

NAIYER MASUD

## Lamentation

I

I HAVE SPENT my life in fruitless diversions. And these days I spend most of my time wondering what, if anything, I have gained from them—which is my latest, perhaps final, perhaps even most fruitless diversion.

For years I knocked about the country, perhaps out of a desire to learn more about our cities, large and small. The upshot was that all cities began to look alike to me, except my own, and after the last trip I remained holed up in my house for several months. Then restlessness got the better of me and I set out again. This time I headed for the rural settlements. But I soon realized that they weren't much different from the cities, to me at any rate. I returned home and was for a long while haunted by the suspicion that I'd lost my ability to distinguish between things. I let the doubt grow inside me, but I made every effort not to let it show from my actions or words. When, however, I noticed that the people with whom I socialized almost daily had begun to give me strange looks, I set out on another journey.

On this journey I roamed the desolate areas of my ancient land. The weather there was harsh and the earth barren. There were no rivers anywhere near these areas, so they were practically uninhabitable for anyone used to rather more amenities. Still they weren't completely uninhabited. I also passed through areas which perhaps had never been home to anyone; they were merely immense stretches of uninhabited geography which, in a vague sort of way, resembled the seas and, though unpopulated, somehow didn't look so desolate. Rather, it was the areas where humans had dwelled from ancient times that looked truly desolate. Across these immense geographical tracts they abruptly surged into view like islands and looked desolate precisely because of their human habitation.

And just as these humans affected their habitats, so too did the habitats affect the humans, so much so that even in bustling cities one could identify them as wastelanders. At least I could, for I had spent the greater part of this journey roaming among just such folk.

These were small communities, each distinct from the other, or so they appeared to me. During this journey my main occupation was observing these communities and spending a few days with each. I was especially keen on this undertaking because these scattered human communities were slowly dying out. A sudden epidemic or a major shift in the weather pattern could easily wipe them out, and often did so. It even came about that on a second trip to the area occupied by a community I had visited some time earlier, I found it deserted and the area itself practically swallowed by the surrounding uninhabited geography. This was because the traces of habitation left by these communities tended to disappear rather quickly—or perhaps weren't even there in the first place.

I couldn't gather much information about these people, for although they could understand my language a little, I could not understand their variety of tongues. We mostly communicated through signs. But this didn't help me much either. Different communities expressed themselves through different signs, and sometimes the same sign denoted the opposite meaning in a different community. Where one community used a particular hand gesture to express happiness, the other used the same gesture to express sorrow. Where a nod of the head indicated "yes" for one, the other used it to indicate "no." Much time was thus required to understand their gestures precisely, and I never stayed long enough in any given community. Thus what little I was able to uncover about them simply could not be trusted, and by the time I returned I had already expelled from my mind whatever confused information I had gathered about them. The only thing that clung to my memory was the congregational lament of these communities, which although different in each place was nonetheless easily recognizable to me.

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I cannot be certain whether it was merely a coincidence or whether in fact these people were prone to a higher death rate, but the fact remains that within a couple of days of my arrival in a community a death invariably occurred, which was announced by the wailing and weeping of the deceased's nearest or next nearest relatives. The other members of the community softly approached the bereaved, calmed them down, and left just as softly. Others occupied themselves with funeral arrangements.

These out of the way, the members came together at a fixed time and place, in some communities after disposing of the body and in others before it, to perform a congregational lament. The lamentation of most communities began with an accusatory complaint against death and moved to a recapturing of the memory of the departed, steadily gaining intensity and tempo. At the lament's highest point, emotion would overcome everyone and their body movements, their voices, and, more than anything, their eyes, all came to reflect anger rather than grief. At times it seemed as though they had all taken some potent intoxicant. In certain places I too was obliged to participate in the rite. In such cases, while I would be busy crudely mimicking them, dumbly and without the least bit of emotion, the lament would come to an end, with everyone trying to comfort and console everyone else. And I too would be offered the same.

