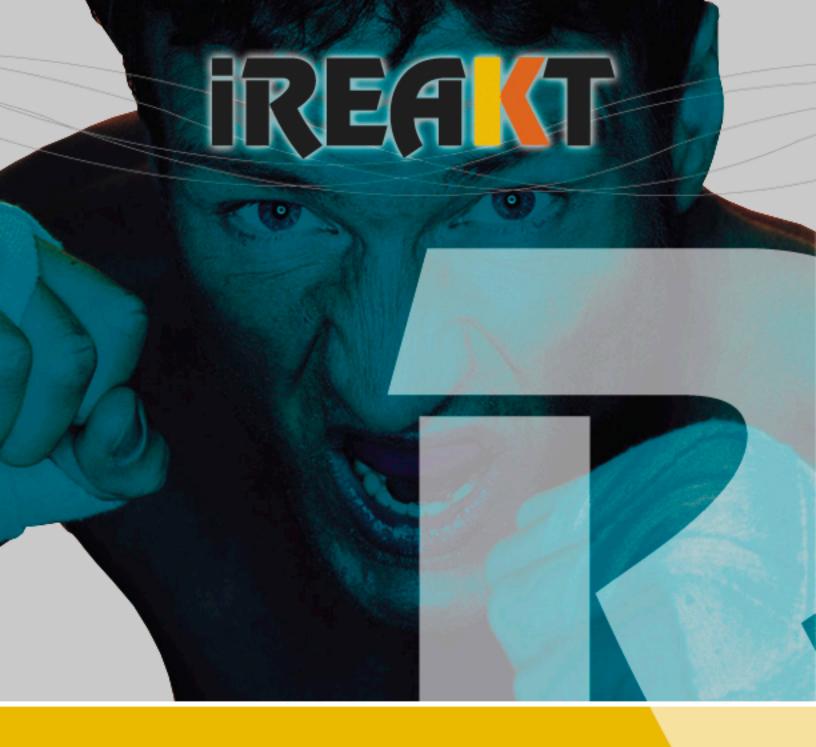
# IREALT







Hold My Hand And Other Musings By Kerem Durdag

# Remembrance of things present

Here I am reading about Rwanda again. This time in a magazine. Several months ago I finished book about Rwanda; I couldn't sleep well for days on end, just thinking about Rwanda. And this time, there are pictures in the magazine. Two children hacked. I looked at them, closed my eyes, and looked again, I read a little, and looked again. I think of my son. And my heart shatters, my soul collapses, my eyes swell up. What was their sin? What did they think when their hands and arms were cut off? How loud did they holler and scream and cry for the doors of heaven to open? Did they remember anything before their skulls were smashed?

And I say to myself, revenge is mine, ours, yours, but then I remember. We allowed it to happen. I remember reading about the killings and thinking it is only a small number of people, slaughtering each other, that it will end soon, that this happens in the backwaters of Africa because of old blood hatred and immovable ethnic madness. I remember thinking this is no way to change the path of the present, that it will get better because there are others who know and know how to stop this madness.

But there was no one. We sat and watched.

Like we watched Bosnia. Kashmir. East Timor. Others.

Now I don't know what to do. Should I forgive? Should I dedicate my life to making sure this never happens again? Never again. Never again. That is what I had written in the guest book at Dachau, "never again".

And it did. And it did. I see those children. I close my eyes and breathe. I think of my son. I breathe.

I breathe and reading the news I see a picture of a four year old Muslim boy with over 80% of his body burnt by Hindus; they burned him because a Hindu teacher was lynch mobbed by Muslims. The boy's eyes are empty. He remembers it all. I memorize his face.

And then I remember the Palestinian boy who was shot together with his father caught in a crossfire last year; both trying to hide behind a barrel, the bullets whizzing, the father bending over to protect his son, and then both getting shot. Earlier that morning a Palestinian had killed Israeli children on a school bus. Hatred for hatred, blood for blood, memory for memory. You can hear the wails of lament over the walls.

I remember the curfew, the riots in Karachi when I was growing up. I remember the sighs of resignation. I remember all that lament. All that lament still near, and now so faraway.

Strains of an old song go through my memories: Where are you? Are you lost or are you found, are you still bleeding or have flowers erupted from your wounds? You are here now. I saw you kneel, eyes upwards, soul-breath condensing on your lips, hands clasped onto your knees, my life, my life, I saw you kneel.

At some point you can't feel yourself. The enormity of the destruction is a constant ache. But one finds a sanctuary from the ache. For me it is my life here in Maine. To be close to the sky, earth and water. To be safe. To be in love with my wife. Sometimes it is thinking about how my son goes to the Scarborough library for children's hour and sings songs. With that smile on his face. Or how he goes to his play group in Portland and partakes in this dance of cooperation, communication and self-determination with his peers. With that smile on his face.

Then I find out that a bomb blows up a shopping center in front of a hotel in Karachi that I used to go to. The bomb blows up at the end of the street on which my childhood friend lives. The wheel rotates again. My friend's kids will be subject to more. Mine, here in Maine will be singing songs.

The song in my memories ends: And you, oh, you kneeling, angels in maelstrom behind the horizon of your neck, head a little forward, hands behind your back, eyes at me, eyes for me, you falling at your knees to kneel in death and final prayer.

While I fall onto my knees to kneel in life, in life and sorrow, in life and remembrance, my son comes and jumps on me while roaring in laughter and giggles. Here in Maine.

### What I was thinking when the FBI interviewed me

When I was growing up in Pakistan, my friends and I used to recite a lot of poetry. Poetry that we wrote ourselves in an effort for intellectual (or comedic) superiority over the other and some we knew by heart from the "great ones". And on top of it, I am Turkish, so there was a healthy dose of passion and loudness. Finally, all of us were in a British school where Shakespeare was god-like and Eliot sat on the throne of modern poetic clarity. Poetry surrounded us; we ate it every day.

What we also ate was a good amount of what could perhaps be known as Americana. Rock n' roll music, great movies, Superman, the belief of freedom of speech, this headlong rush into the future because the past is so new, fantasies of the women from *Playboy* magazine. We wanted to come to the U.S. because we knew this is where we could do what we wanted to do. We came because there was an adventure to be had and all the stories suggested that it would be life changing. And that, there would be the opportunity to change the world.

And, it did change my life. Changing the world is still in progress.

After many an event, I am in Maine. My wife is from South Portland and after many years, the valuable gravity of family, professional opportunity, the melding of ocean and sky before the horizon, I find myself in my third land, this third still-point of the rotating earth for me.

So recently, when I was questioned by the FBI, because someone called them, in great detail of my suspiciousness, I recited several of Faiz's and Hikmet's and Bukowski's poems in my head; I recited poems of exile. The FBI gentleman was extremely professional. One of the suspicions was that I had translated poems of terrorists. The individual found out that I translated poetry (did not bother to read my poems... a shame) and concluded the original poets were terrorists. A certain amount of comedy, a certain amount of sadness.

As I was talking to the FBI, I started to think how Americans themselves would react if they were asked to fill in a form that is similar to what I have had to do on many times, even before the FBI talked to me. The form might read:

- Have you or any members of your family or your ancestors colonized a country by force and been involved in the genocide of millions of native inhabitants of that land?
- Have you ever been a slave owner?
- Have you or any members of your family annexed and conquered other territories based on your 'manifest destiny' to do so?
- Have you ever been involved in the development of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons?

 Have you or any members of your family or your ancestors been involved in, or supported the effort to destabilize the government of the following countries (a long list here)?

I stopped myself. Nobody has the market cornered on stupidity. Whether it is the state of economy in Turkey, or the culture of military rule in Pakistan, or the corruption and intransigence of people to think beyond the present and past in the Middle East, the inability of the Arab states to unify themselves to a common goal beyond ego-satiation, or the moral ambivalence of the Europeans and Americans in the Balkan and Rwandan slaughter, or the crisis of poverty in the Third World, or the dashing dictum of "you are with us, or against us" and "axis of evil", there is plenty of stupidity to go about. In stupidity there is revenge, and hate; this normative state of inhumanity.

And it all comes back to poetry and being in Maine. Exile and my third homeland. Thoughts of how someone believed I was a terrorist because I was a poet. Memories of my childhood when we ate the world. Humanity. The desire to scream silently at all this madness. So, when I sing to my son at night, I say to him, "discover the stars as an astronaut, sing your poems, and change the world." My attempt at a normative state of humanity.

### Ramazan and grace

In the month of Ramazan, there are moments in any given day when the remembrances of the collective experience from what I hear and see culminate into a prayer. When I was young, my friends and I used to fast as bragging rights; the desire to see as we played cricket whether one of us would cave in and drink water because the thirst would hurt so much. Nowadays, my friends and I fast, partly because it binds our past, and partly because it helps to soothe the hurt that is inside us. And because at the end of the day, when the sun sets, we can offer a prayer.

For me, prayers inevitably end up in song or poetry. Recently, I remembered Roque Dalton an El Salvadorian poet. For his poetry, the government killed him. So, when I take a sip of water at the end of the day, I recite a prayer for him, saying to myself, Roque, did you shout freedom or death as they poured gasoline over you and lit you aflame? Roque, what did you say, what did you say, as they laughed when you burned? Roque, did you forgive and kiss them when they were collecting your ashes and putting it in a garbage bag? Roque, listen to me Roque, will you hold my hand when they come for others?

And as I sing, there is the memory of the woman who had a bucket of acid thrown on her in Pakistan. This woman who had rejected a suitor had acid, all that acid over her. It incinerated her flesh, the nose gone, the ears disappeared, the eyes vanished, the melting of her skin dripping onto the ashes of her being; all this animal hate for a woman that had me wanting revenge.

But I don't and I can't, so I scream and scream. And when the sun sets I pray for her, but not for the perpetrator. I make this conscious choice, in this holy month, when angels descend onto earth on the 27<sup>th</sup> day, that there is a limit to my forgiveness. A limit on my ability to comprehend. My search for grace continuing.

My search for grace derailed two Ramazan's ago, after I found out about a domestic violence incident in Philadelphia. This is what the man did to the woman: beat her up, beat her child up and when they escape in a car, he follows them; they are frantically calling 911 via a cell phone, the cops, anyone, driving through empty streets with him behind them, trying to lose him, trying, but they can't. They come to a railroad crossing, and stop. They stop to let the train pass. And he catches up. He parks the car behind them and bangs on the window; child screaming, she is screaming, the window shatters. He is unable to force them out. And then... he goes back into his car and starts ramming her car; train is coming; rams the car, train is almost there, and he rams the car, till she and her son are on the track. And the train demolishes the woman and child. Then he rests.

When I read this, in the middle of Ramazan here in Maine, I had this urgent need to go to the Sülemaniye mosque in Istanbul and hear the call to prayer. I needed the echo of God's name in my insides.

That same need I had several years ago when my aunt from Turkey called to tell me that one of our most well known journalist's was killed when upon turning the ignition key in car, the detonation vaporized him and fused the metal parts in the car into a grotesque monument to hate. So my aunt sobbing on the other end of the line, asks me, where is the sense in all of this.

And last year during Ramazan, immediately after September 11<sup>th</sup>, we were all bereft of the ability to make sense.

In this years' month of Ramazan, I did not seek sense in the lamentful tragedies that surround us. I sought blessing for my family, my friends, and for the world. I asked for the strength and courage and health for my family and friends to affect the present. I prayed for the faith to willingly digest the hurt. And in return, over the million vermillion horizons, as the *muezzin's* call goes out, I offered a prayer for guidance, love and wisdom. A gentle song for a return back to grace.

# Going to Normandy and the moon

There are those days when you get a chance to consciously want life to be better for your children than it was for you. Those days when our personal and communal selfishness evaporates. Those precious days when you are able to look back and look ahead. It is when maybe you sit under the last sun of the summer season to read Walt Whitman, or may be it is when you decide it is a good time to listen to Ella Fitzgerald.

So, these days I am thinking of Normandy. I am thinking of what it must have been like to wade into that fear. I am thinking how it would be to be there. There. In my beautiful foolishness and naiveté I am thinking what it would be like to be there.

Bullets flying, people getting mowed down one by one, blood everywhere, noise, din, screams, the rip of flesh, mortars thudding everywhere all that fear. To wade into that fear. And run from one lifetime to another. To save the world. They did all that wanting to save the world.

Which they did. And I am quiet when I am thinking of Normandy; quiet. To be part of it all. To be quiet for those who died and for those who survived. To be quiet for those in that mass of sacrifice. And I know, I know, beyond the quietness is the loudness of entering that hell which can paralyze, fragment, reduce me.

There is a meaning to Normandy I can't shake off, this meaning that all of us want to grab on to. The search for meaning which divides us.

May be it is because of the madness with Iraq, the rejection of Africa as a continent that matters, or may be it is the Israelis bombing Arafat in the hope he quits, or may be it is the insane in Pakistan corralling seven charity workers, taping their mouths and shooting them point blank in the head in the name of religion and belief. We are in search of meaning, to belong, to be validated and these days we do it in madness.

These days our sense of belonging comes from war. Comes from hate. From killing each other with guns, bombs, debt and forgetfulness. Killing each other after being so destroyed by the lack of hope, health, clothing, food and shelter.

On June 7, 1944 there was a confluence of purpose, of good martyrdom, of sense and will against insanity and fascism. Hundreds of thousands of seventeen years olds did what no God asked them to; decades later I and my son can play soccer on the green grass in Scarborough because of them. So, in those quiet moments when the madness seems to abate, I bow my head to them.

And as I bow my head, the moon rises over my shoulder. I remember reading in LIFE magazine the Apollo landings, over and over again. July 20, 1969 was when we turned upward and believed.

I know exactly where I was when I heard the space shuttle Challenger exploded and I took the day off when the Sojourner landed on Mars. In my professional career I have come across those that worked on the Gemini and Apollo programs and I have had my astronaut application ready on those days when the skies open for your palms to grab hold of.

And when the skies open, on the computer I show my son a video of the space shuttle blasting off, whoosh, whoosh, his lips curling into sounds, his eyes looking, his hands moving upward to the moon and as I hold him, I am doing the same, eyes moistening because riding on top of flaming hydrogen and oxygen looking down onto the earth would make me complete.

I want him to become an astronaut, sit on top of a rocket and zoom into space because part of me will then rest, and gaze upon the earthrise.

May be it is an escape from the madness, may be it is a way to say to the vets, to those 500,000 people who worked on Apollo, look you opened up the space for my life; my son will open it for the next generation.

But in the final analysis, whether it is WW II or the Apollo program, it defines what this country is about. The idea that you can go beyond yourself and belong to others. The idea that I can leave shackles of dogma behind and take a step further into a brand new possibility. The idea that the life, lives, after mine will be better, so much more deliciously better.

### Turkey, sheep, football

Six weeks ago a squadron of F-16 jets escorted the plane carrying the Turkish national football team whom had just come third out of 202 countries, in the World Cup held in Korea and Japan. All the way from the end of the Greek airspace into Turkey; all that pride, all those prayers. All the way from the wait of 48 years when we had last made into the World Cup tournament. Once the team landed, they were taken to the Taksim Square, in the middle of Istanbul, where one million people gathered to scream on top of their lungs, "Turkiye! Turkiye!" Later it was a week long festival in Turkey. And on that entire week, and the several that followed, I wished I was there.

