



STORY

Why Afghan Women Risk Death to Write Poetry

April 27, 2012 | *The New York Times* (<https://pulitzercenter.org/publications/new-york-times>)

BY ELIZA GRISWOLD



Zarmina's parents at her grave. A poet, she died after setting herself on fire. Image by Seamus Murphy/VII. Afghanistan, 2012.

In a private house in a quiet university neighborhood of Kabul, Ogai Amail waited for the phone to ring. Through a plate-glass window, she watched the sinking sun turn the courtyard the color of eggplant. The electricity wasn't working and the

room was unheated, a few floor cushions the only furnishings. Amail tucked her bare feet underneath her and pulled up the collar of her puffy black coat. Her dark hair was tied in a ponytail, and her eyelids were coated in metallic blue powder. In the green glare of the mobile phone's screen, her face looked wan and worried. When the phone finally beeped, Amail shrieked with joy and put on the speakerphone. A teenage girl's voice tumbled into the room. "I'm freezing," the girl said. Her voice was husky with cold. To make this call, she'd sneaked out of her father's mud house without her coat.

Like many of the rural members of Mirman Baheer, a women's literary society based in Kabul, the girl calls whenever she can, typically in secret. She reads her poems aloud to Amail, who transcribes them line by line. To conceal her poetry writing from her family, the girl relies on a pen name, Meena Muska. (*Meena* means "love" in the Pashto language; *muska* means "smile.")

Meena lost her fiancé last year, when a land mine exploded. According to Pashtun tradition, she must marry one of his brothers, which she doesn't want to do. She doesn't dare protest directly, but reciting poetry to Amail allows her to speak out against her lot. When I asked how old she was, Meena responded in a proverb: "I am like a tulip in the desert. I die before I open, and the waves of desert breeze blow my petals away." She wasn't sure of her age but thought she was 17. "Because I am a girl, no one knows my birthday," she said.

Meena lives in Gereshk, a town of 50,000 people in Helmand, the largest of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Helmand has struggled with the double burden of being one of the world's largest opium producers and an insurgent stronghold. Meena's father pulled her out of school four years ago after gunmen kidnapped one of her classmates. Now she stays home, cooks, cleans and teaches herself to write poetry in secret. Poems are the only form of education to which she has access. She doesn't meet outsiders face to face.

"I can't say any poems in front of my brothers," she said. Love poems would be seen by them as proof of an illicit relationship, for which Meena could be beaten or even killed. "I wish I had the opportunities that girls do in Kabul," she went on. "I want to write about what's wrong in my country." Meena gulped. She was trying

not to cry. On the other end of the line, Amail, who is prone to both compassion and drama, began to weep with her. Tears mixed with kohl dripped onto the page of the spiral notebook in which Amail was writing down Meena's verses. Meena recited a Pashtun folk poem called a *landai*:

*"My pains grow as my life dwindles,
I will die with a heart full of hope."*

"I am the new Rahila," she said. "Record my voice, so that when I get killed at least you'll have something of me."

Amail grimaced, uncertain how to respond. "Don't call yourself that," she snapped. "Do you want to die, too?"

Rahila was the name used by a young poet, Zarmina, who committed suicide two years ago. Zarmina was reading her love poems over the phone when her sister-in-law caught her. "How many lovers do you have?" she teased. Zarmina's family assumed there was a boy on the other end of the line. As a punishment, her brothers beat her and ripped up her notebooks, Amail said. Two weeks later, Zarmina set herself on fire.

Like Meena, Zarmina lived in Gereshk, a little less than 400 miles from Kabul. She, too, wasn't allowed to leave her home. She first found the literary group by listening to the radio, her only link to the outside world. One day, on Radio Azadi — Radio Liberty — she heard a Mirman Baheer member reading poems. With no way to contact the group, she phoned another radio program, "Lost Love," a popular show that mostly connects refugees to family members or friends they haven't seen in decades. Zarmina asked for help in finding Mirman Baheer. One of the station's employees was a member. "Oh, so you thought we were lost, too!" she told the aspiring poet, before sharing the phone number.

