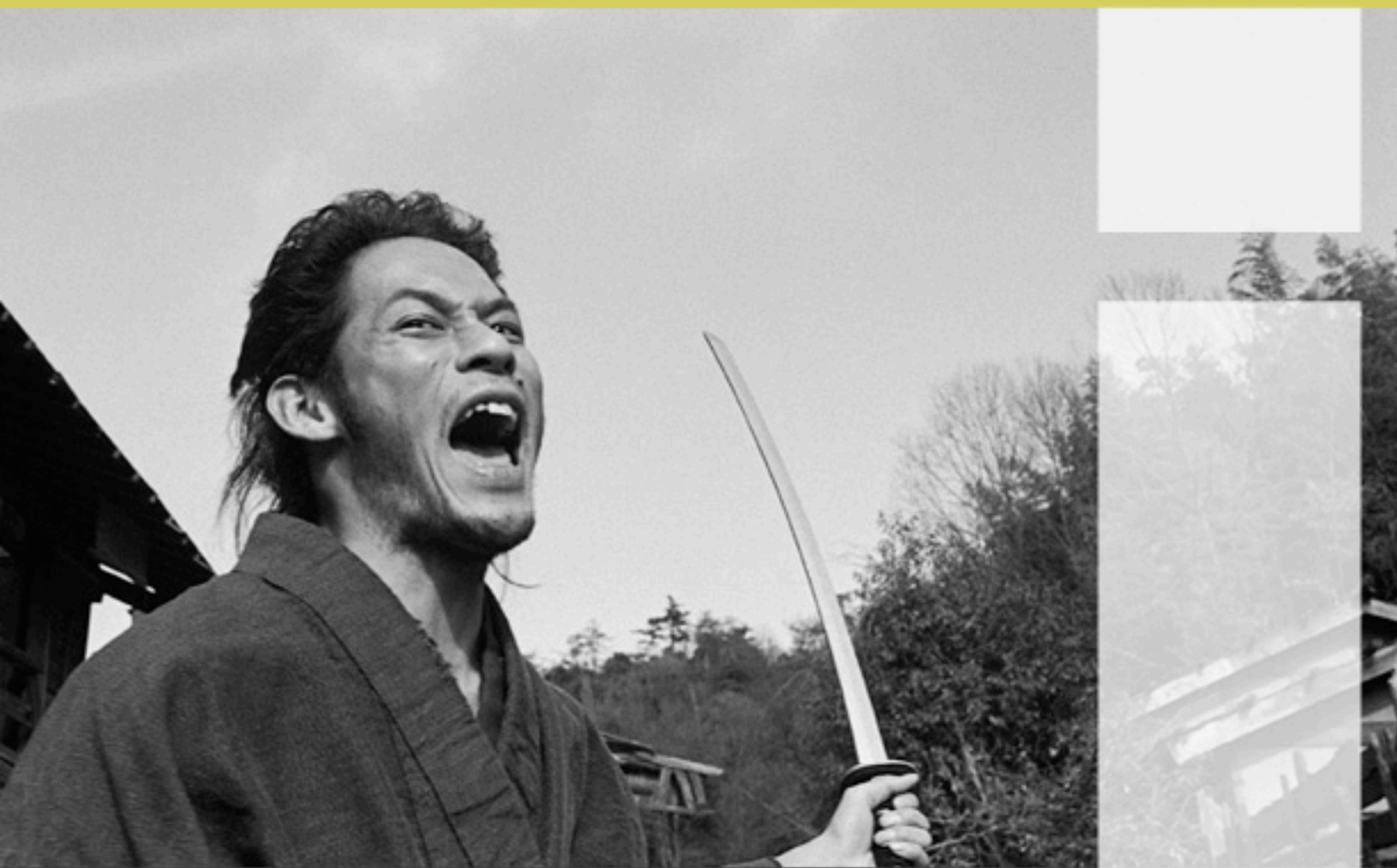


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All the waves come to rest
on your shores

&

Other Writings
By Kerem Durdag

This thing, this capital punishment

I believe in capital punishment.

There are not many things I disagree with my wife. After twenty years of being an active Amnesty International member, there is still one thing I disagree with in regards to their platform. And regardless of what the holy book says, I find myself in contentious argument with the angels above.

Yes, I believe in capital punishment.

I admit the reality that given our human fallibility we will make mistakes in our judgment of others. I admit that the taking of life is antithetical to our existence as sentient beings. And I admit that it is a cowardly weakness to succumb to the call of revenge.

But, I still believe in capital punishment.

When I was growing up in Pakistan, there was always the whisper of the honor killings in the rural areas. If a woman was seen associated with another man that is not approved by the family, the brother or the father would execute her. If the son had taken a life of another family member in a conflict, the afflicted family would grab his soul without a remonstrance on anybody's part. This death, this hook onto the flesh of retribution is something that was always on the periphery of my vision. And so, in that quiet stillness that only ours to belong to, one would think that the stench of such ignorance would compel me to overcome my cowardice in demanding capital punishment as part of a due course of law and justice.

But it does not. My belief in the act of capital punishment is emotive and one fraught with logical lapses. It is born from a fountain of not willing to accept that one should live if she has taken a life. My heart says, one absolves himself of the responsibility of living, if he has taken life. My soul says, once the social contract is abused for power and a life is taken, there is no forgiveness.

No, there is no forgiveness. There is no comfort in the thought that being locked up, even for the rest of one's natural life as punishment for taking another life, is enough of a hell. It is not and I will not forgive.

I can't forgive the man who kidnapped, beat, raped and buried alive a child, who in her last moments on earth was clutching a stuffed dolphin. We have all read it in the papers. I know it is hard to separate the instinctive reaction of wanting revenge from the measured response of a critically strong judgment. For me, the discussion of that separation is theological and jurisprudence exercise. And though the value of diving into that exercise is what keeps us from descending into anarchy, it should not detract us from exercising reactive ethical judgment within the bounds of human law once the determination of guilt is established to the highest degree possible.

Maybe it is because I am a parent and my insides can't absorb the pain of children from events that is out of their choice and control. Maybe because I am at a place in my life when the explicit torture of another life for the satiation of power is simply intolerable; simply and devastatingly intolerable. Maybe because I am tired of us wanting to look away of what we do and are capable of doing.

I don't have the answers that stand up to the strict cross-examination of thought and reason. And for the moment, even if it did matter, it does not matter enough to me. The fidelity of my desire to see the man who committed the above crime die (yes, die) is modulated only by the image of the child who suffered, suffered, suffered in a way that forsakes my trust in us as humans and in the gods above.

Yes, it is a self-righteous to seek the death of the other as a penalty. Yes, it is cowardly to lick revenge and fuel the emotion. Yes, it is a failure of my soul to be unable to forgive today that man. Yes, it is the breath of anger that condenses on the mirror in front of me.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

But he has to pay the price for being an animal. For taking a life. And if it means that the echoes of doubt bouncing in the caverns of the inferno will shatter me, so be it.

So be it.

We are killing our women

I can't sleep well these days. I can't sleep well because we are killing the women of our world. We are killing them in person, we are killing them in our ignorance, we are killing them in our hate.

