SWEARING IN ENGLISH

‘You are how old?’

The boy is sitting on his hands. He is shivering. His feet do not reach the floor.

‘How many years have you?’ the man says slowly. This is his job, each day the same: a procession of lost souls dragged through here like birds blown off course. Some of them expect grace, understanding, sympathy. Instead, they find an office with stains on the ceiling, a man who smells of cigarettes sitting behind a desk.

The boy takes his hands out from under his thighs and flashes ten fingers, then eight.

The man sighs through his brown teeth, derisive. ‘Eighteen,’ he says. ‘You mean *this*?’ He holds up ten fingers; the pen falls to the desk.

The boy, again, flashes ten then eight.

The man shakes his head, picks up the pen and writes *8* on the form. He asks, ‘You have a name?’

The boy looks down at his knees. He has no socks and his shoes are still wet. He doesn’t understand anything, except what his father told him. That they will ask name, age, country of origin, family. That he must lie.

The man pats his chest with one hand. ‘Yacob,’ he says loudly. ‘Yacob.’ Then he points at the boy. ‘And you?’ he says.

The boy says something in his own language, something that is longer than a name. It sounds like a prayer.

‘Eh,’ the man says. Then when the boy is looking at him again he repeats, palm pressed flat into his sternum, ‘Yacob. Yacob. And you?’

The boy pulls at his ear and sniffs. Yacob writes *unknown* on the form.

The boy doesn't know which country he is in, whether it is the one they planned for or a different one altogether. His brother is four years older and promised their mother that he will contact her when they make it where they are going. This country is not supposed to be the final destination. They are supposed to pass through here to get to where they are going. It is the way in.

The man scratches his chin and says, 'Parents? Mama? Papa?'

The boy's eyes widen. He shakes his head.

'Where are they?'

The boy strokes a finger along his throat.

Yacob clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth and writes *Mother Deceased / Father Deceased.* A question mark after those words. He has done this job for long enough that he does not believe anything. If the boy will say he is eighteen then what reason will he have for telling the truth about anything else? Yacob would like to leave this job and work again with his hands. He used to work in shipment. On the dockyard things are simpler. He misses being around the men. Now he must engage in this useless cataloguing, speaking to people who do not understand his language, extracting lies and inaccuracies as though they will do any good. Some of these people cry and beg him for mercy. He tells them he is not their God.

'Which country have you arrived from?' he says to the boy.

The boy looks at the window. It is small and high in the wall behind the man. Beyond it, there is blue. There is a cloud. He feels somehow exposed without his brother. Before he can answer the question he does not understand, somebody opens the door to the office.

Yacob says, 'What?'

The woman is also wearing an old, torn high visibility vest. Its reflective strips are dull and dirty. She says, 'There is another one come in. There's thirty on this one. Two already dead, from the heat.'

Yacob lowers his head, as though if he does not do this then he will lose control of himself. He breathes for a moment and then says, ‘Will they not stop coming? Why are they coming here, to this shithole? What are they dying for?’

Then he says, ‘We are done here anyway, me and the boy.’

On the boat his brother tells him a story. It is about an old man who lives in the mountains. His beard is down to his knees and his hair is down to his bum. When he says bum he widens his eyes meaningfully and the boy laughs. The boy says, ‘His hair will get dirty.’

His brother says, ‘He wipes his bum with his hair. There is no toilet paper or running water on the mountain.’

The boy says, ‘And he washes his hair in urine. He pisses in a bucket and uses it to clean himself.’

‘Are you telling the story or am I?’ the brother says.

‘You have to tell all of it,’ the boy says, meaning every detail. He is obsessed with the minutiae of experience. It is not enough for him to hear of a man living on a mountain. He wants to know how the man eats, how he dries his clothes when it rains, how he cuts his bloody toenails.

There are twenty-four people on the boat including two elderly people and a baby. The only thing that stops the baby from crying is when it sucks on its mother’s nipple. The boy cannot help but watch. He wonders how the milk gets inside the breast. Does the mother have to put it in there? Will she run out?

