

THE WASTED VIGIL

Nadeem Aslam was born in Pakistan and now lives in England. He is author of two novels, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), and *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) which won the Kiriyaama Prize and the Encore Award, was shortlisted for IMPAC International Award and was nominated for a British Book Award.

‘Extraordinary . . . 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.’ Pankaj Mishra, *New York Review of Books*

‘Enthralling . . . The novel will stay with the reader long after it ends.’ *New Statesman*

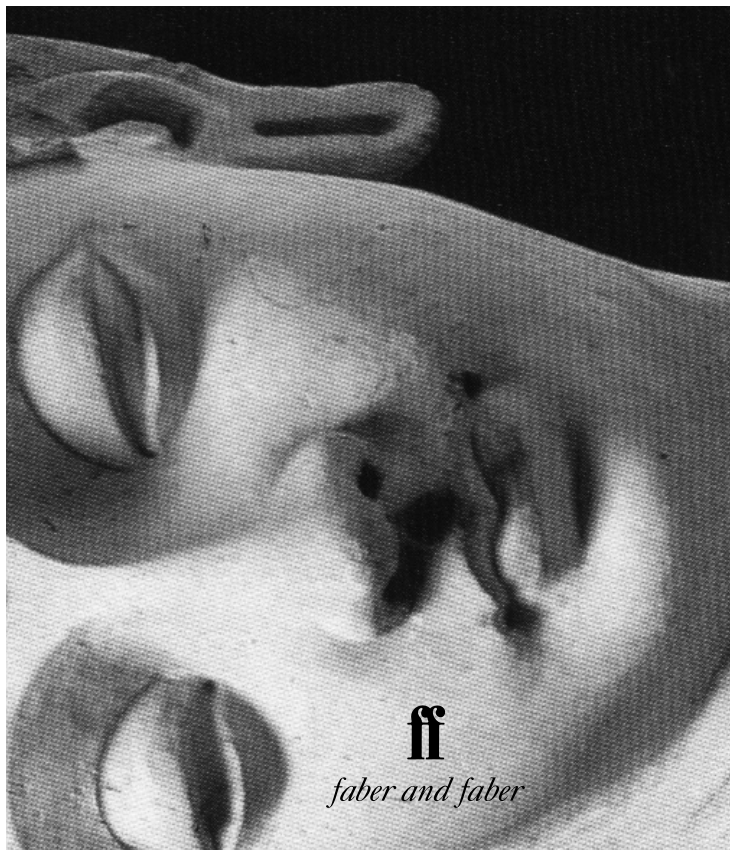
‘*The Wasted Vigil* is remarkable for being at once topical and timeless – a complex and layered vision of contemporary Afghanistan . . . and seems destined to become a classic of modern, globalized literature.’
Time Out New York

‘A humane and remarkable novel.’ *Literary Review*

‘In this sprawling epic of a novel, Nadeem Aslam’s poetic narrative takes in the explosive realities of Afghanistan . . . The book is beautiful and brutal.’ Mohammed Hanif, *Independent*



Nadeem Aslam
THE WASTED VIGIL



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by the same author

SEASON OF THE RAINBIRDS
MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS

First published in 2008
by Faber and Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA
This open market edition published in 2009

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in the UK by CPI BookMarque, Croydon

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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–23879–8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

for Sohail and Carole

What is more important to the history of the world – the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? A few agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, asked if he regretted 'having supported Islamic fundamentalism, having given arms and advice to future terrorists', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15–21 January 1998

And the poet in his solitude
turned towards the warlord a corner of his mind
and gradually came to look upon him
and held a converse with him.

DAULAT SHAH OF HERAT, *Tazkirat-ush-Shuara*, 1487

Contents

BOOK ONE

- 1 The Great Buddha 3
- 2 Building the New 45
- 3 Out of Separations 83
- 4 Night Letter 119
- 5 Street of Storytellers 149

BOOK TWO

- 6 Casabianca 207
- 7 The Silent Flutes 273
- 8 The Caliphate of New York 339
- 9 The Wasted Vigil 401
- 10 All Names are My Names 427

BOOK ONE

The Great Buddha

HER MIND is a haunted house.

