

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset over a body of water. A small boat is visible in the middle ground, and a person is walking on the beach in the foreground. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue.

Abdulrazak
Gurnah

BY

THE
NOBEL
PRIZE
•
2021

'One scarcely dares
breathe while reading
it for fear of breaking
the enchantment'

The Times

THE
SEA

BLOOMSBURY

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021. He is the author of ten novels: *Memory of Departure*, *Pilgrims Way*, *Dottie*, *Paradise* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Award), *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea* (longlisted for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award), *Desertion* (shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize) *The Last Gift*, *Gravel Heart* and *Afterlives* (longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction). He is Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. He lives in Canterbury.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Memory of Departure

Pilgrims Way

Dottie

Admiring Silence

By the Sea

Desertion

The Last Gift

Gravel Heart

Afterlives

BY THE SEA

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2001
This edition published 2022

Copyright © Abdulrazak Gurnah, 2001

Abdulrazak Gurnah has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 9780747557852; eBook: 9781526653406; ePDF: 9781526653420

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Hewan Text Ltd, Edinburgh

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters

For Denise

Relics

1

SHE SAID SHE'LL CALL later, and sometimes when she says that she does. Rachel. She sent me a card because I don't have a telephone in the flat, I refuse to have one. In the card she said that I should call her if her coming was a problem, but I haven't. I have no urge to do so. It's late now, so I don't suppose she'll be coming after all, not today.

Though, in the card she did say today after six. Maybe it was only one of those gestures that was complete when it was made, to say that she had thought of me, in the sure expectation that I would take comfort from that, which I do. It doesn't matter, just that I don't want her turning up in the deep hours of the night, shattering its pregnant silences with a racket of explanations and regrets, and blurting out plans to take away more of the remaining hours of darkness.

I marvel how the hours of darkness have come to be so precious to me, how night silences have turned out so full of mumbles and whispers when before they had been so terrifyingly still, so tense with the uncanny noiselessness that hovered above words. As if coming to live here has shut one narrow door and opened another into a widening concourse. In the darkness I lose a sense of space, and in this nowhere I feel myself more solidly, and hear the play of voices more clearly, as if they were happening for the first time. Sometimes I hear music in the distance, played in the open and coming to me as a muted whisper. I long for night each arid day, even though I dread the darkness and its limitless chambers and shifting shadows. Sometimes I think it is my fate to live in the wreckage and confusion of crumbling houses.

It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with some assurance that first it was this and it then led to that and the other, and now here we are. The moments slip through my fingers. Even as I recount them to myself, I can hear echoes of what I am suppressing, of something I've forgotten to remember, which then makes the telling so difficult when I don't wish it to be. But it is possible to say something, and I have an urge to give this account, to give an accounting of the minor dramas I have witnessed and played a part in, and whose endings and beginnings stretch away from me. I don't think it's a noble urge. What I mean is, I don't know a great truth which I ache to impart, nor have I lived an exemplary experience which will illuminate our conditions and our times. Though I have lived, I have lived. It is so different here that it seems as if one life has ended and I am now living another one. So perhaps I should say of myself that once I lived another life elsewhere, but now it is over. Yet I know that the earlier one teems and pulses in rude good health behind me and before me. I have time on my hands, I am in the hands of time, so I might as well account for myself. Sooner or later we have to attend to that.

I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here. Now I live the half-life of a stranger, glimpsing interiors through the television screen and guessing at the tireless alarms which afflict people I see in my strolls. I have no inkling of their plight, though I keep my eyes open and observe what I can, but I fear that I recognise little of what I see. It is not that they are mysterious, but that their strangeness disarms me. I have so little understanding of the striving that seems to accompany their most ordinary acts. They seem consumed and distracted, their eyes smarting as they tug against turmoils incomprehensible to me. Perhaps I exaggerate, or cannot resist dwelling on my difference from them, cannot resist the drama of our contrastedness. Perhaps they are only straining against the cold wind that blows in from the murky ocean, and I am trying too hard to make sense of the sight. It is not easy, after all these years, to learn not to see, to learn discretion about the meaning of what I

think I see. I am fascinated by their faces. They jeer at me. I think they do.