There is water in the bottom of the boat. They are sitting in it. The water is cold and it makes them shiver, even though there is sun and outside the water it is very hot. When the back of his arm touches the part of the boat that is dry it burns his skin. When he cries out in pain

his brother gets irritated with him and says, ‘Don’t touch it then; it’s easy to remember, or are you stupid?’

Some of the people are scooping the water out with their hands, but most of them have given up. It keeps coming back in. The boat is gradually deflating.

Only the boy, the mother of the baby and one of the old people, the woman, have life vests on. There were only three. The adults debated who would get one, and it was decided very quickly that it would be the boy, the mother of the baby and the old lady.

The boy had wondered why they didn’t give one to the baby instead of its mother. The baby seemed more vulnerable to him, and it would certainly not be able to swim.

‘It is so the mother can keep the baby alive,’ his brother had said. ‘Anyway, do you think one of those vests will fit a tiny baby? You should use your brain sometimes.’

Now, the brother continues with the story, but the boy finds it hard to listen. He is hungry. He is hot and cold at the same time. He is thirsty.

‘The old man is on the mountain because he believes it will make him closer to God.’

‘Does God live in the mountains?’ the boy said.

‘No, He lives in heaven, idiot,’ his brother said.

‘Is heaven in the mountains?’

‘You know it isn’t. It’s in the sky. That’s why we raise our hands to Him.’

‘Some mountains are bigger than the sky,’ the boy says. ‘They disappear into the clouds.’

‘The clouds are not the sky,’ his brother says.

His brother knows the answers to everything. Even so, the boy will argue with him because he feels that his brother is always holding something back, some fundamental truth that will make the world comprehensible to his little brother. Each time the boy argues, his

brother releases a little more information. One day, the boy will have all of it, and then will merely have to piece it together, like a puzzle. And then he will be a man.

The boy forgets about the story even as his brother is telling it. He falls asleep. His dream, thin and scratchy, is imprinted with the movement of the ocean.

When he wakes up, people are pushing together, gathering on one side of the boat, away from the side that is collapsing.

The woman leaves the door partly open when she goes. There is shouting in the stairwell, but it is distant. The walls are hard, echoic, like the inside of a bathroom. The building is not called the tin can for nothing. It is made of converted storage containers.

The man looks at the boy.

He says, ‘You people are fucking everything up.’

He notices the boy looking up at him sharply, reddening, then looking away again.

‘You know this word?’ Yacob says. ‘Fucking? Fuck?’

The boy tries not to smile. He swings his feet. Yacob taps the back of his pen on the desk. ‘Everybody knows fuck,’ he says. He puts emphasis on the last word. He says, ‘It’s in all the movies.’

The boy says, ‘Fuck.’

Yacob says, ‘Fuckety fuck.’

The boy says, ‘Shit.’

‘Ah, another fine one,’ says Yacob.

‘Wanker,’ says the boy. ‘Motherfucker.’

Yacob holds his hand up to indicate that the boy should stop. He mutters, ‘Some kind of connoisseur.’ He leans behind him and pulls a sheaf of forms out of a drawer. He takes one

of these, turns it over and puts it in front of the boy, blank side up. He drops the pen on top and touches the paper with his finger.

'Go on,' he says. 'Why don't you draw something? Draw.'

He makes motions in the air with pincered fingers, as though scribbling.

'Draw a picture for me,' he says.

It is one of Maria's ideas – the woman who came in to tell him of the boat. Recently she told him about how she gets the children to reveal things about themselves. You let them draw something and they will usually draw their family. Occasionally they will write names down too, a name above each of the characters, or just *papa*, *mama*. Sometimes they will draw soldiers, or they will write the name of their country, or a telephone number. Yacob had said to her, *We're not running a kindergarten. This is not art class. You are too soft. Our government wants forms filled out, boxes ticked, so that these people can be sent away.*

To him, it matters little whether the country they will be sent to is the one from which they came.

The boy looks at him.

'Draw,' Yacob says.

Yacob pokes his head out into the corridor to listen to the sounds. It is nothing urgent. One of them off the boat thinking that they have rights and that the treatment they are getting here is as bad as it's going to get. A foreign tongue, and the voices of Maria and Marcus trying to calm him down. Yacob wonders whether he should go and see. Whether it would be alright to leave the boy alone.