Zarmina soon became a regular caller. Whenever she could, she phoned into Mirman Baheer's Saturday-afternoon meetings at the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul. Zarmina would ask Amail if she could read her poems aloud to the

group. But the Kabul meetings were crowded with eager poets, vying to be heard. Amail often had to tell Zarmina to wait her turn. “I’d say, ‘No, I’ll call you,’ but she’d call back within a few minutes.”

Sometimes Zarmina couldn’t stand to wait for a meeting to call Amail. When Amail said she was too busy to talk, Zarmina would respond with a landai:

*“I am shouting but you don’t answer —
One day you’ll look for me and I’ll be gone from this world.”*

“How sweet it would have been if we’d only recorded her voice while she was reading poems,” Amail said. She picked bits of caramelized sugar and almonds from a glass dish. “Now, when any girl calls, I note down everything — the dates of the poems, the phone numbers, every single thing she says.” (The group still can’t afford a tape recorder.)

In her poems, Zarmina described “the dark cage of the village.” Her work was impressive, according to Amail, not only for its distinctive language but also for its courage to question God’s will. “That’s what our poems had in common,” Amail said. “We complained to God about the state of our lives.” Zarmina’s poems posed questions: “Why am I not in a world where people can feel what I’m feeling and hear my voice?” She asked, “If God cares about beauty, why aren’t we allowed to care?” She asked: “In Islam, God loved the Prophet Muhammad. I’m in a society where love is a crime. If we are Muslims, why are we enemies of love?”

As Amail and Zarmina grew closer, they would talk several times a day whenever Zarmina could sneak access to a phone; but there were periods when they managed to speak only once a month. During the two weeks between her brothers’ beating and her suicide, Zarmina gave Amail no indication of how desperate she was when she called. She did, however, recite another landai:

*“On Doomsday, I will say aloud,
I came from the world with my heart full of hope.”*

“Stupid, don’t say that,” Amail recalls saying. “You’re too young to die.”

To the women of Mirman Baheer, Zarmina is only the most recent of Afghanistan's poet-martyrs. "She was a sacrifice to Afghan women," Amail told me. "There are hundreds like her."

Mirman Baheer, Afghanistan's largest women's literary society, is a contemporary version of a Taliban-era literary network known as the Golden Needle. In Herat, women, pretending to sew, gathered to talk about literature. In Kabul, Mirman Baheer has no need for subterfuge. Its more than 100 members are drawn primarily from the Afghan elite: professors, parliamentarians, journalists and scholars. They travel on city buses to their Saturday meetings, their faces uncovered, wearing high-heeled boots and shearling coats. But in the outlying provinces — Khost, Paktia, Maidan Wardak, Kunduz, Kandahar, Herat and Farah — where the society's members number 300, Mirman Baheer functions largely in secret.

Of Afghanistan's 15 million women, roughly 8 out of 10 live outside urban areas, where U.S. efforts to promote women's rights have met with little success. Only 5 out of 100 graduate from high school, and most are married by age 16, 3 out of 4 in forced marriages. Young poets like Meena who call into the hot line, Amail told me, "are in a very dangerous position. They're behind high walls, under the strong control of men." Herat University's celebrated young poet, Nadia Anjuman, died in 2005, after a severe beating by her husband. She was 25.

Pashtun poetry has long been a form of rebellion for Afghan women, belying the notion that they are submissive or defeated. *Landai* means "short, poisonous snake" in Pashto, a language spoken on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The word also refers to two-line folk poems that can be just as lethal. Funny, sexy, raging, tragic, landai are safe because they are collective. No single person writes a landai; a woman repeats one, shares one. It is hers and not hers. Although men do recite them, almost all are cast in the voices of women. "Landai belong to women," Safia Siddiqi, a renowned Pashtun poet and former Afghan parliamentarian, said. "In Afghanistan, poetry is the women's movement from the inside."

