



damazine

Spring 2009

Damazine – Literary Journal of the Muslim World
Published online at <http://www.damazine.com>
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Sins of Monsoons

Shaila Abdullah – United States

The first thing you noticed about him wasn't his bedraggled state or his incessantly snotty nose. It was the bluish-black scar that ran lizard-like across the entire breadth of his chin, forming a half-smile, a semicircle of nature's mockery or a product of someone's cruelty. It lent an unforgettable quality to his features, rendering his incredibly common face very uncommon. The presence of that scar was how I remembered Ramu in the beginning. I forgot faces easily even though I was a very perceptive child with a photographic memory, much to the exasperation of my parents. I could hold them accountable for events and promises made on a whim with no intentions of ever getting fulfilled.

Ramu was Mai Jan's son. She was the maid who came to our house daily at the crack of dawn to do what we had deemed beneath our status to do since I was five — clean up after us, launder our soiled clothes, wash our dirty dishes, and cook for us before we hired Khansama. Mai Jan even gave baths to the little ones. The days she didn't show up, the dishes piled high, and we ran around in a disheveled state: dirty, unwashed, with stinky knickers, sweaty undershirts, food stains and the day's grime coloring our shirtfronts, hair unruly and uncombed. Ami pretended not to notice. On such mornings, she sat in her room, painting her toenails, Lata Mangeshkar blaring out of the radio, curtains drawn. *Us basti ko jaane waale, leta ja paigaam mera*. O Traveler, take my message to the village.

We were chased away when we tried to peek in Ami's room. She almost always had a headache that she was nursing and didn't want to be bothered. Usually when our driver, Azad Baba, came back after dropping Abu off, he would come inside the kitchen and fix us *parathas* for breakfast, square, fat pieces of dough powdered heavily with flour so they wouldn't stick to the pan. He deep-fried them in canola oil to mouth-watering perfection and then slid the oily, slithering masses straight from the pan onto our plates, the steam partially hiding us from each other's view. The first mouthful would always burn and numb our tongues. Azad Baba always cautioned us. We never listened.

Ramu's appearance in my life when I was eight brought a welcome change, although short-lived. He invoked the rebel in me and forced me to take risks with my situation. I was always a dutiful daughter with good grades. I did everything right; I studied hard, I ate well, and I obeyed all authority figures. Later on I loved with a fierceness, too. Ramu operated on a single theory: do what your heart wants and be carefree. I liked his devilish attitude. I learned in time that his rebellion rose from a life of being stifled and ignored. He seemed to have an undaunted spirit despite that and a ready smile.

Ramu was also disaster-prone. He had the face of someone who got beaten up one too many times. When I met him, his nose was at an awkward angle, slightly off-center; he had a swollen cheek and a puffed-up lower lip. And it seemed that every time I saw him after that, his features were shifting and readjusting, old wounds dying, fresh ones taking their place. He fell off a ladder, Mai Jan would offer one day. *Dekh ke nahi chalta*, he walked through a door, would be the excuse for another day, and so it went on. None of it ever had the ring of truth to it, but we just nodded and went about our lives, afraid of the burden that knowledge would bring to our conscience.

I saw him for the first time when Mai Jan was still new, the morning I caught her and Ami in an animated discussion. Mai Jan was unusually late, insisting that it was because she had nowhere to put Ramu, her nine-year-old son who had just been expelled from his school, his third one, for being too raucous. Mai Jan requested, no, pled, short of going on all fours and prostrating in front of Ami, to let Ramu stay outside our door while she worked.

"Alright, okay," Ami conceded at last, wagging a red-tipped finger in Mai Jan's direction. "As long as he does not cause any trouble here." As an afterthought she asked, "Does he bathe daily?"

"Whenever we have water in the *basti*, he does," Mai Jan said sadly in the voice of one who had perfected the art of groveling to get a win in any situation.

Ami scrunched up her nose. "Which is probably never. He better stay out of trouble, or else —"

Mai Jan waved her hands widely to reassure her and joined them together in gratitude before turning around to go about her business. Another battle won as far as she was concerned. The “or else” in Ami’s world could mean so much and often nothing. There was no way to tell until the time came. And so Ramu became a permanent fixture near our door that summer, hunched up and busy with his few marbles, swatting flies all day long while Mai Jan toiled endlessly in our home.

I wandered outside to get a closer look at Ramu, and he scowled at me and returned to his game. I watched him intently, not the marbles, but him. The scar intrigued me.

“Where did you get that?” I asked him. At our age, we rarely bothered with the formalities of introduction. Where Ramu came from, they probably didn’t even bother with them as adults.

