

■ Volume 5, 2022/23

Opening Doors Through Stories: Imagine

Writing from Newcomers to Regina





Opening Doors Through Stories: Imagine

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A project of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and
Regina Open Door Society.

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Message from RODS

It's true that to write is to imagine, and the combination of both writing and imagination is a beautiful and productive pursuit. 2023 is another phenomenal year for *Opening Doors through Stories: Imagine* for work well done by our creative writing contributors.

As in the past four years, the creative writing program was organized by the Regina Open Door Society (RODS) Welcoming Community for Newcomers (WCN) program and the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild (SWG). The program has been a successful platform supporting newcomers' goals and aspirations to learn, improve, and write stories. We welcomed and invited a group of talented and ambitious newcomers from the community to learn, innovate, tell and write stories from their experiences of life and becoming part of the Canadian multicultural society. In October and November 2022, the newcomers met for four sessions with well-known local author, Marie Powell, to learn and develop writing skills to tell stories.

This year, like past years, the Chapbook has been produced by the same resiliency and creativity from the contributors. We want to thank all the newcomers for their contributions to this Chapbook, and for their energy and effort in wanting to learn and improve skills to tell stories through writing. It is our hope that *Imagine* will bring you joy, happiness and memorable experiences. Along the way, if we can become a monument or an opportunity to newcomers achieving their goals and aspirations to learn to become terrific writers, that would certainly mean we have achieved our goals. We value and appreciate everyone's contribution and effort in making Canada and Canadian multiculturalism feel like home for newcomers to learn, write, and tell stories.

Keith Karasin
Interim Executive Director, RODS

Message from Saskatchewan Writers' Guild

In the fall of 2022, we invited newcomers to Regina to imagine fresh narratives, with the help of local writer, Marie Powell. Through four sessions on Zoom, participants devised and developed writing that explores many aspects of the human spirit, including faith, culture, folklore, and most importantly, love. Collectively, this work becomes our fifth chapbook, *Opening Doors Through Stories: Imagine*. We invite you to imagine each word in this chapbook is a cell, each paragraph a limb, and each story a body. If we do this, then this chapbook is more than just stories, it is a home for community, a library of people, a collection of accounts where we can all find our place amongst one another, a site where our presence and these stories can live on.

Cat Abenstein
SWG Program Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

What if people used their imagination to make themselves feel more confident, to connect with their past in new ways, and to make the world a better place for themselves and others? Imagine a world where that was the norm. Imagine that was our world.

Because that's what the writers in this chapbook have managed to do. The stories here are as unique as the writers telling them. It has been my honour and my pleasure to read their words and to get to know these writers over the past few weeks.

I have long believed in the importance of embedding language and culture in our stories, to help shape our perceptions of the worlds we inhabit, whether in our dreams or in our waking lives. Working with these writers has brought me back to that place, to what Gloria Steinem called "the excitement of possibilities," time and again. Our discussions have expanded my appreciation of the ways culture and heritage can inform our daily lives.

According to J. K. Rowling, "No story lives unless someone wants to listen." While reading these stories, I hope you are able to hear the individual voices of the writers behind their words. Whether these scenes and ideas are new or familiar to you, I hope these stories will welcome you home.

Go ahead. Turn the page. Imagine the possibilities.



Marie Powell
Editor



LOVE STORY

Alina Shylan

Photo submitted by Alina Shylan

Alex and Agatha walk through the night city where the ancient Gothic towers lend the scene a magical fairy-tale presence. Agatha wears a long, white, translucent dress. All night long, they enjoy the fabulous city Wroclaw, that feels similar to Prague a little bit!

On one street, they see women in bright, colorful dresses. Red, yellow, dark blue and orange fabric swirls around them. Men with torches move through the women, protectively. Musicians play loud folk music on violins as the festival passes by. Everything moves with different night flashes, like movie slides.

Alex tries not to let go of Agatha's hand. She is moving quickly through the crowd that fills the old town of Wroclaw. This is his first time in Wroclaw. He follows his "nymph," afraid of losing his Polish treasure. His eye is caught by an unusual sight—half-naked women on the catwalk who dance with their hips. His eyes run from blonde Agatha to the dancing women and vice versa.

"This is an ancient city," Agatha says, talking about Wroclaw with pleasure. "Tourists from all over the world come to Wroclaw. Sculptors, architects, and artists from all over Europe built Wroclaw. I'm so proud that I was born in Wroclaw, because it has a history of more than ten centuries."

Alex is fascinated by the amazing reality of the medieval city. Agatha captivates him with her friendliness and gentle voice. Her huge blue eyes look sincerely at him, and at the road that lies before them. Although he is a withdrawn and shy chemistry student from Warsaw, he starts composing a poem about her in his mind. His hobbies are writing poetry and drawing, which he often does in the evenings when loneliness attacks him. He loves to dream, immersed in the world of fantasy.

Someone pushes our poet, and he almost knocks Agatha down. Inadvertently, his face touches her lips, and he kisses her young, hot lips. She reciprocates. He slowly stops hearing the sounds of the music around them. Agatha's sweet lips are burning. As if for the first time, the kiss warms our hero, like hot wine in winter.

Alex is filled with passionate desire. He wants the beauty, with all his being, right here, on the square, in front of everyone. Barely restraining himself, he hugs her by the shoulders and holds her close.

"Let's go somewhere to warm up." Alex whispers in her ear. "It's cold here, noisy and uncomfortable. What do you think?"

"There is Starbucks around the corner." Agatha smiles mysteriously.

