Chapter 2

In the Absence of the Face

“This Apparatus,” he [the Officer] said . . . “was invented by our former Commandant. I assisted at the very earliest experiments and had a share in all the work until its completion. But the credit of inventing it belongs to him alone. Have you ever heard of our former Commandant? No? Well, it isn’t saying too much if I tell you that the organization of the whole penal colony is his work. We who are his friends knew even before he died that the organization of the colony was so perfect that his successor, even a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come. And our prophecy has come true; the new Commandant has had to acknowledge its truth.”

—Franz Kafka, In the Penal Colony (1914)

My principal concern during the last chapter was to mark the substantive evidence of the transmutation of the body into a substitutional representation of the territorial polity it is forced to represent. I have insisted on this forced mutation of the defiant sign of the body into the reluctant signifier of something that it quintessentially is not—the strapping of its bones and banalities to the machinery of some purposeful meaning—in order to suggest and sustain the dialectical force that keeps the suicidal body on the porous borderlines between its material undecidability and its mimetic metamorphosis into something else. In the following chapter, I dwell on an inaugural moment of the Qur’anic revelation when, I propose, the defiant signs put up an active resistance to their doctrinal legislation into a revelatory language and then a world religion. I have opted to work through Qur’anic passages that emphasize the primacy of the word against the principality of the vision in order to investigate how the Qur’anic repressed in effect returns narratively to haunt its own text. I believe that by doing so I have by serendipity detected the central tension that animates the revelatory resonances of the Islamic sacred text.

From the sight of the exploded corpus of the suicidal body, I move to the site of the Unseen author of the authority invested in the living flesh by way
of restoring to the body its originary signature—arguing that body is a sign, and that sign is no signifier. Not in the politics of its despair but in the aesthetics of its will to resist power does the suicidal body posit itself as a defiant sign of its age. As a sign, the Muslim body—the corpus particularis that now stands for a corpus universalis beyond its cultural confinements—is located between a pre- and a post-Eternity. “We belong to God and to God we shall return,” is a common prayer offered at the funeral of Muslims—martyred, murdered, self-exploded, sacrificed, or just plain dead. To that prayer returns the origin and the destination of the Muslim body, from the first instance when Adhan is whispered in the ear of the infant to the moment when ritual prayers are said at his or her bodily burial. In that span of time dwells the immemorial moment of a Muslim body: the sanctity of its composition reminiscent of the paradisial pause when God looked into a mirror, saw His Face, and called it Insan (the human).

His Face, presented in absentia—a vision of the Invisible.

**Save His Face**

*There is no God save Him.*
*Everything will perish save His Face.*

—Surah al-Qisas

*Because Utterance is not like Visual Observation: . . . So that when the Prophet described the blessings of Paradise and the torments of Hell he would be able to say, “I Saw it,” and not just “I heard it.” Because that is logically more persuasive, it convinces more effectively and powerfully.*

—Abu al-Fadl Rashid al-Din al-Maybudi

*Calling them [the idols] gods is not but a meaningless name. The reason is that the Name is not the Named. Because if the Name were the Named, then by virtue of calling them god they would be god and it would be proper to worship them, and they would have been god by attributes, and yet that is impossible.*

—Shaykh Abu al-Futuh al-Razi

I will speak. I will inevitably speak, as I will have to write: in the absence of the Sign and of the absence of the Face, all in the presence of the Unseen and thus in the Name of the Unseen.

The Unseen Face of the Unseen speaks and is spoken to: “In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.” Presuming and resuming the Biblical, the Qur’anic narrative begins in the “Name,” absenting the Face, which cannot be there.

It is impossible to commence in the “Face.” The Face is forbidden, concealed, absent, and thus absented. In the absence of the Face of the Invisible, the Unseen, the Qur’an begins in the Name. In the absence of the Face,