

"This empowering story will resonate with all young people who have struggled to both fit in and stay true to themselves."

—Veera Hiranandani, Newbery Honor author of *The Night Diary*

# Unsettled



Award-Winning Author of  
*Lailah's Lunchbox*

REEM FARUQI



The background of the cover is decorated with various light gray line-art patterns. These include several paisley shapes, some with intricate internal designs, and various floral motifs like daisies and stylized flowers. There are also small, simple star-like shapes scattered throughout. The overall aesthetic is delicate and artistic.

# Unsettled

REEM FARUQI

**HARPER**

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# Dedication

**For Amma and Abba . . . and Nana, of course**



**In memory of Nana Abu, Pyarijan, Dada, and Dulhan Chachi**

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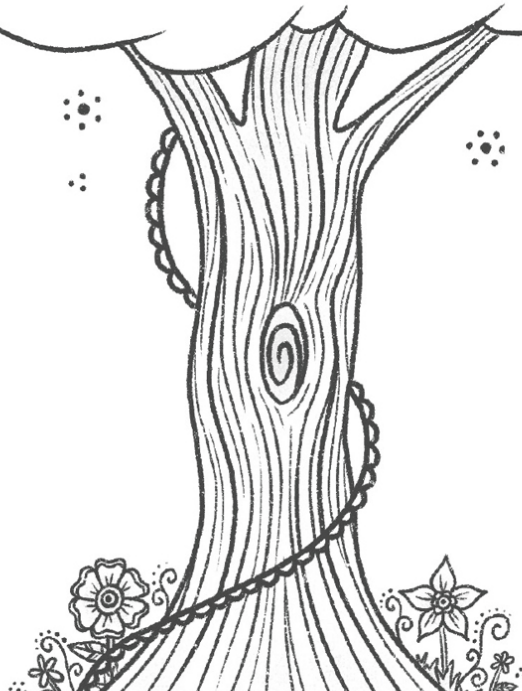
# Family Tree

Nana ♥ Nana Abu      Dadi  
(Grandmother)    (Grandfather)    (Grandmother)

└─ Ammi ♥ Baba ─┘

Nurah Haqq  
(Me!)

Owais Haqq  
(Big Brother)  
\* By 2 years & 2 days





# Part One





Uprooting

# Escape

I grab Asna's hand,  
palm to palm,  
nail to nail,  
    and lean in,  
but Nana's hand  
yanks my shoulder.

*Don't you know  
about the father  
who went in  
to get the mother  
who went in  
to get the brother  
who went in  
to get the baby?*

*The sea swallowed them up.  
These waves  
are **not** to be played in.*

*But Nana . . . I'm a swimmer!*  
Nana gives me a look,  
a flash of gray-ringed eyes.  
A look  
that makes me swallow  
my words up whole.

# Best Friends

My grandmother Nana watches us,  
so we stay on the sand.

After watching  
camels roam in the surf,  
their pom-poms taunting us,  
a balloon seller bobbing by,  
red yellow blue green circles  
looking  
d  
o  
w  
n  
at us,  
an elderly beggar woman  
(with too many wrinkles to count),  
and black crows,  
shrieking for food and company,  
Asna and I trace our names  
over and over,  
watching the waves  
slurp them up.

I watch Nana right back.

# Beach Food

For lunch:

Soft mutton that my fingers shred easily.

*Biryani* rice.

Brown, saffron gold, white

*ghee*-soaked grains

that gently slip off my spoon.

For dessert:

A white box tied with string

Asna and I sneak our hands in.

Buttery biscuits from the bakery,

a dot of jelly in the middle.

For tea:

Roasted corn, its teeth

more black than yellow.

Chips saltier than the sea.

# Teatime

When the sun is dipping,  
and Nana goes in the villa to pray with Nana Abu,  
we tiptoe in finally.

The waves pull hard  
but we smile anyway  
stuff our laughter in our cheeks  
giddy with getting away with it.

After a few waves  
guilt strikes.  
We turn to tiptoe back,  
but my glasses fall  
and even though I try to grab them,  
the sea sucks them up,  
never to return.



# The Perfect Day

If I could choose  
a day  
to live over and over,  
I'd choose today.

Camel rides on the sand,  
the feel of stiff fur.  
Memories of the sun setting in our hair,  
sandy eyelashes.

# Home

After the bumpy ride home  
from the beach  
we are served  
scoops of gold—  
Nana's mango ice cream  
and Baba's news.

# The Worst Day

If I could choose  
from all the days on this earth  
to live over and over,  
I'd skip today.

# Tangle

Just when my grandmother Dadi's mind  
becomes so tangled  
that she doesn't remember  
my name anymore,  
Baba, my father, gets the news:  
a job offer in America.

He says Yes  
because my uncle is here to help.  
He says Yes  
because schools there are better.  
He says Yes  
because of "job security."  
He says Yes.

The Yes slices our old world away.

We will travel.  
Mile upon mile.  
Mile upon mile.  
While my grandmother's mind  
tangles up more.  
Tangle upon tangle.  
Tangle upon tangle.

# Math Class

While I wait  
for my new glasses to be ready,  
reading is fuzzier  
but numbers are still sharp  
in my mind.

The teacher taps her desk,  
picks and flicks  
chipped rosy polish,  
the color of my gums,  
while we are supposed to  
be solving for  $x$ ,  $a$ , and  $b$ .

But I am counting  
hours,  
    minutes,  
        seconds.

How many seconds do I have  
if I leave in 53 days?

Swift pencil marks  
On paper  
Calculate  
 $53 \text{ days} \times 24 \text{ hours} \times 60 \text{ minutes} \times 60 \text{ seconds}$   
 $= 4,579,200 \text{ seconds.}$

I like math  
because there's always one answer.  
 $6 + 7$  will always = 13 (my age).  
I like math  
because numbers don't change their minds.  
I wish Baba  
wasn't like a number right now.  
I wish Baba  
would change his mind  
and let us stay.



# My Family's Outsides

## Me

I have a bump  
on my nose—  
the doctor calls it  
a deviated septum.

My nose is always stuffy,  
and a little crooked,  
and even though I don't want people  
to notice my nose,  
it is always making noise,  
so it gets noticed anyway,  
especially when it gets  
extra stuffy  
after I go for a swim,  
which is my favorite thing,  
ever,  
which is every day.

My eyebrows are not  
inverted delicate Vs like my father's  
but straight bushy lines  
like my mother's.

My face is practical,  
too practical,  
but it envies my hair,

a black mirror  
that in the brightest sunlight  
turns brown.

My hair is always smooth and silky,  
it makes friends easily  
with my fingers  
and the comb.  
If I choose to cover my hair,  
like my mother,  
what will my face envy?

### **My Big Brother**

Owais, who is 2 years and 2 days  
older than me,  
732 days to be exact,  
doesn't want to move either.  
His eyebrows hug each other  
as he pushes *dal* and rice  
around his plate,  
around and around.

Instead of packing,  
he visits the swimming pool.  
Diving deep  
into the water,  
over and over again.

Instead of packing,  
he visits the tennis courts,  
slicing the ball  
easily over the net.

He slices the ball so hard  
and so far  
away,  
that when the ball finally  
hits the net,

he sinks to his knees  
and doesn't have the energy  
to get up.

**Ammi: My Mother**

Original owner of the thick bushy eyebrows.  
My mother's brows are straight lines  
like Owais and me.

If you were to pour tea,  
and add a little milk,  
and count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,  
that would be the color of  
my skin.

If you were to pour tea,  
and add milk,  
you would need to pour,  
pour,  
pour,  
and  
count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
until the color of  
my mother's skin.

My mother, Ammi, is prettier than me.  
I know it in the way she lingers  
at the mirror  
and I don't.

Her delicate features  
boast at more beauty  
while mine  
have already  
accepted  
who  
they  
are.

But there is one thing of mine  
that is better than hers.  
Her hair knots easily,  
and mine never does.

Her smile doesn't  
reach all the way  
to her eyes  
when she tries to sell us America.

**Baba: My Father**

My father's eyebrows are  
the wings of birds  
flying into the horizon.  
Only when my father is mad,  
they become like my mother's.  
Now that we're moving,  
from Pakistan to the United States of America,  
they stay inverted.

**Nana Abu**

The father of my mother,  
Nana Abu,  
has two toes on his left foot  
that hug each other  
one a little in front  
of the other  
one a little behind  
the other  
that I call  
hugging toes.  
Even with his  
hugging toes,  
my grandfather does not really  
give out hugs.  
But when Nana told him  
that we were moving,

his tree arms reached out,  
long and loving limbs  
gave me a side hug.

### **Asna**

Is the tallest in the class,  
taller than the boys,  
taller than Mrs. Zakaria even.

I am the smallest in the class,  
smaller than the teacher,  
smaller than all the other boys and girls,  
but when I am with Asna I am the loudest.  
So Mrs. Zakaria tries to move my seat  
f a r  
from Asna.

Now that I'm moving,  
my seat will be very very  
f a r.

Now is Mrs. Zakaria happy?

### **Last Day of School**

I make my eyes hard  
scoot my chair  
next to Asna  
close the space  
all the way  
no inches left  
not even a millimeter.  
I look around  
and dare Mrs. Zakaria  
to say anything.

She doesn't.

### **Asna**

Asna is my friend.  
Not just any friend.  
Not just a good friend,  
but a best friend.  
Asna,  
who has a new baby sister,  
says  
*but you have to  
be here  
but you have to  
see her grow up . . .*

Have  
Have you  
Have you ever  
Have you ever said  
Have you ever said goodbye  
Have you ever said goodbye to  
Have you ever said goodbye to a  
Have you ever said goodbye to a best  
Have you ever said goodbye to a best friend?



# Visiting Grandmothers

Guilt slaps  
the soles of my feet  
when I run up the marble stairs  
to the mother of my mother,  
Nana's room.  
Then I walk slowly  
to Dadi's room.

# Dadi

When I tell  
the mother  
of my father  
goodbye,  
she doesn't wish me  
a safe trip  
a happy life  
lots of love.

Instead, she asks me my name.

# Seeds of Hope

My grandmother Dadi may not know my name,  
but every morning,  
she scoops seed into her  
palms that are  
lined  
lined  
lined  
and she scatters it  
round the garden.  
The birds are remembered.

When she's not looking,  
I scoop a handful of seeds,  
knot them tight in my *dupatta*.  
I will pack these with me,  
take them with me,  
feed the birds there,  
feed them  
for her.

# Nana

When I tell  
the mother  
of my mother  
goodbye,  
she hugs me so tight  
holds me so long  
my eyes feel hot.

She is lucky.  
She gets to stay.  
Her roots spread deep  
and don't have to be uprooted  
like me.

Did you know nasturtium flowers  
don't like to be uprooted?  
Their roots don't like new soil.

# Nana

Should actually be called *Nani*—  
*mother of my mother.*

But Owais's first word was Nana—  
*father of my mother.*

So Nana

Who is always giving us food

Who is always giving us clothes

Who is always giving us books

Who gives us everything really

grabbed the word

and said

*mine.*

# Nana

*Superb*  
is what Nana says  
about my art  
when I join her  
in the afternoons  
underneath the veranda fan  
to paint, draw, sketch.

When I have a brush  
in my hand  
or a pencil,  
my insides breathe.

But now that we're moving,  
Nana is too busy to paint, draw, sketch.  
I can read her mind  
through her quiet sighs,  
slight wrinkles,  
mouth stitched together,  
so she doesn't say too much.

Still—  
Nana's disapproval  
is like charcoal on paper,  
heavy and smudged.

*They say children are more resilient than we think.*

*Nonsense.*

*Children are far less resilient than we think.*

(Nana knows everything.)

# My Grandmother Nana's Hands

Pierced my ears  
when I was a baby.

Fed me my first bites  
of mushy *khichri*.

Now her hands stay busy  
making clothes  
for me before I leave.

Now her hands  
buy yards of cotton cloth at the bazaar,  
piping at the lace stall,  
bring the cloth home,  
soak the cloth in a plastic bucket,  
so it doesn't shrink, of course,  
dry it in the sun, and take it to the tailor,  
then phone the tailor—  
*Are the clothes ready yet?*

Then return to the tailor to pick up the clothes,  
hand the tailor crisp notes,  
rewash and starch the clothes,  
before finally giving them to me,  
perfectly folded and ready to be packed.

*Fold your dreams and pack them too*



*while you're at it,*  
her eyes say.

With us gone,  
what will her hands do now?

# Blue Cocoon

Under the peach sky  
under the crows cawing  
under the veranda  
by the garden  
is the pool.

One thing  
Owais and I do  
no matter what  
every day  
is swim swim swim  
in Nana and Nana Abu's pool.

Nana Abu floats like a tree  
sways side to side.  
Nana bobs up and down  
down and up  
in her swimsuit and *sari* petticoat  
while Owais and I  
swim laps  
back and forth  
forth and back.

Owais's arms and legs  
have more rhythm than mine,  
have more speed than mine,  
he wins medal upon medal.

But still  
we are the  
Underwater Siblings.

