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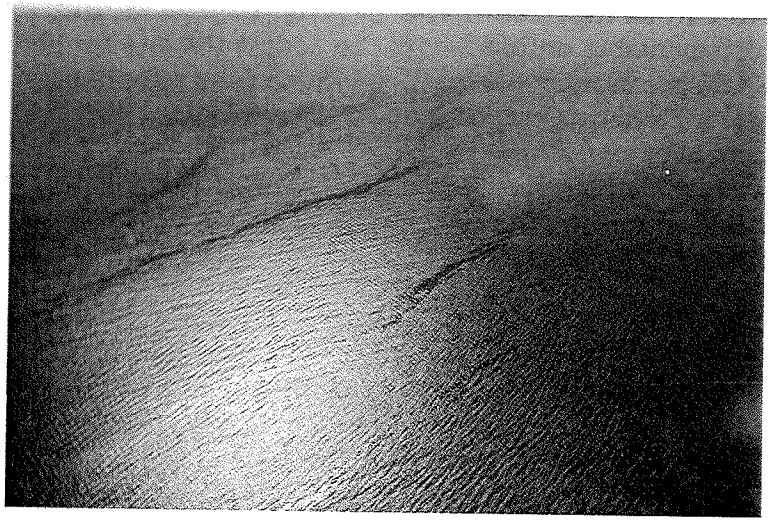
CONTENTS

WATER



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ART AND LETTERS

REVIEWS

ET CETERA

Photo: Ziauddin Sardar

ENDLESS SHORES

Ebrahim Moosa

'Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not.'

I feel that these two lines by Anne Carson, the Canadian poet and essayist, are addressed to me.

I found deep meaning in these ten words; and can admit they made a great deal of sense to me and resonated with my life experiences.

But why does water, among all the elements humans encounter, occupy such a significant place in both our survival as a species as well as in our imagination? Of course, some might rightfully say what humans, animals, and plants do biologically, and minerals do chemically, need water for their survival and to sustain any kind of existence. But why does air not occupy such a privileged place? For surely, humans, animals, and plants cannot survive without oxygen. Why have philosophers, poets, artists, prophets, and divinities across time given water such a privileged place but did not consider the importance of air? Why has fire, not been valued as much as water, especially since there is almost nothing we can do without heat and energy. Especially our modern world is almost entirely dependent on all forms of energy, what our ancient philosopher forbears described as fire.

Well, it is not entirely true that other than water additional elements were not considered as vital candidates for this privileged role. Ancient philosophers did indeed struggle and agonise about which one of these elements—air, water, fire, earth—was the truly vital one for our continued existence. Known as the pre-Socratic philosophers, some of them said it was 'fire,' others said it was 'air' and the one who earned the highest reputation, said 'water' was the organising 'principle' of the world. So now the question is: how did water win out in the sweepstakes to be the primary organising principle? This is a more challenging question to

answer. The eleventh-century Muslim philosopher and physician Ibn Sina also known as Avicenna, noted that water was the only of the four elements that can penetrate with whatever it is mixed. Given that he was a physician, he also ranked the different kinds of water based on the properties of their sources.

There might be more than a few reasons as to why water captured such a large place in our imagination. My own brushes with water have also deeply coloured my perception of this non-viscous, translucent, and fluid element. It might have to do with our dependence and encounters with water in so many, different ways.

Cosmology of Water

Water, in the twenty first century, is a ubiquitous resource: it is our friend and enemy at the same time. Climatologists and scientists are now agreed that we have entered the age of the Anthropocene, an age in which human activities indelibly influence the earth's climate and ecosystems. Some 11,700 years ago until the present, the previous age was known as the Holocene. That period saw the growth of cities, technological advancement from agriculture, metallurgy to writing. But the new ways of living we have adopted for especially the past 300 years, have now left clear human imprints on the face of the earth.

With climate change literally taking the globe by storm—we find in some places an abundance of water and in other areas of the world there is a paucity of it. Six major global cities suffered drought conditions in the past decade. Sao Paulo in Brazil, Cape Town in South Africa, Chennai in India, Mexico City in Mexico, and Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi, both in the US, experienced severe drought conditions often with water restrictions or with a caution about consuming hazardous water. An abundance of water in the form of irregular and dramatically violent hurricanes and floods in the US, Europe, South Asia, China, and Australia now afflict the world on a frequent basis. Between 2014 and 2023, the economic impact of flooding in the US alone had tipped to over 1.2 trillion dollars in infrastructure damage as well as loss to housing and agriculture in 173 separate weather and climate related disasters, most of which took the form of floods.

The African American novelist and writer, James Baldwin predicted fire will destroy the world next. He thought that fire will be worse than water, when he wrote, 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!'

But it seems that we are still in the age of Noah, with many more violent and unpredictable water and flood conditions. The toll of water-based climate disaster to human and animal life in addition to environmental destruction would possibly have surprised Noah too!

