

INTIZAR HUSAIN

Circle*

IT'S AS THOUGH someone is urging me to rake the ashes. Compelled, I sit down to sift the fifty-year-old ashes. What's left there now to explore? But I have the bad habit of scouring the past. Some dusty alleys, some faces that are a bit grimy, some voices, a mildewed parapet, a tumbled-down turret, a few trees, birds—that's all that appears in my mind's eye. Gradually, a tableau unfolds. A shop front, some people sitting and chatting on the shop's stoop, the shop-owner standing behind a huge cauldron of milk, stirring its boiling contents with a ladle. The scene is straight out of my very first story. It comes back to me now with the realization that something is lacking here. In fact, this isn't the story I had wanted to write. Most importantly, the main character is missing from this story. Qayyuma¹ was not the central figure of this story. It was someone else. I don't know how I could have forgotten that while writing the story. I remember it now, fifty years later. I can clearly remember the whole set of characters and that group of people sitting and chatting in front of the shop. In those days my mind had become so hazy. It's only now, after so many years, that my memory has become nimble again. Now, those pictures are emerging clearly before my eyes.

Should I rewrite the story I wrote fifty years ago? I remember something that Karan said. In the forests of Khando, Arjun had slain the serpent that was Ashwa Sen's mother. When Karan aimed his arrow at Arjun, Ashwa Sen thought it was a good opportunity to avenge his mother's death. He slithered up from the bowels of the earth and

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¹Allusion to the author's very first story; it was called "Qaiyūmā kī Dukān" (Qayyuma's Shop). —*Editor*

wrapped himself around Karan's arrow. But with a single stroke, Krishanji caused Karan's chariot to get stuck in the mud at that very moment and Karan's arrow went to naught. The serpent, Ashwa Sen, beseeched Karan to let him entwine himself once again around his arrow and shoot Arjun once more. But Karan said he did not believe in reusing an arrow once it had left his bow. If the arrow was wasted, then so be it; it was destined to go to waste. I mull over whether I should attempt to rewrite the story that has been squandered. After much dilly-dallying, I make up my mind. Karan's words went away with him. I must attempt to write that story again.

No, that story has gotten away from you now. Someone else will write it.

I hear these words but I'm confounded. Where did they come from? Who said them? Did they come from within the story or from among its cast of dramatis personae? Well, never mind. Someone else could also write the story. But the story must be written again. But then who will be this other who will write it? Anybody else could do the job. I wasn't the only one who was present. There were scores of others. Although, everyone else left at some point or other, except for that one person. So, who will be the other? I'm the only other. Now, I shall write the story. Yes, I ... even though I'm one of those who left, all the others have made new homes in new lands. I was the only one who never found peace and tranquility. Sometimes, I'm seized by doubt. Have I left that place or not? It seems as though that other person has gotten left behind. And the rest have all come here. And I, I'm neither here nor there. Like a restless spirit. Anyhow, I'm not about to tell my story here. I have to tell the story of the person who is the central character in that story.

Before I begin the story, I have to first outline the map of that town for you. But even before I do that for you, you also have to understand that towns are not just about geography, nor are they just a cluster of dwellings rooted in solid earth. One part of them is on the ground, the rest is inside our minds and souls. And that's why there's no point in giving the geographical name of that town. Of course, you can see the town as it stands with your own eyes, but there's far more to it than what meets the eye. I've seen the town in so many guises that I've started calling it Rupnagar (Guisetown). And what a town it was! I mean, on the surface it was like any other town. As colorless and drab as all small towns are fated to be. There used to be such a crowd in the grocers' market. The air would be heavy with the pungent smell of asafoetida. Sacks of asafoetida, turmeric, chilies and salt would be piled up inside the shops. You could find everything there. When pulao or korma had to be cooked at

home for special guests, I would buy, from this very market, cardamom, mace, nutmeg and saffron wrapped in bits of paper. But the big market would be even more crowded, what with bales of cotton stacked in piles, and carts loaded with grain, and slabs of raw jaggery all jostling for space. And such a crowd of buyers that God save you from that crush of people! But it wasn't so much the buyers as the slabs of jaggery that took up all the space. And among the buyers there were also sparrows and pigeons, and also a few partridges. If you wanted to see a still bigger crowd you could go to the open-air market near the pond. The place was so full of dirt that by evening a film of dust coated the radishes, turnips, cauliflowers, cabbages, pumpkins, spinach, potatoes, and the assortment of greens and other vegetables.