Traditionally, landai have dealt with love and grief. They often railed against the bondage of forced marriage with wry, anatomical humor. An aging, ineffectual husband is frequently described as a “little horror.” But they have also taken on war, exile and Afghan independence with ferocity. In the 1880 Battle of Maiwand, when Afghan forces were losing to the British, a Pashtun heroine named Malalai is said to have seized the Afghan flag and shouted this landai:

*“Young love, if you do not fall in the Battle of Maiwand,
By God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame.”*

Malalai died on the battlefield, but Afghan forces were ultimately victorious.

More recently, landai have taken on the Russian occupation, the hypocrisy of the Taliban and the American military presence. One landai that came into circulation during the Russian occupation is still uttered today:

*“May your airplane crash and may
the pilot die
that you are pouring bombs on my
beloved Afghanistan.”*

Like most folk literature, landai can be sorrowful or bawdy. Imagine the Wife of Bath riding through the Himalayan foothills and uttering landai so ribald that they curled the toes of her fellow travelers. She might tease her rival: “Say hello to my sweetheart/If you are a farter [*tizan*, one who farts a lot], then I can fart louder than you.” She might make a cutting political joke: “Your black eyelashes are Israel/and my heart is Palestine under your attack.” She might utter an elegiac couplet: “My beloved gave his head for our country/I will sew his shroud with my hair.”

“A poem is a sword,” Saheera Sharif, Mirman Baheer’s founder, said. Sharif is not a poet but a member of Parliament from the province of Khost. Literature, she says, is a more effective battle for women’s rights than shouting at political rallies. “This is a different kind of struggle.”

On a recent afternoon in Kabul, Amail looked over her reading glasses at two dozen poets and writers, 15 to 55 years old, convened around a U-shaped conference table at the Ministry for Women’s Affairs. Sharif held her 7-year-old daughter, Zala, in her lap. Zala clutched a white fur pony purse loaded with markers. She unzipped its belly, colored distractedly and played with an iPhone during a brief lecture on the nature of the soul given by Alam Gul Sahar, one of President Hamid Karzai’s speechwriters and the author of 15 books of poems. As Sahar droned on, the women yawned, their exhales forming puffs of gray breath in the room’s freezing air. As soon as Sahar finished, the workshop began. A young woman stood and raced through a reading of her short story in an anxious monotone: a girl whose mother died in childbirth ends up going to college and having to choose between two potential lovers. One suitor attempts suicide but is miraculously revived. The end. The critique started. One of the group’s more senior members pointed out two problems. First, Pashto stories don’t feature two lovers, because that would sully a woman’s honor. Second, the story’s diction was monotonous.

“Since your character is educated, she should speak in a more sophisticated way,” the woman told the downcast author. In judging a work’s merit, members consider the writer’s recitation. Sharif believes that the group’s mission is to teach young women not just to write but also to speak aloud and with confidence.

The meeting turned to poetry next. The women had brought contemporary landai with them. Traditionally, the poems were traded at henna night, the evening before a wedding when women gather around the bride to decorate her body. The landai are sometimes sung to the beat of a small hand drum. (Because singing is associated with loose morals, poetry can be seen as shameful for women, a notion that the Taliban’s conservatism helped foster.) Landai once focused on the *godar* — the place where village women went to fetch water and where men, who were not allowed to approach them, tried to steal looks at their beloveds from a distance. These educated women used landai to speak of larger issues, like Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s one-eyed spiritual leader who is rumored to be dead, not a

guest of Pakistan: “Grass is growing on the blind man’s tomb/Stupid Talibs still believe that he’s alive.” A mail read one about America’s failing military efforts: “Here, they fight the Taliban/Behind the mountains, they train them.”

When I asked who brought this one, Zamzama, 17, raised her hand amid nervous giggles. She seemed both embarrassed and emboldened to be criticizing America to an American. Along with her 15-year-old cousin, Lima, Zamzama joined the group two years earlier. Lima had recently won the group’s literary prize. When she was 11, she began writing poems addressed to God.

