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Stone, Paper, Scissors

Zahra Abdollah – Malaysia

Palestinian boy; Egyptian papyrus; Delivery room.

Shying with might and main; Writing and reading; Cutting the umbilical cord, baby crying.

Single shot sound; Civilization; Daddy kisses, mommy pampers, baby giggles.

Boy falls; Order, disorder, cry-out for justice; Baby creeping and crawling.

Boy not moving, blood rushes to the ground; Acts and resolutions; Child toddling, walking, running.

Two people run, carrying boy in their arms; Louder cry-out; Child asks.

The pavement is red, blood has won; Failure of resolutions; Child learns.

Silence; Silence; Child playing stone, paper, scissors.

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The Pearl

G. Miki Hayden – United States

His life, in Naik's own view, had been an interesting one. Events around him still aroused his curiosity, and he marveled at how vast a distance he had come — even so far as to leave the people and country of his birth and to travel across a great sea — not once, but twice!

He washed the last plate until it squeaked and set it onto the rack at the side of the sink. Being here, in the kitchen next to the mosque, was remarkable good fortune. Naik was able to hear the prayers, however faintly, and pray along four times a day. The fifth *salat*, the morning prayer, he said at home. While cooking food for others — even in the fasting month of Ramadan — his mind could drift to long-ago times, or he could think how he might improve his soul. This was a very fine way to spend his hours.

Naik, 63, considerably older than his half-brother who employed him, sang a cheerful tune he'd learned in his early life in the hills of Southwestern Arabia. In some respects, Naik had not left the days of his youth behind at all. He carried them with him. Several times a week, the boy had descended from his mountain home along a thick and twisted strap of hemp — a *habal*.

He remembered, with astonishing clarity, the misty highlands and that single rope, the only access to their village of 84 souls. Over Naik's shoulder hung a sack, the object of their mission on such occasions, for his father climbed down the *habal* before or after him, an even heavier bag slung over his back. The two were headed to the souk — to market — with their produce.

His dear father! Worn (but not just yet completely) from a life tending the coffee trees, the fruit trees, the rambunctious goats.

Naik was able, even now, to smell the new-day damp rising from the earth as he moved groundward from heights of green-dotted, terraced fields above gray slate hills.

"Here come the farmers from Habalah," greeted creased-faced, bearded men they met at the bottom of the path — farmers from the other villages, who joked, "They are too thick-skulled to build a ladder to their town."

"We are not such fools as to make the climb easy for the *wali's* tax collector," rejoined Naik's father with abundant wit. In truth, ladders would not last against the wild winds that at certain times of year invaded the cliffs. Nor were there outcroppings along the forbidding stone that they could lash a ladder to. No wonder so few men remained in that awkward place.

A few years forward, Habalah would be entirely abandoned. A sudden hard winter in a usually mild climate and it was come down from their mountain eyrie or starve. Those too frail to come down, or be brought down, died instead.

"I want to lock the door," rasped Salah al-Din, suddenly right behind his brother's back.

Naik didn't start, but the harsh voice made him return immediately to the present. He laid the ragged dish towel across its place, a string between two cabinets, to dry. Salah was ready to leave for the night. "You weren't born yet, when we left Habalah," Naik mused. "We children would sneak into the drying sheds and eat the coffee cherries, no matter how bitter. What a wonderful aroma the dried beans gave off as they were ground. Poor father. But he was dead. You didn't know him."

"I had my own father," rebuffed Salah al-Din.

"Yes, and a fine man he was, too. Upright and a believer of faith."

"Yes," agreed Salah al-Din. "Yes, he was."

Yet it was Naik who had known the man, not Salah al-Din, not for more than the first two years of his life.

The Ottoman Turks had built a railway through Hejaz to Medina and in 1935, the Saudis had added a trunk line down the coast. Naik, with his grieving and anxious father and mother, carried the few cloth bundles that were all that remained of centuries of a family's existence. They sat, heads bent, on the luggage rack with a dozen other villagers, among people they had never seen before — an unimagined occurrence — and traveled thus a hundred or so miles into Yemen. They had heard that coffee was grown in the hill country there, where Naik and his father might get work as farmers — all they knew.

They were traveling in the wrong direction, someone told them, headed south, away from Mecca, where they had never visited. "We'll come back," his father answered in response. The Hajj, the pilgrimage to circumambulate the Ka`ba, was a dream always to be thought of, never fulfilled.

His worn and weary father, already nearly dead then — yet now that the son, Naik, thought of it, probably only 38 years old at the time. His father, 38 or 39, and dead! When Naik himself was today decades older.

Naik walked the three blocks in a silent trance beside his brother. The two men now approached the tenement building that Salah owned. The younger brother had an apartment for himself and his daughter Rabia, and Naik a single room one flight above.

Naik's father had died in Yemen, and he and his mother were left alone; but Naik was a grown man by then, nearly 17, a strong man, able to do any kind of fetch-and-carry work to keep the two of them alive.

