

Of Hungry Cats and Immortal Pigeons

The title is the name of a collection of 65 poems by Farman Ysufzai, published in 1992.

I was first introduced to Farman in 1988 by a mutual friend, Len Turner, who at the time was Leader of the Council of the London Borough of Ealing. Len told me that Farman was seeking to work with a person whose mother-tongue was English so that he could run his poems past them with a view to smoothing out any linguistic wrinkles.

I drove to Farman's home in Berwick Avenue, Hayes and sat down with him and his wife Noor, and I also met their daughter Shameela. It was obvious from the start that Farman's command of English was pretty well perfect and as I read his poems, I was struck by their power and relevance and in some cases, disturbed by their unflinching assessment of the human condition.

Farman and I got on very well and after a while, he asked me to write a critical Introduction to the poems which he was planning to publish as soon as possible. I accepted the challenge, and although it was to be some four more years before the publication, I am very proud to have been associated with the book. Farman challenged my Introduction at several points, whenever he thought that I had seriously misunderstood his work or where he felt that my interpretations were so far from reality as to make nonsense of the poem. We argued about these matters for some time before finally agreeing on a text for publication.

And twenty years later, the book still stands out as an excellent over-view of the way we are and the way we think and the way we fail as human beings. It was particularly interesting to me as Farman writes from a very different stand-point as a Muslim born in the Indian sub-continent, but with a wide appreciation of all religions and a healthy scepticism about everything!



Farman Yusufzai

Here is a little potted biography to put Farman in perspective. He was born in undivided India in 1925 and graduated from the University of Lucknow. At partition, his family moved to Pakistan and he took a Master's Degree in Psychology and English from the University of Lahore. He taught English at Colleges in Rawalpindi and Karachi and was an active member of the Pakistan Writers' Guild. He came to London in 1965 and for a while, worked for a research degree in English Literature at Birkbeck College, University of London, while teaching at High School. He obtained the Diploma in Educational Guidance from the University of Reading in 1972. Farman retired in 1990. He also writes poetry in Urdu. So far, he is the only poet, past or present, who has published original poetry in both languages in book form. Farman moved to Lancashire in 1998 where he is still part of a circle of people writing and thinking about literature and philosophy.

I would like to publish a few of Farman's poems in *Magna* and share with you his incisive and frank descriptions of humanity.

This month, here are three poems by Farman Yusufzai.

**of hungry cats
and immortal pigeons**

You are doomed.
Your back is against the boundary
of the universe,
and in front
is the past-to-future
arrow of time.
You want to escape to freedom.
What can you do?

It's easy.
All you have to do
is to close your eyes,
and with the help of imaginary numbers,
move into imaginary time,
and before you know,
the boundary will go,
and you will be free
to escape to freedom.

Free like the imaginative pigeon
who, when he saw the cat approaching,
closed his eyes
to the world of hungry cats,
and moved into the world
of immortal pigeons.

**he knows
for he lives off death**

Have you questions
about life and death?
Take them to the vulture.
He knows,
for he lives off death.

A tiger pounces on a bull,
as it stands unaware,
beside a withered tree.

A vulture,
perching on the only limb
of the withered tree,
waits –
aware and serene –
looking down at life and death
play their ancient game.

Mauled and mangled,
the bull soon dies.
The vulture descends,
and settles down
to a hearty meal.

Take your questions
to the vulture.
He knows.

the laggard bidder

The laggard bidder slept
at the back of the auctioneer's.
as he always did.

He slept,
until the doors opened.
He moved towards to front t
o make his usual 'better-than-before' bid,
but his wits,
befogged, befuddled,
held him half way up with the question,
'Why, why indeed?'
and a shade more lost than before,
back to his corner he went,
and slept,
until the doors opened again.