

from:

Event Horizon (*Händelsehorisonten*) by Balsam Karam

introduced and translated by **Fiona Graham**

With *Event Horizon*, Balsam Karam has written one of the most powerful and original debut novels to be published in Sweden in recent years. The setting is a city that has deported a group of disenfranchised people to a shanty town, the Edges. Here the dispossessed, essentially mothers and children, eke out a precarious existence. They recycle the city's cast-off junk and hawk trinkets to white tourists.

Young Milde, the central figure, grows up to be as strong as her mother Essa, a teacher and community organiser. But one day she and her friends revolt against the government's injustice, and after gruelling torture Milde faces execution. Or is she instead sent on a one-way journey into outer space, in a bizarre experiment involving a black hole? Her community, at any rate, believes she has crossed the event horizon into eternity. And thus her martyrdom confers immortality.

Balsam Karam, whose Kurdish family came to Sweden from Iraq, via Iran, stresses that *Event Horizon* is no dystopic fantasy. The deprivation experienced by the people of the Edges – but also their courage and solidarity – reflect the reality of refugees and displaced persons everywhere.

PROLOGUE

On Earth, in a place like any other, where a chequerboard city stretched down towards the ocean, its broad beaches now pushing the sea back, now letting it overflow, one of the mothers from the Edges knelt in the glow of the lanterns strung along the promenade and adjusted her bike chain.

As always at night, she had picked herself up from the ground – ground like any other – shaking the sand and seashells from her jumper; the starry sky, black and boundless, had unfurled before her, and her finger had followed the Plough towards Orion and Ursa Minor, continuing past Gemini and Virgo, and stopping at Venus, now larger and brighter than ever.

She had studied the starry vault and, by the light of her torch, made detailed notes on the dimensions of the night sky and the behaviour of the celestial bodies that evening, beginning with the date and the time, and then commenting on any notable differences from the

previous evening (very few), on the conditions expected tomorrow evening (very favourable), and on what the stars had to say in general about the current state of the world (significantly more than usual).

Soon she would have filled the sparkly gold notebook Essa had given her, and she would again have to collect white paper shopping bags from the city's shops and, by the light of the Edges' only lantern, measure out, cut and bind her own notebooks to take with her. At each birthday she would ask Essa how she had managed to afford it, and each year Essa's only reply would be a kiss and two cups of hot coffee for them to take down to the slope in the afternoon light. Essa would sit down where the brush framing the slope grew thicker, just as the sky was lifting the mist from over the Edges before letting it fall as dew at dusk.

Here, standing on the beachside promenade, the sky was still bright with stars and the road that led inland was deserted and empty. Pocketing her notebook, she picked up a full bicycle basket from the sand, slowly pushed off and pedalled along the road, polishing the fruit gleaned from city dustbins against her sweater, which now hung ragged against her body. Biting into the ripe plums she'd purloined from the vegetable stall that had once been hers, she thought warmly of Pepe and his cart.

Maybe Pepe had spotted her earlier that day as she was walking around the stall, just as the afternoon crowds were thickening and bag after bag was being lifted up for him to weigh and collect payment; maybe he'd taken a startled step back when, after edging discreetly around the watermelons and the turnips, she'd popped up next to the maize cobs displayed two by two and the plums, yellow and pink; maybe he'd wanted to speak then but had held back, unsure what to say or how, unsure whether she wanted to be seen, or if she'd meant to come and go unnoticed. She'd been discreet, admittedly, but she'd felt no shame at her actions; there was no shame in taking what you needed, and anyway, who if not Pepe could tell her she had the right to help herself to what the earth had provided, when she herself had simply offered it to him one day, her arms outstretched as if in a hug? Take it, it's yours, she'd said, and Pepe had gazed after her when she turned and, as now, moved off slowly towards the Edges.

Early summer, jasmine trees in bloom along the roads leading out of the city. The only one among the mothers from the Edges who had once been a vegetable seller was now on her way home to those she loved, who loved her back, and everywhere she felt as though the world was sharing warmth and the trees their embrace, and as if everything in between wished her well. The rats that cowered from the white tourists' feet during the day crept cautiously out along the road, and in a tender-hearted moment she threw them two soft

tomatoes and the half-eaten plum from her mouth. Here, she whispered, cycling onward, I hope you enjoy these.

Although she didn't know it, later that night she would be the last of the mothers to see Milde alive, when she cycled past the abandoned execution site and saw it lit up.

During the day, the nooses hung high enough to catch the attention of passers-by whenever a gust lifted them above the wall, but now, just before daybreak, two out of four floodlights were on and a white van was parked outside.

The vegetable seller halted, leaned the bicycle against the wall, and climbed onto the saddle to get a better view.

