

Classic Poetry Series

Ali Alizadeh
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Ali Alizadeh(1976 -)

Ali Alizadeh was born in 1976 in Tehran, the capital of the then Kingdom of Iran, two years before the Iranian Revolution transformed the country into an Islamic Republic. He attended primary and 'guidance' school in his birthplace during the Iran-Iraq War and its immediate aftermath; and, having taken an early interest in books and literature, produced his first public writing – a simplified prose version of an episode of the early medieval epic Shah-Nameh (Book of Kings) – at 13, winning a young adults' literary award, and becoming the subject of a documentary film for Iran's national television.

Only months after, Ali's world capsized as his family immigrated from the oppressive, war-torn country; and his high school years in Queensland, Australia, marred by his classmates' racism, difficulties of adapting to a mostly hostile environment, and the tribulations of learning English, concluded with his enrolling in the Creative Arts Program at Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, in 1995.

Ali's experience as a Creative Writing student at Griffith was formative: influenced by new friends and popular grunge music, he began writing performance poems and reading them at pubs and student gatherings; then, after accepting an offer to do his Honours at the same university, he produced an experimental narrative poem titled *eliXir: a story in poetry*, his first book.

Ali then moved to Melbourne to study for his PhD at Deakin University, went on to complete his thesis, an exploration and redefinition of epic poetry titled 'La Pucelle: the Epic of Joan of Arc', in 2004; while publishing poems and other writings in local and national literary journals, and winning the Verandah magazine's 2000 Literary Award for the long poem 'Princess'. Among other works of this period: poetry-film collaboration with director Bill Mousoulis, *A Sufi Valentine*; and the poem 'Rumi', first performed at La Mama Theatre, published in the literary journal *Going Down Swinging*, featured on ABC television's Sunday Arts program in 2007, included in *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* in 2008, and described by Jaya Savige in a review in *The Australian* as a "wonderful poem [that] resonates unnervingly with the Australian landscape".

Ali has also had poetry, poetry translations and poetry criticism published in literary journals such as *Meanjin*, *Westerly*, *Overland*, *HEAT*, *Southerly*, *Jacket*, *Kalimat*, *The Warwick Review*, *Poetry Review*, *Wasafiri*, *Famous Reporter*, *Divan*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Stylus Poetry Journal*, *turnrow*, *Atlanta Review*, *Red Weather*, *Voiceworks*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Angelaki: The Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, and

Woorilla; The Age, The Australian, and The Sun-Herald newspapers; and anthologies such as Culture Is... Australian Stories Across Cultures, Said the Rat!, The Best Australian Poems 2008, Contemporary Australian Poetry in Chinese Translation, The Best Australian Poetry 2009, Hidden Agendas: Unreported Poetics, Thresholds: Essays on the International Prague Poetry Scene, The Best Australian Poems 2010, The Best Australian Poems 2011, Thirty Australian Poets, and Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia. Ali's poem in the last anthology, 'Listening to Michael Jackson in Tehran', has been described by Kerry Leves in a review in the Overland magazine as "a cross-cultural tour de force which puts sociality – as opposed to, say, clashing fundamentalisms – front-row-centre".

Since being awarded his PhD in Professional Writing, Ali has published four more books: a collection of poems articulating perceptions shaped by violence, Eyes in Times of War (Salt Publishing, 2006); with Kenneth Avery, translations of mystical poems of a Sufi master, Fifty Poems of Attar (, 2007); the novel The New Angel (Transit Lounge Publishing, 2008), a tragic love story set during the Iran-Iraq War; Iran: My Grandfather (Transit Lounge Publishing, 2010), a work of creative non-fiction about Ali's grandfather and modern Iranian history; and the new collection of poetry Ashes in the Air (University of Queensland Press, 2011). Having decided to leave Australia in search of creative freedom and inspiration, he lived in China for two years until 2007, then in Turkey for another year, before moving to Dubai where he taught writing and literature for three years. He has recently returned to Melbourne, and lives with his wife Penelope and son Jasper. Ali is the reviews editor for the literary journal Cordite Poetry Review, one of the editors of VLAK: Poetics and the Arts, and a blogger with Meanland.

A Familial Renaissance

for Saf

Like the Italian one, my family's rebirth
spawned masterpieces, caused a breakdown

like the civil wars of the Reformation
with few victors, countless casualties. Mine

a kind of persecution: bullied, beaten
at school for being a 'dirty terrorist' and

my resurrection stunted, my 'new
start' delayed. Immigration was more than

traumatic, abusive, for my father: defeat
and capitulation at the hands of employers

dreading a foreign-educated 'wog' without
'acceptable' Western work history. Mum's

reshaping as an 'Aussie' almost aborted:
she returned to Iran (temporarily, it turned out)

when denied recognition of her degrees
by the union. I took up drugs; became a drunk

to forget the bullies, banish from my ears
the din of my parents' jousts in the kitchen. But

my sister, a triumphant genius, the Leonardo
of this renaissance tale: the death of her Iranian

identity, followed by calm gestation – caring
daughter in the crossfire between workless father

and alcoholic brother – and then, yes, successful
delivery: a modern young woman, her alacrity

salary, property, paid holidays, etc. In photos

her posture, an homage to Michelangelo's David.

Ali Alizadeh

A Sufi's Remonstrance

I'm sick of You. Your magnificence
precipitates mental pain, ethical

cramps. That You continue to shine
blinds, asphyxiates, twists the sinews

of my words. How dare You bewitch
in an aeon like this? 14 year-old

Iraqi girl kidnapped, raped, burnt alive
by American servicemen; Palestinian

toddler's head pulped by the shrapnel
of Israeli bombs; sleepy Israeli civilian

shattered by rubble while drinking tea; not
to forget the forgotten diseased, starved

billions expiring in the squalid ghettos
of 'globalisation'. Could You possibly

justify the garish brilliance of your
intractable, effervescent spring

as rivers shrivel and soil turns saline
due to pitiless 'progress'? Or the candle

of compassion in this starless night
of cyclic hatred? I honestly can't help

my revulsion at Your volition to remain
prodigious, enchanting, Beloved. So what

if You discharge life, if my life is nothing
but a valley along the trajectory of return

to You? You flaunt the ecstasies of Union
and transcendence when reality demands

outrage and obduracy. Why won't You
let me loathe my fellow creatures instead

of being mesmerised by Your allure? It turns
my stomach, aches my intellect, since I hope

and even occasionally smile, sleep and dream
in spite of the calamities, because of You.

Ali Alizadeh

Aa-Zaa-Dee

How can I define this Real
of language in words? Signs
betray its unsayable being
like a hoax. Has no authenticity

cheated by fakeness; condemns
all things to fantasy. How can I

praise this enemy
of appreciation? When it's around

I'm disoriented, terrified
like a newborn. Has no quantity

beyond its lack; know it
by its non-being, risk its abdication

from your ideals by naming it
as a visible thing. Look and see

the home to the Statue of Liberty
is the empire of prisons, correctional

hellholes. How can you crave this
termination of desire? Beautiful

lover is a tundra if it's the eternal
-ly absent flame. It's understandable

as an ineffable terror, State
of Nature that deracinates words

like 'nature', 'chaos', 'annihilation'.
It's like nothing else. It's the absolute nothing

at the core of our stifling things
' composition. Equality, fraternity

need their triplet. I need it

to tease, evade me; like death

to define life, give it meaning.

Ali Alizadeh

Angelus Novus

<i>After Walter Benjamin </i>

The angry wind has shorn the feathers
off his wings.

He levitates on a fixed spot
by the highway. Is the wind

caused by the flood
of the speeding vehicles

or indeed hurled
by the rabid gods of heaven?

The angel can't tell. He watches
the atoms of his wings' debris

twirl in the tempest. Why
with such affection? A longing

for what? For the ruins
no doubt; for what's been crushed

by the onslaught of the divine
tragedy. Can he save any of it

from irretrievable erasure?
Will his suitcase have room

enough for the volume
of such immeasurable loss?

He can't tell
as yet. He floats, resists

being swallowed by the storm
and doesn't hitch a lift.

Brutus

After the sin, I slipped out
of the cave, bright and brave

for a new world. Father's blood
puddled behind inside the dark

house, the terror of his shadow
scraping the floor, the sclerotic flame

almost dead. I had dropped the blade
and swam across the stream to the city

where I met you. Meek and masked
– and wonderfully urbane — you marvelled

at my nakedness, wetness, patricidal hands
and wrapped your cloak around me. The smoke

of the chimneys, the chiming of the bells
of your secular church, seductive, sonorous

to my empty ears. I was the first volunteer
an absolute convert to your cause, craved

nothing but your confidence. Remember
our pacts, oaths and other artifacts

of allegiance? For how many years
I served and killed, severed fingers and heads

for you? A prodigious assassin
to your proud benefactor. I've been

thinking about all that. When
exactly and why was it that I grew

restless, resentful of your patronage
to yearn for a peripatetic life? Which knife

did I do it with? You know
it wasn't a sin. Your city had become

my new prison, you my new
shady patriarch. I had to hate you. Now

I'm a captive to my freedom
and the dusty winds of the desert

envelope me in place of your wings
as I prostrate. I kneel before your ghost.

Ali Alizadeh

Conclusion (The Fall)

on the floor
a little death after a livid
orgasm.

numb. all feeling gone.
out of breath.

next to them in the flat
a small fenced balcony
above it a cloudless sky.

