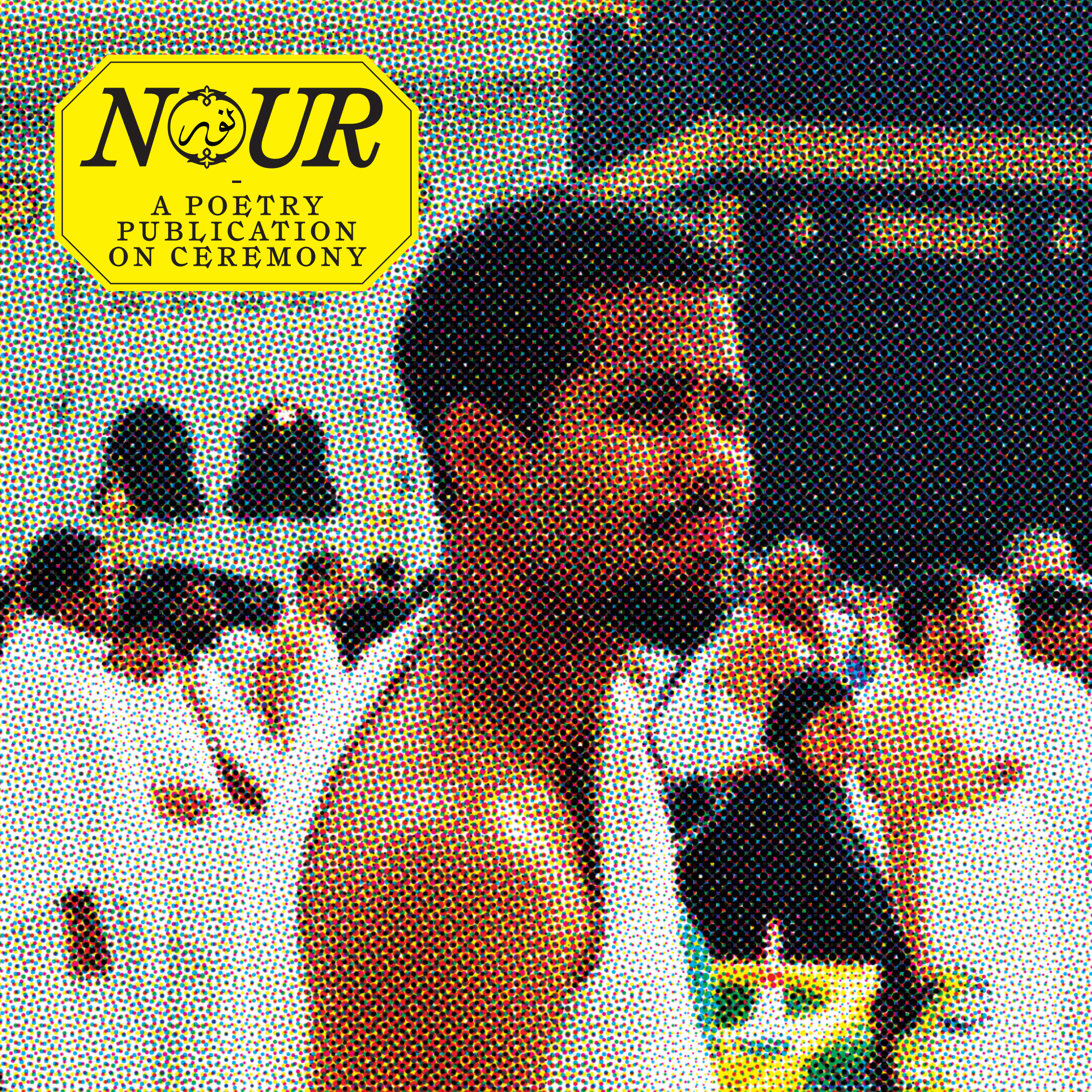
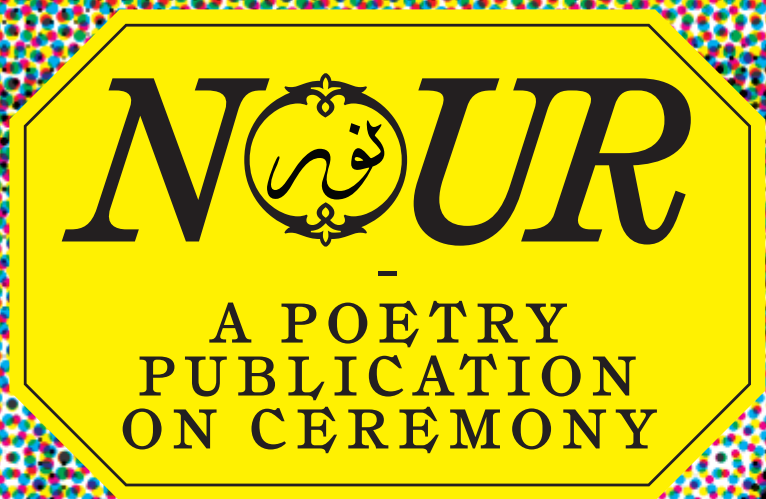




سورة

الاحقاف

With this prayer.

O A l l a h ,

place light in my heart, and on my tongue light, and in my ears light and in my sight light, and above me light, and below me light, and to my right light, and to my left light, and before me light and behind me light. Place in my soul light. Magnify for me light, and amplify for me light. Make for me light, and make me light. O Allah, grant me light, and place light in my nerves, and in my body light and in my blood light and in my hair light and in my skin light.

[O Allah, make for me a light in my grave... and a light in my bones]

Increase me in light,
Increase me in light,
Increase me in light.

Grant me light upon light.

Prophet
Muhammad

[PBUH] ﷺ

I remember being 10, racing through an intimate alleyway with two other boys, all of us small planets in a big hood. We stumbled into a backyard and heard Nas for the first time through a dirty window: "Hope your funeral never gets shot up, bullets tear through the innocent." Lyrics like shrapnel. Soon, Nas' hope would become for us a prophecy. Soon every funeral, and speech, and sleep would be interrupted. We'd spell loss in every language without knowing ceremony in even one.

What ceremony can be found where the ash covers everything? What ceremony can be held in a mass grave? In a country undressed? This house on fire, the bridge on fire, these pages on fire. The fire stole everything and still became my only memory of light. The fire illuminated the world around me.

Time is an animal but I've always believed I could step outside of it. Into that backyard, into a poem, into someone's heart. The first ceremony was robbed from me, but I've always believed it could be repeated. As long as there's a question in the throat and a light in the sky, even if that light comes from fire, even if the sky is the only audience, watching from the stage.

-
Mustafa

NOUR
-
A POETRY
PUBLICATION
ON CEREMONY

مُصْطَفَى

BY MUSTAFA
AND WEPRESENT

When we hear the word ceremony
it can be tempting to think
of the big ones.

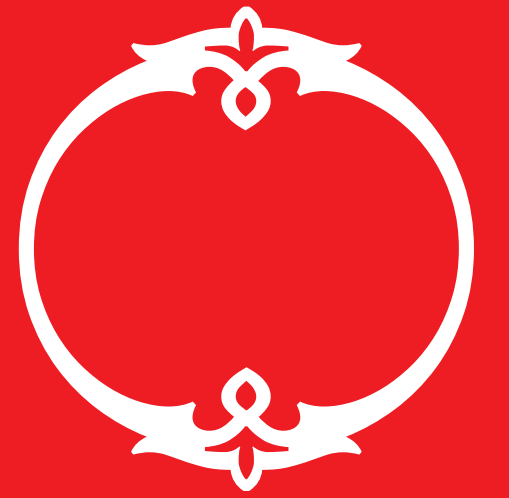
A baptism.
A wedding.
A funeral.
A pilgrimage.
A festival.
A coronation.

But is the real beauty and
universal ceremony not in
the smaller, daily rituals
we perform? There are tiny,
majestic instances of this
peppered throughout the poems
in this publication: watching
football on TV with a friend;
smoking at sunrise; a solitary
moment on the Overground; the
comfort of pulling on a loved
one's hoodie; listening to
Nina Simone in the car.

Without religion I sometimes
feel untethered. No mosque to
go to. No choir to stand and
sing with on Sunday mornings. I
take comfort in understanding
that ceremony and light
stretch beyond faith: they are
to be found in dusty corners
of the everyday. Sometimes
you just need poets to give
you a nudge in the ribs to
remind you.

—
Liv Siddall,
Senior Editor,
WePresent

MUSTAFA
AND



GEORGE SAUNDERS
DISCUSSES MATTERS
OF THE SOUL
PART 1 - P.14 - 23

When Mustafa was asked who his dream interviewee would be for this publication, he uttered George Saunders’ name without hesitation. Mustafa has spent years pressing Saunders’ books into the hands of friends, family and collaborators. By the end of their conversation, they were friends arranging to meet in LA.

Here, Mustafa speaks to his all-time hero—the multi-award winning author of some of the most crucial, complex and brilliant stories for decades—about grief, pain, love and masculinity, and the beauty to be found in writing, writing, writing it all away.

The dream is
mine,
man,

I’m
in it.

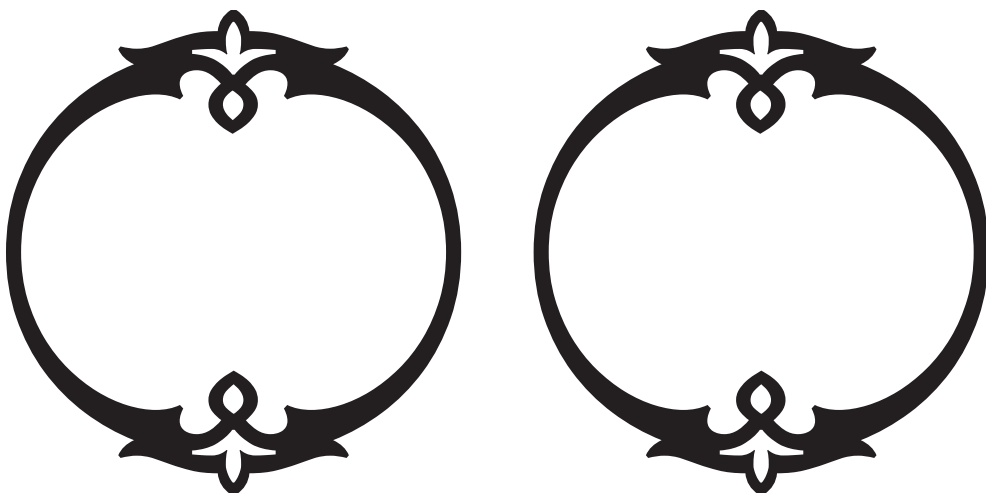
Mustafa

I just want to say, man, your work has been a compass for me. I’ve referenced it so much that it’s actually become a part of my vernacular. I took “Tenth of December” with me to the corners of the earth, to Nubia, where I’m from in Aswan, a little village in Egypt. I would try to translate stories in Arabic to my little cousins and they could just draw parallels to what those diaries feel like in their little town, off the coast of the Nile River. I have taken every possibility to build a kingdom out of the thing that you have given to us. Every day I recommend your work to someone new. I have friend groups constructed around “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain.”

One time I was going to a pond with an artist, and I took a book with me to give him as a gift. And on my way to the pond, it began to rain uncontrollably. And I didn’t realize until I was giving him the book that it was “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain.” I was trying to learn how to swim with him. And then in exchange he gave me “Grief is the Thing with Feathers.”

George Saunders

It’s amazing to get to a point where you feel like you’ve touched somebody like you, to have another artist who receives you. When I listen to your music, I can feel there’s something in common—a way of seeing things. So I’m so pleased to have met you like this, and thank you for all of that. It’s a dream.



M

The dream is mine, man. I’m in it.

G

So you just said all those nice things about me and that we’ve had that connection, and I’m struck more and more, the deeper I get into my work, by the difference between this guy, and the one that you know. And also the one that I know by becoming that person. That magic of that process where you wake up and you’re like, “Oh shit, I’m still myself and I’m still judgmental, and limited, and competitive.” And then you start working and suddenly that person recedes a little bit, and this other kind of more admirable person comes to be. And what amazes me is that it isn’t by willpower. It’s by craft. It’s looking at these pages that I wrote yesterday and just going through them and going, “That’s a little bullshit. That’s beautiful.” And then somehow that better person appears on the page just by sweat really. But I’m so grateful for that because what I found is that as one gets older, and I’m 66 this year, the habit energy doesn’t really give up. In fact, it gets reinforced. So you’re in more of a trap, the trap of self. But that one outlet of art is a way to get free of that a little bit. Almost like somebody coming up for air. “Oh God, I’m connected to the eternal; oh shit, I’m me again.” When you’re composing, is there an uplift like that where an idea comes to you that doesn’t seem to be connected to everyday you?