A long time ago, when I was growing up in Pakistan, reading the newspaper in the morning, I would see announcements for lashings. They were, are, still called lashings. Whippings. Twenty. Forty. Sixty. Hundred. The number registers on the pupils, burns the retinas into speckles of light. The cortex tries to understand. How does all this happen. How does all this happen?

I tell you what; all this used to happen in the national stadium. And this is how they did it.

The accused would be strapped in a X-shaped wooden cross, at a forty five degree angle to the ground facing the dirt. A microphone was placed near his face. And then as each stroke of the whip took off pieces of his skin, thousands would hear the birth of screams. When it was done, the medics would come and carry off the guilty.

And we, they, did this to women who were raped. Side by side together with the rapist. Side by side in that abyss of humiliation and want and need in that desertion of all that is right.

How can I sleep? Tell me, tell me, where is that refuge? Where is that hallelujah?

Let us not get self-righteous and heap invective and spit at those who are us; we kill women in my adopted country; here. A recent U.S. Government estimate indicates that approximately 800,000- 900,000 people annually are trafficked across international borders worldwide and between 18,000 and 20,000 of those victims are trafficked into the United States. Yes, trafficked into the United States and subject to forced labor and sexual exploitation. Killing them softly and slowly.

225,000 victims each year from Southeast Asia are trafficked. 150,000 from South Asia. Over 100,000 trafficked each year from Russia and former Soviet states. An additional 75,000 or more are trafficked from Eastern Europe. Over 100,000 come from Latin America and the Caribbean, and over 50,000 victims are from Africa. Most of the victims are sent to Asia, the Middle East, Western Europe and North America. And this killing of the soul, of the flesh, of heart, goes on.

It goes on as 400,000 women in the US are victims of rape every year. 2 million women in the US are victims of physical assault every year. This is the insanity of us.

The insanity of Darfur. Of Rwanda. We have raped our women, we have burnt them into ash, ripped out the next generation from their wombs and disintegrated their molecules out of their earthly presence.

In Afghanistan, we sell our daughters to pay off debt. We sell our daughters. This insanity.

In how many places of our earth, do we kill our women for that god-forsaken word called, honor and pride?

So, I say what we are doing to our women in genocide. I say, what we are doing is evil. I say what we are doing has to reflect in the inner pools of our inhumanity and congeal into retribution and forgiveness.

You know, there is a saying in Turkish: heaven lies in the soles of your mothers' feet. When I tell my mother about not being able to sleep on the phone, I can feel her lips purse tight and curl. We have failed our mothers.

We have failed because we are killing the mothers of the world. God Almighty, we are killing the women of the world.

I am lost in this wilderness of killing. I am the father of daughters and have I have nothing to offer, but this voice, this yelp of a fight, this claw of a song:

On that horizon where this a drop-off to nowhere/ On that savannah of love that is false/ On that rush of a sky which ejects liquid poison/ I claim my release, I claim my release. And my eyes see no savior/ My ears do not hear any angels/ My hands can't hold any revelations/ I claim my release, I claim my release. If it is my blood, you have it/ If it is my prayer, you have it/ If it is my life, you have it/ But I claim my release, I claim my release.

The real and true story of my third and last tattoo

I have three tattoos; the last and the largest one inked here in Portland after much negotiating with my wife. Actually, about ten years of negotiating. Here is the story of "How I Got My Third Tattoo (And I Really Really Love my Wife)".

It all started when I was in college and right at the end of the movie "Dead Poets' Society" (when Robin Williams melts the world with his goodbye to the students) in a movie theater in St. Cloud, Minnesota, I got up on the seats with my friend and we screamed "Carpe Diem" till the usher came in and with urgent diplomacy, kicked us out.

So, in 1991, I went to my first U2 concert; 8th row from the stage at Foxboro. By the end of the two hours I was hoarse from all the singing, drained from the release of energy and I heard Bono say, "Boston, goodnight. Carpe Diem!" I promptly went and got that tattooed on my right arm.

A year later, for a month straight, every night, I saw dreams where I was swimming in the Aegean, near the village of Selcuk where my mother lives. The waters of the Aegean surrounding my every pore. I can see the ruins of Ephesus surround the south end of the village. From my mother's house, I can see the olive groves. Saint John Baptist's church right behind my mother's garden. I can feel the breeze of the water. I can feel the earth rotate and that Mediterranean sun... oh, that Mediterranean sun.

Soon after that I see my future wife (Mary, South Portland native and tall, beautiful, athletic, compassionate, wise) come into the common room of our graduate school dorm, wearing her Wellesley sweatshirt, right after playing volleyball (yes, she walked in slow motion with the sun radiating onto her long hair). Right there I fell in love (my grand introduction to her, as I watching Star Trek, "So, you went to Wellesley?"). The next morning, I went to get what I saw in the dream tattooed on my left arm.

Couple of years pass, my wife after much adventure (she was with another guy when we met; I won) says it is time to get married (regardless of ethnic background, guys do not volunteer readily). Fairly soon after the wedding, she requests (it was requesting early on) that I not get anymore tattoos. Philosophical differences arise regarding what one does with their bodies. In the interest of love and peace, I agree (reluctantly and only verbally).

Now keep in mind that nobody considered respectable in Pakistan or Turkey, two of my birth cultures, when I was growing up ever got tattoos. So, I had broken ranks; in fact my mother told me after I got my second tattoo, "Kerem, you are crazy and stupid."

Anyway, couple of years after the Treaty of No More Tattoos, I start having this image of a sun with a tree in the middle of it, surrounded by stars on my right shoulder. It started the day we were blessed with the birth of our son. Couple more years pass, and every once in a while, I feel that I **need** the tattoo. Per the Treaty, there is no deal. I am blessed with my first daughter (at Mercy Hospital) and to celebrate that event, I say that I **need** the tattoo. No deal. Then two years pass by and when my second daughter (again at Mercy) arrives, my insides are screaming for the sun with the tree and the stars to be imprinted on my life; I say it is my destiny to have the tattoo. Still no deal.

I keep on saying, "But, I gave up two countries for you!" My sentiments are deeply appreciated but the Treaty stands.

I design it nevertheless. I present detailed plans and proposal on the unobtrusive size, the symmetry of the visual elements, the meaning of each aspect that ties to my family, and how, "Mary, this will be the last one. I promise." At no point do I cry, but I do beg (and you thought all Middle Eastern males were macho). I beg a lot.

On February 3, 2007 the Treaty is modified and ratified. And as the ink exits the needle to come to rest under my skin, here in Maine, I know I have become complete.

Here in Maine, because of Mary.

All the waves come to rest on your shores

Before you read my words, I would like you to get Barber's Adagio for Strings ready. If you don't have it, buy it from iTunes, from Best Buy, or from your local neighborly CD store. Any conductor, any orchestra would do (my favorite being Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic). Take a couple of deep breaths, and after you close your eyes, count to twenty and by then the wisps of white light that are bouncing off your retinas will cease. Then open them. Play the music when you feel like it.

At Saint John's University the Marcel Bauer designed church rises from a hill that is the apex of the campus and if you are lucky and wake up early enough you can bathe in the spears of colored light as they cascade at sunrise when the face of the sun hits the stained glass façade. The wooden pews are lined at an angle converging to the center of the church, the altar. And where the altar is, is where directly up above in the ceiling is a skylight. For me, that church is sacred.

