

Absent Beloved

Ishrat Bashir

'I know what you're thinking right now. What wouldn't have been possible in the world if only you were mine? But you're wrong to think so. I'm nothing if I'm not yours. Every speck of my soul and body belongs to you.'

'Please! It would be better if things remained unsaid. One word opens the gates for more words to burst forth and drown you.'

'But I'm happy if they do. I wouldn't mind if your words drowned me. It's like basking in your light.'

Silence.

Rabia no longer remembers if she had imagined this conversation or she had really had it with him. The place she was born in was a city brimming with light. The mountains that surrounded it helped to contain all that brightness which she feared would otherwise be lost. It would leak out into the plains if the mountains ever gave away the secret of their being. The fear was illogical, of course. How could light leak into plains? Even if light were a fluid, it would need an osmotic gradient to flow. But she feared, nonetheless.

Faisal had his fears, too. He was afraid of the terror that words unleash when they have multiple meanings. The word would often become a bone of contention between the two lovers.

'What is freedom but a word with multiple meaning? Polysemy is the magnanimity of our language, Faisal.'

'A word with multiple meanings is vulnerable, my love. No, not that. It makes *us* vulnerable. It becomes a tool in the hands of our enemies to defeat us, to confuse us, at least.'

'And who is our enemy?'

'I mean if we had enemies.'

'I only know that words are beautiful when they are endless, like *alif* in Urdu.'

'But they are curved and twisted in all manners of the other crooked letters of Urdu. I think words like "love" and "truth", "justice" and "freedom" should have only one meaning. They are important and fundamental words.'

'But the most important of them all is "life" and life cannot have only one meaning. If it were not for the multiple meanings, how could it embrace love and truth, justice and freedom? Multiplicity makes words what they are. Haven't you read our beloved poet Shahid? He plays on the multiple meanings of his name.'

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—

Listen: It means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'Witness' in Arabic.

The couplet helped to melt the bone of contention between them. Perhaps he smiled. She could not tell.

'So you are my Shahid?' he said.

'Of course I am.'

Rabia didn't remember how this conversation ended that night but the next ended in silence. The line went dead as the 25th of January slipped into the 26th. She held the phone for a long time that night, imagining that he too held it.

'Absent Beloved.' Ishrat Bashir.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Februaries and Marchs passed. Springs and summers froze into Decembers. She did not know what had happened that night. Perhaps the doorbell had rung and he had opened it to no one. Perhaps the curfew on networking had made him furious and he had decided to end it for once and all. Perhaps he went after Shahid. Perhaps he had been on the pick up list of *Khuftan Faqeers* (State informants). Perhaps!

No one knows what happened to him for he just, as they say, disappeared. He disappeared without trace, as if she had imagined him, and with the flight of her imagination, he ceased to exist.

Hope is the one thing that doesn't disappear. It grows like mushrooms in dark places and when it gets very dark, some forgotten lantern in the window of the house of memory suddenly lights up, illuminating details of the life once lived. She remembered a school friend, Sohni, whose father had been a policeman. The word 'policeman' has multiple meanings. Polysemy! Law, order, crime, bullets, irreverence, reverberative, shield, stones, security, help, service – many words are associated with this eleven-letter word in the city brimming with light.

This was her only option. She had not been in contact with Sohni for almost ten years. Nonetheless, she was certain that he would help her if she could only manage to contact him. She asked friends and acquaintances and learnt that Sohni was a doctor. She met him in the cafeteria of a local hospital.

'Sohni, I need your help,' she said. 'The brother of one of my friends has disappeared. Could you please ask your father to help us find out where he is?'

Sohni gazed at her intently and could see the waves in her words. 'Of course I will help,' he said.

But promises have their own ways of coming to fruition. A few days passed and then Sohni invited her to his home to meet his father. Perhaps he knew the answer. He wanted to make her believe that he did really talk to his father about this so-called disappearance.

It was the first time Rabia had met a male friend at his home. As she reached up to ring the doorbell, she felt visible and invisible eyes burning into her back. But when Sohni's mother opened the door, her friendly manner and warm smile iced the burning. Sohni's father was busy attending to guests in the drawing room, she explained, leading the way to his study.

The room also served as their personal library. Rabia was surprised. She had imagined policemen would have little interest in books and would only read reports and such. Perhaps Sohni's father was different. A sofa was placed against the only wall without book shelves and Rabia nervously sat down. In front of the sofa was a small wooden table on which lay a heap of books. She stretched out her hand and picked up one. To her surprise it was *Waiting for Godot*. It had also never occurred to her that policemen read plays. As she scanned the titles on the table she saw a book by Alistair Lamb.

At that moment Sohni entered with his father. Rabia was absorbed in memories the book in her hand evoked. She had forgotten that she was in someone else's study in someone else's home. Startled, the book fell from her hands. As she picked it up, something slipped from it onto the floor. It was a red book mark with 'Something is burning' written on one side and on the other, 'My memory is again in the way of your history,' in her own poor handwriting. A corner of the book was frayed and had been fixed with a strip of transparent adhesive tape. It was the same book she had given to Faisal.

Sohni's father apologised for making her wait. He said that he had made preliminary inquiries but it would be difficult to find Faisal. However, he promised that he would try his best. 'Two years is a long time,' he said. Had it been a fresh case he would surely have been able to help her.

Two years of trials and tribulations had yielded nothing to Faisal's family. Rabia believed that she loved him more than anyone in the world. Therefore, she must be the only one destined to find him. Thinking of Sohni appeared, therefore, a divine intervention. She said nothing but asked him where he had bought that book. He smiled, and replied that the books on the table were sent to him by his friend, an officer in the Border Security Force, for the public library that he was going to inaugurate.

Despite all the multiplicity, police officers were still accessible. But she did not know how to contact the army officer. There was no divine intervention here. Besides, a ghost-like suspicion was hovering in the darkness of her mind and she was afraid to expose it to the light.

After a week, her friend called to say that his father could not find any clue about Faisal. But she had not been looking for a clue. Clues are rampant in the cursed city full of light. She wanted an end to all clues.

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