

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI

An Incident in Lahore^{*}

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: It is both exigent and stimulating for me as a daughter and scholar to face the dual complexities of writing about my father and translating his work. Though it is decidedly challenging for me to remain objective, the world of contemporary Urdu literature and its readership has made up its mind about Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. Therefore, I feel at ease speaking positively about his work. Part of my own project is to bring to a wider audience contemporary critical thought and fiction published in Urdu since 1940.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (1936–) entered the world of Urdu literature as the proverbial outsider and emerged as the leader of the modernist trend in Urdu, a theoretician with a unique vision and vast erudition. It is a lesser known fact that he started his career as a short story writer and planned to write a novel—a dream that he recently fulfilled with the publication of the historical romance *Ka'ī Čānd thē Sar-e Āsmān* (Karachi: Scheherzade, 2006), a novel of epic proportions in every sense of the term.

After completing his critical investigations of the entire range of Urdu poetry in his four-volume study of the soul stirring poetry of Mīr Taqī Mīr (*She'r-e Shōr-Angēz*), Faruqi perhaps felt that he still needed to put down in writing more of the enormous knowledge he had filed away over his thirty some years of critical thinking, although, this time, in a different medium. As he says in the introduction to his first collection of short stories, *Savār aur Dūsre Afsānē*, he had written so much on Ghālib by way of literary criticism that if he was to write something more on Ghālib it had to be in a quite different vein, and what could be more appropriate yet different than an *afsāna* or story about Ghālib and his times; hence, the short story “Ghālib Afsāna.” He published it under the assumed name of Bēnī Mādḥav Rusvā in the journal *Shab Khūn*. The story created a stir among Urdu readers

*“Lāhaur kā ēk Vāqī'a” is from *Savār aur Dūsre Afsānē* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēn, 2001), 333–51.

because of the sweep of its scholarly and linguistic brilliance. There was speculation about who could have penned this remarkable piece of fiction. The “Ghālib Afsāna” is the second in the series of his reappearance as a fiction writer. The first, “Lāhaur kā ēk Vāqī‘a,” was published under the assumed name ‘Umar Shaikh Mirzā. “Lāhaur kā ēk Vāqī‘a” is a story that is suspended between a nightmare and an actual incident. It is narrated in stream-of-consciousness style, straddling the line that blurs the difference between an *afsāna* (story) and *ḥaqīqat* (truth). It is a story embedded in a narrative that claims to be part of an autobiography that the narrator is writing. It is about memory, dreams, reality and awareness.

Of the stories in *Savār*, I chose to translate “Lāhaur kā ēk Vāqī‘a” because, frankly speaking, it seemed the one less challenging to translate. I might add here that I have consulted my father on the translation and have benefited from his suggestions.]

IT HAPPENED in 1937. In those days I lived in Lahore.

One day it occurred to me that I should go visit Allama Iqbal. I used to own a beige-colored Ambassador car. I drove it to Allama Sahib’s bungalow. I didn’t know the house number or the exact directions on how to get there, but I had a good idea where McLeod Road was and also that he lived on that street, so I was able to find his house without much difficulty.

The street seemed unusually dusty. The footpath, or let’s say the broad strip of land on either side of the road, was dry and covered in dust. The gate of the bungalow was made of wood and very high. It was plated with a grey tin, or maybe iron, sheet which made it seem heavy and mysterious. The gate was open and I could clearly see the short driveway curving towards the main house. The house was big and grand but old and rundown. One could, even from the street, discern the signs of patchy repair and the single new addition to the building. I recalled Ihsan Danish’s poem “‘Allāma Iqbāl kī Kōṭhī” (Allama Iqbal’s Bungalow) that had been published a couple of months before in one of the magazines, *Kbaiyām* or *‘Ālamgīr*. The poem expressed sadness and regret at the dilapidated state of the bungalow. The last couplet was:

Iḥsān, I hear the house has now been repaired,
I will go sometime and visit there, once again.

I stood debating with myself whether to take the car inside or leave it

by the sidewalk. I thought that there might be another car parked in the portico and if I left mine in the driveway it might block someone's path. So I left my car by the side of the street and got out. At that point I noticed there were two or three stalls—the kind that cigarette or paan shopkeepers have—on the sidewalk across the street from me. There was a crowd of young men and loafers gathered around them and there were some fairly young boys there too. I was displeased to see them wasting their time at paan shops instead of studying at the school.

