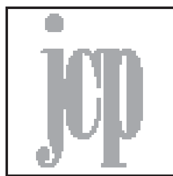

May our love not be centred upon ourselves: A dialogue

Aamer Hussein and Ali Akbar

This is the story of a two-year conversation about storytelling between Aamer Hussein (AH) and Ali Akbar (AA). It started with a question in a lecture theatre in Islamabad in November 2018, continued through a series of exchange of stories, messages and phone calls between London, Islamabad, and the rural hinterland of Sindh, and reached a turning point peaked in live meetings in the garden of the Gymkhana, Karachi, in September of the following year. Another interesting thing is that all the questions developed over a significant span of time. And every question shares a story in itself between the writer and his mentee. In the beginning, Ali Akbar surprised AH by noticing the prevalence of natural landscapes and bird and animal imagery in his narratives. The conversations peaked during two winter walks in Islamabad in January and February 2020, the final one in the grounds of the Faisal Mosque with monkeys leaping from wall to wall, dense natural foliage, and birds and squirrels everywhere. The live conversation was halted by the pandemic and lockdown, but the writers continued to communicate by text, email, voice notes and phone calls, both gathering a dossier of notes and recordings in English and in Urdu. Finally, when they decided to give their dialogues a form and transcribe them in English, a degree of translation and movement between languages came into play, which is, however, part of another story.

With its interviewee being Karachi-born Aamer Hussein (AH), a senior, seasoned author of dozens of celebrated stories and the interlocutor, Ali Akbar (AA), a very young writer from the Khairpur District of Sindh, this dialogue is an excellent example of literature's role in connecting people. It is also an example of the interaction between a big-hearted mentor and a curious protégé, with each

offering spirited comments on each other's work. Reading this will not only help you in interpreting Aamer Hussein's stories but also prepare you to understand the works of other writers and artists better.

Ali Akbar: I would like to begin our interview-cum-conversation by asking the most motivational question for aspiring writers. What compels a writer to begin writing? His internal environment, his desire to be, or external factors like cruelty, injustice and economic disparities in the world, etc.?

Aamer Hussein: I just began to write to see whether I was good at it, and to look beyond myself to understand the motivations of others. I was doing a postgrad degree in philosophy at the time and had no intention of being anything but an amateur writer. But everything you mention can play a part in the progress of a writer; we might change, from story to story, our theme or subject matter. Don't you find that? But I have never believed fiction changes the world; to set off thinking it does is a kind of grandstanding which is detrimental to a writer's vision. We are not preachers. What fiction and poetry can do is to change, subtly, the reader's perception of the world.

AA: In your story 'What is Saved', the artist LM's paintings show the cruelties of wars in different parts of the world. She painted them when she was young and passionate. But when she gets old, her motivation changes from painting the bitter realities of the world to painting the natural world. My question is: do the priorities of a writer change with the passage of time?

AH: How do we even know whether it is the 'natural' world that LM, in her partial blindness, is painting? Or is it an assembly of all the colours she has seen in her life, or what she has absorbed from others' paintings, which our eye then interprets as gardens, lakes or skies? I'm wary of saying that artists of any kind, painters or writers, begin to look inwards, or back, as they grow older. I think many of us continue to extrospect and look beyond ourselves, even if we choose not to protest against injustice in any overt way. Art in itself is a form of resistance. If we give our time to autobiographical recollections, those, too, will invariably include portraits of people and places distant from our daily lives. I've just been reading a lavishly illustrated book, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, by Australian poet and political activist, Oodgeroo, which combines childhood memories with the aboriginal tales she heard as a child; at its conclusion, she says: "We are custodians of the earth and its life forms which we must respect and protect. We own nothing. The Earth Mother teaches us that the earth owns us, that we are too busy fighting machines to take time for each other. Man should have the time and

space to find his spiritual goals." This may well speak for the natural evolution of LM's work as she goes blind. I don't see it as a contradiction.

In your recent story "Qari se Likhari tak", the narrator asks himself whether he should take events from his own life for his stories, and then turns away towards a kind of symbolic narration. And I have very often written about experiences quite remote from my own. A father commits suicide, a mother weeps over a murdered son, a drug-addicted masseur is displaced by partition and upheaval, a poet disappears in mysterious circumstances, a Bihari refugee flees the new nation of Bangladesh. I've had none of these experiences, nor, except in the last case, do I personally know anyone who has. And yes, I was younger when I wrote about them.

