

OVERTLY

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LIT

where faith meets art

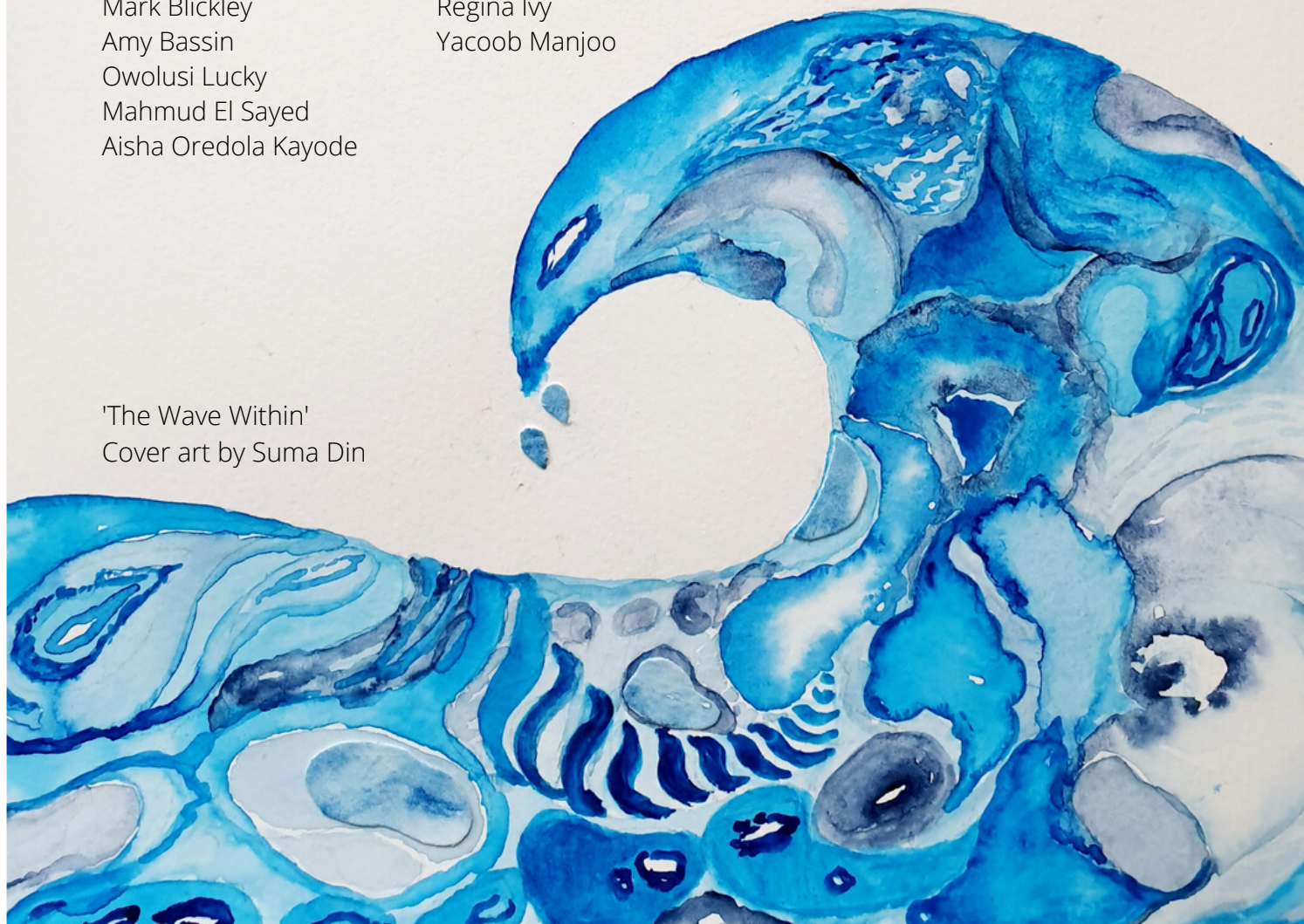
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'The Wave Within'
Cover art by Suma Din



letter from the editors

Welcome to the first issue of Overtly Lit! This issue is filled with remarkable talent and an eclectic range in styles and genres, more than we could have hoped for. It's a joy for us that Overtly is starting as we mean to go on: celebrating writing that touches on faith in all its forms.

We're delighted to feature a mixture of established and new and emerging writers with six decades between the youngest and oldest writers featured. We're also extremely proud of the international outlook, with contributors from several countries and continents, which we feel reflects the varied experiences and views of faith.

There is something for every reader, from writing style to genre and topics; these pieces will delight the many tastes out there.

Unsurprisingly, angels appear a few times, but always in unique ways. There's a demon to be found in Owolusi Lucky's horror-esque short story, *The Grace*. For the science-fiction lovers there's an exquisitely written space opera in Salonee Verma's *Moon Song* as well as Mahmud El Sayed's brilliantly detailed generation ship story.

For the poetic prose lovers Kimberly Sewell's *The Formation of Birds* and Natasha Bredle's *One Step* is sure to whet your appetite for luscious prose. Those hungry for an analytical read, Regina Ivy's essay, *The Myth of Modern Mother Mary*, will provide sustenance.



It's our pleasure to introduce the first of a regular feature: *Salaam Dear Leila*, an agony aunt column with Leila Aboulela. Leila is a celebrated Muslim author whose writing often explores spirituality and faith from an Islamic perspective and a major influence in our own writing. We're so excited to share her advice for readers who we're sure will find it as valuable as we do. As a Muslim woman herself, Leila's advice may touch on Islam but we hope readers of all and any faiths will be able to relate to the faith-centric approach.

We're so grateful to everyone who has submitted to Overtly Lit and for all the support for this new literary magazine. It's shown us how worthwhile this venture is and how central faith is to so many writers, artists, and creatives like ourselves. This issue represents the vast spectrum of how faith can hold different spaces in peoples' lives, from the subtle and implied to the overt.

We hope you'll love all of these pieces as much as we do.

love, Safiya & Madeehah

salaam, dear Leila

In the last year or so I've started taking writing more seriously and alhamdulillah I've had some small but meaningful achievements. As a mother of a young child, I plan carefully to set time aside for my writing. Sometimes I feel selfish for doing so. Writing is just for me. I'm aware it's highly unlikely I'll ever be able to make a steady income out of it, however small, and therefore contribute financially through writing. Sometimes I feel like I should stop writing, that it's a waste of time because there's no benefit to anyone. But then there are times when a reader will tell me something they loved or related to in something I wrote and that makes it all worthwhile for me. Am I selfish for prioritising my writing, should I spend the time on something more worthwhile if I can't make a career out of it?

Jamila

dear Jamila,

You are not being selfish. It's a blessing to have a meaningful activity which you enjoy and which you feel is worthwhile. Being a mother is one of the most challenging roles in life and having time for yourself is healthy and uplifting. You are so right, though, about the unsteady income. In a survey carried out by the Society of Authors, the average annual earnings of a professional author was 10,500 pounds, well below the minimum wage. Unsurprisingly, only 13.7% of authors earned their income solely from writing. So, surviving as a writer will entail having an income that comes from a source other than the writing.

In the not-so-distant past, it was quite respectable for women to be housewives. Talented housewives pursued hobbies and sometimes these hobbies took off and generated income. Nowadays, young women feel an obligation to share or at least contribute to their family's expenses. This is fine, but as Muslim women, it is worth reminding ourselves that we have a God-given right to be maintained by our husbands according to their means. We should not feel obligated to contribute, it is a choice we make freely, without pressure. After all, we are already looking after the children, running households and providing stability for the community – all this is 'work' and hours of our lives that should not be taken for granted.

In every economy, at any point of time, there will be people who are unemployed. It is a fact that there are simply not enough jobs for everyone. You, a busy mother who enjoys writing, could be, by choosing voluntary unemployment, giving up a potential job to someone else who needs it more. In this case, in a roundabout way, you are benefitting another family.

But it is not all about finances, the writing life is full of rejection and loneliness. Career tracks are undefined as are expectations. It is a needy life because writers need readers, and readers are not easy to find. You rightly point out the satisfaction you get when readers respond to your work. Writing is communication and few writers are content to write without a readership. This is where publishing comes in and fierce competition. Readers' time is limited. If they read X, they might not have time to read Y or Z.

Your query does not include any angst over how good or not a writer you are. You are confident about your abilities. Your recent achievements have bolstered you and this is the momentum you will need to keep going. I have observed, over the years that talent is not enough to achieve success. Drive, ambition, perseverance, self-belief, and the willingness to sacrifice tends to matter more, in the long run, than innate ability. Also writing the relevant thing at the right time, luck, providence, endorsement. All these factors play a role.

I would not advise you to stop writing. It is too big a sacrifice and you might end up feeling resentful. You don't need swaths of time to write. Even if you must have a day job, an hour of writing here and there can still be productive. Becoming a professional writer is one of the cheapest start-ups, all that is needed is a laptop. But beware of other costs – all the courses, retreats, services, etc that target the beginner writer. To ease your conscience, do also explore careers that are related to writing, ones that can provide a steady income. You might enjoy working in an arts organization or the publishing industry, working as a librarian or in a bookshop. Pursue all avenues and see which one opens up to you. Wanting to write and not being able to write can be hugely frustrating. At the same time, the need to write could diminish, if you find creative fulfilment elsewhere.

with love, Leila



The Pigeon Man Sings

Text by Mark Blickley

Artwork by Amy Bassin



Dark Truth, C'aran d'Ache drawing on vintage book pages,
10" x 14"

Dark Truth is an excerpt from Amy Bassin's multi-media series that advocates against child abuse within the Catholic church, 'Altared Truths.'

The Pigeon Man Sings

It's freezing outside. I'd say my fingers feel like icicles, but the truth is, I can't feel them at all, they're so numb. I've tried to toss the popcorn with my gloves on but it doesn't work. You can't aim. It always falls to the ground in a clump and that means the stronger and greedier pigeons crowd out the weaker ones.

My name's Wendell Mandanay and though I've lived in this neighborhood for nearly seventy years, most folks know me as the Pigeon Man. Kids sometimes taunt me. They shout 'Pigeon Man! Pigeon Man!' like it was something I should be ashamed of. But I don't think they mean any harm. They're just bored, that's all, though I do get upset when they throw stones at the birds.

I've been feeding pigeons for eighteen years. I try not to miss a day. Sometimes my shoulder acts up, starts really hurting, and it's too painful to even put my coat on. That's when the pigeons miss a meal. These kinds of days seem to be more frequent lately, and I feel bad for the birds.

My shoulder problems come from forty years of carrying a mail sack for this city. I'm not complaining. I enjoyed being a mailman when I handed folks a letter that made them smile. Some days my letters made them cry. When I was a younger letter carrier that used to bother me, but as I got older, I realised bad news traveling through the mail is kind of like the weather— sometimes you can predict it but you can never change it.

Three months ago, I moved into the Senior Citizen Housing the city opened last year. It's okay. The rent's real cheap and it is closer to the park. Up until now I've ignored all the group activities the Seniors' Commission have organized. Mostly they've been bingo games and chartered buses to the casinos at Atlantic City.

I'm not a gambling man. Heck, I'd never have bet I'd live as long as I have. And what were the odds that me, Wendell Mandanay, twelve years older than my wife, Anna, would outlive her by eighteen years? Do you know that after dozens of years of living with that woman the thing I miss most about her is her smile?

Lately, the days seem to be getting darker quicker and I'm not so sure it's because of winter. That's why I've decided to tell a secret I've kept for nearly twenty years. The day after I buried my wife, I stopped eating. I didn't plan to stop feeding myself; it just happened. I enjoyed the taste of certain foods and had earned considerable praise for my cooking skills, but now the only taste I desired was beer. And plenty of it. All I had to do was pick up the phone and thirty minutes later there'd be a case of it outside my door.

When Anna was alive, we enjoyed taking walks and entertaining in our home. But these days I keep close company with the television set. I'd spend most of the time laying on the couch, sipping beer and listening to the TV. The television talked at me day and night. Sometimes I'd awaken in the morning or the afternoon or at night and to my surprise recall the exact content of programmes overheard in my sleep.

The neighbors grew concerned. Every couple of days it seemed someone would knock on my door. I'd rouse myself from the couch, place the beer bottles on the floor beneath the coffee table and quietly answer the door.

"Good afternoon, Wendell."

"It is a fine afternoon."

"How are things going, Wendell?"

"I'd say about three hundred and sixty degrees."

"Is there anything I can get you, Wendell?"

"As a matter of fact, there is."

"What is it, Wendell? What do you need?"

"I could use a smile. Whenever I answer a knock, I never see one. Everybody always looks so upset, so nervous."

"That's because we're worried about you, Wendell."

"But it's all the unhappy faces at my door that makes me worry."

"If I can be of any assistance, Wendell, you know where to find me."

"Thank you. But to find you would mean that I lost you and I hope our friendship never comes to that. Good afternoon."

I just wanted to be left alone. When Anna died not only did I lose my appetite, but I stopped cleaning up our apartment. And then I stopped cleaning myself. About a month or so after my wife's funeral I was watching a nature show on Public Television. It was all about pigeons. I was sleepy, a little groggy, and didn't pay much attention. Not too much sunk in. Or so I thought.

When I woke up the next morning (or a few hours later) and went to the fridge for a beer, I kept hearing the narrator's voice in my head. He was telling me things like: *Pigeons usually mate for life, rearing squabs, season after season, often for ten years or longer.*

All pigeons naturally love to bathe and to keep their feathers clean and shining. Pigeons do not overeat.

Mated pigeons are generally more productive if the male is decidedly older than the female.

I thought it was strange remembering that program because I always hated pigeons. To me, they were nothing more than flying rats. And let me tell you, they made my life miserable when I was a mailman.

I quickly forgot about the birds when I discovered I was down to my last three bottles of beer. When I phoned the corner liquor store, they refused to deliver. I owed them money from the last bill.

This meant I had to go out to get it. And going outside was the last thing I wanted to do. I didn't want to get cleaned and dressed, yet I didn't want people to see me like that. So I compromised by taking

a shave and hiding the rest of myself under a hat and an overcoat Anna had dry-cleaned for me. It was still in its plastic bag.

After pouring two bottles of beer down my throat, I closed the door behind me. On the way to the liquor store, I saw a huge flock of pigeons. Some wretch had dumped bags of garbage in front of my building and the birds were having a feast.

They were all gobbling up that garbage except for this one bird. He had his back to the food and looked like he was tucked real tight inside his feathers. I walked around to face him.

I wasn't in front of him for more than two seconds when he lifted his beak and stared up at my face. I got such a chill at his eyes, and this was in the middle of August! I tried to walk away but couldn't. The pigeon wouldn't let me go.

That's when I realized the bird wasn't eating because he'd lost his mate. So I kneeled down, a bit unsteady from the beer I'd just drunk and the heavy overcoat, and gave him a pep talk. I told him to stop feeling sorry for himself, to stop punishing himself because his wife would hate to see him like that. I whispered that his wife had a husband she could respect and it was unfair to her memory if he became a bird that couldn't be respected.

And don't you know, the pigeon starts bobbing his head like he's agreeing with me. So I stood up and hurried over to the grocery store for some birdseed. When I returned, he was gone. The other birds were still pecking at the garbage, but my pigeon had disappeared.

Being out in the fresh air must've made me hungry. That night I cooked myself a big supper. The next day I began to feed the pigeons, just in case my bird was part of a hungry flock.

New York interdisciplinary artist **Amy Bassin** and writer **Mark Blickley** work together on text-based art collaborations and experimental videos. Their work has appeared in many national and international publications as well as two books, *Weathered Reports: Trump Surrogate Quotes from the Underground* (Moria Books, Chicago) and *Dream Streams* (Clare Songbird Publishing House, New York). Their videos, *Speaking In Bootongue* and *Widow's Peek: The Kiss of Death* represented the United States in the 2020 year-long world tour of *Time Is Love: Universal Feelings: Myths & Conjunctions*, organized by the esteemed Togolese-French curator, Kisito Assangni.