There stood a woman: young, gaunt, guarded by two white men, with a further two close by. Her hair was shorn and she wore an eyepatch; her hands were bound behind her back.

One of the men, just a boy, pulled off the eyepatch and handed it to the others. He spoke to her, waited for an answer. She replied – but what? It was impossible to hear, and soon the exchange was over.

The boy drew a dark veil over the woman's head and took her slippers from her. White as chalk, he led her over to the noose, and the woman stood with her head held high while the loop was pulled tight.

Everywhere it was still early summer, and the jasmine trees were still jasmine trees, now just as before, and the sky was streaked with blueish green, and from now on every dawn would be linked with this.

No sound but the men's voices could be heard from the place of execution when the vegetable seller climbed down from the bike saddle and sped on her way.

Later, when Essa received a delivery – the few items that had belonged to Milde crammed together at the bottom of a cardboard box – the vegetable seller would spot the eyepatch and realise who the young woman had been. The mothers and children of the Edges would set off towards the city that same night, leaving the slope behind them and moving out onto the main road, passing the petrol stations and making their way in among the whitewashed houses that marked the beginning and end of the city. In groups and in a line, in twos or fours, like beads on a string – straggling here, clustered there – the mothers and children of the Edges would make their way through the city, transforming every burning car into a lantern and every lobbed stone into a song. They walked, and along the seaside promenade where the children had so often wandered, holding a cooler bag or a rake, deckchairs in flames were now piled

high and bins emptied out over the street; along the avenues where the children had dragged their raw feet, the mothers now walked, stopping at every café and restaurant, asking people to get up, to come with them. The children and the mothers cried out: no rest, no peace until the Edges, which Milde loved and which loved her back, found out where she was – but no news came, and no Milde returned home.

As if hunted, the vegetable seller would set out over sugarcane fields that were sharp against her bare feet, making her way up towards the red glow of the mountains that towered in the east. She would stride out into the steppe and into the semi-desert and further up into the cool and quiet of the caves. Once she was there, enveloped by stone and dust, she would seek out the place where her hero Milde had once crouched in hiding, and lay herself down.

Back then, when no one but Milde had been declared wanted and no one else had been accused of starting the fire which, in the heat, had spread from the City Planning Office to the Ministry of Education and the embassy buildings next to it, the Edges had clubbed together, using the takings from every beach ball, towel and china necklace to buy Milde all the tinned food and bottles of water she could carry. They'd asked her to be as careful as she possibly could; told her they'd check on her now and then, bring her anything she needed, but she just had to understand it was vital for her to stay in hiding, and not take it into her head to come home – did you hear what I said? Not for a while, Essa had begged, as she went on packing her daughter's bag – don't come home for a few months, Essa had said, turning towards Milde, who'd nodded and given her word: yes, of course, a few months, no problem.

There, possibly leaning against the very same cave wall, the vegetable seller would then remain seated for two days and three nights, without water or food, sleeping only when the sun, white and immense, beat down on the walls of the cave, forcing her to inhale ammonia fumes from the urine-sated air.

When the vegetable seller returned to the Edges, a story had taken shape that she stuck to once she began to write.

That was how it was, and that was how it happened, she wrote: such was Milde, and such was her eternal life.

Milde is seventeen years old and has just reached the mouth of the cave. There are no drawings carved into the walls or floor, nothing but dung and dust. Picking up a lump, she holds it to her nose, trying to guess what creature produced it, but can't tell. Are these lizard

droppings? Hard to say.

Milde pulls the shawl from her shoulders and sweeps it over the ground where she is to sit, eat, sleep and stand; she beats the walls of the cave with her shawl to make them yield up their dust, then sweeps it again and again over the ground.

She wants to sprinkle water on the floor to make the dust settle, but has none left for that. After drinking, she persuades herself that she needs to wash her face and hands at the end of the day, so for that purpose she chooses the spot where she intends to lay out her bedding. The water runs over her head, over her neck and breasts, and onto the cave floor, and so Milde gets what she wants: a sleeping place sprinkled with water. Good idea, practical, she thinks, sitting down, but then she finds herself at a loss.

It is May, and a few evenings ago, in the darkness of the city, Milde set two buildings ablaze. The third, with a guard on duty who saw and was able to give a description of Milde, caught fire by chance. Wind, the trees, she doesn't know how it happened. Lying down, she thinks of the guard who saw her, how startled he looked. Then she thinks of all the mothers and children of the Edges, and falls asleep.

MILDE, THE SPACE TRAVELLER FROM THE EDGES

On Earth, in a place like any other, where a chequerboard city stretched down towards the ocean, its broad beaches now pushing the sea back, now letting it overflow, a vegetable seller bent over the fruit she'd gathered, polishing one tomato after another on her shirt. Removing flies from the pile of cos lettuces next to her, she picked weeds and flowering heads out of the coriander.

