

An Interview with

Shauna Singh Baldwin

by Kris Babe



Like Noor Inayat Khan, the Sufi Muslim Indian living in Paris at the outbreak of World War II who eventually became a spy for the British, aided the French Resistance and inspired her novel, *The Tiger Claw*, Shauna Singh Baldwin doesn't fit easily into categories. Born in Canada to Indian parents, Baldwin grew up in New Delhi, and has made Milwaukee her home for the past twenty years. With an MBA from Marquette University, Baldwin became an e-commerce consultant and radio producer, and is now an internationally acclaimed author.

Her fiction has topped best seller lists in Canada, India, and elsewhere, and has earned glowing reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as well as high praise abroad. Her first novel, *What the Body Remembers*, won the 2000 Commonwealth Prize for Best Book in the Canadian-Caribbean region; it has since been translated into fourteen languages. Her collection, *English Lessons and Other Stories*, won the 1996 Friends of American Writers prize; and her second novel, *The Tiger Claw*, was short-listed for the 2004 Giller Prize and shared the short list for India's 2006 Hutch Crossword Award with works by V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie.

Baldwin and her husband own The Safe House,

a spy-themed restaurant and bar in Milwaukee. There, she met a real secret agent who told her about an "Indian princess" who spied for the Allies. Baldwin began researching Noor's life, but found her story obscured by exotic and erotic stereotypes. The novel upends these stereotypes by taking Noor's point of view.

Baldwin's prose is lush, even lyrical, but takes readers into stories that challenge easy assumptions. In *What the Body Remembers*, a polygamous marriage becomes an allegory for the Partition of India; World War II, seen through the eyes of an Indian Muslim in *The Tiger Claw*, is a morally ambiguous undertaking.

When she isn't speaking at conferences or traveling to research her next novel or launch *We Are Not in Pakistan*, her second collection of short fiction, Baldwin writes in her tiny Milwaukee studio.

Kris Babe: I've heard you speak about the importance of writing into the silences and forbidden spaces. Could you talk about how you've done that with your books?

Shauna Singh Baldwin: *What the Body Remembers* was written from the perspective of three Sikh characters, which meant that the antagonists in that novel were Muslim people of the time. And if I had written from the standpoint of Muslims, the antagonists would have been the Hindus and Sikhs of the time. So the challenge to myself in *The Tiger Claw* was to learn as much as I could about Islam and write a sympathetic portrayal of a Muslim person.

On the internet you'll find stories about Noor; some quite bizarre. And in the author's note I list several books that tell her story, often as male fantasy. My writing a work of biographical fiction about Noor was breaking a silence because Muslim women are more often "done to" rather than "doing." In *The Tiger Claw*, Noor moves things ahead in search of her beloved, a Jewish man.

What the Body Remembers also addresses a huge area of silence. I grew up in India, in New Delhi, where the population was about forty percent refugees from the 1947 Partition. The Partition separated Muslim-majority East and West Pakistan from secular India. Other than World War II, the drawing of the two border lines caused the most violent cataclysm the world has ever seen, displacing seventeen million people. In the chaos that followed, five million people died in both countries. There is little published on the subject. Compared with about seventy thousand books published about the U.S. Civil War, there are only about six hundred non-fiction books published about the Partition, in any language. About ten to fifteen novels have been published in English—there are several more in languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, and Urdu.

Besides, the story had not been told from the point of view of a woman. What was it like to be a Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu woman during the Partition? The atrocities women faced during Partition, the rapes and honor killings, were family secrets. I did not realize how secret these stories were until after the book was published, when after readings, I often found myself at the center of mourning circles.

Kris Babe is a freelance writer living near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work appears in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Free Verse*, *Poets & Writers*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, *Wisconsin Trails*, and other magazines and journals.

Readers used the book as a touchstone to discuss events in their families. Young people asked older relatives: What happened to Aunt So-and-so during the Partition? What happened to your servants, what happened to your employer? How could eighty-four women decide to jump into a well in Thoa Khalsa? How did that happen?