When I was a kid, I used to go to the apple and peach orchards with my uncle. Trudge up to the village of Sirince on the side of a mountain, by the turquoise Aegean Sea where you could see the entire ancient Roman city of Ephesus by the rolling valleys covered with olive trees. We used to eat all afternoon, juices dripping down our chins like forgotten songs, the farmers letting us eat our fill for free. Then my uncle and I would take a nap under a tree, soft breeze over us. My family still does this every Saturday and Sunday from May until October. Everyone still naps in the afternoon. The water bluer than blue just beyond Ephesus. I wished I was there today.

Then there is the art and science of buying a whole watermelon. My mother taught me how to buy one when I was ten. You have to feel if it is firm, whether the skin scratches off easily. You have to shake it to see if you can hear the slight sloshing of the juices. The smell was all-important; it had to be sweet and fresh, filling up your nostrils. Then you took the courage to slice it open; no matter what the result it was yours. And if you did it right, the world was yours. You cut large wide slices, made yourself comfortable on the balcony in the apartment, and bit into that world of heavenly red. Hands and cheeks red, spitting large black seeds onto the street below, you had a smile on your face, burrowing down till you hit the rind. This with your entire family at lunch and dinner. This ritual everyday in the summer. Today, I still do it but it is not the same.

My father, one for rituals and rite of passage, taught me how to sacrifice sheep on the Eid-ul-Azha, that holy day to celebrate the blessings we had and the humility needed to help others less fortunate. That day, wherein in the morning we used to go to the mosque, pray remembering Abraham and Ishmael. I still remember him telling me how to calm my fears and that of the animal, to pray silently as I used the knife, to not forget this is his gift to me, father to son. Together we used to skin the animal and after cutting it up the meat and putting it on our best plates, I used to go and give it to the poor on the street. Person by person, blessing by blessing. Today, I worry if I can give this gift to my son here in Maine.

And it is here in Maine, when there are days I wonder how much have I given up or lost, on this very voluntary exile from my birth cultures. To melt into this diaspora, to find myself anew, to remember again and again, to do more, to travel this journey. To live in another culture that is not mine by birth, but that is mine by education, opportunity and love. It is love. Today I look at my wife, and I know why. For all the decisions that we made together, the genesis was love. And now after so many years, there are days when the breeze from the Atlantic Ocean brings that saltwater fragrance to our house, and in an instant I breathe in Turkey and Pakistan. Then when I exhale, I hear my son, starting to talk in sentences jammed with Turkish and English words... I know why. I see him. The football, the orchards, the watermelon, the sacrificial food for the poor are still his as he bites into that Maine passion that is strawberries and blueberries. Hands, face, arms and legs red and blue, smile all the way to heaven on his face, this my gift to him. Father to son. This reason why Maine is my home.

# **Gathering my life for Mary**

Last week, my wife and I heard for the first time the heartbeat of our second child. The rushing swooshes of sound, the birth of so many expectations. A sibling for my son, another young person for us to learn from; we are lucky parents for a second child. The being that we created becoming real. This being that will be a Mainer; one who will be part Turkish, part Finnish, and part English.

Both of us are still undecided over names. There is much to choose from. The name has to fit the person and so we think: who will the baby look like?

My son for example, who looks Turkish and English with tinges of Nordic features, looks different to various family members. To my relatives he completely resembles me; to my wife's he has looks he shares with his grandfather and mother. The truth lays somewhere in between, in that place where he exists because his parents who grew up in two separate worlds, fell in love and decided to make Maine their home.

Of all places, we fell in love in graduate school. Perhaps it was the vibrant cultural environment or may be it was me singing songs very loudly out of the window, or my wife wanting to try new things, we both found that we shared our love for people. That and the ocean and mountains. And we started to travel on our journey together, with a little trepidation.

I am sure the first time I met my wife's parents, there was trepidation on their part. Here I was, completely oblivious to Maine insider jokes (you know you are in Maine if dressing up means wearing a tie with your flannel shirt), ignorant of Maine pleasures (blueberry picking) and an unabashed intense examiner of U.S. foreign policy and third world politics (and not knowing how Maine is fiercely independent). As time passed I realized that Down East was really up north, ice-cream in winter is a guilty pleasure, and Maine is like my father's village; honest, hard-working, down to earth. And in time my in-laws became my parents, my elders. Their world merging into mine.

My aunt tired of trying to arrange a suitable marriage partner for me, finally gave up. She said it was good that I was marrying an American woman taller than me because not only could she knock some sense into me but she was capable of lighting my way.

And it is the light in her hands that tickles my insides, the light that seeping through her fingers, flowing down her arms, in this river of white, yellow and red, evaporating and dissolving in explosions, kisses, and breaths of what is good and divine.

Good and divine. My mother taught my wife how to make several Turkish meals. She makes them as well as my mother now; and so the worlds have merged

again. There are occasions where my wife and I will have a Turkish meal in Boston or New York. I think to myself, I am lucky that she loves to eat this cuisine, over hours of conversation as much as I do. Good and divine.

And I return to: This is the blessing; the arrival of the mercy, the bridge to the clearing, present and traveled, and that light a waterfall falling over us, cleansing us just as we dive.

It was in the spring when we decided to become parents to a second child. I thought that I would I gather wildflowers for her, here and there, under the stretching sky, our oxygen in and out, blood boiling over and evaporating to become ocean water, flowing from the eyes of the sun. Here, the wind curling around my ears, and waves of whispers washing on my shores, the wildflowers, bending, whirling into a circle of grace and divinity. And ahead, ahead is the expanse of my tribe, horizons melting into the ore of love and desire, the whole clay of the earth folding over me.

It is now summer. We are at the beach; my son leaping into his puddle, chattering and giggling away. And Mary enters the waves. She enters the seas with the wind swept waves clamoring around her, the horizon melting away, the shore spiraling onto itself, and meanwhile I look at her, nebulae being created in her center as she dives in, the arch of her back licking the underbelly of the water, her legs disappearing into the sweet embrace of the silent void, and I look at her. Our worlds merged. And I hear my mother saying to me, "Kerem, heaven lies at the bottom of your mother's feet." She is so right.

Here in Maine I gather here my life for Mary.

### **Storyteller**

Fifteen years ago, when I stood on the seat at the screening of "Dead Poet's Society" and shouted, "I remember you, Mrs. Ahsanuddin" (then got promptly thrown out), I honored my high school teacher who told me to write what was true.

I write because of Mrs. Ahsanuddin because she gave me the gift of listening to stories that coalesce from whispers. As the New Year dawns on us, let me tell you a true story:

A long time ago when the world had just been born from the womb of our mother, there were no oceans and sky, a poet came up to the devil and said, give the world some water and air. The devil said why are you asking me? The poet said, "My father is busy."

A smile licked the face of the devil and he said, for the water and air what will you give me to which the poet said I will give you all my words. The devil, one who had never spoken or written eloquently accepted and gave the world the ocean and the sky at the dawn of the next day.

In the morning when the poet woke up he was dumb and his hands crippled; he went outside and saw the blue ocean and the blue sky and walked up to the house of the devil; the devil wasn't anywhere. He went behind to the garden and came to a river of fire. Across on the blackened shore, he saw the devil doubled over, moaning, and blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, eyes blazing red.

When the devil saw the poet he roared in anger, "Your words are poisoning me." Suddenly, the poet found himself wrapped in rope, being pulled to the river of fire. And the poet decided to stand his ground.

Heave, hold, and heave. The rope cutting into his palms, his ribcage and shoulders inflamed, heave, hold, and heave. He digs in his heels, arches his back, tightens his jaw, his thighs pushing down, heave, hold, and heave.

His lungs are full, his throat screaming, his eyes looking straight ahead, heave, hold, and heave. And he, Titan, pulls, he pulls and pulls believing that in this single instance of time and space nobody and nobody can conquer us, all the music, all the words, heave, hold, and heave.

He pulls, he slides, he falls, he pulls and on the other side of the chasm above the river of fire and blackness he sees fear in the eyes of the devil.

And then the poet says in prayer: Raise the kingdom from under the waves of regret and bleak whispers. Swallow your mumbling, lift those legs from the quicksand of doubt, cut the fog that belongs to our fears – raise the kingdom.

Raise yourself and break the glass in front of your eyes, drink the poison from the fountain where angels are encased in stone, sip in the smell of the dirt that weigh down our lungs, my friends raise the kingdom.

Move with rhythm where the revolutions deafen the ears, crunch on the watermelon seeds of our desires, dance on the banks of the river Jordan. We want the world, and we will be saved from death. We will not surrender and we will raise the kingdom over the love of kisses.

Under the sight of pain and hurt on your chest, we will walk on without shoes on a bed of seductions to rescue each other. This is trust and for this and more, we will raise the kingdom.

Tired and more will tire, lives will no longer be a part of your lies. We will bellow out the anthem we believe in, reach out for the ocean as it spills over the edge. Rip brightness into the abyss, we are all dangerous, we are all lecherous, but we will raise the kingdom of ourselves.

The devil collapses to his knees and dies.

The poet smiles, walks back to the ocean, dives in, floats away face up and disappears. That is why on days when the sun clasps the ocean and sky together to breath forth the secrets of all of us and all of everything, you will see the waves curl up and not crash, the air will rise and not abate, and you will hear a voice say, this is your ocean, this is your sky and the devil has been dead for a very long time.

I am a child of Mrs. Ahsanuddin; a storyteller from far away and long ago.

### The thing about music

When I was growing up in Pakistan, the state-run single channel television station, very promptly every night at 10 pm had a popular singer sing two to four songs. Every night it was a different singer. Every night, my family would gather and listen. My father closing his eyes behind the haze of cigarette smoke, my mother drinking her tea, and I just falling into the melody and music; one tends to remember those moments forever.

The singers ranged from Mehdi Hasan softly singing ghazals from poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz to Noor Jehan warbling like a nightingale about lost loves and ardent desires. Mehdi Hasan, with that pencil thin moustache, his erstwhile tabla player on his left side and sitar companion on his right, cross-legged with the microphone right on his lips, eyes half closed, sang about God, Mohammed, whiskey and wine, memories and regrets, about exile and death. And ah, Noor Jehan, always with the most regal sari, hair done to perfection, alone by herself on the stage, her orchestra invisibly hidden from everyone, looking straight in the camera sang about how she loved, how she hated and how she desired.

On Wednesdays, for some reason it was always the pop singers, with their exported beats from the West, dance moves copied from the pirated videos we could get at the video stores, trying to look slick and polished and making the most of awkward looking but colorful and swirling lights. My mother liked to hum to the melodies while my father gently used to say, "These people are no good; where is Mehdi Hasan?"

And once in a while without even thinking, I will start singing to my son, Urdu songs. So the music has seeped into the blood that runs through the veins.

To this day there are moments of my life where I have to listen to Mehdi Hasan and Noor Jehan and others; that silent refuge of my memories. I remember Faiz Ahmed Faiz poems, hum pop songs and think of how one falls in love with music, remembrances and people.

One falls in love with music like my father and mother did. Every weekend, after dinner, they used take out the old vinyl player or the reel tapes and play music and drink tea (my mother) and whiskey (my father). And we used to talk. Turks tend to talk forever, and we talked a lot. In the background Zeki Müren sang about why love is his salvation and why the meek will inherit the earth. My mother always used to say to me, "Kerem, listen to Zeki; his voice is that of angels, his words of the wise".

And in more ways than one, I am in love with Zeki. That torch bearing soul singer who is unafraid to light the way into the darkness. Zeki Müren, who when he passed away my aunt in Turkey cried for three days and still upon the mentioning of his name, will get teary eyed.

The first time I got teary eyed to western music album was when I first listened to Henryk Górecki's "Symphony No. 3"; the same when I first hear the country music album by Johnny Cash, "American Recordings." Listening to Bruce Springsteen's album "Nebraska" is to drown into America. And there are some songs by U2 which reduce me to stillness.

It is the stillness which halts the restlessness at the bottom of our feet and allows us the luxury to find ourselves, our identity, and our cultures.

It is in music that we find ourselves. If we get lost in the waters of our lives and that of others, music gives us a shore to swim to. When the grace and divinity of our souls touches our existence, it is music we seek expression and clarity. At birth and death, the gentle hand of music guides us through the journey. It is from music that we can launch ourselves into movement and dance. It is in music that language is born and shared.

I have dissolved into three disparate cultures because of music. It is with music I courted my wife, it is with music I bond even deeper with my son, it is with music I am connected to my past and present.

The exact moment I hear Zeki or Cash, the world does not need to make sense. They make sense and that is what matters for that moment. A small, necessary, transitory but delicious resting place in an uneasy world.

### You are us

My son knows that his grandparents will provide him with moments that memories get built on. Memories that will sustain him. Ice-cream, multiple glasses of juice, wide variety of toys are regular intervals, and love. His grandfather has taught him the fundamental engineering concepts behind construction vehicles, architectural techniques in getting it just right with building blocks, the way to enjoy a bear hug and how to make fun of his bald spot. His grandmother is the only one who can build his hiding spot with the correct pillows, the only one he will quickly pose for pictures, the only other person apart from his parents that can put him to bed. My son knows his grandparents breathe within him.

In the Turkish culture, at every greeting, one kisses the hands and both cheeks of the elder. It is a show of respect, of humility, of surrender. My son has gotten the cheek part down; the hand will come later. My son is the bridge between the blood of my ancestors and that of his mother. My son is us.

My wife talks often about how she was very close to her grandparents. She shares stories about them. She shares her connections. Her memories.

My father-in-law's parents came from Finland via Ellis Island, and settled in Rockport. Hard working, straight talker, mischievous sense of humor, loves his chowder piping hot, keeps his garden alive with flowers and plants, and carries plenty of common sense advice. He has plenty of rip roaring stories about how he locked his mother in the chicken-house, how he nailed the floors of his fathers barn with an entire barrel of nails, how he dug a mini-pit in his backyard, and how he leapt off his fathers' tractor not bothering to shut it off when the bees started chasing him when he was digging up blueberry bushes.

In more ways than one, he reminds me of my father. Turkish and Finnish are from the same Altaic language root. This connection. People often say that my son looks very much like me; but there are some photographs when he looks like my father-in-law. My son is us.

My mother-in-law grew up in Glen Cove; her blood-line is from the McGregor clan in Scotland. A long time ago she was a Sea Princess at the Lobster Parade in Rockland; and her side of the family invented the donut (it is true and documented). Her chocolate crème pies are out of this world, her chicken roast memorable, she never forgets birthdays, she loves to go to the Lyric Theater and the Portland Symphony, reads voraciously, shops with an immaculate sense of thought and bargain hunting, loves dessert and is the only one I know, who after eating the very elusive gray M&M, which possibly could have been worth one million dollars, said, "Oh dear, I better be careful chewing them next time." She is always smiling, always kind, always gentle, and always strong.

My son everyday wants to call them on the telephone. He wants to know what Nanny and Dampy are up to. He wants to know when he can sit in Dampy's truck, when he can go out playing with Nanny. He wants to know when he can next make his way over to the previous generation.

Many years ago, my in-laws asked us to help them in sprucing up the graves of their parents. Schedules permitting we do it together every year before Memorial Day weekend. Trim the grass, clean away the weeds, clean off the marker and tombstone, pay our respects. This year my son will come with us also. He is us.

And often during the pregnancy of our second child, a daughter, my wife has said how our daughter is the next generation of women in her family who will be strong, proud and kind. As she says this, I can see she is thinking of her mother, her grandmother and the stories of those before. Our daughter will be us.