It is here in that church, I learned how to remember, love and be a man.

That happened when I got the news of my father's death on the phone around 8 pm in my dorm room; it was his business partner 10,000 miles away telling me he was not a survivor of the bus accident and that my mother was already on her way to claim the body. I walked to the window and screamed. Then I was falling on my knees and my head being cradled by my friend Luis Antonio Moreira.

Luis is my Brazilian twin. Luiz had not had any formal education but thanks to the Benedictine monks found himself at Saint John's. He grew up without running water or electricity and had lived with the Indians in the Amazon. At Saint John's he used to play soccer with bare feet and run circles around collegiate players. He can play any tune on his guitar after listening to the original music once, and at last count could speak more languages than he will care to admit. And in the middle of Minnesota blizzards he would go outside to feel the snowflakes on his tongue.

Several years ago he walked for three months with just the clothes on his back in Italy tracing Saint Francis' steps. Why? To remember ol' Francis, he said.

To this day, if something happens to him, I feel it. And we talk when we have to go to our inner temples. After my wife, my kids, my in-laws and my mother, he is my anchor.

As he cradles my head and strokes my hair and reciting Psalm 23, he tells me to go to the church. To the temple, he says. So, I go. I am in the middle aisle looking straight at the altar and the only light is from the dim lights under the internal arches on the sides of the church walls. The crucifix was in front of me. And on my knees, I recited the prayers from the Quran I knew. It was then I learnt what it meant to love.

One loves by remembering. The film strip of my life, my father's life, ran through my head and the loud din of voice and sight that crams every recess of your insides was mine to carry. And at that point one decides that the exit from the darkness is in the attempt of being alive. So, I dove into a sea of this country.

Couple of months later, Luiz and I celebrated Memorial Day at Saint John's by jumping into Lake Sagatan.

And I come up for air here in Maine and now absorb the day with my family. From the sacred Minnesotan church to this edge of the Atlantic, I remember and love. And hang on to the anchors.

Listen to Barber. Hear how the violin walks on your skin and the melody makes you bend your neck and helps you see your hands. Your hands that held the one you love, the one you remember, the one that made you in ways only your destiny knew of. When the music from the strings undulate, the waves of what you wanted to say and do and see, rest on your shores.

Rest. Rest. All the waves come to rest on your shores.

Kerem is in heaven

I am writing this from heaven. Yes, from heaven. Contrary to what you may hear of what is in store for us Muslims here, there are no virgins and no rivers of milk and honey. Rather, there are lot of Turkish football (it is football, not soccer) fans here, and honestly, for purposes of world peace and gender equality, I prefer the football fans. And what we have are rivers of raki (similar to Uzo, but oh, with so much more body and flavor) and Turkish tea; again much preferable.

One could posit that my presence in heaven is a result of happenstance. Certainly, my life has been one that has it share of destiny (meeting the fair maiden who is the light of my life), luck (making it to a catholic university in the middle of a Minnesotan winter when I had never seen snow in my life), fortitude (finding out that the catholic university was all male), and sheer fortune (my three kids picking me to be their father). Coupled with some fairly bold decisions (waiting till the last day of the given deadline to ask my wife for marriage) and flair (that unforgettable 30 yard kick off a half-volley from my left foot to the upper right hand corner of the net in a football game several years ago), heaven could be said to be a just prize.

Sure there are always the critics. The person who said that as a writer I needed to less insufferable (J.F. Power, National Book Award winner, with whom I had a writing class), or as a poet my translations of Turkish and Urdu poems were awkward (a Pulitzer Prize winner, who I still greatly admire, shared that nugget), or as an engineer I lacked the ability to deliver results (an ex-CEO who suffice to say is not on my Christmas card list) may think I don't deserve heaven. Certainly not deserving of hell, but heaven for me is perhaps too rich a prize.

Nevertheless, here in heaven, I have friends and family. Heaven lacks the linearity of time and space, so the dissolution of past, present and future is fluid enough that memories and dreams and what is real is all bundled together into experience. And in that experience, there (seems) to be truth, sensibility and trust. Sure there is argument among us (is the idea of nation state a dying one given the disappearing of border with human immigration?), and disappointment (will Monty Python ever reunite for one more show?) but it is all under the umbrella of a resonant celebration of each other (U2 and Vivaldi are constantly playing here... live shows).

And you see the mischievous ones here; Tolstoy and Rumi always playing jokes (Tolstoy's favorite: having a 15 minute greeting on his voice mail. Rumi's favorite: Cursing like a shipwrecked sailor every time you ask how he is doing) on all of us. For us guys, being able to have decent conversation with Ava Gardner, is well... a confirmation that the male species is indeed capable of not botching things up.

But I digress (a fairly nominal Turkish trait). You may be wondering why is Kerem jabbering on about heaven when gas prices in the US are nutty and the projected money spent on the oncoming general elections will be on the order of half a billion dollars. The reason my friend (another nominal Turkish trait; our hospitality) is simple: Turkey is in the semi-finals of the UEFA European football championships. This tribulation happens every four years and this year after 12 years of waiting, I get to scream my head off with 70 million other Turks every three days as we play the other countries. We have never made it to the semis, never have won three consecutive games with goals in the last minute of the game, and never have had to face Germany (June 25th, 2008, 20:45 GMT) on our way to endless glory (who needs virgins) of playing in the championship finals.

Sure we can lose and my passport to heaven will be revoked and the devil will be beckoning me to hell to keep his miserable desperation in company. But I know, you know, all of us know, that is impossible simply because we believe. We believe in the round ball to release us to places where we go to be closer to God. Trust me on this. Really, trust me.

Who is this crazy Turkish guy?

I get the 7 year old boys together in a huddle around me. The erstwhile members of the Scarborough Marlins. I tell them the shirt I am wearing is a sign of the love for the game (No 9, Ronaldo), that this why we make magic happen and that I want them to play their hearts out. They are looking at me and I can see it in their eyes: Who is this crazy Turkish guy?

I tell them there are five cardinal rules of the soccer game. First, we have fun (lots of smiles); you get to the edge of the box, wind up that foot of yours, and take a nice big crack at goal.

Two, we rock and roll. At this point (there is a little confusion on this one), one of them says, "Rock and roll? You mean we are going to play music?" I say, yeah with our feet. The answer is taken at face value and there are no follow-up questions.

Three, when we get the ball, we move and kick it to our front (I get a couple of serious nods on that one). One of them says, "How about if I kick it to the side?" "Johnnie, not a problem if you kick it to the side, as long as you are going to get it to go to the front." More nods and we are doing good.

Four, when they come with the ball, we jam them; you get in front, stand straight with legs closed and after they are done kicking, you get it from them. There is a beehive of muttering, "jam'em, jam'em, jam'em." Yeah, that is what we do, we jam'em.

And five, no trash talking. You trash talk, you are going to take a break on the bench. Liam says, "But, what if they tease us?" I say, you let your feet do the talking and... you rock n' roll. Before, I even get to finish the sentence the boys got their hands in a pile saying, "one, two, three, rock n' roll!"

