

Creative Writing Program: **Storytelling**

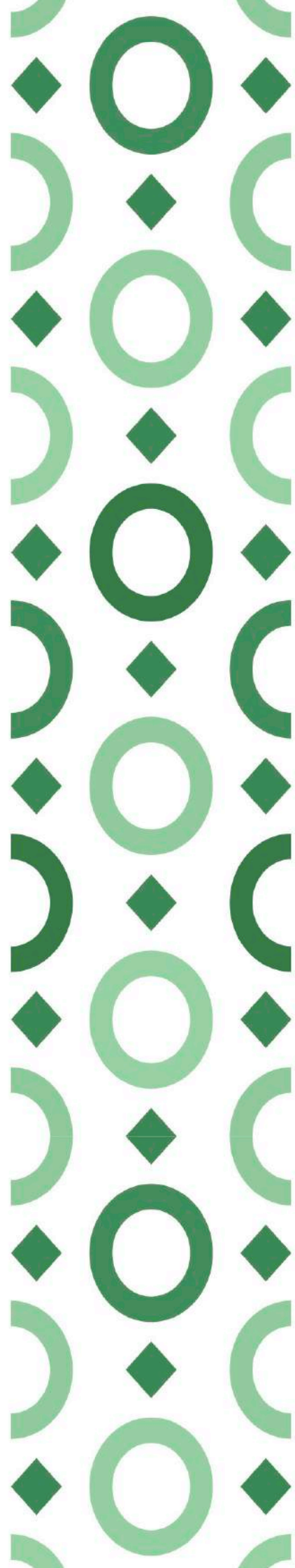
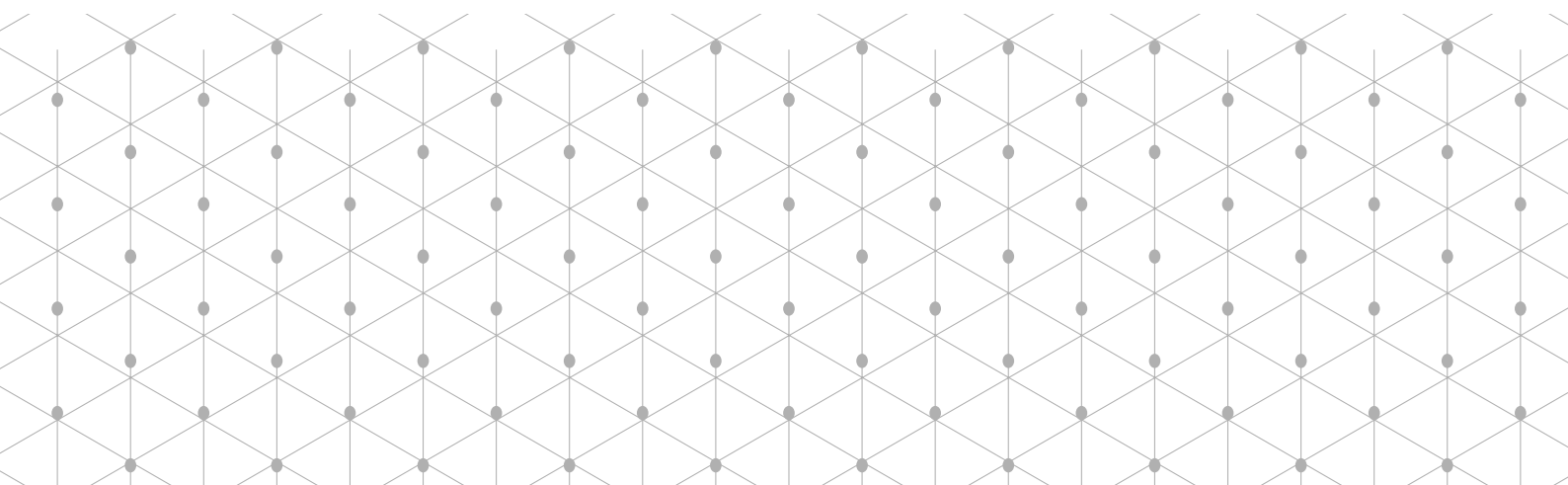


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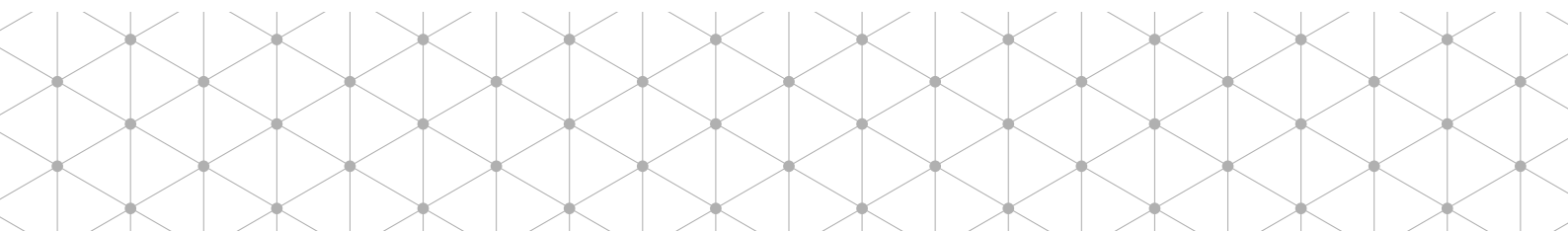


Introduction

Afghanistan remains one of the most challenging places in the world for women in terms of living, education, work, and civil activities. The difficulties facing Afghan women have intensified since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, resulting in their experiences and challenges remaining largely hidden from the global community due to restrictions on media and news channels in Afghanistan. Thus, raising awareness of the current situation of women in Afghanistan remains a significant concern.

