

The Ancient Mariner

When she was born her mother was upset she had not given birth to a boy. Her father said, 'I am not upset. I am glad I have a daughter.' He named her Amal, meaning hope, and he took her to many places in his dark green Morris. Every Friday, the day of rest, he drove her to the Tigris, to walk along the banks of the river. As they walked he sang to her from the repertoire of Umm Khultum, the grand diva of Arabic music.

One morning as father and daughter were strolling by the Tigris they came upon a gathering of people dressed in black, weeping. 'What happened to these people?' Amal asked. 'They have lost their son to the river and they are waiting for his body to rise to the surface,' her father replied. 'Bodies can float,' he said.

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‘In the ocean, many times I wanted to die,’ Amal would tell me years later. ‘I was waiting for the angel of death, but I remembered what my father told me and I held onto the body of a woman. And I heard music. I heard Umm Khultum, and the songs my father sang when we walked by the Tigris. Maybe this saved me.’

I first met Amal in July 2002. She appeared distracted, and anguished. Her gaze was directed at me and beyond, to places far distant. In time I came to understand that it took in the streets of Baghdad, the banks of the Tigris, her perilous escapes in the dead of night, black seas beneath black skies, and the moment the boat sank, Friday, October 19 2001. ‘At ten past three in the afternoon,’ she said. ‘I know because the watches stopped at this time.’

It was the first of many times I heard Amal recount her tale, fuelled by a desperate need which increased as she approached her final months: ‘My brother, when I die, you must tell my story, and the story of what happened to the people who died in the ocean. Tell the people about my father, and the songs he sang when we walked along the Tigris.

‘Tell the people I love music, I love colour, I love movies. Tell them I love Baghdad, but when I see it on the television, when I see the bombs falling, when I see what they do to the people, I do not know my city. It has a different colour. I do not know that colour.’

Five years after her death I am fulfilling my promise. Yet each time I sit down to write, anxiety rises for fear I will not do

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the story justice, will not find the words that convey the terror and beauty of Amal's telling, the fire in her eyes, the look of incredulity and wonder she retained even until the last days before she died, four years after I first heard her tell it.

I recall the many places I heard her recount it, in the various dwellings she lived in, across the northern suburbs of the city where the new communities have settled, within walking distance of stores stocked with fashionable hijabs and emporiums boasting Ottoman treasures from Turkey, shops with businesses named after ancient kingdoms—the Phoenician Café, the Euphrates hairstylist—miniature replicas of Baghdad and Beirut, Istanbul and Ankara.

I recall the public gatherings at which I heard Amal speak: the town halls, schools, mosques and churches, at a memorial service in the national capital, and in a packed cathedral in Sydney where she embraced a fellow survivor. Oblivious to the audience, the two women were weeping and swaying, and Amal was saying, 'I am still in the water with the dying!' And the night she stood on stage at the Melbourne Town Hall before an audience of two thousand, her headscarf glowing in the spotlight, her black robes all but lost to the darkness, and her expression of childish wonder as she prefaced her umpteenth telling by saying, 'When I was a child, my dream was to become a singer, an actor. I dreamed that one day I would become famous. Today I received the Oscar!'

I reflect on the talks she delivered within hours of completing yet another course of chemotherapy, the night she pleaded with nurses and doctors to allow her temporary leave from her hospital bed to speak, as arranged, at a memorial meeting. And

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the late night phone calls, Amal ringing because she dreaded the dreams that awaited her when she succumbed to sleep, fearing her nightly return to the ocean: 'My brother, I am not like I was before. I cannot sleep. I am afraid I will see the ocean. I think I lost something in the ocean. I want to go back to the ocean. I want to ask the ocean, what did I lose? Is there something the ocean has to tell me?'

She says that every night she sleeps on the water. She is alone, and she cannot breathe, and there are people shouting, 'Get back, get back, it's dangerous, you are going to drown, you are going to die,' and she puts her hand out to prevent herself from sinking, and wakes covered in perspiration. She welcomes the pre-dawn birdsong, the greying light seeping through the blinds, her return to the routines of the living.

She says there are nights when she gets out of bed, dresses, steps outside, and wanders the streets to prevent her dreams from returning. She tells me of her late afternoon forays, riding the trains to the city. She sits apart, but she is among people, listening to a walkman, to music, always music. Leaving the train at Flinders Street Station and descending the steps to the river to walk its banks as she once walked beside the Tigris.

She cannot stop thinking about the tragedy, cannot erase the images. She says she wants to paint what happened in the ocean, to paint the corpse that saved her, paint the children asleep on the water, paint the mother and newborn baby still attached by the umbilical cord asleep upon the ocean. She has epic vistas in mind: paintings she has seen of the sinking *Titanic*, panoramas in the manner of Delacroix, Picasso's *Guernica*.

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Amal knew of such works because her husband, Abbas, owned a gallery in Baghdad selling imported posters of classical artworks and paintings of Baghdad streets, iconic places. She sketched the scene many times in preparation for a canvas. She was desperate to get it right, to portray the individual people, the men, women and children choking on water, the mayhem and horror, the boat going under. ‘My brother, I lost something in the ocean. I want to find it. Maybe I will find it in a painting.’

Now I too am anxious to get Amal’s story right, to find the words that will capture her eloquence, and convey the story with the clarity and poetic vision that was evident from our very first meeting, in the winter of 2002, within weeks of her arrival in Melbourne—in a neighbourhood centre, a refuge named Becharre House after the birthplace of Khalil Gibran, the peripatetic poet, a fitting setting for our first encounter.

The people of the city are at work, the traffic snarls long over. A quiet has settled on the streets. Young mothers wheel prams and strollers. School children walk hand in hand, setting out on an excursion. The morning radiates the blessed ordinariness that Amal yearned for in her years of turmoil.

She sits by a table in black robes and black hijab. A short, rotund woman, she leans forward, her palms facing upwards, fingers curling, imploring. Her hand gestures are expansive, her amber eyes alight with expectation and gentle fury, and she is telling me:

‘When the boat went down, I saw everything. I was like a camera. I cannot forget anything. I want people to know what happened. Maybe that is why I am alive, to tell the story of the

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boat, to tell about the children and their dreams, and the women and their dreams, to tell of the men and what happened to them in my country. And why the Iraqi people want to escape, why we had to take this boat to save our lives, to save our families. Maybe this is why I did not die in the ocean.

“The motor stopped and some people tried to fix it. Suddenly the water came up and the women screamed, “We are going to die! We are going to die!” They could not believe it. I looked down and saw the water touch my legs, and I did not know where was my son. I looked down at the water, and it came up quickly. It felt like someone was touching my heart and pushing me down in the water.

‘I didn’t shout, I didn’t say anything. The boat went down quickly, quickly. Quickly. I closed my eyes and when I opened them I saw that I was in the ocean, and I saw there were children under the water with me. I cannot swim, and because I cannot swim I did not breathe, and because I did not breathe I did not swallow water, and maybe this is why I am still living. And when I came up to the surface, the doors of hell opened.

‘My brother, you can’t imagine. I saw children drinking the sea, and they were shouting and going under. I heard one woman saying, “God, I am going to die now,” one man crying, “My wife die, my daughter die.” Someone is shouting, “Oh my family, I lose all my family,” and one woman is screaming, “I lose my children, I lose my husband, I do not want to stay alive, I lose everything.” And my friend is saying, “Please, God help me, help my little son, he is going to die, please help my baby.” And another friend is shouting, “I lose all my daughters. God help

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me, I lose all my daughters.”

