



Hafsah Aneela Bashir

I'm Hafsah Aneela Bashir and I'll be sharing poetry from my collection *The Celox and the Clot*.

Earlier this year, in February, I was touring this collection with New Writing North's 'Read Regional' campaign for 2020. It was the first time I had an opportunity to talk a lot more about where this collection sits in my life. I realised, while I was sat in this northern library, that this particular collection was published at the same time that I decided to leave a twenty-five-year marriage. It's almost as if when you have a dream, when you're going through your everyday life and suddenly a snippet of a dream comes back to you; and I don't know why it took that session of sitting in a library, giving an introduction to my book, that I realised that. The only conclusion that I can come to is that I finally had come up for air.

So *The Celox and the Clot* was published in September 2018 and I am really pleased to be sharing some poems with you. It's made me look at them in a different light. I'll be sharing some of that work and also some croaky singing. It's very strange to be reading to the void and not an actual audience, which I would have been doing for Kendal poetry festival in June. I hope you enjoy the poems.

I thought to myself that it's best to start right at the very beginning. Some of my earliest childhood memories, of growing up in the East End of London, are of car journeys: my Dad would often be driving, and we would be listening to music. Often those music tastes of my Father were songs from the motherland. He would have Pakistani singers like Alam Lohar or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan blaring through the speakers, or my Mom's favourite Bollywood / Pakistani films; her favourite was - Pakeezah. We'd listen to those songs and I didn't realise how much those were part of my memory until they became a part of my poetry. I remember my Dad's favourite was Pankaj Udhas's Chitti Ayeeh heh, which is about a letter that has come from the motherland. I guess the first poem in my collection *The Celox and the Clot* is a very early childhood memory of us going to Cash and Carry stores. They were like mini motherlands for my parents and probably a lot of other immigrants. Being a child of



immigrant parents, I know that I'm not the only one who has memories like that. I remember going in the car to these Cash and Carry stores, where my parents felt so comfortable; there were people that looked like them, spoke like them; they were cooking the same food and could find the food that they loved; and the music that played in the background was always in my head.

The first poem I'm going to share is called *Cumin Seeds*, which I wrote after a creative writing session with Salena Godden. She had given us these small envelopes containing lots of different spices in them: mine was cumin seeds.

CUMIN SEEDS

A bangled-tight grip on my hand
And you take me through suspended plastic sheets
Into Fuchsia pinks, petrel blues, and scents that smell like our kitchen drawer

Rubicon cartons stacked like dominos
Gol jab appear to my right like yellow bubbles, too high for me to reach

A song blares from the loudspeakers
Cucumbers, tomatoes - umbelled and juicy arms piled high

A forklift stacks crates of coke, piled high to beamed ceilings
Pictures of turbaned men and korma on each spice box
Bags of flour with a tiger face on them follow me around

A song plays on the speakers
You take me to sticky counters
'Bangles', I say – glittered glass hoops in sizes too small

At the counter he squeezes my hand tight, to find my size
I learn, for the first time, how easily the skin cuts and bleeds



The next poem I am going to share with you makes me think about my Father who, as a young man, came to this country. I often wonder how he must have felt trying to fit in, in a place that was quite reluctant to accept him. He worked at the Ford Dagenham plant and, at that time, I remember he would suffer a lot of racism. In a workshop with Jackie Kay, she asked us to think about people in our family that protested/showed resilience in their own way. For some reason it made me think of my Dad, when she asked us to think about resistance and activism and loved ones that have resisted injustice in unusual ways. It made me think of this memory, where my Father was cooking food for the same people at his workplace that didn't accept him. I guess my Dad was being quite strategic and quite clever because, I think, he must have realised quite quickly that the best way to the hearts of white people is to feed them Indian food. I call it 'the curry tactic.'

FORD DAGENHAM 1984

Trays of red-roast chicken, carried by your ox-like hands into your workplace
Red-roast chicken, an offering. Red-roast chicken, to sway.

John, who calls you a 'Paki' to your face, on the assembly-line;
For Brian, who complains that you get all the night shifts.

Red-roast chicken, an offering. Red-roast chicken, a bribe.

For Aaron and Marinda, who sit in the pubs with the Johns and the Brians, planning
how to disrupt the speed of your assembly-line

Red-roast chicken, an offering. Red-roast chicken to sway.

Tommy, who cracks the glass of each car door on its way to you



You have only thirty seconds to check, and each faulty one is less pay for you.