A long time ago, my father said upon his death his gold watch would be mine. I last time saw him, he said, "may your road be open" as I walked on the airport tarmac to come to the United States as an eighteen year old. Last year, when my mother visited us she gave me my father's watch. As my mother handed it over, both of us cracking into pieces, my son took the watch, and said, "Mine?" in Turkish. I said, yes. You are us.

# Walking to Karachi Grammar School

It is early morning, 6:55 am and my son is looking out of his window. On his face a smile, his eyes beaming at this vision of yellow; the sun is rising behind the lazy, ripening clouds and the grass breathing its green on a morning when all seems right. The Scarborough School Bus is here and my son, all three years old of him, wants to go on it.

It is early morning, 6:30 am about 16 years ago and I am walking into Karachi, over the sewage canal embankment, past the heroin junkies, the air is already warm with the breath of the desert, the mini-buses with their exhalation of black prayers already on the roads and I can hear the buzz of the 12 million people in my ears. I stop at the Clifton roundabout, looking a little out of place with my Karachi Grammar School blazer, red and blue stripped school tie, black prefects gown with all my regalia and out around the bend of the adjacent road, I see the rickshaw barreling down. I hail him. The morning seems right. My transportation is on-hand and here, all of me, is ready to go to school.

The rickshaw ride is always bone rattling. Doing 70 miles an hour in a three-wheeled machine in traffic where the lights and regulations are only for comical dismal and a reason to exclaim that we are all destined by God written in the Book, is only for the brave. We pass over Clifton Bridge where the smoke from the utter destitute rises like lost angels, and we go by Frere Hall where an artist named Sadequain painted the ceiling and walls with the glory of calligraphy. On the right is Sind Club, tennis and swimming only for the rich, connected and corrupt and further there is Metropole Hotel no longer the chic spot for diplomats to drink whiskey. Entering Zaibunissa Street, the shops are slowly started to open, the smell of the refuse from the lives of so many people starting to bubble and we slip into the traffic that takes us into Empress Market. This is where Karachi's heart pumps and the sidewalk dentist who pulls teeth for \$1 is getting his tools ready and the fortune teller with his envelope picking parrot start to hum songs to each other.

By the Post Office, the literate already have a line of people ready to tell them their stories, their hurt and pain, their dreams and wants, so that it can be transcribed onto a piece of paper, transported to another location by rail and bicycle to the home village, where another soul will read it back to the family members. The lungs of the city breath, the sun is now up and the rickshaw driver is hollering at the top of his lungs to the car next to him, "Is this heaven or hell we are imprisoned in?"

I get out and pay the driver and walk on the sidewalk where there were riots yesterday. And already as I approach the gate, at the edge of the wall, I can see and smell the spices the man is adding to the potatoes and meat in his cart for us for lunch.

And I enter Karachi Grammar School.

I have been going to this bastion of British excellence, pride and the last vestige of colonial ambition for thirteen years and Mr. Wrigley, the gentleman who is the principal of this "grand platform for exercise of the mind and spirit" says, "Good morning, Mr. Durdag" hastily and suggests that in the next cricket match, regardless of the fact I broke the school record, try to improve my form. I nod in agreement.

I walk on to where my friends are, exchange the pleasantries common to adolescent boys, crack a couple of jokes with the middle school kids and get in front of the 1500 students of Karachi Grammar School, stick my chest, crack a smile, point my eyes at the mass of eagerness, indifference and future, dive into all that glory, and shout, "Karachi Grammar School. Attention!"

Back here, as the Scarborough School Bus is getting two additional passengers, these couriers of wisdom and secrets, my son asks if he can get on it, if he can get on it tomorrow. And I, looking far beyond horizon of the land I left behind, dissolving in all that nostalgia and remembrance, say, "Yes, you can, yes you can."

# Atomic signals bouncing off the sky

There are days in the summer when I am in Karachi. I am at the shores of the Atlantic on Scarborough beach but I am really in Hawkesbay beach in Karachi. I am in the middle of Old Port but I am really drinking pure sugar cane juice on the edge of Zaibunnisa Street in downtown Karachi. I am in Scarborough, but I am really in Karachi.

And that is when I remember those I have not seen for a very long time.

Several years ago, over the phone, I talked to you. I wanted to hold you, and tell you that our innocence has been trampled, our desires have been reborn elsewhere, and I still remember how I loved you.

The words trickle down the throat, and I am thinking to myself how love changes over the years, how we have collapsed into dust and risen again so far away from each other. I am looking right at and through the window of this house I grew up in, trying to believe that our memories now belong to our children.

Seventeen years ago I wanted to melt into the breath of your skin and coagulate into explosions of love under your veins. And now, look at us, our souls gifted to another, our flesh licked over by another; our summers elsewhere.

This gently woven connection of ours, stretching out beyond our voices, grabbing onto what keeps our bones glued together, making us kneel at the time of day everyday when spirits of dead people whisper into our ear. And the wise ones say the people you were born with hold the key to your reincarnation after death.

You are the key, and every piece of you makes you kneel and hurt at the knees because it hurts so much to care for another who is so far away over the phone, or on letter paper, or in conversations of casual acquaintances. But you know we will never let go because the precipice is at the edge of the door of your living room, the ground is slippery from the tears we said we would not cry.

Your voice is still the same. And here we are on the phone talking, from one city to another, from one continent over to another. Our eyes elsewhere, back to where we came from. You say my voice is deeper, the accent still intact and that you are 10lbs overweight. And I say you are still svelte, that there are days when I remind myself of you and that as the years go by it becomes harder to hold the sand between the lines of my palms.

We pause a lot; say little, our insides twirling into a gentle breeze of remembrances of that which keeps us alive when all the wars are lost. Our lives our own, the Indus running in front of us with a gentle pace, the sun in our hands, our laughter atomic signals bouncing off the sky.

There is an insistence of not to go on, to stay and remove the sand from the shoes, drink some tea watching the water and Karachi. As I turn on the radio, the crackling voice of All Pakistan Radio coming, I take a handful of cherries and place a small book face down on a thankful chest and then climb a mountain created from years of going on – such is the insistence.

It is the insistence to sit, and breathe, and feel my buttocks settle into the earth, letting the arms snugly rest on desires of throwing kisses at my childhood. The clouds smeared on the top of my head like spilt milk, the trees waving down angels, as the smell of ancient prayers from the grandfathers and grandmothers from the apartment blocks below make me forget that one day all the summers will end, such is the insistence.

It is the insistence to look for the sake of looking, to sigh and inhale time. To reconcile the sorrows, of knowing my destiny, allowing my insides to do whatever it wants to do, to care for you at all costs. Such is the insistence to think about my children and to laugh at what I have written from a long time ago and said even longer ago. So I wait.

I am waiting for you to come, to tell me that we are bonded from eternity, that there is goodness in all of us and that we have finally found a place to sit. In Karachi and here in Maine.

### **Hold my hand**

I have this recurring dream. I am holding my sisters' hand, plastic slippers on my feet, and barely any clothes on her and me. We have nothing. We are on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is the middle of summer. Here in hell, with all this dust and hunger, I say we will be OK.

Here we are on the border with nothing, and nothing to hope for. Life goes on. We have to find some water, something to eat and a place to sleep. Don't cry sister, we will be OK. I will take care of you. I love you. Hold my hand and come with me; let's go over there.

Then I start talking in Pushto to a middle-aged Afghan refugee. He says to me:

We have given up hope because there is not much point to trying anymore. People are dying left and right and we are tired of caring because nobody else does.

You are rotting to pieces inside, your termite ridden bones, hollow tubes of white and yellow, because you see yourself in this cage where nothing matters. You can't move anymore because you don't know where to move to. Your birthright has dissolved into a purple haze of turquoise nights as you swallow tablets which keep diarrhea and cholera at bay.

Faces in front of you are melting into a dawn of scorching blood explosions splattering flower petals on metallic gray dreams of gun barrels.

You know that the iron of the stars is inside the molecules of your eyes, but those stars are spilling in seismic quakes of doubt, fear and loss, the razor under your throat so close to the eyes of the precipice. Your self-esteem has been gnawed like the moon dipped in nitric acid. Look at the children that are half naked chattering and fighting for food.

Behind your eyelids, in the passageways of your nostrils the charred smell of burning flesh tells you, demands of you that there is no redemption, grace and forgiveness but yet, yet the moist stench of oblivion has not yet ignited all your angels; the shadow of evil has not raped you yet.

That light inside you which fathoms the unfathomable wants the attention of somebody to give a damn about you, to give you the answer, to be at peace. And you struggle with all the vultures which roam the archway of your spine, beaten, paralyzed, blind and voiceless, the silence of the difference between the dead and living pushing you, pushing you away from the light of your country that is no more.

You want an ecstasy of orgasm that will lift you into an epoch where pain is fable, an old tale where the distance between reality and dream is immeasurable. This whirling in your soul, the desecration, the violation, the complication of your breathe that is born by such great effort every second by your diaphragm, you want it to stop.

To stop because you are tired, you are tired. You want all your begging and pleading for help to pay off. Someone by now should have been able to stick an I.V. into you, resuscitate you, hold your head in their hands, kissed your forehead and reminded you that the demons, the devils, all the ten million and one fanged hells you have lived and owned and fought against are no more.

You want to be on your bed and a vision will tell you the blades that have sliced your life are but a test of your faith and you have passed this ordeal. That the songs you have will no longer vanish, the show of ablution will now wash you, you will say I love you, and you will have become divine and digested evil forever.

But behind you the ocean is evaporating into a blue pale cloud of useless whispers, the grass has melted to dark green bile that is now your only food. The poison from the promises people you thought would help you and that were never kept is dissolving your feet, the smell of human stench and refuse burning up your lungs.

All these meanings you searched, you searched, you suffered for, still not there, still not existing at all, the pain focusing on your knees as you crumble, and you are remembering everything, every moment, and you are screaming for what we have become.

You are screaming understand me before I splinter into a million buds of jasmine.

I wake up. Whisper a prayer from the Quran. And remember.

## Running with my father

It is 1979, and I am in the forests which surround Izmit, Turkey. I can hear the streams, and the color of green overwhelms me. There is a flat plateau 50 yards long, about 20 yards wide, between the trees and a soft calm breeze. I challenge my father to a foot race. He accepts. He takes off his glasses and we are off. From the corner of my eye I see him hold his pocket which has the black-rimmed glasses. I am ahead; he is gaining, his brown trousers swooshing close to my heels. I run in front of the happy voices and screams, I can hear him laugh in happiness, and I run not even stopping on the grass, not stopping. I ran all the way to the U.S.

I used to massage his shoulders, his back. Those were the singular moments when he surrendered to me. Shirt off, sitting between my knees, my father used to say to me, "Kerem, don't be afraid, squeeze hard like a man." And I squeezed; his flesh, his muscles, his skin scorching my palms, my fingers. His head used falling on his big chest, his breathing slow, whispering, "Son, you are doing well." His brown, olive, oily skin obeying my hands, we dissolve into each other, let go of our battles, forgot the gasp of the day as he says, "Son, you are doing well."

I remember him swimming when we used to go to the beach in summer, until the day he dove into the Arabian Sea at Hawkesbay Beach in Karachi to save a struggling man. I can see him rush by me, hit the water running and disappearing into the waves. Those white frothing waves. A while later he walked out from the ocean to my mother, water dripping down his chest, his curly black hair flat, the sun glinting off his watch still on his wrist; he did all he could but there was no sign of the student. After this (they found the body two days later in the harbor) I never saw him wear swimming trunks at the beach; always trousers with socks and shoes. My mother, I can hear her telling him, to at least take of his shoes because it was so hot. He never once did.

My father, Mehmet Ismet Durdag, asks me where I am going. "To the school dance." He asks if there are going to be any school chaperones. I say the principal and all the teachers are going to be there. He gives me some money and says, "Every gentlemen needs to learn how to tie his own bow tie." Gazing directly at me he ties it for me, undoes it, and teaches me over and over again, until I master it. He says I look dashing. He smiles. That smile of the earth. Hand on my shoulder he stops the rotation of the earth then and now.

I find two love poems written fluidly with a graceful hand, declarations long ago, to his wife, of simple passion, unveiling of the heart, a call to prayer. So, he was a poet of song and language, of clarity and life, those heady, intoxicating days on their honeymoon in 1968 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Those photographs of you and me, son and father, both in our youth, one can tell we have the same blood. Our eyes, swirling for answers in our souls, in the

souls of others, the chin, the nose, the lips, our foreheads, we are the reincarnation of each other. One can tell we have the same blood. Those photographs of you and me both in our ocean and sky.

Today on Fathers Day every time I blink I remember the above and more.

Thirteen years ago my father died in a bus accident on the border of Iran and Turkey. I was a senior in college working three jobs and did not have the money to go back. My only regret in life has been that I did not bury my father. I did not give him his last rites, cover him in a white shroud, hold him, breathe on him and look at him. I did not pray with him in front of me and lower him myself. I didn't get to do what he did with his father.

Three months later having graduated wearing a borrowed shirt and trousers that were too large for me, getting on a plane ready to go home first time after four years, I remembered one of his last words to me, "Don't forget whose son you are." I haven't.

### My mother, her house and her words to me

My mother visited us this summer. Her yearly pilgrimage to be with the kids and grandkids. Sixty-four, the lines on her cheeks are deeper; the eyes more sunken, the hair thinner, her touch still the same.

And we talk.

I see her smoking a cigarette, it is past one o'clock in the morning and sitting on the edge of the bed the glow is a voiceless call in the middle of heaven, she sits without moving. She is thinking to herself how her children are going to get old and that she is not willing to be weak.

She misses her husband, that love of her life who she understood completely. Twelve years have passed and she still tears up when we talk about him.

Her hands sculptured from all the clothes she washed with her bare hands, patiently quietly cuts an arc in the air with the breath of old angels, the air slowly dancing away from her lungs, as she rests them on my shoulder. I don't really know her, I am too young yet.

She knows what I am thinking. She always does and tells me to go to sleep, saying, you have to go to work tomorrow. Years ago, she used to say, go to sleep there is school in the morning.

I see her death in my dream, but I know she is alive. She hides her pain so well, her silence raining on her face which she doesn't seem to mind. All her smiles befriend the wrinkles dissolving into graceful rivulets. The eyes look away when the children want to go and conquer the world, because she conquered it and we are all looking at the price we paid: heaviness of the heart of knowing she is alone.

The graying hair laughs at those who are left behind, the knees complaining only when she reads a book cross-legged without getting up for a long time. Her back is locked as if it was made up of a series of intertwining broken fingers, fingers that belong to the people she told not to come to her burial.

That is how I know she is alive. As my son is explaining to her the reason why he is digging a whole into the earth at the beach, and my daughter looking at her probably thinking, you have a very different face from what I usually see, I can see mother be alive. Time, history and patience stroke her brow like faithful lovers as she huddles with her grandkids.

And I tell her about my college summers in Minnesota where under the splintered light through the cumulus clouds, I read Tolstoy. I tell her about the blueness of the world and the greenness of the grass as I ran and ran across the hills and

dove into the cool Lake Sagatan, trying to find a way into the world. I tell her how when they put Jesus on the cross, the divinity of the human collapsed into the love of the other. I tell her how Fr. Rene McGraw teaching Heidegger and Nietzsche was and is a transcendental moment in time for me. I tell her not seeing her for four years was hard.

We talk little as the sun trudges, the world bellowing like an aching donkey. Sitting across each other, the cigarette in her hand, newspaper on her soiled sweaty lap, we are looking at each other admitting how we will always belong to a man now dead, and now also to a Maine family.

