

CALL ME ZEBRA

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Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi



ALMA BOOKS

FOR
ALL MY DEAD RELATIVES

— ZEBRA

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Surrey TW10 6TF
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However many beings there are in whatever realms of being might exist, whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have form or no form, whether they have perception or no perception or neither perception nor no perception, in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings, in the realm of complete nirvana I shall liberate them all. And though I thus liberate countless beings, not a single being is liberated.

— THE DIAMOND SUTRA

CALL ME ZEBRA

PROLOGUE

The Story of My Ill-Fated Origins

ILLITERATES, ABECEDARIANS, elitists, rodents all – I will tell you this: I, Zebra, born Bibi Abbas Abbas Hosseini on a scorching August day in 1982, am a descendent of a long line of self-taught men who repeatedly abandoned their capital, Tehran, where blood has been washed with blood for a hundred years, to take refuge in Nowshahr, in the languid, damp regions of Mazandaran. There, hemmed in by the rugged green slopes of the Elborz Mountains and surrounded by ample fields of rice, cotton and tea, my forebears pursued the life of the mind.

There too I was born and lived the early part of my life.

My father, Abbas Abbas Hosseini – multilingual translator of great and small works of literature, man with a thick moustache fashioned after Nietzsche's – was in charge of my education. He taught me Spanish, Italian, Catalan, Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, English, Farsi, French, German. I was taught to know the languages of the oppressed and the oppressors because, according to my father, and to my father's father, and to his father before that, the wheels of history are always turning and there is no knowing who will be run over next. I picked up languages the way some people pick up viruses. I was armed with literature.

As a family, we possess a great deal of intelligence – a kind of superintellect – but we came into this world, one after the other, during the era when Nietzsche famously said that God is dead. We believe that death is the reason why we have always been so terribly short-changed when it comes to luck. We are ill fated, destined to wander in perpetual exile across a world hostile to our intelligence. In fact, possessing an agile intellect with literary overtones has only served to worsen our fate. But it is what we know and have. We are convinced that ink runs through our veins instead of blood.

My father was educated by three generations of self-taught philosophers, poets and painters: his father, Dalir Abbas Hosseini; his

grandfather, Arman Abbas Hosseini; his great-grandfather, Shams Abbas Hosseini. Our family emblem, inspired by Sumerian seals of bygone days, consists of a clay cylinder engraved with three As framed within a circle; the As stand for our most treasured roles, listed here in order of importance: Autodidacts, Anarchists, Atheists. The following motto is engraved underneath the cylinder: *In this false world, we guard our lives with our deaths.*

The motto also appears at the bottom of a still life of a mallard hanged from a noose, completed by my great-great-grandfather, Shams Abbas Hosseini, in the aftermath of Iran's failed Constitutional Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. Upon finishing the painting, he pointed at it with his cane, nearly bludgeoning the mallard's face with its tip, and, his voice simultaneously crackling with disillusionment and fuming with rage, famously declared to his son, my great-grandfather, Arman Abbas Hosseini, "Death is coming, but we literati will remain as succulent as this wild duck!"

This seemingly futile moment marked the beginning of our long journey towards nothingness, into the craggy pits of this measly universe. Generation after generation, our bodies have been coated with the dust of death. Our hearts have been extinguished, our lives levelled. We are weary, as thin as rakes, hacked into pieces. But we believe our duty is to persevere against a world hell-bent on eliminating the few who dare to sprout in the collective manure of degenerate humans. That's where I come into the picture. I – astonished and amazed at the magnitude of the darkness that surrounds us – am the last in a long line of valiant thinkers.

Upon my birth, the fifth of August 1982, and on its anniversary every year thereafter, as a rite of passage, my father, Abbas Abbas Hosseini, whispered a monologue titled 'A Manifesto of Historical Time and the Corrected Philosophy of Iranian History: A Hosseini Secret' into my ear. I include it here, transcribed verbatim from memory.

Ill-omened child, I present you with the long and the short of our afflicted country, Iran: Supposed Land of the Aryans.

In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great, King of the Four Corners of the World, brave and benevolent man, set out on a military campaign

from the kingdom of Anshan in Parsa near the Gulf, site of the famous ruins of Persepolis, to conquer the Medes and the Lydians and the Babylonians. Darius and Xerxes the Great, his most famous successors, continued erecting the commodious empire their father had begun through the peaceful seizing of neighbouring peoples. But just as facts are overtaken by other facts, all great rulers are eclipsed by their envious competitors. Search the world east to west, north to south; nowhere will you find a shortage of tyrants, all expertly trained to sniff out weak prey. Eventually, Cyrus the Great's line of ruling progeny came to an end with Alexander the Great, virile youth whose legacy was, in turn, overshadowed by a long line of new conquerors, each of whom briefly took pleasure in the rubble of dynasties past.

Every one of us in Iran is a hybrid individual best described as a residue of a composite of fallen empires. If you were to look at us collectively, you would see a voluble and troubled nation. Imagine a person with multiple heads and a corresponding number of arms and legs. How is such a person, one body composed of so many, supposed to conduct herself? She will spend a lifetime beating her heads against one another, lifting up one pair of her arms in order to strangle the head of another.

We, the people – varied, troubled, heterogeneous – have been scrambling like cockroaches across this land for centuries without receiving so much as a nod from our diverse rulers. They have never looked at us; they have only ever looked in the mirror.

What is the consequence of such disregard? An eternal return of uprisings followed by mass murder and suffocating repression. I could not say which of the two is worse. In the words of Yevgeny Zamyatin: *Revolutions are infinite.*

By the twentieth century, the Persian empire's frontiers had been hammered so far back that the demarcating boundary of our shrunken nation was bruised; it was black and blue! Every fool knows that, in order to keep surviving, that which expands has to contract. Just look at the human heart. My own, reduced to a stone upon the double deaths of my father and my father's father, both murdered by our so-called leaders, is plump and

fleshy again; your birth has sent fresh blood rushing through its corridors.

Hear me, child: the details of the history of our nation are nothing but a useless inventory of facts unless they are used to illuminate the wretched nature of our universal condition. The core of the matter, the point of this notable monologue, is to expose the artful manipulation of historical time through the creation of false narratives rendered as truth and exercised by the world's rulers with expert precision for hundreds of years. Think of our own leaders' lies as Exhibit A. Let us shuffle through them one by one.

When the century was still young, our people attempted the Constitutional Revolution but failed. In time, that failure produced the infamous Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled the country with thuggery and intimidation. Years later, during the Second World War, Mr Pahlavi was sent into exile by the British, those nosy and relentless chasers of money – those thieves, if we're being honest. And what, child, do you think happened then? Pahlavi's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was greener than a tree in summer, stepped up to the throne.

Claiming to be the metaphysical descendent of the benevolent Cyrus the Great, the visionary Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi anointed himself the "King of Kings" and launched the White Revolution, a chain of reforms designed to yank the country's citizens into modernity by hook or by crook.

It was just a matter of time before the people rose against the King of Kings. Revolution broke out. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi spilt blood, tasted it, then, like a spineless reptile, slid up the stairs of an airplane with his bejewelled queen in tow and fled, famously declaring: "Only a dictator kills his people. I am a king."

The Islamic clergy, whose graves the King had been digging for years, hijacked the revolution, and in one swift move the monarchy was abolished. The King's absence allowed the revolutionary religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini to return to the country after a long political exile. Khomeini, former dissident, swiftly established the Islamic Republic of Iran and positioned

himself as the Supreme Leader. The Grand Ayatollah proceeded to outdo the King of Kings. His line of metaphysical communication skipped over Cyrus the Great; it pierced the heavens to arrive directly at God's ear. The Supreme Leader claimed to enjoy unparalleled divine protection.

How did he employ his blessings? By digging the graves of the secularists and the intelligentsia just as the Pahlavi kings had dug the graves of dissidents, Communists and the clergy. With one hand, God's victors eliminated their revolutionary brothers, and with the other, they shucked pistachios, drank tea, raided their victims' closets, ate cherries picked from their gardens.

Child, we, the Hosseinis, were persecuted by both sides. The King of Kings, seeing his end in sight, made no exceptions. His men garrotted the old and the infirm and the young. Mothers and children are still weeping for their lost loved ones. Your great-grandfather, Arman Abbas Hosseini, was among the executed. The ruthless pigs dragged him from his deathbed when he was eighty-nine. Two days later, your grandfather, Dalir Abbas Hosseini, had a heart attack. He could not endure the thought of his father being hanged from the rafters. Before he died, he told me that he could not stop hearing the sound of his father's brittle bones crackling under the weight of his body as it hung from the noose. Until you came into this world, my only consolation was that my father, at least, had died in his own bed. You are a flame of light in these dark woods.

Like everyone else in this trifling universe, we Iranians are a sum of our sorry parts. Put our pieces together and what emerges is not a whole, clear image. Our edges are jagged, unconforming, incoherent. Our bloodline is so long and varied, it can be traced back to the origins of the universe. How is man to make sense of his condition when the wrangle over power between conquerors old and new herds history's stories in ever more puzzling directions?

Now that you have heard the story of our cruel fate, you are ready to listen to the Hosseini Commandments, a text that has three giant heads that you must make part of your own. Why, you might ask? Because if you know the ways of man, the various

conditions of his iniquitous mind, you will not be stumped by fear, guilt, avarice, grief or remorse, and therefore, when the time comes, you will not hesitate to plumb the depths of the abyss and send out a resounding alarm to the unthinking masses, those who are wilfully blind, warning them of the advancing army of the unresolved past.

FIRST COMMANDMENT: *Ecce homo*: this is man, destined to suffer at the hands of two-faced brethren inclined to loot the minds and bodies of friend and foe. Ill-fated child, trust nobody and love nothing except literature, the only magnanimous host there is in this decaying world. Seek refuge in it. It is through its missives alone that you will survive your death, preserve your inner freedom.