Morning, a market square. A hum rose from the place, leafy and muffled, and along the streets jasmine blossoms burst into fragrance and prominence; beneath the trees lay cats in clusters, and along the avenues waiters would soon be serving white tourists a first cup of coffee and later a glass of red wine; on the beach people would hastily undress, one after the other, and spring into the sea; while in the schoolyards bells would soon toll, calling pupils to class.

Soon the square filled with older people who'd finished their morning tea but weren't yet ready to start their midday meal. In flimsy caps and light-coloured tops, they crossed the square to greet the vegetable seller at her pitch, settled themselves on the park benches to the right of the library and pulled out battered packets of cigarettes. While they were having a

discreet puff in the shade of the cherry trees, swapping a few words here and there, the vegetable seller would come over to offer everyone a peach, collecting a handful of cigarettes in exchange. She'd smoke two straight off, thank them and move slowly back to her vegetable stall, from which she had a view out over the square.

There was a long time to wait until nightfall and the starry sky for which the vegetable seller yearned: another ten hours on the stall and an hour's clearing up before the walk home. She would pull the cart down the cobbled streets lined by tumbledown houses and all the way to the blue door which she'd fastened with a hook for want of anything better; from there she would heave the cart this way and that, as best she could, down the long, narrow passageway, and once she'd reached the inner courtyard she'd set it against the wall and sit down. In due course she'd raise the energy to kick off the shoes she'd had on all day and to spread out the mattress she'd tucked away out of the early summer rain that would surprise the city now and then in the afternoon, stopping as abruptly as it had started. She would lie down on her back in the middle of the inner courtyard, and from this vantage point she would contemplate the starry vault in its immensity and infinite beauty.

[...]

In a square like any other – flanked by a fish restaurant, a tailor's shop, two public toilets and a library – two police officers and another white man made their way over the grooved flagstones. They had a woman with them.

The vegetable seller saw them approach, looked at the woman and tried to establish eye contact, but nonetheless failed to recognise her.

Though the thinnest of the four, the woman was also the most dignified figure; gliding like a carp, black-clad and close-cropped, she attracted the attention of passing children, who turned and stopped to gaze at her rolled-up trousers and big, baggy shirt, her black cloth bag, draped loosely over one shoulder, and her face, riven from eye to cheek by a scar.

How old was she? What was she doing there?

Later, the vegetable seller would write: Still early summer, and the sun drilled down, ever whiter, on the city; still morning, and a listless breeze cooled arms and legs, again causing the sand that lay scattered over the square to swarm from bench to bush and back, and blowing it in clouds towards the beach, where the summer tourists' white children, the first of the season, were shouting over one another, jumping to their feet, flinging beach balls around and whooping.

Soon someone would fill a pail with water and carefully carry it outside, then walk into the square, over the flagstones, and scatter handfuls of water to dampen the sand, releasing a cool fragrance. The cool would sweep triumphantly over the square, its pulses reaching the vegetable seller's stall and the basket-seller drowsing in the shade.

The cool would also reach the tall, majestic woman, who would halt for an instant, look around her, close her eyes. It was shortly before noon one Tuesday in May, and just as the policemen were about to force her onward, Milde herself would turn and continue walking.

In the library to which the astronomer and Milde were making their way under the watchful eyes of the police, the proposed experiment was set out like a lighted candle on the white table. It was mutable and nameless; impatiently, it waited for leave to speak.

On the table stood a large jug of cold water and a bowl of ripe peaches which the vegetable seller had picked and been paid for. Later, when she'd realised that the woman crossing the square hadn't been just anyone, but Milde, *that* Milde – the woman the vegetable seller had always wanted to meet, to hug and to praise – she would wish that she'd sold nothing at all to the astronomer, or that she'd sold the finest peaches in her pyramid of peaches, from which she would continually remove fruit, adding more as needed.

That was what she wished, and she pondered for a long time whether Milde had actually taken a peach to eat.

Later she would decide that Milde had taken one, but must have set it aside, sun-ripe and deep yellow, until the meeting was over. The vegetable seller couldn't imagine Milde biting into the luscious fruit while surrounded by those white men – ugh, no, unthinkable – but for a long time she toyed with the idea that Milde would have eaten her peach later in peace and quiet, on the back seat of the police car, as she gazed for the very last time on the city she would never have loved had it not encompassed the Edges.

Yes, that's how it must have been, the vegetable seller wrote, and while the meeting was in progress, Milde – the only civilised human being among those seated around that white table – had remained seated with her hands folded in her lap, waiting.