

NAIYER MASUD

## Epistle\*

My days among the dead are past.

—ROBERT SOUTHEY

*Ānhā ke kubaṅ shudand-o-īnhā ke navand*

(Those who have turned old and these who  
are new)

—‘UMAR KHAYYAM

“Respected Sir,

Through your esteemed newspaper, I would like to draw the attention of the appropriate authorities to the western sector of this city. I feel compelled to say, with great regret, that today, when large-scale development is taking place in the city and the residents of every other sector are being provided the most modern facilities, the western sector remains deprived of even a water supply and power. It looks as though this city has only three sides. When, after a long period, necessity drove me to the western sector recently, I found it in exactly the same condition as in my childhood.”\*

I

I HAD NO PERSONAL NEED TO GO THERE, but I felt obliged on account of my mother. Years ago, at the onset of old age, she had lost her ability to

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\* From the author’s second collection *‘Itir-e Kāfir* (Lucknow: Nizāmī Press, 1990), pp. 11–30.

walk, and later she nearly lost her eyesight. Her mind had also become muddled. In spite of her infirmity she would call me near her three or four times every day and she would feel around my whole body with trembling hands. Actually it had seemed to her from the time I was born that I wasn't healthy. Sometimes she thought my body was too cold, sometimes too hot; sometimes she thought my voice had changed; and sometimes that the color of my eyes looked different. Because she belonged to an old family of hakims, she had come to know the names and treatments for many illnesses by heart. Every few days she would declare that I was suffering from some new ailment and then insist on treating it. During the early days of her infirmity it happened a couple of times that I became engrossed in some work and forgot to visit her in her room, so she managed, God knows how, to drag herself to the door. After more time had passed, when her remaining vitality had also ebbed away, her physician kept me away from her for one whole day just to test whether she had any strength left in her arms and feet. She also remained unmindful of me, or so it seemed. But when, hearing her moan softly late at night, I rushed to her, I saw that she had traversed about half the distance to the door. Her bedding, which she had started to spread out on the floor ever since the death of my father, had been dragged right along with her; or rather, it seemed that it was the bedding itself that was dragging her along toward the door. When she saw me she tried to say something but fell into unconsciousness from exhaustion and remained in that state for several days. Her physician acknowledged his mistake over and over again, expressing regret for putting her through this ordeal, because, following this episode, my mother's sight and mind both became impaired, until, gradually, her presence and absence became one.

A long time has passed since even her physician died. Recently, though, when I woke up one night, I saw her sitting on the floor near my feet, groping around my bed with one hand. I quickly sat up.

"You ..." I said, looking at the web of protruding veins on the back of her hand, "... have come here?"

"To see you ... how are you feeling?" she said, haltingly, before a daze came over her.

I got out of the bed and sat down beside her on the floor, staring at her for a long time. I tried to recall my earliest image of her face as it was preserved in my memory, and for a few moments that face appeared before my eyes. Meanwhile she emerged from her daze a bit. Attempting to help her rise slowly, I said, "Come, let me take you to your room."

"No," she said with enormous difficulty, "first tell me."

“Tell you what?” I asked, in a tired voice.

“How do you feel?”

Actually, I hadn't been feeling well for a few days, so I said, “I don't feel well.”

Contrary to my expectation, she didn't ask me for the details of my illness; instead, she only asked, “So did you have someone examine you?”

“Who should I go to?”

I knew what answer would be forthcoming. The one she always gave immediately and in a sharp tone. This time, after a long silence, she did say the same thing, but with tremendous sadness and a little despair, “Why don't you go there?”

I used to go there with her in my childhood. It was a family of old hakims who were close relatives of my mother. Their house was very large and several families lived in its different sections. The head of all those families was a Hakim Sahib, hardly known in the city, but who nonetheless commanded a group of patients from neighboring villages much larger than any of the renowned doctors in the city.

A lot of celebrations took place in that house, and my mother was invited specially to them; often she took me along as well. I used to watch the strange ceremonies that took place during those celebrations with tremendous fascination. It also didn't escape me that great deference was shown to my mother there and that a wave of happiness swept over the entire place the minute she arrived. For her own part, she never neglected to show proper courtesy to one and all. She called the younger members present, and those her own age, over to her, but went to the elders herself, and everyone accepted her judgment in the family disputes which frequently arose there.

