A Pearl of Every Size

‘Your heart is the size of an ocean—
Go find the gem hidden in your depths!
Your open mouth cries like a seashell:
‘That heart is too small for me!’
That heart contains the whole universe,
How could it be too small for you?’

The day renowned village mystic Mustafa Abdulla Mahmoud al-Assad died after twenty-seven hours of undignified agony, the air swayed with a thick, bored heat. Mohamed Abdulla El Negouli sat on the dusty steps outside his house, wiping impatiently at the small pearls of perspiration that formed insistently between his eyebrows and on his upper lip and squinting through the blurred, amberish air at a group of boys his age playing football in the dirt. He had had a distinctly disconcerting dream the night before, and an uneasy feeling hung over him like a damp fur coat. In the nightmare, his Aamma Dina had given birth to a giant moth. The moth had flown straight out of her and into a candleflame, where it had burnt instantly to ash. It was at this point in the dream that Mohamed had woken, panting, his bed wet with distressed sweat. He muttered a prayer for poor baby cousin Ali and looked up at the sky. He hoped it hadn’t really been her fault, though that was the rumour.

‘He’s dead, that big one. Soon there’ll be none of your kind left!’

The group of boys had approached while he’d been staring up. The one who had spoken was Yusef Hassan, a dark boy with an insolent mouth and whose curiously wide frame, stooped back and spindly limbs gave the uncomfortable impression of his being a cockroach. ‘Peace be upon you, Yusef,’ Mohamed replied coolly.

‘Al-Assad. My cousin’s husband was there, he’s the doctor over that side. Said he was all yellow and hung on way past his time.’ He mock-retched. ‘Good riddance, my father says. He says it’s all heretic evil your type believes. And the dancing is effeminate – your father’s an affront, he says. The worst is the shrines – poly-something.’

‘Polytheism,’ one of the other boys offered. When he caught Mohamed’s eye, he looked down shamefully. ‘The funeral is tomorrow, the procession comes through here,’ he said more softly, ‘But the mayor says no shrines, because it’s haram. And he has to go in the main Sunni tombs, to be buried like anyone else.’

‘I’d spit on any shrine anyway! Shirk! Evil!’

Mohamed ran home. His hands felt heavy as he sprinted through the tangled roads of mud and sand. They were hot, and pulsed as though a whole heart lay under the skin of each palm.

The tall walls of his house were painted a pale yellow with large green calligraphy swirled over it. The colour had gone through the cycle of flaking off in the aridity and being repainted so many times over that the house now resembled a stately, dried-out reptile. It was a large, quite grandiose structure, built by Mohamed’s great-great-grandfather, but its scaly hide ended unceremoniously in mid-air because it had no roof. The family, like everyone else, were avoiding the nationwide tax on rooftops. The consequence of this tax was that the entire country had an unfinished, haphazard look to it. If you
were to climb to the top of any building, you would look out at a horizon full of rusted scaffolding poles so ugly even the golden kindness of the fierce Egyptian sun couldn’t forgive it. Though it was convenient – the Negouli family would build a new floor every so often in order to accommodate its burgeoning ranks, as many families did - it did mean pigeons would perch on the poles and shit on them with a shameless regularity.

When he wrenched the big, metal outer doors open with a screech and stepped inside, he heard exuberant voices. Apparently, an anecdote was nearing its end: ‘But, I forgot! So, when the next one came, I just registered them as twins!’ This was followed by resounding guffaws, which were still reverberating around the entertaining-room as he entered. He walked into a wall of the hot, heady smell of mint tea.

His father sat cross-legged on the floor with his friend, ruddy-faced orchard-owner Abdul Said, who was telling the story. Mohamed Mahmoud’s skin was brown and wrinkled like that of a date and looked as though it would tear as easily. He had one pronounced dimple on his chin, his cheeks were grey and sunken, and he was never without a Camel Red between his vaguely purplish lips. With all this and his bald head he looked rather like a pharaoh down on his luck. He was all bones, but very tall. He was not merely large compared to other men, though. Mohamed Mahmoud was large simpliciter: he had a kind of cosmic largeness, bigger than his dimensions; when Mohamed Mahmoud drank, he sipped the Red Sea out of his tea cup. He seemed to exist on purpose, in a world of people who simply found themselves being.

