



damazine

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This Poem Is Free*

Alfaro – United States

This poem is not imprisoned
It has no basic needs
It is not alive nor dead
It exists whether it is read
Or burned
Or forgotten
It is somewhere
Floating
Not breathing
Blooming
Not seeing
It has no senses
It is pure thought
It is a record
Yet it does not spin
It does not want
It has no pain
No worry
No sorrow
No joy
It is
It was
It will be
Transcendent
Time or t h i s p l a c e
Cannot confine it
It is enigmatic
It is dynamic static
It is therefore
Free

*This poem costs time and money. It is confined to this sheet of paper or this screen or your eyes or your mind. It is trapped in what we believe to be reality. It will only be here, once, this time, this moment, in this space. It will not come with you/us when you/we die. It will remain here, in its cage. This animal will go insane from the utter lack of stimulation. It needs you. It wants you. It can only exist with you and you alone. It, like everything else, can and will only exist if it is loved. This poem is love's prisoner. It is, therefore, not free.

Alfaro is the author of a collection of poetry titled real.m, published in 2007. He is also editor of Silenced Press (<http://www.silencedpress.com>). Alfaro lives in Columbus, Ohio, USA.

Two Poems

Iman El Ashmawi – United Arab Emirates

Her eyes

Her eyes are the color of the sea,
Of sapphires and exoticism,
Of liberation to every Arab.

But mine are only the color of ripe dates
Sustaining your Bedouin fathers,
Or of irrigated farmland waiting to be tilled.

Liberation

Liberation is the after-dinner mint of chaos,
The word you give when you've
Salted all the water
And sold all the oil,
The noun when all the
Verbs have failed.

Liberation is the opiate of the masses,
Broadcast at midnight in shades of
Night-vision goggle green.
Liberation is the mantra of lunatic tyrants,
Even the democratic ones.

In addition to writing poetry, Iman has also taught English and Social Studies at the high school and community college levels. She currently lives with her husband and four children in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, where she works for the Ministry of Higher Education as a professional development instructor for high school English teachers.

Tolstoy in Riyadh

Chris Cryer – United States

Dhahran

It's a zany image, the idea of Tolstoy in Riyadh, the old or the young Tolstoy, either way, belligerent and scowling, haunting the dusty streets, checking out the action, like the vendors rank with the smell of their spicy meats, always sitting without budging, always too liberated to hear his anarchy or rhetoric, never needing conversion and caring not at all to own even the smallest parcel of Riyadh's desiccated floor.

I carry him with me there, not really of course, but in my pen that wants to take him everywhere, since he alone can sum up a place properly. My pens are old and still hold Tolstoy ink. I'm just wishing he were still here to explain, better than Lawrence, better than Asad, what everybody's doing in the Arab world that keeps them wobbling like Sterno in a sea of long, uneasy flame.

Fourteen hours after JFK, I feel the soft air of *Saudia*. The airport in Dhahran is immaculate and cool, unlike Riyadh later, hellish with hawkers yelling out corporate names to catch the polyglot employees, well-arrived, exhausted and accepting, but unable to understand their company cards on sticks. The curb there is thick with drivers, drivers for women, drivers for executive pools that begin to look like cattle, badly dressed, too many in suits that are unsuited to Riyadh. Riyadh is exciting from the first and stays, of course, that way — palaces popping out from hillsides, signs to Mecca, a few wrapped women on the fringes, tucked into corners so as not to greet strangers like me. Riyadh is a capital of tradition and strength, like Jamestown, Washington, and Valley Forge in one.

But it's Dhahran that fixates visions in my mind. The airport during Hajj is transcendent. It is the people, the men, the hajjis themselves. Though they should be going or coming, they seem stopped, finished, completed in the moment; so filled, so spoken, they are now almost silent in the white Saudi light. Everyone waits in white draped sheets, standing in lines under a spent and late-day sun that sprays the entire room of glass in its pale, white dusk. It is the whitest moment I have ever known, a white that seems to warm and ground the hajjis. But they know about it and I do not.