She bleeds into the hot summer sky and I roll back into the ocean, all this with the wash still flapping in the balcony, the rice still simmering and the dust about to settle on the furniture. The house is full of noises, of happenings, of our lives that we are leaving behind and dragging with at the same time. This house of ours in Karachi, where I grew up, overlooking the bay into the Arabian Sea, the groan of the city pushing, pushing us into the belly of other lives.

She tells me she loves the house my wife and I built for her in this little village in Selcuk; on the southwestern coast of Turkey, two miles from the ruins of Ephesus, kissing the olive groves, the breeze from the Aegean washing over the flowers she planted. She says, thank you.

I say, the deal is you see us every year.

And I think my mother's house is so far away.

### **Jesus at Saint John's University**

When I first arrived at the campus of Saint John's University the weather was cold, below freezing and snow drifts taller than me; I had one suitcase and was wearing a light zipper jacket, cotton trousers, a poplin shirt, borrowed sneakers. No gloves, no hat, no idea what -20° C meant.

I was greeted by a priest in long flowing black coat. The first words I heard in the United States was, "Kerem, welcome to Saint John's. May the peace of the Lord be upon you. Mass will be tomorrow at 10 am. And, you look very, very, cold."

Here I was a student at the largest Benedictine university run by the largest group of Benedictine monks in the US, several of whom who had been advisers to the Pope for Vatican II. I was in Minnesota. I was a Muslim boy in the middle of Christendom.

Over the course of the next weeks, I became one of the few housekeepers to the entire monastery. The jobs at the dining service hall were all taken up, and it seemed that cleaning toilets, vacuuming carpets and making beds in the monastery, dusting and moping up the pews, washing the glazed mosaic windows of the Church at 5 am in the morning was not a coveted job.

It was my gain. One early morning that first semester, after I had gotten done washing the floors of the church (this world renowned soulful work of architecture by Marcel Bauer in the middle of the campus) I sat and started to thumb through the Bible. While I was reading, a monk came by and sat by me, and said, "Kerem, you know, it is all about love." And so began my lifelong friendship with Fr. Rene.

Three years later in the spring of 1991 I lost my father. The hours and days surrounding those days remains a private memory, but what I can share is I went to the church on an evanescent sunrise and sought private prayer. As I was in the middle of aisle, doubled over on my knees, reciting the verses I knew by heart from the Quran, several monks came and kneeled with me. One of them said, "Kerem, let's pray together. You are a son to us." And so a Muslim boy prayed in a church lit by light.

Several weeks later, the Gulf War broke out. In the weeks during and after, I was spit at, physically harassed and verbally assaulted on those occasions; for being a Muslim, for being anti-war, for being me. And, in the small sacristy where we gathered together one night I cried together with my friends. It was about love.

It is the Benedictine tradition to reflect in ones own silence, and to act with ones conviction. So, as I walked towards my car late at night having watched "The Passion of The Christ" I thought about the orbit of the world spiraling into our self created madness.

Jesus believed that in the complete acceptance of the other is the key to the dissolution of the socio-economic and political structures that promote arbitrary distinctions; this evil of our age. I am sure that as he died on the cross, he believed that in the complicated dance of choice and personal destiny we carry the ability to walk beyond self executed borders of hatred and ignorance.

So, I desire going to the mosque by my mother's house to pray for the dissolution of hatred and ignorance.

It is hatred that makes 17 year-olds disintegrate themselves. It is hatred to occupy their country. It is blatant ignorance by the Occident to blame the stagnation and oppression of free thought and lack of democratic infrastructure on the West. And it is equivalently ignorant to believe that the West can impart ideals of self government via moral arrogance and brute force. In this standoff, where religion and politics are tools for ends rooted in the justification of personal and national egos, we kill each other.

It is sheer evil that a seven year old in Gaza dies because his heart is pierced by a bullet as he watches his friends play from a window of his house. That bullet, that revolves and spins, reflecting the curling image of the World Trade Center, is an unforgivable sin. It is the inability of humanity to get on the cross.

You know the answer is love. Put down the guns, sit, breathe and talk. Listen. You are not forsaken. So says Allah who carried Jesus from the cross.

### Burial

You know, I never got to bury my father. By the time I got the call that the passenger bus he was on had flung itself into eternity on the border of Iran and Turkey, and that this proud man who could swim the waves like Poseidon had drowned, the only thing left to do was to fall on my knees. I was 21, a senior at Saint John's in Minnesota, pure white snow everywhere and no money to be able to go and bury my father.

On my knees, I asked my mother that I had to bury my father. I screamed that the son leads the ablution and washing of the body, wraps his father in a white shroud head to toe and with uncles and cousins, puts his father on his shoulders and carries him to the mosque, where in front of the community, he leads the prayers. The son has to bury his father. He has to.

My mother, my dear mother, said she was taking custody of my father body in several hours and then they had to bury to him. Even if I had the money, I couldn't get there fast enough. So, once I put the phone down, as I was on my knees, I asked my father for forgiveness. And I prayed.

My father never got to read the letter I wrote to him, which arrived the day after he left on his trip, asking him that we should end our four years of silence, that the time is at hand to put pride and ego away, that for all our differences and arguments we are father and son. That the blood in our veins was the same. That in forgiveness and understanding lays the secret to talking to each other again. When I had mailed it, I had whispered a prayer.

I wished I had written that letter earlier.

Years later, when I was in Dachau, I fell on my knees again. And as I was frantically wiping the dirt of the grave markers, I prayed with verses from the Quran that my father has asked me to memorize when I was eight years old. He had asked me to memorize these verses because in reciting them, you ask for forgiveness for yourself and for those who has passed away. And he had told me, Kerem, as you recite the prayers, repeat them three times; one for your soul, one for theirs and one for the ones that will come after, So here I am in Dachau on my knees, sobbing uncontrollably, whispering words, brought down by Gabriel, three times over, because that is all I could do.

I wished that I could do something more.

It is a strange breeze that slides on your shoulder when you realize that the holy dignity in personally burying a human is what makes us human. There are two moments in ones life where the clarity of what makes us human, overtakes the limitations of our own making. One is the birth of your child. The second is

burying a loved one. And in between those events, the search for grace determines the choices we make and the possibilities we congeal.

So whether it is our blood that we bury, or the blood of others that we are unable to, it seems to me that the only thing that makes sense, is to forgive. To forgive ourselves and others.

In the days ahead, as the madness of our ambitions and the venom of our ignorance ebb away temporarily, and the giggles of our children hand us the keys to our own personal secret gardens, perhaps on the still cool early morning, we should bury our hate. We should wash it in silence, shroud it and quietly carry it while songs of the mother's lament waft in the air when we all pray, and have enough sense to forgive.

It is in the lament and prayer that I miss my father. The singular regret of my life of not being able to bury him has now dissolved to seeing him in the mirror as I age. The lament and prayer that I seek as the world defaces itself, dissolves to a conviction that we can do more to gift grace to each other.

On the 25<sup>th</sup>, go gently into the shine of the sun, into the sparkle of your family, and allow the thin line of the horizon to hypnotize you. And may you breathe in harmony with the grace that is yours to keep forever.

# **Loving Bruce Lee, Bogart and Count Almasy**

My first movie was Bruce Lee's "Enter the Dragon" at "The Palace" at the corner of Hotel Metropole in Karachi. I was ten. My father was a man who loved his Truffaut and Goddard; Bruce Lee for me was the avenging angel.

I loved Bruce Lee because it was the start of my salvation and escape in Pakistan. Movies were the only place where you could leave the hurt of the world behind. People were getting killed, innocent humans were braying under the yoke of external and internal oppression, confusion was a tumor on daily existence; and so we escaped.

We escaped at the cost of freedom of expression. In Pakistan, the movies were censored; if the lover and the hero got close enough, the movie skipped several frames. Or if the projectionist was not bribed enough, you missed several minutes. No kissing shown. No cleavage. No cursing. If cleavage was hinted or becoming apparent, the entire scene was gone; finesse in editing was not the priority. The audience hollered, threw bottles, cursed and then settled knowing the escape was worth the sacrifice.

So, when I read in the newspaper that they sold Humphrey Bogart's hat he wore in the "The Barefoot Contessa" for \$500, I stopped. It should have fetched more. How would Ava Gardner feel about that hat? All those tears for \$500. Humphrey certainly deserves more.

I was twelve when I watched the movie. I cried in my sleep for Ava Gardner who was beautiful and tragic, one trapped in a movie of love and deceit. And I could not save her. Her white fur coat washed away my innocence and her tears covered me with a film of protection from lovelessness. I cried for all this.

That night as I lay, eyes wet looking at the ceiling I vowed to declare my love to Manahil Ansari the next morning, when my heart would admit to itself, "You are a romantic". I did declare my love, she said I was crazy and after a month of two of other declarations, I fell in love with someone else.

At that point I realized, I was a wanna-be romantic hero. Watching "From Here to Eternity" on television (a momentous event because of some miracle the censors fell asleep at the wheel) when I was fourteen, I pictured myself that she and I would be sitting on a shore where the sand is only brown and ours. There is blue in front of us, behind us no one can see. Like an old color lithograph, her skin blends into everything; the shape of her dress just about slipping off that soft shoulder. Then I would kiss her.

There would be no afterwards. We will be stuck in a frame, the salty air blowing at our corners. We would never kiss anymore but sit there, me in my thoughts on such a beautiful day, the woman asking for nothing, half bare.

And you can't be a hero to a woman, without being rebel. So, in high school, when James Dean looked at the screen in "Rebel Without a Cause", I knew I was not going to stay in Pakistan. Destiny lay in risking it all. Whatever the cost, I wouldn't care. And my mind would drip the colors of lost loves which hide under chairs at bare rooms belonging to good poets, bad heroes, and those who kiss only with their lips, driving with a cigarette and a heavy foot on the gas.

Such romanticism waters my blood. And all this water coalesces in the film "The English Patient".

Somewhere in the utter operatic human tragedy of Count Almasy the hero, lies a prayer that we just have to continue on till our feet are awash with the wet green grass growing from the bellies of those we forgot to remember at the end of the day, the end of the day when rain and prayers rest to breathe.

As Count Almasy carries Katherine, his lover, to her grave, where the love is now eternally lost, searching for the intersection of loss and meaning, my heart splinters and breaks a thousand times because I know what it is like to lose one of the things that makes you whole; the past, your personal history, because it is now so far away.

And so the only way I can live my past is to treat it like a movie; to remember the scenes, the characters, the stories. And in more ways than one I am still searching for the hero who will carry tomorrow with flair, romanticism and courage.

## My name is spelled K-e-r-e-m

There is much to be said for a person's name. It is a voice of a birth-right and what makes us immortal. There are few things that belong to **us**, completely and utterly, and our name is one of those possessions. Presumably it was chosen as a harbinger of ones destiny at our moment at birth; our name given to us by our mothers and fathers is our sword, our pen, our clarion call as we dive into life.

So, it is a point of courage when I am asked to spell my name all the time. Ever since I landed on the shores of America, the very act of spelling of my name came occupy a permanent place in my speech pattern. I don't mind it. It is second nature to me now to say my name first and then spell it out, all in the same breath.

Spelling my first name is easy. Rather straight-forward, phonetically there are no confusions in the first part. Saying, "K-e-r-e-m" in majority of the times, the person on the other end of the conversation or telephone gets it that "K-e-r" is not much out of the ordinary. Sometimes, I am challenged with the speculative comment that it should be "K-a-r" which creates a rather interesting situation that a stranger is almost trying to re-brand me by suggesting a different spelling for my name. Not going to happen. Though I am completely cognizant that in the US there can be different spelling variations, for me, my name is my country. If it was "K-a-r" it would mean that I was of Arab decent; I am a Turk and it is "K-e-r".

The second part of spelling my first name yields the start of the adventure for the listener. Programmed by years of phonetic education, it is tough for people to end my name in "e-m". Invariably, it is "a-n", which also automatically forces them to re-examine several assumptions they made when they started talking to me. If we are on the phone, there is a momentary hesitation after they chose to spell my name as "K-a-r-e-n" instead of listening to be spell it as "K-e-r-e-m", indicating they have a tough time believing that my voice belongs to a man. So, I am faced with inane comments like: "Are you sure? or "That is an interesting version of a women's name" (and with my name meaning being "gift of God" ironies abound).

Best part of it all, is when telemarketer's call, or there is a call to my office by someone who does not know me, most of the time they ask for a "Mrs. Karen" even though what is written in front of them suggests otherwise. The refusal to believe that a man can have a name of "Kerem" is insurmountable for them. On several occasions, I have had people tell me, actually vociferously *tell me*, that "Karen" is who they want or need to speak to, not "Kerem" even when obviously the reality is different.

Now all of this becomes infinitely more interesting, with higher stakes with my last name. The "g" in "Durdag" is not completely silent, obviously the "r" has to be rolled in ones mouth, and the "u" is more akin to a softer "oo" sound; fairly

challenging. So spelling it out still does not overcome the mental hurdles. The listener wants no part of "d-u-r" but rather "d-i-r" and instead of "d-a-g" the preference is "b-a-g" making my last name end up invariably as "Dirtbag" (trust me, I have been called Mr. Dirtbag in a formal, professional, business setting). There are many other variations where my name ends up to be some sort of bag or another.

I find it completely understandable that my name is butchered. Small but stinging (this constant reminder of what has been left behind) price to pay to become part of this country. And the suggestion (given to me at regular intervals) that I give myself an identifying nickname (ah, yes, Kerem "Buster" Durdag has a certain visceral appeal) is preposterous to me. Truncating it to "KD" I find a disservice to our human ability to utilize language (everybody in this country truncates names; I so much prefer saying "Robert" or "Michael" and to make them "Bob" or "Mike" is a cop-out if there ever was one). And to anglicize (yes, another suggestion by the masses) it to perhaps "Cameron Dolby" is tantamount to a Faustian deal without the perks.

It is my name. It is me. You see, a gift from above.

## Zamfir, master of the pan flute

"My dear brother, my whole life went before my eyes when the Nordic Track went by my right ear." So, said Prabakar Bikram Rana from Nepal (P.B. Rana for short; who convinced an entire Minnesotan college that his parents were liberal enough to name him Play Boy Rana) sitting in front of me in his underwear, glass shards in his hair, a whiskey in his hand.

"God is great, brother Kerem. God is great". Munnawar Moin, a Bengali, kept on mumbling in Urdu, looking upwards at the heavens, with both arms wrapped in bandages and a neck brace. He looked like a zombie.

Allow me to roll back to two days earlier. P.B. and Munnawar, freshman brethren, a Hindu and a Muslim, both informing me that they were going to pick up a Ford Fairmont with 179,000 miles from Iowa City. On the way back they wanted to listen to some good music. I humbly offered my Zamfir, Master of Pan Flute, Greatest Hits, cassette tape, beseeching them, to take good care of it.

Before this story gets too hard to believe, allow me to roll back to March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1988 when I made my first ever purchase in the United States. Watching TV one afternoon, having come back from class, I saw an advertisement for Zamfir, and after three consecutive days of watching the advertisement (oh, yes, those quick commercials from Heartland Music Club) and scribbling the mailing address frantically before it scrolled away and disappeared, I wrote a check for \$9.98.

I realize now that taste in Zamfir is not really an acquired. In fact, it is no taste at all. But then, in the folly of youth and being mesmerized by actually ordering something from TV, I was doing the devils work.