I was locking up my car when five or six young boys suddenly ran across the road and came towards me. From their demeanor and the way they were gesturing, I presumed they were asking for something. I said to myself that this was worse than wasting time. These kids seem to be professional beggars. They must be under the control of some organized criminal group that made beggars of children and ruined their lives. Before I could pull my car keys out of the lock, four or five of them, along with a thin, mean, evil-looking man, had arrived by my side, their hands just inches away from my jacket.

I was horrified to realize that these boys were not beggars or illiterate vagrants from the neighborhood. They seemed to be professionals, the sort that sell their bodies. I said to myself, "God have mercy, what's going on here? Am I dreaming?" It was broad daylight in a decent neighborhood of a busy city, and here were these criminal boys?

Now it dawned on me that those hands were not angling for my coat pockets, they wanted to grab the edge of my jacket, they wanted to strike a deal with me. These ten- or twelve-year olds' eyes held no innocence. Rather, they had the glint of a strange, evil look. Their faces bore a maturity and unattractive insipidness that even adults seldom possess. Disgusted, I pushed them aside and moved away quickly, but they followed behind. God forbid! Such things don't happen even in the most sensational fiction. "Is this really happening or am I going mad?" I thought to myself. Then I made a not quite gigantic leap, got away from that crowd and went through the gate towards the Allama's bungalow.

Thank God, those rogues didn't dare to come inside. The gates were open, yet those boys stopped by the post as though struck by an electric current. I ran towards the portico, flicking dirt off my clothes and hands in hatefulness and revulsion.

I honestly can't recall the details of my meeting with the Allama. All I remember, and vaguely at that, is that he received me with great kindness.

When I rang the bell, an old man, whose appearance suggested to me

that he was something between a distant relative and a butler, answered the door at once. I gave him my name and he went inside and returned within seconds to convey the information that Allama Sahib was receiving visitors in the drawing room (called, for some reason, “the round room” in Urdu) and asked me to step inside. I have no recollection of what we talked about. I was an engineer with the railways, was interested in poetry (still am), and knew many poems of the Allama by heart, but besides my fascination with poetry, I possessed nothing that would make me worthy of having a conversation with the Allama. I do remember very well that the Allama took care not to make me feel that our meeting was a waste of his time. Nor did he broach a subject that would make me aware of my own ignorance.

My visit lasted half an hour. Then I made my salaams and took my leave. Allama Sahib stepped out of the room to bid me farewell. It did cross my mind to request him to do something about the crowd of evil urchins who hung out just across the street from his bungalow gate, but I couldn’t summon the courage to say it. How did it concern him anyway? This was a matter for the police to take care of. Perhaps the Allama wasn’t even aware of the kind of crowd that hung around those stalls across the street.

When I emerged from the portico, I noticed a grey-colored, somewhat weather-beaten Austin A40 parked in the driveway. It couldn’t have been the Allama’s because I had heard he owned a large-sized Ford. Anyway, it must be some visitor, I said to myself, so it was good that I had parked my own car outside.

I came out, euphoric from the meeting with Allama Iqbal. For a moment, I had forgotten that there was a possibility of encountering those urchins again, but upon reaching the road, I was stunned, completely taken aback. A number of them were standing by my car, they had even pushed the car around for it was now facing in the opposite direction. I was still in something of a shock when I summoned the courage to walk towards the car while those wicked boys were practically clinging to me. Their bodies emitted a strange animal-like odor mingled with the smell of rancid oil. I hadn’t yet made up my mind how to deal with them, when a tall, thin man dressed in a long yellow shirt that was quite soiled, and a matching shalwar, leapt towards me. Barefaced insolence and a lack of morality was writ large on his face, so large, in fact, that I instinctively recoiled as though I had touched something wet and gooey. At that time, I was facing the road and he was on my left, facing the sidewalk.

When I tried to turn around and kick him, he attempted to trip me by

putting out his leg. But, God be praised, his leg became entangled with mine in such a way that he lost his balance and fell with a splash into the deep drain below the sidewalk. Grabbing this opportunity, I quickly opened the car door and prayed in my heart that the car would start without trouble. My prayers were heard. As soon as I turned the ignition key, the engine started smoothly. I put the car in gear and stepped hard on the accelerator.

