

*Letters  
from the  
Takeaway*

SAMPLER

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Khaled Hakim

Letters  
from the  
Takeaway

*and Other Distances*

Shearsman Books

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## Foreword

Tim Atkins

Khaled Hakim. (a) We loved him, and (b) he pissed everybody off most of the time, all of the time<sup>1</sup>. Long before he became a famous poet, according to legend, he ran away from home in Birmingham and washed up in New York's lower east side, alternating between the Poetry Project at St Mark's Place and the kitchens of a family-owned Avenue A curry house<sup>2</sup>. Every time he appeared at a poetry event in the mid-1990s he insisted on telling people that he didn't know who he was or what he was doing there, and half of the time, we believed him. Back in the days when Miles Champion & Caroline Bergvall were slim young poetry groovers upon whom everybody's poetry hopes rode for the possibility of a non-combative, body-odour-free, and sexy new poetry, Khaled was the great, glowering, anti-hero whose twerking stirred up and excited the 37 writers who comprised the British mid-nineties dirty white experimental poetry pantomime.

The scene, back then, revolved around readings organized by Drake Stutesman & Thomas Evans<sup>3</sup> at the East West Gallery in Ladbroke Grove, and somewhat latterly, at readings organized by Miles Champion<sup>4</sup> & myself<sup>5</sup> at the Platform Gallery off Brick Lane.<sup>6</sup> (Mike Diss – a lovely man – also ran a series called Vertical Images. He now appears to be a psychotherapist in Walthamstow). It's hard to imagine, these days, how few events there were for poets under 40. It's even more unimaginable to

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<sup>1</sup> make sure y/ rite loads (all footnotes from an email from K.H. *Some Pointers for My Forrword*)

<sup>2</sup> Make sur yoo tell them I was Asian befor Asians wer invented

<sup>3</sup> Mak sure y/ tel them I saved Tomas from a drunken rapist

<sup>4</sup> mak sure yu tell them how i deliverd Milezs first born on th back of a milk flote

<sup>5</sup> make sure y/ tel them how i deliverd yr first born in a tomata greenhouse

<sup>6</sup> tell them I deliverd Tomases first born on a skatbord in Longleet safari

imagine how few poets there were – at all – who were reading L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and who were familiar with *any* non-British innovative poetries. Karlein van den Beukel & Dell Olson were happily active, Caroline Bergvall was in Dartington (THREE women – heavens!) and there were no poets on the scene who weren't middle class and white. In a way, this was understandable – for however much we wanted an open and expansive milieu for poets of all shapes & sizes, skin colours & sexualities, it would have almost certainly seemed a closed-off and forbidding space. For Khaled, I think that this was part of its gruesome attraction.<sup>7</sup>

When Khaled appeared in the mid-90s, presenting himself as a Paki/Brummie/Auteur/Filmmaker (his words – he is the only person who I have ever heard use the word “Paki”<sup>8</sup>) his work was a source of enormous excitement. (He's always reminded me of Kevin Rowland in his manias and popular appeal, but that's another story). You get the poetry in this volume, of course, and it, to my mind, mirrors the man himself very closely. Both are full of contradiction. Part of the joy of reading Khaled's work is the way that the reader swings from enjoyment to amazement to outrage and surprise with every new line. It's like descending a high alpine peak on a hairpin road at top speed. The constant changes of direction maintain extremely high levels of excitement but you never know if the next turn is going to surprise you with a completely different perspective or throw you over the edge – and then there's the occasional urge to vomit. This is what you get with the poems and this is what, after midnight, in a poetry basement in east or west London in 1998, you might have got with the human.

To the best of my memory, Khaled was last sighted in the basement of The Platform Gallery in Brick Lane in the

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<sup>7</sup> Tell them i saved British ptry from global warming & sliding off the Canford Cliffs

<sup>8</sup> tell them im the onlie black poet in the wld



autumn of 1999. He became immediately unobtainable and his rare & fugitive poetry publications dried up. He taught Sufi drumming somewhere in North London and the only reason that I know this is because I found a thumbnail picture and an advertisement in a community centre in about 2007 when I was trying to get back in touch. He didn't answer my emails for well over a decade, but that didn't stop me publishing some early poems in an edition of onedit.net. I've always read and adored his work. Khaled, in person, has *always* been a compelling and beautiful experience. And at bottom, of course, he has always been a long-gone, lost and lovable individual, banging on his bendir and dancing around the living-room like a beatnik old daddy.

