

## The Silence and Forgetting That Wrote *NOOR*

*Sorayya Khan* \*

### I.

In the summer of 1999, I was in Pakistan conducting research for my novel, *Noor*. Among the people I interviewed was a man who'd retired from the Pakistan army as a Captain and was now selling insurance in Kohat, a tribal area some hours northwest of Islamabad. He'd taken the long bus ride to Rawalpindi after he'd heard that I was going to be interviewing people who'd fought in East Pakistan in 1971. In our first meeting, he was one of seven or eight men participating in a group interview. At one point during a short break, when the other participants left the cramped room to smoke in the cooler night air of the courtyard, the Captain told me that his bunkmates had routinely brought back Bengali women and "had their way with them" in army camps in East Pakistan. It was the first time in any of my interviews that anyone had made any allusion to the rape that occurred during the 1971 war. I tried not to interfere with the revelation, but we were many hours into the group interview, it was already very late, the other interviewees were about to return, and I had much to learn about the discipline required to interview. I interrupted him and simply asked, "Why?" He looked at me and without skipping a beat, eight years after the war had ended, he replied, "I've waited my whole life for someone to ask me that question." In the silence that followed, and in the eventual starts and stops of what he went on to say, it was clear that while he didn't have an answer, he had desperately wanted the question to be asked.

I start with this particular moment because it illustrates the silence and forgetting that accompanies war. During the twenty-eight years in which the Captain was married, had children, watched them grow, and offered one of them back to the army, he'd been grappling with what he'd seen and, perhaps, done in the war. But like all societies that go to war, Pakistani society could not bear to ask him what he had seen. It could not bring itself to ask him why his bunkmates had behaved the way they did. Such questions could not be posed because of the silence and forgetting that accompanies war. In fact, without a culture that condones silence and forgetting, war might not be possible. If we spoke honestly about the experience of war, perhaps we would not send our troops out to obliterate other populations and allow them back into our fold as fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, uncles. While the pervasive silence makes perfect sense, it is also, I think, a tragedy because it doesn't leave us with

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the possibility of learning more about who we are or why. As my experience with the Captain and many others in my interviews seemed to suggest, silence prevents us from making peace with ourselves.

After one particularly moving interview with another soldier, he accompanied me from a restaurant into the busy Rawalpindi night and to my car. Our interview had been interrupted by telephone calls from his wife who was at home caring for their youngest child, a five year old who was sick with a high fever and needed medicine from the pharmacy. The man, a Colonel, had three or four children, and he'd already told me that he would never allow his sons to join the army. Because he was a natural storyteller, and his story was astonishing, I suggested that he write it down for his children so that one day they might understand his legacy. "Never," he replied. His tone was harsh, but he smiled a big, open smile. I pressed him further. Surely his children would want to know how he'd passed three years of his life? "No," he said. Better to forget about it and move on, he seemed to say. Such manifestations of a desire to be silent and forget make war bearable but also unbearable for those who fight in it.

Silence and forgetting need not always be framed in the negative. In some instances and with regard to personal trauma, silence and forgetting might, in fact, be part of a healing process. After all, if you are lucky, there is life after trauma, and perhaps talking and thinking about other things make this possible. But the dimension of collective silence that I was interested in exploring in my novel is the one that occurs on a "societal" level. It's the way we behave as a society as a whole, the pauses and oversights in our conversations, the easy way most of us have of overlooking or talking around things that are too wrenching to discuss. This is not to say that everyone participates in this. Like the subset of soldiers I interviewed, some soldiers return from war and stay connected, reminiscing amongst themselves. But there is a difference between what soldiers share with each other and what they're prodded to reveal at the wider level of society.

History is a narrative, not unlike a piece of fiction. In fiction, the most obvious silences occur in the white spaces between paragraphs or sections on a page of a book. It is what happens off-stage as our characters and stories move from one point to the next. There are some stories, in fact, where what happens in the white spaces (those formless, shapeless silences filled with possibility) is more critical than anything that's "written." Such silences also exist in the narrative of history—what they are, of course, depends on who is writing the history. History textbooks generally tell us only one side of history. In Pakistan, for example, recent local history textbooks provide a sentence or two on the 1971 crisis that divided the country. Of course, Bangladeshi history books devote much more space to the events and say something quite different about their Independence War.