There were many people there, but I remembered, as though through a fog, only the face of Hakim Sahib, and that perhaps only because there was a slight family resemblance between him and my mother. What I do remember clearly, though, is that women, men and children of all ages used to be present in that place and that my mother, surrounded by them all, appeared to me like a flower in the midst of so many leaves.

Now, though, with her withered face turned toward me, she was trying to look at my face with her sightless eyes.

“Your voice sounds hoarse. Avoid eating oily foods,” she said, and then said again, “Why don’t you go there?”

“There ... I won’t even be able to recognize anyone there.”

“You will, when you see them. If not, they’ll clear it up for you.”

“It’s been such a long time,” I said. “I don’t remember how to get there anymore.”

“You’ll start to remember when you set out.”

“How?” I said. “Everything must have changed.”

“Nothing’s changed,” she said. She again began to drift into unconsciousness, still she managed to say one more time, “Nothing’s changed,” and then she became completely unconscious.

I sat supporting her for a long time. I tried to recall the way to that house by imagining the days when I had accompanied her there. I also tried to remember the layout of the house. All that came back to my mind was the mound—known as Hakims’ Perch—straight across from the main entrance. And yes, also that Hakims’ Perch was located on the western side of the city, that it had a few bushes and unpaved graves, and that the last signs of the city ended by the time one reached it.

I picked my mother up in my arms, just as she once used to pick me up in hers, and felt as though I had paid back some of what I owed her. And even though she was entirely unconscious, I said to her, “Come, let me help you to your room. Come morning, I shall definitely go *there*.”

I woke up the next morning a little after sunrise, and some time after I woke up I set out from the house.

2

I hadn’t passed through the western side of my own neighborhood in a long time. Now as I did, I noticed a lot of changes. Mud houses had become brick houses; vacant compounds had turned into small bazaars. A warehouse for lumber had sprung up on the ruins of an old tomb. None of the faces I was familiar with a long time ago could be seen. However, I did meet several people who knew me, and I knew some of them, though I didn’t know they lived in my own neighborhood. I also spoke to them, just the usual pleasantries, but I didn’t tell anyone where I was headed.

Soon I had left my neighborhood behind. Then I came to the grain-market and left that behind too, and then the medicine-and-spice market.

Paved roads ran on either side of these markets and stretched far into the distance, with temporary snack shops and drink stalls along the way. However, on the road I was now walking on I could see potholes straight ahead in several places, and further down it turned completely into a dirt road. Even though I didn't remember the way, I was sure that I was walking in the right direction so I kept going.

The heat of the sun had become stronger. By now even the traces of the dirt road had disappeared, but it could still be imagined between the two crooked rows of dust-covered trees. Suddenly the rows disintegrated in such a way that nothing of the road was left except a vague hint, splitting in five directions like the fingers of a spread out hand. Here, I wavered. It hadn't been long since I had left the house; I was certain that I wasn't too far from my neighborhood. Still I stopped and tried to figure out the way back. I turned around and looked. Dust-covered trees stood everywhere on the uneven terrain. I had imagined the dirt road between the rows of these trees; perhaps the rows themselves were the creation of my imagination because now I couldn't see them anywhere. In my estimation I was proceeding along a straight road, but I had often experienced how seemingly straight roads turned this way or that imperceptibly, throwing the wayfarer completely off course. I was convinced that this far into the journey I had already detoured several times and if I didn't find some trace of the road I simply wouldn't be able to make it back home on my own. However, at the time I was more concerned with Hakims' Perch, which appeared to be nowhere in sight, than with how I'd get back home. Although trees were everywhere they were so scraggly that no sizeable portion of the ground was hidden from my view. But the ground to my right, sloping upward far into the distance, was so dotted with thick bushes, practically fused into each other, that it was impossible to see what lay on the other side of this slope.

If there was anything, it had to be on the other side—I thought, and set out in that direction. And I was right. The instant I emerged from a large tract of overcrowded bushes I saw a single-story house made of small brown bricks rising before me. This was not the house I was looking for. Nevertheless I proceeded straight toward it. A nameplate, most of its letters nearly obliterated, hung on the door. It was quiet inside the house, but not the kind of quiet to be found outside of deserted houses, so I knocked three times at the door. After some time there was a slight sound of movement on the other side of the door and someone asked, "Who is it?"

