

Young Writers Award - 2004 winner

Adhan by Talim Arab

There are ten parts to the Islamic prayer. It starts with the call to prayer.

Arif was supposed to be on his knees the day the twin towers fell. Instead, he found himself outside a department store watching the event on TV, presuming, at first, it was a movie then realizing it was an actual event as crowds gathered around him. And as he looked on with curious sadness, he knew somewhere words were calling him, compelling the faithful to God. He remained motionless. Allahu akbar.

Niyya: Stand with respect and put the world behind you.

Flags were lowered half-mast as if bowing in sorrow. Mourning diluted the school's atmosphere, with students still in shock though weeks had passed. The school, of course, had special assemblies and sessions held by the Chaplain and the Guidance Officer to help students cope with the tragedy. But for Arif, S11 had stripped him of his anonymity.

Being one of 1800 students, Arif thought he might complete his studies unnoticed. He was used to sitting next to a window, silent as fog, letting the teachers worry about the boys in the back row lighting fires or lavishing their attention on the bright sparks who sat up front. You see, schools focus on the best and the worst. The rest fall into the cracks of mediocrity where nobody is bothered to venture. And Arif loved being average: with no pressure, no limelight, no expectation, it meant he could go unnoticed. And like plants left to grow of their own accord, so to did Arif think his intellectual abilities could grow wherever there was light, wherever there was moisture and nourishment to be found; he thought he might grow into himself and not the manicured pot plants most students around here turned into - their world view and open-mindedness just the circumference of the pot that held them. But now he was known. People walked past and knew who he was, and perhaps what he represented.

Qiyam: Place your right hand over your left, look at the ground and recite.

'How do you deal with grief?' Arif though just as he was pulled out of English to see the Guidance Officer - every face turning toward him knowing exactly why he was going. So while he walked down the corridors he assumed that some people tackle it head on. They fought until both problem and person were exhausted, with the problem usually bowing out defeated. Others push grief deep down inside themselves, hoping it might fall into a crack to incinerate in some flaming core leaving only the ash of memory. But when Mr. Rogers asked, 'how are you feeling?' Arif knew his silence placed him in the latter category. Mr. Rogers persisted.

'Well, how are things at home?'

'Fine.'

'How are your studies?'

'Fine.'

'Has anyone said anything to you?'

'No,' Arif said, folding his arms and staring at the scuff marks on his shoe.

'Arif! Nobody is fine after S11, so quit the passive aggressive routine.'

'Can I go back to class?'

'Go. But Arif,' Mr. Rogers said before he left, 'I'm here if you need a hand.'

It wasn't the cliché that caused Arif to roll his eyes: it was the pretence in which the matter was carried out, a genuine fake. In Arif's mind, Mr. Rogers cared only to ease his own conscious by getting Arif to open up. Arif could taste his own cynicism but if they were really concerned why wouldn't they just give him time to establish the way he felt. Emotions work in evolution: they churn and develop before a name like love, grief, or sadness can be placed upon them, and even then our emotions are mosaics enabling us to experience many feelings at once. Arif was stopped in his thoughts as a grade eight kid walked up to him and said, 'Hey, I know you. You're Persian number 3.'
'Yeah. I am,' said Arif, watching the kid skip clumsily away. Arif's theories turned true as despair collided into laughter.

Fatiha: Recite the Fatiha aloud - first surrah of the Qur'an.

How ironic that Arif should return to Mrs. Edwards' lesson on metonymy when Mr. Rogers had offered 'a hand'.

After sitting down and scanning for Saladin, only to realize he was absent, Arif heard Mrs. Edwards explain, 'it is the idea of a part representing a whole,' offering the Crown as an example. Arif wondered if he was metonymic for as Jade read aloud from the textbook he recalled the headlines of the newspapers the day of September 11. 'Bastards!' one paper wrote. Did he represent Islam in all its manifestations? Was he one of the 'bastards' the newspapers spoke of? Were they his hands at the controls of the plane that took thousands to their deaths? Did he destroy the twin towers with the ease of blowing out a candle flame?
'Arif. Arif!' Mrs. Edwards said, jolting Arif from his train of thought. 'Can you give me another example of metonymy?'
A pause of two heartbeats.
'No.'

