

Giving a Voice to Women on the Margin

Poems by Sabrina Mahfouz

Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

Sabrina Mahfouz is a very versatile young poet, playwright, screenwriter, essayist, female activist, who has already won several prestigious awards. The daughter of an Egyptian father and a Guyanese-British mother, she spent her childhood between Cairo and South London and has always remained very conscious of her dual identity, describing herself as a “working-class, immigrant-class woman”. After studying English Literature and the Classics, International Politics and Diplomacy, Mahfouz broke off a fledgling career as a civil servant working for the Ministry of Defence and decided to turn her love for literature into a profession. At the beginning she had to earn her living as a waitress in various London bars and strip-clubs, until a Sky Academy Arts scholarship (2013) allowed her to write full-time. Mahfouz has staged an impressive list of her own plays, runs writing workshops from prisons and schools to the Royal Court and the National, writes for children and brilliantly performs her poetry at national and international events. Central to her writing are questions of identity and the position of women in contemporary societies, British and Arab, with a special interest in women on the margin. Her main book publications to date are *The Clean Collection* (2014) containing plays and poem, *The Things I Would Tell You* (2017), an edition of texts by British Muslim women which became Guardian Book of the Year, and *How You Might Know Me* (2016), a book of poetry, in which Mahfouz gives voice to four women working in the sex industry. We are very grateful for the permission to reprint three poems from this collection. They are characteristic examples of Mahfouz’s poetry, which is subtly political, often ironical, but always full of empathy and marked by a great formal and linguistic flexibility. We listen to 62-year old Sylvia, Muslim girl Sharifa and immigrant Darina.



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marriage proposal (sylvia)

Scott heard his mate steve's missus
do a bit birthday speech for him at the pub
his whole heart felt treacherous
limbs stranded in ice-filled bathtubs;
all because he'd never dented knees
to ensure his name sounded with hot coals,
scott must tell sylvia she's more than quickies
under duvets, more than rants and rigmarole.
in the kitchen he proposes with a white ring
made from rizla, he'll get a proper one in time
she isn't speechless just unimpressed and angling
the threads that sewed him her paradigm;
sylvia shakes her head I'm too old for all that scott,
I know you'd rather I unwrap this ring and roll you a bit of pot.

Even revolutionaries get horny (sharifa)

Men with revolutionary principles
are just like men without any principles at all
when it comes to sex.

They want to share more maybe
want to divulge to me the secrets of their theories
how they wish the world would spin
so people like me could be free
could be so much better off.

But ultimately
they will expect my clothes to disappear
they will expect flesh to be put against flesh
they will expect at least some effort from me
they will expect a nest of pleasure in eyes
they will expect an audible sign of encouragement,
as do I.

The difference with revolutionary man
is that they will also expect a discount,
as of course I should be aware that they are fighting
fighting the system for people like us
so people like me can be free
can be so much better off.

the most honest job I've ever had (darina)

is this one, to be honest. *To be honest* is a phrase I've picked up in this country and have started to use almost obsessively. I have picked up many phrases, it is a country full of phrases, but here is something particular about *to be honest* that gets me, pulls me to it, hypnotises me with its complete lack of irony in a country full of irony. To start a sentence, a conversation a confession with the phrase, *to be honest*, what it does is suggest that usually you are not. The specific thing you are about to say is most definitely honest, but such honesty exists as an exception, being employed only for the purpose of being taken incredibly seriously on this very point. It also suggest that honesty is not expected and that not lying

requires an introduction, a declarative statement followed by a pause and perhaps a slight frown, raise of forehead or narrowing of eyes. To be honest, I have found that this simple combination of words really does work wonders. It immediately offers the person you are talking to a feeling of exclusivity, of encouragement that they are worthy of your honesty, something that is reserved, remember, for only the most special and deserving of occasions. It makes you appear disarmingly self-aware and constructively reflective.

I am not honest. My mother thinks I work at a gym in Westminster. I told her Westminster because she loves the cathedral and would think Canary Wharf was a made up name no matter how many times I might say, *to be honest mum. I work in a place called Canary Wharf.*

I tell clients I'm studying to be a personal trainer, sometimes a yoga teacher depending on how guilty they seem about being in the club. *To be honest, this work complements my yoga teaching practise as I get to keep fit, stretch and work on my inner self by having enlightening conversation...such as this one* is a real winner.

But honestly, if I'm honest to myself, then this is the most honest job I've ever had and, to be honest, I absolutely love it.

*All three poems from:
Sabrina Mahfouz, How You Might Know Me. Out-Spoken Press, 2016.*