



# *damazine*

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## Seeker

Omar Azam – United States

I've approached God in  
so many ways,  
you wouldn't know what's right.

I've found Him in music,  
heard him pulling at my heart,  
knowing He is heard therein.

Sometimes I find him in power,  
the power that makes men  
answer the call  
to action, to bleed.

I find him in revelry,  
in the promise of a new day's  
projects, dreams, impossibilities.

I find the holy in the destruction of all  
that is profane,  
especially that which pretends to be  
high and mighty;  
It falls like castles of dust in my mind.

I have longed to be with You  
in every place,  
in my geography,  
in my life;

my attempts start and stop,  
like the changing of weather in my city by the lake.

Yet there is a focus,  
each time I jumpstart.

99 names of God on my wall.  
I took one down this year,  
passed it around my being,  
saw what I could make of it...

My God, give me 98 more to explore.

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*Omar Azam is an American of Pakistani heritage who was born, raised, and currently resides in Chicago. He comes from a family of detectives, writers, and healers. Formerly, he edited Subjective Substance, an online poetry magazine. His poetry has been recently published in Autumn Leaves and Breadcrumb Scabs.*

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## Tamuz and the Beggar

Marc Brenman – United States

When Tamuz opened the shop, the day was already hot. The street contained little shade, and all appeared normal except for a beggar who had not been there the day before. There was no regular beggar who claimed this street as his territory. When Tamuz unlocked and opened the butcher shop door and flipped the *açık/kapalı* sign around, the beggar greeted him with the traditional request — holding out his hand, “Alms for the love of Allah.” Tamuz went back behind the counter, took 50 kurush from the till, and gave them to the beggar. “*Teşekkür ederim!*” said the beggar.

All day the beggar sat by the door, asking for alms as Tamuz’s customers came and went. Many gave him kurush, and Tamuz made sure to charge his customers odd amounts, so they had change in hand to give the beggar. When dinner time came, Tamuz made himself some food, and divided it onto two plates. He took one to the beggar. “*Kardeş*, you’ve been working hard all day with nothing to eat — please take this.”

The beggar took the plate, touched his heart with the other hand, and looked down. Then he ate deliberately. The next day, the beggar returned, and a few of Tamuz’s regular customers asked Tamuz why he permitted the beggar to hang out in front of his shop.

“The beggar has correctly divined that my customers have hearts of gold.” The customers were embarrassed, and gave the beggar kurush. On the third day, Tamuz carried an old chair to where the beggar sat, because the beggar returned. Tamuz said, “A man should not have to squat on the sidewalk. Take this old chair. I am not using it.” The beggar took the chair with thanks and sat outside the store. But his take went down, because he did not look needy and despairing enough.

On the fourth morning, when Tamuz unlocked the store, the beggar said apologetically to Tamuz, “Sir, I appreciate your chair, you are a kind and generous man, but I do not look like a beggar sitting here. I mean no disrespect, but let me return it.” Tamuz took the chair without offense and said, “You know your business best.”

On the fifth morning, Tamuz brought the beggar an old hat. “The sun beats down on the poor and rich alike. Take this old hat to shield your head.” The beggar put it on with thanks. That day, a regular customer said to Tamuz, “Isn’t that your old hat that beggar is wearing?” Tamuz agreed, noting that it was a tatty old thing he no longer wore.

The next day the customer carried an old jacket and handed it to the beggar, saying, “If Tamuz can give you a hat, I have no use for this old jacket, and you clearly have need of one.” The beggar thanked the man, and was even more surprised when he put the jacket on and found a lira in a pocket. He tried to return the lira to the man. “Effendi, you have forgotten this in the pocket of your old jacket.” “Oh well, finders keepers,” said the man.

The next day, when the beggar arrived to take up his post outside Tamuz’s store, an old pair of shoes was on the sidewalk. He put them on, and, while they were a bit roomy, they were much better than his old ones where he could see his toes and read snatches of yesterday’s newspaper. “This is a peculiar street,” he thought.

The next day, the imam from the local mosque came by with a small old prayer rug rolled up under his arm. “A righteous man should pray five times a day. I notice you are missing

my call to prayer. Take this old rug an elderly parishioner left, Allah keep his soul, and when you hear me from the minaret, pray.” He thrust it at the beggar and walked away.

