

Dževad

مزارکوه محمد اکبر لکهنوی

Karahasan

کوسه

The Solace

کاوارد با سیمه از مزارکوه

of the Night Sky

لکهنوی محمد اکبر لکهنوی

Suhrkamp



Dževad Karahasan

The Solace of the Night Sky

An excerpt

An uncertain loss

Khayyam was wandering through the town without knowing where he was going and without really noticing where he was, but at a hurried pace as if running after something, so that eventually he was dripping with sweat. When he stopped for a minute, exhausted, he found himself in a part of the city unknown to him, he was in what appeared to be a recently constructed borough in which the poor people lived, the ones that flooded into the city, wageworkers that worked with leather, paper and soap, old families from the city that had become poor and had had to move to where life was cheaper, veterans who lived off their savings and went wherever their savings lasted the longest. Those who were lucky enough to live elsewhere mockingly called these settlements bedrooms, for usually there weren't even guards, there was nothing that would make them a borough except for a mosque and some new, usually squalid schools. The inhabitants of these settlements stayed in their houses over night, and come morning, right after morning prayer, they went into town to look for work and subsistence and only left the sick, the dying or those too young to work behind in their houses.

He stopped in the middle of the road to catch his breath and get his bearings while turning on the spot so that the dry wind, an unbearably hot wind that hadn't let down all day even if just for a moment, would dry his clothes. He tried to remember his wanderings through town. Out of habit, like a dog, he had left for the building site of the observatory, but had taken a turn before getting there and set out on another route. He remembered being close to his house, only about fifty feet away. His body had simply taken the steps into the direction it was used to, where it might have found a destination or justification. For a while, he had stood in front of his poor friend Sali's house, quite a long time actually, but hadn't gone inside. He didn't know why, just as he didn't know what had led him there. There was no danger nor any difficulties awaiting him inside the house, Sali didn't know anyone here, just like he, Khayyam, himself. Maybe that had been the reason for their closeness, it had certainly been one of the foundations of their getting along so well, something they had noticed at their first meeting already – both were alone here, were part of an enormous army of scattered people that flooded this town, people without ancestors and relatives. They were so alone that they sometimes could or were even forced to think that they had given birth to themselves. The more sensitive among them recognised one another at first sight, just like Sali and he had recognised each other, and between them a closeness had developed that was without true friendship, a strange closeness bar any reason and joy. They didn't know anything about the other but understood each other completely. They had no reason to socialise, because they didn't bring each other neither joy nor any benefits, but they got together often, probably because each recognised himself in the other. Not just this town, but the whole world was flooded by people like them, lonely people constantly on the move.

Was it the memory of Sali that elicited this feeling of utter loneliness that surged upon and almost drowned him, or was this feeling triggered by remembering the brother in solitude? And why did he think this feeling was stronger now than it had ever been? Had the feeling just intensified or could loneliness actually become greater, deeper, more encompassing? Was it because he was now, after Suhrab had unwittingly ridiculed him, weaker and more vulnerable than usual and just felt his loneliness more intensely or had this loneliness actually become bigger, somehow become complete and revealed this fact to him at this precise moment? How could loneliness intensify, was that even possible from a logical point of view? You are alone when you don't have a familiar person close to you; so can this absence, meaning the not-having of somebody, become amplified and expand? Logically, or at least mathematically, speaking, it can. From zero onwards, you can go on into the negative numbers in which the deficit can grow towards infinity. Was that the case with him, was he already into the negative digits? They say that the loneliness of a person becomes amplified and complete when he begins to feel all those he had lost: It wasn't about never having had somebody, but about having lost somebody. And the one you lost isn't just absent, he is negatively present, like the strong feeling of emptiness, of lack, of deprivation. All losses that a person had suffered, he felt as genuinely and concretely as he did his skin and his nails, it was this feeling that caused his loneliness to grow and complete itself.

Recently, he had first lost Sali, the first coincidental acquaintance he had become close to after his arrival in Isfahan. And then his ill-fated investigation had begun, the one that took Feridun and his dear friend and colleague of astronomy, Musaffer Samarkandi, whom he had accused of being responsible for the disappearance of astronomical instruments in a fit of rage not that long ago, from him. In the beginning, the investigation had held the prospect, almost the promise, of the sympathies of Suhrab and especially Fuzail and maybe even a close friendship with them, but it seemed to have promised it only to make it so that now he could feel the fact that nothing had, or would ever, come of it. All the people he had met in the guest- and tea houses, with whom he shared a table even now, had distanced themselves from him. Not that he had started to see the people as potential suspects, but it was nevertheless part of it. He had been open towards the people, had mingled with them, had received and given thoughts and feelings, just like he had received and given body odour, but he had lost all that a while ago. During his ill-fated investigation, to be exact. Possibly the worst thing was that he appeared to speak to all the people he had lost as if everything was normal, but felt the gap that separated them. Musaffer, for example, had distanced himself after he had yelled at him. They kept on living in the same house, talked to each other, at night they watched the sky together. But the thing that he, Khayyam, had called the solace of the night sky wasn't there any longer. When you look at the night sky for long enough, you realise that every star is



