

Blue

We have left the desert of the brown for a desert of the blue; an infinite space of blue. Above us and all around us is simply blue. It stretches as far as the eye can see; calm clear, never ending, crystal blue. The flat expanse of the sky is reflected in the flat expanse of the water and the two kiss on the thin line of that impossible horizon. And we drift.

We know not the depth of the water as we know not the distance to shore. Miraculously we have not yet drowned, and for this I should be grateful but it is proving a vengeful mercy. And still we drift.

In my exhaustion I close my eyes and slip, gratefully to a happier time; thoughts of my son Sayid, his fourth birthday, before the troubles began, playing with his friends, his infectious laughter. The imagery does not linger before it too is swallowed up in the vastness of the blue and the good life that was once mine vanishes like a ripple on the surface of the waters that now surround us.

Tareq stirs and gives a frail smile. He is trying to be positive, encouraging. Not just for my sake but because, I suspect that is simply his way. On a reflex he reaches for the oars once more, dropping them cleanly, quietly into the water with little more than a gentle plopping sound. I shake my head, with disdain at the futility of his efforts. We're no longer even sure of our situation; the sun has not been the guiding star we'd hoped for, but still Tareq insists on rowing. Under other circumstances his tenacious vitality would be something to be admired perhaps, but here in the confines of the dinghy, after all that has happened it is almost insolent. His refusal to recognize the honesty of defeat is irritating to me now. I wonder what makes him cling to life in this way.

Drifting in and out of consciousness images of my family blur with that of Tareq who stubbornly occupies my thoughts as he occupies what must surely be my final hours. He is my last witness yet, I know so little of this man. He has not shared his story as others have done, and

stripped of everything our stories were all we carried with us when we started out on this journey into the blue.

Tareq has shaken off everything he thinks surplus to his dreams of living in Europe. He is like a stalking big cat, in its pursuit. The past is of no concern to him now. I am torn, between questioning his sanity and wondering if he is just one of life's true adventures; remaining undaunted, driven like the one dimensional comic book heroes of my childhood. If that is truly his nature, then I fear nobility has survived in him which is sadly lacking in me. Time will never erase the horrors I have witnessed these nights past. I live now with the guilt of a survivor

There was no telling who fate would throw together that night we boarded the rusted out ship moored in Zuwarah. Under sheer weight of numbers, packed so tight we were forced to stand, so that the ship's hull sank heavy while we were still in the port. We did not question the vessel's seaworthiness as we did not question the numbers it was expected to carry. Instead we handed over money for the privilege of gambling with our own lives.

The ink pitch darkness of the night intensified the feelings of panic and abject terror when a few hours out to sea waters began to swirl around our ankles and then our knees and then its coldness caressed our hearts. We screamed; called upon our mothers, upon Allah, upon God. When no one came we pushed, punched, and elbowed for anything that might float, for the next breath, for a last breath. In the morning we found ourselves in a floating cemetery.

Since that night our numbers have dwindled in this, one of the few, dinghies worthy of its name. Stories became personal as each body slipped away to join others in their watery grave below. So that now only Tareq and I remain.

In my former life, before I made enemies in high places, I was a simple teacher of history and philosophy with an unhealthy curiosity beyond his station. That curiosity has brought me to this

end and to wonder how time will one day serve these events. Will humanity be judged on what is happening here?

Tareq gives me a sudden, sharp kick. He fears that I will die leaving him to face up to the reality of his situation alone. What use a hero without a witness?

I nod to show that I still cling to a thread of this life and Tareq gives a cracked smile. He continues to gently row; row to nowhere in particular, only for the oblivion of rowing.

My time at the oars was limited; my profession, soft living and my age did not serve me well for such physical demands. I was quickly made hollow and exhausted by my efforts. The weariness I now feel is irreversible, if not terminal, of that I am certain. Even in the unlikely prospect of our rescue I am convinced I will remain this exhausted for the remainder of my days.

Tareq is much younger, thirties I believe and from what I am given to understand he is builder or something by trade; a more marketable profession compared to my own at least.

‘Do you want to know what I think Professor?’ Tareq says, his voice dry, rasping.

I marvel that he retains the strength for conversation. He pulls even, gentle, feeble strokes on the oars which hardly stir the water. Warily, I nod for him to continue.

‘I think life is to be consumed. You must take everything it has to offer; savour every single morsel, good and bad,’ Tareq says.

I let out an involuntary snort. With some effort, through cracked lips I manage to say, ‘this is your philosophy, Tareq?’

‘Yes, yes exactly that Professor; my philosophy, my personal philosophy. Look at me I have nothing now, nothing but I am not daunted. Do you know why?’

I shake my head, my eyelids starting to slowly close once more.

‘Because, Professor,’ he says quietly, ‘what is good about me, I carry in here.’

Tareq lets go of one oar and gives his chest a weak thump.

I nod. I’m no longer sure I can listen to his childish version of heroism. I am nettled by his constant assurance and optimism, wondering what it will take for him to finally concede to the realities of his experience and if he feels more entitled to life by simply willing it so.

Anger builds deep inside me and I want to rage against him, scold him. Others did not have a lesser passion for life they were simply less vocal about it. I feel cheated that of all my family, friends I am left alone in this hour with someone like Tareq who favours bluster over substance.

The motion of the boat steadies bringing me back to wakefulness. I don’t know how long I’ve been unconscious but when I look up Tareq has released the oars and is slumped, crestfallen; his chin rests on his chest. It is as if in the moment of my turning away all life has been sucked out of him. A deflated version of the Tareq I’ve come to know now sits where he once sat.

‘Tareq?’

He is gently sobbing and does not reply. Instead he clears a space on the floor of the boat and starts to lie down.

I draw on what little strength I have, to crawl to him.

‘You have a good philosophy Tareq; do you hear me a good philosophy,’ I say as I paw at him to carry on living.

I take his hand and see more tears waiting to set sail in his eyes.

‘Don’t give up Tareq. I am sure we’re almost there now. Your rowing has brought us close I can feel it. We will be in Italy before you know it, enjoying pizza.’

Tareq shakes his head gently before starting to talk; his voice so very quiet I must bring my ear near to his whispering breath.

‘I held my father’s hand as I now hold yours professor,’ Tareq says pausing, his breathing laboured. ‘But on the night of the ship’s sinking I could hold his hand no longer. He slipped quietly from me and was no more.’

‘I never realised...’ I say, shocked that he has kept his grief secret this whole time.

‘I tried, I swear professor...’

‘You must not give up now Tareq, not when we’re so close.’

In desperation I look up and scan the blueness again for help and it is then that I am sure the horizon is broken by a small discernible dot which can only be a vessel of some kind, I am certain of it.

‘Tareq listen to me; there’s a ship, a ship Tareq,’ I say.

Tareq smiles in such a way as to suggest that he is aware I am trying to switch the deception he has been playing on me.

‘A ship Tareq,’ I say with my very last breath.

I slump, to the floor alongside Tareq; my friend.

Looking up at the sky I am no longer concerned if the ship will reach us in time. What worries me more is how we will appear to those aboard; will they view us ridiculous or just desperate, I wonder. I am however struck by one certainty, that we’re all lost souls held together in the vastness of the blue.