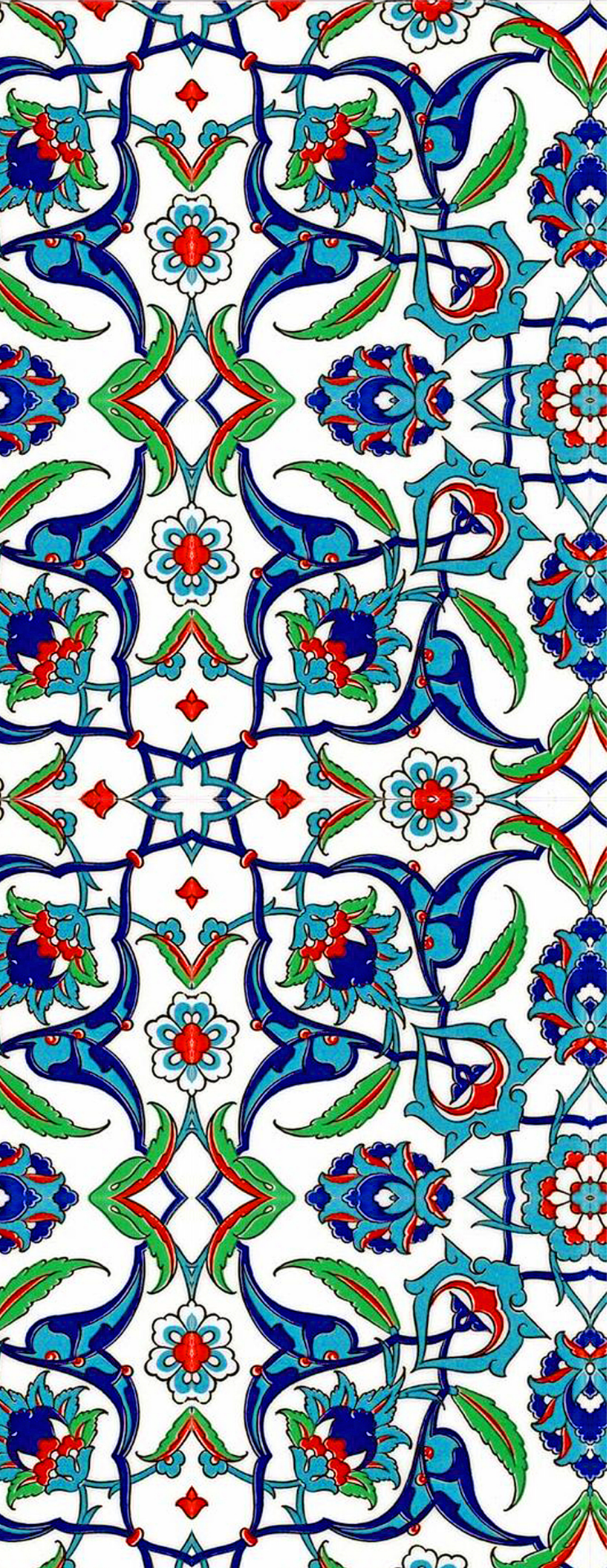


QUARTERLY LITERARY MAGAZINE

Winter 2021

M WORDS

MODERN WRITING BY BRITISH MUSLIM WRITERS

MUSLIM WRITERS NORTH

Dear Readers,

In a world were Muslim representation and creativity is lacking, we welcome you to **MWords**, Muslim Writers North's first quarterly magazine written for and by Muslims.

MWords is an anthology of modern writing by British Muslim Writers. We received numerous contributions and enjoyed putting this collection together. It was extremely important for us to ensure writers from varying backgrounds and lifestyles were represented. This body of work is a testament to our contribution to the literary world as creative individuals and continuing to create a safe space where we represent ourselves.

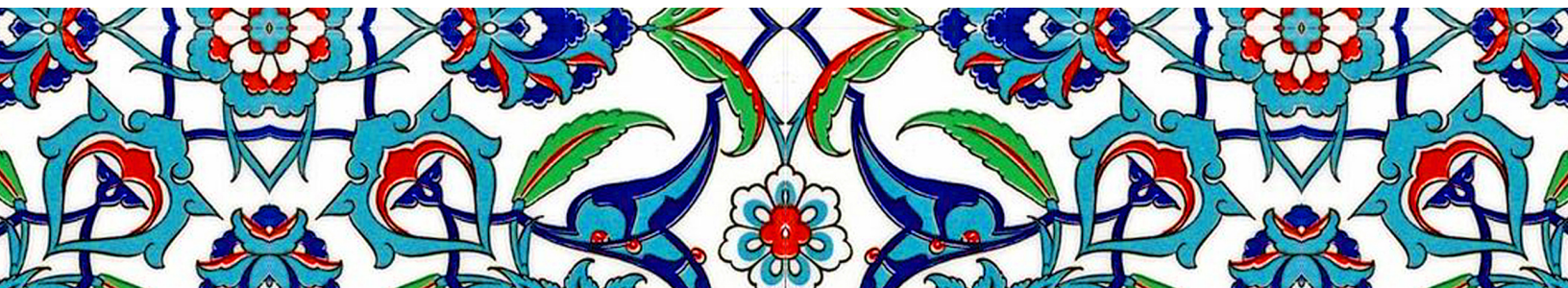
Muslim Writers North is a writer's development agency which supports Muslim writers across the Norther (and further afield) to cross into the mainstream, on page, on stage and on screen.