“Those are mine.” He scooped up the marbles hurriedly and pressed them to his chest. One fell off and rolled over to where I was standing, and he lunged at it.

“Not that, silly,” I said with a laugh, kicking the fleeing marble back to him. “The scar on your face!”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said proudly. “I have tons of those all over my body.”

I looked at him wide-eyed.

“How did you get them?” I asked again.

He didn’t answer. Then his eyes brightened up. “Do you want to play with these? We could play for keeps.”

I didn’t know how to play marbles, and I certainly didn’t know what playing for keeps meant. I nodded nonetheless and sank down beside him, neatly folding my pinafore under my knees so my thighs wouldn’t be exposed, just how Ami had shown me.

He laughed. “You girls dress funny.”

I smiled at him uncomfortably. I hated that dress too, but Ami’s tailor insisted it was the latest “fassun”. The tailor was quite enamored by Ami’s generous proportions and spent hours measuring her. I had seen his fingers go into Ami’s nether regions too, but she seemed not to mind. I always made sure I brought along my measurements written out neatly on a piece of paper with an HB pencil.

Ramu was quite an expert at the game, and I didn’t realize just how much time had flown by until Ami came looking for me outside and seemed shocked to see me with my little companion.

“There you are. I looked all over for you!” she exclaimed, eyeing Ramu suspiciously. “What are you doing out there in the dirt?”

Ramu didn’t look up. He knuckled the blue rainbow marble against the green one and yelled, “*Woh le!*”

I followed Ami inside but paused to look behind briefly. Ramu winked at me.

“You lost the game. That was for keeps,” he whispered.

“What does that mean?” I mouthed back.

“You will be my slave girl for a whole week.” He laughed.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

“That’s what playing for keeps means, don’t you know?” he whispered.

Of course, it didn’t, but I didn’t know it then.

“Dumb, rich girl. Spoiled, so spoiled. Doesn’t know anything,” he continued.

Ami turned around at our derision and buzzing and subjected Ramu to a sharp stare. He bowed his head down and returned to his solitary game.

That night Ami gave me a bath, an unusual occurrence, and oiled my hair afterward. Unlike the amount she used in making eggs, she generously emptied an entire cup of foul-smelling coconut oil over my head. Usually Mai Jan was responsible for keeping us clean, although she often forgot to clean us behind our ears. Ami parted my hair in an uneven two and plaited it tightly on both sides. I winced, and she tapped me lightly on the head.

“You should know better than to play with Ramu’s type,” she said irritably. “What will your Abu say?”

“Ramu is fun. What’s the harm in playing with him?” I picked up the pink hand mirror on the bed and studied my plaits. They seemed to grow almost horizontally from my head like two giraffe ears. I winced at the crooked parting and the uneven distribution of my hair. I couldn’t wait to fix it. I decided to wait until Ami left the room.

“He’s Hindu,” Ami said as if it were a bad word, taking the mirror away from my hands. “Don’t you know?”

I swallowed hard and looked at her in defiance. *So?*

“He’s filthy, in case you haven’t noticed.” Ami tried to strengthen her case. “And the smell he carries around. *Ch!*”

Personal hygiene was a big thing with her.

He did have a particular odor, but I didn’t find it offensive. It was no different than Mai Jan’s — kind of a unique merger of an unwashed mop and stale spices that in time you start associating with a person or kind. To me, it seemed perfectly normal, balancing out the better-smelling scents around the house: the fresh vegetables, Ami’s and Baba’s colognes, the *moghra* bracelet Abu brought for Ami and me on Thursdays — to me it all helped keep it neutral, kind of a nice balance of sorts.

I was sullen because I didn’t agree with Ami. She also was not very firm when it came to discipline. She contradicted herself readily and daily. What was acceptable one day could become a crime the next; situations she strongly disagreed with in the morning wouldn’t matter to her by late afternoon. Ami’s method of parenting lacked consistency, and for my other siblings, it translated into absolute and complete freedom. They did whatever they could whenever they could — the very philosophy that Ramu believed in as well.

He was there again the next day when I sneaked out while Ami was napping. This time he was drawing a two-foot circle with white chalk on the concrete as he frowned in concentration, eyebrows meshed together. He selected a shooter, a big red marble, and placed it inside the circle, and then he chose another smaller one, kneeling on all fours, wiry hair touching the ground. He flicked at the smaller marble deftly, aiming for the red one. The marble rolled with increasing speed and pushed the shooter out of the circle.