Down at the bottom  
of the pool floor  
we are in a  
a bright-blue world.  
Safe  
in our blue cocoon.  
Can we stay here until  
the clouds go to sleep?

They can't make us move—  
can they?  
But we must  
move  
the same way  
we must  
come up for air.

# Motia and Mehndi

Before our l o n g flight,  
Asna's fat *mehndi* cone  
swirls green farewell paisleys  
and her initials and mine  
intertwined  
on my empty palms.

I push my new glasses up my nose  
to study my new hands.

Before our l o n g flight,  
white fragrant *motia* flowers  
are threaded together  
in three delicate circles.  
One circle of flowers  
loops lazily over my ponytail.  
Two circles of flowers  
placed on my  
too-skinny wrists  
by Nana.

Polished petals  
hinting  
at New Possibilities.  
At hope?

## Part Two



Replanting

# On Land

Differences attack my senses.  
The American airport has no smells.  
The AC is strong.  
The floor is carpeted.  
The voices are bold.  
The clothes are different.  
And why is *everyone* wearing jeans?

# settle

*verb* set·tle \se-təl\

**Definition of SETTLE**

- : to end (something, such as an argument) by reaching an agreement
- : to make a final decision about (something)
- : to move to a place and make it your home

My mother  
laughs on the phone  
and tells the mother of my mother  
how well we are settling.

But Nana doesn't see  
what I do.

Ammi's eyes still aren't smiling  
when she laughs,  
and her eye circles run deep.

Nana doesn't see  
Ammi braiding her hair  
with one hand  
twirl bend loop  
or  
biting her nails  
into crescents—  
something she only does  
when she's nervous.



Settled is  
when your roots are strong  
and spread out every which way  
like that tree—oak?  
in the hotel parking lot.  
(I don't know  
my American trees yet.)

Settled is  
when it's hard to pull you up,  
when it's easier just to leave you  
exactly  
how  
you  
are.

I am  
dandelion fluff  
ready to float  
away.

If I could,  
I would  
float all the way back home.  
I don't even need a breeze.

My roots are anything but settled.

# Nurah Haqq

I used to be light  
and free  
before we moved.  
My name means  
“light” in Arabic and Urdu,  
but I do not feel light or free  
anymore.  
I feel heavy,  
even though  
I will probably be the  
lightest  
in my class,  
with maybe the  
darkest skin color.  
So much for light.

# My Mother

Wears a *hijab*  
neatly pinned  
around her face.

Wears a hijab  
because she is Muslim,  
not because she is Pakistani.  
Yet even when  
she does wear jeans  
and lightly lines her eyes with  
L'Oréal instead of *kajal*,  
I doubt they are lined  
with American hope.

Before the move,  
it felt like my mother was in color.

**Bold.**

Now she's in black and white.  
Faded.

Her movements are smaller,  
her smiles zipped.  
Her "back home" accent is turned down,  
like volume on a knob.  
What more will she lose?

# Language Barrier

*But your English is so good . . .*  
is what we hear.

Yet

from the car,  
when we order food  
from McDonald's  
fast  
the way it's done in America  
fast  
they don't understand us.

So we learn  
fast  
to stop saying water  
with a soft *t*—  
instead with a hard *d*.

A hardness new to us.  
But old to Americans.

We learn fast.  
We learn  
the supermarket is a grocery store.  
A dustbin is a trash can.  
A trolley is a shopping cart.

We learn to move quickly in line,  
not linger.

We learn to not expect tea and snacks  
everywhere we go.

# Language

Pakistan is said like: Pack-is-stan  
Muslim is said like: Muzz-lim.  
Water is said like: Wah-der.  
All wrong.

Pakistan is supposed to be “Pah-kiss-tahn.”  
In “Muslim,” the *u* is supposed to be like *oo* in book,  
the *s* a soft and gentle pout—  
not a hard *z*  
buzzing back at you.

# Which Land Is Mine?

In Peachtree City, Georgia,  
the trees touch the sky  
and the air smells different.  
The water tastes different too.  
The wind is pure  
and free  
from exhaust.

Yet the sidewalks are empty.  
The roads have only cars.

In Karachi, Pakistan,  
the trees are shorter  
like me.  
The air has whiffs of exhaust  
and mango juice is plentiful.  
Rickshaws sputter on the roads.  
A donkey here or there.  
Scooters everywhere.  
Sellers of every kind  
selling  
coconuts  
birds in cages  
balloons  
towels.  
They all  
gather on the road.

Different melodies  
all at once.  
Even though their lives  
are hard,  
they seem free.

Yet America with  
its pure air  
and people stuck inside  
all day  
is known as  
the land of the free.

Pakistan with  
its free people everywhere  
and dirty air  
is known as  
the land of the pure.



# Hotel

We are in a hotel  
and our bags are  
sticking their tongues out  
at us  
half opened  
spilling their contents out  
just so.

Our room is ugly  
with small windows  
the color of spit  
and Owais and I are  
restless, trapped  
even though it is sunny out.

*Go get your Quran.*  
*Let's read Surah Al-Kahf.*  
Ammi's voice is  
too floaty,  
too cheerful.

Owais's eyebrows hug.  
His face is light enough to turn red.  
*Whoever reads Surah Al-Kahf*  
*on Friday will have a light that shines*  
*from one Friday to the next.*

*Go get it now,*  
commands Ammi.

*You can't make me.*

Her voice  
is fragile poison.  
*What did you say?*

I want to tell Owais  
don't say anything.  
Just sit down with me,  
open your Quran,  
and read Surah Al-Kahf,  
the way we always did on Fridays.  
The melodious words  
of peace  
rolling off  
our  
tongues.

Instead,  
his voice is  
dangerously quiet.  
*You can't make me.*

Ammi raises  
her palm  
while I wait for the  
stinging sound  
of  
skin to skin.  
The hot slap.

*You know,*  
*here in America,*  
*I can call the cops*  
*and DFCS can take you away?*

He walks to the door.  
Tears pinch my nose tight.  
I who never cry  
in front of anyone,  
never ever  
find that my face  
is wet.

# Little

When we were little  
and Ammi would tell us  
to go pray,  
we would listen.  
But when we would put our foreheads  
on the ground,  
instead of praying,  
we would look at each other  
and whisper secrets.

Now,  
I look at my brother,  
and I don't know who he is,  
or what his secrets are.

# Stop

They both look at me,  
surprised.  
My tears  
surprise me most.  
I cover my face,  
hoping the embarrassment  
evaporates.  
Relieved that their voices are  
mute.

Owais, who was  
on his way out,  
stops  
turns  
changes his face.

*Nurah, I didn't mean  
to make you cry.  
Sorry.  
Ammi, I can't take it anymore.  
I hate this place.  
I'll read later.*

And then he is  
slamming the door  
behind him,  
gone.

# My Family

Is beginning to fracture  
one day at a time  
while we are stuck  
in this stuffy  
hotel room.

Maybe when school starts  
when the leaves  
start changing  
colors . . .  
Baba has promised us  
the leaves will change into  
the colors of  
hot spices:  
cumin, red pepper, and turmeric.  
Maybe then, things will get better.

# Ammi Says

You should:

*Make your bed*

*Go for a walk*

*Pray on time*

*Go find a pool*

Go find a pool . . . ?

Owais and I

exchange a look.

If we find

a safe blue cocoon,

maybe then

our moods

will cool?

# Where?

Where is a pool?

Where are the crows?

Where is the garden?

Where is home?

They're a 15-hour flight away.



# Part Three



7 12

Water

# The Rec Center

A sigh of relief  
even though it  
smells of  
stale socks  
and warm sweat,  
because most importantly  
there is the smell of chlorine.  
A pool.

# Warm Welcome

I s l o w l y

d

i

p

the **big**

toe

of my

right foot

into the pool.

Bliss.

# Blue Cocoon

Under the water  
the bright-blue world  
welcomes me  
with a cool hug.

Under the water  
Owais and I exchange  
one watery smile.

If I just close my eyes  
hard enough,  
if I float just so,  
I can almost imagine  
I'm back  
home.

# Trophy Case

Between the locker rooms  
is a shiny wall  
with swimming medals and trophies,  
and when we walk by the wall,  
Owais takes a quick look.  
But I take a  
s l o w  
look,  
place my hands on the glass,  
leave behind smudgy fingerprints,  
but take my dreams with me . . .

# TV

On the Olympics channel  
Owais and I  
tune in to swimming.  
As I watch,  
I hold my breath.  
Exhale when  
the race is over.  
Owais flicks off the TV.

*Keep practicing  
maybe you can be in the Olympics . . . ,*  
says Baba  
looking at Owais  
the star athlete.

My mouth turns  
the tiniest bit down,  
so he adds  
*You too, Nurah!*

I nod,  
turn my lips back up again.  
But the good energy in the room  
that was swimming around us  
is now drowning me.

What does it feel like



to be a winner?

# School Morning

On my first day of school  
when we climb into the big yellow bus  
step by step  
we don't know that Baba follows our bus to school  
stop by stop.

Ammi tells us later  
Baba wanted to make sure  
we reached school safely.

I guess it's not just Ammi—  
Baba worries too . . .

# The First Day of School

The leaves *still* haven't changed colors.  
I knew I was short at school,  
but I didn't realize  
how short I really was  
until I saw Jason Flynn  
the tallest boy in the school  
and as I followed him  
down the hallway  
my head reached the bottom  
of his book bag.

I knew I was brown,  
but didn't realize  
how brown I really was  
until I saw so many  
who were white and pink,  
pink and white,  
and only a handful of dark brown.

And although school just started,  
and the bell rang only 7 minutes ago  
(420 seconds to be exact),  
I already feel like I don't belong.

# Language Arts

Is a class  
where I don't know where to sit.  
So I stand by the classroom door  
and double numbers  
inside my head  
to calm me.

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

$$2 + 2 = 4$$

$$4 + 4 = 8$$

$$8 + 8 = 16$$

$$16 + 16 = 32$$

$$32 + 32 = 64$$

$$64 + 64 = 128$$

I reach the number

1,024

when the teacher shows me  
where to sit.

Language arts  
is a lie.

There is no art  
in here.

Just lots of punctuation

, . ! — . . . ; ?

And confusing questions  
that can have

more than one answer.

# Science Class

Relief.

Because we have  
assigned seats.

Relief.

Because there is  
a math problem  
on the board.

Relief.

Because math problems  
are safe  
and have only  
one  
answer.

# Hands

I am already solving  
the math problem  
in my head . . .  
when *Hi, I'm Aidan*,  
his arm reaches out.  
*Hi, I'm Brittany*,  
her hand shakes his.  
This time he looks at me.  
*Hi, I'm Aidan*,  
his hand is out.  
His hands waits.  
I am so surprised  
for a second  
I don't know what to do.  
I don't want to explain,  
so instead my hand  
reaches out slowly.  
He smiles.  
My fingers—always cold—  
touch his.  
His fingers  
are warm  
like his smile.

I forget to say my name.  
It's Nurah.

But they don't ask.

I hope no more boys  
try to shake my hand.  
I'm Muslim,  
I'm not supposed to touch boys  
who aren't related to me.  
Guys who aren't my brother,  
father,  
grandfather,  
mother's or father's brother.  
Aidan isn't any of those.

What would Nana say  
if she saw me  
shaking a boy's hand?



# Math Class Decisions

The numbers draw me  
into their world  
inviting me with a wink  
of  $+$   $-$   $\div$  and  $\times$ .  
The numbers almost distract me from  
seeing a girl  
with a fat braid  
who reminds me of Asna.

# Coloring 101

In geography class,  
there is a teacher,  
brown-ponytailed,  
with a too-big smile.

Welcome to geography.  
Otherwise known as  
*Coloring 101*.

*Baba,*  
*You lied.*  
I thought the schools  
here in America  
are supposed to be better?

# Lunchtime

At lunchtime,  
the girl with the fat braid  
is sitting at a table  
    loud with laughter,  
    full of friends.

I realize  
that I need her,  
but she doesn't need me.

I button my lips,  
keep walking past her table,  
past *all* the tables,  
and slink near the stairs.

# Second Day of School

*What did you say your name was again?*

Aidan asks.

*Nurah.*

*My name is Nurah.*

I sneeze.

*God bless you.*

I don't know if

I'm supposed to say thank you,

so I say nothing.

To be safe.

# Aidan

His skin is golden brown,  
like smooth sand.  
His eyes much lighter  
than mine,  
soft toffee brown,  
and much kinder  
when he offers me a  
crooked smile.

*Isn't he cute?* whispers Brittany  
when he gets up  
to go to the restroom.

And when Brittany asks  
that question,  
Brittany Walker with her  
blond hair and blue eyes,  
I don't know why,  
but I feel smaller than I am  
and sad.

I don't feel like I,  
Nurah Haqq,  
with black hair and dark-brown eyes  
am enough  
    enough for Aidan?  
And if I ever will be.

# Lab Partner

For some reason  
when it's time  
to choose a lab partner,  
Aidan smiles  
his crooked smile  
and chooses me,  
not Brittany.  
And I feel better than  
I've felt  
in quite a while.

# Clothes

Nana has tailored  
my clothes  
for me.

