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Who are not, but could be

Fleas dream of buying themselves a dog, and nobodies dream of escaping poverty... The nobodies: the no-ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way. Who are not, but could be. Who don't speak languages, but dialects. Who don't have religions, but superstitions.

—*Eduardo Galeano, The Nobodies*

“To God, my name is Zöhre. By man, I am called Enebay.”

Zöhre was named after her grandmother, and so to deflect the evil eye from both her and her namesake, she went by a blessing instead: Enebay, “grandmother’s riches.” I met her on my first day as an English teacher at the school affectionately referred to as “Number Six” in Turkmengala, Turkmenistan. The head teacher sat me down in her office, which had been the toilets twenty years ago when the town still had plumbing under the Soviets. Now the teachers and children use overflowing outhouses on the edge of the schoolyard; the old water pipes buckle out of the earth, skeletons of progress still haunting this forgotten village. As it was my first day, the head teacher fed me tea and bread with plates of cheese and pickles, and I met the other teachers as they came to rest their feet in her office during free periods. Most did not speak any English, and my Turkmen was still new and clumsy. I could understand niceties, make small talk. Enebay taught math, and babbled to me for what seemed like hours, nervously thumbing her large bronze brooch as I nodded dutifully. At some point she was crying, and I understood something about fire—fire, or maybe grass, it was only a tonal difference. She went on and I dumbly replied “*kyn, kyn*”—“hard, it’s hard”—to her lamentations. At the end she wiped her eyes and complimented my Turkmen. “You understand so well,” she said, and patted my face. “It’s hard everywhere, Enebay-teacher,” I replied, ashamed of my falsehood. The head teacher, who had been grading papers silently in a corner the whole time and who seemed to be on to my ploy, explained to me in broken English that the woman’s sister had set herself on fire the week before and was currently dying in the hospital.

WHEN MOHAMMED BUOAZIZI, a Tunisian fruit vendor, set himself on fire to protest the humiliation he'd suffered at the hands of a municipal official, he inspired uprisings in over a dozen countries. But women have been doing it forever: for every man who sacrificed himself to fire in this Arab Spring, there are hundreds of women who commit this same act every year—women have been throwing themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands throughout recorded history. They chose fire because, as keepers of the hearth, it is their domain. They chose fire because in it beats the burning heart of God. In Zoroastrian times, fire was sacred, and men and women alike had to keep their mouths covered whenever they approached it, so as not to pollute it with their breath. The custom has since evolved: now married women must cover their mouths around males and any of her husband's family members. They are not to pollute their in-laws with their breath, much less their speech. Young brides must be especially diligent around their husband's families, biting their scarf in their teeth to be sure it never falls away from their lips. It is traditional practice for a woman to be abused by her husband and in-laws—most brutally at first, to put her in her place. Alcoholism and heroin addiction among men are rampant; unemployment rates astronomical, and now even the breadwinning is often left to the wife—along with the child rearing, housework, and eldercare. But when women took back fire to make their unhappiness known, it wasn't enough.

Self-immolation is perhaps the most spectacular form of protest: a sacrifice to a cause so urgent it's not only worth dying for, it's worth dying painfully for. It imbues those who chose it with a frightening moral authority: Tibetan monks, Vietnam war protestors, and Arab Spring demonstrators all come to mind. Yet in the history of immolation, women get left out. Or perhaps they merit a throwaway mention: women, after all, have been casting themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands throughout recorded history. But it is not unusual for a Central Asian woman to set herself on fire to escape mistreatment by her family, out of the shame of sexual abuse, or to protest a match she cannot abide. It is not unusual, but it is shameful, kept secret. It is an act of utter hopelessness: an offering to God within a religious framework that reviles suicide, yet makes a concession for suicide bombers. We say, from the outside, that it is an act of utter hopelessness—but what do we know of their ambitions towards heaven? We say it is an act of utter hopelessness, but it is one that, when performed by a man, was transmuted to hope by the anger of millions of oppressed countrymen. The countless women who have

died in the same manner remain silent in their graves. Their deaths were inadequate: a woman makes even fire effete.

