

My Mother Is a Lunar Crater

My mother is a lunar crater by the name of Al Biruni. The crater lies on the far side of the moon, away from Earth. It can only be glimpsed by a loving eye when the moon sways. As I watch my mother on our way to the science museum, I want to tell her the name for this slow oscillation: lunar libration, from our zodiac sign Libra, Latin for scales.

She sits in the passenger seat, tense, nodding very slightly from the tremors that doctors say are nothing serious, her right hand clutching the armrest, her left clutching prayer beads. A libration, I want to say, permits us to peer just beyond the moon's eastern edge. Even then, however, Al Biruni appears only in profile, never head-on.

"You drive well," she says after a time. Moments earlier she had sucked in her breath at the speed of cars at that tricky intersection between Springfield and Chicopee where interstates merge and the GPS says to turn right and then left and the lanes go from three to two to four. I was in the wrong lane and the man passing us gave me the finger. Because she was there, I did not give him the finger back. "How scary," she had said, releasing her breath. That's when she began to clutch the armrest and the beads.

"Thank you," I reply.

This is her first time visiting me in western Massachusetts. This is my second time seeing her since the deaths of my father and sister in Pakistan. I could not make it for the funeral. By the time I arrived, they were already buried. While I was there, each time our friends came to the house to console us, my mother said how glad she was that the bodies had been identified, sometimes they never are. When she had kissed them on the cheek—first my father, then my sister—they seemed to smile, she told the guests. I wondered if she shared this detail only when I was present. I wondered if she knew what it was like not to be able to touch the faces of those you love to say goodbye.

I cannot remember which exit I am to take. My iPhone rests to my right, in the cupholder beside the handbrake, charging. It is hard to see, and the GPS voice is mysteriously silent. I decide it is Exit 7, not 8, and stay in a middle lane.

I first learned of the man after whom the crater was named

through my father. Al Biruni was an astronomer and a polymath who lived in the tenth century, during the Islamic Golden Age. He wrote almost one hundred and fifty books, mostly on astronomy and mathematics, but also on law, medicine, physics, and comparative religion. His pursuit was largely inspired by faith, and a need to locate sacred sites precisely. I remember the day my father told his daughters about him. He said Al Biruni had found a way to measure the tilt of heavenly bodies through creating an early form of an astrolabe. My sister was thirteen years old at the time. I was ten. She wanted to draw an astrolabe—what did it look like? My father hesitated. I think he had never seen one. Then he said “astrolabe”—he used the Persian word *akhtaryab*—meant “star-taker.” So my sister sketched an outline of something resembling a long telescope with a cluster of bright stars caught inside. When I came to the United States years later to study astronomy, she gave me the sketch.

I think, now, that I got my love of nomenclature from my father. I want not only to know where bodies lie, but who names them.

The guiding voice of the GPS has woken, to insist I “return to the route.” It was Exit 8.

“Oh dear,” says my mother. “Now what do we do?” She is looking not at me but at my iPhone.

“Return to the route,” is still the only answer she gets.

I note that in Karachi, a city named one of the scariest places on Earth, my mother is never tense on the road, even after what happened to her husband and child. About half of the city’s population of twenty-one million is known to her. When lost, she seeks the help of human beings. Now she seems to sense that the only person known to her in all of New England cannot help. “Oh dear,” she repeats, looking up from my phone to the windshield, and the infinite expanse of I-91.

“Now we just take the next exit,” I try to assure her. “It will still take us into Springfield.” Though I do not turn my head, I know she is staring in disbelief, because what terrain looks like this—with lifeless signs and hurtling cars and not a single pedestrian or shop to ease the eye?

I take Exit 8. The science museum was my idea. There is a modest collection of meteorites that always absorbs my attention, and she will likely bend before each display, her head trembling,

the beads in her hand, trying to take an interest for my sake. Alone, I am certain she would walk the Astronomy Hall in five minutes. She would rather sit amidst colorful flowers, with friends.

I am about to ask what we should do after the museum, when she asks, “Is Springfield a city?”

Two days ago, upon arriving in Amherst, she asked, “Is this a town?” When I told her it was, she asked, “What is a town?” Though I have lived in one for almost eight years, I still do not know.

“Yes,” I tell her now. “Springfield is a city. Though it’s small. So, I don’t know. Maybe?” I regret my reply, for now she has further evidence that every car but the one she is in knows where it is headed.

