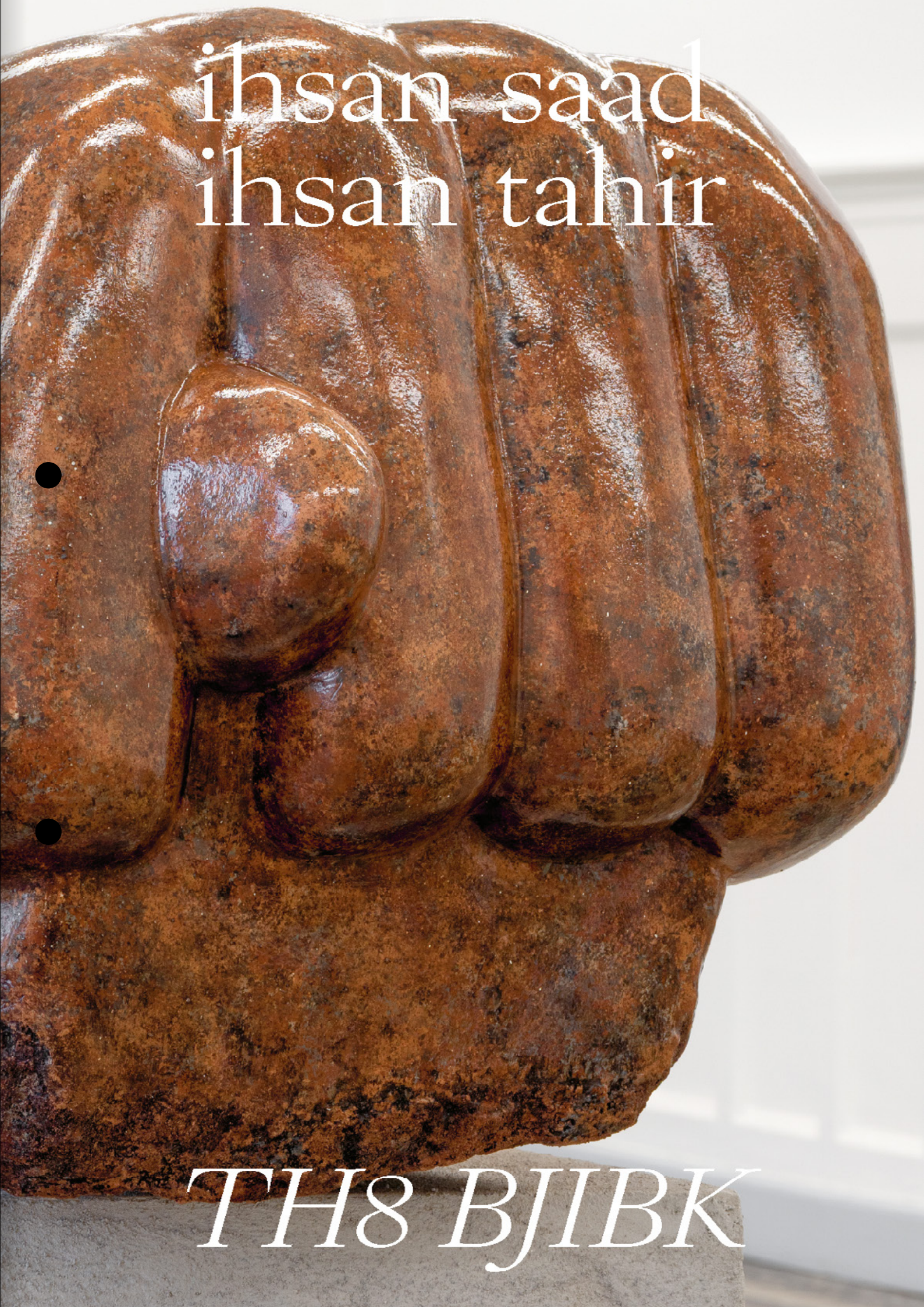




ihsan saad
ihsan tahir

TH8 BJIBK



O-OVERGADEN
O O O O O

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Overgaden nedén Vådet 17, 1414 København K,
overgaden.org

INTRODUCTION

It is a great pleasure to introduce this publication accompanying ihsan saad ihsan tahir's solo exhibition *TH8 BJIBK* at O—Overgaden. Throughout recent years, O—Overgaden has, with the generous support of the Augustinus Foundation, published a monographic series in conjunction with our large-scale solo exhibitions, aiming to expand the conversations around each show and produce new, offspring material.

