



Nuruddin Farah and Somali culture

Ali Jimale Ahmed

I am honored to participate in this project, a theme issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* on Nuruddin Farah. Farah's shadow looms over most of my work. He was my 9th grade teacher, and most of my writings—poetry and prose—seem, in some small way, to be a kind of rejoinder to his distinguished work. One of my first stories, “Nudged”, was written for him. If he does not remember, it won't be his fault, as it had all the hallmarks and insignia of a teenager's infatuation with the writing process. I, too, only vaguely remember the tenor and drift of that early story. In addition to that infatuation, it was written to impress a teacher who had just published his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Reading Farah's first novel sent me on a storytelling path. That tendency, for sure, was already there, as both my parents were consummate storytellers. My contemplative essay in this issue, therefore, serves, in some modest way, to acknowledge the power a teacher could have on impressionable minds. It is uncanny to even reflect on the fact that my first book of poems, *Fear is a Cow*, was somehow a response to Farah's “Fear is a Goat”, a brilliant earlier article.

As Somalia's preeminent novelist, Nuruddin Farah has certainly internationalized the case of Somalia—the country, its literature, culture and politics, to the point that he has become the Somali countenance most easily recognizable in the world. Farah does not speak idly when he tells all and sundry that his writing keeps Somalia “alive”. And keep it alive he has. When the world all but forgot about the war-ravaged country, Farah refused to let go of Somalia. He was not concerned whether readers would be interested or not in reading about a country that had cannibalized itself to the brink of oblivion. Rather, his abiding concern has always been how to ensure that the Somali agony will not fade into a nether region or domain of “donor/humanity-fatigue”. And to that purpose he has devoted much of his work: starting with *Gifts*, which signals the beginning of the Somali collapse, and ending with his latest, *North of Dawn*. The seven novels about the destruction of Somalia comprise more than half of his total novelistic output, and have served to keep Somalia at the forefront of the world's gaze. In this he has succeeded, for the novelist is, to borrow from Milan Kundera, “an explorer of existence” (Kundera 44). Through his work, readers have been made privy to the trials and tribulations of humans swept up in a whirlpool of brutal existence, grim circumstances, and overall catastrophe. What Farah's characters reveal is the precipitous slope down which, more often than not, communities and nations tend to slide in times of war. Yet Farah's work equally reveals how nations and communities ignore their writers' warnings at their own peril. I have mentioned elsewhere (Ahmed, *Daybreak is Near: Literature, Clans and the Nation-state in Somalia* 95) that Farah's *A Naked Needle* could have helped Somalia and its then-leaders avoid the cataclysmic disorder that followed on the heels of the disintegration of the regime of Muhammed Siyad Barre. In short, he has succeeded to give victims of the civil war a platform on which their shattered humanity could be reassessed. This platform is rooted in history, even when the characters are not overtly perceived as sacrificial lambs on History's “slaughter bench”, to quote Hegel.

In his work, Farah reveals a deep understanding of Somali culture as, in his words, “metaphor-based” (Farah, Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 49). He correctly argues that Somali culture is not overtly “proverb-based”. It is possible that many Somalis—scholars or otherwise—did not give much thought to this dichotomy. Proverb-based cultures give prominence to exemplary nuggets of knowledge, a kind of pedagogic knowledge that derives meaning from a precedent, a past still capable of framing the future. (This does not, however, imply that proverbs are irrelevant to contemporary life, or that they do not impart metaphoric knowledge; rather, proverbs, employed as apodictic tools, tend to give, or be utilized as, an unambiguous last word to discourse or discussion.) A metaphor-based discourse, on the other hand, compels the individual to be aware of the ellipses that dot the landscape of any discourse. A metaphor is able to create connections where you least expect them. It also fosters discussion,

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as it points to multi-layered, polysemous meanings. A metaphor-based culture allows a community to associate ideas and things that are not necessarily thought of along the same axis.