In *Noor*, I explore silence and forgetting as it relates to perpetrators of atrocities in the Pakistan army. While victims of personal trauma have their own individual healing processes to endure, examining the causes and costs of silence and forgetting seems integral to the larger society's healing. The conflict that provides the backdrop of my novel is the 1971 civil war between East and West Pakistan. In those days, Pakistan was one country but a geographical land mass divided into East and West, separated by 1000 miles of Indian territory. The country had come into being during the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, its maps drawn by the British Empire. In the elections of 1970, an East Pakistani political party won the most seats in parliament and the West Pakistani power elite refused to accept the results. The Bangladeshis call the ensuing 1971 conflict their war of liberation or independence. The Indians think of it as a civil war in which India interceded on the side of East Pakistan. Three million people died in this war according to the highest estimates, although a more commonly suggested figure is one million.

One of the defining characteristics of the 1971 war is the West Pakistani Army's treatment of thousands of East Pakistani Bengalis. The army's atrocities include rape, execution, murder, and arson. Some classify the war as genocide, on par with some of the other genocides of the 20th century. In Pakistan today there is little talk of 1971 except as an example of how the Indians conducted business as usual in their never ending quest to dismember Pakistan. And if numbers of dead are ever bandied about, the numbers given are small. When General Musharraf visited Bangladesh in 2002, an apology of sorts was tendered on behalf of Pakistan for the "calamitous events" that occurred during the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, and then he added, "Wounds do heal with time..." But do they?

My introduction to the 1971 war was from the radio. I was a child of nine living with my family in Vienna, Austria at the time and my father closely followed news from his country on the BBC, VOA, and whatever other transmissions his old short-wave could receive in our apartment. Not long after the war ended, my father decided that the severing of his country required him to return and help rebuild it, his protesting family at his side. In the summer of 1972, we (my brother, sister, and I) were shipped to Lahore to spend the summer with my grandparents in a lovely, dilapidated remnant of a house that was a legacy of the British. Every so often, an older cousin or my grandfather's driver would take us various places and we would, inevitably, cross into Mall Road. What captured my imagination during those outings when I was ten were huge red banners strung from one side of the wide avenue to the other: *Bring Our POWs Home*. I asked my father who or what POWs were, and he explained that they were soldiers who'd fought in East Pakistan and now were prisoners in India. That's all he said. I don't remember being told there were 90,000 of them and, of course, he didn't know they would be in prison for two and a half years. Despite the radio newscasts that detailed the war and these prominent banners, there was no other talk of the war, and this seemed strange and incongruous to me, even as a child.

At the end of the summer, my parents sent for us and we left Lahore for Islamabad, our new home. My mother had already befriended another Dutch woman (another expatriate who'd married a Pakistani), whose husband, a soldier, was one of the POWs that the banner was demanding be brought home. She had three children, she didn't have the house that for various reasons had been confiscated in her husband's absence, and she lived in a well-known, now somewhat seedy hotel in Rawalpindi called Flashman's. In the first year or two of our lives in Pakistan, my mother was forever pulling clothes out of our closets, exclaiming that they were too small for us, packing them in plastic bags, and driving them to Hamida's one room place in Flashman's Hotel for her children. This was our concrete introduction to what war does to those left behind: it means you're in need of clothes or at least that someone thinks you need her children's hand-me-downs.

Besides Hamida, the only other reminder of the war in Islamabad was the city's landscape. Built to be the capital of Pakistan in the 1960's, the city's streets are laid out just as an urban planner drew them on paper: with uniform plots in a tidy grid. But by 1972 the new city was peppered with houses seemingly frozen in mid-construction. Half balconies hung from these wrecks. Bushes grew into holes for windows that had never been bought, concrete stairs rose up or fell down, never reaching the roofs or the ground. One such house was close to our house and I'd race by it because it frightened me so. My parents explained that such houses belonged to East Pakistanis who'd fled for safety to East Pakistan during the 1971 conflict. The houses were a legacy of the war, rotting and unfinished, some flush against the gorgeous backdrop of the Margalla Hills.

I was introduced to the war from the safety of my childhood and another continent, but the experience was the seed of my motivation for *Noor*. My initiation into the subject of war—hand-me-down clothes for Hamida's children, red POW banners, ghost-like houses in Islamabad—does not stand

alone. It co-mingles with the relationship of others to the war, including policy makers, prime ministers, generals, civil servants, army commanders, soldiers, POWs, families who were left behind, families who fled. All of us participate in the same silence and forgetting. At some level and for a long time, I too felt that the silence was somehow sacred and unbreakable. There is something to the notion that we don't claim our subject matter, it claims us. And this is how I felt while I researched and wrote *Noor*.

