

**The 2016 Castlefield Manchester Sermon:
Lights**

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‘Lights’

Kamila Shamsie

Let us start with the lovers. Patrick and Alice.

‘They sit in a field. They sit in the red and yellow and gold decor of the restaurant, empty in the late afternoon but for them. Hunger and desire spiriting him across the city, onto trolley after trolley, in order to reach her arm, her neck, this Chinese restaurant, that Macedonian cafe, this field he is now in the centre of with her. There are country houses at the periphery so they have walked to this centre, the distant point, to be alone.

She drops into his arms, held out stern as a school desk. He walks then, he dances with the wheat in his hands. When he was twelve he turned the pages always towards illustration and saw the heroes carry the women across British Columbian streams, across the foot of waterfalls. And now her hand above her eyes shielding out the sun. Her shirt on her lap. He has come across a love story. This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull. . . ’

This is the end of the section titled ‘The Palace of Purification’ in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of a Lion*. The following section is titled ‘Remorse.’ When you turn the page from the lovers, Patrick and Alice in the field you come right away to the line ‘He had always wanted to know her when she was old’ – and Alice Gull is dead, killed by a bomb in a suitcase that she mistakenly picked up.

Of all the paragraphs in all the world, Alice and Patrick together in the field is the one I return to most. Not for its evocation of love, though that’s beautifully done – but for the lines: ‘this is

only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull...'

I have read and written about those lines more than once. It is that shift from 'He' to 'me' that particularly interests me. 'He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. . . Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull.' Now, any student of Eng Lit could tell you that this is merely an example of free indirect style and we're in Patrick's thoughts. Which is all well and good except how do you know you aren't in Michael Ondaatje's thoughts? He does this elsewhere, this stepping in of the authorial voice.

And also, I would say to the Eng Lit students: have you, in fiction, ever killed off a character you love? If not, perhaps you don't know that moment, the last in which you allow them to be alive; it is a moment that would make any writer think 'let me stay in this field with Alice Gull – or Anna Karenina – or Albus Dumbledore.'

Previously when I've written about that moment with Patrick and Alice and Michael Ondaatje I've written about the awful power we writers have over our characters, and our wish that we could choose not to exercise it. I am forever trying to talk myself out of killing off characters even though the entire logic of the novel demands their death; usually I fool myself into thinking some other outcome is possible – this act of trickery is necessary sometimes to get to that killing moment, fooling yourself into thinking you have brought them to a particular place in order to save them only to discover you can't, it's impossible, the whole thing will fall apart if you try. The relentless logic of the universe is against it.

And today that's what I want to talk about when I tell you of a writer's wish to stay in a field with Alice Gull and the impossibility of doing so: the relentless logic of the universe.

Let me start with a confession: I have recently come to despair. It is an unexpected place in which to find myself, and quite contrary to what I've always believed my own nature to be. Not despair about everything, I should quickly add. And so – to hold off from despair for a little while – here are some of the things I don't despair about:

the people I love

the human capacity for noble sentiment and actions (including but not limited to compassion, empathy, generosity, self-sacrifice)

the ubiquity of joy

the healing quality of certain landscapes

pleasure, in the many forms it takes

the imagination
friendship
art
love
beauty
dogs

Well, that's quite a lot.

But this is precisely my problem. There is all that, and more. And yet we cannot stay in the field with Alice Gull. We step out of it, we turn the page, and Alice Gull is dead, killed by a bomb. The relentless logic of the universe.

Now hold on, you might say. Terrible things happen but not everyone is killed by a bomb, nor will be. First off, let's not be so confident about the 'nor will be' part with nuclear weapons dotted across the globe, but ok yes, fortunately, blessedly, there remain a great many lives untouched by violence or able to live through violence. Though there are many countries of the world in which I wouldn't make such an assertion - Western Europe has been one of the world's places of exception in the relative peace it's known the last 70 years. So it's worth remembering that too before we get too complacent about what is and isn't 'normal'.