He had been the one to protect his mother from the interest of strange men who looked the still-attractive widow over in that way that strange men had. Finally, it had been he, Naik, who had said yes to a respectable merchant returning to his own country from the holy journey to the Haram — the House of God, the Ka`ba — the Great Mosque built by Abraham and Ishmael. Various problems had kept cropping up for the men awaiting a ship, as Naik understood the matter at the time, difficulties so large they were nearly insurmountable. Something was said about a war and the danger of travel.

But the merchant was pious and had an apothecary shop in Hyderabad, somewhere in a place called India across the broad Arabian Sea. A freighter came and went and the merchant stayed on in Yemen, until at last Naik granted the merchant, Husam al-Din, his mother in marriage. Husam was a fine man, as Naik had said, and Naik had recognized that in him after thoughtful examination.

The next liner carried the three across to India, where another noisy, smoky train fetched them to Hyderabad, the city of pearls, yet so far from the water, so far from Habalah and so very different.

Life when they got to the bustling metropolis of Hyderabad was not as wonderful as Naik had imagined it might be. Husam was a good man, but he had children and in-laws from a previous marriage and these relatives crowded around quarrelsomely, not wanting the newcomers to edge them out. Still, Naik was given a position in the shop as an apprentice, a lovely job, really, since the work was more a matter of care than of excessive physical exertion. It was his place to boil velvet rose petals in a brass cauldron for the *`itr al-ward* — attar of roses — or prepare the *dinh al-'ud* — another popular aromatic. These were recipes of the most exacting sort — family secrets that Husam now shared with Naik, a man not blood kin but only related as a matter of a later marriage.

Naik was sent to buy pearls from the pearl shops and would return to grind the slippery jewels into, first bits and chunks, then dust, with mortar and pestle. Later, he mixed the fine particles with lime juice and oil, a cure for inflamed intestines, heart, and nerves.

Soon, Salah was born, to the pride of the father, and the further jealousy of half-brothers and the deceased wife's parents. Then, in a flash, this second father, chosen so cautiously by Naik himself, was gone — run down in the street by a drunken cart driver.

Naik's family of three still had a home, but the rooms they were transferred to were small and dank and the food offered them was mean and meager. Treated as a servant by his "brother" Ahmed, who took over the apothecary, Naik swallowed his anger time and time again. He tried to remember that even this much from life was not his by right, but only lent him by Allah at Allah's own mercy. This cruelty toward him came not from man, but from Allah Himself, and was, therefore, not cruel at all, but for Naik's great benefit.

Salah turned seven and was sent to a pearl merchant to work among the women, sorting shining nuggets against a smooth red cloth. Glass jars of pearls were opened and the iridescent beauties spread across the table. The sorters plucked the gems quickly, moving the pearls into piles according first to shape and size, then color, then shade within that color. Pink must not clash with gray on a strand. Fingers fluttered with practiced speed; the pearls rolled back and forth as eyes determined subtleties that would allow skilled drillers to transform oysters' irritations into decorations to adorn young brides. Salah al-Din's thumb and forefinger developed calluses. The hours were long, the posture sent his muscles into spasms. Naik counseled patience to his brother. He, too, wished for a much different life, he assured the child. He wanted to marry. But that he could never do while his mother labored, in what rightly should have been her own house, like a slave.

The brothers were close and Naik increasingly the comfort of a despairing Salah. When the boy's hands ached, Naik would massage the child's fingers with his own work-hardened ones. "Someday, I'll have my own shop and you will come and apprentice to me," he promised the youngster. "You and I and mother will live in our own house. And we shall have a farm as well — with donkeys and fertile goats for milk and cheese." Such was his intention, although he held it loosely, fearful to believe.

"I want to live in England," insisted Salah. In the boy's mind, England was one vast pleasure palace, a place of wealth where men wore fine garments, and took their leisure. Having never seen a picture of the country — only of King George — the child imagined the climate and the look of it to be just like Hyderabad, all that he knew — fair, sunny skies, narrow streets jammed with busy shops and dark women draped in chador — the veil.

"I will take you to England, too, yes," Naik assured him. Naik's visual concept, however, was blank when he thought of such a vaunted place. All he could see was the rolling green ocean they would surely have to traverse, very like the sea he and his mother had crossed coming to India.

One day when Salah al-Din was nine, he returned home from the shop in a highly agitated manner, could not sit, could not eat, but ran right to bed as soon as his mother would excuse him to go, and tossed and turned.

Naik came and lay in his usual place beside his young brother. "Aren't you well?"

Their mother could be seen through the flimsy partition still making tidy the shabby room alongside them. All day long she labored for the family of her long-dead husband's first wife, cleaning and pricking her fingers with an embroidery needle. At night, she must work for herself and her boys. "I have done it," Salah whispered to his brother. Naik had no idea what was meant by that statement.