They hug each other's waists and slowly walk to the café. Fireworks explode in the air above them. Many young people shout phrases loudly but the words are difficult to understand. Alex is happy, feeling as if he has won the lottery for a million dollars. He is terribly hungry, but he has enough energy to unload wagons at the railway station.

Agatha's tenderness hypnotizes him. Alex's heart is burning. She charms his soul, and penetrates into his very heart like a healing elixir. The joy of this experience pleases him so much that he has only a hunger and thirst for love. They fall in love at first sight, surfing the evening in the Old Town of Wroclaw, wandering the streets aimlessly. This is how people walk, overflowing with the passionate freshness of mutual feelings.

"What is Ukraine like, tell me?" Agatha tries to start the conversation again. "How is it different from Poland?"

"Agatha! Ukraine is simple, romantic, naïve, and as defenseless as a woman, you know, in a good way. Ukraine and Poland have a lot in common: the melodic language, hospitality and delicious cuisine, the beauty of the women. Just now we have war because Ukrainians so much want to be a part of the European Union, like Poland. In Poland, I feel freedom to the fullest. I breathe it, as if I have

been released from prison. Being part of the European Union gives the Polish people an opportunity to travel the whole world. In Europe, I feel freedom and respect for people. I love seeing the smiling faces of free people on the streets.”

At that moment, a boy passing them in the street sticks a flyer into Alex’s hand—an invitation to a book launch for the Ukrainian novelist Taras Prokhasko.

“The presentation will be right now in the Starbucks coffee shop and bookstore across the street,” says the boy.

“Let’s go to this Ukrainian writer’s launch. You’ll have an opportunity to learn more about Ukraine.”

“Agreed!” Agatha shivers. “I’m cold now, too.”

They hurry to the Starbucks bookstore. People gather in the bookstore, and the Ukrainian language can be heard everywhere. The Ukrainian writer stands at the speaker’s table, and in a few minutes a lively discussion begins. He is about 50 years old, with thinning dark blond hair, wearing khaki jeans and a comfortable brown sweater.

Someone’s voice rings out. “Mr. Prokhasko, tell me, please, what do you think poetry is?”

“Poetry is the realization of the unsaid. It’s space between words. What other people don’t see. What only the poet and the reader can see at the moment. What is between the solid, between two figures. These are feelings that are between words, lines. Poetry as music can be pragmatic, functional, incomprehensible to anyone, or correspond to the rhythm of life.”

A peculiar view of poetry, thinks Alex. *Never thought of it that way, but there is something to it.* He has recently been working on his poetry, in which, in his opinion, he has not quite succeeded yet.

“Do you create the scenario first, and then write, or does it all start with some situation, and then the scenario itself is built throughout the book?” The question echoes in the hall.

“Life is unpredictable, so I don’t create scenarios in advance. Actually, as you say, I start with a situation, or even a topic. Then the heroes begin to act. For that, I, as the writer, need to know the characters well—what they want, what they love, and what they forbid themselves.”

“And what are you forbidding yourself, Alex?” Agatha whispers in his ear.

It’s better for you not to know, Alex thinks, but remains silent. *I don’t even want to look there myself, into the depths of my dark soul. Probably, intimacy is my taboo. It is both beckoning and frightening at the same time.*

“And what topics for creative writing are interesting to you, Mr. Prokhasko?” the active man from the front row continues to ask.

“An idea as a scenario. It has its own life story. Some ideas are momentary, minute, for one or two days. Some ideas live for decades. The life cycle of an idea is a kind of reality of something intangible. A journey of ideas. In the example of genetics, where materialism and idealism are well combined: DNA is a kind of magical medium on which something is written. That is, the chromosomes already have the text, what will be the moisture of the skin in a person, what factors will irritate a person. This text of the chromosome is basic and decisive for the rest of human life. Everything is written there.

“Or another example of a virus! It is like a code that does not exist in nature. It’s like a seal. It makes a stamp of itself, somewhere in the material of a person’s cells, records itself. And since the material part of the virus does not exist, there is only its informational part. Then this virus decides, for example, ‘It’s time to go on a campaign.’ And it begins to transport material from our cells to build viral cells. And so the virus begins to live in the human body. That is, everything starts with an idea, a text as such, information, a kind of code. I am interested in this whole alloy, the point of intersection of physical and material. An idea, a thought, an image are integral parts of each other. A person’s well-being depends on what we think, see, feel.”

Agatha looks confused by these words, although there’s an interpreter. *She must not be influenced by the subtle philosophy of the Ukrainian novelist*, Alex thinks. She seems more interested in Alex.

But Alex likes everything here—both the language and the ideas of the Ukrainian writer. It’s as if he has entered into his native world. As a creative guy, Alex often switches to different topics, as he did to literature. But he is very happy that she is there and that she can enjoy this with him.

“Where shall we go, my sweet girl? How will we end this fabulous evening?”

“Now in Wroclaw, we have the all-night Advertising Film Festival Short Movies. Do you want to spend the whole night in the cinema?”

“Hmm... never did that before,” Alex replies. “As an experiment, come on, why not?” He doesn’t care where he goes with Agatha, because he has fallen in love with her already.

The Advertising Film Festival Short Movies of the Ad-Monster becomes the “new point of the night quest!”

They are terribly exhausted, because it takes them half an hour by bus to arrive at the cinema, located on the outskirts of the city. It is a huge, new, three-storey shopping centre. On the way to the cinema, they buy hamburgers with orange juice from McDonald's to take with them. They greedily eat dinner before the start of the Film Festival.

