

A Bird with One Wing

Bina Shah

When the wedding was over, Zarghuna climbed aboard the bus, leaving the evening's cool breeze for the pungent, stuffy air of the women's section. All in all, there were about forty of them – men, women, and children – returning home from the celebrations in a neighbouring village. The women sat at the front, swathed in burqas hiding wedding finery underneath, their faces made up in carefully hoarded foundation, bright red lipstick, eyes rimmed with kajal. Earrings and necklaces clinked as they laughed and talked and gossiped, while children lay bundled up around them, tired and sleepy in the dark. Further back, their husbands sat together in the men's section, rubbing stomachs full from the six rice dishes served at the feast.

It had been Zarghuna's cousin's daughter's wedding; the other women had teased her cousin, asking if she was ready to become a grandmother. She was only thirty-five.

"May you be the grandmother of seven grandsons," they called out to her raucously making her laugh and the bride cover her face in embarrassment, clearly smiling through her hennaed fingers. Everyone knew you needed sons for inheritance, for land, and for feuding. That is to say, for war. Each house had its own graveyard, at the front of which the bodies of recent casualties were buried, each grave marked only by a small, modest stone. The more stones, the more honour for the family.

As she reached the top of the steps, Zarghuna wondered to her husband which seat was a better bet in case of a crash. Her husband conveyed this question to the bus driver, who said a crash would be very inconvenient for his schedule, and both men laughed while Zarghuna chewed on the end of her burqa, embarrassed. The bus driver was her father's cousin's son, a boy she'd known since she was small. He exchanged a few pleasantries with her husband, a little friendly greeting – *May you not get tired* – and the response – *May you never know poverty* – falling easily from their lips, with smiles and enquiries about aged parents and young children. It was improper to address another man's wife directly even if she was standing in front of you, so her cousin did not speak to her, showing her husband the respect he deserved. But he gestured silently behind him to a pair of seats in a better condition than the rest.

As she sat down, her husband moved on to the back, entrusting her to her cousin's silent care. The young man had already pushed the rear-view mirror up to face

the ceiling so that his glance would not fall on any woman's face. The woman next to her, Shugla, smiled and offered her a piece of mithai from the wedding feast.

"Sit next to the window," Shugla said. "I know you get carsick." She got up and offered Zarghuna the window seat; Zarghuna accepted both the seat and the sweet, popping the coconut barfi into her mouth and chewing it slowly so that it lasted a long time.

It was only a two-hour drive from the neighbouring village to their hamlet, in a small enclave of North Waziristan not far from Shewa. There had been some discussion about which route to take: whether the old, winding, single-lane mountain road or the Shewa-Miranshah paved road would get them to the wedding faster. The mountain road was treacherous, the scene of many accidents, but the paved road had more checkpoints, and nobody wanted to shepherd their women on and off the bus to be glared at by the Pakistani soldiers. The decision was made: to take the back road. They would take the same road now, on the return journey, at three in the morning, and would be home hopefully before dawn.

As a girl, she'd dreamed of being married to a soldier. Zarghuna and her sisters used to watch them from a distance, spinning around in their army trucks, tall and authoritative in their uniforms. But there was no question of marriage with a man from the army. They were the occupiers, and she could only ever be married to a relative, or at best a kinsman.

At fourteen, Zarghuna married the cousin she was promised to when she had been ten. She'd accepted her fate as she'd accepted most of the realities of her life: the many children she was expected to bear, the hard scrabble of living on the mountain, taking care of the house and goats, cooking and cleaning, serving her in-laws. Her husband was better than most; he'd finished high school, and he didn't hit her, even though her sisters whispered to her that a man who hit you was better than a man who didn't care.