Maybe it is simply that these deaths are not truly protests, but escape maneuvers. They are not the dramatic spectacle we think them to be; they are not a wild, accusatory gesture, but a quiet bowing-out, a plausible excuse—the manner of these suicides is a form of obedience. *What a terrible mishap*, her family can say to the neighbors. *Who knew that our furnace was so faulty?* If a woman survives her suicide attempt, she will claim the burning was due to her own carelessness in the kitchen, in order to protect her family's reputation. Most doctors know better, however: the arm that she used to pour gasoline all over her body is untouched by the flames.

I FEEL SOME TREPIDATION in writing a feminist piece. Many of the women in my generation view feminism as this unpleasant, militaristic thing: it has been made into a masculine, aggressive war of the sexes. The prototypical “feminist” we commonly think of takes up arms too readily; she plays too well at a man's game, and so alienates many of the women she fights for. Though the feminism of our mothers sprang out of a social climate quite different from that of today, many young women are hesitant to reformulate feminism to meet modern needs, partly wishing to distance ourselves from the much-maligned term, but also because we are hesitant to question the feminism of our mothers, at risk of seeming ungrateful to those who secured so many of the rights we now enjoy. But now that we can extend our scope more globally, we find that the needs of the “modern woman” are more nebulous than ever. Now, there is so much to ask for that we must begin by asking for less. What we want to see is a laying down of arms. What we want to see is mercy. This is not an assertion of equality, a demand for respect. The respect will come. First we need your pity.

THOUGH THE BORDERS BETWEEN MOST CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES are impermeable, many women have converged upon the same solution: fire. In Afghanistan it has become such an epidemic that the government finally had to take action last year, launching a preventative media campaign in an attempt to temper the plague of self-immolation. The ads, educating the masses under the pretense of “kitchen safety,” emphasize the excruciating pain of burn wounds as the main deterrent for these acts. Yet pain is no threat to these women: they already live in

it. Even if Afghanistan's formal justice system were totally restructured, it wouldn't matter. Most Central Asians use traditional family-based systems of justice to settle disputes involving a quorum of elder men; a woman's grievances, if she will bother to speak them, are heard only by her male relatives. There was no news article when Enebay's sister died. There wasn't even a police report. The brutal rape and subsequent death of two Indian women have made international news, finally. The details are horrifying. They are grotesque. Yet they are not uncommon.

In my first year in Turkmengala, rumor had it that seven girls committed suicide. A neighbor's daughter killed herself by drinking concentrated pickling vinegar. Rumor had it her uncle had raped her and she didn't see herself as fit for marriage. Without her virginity, what was she? She lived for one day after she swallowed the vinegar; the acid melted through her clothes, her mattress, she bled through her skin. When they propped her up to clean her, they could not tell where the bed ended and her body began. Even the hospital didn't have any medicine, so they painted her body with yogurt, hoping it would help neutralize the acid. The sinner whom God will not cure must rely on the mercy of medicine; that is, if she has access to any. There were all too many testaments to failed suicide attempts walking around the village—swaths of scarred skin peeking out of the long sleeves and flowing scarves of housewives in the bazaar.

Most Turkmen girls watch Mexican soap operas and Bollywood movies every afternoon and dream of rich men with roses in their outstretched arms and diamond bracelets in their pockets. They dream of intrigue, of drama, of romance. They dream of choice. This is a dream their mothers don't understand: there is nothing more borrowed than desire. (Their mothers had their own dreams, once. Under the Soviets, they were promised equality, freedom, respect. But, like running water, like medicine, like good roads, this dream went away when the Russians did). Now young girls read their horoscopes every morning with fervor, hoping that their futures might be influenced by something more beautiful, more mysterious than the tribal genealogies their parents marry them by. Love, as it is depicted on television, is self-annihilating, is transformative in the same way that death is. But rising expectations have only led to increased frustration. Most of these girls are killing themselves for love, or for lack of it. They wouldn't see their deaths as having anything to do with politics. When you have been deprived of a voice all your life, you don't expect your death to make a sound. But while the men are killing

themselves in front of the surveillance cameras monitoring embassies, the women are suicide bombers of their own homes.

