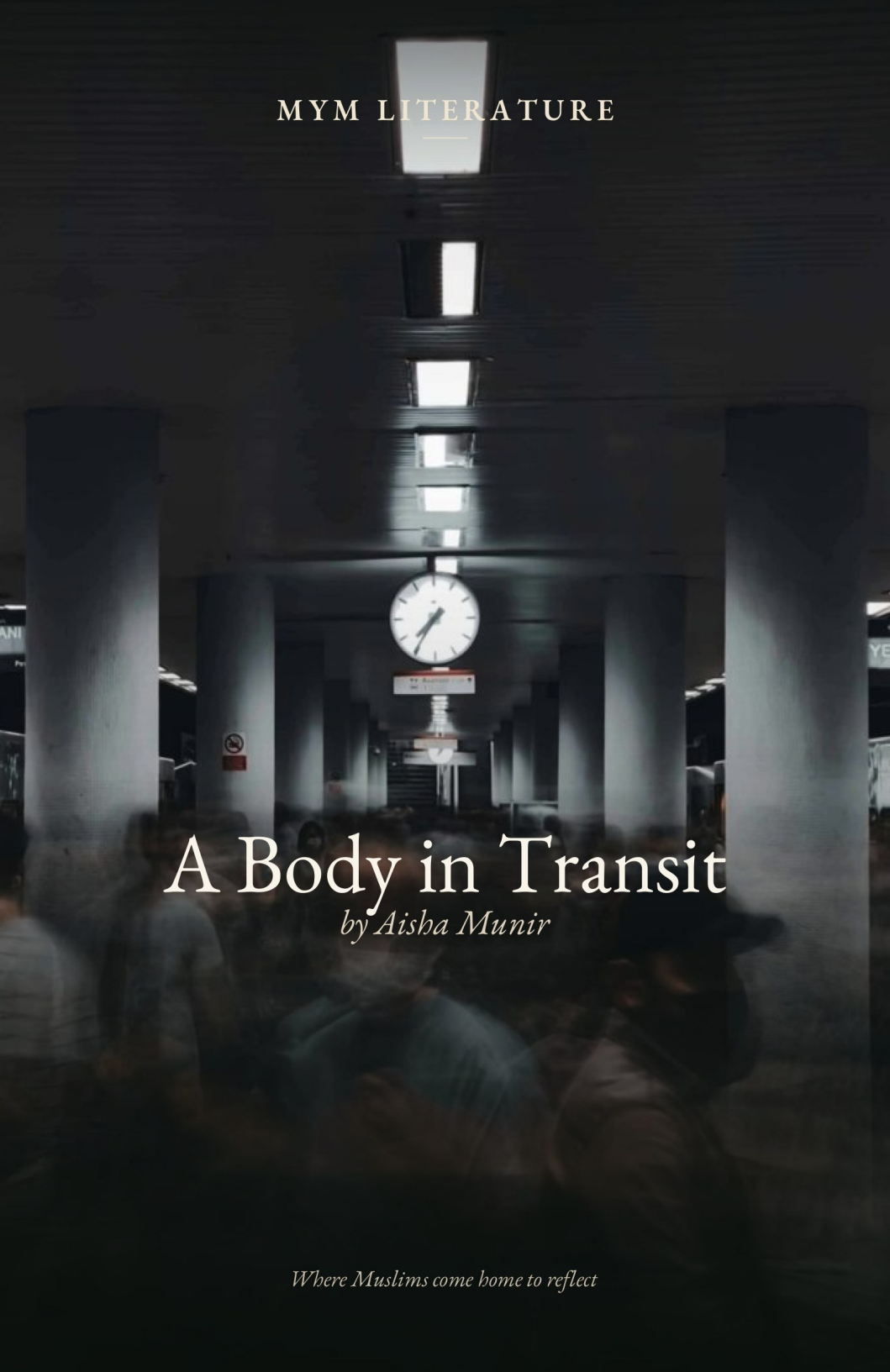




MYM LITERATURE

A Body in Transit

by Aisha Munir

Where Muslims come home to reflect

A Body in Transit

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The sound of my heart thumping reverberates in my ears. All I can hear is the thud—banging against my ribs like a drum. The intense pounding is making me queasy. I take a deep breath, hoping to drown it out, but with every inhale, the sound only grows louder. A sudden pang erupts in my lower stomach and surges up to my ribs, tightening my chest. The breaths become shallow, and the deprivation of oxygen starts to kick in, making me gasp for air. The anxiety I was holding back is flushing through my body like a wave in an ocean.

My hair beneath my hijab sticks to my neck; the fabric is light but feels heavy, as if the chiffon had been woven with wet sand and threaded with concrete. I want to yank it off. It's wrapped loosely around my head, but for some reason, it's strangling my neck, making it hard for me to breathe.

My legs quiver beneath me as I climb the stairs. The office is on the second floor, but the steps seem never-ending, like a mountain. I try to compose myself, but the migraine I was holding back threatens to spill within me. I can feel it pressing, needling my brain.

The questions I had practiced the night before are jumbled in my mind. I can't seem to remember when my birthday is or how old I am. My hands are slick with sweat, sticking to the railing as if it's the only thing keeping me upright. The building is air-conditioned, but I feel suffocated as if the sun is pressing directly against my skin.