The boy is watching him.

'Come on,' Yacob says. He shuts the door and clicks his fingers in front of the boy's nose and points at the paper again. He picks up the pen and hands it to the boy. He says, 'Come

on come on come on, they will be on my back any minute. I don't know why I'm not kicking you out of here right now.'

But he does know why.

The boy is hesitant. Yacob hasn't any children of his own, but he has a nephew, his brother's son. The boy here reminds Yacob of his nephew only in that the boy is the exact opposite. Where his nephew is overweight and imperceptive, the boy is thin, alert. The boy's shoulders hunch protectively. The boy is taking nothing for granted. Yacob watches him settle the pen in his fingers and touch the nib to the paper.

After a minute, Yacob stops him, saying, 'No, no, no. I cannot read Arabic. Picture. Picture.'

He takes the paper away and draws a person with long hair. A person with short spiky hair. A car. His drawings are shambolic. His brother is the creative one in the family. Yacob has always had to work hard at everything he attempts, and the rewards are as nothing.

'Picture,' he says.

It takes him a moment to find a clean sheet of paper out of the morass on his desk. He puts it in front of the boy, gives him the pen again. Points at his drawings, points at the clean paper. He knows that, downstairs, the police guard are smoking and leaning against their van which is filling up with these people, who will be held until they can be sent away.

The boy draws a figure, a man holding a gun. The man has long hair, but by the set of his shoulders and the suit and tie he is wearing, it is clearly a man. The man is pointing a gun, and Yacob finds it hard to watch, though not because of the boy's slow, unsteady hand. He is unfamiliar with the flickering of his conscience, feels it as an internal assault. He goes round to the other side of the desk and moves some papers from here to there. There is a packet of cigarettes sitting off to one side, which he puts into the chest pocket of his shirt. He can feel

his body's response systems firing with the prospect of going outside and lighting one. It is like the crackle of electricity in his fingertips and his toes.

When the boy is done, he puts the lid on the pen. He makes to hand it to the man, but then decides to put it on top of his drawing instead. It seems imperative that the man doesn't come close to him again. The smell reminds him of the men outside the cafés back home, the ones who spend all day drinking cognac and smoking bidis, playing endless games of backgammon and scratching their bare, hairy chests. A rancid smoke sits in the air around them, too thick to be shifted by any breeze. If they are drunk enough, they could get to tormenting the boy whenever he passes them. Even now, hundreds of miles away, the sound of tossed dice clatters through his mind.

Yacob says, 'Good. Now we have to go.'

He decides not to look at what the boy has drawn, but when he picks up the paper he cannot stop himself. He finds his eye pulled to it. The pen rolls across the desk and falls to the floor.

Yacob recognises the picture. It is an image familiar around the world, whatever country you might be from.

They are lucky, most of them. They are chosen. This is what each of them understands about their situation, even as the boat floods with water and its sides collapse.

A thin strip of land is visible on the horizon, and some of them wave their arms at it and call out. Fate is a cruel arbiter. Not one of them can swim.

Lips pray unceasingly. The baby is restless, sensing its mother's fear. The father is kissing his baby and he is kissing the mother, and through his fingers he plays a thin prayer rope, turning the knots compulsively with a thumb.

The boat underneath them is becoming flaccid, diffuse. Wherever the boy puts his weight it sinks beneath him. They're all on their hands and knees, trying to spread themselves, to gain some balance. Two men are trying to hold up the sides, but wherever they pluck the material up, it falls in another place, taunting them.

Finally, as though bored with the spectacle of their panic, the boat capsizes, tossing them into the water.

The old woman screams. The mother, caught off guard, loses her grip on the baby. It drops through the water like a stone. The father is too busy flailing, trying to keep himself afloat, to notice the mother's grief-stricken shrieks. She grabs for the father but he catches her in the face with his forearm and then he is going, too, slipping out of sight with an oddly balletic twist to his raised arm, his fingers splayed in an artful gesture of farewell. The old man never resurfaces after going under that first time. The old woman is trying hard to keep herself in the life vest which is too big for her. The straps puff up around her ears. It threatens to shrug her out of it. She holds it tight.