This concept of culture allows Farah to read clan, for example, as a “text” that is both constrictive and emancipatory. He finds in his reading of clan a “dysfunctional family”, a mausoleum in whose crypt all kinds of ghosts and skeletons are buried. The image he employs in his description of those forces that plague the Somali psyche is the image of “atmospheric spirits” (Farah, *Maps* 122). In the process, the writer becomes an exorcist who tends to summon up ghosts and heals both the body and psyche of the nation. This allows Farah to see through the spectral history that has haunted Somalis for so long. In other words, his narrative speaks to the revenant and re-vanchist spirit that refuses to cease its perpetual roaming. He also understands that *tol*, clan, is that which is sewn together. This is important for Farah’s work: from here he is able to deny the corporate kin system an originary status, a mythic genesis or etymology. Rather, he shows how clan is, like any text, composed. The fictive contour of the clan system makes it an invention, a construct with a history, something with a beginning (in Edward Said’s sense of the term). This view of clan enables Farah to demonstrate the kind of absurdity that has its home in ossified forms of kinship mythologies. In its stead, Farah advances a kind of imaginative vision that privileges the “who” instead of the “what” of clan identity. In other words, his view of the individual preponderates over the person’s clan; it is the individual’s being and self-agency that interests him.

This is not something new in his work: early on, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah’s first novel, the protagonist, Ebla belongs to a circle of women, albeit dictated by expediency, in whose midst she acquires the basic survival strategies that help her thrive in Mogadishu. Granted, the two leading mentors she leans on are themselves liminal figures, but these are women who nonetheless do not depend for their survival on the patriarchy. Also, in Mogadishu, when Ebla commits the polyandric act, the wife of her “second” husband (Tiffo) is supported by a female support group who terrorize husbands and their secret lovers. It is no coincidence that Tiffo is a wealthy person and that Awill is part of the burgeoning intelligentsia and a member of the soon-to-be national bureaucracy, as his is the generation that will bridge the transition to independence. This, to my knowledge, is a novel way of looking at gender inequities through the prism of the dual structure that shapes and dominates individual and familial lives, namely the patriarchy and the modern nation-state. In both institutions, the gendered being is not consulted with but acted upon as regards their affairs.

Dictatorship in all its guises (social, familial, and political), postcolonial ambivalences, civil war and its messy aftermath constitute Farah’s work as the biography of the Somali nation. It is a willed biography that is intended to go against the grain. Both patriarchal and state institutions manipulate the dynamics and dialectics of the corporate kin system. And in *Sardines*, for example, Farah tries to circumvent the clan system by alluding to a founding in the form of Barkhadle, Medina’s father. This places Medina outside the corporate kin system, as both her parents are not directly implicated or shaped and formed in the grid of the Somali clan system. And examples of characters forming their own affiliations and associations at the expense of filiative bonds are found in his other novels, including his latest, *North of Dawn*; here, the Somali diplomat’s son and his wife create an alternative family in the name of al-Shabaab, the armed Islamists. (The theme of creating alternative forms of family reaches a crescendo in the make-up of Kalaman in *Secrets*, to be discussed later.)

This shows how Farah’s works share thematic concerns, and how they form a catena, as well as how Farah, through a form of austere vision, resurrects things, characters, and concepts in a multiplicity of ways and for various reasons. Farah’s goal is not so much to retell the empirical world that seems to inform much of his fiction as it is to mold it in the smithy of his vision. The contours of this vision manifest, at times, in human psychic perversions: the unraveling of the familiar, the disfiguring of language with new vocabulary unrestricted by any longitudinal bearings. In this sense, each successive novel in Farah’s oeuvre, I posit, is a distillation of what Farah and his characters had surmised in the preceding novel. In other words, knowledge in his novels is dialectical and incremental. This argument equally applies to whether a particular novel unveils a narrative of exposure, or of denunciation, or of hooliganism disguised as graffiti. It applies also when the narrative is of a postmortem kind in which the author and his characters attempt to come to terms with the disintegration of the Somali state. Living outside the country at the time of the civil war, Farah was spared the swoon that made, as the lyrics of a popular (and prophetic) song intimated, the collective and symbolic mouth of the poets and storytellers in the country go numb. In his civil war novels, Farah does three concatenated things that give his storytelling strategies their peculiar characteristics, namely, the novels, (1) limn the poetic composition and appraisal of the trauma that has singed the inmost recesses of the Somali (un)conscious; (2) take to task the kind of political formula that is bran-

dished as a way out of an intransigent and stubborn stasis; and (3) manage to put the civil war into conversation with history, politics, culture, rituals, and practices, some of which seem to belong to a different historical time, including the pre-Islamic history of Somalia.

