

سفر نصیب

SAFAR NASEEB / FATED TO JOURNEY

ELYAS ALAVI & FAZIL MOUSAVI

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with written response by Aziz Sohail

When artists Fazil Sahab,¹ Elyas Jan and I first meet to discuss their collaborative commission for La Trobe Art Institute, we converse in four dialects and languages. I am fluent and comfortable in Urdu and English, Fazil Sahab in Urdu and Persian/Hazaragi and Elyas in English and Dari.² We navigate a consistent translation of ideas and concepts throughout this conversation – a seamless flow, but also one of rupture. While all of us understand each other in many ways, there are connections amongst us that are intimate and private and closed off to the other.

I begin this essay to think about this slippery place of multi-lingualism, of translation/mis-translation/untranslatability, and the *accidents* and *possibilities* it is a metaphor for and emerges with. Our ability/inability to speak multiple languages is a fate of history. It is due to empires that have carved artificial borders, dividing our people. It is due to forced and unforced migrations that have decided which side of the border we might live, or in between which worlds we end up. It is through these accidents of life that Fazil Sb, Elyas Jan and I share so much, bringing us together into this dialogue, but it is also what separates us. We are travellers of fate.

Fazil Sahab has been working in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Balochistan, close to the border today with Afghanistan and Iran. While Balochistan itself is the homeland of the Baloch people (and divided between Pakistan and Iran), Quetta is a diverse city with large populations of Pashtuns, Hazara and Baloch people. I first visited the city in 2014 to research and write on the city’s art scene for the now defunct Pakistani magazine, the Herald, and had the privilege of visiting the Sketch Club run by Fazil Sahab. This is a school that he has founded and run since 2008 in the Hazara neighbourhood of Mariabad, set against the dry hills of the city, and which has trained many young students. The Club has continued through a time of extreme violence wielded on the city and country’s Hazara community, becoming a space of comfort, safety and cultural safeguarding. While Fazil Sahab is celebrated as a mentor and an elder to many in the community, his artistic practice itself has been underrecognised both within Pakistan and internationally.

Elyas Jan made multiple visits to Pakistan in 2024 for his participation in the Lahore Biennale. There he met Fazil Sahab in Quetta, which has one of the largest Hazara populations in the world due to displacements and exodus over two centuries. Fazil Sahab’s family moved to Quetta in 1955, before he was born, from what is today Afghanistan. This encounter between Fazil Sahab and Elyas Jan, which has now become a friendship, is also one of lineage, intergenerational dialogue, and preservation.

It is within this frame that I read this collaboration. Key to this work, I consider the idea of the carrier – so simply depicted in this artwork in the form of the boat – as an urgent and ongoing response to the need to cross. This idea is beautifully stated by Aurora Levine Morales in her poem *Red Sea* (2002), when she writes ‘We cannot cross until we carry each other.’³ This concept of carrying also speaks to ideas about producing collaboratively and collectively; Fazil Sahab has mentored many generations, carrying and transmitting knowledge, and at the same time carrying his body across borders.

In the context of Australia the boat has also a more sombre connotation. Australia spearheaded some of the most draconian laws against boat arrivals in the world, especially in the 1990s and 2000s amidst nationwide anxiety of the country being swamped by ‘unauthorised arrivals’. These led to policies such as Operation Sovereign Borders, which detained all such arrivals (many of them coming from Afghanistan and Iran, amongst other places) at offshore sites, including Papua New Guinea and Nauru. These policies flout international law and have been widely criticised. The boat, a humble vessel,⁴ also becomes replete with meaning, both positive and negative. For this collaboration, Elyas has fashioned an image of a boat with pliable blue plasma neon, a reminder of the fragility of this vessel and the body it carries, even as it bridges two worlds.