But you are, I think, referring to what 'fact' might offer us as we age. In recent years I've experimented with the boundaries of story and memoir, and written about people I know, either in scanty fictional disguise, or just as they are or were in real life. Of course, as we grow older there is a compulsion to pay tribute to the dead, to eulogise; a process that often demands the accuracy, restraint and chronological sequence of non-fiction.

AA: I always find multiple plots in your stories. Every character has got their own story behind them. Is it a kind of biography you write for those whom you meet in your daily life or of those attached with you?

AH: I often compose my stories in scenes centred on images, regardless of whether the material I use is taken from memory or imagination. Pattern is far more important to me than plot, a word I despise because it belongs to thrillers or TV drama as far as I'm concerned. The structure is intuitive and organic, not planned. it's the editing that gives a final shape. Memoirs need to follow some kind of chronological sequence and to be as faithful to fact as memory or research can make them; images are incidental. So, there's more chance of fiction, or its techniques, creeping into memoir than the reverse: the autobiographical form needs something more than an assemblage of dry facts to bring it to life on the page; memory is notoriously fallible and tricky. Calling any piece of writing fiction gives the writer the freedom to manipulate reality and time in a way that conventional non-fiction doesn't do.

My late friend the poet Fahmida Riaz often asked me how I created composite characters in my stories, because she said she could only draw from real life. I wasn't aware I was doing any such thing; evidently the characters one creates will have something of the people one has met, even if only fleetingly, otherwise they will appear to be puppets created to prove a point or paper dolls cut out from

other people's stories. On the other hand, if you're writing about someone you know under another name, you have to be as true as you can to your perception of them. That's why I now let real life friends walk around, undisguised, in a handful of my stories. But I don't invade their privacy. However, unless I specifically tell you a story is autobiographical, or write in the first person as myself and give my friends their real names, you can assume it's invented. Sara, the art historian in "What is Saved" ("Zindagi Se Pehle"), has a life story that resembles none that I know, her friend Murad reveals almost nothing about his past, and LM (who does bring the past into the present) is a completely autonomous product of my imagination as are her paintings (by the way, I can't paint to save my life!). In "What is saved", only the cat and the political leaders, none of who actually appear except as absences, are borrowed, unchanged, from real life. Over the last 8 years, I have written about lost friends: a Pakistani poet who died in a freak accident in her 20s, and an Iranian singer who died of cancer to the age of 70 were fictionalised in "Do kahaniyan", because I needed to protect their identities and because bare fact was too painful. And then, I moved to the memoir form in my early 60s, writing about my mentor, Han Suyin, family friend, Qurratulain Hyder, and my Urdu teacher, Shah Saheb, people who played a significant role in my life. Two of them were forgotten in their lifetime and certainly after their death. I needed to remember them for myself and share the moments I spent with them with my readers. I appear in these memoirs as an onlooker, although I inevitably reveal through my portrayals something about my younger and my maturing self, such as my experiences of constant movement between countries – Pakistan, India and then Britain – in my teenage years. Most of these essays were written on commission and were not intended to be part of a book; I was surprised when my publisher asked if she could include 'Annie', my non-fiction piece about Hyder, in my collection *Hermitage*, and it was inaccurately described by critics in Pakistan as semi-fiction.

But I also keep experimenting with fairy-tale and fable and mostly write about the present, which interests me more these days. So it isn't a question of veering in one direction or the other, rather of finding a path between the two. I've often been asked why I don't write an autobiography but something within me resists a chronological account of my life and I keep my secrets for my fiction. Stories are stories, whatever form they take.

AA: In "Zindagi Se Pehle", the main character Murad resembles you. He is in London, he feels old, he smokes, he likes paintings and the stories behind paintings, and much more. Do you agree? If yes, then do you like to portray

yourself as you are right now?