I maintain that the novel that best captures the above-mentioned characteristics is *Secrets*, the novel that follows *Gifts*, set on the cusp of the civil war. *Secrets* furthermore is a profoundly Somali novel. And, without fearing in the least to contradict myself, I would say *Secrets* is also Farah's most diabolical, otherworldly novel, mixing scenes of bestiality with rape, deep-seated family secrets, and a cruel, tortuous history, hitherto never so explicitly and starkly propounded in his work. *Secrets* also brings to the fore Farah's narrative signature: of dislocation, alienation, and escape, molded and shaped by the author's oracular rhetoric and performativity. In *Secrets* coalesce various strands that pull the narrative in different and contradictory directions. In the process, the novel is both profoundly Somali and idiosyncratically Farah-esque, cosmopolitan and worldly. It employs Somali lore and cosmogony more robustly and consistently than any other novel in his oeuvre. In other words, *Secrets* points to a heightened imaginative excursion into the cosmogonic and etiological fables and allegories that elucidate the workings of the natural world and its connections to the lived experiences of the Somali. The novel, I argue, utilizes what I would call the "dialectics of the disemboweled man". It is said that a man who had been stabbed in the stomach came to a council of *xeerbeegti*, men well-versed in customary laws, adjudicating a case under the *geedka xeerka* (the tree of customary law). The man explained how he was attacked and then stabbed by a fellow from the homestead. Immediately, there were shouts for blood. However, an elder in the meeting cautioned against a rush to judgment. It could be, he said, that the other man, the accused, that is, is already dead. The Council acquiesced to the elder's suggestion that the wounded man's assertion could be that of a murderer. The injunction to hold judgment in abeyance points to a paradox: the open wound of the injured man should not elicit instant sympathy, since it is a wound that is transitive, that is, a wound whose authenticity is contingent on an absent entity or body. And so, the concept of deferring judgment until all questions relating to a case are thoroughly and exhaustively presented, heard, and examined, is now enshrined in traditional Somali customary law. Under this law, the litigants and witnesses are given ample time to speak, and the *xeerbeegti* then examine the case from all sides. Their verdict is more often than not final and legally binding.

Secrets takes this concept to heart. The war comes on the heels of what was previously suppressed, starting with the sudden flight of Nonno, Kalamán's grandfather, from another part of the country. If the secrets in *Secrets* point to masks and veils—"secrets threaded into a weftage serving as a veil" (*Secrets* 151)—Nonno's history has its roots in a moment of wrenching that was never laid to rest. Ironically, the refuge that Nonno hopes will foster an ambience of tranquility, an oasis of respite, is itself plagued with congenital problems of its own. Thus, the past and the present of Nonno, the patriarch of Kalamán's family, do not foster a new beginning, a new dawn. What could perhaps help Somalis to break out of the vicious cycle in which their individual and collective and symbolic life is mired, is a willed consciousness that could inaugurate a new way of looking at things. The narrative intimates that Nonno's first flight was not adequately accounted for, nor was it dealt with successfully. Nonno's arrival in the south acknowledges only a temporary relief, and not a long-term cure. His flight was the first symptom of a trauma that sooner or later would suppurate. Farah's technique of suppressing the characters' personal narratives—in essence, keeping them secret—is important. The narration of the ugly and painful story is couched in a national disaster: the nation is broken because of its crooked past. It is also important here to mention that the national story is tied to a gendered story. The dyad is carefully delineated only after the community's purported cohesion is shattered. It is as though no personal story would be possible so long as the individual remained an embodiment of society. Ebla in *From a Crooked Rib* severs her connections to her grandfather's hut, and, by extension, the whole homestead, the minute she verbalizes the disenclosure: "My God, I am out" (*Crooked Rib* 9). The ability to narrate individual stories takes place amidst the broken shards of the smashed carapace that symbolizes the social cohesion that previously held sway over the imagination of the people. In this sense, *Secrets* accommodates the conflicting and contradictory voices in Somali social, political, and historical exegesis. The secret then is in assembling the shards—*jilayo* in Somali—and endowing them with a tongue to narrate their past and present histories. In Kalamán's case, it is also to limn the contours of his and his loved ones' trajectory. Individually, the characters cannot divine a sacred and neutral space able to empower the telling of their diverse and often unsavory perspectives on events that deeply and painfully affect their existence. Thus, the characters are allowed to unshackle their individual tongues to narrate the cacophony of stories implicated in their past. By piecing the fragments together, they let the reader weave a story out of the puzzle, the mystery, of a life lived.