Tolstoy *knows* these hajjis, and I wish I did. For me they're in a hum, but he knows what they're saying to each other and why. I need some dialogue badly, when an agent approaches me gently, scooping up the moment with sweeping arms that give the stairway to me, the entire stairway into a small and shiny Saudi jet. "Madame, you should go in now, before these men." "Oh, I am not alone. This is my son here." I tell him that I know how to travel. I am a lady, albeit born in the West. "No, no," he lifts my bag, and is so inviting, I want to follow. "You must both go now, before the men."

I try to count these men. Can this be right? There are hundreds, humming and fingering their beads, but we go before them. My son and I ascend. It seems a long ascent. They do not see my ankles, as I hold my skirts in close. We leave the sea of white below. The sweeping walls of glass enshrine the hajjis like a hub of orchids in a garden. They are not commuters, travelers, or businessmen, but some kind of Meccan hosts. If Meccan were a language, they speak it now, and it is different. I have not been closer to Mecca yet.

Could Tolstoy know so soon, sooner than I, what the hajjis think and say? My pen says:

One short, dark man wants to show his family pictures to another man, twenty years younger but distantly related.

"This is little Khadija," he tells him. Khadija's eyes are radiant and her hair shiny, long, and black. She's clearly his favorite child. "Ahmad, she has a bike, only two wheels."

"No. She's so young. Three? Where can she ride it?"

"She rides it inside," he says, "all around the house."

"Not in the kitchen?"

"Well, it's okay with me, but her mother says no. Not in the bedrooms either, of course. They're carpeted."

Ahmad takes out his own small things from inside his swaddling clothes. They must be religious souvenirs. I cannot tell what they are.

"Hmm," croons the older man. "Will you keep that one or give it to your wife?"

Ahmad reaches inside again with difficulty and retrieves more. "This one is for you," he says to the older man. "No, keep it."

Then they resume their steady drone, which fades into a hajji hum, and my son and I see no more from our ascendance to the door to Arabia. The older man and Ahmad know what thing it is they shared. I don't know anything about it, but I see and I wonder. There is a soft feeling to this place. It's agreeable, quiet, and white. Night begins to drain the glow. Finally, adjusted, tucked, belted, and pillowed, we fly.

Riyadh

Riyadh is the cosmopolitan place. Expatriates are pulled there from major centers of the world, and ninety percent are foreigners enslaved to bosses who first hold their passports and second offer water, the liquid that made Wahabis famous in the grand and revolutionary democratization of wells. Some countries nationalized industry, but the Riyadh royals nationalized water, knowing they had the one place in the world that clearly knew its drink of choice could never be alcohol. It is the seat of quiet power, the residence of princes, and the nerve center for Mecca.

We all stop there to be sorted out, in gleaming air-conditioned halls, with a grandeur generally preserved only for the dead. Heads are counted there, and money machines cash out embarrassingly thick stacks of bills to even the newest comers. Pockets stuffed with bills, we all move into streets where there is no crime. I am in the lap of chivalry and company policy, in a utopian nation-state.

I see my corporate card on a stick, "King Saud University," and gesture as women will who are drowning. It's the sea of humanity I am drowning in, all of my foreign literature abandoned behind me, incarcerated for the tasteless things it says and *TIME* magazine shows. I am free of it, really, if they will only spare Tolstoy, more my companion than I could explain to those who allow no idols at all.

Can I live without him if they take him? Will they honor his dying words — "What must I do now?" Will they see him as I do, not as a distraction but as a centering force, the most mature of *mahrms*, a cross between the most protective brother and the wisest grandfather? Not really, because they throw him on the floor. I actually step on my own grey, half-bound copy of *Master and Man* before I realize it is not just another piece of security trash.

“Can I keep this one?” It sounds like a question, but the truth is, I’m getting back on the plane if the belted guard says no. In fact, he loses interest in my question and the whole trash heap. He is holding the nastier materials in a special bin and seems to consider my floor pile like chicken feathers at a barbecue. I scoop and run, stuff myself into the KSU jeep, and sit as tightly as I can. I try to reflect that *my stuff* at this point is *my stuff* or I am going home.

