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## Fayeza Hasanat "When Our Fathers Die" United States, 2018

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# Fayeza Hasanat "When Our Fathers Die" United States, 2018

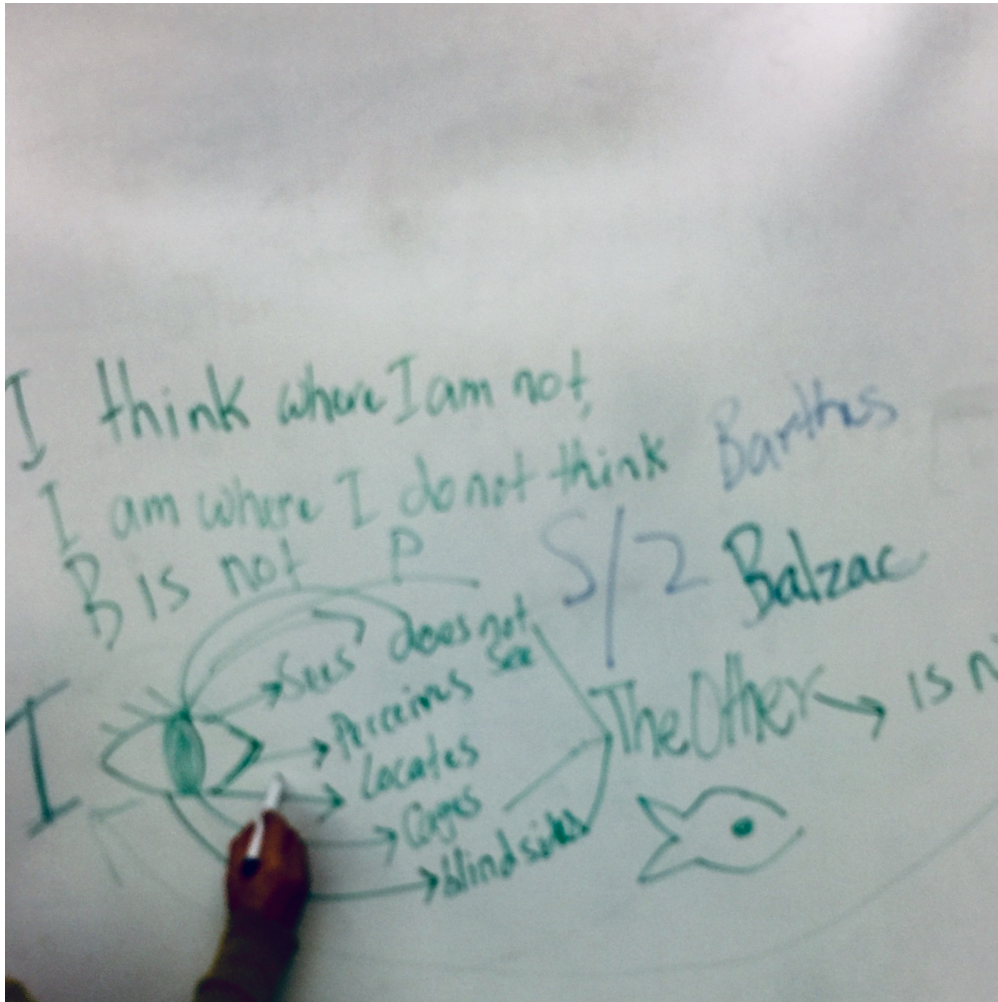


Image provided by Fayeza Hasanat

## Introduction

Fayeza Hasanat is a Bangladeshi American literary scholar whose expertise includes translation studies, gender studies, postcolonial literature and literature of the South Asian diaspora. She teaches at the University of Central Florida. Her first collection of short stories was published in 2018; "When Our Fathers Die" is from that collection, entitled *The Bird Catcher and Other Stories*.