People had avoided such questions. After Partition, everyone wanted to return to “normal” quickly. Consider what happened with Hurricane Katrina: about a million people were displaced. Now multiply that seventeen times to gauge the physical and mental devastation for people of that generation.

Babe: Yes—with a hurricane or earthquake, the natural disaster factor is there; this is man's inhumanity to man.

Baldwin: It is difficult to explain how people can turn against each other. Of course we can blame the British for the lack of security. Lord Mountbatten declared the date of Partition based on an anniversary that had meaning for *him*. Independence on August 14 for East and West Pakistan, and on August 15 for India. The date had nothing to do with planning for an exchange of population, for refugee assistance, debating a constitution, or for providing security. The people had no vote, and Sir Cyril Radcliffe did not consider their recommendations as he drew the two border lines.

British historians and movies like *Gandhi* have portrayed Partition as a religious issue: these three religions couldn't live together, and the people went mad. Well, they'd been living together for a good long time, and people don't go mad without cause. What happened at Partition was more complex, and in many areas more akin to the French Revolution.

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It wasn't primarily religious but economic: How do I get rid of my mortgage? Kill my banker. Or just kill to survive and protect your livelihood.

In the Holocaust, the state did the carnage. The difference with the Partition is that it was violence of neighbor against neighbor. When Muhammad Ali Jinnah called for Direct Action Day in 1946, he called for the slaughter of non-Muslims. He gave top-down permission for carnage. Modern equivalents might be permission to target civilians in war or permission to torture and have ghost prisoners—once you have given permission from the top, it takes years to take it back and reestablish the rule of law.

Then, after all the killing and carnage of 1947, so many men and women felt they could not go back to live right next door to the neighbor who had done terrible things to their families. So they became newcomers in their own country. Many Britishers, also, uprooted by Partition, found it culturally

difficult to reenter life in Britain. They too became refugees in a way.

No Truth and Reconciliation trials were held for the Partition, no public apology has been made by the Queen, and there was no right of return. Only landowners were compensated, and not by Her Majesty's government. Now, sixty years later, some historians have begun to question how the British abandoned India and Pakistan to Partition, what they took when they left, promises never kept, and documents never transferred.

There is no memorial to those who died during the Partition because the two countries were supposed to be celebrating Independence. In 1970s India, you had to be careful to whom you wished a Happy Independence Day—for some it was a day of mourning. Addressing that pain was a breaking of silence.

Babe: Could you talk a little bit about the emotional

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work of the writer? What kind of work do you have to do as a writer to fully embody those characters?

Baldwin: I need to understand the emotions even of those with whom I disagree. I need to be nonjudgmental, whether I’m talking to a Nazi, or a former colonist, or a brown sahib. I remember coming out of a few interviews with former British colonists before writing *What the Body Remembers*, and just weeping, because I couldn’t believe the views I’d heard. And yet, given their worldview, what they said was completely logical. As a storyteller, you wouldn’t have conflict without such different worldviews. At the same time, to understand is not to condone. The narrator can put things in perspective.

Babe: Can you give an example?

Baldwin: Sure. In *What the Body Remembers*, I used a story from an interview. The story I was told was that somebody was “so stupid” that he wore a night suit to attend a wedding. I knew the socio-economic background of the interviewee; I also knew that the “stupid” person was a villager who couldn’t have known the difference between a lounge suit, an evening suit, and a night suit, and who must have told the tailor to make him a night suit. And I felt

that the pathos of that should be the focus of the story. So I chose to show it from the point of view of that well-meaning but poor villager.

A fiction writer can make such changes to bring out the pathos of a person’s life, so the reader feels the suffering of another human being. To me that’s the most wonderful side effect of a novel: it encourages our empathy.

Babe: Can writing stories about war make you cynical?