“*Woh le ho!*” Ramu shouted, both hands up in the air, his greasy sleeves falling down to his elbows. I noticed that he was missing most of his front teeth. His victory cheer never made sense to me, but I had heard street kids holler in that manner, too. Ami would probably have a heart attack if I mimicked that in the house. Ramu was wearing a strange-colored *shalwar kameez*; it was probably once the

color of camel skin but had grown grayer over time with grime and stains that no amount of washing could erase. I wondered how many times it had actually been washed. He saw me and smiled.

“Did you see that? Did you?” He was so excited that saliva shot out of his mouth and showered my face. His breath smelled of foul eggs. I pretended not to recoil, and he didn’t offer any apologies.

“I did. Good one!” I admitted, clapping my hands in camaraderie, and sat down beside him. “Can you teach me this game?”

He was an impatient teacher. When my fingers wouldn’t flick the marble in the right direction, he would hold his hand roughly over mine and almost force the marbles to lunge forward with his strength. I still felt drawn to him although he had crude mannerisms that I wasn’t used to.

I heard my baby sister, Zoha, cry inside the house and got up with a start. Ami had left me in charge of her before she went down for her nap. I could hear the *dhub dhub* of the wooden laundry bat from somewhere inside where Mai Jan was thrashing our laundry, punishing the clothes for the stains they carried, absolving them of all sins. Deliberate or not, her labor almost muffled the young child’s cry.

Those days I measured my life by the sights and sounds that affected me most: the doll I carried around that had lost a ribbon, the toothpaste called Binaca that I used with the curious flavor that lingered in my mouth for hours, the scent of Ami’s perfume — the fragrance of a self-absorbed existence — and the unforgettable taste of *falsas*. On hot sweltering afternoons, Ramu and I ate red, sour berries that with their juice turned our tongues crimson. I would buy the berries for the two of us from the street vendor who came by the house some afternoons. Ramu and I often indulged in a fierce competition to see who could spit the seeds out the farthest. Once we even aimed for Khansama. When Ramu’s seed struck his dark balding head, he turned around, scratching his head in confusion. We pretended to be busy with our marbles, trying hard not to laugh.

Other days we chased the white puffballs — the flowerlets of the shimul tree, fleeing from their split pod — all across the yard. We paused only to trace their wayward path as the gleeful seeds raced past the rose bushes and the bougainvilleas along the fence, bouncing off the windows, escaping from nature and manmade snares. We never caught a single puffball. They always traveled a little too high, a few fingers beyond our reach, like unattainable dreams.

After playing with Ramu those afternoons, I would come home dirty and smelling like a street urchin. Ami would wrinkle her nose and instruct Mai Jan to bathe me. I was certain some days she knew where I had been but decided that I was too headstrong and opinionated to listen. It was either that or she believed that all friendships and relationships have a life span and ours would run out soon. I refused to think that she didn’t pay attention to my afternoon adventures simply because she did not care.

It was raining heavily the day I saw the dark side of Ramu’s life and realized how vulnerable he was under all his machismo and bravado. Ami had gone shopping, leaving us in Mai Jan’s care. I sneaked out when Mai Jan was busy with the young ones and met Ramu outside. He was standing with his hands in his *shalwar* pockets, looking forlorn.

“I hate rain!” he declared, his lower lip trembling. His nose was running, and he made no attempt to wipe away the mucus.

I shivered and stood next to him under the awning, hearing the rain drum down onto the roof of the house. I loved rain, so I had no supportive remarks to make. The monsoons also provided some much-needed relief from the long, scorching summer days.

He pointed toward a little shed that stood a few steps away in the yard beside an old banyan tree. The branches hung low as if laden with sorrow, the tree seeking comfort by resting its arms on the decrepit shed for balance.

“Can I go in there to hide for a while?” he asked, licking his snout.

The shed had tools that Azad Baba kept for household projects, and Ami used it as a *godown* for excess nonperishable food supplies like rice, flour, and oil. On hot summer days, Mai Jan used the extra space to dry slivers of raw mangoes called *keri* before pickling the *achar* in a huge clay pot covered with white muslin cloth. Periodically, Mai Jan or Ami would fill up smaller jars and put them in the refrigerator for everyday use. There were days Ami didn’t scoop out *achar* herself. She said she was unclean and her touching the big *achar* pot on such days would spoil it. It was years later that I found out what being “unclean” really meant.

I was sure the shed had enough room for shelter. I nodded, and Ramu raced toward it screaming as the rain pelted his head. “I don’t want to die,” I heard him yell.

I was surprised at how scared he was. I saw him almost make it to the door when the sound of thunder threw him off balance and he landed on the ground. I raced toward him and pulled his hands to drag his horizontal body inside the shed. He was hyperventilating, and his hair and ears were caked with mud. Under his ribs, his heart was thudding like a panicked dog’s.

