

NAIYER MASUD

Resting Place*

All my past life is mine no more;
The flying hours are gone,
Like transitory dreams given o'er,
Whose images are kept in store
By memory alone.

—JOHN WILMOT, Earl of Rochester
from “Love and Life”

Zamāna gasht, tō hamgard sū'ē khāna'-e khīsh
(Time has turned; you too turn back [to
your] home)

—MIRZA GADA 'ALI GADA
from the elegy “*Imām-e tishna-
jigar nē pas az namāz-e 'ishā*”

I'M EXHAUSTED NOW, or rather, I now think that I had already become tired a long time ago, perhaps after I had been assured that I had no need go elsewhere and that I was to stay in this house from that day onward. I do recall vividly though that I felt full of energy when I first set foot in this place.

I

The house's façade had caught my attention. When I stopped to look at it, my glance fell on the garden in front and I walked in through the gate.

* From the author's first collection, *Sīmiyā* (Lucknow: Nuşrat Publishers, 1984), pp. 209–32.

I proceeded toward the façade looking at the garden over a hedge of brambles. A desire came over me to go into the garden and examine each and every patch at length, but just then somebody asked me, “Who are you looking for?”

I was standing in front of a large room that formed part of the façade and the person sitting inside the room was looking at me intently. From his posture and expression it didn’t take long for me to conclude that he was the owner, so when he asked me a second time, “Who are you looking for?” I replied, “You.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“I’ve been wandering around.”

“Come on in,” he said, but then he himself came out.

“I was passing by,” I said, “and saw this garden. I thought I might tell you, ‘Let it be.’”

“Whatever for?”

“Everything in it is wild, some things are really very useful and not easily found. Please don’t have it torn up.”

“Yes,” he said, looking at me with interest, “I thought so too: it has certain things that are useful and even rare. But I don’t know anything about them.”

“It’s no easy job to lay out such a garden.”

“It hasn’t been laid out, just left to grow on its own,” he said, then, hesitating a moment, he added, “Come, have a look from the inside.”

We went down the two stone steps and came into the garden. I wandered around for a long time looking at the trees, vines and shrubs that grew haphazardly. The owner was walking behind me quietly. Whenever I began to explain something about a leaf, a tree trunk or a root by placing my hand on it, he quickly came up near to me and then fell back behind me again once I had moved on. If anyone saw us then, they would have perhaps taken me for the owner and him for the guest; actually I had started to think of myself as the owner, repeatedly deluded into thinking that I had a guest with me who was being shown around the garden for the first time.

Now we were in a dense arbor.

“You seem to know quite a lot about these things,” he said.

“Not about all of them,” I said, “but I do recognize them.”

“You do?” he said, a little surprised. “So then ...”

“Each one has some kind of effect,” I said. “I know the effect of certain ones, but not others; nonetheless I do recognize them all.”

“Then tell me about this one,” he said, lowering a branch that had long, thin leaves.

I told him the name of the tree and added, “But I can’t tell you what its effect is.”

Thereafter we started back toward the outer room. Going up the stone steps he turned around toward me and said, “You look quite tired.”

“I’ve been wandering around,” I replied.

We came to the door of the room in silence.

I saw that most of the seats in the room were occupied. I stopped at the door. The owner went in and took the same seat he had been sitting in earlier. In our encounter so far he had seemed like a rather serious and somewhat melancholy person, but among these people he appeared to be quite cheerful and carefree. Without paying much attention to the clothing or conversation of those present, I had surmised that most were guests but some were members of this household.

They were talking about the curios that decorated the room. The owner had apparently forgotten that I was there, but when I turned around to leave I heard his voice rise behind me: “Don’t go yet,” he said, standing near me. “Let me finish talking to the guests.”

Turning towards the door he stopped short and said with a smile, “You, too, are a guest, in a manner of speaking, but it’s possible ... All right, I’ll send for you shortly.” Then he went back inside.

I moved and stood a slight distance from the door. I could see a part of the garden from my vantage. The branches of the small trees that grew side by side in a row in this section seemed to be almost fused into one another, and a broad-leafed vine propped up against one of these trees had risen a bit higher, hanging over it and out past the hedge. I recognized all of them, one by one, but didn’t know, or couldn’t remember, what effect each had.

Finally I sensed that all the guests had left and only members of the household remained in the outer room. After a long conversation one of them got up. He came out and asked me to follow him.

There were four or five people, and each was looking at me with great interest. I remained silent as I stood before their eyes. Finally, the person who had come out for me asked, “Where all have you been?”