I only believe in God every second Saturday

by Leela Raj-Sankar

but I think they're the one that always sits down with me for coffee, that puts their not-hand on my shoulder and says, *c'mon, you should eat something with that, or you haven't slept in three days, it's gonna catch up to you soon*. And even though I pride myself on being a good, practical, head-screwed-on-right daughter, all I want is for someone to put their arms around me and say *you know what, it's okay, you did your best, you tried so hard, that's enough, you're enough*. But if there's no one there, I think the sunlight coming through the shutters counts, too; I think the birds clamoring to be heard in the trees count, too. Look, I know I was an ugly, bitter, terrible child, but this feels like a second chance, like maybe I didn't fuck it all up too badly—if there's no one looking out for me, at least I can pretend the universe is! At least I can pretend there's someone waiting for me with a smile when I get home; I can name my want a blessing and love it in the same way I love the sound of my friends' laughter or staying up late enough to see the sunrise. Look, I know I was an ugly, bitter, terrible child, but this is a second chance, and if you'd let me, I'd hold you like you were the whole world, too. I'd love you like you were a religion, too.

Leela Raj-Sankar is an Indian-American teenager from Arizona. Their work has appeared in *Mixed Mag*, *Warning Lines*, and *Ghost Heart Lit*, among others. In his spare time, he can usually be found playing Scrabble or taking long naps. Say hi to her on Twitter @sickgirlisms.



There are Rivers of Honey in Heaven and Rivers of Cholesterol in the Artery

by Jannah Yusuf Al-Jamil

content warning for issues with body image

There are two scenes that are stuck in my head. One: heaven. Two: hell. One: Eve in the dirt. Two: Eve eating the fruit. One: breaking fast. Two: the papery skin of the date. One: a garden. Two: a storm.

When I imagine the future, neither heaven nor hell, I think of laying on a twin bed with a t-shirt rolled up to my bra and showing peachy-pink stomach rolls and a map plastered on the ceiling, throwing push-pins up. What was it Surah Naba said? The mountains as pegs? The sky as a blanket? I hope the pins stick and that they don't fall onto me, get absorbed into my skin. I am full of metal already, keeping me on Earth, stuck in its magnetic field.

One: the Prophet turning away the blind man from his service. Two: his wife collecting his sweat and saying it smelled like musk. When Gabriel cleaned the Prophet's heart, I wondered if there was cholesterol, or just the black of sin as he lowered it into the golden basin of zamzam.

One: holy water. Two: hating how it tastes. There is a history to a family, and mine is poked through with heart issues and brain issues and diabetes type two issues and a migration from Yemen.

I wonder if they went by boat or by land or if anyone had a heart attack on the way, like my uncle with a pacemaker in his chest.

The doctor said, gently, so gently, *you're perfectly healthy, honey*, despite the fat on my stomach, and then they pricked me with Pfizer, pinching the thickest part of my shoulder. The nurse asks my mother if there were any changes to the family history. One: the Prophet eating the meat of a dead whale washed ashore to prove it's halal. Two: beer-battered fish on the beach. My mother says no, only the regular myriad of cancers and the plethora of pain. I think the white girl who speaks up in history class will never understand how things slide in my blood: heady with cholesterol, heavy with ancestral pleas.

One: the rivers of milk in heaven. Two: the fire of hell, where sweetness leaves us. There are two scenes that are stuck in my head. One: heaven in pitch black. Two: hell in pitch black. There is nothing in my mind but fatty acid. Heaven and hell both taste like fresh pakora and gulab jamun in rose syrup: heaven, when it hits your tongue; hell, the morning after. Here's the pin in my stomach. It said to go to Mangalore and eat parathas, dip it in the monsoon water from the side of the street. It's no zamzam, but a homeland is holy all the same. Heaven and hell and homeland all look the same in omega-three: scrawled in India ink, tar-black. The whale's stomach left Jonah in the dark. God fed him fruit afterwards; let the sweet juice slide down his throat.

Praise be
for the stomach and the tongue and clogged arteries –
I think it's all tradition in tar.

Jannah Yusuf Al-Jamil is a Muslim-American writer and a co-founder of antinarrative, a zine for youths of color (@antinarrativeZ). They are on a quest for many things, namely the perfect shawarma. Please talk to them about vigilantes. Find their work in Overheard, celestite poetry, Pollux Journal, and at jannahyusufaljamil.carrd.co.



Sirin

by Irina Novikova



*Ink, gel pen, gouache, paper
(monotype and drawing)*

40x30 cm

Servants of an Unknown Queen

by Irina Novikova



Ink, gel pen, gouache, paper

(monotype and drawing)

40x30 cm

Sirin

remembrance of eternity

There, beyond the horizon, thousands of faces and thousands of masks, birds, only they carry our dreams further .. only they know our thoughts, only they can help us ... Only they know many secrets, the door to which is locked forever ... Do not open eyes, they lie! Don't taste anything you see or you won't come back....! Be like the lifeless ones that are there in the earth .. they don't care, even if you will be like a stone and your heart will turn to stone ... And nothing will happen to you ...

Servants of an Unknown Queen

There were many of them, like thoughts, they rushed about and flew, and the whole world was not enough for them ... Who will give them names? Who will call them? Who can imagine that they exist? Who?

Irina Novikova is an art critic (State Academy of Slavic Cultures), and a graphic designer (MGTA) and has been drawing from an early age. Irina uses watercolor, ink, gouache, acrylic and loves to experiment with different materials. Irina's first series is the *Red Book* dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Irina is inspired by baroque music and black and white films and has recently been leaning towards symbolism.

You can find Irina on Instagram @irinanov4155



The Great Search

by Mahmud El Sayed

On the third anniversary of my master's death, I visited the tree his body was feeding to pick an apple. On the city-ship *Safina*, life feeds death and death feeds life. It's not all that different from life and death anywhere else, really. That apple tree had been nothing but a slender sapling when they buried my master, the Honourable Kalsang Yama, 35th Panchen Lama of the Gelug-pa Path and living emanation of the celestial Buddha Amitabha, under its roots. Now, it towered over and above me, its branches reaching out like hands, its apples hanging down like ornaments.

"*Namo Buddhaya*," a bulky agrotech dressed in the russet brown uniform of the Agriculture deck greeted me, pressing the palms of his soiled work gloves together. I didn't recognize the man, but he clearly had no trouble recognizing the burgundy robes and shaved head of a fully-ordained monk of the Monastery of Waiting.

I mirrored the *anjali mudra* and brought my soft scholar's hands to my forehead.

"*Namo Buddhaya*," I responded, bowing to him and the Buddha-nature in him. "Is it permissible to pick an apple, kind sir?" I chanced in my best Inglez.

The beefy agrotech, half his face covered by a thick dark beard, glanced furtively around the deck. In the far distance, similarly brown-clad figures worked the fields and farms, producing the necessary crops to feed the crew.

“Go ahead, *Bhikku*.”

Artificial UV light reflected through the leaves and branches of the trees above us—descendants of trees that had bloomed on Earth and whose seedlings’ seedlings would, in turn, populate a new world. A vegetal samsara.

I picked a fat, red apple from one of the lower branches and placed it carefully inside my satchel.

“Thank you, brother.”

The agrotech shrugged casually and leaned forward on the trowel he had been using to turn the earth. And wasn’t that a strange word to use on a generation ship, flying so far from home? Earth? The Earth was fifty years and five hundred light years behind us, dying or dead. Yet it’s fruits, and people, lived on.

“The master’s tree is thriving,” he offered shyly.

His Inglez was far better than mine, but then again, it would have to be. Inglez was the crew’s second language. Being a monk, forever shut up in my monastery, I had far less opportunity to speak it than the rest of the crew. I took a step back, comparing the master’s tree to its siblings. The agrotech was right. There were dozens of other apple

trees in this living graveyard, but none so bountiful as Master Yama's.

"I don't recognize you, brother," I told him in my slow and steady Inglez. "Perhaps we have met before?"

A logical question. Buddhists were a small minority on our vast city-ship. I would have thought that I knew all of them, if not by name, then at least by sight.

He shook his head sadly. "I live in Damask berth. I rarely have time to visit Waiting."

"Well, brother, next time you visit, ask for me. I am monk Tashi Choden. It would be a pleasure to share a bowl of tea with you."

The man smiled at my invitation and ducked his head.

"Thank you, *Bhikku*."

He opened his mouth as if to ask a question and then closed it again.

"What is it, brother?"

"Is it time?" he asked. "Is that why you're here? Is it time to begin the search?"

I nodded.

"Yes brother, it is time and past time. We begin the search for the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama tomorrow."

*

On Earth, searching for a *tulku* was no easy task. A conclave would be held where monks who had met the Lama in the time prior to his death would bear witness. A study into the lama's writings and recordings would be conducted to investigate any clues he might have left as to when and where he intended to be reborn. Monks would monitor the tulku's body, and later his grave, for signs. A head tilting in one direction or another. Flowers blossoming in the wrong season. Birds gathering in the wrong place. But given the sheer size and scale of Earth's population, and the number of children born in the hours, days, or even weeks, after a *tulku* died, the possible candidates numbered in the tens of millions.

For who knows how long a soul can linger in the Bardo?

The sixteenth Dalai Lama was not found until he was seventeen years old, and only after he travelled from his homeland in the North American Union to Tibet, to proclaim himself. Luckily for this humble monk, the process would be much simpler on our generation ship.

"The clerk says, 'here is a list of all the children born in Ziyou and Miyako berths within the specified timeframe,'" my translator informed me, holding out a data chip with a perfunctory hand.

The translators were the bridge between crew and Administration. This one was the son of one of our lay members, full of youthful arrogance and self-regard. Spending any amount of time with him was a wonderful way to practice cultivating patience. After all, didn't Khenpo Daisuke himself tell me that patience was not the ability to wait, but the ability to keep a good attitude while waiting?

“And I told you that we need this information for all the berths, not just Ziyou and Miyako,” I responded. Patiently.

The translator—his name was Hiro and he was dressed in a translator’s trademark suit and tie—flicked his fringe out of his eyes and relayed my words back to the Admin clerk who frowned, shook her head, and spewed forth a cloud of rat-a-tat Inglez.

“The clerk says, ‘If you are searching for a Buddhist child, surely you must look to Ziyou and Miyako berths?’”

I took a breath, held it in and chanted Om mani padme hum in the privacy of my mind. “Then kindly inform her that there are Buddhist families in many of the other berths and that is why we need a full accounting. And anyway, we’ve been authorised for this information,” I added.

The Honourable Kalsang Yama was just nineteen when he boarded the Safina to leave the Earth behind. It was agreed that the Dalai Lama would remain, and the Panchen Lama would depart. For how could humanity seek the stars without the living wisdom of a bodhisattva? That same agreement also included iron-clad assurances from Administration that they would not interfere in the search for the Panchen Lama’s reincarnated form. Everyone knew that.

The clerk disagreed. So, too, did his immediate superior. It wasn’t until I was sitting in the office of the head of Human Resources, sipping mint tea and trying to keep my translator calm in the face of such exalted company, that we finally ironed the matter out.

Minister Serhat handed me a new data chip, containing all the information I required.

“The minister apologises for the mix up,” Hiro told me in an over-awed tone of voice. “He says your authorisation has never been used before.”

“We’ve never needed to find a Panchen Lama before,” I answered.

*

The novices milling in the monastery’s courtyard greeted me with waves and shouts. I glanced up at the monumental, green-tinged statue of Amitabha which peeked over the roof of Waiting and bowed my head in its direction before heading inside. When the Safina fled the Earth, it was not just people that it took. We brought our monuments, too. That ancient statue was not even the oldest thing on the Safina. There was a black obelisk that stood in the centre of Cleopatra Square in Fustat berth that was thousands of years older.

Inside, I could see Khenpo Daisuke was already waiting for me in the banquet hall. He was Master Yama’s oldest student, just as I was the youngest, and our master’s death had hit him particularly hard. I did not think that he had expected to outlive our master. Khenpo Daisuke had been a vigorous seventy when the Panchen Lama—barely in his fifties—re-joined the cycle of birth and rebirth. It seemed that vigour had passed with him, and Khenpo Daisuke’s health had taken a turn for the worse over the past three years. He now habitually leaned on a cane when walking, and sitting at the top table in the banquet hall, looked out at me through rheumy eyes.

“All is well?” he asked as I sat down.

"Well and well," I answered, "I have the list. One thousand, three hundred and twenty-eight names."

Yes, I had glanced through it already. I had not been expecting so many names, but the *Safina* was a generation ship—producing the next generation of crew was our crew's most important job.

Khenpo Daisuke nodded, pleased. He took the data chip from my hand and placed it in front of him, before clasping his hands together and murmuring a quick prayer of thanks.

"And the apple?"

I produced it. "An apple from our master's tree."

He nodded slowly.

"A fitting breakfast for a day such as this," he acknowledged.

I passed the apple over to the Khenpo and watched as he picked up a knife and laboriously cut it into halves, and cut those halves into halves again. He placed eight apple slices carefully onto a teal ceramic plate.

"We will find him," he told me. "Have no fear. We will send out monks to all the berths."

I kept the questions I longed to ask deep inside of me. Khenpo Daisuke was never one for idle chatter. If he had a plan, and he surely did, he would reveal it in his own good time, as well as my place in it.

And yet I still couldn't help but imagine being the one to find our master's reincarnated form. Being the one to recognize and return the Panchen Lama to the Monastery of Waiting and all the acclaim that would greet me.

No, I turned away from that. This is base pride. This is unseemly self-regard. No, Tashi, put it aside. Hold to the Buddha, the Sangha, the Dharma. Hold to the Threefold Way. Hold to the master's trust in you.

The other monks took their seats as I struggled with my secret, shameful dreams. Brother Delun glanced at me disdainfully as he sat down, as if he could hear my thoughts. A novice I only vaguely recognized placed the big bowl of oatmeal at our table. Around us, other tables began to fill. Outside, the novices stopped their buzzing recitation of the Migstema Mantra—*Tsong Khapa, crown jewel of the sages of the Land of Snows/Lozang Dragpa, I make requests at your lotus feet*—and rushed to join breakfast.

After our breakfast of oatmeal and twice-baked bread was finished and the other monks had returned to their duties, Khenpo Daisuke did not dismiss us as usual. Instead, he held out the plate of apple slices and gestured for each of us, Master Kelsang Yama's students, to take one. I closed my eyes as I bit into the tart apple, its tangy juice filling my mouth.

“On Earth, the monastery would send out teams of monks to search for a *tulku*,” Khenpo Daisuke said. “Here, we must be more circumspect. I will organize you in three teams. I will lead the first team and we will begin our search here in Huizhou. Brother Delun,

you will lead the second team and begin your search in Miyako berth.”

He looked at me. “And you, Brother Tashi, will lead the third team and look to the outer berths.”

“But Khenpo,” my traitorous mouth exposed me, “there are few Buddhists there. I doubt many families will even let me assess their children.”

Brother Delun snorted, as if to say, ‘Are you complaining already?’ and I shot him an irritated look.

“Do your best,” Khenpo Daisuke told me, “and all will be well.”

*

“Nobody is even going to talk to us,” Novice Ahmed said. “Just watch and see.”

Khenpo Daisuke may have split us into “teams” but my team consisted of only myself and one talkative novice. He was fifteen years old, scrawny and shaven-headed. Unlike most of the other novices though, I had heard his name before. He was the novice who had been charging money to conduct illicit tours of the Monastery of Waiting to outsiders. He had been punished with double kitchen duty for a month.

“Silence!” I told him.

“This is going to be a disaster.”

We were sitting on the hyperlink to Fustat berth, the carriage rocking this way and that as it travelled through the body of the ship. I clutched my satchel with both hands, acutely aware that inside lay a tab that contains the names and addresses of a few hundred children, one of whom might be the future leader of our order.

