After the rain

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Let me take you to Meeran, a village in Nangarhar province in the East of Afghanistan. Imagine tall houses made from mud standing proudly together. Green fields tenderly planted with many different crops. And watching over everything the mulberry trees, rich with purple fruit. Now feel the heat from a forty degree sun that’s barely troubled by clouds. So when the rain comes the joy it brings to this small boy and his friends is priceless.

We sit under the mulberry tree on a *chahar paaye* bed and listen to the drops hitting the leaves. It’s the sound of a musical instrument never heard on earth. The rain falls hard and straight, like daggers made of glass, hitting the ground and shattering. Then the rain stops just as suddenly and the sun shines again.

We run and run through the wet grass in the fields, our dusty feet turning soft and slippery. The blackbirds return in their hundreds, swooping and shrieking out to each other as they take back the sky. The mud walls of the houses darken like caramel, releasing the magical smell that entices children to press our faces close, wishing we could eat the fragrance. We only stop when one of the elders passes by, saying *Salaam,* our expressions innocent, forgetting our muddy noses give us away. Then best of all are the mulberry trees, their plump, glistening fruit demanding to be picked. We climb higher and higher to reach the best spot, then pluck handfuls of the sticky berries, cramming them in our mouths, hands stained red, a beard of juice on our chin. The leaves around us are sparkling, shiny surfaces reflecting the sun like a forest of mirrors. The whole world feels washed and cleansed.

Except.

The man standing close against the wall of a house. Not smelling. But listening. Scanning the roofs of the houses for antenna. He has a handful already in his hand, like broken metal flowers. He goes inside. Watching from our tree we hold our breath. This man has a gun. He comes out, holding a TV in his hands – the angles sharp and wrong against his white *pehraan tumbaan* – as he lifts it and smashes it down. Glass everywhere. Real glass. That will stay in the earth for children’s tender feet to stand on. He moves from house to house, sly like a snake, collecting people’s precious boxes to destroy. The ground is littered with glass, broken plastic, electrical parts.

And I remember. The reason the village is our playground. Why this boy and his friends play out all day, climbing trees, smelling mud, filling ourselves with the songs of the rain and the blackbirds is because we are not allowed to do anything else.