

2011: *Death's New Context*

MALCOLM. Nothing in his life
 Became him like the leaving it; he died
 As one that had been studied in his death
 To throw away the dearest thing he owed,
 As 'twere a careless trifle.

Macbeth, *Act I, Scene IV*

All books have a text and a context. There is an invariable gap between the two which widens with time; it is usually a gradual process. In the case of this book, that gap has widened so dramatically in the three years since it was first published that it has made the writing of these pages essential. It is safe to say: no book, so soon after its original publication, has needed a new introduction as badly as this one.

When I first began writing *Stranger to History* my father had been out of politics for nearly fifteen years. He was a businessman in Lahore; and, for the purposes of this book, which was written in part to tell the story of my complicated relationship with him, he needn't have been anything else. But – and such has been the life of this book and its subject – by the time the first draft was ready, my father had reentered politics as a

caretaker minister in General Musharraf's government. A few months later, just before publication, he was appointed governor of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province; two years later, on a cold January afternoon in 2011, he was dead, assassinated in Islamabad by a member of his own security detail.

The man who killed my father killed him for defending a Christian woman accused of blasphemy and for opposing the laws that had condemned her. For this, he became a hero in Pakistan, a defender of the faith, and my father – in the eyes of many – was declared *wajib ul-qatl*, the Islamic designation given to a man fit to die, a transgressor against the faith whom any good Muslim might kill. The trial that followed was less a murder trial – my father's killer had laid down his gun and confessed his crime – than it was a trial about my father's faith; and, whether his killer had been justified under extreme provocation to act against a transgressor. The defense, in building their case against my father, sought to rubbish his credentials as a Muslim, moving easily towards the conclusion that if he had not been Muslim in the way they wanted him to be, he deserved to die.

In this ugly reconfiguration of reality, *Stranger to History*, which had been one thing in one time, became another thing in another time. It was used in court to condemn my father, making the case that he was not a practicing Muslim; that he drank alcohol; that he ate pork; that he – in another life some thirty years before – had fathered a half-Indian child by an Indian woman.

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Stranger to History was written as the expression of a need, the need to face and record a suppressed personal history. That history began with my parents' meeting in Delhi in 1980. Or even earlier, perhaps, for what was that meeting between a Pakistani politician and the Indian reporter who had been sent to inter-

view him without its context in the 1947 Partition of India! The arrival of my mother's family as refugees in Delhi; the painful shadow of the Partition on my maternal grandfather, an army man who never recovered from the absurdity of fighting wars against men he considered to be his own . . . that history, unrecorded once, is there now, in these pages.

So, too, is the story of my parents' love affair and their separation: my father's return to Lahore to fight General Zia's dictatorship, my mother's to Delhi where she raised me. In 2002, at the age of twenty-one, I made a journey to Lahore to seek out my father for the first time. We were reunited; a brief happy period followed, which, in turn, was followed by more rupture and a new silence. We met for the last time on December 27, 2007, the night Benazir Bhutto was killed. That personal history, painful as it can be at times, is also there in this book, interwoven with the account of the larger journey I made in 2005 from Istanbul to Lahore to understand the faith that had made my father and his country.

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There is no need to go over it again here. What I would like to do instead is to take the story forward to the time after *Stranger to History*.

The book ends with Benazir Bhutto's assassination and my final meeting with my father. I am grateful for that meeting; it gave me an insight into a man I had not always been able to judge kindly.

I wrote at the time:

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had, in a way, also died from a wound to the neck. That had been the beginning of my father's political fight. The person we watched taken away in a simple

coffin, now with no fight left in her, was his leader when that career came to fruition. It could be said that all my father's idealism – his jail time, the small success and the great disappointment, the years when he struggled for democracy in his country – were flanked by this father and daughter who both died of fatal wounds to the neck. And running parallel to these futile threads, with which my father could string his life together, were the generals, one whom he had fought and the other in whose cabinet he was now a minister.

For it to be possible for men to live with such disconnect, for my father to live so many lives, the past had to be swept away each time. The original break with history that Pakistan made to realise the impulses of the faith, and which gave it the rootlessness it knew today, had to be repeated. Like the year of events, which had ended in trauma, all that could be wished for was the distraction of the next event. But in these small interims when the past could be seen as a whole, when my father could cast painful bridges over history, I felt a great sympathy as I watched the man I had judged so harshly, for not facing his past when it came to me, muse on the pain of history in his country. And maybe this was all that the gods had wished me to see, the grimace on my father's face, and for us, both in our own ways strangers to history, to be together on the night that Benazir Bhutto was killed.