The link was busy, full of crew heading to their various watch-stands—Engineering, Environmental, Factory, Maintenance, Agriculture. They were all part of the daily hustle and bustle of life on this ship in a way that I was not and would never be. They were a crew—the offspring of a previous crew, the progenitors of a future one, while we monks are an island of serenity in the middle of this generation ship. There is peace here, yes, but loneliness, too. Sometimes, I envied the crew. But envy is anathema to peace of mind.

“Oh man,” Novice Ahmed said, “would you check her out.”

So, too, are novices.

“Novice Ahmed,” I told him sternly, “I should warn you that I will be reporting your conduct during our mission back to Khenpo Daisuke. I should also say that you were assigned to me because you speak Arabek, not to ‘check anyone out.’”

“Yes *Bhikku*,” he answered in a falsely contrite tone of voice.

I followed his eyes to a young woman in the blue uniform of Factory. Well, Novice Ahmed was not wrong. No, I pushed that thought from my mind and recited the Simile of the Water-Snake. Sensual pleasure is but bare bones, a lump of flesh, a torch of straw, a pit of burning coal, Tashi. It is a dream of borrowed goods, a fruit tree, a slaughter-

-house, a stake of swords, a snake's head.

When we finally disembarked at Salam Central Station, I handed Novice Ahmed the tab and allowed him to take the lead. He was born in this berth. He knew its nooks and crannies, its streets and thoroughfares. Like many orphans taken in by the Monastery, he had not been born a Buddhist. When he reached his majority, he would have to decide whether to pledge to become a monk, or leave Waiting and join the crew proper. It was a decision that I too had to make, although I suspected that Novice Ahmed would find it more difficult than I did. Master Yama had been like a father to me. I could never have left him.

"The first one is this way," Novice Ahmed said with an impatient jerk of his head. "Come on, let's go."

The mother would not allow us to see her child. She would not allow us to enter her home, instead she screamed at us in Arabek and gripped her hijab in alarm.

"What happened?" I asked from the safety of the stairs. The woman was still gripping her hijab and staring at us, but at least she had stopped screaming.

"She says we are *mushrikeen*," Ahmed explained, "immoral polytheists who worship a mortal man as a God."

"But—"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, "she's wrong. Or at least, not entirely right. But she didn't exactly give me the opportunity to enlighten her

about the Triple Refuge, did she?”

The next three addresses on the list were much the same. At the last address, the father of the child we had come to test pushed me away and raised his fist as if to strike me. When I did nothing to defend myself, he merely pushed me again, shouting angrily in his harsh tongue.

Novice Ahmed and I regrouped on a bench in Fustat’s tree-lined atrium. Not for the first time, I wished that Administration’s records included information about religious affiliation. But the First Crew had decided that it would be language, not religion, to divide us.

“What did he say? The last one?” I asked.

“He said that children are a great gift from Allah,” Novice Ahmed told me in a sad voice, “and that they are the only thing that the crew will leave behind. He said no true believer would ever give up a child of their blood.”

*

The afternoon was the same. And the next day. And the day after that. Few parents allowed us anywhere near their children, although one Sufi man, not even the father of one of the children we wanted to assess but a neighbour, insisted on buying us lunch and debating the connections between Sufi and Buddhist practices.

“So we agree that there is no self, there is no reality, these are illusions?”

“If there is no self,” I countered, “who just asked me that question?”

“Nobody,” he told me.

I bowed my head.

Behind him, Novice Ahmed rolled his eyes at us.

Finally, we were done with Fustat berth and moved to Damask. Again, Novice Ahmed and I knocked on doors and begged for entrance. They spoke Arabek here, too, although a different dialect than the one spoken in Fustat berth. Novice Ahmed was twice a stranger here, although we were more welcomed than before. Damask, unlike Fustat, was far more multicultural, and there were Christians and Jews living alongside the Muslim majority, as well as Jainists, Druze and even Manicheans. Initially, I was optimistic that we would find some tulku candidates. I rocked babies in my arms and bounced toddlers on my knee. I looked into their innocent eyes and felt nothing. No inward sign. No special recognition.

Our last candidate of the evening was a three-year-old who alternated disturbingly smoothly between screaming in fright and howling with laughter. His mother sighed as I handed him back and we took our leave.

“I’m tired,” Novice Ahmed said. “Let’s head back to Waiting and pick up the rest tomorrow.”

The thought of heading back to the Monastery filled me with dread. Some of the other teams had already found candidates. Last night, brother Delun had sneered at me over the evening meal as I recounted my failures.

“One more,” I told Novice Ahmed. “Let’s try one more.”

He sighed audibly and then led us to an apartment in one of the new tower blocks, trudging up twelve flights of stairs in a huff.

“Here,” he said, standing outside apartment 123-C, “this one.”

I rang the bell and was surprised to be greeted by a face I recognised. A bulky man carrying a toddler in his arms. How did I know this man? I didn’t think I’d ever seen him around Waiting before. He ducked his head and I remembered. It was the agrotech who had given me the apple from the master’s tree.

“*Bhikku*, welcome,” he said. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

After reading Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, aged 12, **Mahmud** spent his summer holidays in Egypt trying to summon a sandworm. When that didn’t work, he decided to become a writer. A British-Egyptian translator based in London, he is keen on anything sci-fi. You can tweet him @Mahmud0elsayed.

I Have Cradl-ed The Moon

by Fadilah Ali

In my language, we called it “carrying the moon” if as a child, you kept the fast for the whole month. The adults took turns in blaming themselves for not sending you back to bed at sahur, blaming each other for letting you go on past noon, and blaming you for competing with the older kids. They enjoyed it, I’d wager, when they dished out corny advice. Make your intention (to go through the entire Ramadan) on the first day. Don’t drink so much water with your sahur meal, you’ll get very thirsty later. Why don’t you break your fast at twelve? You this girl, you’re too small to be fasting the whole day. Okay whatever.

The first time I carried the moon, I was nine.

When the adults asked me what it felt like to touch the full moon, I flattened my tongue, curved my lips into twin garlands of harmony and spoke in -eds. My *belov-ed* moon, cold at first sight, warm as a zephyr, made me feel quite *ag-ed*. But I had become *learn-ed*. I was nothing like the *curs-ed* little boys and girls whose faint resolve *stretch-ed* out a syzygy of moon, shameless lunch and them. People associated full moons with Ramadan. I associated the moon with *bless-ed* me. The last time I ever carried the moon, I was thirteen.

My moon blanched the skin off my palms on a cool raining day. My moon floated to my face in zigzags, and wandered south. My moon depleted itself in me, trickling drop after drop after dawn. I choked on my words when the adults asked. I would never tell anyone that my moon was cold and heavy, that it was red, red, *r-ed*.

Fadilah Ali is a Nigerian writer living in Edo State. She is currently studying for her MSc. Her work has appeared/forthcoming in Alternate Route, and Briefly Write Magazine among others. She is an in-house writer at The Muslim Women Times. Find her on Twitter @partyjollofism.



The Watermark

by Suma Din

Childhood play

I remember it well, the sheer joy of playing with water in the sink. I remember the interruption to this blissful state too; my mother's call, to come out of the bathroom and come downstairs. A jolt in the idyllic play of my five year old self, swishing circles of soapy lather around in patterns and droplets, cutting through the foam with the plug chain to create more shapes. The ripples and reflections, the concentric circles and sublime shifting shapes that could be made and unmade in a moment of scooping up water in a bottle lid – it was endless pleasure. The interruption, though never welcome, was a prelude to the last bit of fun: pulling the plug and chasing the swirls with my eyes as they gurgled their way down into the unknown.

Water fascinated me as an ever transforming shape; at once transparent, yet still full of the patterns and colours around it - no two episodes of play were ever the same, nor were they long enough.

On the page

Decades later, when I worked on my first book, something happened that took me back to that innate childhood connection to water.

The book was primarily a collation of translated ayaat (verses) from the Qur'an alongside sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to motivate women through different stages of life. In addition to this main body, I wrote some poems, reflections and vignettes from the lives of famous historical Muslim women, revered, due to their spiritual stature as 'Mothers of Believers'. Having spent late nights after my children were asleep and toddler nap times during the day, searching data bases for Hadith (sayings and approved actions of Prophet Muhammad) and making inroads in writing the rest of the layers, I felt like something else would help this publication reach the readership I was writing for. Quite what that something was, I couldn't put my finger on.

My husband and I were out on a regular weekend afternoon with the children and a couple of my notebooks. We were fortunate to visit Kew's botanical gardens regularly, and were spoilt by the exotic array of plants and trees from around the world just a few minutes from our home. After a couple of hours of walking around, I opted out of their next game, and sat down with my notebook, thumbing through lists of 'themes', titles and stray ideas, searching for something invisible. Maybe it was the closeness to the sky that slipped the idea of a water metaphor running through the book to help get the messages across. Maybe the silent counsel of the trees all around me helped, I don't know exactly what it was.

This humble, yet majestic natural resource, an everyday necessity for all, yet a sought after luxury for some: water, this was what I was looking for. Water, in all its incredible life giving forms, would, like an embryonic sac, carry the manuscript: *'Turning the Tide ~ Reawakening the Woman's Heart and Soul'* was the result.

From sacred sources

When I've thought about it subsequently, a nature based theme or motif isn't surprising for a book that is concerned with replenishing the heart and soul. Reading the meaning of the Qur'an in translation and having gained some insight thanks to teachers of Qur'an explanation and interpretation (*tafseer* in Arabic), brought with it a constant interaction with the subject of natural phenomenon. Metaphors, similes, analogies and parables addressing the reader to think and reflect, and ultimately recognise Allah, *Rabb al-'Alamin* – as The Sustainer of the worlds.

"In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and earth: there are signs in all these for those who use their minds."

Surah al-Baqarah 2:164

"Who created the heavens and earth? Who sends down water from the sky for you– with which We cause gardens of delight to grow: you have no power to make the trees grow in them– is it another god beside God? No!"

Surah An Naml 27:60

From the parting of the sea to life-saving groundwater appearing, to floods; certain Prophets' accounts in the Qur'an have powerful images linked to water and the lessons these narratives teach us. Beyond historical stories, our human connection to water goes past this world as we know it, with the mention of the *salsabil* – the fountains in paradise that quench a believer's thirst.

Our eyes are constantly being turned through the words to gaze up at the celestial bodies and contemplate their existence, to gaze down at the life of ants, or across at bees, or into the distance at the fields and forests, the orchards and olive groves, the gardens, the barren land, the rocks, the seas, the oceans. It's no surprise that coastal areas appeal to people and if that's out of reach, as it is for most urban dwellers, then we head for local lakes, river walks to be close to this fluid miracle.

And in our daily lives the ritual washing, Wudu one performs before offering their five daily Salah (the compulsory five prayers starting before dawn until late evening), is another significant connection to water. I've felt the benefit of this connection countless times, when, in preparation to stand in front of Our Sustainer, the physical contact with water is gentle and calming. There's much to be said for mindful Wudu and refreshing our emotions as well as our limbs!

As *Turning the Tide* loosely follows the stages of a woman's life from the inception of her soul and childhood, to the end of her life on earth, the water metaphor flowed through each stage easily. I used a different type of water to symbolise each stage of life, and therefore wrote introductions to each exploring the stage of life and the type of water. For example, the chapter on *Youth* is called '*Streams*'.

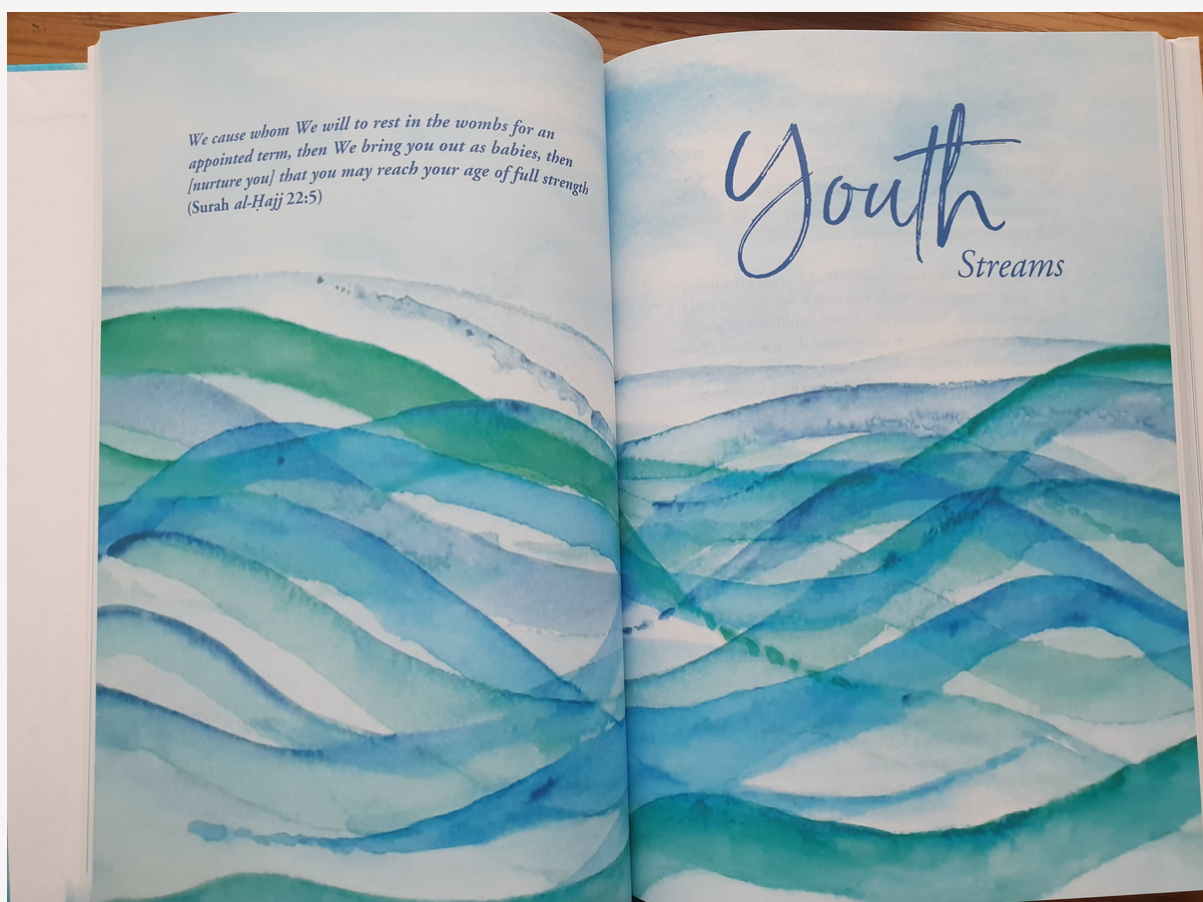


Photo credit: Suma Din

Adding pigment

Roughly three years ago, purely by instinct, I started playing with watercolours, some kind of urge to add colour to water and experiment awoke within me, which coincided with the time the publishers and I planned changes for the fourth edition of *Turning the Tide*. An idea brewed in the back of my mind about adding watercolour art to replace the photograph images. Thinking about abstract art set me off on experimenting with that first small set and a couple of shades from the Cotman's range I bought at the same time. And it was no surprise that Ultramarine, Cobalt blue, Turquoise and Prussian blue drew my paintbrush with a magnetic force I didn't resist.

Painting from instinct created abstract mosaics of sea inspired patterns and shapes within swirling waves of one shape or another. Something about the time taken for rocks and pebbles to form, shaped by the sea's droplets and rain, hold meaning as well as their unique patterns.

The sea ebbs and flows, like our faith (imaan); sometimes brimming over and quenching those around us, other times sinking, a vanishing trickle renders our heart and soul fragile and brittle. I found the process of watercolour painting calming for an overactive mind; playing with the pigment and types of water, creating blooms, specks, or just letting the paint flow and sprawl into stronger or weaker shades.