Red piping.  
3 buttons.  
2 pockets even.  
Floral print.

Colors bright  
and happy.  
Aqua blue  
paired with  
eggplant purple.  
Ripe-mango yellow  
paired with  
unripe-mango green.  
Rosy pink  
paired with  
bright orange.

Cloth so soft  
it feels like tissue.

But then I hear the whispers  
that scratch like nails.  
Even though

I pair the *kurtas*  
with stiff jeans, not *shalwars* . . .

*Why does she wear clothes  
like that  
every day?  
Why doesn't she wear anything  
different?  
I don't know how some people  
go through middle school  
dressed like that.*

The colors of my clothes  
are no longer happy.

In Walmart, the only  
long-sleeve shirts  
that are loose  
that I like  
are in the women's section.  
No pockets.  
No floral print.  
No red piping.  
Shirts rough like towels.

Dull like  
the colors of  
    crumpled litter on the beach.  
Ugly faded brick.  
Faded purple marker.  
But I buy them anyway.



# Autumn

The leaves have finally  
changed into  
a glory  
of spices.  
And our moods  
have cooled  
with the weather.

But even though Asna  
emails and calls  
and I  
email and call,  
she is far,  
too far  
away.

I am still  
alone.  
So alone,  
even when we 4 are all  
together  
in 1 little hotel room.

# Sweet in Comfort Suites

Baba has booked us  
an extended stay hotel  
called Comfort Suites,  
but I don't feel the comfort  
(the sofa bed sags and groans)  
and it's not sweet.

Baba plans for us to be here  
for no more than  
a couple of months  
(60 days or less)  
while we look for a house,  
maybe a home?

Owais and I long  
for a house  
until we realize  
every Tuesday  
and Thursday afternoon,  
the staff bakes and serves  
melty circles of joy  
in the lobby:  
chocolate chip cookies.

The suites are becoming  
sweeter.

# Comfort in Comfort Suites

We don't know anyone.  
But now we know  
Miss Polly and Miss Josefina  
who wear stiff blue housekeeper uniforms.

In the corner of our suite  
is a small black rectangle stovetop  
where Ammi cooks food  
where magic happens  
where the taste of home  
coats my tongue.

When Miss Polly or Miss Josefina say  
*Something sure does smell good*  
(it does!)  
Ammi packs them curried rice  
to take home.

Even though Ammi uses  
frozen bags of vegetables  
and fried onions from packets  
and tomato sauce from cans,  
we scoop the steamy golden rice  
into our mouths  
over and over  
again.

# The Ways of Rice

Ammi shows us  
the ways of rice.  
In Karachi we had a cook  
named Zeeshan.  
Now we must help Ammi.  
We put 2 teacups  
of rice in a pot  
(the one with the  
jiggly handle).  
Wash with cold water.  
Measure the water up  
to 1 fingertip line  
and cook on bubbly high.  
Once the rice  
swallows up the water  
and it looks like finger holes  
are poked in the rice,  
Owais covers the pot  
and sets the timer  
for 10 minutes.  
We wait wait wait  
until  
the *beeeeeeep*!

I fluff the rice  
with a fork,

coat it with ghee . . .

Cooking coats us  
with togetherness.

# House Hunting

We see houses that are too big.  
Some houses that are too small.  
One house looks “just right,”  
a room for me  
a room for Owais.

The “just right” house has big windows,  
rectangles of sunshine that warm  
my outside skin,  
and black creepy shutters that chill  
my inside skin.

My parents pray *istikhara*,  
*Oh God*  
*I seek your counsel.*  
*If you know buying this house*  
*is good for me,*  
*my religion*  
*my life*  
*then decree it for me.*  
*If it's bad for me,*  
*then turn it away from me*  
*and give me something good*  
*and make me satisfied with it . . .*

My parents pray

they talk  
they sleep on it  
then they say Yes.

We get the “just right” house  
creepy black shutters and all.

# A New House

We are in the new “just right” house  
*finally*  
with carpets the color  
of teeth.

We are scurrying  
like roaches  
unwanted visitors  
because the plumber  
is coming.

Quick  
wipe the counters,  
Quick  
wash the dishes,  
Quick  
vacuum the crumbs.

*But why?*  
We wonder.  
*Because we don't want the plumber  
to think Muslims are dirty!*  
Ammi's hands pause from washing  
and find their way  
to her hips.

The air puffs my hair,



floats it,  
as I sigh.

The plumber comes  
and goes  
and he does not take  
off his shoes,  
leaving red footprints  
of Georgia clay  
on the white carpet.

And we are the ones  
worried  
about  
dirt?

# Lunchtime

The loud chattering  
of friends  
who are not  
*my* friends  
scrapes at my soul.

I never know  
where to sit  
or who with.  
So I sit underneath  
the stairwell  
in a triangle space  
that is dark and small,  
just like me.

In my last school,  
I always knew  
where to sit  
and with who.  
In my last school,  
my name was known.  
In my last school,  
my voice was **loud**.

In this school,  
I am mute.

In this school,  
I am invisible.

# Skype Calls

Late nights or early mornings  
when Nana and Nana Abu call  
when Asna calls  
*Boop Boop Boop!*  
*Boop Boop Boop!*  
Happy sounds.  
Even though the screen is small,  
the house becomes a  
home  
full of laughter  
and loud voices.  
But when we say bye,  
our house becomes  
too quiet  
too far  
a house that is  
7,995 miles away  
to be exact.

# Walking to the Rec Center

On the walking path  
golf carts speed by,  
dogs pull people,  
and bikers whiz by.

We hear

*Hey y'all*

*How are you?*

*Hi*

Owais and I

give each other a look

*Who are these people?*

*Why are they saying hello?*

People here must be really friendly  
we think,

but then

*Why don't I have*

*a friend at school?*

# Rec Center

The water is bright.  
The water is blue.  
It says  
*I am here for you.*  
Oh Water,  
do you know  
that you are my only friend?

The water scoops me into a hug,  
laughter bubbles at me,  
and floats me gently up high.

In the water, I'm the meaning  
of my name—  
Light.

# Cold

Even though it's hot outside,  
I hate  
feeling the horrid cold  
snaking into a ball  
in the pit of my stomach  
at school, especially at lunchtime.

But when the weather changes  
one ordinary night,  
I wake up  
cold inside  
and freezing outside,  
and it's brutal.

I wear sweater upon sweater  
5 total  
just to feel warm  
when I wait for the  
bus.

*Let's go buy you a proper winter jacket,*  
Baba says,  
but still  
it is not strong enough  
to keep out the cold.

# Karachi

Back home  
the weather is  
hot hot hot.  
But in the evenings  
when the sun gets sleepy  
it gets cooler  
balmy  
and  
breezy.  
A tropical hug  
before bed.



# American Winter

Winter:  
snips  
cuts  
the tips  
of my fingers.  
I am not made  
for this weather.  
I am not made  
for this country.

# Baba's Patience

We have a fireplace  
that we are still learning—  
a button to press  
a switch to pull  
to make a fire.

By the hungry orange licks,  
Baba mends kites  
and waits for  
an invitation from the sky.

# Birds

In Pakistan:  
the birds are loud  
morning  
noon  
night.

Here:  
the birds are loud  
only in the morning  
only at sunset.

Here I am loud:  
only in the morning  
before school  
only in the afternoon  
after school.

# After School

At the dining table  
I find my voice.  
With a few pencil strokes  
I doodle America  
away  
by drawing the Karachi beach.  
Angry wave  
upon  
angry wave.  
We talk about  
Nana and Nana Abu and Dadi and Asna  
back home  
and the world feels  
smaller.  
Happier.

I push away the  
school day  
flip my apple  
upside down,  
biting into  
the red underbelly  
creating a flower-shaped pattern.

Then pray *namaz*,  
then homework,  
then finally,

it's time to swim.

In the pool  
we dive

low.

We float high.  
On the surface,  
eyes closed,  
I float my worries away.

# Bright-Yellow Flyer

I see it  
at the Rec Center  
underneath the sunny window  
winking at me.

I grab one  
fold it into  
one rectangle  
two rectangles  
three rectangles  
four.

I place it at the top  
of my swimming bag  
with a smile.

# Teatime

*Why don't we both  
try out for  
the Center swim team?*

Owais's face  
is happy.

Owais is the  
athlete,  
the one  
with the medals and trophies.  
I am okay,  
but not good enough  
to win a medal  
or a trophy  
or anything really—  
at least *not yet*.

But when I see  
Owais's dark eyebrows  
unstitched  
I know I can win.  
Maybe even a medal,  
so that is why I ask.  
That is why I say,  
*Let's do it!*

*Maybe you can make  
some friends,*  
adds Baba.

*Definitely!*

Enthusiasm  
is  
contagious.



# Skin

At swim team tryouts  
there is skin  
skin  
skin.  
Arms and underarms  
legs and thighs.

I am wearing leggings,  
a swim shirt with sleeves.  
And even though I am covered  
covered  
covered  
I am scrutinized.  
The odd one out,  
again.

# Dollop of Hope

The next day  
at tryouts  
one girl is there  
wearing tights  
and long sleeves  
too!

She stands by me.  
Does she know  
I need a friend?

Before we dive  
leaving a trail of bubbles  
like hope behind us . . .  
*I'm Stahr!*  
*I'm Nurah!*

# Pep Talk

Coach Kelly's  
hair is  
    curly,  
        bouncy,  
            like the tentacles  
                of an octopus.

But her voice is  
low  
and  
rough.

*If you make the team,  
I expect  
Winners  
I expect  
Medals  
I expect  
A strong team  
I expect  
You to do your best  
I expect  
Teamwork.  
Any questions?*

# Stahr

Whose name has an extra *h*  
but is pronounced like Star  
finds me at school  
before I go to  
my safe triangle  
underneath the stairwell.

*Do you want to eat lunch with me?*  
8 words that change my life.

Stahr has freckles.  
Not like me.  
Stahr's teeth are covered in metal.  
Not like me.  
Her eyes are pale green and gray.  
Not like me.  
She wears long sleeves  
at school  
all the time.  
Just like me.

But one day at lunch,  
she pulls up her sleeves,  
and shows me the yellow,  
the purple,  
and the blue.

*My dad hits us with his belt,  
and cusses at us.  
Don't tell anyone, okay?*

I am a good friend.  
So I don't.

# Camouflage

I always wished I  
had freckles,  
but seeing Stahr's,  
I don't think I would want  
that many.

If Stahr wears green,  
her eyes are green.  
If Stahr wears gray,  
her eyes are gray.  
It doesn't matter  
what color I wear—  
my eyes stay  
dark dark brown.

# Imagine

Underneath a sky  
the color of promises  
Stahr and I sit  
at lunchtime  
on a bench  
in bright sunlight.  
Imagine.

# Difference

The difference between  
having a friend  
and not having a friend  
can be told  
from my face.

Before having a  
friend  
I would wear a mask  
of silence.

I would not look here,  
there,  
everywhere,  
but rather,  
at the hallway floor.  
Tile  
after  
tile.

With a friend,  
I look here,  
there,  
everywhere.

With a friend,  
my feet feel light,



like my name.

With a friend,  
I don't have to stitch  
my mouth tightly  
together.

With a friend,  
I let the corners  
of my mouth  
curl into a smile.

# Swim Tryouts

Stahr swims like me  
and  
I swim like Stahr.  
We share the same pace  
arms slapping the water  
feet kicking.  
We talk about  
how we want to make the team  
how we want to win medals  
and Stahr wants to know  
*How did Owais get so good?*

We float lazily  
and giggle giddily  
until Coach Kelly claps  
her hands  
and barks  
*Okay, ladies,  
less talking,  
more swimming!*

But this only makes us  
laugh louder,  
and Coach Kelly  
offers us a little smile.

# Strokes

*It's all about the strokes,  
says Coach Kelly.  
You want your arms to  
slice  
the water  
not slap.*

This I can understand.

For art  
with my pencil  
I can press hard  
to get darker colors  
light strokes  
for light colors.

For swimming:  
quick strokes,  
precise strokes,  
to win.

# Alyson

In geometry class,  
Mr. Ferguson sings the  
quadratic formula.

*Negative b*

*Negative b*

*Plus or minus square root*

*Plus or minus square root*

*b squared minus 4ac*

*b squared minus 4ac*

*all over 2a*

*all over 2a.*

While he sings  
and I doodle,  
the sunlight  
is making friends with my hair.

My arms are so long they can easily reach  
the tops of the cabinets to get a glass,  
to drink wader not water,  
but my legs are not so long,  
I am the shortest,  
always the shortest in the class.

And Alyson who looks like the person  
on the cover of the magazine,  
and whose arms and legs

and everything in between  
are exactly the size they should be,  
puts down her pencil and says,  
*Omigosh Nurah, your hair is so pretty.*

Surprised, I put my pencil down,  
and let my lips whisper, *Thank you.*

# Owais

I have better hair,  
but his face is better looking than mine.  
If you take a loaf of oatmeal bread,  
I am the brown heel of the bread.  
He is the white inside.  
His lashes are longer than mine  
even though he is a boy.  
His lips fuller  
even though he is a boy.