My father, who was already a minister by then, became the governor of Punjab in the months that followed. His return to politics coincided with the release of *Stranger to History*, a book he objected to on every level. Its publication made final the rift that had begun already to appear in the last pages of this book.

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The cause of that rift was our differences over Pakistan. My father, fiercely patriotic, felt that the threat of extremism in his

country had been exaggerated; he said the Sufi culture of Punjab and Sindh would protect the society from Islamism; he spoke often of his enduring belief in Pakistan. Four days before he died, he tweeted: ‘Peace prosperity & happiness for new year (1 1 11) i’m full of optimism.’

I did not share his optimism. My travels in Pakistan had made me feel that extremism had seeped much deeper than my father was willing to admit. I felt that Pakistan’s problems were not simply administrative, but existential: that the original idea on which the country had been founded – the idea of a secular nation for Indian Muslims – had eroded; and that nothing had come in its place, save for an ever closer adherence to religion. I felt that this ideological collapse, which could never be admitted, for it was like faith itself in Pakistan, had prevented the country from seeing itself clearly, forcing it instead to invent enemies to justify its failure.

By the time the publication of this book came around and my father had returned to active politics – the cause of his original distance from my mother and me – the rift between us was complete.

In some ways I was prepared. Writing *Stranger to History* had taught me that though my father was not a religious man he was still a Muslim. He was like an embodiment of the paradox on which Pakistan had been founded: as a nation for Muslims, but not necessarily for Islam. Its spiritual founder, Muhammad Iqbal, in his famous speech to the All India Muslim League in Allahabad in 1930, had, in making the case for a political entity (though not a separate nation) in what is today Pakistan, spoken of an idea of Islamic solidarity. And later, my father, too, when I questioned him about his faith, spoke of something similar: he described himself as a ‘cultural Muslim.’

At the time I had understood the term to mean some basic adherence to Islamic cultural norms, circumcision, wedding and

funeral rites, a little Urdu poetry. What I had not known, when he spoke of this idea of cultural Islam, was the extent to which it influenced his historical and political worldview, and how things that to me seemed out of the ambit of faith, such as the Islamic invasions of India, the struggles in Kashmir and Palestine, or the war in Iraq, could – for men like my father – come to acquire all the force of faith, could, in fact, become like articles of faith.

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Of these, none was more sacred than the idea of Pakistan. My grandfather, M. D. Taseer, had been among those poets and intellectuals who were part of the original demand for Pakistan. Iqbal had been a mentor of sorts to him, and their relationship was so close that the poet had actually written and performed a part of my grandparents' marriage rites. Iqbal, who died in 1938, did not live to see the creation of Pakistan; but my grandfather did, and he, like my father, remained an ardent patriot till his death in 1950. His defense of his country in the early days of its creation led him to break with the Progressive Writers' Movement – a movement at whose founding he had been present – over their unwillingness to speak out against India in the 1947–48 war in Kashmir.* His growing conservatism brought him into strange company; and, in the now famous obscenity trial of the short story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, he is to be found among the witnesses for the prosecution.

Manto's account of that trial, with its guest appearances from

* They had also maligned him for being the author of a letter in the *Pakistan Times* objecting to India's role in the war. The letter was not, in fact, written by my grandfather; it was written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and edited by Patras Bukhari.

enraged clerics screaming that, in the new Pakistan, literature of Manto's kind will not be tolerated, has the quality of a witch hunt or an inquisition. And, when one considers the direction Pakistan was to take in the name of faith, the snuffing out of a big literary talent, like Manto, in the opening years of the Islamic republic acquires a different light; it gives a foretaste of what was to come. It is, of course, no small irony that my father, whose father sat among Manto's tormentors in 1948, would fall prey to the same brand of religious hysteria that left Manto, a few years after his arrival in Pakistan, a broken man.

Manto, for his part, was too skeptical and probing an observer to have survived Pakistan. It was a nation that had to be taken on faith; and Manto had no faith of that kind. Freshly arrived in Lahore from Bombay, he wrote in early 1948:

Try as I did, I wasn't able to separate Pakistan from India and India from Pakistan. Again and again, troubling questions rang in my mind: Will Pakistan's literature be separate from that of India's? If so, how? Who owns all that was written in undivided India? Will that be partitioned too? Are India's and Pakistan's core problems not the same? Will Urdu be totally wiped out in India? What shape will it take here in Pakistan? Will our state be a religious one? We'll defend the state at all cost, but does that mean we won't have permission to criticise its government? As an independent country, will our condition really be different from what it was under the British?