Calmed and carefully
 she rolls off him
pulls on white, silk undies
and walks out onto the balcony
to breathe and sigh.

She bends over the railing
her breasts rest on the metal.

She turns around and speaks
in a soft, detached voice:
"Where's your accent from?"

Still on his back, buckling his belt
he answers automatically, reluctantly:
– Iran . . . in the middle east . . . under Russia and Turkey . . . next to . . .

"I know where Iran is. I used to be an airhostess. What was your name again?"

– Arash. That's Uh
rash. It's Old Persian
 meaning 'truthful'.

She grins and says: ☐ "Do you wanna know the truth then, Persian
Prince?"

He rolls on the floor, looking
at her beautifully curved back

and answers:

☐ You can start by telling me if you're on the pill 'cos otherwise

. . .

But she hasn't heard him
and spreads her arms
an inspired female Christ
her evangelist, blue eyes
scan the City's concrete panorama.

She says
in a raising, disturbed tone:

"You believe in Heaven and Hell in Iran?"

– You didn't even give me the chance to put on a condo . . . what?
Heaven and . . . ??? Eh?

A cool stream
terrified tears
glaze her dimples:

"It's hell. Burning all the time.
The City. Remember that . . . this is it . . ."

and head-first
throws herself over the railing.

Ali Alizadeh

Coup D'Etat

I'm comfortable with your confronting me
hurling, albeit politely, the epic query

haunting your 'tolerance' and a fever
to my soul. It's frankly a relief

decoding the cryptic cause of my exile
in the context of considering your phobia. So

here, the facts: boys of my generation
marching in front of our tanks to eat into

the landmines. Women not unlike my mother
buried neck-deep for transgression

before having their heads smashed with rocks.
Your tongue has already tried obfuscations

avoiding the 'sensitive' appellation; I put
our minds at (some) ease by offering the term

'Muslim', and using direct monosyllables
to terminate the confluence of innuendo:

"What went wrong?" I briefly catalogue
the points of my suppressed pride: Persian

poets, those geniuses; Islamic civilisation
an absolute paragon of the Middle Ages. 'We'

achieved so much: algebra, alchemy, Alhambra
Avicenna, Omar Khayam, Rumi and Andalusia

and now beheaded journalists, banished feminists
persecuted writers and pulverised regimes. What

did go wrong? You don't require my noting
British divide-and-conquer, Russian missiles

US uranium-depleted and cluster bombs; and let's
please avoid Israel. So I propose a date: 19 August

1953; and the place, Tehran. The event
the calculated abortion of the incipient democracy

of my native land. You know about
the coup that crushed our future, engineered

by the CIA with the mullahs' collusion
and our king's utter complicity? You're right

dismissing my narration as apologia
for a nation's impotence. Why didn't my

grandparents oppose the US-backed generals
in the streets of Tehran on the day our chosen

Prime Minister Mosaddegh was toppled? Where
were our prodigious poets and philosophers

when Eisenhower's operatives signalled
to venal clerics and commanded the junta? Here,

more facts: hurt by the grotesque perfidy
Iranians of my parents' generation mounted

a Revolution against the coup's beneficiary
the Shah; then the Islamic Republic; Sharia law; war

with the US protégé Saddam; and now
terrorism, terror against terrorism, and the terrors

of a nuclear war between Iran and, yes, Israel. You
find my discourse cogent yet, or predictably

tendentious? A history lecture in need of
an addendum of objectivity? You've finally

terminated the small talk, tightened
your grimace. I repeat my own morose

volition to locate an answer. Yes, we will
otherwise be prey to perennial fears and

contemporaneous wars. What went wrong
with noble hopes, 'religion of peace' and all

the bridge-building and culture-crossing?
The soulfulness of Sufi poets and the magic

of Scheherazade's stories. I feel your
disappointment. A romantic quest narrative

crusading knights vs. ardent Saracens
instead of Cold War intrigue and Third World

servitude. I grant something went wrong
all those years ago, and continues to afflict.

Things will keep going wrong. But what would I
know. I'm only traumatised and feverish

by the event's effects, forced into perpetual
exile. I've only survived. What do you think?

Ali Alizadeh

Dubai

I can't pretend
there's beauty to exhume

from these slabs
concrete and sandstone

planted in the sand
funereal totems. I can't

harmonise with the drill
fracturing the boulders

beneath the desert
puncturing the landscape

holes to insert
pillars as foundation

for incipient towers
towards a veritable

concrete forest. What
palm trees remain, inspire

the outline of the artificial
island, beach resort

to A-list celebrities. Camels
happy and humanised

logos on T-shirts
at the gargantuan mall

the largest in the world
outside of USA. Burger King

and co. don't clash
but complement the Arabic

kitsch. I can't conjure
my gifts (meager

as they are) enough
to resemble this reality

in an aesthetically refined
string of words: only this

beveled cluster
of clauses and the like

summoned by a Colossus
of a place called Dubai.

Ali Alizadeh

'Feast Of Hunger' Revisited

For Matt Hetherington

My taut insides
twisted in hunger. I was

at the table, my plate
reflected a callow face. I sensed

the sound of emptiness
creak in my bones. I knew

about you. My knowledge
a précis of our friendship: wisdom

served at the banquets
with hors d'oeuvres, empathy

you freely dished out
to so many. I recollected

your largess. My plate
now smeared with the saucy remains

of past food. I wondered
about you: have 'the spokes of the sacred

wheel' been turning in your
direction? Or is your hair's whiteness

(and mine) an indigestible
ingredient of this hunger? I reconsidered

the void before me. Now
a bowl of garnished dahl

steamed in the shape
of your Roman nose, your calm eyes.

Fetish Commodity

I used to be brave. Emancipation

eludes me now. There's nothing real

in what I get paid to do. Rhetoric

and composition, in-text citation

as useful to my 'students' as sex

education to celibate eunuchs. Pedagogy

is the ideological gloss. As a boy

I had a penchant for walking out. Life

is possible as necessity-cum

-contingency. In the way of a Notion? Desire

must become a drive. I used to fly.

Ali Alizadeh

From La Pucelle: The Epic Of Joan Of Arc

I

--Listen my Prince. This is important. I could feel
the dew setting on the leaves and petals of lilies and camellias.

I was aware of the soil's moisture being
absorbed by the roots of hollies and cedars. I could smell

the aroma of blooming jasmine and carnations. I could
taste the sweetness of wild berries and apples that hadn't

ripened yet. My finger could already stroke the creeping
ivy that had not yet covered the oaks. And the immense moon

the heart of the vast mother nature, vitality
desire filling the universe from it...by God I was

so terrified to be there, alone, a lost little girl
in the presence of such greatness, and the white circle

was getting larger, expanding, devouring me
I was drowning in the heavenly brightness. What was

happening to me? The moon was now the shape
of an infinitely huge person's face. No, don't look at me

like that! By God I'm not lying. I saw this
huge face before me, a ghost, or a fairy, or a monster

whose eyes were a hundred stars, whose smile
the entire horizon, and I was on my knees by now

shivering, about to faint. I was screaming. Brightness
above the thing's head, I couldn't tell horns or

* * *

halo, glistening. Had a gigantic sword. And I
closed my eyes. I can't believe how horrified I was. I thought

this thing, a demon, would kill me with its sword
but when I closed my eyes I saw, my Prince, I tell you

the truth: I saw houses burning, cities burning, countries
burning I saw hundreds of hundreds of soldiers of an unholy

empire destroying me, destroying the village, and
the whole world. I can't remember if I saw anything more

that night before I collapsed after the first visitation
by Catherine of Alexandria herself, Matron Saint of Maidens.

II

--Well, no, I'm not mad. That's what Mama thought
after one of my brothers found me passed out. She

became so angry. And vicious. When she found out
I hadn't been to the stupid ceremony at the Hermitage

she lost her mind. She first broke a wooden ladle
on my back, then started whacking me with a broom

screaming: Jeannette, useless girl. Sick girl.
Shameful girl. After all I've done for you. Of course

I didn't tell her what exactly I'd seen in the woods.
She would've said I was possessed by the Devil. I cried

for so many days, weeks, because now beautiful
Marguerite, all my friends, had been confirmed

as young women, started going to the village dances
without their parents, and they never took me. I don't

know why I was all of a sudden so hated by everyone
and I kept getting so, so many pimples . . . no, I won't

* * *

bore you with that my Prince. But you need to know
that I started going to the church frequently, and

started praying to the statue of Saint Catherine. I took
flowers, bread and wool to the altar, fasted every Friday

and said Pater Noster, Ave Maria and Credo in Mass
every Sunday. I confessed to our priest every week, then

every day. I spoke to Saint Catherine when there was
no one in the church. I knelt on the altar floor in the weak,

shimmering light of the votive candles and begged Her
to guide me. I wanted Mama to love me again. I wanted

Marguerite to stop flirting with idiot boys and ask me
over to her house to spin wool. And the serene statue

of Saint Catherine remained silent and looked on
as I cried. I tried to imagine what it'd be like if Her spirit

could hear me. I didn't know I had just been visited by
the noble Saint. I was so sad, my Prince, so lonely

Ali Alizadeh

Ghazal 1 By Attar

Since there is no one to be our companion in Love
the prayer-mat is for the pious; wine-dregs and vice for us.

