

The Birth of Aliya Mariam

Seemi Bushra Ghazi

*Gracious are the gardens in which in winter
New fruits ripen for every Mary*

(Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi)

I.

My lineage goes back to Adam (upon him be peace). In this respect, I am no different than anyone. I read once in a family manuscript, flowing in rivulets of elegant *nastaliq* script, the threads of imputed origin, Prophets, scholars, pilgrims and holy men, who moved from Yemen to Yathrib (present-day Medina) before the coming of Islam, who hosted the Prophet at their table in Medina, and arrived in India soon after the first Arab merchants. There they dispersed, taught, and preached, and established religious schools or *madrasas*. When I think of these men in my father's family as I encountered them in visits to India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, they bore no resemblance to the wild-eyed mullahs of CNN with their hateful small-time religion. My "uncles" seemed powerful and delicate, majestic and fluid, with features of perfect Chinese brushwork and the poise of the blue heron on our shoreline at low tide.

The shoreline where my family and I live is the coast of British Columbia, where a renegade tropical current moderates the frigid Pacific as it narrows into the Burrard Inlet entering the city of Vancouver. It is a long way from the steppes of my Central Asian forbears, the dry riverbeds of Yemen, the mustard fields of Haryana. It is far even

from the London of my birth, and the Boston and Chicago of my childhood. Mostly it is far from the cities that had always seized my imagination— Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul. I arrived here nine years ago wondering how it came to be that this ancient soul had been flung out onto the furthest rim of the newest world.

It was a question but not a complaint. I'd been forbidden complaint by my Turkish spiritual master, Sherif Baba, who, at the least sign of lament in any of his dervish students, would kiss whatever garment he happened to be wearing and sing, "I like my shirt," a reminder of the Prophet Muhammad's teaching, *Alhamdulillah `ala kulli hal*, "Praise belongs to Allah in every situation and spiritual state." Far then from Mecca and the shrines of our holy ones I resolved to sanctify the life in which I found myself, making pilgrimage through urban blackberry thickets to the wild beach at Kitsilano and probing the shifting mandala of the Mary blue Pacific. Black and azure, grey and gold—the North Shore Mountains became my Layla, both veiled and revealed by the courtship of sunlight and cloud. With many pasts surging together, I sought presence here in nature and tried to imagine a future worthy of our ancient aspirations.

II.

Tonight I will recite the Sura of Maryam (Qur'an 19), the Qur'anic chapter devoted to Blessed Mary. Somewhere in Cairo, a friend is in labor. Her mother e-mailed me last night, "Pray for a safe delivery." Earlier in her pregnancy, in the months of gestation, I had recited the Sura of Yusuf (Qur'an 12), praying that her daughter might grow beautifully in the womb, as the young Prophet Joseph grew in the well and in the crucible of his prison cell, refined in inner and outer qualities— exquisite and visionary, a king. But by now, my friend's baby has known both union and separation, the coming

together of her parents' seed, and the myriad delicate divisions that gave rise to her form. We prayed for her formation for four months, but now her gestation is complete. As her journey to this world begins, we read especially of Maryam, of her noble birth to a priestly lineage, her long devotions in the sanctuary, and the strange and poignant Qur'anic tale of her labor and birth.

I have read this Sura countless times for aunts, cousins, sisters, and friends. Though we live continents apart, a woman feels the pangs of labor, neighbors knock, the phone rings, and e-mails appear out of ether. In Karachi, London, Chicago, and here too in Vancouver, women leave their occupations, draw about themselves the tabernacle of silken shawls, and sing the same sacred song, praying that divine compassion might envelope their sister as the date palm bowed over our Maryam, nourishing her endurance.

I have read the Sura of Maryam for my nieces and nephews with all their beautiful names. I have read it on a Pacific outcropping where eagles circled as Haniya (Joy) was born; I have read it flying across the continent towards little Isra (Night Journey) emerging one month too early. I have read it on a bunk bed flanked by my nephews, Idris and Ilyas, as we awaited the birth of their brother, Isa, the last of a trio of Japanese- Pakistani-Canadian lads named for the venerable apostles, Enoch, Elias and Jesus. And just once, six years ago, I read it for myself.