SECOND COMMANDMENT: Like a gored bull, history is charging through the world in search of fresh victims. Think! Does a gored bull run straight? No. It zigzags. It circles around itself. It is bleeding and half blind. Be warned: The world's numbskull intellectuals, which form 99.9 per cent of all intellectuals, will feed you lies. History, they will say, is linear, and time continuous. During Pahlavi's final years, these deluded intellectuals hoped that revolution would lead to democracy. What came of it but death? Your ancestors, the Hosseinis, paid for their leaders' ignorance with their lives. Do not be caught unawares. Spit the lie right back out. Aim for their heads.

THIRD COMMANDMENT: We Hosseinis – Autodidacts, Anarchists, Atheists – are expert connoisseurs of literature and therefore capable of taking a narrative apart and putting it back together faster than a wounded man can say “Ah!” This talent, passed on to you by your honourable ancestors, is your sword. Draw it anytime you need to strike stupidity in the face.

The depth of our knowledge, the precision of our tongues and our capacity for detecting lies is unparalleled. We are the true intellectuals, the exception to the rule, the .1 per cent. This is yet another source of our ill-fatedness.

We are the loneliest of the lonely. Our message falls on the deaf ears of the unthinking masses. Nevertheless, we are destined to wander the earth spreading the word of our forebears and our

forebears' forebears, the Great Writers of the Past, who, like us, knew to retreat into literature in order to survive history's bloodshed and thus be in a position to share the truth of it with the world. For this we will always be persecuted: for pointing our fingers and asking: is this a man?

Ill-fated child, when your time comes, you must dive head first into the swampy lagoons of our pitiful human circumstances and, after roving the depths, emerge with the slimy pearl of truth. Be warned: the truth is ugly, wretched, full of craters and holes through which rise the fumes of death. Most men, smug and cowardly, will turn their noses away from its stench. Sooner or later, you will have to engage with these men; you will have to persevere despite their private delusions and collective ignorance.

Suffice it to say that, in combination with the events that unfurled during my childhood years, events charged with everything that is futile and unspeakable in this universe, my father's monologue transformed my consciousness. I had not been alive long before my mother, Bibi Khanoum, died. Her death flattened my heart into a sheet of paper. It levelled my mind. It rubbed my nose in manure. My only good fortune is that I realized early on that I am one of the wretched of this earth. But this is a matter for later.

According to my father, during the long revolutionary months prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, my mother – a woman with strong legs and a sweet disposition – would remind my father, Abbas Abbas Hosseini, that he had been accused by the Iranian intelligentsia of being “a passive traitor whose nose was hooked into books while others' were being rubbed in the blood of their brethren”.

Bibi Khanoum, my father informed me, would say: “Don't test your luck, Abbas! People don't like to be snubbed while they're being martyred for their beliefs.”

In response, my father would pace the corridor of their Tehran apartment convulsing, his moods swinging dramatically, while he spewed ad infinitum: “I am a Hosseini. I would rather die than hold my tongue! Pseudo-intellectuals! Imbeciles! People have disappeared, been arrested, executed, their bodies discarded, scattered

across the earth. And they still believe democracy is around the corner? The revolution is going to be hijacked. Don't they know history is full of ruptures, haphazard events, and prone to recycling its own evil phenomena?"

The following year, an ashen sky, greyer and heavier than a donkey's behind, settled over Iran. As my father predicted, the revolution was promptly seized by the Islamic leaders. And even worse, Saddam Hussein, that wide-eyed despot, came sniffing around the borders of our freshly assembled Islamic republic and proudly launched a brutal and tactless war on a fatigued and divided Iran.

A year after the war broke out, the few remaining intellectuals who hadn't been jailed or fled the country with false papers declared my father a clairvoyant truth teller. But my father – Autodidact, Anarchist, Atheist, whose character they had previously assassinated – refused to have his moment in the sun. Instead, he and my mother, Bibi Khanoum, ran for the hills. She was pregnant with me, and my father had suffered enough loss to last him a lifetime. It was winter. The journey was cold, and damp, and dangerous. It had felt interminable to them. But they survived it and took shelter in that stone house in Nowshahr, near the Caspian Sea, which was built as a sanctuary by my great-great-grandfather, Shams Abbas Hosseini, who referred to the house as either the Censorship Recovery Centre or the Oasis of Books, depending on his mood.

I have been told by my father that halfway through their journey, in the middle of the rugged Elborz Mountains, which separate Tehran from the Caspian Sea, he stopped the car and got out. He looked over his shoulder at Mount Damavand, which hovers over our capital like the shiny white tooth of a gentle giant, and wept until the skin around his eyes was paper-thin: "That pig-headed Saddam is going to level our city!"

And level our city he did. But even in the midst of darkness there is always a flicker of light. Months later, in 1982, I was born in the heart of the Oasis of Books, the library, which was designed in the shape of an egg and built around a date palm that shot to the sky through an opening in the roof. My mother leant against the trunk of the tree and pushed. I – a grey-faced, black-eyed baby – slipped out of her loins into a room lined with dusty tomes, into a country

seized by war. I immediately popped a date in my mouth to sweeten the blow. My parents looked down at me, grinning with hope.

I learned to crawl, walk, read, write, shit and eat in that library. Even before I could read, I nurtured my brain by running my hands along the spines of all the old books and licking their soot off my fingers. After feeding on the dust of literature, I sat on the Persian rug and stared at *The Hanged Mallard*, which was fixed to the wall. Once I was old enough to walk, I paced in concentric circles like a Sufi mystic, masticating dates and muttering the family motto to myself: *In this false world, we guard our lives with our deaths.*

The days passed. My education unfolded in the midst of the interminable war. My father read aloud to me from Nietzsche's oeuvre on a daily basis, usually in the mornings, and after lunch, he taught me about literature, culling paragraphs from books written by our ingenious forebears, the Great Writers of the Past: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Mawlānā (alias Rumi), Omar Khayyām, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Dante Alighieri, Marie-Henri Beyle (alias Stendhal), Teresa of Ávila, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Sādeq Hedāyat, Frederick Douglass, Francesco Petrarca, Miguel de Cervantes, Walter Benjamin, Sei Shōnagon. The list went on and on; it included religious thinkers, philosopher-poets, mystics, secularists, agnostics, atheists. Literature, as my father would say, is a nation without boundaries. It is infinite. There are no stations, no castes, no checkpoints.

At the end of each lesson, as bedtime neared, my father stiffly ordered: "Ill-fated child, assimilate and regurgitate!" In this way, he nurtured my mind. He taught me the long-lost skill of memorization. What is the purpose of memorization in the Hosseini tradition? It is twofold: not only does it restore the ritual function to literature – its orality – which harnesses literature's spontaneous ability to transform the listener's consciousness, but it also protects the archive of our troubled, ruinous humanity from being lost through the barbarism of war and the perpetual ignorance that binds our hands and feet. Count the times books have been burned in piles by the fearful and the infirm, men and women allergic to enquiry. Memorization is our only recourse against loss. We Hosseinis can reproduce the pantheon of literature instantly; we

can retranscribe texts from the dark folds of our infinite minds. We are the scribes of the future.

While my father and I spent our days united in the realm of literature, my mother, Bibi Khanoum, spent her days in the kitchen. If she ever ventured out of the house, it was to find us food: rice, oranges, fish the local tribesmen had managed to wrench out of the sea. I didn't spend much time with her. She didn't agree with my father's methods. She considered them invasive and extreme for my age, but he, twenty years her senior, had the upper hand in all matters governing our family.

I remember my mother once walked into the oval library, where she had given birth to me, with her apron tied around her waist and her face moist from the kitchen steam, to scold my father: "Abbas, you are raising this child to be a boy! How will she survive in the world? Who will marry her?"

My father reproached her: "These are times of war and you are worried about marriage?"

"And who do you suppose will feed her once we are dead?" she retorted. "A mother has to worry about her child's stomach!"

Confrontation ensued, but I don't remember anything after that. I have tried hard to remember my mother's face, the tone of her voice, the feel of her touch, but the details are out of reach. She would die not long after that argument, and the void left over by her death would push my father and me over the edge. He would fill the lacunae of our lives with literature. Over time, my mind, filled to the brim with sentences, would forsake her.

In the meantime, on the other side of the Elborz Mountains, that megalomaniac Saddam was spreading mustard gas across the frontier, shooting missiles at random targets, burying mines in the no man's land separating our two nations. What did the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran do? He sat on his newly established throne looking healthier than a fresh pear and ordered human wave attacks to blow up the mines that his nemesis, that bushy eyebrowed man-child, had buried at the front. Human wave attacks! As if it were the Great War!

Now, Rodents, let us ask: what is the purpose of a flicker of light in the midst of all that bloodshed? Easy. To illuminate the magnitude of the surrounding darkness.

At a certain point during the long war, my father started to wander about the perimeter of the house or along the seashore, night and day, holding me up as if I were a torch. He used my head, which shone like a beacon with all the enlightened literature he had inserted into it, to measure the scope of the encroaching abyss. Iran, he decided, was no longer a place to think. Not even the Caspian was safe. We had to flee. We had to go into exile. We departed: numb, astonished, bewildered.

Thus our vagabond life began. We left our home, stopping just beyond the door and looking back once. Pitiful, simpering, we waved our goodbyes to the Oasis of Books, to the orange groves and eucalyptus trees, to the rice paddies and sandy shores. Pressed together on the rear of an ass, my father, mother and I set out across Iran's forbidding horizon towards the Turkish border. Of our earthly possessions, we took only our samovar, a rug, our books and *The Hanged Mallard*. We had packed a few provisions, the little food we had left in the house. It was the middle of summer. Other deserters had died in the rugged flanks and stony depressions of our mountains. We didn't want to be caught in a snow blizzard. We didn't want to die against an icy stone, frostbitten. We rode in silence for a long time, fearful and worn down. No one dared to ask: will we ever set foot on these grounds again? Smell the jasmine bush? Stuff our mouths with the sweet meat of dates freshly fallen from the trees?

