



damazine

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Prostration

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December 23rd. For five days Jamila would have to be Alison again.

"We can't get used to that name of yours," her parents had said soon after she had told them of her embracing Islam. "I hope you don't mind, but we'll continue to call you Alison." What could she say? She did not want to spoil her visits to her family with arguments over names.

She had given her children easy names. The girls were called Laila and Muna and the boys Harun and Samir. No difficult letters for her parents to mispronounce. Even her parents' friends commented what lovely names their grandchildren had. Maybe they were just polite. People were still polite in the small village in Cornwall where Jamila had grown up.

"Anybody coming for a walk before it gets dark?" Jamila called into the living room. No answer. The girls were glued to the television, Harun was playing with his Lego, and Samir was asleep on the sofa.

Jamila repeated her question.

"Is the ice cream van there?" Harun asked.

"Not in winter, love. It's too cold for ice cream. But the sea is still there, and there'll be big waves, because it's a windy day today."

"Are you going to the shops too?" Laila asked.

"No," Jamila said, turning round, defeated. She would have to enjoy a solitary walk. This was the first Christmas her husband had not joined them for the family celebrations. His father in Algiers was not very well, and he wanted to be with him.

The sea was grey and threatening. The beach in winter was deserted. It was nearing the time for the sunset prayer, and the cloudy sky dimmed the little light that was still left even more. Jamila walked along the edge of the sea, the pebbles crunching under her Wellingtons, her headscarf being nearly blown off by the wind.

She walked past a bench at the seafront, noticing a man lying on it in a sleeping bag.

"Crazy," she thought. "He'll freeze to death if he doesn't move on for the night." When she reached the bench the man stirred and sat up. This gave Jamila a fright. She wouldn't have looked at him otherwise, would have walked past with her head lowered, but fear lifted her head and she recognized the man: Charly. Charly. I should stop and ask him how he is. Charly had recognized her too. She could tell from the eyes. His black hair had gone grey and matted, his beard, reaching down to his chest, was uncared for, his face was swollen, his eyes were red. He looked sixty, not the forty he was, and he looked very ill. Jamila did not want to talk to him. Not now, not straight away, when he would notice the shock on her face. Charly, how could he have done this to himself?

While she walked on she remembered that her sister Lynda had told her a few years back that Charly had returned to the village. He had come off the heroin, she said, but you don't want to know him now. He's an alcoholic. He's killing himself slowly.

Jamila's heart was beating fast, her breath was shallow, and she felt heat in her cheeks. Twenty years ago she had been in love with Charly; he had been so beautiful and innocent. Jamila and Charly had been at college together. They both had decided to go to London, to escape a life in Cornwall working in the tourist industry. Charly had got a place at Music College to study percussion, and Jamila took a degree in English. The summers they spent in the village, on the beach. Marijuana relaxed them; peyote satisfied their longing for the unseen. It was Jamila who had introduced Charly to Castaneda's books. She had become obsessed with Juan, Castaneda's guide and spiritual teacher. While Jamila

was fascinated by Juan and his methods of teaching Castaneda to overcome fear, Charly was fascinated only by one method, the peyote. Soon after, Charly fell in love with heroin.

The wind was blowing against Jamila, who was struggling on the pebbles, unable to suppress the memories, the memories of her last forty-eight hours with Charly.

Charly had promised to take her to a film. It had been his idea. He liked German films, he liked Fassbinder. When he hadn't returned from his friends by eight, Jamila knew that it was going to be another evening without him. He often did this to her. Shoot up somewhere and forget her. This waiting for him, this absolute helplessness in having to accept that she would not be able to find him but would have to wait until he remembered her, made Jamila angry. When Jamila was angry she started baking. Twenty years later, Jamila could still smell the chocolate cake she baked that evening. She let it cool, in the fridge. By the time it was ready to be iced it was ten o'clock. By eleven she had eaten half the cake, by twelve the cake was gone and Jamila felt sick. At that point Jamila usually admitted to herself that her anger was a secondary feeling, covering up a truth that was too painful to contemplate: she had lost Charly's heart. By one o'clock she was asleep, dreaming that Charly was standing over her bed with a knife.