The car moved forward with a jolt. My intent was to move quickly from the first gear to the second because the second gear has both pushing and accelerating power. But when I went into second, I realized the car wasn't moving forward much. It seemed as if some force was holding it back and was in fact dragging it in the opposite direction. I looked back and found that a number of the urchins were holding fast to the bumper and the trunk with all their might, preventing the car from moving forward. So here I was, flooring the accelerator, and there were ten or twelve boys pulling in the opposite direction with so much success that the car was barely able to crawl forward at a snail's pace.

I hunched my shoulders and bent my head as if the danger was in front of me, not behind, as if I was about to slam into something with full force. Bending my head and stooping down, I focused all my mental and physical resolve on accelerating the car so I could shake off the group of boys and get away. But, God only knows how much strength those filthy devils mustered at the time. My fifteen horsepower engine, coupled with my own determination, were proving futile. The car was crawling, only just. Before I had barely covered fifty or a hundred yards, I was convinced the car was going to stall very soon, or the power of those urchins themselves would simply prevent it from moving ahead.

By now I was close to a breakdown myself. I kept thinking over and over that this car which I had imagined would be enough to protect me and be the vehicle of my deliverance could become a noose around my neck or a net of death and destruction. If I remained inside the car, in the space of a few minutes this devilish horde would stop me from getting away. They would pull me out of the car and God knows what they would do to me then. The man I had pushed into the gutter might actually cut me into pieces and scatter my body all over the place.

[Now after many years, as I write these lines, I realize that my logical brain, which the physiologists call the "right brain," was numb and I was under the control of my left brain. The left brain, which is also called the "reptilian brain," is common to humans, crawling and egg-laying animals.

It has been said that in the process of evolution it took tens of

millions of years for this brain to evolve, and because it evolved from crawling to egg-laying animals to humans it is also called the reptilian brain. Our fundamental and baser emotions are the product of this brain: lust, fear, hunger, oppression, safety, the flight instinct, etc., all are a product of this brain. It has been determined that in most criminals, especially murderers and rapists, the left brain is more dominant than the right brain. Since it is located in the lower left part of the skull, it is called the “left brain.” The right brain evolved over tens of millions of years: logic, far-sightedness and intelligence are its abilities. The left brain has no interest in logic, intelligence or remorse, and when it becomes dominant it suspends the ability to think or reason. It has also been found that in some types of mental illness, the left brain becomes dominant over the right brain.]

Anyway, right now my only concern was to get out of the car and escape. If the car is no longer a sanctuary, there must be a way to escape by getting out of it—in any case, this was my logic. But how I would leave the car and where, I had no idea.

Suddenly, I felt strangely apprehensive. The street was totally deserted. The empty, desolate road seemed deafeningly silent. A line from Kabir came to mind: *An empty city stood awful all around*. McLeod Road had never been a busy thoroughfare, but it was never entirely deserted either. One or two cars would certainly pass by every other minute. A short distance from the Allama’s place was the grand mansion of his well-known friend Sir Joginder Singh. There were always one or two guards posted at his gate. At a short distance from Sir Joginder’s bungalow was Bahramji Khudaiji’s store, located in a residential type of building. They stocked high quality foreign liquor and cigars. Whiteway-Laidlaw’s sumptuous two-storied storefront was a couple of furlongs from there. Several cars and many carriages were always seen parked in front of this store. God knows why neither those mansions nor stores were in view. In fact, there wasn’t a traffic policeman at the crossroads.

[Now that I think about it, it occurs to me that my speed was so slow it can only be described as “a snail’s pace.” The buildings and stores I have mentioned above must have been several furlongs ahead. So how could they be visible from where I was? But as I have said, at that time the reptilian brain, not my human brain, was in control. I am convinced that had I found the courage and continued driving at whatever speed was possible, I would certainly have reached some safe or populated neighborhood within five or ten minutes: my pursuers would not have been able to touch me. They couldn’t have entirely prevented the car from

moving. If they had tried to attack me through the windows, they would have had to let go of the car, and in the meantime I could have increased my speed and freed myself from the danger. But at that time I felt that the car was like a death cell: if I remained in the car, I would surely be killed.]