We are delighted to announce the release of the first edition of our Creative Writing journal. This edition showcases seven stories written by young women who participated in a series of online sessions conducted by an expert international instructor. Each story sheds light on the challenges that Afghan women face in various aspects of their lives, from dealing with complex family and societal dynamics to escaping oppressive and discriminatory government. Our primary aim with this creative writing program is to empower women and girls in Afghanistan by nurturing their writing skills and providing a platform for their voices to be heard.

We would like to express our appreciation for the bravery and tireless cooperation of our young female participants in writing the stories, the respective instructors for their kind support in delivering the sessions and dedicating their time to assist the young women and girls in Afghanistan, Ms. Sharbari Ahmed, and the dedicated executive team of APT for the effective management of the program and guidance provided to the participants.



About Us

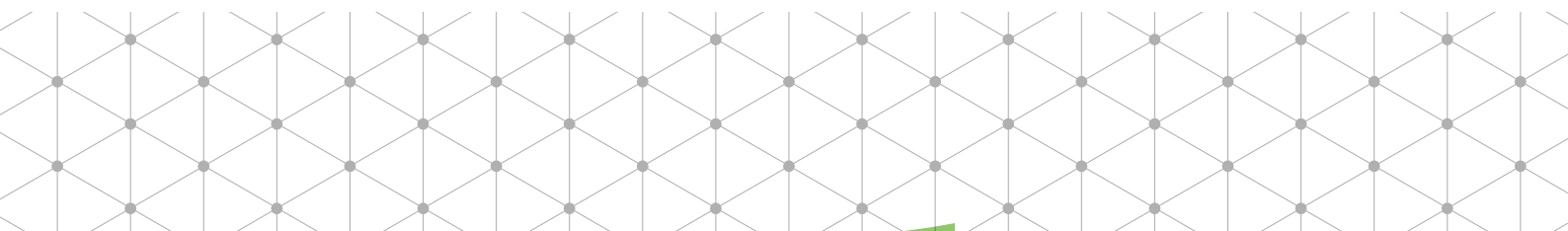
Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) is a youth-led nonprofit organization in Afghanistan that actively addresses human rights crises, with a specific focus on women's rights, while simultaneously promoting girls' access to education through creative and impactful initiatives.

APT's initiatives encompass a range of key areas. It connects female university students in Afghanistan with mentors from abroad, forging valuable relationships and providing guidance. APT also facilitates networking opportunities for youth, both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders, to encourage open dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition to these endeavors, APT is preparing to equip a team of young women with expertise in the "Internal Family System (IFS)" trauma healing technique. This training will empower them to offer healing sessions to others and create safe spaces for family members in need of support.

Furthermore, APT offers a platform for young women to express themselves by writing and publishing their stories, particularly significant under Taliban rule.

Over the course of its 13-year existence, APT has successfully fostered meaningful engagement among young men and women. Through discussions and dialogues, they have influenced policies prior to the collapse. These conversations center on critical topics and propose solutions for a better Afghanistan and a better world. APT's work has played a pivotal role in shaping policies on both national and global levels, owing to the development of leadership and critical thinking skills among its participants. Since its inception in 2010, APT activities have impacted and inspired over 60,000 youth and children to build a vision for a just and inclusive society.

You may read more about APT at: www.aptyouth.org



Bitter Blessing

Is it a boy? Doctor, please tell me! Is my baby a boy?” Her green eyes held a desperate plea as she tightly clutched my hands, waiting for positive news. Her hopeful smile, though crooked, revealed the weight of her expectations. It was as if the gender of her child held the key to her entire world. I longed to grant her the happiness she so desperately desired, to make all her desperation vanish. But once again, fate had dealt her a cruel blow. She welcomed yet another beautiful baby girl into the world. Fatima, now a mother to seven daughters, was considered the unluckiest woman in her family.

The toll of her difficult life was etched on Fatima’s face. Forced into marriage at just fifteen years old, everything since then had been like a never-ending nightmare. Six times she had given birth to daughters, only to be met with beatings, curses, and denial of meals with the family because she was seen as a woman with bad luck. Her daughters, like their mother, were denied the love and joy they deserved in their childhoods. They too endured beatings and were forced into early marriages—struggles that no young girl should ever have to face.

As I delivered the news that it was another girl, Fatima’s hope shattered before my eyes. Suddenly, we heard someone knocking on the door—it was Fatima’s husband anxiously awaiting an update. As I turned my head back towards Fatima, I saw her dishevelled hair and anxious eyes scanning the room frantically. She muttered words of desperation under her breath: “What should I do? What should I do?” In a raw moment of despair and without thinking twice, she impulsively exchanged infants with another newborn nearby—she didn’t want this girl; She couldn’t bear to see her life unravel any further.

