

After the Funeral of Hamad Assam*

(For my mother, David and Laura)

Cast:

Hajj Abbas Habhab: my grandfather
Sine Hussin: an old friend of my father
Hussein Hamod Subh: my father
Me

6 p.m.

middle of South Dakota
after a funeral in Sioux Falls
my father and grandfather
ministered the Muslim burial
of their old friend, Hamad Assam

me - driving the 1950 Lincoln
ninety miles an hour

“STOP! STOP!
Stop this car!”

Why?

“STOP THIS CAR RIGHT NOW!” - Hajj Abbas
grabbing my arm from
the back seat

“Hysht Iyat? (What’re you yelling about?)” - my Father

“Shu bikkee? (What’s happening?)” -Sine Hussin

I stop

“It’s time to pray” - the Hajj
yanks his Navajo blanket
opening the door

“It’s time to pray, sullee
the sun sets
time for sullee”
my Father and Sine Hussin follow
obedient
I’m sitting behind the wheel
watching, my motor still running

car lights scream by
more than I’ve ever seen in South Dakota

the Hajj spreads the blanket
blessing it as a prayer rug
they discuss which direction is East

after a few minutes it's decided
it must be that way
they face what must surely be South

they face their East, then notice
I'm not with them

"Hamode! Get over here, to pray!"
No, I'll watch
and stand guard

"Guard from what - get over here!"

I get out of the car
but don't go to the blanket

My father says to the others:
"He's foolish, he doesn't know how
to pray."

they rub their hands
then their faces
rub their hands then
down their bodies
as if in ablution
their feet bare
together now
they begin singing

three old men
chanting the Qur'an in the middle
of a South Dakota night

*Allahu Ahkbar
Allahu Ahkbar*

*Ash haduu n lah illah illilawhh
Ash haduu n lah illah illilawhh*

Muhammed rasoul illawh
in high strained voices they chant

*Bismee lahee
A rah'manee raheem*

more cars flash by

*se humdililah
rub il al a meen
arrahman il rahim
al humdilelahi
rub el se a meen*

*Malik a youm a deen
Ehde nuseerota el mutakeem
Seyrota la theena*

I'm embarrassed to be with them

*En umta ailiy him
Ghyrug mugthubee aliy him*

people stream by, an old womans strains a
gawk at them

*Willaathouu leen-
Bismee lahee*

I'm standing guard now

*A rah'maneel raheem
Khul hu wahu lahu uhud*

they're chanting with more vigor now
against the cars- washing away
in a dry state
Asaam's death—
he floats from their mouths

*Walum yakun a kuf one uhud
Willa thou leen*

his head in white, his grey mustache still

Ameen...

I hear them still singing
as I travel half-way across
America
to another job
burying my dead
I always liked trips, traveling at high speed
but they have surely passed me
as I am standing here now
trying so hard to join them
on that old prayer blanket—
as if the pain behind my eyes
could be absolution

*The Muslim prayer in this poem is similar to the Lord's Prayer. This poem was originally published as
"After the Funeral of Assam Hamady."