The streets make me tense and nervous, and sometimes even in my locked-in flat I find myself unable to sleep or sit at ease because of the rustlings and whisperings that agitate the lower air. The upper air is always full of agitation because God and his angels live there and debate high policy, and flush out treachery and rebellion. They do not welcome casual listeners or informers or self-servers and have the fate of the universe to darken their brows and whiten their hair. As a precaution, the angels release a corrosive shower every now and then to deter mischievous eavesdroppers with a threat of deforming wounds. The middle air is the arena for contention, where the clerks and the ante-room afreets and the wordy jinns and flabby serpents writhe and flap and fume as they strain for the counsels of their betters. Ack ack, did you hear what he said? What can it mean? In the murk of the lower air is where you'll find the venomless time-servers and the fantasists who'll believe anything and defer to everything, the gullible and the spiritless throngs that crowd and pollute the narrowing spaces where they congregate, and that's where you'll find me. Nowhere else suits me quite as well. Perhaps I should say nowhere else *suit*ed me quite as well. That is where you would have found me when I was in my prime and pomp, for since coming here I have not been able to ignore the misgivings and the agitation I feel in the airs and lanes of this town. Not everywhere, though. I mean I do not feel this agitation everywhere and at every time. Furniture shops in the morning are silent, expansive places, and I stroll in them in some equanimity, troubled only by the tiny particles of artificial fibre which fill the air and which corrode the lining of my nostrils and bronchials, and which in the end drive me away for a while.

I found the furniture shops by chance, in the early days when they first moved me here, though I have always had an interest in furniture. At the very least, it weighs us down and keeps us on the ground, and prevents us from clambering up trees and howling naked as the terror of our useless lives overcomes us. It keeps us from wandering aimlessly in pathless wildernesses, plotting cannibalism in forest clearings and dripping caves. I

speak for myself, even though I presume to include the unspeaking in my banal wisdom. Anyway, the refugee people found this flat for me and brought me here from the lodging where I had been staying, from Celia's bed and breakfast house. The journey from there was brief but full of twists and turns through short streets with lines of similar houses. It made me feel as if I was being taken to a place of hiding. Except that the streets were so silent and so straight, it could have been a part of that other town I once lived in. No, it couldn't. It was too clean, and bright and open. Too silent. The streets were too wide, the lamp-posts too regular, the road-side kerbs still whole, everything in working order. Not that that town I lived in before was excessively filthy and dark, but its streets twisted in upon themselves, curling tightly on the corrupt detritus of fermented intimacies. No, it couldn't be part of that town, but there was something alike in it, because it made me feel hemmed in and observed. So as soon as they left me, I went out, to see where I was and to see if I could find the sea. That was how I found the small village of furniture shops round the corner from here, six of them, each as large as a warehouse and arranged in a square marked out with car-parking spaces. It was called Middle Square Park. Most mornings it is quiet and empty there, and I stroll among the beds and the sofas until the fibres drive me away. I enter a different store every day, and after the first or second time, the assistants no longer make eye-contact. I wander between the sofas and the dining tables, and the beds and the sideboards, lounging on an item for a few seconds, trying out the machinery, checking the price, comparing the fabric of this to that one. Needless to say, some of the furniture is ugly and over-decorated, but some of it is delicate and ingenious, and in these warehouses I feel for a while a kind of content and the possibility of mercy and absolution.

I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker. These are not simple words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so. I arrived at Gatwick Airport in the late afternoon of 23 November last year. It is a familiar minor climax in our stories, leaving what we know and arriving in strange places, carrying little bits of jumbled luggage and suppressing secret and garbled ambitions.

For some, as for me, it was the first journey by air, and the first arrival in a place so monumental as an airport, though I have travelled by sea and by land, and in my imagination. I walked slowly through what felt like coldly lit and silent empty tunnels, though now on reflection I know I walked past rows of seats and large glass windows, and signs and instructions. Tunnels, the streaming darkness outside lashing with fine rain and the light inside drawing me in. What we know constantly reels us in to our ignorance, makes us see the world as if we were still squatting in that shallow tepid pool which we had known since childhood terrors. I walked slowly, surprised at every anxious turn that an instruction awaited to tell me where to go. I walked slowly so that I would not miss a turning or misread a sign, so that I would not attract attention too early by getting into a flutter of confusion. They took me away at the passport desk. 'Passport', the man said, after I had been standing in front of him for a moment too long, waiting to be found out, to be arrested. His face looked stern, even though the blankness in his eyes was intended to give nothing away. I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it, the kind of resourceful ruse the powerless would know. They will ask you your name and your father's name, and what good you had done in your life: say nothing. When he said *Passport* a second time, I handed it over, wincing in anticipation of abuse and threats. I was used to officials who glared and spluttered at you for the smallest mishap, who toyed with you and humiliated you for the sheer pleasure of wielding their hallowed authority. So I expected the immigration hamal behind his little podium to register something, to snarl or shake his head, to look up slowly and stare at me with the blaze of assurance with which the fortunate regard the supplicant. But he looked up from leafing through my joke document with a look of suppressed joy in his eyes, like a fisherman who has just felt a tug on the line. No entry visa. Then he picked up his phone and spoke into it for a moment. Smiling openly now, he asked me to wait on one side.