In some places women outnumbered men in the lament, in others men outnumbered women; but in one community their numbers were equal. This was the only community whose women I was able to observe, even touch, but only during this ritual. Short in stature and tawny in complexion, these women seemed to have been liberally endowed by nature in those parts of the body that made them women, so that they looked like the originals of those ancient statues and mural paintings which, it is sometimes assumed, were fashioned by people who never laid eyes on a real woman, or at least not from up close, and certainly never touched one. The lamentation in vogue among this community went something like this: men sat on their haunches in a row on the bare earth, with women sitting likewise in a row facing them. Each man-woman pair would touch first elbows, then wrists, then slap each other's palms, then interlock their fingers, and then say whatever needed to be said; they would then separate and once again link their elbows and repeat their words. Their lament would repeatedly rise in a crescendo, then begin to fall, then rise up again, like the ebb and flow of the sea, until everyone's eyes were rolling back in their heads. Dripping with sweat, they all finished the lament in a faint, quavering voice and pulled away, panting slowly.

Three deaths occurred during my presence in that community. I participated in the lament for the first two. The third time, death claimed my own host, a decrepit old man. I had tried to treat him with the medicines I had with me, but he couldn't be saved. Not just his face, but even some of his mannerisms reminded me of my father, and I had tried to communicate this to him, partly through speech and partly through gestures. I have no idea what he had told the community about me, but a

couple of the group who came to comfort and calm the bereaved made their way toward me as well, and even though I was silent, “calmed” me down. Their visit brought back the memory of the day my own father had died. The house resounded with the crazed wails of the women folk, while I was left to sit quietly by myself.

My host’s death brought back to me the image of my father’s face just as he lay dying; I then began to recall the face of my elderly host. After the funeral arrangements, when the men and women of the community began to line up opposite each other, I quietly got up and left for the neighboring uninhabited area. Once there I quickly decided to end my journey, and that very day I set out for home.

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These days, as I mentioned, I spend most of my time wondering what I have gained from these diversions. Thus my life, the greater part of which has been spent lurching from one stimulation to the next, has for some time now been quite drab and monotonous. One day, though, a bit of stimulation did interrupt the monotony. The occurrence could be seen as something gained from one of my diversions, but turned out to be worse, I believe, than no gain at all.

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That day early in the morning there was a knock at the door of my house that opens onto the bazaar. I lazily got up and opened it. The local crazy boy—a denizen of the neighborhood—was standing in front of me with a crumpled scrap of paper in his hand. As soon as he saw me he stuffed it into my hand and took off laughing. It was his custom to pick up any fallen item in the bazaar and then give it to others as a gift. He called it “prize-giving.” The market folk begged him to give them such “prizes.”

Well, I got a prize today without even asking!—I thought to myself as I closed the door, and got on with the day’s routine. I also wondered, as I did from time to time, why people considered this boy crazy. There was nothing really unusual about him except that he always looked cheerful and laughed at everything; still everybody thought of him as crazy, so I did too.

Shortly thereafter another knock came at the door. I opened it once again, and there was the same boy. “They’re calling you,” he said, trying not to laugh.

“Who?” I asked.

“The ones who’ve come.”

“Who have come?”

“The piece-of-paper-people,” he said, then laughed loudly and sprinted off.

I closed the door and picked up the scrap which I had earlier dropped on the bed. The paper itself was old; it bore my name and address in my own hand, and appeared to be from the time when I wrote very deliberately, making each letter with flourish and elegance. Those days came to mind, and with them the time I had spent wandering among the wasteland communities. All the same, I couldn’t recall exactly where or when I had written this scrap, though I did remember I had in those days liberally distributed similar slips among the various communities I visited. This was the only way in which I had repaid their hospitality. I would emphasize, in our mostly haphazard sign language, that if ever one of them needed something done in the city, with the help of my hand-written scrap he should come to me straight away. I was sure I would never see any of those countless slips of paper again. Now, though, ages later, one had found its way back to me; I had been apprised that some people, aided by this scrap, had come calling on me, even though the news was brought by one who was considered crazy by everyone, myself included. In the span of a few seconds all the communities I had visited whirled through my mind like dream images and then vanished, and I stepped out of the house into the bazaar.