“I started reading them to my father,” Lima said. She smiled and glanced around at the others who were suddenly listening. “My father doesn’t know much about poetry.” An engineer, he heard about Mirman Baheer from a colleague and now sends his daughters here weekly to learn to write. “He gave me this,” she said. She held up a blue plastic notebook embossed with the words “Healthnet — Enabling People to Help Themselves.” Lima stood to recite her latest poem: a *rubaiyat*, the Arabic name for a quatrain, addressed to the Taliban.

You won’t allow me to go to school.

I won’t become a doctor.

Remember this:

One day you will be sick.

Following Zarmina’s story meant traveling to Gereshk. I wanted to see how she’d lived, and I wondered what, besides her brothers’ anger, led her to take her life. It seemed impossible that I would find the family of one dead girl among 50,000 people or that, if I did, they would speak about her, but I went anyway, as there was also the slight chance of meeting Meena Muska, the teenager who called Mirman Baheer and invoked Zarmina’s name. I began my search in Helmand’s embattled capital, Laskhar Gah, of which Gereshk is a suburb. Government sources and a local network of traditional leaders called maliks (they belong to an Afghan organization, Wadan, the Welfare Association for the Development of Afghanistan) helped me gather a list of reported cases of women and girls who died violent deaths in Gereshk in the past two years. The list was brief but grim. Was I looking for the girl who was found drowned in the Helmand River in a sack?

No. The girl who had her head shaved and then was chopped into pieces by her husband's brothers? No. Well, then, there was only one left: a girl who in 2010 set herself on fire and died in the Kandahar hospital.

"Ten years ago, no one heard about these problems," Fauzia Olemi, Helmand's minister of Women's Affairs, told me when we met. "Now we have a network of organizations that investigate them."

It was a balmy afternoon in Lashkar Gah, and Olemi wanted to show me some of Helmand's modest successes for women's education, which included a three-day workshop on the health benefits of eating tomatoes, okra and other vegetables. Because Helmand is among the largest poppy producers in the world, there's a special effort to encourage farmers to plant other crops.

In a squat, cement-block government building, about 50 women sat in front of a whiteboard, which read, "If you eat two kilograms of tomatoes a day, you will be cured of cancer." This group was very different from the one in Kabul. Many of the women were in their 20s and 30s, their faces deeply lined from working in the fields. It was nearing midday, when the insurgents would begin to explode I.E.D.'s along the road, and the lesson was almost over. As the women gathered their things to leave, I asked if any of them liked poetry. As soon as the question was translated, a wisp of a woman leapt to her feet and began what looked like freestyle rapping in Pashto. She shook her bony shoulders to four-beat lines that ended in a rhyme of "ma" or "na." Gulmakai was 22 but looked 45. She made up poems all the time, she explained, as she cooked and cleaned the house. She said,

*"Making love to an old man is like
Making love to a limp cornstalk blackened by fungus."*

The women roared with surprised laughter, which I, hearing the poem in translation, took a minute to understand (the first, sanitized version offered to me was something like "Being married is like corn"). "I know this is true," she announced. "My father married me to an old man when I was 15." She tried to say something else, but the workshop leader, a man, silenced her. Time was up. The participants needed to go home, or their families would worry.

A few days later, I arranged to travel to Gereshk and meet with Zarmina's parents with the help of a local women's advocate. Under the Taliban, the advocate worked as a physician assistant in Gereshk Hospital, where her services were in high demand. Paradoxically, since their fall, her life had grown more dangerous: being a women's advocate linked her to Karzai's government and to seemingly Western notions of women's rights. Like almost every local women's leader I met, she'd survived several botched assassination attempts. "I have six or seven colored burqas so the Taliban doesn't know who I am," the advocate told me on the phone. She laughed. "The burqas keep me safe." Yet she agreed with Olemi that, for most women, violence was more likely to come from home. "Now that Afghan women are aware of their rights, they fight for them in their family," she said. "If they get their rights, that's good. If they don't, they kill themselves or get beaten up."

The night before we left Lashkar Gah, I dialed Meena Muska's number, hoping she would be able to meet me the following day.

"Absolutely not," she told my translator.