I adore Khaled, of course, for all of these reasons. However nutty and confrontational he was (and he was), he was also hugely tender and vulnerable. As with many great poets (there – I've said it) there is the ability to hold and combine a great many contradictory impulses and thoughts. Part of Khaled always wanted everybody's approval (who doesn't?) and one way that he got this was by being a dazzling conversationalist who would dive into any conversation with passion, depth of knowledge, and strongly-held opinions. (He always said that he had no strongly-held opinions – *of course*). He always knew that his work and his background was a source of great attraction to a group of white liberal poets in a depressingly vanilla landscape, but (and there is always a but) I know that he also felt that his colour or class or accent was a source of exclusion. It's one of the major tropes of his poetry and came up constantly in his conversation. Did it make us feel uncomfortable? Well – yes – because we didn't feel or notice it half as much as he did (and of course we all yearned for this inclusivity) and part of Khaled's mission was to make us feel uncomfortable about our participation in such exclusionary practice. It is a practice which continues in much of the British avant-garde to this day. And so – a typical evening

would run along the lines of Khaled being brilliant and being a fabulously unpredictable livewire, and would (depending on which way his wind was blowing) end in camaraderie and collective endeavour (we were all in the same room because of our shared love of poetry, after all) or in misunderstanding and division. As with all small groups of young poets there was always room for tiny personal or poetic differences to lead to large disagreements. Khaled's desire for approval was balanced by his disgust with himself at liking such bourgeois poetry and his need to have conversations with so many non-takeaway-type writers.<sup>9</sup>

One of Khaled's great tricks has been his ability to turn these profound and ongoing contradictions into such a finely performed poetry. It's the most honest and the most dishonest poetry that I know<sup>10</sup>. I suspect that Khaled knows he is a genius. I am sure that it pisses him off that the people who believe him to be such have very little cultural capital and don't have as much talent as him. Perhaps it annoys him that his creativity lies in a field where nobody is paying much attention<sup>11</sup>. I have no idea if he feels that he is paid attention by a vanilla audience because – as well as being a great writer – he's such an exotic and shiny old bird. I'd hazard a guess that at least some of his non-P.C. statements are made to prick the balloons of his perceived readers as opposed to being deeply-felt convictions. At times, I'm reminded of the feeling that I used to get when watching John Waters' movies; he's doing it to get a different kind of attention. I believe that he's also doing it to make us question our own positions and assumptions.

An introduction to a collection of long-forgotten and recently-discovered poems is the perfect place to make outrageous claims. Here goes: Khaled Hakim is the great lost

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<sup>9</sup> tel them I was the onlie non wite w/in a 300 mile radius

<sup>10</sup> tell them im Bangladeshi i only look white

<sup>11</sup> tell them abowt my gurilla training

British experimental writer of the last quarter century<sup>12</sup>. I believe that his importance (which concerns me less than the pleasure that his work gives – but that’s another story) lies in the fact that he brings a powerful and original set of ingredients to the most important kind of contemporary poetry. His filmmaking background and clear engagement with the work of Stan Brakhage changed the speed and the angle of his L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-polarized poetry. He was the only UK poet to work with David Antin’s conversational poetics. His Brummie-styled phonetic writing drew parallels with the similarly individual universes of Tom Leonard and Bill Bissett, and his class and colour were – and still are, of course – important.<sup>13</sup> The conversations that his writing and being sparked in the 1990s have never really been followed through in British poetry. Danez Smith, in a recent interview, stated that “British poetry is a decade or two behind America in terms of publishing people of colour and in the awards and in recognising the need for different gatekeepers.” I’d say he’s wrong. In terms of size and quality, it is a hundred years behind. Who knows what would have happened if Khaled hadn’t disappeared into a box of floppy discs? The world would have been completely different. It would certainly have been bigger and it most probably would have been better.