We start to rumble over unpaved, rocky hills, and my fourteen-year-old just loves it. This jeep trip sets his first reaction to Riyadh on a positive note. At the end of the year I’ll be advising him that “you can’t go home again,” when he realizes his nights cruising with young adults in BMWs are over. His salaried buddies will regularly make the rounds of juice bars together after work till eleven or twelve at night, schmoozing their way through balmy, starlit cafes. He only has ten months before returning to Alabama, where fourteen-year-olds are confined to riding their bikes down the block for a Slurpee. It will be as though someone has given him the keys to a Harley Davidson and said, “Son, there’s no need to ride with your parents in Riyadh.” We bump and fly over what seem like boulders, and everything hits the air except the rest of my books, which I’ve stuffed underneath my body and stretched out over to hold them down and me in.

The guest house is glorious after a day and a half of travel. Our room is full of soaps, chocolates, and whispering servants. It even comes with a charming man from Austria, who is quiet too and never says that we are not married, which the servants, we come to find, assume we are. We have to part once the truth is discovered; sadly, never to meet again. It seems a place of dreams, including that one.

We’re in the mood of a marathon slumber party, in which the longer you stay up, the livelier you get. In spite of ourselves, it does finally begin to seem that Day One has come to an end. We gradually notice that everything around us is silent, every room in the guest house as well as the vacant space left by the long-gone Austrian. The servants have disappeared too, and there is no buzz of cars at all outside. We can’t see anything out there because all our windows are narrow and designed to meet the ceiling instead of people. It hits us that we’ve also lost all sense of time, even of the day (fourteen hours ahead), Thursday starting the weekend here instead of Saturday. Even the annual calendar bears no resemblance to the western Gregorian. We are well beyond jet lag.

Just as we coalesce into the end of one thing and the start of another, deciding that we are the only ones still awake in the city, my son looks up to the streetlit sky outside our ceiling window strip and says, “It might be dawn.” We chomp on chocolates and smell our soaps, wallow in the linens, and consider the significance of the question, the significance of Day One passing and of the arrival of Day Two.

But there’s a sound. It draws us out of bed. It’s coming from the windows, so we look up. My son gets onto the desk chair, the desk, and finally the top of an armoire. I follow him and we scrunch there, half-sprawled, staring into the empty streets.

There’s a thread of light on the horizon, and we just look hard. There’s nothing to see. But we still hear it and freeze to hear it well. The *adhan*. It’s the *adhan*, the Call to Prayer. We know about it but never stopped to think that we would hear it ourselves, at dawn, like this, right now. We don’t budge till it’s over.

The *adhan* needs to be described, but is indescribable. It is not just song, or prayer, or culture. I have heard some say it is annoying. Others complain about one voice versus another. I’ve known people who especially attend the call to prayer in certain neighborhoods famous for their muezzins. But it is not a fashion or competition. Really, it is always the same, one voice calling all voices. My son says nothing about it, climbing down and into bed, declaring only, “It *is* dawn.”

I don’t know what to say either, but feel the *adhan* is something Tolstoy knew. For his Eastern Orthodox moments of sacrament, candles, and incense, for the funerals and births he’s described of circling friends, repeating their desperate, begging prayers from deep within their souls, he knew about the *adhan*. He knew the Chechens and he knew their *adhan* to be a most stirring and important of reverential cries. In his novella, *Hadji Murad*, his Chechen characters find,

With that the song ended, and at the last words sung to a mournful air, [a] vigorous voice joined in with a loud shout of "Lya-il-lyakha-il-Allakh!" ... Then all was quiet again except for the ... whistling of the nightingales from the garden ...

I remember that, and climb down and into bed. It's hard to sleep. I want more than ever to know where I am and what is happening around me.

The above two chapters are excerpted from the author's work-in-progress, tentatively titled Tolstoy in Riyadh, which recounts her travels in Saudi Arabia.

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 in California, USA. Her email address is bobchapel@sbcglobal.net.