Painting abstracts was like a new language. Nothing is what it seemed. There are rare moments where what we expect and what really is aligns. Mostly we're working out new shapes and patterns of life; looking for one thing, finding another. Discovering a treasure in something discarded. Making sense out of the pieces into something we call life. Painting abstract patterns offers something liberating; a way to see things and represent them another way.

After the fascination with the range of blue shades running all over the cotton paper was satiated, I was drawn to patterns in nature as inspiration: leaves, stems, petals, buds, flowers, and underwater flora. The experience of trying out watercolour paints was instantly fulfilling, especially as I had no plan, no particular goal or standard in mind. Painting in the evenings, sometimes experimenting, other times following a tutorial on YouTube, soon became something I relished. When time didn't allow for this, then even a short stint with

watercolour pencils, a jar of water and one paintbrush brought immense satisfaction.

After a fair amount of experimenting with different ideas, and going through options with the designer, we finally agreed on abstract paintings to accompany each chapter, some of which I painted.

Writing, painting and faith

The more I painted as a hobby, the less stuck I felt with writing when the inevitable writer's block would gate crash on to my desk. I resisted reading up (and still do) on any theories about the connection. Instead I experienced how the more I used watercolours without any agenda or pressure to produce something, the more it seemed to help with writing. Instead of leaving the desk when I was stuck, to do something mundane and mechanical (the default many will recognise – drawer sorting or decluttering, again), I reached for the brushes. Their tapping sound against the glass jar of misty water, trying out strokes on the cotton cold press paper with the spontaneous choice from the palette, usually worked wonders to return back to work and inch forward.

There are surely parallels between writing & painting, they share the same space: a blank canvas to create without the confines people impose; freedom of expression. A form of hope. All my published work has the subject of faith somewhere within it, like a watermark. Belief in Allah, as The Creator and Sustainer, an innate connection to the natural surroundings, painting and writing, feel connected and merge quietly and seamlessly.

The journey from those carefree days of playing with water to contemplating it as a sign of The Creator's magnificence is not as far apart as one may think. Natural phenomenon, faith and artistic expression support one another if we let them. Language itself has endless possibilities to bring good and truth to humanity, and one of my favourite ayaat in the Qur'an expresses this so accurately:

"Say [Prophet], 'If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted'— even if We were to add another ocean to it."

Surah Al-Kahf 18:109

Suma Din is an author and freelance researcher based in Buckinghamshire, England. Her titles focus on social justice, education, faith and women. She taught in the supplementary and adult education sector for many years and wrote non-fiction resources for children. One of her writing passions is to bring marginalised voices to the fore, as she did through her book on Muslim mothers and their children's schooling. Suma is married with three children and lives with her pet fascination for bodies of water and recreational painting.

Further details of publications are at: www.therootedwriter.co.uk. You can also follow her on Instagram @rooted_writer

The Mirage of Home

by Muti'ah Badruddeen

I look her in the eye; this woman in the mirror. Dressed in a pin-striped navy blue power suit, African, in her late twenties, she has short, kinky, midnight-hued hair in gleaming locs. 'At least no one raised objections to the hair', I tell her, running my fingers through it, catching a faint whiff of *adi agbon*, the locally pressed coconut oil women in my family have sworn by for generations. 'I'd have hated weaves.'

It is interesting to watch the snort I give – *how does that even matter in the scale of things?* – on her face, where she wears the 'natural look' make-up I applied so meticulously, tutored by hours of YouTube scouring. Going from years in a strict boarding school to adopting a conservative approach towards religion, I had skipped the entire cultural education on feminine fashion and make-up. Yet, it is imperative that I look good today - my first day of work in almost five years. Any sign of the tethering maelstrom of emotions that I am needs to be kept off this facade.

God, I want to go home!

I close my eyes, imagining myself there. I'd always assumed I would return, after grad school. Technically, I'm American; my mother came to the US for my birth – like many rich, and a lot of not-quite-so-rich Nigerians do - returning home months later with a baby in possession of the coveted blue passport. Yet I have always identified as Nigerian. Not American, not Nigerian-American; Nigerian. For me, Nigeria is

home; the US is the country of my birth, somewhere I moved to for college. The plan was, always, to return. Then, in my final year of college, I met him and... plans changed.

‘You Ok?’ a voice asked from the bedroom doorway.

Bisola is my roommate – or she would be, once I get my first paycheck. For the past two months, I had been her squatter; living rent-free on her couch, occasionally contributing towards the grocery. What meager savings I had left, from days of squirreling away whatever few dollars I could from household expenses stretched beyond their limits, could barely do more than that. But Bisola was my high school best friend. We survived boarding school together; she is my strongest pillar of support. Despite the years I dropped off her radar, rarely responding to her efforts to reach out, she had taken me in when I moved back; nigh-broke and depressed. Notwithstanding our drifting apart; as the zeal of religiosity and euphoria of early married life dreamily carried me away. Or when the euphoria turned into the unsteady raft of marital woes I nearly killed myself hanging on to; she remained there for me. No questions asked when I turned up at her door, my entire life in a carry-on luggage, all bloodshot eyes and blank gaze. She simply let me in and hugged me, letting me unravel, watching me attempt to pull myself together.

‘Yeah,’ even my grimace is weak, unconvincing. ‘Just trying to get used to the new look’.

The smile she gives me is sympathetic. ‘I’m going to leave. Got an early breakfast meeting. Sure you’ll be fine?’ she asks again.

‘Yes, go on.’ I shoo her away, then I pause and dredge up the genuine

semblance of a smile. ‘Thank you.’

‘Yeah. Whatever!’ It is her turn to wave me off.

I listen to the fading tap-tap-tap sounds of her heels and say a du’a of gratitude.

Nothing reveals good friends like bad times.

When my life crashed around me, previous relationships quickly re-aligned along lines I had been too married to notice before. Invincible yet impenetrable lines viciously protected by feminine insecurity. I’m ashamed at how long it took me to get it. Young-ish, suddenly single, attractive Muslim women were apparently, firmly, on the outside of Muslim women friendship lines. Especially pitiful and particularly vulnerable discards like me. As potential prey for husbands’ selective sunnah practices, we’re iced out with brutal efficiency.

I had returned to Nigeria years ago, briefly – to plan my wedding; my father insisted on a traditional one. Contrasted with his family’s less than tepid reaction to our match, it had seemed like a small concession to make. And though they tried to mask it, I felt my family’s unease over the absence of my in-laws, their inability to make it to the ceremony. In Yoruba culture, marriage is a contract between families. But with only a ragtag band of friends accompanying the groom, we held a small traditional ceremony to go with the wedding *owambe*, before the *alfas* officiated the nikkah. And as we indulged my family in the frivolities that constitute a Yoruba wedding, my husband assured me that his family would come around. That they just needed to get to know me; no one who did could ever fail to love me. It was easy to believe him, my tummy awash with butterflies as I felt his touch for the first time.

Even when the reality of our return was met with cool dismissal on their part, I tried to be optimistic; empathetic. He was, after all, the first-born and only son, from a culture that valued those the most. Left behind when his parents immigrated to the US, a temporary measure that somehow lasted almost three decades, until he secured admission for MBA. Now that he was reunited with them, I tried to understand that their plans for him might not have included an African, albeit American, girl.

In hindsight, I suppose some would have considered these issues to be portends of what lay ahead. But I'd prayed my *istikharah*, I'd consulted the Muslims – at the school's MSA and at his local masjid – no one knew anything of him except good. I chose to trust the emotions I felt. And we both scrupulously made sure our short relationship stayed halaal. I entered matrimony confident and hopeful, trusting in Allaah's Rahmah.

It had been blissful.

Our first year together had been filled with the type of romantic moments I only dared dream of in the secret chambers of my recovering romance novel addict heart. We were unabashedly passionate, bonded over seeking and sharing knowledge of our Deen, and grew stronger in our relationship with each other and Our Lord. We found refuge in each other, the one we hadn't known we lacked. Him from being abandoned as a child, me from finding out that my family's love was conditional when I started practicing the Deen. Undeterred, finally free, we lived the mawwadah and rahmah that Allaah promised in His book. We reveled in it, in each other.

The only dampener – aside from his family's continued refusal to

accept me; but they lived in a different state, so we didn't let them get to us – was that he couldn't get a job. I had secured a paid internship straight from college, and it came with the strong possibility of a permanent position. But all he got were interviews and rejection letters. And though he kept busy with temp jobs, with volunteering and studying the Deen, I knew the strain was getting to him. I avoided talking about my own career or the possibilities opening up to me. I sneaked in payments of the bills when he was not around. And I reminded him daily that he was everything I wanted in a man. That this was just a bump on his way to the greatness I knew awaited him.

When his family arranged a job for him in their home state, I did not demur. We agreed; he would take the job. I'd work the remaining months of my internship, and we'd do the long-distance thing. By the time the much-anticipated permanent job offer came, there wasn't really a choice. I turned down the job and moved across state lines to be with my husband. The distance between us had grown, much more than I envisaged. Those months apart had left cracks in the fabric of our marriage that seemed to splinter, unprovoked.

We would hold on for three more years. He would escape increasingly into the fold of his family; their less-than-enthusiastic reception of me growing decidedly hostile. And I would alternatively pacify and lash out – at him, at them, at myself. Fighting to save – or maybe destroying - the dream that was my life as I had made it. When he finally told me, six months ago, about his decision to marry again, I was resigned; too drained for yet another fight. For that one infinitesimal moment, I thought -

- maybe this is better. Maybe if I no longer have to try so hard - to keep a marriage, to simulate a union, to prove something! - I can finally get a life

again. I can find a job, go back to school, or both! I can go, or send money, home! On days when he's gone, I can sleep without wondering "where", "what" or "with whom?"! Let her worry about him, about his family's opinions.

Yup, I would have shared him. Less gracefully than I'm proud to admit, but I would have. Except he was still speaking...

His intended was from back home, a cousin twice removed; she would need a visa. To get him his papers, we'd had our marriage registered under US laws. Now he wanted to do the same for his bride, he wanted a divorce. He assured me he'd be generous – that I could stay on in our apartment, that he would continue to provide my allowance – for the period of my iddah. Afterwards, though, he would need to prepare a home for his bride, and really couldn't afford to keep two homes. Anyway, seeing as we had no kids...

He must have seen something in my eyes then. He stopped and left.

I spent the day crying, cursing his *aromodomo*, and trashing the endless supply of contraceptive pills he had insisted on. 'Just until we are settled'!

I got the papers in the mail the next day.

Oh, I know I could have fought him, if not for him. I could have contested his divorce of 'irreconcilable differences'; taken half of his possessions, fatwa be damned! I could have at the very least, as my incensed lawyer advised, gotten alimony off him; just until I get back on my feet. But I was tired. Heartsore and home-sick. But with nothing, I couldn't go back. Not as this woman - broken in all but body. The faith I'd held over my non-practicing family was shaken, the marriage I had fought cultural norms for was over, the education and

career prospects my parents spent arms and legs to give me a future had languished - while I spent years trying to hold on to someone who never planned to keep me in faith.

No, this could not be my homecoming.

I look in the mirror again. ‘You will not cry,’ I tell her firmly.

There’s been more than enough of that during the iddah. Too many times the sound of my own sobs woke me from what troubled sleep I’d managed, to a reality worse than nightmares. I keep hoping to wake up, even now. Keep hoping that the past months, years, have been a dream. I pinch myself, again, unsure what point I hoped to wake up to. I am here, though. Where I left off five years ago - in this city, with a college degree and an entry level job offer. Alone.

In a national clime that was so bad, no one would hire me with my hijab. Not even after I exchanged my jilbabs for maxi-gowns, my flowing hijabs for colourful scarves. I attended scores of interviews for jobs I suddenly just wasn’t “the right fit” for before Bisola clued me in. The politicians and their tactics have made some people less circumspect. Now, folks can get away with refusing to hire someone for dressing like me.

‘Maybe consider a new wardrobe,’ was her sage, experienced HR advice.

My next interview proved her right.

I eye said-wardrobe now, the clothes hung up in Bisola’s hallway closet. Sombre flowing garments of my past pushed to one side, making room for the small selection of suits and pastel-coloured shirts

my faithful Christian friend helped me shop for. A fitting analogy of my life; representing who I had been, and the certainty I now questioned. And the home that seemed to recede a little farther with every moment I couldn't afford to go back...

I shut the closet door and, refusing to spare the mirror another look, I step out.

'BismiLlaah. Tawakaltu ala Llaah. Laa haola wala quwata illa biLlaah.'



Muti'ah is a Nigerian reproductive health physician, homeschooling mum, mental health advocate, writer and author who writes tales that reflect African Muslim realities, usually in the form of contemporary Muslim fiction. Her international debut novel, *Rekiya & Z*, published by Xlibris US, was lauded as “gripping, all-encompassing, and poignant” on Amaliah Bookshelf and won the 2021 Daybreak Press Book Award for Islamic Fiction, among others. She is on twitter, facebook and instagram as @deenprogress

Pray

by @fantabulous242



Fantabulous242 (she/her/hers) is a self taught digital illustrator based in India. She loves portraying inequality and patriarchal nature of world towards difference in race/culture/religion/class/gender. She uses art as a medium to portray the "elephant in the room". Besides that she uses art & creativity for different campaigns and initiatives from time to time.

You can find her on Instagram and Twitter at [@fantabulous242](#)



The Formation of Birds

by Kimberly Sewell

The world was new. A lump of soft clay painted with the soft fur of grass and the sharp teeth of mountains, still growing and settling. As the Creator looked on, rivers flowed and oceans formed. Clouds gathered, winsome and malicious by turns as they passed over the lands, undulating endlessly between the soft breath of a lover and the angry bruises of the wronged. The Creator was satisfied with this new world, but saw that it was lacking. The trees sighed, their arms bare and lonely despite the leaves and blossoms that adorned them, and the Creator knew what to make next.

From the Ether, the Creator pulled string. From the Ground, still warm and malleable, the Creator pinched a piece of clay. From the winds, the Creator plucked a wisp of cloud, bending and pressing and pulling, until They held in Their hands a feather.

The world continued to grow, flowers bursting open and releasing their mixed aromas into the sky, rocks hardening and rolling to a stop with sharp cracks or rounded edges by turn, and the trees sighed for something they did not know how to miss. All this transpired as the Creator labored over Their new creation, and then suddenly the skies filled with birdsong.

The creature of clay and string and feathers, leapt bright eyed from the Creator's hand. It plummeted towards the earth then spread out two

magnificent wings. The winds lifted the creature and set it among the clouds. The bird trilled its happiness, but flapped its wings and dove down. The grasses swayed and reached upwards to stroke the downy belly of the bird as it flew above them. The bird tittered a laugh as the grass tickled its sides, then it soared upwards again. The bird sang, and the trees sighed. And then, the bird grew tired. It looked at the oceans and decided they were too rough and consuming. It considered the mountains, but their razor teeth were too sharp and foreboding. The clouds, once sweet and soft, had turned dark and worrying.

And then there were the trees. Tall and strong, they straddled the space between Earth and Sky. Their leafy heads created a shelter from the thundering clouds, and their branches reached out to the bird, beckoning it closer. The bird settled on a branch and the leaves rustled with pleasure. The bird sang again, a clear song of threaded notes that knit themselves into the wind and the grass and the ocean and the mountains. And the tree sighed no more. And the Creator could rest.

Kimberly Sewell is a writer and creator in Pueblo, Colorado where she lives with her husband and cats. Kimberly is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from Regis University. You can follow her art and cat-related adventures on IG and Twitter @Kimberlysewell2 .