“She has a djinn that follows her,” it was sometimes explained. “It makes her do things, things she would not otherwise do.” I rented a room in a Turkmen family’s household, and our neighbor Hateja had been haunted by a djinn—an evil spirit—all her life. When she was a child it would tell her to hang herself, it even showed her where to find the rope. She refused it as best she could, but sometimes could not resist it. It’d made her cut her long hair off once—the pride of any Turkmen woman. No one else could see the djinn but Hateja, though it would appear in pictures beside her as a vague shadow on the ground with no body casting it. To this day she still has souls in her; she dreams of snakes often, can feel them writhing under her skin. “If I do it,” she’d say, referring to the sin she had so long managed to refrain from, “just know it wasn’t me.”

“We are good women,” Hateja once told me. “We used to be warriors; all the jewelry we wear was once our armor. Now we are good in a different way. We are quiet. Obedient. We are good like a child is good.”

BIBISH CAME AS A GUEST TO OUR TABLE, bringing a newspaper cone full of salt as a gift, and Maya began to prepare dinner for her. Bibish was an oracle, could feel the other world through her Koran. Her voice was hypnotic; she spoke rhythmically, in lists. “Salaam to the father and salaam to the Father above. Salaam to the husband and the children of his wife, salaam to his wife. Salaam and abundance to this house and garden. Salaam and health to the souls within.”

Normally Maya’s husband, Döwlet, would help her cook dinner, but when guests were over he refrained from lending a hand to save face. Maya and Döwlet got married relatively late, both at thirty. His parents had had trouble finding a match for him owing to his crippled left hand, and Maya was also considered damaged goods—she was smart, opinionated, and college educated. I pumped water into a bucket for Bibish to wash her hands and face with, picking out a grasshopper leg that had come out of the faucet. Muhammet had finally caught a duck with his trap, and when we bled it out and cut it open we found an egg half formed and soft in its belly. Nothing had ever seemed more naked to me. Keyik sat beside Bibish and sewed long gloves for herself; this week she would be working in the cotton fields and her hands were already cut up by the caustic sap.

Maya prepared a large pot of palow as Muhammet and I arranged

a rainbow of pickled vegetables onto serving plates. She spooned the rice dish onto a huge platter, the gold of her teeth sparking out of her grin. “Razzamataz ‘em!” she boasted—we’d been taking turns teaching each other absurd terms in our native tongues. The kitchen walls were papered with news sheets, the current events of ten years ago slowly eating through the chalky lavender paint like revelations, or reminders. Throughout dinner Maya and Döwlet bantered affectionately.

“My headaches are worse than ever; my head’s been feeling like a train ran over it!” Maya whimpered.

“Do you want me to complain to the conductor that he should finish the job?”

“Ach! You see, Bibish? No one would care if I died.”

“The brooms would care!” Döwlet joked.

Döwlet paid the neighbor boy Arslan, whose foot was on backwards, to go buy us a melon from the corner for dessert. There is a species of watermelon whose seeds each bear a secret letter from God’s alphabet. Muhammet and I laid out gibberish holy sentences as Bibish licked off the lines of juice dripping down her arm. Döwlet collected the scraps from dinner and threw them in a pile in the field for our little dog Chapa, ‘the rider’—so named after his propensity for sodomizing the cat—then left to rewire a lamp in the shed. Once he was out of earshot, Bibish reached over and slapped Maya on the thigh.

“Maya, you are so lucky! Döwlet is such a good man.”