As mentioned before, *Secrets* uses Somali popular culture (astrology and pedagogic fables) to interrogate inherent beliefs and misgivings in Somali culture. In this short reflection, which is not a comprehensive analysis of this complex novel, but intended to pull strands from it for specific exegetic purposes, I will concentrate on *Secrets* as a narrativization of a trauma to the consciousness by means of storytelling. The secrets—as oppressive and repressive tools—give legitimacy to a fear motivated by a need to conceal something. What the characters in the novel endeavor to hide or deny expression to, ultimately resurface and violently come home to roost. Erstwhile secrets flourish through gossip and rumor, and with the return of Sholoongo from abroad, they gain poignancy and force Kalamán's family to confront the swirling rumors head-on. Pressing circumstances compel the characters to come to terms with the past. The disintegration of the social and political structures that purportedly gave them a semblance of cohesion, and the eventual implosion of shared moral codes, allows them to reflect on and in the process unearth an accursed past. The vocabulary, the syntax of their discussion of the past is not suffused with conventional war imagery. Rather, it is the grotesque residue of transgressions on the human and animal body, the bizarre coupling of human and animal species, the macabre insinuations of forbidden love trysts, and the unforgivable violations embodied in the rape of Kalamán's mother, which cast aspersions on his beginnings. The family's decision and willingness to tackle or confront directly the innuendos and unsavory rumor and gossip surrounding his birth find solace in or through abreactions that facilitate what the Somalis refer to as "revelation of truth". The family's incursion into the past also points to both a trauma and a way out of it. If in *A Naked Needle* Farah relies on Koschin's individual consciousness to account for personal and communal shortcomings, in *Secrets* he relies on the collective consciousness to exorcise the elephant in the room of their collective memory. (It is perhaps instructive to note here something I mentioned in my article "The Arab Factor in Somali Culture", that "most of Farah's novels, especially after the 'dictatorship trilogy,' have titles in the plural form: *Maps, Gifts, Secrets, Links, and Knots*. They reveal the author's view of reality as multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and to represent that reality, a writer has to capture the nuances of the ruptures and fragmentations that give any reality its specific or particular bent" (28). Farah's narrative in *Secrets* inverts the gaze, as the characters reflect on their own foibles and weaknesses. Through this technique, Farah demonstrates how the awaited barbarian at the gate is none other than one's neighbor who is already inside. The Somalis say, "*Runi isu ma kaa sheegto*" (Truth never calls attention to its presence). One has to be alert to and expectant of its coming. And truth is like wisdom, which according to the hadith (or narrative about the prophet of Islam), is a stray animal to whose whereabouts one is not privy. To accommodate the airing of their divergent views, the characters in *Secrets* are portrayed through a centrifugal perspective. As war clouds gather on the horizon, the characters become more willing to divulge the deep-seated secrets that had for so long hamstrung them. The sharing of secrets in this sense aims at creating a mechanism for installing a kind of memory for forgetfulness. Their rendition of past events is not intended to resuscitate the past, but rather to transcend a present that has long held them inert and captive.

The urgency of the need and desire to confront the past in order to manumit the human potential to soar is best explained in a fable from Baidoa, Farah's birthplace. The fable deals with the process of the *Run-dillac* (revelation of truth), a mechanism or contraption to which societies resort when they find themselves at a sticking-point. The crisis compels citizens to hold *laab-xaar* sessions in which they seriously rethink their quotidian lives and endeavor to find plausible exit strategies. The fable in question deals with a stasis that hampers a family's endeavor to succeed. It is about a father, mother, son, and their shepherd, whose shenanigans lead to the family's inability to deal with life. Finally, the father suggests that they confront whatever it is that is causing the disconnect and discord tearing them apart. At first, the rest of the family suspects a ruse on the part of a father intent on gaslighting the rest. After some discussion, they all agree to participate in the endeavor. The father speaks first: "You see this dead lizard; it will come to life if we all speak the truth." Sensing that no one will volunteer to speak first, he again volunteers to have the first stab at it: "You see," he says, "I have a secret wish that soon my wife would die, so that I will be able to marry a younger woman. It is a wish I have been entertaining for a long time, and one that hinders my being a good husband and father." The wife lets out a guffaw, and, looking at her husband, frames her desire in a contrary wish: "I have been for some time hoping that you die, so that I could marry a younger man." Here, the son joins the fray by spelling out a simple wish: "I, too, have entertained a wish that you both would die soon, so that I could inherit the wealth." The family's eyes turn toward the shepherd, who has been given a seat at the family gathering. His secret wish, he says, was "that you all die, and I'll be the sole owner of your livestock." At that moment, the lizard comes back to life. And, presumably, the family lives happily ever after: truth does indeed set them free.

