<u>Henna</u>

I will call her Ms. Shari, even though she was married. Still, Ms. Shari is how the head of the department and I spoke of her in a tense unhappy discussion behind closed doors.

I was teaching at a state university--crowded, under funded, with clocks that never worked, irritable faculty and windowless rooms that induced fugue states. Still, it was generous, because it admitted almost everyone: The campus looked like an international mall. There were women in tight jeans and four inch heels, men with beards and turbans, mothers in saris wheeling babies, teenagers in yarmulkes, people in business suits who were ready to tell you they had degrees in physics, anthropology or phonetics but were getting an MBA to "shore things up." The elevators looked as though a sample population on a Manhattan subway had been transported. The school was a strange, cloned miracle: New York had merged with California.

The student in question was a woman who'd enrolled in a course I was teaching called Writing from Life. Her name was Ms. Shari. She sat alone in the back row next to the door, looking at her thick shoes, smoothing her chador, or touching her wrists. They were crowded with orange and green flowers as though the henna dots on her fingers had sprouted a garden. My students could write about anything—grocery lists, lovemaking, children, changing tires. Everybody wrote voluminously except for Ms. Shari who said her culture didn't believe in revealing anything personal and nothing she wrote could be less than that. When I asked why she'd taken the class she said she needed credits in English. Then she said: "What do you think? Should a life be open to

the public?" Before I could answer she left. From then on she came to class every third meeting.

"Don't take that kind of thing," said Nicole, the department secretary. "Tell her to drop because she's flunking." Nicole, who wore large shaded glasses and designer suits, ran the English department. She knew the curriculum and figured out whose turn it was to teach freshman comp. She decided who should share offices. Nicole had given me a cherished key to the Xerox machine and made sure I never taught eight o'clock so I could drive my fifteen-year-old to school. I wondered if telling Ms. Shari to drop the course was extreme. "Extreme?" said Nicole. "No one takes shit like that."

The next time Ms. Shari was in class, I leaned by her desk and told her she should drop the class because she was flunking. The cloth of her chador exuded a faint aroma of spice, reminding me of weather and sky I'd never seen. She picked up her books and left.

That day we talked about Sylvia Plath's journals. Most people thought they were a microcosmic view of an unhappy, roiling life. Some worried that writing about that life reified the pain and was responsible for Sylvia Plath's suicide. But Gabriel Gonzalez pointed out that Virginia Woolf's journals were macrocosmic sweeps of an outer world, and she'd committed suicide too. "So it might not matter how you wrote about your life," he said, "Or even if you wrote at all." Gabriel was twenty-two and his eyes were failing: To focus, he used a rolled-up newspaper. It looked like a spyglass, confirming my impression that the windowless room was a ship and we were all in a hold underwater.

"Actually," said Miss Tapali, who was from the Philippines, "If you're already crazy, a journal won't make you crazier."

Everyone laughed except Gabriel Gonzalez: He approached almost everything with melancholy. After the class he stuffed the newspaper in his pocket and said he

didn't see a problem with being crazy. I said I agreed as long as you could manage the world.

I was about to tell Gabriel—not for the first time—that he should try to get his work published. He knew I would say this and left before I had the chance. All at once, I heard a noise and saw Ms. Shari and another woman looming in the florescence at the door. The other woman was so tall I thought she might be a man wearing a chador. I felt a boundless fear and moved past them to the hall.

"I am a representative," the taller woman said, "and we are accusing you of racism. You have asked Ms. Shari to write things that are against our beliefs. You leaned down to talk to her in a condescending way. You never were clear about the assignments."

"This school is for everybody," she continued. "You can't ask people to do things against their religions. You are a racist and an intolerant person." Her voice rose and the international throng began to look at us. I said I couldn't change the way I taught. The representative said they would take the case to the dean, or, worse, to the president. She made her orange and blue hands into fists and said I would have to pay for my lack of understanding. Ms. Shari raised her fists, too. Their twenty painted fingers became tiny people endowed with magic, malevolent powers.

