



# *damazine*

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## **Last to Live**

Maryam Amir – Malaysia

Whispers that breathe in the shape of a triangle  
a pretty face makes up color in mere darkness  
silly songs are sung  
and complete a broken feature  
whilst echoes of footsteps are ascending to blend in  
caressing the wakes enchanted by mysterious laughter until...  
minutes drag the trickles from a shadow of a nearby shore  
into a never-ending forever,  
you and I  
are the last to live.

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*Maryam Amir is at college studying Multimedia Design. In her spare time, she paints, draws, and writes songs and poetry. Her artwork is usually about human nature and the emotional complexities surrounding it.*

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## In Lieu of Sacrifice

Tiel Aisha Ansari – United States

I circle round this thought,  
afraid to touch or get too close.  
Like a bubble swirling in the drain,  
a sun in orbit round a black hole,  
fearing the tides that tear at me,  
the pull of gravity that threatens  
to swallow me whole.

Seven times round the Kaaba  
without touching it. At last,  
drawn to the center, we kneel  
and kiss the stone.

Give up. Give in. Give something up —  
once on this altar a boy was bound,  
and then a ram. And now, every day,  
my self,

surrendered in lieu of sacrifice.

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*Tiel Aisha Ansari is a Sufi, martial artist, and computer programmer living in the Pacific Northwest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Islamica Magazine, Islamic Ink, The Lyric, and the VoiceCatcher anthology from Portland Women Writers. She is the author of the poetry collection Knocking from Inside, published by Ecstatic Exchange. Visit her online at <http://knockingfrominside.blogspot.com>.*

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## Thanks to Mohammed

Chris Cryer – United States

Thanks to Mohammed,  
I go  
slow  
now,  
wherever,  
however...

To beyond  
the shadows  
of the castle  
where serfs  
toil poor,  
where lords  
but pass  
courts  
of the arid,  
paltry,  
gritty,  
and slow,

Where I find  
and know  
a dragged-out  
home,  
thick and whole,  
mean and full.

There  
my chair  
is floor,  
my prayer —  
breath,  
my dance —  
bows.

Time  
does not reach.  
Ramparts,  
moats,  
parades,  
and floats  
pall.

Always near  
the call,  
my song  
is long,  
steady,  
and strong,  
pulse of pain,  
tribal moan  
of man on bone.

Thanks to Mohammed,  
I live apart  
from kings and art,  
from matters,  
plots, and flags.  
The skill to sit  
so long and slow  
is what we have  
and all we know.

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*Chris Cryer is a Muslim convert who was drawn into Islam while teaching English at King Saud University in Riyadh in the 1980s. She has been a mosque board member, principal of a Muslim elementary school, and staff writer and chief copyeditor for The Minaret magazine. She currently teaches writing at Ventura College.*

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## Carnage

Najiyah Diana Helwani – Syria

Idris Ahmed wondered what had happened. At first there was just bewilderment. A sense that something huge had happened ... but beyond that, just a void. All he remembered was buying vegetables. Then the pain clued him in.

Only when the pain hit did Idris process what had befallen him — and what would befall him next. He wondered how violent people lived with themselves, and he cursed every son of a bitch who had turned his country into a living hell.

Through the pain, he remembered the last time he'd gone on vacation with his family. It had been in 1999, before the fall of the government. He didn't wonder why that particular memory surfaced, as we might. He didn't wonder what it said about him as a person or as a Muslim that he should remember their last holiday at this particular time. He just let the memory soothe the pain.

Leena had been pregnant with Rami then. They'd gone to Mosul to see her family. Idris remembered sand pelting the windshield of the Toyota pickup on the way there — the Toyota he'd driven when he'd worked for the generator company. He remembered sneezing all the way to Mosul, even though the windows had been rolled up and the AC turned on. He'd been stuffy when they arrived at Leena's father's house, and couldn't even smell the fish the neighbors were frying. Leena had told him to be thankful for small miracles.