What would be the point of telling that, I thought to myself, and said instead, “I seem to have lost my way; is Hakims’ Perch somewhere around here?”

“Hakims’ Perch ... Where have you come from?”

This was quite irrelevant. I felt a bit annoyed at having my question answered with a question; but it was a woman on the other side and she spoke gently and sounded extremely polite. She was holding onto the slightly ajar door, but just lightly. Her fingernails were painted orange. A faint memory crossed my mind. Just then the door opened a tad bit more and in the span of a second I caught a glimpse of a smallish, dimly lit *devrhi*, the courtyard beyond it, and the sun falling on a few branches of the pomegranate tree growing in one of its corners. In the next second I vaguely remembered that Mother used to stop briefly at this house too. But I wasn’t able to also remember the people who lived in this house.

“Have you come from some place abroad?” the voice came again from behind the door.

“No,” I said, and explained to her who I was. Then I said, “I’ve come this way after a very long time.”

After a lengthy pause I got the answer, “Please go to the back of the house. You’ll see the Perch straight across.”

The heavy voice of an old woman arose inside the house, “Mehr, who is it?”

I thanked her formally and went to the back of the house. Up ahead a number of hills, large and small, could be seen, their disorderly rows once again giving the impression of a road. These hills were just big mounds of earth, but slightly away from them bushes could be seen on another mound. I looked closely at this other mound: signs of mud graves were evident among the bushes. The whitewash on some of these graves glistened in the strong sunlight.

3

The house I was looking for was behind the Perch, and I had to go half-way around the Perch to reach it. Standing in front of the massive, old wooden main entrance, I thought for quite a while about how to announce my arrival. The wood of the door was quite thick and somewhat damp; nothing could be gained by knocking at it. Still I tapped three times, but even *I* couldn’t hear them. The thought crossed my mind that the house was probably deserted. I gave the door a gentle push. Both

of its panels turned smoothly on their hinges and opened, unfolding before me a spacious *devrhi* with a small door on its opposite end. This second door was wide open but a curtain of double-layered sackcloth hung over the entrance. I walked over to the door. Now I could hear people inside the house talking. I knocked and a voice called out to someone, "Go see, somebody's at the door."

At that point my mind became crowded with thoughts. Who all lives here? What should I say to whom? What reason should I give for my visit? How shall I make them recognize me? The urge to walk away came over me, but just then a woman's curt voice asked from behind the curtain, "Who is it?"

I gave her my full name.

"Who have you come to see?"

I had only one answer to this. "The Hakim Sahib," I said.

"The *matab* [dispensary] is on the other side. Please go there. He's getting ready."

Her voice had begun to fade away with the last of her words so I said quickly and a little loudly, "Please tell those inside."

The voice again came close, this time markedly less curt, "Where have you come from?"

Here, again, I introduced myself. Then I paused, mentioned my mother's name, paused again, and gave the name my mother was called at home, saying that I was her son, and then hesitantly I gave the pet name which used to annoy me in childhood. I went through all this in a rather haphazard manner and the woman behind the curtain relayed it somewhat more coherently to someone there who had asked for it, whereupon the voices of the women talking inside became louder and faster for a bit. I heard them repeat my mother's informal name and my pet name several times. I was hearing both of these names again after a long time. I became convinced that if I kept hearing them for a while I'd no doubt begin to recall the entire layout of this house along with all its dwellers; in fact, the image of a spacious courtyard had already started to take shape in my mind. Just then, the sackcloth curtain moved toward me with a rustle and then rose upward, allowing the front wheel of a bicycle to emerge from behind it. I stepped to one side and a boy walked into the *devrhi* holding onto a bicycle. He greeted me and went out the front door. I stood waiting silently. After a while muffled sounds rose from behind the curtain, followed by a few ducks that came into the *devrhi*. The disorderly fashion in which they were moving clearly indicated that they had been shooed out of the house. They waddled toward the front door, quacking

among themselves. Meanwhile nothing was heard from inside the house for some time. I became tired of standing in the *devrhi* and began to imagine that the silence which wafts from deserted houses was pouring out from behind the curtain continually in an attempt to engulf me. Just then somebody on the other side of the curtain said, "Please come inside."