At first, the dirt path under our feet seemed to trot along with us – kind and concerned for our safety. But our fate took a turn for the worse. Somewhere between Khalkhal and Mount Sahand, in a long stretch of no man's land littered with Iraqi missiles, a poisonous black cloud billowing over the south-western horizon, my mother, Bibi Khanoum, died. She had walked into an abandoned home in the middle of a razed village to see if the deserters had left behind any food. Just at that moment – likely when she was hovering over the kitchen table – the house collapsed. She was crushed under the weight of its stones.

I stood before that collapsed house in a state of shock. I could hear my father's voice rising and falling in the distance. He whimpered

and yowled. I could hear him choking on his tears. I didn't know where we were. I covered my ears. I couldn't stand listening to him sob in that manner, like a wounded animal left to die in the dry gales of the desert. But I could still hear his sobs rising into that godless grey dome that keeps us pinned to this meagre earth. The world seemed nebulous, unnavigable. I felt as though someone had taken a rolling pin to my heart, razing it and extinguishing its warmth. I felt a gaping hole bloom in my gut. Then those crucial four words of the first Hosseini Commandment, which my father had whispered to me upon my birth, trumpeted through my void: *Love nothing except literature.*

I put one foot in front of the other and walked towards my father. He was curled up near a rock. My hand hurt as I nudged him. I told him we had to unbury my mother. I told him we couldn't just leave her there to rot. When he finally looked at me, I saw that his eyes had turned into two murky puddles and that the skin of his face had drooped. To me, his features seemed to have melted; his nose was indecipherable from his cheeks, his forehead had merged with his chin. The only thing I could see clearly was his thick black moustache.

It took us a full day and night of hard labour to retrieve Bibi Khanoum's body from the wreckage. My father kneeled against her and pulled her into his arms. He rocked her and wept silently. I stood behind him and watched. Her face was flat and grey. It was covered in dust. It could have been anyone's. Once I had seen it, I couldn't unsee it. Her face had introduced a distortion in my visual field. The world, all of its parts, which, when summed up, still refused to make a whole, seemed unstable at the edges.

Hours later, breathless and confused, we buried my mother beneath a lone date palm. Our fingers were numb from clawing at the earth. We stood over her grave and cried, then we waved our goodbyes the way we had waved at the stones of our village, at the jasmine bushes lining the streets, at the magnolia and citrus trees, and at the rows of eucalyptus growing wild near the sea.

As we rode away from her makeshift grave, my father brought his hand to his moustache, which was as long and limp as Nietzsche's, pulled on the tips that were stained yellow from all the tea he

drank and nervously said: "It could have been worse. At least she was buried in her homeland. There is nothing worse than dying a stranger."

At the ripe age of five, I thought to myself: worse than strangers are estranged brethren. As we moved farther away from my mother, I felt that void – deep, dark, craggy – widen. But I said nothing. Because sometimes, as Shakespeare famously wrote, *the rest is silence.*

We continued our journey. In order not to arouse suspicion, my father designed a senseless path, full of digressions, one long detour after another. This vagabonding through the dead of night, through dark and silent fields, across terrain that was being drenched with poison gas and blood and death, turned us numb and sluggish. At times my father seemed to have forgotten who he was or where we were. In those moments, he would look at the sky with a wide, dry mouth, and it would seem to me that even his moustache was barely hanging on to his crusty upper lip.

Every morning, the grainy light of dawn came down on our heads like a guillotine. We didn't have time to mourn. We tried to push away any emotion that arose: panic, shame, fear, despair, astonishment. We didn't know how else to carry on, how else to move through our remaining days. Sometimes, in an effort to lift our spirits, my father would speak. He would say, his voice breaking, that the lesser men on this earth are the most powerful, and that we, the ill-fated, must draw from scant reservoirs, plumb the depths of our singed minds and hearts, just to find the courage to survive in this world that acts against us with such violence. Worse than violence, he would say, is the indifference of those who watch the destruction of others and remain unmoved by it. With what little conviction he could muster, he would remind me that it was our job to resist the tyranny of hate and its behaviour of choice: the elimination of others.

The next time my father and I came across a levelled village, we sifted through the rubble and dug out from the debris six blackboards that had been used in the village school; we tied each pair together with a piece of old string and mournfully slipped the

boards over our heads and saddled our ass with a pair. We wore them like shields. But while we continued on, our ass, in still another tragedy, died of exhaustion. By the end, the poor animal barely had the energy to keep his ears pointing at the godless heavens. My father, unusually light-hearted, stood over the animal's body and saluted him. "Goodbye, dear Rocinante!" he said, as if our ass had been Don Quixote's infamously weak horse. He knew how much I loved the trials and tribulations of that Knight of the Sad Countenance.

And so my father and I went through the lowlands and highlands of Iran's West Azerbaijan province on foot, dragging our suitcase of meagre possessions along with us. We walked by night and hid by day. We were caught in the approaching winter. Our teeth chattered; our bones ached. It wouldn't be long before glistening sheets of snow would settle across the rugged landscapes that lay ahead. We ate potatoes, beets, turnips; anything my father managed to procure every now and then. We were reduced to desperation by our aimless path, which seemed to fold over itself a million times before delivering us to the border. Our bodies had metamorphosed. We were skeletal, ragged, dirty, stupid from the rough blows of our journey towards nothingness. On the rare occasions when we saw villagers moving across the landscape, ambling into the light and crossing out of it again, they pretended not to see us. It was as if we didn't exist.

One morning, as we sat huddled together at the centre of a cluster of trees, my father said rather conclusively of my mother: "The whole world is a mind. Her mind has been absorbed back into the mind of the universe." I looked around. A thick mist hovered over the landscape. The whole world seemed unreal, tinged with my mother's death and the death of the Hosseinis. I thought to myself: she is everywhere; she has contaminated everything. I took comfort in this. I dragged that vaporous air into my lungs and held my breath.

Nights passed, and we marched on. The closer we came to the border, the more dead bodies we found: dissidents who had tried to flee but who had frozen to death, Saddam's victims. We were north of the front. His men must have been aiming with their rectal holes, killing anything with a pulse.

On a particularly morbid night, my father, who seemed for my sake to recover a little bit of his strength with each passing day, paused near a dead body lying face down on the ground and mournfully said: "It's a good thing we buried your mother. We didn't leave her exposed to the merciless elements. Now, child, look around. As your great-great-grandfather, Shams Abbas Hosseini, would say, *Death is coming*. Take this chance to train that Hosseini nose of yours! It is the only way to guard your life with your death."

As I listened to him speak, I was reminded of the second Hosseini Commandment: it is our duty to remember that history's unfinished business will recycle itself. I remembered: the only way to remain one step ahead of death is to cultivate our ability to sniff the bloodthirsty past before it approaches to settle old scores.

The next time we came across a pile of bodies, I looked at the faces of the dead. My father removed their clothes and piled them onto my small frame. Snow was drifting through the air; it had stacked on the ground, a spectral glow that would soon cover those who lay there, dead and abandoned. I smelled them. They smelled of shit and vinegar and rust. The stench of history, the miasma of death, was coming up from the southern front in waves. For days, there was blood in my head. Blood in my eyes. Blood everywhere I looked.

Weeks stretched on like an interminable road. Through the coldest stretches, my father carried me on his back as if I were a load. Time moved unnervingly slow. But it was in the midst of that decay and putrefaction, and that harrowing winter we had tried so hard to avoid, that my father resumed my lessons in literature. We reclaimed our old habits. They gave us a sense of order. We felt bolstered by the architecture of words. Every day, before we rested from our night's hike, he instructed me to sit on a pile of rocks that jettied out of the brightly glazed snow, and said, "Life crushes us, grinds us to a halt, wears us down."

I listened to him through the bitter chill of the ancient howling wind. I closed my eyes and inhaled his words. I swallowed them as if they were food to my stomach. I felt nurtured by literature's web of sentences, connected through them to this strange and dark universe.

My father warned, echoing the third and final Hosseini Commandment: “Child, you must follow in the tradition of your ancestors, your forebears and your forebears’ ingenious forebears, those great martyrs of thought who retreated into literature in order to survive death, in order to outwit the cruel absurdity of the world.”

He always said *child* just like that; never *my child* or *sweet daughter of mine* or *my doll*. He didn’t believe in the possessive. According to his logic, I was a vessel, the latest to be produced in our ill-omened bloodline, designed to receive and transmit literary signals; destined to contaminate the world with our cross-generational devotion to literature. “Remember,” he would say during those dawn lessons, pacing back and forth before a pile of icy rocks, “literature reveals the lies and the hypocrisy of the world. It is the only true record. After I am gone, you will be the last remaining scribe of the future.”

After a long, thoughtful pause, he would artfully say: “Repeat after me: Memorize! Regurgitate! Transmit!” In the surrounding silence of death, I would echo those words with my eyes still closed. I prepared for my ill-omened fate.

At the end of each lesson, my father instructed me to open my eyes. He pulled out a broken piece of chalk from his pocket and transcribed several verses from memory on the front of his blackboard, which he refused to remove lest someone was shooting at close range. As a result, all the verses were lopsided. He had me recite them back to him, a difficult task. No one should have to carve words on their heart, and no one should be expected to read that writing. But I did.

There were lines from Dante Alighieri, Pier Paolo Pasolini, James Baldwin, Matsuo Bashō, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mary Wollstonecraft, Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muhammad Hāfez-e Shīrāzī (alias Hāfez), Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf. My father’s head was like the library of Babel. Each day, he transcribed different verses. I stored them all away so I could feed on their marrow during the starved days of exile that lay ahead. They were a balm to my wounds; a remedy against the brutal winds that would blow through my void, causing its craggy walls to sting. The line I remember most often

goes like this: *Like desert camels of thirst dying while on their backs water bearing.* We walked hundreds of miles with that sentence scribbled on the front of my father’s blackboard. We were those camels, only instead of water we carried literature’s bountiful load on our backs. We were united in our struggle against hunger, the frigid air that kept us raw, the excruciating pain of my mother’s sudden death.

