

Jan Dost
From *Safe Corridor*

Translated by Marilyn Booth

Translator's Reflection

In early 2019, the Turkish army and supporting military groups attacked the Afrin region of Syria, whose inhabitants are mostly Kurds. The army occupied the region and, as a result, Afrin's people fled.

Jan Dost, Syrian Kurdish author and published poet residing in Germany, has written several war-centered novels since the civil war began in his native country. *Safe Corridor* (2019) focuses on the violent occupation of Afrin. It is a companion novel to *A Green Bus Leaves Aleppo* (2019), a novel in which Dost recounts essentially the same story from a different character's perspective.

Safe Corridor draws attention to the terrible impacts of war, visible and invisible, on children. The protagonist and narrator, Kamiran, is a young boy about 13 years of age, who, as a result of the terrible war-like situation and painful family events, wets himself regularly at night. His father has been captured by Daesh/ISIS in Manbij, the village where they live. Then, his five-year-old sister is killed by a bomb. These traumatic events have left his mother mute—literally speechless. Kamiran's voice frames the narrative. Now unable to attend school, Kamiran tells the details of life in Manbij, Aleppo, and Afrin, the tragedies he has witnessed, the path of internal displacement. Who is his listener? A piece of commercial pale-yellow chalk, taken from his school, which he treasures and protects.

The novel begins with a surreal image: in his family's tent in the refugee camp, Kamiran himself slowly turns into a massive lump of chalk. His body and his organs harden, as he lies in bed, motionless under the coverlet. The excerpt here comprises the first chapter and most of the second chapter.

At first, the family—Kamiran, his mother, sister, and brother—flee from Manbij, heading to Aleppo. However, this city, too, becomes a war zone, and it is here that his sister was killed by a bomb. The reduced family leaves for Kamiran's uncle's house in Afrin. But there is no safety in Afrin either. Due to the Turkish offensive, they find themselves in a refugee camp with thousands of other people who have left their homes. Thus, quite matter-of-factly, Kamiran narrates the dramatic stages and hardships of their lives in Manbij, Aleppo, and Afrin and then in the refugee camp.

In Kamiran's narration, utterly gruesome images of war mirror his own transformation as they take on a surreal aspect (and yield macabre humor) through these accounts of people's lives in multiple displacements and migrations. Eventually, we see that the "safe corridor" the Turkish army allegedly opened for civilians is, in reality, not safe at all and is never sheltered as a "corridor" or an opportunity for "safe passage" (an alternative translation of the title) should be. For the refugees, it is akin to Golgotha for Christ, the place of his crucifixion according to Christian belief. It is a path that must be taken, a passage from one life to another that is inevitable but that offers no salvation.

The novel ends as it began. Kamiran, himself now inert chalk, is washed by the surge of a flood that begins to submerge the entire refugee camp. Kamiran cannot leave the bed to escape. His father's ghost appears and tells him to surrender to his fate. Kamiran slowly melts into the merciless flood, in an act of dismemberment. Chalk is an implement of writing, of telling, of memory, but in this tragic story, it is silent. It cannot survive. Erasure is not sufficient: it is destroyed. The will to remember is destroyed in the face of war, despite the momentary efforts of a child.

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Pale Chalk

On the evening when young Kamiran discovered that he was turning into a lump of chalk, the rain was bucketing down. The sound the drops splattering onto the tent walls made was exactly the same sound he had heard in Afrin—volleys of bullets, raining down two days before the town fell to occupation.

As he lay in bed, ready for sleep and just beginning to slide into its welcome sweetness, Kamiran sensed something odd going on, a change coming over his body. He felt his feet going rigid: that was the first sign of it. He had the sensation of losing his toes, as if they were bits of writing chalk breaking off and dropping with a thud onto the mattress. Almost immediately, he felt something similar, and equally peculiar, happening to his legs. They were stiffening, and they seemed to have fused together.