That night, though, he'd been able to smell Leena's hair, lying beside her in the tiny twin bed she'd slept in as a child. Her hair had been a surprise for him when they'd married. Even though she could have removed her scarf in his company after their engagement, she had almost coyly asked him to wait until their wedding night. Idris had been half happy to wait until their wedding to revel in her full beauty — and half afraid that she was hiding something. Was she bald? Ali, Leena's dependable, down-to-earth older brother, had assured Idris that he would be glad he waited. So he had. When he removed her scarf on their wedding night and she let her river of straight, black, coconut-scented hair unfurl to her waist, he had literally basked in the knowledge that this treasure was his alone. A year later, in her bed, he could smell her hair even with his stuffy nose. Either that or he knew the smell so well he could imagine it as soon as he got near her.

The scent of her inspired him to reach out, and he rubbed her bulging tummy. She turned over and draped one leg across him. Even in the overbearing heat, he welcomed her relaxing onto him.

They had picnicked on the banks of the Tigris that week, and had served as picnic food for the mosquitoes. Idris remembered lighting the coals for shish kabob and fanning them to red-hot with a straw fan he'd bought at Al Shorjah Souk back in Baghdad. He could almost taste the comforting tang of the charcoaled meat and the smooth coolness of the yoghurt they'd dipped it in. He pictured Leena laughing as she popped a grilled onion she had peeled for him into his mouth. That was the last time he remembered eating grilled onions.

Idris remembered seeing his father-in-law cry not long before they had left to go home. Idris' mother-in-law, a portly combination of caretaker and colonel, had died only a year earlier, of breast cancer, and Idris had taken his still mourning father-in-law to the cemetery so they could read Qur'an and pray for her. Idris remembered how uncomfortable he'd felt when he saw the older man's tears — as if a mountain were melting before his eyes. He hadn't known where to look. He remembered concentrating hard on redividing the meat they had brought to distribute among the needy after they left the cemetery.

The next day he'd gone out with Ali. They'd set up their hookahs in a cozy corner of the neighborhood coffee shop — the one next to the florist's. Idris remembered playing backgammon with some of the "uncles". Their opponents were regulars at the café — so regular they were almost a part of the place. Idris only came to Mosul a couple of times a year, and even he knew them all by name. Abu Ziyad, Abu Yusuf, and Abu'l Khayt. Abu Ziyad's oldest son was Ziyad, Abu Yusuf's oldest son was Yusuf, but Abu'l Khayt was a tailor who had never married, so he was called Father of the Thread.

Eventually the conversation had turned to politics. International politics, of course. The safe kind. The men began to banter back and forth about whether the US would attack again. Abu'l Khayt was sure they would. "This son of a dog is a bigger dog than his father was. And revenge is a powerful motivator."

Idris had scoffed. He and his brother-in-law argued that it was too simplistic to think that Bush would attack them, just to "finish what his father started". Idris' own naïve words echoed back at him as if they had come from the blast he'd just witnessed: "The international community won't allow it. The Arab world won't allow it. The Americans know better."

Abu Yusuf had shaken his head. The old men had lived through coups, world wars, and the Revolutionary Guard. They knew better. They knew history. They knew human nature. And they knew the luck of their country.

Idris Ahmed remembered praying the Friday prayer in Mosul that week. The imam was an old classmate of Leena's who'd lost his father and his sister in the war. He talked about the responsibility of raising children. Everyone in the country was worried about their children's physical needs, he lamented, to the detriment of their spirits. People were so worried about getting their kids' teeth fixed, their shoes repaired and their bellies full, that there was no time or energy left for reading about the life of the Prophet — peace be upon him — or memorizing Qur'an.

The imam had acknowledged that the country was undergoing a big test, but told his congregants to be grateful they were tested in this manner instead of like the poor, misled Saudis and Kuwaitis — people whose test was wealth and leisure. The Prophet — peace be upon him — had said that wealth was what he feared most for his *ummah*. The imam assured the assembled men — ragged and careworn as they were — that they were the most blessed in the Muslim world. Along with the Palestinians, the Chechens, and the Kashmiris, they formed an elite club of those whom Allah loved enough to test with trials like those of the first Muslims: war and oppression and privation. Yes, they were in good company.

Idris remembered wondering how he would be able to provide for his new family either physically or spiritually. The responsibility felt like much more than he could ever hope to live up to. He remembered sending up an urgent plea that day, that Allah would send him the strength and wisdom it would take.

