

New Flash Fiction from Drew Pham: “On Their Lips, the Name of God”

This is the memory that stays with him as his blood abandons the body and life fades—this, the one comfort that will carry him into the next life. Dawran had waited beneath a mulberry tree in May of last year. He’d come to love mulberries in a small way—they’d always kept him company through the boredom of waiting. It was still cool in the mornings and evenings, the breeze shaking the branches, dropping the still tart clustered berries. So strange that trees bearing fruit must sacrifice their children to live. How an animal carries that seed away—the length of a kilometer, a province, a nation, to plant and bloom again. In this way, the child’s sacrifice meant something. He’d liked that.

He remembers Zafar’s simple house. Not more than a small compound with a low wall and one building, one shed. The gate opened, Zafar standing there in the vestibule with his daughter propped on his hip; the dim outline of a woman behind them. A handsome woman and child. Zafar put the girl down, kissed her once on each cheek, on the forehead, and on both cheeks again. He turned to his wife, and the woman smiled. The sight of Zafar’s family brought Dawran thoughts of the future, of blooming. At least, that’s how he likes to remember it—a smiling wife, a doted-upon child. Things he’d hoped to have one day, but never would.

Zafar took him up to the mountainside, where they could see the whole valley. They took a small bag. Some naan. Dried nuts and fruit. Rice. They had some work to do. Checking vantage points, watching the Americans and the government troops and police, drawing up maps of the improvements the Americans made to their little outpost. These soldiers were tired or lazy or

scared, so they rarely ventured out, and the summer that followed was as quiet and peaceful as anyone could hope. Before they began their descent down the mountain, a pair of shepherds came across their path, offered them a little food and tea. They sat in a little basin in the foothills, where soil had accumulated over the years from all the sediment washed down from snow melts. While the flock grazed or huddled together or slept, the men sat around the fire, telling tall tales, reciting couplets of poetry, and resuscitating dead memories. They ate, drank tea, watched the half-disc moon crawl up the sky, trading places with the sun. The insects in the green valley below sang their song. Torch flies lit the marshy canal beds and mountain streams. A stray dog howled, and Dawran felt himself fortunate for his belly, now full with warm meat and gravy.

He remembers being thankful for Zafar, who'd had always been a patient eater. Methodical. Careful. And Dawran loved watching his mouth take some things whole, tear other things off in small bites, and seeing the thin film of grease form, his lips reflecting a little of all that moonlight. In the dark, his commander's skin seemed more like polished stone than flesh. More than that, he loved listening to Zafar speak. He told a story about a book his father had brought back from Russia, about a giant fish and the mad fisherman who'd pursued it. *We do such insane things for love*, he'd said, tracing the outlines of the mad seaman's obsession. He'd said it was love that'd driven him to madness, that he'd loved hunting the enormous fish, for it was the fish that gave him life, it was the fish that'd given him purpose.

Dawran remembers all the questions he'd had of the strange tale, questions that, when he gazed at Zafar, he knew he already the answers to. He had thought on that while the meal warmed his belly, and the fire drying the sweat from his clothes. Love deriving from purpose comforted him. It meant he could say he loved Zafar, this man who'd given him purpose,

given his life meaning. And he'd learn how far that insane love would take him, but he'd stay loyal. He would slaughter a fat landlord with a knife, bomb his countrymen, and in his last living moments, watch his beloved commander flee from the field. He remains, above all things, loyal.

Even with the moon, they'd climbed high enough to not want to risk broken bones on their descent. So they spent the night there, camped with the shepherds around their little fire. They had only one blanket—Zafar's—and Dawran was happy to let him have it, despite the night's still chilly air. But the man told him not to be foolish, it was common practice for fighters—indeed a common practice among soldiers everywhere—to make spoons of their bodies and nestle close to share heat. He'd assented, curled himself in his commander's embrace, his body like that of an infant in the womb, and listened to Zafar's strong, steady breath, took in his musk—smelling of damp soil and leather and burnt powder—and fell drowsy to the steady metronome of Zafar's heart against his ribs. They slept the whole night through, neither man moving a centimeter from the other. Through every challenge, every moment of doubt, every difficult choice, Dawran remembers this night above all nights. When the rooster woke the morning, Zafar shook Dawran awake. Soon, they heard the muezzin in the valley below singing the call to prayer. The two stood side by side, knelt in unison, their bodies bending as one, and on their lips, the name of God.



Photo by Drew Pham