That day, the beggar unrolled the rug for midday prayers, and lira appeared on it. Tamuz, though not outwardly religious himself, noticed this and invited the beggar into the shop to wash his feet and hands before prayer. Tamuz held out a broom. “Do you know how to use one of these? On summer days, my shop accumulates dust, and I need someone to sweep.” The beggar took the broom and began to sweep. He was thorough and methodical. “I will pay you in food. Can you get along without begging?”

“I pay a few lira to sleep in a tent encampment under the highway bridge.”

“You can sleep in my storeroom, be my night watchman, and keep the thieves at bay.”

The next day, the beggar brought his bedroll. While he swept, he hummed and entertained the children of the customers. One of Tamuz’s regular customers said one day, “I recognize that tune — my mother from Diyarbakir sang a song with a tune like that.” The beggar held the broom like a dance partner and sang quietly:

“My new bride  
has strong arms  
she works the fields all day  
and at night reminds me  
why I paid the bride price.”

The woman blushed. “Yes, that is the song. Are you from Diyarbakir?” The beggar began a new song:

“Many years ago  
I killed a man  
much loved in my home town  
and now I wander in shame  
on dusty roads.”

He and the broom did a subtle dance step as he sang.

The other customers and Tamuz were now watching, agog. The local chai house owner, in the shop to buy a nice lamb chop for dinner, asked, “How many songs like that do you know?” The beggar sang:

“We poor people  
we have nothing  
but songs and wheat  
but we only eat  
when we work.”

Even in a city butcher shop, the customers could feel the rhythm of the scythes in the wheat harvest.

“I see you work for Tamuz. With his permission, can you come by my chai house and sing at night to entertain my customers? Those layabouts, Allah preserve them, could use some of the old country songs to quiet their incessant political arguments.”

The beggar bowed theatrically with his partner the broom, looked to Tamuz for permission, and sang, louder this time, an old song from the War of Independence:

“Politics does not put food on the table  
but the heathen must be driven  
from the Turk’s land.”

How long had it been since anyone had heard this song?

The next day, the sergeant of the Gendarmes came to see Tamuz. “I hear you have a beggar who sings and is working for you. We have a warrant for the arrest of Nightingale, a man killer from Diyarbakir.”

“No beggar works in my shop, Sergeant, only a proud Turkish citizen. And as for singing, you must have heard me — ‘My love is like a red red rose.’”

The Sergeant put his hands over his ears. “That will be enough, Tamuz Effendi, don’t quit your butcher career! Among the many talents Allah has given you, you bray like a donkey. I mean no offense.”

“None taken, Sergeant. How about a nice leg of lamb for the wife? Perhaps she could cook it for you tonight with string beans and eggplant, in the Greek style? Those Greeks were good for something, and this would be my gift to a long-suffering woman married to a certain Sergeant, who deals with the dregs of humanity every day.”

“Tamuz, I will accept your kind gift on behalf of my ‘long-suffering’ wife who is lucky to be married to a good man with a steady paycheck, on condition that you join us for dinner, and explain to my wife why a man who owns a butcher shop does not have a wife of his own. And then perhaps after dinner, we can have a drink at the chai house. I heard old Mazrik has hired himself a singer from Diyarbakir who sings like a bird.” He cocked an eyebrow at Tamuz. “You vouch for this beggar? No dead bodies will turn up unexplained in my precinct?”

“Allah grants repentance. Sometimes He gives, and sometimes He takes. But I have faith.”

“Not to bring up a sore subject, Tamuz, but you aren’t soft on this beggar because of your own experience, are you? Allah and his earthly authorities forgave you. You did your time. But how do you know this beggar is made of the same stuff?”

“Only Allah sees into men’s souls. But I detect that a good beggar begs for forgiveness.”

Nightingale listened from the storeroom, with his bedroll and rug under his arm and his hat on his head, ready to run out the back door.

After the Sergeant left, Tamuz walked into the storeroom and gave him a big wink. “The road can wait another day, eh? By the way, the Sergeant likes sad songs, and his family hails from Kars. So perhaps tonight, you’ll sing something to appeal.”

Nightingale began to sing quietly:

“The snow falls on Kars  
the mountains grow white  
a month too early  
but all our sins  
will be buried until Spring  
and we will be happy and sad  
happy and sad  
that the long nights  
are here already  
in our bittersweet Kars,  
bittersweet...”