M

Absolutely. Every single time I try to communicate a violence, there’s something that comes out, and it becomes a softness that I don’t think I even practice in everyday life. There’s something about the writing that became a ceremony for me that was robbed of me in my actual life. I always talk about how the writing was like the soundtrack to my drive back home from a funeral, because there was just no kind of sonic arrangement for the drive back from a funeral where someone was murdered, and there was an investigation, and there’s a policing system, and there is media.

And I’m like, “Well, who’s writing songs exploring the aftermath of this feeling?” And I realized the process keeps getting interrogated by different systems that weren’t recognizing me in my fullness. So then, the artistic process became this kind of ceremonial path where there was no interruption. Where I could seek refuge in it without there being any kind of oppressive structure that would take from that.

So in a lot of ways, I was also becoming an individual that I couldn’t become, in real time anyway. So then I was struggling with the person I was in my artistic practice that I never felt I had access to in my actual world. I just don’t have access to that same patience outside of a record or outside of this four-part harmony. So the studio, or the process, was the only place where I could be my higher self maybe.

G

That’s so beautiful. I love that. And I was thinking when you were mentioning leaving the funeral and there being no sonic... That makes me think that, OK, so if we think in those concepts, as you said, they’re dispatches from oppressive systems.

M

Yes.

G

So how do you get clear of that? I’m a Buddhist and we say Buddha nature; if you get rid of all the obstacles and the obstructions, Buddha nature comes through. It sounds like we share the idea that the artistic practice is somehow getting clear of the simplistic, reductive ways of looking that we just inherit, they’re in the oxygen and we don’t know it. So sometimes we find ourselves speaking in those codes, but that always leaves a person feeling incomplete.

M

Yeah.

G

I remember one time, I had a very dear family member who died young in a car accident, and this was in Amarillo, Texas, and speaking also of ceremony and the absence of ceremony... It was really unimaginable, just shocking.

M

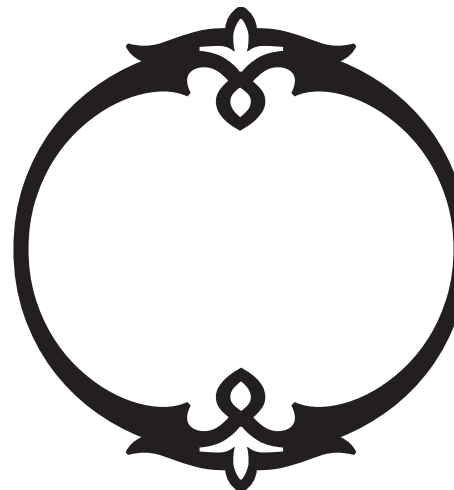
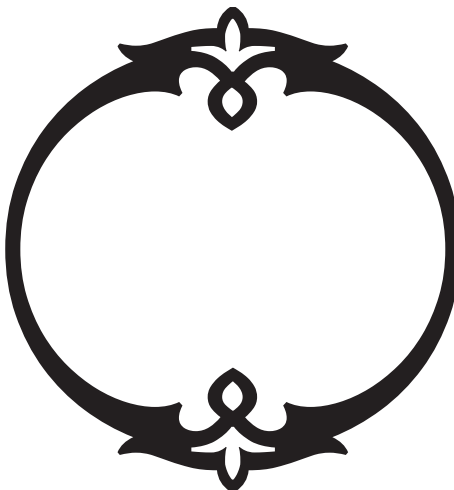
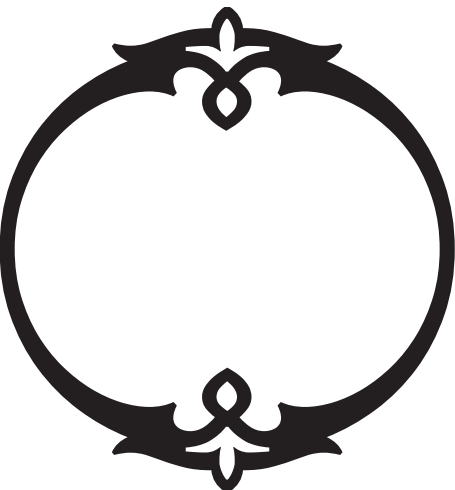
I'm so sorry, man.

G

So we leave the funeral and it's in this area where the strip malls are, so we're out front in that kind of trying to say something, and across the street, there's a Chuck E. Cheese pizza place, and the guy walks out in the rat suit—or whatever he is, that costume. And I just thought, talk about not having a sonic equivalent. So my thing was, what does a story about that sound like? It doesn't sound like Chekhov, I don't think, or it doesn't sound like Hemingway. The event was as eternal and heartbreaking and tragic as anything in Shakespeare, but the accouterments were ours. So that's kind of like, "Oh, how do I get that feeling?"

M

Is there a ceremonial practice that you have in Buddhism that you enter regularly?



I l o v e t h a t
i d e a t h a t
a r t

i s t h e
p r a c t i c e
o f

i m a g i n i n g
t h e
o t h e r

a s

b e i n g
i d e n t i c a l
t o

y o u .

G

I was a Catholic as a kid, and the mass was very much like that. And then we practiced Tibetan Buddhism, and right now I'm in a kind of a lax period where I just talk about it, but when we were more intense, there was a three-hour puja. And it's a lot like a mass, actually; there's a lot of visualization. There's a feasting component, too, but it's an offering. So, very similar to the Catholic masses of my youth. And I think I was meditating then, without knowing it, because I was bored as a kid and I was just sitting. But I often thought too—and I guess this goes back to this idea of becoming your better self—that when I was a kid in Catholic mass, that better self would appear, I think just from exhaustion really. You'd be sitting there thinking about Jesus or whatever, and then you go back to your life and you go back to yourself, but you retain the memory of that slight flare-up.

So to me, that's the sacrament or ceremony; it's about reminding yourself that this you isn't all there is. So you go in there and maybe there's a three-hour meditation, and for a few seconds, you get a little glimpse of, "Oh yeah, I have God in me." And then you go back and maybe you don't have God apparent in you then, but you have the memory of it. And that maybe is something that I cling to a little bit. But I'm finishing a book now, so that's all I'm doing. And I'm slothful in every other way, not working out, eating badly, not meditating.

M

No, bro, honestly, whatever necessary to get the book completed. I think even in reading "Lincoln in the Bardo," so much of it feels ceremonial as well. I find myself reading pages of it to kids in the hood because it's so particular that it's for everyone. And I think because you've developed your own language, and your own universe, it's like it's a universe that we all have access to and we all have equal right to enter.

G

Yes.

M

You've democratized the entry to your universe but with its specificity. And in a lot of ways it means what someone could pull from it is also equal.

G

The essential artistic thing is me imagining you on the other end of the process as generously as I can. No presumptions, no pandering, no condescending. And, of course, it's crazy because who am I imagining? Well, I'm really imagining me. I'm imagining me reading it tomorrow, but in my best state. So I love that idea that art is the practice of imagining the other as being identical to you. So then you can't leave anybody out, because you're looking at the fundamental cells of experience, like humiliation, loss, defeat, longing, guilt, and then the assumption is everybody has that. And some of us suppress it and some of us engage with it. Sure, of course, like in 16th Century Sweden, humiliation looked different. It sounded different, it happened to different people. But when you dig down, that core of humiliation is universal. So for me, I want to get back to the place where I'm speaking to everybody about those core things that everybody has got. And it's hard to do it on an everyday basis, because we're habituated. And also we've got so much of our own experience draped over us, so to make up a language is a way to divert those oppressive concepts we talked about earlier. You make up a language and suddenly you're less habituated, if that makes sense.

M

Absolutely, man. Yeah.

G

That must be true for a musical language, too, though.

M Yeah. Absolutely. I songwrite a lot. And I take great pride in writing songs for other people. And so much of songwriting for other people is about helping them realize their own sovereignty, and their own agency, and just trying to bring as many tools as possible for them to construct the story. Every time I work with an artist, I make them read “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain” because there’s something about the way that you constructed the book; it doesn’t feel didactic or self-indulgent at all. And you’re presenting these stories that are not even your own, and you’re pulling from another period, and you’re surrendering to that story before us. And we get to bear witness to your relationship with a story when you already have an individual power, and you’re surrendering. And the thing is, I’m usually working with great writers who have the ability to get on the piano and write a song without the assistance of anyone else. But then there are periods where they need fuel from another writer. And there’s something about that book that’s granting someone permission to surrender, even when they have all of what could produce a great work.

G Yeah. I love that because that book came out of all the teaching I did at Syracuse, and I’m teaching these writers who are great. And you realize the only thing you can give anybody is faith in their own judgment. And then there’s that thing where you get more comfortable with your own preferences. And instead of saying, “I have that preference, but I’m a working-class kid from Chicago, I must be wrong.” No, stop that. You can’t be wrong. So then you’re a better listener to your own preferences. It’s so beautiful in a way because, for me, it kind of goes out into life. If you walk into a situation, you listen to your preferences, your inner voice, whatever, it is. “OK, I don’t feel comfortable here,” or, “this person is being hostile to me. All right. I’m right about that.” So that book was really me reminding myself of my own preferences.

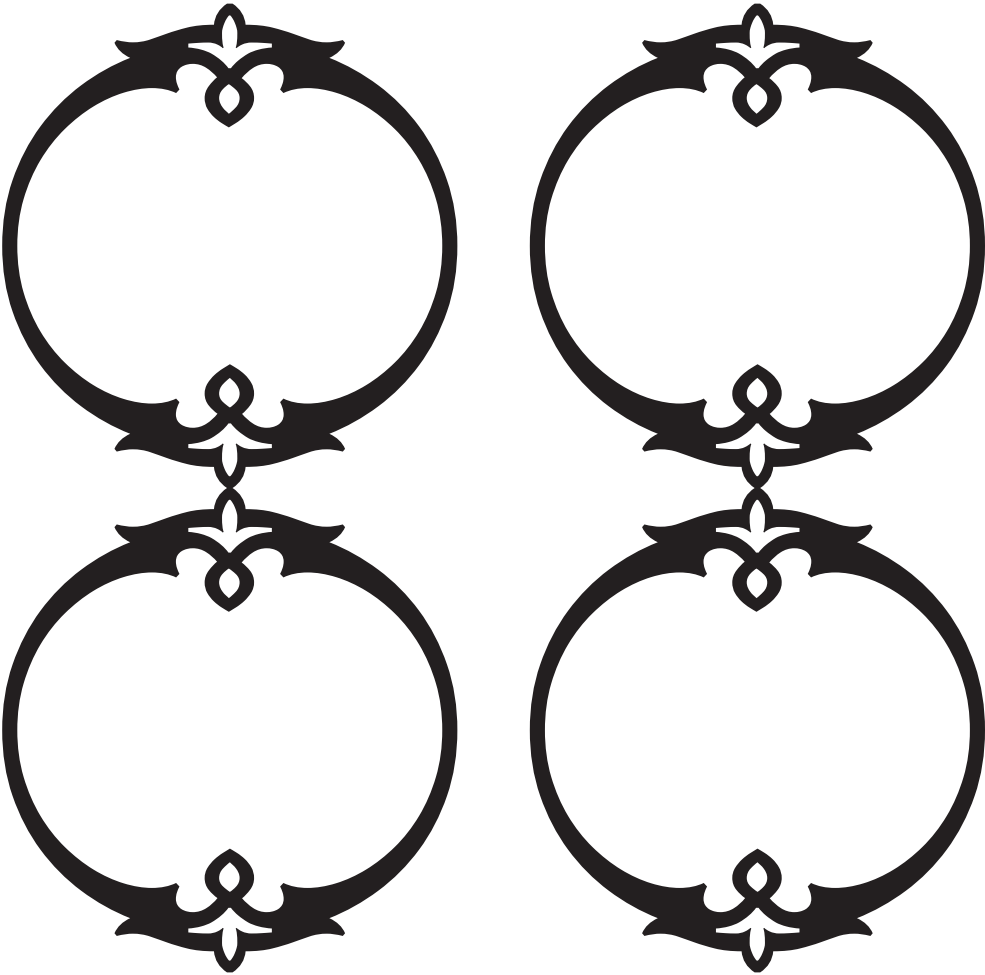
If [you] don’t like something in a story, your first reaction is, “I hate this story. This writer’s a moron.” That’s a very immature response. So then you settle into it and the first thing you have to do is

give yourself permission to not like it. And then there’s that journey towards specificity where you have to say, “OK, you don’t like it. I accept that, but I wonder if you could tell me why.” And then you have to look again, and you’re not trying to overturn your earlier judgment, you’re trying to justify it, understand. So then for me, what happens is everything becomes workable in some way, down to like somebody is aggressive with you. “That’s OK. Just I wonder why you’re doing that.” And in time that aggressive energy can dissipate. It doesn’t always. But it can.