And life had its bright spots, like the wedding parties they attended several times a year. This was the first time Zarghuna had traveled so far outside the village since giving birth to her son. But it was a special occasion, the first wedding since the truce had been declared between the two warring sides of the family, who had each sworn allegiance to a different warlord in the fighting that was going on around them, here and across that invisible line the Pakistani Army called a border. The presence of the womenfolk was a parley, a promise that trust, like a toppled tree, could take root again and grow in a different direction. The men had still worn their rifles and kept their guns in their pockets, but the bullets were stored separately, as a gesture of goodwill. It had all gone well, and when the bride had been carried in her palanquin to her husband's home, everyone allowed themselves to relax and enjoy the rest of the night.

The bus chugged on, climbing steadily towards home. Zarghuna whispered a prayer as they rounded a hairpin curve; the steep mountain bends made her feel nauseous. Her husband had instructed her not to look down, but to focus on a

point far away, out the window. It was not yet dawn, but Zarghuna sought out the white thread at the horizon that indicated the end of the long night. She wanted to see her son, who was back in the village, spending the evening with her mother, who had stayed home to look after him.

They made it past the turn and were on a straight stretch of road now. She could see Sahar Sthoray, the morning star, glittering in the night sky.¹ Zarghuna cheered up when she spotted it, forgetting her queasiness. She recited to herself, *Which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?* Then a humming sound caught Zarghuna's attention. She didn't have time to register whether it was a military helicopter or just the wings of a giant bird. Just as she turned her head to search for it, there was a loud noise: *dum dum*. And then a flash, and the entire bus shook and everything turned brilliant white to signal the end of Zarghuna's world.

At first, there was nothing. Then slowly sound came back. Zarghuna was standing in the women's public call office and the telephone bell was ringing above her head. She shook her chin from side to side; the clamour didn't stop.

It wasn't dark any more; the weak light of the winter sun, an hour after dawn, pressed painfully against her eyelids. When they finally opened, she saw that she was still in her seat, a bar from the seat next to hers pressing into her waist, right above the scar from her C-section. Then she remembered: the wedding, the bus, the winding road. The heat, the light, the impact. She opened her mouth to scream but summoned no one with her cries.

A drone, she thought to herself suddenly. The word, sharp and pointed, quivering with significance, an odd intrusion into the dullness of her brain. *A drone*, she thought again, and wondered if she'd gotten it right. Why was it so important that she had?

Zarghuna checked her own arms and legs to see if they were still there, and her fingers moved of their own volition to push the bar away from her stomach. Something hurt inside her belly, but not enough to keep her from trying to wobble to her feet. As soon as she was upright, vertigo hit her with the strength of a hammer, and she reeled, left to right, bobbing up and down helplessly. Spinning and ringing, ringing and spinning. She held the seat in front of her to steady herself.

Her fingers touched her hair, and then stickiness. The bus driver, her kinsman, didn't move when Zarghuna prodded his shoulder. Now her hand was on her cousin's forehead, and his skin was still warm. But he was gone, already far away from where she was, moving in a different direction. Her hand, when she removed it from his forehead, was red with his blood, mingling with the floral designs painted on her palms. What about his wife and children, sitting just behind her in the women's section? Had he left them behind or were they travelling to the next world with him?

She looked around but could make no sense of the twisted metal, the shards of glass, and the charred bodies slumped in their seats. Nothing moved; there was only the ticking sound of metal cooling down and the hiss of acrid smoke curling into her nostrils. She would suffocate if she didn't find her way outside quickly.

Zarghuna couldn't tell whether the bus was lying straight or lopsided; only that it was roughly the right side up. She looked for the front door of the bus, but it was welded shut from the heat of the explosion. A cold wind was knifing in through the shattered front windows; too much jagged metal blocking the frames for her to try and hoist herself through. The side windows were nothing more than small squares, lined with iron bars. Zarghuna decided to head backwards, into the bowels of the bus, with the vague thought of finding one of the men of her family still alive. The men would tell her what to do, whether it was safe to go and wait at the side of the road for help from the very military men they'd been trying to avoid.

