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From a Mansion Near Tora Bora

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All great events—wars, revolutions, economic disasters—impose a new conception of reality on their survivors, and it was clear soon after the attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001 that the abrupt and radical reconfiguration of social and political forces would also challenge novelists, exerting new pressure on the delicate art form of the realist novel. Ian McEwan was not alone in thinking that "we had gone through great changes and now was the time to just go back to school, as it were, and start to learn." Not only did the scale of the atrocity, and the malevolence behind it, dwarf the most capacious imagination. It shattered the respite from large-scale violence and chaos that the West had enjoyed following World War II and then the Vietnam War, a period of peace and affluence which, though menaced by nuclear war, allowed novelists to imagine themselves working within relatively stable and self-contained bourgeois societies.

As the origins of September 11 in cold-war policies in Afghanistan and the Middle East were exposed, a great and tangled web of actions and motivations came to light: a netherworld in which governments, corporations, ideologies, and organized religions perpetually clashed, making violence and dispossession an everyday reality for much of the world's population. Novelists could still render the effect of what Henry James in his preface to *The Princess Casamassima* called "our not knowing....society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface." But they could not remain oblivious to the sinisterly interconnected world that had been lying beneath the garish surface of postwar affluence and consumerism.

The cold war, for instance, was cold "only for the rich and privileged places of the planet," as Nadeem Aslam writes in his extraordinary new novel set in Afghanistan. Since 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, provoking the United States to organize a global anti-Communist jihad, the country has been continually subjected to mass bloodletting and ethnic cleansing. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was followed by a vicious civil war among warlords, and, as Aslam writes, it remains possible today, seven years after the collapse of the Taliban regime, to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following it back to its origins, collect a dozen stories concerning war—how it affected the hand that pulled it out of the oven, the hand that kneaded the dough, how war impinged upon the field where the wheat was grown.

But then even the writer who manages to collect these stories faces formidable technical challenges in transmuting them into art. The cold war remains a boon to the genre novelist—the writers of spy thrillers and romantic fiction. But the disorder of countries where the Soviet Union and the free world fought for hegemony seems to cancel many of the assumptions of the literary novelist: particularly the liberal humanist notion, which has given the novel its centrality and particular power in Western culture since the nineteenth century, that individuals are capable of exercising free will and assuming personal responsibility for their actions.

The social backdrop that novelists use to give individual striving its scale and tension is missing in places like Afghanistan. The main Afghan character in *The Wasted Vigil* "doesn't even know his own name, doesn't even know how he ended up in the orphanages and madrassas." "A nameless child becomes a ghost," Aslam writes, "it roams the world, making itself visible to the living in order to be addressed in some way...but humans run away from ghosts and won't address them." Some other characters in Aslam's novel also have a wraith-

like quality, as though the great desolation of Afghanistan has stripped them of most recognizable attributes of human selfhood.

In disintegrated societies few people can afford to see themselves as self-directed individuals; their lives seem to them to be almost entirely at the mercy of impersonal and invisible forces. Such a feeling of confusion and helplessness was also the fate, however briefly, of many survivors and witnesses of the terror attacks on September 11. "Our world, parts of our world," Don DeLillo wrote a few weeks later, "have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage." Subsequent shocks and disasters such as the catastrophic war in Iraq and the looming economic crisis have further confounded our sense of reality, which seems to be increasingly dominated by public events.

Seven years is not a long time for novelists anxious to map the now universal and universally visible places of danger and rage. In recent fictions that self-consciously engage with the contemporary world, Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, and Joseph O'Neill record middle-class bewilderment, and John Updike, Salman Rushdie, and Martin Amis draw psychosexual profiles of Muslim fanatics. Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has helped make imaginatively comprehensible the motivations and actions of those unexpected players on the world's stage who claim the sanction of religion and ideology and invoke a long and alien history. But it is narrative nonfiction, such as Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* and Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*, or even J.M. Coetzee's essayistic novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, that has given greater coherence to a widespread experience of trauma, fear, distrust, and hatred.