In the morning she started worrying. Charly had not come home, and he had not called. Usually he would remember during the night that he had a girlfriend and phone her and tell her he was sorry. Sometimes that phone call would wake her at three, sometimes at five in the morning, and rather than soothing her it increased her anger.

But that morning she wished he had woken her at night. Her imagination ran riot. Charly overdosed, was in hospital. Charly was caught buying. Charly in a police cell. Or maybe, Charly in some other woman's bed. She phoned two of his friends. They hadn't seen him since last night. He left around midnight. Alone? Yes.

When Jamila returned home from her lectures that day there was still no sign from Charly. By then she was scared. She sat on the sofa and smoked the last of their marihuana. For three hours she was calm, then she started baking again. The bananas in the fruit bowl had gone black. She made some banana bread with raisins and nuts. She ate it still hot with butter and jam. At ten o'clock Charly's friend phoned.

"He owes me," he said. "He promised to deliver today."

"I know nothing about it," Jamila said. "I haven't seen him since yesterday morning."

The man didn't say any more, didn't want to hear women's complaints.

By two o'clock she fell asleep, the bread in the stomach a stone, the stone growing and growing, until it filled her chest.

"Something has happened to him," she said to herself the next morning. She almost wanted it to be true, because how else could she forgive him for not having bothered to phone her? She made a few phone calls that brought no relief. She phoned her best friend and started to cry.

"Go to your lecture," her friend said. "That'll take your mind off him. If something awful had happened you would know it by now."

When Jamila returned home from her lecture, Charly was asleep in their bed. A girl she didn't know was lying beside him, dressed.

Jamila still blushed remembering how she woke them and screamed abuse at them. The girl never said a word. She simply got up, went to the bathroom, and five minutes later had left the flat.

Charly didn't want to explain anything either.

"I have nothing to say," he repeated.

"You make a decision now," Jamila demanded. "Me or the drug,"

It took him two hours to pack his belongings and disappear from her life.

Jamila couldn't afford the flat on her own and took in a Turkish student. Sirit let Jamila cry and bake and listened to her story.

"Where's my life going?" Jamila would ask her. "I'm missing something, there's a big hole inside me, and neither Charly nor drugs can fill it."

Sirit was a Muslim and had an Egyptian friend who visited her once or twice a week. At that time, Jamila knew nothing about Islam. Sirit never spoke about it. The only thing she told Jamila was that she didn't eat pork. "I shouldn't drink either," she said but Jamila knew that Sirit liked wine. One day Jamila entered Sirit's room to borrow her scissors from her desk drawer. Sirit was out shopping and Jamila was unaware that her Egyptian friend was visiting. When she opened the door and saw him standing in front of the desk bent over at the waist, she was somehow taken aback.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know you were here. I only want to get the scissors." But the man did not answer. He ignored her completely and threw himself to the floor.

"He's praying," Jamila suddenly thought. Sometime somebody had told her that Muslims prostrate themselves when they pray. The man got up again and repeated another cycle of bowing and prostrating. Jamila could not stop watching him.

"He's communicating with his Lord," she thought. Watching him made her weak. She sat down on Sirit's bed. Her body was by now utterly exhausted. From deep within herself a thought formed and vibrated through all her limbs: "This is your prayer."

Jamila lay down on Sirit's bed and accepted the order. Later she would always say that that moment was the moment she accepted Islam. It was a moment when she knew with her body, her soul and her intellect that this was her path.

It was dark by the time Jamila returned to her parents' house. Laila ran into the hall as soon as she opened the front door.

"Mum, Dad phoned while you were out. He said that he'll stay a week longer than planned."

Ahmad had not seen his parents for over a decade. They wouldn't want him to leave just after ten days. Jamila had said so at the time, when he booked his ticket, but he was adamant that he couldn't afford another week off. Jamila had never met Ahmad's parents, only two of his brothers had ever visited them in England.

On Christmas Day, Jamila's sister Lynda, her boyfriend, Jamila's brother and her aunt and uncle were sitting round the dinner table. Jamila had brought the turkey, slaughtered according to Islamic laws, and asked God to forgive her for sitting at a table where alcohol was consumed.

"I do it for the sake of my parents," she told Him after the sunset prayer. "They love me."

Jamila's husband was easygoing concerning this issue.

"They aren't Muslims," he said. "Even if they were, it's not up to you to teach them or shun them. God won't ask you about what they do."