Unquiet

by Zohra Melik

Conventionally, when starting a story, one should have a vague notion of what he or she is going to write. Then, the pen glides upon the paper and lines appear in a beautiful or ugly script, filling the pages with words and sentences that may or may not make sense. Upon that final dot, their future consists of three different and sometimes risky paths: the bin, the book or the drawer.

For me, it's mostly the drawer. They lay in wait, knowing fully that I can't part with them, with words so hard to form and too-long sentences that don't mean much, in the end. The pen is discarded, the paper crumpled and my head is a mess; I can't finish my stories. They come and go, with a beginning and a present so suffocating sometimes I lock the drawer and decide to erase my memory of those pages and paragraphs. I'm left blank. No beginning, no middle, no end. So I read instead. And I think.

Maybe too much.

Words are now jumbled, they race against each other, none of them winning while I'm left disoriented. Day in, day out, they intertwine. Meanwhile, I'm lost. I don't know where to go. I start then stop. I yearn for something that leaves me blank then filled. I try to swim in ink but I'm left stained and I hate it.

I want to pray for elegant words and brilliant sentences but I lack

both. I try to pray but my words flee, my thoughts stop. My mouth opens to utter something. No words come.

I always pressure myself to perfection, a goal no human can achieve. I always fear my weaknesses and failures, when I should fear nothing but Him.

I stutter and close my eyes. I try to comfort myself with words that bring me nothing. I try again, this time, I think of Him and Him alone. He is al-Aleem. He knows what I want to say, what I'm feeling and what my prayers are, even when they are not elegant words and brilliant sentences. He knows my pains and what leaves me speechless. I trust in Him hearing my wordless prayers, my jungle of thoughts, my soundless screams. He knows when my heart races and my thoughts hurt. I trust in Him and it's calming.

My thoughts get clearer. The paper becomes more enticing. My eyes sharpen and I gaze at the pen I had abandoned so harshly. That's when I realise.

When words pack and leave, when I turn toward Him, when I come back to the ink, it's her I think about.

The pen itches and I'm tempted to pick it up again, to write wordlessly about her and her face. I see her shadow in my pen, a figure draped in her usual cream abaya and white hijab, a smile so wide and familiar, the tears just drop upon the page. Her tan wrinkly face lit up at every step we took, at every word we would scream, us children running around the house, declaring ourselves pirates or architects of our own lives and of our house.

I could write about writing or love, I could write about dragons and

friends, but often I write about her, her gentle smile that embodied happiness, her snores that could awaken a village, her soft skin and that greeting I delayed. Delaying... Do I write to delay our goodbye?

“L’waqt l’waqt” Baba proclaimed - or reassured himself. L’waqt is Time and we will all die.

“L’waqt” is all I chant now. “L’waqt” thrums in my blood and flies inside me. It’s always there, in my head, on my lips, when I go to school or to work, when I’m in sujood, when I look out the window to see the calm and loneliness of death at our doors. I smile at them and watch as winter comes, summer goes, autumn falls upon the graves and the dying lay in rest.

I just lied to you. Partially, I suppose.

Time is Time and I sometimes forget. I get wrapped up in my pen, paper and ink. I forget the unforgettable because I want to forget her. I get sucked in my swirling thoughts and in things that eat my energy and my time. I try to avoid any thoughts of her, but she comes back with a force when my hand grips a pen. When I think of time, I think of her, and it’s only now that I can think of time and think of Him alone.

He called for her, He will call for me. He will call for you too.

Time is time and it confuses. It passes and leaves me wondering, plundering books to put words on feelings. I search and travel through stories, I let it trickle and pass quickly. Sadness slowly deserts my memories and lets dread take over me. I’m afraid of time and of its offspring. I’m afraid to let it pass and do nothing.

When Baba said “L’waqt”, he was smiling. Time is Time, it comes and it takes, Time is a friend and not an enemy. When the Time comes, the meeting will take place. We’re aware of it, we’re readying ourselves for it, what more is there to want but this warning?

I don’t know Baba, but I’m restless.



The second of three girls, born in Algeria and raised in France, **Zohra** is a 28-year-old clinical psychologist currently pursuing a master in French and Comparative literature. When she’s not reading or buying books, you can find her attempting to paint or posting on her bookstagram @booksandkitab.

Moon Song

by Salonee Verma

On the night our moon comes down to meet us, my sister has the wrong kind of faith.

It's just me and her left. She rubs her churi onto her wrist hard enough to leave checkered impressions on the skin, eyes flicking from the moon to our altar. "We should go inside," she says around a shiny spoon of halwa.

"It won't help, Didi," I tell her. I rearrange the fruits so they look like a garland around God's clavicles.

We swing the carriage as soon as the clock hits twelve, watching the moon swing closer. It's like a foxtrot-- rise and fall, rise and fall. The night sky is a bandhej sari, stars sticking in the fabric like they've been dyed on. It's bright enough to sew when we break our fast at midnight.

"I'm not saying it's going to help," she snaps back. She takes a deep breath and starts gathering all the dishes, almost knocking over our tin of statue clothes. The fractured mirrors blaze in the moonlight until Didi slams the lid on. "Sorry. I don't mean to yell. I'm just saying, let's go inside and call someone over. Let's not be alone."

"Okay." We pile everything on our arms, leaving the marua ki roti out for the animals. It's not traditional, but we don't remember enough traditions after our mother got eaten by the stars. So, we smash all of

them into one.

What do you do when the world is ending? I'm not sure if there's a prayer for it. There has to be. We all believe in it. Someone's supposed to come for us, Maitreyi or Isa bin Maryam or Kalki or whoever else wants to be a messiah. But there's no one coming except the sky dancing closer and closer.

*

Maybe it started when we jumped planets. Our homeworld had been attacked, so we jumped to the moon on Didi's ex-boyfriend's spaceship. They'd broken up on the ride, so he ditched us on the closest moon and shot off towards the next galaxy without us.

"I still love you," he had radioed us one day, back when we'd still been on that tiny green moon. "I wish it had been different."

Didi had changed the frequency, scoffed, and gone off to change her clothes for a new date-- another pilot. Didi liked to lure in useful people, and Didi liked to run. Pilots were her weakness, in this as in all things.

Maybe it was because she had been studying to become a pilot before Baba had gotten sick. Maybe it was because she still loved kissing the stars at night while she thought I was asleep. Maybe it was because even now, she's enamoured by the entire thing. Her heart stutters when she looks at the moon, sometimes.

Baba said there would be seven suns when the world ends, so we should avoid binary star systems. Didi had told him that there were

millions of suns in the sky at once, that it didn't matter if we had a few extra. If they were in groups of seven, there was nothing we could do anyway.

That moon disintegrated after the comets came back. We didn't even realize that we'd forgotten to name it until we'd left.

*

Didi makes her calls, but only one person's spending the apocalypse without someone to talk to.

Badr makes his excuses a few times before hanging up. A few minutes later, he's standing outside our door with a rolled up prayer mat under one of his arms and a bag of chips in the other.

"My favorite girls," he says, grinning. He hangs up his jacket on the porch and kisses Didi's cheek warmly.

"Don't keep your jacket out," Didi says, rubbing her crossed arms. She's put on lipstick, some type of glittering black that shines in the light. It's not cold outside, but there's a chill in the air. We can all feel it.

"Who's going to steal it?" Badr replies with a smile. He bumps my fist. "What do people do during an apocalypse? Let's watch a movie."

"That's ridiculous." Didi turns on the television anyway, waiting for the static to tick off. It takes longer than normal. The screen immediately fills with one of her lovers professing her still undying love for my sister. It's not unusual. The first string of lovers were radio mechanics who loved riding the channels, showing up on each and every screen. They haven't given up the habit, just applied it to television instead.

Didi rolls her eyes and switches the channel.

There's only reruns playing, some outrageously old movie that none of us have ever seen. Badr makes a joke about how he's glad his parents died before they saw their only child turn into whatever he is. We laugh uncomfortably and turn back to the screen.

*

The third home we lived in was a tunnel inside the core of a planet in the Aldaris system. It had been so dark that Mama had started complaining about how we were meant to worship the sun, and that faith is impossible inside a tunnel. Baba had laughed and rolled his eyes and gotten a plastic sheet to lay on the ground. He'd filled it with water. Our own little river for Chhath.

Didi's tunnel beau had been one of the rebellion diggers, a slenderly strong girl with a pickaxe around her waist. She'd dug us a way out when it was time to go.

She and Didi had parted ways with a sweet hug and a promise to find each other once the violence was over. They never did.

*

The movie ends. We look outside and the sky is brilliant with the shine of the moon coming closer and closer.

"Let's go out," says Badr quietly. He's never usually this quiet. Maybe he's finally feeling the sobriety of the moment, or maybe he's just tired. God knows we all are.

Didi pulls the dusty chatai out of storage while Badr unrolls his prayer

mat. The altar is already outside, and we live next to the church. There is so much holiness in this five-mile radius that if anything's going to save us, it would already be here.

Nothing has eaten the marua ki roti yet, so I take small bites while Didi and Badr kneel on their mats, clasping hands. The church is threateningly quiet--everyone wants to spend their last hours with the people they love.

I've considered that Badr might be the messiah. I used to give him his testosterone injections and there's something beautiful about his confidence. He wants to believe, he needs it. Everyone loves him, including me and Didi.

But if he's planning something, he hasn't told me. He's sitting here with the rest of us, clasping his hands and gazing up at the moon coming closer and closer.

*

This planet was supposed to be our seventh and last home. Didi's ex-lover, a half-tree from Naila, had gotten us off-world before the meteors had started raining down. Baba had still been there when we arrived, albeit very, very small. His voice had flown away from us, and eventually, he did as well.

We should have known luck would leave us, eventually. We'd escaped six apocalypses already. Maybe this was our seven suns thrown together into one bastard of a planet, oceans of lilac algae and all.

Mama cried and took his ashes out on the next shuttle to the sky. She never came back.

*

Badr and Didi are holding hands now. They're lying down on the grass with their fingers entwined and they look at peace. I don't know how they can do it, how they can watch the white sky becoming louder and louder and still smile.

"Don't be scared," Badr tells me, eyes crinkling. He pats the spot next to him and makes me lie down.

He's the most useful one of Didi's ex-lovers, because he was always more than that. He was a lodestar. Everyone loves beautiful things and he was the most beautiful of them all.

"Hey." Didi's voice cracks as she says it. She reaches her other hand out towards mine, locked into a fist. "I love you. Both of you."

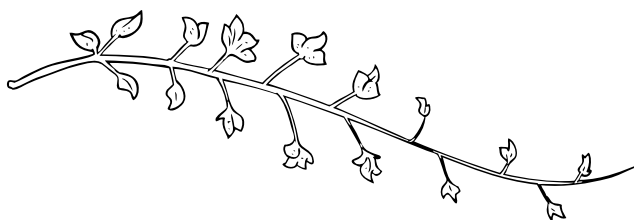
I bump her fist. "Love you too."

It's not enough, but Badr laughs and grips our hands, face awash in the dazzling light of imminent death. Didi and I turn inwards. We're halfway on the prayer mat now, still in front of our open altar.

There's a squirrel eating the marua ki roti. Didi and I look at it and then each other, biting our lips to keep from smiling. It doesn't feel like we're supposed to be smiling, but I'm not really scared anymore. At least something got to eat our holy food. At least we're together.

In the blazing bright dawn of the apocalypse, Badr holds us close and begins to sing.

Salonee Verma is a Bihari-American writer and the co-founder of antinarrative, a collaborative zine. Her work is published or is forthcoming in Backslash Lit, Pollux Journal, zindabad zine, Dishsoap Quarterly and more. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Find her online at saloneeverma.carrd.co.



Uncaged

by Aini Butt



Mixed media: watercolour, ink, metallic acrylic paint

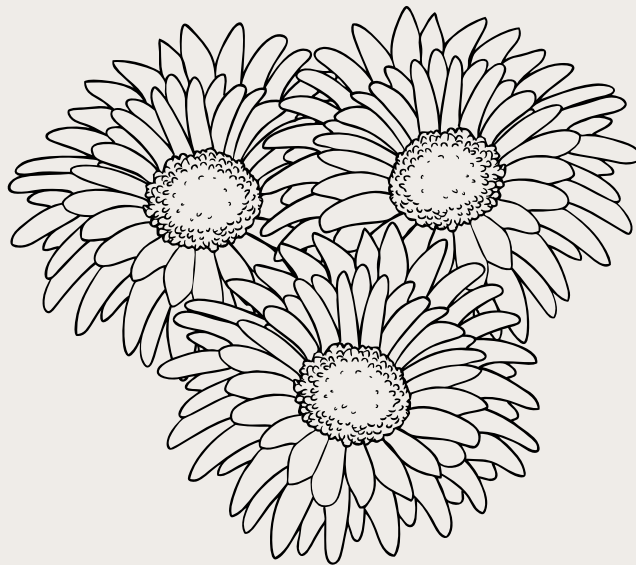
Heavens' Beckoning

by Aini Butt



Collage of old ripped up book pages, ink for details

Aini Butt reflects on her lived experiences through her writing and art. Drawing upon a range of art media and techniques, she articulates the untold stories. Each art piece can be interpreted through a range of lenses, which allows the audience to experience their own reflective process.



Trauma Doesn't Just Evaporate

by Yacoob Manjoo

June 1996. An ordinary afternoon in the car with my father, coming home from school – which was almost over for the term. We were oblivious to what was going on outside – probably discussing the Euro 96 football tournament that was on the go at the time. We had no idea that the next few minutes would be life-changing.

I was at the back, in the left-hand seat, where I always sat. As we pulled into the garage, we realised we were not alone. A man had followed us in. He stood at my father's window, demanding that he open the door. My father froze. He refused.

Out came a gun. The man called over an accomplice, who came and stood outside my door – gun in hand.

My instinct – borne out of years of hiding from my older brother when we'd fight – was to duck down between the front passenger seat and my own. As one of the smallest kids in my class for most of my life, I was still small enough to fit into that little space. I didn't know if that position would save me from what might follow. I didn't think at all. It just kicked in – that reaction. I curled up to hide.

Meanwhile, my father still wasn't co-operating. He could have been in complete shock – unable to act. Or maybe he was strategizing in his

mind, weighing up his options and considering what would happen if he complied. Would they take just the car? Would they take me? Would they shoot one or both of us – to eliminate eyewitnesses who had seen their unmasked faces? Would they go forward into the house?

The first man tried to break my father's window with the butt of his gun. Miraculously, the glass stayed firm and the gun broke.

My father finally snapped into action, starting the car then moving forward – ramming the bookshelf in front of us, before reversing out of the garage.

Somewhere in those few seconds, the second man fired a shot at my window. I don't know if he was aiming for me or my father, but my window shattered and glass fell all over my head and into the back seat. The bullet ended up lodged in my door – thankfully not making it to either of us.

Both men fled.

We closed the garage and ran inside, but couldn't call the police because the house phone was locked. There was no way to make a call – we didn't have mobile phones back then – so the only option was to press the alarm button, triggering a deafening siren which was followed by a call from the security company. Security guards arrived soon after, as did the police. They took our statements and the police went searching for the perpetrators.

One was found – in a nearby park. He was nervous and sweating, with gun residue on his hands. They brought him back to us and I was asked to identify him – while he stood, restrained by the police – just a few

metres away. It was terrifying – having to face this man who was so physically close, just a short time after the crime. I thought it was him, and tentatively confirmed that to the police, before they took him away.

There was no sign of his partner.

The aftermath

I slept on the floor of my parents' room that night, as had been my habit throughout childhood when I was scared. I feared retribution. I worried that the one who got away would come back.

I got to stay home from school for a few days, which was a plus for me, given that we were rarely allowed to miss school. My headmaster came to visit, too. As he left, my dog – excited by his presence, but probably frustrated that he wouldn't play with him – jumped up and bit his backside. It's still one of the highlights of my school career.