Does water have to do with the way our part of the cosmos is shaped? Or does it have some connection to aspects of existence we cannot comprehend—beyond our physical existence? Namely, is water a metaphysical issue? Water is clearly ubiquitous in both our language and our imagination. If water were a metaphysical question, then it would mean that water plays a role in a mode of thinking that allows us to imagine the big picture of who we are and our place in this cosmos. Water then would be in the mix of how we anchor ourselves here on earth, with values and beliefs and, we might wonder if water has any role in how we imagine the possibilities of the beyond—the afterlife.

The existence of water also remains a scientific question. It has something to do with the composition of our earth and the part of the cosmos to which we belong. Scientists are keen to see if water ever existed or exists on the moon or on Mars. Somehow science—especially the life sciences—thinks of water as elemental to our origins and our survival. Planetary palaeontology is an emerging field that combines planetary science and palaeontology—the science that carefully studies animal and plant fossils. These experts study the surfaces of planets in search of past life and biosignatures looking for life beyond the earth. And the markers they look for are the biosignatures for water.

Long before the advent of modern science, some six hundred years before Jesus walked on earth, a philosopher lived in Ionia, the ancient name for modern-day Turkey, once an ancient Greek colony. Some 30 kilometres from the city of Söke, in Turkey's Aydın Province, near the Aegean coast, is a place called Miletus, an antique city. Here Thales of Miletus was born somewhere between 624 and 620 BCE and where he died between 548 and 545. In Miletus, he flourished as a philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer. Despite his many accomplishments,

Thales is best known for his explanation that water is the fundamental substance underlying all matter. He posited water as the *archê*, the fundamental thing underlying all existence. Believing that the earth was a flat disc, he also suggested that the earth floats on water. He might have been half right in this intuition. Now we know that the largest surface of our planet is covered by water. Yes, what we now do know is that our planet does not ski on water.

Thales is a pre-Socratic philosopher: the name of the era before empirical science became separated from philosophy. In this phase of history, people engaged in 'wonder' and 'curiosity' about certain problems. 'Wonder' and 'curiosity,' as the Jesuit historian of philosophy, Frederick Copleston wrote, were the two intellectual drivers which served as the fountainhead of both philosophy and science. Roughly 2,500 years ago, thanks to Thales, humanity did have some idea that water was in some shape or form indispensable to human existence.

Some 1,200 years after Thales died, this knowledge and wisdom of the pre-Socratics must have circulated in the wisdom traditions of the Near East and possibly known to people in that region. The revelation vouchsafed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century also made a passing observation about the indispensable role of water. Working in the Arabian desert, the Prophet Muhammad laboured hard to persuade humanity to recognise that there was a sovereign Creator of the world. Humanity was invited to look around them and to see if they could behold and recognise the work of a Divine Artisan of the cosmos. In the Qur'an it was stated as:

> Have those who disbelieved not considered that the heavens and the earth were sewn together and we rent them asunder? *And we made every living thing from water.* Will they not then believe? (21:30.)

The Qur'an too is interested in drawing our attention to the earth and the firmament—in other words to the far and beyond, in what we today would refer to as our cosmic dimension. Then almost nonchalantly and parenthetically, the Qur'anic verse states: 'and we made every living thing, from water.' This observation is stated in such a manner as if it was an accepted fact among the first listeners of the revelation that water is the source of every living thing. It was not in a form of a contentious question.

But on further consideration, it is as if the story of the creation of all living things stemming from water is connected to a stack of heavens that were torn asunder. And furthermore, that it points to a direction that we are eminently accustomed to: water pours down from above us, namely the heavens, as rain. Irrespective of the source of water, the question remains: were the people of seventh century Arabia, the audience of the Qur'an, already familiar with this idea of Thales? Did they subscribe to the idea of the centrality of water to all of existence? In other words, would we philosophically describe water as a source of being? Is water only associated to every living thing, meaning only restricted to animals? The philosophically minded twelfth-century theologian and exegete of the Qur'an, the indomitable Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, explains that every living thing comprised of water including vegetation. In short, this verse means that water is included in everything that springs to life, in Razi's view.

Surely, the people of the Arabian desert, the first listeners to the Qur'an, knew how essential water was for human survival and for animals and vegetation to thrive. There is a strong indication that they already subscribed to the notion that water is essential for the creation of every living thing. Perhaps they did not describe it the way Thales pressed the point, philosophically, but close enough. Stylistically the attention of the verse is on the rhetorical question: 'will they not then believe?' It becomes clear that to the best of our knowledge, humanity recognised the integral role of water to life.

Planetary palaeontologists are not obsessed without good reason in trying to find water in other locations and planets in our known cosmos. In the Hebrew Bible, we read in Genesis 1:2-3: 'the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.' It is then that God said: 'let there be light'. In the Biblical version water is primordial and it was in existence since the time when the earth was formless and dark.

Poetics of Water

Figures of speech are rhetorical devices that use language in creative and non-literal ways to create a specific effect in the listener, reader, or viewer of texts and art. It is designed to create a deep emotive effect within the

reader or listener, moving them to action, provoking within them certain feelings, and evoking specific desires. Water is frequently used as a figure of speech in multiple languages of the world. Water takes both a literal and figurative form in poetry and literary expression.