I looked at Fatima in shock and confusion: “Fatima! What are you doing?” But before I could question her actions further, loud voices erupted in the corridor outside our ward. A little girl rushed towards us with messy hair and dirty clothes—her eyes filled with fear and worry. ‘Mom? Mommy?’ Her trembling voice echoed through the room as tears streamed down her face. ‘Dad is here... What should we do? Dad said he doesn’t want us anymore... Dad keeps saying he will kill you... Mommy, what should we do? Where should we go?’

Unable to bear witnessing her daughter’s tears and hearing those heartbreaking words any longer, Fatima fled from the ward as fast as she could — I followed closely behind. As we entered the corridor, I saw someone slap Fatima hard across the face — a brutal act that sent her crashing to the ground right in front of me. Doctors rushed towards us while nurses tried to calm down Fatima’s husband.

“God damn you! What should I tell our relatives? What is wrong with you? Why are

you so unlucky?” His shouts reverberated through the hospital walls — each word dripping with venomous anger and frustration. Witnessing this scene of cruelty and despair tore at my heartstrings — I yearned to intervene and prevent further pain — but the helplessness of the situation paralyzed me in place.

Then suddenly, one brave doctor called out to him — her voice trembling yet courageous: “Listen! Stop shouting! This is a hospital — not your home! She is your wife; you have no right to shout at her! A man should be happy to have a girl! What is wrong with you?”

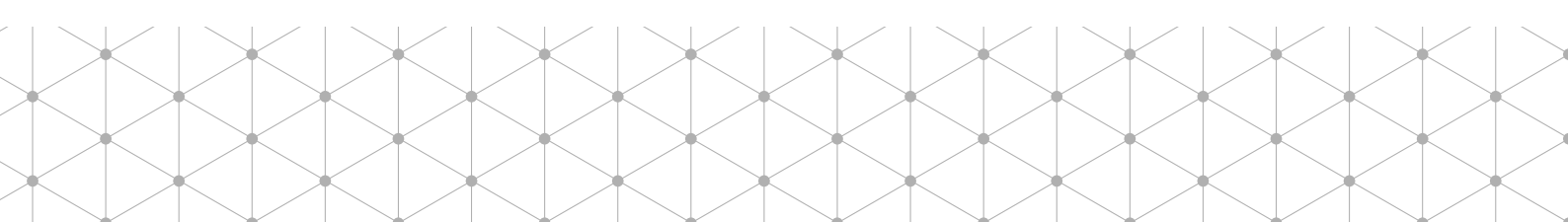
The man’s laughter cut through the air like a knife — a chilling sound that sent shivers down my spine. “Happy? What did you say? should I be happy? Why? No... this won’t work! I know she’s miserable — it’s all her fault! I can’t let my family and relatives say bad things about me... I need to end all of this.” With haunting words, he left the hospital, abandoning his baby girl, his little daughter, and the woman who was once his wife. The weight of witnessing this heart-wrenching moment hung heavily in the air. It was a moment of overwhelming devastation and anguish.

Fatima isn’t the first woman I’ve seen facing this harsh reality, but she represents millions abandoned for giving birth to a baby girl — beaten and considered unlucky for bringing a daughter into the world. In that moment, my thoughts raced a million times over these harsh realities.

The heartbreaking scene in that hospital corridor is not an isolated incident; it’s a reflection of a broader issue deeply rooted in our society. The plight of women and girls in Afghanistan is a stark reminder of how cultural norms and conflict have shaped a reality where daughters are seen as burdens rather than blessings.

From the moment a girl is born, the shadow of ill-fate begins to loom. I don’t know if we should blame our traditions, our people, the women, or the ceaseless strife that has prevented us from recognizing and embracing the truth: that girls, just like boys, are precious gifts from God.

- Safia Akbari



The Dark day of my life

The sun was shining brightly as I woke up that day. I felt excited and full of energy. I had just finished my exams, and the summer holidays were upon me. I couldn't wait to spend my days laughing and having fun with my friends. Little did I know that this day would turn out to be the darkest day of my life. I wished that I hadn't woken up on that day and couldn't see my nightmare in the day.

The morning sun shone brightly through the window, casting a warm glow on the breakfast table. The sound of birds chirping outside was a stark contrast to the silence inside the house. My mother's worried face caught my attention, and I could see that she had been crying. As I asked her what was wrong, the TV flickered to life, and the headline "Taliban Takes Over Kabul" flashed across the screen. My heart sank as I read the article, and I felt a wave of shock wash over me. It was like a nightmare come true, and all my dreams for a better future seemed to fade away in an instant.

As my mom told me about their past stories, it wasn't believable. I thought it was a bad experience that removed from the destiny of my country, but no, it wasn't. We turned back to 20 decades ago, and Kabul wasn't as before, with new people among the community which lived far away from humanity and got prosperity on the life of each of us. It reminded us that every day is changeable, and we can see the nightmare in the day. They became our main purpose of disappearing from the community and exiled us from the connection of the real world and humanity. They win to disappear all daylight of our life and put us in the darkness of literacy and success in life. As we, as a girl, weren't a part of the society and behaved like we do not exist in real life.