A place where people's souls turn and twist like polo balls
is not a place for rogues; so what's that got to do with us?

If the wine-bringers of the spirit sit with the devout
their wine is for the ascetics; lees and hangovers for us.

Cure is for the purists, consternation for the broken,
joyfulness for the do-gooders; while grief is our remembrance.

O pretender, you are not here to witness our wealth
as the Beloved extorted all that we owned within us.

Words of experience came from the messenger of truth:
O weary, as you make your way, shed your grief for us.

Attar was absorbed in sorrow along this Path.
Because he's absolutely finished, his solace is with us.

Ali Alizadeh

Ghazal 18 By Attar

The word of Love is nothing but allusion.
Love is not bound by poetic metaphors.

The heart recognises the jewel of Love.
Reason has no inkling of this insight.

Love doesn't reside in interpretation.
Love isn't of the world of explanations.

Whoever has had a heart ruined by Love
afterwards will never know reconstruction.

Take a loan of Love and sell yourself
for there is no trade fairer than this.

If one moment passes by without Love
that moment will never find redemption.

Retrieve your heart from the grave of your desire.
Your heart won't receive any other visits.

Wash your body with the blood of your eyes.
Your body shall have no other cleansing.

Both worlds are filled with the Friend, and yet
there's no indication of Her Venus.

As She plundered the hearts of Her devotees
a cry arose: This isn't the place for pillage!

Give up your body for this task O Attar
because our vocation bears no malice.

Ali Alizadeh

Ghazal 22 By Attar

Every heart that annihilates its self
becomes worthy of the King's confidence.

The flower that doesn't assume the heart's hue
will be afflicted by its own muddy essence.

If the heart and the clay are attached today
won't they separate from each other tomorrow?

Your body's clay will all turn to atoms;
each atom will turn into a spirit bird.

If the heart remains in the clay of the self
how will it abandon the grave's confinement?

The heart is a mirror with a tarnished back.
If cleaned it will reveal its countenance.

Clay becomes heart just as back turns to face;
when darkness is gone all shall illuminate.

Every time that back and front integrate
the mirror immerses in magnificence.

It's not possible for any creature
to turn God-like or become the Creator.

But a truthful thing could be said
if the essence and quality of the self fade.

Every time one becomes annihilated from these two
he will subsist in the essence of Oneness.

The Presence in speaking of this state says:
A person does not become Us, but becomes of Us.

When will a thing turn into the Existent?
When will the temporal become Eternal?

If you are searching for this unknown life
make yourself acquainted with these tasks.

Sit in the shadow of a master, for the blind are
better off with walking sticks.

Become a straw and upset the mountain
as the master changes you like amber.

If you do not do as Attar has told you
every sorrow you suffer will turn to dust.

Ali Alizadeh

Ghazal 23 By Attar

The being that nullifies its self
becomes worthy of a prompt Union.

The wood that hasn't wiped out the self
cannot possibly become incense.

This incredible business takes place
on the Path of your being and non-being.

Every time your existence becomes nought
at once your nothingness becomes being.

O lover of self, hasn't the time come
for your Iblis to bow down in prayer?

You gambled your heart away in desire's path
so that your desire would bring you profit.

The heart becomes desire and you're amazed
by the celestial converting to earthly faiths.

Every breath you draw for the sake of desire
becomes like smoke in the eyes of the heart.

Unquestionably such a smoke would turn
your heart into a singed and sightless thing.

And so Attar has said all that he knows;
the rest depends on those who would listen.

Ali Alizadeh

Good Idea?

<i>For Justin Clemens

Fin-de-Siècle</i> France
much more congenial

to the glum exuberance
of your thoughts. Exile

in the land of mediocrity
and gum-trees, no doubt

unjust as Ovid's. Our Caesar
a banal bureaucrat who

jogs around a lake
in Canberra. "Intellectuals"

debate base quackery
in our desert island's

bored media. Nearly
buried by the sandstorm's

insignificance, I asked
for a good idea. My thesis

a pauper's grave,
withered formulae; since

the thirst for life
often kills. I was, frankly,

serious. You: "Then again
there are no good ideas"

and discoursed
with obstinate, burning

exactitude the belief

of doubt. Abelard lost

his balls for this. You
may be the last cynic

in the barren domain
of odious and senseless

pastoral optimism;
the strained and resilient

rope flung toward
my hands sinking in

the sand of the island's
so-called culture, or lack

thereof. Amen.

Ali Alizadeh

Grey

for Felicity Plunkett

i

In this World – which is not a world – black
and white withhold truths. In a world

we'd have multiplicities, the purity
of unqualified impurities. In ours we possess

, are possessed by, the comprehension
of qualified organs: terminal vs. respiratory

bronchioles of the lung, left vs. right
hemispheres of the brain. Not a scientist

(thank god) I best understand airports
life's made me travel: arrivals vs. departures

of good and bad, tourists and terrorists,
and our so-called democracy: the Left

(cunning Capitalists) vs. the Right
(coldblooded Capitalists). Is my being

too a binary composite, bichromatic
backdropp of gloom with streaks of hope?

ii

Maybe I'd like to evoke an irrelevant
memory to name the absent thing: my desk

when my parents bought me one after
years of penury, after pouring their money

into a loan for a flashy house in Tehran's
highest-status suburb, temporarily resigned

to their son being anti-social, introvert

ruining his spine by bending over notebooks

on the floor, asked me what colour
writing-table I wanted. Thrilled to get to choose

anything, I rejected their suggestions
(blue, blue, blue), insisted, resisted, fought

for two planks of vertical chipboard
legs joined by the horizontal third, desktop

covered in thick, grey contact. Ashen
's so boring I remember someone sneering

(probably a nosy cousin): in Farsi ash-like
(khaakestar-ee) is the word for grey.

iii

Ashy vastness overshadowed the whiteness
of the page, incisions of my pen's black ink

as I worked (regurgitated what I'd read)
to forge a raison d'être; and I stayed loyal

to the anti-colour post-migration. If I'd been
dark, wog and olive-complexioned

before, dislocation brought me the paleness
of a zombie's skin, of what remains after

so much hurt, rejection, anger, self-hatred
not the certainty of black negation,

not the whiteness of success, undecidable
thing beyond the great and the ghastly

made me, overlooked immigrant boy,
loyal to the lyrics of 90s 'alternative' music

after I heard in a morose song: "Grey
would be the colour / if I had a heart." The singer

a 'Gothic' artiste (albeit a millionaire
rock star) had just termed the emptiness

of my situation, the void of absolute colours.

iv

Cinder's interstitial, sutures matter
to interment in ether, always

impermanent. At the point of erasure
by water or air; a caesura, exceeds

fire and smoke, cremation
is the idea of keeping alive the nothing

-ness of life against the parsimony
of urn and plaque – a person may only be

existent as a thing above and outside
body vs. epitaph, black vs. light, being vs. death

to belong to a world finally worthy
of the name, a world that can only be shaded

in ineffable, incomprehensible grey.

Ali Alizadeh

Immigration

I'll tell you why.
To survive

the onslaught of religion.
To outlive

the ghosts of martyrs.
To recover

from the world's longest war
since WWII. To live

beyond the hatreds
of patriotism. To see

the kinder face of humanity.
To think

free of the Faith's manacles.
To believe

without the obligation
of forming belief.

To discover
the basic joys of being.

The price? I'll tell you.
Evaporation.

Marginalised to the point
of disappearance.

Barred for nothing
more profound than a shade

of skin, a tone
of speech, a taste

of lifestyle. Alienated
beyond the word.

Ignored by the mighty.
Detested by the commoner.

Worth it? Doubtless.
To finally grasp

humanity's fraudulent truth.
To dream

the sweetness of equality.
To see past

the façade of brotherhood.
To be touched

you might say, by the rays
of a luminous discovery.

To abandon
all faith, and come to cherish

the immense solitude
of non-believing.

To desire. To know
the power of desire. To wait

joyfully amid unpalatable sadness.
Recommend it?

Only to loathsome enemies
and to my dearest friends.

Ali Alizadeh

Iran

I cringe (or is it shiver?)
every time I hear the word

motherland. I'd like to think
my blatant internationalism

foments the reaction. But is it
the latent fear forever held

by you, my pays natal, the terror
of un retour? I'd like to

remember the scent of your
jasmine, the ooze of

your pomegranate's juice. But
the torture in your prisons

the sadism in your leaders' eyes
pervade the reminiscence. I'm

drawn to the romance
of your poets, memorialised

so lyrically in the sepulchral shrines
of Shiraz. The tales of turbaned

bards drinking the forbidden,
singing the heady praises of Love

fill me with the desire
to love you, but the ubiquity

of sub-machineguns,
the vigilance of the Guards

repel. And I've been repulsed
across the globe. I've been

made thoroughly homeless. Blame
Islam? The historical disaster

of a revolution without vision?
Anti-colonialism without

the aim of ending the slavery
of the soul to the superiority

of belief? Or, as always, 'them':
the Americans, greased up

for devouring your oil? Blame?
No, I'm not at all interested

in constructivism. I'll accuse,
as they say in my surrogate patrie,

'until the cows come home'. Why
the pretentious reliance on

Italicised French words and Anglo
slang? My mother-tongue

also terrifies. Once the language of
no doubt sublime poets and ghazals;

the discourse of submission
and hatred during my childhood.

Remember your theologians
interpreting reality? I don't want to.