Let's take as an example the most famous Arab poet of all time, Abu Tayyib al-Mutanabbi. Mutanabbi, his nickname means to be a 'pretender' to prophecy. He became infamous thanks to his self-professed, but youthful claim, that he was a 'prophet' in his native Kufa in the tenth century. Perhaps no one took note of his childhood fantasy, possibly because everyone admired his eloquence in composing poetry. But in adulthood, this ostensible blasphemy landed him in prison where he was coerced to forswear such heresy of being a claimant to whatever definition of prophecy he conjured. His genius as a wit, drenched in ambition and pride, all contributed to his insightful commentary on the human condition and made him immortal in the annals of Arabic poetry. His memorable lines smack of ambition and self-confidence, when he said: 'if you venture for a lofty aim, do not settle for anything less than the stars'.

Water in Mutanabbi's poetry is a symbol and metaphor for purity and beauty. He could confidently and effortlessly sketch with words:

> A face, as if the sun had cast its cloak upon it
> And the light of water glistens and reflects upon it.

Water also signifies generosity, benevolence, and open-handedness in Arabic poetry. An object of admiration, especially a generous person, can be described and personified as a cloud. Why a cloud? Clouds provide the life-giving source—water. Like mercy and guidance, some water reaches us from the firmament above us. Arabic poetry and poets love the image of clouds. Patronage in the pre-modern world was essential to the survival of poets and writers. Thus, they had to boost the egos of their patrons and praise their accomplishments in rhymed words.
In one poem Mutanabbi recalls:

> When the battlefield is showered by clouds of generosity
> Just as the rainclouds nourish the fields.

Note that poetry was the equivalent of the media in the premodern world. News of what transpired in palaces and courts in terms of

accomplishments were communicated by poets. In a sense, court poets played the role of today's public relations officers, except that these men of letters were highly accomplished individuals. Their words in praise of their patrons and rulers soon found a way to literary salons of the time and from there to the lips, hearts, and minds of the broader public. And hard to secure patrons provided the life-giving support that literary figures like Mutanabbi desperately needed.

Another touching expression is where water connects with honour. An expression in Arabic literally means 'he shed the water of his face (*araqa ma' wajh-hihi*)', meaning he sacrificed his honour. Put differently, a truly free person or a person of integrity 'does not shed the water of his face': meaning he or she does not bring dishonour to herself, does not lose face. In other words, they maintain their dignity, they retain the water of their faces.

The inimitable fourteenth-century Persian poet Shamsuddin Hafiz frequently uses water in his poetry. For Hafiz water is often a symbol of the beloved's beauty. If exposed to sunlight, then water always shimmers. Hence this iridescent feature serves as an analogy for the beloved's qualities of physical beauty and spiritual attraction. In Hafiz's lines below, the poet blends the love for a mortal friend with love for the Divine. The words used to describe the beloved are also the very same words used to describe the Divine colours and the Divine essence.

> With such love-filled words in praise of the friend
> Every form I paint flows from His water and hues.

In ancient Iranian culture, especially among the Zoroastrians, water was as essential as fire. In their cosmology water was the second of the seven 'creations' into which the world was divided. In Hafiz, water is also a symbol of divine grace, first and foremost. Water by its fluid nature in one form can flow, adapt, and take the shape of its container. Water can flow but it can also carve a rock. Water changes form: liquid can turn into solid ice, liquid or solid ice can turn into a vapour and then the cycle repeats itself. Just as water, in most instances, reaches humans effortlessly, so too does divine grace and mercy reach humans in infinite ways—effortlessly. No wonder when people pray to God, they ask the Divine to pour or rain mercy on them and all of humanity. At most times, gifts and sustenance flow to humans freely: whether through the laws of nature or as acts of

Divine solicitude. All gifts that humans receive flow to them as freely as water reaches human habitations. Thus, water is life-giving and has a power almost like fire, but it treacherously appears more subdued in some instances, before the flood. Hafiz personifies water on a face of a lover, but curiously it is quietly combustible: it gives a glow, but it does not consume the blossoms:

> Drunk and drenched, you stroll in the garden,
> Drops from your face kindle flames within the crimson blossoms

Water and wine are sometimes paired in Hafiz: one forms the base for the other. Water is for purification; it cleanses the body. Wine, in turn, is the beverage for elevation: it lifts the spirit to celestial heights. Water also serves as a mirror reflecting the Divine essence and mirrors the inner reaches of the human soul. It is the clarity and depth of water that generates the purity needed to perceive the divine truth.

However, few poets can outperform Jalaluddin Rumi with his oceanic imagination—no pun intended! Rumi is a master in his abundant and detailed use of the multiple symbolisms of water. In the Islamic tradition two prophetic figures, Noah and Jonah, are associated with water and oceans. Noah, however, became the more popular figure in the Abrahamic tradition, given the account of how most of his people perished in water because of their disobedience to God. Noah toils to convince his people to turn to God for a long time, and in the end only a handful of them and several animals survive God's wrath. Rumi pays little attention to the details of the event, but rather provides insights into the bigger picture that unfolds:

> Noah continued to call (the people to God) for nine hundred years: the unbelief of his folk was increasing from moment to moment.
> Did he ever pull back the rein of speech? Did he creep into the cave of silence?

