

He commences his day during the delicate hours before dawn on a solitary journey across wide asphalt rivers and towards the cantankerous bus, always overdue. Like a man on a pilgrimage, he dons a cotton beige shirt and woolen hat wizened by time and use. He counts the beads of his rosary as the sun breaks through: One year, two years, three years, four...

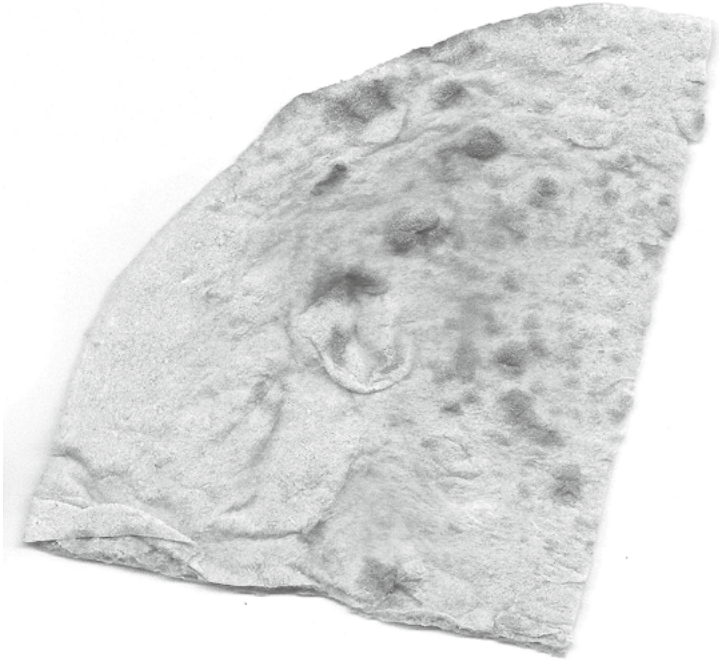
He repeats this mantra as the sunlight blows kisses at the soaring glass curtains ahead, temporarily transforming the metropolis into a glittering kaleidoscope. Albeit beautifully reserved for the larks, the view for him has become a depressing ruse. His destination is a miniature stage; a microcosm on which the homogenization and industrialization of this place is played. Like a toaster, it only accepts sliced bread and rejects the irregular, traditional loaves of different ethnic traditions.

Lifting the shutters, he unveils the white porcelain tiles of his workshop where he will remain throughout the duration of his waking hours. Surrounded by the lingering aroma of yesterday's work, he rolls his sleeves to commence the subtle yet alchemistic process of turning dough into gold. Whatever he makes in solitude magically disseminates into the community and his bread manifests into the daily lifeforce for many households.

For decades, his taftoon, a leavened Iranian flour bread (or tanoori in the Kuwaiti dialect), stemmed from the grain of his soul. The process of making it enables him to undergo an intellectual metamorphosis or transformation of his whole being. He marvels at the fine flour seeping through his fingers for what it is, what it once was, an accumulation of rough grains grounded and transformed into something suitable for consumption. He is a spiritual man who associates the 'grinding' with his self, as though ridding him of weakness, passion and pride.

He mixes the flour with salt, baking soda, and yeast, then adds the water to make and shape the dough. He searches for inspirations of revolution, hoping to reinvent the wheel in the proofing that begins when flour meets water. Bread is still symbolic of the working man or woman and is usually at the heart of conflict, oddly tied up with national identity. From Cairo to Tehran, Sudan to Versailles, this food functions as a metaphorical barometer for class, capitalism and power.

He recollects the day he migrated here in 1982 from Iran to flee from enforced military service, seeking refuge from the economic apocalypse that accompanied the protracted war. He belongs to a large diaspora that never considered their departure permanent, but with time any possibility of return had grown increasingly unlikely. He had always felt perturbed, unsettled ties with his host country, but more so with his homeland.



He misses his strong community here, now dwindling. Together they had turned away from national politics and imagined their homeland in ways that were contrary to how it was constructed, focusing on a transnational identity emotionally drawn from various sources. Over time, this place became his home country, forging him into a new source of identity but also an ethnic minority. His workshop thus became the intermediary that shaped reconciliation between his identity and the host's. It was a sanctuary that masked the difficult feeling of not belonging to a home, being marginalised and uprooted.

The warmth of his clay oven always melts any notions of schisms away, constantly reminding him to be grateful for the fuel and flour that he receives at a subsidised price. He returns to the dough, adding flour by hand whilst rounding. Staring at the aligned pieces he set on a tray, he compares the inner fermentation that is forming, building and binding to the trail of his previous thoughts to the change of his heart and mind.

The first customer arrives as he sprinkles flour over the rounded dough to prevent dryness of the crust. His arrival forces him to compartmentalise his lingering melancholy, for when one arrives the rest quickly follows. Baking for him is a traditional craft taught through an unbroken chain of relationships, like the queue that will form into a steady stream around his bakery by midday. He begins the process of kneading: manipulating, physically stretching and folding the bonds of protein molecules while simultaneously aerating the dough. He anticipates signs of strength and muscles as they begin to form.

The moment the gluten flexes, he punishes its robustness with a rolling pin, then spreads the flattened pieces over soft cushions, using them as protective pads to stick the dough against the inside wall of his scorching clay oven. The scent of his bread wafts through his bakery, permeating his political consciousness, sharply playing out the economic struggle historically associated with bread.