Ruk'u: Drop hands to the side, bend from the waist and place your hands upon your knees. Look to the ground.

Outside the mosque, Arif took off his shoes and socks, rolled his sleeves, and performed the wudu thinking, 'I'm here for my parents.' The sun's rays were sharp as cut glass, and Arif felt refreshed as the cool water trickled over his hands. He rubbed his hands over and over, and then pulled the water up his arm as if it were a glove. As he washed his feet, Arif knew it was only Brisbane river water that was coming out of the tap. But it was more than that because after the wudu he felt clean, pure, light as pollen. Yet hearing the Adhan- the piercing cry of summon - he felt so numb. He sat helpless as a wingless angel.

Qauma: Rise to stand, arms at sides.

Perhaps it was because Friday was a holy day in Islam that Arif felt the courage to ask questions that night at dinner.
'I'm meeting Saladin after school tomorrow.'
'That's fine,' Arif's father said.
'Why did you leave Iran for Australia?' Arif asked his father.
'For the Tim-Tams,' his mother said chuckling to herself. 'Oh, I got a pair of Levis on sale from Myer. I'll try to get a pair for you tomorrow, Arif.'
'Mum, I'm trying to be serious.'
'Arif, you know why, and if you don't look up at that blue untroubled sky tomorrow morning and you'll know why. Besides, my Law firm had a branch over here,' his father said.

Minutes passed. The scents of aromatic curries filled the living room; turmeric, masala, chi and other exotic spices entwined were a culinary tapestry of culture. Arif pressed on.

'Why do I have to pray?'

'No-one's forcing you to do anything, Arif,' his mother interjected.

'Arif, some people send their children to Catholic schools without knowing a think about Catholicism. We'd be hypocrites if we were to raise you with no knowledge of who you are.'

'How do you know Allah exists?'

'How do you know he doesn't?'

'Dad!'

'Arif,' his mother said. 'The almighty Allah is the air: he is all around us but you can't see him; you breathe him in; you need him.'

'But does he need us?' Arif said.

'Ok, Arif, you know the rule: no politics no religion at the table - it gives everyone indigestion. It's something you'll understand when you're older.'

Arif wanted to protest, to argue with his parents until they would send him to his room but instead he ate his meal in silence. How dare they assume he wasn't mature enough to tackle the issue and that the understanding of spirituality was intrinsically part of age. He further despised his parents for their ability to keep the hinge of religion and modern life together. It was only then that he felt it. Something moving away. A shift soft as passing clouds. It was his faith.

Sudjood: Fall slowly to your knees. Lower and touch forehead, nose, and hands to the ground.

F=GMM/d2

Things fall. Scientific fact. Arif contemplated the gravity formulae, under the guise of pretending to do his Physics sums in class (his favourite subject according to his father). When God threw Adam and Eve out of the garden we fell to earth. When we are born we fall down the birthing canal. If we sin we go straight down to hell. Arif raised his hand.

'Sir is it true that gravity is actually the force that attracts objects?'

'Uh. I think so. Yes it is,' said the dilapidated Mr. Snell, holding on to teaching until retirement and more interested in filling out his gold lotto form.

Arif pondered that perhaps Adam and Eve were compelled to leave Eden for Earth; maybe we are attracted to the light of the world to the point of breaking waters that protect us. So are we bound to do bad things: to defoliate trees, to fly planes into buildings, to starve countries through sanctions? Was it a gravity within, an irrevocable and overwhelming force that compels us to destruction? Arif discovered that 'I' was in the middle of sin.

Qu'ud: Rise to sitting position.

He had waited all day. It was time. He dashed to the park after school. The winter sun made the air crisp yet warm enough as to not need a coat. But Arif wasn't interested in the pleasure of climate, as there was Saladin - prototype of Adam. Arif sat beside him trying not to be overenthusiastic.

'How did you get here so early?'

'Spare,' said Saladin, his voice a chocolaty baritone.

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Don't leave me in suspense you bastard! Did you get it?'