So a Turkish guy who lives and dies on the rhythm of soccer, get the privilege of joining 7 years learn for themselves why, o why, when Ronaldo creates magic with the ball, the whole earth turns upside down, gravity is lost and we start floating away while the gods descend from the heavens above and become mortal.

And it is mortality I avoid when I am out there on the green grass running right beside the boys. They jam the onward molecular rush of the opposing team and push the ball and will that round object to go towards its manifest destiny. And as the ball is going, I see my son right behind it, kicking it, get it ahead, lifting his head up to see if his friend Travis or John is next to him, push it to John who is on his right, and then John turns it to his right ever so slightly, get to the box and takes a shot that results in the following sequence of events. The ball corkscrews to the upper right, arrives at the nylon netting which dutifully acknowledges the arrival of the ball and a whole set of arms go up and I realize, I am hollering, "Goal!", channeling the wonder that is being part of 80,000 people, representing 60 million, focusing on redemption, forgiveness and salvation all in the name of soccer for our team.

And it is soccer that also sustains me in Maine; the young boys that will one day become men, but the men I play with competitively in the Maine Masters Soccer League who still know what it is to play like when we were boys. No, we will not admit that we are a little slower against those collegiate players whom we were once. No, we will not admit that running after kids and taking care of family commitments sometimes affects our mental acuity for the games. And yes, every time I run down the left wing and cross that ball and one of my team-mates get a header into the goal, the world melts, time stand-still and every secret is revealed.

All those secrets from way back. And all those secrets that are new for me in Maine. You see, I did all those cartwheels at midnight when Papelbon threw, Varitek caught and the mound was rushed and the Red Sox won the World Series. I was part of the Nation. The distillation of desire. The arrival of our childhoods. The deliverance of immortality.

This is my America

I am having dinner at the Turkish restaurant, *Mediterranean Grill*, and there is a piece of me that does a slow motion dive to the memories of what my mother used to cook. This dive here in Freeport, Maine, in a restaurant where the owner, a Turk, is married to a Chinese. And before my mind starts running, I say to myself that I, born and raised in Pakistan of Turkish parents, married my soul-mate who grew up in South Portland and gifted me a wonderful father-in-law who is 100% Finnish, belong here. I am an immigrant in Maine; one of many who belong here in Maine; we belong to the Maine ocean and sky, long before and long after the immigration debate.

Yes, America belongs to the world and the world belongs to it.

So as the talking heads holler and scream about the dead immigration bill that was yesterday and what immigration is and is not, I want to tell them that Fr. Rene McGraw, a Benedictine monk from Saint John's University who taught me Tolstoy, Heidegger and Nietzsche once said this to me, "Kerem, the light of the world is born from everywhere."

Yes, America belongs to the world and I belong to it.

Build the walls on the border. They will break through it. Since which time immemorial past, has an actual physical, tall, imposing, armed wall kept out ourselves?

Amnesty? Amnesty from what? We are all part of a living social fabric; this is the fabric that clothes us. Come on, ask us. Us, the ones who came here to live, to carve out a color for our destinies. Us, who injected an IV of personal freedom and social obligation straight into our veins. Ask us if we feel the root of our lives here on this land where Whitman breathed the words that define us and where Lincoln talked to his God and ejected the demons of humanity's ignorance. Ask us if whether these roots grew, as we grew.

Today, already there are graduated and comprehensive steps to acknowledge and attain the requirements of being part of that alive social fabric. There are enough processes to choke the system into incomprehensible inertia. Trust me on this; as I went through my F-1 visa, EAD card, H1-B, green card and citizenship process, I was singing Gloria Gaynor's "I will survive" from the rooftops. Ask us.

Since when did the nation-state get defined by the few? Ask us.

And for all of us that are beholden to the fear of the 10, 11, 12 million undocumented immigrants, this is what I say: reach out at the grass-roots level, educate the present and the next generation, envelope the community with acceptance and respect and include us in the decision making process. It will take a while, but it will happen. The other will become us, and we will become them. Let go of the fear of losing what makes you, you, because your clay and your mud and your ash is ever-present.

Yes, there are no easy answers but that is why I came to America; to ask, to seek, to be. I came, regardless of manifest destiny, to create, to extend beyond the limitations of my past, to be a world citizen on my own terms.

To the guy who called me a "damn foreigner" and a "good for nothing wetback" (his geography was interminably off), asking me to "go back where you came from" just several months ago here in Maine, hear this roar (yes, once again) from me: This is my home. And this is my America.

For every time a TSA agent tells me to go to one side for a full body security check, I say, this is my America.

My Ellis Island was the JFK International Airport. Seventeen and a half years old and I landed in this country ready to live.

And I lived because I fell in love and became complete when I met and married Mary and became a father to kids who have the blood of central Asia, Finland and the British Isles running through their capillaries. Look, I became an American, because Katahadin is part of my soul, Johnny Cash is imprinted on the underside of my neurons and Charles Bukowski is my man.

So, ask us.

Yes, America gave birth to me. And there is a whole world of us, us immigrants, birthing America everyday.

They hanged Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto

In the early morning light of April 5, 1979, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the deposed Prime Minister of Pakistan was hanged.

I was in school that day. Class 5-S, situated on the ground floor of the Junior Section of Karachi Grammar School, with its windows facing the courtyard where the hopscotch lines were marked out. To the right of the courtyard was the old boxing ring, without the ropes, a testament to a sport that was discontinued ten years before, deemed too dangerous for us boys. To the left of the courtyard, was the assembly hall with its metal roof.

It was sunny and bright. The air still slightly cool. The usual cackle of conversation rippling through the seats. And I was looking at the clock on the right hand side of the blackboard. Ten past nine.

Mrs. Fernandez, the principal came to the class and whispered to our class teacher. As she left, the teacher turned to the class and said, "The Prime Minister of Pakistan was hanged this morning. The school is shutting down immediately."

Over the course of the next several hours, we got picked up by our parents. This is one of two times when my father actually came to pick me up from school in his entire life. As he drove, he said to me, "Son, they hanged Bhutto. Son, they hanged Bhutto. Our lives are going to change."

As we drove away from the school, I could see people start throwing stones at the windows of the school. This was the school Benazir Bhutto had attended. Yes, our lives were going to change.

When I got home, my mother was crying. She said to my father, "Ismet, I can't believe they hanged Bhutto. Ismet, what are we going to do?"

I didn't go to school for the next two weeks. There was a curfew in Karachi; ten million people ordered to stay in their homes and if they did not, they would be shot. There were tanks at the intersection in front of our apartment blocks. Every so often, jets would buzz overhead; from the loudspeakers of the mosque minarets would float messages to remain calm every time the call to prayer was made. Allah-u-Akbar, God is great.

My friends and I would gather at Adnan's house; my friend in apartment 1C. The government had taken control of all television stations and in their infinite wisdom thought showing American cop shows would be appropriate (the irony of it all). So, at the age of nine, I got introduced to Hawaii Five-O. Every morning at 10 am, we watched two hours of Danny Williams in a land very very far away chase after the evil Wo Fat; the molecules of that bliss still linger in my memories.