I told him a little.

“What all have you been doing?”

I told him a little about that too.

After that they talked among themselves secretively and I occupied myself by glancing at the curios. Then they broke into a loud laugh over

something and the owner turned toward me. “We want to keep you with them,” he pointed at the curios, “but the trouble is you’re alive.”

“These are all priceless objects,” I said, “though each one has something missing.”

“Even so, should you care to rest here for a few days,” he said, ignoring my comment, “space could be found for you too.”

I had not heard the exchange that took place among them; still it occurred to me that for some reason they wanted to populate an unoccupied portion of the house. And a desire to look at this unoccupied part came over me, so I blurted out that I was ready to rest there for a few days.

“Come back tomorrow about this time,” the owner said, and I left.

I found the owner standing near the stone steps leading into the garden. Perhaps he was waiting for me.

“Come,” he said, and led me toward the side-door of the house. There was an enclosed area straight across from the door. It was scattered all over with tiny yellow leaves. I looked up: the leaves of the ancient tree that overshadowed the better part of the area were coming down steadily. I ran my hand over the tree’s trunk and the owner, brushing leaves off of his head and shoulders, pointed and said, “Over there.”

I could see a portico up ahead. I entered it behind the owner. Most of its dilapidated roof had tilted slightly downward, the mortar having crumbled long ago. The walls, however, were sturdy. A small door could be seen in the wall on the left. The door looked as though it hadn’t been opened for quite a long time. Its wood had lost its strength. I gently pushed on one of its panels, but it refused to budge.

“This was once an attached storeroom,” the owner said, “but its roof has caved in. It’s filled with rubble. So now there’s just this portico.”

“Its roof too ...”

“No,” he said, “it’s been like this from the beginning.”

“But the door...”

“The rubble has closed it off from inside,” he said. “If you think you could live in this portico ...”

“I imagine I can,” I said.

“You’ll face three problems,” he said. “A pack of dogs lives on the other side of the wall. Sometimes when they start barking they keep it up all night. This will disturb your sleep.”

“I sleep little as it is” I said, “and when I do, I doubt that I can be woken up by the barking.”

“And when it rains, water sprays come in here.”

“But surely there must be some part or other where the spray doesn’t reach.”

“There is,” he said, “but you’ll have to get up repeatedly. Sometimes it starts to rain all of a sudden; then it’ll bother you more.”

“It won’t bother me,” I said.

“This isn’t a good place,” he said in a tone at once a little melancholy and a little apologetic. “I had wanted you to stay here and rest.”

“I won’t have any problem, really.”

“And yes, the third problem,” he remembered and pointed toward the floor. “Sometimes slither-marks are seen here. I suspect the storeroom has ...” he stopped and shuddered slightly. I looked at the floor. It had obviously been swept clean just recently.

“A snake doesn’t just bite someone on its own,” I said. “Then again, not all snakes are poisonous.”

“So you’re sure you can rest here?”

“I imagine I can,” I said, “but if that would inconvenience others...”

“People only rarely come into this section,” he said. “Nobody will be inconvenienced, in fact nobody will even notice that you’re here.”

2

People rarely came into this part of the house, just as the owner had said, although now and then some sulking child would wander into the compound, followed shortly afterward by an adult who would emerge from the side-door and, after consoling the child, take him back inside the house. If a grown-up took longer in coming, I tried to amuse the child, but the children of this house weren’t comfortable with me.

One day a child came out of the side-door crying and sat down under the tree for a long time. Having failed in my attempt to amuse him, I waited for an adult to show up. But perhaps the house was going through some sort of commotion that day. The child had meanwhile stopped crying and started throwing clumps of dirt at the branches of the tree.

“Why do you bother the tree?” I asked him. But he had already become oblivious to me. I also became oblivious to him. But when he suddenly started to scream, I looked at him. Blood was flowing down his forehead. I came out of the portico and picked him up in my lap. The

wound was deep and the bleeding just wouldn't stop. Pressing down hard on the wound with my hand, I started off toward the garden with the child in my arms. Near the steps I heard a voice behind me, "What happened?" The owner had emerged from the outer room.

"What happened to him?" he asked, looking at the child with concern. I told him what had happened which only increased his concern.

"There's something wrong with his blood," he informed me. "His wounds become infected very quickly."

"This one won't," I said, descending into the garden.

The owner followed me. I put the boy down and sat him on the ground. He had calmed down now and was looking back and forth fearfully at me and the owner.

"He was injured at the very same spot once before," the owner said, "and nearly died."