Alex thinks about what Prokhasko, the Ukrainian writer, said in the bookstore, the combination of the material and the ideological in life, how it intertwines, how to manage it, where is the limit of an idea that turns it into a material embodiment.

“Agatha, what do you think is the first priority: sensation-feeling or thought-comprehension? Do feelings generate thoughts, or thoughts generate feelings?”

“Good question, Alex! My hobby is narrative psychology. There is a concept of constructing new realities. I will tell you a joke on this topic. Three referees are sitting drinking beer. One says there are balls and strikes, and I call them what they are. Another says there are balls and there are strikes, and I call them as I see them. And the third says that there are balls and there are strikes, and they are nothing until I call them. That is a joke about the fact that realities are created through language.”

“What is this about, Agatha?”

“For example, I am writing an autobiography with an emphasis on failure in relationships with boys, or on the phobia of public speaking. As I rewrite the autobiography, through rethinking, what is the source of escape from close relationships with boys? Fear of speaking in public will change my self-perception. In the end, the autobiography will also change. I will write a new life story that will help me construct a new reality of self-perception. In this way, stories and writing can change lives. Do you understand, Alex?”

“Interesting! Is it possible to write a book that will unfold the reality that I would experience in the future? The fiction of personal life.”

Just then, a boy in a McDonald's uniform comes by with a washcloth in his hand. “Sorry, but we're closing now,” he says. Alex stands up and takes Agatha's hand, and they walk together towards the cinema.



LASTING IMPRESSION

Amira Omar

Photo submitted by Amira Omar

One day, Nour took out her photo album. Each page brought back a memory for her. One of the images, honouring her for her accomplishments throughout her university studies, was taken soon after her graduation. All the students in her year were dressed in caps and gowns, gathered on the stage for a group photo. So many faces held tears of happiness, and they shouted with pride that day. Each student wore a gold medal inscribed with the university building and the year. Nour remembered looking around the building during the ceremony, feeling so awed to be part of this huge civilization, and she wanted to add her mark through the work she could do in her field.

Nour still smiled as she recalled the lovely flowers she received that day. She had kept them dried in her living room, close to her wedding picture. As well, she received the first sum of money in her life as a financial reward for attaining Excellence with high marks in her studies. She also recalled the silver cup that she had been given as a reward for her punctual attendance.

“Oh my God,” Nour said, as her eyes began to water, “I can still

remember all of that as if it was yesterday. It was like my wedding day before my actual marriage.”

Suddenly, she heard a knocking at the door. “Mom, where are you?” her daughter asked. “You’re still in your bedroom, right? Can I come in now?”

Nour was taken aback by how long she had spent looking through her photo album and recalling her priceless moments. She made an effort to gather herself together and put away her photo album. *Sometimes you need your private room and space without anyone around, even your loved ones*, she thought. Then she went to help her daughter with her math homework and make her a snack.

Three days later, Nour began to relax by taking out her photo album again. She looked through the photos of the time before her marriage. In one photo, she was checking the gears in a machine at her factory. She had worked there as an engineer for a short period of time, and she had felt strong and full of energized dreams.

Nour set down the album and opened her mobile phone. In her photo gallery, she spotted a very nice photo showing her family together at the airport, preparing to move to a new country. This reminded her of the decision she made to give up her career to raise her children. Her husband played a big role in supporting the family financially, so she decided that her role was to do a great job as a housewife and a mother. At first, Nour agreed with this decision, but after a while, she wondered where her dreams had gone. Where was that strong engineer that she remembered being as a younger woman?

After their move to the new country, she managed to find work again. She wasn’t able to find work as engineer, so she volunteered as a teacher. She wanted to study again, but another teacher convinced her she was needed to help others learn Arabic. She felt proud of herself at this moment because she had already achieved so much and had started strong again after this long gap.

The second photo on her phone was recorded six years ago, when Nour attended the small graduation party for her students. She was standing with the rest of the teachers in the celebration hall after the first semester. Her teacher’s gift that day was a beautiful prayer mat and a nice pink dress. She still had them in her closet. She had oiled them often with the scent of musk. She could still smell the scent.

The next photo Nour saw in her gallery was an apartment building, followed by one of the views of the huge department stores along the street. This was where the family had moved two years later, in a second brand-new nation. Nour made the decision to start over at this point again in a different way and for

a variety of reasons. This time, she volunteered with many organizations in order to become involved and understand the community better. She became happier and freer to pursue her passions while continuing to care for her children and fulfil her important role as a responsible mother.

Nour has always struck a balance between her own development and the parallel development of her family and children. She struggled to understand the new school system and to deal with more things like parent meetings while following the pandemic virtually. In addition, Nour was alone in this new country for a while. She had never driven in her life, so she needed to use public transportation, which was not a simple thing, especially in such a cold climate. She experienced snow for the first time in her life, among the many issues and challenges that she dealt with there.

“Oh, I remember this,” laughed Nour, looking at a photo of herself waiting for the bus in front of the college building. “Look at all the snow on my winter coat! And my face is so red.”

Finally, Nour realized she had to finish preparing supper before her husband and kids came home. It was still light out as she put away the photo album. She turned and spotted a beautiful picture of her and her husband printed on a decorative satin pillow. It was an anniversary present. It reminded her of how many challenges she had overcome, in large part, due to her husband and family, who had always been close to her and supportive in many ways.