And while we watched, people rebelled and many died. The papers had been coerced into not reporting anything (it is an amazing thing reading lies in the big headlines) and the news at night from the single television channel talked about how good it was that the Army had decided martial law (it is an amazing thing listening to lies told by people with serious visages).

Most of the nights, my father's friends gathered at our house and the talk was the future. And the future they feared coalesced slowly, deliberately. The next eleven years, we could not breath without permission, saw our friends humiliated in public and found out that one bows their head when fear is imminent, especially when you find out how many have been hanged.

When I went back to school, the air had a different density. The sun shone with a grimace. The walls, erected in 1847 seemed pensive. Over the next 8 years till I graduated, we did not go to school many days at a stretch because of curfews. Couple of times, we could not even go home for hours after school was out because a crowd pelted the school with rocks.

That stays with me. Tasted it all over again at 6 am on Dec 30, 2006. The lick of fear on my neck. The soft touch of sadness on my arms.

You see they hanged Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto when I was nine. It stays with me.

The grace that I saw reflecting off the edge of the wing

There are those days when the horizon curls around your shoulders; you know those days when you realize that no matter which way the earth rotates, there comes a moment of humble understanding.

And when that moment happens, your knees buckle, your heart falls from your ribcage onto the bottom of your feet and things just make... sense... just for that singular moment.

Sitting in seat 7A, several weeks ago, looking out of the window onto the tarmac speeding by, I heard the stewardess say, "Ladies and gentlemen, there are two servicemen on board this aircraft and I would like us to show our gratitude to them." And in that realization of our humanity, we clapped for several minutes.

As the clapping subsided, and I settled back into my seat, my mind swirled into a past long ago where I had refused to be a serviceman and in doing so forfeited the citizenship of my womb country. Right or wrong, every Turkish male is called up on to serve a mandatory military service; there are no accommodations for conscientious objection. And right or wrong, I refused. And when I refused, I very knowingly decided that the push of generational obligation was bending to a new direction. I would be the first male in my family not to serve the obligation; something my mother would never forget, and perhaps never forgive.

One day I can tell you all the reasons for my refusal; it is a refusal that was born because of my ability to demand a choice. I am sure there was, and still is, an ability on my part to provide a litany of moral and ethical reasons that were (and are) constantly bombarded by cultural affiliations and familial umbilical cords. But at the end of the day, it was a question of choice. And I was able to make the choice, because of the servicemen that are the forefathers of today's.

I wouldn't be in this country if several thousand US servicemen from 1939 to 1945 hadn't decided that it was the right thing to do, to go and make a stand against the bayonet of fascism and totalitarianism. Those 18, 19, 20, 21 year old changed... us... and resulted in the blooming and cementing of a land where one's personal choice was delicately balanced with a commitment to another ensconced in institutions that valued fairness.

And in those days when the boot of dictatorship was on the necks of my countrymen, we yearned for a day when if given the choice, we would in our meekly human ways, verbalize a yawp of passion for those who need our voice for dignity and self-determination. I happen to be among the lucky, very lucky ones today.

Freedom of press and speech are very real to me. And though I am not one to dive into the dangerously nationalistic siren calls of spreading liberty and freedom, I am one who knows that in making a choice to seek another's freedom, whether right or wrong, or executed poorly and arrogantly, lies a courage that is the extension of the inherent goodness of that father, mother, brother, sister, and wife.

Political inclinations aside, or allowing us a moment to suspend judgments that will only be ratified by the lick of history, I am unable to tell you that struggles our servicemen tortuously brave everyday in a part of the world that I know well, are going to result in a nation or community of people that will be free or be in peace. Or that ultimately it is worth it. But what I do know is that among the insanity of the intra-family hatred, there are good people who not only desire the hell to subside, but seek a hand to hold to today. And that is outstretched by our servicemen today.

There is an internal grace to honor and service. One that every so often rattles ever so silently against the hustle and bustle of our lives. But in the finiteness of my being I want to say to all our servicemen, thank you.

Thank you I recite as the clapping subsides on the plane, my hands clasped, for our sons and daughters as the light comes from the horizon, reflecting off the wing and settling on my cheek fleetingly as it all made sense. It all made sense just for that outstretched moment.

Benazir, Benazir, Benazir

It has not been easy for me to write this. It is not easy because my heart is broken. It is not easy because that tenuous faith in the inherent goodness of humanity has greatly suffered. It is not easy because the days have been dark, here in Maine, for me.

And in that darkness, I have Nayyara Noor sing an old Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem, here in Maine, for me: *Stride today in the bazaar with your shackled feet / Salty tears in eyes and a distressed soul is not enough / Accusations of a clandestine love are not enough / Stride today in the bazaar despite shackled feet.*

Far for me to say that Benazir Bhutto's intentions were all pure, or that her past was untarnished. And my friends and I know that she loved power and believed that power was her manifest destiny. She was inherently flawed and in that flawed river of her life, she was also one of us.

She was one of us because she went to our school. She was one of us because there was an internal and vibrant reach to bridge the Occident to the West, and that reach was full of polarization and being torn into a million pieces of doubt. She was one of us because when she spoke of providing for the poor and the disenfranchised, she believed it like we all did. She was one of us because she was a Muslim, a woman who wanted to change the rules of the game, and for a limited time, she did.

Go swing your arms, go intoxicated, go with your feet dancing / Go with your head and hair covered with dust, go with your clothes stained with blood / Come, let's go to the city where your beloved lives / Stride today in the bazaar with your shackled feet.

She was the People's Party of Pakistan. And in doing so, she drove of us all mad with all her petty infighting, corruption and the horse-trading, not to mention her ruthlessness in dealing with members of her own family. All of this is the mainstay of Pakistani politics but the fact that she was on many an occasion gifted with the ability to think straight through the ringing clutter of lies and double-talk, with sincerity that went straight through your rib-cage, now that was what we all loved. And in that love, we forgave and forgot being mad.

With the rulers and the common people / With the arrows of accusation and the stones of insult / With the depressing mornings, with the unsuccessful day / Stride today in bazaar with your shackled feet.

It is easy to endlessly echo that she was a bearer of freedom. In some way, perhaps. But, the reality is that she was the bearer of a potentiality of a better life for those that were and are economically marginalized. From her father, to her, the slogan of "roti, kapra, makaan" (bread, clothing, home) is a defining crystallization of what matters in a country where the slavery is not just political but economic. That stifling boot of poverty draining the soul; Benazir was the hand that could have lifted the boot from the throats of many.

Who else besides us is their intimate friend? / Who now is our beloved city is still pure? / Who is now worthy of the executioners hand?

And as Benazir failed us, we failed Benazir. You, me, the East, the West. Our own hubris, ignorance and busy lives kept us from coalescing a singular voice against the extremists, not just with bullets and rocket launchers, or illuminated thought and discourse, but with a coherent vision of alleviating the Gordian knot of economic disenfranchisement that is now multi-generational.

Pick up the burden of the heart, let's go heartbroken ones / We are the ones who have to be murdered again my friends / Stride today in the bazaar with your shackled feet

She did try, and so will we. But, the days are dark. And at night, as the photons from the computer screen give me a bluish tinted light view into another home for me, that is far away, and yet resides under my shoulders. The music plays, the singer sings, the poet writes and I sit in silence.