Of course, Noah continued his task to invite people to God despite his myriads of detractors. Noah continued in what was his task, just as a caravan does not turn back from its journey because of the clamour of dogs. Nor does the moon change its course at full moon, because of a dog's incessant wailing. Everyone has their allotted task. Then Rumi continues with his interesting analogies to show how devoted Noah was:

Wrath is like vinegar, and mercy is like honey—together, they form the foundation of every oxymel (a mixture of honey and vinegar).

If the honey can't balance the vinegar, the oxymel will be ruined.

People kept pouring vinegar (wrath) on Noah, but the Ocean of Divine Generosity kept pouring sugar (mercy) for him.

Because Noah's sugar was replenished from the limitless Sea of Divine Bounty, it always outweighed the vinegar of everyone in the world.

It will not be lost on the reader to note how Rumi personifies divine bounty as an ocean and a sea, an inexhaustible source. All negative forces, personified by vinegar, can be neutralised by the sugar, especially if the sweetness came from a boundless source. Embodied with this sensibility, Noah was able to face the harrowing trials and tribulations of his unsympathetic and hostile people. He did so with resilience and determination. He never shrunk from his responsibilities. Just like a good tonic or potion, like oxymel, prophecy becomes resilient due to constant exposure to the vinegar—the taunts of Noah's ungrateful people. But more importantly, it is unrelenting because of the embrace of a divine reassurance to Noah, symbolised by the honey or sugar.

Rumi sums up the notion of resilience in these words:

Who is just one person but has the impact of a thousand? Not just a saint, but a true servant of the Most High (God)—they are worth a hundred generations.

One does not have to be a saint to survive life's trials and tribulations, Rumi believes. All it requires is to be a faithful servant of God, like Noah—who as an individual is honoured and compared to a hundred generations. Why is Noah so special? Because Noah is the equivalent of a jar filled with sea water. All other types of water kneel to that oceanic content out of respect. Listen to how Rumi puts it:

The mighty rivers bow in respect to the humble jar that carries a channel from the vast sea,
Especially this Sea of Reality. When the other seas heard this divine command and powerful call,

They were filled with bitterness and shame, overwhelmed by the realisation that the Greatest Name had united with something so small.
At the meeting point of this world and the next, this world shrinks back in humility and shame.

Noah was the vessel of the divine water (the Ocean) and thus was bound to succeed. Here Rumi points to something profound. As a human being, as a prophet, you do not have to be a saint who is dedicated to the worship of God. As a devout saint you will still just be one person among many. Think for a moment about the huge amount of water in a river: it is abundant and intimidating. Yet, when you bring water from the ocean, even in a small amount—in a jar or a container, then by the mere presence of the ocean water, the river water is intimidated by the water from the sea! River water bows to the jar of sea water. Why? For the river acknowledges its limits in the face of the unlimited water of the ocean. So too the prophet of God, he personifies a jar of ocean water, he stands in proximity to the Sea of Reality. The saint merely swims for gratification in a river or a tributary; as a prophet, he works for all of humanity and has the support of the Greatest Name.

Water was not only limited to poetry, but also had a link to architecture, if only as a simile. Already in ninth century Arabic poetry the imagery of water and waves became elements for a simile with polished white marble. With growing affluence in Abbasid society some spectacular architectural accomplishments were perfected in the palaces of the caliphs. In some palaces polished marble was perfected to such a sophisticated sparkle and glow, that an onlooker thought it was water. We know this from the work of a renowned Abbasid-era court poet, al-Buhturi. Buhturi in his eulogy about a palace in the capital city of Samarra, built either by the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tasim or his son al-Mutawakkil, draws the following comparison where marble appears as translucent as water.

As if the glass walls of its interior
Were waves beating upon the seashore
As if its striped marble, where its patter
Meets the opposite prospect,
Were streaks of rainclouds arrayed between clouds, dark and light, and striped, coming together and mingling.

Water also features in a genre of literature known as the *Wonders of Creation* (*ʿAjāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*) going back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These books are rich quarries of information, but they are not often sufficiently mined for material. Meticulously illustrated in rich colours and images, the most famous and well-known of these books is one by Zakariyya b. Muhammad al-Qazwini, author of *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*. Art historian, Persis Berlekamp has done extensive work on this genre in her magnificent book, *Wonder, Image, & Cosmos in Medieval Islam*. Berlekamp draws our attention to another author of this genre about whom we know little, but whose relevance will become clear. Muhammad b. Mahmud al-Tusi is possibly the most reliable name, although he is referred to by other variations of his name. This Tusi was active in the second half of the twelfth century; and also wrote a *Wonders of Creation*, sometimes titled as *The Book of Wonders* (*ʿAjāʾibnāma*) and *The World Showing Glass* (*Jām-i Gītī Nāma*). Berlekamp tells us that Tusi wrote about talismans in his *Wonders of Creation*, but guess in which chapter does he discuss it? He writes about talismans in his chapter on oceans, rivers, springs, and wells. It will soon become clear why and what the connection with the ocean is. The story of talismans appears in the entry on the Mediterranean Sea, which our author calls the Sea of Constantinople. This sea extends to the Islands of Felicity and the Valley of the Monkeys, which is the place of the apes, in Berlekamp's analysis.

