

# A migrant's struggle to forge a settled life

By DECLAN FRY

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## A migrant's struggle to forge a settled life

Three distinct narratives explore displacement, longing and rootlessness in an affecting debut, writes **DECLAN FRY**.

**Pirooz Jafari's debut** novel opens with division: the division of seasons, the division of hemispheres, in the narrator's experience of summer and winter solstice in his adopted home of Australia. He has come from Tehran, a place turned upside down, to one where the seasons are literally Antipodean.

The chapters alternate between present-day Melbourne, where Tishtar works as a migration lawyer, his adolescence and young adulthood in Tehran during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and a narrative set in the 1300s on the Baltic island of Gotland during the Battle of Visby.

There is a lovely line early in the novel, when Tishtar speaks of the "archives of the soul". Migration becomes a point of connection that is also a displacement, a fracture: "The longer you live in your new country, the more the thread stretches, until finally it breaks," Tishtar reflects. "When you visit your old home you realise that you don't belong there any more."

Yet the old home still belongs in you. Tishtar knows this physically: hearing lightning aboard a train, his mind registers the presence of a bomb, the explosions, calamitous massacres.

The present intervenes in the past, but doesn't displace it; it is a shadow through which the ground remains visible, waiting to break the survivor's fall.

As a migration lawyer, Tishtar is unusually equipped to register the indignation and hurt of Australia's bureaucracy. He is working to secure migration papers and visas for a client whose nieces are living, at great risk, in Somalia. Faced with the machinations of the system's requirements and timelines – Tishtar's client's nieces are taken by a relative to their

case officer appointments in Somalia, forcing Tishtar's client to help cover the expense – Tishtar cannot help worrying for them. He works at the coalface of the great Australian talent for inviting people to come help nation-build and then promptly ignoring them.

Jafari's parallel narrative in medieval Scandinavia serves as a temporal – and geographical – correspondent to Tishtar's experiences of a divided Tehran, cleaved between old ways and new. Gretel, caught up in the Battle of Visby, during which the Danish sought to overthrow the Gotlanders, recurs in Tishtar's dreams and fantasies across all three narratives, beckoning him to engage with memories of longing and failed relationships.

Gretel is a haunting figure, her existence refusing the same oblivion. Tishtar recalls how in her presence, "it is as though an invisible wave is vibrating through my soul, a powerful current pulling me in. This is the time, this is the time, says the voice inside my head."

Only it never is. When it comes to time, it is always, for the migrant, too late.

*Forty Nights* is written in unadorned prose,

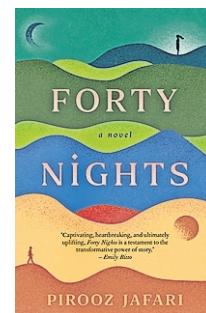
leisurely, sometimes ruminative, sometimes whimsical. The *Divan-e Hafez*, a classic of Persian poetry, is a touchstone, both as a work of imagination and because the act of creation and imagination itself means being able to envisage a way through fear. Tishtar is an odd, somewhat callous man – a loner, coldly aloof. His detachment may be assigned to trauma, though there are suggestions that it is simply an aspect of his personality.

Following Iran's acceptance of the 1988 UN ceasefire that formally ended the Iran-Iraq war, Tishtar reflects, "I really don't know what the end of the war means for us ... It's hard to imagine what a normal life looks like".

This question of imagination – of how to imagine a normal life into being – is writing at degree zero. It is a place where certainties refuse to coalesce, where they refuse closure, refuse narration. It is what gives this novel its existential edge.

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### BOOKS



**FORTY NIGHTS**  
**Pirooz Jafari**  
**Ultimo, \$32.99**