Meanwhile I'd spotted the leaves I was looking for. I squeezed them, letting the juice drip onto the child's wound, and then covered the wound with the crushed pulp.

"Let this sit the whole night," I said. "I'll look at him again in the morning."

"Will this be enough?" the owner asked me skeptically.

"I'll look at him again in the morning," I repeated. The owner picked up the boy and went inside.

The child's wound had nearly healed by morning.

That's how I got started treating the wounds of the people who lived in this house. Before long they started sending even outsiders to me for treatment. Most of the wounds of the outsiders were very old, but all of them were treatable from the resources in the garden, although this sometimes required the use of fire and cooking vessels. On such occasions the owner had the vessels sent over to me from the house. Sometimes he also accompanied these things and watched me for a long time busy at my work.

One day as he was watching I put a brand new vessel on the fire and, when I tossed some roots into it, the inside of the vessel turned black. I told the owner, "Certain items ruin the vessels; this distracts me from my work."

"But whatever you prepare is far more valuable than the vessels."

"Even so," I said, "new vessels hamper my work. If you've got some old ones lying around ..."

“I suppose that can be arranged,” he said appearing to be thinking something, then got up and went back in.

Shortly thereafter the very boy who had injured his forehead came and left several odd-looking vessels near me. Some had their handles broken and some had their lids missing; still they were all quite sufficient for my purpose. As I was about to put one of them on the fire, my hand stopped and I pulled the vessel back up. I gathered up the whole lot and brought them over to the outer room.

The owner sat there in his usual chair, his head bent over. He lifted it when he heard my footsteps. I set the vessels on the floor near his feet and looked around at the curios. The gaping spaces between them gave the room a somewhat strange and unfinished appearance. Meanwhile the owner was looking intently at me.

“Why did you remove these?” I asked. He looked at me even more intently. I realized that my tone sounded demanding, but before I had had time to change it, he asked, “You’re not pleased that I removed them?”

“They were here for a long time ... perhaps even from the very beginning,” I said. “Your room doesn’t look right without them.”

He remained quiet for a while, then a faint smile appeared on his lips. “When you first came here,” he began, “I mentioned that we wanted to keep you close beside them.”

“I remember,” I said, “but the problem was that I was alive.”

“And still are,” he said as his smile brightened. Then he suddenly turned very grave. “That’s the reason you can’t reside with them. But at least they can reside with you. Can they not?”

“They can,” I said slowly, “because they are not alive.”

“They are not alive,” he repeated my last words like an echo.

“But without them this room ...”

“I’ll rearrange things,” he said, “so the absence of those others isn’t felt.”

He stood up from the chair and quickly started to move the curios around. Then he stopped, turned toward me and said, “Although their absence makes your presence felt.”

He turned back toward the curios. I picked up the vessels and returned to the portico.

Those vessels were made of old metal alloys. The effectiveness of whatever I prepared in them was increased many times over.

From then on one of these vessels was nearly always on the fire and I would feel compelled to make several trips to the garden every day. I went there even when it wasn't necessary to do so, just to stroll around among the vines and shrubs. Sometimes I even rested there, until I began to feel that my true place of rest was the garden, not the portico. Though I still spent most of my time in the portico. From here I could see clearly the changing conditions of the small-leafed tree.

Sometimes its branches became heavy with leaves, spreading a cool shade beneath it. Sometimes its leaves turned yellow and scattered all over the compound. Seeing sunshine under its bare branches one felt that the tree had withered away. But then new sprouts appeared on those branches, and sometimes the entire tree turned red with flowers even before the leaves had appeared. Slowly the flowers disappeared, replaced by green leaves that covered the tree.

One day I was looking at the naked branches of the tree imagining where new shoots might appear first. It seemed to me that light green dots had started to appear here and there on certain branches of the tree even as I was looking at it. When I came out of the portico and approached the tree to give those tiny green dots a closer look, I heard something like a noise coming from the house. Several people rushed out of the side-door and ran toward the main entrance. Then some people came back and went in again through the same side-door. That day, for the first time, I became curious about the goings-on inside the house, but I just stood quietly between the portico and the tree watching people as they filed in and out through the side-door. At first everyone was silent, later they started to talk among themselves. Several times their eyes fell on me but nobody told me anything. The commotion inside the house was rising steadily. Finally I stopped someone who had just walked out of the side-door. He hastily told me the reason for the commotion. The owner had died while he was still sitting in his chair in the outer room.