The pond would only be full of water during the monsoon rains. What a large, deep pond that was, with steps on all sides. It looked like a large overflowing sea. During the monsoons, the water became green. In the summer, the water sank to the lowest step and clouds of dust billowed everywhere as the water completely disappeared. During its dry days the pond was distinguished by the two bulls that were usually found standing in it. One was a dirty white, the other black. They stood in splendid silence: one on the right edge of the pond, the other on the far left. The dirty white bull was more irritable; he would begin to snort and paw for no reason. Sometimes he would rush towards the big market, snorting and hissing. He had such an awesome presence that the crowd would part like a layer of algae on the surface of a pond and he would rush through them with complete disregard. Sometimes the black bull would also become restless. Then he too would come out of the pond with imperious measured steps and walk, snorting and bellowing all the way, towards the grocers' market and then on towards the open market and the cluster of small shops. Talking about the cluster of shops reminds me that once the two bulls came face to face with each other there. It seemed like the end of the world. There they stood, with their horns locked in mortal combat. How far the white bull pushed the black one! But when the black bull pushed back, all the trays laden with sweets at Mitthan Lal's halwai shop had been overturned. So you can imagine ...

Mitthan Lal was one of a kind. His *gujiya* was so fantastic that *peramakers* from Mathura and Badayun would come to kiss his hands. How grand his shop looked on the eve of Diwali. Trays filled with sweets would rise in tiers from the floor to the ceiling of his shop. You could find just about every type of sweet here—from *gujiya* to *tangani*.

And what could you find at Qayyuma's shop? Only *peras*. And even those were no match for Mitthan Lal's *peras* and *gujiya*. Anyway, this was not a marketplace. This was the only shop in front of Hafiz-ji's chaupal so there was never any hustle-bustle here. Though, every six months or so, or on certain special occasions, you could hear the cry: *Ram naam satya hai. Ram naam satya hai*. Then a dead body would be rushed through on its funeral bier. Following close behind would be a group of Hindu mourners clutching the firewood for the pyre and chanting their prayers for the dead. This was a Muslim neighborhood but, still, nothing much could be done since the way to the cremation ground went through this mohalla. No other Hindu procession or party ever came this way. Hindu wedding parties, which were led by horses festooned with kite-paper and tinsel streamers, would come right up to the edge of the lane and then turn left towards the Red Temple Lane. The wedding procession of Ramchander-ji would also duck into that lane. Everyone who sat in front of Qayyuma's shop had to get up and go to the edge of the lane to watch the elephant with the red and yellow checked pattern painted on its forehead carrying the howdah in which Raja Ramchander-ji, the groom, and Sita-ji, his bride, sat dressed in their bridal finery. Everyone who wanted to play Holi also took the same route. The largest of all Hindu parades and pageants was Ramchander-ji's wedding procession. Only one other procession had ever been bigger. That had been when Master Piyare Lal courted arrest. That time there was such a crowd here, and such an angry one at that, that had they stormed the police station they would have torn the policemen from limb to limb. The police, too, had their guns trained. Master Piyare Lal paused before entering the police station and addressed the crowd, "Friends, don't forget the words of Mahatma Gandhi. We don't talk about an armed revolution; we only advocate nonviolence. This is what Gandhi-ji has taught us. This is our belief and therein lies the key to the success and happiness of our people. *Mahatma Gandhi ki ...*" and the crowd roared ... "*Jai!*" The air was rent with jubilant cries of: *Inqilab Zindabad!* and *Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai!* Master Piyare Lal folded his hands as he said namaste to the crowd and entered the police station. Then the massive iron-barred gate clanged shut behind him. After the historic battle of the bulls, this was the second major event in the lives of those who lived here.