Our aim is to find and inspire new and emerging writers in different genres, provide an open and friendly environment (from beginners to advanced scribes), develop skills and showcase their writing in an effort to represent them.

We originally launched as *Manchester Muslim Writers* in 2009. We met regularly in locations across Manchester including Shakespeare House, Chorlton Library, Edge Theatre and more recently at the British Muslim Heritage Centre. *Muslim Writers North* now meets at Manchester Central Library. This has solidified the group and the accessible location encourages writers from around the country to get involved.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to M Words; we hope you relish it as much as we have.

Nermeen Salahuddin
(part time lawyer, full time lover of all things written)





"There is something beautiful in rainfall during the stillness of summer. Be it in the fullness of each drop, or how gracefully they fall, one upon another. Be it in the authority it demands, or its request of our silence. Be it in the rhythm of its song, or the way in which it quenches the earth. Be it in its warm embrace, or how each drop drenches the soul. What is for certain; it bids you to remove your shoes and dance."

Monsoon

by Aisha Mirza

Broken Tongues

By Ali Ilyas

Our Fathers have lived alien
far too long to remember they're human.

Displaced their tongues too many
times to remember how it's spoken.

Cut through oceans of an Empire promising success,
yet delivered rains of abuse and nights holding tongues hostage.

Armed with blades and tapes they
tried to mend their English that still remained broken.

They shut their eyes to open up to dreams
that took them back to lands from
which their body was stolen.

Their hearts remained,
never to have the courage to swim oceans to face
people that didn't want them.

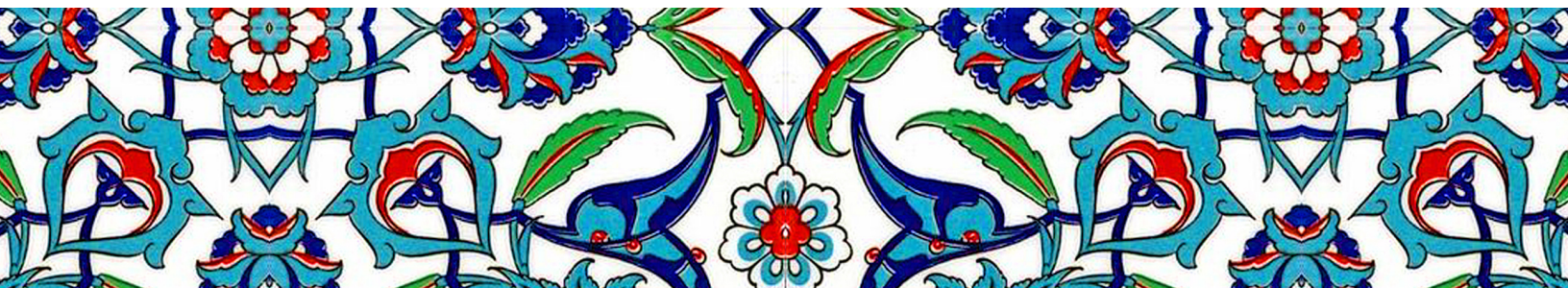
They chauffeured in the early hours
and cleaned drunken vomits with their hands only to raise children that were too embarrassed of them.

Children that grew up too fast to realise broken tongues
don't mean broken minds and love is universal.

Raised children that hid in shades hating them for the
colour in the skin they gave them.

But despite all of this,
despite losing their dreams to tumours
and their children to a language they know not as their own.

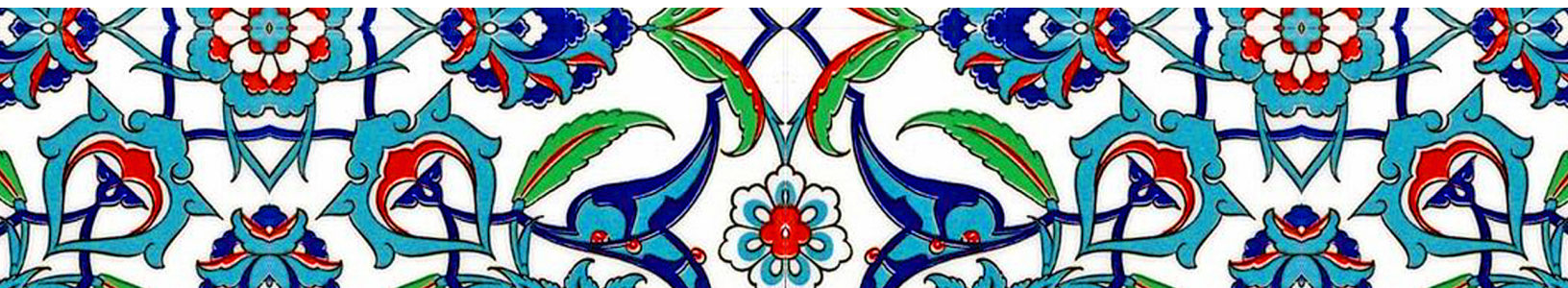
They held on to see their children succeed in roles their eyes were too foreign for.