FEAR AND BELIEF

Ifrah Jamal

The day, the minute, and the second we come into this world, we feel fear. Every single living thing feels it, but how do we survive after dealing with all the fear? Take a minute and think about it. You must have some kind of fear even at this very moment. So here comes the pillar, the genuine support, which we call Belief.

What I remember, the very first and the most frightening fear from my childhood, was that I wouldn't get good grades in grade six. Don't ask why. I don't remember the previous grades; they were quite easy ones. When I was writing my grade six exams, I was having cold sweats. I felt terrible fear inside. I was afraid that I might fail in mathematics. When the exams were over, the fear increased gradually until the day the results were announced.

That day felt like the Day of Judgment. The night before, I couldn't sleep. I was overloaded with fear. And then, finally, the sun was rising and I watched it closely through my window. At the moment when I could finally see the bright gold of the sky with the little birds flying all over it, a question came into my mind.

How are these birds flying again? Why do they not have any fear of falling? How do they have no fear when they sleep at night without any food? But strangely, I answered myself in seconds: they have Belief. They have the belief that there is someone who's taking care of them. They know that the One they believe in will never do injustice to them. He will provide food, health, shelter, life, and everything. But not every single one will get everything at the same time, or in the same way. Instead, He will provide it accordingly, to those who have the will and do something to help themselves.

This thought was a relief for me. It gave me the strength to face the test results. I went to school to receive the news without any fear but with a feeling of inner peace. That day, I scored the highest marks in my whole class, which I had never done before.

The day was over and life continued. I never felt this kind of fear again until it was the day of university convocation, when I felt the same fear again in the same way, and I had nightmares. Before convocation day, I looked back on my whole school life, during which I received good grades by working hard with the belief that He will never do injustice to me for what I've done. So, I was relieved by this thought again and believed in Him, that whatever He blesses me with, will be the best for me. He rewarded me for the hard work I did in the form of a bronze medal for completing my degree.

You can get a thousand stories from only one person of his/her fears and how they overcome them. My story of fear and belief has given me the courage and strength to deal with every fear in my life, whether I had to immigrate to a country of a different language, race, and religion, or whether I had to pass a small job interview. The belief in Him gave me the strength to overcome all fears.

Having fear inside is also a blessing. It keeps you alive. It motivates you to do your best. Either you feel it or not right now, but it's somewhere inside of you. At some point in life, you will feel it, and then you will find the One you can believe in.



HIWET AND THE SPRITES

Mulugeta Zaid

Photo submitted by Mulugeta Zaid

When my aunt Hiwet was a little girl, her parents left her at home alone for a night. That night, Hiwet heard noises. From her bed near the kitchen, Hiwet slightly uncovered her face to look at what was happening. She could see strange people in her family kitchen. Suddenly, she realized they were a crowd of sprites making homemade leavened bread. They were using the dough Hiwet's mom had left aside to ferment. They were cooking and eating it, and the women were feeding their children, too.

Everything was quite stunning. There were three traditional ovens in the kitchen. A traditional oven starts with a stone frame, and we ferment mud with animal excrement to glue the stones together and cover it with a darker clay mud that we bring from the lake. One of the ovens was piled high with olive wood, which makes the fire blaze with a pleasant smoky smell. This oven is called *mogogo* and is always used for homemade leavened bread, *engeru* and cones. The middle oven holds pots made of clay. The third oven holds *moklo*, which is a frying pan. The sprites that Hiwet saw were crowded around *mogogo*.

Hiwet was astonished by the creatures. We believe sprites are just like us, but long ago they were cursed so they are always hidden, and only certain people can see them. According to Hiwet, they can look just like us. They might have black or brown hair, and the women wear their hair in braids. The sprites were chatting and laughing together like we would at family feasts. When they finished eating, they called Hiwet's chickens from their place over to eat the leftover food. In those days, chickens were kept on a lattice platform built under the wood ceiling inside the house. When Hiwet saw her chickens come over to eat the sprites' leftover food, she was upset. As well, she wasn't happy about the sprites using her mom's dough, and she yelled at the chickens to leave. One of the sprites chided Hiwet and slapped her. The sprite's hand felt heavy, like metal. Hiwet was afraid and covered her face and pretended to sleep.

Later, when Hiwet's mom came home, Hiwet told her about the scene last night. "I saw sprites in our kitchen cooking your bread dough and eating it with their children. After that, they called our chickens to eat the left-over food. I shouted at our chickens. Then one of the sprites yelled at me and slapped me."

Her mom smiled and told Hiwet about the sprites. "Even when sprites eat our bread nothing is lost. Every night after they are done eating and drinking, they wish us good night."

Later, my grandmother told Hiwet that when we went on vacation, our neighbour Weini looked after our house. One time, Weini poured the water from our crock and turned it upside down.

"I always leave the crock full of water and put a cup on top for the sprites to use for drinking," Grandmother said. "That night, the sprites came to our house and found no water. One of the sprites yelled at Weini, 'Why did you put the crock upside down?' And the sprite cursed her. 'I wish you were upside down like this crock!' said the frustrated sprite, as she left."



THE GIRL WITH THE NOSE RING

Neetika Mahawar

“I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it.”

— Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*

India, Hindustan, or Bharat – the land has numerous names and is as diverse in culture, traditions, languages, customs, and castes. With all its glory, the nation has a rich history associated with each custom, each norm, and every tradition. It is fascinating to unfold the diverse folklore and stories about these practices and ordinances.