‘And I said, “Oh God, this is hell. What has happened to us?” I said, “I can’t die. I must fight. I am a mother. I must fight because I have a son in the water, and a son who is waiting for me in Iran, and they are going to lose their future. I must fight because I have a daughter who lives in Jordan with her husband and four children. I must fight because I want to hold my father’s hand and walk with him by the Tigris.”

‘I fought, but I did not shout. I looked at the people. I saw everything. I saw the people’s eyes and they were frightened. I saw one woman floating with her baby. The cord was not broken, and the baby was sleeping on the water. This woman was from Iran and she was seven months pregnant. She told me before we left Sumatra that her husband is in Australia. He has a temporary visa, and she must go in the boat to see him. She is going to follow him, and she feels happy, but when the boat sank I saw her dead body in the water.

‘Another woman, she was sixteen years old, she also was pregnant, and she also gave birth in the ocean. Now she and the baby are sleeping on the water. Maybe they are dreaming. Maybe I am dreaming.

‘And I see the children. I know them from the hotel in Jakarta where we were waiting. The children look fresh. They look like angels. They look like birds, like they are going to fly on the water. One girl, she is eleven years old, and she is lying on the ocean, and her eyes talk to me. They are saying, “What crime have I done?” And I say, “Oh poor, beautiful girl,” and I see her falling asleep on the ocean.

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‘Then one big wave carried me away and I started to swallow water. I thought I was going to die, and another wave pushed me under. I didn’t want to die. I pushed down on the ocean with my hands and I came up out of the water, and when I came up I saw my son, Amjed. He is sixteen years old and he was frightened, but I cannot come to him. He was touching a piece of wood, and when he saw me he started to cry, and he said, “Mum, we are going to die.”

‘We can’t believe it. We think it is a bad dream. He said, “Mum, please come and save me.” He said, “Mum, I can’t swim.” He said, “Mum, please forgive me, maybe I have done something bad to you.” He said, “Please come closer, I want to kiss you.” It is hard for me to talk about this, because he is young, and he is my son, and I am his mother.

‘In that moment I saw a woman coming up from the ocean. She was wearing a life jacket, and she was dead. And I remembered in Baghdad, when I was a little girl, and I was walking with my father by the Tigris, we saw many people sitting by the water, crying and waiting for the body to come up to the surface. “Bodies can float,” my father told me, and in the ocean I remembered what he told me, and I held onto the woman with one hand, and I swam with the other hand to my son, Amjed.

‘He took off her life jacket and he put it on me, and he saved me, he saved my life. He kissed me, and a big wave pushed me away, and he shouted: “Mum, I love you, I am sorry we are going to die,” and he said, “Goodbye Mum. Maybe I will see you in paradise.”

‘A wave took me away from my son and he disappeared, and

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the wave carried me to other people. They were fighting for their lives, and they were shouting, "God help us. God help us." There were children in the water, and they could not say anything. They could not talk, but their eyes looked to me for help. They knew they were going to die. I could not believe what happened to them. I did not shout. I just looked at the people. I was like a camera, and many people shouted, "God help us. God help us." There was bread and biscuits, bottles of water and gasoline, pieces of boat, suitcases and oranges swimming on the water, and the people were crying, "God help us. God help us."

'After one hour, everything became quiet. I thought there was no one alive. I was alone, and there was nothing, only the sky and the water, and the dead woman. I asked, "Why am I still alive?" And I answered, "Because I am going to tell the world what happened to us. I am going to talk about the children and their dreams. I am going to talk about the men and women who wanted to make a new life for their families."

'I talked to the dead woman. I told her, "My sister, please forgive me. Maybe I am hurting you. Maybe it is not nice to touch your body," and I asked her, "What did you lose in the ocean? Did you lose your husband? Did you lose your children?" I asked her, "Did you lose your soul?" She was a young woman and I could not look at her face. I felt shy. I wanted her to forgive me. The rain was falling and the ocean was angry. I talked with the dead woman and I asked her, "My sister, please stay with me. My sister, please forgive me."

'The night was falling, and it was dark, and I could not see my hand. Dead bodies and fish were touching me. I smelled

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gasoline, and I saw a black island spraying water. I swam to the island and I saw it was a whale, not an island. Then I saw lights moving over the water. I thought maybe there is another island, and I started to swim to the lights.

‘One light was touching my hand and touching the dead woman, then the light was touching the tail of a shark, and the shark was swimming around me. I smelled of gasoline. Maybe this is why the shark went away and did not eat the people in the water.

‘I was not alone. There were other people in the ocean. The light was sweeping over them, and they were holding pieces of wood and they were swimming to the lights. And they were crying, “Help, help, please save us!” I came close to the lights and I saw it was not an island. It was a boat. The young men were swimming and they were saying, “Follow us. We are going to the boats. They are going to save us,” and I tried to paddle with my hand, to swim faster.

‘There were three boats, two bigger and one smaller. I thought they were going to save us. The light was shining in my eyes and we were shouting and screaming. “Help. Help. Please, help us!” I heard the voices of the people in the water, and I heard the horn of the ships. I got closer, closer to the boats and I shouted, “Help! Help! Please, help us.” I thought they were coming to save me. One man had a whistle, but no one on the ship wanted to hear him.

‘I tried for two hours, but they did not save us. They did not save anyone. Some people let go of the wood. They felt hopeless. The boats disappeared and I was alone on the ocean. It was cold

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and dark and raining, and there was only sky and water. I looked to the sky. I wanted to see the angel of death. I wanted him to take my soul. I wanted the angel of death to end this, and take me from the ocean to the sky, to lift me from the water.'

Amal breaks off and glances around her, disoriented. The strain of the telling has tired her. She wants to talk for a while of other things, her love for her son Amjed, and for her older son, Ahmed, who is waiting in Iran, and the married daughter, who left Iraq years ago and lives in Jordan. She wants to tell me about her daughter's four children. Her tension eases as she speaks, her voice softens. She is relieved to be away from the ocean.

We meet again weeks later, in the flat she has recently moved to. Amal walks from the lounge room to the kitchen to tend to her cooking, and returns to tell me that in Iraq, every Friday, it was her habit to make *dolma*, the dish she is now serving: chopped tomato and minced lamb stuffed in vine leaves, seasoned with paprika, cumin powder, lemon juice and pepper. She is a restless woman, eager to express her passions. She delivers baklava and cardamom tea, and puts on a CD of Umm Khultum in live performance.

The music evokes *Alf layla wa-layla*, the *One Thousand Nights and One Night*, and tales of her beloved Baghdad, which stands on the Tigris four hundred and fifty kilometres north of where it meets the Euphrates on a plain once known as the Fertile Crescent, a region that archaeologists contend was the cradle of civilisation. And it takes Amal to that once-upon-a-time when life was good and her family content. This is how she recalls it

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decades later in a city far distant, coloured by time and nostalgia, and the gloss of childhood.

She lived in a suburb of the old city in a house with six rooms, a garage and garden. The house was full of banter. Her brothers grew their hair long, inspired by the Beatles, and put on false moustaches in imitation of Charlie Chaplin, whose old movies were in fashion, and became avid fans of *Some Like It Hot*, *Saturday Night Fever*. It was that treasured era when her father took her out on the day of rest to the banks of the Tigris.

‘I walked with my father every Friday,’ Amal tells me, ‘and sometimes the people gave us fresh fish from the river. We walked every Thursday night too. There were many people near the water. There was a big garden and a long beach. You could eat anything. You could sit there with your family. We had a good life. We did not need anything. My father was an engineer and he liked to take us driving in his Morris. We drove to many places. I had eight brothers and one sister, and I had many dreams. Maybe I would become a doctor, an actress, a singer, maybe a lawyer.