Consciousness

By Mansoor Shah

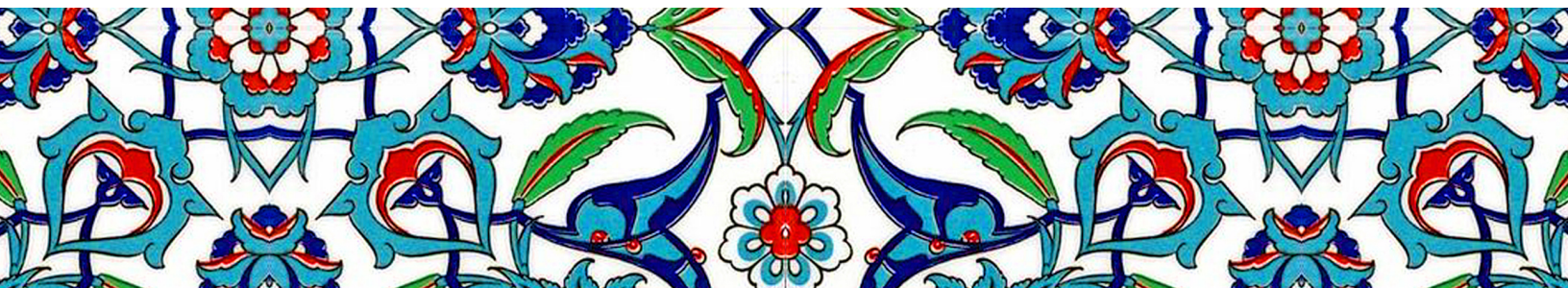
Two bodies, one of emotionless mind
The other of spiritual discerning kind
See their difference of deeds so spread
One alive, the other empty like of dead
The sun obediently divides time into two
Between mountains and oceans of blue
Pursue the light that's been sent down
Take its refuge with all signs shown
Blessed are we to wake up with dawn
Seeing another day of light being born
Opportunity enduing a seeking pardon
lamenting being true adulating devotion
What sincere bliss of warning is to hear
Summoned calling to a deafened ear
Life's journey is of testing peace to find
Spiritual breath given merciful to mankind
Is this consciousness meaning that I exist
I am what I am a devotee to ever subsist



Between the Pen and the Page
By Adil Mulk

Qalam aur siffha ke darmiyaan hai siyaahi
Is aan aur suffah ke darmiyaan hai aagaahi
Is nigah se huah majnoon purjosh
Is sabba se huah 'kaaf nun' khamosh

Translation:
Between the pen and the page is ink
Between the men and the sage is think
From this sight was majnoon's cadence
From this breeze was kaaf-nun's silence



Utopia

by Shahid Iqbal Khan

"Racism doesn't happen anymore," she said
as she quaffed and suppressed her burps and smiled
and clawed for more and more salted peanuts
brushed away the crumbs from her yellow dress
on a May evening in twenty-thirteen.

Is it an illness that has been wiped out?
Was she speaking of a specific strain?
Was it a vision in her crystal ball?
Was she bamboozled by fake nostalgia?
Or did Virgil's River Tiber run dry?

As hate attacks infested the nation
in the leaf of the Brexit leave campaign
did she fuss and think “oh no it’s come back?”
did she carry on her merrily way
in the alley of blissful unknowing

As our very own people were windrush’d
stripped naked of their rights, cancelled outright
defrocked, denounced, dehumanised, destroyed
told to erase their footsteps on the land
did all this register on her radar?

As he implored for his life, "I can't breathe"
tried to tell him but still it, "I can't breathe"
fell on desolate stone ears, "I can't breathe"
George Floyd's murder awoke sleeping giants.
Did it jolt her, the way it did the world?

Exclaim the name of Mohammed Saleem
ruthlessly targeted on his way home
extinguished for simply being Muslim
he never did reach home, to his grandkids
his soul left us in the veil of the night

Every single time I'm shocked by the news
I think back to her, back to that party
and I wonder what she'd say to all this
would she backtrack, spill and swallow her words
candidly, sheepishly, say she was wrong?