She couldn't leave the house without raising suspicion. She also had reservations based on her family's code of honor. "Because of the war, it's dishonorable for a Pashtun to meet an American," she said. "Please don't take it personally," she added. "I didn't mean to insult you." Suddenly, in the silence, she changed her mind. "Meet me at the hospital," she said. "I'll be waiting." Her only stipulation was that I and my translator come alone.

The next morning, our miniconvoy — two white sedans flanked by two green police pickup trucks — left town for the 50-mile drive north along Helmand's main highway to Gereshk. We'd been driving less than five minutes when an oversize rickshaw catapulted out of an intersection and rammed into our Toyota Corolla. Within seconds, a swarm of onlookers surrounded the car, looking at the smashed headlight. It wasn't a great place to be trapped in a crowd — two weeks earlier, a suicide bomber blew up a truck only yards away. There were sure to be Taliban informants among the onlookers; if anyone hadn't known we were coming along the road that day, they did now.

We drove on past young boys raking patches of blown-up road, the mangled rebar gnarled like hair; past America's surveillance blimps hanging cartoonishly low above the salt plain; past a line of camels cruising under industrial power lines. The electric lines were a legacy of a U.S.-sponsored midcentury hydropower project, the Kajaki dam, which, for a while, earned this stretch the nickname "little America."

An hour and a half later, we arrived at the mud-walled compound of Fatima Zurai, a member of Gereshk's local women's council, through whom I hoped to meet Zarmina's parents. An elderly couple, they were seated in the corner of the room. Zurai ran a women's business collective that sold heart-shaped, beaded rainbow purses for 10 U.S. dollars to foreign soldiers. Over tea and caramels, Zurai spoke of the losses she and her family suffered, caught between American forces and the insurgents. Zurai sent her daughter to fetch a bundle of cloth, which she unwrapped, holding up a white, blood-soaked shalwar kameez.

"My husband was wearing this shirt when the Taliban murdered him two years ago," she said. Her husband, Mir Ahmad, was on the Taliban hit list because he worked with the local government as a malik.

Then she shook out a small pair of brown muslin trousers from the cloth pile. Muddy and torn, they smelled like rot, and Zurai's small daughter held her chador against her nose to block the stench. The trousers, Zurai said, belonged to her 12-year-old son, Ihsanullah. He was walking home from school in the spring of 2011 when a military vehicle driven by a U.S. Marine struck and killed him. The U.S. Marine commander, Zurai said, brought the driver to her house to make amends.

"God gave me this son 12 years ago, before the Americans came," she recalled telling the commander. Zurai said that, yes, she forgave the driver. This was less a personal decision than a cultural one. Forgiveness was part of the honor code known as Pashtunwali. (The U.S. military said it did not have enough information to verify the incident; payments for accidental civilian deaths, which Zurai said her family received, are common.)

From her seat on a floor cushion, Zarmina's mother, Simin Gula, a maroon burqa pulled back from her face to reveal a mouth devoid of teeth, leaned into my translator and pointed to me. "Do they have the custom of marriage where she comes from?" she asked. "Is she married?"

"Yes," the translator lied.

Zarmina's father, Kheyal Mohammad, remained silent. Zarmina burned to death two years earlier, her mother said. "It was an accident. She was trying to get warm after a bath, but the firewood was wet, so she poured gasoline on it and caught herself on fire." Zarmina's father nodded assent. No, their daughter absolutely did not like writing, reading or poetry. "She was a good girl, an uneducated girl," Zarmina's mother said. "Our girls don't want to go to school."

"The mother is lying," Zurai whispered.

The parents agreed to take us to see where Zarmina was buried, a five-minute drive away. A maze of rocky hummocks marked the graves. We passed three women kneeling over three smaller, fresh plots. Zarmina's parents stopped before a grave covered in loose black gravel with no headstone.

Walking briskly back to the cars, we passed the three kneeling women again. Behind me, one murmured Zarmina's name. "She set herself on fire because her family wouldn't let her marry the man she loved," she said, then returned to grieving over the plot that held her son, who was killed in a recent suicide attack.