‘I finished high school and I studied in a business school. Then I worked in the Central Bank of Iraq, eight good years when I loved my job. Every morning when I signed my name I was alive. I was working. It was a good life for me. My husband, Abbas, had three shops. He was building a good business. He sold pictures of famous artists, singers and film stars. He had Iraqi artists who were making for him paintings of Baghdad, old mosques and palaces, the famous places of my city.

‘But the bad times came and there was war between Iraq and

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Iran. We were fighting against our brothers and sisters. It was not safe. There was no food and no medicine. There was no school. We did not use oil. We did not have meat. We used to say our food is “air food”, like nothing.

‘My brother, I want people to know why we escaped from Iraq, and why we came on the boat. I want people to know why the people took their children, why I took my son and went on the ocean. Why we wanted our freedom.’

Amal is emphatic, her voice urgent. She returns to the rise of Saddam Hussein and the dark times, which she says began with the outbreak of the war against Iran in 1980. ‘Baghdad started to become a dangerous place and my husband had to go into the army. They told him, “You must go to war,” and they told me, “You must leave your job and stay home with your children.”

‘I looked after my daughter, my baby sons and my husband. I looked after my mother and father, and my brothers. We did not need to make war with anybody. Before the war we had everything: we had jobs, we had children. I was upset when I left the bank, because I had to fight to get that job.

‘The war with Iran lasted ten years, then for one year we rested. I told my husband, “Maybe we are lucky. Maybe we can do something. Maybe we can have a new life now.” But Saddam made another war, with Kuwait, and after this war there was no food, no medicine. There was nothing, nothing in my country. I had lost my job, and now I started to lose my family.

‘Saddam killed my brother, Sa’ad, because Sa’ad did not want to fight with Kuwait. My brother said, “The people in Kuwait are my brothers.” After they killed him, the police called

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my father and said, "Come and take your son's body." We had to get his body and clean it for the burial. When we looked at him we saw that his clothes were filled with blood, and they were torn and dirty.

'My father took me away. He did not want me to see this, but one of my brothers stayed and he found a letter in Sa'ad's jacket. It said: "Please take care of my children. I say goodbye to the earth, and say welcome to my God." My mother told me "Come and say goodbye to your brother." I went inside and I saw they had put some white clothes on his body.

'Another brother, Bahir, was killed when Iraq was fighting against America. He was twenty years old. He worked in Basra, in the Iraqi security, and an American bomb killed him. I lost two of my brothers, and I lost my uncle and cousin. It looked like we were losing all the young men in our family, and then, in 1991, the police killed my husband's brother, Saleh. He was fighting in the uprising against Saddam in Karbala, and the military caught him and killed him. We never saw his body.

'In 1995, another brother of my husband disappeared. He wanted to rise up against Saddam, and when they caught him they killed him and the police came looking for my husband. They arrested him and put him in jail and they asked him, "Do you know something about your brother?" They asked him why his brother did this bad thing. They asked them why he didn't like this regime. My husband said he did not know anything about this. He did not know his brother had joined these people.

'They kept Abbas in prison for fifty-five days and Saddam's police tortured him with electricity. They asked many questions

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and after he was sent home, they told him they wanted to talk to him again. My husband told me, "They are going to kill me. We must be ready to escape."

'One day he called me, and he said, "I can't come home." I asked him, "Why can't you come home?" And he said, "I can't tell you now." He told me he was hiding with a friend, and he was calling me from his friend's phone. Saddam's police knew his number. They knew everything. Abbas told me, "Be careful." Everyone was scared. No one knew who was a friend, who was the enemy.

'I slept with my children and at midnight I heard people knocking on the door. We were scared, my children they were scared so much. When we opened the door the police asked me, "Where is your husband?" I told them I don't know. They searched the house. They looked everywhere. The police were angry because they did not find him. They broke furniture, they threw things on the ground, and they were calling me bad names and shouting, and my children were crying.

'And the men told me, "You must come to the police station." I told them, "I don't know where my husband is." I told them, "I argued with him, and he did not return home." They took me to the police station and they asked me more questions. They kept me there until morning.

'The next day, I left home. I took my children and some clothes and we escaped. I was frightened. I went to my family's house and I stayed with them. When we saw police we were afraid. My son Amjed told me, "I have bad dreams about policemen."

'My husband and my son Ahmed had escaped to Iran. They

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paid some smugglers and they escaped over the mountains. Abbas rang me from Iran and told me we must be ready. He told me I must take Amjed and escape. The smuggler came and said, "Don't bring furniture. Don't bring your clothes. Don't bring photos. Don't bring anything." I went outside with Amjed, where the smuggler was waiting, and I said goodbye to my family.

'My mother was very sick. She had a stroke and she could not walk. She needed medicine and she needed special food, but in Baghdad there was no medicine, there was no food. I was very sorry I had to leave her. My mother told me, "Please don't go. Please stay with me." I told her, "I can't. I must look for my children's future. I must do this for them."

'It was dark when I left the house, and I looked at the homes when we were driving. The people inside were sleeping, and I asked, "Will I have a home again?" And I asked, "Will I see my family?" I asked, "Can I save my children's future?"

Limbo, the scriptures say, is a state worse than death. In mediaeval times limbo was defined as a netherworld suspended between hell and redemption, a realm for lost souls in search of a home. Limbo comes from the Latin, *limin*, pertaining to the threshold, or *limbus*, meaning 'hem' or 'border', as of a garment. In literary usage it means a state of restraint, of confinement and exclusion, in its extreme, as equivalent to prison. To be in limbo is to be consigned to live on the margins, in no-man's-land, with the future tantalisingly close yet agonisingly out of reach.

When Amal left her parents' home for the final time and was driven through the streets of Baghdad, she left the city she had

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lived in for fifty years. She took leave of her foundations. All she had known was slipping away beneath the wheels of the car that drove her from the city into limbo, north towards the mountains of Kurdistan, bypassing police checkpoints.

Settlements rose like ghostly apparitions, and dissolved back into darkness. Amal was plagued by the thought that Saddam's shadow would overtake them before they reached their destination, the city of Sulaimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan, within reach of the Iranian border, and north of the ill-fated Halabja, the town that Saddam had bombarded with chemicals one decade earlier, killing many thousands, leaving the dead and dying scattered over the streets and squares, gutters and alleys. The victims lay where they fell, the dying retching and vomiting, the dead bleached of colour, contorted in agony.

For Amal and Amjed, Sulaimaniya was a sanctuary, even though they were confined to one small room, a sharp contrast to the spacious surrounds they had known in Baghdad. The room had no gas, no electricity, no running water, but it was a haven nevertheless in which they could take stock, and gather strength for the onward journey.

Years later, while under anaesthetic in a Melbourne hospital, as doctors operated to remove her cancer, Amal dreamed she was sitting in a cave in the northern Iraqi mountains. It was a beautiful cave and she was dressed in new white clothing. Everything appeared white. She wanted to remain there, to rest, to surrender. Her sons came to her and interrupted her peace.

They said, "You must leave now! Hurry! It's time to go. We

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must run!” Amal resisted. She was reluctant to forsake the calm of the cave. Her sons grabbed hold of her hands and dragged her out. As she was pulled clear the dream ended, and Amal woke up and realised the operation was over.

The dream rekindled Amal’s memory. She tells me of her onward journey from Sulaimaniya when I visit her in hospital a few days later. Her husband and older son had returned from Iran to join them because they did not want Amal and her younger son to undertake the hazardous border crossing without them.