In this instance, writer and poet Deniz Kiy, curator and writer Mariam Elnozahy, and rapper Sivas have each contributed texts that together comprise a richly varied whole. A warm and heartfelt thank you to all contributors. I further wish to thank the whole team at O—Overgaden for their efforts in realizing the exhibition, as well as the graphic design team at fanfare for their always dedicated work, and of course not least the artist, ihsan, for generously sharing conceptualizations and co-thinking with all of us, through both the exhibition and this publication.

Hands, gestures, poses. ihsan saad ihsan tahir's exhibition at O—Overgaden reflects how depictions of Arab bodies have been continuously feared and desired, appropriated and exploited—not unlike artworks or artefacts—by quoting ancient sculpting formats while reiterating these in contemporary industrial materials.

The exhibition title *TH8 BJIBK* is Arabizi for the expression “trust your pockets.” Arabizi is an informal writing system invented in response to the lack of Arabic characters on early mobile phones, and it remains widely used in popular media, for instance in song titles. It is also dialect-specific, with no official governing rules; a living language of street culture. The title thus points to how Arab culture can carve out a space in a Western-dominated world—and what rules, translations, and signs this produces. “Trust your pockets,” beyond literally meaning “trust what you have in your pockets,” can mean “trust your own currency” or “trust your own value.” In this way, it opens up a discussion about valuation and ownership:

Which bodies and postures are depicted on the friezes of the past as well as the present?

A centerpiece at O—Overgaden is a styrofoam and jesmonite reconstruction of the colossal granite arm of Pharaoh Amenhotep III with clenched fist, expropriated to the British Museum. To this tahir adds a *manus fica*, a historic gesture where the thumb is pushed between index and middle finger. The hand sign carries multiple meanings: Historically it was used in the Mediterranean region to distract and ward off the evil eye and other curses; in present-day Denmark it is used among families with children to signal “I’ve stolen your nose.” Meanwhile in contemporary street culture it is employed as an explicit insult; and here in the work, it signals protest or revolt—a resistance to the colonial theft the sculpture embodies, one that points directly to the current discussion around the national belonging of historical artworks and artefacts, and calls for repatriation.

Alongside this sculpture, a series of reliefs employs the artist's roots in a dual fashion. On the one hand the panels formally reference the Assyrian friezes of Northern Iraq. On the other hand, their imagery is a combination of tahir's private photo archive—a group of his male family members, a selfie, a caress between his father and brother—and found images of Arab men, including, among other scenes, a gangster-like character posing in front of a car as well as a large-scale frieze in which it is unclear if the figures are celebrating or fighting.

Resonating with the Pharaoh's clenched fist, hands are a dominant motif: gesturing, praying, holding a phone, caressing. Carved in polyurethane foam with a surface imitating sandstone, the reliefs' soft, almost vanishing contours ask for an intimate, close-up viewing, that helps to destabilize the stereotypical framing of the Arab male body as combative or aggressive, while pointing to a different, soft masculinity of mutuality and care.

Rhea Dall,
Director and Chief Curator at O—Overgaden,
March 2026

THE GOD ABANDONS ANTONY

Mariam Elnozahy

To ihsan: I am writing from Texas to Alexandria, which is kind of like writing from Copenhagen to Baghdad, or Liverpool to Jerusalem, or Calgary to Carthage—which is to say that when you speak from West to East, you are speaking across millennia and through mythology, and you are speaking the language of the heart. This language is music echoed through gesticulation, intelligible only to those who understand what it is to come from fallen civilizations. They are the ones who know how to rebuild the world with their hands.