Tamuz smiled. “Do you make this stuff up?” Nightingale swept.

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*Marc Brenman works in human rights and social justice, writing from Olympia, Washington, USA. He has lived in Ankara and Izmir, Turkey, and worked with Arab-American and Islamic groups. He has researched culturally appropriate alternative dispute resolution, and has been writing poetry and short stories for many years, including a series about Tamuz.*

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## Night Journey: Riyadh-Dammam Highway

Martin Bennett – Italy

Sun slotted somewhere inside the sky's back pocket,  
Dunes like clouds, horizon sheer black on black,  
Our car's a convertible low-powered rocket:

That headlit patch of tarmac's a makeshift compass,  
The only remaining landmark,  
Gravity's last token against fathomless dark  
And space. At least to us.

In science fiction, if not in fact,  
Some TV-eyed alien physicist charts, perhaps,  
One more smudge-shaped flying object,  
Capsule-type core at once intact  
Yet vanishing a mile per minute  
Along its own tracks:

Or perhaps not. Fact re-overtaking fiction,  
Flight's brought back down to earth  
By acres of petrol station,  
No-nonsense neon,  
Some wheels in a stolid stack.

An attendant unwittingly frowns welcome;  
Humdrum trucks, a long-handled jack,  
Those flattened cans signal, ounce by ton,  
The plain wonder of gravity regained,  
Planet still in place.

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*Martin Bennett teaches, proofreads, and translates at the University of Tor Vergata, Rome. Three of his short stories have appeared on BBC World Service while his poems have been published in Poetry Ireland Review, Stand, Wasafiri, and other magazines.*

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**On the Middle East**  
Pradeep Chaswal – India

A morning in the desert  
A street  
Two girls playing marbles  
An old hunchback vendor passing by  
An old book with yellow pages on the table  
A sleeping camel

The afternoon in a city  
A jewellery showroom  
A crowd of hooligans on its way  
The stinking drains  
A school locked

The evening in a town  
A burnt beauty parlor  
Hungry children in their mother's lap  
An abandoned garden  
A new song on the old tape recorder

A dark night in the desert  
A group of blind men in a circle  
A one-eyed man in the middle  
His hands carry a lantern ...  
And now  
It is midnight  
Bugs swarming on the Arabian Sea  
Hovering over the oil wells

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*Pradeep Chaswal is a professor of English at Maharishi Markandeshwar University in Haryana State, India. He is a poet and critic who has been published in journals of national and international repute. He plans to publish a collection of his poems soon. Contact him at [chaswal.pradeep@gmail.com](mailto:chaswal.pradeep@gmail.com).*

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## Palestinian Driver – New Orleans

Mike Maggio – United States

drives the trolley  
along the riverfront  
past Toulouse and Canal  
this stop for the French Quarter  
next one for the Café du Monde

greeted passengers  
from the riverwalk  
wistful smile  
thirty years  
from Jerusalem  
City of God  
here in the City of Sin

Palestinian driver  
faithful lover  
peers at the tracks  
caresses the controls  
rolls graceful  
in unison with the trolley  
turns toward me  
for brief remembrances of time  
on the West Bank  
of the Jordan  
points to the West Bank  
of the Mississippi

applies the brakes  
helps passengers off  
assists newcomers on  
along the riverfront  
rich earthy face  
old-world façade  
balconies dense with irises  
cathedral nestled in Jackson Square

this trolley  
with reversible wooden seats  
this man transplanted  
screeches with age  
plies like Sisyphus condemned  
back and forth  
back and forth

one trolley  
one man stranded in time  
here on the riverfront  
in the city  
where life yawns heedlessly at the sky

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*Mike Maggio has published fiction, poetry, travel, and reviews in Potomac Review, Pleiades, Apalachee Quarterly, and others. His books include Your Secret is Safe With Me (Black Bear Publications, 1988), Oranges From Palestine (Mardi Gras Press, 1996), Sifting Through the Madness (Xlibris, 2001), and deMOCKcracy (Plain View Press, 2007). He lives in Herndon, Virginia. His web site is <http://www.mikemaggio.net>.*