Only one procession actually went past Qayyuma's shop. And it wasn't a particularly large procession either. It was the procession of the saint Shah Madaar's rods. They weren't exactly rods. There was just one long staff-like thing, as long as the tallest alam. It would be carried to the

accompaniment of drums and cymbals. A person who looked like a dervish would walk alongside wearing green robes. He had long unkempt hair and wore a red and yellow string around his neck. He was the keeper of Shah Madaar's shrine. He would plant the staff in front of Uncle Farooq's gate. The drums and cymbals would start to beat furiously. And some kind soul would come and distribute *malida*.

There, I nearly forgot to tell you about the big procession. The *zuljinah* procession also took this route. After all, the way to Karbala also passed through here. If you went straight, you reached the ruined Chamunda. If you turned left and walked forward a little you could see the moss-covered spires of Karbala. But let me refrain from talking about Karbala for now. If I go that way again I'll never return. But there's no harm in going towards Chamunda. I often used to roam around near its ruined ramparts. I kicked the dust from there up to the little bridge on many a scorching afternoon. Drained by the heat and unable to take another step, I would go and sit on the roof of the Chamunda where an ancient peepal tree provided respite from the relentless sun. This was the only sheltering tree for miles around. Not a single banyan or mango or tamarind grew in this wilderness. The ruins of Chamunda added to the desolation. It must have been a large temple a long time ago but Time had not been kind to it. A few broken-down, moss-encrusted walls and a roof were all that remained. Under the roof was an idol that, as far as I could remember, had not seen any fresh offerings of flowers. Behind it stretched the eerie stillness of the cremation ground. One never knew when a corpse was brought here or when it was burned. Other human beings were never seen, at least not on those blistering afternoons. Although, yes, if you sat under the shade of the peepal tree on the roof of Chamunda, you could see a few plowmen in the far distance digging at the base of the yellow dunes and loading the dun-colored earth onto donkeys. From this vantage point, that scene looked like it belonged to some other world. You never ever saw another human face near the ruined temple. There would just be us and a few monkeys that were dangling from the branches of the peepal tree. But we were never scared. It was only at night, when we heard the howl of the jackals from the direction of Chamunda, that we were frightened. In the silence of the night, their howling could make my heart thump with terror as I lay in bed. Listening to them, I used to imagine that all the jackals from the neighboring jungles had gathered on top of Chamunda and were baying with their snouts turned towards our homes.

There was only once that I was scared during the day. But I wasn't the only one scared. There were a whole lot of us. One blistering hot afternoon we had come out of Chamunda and were shuffling along the dirt track when Shaddu suddenly spoke up in a wonder-struck voice: "A woman."

"A woman," we stopped in our tracks and chorused, "Where?"

"There she goes."

Just up ahead, a woman was walking beside the dirt track. She was wearing a pale red ghagra with a matching blouse, and she had a ring in her nose and large hoops in her ears.

"You twits, that isn't a woman."

"Then what is she?"

"Look at her feet; you'll see for yourself."

When we turned to look, she was gone.

"But where did she go?"

At that very moment, a kite soaring in the sky let out a raucous caw. It was a strange keening sound that seemed to scratch the air around us.

"Run."

And we ran from there. The kite's screech followed us for a long time. Why am I talking about this in the past tense? That scene is frozen in time. I went down that track just a few days ago. After all, how long has it been since my last dream? In my dream I saw everything just as it used to be. If anything, it looked brighter. Or at least it seemed so to me. It's only now, much later, that I'm able to look at that scene in minute detail. I do believe that things only reveal their true nature in dreams. Walls and niches, streets and alleys, plants and trees, the earth and the sky—it's only after we stop seeing them with our eyes that we begin to truly see them when they start appearing in our dreams and calling out to us. In the first dream, then in the second, then in the third, and so on. It's only after many dreams that my town has become fully alive before my eyes and I'm now able to see it fully.