In the evening, Jamila's sister sat down beside her on the sofa.

"When are you going back to London?" she asked.

"On the 28th, at least that was the plan until Ahmad phoned that he would stay on another week."

"When does school start then?"

"The children go back on the 6th, but we teachers have to be there on the 5th." Jamila did not want to think of all the essays she had to mark before the end of the holidays.

"I'm asking because Charly has died yesterday," Lynda blurted out. "His sister phoned me this morning. He had come home for Christmas, after sleeping rough for the last two years. He must have known that his time was up. His mother found him in bed in the morning, already cold and stiff. You may want to stay for the funeral."

Jamila thought for one short moment that she could stop herself from crying but ended up producing a gasping gurgling sound before she gave in and let her tears flow freely. Her children, alarmed by this, stopped playing Monopoly.

"Mummy, what's wrong? Has Grandfather died? Why are you crying?" Muna was hugging her; Samir had climbed onto her lap.

"Somebody your mother loved a long time ago has died," Lynda said. "Go and finish your game, then your mother will tell you all about it."

Jamila sat with her head in her hands, not wanting to talk, not wanting to explain. This is not the time to tell the children about their mother's past.

Only a few weeks back Jamila had a discussion with a convert sister.

"I won't ever mention my past to the children," the sister had said. "Never. They'll think they can do what their mother did."

At the time, Jamila was convinced of the opposite. "No, they won't. Not if you tell them honestly how unhappy you were, about the pain of that time. This was our time of ignorance, why would you want to deny it?" But now Jamila wasn't so sure anymore.

After the night prayer she sat on the prayer rug and asked God to help her answer the questions of her children in the perfect way.

"I want them to be protected from repeating my mistakes," she said. "I want them to know that nothing tastes as sweet as the love for You."

Later in the evening Jamila was relieved to find that only Laila had not forgotten the incident. Laila was nearly fourteen, a quiet girl who struggled to contain her hormone-induced emotional states on a daily basis.

"Was this man your boyfriend?" she asked Jamila in a shy voice.

"Yes," Jamila answered. She was not going to lie. "At that time I was not a Muslim. I was a confused young woman longing for love."

Laila looked at her.

"Did you love him?" she asked. Jamila's throat was tight; she suddenly felt very tired and didn't know what to say.

"Did you love him more than you love Dad?" Jamila detected fear in Laila's voice.

"No, Laila, this is not a thought you should ever have." Jamila was panicking now. She didn't want her daughter to imagine things that she couldn't possibly know.

"Dad and I married for the sake of God. When we married we weren't in love. I loved your father because he loved God, because he loved God as much as I did. And slowly, when you share your life as husband and wife and strive to make your life pleasing to God, God puts a deep love into your heart for your soul mate. This love is deeper than anything you can imagine. It is active, you work for it, you are in charge of it. Before I was a Muslim I didn't know about this love. I fell in love. Falling in love is just an emotion, it comes and goes. It's based on physical attraction or on emotional needs, but these things change."

Laila cuddled up to Jamila.

"I know what you mean," she said. "I had this crush on a boy in my year for a long time. Don't worry, nothing ever happened. I didn't even talk to him. And then one day after not seeing him for two weeks over the Easter holidays, I didn't feel anything for him anymore. I know that this kind of love doesn't last."

Jamila let out a big sigh. She thanked God silently for His help.

"I'll have to go to the funeral," she said to Laila. "We'll stay here another five days. Granny thinks it's necessary to support Charly's parents and sisters. I agree with her. I've known them since I was at kindergarten."

Jamila watched Laila get up and walk to the door. Before she opened it she turned round with a smile.

"I'll tell Muna that we'll be here for New Year's Eve. Granddad said he'll buy fireworks if we are around."

Fatima Martin is an Austrian Muslim living in the UK. She studied Arabic and Islamic Studies before marriage and children. Ten years ago she started writing, and she is currently trying to find a publisher for her two novels.

Fruit

Phyllis Ring - United States

The banana peels never had a discarded look.

Bejan Sabet's dark eyes followed their descent from the roof overhead to the dust of the roadside. They landed gently, custard-colored petals spreading open like lotus flowers, an unexpected bloom, soon to be devoured by a passing goat or cow.