M Yeah. Sure.

G In the meantime, you’re still you, you haven’t succumbed. That’s the dream anyway. I had a good test the other day here in LA. I had my dog off the leash and she’s an old dog, the sweetest dog in the world, but this guy didn’t like it. And he’s screaming in my face, well past what should be allowed, like, “You fucking…” I just kind of froze up and just kept listening to him. And finally, there was just a moment where I could see him starting to maybe doubt himself, or he was going to hit me. And I looked him in the eye and I said: “I really think you need to slow down, and I want you to know I’m not afraid of you.” And suddenly he got kind of flustered, and then he left. And then a few days later I see him, and I’ve been obsessing about it, of course. “Was I not tough enough, da, da?” And he comes up to me and says, “I’m so sorry.” He said: “As soon as I got home, I felt so terrible I drove around for an hour looking for you to apologize.” I had one good impulse from writing, which was, instead of escalating, which I would’ve done like 15 years ago, there’s something that just said, as long as I don’t move the energy’s going to dissipate. And it did. And in fact, there was a very deep story there. You don’t get that enraged without a back story.

You don’t get that enraged without a back story.



M No.

G But I was kind of funny, because I went home feeling a little bit, as a kind of a working-class kid, oh, maybe I should have hit him. Or maybe I should have yelled back. But some deep impulse had kept me quiet. And oh, so that’s actually what raggedy-ass peacemaking looks like; there’s a little bit of humiliation on my end. A little bit of OCD for three or four days, and on his end as well. It was really interesting. And I was laughing, because in Buddhism they always say your opposition is your teacher. And in real life it’s true, but it kind of sucks. It’s kind of a little more fraught.

M That actually really resonates with me, unfortunately in a really deep way. But so much of my life I felt like I was trying to intellectualize my position in the hood. Because everything felt like it was riding on this kind of attention. And I’m almost like, “I know that there’s a world above this and I know there’s a world beneath this, but I don’t know why I can’t see past the world of this circumstance right now.” And I think hearing you say that, it might be one of the most transformative things I’ve ever heard. Not only because of your power as a writer, but then your deep connection still to being a working-class person. And it’s so hard to divorce, you know what I’m saying—

G Yes.

M —any of those teachings. Especially when you're growing up in environments where your personhood is your protection, because nothing else is serving you in that way, and everything is a reminder that you have to develop a kind of a shield. And there's something about being expelled from that. I could understand it in the hood, sometimes I looked at another kid, and I think, so many kids die in the arms of this inner city hell. But there's something about exiting it and being in LA and being like, "Oh no, because of the world that I came from, I can't accept anything that you tell me." You know what I mean?

G For me, what's really hard is to say everything that I felt that night was totally valid. And it was me. So, although I'd like to be carved in marble, making a peace sign, in fact, there are all those other things going on. And without some admission of all that, you don't get the real stuff. But it's tormenting because you tell yourself a story about who you are. And in my case, "I'm a great dude. I'm a writer, and I'm a teacher, and a role model, and blah, blah." So then it's amazing to me how much even a little counter-narrative messes me up. If I'm an impatient person yelling at another driver, it really bugs me. So one of the challenges of getting older and getting some reputation is that you have to continue to be flawed and be interested in your own flaws. And for me that actually means I have to be a better Buddhist, because Buddhism says you're not any one thing. You're a constant flow of things—good, and bad, and perfection, and garbage, and all that. And the feeling that I want to be a perfect person is actually delusional.

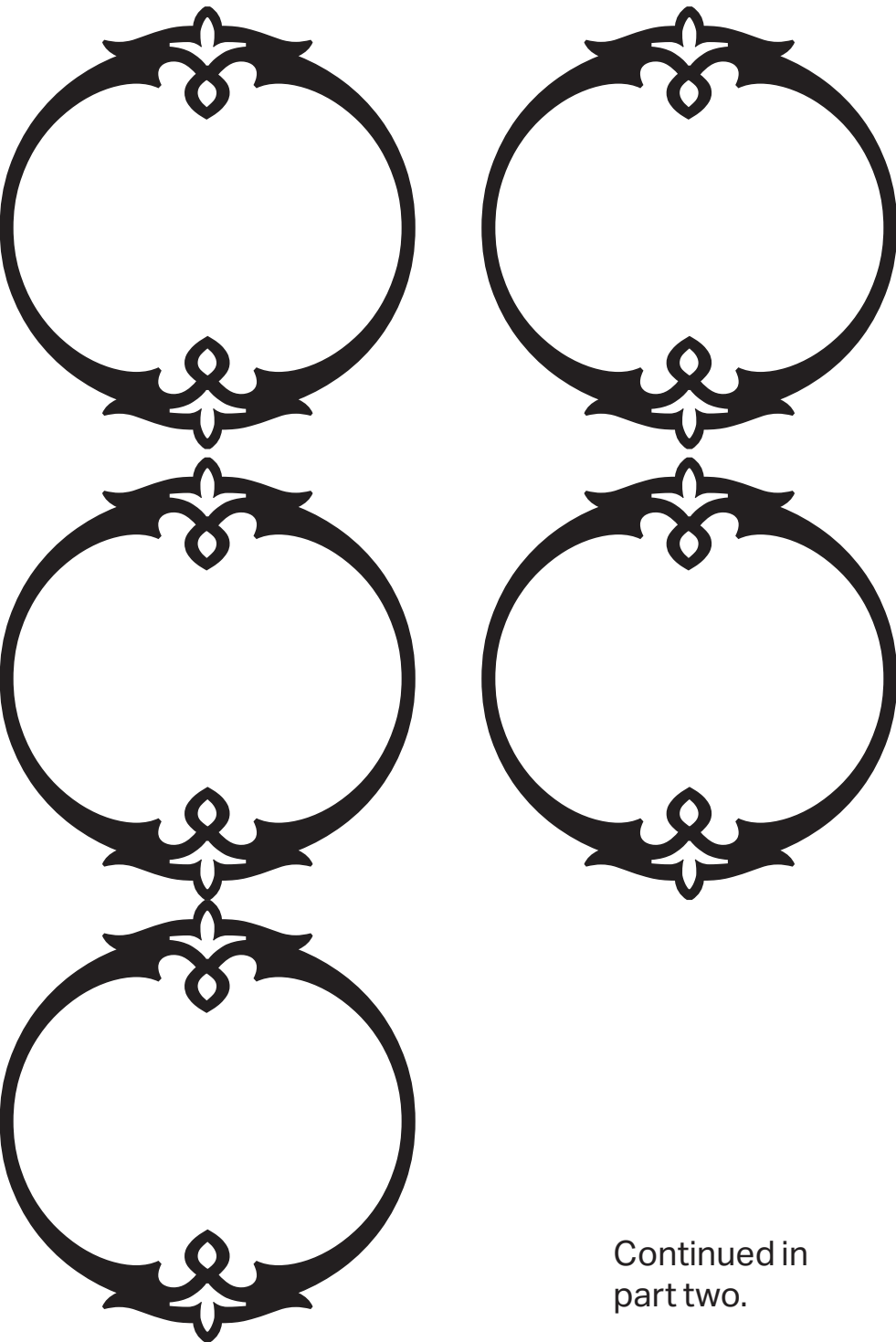
Everything
suggests
a peace,
and everything suggests
a calm.

M Hearing you say that makes it feel so much more human, because sometimes I could feel so small departing a situation, and it makes me feel so far from the person that I've wanted to become. There are days, and I feel so open saying this... but I remember leaving Friday prayer in Toronto a few years ago and getting into a situation with someone. He's a construction worker and he's like 6'5" and holding a cylinder brick on his arm. And my friends, their tempers could be questioned, you know what I mean? I'm in a car, riding around with them, and I'm about to shoot a music video for a small indie folk song that I really love. And I just finished praying and I'm wearing the thobe and I'm wearing literally the testimony. I'm wearing a scarf that has the testimony on it in Arabic.

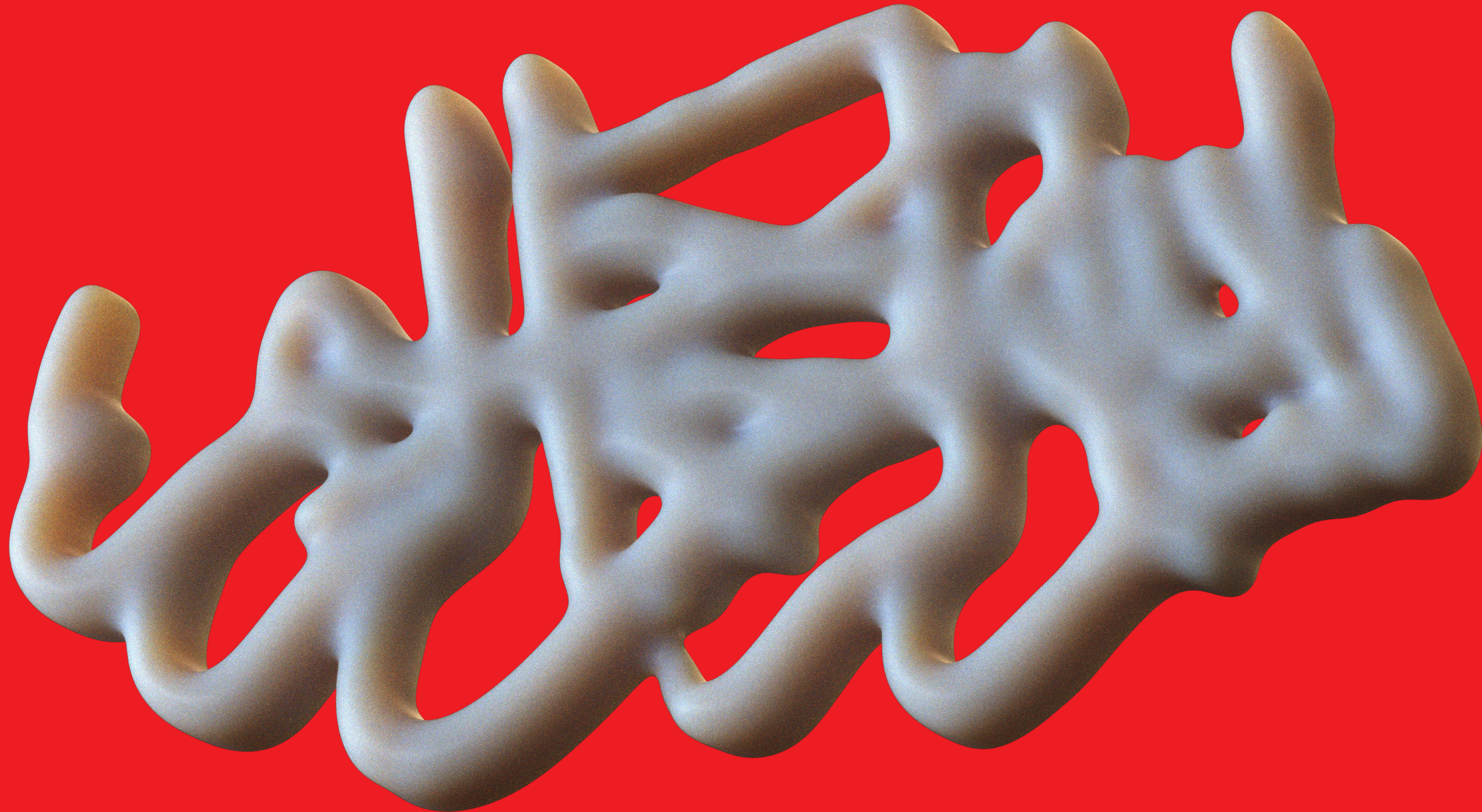
Everything suggests a peace, and everything suggests a calm. And not only am I trying to live in it, I'm actually wearing it in its fullness. But this guy is being so aggressive, he feels like we drove too far into the road, and that forced him to walk around the car. So he's arguing with my friend, and my friend is reacting. They're hurling slurs at each other. I'm telling my friend, "Bro, take it easy, please." Eventually, this construction worker, he spits on the car, and I'm East African, you know what I mean? Where I'm from, you're actually better off spearing me than doing that. And I kind of blacked out a little bit. I came out of the car and fought. I punched him, and I felt so much shame, because I was like, "Man, you're 24 years old now, how are you in this?" You think you live beyond this thing. I remember at some point, all of the construction workers were surrounding me and they had little knives. And then I found a rock in my hand. By the end of the run—

I know
that there's
a
world
above this
and
I know there's
a world
beneath
this, but I
don't know
why I can't
see
past
the world
of this
circumstance
right
now.

G Oh, my God.



Continued in
part two.