When we arrived at one of the promontories of Mount Sahand, that comatose beast of a volcano looming over Iran’s north-western border, my father looked east towards Tehran, south towards Baghdad and northwest towards Van, the first destination in our long journey of exile, just over the Turkish border. It was the end of winter.

There was a terrible silence as we stood there surveying the land surrounding us. I wondered if I would ever lay eyes on that land again. Then my father spat on the rocky ground and said: “I spit on you, you bunch of patriarchal nepotists!” His face, ordinarily wafer-thin, puffed up with rage and grew red. It looked like a swelling pool of blood. I had never seen this side of him before. I felt an odd terror. The wind beat the taut sheet of my heart as if it were a drum. It hammered and bevelled that sheet until it was in tatters. I felt indignation rise in wafts through the hollows. I felt my ears grow hot with fear and scorn.

We were near Lake Urmia along the Iranian-Turkish border when my father gave me the last literature lesson I would receive within the confines of our bludgeoned nation. The shallow, salty waters of the lake were full of bloated waterfowl, dead from Saddam’s waves of poison gas. Greater flamingos were languidly drifting across the saline surface. My father took one look at those dead birds and said: “According to the illustrious poet Abū-Mansūr Qatrān al-Jili al-Azerbaijani, *Those who perished were saved from misfortune and badness, while the living are plunged in a sea of deep sadness.*” I stared ahead, thinking of my mother’s flattened face. My heart folded over itself like an envelope, but I said nothing.

After that, time warped. It slowed down and sped up at random. At some point, I remember my father removing the clothes of a

dead Kurdish man who, like many other borderland Kurds, had been fighting against Saddam alongside the Iranians. My father put the man's clothes on himself and informed me of his twofold plan to avoid our being identified as Iranian deserters and intercepted by the border police. Since he had neglected to teach me Kurdish, I would have to pretend I was a deaf-mute about to go blind while he, who spoke impeccable Kurdish, would pretend to be a Kurdish father who was taking me to be seen by the only doctor in the world who had given us hope, a Berlin-educated Kurdish eye surgeon in Van. I had no idea how he had come up with all this. I had no idea what was going through his head.

"The Kurds are like us," he said. "They are the kind of unlucky men who help their ill-fated brothers. They'll help us get across the border into Van. You'll see."

But I saw nothing. He had tied a strip of black cloth, torn from the clothes of the dead man, around my eyes. I was blindfolded and mute. Like a good pickle, I was soaking in the brine of death.

The next thing I remember, my father and I were sitting in the back of an open-air truck, pressed tightly against other bodies. I could hear my father's voice over the engine. I understood nothing except the following declaration, which he repeated with childish ebullience – "Kurdistan is like Hiroshima!" It was received with feverish enthusiasm by his fake compatriots. "Kurdistan is like Hiroshima!" they repeated with warmth and complicity, clapping, sighing and patting one another on the shoulders. The sound of their laughter rushed at my ears as if from across a great distance. I felt lonely, cut off from my father, ugly, wretched, as pitiful as a soiled manuscript forgotten in a damp trench.

But upon arriving in Van, my father removed the black band he had placed over my eyes. He held my hand and said, with a bucolic euphoria, "We made it across the border!" I looked at Van. The city lay on the eastern shores of an emerald-green lake ringed by pleated mountains, where sheets of snow were starting to melt. It was spring, but there was still a chill in the air. We had survived, each of us one of the few who hadn't been caught or killed, and the knowledge of it would estrange us from the world for good.

We were perched on the edge of Van Castle, atop a steep bluff overlooking the craggy ruins of an old city. All that remained were the blunted edges of fallen homes.

"Look at the ancient city of Van," my father said, pointing at that decimated land below us. "Here the Armenians were wrenched by history, exterminated at the hands of the Ottomans. The first Holocaust!" he muttered, pitifully pulling on the ends of his stained moustache.

I leant over the edge of the castle. My head was still spinning from the smell of the rotting corpses in that no man's land, from my mother's death. I looked at the levelled city, which is known as the Pearl of the East. No bigger lie has ever been uttered. Its remains shone like copper wires in the winter sun. *The Pearl of the East!* Let those who want to lie to themselves lie to themselves, I thought. I remembered the slimy pearl of truth: remorseless, monstrous and full of a terrible stench.

Before we continued on, my father returned the black band to my eyes, and I was plunged once more into a deep lacuna. But over time, that black band heightened my senses. Deprived of sight, I saw the immense magnitude of the darkness that surrounds us more clearly than ever before; I smelled the eternal return of the residue of history; I heard the ringing void of the long exile that lay ahead of us, first in Turkey, then in Spain and finally in the New World; the white noise of death – the past death of my mother, the future death of my father, the death of the Kurds, of Iranians, of Armenians, of Iraqis – booming in the margins of the universe. One day, I told myself, I will emerge from the void of exile, and I will drag the stench of death out with me. After all, I am the youngest of the Hosseinis, the last in a long lineage; it is my job to exhume the buried corpse of our deadly collective history – our truth.

NEW YORK CITY

The Story of My Father's Death and
Burial and the Consequent Formation
of My Multiple Irregular Minds

AFTER LEAVING VAN, my father, Abbas Abbas Hosseini, and I spent years moving across the surface of the earth in search of a place to think. We were like the slugs that come out after a hard rain: ugly, weather-beaten, dispossessed, the refuse of the world. So it goes. No matter how many times you try to replant an uprooted tree, it seems always to fail to take to the soil. The exile never outruns history. Such are the consequences of being born unlucky in an inhospitable world. There is a line by Baudelaire that sums it up rather well: *Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas*. I encountered that same line, written in the words of Paul Auster, after we'd settled in the wretched New World: *It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place I am not*. It seemed just as prophetic then.

By the time we did reach that so-called New World, many years had passed since my mother's death, since our harrowing fugue from Iran – an egress that had chilled our bones and left our hands permanently cold. From that point on, I had maintained the temperature of a corpse. Under the spectre of grief, we moved through Turkey, and after a series of digressions designed to renew or falsify this or that paper, we arrived in Barcelona, our destination, the City of Bombs. There, my father hoped to meet other Autodidacts, Anarchists, Atheists. But events never unfold the way one imagines they will. Barcelona, cautious, worn down by the years of oppression it was subjected to by the childish whims of General Franco – that wide-eyed despot – ultimately disappointed him, and soon we were on the road again.

At times, during our long journey, we seemed to make progress in leaps and bounds. We would move across huge chunks of this uneven universe at the speed of light, then, suddenly, breathless and exhausted, we'd be unable to proceed and would move backward

again. The path we had taken would fold over itself, looping backward as if it were leading us towards some information we had been too impatient to discover the first time. We would scurry back in a panic only to discover that there was nothing there. This sense that we had forgotten something – the haunting after-effect of an indigestible loss – had turned both of us into entirely unintelligible beings. I don't know how long we stayed in each place. I drifted in and out of the light. I was often lost to myself, and even when I wasn't, I had no idea how it was that we had come to be wherever it was we were. I still don't know. All I know is that when we finally arrived in Barcelona I was two years older than when we had first left Iran. Three years later, we were in New York City – hopeless, disoriented, famished.

More than a decade had gone by somehow. Now twenty-two, I still burn with rage, grief and confusion at the arduous path of my past. I stood with my back to the Cloisters and looked out over the river. The Cuxa, the Bonnefont, the Saint-Guilhem and the Trie were behind me, all having been clinically sliced from medieval French abbeys and rearranged here into an artificial whole. The Hudson was below me: green, serpentine, slithering lazily by. I sat down on a bench to take in the commanding view. The fog climbed up the sides of Fort Tryon Park. Suspended over the water, caught in the gauzy winter light, the George Washington Bridge looked like a giant mosquito net. It was a dreary, damp day.

My father was in our Inwood apartment, lying supine on his mattress, approaching death. Soon I would have to bury him, just as I had buried my mother. I would have to lower his body into the ground. I would have no one left to love. Sitting on that bench, watching the fog rise over the river, I thought to myself, years have passed since we left Iran. I sat there and yearned for the most banal things: figs, pomegranate trees, hydrangeas, date palms, birds of paradise. Then I thought, enough: there is no point in pining over a country with a thousand heads, a country that is always changing, that had become unrecognizable to us.

I got off the bench and walked up to the railing that runs along the perimeter of the park. I leant over the edge. I could hear the river down below – swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. The moving water

made the same sound the sentences written by my ingenious forebears made as they swirled around the infinite abyss of my mind. I could no longer see out: the fog was covering everything. Instead, I looked inside myself. I saw acres of consciousness decimated by the lacunae of exile. I felt indignant, downtrodden, lost.

I considered leaping into the river. I didn't want to survive my father's death. Then I thought: no. I am truculent, combative, as good as any other human at kicking around the dust piled up on this miserable earth. And if I were to kill myself off, why should I do it here? I looked around. I said, "Never." If I'm going to die, I thought, let it be among estranged brethren. As forlorn as I was, I would never leap off the edge of this New World, this land of thieves, with my back to a conglomeration of fake cloisters that have been dismantled from real French abbeys and reassembled here. As if the Old World were a mausoleum. What a laughable lack of perspective.

I marched back out of the park with new resolve. It was time to check in on my father. He hardly ever left our apartment, a fourth-floor, rat-infested, rent-controlled studio we had partitioned into two rooms with an old bookshelf. Like many other exiles, we had travelled across the world, dying and resurrecting along the way. But now, I reminded myself, as if to prepare, my father was approaching physical death – the least final but most tangible of all deaths.

I opened the door to find him talking to himself. He had grown gaunt, grim, fragile. His cheeks sagged. His hands were blue and freckled. Our vagabond life had taken a toll on him. I saw him lurching across our studio with an ashen face, leaning against this or that, mumbling from beneath his moustache into the cold air: "Exile is death's muse." I watched his curtained lips form the word *exile*. But I heard *forced separation, expulsion, the refuse of the world*. I couldn't stand to see his diminished figure.

