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Extract from a novel

The Creator

Imagine if Mohammed, prayer and peace be upon him, had authored his own life story: wouldn't that be a treasure beside which the Quran itself might pale into insignificance—in the eyes of some Muslims, at least? Imagine if we could read Mohammed's description—in what English so fittingly terms the first person—of, “Of all his Lord's Signs, the Greatest,” could see whether the Greatest of His Signs might be something other than Allah Himself, Most Glorious, Hallowed be His name? Imagine if we could read Mohammed's account of Zaynab bint Jahsh—I don't say Aisha. Imagine: If we knew what he thought of Abou Bakr, God honour him and grant him peace, and what of Ali, would we be split between Shia and Sunni?

Fine. It's said he “wrote” it. That it exists. It is said that it's in the possession of a group of Muslims, the first of them those God's messenger cautioned against indulging in a civil strife that would rock the nascent Islamic state after his death; whom he adjured, when that time came, to break their swords and bide in their homes. It is said that not one of them died without—one night or some few nights before the coming of the Angel of Death—someone first rapping at his door and calling out, I thirst! and upon being brought water, saying, By God, the water quenches not my thirst—at which the bearer of the Prophet's tale fetched that which did.

We're not talking here of some story by Dan Brown, but of the *sira*, perfumed, perfect, pure and stored in the hearts of a company of men like us, not one knowing another. They are not a secret society: they have no purpose—none, save cherishing the beloved's story, God's blessing bestowed on some of us before others; save waiting on a stranger to rap at their door and lift from them a lifetime's cumbrance that each may pass, unburdened, to meet the face of the Munificent.

This is a summary of the first chapter of *The Creator*, the autobiography of Haturi Masanari (1950-1997). But how is that he, Haturi Masanari, a man from Japan who worshipped no god, knew this while the giants of prophetic biography, ancient and modern, knew it not? This is the question Haturi Masanari answers in the first chapter of the *The Creator*.

The Creator was issued by a major American publishing house with an introduction by the publisher, of which the following forms a part:

“In 1996 I received a call from the illustrious Masanari’s PA arranging a meeting with him in the hotel he owned in Manhattan. At the appointed time and date Masanari, his PA, the Japanese Emperor’s ambassador to the United Nations, the Mayor of New York and a pair of judges were all assembled in the famous hotel’s Diamond Court. The purpose of this meeting was to hand over to me a sealed envelope containing Masanari’s autobiography, on the condition that it not be opened until after his death and not published until after the death of his wife.

“When the sad news of the architectural genius’s suicide reached me I took the necessary legal steps to open the envelope. A file, containing just ten pages: the first page from the first chapter, the second page from the second, third from the third, and so on until the tenth page, the tenth and last of the tenth and last chapter of the book that is now between your hands.

“And a letter. In the envelope there was also a letter informing me that other envelopes containing the remainder of the book would reach me shortly. And in less than two months eight envelopes arrived from 1) the director of a small museum in the south of Egypt, 2) a Malaysian architect, 3) a Russian ballerina, 4) a Yugoslavian-born American poet, 5) a Yemeni film student, 6) a religious scholar of Iranian descent from the Arabian Gulf, 7) a Japanese Nobel prize winner and 8) a Japanese dentist, husband to Haturi Masanari’s late mother.

“One envelope was left. Ten missing pages, one from each chapter, and yet it was plain the book contained a terrible story—though publishing it was not yet possible: Mrs. Rita Masanari was still alive.

“After the recent development, in March 1998—that Mrs. Masanari was now to be assumed as “among the dead”—I received an invitation from the Manhattan Paris Investment Bank to pick up a deposit box key which Mrs. Masanari had instructed should be given me. I didn’t need to be a genius to guess what lay in wait for me within that box.

“And so I present to you this book, the authenticity of each and every letter of which can be attested by those entrusted to safeguard its various parts. Enjoy, and judge for yourselves.”

The most fraught thing in this book, as far as we are concerned at least, is the material about the Prophet Mohammed; that aside, the rest is the author’s life story, but that, in its turn, is no ordinary autobiography, or not merely.

Concerning the Prophet’s *sira*, here is practically everything Masanari has to say on the subject:

“It happened that in 1995 myself and Rita were together (when were we apart?) at a resort out in the Emirate’s sandy wastes. The party was, as usual, noisy. A mixed bag of Asians, Europeans and Africans had been downing booze amidst a din of laughter and music and suddenly the tune changed and it was that song, that dance, the Macarena—all the rage at the time—and there they all were, dancing that idiotic dance like children in a gym class with Rita, of course, their leader, her eyes, the movements of her lips, calling to me, and there I was, getting to my feet and, instead of answering her summons, doing something that she described to me as most peculiar.

“Rita told me later that I looked like a sleepwalker, hurrying through the dancers as if fleeing something no one but I could see. But I was not fleeing: I was coming apart, to the point where I could make out every bone in my body, the point each bone began and ended, as though I saw them all uncoupled, clanking in my skin. And the drinks being downed all around me seemed utterly revolting.

“The room’s door opened for me as soon as I drew near. The night’s blind heat brushed my face and a fog coated the lenses of my spectacles. For a while I walked straight ahead, out into the gradual darkening, between myself and the world that fog that returned to coat my lenses each time I wiped it away. It was only when the feel of the ground changed beneath my feet that I realised I’d come further than I should: instead of the paving stones of the resort’s walkways I was walking on sand.

“Eventually my glasses lost the last of the room’s chill and became part of the outdoors. I saw the sky with perfect clarity: not separated from it by fogged lenses, perhaps not even by my eyes. I looked behind me and there was the resort, far off, a lustrous pearl in the desert night. Exhausted, at the limits of exhaustion and overwhelmed by thirst, I sat down, and suddenly from the depths of the dark desert, the harsh sound of motorbikes approaching, and lights.