I stood with my eyes lowered, so I did not see the approach of

the man who took me away for questioning. He called me by name and smiled as I looked up, a friendly worldly smile which said with some assurance, Why don't you come with me so we can sort out this little problem? As he strode briskly ahead of me, I saw that he was overweight and looked unhealthy, and by the time we reached an interview room, he was breathing heavily and tugging at his shirt. He sat in a chair and immediately shifted uncomfortably in it, and I thought of him as someone sweatily trapped in a form he disliked. It made me fear that his distemper would indispose him towards me but then he smiled again, and was soft-spoken and polite. We were in a small windowless room with a hard floor, with a table between us and a bench running along one wall. It was lit with hard fluorescent strips which made the pewter-coloured walls close in out of the corners of my eyes. He told me his name was Kevin Edelman, pointing to the badge he wore on his jacket. May God give you health, Kevin Edelman. He smiled again, smiling a lot, perhaps because he could see my nervousness despite my best efforts and wished to reassure me, or perhaps in his work it was unavoidable that he should take pleasure at the discomfort of those who came before him. He had a pad of yellow paper in front of him, and he wrote in it for a moment or two, taking down the name from my joke passport before he spoke to me.

'May I see your ticket, please?'

Ticket, oh yes.

'I see you have baggage,' he said, pointing. 'Your baggage identification tag.'

I played dumb. You might know *ticket* without speaking English, but *baggage identification tag* seemed advanced.

'I'll have the baggage collected for you,' he said, keeping the ticket beside his note-pad. Then he smiled again, interrupting himself from saying more on the subject. A long face, a bit fleshy in the temples, especially then as he smiled.

Perhaps he was only smiling in anticipation of the mixed pleasure of picking through my baggage, and the assurance that what he saw there would tell him what he needed to know, with or without my assistance. I imagine there would be some pleasure in such scrutiny, like looking into a room before it has been

prepared for viewing, before its truthful ordinariness has been transformed into a kind of spectacle. I imagine there would be pleasure too in having an assured grasp of the secret codes that reveal what people seek to hide, a hermeneutics of baggage that is like following an archaeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map. I kept quiet, matching my breathing to his, so that I should feel the approach of annoyance in him. Reason for seeking entry into the United Kingdom? Are you a tourist? On holiday? Any funds? Do you have any money, sir? Traveller's cheques? Sterling? Dollars? Do you know anybody who can offer a guarantee? Any contact address? Was there someone you were hoping to stay with while you were in the United Kingdom? Oh, bloody hell, bloody stupid hell. Do you have family in UK? Do you speak any English, sir? I am afraid your documents are not in order, sir, and I will have to refuse you permission to enter. Unless you can tell me something about your circumstances. Do you have any documentation that might help me understand your circumstances? Papers, do you have any papers?

He left the room, and I sat calmly and still, suppressing a sigh of relief, and counted backwards from 145, which was where I had got to while he was talking to me. I restrained myself from leaning forward to inspect his pad, in case he had seen through my dumb silence, but I suspected someone would be peering at me through a spyhole, watching for just such an incriminating move. It must have been the drama of the moment that made me think that. As if anyone could have cared whether I was picking my nose or secreting diamonds up my bowel. Sooner or later they would get to know all they needed to know. They had machines for all that. I had been warned. And their officials had been trained at great expense to see through the lies people like me told, and in addition they had great and frequent experience. So I sat still and counted quietly, shutting my eyes now and then to suggest distress, reflection and a trace of resignation. Do with me what you will, O Kevin.

