

A masterpiece on the law of flight:

literature as a bridge between two worlds

KADER ABDOLAH

Spijkerschrift *Cuneiform*



photo Klaas Koppe

Kader Abdolah (b. 1952, Iran) studied physics in Teheran and was active in the student resistance. He published two novels about life under the Khomeni regime before fleeing his homeland in 1985. Three years later he came to the Netherlands. He quickly mastered the language and has now written and published four books in Dutch: *De adelaars* (Eagles, 1993), *De meisjes en de partizanen* (The Girls and the Partisans, 1995), *De reis van de lege flessen* (The Journey of the Empty Bottles, 1997), this year has seen the publication of his most ambitious and voluminous effort yet: the novel *Spijkerschrift*. In 1997, he received the Dutch Media Prize for his collected columns from *de Volkskrant*.

An inspired writer, who tells of both the magical illusion and the bitter reality of his country (...) an exile from Persia, who has become a great Dutch writer.

Jean Paul Bresser in ELSEVIER

A most convincing book by a writer who has earned himself a unique place in Dutch-language literature.

Desiree Schyns in TROUW

A beautifully woven tapestry of words.

Ingrid Hoogervorst in DE TELEGRAAF

as an attempt to find his own language in a country whose inhabitants are oppressed by the consecutive regimes of the Shah and Khomeni.

Aga's son, Ismael, is no exception. He has fled to the Netherlands and comes into the possession of the manuscript, which he is determined to translate, in despite its illegibility. Just as in the past, he has to be the means through which his deaf and dumb father is understood. He is an extension of his father and of the history of his country, including its flaws, plus whatever he himself remembers, or imagines, which creates a wonderful chronicle. Ismael paints a penetrating and colourful picture of both his fatherland and of himself as a translator and writer. In that respect, he appears to have created a second homeland by writing himself into the literature of his new language.

Constantly jumping back and forth between the present day and the past, his book gradually spans a bridge between two worlds, which are both given a new tint by the strange intermediate position of Ismael. 'I write my story in the language of the Dutch people, in other words in the language of poets and writers who are no longer with us (-). I do so because it is the law of flight.' And it is in its very language that *Spijkerschrift* excels. As a foreigner, writing in a language foreign to him, Abdolah is extremely economical with his words and possesses a unique power of suggestion.

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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

Les jeunes filles et les Partizanes (De meisjes en de Partizanen). Paris: Gallimard, 1999. Also in German (Alexander Fest Verlag, in preparation).

Die Reise der leeren Flaschen (De reis van de lege flessen). Berlin: Alexander Fest Verlag, 1999. Also in Spanish (Galaxia Gutenberg, 1999).



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An interview with Kader Abdolah

‘FREEDOM CAN BE A NIGHTMARE’

by Frits Abrahams (12 August 1995, NRC Handelsblad)
translated by Sam Garrett

A unique phenomenon in Dutch literature: Kader Abdolah, a political refugee from Iran who writes little gems of stories - in Dutch. It took him only five years to master the language. How did he do it? And what keeps him going? Kader Abdolah talks about his ‘terrible youth’ in Iran, the struggle against the Shah and Khomeini, and about the exile’s dilemma. ‘The Dutch language is overflowing the banks of my mother tongue.’

‘I’m an exile, and an exile always needs a light at the end of the tunnel. I don’t know whether I can make my dreams come true, but I want to reach the Dutch literary and linguistic top. I say that quite consciously: to keep that light burning in the future. An exile always runs the risk of falling, and I don’t want to fall. I want to stay on my feet.’

The eyes, the voice, the diction: everything about Kader Abdolah radiates willpower. Imagine an energetic ‘oomph’ behind every word, an exclamation mark at the end of most sentences, and you’ll have an inkling of the way he speaks. He struggles in utmost concentration with words he wasn’t born with, words which therefore continually threaten to escape him, should his attention lag.

He’s on a winning streak. In five years’ time, he not only learned to speak excellent Dutch, but he also proved capable of writing lovely, evocative prose. Both his loosely autobiographical collections of short stories, *De adelaars* (‘The Eagles’, 1993) and *De meisjes en de partizanen* (‘The Girls and the Partisans’, 1995) received a warm reception from the critics, the latter being on this year’s list of titles longlisted for the AKO Literature Prize.

Very few writers (Nabokov, Conrad) have ever succeeded in writing in anything other than their native language. ‘I was terribly afraid at first,’ Abdolah tells us in the café in Zwolle where we meet. ‘When I started writing my stories in Dutch, snakes entered my bed. I could reach out and touch them, like that. They came because suddenly, as a writer, I had become *nothing*, because all those strange Dutch words were threatening my life as a writer. My vocabulary produce literature. I was putting my position as a writer on the line.