What Manto seems to sense here is the thinness of the idea on which the new state was founded. He seems to want to know: how would it assert itself? Would it break with its shared past with India? What would it keep, what would it leave out? On what basis? There is an anxiety in his questions about what Pakistan would lose if it defined itself purely by its opposition

to India. There is an uneasiness about the role religion will play. And, most of all, there is the anticipation of tyranny.

Manto's prescience hardly needs to be stated. In those early days he seemed already to have recognised the violent potential of Iqbal's utopia. The coups that were yet to come; the failure to perform a single legal transfer of power; the 1971 massacres in Bangladesh; the hanging of a sitting prime minister; the public floggings of the 1980s; and the terrorism and suicide-bombings of our present time.

Though he does not say it explicitly, Manto seems also to be questioning whether the religious state has an autonomous existence at all; whether its vitality and energy are its own, or simply derived from its opposition to a social order outside itself. He seems to be asking – and the point is just as valid in Iran where the Islamic Revolution has recast the modern world along Islamic lines – whether the idea of the Islamic Republic is a real entity or a nihilism.

In this respect, his vision is extraordinary. For in the decades that followed Manto's arrival in Lahore, the idea of Pakistan came to be expressed not so much on its own terms, but as a negation of India: not so much by what it was, but by what it wasn't. The country's non-Muslim populations had been forced out in 1947; in the independent years, the Islamic Republic set itself the task of erasing its association with the subcontinent, an association which many in Pakistan came to view as a contamination. Its mixed language, an incredible amalgam of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic words, was cleansed of its Sanskrit vocabulary; history, even when Islamic, was taught in such a way that the connection to India was edged out; all things regional and cultural – dress, customs, festivals, marriage rituals, literature, ideas of caste – that had been common to Muslim and non-Muslim alike in pre-Partition India fell under suspicion. The assertion of Pakistan came to mean the rejection of

the subcontinent and its composite culture; and in rejecting this culture, which was the only culture Pakistan had, it did not so much turn its back on India as it turned its back on itself. 'To build Pakistan,' Salman Rushdie wrote in *Shame*, 'it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lay just beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was rewritten; there was nothing else to be done.'

The other side of this systematic historical and cultural denuding was an ever louder – and ever vague – call for purer faith. The country slipped into a perverse cycle where, for problems to which the faith could provide no solution, it came to be seen with ever greater urgency as the only solution. This flawed dialectic – visible in Iran too – is perhaps the most destructive aspect of the religious state. For at the heart of it is the cynical wish to enjoy the fruits of one civilization while extolling the values of another. The ground is automatically prepared for all manner of hypocrisy. And in the religious state, as in those countries where two currencies are in circulation – one official, but valueless, the other illegal but real – the idea of value itself becomes distorted.

Places as these need enemies the way other places need ideas. They are there to justify the failure of the ideology on which the nation was ostensibly founded. In the more than six decades that Pakistan has existed various things, inside and outside its borders, have become the focus of this need: India, America, Israel, of course; but other, more subtle things too: the country's non-Muslim populations; the sari; the syncretic Islam of the subcontinent, which every day is under attack; its mixed language; its few remaining minorities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike: Shias, Ahmadis, Christians . . . the list grows ever longer till one day the ideological state comes to consume itself.

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In the last days of his life, my father, whose love of Pakistan prevented him from seeing it clearly, found himself declared its enemy. His crime was his defense of another enemy: Asia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy after drinking at her village well (there is a distinct suggestion of caste to this story: of the old Hindu caste system and Untouchability – though strictly forbidden in Islam – still hanging on in Pakistan after all these years). Because his country was founded in faith and blood – a million people had died so that it could be made – my father could not say that the grounds on which she was condemned were wrong; the grounds stood; what he sought for Asia Bibi was clemency. But it was enough to demand his head.

What he never could have said is what I suspect he really felt: ‘The very idea of a blasphemy law is primitive; no woman, in any humane society, should die for what she says and thinks.’ And when he sought the repeal of the laws by which she had been condemned, the laws that had become an instrument of oppression in the hands of a majority against its minority, my father could not say that the source of the laws, the faith, had no place in a modern society. He had to find a way to make people believe that the faith had been distorted.

But the clerics and the media, the same men who in another time had condemned Manto, didn’t believe my father; they could tell that he was part of a godless and westernized elite. And one of the only times in my life that I have seen my father scared was during a TV interview with a Pakistani journalist, a woman with a painted face and blow-dried hair, who would not accept his rationale for opposing the blasphemy laws. At last, exasperated, he said: ‘Why do you keep making it seem as if I, myself, am guilty of blasphemy? I’m not, I am absolutely not . . .’