'Of course.'

'Brilliant!' Arif said.

'Need to send the company some photos but it should be fine.'

'Well, don't forget me when you grace the covers of all the magazines.'

'Forget you? Don't be stupid. You're with me all the way, bud.'

Arif deleted some memories in his mind and saved this one to the hard drive to keep for prosperity, even when Saladin would come to abandon Arif years later for an acting contract in the States.

'How are you coping with all the S11 stuff the school's pumping out?'

'Call me Mr. Teflon. I'm just ignoring it all.'

'I suppose you got called to Rogers' office. It's all screwed. They don't want to draw attention to us but they're doing so through all these stupid "de-briefing, grieving, emotional, touchy-feely meetings". Zaid and Mohammed hate what the school's doing.'

'I know,' Arif said, his voice dulling slightly.

'Are you taking those swimming lessons yet?'

'Nearly.'

'I've no idea why you want to learn to swim.'

'I've my reasons,' Arif said with more passion than he would have like to.

'Ok. Anyway, let's celebrate!' Saladin then pulled out a paper bag from his backpack. He gave it to Arif.

'What is it?'

'What do you think idiot! Champagne. Drink!'

It seemed like a test. He could free himself from his religion in a single sip. He took the bottle to his lips smelling the alcohol coming from it. He saw the luminosity of Saladin's smile. The drop was to hit lips. But he stopped. A moment, a pause of reflection: his heart maybe shifting shape but the blood that flowed within it was still the same, the same blood that didn't want any toxins traveling inside it. He didn't want to do this; he didn't have to. He gave the bottle back, not surging with strength but ready to accept his grief. The power of 'no' was a fire to incinerate the worst emotion of all: numbness. But mosaic as emotions are, Arif felt the emptiness of a friendship in the process of ending. The slight look of offense on Saladin's face said it all. There was nothing Arif could do but watch the sun collapse to its knees.

Sujood: Prostrate again.

The word Islam means to submit. To give yourself to God and that was what Arif did during the winter holiday by reading The Holy Qur'an. He learned that hijad was not hijack. He knew his religion did not promote any dimension of terrorism. But like all religions, politics could be used to corrupt them. It - being the politics - made the people commit suicide crimes, made others bulldoze houses on the basis of suspicion; the blend could cause governments around the world into a frenzied paranoia. And even though he understood this, Arif would never again feel the blood run to his head when his nose would touch his prayer mat and submit to God.

Qu'ud: Rise to sit.

Click. Click. Click. It was as easy as that. Arif had completed his University enrollment. 'Painless. Paperless. Personless,' Arif thought to himself. It was so unlike when he enrolled at school. It was one of the only times his parents had accompanied him. They sat with him in Deputy's floral filled office as she completed Arif's enrollment.

'Now, what's his Christian name,' Mrs. Loosemore said.

'Arif,' said Arif's father, oblivious to Arif's discomfort.

'Right. Now, what's your religion Arif?'

'Islam,' Arif said as if it were an apology.

Click click click went Mrs. Loosemore's manicured fingernails.

'Lovely, now Arif I'm sure you'll fit in well,' Mrs. Loosemore said, rising from her seat to escort Arif's parents out. The idea of 'fitting in' implied that it was Arif who would have to change, not the school itself. And that's how you spend the rest of your days at high school, contorting your personality to fit the institution's shape.

To complete the prayers recite all rakats, look over right and left shoulder, and say a personal prayer with cupped hands.

Hours after Arif met Saladin he knew it was time to go for prayers. He got off the bus and continued in the direction of the Mosque. But instead of entering he kept on walking, checking over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching, except, perhaps, the Angels on his shoulders taking note of the lies he would tell his parents from now on. And as he walked away from the Adhā somewhere into the night streets spherical water formed and clung to the corner of his eyes. He would not call them tears, as tears acquired their name only in the act of falling. 'Perhaps the world would be vigilant now, things would spiral not out of control but coil tightly into an effort towards peace so something like this would never happen again,' Arif thought, feeling the light of optimism come bursting through to crumble the wall of sadness inside him.