“THE ENTIRE EARTH HAS BEEN MADE A PLACE OF PRAYER...” — PROPHET MUHAMMAD [PBUH]

Photos by Yasin Osman
Words by Liv Siddall

In early 2025, on my way to speak to Mustafa about this publication for the first time, feeling a bit nervous, I was walking through London and glanced into a bus that had pulled in next to the pavement. The bus was empty of passengers, and the driver was standing in the middle of the lower deck, in his uniform, hands outstretched softly in front of him, eyes closed, deep in prayer.

Later, I told Mustafa about what I had seen, and he lit up. He said that that image reflected so much of his own feelings about his faith.

We embarked on this publication with this in our minds, putting together stories, photographs and visuals that are in some way connected to the ways in which faith meets the modern world, and ceremonies—no matter how big or small—we all conduct and hold in our daily lives. Mustafa spoke of finding spaces to pray on the road: in gas stations or car parks, or performing wudu, the cleansing ritual, in a car full of people, passing around a small bottle of Evian.

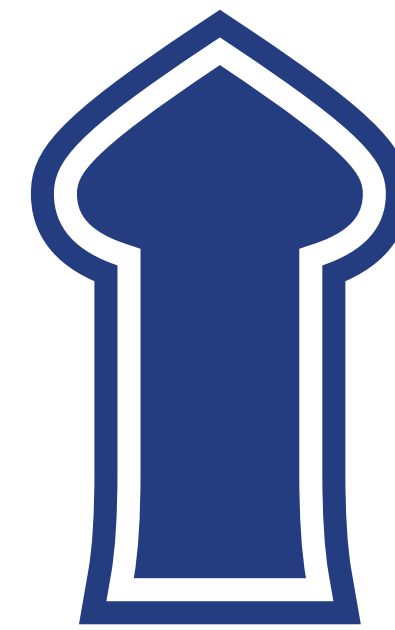
This feature, by Mustafa’s dear friend and collaborator Yasin Osman, looks at the way the ritualistic prayer of the Islamic faith intersects with the modern world.











P O E M S

P.38-69

○ CHANNING TATUM ○
DANIEL CAESAR ○ DEV HYNES
○ FATIMAH ASGHAR ○ HANIF
ABDURRAQIB ○ HALA ALYAN ○
MAX PORTER ○ NOOR HINDI ○
MUSTAFA ○ PEDRO PASCAL ○
SAFIA ELHILLO ○ WARSAN SHIRE



JUST
BEING
ALIVE
IT
CAN
REALLY
HURT

HANIF
ABDURRAQIB

the person you love may have hated the flowers you carry & you carry still. in my dreams, I lift the dead onto my shoulders & our shadows stretch for miles. this is a poor excuse for resurrection, I know, but the moment has passed & I have made peace with loneliness the way the flower's stem makes peace with severance, the way the head of the sunflower moans into an empty field. by some fluke or coming apocalypse it is warm enough in the middle of december for me to be sweating through your old hoodie at the border between ohio and west virginia, where, on christmas in 2009, we swung our legs over the bridge & you dropped your white shoes into the water where they floated upon the darkness in the moonlight like two lonely diamonds left on the desk of a lover wrecked with grief. your mother said that after they took your body away, all that remained were the pills, spilled along the black carpet, like you had coughed up a series of stars. your sister said that the grave is not always the grave & I take that to mean the grave is sometimes the place you first chose to not die, the place you & a beloved both walked away from, weeping into each other's arms & knowing that one of you will be required to outlive the other. a consequence of my survival is the rising river & all it washes up. *what leaves you once will arrive again to someone else who needs it* is what the tacky wooden sign reads, leaning against the cash register at the flower shop, where every year I get the same arrangement & the black woman does not speak but does put her hand atop my hand right before I go & throw the roses to the river & when the flood comes I will find you, when the flood comes I will run into the water.

أَحْمِلِ الْمَوْتَ عَلَى الْكُلْفِ
أَتَعْرِفُ سُبُطَكَ الْقَدِيمَةَ عَلَى الْحُدُودِ

CHANNING
TATUM

You told me God wasn't real
as we sat in the water in the dark that night
I couldn't see your eyes but I could feel the anger
in the water. You said if there was and that god
could let a child be violated it was not a god
worth worship. Many other things were said
on many nights in that angry water
Mostly talk of power soaked in booze and fear

So it's safe to say I've never known religion
I still hear your voice say "Worshipping anything
is for fools" over the dull sound of the football on TV
I always imagine clowns on bikes with baskets on the front
Honking and riding in circles

But my great secret is that I have always felt you
Felt angels. Felt love.
Felt the magic of so deeply caring for another
I never knew what exactly to call it.
Now as I write this maybe that's what worship has been for me

I've heard it said, *god is love*. Maybe my way to worship
is to love. Every person I meet. As reckless or stupid
as that can be. But I also worship
my bedsheets, my favorite pillow. I worship the feeling
right before I drink coffee, the smell of breakfast

I have loved so much as I have drifted through this life.
Loved so hard I almost loved myself
right out of this world because it was all too much
But now I surrender at the feet of each day
that I get to experience beauty, the warmth of love
Sun on my skin

I have never known religion but I've always
known you. My love. Love. Love.
I will always worship love. I surrender
my love always. I surrender my love forever.

في الخمر والخوف

كلما عجز الشيطان منقوع

Be now
my Glock
my protection

Vanquish
my foes

A compass
to point my direction

Carry
me home

Niggas they're watching
they're waiting

till I reach
the valley of death

We've got something
for them, we'll fight

with a vengeance
they will not forget

Support me
like trestle, Lord

make me
your vessel

you will not
regret

بوصلة
تُخبرك أين أنت

THOUGHTS
ON
THE
OVERGROUND

DEV
HYNES

Nothing more to do but leave
following the corners of the room

A knitted heart, they gave to me
I wash my hands and stare into the drain.

Elizabeth, it travels through, and Ilford
is the place that I hold dear amongst

all the things that we had to do
my sister understands just how it feels.

Sitting in the dusk of the room
you fell asleep, anyway

Time has made it seem we can talk
but then they took you away.

So in the middle of your life
could you have taken some more time?

If it's nothing like they said,
it's somewhere in between.

So I surrender to being just a body
with tired limbs.

When the world is in your hand
you can't be inside of it.

This light was just for hope and it keeps flickering
But I just want to see again.

I know I can't pretend to know everything ends
I just want to see again.

I just want to see again.
But it's hard to look at you.

It's a fallen fallacy waiting at your window
in the corner reaching out and nothing makes it better.

And still you try and book a room, hoping something
comes to you and still you're dry

It's like you've never touched a six string guitar
and the more you write, you never get far.

He has seen the vivid light, thievish in his disdain
as a life of honour falls I find myself in rage

Because I don't want to be alone
naked on the sixth floor when the music starts.

It's like you've never seen your anger at large
and the more you hide, the smaller you are.

Perfect nights, that still deceive me every week
but I couldn't eat.

I wasn't falling for the hope and something that you said
you're used to, but now it's sad in May.

I know, a harder truth to take in and I swore I thought
you'd make it through the night so I could see you at noon.

I couldn't wait to bring you home to him
how could I think it's alright?

مغالطه كه ينظر عندنا فذلك

MUSK
FROM
KARBALA

FATIMAH
ASGHAR

musk from karbala, oud
lingering. what smell keeps
the jinn away, what smell
invites them in. summer jasmine
& winter amber, sweet & thick
riding in the language of wind.
rose petals & salt tucked in news
-papers, sand from the slaughter
hardened to tasbeehs, glass bangles
yaqoot & feiroza, ocean stone
rocked into ring. i come & my
family stacks me with stores,
taweez, chilis over my head
rotating seven times & burned
in the fire. smell or no smell,
who gave me the look, what face
comes in the flame. little amulet
carried in my wallet, bits
of earth prayed over & torn.
i arm myself with what
the land gave, i arm myself
with my tongue, quick to spit
a surah or a curse. not thinking,
i slash into a pomegranate & there's
a massacre on the table. blood
& no seeds to eat. after watching
the youtube video, i cut with
the precision of an aunty. the fruit
gifts for days. plump seeds
the color of yaqoot. with respect,
everything permissions. touched
the right way, even poison ivy won't
sting. call it by its true name & the world
opens. yes, reader. even to you.

بیدوزم گیسو
بشالات و دردمند

WHAT
IS
THE
MOST
AMERICAN
THING
ABOUT
YOU?

My mouth. My nerves. The six accents in my accent.
The way I use my hands:
Wudu or desire. Fill a suitcase or empty my body.
Wake at dawn to nothing.
The way I count a slaughter in months.
One, two, three, four.
My mouth. That I still believe it can get me out of trouble.
Like when a soldier asks *from where* I say
here then here then nowhere.
And when that soldier touches my hair
and says *who knows what you might be hiding in there*
I say yes say sorry say I got it from a woman.
Don't worry. She's dead. You flooded her village.
Five, six, seven, eight.
How many months are in a body.
How many cradles are in a bloodline.
A father walks the streets and says:
This is a child. This is a child. This is a child.
My mouth.
The way it makes confessions nobody asked for.
The way it forgets the word for hasra, khayyal, istislam.
The way it's always telling a story.
Once there was a man. A ring. A border shredded like paper.
Once an army banned wedding dresses
and apples and pianos and the children became memos
and the land flattened with noise

and Lorca says *nor is my house any longer my house*
and Darwish says *I forgot, like you, to die*
and what do you call a photo op?
What do you call water that nobody can drink?
What is the most American thing about you?
My mouth. My loud. My dollar.
How it goes from pocket to pocket to missile,
lodges itself into a boy's rib.
My river, my tree, my ring.
How I still love the moon
even when drone
even when checkpoint
even when children eat what do they eat.
O but the moon.
Once it glowed in Jbail.
Once I wore a dress and walked into a room of music.
Once I gave a ring back.
I'm sorry. Forget the ring. Forget the moon.
A father walks the streets and says:
This is a country. This is a country. This is a country.

Once a man said *I will burn the English from your mouth*
and what he meant was
I am like you
dangerous and pretending not to be.
Forget the man.
I'm saying I want to be remade: in a Belfast terminal, in a ten-thousand-person march,
in a bed in Greenpoint.
To be touched until I forget my own name.
Lorca says *just your hot heart.*
Darwish says *I want from love only the beginning*

أَمَّا الْحَقِيبَةُ فَوُفِّرْ جَسَدِي .

so here's my American memory,
short as a song.
Here's my grandmother's sea —
it moves bright as gossip, visible from every window,
o land of interruption,
o road trip into the past. Forget the past.
I'm trying to say I love a good interrogation.
I'm trying to say

they turned dresses into crimes.
Who remembers the music?
Who breathes through rubble?
Once a place exploded and my father became fictional.
Don't talk to me about September.
Whose birthplace. Whose soldier pointed a gun and said,
Hey pretty, sit down.
What is the most American thing about you?
Was it your hair or your knife?
Your rot or your metaphor?

Once I hitchhiked from rooftop to sea, left during the war,
came back, slept on a bench, slept for a year
and the walls were yellow and the
bombs rattled the windows and nobody died.
What do you think I'd do with a missile?
My knees on the ground.
My god on the line and I can't stop dreaming about
those dresses
the shovels
the children
the way Lorca says *why was I born among mirrors*
and Darwish says *if there must be a moon, let it be high.*
Once my grandmother left a village
and they put a waterpark in its place.
Once I left my name in a man's mouth
and I think it might be time to go get it.

فَضْنُو عِوَالِي غَيْبِي

Forget the moon. I'm saying I want to live.
I want to hear adhan every morning. I want music. I want red eyes.
I want the wrong accent, the wrong sea, the wrong hands
against my throat, I want what
I want what I want and this
is the most American thing about me.

I'm saying forget my hands. I'm nowhere near a checkpoint.
I'm ten past midnight
a full mile west to the water
and from here? This river could almost be a sea.
This country could almost be a country
and how dare I speak of love?
Where are the dresses now?
Who hems their lace?
Whose hands collect white?
Whose hands count bodies?
Who will remember what was done?
Who will be left to do all this living?

It was the diary, not death, that scared me,
so I unpinned myself from the illusion of time
and the pretence of self (no more days)

I shed my skin, I put away money, I unimagined work
(no more weapons no more borders no more names)
I put away needing to own or belong
I washed off the language and signs of our time
and what was left was

devotion

was a held breath
where countless generations and species overlapped
and haunted one another in a timeless ecology
of unspoken grace

and in the orbit of this held breath we knew peace for aeons
for a full turn in the tidal cycle of the infinite

because hidden in this pause was the life spark, which was faith
which we realised was home, which is bayt
and when we came back into the body
we knew that waiting in the long-held breath
was the coming exhalation
and we recognised what it was.
It was freedom.