The cassette arrived in three weeks (amazing... mail arriving that quickly; preposterously unbelievable to me at that time). And two days later, having listened to it once (my reaction: needs more listening before a final judgment) I handed it over to P.B. and Munnawar.

So, here is P.B. in the resident assistants' room. Moments earlier I was woken up by the Faculty Resident and the R.A and told that two friends of mine, both in shock, were asking for "Kerem Bhai". As soon as I got there, the Faculty Resident (a monk who believed a stiff drink was a good cure for most moral and physical ills) gave me a glass of whiskey and said, "Give it to PB. If you need, you can have one also." Nothing more divine than a Catholic monk offering libation to a Hindu and a Muslim.

In between sips the story was this: After they bought the car for \$500, on a side street, with a "For Free" sign, P.B. saw a Nordic Track, which he decided was a good buy. They were able to stuff it on the back seat. On their way back, on I-94, P.B. got too close to an 18-wheeler, did three full 360 degree flips of the car

and landed in the ditch (pictures later showing the \$500 investment negated). Paramedics came; then they drove them 200 miles north in a hospital van after getting discharged from the E.R.

P.B says to me: "Man, that car was driving so well. Smooth as a lady".

Munnawar in a deadpan voice: "The windows were down. It felt so good to have the wind rushing. And Zamfir was playing."

"And then that damn fool had to hit the breaks in front of me. Just as I was cranking up the volume of Zamfir. My dear brother, my whole life went before my eyes when the Nordic Track went by my right ear." says P.B.

Calmly I said, "Then what happened?"

In shrill agitation, PB says, "What happened? We almost died. Do you know how close I came to re-incarnation? Never again will I turn my back on my gods. What happened? We are in the ditch, sitting upside down, I am wondering how can my windshield disappear so quickly, and there is the damn fool Zamfir, still playing in the tape player. Can you believe it? Zamfir, my brother, still playing!"

Comprehending the gravity of the situation, I said, "My tape! Where is my tape?"

P.B. screaming (Munnawar still mumbling) saying, "Your Zamfir tape? Here it is. The devil's music. Take it away!" And so, with the casing cracked, spitting at it, he "gave" me the tape.

It still plays. My birth into this country connected to a Romanian gypsy from TV playing Broadway tunes on a pan flute. Only in America.

## Football, football, football

Just last month, I was at the Portugal-England soccer game in Lisbon. 80,000 people in that beautiful stadium all exploding in passion at the same moment; millions, you know millions, screaming their hearts out for their national team. I was at the game with my Brazilian friend, Luiz. Both of us lost of voices; both of us collapsed at the end in tears; both of us reaching a piece of nirvana.

My U.S. friends, who were with me said, "Kerem, what is this passion for soccer?" Luiz and I looked at each other and said:

Football is faith and faith is a rambling love song which kills the wind in your lungs, makes you lunge for the absent glass of air, and all you can see are lights cutting your night into million flower petals, making you forget the string over the chasm you walk on.

It is yearning for longing, to yearn for the spirit and clay. It to see our children become us.

It is the fact you want to belong, you want to grasp the meaning of the emanation of your voice.

"Yeah, you guys are nuts and keep on believing that soccer will save the world!" was the response back. But how else can I explain what football means to Turks and Brazilians? We are nuts and we do believe football will save the world.

My first memory of playing football is when I am four, out in the street in front of my house. There is a goal, deftly marked by two small stones and all of us happy screaming on top of our lungs, "Goal!" when one of us scores. But I also remember being gloriously happy because the way the breeze felt on my back as I ran, the ball softly touching the inside sole of my left foot, my elbows out trying to keep my friends from getting the ball and going giddy with delight when I dribbled by the defender.

My first memory of a televised live game: Johann Cruyff playing for Holland in the 1976 World Cup against Kempes of Argentina, losing 3-1, making me cry for hours on end, prompting my mother to say, "What is it with us and soccer?"

Those memories whorl into a kiss on my cheek from my wife when she first came to one my games and said, "You look so happy when you are running." Perhaps it is the purity of the sensation I still feel when I put on my cleats and get on the pitch. It never has changed. That sensation of being part of something more beyond my skin. The belief that life is meant to be lived passionately.

Not matter how passionate I may be, I am not as fast as I used be in college and there is more light jogging on the field trying to catch my breath after several

sprints on the left wing, instead of just continuing to harass the defenders. But in the sensation of ball on your foot, and instinctively passing or dribbling without a milli-second of forethought, lies the secret of the universe. So, when I am out with my son, who for his own inexplicable reasons, chooses to run and run like mad, laughing and giggling and screaming "Goal!" the secret coalesces: it is passion and joy.

My friends on the Portland Master United team call me Crazy Turk (there are other ones but none too complimentary). It could be my white cleats, my hollering out "Goal!" and going red in the face doing it when we score, or my belief that crass jokes are universal in nature and can be shared among friends. To share passion and joy among friends is perhaps a most fortunate happenstance for me. On this motley team where my friends are lawyers, doctors, the nations top anti-spam expert, urban youth counselor, engineers and teachers, every weekend our cultural identities melt into what matters most; coming together with fantastical desire (it is fantastical; ask our wives of how we try to get out of family commitments) to play. To play and play.

I suspect baseball has the same thread of desire; Red Sox vs. Yankees especially. But football has one thing that no other sport has: couple of billion people play it and it is our planets' unifying language. When you scream "Goal!" you scream with a whole nation, when you pray that Beckam not miss the penalty, you pray with God at your side doing the same.

Yes, it is only in football where our divinity becomes human.

## The secret of water

The first time I took a shower in the United States I scalded myself. That silver knob stared at me with a couple of arrows suggesting that the knob can be turned in either direction. There was a 50% probability at getting it right. I chose wrong.

This resulted in screaming my head off in pain and yelling, "The water is hot!" to a dormitory of 18 year Minnesotan kids. Welcome to the U.S., Mr. Durdag, here we do have hot water.

It was inevitable that I would choose wrong. I never had showered with hot water. In fact showering at all with water flowing out a shower head was a luxury. In the apartment complex I grew up, in the southern edge of the 12 million strong beehive of Karachi, we used to get water for 30 minutes a day, three times a week.

In those 30 minutes, life takes on a sense of urgency. Under orders from my mother, I used to run down the stairs with buckets to fill them from the spigot that reluctantly coughed to life. You jostle you way into line, give the superintendent of the building a couple of bucks to forward to the driver of the water tanker (bribery for water, extremely elemental) and you wait your turn.

Meanwhile, my mother opens up all the taps in the house filling up every available pot and pan. And she starts doing the laundry and washing the dishes. The laundry was straight-forward. All the clothes were in a large bucket in our bathroom which was filled to the brim with water; then powdered detergent was added, the clothes soaking for about five minutes. In those five minutes she was able to get the dishes wet.

Running back to her laundry bucket, she used to sit on her little stool, knees to her chest and start pounding the clothes on the bare floor of the bathroom, kneading them with her bare hands, pounding and kneading them again, and then putting them into a plastic hamper.

The laundry taken care of, she rushes back to the dishes. In the meanwhile, I bring up the buckets of water. Rationing it extremely carefully (it took skill and practice) I took just one bucket to each of the bathrooms to "flush" the toilets. Once that was done, I sprint back down to stand in line again to fill up the bucket again.

Once the dishes were done (which meant there was still about 10 minutes left) my mother would take a couple of the pots, consolidate it into a larger pot and put it on the stove to boil. The other pots going back under the tap to refill (in our apartment building the flow out the taps was considered miraculous since there was a steady stream without interruption).

As soon as the water started to boil, you could see brown particulates starting to settle on the bottom (when I was told that there was bottled water in the dining hall of my undergraduate college, I thought, there was *really* a big bottle outside from where the water was piped from).

Once the water was boiling, she used to take a couple of glasses of it, allow it to cool and then start washing the vegetables. Meanwhile, having brought up the last set of buckets upstairs (all our buckets were orange color, orange like the hot sun), I rush to the shower. Eight times out of ten, the water sputters out in strong protest and then in a final show of defiance, makes a shrill sucking sound. So, naked with three drops of water resting on your arms, you realize you did not beat the clock by a large enough margin. Out of the small orange bucket, with one of the plastic glasses you take your bath (in the winters, I would have to go down, boil a small pot, mix that with cold water, and have a warmer bath).

The water tanker always came at 9 am or 3 pm (depending on bribery and mood). The routine was always the same. And we were the lucky ones in the city to have that routine.

I have not scalded myself since that first time. But every time I drink from the tap or take a shower, I think the secrets to our self-preservation lie in water that arrives without bribery, without back breaking work, without discrimination.

So when I am asked, what is the tangible secret to peace? I say, water.

## Talk to a cabbie today

I am a child of a culture where we love to talk; we love to talk with words, we love to talk with our hands, we love to fold over the skins and muscles over our hearts and show the worlds how the blood pumps through our veins for each verbal breath. And one of the best conversations happen in taxi cabs.

I like talking to cab drivers; I love listening to them even more. They are the modern myth makers; the wisdom grabbers of a country that is constantly on the move. Since I travel a bit and somehow destiny seems to make me a passenger in cabs whose drivers inevitably end up being from my part of the world, I feel blessed. They are me if I was talking to my friends in Istanbul or Karachi; they are me in America.

When I was in New York, a cabbie who actually graduated from the high school next door to mine from Karachi, said:

"Tell you what man, everything is collapsing and wilting into chaos. There are homeless children begging for food in every city, crime no longer makes us numb, and money has imprinted its color on our skins. Look around man, people are dying, women are wailing for good reason, the rent is due, and where are all the people who are supposed to be smart enough to solve humanity's problems. God and hope are absent. Where is the sense in all this? There is no tomorrow. It is destiny. We have drowned in our own sea of blood and screams."

After that, all I could say was, "There has to be a way to make sense."

But the cab driver from my mother's village did not want to make sense. He wanted someone to blame. Bobbing and weaving through Chicago downtown traffic, with no hands on the steering wheel he said:

"There has to be someone to blame for all the murders in the cities, the hunger residing in the stomachs, the dingy air floating in houses, the wars sweltering across the concrete highways, the blood and screams of bones between four walls, there has to be someone to blame. There are idiots worried about fashion; there has to be someone to blame. Inside my anger morphs into green gangrene, but shoppers go on shopping, and the t.v. goes on mumbling. No wonder the planet is over heating. It is getting too hot to live. We need to find someone to blame."

I said, "I could use a blaming or two." And then I remembered, the cab driver who was an ex-revolutionary who said:

"They stuck an i.v. into my arm which says "revolution" on the label. It was not enough that my bones had been shattered by batons. Soles of my feet couldn't carry the struggle anymore. Knuckles in my hands can't grip a pencil to protest

with anymore, my tongue has receded into silence after being electrocuted. Tell me my brother, I disappear into memories. I should have been given me an i.v. of peace."

I couldn't respond with my words. I used the words of a cabbie in San Antonio; a guy who had wives and kids back home and was just simply missing them. He said:

"At the end of it all, I don't want the day to hurt anymore. I want the sun to sink into the depths of my worries over my shoulder, kindly nudging a new moon to lift me up from the clouds of death. The food in my belly dissolves into dark dreams and I have trouble digesting because not only do I remember them, I even understand them. Love floats between the spaces of my chest, and I am left bereft of the security of faith, waiting for the coming of night where you can desert yourself, detach to an unknown destination, return to the nudeness of your lies and masks and parents. I am not getting any younger and sleep comes more uneasily. I want the rest of soul, ease of breath, collapse of hate and judgment, for a time and space in my life when solace was not a word but a painting you knew Van Gogh gave birth to at great expense, for you and nobody else a long time ago."

It is in these conversations I see the reflection of us curl around the drop of the present. So, when people ask how my brethren converse, I tell them to make sure they take a cab in the large cities of America and have a conversation.

## Johnny Cash said Allah-u-Akbar today

There is a shortage of burial cloth in northern Pakistan. We need to bury our dead, shroud them in prayers and lower them to the earth that delivered them. But we need the cloth.

The last time I listened to Cash sing "Spiritual", on constant automatic repeat, from his Unchained album, was when 20,000 people evaporated in the earthquake in Turkey in 1999. It is a sacred song. Automatic repeat for hours as I clicked on the images from scores of websites, as Cash said, "Jesus, I don't want to die alone."

That is what I did because there was nothing else I could do. When you are miles away from the womb that birthed you, it is not just the longing for what is now no more, but for the longing for what it will never be again. So, I listen to Cash again these days.

And he sings, "Voices calling, voices crying, some are calling, some are dying, it's alpha and omega's kingdom come."

What comes are the images, those digital kisses of technology that nail into the middle of my forehead a plea to watch, to absorb, to love, to not forget. There is no audio but I don't need it. I can hear the loud conversations in Urdu of the volunteers trying to get to the 2 year old who is under the concrete. They are saying "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) in unison, again and again, till the angels descend and gift the boy back to his parents.

Cash is the voice of God. In this month of Ramazan, as I fast, for me, when Cash sings the old Memphis hymns for salvation from the Lord above, I let the man tell me which road to seek.

And on the sought road he sings to me, "All my trouble, all my pain, it's gonna leave me, once again, all my troubles, all my pain, it's gonna leave me, once again."

The 27<sup>th</sup> day of Ramazan, is when the angels descend. To put a balm on our troubles. I am going to have a heated conversation with them. Cash has my back.

It shreds me into pieces knowing that a school wall built by our hands collapses and melts the lives of 250 girls without an earthly explanation. It was a wall that could not stand up to 7.6 thundering hoofs from the gates of hell and those girls who were there to learn, to grow, melted away from our grasp. And in that instant, 35,000 others did also. And I am here. It scorches me to be here and to see my friends be there.

I am here, the dead are there and Cash tells me: "Oh, have I seen an Angel, oh have I seen the Ghost."

I look at the photograph of Cash that I have framed; he is my age. He is looking down and you can tell he is thinking of how to sing the song so that it will stay in him, in you. His lips are slightly pressed to together, ready to deliver himself to the world without artifice.

Johnny whisper, whisper to me: "These are my people. They were born on and lived by the land. These are the ones who lived and reached for the stars."

It rips my ribcage open. It rips me because they are my people and my anchor to the mantle of this earth is unchained. I am angry that I can't leap over the oceans of separation and start lifting pieces of rubble and try to fatigue myself into forgetting that there is no sense in the misery of those who are left to live.

There have been some clerics who have suggested that we have strayed from the path and hence the wrath from above. To them I shout, with all the unforgiving venom I have in me: "the Devil is going to burn you with your own bromide bile". I say it in Turkish. I say it in Urdu. I say it in English.

And I return to Cash singing "Danny Boy" to me, saying, "And I am dead, as dead I well may be. You'll come and find the place where I am lying. And kneel and say an "Ave" there for me."

So I fast. I fast, pray for burial cloth, wait for the angels, seek the road and remember this passage: For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (II Corinthians; chapter 5 – verse 1). And I know Johnny Cash has my back.

## Stumbling into fatherhood

My mother handed me over the gold coin with the azure blue evil-eye charm, kissed my new-born second daughter and said, "May the blessings of the heavens be hers". She then turned to me, and with a smile said, "Travel well on the road of fatherhood."

Fatherhood. If you say it slowly, syllable by syllable, you realize that there is a grace and weight to the word. Put aside the spectrum of responsibility, and let go momentarily of the intricate challenges of being a father and a husband, and give yourself a minute to see that saying the word expels the air out of your lungs till the last possible curl of the consonant "d". And when you do that, you condense onto the world.

