

New Poetry by Carol Alexander: “Late of Somewhere in the East”

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New Fiction by Abu B. Rafique: The Madman of Sheen Bagh



The little mountain-village known as Sheen Bagh sat right on the border. So exact was the placement that the people in the village often did not claim either country that surrounded their home, but simply stated that they were from Sheen Bagh and that the borders had been built around them and not the other way around. Regardless, a tattered Pakistani flag waved from one of the walls surrounding the village, though it could never be certain who had placed it there and when. No local had ever cared enough to take it down.

Sheen Bagh and its people did not simply live in the space between borders, they also lived in the middle of countless conflicts. Twenty years ago, the government in Pakistan had decided that this region was where radical militants were based. This decision led to their allies also agreeing that this was, indeed, the area where their enemies must be. And in a turn of cruel fate, the militants they were looking for decided that since this region was frequented by several

different enemy troops looking for them, it was the perfect place to engage them.

No matter whose decision was more foolish or ill informed, the countless villages, townships, and other localities suffered as a result. Sheen Bagh, along with most of the valley and borderlands, had been torn apart by fighting. The land lay barren for the most part since continuous bombing and skirmishes had blasted apart the meadows and valleys, leaving them upturned and a dry brown, with only the skeletons of the oldest trees left standing. When the winters came, the fighting was stopped, since nobody but the people living in the mountains knew how to traverse the dangerous terrain in the snow and bitter cold. And come springtime, when the valleys thawed out, as the first flowers started poking through the cracks in the ground, the bombs would begin falling once again and smother them before they could fully bloom.

Even the Pakistani flag that hung on Sheen Bagh's wall was not green, but black from years of ash and dust settling on it. Only the crescent moon and star symbols on it retained a bit of their original white color under their now mostly brown hue.

As jarring as all of this was, none of this was the strangest thing about Sheen Bagh. The strangest thing about Sheen Bagh was a man named Ghamay Jaan, who was living in a crumbling and abandoned building that had once served as a jewelry shop. Ghamay Jaan was a man who was deeply in love but, to the people of Sheen Bagh, he was utterly insane. A tall, lanky man in his early forties who wore a dirty, gray turban wrapped around his long, mostly white hair and who dressed in a simple, blue tunic and shalwar. His boots were torn and their color was unidentifiable and on the middle and ring fingers of his right hand he wore two silver rings with faded, black stones.

The older townsfolk could recall the man's childhood, back when he was as normal as anyone else. A quieter but still happy child who played football and went to school and raced horses just like the other children. When he was around fourteen or so, both of Ghamay Jaan's parents fell ill and within that year, both died. This left Ghamay Jaan to be herded around to different relatives for the next two years until he wound up right back where he had started, in Sheen Bagh. A cousin of his mother's had moved back to the village and had agreed to take the boy in on the condition that she be allowed to find him a wife when he turned seventeen.

The death of his parents had already triggered the beginning of what everyone would label as Ghamay Jaan's insanity. He hardly spoke back then and if he did, it was never more than a few words at a time. Despite still being a young boy, his hair had begun to whiten at the ends and this showed in his sparse, new facial hairs as well. 'Grief can color deeply sometimes,' an elder had remarked one day to a friend when they saw the boy walking home from the store.

He was also seen talking to himself quite often and after a couple of years of living with the aunt, Ghamay Jaan developed a habit of wandering off without any warning. Word of this, just like word of anything else in a small town, spread rather quickly and people began to regard Ghamay Jaan with a mix of pity and mild fear. All of this served to eliminate any chance of his aunt marrying him off to anyone from the village and so she spent another year or so trying to find prospective brides in other towns and villages in the region. Nothing ever came of these efforts; the families of the young women would find out one way or another about the young man's afflictions, or they'd see them firsthand if they made it to the point of meeting with Ghamay Jaan in person. There was no hope to be had and so Ghamay Jaan's final guardian simply packed up and left Sheen Bagh, leaving Ghamay Jaan behind, for a return to a less difficult life in the capital city.