Alas! I am such an unfortunate soul as I have never been able to distinguish the people of India by their castes, creed, customs, or traditions, for I believe they all have similar mindsets, similar social norms, and the same conservatism, with a history of female subjugation from generation to generation, and not to forget, the preaching of patriarchy. Something I am opposed to. But times have changed now, and women are emancipating. Women are now educated,

understand their rights and practice them; they are now learning to be self-dependent. But the situation was not always like this. I remember how Indian traditions and cultural norms exploited women when our mothers and grandmothers were younger. They hardly had access to education; forget about being self-dependent.

My grandmother once shared a very personal incident with me that threw light on one such cultural flaw that Indian society had in older times. The year was 2011. I was in the second year of my program—studying English literature (admiring Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Walker, and the list goes on)—when my maternal grandmother (in India we call maternal grandmother Naani) visited us. She had returned from my aunt’s place in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Of all of my family, my Naani has inspired me the most. For her age she was hale and hearty; extremely active, tall build, having a young and youthful soul with wrinkles and all gray hair of course. Her elderly appearance had an exclusive grace.

She always wore lighter-coloured cotton *Sarees* as she was a widow. According to Hindu customs, wearing bright-coloured clothes was forbidden for a widow, but the real reason for her lighter-coloured clothes was because of her old age. However, she would not restrict herself from wearing green, blue, yellow, or other bright-coloured glass bangles; she adored dressing up and wearing jewelry in spite of being a widow (I get the habit of shunning and challenging the rudimentary social norms from her).

One afternoon she was sitting on a mat on our terrace, basking under the bright winter sun. The sunlight shone on her silver crown with thin and long hair falling over her creased forehead. Her grayish eyebrows frowned a little because of the direct sunlight. She squinted with her long gray lashes adjacent to crumpled eyelids. The pointed, crinkled, pierced nose complimented her slim, wrinkled lips, sporting an almost invisible female mustache at both ends. I could stand there all day and admire her elderly beauty. Wondering how gorgeous she would have been in her younger years.

I handed her the newspaper, as reading the newspaper was her favorite pastime. She wouldn’t put it down until she was done reading each and every page. But she set it aside and asked me to sit next to her. I was a little taken aback as she never ignored a fresh newspaper. I sat so close to her that one end of her *Saree* was pressed under my right butt cheek. I kept looking at her furrowed face until she spoke.

“You write, don’t you? You like writing stories?”

“Yes, Naani!” I replied promptly.

“Would you write a short story about me?”

“Of course, Naani, without a doubt! I would love to!” I sprang up joyfully.

“Well, I am not sure whether I would be right to call it a story. It’s more of a personal journal about my childhood best friend. For some reason, today, I cannot stop thinking about our distorted friendship.” Naani had a sad smile on her face, and her wrinkled forehead frowned more deeply as she uttered the word “friendship.”

“Oh Naani, whatever it is, as long as it is coming from your mouth, I am writing it!”

“But promise me not to publish it before I die.”

I jolted at the word “death” dropping from her lips. My smile faded and excitement vanished in a moment, but I nodded.

“Okay, then listen carefully. When I was younger I had a best friend named Ruksana. We were of the same age. In fact, one of the reasons for our bonding was that we shared our birthdays. We were such good friends that we referred to each other as sisters. We used to play together after school hours. Her parents never sent her to school, so she often used to wait outside my home for me to return from my school—”

“Why won’t her parents send her to school, Naani?”

“In the 1940s, female education was still prohibited in many households. Some even disdained my father for sending me and my sisters to school. Too conservative!” Naani replied with disgust in her voice.

“Poor Ruksana!” I remarked.

“I know...she would often ask me to spell her name in English. I taught her how to write her name in Hindi and English. She would practice in secret.

“Ruksana often had lunch at our home; she loved the kind of food my mother cooked. My parents admired our friendship and so did her family. Both of us were inseparable till the age of fourteen.” Naani paused after the last sentence, as if she had forgotten the story.

“What happened after you two turned fourteen, Naani?” I asked.

My curious voice woke her from her thoughts. She sighed and continued. “We were separated when we turned fourteen. In those days, when a girl reached the age of fourteen or got her first period, she was considered a grown woman and no longer a child. In most cases, girls were married off by the age of fourteen

or even before, if they got their first menstruation.

“We were about fourteen when Ruksana got her first period and she suddenly vanished. Her parents would not let her out of the house. She was confined to her room. I would often try to peep into her house but never caught a glimpse of her. Even my parents encouraged me not to approach her or visit her house. I was worried for her and then rumours started making rounds. Some said she ran off with a guy. Some said she married a much, much older man...but soon the news of her nose-piercing ceremony circulated.

“Ruksana belonged to a family that was economically unfortunate, and in chronic poverty, rudimentary casteism was customary. In her family traditions, when a girl reached the age of puberty, she was ready for the nose-piercing ceremony. In this ceremony, rich men from the higher caste or statuses would come to the families like Ruksana’s and perform the nose-piercing ceremony. A man would adorn the girl with a gold nose-ring, which signified that the girl now belonged to him.

“By all rights, the girl would now be his property, and she was entitled to live with him. It was up to the man whether he wished to marry her or simply keep the girl with him as a mistress. Many people in society considered this equal to prostitution and disapproved of such families. When my family learned that Ruksana belonged to such a family or community, they prohibited me from speaking to her. If I have to be completely honest, I disapproved of this, too! I hated the fact that she was now a keep! We considered her impure.