The woman named Lara looks up at an imagined noise. Folding away the letter she has been rereading, she moves towards the window with its high view of the garden. Out there the dawn sky is filling up with light though a few of last night's stars are still visible.

She turns after a while and crosses over to the circular mirror leaning against the far wall. Bringing it to the centre of the room she places it face up on the floor, gently, soundlessly, a kindness towards her host who is asleep in an adjoining room. In the mirror she ignores her own image, examining the reflection of the ceiling instead, lit by the pale early light.

The mirror is large – if it was water she could dive and disappear into it without touching the sides. 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. Kneeling on the dusty floor at the mirror's edge she tries to read the titles. The words are reversed but that is easier than looking up for entire minutes would be.

There is no sound except her own slow breathing and, from outside, the breeze trailing its rippling robes through the overgrown garden.

She slides the mirror along the floor as though visiting another section of a library.

The books are all up there, the large ones as well as those that are no thicker than the walls of the human heart. Occasionally one of them falls by itself in an interior because its hold has weakened, or it may be brought down when desired with the judicious tapping of a bamboo pole.

A native of the faraway St Petersburg, what a long journey she has made to be here, this land that Alexander the Great had passed through on his unicorn, an area of fabled orchards and thick mulberry forests, of pomegranates that appear in the border decorations of Persian manuscripts written one thousand years ago.

Her host's name is Marcus Caldwell, an Englishman who has spent most of his life here in Afghanistan, having married an Afghan woman. He is seventy years old and his white beard and deliberate movements recall a prophet, a prophet in wreckage. She hasn't been here for many days so there is hesitancy in her still regarding Marcus's missing left hand. The skin cup he could make with the palms of his hands is broken in half. She had asked late one evening, delicately, but he seemed unwilling to be drawn on the subject. In any case no explanations are needed in this country. It would be no surprise if the trees and vines of Afghanistan suspended their growth one day, fearful that if their roots were to lengthen they might come into contact with a landmine buried near by.

She lifts her hand to her face and inhales the scent of sandalwood deposited onto the fingers by the mirror's

frame. The wood of a living sandal tree has no fragrance, Marcus said the other day, the perfume materialising only after the cutting down.

Like the soul vacating the body after death, she thinks.

Marcus is aware of her presence regardless of where she is in the house. She fell ill almost immediately upon arrival four days ago, succumbing to the various exhaustions of her journey towards him, and he has cared for her since then, having been utterly alone before that for many months. From the descriptions she had been given of him, she said out of her fever the first afternoon, she had expected an ascetic dressed in bark and leaf and accompanied by a deer of the wilderness.

She said that a quarter of a century ago her brother had entered Afghanistan as a soldier with the Soviet Army, and that he was one of the ones who never returned home. She has visited Afghanistan twice before in the intervening decades but there has been proof neither of life nor of death, until perhaps now. She is here this time because she has learnt that Marcus's daughter might have known the young Soviet man.

He told her his daughter, Zameen, was no longer alive.

'Did she ever mention anything?' she asked.

'She was taken from this house in 1980, when she was seventeen years old. I never saw her again.'

'Did anyone else?'

'She died in 1986, I believe. She had become a mother

by then – a little boy who disappeared around the time she died. She and an American man were in love, and I know all this from him.’

This was on the first day. She then drifted into a long sleep.

From the various plants in the garden he derived an ointment for the deeply bruised base of her neck, the skin there almost black above the right shoulder, as though some of the world’s darkness had attempted to enter her there. He wished pomegranates were in season as their liquid is a great antiseptic. When the bus broke down during the journey, she said, all passengers had disembarked and she had found herself falling asleep on a verge. There then came three blows to her body with a tyre iron in quick succession, the disbelief and pain making her cry out. She was lying down with her feet pointed towards the west, towards the adored city of Mecca a thousand miles away, a disrespect she was unaware of, and one of the passengers had taken it upon himself to correct and punish her.