As the day progressed, more and more news started pouring in. People were being arrested, houses were being investigated, and all the people from my country raided the airport and tried to escape from the country, which is like their birth place and their ethnicity. They did this for their lives, and they were in danger, and chaos took over the city. I felt like I was living in a nightmare. But what scared me the most was the fact that they had closed all schools for girls.

I had always dreamt of getting an education and becoming successful in life. But now, that dream seemed impossible. I felt like all my hard work and dedication had gone to waste. The thought of not being able to go to school made me feel hopeless and lost.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. I watched as boys went to school, while girls were forced to stay at home. I longed for the day when I could go back to school and continue my education. Every night, I dreamed about my ambitions, desires, wishes, and goals.

In January, our school called us for our midterm exam results. I was nervous as I made my way to the school. But when I received my result sheet, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had gotten the first position in the class with high scores. My hard work had paid off, and I felt proud of myself.

But my happiness was short-lived. The school promised to reopen its doors for the new academic year, but they never did. Boys could go to school, but girls still couldn't. It felt like a cruel joke. The right to education, which is a basic human right, has been taken away from us. I felt a wave of shock and disappointment wash over me. I couldn't believe it. All my hard work, late-night study sessions, and sacrifices seemed to be for nothing. I felt like I had let myself down, as well as my family and teachers who had high expectations for me. I felt like a bird trapped in a cage, unable to spread its wings and fly free. The world seemed much crueler than I had ever imagined. But I didn't give up. I turned to writing and poured my heart out on paper. Writing became my best friend, and it helped me express my feelings in a way that nothing else could.

The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months as the Taliban tightened their grip on Kabul, imposing strict rules on the people. They closed all schools for girls, leaving them with no hope for education. It was a dark time for the people of Afghanistan, especially for the girls denied their right to education.

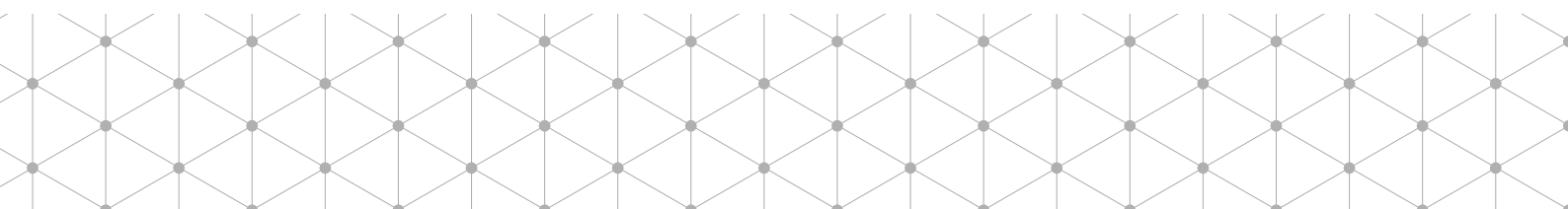
As the reality of my failure set in, I fell into a deep sense of despair. I couldn't stop thinking about what this would mean for my future and how I would face my parents. I felt like I was drowning in self-doubt and regret.

The following days were some of the darkest I had ever experienced. I felt like I was in a constant state of sadness and hopelessness. It was hard to even get out of bed, let alone face anyone else.

But the reality was harsh: the Taliban had imposed their strict rules on the people, with no intention of letting girls go to school. It was a difficult time for all of us, but I refused to give up. I knew that education was important, and I was determined to fight for my right to education.

So, I turned to writing. I wrote about my dreams, my hopes, and my struggles. I wrote about the pain of not being able to go to school and the fear of never being able to achieve my dreams. Writing became my escape from the harsh reality that surrounded me.

But even amid all this darkness, there was a glimmer of hope. The world had not forgotten about us. People from all over the world were fighting for our right to education,



and their voices were being heard. It gave me hope that one day, I would be able to go back to school and achieve my dreams.

It's been 864 days since that dark day of my life, and I still count each moment. But I haven't lost hope. I know that one day, I will be able to go back to school and achieve my dreams. Until then, I will continue to write and fight for my right to education.

The right to education is a basic human right that should be available to everyone. No one should be denied this right, no matter what their gender or ethnicity is. The Taliban may have taken away our right to education, but they can never take away our determination and our hope for a better future. We will continue to fight for our right to education until it is granted, and we can finally achieve our dreams.

- Anonymous

Silenced Dreams

Luna was a force of nature, a whirlwind of passion and determination that captivated everyone she encountered. From a young age, she exuded an indomitable spirit that set her apart from her peers. Her golden hair, pink cheeks, and piercing green eyes seemed to mirror the intensity of her inner drive. She possessed an insatiable thirst for knowledge, devouring books on a wide range of subjects and engaging in lively debates with anyone willing to match wits with her. Her intellectual curiosity knew no bounds, and she approached every challenge with a tenacity that belied her tender age.

