

A poetic odyssey: from an Afghan poppy field to the Calais 'Jungle'

The Afghan journalist and poet Suhrab Sirat arrived in the UK after a journey that only ended after crossing the English Channel in the back of a refrigerated container. **Aviva Dautch** speaks to the writer about the poetry that emerged from this experience and his fears and hopes for those left behind in his home country

In September I read a poem at a wedding in London. Being asked to read poems at weddings is an occupational hazard for a poet, and one of the joys of the job. But this was a wedding between two former Afghan refugees, held just a few days after the reinvansion of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the final airlift from Kabul to Britain before the closure of the borders and Britain's resettlement scheme. Members of the groom's family are still in Afghanistan, although his mother passed away a few years ago. He was grateful that she wouldn't have to endure this new occupation but sad that his own refugee journey meant he hadn't been able to see her before she died.

Despite the undercurrent of fear and sadness caused by the latest news from the country, there was a celebratory feel: the wedding was alive with music and dancing, guests were served a Middle Eastern feast, and the ceremonial Persian wedding table, the Sofreh Aghd, was covered with a traditional embroidered cloth and loaded with symbolic food and gifts: mirrors and candles to bring light into the couple's life, eggs, nuts and wheat for fertility, coins for prosperity, honey for sweetness, spices to ward off the evil eye and, at the centre, a 'holy' book. In Persian tradition, couples about to marry choose a book that is 'holy' for them. For religious Muslims, it's the Qur'an but secular couples sometimes choose poetry books. This couple, Rabia Nasimi and Suhrab Sirat, had chosen a poetry anthology by Hafez, a 14th-century Persian poet, whose pen name means 'the keeper of memory', as their book.

The poem I read to the couple and their guests was an English translation of one of Hafez's poems, which takes the form of a ghazal, about the joy of finding a home, in both a place and a person.

The ghazal is important to both Suhrab and me. For me, the form's rhymes

and refrains were a central part of the Hebrew liturgical poetry that I had grown up reciting. Many Jewish High Holiday piyyutim, elements of our daily and Shabbat prayers and the Pesach song, Dayenu, were originally written as ghazals. Interestingly, the medieval Andalusian Hebrew poets, such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Judah Ha'Levi and Abraham Ibn Ezra, often used the ghazal and related forms as tools for dialogue with the Arab poets they lived alongside – a fascinating model for interfaith cultural engagement. For Suhrab, the ghazal was something he could pack in his metaphorical suitcase when he had to leave everything else behind. It gave him a sense of home in language, when he didn't have a physical home, "not even a room the size of a grave" as he writes in one of his recent ghazals.

Born in 1990, in Afghanistan's Balkh province, Suhrab was a multimedia journalist and civil rights activist in Afghanistan. In 2013 he received death threats from the Taliban because of his promotion of anti-extremist views and for producing reports about women musicians, artists and politicians. Forced to flee his home, he decided to seek political asylum in the UK (where his brother already lived) and travelled across multiple countries, finally crossing the English Channel in the back of a refrigerated container in January 2014.

By that time, he was already an award-winning poet with three collections, whose work had been published across Persian-speaking countries and who had represented Afghanistan at international literary festivals. He had written lyrics



Rabia Nasimi and Suhrab Sirat at the henna party that was part of their wedding celebration in September 2021

for several well-known Afghan singers, including the first Afghan female rapper. As he found his feet in London, studying for an MA in Human Rights and becoming a journalist for the BBC World Service, he continued to write in Farsi: modern versions of those traditional, musical ghazals, and a long, free-verse narrative about his journey and what it meant to be a refugee. This became our first joint project as I worked with him to create

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a parallel English version, published as *The Eighth Crossing* by Exiled Writers Ink.

The Eighth Crossing begins in summer and ends in winter, both a literal and symbolic representation of Suhrab's travels. The 'I'

in the poem is an autobiographical 'I', but expands to encompass the experiences of others he met in the Calais 'Jungle' and the voices of his family, including his wife Rabia Nasimi.

Rabia's family arrived in the UK when she was five, also after walking across multiple countries and crossing the English Channel in the back of a refrigerated container. Her family were granted asylum because her father had been targeted by the Taliban as a civil rights activist. He

went on to found the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association, an organisation dedicated to helping refugees integrate into Britain. Rabia is following in her father's footsteps – as a civil servant, she is a Cohort Insights Lead for the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

Suhrab's poem is an odyssey that takes us from Balkh to the red-light district of Athens, from the dangers of the poppy fields to a moment of sanctuary in the last synagogue in Kabul, from the burning sands of Nimroz to those icy transports that carried them from Calais to the UK. But what concerns Suhrab now is those who can't travel at all, especially his and his wife's families back in Afghanistan.

Rabia's grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins have all lost their work in Kabul. Her uncle, an engineer formerly engaged on major infrastructure projects, can't apply for a new job because he was a government employee, working with international NGOs. He told Rabia he had burnt the documents relating to these jobs as that information would have endangered him and the family.

While one of Suhrab's sisters, Roya, a presenter for Afghan television, is safe in the UK, another, a 21-year-old, is at home in Afghanistan, training to become a dentist. After an initial pause last autumn, her classes have resumed – with a thick curtain dividing the classroom,

separating her from the male students and instructors. Suhrab's voice betrays his concern for her. He is worried for his younger brothers too, for whom he sees "no real future", unless they take on the strict Islamic life ordained by the mullahs.

His biggest fear is for his father, who under American rule was a peace activist and occasional translator for foreign forces. "Now they [the Taliban] are sorting out how to manage the country, they don't have time to start taking revenge. But once things settle down a bit..."

Are the current breed of Taliban as vicious as those before the 2001 NATO invasion? "Taliban in the media might talk about allowing women to work and girls to have an education, but that doesn't represent Taliban across the country. Everyone's experience is different depending on where they live..."

Suhrab trails off, then smiles ruefully. As a writer who believes in the power of language, he can hear the irony in what he is about to say: "Even the [British] government is saying, we have to judge the Taliban by their actions. We can't just take them at their word." ■

The Eighth Crossing by Suhrab Sirat, trans. Hamid Kabir and Aviva Dautch, Exiled Writers Ink, 2021 (see right). Join Suhrab and others to learn more about the history and culture of Afghanistan at our special event on 9 February. See p55.



The "last dusty Torah"

In this excerpt from his long poem, *The Eighth Crossing*, **Suhrab Sirat** describes life at the Calais 'Jungle' camp where he stayed before hiding in a refrigerated container and being carried across the English Channel

Inside the tent full of holes, at the centre of the Calais Jungle, I am so very lonely. This jungle has no law. Our fate is in the hands of wolves who have no fear of God but run only from the French dogs in uniform.

The queue of the starving in the SALAM camp is long: kind people bring us warm food and clothes. In the rest of the Jungle neo-Nazis burn down migrants' toilets, scrawl in letters black as coal:

Return to your countries you Bastards!

At night the wolves take us to the lorry park. A few displaced travellers who reach for their dreams are hidden inside a shipment.

Inside the refrigerated truck, which isn't unlike a dark and deserted morgue in a war-torn city, I am even more lonely.

I think of the last dusty Torah on the shelf of the last synagogue in Kabul, of the desperation of Zablon, a Moses who can no longer turn his walking-stick into a snake, and a God who no longer listens to him, of the loyalty of the only Jewish survivor in a country of thirty million people. ■