

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# Nani's salt



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

**But even in her silence, she made a promise. Her daughters would not inherit this. They would not live with hearts clenched in smoky kitchens. They would not measure their worth in teaspoons of salt.**

LAZEENA MUNA

"Amar moto sarata jibon ranna ghore katio na."

Her voice, thin as a whisper, sharp as a blade, sliced through the kitchen air thick with mustard oil and regret. The words echoed, bouncing off stained walls and copper pots that had borne witness to her life. My nani, Morium Nesa, stood stooped over a boiling pot of dal, her saree wrapped tightly around her frail 4-foot 8-inch frame. The smoke curled around her like a noose. But she kept stirring. Stirring was what she knew—what she had been taught to do. Stir the pot, smooth the tempers, swallow the rage.

In the early days of her marriage, my nani held on to the fragile hope of a good life—stitched together with respect, perhaps a little love, maybe a few sweet words under the soft glow of an oil lamp. But promises, like salt in warm water, tend to disappear, leaving only a bitter aftertaste.

The marriage wasn't heaven. It wasn't even earth. It was a battlefield. The daily routines—children, chores, the ceaseless labour of keeping a home—clashed with a sharp mind

that knew it was meant for more. But what wore her down was not the work. It was the anger, rage that sparked over trifles by her husband. The salt in the curry was never right. Too much. Or too little. On such days, her husband's plates didn't stay on the table. They flew crashing into gardens, walls, verandas, wherever the fury flung them.

My grandmother, cheeks streaked with silent tears, would cradle her father's photo, her last anchor to the idea of safety, and cry. Not loudly. Loudness was reserved for men. Her sorrow came quietly, slipping through the cracks of the house, curling into her daughters' ears. Women's grief, in her time, was meant to be swallowed. Like bitter medicine. Endured, not expressed.

But even in her silence, she made a promise. Her daughters would not inherit this. They would not live with hearts clenched in smoky kitchens. They would not measure their worth in teaspoons of salt.

"Not you," she told them. "Not your lives. Not your world."

Her daughters didn't just learn to read. They learned to unlearn. To unlearn the inherited

hush passed down like heirloom jewelry: silent, glittering, and suffocating. They unlearned that a woman's value lived in the softness of her rice, or the approval of a man too tired or too entitled to see her.

My grandmother made sure of it. She didn't just raise daughters. She raised defiance.

Her daughters didn't just learn to read, they learned to unlearn. To unlearn the inherited hush passed down like heirloom jewelry: silent, glittering, suffocating. They unlearned the idea that a woman's worth was measured by the softness of her chal and daal or the approval of a man too tired or too entitled to see her. My grandmother made sure of that. She didn't just raise daughters; she raised defiance. She told them: study. Dream. Break the script. Write your own. A life beyond the kitchen, beyond kitchen and obedience, beyond survival—one made of choice, stitched with dignity.

She never saw education as something to be folded into a dowry list, tucked between Benarasi silks and kansa thalas, one more bharis of gold to sweeten the marriage bargain. It wasn't a clever line on a biodata, recited between sips of syrupy tea, clicks of china and brittle smiles: "The girl knows English." "She can help with homework." "She'll raise clever children". All this murmured, as the matchmaker painted futures where daughters became mothers in someone else's house, their learning neatly domesticated.

Not for her girls. To her, education wasn't a decoration to be admired on the wedding morning, like a turmeric-scrubbed glow. It was something else entirely. Education was the thing no one could take. It was the seed planted in the spine. It was voice, and walk, and the courage to look up. It was how her daughters would learn to name themselves, to write their own futures, to walk streets their mothers only passed in stories. It was not an offering. It was a possession.

Not a bridal ornament, but an inheritance, meant to be kept, carried, and passed on like fire.

**This is an excerpt from the first chapter of Lazeena Muna's memoir, *Kumu*. Read the full chapter on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.**

Lazeena Muna is a global public health and development practitioner, who writes occasionally.

POETRY

# Mosaicked wounds

OHONA ANJUM

This was the way it ended: not with fire, But carried quietly under sleep beds, Toward the rubble-heads, the hollow men's republic.

A vastness aches to be out Like a falcon stoop towards the ground For the first time in its life. Then, days spin across my oceans Sinking tiny bottles of time Lived, Loved, and Buried. Adieu! I said to them, For there is a long travel ahead. I gently push them down. For it is not a time to ponder, The falcon must not hit the ground, There is yet so much flying to do, There is yet so much dying to see. Let the tinted glasses, stack together In beloved red, black and green. They must not let go of their corks Of Sight, Sound, Touch they carry. These sealed-away wounds, cling better than the mosaicked walls, Must not be painted into my common breath. Until my ocean thickens to ink and acid rain, Until the bottles drift, drift and shatter, Until every shard becomes a lidless eye, And every eye a grave.

Ohona Anjum writes, rhymes, and studies English literature.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

POETRY

# The people within me

ADIBA ASAD

I am not a single name. Not a single wound. Not a single sky. I am the echo of footsteps that left, and the silence that stayed behind. A mirror shattered by many suns—each shard a memory, still burning. They passed through me like wind through broken windows. Lovers, strangers, enemies, each carrying a piece of my face, and leaving a name I no longer speak. Even the ones who no longer write, who turned into stone in the garden of time—I carry them in the curve of my hand, in the way I fold my grief like an old letter. There was a version of me that loved them. And died with them.