“Ah, he is good enough.”

“Don’t you love him? I love my Akmyrat.”

“I’ve never loved a man my whole life.”

“Really? My husband and I are crazy about each other. I just love—everything! Even just kissing him! It’s so much fun!”

Maya laughed. “Blech, really? I hate that stuff. It’s a nasty business! Döwlet always makes me do it, I am a good wife, but no. I’ve never liked it.”

“Oh, I’ve always loved it. I liked kissing my husband from the very start. It was an arranged marriage but it worked out for the best. All the girls these days, wanting love marriages! You can’t ever be sure how it will work out, either way.”

“You’re lucky, then! I don’t know anyone else who likes the kissing business but you! We have to start thinking of finding someone for this one,” Maya patted Keyik’s head. “It’s not easy—finding out who is in what tribe, how pure their family has been for so many generations... it’s

senseless! Who cares, really—it's so sad! Blood is blood, but to see sometimes these young lovers torn apart by it is tragic.”

“Do you mean you'd let me marry someone from outside our tribe, Mama?” Keyik asked.

“Of course not, are you kidding?” Maya playfully slapped Keyik's cheek. “What would the neighbors think?” After a pause, she added: “Don't ever love a man, Keyik. You may love one but he'll never love you back. They only know how to care for themselves. They don't have a heart like a woman has a heart. Keyik, don't ever love a man—it's not worth it.”

Keyik had tried to kill herself with pickling vinegar just before I moved into their house. A boy she'd loved, and whom had taken her virginity, had been married off to another girl. “I was ruined. I thought we would marry, otherwise I wouldn't have... He named his first daughter after me, though,” Keyik boasted. Many more girls had lost their virginity than their mothers would ever admit, but there were surgeries to fix that. Some families were wise to the ploy, however: a mother might advise her newly-wedded son to wait three days before consummating his marriage. In three day's time, the sutures of a girl's false hymen would have dissolved and no blood would be produced. Then the in-laws could flap a pristine white sheet after the cast-out girl as she ran back to her family's house, weeping with shame. Keyik continued. “It was unbearable to live after wanting to die so badly. I became a different person for a while. Then you came here, and I became happy again.” When she confessed this to me, I confided that I had felt the same way once. “Was it about a boy?” she'd asked. I didn't know what to tell her. It wasn't because of anything; it was just something that had always been in me, even as a child. How could I explain to her that my life had been perfectly fine, and privileged, and free? How I was raised believing I could be anything, have anything, say anything. And yet how I'd had the same darkness she'd had, how I used to think about it all the time. How it had quietly been slipping away. And how, for some reason, the senseless violence and heartbreak I'd seen here had made me want to live more than anything ever before. “I had a djinn,” I told her.

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED IN TURKMENGALA, I would sometimes say “what a beautiful day,” but they did not understand my use of the word beautiful. Days are not beautiful, weather is not, only girls, dresses, jewelry. Only things are beautiful, not ideas. I'd ask, “how can you say you

don't find this beautiful?" and they would tell me, "you can say that because it's different for you. This is nothing to us." I'd take photographs of a bucket full of sunset-colored persimmons, or a barefoot girl herding goats, and they'd shake their heads at the film I'd wasted. They were right. The beauty I found in everything was a distancing. It filtered things, made them tolerable. I could romanticize almost anything, because this would not be my life forever. Anything can be endured, even enjoyed, with an expiration date. Their tragedies seemed photogenic to me.

