the public toilets thirty metres away. Look at them, he thinks. Sharing secrets already. He feels shut out. It occurred to him during the dark period after Lucy left that women are the more autonomous of the sexes: they don't need men - at least not in the same way, nor to the extent, that men need women.

Face it, John tells himself, I've got nothing to offer Emma that she doesn't have already.

They would both lose their pensions, for a start.

'You rotten thing!'

The cry - shrill, echoing - comes from the toilets. He looks up and sees Sam's bent-over form dart out of the building. She sprints towards the playground. Now Emma appears in the doorway. She's shaking water out of her hair.

'I'll get you for that!' she yells.

Kicking off her sandals, she sets off at a run after Sam.

John watches them racing around the playground. They are as uninhibited as children. It would be fun to join in. But he knows there is no place for him, nearly forty years old, a man, in their play.

Anyway, someone has to look after Caleb.

Eventually it's Emma who tires first. Slowing to a walk, she makes her way over to the see-saws and flops down. Sam comes back, taking a circuitous route around the swings and the giant noughts and crosses set. She walks slowly, keeping a wary eye on Emma while trying to appear nonchalant. Emma waits until she comes past, then plucks a handful of grass and tosses it ineffectually in her direction.

'Bar-ley!' Sam says, holding up two sets of crossed fingers.

Emma laughs. 'You'll keep,' she says.

Both girls are whooping up a medley of coughs, wheezes and laughter. Emma, pink and dishevelled, seems younger than ever. She and Sam could be sisters.

I'm a fool, John thinks.

Draping her upper body across the see-saw's raised end, Sam presses down.

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And, so slowly at first that she hardly seems to be moving, Emma rises up off the ground. When the bar is nearly horizontal she puts her feet down and holds it there.

‘Get on,’ she says. ‘Let's do bumps.’

John has never heard it called that before, but he knows immediately she means the same roughhouse game that, in a darkened playground somewhere in Canberra nearly eighteen years ago (Emma would have been a pre-schooler), all but ruined his honeymoon. He remembers driving round that unfamiliar city at night looking for a dentist to repair his new wife's broken front tooth.

And how, later on at their motel, she'd said: ‘How can you even think about sex after what's happened?’

Caleb is awake. He has wriggled right around so that his face is pressed into John's chest. John can feel the urgent little mouth searching through the gap in his shirt for a nipple.

‘Sorry mate,’ he says, lifting the child gently away from himself. ‘Look, I'm a man.’

He remembers feeling, that first time Lucy refused him, that he was being punished for breaking her tooth. Which didn't seem fair. If blame was to be apportioned, surely the accident was as much her fault as his. But gradually - it took years of similar refusals - he has come to realise that it wasn't punishment at all, it was simply part of the dues that must be paid for the love of a woman.

**Justin D'Ath** teaches Professional Writing and BRIT at Bendigo TAFE. He published one adults' novel, *The Initiate*, and short stories published in 15 countries. He has written seven children's novels. He lives in Spring Gully, Victoria, Australia.

**JOHN HOLTON**

*Short Story*

## Blood and Chocolate

*Step 1: The cocoa beans are cleaned to remove all extraneous material.*

This is a true story, though I won't be surprised if you don't believe me. It would be much easier to think I'm mad, especially when I tell you that I've been sitting here at the kitchen table for the past five hours staring at a sheet of paper. The paper contains a letter, and at the bottom of the letter is a dotted line on which I'm expected to sign my name. If I don't sign it my son, Marty, will hate me. If I do, I may well go crazy. But none of this will make any sense until you know my story.

I grew up in Strickland Avenue, South Hobart, within a sniff of the Cascade Brewery where my father worked as a storeman. My best friend Colin Trelevan, whose dad was a GP, lived in a big two storey place overlooking the brewery and the Waterworks Reservoirs. For a couple of ten year olds the Cascades district of Hobart was a wonderland; the brewery like our own private Camelot. Colin and I were inseparable and everyone at the brewery knew us by name. We had the run of the place, knew every inch of it, from the creaky steel ladders that led to the rooftops, to the musty cellars full of old kegs and wooden crates. I'll never forget the sour smell of fermenting hops and malt. It filled our houses and everything we ate tasted of it. I can remember returning on the bus from shopping trips to the centre of town and getting that first whiff of the brewery. It was the smell of coming home. When I finally moved away to the mainland as an 18 year old it took weeks before I could eat

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or sleep properly. I hated the smell of fresh air, the real taste of food. But I'm getting off the track, aren't I.