A man tries to hang on to what is left of the boat, but the material has no air in it; it winds itself around his arms and he cannot get loose. He makes strangled sounds as he inhales water and vomits it up and struggles to free himself.

Some of the others are able to tread water for a while, to their surprise. There is something atavistic about swimming, the innate impulse to cycle the legs and throw the arms, the belief that movement, action, will save them, rather than merely delaying the inevitable.

Unused to the exertion and rhythm of swimming, though, they tire quickly and drop, one by one, some uttering a brief shout to their god, or to a long-dead family member that they believe they will see on the other side, before the ocean seals itself over them.

The boy's brother is the last but one to go. The boy tries to hold him up, but the vest will not take the extra weight. The boy is crying. The brother gasps for air and makes a warning

noise, the kind their father makes when he disapproves of something the boy has done. Then his brother looks over at the strip of land with a wild, demented gaze, his head bobbing spastically with the effort to keep himself up. He says, ‘Swim.’ The boy follows his brother’s gaze and sees the land which looks blue and flat, a straight thumb, and when he looks back his brother has already gone.

The mother kicks around in circles for a while, moaning and crying. The boy watches her, not knowing where else to look. It feels as though there is something stuck in his throat. Eventually, the mother slips herself out of the vest and disappears below the surface, to meet the same fate as her husband and the child she failed to protect. Her life vest rocks on the water, taunting the boy.

The boy finds it surprisingly easy to kick his legs and move forwards. The old woman has managed to get herself into her own vest more comfortably, although she is reclined backwards. They try not to look when one of the bodies rises to the surface and floats, face up.

The old woman takes his hand and she kisses the backs of his fingers and he sees that she is crying. They kick at the water inexpertly, the old woman facing the sky, the boy on his front trying to fathom the mysterious depth below them. Soon, the boat with the flag comes out to meet them.

Yacob touches the backs of his fingers to his lips. His knuckles are dry, cracked.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he says, for a moment expecting the boy to understand him and respond.

The boy has drawn it from memory, his favourite poster, almost his favourite possession in the world. His brother bought it for him from the market for his birthday and he had taped it to the wall above his bed. It is a scene from Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, the two hitmen

standing side by side, their bodies canted to the left, guns raised. They look dressed for a funeral. Their shoulders are set, ready to cushion the kickback from their pistols.

'You have some talent,' Yacob says.

But it isn't just admiration for the drawing that Yacob is feeling. He is thinking again of his nephew, and of being glad he hasn't any children of his own, of the sadness of pushing your flesh and blood into a desperate, irresponsible world. Of colluding in another human being's inexorable demise.

He folds the paper into quarters and puts it in his back pocket.

He says, 'Up. Now.'

The boy seems to understand this, or perhaps he only understands the urgency in Yacob's tone. He stands, pushing the chair back a little with his legs as they straighten. The boy's heart misses a beat, and he thinks how strange that a missed beat doesn't feel like an absence at all, but a force, a fist striking the chest. He understands that something is about to happen.

When Yacob comes round the tin can, alone, there are flashes behind his eyes where the sun's glare meets his corneas. There is a single throb in his head, as though his brain swells and shrinks in one beat. As he comes round the building – the tin can and its narrow alleyway between other storage containers waiting to be lifted onto a ship – things swim into focus: the police guard not idly smoking but alert, pacing, rifles cocked; refugees dazed from being at sea, unsteady on their feet, expecting the ground to shift beneath them; and Maria emerging from the crowd, saying, 'Where's the boy?' Beyond the slipway, where this new boat – another large inflatable; a dinghy, he would call it – sits at a tilt, the light shatters over the water and floats in flickering shards on its surface.

Two members of the guard hear what Maria has said and approach Yacob, who stands there blinking for a moment. He shakes a cigarette out of the packet and lights it, and then points with his holding fingers at the stacks of storage containers, the network of alleyways between them, wide enough for a boy's shoulders. The crane stretches its neck out over it all, as though about to dip its hook and pull something out of the maze.

'I'm afraid,' he says. 'I'm afraid the boy is making a nuisance of himself.'