A few days later, while walking outside, I thought I saw the man who'd escaped. He was sitting on the pavement, across the road from our house. I wasn't too close, so he wouldn't have spotted me easily, but I was terrified. I just kept walking – around a few blocks, trying to buy enough time for him to leave. It may or may not have been him...I really don't know. I was still shaken up at that point, and I didn't want to take any risks.

Later on, even though I felt okay, my mother forced me to go to a psychologist for trauma counselling. I answered her questions and listened to her stories, including one where her son was confronted

with a home invader... her way of trying to connect with me around what, unfortunately, is too common in South Africa.

I'd done karate for years before that, and at the end of each lesson, our sensei would always remind us of the dangers in our country. He wanted to emphasise how important our training was. I don't remember the exact figure, but he always said that, statistically speaking, at least one of us in the class would be a victim of crime. I never thought it would be me.

Anyway... I didn't want any follow-up counselling. I was okay, I told myself.

My father flatly refused to go. He didn't believe in psychology. Still doesn't. So the psychologist came home to speak to him, having just one session – as she did with me.

We moved on, and that was that.

For him, it was a life-changing event. But for me, it didn't seem to have much impact. Or at least, that's what I thought at the time.

At the end of that year, we went to court to face the man who was caught. We were to testify – me testifying in-camera, as I was still a minor at the time. However, the facilities weren't available when it was my turn. A little girl who was testifying in a separate case needed it more, and I didn't want to wait.

I faced him again – in court. I answered the questions put to me. He got off.

There was some misunderstanding in my perception of the details and what happened after the attempted hijacking. Whether that played a role in his acquittal, I don't know.

But I just wanted it to be over. And it was.

Trauma doesn't evaporate

No fear lingered over me afterwards. I didn't worry about whether either of them would come back for us. We still lived in the same house and went about our normal lives, though more cautiously.

It was just part of life. It was history. I never believed it had a long-term impact. But I now realise it must have. The trauma doesn't just evaporate.

For many, many years afterwards, one of my recurring dreams would be that I'd be at home – in that same house – and the garage door would be open, or unlocked. Either that, or the yard door would be unlocked or open. We would be exposed to danger. Anyone – any criminal – could just waltz in and harm us. And I always felt that those criminals were just outside – waiting to come in.

It gave me anxiety in my dreams. I felt the fear. I felt the vulnerability. But I would always wake up.

Until now, I never connected those recurring dreams to that attempted hijacking. I always felt I was okay.

But I wasn't.

I was just 15 years old at the time, so it left an impact.

Saved

It would have been a tragedy if I'd died that day. Not just because I would have left this world so young, but more so because of my own internal state at the time.

I was a self-centred teenager. I believed in God, but my religion was, to me, nothing more than a set of rituals. Rituals I followed simply to get my parents off my back. I had no deeper understanding, nor any will to understand. I simply lived for what I wanted. Did what I wanted to – as far as possible. I didn't care about where I stood in the eyes of my Creator. I didn't care about what happens after death.

And had I left this world in that state...I shudder to think what would have happened to me in my grave and beyond.

But my Creator saved me from that fate. He allowed me to survive, even though I cannot perceive the reason.

It would be another five years until I finally woke up. A sort of spiritual awakening that finally set me on a path of more consciousness. A path that's taken me far away from who I was back then. So much progression...so much growth.

I don't say any of this in the arrogant belief that I'm now a saint. That Paradise is guaranteed and I'm the best version of myself. Far, far from it.

But I write this out of gratitude. Gratitude that I was given another chance. That my life was not taken in that state – where, in my view, it would have been a life wasted...one where I contributed nothing to this world.

The things we don't see

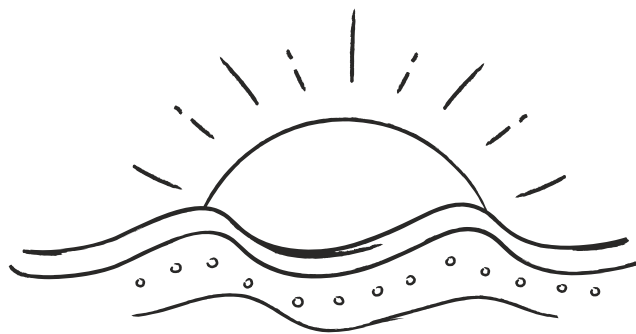
The common cliché is that “everything happens for a reason” and in this case, I see the wisdom behind the event for my father. But beyond that, the experience shows that no matter what the physical world looks like – however threatening the danger may seem – there’s always an unseen reality at play.

It was no stroke of luck that the gun broke. In general, a car window – a fragile piece of glass – does not make a gun fall apart. But that’s what happened. Yet it wasn’t the strength of the glass that broke that gun. It was an unseen force that God used to protect us in that moment.

Sceptics may scoff at the idea, and atheists will deny it, but people of faith know that there’s more to this world than what our earthly eyes perceive.

The ultimate lesson is that no matter how desperate our challenges may seem, we should look beyond the outward appearance and remember Who is in control, and how easily He can change our circumstances.

Yacoob Manjoo is a South African writer, blogger, and poet. His book of poetry and reflections, *Let it Flow*, was released in 2019, and he released a collection of pandemic inspired writing, *Corona Times*, in 2020. Find more of his material on his blog dreamlife.wordpress.com or on Instagram (@dreamlife.za).



One Step

by Natasha Bredle

Who is she? You don't know.

You've only found yourself here, on this park bench overlooking a field of winter-bleached grass. It's cold outside. Frosty wind bites at your nose. The last visitors, a middle aged man and his bob-tailed rottweiler, left minutes ago. Now only you remain, seated on this ugly blue-green bench. It's made from bottle caps, some of which you donated yourself, after spending weeks and weeks digging through your family's recycling bin, removing caps from plastic bottles and stashing them away in ziploc baggies.

You should be proud of this unattractive landmark you took the initiative to contribute to, but all you notice is the way the thick planks dig into your pelvis. You wonder if this is how some homeless people feel when they settle down to sleep on benches for the night—the initial bite of the discomfort, followed by that creeping shadow of hopelessness. Perhaps for the first week or so, but soon enough they probably grow numb to it.

At least the girl beside you doesn't seem to mind it. You don't think she's homeless, but then again, you never know. There's no way you can tell from her clothes or the expression on her face. Usually you're adept at reading people, but the girl has a different air about her. You can't describe it, you just know that it's different. She's different. Somehow.

It's strange; she looks straight ahead, to the hill with the flagpole and the parking lot beyond, but you can feel her gaze on you. The air between the both of you is still, as though waiting. You aren't counting the minutes, so you don't know how much time passes before she speaks.

She asks you what your name is.

At first thought the question seems childish, the sort of thing you'd ask a fellow kid in preschool. But your thoughts bring you back to junior high, when an English teacher claimed it was the contrary—someone's name is the most important thing you need to know. According to her, asking someone's name is the equivalent of acknowledging that they are human. That they have a life separate from your own, with joys and heartbreaks, wants and needs. Not as if knowing a person's name automatically entitles you to all of that, or even gives you the slightest glimpse beyond the surface.

But when you give the girl your name, you can't shake away the feeling that you have just opened up everything to her. Even to you it sounds absurd, but the feeling of vulnerability can't be revoked.

The girl's lips quirk up. Only a subtle flicker of a smile, but warm. Grateful. She doesn't offer you her name in return, and you don't ask for it. At this point, it seems too precious a gift. Yet you still can't explain why.

With a discreet glance, you observe her face again. Her blue eyes shimmer like oceans, and you quickly avert your gaze for fear that if you look too closely, you really will see waves lapping inside them. Her hair ripples down her shoulders like a silken tapestry. It stands

out against the gray day, glowing as if illuminated by a sun somewhere within. Each fine strand is so blonde snowflakes would melt and become one with them. She is beautiful, you realize, but not in any typical way. Not even in any other rare way that some people are. You almost chuckle inwardly, thinking beauty might need yet another definition. Or a new word entirely. Or, maybe there *is* a word for this. Maybe you'll find it one day, in a book or a dictionary. And it will remind you of this girl.

"It's cold outside."

The girl speaks your thoughts from just moments ago. If her voice has any cadence to it, it's neutral. Not energized, not depleted. Just there. But there for a reason. And this is what soothes you.

"Yeah," you agree. "That's how it tends to be, in December. I probably should have worn a thicker jacket."

"Don't you want to go home?"

A shiver runs through you. For a moment you wonder if your lips will stitch together, like they often do when there are things you want to say, but can't. But no. Right here, in her company, your mouth moves as freely as water.

"Do you ever feel like you don't deserve home?"

You don't regret the words once they come out. They merely hang in the air, like docile animals. Birds, maybe. Birds wondering where their wings went.

The girl does not answer your question. But her silence, you realize, is all that you need. It's a listening silence, an understanding silence. It comforts you in a way words could not, but it also reminds you of silence's fickle nature, all the ways you have used it in your life, and the times it has used you. You suppose it is like the sea. The sea can be violent and hectic. It can sweep you up into its maelstrom, submerge you over and over again until water fills your lungs and you can't draw breath. But the sea can also be still, glassy. The reflection of a clear sky, bringing you some sort of peace.

The girl's silence is of the latter kind, and you find it has given you the composure you need to ask your next question.

"How do you keep going?" You keep your voice low, gentle with the heavy words. "How... how do you keep on moving, when your whole world is crumbling around you?"

You're worried she won't answer. You're worried she might leave you. You fight back the precipitation swelling in your eyes.

But then she speaks, and for a brief moment the cold around you softens.

"It's easy," she says. "I take one step. Then another. That's all."

Two minutes later, you're standing in the parking lot, about to drive home. Your car is right ahead of you, but you hesitate before approaching it.

When you left the bench, the girl was still sitting on it. But there are

no other cars in the parking lot.

The girl's last words resonate in your mind over and over, and as they do, her voice begins to sound more familiar. Not the accent, not even the tone. Something... deeper.

Because she spoke with the voice of a stranger whom you've never met, but have known all your life.

You can't possibly explain this. But you were never meant to.

You don't know what comes next. All you know is that you will take one step, then another.

Soon enough, it may get easier. Or it may take longer than you'd hoped. But for now, it helps knowing that you no longer just believe in angels. You are certain that they are the realest thing on Earth.

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Dust

by Marc Isaac Potter

The oxygen of the air has little chance to compete when dust whips itself up into a storm. The dust is not superior, just so granular. So much bigger. If a lizard opens its nose, its mouth, its ears, the dust moves in like a bulldozer. ...

... Even when there is no dust in the air at all, it can suddenly rise, almost miraculously - a terrifying, vicious miracle. The oxygen gives up its attempt to seek safe harbour in the lungs, brain, nostrils of the dying lizard just as also the water of the desert abandons its duties - even the vapours of the waters - they just plain leave and don't come back.

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Interpretation of Misery

by Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

“Misery breeds art,” my granduncle had proclaimed once.

Funny then, I remember thinking, why being miserable isn’t something we strive to achieve more than anything else. To oppress our soul (or whatever we call the encapsulation of our consciousness) with the unrelenting pressure of this thing we call life, to have it willingly step into an inescapable black hole that’s devoid of any trace of joy or happiness, to subject it to a pain that borders on agony...

Sounds foreboding, doesn’t it?

My granduncle’s maxim was part of a tale he shared with me, one he claimed was “as real as the sun that gives us warmth, as the water that quenches our thirst.”

“There is a large field close to where I used to live as a kid,” he started. “I had never been there. People said it was haunted, and I didn’t once doubt their claim. Anyhow, throughout its existence, several stories have sprung from its infamous legacy. According to one of them, anyone who walked through the seemingly endless treacherous path – a territory ruled by walking demons who breathed out fire – to get to this field was emancipated.”

As a kid, I didn’t know what “emancipated” meant, but I didn’t disturb him.

He continued. “They are the ones, it was said, who had truly endured sufferance, who didn’t submit to those demons, and attained glory.”

He leaned a little closer, looked at me squarely and took his time before continuing. “These people are called artists,” he said, letting me absorb the story. “Misery breeds art, always remember that.” Only when he saw me nodding did he go back to the football game he was watching on the TV. He left me, a mere nine-year-old boy, wondering just what the story really meant.

I wanted to ask him if he’d had a bit to drink, but I held my tongue.

That story came back to me many years later, when, last week, I finished the first draft of my debut novel. I don’t know if it’s any good (to tell you the truth, I would call it a relentless and ridiculously long rant), let alone if I’ll be able to find a publisher who will back it. And, even if I do, it’s highly unlikely it’ll sell well. It took me two years to write it, and, regardless of its probable fate, I can say that I’m quite proud of it. Going through the massive pile of the hard work I’d put in in the last couple of years, I discovered a sense of relief wash over me. What followed that relief was what I would like to call, for the lack of a better word, emancipation.

Yes, exactly like the victors who had trudged through the treacherous path and tasted the glory my granduncle had spoken about. Oh, how these warriors must have felt as they stepped onto the carpet of freshly cut grass, the sun on their faces, the sinister demons behind them. The elation, the sheer joy.

But, as I think now, would this emancipation even be realised if it wasn’t for my own treacherous path that I had to move through? For

the needles I had to walk on, with cuts and bruises all over my feet as I determinedly put one leg after another? For the fire breathing demon chasing me, his face a horrid mix of revulsion and sinisterness?

Or perhaps I'm blowing things a little too much out of proportion. But, then again, exaggeration is a useful asset for a storyteller. And, after the last two years, I do get to call myself a storyteller, don't I?

Maybe my miseries aren't as significant as some of the more pressing – more tangible – issues our world faces today. I have a job, one which gives me no reason to complain financially. I have a place to live; and, even though I rent it, you don't take a roof over your head for granted. I have friends and family who care for me. I am in good health; sure, I could cut down on unhealthy habits (too embarrassing to be specified), but I do maintain what I can safely call a reasonably fit lifestyle.

And isn't that all that we need?

But, yet, time and again I find myself... miserable.

Especially when, for example, I have just had a tiresome call with a disgruntled client who, unhappy with the services our company was providing her, called me a "thief" and a "sadist"; and a panic so deep and formidable set in me because the cycle would repeat the next day, and the one after that, and the one after that. Or each time I would let my aunt walk all over me pointing to how my boy, who dropped a year in high school, was a "failure"; while, inwardly, I'm seething, cursing myself at not being courageous enough to tell her off. Or even when, sucked into the wormhole of memories from my past, I am forced to relive the bullying and the name-calling I had to endure in

school because of my stuttering. Kids in high school are ruthless, and anyone who says otherwise is either lying or incredibly fortunate.

I opened up about how these instances left me miserable to a friend a few years ago. She, a well-wisher as she likes to call herself, was quick to point out that I “can’t keep all this bottled in,” and that I’ll “erupt like a volcano,” with the “lava of these miseries scorching everything they so much as touch.”

Quite a colourful picture, isn’t it?

Today, as I leaf through this documented rant that I ambitiously call a novel, I say to her, “Look, Nancy. I erupted.”

A drop forms at the corner of my eye, and I don’t bat it away.
“I finally erupted.”

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The Myth of Modern Mother Mary: an analysis of “All God’s Children Can Dance” by Haruki Murakami

by Regina Ivy

Religion *is* absurd. The act of putting faith in something that is not tangible obviously does not make sense to many. It is absurdism that recognizes that life happens despite the meanings we may or may not make for it. Religion offers a way to make sense of life despite its absurdity. The two concepts are seemingly polarizing. Then, what is there to say about those who believe in completely absurd things- in the name of God? I turn to Haruki Murakami for answers. In his short story, “All God’s Children Can Dance” I truly feel there is a way to prove that religion is not only every bit absurd as life itself, but that the absurdity of it is vital for those who live by it.