Your ox-like hands work quickly; the same ox-like hands that beat the chicken pieces tender; spiced and marinated them all the night before

You watch all those who do not care to know your name eat the red-roast chicken, carried by you into your workplace

The next poem that I'm going to share came about from a visit to a Manchester Literature Festival event - this was at Manchester Central Library. As I came out of the library, I must have gone over my parking time. There was a parking attendant giving my car a ticket, and I remember running up to this parking attendant. Our encounter prompted this poem.

JIMMY, JIMMY, JIMMY

Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, aaja, aaja, aaja.

Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, aaja, aaja, aaja.

I catch you one night - high-vis uniform, flat-cap shining as the ticket prints

And run up, flustered, to my car and ask.

'Why would you do that?'

Startled, you stare lowering your machine.

'If I'd known it was you, I wouldn't have given the ticket, but I've punched it through now.'

You look like a tired disco dancer: red-weary eyes; gold chain winking at your neck.'

I ask for your name and you say,

'Jimmy.'

'No! Your real name.'



'Amrit Lal, from Gujarat,' you told me, and I admit, like a long-abandoned friend,
'Sometimes I call myself Annie. And we come from India too, before 1947, a place
called Sunam.'

Our bastardisation rears like a welt from a colonial whip.

An old familiarity embraces us.

'I'm sorry . . . if I'd known . . .'

We exchange a wave, as if we have had many goodbyes, not quite like siblings or
lovers but maybe friends from a different life.

The reference to the song, I was singing at the beginning, is a very famous
Bollywood song. I just thought it was apt for this man, who was called Jimmy and
looked like the Jimmy I remembered from the Bollywood film.

The next poem that I'm going to read is called . . .

TEASPOONS

Today you kissed me passionately

A welcome change from the pat on my head

Reward for the Hoovering and stack of ironed clothes

Not enough though for a transaction of love making

Maybe if I cook you favourite tea, warm the plates,

Or separate all the plastics from the rubbish,

Would you stroke my hair,

Place your hand gently in the small of my back,

Gaze into my eyes,

Perhaps lean towards me and give me more than

A teaspoon?



SADDLEWORTH

So here we are, you driving me through the narrowest country lanes.
Even the tarmac spreads herself out at speed for you.
Outside, willow trees stoop as they see you coming.
Inside, fickle words settle at my boots like blossom.
'The window cleaner lives on the Ryegate,' you say.
And this is how you rectify our demise.
I know what you're trying to do:
Buying love with a French chef and three rosettes,
As if I'll pin them through right to the skin of my breast.
A prized possession.
I look away - all this body will offer itself,
Drown out whispers from bones seeped in love.
It's getting dark as hill tops rise, watching our headlights.
If I sleep early tonight, I think the world will keep spinning.

BUNTING

I watch, through the window, a digital clock.
Each second sluggish, refusing to acknowledge the train just about to leave.
Between us the air hardens, the table our referee.
If it had arms it would be pushing a hand into our chests.
Earlier, outside the station, bunting the colour of pulped fruit
Struggled to release itself; the string not letting the flags flow free;
Little shark's teeth spread over three rows.
If they had a voice they'd be screaming, 'Let me go! Let me go!'



My next couple of poems are from my experiences of being a humanitarian. I've travelled to conflict zones to deliver medical aid and emergency supplies. This particular poem won the Palestine Verses Competition - it came first. It's called A Tap on the Roof, and it's the fifty-eight seconds warning that the Israelis give to Palestinians, to leave their homes before they obliterate them.

A TAP ON THE ROOF

The warning scud skirts the roof
58 seconds to run
58 seconds to run
58 seconds to run

Slah Nuwasrah gathers his nephews
Nidal wide-eyed
Muhammad screams in his cot
The pregnant wife frozen to her bed
Corner of the quilt chewed wet by clamped teeth

48 seconds to run
48 seconds to run
48 seconds to run

Serrated edge of a warning phone call
Spreads panic
Hana frantically searches the yard
'Where is Muhammad Malaka?'
Wheels of a little bike spin to a halt

38 seconds to run
38 seconds to run
38 seconds to run

Basema sips her coffee
Thirsty from today's long fast
Husband, Mahmud has his feet up on the table – again
She lovingly chides him and says 'Don't, the children will do the same!'