کانت ایومنیات، ولیس الموت

NOOR
HINDI

قَسْرَ الشَّمْسِ

it was the child dancing with no regard, no — the year began & i
was already wearing someone else's shoes, no — the year began
with a punk at the bar & dear god
i feel closest to you when my heart sounds like a dog
being put down, no — the year began & the face
of everyone i love was so sweet & so blurry & it started
in platform doc martens i was drunk
enough to slip into & leave, no —
the year began & i waited for a text & i started saying
inshallah: *inshallah my brother doesn't die inshallah i*
keep my job inshallah i'll see the ocean inshallah
i visit Palestine inshallah, no — the year began
with a pretty girl at a bar & me reading Surat Ash Shams
to her, no — the year began in a freeze, in ice coating
my front porch & that shovel i used to fracture
every crystal & that phone call at midnight & that gun, no —
the year began with a letter to my ex
asking her: *do you still wear your stupid eyeliner like a wing,*
do you still love the moon? do you still drink Grey Goose when
you're lonely, no — it began in a rainstorm, nothing purer than
mud, an oath to the sun, the scent of jasmine
on a walk, no — the year began with Yasmine
teaching me to dance with my shoulders, with my therapist
repeating: *it's not your fault*, with a ten mile run
towards anywhere but here — no, the year began
with a rope & the perfect knot, Nina Simone's
whiskey voice spilling over my car's dashboard — no, it began
with a derbake, a high-pitched squeal, the tips of my fingers, &
a text that reads *the moon is so pretty* & dear god
i offered her heart back & dear god i thought my mother
would blame me & dear god the year began
with a hand on my shoulder, so steady, so tender i
learned we are capable of anything & dear god i
gave the shoes back one size too big & too clean &
so the year began & i returned everything that isn't
mine even this life even my shame & dear god
i feel empty

I
WANT
TO
PRAY
BEHIND
YOU

MUSTAFA

إلى متى تدوم الكدمة
قبل أن ترتد أمير السماء

I can hear his hands but I can't tell
where they're placed
I want to be a good servant
tipped over in the middle of collapse;
Where my father is praying for beauty
in a voice that's asking me to die

I become the colour of the carpet while he prostrates
The closest I get to a kiss on my scalp
It's 2015 and he wants me to be still,
To undress the Dunya and hang it on Regent Street
so the men in the front row can congratulate him
for bringing me to my grave

He follows the applause
but it always ends up gunfire
The prayers have to be specific
Maybe he only asked for noise
An answered prayer can be a prison

أريد أن أكون خادماً صالحاً
مقلوباً في وسط الإنهيار

Oh Lord, what can you give me in exchange
for this? What's my skin? What's my mask?
I can't tell which place he kissed
What do you call a boy so close to the sun
his dreams become amber? What do you call
a boy so close to his lord his whispers
have turned supple? Turned choir?
Turned enemy to worshipper?

I want to be a simple man but I can't keep
my feet on the ground
How long must the bruise persist
before it matches the sky?

Oh Lord, you gave me a forest
but I don't have space left in my chest
Too many long texts
from boys who've left their bodies
Too much soil, glass, ceremony
I laugh at their leaving and don't know where
my laughter ends and my body begins

Only one third of my father is left
and I hold the rest of him around my neck
The winds are too strong to open my mouth
He hasn't heard my voice in weeks
I think he prayed for wind
I think he left the window open

Which answered prayer will lead to my end?
Which of mine will he not let in?

UNTITLED

PEDRO
PASCAL

I see you

late bloomer

smoking just after sunrise for the first time.

Wearing pants and buying pillows

dropping cash

then leaving them lonely in a stranger’s closet.

Mushroom lamp says “What the fuck? Lemme outta here.”

I explain to her that first I have to go back

and back and back again

until I understand that I will always be in love with those footprints.

“Fine.”

People smoke here

because they like me. See me sitting near the bird shit, making things up that never happened.

But they’re cool with it.

Someone tells me she was kidnapped by a man who held a knife to her neck

because her sister always picks the wrong men.

I tell her I was a very late bed wetter.

All the other talk happens alone,

never into a mirror and never to you.

But to objects caught off guard by my hostility,

by the shape of this grief.

Eleven months and only this:

I am struck by the lightning of your presence

now that you are gone.

تليسين البنىطونات
وتشترنا الويسائد

ARS
POETICA

SAFIA
ELHILLO

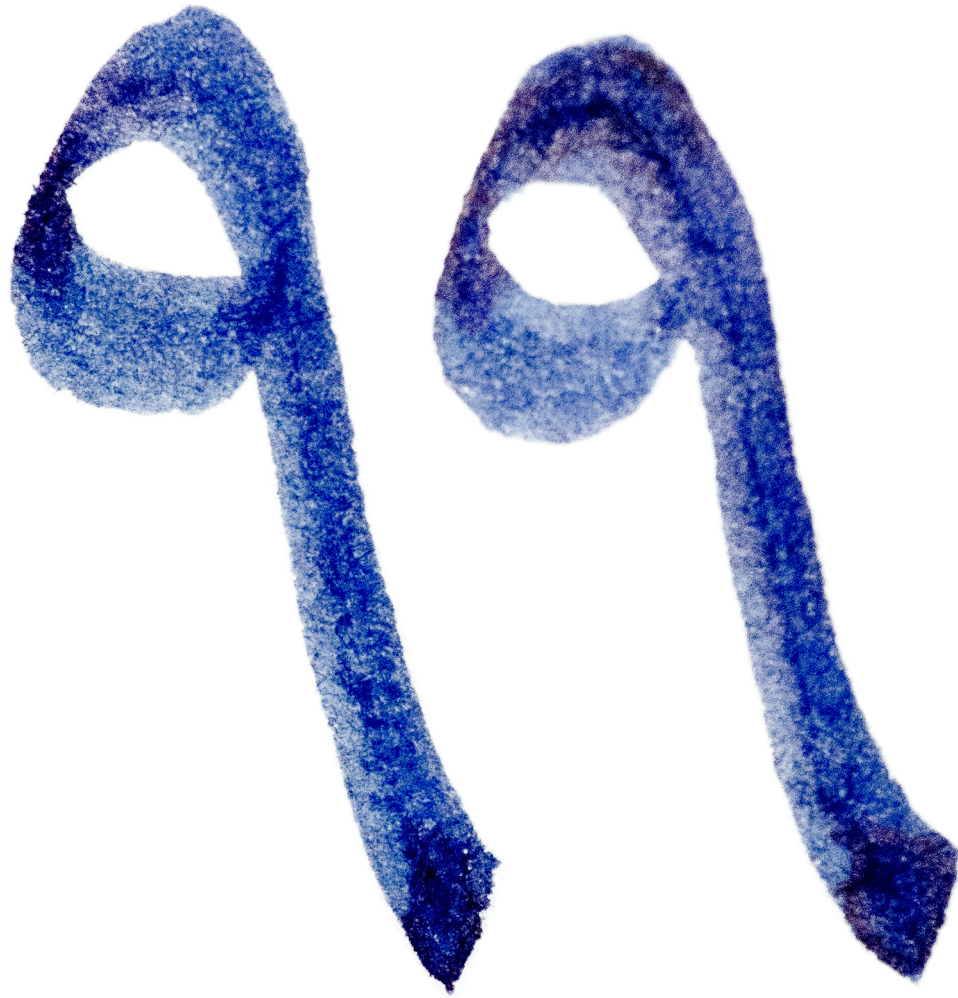
هَذَا الَّذِي
هُوَ خَارِجُ الشَّعْوِ

*i would love it even if i wasn't good
at it, i find myself saying these days
to friends over dinner, worrying the ice
at the bottom of the cup meant for water.
what i have given over of myself
to this enormous & unknowable,
the way most days it looks almost
like nothing: dozing in a yellow patch
of sun, short walk to the movie theater,
the cheap white bookshelves improperly
assembled, crowded & warping beneath
the weight of the books. if ever asked
i don't know that i could describe
what exactly it is that i love, what exactly
to name it without borrowing from the ancients,
dark chamber inside my mind, or behind it,
a room that does not quite belong to me.
the feeling of something immense & always
just out of reach. the act of reaching, long
life of attempt & failure, of trying to press
language against what is too big for language,
but trying still. i don't know even what i mean
when i say *i love it*, this thing outside of feeling,
outside belief. it does not need my love, the fact
of it bigger than the small gestures of my human
heart, bigger than my belief so it does not need
my worship. *the poem*, i could call it, & laugh
immediately at my own failure. this brain older
than my brain, this thing i borrow that will
outlive me, will after my body move on.*

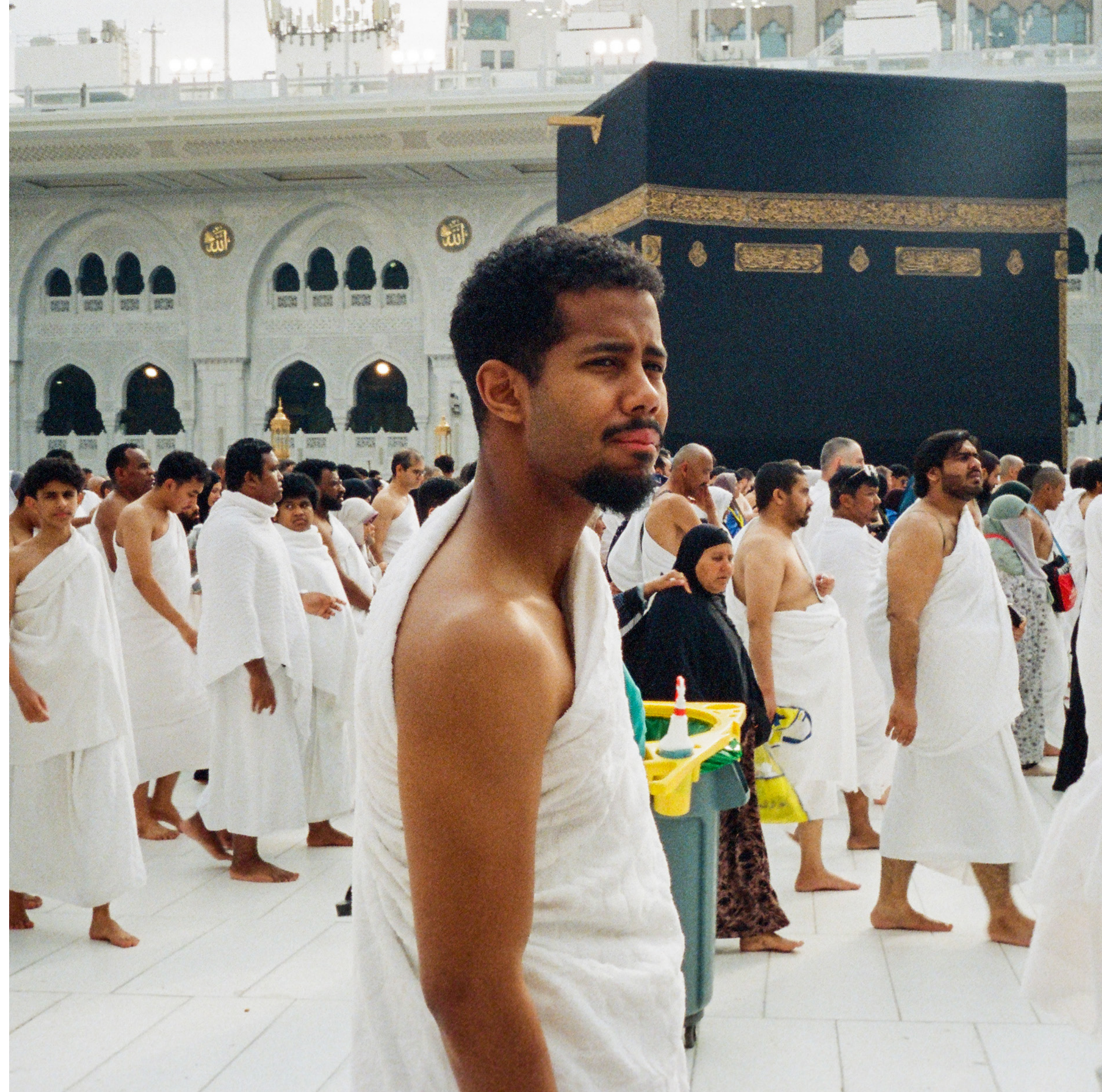
MY
BELOVED
HAS
99
NAMES
AND
CRADLES
ME
IN
MY
SLEEP

WARSAN
SHIRE

most and entirely merciful. bestower of this mercy.
owner of dominion. absolutely pure and sacred. perfection
and giver of peace. the one who gives security.
witness. all mighty. restorer.
supreme. creator. evolver. the fashioner.
the all and often forgiving.
the subduer. giver of all gifts.
the provider. the opener. all knowing.
the withholder. the extender. the reducer.
the exalter. the honourer.
the humiliator.
all hearing. all seeing. judge. utterly just.
most gentle.
all-aware. most forbearing. magnificent.
exceedingly forgiving.
most appreciative. most high. most grand.
preserver. sustainer.
reckoner.
majestic. most generous. watchful.
most responsive. boundless. all wise.
most loving. glorious. infuser of new life.
all observing and witnessing.
absolute truth.
disposer of all affairs. all strong. firm.
protective. praiseworthy. all-enumerating.
initiator. restorer.
giver of life. creator of death. ever-living.
sustainer. perceiver. illustrious.
the one. the only one.
eternal. omnipotent. powerful.
expediter. and delayer.
the first. and the last.
manifest. hidden one.
sole governor. self exalted.
source of all goodness.
ever-pardoning. avenger.
the pardoner.
the most kind.
master of dominion. possessor of glory and honour.
just one. gatherer. wealthy.
enricher. withholder. distresser.
the benefactor. the light. the guide.
incomparable originator. ever-lasting.
inheritor. guide to the right path.
most patient.