Pushing on the double-layered curtain, I stepped into the courtyard of that house.

4

In my childhood I had seen any number of houses with large courtyards and small courtyards, with double and triple dalans, overhanging balconies, and wooden arches. This house wasn't any different; I still couldn't recall having frequented it at some point. Stopping in the middle of the courtyard for a few seconds, I noticed that every part of the house was occupied. In several small courtyards women were straining their necks and peering at me with curiosity. I tried to guess where the mistress of the house was most likely to be found and proceeded straight to the dalan where big lanterns hung from its high arches. A large *chauka* made of wooden boards sat on the floor with heavy-looking canopied beds on either side of it. The beds all had sparkling, freshly-washed sheets, still crisp with starch. An old lady sat on the *chauka*. I greeted her without knowing who she was. She smiled, showered me with blessings, and said, "Son, what caused you to wander in here today?"

It occurred to me that this question was not intended to be answered, so with as much courtesy as I could possibly muster I inquired after her health. And she said, "Why, you'd hardly remember now, but when you came here as a child you just wouldn't want to go back home."

Then she recounted many occasions when my mother had to stay on for days because of my insistence.

"And even then you left here crying," she said, wiping her eyes with the edge of her dupatta.

Meanwhile, women continued assembling in the large courtyard from different parts of the house. Most took the initiative and introduced themselves. I was not one to grasp convoluted relationships; still I tried to look as though I recognized every woman who introduced herself and already knew how we were related. The women's hair was heavily oiled and combed, and all of them were draped in coarse cotton dupattas, some seemingly dyed at home. Each one had a collection of stories about my



childhood. I was shown a guava tree at the edge of the courtyard from which I had taken a fall and been knocked unconscious, causing my mother to fall unconscious too. When the subject of my pranks came up, I found out that not a single woman present had escaped becoming the target of one of them.

I realized that I hadn't spoken a word for quite a while. Perhaps they were now waiting for me to say something since the courtyard had become somewhat hushed. I swept my gaze around and saw a few girls sitting on one side of the *chauka*. When I asked them about their studies and what other things they did to occupy themselves, they blushed and started to edge closer to one another, while somebody else answered on their behalf. At some point three boys had come in and they were sitting at a distance from the girls. I talked to them about a few things I thought might interest them, but I had no idea what their interests were. The boys seemed stupid to me, the girls ugly, although I did like the way the girls drew back from modesty. I was fishing for some topic of interest to the boys when a rattling sound was heard at the door. The boy with the bicycle had returned holding in his hands something wrapped in newspaper cones which had begun to ooze oil. He looked at the *dalan* and made a sign. Promptly the girls got up and left. Shortly thereafter sounds of their laughing and of the clanking of china rose from a part of the house nearby. I sensed a vague resemblance between the two sounds; I also suspected that they were imitating the way I talked.

How long had I been sitting in this *dalan*? I tried to guess. Just then a door opened to my left and I saw Hakim Sahib standing behind the reed screen that was hanging in front of it. I recognized him instantly. He was trying to adjust the angle of his cap. Then, turning his face toward the screen, he started groping for something in his pockets. I saw another door behind him with a crowd of peasant men and women near it.

"Listen everyone! I'm coming in," he announced as he lifted the screen.

"You may come in now," the mistress of the house said. "Look, who's here—recognize him?"

By now Hakim Sahib had walked into the *dalan*. I quickly got up and greeted him. Repeating my whole name softly he said, "Miyan, you've changed so much. If I had seen you elsewhere, I wouldn't have recognized you."

For a while he recounted some of the things that had happened in my childhood and also told anecdotes about my father's unwavering deference. Meanwhile a maidservant walked in with a rather long brass tray

of snacks. I glanced at the delicate china plates. Most of the foods on them had been bought from the bazaar, but some items were also home-made. Hakim Sahib pointed at the tray and said, "Now don't let ceremony stand in the way." Then he said to his wife, "All right then. I'm going to be late getting to the *matab*."