“I still remember the last time I saw her. I was standing at the window of my room, and I saw her passing by. She was the same Ruksana but in different attire. She was heavily dressed in traditional clothing, but what I focused on was that big, round, golden nose-ring in her nose. When her gaze met mine she was so ashamed she immediately dropped her head and stared at the earth. I too stepped back from the window. I felt mixed emotions. I missed her and longed to be with her, I wanted to ask her how she is feeling and how everything changed suddenly, but at the same time, I hated her for what she had become. After that small encounter, I never saw her or heard about her. I later moved on with life and buried this childhood friendship deep down in my memory.”

“But Naani, that wasn’t her fault!” I spoke with pain in my voice for her and anger for the society of that time. “She was forced to live such a life because of rudimentary customs. You shouldn’t have hated her!”

“I know, honey! I know that now! I later met her in Mumbai when I was

at your aunt's place. She had been searching for me and she finally found your aunt on social media and fixed our meeting. She told me how her life turned around. Her nose-ring ceremony happened twice. The second man that took her was a gentleman from the Navy. He gave her the status of a wife and provided her with an education. She has two grown-up sons and three grandkids now, and she asked me not to share her past story with anyone, as not even her sons know about her first nose-piercing ceremony or what family she belonged to.

“When I met her in her expensive bungalow, having a fancy meal together, I was so happy for her, but this time I was ashamed, too. I was ashamed of shunning her for what happened to her in our childhood. I was ashamed of not being in touch with her or not wanting to know her whereabouts. I was ashamed of giving up on our friendship.”

Both Naani and I had tears in our eyes. But Naani soon broke into a smile.

“So, now that you know her secret story, promise me you won't write it or publish it before I die! Or she will kill me!”

We both laughed out loud this time.



CHILD LABOUR

SAMIRA HAMIDI

The smell of *Bolani e tandoori* wafted all around the house. Sara could tell it was her favourite type of *Bolani*. She really liked the traditional dough baked with spinach, potato, and extra vegetables. Whenever she went home to the village of Shirak, her mother baked her favourite *Bolani*. Then, when she went back to the city of Sheberghan, her mother also prepared *Bolani* for her to take to her room-mates in the dormitory.

Sara came closer and watched her mother baking. First, she hugged her mother. Then Sara suddenly grabbed a big piece of *Bolani*, which was already baked, and took a big bite.

“Be careful dear. It’s still hot. Let it cool a little.”

Sara swallowed the food and smiled. “Mom, it’s been a whole week since I’ve eaten your cooking so I don’t have the patience to wait.”

Mom smiled and didn’t say anything. Sara always came to Shirak on week-ends to visit her family, after studying hard in university. She was a sophomore in the faculty of sociology, her favourite field. After one day at home, she had to return to Sheberghan. She was the eldest daughter of the family and she had to do chores when she was at home because her siblings were younger and always busy with studying and playing.

After lunch, Mom asked Sara to help her to do the laundry. Sara brought a big pail of warm water for laundry, which was already heated on the mud stove. She noticed that Mom was separating white clothes from coloured clothes to wash them in the nickel tub. Sara piled the whites into the tub, as her mother began scrubbing them with soap.

As Sara was doing laundry, she noticed that her second-younger sister Sadia was helping Razia, their baby sister, to do her mathematics homework. Razia was an intelligent kid, but she had problems in solving multiplication.

When they finished their homework, they ran toward the yard to play *Jozbazi*, their usual local game. *Jozbazi* is played in pairs or in groups on a rectangle drawn on the ground with white chalk. Today, it was Razia's turn to draw a big rectangle and divide that into four columns.

"Razia, add two more columns so we can play longer," Sadia said. Sadia knew that she could play confidently whenever her elder sister was at home to help their mother.

Later, Mom continued doing the laundry while Sara was hanging clothes on the clothesline. Sara asked hesitantly, "Mom, I need to buy new clothes for a cultural exhibition which will be celebrated in university next week. Can we go shopping together this afternoon?"

Sara was excited about her event. Last week, in the cafeteria, her classmates were talking about the new and traditional Afghani clothes that everyone would wear to the event. Sara did not want to be underestimated by her stylish classmates and urged her mother to buy her new traditional clothes.

"Oh, my daughter, definitely I will take you shopping, but not today," Mom said as she wrung out the clothes. "Our salary was delayed this month and it takes a couple of days to arrive. But I already have cotton fabric and I will sew that for you, honey."

Sara's mother was a teacher in an elementary school and had a low income. She had to pay rent and feed five children. Her father was a labourer and had no stable job and income. Her mother had the responsibility of the whole family.

Sara wanted her mother to buy her new clothes. "Mom, I know that you are struggling with all these issues, but this is a formal, cultural, and important event and I have to wear appropriate clothing."

"Okay, honey," Mom said, gently. "I have been saving money to purchase a new carpet for the living room. So, I can take some for you."

Sara was filled with joy and happiness and hugged her mother to show her appreciation.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and the city was experiencing extremely hot weather. Usually midsummer temperatures reached about 50°C in the north of Afghanistan. Sara and her mother walked toward the bazaar. The weather was unbearable, but still the bazaar was crowded.

Sara watched the people, who were working so hard. Along the left side of the street, a line of bakers sat at their tables, with big baskets of bread in front of each of them. Along the right, vendors were selling fresh fruit. Going forward, she saw a group of young women standing in front of a big clothing store, as salesmen were showing them different designs and colours of fashionable dresses. These women are definitely shopping for a wedding ceremony, Sara thought. Sara and Mom walked toward a store where they used to buy clothing for a reasonable price. Sara was imagining herself in a light green dress with high heels.