AH: Murad shares some of my habits and my circumstances, yes. He's also about my age. I don't feel young or old, but 66 is officially old! But they're superficial characteristics, like smoking and limping, because the story really isn't about him or his life. He could be just about anyone in London, which makes it easy for readers to identify with him. He's an observer. I myself lead an unexceptional, settled life with not much excitement in it, just like thousands of other people. The fact that writers travel, give public lectures, attend festivals etc., shouldn't make you believe there's anything very glamorous about our lives. If we spent our lives on stage, there would be no books! Most of the time we try to steal time to stay home and write, which is unusual only if you don't need to go out to work daily, which many if not most of us do. I've taught for the past two decades, which took me out of the house until I semi-retired, but even teaching is on Zoom now which means that even at home my writing hours are limited. That's perhaps all I have to say about biographical or autobiographical realism.

AA: Your amazing story, "Dove", is the symbolic journey of a girl who is attached to a dove. She understands the call of the dove which changes with the change of time and space. The dove's call is reflected in her writing, which is beautiful, perhaps in praise of the beauty of the bird. When the time-space changes, the dove also changes its voice as it couldn't remain the same as it was once in the memory of that girl. She still writes but now she writes melancholy poems because her surrounding is full of woes, sorrows, and aches. When she tries to remember the dove of happiness, she can't recall it. As if it has been erased from her memory. Who is the symbol of the political situation here, the dove or the woman? Or if you allow me to say this: Aren't the dove and the woman the same?

AH: The dove, as you once said elsewhere, reminds the woman of her girlhood home, her *maika*. You mentioned her symbolic journey. I don't think it is symbolic, it's chronological, crossing the span of a life from the third decade of the last century to about 2013 when Islamabad was paralysed by two strikes during a short visit I made there. Time, like the changing seasons, is a constant narrative preoccupation with me – how many years we can encapsulate in one paragraph. So, my use of the dove is in the realm of synecdoche, rather than symbol – how much does the part reveal of the whole? The second, almost contemporary section of the story is closely connected to my own visual impressions of Islamabad, a city I often visit (for example the flowering jacaranda tree). Yes, the effect on her ear of the dove's call changes: a song she heard as happy when she was innocent, now echoes, as you have said, her woes, and sounds melancholy to her. The woman –

as she is, at the end of the story – is a witness to history (as often, history often forms the backdrop to my stories; the characters are usually witnesses rather than actors). The sound of the dove's call remains the same; but the human ear hears it differently in different situations. The dove and the jacaranda tree are entirely indifferent to history unlike in a fable where they might have something to say in human words to each other or to the narrator.

I am reminded here of a story you wrote, "Chiriya", in which a man after releasing several birds from their cages, then decides to divorce his much younger wife, and the moment is symbolised by a bird flying away. Does he identify his wife with the bird? Or is the bird the spirit of his wife? Are they both equal symbols of captivity in the protagonist's mind? Or is it you, the author, connecting the two? These processes are often deeply unconscious, and I don't believe writers should impose external allegories on their own texts.

AA: Another question. Why did you choose a girl and a dove?

AH: The brief answer to this is disappointingly unromantic! I was inspired by a chapter in the poet Ada Jafarey's voluminous and fascinating autobiography, *Jo rahi so bekhabri rahi*; I wrote I decided, quite simply, to steal the images of the dove and the poet's childhood home! The *maika* in the first section somewhat resembles the traditional North Indian havelis I holidayed in as a child, but the Islamabad I evoke is the city I know today, so the conclusion of my story differs from the original. Only the dove comes from the poet's autobiography. I have to admit that I have no relationship at all with the song of the dove, it's a reminder of how evocative good writing can be. In another story I have a boy, his fear of drowning, and a lake. I do love lakes – artificial lakes too - and though I can't swim, I don't have to overcome any fear of water in the way the boy in my story does.

AA: In your story "A Convalescence", the first-person narrator tells us that he was befriended by a swan. The narrator at first glance observes that something wrong has happened with the swan. He thinks that the swan is ill. The swan notices and shows that he is not. He proves this by dancing, gives an elegant performance for the narrator. The narrator takes many photos and goes away happy. Again, after some months, the narrator meets another flock of swans. And again, the narrator wonders, and some questions come to his mind. You as a writer can recall them better. You left those questions unanswered. In the story, every time and everywhere, when you talk about swans in a fable or a tale, something wrong has happened with them: why is it so? And the narrator seems to be like a swan himself. The stories or memories he shares are narrated, moving from city to city. The narrator, like a swan, starts from London and reaches Chennai, and goes

from Hyderabad to Karachi, Islamabad to Medina, fable to reality, plant to animal or bird, friend to enemy, so on and so forth. If I were to say that the narrator is the swan himself what would be your comment?