When I was little,  
I thought Owais and I looked alike.  
But now when I hear the aunties talk about us,  
my ears pay attention  
and I realize  
we don't look alike at all.

Aunties will smile wider  
when he is around  
will compliment his looks  
the slice of his dimple  
when they think he can't hear,  
but they forget that  
we can hear  
much more  
than they think.

# Masjid

At the *masjid*  
I am covered.  
You can see just my face  
and hands.  
Here we are mirrors  
of each other.  
Everyone here is almost all brown—  
different shades,  
and I feel like I can breathe easier,  
like I'm almost home.

With my forehead down  
on the prayer mat,  
cool and soft,  
I pray for me  
to make the swim team.  
I pray for medals.  
I pray for peace in Pakistan.  
I pray for God to give me the world.  
Ripe and glistening  
a gift  
in my palm.

At the masjid, no boys will try to shake my hand.  
Here the girls will try to be my friend,  
but I will see them looking over my shoulder.  
*Is Owais looking?*

I talk about him just enough  
to keep their attention.



# Junaid

Owais's new masjid friend is named Junaid.  
After basketball in the parking lot  
when the boys are in a circle,  
even though a circle has no point,  
no leader,  
he is the leader.  
His laugh the loudest,  
his eyes the brightest.

In my mind,  
his name bounces  
round and round.

Does Owais talk about me at all to him?  
I wonder.

# Hair

It is too long  
and its weight  
is bogging me  
d  
o  
w  
n.

At the salon,  
I point to my chin,  
like a girl in a magazine  
confident and smooth,  
to show the lady  
how short I want it to be.

*Sweetie,  
is your mom here with you?*

My head shakes angrily.  
No.  
*Can I talk to her on the phone?*  
I am tired  
of always being treated  
like a baby,  
but I mumble the number anyway,  
a number that I don't even like  
memorizing

because I miss my old number  
back home.

*I just wanted to make sure  
it was okay to cut her hair so short.  
She looks so young!*

As she cuts and snips,  
my anger evaporates.  
But when the assistant  
sweeps away my hair  
smiles at the  
silky black Cs  
on the floor,  
she says  
*I'm trying to grow my hair out.  
Just like how your hair  
used to be.*

I don't smile back.

# School

I get random  
compliments  
from random people.  
But when Aidan  
walks by me in the hallway  
he looks looks looks  
at me  
just me  
and says,  
*Nice hair, Nurah.*  
I now know the reason  
for my haircut.

# Stand Out

*Coffee break!* yells Coach Kelly  
whenever she wants to give us  
a pep talk.

*Remember,*  
*when you're in the water,*  
*you want to STAND OUT.*

*Got it?*

*Stand out.*

We nod  
and shiver.

Yes,  
we will  
do our best  
to stand out.

# Fall Parent Conferences

*Needs to participate more*  
is written under the comments.

*She can't stop talking at home,*  
Ammi tells Ms. White.

I am tired of being told  
I talk too much  
or I talk too little.

Ms. White thinks  
I talk too little.  
Coach Kelly thinks  
I talk too much.  
Why can't they just let me  
be?

*Hi, Nurah!*  
*This is my mom.*  
*This is my dad.*  
Stahr says to everyone,  
eyes gray today  
because she's wearing gray.

Walking proudly  
next to her parents.

I do not tell anyone  
*This is my mom*  
or *this is my dad*.  
I try to walk a little in front,  
sometimes a little behind.

Ammi is the only one  
wearing a hijab  
(seafoam green at that)  
and even though I like the sea,  
I really don't want  
to call more attention  
to us.

Why can't I just  
blend,  
like everyone else?  
Why can't I just  
blend,  
like Stahr?

# Amphibian

In water  
I want to stand out.  
But on land  
I want to blend in.



# On the Way Home

*What a friendly child*  
*your friend Stahr . . .*  
*what nice parents too . . . ,*  
Baba and Ammi remark  
and I hate  
how anger  
pools inside of  
me.

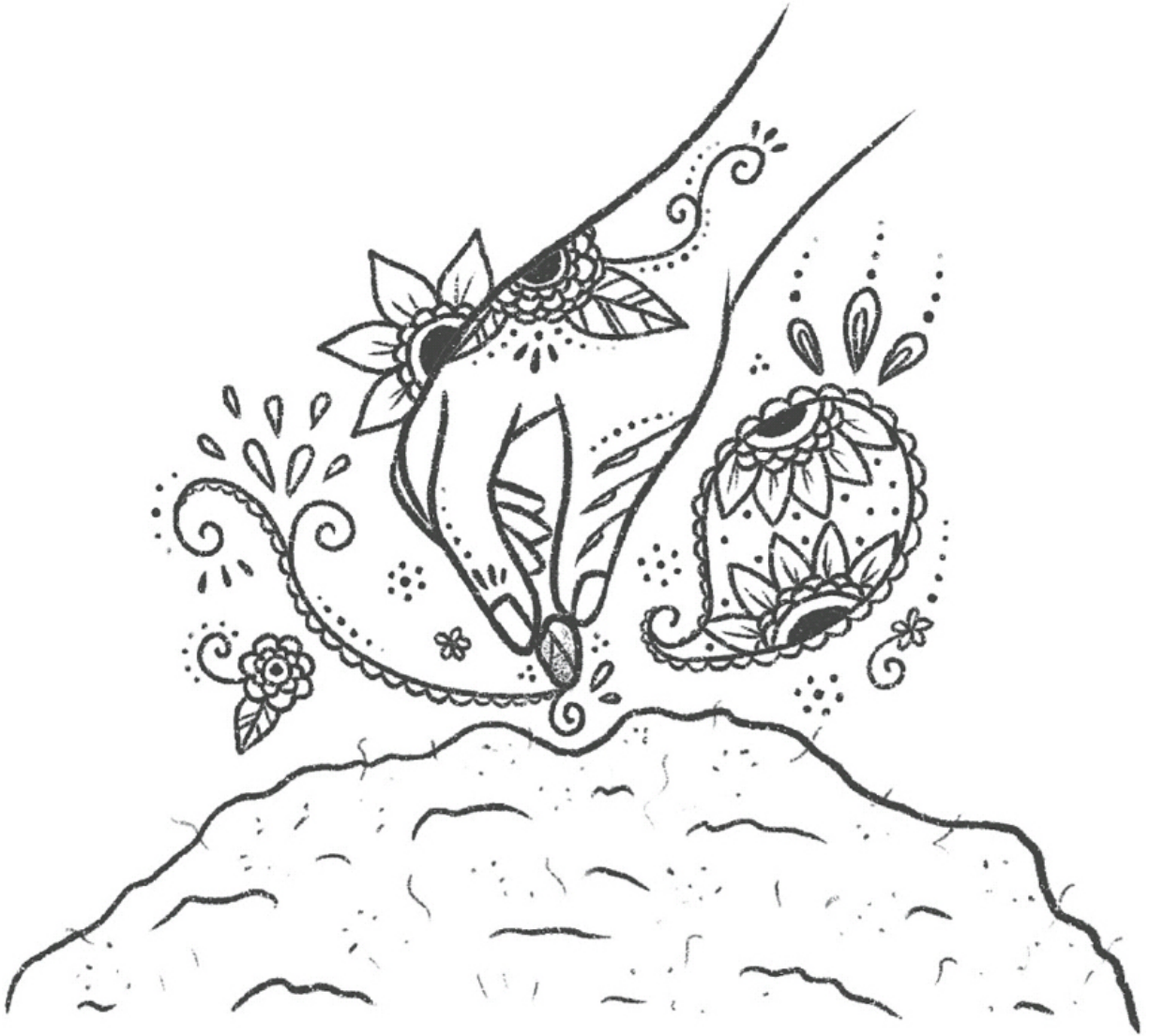
To make them stop,  
*Her dad hits her*, I say  
and my mother's face is sad again.

# Swim Team

My mother's face  
My father's face  
My brother's face  
My face  
are happy today  
because we *both* made the team.  
(Stahr too!)

In a red booth  
we sprinkle pizza with red pepper.  
In a red booth  
my mother wears red lipstick.  
In a red booth  
the cheese melts long and liquid—  
into joy.

# Part Four



Planting Seeds

# My Mother's Belly

The belly of my mother is  
mostly flat  
but inside it  
there is a secret.

The secret  
is the size  
of a raspberry.

*I am expecting a baby,*  
she says, her voice full of  
hesitation,  
but underneath the hesitation,  
I hear hope.

I finally feel  
light  
like the meaning  
of my name.

# Back Home

Asna has a baby sister  
whose hair smells like Cocoa Puffs  
and when I held  
the baby,  
I knew  
how to  
curl my mouth  
into  
a sh-sh-sh-sh.  
I knew  
how to  
bend my knees  
up-down-up-down.  
My body will remember  
again.

# Doubts

But later,  
when I'm alone,  
I wonder and wonder and wonder  
and the wondering makes  
me feel heavy and heavy and heavy  
all over again.

## Before Bed

*Did we move to  
America  
just so you could have babies  
who are American citizens?  
Is that why we are here?*  
The question slips out  
much louder than I meant it to  
and I can taste the salty anger  
on my tongue.

My mother looks up  
while she braids  
her hair with one hand—  
twirl bend loop.  
Her face tired,  
so tired  
that I feel sorry—  
I wish I could iron  
her wrinkles away.



# My Father's Answer

*No*

*No*

*No*

*No*

*That is not the reason  
that we are here.*

*We are here because of  
job security,  
the schools are better,  
more opportunities.  
Don't you like it here?*

# Anger

When I was little  
and I lost swimming races  
against Owais,  
I would cry tears  
shaped like secrets,  
salt mixed with chlorine  
behind my goggles.

I would throw my towel  
call him names  
churning the sadness  
into anger.  
Because isn't it easier  
to be angry  
than sad?

# Swimming

The next day,  
sunlight  
brings  
me  
hope.

At times, I don't  
understand the moods  
of my heart.

But today  
is easy.  
Owais and I dive  
high from the board  
deep into the pool.

Everyone swims  
(Baba too!),  
except our mother,  
whose face is  
yellowy and who  
doesn't like the smell of chicken  
or spices  
(or anything really)  
so we pick up fish fillets  
(the only thing that could be *halal*  
on the menu)

through McDonald's  
drive-through  
on  
the  
way  
home.

# The Moment

The moment the ultrasound technician  
tells my mother,  
I am eating an *aloo kabab* sandwich at school,  
Owais is solving for  $x$ ,  
and our father has just made a big sale.

# Teatime

I spread the butter  
just so,  
bury it under jam,  
am slicing the crusts off my toast  
when my mother says  
*I'm not having a baby anymore.*  
I stop slicing.  
*On the ultrasound, they saw an egg sac,  
but there was no baby inside.*  
Ammi, I don't understand.  
*This means there is a baby's home,  
but no baby.*

I understand the baby.  
It didn't feel like the egg sac was  
home.  
It, too, didn't want to join us  
in a place that doesn't feel like  
home.

# Part Five



Sprouting



# The House

That doesn't feel like home  
yet  
is changing.  
The sink once hungry  
and hollow  
is now swollen,  
throwing up dishes.  
Dust hugs the corners.  
Stubborn crumbs  
stick to feet.  
I squirt soap  
into the shape of a  
heart  
onto a sponge.

*How can I  
take care of a baby  
when I can't  
even  
take care of a house?*

Ammi's voice is  
a cracking eggshell.  
Before her face gets  
runny,  
she walks away.

Fact: I have never seen  
my mother cry.

# Raspberry

I never liked  
the taste of raspberry  
anyway.

# Google

A blighted ovum  
known as “anembryonic pregnancy”  
happens when an egg  
(a fertilized one)  
attaches itself to the wall of the uterus,  
but the embryo doesn’t develop.  
Cells develop to make the pregnancy sac,  
but they don’t bother to make the embryo.

# Baby Sizes

Mustard seed.  
Peppercorn.  
Orange lentil.  
Raspberry.  
Peeled almond.  
Cherry.  
Green olive.  
Fig.  
Lime.  
Banana.  
Squash.  
Mango.  
Corn.  
Coconut.  
Pineapple.  
Watermelon.

# Nurah Haqq

I am a little sister  
who was never meant  
to be  
a BIG  
sister.

# Skype

When Nana and Nana Abu call,  
I tell them the news  
news that was once good  
now bad.

Nana's lips get small,  
face turns down.

*Verily to God we belong  
and verily to God we return,*  
Nana Abu says.

Even though it's all he says,  
his voice,  
his words  
are pieces  
breaking  
into the sky  
swooping  
d

o

w

n

hugging Ammi and me.

# Fajr Prayer Before Sunrise

I know it's bad  
because Ammi  
doesn't bother to wake us up early  
at the white thread of dawn  
to pray.  
And I,  
the lover of sleep,  
sleep sleep sleep,  
wake up with tension  
nibbling my stomach.



# Nana's Worries

When Nana calls  
and asks how my mother is,  
I tell her fine *alhamdulillah*.  
I don't tell her  
how she really is.  
I think the way Nana  
shrinks her mouth,  
raises her eyebrows,  
sighs,  
she knows too.