It may be that as Deborah Eisenberg, commenting in these pages on a widely felt marginality of literary fiction, wrote, readers have been trained to look elsewhere to gain an understanding—or misunderstanding—of their world, or [have] been, in the course of the single-minded cultivation of an army of consumers, ruthlessly undereducated.

Certainly, if these readers feel that "what contemporary writers perceive and say is in some fundamental way divorced from reality," it is because few novels in the years preceding 2001 manifested an awareness of the events that have led up to our tormented present. Given this lack of predecessors Nadeem Aslam's new novel is an audacious panorama, seeking as it does to encapsulate several national histories as well as the overlapping destinies of individuals caught up in apparently disparate events. A quick survey of its spacious historical terrain—Russian brutality in Afghanistan and Chechnya, Muslim fundamentalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the war on terror and the American recourse to torture, and the resurgence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in post-September 11 Afghanistan—makes us initially suspect that the novel is as noisy and sprawling as it is aggressively topical. Yet Aslam manages to describe the lives of his many characters, and their illusions and despair, with consummate skill.

The Wasted Vigil is set in a crumbling mansion near the Tora Bora mountain range, amid a grim post-September 11 Afghanistan where al-Qaeda and the Taliban are regrouping and warlords allied to the US pursue their private vendettas in the guise of the war on terror. The house, which overlooks a lake, belongs to Marcus, a seventy-year-old Englishman who has spent much of his life in Afghanistan, and before the novel ends its crumbling walls will host an international cast of characters: Lara, a Russian woman who is in Afghanistan to look for her brother, a former soldier in the Soviet army, who may have known Marcus's missing daughter Zameen and fathered her son; David, a former member of the CIA who fell in love with Zameen during the anti-Soviet jihad, and who is now haunted by his own role in the destruction of Afghanistan; Casa, a fanatical offspring of madrasas and terrorist training camps on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border; and James, a young American volunteer in the war on terror, who is convinced of the righteousness of his cause.

Aslam tells the back-stories of these victims of war concurrently with many quick flashbacks: the device that along with some romantic details (the house has a half-buried statue of the Buddha, a perfume factory, and murals painted in the Persian style in the nineteenth century) makes *The Wasted Vigil* seem an extended tribute to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Aslam shares Ondaatje's penchant for semi-surreal images, opening his novel dramatically with one that seeks to evoke the furtiveness and derangement of ordinary life under the

Taliban: On the wide ceiling are hundreds of books, each held in place by an iron nail hammered through it. A spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred.

There is nothing of the feel-good quality of Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel *The Kite Runner* in Aslam's depiction of Afghanistan. We see Afghan children in refugee camps in Pakistan forcing a boy to throw up so that they can feed upon his vomit. We encounter, too, a corpse abandoned by the roadside that has been covered with fragments of mirrors in order to deceive vultures, who are "frightened off by their own reflections," and who flap their wings as they sit in vigil, "as though fanning away the stench rising from the decaying flesh."

"Torn to pieces by the many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world," it is a country where single shoes are sold in shops, and where total and endless conflict has brutalized several generations. Describing Afghan cruelty toward Soviet prisoners, who were raped, buried alive, or thrown off mountainsides, Aslam writes that "given the chance the rebels of today would do all that and more to American soldiers, to the enemy cities and towns of their bodies"—a chillingly efficient phrase that implicates the barbarism of "precision" bombing in the savagery of retaliatory beheadings and mutilations.

Aslam, who was born in Pakistan and grew up in a lower-middle-class Muslim community in the north of England, published two novels before *The Wasted Vigil*. Set in Pakistan and northern England respectively, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) and *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) depict small, densely interconnected Muslim communities seething with intrigue and fear. Events of a somewhat grotesque nature—murder, torture, sexual violation—haunt all of Aslam's narratives. Yet his prose remains calm, even languid, as it draws, with the delicate precision of a Mughal or Persian miniaturist, portraits of men and women going about their constricted and often very mundane lives.

In *The Wasted Vigil*, too, Aslam's main narrative is full of ominous echoes of what may have happened in the past—to Lara's brother, to Zameen, to Zameen's son—and forebodings of what is to come. So even as the reader rests in the still center of some extraordinarily dramatic events, he is never less than aware of a growing tension, created as much by what the story suppresses as what it reveals. Indeed, Aslam is more skilled at showing repressed emotions than declared ones: the most unforgettable character in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is not any of the lovers doomed by prejudice but a devout Muslim housewife doggedly circling around her memories and anxieties.