It was time to drag him out of the house. Perhaps an outing would revive his spirits. The next morning, I took him to Brighton Beach, where the waters are as dark and oily as the Caspian. The fog had lifted, but there was a bitter chill. It was the middle of winter. The beach was deserted. Lead-coloured waves were scraping the metallic underbelly of the sky. Scattered across the

shore, between briny patches of sea foam, were piles of seaweed and dead fish rotting in the wind and sand. Those fish activated my father's trauma. Dead animals often brought on his rage. He staggered over and weakly pointed his cane at those limbless vertebrates, then wailed that the sea had heaved out all those scaly, gilled creatures in the same way we had been forced to flee our bludgeoned country and that now we all had been left to die on the fringes of the New World. As I watched his fury unfold, I realized more clearly than ever that we could have been living anywhere: in a hut in Cambodia, a houseboat docked in the canals of Amsterdam, a tent made of coconut hair in India, a prison at the bottom of a snow-capped mountain in Tibet. Our address would always be the same: the Nation of Exiles, neither here nor there. With him gone, I would be alone in that boundless nation, aimless and adrift. I felt an intense dread approach from far off. Then I pushed away the thought and all the feelings it had the power to exhume. I refocused on my moustached father.

In honour of the Hosseini family tradition, I had brought a stack of books with me to the beach. When my father was done airing his frustrations, I helped him down to the sand. He could no longer read. His eyes were too weak. He suffered from advanced macular degeneration. So he sat there, hunched over, mouth downturned, cheeks puffy, sulking while I read out loud to him. I took turns cracking each book open to a random page as if it were an oracle. There were certain sentences that delivered an electric pulse and momentarily brought him back to life. It worked like a charm. There was no denying it: there are units of language that have a mysterious aura about them, a metaphysical force. Encouraged, I got to my feet and walked in circles around my father like an old peripatetic Greek. Better yet, like an old Sufi mystic, the way I had walked in that oval library as a child.

My father slapped his knee with enthusiasm. The pink tip of his tongue protruded through his lips; it grazed the ends of his moustache. He was content. The man had persevered for my sake through that nauseating no man's land, through the toxic fumes of war. The least I could do now was continue reading despite the brutal winter chill and the fact that my feet kept sinking into

the sand, causing my knees to buckle. So I opened the books one after the other and recited ominous sentences in a prophetic tone.

In a clipped voice, I repeated the following: *Things are going to be spoiled by those who are already rotting*. Dalí. One of my favourites. A man with a tongue as sharp as a rigger brush who wasn't afraid to use it. I could tell my father was happy because he dug the end of his cane into the sand like a child, making little holes. His eyes moved inquisitively from side to side and, beneath them, his moustache looked as if it were about to levitate. I felt useful, invigorated, blithe. When I was sure I had committed the lines to memory, I sat back down. We shared the view of the Atlantic under that gunmetal sky a moment longer. Then we got on the subway and rode back to Inwood.

You could say I am the AAA's most militant member. I have a tattoo of our family seal on my left forearm: three As enclosed in a circle. In deep black ink, our family motto appears beneath the seal: *In this false world, we guard our lives with our deaths*. Upon my father's passing, I will be the only Hosseini left, the last in a long lineage. My inheritance of their intellectual prowess will be complete. I don't take the charge lightly. I have always been schooled by my father just as he was schooled by his. But, truth be told, the tutorials with my father had ended long ago. I could no longer study with him, because he was nearly blind and, as a result, extremely impatient. He struggled to access his mind. I watched, bewildered by his helplessness. It was like watching a toothless dog gnaw on a bone, resolute despite his inadequate resources. For a time, fearful of betraying our family's long tradition, I remained mentorless. Guruleless. I worked on my mind alone. I prepared for the desolation that lay ahead. Once my father was gone, I would be leading a life with no railing to lean on. A life with no foothold. But we had not come all this way just to surrender to this unscrupulous New World. No. I had no other recourse but to continue fortifying my mind – which he had worked so hard to arm with languages and literature – by stuffing it with even more texts.

Over the years, I had received an endless stream of mail from this or that recruiting university offering me a variety of scholarships. I have no idea how the universities got my name or address, perhaps through the tortured process of acquiring our residency

papers. No matter. I rejected all their offers. I was certain that this mail was just another way for the New World to shed its white guilt while simultaneously exploiting Iran's ousted intelligentsia. This is perfectly in keeping with American foreign policy, in my humble opinion, which seems to subscribe to the following mission: interfere with and profit from far-flung governments at the peril of their citizens, and once those poor, unfortunate souls have been dispatched to the Four Corners of the World, in exile and on their knees, offer a scattering of them asylum and a compensatory education. But the buck stops here! I, an ill-fated member of this infested universe, a Hosseini descendent, would never give in to such effacement. I would never eradicate my difference.

Nevertheless, I didn't want to remain mentorless for ever. So I made an exception to my boycott of American institutes of so-called higher learning: José Emilio Morales, reluctant Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at New York University; Chilean exile (kicked in the rear by that madman Pinochet); fervent Communist (though he has learned to keep his politics to himself – he has mouths to feed in Chile); and ex-confidant of the deceased poet Pablo Neruda.

I will never forget the first time I saw Morales. He was walking around this congested and surreal island – the self-proclaimed centre of the world – with a copy of Neruda's *Tercera residencia* tucked into a pouch he had sewn into his suit jacket. Every fifteen minutes, he pulled the book out of his jacket, flipped it open to a random page and breathed in one or two lines. I followed him all the way to Washington Square Park, where he walked the perimeter. At first he kept his arms clasped behind his back and his head hanging, pensive; then he lifted his arms up in front of his face, holding Neruda's book in his hands. I couldn't believe my eyes. Search the world over and you won't find another man like him.

He is a physically unique specimen. He has white hair, an unruly salt-and-pepper beard that grows in uneven patches, a round, oily nose and small grey eyes that appear distorted due to the thickness of his reading glasses, which are held in place by the greasy end of his stubby nose. Like me, he is not attractive. Like me, he has an inward-looking gaze that suggests that at any moment he might

sink into himself and disappear, vanishing from the earth entirely. But unlike me, the man is fixated on the colour red. He wears red slacks, a red button-down, a red tweed suit jacket, red socks. The only contrast comes from his shoes, which are brown.

I kept my eye on Morales for months. I didn't want to approach him right away. I was afraid he would startle if I came on too suddenly. Every afternoon, during my father's long naps, I set out to watch him walk the perimeter of the park with his head in Neruda's book. He read with one eye, and with the other he navigated the dogs, the hippies with their guitars, the skateboarders, the wealthy Lower West Siders with their fingerless gloves and frothing lattes. He never bumped into another person. He never tripped over a cable or the stumpy roots of a tree. One day, when the moment was ripe, I followed him all the way to his office at NYU. When he got to the door, he finally turned around and, as though he had eyes in the back of his head, he asked, in a surprisingly unguarded voice: "What do you want?"

I told him I was in need of a mentor, and then I provided him with a few basic coordinates of my life. I exposed the nature of my relationship to books. I told him that my ill-fated ancestors and I had survived death through our intimate engagement with literature. Then, I thought to myself, *engagement* is too mild a word, so I replaced it with *refuge*. I said: "We, the ill-fated, have taken refuge in literature." But this description also failed to communicate a sufficient level of intensity. With a hint of violence, I added: "Hear me! We have pitched our tattered tents in the dark forests of literature!"

At this, Morales invited me into his office, which was long and rectangular and had a small boxy window overlooking an interior quad where a few sad trees that barely got enough sun were clawing the air. Without bothering to look at the floor, Morales stepped over a few rows of the books he had laid out on the floor in alphabetical order and sat down in the leather chair behind his desk. He leant forward and rested his weight on his elbows. He said, "If you can cite the following lines of verse, I will take you on informally." He leant back and a wide grin spread across his face. He looked like an old dried flower, that white face with all

the red cloth blooming around it. He said, “They can’t fire me if I do. They’ve tried many times to eradicate my presence from this campus. Communism is still treated as a crime in this country. Every year they ask me to sign a paper that says, *I, José Emilio Morales, am not a Communist*. I have never signed it, but still I wear red every day to get back at them for that piece of paper.”

He reached up and turned on a dusty lamp. In a melodious tone full of drama and melancholy, he recited: “*Oh pit of debris, ferocious cave of the shipwrecked*.” He closed his eyes. Behind those thick glasses, his lids looked like raw dough. “*In you the wars and the flights accumulated*.”

Every evening after watching Morales walk the perimeter of the park, I had returned home to read Neruda, the poet who moves through the subterranean channels of the human heart with expert precision. And so I said, “Easy breezy. ‘A Song of Despair’, the honourable and deceased Pablo Neruda *circa* 1924.”

“Ah,” he said, “you have pitched your tent in the same dark forests as I have.”

That’s life. You travel the world over, aimless, friendless, adrift. Then suddenly you find another rodent who shares the sorrows of your juiced organs. I felt as though he had ironed out the wrinkled sheet of my heart.

We agreed to hold weekly meetings in his office. I revelled in our encounters. I looked forward to them, and for their duration I could feel an electric charge coursing through my void. At our first official meeting, I informed Morales that in order to honour my father, Abbas Abbas Hosseini, a man whose mind was as vast as the library of Babel, I intended to compose a manifesto titled “A Philosophy of Totality: The Matrix of Literature”.

“Methodology?” he asked, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

“Memorization,” I offered.

He nodded respectfully.