From his seat by the window, Bejan watched the shadows cast on the ground outside by the crowd of passengers huddled atop the roof of the bus. His eyes had kept watch on them during the hours that the bus had lumbered out of Allahabad, these figures that gestured in animated debate, bodies swaying with the coach's rough progress.

At times his brown fingers had clenched the seat's peeling vinyl, two urgent vises that seemed to hold the passengers above him in place with each jostle and bump.

Their discussion drifted down to him through the open window. The sounds trickled in, rising and falling. Though he spoke little Hindi, the sound had a pleasing familiarity to his ears.

He was beginning to savor the open way people looked at him here, especially in the small villages to which he traveled. He was hailed as an important visitor now, a respected horticulturist come to oversee their accomplishments.

Somehow, the villagers always made time for him at the end of their long days. In those evenings of simple friendship, they immersed him in the kind of sociability he had never found during his education in America.

The work with the fruit trees progressed slowly, but it did progress, and always, when the people helped decide how things would go. Bejan liked the keen expression their faces wore when they consulted together about the tree-planting project. It showed reverence, almost, as though decision were a sacred act.

The diesel coach, whining louder and louder, had at last ground its arthritic gears to a shuddering halt. Bejan heard the rooftop passengers scrambling for balance overhead as the engine lurched, then quit, in a protest of angry steam.

A host of passengers disembarked behind the turbaned driver, commiserating in a symphony of voices as the hood was wrenched up.

Across the aisle, Stouffer swore softly.

Stouffer's wife investigated the bulging straw bag near her feet. Her small white hands drew forth stacks of sandwiches and a thermos bottle of tea.

Stouffer mopped his face with a yellowed handkerchief. "Godforsaken place." He fixed watery eyes on Bejan. "We'll never get there by dark, now. It's a fruitless task, anyway." He laughed indulgently at his words.

Bejan pretended not to understand the joke as he turned his gaze toward the window. He shifted in his seat in search of comfort, without success.

A quarter of the sandwich in Stouffer's hand disappeared in a single bite. "Could've flown back to the States for all we'll accomplish this week." Crumbs flew from his mouth, accumulating in the folds above his waist. "Some nice university orchards will seem like paradise, after this."

Bejan turned to face him slowly. "We will see."

Stouffer's wife offered Bejan a sandwich.

He declined politely.

"You won't see much." Stouffer helped himself to another sandwich and sucked a glob of mustard from his thumb. "Just thousands of hard-earned American dollars rotting in some place where they can't keep the flies off their children." He belched, then paused to gulp the tea his wife had poured.

"They will surely have begun harvesting the fruit now," Bejan said.

Stouffer waved a hand at him. "Hell, it'll be a miracle if the trees have borne fruit at all." His sniff used most of the muscles in his face as it wrinkled his nose. "Hunger." The word had a discarded sound. "They eat their food like animals. They've got more important things to do than grow trees—like watch their cows starve to death."

Bejan felt hot anger surge like liquid inside him as the hands that rested palm up on his thighs curled. "It is the women's project. They understand that the trees will feed their children's children." His brown stare was unblinking.

Stouffer's wife's pale eyes darted away to where voices were rising in quick bursts near the hood in front.

"Waste of money." Stouffer's headshake was the kind with which he closed conversations firmly. It said, "I am done talking. The conversation is complete." He plucked large crumbs from his lap.

Money seemed to mean a very great deal to the Stouffers. In the days since the Service had teamed him with the Americans, Bejan had watched how eagerly they sought out goods to buy with it; how reluctantly they parted with that money when goods were at hand.

Shortly after dawn, Stouffer had tried in vain for long, impatient minutes to find someone who would break a two-rupee bill when the vendor at the station had been unable to make change. Bejan had figured the difference to be about eight American cents. The vendor's face had sunk with resignation as Stouffer berated him. Bejan had withdrawn nearly twice the purchase price from his pocket and pressed it into the old man's lined hand. Boarding the bus, he had felt disgust churning inside him.

Outside the window now, two small figures had paused to eye the banana peels where they spread their petals upward in the dust.

The girl, perhaps seven or so, wore a ragged sari whose crimson color was bleached pink in spots. The small boy beside her, probably a brother of four or five, was dressed only in an oversize shirt of faded madras.