In those last few weeks, when they were burning him in effigy and declaring him fit to die at nocturnal rallies, at which his bodyguard assassin was present, he seemed to sense the trouble

he was in. In one TV interview, available now on YouTube, a journalist sympathetic to his cause asks if he is nervous about having excited the passions of the religious men. My father replies that many people had told him to steer clear of the issue, many had warned him of its dangers; but he had felt, he says, quoting his uncle, the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz: 'Let's go today in fetters through the bazaar, with our wounded hearts bound fast, to our death we go, come, friends, let us go.'

My father, whose father had also been a poet, and who grew up surrounded by Urdu poetry, had much occasion at the end of his life to quote from the poets. These snatches of verse, to be found now in a YouTube video, now in some final tweet, form a macabre compendium, unbearably painful, of a man seeming to anticipate his death. There is the famous verse from the Punjabi poet Munir Niazi, quoted in an interview: 'In part, the road was hard, in part, I wore a collar of grief about my neck. In part, the people of the town were cruel, and yes, in part, I, too, knew a taste for death'; there was the Faiz; and, literally days before he died, there was Shakeel Badayuni: 'So robust is this body that it knows no fear from stray fires, it fears only the fire of that flower [within], which alone can set the garden ablaze.'

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A few days later, on a dismal January afternoon in Islamabad, as he left a restaurant where he had been having lunch with a friend, his twenty-six-year old bodyguard, persuaded of my father's designation as an enemy of the faith, shot him to death in the street, firing round upon round in the presence of the rest of the guards who did nothing to stop him. Within hours, the components of Pakistan's parallel morality, a morality distorted by faith, fell into place.

My father's killer was showered with rose petals, billboards

of him were erected through the city of Lahore, men came to give food and money in thanks for what he had done, and there were vast rallies of support demanding he be freed. The senate, which in the months to come would have a prayer to say for Osama bin Laden, was unwilling to pass a simple motion to condemn the killing. Those who defended my father, in no matter how small a way, were themselves either killed or forced to leave. In March, Shahbaz Bhatti, the minister for minority affairs, who had joined my father in opposing the blasphemy laws, was gunned down by unknown men outside his house in Islamabad; in August, the cleric who had performed my father's funeral rites when no one else was willing was forced to flee the country; and, in October, the judge who dared hand down a death sentence against my father's killer left for Saudi Arabia, after his court was smashed up by protestors.

Pakistani liberals – who themselves constitute the tiniest of tiny minorities – like to say that these are the actions of a still tinier minority: the extremists. Perhaps they are right; I, for one, don't believe that they could occur without the quiet assent of the majority. And, in any case, what cannot be denied is that my father, who loved his country, died wretchedly in Pakistan, forgotten and un-mourned by the majority, an enemy of the faith. It was a death that recalls the last sentence of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*: "Like a dog!" he said. It was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him.'

Some days after his death, I had written:

Though I believe, as deeply as I have ever believed anything, that my father joins that sad procession of martyrs – every day a thinner line – standing between him and his country's descent into fear and nihilism, I also know that unless Pakistan finds a way to turn its back on Islam in the public sphere, the memory of the late governor of Punjab will fade.

And where one day there might have been a street named after him, there will be one named after Malik Mumtaz Qadri, my father's boy-assassin.

A year to the day, that forecast, grim as it sounds, still stands; so, too, does this book, *Stranger to History*. It is a source of some satisfaction to me that my account of the countries I visited on that eight-month journey from Istanbul to Lahore is more relevant today than when it was written. In Turkey, I believe it is possible to see in the story of a man like Abdullah the new equilibrium that would be reached in the Erdogan years between Islam and Kemalist secularism. In Syria, one cannot but have an intimation of the disturbance that lay beneath the apparent placidity of the Assad regime and that would come boldly to the surface five years later during the Arab Spring. In Iran, through women like Nargis and Desiré, we meet the kind of people who became the face of the now suppressed Green Movement.

Nowhere is the book more relevant – and here is a little irony – than in Pakistan, where it anticipates so much of the violence and futility that was on the horizon. But, here alone, there is little pleasure for me, and a considerable sadness. For writing *Stranger to History* came at the price of losing my relationship with my father; and, in the end, I was, as I had been for so much of my life, estranged from him.

I cannot say I regret writing it; I don't. This book made me who I am; it was my reclamation of the past. If there is regret, it comes only from having had the fortune to see, more clearly than my father could ever have allowed himself to, the place his country had become.

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