But it wasn't just her intellect that made her stand out; it was her unwavering sense of justice and compassion that truly set her apart. She possessed an innate empathy that allowed her to see the world through the eyes of others, and she was quick to champion the rights of those who were marginalized or oppressed. Whether it was speaking up for the rights of girls in her community to receive an education, or advocating for the protection of the environment, Luna was always at the forefront of the fight for justice. Her voice, though soft-spoken, carried a weight that demanded attention, and she fearlessly confronted any injustice she encountered. Her ability to connect with people from all walks of life was nothing short of extraordinary, and she had an uncanny knack for making even the most downtrodden souls feel seen and valued. Her infectious laughter and genuine warmth created an aura of comfort and acceptance wherever she went, and those who crossed her path were forever changed by her presence.

Luna's love for adventure was as boundless as her love for humanity. She sought out new experiences with an insatiable hunger, eager to immerse herself in different cultures and explore the wonders of the world. Whether it was trekking through lush rainforests, scaling towering mountains, or wandering through bustling city streets, Luna approached each new experience with wide-eyed wonder and an open heart. Her thirst for adventure was matched only by her deep appreciation for the beauty and diversity of the world, and she embraced every moment with a sense of gratitude that was palpable to all who knew her.

Despite the challenges she faced, Luna never wavered in her pursuit of her dreams. She refused to be limited by societal expectations or gender stereotypes, and she blazed her trail with unapologetic confidence. Her resilience in the face of adversity was nothing short of inspiring, and she never allowed setbacks to dampen her spirit. Instead, she viewed each obstacle as an opportunity for growth and learning, and she emerged from every trial stronger and more determined than before—except for an unfortunate event that affected not only Luna's life but all the girls in her land.

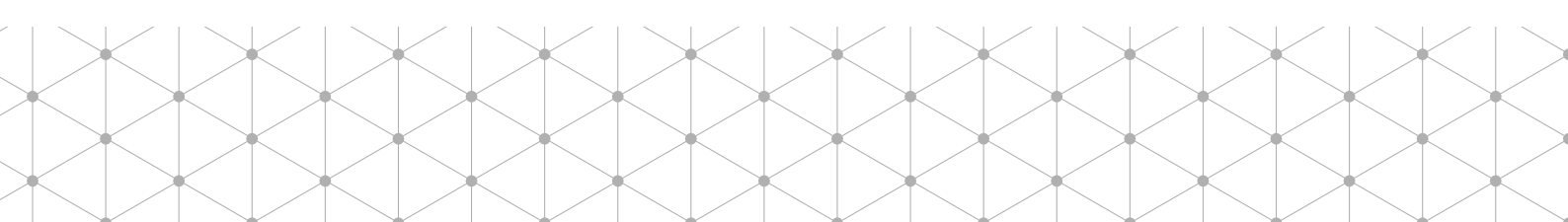
She was just in 10th grade when the oppressive regime swept through the country, bringing with it a wave of restrictions and fear. Suddenly, Luna's world turned upside down. The school she loved attending was closed, and she, along with all the girls in her land, was forbidden from continuing their education.

The event shattered Luna's world. It left her feeling weak and powerless, unable to muster the strength to fight for her dreams. The lack of growth and opportunities for girls in her society haunted her, and it seemed like her country would never be able to compensate for the loss.

Years passed, but Luna remained trapped in the suffocating grip of the Taliban's rule. She longed to continue her education, to experience the joy of learning, and to contribute to her community. However, the oppressive regime had taken away from her freedom and left her feeling limited and hopeless...

On an ordinary day, Luna attended school, studied, and chatted with friends before saying goodbye. The next day, the Taliban took Kabul, closing schools for girls. Luna didn't see her friends and classmates again until today. Overnight, her world turned upside down, and forced goodbyes, marked the beginning of a dark and challenging chapter in her life.

Her family, fearing for her safety, made the difficult decision to marry her off and flee to Iran. At the tender age of 17, Luna found herself in a loveless marriage, far from everything she had ever known. Her dreams of education and independence seemed like



a distant memory as she struggled to adapt to her new life.

Her mother-in-law, a cruel and manipulative woman, didn't miss the chance to exploit Luna's helplessness, making sure to make Luna's life a living hell. Constantly berating her and undermining her relationship with her husband, Luna felt isolated and alone. The pressure to conceive weighed heavily on her, and when she finally gave birth to a girl, the mistreatment only intensified. Despite the hardships, Luna refused to let go of her dreams. When the Taliban's rule finally ended, and girls were allowed to study again, she mustered the courage to ask her husband for permission to pursue her education, but his harsh words shattered her hopes once more, leaving her feeling defeated. As the years passed, Luna's spirit remained unbroken, but the scars of her past continued to haunt her. She never achieved the independence and fulfillment she longed for, but her resilience and determination never wavered.

In an alternate reality, where Luna could have pursued her studies, she might have become a prominent poet, weaving tales of hope and resilience that would inspire generations. Despite the absence of that opportunity, Luna's unyielding spirit has left an enduring mark on the world.