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It was time for the shops to open, but most of them were still closed. The shopkeepers, however, were present, standing in a group whispering furtively. When they saw me, they strode over to me.

“Who brought this?” I showed them the piece of paper.

Without saying a word they pointed at the nameless dirt path which sloped down toward the north, its mouth nearly blocked off by the bazaar’s encroaching garbage dump. I looked where they pointed. At first glance it appeared as though the area beyond the dump was dotted all over with small garbage heaps, but a second glance revealed them to be a group of people who sat crouching on the ground.

“Who are they?” a shopkeeper asked me.

“Looks like some community,” I replied. I was about to walk over to them when another shopkeeper asked, “Did you invite them?”

“No,” I said.

“But it’s you they want to see.”

“Still, I haven’t sent for them.”

“All right, fine. At least get them to move their cart. It’s blocking the way.”

Only then did I notice the cart that stood in the paved street. A barrel had been cut lengthwise, so that it resembled a small round-bottomed boat, minus the tapered ends. Or maybe it was in fact some discarded boat on which they had stuck a couple of wheels—huge disks cut from the round trunk of some old tree—making it usable on dry land. On closer inspection, I discovered that what I’d imagined to be a barrel was in fact a hollowed-out tree-trunk, with a big shapeless stone secured below it by a thick, coarse, tree-bark rope, dangling so low it practically scraped the ground. Most likely it had been attached to stabilize the cart; all the same, two men were holding the cart on either end. Suppose they let go—I wondered absent-mindedly—which way would the cart tip, forward or back? Then I gave it an even closer look.

The inside of the cart was completely filled with rags. A woman stood bent over it, continually shifting the rags back and forth. Even though she was wrapped from head to toe in a *chaadar*, she appeared to be young. I had barely glanced at her and the two men holding the cart when I heard another shopkeeper ask, “Which community is it?”

I turned to look at the people who were squatting on the ground beyond the garbage dump. There were ten or twelve men in all, and so covered with grime that one couldn’t tell the color of their clothes. Seeing them, not a thing came to mind; still I had no difficulty recognizing that it was one of the wasteland communities. I stared at them for a long time. They were all looking at me with indifference, and with every passing instant I was becoming more certain that I had never stayed among them. I couldn’t understand how they had come upon my name and address. Once again I examined the scrap of paper. Just then they noticed that I had the scrap in my hand, and a sudden surge of excitement swept through them. They exchanged a few words among themselves and quickly rose to their feet. Some dust drifted up from their clothes, and soon I was surrounded by them, as well as by the queries of the bazaar-wallahs, who began by repeating their last question: “Which community is this?”

I told them that I didn’t know these people, but they kept on questioning me as though they thought I was accountable for them. Their questions, however, were such that I could not possibly answer: Aren’t they untouchables? There’s been a rash of thefts in the city, do you think

they are behind it? Where have they come from? Could they be beggars?

Now I asked: "Have they asked anyone for anything?"

"Well, not so far," I was informed. "When we arrived, they were showing everyone the slip of paper and asking how to find your address."

"In what language?"

"By signs."

"So?" I asked, "Did any of the signs look like they were begging?"

"But just *look* at them ..."

"I *am* looking."

"And the cart ..." said the shopkeeper with the loudest voice.

"I'm looking at that, too."

"...And who is this they're hauling around in the cart? Suppose he dies this instant—wouldn't they beg us for help? They're all tricks to swindle something out of us."

At that point I peered at the figure in the cart. What, until then, had looked like a lump in the pile of rags turned out to be the rider's constantly drooping head, which the woman was now and then trying to prop up; but it always just drooped back down. I strode over to him. Just as the woman was propping the rider's head up once again with both her hands, I heard their voices, all at once, and turned around to look at them.

They were touching my knees over and over again, saying something. Their speech sounded like a corrupted form of my own language—or its primitive form before corruption had set in—which was unfathomable to me. They would touch my knees and then point at the cart, their tone sounding increasingly like a plea. This made me wonder too whether they might perhaps be a pack of beggars after all. A few words to them and I was convinced that they didn't understand my tongue either. Given my perfectly flat intonation, they couldn't even guess at what I might be saying. Their own speech was varied in tone, but nonetheless I could easily sense that they were hugely afraid of something, that they had endured all manner of hardship to get here, that they were looking for some kind of assistance from me, and that all of this had something to do with the occupant of the cart.

