

Eyes in Times of War

ALI ALIZADEH is an award-winning Iranian-born Australian poet. He migrated to Australia after living through the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, and is a writer of poetry, criticism and plays. The major themes of his works are history, dissent and the dilemmas of religion and spirituality. He holds a PhD in writing from Deakin University Melbourne, and this is his second book. He is currently living and teaching writing in China.

Also by Ali Alizadeh

POETRY

eliXir: a story in poetry (Grendon Press, 2002)

Eyes in Times of War

ALI ALIZADEH



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Ali Alizadeh, 2006

The right of Ali Alizadeh to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2006

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN-13 978 1 84771 287 8 paperback
ISBN-10 1 84771 287 7 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Contents

MONSTERS	1
I, the Monster	3
War Narrative	6
I Am Filth	16
Apostasy	18
Your Terrorist	21
Happy Immigrant	24
The Clash	26
The Wind of Sheba	30
A Ghazal by Attar	32
BATTLES	35
In Times of War	37
The Incinerator	39
Australia	44
France	47
The Opium	50
The Next Superpower	53
The Traitor	56
Immigration	60
The Honest Truth	63
EMBERS	65
Rumi	67
Three Quatrains by Rumi	69
A Ghazal by Rumi	70
Beaten	71
Annihilation	76
A Ghazal by Attar	79

Writer in Prison	80
Iran	82
Eyes in Times of War	86
Angelus Novus	91
Good Idea?	93
Barfly	95
The Hermit	100
This Thing	101
Golden Girl by R. Shiri	105
A Ghazal by Hafez	106
My People	107
RETROSPECT	109
Teeth in Times of War (for 8 October 2001)	111
The Ghosts (from elixir: a story in poetry)	112
ABC (from elixir: a story in poetry)	114
A Memory	126
Princess	128
The Fruiting	134
Out of Water	135
Lover's Name	136
You're the Sentinel	137
Windows #3	138

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to those who have assisted with the development of this collection and its poems: Penny Pitt-Alizadeh, Andy Jackson, Angela Costi, John Kinsella and Salt, Ken Avery, Joe De Iacovo, Matt Hetherington, Justin Clemens, Kris Terbutt, Ouyang Yu, Jess Stafford, Ashley Brown, Bill Mousoulis, Judith Rodriguez, Soraya Fuladi, Davood Alizadeh, Safoura Alizadeh and Peter Wojciechowski.

Some of the poems in this collection have been previously published in the following: *Cordite*, *Dan O'Connell Hotel Poems*, *Divan*, *Flaming Nibs*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Kalimat*, *Love & Fear*, *mod_piece*, *Red Weather*, *Said the Rat!*, *Saloni Mediterranean*, *Southerly*, *Thylazine*, *Verandah*, and *Writing Australia*.

Monsters

I, the Monster

I, the monster
you, the angel

are humans?
My fangs are plastic,

your wings paper;
human-made to signify

un-humanity. Such
poetry this

deformation of
reality. No, I don't

mean truth, the source
of this elaborate

fairy tale. Let the gods
play at that

as Euripides might say
'from their ethereal thrones'.

Mine is more like
a dilapidated toilet-seat

all too earthly
for the theatrics of divinity.

That makes me
monstrous? Abject?

Still too polite to say
'Can I borrow thy whitish wing

to wipe my arse?'
I play my part

in the drama of The Battle.
Such an actor

I look so defeated
toppled by your gleaming

Archangel Michael.
There. The crowds cheer

and overcome
their humanity.

Backstage I help you
slash your heavenly wrists

upon my blunted horns.
I know you'll win this war

too. I'm the archetypal
loser. At your funeral

the crowds howl louder than ever.
I'm all too indifferent

all too monstrous
to hold back my tears.

War Narrative

I.