I was cured of this my second year of teaching. Arslan was a boy in my third-grade class whose whole body was covered in a honeycomb of burnt skin, his sweet face drooping off his tiny skull as though it were melting, sometimes pinned back up to his cheeks by his wide smile. His mother had thought she was dying alone, had thought her son was fast asleep. But Arslan had followed her midnight trip to the shed; had seen her dark body spinning in a skirt of flames. He'd run up to her, eager to save her, only damning himself. She did not cry "Freedom!" before she did it. It was not noon on the public square; it was midnight in the back corner of her in-law's courtyard. Her death meant nothing to anyone beyond the walls of that compound. It meant another hole to dig. It meant one more ache had ended in another dismissed country, where being born female is a sin in itself. Her orphaned son, seething in his seat every morning because he could not bear the feel of his cotton slacks against his ruined skin, served daily as her tombstone. I never knew Arslan's mother, but his pain was a persistent echo of her own. His maimed body was archeological evidence of this dead woman's desperation; a window into the pernicious household that was his inheritance.

The Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch argued that all human experience is directed towards the future; that every individual views—and lives—his life as something incomplete and unfinished. Bloch argued this mindset of hope dictates all of politics, philosophy, and religion (our striving for a utopia, our quest for knowledge, our seeking of God) which we, feeling some lack, project as existing in some time other than now. We worship gods who promise relief, and elect political parties who promise progress. There is an evolutionary advantage to such overconfidence, to optimism. On average, man is more hopeful than he should be; nature designed us this way to preserve us, to prevent us from losing our will to survive. But this bias towards optimism is the instigator of military conflicts, and the force behind our persistent belief in marriage and politicians, despite all statistics. It informs our resistance to chang-

ing our unhealthy habits, and acts as the inflating breath of economic bubbles. Studies show that depressed people tend to have more realistic worldviews, to have a better handle on the truth—raising the question whether depression is really a medical condition, or simply realism. We are, as a species, future-obsessed; but if we see no relief in the future for the ailments of the present, we can lose ourselves. Hope frustrates us just as often as it animates us. While depression and suicide rates are rising throughout the world—medical experts link this to the global economic crisis—in 2012, for the fourth year in a row, more US soldiers killed themselves than died in combat. The western notion that everyone is entitled to happiness is laughable to most Turkmen: all is in accordance with Allah's will. To them, happiness is no art, but simple luck, and so the death of these girls has nothing to do with pessimism, with optimism. It's not a matter of seeing the glass as half full or half empty: these are simply women for whom the glass is half nothing, half everything.

"I want SEX, baybee!"

These were Ayna's last words to me. She grabbed my face comically, grinning lewdly. She knew what the words meant.

Ayna was an only child, her father an alcoholic who'd left for the capital to undergo "rehab" years ago. She was a senior in high school, had a wild reputation, and, thinking herself cosmopolitan, liked to show off the few English phrases she knew whenever I was around. In fact, she would have fit in perfectly in any high school in the US—she was funny, vibrant. She loved to dance, loved to flirt with boys, loved listening to the latest pops hits. But in Turkmenistan, she was a disgrace. Ayna was from Zahmet village, where there is no gas line. There women must still cook over a fire, must keep it burning through the long winter nights. In Zahmet all the girls braid one another's hair after school and map out their futures as though they had any say and declare, "I don't care *who* I marry—just so long as it's someone from a town that has a gas line!"

We were dancing, a circle of girls at our friend Umida's birthday party. Umida's father Yslam was deaf, but he could tell vivid stories with his hands. He raised rabbits for income, kept them, all inbred and living as one undivided, panting mass in a tiny shed just outside their apartment. For his daughter's birthday dinner he had grilled rabbit shashlyk with eggplants and peppers and was feeling up all the girls surreptitiously as we danced. Ayna twirled her skirts and lodged herself in the center of every circle of dancers, sneaking sips of vodka from the men's teacups

when they were not looking.

A week later, I was sleeping over at Umida's house after a long day of swimming at the Hindukush dam, wedged in a Western style bed between her and her sister Malika. Malika told me the news, as if an afterthought.

"You remember Ayna, dancing like a crazy girl at the party? She burnt herself yesterday, she's all scrambled up inside. Stupid girl. But the doctors say she will be okay, they sent her home already."