“All God’s Children Can Dance” centres around 25-year-old Yoshiya. Yoshiya feels that he is not extraordinary in any specific way despite his strange, overly religious upbringing and abnormally large penis. His mother, however, insists that he is special. Yoshiya is the son of God- or at least she believes he is. The mother fell into an unfortunate relationship with her doctor – a young bachelor who taught her contraceptive methods and was missing an earlobe. The intimate relationship with this doctor occurs around the same time Yoshiya’s mother becomes pregnant. The doctor refused to admit that the child could be his, which led Yoshiya’s mother to eventually believe that the child came from above.

One afternoon, Yoshiya spots a man with a missing earlobe entering the subway. He believes him to be his father. Yoshiya follows the man until he cannot track him anymore and ends up alone in a baseball field. He contemplates his life and the absurd circumstances that have made him the person he is. It is in that baseball diamond where Yoshiya comes to believe that all of God's children can dance.

Absurdism is the struggle to find meaning in an existence that potentially has none. If there is one, it couldn't ever be accessible to humans. In Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argues for living life anyway despite its nonsensical chaos. In a sense, we must continue living because we *just have to*. The only other option in our own hands is death, which according to Camus, is a confession that says life "is not worth the trouble—" which is strikingly similar to a thought that Yoshiya's mother had when carrying him during her pregnancy.

In the essay, Camus details the myth of Sisyphus. He was cursed by the gods to roll a stone up a hill over and over again in the underworld for eternity. How would there be any way to overcome this if he knew he would fail every time? Well, according to Camus, "one might imagine Sisyphus happy [,]" because "[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."

Religion is the belief in and life-consuming dedication to a higher power beyond human comprehension. Many religious officials *believe* they understand the character of God, but it is to no avail – because no such thing has ever been agreed upon. This is why churches split, denominations are created, and church attendances are dropping. If God is meant to be the ultimate answer to life's absurdities, then would He not be clearer about who He is? Yoshiya ponders God's nature in

the story, he asks, “if it was all right for God to test man, why was it wrong for man to test God?” Yoshiya is not asking to be God in this moment, or for a chance to try to get the best of Him. Yoshiya is asking for clarity and fairness. It is Yoshiya who blames Mr. Tabata for his own death – because he never took it into his own hands to ask God for healing. Yoshiya thinks:

“His [Mr. Tabata’s] final months of suffering were excruciating to see. Had he never once in all that time tested God? Had he never once prayed to God for some small relief from his terrible pain? Mr. Tabata had observed his own strict commandments with such rigor and lived in such intimate contact with God that he of all people was qualified to make such prayers.”

While religion does offer the presence of a higher power to lay burdens on, it still requires a sense of autonomy, agency and choice that has to come from the individual.

Yoshiya’s mother believes she is the modern mother Mary, and that Yoshiya is one of God’s special children. She believes certain parts of his body are a sign of this- despite Yoshiya never asking for any of it. The story states that “the craziness of it struck him. All he had ever prayed for was the ability to catch outfield flies, in answer to which God had bestowed upon him a penis that was bigger than anybody else’s. What kind of world came up with such idiotic bargains?” As absolutely crazy as that belief may sound, it is Ms. Osaki’s right to keep believing so. It motivates her to keep living- or to revolt, as Camus puts it. Yoshiya’s mother believes very insane things – but she believes that they are possible because of God. She landed herself in a situation that left her down on her luck – she needed to believe something, otherwise she would have given up completely and taken her own life. She claims

she “wasn’t the least bit afraid to die,” and that she would have thrown herself off a boat to Oshima had Mr. Tabata not stepped in and told her this:

“You took the most rigorous contraceptive measures, and yet you became pregnant. Indeed, you became pregnant three times in a row. Do you imagine that such a thing could happen by chance? I for one do not believe it. Three ‘chance’ occurrences are no longer ‘chance.’ The number three is none other than that which is used by our Lord for revelations. In other words, Miss Osaki, it is our Lord’s wish for you to give birth to a child. The child you are carrying is not just anyone’s child, Miss Osaki: it is the child of our Lord in Heaven; a male child, and I shall give it the name of Yoshiya, ‘For it is good’ (Murakami).

Although her story about Yoshiya being one of God’s special children is crazy – it is her way of embracing the “absurd” thing that has happened in her life: the pregnancy. It is the pregnancy that acts as her “boulder” she is continually rolling up the steep hill of life.

Some philosophers might say that religion is a pacifier, a “lazy out” for those not mentally strong enough to handle the “truth” of life having no inherent meaning. Religion has been referred to as “the opioid of the masses.” But what makes a belief in God any different than a belief in no meaning at all? If religious people are fulfilled by making decisions, they know will please their god, then how is that any different than a person bound to Nothing being fulfilled by making choices that affect Nothing? My point here is belief in God is just as much (or as little) as a “pacifier” as a belief in anything else. Religion does not offer a life of passivity and complacency, for those who are religious still feel strain and struggle as much as anyone else. What it does offer is a way to embrace the struggle in the way Camus suggests in his essay.

Religion, by its very nature, is absurd. It requires one to put faith in something that they cannot see or lay hands on. But the faith is *not* for holding out hope that one day we might stop struggling – it is to help us embrace that very struggle and move on with our lives. To quote the apostle Paul:

"... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him who gives me strength." (New International Version, Philippians 4:11-13).

Not in the struggle itself, not in conquering the struggle, but the embrace of it – this is where true freedom lies. And it is true no matter how one might choose to do it. Embracing the struggle is not about being passive and sitting at the sidelines of life because the embrace itself is an action and a choice. We choose to not let the struggles of life bother us through whatever means we see most fit. Perhaps that is through God, or through Nothing, or maybe through the love we have for those around us.

"All God's Children Can Dance" ends with Yoshiya alone on a baseball field. He had just followed a mysterious man that resembled what he knew about his biological father – but he has disappeared. Alone in the field, he thinks about his past, his relationships, and his life – and he dances. The dance in this story is an expression of freedom, the story mentions his lack of fear, it says:

"Unable to think of a song to match his mood, he danced in time with the stirring of the grass and the flowing of the clouds. Before long, he began to feel that someone, somewhere, was watching him."

His whole body—his skin, his bones—told him with absolute certainty that he was in someone’s field of vision. So what? he thought. Let them look if they want to, whoever they are. All God’s children can dance.”

Why is he dancing? I do not know – but it is also not for me to know. Perhaps somewhere between God’s absurd answers to his prayers and the unwavering faiths of his naïve mother and good friend, he’s found a truth of his own, an epiphany that makes him call out: “Oh God.”

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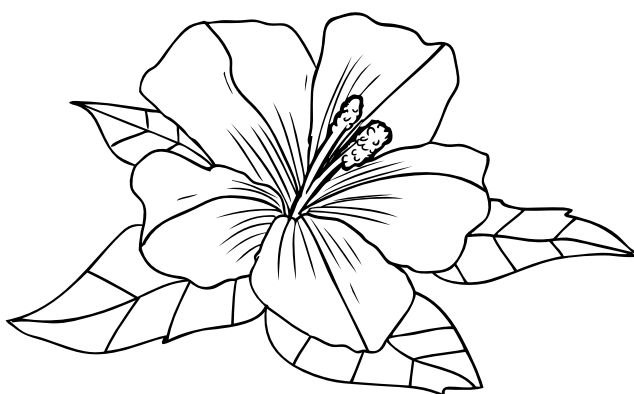
Quranic Resonance

by Shaheena Uddin



Photography

Shaheena Uddin is a multi-award-winning photographer, a journalist, and a podcaster. In 2018, she was awarded a ‘Judge’s Favourite’ prize by the ESRC’s national “Bigger Picture” competition, resulting in her work being displayed in the Espacio Art gallery, London. More recently in 2020, she won the IAM photo-competition. You can find her on Twitter @shaheenauddin and Instagram @falconess.fotos



Lost Connection

by Aisha Oredola Kayode

I do not want to open my eyes. When you know the mess you have made, the gravity of it and the consequences, you want your eyes shut until some extraterrestrial force helps wipe the mess clean like it never happened. Me being in my sister's room makes this all the more complicated for me.

The insomnia dealt with me last night and I had to snuggle up to Iman to get some sleep. Being around her is so easy. The four-year difference between us isn't a wide gap that needs closing. It is filled with love. I wish our parents could see that Iman isn't the difficult one. If anything, I am, but Iman is the one they are afraid of, the one who has their focus. Her dangerous good looks, intellect and audacity – exactly like our mother was at her age – scares them. They are certain she is going to fall into the same trap life set for my mother so they choke her with protection.

She had been warm, asked me to use her bathroom for a quick shower – oh that shower calmed my nerves – and offered me milk. I dried up my body using a spare towel, put on a nightdress of hers at her insistence. Her room felt as if peace were a place. She was on a call with Kawther, our chatty, attention-hungry cousin, for a stretch of painful minutes while I gulped down some milk. Their conversation on speaker was more of a lecture where Iman was the lecturer and Kawther the deaf student, uttering her indifference.

I was tired of this. I wanted Iman to myself. Later, I asked what exactly they were talking about around 1:41AM because after listening for minutes, it wasn't clear. They were using codes and obscure phrases. Iman shot me a quizzical look, folded her arms and asked why I sounded like Mum when it wasn't even a guy she was on phone with. We laughed over this, talked about random things, recited Kursiyy and some dua, and turned on our sides to sleep. I think I drifted into sleep faster.

Now, I wake up and this? The only good thing is that Iman isn't here to see this mess. Alhamdulillah, that she is an early riser. She turns twenty-one in a few days and has had the same habits she developed as a teenager. The girl is way ahead of me.

I press my palms on my sides to reduce the demonic pain of the cramps but all my mind can do is place me in an endless spinning loop where the pain increases with every minute. I can compare this feeling to a dozen otherworldly things and still not have words for it. That's what menstrual pain does, it overwhelms you. *Seriously, the lining of the uterus every month has to be this dramatic?* Not every female has the same experience. Iman doesn't feel pain, just severe discomfort during her periods. I am enraged about the cramps but devastated that my period came unexpectedly and five days earlier.

"This is not happening to me." My palms cover my face in sheer horror. I am cautious; I even have a calendar app that tracks my period. That proves useless now. The room feels small and stuffy all of a sudden. Cleaning myself up, and washing the bedspread before she's back in the room should be my move right away.

I peek to see how bad it is. The white bedspread is stained deep red beneath me. Her bedspread isn't the only white item in this room. *She is obsessed!* Even the frame of the rectangular mirror that rests boldly opposite her wardrobe is white. She says white symbolizes strength; that it represents us, how we are vulnerable, how we get stained but still dare to exist regardless of the dirt the world throws at us. If something isn't white in here, then it is cream.

Without my glasses, I squint to see the wall clock, but Iman barges in, her eyes unstable and searching the entire room. A stabbing pain courses through my head that I have to grip it before speaking in a calculated manner. "Salam alaykum sis."

Weirdly, she doesn't reply. Iman always replies to the teslim.

"Sis, are you okay?"

No reply.

Maybe she didn't count it as a question.

"Iman!" Her name. I can hear our mum call. She feigns not hearing.

Lamenting, she opens this drawer and that, then kneels to see what's beneath the bed. From her cluster of mumbling angry words, I pick up something about independence and overprotection but stay glued to the bed so she won't notice I've stained it.

"Iman! We aren't done down here!" Mum is furious.

“Have you seen my car keys?”

“No, but sis, mum is-”

“Ugh!” She flings her tote bag to one corner of the room and covers her face in her hands. “I’m sure I kept them right here, right here.” She points to the top of her bedside fridge. I just want Iman to leave so I can clean up this mess.

“Iman!” Our mum is still yelling downstairs. Iman rushes to the door, locks it, resumes her frenetic search for her car keys. When I’m about to question her, the pain rushes to me with a force that I don’t expect. I let out a moan while pressing my lower abdomen in a futile attempt to suppress it. Menstrual cramps should not happen to anyone.

“Are you okay?” She sounds like she has dropped everything concerning herself for me.

“Cramps.” Groaning, I bend until I’m in between bending and standing and take slow steps to the bathroom. She follows me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want to throw up.” I weakly say and turn on the tap so I can at least wash my face. It doesn’t help at all but it’s a brief distraction. My mouth is wide open in preparation to puke but it is futile; the nausea comes and goes. Now I feel like a swordsman is using my lower back to sharpen his sword's edge.

I feel Iman's soft hands hold my shoulders gently. "You'll need a shower, a pad and new clothes, Niyah," she says and I know she's going to get the things she just mentioned. I hear her quick footsteps in the room. She must've seen the stain by now.

Iman's name has been bouncing into the room and now, on the bathroom walls. If she was in trouble before, she is in double trouble now. I'm in too much pain to ask her any questions. Turning to my left, I see Iman hand a pack of fresh underwear and sanitary pads to me, with seven pieces. "Help yourself. The panties are new."

"Thank you." Words leaving my mouth feel like serious torture to every cell in my body.

"It's nothing." She turns to leave. "Don't worry about the stain. You're in no condition to wash. I'll pack it up and handle it, okay?"

Iman's love for me always stuns me afresh. When I'm done, I manage to ask her why Mum keeps yelling her name and why she is looking for her car keys.

"I just need to leave this house ASAP."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

My eyes roll to the bedside fridge and back to my sister. "What happened sis?"

“Look, Niyah, just rest.” She scowls. She must have had another argument with our Mum and me asking her to explain has put a bad taste in her mouth. “You’ll find out soon anyway. Mum won’t stop talking about it. She takes one small issue and talks about it for all eternity until another seems good enough to pick up.”

I swallow two tablets of paracetamol and gulp down some water from the glass Iman handed me. Her room feels like mine. That she doesn’t act possessive with her stuff or space makes me comfortable. Iman has always drawn me to her for as long as I can remember. Only someone not in their right sense of mind would want that tight bond to slacken.

I hear Iman's Yoruba name, Ololanimi, echo from down the stairs. Mum shouts it again. Louder this time. Repeatedly. There is no room for Iman to answer and I know that whenever she calls her this way, it’s something heavy, something bad. My eyes sneak a peek at Iman. She doesn’t even flinch.

My mother has reached the door and the loud knocks are deafening. Iman fumbles with herself for a couple of seconds then she decides to open it. The door opens in such a frightening way that I jerk backwards.

“I have been yelling your name since! Are you now deaf?” Mum looks angrier than I’ve ever seen . “I still need an explanation! What were these doing in your bag?” She throws some items at Iman. Like small packs of something. I’m squinting from the bed to see what they are.

“They’re not mine.” My sister folds her arms, looks away without

moving an inch from her standing position. She's ready for the consequences of her attitude, I can tell. It's a quick switch from how soft she has been with me.

"Answer me! I'm talking to you!"

"I gave you an answer, Mum. The same answer I gave downstairs. They're not mine." She doesn't raise her voice.

"They're condoms, Iman! Condoms!"

Iman stands to face our mum. "But they're not-"

"Whose are they then? I want answers. Now!"

Iman opens her mouth again in an effort to speak but my mum dives into the next question almost immediately, ignoring me the whole time as she paces the room, astonished. "Have you started having sex?"

"No! For Allah's sake!" I have never heard my sister raise her voice at our mum. This is a first. "I am not you!" Her tone is heavy with all the emotions she hid for years.

In a flash, this coming scene happens before me in a frightening way. Mum darts at Iman to strike her face hard. The sound pushes me to hug the pillow tight. Iman falls sideways until her left hip hits the floor. I see her glistening eyes and shiver at what this means. Without being hit, she was already distant from Mum. The passive aggression, lectures and proverbial insults came but she had never been physically hurt by

Mum, who boasted of having enviable parenting skills and rang the hadith in our ears that it was absolutely wrong to hit anyone's face.

My mother, partly fuming, partly confused, coats her conflicting feelings in lack of regret and roots herself in one place authoritatively, as if to show that she has no regrets. Iman buries her face in her hands. Her sobs are shaking the entire room. I'm on the bed, deliberating, unnoticed.

"I don't think they're hers." My lips part for my mouth to utter.