I thought to myself that if I could find a stout pole or a wall somewhere, I could dash the car against it. The sound of the collision would at least attract a few people, maybe even a policeman, or perhaps I would be injured or become unconscious and then this gang of ghouls would surely let go of me. At that time, it didn't occur to my reptilian brain that in order to have a real accident there has to be speed. My speed must have been around five miles an hour and a person needs to be going at least twenty or twenty-five for a satisfactory accident. It also didn't occur to me that I would be completely at their mercy if I was injured or became unconscious. They could take me anywhere on the pretext of going to the hospital. Or, they might injure me further right there. I consider it my good fortune that I didn't then see any object to crash my car against and carry out my plan.

At that moment, I realized the repulsive man in the grubby yellow shirt was also helping the urchins stalling my car. "I'll never be able to escape now," I thought. Although the speed of the car hadn't been affected much yet, I was convinced the man in the dirty shirt would risk his very life to stop the car.

"How long can a mother goat hope to keep her kid?" I thought. I was reminded of a servant of my late father's who had an appropriate, albeit slightly comical, couplet for such occasions:

How long will the baby mangoes shelter behind the
leaves?
One day after all, they'll grow into full mangoes
And be sold in the market.

Normally, I would smile when I recalled the couplet, but today I felt like crying. Furthermore, at that time I saw my childhood in a rosy-pink-and-orange light, full of hope and arousing desires for success, even though in reality my childhood had been rather unhappy and not worth remembering.

[It is said that once Bismil Sa'idi told Josh Malihabadi, "Josh Sahib, were your poetry not lacking just a little bit in the moods of pain and sorrowful thoughts, you would have been an even greater poet." Josh replied, "Certainly not. My poetry is not lacking in pain and sorrowful thoughts. Just listen to this couplet:

The best days of my life,
Those that tell of my weeping.”

On hearing this, Bismil Sa‘idi burst out laughing and said: “By God, Josh Sahib, I never heard a better couplet on the theme of childhood!”

Anyway, forget about Josh Sahib and Bismil Sahib, the truth is that *my* childhood was spent being thrashed by those older than me and howling at those thrashings.] On the verge of tears, I thought to myself, “I wish I was seven or eight years old, so that I wasn’t in this car, in this state, where my honor and my life are at stake. After all, I haven’t harmed anyone, have I?”

I was then reminded of my childhood days when I was scolded or beaten for every little thing, often without reason. And if there was a reason, then my innocent little brain wasn’t able to understand what it was. In those days my small brain would conclude: There doesn’t have to be a reason for everything. Later on, after I understood the difference between cause and reason, I concluded that if one knows the cause of something, it doesn’t follow that one can also determine the reason. For example, a person is murdered and after examining the body the conclusion is reached that his death was caused by a bullet from a pistol. This is simply the cause of the murder, it doesn’t tell us the reason.

At that moment, the cause for my life being at risk was that I was at a certain place at a certain time. If I hadn’t been there, this wouldn’t have been the case, but there was some reason for my being there, and there must have been a cause for that reason, and a cause for that cause ...

So, is the whole world merely a tale of causes? Is there no reason? Or, perhaps, we’ve come here for some reason? Mir Taqi Mir whispered in my ear: “*Conditions arose that caused me to be here for many days now.*” “What causes? Why was I brought over here? So that I might become a victim of these young flesh traders, even as I rode in my own car? To become the target of the unholy activities of their leader?” I wondered to myself in a state of near hysteria.

Suddenly I heard a noise in the street from behind the car. It seemed as if some more people had come out to help my enemies. The car’s speed slowed further. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I decided that remaining there for even one more moment was as good as inviting some catastrophe. I recalled that my devilish pursuers had stayed away from the Allama’s bungalow. Perhaps they were afraid of going into homes? So the best thing for me would be to stop the car by the side of some gate in such a way as to block the gate, jump out and run for it. But who would I

run to? Won't these people pounce on me instantly and grab hold of me? I was thinking about these possibilities when, on my side of the road, that is, on the left side, I caught sight of what seemed to be a safe bungalow. "Gotcha!" I said to myself with joy in my heart.

With a forceful jerk to the steering wheel, I turned the car into the gate at an angle and stomped on the brake with all my strength. The force of my swinging to the left and the clamping of the brakes made the car stall and stop at an angle in the center of the gate. My pursuers, also unable to bear the centrifugal force of the sudden movement, fell off and were thrown about. I looked back and saw that my nearest pursuer was at least ten or twelve feet behind me. I grabbed the ignition key and ran blindly toward the bungalow. That is, I entered what I thought was my refuge.