I wanted to explore the war in a novel, but I hoped to concentrate on what I thought of as the after-the-fact-war. That is, the war that keeps on happening in the minds of returning soldiers, just as I thought it must be alive in the minds of their family members, the wives who couldn't share what their husbands had seen and done, the children who would never have their questions answered. It seemed to me that in war there is enough complicity and sorrow to implicate everyone. Rather than focus on war in the theater of the battlefield, I wanted to study the effects of war in the theater of a family. As I began to think about my characters in *Noor* and the events that would consume them began to emerge, I was faced with endless questions. Where were all the soldiers? Why didn't they talk about what they did? What they saw? What they were thinking? Did they rape women because they were told to? Did they shoot at random because they were afraid or because they wanted to kill? How did they learn what they knew about Bengalis? What did it feel like to be an occupying force? Did they believe in what they were fighting for? While considering these questions, I became fixated on others. How was it possible for those who'd perpetrated horrors on others to slide back into society as easily as if they'd been away on a hiatus, a vacation of some kind? Who were those who let them in? Who were their wives and mothers, fathers, and children?

I didn't think I could write *Noor* without trying to read everything I could about the 1971 war, without visiting the places it occurred in, without speaking to people who'd been there. As it happened, I was lucky enough to be funded by a grant that allowed me to do exactly these things. I thought I had a viable plan, detailed in the grant proposal that funded my travels to Pakistan and Bangladesh. I specified that I was interested in the reconciliation between soldier and society, and the reconciliation between victim and the past. I would conduct interviews, study archived documents, visit museums, travel to the settings mentioned in interviews, visit scenes of mass graves, and speak to survivors. Before leaving for Pakistan I spent countless hours coming up with questions I wanted to pose to prospective interviewees, as if the right questions would unlock the mystery of the war. Why did you join the army? What were your expectations of East Pakistan before you got there? Did you ever think of deserting? Did you feel betrayed when you returned home? What was it like to see death when you were so young? Do you talk about the war?

I arrived in Pakistan a few months before the 1999 coup in which General Musharraf overthrew Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Initially, without ready access to a network of soldiers willing to tell me their life stories, it was very difficult to find people who would talk to me about their experiences in 1971. Family and friends got me appointments with bureaucrats who had been responsible for policies, but they were reticent. They seemed desperate to repeat flawed claims, as if worn and tired arguments could stand up to the facts. After such conversations, I was left with the impression that time does many things, but it doesn't set the record straight.

When I finally met the soldiers whose stories made *Noor* possible, I had no idea how complicated interviewing would be--that people who'd been monsters could become people again, funny and loving, smart and witty, kind and polite. Several of the men remain the funniest people I've ever met. We laughed while we drank tea together in marathon interviews that circled around details of horrible encounters because there were so many comedic details: dentures falling out, untied pants

falling down, the expressions on the faces of soldiers caught in friendly fire. I wasn't prepared for their humor, and if it hadn't been so pervasive, so defining, I wouldn't have believed it. It was astonishing to discover that returning soldiers traumatized both by what they'd done and what they'd seen were people in many ways no different from you or me. In hearing their stories, I discovered that the soldiers of 1971 were everywhere and that their families were people who lived, almost literally, next door. They are people with pasts and histories and memories that collude in ways that let them survive. But they are, of course, also the reason for our silence. To acknowledge them, to acknowledge their stories, is to shatter the silence we imagine protects us from who we are or who we might, under the right circumstances, have become.

Someone I interviewed told me that before he left West Pakistan for his assignment in East Pakistan, his uncle saw him off at the train station. His uncle held on to him longer than he was accustomed and, before whispering prayers, his uncle quoted a verse from Waris Shah, the Sufi poet. The translation that was offered was this: "The people who say—those who go away will return—tell lies." The person who returns from war is different than the person who left for it. Our societies do not have a mechanism for understanding or accepting this, and when I spoke to the soldiers about their homecomings, they repeatedly offered how changed they'd been by war, how different they felt, how odd it was to find family members living their lives in the same houses, the same rooms, the same way they had before their departure. Returning soldiers were faced with the seemingly impossible contradiction that the life left behind continues.

I had the opportunity to question some soldiers in what became mostly group interviews. For the most part, I didn't pose the questions that I'd spent months formulating because when I was making my list, I had yet to learn that interviews can't be scripted, that the most fruitful interviews are the ones in which the interviewee is allowed to tell his or her story with as much freedom as possible, without being interrupted, prompted, or directed with questions. During those long nights of conversation, I learned that the interviewing process shares something with the writing process. Just as the interviewer must allow the interviewee to tell his story, you have to let the story (in my case, a novel) tell itself. It's no use directing it, telling it what it might do, interrupting to pose questions it isn't ready to tackle, because it'll stop revealing itself to you. It's during the slowest times, when your patience is most tried, but you hang in there, that the story begins to work. And so it was during my interviews with subjects who wanted to talk about what they wanted to talk about at their own pace and only wanted me to shut up and listen. But when the Captain answered my *Why?* with the *I've waited my whole life for someone to ask that question*, his words acted as a zoom lens finding focus in my project.