He returned with the small green cloth bag I had brought as my luggage, and put the bag on the bench. 'Would you mind opening this please,' he said. I looked agitated and uncompre-

hending, I hoped, and waited for him to elaborate. He glared at me and pointed at the bag, so with smiles of relief and understanding, and placating nods, I got up to unzip the bag. He took one item out at a time, laying each one out carefully on the bench, as if he was unpacking clothing of some delicacy: two shirts, one blue, one yellow, both faded, three white T-shirts, one pair of brown trousers, three pairs of underpants, two pairs of socks, one kanzu, two sarunis, a towel and a small wooden casket. He sighed when he came to the last item, turning it round in his hand with interest and then sniffing it. 'Mahogany?' he asked. I said nothing, of course, touched for the moment by the paltry mementos of a life spread out on the bench in that airless room. It was not my life that lay spread there, just what I had selected as signals of a story I hoped to convey. Kevin Edelman opened the casket and started with surprise at its contents. Perhaps he expected jewellery or something valuable. Drugs. 'What's this?' he asked, then carefully sniffed the open casket. It was hardly necessary, as the little room had filled with glorious perfume as soon as he opened the box. 'Incense,' he said. 'It is, isn't it?' He shut the casket and put it down on the bench, his tired eyes sparkling with amusement. Interesting booty from the reeking heat of some bazaar. I sat down on the chair as he instructed me, and waited while he went back to the bench with his pad and noted down the grubby items he had laid out there.

He went on writing for a moment longer after he came back to the table, having now filled two or three pages of his note-pad, then he put his pen down and leaned back, wincing slightly as the back of the chair bit into his weary shoulder-blades. He looked pleased with himself, almost cheerful. I could see he was about to pronounce sentence, and I could not suppress a surge of depression and panic. 'Mr Shaaban, I don't know you or know anything about the reasons that brought you here, or the expenses you incurred and all that. So I am sorry for what I now have to do, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse you entry into the United Kingdom. You don't have a valid entry visa, you have no funds and you have no one who can offer a guarantee for you. I don't suppose you can understand what I am saying, but I have to tell you this anyway before I stamp your passport. Once I

stamp your passport as having been refused entry, it means that next time you attempt to enter the United Kingdom you will automatically be turned away, unless your papers are in order, of course. Did you understand what I just said? No, I didn't think so. I'm sorry about this, but we have to go through these formalities none the less. We'll try and find someone who speaks your language so that they can explain it all to you later. In the meantime, we will be putting you on the next available flight back to the destination you came from and on the airline that brought you here.' With that he leafed through my passport, looking for a clean page, and then picked up the little stamp he had placed on the table when he first came back.

'Refugee,' I said. 'Asylum.'

He looked up, and I dropped my eyes. His were angry. 'So you do speak English,' he said. 'Mr Shaaban, you've been taking the piss.'

'Refugee,' I repeated. 'Asylum.' I glanced up as I said this, and started to say it a third time, but Kevin Edelman interrupted me. His face had gone slightly darker and his breathing had changed, had become less easy to match. He breathed deeply twice, making a visible effort to control himself when what he would really have liked to do was to pull a lever and have the floor beneath me open into an airy and bottomless drop. I know, I have wished the same myself on many occasions in my earlier life.

'Mr Shaaban, do you speak English?' he asked, his voice mellowing again, but this time more sweaty than oily, officially soft-spoken now, labouring. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. I was catching up with his breathing again.

'Refugee,' I said, pointing at my chest. 'Asylum.'

He grinned at me as if I was persecuting him, giving me a long look which I returned this time, smiling back. He sighed wearily, then he shook his head slowly and chuckled, perhaps amused by my uncomprehending smile. His manner made me feel that I was a tiresome and stupid prisoner he was interrogating, who had just momentarily frustrated him in some petty word-play. I reminded myself, needlessly, to watch out for a surprise attack. Needlessly because his options were many and I had only one: to

make sure that Kevin Edelman did not become angry and contemplate something brutal. It must have been the tiny room and the duplicitous courtesy with which he was speaking to me that made me feel I was a prisoner, when both he and I knew that I was trying to get in and he was trying to keep me out. Wearily, he leafed through my passport, and I felt again that I was a tiresome nuisance, causing reasonable people needless trouble and inconvenience. Then he left me in the room again while he went to consult and check.

