

New Fiction from “Still Come Home” by Katey Schultz

The following is an excerpt from *Still Come Home*, Katey’s novel set in Afghanistan.

A few weeks ago, it wasn’t the Taliban fighters’ movements that gave them away to Rahim, but their laughter, little jabs of sound punching through the packed heat. Rahim looked up and saw them traversing the slopes above the road. They moved as easily as mountain goats along the edge of distant boulders and, very quickly, they were upon him, telling Rahim and Badria to climb out of the creek bed. It’s not as if the fighters held them at gunpoint. No one threatened or fired; no one suggested that Rahim couldn’t back out. The desert simply offered the fighters and their money, pairing them with this sideline opportunity to ambush deliveries and suspicious non-residents. Rahim had wanted to ask about the Americans. They were nonresidents, but their firepower wasn’t anything two men could take on. Didn’t they still patrol here once or twice a year? But he stayed quiet, shocked by the currency the Taliban promised next. The Taliban’s instructions were clearly given: deter vehicles just enough to get them to turn around and prevent them from entering the valley. Five American dollars paid to each man, per deterred vehicle—more than a month’s income for Rahim and Badria combined. One of the fighters had even waved a bill in the air, like candy, chuckling as he incanted: “In God we trust.” More laughter. “In God we trust.”

All totaled, Rahim and Badria deter four vehicles for today’s work—the van and SUV, one sedan, and a rusty delivery truck bearing a different, unfamiliar logo. French? German? Such odd letters, as haphazard as insect trails in the sand. By the day’s end, Rahim is more than ready for a break. Soft shade. Warm tea. The ease of letting his eyelids close. With shovels

and buckets in tow, he and Badria part ways along the loop road and Rahim walks the remaining blocks back home.

As he nears his apartment, Shanaz shouts and waves, insistent on a visit. He avoided her yesterday. Today, he relents. She never cares to listen; rather, to report. It annoys Rahim, if for no other reason than the energy it takes to pay mild attention to her when he'd just as soon be in his own home. Between bursts of pious proclamations, she informs him that Aaseya went to the bazaar by herself yesterday morning. Did he avoid his sister's gaze? Did she even notice? He is so utterly fatigued—by the day, the circumstances, the endless, endless rope of it all. Even years ago, working in the Mirabad Valley, as beautiful and free as it had felt, it still came at a cost; some sense of fatigue and falling behind Rahim can't seem to shake.

Finally home, he sets his supplies in the alley near the defunct tap stand, its dusty pipe a mockery. Such uselessness. Such waste. He can recall a few years of his forty on this Earth when Afghanistan wasn't being invaded. But those times are mostly lost to the fog of childhood or delegated to the realm of family lore. Mostly, when Rahim thinks about his life, he thinks about a spiral—always circling toward the same black hole, always seeing what's trying to pull him down, helpless against gravity.

He thuds up the mud steps to his apartment and rests for a moment at the top of the stairs. He fills the entryway from top to bottom, his long, gray dishdasha caked in sweat and dust. Linen pants of the same color balloon from his legs. Aaseya glances up from her work slicing cucumbers. Here's the moment he could tell her he's not making bricks anymore. That he's working for the Taliban, but not with them. That in fact, right in their bedroom—pressed into a small wooden box—is a hidden stack of U.S. bills, which may someday very soon be of use. Whether the Taliban pay in *rupees* or *afghanis* or dollars isn't for Rahim to worry about, though if he dwells on it, he

knows it means his situation is unsustainable. The money will either run out or bring something bigger to a head. He can't say when, but he's seen enough of war to say one of those outcomes is inevitable. For now, he does his job, earns his pay. That's got to be enough.

"Salaam," Aaseya says.

A dignified man would probably shove her into the wall. Might even ask his brother-in-law to help plot her execution. But even this thought comes with a wash of fatigue. What can be said of dignity for a man who's had the unforgivable forced on him? Rahim's heart pounds in his throat and he remembers nights with General Khohistani as a boy. Aaseya nears to kiss his cheeks in greeting, but Rahim feels frozen. He studies the thin, downy hair along her upper lip. A silk forest of grace, perhaps how forgiveness would feel if it were a place. More: the easy curve of flesh above her mouth, the naive hope her youthful body suggests. The General falls from memory and he leans forward, accepting Aaseya's welcome.

"Salaam," he replies.

He crosses the room and reaches for a cup on the counter, then sees the water pail is empty. "What's this?" He frowns. "Shanaz said you've been out again and still—not even any water?"

Aaseya looks at her feet. Her restraint in his presence reassures him of his power, perhaps the only thing that remains his own in a country torn to bits. But in truth, he's never been good at punishment, his thoughts often pulled into poetic frenzy, encouraged by his studies in music and culture as a young boy. All things good and true. All things close to heaven, echoing the divine. He'd just as soon forget the rest and go take a nap. More powerful than any weapon he fires, it's the tiny salvations that keep him from splitting in two. Like a poem finds its form, he too will find his role.

"I'm sorry," Aaseya says. "We were only given a small portion."

Rahim shakes his head, nostrils flaring. He knows the spell his silence casts, the oddity of his own expression with the right side of his nose smooshed slightly off center, the result of an early disobedience Aaseya would never understand. Does she think he's a fool or ferocious? Most days, Rahim feels too tired to venture a guess. "Tea will be fine," he says.