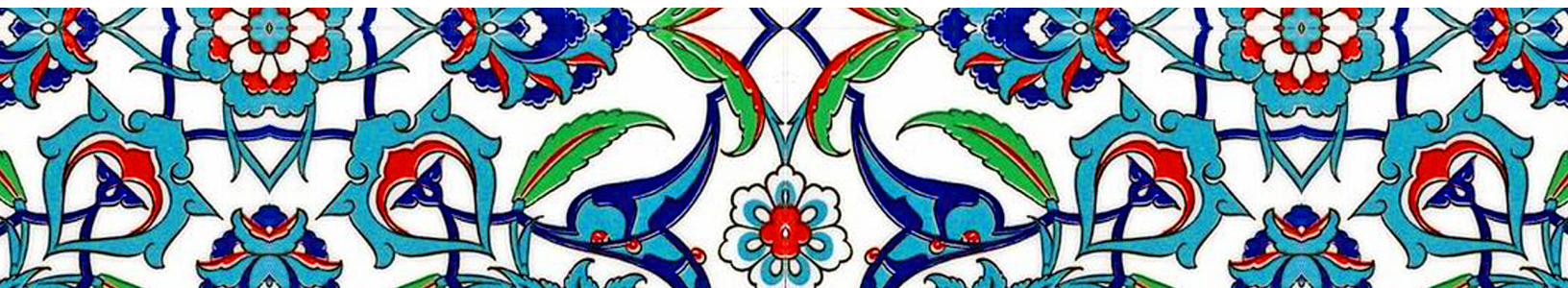
Did I get it wrong? Did I get her wrong?
Was she just seeing life from where she stood
an angle, an outlook, I could not know
was she speaking of microaggressions,
microassaults, against her own brown skin

What she articulated that evening
could simply be a promise, a yearning
a declaration, that it stops here now
that no longer will she tolerate it
no more will she make excuses for it

I go on and still the reports come out
Sewell jewels glorywashing Britain
“let's counter pessimistic narratives”
“more ethnic minorities got covid
because they all live with the elderly”

What if she heard her own charming echo
her voice resonating in there somewhere
in the sewellisms that blot out an ism
like problems quelled in a game of Fortnite
and thought “Racism doesn’t happen anymore.”

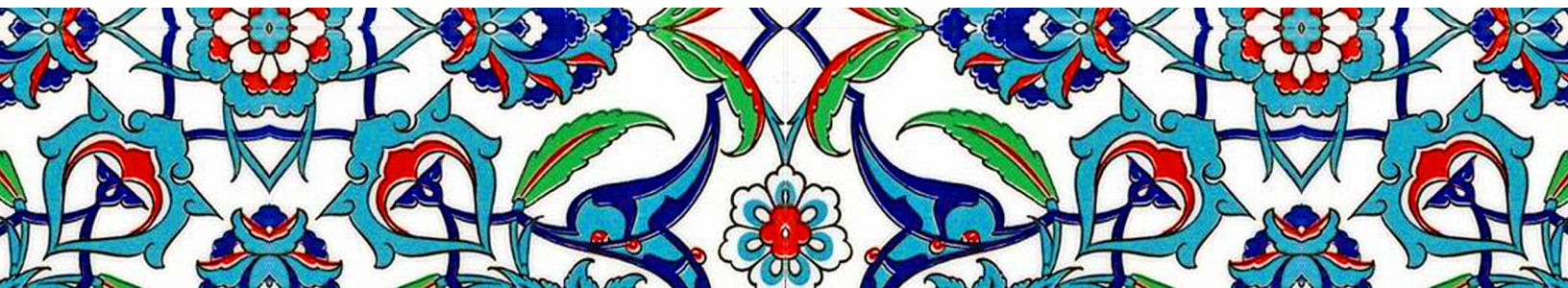
What if instead of quickly moving on
we gave her the space to elaborate
what if I didn't remain so reticent
what if I misunderstood, skipped over,
her words as they travelled from ear to ear.



Smile

By Mansoor Shah

Lingering in the dawn of light
Fragrance words heard to recite
Encircled with love so embraced
Blessings of my salvation faced
With my forehead on the floor
Faithfully your mercy I adore
Another day given is now born
Dedications of your loves yearn
Now that I have seen your smile
My heart is nourished for a while



Why do You Judge Me on The Colour of My Skin — or is it My Religion?
By Sheena Hussain

The truth, you should judge me on my character.
Let this poem serve as a reminder.
Remember that evening excitement invaded
my stomach like knife to bread. Brown hands
plated a three-course meal, snow-capped cupcakes
I baked. You were coming for the first time.
Lost count how many times I carried you in my car:
my culture the elderly are treated like kings and queens.
Even to the point, that morning, I prayed
early hours that you would be in safe hands at the clinic.
After serving my mother,
my hands washed surgically I prepared sautéed mushrooms,
buckwheat (your favourite) and docile chunks
of avocado (my favourite). You were in
no state to hold, fresh bandage wet on your palm.
I prayed your left shoe lace didn't trip you flat to
the ground. The nerves of hand already pinched.
Your neighbours peered, we stood at the door.
As the sun splashed as if water, my heart cooled.Like an
owl scanning a room my head swivelled towards you,
now a shadow exchanging pleasantries with neighbours
who find taking your parcels in, a burden.
Like the tin foils of food you leave me
crushed I swear it was your hand.
My courtesy extends, gifts
to all your lady 'friends' as you call them.
Never would I dream of analysing your belongings,
one always feels when you leave, your grip
has passed judgment on the contents of my abode.
One bitter December as you leave, you try
humour "thank you for serving the wine", you said.
Red hue water of some sort.
To drink in raised glasses is my choice,
as is wearing the veil, refusing touch of man.
And you call me your 'friend'.
And I raise dorsal hands and pray to Allah,
you come to the truth, before your last breath
takes you home.