# Swim Meets

My skin  
tingles all over  
feet flex  
arms swing

Coach Kelly  
barks  
*Swim your fastest.  
When you do freestyle,  
and you're not breathing for air,  
keep your head still.*

*Make sure your eyes are  
at the bottom of the pool—  
focused.  
Don't look around  
comparing yourself  
to others—  
especially when you're in  
the middle of a race.  
That'll make you lose your focus!*

Got it?  
Before thinking,  
I pump my fists  
and yell  
YES!

Stahr giggles.

Coach Kelly's mouth  
smiles wide.

*I like your energy, Nurah!*

# Where Is My Mother?

Before, Ammi would  
come to our swim meets  
and watch me  
always finishing right in the middle.

Before, Ammi would  
come to our swim meets  
and watch Owais swim  
always finishing first.

Now, Ammi doesn't come.  
She says her head hurts.  
Does her stomach hurt too?  
Does it miss the baby?

# Almost Neighbors

Stahr lives only 8 houses away from me  
but she doesn't know how long she's going to live there.  
*My mom is looking for a place away from my dad . . .*

Stahr eats dinner at 5  
and we eat dinner at 8  
and tea at 5.

So when her mom is late  
from work,  
Stahr comes over  
and waits to eat my mother's *samosas*,  
which are perfect hot triangles—  
golden-brown pastries full  
of spices, meat, and oil.

But lately,  
my father is still  
at work  
making money  
working hard to keep  
“job security,”  
and my mother stays in her room.

Stahr asks  
*When are we going to have samosas?*  
*Where's your mom?*

I let the words slip out  
heavy  
*My mother*  
*had a miscarriage.*

And Stahr who has too many freckles  
and too many words  
stays silent.

## The Next Day

Stahr's mom  
rings the bell  
at 5:33 p.m.,  
and we still don't have samosas,  
or tea,  
or anything really,  
and *sorry* hovers  
at the edge of my tongue.

But before I can say anything,  
*Here's a casserole*, she says.  
I've never had a casserole before,  
and when I peek at it  
underneath the foil  
the yellow layers  
muddle me even more.

She asks to see my mother  
*Ammi, someone is here to see you . . .*  
And Stahr, who is just Stahr,  
not a big sister,  
or a small sister,  
or any sister,  
whispers,  
*Four.*  
*My mom had*  
*four miscarriages*

*before she had me.*



# Teatime

When Stahr's mother  
is over,  
samosas are fried quickly,  
*jaldi se*  
tea brewed,  
and my mother is not in her room  
anymore.

# Plans of Penelope

Monday Wednesday Friday  
are the days that Stahr's mother visits.  
Penelope,  
whose hair is orange,  
but here they call it red.  
And instead of samosas  
they nibble on Munchkins  
that she brings  
and I see my mother  
becoming who she once was.

# Staying Together

Fajr  
the prayer of dawn  
Zuhr  
the prayer of noon  
Asr  
the prayer of afternoon  
Maghrib  
the prayer of sunset  
Isha  
the prayer of night

Once more,  
my mother starts to wake us up  
for Fajr  
and I don't feel  
the tension nibbling  
anymore.

The other prayers  
we pray together  
and stay together  
too.

# The Surprise

Baba,  
whose hours  
are not so long anymore,  
now that we are having teatime again,  
now that my mother is *almost* herself again,  
tells me he has a surprise for me.

Two big brushes.  
two cans of paint,  
the grayest blue,  
to match the ocean waves,  
he says,  
and a rusty gold orange,  
to match the sand.

Baba knows  
I miss the beach in Karachi,  
and am tired of the walls  
white white white,  
so we begin,  
and now whenever I enter my room,  
I hear the waves,  
and smell the sand.

Baba hangs up hooks  
with a hammer  
and a bearded smile.  
*For your clothes*

*and medals  
one day!*

# Leftover Paint

Our “just right” house  
no longer has creepy black shutters,  
but shutters that match the ocean.

# Art Class

When I doodle,  
my mind forgets  
all that is happening  
around me,  
the bad  
and the good  
and the in-between.

My doodles  
become sketches.  
And when I write  
in my journal,  
the words and pictures  
play and flirt  
with each other.

I linger  
over the paper  
the way my mother  
lingers over the mirror.

# My Art Teacher

Ms. White  
gives us a project  
to draw a self-portrait.  
I am forced to look  
in the mirror  
and draw, draw, draw.  
Shadows of the eye,  
bushiness of the brow,  
hollows of the bone.  
B+ is the grade I get.

Our next project:  
*Make a collage of a special place  
that has meaning to you.*  
So I glue, cut, draw  
crushed pink tile  
hungry green plants  
bold blue pool  
by Nana and Nana Abu's garden  
and get an A.

I wonder  
what was wrong  
with the picture  
of me?

*For the final project*



*draw yourself  
for a self-portrait  
but with something unexpected.*

The class grumbles.  
She pushes up her glasses  
holds up a finger.  
*Draw what feels good.*  
*Surprise me . . .*

# The Words of Ms. White

*I won't remember  
your name  
long after you're gone,  
but if you have a piece  
of art that's memorable,  
I will always remember your work.  
Always.*

I want to be remembered.

# Swim Meets

Owais and I  
are used to Ammi  
not coming anymore  
but last time  
Baba came,  
and Ammi too.  
Ammi's face was tight  
Baba's face was loose  
but when Owais won,  
her face became  
loose and lovely  
and I wished that  
I was a winner too.

# Swim Meet

If I watch the ways of winners,  
watch them hard enough,  
maybe I will learn.  
Once Owais swims lazily  
in second place.  
Way behind.

I am growing bored watching.  
But suddenly near the end,  
his pace  
picks up . . .  
I gasp as  
his arms  
slice the water  
feet a blur  
and suddenly  
he is in first place.  
I am hooked.

*How did you do that?*  
My features incredulous  
*It was easy.*  
He shakes off the water  
with a smile.  
Now that he is back in the water,  
his dimpled smiles come easy.  
Too easy.

It's not fair.  
Does he know how badly  
I want to win?

# Extra Sleep

Is like scraps of frosting  
to me.  
Irresistible.  
But now on weekends  
at the white thread of dawn,  
I no longer sleep in.

Instead I head to the pool—  
Stahr sometimes joins me.  
We dive in  
and practice.  
Easy for Owais,  
but not for me.  
I do it anyway.

*You need to work on your  
technique,*  
says Coach Kelly.

I learn to slice through the water  
not slap it.

I learn to make my feet  
flutter into a kick.

I learn to breathe  
every 3 strokes.

I learn to e x t e n d my arms,  
catch the water at the top of my stroke,  
rotate as I breathe.

I learn the perfect flip turn  
to streamline off the wall.

I learn to reach forward  
into the blue.

# Afternoons

On a day  
when the sun peeks out,  
after Stahr and I swim,  
we head to Baskin-Robbins  
for scoops  
of ice cream.

Stahr gets pistachio  
one day,  
strawberry  
another day,  
chocolate  
another day,  
and I get cookies and cream  
all the days.

At Baskin-Robbins  
Aidan works  
behind the counter  
sometimes.

*Hi, Nurah!*  
he says with a crooked smile.

Who *is that*?  
Stahr asks.



I whisper to Stahr about how  
Aidan chooses me  
in science class.  
Stahr tries  
to whisper  
how she chooses  
Mason in math class.

Even though I have never  
heard his name  
I know he must be important  
because Stahr actually whispers  
when she says his name.  
When I am with Stahr,  
secrets spill out  
in seconds,  
secrets I didn't even know  
that I had.

By the time I have  
talked  
talked  
talked  
to Stahr,

My cookies are all melty.  
No longer hard  
mixed with soft.  
Maybe that's what moving is like:  
all the hard bits  
eventually go away.

# Help

Ammi's eyes are no longer foggy  
but clear and focused.  
So when Penelope comes over for tea  
freshly bruised and watery-eyed,  
Ammi serves steaming chai and questions.  
*What are you going to do?*

Too long a silence.

A heaving sob.

*I've been saving for a place.*

Ammi puts two hands around Penelope's hands,  
whispers  
*I'm going to help.*

# Delayed Teatime

While Stahr's dad works,  
Ammi helps Penelope.  
I help Stahr  
fold and pack their clothes  
and dreams away . . .  
for later.

# Getting Better

Sometimes my dives  
are crooked.  
I close my eyes  
wince  
before diving in.  
A broken dive.

When I race,  
sometimes the water  
is not my friend,  
even though I try so hard.

*You're bringing your arms  
out of the water  
too soon.  
Follow through with your strokes.  
Trust the water,*  
says Owais.

So I do.  
Slowly,  
slowly,  
I am getting better.

I know this because  
Owais high-fives me  
Stahr hugs me

and Coach Kelly  
smiles wider when I finish  
my laps quicker  
beating the clock  
second by second.

Coach Kelly tells me  
if I keep it up,  
I will start winning soon.

I am the water,  
buoyant with hope.

## Part Six



Rot

# Bullied

Now that Ammi  
is herself again,  
she is back to what she does best:  
worrying.

Ammi worries about us,  
too much.  
She buys us brand-new swimsuits  
that smell like Walmart.  
She packs us school lunches,  
rolled-up *parathas*,  
fried aloo kababs,  
thermoses of rice  
that tease us of home.

*Are you being bullied?*  
No, we say,  
because we aren't.  
We smile big,  
too-big American smiles,  
to reassure her.

But  
if she were to ask me  
about the man  
the man on the bus,  
I would have to

say Yes.



# The Bus

The bus is a friendly yellow.

On the bus is a man.

The man on the bus is a monitor.

He is almost whole.

He has 2 legs.

2 eyes.

2 feet.

2 ears.

2 nostrils.

1 arm.

1 hand.

# Jay

On the bus is Jay.  
Jay like the alphabet,  
Sandwiched between *I* and K.  
*A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K . . .*  
Jay has eyes the color  
of a swimming pool.  
A dangerous one  
I wouldn't want to jump into.

Jay and Cal are a team.  
They whisper  
to the man on the bus.

# Did You Know?

A wedding ring  
is worn  
on the left hand?

# The Incident

Jay and Cal do not whisper  
anymore.

Their voices are loud.

*Do you wear a wedding ring?*

*Can you shake hands with your left hand?*

Their faces  
change.

Their lips  
smirk.

Their voices  
laugh.

They laugh

All

The

Way

Home.

Mr. Tim,

the bus monitor,

stutters,

face turning red,

and looks out the window.

All

The

Way

Home.

# I Wish

My skin stings  
hot with anger,  
but is too brown  
to turn red.

I wish I could say something,  
do something,  
stop them,  
but how?

I just look outside  
at the trees.  
Silent witnesses.  
Just  
Like  
Me.

# Sunday School

*Whoever sees evil,  
change it with his hand,  
and if he is not able to do so,  
then change it with his tongue,  
and if he is not able to do so,  
then with his heart—  
and that's the weakest of faith.*

I am the weakest.

# Pep Talk

*Coffee break! yells  
Coach Kelly,  
her arms  
waving us over  
even though  
there is no coffee  
just puddles  
of chlorine water.*

*By the pool  
we huddle  
shivery and warm,  
warm and shivery.*

*Don't forget  
be like an octopus!  
An octopus is not only quick  
in the water.  
An octopus is highly  
intelligent.  
An octopus knows  
how to free itself  
from difficult situations.  
An octopus knows  
how to soar  
through the water.*



I want to be  
like an octopus.

# Courage

Ms. White  
arranges dying flowers in vases  
walks around the room  
in shoes that make no noise.

Ms. White gives advice as she peeks:  
*Soften your edges . . .*  
*Notice the angles . . .*  
*You could add more here . . .*

Behind me she stops  
quiet  
pushes her glasses up.

Her mouth lies down in thought.

I think she is surprised by  
how I hold my charcoal  
easily  
how I press down  
dark  
how shapes and shadows appear  
clear  
*It takes courage to be so*  
***bold.***  
*Nice work.*

# Time

I hate riding  
bus 11-269.  
I hate stopping by  
Blueberry Hill.  
The stop adds 10 minutes  
to our ride home.  
10 minutes.  
600 seconds.  
Enough time  
for anything  
to happen.

# Temper

In first grade,  
Ms. Chowdhury made me sit next to  
Ahmed Anwar.  
A good girl  
next to a bad boy.  
Why don't teachers  
change their tactics?

He threw my favorite  
Little Mermaid  
pencil case  
down to the ground.  
I gave him a look.  
The second time  
I told him to stop.  
The third time,  
I pounded  
the back of his head,  
right next to  
the gentle circle  
of his cowlick,  
Pound, pound, pound,  
down to the ground,  
until I got dragged out  
to the hallway  
by Ms. Chowdhury.

Good Girl no more.

# Inside

When I get mad,  
I am not like  
the water in a rice pot  
simmering slow.  
I am calm  
calm  
calm  
and then I explode.  
I am a teakettle  
waiting to scream.

# The Incident

Tension takes bites  
out of my stomach.  
At first nibbles,  
but then bites.

Jay and Cal  
are bending their arms  
into stumps  
wagging them  
back and forth  
laughing quiet and loud  
all at once.