I say "once," because I have recited the Sura of Yusuf for myself many, many times. Two years before my daughter's birth and three years afterwards, I read it for a full trimester. Though the two sons I bore too early and then buried— one a finger's length of a boy, the other a delicate seahorse— did not linger long, in their brief sojourn they revealed to me Yusuf's perfect beauty. They chose themselves names in jest and

then in earnest, Pir Ali and Ibrahim, scattered small miracles for their expectant mother like so many red money packets at the Chinese New Year Parade, and cared for me even as they slipped away, announcing their departure and promising me protection. I folded them in white cotton, recited the Sura of Ya Sin for their passage, and buried them beneath daisies near the Coast Salish site at Jericho beach. They appeared to me as six year-olds, as teenagers, as young men. Once in a dream they stole upon me out at Spanish Banks, two strong sons who lifted me up, up by the arms like a girl and ran laughing the length of the surf, Pir Ali with shining curls, gravity in mirth, and Ibrahim's dark eyes, mirth in gravity. Though briefly embodied, they made themselves known, rending the veil between the seen and the unseen, and offering me so much of themselves and the world to which they were turning, that I now fall silent, lest I transgress the boundaries of spiritual courtesy.

My daughter Aliya was another matter. She grew within me a full nine months, but would not reveal herself. Sherif Baba cautioned us against speaking of her unnecessarily, and she assured our adherence to his guidance by eluding us entirely. In ultrasounds she turned away from the camera, briefly presenting one almond eye and then a pearl strung languor of spine. The technicians, who had been charged with photographing the four chambers of her heart, suggested we roll down the hospital greens to elicit her compliance. After ten minutes of entertaining interns assembled under an arbor for a smoking break, I sat by a late blooming magnolia in conversation with my unborn daughter. "It is true that the chambers of your heart are no place for strangers to be probing, and I admire your discretion and clarity of will, both of which, God knows, I am lacking. Still, if you would indulge these people, it would save us both returning next

week, by which time I intend to be well past somersaulting on public lawns.” Minutes later, she turned just long enough to assure us of her heart’s bi-valve perfection. By the time I asked to see her face, she had sequestered herself again.

The first four months of my pregnancy with Aliya were not marked by wonder. I was nauseous, exhausted, and hypersensitive, with an animal sense of smell. I could not be in the remote vicinity of chicken or cologne. Though others assured me nothing had changed, the odors of municipal sewage seemed to permeate my home by way of the kitchen drain. At one point, I could not tolerate even the fragrance of my own clean skin. Then one morning I awoke and the sickness was over. Not having walked more than three blocks in that time, I announced to my bemused husband Osman that his child wished to go to the mountains. At Cathedral Lakes Provincial Park, ten thousand meters above Earth’s northernmost desert, Osman and his friends hiked the advanced trails. My baby and I set out at our own pace, aided by a reliable walking stick. Together we traversed an improbable vista of rock-scape, glacier, and alpine meadow. We stood, one foot on ancient ice and the other in a field of ephemeral bloom. I thought of Moses climbing Mt. Sinai, and of all who ascend. The scent of anguish fell away. Perhaps here arose the seed of intention that brought us the name Aliya, “Raised High,” or “Exalted.”

Returning home, I was again afflicted, this time by insomnia. My mother, *Ammi*, had always retired early and arisen before dawn. As a girl, I awoke to the sonority of her morning devotions. God’s breath in *Ammi*’s breath called me before the first light. While my younger siblings slept, we shared the communion of dawn prayer, tea, and toast with guava jelly, conversation, reading, and reflection. Even today, I relish the hours between five and eight a.m. But something was not letting me sleep until the hour

when I usually arose. Though preferable to my previous nausea, sleep deprivation soon began to trouble my equanimity.