All about Jon

My friend Jon Robertson, together in partnership with his four children and wife, is leaving Biddeford for Hong Kong in a couple of days. Leaving for about three to five years. He is going to be the coordinator and front-person for his company in Westbrook to set up operations in the Chinese mainland to grow their markets and products wider. The native Mainer is leaving the womb. I am going to miss him and his family. Actually, I am going to miss him terribly.

I first met Jon in New Hampshire in the mid 90's when the company I was with, hired his company in Wells to provide contract electrical engineering services for one of our product lines, which in those days was one of the leaders in the global market. Jon, unassuming but confident, had this easy way of putting things in perspective, a combination of the fact that he is as good as an electrical engineer one will find with a very keen sense of humor. Deadlines, people with high expectations, vendors who did not know their products as well as Jon did, and a corporate ethos which was struggling with putting its arms around a new way of doing business, were the things Jon took, processed and calmly executed. He said it the way it was, did it the way he thought was right and stood behind what he did with pride.

We hit it off. I (as you well know) prone to outward displays of emotive exuberance (loudness, gestures with hands, soccer, poetry, etc.) found this oasis of calm and genuineness a little whisper of wisdom from the gods above. I can't speak for him, but I tend to believe he thought we both shared the prime vision of working hard and having fun while doing it. After a year or so of working together, he decided to join my company. Couple of months after he joined, I had to give him the news.

I wrote him a letter. Took me a while, but I wrote it. I read it many times over and then I asked him to sit with me in my office. I told him that I was leaving for another job because it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up; it was not something I was searching for and it was not something I could deny. And as I said that, I cried. I cried because I felt like a heel for letting him down, and I cried because I was going to miss working with him. I made promises that we have all made to those special ones in our lives that are part of our earthly anchor. And I hugged him tightly.

For the next decade we shared the birth of our children, our wives became good friends and getting together as a family by the beach and having a cookout became not just something we do, but what we are. And in doing so, as much as I came to belong to Maine, a Mainer became a very close trusted friend.

Over the course of that journey we have shared the struggles that come with learning, growing and adulthood. And part of our friendship is this crazy commitment we have given ourselves to live our professional and personal lives with a constant taste of Maine in our mouths. And this on occasion means to stretch our shoulders to balance a new horizon.

So, in his church in Hollis, we all gathered to wish Jon and his family the Lord's good blessings to stay with them on this adventure. The adventure will have plenty of twists and turns (no softball for Jon, so he is actually planning on playing soccer....ah, the majesty of having him appreciate the beautiful game!) and the change will be dizzying; there will be transcendent moments of loneliness coupled with the lush colors of love and grace. And he, Deanne, Rachel, Rebecca, Lydia and David will be gifted with a world. Mainers gifting themselves and in turn receiving secrets that will sustain all of us.

No matter how many Skype calls we make, he will be on the other side of the Pacific as our kids get older. So, in that church in Hollis, I tightly hugged him again. I told him how I am going to miss him. I told him we will see each other again soon.

My father, my Mercedes Benz and me

My father always drove a used Mercedes Benz after the age of thirty-seven. Every time he turned that key in the ignition, he used to rev it up, let the engine settle into a rhythm of noise that only he knew, and then always, always, with a light smile on his lips, used to put it into gear.

The love of cars was one of the few things we did share in common. The love between father and son is one of hidden languages, lost opportunities and competing souls; for us, loving cars was the conduit to pass on messages.

When I was about nine, after a sermon, he told me that the accomplishment of three events would make him consider me to be a man. The first, getting my first job in my chosen line of profession, the second becoming a husband and father, and the third, when I bought a German car similar in make to his, and give him a ride. Yes, doing that, he said, "Kerem, my son, then I will know you are a man."

During the years from being a young boy to an adolescent teenager, I worked as a mechanic in a car garage, while also working in my fathers' office learning how to make technical drawings. He had asked me if I wanted to become an architect, to which I replied that my first choice was to be a mechanical engineer designing cars. He just nodded. I had his approval.

Soon one day he tells he is going to teach me how to drive, in his car. Speechless with fright, anxiety and joy I listened to his instructions as my mother proudly beamed from the window.

So, I get in the car, put the key into the ignition, start it up. The car roars, absolutely roars. Roars even more when I give it a little more gas. My father meanwhile is standing on the drivers' side looking in, hands on the door. He tells me to put it into reverse gear. I do so. He says, "Release the brake and gently, give it gas." I do so. However, not so gently and the car takes off, in reverse, like a madman. My father starts to scream, "The brakes, the brakes!" In the fog of confusion, I actually give more gas. My father, as the car separates from his grasp as a forlorn lover, screams, "Stop! Stop!" From the corner of my eye, I see my mother bang her head on the window as she instinctively reaches out from me. Meanwhile, going backwards, in the parking lot with other cars (now other people screaming at me) with all the noise and din around me, I hit the brakes. I stop one inch short of embedding the car into the compound wall. I see my father running up and I thought he was going to butcher me. Instead of taking out a carving knife, he yells, "That is not how you treat a Mercedes Benz".

The next two days he tries to teach me but fails. Between shouting, "Watch out for that car!" and "You are abusing the car!" and "You are insane for trying to take that right!" it is too much for him.

Years go by. The last time I see him was when I was eighteen coming to the US, in my act of independence from him. We didn't talk to each other for four years; that breathing tug of war between fathers and sons, that yearning pride. And before we talk, he passes away in a bus accident and never sees me become a professional, a husband and a father.

For years, I tell my mother and wife that when the time is right, I will buy a car that would make my father proud. With my car on its last legs, several months ago, I found a used Mercedes Benz, a model that I had looked for, on and off, for four years. My first Mercedes Benz. I was thirty-seven.

The first time I drove it home, coming on I-95, as I slip it into gear, give it gas and make that engine roar, I see him sitting on the passenger side, a light smile on his lips. Looking straight ahead at road, he says, "Kerem, now you are a man."

Yes, Father, yes, I am now a man.

The matter of choice

They demanded of me to become a soldier. For a total of eighteen months they wanted me to carry a rifle on my back, listen to a canned speeches, read outdated books, take orders from those who loved power, and sing patriotic songs. They: the Turkish government. The reason: because it is mandatory for all Turkish male citizens.

I couldn't do it. I wouldn't do it. It was a matter of choice. I said, I could build houses for the poor for eighteen months. They said no. I said, I would go teach in a primary school in a village where children need to be taught. They said no. I said, is there an alternative? They said, pay us \$10,000 and can fulfill your obligation in twenty-eight days. I said, I have a moral issue with that. They sentenced me to jail for three years in absentia.

And because of that, I couldn't set foot in my womb country for eight years.

When I first told my mother that I was not going to serve, she said she was disappointed. She said the word "disappointed" in that slow deliberate manner that melts the rays of the edge of the sun. My father used to tell me stories about his days in the army and here I was not carrying the tradition onward. Being a male Turk means you go and serve your country and here I was letting go of that identity.

But what is the totality of that identity? I don't have an answer for that except that I know that there are times in ones life when the decisions to make condense to a singular point where ones own personal history determines the direction of a life. And my identity was not limited to a definition of an action that was designated by a political structure, or a national psyche or a cultural tradition.