I informed Morales that I wanted my mind to become so elastic it would be capable of containing all of literature; once internalized, the maxims, diatribes and verses written by the Great Writers of the

Past, my ingenious forebears, would begin to mingle spontaneously with one another in the decimated fields of my consciousness and produce unexpected but truthful associations that I planned to record in the manifesto for the good of my fellow vermin. Memorization, I declared, is the Hosseini way. I told him that we have combated the potential loss of will to power, a natural consequence of war and our lifelong ill-fatedness, by reciting lines from the vast web of literature. Memorization, I insisted, is how we have kept our minds engaged, decolonized; it is how we have kept ourselves from giving in. We, I told him, employing a conclusive tone, are the scribes of the future. We are the guardians of the archive of literature.

Though he agreed to test my memorization skills during our weekly meetings, he was quick to follow up with a counter-condition. If we were going to work together, he said, employing an edifying tone, he needed to know that I understood and would abide by one thing.

“What thing?” I asked.

He answered with the following: *There is no such thing as reading; there is only rereading*. As cool as a cucumber, he relayed his expectation that I should read every book several times at different hours and in different settings, and that I should recite quotes in the original language as well as the English translation. I agreed. It was a brilliant idea. I would be dispatching different parts of my mind – each language I had learned was housed in a subsector of the same quadrant – to metabolize texts. In other words, I would approach each text from multiple angles, employing the sum of all my disparate parts.

All winter, I studied under his guidance; I read more than I had ever read before. I matured my Spanish, Italian, Catalan – languages over which Morales had an impeccable command. I worked my way through the canon, then through the avant-garde. I read this and then that. I underlined, scrutinized, read again. I skipped over certain things to make way for others. I read various translations of the classics. I combed through every line multiple times. Each time, as Morales had implied, the line appeared differently. It made a different sound, produced a different meaning, stirred awake this or that buried self.

I reported all of this to Morales during our weekly meetings, which he spent awkwardly pacing through his overflowing office in his Communist uniform, hands clasped behind his back, head hanging as he stepped over stacked columns of books, empty boxes, unopened mail. Every once in a while, he paused to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

If I really impressed him with my pronunciation and memorization skills, he would say, “Brava, brava!” and gently tap my head with his spent copy of *Tercera residencia*. Under the shadow of that book, I recited the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Clarice Lispector, Cristina Peri Rossi, Alejo Carpentier, María Luisa Bombal, Miguel de Cervantes, Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, Josep Pla, Mercè Rodoreda, J.V. Foix, Quim Monzó, Salvador Espriu. The list went on and on until the names blurred together.

On a particularly blustery day in January, while I was headed towards Morales’s office for my weekly recitation, a girl with a nose piercing and a purple Mohawk and pale green eyes that looked out from their sockets with a mixture of pride and disgust stopped me near Washington Square Park.

“Not so fast,” she said, raising her gloved hand as if I had been trying to avoid her.

I stopped. She was tall and thin, all angles, no curves, as sharp as a whip. She looked like a futurist statue. Even as she stood still, she gave the appearance of being in motion, as if she were headed someplace more important, where things stood a chance of being resolved. She was wearing a studded dog collar, and the metal bits kept catching the bright winter light, nearly blinding me. She had deliberately cut holes in each layer of her outfit. She wore black surfaces all the way down, leading me to conclude that it was her sole purpose in life to expose the depth of the darkness that surrounds us, to signal the infinite and stratified nature of the abyss. I immediately liked her.

She pulled a book out of her bag and knocked me over the head with it in the same way Morales would knock me over the head with his copy of Neruda’s saddest poems. I never knew which goodbye between my father and me would be our last, and these whacks,

delivered from the realm of literature, drew me out of the fog that settled over me each time I left our apartment. I examined her face. I understood immediately: she too had been an informal pupil of his. There were many of us. Morales was using official means to nurture the dissident tendencies of his unofficial advisees, who had flocked to him like moths to a light. No wonder the university was trying to fire him.

“I studied with Morales for a while,” she spat out. “And it’s true, there is no one like him.” She paused thoughtfully and turned her nose to the sky. Then she added, “But he never gave me this.” She handed me the book she had pulled out of her bag. “This is a book one anarchist woman gives to another. Read it. It will make you feel a lot better about all of this shit.”

I looked at the book. It was *Don Quixote* by Kathy Acker. I had never heard of her before, and I felt my heart quicken with excitement at the thought of discovering this radical woman’s sentences. The cover was a glossy grey blue, and it featured a photograph of the author. In the picture, she has her back to the camera. Her shoulders are bare, exposing a flower tattoo that extends across her upper back. The photograph appears to have been ripped to pieces and then fit together along the edges of the seams. I took these fissures to be indicative of what lay between the covers. I was stunned by the beauty of the composition. By the time I looked back up, the girl had begun walking away. I stood there and watched her; her Mohawk made an incision in the sky, tearing the godless heavens asunder.

I sat in the park at the foot of the commemorative statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi. I saluted the short, bearded “father of fathers” drawing his sword and, under his aura of resolve, prepared to inhabit Acker’s sentences. I took pleasure in lifting the book to my nose. I picked up mild tones of sage, black olives, nicotine. I noticed wine stains on the spine. The pages were brittle, yellow. I opened the book three times at random. In the Hosseini tradition, I consulted it as if it were an oracle.

I read: *Isolation is a political tool.*

Then: *I have left behind all that I know, so I go into the room of my death.*

And finally: *I travelled all over the world, looking for trouble.*

As I closed the book, I thought to myself: these three prophecies will come to mean something very soon.

Morales didn't have a dearth of official students. I often bumped into a particularly banal pair of them on my way to his office. Alice and Tomaso were a feckless duo with broad, plain foreheads. They wore overalls and thick old-man glasses (it was unclear to me why they dressed alike), and they called themselves the New Poets. They walked around fluffing their feathers and boasting about having been admitted to the Master of Fine Arts in Poetry programme. A couple of amateurs. While they struggled to compose a single verse a month, I read and wrote until my fingers were bruised.

I wanted nothing to do with them, but they were clingy, wide-eyed, curious types with spongy cheeks and large ears; the kind of undiscerning, overprivileged humans who ask inane questions and then listen to the answers with their mouths ajar.

That afternoon, I was particularly loath to talk to them. My hand was burning from holding Acker's book. I wanted to get through my meeting with Morales as quickly as possible so I could return to my apartment, where my father would likely be reclining on his mattress, and read the book cover to cover.

The New Poets beckoned as we crossed paths in the hallway. "A minute of small talk?"

Small talk! Their diction was as terrible as their breath. I had had it with them. I told them that I would never use the term *small talk*, let alone engage in it as an activity. I considered speaking to be a grand waste of time unless its purpose was to get the big unsaid truths out in the open. I declared: "I have no time for small talk! While you two expose yourselves to the detrimental effects of a formal education – reduced self-knowledge, submission to authority, covert institutional indoctrination in linear time – I am employing unorthodox methods of learning in order to facilitate grand associative leaps, heightened cognition and transcendental intellectualism, because with my father's death fast approaching" – I bore into them with my eyes – "it is my duty, as the last

remaining member of the Autodidacts, Anarchists and Atheists, to make a major philosophical intervention aimed at correcting the skewed and pitifully narrow perception of the world's pseudo-intellectuals and heretics, your erroneous brethren!" The words came out with such ease, with such deliberate organization, that I realized they had been sitting on the tip of my tongue awaiting their turn to manifest.

The New Poets stood with their backs against the wall, looking mystified and confused. They gawked at me as if I were an exotic animal they were seeing for the first time, a wildly frustrated creature pacing inside a cage. I could see saliva pooling in their open mouths. Throughout my monologue – let's call it what it was, an intervention – they were nodding at me with so much fervour I thought their heads had come loose. When they finally got it together, they asked me if I wanted to go eat a taco with them.

"A taco?" I asked. There was smoke coming out of my ears.

"A taco!" they implored in unison, as if they were twins.

There was no use in repeating myself. That pair wouldn't be able to see themselves clearly if I held a mirror up to their tongues.

"I don't eat tacos," I said, and they dropped the subject.

The events of that draughty day marked a turning point in my thinking. The intervention I had spontaneously offered to the New Poets, the way those words had glided out of my mouth, *grand associative leaps, heightened cognition, transcendental intellectualism*, helped me to realize that I was on the cusp of a revelation. By funnelling extreme amounts of literature into my mind, I had engineered it to make a Grand Leap in Consciousness. All that was left to do was to push things over the edge, the way our exodus, in combination with my mother's untimely death, had shoved my father and me over the threshold of sense.

I did this by reading even more intensely than before, with a passion bordering on madness – madness contained, the irrational in the palm of my hand – and with what I had identified through my studies as the Paranoiac-Critical approach of Dalí; a *spontaneous method of irrational knowledge* that allowed me to carve ever more *delirious associative pathways* within and among texts and

therefore to expedite the plan I had been hatching all along: a vast constellation of literary networks I could inhabit during the period of grief that awaited me due to the rapid decline of my father's health. In other words, due to his imminent death.

The night of my encounter with the New Poets, while my father was fast asleep, snoring through his moustache, I walked in concentric circles honing my plan. I said out loud to no one, "In contradistinction to the New Poets – literary attachés to the Master of Fine Arts in Poetry, a pair of disengaged numbskulls who lazily read with their eyes – I, outsider and literary terrorist in training, read not with my eyes but with my consciousness, scanning the stratified layers embedded in each text like an archaeologist in an excavation site!"

The next morning, I found my father in a fit. He was in a horrifyingly bad mood. It was obvious why. We both could see that my plan to compose a manifesto and his approaching death – his disintegration and eventual reabsorption into the mind of the universe – were inversely related. He pushed his glass of tea over the edge of the dining table with the end of his cane. It shattered, and I had to clean up after him. I looked around. The apartment was in a terrible state: dirty, disorderly, its corners patched with cobwebs that matched my father's white-haired armpits. "This," I said sombrely, "is a Room of Broken Heirlooms." At that, he fixed his eyes on me. His gaze was loaded with helplessness and rage. I watched him try to take in the circumstances of our lives, but he couldn't. A barrier had gone up, and he was stuck on the other side of it looking as lost and bewildered as I had felt as a child. I nearly wept as I looked back at him. I turned away to conceal my pain.