I don't know if my psyche
can handle many more nightmares.

Let it suffice that I can recall
the purges, the bruises, the glow

of the incinerations. I'll have
you know that I now fathom what

you had in mind for me: a plot
among the 'martyrs'

in the Heaven of Zahra
mausoleum in Tehran. Now

I hear you're armed
to the teeth to continue your

infernal war against
timeless nemeses. Your wealthy

still holiday in Europe and plan
cosmetic surgeries. Your clerics

still issue death warrants
against 'apostates' and 'infidels'. I'm

almost dead in the quicksand
of the deserts of foreignness and

exile. Do I even begin to dare
contemplate a return

to the makeshift terrains
of memory? To the localities

that cultivated my senses
of placement, to the orchards

that I wandered as a bored
child? The people are mostly dead.

The remaining form a diaspora
of regret and disillusionment. I'm,

as I said, not a positivist. Only
a fickle and shuddering ghost

rejuvenated and alarmed
by the mention of the word

motherland.

Ali Alizadeh

Jeanette Speaks

1.

A bright and barefoot little girl
with a garland of cherry blossoms
enters the unattended village church.

She makes a shorthand cross
upon the makeshift wooden amulet
attached to her leather necklace.

She then runs her bony fingers
through the long, black locks
parted above her forehead.

She walks past the empty benches
towards the peaceful altar
and her petite, russet-clad figure
stoops to kneel there.

She clasps her delicate hands
in front of a wooden statue
and casts her large, green eyes
upon the Saint's figurine.

She whispers
in a soft but confident voice:

– Sister Catherine. I didn't give you
the spring's gift yesterday.

Mama told me to donate
my pickings to Mother Mary.

It's Jeannette speaking, sister
in case you've forgotten me.

Please don't be mad.
Here, I hope you like these.

She places the crimson wreath
at the pedestal of the religious icon
and stands up to leave the chapel
glowing with a heart-felt grin.

2.

I think
 she liked the flowers.

I know I would
 if I was a saint.

I wonder how
 a girl gets to become a saint?

My Godmother, old Madame Agnes
 says before there were saints
there used to be sacred women called High Priestesses
 or Goddesses in this land. But Mama says
Madame Agnes is a witch
 and I shouldn't listen to her.

Now I should go and do my chores.

Afterwards, if there's time
I'll go with my friends
to the slopes near the Fairies' Tree.

The Tree, they say, is a hundred years old.

We'll pick lilies-of-the-valley and camellia
for wreaths to put on the branches of the Tree at Lent
and I'll get some jasmine
for Mama's vase at home.

The jasmine have such an amazing
smell now
in early spring.

The best mushrooms grow on the paddocks
behind the Virgin Spring.

I've heard the nuns at the Hermitage say
the Spring has healing powers.
I've even seen a leper and a blind monk
come all the way from Nancy to drink its water.

I wonder if any of them is cured. I'm lucky
to be "strong and healthy," Mama says.

She reckons

I was born in winter, on the night of Epiphany
about nine or ten years ago. She says
Epiphany was when Lord Jesus
was first recognised as the Son of God by
people. But

Madame Agnes says my birthday

was on the same day as Le Jour des Rois,
Day of the Kings, an ancient celebration
when the rich baked a cake for the beggars
and the last beggar to get a piece
was named the Bean-King, or something like
that.

Mama says

it's blessed for girls
to go down the Valley to pick
blossoms and weave garlands
for the images of saints in our Church
and for those in the Hermitage behind the Bois
Chesnu

Oak Forest. I love

Saint Catherine's statue, and Saint Margaret
too.

She sometimes looks

straight at my praying and
when feeling the kindness of her eyes
I wonder why Papa says
the statue is a lifeless thing.

Mama calls Papa sacrilegious
whenever he makes fun of our praying. Why
does he call the statue
lifeless? Doesn't wood
come from the living trees?

My dress today
is the colour of oak. It's made of
rough wool cut out of Mama's old dress.
She's given it
puffy sleeves and stitched pretty
blue ribbons
on the skirt
making it look like the dress
of a rich city girl. She says
I'm short like her but have Papa's
legs.

I'm not sure what she means.

My hair's black like Papa's
and really messy today
I'll have to get Mama to brush it
once I've been to the well
and drawn water. Now
she's making lunch for Papa and the
boys
and putting the bundle of bread and fruit
into the saddle of the mule they'll take with
them
to the farms.
Sometimes they take me with them
to help with sowing the seeds, pruning the
plants
or ploughing. I like
digging furrows between the rows of grape
and corn.
I like using a sharp spade
and getting my hands dirty, but
being a girl, and "little"
Papa usually makes me take the sheep
to the meadows near the Village of Maxey.
I have to sit there and watch them
stuff their mouths with grass and leaves.
I use my spinning distaff
for handling the silly animals when they don't

listen to me.

I have wound a bit of wool
on top of my staff. When I get bored with being
a shepherdess

I spin the wool
around the stick. I use it
like a cane when climbing a steep hillock
and it's a weapon
if the Maxey kids come to annoy my flock.

I know I'm supposed to act like a girl
and scream and cry if there's
trouble
but sometimes I can't help
chasing the bullies, or at least yelling at
them.

Mama gets upset sometimes
telling me I'm too much like a boy

but I'm very good at spinning wool
and sing with the girls
the Maiden Melodies
at the dances and celebrations.

And today
after visiting Saint Catherine,
getting water and milking the
cows,

I'm in the kitchen with Mama
with canvas aprons over our
skirts.

She's teaching me to make
the dish she calls
"Our great region's most famous cuisine."

I don't really like Quiche Lorraine.
I prefer fresh bread and creamy cheese.

But Mama is very keen
and doesn't give up until I've beaten my eggs
and made them as foamy as hers. She tells me
with pride in her voice:

"Ah, Jeannette, have I told you about my pilgrimage to
Rome?"

(She has. About a hundred times)

"There I presented a slice of our cherished pastry
to our Holy Father, the Pope himself.
That's why they call me
Isabelle Romee, because I've been to the
Holy City."

After pouring the mixture
into the vessels covered with pastry
we take the clay pots
to the communal village oven.

Mama's worried I could burn myself
and lets me go before
kindling the fire herself. I return home
take off the apron, put an apple
in my pocket and fasten the clog sandals
to my ankles. I take my distaff
and go out into our back garden...
the silly rabbits
have made it through the fence again.

I step over the leftovers of our baby carrots
and yell at the neighbour's cottage:

– Margarete! Margarete! You
wanna go
graze the sheep?

My oldest friend quickly runs out.
Her golden hair is so beautiful
and her teeth are much nicer than mine.
She throws herself at me
and giggles: "Let's run! I'm so sick of my baby sister!"

She's crying all the time!"

And we lock arms
and skip in our heavy clogs
to where the animals are caged
in a fenced field behind our cottages.

3.

We open the strong gates
and my cattle dog Claude
a big wolfy breed called Alsatian
barks the sleepy sheep into action.

The lazy beasts bleat unhappily.

I yell: "OHOY OHOY" and poke my distaff
into the stubborn ones refusing to move
accidentally hitting the grumpy ram
Papa's told me to stay away from.

I stand still and see the horned beast
huff and shiver with anger.

My heart beats fast and I go
to call for Margarete but how
could she help?

The ram attacks me.
I jump out of his way
over the lazy sheep.

But he hasn't forgiven me
and shoves the others out of his
way
spotting me with his furious eyes
and bolting towards me again.

And all of a sudden
a gilded image
I've seen painted on the walls of the

Hermitage

flashes across my mind:

Saint Michael the Archangel
Hero of the Battle of Heaven
and Hell

a winged, armoured knight
pushing his lance into the
throat
of a vicious serpent.

All of a sudden my distaff
becomes the Angel's holy lance
and I firmly aim it
at the oncoming monster
pushing it into his thick fleece
making him stop. The ram
angrily stamps his short legs
pushing against the tip
of my hard distaff.

I clench my teeth and groan
against his force
holding the distaff with both hands
when Claude, my strong wolf-dog
jumps over the other sheep
into the scene of my battle
and furiously barks at the ram
who's been outnumbered
and begins to set back.

I pat Claude's hairy neck
when the ram has been pushed
into the flow of sheep
exiting the fenced area for the pastures.

I plant my distaff into the ground
to catch my breath while putting my messy hair
into a horsetail. I notice
Margarette staring at me from the other side of the
fence.

I say:

– Stupid ram! What was his problem?!

Margarette doesn't laugh
at my smart remark
like she usually would. Her blue eyes
are bulging with fear. She speaks
hesitantly:

“Jeannette...
how did you do that?”

– How did I do what, Margarette?

“Fight! How did you
fight like a...
like a...
boy! You looked
so mean...so angry! Why didn't
you
cry for help?”

– I... dunno...

Margarette hitches her skirt
and steps carefully over the fence
coming over and giving me a hug
her beautiful eyes breaking into tears:

“I was so worried... Oh sister... I was so
scared...”

I giggle and boast: – It was only a sheep! By God!
It wasn't a wild boar or anything!

She sniffs her nose and says: “No it wasn't... it was... it was...
terrible... you... you
scared me... don't do that again. Promise me!”

Feeling confused and uncomfortable
I push her away and run towards a wandering lamb
who's left the others

yelling: – C'mon Margarete! I wanna pick mushrooms later
on...

we're gonna run out of time. C'mon!

