

## In Conversation with Homan Yousofi



*In this podcast for the Afghanistan Society, Homan Yousofi talks with Jessica Barry about how the landscape of London and Wales provides inspiration for his poetry, and how a love of nature lies at the heart of his work with Afghan migrants and refugees. Reading his poem **'Birds of Kabul'** revives in him memories of childhood years in Afghanistan; Listening to his musician brother play the Rubab evokes family life in London; In his work with migrant communities, Homan's love of space, silence, and water become paths to wellbeing.*

JB: Homan, thank you so much for being with us today and for talking about your work and your poetry. We are sitting in North London, but it's possible to see some trees around, and it's not too far from Hampstead Heath. How would you say that landscape and nature are important to you for your writing and for your poetry?

HY: Hmm sure. The Heath itself has always been there for me, having arrived in London at about six-and-a-half, or seven maybe, and the landscape of the city has always contrasted or complemented the canopies of Hampstead Heath and the trees and the wildlife there, and the four or five ponds that have always been present for me. And still are since I moved back from Wales where I lived for ten years. It's where I spend every morning, I go for a swim, and yeah, it informs a lot of my thinking.

JB: Also in Wales, I imagine, those wonderful mountains in Snowdonia have been an inspiration for you as well?

HY: Of course, yes, They grew over time as has different natural features. I guess their unchangingness in the face of weather and man's human-scale time, without going too deep into it I think they just naturally represent that to people. I mean when you spend time in them, they just kind of accompany the background thought and they're a kind of touchstone to life in a wider sense and it's good to have them in sight I think.



In Wales, after I'd finished my studies there, I just had the urge to introduce people who would otherwise not connect with the national parks. That could be ethnic minorities, people who had suffered trauma, young people. So I would take reading groups out, we would do play outside. I loved the idea of communities that form around water, around swimming, that locals would engage with anyway, and discovering those little nooks and from there sorting and validating it and seeing what can arise when they can express themselves in those environments.....

JB: Coming from Afghanistan and leaving Afghanistan as a child, you must nevertheless had many influences all through your life from your family. Is that where you get your creativity from ?

HY: Of course. I do have a creative family. My father is a writer and he was singing yesterday at home and being accompanied by the Rubab, my brother plays the Rubab, and that's a very typical scene from our household, and to no particular standard. We were not often taught great music or anything like that it was just a kind of natural habit and that's something that I find very positive for what I want to help others feel confident in as well. And to play, to play with experience and with the sense of self. I think it kind of there's something light about creativity and it can go towards heavy topics but it's inherently playful as well, and yeah that's something I'm passionate about. And it's something that informs a lot of my wellbeing work.

JB: You talk about self-awareness and identity. As an Afghan, how do you bring your identity to your work?

HY: It's interesting. Identity is a big topic for me. You know, we grew up as quite self-assured brothers. I'm not sure how healthy that was, but quite confident, so it wasn't a thing of pain that initially caused the reflection of it, but I find that coming into London and seeing this mishmash of cultures, and then the internet age, and post-modernism where you pick and choose different bits, you've got a bit of reggae and punk and vegan, and then Hindu... This mishmash, more so than anything else, and perhaps as a refugee you stand slightly apart and you can see that. So

on the one hand, I really enjoy engaging with that, and on the other hand you look at what is there that can lead beyond the identity titbits, for want of a better word. So it's through that that you look into nature, or, I don't know, perhaps a more spiritual awareness, or consciousness, which for me is done through swimming, through walking, through silence when I can find it in London. But actually, the cultural aspect of it, is something that I have a dual relationship with. There's a levity to that, a playfulness, that I love in post-modernism where you are a collage of different identities, but you hold each of them quite lightly I would say.

JB: There's a lot of playfulness in your poetry that I sense when I read your poems. Is there a poem that you would like to read for us?

HY: Yes, for sure. A lot of my work focuses on nature, but I've got a few about my memories of Afghanistan, so I will read one maybe that I wrote the other week.

This is a memory I have from Macroyan Kohna. It's a kind of housing project in Afghanistan, a communist housing project where we lived but it was a nice one, maybe representative of what the government wanted everyone to live by. Anyway, I would play out a lot and we had a group of about 15 boys, all different ages, and sometimes we would go hunting.

Our gang when aired out, for example on a hunting excursion  
With a pinched air rifle from a sleeping dad,  
Felt close as matchsticks marching in a box.  
Neighbourhood tulips left carefully un-trampled this time  
Were scent trail to a sparrow.  
A camouflage of dust followed the silence,  
Our hard worn (sorry) Our hard won marbles held still in pockets.  
And the bird, shot so beautiful on the long slope of a branch  
Divvied and tongued by a startle of ten boys  
Over a small, blue fire.

JB: Beautiful poem. So full of image and light, and playfulness as you are saying.

HY: Yeah, it was a very playful memory and then the shock of the actual reality of the bird that tiny bird that we were dividing, I don't know, the liver or something, into ten pieces was kind of comical. It does feel quite comical, but it was one of the early memories of killing something, you know....

JB: And it's a memory from, six years old, five years old? You left Afghanistan when you were very young.

HY: Yeah, I was very young. My memory of Kabul is my neighbourhood, which is mapped out quite clearly because I was always outside, and then the way to my primary school, and my nursery. And the neighbourhood of my cousins and my aunties who were all very close and still are, as Afghans are. So I have a very particular map of Kabul which is perhaps not so extensive.

JB: Let's look for a moment at what your hopes are now for the future. Where do you hope your work and your poetry will go, and your relationship with people coming into this country. How will that develop for you?

HY: So my work focuses on water. And maybe there is a project where we may take different groups including Afghans along bodies of water and then they can reminisce about their own experiences of rivers and pools, pools I remember in Kabul were important things in my family. But actually more broadly what I want to do with my work, especially with refugees is to introduce a sense of ownership and playfulness and nuance with landscape that perhaps naturally comes when you are in a place long enough. So whether it's the way you interact with public buildings and private buildings and exploring them on a very literal level, orientating yourself around London. And then, having the confidence to, you know, challenge aspects of it, whether it's colonial aspects or whatever it might be. So to have, say, the way I feel about Hampstead Heath, where, if they were to do something to the ponds, I would feel, "Hmm... what are they..." I have a

sense of ownership of that. I think you can have that as a migrant, the sooner you feel that to a place, to a city, the more interesting and intricate your relationship will be, and healthier, and you are not looking at it from afar, or as an outsider. Or maybe you want to continue looking at it as from an outsider but that's not the default position.



*Homan and community members taking tea. Photo credit Anna Learner*

So that's how I want to work in relation to landscape and nature and place with people. And then I would also like to work with other wellbeing aspects, so body, sleep, looking after and thinking about mental health as something you can have some control over. The variables anyway, you can't obviously control every aspect.

And then, lastly, just giving space to being rather than planning all the time. Planning usually equals worrying so, having seen that from my own family and migrants I work with, they're either thinking about the next generation or planning ahead, and the Afghans I've been working with in the ARAP scheme. There's a lot going on, but on day-to-day a lot of worry is continually in the mindset of ... What's next? what's planning? How can we settle? Where can...? which is very important to do, but by giving some breathing space and silence to be, I think that's something that hopefully I can, maybe help with...

JB: Thank you so much Homan, it's been a really wonderful journey, listening to you and going through so much with you about your work, and about the inspiration that your work has created. And I wish you all the best for the future.

HY: Thank you so much Jessica....