

Gulzar  
Haider

## DISTANT THUNDER

BEING the youngest of the brothers, it was my lot in life to fetch milk from the local dairy every morning. I would get up before sunrise, offer prayers, especially during exam days, take the milk jug and set out on my duty. His garden and the house was on the way. Expectantly, I would peak through the holes in the garden wall and there he would be, hunched over his flowers or scattering seeds for the birds. He would invite me in, pat me on the head and talk to me. Even then I felt that he was different and had an unusual way of conversing. All my elders lectured at me but he always asked me questions and approvingly laughed at my spontaneous answers. On my way back from the school, I knew that if I stopped to see him, he would give me sweet flavoured drinks. He always had something for me, a piece of dried fruit, some nuts and perhaps a sugar candy. In my orphaned childhood, drowned in unsolicited pity, he was an island full of wonder, surprises, smiles and hopes.

As I grew up, I realised that he was a *Hakim*, a traditional holistic healer. A calligrapher, a reciter of the Quran, he had a vast collection of Arabic and Persian books. Day after day he stood behind a low counter in front of what seemed like an endless row of assorted bottles full of syrups of different colours. There were porcelain jars with mysterious and complicated inscriptions on them. In front of the counter there were some hard chairs and along the wall, old wooden benches. There, people sat listening to him as he slowly, calmly and endlessly prepared his prescriptions. He asked questions; he felt the pulse, checked the colour of the nails, looked into the eyes and bringing his face close to the patient's ear, made enquiries in a hushed voice. One of his caring hands was always on the sick person's shoulder. Women came into a separated section of his portico and across a screen he attentively listened to their complaints. He addressed them as mothers, sisters, daughters and never failed to ask about the sons who had gone far away. Handing them the medication over the partition, he sent them

# Is Jasmine Just a Fragrance?

off with prayerful good wishes. Every now and then he would look at the shadows in the garden, take his glasses off, cover his eyes with his palms, take a deep sigh and whisper praises to God, the Healer the Forgiver, the Sufficient. Then, smiling, he would resume making little paper folded envelopes for his powdered potions.

I left for the big city of Lahore to study science at the university. Now I could see him only after months. His manners and style never changed but the questions he asked me now were quite different. 'Why does mercury slip through the fingers?' 'Why are gazelles so fast?' 'Why do moths circumambulate the flame?' 'Why does the flute sound so sad?' 'Why is jasmine so generous and dutiful about giving its fragrance to all, beggar and prince, alike?'

As I tried to explain everything scientifically, as I struggled with causalities and as I theorized the natural phenomena, he would listen with fascination and a twinkle in his eye, asking, 'Is jasmine just a fragrance and if so could perfume substitute the flower?' He would confront me thus and noticing my silence, he would proceed to say, 'Jasmine is a creation of God that is trying to awaken our senses, inviting us to see His Beauty; it is generously giving what God has given it; there is no trace of callousness; there is perfect obedience; it never forgets to blossom at the right time. Silently it senses the purpose of its creation... But man? Ah! he is forgetful, proud, rebellious, unjust, usurper, exploiter. That is why he needs the Quran and the Prophet'

His speech would become passionate and sometimes, overcome by his own emotions, he would cover his face and break down into ecstatic sobs. During such sessions, I heard him quote the Quran, speak most reverently about the Prophet, recite Rumi, Hafez, Iraqi, Jami, Iqbal and occasionally, when the gathering around him was small, he would get into Farabi, ibn Sina, Razi, Ibn Arabi, Gazzali, Tusi, Maskawieh and Mulla Sadra. He never showed any impatience towards my naive inquisitiveness. I perhaps was the archetypical growing, young Muslim of our modern times. To him I represented one of the

last opportunities of his life and a challenge.

I was 21 now and had started grasping the wisdom of his questions. Quite unknowingly his manner of knowing through asking had crept into my own personality. Unaware I had started to carry his voice within me. His questions were more clear to me and perhaps my answers were more acceptable to him. Diversity had started to collapse into unity.

And then I left, not only my home but also the garden of this sage. I came to Europe and then kept going farther West. It is almost a quarter of a century now and my journey has been long and eventful. Through this period I have met numerous 'scholars' of Islam. Many are certified from prestigious institutions of Islamic Studies. Some are self taught and some are self appointed and thrive on cultish followings. Eager to be addressed as doctors and professors, they are obsessed with recognition and authorship. They carry their visiting cards to the conferences and keep you informed through their updated curriculum vitae. They have atomized Islam and jealously guard their self created specialities. Veiled in mannerisms of modesty, they will give you boringly long accounts of their achievements, some of which may sound like, 'When I had lunch with His Royal Highness... or 'I shocked the theologians out of their turbans when I said

They exude intellectual energy but most of it is like turbulence in shallow waters. Their infantile egos cannot take any criticism. They do not ask questions; they only pronounce their positions. They do not teach; they only inform you of the impressive scope of their knowledge. 'Knowledge' is their arsenal in the academic battlefield and they confuse truth with winning an argument. They cannot heal; they only diagnose and pronounce depressing prognoses. They will give you a long lecture on the etymology of *taqwa* but are not *muttaqi* themselves.

I am caught in this Babel of new Islamic intellectualism. I miss the gently asked, deeply felt, challenging questions of the pious healer of my childhood. I miss the enlightening discourses and the poetic wisdom of this philosopher of my youth. But more than anything else, I miss his garden. ■