In the midst of this condition, I attended a celebration of the birth of the thirteenth-century poet and mystic Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi. There I asked Sherif Baba whether he could suggest a prayer or divine name to alleviate my condition. He laughed, “Don’t ask for sleep! The holy ones love the night. Perhaps the one within you is awakened. Bear with her. No frustration. Lie in bed peacefully and reflect upon whichever divine names and verses come into your heart.” Late that night I left Osman sleeping and wandered out to a towering bonfire around which young dervishes were immersed in *dhikr*, the ceremony of divine remembrance. A woman beat a frame drum laced with iron rings. Their two faces flickered, woman and drum, golden moon skins shimmering with song. I sat on a bench with the *dhikr* around me, *Ya Jamal, ya Jalal*, Oh Beauty, Oh Majesty. *Ya Qabid, ya Basit, ya Hayy, ya Haqq*. Oh, Contractor of Hearts, oh Expander of Souls, oh Life and Vitality, oh You who are Real. *La ilaha illallahu. La ilaha illallahu*. There is no God but the one God (He). There is nothing but the One. *Hu, Hu, Hu, Hu*. I joined them on *Hu*, the breath of creation, remembering Allah’s divine name *Al-Rahman*, the creative womb-like Compassion that exhaled a primordial and eternal *Hu*, warming and animating the damp clay of the original human being. I took that *Hu* home to my cabin and fell into a deep and restful slumber. Insomnia returned the next night and did not leave until Aliya was born, but my feelings about it had been transformed. I surrendered to the night’s serenity, to intimate discourse with my unborn darling, and to a subtle presence that I had not experienced before, the presence of Hazrat Maryam.

III.

Hazrat Maryam, Islam's "Noble Mary," was born into a priestly clan in the lineage of Aaron, Moses' brother. Her mother Hannah had promised to dedicate the child in her womb to the service of the Temple. That the child was born a daughter did not deter her. Under the spiritual mentorship of her Uncle Zakariyya, the young Maryam flourished.

Her Lord accepted her in beauty
And cultivated her in beauty,
Entrusting her to Zakariyya.
Whenever Zakariyya came upon her
In the *mihrab* (sanctuary),
He found her blessed with sustenance.
He said, "Maryam, whence comes this to you?"
She said, "It is from Allah.
Surely, Allah grants sustenance without measure to whomever He wills."
(Qur'an 3:37)

I first noticed this verse twelve years ago. It was inscribed in Sherif Baba's fanciful hand on the door of his library. He nodded toward it and then toward me with a glance that said, "Pay attention." Over the years, it has shown me much about transmission between generations, between genders, between teachers and students, within families, and especially between God and human beings. Zakariyya offered Maryam a sanctuary and trusted her cultivation of her inner world. The physical sanctuary in this passage was Maryam's prayer-niche located within the Jerusalem Temple, but the literal signification of the Arabic term *mihrab* is "a place of struggle or battle." Though we revere Maryam for her serenity, she engaged in a profound inward struggle without which her *mihrab*, as a site of inward battle, could not have become her

mihrab as a site of sanctity and retreat. Through struggle Maryam became her own *mihrab*, “Maryam Full of Grace.” One manifestation of this grace was the sustenance she received from Allah “without measure,” a miraculous sustenance which Islamic traditions describe as the fruit of winter in summer and the fruit of summer in winter.

Zakariyya asks Maryam a question, “Whence comes this to you?” although as her elder and spiritual mentor he must have discerned the answer. He attended to her story and honored the fruit of her communion with the unseen, allowing it even to nourish his own spiritual trust. Despite Zakariyya’s advancing years, he had been granted no son. Maryam’s experiences moved him to return to the sanctuary and to pray to Allah for a child. There in the winter of old age, he received the promise of summer’s fruit: he would be blessed with a holy son named Yahya (John). This son, John the Baptist, would later foretell the birth of Maryam’s own son Isa (Jesus), a fruit of summer conceived and borne in the winter of Maryam’s maidenhood. Once, I asked a group of women, “What if we were to regard these verses as a promise?” What if Mary’s daughters and sons were promised that whenever we turned to the sanctuary, we would be blessed beyond season? Does it ever happen that we turn from the merely incidental to the most sacrosanct place within, without receiving some immeasurable gift?