English is the most spoken language in the world, even though Chinese is the most widely spoken native language. Many people across the globe speak English as a second language. In this story, written by the first Bangladeshi woman in print in the US, a college professor from Bangladesh teaches English and is mocked for her Bangladeshi accent. The student who mocks her otherizes her but also looks to her as a mother figure, which creates a complicated overlapping of imagery in her efforts to teach him, to forgive him, to forgive herself for being absent from her Bangladeshi family, and to make English literature accessible to her American students. The story takes us through the process by which postcolonial citizens speak and read a language and literature that was not originally "their own" and yet, still somehow is their inheritance, culturally and ethnically. The professor's father permitted his children to write lines of English literature on his body with their fingers so he

could guess them; this becomes a physical representation of how postcoloniality constructs identity and writes itself on the physical bodies of those who are formed by its ideologies.

# When Our Fathers Die

*Dear Dr. S.,*

*Family tragedy hit me this weekend: my father died.*

*Sincerely,*

*Daniel Harrington*

White letters labeled on the black cubes-85 cubes in total. Cubes that held secret keys to unlock the doors for unlimited words to rush in, like a ceaseless flood. But I sat motionless and let letters cluster and foam and Huff over my thoughts, like the caramel frothed topping that sits defiantly over my morning macchiato denying my lips their rightful access to the warmth of the nicely brewed coffee hiding underneath. Tilt the cup and it will spill. Keep it straight and your nose is frothed. You need to make a mess to avoid making one. Daniel didn't seem to be a fan of frothed topping. His was just direct brew. Dark Roast. Or blond, maybe. White man's coffee. How simply he could put a few letters together and hit "send." And his message was sent. Like his usual, a quite direct and simple approach.

"Are you from India, Dr. S.? No? Where is Bangladesh?"

But I don't get it .... why don't your people focus more on,  
what's it called? Bengali literature?"

Let's focus here, Daniel. So what was I saying?"

"You were saying a text is an ontological being, a living, breathing specimen, just like one of those talking books in *Harry Potter*. How can a text mean anything if a reader has no freedom?"

"Wait 'til I get to the part where I will tell you about the death of an author."

"If the author is dead and the reader is powerless ... Goodness, Dr. S., then what is the point of reading?"

"Nothing, Daniel. The point of everything is nothing, and beyond."

"This Barthes guy makes no sense to me!"

Daniel always had something to say, something to refute, or something to explain. Words would come to him easily and effortlessly, of course, because the Irish stiffness of his ancestral tongue was long dead and buried. He laughed every time I struggled on a word that didn't want to come out of my forked tongue: one part third world, one part hyphenated American. My words were Rapunzel's exotic hair, frantically guarded by the mother not my own. Accidents were bound to happen if I did let that hair down. Words crawled and crept and slimed and slithered. Words got stabbed by the forked ends and caved in underneath my divergent tongue. If words were delicate foods cooked with sounds and winds, then I could have bragged of my culinary mastery at any great 'wordstaurant.' But words were nothing but vibration of the wind, plucking strings of the pinnate leaves of thoughts, filtering sound through tongue, lips, and jaw. And sometimes the wind would show its true color and try to topple a tree, with its roots hanging up and its pinnate leaves uselessly hanging down, like Rapunzel's chopped hair.

I was teaching Roland Barthes that day. And in my attempt to emphasize the slash that he had placed between a B and a P, I almost slashed out my calm.

"In the sixty-four lexicons of S/Z, Balzac[1]," I started my lecture. And here came the faltering moment as I tried in vain to throw Balzac's 'Bal' as a ball and let the 'zac' fly away like a 'duck.' In my mouth, poor Balzac got