The Damascene Dancer

Oliver Duillier – Syria

I saw her under the flicker
of a damaged street lamp.
The music of ancient Damascus
dissolved in the busy street
but she remained undisturbed;
the beat resonated in her bones.
She swayed like the branches
of the white jasmine trees,
moved sporadically and erratically
by the unpredictable wind.
The city surrounding her
flowed; a river around a rock,
unmoved by the untamed beauty
marring its urban rhythm.
White scarf in hand
and ebony hair swinging wildly,
she danced with the dervishes of old,
spinning, spinning, spinning,
until she could spin no more.
"I love you," I told her
and begged her to marry me,
for her dance had intoxicated me
as surely as the strongest wine of Bekaa.
"I love you," she said,
"but we cannot marry
for you are not Muslim."
"I will convert," I replied
and tore the cross from my neck
to prove my conviction.
"What sort of love is that,"
she asked me,
"that you would reject God for?"
Her brown eyes shone
brightly as the clouds parted
and the stars perforating the black sky
smiled down acceptingly.
"What sort of God is that,"
I asked her,
"that you would reject love for?"

Born in Helsinki, Finland, Oliver Duillier is a would-be writer currently based in Damascus, Syria, where he is hoping to complete his first novel without losing the last of his hair.

Pale

Zdravka Evtimova – Belgium

Few customers visit my shop. They watch the animals in the cages and seldom buy them. The room is narrow and there is no place for me behind the counter, so I usually sit on my old moth-eaten chair behind the door. Hours I stare at frogs, lizards, snakes, and insects. Teachers come and take frogs for their biology lessons; fishermen drop in to buy some kind of bait; that is practically all. Soon, I'll have to close my shop and I'll be sorry about it, for the sleepy, gloomy smell of formalin has always given me peace and an odd feeling of home. I have worked here for five years now.

One day a strange, small woman entered my room. Her face looked frightened and grey. She approached me, her arms trembling, unnaturally pale, resembling two dead white fish in the dark. The woman did not look at me, nor did she say anything. Her elbows reeled, searching for support on the wooden counter. It seemed she had not come to buy lizards and snails; perhaps she had simply felt unwell and looked for help at the first open door she happened to notice. I was afraid she would fall and took her by the hand. She remained silent and rubbed her lips with a handkerchief. I was at a loss; it was very quiet and dark in the shop.

"Do you have moles here?" she suddenly asked. Then I saw her eyes. They resembled old, torn cobwebs with a little spider in the centre, the pupil.

"Moles?" I muttered. I had to tell her I never had sold moles in the shop and I had never seen one in my life. The woman wanted to hear something else — an affirmation. I knew it by her eyes; by the timid stir of her fingers that reached out to touch me. I felt uneasy staring at her.

"I don't have any moles," I said. She turned to go, silent and crushed, her head drooping between her shoulders. Her steps were short and uncertain.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. "Maybe I do have some moles." I don't know why I acted like this.

Her body jerked, there was pain in her eyes. I felt bad because I couldn't help her.

"Mole's blood can cure sick people," she whispered. "You only have to drink three drops of it."

I was scared. I could feel something evil lurking in the dark.

"It eases the pain at least," she went on dreamily, her voice thinning into a sob.

"Are you ill?" I asked. The words whizzed by like a shot in the thick moist air and made her body shake. "I'm sorry."

"My son is ill."

Her transparent eyelids hid the faint, desperate glitter of her glance. Her hands lay numb on the counter, lifeless like firewood. Her narrow shoulders looked narrower in her frayed grey coat.

"A glass of water will make you feel better," I said.

She remained motionless and when her fingers grabbed the glass her eyelids were still closed. She turned to go, small and frail, her back hunching, her steps noiseless and impotent in the dark. I ran after her. I had made up my mind.

"I'll give you mole's blood!" I shouted.

The woman stopped in her tracks and covered her face with her hands. It was unbearable to look at her. I felt empty. I didn't have any mole's blood. I didn't have any moles. I walked into the storeroom. I

imagined the woman in the front, sobbing. Perhaps she was still holding her face in her hands. Well, I closed the door so that she could not see me, then I cut my left wrist with a knife. The wound bled and slowly oozed into a little glass bottle. After ten drops had covered the bottom, I ran back to the room where the woman was waiting for me.

"Here it is", I said. "Here's the mole's blood."