It was shortly after this that the fighting began, and Sheen Bagh fell victim to the continuous violence, that Ghamay Jaan's insanity took complete hold. Nearly every night, bombs and rockets and gunfire went off on the outskirts of the village, shaking the surrounding fields and lower mountain ranges. Shouts would echo through the night in vibrating tremors of Pashto and Urdu and English, all blending into the same dull ringing in the ears. And every few days, the destruction would breach the walls of the village and bring death with it. Bombs and rockets would explode in the center square; stray gunfire would rip through the stones of the wall and the stones of buildings and houses; the locals would scream and run and duck for cover. And they would pray: the loudest of the prayers being shouted out by those who found themselves engulfed in flames from an explosion, or blasted in several different directions from the force of a bomb, or torn through a dozen different ways by hot gunfire.

Sometimes, the militants in the region would storm the townsfolk, accusing them of helping their enemies, of betraying the Almighty, or simply because they needed to rob the locals of their supplies. It was like this in all the towns and villages of the region, not just Sheen Bagh, and it became a new cultural norm after several years for everyone, boys, men, women, and girls alike, to be taught how to swing a sword. This was not to fight off the militants, but simply to behead them as they entered through the gates. The locals learned the hard way that to shoot them as they entered came with the risk of setting off an explosive strapped to a suicide bomber.

Every morning, after the violence settled, the locals would tend to their dead. Ghamay Jaan would stumble around helping, just like everyone else. He would carry the mangled remains to the mosque so they could be buried, and he would grab a clean cloth and a bucket of water and go around the village, wiping blood off walls.

One evening, around the time the shelling and firing would usually start, he saw a glimpse of dark hair from a rooftop right above him. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he looked in the direction of the distant, fading moon. It was right past the edge of the rooftop and he saw another glimpse of hair. It was fleeting, but curiosity urged him on and Ghamay Jaan reached up to the wall and then grabbed the edge of the rooftop. He pulled himself up to where he could just barely look over the edge and, in an instant, he fell in love. Letting go of the wall with a laugh, the man fell backwards onto the ground and lay there laughing and smiling up at the evening sky.

He had moved into the building that very night, hoping the woman would come down eventually, and this was where he had been ever since. The old jewelry shop, housing the village madman who fell in love at first sight.

The villagers, at first, could not figure out what woman had taken to the man enough for him to fall in love and apparently move in with her. In the moments of calm between the violence of their day-to-day lives, they asked each other; they listened for rumors, gossip, anything that might tell them the truth of this curious matter. A few men asked Ghamay Jaan himself one day when they saw him at the market, singing loudly to himself while he bought fruit. 'Let us meet your new wife, Ghamay Jaan. Let us congratulate her and welcome her to the village,' said one of the men.

Ghamay Jaan simply laughed loudly and said, 'F00LS! Do you think a beauty like Ghamay Jaan's is around all the time to meet the likes of you? Ha! Ha! No, no, she'll come at night. She only comes at night!' and he pointed up into the sky and the men along with some of the marketgoers glanced up into the air.

'What're you talking about, you madman?!' cried one voice.

'Last night her face was half hidden! Veiled! She was so high up, how could none of you see?! You're all blind, BLIND! My eyes always find her, always!' and Ghamay Jaan laughed, throwing a few coins at the fruit stall owner before dashing out of the marketplace.

The villagers spent a few hours in confusion, convinced that Ghamay Jaan had lost his mind entirely and was now simply at a new point in his mania. Some of them wondered if the constant fighting and death hadn't finally shattered whatever remained of the man's psyche. It wasn't until the sunset prayers that one of the villagers pointed up in the air and cried out 'Look!' And immediately, everyone understood. 'The fool thinks the moon is a woman!' these words rippled through the village and, by nightfall, everyone was touched with a mixture of alarm and amusement.