Having grown up in Pakistan, gone to a college in Minnesota and New Hampshire, fallen in love and married a Mainer, become a father to three gorgeous children, and a bona fide member of the Portland Master United soccer team, my identity was not limited anymore to what someone else would bound me with.

Still, it is not easy to be split into fragments. Our anchor and our roots lie in a sensibility of connectedness to a greater and larger mass of humanity. Even with all the maelstroms we encounter we have a need, a desire, a want, to belong. Regardless of where we may be born, how many languages we can speak, how comfortable we may be among the colors of humanity, what runs through our veins is that indeterminable lick of the soul of where we want to sit and just be. And for me, that had always been on the shores of the Aegean.

So, when I lifted my right hand, swore allegiance to the fluttering flag that had 50 stars on the top left hand corner with these broad blue, white and red stripes, I had re-arrived on the shores of my identity. There was the perfunctory speech on how glad we should all be that we had left our old lives back. There were the cute little flags handed out by the Daughters of the American Revolution. I had the canned letter of welcome from the President. Couple of weeks later I got my new US passport in the mail.

I surrendered my Turkish passport in the mail with a cover letter saying that I was now an American and I did not need a piece of paper from them telling me that I was not also Turkish.

It boils down to choice. It boils down to a right of making a personal choice that is core to ones heart, soul and mind. It is a choice I had found in a country that is kissed by the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Now I want to be buried with a view of the Atlantic from the coast of Maine.

80's music and how it holds the secret to our lives

I must admit that when I play "We Built This City on Rock and Roll" by Starship, a wormhole opens in the intergalactic space-time continuum and I am back wearing extremely unflattering thin neck ties, jacket blazers tortured by pulling their arms up with a hairstyle that would make any self-respecting male human being ask the eternal questions, "Is this pompadour really bring out my good looks?"

This 80's music, I tell you is very, very devious. At first you think that crooning to George Michael's "Careless Whispers" is the ultimate act of love and passion till your wife reminds you that you now at this age of your life miss two important things: 1) That boyish stubble look and 2) the taut behind. Of course, undeterred you start singing A-ha's "Take Me On" and remind her that it this to song that millions danced, after which you realize that a long-ago Norwegian music group made you do some very stupid things.

Case in point, on a mid-summer evening, a couple of us in high-school, decided to have a party. Ah, the cocoon of youth; outside, the military dictator was celebrating the fact that 99.99% of the people voted for his re-election (I am sure thankful for the dissenting vote because after all it was democracy in action; don't matter that he was the only candidate) and here we were, getting ready to put on the music. We set everything up, and one of us in our infinite wisdom decided that we should sprinkle vast quantities of talcum powder on the floor to aid in the dancing (you know for those footloose fast feet moves). Infinite in intent, not so wise, when the music got cranking away and people jumped on the floor to exhibit their moves, they slid right off and bones suffered; one of my friends broke his ankle.

Sure, the people who did not crash into the furniture (a rather small minority) and were left there to impress the other gender (yes, regardless of culture, the male exists to impress the other gender) thought they had a clear field. That was before one of us decided to put Madonna's "Like a Virgin" and get perhaps, a little too enthusiastic with the gyration of the torso. The women promptly left.

When the women left, we decided that we should put on Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" and dance to it (another universal maxim: young men for an inadvertent reason can't synthesize embarrassment). Imagine our disappointment, seeing the disappointment of the parents of our host, seeing a bunch of boys, screaming with a shrill voice and holding their crotches in that act of rock and roll defiance (sans the hat and white glove nevertheless).

Yes, 80s music made us do stupid things.

I realize that there is a vast measure of nostalgia on my part; having a handful of radio stations here in Maine play the music that is seared into my brain is part of a global plan of domination by the same folks who gave us band names like "Ratt", "Poison", "Warrant" and "Skid Row" (before all this bling-bling mumbo jumbo, there was excessive hairspray and makeup).

But apart from nostalgia there is also utility in holding 80s music handy. Absolutely. It is a well known fact that by singing "Caribbean Queen" by Billy Ocean (or other songs by the other well known, Billy... Bill Idol) will instantly render boring conversation delightful, any uncomfortable social discomfort bearable, and make you a champion in Trivial Pursuit.

And a champion of acquired taste together with that spirit of cavalier machoism and physicality in "I am Too Sexy for my Shirt" by Right Says Fred (a monumental band and not to mention a monumental band name). The lyrics are ridiculously camp, the singing horrifyingly terrible and the video... well, devilish.

But no matter how stupid, however funny and bad, there are those subtle gems which reduce us to what we elementally are. It all starts with "Every Breath You Take". Really.

Come on. Forget about the kids. Put that song on, crank up the volume all the way up to eleven and disappear into those sound molecules thumping and blasting you to al the way to nirvana. Try it. It is the only way to get back to home.

It is the home you left but never let go.

Be alive

The Boston Garden. Summer of 1992. Pearl Jam ripping the world apart. The woman I loved from South Portland was not sure about me. My father had recently died. I had to figure a way to get my sister through college. And the president of the New England graduate school I was attending had referred to me as a "foreigner who does not have the charm I am used to reading about."

So I growl with Eddie Vedder. It is the scream that rips through your ribs and shatters the cage inside your head and you shout because there is nothing else you can do and why should you; the world around you has collapsed into a whirling tornado of confusion where the eye is lost in a blue tear of regret and lost innocence; and you are tired, tired of the walking and running, tired of the loss of direction, tired of the love you lost without question, it is the weariness of not knowing if people will bury you with pride and a soft hum of wails of sorrow.

I know that I know because the blood in our fingers congeals and makes you and me scream and scream and say to everybody else that we will not give up and we will not drug ourselves in desperation. That we are going to find the meaning of what all this is about. That the fact we are losing our vocal chords for the glory of desiring what is our birthright is what sustains us, yes, yes, you and I are angry, we are angry because we are nailed on walls of solitude, sprayed with hate and separation, yes we are being forsaken by angels and prophets and by ourselves, we will scream, we will scream just to show you and I and everybody else that we are alive, alive and that is what matters to us most.

I want to huddle over a microphone, my hair falling across my face, my spine stretched between my words, and my hands cupping the iron stand for a prayer; I want to close my eyes and tell the people watching me I have the answer.

So I shiver, bend backwards, my feet planted to the ground for the lack of courage and say, yesterday I woke from a dream when the devil said, "Kerem you can not win over me".

Lights, those white lights which divide my face into two halves will scorch my cheeks, make them go red and I will be muttering to myself this is one time I will not lie. I have this fear of thinking that I am a prophet of my generation, the trembling quaking under my ankles because what if all I say and all I do is wrong, or futile or just plain stupid in front of the mike. I will say (and I will believe in it) every morning that I hope for the sin on my hands to wash away with the blue breeze which curls around me with an aquamarine satin sheet of comfort, every morning.

All those people watching me, waiting for me to voice their tongues and to answer for all their doubts and fears in a place, a concert hall, where that night I will collapse in my own dreams, and words. There is not much else I can do, except to bare my skies and embrace the raped, the pillaged, the tortured, the disappeared, the unknown, the wise, the innocent, from far away. I am one of the witnesses of my generation.