I can't help but admire her strength and resilience in the face of adversity. Yes, she is my mother, and her story is a testament to the indomitable human spirit. She faced significant challenges and couldn't fulfill all her dreams, yet her incredible strength and determination shine through. Her ability to persevere through hardship and continue inspiring those around her is a remarkable achievement in itself.

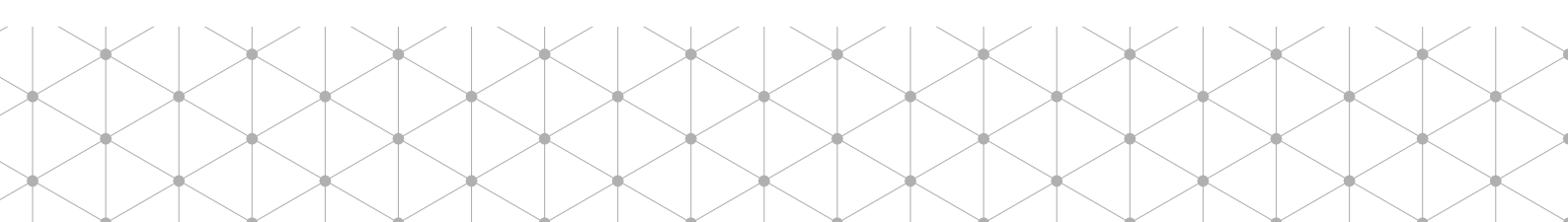
This is not only Luna's story, but thousands of Afghan girls face similar fates and experience moments that bring tears to their eyes and disgust in their throats.

Today, the story repeats itself after 25 years, with the same incident unfolding for two generations. It feels as if the same fate is awaiting us, as our strength is taken away, leaving us with a dark and uncertain future.

I often find myself wondering if we can rise again, achieve our dreams, and muster the strength to fight. Or do we let go of our dreams and face the shadowy destiny that hangs over us like a dark cloud?

On the eve of the third anniversary since the fall and change, I still gaze at the presidential crossroads with regret, concerned about the possibility of witnessing an improvement in the condition of our people.

- Muzhda Karimzada



The Wings of Hope

Stepping through the corridor to go upon the stage, in a conference where everyone is there to listen to untold stories, I feel extremely nervous and still wonder how I managed to come this far from home, Afghanistan, and share the most poignant moments of my life. I am about to chant these stories for people who may have heard about them, or some who may have witnessed similar experiences as mine but probably did not feel as determined to take the steps I am taking now. As I think, I feel courageous and find myself right upon the stage. At the first glance, my eyes meet Maryam, not only my best friend but also my soul mate. I see a huge smile on her face that accelerates my courage and enables me to start my speech.

Here I go;

On one of the days of God, at the peak time of school, I was lost in my thoughts when a hand hit my shoulder. As I turned back, Fatima and Maryam were there, looking at me so curiously. “Something must have ended up that you are thinking as if you decide to bring about a global change, don’t you?” Fatima asked. With no answer from me, we laughed. I welcomed them to sit down near me on the bench, and we talked, maybe exchanging our thoughts on the selection of our field of study, as we have been doing most of the time when we could find the right time. The fact that both of my friends, Maryam and Fatima, come from the most traditional families should be considered. Their families possibly do not allow them to live their desired lives, which means it would affect their field of study as well. They should obey what their parents’ rule guides them, even if the rule is to pursue education not higher than high school. As we chatted during breaks between study hours at school, I truly understood that despite such a significant barrier, their family’s mindset, they were both determined to convince their parents to study what interested Maryam and Fatima. Maryam’s dream career was engineering, and Fatima’s was business. As for me, I dreamt of becoming a leader. This time, I suggested a list of courses where the three of us could prepare for the Kankor examination. After much deliberation, we decided to enroll in the Kaaj Kankor preparation course, a choice that I wish we had never made.

Time went on, and it had been about two years of studying at Kaaj. During this time, we were not only busy with studying but also broke many taboos in our families and society. We deserved awards for what we had achieved. We defied arranged marriages. We defied the notion that “girls could not ride bicycles.” We overcame the fear and insecurity brought by the current regime for women. Tick Tock Tick tock! Consequently, four weeks remained that Maryam, Fatima, and I would take the entrance examination of Kabul University. As always, Kaaj would hold a pre Kankor test at the end of each week, and since we were so close to the real exam, a huge number of participants were joining the exam. It was Friday, and yes, we were in the center. Before entering the exam hall,

Fatima reminded us of the commitment we had made to increasing our score in the week before. Maryam and I waited for a while and just looked at each other with a world of confusion in our sights. Since it was unheard of and unusual for Fatima to mention the commitments, we had made for our goals, I was sure that Maryam was thinking exactly like me. As she followed me to Fatima's chair, we were getting closer to the line of chairs. Fatima's eyes were reflecting a meticulous charisma that I gave her a hug and thanked her for the reminder, and so did Maryam. There was no empty seat for both of us near to Fatima, so we preferred to sit in front of the class, somehow steps far from Fatima. All students had their test papers in front of them, waiting for the teacher to end his spectacular few-minutes inspirational speech. Moments passed. Almost everyone had solved half of the questions on his or her test paper.