Many who have dedicated their lives to the production of culture have encountered—perhaps at a pivotal moment, perhaps in passing—the art and literature of Western antiquity, by way of ancient Rome or Greece. How is it that the *classical trace*, those tropes and motifs that remain after the passing of Greco-Roman civilization, remain so present in our museums, books, and curricula after thousands of years? This civilization, for many, is considered to be the bedrock of the “West” as it stands today. It serves as the foundation of the Western nation-state—from the Peace of Westphalia to the Weimar Republic—in its ideals of order, ethics, rationality, law, cities, citizenry, and representative democracy. Ontologically, it is almost always contrasted with the irrational, barbaric, or primitive East, a juxtapositional framing that enabled the colonial projects of Western Europe to justify their “civilizing missions” in various outposts across the world. Still today, Western powers use classical heritage to legitimize their dominance, presenting themselves as heirs to reason, order, and progress.¹ Hence the ubiquity of museums flanked with classical friezes and modern cinematic homages to Homer (Christopher Nolan’s *The Odyssey*,

1. See the great debate between Samuel Huntington and Edward Said: Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.3 (Summer 1993): 22–49; Edward W. Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” *The Nation*, 22 October 2001; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

forthcoming). But what if we understood Rome as a model for modern Western empire (read: Euro-North-American Empire) through its defeat, not its victories? Through its weakness, not its prowess? Perhaps then we can understand what it means to bear witness to the fall of a civilization.

Plutarch’s *Life of Antony* traces the defeat of Mark Antony and the end of the Roman Republic. Antony, a Roman consul and general who ruled over Rome’s Eastern provinces from 43–30 BCE, was a famously hedonistic yet dedicated soldier, whose unruly love story with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, precipitated his defeat by Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) in the last of the civil wars that destroyed the Roman Republic.² Plutarch attributes Antony’s fall to his adoption of “Eastern” ways: his lechery acquired from his time in Iraq during the Parthian campaigns, and his corrupting excess and disorder as things he picked up during his time in Libya or Alexandria. His defeat is characterized by the abandonment of Roman discipline and civic virtue in favor of Eastern indolence and personal passion.

The irony, of course, is that Antony was defeated not only by his own kin, but also by the Parthian Empire, Rome’s enduring eastern rival. The Parthian Empire spanned from the mid-3rd century BCE to the early 3rd century CE, and controlled a vast terrain stretching across the Tigris and Euphrates (from Mesopotamia and Iran) to parts of Central Asia. With its capital in Ctesiphon, about 35 kilometers east of modern Baghdad, the empire flourished as a hub for trade, art, and architecture, and ritual traditions that encompassed the plurality of influences, from Hellenistic to Zoroastrian and beyond.³ Plutarch describes Antony’s Parthian campaign as a disastrous failure wherein the Roman troops were crushed, bested by a superior military power and more strategic opponent in the Parthians.

Antony’s multipartite defeat is pathetic and unremarkable. There is little to mourn about a civilization that, rich in cavalry and expansive in terrain, falls ill to its own hubris. After his defeat to the Parthians, and before his defeat to Octavian, Antony is depressed and “ghost-like,” with nothing to live for. When he musters up enough energy to offer his final jerks to redeem his dignity in a battle against Octavian that he knows he will lose, he makes sure to inaugurate the campaign with a massive debaucherous feast and party. Everyone in attendance knows they are marching towards their own death, and they drink accordingly. That night, amidst the final hoorah before the ultimate defeat, Plutarch writes about an omen that takes place in the backdrop of Antony’s final festivities. This omen takes the form of a great

2. Plutarch, “Life of Antony,” in *Parallel Lives*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1920), bk. Antony, sec.1.

