

Fighting for All of Time: Katey Schultz's Novel, 'Still Come Home'

Still Come Home, the first novel from *Flashes of War* author Katey Schultz, opens in the tiny town of Imar, Afghanistan, where a young woman stands by the window, wanting an apricot. The weather is hot and the woman is hungry and thirsty, and she thinks to herself that she would like very much to walk to the market and purchase an apricot. "It would taste like candied moisture," she thinks, "like sunlight in the mouth."

This seems a simple and easily attainable desire. But in Taliban-occupied Afghanistan, without a male relation to accompany her, it's next to impossible. Seventeen-year-old Aaseya is a young woman nearly alone in a village that "insists on the wrongness of her life." Her family was killed by the Taliban, under the mistaken belief that they were American collaborators. In truth, they were only a moderately liberal family with a dangerous belief in freedom and education, including—most suspect of all—the education of girls. Now she is married to Rahim, a man twenty years her senior, whose work—which she believes is bricklaying, though he has actually, and reluctantly, taken a recent job with the Taliban—keeps him away from home all day while she is taunted by neighbors, including her own cruel, myopic sister-in-law, and unable to fulfill even the most basic longing for a piece of fruit. The metaphor has many layers. Aaseya's sharp mind longs for the pollination of reading and books but can't get them. Her marriage has not yet produced children; all speculation as to this lack is directed at her, not at her much older husband.

Aaseya mourns the loss of the local school where she was educated and its English-speaking teacher, Mrs. Darrow, who

was forced to flee three years before. She doesn't know that her husband Rahim may be at this very school building right now—it has become “quietly minted Taliban headquarters”—getting his instructions for the day's distasteful work. (“Afghans have been fighting for all of time,” he reasons. “Even not fighting ends up being a kind of fight.”) His employer is the gaunt, black-robed Obaidhullah who drifts through the schoolhouse overseeing a cadre of drugged, cackling foot soldiers. Rahim is an inherently nonviolent man who finds comfort in verses from the Sufi poet Hafiz (“the past is a grave, the future a rose. Think of the rose”), but his past could serve as a grave for even the strongest of people: he was taken at a young age to be a *batcha bazi*—“dancing boy”—for a corrupt general. He reflects, movingly, that “his body was like his country; it would survive and it would always be used.”



Rahim is paid to dig up AKs, hidden along roadsides in advance, and use them to deter aid vehicles, along with his friend Badria, who's in with the Taliban deeper than Rahim knows. Rahim aims for the dirt, or the tires, or the rearview mirrors, and hasn't yet killed anyone. But he cannot tell Aaseya, whose family raised her with an idealistic affection for Americans and for democracy, of this arrangement. When she sees him carrying American cash, she's thrilled, but it hasn't come directly from Uncle Sam—it's come from Taliban leaders accepting payment to let certain convoys through, for a cut. Now Taliban fighters swagger through the market place showing off stacks of American dollars loaded enough with meaning to be nearly munitional in themselves.

So Aaseya spends her days alone. She will, not, in the end, be able to buy the apricot. (It's amazing how much traction a simple desire can get in a work of fiction—the reader simply knowing their protagonist wants to buy a piece of fruit.) But this day will end up bringing a much greater gift in the form of a small, mute orphan boy named Ghazel, who'll change the structure of her family forever, even though she's just now spotted him from her open window.

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Meanwhile, not far away on FOB Copperhead, National Guardsman Nathan Miller—a well-meaning, slightly uptight, former high school Valedictorian with a wife and young daughter at home, plus, sadly, the specter of the child they lost—is preparing his team for one final, humanitarian, mission. They will be delivering water to Imar, where Rahim and Aaseya and Ghazel live, a town watched over by its one, defunct water pump installed years before by hopeful Americans and now silently gauging the town's decline, like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in *Gatsby*. The dry pump and a distant well have put pressure on marooned Imar—Rahim has returned home more than once to find there's not enough water left after cooking to drink—and Lt. Miller is almost looking forward to the mission

and the chance to do good. His four deployments have strained his marriage to a point he fears irreparable, and he struggles daily with the lack of clarity that descends on a life of perpetual war-fighting in a tribal environment of unknowable loyalties, connections, and deceptions. There is the constant threat of death for Miller and his men; death provides its own awful clarity, but he never knows when it's coming ("it could be now. Or now. Or now"). Working for change is even harder. One step forward, two steps back. As Aaseya does, he uses the word "impossible": "Like grabbing fistfuls of sand—that's what this war is. Like trying to hold onto the impossible." When Miller finally does get his humanitarian mission, it's a dream come true, the water bottles sparkling in the sunlight as thirsty children drink. "It feels so good," he thinks, "to do something right." By "right," he means something charitable, something unselfish, but also finally—clearly—that they have done something *correctly*. They have not, yet, screwed up.

One can't help but think of Kerouac here, warning, "that last thing is what you can't get." But Miller gets so close.

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Readers of Katey Schultz's critically lauded 2013 collection *Flashes of War* will recognize Aaseya, Rahim, and Lt. Miller and his wife Tenley from those pages. As with Brian Van Reet's character Sled, whose genesis occurred in *Fire and Forget* and then grew to be a major character in *Spoils*, it's a pleasure to meet these characters for another round. It's satisfying to see them grow into not just themselves but into the preoccupations and concerns the author has provided for them. Forgiveness, shared humanity, the frustration of unfair restrictions (upon women, upon soldiers, upon children like the orphaned Ghazel and like young, exploited Rahim) come to the fore again and again in Schultz's work. For *Still Come Home* she has chosen an epigram from Yeats's poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul": "A living man is blind and drinks his drop," it begins. True enough. We're all blind. But its close

urges gentleness, with oneself and others: "I am content to live it all again...measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

I don't know if these characters would want to live everything all over again. It might be cruel to ask them to. I do know that I gained understanding and compassion at being walked in their shoes. These are characters who ask questions and, by Schultz, are asked. (A notable number of sentences in *Still Come Home* end with a question mark, often questions the characters are posing to themselves. There are so many questions that I thought of Rahim's beloved poet Hafiz, chided gently by the Magian sage: "It's your distracted, lovelorn heart that asks these questions constantly.")

Rahim might say, echoing Hafiz: "There are always a few men like me in this world/ who are house-sitting for God."

Schultz's characters find ways to care for one another in a world that tries to claim there's no time or energy left for that, that this is the first thing we must cut out. In the end they will, despite the hard tasks they have been given, find themselves emboldened by and for love. There is the shared sense among them that all this pain will be worth it if at least something endures.

Schultz's authorial balance is realistic, tough, painstakingly researched, steeped in the knowledge that the world is unfair. Her writing style is supremely attentive, and it's this attention that may be the great gift of writing and novels: not a trick-like verisimilitude or trompe l'oeil but a careful asking of questions. What would happen now; how would this person feel now? What would they say now? I find myself wanting to ask her, as Hafiz does his friend:

"When was this cup
That shows the world's reality

Handed to you?"

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An excerpt of Still Come Home appeared in the August 2017 issue of Wrath-Bearing Tree. You can read it [here](#) and purchase the book [here](#) or [here](#). Wrath-Bearing Tree contributor Randy Brown has a [recent review](#) of Still Come Home—with valuable insights—on his blog, Red Bull Rising.