After the sermon he'd found enough courage to ask Ali for a loan. He cringed at the salty disgrace of putting himself in the position of the lower hand, but the one-room flat he and Leena were renting would soon be too small for the Ahmed family, and it was time to build on the land his father had left him. Despite his best efforts, Idris hadn't saved enough yet to begin, so he turned to Ali that week and humbled himself for the sake of his family.

His brother-in-law, tall with a broad beard and a smile to match, had been great about it, not rubbing Idris' nose in it either then or later. But his wife Jumanah had known about it — and that meant that the rest of the family did, too.

Idris smiled, remembering the day he had paid back the last of the loan six years later, when Rami was five and they'd lived in their new home for four years. He had immediately felt the morbid weight of debt lift off his heart, and had become closer to his brother-in-law than ever, now that they were back on an equal footing. Talking to Jumanah had still tripped his gag reflex though, and he tried hard to forgive her and remember that her indiscretion was just part of the test.

Idris wondered what his home looked like now. He pictured it before it had fallen victim to the Americans' peculiar form of liberation. He saw Leena watering her plants, Rami coming up the stairs, back from Qur'an class. But then the bunker buster had come to visit, and they'd had to move in with his sister and her family. Amira's family had welcomed them with open arms, but the stress of living in cramped quarters was taking its toll on everyone.

Something bright flashed near him and jolted Idris back to the present. He was bombarded at once with the violent sounds of the blast's aftermath — sirens and shouting and scraping metal. He remembered that he had gone to the market to see what half dead vegetables might be available for Leena and Amira to make some sort of nameless stew from. He had just bought a half a kilo of potatoes and a wilted bunch of cilantro when the blast had hit.

When he was able to focus on the flashing light he found it was a camera, wielded by a silent young female reporter. He wondered what she was doing in a war zone if she didn't have to be there.

The woman focused her camera on Idris Ahmed — on his body and his severed leg several feet away. She snapped her shutter as he raised his right index finger and spoke something she couldn't hear. Then his body became another piece of rotting carnage.

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*Najiyah Diana Helwani is the author of the acclaimed young-adult novel Sophia's Journal (available from <http://www.muslimwriterspublishing.com>.) Her articles have appeared in Azizah, Q-News and M-Voice magazines. She teaches English and writing in Damascus, Syria, where she lives with her husband and six children, and is currently working on her second novel. Najiyah can be contacted at [tellnajiyah@gmail.com](mailto:tellnajiyah@gmail.com).*

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## **A Kind of Growth**

Bryon D. Howell – United States

My arms and fingers grazed the razor wire,  
Reminding me I have been here a while.  
Although my need to leave is often dire,  
I faced the fences with a hopeful smile.  
I then continued on back down the wall.  
I think this time I went a bit too high.  
I realized I was about to fall.  
Reality exhaled, much like sigh.  
I pushed myself to limits, boundaries,  
A kind of growth which many just ignore.  
As long as I keep moving, boredom flees,  
And day by day, I'm headed for the door.  
Where men are stored and freedom is erased —  
I am the ivy growing on that place.

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*Bryon D. Howell is a poet currently residing in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. He has been writing poetry for a great number of years and has been published in many poetry journals. He plans to relocate to the Philippines in late 2009.*

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## **A Walk to Myself**

Aziza Marini – Syria

Deep inside Souk Hamidiyah there's an old Damascene house.

It's a museum now.

One hundred and fifty Syrian pounds gains me entrance into its courtyard where a fountain greets its guests.

Three little girls sit on its ledge smiling for their mother's camera.

Inside, mannequins pose in painstakingly hand-sewn *thobes*, Middle Eastern dresses of old, their heads covered in vibrant, flowing scarves, more alive than they are.

In their dresses, I recognize my grandmother weaving a folktale with her rainbow thread. But seamstresses have been assassinated by machines.

Where has my culture gone?

When was it locked up in rooms, forced behind panes of glass?

In the weapons room, guns and swords stand at attention, saluting a time before modern technology.

China plates, once functional, hang on the wall denied their purpose.

Hand-carved instruments – lutes, flutes, and guitars – wait in vain for fingers to pluck them from their silent abyss.

How many joyful notes have those same instruments played at parties held inside these walls? How many celebrating loved ones have been replaced by curious strangers?