It was dark inside, and my eyes needed to adjust. I rubbed them furiously and blinked a couple of times, unleashing dancing spheres. Dark and eerie, they bobbed up and down the wall, making me woozy. A prickly scent of rotting pickle permeated the air along with the stench of animal excrement. Even though I tiptoed around the shed, the floor below me still creaked and groaned from age. I worried that it would cave in and carry me into the womb of darkness below. Uncertainty always scared me. I stopped and glanced behind me. All I could see was a pair of frightened eyes, large and unblinking. The only bulb in the shed was shattered, its filaments exposed, all tangled up with the metal prongs. I stumbled over an old red torch that I quickly turned on.

“It’s okay, Ramu,” I said softly. “Rain doesn’t hurt.”

“It does,” he maintained sullenly.

A few drops of rain glistened on the roof, threatening to drop on us. I laid the torch on the floor, and it formed a giant circle of light around us. Next, I dragged a bucket under a slow trickle that was growing steadier. The place contained a feeling of sadness, of being forgotten.

“How so?” I asked when I was done. I sat beside him on a flour sack.

He was silent and remained still on the floor. I realized that no answer was forthcoming and sighed as I looked up at the wooden slats on the ceiling. Above us, cobwebs and sparrow nests were crisscrossing paths. On one side, an enterprising spider was busy weaving an incredibly large web. I saw it greedily eye a housefly flitting about and weave a few strands its way, seemingly providing a restful area but in reality setting a trap. A baby sparrow flew by nervously at our sight, and her anxious cries filled the shed. Just then a clap of thunder sounded, and it fled for cover.

“I hate love,” Ramu whimpered. “Love hurts.”

When I heard his voice, I turned to him in surprise, not sure of the reason for such an outburst. Ramu’s eyes were closed, his eyelids trembling. A lone tear slid from the corner of his eye and ran toward his ear.

“Who do you love?” he asked after such a long time that I jumped.

I thought about that for awhile.

“I think I love Abu, my brother and sister —”

Did I love Ami?

“Everybody loves their own family,” said Ramu. “Who do you really love?”

I was quiet, running the list of other people through my head. Did he mean my friends? Schoolmates?

“Forget it.” His voice broke into my thoughts. “Do you think your Abu loves you?”

“Of course he does!” I don’t know why I sounded so defensive.

Ramu turned to me and asked matter-of-factly, “Where does he touch you?”

The question loomed large inside the little shed, rebounding off the walls and coming to rest alarmingly on me. I looked at him in confusion.

“What do you mean? Like when he holds me close and kisses me?”

He shook his head. “Does he touch you down there?” He gestured toward my knickers, and I recoiled from him and sat up, ready to flee.

“Does it hurt when he touches you? You know, when he says he loves you but it doesn’t really feel like it?”

Ramu’s voice seemed like it was coming from a distance. It didn’t even seem to be his anymore; it had an inhuman quality, as if all emotion had been stripped from it. My own voice was gone. I had no words; I had no answers. I didn’t understand his questions, but my built-in sense of danger alerted me that it could only mean something dreadful.

Ramu stood up resignedly and turned to me as I stupidly backed up against the wall, my heart threatening to open my chest cavity and pop out. I watched as he undid his *shalwar* strings. The trousers fell in a bunch around his soiled ankles and then he looked up, his face a blank slate. I clapped a hand to my mouth to silence my cry of shock. His little shriveled penis was swollen and red, surrounded by scars and burn marks of all shapes and sizes. His entire lower body was covered in new and old wounds; some angry cuts were getting ready to clot.

“This is how my Baba shows his love —”

I raced out of the shed, almost tripping over the bucket of water. I ran and ran until I got inside the house. I shut the door to my room and bolted it from the inside. It was then that I fell against it and cried for a very long time. At some point late in the night, his final words came to haunt me.

“Can I show you my love?”

By then the rain had stopped.

I never played with him again. I stayed indoors and stopped wandering outside. Ami seemed pleased. Once in a while, I glanced out the window and saw the top of Ramu’s scruffy head, but he never looked up. On occasion, I hid and listened to the sound of his marbles hitting the concrete. I bore no ill-feeling toward him, only a sentiment of a drawn-out sadness. And then he stopped coming to our house. When Ami asked Mai Jan about him, she raised both of her hands heavenward.

“*Allah jane*, where he is,” she said and wiped a tear from her eyes with her *pallu*. “He hasn’t come home in three weeks.”

“Three weeks?” Ami looked shocked. “What do you mean? Have you and Akram looked for him?”