Suddenly, as the shouting of vendors, the crowds, and the smell of sweat distracted her thoughts, Sara caught sight of a child of about twelve years old. This child pushed a gray wheelbarrow containing a fifty-kilogram bag of flour. He clung to the two handles and pushed the wheelbarrow forward on its single tire. The boy wore dark blue traditional Afghani clothes, but a couple of stains of oil and flour were visible in his lap. The sweat showered from his forehead, and the child looked exhausted and frustrated. Sara could hear his grunts. He did not have enough strength to lift the bag of flour, and every five steps, he dropped the wheelbarrow and then lifted it again. A narrow line of flour followed him. It was clear that the bag of flour was split.

Child labour was common in Afghanistan, but that scene made Sara feel despair. Sara called to her mother. "Mom, I don't want to buy clothes anymore."

"But what will you wear to your event?" Mom asked, surprised.

"I don't care. I want to give this money to that child instead," Sara said, pointing to the boy in the street. "I want him to rent a rickshaw to transport him and his flour to their destination, and then give the rest of the money to him. I will ask him to rest tomorrow and not work. I know I cannot solve these problems, and I still see lots of child labour around. But at least for one day, I can pay him to not work as a labourer. Then he can just study, play and rest like normal kid who doesn't work on the streets."

Sara and her mother gave the money to the child and asked him to rest and take the day off work tomorrow. Sara went home empty-handed but full of joy

in her heart because she could remove the sorrow of a child, at least for one day.

Later that day, Sara and Mom were in the kitchen preparing dinner. Mom noticed the expression of joy on her daughter's face.

“Sara, I'm so lucky to have such a generous and kindhearted daughter, and I'm proud of the dedication that you showed today.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Sara said. “You've always been my role model in life, and I've learned a lot from you. Today taught me a lot. I've decided to study hard, get a degree, and find an ideal job. Then I'll build a foundation and fundraise for children like that boy, to support them, to stop child labour so all children can just continue their education.”

Mom nodded and hugged her tightly. “Don't worry about your event. I'm going to sew you a *gand afgani*.” Mom showed her the green, red, and black cotton that matched the colours of the Afghan flag. Sara could imagine the traditional gown and scarf her mother would make.

“My dear,” Mom teased, “I want to prepare more *Bolani* for you to take to your roommates in the dormitory. But promise me that you will share that with your roommates. Don't eat it all yourself.” And both of them laughed.



SUNBEAM MOUNTAIN

SAMIRA HAMIDI

Photo submitted by Samira Hamidi

“Spinach, potatoes, ice cream...”

A vendor was shouting as children chased him, screaming with excitement. I watched from the window as the vendor crossed to the next alley, his voice and the children’s screams fading as they disappeared. The sun had risen, and the sunbeams were reflecting off the rock of the mountains.

That day I did not go to work because I worked overtime last week. I had a high position in a government office in Kabul. On days when I did not go to work, I would usually wake up to the sound of vendors and children shouting. Vendors started their work around 9:00 am and walked the alleys to sell their products. Most days when I was at home, I sat behind the window and stared at that beautiful view and enjoyed the moment.

I decided to clean my home, go to the bazaar, and then watch TV later. I had breakfast and then started sweeping the floors. My apartment was not that big; it just had a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen, so it was easy to clean. I lived alone, while my family lived in another province called Jawzjan, which was located in north Afghanistan. I used to go to my hometown once every three months, or my family would come to visit me. For the past few months, Jawzjan had been occupied by the Taliban and I was scared to go there. One of my brothers, who had a job in Kabul, frequently came and visited me, as well as my aunt, whose apartment was in the same building.

Later that afternoon, after cleaning, I prepared to go to the *bazaar*. I called

a taxi. When I was in a car, I would always stare out the window at the view of the small homes located at the top of the mountains and then back to the vendors in the street. But that day, the city was covered by silence. Everyone seemed strange. No vendors were calling people to buy their goods. I could just hear people's footsteps as they walked and vehicle horns blaring.

When I arrived at the *bazaar*, people's sad expressions frightened me. All the people seemed disappointed and nervous. Everyone was calm but still. Two middle-aged shopkeepers were murmuring about a bad situation, which was going to happen soon. I could hear their conversation clearly.

"Remember what happened twenty years ago?" the shopkeeper said to his friend. "I don't want to experience that again. When the Taliban occupied Afghanistan, I lost my job. The school's doors were closed in my children's faces. So I immigrated to Iran and stayed there for five years."

"What happened then?"

"In Iran, refugees couldn't get proper jobs, so I came back to Afghanistan. The situation had already changed, and the Taliban was gone. I decided to start my own grocery shop in my own country. I investigated a lot to build this, but now I don't know what will happen to me, my family, and my property."

"It's just a rumor, hopefully," the other shopkeeper replied. "I'm still optimistic because we have a large group of military, and they will fight to protect the country."

Still I could not find a reason why people seemed disheartened. I bought some groceries, and then went into a café to have a coffee. Suddenly, my glance was caught by the TV screen. The president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, declared that the country would be surrendering, and the Taliban would lead the government.

My hands started shaking and I had a lump in my throat. I wanted to burst into tears. Although I knew they had already started occupying the other provinces, I had not expected the occupation of the capital of Afghanistan.

I went home and called my mother immediately. She was the person who could help me calm down. I told her the whole story and started crying. My mother tried to console me.

"Twenty years ago when I was younger," she said, "we experienced this same situation. It is not permanent. The situation will return to normal soon. The dark and the light exist side by side. Be patient."