3. For more reading on the Parthian Empire, see Uwe Ellerbrock, *The Parthians: The Forgotten Empire* (London: Routledge, 2021).

music heard over the city from a distance that plays at midnight. The tune is identified as accompanying a Dionysian street parade. Distant and dream-like, the sounds come from a procession that moves away from the festivities in the city center and towards Octavian’s camp on the margins of the city before disappearing entirely, surrendering the night to silence. It is said that this procession was the god Dionysus himself—the god that Antony had devoted his life to—abandoning him, marching off into the distance away from the city.

What is the music that plays when a civilization falls?

In 1911, the Alexandrian-Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy (1863–1933) wrote about Antony’s defeat in his poem “The God Abandons Antony.” Cavafy was born in Alexandria and died in Alexandria, but in between lived in Liverpool, London, and the then Constantinople, working as a civil servant for the British government. Though he is the definitive poet of Alexandria—an extraordinary accolade for a modern man in one of the oldest cities in the world—he often writes about “the city” writ large. The city is almost always Alexandria, but can also sometimes be Liverpool, where he spent a formative part of his childhood, or Ithaka, the ancient home of Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey* and a former Greek capital later occupied by Rome and Byzantium. Writing in modern Greek, his poetry is distinctive in its accessible, arresting prose that speaks of longing, heartache, civilizations, cities, and the endurance of the insufferable human condition. In “The City” (1894) he writes: “You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore. This city will always pursue you.” In “Ithaka” (1911), he writes: “Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey. Without her you wouldn’t have set out. She has nothing left to give you now. And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you. Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.”

Similarly, “The God Abandons Antony” is about a modern city as much as it is about a Roman defeat. Cavafy saw the last days of a cosmopolitan Alexandria, before Egypt’s independence and nationalization. Even in his lifetime, the Alexandria he inhabited was fleeting, marred by the thrashes of modernity that were transforming the ancient city. The social and cultural homogenization of Alexandria and Egypt was a defeat cast in the shadow of a nascent republic’s victory over decades of colonial rule. Within a matter of a few years, the polyglottic city’s Greek and Italian was steamrolled by the far superior tongue of Arabic. With every defeat comes a victory: Arabic over Greek, East over West, Parthian over Roman, Cleopatra over Antony.

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear an invisible procession going by with exquisite music, voices, don’t mourn your luck that’s failing now, work gone wrong, your plans all proving deceptive—don’t mourn them uselessly. As one long prepared, and graced with courage,

say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving. Above all, don’t fool yourself, don’t say it was a dream, your ears deceived you: don’t degrade yourself with empty hopes like these. As one long prepared, and graced with courage, as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city, go firmly to the window and listen with deep emotion, but not with the whining, the pleas of a coward; listen—your final delectation—to the voices, to the exquisite music of that strange procession, and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Cavafy’s poem universalizes what Plutarch records: civilizations fall first in spirit. The strange music heard at midnight—the Dionysian procession leaving the city—is a lullaby as much as it is an alarm. Cavafy calls on Antony—the pathetic, boyish, prodigal son—to listen carefully to the music, and accept it. Accept the defeat.

The music of defeat as written in Plutarch, in Cavafy is a recurring historical sound. Many composers have tried to animate it (what is the music that plays when a civilization falls?) and each rendition is equally as devastating and sublime as the next.⁴ Larry McMurtry hears the music too in *In the Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (1968), where a Texas folk song lamenting the passing of the cowboy way of life echoes Antony’s moment at the windowsill in Alexandria. He writes, “It’s a slight song, but for the Texas writer, an inescapable subject. When I think about the passing of the cowboy, my mind inappropriately hangs on the poem of Cavafy’s, from the scene in Shakespeare, from the sentence of Plutarch’s: the poem in which the god abandons Antony.”⁵ Larry McMurtry was the writer laureate of Texas who co-wrote the screenplay for the film *Brokeback Mountain* and inscribed Americana in the 20th century in a way only a cowboy could: from the perspective of debauchery and defeat. For him, the cowboy is a disappearing way of life, a fading American myth who represents freedom and grit that masks cultural emptiness and historical loss. He pores through different representations of the cowboy in Western film and literature, demonstrating the process of hollowing out a symbol whose role is calcified in a foregone past. The cowboy is an empty signifier for victory: a man on a horse riding into the horizon of a falling empire. For McMurtry, and for myself, the cowboy is not to be mourned, seeing as his fall signifies the cosmic redemption for injustices incurred at his will. Nevertheless, when portrayed as a singular, lonesome fellow, trotting off into the distance while cars speed past him, we can’t help but feel a pang of loss.