Mai Jan nodded. "I did. His Baba is always doing drugs. He's never in his *hosh* to go search for Ramu. He got out of jail on Friday after two weeks this time. Been in there for hashish. Had a big argument with Ramu before that. Men and their tempers. God has created them in a unique mold."

A chill ran down my spine at the mention of Ramu's father. He had a sinister presence in my mind. He scared me even though I had never met him. I hovered in the area, listening in with a glass of milk in my hand.

"What about the police? What did they say?"

Mai Jan laughed and sank down on her knees with the *jharoo*, sweeping away a large arc of dust. The little restless particles took off in the air in distress, shimmering in the light filtering through the window, unsettled molecules that floated in the air in panic and lost their way. I wondered about the fate of the displaced dust particles. Doesn't man pay a price for such transgressions, I wondered. I looked at the glass in my hand worriedly. I wondered how loudly it would shatter if I let it go. Where would the pieces fall? I was troubled by the unpredictability of everything around me — people, inanimate objects, words. I winced from pain as if a shard had already struck me.

"*Bibi*, police don't care for underprivileged children like Ramu," Mai Jan was saying. "They are a dime a dozen and always running away from home. They will probably tell me to go home."

Ami was speechless. She was rooted to the spot and looked at Mai Jan for a very long time. Then she turned and went inside her room. I had never seen Ami that disturbed.

For a long time afterward, whenever our car stopped at intersections, I hungrily scanned the sea of disheveled little boys that surrounded our car for a familiar face — the ones who scrambled and fought each other to clean our windshield with their rags. Their discolored, dirty washcloths always left more smudges than what was previously there. For me, monsoons only heightened such imperfections, exposing the sins of the season, laying bare the inequality of our losses.

Noted as "Word Artist" by critics, Shaila Abdullah is an award-winning author and designer based in Austin, Texas. Abdullah's new novel, Saffron Dreams, explores the tragedy of 9/11 from the perspective of a Muslim widow. Her debut book, Beyond the Cayenne Wall, is a collection of stories about Pakistani women. More information is available at <http://www.shailaabdullah.com>.

Hira

M.A.R. Habib – United States

For years, the darkness has draped me,
Enshrouded in the high mantle of night.
The darkness of idols, greed in business,
Abuse of orphans, widows, women.
Here, from the mountain, I see the darkness
That enfolds the world. Yet now
Another darkness descends on me,
A beating of wings, shuddering, as if
Beating in my own breath, heart, soul:
Shadow everywhere, shadows, all shadow.
What moment is this, opening into
The very soul of time, what mode of time
Unfolding the very breath of
Eternity. God. Worlds above, worlds
Upon worlds. What weight of universe
Descends upon me, spreading through me,
Breathing into my lips, through my language,
A voice from so high yet so deep within,
Shuddering in Angel breath: O vision
At the edge of vision, wherever I turn
The dark horizon is lit with the form of Angel,
Forcing me, wherever I turn, he stands,
Confronts, blinding, colossal, power of light
Burning before me yet deep within:
Archangel.

All the forces of mountain and desert
Cry into my heart; the black sky
Thunders in my throat:
All the sources of life, all sense, all
Power of reason, of beauty, the sublime
Freeze in this moment, in this cave,
All resources of language, lips, eyes, hands
Flow and freeze in this one command:
Read! Echoing inside me, pounding,
Read! My own voice. I hear
Myself, from deep within:
I cannot, I cannot read.
Again the echo, pressing louder, harder:
Read! The word, the world, bites
In my head, my frame shivering yet
Numb: I cannot read. Read!
And now, I know the power, know
The hour is too great: What shall I read?
Read in the Name of Thy Lord —
My being is cleft as dread
Spreads through this human form:
It is both Night and Day, the desert
Horizon rises to sky, all heaven
Burning over every grain of sand.
And here I stand, man
Transformed, yearning,

Shivering, breathless, touched
In spirit, breathing a word.
The Word.

*The Cave of Hira is located in Mount Nur in Mecca, and was the location of the Prophet Muhammad's first revelation.

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Scents of Direction

Asad Jaleel – United States

A family moves West
Packing up all the sundry items
And traveling over mountain, prairie, and desert
Except the dog
No room in the truck
No pets allowed
One more creature left behind
Days later, boxes unpacked
New roots planted
And at the doorstep
Impossibly, inexplicably
The dog arrives
Having trekked across countless miles
Over mountain, prairie, and desert
Guided only by a familiar scent
And the celebrated canine nose
Nature throws down the gauntlet
See what Spot does for love
A dog can do it, but can you?