Baldwin: Sometimes I become cynical and forget the lyrical. When that happens, the writing turns to joyless work. To me, allowing human beings to be complex and sometimes contradictory is the fun of writing. That’s where I can discover my own humanity or recover my own compassion.

Babe: Talk about the use of terms like “terrorism” and “insurgents” in *The Tiger Claw*, because I thought they were a very effective mirror to hold up to current events.

Baldwin: “Terrorism” actually was in use in 1942. I ran across a speech from 1942 in which a British member of Parliament is excoriating Indian terrorists

for what Indians call the struggle for freedom, and he called it “the insurgency.” And so the word goes back that far and its meaning depends on who’s using it. As Ronald Reagan said, one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter—well, he ought to know.

In writing from the point of view of a very hybrid Muslim woman, I found that World War II did not turn out quite so black and white. Noor did everything an Islamist terrorist would do today, but since she did it for an Allied agency, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), it was “okay.” Her “resistance work” was funded by the British, and she was betrayed by the British. Historians have deemed this necessary, because the Allies did it. But to the Germans occupying France, Noor the radio operator, who told the English where to bomb and who planned and assisted acts of sabotage, was a terrorist.

We have similar moral ambiguity in our day. Is state-sponsored terrorism the same as individual terrorism? Is it really “necessary” to throw people in camps for five to six years without trial in contravention of international law? Such questions came up in Noor’s experience in wartime France. Parallels with current events weren’t deliberate, but emerged during the writing, and Noor’s story addresses a few areas of silence in our current public discourse. You ask yourself tough questions, and invite the reader to examine them with you, and you have to go where that leads.

Babe: Steve Almond, who wrote a book called *Candyfreak: A Journey through the Chocolate Underbelly of America*, was roundly criticized by some people because he included political commentary in this book. In response to the criticism, he wrote, “One of the functions of art, yes, even popular art, is to call people out of their narcotized stupor, to raise consciousness, to awaken their capacity for compassion.” And then he posed the question: “When are we going to allow grief to inform our art?” And I wondered if you could talk about using grief to inform your art, and how you choose to use the political in your fiction.

Baldwin: *What the Body Remembers* is primarily informed by grief; the grief of displaced people and their terrible feeling of loss, not just of homeland but of familiarity and status. A collective grief informed that novel.

A different kind of grief informed *The Tiger Claw*; grief for a woman who became the subject and prisoner of male fantasy in life and afterwards, and who was never taken as herself. She was subject to the hypersexualized Indian princess myth, and the idea that an oriental woman must and can only be rescued by an occidental man. So that book came from a grieving for the individual’s experience.

And your second question was on politics?

Babe: Yes.

Baldwin: I don’t know how to be apolitical. My writing will annoy somebody, somewhere, or I haven’t said anything worth saying. I think my writing turns political because economics underlies my characters’ emotion and motivation. If you write about people, you’re writing about economics, and still you’re writing about feelings and identities, and if you’re writing anything cross-cultural, it’s political. For instance, people who don’t have social security, unemployment, and workmen’s compensation rely on the tribe—that’s called nepotism in the West and sets up automatic conflict.

At the same time, if you approach your work with love, and with the intention of showing the way people are to the best of your ability, then I don’t think you need to fear adverse reaction. It’s when

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fiction is written from contempt for the characters that I feel the writer can do readers a disservice.

Babe: You help run your business, the Safe House, and have done consulting for businesses. How does that influence your writing?

Baldwin: My business background helps when I'm building characters, because characters who are employed are very different from characters who own their own businesses. And politicians who play with other people's money are very different from that. So I ask my characters: Whose money are you using? How hard does it hurt when you spend? How much financial literacy do you have, and how can somebody else con you? Are you a woman who is very well aware of investments and banking and money, or do you not want to talk about money?

Babe: Like Noor, in the *The Tiger Claw*,

Baldwin: Yes, Noor's Achilles heel is that she dislikes discussing money. She can bargain—but actually talking about her salary, or asking for money from her boss? Impossible. You know women like that, women who can find the best bargain, but are unable to discuss getting paid. So I think a person's relationship with money is part of every character.

