

Beaded Confetti

Merav Fima

She had never heard the *muezzin* so loud and pervasive in that particular part of town as she did that day, crossing the train tracks on her way home from work. It was an upscale neighbourhood with a large Anglo population, filled with little children playing in the parks and streets. The last rays of sun barely pierced the rink of grey clouds above; perhaps it was the devout singing that froze the heavenly bodies, making them shudder.

The chanting grew louder as the pitch rose. At one point, she sought refuge under the gutter lining the synagogue's roof, thinking that she was hearing a siren warning of an approaching missile. But the *shamash* continued sweeping the brown leaves that had fallen into the courtyard, apparently unfazed by the elongated tonality. It was only a prelude to another "*Allahu Akbar*," sung in unison by the city's Muslim chanters, an elongated sound, a wordless interlude, decibels rising with every note. She was suffused by the sounds floating to her ears from every direction: melody from the north, harmony from the south, tenor from the east, bass from the west; and she, shivering, at the centre of it all, absorbing the sound waves.

She had never thought it would happen on Rivka Street so early in the evening. The sky was getting dark and it was difficult to distinguish the forms moving about in the distance. She was used to walking that road, a wide, well-lit one, frequented by numerous pedestrians and motorists, a central artery of the Baka'a neighbourhood, connecting it to the Talpiyot industrial zone. She had purposely selected that route for its centrality and refused a ride home in her confidence of security.

The nightmare had begun at the start of the block, where three little boys played at springing out of cardboard boxes abandoned next to the dumpster, in imitation of Jack-in-the-Box, startling her as she walked by. She had dressed up especially for the occasion: a jeans skirt that she had herself trimmed with black lace, falling narrowly over her legs. She would later realise that it had restricted her movement, preventing her from advancing as quickly as she would have liked in order to get away from him. She had also taken her digital camera – to have her picture taken with the guest lecturer. And her hand-embroidered jeans wallet, filled to the brim with five hundred shekels, in addition to identity and credit cards; she had two of everything, as she had lived abroad for many years and had just recently returned home. She had also thrown in the book she was then reading and a mandarin for a healthy snack.

She had chosen her favourite handbag, the one it had taken her months to design, sew, and adorn, more glamorous than anything she had seen in the most exclusive boutiques and art fairs: mustard-yellow velvet embroidered with red seed beads in the form of petals, with green bugles standing in for the stems and leaves. There hadn't been a single time that she had worn the purse without receiving a compliment, including that very night. Everybody admired it as it glimmered under the street lamps or as the rosebuds blossomed in sunlight. It was her handiwork; her very own creation from start to finish.

She was sure he would strangle her, though it turned out, according to the police officer's assessment, that he had merely attempted to tear off her *hamsa* necklace inlaid with crystals. He couldn't tell the difference between cubic zirconia and diamonds and mistook her for a woman of wealth. He approached by asking for the time, to find out whether or not she wore a watch. Hers was bejewelled, but too complicated to grab and remove in the split-second in which the street was empty of passersby. Her earrings, consisting of pearls and Swarovski crystals, must have caught his eye as he and his collaborators cruised the street in search of their next victim, the crystals glimmering like prisms pierced by the car's headlights. He must have imagined that her overstuffed purse contained similar treasures, and would have been disappointed to find out that it was filled with toiletries and a book.

Upon the officer's arrival, she recalled the robber's round face incised with scars, his wild mane streaked with white, his untucked red t-shirt and baggy jeans. The policeman raised an eyebrow at the white streaks adorning his hair, surprised that he didn't fit the profile of the young gangster.

Once he had closed the gap, he yelled “give me your purse!” and, without leaving her time to ponder his request, tore it off her, straining her shoulder blade. The strap broke and fell to the ground, later to be collected by the police officer for identification purposes and for display as a trophy in the clear glass cabinet behind his desk.

The man tucked the purse under his arm and pushed her into the narrow driveway, where she fell against a pole and bruised her hip, though padded by the thick down coat that had in previous years served her to overcome the vicious Canadian winter. When he leaned towards her, reaching for her neck, she screeched at the top of her lungs. He ran to the car awaiting him on the corner of Bethlehem Road and jumped in, just as the street’s residents poured out of their apartments to come to her aid.