What is Freedom?
By Sumaya Salam

I received the call. My hands suddenly sweaty from holding the black receiver. It pressed hard onto my ears that they ached, as if the news would be clearer if it was closer. But I heard her. Very clear. Even when the shouting of inmates grew louder.

“Can you hear me? Are you there?” Jessica asked.

A squeak was all I could muster. “Yes, I heard you.”

“And?” she expected a thank you. Oh, yes. I need to thank her. An enthusiastic young lawyer who still believed in the justice system. A system I gave up on more than fourteen years ago. “Thanks, Jessica. I mean it.” She expected more than that, but that was all I could manage.

She began rustling papers. “Well, OK. The judge said you’re free to go immediately and you’ve done the time so I’ll come and pick you up.” Silence. “Aren’t you excited?”

Cleared my throat. “Yes, of course. Thanks. Uh, I need to go. Gotta get back to the books,” I said, aware of Jim Simmons behind me. He was getting restless, waiting to use the phone and his body was getting closer and more intimidating. Get back, I thought.

“Did you hear me? You’re not doing the library job anymore. The judge ordered your immediate release!” She shouted it this time. Lingering on immediate for two seconds longer.

“Oh.”

“Go get ready! Whatever you have in your cell, pick it up and the guards will come for you. I’m leaving the office now and I’ll be there soon. I wanted to give you the good news as soon as I got it!” She sounded much more excited than I felt. Maybe this was a joke. The guards will come for me, take me to reception and then take me back to my cell and laugh at my expense for the next week. Maybe they’ll take a video of my facial expression as evidence to send on the guards’ WhatsApp group.

I put the phone down as she was talking mid-sentence about Mr Richards and how he congratulated her on a job well done. I walked back to my cell like a zombie, as inmates talked loudly to each other. I was one of the veterans here, respected by guards and inmates. It took a while to earn that respect but I stayed out of trouble. A few years of problems but they learnt to stay away. I worked in the laundry room for a few years but then when I gained my high school qualifications, studied a degree and a masters, I was transferred to the library. During that time, I had helped hundreds of inmates to read and study before they left. But I had stayed on. For seventeen years, five months and three days. I looked down at my watch. And four hours and 23 minutes.

I walked into my cell and collapsed onto the bed. 6x8 feet. Every centimetre was paced and no centimetre unstudied. The peeling, green painted walls suddenly looked depressing. The short, wooden desk was filled to the brim with stacked books I had kept and read over and over again. My favourite was The Count of Monte Cristo by Alexandre Dumas. It was tatty at the sides and pages had fallen out but I sellotaped them back in. Tim, one of the nice guards offered to get me a new copy but I said no. This one was special. Given to me by one of my teachers, Ranjeev more than sixteen years ago. I learnt from him in two years more than I ever did in all my education previous to incarceration. But he was dead; a heart attack thirteen years ago. I didn't get to say goodbye or tell him how much he meant to me.

I peeled the five photos stuck on the wall and stacked them on the bed next to Monte. Pictures of the kids when they were six and four years old. Martin and Meesha. They'd be in their twenties now and if I met them on the street I wouldn't recognise them. Rita had asked for a divorce and moved city and changed their surname. Maybe even married with a new family. My freedom and children had disappeared in one day. I could employ a private detective to find them, but there was no point because they would never see me.

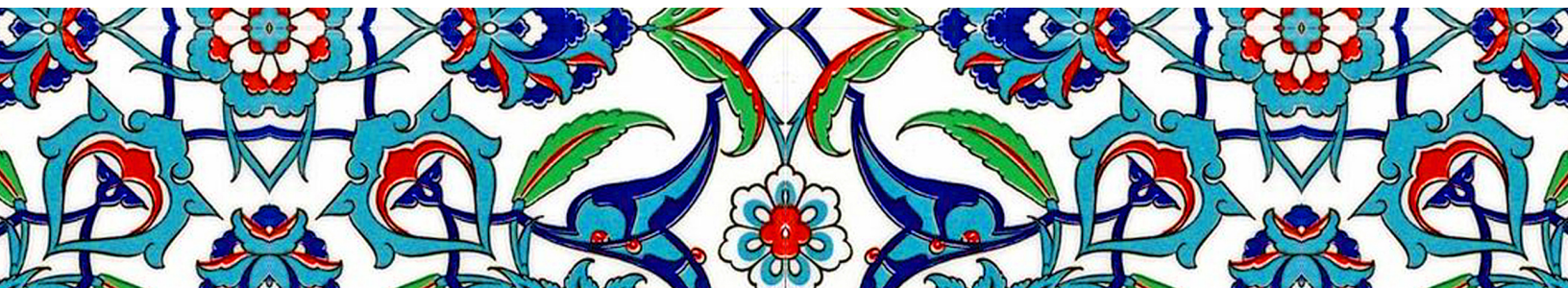
I was the dad who abandoned them. The one who robbed the bank and killed a guard. Or so they say. The three of us were wearing masks and the son of the ringleader had killed the short, fat guard. Not me. I protested for a few weeks, then the gang sent a messenger in the showers and threatened Rita and the kids. So I shut up and accepted my fate. My life inside.

