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The Fortieth Day

Kazim Ali
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In the first poem of Kazim Ali's latest collection, *The Fortieth Day*, God gives way to Lostness, and questions become more important than answers. The search for understanding is relentless, and in order for this search to occur, the speaker must admit what he doesn't know. He must admit, for example, "Death is a miracle I do not understand." With such admissions of ignorance comes sincerity, and even if the speaker falls short of being a prophet, he is someone to trust.

Religion is one of Ali's major themes, and is continued from his celebrated first collection, *The Far Mosque*. However, *The Fortieth Day* should not be considered a mere sequel, for it is a book more satisfyingly unified than most poetry collections. While not one of his named influences, there is something of H.D. in this collection. Her trilogy of books—*The Walls Do Not Fall*, *Tribute to the Angels*, and *The Flowering of the Road—*is often compared to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Although all of these projects seek truth beyond the visible parameters, there is a kinship between H.D. and Ali in their paring down, their insistence that grandeur can exist without the grandiose. H.D. posits, "though there was a whirr and roar in the high air, / there was a Voice louder, // though its speech was lower than a whisper," and Ali answers, "You are never going to know which night's mouth is sacredly reciting / and which night's recitation is secretly mere wind" (from *The Walls Do Not Fall* and "Ramadan," respectively). Such doubt, an inability to distinguish between the earthly and the heavenly, is appropriate for a book titled *The Fortieth Day*. The fortieth day is often the last day of trial in religious texts such as the *Bible* and the *Qur'an*.

Ali is also the author of a novel, *Quinn's Passage*, and a columnist for the *American Poetry Review*. He is the co-founder of Nightboat Books and teaches at Oberlin College and Stonecoast. The accomplishment of *The Fortieth Day* can only legitimize this young poet's growing success.
ERICA WRIGHT (April 14, 2008)

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