Clawing, stumbling, her hands pulled her body in the right direction. She held onto burst seat backs for balance, their plastic and stuffing melted into clumps. It was difficult to see the floor with so much debris blocking the way: bags fallen from the overhead rack, shawls, shoes, a Quran. And more women's bodies, or the fragments of them; whatever was left after the drone had found its target, and released its rockets.

Zarghuna passed all the men, dead in their seats, or thrown onto the floor. Broken glass crunched under her feet as she walked by the remains of her husband, her brother-in-law, her cousins. Some were intact, lolling backwards, others were taken apart, like butchered goats. There were empty seats, too, which meant that some had been thrown clear of the bus, a gaping hole in its ceiling. That's where the rocket had struck, blowing out the top of the bus. But it was as if the dead were the living, and Zarghuna, the ghost moving amongst them.

And then the image of her child came to her, the infant who had emerged from her body a wriggling, struggling lump, all elbows and knees and large hands and feet and head. She had been lucky to be taken to the THQ hospital in Shewa for his birth; her husband had wanted his firstborn son to be perfect, and for Zarghuna, his young wife, to survive the birth. She had been attended by a midwife – an unheard of luxury for the women from the more remote villages, most of whom laboured and gave birth in their homes, sometimes dying there in the process.

The moment her son had emerged from the slit in her stomach, everything was wrong and right at the same time. Zarghuna had known it before they'd even told her. Her husband had taken another wife after the child had been born, wanting healthy children that Zarghuna would obviously never be able to give him. She remembered just then that Shugla, her co-wife, was sitting at the front of the bus with her head and limbs blown off. If they had not exchanged seats at the beginning of the journey, Zarghuna would be dead.

Zarghuna's son had been afflicted with mild Down's Syndrome, a diagnosis she had not understood when they told her, and only understood it a little better now. They watched her carefully for weeks after the birth, worried that the news of her afflicted child and the second wife would make her suicidal. They had misunderstood her completely. She had been terrified her child would spend his life crawling on the floor, unable to sit up by himself, talk, or feed himself. The child she got instead was sweet and pliable, sharply intelligent, humorous and loving. He couldn't speak clearly and walked with difficulty, but she loved him all the same, perhaps more, in place of her unreliable husband. Her son was her bird with one wing; she whispered the endearment as she bathed him, rocked him to sleep, nursed him. *Fabi ayyi ala i rabbikuma tukazzibaan . . .*²

It was for her son that she forced herself to take step after painful step, pushing herself along the bus's blasted insides. This was how he felt when he walked. She could do the same for him.

She was breathing hard, sweating with effort. The sickening odour of smoldering steel, chemicals, gasoline, and electrical wiring assaulted her senses. And other, worse smells: charred flesh, burnt hair. But there seemed to be no immediate danger of fire; what flames had burned the bus were already dead. Still, another explosion could come at any moment; drones would often circle back and strike again at the same target. She had to keep going. Onwards she pressed, until she reached the end of the bus. Her husband and his brother had taken the seats at the back, wanting to laugh over silly WhatsApp videos on each other's phones, away from prying eyes.

She could see as soon as she reached them that they were both dead. Her husband's legs were blown off; his brother was leaning forward with his forehead torn open. To the side, the gaping hole in the ceiling reached all the way down to include their window. Cold air whistled in, invigorating her. All she had to do was climb up on top of them, push herself out through the hole, and she would be free.

But she hesitated. Maybe she should stay here until someone came to get her out. Surely it was the safest thing to do. The drone might be lurking around, waiting for signs of life, to strike again – to finish the job. Suddenly she realised that it wasn't inevitable she would get out alive.