A rather large bungalow, though somewhat dreary looking. There was no servant or watchman or even a gardener at the front. There was a verandah with a high plinth with old-fashioned easy chairs and frog chairs and a dressing table against the wall with a full length mirror. A hat-stand stood beside it. I hadn't the time or the courage to stay and observe more. Dashing across the length of the verandah, I saw what seemed to be a room at the end. The door leading to it was slightly ajar so I stepped quickly inside and drew the bolts.

There was a faint smell of disinfectant in the room. Opening my eyes wide, I looked around and realized I was in a bathroom. I felt around and found the light switch. A yellowish light came on and I saw that it was a space seven or eight feet in length and about the same in width with a toilet seat and an area for bathing. Instead of a dry commode, there was a new-fashioned flush system with an iron cistern above; a chain was suspended from the cistern. There were very few bathrooms of this style in India at that time. I was, however, familiar with them because two big railway companies, the Great Indian Peninsular Railway and the Bombay Baroda & Central India Railway, had ordered such bathrooms installed in the first-class waiting rooms. I worked for the G. I. P. Railway myself.

I had a terrible urge to pee. Perhaps it was on account of fear or maybe I really needed to go. I didn't exactly feel safe, but the urge to relieve myself was very strong and I didn't know when I would next have a chance to do so. I had barely touched my trouser belt when a loud incessant pounding started on the door. God knows if these were my enemies or some member of the household who suspected there was an intruder in the bathroom. Anyway, I was in no condition to open the door and come out. And there seemed no possibility of remaining hidden in

the bathroom either. Where would I go if I came out? Then I glanced at the opposite wall and noticed a door. I didn't care where it led, it was an escape route.

Softly, I slid the bolts on the far door. Thank God, the door isn't locked on the other side, I thought to myself. It'll take them longer to break down two doors, and the pandemonium created by the breaking doors will surely attract someone's attention. At that moment I had forgotten that the devil-horde couldn't enter any homes and therefore it was very likely that the person or persons beating on the door were connected to the owner of the house.

When I came through the door I saw that I was back in the same verandah and that it actually extended much further. On my right was an enclosing wall so the verandah was now a corridor. Right next to the bathroom door was another door that must open directly outside. The door was partially open and there I could clearly see three servants. They were seated on the doorstep and the threshold, and they were so absorbed in gabbing that they weren't aware of my presence at all. I didn't want to draw their attention either.

I must have crept along stealthily like a cat for some ten yards when I noticed a door that opened into the house. Then I heard the muffled sound of the bathroom door caving in so I didn't linger any longer and stepped inside the house.

Once again I was in a hall, a spacious hall with archways. It gave the impression of a house of busy inhabitants. Two women sat on a wide bedstead finely chopping some betel nuts. I can't recall their faces or their dress now. A plump, soft-bodied, fairly good-looking middle-aged woman wearing a sari was seated on a large padded frog chair near the bedstead. Across from her, two relatively younger women sat on chairs, knitting. I judged that the middle-aged woman was the one among them with some authority and I offered my greetings to her. I think that from my body language and speech and my air of being totally confused and rattled she sensed that I wasn't a vagrant or a housebreaker. The other women certainly seemed a little nervous, but they didn't protest or raise an alarm. Perhaps they felt safe in the presence of the older woman. She didn't return my greeting. Instead she inquired in a cold voice: "Who are you? How did you get in here? Get out of here at once." She seemed more annoyed than afraid.

"For God's sake, give me shelter. I'm in grave danger," I replied in a whisper.

"Why? Are the police after you?"

"I'll explain later. There are no police. I'm a respectable engineer. Some rogues are after me."

"Rogues chase rogues. Respectable people have nothing to do with them. Now get out. At once. Or I'll call the servants."

"How will you face God if I'm killed?" Suddenly the idea flashed in my mind that this woman, even though she looked highly respectable, was not the lady of the house. "For God's sake take me to some responsible person!"

My arrow had found its mark. She changed her posture and said, "Responsible? Who else is responsible here? What is your story?" Her tone was sharper now; the emphasis was on the pronoun "your."

Haltingly, I began to tell my story. I was afraid that the incident was so bizarre they wouldn't believe me. If someone narrated such a tale to me, I would consider it madman's chatter. This apprehension made my voice sound unconvincing, even to my own ears, and it seemed more impossible than ever. Anyway, those people appeared to listen attentively. The tale wasn't exactly long. It would take only a few minutes to finish so I continued and prayed in my heart that they would believe me.