‘To escape that fear, I started translating my stories into Persian, as soon as I’d written them, and sending them to Persian publications abroad. But by the time I’d written the last two stories in *De adelaars*, I’d stopped doing that, and I didn’t do it all with my second book. My memory was creating more and more space for

Dutch all the time. When the second book was published, a snake came again, for the last time. In my dream I seized him between two fingers and squeezed, squeezed, squeezed until he died and I tossed him on the ground, whap, like that. I woke with a start, the sweat was running down my face, but it was time to celebrate. The snake was dead!

He must have pounced on the Dutch language as soon as he arrived, seven years ago. 'No, you're right, it's not normal,' he nods. 'After I'd been here for two years, I went to a psychiatrist. 'I want to write Dutch literature,' I told him, 'please examine me to see if I'm crazy.' All the man said was: 'I'm looking forward to your first book.'

Well, you succeeded.

'But it's only the beginning. It takes such tremendous discipline. I've resolved to write exclusively in Dutch for the next fifteen or twenty years. Nothing but my diaries can be in Persian. Maybe a time will come when I can't write in Dutch anymore. Then I'll just have to go back to Persian.'

Why would that ever happen?

'An exile's life is unstable. Ruled by fear, especially when you're so deeply involved with a language. Your brains are under enormous pressure all the time. I want to make something stable out of my unstable life. To do that, I needed a hard and serious task. That's why I chase down those incredibly difficult Dutch words.'

But why the fear?

'I'm afraid that I'm going to die, that my third book, the one I'm working on now, will only be half-finished. So I write day and night. When I come home from work - I work at the National Archives in Zwolle - I start in right after dinner. A half-hour nap, half an hour with the children, then I grab my bike, cycle along the dike for an hour and start writing somewhere. I write in the library as well, and in the train. But I never write at home. I only revise at home. Why don't I write at home? Because a sort of fear overcame me in my little room, a feeling of desolation. I thought: the world is moving on, I'm falling behind. I had to get out the door.'

What amazes me most is that you're able to write so evocatively in Dutch.

'I don't just sit down and write whatever comes to mind. My second book actually consists of ten different experiments. Each story has a personality of its own, each one is written in a different way. I thought: there are enough writers in Holland, I have to do something different, write something new. I start every day with the Persian classics, and old Dutch poetry from Komrij's anthology. That's how I learn the magic of language, the magic of the original Dutch as well. It's

often a very sparing language - not a single word is wasted.

‘From the time I was a child, my brains taught me the economy of expression. I had to learn that. My father was deaf-mute, I was his helper. I had to be able to boil a thirty-page story down to a few gestures.’

He talks about how he came to grips with Dutch. At first there were the usual language courses. ‘I consciously tried to learn all those words and sentences, because I knew they were the building blocks for my future literary home. I read Annie M.G. Schmidt’s children’s books, Carmiggelt’s columns, Kopland’s poetry. After awhile I could read Dutch quite well, but I still couldn’t speak it. My wife, who came to Holland in 1988, at the same time I did, was much further. So I had to get a job: in a museum or a company, whatever, and learn everyday Dutch as well.’

But writing is different from reading or speaking. It is - certainly for him, he realizes - a never-ending struggle. ‘While I was writing my first book, I asked all kinds of people for advice. I showed them words and sentences. I still do that, but not as often. My oldest daughter is twelve, her Dutch is excellent. She often spends fifteen minutes with me in the evening, I ask her questions about the language, and she gives me perfect answers. It’s a wonderful thing, learning.’

Why do you do it? You could have gotten by with other people’s translations of your work into Dutch, couldn’t you?

‘An exile lives on the fringe. You always remain an outsider, you don’t feel at home anywhere. Iran is a fantastic country, it’s my fatherland, my motherland, my murdered brother is buried there, my sister has been in prison there. It’s the land of my past, but I can’t get to it anymore. I don’t feel like an Iranian writer anymore, I don’t even feel like an Iranian. But the writer wants to assume a central position, even though he’s an outsider. He needs to be the center of attention. So I stay productive - in Dutch.

‘Besides, an exile always has a great longing for home, especially for his parental home. That homesickness never goes away. In my stories, I bring my home back here.’

How does your wife feel about living with a man possessed?

‘She always wanted a normal husband, she spent years struggling to lead a normal life, but she didn’t succeed. She used to hate it that I was always off in a world of my own. Now she feels it’s her destiny. She’s accepted it, and tries not to struggle against it. She probably figures there’s no other way.

‘But she has a great deal of freedom. Unlike me, she comes from a free family, and she had a Western education.’

His great-great grandfather was not only premier of Persia around 1870, but also a famous poet. He patiently writes his name for me in full: Mirza Abolghasem

Ghaemnaghm Farahani. 'He was murdered. By the Shah's men.'