Initially, I'd planned to study two elements of the war: in Pakistan I would study the reconciliation between soldier and society, and in Bangladesh I would study the reconciliation between victim and his/her past. The overarching question was the same. How can people move on after witnessing or participating in the horror of war? My trip to Bangladesh, however, shifted the direction of my research. On the way from the airport to my hotel, Noreen, my contact, asked me how I would spend my time in Bangladesh. I shared my plans, all the while noticing that the landscape of the city was defined by the 1971 war. Each traffic roundabout appeared to hold a remnant of the war I planned to study—a captured tank, a downed Air Force Plane, other recovered war machinery. I repeated what I'd written in my grant proposal: I'd visit archives, visit museums, travel to mass graves, speak to survivors. Before I'd finished, Noreen interrupted me and said she could tell me what I needed to know about the war. She'd lost family members, her co-worker, whom I was about to meet, had lost his father, her neighbor had lost her brothers. By that time, we'd reached Dhaka University where a triangular roundabout was filled with busts of renowned academics who were murdered on March 25,

1971, the night the official war began. Noreen ran off the names of people who'd been killed, their positions at the university, their departmental affiliations. When we reached the hotel, I knew I would not conduct my imagined interviews. I could not, in good conscience, approach a woman who'd been raped or a son who'd lost his father, with the ridiculous television news question, *So what did that feel like?* even if that would have informed my characters in *Noor* more fully. Until then, I hadn't considered that I might be appropriating victims' stories or that what I intended to do mirrored West Pakistan's troubled relationship with East Pakistan, and I puzzled over why it took the physical act of traveling to the country to gain insight. I threw away my list of questions and abandoned my interview plan. In their place, I spent my stay in Bangladesh attempting to reconcile places highlighted in the soldiers' stories with my experience of them years after the fact. Among other things, it was an education in the topography of loss.

Still in Pakistan, the Captain's answer had already given me pause. I did not comprehend the seriousness of the situation I was trying to understand and his response, his waiting, brought that gravity into focus. Perhaps, if he and others had been waiting their whole lives for someone with whom to share their experiences, to validate them by listening and nothing more, there was an immensity to the experience of a returning soldier that required full attention. The novel that became *Noor* had already taken hold of me, but with this interview and my travels to Bangladesh, it held me in new ways and wouldn't let me go.

## II.

My father died in April; in June my husband, our boys, and I arrived at my parents' already dissolving household in Islamabad so I could begin my research. My Dutch mother, who'd lived in Pakistan for twenty-eight years, had decided she could not remain without my father. Eight weeks after we buried him, I walked into my parents' bedroom and opened my father's side of the closet in search of his smell, but his clothes were almost all gone. My sister and I lamented that all this was happening too fast, but neither of us dared suggest this to my mother whose life and heart were broken. His suits, like the lives we'd known, had disappeared.

Grief is an animal that lives inside of you, and so it was with my mother. She did things she would never have done before, like rid our home of my father's prized copper collection. He had spent years building it, searching for antique pieces in the old bazaars of Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Lahore, or whatever city he found himself in with an hour to spare. Upon learning of my mother's decision, a dear friend promised to take care of it and quietly instructed Khan Afzar, who'd worked for our family for years, to hide it in a storeroom at the back of our house. He unlocked the door for me one day, and there on an empty charpai was a pile of copper so heavy the web of rope that was the bed had sunk to the floor.