When I was researching *What the Body Remembers*, I wondered about things like “what was the interest rate that money lenders were charging in India in the '30s? How bad was the Indian recession during the Depression years in the USA?”

Do you know the rate they were charging in the '30s during a recession? Twenty-eight and half percent, the rate charged on many high-risk credit cards today. Money lenders are doing the same to us

today as they were doing in colonial times, so that percentage was an interesting detail, and I brought it into the novel.

One reader asked, “Why this concentration on how colonialism worked?” I said, “Because its techniques are still working.”

Babe: How does your work at The Safe House balance your writing?

Baldwin: It keeps me in touch with people, so I don't end up incomprehensible to the normal person.

Babe: Do you believe literary fiction is for everyone?

Baldwin: In Canada it is. Most Canadian fiction is literary fiction. I don't think Canadian readers can be that different from Americans, but maybe we have made some artificial distinctions in this country

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I couldn't believe the views I'd heard. And yet, given their worldview, what they said was completely logical.

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between literary and popular fiction. What if we said, Complexity is in! Paradox is fun! Literary fiction is food for the brain! It could lead to regime change.

Babe: You have gone into some areas in women's lives that not a lot of writers touch. In your stories, polygamy comes up, and abortion; all of the things related to a woman's sexual being, and you treat them in a way that is far more nuanced than how a lot of people do. Tell us about how you work with those very private areas of women's lives.

Baldwin: Many works of fiction published today are directed at “the market”—women over forty. And often, the female characters have women's names, but are essentially masculine women.

To be a woman means that you menstruate, means that you bear children. And that you are responsible for the human race in a way men are not. If you

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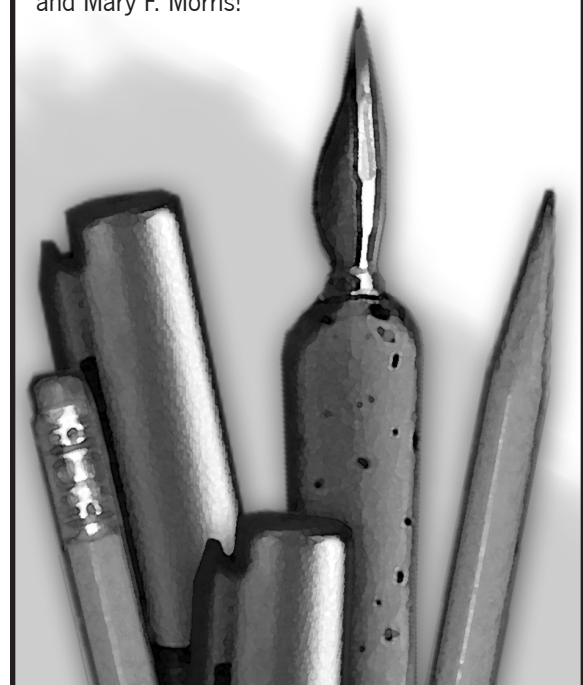
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are female, you have to deal with your reproductive system, like it or not. So if I write about women, it automatically comes in. I don't know how to do it differently, because I'm interested in women. That may change. I reserve the right.

In *We Are Not in Pakistan*, I have quite a few stories now from male points of view, but the men are on female journeys, to discover and recover the feminine.

Babe: One of the things that is important both in your life and in your characters' seems to be having a foot in more than one place, having multiple loyalties, and multiple pulls. How do you use that to make your characters as complex as they are?

Baldwin: I think we have many allegiances. We all belong to so many different groups today. You can no longer say, "Oh, this person is a Sikh." Well this person might be a Sikh plus an Indian, another might be a Christian plus an American, a third person might be a Hindu but also a Canadian. It just depends on what groups that person has been a part of in his or her life, and what that person has learned from those different groups. I don't like the idea that people think we can be homogenized into one big multi-entity—we can't work that way in today's world. We are responsible to too many groups. Each pulls us. If we're going to be parochial and say we belong to only one group, well, that's a recipe for endless war, isn't it?