That night after the Campanile
when Papa and the boys return from the farms
Mama serves the quiche
she's made. My quiche
"didn't have the proper consistency" she reckons
and was given to the parish priest instead.

Papa teases me:

"You won't find a husband if you can't cook properly!
We'll have to send you to a bloody convent! How about that?!"

I stick my tongue out at him.
He laughs and ruffles my head.

4.

A few months later, on Saint Jean the Baptist's Eve
everyone in the village brings a log
or a bundle of sticks. Jeannette has a twig

for the bonfire lit every year near the Fairies' Tree.
Madame Agnes has told her that this ritual is actually
a pagan salute to summer called Midsummer,

symbolising the passage of spring
with a bonfire that consumes the flowers. But
Jeannette's mother, Isabelle, believes

that the fire is a reminder of Hell for the sinful
and the vain; she's told her daughter to burn
something precious to her, so Jeannette's tied a fresh lily

to her twig.

The evening begins with the chiming of church bells

and the villagers, in their best dresses and tunics
walk cheerfully up the hill towards the primeval Tree.

Jeannette and the children sing:

“This is Saint Jean’s night
The great occasion
When lovers delight
And burn with passion
The moon has risen.”

Madame Agnes, despite her frail legs,
has climbed the hillock ahead of the others
instructing the young men and girls

to arrange the wood in a pyramid
that would last long and look prominent.
She whispers to Jeannette’s oldest brother, Joe

quietly so that the parish priest can’t hear:
“You’ll see, dear boy, once the flames have risen
the fairy folk will come to dance beneath the Tree.”

5.

Jeannette is full of verve
running ahead of the other children
her singing is the loudest

noise after the ringing of the bells.
The thin girl hops like a stag
and her green eyes radiate

with anticipation. The elders choose her
as “Saint Jean’s Queen”
to light the bonfire. She’s hoisted

on the shoulders of her uncle, Durand,
and Isabelle holds the torch that sets fire
to her daughter’s twig. Jeannette brushes

the unruly black hair off her pink face

and throws the ignited flower
at the hay stacked beneath the tower of wood.

The villagers crack open the barrels of wine
and the priest begins playing his lyre.
Margarette is holding the hands of a boy

called Collot and Joe has his eyes on a girl
he hasn't met before. Jeannette, having drunk
a cup of wine diluted with water,

is almost shouting at Madame Agnes:

– The Goddess of Moon?!!!
I wanna see her! And the fairies!
Where are they! You promised!

Jacques and Isabelle watch their children
from a distance. She tells him: "Jacques
could we go to Toul, please. I wanna give alms

at the cathedral there. We must thank our Lord
for our children, the harvest, oh...for everything!
We're so blessed...Can we Jacques?"

Jacques kisses her and empties another goblet
into his mouth before saying: "Sure, sweetheart.
We should thank God, and our lucky stars."

6.

Now everyone's smeared with the orange glow
of the flames. Some are dancing in a circle around the pyre.
Some of them believe that this dance will prevent

illness and bad luck for the next year. As is
and has been customary for centuries,
the night ends with the younger couples jumping the subsiding blaze

holding hands to strengthen their romance. Jeannette
who has no interest in boys yet
has decided to take part in this closing ritual alone

because Madame Agnes has told her that her father's crops
will grow as tall as her leap tonight. She's rolled up her skirt
above her calves and kneecaps, watching impatiently

as the others hesitate to brave the fire. She yells:

– My turn! My turn!

and runs towards the flames. Her legs heave
and fly over the bonfire. She swims through
the smoky air. The flames brush the soles of her feet

but can't hurt her. She makes it and joyously screams
upon landing, but her excitement
quickly dissipates. She's exhausted; her large eyes close

and her body collapses into the grass. By the time
Jacques has come to her side, she's fast asleep.
She's so bloody adorable, he thinks

and lifts his snoring daughter carefully. He places her
on the bed at their house and himself returns
to have a few more drinks with the other farmers.

7.

Jeannette's tiny lips shiver in sleep
and her cheeks tremble as she breathes
heavily; she dreams

of the villagers drinking and being merry
a year of joy descends upon the Valley

her white sheep flying through the blue sky
the crops weaving into crowns for her head

ghosts twist into the tubers of the Fairies' Tree
Archangel Michael and Saint Catherine get
married

a bouquet of daisies burns in the sacred fire
the sun mixes with the soil and plants are

born

and far behind the Oak Forest

a flood
of identical men
wielding axes

cut down the trees and crush the farms

Valley
they're thousands and their stampede rattles the

they're soldiers of the greatest army in the world

their faces are eyeless and their feet are hooves

they have black crosses tattooed on the
forehead...

Jeannette wakes up
next to her parents and brothers under the blanket.

They're deep asleep
and the girl's shivering figure doesn't wake them.

Outside, a few farmers
strew the ashes of the fire over the vegetation
to banish bad omens.

Ali Alizadeh

Joan Of Arc

She and the fire
fight adjectives. Their concreteness

deflects reification
by language. She simply is

a pronoun. It may signify
say, my wife (coming from me

'she' often does) or, yes
a medieval French woman, her being

so roughly abridged
by the pronoun, as brutally fed

to the fire. Regarding the fire
dazzling, heaving, devouring

won't do. It only suggests
a familiar occurrence: ouch

when flame touches skin. Indeed
flame doesn't suffice (rhymes with lame)

and a pyre, much more poetic,
based on the transcripts based on

wordy statements. So much
reliance on the makeshift engine

of abstraction, language. She
did, I think, end in fire, but hero

saint, witch, schizophrenic
won't do. Will numbers rectify

the flaws of alphabetical signs: 1412
to 1431? Historians can't be certain

about either: no records
other than her reserved guess

on the first day of trial
apropos birth, and her famed death

also contested by theorists
of bad conspiracies. So I can't

force the ephemeral stuff
of her matter into a mould (a poem)

with description, facts
or even an attempted evocation. She

floats and evades
perhaps - if I may hazard a simile -

like her ashes, diffused
by an English guard over the Seine.

Ali Alizadeh

Languages

For John Mateer

I'll speak you mine, you speak me yours
since all's in the telling, content, form

to mangle the Master's eavesdropping
on subalterns' whispers, going Chinese

subversive, maybe just incomprehensible
or incomprehensibly blunt. My Farsi

the fierce Real or the sad Other of the Master-
Signifiers, Sylvester to their Tweety or

a Roadrunner, mercurial, radical
to thwart the tyrant's order of things? I'll say

something to you, you say something
to me, and bar me from understanding

this or that - who'd ever want me
in control, so damn crazy to accumulate

secrets, gossip, sedition, gesticulation
even if I am, say, sentient, so what

's in it for you? Forge a discourse
to chain your/my tongue/s. You'll write me

yours, I write you mine, and we'll relish
the mystery of the written sign, the tricky

similitude between things, incoherent
thorn in the monoglot Master's eye.

Ali Alizadeh

Listening To Michael Jackson In Tehran After Azar Nafisi

Smuggled across the fierce chasm
between us and the US, and then

hidden, stuffed between Farsi
and Science textbooks in my school

bag, the illegal and sacrilegious
cassette-tape of Thriller, ready for

revelation to the sheepish, ignorant
kids on the bus to my primary school

in war-stricken Tehran. My plan:
to expose the forbidden thing, exhibit

my courage, rebelliousness, etc. Autumn
of '83, desperate for attention/approval

from the other kids. My copy of
dangerous Western "art" would

unsettle the boring, Islamic world
of my classmates – and elevate my

cowardly, chubby, unpopular
self. I whispered to the kid next to me

if he had ever heard of "Billie Jean"
and "Beat It"; if he knew anything at all

about the number one famous
star of our wicked enemy. "I love

Thriller! Aren't the zombies so scary
in the music video! They're so ugly!" His

boisterous words echoed. The bus

vibrated with the singer's name. Another

shouted he had a Thriller poster, and
another, a "Billie Jean" T-shirt, a gift from

Turkey. Silenced, robbed of my planned
stardom, I sank in my seat; later threw out my

Thriller tape, the fetish of Great Satan's
useless, ubiquitous popular culture.

Ali Alizadeh

March To War

The incorrigible sycophants clap
their wrinkled hands and I won't

pretend that calamity can be
averted. The President has at last

constructed sentences with good syntax
signifying something to the effect of

sabres rattling or bugles polished
to announce the onslaught; and I won't

deny the deleterious import
of the Texan's contrived eloquence. This

heralds, to begin with, more insomnia
instigated by the conflation of memory

and premonition. The drums
are surely being bashed and I won't

even attempt blocking my ears when
my eyes simmer beneath the blindfolds

and I can't sleep. He must've received
elocution lessons and the expertise

of an 'innovative' speech writer. Now
my native land transcends an 'axis of evil'

to perch on a nuclear fault line. The bombs
may fall, 'my people' go off like firecrackers

in the crystal-clear dreams that keep me
awake, animated by the words of the Emperor

who now blurts with commendable grammar
about the oncoming war.