Slowly—deliciously—the sensation of it crept higher over his body. Thighs, buttocks, and then his prick, like another little segment of hard chalk. His belly, his chest. He felt the fingers of both hands plop heavily onto the mattress, although they didn't make a sound. He could make sense of what was happening only if he thought of it as a horrifically frightening nightmare—but, in fact, the boy felt no fear. He raised his head off the mattress—at least, as far as his neck would allow, since at that very moment, the stiffness had got as far as that. He was preoccupied, not unhappily, with observing these changes to his own body. Somehow, this transformation afforded an enjoyment greater, as far as he could remember, than any happiness he'd ever known. Yes, he was aware that it was out of the ordinary to feel such intense pleasure at this conversion of his flesh and skin into hard, calcified matter. The strongest emotion he felt was a fervent hope that what he was going through right now would not end. A longing that time would stop here, that he could hold onto these moments of gratification, grasp them with his fingers—even if his fingers had fallen off, like pieces of school chalk, to disappear into his bed.

In fact, matters had begun to take this strange course earlier, when they'd been on their voyage, he and his mother Layla, who never spoke now; his little brother, Alan; and his Uncle Ali, the *buzuq* player. To begin with, the four of them had left the town of Sharraan, not far from the Turkish border, fleeing the contingents of extremist militias who marched on the heels of the Turkish army. They took shelter with another brother of his mother's, Uncle Naasan, who lived in Afrin City and was quite a lot older. But then the units of the Turkish occupation force reached Afrin, and so they picked up and left again, in a great hurry, on the 17th of March 2018. At that time—before that time too—tens of thousands of civilians were in flight from the hellish Turkish bombardments. And they were just as afraid of the militias who had allied themselves with Turkey and were playing their part in the wholesale strafing of the entire Afrin region. And so it ended, in blood and fire—the era of self-rule that a Kurdish party in the north of Syria had proclaimed. For the Turks had seen that project as an immediate and existential threat to their national security which they could not allow to continue.

The earliest signs of Kamiran's metamorphosis—which would take less than a month to complete—appeared when they were stopped, near the military checkpoint outside the town of Kiimar, on the way to the famous Ziyara Crossing. The tractor pulling their wagon came to a dead stop. Kamiran and his family were packed into the cart along with some other refugees including a pregnant woman. Driving the tractor was Ali, whom everyone knew as Ali the *Buzuq* Player, Kamiran's uncle. It wasn't the roadblock that stopped them. Ali stopped because that poor, miserable woman went into labor suddenly just before they reached the Crossing. It was clear that she was in a lot of pain.

On that same day, Uncle Ali discovered that the skin on his nephew's neck was so desiccated that it was cracking. He didn't know anything about the disease called calcinosis cutis. It targets the layers of skin just below the body's surface, and various things can cause it, among them an excess of calcium in the blood. Young Kamiran did not give this any serious attention; it must be a simple ailment of sorts, to the point that he joked with his uncle as they stared at his scaly skin, "I'm afraid I'm turning into a fish."

Day by day, the patches of afflicted skin widened and lengthened. His fingers grew as stiff and dry as firewood. The skin on his legs, neck, back, and buttocks, and even his penis, dried out. What was truly odd was that despite the skin condition, he didn't feel any pain at all. For that reason, the camp's doctor, who worked for the Kurdish Red Crescent, didn't concern himself much. He just handed Kamiran some sedatives whose only effect was to rouse some bitter mockery, tossed back and forth between this concerned uncle and his sister's son.

By the time the dry-skin condition had more or less engulfed his entire body, Kamiran's yearning to write something had grown more pressing. But there was no proper place to write, and the surroundings were not hospitable. He began talking, instead, to his pale piece of chalk. He told her the things that had happened during these years of war, across its harsh months, its long days. He told her the secrets he had hid from his family. He gave vent to his feelings, and his fears, everything that was apt to fill the mind of a boy on the verge of his teens living through the terrors of an insane war in a country where reason had lost its ability to steer the course of anything or anyone.

Now, as this later stage of Kamiran's transformation drew to a close on this rainy night, his mother, forever silent, was asleep. He could hear her breathing and it comforted him. His brother, who had been in agony all day with the intense pains in his hands and chest caused by the burns he had sustained from the firing that morning, was turning over restlessly on his mattress, muttering and grunting. And meanwhile, his Uncle Ali, the young *buzuq* player, was sitting with his mates in a tent somewhere, some distance away, plucking his small lute and chatting the evening away as he usually did.

This night, the boy was alone with his ordeal, on his own with the astonishing changes making their way across his body; alone, too, with this harsh pleasure buffeting him, like gusts of cold wind hitting his skin from the tips of his toes to the parting on his scalp.