28 seconds to run
28 seconds to run
28 seconds to run

Suha Abu Sada tries to force her legs to move
Clutches of her wheelchair means she must stay put
She stares out the window,
fingers circling prayer beads

18 seconds to run
18 seconds to run
18 seconds to run

Argentina take on Holland
Muhammed, Ibrahim, Salim, Suleiman, Musa, Hamdi
watch the penalties – laughing

8 seconds to run
8 seconds to run
8 seconds to run

Naifa, 82, cries remembering how once she would have sprinted
Sprinted down the three floors of her storey
Cleared the 100 meters to a place where only her lungs would burn
From the acrid smoke

7
6
5
4
3
2
1

A small head amongst the garden, a house blown wide open like a
faceless corpse, only legs dangle from a mangled bike, bloodied football shirts
lying amongst the rubble, vultures on high hill tops clapping – laughing
at the show

Operation Protective Edge
Obliterating Palestinians Dead

58 seconds to run



I WILL TELL GOD EVERYTHING

I will tell God everything
Ask if the lightning in the sky
Was him taking photos
If not, I'll give him my drawings

The men with guns and the aeroplanes on fire
Will all get into trouble
The sharp metal pieces taken out of my stomach
Will all have to come with me

I will tell God everything
That Mama's face was gone
But I found Baba's feet
And put them together like shoes

In my poems I wrote a lot about people: people in my life; people that I care about; people that have touched me in some way; people I don't know. I often humanise them by giving them names, naming them. Part of that is because I don't want them to be statistics. One of those poems is about a special lady in my life. She suffered from dementia and she wasn't very well towards the end of her life. Every time I met her it was as if she was meeting me for the first time. She was a wonderful soul and I learnt a lot of things from her, mostly about having patience and gratitude. This poem is called *Rani*, which means 'Queen,' and which was also her name.



RANI

Tonight I walked in and you greeted me as your sister
Kissed my hands as if I'd crossed oceans to be here
You recited Persian poetry
Your eloquent English . . . very well . . .
Speaking to nurses only in Urdu
While they ticked sheets pretending to understand

Tonight I walked in and you greeted me as a single woman
Asked me if I'm married or if I wanted the cup of tea you think you brewed a while
ago Standing in your kitchen
Your fisted boned hands tight like clam shells on sandy pillows

Tonight I walked in and you thought I'm your granddaughter's friend
Asked if my university is far and whether I ate almonds to help my study
You insisted I take down the clothes you think you washed today
As I unfurled the curling question mark your body has become

Tonight I walked in and your apology on loop . . . *Sorry, main bhool gi hoon (sorry I forgot). Mera koi nahin hain; jiska koi nahin hota, uska khuda hota hain (I don't have anyone; those that don't have anyone, they have God)*

You recreate my bloodline every day . . . *Aap ko pata hain? (Do you know?)*

You are Nasia. Your brothers are Farokh and Aftal.

Roger's living in our house, forty years ago
You still think Sufyan is fourteen
Insist that six o'clock you make roti for your husband
Shout to whoever's listening, 'Wake my Mother up!'
She died five years ago



Persian couplets leave your lips and I can't understand you again

'Haji, baji ,sharabi,' you recite when agitated

Your husband props up your pillow

Hoists you a little upright to stop you disappearing under the white shroud

He chews the delicate flesh of an apple between his teeth

And places it in your mouth as if you're Eve

The next poem that I am going to share is called *To You*. I wrote this when we went through three deaths in the family, very close together. So this poem speaks to that experience.

TO YOU

Is it going to be?

the comfort of lingering cigarette smoke or the way our discarded shoes point
in different directions

the blue mug brewing yesterday's tea
on the worktop
and the teaspoon you said takes the heat away

the disfigured toothbrush,
your unworking watch with its cruel hands stare intently

God told us we are like garments to one another so today I am wearing six of your
tops
carrying all of you with me
like the time you lifted me and my muddy wellies out of that ditch

I needed to tell you
that the heavy rug has moved, that paint stain you caused when we decorated this
place together, peeps at me like a great aubergine eye I sit on different sofas and
watch it cry



Oh and the bed still smells of your scent

I have decided to keep it that way
half expecting to hear your faint snores or see your rising shape under the covers
and the whisper

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raajoon

. . . and that means 'To God we belong and to God we return.'

My next poem that I am going to share is from a time I was living with in-laws; which is a wonderful learning experience, also very challenging at times. One of the things that you had to be very good at was making round rotis. For anybody who doesn't know what that it is, it's chapatis. The particular chapati that I'm talking about here is called 'aloo paratha' – it's two chapatis put together with a potato filling inside. If you haven't had one, you must have one once this lockdown is finished. The poem is titled *Aloo Paratha*, really, it's about expectations. A lot can be judged be the way a woman makes her roti. There's an art to it and the more you know about that art the more you're valued. I hope you enjoy this poem.

ALOO PARATHA

My son, wide-eyed and curious,
Stands near the kitchen stove
A smoky *tawa* (*hotplate*) spitting till piping hot,
Ready to bake thin potato filled parateh

He stares at his *Dadi jaan's* (*Paternal Grandmother*) asbestos hands,
Used to the heat, tirelessly providing,
Places his hands on her shoulders and says,
'Teach me to make an aloo paratha.'