AH: Remember that the story – which is, by the way, entirely true, so much so that a writer friend who read it at the time called it a diary – begins and ends with the tale of Rashid, a young man in Jamshoro, who is befriended by a pigeon. So, in a sense the injured narrator begins his reflections on birds with Rashid's story, and is reminded, by that, of the dancing swan he saw only a few months before the time of writing. A request from his Pakistani publisher who's working on a collection of stories about animals for school children reminds him of a story he once wrote about a wounded swan and its protector. He decides to write another one about swans and crows. The odd part is, that Rashid's response to the friends who tell him to cage his pigeon is similar to the response of the prince in the story I originally retold, which Rashid had heard recited a few months before at the Arts Council in Karachi: "It's a free bird, it comes to him of his own will and comes and goes as it wishes. It'll fly away if it wants to, he says, and otherwise it'll stay." At the conclusion, the narrator emails him the story of the injured swan and his saviour, which reflects Rashid's thoughts about leaving the bird completely free while he offers it safety, food, refuge.

Here I want to pause and dwell on my thoughts on possession and ownership. Does an animal that adopts us make demands on us? That we should wait for it to come and go as it pleases? Isn't that a kind of ownership too, on the part of the bird, though a transient one that lays more emotional claim on us than it seems to, as it demands unconditional love? Just like the men who leave their families and their villages for months to work or study in cities and return as and when times allow, sometimes on a whim, a subject I often ask you to address in your own fiction? Here again the attitude of a human being to a bird, or an animal, might reveal to us our attitudes towards our relationship with other human beings. In the story I also mention my cousin's crow Hoppity, a sort of pet, which comes and goes as it wants to. Now crows in fables are often seen as wily and acquisitive, but this real-life story overturns that negative image!

But you were asking me about swans. Why are swans in traditional stories often injured or trapped? I can't say. As you said, in my story the dancing swan evokes a moment of celebration, of joy: for me, it's a memory of summer and of a time I could walk freely, chase the swan, without the terrible zimmer frame I was forced to use while I was writing the story. And a moment of astonishment, even wonder.

As for the narrator and his flights: the cities you mention are photographs of the recent past he sees in his Facebook feed, but yes, I deeply identify with a Persian verse by the poet Farrokhzad: "The birds have gone in search of the blue direction (sea, sky), so why should I stop, why?" The thought of birds flying outwards always stops me from staying still; the flock of birds in flight, and the dancing swan, not the caged bird or the wounded swan, inspired me in this story. And the swans on the river in winter have no answer, they only pose a question: why do some birds choose to stay in one place, while others fly away in search of warmer climes? The narrator of the story isn't, as we have all often been in the lockdowns during the pandemic, imprisoned in his own body or room for any other reason than a freak accident. He's acutely aware that his body must obey the laws of nature by resting and recovering. There's no way around that. But his mind is free to take flight – like, as you said, the flight of swans. So though I wouldn't see myself as the wounded swan or the dancing swan, I do think many bird stories are reflections on captivity, isolation, and journeys both mental and physical.

AA: "A Convalescence", echoes multiple chapters of life: memory, desire, love, passion, nostalgia, pain, struggle, past, present, and pleasure. We see in the story a pattern of memories, just as they appear in our mind one after another – a kind of celebration in the present, which is interwoven with the past, caring very little about the future.

AH: Yes, there are about four strands to the story. Rashid's relationship with his pigeon, the narrator's injury which leads us to think of the body's relationship to time and space, the folkloric element which is introduced by his publisher Shahbano's persuading the narrator to write for children, and the nature of birds in fables and in real life; I think all the elements cohere, though, I hope, not too neatly. The narrator's friend Mukund asks him at a conference about the "zigzag shifts" between these elements: "solid realism and patterns of fancy".

Future? I think a few quiet, but crucial, lines do present the narrator's will to go onwards and his determination to do so: "Messages from old friends, near and far, remind me that yesterdays are a bridge to today: a reminder that I'll be out there again, walking, photographing trees in the rain."