trapped in the two vowel sounds in 'ballduck,' a word yet to be created by a non-existent tongue. Damn it! These facial muscles! They'd loosen up over unintended letters and get stiff when muscle relaxing was mandatory!," ... as I said, Balzac's S/Z is Barthes' way of saying ... " I falter again as Balzac and Barthes-- two words with their unmanageable vowel sounds-coiled in the fold of a tongue--my tongue, that has lived through the rampages of borrowed history, sucked its life's energy from the vomits of English ghosts haunting the corridors of English Departments, and then took a detour to reach a hotchpotch conundrum of a deferred dream land where it finally wanted to relax after three long centuries of stiffness--suddenly became awfully insolent! It held me back by either allowing the windpipe to pass extra air or causing my vocal cord to unnecessarily vibrate. My hyphenated vibrator of shame. The cause of my embarrassing word-farts. Bildungsroman was one of my permanent wordfarts. In my earlier preaching days, like any obedient colonial convict, I would try to include a Dickens, a Bronte, or any other author that had written one of those bildungsroman novels. And God never said a word each time I killed that weird, Bildungsroman. My own miserable travelogue. God help me if I ever tried to write a travelogue, or even a memoir. "Balzac's S/Z is Barthes' way of saying that b is not p."

I was writing down those two hideous names on board when I heard someone laugh--Daniel, I knew, without turning--like a little child who would laugh at its mother's meaningless gibberish spoken only to make him happy. In an effort to hold their grips on the dry erase marker, my frustrated fingers pressed hard on the S and the Z and made them look like two irrelevantly slithery bodies lying dead on a white ground.

"You speak funny, Dr. S.!"

"Yeah."

"Do you have snakes in Bangladesh?"

"What?"

"Are there lots of snakes in your county? Are snakes considered a kind of god or something?"

"Oh, yes. Snake's a goddess, indeed. In fact, every child is taught to be a snake charmer at the age of six, you know. Children are taught mantras so that they can throw a spell to freeze the motion of a moving snake and destroy its three fangs."

"What? You have snakes with three fangs?"

"Yes. One to bite your body with, one to eat your dreams, and one to poison your reality. Snakes in our country like to bite people when they are sleeping, especially when they are dreaming. They leave a tiny drop of venom in your system and you are done. Capisce! Your beds should be about a few feet high and you should sprinkle carbolic acid every day, and you should keep a pot of milk outside every morning for them to drink."

For real?"

"Yes, Daniel. And you know what? I wish I had time to teach you at least one snake charming mantra .... "

But what's her name?"

"Whose?"

"The snake goddess."

"Manasa."

"Man-asa? Why is a 'she snake' called a man?"

"She is a man eater from Asia, that's why," I said sardonically.

"Ahh. Man-a-sia!"

"Now you speak funny, Daniel! Just as those two gentlemen said (and this time I didn't dare pronounce their names again): b is not p, s is not z. And I am not you."

On my way to the next class, I heard him telling someone, "Wait until you hear her say the words Balzac and Barthes. She sounds so funny."

In my next class, I talked about Barthes without mentioning Balzac.

After the Balzac episode, I became extra cautious to prevent accent mishaps. I would talk about "Minute On Education" but write down Macaulay's name on board. Macaulay was my other enemy.

"This guy," I would point at Macaulay's name written on the board, "is my Prospero, in a historical sense. My ancestors were all happy Calibans before he came. He brought his wand of knowledge and some of my ancestors became Ariels, while some learned how to curse their master."

I moved my dry erase wand over the board and my words turned into this relentless stream where Said and Fanon and Lacan floated without faltering. And every time I uttered a word unfriendly to my culturally relaxed facial muscles, I'd cast a secret glance at Daniel's face. A serious expression on his face would tell me my accent was not sharp enough to disrupt his attention. One smirk, one slight twitch of his lips, and I knew he got me. For a whole semester I was secretly haunted by a pair of ears that had the power to separate an echo from a sound. A shadow has a form to mimic, but echo is this shapeless, endless stir in the air that makes us aware of a vacuum, a caving emptiness. For me, Daniel Harrington was the caution sign of my void. My emptiness.

"You know Dr. S., my dad loves snakes."

"Okay."

"No, seriously. He has two big pythons. Very big. And a boa. He got them for free from his job."