Once in the car, safely in motion, he tore open the purse, beads flying in every direction like confetti. Rejoicing over the contents of the wallet, he high-fived his partner, the driver, as they drove off to fill up on petrol, charging her credit card, in order to enable further perusal of the dark streets. He removed the extra passport photo from her wallet, safeguarding it for his Wall of Fame – a row of portraits of the victims he had managed to rob thus far.

Extracting the camera from the purse and aiming it at the starlit sky to test its resolution, he slowly peeled the mandarin, savouring its sweet nectar like the god he believed himself to be after each such triumph. He then threw the peels and pips back into the emptied purse with sticky fingers, juice dripping down his forearms.

Several days later, the deflated parcel would draw the attention of a man passing by the corner where the robber had thrown the purse out the window of the speeding car. Mistaking the stained yellow velvet, deprived of its adornments, for a decomposing cat, the poor man’s heart skipped a beat.

The mouldy purse: months’ worth of intense labour on her part, each stitch a precise mark, each bead individually selected for its sheen and flawless circularity, all adding up to a beautiful purse that caught everyone’s eye and enhanced her outfits. The singular accessory was now rotting on the sidewalk, at the mercy of roaming cats and crows, deformed, deteriorating with every passing moment.

She sat down at the sewing machine and rummaged through the wicker basket in which she collected scraps of textile. She selected a sturdy piece of black velvet, a remnant of her cloak of mourning, and, using the palm of her hand, brushed the hairs aside, reviving their natural glow. She cut out two ovals and a thick strap for the handle and stitched them together under the rhythmic hammering of the mechanical needle. She then unscrewed the lid of the clear plastic container safeguarding her beads and picked out all the pinks and blues she could find, examining each tiny sphere in turn to assess its imperfections.

Though she followed the exact same pattern as in the stolen purse, she could tell that it was affected by her altered mood: the tightness at which she pulled the thread, the enlarged proportions and sharp angles, all pointed to her agitation. As the embroidery progressed, the repetitive manual work calmed her, and she grew more tranquil; the strings loosened and the floral motifs grew more delicate. The pastel beads against the black background dazzled her, enlivening a dull, discarded material. The laborious motion relaxed her taut muscles and brought a smile to her face, thrilled at the beauty she had produced, and reproduced, by the work of her own fingers, appeasing her melancholic heart.

She spent hours and days reinforcing knots and putting the finishing touches on her renewed creation, and was in awe of the outcome, surpassing the model in her mind. She cherished the purse and carried it everywhere, tucked in a tight embrace under her arm.

Until one evening, still shaking with dread while walking home alone in the same neighbourhood, just a few blocks from the scene of the incident, she encountered a withered old woman in an unravelling headscarf, lying almost inanimate on a wooden bench.

Extending a trembling hand in supplication, she complimented her on her purse, each syllable emitted from her toothless mouth accompanied by a laborious breath. "Does the splendid handbag contain any spare coins to help an old woman keep warm on such a frigid night?"

Sliding the purse off her shoulder, she handed it whole to the beggar. Avoiding eye contact she turned away in silence, as the cry of the *muezzin* erupted from the nearby mosques. Suppressing a shiver, she allowed herself to be suffused by the tonal harmony intermingled with the sunset's reflection against the Jerusalem stone.

MERAV FIMA's prose and poetry have appeared in a number of anthologies and literary journals, including: *Verge*; *Poetica Magazine*; and *Meanjin Quarterly*. Her short story, "Bride Immaculate," won the 2014 Energheia Literary Competition (Matera, Italy) and "Rose among the Thorns" was a finalist in the Tiferet literary journal's 2019 fiction contest. She is the translator of Gal Ventura's scholarly monograph *Maternal Breast-Feeding and Its Substitutes in Nineteenth-Century French Art* (Brill) and is currently at work on her first novel as part of her doctoral dissertation in Creative Writing at Monash University.