The apartment was scattered with objects – most of them rusty, damaged – that we had either carried with us across that no man's land, that miasma of death, or accumulated during our subsequent exodus through the Mediterranean in search of intellectual freedom. A vain search that turned up nothing, because no matter where you go, knot-brained idiots outnumber honest and straightforward men.

I stood near the dining-room table, dustpan in hand. I examined the objects of our lives: a rust-stained samovar, a hand-woven rug

that looked like it had been bludgeoned, an old suitcase shaped like a chest, *The Hanged Mallard* (our most prized possession) and a book of poems by Hāfez, which was lying on the floor near my father's La-Z-Boy. He was sitting in that armchair now, slumped over, nervously tugging on his moustache. He had staggered over to it with his cane, grunting along the way, while I swept up the shattered glass.

My father often consulted Hāfez's poems. In what turned out to be the final weeks of his life, these poetic consultations confirmed for him a fact he had firmly come to believe and that seemed to have revised his thinking up to that point: our future had been sealed off, we had been permanently barred from it, and we would never have access, not now, not ever, to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; we, to put it shortly and sweetly, belonged to the cast of the living dead and there was no point in our continuing on.

"No point! You hear me?" He spat so loudly that his voice carried across the room. He was breaking down inside. He had given up his sword.

I walked into the kitchen, stunned. I removed the lid from the garbage and got rid of the shattered glass. My father, annoyed at my lack of response, got up and lurched across the rug to the window that looked out onto the street. I came back out of the kitchen and watched as he struggled to open the window. He kept pointing at the glass, at the people on the street below. He was repulsed by their dress, their manners, their way of being in the world. He banged his cane against the sill. The framework came loose. He stuck his cane out, pointed it at a passer-by and announced: "I spit on my life!"

Then he wheeled his head around, slipped his cane out of the crack in the window and pointed it directly at me. He said: "You should know: the final hour is always approaching." His hands were shaking. His cane was bouncing up and down. I noticed his moustache was wet. The tips were so long that they were getting caught in his mouth. I took this as evidence of a bad mood gone sour.

That night, before my father went to bed, he reached into his pocket and retrieved an image of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's face, a cut-out from an old rial banknote. When I was a child, he

had made me a mobile out of those cut-outs; he would twirl the mobile around and I would see the King's shadowy face redoubled on the ceiling and the walls. I remembered him telling me: "Look, the Ruler of the Aryans ate the ground!" Or, with a chorus of defiant laughter, applauding his own sarcasm: "If we who have mingled with the Arabs, Turks, Mongols and Greeks for hundreds of years are Aryans, then the Spanish are pure-blooded Iberians!"

Now, as if the King of Kings were still alive, my father looked at me from across the room and let out: "Ha! The man thinks his sweat is as white as milk!" He was holding the King's face up to the light. His mind had unreeled.

He seemed to be working his way backward across his life, which was ending in the most unfortunate place: exile's cold claw. As I observed him, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. This pain, I believe, derived from the sudden and unexpected loosening of the screws that kept the lid on my past tightly shut. I was faced with the prospect of having to open that lid in order to fit my father in the same container I had relegated not only my mother to but also the senseless phenomena that had accumulated during the course of my ill-fated life. I was sure those forgotten fragments of memory, sharpened into spears on the jagged cliffs of time, would inevitably slip out and stab me in the gut. I had no doubt that upon my father's death I would enter a labyrinth of grief so complex that I may never find the exit.

That fateful day finally arrived. In April, while the cherry trees were blossoming and the sky was a cloudless blue, my father died. His heart stopped.

I came home from my weekly meeting with Morales and found my father sitting in his La-Z-Boy, dead, his cane resting across his lap, his mouth open, his tongue sunk back, his moustache flat and lifeless. I felt as though my heart had been put through the shredder. I heaved and wailed, but I couldn't shed any tears. I had gone dry, like that no man's land we had traversed. My eyes stung and my gut burned. I bit my lips until they bled. I gnawed on my fingers. I attacked myself the way animals do when they are in distress. Some time later, somnambulant, comatose, I walked over

to my father and caressed his face. I closed his eyes. Then I went into the kitchen and poured some tea. I didn't know what to do with myself. There was a small radio balanced on the window sill that led out to the fire escape. I had never turned it on, but I did then. There is a first time for everything, after all. I leant against the sink and listened to the voice coming through. It said, "The long siege." We were right in the middle of the reckless chaos of the Bush years.

I retreated from the kitchen and again looked at my dead father. There was a white hue to his skin. I couldn't stand to see him that way. I looked around. There was a notebook I hadn't noticed before on the dinner table. My father had left me a present, a leather-bound notebook with a note on it that said: "Ill-fated child, last of the Hosseinis! Add to history's pile of ruins the uselessness of our suffering."

I grabbed the notebook and went back into the kitchen. I leant against the sink. I opened the tap. I watched the water run down the drain. I looked out the window. The New World. There it was, shamelessly conducting its business while halfway around the globe whole towns, cities and villages were being razed to the ground. Then I thought, what does that word – *new* – mean anyway? I had never seen anything new in my life. All I had seen was the anxiety of people wanting to say something new. The New Poets! The New World! I examined the word. I filled a glass and took a drink of water. I turned off the tap. "New!" I turned the word over on my tongue. "New!" I laughed. I laughed with repulsion, with hatred. The sky changed colours. Yellow to ochre to rust. I don't know how much time went by. Soon it was evening. In the street, the neon lights of the shops came on. Their green glare glided across the walls. I felt as if I were standing at the bottom of the sea. For a brief second, I remembered the wrinkled surface of the Mediterranean, how it shone like treated leather in the muted light of dusk. Fragments of the past were already pushing their way up to the surface in spontaneous fits and bursts. The Mediterranean, that green sea, that Sea of Sunken Hopes, appeared like a photograph, a surface without depth. I laughed. I laughed until I had no idea what I was laughing at. I laughed until there were tears coming

out of my eyes and ears. Brackish waters rose through the craggy walls of my void. It stung so hard, I thought my organs had been set on fire. Then I called 911.

The police and paramedics came and went. I told them they were not allowed to move my father from the La-Z-Boy because I, his only surviving family member, was in the middle of a funereal ritual.

The paramedics leant over his pale body. They tried to resuscitate him despite the obvious signs of death. I wanted to speak out, to stop them from touching him, but my voice had drowned.

Finally, I murmured, "He is not returning. He has gone back to the beginning, to the space before his birth. His mind is in the process of being reabsorbed into the mind of the universe."

They hardly heard me. They pumped his chest. They shocked it. They gave him mouth-to-mouth. Nothing. Finally, they gave up and pronounced his time of death, then proceeded to walk around, investigating the scene with sinister grins, clearly hoping to uncover a crime.

"Look all you want," I said, exasperated, my voice thin. "My father died when it was time for him to die."

They pretended not to hear me. I tried to raise my voice a notch, but a thinner voice emerged, a babble incomprehensible even to me. I was standing there watching myself dissolve. I couldn't tell where I ended, where the room began.

Eventually, one of the police officers came up to me. He was tall and imposing, and had a flat face. He looked like he had been attacked with a pan. There were three of them altogether. Two men and one woman.

"What do you do?" the flat-faced officer asked, and my mother's face swam up the back channels of my mind. I pushed it away.

I heard myself say, rather matter-of-factly, "I am composing a manifesto."

His face distended, as if someone had gone over it with a roller. Thoughts were galloping around my mind, colliding into one another. I took a step back and corrected myself. I told him it was more complicated than that.

"What do you mean?"

I leant against the bookshelf near my dead father. I drew several deep breaths. Then, as coolly as I could, I explained to the officer that I was preparing my mind to produce a manifesto and that once I had sufficiently primed my mind with literature the manifesto would come to me as if it were my second voice. I would just have to transcribe that voice into my notebook as faithfully as possible. I pointed at my notebook, which was on the table. I picked it up and sniffed its pages. They smelled musty, old. I looked over at my father's face. He looked thinner than he had been an hour before. He was already shrinking, shedding parts of himself, beginning to disappear.

I looked at the officer again. He had brandished a pen and a notepad from his pocket and was jotting a few things down. I saw him carve a question mark into the paper. He was making such a tight fist with his hand that the ball of his pen nearly tore through the sheet.

"Are you a graduate student?" he asked, looking up at me. His eyes were narrow and blue, barely a contrast against his veiny white skin.

"Exactly," I lied, letting myself off the hook, because my mother's face had returned to occupy its proper place next to my father's, and with my parents' dead faces illuminated by the feeble light of my mind, I felt I was going to faint.

Before the policemen and the paramedics had arrived, I'd extended the La-Z-Boy by pulling on the lever and managed to straighten and then bend my father's limbs. I wanted to avoid the worst of rigor mortis. After that, I pulled all of Nietzsche's books off the shelves and laid them on the floor in a circle around my dead father. The police officers were examining those old tomes now. I told them that I planned to walk around my father's body all night, picking the books up one by one and reading several passages from each book out loud. He had read to me through the deepest recesses of our lives. Now it was my turn to read to him, to siphon literature into the hollow left over by his absence.

I said to myself, "Walking is the best medicine!"

The policeman with the flat face looked at me with the suspicious gaze of a passport controller. He looked like a man whose head is full of questions.

Before he could form his words, I said, bitterly, “Don’t ask me. I plead the Fifth!”

A terrible silence fell.

I wanted to push him over. I added, “Keep on bombing Iraq and invading Afghanistan, strangling the region, and there will be more of us here!”

His flat face grew red. It looked like a plate that had been rubbed with the blood of a rare steak.

“Get a grip!” he ordered.

I wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself or me.

“A grip?” I echoed. Inwardly, I thought that, like my mother, my father will soon be swallowed up by the earth; there are no ledges in the abyss of grief.