I read the question, which ended up being the last question. It was about the history of Afghanistan.

How was the life of women in the Widi era (the first civilization in Arya or current Afghanistan)?

- A) They were oppressed
- B) They had social freedom
- C) They were convicted
- D) B and C are correct

So close to ticking B, the right option (they had social freedom), I was pushed from the back to the ground by a heavy force. When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing but dust surrounding me, as though a storm had come from outside the hall, swirling around the room and the chairs, like a scene from a movie I had watched long ago about the Second World War. Wait! I was feeling pain all over my body, which meant it was not a storm, but an explosion in the hall. Despite the pain and injuries, I searched for Maryam and Fatima to ensure they were fine. Brushing the dust off my clothes, I tried to find a way to reach the chair where Maryam was sitting. Here, I guessed the chair in front of me would be the one Maryam was there. But no, she wasn't. I turned left, then right in search of Fatima, but could not find her either. I had completely forgotten about my own pain; however, neither Fatima nor Maryam were in the hall. My attempts to find them failed, and I was no longer able to endure the situation.

Later, I found myself on a bed near a window at the hospital. Like an absent-minded person with ambiguous and hurtful thoughts. I thought to myself that I cannot carry this heavy story alone and decided to share it with the world and add some of my words to those who are tired of war, like me. Looking at the audience, I continued to speak. "It took me months to accept that Fatima was no longer alive. The one who once made me

feel like a special person in this world, that friend who was not just a friend but a part of my family and soul. We had planned to get to our goals together, but destiny had written something that did not match our desires in life. Was it destiny that really killed innocent people? Destiny or terrorists? Destiny or an ignorant group of people who are against education and freedom? Like me, who else has lost their friends and families? Of course, millions of people!” As I spoke, my words, filled with the pain in my heart, touched the audience’s hearts and brought tears. I saw Maryam among the audience; she wept and understood more than anyone else what I meant by my words.

- Zakia Mirzaye

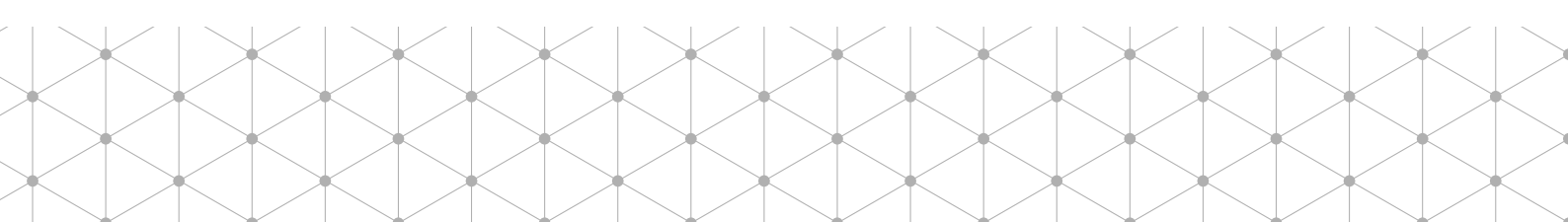
Echoes of Suffering

It was a cloudy day, and the leaves were falling gracefully, signaling the beginning of autumn—a season that tests nature’s limits and makes it stronger. On that day, I accompanied my grandmother to the passport office, trying to clench my jacket tighter in an attempt to deal with the piercing cold wind that seemed to seep through every layer of my clothes.

As we entered the office, we found ourselves among a long line of women, each struggling with their ailment, waiting impatiently to receive their passports. The room felt suffocating, filled with agonizing stories, each settling on my shoulders like a heavy burden that I could not let go. Listening to their stories, all I wanted was to do something, anything, to change their situation. However, what could I do?

Amidst the chaos, my eyes captured a woman who was sitting far away from her family. Seeing tears streaming down her face, something inside of me knew that she had a story to tell. Mesmerized by her aura, a young woman’s voice caught my attention, “After I lost my brother due to suicide, I don’t have any reason to live, and I don’t want to come out of my room. After my father’s death, he was the sole provider for our family, covering all our expenses.” Her voice cracked with a twinge as she uttered these words. As she recounted her story, the room filled with different kinds of reactions. “It’s alright, you are young, keep yourself happy.” “Your brother was really ungrateful to kill himself.” “Perhaps he was involved in criminal acts or drugs, and his guilt drove him to suicide.”

The weight of their words ignited an intense blade of frustration and anxiety within me.



Another woman began to dissect the plight of her own family member and brought my attention back to the estranged woman. “My sister-in-law, Zarmina, embodies the same characteristics. She is sick in the head, and it is all her family’s fault. She has two children, and she will never be a good wife or mother again,” she said, pointing to the tearful woman. Some nodded in agreement at her declaration while others remained awkwardly silent. Into this uneasy quiet, an irrational voice tried to impose its own twisted logic, “Have you sought an exorcism? Maybe she is possessed by a jinn?”