Bernadette Mayer, as ever, says things best: *Wake up! The cobra commander is back. To make love, turn to page 27. To die, turn to...* whatever title they cook up for this kind-of-okay-for-a-middle-aged-Brummie’s long lost floppy disc poetry collection. Look upon these works, ye mighty, and tremble.

Dr<sup>14</sup> Tim Atkins<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> make sure yu tell them you owe yr entier poetick career to plagiarizing my waste bin w/ my permission

<sup>13</sup> tel them about my gurilla

<sup>14</sup> mak sure yu sound qwalified

<sup>15</sup> Did i tell yoo im Asian?

## Acknowledgements

During a brief period in the '90s I allowed to be published less than a dozen poetic works – I can't be sure of the number or how it happened. I can't be sure of when they were written or what order. The last publication was in Nicholas Johnson's *Foil: defining poetry 1985-2000* which neatly closes the period. Indeed, I believe I never proofed those anthology pieces, left no forwarding address for copies, was uncontactable for the opening launch, and had already disappeared from the poetry world for the next fifteen years. That is pretty emblematic of my careless disregard, irritated observance, and ultimate ingratitude during a time that would leave me as scarcely a footnote in an already marginal activity.

That life got packed in boxes, and the unpublished works and drafts became anachronisms on floppy disks. And never another thought about it till about 2015. I opened a box, read some handwritten pages, couldn't remember writing them, but thought he had something whoever he was. I believed the majority of my work including the performative routines was inaccessible until someone told me that floppy disk readers were *cheap*.

When I put toes into the innovative poetry scene again in 2016, I was a nobody. I'm not sure I was anybody when I was active. For a mainly performative poet it felt like there wasn't a gig to be had for love nor money. Then I went to the Small Publishers Fair in Conway Hall and met four of my erstwhile publishers. Many thanks to Kelvin Corcoran, Andrew Duncan, Tony Frazer, and Nicholas Johnson for their time and encouragement since then.

I tell myself that I only bothered to put together the manuscripts for two books (this volume, and the forthcoming performance routines) because I was midwifing the birth of a very different work with a very different tenor – a 'degraded

epic' that had taken over six years. The old work would clear a space for *The Book of Naseeb* to make a splash. But as I spent time with the older work it seemed a shame they'd spent so long in utter obscurity given that the project I was engaged in was so singularly aberrant.

Looking at the prosody of both the 'poems' and the performative work – both of which disdain the poetic for a hollowed-out discursiveness – I couldn't get a feel for what was originally behind it apart from dadaistic gesture. It took months before I remembered that it didn't owe anything to then-current poetics or individual poets because it was in reaction to the whole framework of poetry, and that the language I used to navigate with came from the artworld and experimental film-making.

Inevitably I am a stranger to these poems. Others gave them a home. Opening up that cardboard box marked 'Poetics' it contained letters and manuscripts from poets, invitations to publish: all I wager I left unanswered. I am being reminded of supposed conversations with publishers offering to do a book – I have no recollection and would have regarded it in the same manner as an invitation to join them at the gym.

I am grateful to that initial group of poet-supporters who congregated around the East West Gallery readings organized by Thomas Evans, and later platforms with Miles Champion and Karlien van den Beukel, whose faith I tried with my wildly uneven performance routines. It is to Thomas Evans I owe the most. He it was who first *got* me: the minimalist poetics and the ear behind it, particularly the performative work which is couched in fuck-off dumbness.

This year I have suddenly realized that 30 years ago I was the only non-white pebble on the UK experimental poetry shore. My poetics certainly played up 'non-bourgeois' tropes – the belligerence, the anti-intellectualism, the denial of sensitivity. But the damage and destructive tendencies that have brought me to invisibility are the same forces that led

me to take up an occulted practice in the first place – one that cuts me off from much of my family and community.

I want to know if anything I did is relevant now. Only old people know me. But by temperament I am an adolescent autodidact who forged an occasional poetry of narrative, theory, and insult.

