

Say Wallahi

An excerpt from Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's [*Il comandante del fiume*](#)

Translated from the Italian by Hope Campbell Gustafson



We're excited to share with you today the work of another 2019 PEN Heim Translation Grant winner, Hope Campbell Gustafson, for her impressive translation of the novel [*Il comandante del fiume*](#) by the award-winning author of Italian-Somali descent, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah. This powerful novel is the coming-of-age story of the teenager Yabar, and it deals with war, colonialism, terrorism, racism, Islam, relationships, trauma, memory, as well as the movement and mixing of people and cultures and languages. And a street mural in London, with its haunting eyes of a young migrant, is the perfect accompaniment for the text.

This is a compelling read that we hope will transport you into a new world. Tell us what you think using @TranslateMonth and #TranslationMonth!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Translator's Note:



This is an excerpt from Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s novel *Il comandante del fiume* (66thand2nd, 2014). This novel is the coming-of-age story of Yabar, an eighteen-year-old second-generation immigrant dealing with the post-memory trauma of the Somali civil war; uncovering secrets about his absent father, destructive clan divisions, and Italy’s colonial past; and coming to terms with what it means to be black in Rome. It deals with war, colonialism, terrorism, racism, Islam, relationships, trauma, memory, as well as the movement and mixing of people and cultures and languages. Here you will read about Yabar’s experience in London, where he has been sent to visit family. The greatest challenge I had translating this passage was dealing with the rich mix of languages in dialogue—Italian (at times mispronounced), Somali, and English. I ultimately decided to keep the macaronic phrases, in the hopes that the Italian words mixed in have a similar effect on an English reader as the English words have on readers of the original.

— Hope Campbell Gustafson, translator

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The day before my departure for London my mother and I spent buying gifts. She couldn't send me to our relatives with empty hands, I had to bring something for each member of the family. Naturally she had gotten a very complicated wish list—some items specific, some very general, and some no more than vague clues left to her free interpretation.

Being unsure, she chose: sweatshirts and t-shirts that read I LOVE ROME for her nephews, a pair of leather shoes for her brother-in-law, and lastly some perfume and a Prada bag (fake) for her sister. While paying the Senegalese boy selling her the bag, she had an ironic little grin on her face that I'd never seen before. "She only cares about making an impression, she'll never realize it's not an original." Then she added that it'd been a while since she'd sent so many presents and that Somalis, if someone is coming from Italy, always ask for shoes and bags.

Finally the time came for me to leave. It had been years since I'd taken a plane, I was excited. I'd be able to find a little job in London and buy gifts for everyone, for Jessica in particular, even though I'd only just met her. When I thought about her a cold shiver traveled up my spine, it started at my hips and clouded my thoughts, I'd sit in a daze dreaming about her body for hours.

My mother had gotten it into her head that she wanted to accompany me to the airport, so we went to the Ostiense station and took the train to Fiumicino from there: it's fast, it only takes half an hour. Mama was agitated, she was excited too, she kept giving me the same advice ("show respect for the adults," "Watch your big mouth," "Follow the rules," "Don't argue with the boys"), as if she hadn't already told me these things three thousand times before. We'd just done check-in when, while heading towards passport control, she got all anxious that something would go wrong and began asking the security people questions. I was embarrassed, because my mother isn't a klutz, but that day she was acting like someone who had never in her life taken a plane. By that point I couldn't wait to leave.

The trip went by fast because I had thoughts of Jessica to keep me company. Once we landed, everything went smoothly, even though there were a bunch of checkpoints because of the attacks and the line was super long. They took my fingerprints and photo for the British immigration records.

My aunt's husband was waiting for me; he recognized me right away, maybe mama had sent him a photo, or maybe I just hadn't changed much since I was little. "Haye abti, see tahay?" he said. I felt shy, but was still able to respond with "waan ficannahay," I'm well, uncle.

"We go guriga. Everybody, habaryar, Maxamed, Muuse, tutti, is there!" he said, satisfied with having added in a word in Italian for my sake.