His ancestor's weight laid heavy on his conscience - and perhaps it still does. 'It was my family's dream to one day produce another famous writer. Thanks to him, my family once enjoyed a high status. After his murder, we went downhill, every generation fell a little lower. My father was a carpet-weaver in Arak, our home town, a very religious place. Everyone in my family wanted to be a writer. I did too, but my great-great-grandfather's shadow was too heavy for my shoulders. That's why, later, I chose the pen name Kader Abdolah, the name of a comrade who was killed in the resistance. I had to, for my own safety as well.

'I never felt free, not even as a child. I always thought I had to prove myself, especially since my father was handicapped - mentally as well. Even as a boy of ten, I had to assume my father's role. I never had a real childhood, I was always a man, the man of a family with four daughters and, later on, a little brother as well. Whenever we would go to visit somewhere, I had to keep an eye on my father.

'And then, of course, there was my family's dream. When I was twelve, my great-great grandfather appeared in my sleep one night. He said: 'Be calm, you're the one, you'll be the one...' From that day on I started keeping a journal. For ten years, sometimes as much as thirty pages a day.'

He points to his throat. 'I always had the feeling there was a stone in my throat, I wanted to scream all the time, I don't know why. I wrote about everything, about the things that hurt me, about the crying going on behind my eyes.'

It doesn't sound like a very happy childhood.

'It was a terrible childhood. I had problems with the religion, with Hell, with the Day of Judgement. Then that terrible puberty. I dreamed about women, and there was no one who said: 'Listen, boy, you're becoming a man.' We didn't really talk at home. I couldn't talk to my own father, my mother and my sisters treated me like the father. I didn't have any friends, in fact, later on I didn't either.

'My spiritual father was my uncle, who lived with us. He was the one who established the norms and values. He talked to me, but never about feelings - only about actions and tangible things. Love was a forbidden subject. I was in love, but I felt that as a betrayal of my family's norms and values. There was a huge discrepancy between my desire and the way I was raised. I'd learned a great deal from the Koran, but much of what I was looking for was in conflict with that. I wanted to go into cafés, sit down next to women... It was during the Shah's time, all the cafés were still open. But in my family, those kinds of things weren't done.'

Was it such a strict Muslim family?

'When you people use the word 'strict', you think right away of those fanatical Muslims in Lebanon. But it wasn't like that. There were Muslim families who appeared much stricter, but who were actually much more permissive: families with a double ethic. In my home, everything was serious, we were a family with

fixed norms and values. And I was a serious man with serious problems.'

Who is the father figure in your novels? Your real father, or your uncle?

'I sometimes have trouble telling them apart in my own stories. My real father died a year ago. My uncle is still alive, he's 92. If you read my stories and you feel tears coming to your eyes, it's about my real father. When the reader feels something powerful, then it's my uncle. I owe him a lot. If it wasn't for my uncle, I wouldn't be writing stories in Dutch. He helped me learn how to read the Persian classics, like *The History of Behagi*. He would often call out: 'Listen to this, boy, feel the magic in these lines.' He must have recognized my talent. He called to *me*, not to his own sons.'

How long did you remain a practicing Muslim?

'I went to the mosque with my uncle every day until I was twelve. When I started keeping a journal, I started doubting. I fell in love with a girl from our street when I was fifteen. I figured: I'm going to put God to the test. I wrote in my journal: 'God, I'm in love with that girl, I want to see her down on the corner - if she's there, you exist.' She wasn't there, and God vanished as far as I was concerned.'

When Abdollah went to Tehran in 1972 to study physics ('a fantastic practice for a writer'), he soon became involved in the student resistance to the Shah's dictatorial regime.

'At home, we'd always been against him, but outside the house you never talked about it. As a student, I became a pen-and-ink crusader. The Shah's secret police were powerful, but at that time the left-wing student movement was also growing and becoming stronger. It was risky, of course, but in Persian tradition it's an honor to die for the people. What's more, I didn't want to be a second-class writer. I wanted to experience everything, so I could write about it later on. If you want to be a great person, you have to perform great deeds as well.

'Two-thirds of the members of my party were murdered during the Shah's regime. One year before he was overthrown - in 1979 - he began releasing prisoners. We could build up the party again. I joined the editorial board of the party's underground paper.

'We opposed Khomeini too, later on, but we couldn't do anything against him. The people would have devoured us if we had put up a fight. We didn't trust Khomeini, we knew his views on the revolution and women. While Khomeini was waging war against Iraq, he also destroyed all the opposition parties. A small group from my party was able to escape, the rest were arrested, tortured and killed.'

Was the persecution under Khomeini different from that under the Shah?

'It was harder for us, and more terrible. The Shah was really an outsider, he needed his secret police. But Khomeini and his people were old Muslim rebels, they knew the people well, knew how a secret party worked. Khomeini *was* the

people. He didn't need any secret police.'

During those years, Abdolah illegally published two books, journalistic novels. One of them was entitled: *What do Kurds have to say?* 'At a certain point I no longer dared to keep a copy of it. I destroyed the manuscript too. After a reading in Antwerp last month, an Iranian came up to me. It turned out he'd saved two copies of my first book. It was fantastic. Like having a lost son come home.'

