

AMAN MOJADIDI

Aman Mojadidi has been working in Afghanistan for several years now in the nonprofit sector. This prose poem documents the conflicting emotions and realities of being an Afghan American in Kabul. Meant to capture Kabul in a specific time, this prose poem is a time capsule, one that is honest about the political situation and Mojadidi's own ambivalent identity.

What Can One Say about Living in Kabul?

Kabul, Afghanistan 2006

Where things go “boom” in the night while children dream of fallen kites and parents lie awake thinking of what they will feed them tomorrow. Where youthful love resembles a Bollywood film and frustration simmers beneath the unturned skin of unemployed men passing you on the street. Where militaries and militants play their war games, each thinking they know what’s best for everyone else; while most everyone else just wants the fighting to stop. To stop hearing bombs explode in the not distant enough distance and seeing men with guns roaming around playing fiddle on their AK-47s. Children on Chicken Street fighting over who gets to sell you matches, while adults try to dig deep into your pockets selling you “all handmade, very old” tapestries and fur coats you’d be too embarrassed to ever actually wear in Kabul . . . or at least you should be. And what about the day-streets where everyone seems to live?

Men sitting around
 walking around
 looking around
 looking at you.

But when driving at midnight, most all have disappeared into the night, while a few appear in the headlights—out of the dark and into the dark

they seek out their homes amid the settling dust. Where weekends can be had by the lake just outside of town and mornings can still be magical; nestled beneath the bright sun, above the shimmering lake, and between snow-covered mountains. These are the happier days! Yes, the happier days when one can appreciate being in such a land. And there's also the "moneyer" side of things . . . dinners for dollars, lots of them. Among expats and foreigners and music and alcohol, we forget about the world outside . . . at least for a while. "But is that so wrong?" I ask myself as images of pasty-faced colonialists slowly fade into my head saying, "Of course it isn't!" Another whiskey please! And then off to save the impoverished, the ones who can't save themselves. But do they really need saving? Like coins we set aside as "ours," only to be spent later when the world has lost interest and turned its sights on new vulnerables, or old vulnerables that now seem vulnerable again.

And the question that never grows old:

"Where are you from?"

And the difficulty I have in trying to explain how I don't know. How nowhere feels like home. And how it's not really about where I'm from, but where I'm going. Not far enough . . . from my own fear, my own uncertainty in all that makes up this fragile life. And here on the street, the butcher keeps butchering, and the soldier keeps soldiering, and the fruit seller keeps fruit selling, and the beggar keeps begging, and the, well, you get the point. Or do you? Does anyone really know what's going on here? Where the price of paradise is strapped to one's chest and paid with the push of a button? Where militaries come and go bringing freedom in a bullet and Burger King behind barbed wire? Where teachers in cardboard schools with collapsing roofs get trained once and forgotten and keep beating students with a stick when they don't answer quickly enough? Where health clinics lack basic medication because it's all ended up in the streets of the bazaar for sale on the open market? But Afghanistan is an open market, full of opportunity, full of potential—the potential to exploit. To put profits before people and to pay the minimum because people will do it for that price. And you can say they have a choice, but then never ask yourself, "Do they?" And what about those IEDs? Incomplete Educational Directives? Wait, no, that's not what anyone wants to talk about. It's the Improvised Explosive Devices we're all worried about.

Improvised, making it up as they go, a cell phone, a teddy bear, an oil can. Did you know that a bag of rice could kill you? So among such things, how does something resembling love grow in one's heart? Where the soil is no longer fertile, unable to nurture those emotional roots so that what grows may properly bear fruit? But who wants to hear me speak about love? I don't. So let's talk about other things like . . . how 'bout them L.A. Lakers? But Qarghah Lake is low again so we fear drought. Come on, snows of Paghman, fall! And more importantly, melt! So there is water once again and we can start to fear floods. And now the cold is settled in. Into my skin, into my bones, and into my dreams where death made special appearances lately, impersonating my mother. Staring into yellow-green eyes, I'm told it could mean I saved her. Taken the life in my dreams so the dreams in her life could survive and death stays away. And I want to believe her. I want to believe in her. But she's restless, and unsure of the answers to questions that guide her hair through the fingers of her left hand. And then another night begins to fall, putting the day's dust to rest and pushing people off the street and into their cold, dark homes so . . .

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