I am just starting out.

Walthamstow 2018

*Letter to Brakhage* was published both by Miles Champion, who wheedled it out of me for *Tongue to Boot* #3 (Summer 1996), and by Tim Atkins in *Onedit* #9. And I hear there are recordings of it in libraries. Written much earlier, as my first poem in this form, I am amazed I got it right first time. Stan kindly answered the letter.

*Letter to Antin* was picked up by Andrew Duncan for *Angel Exhaust* 14 (Winter 1996) and was also reproduced in *Foil*. David didn't answer the letter. The address to Nicholas Johnson at the beginning is anachronistic: Nicholas never saw it till it was going to *Foil*. But I owe him that much – I'm proud he thinks as highly of my work as he does and part of me thinks this book should have been amongst the voice-led Black Mountain-conscious poets of his Etruscan Books.

*Run Poem* was published as a chapbook for Kelvin Corcoran's Short Run series (Spring 1996) and was also reproduced in *Foil*.

*Second Letter to Brakhage* was circulated in manuscript and probably reached a wider readership than some published pieces. I thought it got formally published somewhere but I'm not sure. From internal evidence it's the earliest completed poem in this book.

*Second Letter from the Takeaway* is the first of my poems to be published, in *Angel Exhaust* 12 (Autumn 1995).

*Letter from the Takeaway 1* & *Letter from the Takeaway 4* (as originally titled) were published in a double issue of *Talus* 9/10 (1997) guest-edited by Thomas Evans.

*Third Letter from the Takeaway* was published after my return to poetry, in *Shearsman* magazine 111/112 (Spring 2017).

*Letter to Peter Gidal/Kurt Kren* was originally presented at an East West reading as *Letter to Gidal*. I still regard it as primarily a performance piece, but there tends to be cross-over between textual and performative pieces. I believe it was originally unfinished.

*Letter for S* was published in *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985-2000*, and aside from perhaps site-specific performances it is the last poetry of this period. It's also probably my favourite, as it points to a new landscape of feeling.

*Ben-Hur* is roughly contemporary with *Letter for S* but got forgotten as I left poetry. It was published in *Shearsman* magazine 117/118 (Winter 2018), guest-edited by Kelvin Corcoran.

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# PROEM

## Letters to Khaled Hakim

Dear Khaled Hakim

I knew you 16 going 28 yers ago wen y/ wer pretending to be human

& now Im flying bak – a meat seeking epistel burning in the decayed aire – th spaceshop Old Hill Takaway traveling to its own past for a Chicken Madras & a keema nan –

who wil i meet on th counter, is it me or is it yu –

Are yu stil waiting otside biding yr tyme to smack my uncl in the face? Go eezy on him – we hav oure hole lyf to be a failyr.

I hav vital news. Yu must publish bifer y/ get frozen sholder. In th futur we ar impregnated by Saurian nanobots spred by perfum sampls in wimens magazins. We wer on th brink of getting wiped owt. And it is yorr unborn children who turnd th tyde. I wont tell yu who the mother is in case it afects th futur. But mak sur y/ apply for Child Tax Credits.

No not reely.

How ar yoo?

Ye kno I walkt from it all.

Fifteen yrs ago God dyed to wake me up. I blew my hed owt.

Ive been to th further littoral of realizacion. The Hero w/out a book. I waz *ashik*. I waz rubarb crumbled. I wont tel yoo who dyed – it mite affect yr futur.

I was a pig farmer on th Norfolk Brords wen a lone emissary cam stryding acros th growse feelds & askd me to riturn:

I cant return, I dont rede anymor.

And he sez, A R Orage sez abot Cyril Connolys 100 Best Books: Wat is anywon doing reeding a hundred books? As if ther ar a hunderd books worth reeding. 10 books are enoufh if you ar *really* to rede. *Won* book – if it is th rite book.

Ah but A R Orage hadnt herd of th badlands razed w/ theorie the anti essensialist, th alyrick absenteezm, th qweer demanding departments

Oh dont get me started.