In 1985, Abdolah was ordered to leave the country. By his party? 'It wasn't a personal decision,' he says. 'It was an agreement. It's too early at this point to say anything about it. I would be endangering my family and others if I did.'

But don't your books endanger them?

'My uncle called me once and asked what kind of work I was doing here. I told him: I write stories. He asked me what kind of stories. Stories to bring back our dead, I told him. He understood, and said: I know you. I asked him if that would create problems for them. No, he said, keep at it, you don't have to hold back for our sakes, we have nothing more to lose.'

'I want to take revenge on the dictatorship, in a beautiful, little dictatorship - a blow *you people* deliver. I want to write the history of the people I lived among for the first 34 years of my life. I want to be the teller of the truth.'

Has a lot changed since Khomeini died in 1989?

'Nothing really. There's no criticism, no real political opposition. But the regime is no longer able to keep a finger in every pie, there's too much poverty for that. Because the oil is so cheap. You people buy cheap oil. The opposition tries to keep the coals of resistance glowing, for there will come a day... but that day could take half a century to arrive. This regime can't be overthrown with a revolution, it will have to undergo a metamorphosis.'

So what does that mean for Salman Rushdie?

'Two things. Rushdie is a sort of exile. Every exile has, in a figurative sense, taken the keys to his old house with him. When he comes back, the keys no longer fit the lock. What I mean to say is this: even if the *fatwa* is lifted, Rushdie will discover that he has undergone a complete change of spirit. And furthermore: the *fatwa* is God's word, as spoken by Khomeini. Even if another regime decides to lift it, it will always remain God's word for many of the devout. So the *fatwa* can never really be lifted. For Rushdie, that fear will always be there. He'll have to accept it.'

A political refugee in Holland. One who ended up here more or less by accident, because a Dutch delegation to the United Nations in Ankara - where he had fled - suddenly had room for him.

'At first I thought I'd walked into a trap. I saw nothing but those cloudy skies above me. How could I write stories in this damp country? I love the Dutch

language now. And when you come to love a language, you start loving the people too. These days the IJssel River flows through my mind, I have thousands of cows in my head, I see green landscapes. Holland isn't just another country to me, I've made a world out of Holland, Abdolah's world, and I love it.

'After a difficult entrance examination, I studied literature at the University of Utrecht. I did that for one year, studying seventeen hours a day. It was a major turning-point in my life. We did prose analysis. I had never analyzed literature so deeply before. It was decisive for my new writing career.'

Imagine that, all of a sudden, you were free to go back to Iran - what then?

The question visibly depresses him. Loudly, almost despairingly, he says: 'It would be fantastic and, at the same time, it would be a nightmare. All the work I've done to acquire the Dutch language and then, suddenly, it's no longer necessary... terrible. I just have to work hard, so I don't think about things like that.'

'I've fought for freedom. But for me, freedom can be a nightmare. The Dutch language in my mind is overflowing the banks of my mother tongue. Sometimes I cry out: help, bring in the sandbags, the dike of my mother tongue is about to burst! But I'm the attacker. That's the tragedy of a writer on the run. I'm a whale who can swim in Dutch waters.'

Would your children go back with you?

'My children are Dutch, they wouldn't go back. We feel like they're no longer ours, they've assumed Dutch colors. They don't understand our parents' culture. Their mother tongue is a foreign language, even though we speak Persian at home. I try to get them interested in Iran, but it's hard. Terrible things happens sometimes. My mother-in-law came to visit from Iran. She saw our youngest child for the first time. He didn't accept her, he called her 'aunt'. After a lot of fuss, he started calling her 'auntie-grandma'. When you're a child, what good is a grandmother who can't even buy you an ice cream cone, who's dependent on you for everything?

'Those things are impossible to accept. Those who flee have to pay a very high price.'

You once wrote: 'One day, I think someone will come, someone who'll help me get over my intense longing for home.'

'I'm always waiting for someone... maybe every exile feels that way. Sitting on the couch at home, I'm always waiting, looking out the window. I know that, one day, someone will come. Maybe that hope is what keeps you going.'

An excerpt from Kader Abdolah: *Spijkerschrift*

‘Cuneiform’

(Breda: De Geus, 2000)

Translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett

[pp. 18-33]

Hadjar bore seven children. Aga Akbar was the youngest, and he was born deaf and mute.

She knew it even in the first month. She saw that he didn’t react. But she didn’t want to believe it. She never left him alone, and no one else was allowed to stay with him for long. For six months she kept that up. Everyone knew the child was deaf, but no one was allowed to speak of it. Until finally, Kazem Khan, Hadjar’s eldest brother, felt it was time to get involved. Kazem Khan was a free man whose habit it was to travel through the mountains on horseback. He was a poet who lived alone on a hill outside the village, but always had a woman. In the light of his window, the villagers saw a different woman every time.