All the while the woman kept arranging the rider's seat and supporting his drooping head. I edged closer to the rider. He was buried chest-deep in the pile of rags, and his head was also wrapped in rags. The woman moved to one side and raised his head with both her hands, turning it toward me.

I saw the inflamed face of a child before me. His eyelids were incredi-

bly swollen. One of them was open just a crack, and he was looking at me through the opening. The other was completely shut, but it had been smeared with lime or some other white substance; in the center was a large iris painted with lamp-black or some other black substance; this gave the illusion of an eye frozen in a stare of astonishment. I looked away from it and bent down to peer into the slit of the other eye. Hidden behind the matted lashes it radiated torment, entreaty, and disgust, all at once. I made to look at his face from still closer, which seemed to create a series of waves in the rags. The rider jerked his face away. His lips drew back, exposing his teeth. From a distance he may have appeared to the shopkeepers to be grinning, but to me he looked like a sick dog with mean boys coming at it.

Rising behind me I heard the buzz of bazaar-wallahs and the shrill voices of the community folk, which led me to suspect that the parties had perhaps begun sparring with each other. I whirled around to look: Both parties were telling me something, but I couldn't understand a word. Just then the woman grabbed my hand and I turned toward her. She stuck her free hand into the pile of rags and rummaged through it, eventually pulling out one of the rider's hands all the way up to the elbow. I had three hands before me: my own familiar hand, its fingers interlocked with the soft, white fingers of the woman, slowly turning moist, and between our two palms the hand of the rider—small, withered, with motley strings of color hanging down between the wrist and elbow; dead, wrinkled skin showing through.

Her fingers throbbed in mine like a heart, and my body quivered lightly. The rider emitted a sound, like the sick dog I had imagined.

One of the shopkeepers placed his hand on my shoulder and I turned toward him. "Tell them to move the cart," he was saying. "They're ruining our business. First thing in the morning these people ..."

I turned toward the community folk. They were staring at me mutely. I made a sign for them to proceed westward on the straight road, and they understood my meaning right away. The men who were holding the cart on either end easily turned it toward the west. The woman withdrew her hand from mine, put the rider's hand back into the pile, and supported his head as the cart lumbered forward with a rickety noise. The clan followed behind, holding their drab, dingy bundles and long clubs, while the shopkeepers and neighborhood folk—among them a few women and children—stood quietly arrayed on either side of the road. Hurrying ahead of the cart and leaving the line of shops behind, I came to the southern bend in the paved road and stopped. I turned around and



motioned them to halt at the bend, and they kept coming along slowly. Dust was hovering around them like smoke. And then I saw it all at once. Everyone and everything in their aggregate seemed fragile and decayed and in the path of imminent disintegration. And yet, I thought, had it all not been so grimy, had the stone suspended from the cart had the slightest fineness to its cut, the whole parade might have been taken for a royal procession.

They came up to me and halted. Behind them some distance away I saw the shopkeepers return to their stores and the line of onlookers start to break up. Now I turned my attention to the clansfolk; they too perhaps surmised that I was now ready to listen to them in some peace. They started to speak in a relaxed manner. I could make out that they were trying to get across some details about the rider, but I was able to comprehend only one thing: the rider inside the cart was the last one. During my journeys among those small communities the meaning of the word “last” had been so frequently expressed to me in so many different tongues and through so many different gestures that I understood it immediately. Most everyone of this community too, after recounting the condition of the rider, touched my feet and solicitously informed me that the rider was the last one.

Absurdly, I felt responsible for them, and even more for the rider, and motioned for them to rest easy. They became silent and fixed their gaze on me; they gestured to one another to rest easy and in fact did so. I made a sign for them to stay put and wait for me. Then, walking quickly as if I’d be right back, I returned to my house.