In *Secrets*, the family and their interlocutors—Sholoongo, Timir, etc.—agree to unburden themselves of what, for all practical purposes, could be called “secrets in plain sight”, since from the very first chapter of the novel, the reader is provided with innuendos—concerning Kalamán’s birth, for example—that pan out later in the narrative. What the plot of *Secrets* and the Somali fable from Baidoa share is the simple fact that individuals, communities, and nations do not prosper without a real reckoning of their most hidden desires and traumas. In *Secrets*, Farah creates a narrative he knows to be inchoate; yet he hopes that the end of the impending civil war would dovetail with his creative solution to the problem. It is important to bear in mind that both *Secrets* and the fable about a dysfunctional family impart their messages through the “Rashomon technique”. Both demonstrate through multi-voiced narration the urgent need for a new covenant, one that rethinks the foundations upon which stand familial, clan, and national identity. What is needed, they seem to intimate, are introjected and internalized feelings of family, clan and nation, congealed subliminally in the consciousness of the disparate members of all three institutions. Both narratives are philosophical, emotional, and axiomatic depiction of a present and a hoped-for future society.

Farah’s amazing knowledge of Somali culture is seen through the allegorical names of his characters. The names are integral to the characters’ identity, history, idiosyncrasy, and their overall demeanor. *Secrets* is no different. Kalamán and Talaado, his intended, sport names that are laden with signification. Kalamán does not understand why Nonno named him such, to which the grandfather responds, “I had the foresight to call you Kalamán because I knew it would stand on its own, independent of your father’s name or mine” (*Secrets* 5). But that is not a sufficient response to assuage a boy’s inquisitive probing. More than halfway through the novel, we hear speculations about the name’s purported Islamic or pre-Islamic origins. “One man, *purporting to know more than the others*, made what was taken as a *facetious comment*, ‘I think it has something to do with the ABC of the Arabic alphabet’” (163, emphasis added). And therein lies the rub. For indeed the name without the vowels is part of *ABJAD*, a system that “ascribe(s) number values to each letter of the Arabic alphabet” (Mukhtar 22–3). *KLMN* (كلمن) is one of the “rhythmic mnemonic codes” of the *Abjad* (23). Transcribed in Somali, the name becomes Kalamán, which, in addition to its *Abjad* ancestry, becomes a quasi-Somali name, and a non-Arabic name at that. Hence the smart-aleck’s explication of the name’s pre-Islamic origins. *Kalamaan* (with a long vowel) is a compound word—*kala* and *maan*, meaning “of two minds”. Kalamán is the locus, the site of contradictions, of memory, of members of a family coming together, of a community forced to reckon with its sordid past, and, finally, the name represents a distillation from the past of a new chart on whose grid could be constructed a new future. What he does with the narrative that is now at his disposal points to the trajectory of the family and, synecdochically, the nation. Talaado (Tuesday) is his chosen partner. Contrary to apocalyptic endings, *Secrets* ends on an optimistic note. It is no coincidence that his intended is none other than Talaado. This is so, because, *Sanad Talaadaad* (a Tuesday Year) in the indigenous Somali calendar heralds a more propitious year. His refusal to sire Sholoongo’s hoped-for baby seals the fate of the old order. The secrets in this complex novel are to be found in a rigorous analysis of the shards—both in their pre-shardic lives and their post-shardic reconfigurations. Farah reveals through the actions of Kalamán that the corporate kin system as identity—what’s your clan? —is superseded by a more intrinsic identity—who are you? What do you stand for?