*Step 2: To bring out the chocolate flavour and colour the beans are roasted. The temperature, time and degree of moisture involved in roasting depends on the type of beans being used and the sort of chocolate product required from the process.*

Colin's dad was a GP, have I said that already? and their house had almost as many rooms as the Cascade Brewery. It was a mansion, and Colin's bedroom was at the very top, up a separate flight of stairs, almost in the roof. It had one little window that opened out onto a mossy, red-tiled roof. On warm nights we would sit out there eating chocolate, Mt. Wellington looming God-like over our shoulders and the Derwent turning all shades of pink in the fading light. Dr Trevelan, Colin's old man, had a serious sweet tooth. Well, actually, he was a chocaholic long before the term was invented, and Colin had undoubtedly inherited the same gene. The doctor kept a stash of chocolate in his surgery which Colin regularly siphoned up to his room. It was an idyllic childhood really. All beer and chocolate, and the cleanest tap water in the Southern Hemisphere- that's what Dr Trevelan always said.

*Step 3: A winnowing machine is used to remove the shells from the beans to leave just the cocoa nibs.*

Colin and I were both only-children. My mum couldn't have any more kids after me, though I still don't know why- women's problems I suppose. Colin's mum was too busy vacuuming and watching Days of Our Lives. Anyway, one night out on the Trevelan's roof Colin and I decided to become brothers. Blood brothers I mean. Colin got the compass from his pencil case and we each stabbed a chocolatey finger. Chocolate in our blood, that's what Colin said. He wasn't far from the truth.

The day before it happened we were riding our bikes home after school. Well, Colin was riding his bike, a brand new Repco Dragstar with a sky-scraping sissy bar and three speed gear shift on the cross bar. It had marlin handlebars like a Harley Davidson and, in 1974, was by far the coolest bike ever to grace the streets of South Hobart. There was nothing like it in the bike shops at the time. I was still riding a scooter, trying to keep up with Colin and



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retain some dignity at the same time. This particular afternoon I was hoofing it along the footpath, feeling jealous as hell of Colin on his Dragstar, and I came upon a bundle of ten dollar notes wrapped up with an elastic band. Over \$100, a lot of money back then. For some reason that I can't recall I told my mother and she made Colin and I take it to the police station. The police told us that if it wasn't claimed in three months we would get to keep the money, which we did. Well, I did. I've still got Colin's half in a Commonwealth Bank savings account. I don't know what to do with it. Twenty six years at 3.25%. It's more than doubled. You see, these are the sorts of things I don't tell anyone, not even my wife, especially the psychologist. Anyway, you're waiting to hear the story. You've been very patient.

*Step 4: The cocoa nibs undergo alkalisation, usually with potassium carbonate, to develop the flavour and colour.*

Colin and I went to South Hobart Primary in Anglesea Street, and every year the grade fives went on an excursion to the chocolate factory, out on the river at Claremont. It was the pinnacle of five years at school. Each year from prep onwards we heard the stories from grade fivers, and every year they became more exaggerated. Starting out as a few free samples, then it was as much as you could eat and kids vomiting out of bus windows. The year before ours they were talking stomach pumps and kids swimming in enormous vats of chocolate. It was all very 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' which, to a couple of kids with chocolate in their veins was like a holy grail.

*Step 7: The cocoa liquor is pressed to extract the cocoa butter leaving a solid mass called cocoa presscake. The amount of butter extracted from the liquor is controlled by the manufacturer to produce presscake with different proportions of fat.*

Colin's Birthday was a week before the excursion and his parents bought him a camera. Not some crummy little Instamatic but a really wizz-bang 35mm job. An Olympus Trip. You can still buy them in second hand camera shops. Brilliant little cameras. They gave him two rolls of film as well, so Colin decided he would make a book. A kind of pictorial celebration of chocolate. It was all very exciting.

That same week Colin got new runners. He was always first to have the

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latest name brand, and we were all in awe of his Adidas 'Romes'. They were impressive shoes; white and glossy with royal blue stripes. He looked like a million bucks getting on the bus that day with his new camera slung around his neck and his feet glowing like weather beacons. The world was his Yowie, to use a 90's metaphor. Life is held together by such a thin thread isn't it. I don't think you really understand that until you have kids of your own.