To explain myself though I need to leave this millennium and this continent and go back to my growing up years in Pakistan. It was a time of military rule, and terrible darkness. But here's the thing about terrible darkness – when there's a light in it, it burns so brightly. Among the brightness of our lives in Pakistan, there were poets. The feminist poets – particularly Fehmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed – were a significant part of the movement against military rule.

As the government enacted increasingly misogynist laws in the name of religion, Naheed wrote her most well-known poem 'Hum Gunahgaar Auraten' or 'We Sinful Women' – which starts

We are the sinful women
Confronted with the trappings of power
We don't feel awed
We don't sell our selves
We don't bow our heads
We don't supplicate
We are the sinful women

The military government of Zia-ul-Haq was concerned enough with trying to limit women to the private sphere that it started a campaign aimed at doing just that with the slogan 'Chadar Aur Chaardiwaari' – meaning 'The Veil and the Four Walls of Home'. It should be remembered that the face of opposition to Zia ul Haq was a woman, Benazir Bhutto. Fehmida Riaz responded to the campaign by writing a poem with the title 'The Veil and the Four Walls of Home'.

It starts:

My lord, what should I do with this black veil
Why have you so kindly bestowed it upon me?
I am not in mourning that I should wear it
To announce the sorrows I bear
I am not a disease that I should drown myself
For shame in its dark folds.
I am neither sinner nor criminal
So why, now and always, should I stamp its black seal on my brow?

And it goes on, in increasingly biting tones, to offer the black veil to those in power so that they might cover up the corpses lying in their own chambers.

Kishwar Naheed was followed everywhere by security personnel for years; Fehmida Riaz went into exile in India in order to avoid being imprisoned for her writing. But they both went on writing.

And Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the greatest of Pakistan's poets, he went on writing, too, as he had through earlier periods of military rule during which he had been imprisoned. In 1979, the year Zia-ul-Haq hanged Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the democratically elected Prime Minister who he'd overthrown, Faiz was in London, in exile, staying with the poet Zehra Nigah. One night she threw a dinner party – as one of the guests, a man soon to return to Pakistan, was leaving, Faiz gave him a piece of paper and said, 'take this to Pakistan and make copies for our friends'. That was the poem Hum Daikhen Gay 'We Shall See', which became one of the most iconic of

Pakistan's poems with its opening lines of 'We Shall See/ It is certain we shall see/ That day which has been promised to us.'

Faiz remained in exile for a while, mostly in Beirut, but returned to Pakistan shortly before his death in 1984. I was 11 when he died; I remember the banner headlines announcing his death, and the sorrow of the nation. It was a time of press censorship, but that couldn't possibly stop all the newspapers from covering their front pages with obituaries for Pakistan's most beloved poet, who stood in opposition to everything which the government represented. The following year, 1985, a festival was organised in Lahore in his memory. Faiz's poems had always been set to music and performed by the country's most popular classical singers so it was no surprise that the singer Iqbal Bano was among those performing at the event. There were probably some delighted raising of eyebrows to see her performing in a sari – a garment which the military dictator had condemned as being 'too Indian' – he preferred the more modest shalwar kameez. The hall in which she was performing had a capacity of 700 but before it started activists from various left wing organisations arrived in large numbers, and the doors were open to let them in. Every inch of possible space was utilised, estimates say there were over a thousand people in there. The recording is on YouTube. You can hear the smattering of applause as Iqbal Bano starts to sing, and everyone recognises that she isn't just singing Faiz, she's singing 'Hum Daikhan Gay', the most provocative of all his poems. It must have been a shock and a delight and some source of anxiety to hear it. But by the time she's halfway through the poem, and singing of the day when 'the pure of heart, who have been made outcasts by zealots, will come to power' the audience wants only to join its voice with hers. And when she sings the line 'all crowns will fly off the heads that wear them' the audience goes into a complete frenzy. You can hear the shouts of 'Inqilaab Zindabad' – 'Long live the revolution' reverberating through the hall.