For most of the summer, our three-year-old son was sick to his stomach, regardless of what he ate. I spent most of those hot months with him nestled in my arms, both of us sitting in the family room under the fan, soaked with perspiration. The only times he seemed to come alive were in the presence of his cousins and, especially, during impromptu cricket matches organized in my parents' or sisters' lawn in which the driver, the cook, the chaukidars and anyone else from the neighborhood indulged a band of children. On other days, I tried to work with him in my arms. Those were the days before the prevalence of laptop computers, and I sat with my notebook next to me, trying in equal strides to write more of my novel, think of people to interview and compile lists of questions. I failed at this. In the six months I was in Pakistan, I didn't add one sentence to my novel. The already-written sections were tucked in a folder and saved on a computer disc and, every so often, I leafed through the pages or

scrolled through files, as distant from the material as if someone else had written it. The scene I mulled over most was directly lifted from a dream. When I was pregnant with our younger son, I dreamed that my baby would be a child with Down syndrome. In my dream, I awoke in my parents' home to the sun slowly rising above the Margalla Hills outside my bedroom windows, while this child, an adolescent daughter, caught my eye in the mirror and softly called, "Mama, Mama." I was only a few months pregnant at the time, the short span when vivid dreams and psychedelic colors danced in my head, and the only way to survive my dream was to write it into my novel, to speak it to no one but the page and hope that such an act would keep it at bay. Little did I know that this other worldly little girl was Noor, that I would fall in love and live with her for years, almost as if she was my child.

From one day to the next, my mother packed my father's two Samsonite suitcases, bought an airplane ticket, and early one morning we sat in the kitchen together while she broke the news to Khan Afzar that she was leaving. We all pretended she would be back one day, but the evidence of the house told otherwise. Fall had arrived, the children had just started school, and the house felt bare. My father's closet was barren, but so was hers. The drawers of the dresser my mother had inherited from my grandmother had once been filled with scarves, perfumes and medicines, but were now empty. The bed was made with fresh sheets, as if not just my mother, but my father, too, might rise from the dead to sleep next to her again. A crocheted bedspread replaced the one she'd set aside to take with her. Different piles sprung up through the house, each assigned to one of us. The living room furniture was pushed against the walls and in its place were the items Ayesha, my sister, would take with her to Karachi. The library, an extension of the living room, held cartons of books, a rolled up Chinese carpet and the dining room furniture assigned to my brother. The emptied dining room was stacked with things my mother had given us, my childhood desk, her mother's crystal, the teak buffet, lace tablecloths. As shocking as the dissolution seemed at the time, it was in the early stages yet. It was still possible to see remnants of my parents' home as it had been: paintings on the wall, vases set just so, lime bushes running along the driveway, cassettes carelessly thrown near a speaker.

By then my husband had left as well, returned to New York for another semester of teaching. Alone, I worked in my father's study while the children were at school, sitting in his chair, every so often fielding a telephone call meant for him. In a cabinet I found a thick envelope of newspaper clippings pertaining to the 1971 war, as if he knew I'd need them when he clipped them decades earlier. I scheduled appointments during the school day and when interviews necessitated late afternoon or evening hours, Ayesha picked up the children from school. She had just had a baby that summer, too late for my father to know her, but a beautiful little girl who was the joy of our lives then. Despite the new baby, sleep deprivation, work, the responsibility for organizing her own family's move to Karachi, she drove our children to school, picked them up, and cared for them when I did my interviews.

Still, I was fast getting nowhere. I had long lists of questions in my notebooks that no one ever answered, and while I dutifully took notes on endless pontifications, hardly anyone said anything worth recording. Once as I sat down to meet a former government official in his house, he eyed my bag suspiciously and asked me what was in it. "Not much," I said, but he wasn't satisfied. I put it on the floor and pulled out the contents: pens, paper, tissues, a microphone and professional recorder my brother had loaned me, extra batteries. I removed the batteries from the recorder to show him he wasn't being recorded, but he refused to say anything of consequence. Another time, I met a friend of Ayesha's who had fought in 1971 and had been briefed about my project, and still he offered nothing but small talk and general diatribes against the Indians. "Weren't you there?" I asked, confused, and he looked me in the eye and said, "Where?" Later, when Ayesha met him at a party and chided him for being such a lousy interviewee, this man of sharp mind and wit claimed to have forgotten I was her

sister. I secured an interview with a man who'd had a senior post in East Pakistan during the war, and even he, who'd opposed the war, could say nothing of substance beyond expressing incredulity that half the country was lost in the war yet what remained was still called Pakistan. A close friend of my father's, a lovely man who'd been stationed in Dhaka with the civilian government, spent hours with me over afternoon tea. "It was very bad," he said, "but no one listened to me." And in the comfort of his home with his wife at his side, in the company of those who'd known my father for more years than I'd been alive, I lost interest in the war. I let myself be regaled by familiar tales which brought my father back to life. I should have taken notes, but instead I surrendered to their adventures, among them racing trains in railway tunnels dripping with moisture and daring policemen at mass protests against the British.