The door through which I had entered remained open, as before. Everyone was engrossed in my story. Suddenly the man in the grubby yellow shirt walked in, quite casually. He had a long-barreled pistol in his hand.

I ran and tried to hide behind the older woman's chair. The man pointed the gun straight at the woman and said in a strangely aloof, cold, harsh, and extremely derisive tone: "Come, tell me, what am I to you?" Instead of "you," he used the Urdu equivalent of the French *tu*, indicating familiarity or contempt.

A sensation of terror gripped my body. "Were they all in it together?" I asked myself in terror and amazement. None of us were in a state to do anything to remove this new danger. The women were frozen as if carved in stone. There was a door right behind the place where I was trying to hide ineffectually, but some instinct told me there was somebody behind that door.

Before I could make up my mind whether there really was someone behind the door, or whether he was friend or foe, the door opened with a thunderous clap and something black came out making a loud soughing whooshing sound. It swept into the courtyard and established itself there like a whirlwind or dust devil.

I saw that all the women lay almost unconscious, their faces covered with their dupattas. The gunman was on his knees, his face bowed. His

hands were folded at his chest in a manner that suggested obeisance. His pistol had fallen from his hands and lay at the feet of the middle-aged woman, but the lady herself seemed completely detached from everything. She had covered her head and face with the hem of her sari and had collapsed in the frog chair like a rag doll. My feet weighed a ton and my heart had sunk into my shoes, but my brain (the reptilian brain) was still somewhat alert. I said to myself that there couldn't be a better opportunity than this to make good my escape. Perhaps I would even be able to get my car out of the gates of this house.

Full of fear, almost dragging my feet, I came out of my refuge [pah! what a refuge!] like a thief. That black funneling whirlwind remained as it was in the courtyard. I could hear the whooshing sound it made. Now it seemed almost like a wail. I don't know why, but I felt that I shouldn't make the slightest noise. Was it a dust devil, or some bad spirit, or a scourge from God? But what effect could my silence have on it? Perhaps that too was a thought of my reptilian brain—crawling animals often freeze when faced with danger, as if they're dead.

As I crept by the man wearing the dirty yellow shirt, I had an urge to deliver a solid kick to his ribs. That bastard was now dead anyway. But what if he wasn't? And the black whirling funnel? I restrained myself. Then it occurred to me to pick up the pistol just in case those fiends were waiting for me outside. But whatever sense remained in me cautioned that I didn't know how to use firearms, nor did I have a firearm license, so why invite more trouble upon myself? I had died a thousand deaths before I survived this one ordeal, I should get out without committing any more follies.

"But suppose those women and the man in the grubby yellow shirt are actually dead? The police might pursue me...", I told myself fearfully.

"Stupid," I scolded myself in my heart, "if you hang around here any longer the police will surely come, even if they weren't coming in the first place. So what if these people are dead? It's none of your business. But if the police catch you here, you're in trouble. You'll be taken around everywhere in fetters. You'll lose your job too. Move your feet and get out of here immediately."

I walked out gingerly, as if on egg shells. It was dark by the door in the corridor. Perhaps the three servants had fallen asleep or were unconscious, who knows? I stepped over their bodies and came out of that house of ghosts and fears.

The street lamps were lit. A vehicle or two passed by slowly. Everything seemed normal, yet changed somehow. I couldn't put my finger on

exactly how it had changed. In a little while it occurred to me that McLeod Road wasn't as deserted as it had been in the morning. Also, when I had entered that bungalow for refuge it was broad daylight, perhaps eleven o'clock or so, and I was sure I hadn't stayed in that house more than fifteen minutes. So then why was it dark outside?

Nervousness and fear made me feel nauseous. My mouth was filled with brackish watery saliva, and before I could control myself I threw up reflexively, emitting a deep-throated, buffalo-like sound. Only a mouthful of bitter blackish-yellow substance came out. I had had a very light breakfast and many cups of tea that morning, and that was several hours ago (or perhaps an entire day had passed), so what else could I expel from my stomach? Panting like a heat-struck dog, I tried to control my heaving chest and stomach. My nausea hadn't subsided despite the vomiting. I recalled the beginning of the novel *Taubatu'n-Naşūḥ* (Nasuh's Repentance) when Nasuh had vomited with great force (black like a crow's feather—I also recalled another story I had read as a child in which the vomit was as black as a crow's feather). I asked myself anxiously, "Am I too suffering from gastroenteritis then? Or have I put poison in my mouth somehow?"