‘I have some sweets for you. I picked them up at the shop. There you go, they are on the table, just there. But don’t count them yet! Before you count there could be any number of sweets – you could have ten thousand sweets before you force them to be a specific number with your counting! Just wait! Now, come here, ya Mohamed, sit down. I must tell you about my dreams! I had many dreams last night, my son, let me tell you. I dreamt I was yearning, yearning so hard but for what I could not say! Until I looked down and saw my scales and fins – I was a fish, my boy, a fish on land! So of course, I was yearning for the ocean! Ha ha! But then, my boy Mohamed, my dream changed, and then I was looking up at a black shiny sky – glistening, like black papaya seeds, dark black and wet, yes! – and I was climbing to the top of a glittering mountain and looking out to the landscape below. But not a normal landscape, oh no! Jewels and gemstones; swirling seas of ruby lava and bubbling towers of pearls, bulbous and wet-looking, sloppy and slippery! Ha ha! And then when I reached the summit it became the dawn, and there I played the sun’s rays like a harp, my boy, and rode a blue camel back down to earth. What do you say to that!’

‘Baba –’

‘But the last thing I dreamt, ya Mohamed, was the best. It was the best because I saw the universe. I picked up the universe and held it in the palm of my hand, because it was an oyster! The universe was an oyster! And the pearl at its centre was no size. It was no size because it was every size, all and every size! The universe was an oyster whose pearl was every single size! Don’t you understand what this means, my boy?’

‘Baba, they told me Mr Assad has died. I am very sorry... Peace be upon him. I know he was your close friend.’

His father’s great cavernous chest shrank inwards. His upper lip fell open in sad surprise, revealing his gold tooth, dull in the darkish room. He looked smaller, suddenly; more shrivelled.
'He was a cognizant man, enlightened. He will have died already. Now he is merely separated, soul from body.' He blinked, and recited, 'you mustn’t be afraid of death / you’re a deathless soul / you can’t be kept in a dark grave / you’re filled with God’s glow. The funeral will be tomorrow I suppose. Do you know where they plan to build the shrine?'

'The mayor said no shrine... The boys said it’s haram. And they said he must be buried in the Sunni tombs. Though they didn’t say anything else, so perhaps they will let us embalm and shroud him.'

His eyes flashed up in embittered shock. ‘Let us choose how to embalm him? Ha! They might as well ask us to choose the sauce in which we wish to be cooked! What tyranny is this? May the darkness keep them all awake tonight with a deafening indictment!’

Mohamed shuffled nervously. The words evil and effeminate echoed maliciously in his mind, bouncing incessantly back and forth between his ears. His father’s eyes darted to him and widened, ferociously quick.

‘I see right through you, Mohamed, like you are a window. How positively pellucid you are. I know you doubt, I know! They are afraid to desire Him, Mohamed. Not me. I am desiring Him every second, desiring with every hair, every cell, every smell. That is real. Yes, they have a path, and it goes somewhere. But their path is to the watering hole, well-trodden and besmirched with footprints in the mud. Let them have it. The path we walk is new and unknown, just like its destination! The springs of knowledge and love are eternal! Love is eternal and always new! It manifests itself differently in each of its vessels!’

While he hadn’t the faintest idea how to rebut them, his father’s words did not inspire even the smallest hint of confidence.

‘My boy, tonight you will see. You will come with me to dhikr tonight.’

---

As Mohamed Mahmoud whirled, he coruscated, as though bedizened from head to foot with jewels of sweat. His great torso seemed almost blurred, so fast was he moving. His wide, white skirt could almost be heard cutting through the air as he gazed with a furious desire up at his raised hands. He revolved devotedly from right to left, taking care to keep his heart central in his movements. He glittered hypnotically, his fellow worshippers surrounding him in a circle. Their fervent chant filled the small, dark room with an air of ecstatic frenzy. They were singing to him.

‘You are the delight of the Lord God, the highest Full-Moon of created beings,
You are the light of the eyes of His Messengers, the Lamp of our eyes.
O our master! Friend of God! My sultan!’

Mohamed Abdulla watched, enraptured. His hands throbbed ardently. Suddenly, his father began to shout, eyes wide. He fell to his knees and screamed a scream that took stomachs in its fist and twisted them hard with its force; a scream so soaked in distress it tore tears from tear ducts with magnetic urgency. His cries ripped through the now-silent room for a minute, or perhaps an hour, all eyes locked onto him. Then, like the flicking of a switch, the worshippers surged forward to help. Mohamed Abdulla was stuck in a kind of paralysis. He stared agape at the fluttering whites of his father’s eyes as his head was laid down and cradled, thrashing, and felt the urge to vomit but was too numb to do so.
He looked down at his hands and felt his throat clench - they were huge and scarlet, veined and monstrous, beating. In panic, he went to feel for the heart in his chest with his left hand, but the pressure in it surged as he lifted it up and the fragile skin tore wide open. Streams of blood rippled down his arm, pooling in the crease of his elbow and dribbling to the floor. He swayed, his head light, eyes closing.