Abti led the way towards his car, a white Ford Escort. He'd decked it out in his own way: a furry steering wheel, a few verses from the Koran hanging on the rearview mirror, there was even a hookah. He works as a taxi driver and spends most of the day in the car. His minicab, as they call the taxis in England that don't have a license from the city, still smelled like roses and smoke—he must've been there waiting for me for quite a while.

"Tutto abbasto? All good? Do you want to watch a movie?" he asked while opening his laptop and pointing at a list of movies.

I replied, "maya abti, mahadsanid!", no, thank you uncle, and then, throwing out a satisfied exclamation, he said: "Brafo!" maybe because he'd been worried I only spoke Italian and that we'd ride the whole way in silence. Not that we engaged in very much of a conversation anyway, but just having the ability to speak to me must've reassured him.

They lived in a red brick townhouse, the kind you see all over some parts of London. We parked in the driveway and, the moment she saw the car, habaryar, my aunt, opened the door to come out and meet us. She seemed to be overflowing with happiness, her eyes tearing up from the emotion. She hugged me, pulling my head onto her shoulder as if I were a child: "Sei grande, so tall!" and, when her husband told her I spoke a bit of Somali, "waa weynaatay!" she repeated. My aunt looks a lot like mama, but she's rather short and chubby—I remembered her taller, but so much time had passed—, she keeps her hair gathered under a scarf and wears traditional clothing.

Inside the house was the smell of rice and goat, my cousins were sitting in the living room with other people I didn't know and, when I walked in, everyone stood up to say hello, and each explained how I was related to them.

"Waxaa dhalay your mother eddadeed wilkeed," he's the son of the son of your mother's aunt, "waaxaa dhalay your mother awooweheed walaakiis," she's the daughter of the brother of your mother's grandfather, and my head spun with all those possessives, so I just nodded and smiled dazedly.

After the ritual of presentations and welcoming ceremonies, we sat around the long oval table in the dining room, where my aunt had set out many platters: rice, pasta, goat, chicken, salad,

and bananas. Meanwhile, my cousins poured mysterious juices into all the glasses—alcohol isn't drunk during Somali meals but there's always some syrupy liquid.

There was enough to feed an army and habaryar stayed on her feet, she didn't sit with us. That's what Somali women often do—they take care that everyone is doing well and that there's enough food, but they prefer to eat on their own. My mother, instead, values meals together, I bet it's one of reasons why they would tell her she's been westernized.

“Isbaghetti! Isbaghetti!” my uncle said, pointing at the pasta and laughing, but I preferred rice, mama makes it all the time. I took a little with some goat and banana.

Having seen what I chose, habaryar exclaimed: “Mash'Allah”, praise Allah, maybe because she didn't expect me to know how to combine the traditional foods. And that's how she acted—caught between satisfaction and wonder—for the entirety of the meal. The boys were almost completely silent, the guests chatted and, each time I uttered a word in Somali, whatever it was, even simply “biiyo,” water, habaryar threw her head back with laughter and told everyone “wiikayga!,” my boy, he knows our language!, as though they hadn't heard me themselves.

I don't know why she found it so remarkable, I mean, I was still her sister's son and, all things considered, I think I speak Somali pretty badly. It's true my mother had cut ties with everyone, but it doesn't mean she'd forgotten who she was. They clearly didn't understand that.

After dinner my cousins and I went upstairs to their room, but it was still early so we started playing Call of Duty—the Sybarite and my favorite shooter video game.

The earlier games are set during World War II, and seem to be made especially for people obsessed with history like we are. The only thing that bothers me is that the game has already decided who's good and who's bad. One day I'll write a letter to the creator and tell him that everyone is capable of siding with the winners.

The Sybarite is convinced that good guys and bad guys are always distinguishable: he argues that the Nazis were obviously the bad guys. You can't imagine his shock the day I brought him a documentary on some black South Africans who, since they hated the English, had started using the names of Nazi officials as nicknames! This was, of course, before things degenerated and the Afrikaners did what they did.