In my conversations with Fazil Sahab and Elyas Jan, it was urgent for them to discuss and clarify that their practice and stories are not just about loss and displacement and tragedy, but also about connectivity, endurance, family, lineage and long relationships. For me, Fazil Sahab’s two

large scale mixed media drawings unravel complex ideas and stories. These works bring together multiple thematic concerns that Fazil Sahab has been engaging with since 2001, in the wake of 9/11, the long wars on terror and the subsequent displacement of community and kin.

In staying with the work, the viewer may see many shapes revealing and obscuring themselves in orchestrated simultaneity. One can see a crescent, perhaps both waning and waxing, speaking to the passage of time, reminding us of the poet Allama Iqbal when he writes that ‘the succession of night and day is the architect of events’. There are footprints, etched and mirrored with each other, embodying ideas of presence and impact, but also ideas of timelessness – an ode perhaps to life beyond human or to the journeys we make. There is an abstracted, almost broken ribcage, the idea of holding a soul, trying to break free, and just about able to, but bound by the vagaries of fate.

Fazil Sahab and Elyas Jan both share a deep relationship to poetry. It is then no surprise that poetry as a means of commemoration and translation of ideas becomes apparent in their collaboration. As both writers and poets, they have a rich understanding of the long and complex traditions of Persian, Urdu, Afghan, Arabic and Hazara poetry. Indeed, in a time of such loss and manipulation of language, poetry can be a retreat, an escape, a cipher to make meaning. My conversations with Fazil Sahab and Elyas Jan were regularly punctuated with the recitation of poetry, itself an act of memory-making. In particular, I stay with one verse, by the poet Ahmad Salman, that Fazil Sahab shared with me and I share here, as a caution and a reminder to recognise the opacity of this work:

Jo dikh raha hai usi ke andar
Jo un dikhā hai woh shā‘irī hai.
Jo keh sakā thā woh keh chukā hoon
Jo reh gayā hai woh shā‘irī hai.

جو دکھ رہا ہے اُسی کے اندر
جو ان دکھا ہے وہ شاعری ہے
جو کہہ سکا تھا وہ کہہ چکا ہوں
جو رہ گیا ہے وہ شاعری ہے

What you can see, whatever within
This is unseen, this is poetry
What I was able to say, I have said
Whatever is left, this is poetry

Situated within the drawing, one also observes text, rendered and broken across two sheets. These are fragments of letters written to Fazil Sb’s father in Pakistan from his uncle in Afghanistan, a movement of knowledge and lineage across borders. Looking at this split text, I think of the divide as both a crossing and a border, I think of the Durand Line of 1917 that divides Pakistan/Afghanistan today but also the Radcliffe Line of 1947 which divides India and Pakistan, both colonial inheritances that impact our lives today. The crossing of these words across these two drawings functions as both as a bridge and a representation of brokenness, rupture and repair intertwined.

Within this brokenness, this encounter and subsequent collaboration between Elyas Jan and Fazil Sahab opens up our understanding of an expansive community, still stitched together through memories of migration, connected through language and affect, and threaded through the journeys they have made. We are indeed travellers of fate, at the mercy of empires and destinies, within whose whim and orbit we move, in ways that can completely erase us. Let us then read this collaboration as a repair, as a resistance to this history, as a desire to chart an otherwise destiny, an alternate journey, across space and time.

– Aziz Sohail, July 2025

¹ Throughout this essay, I will refer to the artist Fazil Mousavi with the honorific Sahab (as a mark of respect for an elder), and Elyas as Jan (as a mark of respect for a friend/loved one). I think these ways of addressing and building relation are more true to our communities and contexts.

² A dialect of Farsi spoken in Afghanistan.

³ Here, I use the verb cross to refer to a multiplicity of movements across space and time – to refer to crossing generations, waters, lands, communities, and labour and possibilities of carrying implicit in this.

⁴ I curated an exhibition The Humble Vessel looking at depictions of the boat in contemporary art, in 2016 at The New Art Gallery Walsall, UK. I borrow this phrase from that exhibition.