Kamiran wasn't thinking about what would happen in the next few moments—or about the fix he would be in when this small family discovered his condition. He didn't think about his mother, who would wake up the next morning and come to lift the blanket off

him, ready to give his shoulder a shake as she always did, summoning him to breakfast. He did not think about his brother Alan, who might come and sit next to his head, pleading with him to undo the dressings over his burns and put new ones on, or letting him know that the burns weren't hurting so much now. He was not musing about his uncle either—Uncle Ali, who might come into the tent at any moment, cursing the camp and Turkey and the war and the Party, as he had been doing ever since he came to live in this ill-omened place.

Now he couldn't even see the ghostly shapes that had lived with him, a constant presence in his mind, before this operation took its course and turned him into a giant piece of chalk, 160 centimeters long. Inside him, so very much had changed. Now he belonged to a different world, one where time didn't matter—or at least, time didn't seem to be like any of the other forces of nature. At the end of the day, here he was, an inanimate object, a huge length of chalk inert beneath the heavy blanket, listening to the thud of raindrops that the storm hurled relentlessly against the matte-white outer skin of the tent.

Let Me Make the Introductions

My name is *Kaamiyran*. But you can just call me Kamiran. In fact, you ought to say my name that way, because it's really more accurate. In Kurdish, it means “the one who's blessed with luck.”

My mother used to be an English teacher. Laila Aghazadeh is her name. My father—the surgeon, Dr. Farhad—was kidnapped by Daesh years ago, when we were still living in Manbij.

I don't think you know me very well, do you? Even though you have lived with me for two years now. I haven't written very many sentences with you. Not many at all, I'm afraid. Just a couple of shambolic slogans, I guess, like for instance, *Long live the Revolution*, or a saying like *al-Jaysh al-hurr Allah yahmiih*. God protect the Free Army. That's what I used to recite over and over along with my schoolmates at primary school in Manbij, before Daesh came. But I don't remember using you to write, for instance, *The people want the fall of the regime*. That was the sentence we kept on repeating, back

when we were walking alongside the adults in their demonstrations. Or, there was the other one, *Your head will be eaten away* . . . and then one doesn't even need to say the rest: *Your head will be eaten away*, and that will make you as short and stubby as my little brother's penis. He hasn't been circumcised, my little brother.

I stole you one day—it was sometime in the autumn—I stole you from school. I thought you were so elegant. Slim, shiny, not like the other pieces of chalk, the cheap ones that came in white boxes with “Directorate of Education of Aleppo” stamped on them. Those “government” chalks were fat and stubby, and whenever you tried to write with them, they made a lot of chalk dust. And the lines they made were only faint ones. You'd try to write a word and one letter would appear clearly, but you could barely see the other letters, so the chalk mutilated the word you were trying to write. There was one of our teachers—he was taken by Daesh later on—one of our teachers who despised the chalk. He was so disgusted by that government chalk that he used to shout curses at it. One day, he was writing something on the board with one of these pieces of chalk, and then suddenly he threw it out the window. He said to us, coughing, “A revolution has started, and things have changed in this country, but the chalk has stayed the same. *You* have to start a revolution now, one that's going to bring down this god-awful chalk. Changing this chalk will certainly mean changing the regime which can't for the life of it produce sound chalk that doesn't kill people off!” *The people want the fall of the chalk*—

“Now, repeat after me: *The people want the fall of the chalk.*”

We yelled out this sentence until the chairs in the classroom were vibrating and all of us, all the pupils in the room, collapsed into laughter. The teacher slapped his hand against the table and ordered us to get quiet.

Laughter, yes, but it was a true disaster whenever the teacher ordered us to erase the chalkboard or when he wiped it clean himself. That white chalk dust filled the whole room. We always had to open the windows wide and air out the room, even if it was the middle of winter. The white chalk dust settled stubbornly on the teacher's hair and got into his eyebrows and mustache. He didn't look like a teacher anymore; he looked more like the miller in our

town. He was always trying to brush the dust off his teacher clothes and shake it from his hair. All the while, he would be muttering to us, “I am going to die of asthma. This chalk causes asthma, it’s worse than pollen and factory smoke. God’s curses on the life of a teacher, before the revolution started, and on his life after it started too.”