'Maybe someone should see about getting that man to a hospital in the city,' said one of the elder-women of the village with concern in her voice.

'Oh please, Khala Jaan. This is no issue; we have bigger problems! We have to survive here, don't we? How can we worry about carrying some mad fool to a city? If he's happy, let him love his moon-woman. So long as he doesn't hurt anyone or get in anyone's way when we're trying to survive all this fighting,' said a young man who had realized the truth of the matter after prayers. Everyone else murmured in agreement and so it was decided, Ghamay Jaan would be left alone, as usual.

But Ghamay Jaan himself couldn't care less what the villagers decided to do; he was content. He would whisper snippets of poetry while laying on his back, gazing up at the moon every night. In his eyes, she turned her head and pushed her long dark hair back, blushing and smiling at his words. Sometimes she would even reach down from high up in the sky and touch his weathered cheek. 'I love you so much, my Ghamay Jaan,' she would say. And this would cause a warmth strong enough to make

Ghamay Jaan think he could sit through the entire winter with ease.

The problem became apparent to everyone the next time the village fell victim to shelling from the mountains. As usual, everyone scrambled for shelter. And Ghamay Jaan, laying in the jewelry shop, suddenly saw something bright fly out of the Moon's hands to the Earth below. He ran from the shop, heading in the direction of the fire and panting hard before someone tackled him around the knees and pinned him to the ground. 'Where are you going?!' cried the man who had tackled him.

'Let me go! Let me go!' cried Ghamay Jaan, 'She has sent a gift for me! She has! I have to go get it!'

'You'll be killed you fool!' But Ghamay Jaan would not hear it; he struggled and fought the man on top of him before the man swung his fist into Ghamay Jaan's face and knocked him out.

A few others were called over and together they all dragged Ghamay Jaan's unconscious form to the mosque where all the corpses were. 'The madman thinks his Moon is throwing gifts down for him!' said the man who had tackled him.

'What are we meant to do now? Is someone supposed to watch this lunatic every night now? Don't we have enough troubles?!' roared another

'Let him die! So what?'

'Ya Khudaya! Fear Allah, Ghamay Jaan is his creation like the rest of us. He cannot help what he is. You would just let him die?' said an elder who had known Ghamay Jaan since childhood.

The village people argued back and forth while they tended to their dead that night. Half were set on leaving Ghamay Jaan to whatever fate awaited him, the other half thought to shake the man out of his latest bout of insanity. So absorbed were they

all in their dispute that they didn't notice Ghamay Jaan get up and limp back to the jewelry shop. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he sobbed, staring up at the sky. Moon was not out yet, shadows of stars were beginning to peek through, and somewhere just beyond the lowest clouds, Moon was descending to her perch. Ghamay Jaan could not see her yet; he hobbled over to the ancient sink in the corner and washed his face and performed his ablutions. He prayed in the corner and by the time he finished, he could see her in the sky again.

Ghamay Jaan knew what he would do; he snuck out of the shop and circled the village, walking near the outskirts and watching as candles were lit in people's homes and fires in their courtyards. He knew they were preparing for the night, bracing themselves for what might happen. He knew the sandbags would be piled near what remained of the front walls to try and hold back any damage. And he also knew that the villagers all now kept their horses in an old building towards the back end of the village, as far back from the usual areas of damage as they could without setting the beasts free entirely.

He approached the building slowly, pulling some old sugar candies out of his pocket. It took him a little while to find a horse that didn't rear its legs up at his approach; it was a small, dark brown horse. And Ghamay Jaan spoke to it quietly, holding the candies up to its mouth and waiting for it to eat them before he reached out and patted the muzzle. Once the horse bowed its head, Ghamay Jaan led it out of the little hut and swung his legs over the back. He held the reins and looked up at the sky, waiting.