Her real mistake was to have chosen to travel swaddled up like the women from this country, thinking it would be safer. Perhaps if her face had been somewhat exposed, the colour of her hair visible, she would have been forgiven as a foreigner. Everyone, on the other hand, had the right to make an example of an unwise Afghan woman, even a boy young enough to be her son.

Marcus opens a book. The early morning light is entering at a low angle from the window. The fibres of the page throw their elongated shadows across the words, so much so that they make the text difficult to read. He tilts the

page to make it catch the light evenly, the texture of the paper disappearing.

Within the pages he finds a small pressed leaf, perfect but for a flake missing at the centre as though chewed off by a silkworm. The hole runs all the way through the pages also, where he had pulled out the iron nail to gain access to the words.

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. He skimmed many of the bottles from the surface before they could disperse and found

others over the coming days and weeks, split or whole, scattered in the long grasses of his neglected orchard.

He lowers his pale blue eyes to the book.

It is a poet's diwan, the most noble of matters, dealt with in the most noble of words. As always the first two pages of verse are enclosed within illuminated borders, an intricate embroidery in ink. Last night she clipped his fingernails, which he normally just files off on any available abrasive surface. When she leaves she should take a volume from the impaled library. Perhaps everyone who comes here should be given one so that no matter where they are in the world they can recognise each other. Kin. A fellowship of wounds. They are intensely solitary here. The house stands on the edge of a small lake; and though damaged in the wars, it still conveys the impression of being finely carved, the impression of being weightless. At the back is the half-circle formed by the overgrown garden and orchard. Shifting zones of birdsong, of scent. A path lined with Persian lilac trees curves away out of sight, the branches still hung with last year's berries, avoided by birds as they are toxic.

The ground begins to rise back there gradually until it reaches the sky. The broad chalk line of permanent snow up there, thirteen thousand feet high, is the mighty range of mountains containing the cave labyrinths of Tora Bora.

At the front of the house, a mile along the edge of the lake, is the village that takes its name from the lake. Usha. Teardrop. Thirty miles farther is the city of Jalalabad. Because Lara is Russian, Marcus's immediate fear regarding her illness was that she had been fed a poison during

the hours she had spent waiting for him in Usha, her country having precipitated much of present-day Afghanistan's destruction by invading in 1979.

In the darkness soon after four a.m. one night, Lara had got out of bed. Accompanied by candlelight she went into the various rooms of the house, moving under that sheath of books, needing movement after the countless hours of being still. She avoided the room where Marcus was but entered others, looking, enclosed within the sphere of yellow light from the flame in her hand. Somewhere very far away a muezzin had begun the call to the prayers of dawn, defined by Islam as the moment when a black thread can just be distinguished from a white one without artificial light.

When enough light began to enter the house, she placed mirrors on the floor to look at the books overhead, though not all of them had been nailed with the titles facing out, and any number of them were in languages she did not possess.

Some years ago, at a point when the Taliban could have raided the house any day, Marcus's wife had nailed the books overhead in these rooms and corridors. Original thought was heresy to the Taliban and they would have burned the books. And this was the only way that suggested itself to the woman, she whose mental deterioration was complete by then, to save them, to put them out of harm's reach.

Lara imagined stretching a fishing net at waist level, imagined going to the room directly above and banging her feet until all the books were dislodged and caught without further harm in the net. Marcus said the deep rumble of the B52s had shaken loose every book from one side of a corridor when Tora Bora began to be bombed day and night up there in 2001. The intermittent rain in the whole house had intensified during those weeks in fact.

The Englishman said he had bought the house more than forty years ago, just before he married his wife Qatrina, who like him was a doctor. 'I used to say she brought me Afghanistan in her dowry,' he said. The house was built by an old master calligrapher and painter in the last years of the nineteenth century. He belonged to what was almost the final generation of Muslim artists to be trained in the style of the incomparable Bihzad. When the six-roomed building was complete, the master – who had painted images on the walls of each room – brought to it the woman he wished to make his companion for life. Beginning on the ground floor, each of the first five rooms was dedicated to one of the five senses, and as the courtship slowly progressed over the following weeks, the couple went from one to the next.

