

## Maghrib

Sunset in Banda Aceh is a quiet time, of closed shop doors, a scattering of pedestrians and motorbikes, and a few cars like ours. Our Acehnese driver takes us to a café on the riverbank, hidden from the road, where those who don't pray are talking and laughing loudly over coffee. The air is scented with the coffee, with the rising river smells and the petrol that vaporises from motorbikes parked beside our table. The last of the sun sparkles on slow river water and glances off the graceful blue and yellow prows of fishing boats. Here we wait until we re-emerge into the evening and into the flow of headlights towards market and shops.

*Maghrib*, the sunset prayer time is over, but its residue is a kind of torpor - weighting the arms of a vendor as he pushes up a shutter, the movements of the stall keepers uncovering again their fruit and furniture. Motorbikes and cars too are slow to gather pace, and the endless sharp tooting of daytime has given way to the quieter, different evening.

*Maghrib* is known as the prayer of red twilight. It starts minutes after the sun sets, and its end is like the end of grief – a bone deep quietude that stills the body and readies it for the peaceful dark.

During decades of conflict across the countryside, this evening time of peace became the time of greatest fear. I still remember the note of regret in the voice of an old Acehnese man:

*Very hard, during the conflict. At the Maghrib prayer nobody showed up in the mosque. During the conflict time, when the afternoon comes, everyone closes the door, we stay at home and pray. Otherwise, they will take us if they come.*

*Sometimes, we will observe the situation; if it's safe then we will go and pray, behind the wall. But after prayer, we have no further chat; everyone just goes back home. If they happened to take us, we might not survive from what they will do.*

'We might not survive from what they will do'... but tonight we are in peace time. In the rare luxury of our car, we move through a twilight that is now blood red and tangerine orange, flaring out behind the black curves of the mosques and scudding over the low flat rooftops of the city.

The driver tunes in to the local radio station. As always there is a piece of music to mark the end of prayer and the return to the everyday world. Tonight's music, our driver tells us, is an Acehnese folk song played by a young local man on acoustic guitar. He reaches across and turns up the sound.

The air shivers to the first notes. It is piercing, melodic, a long drawn out keening. It quickens to a crescendo, slides into a decrescendo, and ends in a last long sigh. As we pick up speed through the darkening streets, the notes are a memory of all the grief in the world, brief moments of joy, and then, on a note breathed outwards, release and emptiness.