Merri Creek

Rivers are all the same. Dirty water
if you're lucky, smelly mud and silt

increasingly the case. And dreary
water sports, flotillas of filthy plastic

bottles and bags; I'd like to emphasise
the stench. Caesar's Rubicon

on the other hand, soaks my head
in a tale of courage, confrontation

I read when I was seven. On Twain's
Mississippi, in my room, I floated

away from the indisputably evil
place I was born in. And the Seine

luminous, a Third World dream
for life in a Western city. I swam

in the weird, inexplicable words
of your Hawkesbury, a migrant

with little English, holding my breath
under the phonetics of birds' names

and scales of fishing metaphors. Then
I was drawn to Melbourne, and lonely

in the struggle with life and poetry
I kept my head above the dark surface,

the swamp of desire and alcoholism,
by drifting alone on the rundown trail

along Merri Creek. I'd scowl at geese
and unwittingly infuriate the drakes

on macabre winter days, menacing
summer evenings. Banks, hardly scenic

after routine floods, beaten willows
cobwebbed with human waste: cable

wires, shoes, tyres, etc. I repeat
the river reeked, a feral fusion

of organic and manmade decay. But
what can I say; leafy corridors,

sunlight accentuating algae
on stream's translucent face,

even rusted didactic plaques; picture
of these usually soothes, protects me

when I'm hurt or restless, marooned
in China, Turkey, Dubai, Sydney; it's

just a river, like I said, and just
about the only place I'd call home.

Ali Alizadeh

My People

Snared by nostalgia
reduced to an absolute past

o my people
how shall I save you?

Your faces reduced to eyes
that flicker from the dark

oppression of forgetting.
How shall my remembering

have the means to oppose
the sublime tyranny of time?

How my treasures
are buried with your being

beneath the rubble of memory.
Your name is a whimper

a history reduced to a sigh
beneath the mess of earthquakes,

revolutions and wars.
Your ancient tongue an elegy

at the funeral of belonging.
No, I can't save you

but place, once in a while
my freshest rose at the mausoleum

of your name, o my family.
And as the phases of my loneliness

wane towards a dark moon
I shall erect memorials

for the songs of your fading eyes
in the lands of annihilation.

Ali Alizadeh

Rumi

I escaped from the city
barefooted. I escaped from the fires

naked, except for the bag
of ancient books

slung over my back.
I ran into the desert. The horsemen

chased. Their torches
had coloured the tenements.

I ran for months. Finally
on a glorious night

I stopped. The raiders had given up
on me. I was alone

with the moon and the sand-dunes.
I looked down at my feet.

They were skinned.
I looked at my trace: red footprints

dark on the glowing plain.
I thought about my tribe

butchered as sacrificial beasts.
I remembered their smiles

before the flames. On the holy night
I knelt before the moon

and wept. In the desert
tears are elixir. From their pool

a fountain bubbled. I cleaned my scars
in the water. The books

weighed on my body. I took them out
and one by one

dipped them into the spring.
All knowledge, all art, and all history

drowned before my eyes. Freed
from the clutch of paper

words' ink dissolved in the lake.
I then drank. I was saved.

Ali Alizadeh

Shut Up

So he's shut up. Vilified:
an unpatriotic recalcitrant,

gagged for penning
'Imperialist turpitude', then

summoned, sentenced
to 'purgation' in Tehran's

Evin Prison. How the writer
finally escapes, his fingers

nearly crushed and chopped. Has
himself smuggled, his heart

simmering with a whim
'freedom of speech', democracy

etc. Then branded 'illegal
immigrant' and caged in a camp

in Australia for three years, before
'temporary protection' after

his wrists have been indented
by his own razor, a rib fractured

by an overweight guard. He wants
to return to writing, but anger

blocks the passage of language
from the heart to the page. So he's

shut up.

Ali Alizadeh

The Brink

I sat at the brink
of the precipice. I massaged

my frosted toes
before the leap. My fingers

hard as marble, about
to crack like crystal. I knew

my own story: excess
in an auburn, tropical place

tanned people, and their
casual debauchery. All

smothered now, under
this cloak of fragmented ice. My feet

didn't dangle off the edge
of the cliff. They were more stiff

than frozen rock. My breath
steamed when I remembered

the abundance and heat
of my past. Moist beaming faces

I used to dance with
at youth festivals, when love

allured unconditionally. Now
expectant ghosts of friends,

sad guests at my ceremonial
plunge. I wasn't sad. I yearned

to fall from the harsh parsimony
of the desert of snow. I found

that my blood was flammable
after my demise. It leaked

then gushed from the broken
crevices of my body. The spark

provided by the projections
of a shaken mind. Blindingly golden

flames heaved from the mess
of shattered organs. I felt warm.

Ali Alizadeh

The Clash

Civilisations, it's often shouted,
clash. Particularly mine

and yours. At Thermopylae
the Persians crashed

into and squashed the Spartan
infantry. At Salamis

the Athenians sank the Persian
fleet. Romans were crushed

by Parthian horsed-archers
but they later skilfully

smashed Cleopatra and took
Egypt. Then Christianity

and the destruction
of Jerusalem's temples. Yet

my religion untouched by your
god's self-sacrifice

Zoroastrian, polytheist, Jewish
and Islam: your Romanised tribes

unified in the exigent cause
of the Cross. My side took Spain.

Yours defeated the Saracens
at Poitiers. Then the Crusades. Then

the Ottomans. Scimitars clashed
chainmail, cannons fired

on muskets. Then the tanks,
the air-raids and suicide bombers.

But do I forget to tell
you about the Muslim scholars

studying Aristotle? The English
poets translating the ghazals

and rubaiyats of Persians? Or my
watching sneakily the pirated

videos of Friday the 13th
and Mad Max? Or your eating

kebabs and saving to buy
an Afghan rug? Perhaps. But my

forgetting to include
the images of exchange

in the midst of the clatter
of the chronology of hostility

proves a little more than dubious
compared to the fallacy

of classification. How did I
become Eastern and you

my Other? Vice versa? How
am I grouped? According to what

mischievous logic? Am I
shrunk to an ethnic type? But I

don't wear turban, ride camel
have never spoken Arabic or bothered

with the Koran. Your pride in
the Acropolis, Colosseum

and Westminster Abbey, frankly
nonexistent. To what cultures

do we belong? To repeat:
mine, not of sensuality

and hashish-induced lassitude, but
a love of Rimbaud

and Belgian beer. Yours, not of greed
and rationalist modernity

but baklavas and the Book
of Thoth. Why determine us

by the trite significance
of hair-colour and nose-shape? What

does it take to overcome the logic
of the Third Reich? But enough

questions. What use when The Answer
is being shouted and proliferates

above the murmur of my individual's
doubt.

Ali Alizadeh

The Dervish

Schemas and schedules. The price
or the worth? Chant of recalcitrance

from solitary sandstone minaret
protruding from the promenade

patched with bikini girl billboards. This
modernity, fringed, at times punctured

by the intransigent "Real"-the hidden
conspiring to cause havoc? Strategies

and methodologies; scaffolding
and Content-Based Instruction: chains

to contain the "backward" menace
of veiled women and rosary-fiddling

unemployed, unshaven men. This
modernity-an intensive course designed

by squadrons of directors-shivers. Manuals
and handbooks; policies and procedures

can't abate the horror of the superstitious.
Regulations are no match for religion

in spite of the sheen of Ataturk's wellingtons
or the threat of Uncle Sam's bomb-

bearing promulgations. The fear of
an incipient blotch of black Islamic ink

creeping from the centre of the fabric
of the secularists' fantasy flag, can it be

* * *

assuaged by probation and invigilation;

supervision and castigation? Utterly exhausted

I forget why I'm paying for "progress";
with my freedom. Ah, how joyous

the howl of someone praising something
called Allah; this soothing, primitive growl.

Ali Alizadeh

The Hermit

<i>For Edward Said </i>
He stands outside the walls
with a torch. To the courtiers

his light is a novelty; something quaint
flickering like a distant star

amusing, at best, but often
trivial and dismissible. He stands there

in the rain, in the midst of wars
his beard grows long and white

his torch burning night and day.
The empire's nobles and courtesans

occasionally remark on his perseverance
and almost always mock his passions. But

to us, the homeless peasants
his torch is an oracle

the beacon of survival
during the onslaughts of storm and pillage.

We gather around like moths
warm our eyes on his flames

thanking our goddesses and gods
that he's here to shed light

on our forgotten lives. O, how
lost we'll be without him.

Ali Alizadeh

The History Of The Veil

...sexuality is originally, historically bourgeois...

Michel Foucault

I

Once upon a time: Bedouin shepherd marries into early-Medieval mercantile city-dwellers of Arabia. Freed

from the bondage of work, he lazes in caves, imagines god. His urbane wife, connoisseur of comfortable life

hates deserts, caravans and camels; the first convert to his way of imagining god. But how to exalt, distinguish

the new path from the old idols'? The middle class lady knows best: something some pagan Persian princesses do

to mark affluence, exceptionality; shrouding their 'beauty' (face and hair) from the gaze of commoners and slaves. So

the Prophet's wife, the first Muslim woman, fashions the hejab. Yet the effect of the loose covering surpasses

class, overlaps 'gender'. Why? The Crusaders, centuries later camped in the Middle East to battle 'the heresy of Islam';

Norman brigands, Goth marauders and Nordic rapists see Woman as the *raison d'être* of Man's Fall from Heaven

hear erotic Sufi poetry, return to their castles to inaugurate Chivalric Romance, etc: the interminable Western obsession

with what (Muslim) Woman wears/shouldn't wear. 'Woman' herself reinvented, characterised by the appearance of body

being covered or not, modified or not, desirable or not. But don't confuse sexuality with *ars erotica*. Gallant knights riding

forth to fight for a Faire Lady didn't pine for the pleasures
of sex. Phallic lances clashing over the chatelaine's kerchief

a class struggle: between the up-and-coming page boy/squire
and the aging chevalier – burgeoning Gentry vs. expiring

Nobility. We call this Modernity: the ascendancy of the West.
Yes, Islam was finally subjugated by the steam-engined navies

of Enlightened bourgeois Christians; Egypt, Palestine,
Mesopotamia carved up by the Anglo-French armies. Now

the Islamic veil, the sign of a beaten civilisation, and then
a fixed attribute of an inferior species of colonised beasts.