And I do not bury the dead. I build my home from their shadows. I am not whole. I am the map of exile, drawn with fingers that trembled. A mosaic made of borrowed light, and forgotten prayers. Do not ask me who I am. Ask the wind. Ask the Bougainvillea that returns each spring to the window of someone who no longer waits. I am everyone I have ever loved, even for a heartbeat. Even in silence. Even in ruin.

Adiba Asad is a student at Viqarunnisa Noon College. She writes to explore the hidden architecture of grief, memory, and identity, believing poetry can hold what time cannot.

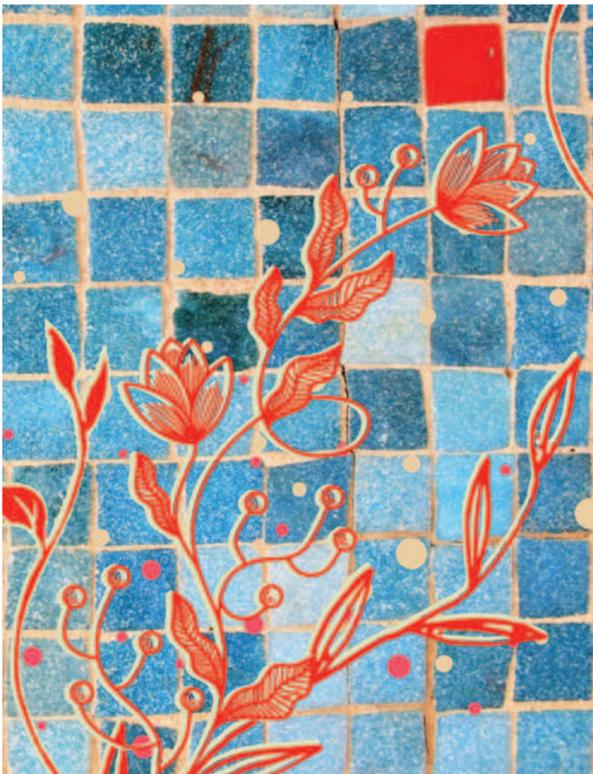


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE



PHOTO: COLLECTED

POETRY

# FRAGMENTS

ZERTAB QUADERI

Grey chips of rough cement  
Rust rubble all around,  
Diamond patterns on a carpet  
Edges frayed.  
Half a tomato, wilted leafy greens on a  
Broken plate.  
The smile of a mother, front teeth

missing,  
The stump of a father's arm  
Raised in prayer,  
Beckon the three- and a-half children  
Playing in the dirt without a care.

Zertab Quaderi is living her dream life: reading books, dabbling in art, spending me-time, and guzzling coffee.

FLASH FICTION

# Polychrome

ATIQA TANJEEEM

I made my first kite out of white paper scraps; on my 16th birthday, it came to me that they needed a pop of color. I put five of the finest highlighters I owned between each finger and dragged the nibs aimlessly, tangling and untangling the swirls over and over again. Matted strands of hair slipped past my shoulders to fall over them, and the colors peddled back to whichever corner they could find, though some scurried closer and closer. The blues and whites crashed into each other at the ends of my hair, the pinks and reds fused into the afternoon sky. A tinge of silver tapped away at the corner of my eyes, its glint stewing in solitude at my parched lips. I saw them push and pull, pirouetting in an uncannily human routine.

In unison, they whispered verses into my ears

**The whispers froze, but I took solace in the fact that they are for me, and only me, to hear. Only I can decipher their language. Only I can press onto my palms the dewdrops they leave behind. Those edges can only taste my blood: rotten, blued or maroon. The copper on my tongue is borne of my own veins, the crescendos of magenta hum on my own vocal chords.**



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

in a language both alien and intimate. Pokémon card sets I had bought with my lunch money, the warbly Rabindra Sangeet from my mother's old cassette tapes that used to lull me to sleep after school; stacks of Barbie CDs collecting dust beside my card sets; bootlegged Jane Austen paperbacks from the quaint bookshop near my school; a Deviser 4040 I never quite learned to strum—each syllable exploded into an erratic saffron alpona. Basalt braided through the curls falling upon my kameez—curls I once wished could have been sleek, satiny and of charcoal. Moonstones swayed in circles around unruly eyebrows, dotting the spot on my forehead where they melted into each other's embrace. The kite broke into pieces, some tearing into my corneas with their

jagged edges as some glided up my bare skin with the caress of porcelain; then it all bled back together into a polychrome mosaic.

The whispers froze, but I took solace in the fact that they are for me, and only me, to hear. Only I can decipher their language. Only I can press onto my palms the dewdrops they leave behind. Those edges can only taste my blood: rotten, blued or maroon. The copper on my tongue is borne of my own veins, the crescendos of magenta hum on my own vocal chords. The ghostly lime greens are mine, as much as the midnight blues are.

They are my prison, and my home.

Atiqa Tanjeem occasionally writes for *Star Books and Literature*.