No one knew what he did, or where he went on his horse.

When the light was on, people knew he was at home. The poet is home, they said then.

Nothing more was known about him, but when the village needed him he was always there to help. At moments like those he was the voice of the village. When the riverbed suddenly filled and flowed over and the water ran into the houses in the village, he was there on his horse and knew how to stop the flood. When several children had died unexpectedly and the other mothers were fearing for their own, he suddenly appeared on horseback with a doctor behind him. And any bride or groom of the village was honored to have him show up at their wedding.

It was this same Kazem Khan who came riding into Hadjar’s courtyard. Without climbing down, he sat in the shade of the old tree and shouted: “Hadjar! My sister!”

She opened the window.

“Welcome, brother. Why don’t you come in?”

“Will you come to me this evening with your child? I want to speak to you.”

Hadjar knew that he wanted to talk about her son, and realized she could no longer hide him.

When evening came she bound her child to her back and climbed the hill to the house that the villagers called a fallen jewel among the old walnut trees.

Kazem Khan smoked opium, which was generally accepted and even seen as a sign of his poetic nobility.

He had prepared the burner, his pipe was lying in the fresh, warm ash, and the fine slices of yellowish-brown opium were on a plate. The samovar bubbled.

“Take a seat, Hadjar. You can warm up some food for yourself in a bit. Feed your child if you like. What was his name again? Akbar? Aga Akbar?”

Hesitantly, Hadjar handed the child to her brother.

“How old is he? Seven, eight months? Go and eat, I’d like to be alone with him.”

She felt a heavy load on her shoulders. She couldn’t eat, and she began to weep.

“No, don’t cry. Don’t act so pitiful. If you hide him away, if you simply give up, you’ll make him stupid. For the last six or seven months he’s seen nothing, done nothing, he’s had no real contact with his surroundings. Everywhere I go in the mountains I come across deaf, mute children. We have to let everyone talk to him. All we need is a language, a sign language. And we’ll have to come up with it ourselves. I’ll help you. From tomorrow on, you’ve got to let others to take care of your child as well. Let people make contact with him, each in his own way.”

Hadjar took her child into the kitchen. There, once again, she burst into tears. Tears of relief.

Later, after Kazem Khan had smoked a few pipes of opium and was light and cheery, he came and sat beside her.

“Listen, Hadjar. I don’t know why, but I feel that I must have something to do with this child’s life. I never felt that way about your other children. Especially since their father was that nobleman. And I want nothing to do with him. But before you go, I must tell you a few things, things that are important for your child’s future. That nobleman must also know that I am Akbar’s uncle.”

The next day Hadjar took Akbar to the castle. Never before had she shown one of her children to its father. She knocked on the door of his study and went in, with Akbar in her arms. She stood there for a moment, then laid him on the desk and said: “My child is deaf and mute.”

“Deaf and mute? What can I do to help?”

It took a moment before Hadjar could look him straight in the eye.

“Let my child bear your name.”

“My name?” he asked, then fell silent.

“If you give him that, I shall never come here to ask you for anything again,” Hadjar added.

Still the nobleman said nothing.

“You once told me that you favored me, and a few times you said you respected me. You said I could always ask you for what I needed. So now I am asking you; let my child bear your name. Only your surname. I am not asking for an inheritance. Let Akbar’s name be put on paper.”

“Feed the child, don’t let him cry like that,” the nobleman said after a while. Then he stood up, opened the window and shouted to his servant.

“Bring the imam to me. Immediately. I’m waiting.”

The imam was not long in arriving. Hadjar had to wait in another room. The conversation took place behind closed doors. The imam wrote a few lines in his book. Then he drew up a document for the nobleman to sign. It was finished in no time. The imam went home on his mule.

“Here, Hadjar. This is what you asked for. But there is one thing you must not forget. Keep this paper hidden, and keep it a secret. When I die, then you may show it to others.”

Hadjar hid the paper under her clothes and tried to kiss his hand.

“You don’t have to do that, Hadjar. Go home now. And come see me often. I have always said it, and I say it again. I do favor you, and I will always want to see you.”

Hadjar bound her child to her back again and left. As she went down the mountain, she knew that she was carrying a child with an old and important name: Aga Akbar Mahmoodi Gazanvia Gorasani.

The document proved a worthless piece of paper, for when the nobleman died his heirs bribed the village imam to scrap Aga Akbar’s name from the will. But that didn’t matter, for Hadjar had not expected an inheritance for her child: the name alone was enough. His father was famous, and his roots lay there in that old castle on the mountain at Lalezar.

When Akbar grew up, he married and had children. And although he was a lowly carpetmaker, he remained proud of his lineage. He carried the paper with his long name wherever he went.

Akbar often talked about his father, and especially wanted his son Ismael to know that his grandfather had been an important man, a horseman with a rifle on his back.