4. One such example is a Cantata composed by Nicolas Roussakis: [youtube.com/watch?v=oLhsQjgmm2k&t=376s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLhsQjgmm2k&t=376s), another is George Dalaras: [youtube.com/watch?v=_vRjgW52mYY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vRjgW52mYY).

5. Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

As the 20th century progresses, riders on horses yield to riders on motorcycles; frontier masculinity gives way to modern displacement. Like Antony, the cowboy is not defeated in battle but rendered pitiful by history. Across Rome, Alexandria, and Texas, the lesson remains the same: when civilizations are defeated, the losses incurred are merely the indictments of history. To hold onto the remains tightly is to blister and burn. Even still, to thrash and resist defeat is to widen the radius of the harm suffered in its name. It is true that civilizations are most violent when they are collapsing. If we understand Rome as a model for modern Western empire through its fall, we can begin to recognize the true tragedy of defeat as the inability of acceptance, the indignity of an incorrigible narrative: an indignity which most often befalls proud men.

What is the music that plays when a civilization falls? There is no joy to the ears like the sound of a lullaby-alarm-song that precedes a new dawn. To listen, to really hear it, seems to be the true victory.

THE WITNESS'S WITNESS

Deniz Kiy

Along the wall that encircles the sunken Blågårds Square in Copenhagen stand 22 granite figures, all representing the neighborhood's working-class history. *The Fisherwoman, The Paver, The Greengrocer*. Among the statues, Copenhageners sprawl. The sound of beer caps scrapes through park grit. The kids whirl up dust clouds along the wall and then burst them apart with their toy guns raised and their flip-flops cracking. They shoot their way through a scene, words fired out in salvos, shots shaped behind their front teeth. A car sweeps gently by, wide and shiny, mirroring the square and its social housing units. The library's façade slides into the summer sky. The sun burns white. Now the streetside cafés and granite bodies writhe across the car doors, shimmering like oil in a hot pan. The air is nauseating, dense, inescapable, reminding me of the air under a long-sleeved cotton shirt in Ankara's summer heat: *this is unbelievable*. I'm sitting at a bench below the trees. At the far end of the square, close to the playground and the gravel, mothers are sitting under a Real Madrid helium balloon, tied to a pram and hovering over it.

But it wasn't until the on-site forces suddenly appeared in full armor—weapons drawn, aiming at the kids—that I became the witness's witness. As the children ran back to their mothers' protective embrace, the forces retreated without a word, as if the violence had never been there.

Across the bridge, around the hill and then on to the forest road among the pine trees. Increasing unrest breaks out between us as someone buries their face in their hands and starts crying. The car finally stops. Snow piles up in duvet mounds along the tracks. We stay where we are, silent, until the air stiffens. We're ready to run for the train, and then, with a crack through the body, the train has already passed. When, from one moment to the next, a group shrinks from six people into five and this sixth member has shed his holster, changed his shape, gliding around between the remaining five in a state of non-being, silence is a quivering sensation at the inside of the skin. When someone bursts into tears the air is drawn out of the others and grief becomes symbiotic without knowing who benefits from this symbiosis. Most of all there is this quivering; most of all the smell of death sticking to the fingertips.