Days later the family joined a convoy of three other families, and left the city at the fall of darkness. They were driven north by smugglers and came to a stop short of the border. They moved on by foot, a party of twelve, climbing towards the higher slopes of the mountains. They were guided onto a narrow path as rain began falling. One smuggler led the way and two brought up the rear. They stumbled over rocks and exposed roots, and forded a river; the water rose to their upper bodies. They scrambled over mountain passes, descended and ascended, leaning on staffs they had cut from branches.

They walked fast to avoid the Iraqi police patrolling the borders. In the near distance could be heard the howling of wolves and the movements of bears and foxes. As the night sky thinned out to the first signs of dawn, the smugglers shouted, “Run! Run!”

‘I told them I cannot run,’ says Amal. ‘They said, “You must run.” I tried hard to run. Soon after we began to run the smugglers said, “You do not have to run. You are in Iran now.” I turned my face to Iraq. I said goodbye to Baghdad, and I said goodbye

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to my family, to my friends. My brother, you can't imagine. In that moment I knew I would never again see my country.'

And years later, after Amal's death, as I write the story, her voice takes hold and works its way back into my consciousness. It is with me as I go about my daily business, and returns with greater force when I resume writing. Something is niggling me, something about her voice, its intonations and cadences, the repetitions, its musicality.

I make my way to Sydney Road, the main thoroughfare in the northern suburbs, to the 'Platinum Desert', a shop that specialises in Arabic music. I ask if they stock Umm Khultum. 'She is still loved many years after her passing,' says Omar, the Lebanese musician who runs the business. 'She is still our best-selling artist. We have CDs that were recorded in the 1940s through to the last ones before her death in the 1970s.'

He sorts through the shelves and returns with a selection. Over four million people attended her funeral in Cairo, he tells me. It was the largest single gathering of people ever recorded in history. She was mourned throughout the Middle East and the people still revere her.

Omar grew up in Beirut listening to Umm Khultum. When he was young he idolised her, and as a musician he still turns to her for inspiration. He chooses a CD and plays it for me. The sense of melodrama is apparent from the opening bars of the prelude. The instrumentation is a synthesis of western and eastern: violins and cellos, double bass, violas, the oud and zither, with tambourine rhythms. The prelude paves the way for Umm Khultum's entrance. She is greeted by a roar from the audience.

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People loved her for her unrestrained emotion and the epic stories she told in her songs, tales of loss and longing and the fortunes of ill-fated lovers. She improvised, paraphrased, dramatised and adapted, while remaining true to the tradition. Each performance was an act of renewal, building from quiet beginnings, increasing in intensity, and culminating, for the performer and audience, in an exalted state known as *tarab*.

In Umm Khultum's voice I hear Amal's. In the rhythms, I discern the tempo of Amal's telling. In its repetitions, I come to understand Amal's recounting as an incantation, which the ancients saw as a way of raising the dead, and of restoring them to the living. In the rising tension, the build-up of emotion, I hear Amal willing her tales to their limits, conveying her truth through gesture and emotion, inducing in her listeners a state of enchantment.

I hear her voice intensifying, ebbing and flowing to and from the state of *tarab*, rising in a succession of waves before receding back to an interlude, while she regained her resolve and nerve before proceeding with the next ascent in the telling.

'My brother, I want the people to know why I left Iraq, and why I wanted to come to Australia. I want to tell them that when I escaped over the mountains and came to Iran, I began to hear about Australia. Many Iraqi people who escaped were talking about Australia. They said there is a way to go there, they said the smugglers can take us. They said that Australia is a democratic country.

'I started to have a dream about Australia. I dreamed my children could go to school there. When they lost their school,

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they were still young and I worried for them. Now we had a new dream and I must fight to go to Australia. I thought that when I arrived in Australia all my problems would be over.

‘But the money was not enough for us, only enough for my husband. Abbas went alone. He flew by plane to Kuala Lumpur, and went by boat to Sumatra, and then he flew to Jakarta. When he arrived in Jakarta he called me and told me he was upset because he had left me alone with our sons. He said we must believe that one day he is going to save us.

‘He called again and told me that he had seen the ocean, and he was very scared. He told me that many people had disappeared in the ocean, and I told him, “Don’t go on the ocean. Come back to Iran.” He said, “I can’t go back now. I must do something for my children.”

‘I talked to him again in December, and then for a long time I didn’t hear from him. I was scared that the boat had sunk and I had lost my husband, but after two months he called again and he said he is in Woomera Detention Centre. He is in the desert, and he does not know what is going to happen to him.

‘I was scared because I lived with my two boys and we had nothing. We lived in a small room. I cooked in that room. Our clothes smelled like that room. We felt hopeless in that room. After eight months my husband called again and he told me that they had given him a visa, a temporary visa. He was not allowed to come back to see us, and he was not allowed to bring us.

‘Amjed and Ahmed were upset. They said, “Mum, you told us you are going to save us.” I phoned my husband and I told him we are going to follow him. He said, “Don’t come, it is dangerous

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in the boat.” He told me, “I am scared. Maybe you will die in the ocean.” He told me, “Wait. One day I will be a citizen, and then you can come to Australia.”

‘I told him I can’t wait. I told him, “I must come even if it is dangerous.” I told him, “Waiting and waiting is like death. We are slowly dying.” He sent me some money and he said, “Use this money to eat, use the money to buy clothes and, if you like, you can rent a nice home and stay there, but don’t come. It is very dangerous.”

‘I didn’t buy clothes with this money. I kept the money, and I bought passports. I wanted to buy tickets, but they were very expensive. I did not have enough for three tickets. I did not know what to do. I am a mother. I could not decide which son to take. My older son Ahmed said to me, “Mum, don’t feel upset, please go with Amjed, but don’t forget me. One day I will follow you.”

‘I promised Ahmed I am going to save him, but I was very upset. When I had my two sons, and when we went out together, they would walk with me one on each side, and they would hold my hands. They were my wings. How could I fly with only one wing?

‘It is very hard for me to remember how I looked at Ahmed’s face and said goodbye to him. He said, “Mum don’t forget me.” He said, “Mum, take care of yourself, and take care of my brother. Mum, I am going to miss you.” When the aeroplane went up, my heart was with my Ahmed. And my younger son Amjed felt sick because he had taken the place of his brother.

‘When we left I had just one bag with some tins of tuna and vegetables, and Amjed laughed. He said, “The bag is empty, we

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have nothing.” At eleven o’clock in the night we arrived in Kuala Lumpur, and there were many smugglers waiting for us at the airport. The smugglers were fighting over us. They said, “Come with me. Come with me.” We chose one and he took us to the hotel. He told us there was only one way to go to Australia. First we must go by boat to Indonesia.

‘We stayed in the hotel for three days, then the smuggler said, “Tomorrow you must take the boat to Sumatra.” He said, “Take your bag and come with me.” We went by taxi and we arrived in a jungle. There was nobody there. There was no food, and nowhere to sleep, no cover. There was only one dirty toilet.

‘The next day a boat came. We travelled in the night. There were many women and children. The boat was no good. It was small and it was crowded, and they put some wood over us to hide us, and we could not move, we could not breathe. We stayed one day in that boat. It was very dangerous. The boat stopped in Sumatra and we still had to find our way to Jakarta. A smuggler told us it is a long way to Jakarta. He said it is better to go by aeroplane, and it is cheap, only eighty dollars.

‘We bought a ticket and flew to Jakarta, where we stayed in a hotel called the Villa Amelia. We were waiting for a boat to Australia. We talked to a smuggler, Abu Quassey. He was from Egypt. He said he had a strong boat. He said it had everything, and we trusted him. He gave us a big hope, a big dream. We gave him money for the boat. We trusted him because his face was nice. He was like a brother.