So, I think the future is very much there, much more so than any regret or self-pity. As far as nostalgia goes, there are only two references to my childhood and teens, and both are in the company of friends – Mehreen, Mukund – with whom I relived them when I met them only a few months before writing this story/memoir of injury and recovery. But more than nostalgia these are stories of arrivals, departures, reconciliations, homecomings and leave takings. And

generosity between humans, animals, and between species. Memories of those meetings were very fresh at the time I wrote them. I went through so much myself in the year that was to follow – sickness, the death of loved ones, collective and entirely unprecedented collective, upheaval – that I'm surprised by the calm tone of this story. There are no political events obtruding but then, as I remember, April 2019 wasn't a very tumultuous time. And there are no memories of tragedy or great personal loss. In fact, the narrator – obviously myself in that moment, though I feel very different from that former self - distances himself from such memories. What he misses most is going out and taking pictures not only of birds and water and plants but also of bridges and passers-by. He knows what is going on around him, and he's excluded from it. But his photographs, and those sent to him by friends, remind him he'll be out there again; it's a question of waiting. I'm glad you see celebration there. If there is, it is of friendship, survival, and the art of storytelling.

AA: Do you believe that sharing our emotions with so many things around us can get us beyond convalescence, like the swan did by celebrating the present with dancing?

AH: I certainly believe that reading, writing and communicating with friends, at different moments of the day – sharing our emotions, as you say – is a testament to our will to survive! I live in a city and I'm a city person, so moments like mine with the swan are a tiny, though utterly essential, part of my daily life. It's what Irish playwright Teresa Deevy calls the "rare moment", the moment when nature parades itself in its beauties, and some of us are lucky enough to hold on to such images in times of struggle as signifiers of better tomorrows.

As I lay on my back or sat up as I waited to be able to walk again I would look out of the four windows I was facing and observe the changing of the light at dawn, the return of the songbirds, new leaves on bare branches at the start of spring. Those scenes were not in the story, which as I said I wrote in April 2019, but they were in my mind's eye. I couldn't leave the house until May. My next story, "Neela Moti", was about an injured boy and a tribal lad who rescues him….

AA: You treat every character (birds, trees, mountains, animals) equally. You don't favour anyone nor discriminate against anyone. Don't you think we, being humans, discriminate based on colour, caste, creed? But on the other hand, you make everything fall in one soul.

AH: How do I make everything fall into one soul? I'm not sure what you mean. Nature can be cruel. There are the cold bleak dark winters of London where I live and the scorching summers of the desert. Floods and earthquakes figure in

earlier stories I wrote and in this one there is underlying violence, both human and animal – Rashid's roommates, by tormenting his pigeon, are also tormenting him; the outsider is unwelcome, and by attacking a being of another species they reveal their own prejudices and bigotry. Unfortunately, in real life they succeeded in driving the pigeon away just a few weeks after I wrote this story. So Rashid's refusal to cage the pigeon, to make a pet of it, actually deprived him of his companion. A few months later, I used the same material in an Urdu story, "Kabootar", also written at Shahbano's urging, and for Rashid. That ends in the pigeon flying away for ever.

So I'm not sure what you mean about discrimination, except to make a knee jerk reaction to conventional realism, or, rather, protest writing which is meant to present current affairs or social problems in a quasi-journalistic way. In my stories, crows attacking swans have been read as a political metaphor for everything from the brutality and lockdowns in Kashmir to Zionist appropriation of Palestinian territory (matters which are also present elsewhere in my writing). Allegory is, I suppose, implicit in the fables and tales I retell, and the swan story I wrote ends in a battle for justice without referring to specific political events; I've dealt with those elsewhere. Folklore and children's stories – and I derive these stories solely from our South Asian or Persian sources, from folktales to fables from the Jataka, from the Sufi teaching stories of Fariduddin Attar to tales from the Raja Rasalu cycle give us images from the unconscious mind; they can be also deeply negative towards one species while favouring the other (wolves, crows, foxes are wily and wicked or foolish). For example, the African writer Amadou Hampate Ba recalls a beautiful story his Sufi master Tierno Bokar told him which compares the good and bad impulses within us to black and white birds in constant conflict and inevitably asks us to keep the black birds in control. But why, in Africa too, should black birds be symbols of lust and greed? The same Sufi master elsewhere preaches kindness to all living creatures, however great or small; one of his most faithful companions was his pet dog. So there is a contrast here in his lived reality and the allegory which doesn't correspond with his division of white and black birds or with the fable I wrote about swans and crows, possibly under the subliminal influence of his story which a friend first told me 30-odd years ago. But fables can also be joyous. In real life, Hoppity the crow who visits Yusuf embodies an entirely different image of a crow, and there's no reason for a children's story not to do the same. Romila Thapar tells a story I read a few nights ago of a wise crow who is cheated of a pearl by a sparrow whom he ultimately forgives for its cupidity. The very next morning I read an identically