But now the judge said the charges were dropped because the only evidence was a fuzzy tape that had gone missing and a questionable witness. Seventeen years, five months, three days, four hours and 29 minutes late.

There was no one outside for me. Mum had supported me, attending every day of the trial and cried for her baby. But she had died five years ago and I wasn't allowed to go to her funeral. I was deemed a flight risk.

My brothers and sister didn't even come to the trial, guilty by newspapers. A panel of mainly white, female jurors who had already made up their minds. Strong black guy, who had shot a white security guard. Guilty until proven innocent.

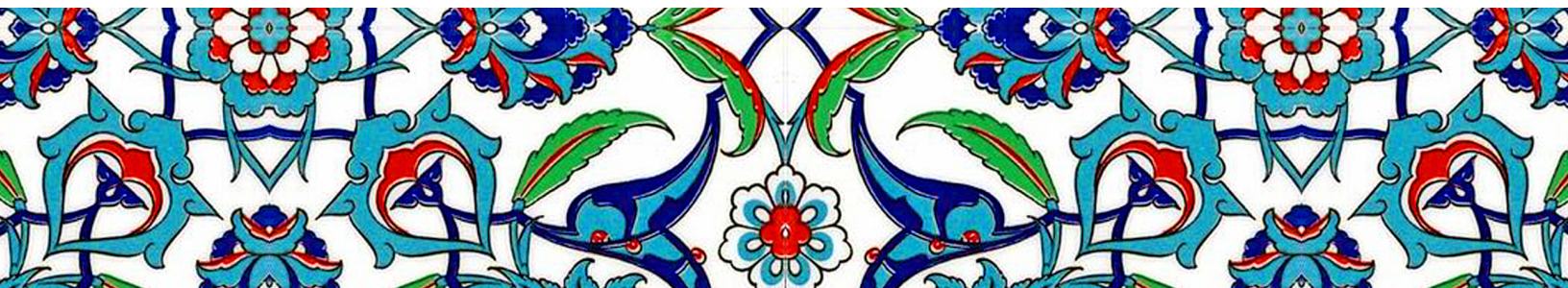
The prison guard stood at the door, frowning down at me. I tucked the pictures inside Monte and stood tall. As I walked out of my cell, he shoved me in one final act of cruelty. Because he could. I sighed and thought about freedom. What is freedom?



Dua

By Asmah Bibi

A head full of dreams
Of a world not seen
Treasures untouched
Buried within me
A sky full of stars
Light up in my head
Miracles beyond imagination
Like the parting of a sea
I can, and I will,
see
the possibilities
that my lord put in me.
Words locked by my tongue
But it is
In my hands
Where lies the key.



Untitled

By Adil Mulk

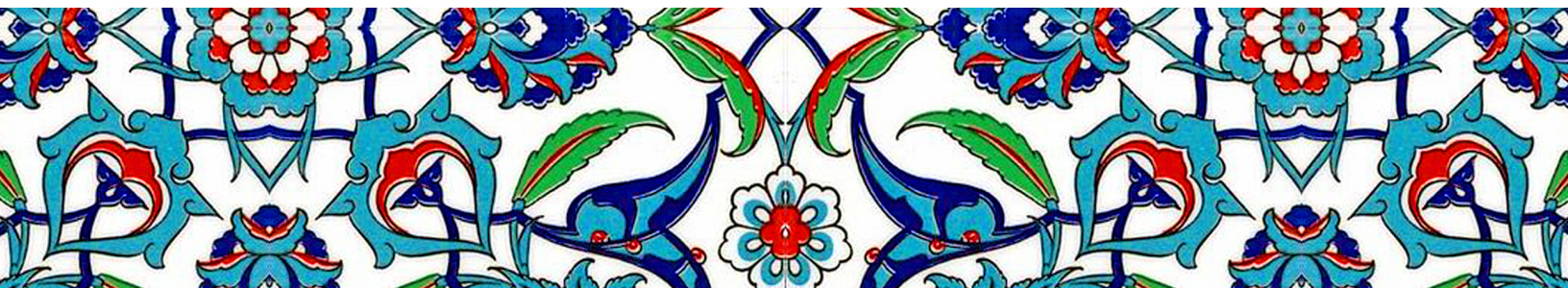
In the beginning there was a glance
An uninterrupted cosmic dance

I turned to we which turned to you
Your majesty veiled by morning dew

The earth exhaled and I inhaled your spirit
The veil becoming stronger and I tethered to it

Until I saw a sign of you in the growing mist
A stranger appearing who I could not resist

He rang the bell from which the fog disappeared
I took a long breath as my lungs finally cleared



A Personal Reflection During the Pandemic

By Muhammad Khan

Most people were confined to their homes during the Lockdowns, but they had the chance to enjoy the freedom of restrictions being eased in-between. I didn't get that chance. I've spent the entirety of the Pandemic living in a psychiatric rehabilitation centre in Stockport.