And just then he was the universe. Both everything in the world and the outer limits of everything: sustaining and allowing life and light. He had opened up to it all – everything that was and everyone that he had been or could be. He was a black hole. Furiously passive, but whole in his very holeness.

Now he was in a boat – a small fishing boat on a calm, black, concave sea. He leant out of his boat and plunged his hand down, stretching his fingers out, finding himself touching small, round smoothnesses. He lifted his hand out, clutching a handful of them. Pearls, gleaming with a dull muteness. He bit into a few, but they crunched to dust in his mouth. Only the last of his handful stayed resolute between his teeth. He bit it again.

He woke up to a grating sound that stopped as his lids opened. His molars ached painfully, sore from merciless grinding. He looked down at his hands. They were normal, flesh-coloured, hand-shaped, unbloodied. He looked around him, seeing only his bedroom illuminated by the slivers of sunlight shining through the gaps in the curtains. He felt very tired.

Just then Mohamed Mahmoud exploded into the room in a flurry of white largeness. ‘Get up, my boy, get up! We’ll miss the funeral procession! Time to go!’ He grabbed his son by the upper arms and wrenched him out of bed, stripped him naked and flung a white jalabiyyah over his head. It was a too big and pooled a bit on the floor. Mohamed clutched at his elbow.

‘Baba, are you all right? At the dhikr... you were screaming... I think I might have fainted, but I had a dream -’

‘Did you find a pearl, ya Mohamed? A real pearl?’ His father’s eyes bore down on him earnestly. Then he smiled, and cupped Mohamed’s cheek in his palm, kissing him on the forehead in the space between his dumbstruck eyes. But time was moving quickly now. Grabbing his son’s hand, he rushed the pair of them outside. They took their seats on the side of the street just in time.

The procession was on its way past. It was a caterwauling cacophony of wails and moans, with an imam shouting prayers loudly over the top of the cloud of noise. Only men were allowed in the procession. The all wore white tunics over white trousers, with white taqiyyas on their heads. Richer men had more intricately embroidered clothing. The gracefulness of their attire was somewhat dampened, however, by the stinking sweat that festered under their arms – the heat was stifling again today.

Many were weeping, covering their mouths or holding their head in their hands. The women, confined to the sides of the streets, wailed and flung their arms around, performing their grief. At the front, though, was the mayor and his Salafi posse, including the male family members of Yusef Hassan. They held the casket but looked bored and impassive. Their imperious black beards and the pious bruises in the centres of their foreheads – only those who hit the ground hard enough when they knelt down to pray developed such marks – made Mohamed shiver. They looked to be leading
the group down the right fork of the main dirt path – a move which was to take them far from the beautiful, shrine-peppered Sufi burial ground a few miles down the leftward road.

‘Those bastards. They’re really doing it. They’re forcing him into the Sunni tombs,’ came the mutter from his father. He shook his head disgustedly.

A shrill laughter jolted his head to the left. He saw Yusef and the others, eating snacks and giggling disrespectfully. Some of the boys threw their fresh fruit in the direction of the coffin. The sweet fresh smell of guava wafted over, mixing with the hot, dark death in the air. Mohamed felt his father trembling. His eye twitched.

Suddenly there were shouts of shock. The procession had stopped moving exactly in the middle of the fork in the road. It took Mohamed a few moments to realise why. It was stuck. The bearded men holding the casket were swaying from side to side uncontrollably, feet glued to the ground, eyes bulging in terror, lips bound closed, throats making urgent, trapped, guttural squeaks. People rushed forward to help, trying to prise open the men’s mouths or push them forwards. Their efforts were frantic, the eyes of the bearded men frenzied.

Now they were able to scream, and scream they did: curses and cries begging for mercy bounced off the walls of the houses on either side of them, colliding in the middle of the street and tangling forcibly into a knotted confusion of anxious noise.

Then it happened. The mayor and the men of the Hassan family were propelled forwards, arms first, dragged across the ground by the casket. The rest of the village watched dumbfounded as the group sped through the dirt all the way down the left fork in the path, until they could no longer be seen.

Mohamed Mahmoud flicked his son’s ear and smiled. The sun winked off his gold tooth.

Based on a dubious anecdote.