I knew he would find that the British government had decided, for reasons which are still not completely clear to me even now, that people who came from where I did were eligible for asylum if they claimed that their lives were in danger. The British wanted to make the point to an international audience that it regarded our government as dangerous to its own citizens, something both they and everyone else has known for a long time. But times had changed, and now every puffed-up member of *the international community* had to show that it was taking no more nonsense from the unruly and eternally bickering rabble that teem in those parched savannahs. Enough was enough. What did our government do that was worse than the evils it had done before? It rigged an election, falsifying the figures in front of *international observers*, whereas before it had only gaoled, raped, killed or otherwise degraded its citizens. For this delinquent behaviour, the British government granted asylum to anyone who claimed their lives were in danger. It was a cheap way of showing stern disapproval, and there weren't too many of us, being only a small island of relatively poor people only a few of whom would be able to find the fare. Several dozen young people did manage to raise the fare, forcing parents and relatives to give up their secret hoards or borrow, and sure enough when they arrived in London they were admitted as asylum-seekers in fear of their lives. I too was in fear of my life, had been for years, though only recently had my fear reached the proportions of crisis. So when I heard that the youngsters were allowed in I decided to make the journey myself.

So I knew that Kevin Edelman would return in a few minutes with a different stamp in his hand and that I would then be on

my way to detention or some other place to stay. Unless the British government had changed its mind while I was airborne, had decided that the joke had gone on for too long. Which it hadn't, because Kevin Edelman returned after a few minutes looking wry and amused, also defeated. I could see that he would not after all be putting me back on the plane to where I had come from, that other place where the oppressed manage to survive. For that I was relieved.

'Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this, a man of your age?' he said, sitting down clumsily and looking sad and furrowed with concern, then leaning against the back of the chair and working his shoulders slowly. 'How much danger is your life really in? Do you realise what you're doing? Whoever persuaded you to do this is not doing you any favours, let me tell you that. You don't even speak the language, and you probably never will. It's very rare for old people to learn a new language. Did you know that? It may take years to sort out your application, and then you may be sent back, anyway. No one will give you a job. You'll be lonely and miserable and poor, and when you fall ill there'll be no one here to look after you. Why didn't you stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. Mr Shaaban, a man of your age should know better.'

At what age are you supposed not to be afraid for your life? Or not to want to live without fear? How did he know that my life was in any less danger than those young men they let in? And why was it immoral to want to live better and in safety? Why was that greed or a game? I was touched by his concern though, and wished I could break my silence and tell him not to worry. I was not born yesterday, I knew how to look after myself. Please stamp that passport, kind sir, and send me away to some safe place of detention. I dropped my eyes in case their alertness should reveal that I understood him.

'Mr Shaaban, look at yourself, and look at these things you've brought with you,' he said, visibly frustrated, holding out his arm towards my worldly possessions. 'This is all you'll have if

you stay here. What do you think you'll find here? Let me tell you something. My parents were refugees, from Romania. I would tell you about that if we had more time, but what I mean is, I know something about uprooting yourself and going to live somewhere else. I know about the hardships of being alien and poor, because that is what they went through when they came here, and I know about the rewards. But my parents are European, they have a right, they're part of the family. Mr Shaaban, look at yourself. It saddens me to say this to you, because you won't understand it and I wish you bloody well did. People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don't belong here, you don't value any of the things we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here. We'll make life hard for you, make you suffer indignities, perhaps even commit violence on you. Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this?'

That this too too solid flesh should melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew. It had been easy to match my breathing to his as he spoke, until the very end, because for most of the time his voice was calm and ordinary as if he was only reciting regulations. Edelman, was that a German name? Or a Jewish name? Or a made-up name? Into a dew, jew, juju. Anyway, the name of the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe's values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn't get to enjoy them. Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her. I thought of saying something like this, but of course I didn't. I was an asylum-seeker, in Europe for the first time, in an airport for the first time, though not for the first time under interrogation. I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words. So I only thought this to myself. Do you remember that endless catalogue of objects that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives? I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you'd better take me too. I joke, I joke.

As for indignity and violence, I would just have to take my chances on them – though there weren't many places you could

go to avoid the first, and the second could come at you out of nowhere. As for someone to look after you when you are old and poorly, better not to put too much hope in that solace. O Kevin, may the rudder of your life stay ever true and may hail never catch you in the open. May you not lose patience with this supplicant, and may you be kind enough to press that stamp in my joke passport and let me sniff the values of Europe's generations, alhamdulillah. My bladder is in urgent need of relief. I didn't even dare say that last, though it was true at the time. Silence imposes unexpected discomforts on you.

