

My name is Asma Rahimyar.

Stowed underneath my sprawl of maps, chronologies, international legal provisions, and Afghan history books is Robert Bly's poem, "The Night the Cities Burned". The following stanza is circled, twice over, in red:

*I'm never tired of despair and desperation,
And I won't be quiet. I keep crying out that the house
Is being robbed. I want even the thieves to know.*

Researching Afghanistan's political situation is an undertaking that has colored my dreams in an array of Orwellian shades each night; however, my recurring nightmares of purges, indoctrination, imprisonment, and refugee camps are little penance for the insight I have gleaned into what happened to my uncle's friend, my mom's neighbor, my dad's professor, and the human beings who are continuously commemorated with Amnesty International reports instead of tombstones. There is a profundity in this gleaning, too; there is a profundity in the fact that I frequently fall asleep with my head rested against a book instead of a pillow, that I document human rights infractions with perpetually ink-stained fingers, and that I write about justice with an ardency that seeps my dreams in it. Yes—I am here to tell you about how improbable, how brazen, and how utterly miraculous it is that I, whose father studied anatomical structures in a deserted library and whose mother held nothing but Kabul's moonlight in her palms when she fled, am fervently studying to become an international human rights lawyer. When you invest in my education, therefore, you are fulfilling my parents' wildest dreams—you are insisting that the unlikely is, in fact, an imperative worth championing. My fellow students and I are the bearers of legacies, the manifestation of prayers, the carriers of folded-up postcards, and the embodiments of relentless hope—ours are hero's journeys, too. Above all, we must retain the dedication necessary to recognize them as such.

I am here to tell you that the sum total of my knowledge regarding the structure of the Senate, my understanding of Jane Austen's satirical wit, and my love for Rumi's hypnotic quatrains is far greater than its parts; my experience discussing Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at the United Nations, debating natural law theory with my classmates, and helping a student figure out the proper placement of a semicolon within an essay about the death of her sister are, similarly, worth far more than what a transcript or a resume could ever capture.

To be curious—to sit on the edge of one's seat as a professor describes Socrates' exaltation of the examined life, and the necessity of seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake—is a human right, and I will safeguard this right through the questions I ask, the career I hope to pursue in human rights law, and the conversations I partake in, whether they be about the Categorical Imperative, the impact of rising tuition prices, or the best friend my uncle lost. His eyes were the color of mung-beans, and he was killed because he didn't know how to stop asking questions.

I am impelled, then, to attend meetings regarding the implementation of social justice within curricula; I am obligated to stand alongside students rallying for immigrant rights on campus, and when I am handed the megaphone all it takes is a reminder that my mother once

played the same card game five times in a row—as if the monotony of it could distract from the airstrikes overhead—for me to speak. I am compelled to lead the Muslim Student Association, to participate in voter engagement efforts, and to write about the need to measure life with our words because I have to—because a boy with eyes the color of mung-beans was once killed for having a voice, because there is a girl my age who learns about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from within a classroom pockmarked with bullet-holes, and because my dad, who saw politics at its darkest, places a blanket around my shoulders as I study international relations and smiles: *keep at it, future world shaker. My idealist with a pure heart, my mom adds—as well as a liking for sticking herself in situations that don't immediately call for her presence. Live out the life so many before you could not.*

I am here to tell you that the sum total of my knowledge is an awareness of my own smallness, as well as an understanding of what I owe the world in response. Indeed, I cannot let the fact that I am on this side of the Atlantic make me forget the miracle of my circumstance, nor the action this miracle warrants.

Before cities burn to ashes, there are children named after things cherished, with penchants for laughing at inopportune moments and carving their initials into trees, as children do. After cities burn to ashes, there are men and women who grow up without tiring of despair and desperation—one even hears her grandmother's voice as she studies for exams, walks to classes, and stands behind podiums, as dreamers do. This is what she says:

My child—my lonely, dark haired child, who falls asleep with a river of smudged ink streaming across her palms, like calligraphy without the words. The next time they ask you what you are, you must cast away the hyphens, the apologies, the mispronunciations, and the acrid taste of words unsaid, their fluttering heartbeats caught, dying, between your clenched teeth. Cast them away in oceans of ink, *dokhtar e mah*. Open your mouth. My child with the gossamer voice—you must tell them this story. What we could not say will nourish the cracked earth, and *laleh*—your grandfather's favorite flowers—will grow from our tears. You must know that the horizon is yours for the taking, and you can fold it in half to fit in your pocket so long as you remember what belongs to you.

Yes—I am here to tell you that our students pursue the rhythm of their coveted ambitions, and that the world is better for their striving; all can never be lost so long as the extent of our aspirations remains unfettered by circumstance. My peers and I are here before you, after the ashes; I promise that the cadence of our voices warrants your attention.

Thank you.