Babe: It seems to me that those divided loyalties create a lot of the opportunities that drive your characters forward.

Baldwin: Well yes, because ambiguity leads to conflict. Conflicted people have to express that in some way. If we were all happy, we wouldn't have any stories, would we? But my characters definitely go on feminine journeys, in the sense that if you were looking for Joseph Campbell's hero's journey—the one where the hero gets a call to action, refuses the call, then answers the call to go out and slay the dragon and come to terms with his father—it hasn't surfaced in my books to date. My characters are usually on a feminine journey, to recover feminine values in their lives. And that's a very different process.

Babe: Could you please elaborate more on the feminine journey?

Baldwin: The standard for Hollywood movies is the masculine journey, also called the hero's journey. And an alternative is the heroine's journey—basically the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. That myth may be relevant to Western women, I don't know. But the feminine journey has to be broader, not simply a matter of re-performing Greek mythology.

I don't think any *one* myth portrays a woman's journey today. Oriental and occidental stories must be mixing even more today in young people

worldwide—maybe a little less in the USA, but soon globalization will require people in the West to read beyond works in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and learn non-Western symbolic language.

I grew up with the Sita story from the *Ramayan*. Do I re-perform it? Sometimes, when I try terribly hard to be perfect. The Sita story is difficult for any woman to overcome. But I've also grown up with the stories of the protective sister Bebe Nanaki, valiant Draupadi, and vengeful Durga. And these coexist with tales of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella in my psyche. So different myths operate at different points in my life.

Babe: Then what is the feminine journey?

Baldwin: It begins in a situation of blithe-spirited, wonderful, elysian sanctuary, and then the character experiences a fall and has to recover him or her self through relationships with others to become a whole human being. *The Wizard of Oz* and the Bible story of Adam and Eve are examples of feminine journeys. In the feminine journey you discover what it means to be separated from your birth family. What does it mean to try to remain an individual under patriarchal pressure to conform to the group to which you belong? How does the group expect you to behave, dress, talk, and marry? Do you have to produce children and raise them in a particular fashion? Must you or your children spout an ideology? Do you get ahead by competition or cooperation? How does a person keep her (or his!) individuality and creativity under such pressures? The feminine journey is for the recovery of feminine values of creativity, nurturing, care-giving, connection, cooperation, and relationships.

In many cases, I think we're recovering our selves as we were at eleven or twelve. Studies show girls lose confidence at that age because people around you say you can't—or we won't let you—self-actualize the way a boy can. You have to be a caring, nurturing, self-negating person, perfect in all regards. And eventually, these are the messages women need to temper whether we live in the occident or the orient.

The Tiger Claw shows Noor on that feminine journey. But it's also a very, very old journey, in that it is also the Sufi path. So in the deep structure of *The Tiger Claw* is exactly what the Sufis teach: Rejection of single-path solutions and the turning in of the counterfeit self. All of these are stages along the way to wholeness or what they call enlightenment. I didn't know this while I was writing, but after having written a few drafts, I realized, "Ah, it's the Sufi path," which made sense, because Noor is a Sufi Muslim.

Babe: What was, I thought, especially poignant about that aspect of the story was the way in which her family sought to rigidly structure that, and to basically negate Sufism to uphold it.

Baldwin: Yes, you see, they had trouble practicing

what they preached.

Babe: Right.

Baldwin: I think we all preach one thing and practice another, but to what extent? And then in addition, do you make people in your family go against their nature to do as you want?

Babe: Do you, as an Indian woman, find that people expect a certain kind of writing from you?