The nobleman was killed by a Russian. But exactly who his killer had been, no one knew. Was it a soldier? A policeman? Or a Russian thief who had sneaked across the border?

The mountains where Aga Akbar and his forefathers lived were on the border with Russia, at that time a part of the Soviet Union. The southern side belonged to Iran; the northern slopes, with their perpetual deep snow, belonged to Russia.

But what that soldier, or the Russian army was doing there in those mountains, no one knew.

The only reminder of the murder was a story that lived on, thanks to Aga Akbar.

Whenever he and his son were home alone, Akbar would tell the story to Ismael, who then had to play the horseman. He himself played the Russian soldier, with a long army coat and a cap with a bright red hammer and sickle.

Ismael rode on a cushion and wore a wooden rifle on his back. Aga Akbar put on his coat and hat and hid behind a big cupboard. A rock on Saffron Mountain.

Now Ismael had to ride his horse. Not too fast, not too slow, but with restraint, like a nobleman. He rode past the cupboard, and at that moment a head appeared. The horseman had to ride on for a few yards, until the soldier jumped out with a knife in his hand. He took two or three giant steps and planted his weapon between the shoulders of the horseman, who fell to the ground dead.

The story was probably based on fantasy, but the death of his mother was one thing Aga Akbar had experienced for himself.

“How old were you when Hadjar died?” Ismael gestured.

But Aga Akbar had no sense of time.

“She died when a flock of strange black birds came to roost in our almond tree,” he signaled back.

“Strange birds?”

“I had never seen them before.”

“But when was that, when those black birds roosted in the tree?” Ismael signed.

“My hands were cold and the tree had no leaves and Hadjar no longer spoke to me.”

“No, I mean, how old were you? How, how old were you when your mother died?”

“I, Akbar. My head came up to Hadjar’s breast.”

He was nine or ten at the time, Kazem Khan told Ismael later. Hadjar lay in bed and was deathly ill. And Akbar crawled under the blankets and held her tight.

“Were you holding your mother when she died?” Ismael gestured.

“Yes, that’s right... but, how did you know?”

“Uncle Kazem Khan told me.”

“I crawled under the blankets. Whenever she was sick, she would talk to me and hold my hand. But she wasn’t talking any more, and she didn’t move her hand either. I was afraid, very afraid, I stayed under the covers and didn’t dare to come out any more. Then someone grabbed me, a hand from outside, and tried to pull me away. I held Hadjar’s body tight. But Kazem Khan pulled me away. I cried.”

The next day the oldest woman of the family spread a white cloth over Hadjar’s face. Men came with a coffin and took her to the graveyard.

After the funeral, Kazem Khan took the little Akbar with him.

“I wanted him to become familiar with death,” he told Ismael later. “I rode with him through the mountains, looking for something that would show him that dying was a part of life.

“I looked for a dead bird in the snow, a dead fox or maybe even a wolf, but on that winter’s day the birds flapped their wings more vigorously than ever, and the wolves jumped from rock to rock. I stopped, had him sit on a stone and pointed to an alpine plant that had been buried under the snow. ‘Look! Those plants are dead too.’ But it was not a good example. I saw an old mountain goat struggling from one rock to the next. ‘Did you see that? One day soon, that goat will die too.’ But no, that wasn’t a good example either.

“I was hoping that a bird would suddenly stop flying and fall to the ground. But that day no birds seemed willing to fall.

“I put Akbar back on the horse and we rode further.

“At a certain point I saw the nobleman’s castle in the distance. It had been empty ever since he died. I rode towards it.

“What was I thinking? I don’t know. I thought: we shall see.

“I led the horse around to the back. Aga Akbar didn’t understand what I wanted to do. ‘Stand on the horse’s back,’ I gestured, ‘climb onto the wall!’

“‘Why?’ he gestured.

“He didn’t want to do it. So I went first and climbed onto the wall. Then I lay down on my stomach. ‘Come on, come on now! Just give me your hand.’

“I grabbed his hand, pulled him up and helped him onto the roof. Together we crawled to the stairway.

“‘Don’t look so shocked,’ I said once we were there. He didn’t want to climb down.

“‘What are we going to do here?’ he signaled.

“‘Nothing, just look around a little. Come on. This castle belongs to you as well.’

“Then we made our way down the stairs. He had forgotten his mother for the moment. I even saw him smile.

“We went into the courtyard. I had never been in the castle before either. I thought everything would be locked, but all the doors were open. I thought perhaps the rooms would be empty, but no, everything had been left as it was. The wind had blown open the door to the courtyard, and snow had drifted halfway down the hall. I stepped inside.

“Everything was covered in dust, even the expensive Persian carpets were buried beneath a layer of sand. When you walked on them, you left footprints behind. From those footprints you could see that a man and a boy had walked through the rooms.