The room is oblong. It's a pacifying shade of baby blue with a bench against the wall, a mattress, and an adjacent toilet with mirrors. The engraved postal codes. A slight draught around the wall. Later, they drove us

to the train station. She was aching but, like me, totally accepting of the incident and the fact that we were sat in the back of a police car, escorted to the station. There was a joking tone between us; what more did we have to lose? "As soon as you grab the wheel, you risk being pulled over, you risk losing your right to silence," they said. But we needed our car. The tarot cards, laid out across the tray on the McDonald's stone table, told us to follow the trail backwards, and so we did. We trotted up the hill in the dark, through the iron gate and up to where the car was parked. I backed it out and a dark, mercury-looking figure appeared in my peripheral vision, fastened, became a car and blue lights. We were stopped again, but we managed; managed to be a human again in the eyes of the immigrant cop. I think we exchanged a look. Whether we did so or not doesn't matter. My assumption that he'd treat us better than his colleagues turned out to be true.

I actually don't know how many times I tried to describe it. At first, I wanted to portray it as a space between spaces. I called it the space of translation: a corridor like the link between doors. A kind of in-between where information is exchanged from one language to the next and back again. But the descriptions weren't sufficient. I deleted the sentences, the images, and was left with a blank sheet. Afterwards, I tried to describe how the space, the in-between, expanded like a balloon, as if blown up in the wake of a present that whirls around like a storm behind the walls. I tried to describe how the writing exists at the heels of the present moment, reaches out to catch it only to, like Midas, face the fact that the moment has already passed and what remains is already dead, non-living, like a golden egg that doesn't break.

My lower back hurts from sitting with my head in the metaphysics. I'm tired. It should be easy to describe the space, after all I've been here since my conscience sketched up the walls around me. This was many years ago. It's probably a matter of gaze, of language, languages, of a mother who needs guidance through the state's IT-solutions and a father who, in a moment of injustice and misunderstanding runs onto the pitch to hold his child's ankle, as it's crushed in a game where bystanding parents shout the most horrid phrases at the foreigners' children. It is a matter of belonging. It is a matter of distance. It is a matter of laying a hand on his shoulders and allowing yourself to be carried away, of being placed in the car and driven home, into this space I'm trying to describe.

I'm shutting down my screen, in an odd mood. Walking into the kitchen, a silverfish disappears beneath the floorboard. I make coffee, tidy up the morning routine: oatmeal, plastic cup, put the children's books back in their place. At the balcony with the coffee, fourth floor, gaze towards the back stairs, silently observe who walks in and out. I always used to sit at the back of the bus, do what I do now—watch, view, understand, attach the coordinates—and in the ephemeral mirror of the window, I notice two brown eyes gliding through the cityscape.

DEFEATS & TRIUMPHS

Sivas Torbati

As a kid, when I got lost in the jungle I thought my life was over;

Roaming around, I found the oasis and so I retrieved the hope.

See how fragile reality can be for the kids and for the young, and how easy their thoughts really bring them down,

Especially these days, where youth has turned into products;

These days where we promote our triumphs only.

What about the defeats that made you the one they admire?

Did you forget the days, the hours we spent in the bunker?

All of you, you forgot yourself and where you started,

Just for some bloody diamonds and some fucking wads.

I'm Mike Tyson when he tore Holyfield's ear to bits,

'Cause they try to head-butt me but I never give in;

Mohammed Ali in the jungle while my stomach churns,

Michael Jordan jumping at the rim as long as the heart dunks.

I teach my young to fish while you're eating lobster.

There is no summer that will satisfy my endless hunger.

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ihsan saad ihsan tahir (b. 1995, UK/DK) graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (2025) and Goldsmiths University of London (2025), and lives and works in Copenhagen. Tahir has previously exhibited at institutions including Kunsthall Kongegaarden, Korsør (2026); SKAL Contemporary, Skagen (2025); 13 Vitrine, Lausanne (2024); Kunsthall Aarhus (2023; 2024); Collega, Copenhagen (2024); and All All All, Copenhagen (2023).

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