祝賀



THE JOURNEY TO MECCA.

P.72 - 123

A pilgrimage is an invitation
from Allah, it's an invitation
from God. I am so privileged
to have been invited
multiple times.

I have done it after large
deaths in my life. I have
done it to ground myself
after a large high in my life.
And I usually go with people
that I love and with people
that haven't been before.

After my fourth or fifth time,
I worried that I wasn't going
to share the same kind of
colossal feeling I had felt
in the beginning. But the
beautiful thing is that when
I go with someone who
hasn't been, I get to feel it
again through them.

This time I went with
a group of friends. We
go every year during
Ramadan, and each year we
bring someone that hasn't
been before. This year it
was Bakar.



صِدْقَةُ اللَّهِ الْعَظِيمِ



WORDS BY
MUSTAFA

PHOTOS BY
YASIN OSMAN



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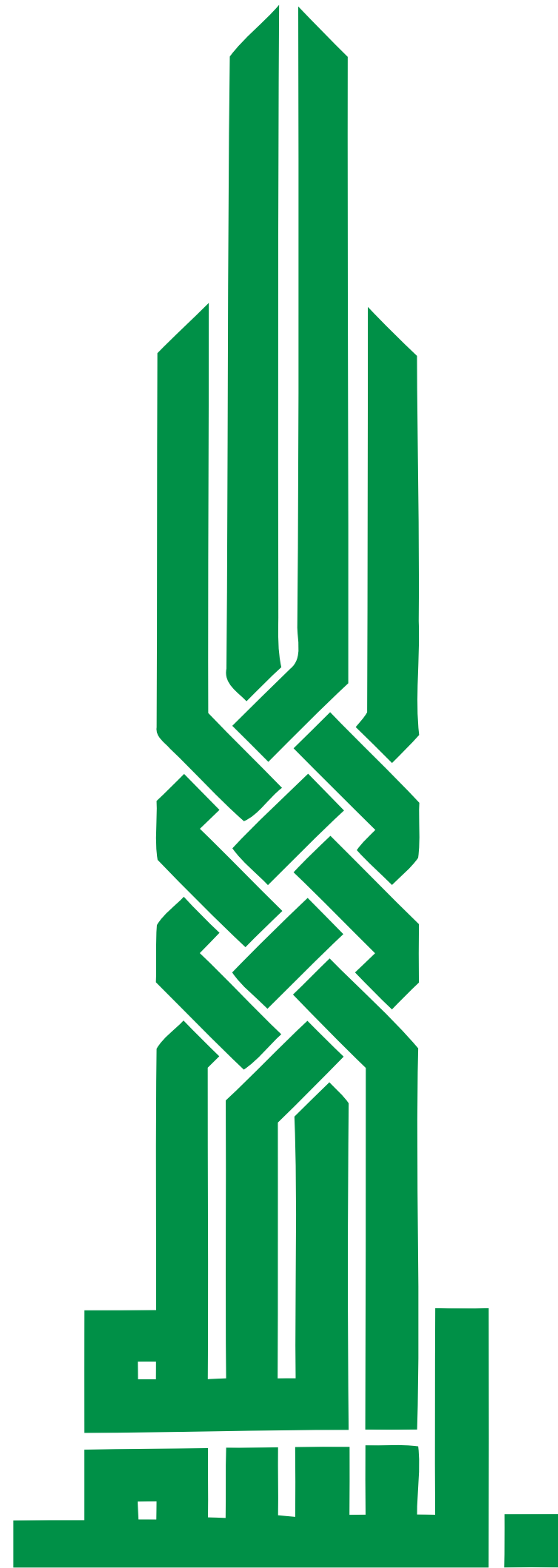
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Mutawif No: 51





فَتَسْأَلُكَ اللَّهُ لِمَ أَتَيْتَهُ بِذَلِكَ











“Right shoulder is
exposed when you
first begin your
t a w a f
(circumambulating
the Kaaba).”

الْبَيْتِ الْمَكْرَمِ

“The color is a gift,
but a critical way to
stay close in the swirl
of worshippers.”

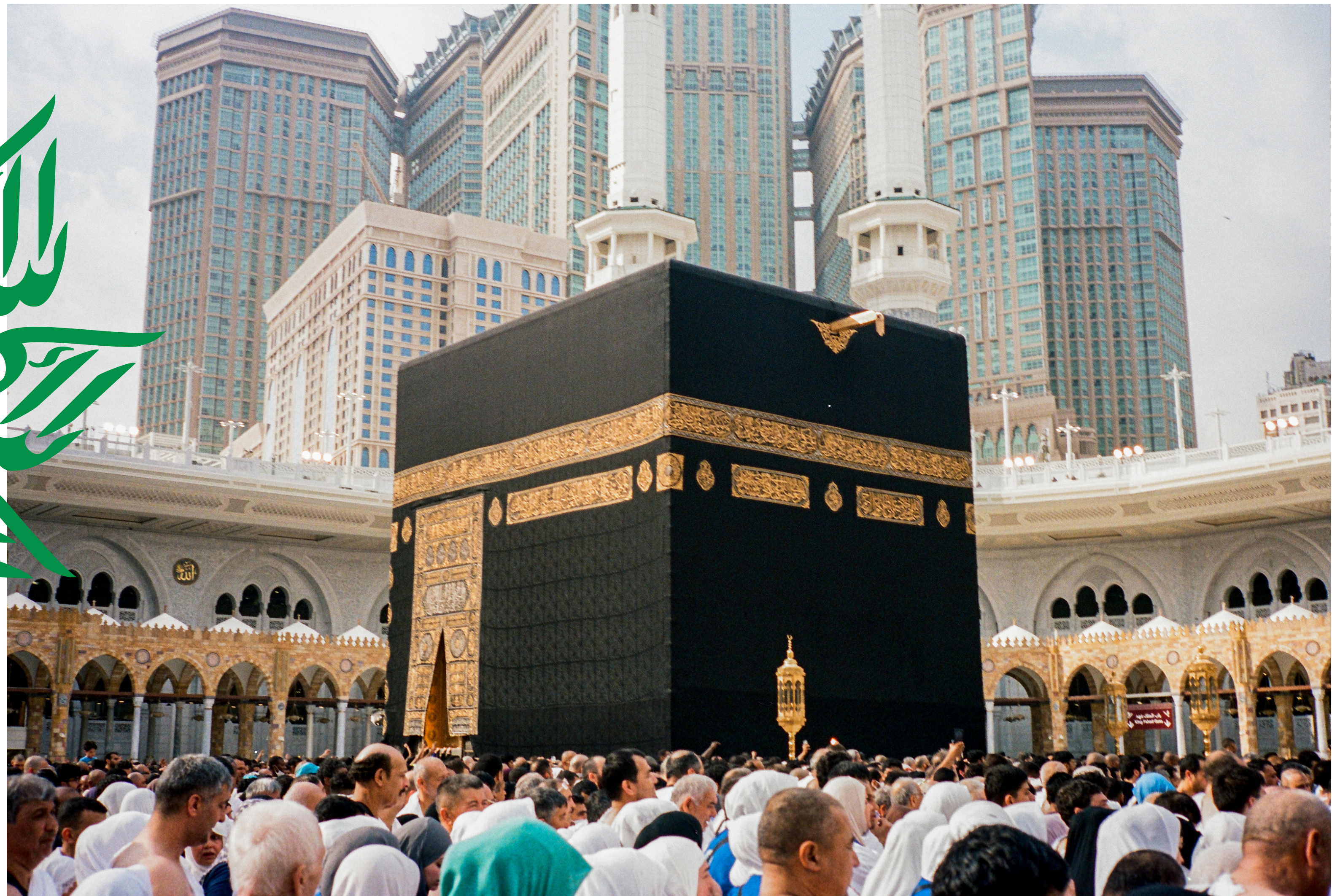






السلامة والسلامة

الحج والعمرة







اَللّٰهُمَّ صَلِّ وَسَلِّمْ عَلَى رُسُلِكَ وَامْنِ بِرُوحِكَ



“Travelling
to different
spheres.”

“Worshippers surround the Black Stone, some reports say it used to be white, and that it became black with all the sin. You are meant to kiss it with each lap, but as the ardor of millions wrap it, it’s probably best to wave from afar.”