He went on talking, frowning and shaking his head, but I stopped listening. It's something I taught myself to do over the years, to win a little respite from the blaring lies I had to endure in my earlier life. Instead I stared dumbly at my passport, reminding Kevin Edelman that this one had got away, so could he put an end to the sport and inscribe. He stopped suddenly, frustrated in his good intention to persuade me to get back on the plane and leave Europe to its rightful owners, and rifled through my passport with the other stamp, the good stamp, held between the fingers of his hand. Then he remembered something, and it made him smile. He went back to my bag and took out the casket. As he had done before, he opened it and sniffed. 'What is this?' he asked, his emphasis sterner, frowning at me. 'What is this, Mr Shaaban? Is it incense?' He held the casket out towards me, then took a deep sniff and held it out again. 'What is it?' he asked, placatingly. 'It smells familiar. It's a kind of incense, isn't it?'

Perhaps he *was* Jewish. I stared back dumbly, then dropped my eyes. I could have told him it was udi, and we could then have had a pleasant conversation about how it was he remembered the perfume, some ceremony in his youth perhaps when his parents still expected him to participate in prayers and holy days, but then he wouldn't have stamped my passport, would have wanted to know exactly how my life was in danger in my little bit of parched savannah, might even have had me sent back on the plane in shackles for pretending not to speak English. So I didn't tell him that it was ud-al-qamari of the best quality, all that remained of a consignment I had acquired more than thirty

years ago, and which I could not bear to leave behind when I set out on this journey into a new life. When I looked up again I saw that he would steal it from me. 'We'll have to have this tested,' he said, smiling, waiting a long time to see if I understood and then bringing the casket back to the table with him. He put it down beside him, next to his yellow pad, tugged at his shirt to make himself more comfortable, and went on writing.

Ud-al-qamari: its fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved's arm on my neck. Every Idd I used to prepare an incense-burner and walk around my house with it, waving clouds of perfume into its deepest corners, pacing the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, rejoicing in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones – incense-burner in one hand and a brass dish filled with ud in the other. Aloe wood, ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon. That was what I thought the words meant, but the man I obtained my consignment from explained that the translation was really a corruption of qimari, Khmer, Cambodia, because that was one of the few places in the whole world where the right kind of aloe wood was to be found. The ud was a resin which only an aloe tree infected by fungus produced. A healthy aloe tree was useless, but the infected one produced this beautiful fragrance. Another little irony by you know Who.

The man I obtained the ud-al-qamari from was a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, he and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbour. Then in the early months of the new year, the winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home. It was all as if intended to be exactly thus, that the winds and currents would only reach the stretch of coast from southern Somalia to Sofala, at the northern end of what has become

known as the Mozambique Channel. South of this stretch, the currents turned evil and cold, and ships that strayed beyond there were never heard of again. South of Sofala was an impenetrable sea of strange mists, and whirlpools a mile wide, and giant luminescent stingrays rising to the surface in the dead of night and monstrous squids obscuring the horizon.

For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent, which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds. They brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse of the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours. And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, leaving some among their numbers behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away with them, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands. After all that time, the people who lived on that coast hardly knew who they were, but knew enough to cling to what made them different from those they despised, among themselves as well as among the outlying progeny of the human race in the interior of the continent.

Then the Portuguese, rounding the continent, burst so unexpectedly and so disastrously from that unknown and impenetrable sea, and put paid to medieval geography with their sea-borne cannons. They wreaked their religion-crazed havoc on islands, harbours and cities, exulting over their cruelty to the inhabitants they plundered. Then the Omanis came to remove them and take charge in the name of the true God, and brought with them Indian money, with the British close behind, and close behind them the Germans and the French and whoever else had the wherewithal.

New maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to. Those maps, how they transformed everything. And so it came to pass that in time those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves

part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles into the interior, teeming with people they had thought beneath them, and who when the time came promptly returned the favour. Among the many deprivations inflicted on those towns by the sea was the prohibition of the musim trade. The last months of the year would no longer see crowds of sailing ships lying plank to plank in the harbour, the sea between them glistening with slicks of their waste, or the streets thronged with Somalis or Suri Arabs or Sindhis, buying and selling and breaking into incomprehensible fights, and at night camping in the open spaces, singing cheerful songs and brewing tea, or stretched out on the ground in their grimy rags, shouting raucous ribaldries at each other. In the first year or two after that, the streets and the open spaces were silent with their absences in those late months of the year, especially when we felt the lack of the things they used to bring with them, ghee and gum, cloths and crudely hammered trinkets, livestock and salted fish, dates, tobacco, perfume, rosewater, incense and handfuls of all manner of wondrous things. We missed the ill-kempt gaiety they filled the town with. But soon we mostly forgot them as they became unimaginable to the new lives we led in those early years after independence. In any case, perhaps they would not have gone on coming for much longer. Who would choose to come hundreds of miles across the sea to sell us cloth and tobacco when they could live a life of luxury in the rich states of the Gulf?

