



Mahmudiyah

by **Katie Rose Guest**

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We're all dead down here together. There is a special place reserved for us, for women who died the way we did. One woman, from your country, says it reminds her of something she heard about before we came here, *support groups* she called them, where women sit together and talk about their problems. But now that we're dead, she says, What the fuck do we have to talk about? Her neck is ringed with purple, her finger with a gold band. She says, with a laugh, that the rings go together. She is very strange, but I like her.

I only arrived here yesterday and she is my first friend. She says she's been here a long time, but that she can't remember days any more. She gestures at the stone dome above our heads and says, It comes with the territory.

I'm glad that all the women speak the same language. At first I was afraid I would be lonely, when I saw from how many different places we have come. I thought I would sit alone in the stone caverns and listen to mere babble for eternity. Instead, we were granted magical comprehension.

The strangled woman asks me if rape is even a crime in my country. I tell her, Of course it is, just like murder. We are both surprised by the other's words. Maybe we do have things to discuss, after all, maybe this is why we're here: it is important that people understand each other, even in death.

I look down at my chest, at the hole. It is rimmed with crusted crimson that has stained the cotton. My mother's sister wove this fabric. She spun the thread on a wooden spindle crafted by her husband. My mother's family has made fine fabric for a thousand years. They have made it for kings.

For the last few months I've washed my clothes in water that I carried in buckets because the bombs blew our water away. I felt like a stinking donkey, hauling water for cooking and cleaning. We were never sure if the water was safe, even as we gave it to our children to drink.

After the bombs, your soldiers came in their loud trucks every week to search our houses. They would mock us. Once, a soldier ripped the veil from my neighbor's face. He stood close and yelled, but I could only understand one English word: *Spy! Spy!* Then he called her *ugly* in our language so we could all understand the insult. The soldiers laughed, and their teeth were very white. As they drove away, their trucks throwing dust in our faces, all I could think of was the whiteness of their teeth. I'll have to ask my new friend here about it. How can it be that every man's teeth are so perfect and straight and white? Teeth

should be like faces, with different colors and shapes and personalities.

After the soldiers ripped her veil, my neighbor entered her home and did not leave it again, even to get water. So I hauled extra water for her family. That is, until yesterday. Everyone was forced outside yesterday when the men returned. And now I'm here. I don't know who will bring her family water now. But really, I don't know if any of us will need water any more. I look around the cavern for her face, but I don't see it.

The floor of the cavern is dry, the air is cool, and I no longer feel thirst. It is a relief.

Yesterday's final insult to our village was easy to understand, even though the men only spoke your language, only spoke in low voices. I don't know if the one who hurt me was the same man who stole my neighbor's veil. They all look the same with their uniforms and shaved heads and sneers and half-dead faces. These are barely-living boys. I pity them, even as I hate them.

Understand: I don't hate them for what they did to me. I'm strong and my spirit will outlast all of this. But my babies never had time to become strong in themselves. Already I feel my memory of them slipping away along with my mother's worry.

I don't know where my children are. They have slithered down the cracks in these timeless rocks to drift alone in the intermediate void, voiceless, faceless, incomplete.

For that, even I would strap a bomb to my chest, lie down in the soldier's home one night, in your country, where he believes he is safe with his wife, his children, lie down on the floor and sleep until we all sleep in fire together.



About the author:

Katie Rose Guest teaches writing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Most recently, her fiction has appeared in *Ecotone*, *Flashquake*, and *Descant*. She is currently finishing her first novel.

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