From my prayer mat, in the dining room, I
Hear her dish up firm words of advice:
'It's a woman's job to cook and a man's job to earn.'
And the slow lick of fire starts its slow burn.
'While I'm alive,' she says, 'I'll make them.
And when I don't, your mother will.
And when she can't, your wife will.'

Her beliefs as perfect as her round parateh.

I always smile when I get to the end of that poem because I know that all four of my boys are going to learn how to make parateh.

I think we have time just for one more. *Songs of Protest* is borne from South Asian hen nights. We call them Dholki nights. That's where traditional folk songs are passed down, with lots of women gathered, sat around a drum. I have very fond memories of them, from when I was younger., often attending them. This poem is called . . .

SONGS OF PROTEST

The first form of protest I ever saw was in a gathering of women:
Conservative, strict, steadfast;
All leaving the layers accumulated over time at the door

Slow careful unravelling of headscarves,
Unveiling shy glints of tinder beneath black robes

In the centre of the room, a hollowed drum,
Leathered skin, tight on either end,



A silver batted type spoon tapping surely against it

Bangled hands clapping, no placard in sight
Only the familiar glint of fire in the eyes
The tell-tale sign when women have had enough

The strictest of them dipped the shoulder to give permission
And women wharfed to megaphones

*Suhe ve Cheeray waleya main kehendi haan, suhe ve Cheeray waleya main kehendi
haan, bhar chatteri di chaon mein behndi han (Oh! The One with the red turban I
say, Oh! The One with the red turban I say, I sit under the shade of the parasol)*

Each recalling her love, her heartache, her joy, her hopes
Laughter pulsating the room

Women, heads back, chest defiant,
Firm hands on each other's shoulders
Allies sat tight knit together, knee to knee in solidarity
No-one to silence this protest as they sang

*Kala doria kundey naal adya ee oye, chuta devra bhabi naal ladya ee oye (The black
rope is stuck on the lock, the younger brother in law is fighting with his brothers wife!)*

Women warring against injustice
Through words through beats through song
Challenging those accusing them of being wrong
Hands on hips fingers pointing at the imaginary accused
Practise against oppressors absent from the room
One by one they rose, fists as microphone



*Terey maa ne pakayay anday, Terey maa ne pakayay anday, asi mangay thay
paygay danday, (Your mother cooked eggs, your mother cooked eggs, we asked for
some and we got beat!)*

*Lathay di chaddar, Utte saleti rang mahiya, Aawo sahmne, aawo sahmne
Kolon di russ ke na lang mahiya (A cotton shawl, on it is a grey pattern, come over to
me, come over to me, don't pass me by in anger)*

My first lesson: speaking out against injustice as each generation ignored,
Their knees quaking, voices shaking defiant against men weaponizing our silence
All the matriarchs raising their heads high, looking out for the silent ones, the timid
ones, Their flick of the hand across the room as they caught our eye, a signal to us
fledglings to sing

*Rang barse bheege chunar wali, rang barse (The girl in the scarf is drenched in
water colour)*

Meanings did not matter to us

We, the generation of women who flicked between identities

The partitioned ones, the fragmented ones never seen as the whole ones,

The old ones with the new ones, the traditional ones with the modern ones,

The singing ones with the unheard ones, the Pakistani ones with the British ones

*Balle balle O balle balle, bai tor punjaban di, oye balle balle, bai tor punjaban di,
Jutti khal di marora nai chaldi, tor punjaban di, Balle balle (Hooray, hooray, the strut
of the Panjabi woman, oh hooray hooray, the strut of the panjabi woman, those
leather shoes might twist but they wont change, the Panjabi woman's strut)*

Meanings did not matter to us

Our gatherings helped the hymens of our voices break into song

The first lesson: communication of our struggles, each chorus in unison



Second lesson: unity of our protest, each generation holding the hands of the next
Third lesson: have strength and courage while doing so. me bent proudly for our
cause . . .

*Mathay Te Chamkan Waal, Meray Banray De (My shiny hair is styled on my
forehead)*

Years later, when we questioned our ability to love, to be loved, to have love, to
touch love; questioned our permission to surround ourselves with love, questioned
the desire to entertain love, questioned our denial to love, followed our fiery, steely-
hard determination to find and become that love, the songs of our women rang in our
ears

I hope you enjoyed that reading. These were poems from *The Celox and the
Clot*, published by Burning Eye Books. If you do want a copy you can get that from
their website. I hope you enjoyed them. Take care. Bye bye.