See it fully ... I said that wrong. I still haven't seen it fully. For, you see, I still haven't been to Karbala. How I love going in that direction! Then, God knows what happens, I wake up. The map is incomplete if it does not include Karbala. That used to be the high point of our town. You could only say you had mapped the town fully after you had been to Karbala. It's always the last stop on my enchanted journey. On those long, silent afternoons which never seemed to end, we would trudge through the dusty alleys of our neighborhood, walk from the Chamunda right up to the little bridge, and then, as we turned to trace our steps

back, one or the other of us would pipe up, “Yaar, shall we go to Karbala?” And it was as though we had spoken in unison, from deep within our hearts. And our feet would immediately turn in that direction. From Chamunda, we would go past the old fort. As we rounded the mound near the old fort, we would come upon the fields belonging to Sheikh Maddu where a Persian wheel would be spinning slowly. Just a little further a red tamarind tree grows and beyond that lies Babwa, the wrestling pit. After the Babwa wrestling pit there is a tangle of berry bushes, then the white man’s grave, and then the orchard belonging to the Sambhali family. Just after you cross the orchard, there, there lies Karbala. A high wall runs all around it. And enclosed within, the deserted grounds of Karbala. In one corner there are two deep pits. The *taazias* belonging to the Shias are buried in one pit and those belonging to the Sunnis in the other. And the doorway ... how tall and grand it looks. An iron-barred gate with two massive pillars on either side. Sitting atop the pillars are two spires which had become black from the onslaught of the sun and the wind and had begun to look as though they were made of iron that had rusted over. The gate would only be opened during Muharram; for the rest of the year a massive lock dangled from it. When we used to peer through the barred gate at that barren, sun-scorched wilderness, it truly looked like the desolate battleground of Karbala. And the searing loo wind that blasted us like a furnace seemed to come straight from the real Karbala. On this side of the gate, next to the platform, stood Bholu’s hut, and inside its unpaved courtyard stood a pitcher of water under a *kaithu* tree. We would put the water in a coconut shell tied to its mouth with a bit of twine, pour it into our mouths without touching our lips to it and, with our thirst satisfied, sit down on the platform beside Bholu’s hut. An old, exceptionally dense peepal tree grew in the middle of the platform so you could always find shade there. Other trees, such as the tamarind, grew along the left side of the Karbala wall. Those trees too were tall and dense. The tamarind fell from those trees in such abundance that you could never pick all of it up. You could find fallen tamarind all the way from the Karbala wall to the elephant’s grave. There was only one blood-red tamarind tree—the one that grew right beside the elephant’s grave. If you bit into its fruit, you could actually feel your mouth turn red from its crimson juice. Didn’t I tell you that if I once venture towards Karbala I can never return? That’s the way the place is. But I can’t say any more about it because I haven’t seen it for the past fifty years. I’ve never been able to reach it. The closest I’m able to go is up to Babwa’s wrestling pit. Even that makes me happy; my Karbala lies just beyond. All I would need

to do is enter Sambhali's orchard and come out the other end and I would reach Karbala. But at that very moment, sleep deserts me and I wake up. Though, on one occasion I actually made it to Sambhali's orchard. How fragrant the grave of Sheikh Madad Ali Sambhali was! The *haar singaar* tree at the head of the grave had shed so many of its sweet-smelling flowers that the grave looked like a bed of *haar singaar* blossoms. How soulfully our dear departed Sheikh Sambhali used to recite the *soz*. Even the most stony hearted would leave the majlis with drenched handkerchiefs. A dirge-like atmosphere permeated his Imambara on the eve of the eighth day of Muharram. The majlis for the big alam would begin after midnight and Sheikh Sahab would start the recitation in a voice racked with pain:

When Husain turned towards the canal ...