I sat down under the tree leaning against the trunk. I remembered that I had seen him just that morning. He had walked over to me from the outer room as I was going down the garden steps. Standing there, he had queried me for a long time about different kinds of wounds and their treatments. Then I had gone down into the garden. When I was returning with an assortment of barks and leaves, I again found him standing near the steps. He asked me about the effects of the leaves and barks I had, expressing, with feigned seriousness, his desire to be wounded some-

time and to be treated by me. His last words rang out in my ears, "Provided," he had said, laughing, "the wound is one I would like."

God knows what sort of wound he had wished for himself? I wondered, and I felt a burning sensation in my nostrils. I looked up in front of me. The portico was filled with smoke, but I stayed under the tree. I knew that whatever was boiling in the old, uncovered cooking-pot in the portico must have boiled over and put out the fire.

4

I didn't venture out of the portico for many days. Meanwhile calm had returned to the house and sulking children had again started to wander into the compound. Now they sometimes even talked to me a bit. It's through them that I guessed that the man who had come to usher me back into the outer room the very first day was now the owner.

One day the new owner sent a boy to get me and bring me to the outer room, but when I got there I found that the door was fastened from the inside. I left. A few days later he sent for me again, and again I found the door closed. This happened several times. Finally one day as I was going away I stopped and tapped gently on the door. It opened. The new owner was standing across from me.

"Come," he said, sitting down in the previous owner's chair.

"I came several times before," I said, stepping into the room, "but the door ..."

"Yes," he said, "I keep it closed."

I took a sweeping glance around the room. The former owner's portrait hung on the wall straight across from me and the gaps the vessels had left between the curios were still there. I went over near the portrait and started looking at it. "He always watched over us with great care," the present owner said. Then he talked about the deceased for quite some time while I looked at the portrait. Now and then my eyes came to rest on a space left vacant by a vessel.

Finally I said, "He watched over me with great care too."

"That's why I've called you here," he said. "He hoped that you wouldn't go anywhere else," he paused, and then added, "and I hope that too."

After a long silence I said, "I won't," and turned around to leave.

"But he wanted you to rest here," I heard him say. "You really must rest."

I sensed something in his voice, so I stopped at the door.

“I’m not in any difficulty here,” I replied.

While I continued standing at the door he started to say something several times but hesitated. Finally he got out of his chair and came over to me.

“This disorderly garden doesn’t go at all well with this house,” he said, faltering. Everyone had wanted it to be freshly laid out. He did too,” he pointed at the portrait, “but ...” he hesitated, and said after a pause, “the fact is, it doesn’t look like a garden at all.”

“The fact is, it’s not a garden at all,” I said softly.

After that I remained speechless for quite some time and so did he. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “He cared for you a lot.”

“If you would leave the door open for a bit ...” I said, going out the door.

I went to the portico, gathered the vessels and hauled them back to the outer room. He was sitting in his chair.

“But he had given these to you,” he said, looking at me intently.

“Empty spaces don’t look pleasing,” I said, returning the vessels to their places. He stared at me silently, then, when I’d finished my work and turned toward the door, he said, “You really must rest now and, as was his wish,” he again pointed at the portrait, “you must stay on here.”

5

I rest now. But I’ve allowed my curiosity to get the better of me. I want to know more and more about the things that transpire in this house. At first, the older people in the house answered my questions in great detail, then they may have begun to suspect that after asking a question I didn’t really pay attention to their answer, or that I forgot the answer the minute I heard it. Later, they became convinced that I forgot my own question before they had even answered it. So now it doesn’t surprise me that they don’t like me asking them anything, and once one of them even blurted out, “You’re afflicted with talking.”

Children are no longer seen in the compound. Only one boy wanders in now and then. I know he’s the one who will be the next owner of this house. He’s very at ease with me, but whenever I ask him something he answers it in such a way that, were I to reflect on it, my mind would become completely muddled, but I don’t reflect on it, although he thinks that I do. He’s the one who told me about the plan for the new garden,

which I couldn't understand. Nevertheless I kept asking him about each and every corner of it, always forgetting what I had just asked. Finally he got fed up and always said the same thing, "Why don't you come along and have a look at it yourself?" and he would go back inside the house without waiting for my answer.

People continue to come and go in this house and this boy keeps me informed about it. But he purposely only gives me incomplete information so that I will continue to ask him question after question, and he can continue to give me incomplete answers.

One day he ran over to me and said, "Your guest has arrived."

"My guest?"

"Now this portico will be taken away from you."

"Will the guest take it away?"

"No, the patient, not the guest."

"A patient? What illness does he have?"