My head spun uncontrollably and I crashed against a nearby wall. My hand hit the wall, as if to break my fall or to save me from injury. I felt a sharp pain in my palm, like the sting of a scorpion. Anxious, I examined my palm closely and found that a thick nail that was probably jutting out from the wall had pierced my palm creating a half-inch deep wound. The gash bled profusely. My shirt sleeve and trousers were spotted with blood. Dizziness and fear, together with this wound, made me more distraught than ever.

I had no alternative but to stay put, so I leaned against the wall after checking it thoroughly. I bandaged my palm tightly with a handkerchief to stem the bleeding. After a long time, I felt a little better. I said to myself that all this must surely be the work of the jinns, or evil spirits, and I should recite the Qur'ānic verse of "The Chair" to ward off their evil. But I couldn't remember the words, so I began reciting the short chapter called *Iklāṣ* (declaring the Indivisible Oneness of God) and another Qur'ānic verse "*Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā bi'Allāh*" (There is no Force and no Power except God) over and over again. After some time my heartbeat stabilized. My throat felt parched, but where could I find water there? I told myself that I should be brave, cross the road, get into my car and make a run for it. This wasn't the time to look for water or worry about getting proper medical treatment for my hand.

I dragged my tired feet and walked towards the gate of the bungalow where I had left my car. I was a little afraid that those vicious urchins might still be there. But their leader lay inside (presumably dead), so those dirty bastards must have gone away too. Having voiced these thoughts to myself, I hastened towards the gate.

When I was running towards it for refuge, the bungalow had seemed extremely large. I had imagined the front verandah and the inner corridor to be at least two hundred and fifty feet long. Surprisingly, the distance now was much less. I had barely walked a dozen steps when I saw the gate, but my car wasn't there. I was shocked for a moment, but then I remembered that I had left my car at such an angle that it blocked access through the gate, so someone may have pushed it to one side.

But the car had disappeared, and so thoroughly that there weren't even tire tracks at the gate, no telltale signs or drag marks scored on the earth by my slamming on the brakes to stop and make a sharp turn into the gate. My car had vanished as if it had never existed. "Did someone steal it?" I wondered. But people didn't steal cars in those days. Where would a car thief sell it? Few people had cars then, and they were mostly lawyers, doctors or government officers. Anyway, even if a thief had stolen it, I didn't have the courage or the time to go lodge a complaint. What story would I give the police? What was I doing there in that bungalow? There was no sign a car was ever parked there. All I had were the keys in my pocket. I checked my pocket, the keys were there.

To have his car stolen was not an ordinary event for a railway assistant engineer. I should have had the matter investigated immediately. Obviously, it wouldn't be easy for me to buy another one. Perhaps I would never own another car at all. But at the time I had no option. I also figured that a car wasn't like a needle that could get lost and never be found. At that time the best thing for me to do was leave as soon as possible. Often the human brain can't comprehend simple things, and this was certainly beyond what was natural and normal. It was best not to investigate it any further. I was saved by God's grace. I've heard of people losing their minds from fear, even of dying in such circumstances. I needed to think of myself, not the car.

Convincing myself this was the best route to take, I came out onto the road under the street lamps. For some reason, my clothes seemed yellowish to me. Perhaps it was the dim, half-blind municipal lighting. A tonga was approaching so I hailed it and got in. My clothes seemed even more yellow now. God forbid, did I have jaundice? Just then the driver turned and looked at me curiously. Perhaps he had noticed the splotches

of red on my clothes. Or were my clothes really yellow? Suddenly I was wracked with a feverish tremor. My voice shaking, I asked the driver to get me to the railway station in a hurry because I had to catch a train. The Mughalpura Station was nearby. I was there in minutes. The Pathankot Express was pulling in when I arrived. I bought a ticket, boarded, and sank into a seat. So what if I didn't know anyone in Pathankot. The man in the grubby yellow shirt and the black whirling funnel weren't there either.

*

A friend of mine read all that I've written above and said: "What nonsense have you written here? Are you writing a memoir of your life or made up stories and events from your dreams?"

"You know that I've sworn not to write even one false word in my autobiography. That's why I make you read every page so that if there is any error or untruth you can help me correct it."