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## A Poem After Rumi

Richard Schiffman – United States

I hereby announce, publish and declare  
that I will not, I say not from here on out, consent  
to be the dumb punching bag  
of my own moon-mad mutant mind.  
Nor the innocent (nor otherwise)  
victim of vicissitudes,  
nor the crowned chump of circumstance,  
nor the whirling dervish  
of whim and whimsies.  
I will not, repeat not, (either now,  
or in the nonexistent future)  
be anything or anybody  
that you think I am, that you wish I were,  
that I wish I were. That I ought to be. No, not me.  
Not me. Nobody's patsy. Nobody's fool.  
Not God, not man, not beast.  
Not even myself (whoever that might be).  
All that is water under the bridge.  
All that is chaff that's flown.  
But whatever glinting stone remains of mystery —  
after the chickens have gone home to roost,  
after the deluge, after the stock market crash.  
Whatsoever ineluctable presence persists,  
when that house of cards  
in which somebody (who called himself  
myself) once lived, once died — collapses.  
We'll meet in that field.

---

*Richard Schiffman is a writer based in New York City and a former journalist for National Public Radio. He is the author of two spiritual biographies. His poetry has appeared in Poetry East, The Atlanta Review, Rosebud, The Southern Poetry Review, and many other journals. He is also Kabir, a dervish in the Jerrahi-Helveti order.*

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## In Which You Tell Me You Have Set Islam Aside

Joanna Catherine Scott – United States

*In Which You Tell Me You Have Set Islam Aside ...*

I used to dream, you say, that one day  
I would take a pilgrimage to Mecca,

but I have given Islam up.  
I have taken my name off all the lists.

I no longer go to pray,  
although I pray to Allah in my heart.

I thank him for the Qur'an,  
which I also have inside my heart.

Get knowledge and understanding,  
it instructs me.

And so I read and read and think,  
and argue with myself, and others too,

and have become a wiser person  
on account of it,

which is why I have set Islam aside.  
What point is there,

I came to understand,  
in fighting with an enemy

who has the upper hand?  
What point in setting myself up

for persecution by the guards and warden  
because I wear the Muslim cap

and fast for Ramadan?  
A man must act upon his wisdom.

So I have set aside the kufi.  
I do not abase myself.

I have light within me, though.  
They cannot take that away.

*... And I Drive Home in the Rain*

The fallen sky laying itself out  
and laying itself out along the road

like grey-clad pilgrims  
abasing themselves full-length

and rising,  
and then the abasement,

and the rising up again,  
end-to-ending themselves

like inchworms inching their way  
across grey countryside

toward the holy city,  
pelted on, and blown up

into a thousand falling fragments  
by lumbering grey trucks.

Gathering themselves together.  
Shaking off the insult.

Rising and abasing.  
Rising and abasing.

And being blessed for it.  
And blessed for it.

That glittering  
spinning of the wheels.

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*Joanna Catherine Scott is the author of the prizewinning poetry collections Breakfast at the Shangri-la, Fainting at the Uffizi, and Night Huntress. A graduate of the University of Adelaide and Duke University, she was born in England, raised in Australia, and now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Her website is <http://www.joannacatherinescott.com>.*

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## Math-Phobic

Mary McLaughlin Slechta – United States

The math paper was different today. There was a woman with a baby kneeling among the equations. Fatma thought the woman looked a bit like her mother, but her mother was math-phobic. “Hopelessly math-phobic,” she’d tell Aabo, Fatma’s father. That was long ago in the old Mogadishu after she’d overspent on clothes and entertaining her colleagues at the university. When Fatma cried, worried her mother had a terminal illness, Mrs. Ali laughed until her sides ached. “It’s what the Americans say if you don’t have a head for numbers.” She repeated the story a dozen times, always to great laughter, and each time Fatma would lower her eyes and bite her lower lip between her teeth.

A year later, she still cringed with humiliation. Even worse, she blamed her mother’s careless attitude towards numbers for conjuring the plane that carried them from Aabo. On the rare occasion she spoke to him, reciting a prepared list of achievements, she pictured a man as tall and lonely as the number one.

Thinking of Aabo usually made Fatma cry or scratch ashy trails along the map of her arms. Not this time. The Math Woman, her head bowed to fit a line for name and date, showed her the big difference between her mother and father, and the difference was so obvious, she wondered how she’d ever missed it at all. Like the Math-Woman cloaked in white, Aabo wore only simple, white clothing.