"But I had so many hopes and plans for my career," I said, sobbing.

“Now I am totally discouraged. I worry about myself and also about the whole country. Our country earned so many achievements and made improvements in the past twenty years.”

“I know, honey, but there is nothing to do. You have to be strong.”

The next day, August 15, the Taliban occupied Kabul, as well as the whole country. I lost my job. Days and nights passed in sadness.

The evacuation of refugees began. Everyone in Kabul gathered around the Hamid Karzai International Airport. Most of them were ordinary people and not eligible to be evacuated. My governmental job meant I was considered one of the vulnerable employees, so I received an invitation from the government of Canada. I decided to go to the airport with my brother and be evacuated.

We took a taxi to the airport and arrived at 5:00 pm, when there was no room for an apple to fall because it was so overcrowded. The gates of the airport were locked, and people were not allowed to enter, except for those who had eligible documents. My brother and I tried to push through the crowd. We struggled to arrive at one of the gates, but we could not get through. We stayed till midnight but could not find a way to reach the gate. I was exhausted and could not endure the crowd, hunger, and thirst a moment longer. My brother Ahmad also looked stressed.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I said. “I’m exhausted and I feel like I’m dying.”

“Calm down sister,” Ahmad said, putting his arm around me. “We have to endure this situation. We have no other choices. If not now, never!”

Ahmad’s words made me realize our situation was desperate and motivated me to be patient and struggle harder to reach our destination. But suddenly, we heard the groaning of two young men, who were being whipped by the Taliban. The behavior of the Taliban toward ordinary people frightened me. Ahmad saw this and found a taxi to take us back home.

The next day, we went to the airport again but faced the same situation and came back home again. The following day, we were still at home when we heard the news. Two explosions happened at the airport and hundreds of people were injured and died.

Months passed and there were not any flights out of the country from Afghanistan. Then I decided to get a Visa to Pakistan. With so many offices closed in the city, I had to wait six months to get the Visa. It was April 2022. I crossed the border by car to Pakistan, and after a couple of months I made it to Canada.

BIOGRAPHIES



Samira Hamidi was born in December 1994 in Jawzjan, Afghanistan. She studied psychology at Jawzjan University in Afghanistan. Samira is passionate about writing and has written short stories since childhood. When Samira came to Canada, she received an opportunity to write stories under the consideration of an experienced instructor, Marie Powell. Samira appreciates the Regina Open Door Society for providing programs like this for newcomers, and thanks her kind instructor, Marie, for her encouragement and guidance.



Ifrah Jamal is a Pakistani-born lady who loves sky gazing at any time of the day, is close to nature, and loves being surrounded by it. She graduated from university in 2019 and got married in the same year. After immigrating to Canada as a Permanent Resident in 2021, she challenged herself to discover new and valuable opportunities in Canada. She is willing to spread positivity in the world by using her voice in the form of writing.



Neetika Mahawar hails from Delhi, India and recently landed in Regina, Saskatchewan in August 2022 as a Permanent Resident. Neetika is a writer from heart and profession and holds a Master's Degree in English Literature from Hans Raj College, Delhi University. After working as a content writer/copywriter for more than five years, Neetika stepped into the world of digital marketing and helped several brands flourish in the digital realm. Neetika currently plays the role of Content and Community Manager in a Vancouver-based firm that helps newcomers/immigrants to Canada network and succeed. Neetika's passion for literature, technology, ancient history, travel, and zest for writing makes her a writer all around.

No
Photo

Amira Omar is an Egyptian engineer, and has worked as a textile mechanical engineer at one of the biggest textile companies in Egypt. Amira is also an Arabic teacher and since arriving to Canada three years ago, a volunteer with many organizations, including the Regina Open Door Society. Amira was brought up with a lot of love that she likes to share with the world. Amira loves gum, even though it affects her teeth. She believes that age is just a number, and as long as you breathe, you can dream and achieve anything.



Alina Shylan was born in Lviv, Ukraine and is a motivated and driven professional and self-starter focused on driving company and industry growth. Alina works well independently or as a part of a team. Alina is a business professional with over 10 years of experience in sales, marketing and business development. Alina has working experience in several industries including Banking, Media (Newspaper, Radio, & Television), and IT.

No
Photo

Mulugeta Zaid was born in a village called Embaderho, Eritrea. From early childhood, he learned from his parents how to grow crops and care for livestock. In 2005, in Mulugeta's last year of high school, the Eritrean government forcibly conscripted him to the army. After a year in the army, he fled and crossed the border to Sudan. He spent a year and half in Sudan and then crossed to Israel in 2007; however, after living for almost a decade in Israel, the Israeli government deported Mulugeta to Uganda as part of a third-country deportation scheme targeting only Black Africans. He was resettled as a refugee to Canada in 2020, and he is now married and a father.



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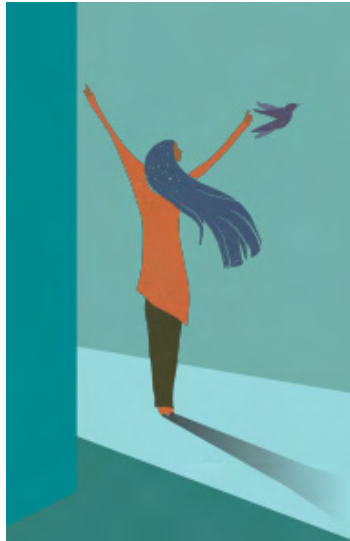
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