Yeah, that’s exactly what was going on, my dear, pretty chalk, my elegant chalk. *That’s* what the teachers’ chalk was like, the chalk that the government makes in its factories. But you, my own piece of chalk, you’d come from somewhere else, somewhere outside the country! You were just lying there one day—on that day I stole you. Yeah, just lying there, still and silent, and you grabbed my attention, just by lying there at the edge of the green chalkboard. I shot my hand out, I was just playing, really! And then I hid you, very quickly but with a lot of care, I put you in my pocket, and I took you home. But even now, I still don’t really understand why I did it. You were really appetizing, so tempting! Something, but I didn’t know what it was, attracted me to you, pulled me. Maybe it’s that I love to write, and I want to have *something* to say about everything that’s going through my head. But then, after I took you, you changed, you were just a plain little piece of something tossed into a corner of my room which overlooked the main street in Manbij. Just a little piece of something that no one would think twice about, except for me. I heard you complaining, every day. It was as if you were actually talking to me. Like, as if you were saying, “Boy! Hey there! If you don’t mean to write anything, why did you bring me home like this? C’mon, pick me up, and write something with me. Whatever you want to write. Just do it.”

So things just went along like that until we were forced out of Manbij, and we headed for Aleppo—about two years ago I guess it was. We were on the point of leaving the house, I remember this, and suddenly something yanked me to you—again—it seemed like some mysterious force, I didn’t know what it was, but I took you along with me. Once we were there—in Aleppo, I mean—I forgot about you completely. I think I forgot you because I didn’t find a single wall there on which I could write any of the sentences or phrases that were whirling about in my head. The walls in the neighborhood where my grandpa lived, in Masakin Hanano, were either half-

destroyed now, or they were already unsafe anyway, so fragile they were on the point of collapsing. Or they were walls nobody could come close to, because you would see warnings on them or nearby, left by some unidentified military authority. There was never any explanation to tell you why or how this wall was off-limits, or where the orders came from. Anyway, most of the time I was too afraid of going out into the street. A lot of kids were dying out there. One of them was my beautiful little sister, Maysoon. The children died of snipers and bombs, and they died crushed beneath the ruins of their collapsing houses. We saw it all during the time we lived in Aleppo.

When it started, we really did believe that anyone who was dying in the war must be army, or at least fighters of some sort. But then we discovered that the bombs and the missiles and the bullets—the damned sprays of bullets that were louder than a microphone when they got close—were one-hundred-percent blind.

Back when we were still living in Manbij, I always carried you around in my pocket. I was waiting for just the right opportunity to write out one of the things my father used to say. My father, the surgeon Farhad. Before Daesh snatched him and he disappeared from sight and no one ever saw him again. There was one sentence my father repeated a million times in my hearing, and it really affected me. I knew it by heart as well as I knew the first verse of the Quran.

“All revolutions are alike, Kamiran, my boy. They’re just like ass droppings—you can’t tell one from another. Or like hair—every one like its twin brother. *Baarra, shaarra!*”

I didn’t understand what my father was getting at with this sentence of his, but I learned it word-for-word anyway. And then my father disappeared all of a sudden. We waited for him, we waited a long time. My mother waited for him. She began standing, every evening, at the window, with Maysoon. They would be peering out the window, ready to catch the very first glimpse of him, but it was never any use. Then my grandfather arranged to bring us surreptitiously to Aleppo. And from there, and after my little sister, Maysoon, was killed in the bombing, we fled again, to Afrin. Running from one place to another, I forgot about you, I kept forgetting about you. But even though you weren’t inside my head, and I didn’t write anything with you, I never left you alone, not for a single day. No, I took you

with me wherever I went. I guess there must be some secret to it, the way I take care of you. You're like a witch, my ghostly piece of chalk. I think *you* have some secret that you haven't told me ever.

What I think is—I have to write my father's words of wisdom out somewhere. But where shall I write all of this? Across my own palm, or across the enormous behind of our neighbor, Mazyat?

Of course, you wouldn't know our neighbor Mazyat, my dear chalk. My pale, thin friend. No, of course not. How would a piece of chalk with no features to speak of and no feelings get to know a village widow with such miserable luck and so much sex appeal?