The world is colored by what we meant to our own fathers. When I was ten, my father sat me down and asked me, if I had a signature for my name. I said, no. He gave me his gold-tipped fountain pen, got his notebook out and asked me to practice. Over the course of the week, he criticized me, cajoled me and then approved of what I did. He ended the project by saying, "Kerem, you are ready to leave your mark one day." I still have that same signature, and every time I sign my name, I can feel his look on my neck.

And my neck looks like his. My face is his and as the years go on, my body is also getting to be like his. We are like our fathers and on the days when we gain clarity because of the common sense our wives impart to us, we realize how much we struggle with our fathers.

It in the United States, only recently has the ethos of our collective society allowed itself the luxury of asking questions regarding the challenges of fatherhood. The divinity of motherhood was never in question but it would be dishonest to deny that fatherhood has taken its share of revisionist blasts in the last twenty years.

As a father today, my challenges are different than my fathers', and also the same. The struggle to find mental energy after work and creatively spend it with kids who are moving at a breakneck speed, to hold on to an identity that is concurrently relevant to our personal social circles and also defined by our family commitments, to be able to be a passionate and giving husband when time for private soulful connections is short, are aspects of my life, our lives as fathers, that need to be admitted to discussions when we talk about what it means to be a parent.

Washing dishes is easy. So is hugging and kissing my kids and being an informed and passionate, expressive and emotive guide on their destined road. Realizing that gender roles and our understanding of equitable rights has evolved

to a place where the personal choices we make are interdependent on those made by our wives, is also easy.

What is not easy is the reluctance of the world at large to say, thank you for being a father. Fathers are not clamoring for a presidential medal of freedom, or for a dictatorial return of absolute authority, but it would be nice to have in our discussions of parenting, a tacit approval that challenges of career and life, and the constant and reflective negotiation of personal desires and public responsibilities, are not just limited to women and mothers.

And yes, we may not know how to color coordinate our kids clothes and do crafts, but rest assured there is value in knowing the *Three Stooges* or the thrust-force of the Saturn V rocket.

My Pakistani and Turkish birth cultures are not one for such thoughts, and for all the stagnant rot there is in intellectual critical thought, there is nevertheless a respect afforded to one for being a father. The father is one of the reference points for a sense of a beginning of construct of the societal unit, the family.

All fathers at the core of their rib-cages are wanderers. We are rooted in our desire to seek what is unseekable, anchored to loving what is real, while dreaming of what is ethereal. We are defined by our stumbling towards meaning, by our staying at the shores of grace.

So say it well and say it deliberately. Father. Fatherhood. And... thank you.

# My daughter

When my two year old daughter Sofia, while reading tilts her head just right, and looks at me, she is an image of my grandmother. My grandmother, who to the day she died, did not know how to read, was this spirit of intensity (my mother would prefer to call it obstinacy) who once had said to me, "Kerem, women can see things that pure and beautiful, that men never will."

I believed here then, and I believe her now. When my daughter gazes out from our back window, or when she looks straight at the horizon at the beach, she knows something that I don't. It is in that moment, I find myself, consciously realizing I am a father to a girl who will become a woman and walk on through this world as a mother and wife.

I never thought I would be a father to a girl. Even though I have a sister, the prevailing psyche of being a male in Pakistan is such that, the bond of father to son, brother to brother, friend to friend, is what defines you, is your destiny, is your anchor. The woman is the other, separate.

So, there are glorious love stories where the male lover conquers all to be with his true love. There are oral poems that one can recite for days, where the male hero goes to the world beyond to follow his destiny and avenge the dishonor wrought on his wife. And depending on your station in life, you will sing songs that shower a million caresses on your daughter protecting her from all the evil in the world.

Even though I read all the stories, read all the poems and sang all the songs, I listened to what my mother used to say, "You are not a man, without a woman." So, growing up in Pakistan under the madness of a dictatorship, I used to ask her, after reading in the newspaper that a woman was going to get 50 lashes with a whip in public at the local stadium for being raped, why, why, why, she would say, "The madness of men." When I used to ask her, about the stories of brothers killing their sisters, fathers killing their daughters, because the sisters and daughters had an illicit affair, all in the name of honor, all of it in the name of honor, she would say, "It is the abject ignorance of men."

In due time, the madness and the abject ignorance, of what I mention became unlawful (whether the above and other human rights inequalities become part of the cultural fabric of acceptance is entirely another issue). And suffice to say, because I am also Turkish, due to the clarity of my mother, the happenstance of me ending up in the pine woods of Minnesota when I was eighteen, growing up and seeing a larger world, the woman was never separate, never just the other, to me.

And so, there is a part of me that is glad that I am a father to a daughter here in Maine. I think, if she ever played field hockey, I can show her dribbling moves

and field tactics that will amaze her coach and team-mates (men's field hockey is a national sport in Pakistan, where they are world and Olympic champs; and I, fairly humbly speaking, was very good at it). When she is ready for folk poems, I will be able to read Whitman and Hikmet and Faiz, that wonderful breath of Americana and Anatolia and Pakistan. And when she is ready for the glorious love stories, we will watch "The English Patient" together.

But there is a part of me that knows what she will not grow up with: the sunsets over the mighty River Indus, listening to the songs of Noor Jehan (her nick-name "Nightingale of the sub-continent"), having traditional henna on her hands when she and her friends get married, being able to walk among the ruins of Troy and Ephesus, or eating Iskender Kepab with sour cherry juice.

The eternal fine balance.

And so now, as Sofia rests her head on my arm as we read, I think, you are this messenger, resting on me, the water from the ocean lapping on the shores of your hands, the silt from unabated rivers washing your feet, and all those secrets, all those secrets oozing, dripping, crashing from the edges of your lips as you laugh.

And I am reduced. Like all fathers when they are with their daughters.

# Don't forget us

It was towards evening, when I got home after a field hockey game, went to the kitchen and sat on our chair, looking outside our bungalow apartment.

My mother asked me, about the game. I said, we lost; and as captain of the team, it was my fault. And I showed her my shoes. Two large holes in the bottom. Because of the holes, my socks were shredded. My feet were blistered. And because of my blisters, I said I couldn't run like I should have.

And then she came up to me, put her soft hands on my cheek and with her thumb, nimbly wiped my tears. Then she went and got a packing box, cut it up and gave the pieces of cardboard to me telling me to put the pieces of cardboard in my shoe, put tape on the outside, and run, run like the wind. And she said, looking straight at me, "Never forget. Never forget."

I used to get the shoes from a flea market in Karachi, specializing in used clothes and shoes discarded by diplomats. The selection was poor, and, size was always a problem. Over the course of the years, I got Nike's that I had to stuff wads of cloth in because they were too big, and Puma's that were so small that to make them a tad more comfy I cut slits in the side. The only time I got the perfect pair of old Addidas', it got stolen the next day; a week later they were replaced by Converse high-tops that were on the tight side.

Later, at Saint John's University, I wore only one pair of shoes for four years; a pair of used Nike sneakers that was the prize jewel in my single suitcase coming to the United States. For four years the shoes were glued, duct taped and stapled (oh yes, with skill, using industrial staple gun) to hold together in various configurations. And when I walked in graduation, wearing my friend's dress pants (the waist fit fairly well; the length was entirely another matter) and shirt (arms fit well, the collar chocked me), I kept on saying to myself, "Never forget."

But I do forget. We all forget. We forget because our minutes are greedily eaten by the gluttonous appetite of responsibility and the forward rush into the future. When all of us find a moment to ourselves, having put our kids to bed, having shared one private secret of the day with our wives and husbands, and after having reconciled our inability to find complete fulfillment in work with our desire to hope and strive, we arrive at an oasis. And at that oasis, we dream.

We dream about things which render the daily howls of the pundits insignificant. We dream about people that were once near to us. We dream about a place and time, where we were important. And at the end of the dream, we remember, with necessary selfishness, what makes us happy.

Hence, most of the time I forget how lucky I am. I am lucky because I don't have to second guess on choice of footwear. Through a curious mix of luck, fate and

faith, I came through the new Ellis Island of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (JFK Airport) and rooted myself to a country that has given birth to *The Federalist Papers*, Gettysburg address, Huckleberry Finn, interesting verbal contortions as "collateral damage" and the integrated transistor circuit.

So, I whisper gratitude to the gods. And I try to not forget them. Them. Those that I grew up with. The poor, the very poor, for whom the day to day resiliency of their spirit, is our only collective divinity.

With that desire not to forget, the vermillion anger at a forgetful world finds a focus. We forgot the butchering in Bosnia. We forgot the annihilation of Chechnya. We forgot the abyss of genocide in Rwanda. We keep on forgetting the destitution and starvation in Sudan. We keep on forgetting, our common thread of human grace and decency.

But, if we don't forget, we live. If we don't forget, they live.

And I don't have an easy answer. I think the secret lies in what a rickshaw driver told me the last time I was in Karachi. As we went by a building that was bombed to pieces, he said, "You lucky one, be a witness. Don't forget. Don't forget us."

In that oasis of yours be a witness. Don't forget. Don't forget them.

## Born in the USA

A long time ago, in a 1980 light blue Chevy Malibu with North Dakota plates and temperamental radiator, with two other friends (a North Dakotan and Oregonian) I went on an adventure. We started off in Minneapolis, made it to the Pacific Ocean and drove up to foot of Mount Hood in Oregon and floored the gas pedal across Idaho, all the way to Minnesota. In that adventure, I learned why one may regain faith in things that are heavenly and good... driving through Wyoming and Montana on an open road with nothing but you, God and good conversation, will do that.

But before we got to the good and heavenly, we drove across Nebraska. Across that soul of this country. We crossed the state lines shortly after dinner and drove across all night. And as we drove, we had Springsteen's "Nebraska" album in the cassette player. Bruce sang to us all night, over and over again. Driving across Nebraska, I found America.

It is not easy to find America. The country is rather large and is held together with this invisible love for being yourself and the visible kiss of doing what you believe is right. You do what you believe and you are given the kiss of believing what you do. In the middle of all of this, stretches rivers of secrets; secrets to long life, everlasting love, pride and arrogance, liberty and freedom, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, why the \$19.99 Flowbee which you can buy on TV can give you a good haircut, why men are evil, and why our children will make a fine next generation. All those endless secrets criss-cross us. And these secrets flow in Nebraska.

Highway 80 slices Nebraska; for about half of the state it is straight as an arrow. And flat. In that straightness and flatness, as Bruce sang about Johnny and Joe Roberts, we talked about our fathers and mothers, our friends that we left behind, what we wanted to do with our lives. The windows were slightly rolled down, so we could smell that unique fragrance of cultivated earth, watered by the long mechanized irrigation systems. It is unmistakable; if you take a deep, deep breath, your lungs will fill in with air that will *feel* like fresh damp earth.

As we drove, we talked about what America was. For one of us it was the vastness, the scale of everything. For another, it was the freedom to express. For me, it was the truth of things. And as Highway 80 wore on, that endless asphalt track of conversation and dreams, the three of us started talking about what it meant to be good and divine (as does any good conversation).

And Bruce's refrain regarding the meanness in this world kept swirling around our heads.

So, while the faint red glow of the dashboard lights kept flickering, I told my friends that I had found America. That it was right here in Nebraska.

In Nebraska, for every sunset, a prayer is born for us to make sense of things. For every sunrise, a truth is delivered, that is yours alone to digest. In Nebraska, there are no lies.

We got to a gas station. After I pumped the gas, I went to pay and the gentleman behind the counter, big guy that looked like he could have been on World Wrestling Federation, says to me, "Not from around here, are you?" I said, "No." Without blinking, as he gave my change back, he said, "Nothing like the open road. And always ride with your window rolled down, that's my only advice to you."

It was and is good advice. If we fear the lives that run right into us, we fear ourselves. And when we fear ourselves, we numb ourselves with undeliverable promises. So, roll down that window.

From the womb of Nebraska, you are launched into the Wyoming, where the soul of America, becomes earthen clay and in the bathing of grace and beauty, you understand, we all begin and end at the same point. The point, at the end of every hard earned day, is with our congregation and preacher at our side, where we have a reason to believe (amen, Bruce).

I found America, as I lost my birth home. Everything that dies someday comes back (sing it, Bruce). I found my North Dakotan friend, who to this day, is one of my closest confidants. And as Bruce sang, I found that I was already delivered from my mother's arms to a new family.

## **Heroes**

The first comic book I ever bought was, when I was eight years old. "The Almighty Thor", from Agha's Supermarket in Karachi for 30 cents. Agha's was the first real supermarket in Karachi. Every week I went there to do grocery shopping and got the latest issue of *Batman* and the *Fantastic Four* (yes, even at that age, I was discerning enough not to like Archie comics), to read it at least three times that very night.

Do note that Agha's is not in the same scale as Hannaford's. Agha's would essentially fit in the Hannford bakery and deli section. Eight aisles, each fifteen feet long, only packaged food and fruit and vegetables, two cashiers; the gold standard in those days.

A week after I came to the U.S. as a college freshman, the dorm guys took me to the local supermarket to get breakfast cereal. I promptly proceeded to get lost. I was told to go down the specific aisle for the cereals; I just went down another aisle as my eyes glazed in awe. The next minute I am looking at a great selection of trash bags (which at that time, I thought were just plastic bags) and have no clue as to my orientation.

Before long, I hear one of the dorm guys screaming my name. Somehow by the bags was by a flimsy comic stand, so all I could yell back was, "I am by the comic books." I hear back, "Comic books? Where is that?" I replied, "By the plastic bags." "Plastic bags? Where are the plastic bags?" "I don't know." It took them 10 minutes to find me. I left the supermarket with the *Daredevil* comic book (for \$1.50), and without the cereal (with fifty varieties of cereal spread in their infinite glory over one aisle, they still did not have plain cornflakes cereal that was unsweetened).

The trauma of being lost in the supermarket with a comic book eased over the years only to be renewed recently.

I was at a store with my son Kemal (five years old) and Sofia my daughter (two years old). Sofia sees a Yoda action figure and says, "What is that?" "That is Yoda." I said and pressed the hand which made Yoda say, "May the Force be with you".

Disturbed by this and obviously not impressed by the presence of the Force, Sofia screams, "I don't like Yoda". As I am trying to call her down, she continues, "You love Yoda. I don't like Yoda." Her older brother interrupts, "Does Spiderman love Yoda?" I said I didn't know (several days before, explaining the qualities of spiders to Kemal, I did give him important background information on Peter Parker). Sofia pipes in, "Yoda loves Spiderman. You love Spiderman." And she keeps on saying it; very loudly.

Kemal adamantly insists, "Spiderman does not love Yoda." Soon, both of them are arguing on top of their lungs about Yoda and Spiderman, specifically who was a "good guy" and "bad guy". I meanwhile, having given up moderating the discussion, resign to admire the Batman action figure (which was never available in Karachi) also present on the shelf.

Couple of weeks later we are in the supermarket and Sofia sees the most wise of Jedi Knights on a 12 pack, which leads here to scream at top of her lungs, "Yoda on the soda! Yoda on the soda! I don't like Yoda!"

This leads Kemal to ask the burning question of the day, "Why is Yoda on the soda?" As Sofia is screaming "Yoda on the soda!", I am forced to answer the obvious, "Kemal, Yoda is a very wise Jedi Knight and he is on the soda to spread wisdom and peace." I thought that would lay the issue to rest (albeit tenuously). That was not to be because Kemal says, "But there is hair on his ears."