alone and infinitely far away from the next one, but that they are all subject to the same rule and that this rule dissolves their loneliness. It connects them, creates relationships between them, and initiates a conversation between them even if they aren't aware of it. The same had to apply to humans, he and Musaffer had philosophised. We are actually alone and each one for ourselves, but we know that there is a rule that connects us, because we are all subject to it. As long as it exists, as long as it connects us, we talk to our unknown brothers. Lately, after his outburst, Musaffer and he had watched the night sky twice, but they hadn't talked like that. They had talked, but not like that.

This was what had probably intensified and completed his loneliness. He felt the loss of each and every one of those irrecoverable people, like you can feel a hand or a leg you lost. And all of it had started with Sali's departure. Had that been the prelude to the investigation that was to wrap him up in absolute solitude or was the investigation and the loneliness to which it had led part of the fate he was destined for?

The scent of fear

One morning, people who had fled from Mazandaran suddenly appeared on the Great Square. Those going to morning prayer met a group of about fifty people with a coating of dust on their clothes, faces and heads in front of the White Mosque. Some of them were sitting on the square, a few were lying about and slept, but most of them were standing there, with their backs to the wall of the graveyard belonging to the mosque. But all of them were, despite the position in which they awaited dawn, visibly exhausted and had no strength left.

They said that they had been exiled by Hasan-i Sabbah, or rather by his people. They had virtually taken over Mazandaran, initially it had only been the region around Alamut, but the area they were ruling was extending with every passing day. Just about a month ago, or maybe a little earlier, they had announced that from now on, Hasan's name was to be mentioned before anything else in the sermon after Friday prayer in every mosque. The names of the sultan and the caliph of Baghdad could be mentioned by the imams of the single mosques, nobody would forbid it, but they didn't have to and maybe it would even be better not to mention them so as not to confuse the people. But after every Friday prayer they would have to pray for the blessing and fortune of Hasan-i Sabbah. Those who had protested were slaughtered right there and then by young men dressed in white, with boots and chest harnesses made from red leather. But those willing to respect this decree would be able to remain in their houses as if nothing had happened. From now on, they were to pay their taxes to the power residing in Alamut and give at least one son each to be trained in the fortress, everything else would stay as it had always been. All those who didn't want to defer to these decrees were free to go and take of their possession what could fit into one bag.

Almost nobody had left right then, because people were hoping that they could somehow wiggle their way out of it and find some middle ground to cheat the new power. No normal person liked to give up their home, nobody leaves their fertile land blessed with good climate as it is to be found in the valleys surrounding Alamut willingly, and since the existence of God and the world, people who tend to their own land have been forced to cheat some form of power and to find a way to cope with it. And they had always found a way around it. They would bribe whomever they had to, and play a little dumb, pretend not to have understood wherever, in their esti-

mation, it would be helpful. The powerful, on the other hand, show themselves a little lenient and relaxed as soon as they have established themselves, and are willing to turn a blind eye. And so you find the middle ground that the country folk have been seeking out for as long as anyone can remember and which they find in cheating the power, the ground that enables them to survive and that allows the powerful to carry out their plans. They had assumed that it would be the same this time around with the new power. Almost everybody had stayed at home and had thought about how to come to an arrangement. By the time the new power would have found its way, had registered all the households and properties and taken control of the villages and towns, the people would have found a way to get their sons to safety and to come to an agreement on compensation or a fee or whatever else with the powerful. But it wasn't like that, not even close. They had exact lists of every household and property, lists they had obviously gotten from someone in the previous government, so that they went to every house with the exact knowledge of what and whom they wanted to have. And there were no signs of them becoming more permissive and moderating their demands, to the contrary: with every passing day, their tone and their behaviour towards their subjects became harsher. The emissaries of the new power came into the houses, knowing the name of the one they wanted to take to the fortress for training, just as they knew which and how much taxes they could gather from the household in question down to the last Dirham. If the young man they wanted to take in for training wasn't at home, and if the other residents had no idea as to where he was and when he'd be home, the men in white killed all residents one by one because they interpreted their actions as insurgent. Every Friday after prayer, the powerful announced whom they had killed for insurgency or treason, while emphasising that everyone who didn't want to live here was free to move away.

As the number of slaughtered families increased, so grew the number of those who were ready to move away, be it under the horrible conditions the new power dictated. But where to? And how? In the end, their fear was so great that the people didn't even wonder about that anymore, but stuffed whatever would fit into their bag and set out for a journey without destination or return. Their group, for instance, that had shown up in Isfahan, consisted of about one hundred families. They had left the children and the elderly behind with relatives, friends and acquaintances, just wherever possible, while the men and adult women that had enough strength left came here in order to seek out the help and protection of the sultan.





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