A secularist, Aslam excels at depicting people of faith, such as the sensitive mullah in *Season of the Rainbirds* who is forced to maintain a harsh public position, or Casa in *The Wasted Vigil*, the young orphan who is deeply vulnerable to the fundamentalist lament for Islam's lost glory and power, a once-proud civilisation brought low by the underhandedness of others, yes, but mainly by the loss of faith among the Muslims themselves, the men decadent, the women disobedient.

A dreamlike setting—a lake with exotic wildlife features in *Maps for Lost Lovers* as well as *The Wasted Vigil*—and a keen, tender eye for nature continuously transform the ordinary. In *Maps for Lost Lovers* Aslam moves from a simple sentence about the local weather to this exquisite conceit:

During the nights, the condensation on the windowpanes has frozen into sparkling patterns of bird feathers, insect wings and leaf skeletons, as though each home contains within it a magical forest, tangled with fables and myths, the glittering foliage growing pressed against the glass.

As though in deference to its subject, *The Wasted Vigil* has fewer rich metaphors and images, and it often has to shoulder the weight of exposition and analysis. Here is Aslam writing about the Taliban, who were mostly poor foot soldiers from primitive and impoverished backgrounds. Vulnerable and easy to control, it didn't take much effort to work them up into a frenzy over what they had been taught to believe as religious truth, and the domination over women was a simple way to organise and embolden them.

This has a journalistic briskness. But the prose in *The Wasted Vigil* is usually so generous with startling perceptions that the reader rarely feels overwhelmed by the social and historical facts that Aslam, writing about a country largely unknown to his readers, has to constantly smuggle into his narrative. A more characteristic paragraph occurs early in *The Wasted Vigil*: He has given her only the purest water when she has been thirsty. This country has always been a hub of things moving from one point of the compass to another, religion and myth, works of art, caravans of bundled Chinese silk flowing past camels loaded with glass from ancient Rome or pearls from the Gulf. The ogre whose activities created one of Afghanistan's deserts was slain by Aristotle. And now Comanche helicopters bring sizeable crates of bottled water for America's Special Forces teams that are operating in the region, the hunt for terrorists continuing out there.

Caches of this water are unloaded at various agreed locations in the hills and deserts, but two winters ago a consignment must have broken its netting—it fell from the sky and came apart in an explosion close to Marcus's house, a blast at whose core lay water not fire, the noise bringing him to the window to find the side of the house dripping wet and hundreds of the gleaming transparent bottles floating on the lake in front of the house. A moment later another roped bundle landed on the lake and sank out of sight. Perhaps it broke up and released the bottles, or did it catch on something down there and is still being held? Water buried inside water.

Opening with an innocuous sentence, Aslam moves from Afghanistan's role as a crossroads in the past to the degraded cosmopolitanism of its present, ending with an arresting image of an explosion of water bottles over a lake (the buried plastic will show up later in the novel, part of Aslam's studied pattern of repetition and echoes).

However, the most distinctive feature of *The Wasted Vigil* is Aslam's liberal use of free indirect style to describe people trapped in their own national subjectivities: the device allows him to create a political polyphony, in which characters can at least conduct an internal, if not public, argument with each other. Casa recites the verse from the Koran "which gives permission to massacre prisoners of war: *It is not for the Prophet to have captives until he has spread fear of slaughter in the land.*" At the same time Casa, the veteran of the training camps, is well armed against accusations of Islamic barbarism: These days they keep saying, *Why do the Muslims become suicide bombers? They must be animals, there are no human explanations for their actions.* But does no one remember what happened on board flight United 93? A group of Americans—"civilised" people, not "barbarians"—discovered that their lives, their country, their land, their cities, their traditions, their customs, their religion, their families, their friends, their fellow countrymen, their past, their present, their future, were under attack, and they decided to risk their lives—and eventually gave up their lives—to prevent the other side from succeeding. He is not wrong when he thinks that that is a lot like what the Muslim martyrdom bombers are doing.