She didn't say anything, just stared at my left wrist. The wound still bled slightly, so I thrust my arm under my apron. The woman glanced at me and kept silent. She did not reach for the glass bottle, rather she turned and hurried toward the door. I overtook her and forced the bottle into her hands.

"It's mole's blood!"

She fingered the transparent bottle. The blood inside sparkled like dying fire. Then she took some money out of her pocket.

"No. No," I said.

Her head hung low. She threw the money on the counter and did not say a word. I wanted to accompany her to the corner. I even poured another glass of water, but she would not wait. The shop was empty again and the eyes of the lizards glittered like wet pieces of broken glass.

Cold, uneventful days slipped by. The autumn leaves whirled hopelessly in the wind, giving the air a brown appearance. The early winter blizzards hurled snowflakes against the windows and sang in my veins. I could not forget that woman. I'd lied to her. No one entered my shop and in the quiet dusk I tried to imagine what her son looked like. The ground was frozen, the streets were deserted and the winter tied its icy knot around houses, souls, and rocks.

One morning, the door of my shop opened abruptly. The same small, grey woman entered and before I had time to greet her, she rushed and embraced me. Her shoulders were weightless and frail, and tears were streaking her delicately wrinkled cheeks. Her whole body shook and I thought she would collapse, so I caught her trembling arms. Then the woman grabbed my left hand and lifted it up to her eyes. The scar of the wound had vanished but she found the place. Her lips kissed my wrist, her tears made my skin warm. Suddenly it felt cozy and quiet in the shop.

"He walks!" the woman sobbed, hiding a tearful smile behind her palms. "He walks!"

She wanted to give me money; her big black bag was full of different things that she had brought for me. I could feel the woman had braced herself up, her fingers had become tough and stubborn. I accompanied her to the corner but she only stayed there beside the streetlamp, looking at me, small and smiling in the cold.

It was so cozy in my dark shop and the old, imperceptible smell of formalin made me dizzy with happiness. My lizards were so beautiful that I loved them as if they were my children.

In the afternoon of the same day, a strange man entered my shop. He was tall, scraggly, and frightened.

"Do you have ... mole's blood?" he asked, his eyes piercing through me. I was scared.

"No, I don't. I have never sold moles here."

"Oh, you do! You do! Three drops ... three drops, no more. My wife will die. You do! Please!"

He squeezed my arm.

"Please. Three drops! Or she'll die."

My blood trickled slowly from the wound. The man held a little bottle and the red drops gleamed in it like embers. Then the man left and a little bundle of bank-notes rolled on the counter.

On the following morning, a great whispering mob of strangers waited for me in front of my door. Their hands clutched little glass bottles.

"Mole's blood! Mole's blood!"

They shouted, shrieked, and pushed each other. Everyone had a sick person at home and a knife in his hand.

Zdravka Evtimova was born in Bulgaria. She works as a literary translator from her current home in Brussels, Belgium. Her short story collections Bitter Sky and Miss Daniella have been published by Skrev Press in the UK. She has also published a short story collection titled Somebody Else through MAG Press in the USA.

Masks

Ahmed A. Khan – Canada

My name is Kashmir. Of course, it is not my real name. None of the names recounted here are real.

I am from India and I am twenty five. People tell me that I am quite unpretentious, nice, and not bad-looking either. They also say that I am temperamental. Of course, you can't expect them to be right every time.

The time that I am writing about, I was on the lookout for Mr. Right.

I was an only child of my parents. I had studied medicine and, at the age of twenty-four, I was offered a job in the petroleum-rich country of Kuwait. I was to work there as a doctor in a private hospital. I left for Kuwait. My parents accompanied me.

My first few days in Kuwait were terrible. First, there was the culture shock. Second, there was the language barrier. Third, there was the extreme climate. Kuwait was — and is — one of the hottest countries in the world. It is hot seven to eight months of the year and at its peak, the temperature goes about 55 degrees Celsius in the shade (which is about 131 degrees Fahrenheit). Just imagine what it would be in direct sunlight. Due to these extreme conditions, it is a law that a public holiday be declared on any day when the shade temperature crosses the 50 degrees Celsius mark. However, it is a curious fact that the officially declared temperature never goes beyond 49 degrees on working days.