*Step 8: The processing now takes two different directions. The cocoa butter is used in the manufacture of chocolate. The cocoa presscake is broken into small pieces to form kibbled presscake which is then pulverised to form cocoa powder.*

We were half way through the tour, in the part of the factory where they mix the cocoa butter with the milk and sugar and emulsifiers, when it happened. It probably sounds a bit technical, but you know, I can remember all of the first nine steps in the processing of cocoa beans into chocolate like they've been etched into my brain. There are fourteen steps in all, starting with the cleaning of the beans, through to the packaging of the chocolate. I don't know anything after step nine. The very thought of chocolate makes me nauseous. I haven't tasted the stuff in 26 years. But it's still in my blood. It won't go away.

There must have been twenty or more huge stainless steel vats full of the chocolate mixture. They looked and sounded like giant replicas of my mother's Kenwood Mixmaster, churning away at the thick, dark chocolate. There were large control panels with hundreds of lights and buttons, and steel scaffolding with narrow walkways suspended above the vats. The noise was deafening and the female guide, who we dubbed the chocolate lady, had to scream out how each vat contained different varieties of chocolate. Colin and I were at the back of the group, Colin taking notes for his book and hanging back to take photos. This part of the story gets a bit hazy, but I'll tell it how I remember.

It happened very quickly and all simultaneously, to my memory. Red lights above the control panels started to flash, a high pitched alarm sounded, and all the machines whirred to a halt. I remember the clanging sound of boots on the steel scaffolding as we were ushered outside into a yard full of forklift trucks and packing crates and told by our teacher, Mr Sharples, to sit down and not move. I looked around for Colin but he wasn't behind me any more. I think I knew then that something terrible had happened.

We waited ten minutes, maybe longer. It's hard to remember those sorts of

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details. I think some of the kids thought at first it was a fire drill or a bomb scare, like we sometimes had at school. There was the usual laughter and wisecracks. Then Miss Murphy, the other teacher on the excursion, came out to speak to us. I'll never forget the look of complete terror on her face. She was drained of colour and her voice tremored as she spoke.

'There's been an accident. We won't be completing our tour of the factory. The bus will be here shortly to take us back to the school.'

'But Miss', one of the girls said, 'Colin's not here.'

And that was when Miss Murphy lost it and started to cry. Not just tears, but the kind of crying you see at Italian funerals. Her whole body convulsed and she wept loudly with her hands covering her face. We looked at each other, white-faced and shit scared ten year olds. I doubt that any of the grade five class of 1974 have forgotten that moment. For me, however, there was to be a more lasting image.

*Step 9: Cocoa liquor is used to form chocolate through the addition of cocoa butter. Other ingredients such as sugar, milk, emulsifying agents and cocoa butter equivalents are also added and mixed using a machine. The proportions of the different ingredients depends on the type of chocolate being made.*

This is the part of the story that even I have trouble believing. Mr Sharples took me aside and said that because I was Colin's best friend the police would like to ask me some questions. So while the other kids got on the bus I had to go back inside, walk back past the shiny vats and flashing control panels, then up a flight of steel steps to an office that overlooked that whole part of the factory. It was eerie and quiet without the noise of the mixing machines, and the smell of chocolate hung sickly sweet. A man in a suit asked me, among other things, if I thought Colin was a happy child. Can you believe it? What sort of a question is that to ask a ten year old? They asked me if he'd said anything unusual to me in the days before. Christ, everything we said to each other would have sounded unusual to an old guy in a suit. So I said nothing. I didn't even mention the book. That was Colin's business.

It was as I walked back down the stairs that I saw it. It lay on a plastic bag on the floor, near a group of uniformed police who stood, arms folded, talking in low mumbles. A chocolate coated running shoe. The toe was still white. It looked like an huge Choc Wedge with the chocolate nibbled away. I stood

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frozen to the steps, staring at that shoe until Mr Sharples dragged me out into the daylight and I vomited on the leg of his trousers. That's it, my last memory of Colin Trelevan, my best friend and blood brother. So now you know.

There were no such things as grief counsellors in 1974. Grieving was something adults did privately. Children were shielded from such trauma, so Colin's name was never uttered again in our house and I was sent back to school to get on with things. I hung my schoolbag next to his empty hook and sat next to his empty desk. I ate my lunch alone and wept down behind the school incinerator until my head swam and it hurt to swallow.

And, here I am, a bloody mess; a grown man crying over a simple permission slip, and Marty due home from school any minute.