The crazy boy was standing at the door and looked scared.

“Who are they?” he asked in a choked voice.

“They’re the paper-people,” I replied. “You didn’t give them a prize?”

“Prize?” he asked, uncomprehendingly.

I patted him on the shoulder and said, “Run along, find a prize for them quickly. Then we will go visit them.”

“No,” he said, appearing more frightened than before.

“All right, go and play,” I said. “I’ve got work to do.”

“Who is that old man?”

“Old man?”

“The one hiding in the cart.”

“He’s not an old man,” I said.

My mind had another jolt. Why had I supposed he was a child? He might just as well be an old man. I recalled his appearance. His face was swollen and there were wrinkles on his hands. I strained to remember his

hand, but what came back to me instead was the slowly moistening white hand of the woman, its fingers locked in mine, throbbing like a heart. I shook myself out of it and tried to recall the words and gestures of the community folk. All I could fathom was that he was the last one. The community's last child ... or last old man? The last emblem of some person or event? The last testimonial of something or some age? I felt increasingly confused. Perhaps I allowed myself to indulge in my confusion far too long, for when I did decide to go back and look again, the crazy boy was already gone and the afternoon was beginning to wane.

Leaving the garbage dump and the series of shops behind me as I moved ahead I saw them approaching me. The cart pulled ahead of them. The rider's face was resting on the side of the cart and the rags wrapped around his head had come undone in several places. The woman was repeatedly trying to climb aboard the cart, but each time one of the clan grabbed her and pulled her back. I heard their voices beneath the clatter of the cart. They were singing something. By turns each person chanted something, then others took up the last few words and repeated them in unison. They had lined themselves up in a row and their voices were gaining volume. One of the men stepped slightly out of the row and intoned something, and the others chanted it back. Then he stepped back and another stepped forward. His voice and the following chorus were louder than before. And now their hands and their bodies had begun to sway, almost as in a dance. Every now and then one of the men would step forward and intone some words; the others would join in and then shake their heads as if in applause. At least I took it to be a gesture of applause; in reality, though, I didn't know exactly what the gesture meant in this community.

Perhaps they didn't see me, even though I was well within their field of vision. As they moved forward, I found myself moving slowly backward, my ears tuned to their voices, my eyes fixed on the movement of their bodies. They were recounting some ancient tale, whose hazy scenes were forming and dissolving before me like images in a dream. I saw a newborn child held tenderly in someone's arms. The child is learning to walk, he wobbles along, tumbles down, cries. He's picked up and pacified. He's running about, climbing trees, and falls asleep, exhausted. He wakes up, rubs his eyes with his palms; his eyes have turned red.

I saw many pairs of red eyes advancing toward me. They were all screaming "Last, last!" in unison, in a single voice, with a single gesture, and their throats seemed ready to burst. A terrible agitation had seized them and they all seemed crazed with anger. Then a kind of drunkenness

came over them. A gentle cloud of dust rising from their clothes and feet slowly enveloped them. Behind the dust the woman once again propped up the face of the rider. The slit in his eye had closed, but the other white-and-black-painted eye was fixed on me in a stare of astonishment, refusing to close although utterly covered with grime. The cart bumped over a rut in the road, jolting the rider's head. A trace of reproach flashed in the eye, soon turned to anger, then slight inebriation, and then it once again fixed on me in a stare of astonishment.

Approaching the series of shops they quieted down and halted. They appeared utterly exhausted and oblivious to my presence. After a brief consultation among themselves they pointed into the distance toward my house. I turned and quickly walked back home. Just before reaching the door I turned to look back. They were pointing at me and telling each other something. They began to move ahead, straight toward me. I turned and walked away, stopping again only after I had left my door some forty or so paces behind. I turned slowly and looked at them; they seemed like a moving pile of refuse. Then they broke into disarray and hung their heads low.

For a long time I felt I had seen a spectacle I was not likely to see ever again. I experienced a faint remorse that I was not included in it.

All the same I also felt myself quite safe, for they were now descending the nameless dirt road to the north that sloped out of the city toward the wastelands. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*