The Arabs call the dog — *kalb*
And they named the heart — *qalb*
Maybe they were on to something

They also tell a story of Joseph and Jacob
Joseph disappeared and Father Jacob wept
How long would you weep for your lost child?
So much that Jacob's prophetic eyes went blind
And the vision of a prophet
Includes colors we have never known
When Joseph revealed himself to his brethren
He sent them home with his shirt
The mere scent of Joseph restored Jacob's vision

Helen Keller called smell
The fallen angel of the senses
Angel indeed

Asad Jaleel is a graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received a Bachelor's of Science in 2003 in Biology with a minor in Classics. He is currently doing graduate work toward a Master's Degree in Education. He enjoys reading, blogging, and playing video games. His parents immigrated to the U.S. from Pakistan in 1976. He was born in Chicago in 1982.

Coconut

Bilal Latif – United Kingdom

Rain paints road, streetlights and the pedestrians in between into a shivering watercolour streaked back into oil clarity by dark plastic arms. Kam adjusts the rearview, in which Mosh's alternately blurred, clear form recedes to enter the building.

Ringling trills in Kam's headset as he pulls onto the main road. A police car draws near, siren wailing banshee calls. Into Kam's car splashes topaz light. It flickers across the passenger seat and casts the rucksack holding the box as a square ghost in the corner of the windscreen. He reaches over, zips the bag shut. Just in case.

As the police car passes to wink blue on the moonlit horizon, the siren twines trills into an electric chorus that drones a crescendo. Stops. Eddy's words replace it: "Hi, leave a message and I'll give you a shout."

"It's Kamal. I'm on my way." He glances at the bag. Something that mustn't become regret clutches his chest. Something that mustn't become remorse lowers his voice. "Should have enough to settle it." He ends the call. Changes gears. The bag slides off the seat, hits the floor and jangles like orphans' bones.

Or shrapnel dissecting them.

He tries to exhale his thoughts, but his breath feeds the blaze in his heart. He can't forget.

You just walked in. Like it was nothing. Shouldered your rucksack, strolled through the double doors, down the corridor, and entered the prayer room. A pious student come early for Isha. As if you were honest. As if you belonged.

The place was empty save for the man reading his Qur'an in the far corner. He didn't look up. You were sure. You played it safe. You waited maybe two, three minutes. Seconds. He didn't look up.

You placed your shoes in the rack. At its end, on the floor, were the two wooden boxes. You knew what they contained. You just lied to yourself that you had to read their labels first. So, your back to the man in the corner, you crouched beside the boxes. One of them held donations to the Islamic Society.

The other was some appeal. War relief? Aid for victims of a natural disaster? You might have paid more attention if you hadn't kept looking at the man over your shoulder. He didn't look back.

You turned to the boxes, ignored whatever that feeling balled in your chest was, and slipped the backpack to the floor. Because you could only fit a single box into the rucksack, you weighed both in your hands and bagged the heavier one. You didn't read the label.

You stood, and now the man was looking. Staring. And that ball in your chest sucked the air from your throat. You couldn't move. You couldn't look away. You couldn't stop the heat draining from your face.

And when he smiled, you couldn't return it. When he looked back at his Qur'an, all you could do was retrieve your shoes and head for the entrance, footsteps in time with your pulse.

But you couldn't leave. In the doorway stood Mosh.

Ahead, a nebula of electric light flashes blue and yellow against the pavement. Vehicles queue before Kam's, their drivers waiting to gain access onto the side street.

Kam unclenches his jaw and breathes. A police officer walks among the vehicles to tap on their windows and talk to their drivers. The first car in line turns left onto the side street. The van behind it follows like the next pendulum in a Newton's Cradle.

Kam's phone beeps text onto its screen.

COME BACK. WE'LL SORT IT OUT.

— MOSH

Kam closes his eyes, palms his forehead. He can't decide if the ache it hides is a cause or an effect of his burning chest. He looks down at the bag, which silently yells children's screams, adults' wails. Mosh's words.

Horns herald a knock on the window. Kam faces the police officer.

"Sir, there's been an accident. Please detour on the left."

As Kam does so, he sees the cordoned-off wreckage, all shards and mangled metal, until his car draws onto the side street and the wreck becomes a memory hidden by the building behind him and to the right.

Ahead and to the left, cars trickle onto the street from the main road and join the ranks taking the turn at Kam's right. Maybe some will loop around the accident so they'll end up a mile or two away, near Eddy's place. Behind and to the right.

He looks to the main road in front. Just a simple matter of reaching it, turning left and heading back for Mosh.

Kam shakes his head. Crossroads are no problem, regardless of his drummer-pulse or the pleading tinkle of the charity box. He won't be crushed by a choice between left and right. He won't let it become a choice of right and wrong. It's a matter of honour. Of respect. Of life. So he doesn't question himself as he turns right.