Baldwin: Indo-Canadian-American woman. Yes, there's expectation. For my first novel, *What the Body Remembers*, reviewers of South Asian origin applied a "how dare you" factor: How dare you write about the Sikhs during the Partition when *you* didn't go through it? Your grandparents went through it, but you didn't. You don't know half of what my family suffered, your family didn't suffer half as much as mine, therefore you have no right to write about this. That was bound to happen to anyone writing in English about the Partition.

For *The Tiger Claw* I thought there would be more criticism about writing from the point of view of a Muslim character when I'm not Muslim, but that was overcome by the larger problem that there are so few stories about Muslim women who have contributed to world history.

My latest, *We Are Not in Pakistan*, will not satisfy desires for descriptions of the fragrance of spices or the hubbub of bazaars. The ten stories are set in many different cultures and countries. But I want to explore something different each time, write a different book every time.

Babe: Tell us more about the How Dare You factor.

Baldwin: Writers face quite a few, and they can sometimes exist only in our own minds. My "how dare you" factor applies because I'm outside India and writing about Indians in India or in the diaspora. It applies if I'm outside Canada but writing a story set in Canada. Both of which I'm doing for my novel in progress.

And a few of the stories in *We Are Not in Pakistan* are set in the USA, and only a couple of stories are about Indian people. But they're looking at Western cultures through Indian eyes, and I know that's controversial. For instance, one story shows the practice of dowry operating in American life—much as it does in India.

Babe: Sure.

Baldwin: I think the storyteller's origins shouldn't matter. If the story about a Costa Rican man can be read by Costa Rican readers, and maybe some feel it expresses their reality, well, then my project was worth doing.

Babe: Nobody's outraged when a man writes a book from a woman's point of view.

Baldwin: No, or when somebody from the West writes a book that's set in India—provided they're of European origin.

And I know it's not acceptable for an "ex-colonial" to write about World War II because what would I know about it?

Babe: I suspect the answer is: A lot more than you'd like me to.

Baldwin: My characters' perspective is bound to be a little different from the way the "good war" is portrayed in England, Canada, or the USA.

For instance, in 1943, Noor would know that people were dying of starvation in India, and by 1945, her brother Kabir would know that Churchill's diversion of food to British troops and his inaction

had resulted in the famine deaths of 3.5 million brown people.

Babe: So how do you overcome the How Dare You factor?

Baldwin: One of my characters gave me some good advice in *The Tiger Claw*. He said, "An artist cannot wait for permission, but must seize it." So I give myself permission to write. Lately it's been permission to write in the voice of a Mexican-American gentleman, a Greek waitress, a Ukrainian Jewish woman living in Moscow, and a dog.

Babe: Are all your books available in the U.S.?

Baldwin: My first novel *What the Body Remembers* and *English Lessons and Other Stories* are available. Nan Talese of Doubleday mistakenly pulped two thousand eight hundred hardcover copies of *What the Body Remembers*, which negatively affected US and U.K. publication of *The Tiger Claw*, but readers from all over the world can buy the Knopf Canada edition of *The Tiger Claw* at <www.shaunasinghbaldwin.com>. Or you can go directly to <www.amazon.ca>. And *We Are Not in Pakistan* has just been published in Canada by Goose Lane Editions. AWP

from *The Tiger Claw*

by Shauna Singh Baldwin

Chapter 1

*Pforzheim, Germany
December 1943*

December moved in, taking up residence with Noor in her cell, and freezing the radiator.

Cold coiled in the bowl of her pelvis, turning shiver to quake as she lay beneath her blanket on the cot. Above, snow drifted against glass and bars. Shreds of thoughts, speculations, obsessions . . . some glue still held her fragments together.

The flap door clanged down.
"Herr Vogel..."

The rest, in rapid German, was senseless.

Silly hope reared inside; she reined it in.

The guard placed something on the thick, jutting tray, something invisible in the dingy half-light. Soup, probably. She didn't care.

She heard a clunk and a small swish.

Yes, she did.

Noor rolled onto her stomach, chained wrists before her, supported her weight on her elbows and knelt. Then shifted to extend the chain running between her wrists and ankles far enough for her to be seated. The clanking weight of the leg irons pulled her bare feet to the floor.