For a moment, she considered huddling in the corner of the bus, or crawling under the bodies of her husband and his brother and staying there until death came for her too. The relief that such a decision offered her for those few moments was more powerful than any sedative. The struggle would be over: all the striving and back-breaking housework, the scrimping and saving, the endless need to be cheerful for everyone else's sake. What a pointless charade, just for others to look at – her life with her husband, his second wife, and her disabled child – and still feel superior about. For sure, they would continue to whine about the imperfections and frustrations of their everyday lives, but secretly they were all grateful for

their better fortune. If she gave up now, she could stop being everyone else's cautionary tale.

But just as Zarghuna was about to sink down, she heard a second explosion in the distance – the drone had found its true target: maybe a house in which a militant lived. There were a few in their village, though none belonged to Zarghuna's family or kin.

She stood stock-still. The voices came to her gradually, at first as a wall of sound, then slowly as individual strands of words.

"Allah! God have mercy!"

"Another one! God curse America!"

"Is anyone still alive?"

Zarghuna wanted to call out to them, but fear put its hand over her mouth. Fear of those birds that brought death, that kept them hiding in their houses, that stopped their children from playing outside. Her family had thought it safe to go to the wedding, since it had been a long while since the last drone strike. That calculation had been their last mistake. And now forty of them had met God, but not her. And not her son, her bird with one wing.

Soon there would be the growl of the military cars coming to check on the strike and eventually the wailing ambulances arriving from Shewa Hospital. All that fuss for only one survivor.

Zarghuna whispered to herself: *Which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?*

She put one unsteady foot into her husband's seat, where his legs had once been, then the other, balancing herself against the skeleton of the bombed-out bus. She glanced down to check the steadiness of her position: her toes were blue and cold in her wedding sandals, her nails painted pink a million years ago for the occasion. She climbed carefully out through the window, pushing her head and shoulders out of the broken pane of glass.

The villagers on the road, milling around the bus, spotted her and began to shout encouragement. "Subhanallah! A survivor, praise God!"

"Khoray, that's right, come on, you can do it!"³

"We'll take revenge, Khoray, if it takes a hundred years!"

She knew their vows served no purpose. They could not stop the drones from coming. All they could do, after it was over, was sort through the bodies, and protest with raised fists against the killer in the skies.

The villagers kept cheering her onwards. Strong arms reached for her, to help her climb down. The black burqa flapped around her as she emerged, like the wings of a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. She tried to keep it wrapped around her head and mouth, conscious of her honour. If she died, they would tell her son that she'd behaved like a proper Pashtun woman even in the face of death.

When she felt her feet touch the icy ground, she collapsed, trembling, onto her side. Dust filled her nostrils, and she coughed hard, her lungs seared with the heat

and smoke from the burning trees that had caught fire from the explosion. The ambulances and fire tenders were already there, rescue workers and policemen swarming all over the road. Zarghuna closed her eyes and waited for one of them to notice her. Now her job was done, and it would be up to all the others to bring her back to life.

If she listened very carefully, the voices of the shouting villagers started to blur into the sound of a muted trumpet – Jibrael’s on the day of Qiyamat. Tomorrow the mourning would start, and perhaps in a hundred years there would be revenge. But Qiyamat was a long way off, and her son was waiting for her to return. She closed her burning eyelids and saw her son’s face, his smile, and she stretched her arms and legs out, to swim like a dolphin in the epicanthic folds of his eyes.

“A Bird with One Wing” by Bina Shah was first commissioned for and published in *The American Way: Stories of Invasion*, edited by Orsola Casagrande and Ra Page (Comma Press, 2021).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bina Shah is a journalist and author of five novels and two collections of short stories. Her latest novels are a feminist dystopia, *Before She Sleeps* (Delphinium Books, 2018), and its sequel, *The Monsoon War* (Delphinium Books, 2023). In 2022, she was awarded the rank of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the government of France.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Sahar Sthoray is the Pashto name for Venus.
- ² Arabic, from *The Quran*, Surah Rahman: *Which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?*
- ³ Khoray is the Pashto word for *sister*.

© 2021 by Bina Shah and Comma Press

Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license

https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_02004