Another thing that took a bit of adjusting was the fact that the weekend here was Thursday and Friday and not Saturday and Sunday.

With the passing of time, I became acclimatized to the new culture and found that it was an interesting one. Kuwait was a city flanked on one side by the sea and on the other by the desert. Here was a combination of the traditional and modern. Beside a crowded five-star hotel, you could find an equally crowded roadside cafe, where people, in their traditional dress, sat drinking *qahwa* (Turkish coffee, strong, black, and unsweetened) and playing dominoes. A couple of hours' drive in a car would take you out of the city into the desert where sheep and camels could be spotted grazing on the sparse desert plants and grasses.

Being intelligent and articulate, it didn't take me more than six months to pick up enough Arabic to manage a conversation adequately. The problem of the extremely hot weather in the long summer months was solved simply by remaining indoors as often as possible.

Being a normal full-blooded woman, desire for male companionship was never far back from my consciousness, and my innate nature was such that this desire was immediately followed by thoughts of marriage fleeting sweetly through my head. I did not believe in extra-marital sex.

My parents had already started looking for a suitable match for me but fates decreed otherwise. Both of them died in a car crash.

I was shattered. But the seemingly eternal sands of time slowly buried my grief under them. Slowly, life returned to normal.

A year later, the perfumed thoughts of marriage once again began wafting through my brain. And this time, I was on my own. Whatever was to be done about my marriage, had to be done by myself.

More and more frequently, I began picturing myself in a bridal dress. There was one difficulty, though. I didn't know anyone in Kuwait, or in India, whom I could picture as my bridegroom.

But wait. There was one young man who just might have qualified: a man whom I had known since he and I were small kids back in India; a man who people said was open, cheerful, and kind; a man who

was well-educated, well-bred, and well-settled. Another great thing was that he was close by. He too lived and worked in Kuwait. His name was Azmi.

There was, however, one small problem. I didn't like Azmi at all. Something about him, some nameless thing, rubbed me the wrong way. Even as kids we had always fought each other on one pretext or another. My match with Azmi was therefore unthinkable.

One day I went shopping for some dresses. There was a discount sale going on at one of the big ready-made garment shops in Al Watan shopping center.

And there I met Samean.

Samean was a ruggedly handsome young man. He was the owner of the garment store. The first time I met him he was dressed in a spotless white *dishdasha*, the cultural dress of the Arabs. He looked quite dashing in it. We started talking. He complimented me on my dress. (I was wearing a deep sky-blue Punjabi suit and it was one of my favorite dresses.) He invited me to dinner and I accepted.

At dinner we found out a lot about each other. He was twenty-nine years of age. I was impressed that at such a young age he had turned himself out into a successful businessman. I found myself attracted to him in spite of the fact that he seemed to lack a formal education beyond the high school level. But the magnetism of his personality made this lack seem insignificant to me.

Samean overwhelmed me, swept me off my feet, and one day, he proposed to me.

This was what I was waiting for. I accepted, a bit too eagerly, I think.

One evening, as I relaxed in the living room of my apartment, watching TV, the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, Kashmira," said a slightly familiar masculine voice.

"Who is it? Azmi?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes," a short silence. "So, you haven't forgotten my name yet. That is good to know."

"What do you want?"

"I want ..." A pause. "Well, I want to warn you."

"What?" I snapped.

"Don't bristle. Just listen to me. I know you do not fall over yourself in taking my advice ever, but I still feel it is my duty to tell you that Samean is not a very good person."

"Mind your own business," I shouted into the mouthpiece and slammed the receiver down on the cradle.

Then one hot summer day, during a picnic at a lonely beach, Samean took me in his arms and kissed me full on the lips. The kiss tantalized me, left me breathless. The force of gravity lost its grip on my senses and I felt I was floating in air, weightless. I was brought down to earth with a jarring impact when I felt Samean's fingers unbuttoning my blouse.

"No." I pulled back. "What are you doing?"

"Relax," Samean said in a cool voice. "We are going to get married anyway, so what's the problem?"