After weeks of disappointing interviews, I arrived at my son's school early one Friday afternoon and joined the line of waiting mothers. A young woman struck up a conversation with me and asked about my work, and because I was particularly discouraged that day, I didn't waste words: I'd had no luck finding soldiers to interview for my fieldwork. She shared that she was an Urdu speaking Bengali, her family had fled East Pakistan for West Pakistan during the 1971 war, and she had family friends who'd fought in it. By the time our children came running through the gates, she'd promised to put me in touch with her contacts.

As a result, I met the group of soldiers that made *Noor* possible. I arrived at a hotel on the outskirts of Rawalpindi, a sprawling and not so slowly dilapidating compound of yellow bungalows that had been built by the British in another era. I was shooed into the manager's office and served the first of many cups of tea. Over the next hour or so, soldiers began arriving into the attached conference area and my attempt at conversation began. We sat in a messy circle of chairs and sofas, with the least interested men standing apart eyeing me suspiciously. Every time a new participant entered the room, I asked for permission to record him, but the answer was always an adamant *No*, and eventually I gave up asking.

The air was dense with cigarette smoke and the open window in the poorly lit room hadn't been washed in years. The group of men knew each other, some better than others, and a chorus of salams rose every time someone joined the gathering. Initially, the talk was nothing but platitudes and everything that is wrong with Pakistani discourse of the 1971 war, which meant that what was said was both uninteresting and false. The West Pakistanis behaved in East Pakistan no differently than any army behaves during wartime. Someone referenced an African tribe that claims the right to rape conquered women, a wild proposition that I didn't believe. Again and again, India was described as the troublemaker extraordinaire, the sole reason anything had ever gone wrong in Pakistan. Bengalis were not Muslim, they were Hindus and deserved to be killed. The slaughter on March 25<sup>th</sup> that claimed the lives of dozens of Bengali intellectuals on the campus of Dhaka University was ridiculed as exaggeration. Incidents were recounted of army officer's wives being raped by the Mukti Bahini, the guerilla force fighting for independence. I put away my lists of questions, but tried to hold on to the advice Omar, my brother, shared with me just before I left New York. A year or two of interviewing people about their experiences of the 1947 Partition had taught him that people will talk about themselves when given the opportunity. "Let them, and you'll be surprised," he'd said. But their droning went on and on, and I leaned further into the desk next to me and fiddled with my pen. I tried not to think of the fact that I was the only woman in a room crowded with men, and Allah Baksh, Ayesha's driver, the only person who would protect me if anything went wrong, had probably fallen asleep in the car waiting. It was dark, I was hungry, and my mind wandered to whether Ayesha had bathed my three-year-old. My visit to Gutmell Hotel seemed a terrible mistake.

Hours into this and quite late, Mr. A arrived. When he entered the room, I imagine my eyes were glazed over from listening to yet another soldier tell me how the East Pakistani Mukti Bahini were Indian agents and that if the Indians hadn't interfered, the internal problems between East and West Pakistan would easily have been resolved. Mr. A was full of apologies: he'd forgotten the meeting time, he'd miscalculated the length of the drive across town during rush hour, and finally, he'd only decided at the last moment to come. All the while, in his waltz into the room, he warmly embraced many friends, flashing big smiles to the others. To be honest, he said, he hadn't intended to participate in the interview, but at the very last moment, he'd mentioned the meeting to his wife and she insisted he come. "Yes, *insisted*. You know how wives can be." He looked at me knowingly with a twinkle in his eye. He said he was ready to speak what he hadn't before. He pulled a chair into our circle, straddled it with his legs, waved at his friends, and said, "They must have told you their stories. Now it's my turn." No one corrected him, so he had no way of knowing that not one of them had shared a single thing worth mentioning. He began to speak. His story came out in perfect chronology, as if he'd spent his whole life practicing, sifting, ordering his memories in anticipation of the moment.

I know a story when I hear one, but his was a novel. It included being ambushed by the Mukti Bahini, fleeing into a jungle filled with monkeys, caught and tied to a tree, saved by a soldier who'd switched sides but was originally from his mother's village and recognized him, escaping being blown up by a contraption his Bengali batsmen set for him, killing two Sikhs after Pakistan surrendered and he fled in their jeep for Burma before he was caught by a former platoon commander who not only recognized him, but remembered he'd once borrowed money from him and never paid him back and, after a monologue suitable for late night comedy television (i.e. *Did you participate in looting? Why, no! I don't see any looted goods lying about. Do you?*) pulled him from the pit of mud intended to be his grave and spared his life by making him a POW.