*Dear Parent,*

*On Friday the 21st of April the grade five class will be visiting SweefTime Confectionery Manufacturers at Camden Vale as part of our Easter project on the production of chocolate from cocoa beans...*

**John Holton's** short stories have won him numerous literary awards. He is a co-editor of *The Animist*, an on-line journal of the Arts, and lives with his wife and three young sons at Lake Eppalock in central Victoria.

S H O R T S T O R I E S

## RAGHID NAHHAS

### *Short Story*

## Night Stars

After unlocking the padlock and raising the roller-door of his shop, hajji Subhi raised his head towards the sky and muttered: 'Ya Generous ya Provider, make this a blessed day for the sake of your beloved prophet. And protect us from the evil eye and the cunning of the scoundrels, and enable us to do good, for you are the All-Hearing All-Answering, amen.' Hajji Subhi has repeated this daily ritual every morning since he took over the shop from his father some thirty years ago. After arranging the shop-windows, he would go out to the yard of the khan, stand by the fountain in the middle and drink his *qahwa*, the coffee prepared for him by the *qahwaji*, the drink master who services shop-owners in this historic khan located near the famous market the Hamidiyya Souk in Old Damascus. As he stood, he would exchange the morning *assalamu alaikum* with his neighbours as they arrived one after the other, so that the noise of raising the roller doors was mixed with the sounds of morning greetings.

Shop-owners in this khan were retail merchants, as was hajji Subhi. The exception was one they called hajji Cesspool who was a wholesaler. He imported goods from Aleppo and sold them to the rest of the traders, mostly on credit. The traders were fascinated by *brocar*, brocaded clothing material Aleppo was famous for. Whenever a new shipment arrived they would quickly gather in his vast shop, competing to buy rolls of clothing material of designs they considered saleable and profitable.

Hajji Subhi was at odds with one of his neighbours who continually

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counterfeited some of the special trade marks the hajji used to produce. This rival also did everything he could to tarnish the hajji's reputation, particularly amongst the Lebanese customers who used to frequent Damascus to buy abundantly in the sixties when the Lebanese lira was worth much more than its Syrian sister. The Lebanese used to buy goods and enjoy the best of food for the difference in the value of the lira. Hajji Subhi was the product of inherited wealth. He was not the type who would confront his rival directly. He adopted indirect methods, such as stocking his shop with many products that were loved by the Lebanese. He used to boast in front of them that his wife was a Lebanese herself. He would tell them that he was proud of that, that he loved his other half the Lebanon, that this was why he discounted his prices for them and gave them the best advice possible. He was very generous in ordering drinks for them. This made him the most valuable customer of the *qahwaji's*.

When the hajji entered the khan that morning he avoided, as usual, looking at his neighbour-enemy. He could not, however, avoid passing him by because his shop was located at the entrance to the khan. It was a Sunday, the official Lebanese weekend. Everyone was awaiting the arrival of the Lebanese eagerly. Sunday was a lucky day for hajji Subhi. He was certain that his reputation and friendship with many Lebanese were his two main weapons, enough to bring him the largest number of customers, and let the eyes of his envious rival pop out! The question was, of course, how many visitors would become buyers, and how many would drink coffee and depart.

The hajji drank his coffee whilst in his imagination he was drawing up the day's strategy: how he would welcome the customers, show them the goods, order the drinks for them, wish them a good day and a lucky return to the Lebanon. How he would respond to them when they told him about the difficulty of one-day travel in the summer, accompanied by the waiting at the frontier. How he would smile at them when they told him that what they had bought was worth all the trouble. How he would be very patient when some women talked to him with pride and arrogance, boasting about their family origins and saying that they were the sisters of this and the daughters of that. How at the end he would explode his time-bomb and expose the lineage of his wife so that the listeners would be taken aback when they discovered the extent of the influence, reputation and wealth of his lady's family. He laughed to himself and felt victorious despite the day not having effectively started yet, and not a single piaster dropped in his palm.

Here he was leaving his cup of coffee on the edge of the fountain when the first Lebanese group arrived and it was not even nine yet. 'Welcome! We greet

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you brothers and sisters. We are blessed. You are in your land and country. You light up our shop.' At the same time, his shop-hand arrived, and another boy started sweeping the shop floor, spraying water to prevent the dust and reduce the air temperature.