The military government barred Iqbal Bano from participating in any officially sanctioned events after this, but there was never any shortage of demand for her in private gatherings. She outlived Zia-ul-Haq, dying, a national icon, in 2009. And that performance of Hum Daikhan Gay has become so legendary that Wikipedia will tell you it took place in front of an audience of 50,000. This is factually untrue, and yet I feel no inclination to go online and correct it.

Let me be clear: I'm not nostalgic for those days of military rule. But what they did – either at the time or, because I was only 15 when it ended, in retrospect – was divide the world cleanly into what was oppressive and what was progressive. On the side of the oppressive was censorship, torture, the abrogation of civil liberties in the name of security, absence of due process, meddling in other nation's destinies for your own government's perceived gain which in the end wholly backfires on your nation, surveillance, paranoia, divisiveness, and above all, fear. On the side of the progressives was an opposition to all of the above, unequivocally.

Perhaps you begin now to understand my growing despair in this young century which, in this country, has already seen rendition, control orders, complicity in torture, illegal war and immoral interventions, racial profiling, thought crime, teachers being turned into extremism watchdogs, the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, a refusal to act on promises to help child refugees, the distorting of the right to citizenship into the revocable privilege of citizenship (particularly with regard to migrant citizens), growing inequality due to government decisions which are instead blamed on the presence of migrants, surveillance and more surveillance, increased racist attacks, and a rise in extremist ideologies of more than one hue. We are moving further into the darkness. There have been many different moments that could have felt like breaking point – for me, the assassination of Jo Cox was the moment I truly realised I was in despair. The kind of things that I thought happened ‘there’ rather than ‘here’ had come here. And it wasn’t an isolated event – it was symptomatic of the fear, hatred, divisiveness that seem to be growing in strength in too many countries of the world.

Some of you will already be thinking of things you can say in opposition to this – examples of solidarity, compassion, love, resistance, that are in the world all around us. Of course there are. But the forces ranged against them are far more powerful. And they’re winning.

I don’t know this because of what I hear from racists and bigots and the cold-hearted, the cruel, the venal. I know this because of the number of people of intelligence and a moral compass who have come to believe that many of those things which I recognise as the tools of dictators are a necessary component of democracy. In the name of security. In the name of stability. In the name of their children’s futures. I would like everyone who does something in the name of their children’s futures to sit down with those children and say: here is what I’m doing for you, for love of you - here are the other children I’m condemning, the people I’m stigmatizing, the rights you will not grow up with because I’m consenting to having them given away.’ And don’t get me started on the ‘have-a-pointers’ – as in, ‘I disagree with a lot that X stands for, but he (or occasionally she) does have a point’.

I realised something at this point in the writing. I wasn’t actually feeling despair. I had started with it, but I hadn’t been feeling despair since I read the Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz poems and listened to Iqbal Bano singing Faiz. I had moved instead to anger, a far less listless place to be. And from the position of anger – which is, by the way, a much under-rated emotion – I was able to be contemptuous of my earlier despair. I went off at this point to have lunch with Ali Smith, which is always a good idea mid-sermon.

‘Despair is a position of luxury’ I said to her without preamble.

‘I see what you mean,’ she said, seeing what I meant before I did. ‘Despair isn’t desperation.’

Well, yes. Those years of military rule were times of desperation. How would we ever find our way out of it? What could possibly stand against the organised violence of the state which killed and imprisoned and exiled and persecuted its opponents? And in that desperation the poets wrote and the singers sang and, in some small corner of the nation, on a particular day, the audience shouted for revolution.

In retrospect, when military rule ended brought down by the violence of a bomb, it became possible to tell a story of how we survived those years, and of how, despite all the damage that Zia inflicted, when the people had a chance to go to the ballot boxes, they voted out the religious parties which had allied themselves with Zia and his misogynist, hateful, so-called Islamic rule and voted in a 35 year old woman, Benazir Bhutto. In that story, the poets weren’t voices calling out in desperation – they were the keepers of our conscience, the light in the darkness, the reminder of other possibilities and ways of being. But all that was in retrospect. At the time, they were people doing all that they could. Not because they knew they would win, I don’t imagine, but because they chose to do all that they could.