Let's have a story, for tales
truncate the unknown and impart

wisdom. Let's say the reader
demands law and entertainment. So

let there be a hero. S/he no doubt
reflects the reader, the same

complexion as the reader, the same
lifestyle and volitions. The hero's tongue

mimics the quotidian noise
of the reader's society. Call

this fiction 'one of us', compel
identification. Reduce the tropes

of language to a common schema
of 'our values'. She is a good mother

with cute, food-loving children. He
the bread-winner with a coquettish

wife, machismo and the rest. She, of course
exceptional, parent, daughter, friend

even 'modern woman'. He displays
only the best traits of our dubious

patriarchy. But let's confine the doubts
in denial, under the surface. Let our hero/ine

cruise the surface, smile, make love
and exhibit our boundless humanity. Until

the villain comes. Now our narrative
enters initiation, development. And

the reader reaches for snacks and sniggers
with delight—Ah, what a show!

II.

Let the villain have horns, crimson eyes
and a warped voice. Best if s/he speaks

a barbaric tongue, the absolute other
of our beloved idioms. Let it not be

he or she, but part mechanical part
hermaphrodite. An insect, really, an ugly

cockroach with the mask of
humanity. It wants to steal our food,

desecrate our ideals. Watch
this abomination defecate on the clean

sites of our propriety. Look deep into
its soul and discover that, yes, it

has none. Madness becomes
our foe; not a 'mental illness' entailing cure

its opaque and sweaty lunacy. Ensure
that it gorges on things that don't

resemble (our) food. Displace 'race'
with 'culture' and rejoice in demonising

the Other by proclaiming your lack of
racism. So, yes, let our enemy be

from a 'culture' that, in contrast to ours,
means only brute 'nature'. Horns, then

can be more 'creative' metaphors. Try
beliefs that revoke ours, sexual habits

that offend our (heroes') morality. Then
show the lurid outsider's utter cruelty

its hatred of cute, food-loving children, its
violation of good mothers and 'modern

women', its affront to the might of our
no-longer dubious but now righteous

patriarchs. Let the battle begin.

III.

Does the enemy have a history?
Did it crawl out of the sewers

of pure darkness and incontestable
filth? But, more importantly,

can our tale see to questions? Would
doubt delay, even prevent

the action, the march to an exciting
confrontation? I think

I'm a party-pooper. The reader wants
rules and release, certainty

and leisure. S/he doesn't care for
pausing the drama to contemplate

the genesis of our foe's menace. What
does it matter if the enemy is not

a generic *objet d'art* but
a signifier of reality that justifies

our concept of the real, our passion
for war? I mean

doesn't the nemesis—Satan, if you like—
have parents, a past and a being

as we do? What if its horns,
knives, poisons, homemade bombs

are hollow metaphors, fake props? Our tribe
is being terrorized by scarecrows

erected by sneaky storytellers. Our enemy
only a (very demonic-looking)

costume, tailor-made for the Others?
What then? Do we still

fight, if the enemy's terror
results from ours? If its victims

are better off healed than avenged?

IV.

But we cannot have that. Only a clash
between our protagonists and 'it'.

Let's enjoy the performance, cheer for
our heroine, 'overcoming the odds'

to put on view her genius, proficiency
at, yes, love, motherhood, being 'modern',

etc. She is so unique, so unlike
the enemy. She has intellect, intuition

and an abundance of beauty. She beats
'its' innate, incurable ugliness, immorality

with stealth and (again) love. An enticing
comic resolution. The reader drools over

her competence and sexuality. Hers
the boons of contentment and rarity. The male

hero's physical power and technology
trounce the enemy. The reader leaps

with joy every time another slimy foe
incinerates in the fire of the hero's gun. If

the climax implies or explicates too much
glorious carnage then why not

a 'redemptive' denouement, say
an apologia by the dying fiend or a eulogy

by the killer-hero after the killing, even
exculpation, but only after

masculine punishment. If the enemy
is to be reformed rather than obliterated

then this correction the work
of our hero's conscience. The reader applauds

this ability to forgive the defeated
adversary. An 'ethical' finale

to the story's battle between us and evil.

V.

Can I but interrogate
our heroine's victory? Her alibi

utterly fraudulent, manufactured
by her own desires. What's to distinguish

between her 'love'
and the desires of her rival/enemy?

Why should we assume
her brilliance more palpable

than 'its'? A matter of
point-of-view? Is the reader

really that myopic? Too shallow
to object to our hero's violence

perpetrated in the name of our clan? Is
terror heroic when committed by us

and diabolical when attempted by 'it'? Who
will count the losses, timeless injuries