"What do they eat?"

"Fresh meat, live rats--a bunch of them--and other living stuff. One of his snakes ate my Chihuahua once."

"Who feeds them, your mom?"

"Nah, Mom left him, 'coz the boa tried to eat her up one day and she asked my dad to choose between the snakes and my mom, and he chose his snakes." Daniel paused for a moment and then muttered in an almost inaudible voice: "she died last year, my mom. She had long wavy hair, you know, just like you."

"Black?" I asked curiously.

"No, red," he said. "But you resemble her in so many ways!"

I suddenly felt awkward, and did not know how to respond to the emotions of a grieving son who was seeing in me the reflection of his Irish-American mother. I redirected the conversation back to his living father.

"You live with your dad?" I asked.

"With my grandpa. When I was young, he always said that he might feed me to his snakes if didn't do my homework, and that scared the hell out of me." Daniel's father was snake-charmed. He was in love with Florida pythons. He lived on his airboat and worked as a ranger at the Everglades, the python capital of the world. If you saw a big python blocking your driveway or basking in your garden in Port Everglades, the first number that you called would be Daniel's dad's, and he would come with a big sack and tongs and hooks. One day, this little boy was playing with his dog in the backyard and came to find a nice brown stick. Who doesn't know dogs would be

crazy-happy to have a nice stick to play with? The boy wanted to pick up the stick and throw it to his dog, a midsized cocker spaniel. But the stick that he picked up snapped and swirled in an attempt to coil around the little boy, and before the boy saw it, the dog saw it, and before the boy snatched his cocker away, the snake snatched it as the brave spaniel ran toward the coiling stick and barked its heart out until the Boa coiled around its soft, fluffy body, crushing and squeezing and rolling it close to the big mouth that swallowed the savior, head first.

Daniel's dad had already arrived at the place when the rolling process was halfway done, but he stood there as the Boa swallowed its prey. The homeowner came out with his shotgun but the ranger stopped him. It would be a sin to deprive a hungry creature of its meal, he told the others, and waited like an angel, guarding God's dangerous creature from other's venom. That was the boa that he later took as a pet: the same boa that ate Daniel's chihuahua and chose Daniel's mother as its next target.

Daniel Harrington, my accent nemesis, always waited outside my office, as if my office were the place where I had to go to listen to his stories. Stories about a father who loved snakes. About a mother who cooked whole grain rice with cannabis leaves as a special herbal remedy for her terminally ill friends. About his sister who was working at a strip club to pay for nursing school. And about Daniel, who wanted to be a college professor and teach literature, just like me. After his regular office visits, he walked beside me, like an oblique shadow, and accompanied me to a class, where he waited with his tongs and hooks to capture the hissing words that fell from the womb of my forked tongue.

My shadow left me for a week and reappeared as an email. *Family tragedy hit me this weekend: my father died.* A simple statement generated a flow of questions: how old was his father? What did he die of? Did he have the same blue eyes, Irish-red hair? Did he really intend to feed Daniel to his snakes? Was it his boa that took his life? Was it his heart that gave away the fight? Was Daniel standing by the hospital bed, watching his father turn into a memory as the cardio-hills on the screen started flowing like one horizontal line from one end of the screen to the other, in an attempt to reach the endless end of infinity? Did he watch his father's last breath mist on the disposable oxygen mask--the last mark of life soon to be dumped in the hospital's trashcan? Did that last mist of life create any shape, any last message for the griefstricken faces that crowded around the bed in a futile attempt to block death's way? What shape did my father's mist create on the oxygen mask that was strapped over his face, as if to suction death out of him, or thrust some life force in? Did he quiver a little when Dr. Yeng unplugged his life support? Did my father feel in his heart, somewhere in his blood-clotted, dead brain, that it was I--his precious daughter--who had given the signal to pull the plug?