Lying awake in my bedroom sanctuary, I began to meditate on silence and night. I knew that when Zakariyya had received word of the birth of Yahya, the angel Gabriel granted him a sign: that he should not speak to any human being for three *layali*, three nights, except in signs (Qur’an, 19:10). I also recalled hearing in childhood of young Maryam’s nocturnal devotions, and how she too had received angelic guidance and “fasted” a time from speaking (Qur’an, 19:26). In quiet solitude, I began to imagine

nights that I called *Layali Maryam*, nights that Maryam had devoted to prayer, meditation, and fasting. I entered each *Layla*, each single Night: *Layla* of Mystery, *Layla* of Union, Moon *Layla*, *Layla* of Seventy Unveilings, *Layla* of Shining Constellations, and strangest of all, the *Layla*/Night when the *Ruh*, the Divine spirit, breathed into Maryam the baby Isa (Jesus), a child conceived like the first human being, Adam, of sheer Divine desire. (As the Qur'an tells it, Allah commanded, *Kun fa yakun*, "Be! And it was.")

With my daughter now dancing within her own sanctuary, brushing her wings against my womb, and sending me delicate butterfly epigrams, I touched the improbability of human development. That any child should be conceived and thrive, and then emerge living for even one breath, became no less remarkable to me than the virgin conception of Isa.

She conceived him and withdrew to a distant place.
The birth pangs drove her to the trunk of a date palm. She said,
"I wish I had died and were forgotten!"
A voice called to her from below, "Grieve not. Your lord has placed a stream
below you.
Sway the trunk of the tree toward you. Ripe dates will shower down.
Eat and drink, and be comforted. If you meet anyone, say, I have consecrated a
fast to the Compassionate and cannot speak today to any human being."
(Qur'an, *Maryam* 19:22-26)

Aliya began to enter this world on December 17, 1999. That evening we had gathered in the Quaker Friends Meeting Hall to celebrate the *Urs*, "Wedding," or death anniversary of Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi. I lay on a narrow wooden pew, as around us dervishes in ethereal white whirled the dance of the cosmos and the soul's rebirth. Right hand raised, they sought grace, left hand lowered in offering. They spun on the axis of

the left foot, centered in the heart and in divine unity, but with the right foot turned to embrace all directions, all creation. I had been asked to recite Qur'an and perhaps lead the chanting at the conclusion of the ceremony, but doubted my ability to do anything at all. And yet when the music suddenly stopped, as the dervishes folded up their flowering forms, I sat up and recited the Sura of *Qadr* (Qur'an 97), the Chapter of Divine Power. This Sura invokes *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Night of Power, destiny, and value, on which the Qur'an was first revealed. It is a night "better than a thousand months," an angelic night pregnant with spirit, a night of "peace until the rising of dawn" (97:3-5). Afterwards, we invoked God's ninety-nine names and I sang Rumi's Persian poem, "Come, come my sweet heart, come into all that I do. You, you are my garden. Whisper my innermost secret. Come, come my dervish. Do not leave my side. You, you are my own tress, you are my very self." I arrived home near midnight and began to feel my daughter's descent.

When Hazrat Maryam came to this moment, the Temple could no longer shelter her. She had conceived a child with no father and risked the opprobrium of her people. Young, unprepared, and utterly alone, "she conceived him and withdrew to a distant place" (19:22). I thought of her solitude as my pains increased and beautiful companions joined me. I had let Osman sleep to gain strength for the next day, but he awoke early, sparkling with vitality and goodwill. *Ammi* arrived in the afternoon on the first flight from Chicago. She had been reading the Sura of Maryam on the plane, and disembarked to blow its blessings thrice over my body as we lingered near the baggage claim in International Arrivals. Her eyes told me that she would not cease until I had safely delivered her grandchild. Later I was joined by three women whom I had thought of as

wise Sherpa guides. They would lead me, share my burdens, and teach me how to breathe in the thin, high altitudes of labor.

The first was Jackie, our *doula* or birthing companion. She had met with Osman and me twice during the pregnancy and helped us reflect on how we should experience this event. Mostly, I knew that I wished to be present and conscious, to experience each moment of the journey and greet our child, clear-eyed and fully aware. Who would she be at the moment when she arrived? What would I become? I wanted to share a first glance unmediated by any sedative. I called Jackie on the afternoon of December 18th to say that I was still at ease, despite riding the waves of suffering and relief. An hour later, Osman phoned again, urging Jackie to come quickly. As soon as she arrived, Jackie filled the bathtub and crouched beside me all night. When the hot water ran out, Osman boiled some more, running back and forth like a midwife's apprentice in some earlier century. I must have fallen asleep before sunrise, for when I awoke I found that someone had carried me from the bathtub to the bed. How long had I been unconscious? Five minutes? Five hours? Jackie lay sleeping on the floor.