In that dark and smoky hotel room, no one else spoke. At first, men nudged each other, shook their heads, and made as if they would interrupt him, but before long, they too were engrossed in Mr. A's tale. He spoke, we listened, and I scribbled furiously in my hastily retrieved notebook. In the middle of the interview, we were joined by Mr. B and when Mr. A finished speaking, he pulled out prepared notes on folded sheets of paper the size of index cards and began his story. The night continued on like that, in tandem, one soldier beginning to talk as soon as another stopped. Men with arms clasped tightly against their bodies relaxed in their seats and waited for their turn. The only interruption was Ayesha's panicked telephone call to the hotel manager to confirm that I was still alive.

I'd never been in the presence of anyone who'd killed, much less confessed. Trite as it may be, I worked hard not to be obvious about studying a soldier's hands, searching for the mark left behind by such a deed. In order to open myself to his story, in order to muster the empathy required to listen, I had to silence the rippling power of his act. But what is far harder to share is that sometimes it was ridiculously easy to forget the horror and allow myself to be pulled into an intoxicating camaraderie, an intimacy, with these men I'd never see again, to laugh along with them and joke about their children and mine. The interviewing experience was tense and taut, but fluid also. It was silence and forgetting, and noise and remembering. It was the contradictions of life played out in a dim room full of strangers in the outskirts of Rawalpindi.

Long after a late dinner was served to us on heaping platters, Allah Baksh drove us back to my sister's home. The children had long since gone to sleep, and for the moment even the baby was quiet. I put my bag on a dining room chair and reached for the ever-present pitcher of boiled water on the table, suddenly overcome with thirst. I inhabited a zone that is hard to describe: exhausted, exhilarated, desolate. I might have been shaking. I hadn't slept well since my father died and was accustomed to the

spinning ways of my mind when my body craved sleep and my mind refused to grant it. This was different. I was lightheaded and desperately sad, yes, but also oddly energized. On the drive from Rawalpindi to Islamabad, I felt as if my head might burst, newly acquired content agitating as if in a washing machine. On my second glass of water, I was startled by Ahsan, my brother-in-law, who'd been unable to sleep. As naturally as if it was the middle of the day, he pulled out a chair and joined me at the table. "So, what did they say?" he asked.

With three children asleep in the room next to us and Ayesha desperate for a few moments to herself, the dining room was ours. I began by recounting a few snippets offered by the night's final interviewee. His classmate lived near army headquarters in the city in which he was stationed. He'd been asked to check on his family, but when he appeared at the door, he was verbally abused by his classmate's wife and sister who finally chased him away. The following day, after he collected his army rations, the soldier returned to the house and threw the ration into a window. Another time, he and an officer were making their way along a field near the side of the road when they were fired upon. In a lull, the officer realized that they were the target of friendly fire and shouted at the man to stop. The culprit had no excuses except for the fact that he had failing eyesight. *You see the caliber of my comrades?* the soldier asked as emphasis. Each incident struck us as funnier than the last, and I could barely get out the episode in which a companion's pants fell down when he stood to fire. We laughed so hard we were crying when my sister came downstairs to beg us to stop and tell us we were going to wake the children. "It just can't be that funny," she said. But it was.

The night set a precedent. I interviewed a subset of the same soldiers a few more times and those sessions, too, went late into the night. Whatever time I returned home, Ahsan appeared in the dining room. I'd listened carefully to their narratives, I'd *heard* them, I'd recorded them in my notebooks—they'd entered my mind, but they resided there incompletely. *I've waited my whole life for someone to ask me that question* collided with the soldier who likened Bengali dead floating in the river to drowned flies which, in turn, crashed into the revelation that collaborators provided two or three Bengali women a night for soldiers *to have their way with*. And so on. I couldn't separate beginnings from endings or make the connections that were the horrifying landscape in between. In some fundamental way, the stories floated beyond my reach. It was in a second telling that I claimed them. Details migrated to where they belonged, trajectories emerged, and my body absorbed carefully rendered stories. My mind stilled. To this day, it is the interviews that I shared that I recall with the most clarity, as if the very act of speaking imprinted them in my mind.

I did not transcribe my interviews and, all along, I knew this was a serious mistake. My notebooks are filled with scribbling; what made sense months after the interviews is almost incomprehensible now. Out of the half dozen most important interviews, I transcribed only one and that only out of necessity. I interviewed the man twice and after the first interview, I typed up my notes along with any additional detail I could remember. The work was preparation for a second interview in which I asked him to elaborate on an incident buried so matter-of-factly in his initial account, I almost missed it. In our second meeting, I realized that he broke both arms of a subordinate who had suggested assaulting a Hindu girl. Now, when I study those interview notes, I see the sketch of the narrative in my scribbles, but some details, the howl of pain when bones were broken, are not written down. They are preserved in my memory of a second telling.