The child sat up and Naik came erect too, placing a hand on the child's smooth cheek, wondering if his brother were feverish.

"See," Salah murmured, reaching into his ragged clothes and displaying a small object to the older brother in triumph. "Now we'll go to England, you, me, and mother."

He held a lustrous pearl on the flat of his palm and smiled with teeth that were similarly small, white, and even.

"The Prophet be blessed!" Naik passed his hand over his forehead and eyes. "You have stolen."

"Yes!"

He stroked the boy's cheek in a gesture meant to soothe.

"I will sell it to the nawabs. We can leave here and go to England soon."

"Salah, this pearl is a lovely one but quite little. These kind are like peas that come from a pod, too usual to be of any real value. You nearly lost everything because of this one, small, ordinary pearl."

Salah, shocked, broke into sobs so loud that his mother in the next room hurried in to him. The boy could not help himself, but cried ferociously, despite all efforts to quiet his anguish. Yet he kept his hand clenched tight while his mother offered succor.

When their mother lay down at last to sleep, Salah placed the pearl into a chink in the wall beside their mat and covered it with a bit of paper he wet against his mouth.

Naik saw no sense in making the boy bring back the bead. That would invite a punishment equal to the child's being caught without owning up to the theft.

For many years thereafter, Salah al-Din would nightly take the pearl out of its hiding place and look at it, then replace the gem back into the wall. Naik always watched him, but neither said a word about the pearl, the theft, the possibility of flight.

One day, when he was a grown man, Salah left without telling anyone where he was going. When Naik examined the space in the wall, the pearl was still there.

Fifteen years later — after their mother had died, after Naik had married, and his wife and child had also died — Salah finally sent for his brother Naik. Through a twist of fortune, Salah al-Din had found his way to England and had established himself among the merchant class there.

Soon, Naik followed his brother and crossed the North Sea. Only on the airplane, in midflight, did Naik realize that, in his excitement, he had not retrieved the stolen pearl.

Edgar Short Story Award winner G. Miki Hayden teaches at Writer's Digest online workshops. Her first novel, Pacific Empire, appeared on the New York Times summer reading list, and her nonfiction instructional, Writing the Mystery, was nominated for three awards, winning one. Miki's latest is a style and composition guide, The Naked Writer.

flower

Psycho Kanev – United States

the sky is blue and somehow
dumb:

flower, flower
scream for me

during all these centuries
you have seen the wars and the kings
and the different sun every day
and you sang

you have been picked by young ladies
beautiful as flowers
and you have given them something
and after that they took from us
a lot more

flower, flower
scream for me

I picked you once
and you said yes yes –and sang again
and I tore away all your petals
I thought I violate the maiden and
your aroma died

yes yes flower
my hands reach out for the glass
scream scream
I made a mistake, the world is turning
the fields the flowers
and the poems fall upon them
like the last thing that counts
in the silence

Psycho Kanev is 28 years old. He was born in Bulgaria. He loves to listen to sad music while he slowly drinks his beer. His work has been published in Word Riot, Gloom, Cupboard, Poetry Cemetery, Nerve Cowboy, The Chiron Review, The Guild of Outsider Writers, Spoken War, Side of Grits and many others. He loves to put words down and not talk on the cell phone for days. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Award. He lives in Chicago. Alone.

Walking in the City: Muslima, Meet World

Saalim Mills – United States

Sheet, blanket, sheet,
she heard it all.

Little Naima,
six years old,

wrapped head to feet ...
her tears

stone naked,
bent in the wind

and broke
as she ran home

from her first day
of public school.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and raised in the small town of Chesilhurst, New Jersey, Saalim A. M. Mills is one of eleven children. He graduated school in '99 and spent subsequent years in the U.S. Army, including a deep stint in South Korea. He is currently studying to become a Professor of Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky.

Treading the Fire

Ernest Williamson III – United States

maybe beauty will remain an abstract dirge
a mantra to be ruminated over like a submerged leek becoming tender in warm water as it seems to
me all as vanished from our worlds galaxies and cliques much poetry has propelled into the bellowing
mushroom cloud of noxious gas
Earth has garnished her seedlings as the trees convulse in 4/5 time leading scholars to compendious
shame shaking with violence muttering intellectual gibberish to the delight of the spittle forced out with
the saying of it
but what about me the reporter
the documenter of my purview
what do I make of anything now
I say to myself in this pallid skin
in these pallid days
perhaps I should go tell it on the mountain
given the effulgence of effort
not merely in mind but of the being directing my reticent walk out of a crawling crowd

Ernest Williamson III is a 32-year-old polymath who has published poetry and visual art in over 180 online and print journals. He is a self-taught pianist and painter. He holds a B.A. and an M.A. in English/Creative Writing/Literature from the University of Memphis. Professor Williamson is also a Ph.D. Candidate at Seton Hall University. Get more information here: http://www.pw.org/content/ernest_williamson_iii.