My friend Lou arrived later that morning in a penumbra of red-gold curls. Once a nurse in rural Newfoundland, skilled in low-tech labor support, she was now an anthropologist, psychologist, and harpist. One day I said to her, "Lou if I get to that point in labor where I can't continue, I think I will be alright if I can just look into your eyes." Now her eyes held my gaze and her body held my form, moving together in the Tai Chi of "Love your baby down." I shuddered through each season of pain, too much now and too long, and Lou absorbed it, sloughed it off, and filled me with her melodic light. My child would not descend. Why? Was an elbow askew? Was her chin in her

palm? We wound up the Hawaiian music box my brother had brought back from his honeymoon and swayed with the mechanical hula girl as I wept, “Come down, baby, please come down.” In Jackie’s notes she says that *Ammi* approached me around this time saying, *Beti, Allah se bhi maango*, “Darling, also ask Allah.” “You ask Allah, Mum, please. Talk to Allah. Right now I need to talk to my baby.”

By the time Dr. Rachael arrived, the labor had been going on for 36 hours. She knelt beside me, “How are we?” I remember saying, “This is hard now, Rachael, really very hard.” Dr. Rachael was an advocate for midwives and home birth. She could not recall the last time she had needed a knife and a needle. Rather than telling women to push, she urged, “Love your baby down,” and called her work “catching,” not “delivering” babies. I knew the first moment I had met her that I wanted her to “catch” mine. Though Rachael was herself five months pregnant, she had dropped in on her Sunday off, just to see how I was doing.

A woman must open for a child to be born, open in every possible way. Medically, it is said, she must open ten centimeters. After 36 hours of labor, I anticipated success, but somehow the examination revealed otherwise. “You have not yet begun to dilate,” said Rachael, “there are ten centimeters to go.” My heart fell— after all that time! (Women are expected to dilate one centimeter per hour.) “But you are fully effaced,” Rachael added, “That’s the hardest part. You’ve done remarkably well.” Rather than noting my failure to progress, Rachael offered her dazzling approval and made me feel like a hero.

Rachael felt confident that in Jackie’s care we could continue to labor at home, but upon phoning the hospital we learned that a room had just opened in a new ward

called Cedar where mothers could labor, deliver, and recover all in one suite. I had seen the windowless delivery rooms in the old basement wards and felt certain that I would feel caged and claustrophobic there. Cedar had spacious windows, pullout beds, endless hot water, and room for all of my companions. Room 7 was available and I didn't want to lose it. How long would it take to get there? With green lights all the way and one red light on Broadway— two and a half contractions.

At one point, preparing our birth plan I had become self-conscious. Women give birth every day in challenging circumstances. Why was I walking, swimming, and meditating? Why did I need five companions? Was this not self-absorption? Then one morning before dawn prayer, I dreamt of myself within a vast tent, a circular tent of white skins. The skins were supported by four peripheral poles and one great central pole. Smoke ascended skyward through an opening in the roof. Waking, I knew with certainty: the four “poles” were Osman, Jackie, Rachael, and Lou. Without each one of them, the tent would collapse. The central pole was *Ammi*, her unceasing recitations opening up to Hazrat Maryam. At first, labor would be like ascending a mountain, later like plunging into a burning sea, but *Ammi* would blow into me the presence of Maryam. Without each one of them, my will would fall into absence. Without each one of them, my baby would not be released.

At first, I bore the surge and the retreat. I called upon the divine names *Al Qabid*, *Al Basit*, “Contractor, Expander, grip and release me, draw this being from my being, let this child be born!” As the storm rose, so too did my endurance. The women told me, “Other pain is a signal of warning and danger, but not this pain. This pain is safe; it is the pain of creation, and you are safe with us.” Somehow, this made a crucial difference. I

feared the sensation of pain, but I never feared that it would harm me. I loved its work and its effect. The women knew these contours of ocean, islands of respite, and depths of sky. I shivered, trembled, and cried out. They embraced me in the ceramic hospital tub, pouring warm water down my spine. They would not let the ark of my body shatter on any reef.