"That may be, but what the hell do I correct here? Damn it, you've crossed all the limits this time. You say you had an Ambassador in those days. You idiot! That car was manufactured for the first time by the Birlas in 1957, well after India's partition in 1947. They bought the blue prints of the English Morris Oxford and manufactured a car called Hindustan 14. When the Morris Oxford model changed after a couple of years, the Birlas came up with a copy of the new model and called it Landmaster, and then after a few more years the Hindustan Ambassador was built according to the latest design of the Morris Oxford. How on earth could you have driven an Ambassador and gone to meet Allama Iqbal in 1937?"

"I must have forgotten the model!" I retorted irritably. "You know I always had a car from the time I got a job."

"How could you forget the model? You forgot the model of your very first car so well that you created something that didn't exist? And son, tell me, how could the Allama live on McLeod Road in 1937? In October of 1936, or sometime thereabouts, Allama Sahib had gotten the construction of Javed Manzil completed on Muir Road and he moved there soon after. In which life did you meet him on McLeod Road in 1937?"

"Maybe it was Muir Road, not McLeod Road." I was annoyed. "There's not much difference in the names. Can a person remember such minute details? Perhaps that's why I didn't see Sir Joginder Singh's bungalow and those big shops there."

“Doubtless, a person can’t remember every minute detail, but we’re talking about important details here.... Well, if one were writing an oral romance like the *Amir Hamza* and calling it an autobiography, that’s something else again.”

“Don’t drag the *Amir Hamza* into this. There can’t be a better historical narrative,” I said enraged.

“As you wish, but don’t say that in front of everyone or they’ll send you to the lunatic asylum. And my dear, the urchins you talk about, you must have read about them in the newspapers. They belonged to a nomadic tribe called the Kanjar which practiced crime as a profession. A band of Kanjars came into Lahore one time and members of their community, especially the young children, were often caught committing petty thievery. They had set up camp in the Baghanpura neighborhood, not on McLeod or Muir Road. You may have passed that way one time and must have had a dream about them later. Now you’re embroidering your autobiography with their tale.”

“Okay, have it your way, but look at this!” I thrust my palm right under my friend’s nose, almost into his eyes. The old wound’s deep scar was still very clear on my palm. “You bastard, what is this then?” I said through gritted teeth. “I can even tell you the name of the doctor in Pathankot who treated this wound.”

My friend was shocked into silence for a moment. It was quite apparent that he was at a loss. But he was no less adamant than me. After a while he said, “The scar doesn’t prove that this wound was inflicted at the time and place you mentioned in your st... I mean in your memoir.”

“Okay, maybe not, but if the doctor is alive, at least he can verify the time and the year.”

“It’s been more than fifty years. God knows where the doctor is, or whether he’s alive or dead.”

“Even Galen didn’t have a cure for doubt, and even Socrates couldn’t treat obstinacy.”

“Granted. But I’m arguing because you asked me yourself to read the book like a hostile critic. I don’t want even one erroneous thing to find its way in.”

“So okay, because you didn’t really find anything so far, you began to invent false charges against me.”

“The fact of the matter is that there were many things in your narrative that bothered me, but they weren’t so important, or noticeable. In this particular chapter, you haven’t written even a word that could be considered factual.”

“Many things—such as?” I asked making a great effort to suppress my anger

“You haven’t mentioned anything about the Allama’s voice. By then, his voice had become completely hoarse.”

“I’ve already said that I don’t remember any details of that meeting.”

“But such an important thing...”

“Shut up. Do you know that the word ‘incident’ [*vāqi‘a*] also means ‘reality’ and ‘dream,’ and even ‘death,’” I said with great pride, as if I was disclosing a marvelous discovery to him.

“Then I have nothing to say. But tell me, why did you give credit for Munir Niazi’s line to Kabir?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” I yelled.

“Well, nothing, just that the line of verse ‘*An empty city stood awful all around*’ is Munir Niazi’s, and you can find it on page 25 in his book of poems titled *Dushmanōñ kē Darmiyān Shām* (An Evening in the Midst of Enemies) published in 1968. You’ve attributed it to Kabir in 1937. Where did you see it in Kabir? Come now, accept the fact that you’ve inserted a story in your autobiography!”

“All stories are true! All stories are true!” I screamed after a moment’s silence, and then began to sob uncontrollably. □

—Translation by Mebr Afshan Farooqi