This prompts Sofia to scream, "I don't like the hair in Yoda's green ears", repeating it, again and again. Unable to make a satisfactory connection between green ear hair and wisdom, especially since other numerous people in the aisles were coming up to me and saying (and not doing all that a good job of not laughing), "Why is Yoda on the soda?", Sofia ends the discussion (and preserve my sanity) by emphatically saying, "Yoda is a bad man on the soda. And I don't like bad men."

That evening driving home (the kids calmly talking about Spiderman's blue underwear), dreaming of reading my newly purchased *Batman – The Dark Knight Collection* book, I thought, in more ways than one, I am home.

All of us have a war to fight. Whether it is with ourselves, the others, those who are invisible, it is a raging war. It is a red-colored war that rages because we want to belong.

# **Diving into Karachi**

The last time I was in Karachi, I was not sure how to feel as I washed myself with the city; the black carbon monoxide blanketing me, the tongue lashing blare of voices and noise slurping my bones. There was more traffic, couple of new buildings, screams of all this new technology, but it was still the same. Beggars grabbing my feet, the dust from outreached hands settling on my arms, the pleas for sanity floating softly under the humid haze. But this was my city. Mine.

My school teachers have retired and those still left, are old as my mother. Most of my friends walk onto the elite class where the takeoff runways were always waiting for them. So I think this is my city, I belong and yet I don't anymore, in exile once more; I am not struggling with it though, it is what it is and I continue. They look at me as I walk with within them, and when their daily lives siren calls them to shift their gaze, I dissolve away, to be born all over again somewhere else, this voluntary exile, the ink of my soul.

And I am born again in the gaps of the cobblestones on Dana Street, between the walls of the dirty buildings, just like I did when I walked through Prague years ago; gaps where one can hide and cloak over, you can hear the sky sighing when footsteps of gypsy women whisper stories of angels (their wings cutting the air above your head) and your darkest heart which you know is true, because beyond the turn you see Marlene Dietrich under a single light sing a torch song for you and the life you can't have, raising her eyes at you as a breeze rolls over my shoulder, I am on my knees when she kisses me on the forehead gently, softly, sweetly, saying with a smile you are home at last.

But even at home, here in Maine, there is a burn of skin. It is a burn that erupts when I look at me and sometimes get incensed with God, incensed for that photograph that shows my brethren buried in concrete with their hands upward, or encased in burial cloth with a slight smile.

But He presses me against His chest, and the curve of the tear on His cheek reflects smoothly my dear wife in the doorway. And while she is in the doorway, I'm remembering what I heard about one of the nurses who went to Vietnam, recount: a guys best friend blew up right next to him; so he got a plastic garbage bag, collected all the pieces, brought it to her and walked back into the darkness.

The darkness that is the singular side street in Baghdad, where we war on ourselves using armored Humvees and back-packs laden with explosives and nails. Or the street in the suburbs of middle France, where the flame-throwers were launching the dreams of their ancestors. It is the darkness that bleeds.

In that bleeding is a deliverance. Take my word for it; dive into the waters of the Atlantic of the coast of Maine and as you are swimming into the uterus of America, and desire your grace, that humble nectar of divinity, you will find that

the answer lies in walking to your brother and saying, I forgive. The answer lies in walking to your sister and saying, I believe.

A very long time ago, in that Karachi of mine, I got teased and slapped for being of a lighter skin. Dive, ask, walk, forgive and believe.

A long time ago, in this America of mine, there were some who woke me up one day, slit my mattress, spit at me and pushed me around because I was not one of them. Dive, ask, walk, forgive and believe.

Take a seat, rest your feet, and ask, at what point do I raise my voice without hollering, look without glaring, touch without bruising?

Today. Now. Hold on to the blueness of the horizon over your shoulder.

The collapse of our souls is no longer imminent. Take my word for it.

## Listen to Abe

It must have been a messy walk on the streets of Washington D.C. on March 4, 1865. The air was probably damp, absent of any lingering promises that spring was at hand, and the clouds that had been around for weeks, made for a heavy morning.

But one has to walk, through the mud, the standing pools of water because there is a man who we all want to hear. Trust me, this is the man we all want to hear. Across the horizon of our shoulders, our brothers and fathers have evaporated, for a set of beliefs that binds all mortal humanity together, so we have to listen to this man who has not promised us anything.

He is at the East Portico of the Capital Building looking at what he wrote. Each alphabet is strung together in black ink, clear, strong, the cadence steady, forward moving, deliberate.

As you settle in to hear this man after Supreme Court Justice Salmon Chase administers the Presidential Oath, you see this tall man, gaunt, heaviness on his frame, his cheek bones dripping with melancholy get up and stand at the podium and the crowd, your crowd, roars, each roar coming across the ocean in waves of respite and understanding, each roar a breath of the nation exhaling for a rest. And from the corner of your eye, you see the clouds break.

As this man starts to speak, the sun floods forth and you know what is going to be said is meant to be said. To be remembered.

And if you were from Maine that day, you probably thought that Hannibal Hamlin was better off not being the Vice President. More deeply, you remembered that about two years ago as Joshua Chamberlain and the Twentieth Maine charged down the hills without ammunition, this man you are listening to was sitting at the desk, his head bowed, thinking how all this loss, guilt and sin would be reconciled on the doorstep of God.

I think of all of this as I remember all that I am caught in between. And all that I have seen and felt, I have tried to keep in my hands with all that I believe in. There is a time of day everyday when I know the imprint of my feet matter. Here in Maine. But it is not easy to admit that the imprint of my feet is not in my beloved city of Karachi or in the small village of Selcuk in Turkey where most of my mother's family resides.

So as the refrains of "whose side are you on" float in the reservoirs of our conversations, my footprints are those of a Muslim American, who is also Turkish and Pakistani. What our ancestors heard on March 4, 1865 is what we need to hear today. Reconstruction of what we have cleaved into two, rejection of triumphalism and the recognition of the madness of inequity.

What is carved on those walls of the Memorial are words we need to touch, trace out on piece of paper, fold it into our pockets and know that every time the mallet went in to carve the words, the stone gave away because it was the only way to heal.

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

And as we all swirl in our own worlds, as we all continue to eat hate and digest the bullets of the world, know that the clause "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan" is the mission statement of the US Veterans Administration. War in the past begat the balm for the survivors of the war of today; the survivors are you and me.

Using that balm, we have to find our own way and I am not sure how much we will find at the end of the day. There are no guarantees. Emancipation from the chains of ignorance is what we seek. And I, for one, am not taking sides.

# Playing cricket for Yelda

I grew up playing on the streets of Karachi. Streets where the asphalt was cracked like the dry skin of the desert and the sun beat down with kisses and promises of the freedom to believe that the world would not forget our names. I know it sounds impossible but when we played the world did not rotate about its axis. With our cricket bats, field hockey sticks, soccer balls we rotated towards the possibility of futures unimagined. And we sang songs.

The songs we sang were mostly love songs written by those whose unrequited love had burnt the inside of their palms as they held the dream that was never meant to be. But what did we know? We got to live out the songs, make fun of each other and escalate our own desires. And once in the month of December, close to December 25<sup>th</sup>, there was a convergence. The one that makes the heart of a 13 year old boy beat for the first time.

The sun was shining and there was a faint hint of a cool breeze coming off from the Arabian sea. We were playing cricket on a dirt field, and I hit the ball hard for a couple of runs. The ball bounced and went into the apartment compound that was at end of the field. Unspoken rule was that whoever hit the ball beyond the fielded area retrieved it, and so I went. As I leapt over the wall, I saw her, you know, her. She was holding the ball, wondering where it had come from.

She asks me my name. She tells me hers, Yelda. She asks me where I live and which school I go to. She tells me that she goes to the American School and that they were learning Christmas songs. I tell her that I was in the choir and that we were singing "Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer" on top of our lungs too, as our principal Mrs. Fernandez had suggested, in order to "bring forth the joy of Christmas loudly and proudly."

So I am standing in front of my first crush (how it comes so suddenly) and we talk for a couple of minutes about the oncoming Christmas holidays. I hear my friends hollering for the ball and she gives me the ball and our fingers touch. The heart implodes (doesn't it always). And before I jump back over the wall, I tell her, she has a nice voice (the remembrance of things past).

As I run back to my friends, I realize I am playing cricket on days when in the morning at school I am singing songs about lands that have snow, cold winds and an imaginary man in a red suit.

For a couple of weeks, I tried hitting the ball back to where the heart desired, to no success (what was once is now no more). And she never came to watch us (the recipients of unrequited love never do). I soldiered on.

So time rotates and I find myself playing kickball with my son on a December weekend here in Maine, where the sun is shining bright and we are just wearing

our t-shirts. And the grass is green, soft under our feet and my son is asking me if Santa is going to get confused because there is no snow on the ground.

I tell him that Santa and his reindeer don't get confused too easily, that he will definitely stop by our house, and I am thinking to myself many years ago, in the first grade, to this day, I remember singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" courtesy of being in a British school in the middle of Karachi. Hollering, lined up in the front of the class, cut-out posters of Santa on his sleigh on and the word "Merry Christmas" painted in bright red on the walls.

A Turkish boy in the middle of Pakistan singing songs for a day when the real Saint Nicholas in Anatolia a long time ago dedicated his life to serving the poor. I am singing songs for a day when the man from Galilee came to tell us that our capacity to love and forgive is a desire that propels us to a grace for a humbled heart on a bended knee. A Turkish boy in Maine who played cricket on sunny days in December a long time ago.

# He died earlier this year

My mother in the middle of a conversation, said, "Anwar, died earlier this year." Her lips quivered and she whispered, "I was so sad, I was so sad." She said this while I was taking her to the airport, after she had spent three weeks visiting us. She said this and it took all of my strength to keep my right hand on the gearshift, my left hand grasping the steering wheel and my foot gently pressed on the accelerator. And in the back of the car, my son Kemal, asked me, "Who is Anwar?"

Anwar was the sweeper of the apartment compound where I grew up, where I almost became a man. He swept the stairs, the hallways, parts of the parking lot and upon invitation the apartments themselves, all with a bundled straw sweeper. He was in his early twenties when he started in our compound and for ten to twelve hours a day that is all he did. He did it to the day he died; he died with his son beside him. His son, whom he took out of school because he could not afford the payments, is also a sweeper.

I remember giving him cold water from our refrigerator on those hot days when Anwar was drenched in sweat. In Karachi, in the summers, it comfortably gets above 110 Fahrenheit in the shade. I remember holding that cold cup in my hand, giving it to him and him telling me how thankful he was to have cold water on such a hot day. And then I used to go back inside and get him another one because he was too proud to ask for another one himself.

When we used to play cricket in the hallways, he used to ask us if he could sweep up the floors, so that it would be a little cleaner for us to run around in. When we played field hockey in the parking lot, he would come and sweep in place where the dust and dirt had accumulated; he used to say, we deserved better.

On the days when the stench of the garbage mound that was right outside the apartment compound wall was too much too bear, Anwar would walk right up to it, flies buzzing around his head and fill up plastic bags, so that on the far chance the municipal collectors came by in their truck, they would pick it up, instead of just driving by.

In a country where surviving to make a living is an art form and the ethics and morals of what is permissible in order to feed your family dissolves in the daylight, Anwar was incorruptible. When every couple of weeks, my mother needed him to come to the apartment to help her clean up, Anwar would come and carefully do what was requested, without supervision. He used to tell my mother, he enjoyed working with her because he was kind to her. And years later, he used to ask her, as he swept the floors, "How is Kerem in America?"

There were days when my mother called me up and asked me to wire a small amount because Anwar or his friends (Saifullah and Nazir, both door attendants to the compound entrance) needed glasses, or medicine for their coughs, or socks and shoes for their blistered feet, or clothes because what they had to wear was thread-bare. And they always asked her, "Is Kerem a big man in America?"

So, as I am driving my mother to Boston just going by the Wells exit, she puts her hand in on my neck, and she tells me how they are grateful to us. And I say to her in a combination of Turkish and Urdu that our lives are graced by theirs. What else can I say? I don't look at my mother, because if I do, I know I am going to cry and drive right off of I-95.

On the way back from the airport, my son and I stopped at a fast food restaurant. In the rest room after we washed our hands, he threw the paper towel and missed the bin; there were many others who had missed. Together we cleaned it all up.

I led my son to the table, with my hands on his strong and young neck. And I requested for all the goodness in the world to melt at the feet of Anwar. What else could I say?

## **Architecture in Maine**

We are our being where we live. We become our destinies when we construct our dwelling. We enable love and passion when we chose to architect our own physical space. And on those days when everything we wish for intersects with what is possible, and that sun ray from the tips of the trees lands with a kiss on our skins, you know the house you live in has a deliciousness that makes life worthwhile.

You see, my father was an architect. Most of his life's work is in Pakistan. When I was growing up he used to tell me that architecture was like a novel; one with its internal music and a progressive story that one writes for herself and hopes (hopes against hope) that it means something for the other. He used to tell me that as part of his final examinations in college at the Istanbul Technical University, he had to do calculations for the dome of the Sulemaniye Mosque (a work of subtle magnificence built in 1551-1558) in Istanbul, designed by Sinan. He was smart enough to figure it out; confident enough that when he told me the story he always had a gentle smile on his lips.

And like Sinan, he had his own team. With the exception of two years, he spent his professional life on his own terms. Barely able to talk in Urdu, for thirty years he was with his Pakistani colleagues at the forefront of designing buildings and houses that were not just spaces to work or live, but a haven of the relationship of the real and the unreal; of what mattered and what would matter. That still point in a turning world where the light bounces of walls and comforts ones secrets. Everything he designed still stands; dirty and grimy part of the everyday taste of Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan.

So, months ago when I found out that Louis Kahn, one of the premier architects of modern architecture in the U.S, had a connection to Maine, I felt the brush of my father's hand over my neck. Kahn is known for his grace and eternal rush of clarity and deliberation in his design of the Salk Institute building in La Jolla, California, or the design of his masterpiece of subtlety, movement and invigoration of the National Assembly building in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is the man Philip Johnson referred to as the "authentic one" designed the elemental Exeter Library in Exeter New Hampshire. Or as I heard one say, Kahn designed for permanence, with an effort to capture the godliness of humanity. And he was connected to Maine.

One of Kahn's loves, Harriet Pattison, who is credited with introducing nature and landscapes to his designs, lives in Maine. Kahn, ever the emotional (and physical) wanderer visited Maine rarely even as their relationship resulted in a son. In 1974, Kahn died alone, suddenly at the age of 73 in New York's Pennsylvania Station.

And that is where I start to think, as Dylan sings "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall" (And I stand on the ocean until I start sinking/I know my song before I start singing) in the background that one day I have to design and build a house with my wife that honors what architecture is: the creation of silence that is loud enough to matter for all.

My father died alone when the bus he was on flew into eternity off a cliff. I have only one regret in life: I was not there to pick him up and bury him. And when that regret arises, I remind myself he took my mother to Dhaka, Bangladesh on a honeymoon, something which to this day, my mother still says, was so gloriously beautiful.

My mother has my father's sketches and parts and pieces of his unfinished plans. All are defined by his clean focus on clarity that promises to arrive at a state of grace. And so, my father's son, with his own sensibilities and biases, in his own way wants, capabilities and resources permitting, to arrive at the promised land where design and life will verbalize and become tangible to a state of grace.