To give you a fuller picture, I've lived with mental health challenges for the past decade and been detained in different hospitals across Greater Manchester. Over the years I've stayed on acute wards, a rehabilitation unit and PICUs (Psychiatric Intensive Care Units). I've been a resident at the unit in Stockport for more than three years.

It wasn't always like this. Prior to becoming unwell I was studying for an MA in Journalism. I hope to complete my studies one day.

My experience of being sectioned was harrowing. I'd never been confined before. I'd never been observed day and night, unable to leave, unable to do what I normally did. Yet over the years I've encountered remarkable nurses and compassionate patients who've inspired and guided me. They never judged me but helped me on my arduous journey.

Before the start of the Pandemic, I was beginning to enjoy life on the unit, and I was looking forward to going home. Residents had a packed timetable and regular leave to visit friends and family. I joined group activities to the cinema and even went to car boot sales. I also learned how to cook and to balance the books. My psychologist helped me to develop coping strategies. Things might not have been great, but they were good.

However, once the first Lockdown began everything changed. I couldn't go to the shops and a visit to the mosque was out of the question. My GCSE maths course at the local college was suspended and worst of all, leave to visit family came to a complete stop. I recall the sense of desperation at being restricted at every turn like a fly trying to find a way out of a locked room bumping its head on the window. I felt intense claustrophobia. I couldn't shake it off.

The staff at the unit are empathic and tried their best to make life bearable. They let me go for a daily walk to the local park.

What really helped me during this difficult period was that I started to write. I was tired of wallowing in self-pity. I found writing to be therapeutic and liberating in equal measure. Incredibly in the space of a month, I completed the first draft of my Young Adult fantasy, The Fire Mage.

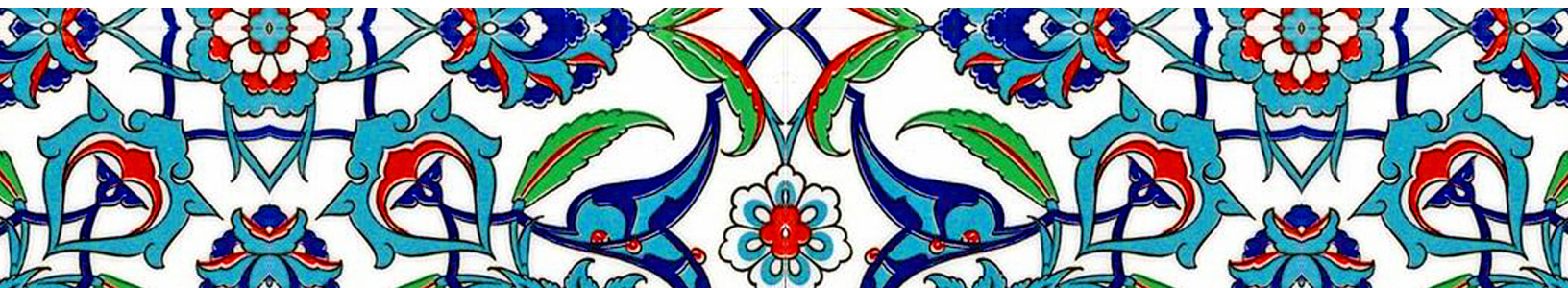
I then started a blog about mental health for which I recently won a Blogger of the Year award. I've also written an article for a journal. I began to contribute regularly to Asian Image and to Mental Health Today.

I've come to see myself as an advocate campaigning against stigma and shame around mental illness. My blog is a safe platform where people can share their experiences without being judged. I've received great feedback from people from all over the world including America, India and Canada.

It now feels like there's light at the end of the tunnel. Life is slowly getting back to normal. I can now go shopping and visit the mosque again. Tragically, my respected father passed away due to the virus but thank God I was able to see him before he died. I pray for everyone who has passed away due to Covid-19.

What lessons have I learned?

I learned patience and gratitude for the blessings we take for granted. Just being able to go out and visit loved ones freely is a truly a great boon. With the ongoing refugee crisis in Afghanistan and Syria I truly appreciate living in a peaceful place, free from bullets, bombs and atrocities. I appreciate having three square meals a day and warm and dry shelter. I've learned to take life one step at a time and to be grateful to God for the big things and the small things too. And I've learned about the healing power of writing and what a remarkable gift that is.



STRAPLINES

by Z. Zareen

Mother: money changes masters.
Its milk finds new mouths to swallow.

Sarai!

Western strangers come here to cremate
the natives with their Doomsday weapons
roared on by double-blinded subjects
in Republican Democrat rallies
a promised land crucifixed to a cause:
all they must do is drink
drink blood.