He died alone, my father, in a hospital that was far away from his home. His wife stayed in the background, with four minor children, waiting and wishing for a miraculous cure that could save her husband, while the oldest child fancied herself

a maestro abroad, pulling cords to end a life's opus or tapping keyboards to create a tantalizing dissertation on some transatlantic texts. A call from a distant hospital woke her up one winter night and asked her to make a decision about the fate of her comatose father. There were too many decisions for her to make in two weeks. She had to put an end to too many things. Fall semester had to end and a dissertation had to be submitted. A c-section date had to be confirmed; a bunch of trips had to be made to Babies "R" Us, and a suitable departure time had to be decided in order to put an end to the piles of hospital bills accumulating over the suspended life of a brain-dead man.

## II.

My father had this funny way of playing charades with us. He used to lie on his belly and offer us his back--the two sides of his vertebral column--as our blank slate. *Tabula rasa.* We would write a few words from any poem with our tiny fingertips and he tried to sing or act out the full line. The toddlers usually wrote "Twinkle, twinkle" or "London Bridge." Being older, I wrote words from Tagore, Wordsworth, Keats, or Coleridge, and of course he knew what I was writing, because he was the one who had read those poets to me. The line that all of us loved most was "five miles meandering with a mazy motion." We used to jump and laugh hysterically as he coiled and shook and writhed his body like a snake to bring a dead author's words back to life.

My son was meandering with his own mazy motion inside my womb when that ominous phone call came. I think where I am not; therefore, I am where I do not think. My family had given me the power--the power to think without being present and the power to terminate the very source that taught me how to think. If thought had a color, then mine would be darker than night. Like the darkest of the dark green, brushed over the clusters of pine needles. Or like the dark shade of green of my first sari.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Dark green. "

"Dark, like matured leaves? Like deep grass? Palm tree dark?"

"No, dark, like this bottle dark."

I showed him the empty Chardonnay bottle that Mother used for storing water in the freezer.

My father took that bottle with him the next time he went to inspect a small-scale silk-weaving factory. and requested its owner to weave a silk sari and dye it green, like the bottle. It took forty-eight hours for the weaver to weave, dye, wash and dry that ten-meter-long green perfection. That green sari still looked the same now and had had the same bright tinge eighteen years ago, when Dr. Yeng had asked me to give the signal to cut off the roots of my father's tree. On the other end of the phone, I had been Daniel's father, waiting like a messenger of death as the dog of my father's life vanished into the belly of time.

When my father reached home, boxed and labeled as a foreign import, Bindu, my rebellious sixteen-year-old sister, called to tell me that she was planning to arrange a spiritual ceremony to call Daddy's exiled soul back home to join his deserted body. Bindu sounded happy on the phone:

"I already talked with a friend of mine who knows a gentleman who is a really good medium and can talk to the body-leavers (she refused to use the word dead). This gentleman will call Daddy's soul and guide it toward the body that's lying in the mortuary. Isn't his soul feeling lonely, wandering over a foreign sky in Singapore?"

Bindu believed that after twenty-four hours of ceremonious calling, Daddy's wandering soul should definitely find his way back to his body lying in a funeral home in Bangladesh. After that, once his undead soul was united with his decomposing body, our daddy would peacefully join the funeral procession to enter the cave of his burial ground: the gateway to the garden of eternal bliss: *Jannat al Firdaws*.

Bindu kept a candlelight vigil around the coffin. She sat beside it holding a package that contained Daddy's favorite things: a framed family picture, an ocean-blue shirt, a pair of khaki pants, and a pack of Benson & Hedges. On the day of burial, she sat beside the open grave, holding that package, and watched our uncles and other male members of the family sprinkle rose essence over Daddy's broad forehead, his peacefully closed eyes, his sharp nose, a pair of full lips that were meant to generate happiness. She sat through the whole process as our grandfather pulled the white shroud over his son's face and placed him in his final resting place and signaled his other sons to keep pouring the loosened grave din and to press firmly with their hands so that our father stayed there, undisturbed.