I am scared. But I have the answer to the question of, what does all this mean. Even with what I have been saying here, I have the answer because I saw it yesterday when it was 6:30 p.m. on the evening news; I saw it scrawled on the warm earth outside. I will bring my lips close to the metallic flesh. And I will whisper. Just be alive.

All that and more I sang. I lost my voice for three days and when I got it back, I said to myself, aloud, "I belong here."

The woman I loved married me. I forgave my father. I put my sister through college. And I refused to be victimized by racism.

Open your lungs at a concert that is yours to own. Be alive.

It is true, it is true, it is true

Tell me, tell me, oh please tell me that we are brave enough to not to look away. So, here I say: The Turks committed genocide against the Armenians. It is true. It is true.

I am not sure where all the sorrow and laments go, but I find it a matter of soul that I as a Turk say the Turks did commit genocide against the Armenians. At the end of the day, if we are to release ourselves from the willful forgetting of our past to be able to grasp the oncoming rush of the future, then we have to sit down and admit the kiss of history.

Say the word: genocide; roll it around your mouth with your tongue and feel the barb edges, the solid bullet taste, the sting of the flesh. It is useless to hide behind obfuscations of semantics or the crutch of the mists of time; whether it was the Ottomans, the Turks, or the militia, it does not matter because at the end of the horizon, hatred born from the mouth of ignorance and power was used to defile and desecrate the humanity of the other.

And the others that were desecrated, on many occasions were Turks at the hand of the Armenians but that does not release me from the responsibility of saying what is true. Or asking that we need to heal.

And it is foolhardy to want to believe that admitting the inhuman transgression of the past conducted by those in wanton power in anyway impinges on the validity of the identity of being a Turk today or that it reduces the nation-state that we wrap ourselves in today.

Saying the above gets me into trouble. My mother refuses to talk to me about that period, and if I push too far, she will say to me, "Kerem, please, you don't know what you are talking about." Among my friends, the position of reconciling our psyche to history is met with rejection.

All this culminates with the spit of disappointment, "You are not Turkish enough." How it rips under my chest, burns my lungs.

What is one to do? Say a prayer, stand at the edge of one's world and breathe what is true. And heal.

Several weeks ago, in Turkey, a lion-hearted journalist was shot because his columns requested the acknowledgment of the fact that what is being sought is not a determination of guilt, but a forgiveness of reconciliation. For that, for not succumbing to the adrenaline rush of nationalism, an idiot killed him. Shot him several times just to make sure that the first bullet that ripped through him was understood as a message of retribution and death.

And that singular fact that Hrnt Dink died because of the abject absence of grace and sense, absolutely maddens me. It maddens me because that finger that pulled the trigger was a representation of fear; the fear of letting go of what sustains us via power, the fear of accepting responsibility for a disparate and contradictory past, the fear of not belonging to a horde that believes the same as oneself.

So, when several hundred thousand Turks congregate in the middle of Istanbul and scream at the top of their lungs, "We are all Armenians" enables a respite from the inward madness. The tears that gather at the corner of the intersection between faith and reality fall singularly and dry up, leaving a trail of promises that we all have to keep.

And there lies the struggle for me as I go sledding with my kids down hills where the wind whips right up under your chin as the laughter mixes in with the dreams you desire to have. The blood that is under my skin started out in the plains of Central Asia and along the way has sediment that lines the bottom curve of my veins. And the sediment feeds the collective history of my ancestors while at the same time, coloring the cheeks of my kids, my promise of goodness, grace and compassion.

That is where I want to stand: on the hill, not accepting of what comes easy, saying, "We are all Armenians."

Don't let the ignorance of ourselves grind you down. What is one to do? Say a prayer, stand at the edge of one's world and breathe what is true. And heal.

Some ask me about my faith

Some ask me about my faith. This thing about being a Muslim in Maine, is an urgent curiosity. So, this I say:

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

It is yearning for longing, the blood on your shoulders carrying the dust from the graves of countless holocausts, a cry for help, a kissing you on your cheek by a stranger, saying it is o.k. to be lost, it is o.k. to be forgiven, give us the guilt, take the sin, blow into the spirit and clay, lick the wounds.

It to see your children running away into the future, you are stuck here for good where your body is aching because you have crawled so many miles under so many skins wanting a sip of water, a touch of a careful hand, the slap of gentle & kind dream.

It is the fact you want to help, you want to belong, you want to grasp the meaning painting your soul black & gray, freedom is carved onto your chest but it disappears in the morning, the loss of love, the darkness of hope, that is it, what you have wanted to say, the darkness of hope, you come out of the room dreaming the elevator door is opening & closing by itself, the elevator is full of buckets filled with words, alphabets, letters, nuances, space of chances, satisfaction, your heart is somewhere else.

It the crash & foam over the oceans of disappointment, wash your mouth with lust & sin, early, it is still early, hold on to the hand, hold on to me, swim till you drown & monuments crumble, the motto of lunatics, swallow the hurt my friend, cry the tears which you never shed, for the water in your veins you never freed, the battle was never won & the war was never started, cannons and machine guns melted to iron ore in your flames, leave, leave, close the gap over the chasm, chasm, ride the waves on the spirits of horses over the plains, tell me if you fall, fall, fall for the sake of Adam & revenge.

It the escape from a lie, ask the mirror, ask the charlatan & the trickster & the lunatic behind the bars of the cage you carry under your ribs, breathe, sing and breathe, spin and turn for the nausea, ask the wind to cure the sickness of the world, hallelujah for the sake of our lives, hallelujah, continue on, leave the darkness behind, look, look at the rain of rains, it is time to remember the memories letting the banner for the disappeared to wrap itself around your skin, your hands are clean, let go of the whispers, see the mountaintop, the mountaintop will never smell your want, color the sidewalks with demands, for the release of truth to release us from the bondage of doubts.

I see you collapsing into a whorl, into arms to lift me up to smile at the faces of myself, of my other enemies, there will be a need for you and me, to mix our ashes to rise in flames we will never see, final acts of martyrdom standing on the edge of a windy precipice screaming, screaming over voices to the great void, we are here, we are here, the violins tearing itself into chords sticking to our hair, this is a marriage till the clouds fall of the end of the world, slipping, slipping further down a slide such are the thorns of love and hate and no balm will heal the bruises or remove the hurricanes from our eyes; so ask me about faith.

I say there will be sorrow, so ask me about faith. I plead there are poets who want to be rescued, so ask me about faith. I struggle I can't tell you, so ask me again, again and again. I whisper wrap your arms around the dead, so cry to me faith, faith and faith. And I voice to all forgive the living, you are free and chained to the world.

I am Turkish. I am Pakistani. I am American. This is my faith.

Raise the kingdom of ourselves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then the poet says in prayer: Raise the kingdom from under the waves of regret and bleak whispers. Swallow your mumbling, lift those legs from the quicksand of doubt, cut the fog that belongs to our fears – raise the kingdom. Raise yourself and break the glass in front of your eyes, drink the poison from the fountain where angels are encased in stone, sip in the smell of the dirt that weigh down our lungs, my friends raise the kingdom.

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

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

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

The devil collapses to his knees and dies.

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

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

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