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In a Jail in Cuba Beat the Heart of a Poet

Afghan, Now Freed by U.S., Scribbled on Paper Cups but Never Stopped Writing

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan -- Among the old leather volumes in the library of Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost is a black plastic binder full of rumpled letters he wrote, sent from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

At the bottom of each form is a perfunctory salutation. The rest is taken up with the poems that helped Dost keep his sanity during nearly three years of confinement.

"Bangle bracelets befit a pretty young woman," begins one of the poems. "Handcuffs befit a brave young man."

The letters were one in a series of measures the Afghan-born author said he took to record the torrent of imagery and insights that flooded his brain nearly every day of his captivity.

At first, deprived of paper and pen, Dost memorized his best lines or scribbled them secretly on paper cups. Later, he was supplied with writing materials and made up for lost time by producing reams of poems and essays -- only to have all but a few of the documents confiscated by the U.S. government upon his release.

"Why did they give me a pen and paper if they were planning to do that?" Dost asked last week with evident anguish. "Each word was like a child to me -- irreplaceable."

The slight, soft-spoken man of 44 was back in his library Friday in this city near the Pakistani-Afghan border, surrounded by stacks of Islamic texts. It was just two days after the U.S. government had delivered him and 15 other former prisoners to Afghan authorities.

As soon as he was freed, Dost headed east to Peshawar, his home since the 1980s, where several hundred well-wishers and eight shy children waited to greet him in a large carpeted parlor.

Dost said he was arrested by Pakistani police in November 2001, along with his younger brother, Badr. The two were kept in solitary confinement for two months, then transferred to U.S. military detention in Afghanistan, where prisoners were kept in larger groups but forbidden to speak to one another.

The brothers, both gemstone dealers, said they had been falsely accused by enemies linked to the Pakistani government and detained in the frenzied hunt for terrorists that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. They said they had no links to either Afghanistan's Taliban regime or al Qaeda.

But their American captors, they said, seemed to believe otherwise. In Afghanistan, they said, Americans sheared off their beards, forbade them to wash, shoved their faces into the dirt and screamed curses in their ears during frequent interrogations.

The accounts could not be independently verified. The procedures are secret, and U.S. officials in Afghanistan refused to comment on the 16 detainees released last week.

Badr, who was released six months ago, said he volunteered to clean out the metal drums used by prisoners for bathing, hoping to get close enough to Dost to quietly compare notes on the accounts they were giving interrogators.

Dost had other priorities.

"What kind of spring is this," he whispered in verse as Badr approached, "where there are no flowers and the air is filled with a miserable smell?"

Badr said he gaped in disbelief. Even in prison, his brother was composing poems.

But Badr said he gained new appreciation for Dost's talent after they were shipped to Guantanamo in May 2002. The two were kept in separate wire pens, and could only glimpse each other from a distance. The U.S. government had declared all such prisoners "enemy combatants," subject to indefinite detention and ineligible for many rights accorded prisoners of war.

Badr said he grew increasingly depressed, until one day someone handed him a tiny note written on a flattened paper cup.

"It was just a short poem," Badr recalled. "Something about how in life everything is possible and we should be patient because freedom is close at hand." But it was enough to swell his heart with hope. "I was suddenly so happy," he said.

Dost had smuggled the note to Badr through an ingenious ruse. Every few days, representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross arrived with forms so prisoners could write brief letters home. They were given only 10 minutes, but that was enough to dash off other notes on hidden scraps of paper cups. Prisoners then passed the messages between wire pens on pulleys made of threads from their prayer caps.

Dost said he also began adding poems to the Red Cross forms. When they reached Peshawar, his oldest son carefully stowed each new missive in the black plastic binder.

In his first months of confinement, Dost's poetry had been full of despair. But now, having at last found a way to record his compositions, Dost said he felt his spirits lift. The heat and mosquitoes in the camp were as bothersome as ever, but his sense of hopelessness gave way to optimism and defiance.

"Just as the heart beats inside the darkness of the body, so I, although in a cage, continue to beat with life," began one letter-poem. "Those who have no courage or honor think themselves free, but are slaves. I am flying on the wings of thought, and so, even in this cage, I am more free than they."

Meanwhile, about a year after Dost's arrival in Cuba, he learned that U.S. authorities had agreed to allow the prisoners pens and paper.

The rules were strict. To prevent detainees from using pens as weapons, the guards gave out a flexible, rubber variety that made writing awkward. Each man was limited to one sheet of paper per shift, but Dost said fellow inmates donated their paper to him, then eagerly read his poems. One of his most popular was a satire criticizing the U.S. military for sending people to Cuba on thin evidence.

"That poem was on everybody's lips," he recalled with a proud smile.

Dost's satirical penchant had gotten him into trouble before. After he wrote a poem lampooning an Islamic cleric in Peshawar, he said, the man bore him such a grudge that he fingered him to Pakistani intelligence agents, leading to his arrest.

At Guantanamo, he said, he had to spend hours explaining to interrogators a satirical essay he had published in 1998, after President Bill Clinton offered a \$5 million reward for Osama bin Laden. Dost's essay offered a reward of 5 million afghanis -- then the equivalent of about \$113, he said -- for Clinton.

Eventually, he said, the interrogators seemed convinced that he had not meant any serious harm. In February 2004, Dost said, he was transferred to another section of Guantanamo where he had access to as much paper as he wanted.

He continued to produce hundreds of poems, translated the Koran into Pashto and wrote a text on Islamic jurisprudence.

In the meantime, Dost said, he was taken before a review tribunal, a brief procedure that he described as a "show trial," even though it ultimately resulted in his release. To date, U.S. military officials said, 232 Guantanamo detainees have been released and more than 500 remain in custody.

Often, Dost said, the guards conducted raids when officials suspected a detainee had issued a fatwa -- an Islamic decree against them. Each time, all inmates' writings were confiscated. Dost said he was assured that his work would be returned to him on his release.

But when that day finally came last week, Dost said, he received only a duffel bag with a blanket, a change of clothes and a few hundred papers -- a fraction of his writings.

This parting blow, he said, struck him harder than all the humiliations of confinement. On Friday, as well-wishers swarmed into his home, he said his only thought was how to recover his work.

"If they give me back my writings, truly I will feel as though I was never imprisoned," he said. "And if they don't . . ."

Dost's voice trailed off. For the first time in three years, he was at a loss for words.