Fatma’s mother loved color. Bright color. Orange, yellow, red, all kinds of green, and lately something called fuchsia. Because her deficiencies in science rivaled those in math, Fatma assumed her mother couldn’t be photographed in black and white. Large and dazzling, like the dyes in her headscarves, she leaked color and lent brightness to most everyone she touched. This wasn’t just Fatma’s opinion.

People loved her mother’s big laugh and broad sweeping hands. For parties those hands could roll and fill sambusas like a machine. They could cut and chop the air itself to carve an entire city or a single face. People either wept buckets or laughed hysterically at her mother’s stories. There was no middle ground. The woman on the math paper, now she thought about it, was totally calm. There was nothing on her stove, no one at her door, and no one calling on the cell phone. Her eyes, gray lines scribbled above a small ‘j’ for a nose and a minus sign for a mouth, were completely fixed on her tiny baby in his crib.

Fatma glanced at the teacher from the corner of her eyes. After giving what she called a *crystal clear* explanation of the assignment, Ms. Richard had stationed herself at the desk to correct a stack of papers. She wouldn’t like students’ eyes darting about, so Fatma pinched the bridge of her nose to imitate Anh Nguyen’s cure for headaches. She and her mother, feet up to watch TV, identical heads uncovered to scratch and breathe, suffered headaches from speaking and listening to English all day. Fatma’s mother said translating was like doing a puzzle, an activity they shunned after being given several by the Catholic Charities. That was before they got the TV. Some days the puzzle was 100 pieces, other days 10,000.

While Fatma plodded through English lessons at middle school, her mother answered the phone in the Refugee Center and was shuttled here and there to translate for newcomers. Whatever her job description might have read, Mrs. Ali had her own fixed opinions on the worthiness and appropriateness of what the English speaker wished to convey. Naturally there were times she couldn't or wouldn't translate what was being spoken and would simply chat with people.

Fatma's mother liked to chat. The only thing she liked better than learning something new and useful was being the messenger of that information. Fatma told her about the headache cure. Right away Somalis all over the city were bending for daily prayers with red pinch marks between their eyes.

Today, after Ms. Richard explained the multiplication sign for the *hundredth* time, Fatma knew she was destined to be math-phobic like her mother. She'd leaned her left cheek on her left palm and seen nothing but plus signs. To compound matters, she wasn't strong at addition either. This fact had been quickly revealed the previous spring when they'd been in the U.S. only four months.

On the day of the State Math Exam, when the Refugee Center sent her mother to translate, Fatma tried to tell Ms. Richard her predicament. In answer, the teacher set a Somali-English dictionary on the desk and tapped the cover as if it were asleep and needed a nudge. Neatly pivoting on her high heels, she began hissing and purring even before she turned at the front of the room: "*State Law* prohibits me from reading or explaining *any portion* of this test in English if a *suitable translator* has been found. Do *not* open the test booklet until told to do so."

Fatma's head hurt from chasing Ms. Richard's voice in and out of range. She tried to link the broken signals, even pounding her head like it was the old radio back home. She needed something, anything to make Aabo proud.

As usual her mother was unflappable in an emergency. Smiling at Fatma, she winked as though the State Exam was a game show on TV. *Suitable translator*, she bragged, tapping her chest when Ms. Richard finally took a breath. The other translators laughed. Powerless to ask what happened if the *suitable translator* turned out to be your own math-phobic mother, Fatma ground a pencil to powder before Ms. Richard pointed her back to her seat.

Sure enough, Mrs. Ali, her head covered in something resembling a tropical rain forest, only pretended to translate the directions. Actually she was calling Fatma the Somali word for *dunce* and insisting she ask someone else. Fatma stared hopefully at the Bosnian and Cambodian translators, but they too were sworn and bound to *State Rules*.

Meanwhile, Ms. Richard circled the desks — as an *observer*, she explained to the adults, as well as *special assistant* to Anh Nguyen and others. Those lucky ones included a tall boy who'd arrived the previous Monday. Although no one could translate this to him, Bao, his nose burning red with fear, was being given *an opportunity*. Remembering her own first week, Fatma gave him a friendly smile and he stuck out his tongue.