Much.

You didn't want anything to do with Mosh. All the laughs, all the chats, all the rapport and the fun were worth less than a clear escape route and no questions asked. And the worst thing? You probably didn't hide it very well. Yeah, you tried to smile or joke, but inside you felt that pain nobody should feel. That obvious, rotten side effect from looking into the eyes of a friend and lying.

Mosh stared at you. He must have seen that pain. He definitely saw the box in your bag. But he just looked — disappointed.

That made the pain worse. So you lashed out. "Move." You thought uttering it was more polite. And the fact you couldn't focus on anything but the floor made speaking up difficult.

"Don't do this." Mosh grasped your arm.

"Got no choice." Your eyes wouldn't lower any further. Your voice would. "Move. Please."

“Look, we’ll tell the police —”

You laughed humourlessly. That old chestnut. “All I have to do is pay him back.” You closed your eyes. “So let me go.”

“I’ll get the others to help. That’s what friends are for.”

You yanked your arm out of his grip. “Friends?” Suddenly you could look him in the eye. If only because you wanted to pluck it out. You were pretty loud too — the man in the corner noticed. Didn’t bother you. “Friends don’t mutter behind your back.”

Mosh looked confused.

Your jaw tightened. “Football last week? I heard them. Called me a coconut? Brown outside, white inside? Ring any bells?”

It did, but Mosh played dumb like he always does when he thinks he’s helping you out.

“Moshin, you know this isn’t an act. I’m making things right.” You wanted to sound earnest but it came out an angry whisper.

Now Mosh couldn’t look you in the eye. “They were just — it meant nothing.”

“Nothing?” You wanted to beat him until he bled. “Know what some of them call you? Some of those white people the others hate so much?” You tugged his beard and he recoiled. “I defend you, Mosh.”

His face showed what you were looking for — that hint of irritation, that tweaked lip of offended embarrassment. For a second, you’d made him feel as rotten as you. But he cooled. “Give me something to defend.”

If not for the man in the corner, you might have discarded all those years of friendship and broken Mosh’s neck. Because as much as his words stung and nipped and gnawed, you knew they were right. Stealing charity money to settle gambling debts with a shark? Sinful and pathetic whichever way you looked at it. Naturally, venom infected your voice. “Get out of the way.”

Mosh set his jaw. “It’s not worth Hell.”

“If I don’t pay him off, he’ll send me there anyway.”

He held your shoulder. It felt like he wanted to slip the bag off it. So you shoved him away. You would have hit him had your other hand not been intercepted.

The man from the corner now stood glaring behind you, Qur’an in one hand, your fist in the other.

Kam’s fingers drum the dashboard. The beat outpaces that of his heart, but cannot clear the clouds his pulse spreads across his mind. He pulls onto the roadside. Breathes deep.

Rain blurs the exterior into a sludgy sea swum through by a school of orange streetlights. The windscreen wipers perform a token cleansing pivot, and he stares through his arc of clarity at the tower block on the road’s far end. Eddy’s place.

Kam pulls the bag onto the passenger seat. No screams or rattling bullets — just the shifting jangle of hefty coinage.

He flicks through his mobile's contact list. Highlights Mosh's name. There's still time. One button press can fix everything.

The phone rings and flashes Eddy's name onscreen. Kam swallows. Answers.

"Hey, Kammy boy." Eddy's tone betrays his sneer. "Ain't got all night, mate. Chop, chop."

Kam forces a laugh. "Just around the corner." He hangs up. Looks ahead. Starts the engine.

You would have started a fight, psyched on guilt and adrenaline, free hand ready to strike the man till he let go of your other fist. You'd have sent the guy reeling into his corner for daring to play referee between you and Mosh.

Then Mosh — that infuriatingly reliable saviour — solved your problem. "It's all right," he told the man. "Just had a bit of an accident."

The man looked from you to Mosh. "He was going to hit you."

Calm, smooth, soothing. "We're just messing around." His palms clasped the man's hand, which gradually loosened its grip on yours. "It's all right."

You couldn't face Mosh. You could only stare at your backpack, feel the box shift as you adjusted the strap. Relief turned to gratitude and gratitude to shame, because you could have ended it there.

But the only thing you left was the room.

The road unrolls beneath him, a rain-soaked conveyer belt drawing the tower closer. The charity box is silent. So is the phone. No last-minute interventions from Mosh to talk him down.

He reaches the driveway, which tapers into the car park. On the far end, at the base of the tower, stands Eddy with a friend.