Beggars, Bejan thought, and watched them through the pitted glass. He reached toward his pocket. His hand froze when he realized their intent.

The girl's back was perfectly straight when she squatted beside the peels and slowly brushed sand from them. She pulled a stained cloth from the tattered folds of her sari. After her precise fingers smoothed out the rumped square in the dry grass beside the road, she gestured for her companion to sit.

With slow, meticulous effort, she pulled the soft portion of each peel away from its skin and placed it gingerly on the cloth.

The boy's dark eyes followed her progress along with Bejan's until she finished the job and tossed the tough outer skins into the grass.

The driver's turban reappeared inside the bus as the winged jaws of the hood slammed shut with a crunching sound. Triumphant cheers from the makeshift engine crew followed when the engine roared to life on the first try.

Beside the road, the girl scooped up half of the peelings and placed them in front of her brother.

The boy sat cross-legged, the girl, with thin legs folded alongside her as, dark heads bent in the sun, they sampled their meal in small bites.

Phyllis Ring writes about culture and spirituality from her New Hampshire home. Her articles, essays, and stories have appeared in Hope, Ms., and The World & I.

The Bicycle Thief of Damascus

John-Paul Walti - United States

In the fall of 2007, twenty-four Sunnis fit into a single habitation of an unfinished apartment complex near the Al-Sayedah Zaynab shrine in Damascus. Any more and it became unbearable. Needless to say, this upset the landlord to no end. Each month roughly 30,000 people crossed the border into Syria and through the fabled gates of Damascus. What did he expect?

Doctor Aram Kalas Kadri delivered eight babies in the building that year. During this time, it was difficult to find a working toilet, let alone a proper place for a woman to give birth. The hospital where Aram Kalas Kadri had served seventeen years of his life was hundreds of miles away now, and that was to say nothing of the artillery shells that reduced the 47-year old building to a chalky pile of barbed concrete. Of course, this mound of debris consisted of much more, but even a brief description of its remains – the Doctor's diploma from the University of Iraq in Basra, the ocular textbook with underlined passages of blindness, or the Iraq national soccer team's mug filled with maliciously sharpened number 2 pencils – are of no use to us now. His last memory of the hospital still stood tall in his mind though, and he considered himself fortunate for that.

Doctor Aram Kalas Kadri charged these mothers for his services, of course. All except for the one that died; he did not charge her for that. He had tried to limit his medical assistance to the apartment building itself, but this became a futile endeavor. There were too many things wrong with people. There were Syrian hospitals and Red Cross tents at three locations throughout the city, but they were often overcrowded, with lines sometimes stretching for blocks. This also said nothing of the fact that to be an Iraqi in Syria was significantly more expensive than to be Syrian. The price of water, a taxi ride, bay leaves or even a bit of tobacco was raised the moment a distinctive accent was heard. But if a baby needed to come into the world, well, at least they were charged a fair price.

The ceilings of the rooms in the apartment building were high, and gave the illusion of openness, but reality from one vantage point is often very different from another. To escape the heat and sour breath of bodies, many of the men without families congregated on the rooftop at night, where they could smoke in quiet among other men and look out upon the city of Damascus from a distance. The steady line of cars and buses below carried the smell of exhaust. Exhaustion. The sky held no stars, but the stars became very close to them there. The men looked cautiously towards the dark clouds in silence, as if they might suddenly materialize into something menacing, a dust storm perhaps, or a wound in the sky of biblical proportions, but at times the men were also moved to speak.

"They say the Americans have dropped poems over the southern end of the city," one man said.

"Is that true?"

"Poems?" the landlord asked.

Each man that spoke did not change the tone of his voice or the expression on his face. Nor did they look into each other's eyes, which in their exhaustion gave the impression that their voices somehow belonged to each other; that their words were an extension of their own thoughts.

"What good is an American poem — what can they teach us that's worth anything at this moment? Today I watched an opened artery empty into a soup bowl, what good are poems?" But the moment the Doctor said this he felt embarrassed at the pretentiousness of his statement — he knew he was not the only man to know suffering or to have witnessed such things.