In this country, his taftoon cannot exceed twenty fils (less than seven cents) by virtue of the subsidisation law that he has humbly conformed to. A double-edged sword, his style of bread counters shifting class relations not only in its ideals, but in its ability to provide for all. However, it denies him a bigger slice of the cake which he compensates for through an array of additives like sesame, thyme and fennel. Tiny in size, they complement dishes popular here, such as al-baja (lamb bits stuffed with rice), al-karaeen (cooked sheep feet), classic chickpea plates or even beans and cooked fish.

Within a minute, his circular, non-sweet, crispy taftoon are ready and pulled out using a long stick that reaches into the oven and outwards towards the customers. He always exaggerates this gesture to respect the ancient culture of his home. He presents his bread as *barakat* meaning God's blessings, for in the process of its making he finds beauty and meaning delving beneath the crust of his creation. Derived from the Persian word *tafan*, meaning heating, burning, or kindling, the production of this bread is sweltering and laborious but the results carry strong flavour and diversity.

Stacked or folded, the handover of the bread recalls a history of migration, identity, and hybridity. Irani, Afghani, and Hindi bread in this country was once shrouded with a cosmopolitan veil that promoted a compulsion toward multiculturalism. He perceives things differently now and, looking into the bubbling dough inside the clay oven, sees his antiquated self-image imprisoned. It is but a façade, for his bread is the otherness of others; a relic reduced into eventual insignificance by modernization and nationalism.

In between smiles and small talk, he mulls over the two faces of his taftoon. The bread is always presented face up like the hierarchical approach taken by nationalism to its external relations. But once it leaves his shop, he has no control over how their boundaries are consumed. He had always imagined them devoured equally through participation and with a universalist approach. Recently, he sees the crusted edges of his bread like garden fences that deny him rights, rendering him as undesirable and possibly even barbaric by a nation that has become barbarous.

He usually takes his siesta at midday when the shadows cast by the glaring sun are short and sharp. Today he is feeling restless and mournful, nostalgically longing for the workshop he still occupies. He orders a bowl of spicy chickpeas from a neighbouring shop; half closes the shutters of his workshop and finally sits for the first time in hours. Looking at his dancing reflection over the steaming golden broth, he foresees himself amid millions of people who will undergo a process of elimination performed by the same state that once welcomed him.

The warmth generated by the spices is lacking today and does not sting his tongue like it usually does. He chews on a broken slice of leftover taftoon and recalls the article he read regarding the government's aim of redressing the *imbalance* created by the residency trade: Kuwait is going ahead with the decision to ban work permits for expats over the age of 60. The decision applies to expat workers who do not have a university degree.

Hoping that each bite serves some closure, he imagines eating pieces of his work permit and fragments of his existence. His bread has become emblematic of a divide defined by dehumanising policies. He wonders how it can transform into a harbinger of revolt. He has nowhere to go, is in a provisional state of limbo and the process of crossing a tunnel — but he does not know where the tunnel ends. His mind is at war, as though battling hundreds of mould spores that have found their way onto the surface of his thoughts. A colony of fungus has settled on what little perseverance he has left.

The call for prayer disintegrates his slow manifestations of bread and politics, distilling his mind and heart. What he can't change with his hands, he transfers from his mind onto the surface of his praying mat. Like breadmaking, the act of preparing for prayer is integral to the process that leads to the final form of a meditative state. Walking to the nearby mosque, he surmounts political ideology with the ethos of bread and spirituality. It is a philosophy he is more acclimated to.

His shop reopens when the pavements begin to roast by the heat that continues to build during the afternoon. Through the mirage haze of the urban desert heat, the co-operative where he works begins to revive. His morning ritual repeats until the sun sets behind the pink neoclassical house across the street which lights up against the starless night. Before closing, he prepares the ingredients and products for tomorrow's work while synchronously cleaning his atelier.



Yawning extensively, he bitterly regrets rejecting his nap which is a fundamental respite at his age. His elderliness echoes in his mind as it is the first reason for his impending departure. The second reason is ludicrous and if he was permitted could easily justify not having acquired further education. "Bread is a craft only learnt through years of making," he would shout to the deaf ears perched on high pedestals.

He finishes his day on the disgruntled bus that omits him from his surroundings, preventing him from interacting with the host's neighbourhoods or residents. For some reason his existence is a non-dramatic resistance that unintentionally confronts the public which scrutinises him, searching for hidden subversion while ignoring, fearing, demonising or romanticising his ordinary life.

Over the roaring motorways, he crosses his daily bridge and looks toward the distant gem that sparkles from the populous city before him. He has no right to this city and does not belong to the commons that can reshape its process of urbanization. The bridge he stands on belongs to the latent landscape that migrants produced, a transit in a microstate that bolsters separation and segregation.

In view of his unfolding realities, the concept of going back to the homeland seems awkward and anachronistic. It is incompatible with his aspirations. It is unfortunate that his bread cannot be exchanged for freedom nor its sustenance for unity. "There is a basket of fresh bread on your head, and yet you go door to door asking for crusts," he mumbles the words of Rumi to himself. With the scent of bread still stubbornly clinging to him, he counts the beads of his rosary: One year, two years, three years, four...