And of course history has moved on and those days of impossible light when democracy was new and the world was flooded with hope again are no longer ours. But they still serve as a reminder that history can turn, sometimes faster than you think possible, and what appeared to be futile, isolated events can transform into a series of lights, forming a path into a different kind of reality. I’m a writer, I know a thing or two about how narratives form.

And so I know, now, that when I was wallowing in despair I had decide to form one kind of narrative rather than another. The story of Alice and Patrick had become a story of the relentless logic of the universe. It doesn’t have to be. Michael Ondaatje in no way insists we read it that way.

A friend of mine was assassinated last year. I wasn’t going to mention this, but now I see I can’t fail to do so because everything I’ve spoken about here is a conversation about her life versus her death. Her name was Sabeen Mahmud. She ran a venue in Karachi called T2F where you could find open mic nights, science classes, poetry readings, concerts in the qawwali style, activists discussing strategy, book launches, hackathons, political discussions, and excellent

coffee. Everything authoritarian and joyless and bigoted was contested within that space. The venue was important to those of us who went there but it was small, and – we all believed – that meant it and she could operate under the radar. But when she was assassinated, we discovered that wasn't so. There remain questions around which of her political stands in particular was the reason for her death - but there is no question that she died because someone - or several someones - decided a woman of her views and ways of being in the world shouldn't be allowed to live.

And then, a little over a year later, Jo Cox was killed. She was killed the week before her 42nd birthday, which would also have been the week of Sabeen's 42nd birthday. The day which would have been Jo Cox's 42nd birthday - 22nd June - was the day that a singer was assassinated in Karachi.

His name was Amjad Sabri. He was one of the finest of Pakistan's Qawwali singers – Qawwali is a form of music rooted in Sufi Islam; in its mystic, rapturous, inclusive spirit it is in implicit and often explicit opposition to the joyless fanatical Islam that we constantly see splashed across the headlines. It seems more than likely that's why he was killed. Because his music was one of those points of light against the darkness. No one knew this better than Sabeen who loved qawwali, possibly more than all those other art forms she also loved and celebrated at T2F. And so those days of June were – looking back – the point at which I fell into despair. My grief at the loss of my friend was echoed in loss after loss in both my nations of Britain and Pakistan – all those points of light being extinguished so quickly, and so completely.

But today I listened to Iqbal Bano singing Faiz. And I thought of some of the other ways of reading *In the Skin of a Lion*, which is only at its halfway point when Alice Gull dies. You can read it as a book about the desire to meet violence with violence, and the decision not to; or the ability of the heart to go on loving even after it's been broken; or the kindnesses and acts of solidarity which co-exist in the universe alongside its cruelties; or the decisions people make about whether to be on the side of the powerful or the powerless, and what it costs them either way. And by the way, the last word spoken in the novel is 'lights.'

We can't ever really read the moment of history we're living in. We're too busy living in it. But we can choose the stories we tell ourselves about it, the narratives we form about the lives around us. And I can decide that Sabeen's life counted for more than her death.

These **are** dark times. It would be irresponsible to deny that, or to turn our back on it and seek solace rather than allowing ourselves anger. But anger alone is a destructive diet. It needs other, more creative emotions to co-exist with it.

And so there seems no better place to end than with a section of a poem about Faiz Ahmed Faiz, written by the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali. It's a poem I read at a memorial for Sabeen earlier this year:

. . .I

had gone from poem to poem, and found

you once, terribly alone, speaking

to yourself: "Bolt your doors, Sad heart! Put out

the candles, break all cups of wine. No one,
now no one will ever return." But you

still waited, Faiz, for that God, that Woman,
that Friend, that Revolution, to come

at last. And because you waited, Sabeen,
I listen as you pass with some song,

a memory of musk, the rebel face of hope.