Even though my face is calm  
like a lake,  
with no ripples at all,  
my face becomes a wave.  
Tidal.  
Wild and furious  
all at once.

*SHUT UP!*  
*SHUT UP!*  
*ACT YOUR AGE.*

My voice is so loud,  
such a surprise—

it  
shuts  
them  
up.



# Tomorrow

I fidget at the bus stop.  
I am so scared  
of what they will do today,  
of what they will say today.

Owais is so lucky he is 15,  
and that his friend Michael Lee is 16  
and drives him to high school.  
I feel so alone.  
But before leaving, Owais  
nods at me.  
Is he trying to say  
*Everything will be okay?*

# Aftermath

Today  
Cal and Jay  
don't even look at me.  
Not a peek.  
They don't look at  
Mr. Tim either.  
The edges,  
corners,  
of my heart  
feel lighter.

# Terrorist Attack

We can't focus  
on our homework  
because the words  
stare angrily  
in WHITE CAPITAL LETTERS  
from the bottom  
of the TV screen.  
I don't like  
the way  
they are saying  
Muslim  
on TV.

Owais throws down  
his pencil.  
*It's ironic, isn't it?*  
*Islam means peace.*  
*I guess the shooter*  
*didn't really click*  
*with that part.*

The faces of my parents  
look old and tired  
and their sighs are  
those of old people.

My father's face is still a frown

and his eyebrows  
inverted Vs no more.  
*Please pray for the victims.*  
*Be careful when you are*  
*out and about.*  
*You never know*  
*when someone will look at you*  
*and because they may think*  
*you believe*  
*what that idiot does,*  
*they may*  
***snap.***

# Knock on the Door

The next day,  
when we are in school  
and my father is  
buttoning the third button  
on his shirt,  
there is a knock at the door.

The man's shoulders  
are as wide as a refrigerator,  
his waist a narrow bucket.  
*Sir, can you step outside?*  
My father asks why.  
Again  
*Sir, can you step outside?*  
Then  
*I'm from the FBI*  
*I need to ask you some questions.*

Although my father's  
eyebrows change  
from delicate inverted Vs  
into straight lines,  
he asks

*Why don't you come in?*  
The man whose shoulders  
are as wide as a fridge—

his eyebrows become inverted Vs,  
*Sir, are you sure?*  
*If I step inside,*  
*and I see anything,*  
*anything,*  
*I can arrest you.*

My father's answer  
is easy:  
*I have nothing to hide.*

My mother's voice  
is gentle:  
*Would you like some tea?*

Don't they know yet?  
*You don't have to be nice*  
*to everyone in this country.*

# Facts

In Peachtree City,  
it is sometimes colder in February  
than in December.  
It rains often.  
Thunder.  
Lightning.  
Sometimes when it rains  
hard enough in Peachtree City,  
the electricity goes.  
Just like in Pakistan.  
In the darkness,  
I am reminded of  
home.

But today, it is rainy  
and cold  
so I cannot eat outside  
with Stahr,  
but Stahr is not here  
because she is  
getting the metal  
on her teeth  
tightened.

Inside the cafeteria,  
a blur of faces,  
I don't know

where to sit.  
My insides feel  
tight.

No one else  
except Stahr  
has said those 8 words to me  
*Do you want to eat lunch with me?*

I square-root numbers inside my head  
100 . . . 10  
81 . . . 9  
64 . . . 8  
49 . . . 7  
36 . . .  
to calm myself.  
I am only at 36 when . . .

A whispery voice.  
*Where are your friends today?*  
Cal is in front of me.  
*Probably no one*  
*wants to sit with you*  
*or your people*  
*anymore.*  
His face is a chewed-up sandwich.

My insides become ice  
my cheeks become fire  
I am too brown  
to become red.

I open my mouth.  
But this time—  
the words are stuck  
inside me.

*Y'all need to find a seat . . .*



Ms. White is on lunch duty  
walking with purpose.  
Cal smirks,  
*Good luck with that . . .*

Ms. White turns.  
I scuttle out of the cafeteria,  
plan to go back to the triangle space  
underneath the stairwell  
to eat my lunch  
alone  
again.

A tap on my shoulder  
I look up  
Up  
Up  
at a tall girl  
*I saw what happened.*  
She pushes her braids  
behind her ears  
a warm smile  
brown sugar skin.  
*I'm Destiny.*  
*You can eat with us . . .*

I follow her.  
Knots loosen  
from my tongue.  
*Thanks . . .*

Inside the cafeteria  
the lights are too bright  
But Destiny  
walks right by Cal  
too close.

*You'd better leave her alone . . .*

She is much taller  
than Cal,  
much wider too,  
she holds her breath in,  
looks down at Cal,  
with scowling eyes.

Cal's face becomes  
sour,  
pinched.  
He looks at me  
hard  
then walks a w a y.

# Art Class

Blocks of paper  
creamy white,  
charcoals smoky,  
fat pastels,  
welcome me on  
Tuesdays and Thursdays.

In math there's only one correct answer  
which I like  
but in art there is no wrong answer  
which I love.

A line can be swirly or straight.  
A circle can be perfectly round  
or turned into an oval.

Math I can do quickly  
But art  
I do  
s l o w l y  
on purpose.

# After the Terrorist Attack

The FBI officer  
makes sure  
to knock on all the doors  
of the neighbors  
before leaving  
to ask questions  
about any suspicions  
they may have.

Does my father's skin,  
beige like the grass  
that has died in winter,  
make you suspicious?

The voice of my mother  
tired of being gentle  
is now tight—  
*Assalamualaikum, Nurah,*  
*Wa-alaikum-as-salaam, Ammi,*  
*How was your day?*  
*Fine.*  
Hidden words fill the air.  
I don't tell her about Cal  
picking on me  
in the cafeteria.  
I don't want to worry her.  
I have a feeling she worries enough

by the way she peeks in the mirror  
and loosens her hijab  
ever so slightly,  
before she leaves  
the house.

# Part Seven



Budding





# Looks

It is important to note  
that my skin is  
dark  
like the heel of oatmeal bread  
while Owais's skin is  
light  
like the center of oatmeal bread.  
We do not look alike  
are not recognized  
as brother and sister.

# Jealousy

Coach Kelly praises Owais  
all

the  
time.

Owais is always  
first.

I am almost always  
in the middle.

When Owais wins,  
Coach Kelly smiles big.  
When I finish in the middle,  
Coach Kelly smiles small.

Today, in our race,  
I forgot my technique.  
50 yards of me  
slicing through the water,  
my rhythm is off,  
my arms and legs thrash  
and

I am last.  
Behind my goggles,  
I can feel the familiar  
pricking  
of tears.

*Why can't I be more like him?*

*When will I win?*

# Owais's Room

By his mirror  
smirks  
a  
shelf  
that  
shines.

By his mirror  
smirks  
a shelf  
full of  
trophies  
and  
medals.

By his mirror  
I am invisible.

By his mirror  
if my insides  
were visible  
you would see  
anger  
bubbling  
underneath  
my skin.

# Extra Practice

*That is all you need,  
reassures Owais,  
my Underwater Sibling.*

*But I am already practicing extra  
in the mornings.*

*Come with me  
on the weekend  
I'll show you some pointers,  
Owais's slice of dimple smiles.  
He tosses another medal  
too easily  
onto his shelf.*

*I shouldn't have said Yes  
while my anger bubbled.*

# Star Athlete

Coach Kelly smiles  
a big smile  
to see us at the pool  
on the weekend.

*He's my star athlete!*  
she boasts to  
the other coach there.

Owais is tall  
has swimmer shoulders  
and a swimmer waist  
I am small and  
don't have much  
of anything.

Coach Kelly doesn't  
see me  
or maybe she does  
but today  
she doesn't really  
see me.

# Instead of Pointers

From the very top of the diving board  
Owais is diving  
high to low  
high to low again  
a flip here  
a flip there  
and there is a girl  
with pink-painted lips  
who looks up  
smiles and claps.  
If I were to do  
the same dive,  
she would not clap  
for me.

Owais is  
a better diver  
a better swimmer  
better in looks  
and most things  
and sometimes when  
I'm with him  
I fade  
away.

If I were to sink  
to the bottom

of the pool,  
nobody would notice.  
They would be too busy  
looking at Owais  
diving and  
diving again.

The girl with pink-  
painted lips  
waves to Owais  
before he goes  
to the locker rooms.  
He waves back  
and I roll my eyes.



# False Promises

Owais  
didn't show me  
any pointers.

Owais  
didn't teach me  
anything.

Owais  
didn't do  
what he was supposed  
to do.

# Before the Locker Rooms

Out of the corner  
of my eye  
I see two of them  
with football-player bodies.  
They exchange a look  
before they frown at Owais,  
who still has a smile  
on his lips.

They walk toward the girl  
with the pink-painted lips.  
*That jerk needs to stop showing off.*  
I see one nudge the other.  
*I know, right?*  
smirks the girl  
with the pink-painted lips.  
She's looking  
straight at me.

*Do you know him?*  
she asks.

I don't really know him.  
Not anymore.  
I let out a laugh  
that doesn't sound  
like a laugh.

I let out a shrug  
that doesn't look  
like a shrug.

I let my mouth become an *O*  
let my answer s l i p  
out easily  
too  
easily.  
*Nope.*

# Locker Rooms

I should call Owais back  
before he goes  
inside the locker room  
but he isn't paying attention  
to me.

So  
I  
let  
him  
go.

# Girls' Locker Room

Underneath the shower  
*drip drip drip*  
runs shower water

*Drip drip drip*  
run my tears  
not from  
the chemicals  
of the pool,  
but from  
the chemicals  
of my heart.

And although  
the water is hot,  
my tears  
run cold.

I try to wash  
the worries away  
scrub my fears  
lather the pesky voice  
that says

*What kind  
of person,  
what kind*

*of sister  
are you?*

# Waiting

I am waiting  
for too long  
outside the locker rooms  
on the too-hard bench  
and the two guys  
who are tall tall tall  
and wide wide wide  
come out  
laughing.

The girl  
with the pink-painted lips  
smirks at them  
*All done?* she says.

I am stuck  
waiting  
waiting  
waiting  
for Owais.

*Where is he?*

Guilt nibbles at my stomach.  
I stood up  
for the bus monitor man,  
but for my brother who

has 2 arms  
and is better than me  
at everything  
I didn't call back.

When trouble  
was thick in the air,  
heavy in my ears,  
I just watched  
and waited.

Invisible.



# Probably

He is probably just taking  
a long  
long  
long  
long  
long  
shower.  
Right?

# Lifeguard

Turning out the lights  
my tongue is swollen  
with tension.

My words are dry.

*My brother hasn't  
come out yet,  
can you check on him—  
please?*

# Stretcher

Under a sky  
the color of  
broken promises  
the body of  
my brother  
is lifted out  
of the locker room  
in a stretcher.  
His face  
is puffy  
and discolored.  
I feel so  
so  
so  
alone.  
*Why did  
I let him go?*

# Hospital

At the hospital  
my parents will  
demand  
*Who has done this?*  
*Why did they do it?*  
But I will  
just shrug.  
The words  
clogged in my throat.

# Sorry

He cannot hear me.  
At least I think he can't . . .  
I hold his hand,  
*I'm sorry*  
*I didn't warn you.*  
*More sorry*  
*than you can*  
*imagine.*  
The sorry  
loosens my tongue.  
The sorry  
teaches me that next time—  
*if* there's a next time—  
I will know what to do.  
I will know what to say.  
I will  
I will always  
I will always say  
I will always say something.

# Fighter

When my brother wakes up,  
his face is still a little colorful.  
*Owais, what happened?*

*Nurah, I told them  
I'm not a fighter,  
but they wouldn't listen.  
They wouldn't listen . . .*

Doesn't he know  
the day we came here  
we were made into  
fighters?

# Home Visit

Coach Kelly  
comes to our house  
and words like  
    *surveillance cameras*  
    *file a report*  
    *justice must be served*  
are written by Baba  
on bright-yellow paper  
served on the table  
right next to chai  
next to Owais's  
emergency room  
discharge papers.

Words fill up  
the paper.

# For My Brother

Before I felt  
bubbles of anger.  
Now I feel a  
Water f  
    a  
    l  
    l  
    of regret.

For my brother,  
I churn my apology into action.

I bring him steaming bowls of dal,  
fresh stories of back home,  
a pile of laundry  
with socks matched  
toe to toe.

I tell him he doesn't look so bad,  
wait for him to smile,  
but he's not ready yet.



# Later

His face will become  
the right color.  
He will be fine.  
Handsome again.  
The two boys  
will be reported  
but they will come back  
to the Rec Center  
unfazed  
and my brother  
my brave  
diving brother  
will stay away from  
the blue cocoon  
of water.

# Part Eight



Wiltling

# In America

I will look  
for my grandparents  
by habit  
even though I know  
they are back home  
in Pakistan.

I realize  
when I am in  
the checkout line  
helping  
my mother  
(always helping)  
bananas  
eggs  
cans of tomato sauce  
(for curry)  
that I don't see  
old people  
here.  
Where do they hide?