People would begin to sob from the first line and by the time the alam was taken out the beating of breasts would have started in earnest. Cymbals beating outside, inside the rising tempo of loud mourning—the walls of the Imambara seemed to reverberate. Heads spinning and dazed by grief, mourners would begin to fall on the ground like ninepins, from where they would be picked up by watchful attendants who would lug them outside, place them on settees and sprinkle them with so much rosewater to revive them that their faces, necks and chests would become redolent and wet. The moment the call for the early Morning Prayer was heard, the cymbals would fall silent after one final resonant clap. The mourners would end their lamentations and the alam, with its shining, resplendent *panja* and its streamers speckled with red stains, would be stored away out of sight in the little room. That served as a signal for the sonorous lamentation to be reduced to muffled sobbing and the occasional hiccup. Soon afterward *sheer maal* would be distributed and I would return home in the pearly twilight clutching my portion. It would be nearly morning by the time I arrived.

History, too, has its moments of twilight. That year Muharram fell on one such occasion. It was the last Muharram for Sheikh Madad Ali Sambhali. His son had already announced his intentions of leaving. The family would depart immediately after Muharram. As always, Sheikh Sahab began reciting the *soz* on the eve of Muharram:

*On the night of departure, when Shabbir
went to the grave ...*

But he was so overwhelmed by the first line that he never made it to the next line. His sons had to take over and complete the rest of the *mar-siya*. Then, on the night of the eighth day at the majlis for the big alam, the *soz* that was traditionally narrated by Sheikh Sahab had to be recited by his sons. Sheikh Sahab took to his bed in such a state that he never ever got up again. Within weeks, he was gone. The Sambhali family buried their elder in the bosom of this land and went away forever.

Look how far I've digressed! As I was saying, on that one occasion, I made it all the way up to the Sambhali family's orchard. Before that I would wake up while I was loitering in some alley near Qayyuma's shop. Once, something terrible happened. I lost my way. I would come out of one alley and immediately find myself in another. Out of the second, I would enter a third. Allah, save me from this entrapment! What a web of alleys and back streets! My town didn't have so many streets. Have I, then, come to some other town? No, it looks like my town. But where have all these streets sprung from? Arrey, have I somehow come out in Qazi Khel? If this is Qazi Khel, where is Shavilat? I look everywhere but I can't find Shavilat. No, then this can't be Qazi Khel. It must be Hinduwara. Hinduwara had extremely narrow streets but every house had the figure of Lord Hanuman painted in a red-ochre color on the whitewashed wall beside the front door. A little further on you came to a chowk that had a well made of red stone standing right in the middle of the cross-road. A few steps more and the alley came to an end. Then you could go towards the road that led to the open-air market. There, straight ahead, you could see the pond. If you don't see all this, then this isn't Hinduwara. I wandered around for a long time, anxious and thinking that I must get to Karbala. How long must I wander around in these streets? I walk a few steps and the road comes to an end. What is this? Have I walked into a dead end? A dead end? But there was no dead end in our mohalla. I fret for a long time wondering how I could have reached this dead end. How will I get out? How will I reach Karbala? But what do I see ... the dead end has disappeared. Instead, there's a flat expanse of ground. Empty and desolate. Not a living soul around. Ya Allah, where am I? What is this place? I spot a rustic-looking person walking past carrying a bundle of grass on his head. I hurry to ask him, "Where is the holy Karbala?"

“Karbala? Oh, you mean where the *Muslas*² go with their *taazias*?”

“Yes, yes, that’s the place.”

“Ask a *Musla*. This is Ravan’s Patpari.”