Not now, Maya, I beg myself. But the panic is already there, simmering through my bones and spilling onto my skin like blood seeping from a wound.

It's not the end of the world, I tell myself, slowly and deliberately, but my body doesn't seem to comprehend. I swallow, trying to shove down the panic, but that doesn't help. My throat clamps shut as if a serpent has sunk its sharp fangs into me.

A few people come down the steps, holding onto folders, wearing black tailored blazers with white button-down shirts, and closed-toe shoes. For a moment, I stop and stare at them as they rush past me, confidence and calmness in every step.

How easy is it for them? Envy gets the best of me, and I accuse them of having luck on their side. I curse at them for not feeling what I am feeling.

It's okay, I keep reminding myself, burning the thoughts into my brain. But my body quivers at the image of me sitting in front of people who will judge every word I say.

When I make it to the second floor, I forget the room number. *Maybe I should just go home*. I clench my hands, digging my fingers deep into my palms, creating moon-shaped creases with my nails, but that doesn't help either.

I walk around, trying to calm myself, hoping the panic will leave my body, but it just digs deeper and deeper into my nerves.

I focus on the orange carpeted floor with its black polka dots, but the dots blur into tiny beetles, scattered everywhere. The walls hold a stale shade of blue that feels airless—as if they're trapping all the oxygen inside.

My interview is in five minutes, but I can't seem to breathe. I exhale slowly. But the air has become sparse. I look around as if searching for the oxygen.

Four minutes. Nothing. No matter how hard I try to exhale, the oxygen just won't go into my lungs. My chest locks. My legs tremble. My knees jitter.

Three minutes. I loosen my hijab. Take off my office jacket. But the heat is skimming. From beneath my skin.

Two minutes. My fingers tingle. I can't swallow.

One minute.

My mind whirls out of control, and the panic spills. I grab my jacket and rush back down the steps. I look for the bathroom, but I don't find it. Tears pool in my eyes, making everything seem blurry, but I don't let them fall. As I make my way to the first floor, I scan the lobby to find the bathroom, but I only see an exit.

"Hey, are you okay?" An elderly woman touches my shoulder, her brow furrowed, concern draping her face. Her lips are moving, but I can't make out her words. It's only when she repeats for the second time that I understand her question.

I try to speak, but the words don't come out. I want to ask her for the bathroom, but the letters in my head don't form into sentences. So, I just stare at her, with my eyes full of water.

Inhale through your nose and hold for six seconds, then exhale from your mouth.

The thought reverberates in my head like an echo on a mountain. I try, but the notion of missing the interview rebounds in my head, and the thoughts I was holding back flood through my brain.

Who would hire someone like you—panic attacks are learned, so get over it—you're so stupid for feeling this way—dumb girl—who has a panic attack over an interview—how will you explain this to Mama and Dad—your siblings look up to you.

"Honey?" she speaks, gently tapping my shoulder. The breath I was holding back rumbles in my chest.

A tear trickles down my cheek as I try to compose myself. My breathing becomes shallower, and the thudding in my chest increases like a drum in my brain. The migraine that was once spilling now avalanches into my skull, and I gasp. Another tear cascades down my face and falls into the hem of my shirt.

The loose hijab around my head tightens against my skin, suddenly suffocating. The lobby walls start to press inward, draining the room of oxygen.

People know you're Muslim—you're supposed to represent Islam—they'll think you're acting like this because you're oppressed—you're making us look bad.

I take a step back, her hand falls to her side, and I bolt out the door. Fresh crisp air hits my face—still no oxygen. I yank my hijab off. The messy bun of uncombed hair falls on my face and shoulders. The air doesn't feel welcoming. I try to control my breathing. But my heart pounds louder and louder in my chest.

Your hair is showing—I can't breathe—Allah will punish you—no, he is the Ar Rehman—maybe I should call Bhai to pick me up—but what will you say?

I don't know where I'm going. The tears accelerate. My legs start to wobble, then give way. I crash onto the sidewalk, and the panic attack I've been fighting surges through me, forcing air out in ragged wheezes. My heart thunders in my chest. If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a heart attack. A sharp pang grips my chest, as if bare hands are crushing my heart.

A small crowd gathers. Someone presses a bottle of water into my hand, and another rubs my back.

Inhale through your nose and hold for six seconds, then exhale from your mouth.

I hold my breath for as long as I can, trying to calm the thunder in

my chest. I bite the inside of my cheek until it becomes numb. When I let it go, I feel a sting. The physical pain diverts my attention, and I feel my breathing slow down. I count more in my head—*three, two, one*, visualizing each number in a hue of yellow and orange.

A man in his late forties reaches for his phone, trying to call an ambulance. The wheezing and gasping start to slow down, long enough for me to stop him. When I compose myself, embarrassment takes hold. I spring to my feet, thank the people staring at me with confusion in their eyes, and walk away. My head is throbbing behind my eyes—I don't have the energy to walk back to the hospital for the interview

I loosely drape the hijab back over my head, tucking in the loose strands of hair, put my jacket back on, and head to the train station.

Fa inna ma'al-'usri yusra, I whisper under my breath.