Ali Alizadeh

The Incinerator

I.

You, domain of debris and ash;
whose fire constructed your black towers?

In whose excited furnace fire
and fiery science dared to collude?

Which architect designed your walls
of bricks and charred human sinews?

Whose pestle crushed the bones and lives
to fashion mortar for cobblestones?

Which creator made the people the fuel
to burn as torches on coal-black nights?

Which authority sanctioned the heat
that melted nature to mould your towns?

Your proud, infernal landmarks are raised
by whom? By whose dire commandments?

II.

After Jacques Derrida

You say this is the end
of history; I sense

fresh fumes rising
from the wreckage. You say

this is not at all
a wreckage, this wonderful

destination. You note
the revolutions and the fires

naming us the victors
of the "timeless" conflict. I feel

nothing is timeless;
humanity has always been

a victim and an effect
of time's cruelties. You point

at the palaces
erected upon the ruins, the Light

on the Hill; "at the end
of the tunnel". I'm suffocating

and smouldering in the furnaces
of your Kingdom. I see

there's never been
such horror, not even at the first

apocalypse when your likes saw
the Four Riders. Or was it all

a macabre fantasy? You say
you're not a fantasist but

an Enlightened observer. You cite
philosophers and scientists

and declare that you're not
a fanatic. I am an observer too

and have seen carrions extracted
from bombed ruins and charred

martyrs in urns paraded
down the streets. I've smelt

the cooked flesh of
the children devoured by the fires

of your Cold War. I find
the devastating appeal

of the scent of your hubris
utterly rancid. You repeat this

is "the end of history"; you sport
a white armband and wave

your Cross and celebrate and expand
your Law in place of

Justice; you say civilisation's been
perfected via Christianity,

the Enlightenment and Free Market
Capitalism. Yet I stare at the infernos

of history's unstoppable
barbarities. I watch my own

skin blister and melt in the endless
flames; and I know my cells

are cinders and my words the scars
of past and present burnings; for

my presence is the chimney-pipe
where the smokes and spectres

merge above the high-rise
turrets of your fortresses

where the despised are disposed of
in the oven; and your children

grin and warm their hands
and rejoice in the "happy ending"

of a grotesque, endless history.

III.

He fed my passport to the flames
and rubbed his hands above the fire.

His frosted fingers trembled. I
saw my breath linger like a ghost

a transient fog. It disappeared
into the night's bleak, biting air.

At our latitude, the winter's
cold stung our skin and shook our bones.

"We'll have to cross the border now
before the guards restart the watch,"

he spoke as I beheld my face
crinkle amid the fading flames.

My picture, parents, date-of-birth,
my name and my nationality

were soon cinders, and I shivered
and buried my hands in my jacket.

Ali Alizadeh

The Lecture Last Night

after Howard Dossor

i

Life is a travesty. I've endured
even worse. Used to be

a time when cognisance
had the better of me. When I believed

in the aura of authenticity
(if I hadn't had too much to drink.) Now

I'm a cog. Meetings and salary
, a healthy diet, recycling bins. Subjectivity

, frankly academic. I even laugh
at my boss's jokes. Used to be

the kid who renounced conformity
, no hope for love or popularity. Now

I'm a participant. Debates and discussions
, clean socks and gas heating. Essence

was certainly secondary to substance
abuse. Don't get me wrong; I despised

being. Truly. It wasn't purpose
I lacked. (I have it now & don't like it.) What

I missed was the vision (or wisdom?)
to perceive the voids of hedonism

; now that the spade is called a spade
all too often... I'm speechless. Contrivance

of the Symbolic surrounds me. Can't I curse

God again even if he doesn't exist
without a bad science? Can't one shoot
an oblivious Arab on the beach, for old

time's sake? I even compliment my aunt
on her cooking. I perve, obediently, on women

in advertisements. The normative
has consumed me. I've become a human.

ii

On the way to the lecture
I noticed the footpath widened

to accommodate two-way traffic
of effervescent teenage shoppers

in what was only six years ago
a spooky, rundown suburb. How

self-deception dissolves all
in its path of necessity. On the way

to the lecture on 'Existential Love'
one week night, waiting for the tram

I overheard a soft-spoken man
give directions for an authentic Thai

restaurant on his Blackberry; later
on the tram a mentally ill tramp

grumbled to himself about the bitch
who took his sandwich-maker. Is the jury

still out on religion or do we see it
as the license for a will to power? I see

people being what they want to be. Free
-dom, style, choice abound. On the way

to the monthly lecture of Melbourne's
Existentialist Society, I'm the autonomous

agent who chooses the singular, special
deal - half-priced donut with a coffee -

at the 7-11 opposite where I get off
the tram. An absurd dinner, indeed. I spill

jam on my jacket (I always do)
on the way to the church building

where the secretary of the Atheist Society
chairs tonight's lecture. Irony

isn't a mark of a true being. (or
is it?) Illusions, illusions. The lecture begins.

iii

But how do I account for this
love? So much oppression

I've seen and felt, can't undo the notion
of my/your integrity. If I can't sense you

at the level of vitality, won't we touch
as mere, sacred bodies? So much simulation

I've lived with, can't refute the passion
for the Real, shattering originality. Where

do I trace the tangible locus
of this love? So much consternation

I've been offered, can't oust sensation
of attachment, however transient. And why

do I need this love? So much sedation
by the opiates of religion, facts, information

can't turn me off Truth entirely. Love

has brought me into Being. Sexual, ineffable.

iv

After the lecture, I'm hungry
and have an overpriced felafel. Angry drunks

outside Smith Street Woolworths, gone
, supplanted by suave African tourists. Windows

of shops proclaim the glory of saving
money on wine glasses, hand-knitted scarves. I tend

to agree with Adorno apropos the jargon
of authenticity. Capitalism has made a killing

from our existential obsessions. I'm
an unnamed soldier. I march (with dread)

towards Monday morning, office computer
and ripples of status anxiety in the eyes

of battle-hardened colleagues. The tram
slithers past my old Northcote joint, a warren

actually. There I survived on alcohol
, dope, fantasy until love's insubstantiality

lured me to her proximity. Am I sufficiently
committed to my innateness? When

I get off the tram, darkness of the street
doesn't obscure the path to the small flat

where loved ones sleep. It was interesting
, the lecture last night, I'll tell her in the morning

before roaring, chasing Marco as a Velociraptor
and at work I'll maintain a sort of smile. I'll sense

the point of existence, the price of Being.

The Letters I Won'T Write

The letters I won't write
murmur most inaudibly

through the signs
of something like this

sometimes find the cracks
to transmit their noise. I've

no intention to write
to my father (about it all) but

it's a parallel epistle
fear and disappointment

inscribed in between
lines of a poem, say, or lines

spoken by a novel's hero
who (of course) has nothing

to do with a father. Cunning
and assiduous as I am

I can't always trap
the unknowable facts

in a cage constructed
of calculated artifice. Sooner

or later, hellish growls
of past hurts vibrate

the basis of an elaborate
indirect simulation. Not

formal constrictors - 'Dear...'
to 'Yours...' - but the gist

of an absolute, undocumented
list of accusations

that only insinuates
and never truly represents

the letters I can't write.

Ali Alizadeh

The Next Superpower

On the much-publicised full moon
festive youths and families gorge

on overpriced moon-cakes
to celebrate mid-autumn. How

very poetic. Not all that far away
the plants' wastes flow

to choke the Yangtze. I can't
appreciate the taste of the cakes,

their severe sweetness. The Chinese
cherish the stuff. This, they say,

is a beloved tradition. I can't
remember ever loving anything

resembling one. You can't finish
yours, and stroll onto the balcony

to view the fireworks. I'm worried
about the colossal dam cracking

and the River devouring this stuffy,
miasmatic city. Will nature

ever know what to do with
humans? Will humans surpass words

like "nature", "river" and "moon"?
The cake, I've been told, grows

every year in price. China swells
every year in wealth and power. I'm

frankly terrified of an ecological
armageddon. You seem bored with

the festivities and utterly finished
with the West. We left Australia

for an ancient culture. How
perturbed we are to discern

this country's gargantuan
industrialisation. I leer at the remnants

of the pungent cake. The West
has traded its soul for a few dollars. Will

China remember the Opium War or
keep eating the impossibly rich

sweets? Am I being simply
disrespectful? What

of it? Glaciers melt and, yes,
this autumn is hotter than summer. So

Capitalism won; the cadres swapped
their gray Mao-esque suits

for the latest Armani. Indeed
your ennui and my disenchantment

match. We're in love, two ex-pats
struggling to finish our moon-cakes

in the furnace of "the next Shanghai";.