The first was dedicated to the sense of sight, and on the walls, among other things, Subha in a dancery gesture presented her eye to a rogue in the forest.

Allah created through the spoken word, read the inscription above the door that led to the interior about hearing. Here the walls showed singers and musical gatherings, a

lute with a songbird sitting on its neck – teaching perhaps, perhaps learning.

From there they moved to the faculty of smell, where angels bent down towards the feet of humans, to ascertain from the odour whether these feet had ever walked towards a mosque. Others leaned towards bellies, to check for fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

In the room about the sense of touch, there was a likeness of Muhammad with his hand plunged in a jar. He was someone who would not shake hands with women, so in order to make a pact he would put his hand in a vessel containing water and withdraw it, and then the woman would put her hand into the water.

Then it was on to taste, and from that room they ascended to the highest place in the house: it contained and combined all that had gone before – an interior dedicated to love, the ultimate human wonder, and that was where she said yes.

The imagery was there on the walls still but, out of fear of the Taliban, all depictions of living things had been smeared with mud by Marcus. Even an ant on a pebble had been daubed. It was as though all life had been returned to dust. Consolation of a kind could be had from the fact that most of the rest of the images had survived – the inanimate things, the trees and the skies, the streams. And since the demise of the Taliban, Marcus had begun slowly to remove the swirled covering of mud. The highest room stands completely revealed now.

Marcus took Lara to one corner and pointed to the foliage painted there. When she looked closely she saw

that a chameleon was sitting perfectly camouflaged on a leaf. She leaned closer to that lovely fiction and touched it. 'The Taliban would even burn a treasured family letter because the stamp showed a butterfly,' said Marcus. 'But I missed this, and so did they.'

Roaming the house at night, her shadow trembling in accordance with the candle flame, Lara had entered the topmost room. The walls were originally a delicate faded gold, painted with scenes of lovers either in an embrace or travelling towards each other through forest and meadow. They were badly damaged by bullets. When the Taliban came to the house they had proceeded to annihilate anything they considered unIslamic within it. What they had heard about this room had enraged them the most. This they wanted to blow up, even though the lovers had been made to disappear behind a veil of earth by Marcus.

Lara's eyes moved across the shattered skin of the walls, the light picking up hints of gold here and there. This country was one of the greatest tragedies of the age. Torn to pieces by the many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world. Two million deaths over the past quarter-century. Several of the lovers on the walls were on their own because of the obliterating impact of the bullets – nothing but a gash or a terrible ripping away where the corresponding man or woman used to be. A shredded limb, a lost eye.

A sound originating in one of the other rooms startled her where she stood, her heart speeding up at the possibilities.

It was not a thief, she reassured herself, nor a Taliban fighter looking for somewhere to hide. Nor an Arab, Pakistani, Uzbek, Chechen, Indonesian terrorist – seed sprouted from the blood-soaked soil of Muslim countries. On the run since the autumn of 2001, al-Qaeda appeared to be regrouping, to kidnap foreigners, organise suicide bombings, and behead those it deemed traitors, those it suspected of informing the Americans.

‘What fool drew this?’ the Tsar had demanded to know of a fortress that a student at the Academy of Military Engineering in St Petersburg had drawn inadvertently without doors. The young man was Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Lara wished this house was similarly devoid of entrances as she slowly moved along the corridor, the drops of molten wax sliding down the side of the red candle in her hand.

No one came near the house, Marcus had told her, because the area around the lake is said to contain the djinn. Lake wind, mountain wind, orchard wind collide in the vicinity, but to the Muslims the air is also lastingly alive with the good and bad invisible tribes of the universe. If that was not sufficient, a ghost said to be that of his daughter Zameen had appeared in one of the rooms the day the Taliban came here, the apparition putting them to flight.

After the sound, she was aware of the completeness of the night’s silence.

Perhaps Marcus, fumbling, had dropped an object. The word ‘lame’ described what happened when a foot or leg became damaged or was missing, but she could think of

no specific term for when an arm or hand became unavailable, though the body was just as out of balance.

She entered a room and stopped when she saw the book that had detached itself from the ceiling and fallen with the thump she had heard. The disturbed dust of the floor was still in movement around it.

