

Behind the University Gate

By: Raihaneh Karimi

As I walked out of my house, the city felt emptier than it ever had before. Maybe rainy days always feel this way—people pushing their plans aside, waiting for the sun to return. But is it really so terrible to get caught in the soft drizzle?

I'm only a few steps away from my destination, with Mohammad Motamedi's song playing again. Along the way, I pass by two people with their hats pulled low over their eyes and hands shielding their faces, as if the raindrops were something far heavier falling from the sky. They hurry past.

When they cross the street, they glance over at me, my hands tucked into my pockets, walking calmly as if I have all the time in the world. And in their minds, I can hear them think: "Where is she going? No university. No classes. Not even a café with space for a girl."

I ignore it and keep walking, Motamedi's voice filling my ears: "Now only tears truly understand my sorrow..."

I walk down the last alley, each step heavier than the last. When I finally reach my destination, I lean against the damp wall, not caring if my coat gets dirty. From here, I can see the university gate. It feels like time has stopped. I shake my head, struggling to believe what I'm seeing. The sight pulls me back into a memory I can't escape. I close my eyes, and when I open them, it's as if I've been carried to another time and place—a time when dreams came alive, and voices promised brighter days ahead.

In my hand is a book on the foundations of the visual arts, and in the other, a flask of iced water with a few fresh lime slices—prepared by my mother to keep me cool.

I lift my head and feel the sunlight on my face. Jamila and Zahra are smiling beside me, looking at their photos, criticizing their shots. They glance at me, saying something I can't quite catch, while pointing to the alley behind us.

It's full of students, walking toward the university. They must be pointing at Niloofar, who's weaving through the crowd to join us. Everyone is smiling—even Niloofar, despite being late. A content smile lingers on my lips.

Then, I hear it:

“What are you doing here, girl?”

A raindrop hits my face. I open my eyes, and suddenly, everything fades—the books, my friends, even the sunlight. Standing in front of me is a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder, his voice full of anger:

“Can't you hear me? What are you doing here? What are you checking?”

I turn and walk away, retracing my steps, heading back toward home.

He stays where he is, still shouting questions I can't hear anymore.

“What are you doing here?”

I wish I could answer him, but I know better than to engage.

I wish I could say: “I was checking the dream that was stolen from us on August 15, 2021. I was trying to make sense of the way we woke up one day and found our rights erased. Our right to education. Our future. I was mourning the loss of everything we fought for.”

The rain keeps falling, but now, I can't tell if the wetness on my face is from the rain—or the tears I can't stop shedding.

Yes, dear reader, this is Afghanistan—the only place where women are denied the right to dream, to learn, and to build their future