Watching the three Cuban kids breeze through the Spanish version of the exam, her eyes itched with envy. Then Luis winked and Freddy gave her the middle finger to show it was a put-on. You couldn't have told that to Ms. Richard, with her face knotted tight as a pale pink bow. She was the exact opposite of an orchestra conductor, for she had a great talent for conducting long symphonies of silence. Under her soundless baton, nervous students reopened scabs and even the brilliant ones chewed productively on their cuticles. For Fatma, who had memorized her neighbor's pencil strokes, Anh Nguyen's bloodied fingers were a source of fascination, never brighter than on test days.

Suddenly, as if the long ticking silence had been a bomb, there was an eruption of horns and bells and whistles and drums at the center of the room. As startled as everyone else, Fatma stared at the cell phone in the open pocketbook at her feet. The next instant a pencil whizzed by her head and Ms. Richard had her hands full breaking up Luis and Freddy. Naturally Mrs. Ali took the call. She was a busy woman and chatted loudly in the hallway to prove it. For nearly ten minutes Fatma's thin, lonely arm waved like a lizard abandoned by her mother's scarf.

The Bosnian girls giggled. Their translator, humming the cell phone ring just below Ms. Richard's radar, was a slim, handsome Muslim who drove a Trans Am. Fatma saw him late at night, leaning against his car in front of the apartments. Her best friend Naima said he chain-smoked cigarettes and was dating an American girl even though he was engaged to somebody back home. Hearing the breathy sound of her classmates competing for help, Fatma was sure he would give whatever answers he had without hesitation. What boy wouldn't? Those girls never covered their heads. Their hair swung loosely over their shoulders, and the boys were forever trying to touch it.

The day after the State Exam, Fatma removed her hijab in the girls' room. Ms. Richard glanced up for a second, long enough to tuck the tiniest of smiles in her red cheeks. Fatma knew then, even before the class exploded in laughter, how completely the wet comb had been defeated. If not now, after she'd prayed with all her heart, she knew her hair would never swing and her mother never pay for extensions or straighteners. The best she could do was to wear black scarves. Wrapping her head each morning, letting the ends hang loose like a ponytail, she wondered what was the use of hair if you couldn't train it to behave.

Remembering the State Exam and Aabo and now her awful hair gave Fatma a real headache. She squeezed her nose with one hand, began to raise the other for the nurse, and scratched her ear instead. Ms. Richard had been very clear about anyone asking for a pass. *Crystal clear*. No one was leaving. Not to the lav, the water fountain, the office phone or to the nurse.

She recounted the math problems. Besides the two examples done for them, there were eighteen to go. Eighteen. "Don't forget your name," she heard Ms. Richard warn the first students to hand in work, and, as if this action might bring her closer to completion, she spent five minutes printing the letters of her name. Lifting her hand for the date, she saw Ms. Richard's mouth disappear into a thin white line and pretended her eyes needed a good, hard rubbing.

She reexamined the Math Woman. American, she concluded, and, despite the headscarf, definitely not Muslim. She reminded Fatma of the ladies pushing wide strollers in the mall and forcing everyone in the opposite direction to go around.

Without thinking, she slid her eyes back to where Ms. Richard was thumping the corrected papers like a deck of cards and wondered if she would ever see her teacher pushing a stroller at the mall and whether Ms. Richard would make her go around or stop and chat like her mother: “How are you, Fatma? How pretty you look. Are you making your mother proud?”

Ms. Richard glanced at the clock, set the stack on the corner of the desk, and opened her middle drawer. Fatma knew exactly where a certain flair-tip pen would be tucked away and continued to watch Ms. Richard rummage through a shopping bag pulled from under her desk. Everything Ms. Richard did required a lot of effort. She was pregnant with a large, high belly and her short arms didn’t match her anymore. Fatma counted as she took nineteen narrow packages from the bag. Wrapped in crinkly red paper, the packages made everyone peek.

Samouen, one of the class pets, finally asked what they were for. “Santa Claus,” Luis answered before anyone had a chance. The girl beside him, Freddy’s latest girlfriend, sang what sounded like “*police mommy dad*” until Ms. Richard brought her hand down for silence. Below the hum of the heater, Fatma caught the whispered Spanish word for *nasty woman* and rolled it on her tongue like a piece of sugar. Even Anh Nguyen, who pretended not to hear bad words, tilted her head like a little bird enjoying the breeze.