Yslam woke us up early the next morning, pantomiming that he'd just gotten news that Ayna had died in her sleep. Malika, who had been hugging me throughout the night, wrung my body out, choking with silent sobs.

"I was her only friend! She told me everything! She'd come to me before, she told me 'I'm going to slit my wrists, or drink vinegar'—I could always talk her out of it. But this time, I was away in Mary. She told the boy who sold her the gasoline that she was going to kill herself with it. He just laughed, he thought it was a joke."

We quickly washed our faces and got dressed; in Islam a body must be buried within twenty-four hours, the funeral was already underway. We took a taxi to Zahmet, in an ancient Lada that vibrated wildly when it went above twenty kilometers per hour, the stump of one windshield wiper wagging pointlessly across the dusty windshield like a finger in warning. There was a crowd around Ayna's family's house, and male relatives milling outside. We entered into a dark room full of wailing women. Ayna's tiny body was wrapped in a white sheet and laid out on a thin dusting of sand so the carpet wouldn't absorb the smell. Ayna's mother Surai was screaming over her daughter in an orgasm of grief; her sorrow made her body its flailing puppet. She howled a new lamentation with each incoming guest.

"Oh, Malika! Umida! If only you girls had been home yesterday! You could have talked sense into her!"

"Auntie Lachyn! Why didn't we take better care of her?"

"Oh, Sveta! You were her favorite teacher! She'd always listen to you!"

The women were all weeping loudly into their scarves. Umida had handed me a napkin in which I hid my face—too shocked, at first, to cry. The fabric smelled of mutton; it must have been left over from a party. Malika was crying so hard the women had to give her some kind of pill to calm her down. Surai kept lifting the sheet off her daughter, as though to torture herself with her child's face, petting her hair and begging for

God to bring her back to life. I saw charred skin smudged in the shadows of the white linen. “Oh, Ayna! Get up! Your friends are all here to see you!” Ayna’s face was waxy and yellow. “Oh, Ayna! Your heart was like glass! Look at me, Ayna!” The women threw little wads of money—in-significant amounts—on Ayna’s body to help defray the cost of her death, which is what set off my weeping. The elderly women kept speaking of clothes Ayna had just bought without ever getting to wear them, and a TV her mother bought that she had barely gotten to watch, as though that were the most tragic part of it all. Umida found this particularly sad and commented to me how expensive all the memorial dinners would be. The older women began kicking us out, and had to drag Surai out, bucking and bellowing, so that they could prepare Ayna’s body for burial.

When we were outside, having displaced the mass of men slightly, the women began their gossip.

“For what now will Surai live? I think she’ll kill herself too,” clucked Gulalek, whose brother prostituted his own wife to pay for his heroin habit.

“What a tragedy, to die so young,” Sveta shook her head. Sveta had to work two jobs to support two families; her husband was an abusive alcoholic who kept a second family the next town over. I wondered what all the women who held their tongues were thinking: as though death were the saddest thing. I imagined all the humiliations from which Ayna had saved herself, and all those her mother would now have to endure. I worried for Surai. A woman without a husband, a woman without any children is not a person here. This is why most Turkmen families have as many children as possible: one is too precarious. One is untenable. We should endeavor to fill the world with as many hearts as possible on which to fall.

Outside, Surai was leaning on an old woman whose features were lost in a sea of wrinkles so well cast by both joy and sorrow equally that one could not tell whether she was laughing or crying.

“Oh, Ene, Ayna had always complained that her heart hurt! We took her to the doctor, put her on blood thinners, tried leeches. We were even going to have an operation scheduled. Why didn’t I listen to her? Why didn’t I realize it was her other heart that hurt? We were feeding her aspirin for her heartbreak!” The old woman shook her head, cooing to Surai as she stroked her head with large, knotty fingers. After a long pause, Surai began again.

“Ene, tell me!”

“Yes, Surai-love, ask.”

“Why have our prayers gone unanswered?”