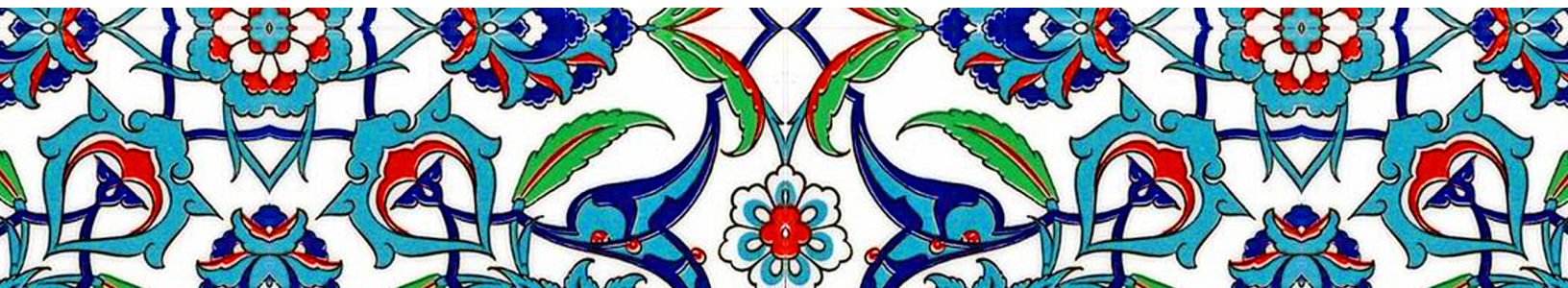
Qurbani

“I have been walking on my stumps
out of the coffins of soldiers
whose language is serial numb-
ers etched on the burnished back of
drones.

Makawa!

Its heft scummed on the palm of a desert
ground from the plump flesh of an Afghan goat
the bone sticks in the throats of invaders.
No they are not supposed to learn.
No they have never learned.
No, they *have* learned

to never.





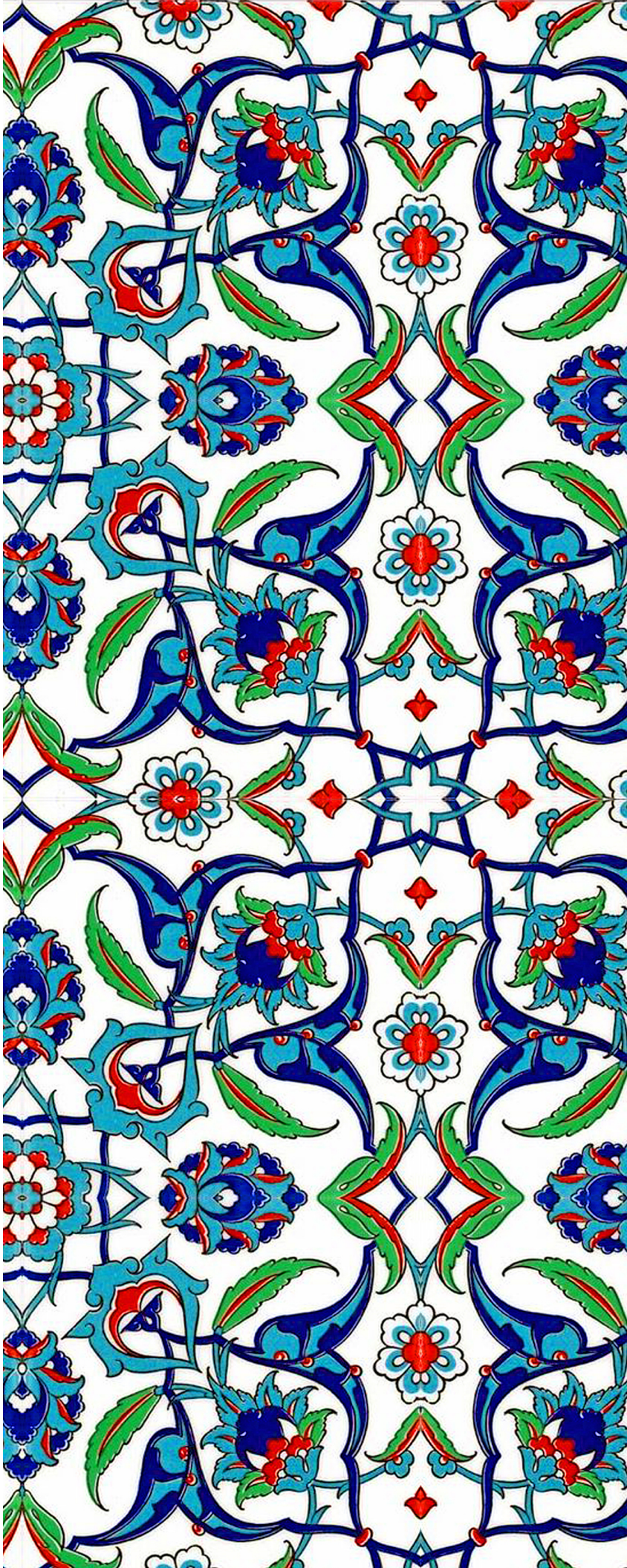
"We all change a little, fade a little, wane a little, break a little, and die a little each day."

-Farewell

Aisha Mirza 2020

Contributors

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Ali Raza Ilyas
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MUSLIM WRITERS NORTH