After that he went back to his room.

"The *matab* keeps him so busy," the mistress of the house said apologetically. She also said something more but I may have dozed for a moment. When I became alert she was the only one left in the *dalan* and curtains of some coarse material were swaying in two of the arches. Only the arch in the middle was still open and the lantern hanging there swayed, sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, in the wind. I looked in the direction of the reed screen. Near the door that was behind it, Hakim Sahib had his hand on the pulse of an old peasant man and seemed to be lost in thought. I turned toward the mistress. She too had dozed, but the muffled sound of girls' laughter coming from some small courtyard nearby made her sit up alert.

"Has Mehr come?" she asked herself, and I saw a faint trace of anxiety sweep over her otherwise contented face for the first time. Just then the curtain drawn over the right arch moved to one side and a young woman entered the *dalan*. I gave her a fleeting glance. She was dressed in an orange sari made of some wrinkle-proof fabric and she wore nail polish of the same color. The mistress turned toward me, "Do you recognize Mehr?"

I again glanced at the young woman's face. She was wearing a faint shade of orange lipstick. I answered her greeting by shaking my head as if I recognized her, just as I had for the other women. I was about to look at her more closely when some girl called to her softly from behind the curtain and she went out of the *dalan*.

Hakim Sahib still had his hand on the old peasant's pulse and the mistress had again begun to doze. I got up. The mistress looked toward me with half-opened eyes, and I said, "With your permission I'll go now."

"So you want to go?" she asked in a heavy voice, and suddenly I remembered something.

"That ... scary room ... is it still there?" I asked.

"The scary room?" she said thinking, and then she recalled with a melancholy smile, "Once you locked Mehr up in that room." The melancholy in her smile deepened. "At least you remembered something of this place."

"Is it still there?"

“It’s there all right. Over there, the door by the *devrhi*. It’s not much. The kitchen used to be there before. The walls are black from the smoke. Has a door that opens to the outside. Must be open. The latch doesn’t fasten anymore.”

“I’ll let myself out that way,” I said, raising my hand to say good-bye, and turned toward the courtyard.

“Do come sometimes as you have today. Back then you came almost daily,” she took a deep breath and her voice trembled a little, “Time has made such a big difference, son.”

Her lips were still moving, but I walked across the courtyard and went through the door adjoining the *devrhi*.

## 5

There was nothing unusual about the room. The ceiling and walls were coated with soot. But that hadn’t made it overly dark. A large hearth, fashioned from wet clay mixed with chaff, stood on one side, but it had become dilapidated. In front of me I could see a vertical shaft of light.

Must be the door opening to the outside, I told myself, and coming close to the shaft I peered through it. I could see Hakims’ Perch straight across. I felt the cool touch of the dangling iron latch on my forehead and pulled it toward me. One of the door’s panels opened. I let go of the latch, the panel slowly closed on its own. I did this a couple of times, recalling how opening such doors and then watching them close on their own used to be my favorite pastime as a child. I pulled both the panels toward me simultaneously and went out.

A few moments later I was in back of the one-story brown brick house. Hakims’ Perch and the bushes and graves on it could be seen more clearly now. I sensed that something was missing there and immediately the thought occurred to me that I had not gone to the top of the Perch to have a look. At the very same instant I recalled something else. I turned back around and walked up to the top.

There were more graves than I had imagined but the dense patch of straw, which was believed to harbor an ancient snake, had disappeared. Those who claimed to have seen the snake said that hair had spouted on its hood. Children used to play near the straw patch, and I even used to hide inside of it, but the snake had never harmed anyone. Perhaps that’s why it was widely believed that the snake had stood guard over the Hakim family for generations. By now the image of the partly dry, partly

green straw patch had been completely resurrected in my memory, but what I couldn't remember was its precise location on the Perch. The place where I suspected it to be was occupied by several graves sparkling from the lime wash.

I kept looking at the main door of the house from the Perch. The desire to go and knock on it began to well up inside of me, and I even took a few steps in its direction, but then I stopped.

That would be an absolutely absurd thing to do, I thought, and started to come down from the Perch in the opposite direction from the house.

The way back was not difficult. I reached my home easily. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*