Here I see  
young  
and middle aged.

Only later when I join  
Key Club

and have community service  
I finally see  
the old people  
in nursing homes  
rocking on chairs  
staring into space  
not being served  
crispy samosas  
not having their feet  
massaged  
not being visited.  
Just staring.

# Dadi

When Baba  
says that Dadi is going to visit  
to see a few doctors,  
my heart lifts  
to the top  
of my short hair  
I will see her soon.  
But it drops again  
to the bottoms  
of my feet  
when I remember that she  
won't remember  
my name.

# Airport

At the Atlanta  
international terminal  
anticipation bubbles  
around me.

There are people  
who have light skin  
the color of milk  
with a drop of tea,  
medium skin  
the color of milky tea,  
and dark skin  
the color of tea  
without a drop of milk.

People who are all  
looking around  
hungry for family.

I am holding my sign  
*Welcome Dadi!*  
On purpose  
I left out  
*Home*  
because America  
is not a home  
for Dadi.

When Zaidu Chacha  
and the attendant  
walks Dadi out,  
we wave big.  
But Dadi  
sees us  
has to be guided over  
to us  
and when she sees us  
her arms pat  
the bones in my back,  
and I smile big  
because she must  
remember me,  
but then she  
asks my name.



# Babysitting

One Friday a month,  
my neighbor Ms. Grayson asks me to babysit  
her kids.

For dinner,  
I feed them  
    sticks of fish  
    trees of broccoli  
    valleys of chocolate mousse.

At bedtime,  
I braid the sky  
with my stories.

I blend  
    stories of land  
    stories of oceans  
    stories of Pakistan.

When Ms. Grayson returns,  
my stories evaporate back into the sky,  
but it's okay because I get paid money.

## Hardware Store—\$14.99

In the aisle  
next to food for cats  
and food for dogs  
I see the food that will make  
Dadi happy—  
food for birds.

In the area  
at the back  
that peeks outside  
I use my babysitting money  
to buy a pot of flowers  
that will make  
Dadi happy—  
petunias.

# Garden

On the grass that is  
green  
like the Pakistan flag  
Dadi's mind becomes  
like a pointed pencil,  
sharp,  
as she scoops out  
the birdseed  
I bought for her.

Dadi's hands  
do not tremble.  
Dadi's hands  
are full of  
purpose.  
Dadi holds in  
a deep breath  
full of hope  
and longing  
before letting out a laugh  
that floats.

The cardinal comes  
right before sunset,  
a fluttering flash  
of red wings.

# Deadheading

Dadi's voice is clear  
as she pinches off  
pouty pink petunias,  
wilted blooms.

*You need to get rid of  
all the old  
and dead flowers  
to make space  
for new ones.*

Maybe I need to get rid  
of all my old  
and bad choices  
to make space  
for new ones?

# Chess

My brother spends  
too much time in his room  
so I set up the chessboard  
and challenge Owais.

Usually Owais wins,  
but today looking at the pieces  
his mouth goes into a yawn.

When I play Owais,  
his mind is not on the perfect squares in front of us  
but on the other shapes in his mind.

In chess,  
my horse hops  
my bishop bops  
my queen glides everywhere.

*Checkmate!*

And even though I'm finally beating Owais in something,  
it doesn't really feel good.

# Junaid

At the masjid  
he is the one who makes the others invisible.

Everyone seems to light up  
around Junaid,  
even Owais.

In the parking lot  
under the basketball hoop  
Junaid dribbles neatly  
jumps high  
swishes the ball through the net.

Nothing about Junaid  
is awkward.  
He moves like water.

My eyes must be drinking  
because when he pauses to look at me  
looking at him

I feel important  
and floaty  
like the ocean.

# Conspirator

After Zaidu Chacha flies home,  
Dadi whispers to me,  
not Owais, because  
he is  
always in his room  
lately,  
because he is safer  
on land  
than in water,  
*Do you want  
to go to Baskin-Robbins?*  
I say *Yes!*

But today,  
my mouth apologizes *No* because I am struggling  
to balance equations  
in chemistry.  
Carbon  
Hydrogen  
Oxygen.  
I balance my voice  
because that is something  
I know how to do  
and focus  
on my work again.

But when the house

gets quiet  
too quiet  
because I don't hear  
her Quran playing  
in the back  
or hear her *tasbeih* beads  
clicking praying clicking praying clicking praying  
I get up to get  
a glass of water  
then run to the wide-open  
front door.

*Where is she?*  
Panic.

I run down the  
cul-de-sac.  
She is not there.  
Up the steep hill—  
she is not there.  
On the walking path  
I spot her curlers  
her nightgown  
swirling with the wind  
right  
and left.

I call her name  
and she looks up at me.  
Confused at first,  
she smiles.  
My heart whispers  
*Alhamdulillah.*  
*Praise be to God.*



# The Walk Home

When we walk home  
the next-door neighbor  
Ms. Grayson waves hello.

*Hi y'all!*

She smiles with her coral-painted lips,  
but not with her eyes.

And even though Dadi's mind  
is unraveling,  
she sees this  
and returns the same  
lukewarm smile.

When Ms. Grayson  
pulls me to the side  
and asks,

*Does she speak English?*

I am so angry

I want to spit.

*Do you know that she reads*

*Yeats,*

*Shakespeare,*

*Austen?*

*Do you know that she has  
shelves full*

*of books?*

*Do you know that she graduated*

*top of her class?*

*Do you know that she taught  
English at school?*

Instead, I nod,

keep walking,

and never babysit her kids  
again.

# Weighing Down of Words

It happens again.  
This time Dadi doesn't ask  
if I want to go  
to Baskin-Robbins.  
This time I am reading  
words heavy on my mind  
and when I look up  
and around  
she is gone  
and the front door  
is open  
again.  
I run down the path.

Relief.  
My heart  
begins to beat slower  
when I see her there.

But oh no oh no oh no  
her hands are holding out  
*rupee* notes  
and someone is giggling.  
Aidan is behind the counter  
and his smile  
is not a good smile,  
but a straight line

mocking her.  
How can a smile  
make me feel  
so bad?

# Aidan

When he sees me  
he doesn't acknowledge me  
with the crooked smile  
the way he does  
in science class  
instead  
his eyebrows rise  
and his straight line  
goes away  
but it is too late  
my fists roll up  
the rupee notes  
and when I guide Dadi  
out the door  
quick quick quick  
leaving her strawberry ice cream  
behind  
I hear their laughter  
erupt.

# Decision

*Ek minute*

I tell Dadi  
steadying her  
by the door.

I remember when my tongue  
betrayed Owais

I remember when my tongue  
betrayed me.

I remember I need to  
*say something.*

I go back in  
to their laughter.

I find my voice  
and

spit it out

*It's not funny.*

The store gets

Very Quiet

and I feel

light again.

I grab Dadi's ice cream.

I remember what hope

tastes like,

a little sweet

and tart

like strawberries.

# The Mirror

In the mirror,  
I hide my hair  
    in a sparkly pink  
    chiffon.  
    In a dusty-orange  
    cotton.  
And my favorite  
    an aquamarine-blue  
    silk.

I study who I am  
who I am becoming  
who I want to be.

Before  
I would have thought  
what Aidan thought  
what Junaid thought  
what Stahr thought  
what Alyson thought  
but now  
I care  
what I think.

I care  
what I say  
and it feels good.

I think of Ms. White.  
I grab my pencil  
and  
start to draw  
something unexpected.  
The new me.



# No Longer

I no longer  
speak to Aidan  
in class  
and the only thing  
he says to me  
is  
*Uh sorry*  
*your grandmother*  
*looked scary,*  
dry laugh.

But it is not funny  
to me,  
I cannot dry laugh  
with him.

I wish I could  
pound pound pound  
the gentle cowlick  
of his head  
but instead I fix my eyes  
on the teacher  
on the board.

Instead I let Brittany  
do the talking,  
be his lab partner,

which she happily does  
and doesn't notice me,  
not once.

# Lab

My anger doesn't feel  
so angry,  
it feels sad,  
it feels lonely,  
because I'm supposed  
to have a partner  
and I don't have one  
anymore.

# Trying Again

Two tables down sits  
Brittany's old partner,  
who looks as lost  
as I feel.  
*Want to work with me?*  
A sudden smile.

Brittany's old partner  
Emika  
was very quiet  
with Brittany  
but with me  
she talks talks talks  
and my ears welcome  
her voice.

When she turns,  
her thin braid  
winks at me.

# Melty Circles of Joy

Stahr's eyes are leaky  
with tears  
while she and her mom stay at  
Comfort Suites  
for a few days  
before moving  
to their new apartment  
which is no longer 8 houses away  
from me  
but 2 windy golf cart paths  
or 3 roads away  
and 6 traffic lights.

Stahr's tears stop leaking  
when I lead her to the lobby,  
introduce her to  
Miss Polly and Miss Josefina  
and to the freshly baked  
chocolate chip cookies,  
to melty circles  
of joy.

# Unwanted

After school  
Stahr drives her golf cart  
over to my house  
and rings the bell.  
She brings Mason too.

Mason, who she chooses  
for a partner  
in math class,  
has chosen  
for a partner  
in real life.

Ammi gives me a look  
her eyes saying  
*What is that boy doing here?*  
as she opens the door.  
My face feels hot.  
Too hot.

*Don't you know  
girls and boys can't be  
just friends?*

I know Ammi is thinking that.  
But he is not my friend.  
He is Stahr's friend.

He is Stahr's boyfriend.

*Want to go with us  
to Target?* she asks.

*No thanks,  
pretty busy around here.*

*Got to go.*

I feel relief as I shut the door  
in their faces.

Ammi's gaze on me  
cools.

# Practice

Ammi's gaze on me warms  
when I practice wearing  
my hijab  
a little bit  
now and then  
to Walmart  
to Pizza Hut  
other places too.  
In the beginning  
the looks of others spear me  
but the more I wear it  
the easier it becomes.  
The more I wear it  
the looks seem to  
soften.



# Spring Conferences

A kernel of an  
idea  
of hope  
curls in my mind.

I think I would like  
to try to wear it  
tonight.

This time, I say:  
*This is my mom.*  
*This is my dad.*

This time,  
I introduce them  
to people.

This time,  
you can see from my hijab  
loosely looped  
and my mother's hijab  
tightly wrapped  
that we are related.  
Family.  
The way it's meant  
to be.

# Part Nine



Flowering

# Owais's Room

His shelf is bare  
swimming medals  
stuffed in a drawer  
no longer smirking  
at me.

Hollowness pools  
inside of me.

Now what?

# Without Owais

Loneliness is the color  
of the swimming pool  
today.

Without Owais,  
I match the mood  
of the pool:  
Blue.

# Offerings

I offer my brother  
invitations to the pool  
in blue and green pastels,  
the colors of hope.

*Come back to the  
the blue cocoon.*  
I tell him  
it's safe again.

*You are my  
Underwater Sibling.  
Come back, please?*

I bring him  
a note  
from Coach Kelly  
urging him  
to come back  
to practice.

Instead he shrugs  
it all away.  
*I like tennis*, he says.

# Returning

My grandfather Nana Abu does not smile  
for photos,  
doesn't smile on Skype either,  
but  
when I tell him  
we are bringing Dadi back,  
returning  
on June 12th  
for a visit,  
his smile fills the screen,  
his voice becomes  
floating bubbles  
of laughter.



# My Father

It is not fair  
of me to say that  
my father is here  
just for job security  
and schools.

He is here  
and we are here  
because he believes  
this is where  
we should be.

# Thirsty

But still,  
I am thirsty  
for home.  
I want to see Nana and Nana Abu  
and Asna  
and everyone else.

# Friends

Every Sunday,  
my father wakes  
at the white thread of dawn  
and goes to the mosque  
with food in hand  
for the Breakfast Club.

Sometimes it is  
warm flaky parathas,  
doughy circles full of air,  
scooped balls  
of watermelon,  
eggs that are so so spicy,  
enough for six men.

And my father,  
I realize,  
is making friends too.

# Hobbies of My Brother

Every day  
after school,  
Owais doesn't go with me  
to the Rec Center.  
Instead, he plays tennis  
with his friend  
Michael Lee  
who lobs the ball  
high  
high  
high  
and Owais,  
who always has  
an eye on the ball,  
smashes it  
low  
low  
low.

And this time  
if the ball goes  
into the net,  
he picks it right up,  
dusts off the fluff,  
soft and yellow,  
and keeps on playing.

# Who Do We Have?

I have Stahr  
my mother has Penelope  
Owais has Michael Lee  
my father has the Breakfast Club.

# Stamina

Is what you have  
when you swim  
back and forth  
forth and back  
easily without stopping.

Stamina is what I need  
so I can swim  
back and forth  
forth and back  
easily  
without gasping  
for air.

When Coach Kelly calls  
*Coffee break!*  
she looks right at me.  
She sees me.  
She throws her arms  
w i d e  
in the air.

*You can only eat an elephant  
(or a whale!)  
one bite at a time . . . ,  
she reassures me.  
You can only win a race*

*one breath at a time.*

I can do this.