“‘Just give me your hand, Akbar. Do you see this? This is what dead means.’

“I found the study, the nobleman’s library. Akbar looked at all the things in amazement, the chandeliers, the mirrors and the paintings. ‘Take a good look,’ I said, ‘look at those portraits, those are your forefathers. Come, look, oh Allah, Allah, look at all these books!’

“I had never known there were so many books on Saffron Mountain. ‘Hey, Akbar, come here, look at this book. It’s handwritten, read this:

Godaya rast guyand fetne az tost,

wali az tars natwanam chagidan.

Labo dandane torkane Gota ra

be in gubi na bayad afariedan (...)

“I took a parchment down from the shelf. There was an old family tree drawn on it. ‘Do you see these names? These men all have a book of their own. You can write your own book too. Something all your own.’

“‘Write?’ Akbar gestured.

“‘I’ll teach you.’ I looked for a blank notebook in the drawer, and found one. ‘Here, take this and put it in your pocket. Hurry, we have to go now.’”

They made their way back over the castle wall and Kazem Khan rode home. First he needed to smoke, and drink two or three cups of strong tea. “Where are you, Akbar? Here, here’s a lump of sugar. The tea is delicious, take a sip. It’s good sugar too, from Russia. So where’s your book? Come and sit next to me. Opium isn’t good, you must never smoke opium. If I don’t smoke on time, I start shaking. But when I do smoke, I write heavenly verse. Get your book. Write something in it.”

“I can’t write, I can’t even read,” Akbar gestured.

“You don’t have to read, it’s not necessary, but writing is. Just scribble something in your book. Do a page every day, I don’t know, a couple of lines. Go on, go upstairs, write in your book and then show it to me.”

When Kazem Khan was finished smoking, he stood up and climbed the stairs.

“Where are you, Akbar? Haven’t you written anything yet? Never mind. I’ll teach you. Do you see that bed? From now on, that’s your bed. Open the shutters and look at the mountains. That beautiful view is all yours. Open the cupboard there on the wall. That’s yours as well. You can put your things in there. And here is the key to your room.”

When you sat at the window of that room, Kazem Khan lamented, you couldn’t summon up enough concentration to read or write, because you were caught in the spell of nature, taken by the view. All you could do was put down your book, place the pen back in your inside pocket, fetch the pipe, slice the roll and put a piece of opium in the pipe, take a glowing coal in the tongs and smoke, smoke and smoke again, then blow the smoke at the view and look at it.

First you saw the old walnut trees, then the pomegranates, after that a landscape with yellow wildflowers and a field covered in bushes the color of opium. You saw the yellow flowers and the yellowish-brown bushes blending together in the foothills. And above it all rose Saffron Mountain.

If you could climb to the summit of that mountain, balance on that precarious peak and hold your binoculars at the same time, you could - if it wasn't too misty - make out the silhouette of a building and the soldiers of the Red Army. That was the border, the customs post. But on the day that Aga Akbar and Khazem Kan stood at the window, no villager had ever yet reached the top of Saffron Mountain.

Saffron Mountain is famous throughout the country, not so much for its inaccessible summit, but because of its famous historical cavern. Saffron Mountain is well-known in archaeological circles as well. Its cavern lies halfway up, at an inaccessible spot, a spot where, in those days the wolves slept during cold winters and bore their whelps in spring.

If you were a mountain climber making your way with hooks and ropes up the face to the cave, you would see fur everywhere, and the bones of the mountain goats eaten by the wolves.

And if you arrived in spring, chances were that you would see whelps calling to their mothers at the mouth of the cave.

Somewhere deep inside that cave, in the darkness along the southernmost wall, an epigraph has been chiseled. It is more than three thousand years old. A cuneiform text pounded into the rock where it cannot be reached by time, sun, wind or rain. It is a writ from the first king of Persia. A mystery as yet unraveled.

On rare occasions, standing at the window of Kazem Khan's house, you could see a rider, a cuneiform expert – an Englishman, Frenchman or American – entering the cave on a mule. Then you knew that a new attempt was being made to decipher the inscription.

"Come on! Saddle the mules," Kazem Khan gestured to Akbar.

"Where are we going?"

"To the cave."

"Why?"

"To learn to write. I'm going to teach you to write," gestured Kazem Khan.

They put on warm clothes, straddled the backs of strong mules and rode to Saffron Mountain. The mules smelled the ground, found where the mountain goats had gone and so inched their way to the top. After three or four hours of climbing they reached the entrance to the cave.

"Wait!" Kazem Khan gestured. "First we must chase away the wolves."

He slung the rifle off his back and fired three times in the air. The wolves fled.

They climbed down from their mules and went into the cave. Inside, Kazem Khan lit the oil lamp and on they went, deeper and deeper into the cave, leading the mules.

“Come on, follow me.”

“Why are you going into the darkness?” Akbar gestured.