"Two of their buildings fell down," Casa ruminates, "and they think they know about the world's darkness, about how unsafe a place it is capable of being!" David, the contrite ex-member of the CIA, wonders, what did Americans

really know about such parts of the world, of the layer upon layer of savagery that made them up? They had arrived in these places without realising how fragile were the defences that most people had erected against cruelty and degradation here. Conducting a life with the light from a firefly.

Assured of American good intentions, James is quick to rationalize his government's support for Islamic fundamentalist regimes: The people who want to replace the Saudi government these days don't want an end to this barbarism: they want to *extend* public beheadings and whipping, and the cutting off of hands and feet, to other countries. To the rest of the planet.

Staging this dialectic, Aslam deftly avoids coming down on one side or the other; it is possible to read—and prove—every point of view in his novel. However, Aslam's own anger, evenly rationed and beautifully controlled, at the heedless men and nations complicit in the destruction of Afghanistan is unmistakable on every page of *The Wasted Vigil*. "In a place," he writes, where not many can read or write, each person's memory is a fragile repository of

songs and ceremonies, tales and history, and if he vanishes without passing it on, it's like the wing of a library burning down.

If the murder and displacement of the country's nameless millions—the "collateral damage" of the cold war—becomes something more than a dreadful statistic to the non-Afghan reader of *The Wasted Vigil*, it is because of Aslam's profound feeling for what Afghanistan has irrecoverably lost.

Locked into an endless and fruitless vigil, the characters in *The Wasted Vigil* can appear no more than role-players in the central myth of Aslam's creation, the ruin of Afghanistan. In a phrase of cinematic shorthand, Marcus's "white beard and deliberate movements recall a prophet, a prophet in wreckage," and sixty pages later Aslam embroiders the portrait of the man who has lost his wife and daughter: "The soles of his shoes are worn the way the edges of erasers become rounded with use. As though he walks around correcting his mistakes."

The brutality and devastation that scar their private lives, and through which they always have to be grasped, make the characters in *The Wasted Vigil* appear reflections of one another; compared to them, the denizens of the Muslim ghetto in *Maps for Lost Lovers* seem richly distinctive. Appropriately, the character who possesses the greatest inner freedom is an orphan and a terrorist, Casa. At Marcus's house, Casa, who has come to believe that "human beings had little to offer beyond cruelty and danger," first meets a young woman, Duniya, who lives in the nearby village. He has learned from his madrasa teacher that "women's guile was immense, their mischief noxious, that they were evil and mean-spirited," and he is greatly disturbed by Duniya's beauty. Describing Casa's vulnerability, Aslam makes his character undergo, in just a few skillfully crafted pages, the complete gamut of Dostoevskian emotions: abject longing, hatred, pride, and the will to power.

But none of Aslam's characters can feel even the slightest possibility of Dostoevskian redemption. Their vigil ends with some awful revelations: Lara's brother, it turns out, was tortured by an Afghan warlord, and his ravaged but still half-alive body then used for a game of buzkashi, a Central Asian version of polo in which riders ordinarily use the carcass of a goat or a calf as ball. David learns that his old friend from the CIA had been complicit in the murder of Zameen by an Afghan warlord. In the novel's most horrifying scene, Aslam describes an American interrogator directing a blowtorch into Casa's left eye.

"In recent years," Deborah Eisenberg wrote in these pages, we, the populace, have been stunned with fear and shame by events in which we have had, however unwillingly, a hand, and this fear and shame seem to have taken a great toll on our composure, our ability to look at what is in front of our eyes.

Aslam's determination to gaze resolutely at the darkest side of our many cold and hot wars is what gives *The Wasted Vigil* its depth and power. Readers may blanch at the novel's fixation with atrocity, its apparently unaesthetic preoccupation with politics and history, and Aslam's insistence on banishing its characters to the lowest circle of hell. Yet they would find it hard to deny the truth of Aslam's portrait of an accursed country where the conflicts and ideologies of the modern world have short-circuited even the oldest conventions of life—childhood, love, family—until the point where fear and foreboding alone define and render intelligible all human relationships.

This story was found at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21977?email>