Ravan’s Patpari? But there used to be a tall tamarind tree over there. Where has it gone? On those scorching afternoons when we used to come this way we would go only as far as the dharmashala. We would gaze at Ravan’s Patpari from a distance; it was a desolate, eerie place. Not a blade of grass nor a bush nor scrub grew on it. And only one tree. It stood right in the middle of the field looking like Ravan himself. As I was saying My heart began to beat furiously. I wanted to turn away immediately. Arrey ... I’ve come to Qayyuma’s shop. I’ve found my way. If I turn left instead of going straight ahead from here I’ll first come to the cowherds’ lane, then the ruined tomb, then the old fort beside the hillock ... Arrey, but where did the cowherds’ lane go? Has it gotten lost? I’m surprised. And then I wake up.

Once again, I’ve reached there. Once again, I’m surprised. This used to be the *ikka* stand. And here was Ismail the shoemaker’s shop. So many shoes displayed on shoe-racks and a needle forever busy in his hand! Bits of shiny black and tan leathers would be strewn all around him. Where has that shop gone? The snake charmer is playing his flute in front of a closed basket. A crowd of people, young and old, is standing in a circle around him. I stand among them, as though I’m a part of that crowd. Finally, the basket’s lid opens. Two hooded black snakes emerge and begin to sway. Their needle-sharp tongues dart in and out of their mouths. They’re coming towards me and their hoods are becoming larger and larger. Suddenly, my eyes fall on a grubby boy standing in front of me who has been staring at me instead of watching the snake show. Thoroughly rattled, I look around furtively and slip away from the crowd. I remember that I don’t have a passport. I’ve been roaming around here without a passport. Fear grips me and now I’m all the more terrified of that boy who was staring at me. Has he recognized me? My heart begins to beat furiously. Did he see me slipping away? Is he following me? I quicken my step. I come out of one alley and quickly duck into another. From there, I enter a third. It’s deserted. There isn’t a soul around. Two jackals are standing beside the peepal tree staring at me. My feet feel like lead weighing a hundred *maunds* each. Then my eyes open and I’m

²A term of contempt used for Muslims, often also used as “*musalla*.”
—Editor

awake. It's a good thing that I wake up. God knows what else awaited me! I've been saved. Because I had neither visa nor passport with me. I have only one claim on Guisetown, at least to my way of thinking I do. And that is that I'm part of its soil. My umbilical chord is buried there. But what significance does that have? Even if you are part of that soil, so what? The thing that matters is the visa. Without a visa, a man who has left this land can never enter it even in his dreams. So it was a good thing that I woke up when I did. This is the only time that I've been relieved to wake up and find that it was only a dream. Otherwise, I usually curse myself on waking up and wish that I could have slept longer so that I could have dreamt some more, even if I had slept longer than the men who fell asleep in a cave and won't be woken up until the Day of Judgment. It's not as though I was trespassing. I was only wandering around the streets of my own town. Why couldn't I have wandered around some more? It felt good to be back on those streets. After all, it's only through these nocturnal wanderings in my dreams that I've come to know my city so well. When I lived there and used to look at it all with my eyes wide open it was tantamount to not seeing my own town! How much do any of us see with our waking eyes? Things reveal their true selves only in dreams. That's why I was saying that the story called "Qayyuma's Shop," which someone else wrote, has been thirsting for completion. *I must write that story. And I must write it now, now that I've scoured that town in my dreams for fifty long years.*

Fifty years is not an inconsiderable period. I mean the dreams of fifty long years. There are so many dreams that it's difficult to count them. Except for that one dream when I didn't have a passport, every dream has been such that I've wished I could go on dreaming it forever. I've always regretted waking up because wakefulness brings nothing but misery and wretchedness; sleep brings such relief. Save for that once, I've always felt sad on waking up, and also happy. Happy because one night's sleep has given me so much, almost as if my lap has been filled with treasure. And sad because so much has been held back from me, almost as if it was within my grasp, yet still eluded me. One morning I felt particularly wretched when I got up. That was the night I saw Bela. I felt as though I had gone back to my own home. It was wide open. And empty. Arrey, there's no one here. Where has everyone gone? I go to the room upstairs. I look out the window that faces the back street and there, across the street, is Lala Piyare Lal's tall house. I open the window ... and what do I see? There in front of me on the roof of her house stands Bela, drying her hair. She looks so pretty. Bela was never so pretty. She looks like a fairy

who has flown down from Fairyland and alighted on Lala Piyare Lal's roof. I feel like jumping across to her roof to touch her to see if she's real, is this really Bela?