Where the land melts into the ocean. Where the blueness of the sky gets lost in the water. Where I married my wife and had my kids. Here in Maine.

## **Coming to the United States of America**

I wasn't reborn at Ellis Island. I arrived without an umbilical cord at JFK International airport; that behemoth of a cavern where others, my compatriots, were reborn with me. I see snow for the first time.

There is a camel hair coat on me; hideously brown, smelly and marginally warm. I have no gloves. In both hands two used and old pieces of luggage my mother had gotten for me; under my arm my father's old briefcase. And on my legs and feet, trousers and shoes that belonged to someone else. Under my ribcage, thumping fear.

Good thing for being educated in a British school because the signs made sense and I was in the customs line for the next three hours. Throngs of people waiting, worrying, dreaming, looking around, like me. A handful of questions from the passport officer and I was through making my way to the American Airlines desk for my connecting flight to Minneapolis.

The gentle looking man asks me, how much money do I have? I say, one hundred dollars. He says, hang on to it well. He also says, do you know you have to go to Newark in the next hours? I say, I can catch a bus. He says, son there are no buses. So, I say, I will take the train. He says, son, there are no trains that can take me there that fast. I say, then what do I do? He says, do you have a place to stay in New York? I say, I am alone. He says, then I will take care of you.

He tells me that he will issue new tickets from JFK to Minneapolis for me early morning (7:30 am) and that the hotel voucher will get me a room and a meal at the hotel in Manhattan. I ask him if I should take a cab and he tells me to save my money and take the hotel shuttle. As I step out, it is the first time my skin and lungs have been exposed to 10 degree Fahrenheit. I cry.

As I get on the hotel shuttle I see the lights of New York. So many lights. In half an hour I step through the door of the hotel, walk up to the desk and ask to be checked in. The man looks at me and says, rudely, I don't think someone like you has a reservation in an establishment like ours. I present the voucher. He curls his mouth, punches a few keys, and gives me my keys. I got to my room; on the desk there I see a little sign, "Welcome to the Four Seasons".

I have not eaten in a day. I go down to find the restaurant but see that it is closed. I find a vending machine but don't have any change on me. And I don't know how to get change. I look in the hallway mirror and know that I am not going to get change from the desk. So, I go up to my room and feast on the complimentary pretzels.

I sit on the bed and sink into it. Different than the wooden slat bed with the quarter inch thick mattress I grew up on.

I go to the bathroom and on the sink see a hot and cold faucet. Hot water from a faucet?

I can't work the alarm clock. I am scared that I will miss the shuttle tomorrow (leaves every half hour starting at 4 am). So, I decide to stay up through the night. I turn on the television. My eyes for the first time see more than one channel. One has the Three Stooges marathon. I watch that all night.

I get on the shuttle, make it to the flight and get to Minneapolis and my birth is complete. The Benedictine monks swaddle me and destinies get re-arranged. I become a forefather of the late 21<sup>st</sup> early 22<sup>nd</sup> century America.

The national anthem stays in English. Teach us Spanish and learn English, as we try to make sense of what this country may mean to all us. There is a way to compromise on how to earn the right to become a citizen.

The rotation of the earth is due to how all of us, run from one place to another. This search. This re-birth.

## **Swallow**

I saw the building swallow the plane; like a white whale swallowing Jonah. Right there on live T.V., you could see the sun glint off of each one of the billions of shards of glass. And I kept saying to myself, finally the bloodbath has come to the shores of my adopted home.

There is a fabric to our lives; some of it invisible and some of it thread by ourselves. And for us, on that day when we burned in the hot plasma of grief, and our hearts broke and broke and broke, the fabric tore. For me there was an overwhelming sense of stoppage; the stoppage of thought because what is there left to think after 2834 souls evaporate in front of you?

We all grieve in different ways; the evaporation of souls resulted for me in remembering that my fathers' first name was Mehmet. Mehmet is the Turkish version of Mohammed. And so as NBC, ABC, CBS and CNN's photon images were bombarding my retinas, I kept thinking that the person who led one of the teams of men to kill, one who had stayed here in Maine, had the same name as my father. And that name is the name of our prophet, what I and my brethren, believe to be the man who like those before him, received the grace and revelation of a divinity that is all ours to share and commit to.

And as I grieved, I remember, how with my father, I used to go to prayers on the special days, like the end of the fast month. He and I used to wear our crisp white shirts and new trousers and go to a ground in the middle of Karachi called Polo Ground; long ago the British used to play polo there. So, here at Polo Ground, together with 200,000 souls, my father and I used to kneel on our knees, touch our foreheads on the mat, and repeat words that requested the guidance for a path of meaning and belonging, to our God, to our fellow people. And after we were done with prayers, I used to kiss my father's hand and kiss his cheeks. And then we turned around and embraced those around us who prayed with us.

There are some who defile that tradition. And those some are from my birth womb.

It would easy for me to tell you that the reasons for why these men and women are unable to let go of their hate is singularly anchored in their belief regarding the onslaught of Western foreign policy. It is easy to scream about how Palestinians became refugees, the refugees melted under the bullets shot and manufactured by the occupiers, and memories etch like acid on skin depending on who you are. And the redress never takes place. Think Lebanon. Afghanistan. Bosnia. Chechnya. Iraq.

It would also be easy for me to tell you that the ability to freely express oneself without the despots' boot on your throat is a right belief for humanity. And that, there is a moral imperative for us to act when barbarity becomes the precursor to

inhumanity; such progressive thought is a rebirth of our past for a relevant future. I am a product of the Renaissance from continental Europe; so are you.

But what is hard for me to say is that I and you are complicit for today's blood. It is hard because we want to move in a blaze of speed without actually being vulnerable enough to sit down and cry with the mother who holds her daughter, who is no more, because a piece of shrapnel found its destiny at the expense of innocence. It is hard because we are fearful of being weak and taken advantage of. It is hard because bold statements breathe confidence even though all of us are lying and harboring secrets. It is hard because it is easier to wage war, then it is to wage peace.

So, as our mothers and fathers and children sing songs of lament and grace for our hearts that broke on the sacred ground in the middle of New York City, what I am asking from myself is the ability to turn my head as the sun breaks over my shoulder and desire and want and demand courage.

The courage to see the day through. The courage to hold on to you. The courage to seek what is true.

## **Shalom**

Kerem Shalom is a kibbutz and border crossing near the Gaza-Israel-Egyptian border. The Kerem Shalom border crossing is used to bring cargo from Egypt into Gaza. And it is has been used for the delivery of humanitarian supplies from Egypt. Pallets arriving on trucks from Egypt are offloaded in Kerem Shalom and Palestinian trucks carry the pallets into Gaza.

European monitors used the Kerem Shalom crossing to get to the Rafah crossing. Therefore, when Kerem Shalom is closed due to security reasons, the Rafah crossing must also close. And when it does, the misery index climbs a notch or two higher.

You and I don't know that misery. Never will. It is a misery that is born from a mental and cultural occupation, that bleeds hate onto the granular mud, splatters onto the walls that hide nothing, and ends in the screams of the girl that was raped and burnt to ashes by a deranged soldier in Iraq.

It is a continuum across tribes.

And part of that continuum whispers here between all of us. I have a friend Shalom here in South Portland, an Israeli, long time ago was in the Israeli Merchant Marine Navy, loves to fly and because he is a very tall guy has tough time being comfortable in regular cars. Every once in a while he will ask me to talk to my Muslim brethren in the Middle East and see if they will reason to dialogue. I say, I will try.

In my mind I am thinking, would I talk to me, if tanks ripped through my living room and mothers were left barren of their dreams? Borders and memories blur.

And the madness there has no more borders. The occupier is occupied in a cage of fear and self-preservation and the occupied has got nothing more to lose, so they strap on the explosives and launch pieces of themselves in a final vomit of destruction and futility.

Kerem Shalom; think of it that one of the oldest kibbutz's in Israel has the trail the leads to my name and that of my friend. My name in Hebrew means wine yard; the dream of imbibing in the sweetness of peace does not escape me on some days. Then there are days when exhalation of martyrdom is not understood by me; martyrdom in the name of this wanton and mistaken Jihad where twelve year old boys are recruited with promises that are delivered by the breath of evil. Yes, it is evil; it is evil because this jihadi martyrdom is not a prelude to divine forgiveness and the ignorance that births is not of my culture, of my history and of my countries.

Countries... the idea of nation-state dissolving ever more into what was before; borders that were vibrant and alive and meant something. Something. Anything.

But on June 25 of this year Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured by Palestinian militants near Kerem Shalom after the militants crossed the border from Gaza into Israel via a tunnel. Two Israel Defense Force soldiers were killed and three others wounded, in addition to Shalit. In response to this, IDF entered the Gaza Strip as part of the Operation Summer Rains on June 28<sup>th</sup>. And it rained bombs and mortars and bullets across a border that bled again.

About two weeks later the Hezbollah itching to gain relevance for themselves, for their masters, ignite the Katyusha rockets and their AK-47 gun barrels and burn up the sanctity of self-determination; they burn because they want to be heard above the din and clamor of inter-religious righteousness. And Beirut, from where I used to get shiny toys long ago, what my mother remembers as the Paris of the Middle East, burns again and again.

When things burn, what we put up, comes down in a landslide of debris and crackling embers. We look straight ahead and get angry and as the call for the prayers comes over our shoulders, there are some like me who point to the Hezbollah, the Hamas, the jihadis and say to them, "You are not my brother. You are hate. You die for nothing. You kill for a God who no longer belongs to you. You live for a dream that is dust."

So my friend Shalom, I have spoken again. And, I will try again.

## Praying at the wall

There is something holy about the Vietnam Memorial for me. The air coalesces right to the intersection of prayers of the runways black granite slabs, and you can clearly hear the names whispered.

I grew up with photographs of Vietnam in Life magazine; and in my childhood I lived in the days when the Russians went to Afghanistan and sowed the human desolation of today; their Vietnam. 4 million refugees streaming into Karachi unearthed from sanity; 4 million madnesses descending on lives that were already burdened with the yoke of unanswered prayers. Refugees who without asking, without agreeing, without giving up their basic rights to be human beings, were reduced to what refugees are always reduced to: forgetfulness.

When I went to Washington in the March of 1989 to help out in a homeless shelter for a couple of weeks, I wanted to visit the Memorial. I went there late in the afternoon and as soon as was in the grounds of the Memorial, I knew it was holy. I remembered Psalm 23 and recited, "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want."

As I got on my knees and touched a name, I said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou are with me; they rod and they staff they comfort me." And in those moments, there was a private request for grace.

I got back to the shelter around 10 pm. A ham dinner had been served and a crew was washing down the kitchen. I volunteered. When I was doing the dishes, one of the homeless men came and asked me for a utensil. I washed him one and handed it over. He said, "Son, didn't you say in your introduction to the home, that you were a Muslim?"

I said, "Yes." He said, "Son, isn't the meat of the pig unholy to you?" I said, "Yes." He asked, "Then why?" I said, "Sir, because it is the humble thing to do."

So we got chatting. He had seen me at the Memorial. He was a Vietnam vet who went there everyday; his favorite words to his colleagues was Psalm 23. And at 4 am in the morning, as our conversation winded down, he held my hand together we said, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

I went to the Memorial several more times, every time in the late afternoon and every time in the silence that only belongs to you, I asked for things, I did not receive.

And today, I find myself asking for things that I want to receive. I want to receive a voice so I can sing the Pentecostal spiritual that goes, "O Mary don't weep, don't mourn/ Pharaoh's army got drownded/ O Mary don't weep" to those who melt away from us because we kill and get killed.

I want to receive two strong hands so I can hold the faces of my brethren as I look at them and tell them the jihadists are wrong, our self inflicted ignorance of our own culture is wrong, the hatred for the West is hypocritical and even worse makes for amazing lousy political policy, and the poverty and destitution of our past eats us from the inside as the bile from ethnic and tribal demarcation being erased from colonial re-mapping leaves us with an empty shell of nationhood. To tell them this again, and again, without my hands or my voice tiring.

I want to receive a revolution of thought so that when the talking heads move their lips on about terror and rights and heroes and freedom and stability and values, I can communicate to them that when one shames the other for the sake of power, we are no longer able to shoulder each other; that the rot of our arrogance will claim our children.

I want to receive some secrets that I asked for in the March of 1989. I want to receive, the grace of "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." This grace against the war of forgetfulness. This grace for the sun to light our darkness.

Tell me, how much more do you and I have to ask, nay, demand, to receive? How much more?

### My way

I heard Paul Anka's spoken to me when I was about seven or eight. My mother and father were listening to a Connie Francis cassette recording and my mother said that as much as she liked Connie Francis, she still preferred Paul Anka. She said to me, "There is no one like Paul Anka." To which, I remember, my father replied, "Sinatra is the best. He unlocks all the secrets." And he said no more that night.

Couple of days passed and I asked my mother about Paul Anka. Apparently, when she was a young university student in Ankara and was being courted by my father, Paul Anka ballads were the rage in Turkey. And with a slight secret smile she said, "Anka's song "My Way" was my favorite."

Couple of years later, my father asked me what I kind of music I liked. Upon hearing my ignorance of Sinatra, he suggested I get one of his "old ones" and learn what "real singing" is all about. Especially, "My Way". I proceeded to promptly forget.

So, when I was at Saint John's University, late one night flipping channels in the student lounge, I came upon a station that was showing a Sinatra concert. It was at the MGM Grand, and there on the stage, there is Sinatra, a little pudgy, a little weathered, that swagger still there, and he starts singing, "And now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain". Brave words; got my attention and the song starts to seep in quietly.

The camera swirls, and with Sinatra looking to a point beyond the shoulders of the audience sings, "And more, much more than this, I did it my way." Clouds parted, God appears, revelations are revealed, and I became a disciple.

For years, as I collected Sinatra songs, I searched for the live version of "My Way" (found it last year). In the course of my journey, I came across the Anka version (my father was right, Sinatra is the best). In fact last year, when my mother visited us she asked me to get her an Anka CD with "My Way" on it. Both of us listened to it together, clearly she was world away while listening (cigarette in her mouth, a soft smile, constantly looking at her ring finger) and at the end of which she said, "There is something about that song."

Something is right. "Regrets, I've had a few; but then again, too few to mention." True words and the syllables gel into secrets.

And those words that stick in my throat that I am not brave enough to verbalize. "I've loved, I've laughed and cried. I've had my fill; my share of losing." The song starts becoming yours.

As the gear shifts, "And now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing." I always think to when this song becomes the anthem of what I long for: that silent space when I understand I live for tomorrow.

And when I get what I long for, I play Elvis Presley's version of "My Way", which is transcendent. I remember looking for it and finding it, and when I played it, I cried (still do).

Trust me, it is transcendent. When Elvis sings, "For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught." you know, he is singing for his own redemption. And you are his witness. A witness to him. A witness to his voice.

"To say the things he truly feels; and not the words of one who kneels." Elvis is singing to you, exhorting you to ask for your remembrances. He is a witness to you. To your secrets.

And it all whorls into, "The record shows I took the blows - and did it my way!" as you arrive at the end of your journey from your birth to your present.

So, as the chattering pundits talk about the clash of civilizations, take it from someone who was born and raised 10,000 miles from here, and ended up in the state where there is a plague to Presley's memory at the Augusta Civic Center for the last concert he never made it to, and married to my soul-mate who thinks Sinatra and the song are "cheese-ball", listening to "My Way" holds the key to unlocking all the secrets we bleed.



# IREALT