Ali Alizadeh

The Suspect

Over there, in the Other land, I was
gharb-zadeh, Farsi to the effect of west-
smitten. Over here, in 'Our' land, I am
Muslim immigrant, nomenclature with grave
allusions: unemployment, anger, and
unpredictable police attention. Over there
I was an 'apostate', principal's term for
the boy who failed Koran Studies and wrote
an essay on Leonardo da Vinci. Over here
dainty high school girl rejected this thick
accented adolescent for being too hairy
and a 'Muslim rapist'. Over there, utterly guilty
of doodling Zorro; hence flogged by the irate
principal. Over here shackled to a passport
etched with 'born in Tehran'. There I was
suspected of perfidy to the Faith, an Infidel-
wannabe. Over here I am suspected
of terror, 'Our' values' covert enemy. My likes
aren't to belong to tribes, nations, et al; but
welcome at the cells of the Islamic Republic's
Evin Prison, pliers pinching their finger-
nails; or sleep-deprived and hooded indefinitely
in the dark solitaries of Guantánamo Bay.

Ali Alizadeh

The Traitor

We wept and cleared the land
of their barbwire and bombs.

Their calloused victims
we cheered with our victory.

The ruins of invasion
we set to reconstruct with

the songs of resurrection
tingling our moistened lips.

Reconciliation? That too.
And retribution

we sought from the ousted.
How our children

rejoiced at the ecstasy
of our revival. But did they

laugh with joyfulness
or snigger with mischief

and unconscious fear? We
should have granted

closer attention to the
expressions of our "hopeful". We

busied with the tasks
of intrepid restoration

and justice. "Revenge";
we forbade as a word

but in action? Traitors
we indoctrinated in sedition

and punished in public. The nooses
rarely free of the necks

of vicious collaborators. And
our early songs of hope

now lumbering overtures
of nationalism and grievance. Did

our leaders succumb
to mere temptations of might

or something altogether
more terrible, as the piles

of dead "traitors"; mounted
higher than our reclaimed and revised

national landmarks? Our flag
the embodiment of all

our heritage, our religion, our pride
and other mythic colours

flapped higher than our leaders'
intrigue and rivalry. Then

the war with barbarian neighbours. I
enlisted to fight for our freedom

to be entrapped in a charred trench
for weeks, months, years. The reek

of my comrades' cadavers
rotted my nose; the sight of their

decomposition... how
I began to snigger with horror

like the children who now
brutalised by the coarse notes

of our symphonic national anthem
marched and brandished guns

beneath the cutthroat and vehement
sneer of our Supreme Revolutionary

Leader. They declared me
unfit. I agreed wholeheartedly

with their dangerous verdict. They
replaced me with a less sentimental

freedom-fighter. Delirious
with what I'd seen in the battle

and naturally haunted by the face
of the "elitist"; "counter-revolutionary";

I myself had hanged
during the early years of Liberation,

I spat at our national flag
and farted with all my intestinal vigour

during the national anthem. They
shaved my head, branded me names

that I finally found incomprehensible
and, though left to survive

unlike so, so many others
the blisters of the word "traitor";

still sting my flesh, so many years
since the Revolution ended.

Ali Alizadeh

The War

Are you sure my tears are righteous, not
apocryphal, or a crocodile's? Consider this

woman's: a victim of vaginal mutilation
a refugee from an Islamist hellhole in Africa

her frank indignation and now her élan
at winning the lucrative job of the "native

informant" to the "War on Terror." In truncated
form: her anger at being circumcised by her vicious

grandmother, alibi for Westerners' furious
incineration of much of the Middle East. Is

this anything but invidious, my desire to hurt
because I've been hurt? Many more thousand

deaths to atone for her sliced clitoris? Titular
"liberated feminist activist," star of Western media

what does she or I propose should be done with
the traduced Muslims who do nasty things e.g. hate

Israelis, wear chador instead of flashing their
(monstrously unshaven) legs and thighs? Burn

them? With cluster bombs, bunker-busters,
tactical nukes? Grafting concern for women's rights

onto an Imperialist quest to sequester the planet's
"black gold" fields: our mercenary's curriculum vitae

in short. And what about the wails of the war-torn
harmonising with the salvos at makeshift funerals

* * *

across Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine,

Somalia, Lebanon, Chechnya, etc? Well, we won't
hear of them. We've had our ears blocked, watching
TV, entranced by one to three languid, shiny tears
wringed by the camera from the Rasputin eyes
of the "good Arab" defector who says she loves
democracy and freedom, who vindicates this war.

Ali Alizadeh

This Thing

<i>For/with Penny </i>
How to begin to define it
this momentous thing

between us? A monosyllable
rhyming with "dove"

and "above", so dull
and dubiously religious

compared to the spirit
of our connection. Not that

talk of the numinous
wouldn't apply. Your penchant

for the Tarot, mine
for the Sufis, altogether

I suspect more transcendental
than the babble

of necessity and hope
desired by our former selves. Now

I can't say if "love" ever
belonged to my former lexicon

of merely being
with someone. A confession?

That wouldn't become
my professed agnosticism; but

fate always the star
of your astrological ciphers

and my horoscope
no doubt a serendipity

in the house of your heart. Mine,
(forgive the war metaphors)

a fortress reigned by
the tyrant of solipsism until

your ram battered the gates
and your vanguard scaled

the ramparts. Now the untied
captives laze on the fields

of your victory. The tyrant
a cross between theologian

and troubadour, no longer a threat
to my peasants. But what

have you gained
from this conquest? Do I

make you happy? What do you call
this earth-shaking thing

between us? I suspect
your images altogether sharper

than my medievalist detours, say
animals—am I

salamander to your unicorn
or you a yellow crane

perched on my tortoise? Or
fairytale: you see

yourself as a compassionate
Little Red Riding Hood

to my repentant wolf? Not
very likely. I've never really

queried eating you; but
you must've glanced

the dangers of sharing life
with a confused and brooding

loner. A person of your insight
doesn't mess around

in Blue Beard's chamber.
And I'm frankly just

a diffused dragon. So do we
call this thing

domestication? What about
the euphoria of escaping

our house together
and boarding planes? Am I

your accomplice
or live cargo? Does it sound

like complaint? It's in fact
a celebration of the ecstatic

thing between us. I ask you
to comment. You say:

"It's a magical
ever-changing intertwining

of two lives on levels
mundane and divine."

Ali Alizadeh

Windows #3

I opened the windows and saw the giant flags
black and red, they had covered the winds
the tyranny of human symbols and arms
had mangled the air and veiled the sky.

Then I saw a bird, unspecific small bird
blue with yellow tail and clipped wings
tied to a flagpole with a tight metal string
its beak bound by grey masking tape.

It was too much for me, the oppression
I threw myself out the window and then
the bird caught the fire of my suicide
and flames raged up the firm flagpole.

And in the glory of freed wings
one by one the flags of the prison caught fire
and wind stormed again, sky was freed
the bird flew up to join the mating flocks.

I raised, shook off the blood and restarted the heart
and approached to open another window.

Ali Alizadeh

Writer In Prison

Your cell is a cavern; the guards
grinding teeth outside your grotto

marginally refined ape-men; you
the last human in the world

of triumphant beasts. Is your pen
the key to emancipation?

No. The lock has no keyhole
and welded beyond breakage,

bolstered by all the energy
invested in orchestrating

your captivity. Such formality
staged for the incarceration

of one soul. The vilification,
the public outrage, the trial

and the theatrical castigation
all to ensure that the curtain

forever falls over your life. What
could a pen possibly do

to alter the absolute plot
of the script of so-called justice?

Zilch. Your freedom is untenable.
Barbarity always possesses

the upper hand. Don't waste
your vital ink doodling tears.

In your pre- or post-historic cave
you are the insider archaeologist.

Your pen is a shovel, chisel
and brush only for exhuming

the bruised icons, recovering the abject
tales and treasures from beneath

the stone, lava, rubble and sand
of the storms of tyranny. Please

don't get sentimental now.
You, writer in prison,

may yet be our saviour.

Ali Alizadeh

Your Terrorist

You call me a barbarian.
I call you master.

You don't speak my language.
My words

noise in your ears; my poems
meaningless melodies.

Your poems
masterpieces of literature.

Your clothes
constitute fashion; your homes

architecture.
My house

the hovel your tanks levelled;
my clothes

rags. My beliefs
crushed by your technology

because I'm a barbarian.
But I must understand

your language. O master, your words
are essential to my survival. I have to

put your goggles on my eyes
to see myself,

a dangerous alien with
incomprehensible language

and innate savagery
because you're so civilised and meaningful.

You have the weapons
the tools for proving the logic

of your power. You wear clothes
that bolster your shoulders

and accentuate your height.
Me, I'm naked

and paraded as a prisoner
on your catwalks. I've been

defeated, dispossessed, and now
detained in the cages

of your metropolis. I can't remember
if I ever had my own culture

because your powerful voice
has deafened my memories. Your logic

proves I'm a primitive
at the mercy of your civilisation.

Yes, I understand
your language. I've been learning

the lexicon of my inferiority
from behind the bars. I now know

how to spell and pronounce
the terms of my slavery. Your shackles

are called Security; your war
Operation Freedom; your cluster bombs

food parcels for my children. O master,
I understand

what you want your filthy slave to be. I am
your barbarian, your terrorist;

your monster.

Ali Alizadeh