I hid my notebooks on an empty shelf in my closet, out of reach of my children. It didn't matter that my older son could not decipher my personal shorthand and my younger son was too small to read. Tucked out of sight, the children were safe, the boundary between my work and my family securely drawn.

All the while, Ayesha and I were dismantling our family home, packing and sorting, the boys' and my living space finally reduced to two rooms, all the others piled high with boxes that obliterated the beautiful view of the Margalla Hills across the street. The rescued copper collection lay divided between our piles. But rooms were opening in my mind to make space for the soldiers' stories. It was an awful time, really, but I think that their misery saved me. There's a perversity in this that isn't comprehensible, but is still true. How does one write about that?

I needed those interviews with a desperation that shamed me. The brutality filled me up. I felt myself expand with each story, become someone I'd never been. From being a stranger to horror, I became someone who lay down beside it every night. On the cold October night a tremor shook Islamabad, my dream absorbed the shaking into a bombing run on Dhaka airport, in which an interviewee watched his partner blown to pieces. The stories terrorized me, but they kept me awake to the world, alive to its possibilities. They forced me outside of myself, directed me to a sorrow that was greater and less bearable than my own. My father's death was hardly significant on a spectrum of loss that included women who'd been raped, children who'd been killed, and soldiers who had lost themselves.

The soldiers silenced my grief. They spoke, and I forgot my father's death, our dissolving house, the fact that Islamabad would never be my home again, the worry that I might not be Pakistani with him gone, and the infinite other losses his death incurred. Their stories gave me *Noor*, but in a fundamental way, they kept me alive.

Between novels, I tell myself I will return to those interviews and reconsider them, finally find a reason to compile them and a way that makes sense. A few years ago, I went to a conference in Dhaka on the 1971 war and, again, I remembered my forgotten notebooks. A voice inside my head surfaced, as it does every so often, and demanded, *Do something with them!* I didn't. Instead, I prepared a talk on fiction as a vessel for memory. Then last spring, I was invited by Eastern Mennonite University to give a talk on the research behind *Noor*. I'd written talks like this many times and always framed them in the relationship between research and fiction, intentionally ignoring the reality that this relationship is only one aspect of how I wrote the novel. But I'd finally tired of my stale subject matter, and on a whim I obliged that nagging voice just a little bit. For the first time in a dozen years, I opened an old notebook and challenged myself to piece together an interview. I transformed several pages of notes into a narrative arc and shared my single-spaced pages with a small group of faculty over a surprising dining hall lunch of Pakistani dal. And as I read it out loud to a small but transfixed audience, dishing out horror as if it was mine to give, I began to reassess my role in seeking out this and other stories. In my discomfort, I had several questions for myself. What had I done, if anything, to deserve an audience that day? Had I been anything more than a voyeur during my research process? What right had I given myself to take someone else's story and present it publicly? But most of all, I was struck by something far more basic, which had escaped me until then. Where was *I* in the story of my research? What work had the research done for *me*?

I know why I wanted to write about the 1971 war: I wanted to explore the silence and forgetting in Pakistani society that allowed the event to be swept under the rug of Pakistan's history. How does that happen, I wondered, and I thought my characters— Ali, Sajida, and Noor—might show me. But until Laura Shepherd, a reviewer for a previous draft of this essay, suggested that I, too, might have engaged in silence and forgetting to write *Noor*, the thought hadn't occurred to me, the irony all but lost.

As a novelist, I'm often asked to identify how much of my work is autobiographical. Despite how often this happens, I stumble over questions that conflate me, the author, with my narrators.

Flustered, I once answered as if, indeed, I *was* the adolescent narrator in my imaginary universe who had yet to find her way in the world. Over the years, I've settled on a cursory response that claims that the inspiration for my novel is autobiographical, but not the story. In Karachi, at a reading in which I mispronounced a common Urdu word because I'd been away so long, I made a joke of the question. "Noor is in the novel. I, on the other hand, am right here. Talking to you." In truth, however, the answer is far more complicated. What portion of my work is autobiographical? The answer is always both *all* and *none*. A novel is the sum of the author's life experience, yet this almost never means that our narrators are telling *our* stories. Novels are life and the depicted life is informed by our own. The two spheres of our lives—the personal and the work—are intertwined. They need each other. We are our work because it is doing work for us, even if at the time we cannot identify what that is. And sometimes, that work is silence and forgetting.