In the silence that followed, each man returned to similar memories, which were set sharply into the folded corners of their brains like cirsium thistles. Aram Kalas Kadri watched a helicopter move north towards the Orontes Valley, and although there was no way for him to know that it carried a frozen heart in a bed of ice within a cooler, he recalled a time after the birth of his daughter when he gave great consideration to the life of his heart. He calculated how many times it had knocked his blood through his arteries and how much longer it could go on. He discovered picoseconds and yoctoseconds, and then and only then did he want to live in that time, with seconds stretched out like

years ahead of him. He wanted his daughter to feel such considerations in her life. He wanted to hold his own heart in his hands then; he had wanted to instill an understanding of his gratitude at its defiant persistence. But he no longer paid attention to these sentimental thoughts. Of course he did not know that the helicopter carried a frozen heart, but he looked upon it with the intuition of a doctor. Somehow the voices of these men could still raise themselves out of even the stillest cells of their hearts, and after some time another man spoke up and momentarily released each man from the mire of his grief.

“They found a woman’s body, a Sunni from Umm Qasr, floating near the Tremiti Islands in the Adriatic Sea. They say she floated seventeen days without sinking,” one man said.

“It is not possible,” the Doctor said. “Our bodies are made of water, they cannot float more than a few seconds without air.” Aram Kalas Kadri was annoyed with his mood. His pessimism was a stone in his belly that he could not pass. But it was a fact, and a man must live on facts if he is to survive. “There are no real poems and there are no miracles,” he added, because some men’s grief is limitless.

The men’s eyes closed and opened, as their words came and went. It was past midnight, and a southern wind cooled them slightly. Aram Kalas Kadri stood and walked over to the edge of the building and stared at the dim light of a closed bookstore.

“Hey, that boy,” he said, pointing down to the street below.

But no one moved from his place to peer over the edge. No one even looked his way.

The sight of a boy stealing a bike five stories below disturbed him more than anything he could have imagined. He could hear the boy slamming the lock with a hammer; slowly, steadily, he came down upon it with great force.

“That bike does not belong to you,” the Doctor said. “Hey, stop. Stop that I say.” The sound of his voice startled a flock of birds resting on a laundry line and they rose into the sky in their collective fear. The men looked at him intently now.

“Quiet yourself, Doctor,” one man said.

“You’ll wake the whole neighborhood,” another man added.

In Damascus, the children run the streets at night. This was nothing new — of course a mother would want her child to feel his own freedom after such an exodus. Of course a child would demand it. But the sight of a boy stealing another child’s bike unnerved him. He left the rooftop without hesitation. He ran down the stairwell, over the feet of sleeping men, through the smell of sour bodies. He moved with such intensity that he did not hear the men curse him or the sound of his footsteps echoing through the stairwell. The fear that he would lose sight of the boy made him anxious. By the time he reached the sidewalk, sweat formed into small droplets on his forehead, and he could smell his odor distinctly against the wind, but he was not too late and saw the boy peddling down the right side of Mannaseh Street. He ran after him, shouting and holding his right hand against his chest. The boy turned right into Ephraim Street and Aram Kalas Kadri did the same. It did not take long for him to find himself surrounded by children. Their bright eyes were turned towards him now. Unlike the newborn babies, their wet eyes had seen what the world had to offer, and he knew nothing he could say would change that. What can a man say in the face of such things? It was all very clear to him then. He fell to his knees before they reached him and he tried to stay that way as long as he could.

As they hit him, the Doctor began to follow the boy again. He followed him through the streets of Damascus and then into the desert. Although he wanted to run faster he could not; he seemed locked into some still cavity of time, almost at rest, and he had no control over how fast he could move. Perhaps it had always been this way, he thought. Still, he followed the boy through the gate of Bab Al-Salam, and then further across the cold sand of the desert, and there hidden between the slender shoulders and thighs of dunes lay hundreds of bicycles, perhaps even thousands, tossed on top of each other like bodies. The wind blew over them. Sand fell into the spokes, covering pedals and

wheels. The sight of this caused him to weep. The Doctor fell to his knees and felt the sudden sensation of a bone breaking.

On the rooftop of the half-finished apartment complex, the men remained still, however, for even though there was no way for them to know what had become of the Doctor, they looked upon the dark clouds with the intuition of poets.

John-Paul Walti's fiction has received the Leo Litwack Short Story Award, the Audre Lorde Short Story Award, and the Wilner Award in Short Fiction. His stories and poems have appeared in Transfer Literary Magazine, the Pudding Review, and Cosmopsis Quarterly.