An August day of fire this was! Hot summer. Amongst the many Lebanese visiting the Damascene shops, you would always encounter a lady who is more liberal than the others in her adornment and grooming, fashionable with a dress revealing her body in a way that made it impossible for her Damascene sisters to compete. Whenever one of these ladies entered the khan, the eyes of the merchants and their assistants would pop out. Winking, whispering and talking in male riddles took hold. This was also an act of letting out for their thirsty desires that can only drink from phrases such as 'cream', 'honey', 'praise the Creator', 'oh Mohammed the Arab', 'I seek refuge in Jesus and Moses' and so on. Hajji Subhi had to withstand two problems. First, he hated this behaviour of his compatriots strongly, and considered it to be low. Second, that damned instinct of his telling him that everything they felt and said was correct. He muttered, 'No strength or ability but by the blessing of Allah', and averted his vision as per the holy instructions. He concentrated on his customers.

When it was approaching ten o'clock, the hajji noticed a halt in the usual clamor of arguments, whispering, remarking and calling out of merchandise. The inhabitants of the khan seemed suddenly struck by silence. A woman entered the khan. A woman this khan had never witnessed the like of before. As the hajji himself commented later, and this was the first time ever he would participate in such a commentary, his father must have danced in his grave on the rhythm of the footfalls of that woman. She had the body of Najwa Fuad and the face of Hend Rustum, a dancer and an actress beloved by men. She had a thick golden hair thrown over the shoulder, reaching her lower back. Her hips danced right and left and up and down to the rhythm of her very high heels. Every footfall on the khan's floor was a dagger implanting the heart of every man who stood neck-stretched, lips parted as he monitored that noble white horse heading towards the shop of hajji Subhi.

The khan's inhabitants, shop-owners, keepers and their assistants started pretending that they had business outside the khan. They went out and in passing by the hajji's shop to take a look at that blue-blooded filly who was game enough to sit and light up a cigarette, cross-legged, with the hem of her dress well above her knees.

When the lady started talking, hajji Subhi felt a cascade of jasmine bathing

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every corner of his body which could no longer bear his accelerated heartbeat. Her words were coming out of lips painted by a brush of lust. The lady spoke of how so-and-so, from this family and that, of this Lebanese village and that, informed her of the shop of the best merchant in Damascus. She wanted to buy a quantity of the best *brocar* Syria produced. The lady wanted to select the material, pay for it and send someone to fetch it later, if that was all right with the hajji. Hajji Subhi smiled, and told her that his shop was hers, and that she could leave the material in his trust as long as she wanted.

Hajji Subhi began selecting material for her himself. He would unroll a few metres of a cloth and fashion them around the lady's body. The lady would turn towards a big mirror fixed onto a door that separates the shop from a back storage room. She would adjust the material around herself, spreading her very long-nailed fingers to hold as much as possible in place. Whenever the hajji approached her to hand her the verge of the cloth and assist her in spreading it around her shoulders, he would inhale with all his capacity the scent spreading from every corner of her body.

She selected many pieces. She then told the hajji that now she needed a very special piece for herself that she would like to take with her. She requested to be shown anything better than what she had already purchased. The hajji assured her that all the material she bought was of fine quality. He, however, had a favourite design that he put aside for his special customers. When the hajji spread the material, the lady eyed it with enthusiasm. Her eyes sparkled the sparkle of those who hit upon Solomon's treasures. She said, '*Yasalami!* What a wonderful piece hajji!'

'true...true, it is the most beautiful and exotic production this year. As you can see the background is black, and these small dots in green, red, blue and silver are spread like galaxies over the sky in a summer night. This is why we call it Night Stars. It is a deviation from the traditional designs we are used to. Very modern.'

'My! My! I want from this enough for a long dress. How much per metre hajji?'

'For you, the metre is seven liras only my lady.'

The hajji cut the required piece, congratulated the lady on her choice, and wished her a blessed and happy enjoyment of the dress.

The lady finished her cup of coffee offered to her by the hajji, thanked him for his excellent treatment and hospitality, and left the shop carrying her prized piece of cloth. There was a smile on her face as her footfalls resumed their teasing clamor. The eyes of the khan's inhabitants followed her and their



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hearts fell at her feet, but they were not able to fulfil their desires.

The hajji lit a cigarette, and withdrew from it enough smoke to fill his lungs as he was contemplating the abandoned cup of coffee that had the imprint of an abundant lip on its rim. A crimson red lip. He exhaled all the smoke content of his lungs as he relaxed backward on his chair, preparing himself for another smoke before he resumed his activities with other customers. His condition was obvious to his two assistants, but they would not dare comment.