She picked it up and, setting the candle down, wrested out the nail. Opening the book on the floor she began to read, sitting chin-on-knee beside it.

*Tell the earth-thieves
To plant no more orchards of death
Beneath this star of ours
Or the fruit will eat them up.*

In the garden Marcus opens his eyes, feeling as though someone has drawn near and blocked his sunlight, but there is no one. Letters and messages, and visits, are received from the departed. And so occasionally, and for a fraction of a second, it is not strange to expect such a thing from those who have died. It lasts the shortest of durations and then the mind recalls the facts, remembers that some absences are more absolute than others.

It was in the darkness of the night, in 1980, that the band of Soviet soldiers had broken into the house to pick up Zameen. The cold touch of a gun at his temple was what awoke Marcus. The darkness was cross-hatched with the silver beams of several flashlights. Qatrina, beside him,

came out of her sleep on hearing his sounds of confusion. In those initial moments of perplexity she thought this might be a repeat of what had happened the previous week, when a patient was brought to the house in the middle of the night, the victim of a Soviet chemical weapon from the day before, his body already rotting when he was discovered in a field an hour after the attack, his fingers still looped with the rosary he had been holding. He must have been in unimaginable pain, and though he couldn't speak the stare from him was so strong it verged on sound.

The couple were not allowed to switch on the light but there appeared to be about ten soldiers. From their voices Marcus could tell they were in their teens or early twenties. He wondered if they were deserters, frightened young boys running away from the Soviet Army, running away from the Soviet Union. People from East Germany, even from as far away as Cuba, came to Kabul and then defected to the West. His mind was jolted out of this consideration when they asked for his daughter by name.

Qatrina's grip on his forearm tightened. There had been reports of Soviet soldiers landing their helicopter to abduct a girl and flying away with her, parents or lovers following the trail of her clothing across the landscape and finally coming across her naked bone-punctured body, where she had been thrown out of the helicopter after the men had been sated.

Two of the soldiers could speak a broken Pashto and they were asking for Zameen and would give no explanation as to how they knew her or why they had come for her. There followed moments of rancour and violence

towards Marcus and Qatrina. The men had searched the house before waking them, and had been unable to locate the girl.

A soldier stayed with them while the others spread out through the house once again, their voices low: it was a time of war and they always had to be alert to the possible presence of rebels near by. Some were searching the garden and the orchard, others Marcus's perfume factory which stood beyond the garden, a voice drifting up now and then. There was great urgency in them, and Marcus thought of the night the previous year when the Soviet Army had entered Kabul, the Spetsnaz commandos running through the corridors of the Presidential Palace looking for the president, whom they immediately put to death when they found him.

Marcus and Qatrina managed to engage the Pashto-speaking soldier in a conversation.

'Your daughter is sympathetic to the insurgency. Her name is on the list we have been given by an insider.'

'There must be some mistake,' Marcus said through the cut mouth.

'Then where is she at this hour? We are here as part of a big operation in Usha tonight, to capture those who attacked the school earlier this month. We'll make them pay for the twenty-seven lives we lost.'

The sun was beginning to rise outside when someone came in and said Zameen had been apprehended.

The lapis lazuli of their land was always desired by the world, brushed by Cleopatra onto her eyelids, employed by Michelangelo to paint the blues on the ceiling of the

Sistine Chapel, and, from the look of certain sections of the sky above Marcus and Qatrina as they came out into the garden, it could have been Afghanistan's heights that were mined for lapis lazuli, not its depths.

The couple searched their surroundings and then went into Usha, trying to understand what had happened.

Hours later, as dusk began to fall, Qatrina stood beside an acacia tree, holding with both hands the clothesline tied around the trunk. Marcus thought it was for balance, but then saw that the section of the rope between her hands was tinted indigo, where one of Zameen's dresses had once seeped colour into it, the dress she must have been wearing when they captured her because it was missing from her room.

He led her back to the house, the perfume from the acacia clinging to her. The djinn were supposed to live in the scent of acacia blossom, making themselves visible only to the young in order to entrap them in otherworldly love.