Nicole's office was at the end of the hall. Through her open door she saw everything through her shaded glasses. When the women left, I went to her office and began to cry. I hadn't cried in school since kindergarten when I'd been sent back from the playground for walking across fresh tanbark. Nicole closed the door and gave me chocolates filled with brandy.

"They're just crazy is all," she said. "You're not a racist. I know about that." Of course she did. Nicole was black and raised in the South.

That night while I tried to sleep the women's fists morphed into fabulous artifacts, dangerous codes, puppets with frightening powers. One thing stayed the same: They wanted to hurt me.

Two days later the head of the English department called me to his office. When I passed Nicole she shook her head and said, "I'm sorry."

The head of the department, who came from a distinguished line of Asian scholars, looked at me sternly through rimless glasses. There had been a complaint about me, he said, a serious complaint, and it was ill advised of me to take Nicole's advice. Perhaps, he continued, I wasn't used to teaching. Perhaps, he said delicately, I was "the artistic type" and never had written a syllabus. I knew it would be umbrage to tell him I taught in graduate programs: Instead I showed him the syllabus, which he looked at carefully. When he found nothing wrong, he got more upset.

"Then the issue is racism," he said, "and racism is serious. Ms. Shari says you're asking her to do something against her religion."

I said maybe I was, but she'd taken the course. I tried to focus on his bookcase—*Semiotics Applied to Keats, Reader Response and Henry James.*

"She can't flunk," he said. "She absolutely can't. We're here to give people degrees. *Everybody* is entitled to a degree." He explained what would be involved if this were taken to the dean, and then to the president: "A disgrace to all of us."

Again I felt a boundless fear. I offered to meet with Ms. Shari privately to find out what felt right for her. This was the humility the head of the department wanted to hear.

"Oh no," he said. "No one expects you to spend that kind of time with a student or change a course. I'm going to tell Ms. Shari she has to turn in the assignments you ask for." He stood up. The meeting was over.

The next day Ms. Shari came to class and sat in the back the way she always did. She began to hand in work. Her pieces were so precise they reminded me of mosaics but I never told her because I was afraid she'd say I was thinking about her culture in stereotypes.

Because I must keep her writing confidential, there's only one piece I can paint in broad strokes: It was about how Ms. Shari and her husband celebrated their wedding anniversary on an early spring evening. They came home from work, ate lamb stew on a red and golden cloth upon the floor. They opened presents from their families—for Ms. Shari, bracelets in 22-karat gold--and then, because working overtime was essential, both went back to their jobs. "This is how we live our lives," Ms. Shari wrote. "It's very simple."

I was in the middle of an acrimonious divorce. The piece made me think about my almost-former husband—the gifts we'd gotten, the gifts we'd lost. The pages felt like a door to her house—prayer rug, pillows, lamb. For a moment I walked inside.

At the end of class people read their work aloud: Ms. Tapali about training to be a law enforcement officer, Gabriel Gonzalez about meeting himself at every second of his life—an infinite number of Gabriel Gonzalez's with anxiety about future ones or grudges against previous ones. Ms. Shari, the last to volunteer, wrote about visiting her country for a relative's wedding. She wouldn't read it aloud, but agreed to answer questions if she could sit in the back. Everyone was curious: ""What about men and women being segregated during a wedding?" "If our whole life consisted of going to weddings," she said, "It wouldn't be worth being married!" People laughed and asked more questions: "Has your history been recorded?" "At least as well as yours."

Even Gabriel Gonzalez fixed upon Ms. Shari with his newspaper spyglass. When she finished talking people applauded. She left without picking up her papers. I gave her an A.

Later, much later, when the university and its twilit rooms became an underwater dream, I found Ms. Shari's piece about her anniversary. I'd put it, unthinkingly, in a cabinet with rubber bands and stamps. Once more the pages became a door: The lamb, the blessing, the opening of gifts, I'd never forgotten her work, although I'd forgotten all the others except the extraordinary writing of Gabriel Gonzalez. Was it because of the difficulties with Ms. Shari? My unhappiness about my divorce? Or was there an aura of intimacy to her writing that belied her reluctance to write in the first place? The word *beloved* rose inside my heart. It was the *beloved* of old walled cities, hanging gardens. I discarded it as a romantic notion.