I keep looking at her like a moron. Then I go close to her and say, "Bela? You are Bela, aren't you?"

"No, I'm Beecha," she lets out a peal of laughter, then turns around and slams the door shut. She slammed the door so hard that its deafening sound caused me to wake up.

I never saw her again. How I longed to see her again in my dreams! But dreams come of their own volition. And they come suddenly, unexpectedly. After that, I thought of Bela on many occasions, but always with regret: why did I never notice how pretty she was in those days? Why did I always make awful faces at her? Whenever I spotted her on her roof, I would start making hideous faces and she would call out to her mother, "Mother, look, that *Musla* is making faces at me again." And I would immediately duck behind the window.

Once, on the occasion of Holi, a troupe of dancers and singers had come from the nearby villages. I spotted Bela, standing in the crowd and watching the Holi-revelers beating their drums and singing and dancing. I went and stood close beside her. She was so engrossed in watching the dancers that she didn't even notice. This was the first time I had ever had the opportunity to stand so close to her. I said to her, very nicely, "Bela." She turned around with a start, saw me and hissed, "Get lost, you *Musla*!" and was gone.

Then there was a dream that made me laugh, and also saddened me. We're leaving Guisetown. As we're about to turn the corner, my eyes fall on the roof of our house. How black it has become from the wind and rain, and how dilapidated! A kite comes and lands on its parapet. A paper kite, with its broken string dangling behind, swims in a lazy current of air above. Its crimson string skims the parapet as it floats past. My heart begins to sink. The *ikka* turns the corner and, within a single beat of my heart, the blackened tumbledown parapet of my house disappears from sight.

I laugh. What a dream! It was only the sooty, moss-encrusted, decaying parapet of our old house, not the arch of the Alhambra Palace! And it's not as though I was leaving Cordova behind me! It was only Guisetown. One may well sigh when leaving something precious behind, but not when leaving behind something as commonplace as Guisetown, which could never make a place for itself in history. How I laughed! Then I became sober and that sooty, moss-encrusted, decaying parapet swam in

front of my eyes for a long, long time. Then the thought occurred to me that perhaps I had never actually left that place. Perhaps I was still there, left behind. After a very long time, I feel like laughing. I've had many dreams but, finally, that moss-encrusted, broken-down parapet has revealed itself to me! Then, once again, sadness overwhelms me. Swimming before my eyes are all those kites whose strings others had cut and I had grabbed while standing on that parapet. And also, all those other kites which had eluded my outstretched hands and grasping fingers and simply floated past. And also, all those other kites with long dangling strings that must have glided past my parapet. Someone else must have grabbed them. A kite whose string has been severed is bound to be grabbed by someone or other. Such is the fate of a kite whose string gets cut by another kite. There are very few kites that manage to elude the outstretched hands and grasping fingers of eagle-eyed little boys and find a safe haven in the tangled branches of a tall tree.

