

I A N M I L L E R

The Heights

Mostafa

When Bahrain erupted in the spring of 2011, my friends and family (heady liberals from the Pacific Northwest) wrote, unnerved, to ask: “What’s your take on this?” And although I lecture at Weill Cornell Medical College-Qatar, I could only tell them of Mostafa from Cairo who walked in to my office (this in the days of fires rather than songs in Tahrir Square) and asked—mistaking me for someone who might know something—what he should do.

He told me: “There’s no food. No water. The jails are open. Murderers and rapists are coming like packs of dogs across the desert for the capital. My friend saw someone shot in his yard yesterday. My uncle lives down the street, alone. My father has only one rifle, a few bullets. My oldest brother is twelve. Civilization is square one.”

Academics

When the uprisings in Tunisia first commenced, one of my colleagues posted this from Martin Luther King Jr. on his door: “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Beneath, a mug shot of the clergyman himself, the numbers 7089 hung on a large dog tag from his well-tailored neck. We’d be fools to second-guess King, but the question begs: how does this “language” translate into a quantifiable and sustainable change, a movement that doesn’t just return to the patterns of power that rules in order to maintain power? Will enough poverty and frustration among

the unnumbered—crowds of unemployed young people sitting in cafes, smoking, drinking tea, steeping in discontent, broke, without prospects; the day in day out reality of life in a system long maintained at the discretion of US foreign policy and design, a tableau-vivant I believe in far more than any pundit's daydream of democracy—lead to radical shifts in the paradigm of distribution? Certainly did in Russia, 1918, if we're allowed such flawed comparisons. But again, the shift became the control, became the governance, became the measure by which power redefined itself into the same old role, and with disastrous effects.

Baristas

When Jason writes to me from Portland to share what one of his students recently cited in an essay, how in the early 90s a woman died after receiving a transfusion of microwaved blood, which he thinks is apropos to what'll become of the Arab Spring. I return to Walter Kaufmann's introduction to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo*, where the editor and translator laments: "As long as one knows about existentialism, one can talk about a large number of authors without having actually read their books." Because this is how I remember window-shopping along Hawthorne while I was home during Christmas break. Gray stewy sky. Rain. Wet smell of dog and wool. Coffee. Bread. And there on display in a storefront case is a pile of lavender T-shirts. Printed on the chest is a yellow silkscreen of a young pretty white woman, what could be a picture of the barista across the street who has just made my double Americano—same radiance, same palatable air of good intentions. But the one on the T-shirt has removed her apron. She has come out from behind her counter. She has taken to the street, fist raised, mouth shouting. Beneath her waist: "The People's Republic of Portland stands with the people of Iran."

I wonder what Walter Kaufmann would say to that. Wonder what he'd say to Facebook. Or Twitter. Maybe he could tell me if the meaning of *twitter*, as both intransitive verb and noun, is truly lost on everyone or I just missed an important cultural memo.

Windows

Thirty-nine stories above the desert floor. I go gerbil-wheeling on the treadmill in the gym of my fully serviced apartment skyscraper (air condition blasting and floor to ceiling glass) to 24-hour newsfeeds from dusty buckle-broke Libya that appear cut from reconditioned clips of *Mad Max*: young men hooded in filthy rags driving fast across filthy earth under filthy sun with chopped apart Jeeps and Ladas and Land Cruisers.

I look out at the ghost towers and the cranes and the sloth-like puddle of Gulf that laps, hot as tongue, on the flat yellow chalk shores of Doha. Below me, a sea of men from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and places like Myanmar labor for 175 USD a month on another National Convention Centre that could, if it wanted to, house the alphabet district of NW Portland. *World Cup 2022!*

The feed flashes to Japan. HAZMAT through sludge and smoke and rust.

Feed to John Boehner standing tall on a marble staircase between two Grecian columns, as solemn as a man can be with one eyebrow raised.

Feed to austerity protests in England. Feed to electric tickertape. Numbers in space. Monetary figures.

Water rising.

Missiles.

More dust.

Live as it gets.

I gerbil-wheel. I raise my fist. I stand with the people of Yemen. Thirty-nine stories off the ground. Where out there, among the tens of thousands of Middle East miles, Mostafa's father packs just one rifle and a handful of bullets.



IAN MILLER'S work has recently appeared in *Confrontation*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *BlazeVOX*, and *Lilies & Cannonballs Review*, among others. His fiction has been recognized with fellowships from the Summer Literary Seminars, residences at the Banff Centre, a scholarship from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and a nomination for *Best New American Voices*. He currently lectures in the Writing Seminars at Weill Cornell Medical College-Qatar.