At first, I thought Samean was joking, but finally when I realized that he was not, I tore myself free from his grasp and ran to my car. Samean ran after me but panic seemed to give me wings. I reached the car, started it, and had it moving before he could reach the parking lot.

At home, I wept with self-pity at my poor choice, at the falling of my idol, and at the fact that Azmi had been proven right.

That night, Samean called me on the phone. He told me that if I reported that day's incident to the police or even to my friends, he would kill me. His voice was cold and matter-of-fact when he told me that. And I believed him. I believed that he was capable of doing what he said he would do.

I was so frightened that the whole night I remained awake, shivering in spite of the intense heat in the air. I had never felt so lonely ever before.

A few days later, I met Ameri at a party. Ameri was a suave, sophisticated, smart young man. He was a police officer.

Ameri seemed to be attracted to me. At the party, he invited me to dine with him the next weekend. I refused. Somehow, I felt repelled by him. There was something about him that made me dislike him.

A few days later, at another party, I ran across Ameri again. Despite my unwillingness to talk to him, he managed to attach himself to me. Then, just as I was trying to think of ways to dislodge Ameri from me, I spotted Samean and I suppose my face went pale. Ameri noticed this.

"What's the matter," he asked, his voice full of concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes," I managed to mumble.

By then, Samean had spotted me. With an insolent smile on his lips, he sauntered toward me.

"Got yourself a new boyfriend, hmm?" he said. "Who is this wimp?"

"Get lost," said Ameri before I could say anything.

Samean looked disdainfully at him.

"Shut up," he said.

"You know who I am?" asked Ameri calmly.

"Yes, I do," said Samean. "You are stupid."

Ameri put his hand in the pocket of his coat and pulled out one of his visiting cards. He handed it to Samean.

Samean paled. Insulting a police officer is not at all healthy, especially in Kuwait. He turned tail and within moments, had vanished from the party.

I immediately felt my dislike for Ameri lessen. In the next few minutes, I had accepted his dinner invitation.

This had been during the weekend, on Thursday night. The next day being a holiday, I slept till late in the morning. What finally woke me up was a combination of a bad dream and the telephone bell.

I yawned, stretched out my hand, and picked up the receiver that lay on the table beside my bed.

"Hello," I said sleepily.

It was Azmi on the other side. My heart skipped a beat. I felt that Azmi's calls had become some sort of an omen for me.

"What do you want now?" I asked wearily.

"I will not say 'I told you so' about Samean. But at least listen to my advice now. Ameri is no better than Samean. I am sorely disappointed with your choice of male friends."

"What do you do? Spy on me?" I was enraged.

"I have done my duty. Now it is up to you," he said and disconnected the line without giving me the benefit of a reply. I sat in bed for a few minutes, feeling, for some reason, totally disoriented.

Days passed and my friendship with Ameri seemed to grow. One day, Ameri proposed marriage, but after Samean, I wanted to be extra careful. I told him that I needed time to decide. Ameri took it very well and didn't push.

A few days later, after sunset, while returning home from the hospital in my car, I spotted a neon-lit board displaying the name of an Indian restaurant. That day I didn't feel like going home and cooking my own food so I pulled my car to the curb, parked it, and entered the dim-lit dining hall of the restaurant.

As I cast my eyes about the place to select an empty table for myself, I spotted Ameri at a table down the hall, half-hidden by some potted plant. Oh good, I thought, I won't have to eat alone now. As I was about to make my way down to Ameri's table, I noticed that he was not alone. There was another man with him and both of them were deeply immersed in conversation.

I was shocked when I recognized the other man with Ameri.

Samean!

With Ameri?

I went and sat unobtrusively at a table near theirs, such that the potted plants formed an effective barrier between us. Then I tuned my ears to their conversation.

"... in Kuwait for quite a few years and has a sizable amount stashed away in her bank account," Samean was saying, "and she is pretty too."

Whom were they talking about?

"You approve of my choice?" Ameri asked, laughing.

"Wholeheartedly."

"And my strategy?"

"Perfect. You have all the makings of a good political leader."