‘We lived with many Iraqi people, many women and children who had fathers and husbands in Australia. They all had

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a dream of Australia. The children talked to Abu Quassey and they were very happy. He told them, "In Australia they are going to say welcome to you." He said, "They are going to help you." He said, "You are going to have a good home." He said many beautiful things.

"The children played in a tiny garden, and my room looked over this garden. They woke up very early and they started to run and shout. I got out of bed and left my room, and I said, "Why did you wake me up early? Please, I want to sleep, I feel tired."

"They said, "Please auntie, come and tell us a story." They started to ask me about Australia. They asked, "Have you visited Australia before?" And I told them no. And they asked, "What do you think Australia looks like," and I told them, "It looks like paradise."

"One boy, his name is Sajjad, asked me, "Do you think when I arrive in Australia I will have a PlayStation?" I told him, "Yes, you are going to have a PlayStation." He asked me, "Do you think I am going to be happy?" I told him there is no Saddam in Australia. I told him, "You are going to be safe there. You are going to be happy."

"The children had special dreams. One girl, Alia, told me that when she was a little girl, she played with candles on her birthday and her legs were burnt. She told me that in Australia she is going to have plastic surgery and have beautiful legs, and buy beautiful clothes, and she is going to tell her friends, "Look at me, I have a nice body."

"The children drew many pictures of the ocean. They drew pictures of boats, they drew fish and dolphins, and they drew

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flowers. They told me, "I want to go to school. I want to meet my father, because I have not seen him for three years." They thought the boat would bring them happiness.

'When we made a deal with Abu Quassey, he said he would be ready after one week, maybe one month, but we waited for a long time. We waited and waited. One day I was watching TV and I saw many buildings burning in New York, and I asked my friends, "What happened? What's wrong?" And they told me al-Qaeda did this. I was very upset about what happened to the people on September 11, and I was frightened because maybe they would say it was our fault.

'We ate, we breathed, we were alive, but we were not happy. The people's money was gone, and they borrowed money from the mosque, and Abu Quassey was not happy because we did not have enough money. He cared only for the money.'

'On October 16, the smugglers took us by bus from Jakarta to Sumatra Island. We went in five buses. No one could see us. There were black curtains on the windows. They took us to a port and at night they put the buses on a ferry. The ferry took us from Java to Sumatra, and the buses took us to some place like a motel. The smugglers told us we are going to go on the boat tomorrow. They told us we had a big boat and it had everything: a radio, a satellite, life jackets, food and water, and bathrooms. They told us we were very lucky.

'On the last day I did not have any food. Many people tried to make some food. They made bread and soup and they gave me some bread. When I ate this bread I remembered the Iraqi

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people. In 1991 there was no food in Baghdad. I remembered my mother. When she became sick, there was no medicine for her. She died when I was in Iran. And when she died, she had nothing.

‘That night I had a dream. I saw my mother. She told me, “Come, I want to show you something.” She touched my hand and she took me to a room. The whole room was my brother’s coffin, my brother Sa’ad who was killed by Saddam. The room was filled with ice and water. I asked my mother, “Why is there so much ice, so much water?”

‘She did not answer. I asked her, “Please tell me what happened.” I felt sick. She touched my hand and took me to a bed. I lay down on this bed and I asked her, “Mother, what do you want to tell me?” It was dark and she was holding someone’s hand, my son Amjed’s hand, and she pushed him to me. Amjed hugged me, and he fell asleep beside me.

‘Then the smugglers were shouting, “Wake up! Wake up! We are going now. Hurry! We are leaving!” They woke me from the dream. I did not know then what my dream meant. I did not know that my mother’s soul had come to tell me I will be saved, and that my son will be saved. She told me everything. She told me this coffin was not for us. This coffin was for the people travelling with us, and the ice was covering their bodies. I did not understand. I did not know that my mother’s soul had come to tell me we are going to have an accident.

‘The smugglers took us to a beach. It was one o’clock in the morning. When we saw the boat on the water, I couldn’t believe it. None of the people could believe it. The boat was not big

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enough for us. It was maybe twenty metres long. There were four hundred and twenty people for this boat. My brother, you can't imagine.

'Abu Quassey said, "First I will take just the women and children." They took us in a small boat from the beach, twenty-five people at a time. Maybe they were afraid the men would not get onto the boat when they saw it. What could the women say? It was night, it was dark, and nobody could say anything.

'Believe me, when we reached the boat, I knew it would not arrive safely. When I stepped on board, I told myself, "This boat will not arrive anywhere." Somebody said, "Maybe there is another boat waiting for us?" When the men arrived they were angry and shouting, but the smugglers said, "Quickly! Quickly! Maybe the police will come and catch you. We must leave quickly."

'When the boat was moving we were very hungry, but we couldn't eat because we were sick and frightened. The smugglers told many lies. They told us the boat had a radio, but it did not work. They told us we are going to have so much food, but we didn't find anything, just bread and water.

'The people started to shout, "We don't want to go in this boat. We want to go back to Jakarta." After some hours we saw some islands, and a small boat came close to us and some people jumped on the boat. I told my son, "I want to go with these people. I don't want to stay in this boat." My son went to look for our bag, and when he came back it was too late to catch the small boat.

'We were very upset and one man told me, "Don't think

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about this. You don't have any money. If you go back to Jakarta, maybe immigration is going to put you in jail and you are going to lose all hope." I told myself, "This man tells the truth." And I said to myself, "I must pray, I must ask God, please help us. Please help us."

Umm Khultum's CD is playing as I drive about the city. Her voice is rising. It is a supplication, an entreaty. It evokes Amal, her urgent walk as she rushed about on errands. Amal as she stood on the Melbourne Town Hall stage, dwarfed by the ornate walls, the tiered balconies and the massive organ, which all vanished and gave way to the ocean, as Amal commenced yet another telling. And it evokes encounters I had all but forgotten, yielding unexpected details.

On the morning of the fourth anniversary of the sinking, I met Amal at Melbourne airport to catch a flight to Canberra for a memorial service. The service was to be attended by survivors. 'My brother, I am tired. I could not sleep all night. I could not stop thinking, where were we four years ago, at this time? Where were we in the middle of the night, fifteen hours before the sinking?

'I got out of bed, made a cup of tea, closed my eyes, and I remembered. It was raining, and the ocean was angry. Our boat went up and down, up and down into the water. Everyone was screaming, everyone was shouting, "My God, please help us!" We were sick. We couldn't eat. We couldn't drink water.

'After midnight, the wind became more angry. The boat went up and down, and when it came down I thought we were

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going to go under. It was cold and everyone was wet, and the children were crying. Everyone was frightened, and they were all praying, "God help us. The ocean is angry. God save us." But the boat was climbing higher and higher, and falling down, down, down into the ocean, and the people were shouting, "We are going to die! We are going to die!"

'I saw five people, a man and four women. They were standing together and writing something on a piece of paper. The boat was climbing up and falling down, and I went over to them. I was holding onto people and stumbling, but I wanted to know what they were doing, and when I reached them they told me, "We are writing a letter to the angel of the ocean," and they showed me what they were writing: "Angel of the ocean, please help us. Angel of the ocean, please look after our children. Angel of the ocean, do not be angry. Angel of the ocean, do not leave us. Angel of the ocean, please save us." And they folded up the paper and threw it into the water.

'In the morning it was quiet and the captain came down to tell us we have been at sea for thirty hours, and in six hours we are going to be on Christmas Island. The ocean was resting and everyone was happy. The children started to shout, "Look at the dolphins." The dolphins were jumping around us, and the children were jumping with them, but something in my soul told me we are not going to arrive on Christmas Island.