When the lady was leaving the khan, the rival neighbour looked at her. He was envious and disappointed. He wished she had visited *his* shop, after all he was much younger and more handsome than hajji Subhi. He could tell from spying and from the length of time the lady spent at the hajji's, that she was a good customer. He decided to deploy his tactics. He told his partners that he was going after the lady who must surely meet the rest of her company at a known square nearby where buses park. He would attempt to bring them over to his shop.

Two hours had passed. The hajji was now at his desk sipping his glass of tea and resting after a busy morning. He was raising his glass with his thumb and forefinger holding on to its rim, and about to take a sip when the sound of her footfalls struck him again. Yes, the lady herself. The joy in his heart, however, did not last long. When he raised his face to look, the face of the noble horse was now injected with anger, becoming more like that of a raging bull. The woman barged inside the shop repeating acrimonious phrases not compatible with her elegance. She was reproaching the hajji for his betrayal and deceit that he sold her the Night Stars for double the price. Be it not for respect, she said, she would have shown him the *day stars*.

Amidst the puzzlement of the inhabitants of the khan who could clearly hear her loud rebuke, and the joy of his rival who expected this calamity, the hajji controlled himself, and this was rare. He asked the lady calmly to sit down and relax, and give him an opportunity to explore the problem. He asked his assistant to bring the lady some juice or coffee or even both together. She refused first, but accepted after the hajji insisted. She ordered a cup of black coffee without sugar. She did not hesitate in accepting a cigarette from the hajji who had never granted a cigarette to a woman before. He asked her gently to be kind enough to tell him the full story.

'Hajji, you sold me the metre of the Night Stars for seven Syrian liras. I did not bargain with you because I came here certain of your honesty and reputation. I, however, discovered that the price of this material is only five liras per metre. I am no longer sure about all that I bought from you.'

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‘My lady, and have you bought other things from where you bought the metre for five liras?’

‘Yes, I bought some oriental brass articles Damascus is famed for.’

‘May I have an idea about the prices you paid?’

‘By all means. For example I bought this coffeepot for seventy-five liras.’

The hajji then produced an exaggerated artificial laugh, attempting to disguise his anger because he had directly discovered the trick. The cost of the metre of the Night Stars is five liras and a half. No one can sell for less without incurring a loss. His rival deliberately reduced the price of the Night Stars because he knew where the lady had bought it. He compensated for his loss many times over by the sale of the brass articles which the hajji does not deal with. The coffeepot alone could easily be purchased for forty liras only. The hajji continued to deal with the problem gently without mentioning his rival at all.

‘My lady, this piece you bought for five liras a metre, I have for four liras and a half.’

‘But this is the same material I bought from you!’

‘Allow me to show you something my lady.’

The hajji went over to the storage room and brought three rolls of the Night Stars after marking some numbers on the edge of the carton over which each cloth is rolled. He spread part of each of the three rolls for the lady to see.

‘These are all Night Stars. No one can distinguish the difference. This first one sells for four liras and a half per metre. It is the same one you bought for five liras per metre. This second one sells for seven liras a metre, and this third one for ten liras. You choose what you like.’

‘But this is the same material hajji!’

‘No my lady. This is what you think. This first one is woven from local threads, and dyed locally. The second one uses local thread but French dyes are applied. This third one uses French threads and dyes. The weaving in all cases takes place in Aleppo, of course. I chose for you from the second because it is as good in quality as the third. The problems of our local products lie not in our threads but in our dyes. I did not show you the third most expensive variety because I did not want you to spend unnecessarily. If I considered you to be just like any customer, I would have explained this to you from the beginning and left you to choose. I allowed myself to choose the best for you, so please forgive me if I overstepped my limits.’

‘Allah forbids oh hajji! It is I who ask your forgiveness for my rash judgement. May the devil be cursed. And may your neighbour be cursed

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because he was behind all of this. He must have cheated on us with the brass prices.'

'Allah only knows my daughter, but I advise you to shop around before buying directly from one place.'

The lady returned later that day with a group of her friends who were cheated with the brass they bought from the hajji's neighbour. They discovered the distortion of the prices paid to that cheat, after he had attracted them with reducing the price of the clothing material to less than its cost. They cursed him, swore at him, threw the articles on the floor of his shop and retrieved their money.

They cooled down only when hajji Subhi received them with his hospitality and nice words when the lady brought them to him for acquaintance. They all wanted hajji Subhi to buy everything for them from Damascus if he did not mind.

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Facsimile: 61 3 9381 0305

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