Aaseya turns to her small cooking space and jabs at the coals, then sets the kettle on to boil. When the chai is ready, Rahim gulps it quickly. Warm silt slides down the back of his throat. He stares at the empty cup. He'd like more, but feels something beyond thirst. A tightness in his gut nags, some days worse than others. Today it feels like a tiny man is working down there, twisting Rahim's gullet into knots. He wonders, briefly, if anything could actually soothe that kind of pain. It seems too unpredictable to name. An embarrassment, really. A sign of weakness. Not something he'd ever complain about out loud. Even if the pain had a name, there's nothing that can be done. He shifts a little with the discomfort and imagines that the tiny man has started to pound pinhead-sized fists into the bottom of his gut. More than water, more than a hot meal, more than a wife, even, he'd love to kill that man and quiet the pain. The first time he felt it he was ten or eleven, as a batcha bazi dancing boy. There were nights when General Khohistani dubbed Rahim the most talented. Such a cursed compliment. Rahim learned to focus inward to get through the initial humiliation of Khohistani's advances, imagining a rootball in his belly, firey and alive. When he danced for Khohistani, Rahim pretended that the rootball grew, spreading its tendrils upward and out of his throat until his entire body was covered in a knobby shield that protected him from the General's fondling. Most of the time, the mind-trick worked. But one night, Rahim's imagination failed. There was

only the darkness of Khohistani's office, the way he entered Rahim from behind. Then Rahim's slow slump into passivity.

Quite immediately, he understood: his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used. But enough of that. The Persian poet Hafiz would say that the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose.

Aaseya reaches for Rahim's cup and he feels her fingertips meet the edge of his. As soft as a petal. As un-callused as polished stone. There's so much she hasn't seen, but for a young woman quickly cast as a wife—and moreso, a young woman raised under Janan's worldly idealism—Rahim knows that she's more savvy than most her age. She returns his mug, refilled, and walks to her cooking space. She appears sluggish, her limbs moving heavily as she mixes half-moons of cucumbers with lemon juice and salt. Rahim leans his back against the wall and rests.

Before long, Aaseya carries their meal into the gathering room and sets the tray on the floor. She smooths the striped canvas dastarkan and sits across from Rahim. They eat silently, like isolated leopards startled to find themselves in the same den. Rahim watches her chew. The nervous way her fingers clasp each wedge of bread. The calculated flick of her tongue to collect hummus from the corners of her mouth. She could almost be feral, a helpless cub. But there's restraint in her movement. A careful calculation that Rahim recognizes as a secret withheld. Three years of marriage and still, she makes everything so much more difficult than it needs to be. He understands that Aaseya likes his touch sometimes, a firm, hot hand sifting through the folds of her shalwar kameez. But other times, he presses into her and asks, "God willing?" The pleasant shock of her lips on his. "God's will is busy," she said twice this week already, her freedom of refusal a rarity in Imar, in Oruzgan Province, in most of her country. He's weary of her dismissiveness, too fatigued to press. Would she understand, if he told her? That odd pain in his gut, liminal,

almost. Like a ghost. Batcha bazi—dancing boy. Two words he'll never repeat, though they make this marriage what it is. Being courted under the guise of tradition and honor turned Rahim inward, his poetic fancies blooming into elaborate disassociations—the rootball growing, spinning, cinching down. As frequently as Aaseya denies Rahim's advances, he has yet to push her into the wall, to grab her throat, to truly punish her. Not after all he's seen. Besides, with what energy would he muster such violence? He'd just as soon have a day of rest.*

Daylight fades and, with it, the pervasive heat. Something that could almost be called cool settles the dust in their tiny apartment. Rahim rests along a row of low cushions propped against the wall. Every few moments, he brings the lukewarm tea to his lips. His stomach loosens slightly and he exhales, willing his shoulders and neck to release. It's not like the leather strap of an AK feels so strange. It's not even that so many hours in the sun each day cause more distress than he's put up with before. No, this tightness has the twist of a warning. A tired fable. His work with the Taliban will have its consequences. Meantime, Imar continues to destabilize, its inhabitants growing more and more susceptible to bribes or back-knuckled work. "You know what they say," Badria had told Rahim just last week after the Taliban paid them. "Follow the money to its source."

But dollars can come from as far away as the markets in Tarin Kowt or Kandahar. They can be plucked from dead bodies or filtered through the hands of Afghan National Army recruits in training. The source of Rahim's pay could be perfectly legitimate, even if the outcome is not—and what is legitimate, when war has its hands in everyone's pockets? Morality is for the privileged; honor codes for the elderly still remembering a world that never knew Osama bin Laden. Everything feels like a backwards pact; as though the rest of the world is watching his country try to feed itself with its own hands, then seeing

those hands go down the throat, followed by the arms, straight out the asshole and up into the mouth again. The image only exaggerates Rahim's physical discomfort at the end of this long day. Needles move up his spine and settle like razor blades underneath each shoulder. Too much movement and he could slice himself in two. Maybe then the tiny man could crawl out. Maybe then the only thing that would matter would be those pieces of himself left behind. Pieces still useful enough to save, and isn't redemption something else entirely? Beyond dollars and roadside bargains? His heart says yes. The poet Hafiz would believe in a world that said yes, too.

About Katey Schultz



Katey Schultz. Photo
Credit: Nancy W. Smith

Katey Schultz is the author of *Flashes of War* (Loyola University Maryland, 2013), which was named an IndieFab Book of the Year and received a Gold Medal from the Military Writers Society of America. She mentors serious writers via distance, including a new craft-based webinar series [dispatching from her 1970 Airstream trailer](#) this fall.