'After four hours, the engine broke down and the crewmen tried to fix it. One man told me they tried to close a hole with a pair of jeans, with clothing. Suddenly a woman shouted, "The water is coming. We are going to sink, we are going to die!" I

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couldn't believe it. I looked down and saw the water coming into the boat, coming over our feet, touching our legs, coming quickly.

'I wanted to say goodbye to my son. I wanted to hug him, but the boat went down quickly, as if someone had taken me and pulled me into the ocean. I went down into the water. And when I came up, the gates of hell opened.'

Umm Khultum holds me spellbound. She retains one note and extends it to the very limits. The audience is exalted, their response visceral. In her voice I hear Amal's insistence, and in the song's repetitions, the phrases that Amal would return to in each telling: 'My brother, you can't imagine. When the boat went down I was like a camera. I saw everything. It was ten past three in the afternoon. I know because the watches stopped at that time. My son said, "Forgive me, mother. Maybe I will see you in paradise." The children. They looked fresh. They looked like birds. They looked like they are going to fly in the water. My brother, you can't imagine.'

I cannot fathom how Amal resurfaced, and how for years she had willed herself with each telling to return through the gates of hell, back to those children sleeping on the water. And as I drive, I reflect upon the rest of the story, the events that ensued after the three boats abandoned her, on the night of October 19, until her rescue, and her arrival in Australia. And the final irony: Amal's death from cancer four and a half years after she was hauled from the ocean.

When the sun rose on the morning of October 20 2001,

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Amal still clung to the body of the dead woman. ‘I was going up and down, up and down, and I was fighting with the water. I was tired. I was hungry. I was thirsty. I thought, maybe my son died. I thought no one is going to save me. All the people had disappeared and there was no one. Just sky and water, birds and dolphins, and I said, “Forgive me, but I want to die.”

‘I wanted to go quickly. I tried to swallow water, but I couldn’t. My brother, believe me, I wanted to go quickly, and I tried to swallow water. I tried to kill myself, but I couldn’t. I looked up and saw birds, and it seemed like they were talking to me. I asked myself, “Why are these birds shouting? What do these birds want to tell me?”

‘Then I heard the noise of a motor, and I heard voices. I could not believe what I was hearing. I thought, maybe I am dreaming. I turned around, and I saw a boat, and I thought maybe I am going crazy. Then I thought, maybe this is what the birds were shouting. Maybe this is what the birds were telling me. Maybe they showed the Indonesian fishermen my body. Maybe the birds saved me.

‘A man came down into the water to help me, and I said, “Please, please, can you take the woman I am holding?” And he said, “No, we did not come to save dead bodies.” I let go of the woman and I said to her, “My sister, thank you, you saved my life. You stayed with me all night.” I said, “My sister, please forgive me. Maybe I will see you in paradise.”

‘When they lifted me into the boat I saw many people; but I did not see my son, and I started shouting, “My poor son, I have lost you.” Someone told me, “I saw your son in the water. He was

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holding a piece of wood with other people.” I ran to the captain and I begged him, “Please look for my son.” He said, “I have too many people.” He said, “There are no more people in the water. I must go back to Jakarta.”

‘I shouted, “You must look for my son.” I shouted, “Please. I am a mother, you must help me.” I shouted, “Please, you must save my son.” I shouted and shouted because I am a mother. I shouted until the captain said, “Okay. Okay! We are going back. We are going to search! For just one hour.”

‘Soon after, I saw my son on a big wave. I could not believe it. He was holding onto a piece of wood. It looked like he came back to me from the sky. His body had blood all over it because the wood had nails, but the wood saved him. I hugged him, and I said, “Oh my son, welcome back to life again. My son, I love you so much.”

‘He slept in my arms like a small bird, and I fell asleep and dreamed of a shark swimming next to me, and when I woke up, I saw it was not a shark, but my son lying against me. I looked around the boat, at the people. They were staring at the sky, or at the ocean. Some were asleep, many were weeping. And I asked, “What happened to them? What happened to us?”

‘I fell asleep again and in my dream I saw the children. They were pulling my hair, and they were asking me, “What happened to us? What happened to us? Tell the truth. Tell the truth. What happened to us?” And they began flying.

‘I woke up from my dream and I saw a girl sitting near me. Her name was Zainab, she was twelve years old, and she was shaking and crying, and I asked her, “Why are you crying?” and

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she said, "I lost all my family. We were six brothers and sisters, a father and mother. I lost all my family." And I told her, "I am your mother now. I am your family. You are going to stay with me. I will look after you."

'After two days we arrived in Jakarta, and Indonesian immigration officials came and took us to prison, but when we told them our story, they called the United Nations and UN people came and took care of us. Then the Iraqi ambassador came and said, "Salaam, how are you," and he told us that Saddam said we must go back to our country. He said, "There is an aeroplane waiting for you."

'We were very scared. We were praying and crying. A man from the Pakistan embassy was very angry, and he said to the Iraqi ambassador, "Why do you treat people like this? Leave them alone. They have lost their families. They are in shock. They don't want to go back with you."

'We were taken to a hotel, and people came from all over the world to hear our story. One woman told them that dolphins saved her. The dolphins touched her, and pushed her to the boat. She said it was a miracle.

'Zainab stayed with me in the same room. She had an uncle in Sydney. I told her, "You must go to Australia. You must join your uncle. You must study English. You must become something. Your family was fighting for your future. They escaped from Iraq to save you. Don't lose your future."

'When she received a visa for Australia, she said, "Mother, I want to give you a present," and she gave me her watch. The watch had not moved from ten past three. It had not moved

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since the boat went down in the water, and Zainab said, "Mother, when you look at this watch you will remember me."

'The United Nations said the Australian government was going to give me a visa because my husband was in Melbourne. We waited for seven months, and we became very frightened. We thought they would not take us. In June they told us we can go and we were very happy.

'I cut some flowers and I took them with me. I wanted to bring flowers to my new country. When I arrived with Amjed in Melbourne airport, I saw a man waiting for us. He worked for immigration, and he told me the Australian government had given me a five-year temporary visa. He told me that with this visa I could not leave the country. He told me that maybe after five years I would be sent back to Iraq.

'I could not move. I could not visit my daughter. I could not see my father. I could not bring my older son Ahmed. It was like they put me in jail for five years. I could not believe it.

'The man from immigration told me, "There are some people waiting for you from television and the newspapers. Don't open your mouth. Don't say anything. Don't make any problems." He said, "Come with me and I will take you to your husband. He is waiting."

'When I saw my husband I felt very strange. I had not seen him for a long time. When I saw him I thought he had changed. He looked like a stranger. Maybe something was changed in me. Maybe something changed in the ocean. I told him, "Maybe I am not your wife. Maybe your wife is still in the water. Maybe your wife did not arrive in Australia. Maybe I am a ghost."

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'He could not understand what had happened to me. Only the people who were in the water could understand me. I tried to be busy. I started learning English. I started to know the city. I used the train. I used the tram. I used the bus. I started to learn the computer. But when the day was finished I missed my family. I could not see my daughter because if I left Australia I would lose my visa. I could not go back, and I could not go to the future, and at night I could not forget the people in the water.

'Sometimes I think the people who drowned were lucky. Maybe the victims are the ones who are still alive, because they cannot forget what happened. We escaped from Saddam's regime, but sometimes I think his hand is still following us, still touching us.

'After one year in Australia I started to feel sick, and the doctors told me I had breast cancer. I thought I was going to lose my life but they told me they are going to save me. Everything changed in my life. I had chemotherapy. I was losing my hair. I was losing myself.

'There was a big room in the hospital for chemotherapy, where they gave the people drugs. The chemotherapy made my body dry. On the day I had my operation I was very scared. On the ocean I lost my soul, and in Melbourne I was losing my body.'