She has gone from clutching to reading the prayer beads. I hear them click, each a milky moon in her hands, awash with light and dark seas.

On the nights after my father and sister were killed, I would bring my sleeping bag onto the front porch. Before me lay a corral with horses and behind the corral lay Mount Holyoke. I saw rabbits spring through shadows and horses raise their necks, listening. I felt the peace in not knowing what they heard. As the moon rose above me, soft and blue, I examined its face. Instead of reciting funeral prayers in Karachi, I recited lunar names in Amherst. Mare Imbrium, the left eye, would be my sister, who drew magnificent pictures with her left hand. Mare Serenitatis, the right eye, was my father, for he was righteous until the end. He used to make fun of my mother and her prayer beads—he used the Arabic word *tasbeeh*—arguing that Ahmadis had no use for them, uttering *Ahmadi* with more ease than anyone I know. Islam was beautiful as is, he insisted; how could we add or subtract from it by sliding pretty glass on string? Besides, the Prophet did not carry a *tasbeeh*; why should we?

Mare Cognitum: the sea that has become known.

What is known is that some names have more meaning when they are false. There are no “seas” on the moon; those are dark plains, most likely formed by lava. Yet I have met no one who prefers Planus Serenitatis to Mare Serenitatis.

On those nights, I also recited the names of craters, always ending with Al Biruni on the dark side of the moon. Al Biruni had devoted his life to worship. Why had they banished him to the side

without a face?

And I came to slowly say that word, the forbidden one. The one my father always spoke with ease. The one that still makes my mother turn to prayer beads. Ahmadi. The sect that Pakistan declares heretical, prohibiting us from practicing Islam, or even calling ourselves Muslims. But my father did. Right until the end. He would decide for himself what we are called, because some names do not have more meaning when they are false.

“If it is a small city,” my mother murmurs after a while, “why are we lost?”

It takes me a few beats to recall where I am, and what she is referring to. Springfield. We were talking about Springfield. The beats are the sound of her beads. The GPS voice is again silent.

When we pass a gas station, I pull over. I unplug my phone. Dead. I can't remember where I bought the cheap phone charger. Most likely, a gas station like this. I don't know the way to Edwards Street and the quadrangle of five museums with the science museum, so I ask my mother to stay in the car while I go inside. The cashier says they do not carry chargers. I could try the station a few blocks away. When I come outside, my mother is walking about. She is dressed in a fuchsia shalwar kameez with a bold floral pattern, swinging her private moons. If people look at her as an alien, she does not seem to notice. She smiles beatifically: the first real glimpse I have of her since she arrived. She wants to walk. She wants to meet people. They are in a hurry.

I return to the driver's seat. Reluctantly, she slides back in next to me.

“I'll try at the next one,” I say. “Don't worry.”

“Let's do that,” she agrees. Having seen the interstate parallel civilization, she seems less tense.

Three months ago, when I telephoned her in Karachi, begging her to visit, she had resisted. “I have to get a visa,” she complained. I said that any one of her many nieces and nephews would gladly help her to fill out the forms. “What about Trump?” she tried.

“The ban is not yet against Pakistan.”

“But you are so busy. You don't even have time to call.”

“I do call. This is a call.”

“But you barely talk.”

“What am I doing now? Please don't change the subject.”

“You should visit more. You hardly visit.”

“I have visited, since it happened. You haven’t.”

“I am your mother.”

“I am your daughter.” I did not say, your only remaining child.

In the end, I am told, it was a religious figure who persuaded her to come to me. As I spot the second gas station, I try to suppress my sorrow that she listened to a stranger, but not to me.

“What is wrong, *beti*?” she asks.

There is something about the way she says *beti*, daughter. It is a word like no other, to make me feel safe. I have pulled into the parking lot, the car is stalling, and my eyes are shut. If I open them, I know they will meet hers. I know we need to find a new equilibrium, with fifty percent of our family gone. I know it has to happen now, and there are things we must face—things that hover beyond the edges.

“I’ll be right back.” I leave the car.

There are phone chargers inside. I pick one and walk down the aisle of snacks. I take after my father. I do not eat between meals. My sister was like my mother. She could eat at any time. I select a packet of cashew nuts, a bottle of water, and a Snickers Bar. Then I put the Snickers back as my mother has to watch her cholesterol. It is hot for May, and though I do not like air conditioning, I need it now. I return to the refrigerator, lean forward, press my forehead to the cold glass.