In this place of the apes, an Abd al-Malik b. Marwan is a revenue collector, not to be confused with a caliph by that name. Abd al-Malik gives orders to divers to get to the bottom of the ocean to bring him gems. One diver comes back with an ewer with some copper pieces coated with tin. The revenue collector demands an account from each diver and each one complained: 'oh, Son of David, for how long will you keep us confined here?' And the story further tells of several thousand ape monkeys emerging, one of them as large as a camel, with a long beard and from his neck was an iron tablet, a talisman, given to him by the great King Solomon. Written on the tablet in Syriac was: 'in the Name of God the Most Significant. This is the writing of demons in this sea: be ye safe from jinn and man'. The ape presented the talisman and demanded that the ewers and pitchers be scattered in the sea, and they be left alone. All

this is partly illustrated in a painting, where small demons with horns and distinct noses can be seen to angrily remonstrate with the diver.

What the description and painting disclose is that these are the demons of Solomon that live in the sea. Medieval Islamic tradition held that in addition to his deep talismanic knowledge, King Solomon also viewed as a prophet in Islam, had knowledge of the stars and was gifted the ability to control the winds.

Qazwini, in turn, in his book of *Wonders* also tells of a story of writing, but this time it is in connection with the river Nile, not an ocean. The incident dates to the first Muslim governor of Egypt, Amr b. al-ʿAs who conquered that land in 641. When the Nile did not flow as usual, the local Egyptians were in a habit of sacrificing a girl to appease the river. When this offering did not bear fruit, Amr wrote to the Caliph in Madina, Umar b. al-Khatib for advice. Umar's advice was prompt and clear. Written on a card sent to Amr was a message to be conveyed to the great river Nile. The message read: 'from Umar, the commander of the faithful, to the Nile of Egypt. As far as you are concerned, you used to flow before and now you do not. God, the One and Almighty was the one who made you flow, therefore we ask Him to make you flow'. Amr threw in the card in the Nile the day before Good Friday, a significant day for the Christians of Egypt. On Good Friday the Nile rose sixteen cubits.

Each story has an underlying moral. The iron tablet as a talisman displayed by the ape exerted power over the revenue collector, Abd al-Malik, since it carried the authority of Solomon himself. The writing of Umar, in turn, did not only have power over the Nile, but also over the Copts who witnessed its efficacy, testifying to the divine will and the power of prayer at the command of the commander of the faithful.

Faith in Water

One of the first textbooks that I studied as a madrasa student in India, once my Arabic was proficient, was titled, *Light of Clarification* (*Nur al-Idah*) authored by a scholar from Egypt, Abul Ikhlas al-Shurrunbulali, whose last name is even in Arabic, a mouthful. Being able to tap into the writings of the authors who constructed this magnificent intellectual legacy of Islamic scholarship was for me a thrill like none other. Abul Ikhlas became a

renowned professor at the distinguished seminary in Cairo, the al-Azhar. And three hundred years later, tens of thousands of students around the world were still reading his text. The opening chapter in any introductory text on Islamic law focused on rituals would always start with the book of purification. Abul Ikhlas too listed seven types of water authorised for ritual purification. Water collected from rain, sea, rivers, wells, snow, hail, and springs he explained, before going into great detail.

The *Light of Clarification* is among the few textbooks that I still possess from my student days. What happened to the others is still an ache and a loss I feel till today, for it contained my most cherished memories, emotions only books can provide. I had dutifully collected all my textbooks in a metal trunk. And on leaving India I had left the trunk in a basement storage facility at the home of relatives in Mumbai, then known as Bombay in 1981. However, I did not leave my first textbook in the trunk because I carried this one with me to serve as a handy reference to consult whenever I was asked questions on Islamic law after I had graduated. That is the reason I still possess this text from my student days. As to the fate of the rest of my books? Well, I was hoping to earn enough money to pay for the transportation of my trunk of treasured books to South Africa. After several years had elapsed and when I had the means to pay for the shipment, I was informed that my books were soiled and destroyed by periodic floods that afflicted Indian cities and soiled the basement! My madrasa books, in my experience, were the first casualties of climate change.

Few people outside the Muslim community might be aware of how dependent all pious Islamic rituals are on the availability and use of water. Before each of the five daily prayers, a Muslim is required to be in a state of bodily purity. That state of consecration is achieved by washing the hands, face, arms and feet and rubbing the forehead with water, called *wudu*. Some interpretations allow for the rubbing of the feet too with wet hands. That state of consecration is broken by the natural acts of bodily elimination and excretory needs, flatulence, and blood oozing from the body. It is also highly recommended to recite the Qur'an for liturgical purposes, in a state of *wudu*, before touching the revealed book of God. After sexual intercourse, the end of a menstrual cycle, and after childbirth the washing of the full male and female body is a requirement since this is a foundational state of ritual purity. Given the common tradition that

Judaism and Islam shares, the word for ritual purification in Hebrew and Arabic is the same: *taharah*, *tahara*. In Judaism too there is a requirement to undertake ritual purification involving a full-body immersion in a *mikvah* (ritual bath). In Islam no immersion is required, except that one must ensure that all body parts are washed including the hair, with some exceptions for braided hair. It is enough to pour water over braided hair without the braids being undone. Only in rare instances when water is not available, or water would be harmful to one, does one resort to using earth and soil, to symbolically undertake the ablutions.

