

In Search of Weight
By Kiana Rawji, 2018

“The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?”

— The Unbearable Lightness of Being, *Milan Kundera*

An object’s mass is the measure of its intrinsic, indestructible matter. An object’s *weight*, on the other hand, is the measure of gravity’s *pull* on it. We can never be massless, but we can be weightless—it’s all a question of gravity.

History is like gravity; without it, we’d rise higher and higher until there’d be no such thing as height anymore. Like gravity, history distinguishes us from the satellites, the comets, the golfballs, the bits of broken things floating aimlessly in space—all weightless, all suspended in their own, insufferable nothingness. History makes us *something*. It demands that we realize our own mass. Like gravity gives weight to an object, history lends identity to a wandering soul.

At eight years old, my great grandfather became a wanderer. The Imam said “Go West,” and so West they went. Mounted on the rough, calloused back of *his* father, he journeyed from Gujarat—near the western tip of the Indian subcontinent—to Kenya—along the eastern coast of Africa. By day, as they trudged through the jungle, their bare feet struck hard soil, the ground dark like their skin sizzling under the searing Indian sun. At night, they slept in trees to evade the hungry eyes of tigers. After months of walking, when they finally reached the coast of the Arabian sea, they boarded a flimsy dhow for another half a year, and until they reached Africa—the promised land, or so they were told—they gave themselves over to the mercy of the sea and the mercy of their God.

After one generation, when East Africa did not live up to its promise, when poverty and racism plagued my grandmother’s family, Canada became the next promised land. Time and time again, my family has been told that the further we venture from where we are from, the better the life we will have.

Just as my great, great grandfather carried his kids on his back to another continent, my grandmother carried her children in her arms and on her lap, as they took flight, thanks to the Imam, across another ocean to another life.

As my grandmother, my Nani, tells me about the lives and journeys of my ancestors, I hear the leaves brushing against my great grandfather’s bare back as he sleeps in a high-topped tree. And I hear the tiger’s paws prowling beneath him. When Nani speaks, I hear the jungle groaning, the sails rustling, the ocean churning—I can hear it all. Yet it doesn’t feel even remotely mine. To my young ears, it’s myth. As I look at her, she looks elsewhere, as if she is watching the past unfold (or rather, re-unfold) before her. And though she doesn’t move her eyes, something moves in them: her story. I can see it moving, breathing, *living* in her eyes, and I want it to live in mine too. But a story must first be born, written in the heart before it can live and be told by the eyes.

You have to know where you came from before you can ever know where you're going. Those months on that little dhow, my great-grandfather—still a child, still light as the wind that propelled him across the ocean—didn't know where he was going. And for a long time, neither have I.

My Nani comes from another world. We do not share the same reality. We may be bound by blood, but we are strangers to one another. "You don't know what's happening on the other side of the wall, because you don't want to know," James Baldwin warned me. For so long, I haven't wanted to know. For so long, I have denied myself of gravity, rising higher and higher into the "yet unknowing world"¹ above, where truth is as absent as weight.

Ascension

1.

In elementary school, I loathed my middle name because it didn't sound like the other girls' names. Throughout 5th grade, my stomach lurched every time another kid asked me what my middle name was. All I would tell them was that it started with an "N". I would let them leave the conversation believing it was Nancy. Or Natalie. Or some other name that I'd never known another Muslim or Indian girl to have. But that was precisely why I loved this little guessing game: because the others would assume it was a name I would never have. A "normal" name. And it affirmed my belief at the time that I was just like them. That on the "inside," I was white. I was a coconut. And what a blessing it was to be such a light, hollow coconut.

2.

Growing up, all I ever wanted was to be "normal." Normalcy, to me, was paradise. In my mind, "normal" meant looking, acting, being like the main characters in my favorite TV shows—like Alex in "Wizards of Waverly Place," like Miley in "Hannah Montana," like Lizzie McGuire. One day in the future, I dreamed I would be cast as Dorothy in my school's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. The way I was—with my skin color, my family, my history—I thought I could never be any of those things. So I blew a blissful bubble around myself, in which I could pretend I wasn't the way I was, and in that bubble I basked, I luxuriated, as I floated higher and higher into the air.

3.

At a feed in 10th grade, when we were all eating coconut ice cream, someone asked, "Kiana, how are the coconuts in India?" At the time, I'd never been to India. So I didn't know what an Indian coconut tasted like, but I imagined it tasted as sweet as what it felt like to be one in 5th grade. I've been asked where I'm from, where I'm *really* from. I've been asked if I have an Indian passport, if I can do an "authentic" Indian accent. I've even been asked if, for Thanksgiving, my mother cooks a *curry* turkey. And with each question, I've been offended. No, I've been ashamed. Disgusted. Not, however, because of anything particularly shameful or disgusting about my heritage, but only because I thought it would keep me from achieving some sort of paradise. The idea of being different, of never being who I thought I wanted to be was too heavy a burden to bear.

¹ From *Hamlet* by Shakespeare

Today, I am just as ashamed and disgusted to say that I was ever ashamed of or disgusted by my past. By myself.

Descension

3.

One summer when I was young, my dad decided to shave his beard. At 7 years old, I had never seen his face hairless and when I did, I was mortified. I wouldn't look at him until it grew back. I remember telling him, in the best grown up voice I could muster up, to never, *ever* do that again. My mother and my sisters agreed with me.

Ten years later, at the dinner table—where most serious conversations in my family are held—my mother suggested that my father shave his beard for good because he'd have an easier time getting through airport security without one. With that, I felt something painful strike the inside of me—something cold, something sharp. Something I still can't entirely explain. This wasn't just about him looking funny anymore; my father's beard is a part of him. The thought of something taking that *away* from him felt so wrong to me.

And I realized what I'd been taking away from myself for so long.

2.

My middle name is Noor. It's Arabic for the light of God, the light of Allah. When I started taking Arabic, for the first time, my middle name made me feel like an insider. When we chose our Arabic names—the names by which we would call each other in class for the next 4 years—I chose Noor. Because it was real. Because it was already mine. It had always been part of my mass but it wasn't until Arabic class that I let it become part of my weight.

1.

As I am listening to my grandmother tell me her story, I watch it dance and flicker in her eyes. And I want my eyes to hold that heavy story, to be alive like hers; I want my heart to beat, to pulse with the music she plays, with the music her grandparents and their grandparents played. Nani breathes into the air the sounds of the jungle groaning, the sails rustling, the ocean churning and I can hear it all, but I don't just want to hear it, I want to *own* it. Like it's an invisible anchor in my back pocket, all I need to do is reach for that story, let it drop to the ground and take me down with it—down into the knowing world.

History makes us *something*. Like gravity gives weight to an object, history lends identity to a wandering soul.

Will I be something?

Am I something?

And the answer comes:

You already are.

You always were.

And you still have time to be.²

I haven't crossed jungles, oceans, or continents like my great grandfather, but I too, have been wandering. I, too, have been venturing West, a stranger to my own Eastern past.

The life of a wanderer is wondrously light, like the sails of a flimsy dhow, like the air suspended inside a bubble, like the satellites, the comets, the golf balls—all the bits of broken things floating aimlessly, weightlessly in space.

The alternative is a heavier, harder existence—maybe more painful, but maybe more real. What then shall we choose?

² From "Here Am I" by Anis Mojgani