She slipped into prison clogs, shuffled across the cement floor.

A pad of onionskin. A scrawl that filled the whole first page. It said in French, *For Princess Noor — write children's stories only*. Signed, *Ernst V.*

She had asked Vogel for paper, pen and ink, but never expected to receive them. "Everything in my power," Vogel had said.

She tucked the pad under her arm, then tested the pen nib against her thumb.

She reached for the glass jar. Dark blue ink. She opened it, inhaled its metallic fragrance. She carried the writing materials back to her cot. She lay down, eyes open to the gloom, gritting her teeth to stop their chattering. Mosquito thoughts buzzed.

Do it. Shouldn't. Do it. Shouldn't. Do it.

Use initials, think the names, use false names, code

names.

She caterpillar-crawled to the edge, turned on her side to block the vision of any guard and examined the leg of the cot. A pipe welded to the metal frame. Hollow pipe with a steel cover.

If I can hide some of my writing, I will write what I want.

She pressed a chain-link against the steel cover. Was it welded? Cold-numbered fingers exploring. No, not welded. Screwed on tightly.

Push, push with the edge of her manacles. Then with a chain-link. She wrapped her chain around the cover like a vise. It didn't move. She pushed and turned in the dimness for hours, till she was wiping sweat from her eyes. She froze whenever she heard — or thought she heard — a movement at the peephole.

Deep breath. Attack the hollow leg again.

Night blackened the cell. Baying and barking outside, beyond the stone walls of the prison. Twice, the rush of a train passing very close. Noor grimaced and grunted on.

Finally, the steel cover moved a millimetre along its treads. By dawn, it loosened. She lay back, exhausted. Then, with her back to the door, she rolled up half the onionskin, poked it down the pipe-leg and, with an effort, screwed the cover on again.

Above her, the window brightened.

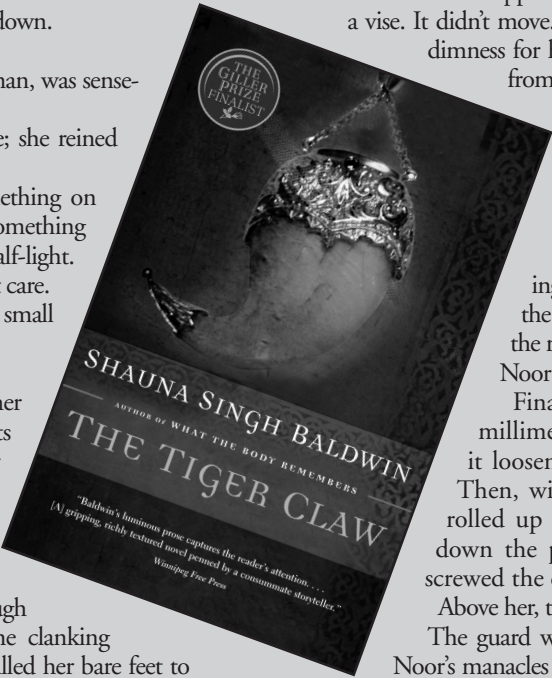
The guard was at the door. She unchained Noor's manacles so she could use the toilet. Did not glance at the bed. Did not shout.

The flap door dropped for Noor's morning bowl, sawdust bread. A single bulb lit the cell.

Begin, "Once upon a time there was a war . . ." No. She would write *une histoire*, not the kind her captor had in mind, but for someone who might read her words in a time to come:

I am still here.

I write, not because this story is more important than all others, but because I have so great a need to understand it. What I say is my truth and lies together, amalgam of memory and explication. I write in English, mostly, English being the one language left in the ring. Other languages often express my feelings better — French, Urdu, Hindustani. And perhaps in these languages I could have told and read you stories better than this, your mother's story. But all my languages have been tainted by what we've said and done to one another in these years of war.



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