structured tale in Urdu, in Shafi Aqeel's collection of Punjabi folktales; here, the crow is the greedy predatory creature who cheats his sparrow-friend of a grain of rice. Our minds will constantly perform these acts of reversion to cliched imagery, mine included, when working within the conventions of fable, but we can always struggle against them. In fact, I was taught as a child that the crow's call meant the arrival of a guest, so it was good news. Yesterday, while photographing white birds on the lake near my house, I also attempted to photograph a crow and record his haunting cry, but he kept escaping my camera's eye….

Looking back over all my work in response to your questions, I see I have included birds and animals in all my books too. In "The Sound of Absence" and "Little Tales", both early stories collected in my first Pakistani publication *Cactus Town*, there are images of a runaway peacock, an eagle, a pet cat; in "What do you call these birds?" a flight of seagulls, a pet lamb in "Electric Shadows"; in the title story of This other Salt, a talking parrot, in "The Lark" in *Insomnia* a songbird in flight. These are not images from fairy tales but mostly from my memory bank, my *zaman i batin*. But yes, I remember that in my second collection, one of my characters also retells Tieno Bokar's parable of the black and white birds. Again, I return to the words of Tierno Bokar to his student, Amadou Hampate Ba:

> May our love not be centred upon ourselves! May this love not incite us to love only those who are like us or to espouse ideas that are similar to our own! To only love that which resembles us is to love oneself; this is not how to love.

As far as nature is concerned, I'm not a 'natural mystic' who believes that nature is essentially benign, or that good and bad are one and the same. I think as a very ordinary person I interpret cruelty, violence and evil according to my own limited experience and emotional resources. So no, I can't see myself make everything 'fall into one soul'.

Akbar, you've grown up in rural surroundings in the natural landscape of Sindh. How much do you miss your native scenery when you are in Islamabad, let's say in winter, when the city is cold and not so green? Why does it not figure more in your stories of village life such as 'Quarantine', the one you wrote about the pandemic destroying all the old folk in a village? Do you take the natural surroundings for granted? There is, in that story, a single beautiful image of the sun setting in the date palms near a playing field, which seems to me an utterly realistic, even photographic, image, in contrast to the metaphoric manner of narration you adopt. You've also told me about rescuing snails in Islamabad and growing strawberries in your village, so evidently you are deeply connected to

the flora and fauna of the natural world too, which perhaps explains your question about one soul, though you haven't yet put those experiences into a story. But then you have the little tale of the budgie in the green window which I was so taken with that I have just translated it.

As someone who has spent an entire life in cities I'm grateful for man's desire to create green and shady spaces, to replicate woods and forests, with lakes and canals on which there are waterfowl of many kinds and trees and flowers even out of season. Now I don't entirely accept that the pandemic is nature's way of punishing us for the ways we've tried to subjugate it, or for the evil of city folk as some of the characters of your story believe: but who's to say? During this lockdown, green places in London, made by us as places of refuge, are where we can meet, eat together, and try to conduct our relationships. Essential to our mental and our physical wellbeing.

AA: When you personify the animals as human, do you see the same characteristics as animals in humans as well? What kind of relationship between humans and nature do you want to portray?

AH: There are several questions here. Talking animals and even trees are familiar to us from fairy-tales. In fables they are anthropomorphised, and their behavior and world reflect ours. In fairy-tales they usually inhabit another dimension; they're voices of wisdom beyond human wisdom. I happily use either convention if my story demands it, but the fairy-tale mode predominates over the animal fable. Above all, I'm interested in the process of traditional narration and sometimes my use of folk and fairy-tale is just that – a fascination with the genres and how I can find a voice within them. I may use them to ask simple questions which readers can answer for themselves. That's perhaps beyond the boundaries of your question, which is about our relationship to animals and nature. We might overlook what we see as the cruel antics of animals. But we have an entirely different moral compass when we judge human beings: to forgive a sinner is something we are asked to do by wise men, but where do we draw the line between a sin and a crime? And when is a crime punishable? Is someone who steals a bicycle or a bag of rice even remotely comparable to a soldier who brutally blinds a youth – or a group of youths – with bullets, just because he has been ordered to do so? And is the faceless gang of war criminals that issues orders to maim and kill even more culpable than the brainwashed soldiers?