### III.

The box that brought our father home was kept in my old room, over the big chest of drawers. The day I went home, the first thing I wanted to see was that mahogany box. I stood on a stool and pushed the lid open. It had a mixed smell of formalin, mothball, and other chemicals that the hospital might have used for proper packing. North was where Daddy's head rested. South, his feet. East was his right hand, and West, his left. I could see him lying there peacefully. His hands folded on his chest, his legs all stretched and the right one on top of the left--that was how he used to sleep. There was a hole in his left leg bone, right below his knee, a medical mystery, he used to call it. He got injured playing soccer when he was a little boy and somehow that little open wound in his bone



never healed. He always had to put a bandage over it to keep it clean. We were so accustomed to that wound that it became for us a mark of fatherhood. I remember how shocked my five-year-old eyes were to see my uncle's flawless legs. "You see," I told one of his children who was my age, "Uncle Iqbal can't be your father; he doesn't have a leg wound."

I spotted a faded stain on the left side of the planked floor of the box and instantly knew it came from my father's left leg. The open wound left its last mark for his children. I touched that pale trace of blood inside the box and felt

a sudden flow of memory running through my veins, my consciousness. Vertical lines of nicotine and caffeine stains shamelessly standing between each crease of his teeth, a tiny white flake of gray shining through the parting of his messy hair, a small scratch mark on the tip of his nose--all ran through my veins. Like blood cells of memory. This box that once held my father's body now contained his smell, his being without being. I could smell Old Spice and see his hands splashing it over his cheeks. The dry blotch of his blood reached my soul, my open wound, and I tip-toed and stretched my arms to hold my father's wooden body in an embrace. I gave out an inhuman howl, a sound that I never knew I was capable of making. A big thud then followed that piercing scream as I slipped from the stool and fell on the floor dragging the casket with me. I lay on the floor, stuck under the casket, only with my hands stretching out from beneath it in an attempt to save my father's broken coffin.

Snaking ribbons of my screensaver chorded my present with a past where I was not. *I think where I am not; therefore, I am where I do not think.* I was not there to see the ribbons of wrinkles on my grandfather's face stand still as he wrapped his firstborn's body in a white shroud and brushed away armies of red ants that were already crawling in. I was not there when my father's silhouette merged with the earth, marking the death of time for one man and the birth of haunting memories for the people he left behind. But Daniel would be there, at the church, where his father lay in a casket covered with flowers, looking peaceful as if lost in a world of endless dreams. Daniel would observe the mark of time's end and memory's beginning. Haunted in his dreams by a snake with three fangs, he would not have to run from reality only to find comfort hidden in the stains of a wooden casket made in Singapore. Daniel's father's snakes were now the county's property. Daniel could get a new chihuahua and could easily move back home, once the snakes were sent back to the everglades of memories. This was not the case for me. My father's coffin was broken. My shadow grew taller every day and ate me up and spewed me out a thousand times. Every night it pulled me out of my bed and placed me before a mirror that only reflected the face of an executioner. And in my dreams, I was always Daniel's father's python that wrapped its weight around my own cracking conscience. Grief fades, but guilt does not.

The eighty-five tiny black cubes on my keyboard started tap dancing as I slowly began connecting letters, punctuations, and spaces to speak in a silent voice that surpassed all ethnic accents to console a grieving child whose eager ears could stay alert for a thousand years like an ageless deer, only to have a chance to chase the echo of a father's affectionate voice down through the rectilinear tunnel of time.

'Dear Daniel,' I started typing, 'I am so sorry to hear about your loss.'

And I sat there, not knowing what to type next.

## Footnotes

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S/Z>

[2] [map of SE Asia](#)

[3] Thomas Babington Macauley was a British minister to India who is famous for writing the "Minute on Indian Education" when Great Britain was considering the pros and cons of establishing education opportunities for its Indian colonial citizens in their native language or in English. Macauley wrote, without irony,

“I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

### **Source:**

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