Ive got a favor to ask Khaled, Im having cashflow problems & i just need to borrar yr credit cards. Im not even going to tak owt any money, y/ no me. Im doing an event on Sardy, Ile put it strait bk. I no yve got the money ya cheep mendicant dormows. Id reely apreceate this.

I cant even remember, wat did we do in th dark ages?

Can y/ remind me wy I was ever interestid in minimalist poetiks. Th religius feeling has fallen away & only wats left is left.

Yr bro Khaled  
*London 2018*

Dere KH

Is it realy yoo. Do yu recognize me – Ive com flashing from  
th past in th photon shop at one farthing a second.

And here y/ are the incompetant back of howse,  
the next big sandwich,  
a linen suted world muzician  
th peripatetick howse sitter

Fuk me, you havnt changed.

Work fals down th gradiant at minimum wage  
the tyme expanding to fill all posible went  
mor seconds more happy happy

Go, yoo hav erved yor varicos vains,  
spend it on stilts

How ar y/ going to rescu me in posteritie – are we all being  
retraned on permanent Yooth Traning Sceemes ware in th  
futur everywon wil hav a job for 15 minits.

I stand w/ sublime tears on the campus tuchline watching th  
first XI – my toilet paper is calld Freedom

35 yers ago I was a rickshaw driver in Bangladesh & they  
kidnappd me & dressd me up as a New Romantik child  
bride; then they put me in a matter transformer w/ Prince &  
created a lyf size famin victim in winkelpickers – a moment  
representing a constituency of damige & transgression &  
other peer consensus. Ther wer peple dying of a plage of  
thrush in alternativ kitsch capitals –

But I digress

now i surface to British post avants – heeres Tim & Jeff  
hilson & Karleen & Peter yaeger & Keston & – all wite  
collar criminals.

Now I am middel aged & familied & inevitably unemployd  
& asking: Who ar the lions of Universiti poetry;

a categorie as definabl as pub rock

luxuriantly varied, somhow divergent practises produse a  
monocultur of poets.

Surly ther was a tyme wen inovative poetiks was not tenured  
to a Theorhoea that betrays the anxietie of subject status – in  
a langwige of hieratick snake oil hucksters

Jezus Crist, do ye kno wat its lyk to be looking at an  
online poetiks publisher wich reproduces its contributors  
departments & akademik status – Senior Lecturer Universiti  
this, & Universitie Hed of Creativ that – w/ all th pomp of a  
roll call of titled Patrons to an investment bank

Yee myriad few to ‘disrupt th workings of capital’ & safegard  
the power & privalige of akademick robber barons

Let me duble think myself out of that line in cas anywon  
ever offers me a job.

Bring me my citation  
bring me my homspun  
enter th munisipal gardens of retarded parkys

Now I am old & familyd & inevitably unemployabel, &  
asking, Why havent I killd anywon yet? It wd be a releef.  
As it wd be a releef to be a human beeng. We can stop  
thrashing th wyf & affirm th Logos.

Yoo remind me of my gums exploding lik a fossilizd guppy.

Dere KH, yoo wer a minimalist? I hav no idea. Was yr silens part of a project?

Im sorry mate, id realy lik to help y/ but my moneys al tyed up at th moment Ive got to do a moove & hire a van. Unless I uze the shop for th moov. Wy dont yoo work for my uncel – hes going to be short of a waiyter isnt he?

I name this ship Old Hil Indian Takaway & Van Rentals  
may God bless her & all who peel the onions.

Kindest  
Khaled

*Birmingham 1993 or possibly 1998 or 2000-and-something*

Dear Khaled

Wy ar yoo leving. I set th controls to 2000-and-sumthing & found thers nowon in.

Actully I dont fancy going back ther.

You kno yu remind me of mee wen I was yorr age –  
a subjectspeking Juvenal  
an I that dremes of margareen  
20 yeres a colapsed khimera w/ th mirrer gazing at me as a  
woman

Let me tell y/ abot my vow of silens w/ the Iluminati – it  
waz after won of my conserts & a woman & her adolescent  
dawhter gave me a mysterius glossy brochur w/ a card  
inviting me to join. I think she was waving th 12 yr old girl