Anyhow, I'm not about to write an epic on the rise and fall of kites. Such a story would be long and quite heartrending. Nor do I intend to write a history of my fifty-year-old dreams. In any case, I couldn't write that since I don't remember any of my dreams in their entirety. Every dream rises before me in my subconscious as though there's a great deal preceding it that I've already seen, and whatever I'm seeing now is actually only a dream and I'm slipping, slipping through the spiral of sense and sensibility. And then the dream ends, or rather it doesn't end, it simply dissolves. Anyway, a dream is not a short story or a novel that ought to have a plot with a well-defined beginning, middle and end. But even so, my dreams are unusually disconnected and unrelated. I mean, the dreams I've had during these past fifty years. Or so it seems to me. It's almost as though every dream is a link in a long chain. Yet all my dreams are so different, so unrelated. That story about Qayyuma's shop that I've been wanting to write again ... suppose that turns out to be equally unconnected? My story isn't like a proper story; it's like recounting a dream. Actually, it's quite a pity that a real, living city should be reduced to a dream. Guisetown existed fifty years ago, and fifty years later it's still there. If anything it's more real. Because, during these fifty years, the towns and cities of this Subcontinent have made great progress in terms of trade and commerce. Great new plazas, shopping malls, housing colonies, apartment blocks and bungalows have mushroomed. Guisetown, too, has grown in proportion to my imaginary blueprint. That is, it's no longer the Guisetown of Qayyuma's time. This town has now grown and expanded so much that it's difficult to describe it within the framework of

a short story or novel. Be that as it may, I still have to rewrite that story—either completely or partially. As the author has said, while writing “Qayyuma’s Shop” he forgot to describe the main character of his story. All the characters described in it were minor characters. Qayyuma himself was a minor character. The day he closed his shop and left Guisetown, that very moment he became a minor character.

The protagonist of this story is the person who stayed behind. At that time, it didn’t occur to any of us that he wasn’t leaving with us. He was rooted in that ground and he didn’t budge when the rest of us were going. The writer didn’t think of him, even when he was writing his story; he simply went on describing Qayyuma. It was only later that it occurred to us that that person who was one of us was no longer with us. Where is he now? He used to sit on the stoop of Qayyuma’s shop. But now that Qayyuma’s shop is closed, where is he? Has he found a new perch? No one seems to know his whereabouts. I’ve come to know every little detail about my town through my dreams and it’s very strange that he’s never appeared in any of my dreams. He’s the only one who’s never appeared in my dreams. Other than him, there’s no one from Guisetown who hasn’t, at sometime or other, come into one of my dreams. Even Bela appeared in my dream on that one memorable occasion and showed me a tantalizing glimpse of herself. And what a glimpse that was! There she was drying her hair! Such long hair! Fairies are said to have such beautiful long hair. And what a lovely, full bosom! I must have been blind when I lived there. I was so busy making faces at her that I never saw the beauty that was Bela. Anyhow, had I seen her beauty, this story would have become Bela’s. So it was a good thing that I never saw her for what she was. But why has that person never appeared in my dreams?

I’ve suffered defeat in my dreams on only two counts. First, I’ve never ever been able to reach Karbala in any of my dreams. And, second, I’ve never been able to find that person in my dreams. For fifty years I’ve been wandering in this dreamscape. Are these my dreams or the Fourth Corner of the world? Once a world-weary all-knowing king said to his son: “Conquering the world has been the glorious tradition of all great rulers. So go out and conquer the world.” But at the same time, that old father who had seen the ups and downs of life cautioned his son, “Go to the Three Corners of the world but don’t ever step into the Fourth Corner because endless hardships for the conquerors of this world lie there.” The young prince heeded his father’s wise counsel. But once, while chasing a deer, he unwittingly entered the Fourth Corner. The deer soon disappeared and the bewildered prince found himself alone in the terrifying

lifeless jungle. My dreams are my terrifying lifeless jungle. I've been wandering alone in this jungle for so long. But my destination is still as far away as it has always been in my dreams. I can see the spires of Karbala and I'm on my way there when the thread of my dream snaps. And that lost person ... what about him? There has never been any news of him.

Āb kō cāhiyē ik 'umr aṣar hōnē tak

It requires an age to make a sigh come true

But an age has passed. Fifty years *are* an age. Now I shall ask He Who grants life to grant me another life. Karbala is still so far away. When will I find that person who has been lost? When will I see that single dream the hope of which has been sustaining me all along? When will that dream be united with my wakeful self? When will I write my story? Or will I circle round and round forever in a spiral? □

—*Translated by Rakshanda Jalil*