Umm Khultum is singing, building to a crescendo, and the inner city lights can be seen in the distance. I drive towards them and think of Amal riding the train to the city in the evening, in the company of strangers, staving off sleep and the return of her

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dreaded dreaming, and the fear she would never again see her absent children.

Amal was one of forty-five survivors of the sinking and, in the months after their rescue, thirty-eight were granted visas: to Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, Canada and New Zealand. Seven survivors were allocated to Australia, allowing them to reunite with relatives who had preceded them.

Those who were assigned elsewhere received permanent visas immediately, in recognition of their trauma and the horror that had afflicted them. The seven survivors assigned to Australia received temporary visas, a predicament that compounded their trauma and cast them back into limbo. Then—three years later—a simple act of acceptance.

Amal was in hospital when she was notified. A nurse handed her the phone. At first she could not understand what the caller was saying. She was disoriented from the illness and its treatment. ‘Immigration told me they changed my visa, and I asked them, “What do you mean?” They told me, “We have given you a permanent visa!” I shouted, “A permanent visa, I can’t believe it.” I cried. I shouted. “Oh God, I am going to see my son, I am going to see my father. I am going to see my daughter. I am going to see my grandchildren. God bless you.”

‘I was shouting and the nurses were running. They thought something was wrong. I told them what had happened, and they were happy. It was like a miracle. I told them I have my permanent visa and I can see my family. I have my permanent visa and I can fight to bring my son here, I can fight to bring my daughter

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and her children. My God, I have my visa. I am a free woman in a free country.'

Within months Amal was on a flight to the Middle East. She returned to Melbourne three months later in a wheelchair. The following day she was back in hospital. Days later, as I walked from the car I felt that air of unreality, of time winding down, that I often feel when approaching an ill friend in hospital. I was entering a zone in which time seems suspended, a variant of limbo.

Amal was seated on her bed when I entered. I was surprised by a change in her appearance. She was wearing brightly coloured robes embroidered with images of flowers. Her headscarf was removed and her hair was flowing.

It was the first time I had seen her face uncovered. Her tresses of black hair had strength and lustre despite the ravages of her illness. She seemed unburdened, careless almost. She had something of the youthful spirit and playfulness of the seven-year-old who walked with her father on the banks of the Tigris.

Fearing I had transgressed by seeing her with her hair uncovered, I turned to leave. 'My brother, it doesn't matter,' she said. 'It is not important. People are more important than this. I like the people here. I am sure many people will be at my funeral. I am not afraid. After I die, the birds will keep singing.'

Amal reached for her handbag and took out some photos taken on her recent journey. 'My brother, you can't imagine,' she said, holding the photos, 'when I was coming back to Australia, I read a sign at the airport, "Dubai to Melbourne", and I was very

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happy. I felt like I was coming home. In the jet I heard a woman talking with an Australian accent. I wanted to hug this woman. I told her I also have a home in your country. I also have a country. I have a family waiting for me.

‘When I arrived in Melbourne I was very sick. I went to hospital and the doctor told me that the cancer had spread to my bones and my liver. I told him, “Please, I don’t want chemotherapy. What are you going to save? The cancer is all through my body. I don’t think you can help me. I don’t feel hopeless or sad, but this is the truth. I am going to die and I must be ready.”’

She hands me the photos of her daughter Manal, taken at the airport on the day of her arrival in Oman, and photos of her grandchildren. Manal is married to a Palestinian. They first met in Jordan and in recent months had moved to Oman where he had been offered a job as a sports journalist. They have four children.

‘I want to tell you a story about my grandson Yanal. He is eight. When I saw him, he looked exactly like my son, Amjed. He hugged me and he ran away. I did not see him for a long time. The next day a journalist came and I told her the story of the boat. I told her everything and they put the story in an Arabic magazine, *El Magili*.’

Amal rummages through the drawer next to the bed, and takes out a printed page and unfolds it. The article is dated November 15 2005. The script is in Arabic, and there is a photo of Amal. ‘My daughter’s neighbours, six women, came to see me, and they brought me food and clothing, they brought me presents, and they said, “When we read your story we wanted to

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give you something. We wanted to cry with you. You are a brave woman.”

‘When we were talking, Yanal came to me. He was very upset, and he was angry. He told me that he had an argument with a boy who did not believe the story about his grandmother. He did not believe I was the woman who survived in the water. The boy said to Yanal, “You are a liar.”

‘I told Yanal, “Call your friend and bring him inside.” He brought him to me. He was a little boy and he was wearing glasses. Yanal said to him, “This is Amal, my grandmother. She saved her life. The boat sank. She was in the water, and she saved her life. I am not a liar.”

‘I told the boy about the dead woman who saved me. I told him about the children in the water. I told him about the whales and the dolphins. I told him about the shark who swam so close I almost touched him. I told him that I saw my son returning on a wave from the sky back to the ocean. As I talked his eyes were growing wider. He said, “I am sorry. I will tell all my friends about the woman who saved her life in the water.”

‘After one month, I left my daughter and flew to Iran to see Ahmed. It was too dangerous to meet my family in Baghdad. We planned to meet in Ahmed’s flat in Tehran. I waited two weeks for my family. I was scared they would not get out of Iraq, that they would not give them a visa. For eight years I had not seen them. Then my father arrived with three of my brothers. One of them came with his wife and daughter, and my father brought my sister and her nine-year-old son Ali.

‘Ali stared at the running water in the bathroom. He could

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not believe there was running water. He could not believe there was electricity. He could not believe that when we were sleeping there were no bombs, no terror. He said, "We are in paradise."

'My family's skin colour was strange. Yellow. In Baghdad they did not have enough good food. On the first day they walked like zombies and they did not know they were like this. My father was very sick. He looked very old. He walked very slowly with a stick. I did not want to tell him I was sick. I did not want him to worry.

'I went with them to the beach. I tried to make myself look healthy. My father told me, "I can't believe you fought with the ocean." I told him, "Father, don't worry, the ocean is soft." My sister and brother went to play in the sea, and they looked back at me and said, "We are going to kill the ocean. We are going to ask the ocean, why did you try to kill our sister?" They wanted to make me happy.

'They said, "Baghdad is dangerous. It does not matter which people are in the government, they are all thieves. They want to steal the oil. The only ones who do not have oil are the people. We wait for oil in queues for hours. We open a gas cylinder for cooking and we are afraid we will never have another cylinder. We cut down trees for heating and now there are no more trees in our suburb. We go to the stream for water. It takes us three hours to go there and return. We see dead dogs in the water."

'My brother's little girl is eleven, and she said to me, "Auntie, I want to go with you. I want to go to school. I want to be something. Please take me with you." She was afraid. One of her friends was kidnapped. It was dangerous in Baghdad.

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‘On the last day we went to the mountains near Tehran. The children played in the snow. On the bus Ali was very sad. He did not want to go back to Baghdad. When he came to Iran he was free. He could talk, he could shout, he could go outside. He was not worried that someone might kill him or kidnap him.’

Amal pauses. She folds up the newspaper and returns it with the photos to her handbag. ‘My brother, there is something I must tell you. Something changed in me in Oman, in Tehran. I fought with the ocean. I fought with people smugglers. I fought with immigration to give me a permanent visa. And I was right. Everyone in this hospital is an angel. Australian people have been kind. They help. They help people. I want to tell you something: I started to love Australia.’

‘Before I went to Oman I told my husband and my son, “When I die, bury me in Iraq.” I told them, “I don’t want you to bury my body here. If I die please send my body to Baghdad, to my family. I want to sleep near my mother and my two dead brothers. Yesterday I told my husband and my son, “Bury me in Australia.”