Since Islam was birthed in seventh century Arabia, the Muslim tradition annually recalls the story of the Prophet, Ibrahim (Abraham) and his slave wife, Hajar (Hagar) as a basis of the story of the pilgrimage. Hajar was left with her son Isma'il (Ishmael) in the desert by Ibrahim as a trial by God and to soothe the feelings of the then childless other wife of Ibrahim called Sarah. Hajar the mother of Ibrahim's firstborn child soon needed water. Hajar run up and down two hillocks looking for water, but in vain. In the meanwhile, a crying baby Ismaa'il in distress rubbed his feet in the sands and God then miraculously provided water from a source, known as the well of Zamzam. Pilgrims to this day drink this blessed water and bring back jars for their friends and families. And the effort and labour Hajar invested in her panic-stricken search for water for her survival and that of her child—that act is re-enacted symbolically by every pilgrim between the two hills of Safa and Marwa as an essential component of the annual seasonal pilgrimage, called the hajj or when one merely visits the Makkan shrine in a ritual called the *'umra*. That run or gentle jog of Hajar is called the *sa'i*, literally meaning 'effort', a gesture every pilgrim reenacts in their performance of the ritual too.

Water plays an unusual role in the religious imagination as a purificatory element. Through experience we can hardly deny it: the refreshing feeling water has on a face, on a body. Depending on the season the convenience of hot water in winter and cold in summers, each have an impact on the body and psyche.

Yet Islam teaches that water should be conserved not wasted. Islamic ethics based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad states that if you are making your ritual ablutions at the edge of a running river, you still do not have a license to waste water!

To the Edge of Water

When I read Anne Carson's words – 'Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not' – they grabbed my mind and soul like a magnet. For I have intimate knowledge of water. As a child I grew up near water. If I stepped out of our family home, in a once multiethnic neighbourhood in the heart of the city of Cape Town called District Six, then to my right was an imposing Table Mountain. Straight, as the crow flies, from our family home to the face of the mountain could not be more than three or four kilometres. To my left, less than three kilometres away, was the expansive Atlantic Ocean. Sights of merchant navy ships, passenger ships, and cranes in the docks of the city of Cape Town, South Africa, were normal to me, it was my everyday visual. Yet, water always intimidated me.

Then in my teens I grew up in a seaside town called, the Strand, some thirty kilometres outside of Cape Town boasting the world's most spectacular beaches: pure white sands, crystal clear water, if you can ignore the occasional sea weeds brought in by the high tide from time to time. If you lift your head on the beachfront, then, at a distance of forty kilometres, you can on a clear day behold the sight of the promontory, a high piece of land falling into the sea, known as Cape Point. This sickle-like piece of land strip geographically turns the surrounding area of Cape Town into a peninsula. This bay, known as the False Bay, has neither the icy water of the Atlantic Ocean nor the lukewarm liquid of the Indian Ocean. It is refreshing.

Even though I lived near the sea, the sound of waves putting me to sleep at night, I could never venture near the sea. First, traditional Indian trader families in South Africa like mine had little time for leisure. Beachgoing and swimming were not their idea of relaxation. Their way of life was different, conservative and restrained. Baring bodies in front of strangers and playing in the water was an entirely different way of life to them. Furthermore, no one in my family could swim from among parents, uncles and aunts and grandparents. The sea and beach were zones of intimidating fear with potential moral terror. But it was also frequently recalled as a site for drowning. We as kids were sternly warned to never go near the perilous waters. Second, the beaches nearest to me were regulated by apartheid South Africa's racial segregation laws. The azure

waters and the powder white sands of the beaches were reserved for people of white pigmentation. Ghastly signboards posted along the shore screamed at you: 'For Whites Only/Slegs Vir Blankes' in English and Afrikaans, the two official languages at the time. As a person of colour, I did not qualify. Putting your foot on the sand was legal trespassing with either a fine or jail time awaiting you, if law enforcement officials who constantly monitored the beaches caught you. The little strip of beach reserved for 'non-whites' were on a neglected and isolated area with deadly rocks, and part of an unsafe and dangerous shoreline.

Years later, I came to know the brilliant poet, journalist, and liberation activist Don Mattera, who suffered the lash of the police on his body when he swam on the wrong side of the beach as a child. That incident in Don's life made him fashion a poem, *Sea and Sand*, whose every word and line struck the very sinews of my being. I only cite the relevant part of his beautiful poem now that I have back the sand and the sea in the South Africa of my birth.