Iman rises, one hand on her cheek, breathing uncontrollably.

Mum directs her piercing gaze at me for a fleeting period, then back to Iman. "Stay out of this Niyah."

"But I don't think—"

"Then whose are they? And is that why she thinks she can insult me?"

"I think—"

Iman raises her hand to stop me from speaking. "You've always been so afraid that I will end up like you. After all I'm the child you had with dad when he wasn't ready to go the halal way with you. A child of zina, right? You compare me with Kawther because you think she's better off morally, Islamically." I follow her gesticulations closely. "Mum, please I want that notion to stop. I'm not in a haram relationship, not having sex yet, not trying to get pregnant before I get married. Stop treating

me like a prostitute every minute of the day. Please.”

“Iman is right.” I chip in. My comment is ignored by both. Perhaps I whispered it and it was not heard.

“You search my bag, my phone, my car, my room, everything about me, everyday. You don’t trust me.”

“H-How can I trust you when you behave so cold and distant? When I try to reach out but you always withdraw yourself? When I check your bag and see condom packs? Some of which have been emptied? Whose are they?”

“Kawther’s.” Iman sighs. “She has an addiction problem. Alcohol, weed, sex...”

“That’s not possible!”

“You’d rather believe your niece’s facade than the truth?” She throws her arms in the air, almost giving up. “Mum, I didn’t want to tell you. I want her to quit these things, see a therapist. She has been living a double life but tells me a few things and anytime she comes to visit us, like last weekend, she leaves traces of her stuff.”

Iman explains that Kawther dumped the condoms in her car. When she saw them, she was going to dispose of them, and that’s why she put them in her bag and forgot.

Mum holds her hands in her head. I know she wants to apologize and

make things right with Iman. What I don't expect is for her to dash at Iman to wrap her in her arms. "I'm so sorry, my baby. I'm so sorry." She runs her fingers through Iman's twists. "You look and act a lot like me when I was your age. I have been living in fear that you'll make my mistakes too." She pushes Iman's shoulders backwards a bit to examine her face with her hands tracing the outline then embraced her tighter. "And you're not a child of fornication. You're your own person. That tag has nothing to do with you. It was my slip. Your father's slip. It was three years after that we got married but it has nothing to do with you. Don't be so distant from me, baby, please. I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you too... I just want your trust Mum."

"I promise you'll have it. I promise."

"And we have to find a way to help Kawther."

"We will In Sha Allah."

I've never seen our mum so vocal and Iman so free. I feel left out so I try to get up. The sharp pain pierces my being, as if it was waiting for me to dare to make a move. "Ah!"

"Niyah! Are you okay?" Mum acknowledges my presence.

"Menstrual cramps." I blurt out.

Smiling, Mum holds Iman by her hand and they walk over to me. She

raises my jaw with her fingers only to look away and interlock her fingers. This way she looks vulnerable, younger, small. “I’m sorry Niyah for not giving you the attention you deserve all this time.” But I like it. This is the side to my mother that I have always craved. Her relationship with us has been smudged by seeing us as reflections of herself instead of just us. Now the connection we lost is coming back. “That too will change, my love. I promise.” I feel her hand on my shoulder just as Iman hands me a cup of warm water which she mixed from the dispenser, and I’ve never felt more assured.

Aisha Oredola Kayode is a Nigerian author and public health practitioner. Her works have been published in the Blue Minaret Literary Journal, Bad Form Review x Literandra: African Writers Issue, Kalahari Review, African Writers Review, Freedom Magazine and Elsewhere. She won the Panacea Essay and Short Story Contest in 2020 and was longlisted for the Collins Elesiro Prize in 2019. If she isn't writing, she is diving into a book. *Rid Me Of This* is her debut novel.

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Sleep

by Saptarshi Bhowmick

It is mandatory to sleep between journeys when you become a daily passenger. Rising early, mending beds, and grabbing something to eat, he would swiftly follow the headlines of a daily newspaper. By the time he realizes nothing is exciting about it, the dear one will nudge him, reminding him how late it is to catch the morning train.

Thus, the journey began. For it had begun long before when he had decided to stand in the queue of becoming a daily wager. Then, having a preoccupied mindset, he ultimately conveyed the thought of being versatile. But it also dimmed before the effulgence of life's versatility.

Recalling his early childhood days, he sustains his breath as he starts running. Swiftly along the road like a pedestrian, he passes hundreds of creatures like him. With impatience written in their helms, they follow the same path every day without noticing each other. One outside of their cantonment might misunderstand them as the morning marathon racers.

But once they reach the train station, their mood shifts, and monotony often cradles their motions. With steps taken to enter the galvanizing aura of a populace, they mix themselves with millions. Like a river, they will drift now, towards the estuary.

Amidst these tiring ventures, one can relieve himself by sleep. This

sleep is their last awaiting lapse, before they can finally reach their destination.

Though only now it ends the first half of their journeys. As the parting bell tintinnabulates, they catch the homebound seasonal train. He wonders if the monsoon was this fast when he visited Bengal.

Still, the end of the journey is not tedious at all. This time, not even the most unnoticeable things remain out of vision. He gradually follows the microscopic world before entering the gallops. Through the ghetto, the suburban streets become blurred now. The neon light from the distant shop illuminates mystery into these nocturnal suburbs. And suddenly, they visualize themselves in a world, forlorn and dejected. Failure, as they see in their apparitions, they imagine their lives as hollow.

With no meaning in either end, both halves of their journey reach their prime this way. And what they get is a little reward of slumber.

Curating the solid imageries taken from real-life experiences, **Saptarshi Bhowmick** makes his sanctuary of sublime poems. The little praise he collects fuels him to write further. Saptarshi has been published in many International Magazines, including The Rainbow Poems, Tofu Ink Art Press, The Antonym, Wingless Dreamers, Sparked Literary Magazine, MOIDA, The Compass Magazine, SeaGlass Lit.

A Fall Withheld

by Sara Hassan

Do you not think of all the times we didn't fall? Each time just experiencing a sliver of the awaited pull, the promise of hurtling towards the chasm of infinity. The call of judgement swinging above our heads; dangling with an unquestionable certainty, yet never making true on its promise. When despair was ripe for the taking but still eluded our grasps. Toying with us, surely: we are merely prey to a hunter.

We are always there, on the precipice of the drop beneath the souls of our feet, but some essence- fate or chance perhaps- lays a barrier to obscure the edge. Maybe we want to tempt it, edge just that much closer, in hopes to glimpse at the ledge and what lies beyond. We may know we should not even entertain the idea yet how are we to resist the open call of our curious natures? To not give in to the demand that we push a bit further, press a bit harder, break through the limitations which make us question why they were constructed.

Do you not wonder why humanity still insists on being given the right to do as it pleases, to never surrender what experimentations it dreams up? Why do we fight to cling to our fantasies and then persevere in their tragic turns, only to start again as if we learned nothing? We evaded countless falls and endured millions more just because something linked in our atoms refused to be bargained with. We held onto scraps and bled on the jagged rocks as we hoisted ourselves onto

even land. We slipped, or let go, or accepted the end staring into the void. We witnessed our rise over others and we hoped to outdo it all when it became our time to face the marching force of decay over all life.

Do you not feel the eddies colliding in their storms? Opposing forces, opposite sides, perspectives too diverging. What makes them so certain in their paths, so firm in their beliefs? Is it not, then, our humanness alone that deems us falsely worthy of our titles? Is it not that we were cut from some cashmere cloth, but that we choose to be sewn in a pattern of our own devising? Is it because we make our delusions shine like gold and let its glitter blind us, that the only way for us to see beyond those deceiving constellations is to spill forth our faith in surplus.

To learn and abide by humbleness and sincerity in the face of worlds that dwell much too deeply in indulgences and haughty promises. Can we only impede the steepest of falls when we surrender to more than ourselves and receive guidance in its truth?

Sara Hassan is an aspiring writer based in Pakistan. She graduated A levels with a concentration in English literature and Information Technology. Her works have won national and international awards, including Gold in the HRCA Writing Event and Bronze in the Queen's Commonwealth Essay Writing Competition. She has been featured in online literary magazines and non-profit print collections. You can find her recent works in Pen, Paper & Me and Spellbinder.

The Grace

by Owolusi Lucky

The fluttering window blinds cast a shadow that spooked Chukwu. He looked through the window, a mountainous wall of trees stood outside the cottage covering the face of the moon. The creaking floorboard at the door and howling that followed made him jump in his skin. He crawled on all fours towards the kitchen, grabbed his Bible on the couch and held it like a shield as he hid under the table. From the entrance, cockroaches started flooding in, climbing his night gown. He cursed, banging his head on the table, crashing the flower vase.

He crawled towards the stairs hoping to escape the insect invaded floor. He dropped his Bible behind on the moonlit floor as he gathered his long gown in his hands to freely move his legs.

The windows shattered in their jaws and the wind howled an eulogy of doom, cold pierced his spine. Each breath suffocated by a gasp as he ran to the window to defenestrate himself and trust to the wind. But the window closed its teeth like it had a mind of its own.

Cold travelled from the floor below and gripped him in chains, like the door of Hell had just been opened and a creature of night had gotten loose, coming for his soul.

He pushed the window with all his might but the evil upheld his jaws, closing all hope of escape. To the step he ran, but a noxious odour of rotten horror choked him. Then he saw the eyes of Hell into which no soul ever gazed, saw the light of day in the middle

of his living room, glaring at him.

It crawled on all fours looking up like a giant hound in hope of bones, cloaked in a rag of ageless fabrics that clumped around its contoured frame. Its claws curved like eagles, black like night, its tongue rested between blade-like jaws, but its eye desired soul and to make a cadaver for its evil claws.

He whizzed down the steps to the back door. The thing made an unholy leap and stood between him and the door, sweat blurred his vision and his heart beat like a drunkard's drum. He walked with his back to the kitchen door, hoping to escape. The creature rose to its fullest height, a grin of death crossed its unholy face, murk oozing from his mouth, delighting in its own grandness, before it howled and rushed at him. He jumped away just in time as the creature crashed into the kitchen tables filled with knives, and its body was riddled with blades. It roared in agony and turned to face him once again.

The creature removed the blades one by one, black liquid dripping from its side. Each blade it removed clattered to the floor. Chukwu again took to the stairs and removed an axe hanging on the wall. He rushed to the bedroom and locked the door behind him, making a barricade with tables and the bed frame. He knew this would not stop the evil but he held on to hope and started cutting the window, each hole renewing his hope of escape.

Then he heard the angry howl, the creature pounding the steps towards him. With a sweaty face and wet hands he cut the window with renewed vigor, each filtering moonlight promising escape. The creature began to pound on the door, then it stopped and silence

reigned for seconds till it appeared right in the room before him and slapped him hard. He flew across the room landing by the wardrobe.

“What is my sin to be visited by the Devil?” he screamed.

The creature stopped in its tracks and hissed a sound that sucked in grace.

“No devil, humans, precious things, weak things that across the land lives. We have come to reap your souls, and purify this planet from your wanton evil,” the creature replied, coming towards him.

“I have done no evil,” he pleaded, swallowing hard.

“Your thought, I can smell them human, and hate behind your pathetic smile!” The creature looked around the room speaking with conviction as Chukwu cowardly folded into a ball reciting the Grace, his only hope.

“Humans, beloved of God,” the creature seemed to laugh, a sound that felt like glass shattering.

The creature sighed, and moved so fast he appeared above Chukwu. Holding him by the shoulder blade, he raised him to his jaw, a wide gate of spiny teeth; he was shivering, and kicking like a puppet. He was but a feeble doll against the monstrous being. He resigned to teary grace as the jaw struck at his face.

Everything froze to a stop as light shattered the darkness and the windows flapped their wings in freedom. The sweat dried on his face, his legs stopped twitching, his fingers unclenched, his heartbeat

regained its rhythm. He felt he was bathed in grace that calmed his spirit. He opened his eyes but was blinded by light and he screamed as the demon dropped him on the floor.

With a growl the demon shouted, “Damn you sons of God!”

He heard the metallic click of a sword leaving its scabbard, he squinted and saw the wings, white as snow, radiating grace.

“Repent or be judged!” the angel said in a voice that shook the hammock.

“Repent of what?” the demon hissed as a sword red like burning coal appeared in his hand and a shield of darkness in his other.

He lunged for the angel who struck him with a wing that slammed him back on the wall.

“Repent....” the voice pleaded, like a spring the word flowed forth, a peaceful breeze that smoothened evil.

“Your enchantment will not work on me.” The demon spat and launched again for the angel.

But the celestial steel seemed to have a will of its own as it flew from the angel's hand and stabbed the demon in the chest mid air, pinning him to the wall where he howled in pain as he disintegrated into dust.

“Go and sin no more.” The angel turned to Chukwu as light flooded his vision.

*

He woke up around 7:00 am on his bed, everything in their places. He fell from the bed out of confusion, looking around without seeing any sign of conflict.

“It’s not a dream,” he shouted as he covered his face with his palm. He looked at his shoulder and saw a painless scar was there. He rushed to the bathroom mirror, removed his clothes and saw it across his bowel.

“I carry the devil mark, a scar of claws even an angel's hand cannot remove,” he said, and burst into tears.

He knew what he had to do, checking his purse in the wardrobe, he grabbed the car key, and drove for an hour thinking about it, and how he found grace like his mother promised.

He parked at the front of a shop where a hooker came out with part of her breast exposed. He entered the dimly lit passage way.

“Hey Chuk,” a prostitute called to him, shyly licking her tongue, “Why so early, horny?”

He smiled at her, waved her away as he continued and entered another room in the corridor.

“I need a tattoo,” he said to a guy cleaning his tools.

The guy came to him without any formality.

"What you have in mind Chuks?" he asked with a thick African intonation.

"I need an angel all over my body."

"You religious now?" he asked in wonderment. "Them bitches gon miss you," he said with a grin bending over with laughter. When he raised his head, the look on Chukwu's face suggested he wasn't in the mood for humour.

"Alright," he said and cut the laughter, "here." He opened a laptop, then a folder titled angels.

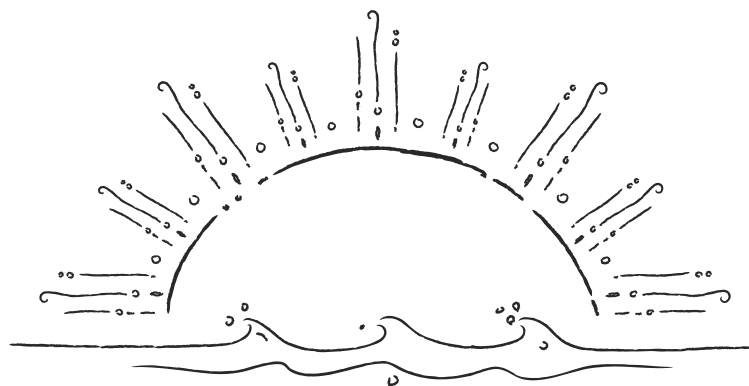
Chuks was busy unbuttoning his shirt, getting ready for his tattoo. The tattoo artist stopped mid sentence. He looked at Chuks's chest.

"Shit." He dropped the laptop and looked curiously at his chest covered with an ugly scar of claws. "Ouch... You really need a tattoo bro, and I gat you angels baby," he said as he brought the laptop from the table and showed him pictures of angels with their names above.

His only predicament is he doesn't know which angel is watching his back; he has forgotten what his mother always called him in her prayers.

Owolusi Lucky is a Nigerian writer. When not writing or in company of friends, he seeks comfort of nature. He has published in magazines, anthologies and journals including, Noctivagant press, Crosscurrent, America Diversity Report, Afrorep, Decolonial Passage, arkorewrites, Hallowzine, scars publication, Sweet Cat Press Anthology and others are forthcoming at macromicrocosm, Dietmilkmag, Collegevilleinstitute and Solarpunk Anthology.

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