Well, I couldn't manage to say such complicated things to my cousins, so I settled for playing the part of the American, English, or Russian who fights against the Germans.

About an hour later Maxamed got a phone call and said: “Let's go to Masaajidka.” I stared at him with wide eyes, because I wasn't sure I'd understood, but seeing that both he and his brother quickly put on the white tunic over their jeans, the cap and tusbax necklace, I deduced that yes—

the mosque was where we were headed. Thankfully they didn't ask me to put on one of their tunics, that was the last thing I needed. We said goodbye to the adults who were still chatting in the living room. A car was waiting in front of the house with two boys our age inside, decked out in the same way. My cousins' friend loved driving fast and a voice reciting the Koran came out of the speakers. From the way he was taking the curves and skidding it seemed more like we were headed to dance than to pray.

Finally we arrived at the mosque—it was different from how I'd imagined it, the exterior didn't vary much from the surrounding buildings. The mosque was also, in fact, made of red bricks, with a sloping grey roof and a minaret, on top of which stood the crescent moon.

"It's time for saladda" the boys said, which I thought meant "let's go pray," or maybe perform ablutions, but, since I don't know the prayers and I didn't want to confess it, I pulled out the excuse that I hadn't had the time to take a shower. My mother did teach me a few things, far from everything, but I knew that you can't go pee then pray without washing yourself as if it were nothing.

While waiting for them I observed the men who were gradually arriving, people of all types and nationalities: old, young, white, black...I was reminded of the suicide bomber. I wondered what kind of mosque he'd frequented to become such a fanatic.

As I'd told Ghiorghis, I had tried to be Muslim at various times. When I was little my father would bring me to the mosque and to Koranic school, and I remember liking it. Over the years I've attempted to recover his teachings but haven't succeeded. The fact is I was raised by a pragmatic woman who has no particular aptitude for religion, and she trained me to question everything. I was circumcised when I was born, "because it's good hygiene," claims my mother, who has never felt compelled to flaunt religious belonging. Mama has always been allergic to extremes ("whether or not I believe, it's between me and Allah" she says). She always says that Somalis rediscovered religion as a result of war and exile: they needed to believe in something worth belonging to.

That evening I wanted to learn more about Islamism, so I went to find my cousins and saw them speaking with a man, he must've been a sheikh, who was showing them a digital Koran in ten languages. I was interested in that Kitaab so I asked him "wa meeqa?", how much is it. My cousins were very admiring and, to show me so, they bought a prayer mat for me right then and there. It was one with a compass built in so that, if you're someone who gets confused with the sun and the cardinal directions, you can never go wrong.

Then, prayers finished and purchases completed, these boys—who had struck me with their faith—diligently folded their tunics once they'd gotten back in the car, took off their caps and tusbax and, putting the car in drive, turned the radio on at full volume and tuned into an entirely different kind of station.

“Let's go to the disco!” Muuse exclaimed, all happy, and I was so stunned I burst out laughing, thinking they were messing with me—but the boys were completely serious.

The discoteca was full of people and they all ordered something strong. I couldn't believe my eyes: every so often I go overboard with beer, but I rarely drink hard liquor. They'd brought McDonald's cups in with them, and immediately transferred what they'd ordered into them. My cousins and their friends didn't want anyone to know that they drank, even though everyone was doing it.

Maxamed, who at the beginning had seemed to me a reserved, serious, quiet guy, danced like he was possessed: his knees slightly bent, his pelvis moving back and forth—he even grabbed the dancer around her waist and twirled her as though she were in his own personal music box. It goes without saying that I was terribly embarrassed and slid down in my seat behind a corner of the bar hoping that no one would come track me down.

That night, when we got home, habaryar made my cousins swear to Allah that they hadn't had anything to drink and they both replied “wallaahi.”