Both *Secrets* and the fable spearhead a new way of looking at the world. The narratives refuse to accept an injunction couched in a Somali proverb: *Abeeso haku cunto afka uma roona* (‘May a puffadder strike you’ is not good for the mouth). The fear is predicated on a belief that the enunciation might inspire thought of some sinister action. Breaking with the past is a requisite for averting danger; it will also allow citizens to speak their minds. *Secrets* and the fable create fictional mechanisms in which the slogan is: Speak woman! Speak Man! Speak Children! Speak O elephant of the savannah! Above all, speak the truth. It is only then that Somali society might find a way to deal with its traumatic past: the pastness of the foundational myth of Bucur Baceyr (Bu’ur Ba’ayr), pointing to a time when the *Yibir*, or as Farah calls them, the “griot[s]” (*Secrets* 160–1) reigned supreme in the land, of the Midgaan caste myth, of clan fictions, of Bantu *Jareer* suppression (Eno 177) or *Shiidliana* (from *Shiidle*, a Bantu *Jareer* group in Somalia), as Farah has it in *Secrets* (61), of the myth of Carraweelo, the queen who castrated men (*Secrets* 15). Avoiding apocalyptic doom by looking toward the future, by announcing it before its advent, in the hope that such enunciation will preempt its arrival, is tantamount to creating a “space [that] can only be reached through reliving that disaster and fashioning from it a miraculous weapon against its latter-day perpetrators” (Winks n. p.) *Secrets* and the fable must be read as a kind of *laab-xaar* (making a clean breast of it) as well as a shout of deterrence.

No doubt the connections between *Secrets* and Somali culture problematize the affiliation-filiation dichotomy between authors and their cultures. In Farah's work, the culture does not overwhelm the author's intentions, since all cultures radiate and anticipate some form of contumacy. In Somali culture, proverbs and oral narratives that point to and encourage distinct contrariness abound. A Somali proverb extols the virtues of the differences in human thinking and behavior: *Maan dadaad waa sida midabbo xoolaad* (The human mind is as variegated as the colors of animals). But neither does the writer forfeit knowledge of his culture. The dialectical tussle between Farah and Somali culture is best seen in the dialogic intentions of my title "Nuruddin Farah and Somali Culture". The "and" (*iyo*, in Somali) foregrounds the subtle contradictions in the two parts of the title, where the conjunction is both a copula that establishes a relationship, and a contradistinction that is worthy of a rival. This tussle, as I have argued elsewhere (Ahmed, "Introduction: Understanding the Horn through the Literatures of Its People" 7-8), is also evident in the Somali word for writer, *qoraa*. The etymology of the term *qoraa* is *qor* (*qoris* or *qorid*), write or carve. (Carving is not that far from writing, when we think of the origin of writing itself.) The root word gives two images, viz., that of a scribe, or an amanuensis, and that of a carver, of wood, for example. The first is seen as a mere recorder; the second image is somewhat problematic and needs clarification. The profession of the carver challenges edicts gleaned from scriptural injunctions: the injunction against the "graven image". The demotion of the *qoraa* (author) perhaps reflects or manifests a latent concern on the part of Muslims that authors will aspire to create a parallel world to that of the Qur'an, the Muslim Holy Book. Edward Said analyzes this concept of the author in relation to the *katib*, Arabic for author or writer. If the scriptures are to mediate between the believer and the external world, it is feared that an author, in Said's sense of the term, would advocate for his product a similar status (Said 81). Yet the genre as a non-autochthonous medium is given leeway, and Farah certainly challenges the culture even while simultaneously drawing from it. All in all, Farah is as much a Somali as he is a cosmopolitan writer. *Secrets* is a profoundly Somali novel, as it is a profoundly cosmopolitan, fiendish narrative. And there is no contradiction there.

I would like to end this essay with a poem I have written in honor of Farah.

Anthem of the Living Dead

For Nuruddin Farah

Behind me, the clangor of hammers
 Behind her, the clang of fire alarms
 Behind us, a clank of sickening sounds
 Bereft of hammers, bereft of fire alarms
 Anthem of the ants, anthem of the living dead
 Despondent, decidedly worldly
 Tenebrous yet placid
 Migrant scrolls
 Mandate
 The making of revised roadmaps
 Without too much worrying
 About the misty quality of tambalas
 Now prevalent in the homestead
 This, too, shall pass, as did
 The old puzzle of the hen track that cracked open
 Cracked open with the advent of the sign reader
 Whose bag was full of tamarind seeds
 "You see what you have," he said.
 "Did you ask for what you could have?"

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