One breath at a time.

# Sunday School

Here,  
at the masjid,  
I wear Nana's kurtas again  
with piping,  
3 buttons,  
pockets even.

And instead of jeans,  
tight denim that chokes my legs,  
I wear my shalwars  
soft and forgiving.

I remember the words of Nana,  
*When you wear hijab,  
each step you take  
it is as if God is smiling  
upon you.*

Today when I wear my hijab,  
tightly wrapped,  
shimmery light blue,  
I can't see my hair,  
and even though my face  
usually envies my hair,  
today when I look  
in the mirror,  
I think—



*Not bad.*

# Masjid Lobby

Where boys and girls  
stand  
and there is no  
wall partition  
like there is  
when we pray,  
I see Owais  
and Junaid.

Although they are  
arguing,  
it is playful  
and their features  
are enhanced  
instead of  
distorted.

I stand by Owais,  
waiting.  
Have I ever been  
this close to Junaid  
before?

If he was like Aidan,  
he would put out  
his hand.

I am aware of  
how I stand  
how I blink  
how I breathe.  
The shape  
my mouth makes.

He has a letter-C scar  
on his chin.  
How did he get it?

*Nurah, I know he can play basketball,  
but is he as good at swimming  
as he says he is?*

Junaid's question  
sprinkles the air.

*WE both are*, I say.  
His eyes crinkle  
into smiling  
crescents.

*You both are something else!*  
Owais smirks.

When Owais turns  
to get water,  
Junaid offers me  
a smile,  
just me,  
while I tuck a smile  
into my cheek.  
Even though he can't see  
my hair  
I feel prettier than I have  
in a long time  
and exactly where

I'm supposed to  
be.

# Final Art Project

Looking through  
my portfolio,  
Ms. White scans through  
my latest  
self-portrait,  
my brown  
look-at-me skin  
shaded with pride—  
my something unexpected  
me in my aquamarine  
silk hijab.

Ms. White's lips dance  
into a quirky smile.  
*Nurah, welcome to  
my memory.*

# Final Swim Meet

Before the final swim meet,  
I know what I need to do.  
I walk into my brother's room.  
My Underwater Sibling.

Grab his trunks,  
and YELL  
with my voice,  
the one that made teachers  
move me f a r away  
from Asna in class,  
*Enough is enough!*

*Fine* he grumbles,  
*Fine* he mutters,  
*Fine* he smiles.

# Coach Kelly's Warm-Up

Tan muscular arms  
tracing triangles  
through the air.

Freestyle.

Tan muscular arms  
swirling circles  
through the air.

Breaststroke.

We copy her,  
stretch our doubts away.  
I am ready ready ready.

# Diving Block

Inside my tummy  
it feels like  
frogs are  
hop  
hop  
hopping.



## 50 Yards

I have practiced  
and practiced  
over and over  
back and forth  
this whole season  
and now have the right  
rhythm for freestyle  
and breast stroke.

With breast stroke,  
I know to keep my arms straight together,  
do a frog kick,  
then circle my arms.

With free style,  
I know to breathe after I've passed the flags,  
glide through the water,  
streamline off the wall  
to speed  
efficiently through  
my blue cocoon.  
I pat my goggles  
over my eyes,  
wave to Ammi  
and Baba,  
nod to Owais,  
squeeze Stahr's arm,

and when the race begins  
I am already in the water  
in a perfect

d  
i  
v  
e.

# Final Swim Meet

Coach Kelly's hair  
is straighter than mine today  
and even though I am dripping  
she scoops me up  
into a hug.

*You did it, Nurah!*

*I'm so proud!*

My hug makes  
the tips of her hair  
curl up into smiles.

And Ammi  
and Baba  
are looking at me,  
faces light and loose and lovey  
because I am in third place,  
a winner  
of a medal.

## Owais's Turn

The pool welcomes him,  
acts like he's never been gone,  
and he swims  
so beautifully  
so swiftly.  
Even though I'm  
out of breath  
from doing laps,  
watching him  
still takes my breath  
away.

# Medal

It is the perfect  
amount of heavy  
and hangs on the hook  
on my wall  
and on my heart  
in my body.

# Newspaper

In the city gazette  
is a picture  
of the team  
me on the lower right  
next to Stahr  
holding my medal.

I  
snip  
snip  
snip  
the paper rectangle  
out  
carefully  
to show Nana and Nana Abu  
and Asna and  
family back home.

I highlight my name  
in yellow,  
show it to Dadi.  
When she asks me  
my name,  
I point to it  
proudly.

# Summer

Suitcases being zipped up,  
full and fat,  
when the bell rings.

# Visitor

The man who is missing one arm  
Mr. Tim  
holds out the smell of cinnamon.  
*My wife b-b-b-baked cookies.*

*Thank you,* says Owais.  
My father e x t e n d s his hand.  
*Please come in.*

But Mr. Tim shakes his head  
and smiles,  
how different he looks  
with a smile on his face.  
*Sure fine d-d-d-daughter*  
*you got there . . .*  
He waves,  
and this is the first time  
I notice  
a wedding ring on the fourth finger  
of his right hand.  
Glinting in the sunlight.



# Teatime

My mother delicately  
nibbles Mr. Tim's cookie,  
then smiles and rests  
her hands,  
with the tips of her nails  
bitten into  
crescent moons,  
onto her belly,  
which is full and fat.

This time,  
the baby is the size  
of a mango,  
my favorite fruit.

# For My Mother

My father presents  
a bouquet  
of white flowers  
so tiny  
and faint  
like tissue paper.  
*Baby's breath*, she says,  
her eyes smiling  
so hard  
her mouth  
is jealous.

So

*Do you like it here?*

asks Baba

and Owais

answers an

*I guess so*

but not before

he tucks

a smile

inside his cheek,

making all of us

smile

smile

smile.

# Windy Day

My father  
sometimes reads people  
well,  
but he reads the wind  
very well.

On windy days,  
when the trees dance,  
my father calls us  
and we watch  
his kite  
unfurl on a long  
long  
long  
piece of thread  
until it kisses the sky.

And even though  
the trees here are taller,  
the houses too,  
my father makes the kite  
dance easily in the wind.

Trim little circles,  
zigzags  
too.

In those moments,  
when I dive into  
my blue cocoon,  
soar through the water,  
I become the kite—  
free.

## Author's Note

Although this story is fictional, I drew on my experiences from when I moved from Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, to Peachtree City, Georgia. Like Nurah, I joined a team—not swimming, but a tennis team, and found those experiences shaped and challenged me. I barely made the team, but got much better with consistent practice. Full disclosure—like Owais, my three brothers excelled at the sport much more than I did!

Like Nurah's, my grandmother, who was highly educated, struggled with Alzheimer's and did not remember my name anymore. I still remember the numb sadness I felt watching her decline, and tried to show it through Nurah's eyes.

Like Nurah's father, my father followed the school bus to our school on our first day of high school to make sure we reached it safely. I rode a bus where the bus monitor was missing an arm and was picked on by some students. I remember the horror I felt. I remember wishing I could say something to help. Alas, I did not find my voice, but my eldest brother did. The day the students teased the monitor asking if he wore a wedding ring was the day my eldest brother broke his silence and yelled at the other students to SHUT UP. I remember feeling elation mixed with fear. I worried that we would become easy targets the next day, but amazingly the students stopped picking on the bus monitor. To this day, I think saying something, *anything*, to help someone who is being picked on mercilessly is better than just sitting there and being a silent witness.



I was a senior in high school the year the September 11 tragedy occurred. Unbeknownst to us, an officer from Homeland Security stopped by to interrogate my father. Luckily, my father was eventually left alone, but that is not the case for others. Unfortunately, there are criminals who commit terrorist attacks citing Islam, a religion of peace, as a reason. For Muslim students, it can be mortifying to go to school the day after a terrorist attack has been committed by someone touting Islam. The day after September 11, I was not picked on, but one of my best friends, who was born and raised in the United States, who also wore a hijab, was picked on and told to go back to her country. Owais's line in my story "I'm not a fighter" was inspired by my cousin who said this courageous line when he was picked on by high school bullies in the locker room.

I started to wear my hijab in high school on a Wednesday in tenth grade, but like Nurah I practiced wearing it first to regular places like Pizza Hut and Walmart. I think wearing anything that makes you look different, especially when all you want to do is blend in, can be quite challenging. I admire those who choose to be different in a country where it is not common and appreciate all those who support these students, whether it's simply being a friend or treating them exactly the way you would want to be treated.

I also remember sitting alone at lunch and how different my school experience was when a girl asked if I would like to eat lunch with her. Having a friend believe in you, like Stahr and Nurah do for each other, is life changing. Thank you to all those who invite others to eat lunch with them—it makes a world of a difference.

# Glossary

**alhamdulillah:** Praise be to God

**aloo kabab:** potato and ground beef mixed together and then dipped in egg yolk, coated in bread crumbs, and then fried to make a crispy patty

**assalamualaikum:** Muslim greeting for “peace be upon you”

**biryani:** spicy meat and rice cooked separately before being layered and cooked together

**Chacha:** Urdu word for paternal uncle, specifically father’s younger brother

**dadi:** paternal grandmother

**dal:** lentils

**dupatta:** a shawl-like scarf women in Pakistan wear over their shalwar kameez and worn over the kurta. It can be draped over the head or chest.

**ek:** Urdu word for *one*

**ghee:** clarified butter made from the milk of a buffalo or cow, used in South Asian cooking

**halal:** “permissible” in Arabic. For food, it typically means meat that is specially butchered with Islamic guidelines. For fish, the guidelines are more lenient, which is why Nurah gets fish fillets from McDonald’s.

**hijab:** headscarf Muslim women or girls may wear

**istikhara:** prayer recited by Muslims when in need of guidance on an issue in their life



**jaldi se:** Urdu words for *quickly*

**kajal:** powdery eyeliner that women wear in Pakistan

**khichri:** rice and lentils cooked together until soft. It is cooked extra soft for babies.

**kurta:** loose, flowy Pakistani top. Girls' clothes are usually colorful.

**masjid:** Muslim place of worship

**mehndi:** henna paste that temporarily dyes hands, usually drawn on hands to celebrate events, but can also be put on for big moments, such as Nurah moving, in this case!

**motia:** tiny white flowers that appear at the start of summer and bloom joyously in shades of white. These flowers are often threaded together to form bracelets or necklaces in Karachi, Pakistan, and South Asia.

**namaz:** Urdu word for the obligatory Muslim prayers that occur five times a day. In Arabic, the word for prayer is Salah.

**nana:** maternal grandfather (Nurah calls her maternal grandmother Nana, though, since it was Owais's first word)

**nani:** maternal grandmother

**paratha:** delicious flatbread consisting of layers of cooked dough

**rupee:** Pakistani unit of money

**samosa:** a fried or baked pastry with a savory filling, such as spiced potatoes, onions, peas, meat, or lentils

**sari:** an outfit worn by South Asian women that is made of several yards of lightweight cloth. It's draped so that one end makes a skirt and the other is typically a shoulder covering.

**shalwars:** loose, flowy Pakistani pants

**Surah Al-Kahf:** the 18th chapter of the Quran. Al-Kahf means "The Cave."

**tasbeeh:** prayer beads

**wa-alaikum-as-salaam:** Muslim reply to *assalamualaikum*, meaning "peace be upon you too"

# Nurah's Aloo Kabab Lunch Recipe

## Ingredients:

- 6 medium potatoes
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ginger paste
- 1 teaspoon garlic paste
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon ground red pepper
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 cup bread crumbs
- Vegetable oil

1. Peel and boil the potatoes (aloo) until soft for approximately 25 minutes and mash separately.
2. Cook the ground beef until brown. To the beef add the salt, ground cumin, ginger, garlic, ground coriander, and red pepper.
3. Mix the mashed potatoes and browned ground beef evenly.
4. Shape the mixture into circular kabab shapes with your hands.
5. Dip kababs into the beaten egg.
6. Coat kababs with bread crumbs.
7. Shallow fry in medium-heat oil. Flip the kababs over to ensure they are golden brown on each side.\* Enjoy! They are delicious served with rice or naan bread.

**\*Tip:** Freeze the kababs first if you can for a couple of hours, as it makes frying easier and the kababs will be less likely to break apart.

**Storage:**

If you have any extra kababs, they can be stored in the freezer. They can be cooked quickly or jaldi se by shallow frying them in vegetable oil.

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## About the Author



*Photo by Mariam Shakeel*

**REEM FARUQI** is the award-winning author of the ALA Notable Children's Book *Lailah's Lunchbox* as well as *Amira's Picture Day* and *I Can Help*. Of Pakistani descent, Reem immigrated to Peachtree City,

Georgia, in the United States from the United Arab Emirates when she was thirteen years old. Reem is also a teacher and photographer who loves to doodle. She lives in Atlanta with her husband and three daughters. Like Nurah, Reem loves the Karachi beaches, crows, her aquamarine silk hijab, and especially her grandmother, Nana. *Unsettled* is loosely based on Reem's own story. Visit her online at [www.reemfaruqi.com](http://www.reemfaruqi.com).

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