The early-afternoon sun had swung above us. The local council members urged us to hurry. But before we left Gereshk, we had one final stop to make — to meet Meena. Leaving the entourage behind at the district governor's office, we drove through the bazaar's crowded warren of streets and pulled up under the dusty, red-lettered sign of Gereshk District Hospital. A handful of people milled in the parking lot. Meena Muska hadn't come after all, I thought, my heart sinking. Then the phone rang.

“Why did you bring the police?” a high voice demanded. She was suspicious of our armed government guard. Through the windshield, I saw a woman in cerulean blue glide past. Her burqa was an awkward shape; she was on the telephone. Without glancing our way, she breezed around the edge of the whitewashed clinic. I tumbled out of the car, unaccustomed to the tangle of fabric engulfing me, and shuffled after her. Behind the corner of the building stood a young woman with a diamond stud in her nose. She wore thick black socks and open-toed rhinestone slippers. The rest of her face remained behind a piece of woolen fabric. There was no need for introductions. We embraced. Next to her stood a shorter, rounder woman, with a heavily wrinkled face. She was the girl’s meira: her second mother and her father’s second wife.

“I told my father I was sick and had to go to the doctor,” she explained. But she told her mother and her meira the truth; both women support her writing, at least for now. She led us into a winter garden, where we four — Meena Muska, her meira, my translator and I — knelt facing one another on the faded grass. Our blue, crimson, jade and dove burqas were the only colors in the gray garden. From her plastic purse, Meena pulled out her notebook. The forearms of her dress were black mesh, her fingernails carefully painted. For a girl who couldn’t leave the house, her latest Indian-inspired fashions were surprising. But this was a special occasion, and Meena had dressed in her finest. At my request, she took a notebook and began to transcribe some of her new poems line by line in sloppy, schoolgirl script. She copied a *ghazal*, a sophisticated form of Persian poetry, then scribbled the following landai:

*O, separation! I pray that you die young.
Since you are the one who
lights lovers’ houses on fire.*

This was her protest against being torn from her dead fiancé, she said. She asked that translations of her more formal poems go unpublished in this article. “My poems don’t deserve this much attention,” she said. “I am just learning to write.” Meena had little hope for her future. She would be marrying one of her fiancé’s two surviving brothers whenever her father and brothers decided it was time. She

wrinkled her nose and let the cloth drop from her face, then pulled two mobile phones from her purse. Her brothers, who ran successful irrigation-pipe factories, bought her the phones; they also monitor her call log to make sure she isn't speaking to boys. I wanted to give her something, but I feared that a book of my own poems might endanger her. If her brothers found it, how would she explain where this American's poems had come from? Having nothing else, I tugged a scarf from my neck. She reached into her purse and handed me a rhinestone butterfly comb. Then she tugged the burqa's soft grille back over her face, took her chaperon by the hand and disappeared into the crowd.

In the parking lot, one of the hospital's doctors, Dr. Asmatullah Heymat, was waiting to speak to me. "I know of this girl you are looking for," he said. "Her name was Zarmina, and she set herself on fire because her parents would not let her marry the man she loved." That was all he knew.

"Zarmina's mother couldn't tell you the truth in front of her husband," the girl's aunt told me by phone once we returned to Lashkar Gah that evening. Zarmina loved to dance and sing. "She loved fashion," her aunt said. "She loved a good burqa, nice shoes." She also played the hand drum at weddings and loved to recite landai. "She'd say landai in front of her mother, but never in front of her father," the aunt said. As for being able to write, "She knew some Koran, but only had a childhood madrassa education." The aunt could recall little else about her poetry: "I've had so many of my own problems, I've forgotten the landai she used to say."

From childhood, Zarmina was engaged to marry her first cousin, whom she'd grown to love. Yet when the time came, the boy couldn't afford the bride price of about \$12,500. Zarmina's father refused the match, knowing that he would have to support the couple. The boy visited Zarmina's home several times hoping to win her father's approval, her aunt said.