Yet, those little girls dance around the fountain even though the melody has faded away.

They float from room to room, learning about a time that has long preceded them.

And they, like me, will unlock a piece, and take it away with them and make it their own.

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*Aziza Marini is a New York native and an aspiring freelance writer. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature. She lives in Damascus, Syria with her husband and three young children.*

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## Pollywogs

Serene Taleb-Agha – Syria

Raya was doing a good job grieving. I had expected tears, which I could handle. I would be cheerful, crack a few jokes, and she would fight back the smile, just like in the old days. But she didn't even cry. She just sat there in her velour housedress with her eyes aimlessly scanning the floor tiles while her kids threw plastic toys all over the place. It was Mom's idea that I fly out here and cheer her up. You're her only brother, she's close to you, she said. But so far, Raya seemed to walk around in an invisible mist that nothing I said would clear.

There was no point in getting up this morning, though I could tell it was almost noon by the sunlight streaming through the broken slat in the shutters. I turned over and threw the blanket over my face, trying to press my body further into my slab of a mattress. After three days, I was still badly jet-lagged. Why couldn't they make decent mattresses in this country?

I heard Raya's slow shuffle make its way to the door of my room. She had slowed down since having kids, the way it seems all women do. But when I peeked out of the blanket, I saw that she had brushed her hair and her eyes were a little brighter.

"Are you awake?" she asked. "I was thinking of taking us on a picnic today."

We used to have picnics together when we were in high school. I was teaching her how to drive, we would take the car on a weekend morning and drive out to a meadow, or to the shores of Lake Michigan. Once we came upon a huge flock of Canada geese and chased them, and I even got one to bite me. I didn't expect as much excitement today, of course, but I got up to get ready. Maybe she was remembering too.

Raya wrapped herself up in a dull blue coat and scarf. She looked so Syrian that way. Then we crumpled ourselves into her tiny black car. I offered to drive and she didn't refuse, although she warned me that in Syria, the only driving rule was, keep your eyes open. Her two kids sat on their knees in the back seat, facing the rear window. The boy looked a lot like Munzer, even down to the permanent frown that had always given Munzer an air of disapproval. But he laughed with his sister, happy to be out of the house.

Raya lived in Bloudan because Munzer's parents owned a summer house there, and when he decided suddenly to move to Syria for good, he couldn't afford to buy a house of his own. In the winter, Raya had told me earlier, the snows can reach your waist and the dry cold air zaps its way into your very core. But now the trees lining the hilly streets were in full leaf and there were pedestrians everywhere. At the top of one hill, Raya told me to stop the car, and we looked down on the valley, carpeted with orchards.

"This is why I could never live in the city," said Raya.

"Did you have a choice?" I asked.

"No," said Raya. "So what?"

We drove off again and Raya directed me to a small shop on the roadside selling roasted chicken off a spit. She ordered two from the window and we continued on, banging hard each time we hit one of the numerous potholes.

Keep your eyes open, I told myself. I wondered if Munzer had been keeping his eyes open when he had crossed the street, just before the taxi sent him sailing into an apartment building wall.

We finally reached a place that had no name, a cross between a picnic area and an outdoor café, occupying one bank of a small river. The owners had ranged a single row of folding tables and plastic

chairs along the railing that followed the riverbank. I sat gingerly on one chair; years of dirt had become one with the plastic.

“Tell me what’s better, this or KFC,” said Raya, and she tore off a quarter of one chicken and handed it to me on top of a sopping piece of pita bread.

I bit into it. “Delicious.”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“Amazing what a pinchful of germs can do.”

With shiny fingers, she guided mouthfuls of chicken to her daughter. A couple of times I tried to talk to her, but I found it disconcerting, like I wasn’t sure if she were really paying attention to what I said. So I concentrated on the chicken, which really was delicious.

“If my mother-in-law finds out I was here, I’m in trouble,” said Raya. “I’m not supposed to be out of mourning yet.”

I looked blankly at her.

“They’re a bit old-fashioned, think I shouldn’t leave the house until the forty days are up. But you’re only here for a week so I don’t care. Can’t you extend your stay?”

“I have to get back and look for a job.”

“I suppose if you hadn’t lost the old one, you wouldn’t even be here. Thanks for making it anyways.”