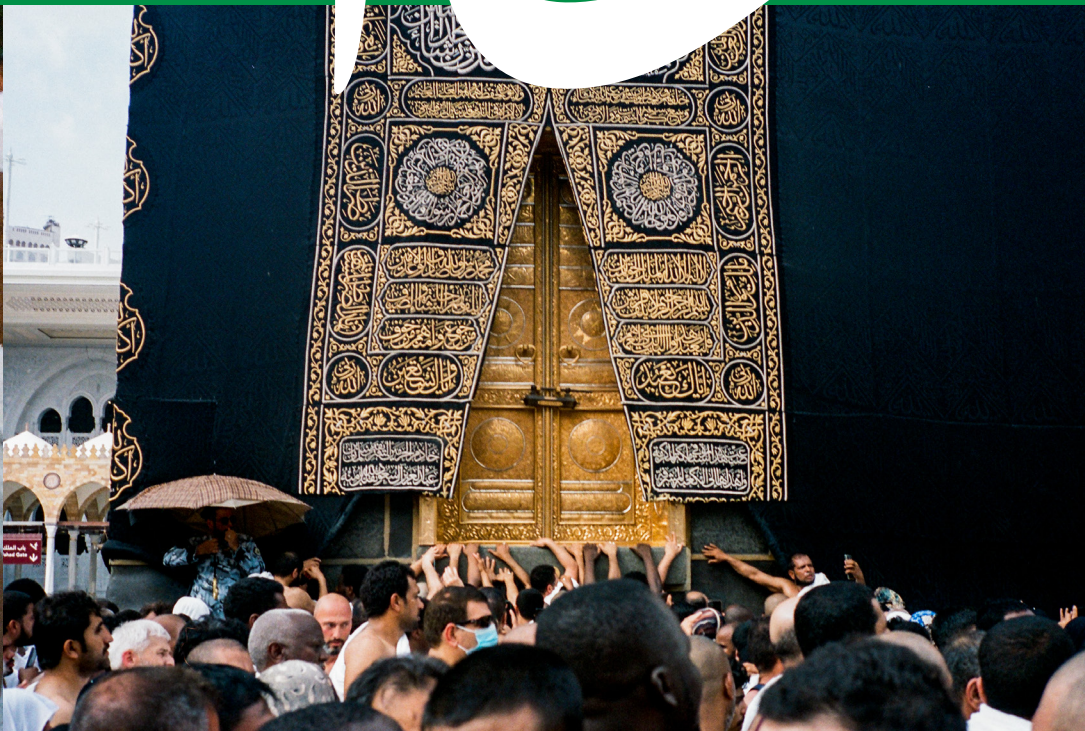


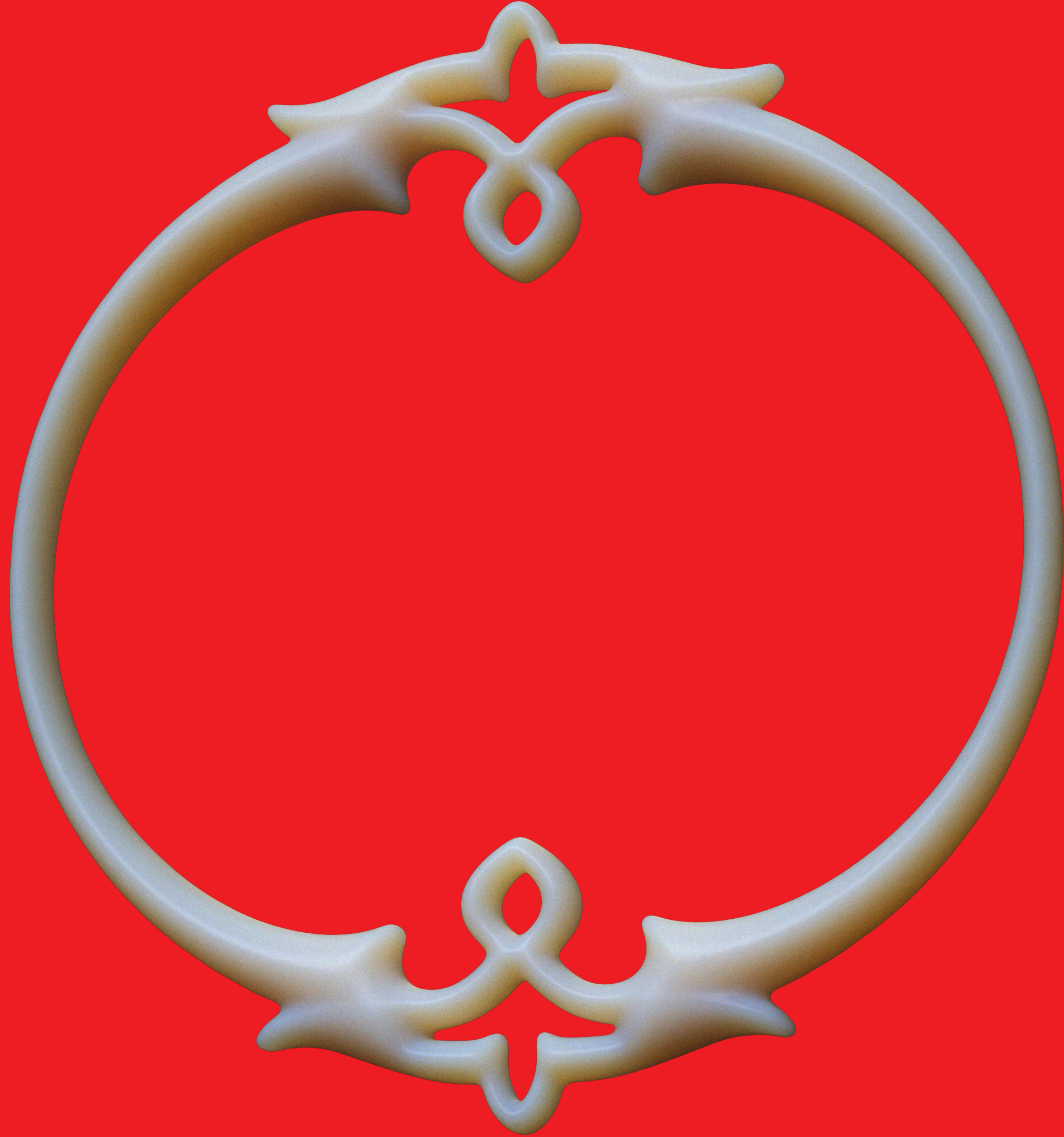
“Two boys
guarding
their
mother.”

The most
noble
service.”



مسالك فوكالا





SABİHA ÇİMEN

Sabiha Çimen was born in Istanbul, Turkey. A self-taught photographer with a master's degree in cultural studies, she likes to work on long-term projects, documenting the intersection of modern Turkish life and Islamic culture.

The photographs on the following pages are mainly from "Hafiz," her photo project documenting the daily life of the young girls in Quran schools in Turkey.

P.124 - 139

Sisters Sare
and Şeyma.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2022.



Girls doing
taekwondo.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2022.



A plane flies
low over students
at an amusement
park.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2018.



Hatice, nine, tries to
recite Quran passages from
memory to her classmate.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2021.



A discarded plastic
dolphin from an amusement
park in the school's
backyard.
Kars,
Turkey,
2018.



Asya plays with pet
birds in the teachers'
room.
Rize,
Turkey,
2018.



A student who has left the
school mid-term waits for her
father to pick her up.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2018.



Sisters crowning each other with a handmade garland.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2018.



Students having fun at an artificial lake during a weekend event.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2018.



Melike displays her
collection of fruit
erasers.
Istanbul,
Turkey,
2018.



Havva lies in
the sickroom at
a Quran school
while listening
to music with
earbuds under her
headscarf.
Istanbul,
Turkey.
2017

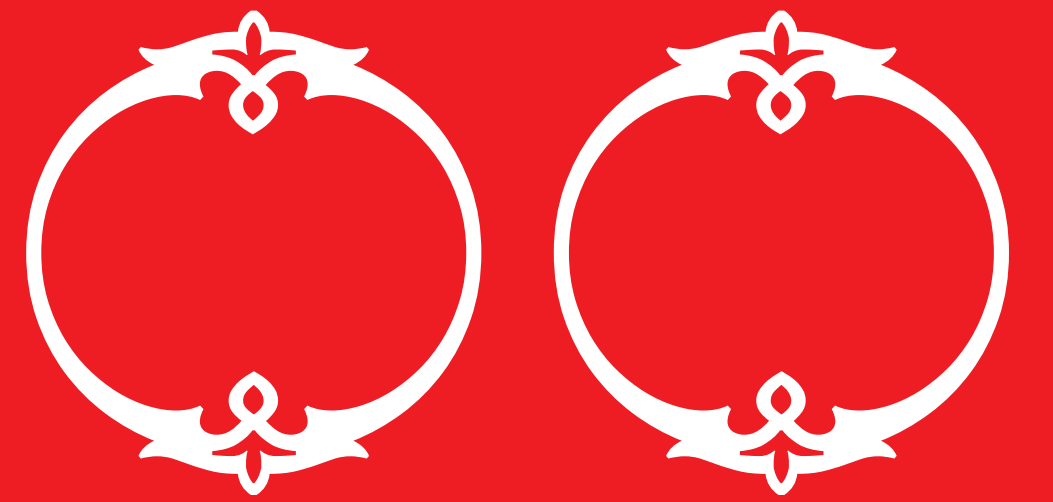


Students sing religious
farewell songs at their
graduation ceremony from a
Quran school.
Istanbul,
Turkey.
2017





MUSTAFA
AND



GEORGE SAUNDERS
DISCUSSES MATTERS
OF THE SOUL
PART 2 - P.142 - 151

I n t h a t
m o m e n t I
l i t e r a l l y
b e c a m e
n a u s e o u s
w i t h t h e
t h o u g h t

o f h o w
f a r I w a s

f r o m w h o
I t h o u g h t

I w a s .

M I think I hit him with the rock. And there was blood on my thobe. Imagine me leaving Friday prayer, this Black Muslim man leaving Friday prayer, and I’m in a predominantly white neighborhood because the most spacious mosque I could find is in the white neighborhood. And now there’s a community of people surrounding me. And, oh, my God, their resentment was palpable, bro. An ambulance truck comes, and I get arrested with assault with a weapon charge. Eventually it got dropped because they had weapons as well. But wow, it was such a scene, because I was just standing at the center of it, like I was in the Colosseum.

G You were.

M They’re seeing a Muslim man with a thobe on and it’s just covered with blood, and they have no context. I felt so gravely misrepresented. In that moment I literally became nauseous with the thought of how far I was from who I thought I was. I was parched and exhausted. Because I had done so much work in my life to show up in the world without any evidence of criminality, and tragedy, and pain. Sometimes I walk into a room and I feel like there’s a banner of mourning above my head. And I’ve always wanted to walk in lighter. I didn’t want to walk in with all that weight and all that sorrow and all that violence. But in that moment I thought maybe I’m just doomed to wear it for the rest of my life. If someone asked me what you would do in that circumstance, someone yelling at you, I’d be like, “Oh, George. He would understand the spectacle of the entire thing.” But what I failed to realize is that your power is also the fact that you are one of us. And hearing you speak about this circumstance and how you tussled in it means a lot to me, man, honestly.

T h a t ’ s
j u s t m e
h i d i n g
b e h i n d m y
d e l u s i o n .

G Your story is beautiful. Those of us who early on sensed that we needed a spiritual component of our lives to get through it, we make the mistake, sometimes, [of thinking that] it’s an on-off switch: you’re either spiritual or you’re not. But it’s in the mess that’s where it is. And that moment that you said, where you felt parched with the difference between who you thought you were and who you are, that’s it.

For me, what was interesting about that night is to say, OK, every time I think I’m an angel floating above it, that’s just bullshit. That’s just me hiding behind my delusion. But the one thing I’m learning about myself is that if I sit down and be quiet, the better person has a chance to get to the table and all the work that I’ve done has a chance to show up. But if I’m reacting I’m just a brawling idiot. It was humbling. It was painful. And it’s funny how you can be embarrassed even when you’re alone. That night I was embarrassed. But the interesting thing was that the conversation in my head was sometimes, “You idiot, you were not peaceful enough.” And sometimes it was, “You idiot, you didn’t stand up for yourself.” It was like I was inadequate from every direction.

M Wow, that’s so true. I guess we are not absolutely any of those things. It’s amazing the concept of being embarrassed when you’re alone.

G Yeah. In Buddhism, they would say, “What was improved [by] being embarrassed?” And I think now, at this point in my life, I think it’s a neurological firestorm that mistakes itself for George. So you’re talking to that firestorm, “Why are you so particular about who I am? What do you care? You’re just like a brain fart.”

M But on a spiritual level, what you’re saying about the angel floating above being bullshit, it’s true. And Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), he often said this prayer, “Ya Muqallibal Quloob thabbit qalbi ala deenik,” which is, “O Turner of the hearts, turn our hearts to the straight path.” And his wife would ask him why he would say it so often when he was already on the straight path; he was the final messenger of God. And he said “because the heart is between the two fingers of God,” and he could turn it any direction he wants. And that’s really powerful, because it doesn’t matter if you’re the Prophet or if you’re a layman. None of our hearts are on an absolute path. At any given moment, the Turner of our hearts could turn our hearts in a direction that it wasn’t intended to go.

G Almost like a heart that doesn’t have a turn in it isn’t a heart.

M I think about that even with the way that maybe my heart has been turned away from Islam. I learned this term called scrupulosity, it’s an OCD specific to morality and religious issues. You know what I mean?

G I have it.

M

You and I both.

G

But tell me more. So how does it manifest?

M

It can manifest in compulsive religious rituals or if you have blasphemous thoughts. Or if you're in this kind of excessive confession—you're feeling like you're always having to confess. And the people that have this scrupulosity use these mental gymnastics, or behavioral compulsions, to reduce their anxiety sometimes. And sometimes it enhances their anxiety.

G

It's like a negative hyper-self-vigilance, where you're always looking at yourself to go, "what's wrong with you today you piece of garbage?"

M

Yeah. Exactly.

It's like
a negative
hyper-self-vigilance,
where you're always
looking at yourself to go,
"what's wrong with you
today
you piece of garbage?"

G

No, I have it.

M

And it's borne out of this kind of morality that's weaponized against us. When I was younger, I wanted to write music and I remember an Islamic teacher telling me if you make music, on the day of resurrection there's going to be volcanoes in your ears as a punishment. And it was very strange.

I was learning that my heart was turning back and forth because of the way that faith was communicated to me. And it's a beautiful thing when you're able to return to a thing that was maybe in some way weaponized against you, but you could return to it with love.

When I look at the fragmented way that faith was taught to me, I could think of the periods where especially my mother and my father really shared it with me in the kind of peace that I hold it with now. But every time I see someone that completely expels it from their lives, it breaks my heart because I think "Who is the custodian that brought it to you?" And that's why I think there's so many things that you've taught me in your writing where you were the custodian for a message, and thank God you were the one that communicated it to me because if I learned it in a different way, maybe I wouldn't have received it.

G

Oh, that means so much to me. And I was going to say, too, this turning of the heart idea—I think I have that scrupulosity. But one thing I try to self-comfort with is to say—and this is so true in writing—if you don't have an excess, you're in trouble. If you're perfectly moderated, maybe that's hard to work with. But everything has two sides. If I use the same quality of obsessiveness that sometimes torments me to clean up my internal monologue, I get literature.

So when I have something negative about myself that I'm brought face to face with, I just kind of go, all right, well, can I turn you around and see what blessings you have? Because I see it in my students. There'll be somebody doing something that is not working. And my way is to say, "OK, what is that? That's a positive virtue in a negative cloak. Can I get you a different cloak for that?" And then suddenly the thing that looked bad is just misunderstood power. So I need a lot of self-comfort on the way, and a lot of reassurance like you're not stuck, you're just digging. My wife was a student of Toni Morrison, and Toni one time said her best books were books that had very, very deep foundations that took a really long time to dig, and it wasn't that fun.

M

Wow.