Sea and sand
My love
My land
God bless Africa
But more the South of Africa
Where we live

Bless the children of South Africa
The white children
And the black children
But more the black children
Who lost the sea and the sand
That they may not lose love
For the white children
Whose fathers raped the land.

Apart from the political violence inscribed around water that Don's poem so eloquently captures, my point is to let you know that I had zero aquatic skills, no beach literacy, and could not swim by the time I graduated high school. All the descriptions I have provided of the aquatic

flora and fauna of the beach and the sea, the geography of the land terrain I inhabited in the land of my birth, is knowledge and experience acquired much later in life. When I could go on the beach, enjoy its waters and look at the horizon without racist laws preventing me from doing so. So, at age eighteen, I embarked on a life-altering adventure to acquire a theological education in one of India's madrasas. That scholarly sojourn of mine, I had already documented in my book, *What is a Madrasa?*

During my six-year stay in India, for some strange reason, I kept a diary off and on, for which in hindsight I am in absolutely delighted. I must have seen other people in the Tablighi Jamat, the global Muslim propagation and reform movement which I joined at the time, adopt the habit of keeping a diary, so I did the same. The Tablighi Jamat helps one to become devout and committed to Islamic practice and they especially invite fellow Muslims to adopt a life of piety. Most of my co-sojourners in the Tablighi Jamat kept a diary to keep track of their spiritual experiences. While I desired a spiritual life too, I was less fortunate. In the beginning of my stay in India my daily diary hardly recorded any mystical experiences, but it noted my everyday events and some thoughts. Later, I dropped the habit of a daily diary but on occasion made notes in my diary of highlights of a year in review.

The entry for Tuesday 6 May 1975 reads:

> We went to Shaazli masjid (mosque) near the Shaazli river. We went to bathe in the river when I nearly drowned. I walked on the edge of the water when my foot slipped. Luckily one of the youngsters came to my rescue. *Alhamdulillah* (All thanks to God).

It is rather cryptic. For the very next line says I washed my clothes, then it mentions that I developed a headache that forced me to sleep after the afternoon (*zuhr*) prayers. All as a matter of fact. But it was far from such a mundane event.

First some context. The Shaazli mosque and river is in the city of Bhatkal, a coastal town along the Arabian Sea in the Indian state of Karnataka, some 750 kilometres from Mumbai and 140 kilometres south of Goa. I remember the journey from Mumbai to Bhatkal as a very onerous one, many hours on the train, with the first stop in Belgaum, now Belgavi, also a city in Karnataka. After several days there, we went by bus to Bhatkal.

My diary entry hardly does justice to my near drowning event. But I remember it as clear as daylight, able to recall every thought and emotion. I recall walking on a ledge of the steps going down from the Shaazli mosque nearest to the flowing river with its beautiful greenery and palm trees on the opposite bank. While walking on the step covered with moss, my foot slipped and the next second, I was flailing in distress in the river. I was wearing a lungi, a traditional waist cloth, for ease of bathing in public, but I was sinking, swallowing water. As I went down, all I could think of was my saddened mother who I knew will be in deep sorrow if I did not return to her. The next thought was that I should recite my declaration of faith in Arabic—'there is no other deity other than Allah and Muhammad is His messenger', as the tradition teaches, that one should die with these words on your lips as a sign of the orientation of your soul to God. As these thoughts went through my mind in nanoseconds, suddenly, I felt someone come under me. And next my head was above water, I recovered, coughed in distress, until I could take in air, my rescuer gently made sure I reached the step from where I fell into the water. Of course, I was relieved to be alive and safe, but I was undoubtedly shaken for the rest of my life.

How I was rescued is a tale on its own. While my Tablighi associates were themselves bathing and washing their clothes in the river, hardly anyone saw what had just happened to me. It turns out that a young kid, no more than ten or eleven years of age, watched the spectacle of me disappearing under the water from his perch on one of the lower branches of the palm trees from where he and his friends were diving and frolicking in the river. I noticed these kids as I approached the river that in hindsight would become the site of my immersion. The lad dutifully dived and swam to where I was and effortlessly pushed me up by turning his body into a submersible vehicle to lift me up to safety. All I remember is the smile on the face of this young lad, proud of his good deed. I owe this nameless boy an eternal debt of gratitude and I pray for his well-being and success in life wherever he may be. And if he or anyone familiar with this incident, which is hardly thinkable, recall this event, to contact me so that I can offer him a more meaningful gesture of gratitude.

Over the years since that episode at age eighteen, I was determined to learn to swim. Over the years in shallow gym pools, I learned to unlearn my fear of water. I learned how to kick and reach the other side of the

pool with the help of a paddle board. But I watched with envy how people effortlessly swam the length of pools. Finally, at the age of thirty, a friend, Siddique Davids, well into his sixties, whom we respectfully called 'Boeta Diekie Pondok' taught me to swim. The first word meaning 'elder brother' in Cape patois, Diekie was a colloquial abbreviation of his first name, and the last signifier was the name of his house, Pondok, meaning a small shelter in the Malay language. He was a master swimmer. I witnessed how he would traverse through rough and high waves in the Atlantic Ocean. For about six weeks I would meet Boeta Diekie at the Kensington public pool at seven o'clock in the morning, more than three times a week for a one-hour lesson. Thanks to his patience and my trust in his skills, within six weeks I could manage myself in the water and my phobia for the deep six-foot end of the pool became something of the past. I knew how to swim: move my arms, paddle my legs, breathe, and move forward as one single coordinated act, which is the essence of swimming. And then to be able to repeat these motions without thinking.