Shah Waliullah speaks of the animal disposition we share with beasts, which is that of instinct, survival and bodily functions like hunger, shelter and the need to relieve oneself. Now I don't keep a pet and never would, but I've observed, in my

childhood, a pet dog torturing and killing a chameleon not for food but for the pleasure of the kill. I'm also told the same about cat owners and their pets: they'll capture and torment birds just for sport like human beings who go hunting. And it isn't the instinct to survive that makes us kill or bomb; it is the human intellect, a distortion of Waliullah's angelic disposition, that makes us destroy nature in the name of progress and create artificial catastrophes such as floods and landslides, not to mention atomic fallouts.

I can answer two of your questions through the characters of the art historian Sara in my story "What is Saved", who turns her back on painting and becomes an art teacher; her artistic urges are satisfied by her gardening and her love of flowers (relationship to nature). She also has two cats who play a major role in her life (kinship with animals). She rescues a sparrow from the jaws of one of her cats and in the process of burying the dead bird she breaks her wrist. The story follows on from "A Convalescence" by looking at injured bodies in space. But we also see how Sara's pity for the mangled bird won't diminish her affection for the cat; she sees its behaviour as one of the mindless cruelties of animal life.

Murad, the other protagonist of the story, gets exasperated by the bad news of the day, which he can't avoid, and goes out to search for summer roses. He hears on his walk that Boris Johnson has become the PM of Britain. He also has the violent lockdown in Kashmir, and its effect on his friends there, on his mind. He views an idyllic scene of water and trees, but when comes to the rose patch he sees all the flowers there have withered and even rotted in the July heat. Now you might read this as crude symbolism, though it wasn't: the scene replays exactly what happened to me in real life, which as I already said about the dancing swan, offers us the most exquisite or disturbing and appropriate images.

Speaking of this story, I remember the part you played in it: I sent you photographs of an exhibition I had visited, and when, that night, I had a nightmare about a long operation I was to have on my eyes you commented later that I'd been affected by the paintings I'd seen. That dream went into my story, though I invented LM's paintings. (LM, a painter who is also politically active, is the third, dead protagonist of the story.) There's a painting that looks like a river from a distance but close up it is a river of injured bodies. Today in a voice note you mentioned the shock of moving from a room in the exhibition I describe in which the paintings are expressionistic or surreal depictions of actual historical events such as the massacres in Sabra and Shatila, the first Gulf War, and the war in Vietnam, to a room full of impressionistic depictions of jungles and gardens and skies. But the exhibition isn't meant to be only of paintings that are responses to history

or current affairs; it's a curated retrospective of the dead artist's work. (By the way, the real exhibition took place in a concrete tower, but I placed it in a one-storey gallery in Hyde Park). In a sense I achieved my purpose by shocking you into changing your perspective, by moving you from a room of siege to a room of tranquillity. Like Sara, you were caught up in the historicity, chronology and geopolitics of the paintings.

We all carry within us imprints of certain transpersonal moments, such as sunsets over date palms, gardens, dead leaves, dancing swans. These exist in what the Sufis refer to as *zaman i batin*, interior time, which has no dates and is probably closest to dream time. Such images will exist out there in the world whether or not we are there to witness them, but the artist will attempt to put them into words or colours. LM nearly loses her sight in the last years of her life, so whether she's painting from her memories of Africa and Asia, from her imagination, or from her own garden, is left for the observer/viewer to decide. Her last, minimalist painting is titled' Before Life, Death'. Does she feel she has been born again when she loses her sight? Or when she retires from public life into semi-obscurity? Or does she feel all artists have to die a living death and be reborn? The questions are left unanswered. Sara, LM's biographer, responds to the paintings with regret and sorrow in her eyes. But Murad, we feel, sees her final paintings as timeless and even optimistic.