

We were some immature imbeciles anyway, no one expected much from us. 'Ignorant' was a fitting word for us/me (it is up to the reader to choose which pronoun to read the sentence with, whichever they see fit). We were sent to school to receive an education, learn to become decent human beings and grow up.

It began with Aleph. The first letter. From the sound of Ā. From Āb and Āh and Āftāb when queuing up. There was no question: if we could properly express the sound of Ā and correctly write it down, we would continue to learn the rest of the letters of the alphabet. It would not involve much difficulty. It worked by practice and practice and practice. The practice of Ā, the practice of Ābādi, the practice of Ābādān, the practice of Āqājān. We would repeat this to the point of reaching the very end. From Aleph to Aleph.

Well, it is the practice assigned by the teacher and in whatever the teacher says there is no doubt a deeper purpose. It cannot be that our continuous practice is merely because the teacher likes it. There is surely a benefit and a justification in this practice. The hat-like line on that Ā is a hat tailored to our heads (1). They put it on our heads because that little schoolboy head, which got shaved bald to attend school, will get cold. They would rather not keep our heads uncovered. We do need a hat, and that hat, whether covering our head or removed, undoubtedly serves a purpose. We are not elementary-school comrades yet, we are only elementary schoolchildren.

We have not yet learned that it was Bābā who gave Āb (2), but we do remember that he gave us our practice notebook. We had not yet practiced Aleph, but we illuminated the notebook with red lines drawn by a pen on each side of each page. It makes no difference to do it with a red or a blue pen. If it is red, it will make us pay more attention. We must not cross those guarding lines.

We give our full attention to the board. To the hand of the teacher and the chalk they hold. On the board, they write the first Ā with the width of the chalk. Slow-paced while making an irritating screeching noise. They put on the hat-like line on it with the same aggravating noise. From the right side, on the first line, from the very top, we start writing down the Alephs, covered with a hat or not, and we go on until the last line. We are not yet sufficiently trained in writing to be able to start with 'his' name. Our beginning lacks his name (3). Our ominous fate was decided here. Aleph marks the beginning. We can even forget about its hat.

We draw the form of Ā from top to bottom and finish it on the lined papers of our notebook. We do not know whether we can make room for its hat or not. But if the teacher so wishes, we can make them a hat. We start the second Ā. We are unaware of the distance we need between Ā to Ā. We look at the work of our fellow

elementary school students. In all of our absent-mindedness, we have been taking the lead over each other. When we start repeating, things get marginally easier. Neither are the Alephs similar in size, nor are their hats much alike, and the distances between them vary. It is an amalgamation that is similar to the calendar of a prisoner, like tally marks on a wall (4). Even with the ignorance of a seven-year-old, one could see how ugly the page was.

The rest of this we all know. How much we wrote. Both with laziness and determination. We covered the pages with silent and silenced Alephs. We painted the pages black with our warps and wefts. How soon the pleasure was lost to us in this practice of repeating. We used our smarts to write larger letters so as to reach the end of the page more quickly. We rightly believed ourselves to be idiots, and extended a higher dose of this attribute to the teacher. We drew wider Alephs and skipped lines. Where were we going and why so fast? (The streets, of course). Who was running after us and who were we running after? Who killed this love, this motivation, and this enthusiasm so early on the way? What did those who wrote the letters so meticulously and carefully achieve? And what did we, who believed the benefit was in not writing, achieve? Which one of us became the pride of that teacher? How small and meaningless is this word, 'pride'.

Which one among us remembers a teacher for their own achievements? Which hitting of the stick made us become better human beings? Which stick and which punishment of those teachers transformed us into decent people? If that teacher had been transformed into one, they would not be carrying a stick. How did standing still facing a corner of the classroom as punishment opened any doors to us? What good did penalties and discipline do for us? As a friend says, those who did not have sticks had learned teaching and interrogation at KGB.

Who were the good ones? I remember the bad ones. My dearest friends. We lost each other in destiny's dust, and never forgot the memories of being one. We did not sell each other to the pain of the stick.

Where did these non-teachers come from? Who taught them to scorn and denigrate? Wherever we looked, as far as we could ever see, there were such non-teachers, and among them there were patches of loath and disdain which they had chained together into alphabets and wanted them to repeat over and over again. It is not on us to cure our teachers to take revenge. It will be enough not to become like them.

Postscript: There were among teachers, no doubt, ones who planted seeds of curiosity and a will to learn and explore in the hearts of the students. One should kiss

their hands. We were unfortunate to have never had the opportunity to have such teachers.

Shabahang Tayyari

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Translated by Ashkan Zahraei

Notes on English Translation:

- (1) Among the different diacritical marks used on the letter Aleph is 'Madda', often referred to in Farsi as a 'hat' one puts on the letter. Moreover, 'putting a hat on someone's head' is a colloquial idiom that denotes deception, scamming or fraud.
- (2) The written form of "bābā āb dād", which translates to "father gave [us] water" is among the first sentences taught at elementary school.
- (3) Traditionally, all writing would begin with the name of God.
- (4) The simplest form of the letter Aleph resembles a straight vertical line.

Shabahang Tayyari (b.1987, Khalkhal, Iran) is a Karaj-based artist & writer. What he offers ends up appearing simultaneously both anxious and hopeful, innocent and corrupt. His artistic strategies are witty, poetic and dark; they employ game tactics and clever manipulation of texts, ideas, images, and meaning, merging together the provocative and the delicate. He has presented solo exhibitions at Balice Hertling Gallery Paris (2021) Delgoshah Gallery Tehran (2016 2017 2022) ZKU Berlin (2018) Raf Projects Berlin (2016) Etemad Gallery Tehran (2014) and Maryam Fasihi Harandi Gallery (2011). His work has recently been included in group shows at Balice Hertling Paris and Giardino Segreto in Milan among others.