You rushed up the corridor. No words, no looking back. You pushed open the exit door and felt a hand on your shoulder.

You turned to face Mosh. You should have thanked him for protecting you, shook his hand. All you could muster was a nod. He didn't say much. Five little words and he'd let you on your way.

But before you ran through the rain to your car, before you'd seen him watching you leave, he'd asked a question your heart absorbed to brand into your future:

"Is this who you are?"

Kam processes the question even as he draws nearer to Eddy and his accomplice, the hood of the former slick with rain, the cricket bat of the latter barely concealed behind his back.

Kam turns the question this way and that, hardly noticing Eddy's barked greeting. *And even as he sees Eddy's grin and hears the accomplice slapping his bat into his palm, Kam's heart answers the question.*

It answers by rushing blood to the muscles of the foot on the gas; by turning his face from Eddy's scowl as the car passes; by focusing his eyes on the road despite the crack they glimpse webbing across the rear window from the accomplice's bat.

As the car bursts back onto the road, Kam's mind provides its own answer. It pays little heed to the van Eddy and his brute jump into. Kam could live for minutes or years, but he will die knowing what he is not: a pretender, a thief, a hypocrite.

And the blaze in his heart ignites his mind; and both scorch the meat in which they sit, and that which sits in them; and his body spurs the vehicle it steers until soul and flesh and car together flee from pain and disgrace. Yet —

Neither mind nor heart can say what he will become. A hero returning that which he stole? A coward submitting to his pursuers? A casualty crushed in a hulk of mangled metal?

Come what may, he is, in this moment, simply who he is. Honest. Determined.

Muslim.

Bilal Latif has had fiction previously published in Libbon magazine. Additionally, he has aided in the writing and production of short films, and has worked on graphic novel projects. He lives in Leicester, UK.

The Flutes of the Djinn

Djelloul Marbrook – United States

Introduction

They say some people, but not all, hear the flutes of djinn — in English we sometimes call them genies — in Algeria's Tuareg country. My mother heard them there.

The Flutes of the Djinn

I don't know, djinn, how much you remember
but I know you measure the Sahara's sands,
wear stars on your fingers
and remember that once on Third Avenue
an old man freed you and asked nothing.
You studied him a long time before you left
to make sure he understood the consequences.
He did. And then he left,
and somewhere a child was born
wearing them on his face.

How do their flutes in the Tuareg night
summon us to the secrets of the djinn,
and how does the sexual electric of stars
wake us to the meanness of our wishes?
I think hearing is easier than seeing them
thanks to our brushes with the vast.
Abhor the misshapeness of words
and make this gnosis your heart:
everything is a facet of the same jewel.

Djelloul Marbrook's book, Far from Algiers (Kent State University Press, 2008), from which the above poem is reprinted, won the 2007 Stan & Tom Wick Poetry Prize. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in American Poetry Review, Oberon, The Ledge, and Reed Magazine. His story, "Artists' Hill," won the 2008 Literal Latté fiction prize.

Speed of Life

Sankar Roy – United States

Dear Allah, my mullah, you're reeling the movie roll of my life
way too fast. I am having a hard time keeping up with it. In one minute,
I have thick hair, in the next, I am bald as a gravestone.

Yes, a bit more slowly, another notch down, that should be good.
Let me see — have I seen that face before, a *nazzaara-e-jamaal*^{*},
those eyes whirling by me?

Who is that woman, sitting on a park bench, staring at me? I like her looks.
Please rewind the roll and let me pass again by the way where she is sitting.
Let me stop and ask her name, take her phone number.

I like the melody in her voice, her sad eyes. Let me sit beside her and chat
for a while. Then let me hold her hand, slowly.
Well, may you press the pause button now, keep as it is

that tree bent by the wind, its leafy branches blurring in the light.
You may keep this scene on the TV screen
for eternity.

^{*}beautiful woman

Sankar Roy, originally from India, is a poet, translator, activist, and multimedia artist living near Pittsburgh, PA. Sankar's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in over seventy literary journals and anthologies, and he is the author of three collections of poetry and an anthology.

From the Camera

Joanna M. Weston – Canada

each time the shutter opens
another face slips in
stored until I'm ready
to open the package and
release hostages
with forgotten names

children who live
in Spanish castles
or long-flight planes

I open the camera
and watch it bleed
onto blank pages

Joanna M. Weston lives in British Columbia, Canada, and is married with three sons and two cats. She is a full-time writer of poetry, short stories, and poetry reviews. She has been published internationally in journals, print and online, and anthologies. Joanna has written a middle reader, Those Blue Shoes, and a poetry collection, A Summer Father, the latter published by Frontenac House of Calgary.