I have read that even elephants give birth like this— elephant *doulas* and midwives stroking their elephant sisters, murmuring secrets remembered from ancient elephant times. Here is an elephant secret: at the height of labor, in a time called “transition,” a time of vomiting, terror and delirium, if a woman is held and comforted she can fall into a restorative sleep in the single minute between contractions. I had been awake more than forty hours. Now, I slid to the bottom of an ocean, slept with strange aquatic angels, waking, and slumbering, conscious, and gone. Lou and Jackie sailed my body back and forth in their arms. My baby swam down, down, finally engaged.

Aliya did not want to be born in water, and I wanted strength beneath my feet. I crouched on the linoleum floor. Glancing up, the hospital bed seemed as remote and unstable as scaffolding or aerial wire. The urge to bear down became the most powerful instinct I had ever known, seven worlds thundering down into the depths of my abdomen. Though my friends surrounded me, I arrived at the place where Hazrat Maryam had begun and retreated into a wilderness where no one could find me. The Maryam who had arrived at this place was not the Queen of Heaven. She was a woman like every other woman— spirit, yes, but also flesh and blood, milk and bone. “The birth pangs drove her to the trunk of the palm tree” (19:23). She cried out in a voice so intimate, so colloquial, “I wish I had died and been forgotten!” It was the desire to become oblivion itself, to fall

away traceless and unremembered. I could neither proceed nor retreat. *Ammi* had read the Sura of Maryam and blown its blessings over us unceasingly for one night and two days. In her murmuring, I heard the fugue of all my scattered kin. Sherif Baba would be reading from the Sura of “He Frowned” (Qur’an 80), “And then [God] eased the path” (80:20), but I knew now that nothing could ease this path. My child would never be born, nor would I survive. “I am dying now,” I said, “I am going to die.” I began to disappear, but was drawn back by someone whispering, “If you have seen the door of death, then you are ready to have this baby. No woman can give birth, Seemi, without witnessing that door.” Then there was screaming, a body rent, and Rachael exclaiming, “What a sweet face!” and our small slippery daughter crying out in my arms.

IV.

A root grows in the hills outside of Medina. The Bedouin women harvest small bunches of it and bring it to the graveyards of the Muslim martyrs. *Ammi* remembers it from her Indian childhood. The Hajj pilgrims would return from Mecca on great wooden ships, disembarking to garlands of marigold, jasmine, and rose. In return, they offered their loved ones vials of healing *Zamzam* water and bunches of the root known as *Panjane Maryam*, “Mary’s Fist.” They said that this same root grew in the hills near Bethlehem, and that Maryam grasped it when she was overcome by birth pangs. *Ammi’s* aunts used to soak it in a bowl of water until it was soft and grasped it in their own labors, calling upon Hazrat Maryam to stand by them in their pain.

My sister Saba had bought two Fists of Mary at the graveyard of Badr near Medina when she was but twelve and I was seventeen. Since then, they had accompanied

her to Chicago, New York, and North Carolina. She used one root for the birth of her children and the other she saved for me. She told me how she had watched the “fist” unfold in her first labor, gradually tinting the water a delicate amber color. I too witnessed those deepening hues, and held the root in my hand, folding Maryam’s strength within mine, sending *salaams* to her spirit.

Two nights and days had passed striving to give birth to Aliya. Night had come once again before she was finally born. It was December 19th, 1999, the eleventh night of Ramadan, two hours before yet another midnight. As the post-partum nurses settled our daughter to rest, I turned to the glass bowl at my bedside and glanced at the Fist of Maryam, still floating carnelian and serene. Once gnarled, desiccated, and closed, it had slowly unfolded and softened in the animating medium of water. The fist had become a pliant hand, and now after 48 hours, it revealed something that no one had intimated. The root of Maryam had traveled from its ancient home to my daughter’s land and become a tentative garden. On this, our last *Layla* together, Maryam’s palm opened, offering green leaf and blossom.