That's how I found out that Somali kids who grow up in England are called “say wallaahi,” because they're always repeating that word, even when they swear falsely.

Before long I was brought to the social club, apparently London is full of them and they are frequented primarily by men—the sort of place mama would hate. My uncle went every day and, as just another male, my presence passed largely unnoticed. The kitchen was open at all hours, there were no women among the cooks nor Western customers among the patrons. They served big portions of traditional food—rice, meat, and spiced tea in abundance. The television was always set to Universal TV, a Somali language channel broadcast in England.

The men discussed universal issues, and the main reason I liked going was that an old man who'd studied in Italy when he was younger was usually there, and every time I walked in he'd make a big deal of it. He couldn't wait to speak in Italian, so he'd invite me to sit at his table: “Are you a big eater? Have a good appetite?” He pronounced the phrases like in the old days and he seemed more than happy to buy me lunch. The prices were very economical and often people who

couldn't afford to pay ate on credit. The old man wanted to discuss Italian politics, he overwhelmed me with questions, but he was the one talking most of the time because he read the entire "Corriere della Sera" every day, from start to finish.

My cousins called him "awoowe," even though he wasn't actually their grandpa, but because he was higher up in the family tree than their parents and out of respect, among Somalis, you never call an older person by name. Sometimes I'd come with Maxamed, and awoowe would invite him too but got all confused with the languages, sometimes he'd speak to my cousin in Italian without realizing and, not receiving a reply, would stare at him, taken aback.

Those were the moments that made me want to laugh most: the old man would short-circuit and tell Maxamad: "prendimi un altro bicchiere di tè!" and my cousin would ask, stunned: "Yaa awoowe? You are talking in Italian!" and he, to hide his embarrassment, would act as if nothing had happened and ask again for another cup of tea in English or Somali.

Another reason awoowe amused me was because he had no filter, in the sense that he'd say anything that came to his head. When we first met, for example, the second we were left alone, he asked with a conspiratorial air: "So, what can you tell me about your mother?"

I had no idea what kind of information he wanted, but so as not to disappoint him I spit something out: "She's doing well, awoowe, she works a lot."

"Did she remarry?"

"No, awoowe."

"Poor thing."

"No, actually, she's happy as is."

"I've always defended her, I've always argued that she's a good girl, but they're all so ignorant!"

"Who, awoowe?"

"Everyone, everyone!"

When the others joined us he changed subjects.

That's how I learned from awoowe that mama, although resistant to rules (yes, she of all people!), had been considered the family's crown jewel. In fact, my real grandpa (not awoowe), Allah ha u naxariisto, rest his soul, held her in high regard because she was the only daughter of his to have studied. Awoowe knows that people bad-mouth her, "waa gaalowday," she's a nonbeliever, she's been westernized, she betrayed her family, but he tells them: "Quit your gossiping, she's a good girl."

This is something I really need to tell mama, it would make her happy.

About the author



Ubah Cristina Ali Farah was born in Verona, Italy, of a Somali father and an Italian mother. She grew up in Mogadishu but fled to Europe at the outbreak of the civil war at the age of eighteen. She is a writer, an oral historian and performer, and a teacher. She has published stories and poems in several anthologies, and in 2006 she won the Lingua Madre National Literary Prize. Her novel *Madre piccola* (2007) was awarded a Vittorini Prize and has been translated into English with the title *Little Mother* (2011). [*Il comandante del fiume*](#) was published by 66thand2nd in 2014.

About the translator



Hope Campbell Gustafson has an MFA from the Literary Translation Workshop at the University of Iowa and a BA from Wesleyan University. Her translations can be found in *Asymptote*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *EuropeNow*, *Nashville Review* and *Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations* (Comma Press/Deep Vellum). Hope was a 2018 resident at the Art Omi Translation Lab with writer Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and she received a 2019 Pen/Heim grant for her translation of Ali Farah's novel. A Minneapolis native, Hope currently resides in Brooklyn.