G

While you're digging the foundation you feel like you lost your thing, you lost your power, but then the building goes up higher. So I used that a lot, and I try to tell my students that reducing one's anxiety about the creative process is actually part of the process. So I always wondered about this, when you're in the studio, are you watching your state of mind? How do you know that that's you, that that's good enough?

M

Do you know what it is? It's like that is the mania of music. It's funny, I'm in it right now where I'm working with this artist, and the song won't end. The song ends when you choose for it to end. Depending on where you are, you can move the goalposts. And even if you move the goalposts just a few centimeters to the right, all of a sudden the parameters for the completion of the song change entirely. Because you're like, well, now the song needs a string arrangement. Oh, if it needs a string arrangement, well maybe it means we have to change the B section of the song. Oh, maybe the bridge actually needs to change. And then it's like, well, we need to change the key of the song because it's all about a feeling.

And then when the feeling is satisfied, that's the song. But sometimes you start to pick apart the song, and you're interrogating how long the feeling is going to last, or whether it has enough stimulus in it. I believe that the song is only completed once it's out in the world. It's like you could write songs forever. I've seen it, man. I helped another person complete their album, and we went everywhere. We went to Santorini, we went to Peter Gabriel's studio right outside of London, Real World Studios. We went to Jamaica, we were in Toronto, we were in New York. And at some point, we were together in New York, and he's like, "I don't know, maybe we should go to..." I said, "Do you want to cover the entire earth before you decide?" And it's less about where he's traveling, and more about what we need to communicate to ourselves to believe that we actually went to the ends of the earth to complete the record.

G

We've literally turned over every stone.

M

The microphones are the same. There's only so many iterations of an SM7. There's a rubber bridge guitar. You can get a rubber bridge guitar anywhere, and you get a 12-string, you get a six-string, you get every kind of synth possible in every continent. But you know what it is? We're all just kind of sitting patiently for the arrival of the song.

G

Yeah.

M

Everyone is trying to design a space that allows for the song to enter. And hopefully, we're translating it with the tools we have, without tarnishing what's coming through. And the beautiful thing about writing songs is that it feels very much like the old way of genius. That genius is a thing that arrives to you. That it's not a thing that's innate, but it's a thing that arrives. And I think that's very much what the process is. And I don't know if that feels similar to how you're writing.

G

I always liked that thing they say, the muse likes to find you at your desk. I have a lot of confidence in rewriting. I never have to be good, because cumulatively I'll be good.

M

Wow.

G

And that takes the pressure off. There's a Rubik's Cube quality to it. And something you said earlier really resonated where, looking in this direction, the problem is impossible to solve. Then one day you cut a paragraph out of it and it goes over here and oh, it's impossible not to solve. I used to know a guy when I was working in the oil fields, they would refer to mechanics as parts changers, like a bad mechanic was a parts changer, where all he did was he just took stuff out and replaced it until it started working again. So I think sometimes a writer is a parts changer. Like just, OK, take out the bridge, take out the beginning. And then for me, the big million-dollar problem is how do you retain a fresh vision so that when you read it tomorrow, you're reading it accurately. And that's really hard if you've been through something a gazillion times.

But then on the bigger picture, I'm going to have days where I don't read very well, days where I read really well, days where I read generously, days where I read grumpily. But over the whole process, it all comes out at the end. By the end, all my different selves have had a chance to weigh in. They've all been there.

M

Man, that's so beautiful. All your different selves had a chance to weigh in. [When you sit down to write], do you know the story? I read [your] stories and they're so clear, so I wonder, do you have to know the story? Or are you searching for the story in the process of the writing?

G

It's usually that.

M

Do you know the characters?

G

Nothing.

M

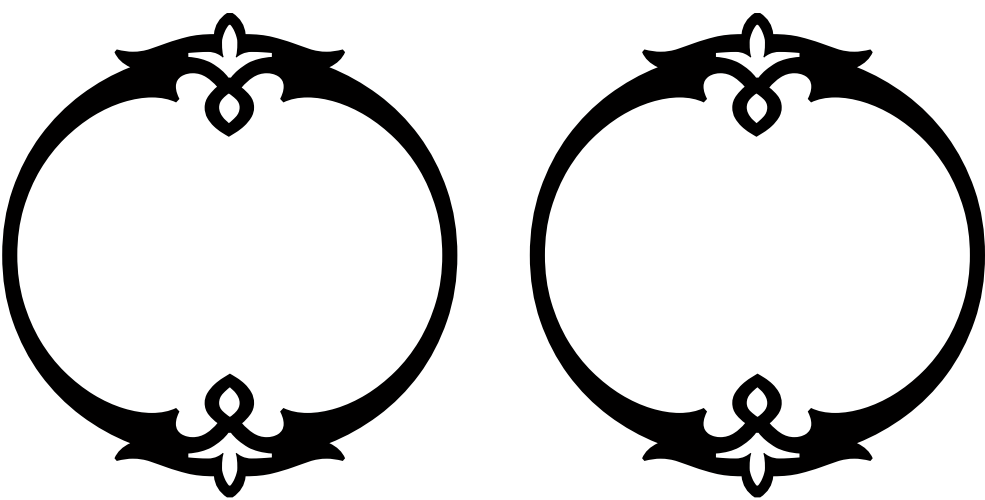
Wow.

G

I mean, in the best case, extreme version, nothing. And you just have a few sentences and you start poking at it to make it sound better and then it sprouts a little something. That's the best. And that clarity that you mentioned, thank you, that just comes from going through it so many times that the places of unclarity get clarified, or taken out. I sometimes think of it like, I'm going ahead of you on a path and I'm trying to design a hike for you. And you're there. I mean, I'm very aware of you, but I want to make sure that we don't do anything stupid.

If I use the same quality of obsessiveness

that sometimes torments me to clean up that internal monologue, I get literature.



So I go up this path and I'm like, yeah, no, that's the path that Mustafa is going to expect me to go up. So I maybe should just pretend to go up for a second and come out. Then you are there behind me. Like, "Oh, I see what he's doing." It's a respectful relationship. So it's kind of path design, and that means I have to do a lot of days that you're never going to know about to make the story seem just spontaneous, and clear, and simple.

M

What an amazing metaphor, man.

G

Part of that respect is you have to be very aware of what you've caused the reader to expect. And in some complicated way, I think that's a form of love. But it's also a form of narrative sophistication, because we're trying to get quickly to the highest ground. And we can't do that if we spend too much time in the banality or the habituated.

M

Of course.

G

But as a person, I'm going to do that. So what I do for a year is I go off and be banal and eliminate it and I come back. So hopefully what I'm presenting to you is a rarification or purification of the normal.

M

Did you have a knowing about your ability to tell stories? I'm going to be open just because my brother, he worked in the oil fields. So hearing you say that, it struck me. He was murdered—

G

Oh, I'm sorry.

They were
just birds
sitting on
the table
like
nothing.
I
couldn't
get them to
fly.

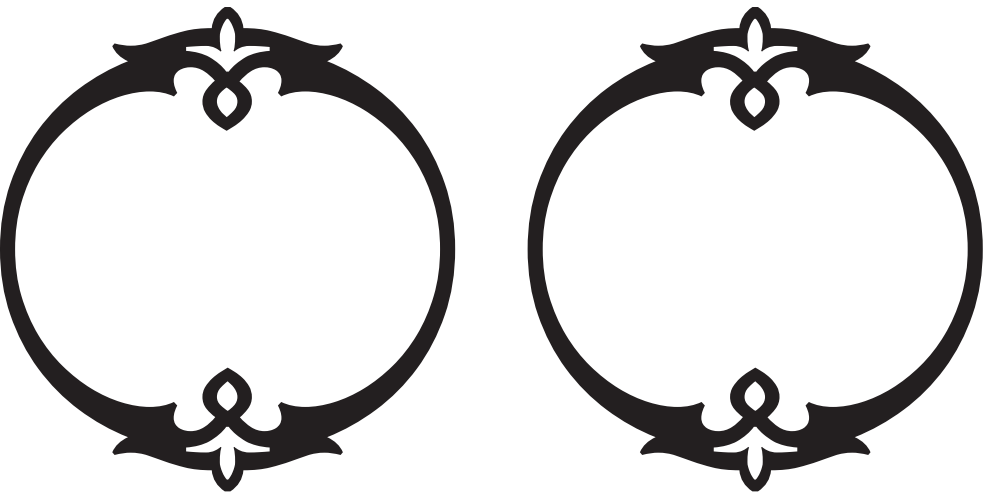
M —just two years ago. And I think the period in which he was working at the oil fields was the period where I didn't know him at all. He was in his early thirties when he passed. And it's wild when somebody dies in that way, and I appear at the funeral, and I think I know him because that's my only older brother, but there are all these new stories that are appearing at the burial place, and I don't know what's happening. All these people from the oil fields, they appear. And I think to myself, there was a person that I imagined he was, and there's a person that he imagined he was, and then there's a person that he actually was.

G And there's also all the people they thought he was.

M And I guess the question that I have about all these stories appearing is knowing which ones to hold. In my mind I want to talk about my brother. But is that my responsibility? But he was killed, I want to reimagine his memory. I want to write beauty where there wasn't. But then I also don't want to misconstrue the reality of the harshness of what it was.

Sometimes I see a film about my country, Sudan, and by the end, it feels conclusive, but the genocide reigns on in Sudan. The horrors continue. So what is the responsibility of the filmmaker then? Is this film to remind us that we have to remain steadfast in our connection to what's happening in Sudan? Or is it OK that there's a story that has taken an alternative path to what's happening in the actual world? I find myself splintering between all these different ideas of what my responsibility is as an artist.

So, when you told me about the young family member who passed in the car crash, I realized I was scanning, in my mind, all the stories that I know that you've written to find evidence of a story that maybe could have been inspired by the event. Because then it would tell me what my responsibilities are, because sometimes I don't know. And there's no court of law. There's no high priest of art being like, this is what you're assigned to make about the story that you've abandoned.



G No. But I think there might be a high court, at least for me, which is, is the work you're making powerful? So for me, I have written those stories about the oil fields and they didn't get off. They were just birds sitting on the table like nothing. I couldn't get them to fly. So what I found, and this is just for me, when I started telling stories that were defiantly not of my life, just totally made up, then they started to fly.

Now, I know that my life is in them. There's no doubt. But if I start to tell a story about something that happened to me, and that I sort of know the meaning of, it just lies there. So for me now the mantra is: "Does this fucker have any power? Does it have lift-off?" If it doesn't, it can have the best intentions in the world, it's just lying there. It's a piece of paper. If it flies it's moral—something like that.

M That's beautiful, bro. That makes so much sense.

G And that gives us the gift of saying, we don't know what our gift is. We don't know what we're offering yet. We're going to find out, if it flies, what we offer. That's how I think of it. But that's really hard, because then, as you're saying, times like right now I feel like why am I writing this whimsical little thing when all this stuff is happening out there, and I want to be a force for good? But then the little voice says, well, be as moral as you like the bird is going to be dead. So offer the world a dead bird if you want. So that's hard. But it makes me sick sometimes when all this stuff is happening, and I know what I think about it and people are suffering. But when I type that up, it's dead. Not always, but if it is dead, then I don't want to offer it, because it's not going to help.

M It sounds awful.

G And the other problem is if you subscribe to that idea too strongly, you just end up being Mr. Whimsy, who's just got his eye down on his desk. And then life can go out of your work as well. So almost like before the turning of the heart, we have to both honor the power and then try to do something else as well, in order to get the best result. No autopilot, that's the trick. You just can't rest. That's the truth.

M You solidified it for me in a really important way. We don't know what our gifts are. And at the end of the day, I know a lot of people that do the work. They do the work for the people that are on the ground everywhere, in Sudan, and in Gaza, Ukraine and in Syria, and in so many places in the world. And I know that a lot of people read your work as fuel. I'm out here sharing it with these young kids in the hood who are so vulnerable and who have no path out. And I'd like to believe that some of the escape that they found is in me recounting some of the stories that you've written. The funny thing is you're writing stories that are reaching boys that are in the oil fields anyway.

G It's funny, when I was a kid, Monty Python was just getting popular. And my dad was a great guy, and kind of Chicago tough guy. And he would watch that Monty Python, and he would laugh so hard, he would literally slide off the couch. So to me, I keep that in my mind. I don't know what the sketch was, but it wasn't about world peace. But the joy and the transcendence and the uplift. Or in music, there are songs that are just idiotic that are somehow perfect, and your heart goes up. So it's mysterious. What we can offer is very mysterious.

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Turbo is an independent design and visual arts studio and space established in 2015 by Mothanna Hussein and Saeed Abu-Jaber. Specializing in visual identities, editorial design and visual communication and graphics for a global clientele, the studio has been at the forefront of a resurgence in Arabic typography and experimental design. Mothanna and Saeed are also the co-founders of Radio Alhara, an internet radio station and cultural platform.

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