It was winter when I found her piece. Rain was beating on the skylights of my study—steady, endless rain that once poured on wooden roofs in Japan and mud huts in India and passes again and again through this northwestern sky. It drummed on the glass above my head. I wondered whether Ms. Shari's country also had rain.

Yes, it did, an atlas said. Deep, steady rain, except not nearly as frequent as rain in California. I remembered Ms. Shari's hands and wondered what it would be like to have my own hands decorated with henna. Was this a whim from a catalogue dreamt near a liquid metal bracelet by Sergio? Or did I want my hands to look like Ms. Shari's? I discarded the idea as another misplaced notion.

And then I forgot about Ms. Shari, until the World Trade Center shattered and everything about her became vivid. I remembered her sarcastic wit, her dark eyes, her thick shoes. I re-read everything she wrote and was obsessed with the idea that I had to tell her how much her journal meant to me. I also had the less plausible thought that we'd start conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims: So many of us are thrown here, adrift in this curious century. We'd have a lot to say.

I didn't believe we'd do this, but the idea morphed into an image of Ms. Shari and me--once adversaries, now friends--opening an information booth. And one day, without knowing what I'd do, I went back to the school of broken clocks to see if I could

find her. The head of the department was on sabbatical. Nicole had left to direct admissions at a private school. The registrar, speaking through an assistant in a sari, said it was a policy not to release addresses: I was on my own.

From something Ms. Shari wrote, I guessed she lived in a part of the city called *the spice streets* because it was inhabited largely by Indians and Muslims. I went to this section, which was crowded with women in chadors, men wearing business suits and stands filled with fruit and vegetables. The more I walked there the more I understood the information center was pure chimera as were the chances of finding Ms. Shari. So when I did see her, carrying a briefcase with one hand, holding a two-year-old with the other, I felt shock and unspeakable fear. Ms. Shari gave me a direct look, clear as rainwater. Then she walked away. The look signaled something irrevocable: I imagined seeing me was something she thought might happen: It was minor, but satisfying, the way it feels when a horizontal letter in a crossword puzzle jibes with a vertical word.

I kept walking in the opposite direction, passing meat shops, tea parlors, walking without purpose, until I remembered the night when I thought about decorating my hands with henna. At first it was a memory. Then it became a desire. Women I asked about henna shook their heads. A man unloading a crate of apples overheard me. “It’s private,” he said. “Women do it together here. But someone from Turkey has a parlor around the corner. They call her *the henna artist*.”

The parlor was dark with red pillows, pillows I’d imagined in Ms. Shari’s house, except the room was filled with western teenagers. The henna artist wore modern slacks and crescent earrings. “Do you want a traditional design or a modern one?” she asked. “Traditional,” I said. She worked with terse efficiency. At one point she told me about a woman in her village whose husband left her for a month. This woman gathered eleven friends and read the Koran backwards by the light of a full moon. As soon as they’d

finished reading her husband came home. I wondered if she knew I wasn't happy about my divorce and was giving me advice. But she looked at me sharply and said,

"It was a coincidence, in my opinion."

When the thick clay mixture dried, my hands looked like those of Ms. Shari and the representative, as well as the hands of many other women on the spice streets. The dots on my fingers were fertile, sprouting innumerable gardens: There were garlands around my wrists, flowers on my forearm. These hands could hold a pen, drive a car, make a meal. They could transform into deities of anger and protection. Indeed, if you looked them, you'd never guess who I was or where I came from.

And then, with surprise beyond fear, I saw Ms. Shari and her child walking to catch a bus a block from the parlor. It was an accident outside of a puzzle. The collision made both of us smile. Ms. Shari told me the name of her son. I showed her the patterns on my hands.