“Rotten me. Well, you don’t exactly live down the block.”

“So it’s all my fault.”

“Not yours.”

Raya began gathering the bones and crumpled napkins into one pile. She avoided my eyes.

“I said something wrong, didn’t I?” I said.

“It’s okay. That’s what Mom and Dad think too, right? That Munzer dragged me here?”

She was right. It had been hard on them, especially since there was no chance of them ever visiting her in Syria. Mom’s bad back made long plane rides out of the question, and Dad had made the wrong friends back when he was a young man and ended up on a government blacklist. He hadn’t been to Syria for 36 years.

“Just forget it. It doesn’t matter now anyways,” I said.

Raya leaned her forehead on her hands. “He was a good man,” she said quietly. “Stubborn maybe, but a good man.”

I wanted to slap myself. I had to remind her again, on the first day she was starting to feel normal. A breeze ruffled the leaves, then stilled. I said nothing, hoping the silence would soothe her and erase my misdeed. The kids had run off to play, though I couldn’t see a playground anywhere. They had been babies when Raya left the States. Munzer was insistent that Syria was a better place to raise children, that sending them to an American public school was like saying good-bye. I always thought he was paranoid. I mean, look, Raya and I came out okay. I could even speak a bit of Arabic.

It took me a while to notice the smell, a damp, fungal smell, coming from the river. I stood up and leaned over the railing. It was a ribbon of green moistness flanked by a tangle of tree roots and rotten reeds. Soda cans studded the banks here and there, and plastic bags, their clean crackle long gone, lay embedded in the mud.

"I'm not doing you much good," I said after a while.

"Of course you are," she said. "I was a wreck before you came. And I haven't seen you for three years. Hell, does something awful have to happen for me to see you?"

"Maybe you need to come back to the States. At least for a while. Mom and Dad would love it."

"Yeah. Maybe once the kids have gotten over this —."

"Won't school be starting soon?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you come back with me now? It would be great, remembering the old times."

"I thought you said you were looking for a job."

"Do you know Mom still hasn't changed your room from the day you got married? There's even that old ballerina poster."

"Oh God. I told her to take it down."

"And the lowest octave still doesn't work on your piano from when I spilled soda all over it."

"How do you know? I thought you were still living out on the East Coast."

"Well, last time I was there it didn't work."

"The kids would probably finish the job for you. They've never even seen a piano."

"So what do you say? If money's a problem, don't worry about it. Dad and I will figure something out."

She looked down, her arms crossed over her chest. "I can't," she said finally. "It's too soon."

I watched an ice cream bar wrapper float down the stream, in no hurry to get to its final destination, wherever that was, and start to decay. How long did ice cream wrappers take to decay? A hundred years?

"You think it's an ugly river," said Raya.

"It's fascinatingly ugly. Do you want me to lie?"

"No. It's funny how I don't notice it unless I'm with a foreigner."

The kids ran up, slapping wet footprints behind them. The boy was excited; he put the sawed-off bottom half of a plastic water bottle on the table in front of Raya and fired off words I couldn't make out. All I could see in the bottle was some kind of weak cloudy tea, but then Raya said, "Neat! Show your uncle." He pushed the bottle to me shyly. I saw black spots moving in the water, at least ten of them. They were pollywogs, frantically crisscrossing the surface.

"They'll be frogs soon," I said.

"Yes, I know," said the boy.

The kids begged Raya to come see their fishing location, and she let them pull her up off the chair. I walked along with them to a gap in the railing at the far end of the café. Raya stopped at the edge of the muddy ground.

"Come on, Mama," said the kids.

She looked at me. "This will mean I'll have to wash and iron my coat when I get home. Tell me," she said. "Is it worth it?"

"What kind of question is that?" I put on a stupid smile and took three strides down the muddy river bank.

"Those look like nice shoes," she said. "Don't be surprised if they smell for a week."

I kneeled down at the edge of the stream and saw them, thousands of them, pollywogs swimming ecstatically in the murky green.

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*Serene Taleb-Agha writes fiction from her home in Damascus, Syria, where she has lived for the past four years. Most recently, she has been published in Azizah Magazine. She also edits Damazine, serves as mother to her three children, and every now and then takes an all-day hiking trip to preserve her sanity.*

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