Sagar — The Ocean

Neha Simlai - India

Sagar. The Ocean. The personification of love, serenity. The tears of Gaia. Peace is a thin film over its surface, a film of oil that catches the slanting rays of the sun and paints rainbow hues on itself. And the rainbow film swells and glides, caressed by multitudinous fingers from below the water surface — the sedate, torpid movements of a woman under the expert hands of her lover. A million tiny ripples on the surface. The skin pockmarked by stabbing wind, it carves small depressions and floats on the surface a fleeting moment, only to traipse along again, in a futile attempt to make a full trip along the unending plane of the rolling sea.

And the Ocean rushes to the shore to lick at it with a thousand tongues. Foaming at the mouth with exertion, goaded by the wind to taste the wet sand again (and again and again). The silica ground to talcum powder softness by the relentless loving of His hands, sometimes tender, sometimes callous, the grit tumbles over itself impishly. The slush of sand and water coats my hesitant feet in a thin grainy layer. The water swirls around my ankles and washes a fistful of earth from underneath my feet. I sway in slight euphoria. Only He is capable of this, this teasing, this show of might. "Look what I could do to you, but I don't."

And then it conjoins with the wind in playful abandon. Waves — the Wind and the Sea. In the hollow of a mighty wave that rears its head in majesty, one can see the hand of the Creator, the Sculptor who carves and chisels the Universe. Does He stand on the shoreline somewhere, to lift a wave, peeling it off the Ocean and with a careless twist of His wrist, hurling it across till it crashes down on the shore again, swirling in small pits in the sand, washing castles away, and looping around ankles?

Each wave rears, with white surf filigree, white horses neighing and galloping across the water to bring it homeward, to drench the earth again. And they confabulate amongst each other at the end of the journey. Frothy white bubbles. Flying manes and restless hoofing. And the Ocean washes them back again, into its warmth to rejuvenate their tired bodies, meanwhile dispatching another herd to sate the reckless voracity of wanton Earth. Again and again and again.

What of the anger? Violent eddies and whirlpools that threaten to drown the cockleshells of arrogant civilizations, it raises a thousand hands in rage, thrashing them on the surface, churning the water, drowning in itself in fast, spinning vortices. The callousness of destruction matching the tenderness of love.

Sagar. The Ocean

It stretches in a vast expanse of undulating blue-green and where it meets the horizon, I imagine it is the edge of a giant waterfall. The curve is where the water spills over in thick white curtains; roaring and gurgling as it touches the bed of the Universe. And do they bathe there — at the base of the cascade — glorious, otherworldly creatures? What treasures does it hide, the Ocean, beyond the Edge? Even the most bewitching and enchanting fabrication of fancies would pay little justice to the indescribable, inconceivable splendor and glory that might unfold there. And if one be taken to the very edge, where the unending span of turquoise merges seamlessly with cerulean horizon, would one's soul be sufficiently prepared to embrace and imbibe its staggering magnificence? Would the heart not be impeded in its rhythmic pulsing, by that brazen opulence? Would the spirit endure the mortifying terror and ecstasy that such sights would bring upon itself? Because beyond ecstasy, there lies terror. The peaks of joy can't help but vault down to the abyss of horror. Ask the Lotus Eaters.

*Sagar means Ocean in Hindi.

Neha Simlai is a Research Associate with the Socioeconomic Development Foundation at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, New Delhi. She studied English Literature during college and specialized in Print Journalism at the Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi.

Together...
Shakeel Abedi - Malaysia

Glance not
Over your shoulders at
Those fast fading glittering dreams
That slipped by,
Or an event that
Your eye might perceive a stain
But,
When you smell the fresh blood
Being transfused to and fro
And hear the new waves rush in,
You might see
A ruin
Or a shattered crystal glass
Or a dried twig
Or a twisted yellowed leaf.
Then, gather them and
Archaeologically reconstruct
A vase
In which you and I
Together shall arrange
A momentous flower
Of unfaithful love.

Shakeel Abedi lives in Malaysia, where he works on stained glass and writes poetry and fiction. His work appears in local newspapers and magazines. He is currently working on his first novel.