‘I said, “You must forget everything, because there is no Iraq. It is over.” I want my children to stay here. I want them to bury me here. They are going to have something here. They are going to put a big stone over me, in this earth, in this safe country.

‘When I was in Dubai I heard Australian people talking. I was happy. I wanted to hug them. My brother, when they gave me a five-year protection visa they killed me. And when they gave me a permanent visa, I came back to the living.

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I saw Amal for the final time two months later in the last house she rented, the house in which she hoped to receive her older son Ahmed, whose arrival was imminent. She lay in bed, defiant, two days before her passing, refusing to eat, refusing to be shifted to a palliative care unit. She opened her eyes when she heard me entering the bedroom. She was making an effort, willing herself to be lucid.

‘My brother, it is good to see you,’ she said, lifting her head from the pillow. She talked of her hopes for her son Ahmed who, she had learned just days earlier, had finally obtained a visa, and would soon be flying from Tehran to Melbourne. She was holding on for the day of his arrival, to be at the airport to welcome him.

She hoped to bring her daughter and grandchildren, and other members of her family to Australia. She knew she was dying, but she talked of the future, talked until she lapsed into a sleep that I hoped would be dreamless.

The following day, Amal had consented, after the entreaties of her family and doctor, to be shifted to a hospice. From her room on the last evening she watched the sun set over the city. The dome of the exhibition buildings reminded her of the domes of Baghdad. Amal Basry died on March 18 2006, a warm Saturday afternoon in autumn.

Days later we gathered in the forecourt of the Fawkner Mosque. As we waited for the arrival of the hearse I talked to Faris Khadem, another survivor of the sinking. He said that when the three boats disappeared, he gave up hope. He no longer cared whether he lived or died. He had lost his wife Leyla and his seven-year-old

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daughter, Zahra. He saw them disappear from his outstretched arms into the ocean.

The thought of seeing his son, who was already in Australia, had kept him afloat. But his desire to survive was crushed when the three boats that had appeared in the night vanished.

He had turned onto his back, placed his hands behind his head, let the life jacket support him, and settled back on the surface of the water as if it were a mattress. He no longer cared if he was dead or living. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, and when he woke, the sun was rising.

He heard the hum of a motor and saw a fishing boat approaching. The crew dragged him from the water. He was the first to be rescued. He saw other survivors clinging to debris, their strength ebbing, and he helped drag them one by one from the ocean.

Late morning they sighted Amal clinging to the bloated corpse. The crew failed in their first attempt to lift her on board the vessel. She was too heavy. They lowered a tyre to retrieve her and Faris went down to help her. They were hauled back on board together.

Faris heard her frantically asking her fellow survivors about her son, Amjed. He saw her pleading with the captain. She would not stop until the captain agreed to search for that extra hour. He witnessed her son's rescue and the reunion between mother and son, an embrace that just one hour earlier had seemed impossible.

In Jakarta, Amal became the mother of the bereaved survivors. She cared for her son. She cared for the girl Zainab. She cared for them all. In the months after the rescue, she visited

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Faris every day to see if he was well, and to give him comfort in his grief. She visited everyone. She was concerned for their health, for their despair and their hopelessness. She moved about in her black hijab with that urgent expression I would come to know so well, but her face softened instantly whenever she talked to the children.

It was in those first weeks after the sinking that she began to tell her story. To officials, to journalists, to diplomats, to anyone who would listen. Overnight she became the teller of the story, the one who sought to make sense out of the calamity.

Faris's recollections brought to mind stories of people whose hair had turned white overnight after extreme tragedy. Amal's hair retained its colour, but talking with Faris I came to understand that in clinging for over twenty hours to the corpse in the ocean, Amal had aged many years. Overnight she had become the Ancient Mariner.

The hearse entered the forecourt mid-morning. The coffin was lifted onto the shoulders of the pallbearers and the crowd followed it into the mosque, chanting. They placed the coffin on the carpeted floor and performed the ritual prayers.

Behind the partition wall, hidden from view, women were weeping. A mudlark flew in through the open door and over the mourners. It paused on the chandelier and darted past a banner embroidered with the Quaaba of Mecca.

The coffin was driven to the cemetery, to the Islamic quarter. The children ran about in the sun, the women squatted by the coffin, Korans in hand, chanting, while the men stood around

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the grave attending to the burial. Amal's body, clothed in a white shroud, was lifted from the coffin and lowered into the ground to Amjed, who had climbed down to receive it. His task was to arrange the body in accordance with tradition: right side resting on the earth, head facing Mecca. The men lowered a mixture of earth and water to Amjed to fix the body in the correct position.

Amal was buried to the chatter of birds, the laughter of children, and the murmur of prayers and conversation. This was how she would have wished it.

Ten days later, Amal's older son, Ahmed, arrived in Melbourne. The brothers had rarely been apart until they were separated in Iran, Amjed told me as we waited for Ahmed to clear customs. They had not spent any time away from Amal until she was forced to choose who would go with her on that ill-fated journey.

In the five years since, Amjed had been burdened by guilt at being the one chosen. There were times he wished he had not survived the sinking. When Ahmed stepped through the arrivals gate, the brothers embraced and wept.

Now, almost five years since Ahmed's arrival, I am driving into the centre of the city. I am nearing the completion of my promise. I cast my thoughts back to a phone call that I received one night from Amal.

'My brother, I cannot sleep. I must tell you something. When I was a girl I asked my father, "Can I be a singer?" And he told me, "This is not a good idea. It is a hard life. It is not a good life for a woman." He loved Umm Khultum. He loved music.

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He sang to me when we walked by the Tigris, but he told me it was not good for me to be a singer. Sometimes I think if I had become a singer my life would have been better.'

I now see that, in ways she would never have wished for or imagined, Amal was the voice of those who survived and those who perished in the ocean. Her voice resonated with the power of Umm Khultum's. Like her idol, she possessed a charisma that drew people to her. She was a consummate performer, recounting her tales with an incessant beat, a mesmerising rhythm. From quiet but intense beginnings, she built towards a state of *tarab*, of union between teller and listener.

I park the car in the inner city and set out, as Amal had done, from Flinders Street Station. The footpaths on Princes Bridge are crowded with peak-hour commuters. I descend the stone steps to the river. On this warm evening the riverside bar is overflowing with after-work drinkers, but I am focused on the banks opposite, at the palm trees rising from the lawns that slope down to the water.

I walk from the bridge on the concrete walkway, and step onto the sandy path beneath the Moreton Bay figs that line this side of the riverbank. I am beyond the busyness, but still in touch with the city.

I sit on the bench beneath the figs, where Amal sat, and look at the palms across the water, diagonally opposite. The sight of the palms from this bench, Amal once told me, was the goal of her night wanderings. It returned her to Baghdad, to the banks of the Tigris.

I think of her on the morning she came upon the gathering

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of weeping people and learned that a person can float long after they have ceased living. I see the fire in her eyes. She is haunted by what she had endured on the ocean.

And I hear her voice: 'My brother, I cannot sleep. I just woke up from a dream. In the dream I am walking towards a door. It is the door to paradise. I open the door, and inside it is light. Everything is white, and I see the people who drowned, the three hundred and fifty-three men, women and children. They are together, they are laughing. They are happy and they are calling to me. "Come join us. Come join us."

'I want to go with them. I start to walk towards them, but I stop. I cannot leave the story of the children who are lying on the ocean, and of the women and their sons and daughters. I cannot forget what the ocean did to them. I must wake up. I must tell everyone what happened. My brother, this is what my life is for. To tell what happened.'