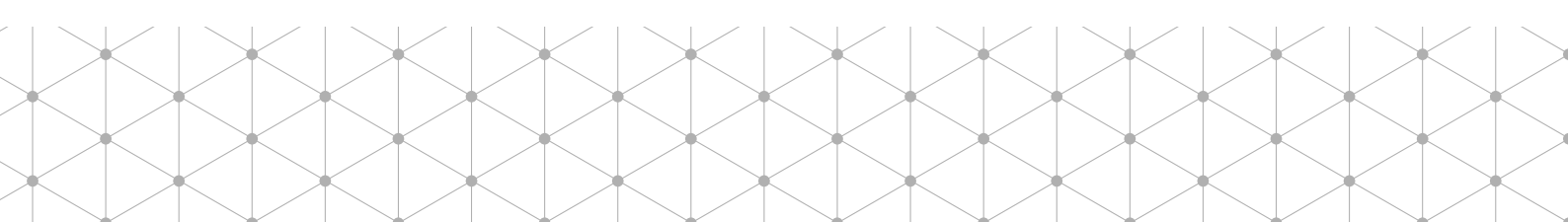
Enveloped in a storm of emotions caused by their judgments and horrible advice, I approached Zarmina. I started talking to her by gently introducing myself. “How are you feeling today? Do you want to talk about it?” I asked. She tried to answer, but the words seemed to stick in her throat like a bitter pill. But just as I thought she might never speak, Zarmina interrupted my questions and asked if we might go for a walk, away from prying eyes and critical ears.

As we were walking, the tension started to release, and Zarmina finally opened up to me in a way that left me reeling.

“In bed for four months, unable to walk. Doctors were unable to determine the cause of my ailment. Electrical shocks were my only visitors in mental hospitals. My family hates me, and I have grown to believe that I am nothing but a heavy burden,” Zarmina said.

Her thoughts raced uncontrollably through her mind until they were all-consuming and intrusive. Then, amidst this sea of pain, she uttered the most heartbreaking revelation: the loss of her baby at nine months of pregnancy. As the room buzzed with conversations, my grandmother’s voice broke through the murmur of the crowd as Zarmina’s words trailed off into silence once more. Zarmina hugged me tightly as we parted ways, and in that moment, she murmured those words that will stay with me forever. “Perhaps all I needed was someone like you to listen without any judgment.”

- Anonymous



Shadows of Loss

As memories quietly slip away, his deep and mysterious eyes linger in my mind like a shadow. I often go back to the times we spent together, but now he's off on a solo adventure, leaving behind a trail of thoughts.

Someone wakes me up, and I strain to see. Is it him? Are they carrying him in a casket? People surround us—men and women, my small family. Mom, my younger sister, and I are left with only the memory of my twin brother.

It's been three days since he left us. People move around in black clothes. Why the tears? Was he a chapter in their stories, or are they shedding tears for our sad journey? Sad faces, like the ones at Dad's memory, now fill our home. The first year without Dad was tough, but Mom used to say, "Don't be sad; we still have your brother." Now, he's off on a different path too.

The shocking reality is that the Taliban violently took away my brother's life. Why must they be so heartless? It's as if they are sinister shadows, devoid of humanity. They manipulate and control, forcing girls into marriages against their will. But it doesn't stop there; they snatch away the basic rights of education and work—the very tools that light up a future for these girls.

Now, what's our next move? I need to figure out a way to escape from their grip, but how? The air is thick with uncertainty. What steps should we take in this confusing situation? The desire to break free from their control is growing stronger, but finding a clear path forward is challenging. How can I navigate through all these obstacles and ensure our safety?

Again, I'm stuck in a lonely room alone with my thoughts, thinking of getting out of Afghanistan. Our safety is in immediate danger if we stay here, so the seriousness of our predicament is overwhelming. I suggest leaving after having a heartfelt discussion with my mother and sister. Mom objects at first, which I can understand considering the situation, but after some thought, she finally accepts leaving our homeland.

Our destination is set on Pakistan, our secure place in these uncertain times, only to find the way blocked because they require a male travel companion. When I see this obstacle coming, I have a bold idea that I won't take lightly: I cut my hair to walk in my brother's shoes. This transition seems plausible because of our similar facial features, expressive eyes, and identical hairstyle. The idea of cutting my hair turns into a moving representation of the difficulties I face. I'm struggling to make my way through a complex web of misfortune after losing both my father and my brother. The moment has come for us to travel to Pakistan since we have no choice but to flee because of the Taliban's brutal rule.

When we confront the various challenges life presents, it's like attempting to put together a complex puzzle where every piece is weighed down with its own uncertainties. Knowing that there would be Taliban present made me anxious about our travel to the border. Although we are spared the immediate danger; we do experience a small sense of comfort as we arrive in Pakistan unharmed.

Although Pakistan provides a refuge, living there comes with its own set of challenges. Everyday problems include the unfamiliarity with the language and the complexities of adjusting to this new environment. My sister and I work in a sewing store to support ourselves; it's a meager wage that helps us survive. However, the specter of an unpredictable future weighs heavily on our current situation.

In the middle of these challenges, I can still clearly remember him and his penetrating look. Even after forty years, tears remain an uncontrollable reaction to such a great loss. But even with this persistent melancholy, there is a faint strength, a persistent reminder of people's ability to find bravery and resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity.

- Salma Juya

THE END