A few years later, in the 1990s, I was delivering a series of lectures in Durban, a city on the Indian Ocean. With time on hand, I ventured out to the beach across from my hotel to take a late morning swim. Before I ventured out into the water, I saw the lifeguard sitting up in the tower. I also saw two flags posted prominently at two ends of the beach. But in hindsight it became clear that I was not beach literate: I had no clue what the flags meant. As I swam out, I ventured left. Very soon I felt a current tug at me. I was battling the waves in a riptide that felt like a whirlpool. I was not making progress in my effort to get out of this imminent danger. Panicked and scared I gave giant kicks and increased my hand strokes, with Boeta Diekie's reassuring voice in my ear: 'Don't panic, Ebrahim.' In minutes I managed to get out of water danger. Once again, a narrow escape-relief. By this time a furious lifeguard was already in the water approaching me in rescue mode. Once he saw I was safe, he upbraided me for ignoring the safe zone between the two flags in which I should have stayed. Embarrassed by my lack of beach literacy I walked out of the water with a false sense of bravado. My body language semaphored to onlookers, that I can handle myself in dangerous water. But once the adrenaline wore off, I realised my catastrophic ignorance. Unlike Solomon who had control of demons in the oceans, I was fortunate enough to have angels who

rescued me, once in a river and at another time, another angel was on standby in the ocean, just in case I needed him.

I can hear Anne Carson say:

Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not.

My journey with water, our journey with water as a humanity teaches us many things. Questions if water is elemental to our existence or if it has any metaphysical proportions, are now all moot. Why? Because water is our life blood, our source of survival, and now it also poses the greatest threat to our civilisation. Over the centuries the imagery of water in language and nature soothed our souls and healed our brows, through its metaphors, imagery, and its gentle caress. Prophets and philosophers taught us about its value as a medium that renews, heals, and explains our world. We respect water just as much as we are in awe of its renewing power and at the mercy of its destructive force.

For me, personally, it is another story. If, God forbid, things went wrong for me in the Shaazli River in Bhatkal or in the Indian Ocean in Durban—if my water angels did not come to my aid in time—just imagine the tragedy that would have unfolded in my family. I dare not imagine. Thinking back, I am blessed in many ways to have escaped sure tragedy—call it fate or destiny. Given my encounters with water, I give the last word to the Greek playwright Sophocles. For him tragedy is an evil to be avoided. What remains uncanny is that I could never have imagined that Sophocles's words in the mouths of the chorus in *The Antigone*, could speak to my predicament so clearly, so powerfully.

Right blessed are they whose life hath tasted not
The power of Evil; for surely if once God's hand
Is lifted against a House, there lacks not aught
In a long moving stream of tribulation,
On, on, from generation to generation,
As waves upon the sand,
When the whole great ocean swells,
And the wind blows cold from Thrace,
And the dark of the deep sea-wells
Steals over the water's face,
Weeds and black oozes sweep

Up from the ocean floor,
And loud against the storm the steep
And wind-racked headlands roar.

RANGO'S ORDEAL

Liam Mayo

'Something you said keeps rattling around in my frontal lobe,' Rango, the chameleon lizard turned town sheriff says to Mayor D.D.F.W., the wheelchair-bound tortoise and mayor of the town Dirt.

'What's that?' Mayor D.D.F.W. enquires. The two are playing a round of golf.

'Control the water, and you control everything.'

'Come now Mr. Rango,' the mayor rebuffs, 'you attribute divine power to me. How on earth can I possibly control the water?' He sinks his putt.

'Well ... you've obviously mastered this game,' says Rango.

'Well, I've been playing it for many years Sir.'

The 2011 animated film *Rango*, directed by Gore Verbinski, follows the journey of a chameleon who accidentally falls out of his owner's car and ends up in Dirt, a drought-stricken town of anthropomorphised animals in the Mojave Desert. While ostensibly a children's movie, *Rango* weaves in profound social critiques, cleverly unpacking themes of capitalism, consumerism, and their devastating impact on nature. The film highlights the role of neoliberal water privatisation, depicting how commodifying a fundamental resource exacerbates inequality and leaves the residents of Dirt desperate and powerless. Through this lens, Rango explores the environmental and moral costs of economic systems that prioritise profit over communal well-being.

As Rango, voiced by Johnny Depp, assumes the role of Dirt's new sheriff, he takes on the monumental task of solving the town's water crisis while confronting dangerous adversaries and unravelling the mayor's corrupt plot. The mayor's schemes revolve around the neoliberal principle of commodifying water—a resource essential to life—by privatising it for political and economic control. Neoliberalism posits that publicly owned resources are often inefficiently managed due to regulations like taxes and