Zarmina took solace in writing love poems and reading to the women of Mirman Baheer by phone. Then came the spring day in 2010 when Zarmina got caught reading these poems and her brothers beat her. A couple of weeks later, according to her aunt, when the girl was cleaning the house, she locked a door behind her and set herself alight, a common means of suicide among women in Afghanistan

and elsewhere. The custom can be linked to the outlawed Indian practice *suttee*, when a wife climbs on a funeral pyre. The practice and even the Hindi word — *suttee* — exist in Pashto, too. In this sense, it is possible that Zarmina saw her choice to die for love as romantic and honorable.

Her sister-in-law tried to break into the room to reach Zarmina, then called her husband, who was working as a contractor for the Canadian military, stationed at the time in Gereshk. Zarmina's father was at his factory. Her mother was at her aunt's house fetching water. A young girl came racing into the compound, crying that Zarmina had tried to kill herself. By the time her aunt and mother reached her, Zarmina was nearly unrecognizable.

“Give me water, give me water,” she said.

With one of her brothers as a chaperon, Zarmina traveled by helicopter to a hospital in Kandahar more than 100 miles away. But there was little the doctors could do. Zarmina had severe burns over most of her body. A week later, she died.

After Zarmina's death, her fiancé tried to commit suicide by stabbing himself multiple times. His friends managed to stop him, Zarmina's aunt said. (Local leaders confirmed this.) Later, he married and moved to Kandahar.

Zarmina's family had also dispersed. One brother escaped to Herat after receiving threats for working with foreign soldiers. The day after I met them, Zarmina's parents were scheduled to join him there. There is little evidence of Zarmina's life left in Gereshk. After she died, her father gathered up her belongings, including some books and some scrawled-on pieces of paper. “I don't know if he hid them or burned them,” her aunt said.

But the whole village remembered Zarmina's story. Her two neighbors, 15- and 17-year-old girls, confirmed details, as did the local women's leader who recorded the case two years ago. “She was such a good poet,” the 15-year-old neighbor said. “We were the ones who encouraged her to start calling the radio. We were the ones who told her to write down her poems.”

When I returned to Kabul, I went to see Ogai Amail in Microrayon, a row of concrete Russian-era apartment blocks in northeast Kabul. For \$200 a month, Amail shares a single room with an older poet and member of Mirman Baheer who took Amail in after a family argument. She had nowhere else to go. Still unmarried at 40, Amail has no husband or children to ensure her position in society. Although she cherishes her independence, she said, hers is a difficult freedom. She has made the women and girls of Mirman Baheer into her family. She calls the younger poets her “little sisters.” Amail was nearly ecstatic to hear that I’d met Meena Muska face to face and that I’d found Zarmina’s parents.

Amail recalled how she learned that Zarmina set herself on fire: shortly after the incident, Zarmina managed to call from her hospital bed in Kandahar. She told Amail that she had burns over 75 percent of her body. “She sounded so normal, I didn’t think she was dying,” Amail said. Zarmina wanted Amail to call her brother and impersonate a doctor offering treatment in Kabul, Amail told me. She thought if she could make it to the city, she could start a new life. Amail did what Zarmina asked, but she knew Zarmina would not make it to Kabul. The next phone call she received from Kandahar came from Zarmina’s sister, who told Amail: “All you can do is pray for her now. She is dead.”

When I told Amail the story of Zarmina and her fiancé, she wasn’t surprised.

“Her poetry was all about broken love,” Amail said. “She asked me, ‘Do you love anyone?’ I said: ‘Why not? Am I not a human being? Do I not have eyes?’ Zarmina only said: ‘I have so many problems, I don’t want to worry you. I’ll tell you when we meet.’ ”

Amail assumed that someday the resourceful young poet would reach the relative freedom of Kabul. “She used to say you are the luckiest people since you can meet with your friends openly,” Amail said. “You can learn from your mistakes and write better poems.”

Flipping through her notebook, she found a poem she wrote after Zarmina’s suicide, called “The Poet Who Died Young”:

*“Her memory will be a flower tucked into literature’s turban.
In her loneliness, every sister cries for her.”*

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PUBLICATION

The New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/magazine/why-afghan-women-risk-death-to-write-poetry.html?_r=1)

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