Moon turned her face to look at him; her head rested against her hand and she smiled, her lips parted, and she called out 'Ghamay...' and Ghamay Jaan felt his heart beat so furiously that he could taste it. She nodded her head, beckoning to him, her lampshade earrings bobbing between the stars in the sky. Ghamay Jaan praised Allah and squeezed his heels into his horse's sides; they began to trot along and Ghamay Jaan urged

the horse along, flicking the reins with both hands. The horse began to run with Ghamay Jaan crouching down low in the saddle. He sped through the village, alarming everyone who quickly dove out of the way or stepped out of their homes to see who was going by. Before the villagers could finish calling out his name, Ghamay Jaan sped through the village entrance and onto the dirt road leading through the mountains.

When he glanced up at Moon he could only laugh with triumph and he could see the bemused expression on her face as well; she knew her Ghamay was heading towards her. 'A gift! I want a gift! I want whatever you'll give me! I want you forever!' he cried up to her with happiness as he tore through the valley.

A short distance away, perched on one of the cliff edges holding the caves that surrounded Sheen Bagh and the rest of the valley, an American soldier held his rifle up to his gaze. Through the scope, he could see a man riding along on a horse at quite a pace, but it was a strange sight, for the man had no weapons on him that he could see. No ammunition or explosives at all either. The soldier's finger rested on the trigger and he glanced back at his commanding officer, who was busy some feet away going over a map of the valley with a translator. Was this worth getting the commanding officer's attention over? He looked back at the figure on the horse as it rode into a thicket of trees; he might have sworn he heard a voice crying out and saying something but there was no way to be certain. The moment had passed, the figure was gone.

The soldier took his finger off the trigger and shouldered the rifle. No threat at all, it seemed.

New Fiction by Paul Rabinowitz: Little Death



Each night our mascot—a black and white cat—sneaks into the base searching for a warm lap and scraps of food. Tonight our reconnaissance unit joins an elite group of combat fighters. These guys volunteer for their unit with the promise of death missions into enemy territory. I wonder why the cat isn't afraid of these men, their lack of fear, so thick it sets me on edge. Our orders are to confiscate cars and drivers' licenses from local farmers. This allows us to drive through villages undetected and gather information about terrorist activity. I know what hasn't been said. I know these guys in my ranks feel untethered, buzzing with adrenaline at the implicit license to do whatever it takes.

"Be careful tonight," our captain warns. "When you get back there'll be hot chocolate on the stove."

Darkness falls. We set ourselves into ambush formation and wait for our prey.

I sometimes think I was crazy to sign on for this.

“Get out of the car and hand me your license,” the commander barks.

“By whose authority,” the farmer says.

“Fuck you—that’s whose authority.”

He slowly gets out of his car and looks into the commander’s eyes. “If I give you my car I can’t get to work, if I can’t get to work I lose my job, if I lose my job I can’t feed my family—no, I can’t give you my car.”

The commander waits for him to finish and then cocks his gun and points it at the ground.

“If you don’t give us your car you lose your foot,” he says.

The farmer looks at the ground where the commander is pointing the rifle and says, “I can’t give you my car.”

Suddenly there is a rustle in the bushes and the little cat appears, a flash of black and white. For a moment his meow breaks the tension and there’s nervous laughter from everyone—except the farmer and the commander, locked in a staring contest.

“Let’s return his license and move on,” I say.

He looks at me as if I am less than a soldier—but agrees. He gives the farmer his license and slams the butt of his rifle into his stomach. The farmer doubles over and falls to his knees.

We return to the base before dawn, sip hot chocolate and sit around recounting the mission. Suddenly there’s a noise in the nearby woods—the commander tells everyone to get down and be

quiet. Our mascot comes prancing into our party, rubbing his body against the commander's leg. We all break out in laughter. He looks at me with a forced smile, cocks his rifle and with one shot silences the cat forever.

Somehow I knew this would happen. I knew the cat's lack of fear was strange.

I panic at the thought of what else I know.