Fatma snuck a glimpse at the teeny plastic tree in the back corner. All week, Ms. Richard had been explaining about Santa Claus, Christmas, and the tree. They’d been doing holiday word-finds and graphing trees, stars, and candy canes. The multiplication problems today were supposed to tell what someone named *Rudolph* said to an *Easter Bunny*. Silently, Ms. Richard carried armfuls of packages to the tree and placed them evenly around the base until all nineteen, piled round and round and higher and higher, made the teeny tree even tinier.

“Can I help?” Luis begged. Everyone looking up, waiting to hear if the answer might be yes this time, but Ms. Richard, who treated questions as the most unnatural things in the world, was unmovable. “Finish your work,” she told him firmly.

Nothing stopped Freddy. “Miss, are those presents for us?” There was an excited hush. It was the last day before vacation and since morning the other teachers had been passing out chocolates and peppermints and giving free time for movies and games. Only Ms. Richard, last period of the day, had been withholding. Nineteen faces stared expectantly. Thirty minutes remained. Still time to think she was the greatest teacher in the school, the entire world, if there was something inside those packages for them.

“When everyone’s finished,” she said, surveying the room. “*Everyone.*”

Fatma heard desperate scribbling everywhere. Only her pencil was moving silently. Very carefully she was copying Anh Nguyen's answers onto her paper.

"Fatma!" Her head sprang back, and she saw, as through a cloud, Ms. Richard beckon her to the doorway. "Bring your paper." No one dared breathe, least of all Fatma who watched her best handwriting ripped to shreds.

"Yes?" From overhead a tired voice spoke as if God was on the line, weary of her mother's prayers for a smart daughter. But Fatma, who attended Muslim school in this same building on Sundays, knew God didn't live in King Middle School or even visit. It was the nice lady in the office who talked while you waited for the principal and sometimes, if it took too long, gave you papers to staple and let you sort the mail.

"I'm sending Fatma Ali out," Ms. Richard told the voice. She handed Fatma a clean paper without looking at her. "She's going to the In-School Detention room until dismissal."

"Tablecloth head!" A pimply-faced boy at the window put up his middle finger.

It would have been too much to bear if she hadn't heard the taunt before. She heard it so often she recognized boredom in the kids who taunted. Only twenty minutes left, the room monitor grinning into a gift bag, there didn't seem any point to complaining or fighting.

By the time she signed in, the boy had forgotten her anyway. Facing the window, he'd cushioned his head on a stack of binders, their crumpled contents curling around his head like a pillow. Nestling her cheek in the crook of her elbow, Fatma watched the snow outside seem to fall on the mountain of his hunched back and tried not to cry.

When the bell rang for dismissal, she ran to her locker. She had to pass Ms. Richard's room to catch the bus on time. Ms. Richard was laughing with teachers on the opposite side of the hallway. She had her back turned and couldn't see through the crowd of yelling and running students. Fatma held her breath and ducked into the classroom to snatch the last present.

It was still under the tree. One lonely package with a white tag and her name printed in the most beautiful red letters she'd ever seen. Her heart pounding, she started towards the desk and the flair-tip pen but lost her nerve. In the back of the bus, she shredded the wrapping like a tiger and gobbled the chocolate bar and peppermint stick before Naima joined her. She broke the red and green pencils in half and lobbed them at two meek heads halfway up the aisle.

Over vacation, Fatma helped catch up on the wash. Her mother's hijabs soaked in the tub like an underwater garden, and into their soapy midst Fatma pushed her black ones like skinny sharks. Working close to her bareheaded mother, Fatma could count the broken, gray hairs around her face. It was like staring into the mirror at an old Fatma.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Ali was her usual chatty self as she sorted clothes from the hamper. She was in the middle of an instructive story about raising farm animals when she found the crumpled math paper in a pants pocket. Lifting her head like a dopey cow, Fatma nearly laughed and sang with relief. Her mother was furiously shaking the lady with the baby. “Where did you get this?” she demanded.

Before Fatma could fully explain about not doing the math, her mother smiled, suddenly very pleased. “You were right not to participate,” she told Fatma. “This is for Christians.”

Fatma knew her mother would tell everyone about her good Muslim daughter and the Christian math. She knew the Somalis would praise her mother for raising such a smart girl and her mother would deny the praise out of modesty. Then she thought of the candy she’d stolen and the broken pencils and the whole miserable week of smudged, unfinished worksheets like a long, littered path between her and Aabo. She cried, on the edge of the tub, with those big hands of her mother pulling her close.

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