“Be patient. Come along. Look! There! Up there!” said Kazem Khan, holding the oil lamp above his head.

“Do you see it?”

“See what?” gestured Akbar. “I don’t see anything.”

“Wait. Let me find a stick.”

He searched the cave for a stick, but couldn’t find one.

“Okay then, hold the reins.”

Kazem Khan climbed onto the mule’s back and lifted the oil lamp again.

“Do you see it? That thing on the wall, in the wall. Go stand over there. Now you can see it better. I’m getting down. Take a good look. Do you know what that is? A letter. A message from a king, a great king.

“In those days no one could read or write. Paper didn’t exist. That’s why the king gave orders to have his words chiseled into the wall of this cave. All the foreigners who come up here on their mules are actually trying to read this story. Get your notebook, find your pen. Come on! I’ll hold the mule against the wall. Climb up on its back. That’s right, up on the animal’s back. Come on! Are you there? Oh look, you can hang the lamp over there. That helps. Write it down, look at the text carefully, look at all those marks and write them down one by one. Just start doing it. Don’t be afraid. I’ll hold the mule. Go on, write it down!”

Whether or not Aga Akbar understood what his uncle was trying to do, he began copying the text. He looked at the cuneiform and tried to trace all the symbols in his book, one by one. Three pages full.

“I’m finished,” he signaled.

“Good, put it in your pocket. And get down carefully.”

That evening at the house, when Kazem Khan was at his opium again, he gestured to Akbar: “Bring your notebook. Sit down here beside the burner. Give me your pen.

Now listen carefully. Today you copied the king's letter. Do you know what it was about?"

"No."

"What you wrote down is a letter, something that was once in the king's head. But what the letter says, no one knows. Still, it says something. And you, you can write a letter as well, here on the next page, and next time another letter on another page. You can write down what's in your head, just like the king. Try it!"

Years later, when Ismael, the son of Aga Akbar, was about sixteen and living in the city, he visited his great-uncle in the mountains. "But Uncle Kazem Khan, why didn't you teach my father to write normally, or to read normally, like everyone else?"

Ismael asked at dinner.

"Who else do you mean? These days one must learn to write, but back then it wasn't necessary. Especially not here in the mountains. Even the village imam could barely write his own name. Who could teach a deaf, mute boy a language in those days? I wasn't the right person for that. I simply didn't have the patience for it. I was not the man for that. I was always off on horseback, riding around.

"To teach someone that, you need a skillful father and a strong mother. No, I wasn't out to teach him to write at all. But I felt, I saw that Aga Akbar formed sentences in his head, created stories, do you understand?"

"That talent, those sentences in his head, could have destroyed him. He was always having headaches, and I was the only one who knew where those headaches came from. That's why I taught him to write in cuneiform. Just write. I had no idea how he was to go about it. And I didn't know whether it would help. I was just looking for a solution. You see, no one can read that inscription, that royal epigraph, either. Maybe the riddle will never be solved. Yet still, the king was able to write down his thoughts.

"Did I help him, or didn't I? You're free to give your opinion, but I believe that my method worked. Your father still writes. And cuneiform is a beautiful, mysterious way of writing. It gives you a language all your own, a language you can write in. Have you ever looked at your father's notebook?"

"No. Well, I mean, sometimes I see him writing in it."

"But have you ever tried to read part of his story?"

"Oh no, I can't."

“You could ask him to teach you.”

“And you, uncle? Can you read it?”

“No, but I know what it’s about. One time, my God, when was it? I went into his room while he was at the table, writing. I think he was about your age. But he was stronger than you. Broad shoulders, dark hair, bright eyes. Anyway, I saw that he was writing. ‘Show me,’ I said to him. ‘Tell me what you’ve written.’

“In those days, you know, he was often in contact with foreigners who went to the cave. They were trying to decipher the text. I think he had learned something from those experts, something about another script, or a possible translation. ‘Explain to me what you’ve written,’ I said. He didn’t want to at first, he was ashamed, but I pressured him. I wanted to know whether my method had worked.

“And he read it aloud. Listen, I still know it by heart, it’s wonderful: *‘I, I, I, I am the son of the horseman, the horseman from the castle, the castle on the mountain, the mountain with a cave in it, and in the cave is a letter. A letter from a king. A letter in stone. From the days when there was no pen, only a hammer and chisel.’*”

Later, as a young man, Aga Akbar worked as a guide. He led the cuneiform experts, the Americans, the English, the French and the Germans who went to the cave on mules. He would stand on a mule’s back and hold up the oil lamp for them while they tried to make photos or copy the text for the umpteenth time.

Anyone interested in cuneiform, anyone who works with such writing, will be sure to have a few books on the subject at home. Those books always contain a photo or two of the epigraph in the cave on Saffron Mountain. And among those photos is surely one in which the young Aga Akbar can be seen, standing on a mule, lighting the inscription with an oil lamp.