This Mazyat was our neighbor back in Sharraan, the town near the Turkish border where we used to live. I'm not going to tell you about her right now. It would just make your saliva run, and then I'm sure you would melt away. Yeah, you see, your saliva would come streaming out just as if you were a bitch in heat. Any talk of Mazyat and even the saliva of saints and pious men starts flowing.

Anyway, my girl, my thin little friend, this isn't the time or space for talking about Mazyat's behind, or the smell she gave off, which I'm sure would make heads swim even among those men on the other side of the border, the Turkish gendarmerie, I mean. I'll come back to it, this subject of Mazyat, when you and I are alone, and when my brother Alan isn't with us here, that little lice-shit who doesn't know how to keep a secret.

Maybe you are feeling really surprised that I'm even talking to you now, since two years ago, I didn't talk to you. Maybe you are saying to yourself, "This boy is talking nonsense. He must have smoked a wad of hash or found some white powder to sniff."

Believe me, I haven't sniffed anything except you, that smell which reminds me of the way the walls in our school smelled and the board in our classroom in the primary school in Manbij, which we fled. I haven't inhaled anything except the pale dust you make, waves of tiny particles on which I can float. You are right, my dear, to object to my silence, and my neglecting you, for two years now. And then, well, why am I talking to you now if I didn't then? Because I was so stupid then that I believed a piece of chalk has no feelings, and doesn't sense anything, that she can't have any kind of relation-

ship with a human being. I didn't know you, and that's why I didn't introduce myself or say anything to you.

It's the war, my friend. The war taught me that everything can feel stuff. Even if it's the little bullet that bores into people's bones, it doesn't matter whether they are soldiers or ordinary people from town; still, that little bullet might be very sensitive—it might feel as much as the finger that presses down on the trigger feels as it frees the poor little bullet from its tiny cave in the muzzle. And also, just like the war taught me that everything has feelings, it also taught me that a person's most trivial possession, when they're in the midst of a war, is exactly this—their senses, their feelings. In fact, it's their feelings that are responsible for whatever agony and horror they go through.

Now I'm going to tell you a little secret. It's not really important, as secrets go, but I'm going to tell you it anyway. Think of it as a confession from a child who is scared of being punished. One day, I had the guts to poke a cheap thick pasty-white piece of chalk into the behind of the teacher's son. This was the teacher who arrived after the nice, funny teacher who cursed out the chalk wasn't there anymore. I hated this teacher's son; I hated him a whole lot. He used to swagger around in the school courtyard because his father, the new teacher, was related to one of the Daesh emirs. One day, when we were standing at the green chalkboard drawing tanks and helicopters, that boy started chanting at me: "Your dad was treating the men from the Free Army. Your father's one of the Sahawat."

"Sahawat?" I said it in a way that showed I didn't believe him. Anyway, it was the first time I'd heard that strange name. Sahawat! But even if I hadn't heard it before, I understood that this word was definitely meant as an insult. Then I learned that it meant someone who didn't bow their head to Daesh, or maybe even who didn't help them. I was furious.

"My dad, Sahawat? Well your mama's a whore." I had him by the collar. The other boys stared at us, worried but also curious. They were in their seats, sitting "properly"—that is, with their hands stuck under their armpits, the way they were supposed to sit whenever the teacher entered the classroom.

He was wearing a blue tracksuit. I put out my hands and yanked the bottoms down, exposing his brown behind, soft and fleshy and darker in the middle. The bastard swung around to stand with his back to the chalkboard, trying to protect his backside from the curious eyes of his classmates, darting looks at him like arrows. But I jerked him forward to my chest, and then, holding him, I turned and forced him to stand with his butt facing the class so all the students could see him like this. They clapped and began shouting and striking their hands against their chairs. Then they split up into two teams, one of them urging me on and the other one supporting him.

“I’m going to fuck your whole family’s daftar.”

I’d learned this insult from my Uncle Ali—after all, these government-issued identity booklets, recording marriages and children’s names, were as precious as you could get. As I jeered at him, I was reaching for a piece of fat white government chalk, as thick and gross as the finger of a big fat man. It was at the edge of the board, exactly where you’d been lying before, and I had just had the wickedest idea.

“Give me one reason not to push this stupid second-rate chalk into your third-rate bum.”

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