Trying to Express Myself
Nasira S. Abdul-Aleem - United States

I receive water in cupped hands
But it eludes me
Through pores between my fingers

I grab at it,
Squeeze it,
Lick my palms.

Unquenched, I cry
And drink my tears
As they trail into my mouth

While I grasp
For wisdom
Found from pain.

Nasira S. Abdul-Aleem is the daughter of folk singers. She studied at Quaker schools, then became Muslim in 1971. She has four children and nine grandchildren. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in psychology and social work.

Underground

Benjamin Buchholz - United States

they set Ishmael on the ground, leaning back, into it,
for minutes it felt in process, the setting, closed in sky

surrounded by the sickened faces of his friends, what did
they see? stealing glances at the black blood, white linen

stained black, looking under it where Haran tucked the last
bit of him haphazardly into—, wait, in process, they're

gone before he knows it, late morning, hot already, flies
on the blanket, on the corners of his mouth, a cur dog

approaches, ears down, Ishmael waves, I'm halved, dog, go
away, go away, the dog goes, just a few feet, away, digs

in the shade, lays down with his head on the scrapings,
looks at Ishmael, yawns, he'll wait, watch, when the US

came through three years before, he ate the dead, knew no
difference between the crushed mule or lamb, the crushed

child, the wet smell of blood, half underground in shade
comfortable as survival is, the wire, rusted, the gate bent

around serpentine berms, concrete, one tower blotting sky,
sidewise, leaning, or had he been set askew?, Ishmael

waiting, he tried to pray, couldn't remember God's name,
not the simple name, Allah, he knew that, but tongue deep,

remote, the shiver of god in a word, blue, meson, football,
it opened with coughing, fresh blood in bandages, America

come, I believe, I've seen the skyscrapers, glass towers,
I've crawled into bed with them, frozen my lip to frames

reflecting me, sold carnations to the shoppers, quiet here,
there is no one on the busy corner, they all know, by law

the savior is responsible, a basket of nectarines, a scale
with a leg of lamb wrapped in paper, weighed, the worth

determined and noted, America come, come Sergeant Coleridge,
I've opened with coughing, fresh blood bandaged, America.

Benjamin Buchholz is a US Army Officer recently returned from Iraq. His recent work, largely focused on war and the changes war causes in young soldiers, has been nominated for four Pushcart Awards. See <http://www.benjaminbuchholz.com> for more.

I Dream of a Place of Peace

Anjum Wasim Dar - Pakistan

But in vain,
Time and again there is pain;
I was brought to a Promised Land
Created with killing, insane;
Where
Remnants of blood,
Traces of flood,
Sensations of fear
Remain;
I dream of a place secure,
Clean, colorful, and pure,
But I am not sure
As I see
the flying roof of a bus,
As I hear
the terrifying sound of a blast,
Oh, how long is it going to last?
As I fear
One moment in time
May be so fast
Before we know
And thus...
We are... no where,
No more.

Anjum Wasim Dar was born in Indian-held Kashmir and migrated to Pakistan in 1952. She was fortunate to have a literary cum religious environment at home. She holds a Master's degree in English Literature and has published numerous articles in national newspapers and magazines. She has three children.

Fabric

Poupa Jenny Marashi - United States

I noticed your delicate pale cheeks again in the bright fluorescent light of Century 21.
I have known you all of my life.

Long unpolished nails,
perfectly self manicured.
Nails set in a soft no-cuticle
partition
that struggle could not reduce.

I know what happens when you
quietly cry
at my apartment alone.
You never wanted to be a burden on your children,
you remind yourself as you fold my clothes,
and scrub my bathroom tile.

"Mom, buy *something*," I stop to say,
while imperviously analyzing the third floor merchandise.

You slide brazenly through
and lift a pair of long black pleated pants from the clearance rack.

"You already have fifteen black pants in the back of your closet, " I nod.

Just as my disappointed gaze is breaking,
I am shredded by the sight of
two pink crescents on the upper ridge of your cheekbones.
They unveil hours wrapped
wiping the scathing cascade of regret, sorrow, and burden,
while all the time
pretending to stand tall.

In your gradually shrinking body,
that has carried me all of my life.

Poupa is an Iranian-American attorney living in New York City. She hopes to eventually be the Johnny Appleseed of night-blooming jasmine.