Tomorrow is the seventh anniversary of their deaths. Seven years, depending on how we define a year. If it is the length of time taken to orbit a parent body, has it even been twenty-seven days? And if the parent is buried first, before the body is kissed—how long is that? And the sister? Which loss is held foremost?

There are times when my body is wrenched apart, like those the gunmen attacked in Lahore on May 28, 2010. Two separate Ahmadi mosques on the same day, my father praying in one, with almost three thousand other men. He was in Lahore because of my sister’s exhibition at a prominent gallery. He did not die in the mosque. He died in the hospital where he and many others were taken. My sister was with him when the gunmen entered the hospital. Had my mother also gone to Lahore for my sister’s show, she

would also be dead.

I did not know it happened until two days later. I did not have my passport with me. I did not even have my phone. I had been invited to a science conference in Zurich and needed a visa. Before I could submit the visa application, like all Pakistani nationals, I needed to be fingerprinted. So I had gone to Lowell, Massachusetts, and there, perhaps at the restaurant where I ate lunch, I left my phone. There is an expiration date on how many days after fingerprinting an application is valid, so I mailed my passport to the Consulate General of Switzerland in New York City as soon as I returned. Then I bought another phone and called what I thought were two parents to inform them not only of my new number, but also that I would soon be going to Zurich. It would make my father proud. It would help him to forget that our passports had a column where we were listed as infidels. It might help him forget, too, that in the United States, where it was not illegal to declare ourselves Muslims, this was not a helpful word either. In both countries, for different reasons, we were unsafe if we named ourselves.

In the gas station, I feel a hand at my back. I see her reflection in the refrigerator door. She sees mine. The blow of the attacks—is it deeper on her face, or on mine? She is pulling me toward her and I inhale her scent of cumin and lime.

Before coming to the United States, I put the question to my father. The one about why Al Biruni was banished to the far side. Together, we tried to find the answer on the internet, but discovered only what we had already guessed: of the more than sixteen hundred lunar craters, most were named after men of European heritage, twenty-nine after women of European heritage, and twenty-four after men of Arab or Islamic origin. Of the latter, most could barely be seen from Earth. There were none named after women of Islamic origin. “You will change that,” my father had said.

I want to tell my mother that I have no need to. I am happy with her beside me, here, where she is alive. I want to tell her, too, of the days I waited for the passport to be returned. There was no direct number to the Swiss Consulate. I sent faxes. I called an agency that charged an exorbitant amount per minute, only to speak with someone who did not understand what I was screaming. “What? You want your passport *back*? But it hasn’t been *processed*.” And they would hang up. I cursed all borders for being, like

Prophethood, a closed door. Only the sky was not closed to me. So I lay outside each night, reciting lunar names. Mare Orientale. From the Latin *oriens*, though not a single person from the “east” was included in its naming.

“What time will the museum close?” In the glass door, her reflection is smiling.

“Soon.” I pull away from us, and pay for the charger, the cashew nuts, and the water. While she uses the restroom, I wait in the car, wondering if the charger will work. Then I see her come out of the building, talking to a woman and a child. Together, they admire a dogwood tree in bloom. I cannot hear them, but she is laughing, and so is the woman.

“Goodbye,” my mother says, approaching my car.

“Goodbye,” says the woman, and the child waves.

“Such a beautiful tree,” my mother says, fastening her seat-belt.

Pink is her second favorite color after yellow, and I think I see something in the dogwood flowers, but then it is gone.

The phone has not come back on.

“What should I do?” I ask her.

“You should let others help you.”

“Should I ask the cashier inside to call AAA?”

“Who’s that?”

“If the car doesn’t start, they’ll give us a ride back to Amherst and we can stay home and I’ll cook.”

She laughs. “Let’s do that!”

I put the key in the ignition. She is watching me, a smile still on her face, her head still trembling. The roots of her hair are white. The rest is bronze in the sunlight streaming through the window. Her nose is like my sister’s, wide and slanting. On her left cheek is a large mole my father would kiss. The wrinkles in her neck are abundant, and I want to touch them, I want to say hello.

Behind her, amidst the pink flowers where I thought I saw them earlier, the golden wings return. I step out of the car and open her door. I take her hand, small and warm and still clutching the beads. “Oriole,” I say, “from *aurora*, Latin for light.” As she continues looking at me, not at the bird, I pray that I never lose sight of the way back to my mother.