"Listen. I want to wind up this operation fast. The last time I asked her to marry me, she pleaded for time to think it over. I don't want to give her any more time."

WHO IS HE TALKING ABOUT? My mind screamed at me.

"I think it is time you put some more fear into her," continued Ameri, "so that she rushes to me for protection."

"Will do," said Samean nonchalantly.

They ... are ... talking ... about ... me ...

In a flash I understood the intricate politics of the situation. My eyes now perceived the masks that people wore in the world around me.

I felt a shroud of numbness slowly descend upon me and cover me from head to feet.

Many days later:

A winter evening.

I rang the bell at Azmi's apartment.

He opened the door. He was dressed in his pajamas. His mouth fell open when he saw me.

"You?" was all he was able to say.

I entered the apartment without speaking, and went and sat on the sofa in the sitting room. He followed me silently and sat on another sofa facing me. We looked at each other for some time. His apartment was cold. I started shivering in spite of the thick jeans and jacket and the overcoat that I was wearing. He noticed this, got up, went inside, and returned, carrying a blanket that he extended to me. I took the blanket from him and wrapped it around myself.

Once again he went inside. This time, he returned after about ten minutes carrying two cups of tea and another blanket.

Very soon, both of us were wrapped in blankets sitting on sofas facing each other. Both of us had steaming cups of tea in our hands.

"Why don't you turn on the heater?" I asked, sipping my tea slowly.

"A blanket is more fun," Azmi replied with a grin, "but I am sure you didn't come to my place in order to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a blanket over a heater. What brings you here, Kashmira?"

"Still the same old, blunt Azmi?"

Azmi spread his hands deprecatingly. Silence prevailed in the room for a few minutes.

"Azmi?"

"Yes?"

"What is your opinion of me?"

Azmi stared at me, surprised at my question. Then he laughed.

"You are an addle-brained, quarrelsome, idiotic girl. And your choice of boyfriends is nothing to be proud of, either."

I didn't say anything, only looked at him.

Laughter left his face.

He said, "And I too am an addle-brained idiot because I still like you."

His voice was still light but his face and body language expressed an unusual intensity.

"Do you truly like me?"

"Yes," he said, simply.

"Do you like me enough to marry me?"

"What?" Tea spilled from Azmi's cup on to his blanket. For several seconds, he stared at me incredulously. Then he carefully put down his cup of tea on the table, and bent forward.

"You are not joking, are you?" His voice was almost pleading.

I lowered my eyes. "No," I said. "I am not joking."

He was silent for a long time.

"The question is," he began speaking softly, "do you like me enough to marry me?"

Without any reason that I could pinpoint specifically, my eyes filled with tears. I lowered my head. "Yes," I said — and knew it to be true — and suddenly I started sobbing. Amidst my sobs I heard a sniff. I raised my head to find that tears were flowing from Azmi's eyes too. The sight was so ludicrous that I smiled through my tears.

"I was under the impression that only women are supposed to cry and not men," I said.

"Humbug," said Azmi through his tears. "I am willing to smash the face of anyone who claims that."

"Let us go back to India," I said.

"We will," he said.

Suddenly, both of us wiped off our tears and smiled, and it was like the sun coming out after rains.

Ahmed A. Khan is a Canadian writer, originally from India. His works have appeared in Interzone, Strange Horizons, Anotherealm, and several other venues. He maintains a blog at <http://ahmedakhan.livejournal.com>.

The Cuckoo and the Author

Iftekhhar Sayeed – Bangladesh

the muezzin calls
between
the thin light
of night
and dawn

voices flower
in the dark
until
the cuckoo
takes up the call

and stars blanch
blink
and blue
for the sun

the endless
calls of the cuckoo
announce
the stellar
departure

and they say
the cuckoo
does not call
but reads
the rosary
for the author
of the new day

Iftekhhar Sayeed teaches English and economics. He was born and lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has contributed to The Danforth Review, Axis of Logic, Enter Text, Postcolonial Text, Southern Cross Review, Opednews.com, Left Curve, Mobius, Erbacce, The Journal, and other publications. He is also a freelance journalist. He and his wife love to tour Bangladesh.