“They saw me when I saw them: young, clearly drunk and just as clearly, locals—or most of them, at least. They passed me by then two came back and one asked me in immaculate American if I needed a lift or anything, then he sat me on the bike and his girlfriend behind me.

“Back at the resort I thanked him and he and his girl headed to their private chalet while I stayed there, standing, without the strength to move. For some reason the young man turned round and saw me and came back. What was wrong, he asked, and so I said, I’m thirsty.

“He supported me and walked me to the chalet where he and his girlfriend were staying, close by the parking lots. He told me he had brandy and that in my state it would help. No, I said: I don’t drink.

“He sat me on a bamboo chair outside and came back out carrying a bottle of Evian. Practically the moment I saw it I said: I don’t think this water’s going to quench my thirst.

“No sooner had I uttered these words than the young man collapsed onto the chair next to mine and cried: It is now! Now! Now!”

Haturi Masanari says that two months were all the time he had: “Just two months, from the time the fork fell under the table and I bent to pick it up and picked up with it a piece of carefully folded paper... until the deadline for submitting pitches and ideas.

“I spread the paper open and see, on one side, an advertisement for an international competition held by the Emirate of X to design a city of eighty thousand dunams by the Sea of Y.”

Haturi Masanari—who is, at the end of the day, Japanese—is careful to inform us that it was not because of the advertisement that the paper had been folded away, but for another reason: on the other side, another advertisement. Masanari says: “It was the moment I learnt that BM made yachts as well. *Why not cast off?* That’s what the advert said. As for me, what I murmured to myself was: I don’t know. At that moment there wasn’t the slightest reason I knew of for not just casting off.”

And because Haturi Masanari is Japanese, or simply because he’s Haturi Masanari, he asked the waiter to bring him a piece of paper, onto which he transferred every last detail of the advertisement then, “I folded the paper and put it back in its place.”

That Haturi Masanari’s letter reached the ruler makes no sense. True, he attached proof that he was an entrant in the competition and that he’d paid the necessary fee, but that in itself shouldn’t have excused his failure to send his pitch to the committee tasked with receiving pitches. True, too, that the ruler was chairman of the committee, but no one should expect a head of state, even one who’d appointed himself chairman of a technical committee tasked with a specific responsibility, to actually participate, even from afar, in its affairs. And yet the letter reached the ruler.

“My dear, respected ruler,

“It is you that I address and not the committee, so do not read this in your capacity as its chairman, but as a ruler, a man with a vision. Those on the committee will not be able to deal with this letter of mine because they read with ruler and compass. They will not understand this language because it is not their language: they cannot read anything they have not read before. What I am proposing here is not a new city, but a new language.”

By rights the ruler should have felt some slight, at least once in the course of this letter, and yet maybe he wasn't paying attention, maybe he chose not to notice, maybe he concurred with Haturi Masanari that he ruled an emirate without a history.

"My dear, respected ruler,

"History is not what has happened. Which of us can say what has happened? All any of us know is tales that are told; some of us want to believe they happened and some of us accept them with the simplicity of the thoughtless, or the simplicity of those for whom it truly makes no difference. But anyone who takes a calm look at history knows that it can be fashioned; moreover that this fashioning has happened, is happening and will happen, that it must. That there must be many histories, deliberately set down, their connection to 'the truth' no stronger than to 'falsehood' or what we term 'imagination'—without this being a question of propriety.

"Just the advertisement for the competition is part of the city's history; the number of those submitting their ideas are part of its history. The minutes of the technical committee's meetings, the whys and wherefores of preferring one idea over another, the award celebration, the construction log, the opening, first residents, first births, first deaths, first foreign visitor... but all that's no more than the history of some building project, a factory, say, or a public park, something prefaced by no chapters. True, the city will fashion its own history piecemeal but that, too, comes down to chance, and in the end it might prove an irrelevance. What history have the people of your emirate created, with all the centuries granted others, to those ancient peoples with their histories? And then: Why wait for history to take shape, glorious or irrelevant? If you rule over an emirate with no history, or none worth mentioning, then make that your priority, the cornerstone of your city. A history. Let us devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the first chapters of the city's history."

As a child I would be astonished whenever they excavated in our village and found nothing beneath the soil except water and clay. I was quite sure that anyone digging a fairly deep trench beneath our village—an Egyptian village, ancient to the point of decrepitude—would have himself a vertical cross-section of accumulated history, would see with his own eyes Islamic dwellings stacked on Coptic stacked on Pharaonic and, oh, the naivety of it all... But early on I learned why this was fantasy. One of our teachers had told us there was no archaeology worth mentioning in the Nile Delta, due to its abundance of groundwater. So history dissolved in the water we drank: anyone who wanted to find Egypt's history would have to prick holes in us, not our soil; would have to deal—with the gravity accorded archaeological maps and ancient graves—with our piss and shit. Instead of this groundwater nonsense, why didn't the oh-so-clever teacher inform us that the people of our village were ancient in their

irrelevance, that from time immemorial they'd been unworthy of immortality, that there was no nearby mountain inducing them to emulate its eternal constancy, that their only vision of the world was clay's ooze and insubstantial dust?

Pharaonic Egypt blinded me—in my childhood, at least—to the beauty around me. They had always taught us that beauty was stone and age. That he who has no history—thousands of years of history at least—has a deficient present and a future of dubious worth. And for a long time I never questioned this deep-rooted certainty.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

An excerpt from *Al Khaliq* [The Creator] (2013)