I walked over to my father and placed my hand against his forehead. His body was growing colder by the minute. I combed his moustache with my fingers. I pressed my hand against his cheek. Again, I felt dizzy, as if someone were draining my blood. My legs grew weak.

The other two police officers, who had been mute until then, came over. The woman had brown hair and thick, straight eyebrows that sat over her round eyes like dashes. Her partner, a short, bald, squat man with glasses and arms as long as his legs, walked around with hunched shoulders, emanating a kind of resigned kindness. He looked like a man who had taken a few beatings in the neck.

“Do you have a cemetery plot?” he asked, his voice gentle and reserved. “Have you called the morgue?”

“Yes and yes,” I lied, steadying myself against my father’s body. Once I had regained my strength, I said, “Your flat-faced partner over here is looking at me with such sadistic appetite, you’d think I was a pig about to be butchered.”

He apologized on his partner’s behalf.

“We’ll get out of your way,” he said.

The female officer was so wide that she looked like she had swallowed a helium balloon. She floated across the room and took the other two with her.

I closed the door behind them. I was alone with my father. I could finally breathe. My mind freshly oxygenated, I did what I had to do. I walked in a circle and wept through the night, shuddering and incredulous. Even so, I read to him until the crack of dawn. When I came across his favourite verses, I managed to stay calm long enough to kneel and whisper them in his ear. By morning, my face was dirty, streaked with tears. Tracks of salt sliced my cheeks in half. I caught my reflection in the window. My hair was a tangled mess. I had never seen anything so ugly. I thought to myself: I am one of the wretched of this pungent, futile earth. Far off in the distance, the half-moon, which had risen through the night, faded; it turned a translucent white. The lights that had come on in a sequence along the empty road, a necklace of pearls that illuminated the ghostly street through the night, died down. Instantly, my image vanished from the window’s reflective surface.

I went to the bathroom and washed my face, then headed out to the neighbourhood café, which had free Wi-Fi, and searched eBay for a cheap cemetery plot. There was a man in Westchester County selling a grave his father had purchased before moving away; he had left the plot behind. His son, who said his name was Kevin, had taken several photographs. The grass was overgrown. The stones in the adjacent lots were falling over. There were a few fake flowers scattered across the lawn, blown here and there by the wind. In one of the photos, Kevin, wearing a white polo shirt and slacks with a cell phone clipped onto his belt, was lying down on the site of what would have been his father’s future tomb with his arms on his chest. He looked as good as dead. I told him my father was much thinner than he was; in fact, he was emaciated but, judging from Kevin’s graveyard portrait, about the same length. Kevin confirmed that it was the perfect size for an adult male, and I bought the plot then and there.

The next day, I took my dead father for a ride on the Metro-North in our chest-shaped suitcase. It took hours to fold his knees into his chest so he would fit. But I persevered. It was how he would have wanted it: transported in the memorabilia of the past.

He weighed next to nothing. Even so, we both arrived at the funeral home a few pounds thinner.

I sat in the funeral home for hours, waiting. Eventually, the man who prepared my father's body for burial and wrapped him in a white sheet – a reserved, thin man with polished cheeks – came out to offer his condolences. He disappeared through a door and then reappeared a moment later and offered me a glass of water. It was so quiet I could have heard a pin drop. The man stood there, hovering over me while I drank the water. I wanted him to go away, but he continued to stand there in silence. He seemed to expect me to say something, to explain the circumstances of my father's knotted body. I began to lay bare the various nodes of my ill-fated life. I found myself saying that I intended to reverse our exile – “Our forced retreat from the past,” I said with emphasis – by retracing our jerky, incoherent journey across the Mediterranean, street by street, in a backward manner. As soon as I heard myself say the words, I realized I had been nurturing the idea since the start of my father's decline, the onset of his blindness.

It became clear to me then and there that my father's missive to record the *uselessness of our suffering* would become, over the course of the following months, an unstoppable impulse. An impulse that would require everything of me. I, alone in the world and without family, am a person of little consequence. But, I thought inwardly, let the story of the Hosseinis, which is also my story, the story I inherited and through which I must slog, be a resounding alarm to the rest of humanity, the 99.9 per cent of anti-intellectual rodents who scamper about this earth indifferent to the pain of others. I'm not talking about a mild heartache. No. I'm talking about the kind of pain that eviscerates, the kind that levels your life, that leaves you barely holding on. I reached for my notebook. “This notebook is my only hope,” I told the gentleman who had prepared my father's body. “Everything rests on it. I am willing to extend my life, which is itself a death, in order to put these words in the record.”

The man stood there, nodding along and smiling warmly.

I said, “I intend to dive into the lacunae of exile. In other words, just like my father and my mother, I am going to become nothingness, fade into the white noise of death – only I will do so by

physically retracing the ill-fated steps of our journey from Iran through the Mediterranean to the USA.”

His eyes widened, but he kept nodding.

“The USA,” I said, letting out a chuckle. “The Unanimous Station of Apathy, a station where the selfish and the greedy readily set up shop with the intent of exploiting the vulnerable!”

The funeral director looked at me with that polished countenance of his.

I said, “Just so the message is clear” – at this, he looked like I had slapped him in the face with a dirty dish towel – “I intend to prolong this ridiculous habit of living just long enough to examine the landscapes we traversed during our long and brutal exodus. After that, there is no knowing what I will do.”

Once his initial surprise had passed, the funeral director did his best to normalize the situation. He stood there and continued to smile kindly while he searched the ground at his feet. But his unresponsiveness failed to soothe me; it only fuelled my anger. I raised my notebook to my nose and sniffed it, then I took another sip of my water.

“Soon,” I said, swallowing, “this notebook will smell like ink, like the blood of literature, the blood that runs through all Hosseini veins.”

The man took a respectful step back. He stood there with his hands clasped, his head bent humbly. He was still staring at the grey carpet beneath his feet. I took another sip. His mouth finally opened. His tongue had started working again.

“I understand,” he said humbly. He raised his head and looked past me at a man who was walking across the room carrying an arrangement of roses, lilies and white hyacinth.

I got up and walked over to the chest-shaped suitcase, which I had parked near the door. Naturally, my dead father was no longer in it, but the pungent door of his corpse had been absorbed into the leather and wood. The scent of his death made me dizzy, but I carried on. I had to persist in the face of dread. It was the valiant thing to do. I pulled out a few of our favourite books: *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *The Odyssey*. I walked back over to the man with the polished face and asked him if he could give the

books to the undertakers to put in my father's casket before sealing it. I wanted him to have access in death to the tattered pages from which he had so often read to me in life. I could see the man wasn't pleased with my request, but again he nodded and said he understood.

"And who do I give the epitaph for the tombstone to?" I asked, shoving the old tomes under his arm.

"I can take care of that for you," he said.

I handed him a piece of paper. It read: *Like desert camels of thirst dying while on their backs water bearing.* The man read the note. He looked up from the page and asked: "This is what you want on his tombstone?"

"Exactly," I said. "And make sure the engraving is poorly done. I'd like the words to be lopsided, as if they were written hastily and upside down during times of war, between bouts of carnage, detonations and bombings." As I spoke, the bony knobs of my knees ached the way they had hurt when we walked across that no man's land with those blackboards hanging over our chests and backs to protect us from the imprudent blows of history.

The man who had been carrying the flowers was now walking back across the room. This time he was holding a blown-up photograph of one of the world's other recently deceased, a man with glasses, a tiny nose that looked like it had been chopped off and white hair.

After that, I don't know what happened. At some point, hours later, I was standing out in the cemetery under a cluster of trees looking at the plot I had seen on eBay. It had since been dug up. It was a moist black hole. I was dazed, holding my notebook, watching as my father was slipped into the mud of the earth. Again, I had the feeling that someone was draining my blood. I yielded to the dizziness until I was at the point of delirium, until I felt myself double, triple, quadruple. I thought to myself, I am among the loneliest of this pitiful world; all the other Hosseinis are dead.

My void widened in order to contain my increasingly voluminous loneliness. In response, my consciousness stretched and spun. Just then, like a bolt of lightning, a magnificent thought struck my mind. It occurred to me that I would need a new name for my journey of

exile, one that referred to my multiple selves. I declared inwardly: I, the last of the Hosseinis, will continue to live so that this scattered collective of selves can fill my notebook with literature; in other words, my manifesto – composed of literary fragments systematically organized into a vast matrix, with each portion reflecting a disparate self – is my only vindication, my final line of defence.

At that critical moment, the light came down through the trees in the cemetery and fell across my father's casket so that it appeared striped. The image was charged with an electric force, and for a brief moment, my inner and outer worlds were in perfect alignment. I felt as though the fate of my future self were tied up with that image of my father's casket wrapped in alternating bands of light and darkness. It formed a kind of chiaroscuro composed of shadowy, inky bands laced with contrasting stripes as white as paper. That's when the word appeared in my head: *zebra*.

I let it sit for a moment. I watched the undertakers – three men dressed in black, all of them strangers – sow my father into the earth, thinking, as I did, that the juxtaposing stripes of light and darkness were sending a message to me, a message that consisted of that very word, *zebra*, which had spontaneously manifested itself much as the truth does. The truth, which is odder than one expects.

I turned the word over on my tongue; I muttered it to myself. I examined it. Zebra: an animal striped black-and-white like a prisoner of war; an animal that rejects all binaries, that represents ink on paper. A martyr of thought. That was it. I had arrived at my new name. To the funeral director's astonishment, I declared out loud, "Call me Zebra!"

The funeral director leant his polished face over to look behind the trees, his eyes searching for a zebra grazing in the grass. But unbeknownst to him, I was the zebra; the zebra was I. I gave him a broad, happy smile. He shrank, like any man would, because that smile was the smile of a conqueror.

That night, after returning the empty suitcase to my studio, I set out again despite feeling exhausted. I went out on a peripatetic walk in honour of my father. I walked around New York for hours, thinking of him, of the long lineage of autodidacts I had descended from, of the relentless machinery of terror that is history, of its