The boy pressed his lips with his finger waving his hand back and forth as if saying no, and waited for my next question. But I didn't ask him anything. He looked at me for a while feigning fear, and then suddenly said in a tone filled with the same mock fear, "Run! He's coming," and took off, disappearing behind the side-door.

I saw that a man had, in fact, entered the compound and had already walked up as far as the tree, with the owner and some other members of the household following behind. They stopped and stood under the tree. The owner was explaining something to the man. Then, taking slow steps, all of them came towards the portico. The guest's eyes were scanning the ground, as if he was searching for something. He was moving with deliberate slowness, but he didn't appear sick at all. He stopped a short distance away from me. Even now he was looking at the ground with half-closed eyes. The owner drew near him and said, "Just this portico." The man opened his eyes wide, lifted his head and twisted his neck giving just one glance at the compound, the tree, the side-door, the portico and me, and then he turned around to leave. It seemed to me that everything he had glanced at disappeared into his eyes and then came back out within the space of a single second.

Now they were entering the side-door. His eyes hadn't tarried on my face at all; still I was feeling as if I had just walked straight out of some maze.

6

I was bound to be curious about the patient. The boy visited me now and then and brought up the subject on his own, but since I knew he would never give a straight answer to any of my questions, I asked him about other things instead. Finally he stopped mentioning the patient altogether. But this only increased my dilemma further until one day I myself asked him, "How is your patient faring?"

"Why don't you ask the girl who comes to look after him," he said. "She comes here in this area too."

"Here?"

"She just sits for a long time under the tree," he said. "Perhaps you don't see well these days."

It occurred to me that on certain days I had, indeed, seen a girl under the tree, but I had thought of her as a guest.

"So she's his nurse?"

"No, she's *your* nurse," he said feeling bored, and he got up and went back into the house.

That same day, when the girl arrived and sat down under the tree, I came out of the portico. She saw me and greeted me. I approached her. She quickly stood up and I hurled one question after another at her about the sick man. However, I couldn't get much information out of her. She knew very little herself, but she did tell me as much as she knew.

What I found out from her was just this: for generations the relations between the families of the people who lived in this house and the family of the sick man had been very close. He had gone away somewhere. When the people of this house found him, none of his family except this girl remained alive. He didn't tell anyone where he had been, but he was willing to live in this house now.

"And what ailment does he have?" I inquired.

"He doesn't talk," the girl replied.

"Something wrong with his throat?"

"No, he's chosen on his own to give up talking."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask him?"

"What's the point? He's given up talking, hasn't he?"

I realized that my question was absurd.

After that, whenever she came into the compound, I would come out of the portico. She would greet me and I would spend a long time telling

her all kinds of interesting stories. I had taken it upon myself to amuse her. Sometimes I also asked her about the sick man, invariably adding at the end, "I want to meet him at least once."

One day she told me that everybody in the house had gone out to some wedding and, if I wanted, I could meet with the sick man now.

The people here hadn't invited me inside the house up to now. Perhaps I really shouldn't go. I thought for a while and then followed the nurse through the side-door. After passing through several sections of the house, we came into a section the greater part of which looked unoccupied. Coming to the open door of a room, she asked me to wait there and went in herself.

I saw the patient from the door. He was sitting on his bed and his eyes were apparently searching for something on the floor. After a while he lifted his head and looked at the girl, who beckoned for me to come in. After some hesitation I entered. The patient's eyes had again started to search for something on the floor but I somehow felt that he was, in reality, observing me. Finally, he lifted his head and turned his face toward me.

We kept looking at each other, in silence, for the longest time ever. Our faces didn't betray any kind of curiosity. His eyes had an intensity, a brightness, but throughout this time, never for a moment did they seem to be devoid of feeling. I could not understand if his eyes were trying to say something or were merely observing me, but I felt we were coming to some silent understanding. All of a sudden a terrible feeling of despair came over me. It was the first time I'd felt like this since I'd come to this house. Just then his nurse placed her hand on my arm and led me out of the room.

Outside, as I spoke with his nurse, I realized that my speech was a shortcoming and that the patient was traveling far ahead of me on a road I knew nothing about.

Bouts of despair strike me; still I let my curiosity grow as much as, or even more than, before. The people who live here still become flustered by my questions. I continue to tell the nurse all kinds of interesting stories and inquire after the patient's condition. But when I'm seized by an attack of despair, I feel as if tiny yellow leaves are coming down in a shower between the nurse and myself. The boy who must own this house

one day begins to seem like a vanishing shadow. And the ceiling of my
resting place feels like it's right on top of my chest. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*