This is the story of the trader I obtained the ud from. I'll tell it this way, because I no longer know who may be listening. His name was Hussein, a Persian from Bahrain, as he was quick to remind anyone who mistook him for an Arab or an Indian. He was among the more affluent traders, dressed in the light cream embroidered kanzu of the Persian Gulf and always clean and perfumed and faultlessly courteous, which was not the case with all the traders who came with the musim. His courtesy was like a gift, like a kind of talent, an elaboration of forms and manners into something abstract and poetic. His business was perfume and incense, and to tell the truth that combination of courtesy, affluence and unguents made him seem slippery and dissem-

bling. For some reason he befriended me. I don't mean that I had no idea why he befriended me, but Hussein was not the kind of man to announce such things, and I am afraid of seeming immodest by speculating. I fear I might end up flattering myself, and make Hussein's subtle cultivation of our acquaintance into something crude.

This was the musim of 1960 and I had just recently set up in business, openly. For some four years before then I had been doing a little business on the side, along with my job as an administrative officer in the Directorate of the Financial Secretary. But the British were nervous of employees of their administration running a private business as well, especially if they were anything to do with financial services, and since opportunities came my way, I was forced to take them clandestinely while I was accumulating some capital. Then in 1958 my father died, and left me enough to turn to business as my livelihood. A life of business is a cruel one, merciless, preying, open to misunderstanding and gossip. I did not know that when I started out. Then my step-mother died soon after. I buried both of them with all due regard and observances, as I shall recount in its place, despite malicious muttering to the contrary. When I met Hussein, I was thirty-one years old, recently bereaved of my father and soon after that my step-mother, living alone in a comfortable house and envied by many for the good fortune that had befallen me. Tongues were wagging mischievously about me, which in the kind of little place I lived in was an unmistakable sign of growing power, I thought. In my vanity, I lost sight of the looming malice around me.

Years before, the British authorities had been good enough to pick me out of the ruck of native schoolboys eager for more of their kind of education, though I don't think we all knew what it was we were eager for. It was learning, something we revered and were instructed to revere by the teaching of the Prophet, but there was glamour in this kind of learning, something to do with being alive to the modern world. I think also we secretly admired the British, for their audacity in being there, such a long way from home, calling the shots with such an appearance of assurance, and for knowing so much about how to do the things

that mattered: curing diseases, flying aeroplanes, making movies. Perhaps *admired* is too uncomplicated a way of describing what I think we felt, for it was closer to conceding to their command over our material lives, conceding in the mind as well as in the concrete, succumbing to their blazing self-assurance. In their books I read unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves. I read about the diseases that tormented us, about the future that lay before us, about the world we lived in and our place in it. It was as if they had remade us, and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us. I don't suppose the story was told cynically, because I think they believed it too. It was how they understood us and how they understood themselves, and there was little in the overwhelming reality we lived with that allowed us to argue, not while the story had novelty and went unchallenged. The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful, sacred and secret myths that were liturgical metaphors and rites of adherence, a different category of knowledge which, despite our assertive observance, could not contest with theirs. So that is how it seems when I think back to the way I was as a child, with no recourse to irony or knowledge of the fuller story of the multitudinous world. And at school there was little or no time for those other stories, just an orderly accumulation of the real knowledge they brought to us, in books they made available to us, in a language they taught us.

But they left too many spaces unattended to, could not in the nature of things do anything about them, so in time gaping holes began to appear in the story. It began to fray and unravel under assault, and a grumbling retreat was unavoidable. Though that was not the end of stories. There was still Suez to come, and the inhumanities of the Congo and Uganda, and other bitter blood-lettings in small places. Then it would seem that the British had been doing us nothing but good compared to the brutalities we could visit on ourselves. Their good, though, was steeped in irony. They told us about the nobility of resisting tyranny in the classroom and then applied a curfew after sunset, or sent