

The background is a painting of a forest scene. In the foreground, there are several sheep, one larger and three smaller, standing in a field of green grass and yellow flowers. The middle ground is dominated by a large, irregular, bright red stain that covers a significant portion of the scene, obscuring some of the trees and foliage. The background shows a line of trees under a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is painterly and somewhat somber due to the red stain.

Rahela Nayebzadah

# MONSTER

# CHILD

*a novel*

**MONSTER**

**CHILD**

Also by Rahela Nayebzadah

*Jeegareh Ma*

Rahela Nayebzadah

**MONSTER**

**CHILD**

*a novel*



A BUCKRIDER BOOK

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead; events or locales is entirely coincidental.

© Rahela Nayebzadah, 2021

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Buckrider Books is an imprint of Wolsak and Wynn Publishers.

Editor: Paul Vermeersch | Copy editor: Ashley Hisson | Dari copy editor: Hamed Rouzbehani

Cover design: Michel Vrana | Interior design: Jennifer Rawlinson

Cover image: Children visiting spring lambs on the farm, Victorian 19th Century

© duncan1890, iStock; Abstract red watercolor background © carduus, iStock

Author photograph: Joseph Reeves

Typeset in Nassim Arabic, Haettenschweiler and Aktiv Grotesk Arbc

Printed by Brant Service Press Ltd., Brantford, Canada

Printed on certified 100% post-consumer Rolland Enviro Paper.

“La Ruelle Monstre” © Paul Matthew St. Pierre, 2019. Reproduced with permission.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada.

Buckrider Books  
280 James Street North  
Hamilton, ON  
Canada L8R 2L3

#### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: *Monster child* / Rahela Nayebzadah.

Names: Nayebzadah, Rahela, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20200410237 | ISBN 9781989496305 (softcover)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8627.A94 M66 2021 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

For my beloved sons, Malek Forest and Matin River

In loving memory of Carl Leggo



La Ruelle Monstre  
cons and pushers,  
surge of races,  
mixed, apart,  
they seek  
familiar faces  
in the crowd,  
in rows of slums,  
among losers and bums,  
frag  
ments  
of old world order,  
dregs  
of post-apocalyptic disorder,  
an exercise in anarchy  
and zero-degree  
narration  
drugs  
skids  
thugs  
kids  
in Monster Alley.

— Paul Matthew St. Pierre, “La Ruelle Monstre”





# **PART 1 - ب**

**BEH**



# CHAPTER

# ONE

Friday, March 17, 2000

“You’re a disease, Beh,” I was occasionally told, meaning one of two things: I was contagious, contaminating others with abominable infections; or like a tree, I branched out and slowly grew on people. And though they called me a disease – especially after trying to seduce my English teacher, Mr. Harvey – my sister, Shabnam, is the monster child. She’s the one who cries blood.

This morning, I’m woken up by Padar. “Get up. Farhad’s waiting in the car,” he says.

I look over my shoulder to catch a glimpse of the time. It’s not even 5:00 a.m. The birds aren’t even chirping yet. “Can we have breakfast first?”

“No.”

Getting out of bed, I try to make as much noise as possible. If I have to wake up this early on a Pro-D Day to see animals slaughtered for Mâdar’s mehmouni, then so does Shabnam. I lift my torso and legs up in the air and let them fall down, hard.

Shabnam is still sleeping. The walls could cave in and she'd still be out cold.

I wish I looked as serene when sleeping. Despite her bloody tears, Shabnam sleeps with a faint smile, mouth closed and her hair neatly in place. I, on the other hand, sleep with my head buried in my pillow, my hair dishevelled and my mouth wide open. Some mornings, I wake up with a stiff jaw.

I grab a sweater from Shabnam's dresser and head out, but first I make sure to kick the door, loud and clear, before dragging myself down the stairs.

Mâdar is on her knees, scrubbing the kitchen tiles. "Why isn't she up yet?" she asks Padar, upset that Shabnam isn't behind me.

"She was up all night studying," Padar says.

"I was up later. I even woke up with a headache. You don't see me in bed," Mâdar says.

Alif, however, is all set, ready to go. Dressed in a bandana, camouflage pants, vegan boots and a shoulder bag filled with pocket knives he purchased after becoming a butcher at Kâkâ Farhad's Bismillâh Halal Market, my twat of a brother makes it no secret that he looks forward to our monthly excursions.

"Hunter by day, butcher by night," he tells me.

"You look stupid!"

"Not as stupid as you," he says.

"Get moving," Padar says as a horn honks outside.

A rusty, blue car awaits us. Being the penny-pincher that he is, I wouldn't be surprised if Kâkâ Farhad drives that thing into the ground.

“You trying to wake up the entire neighbourhood?” Padar says to his brother. Padar slams the passenger door shut.

“Salâm to you too, Kareem,” Kâkâ Farhad says. “It’s not like you get along with any of your neighbours anyway.”

All these years, I don’t think I’ve ever seen the two have a civil conversation.

Our cousin Amir scoots to the middle of the back seat, leaving Alif and me no other choice but to sit on either side of him. Amir spills over from his own seat, spreading his legs wide open. His thigh touches mine and I feel like puking. I squish myself against the door.

Amir doesn’t take after his padar. Amir is short and stocky, and his padar is tall and lean. Amir is lazy and eats more than he breathes. Kâkâ Farhad is one of the hardest-working men I’ve ever seen. Back in his prime, he was a well-known wrestler of pahlwâni in Kabul. To this day, his medals and awards are polished and displayed in his home. He was known for his impeccable balance and brute force. At the end of every match, his clothes were torn to pieces. Without question, women who came to see Kâkâ Farhad twist and turn his hips from side to side wished it were their shoulders being pinned to the ground.

But just because Kâkâ Farhad was handed the better frame and height, it didn’t mean that the rest of him was better. His thinning hair is unkempt. He has a creased forehead and a weather-beaten face. His eyes are sunken and hidden under dark circles. Two flaring nostrils are apparent on his crooked nose. His teeth are yellow, chipped and crooked, and his thin lips are buried under his facial hair. And he always stinks of cigarettes.

The sun shines directly into my eyes. Driving to one of just two farms in all of British Columbia that practise the Islamic methods of slaughtering, one can imagine how daunting the essence of collective sweat can be, especially when Kâkâ Farhad refuses to roll down the windows.

The air in the car smells like morning breath and armpits. Amir, in particular, has a peculiar body odour. He smells like qorma sabzi. Not even the pine tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror can fend off the smell.

I'm not the only one irritated by the silence. Kâkâ Farhad gives in and plays rowza. Luckily, I brought my Discman with me so I don't have to listen to a bunch of men who sound like cats in heat.

I slowly drift into sleep and Alif nudges me. "Nice try, I'm not letting you sleep your way outta this."

Finally, Kâkâ Farhad pulls into a parking lot at Mostafa's farm. It's a two-hour drive from our rundown neighbourhood of crooks, stoners and illegals. I step out of the car and catch a whiff of fresh air at last. The sun is still blazing hot. My throat is dry. I lick the roof of my mouth.

Mostafa, dressed like he's about to attend a golf tournament, steps out of his mansion. He greets Kâkâ Farhad but not Padar. "Salâm, biâdar jân. Why don't you come inside and join us for tea? My wife just finished baking naan." Because the other halal farm is located in all-white Fort Nelson, Mostafa knows he can get away with being a dick.

"Thank you, but we're pressed for time today," Kâkâ Farhad says.

“Everything is set up for you. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do,” Mostafa says.

Padar and Kâkâ Farhad go searching for the chunkiest animals to slaughter, while Alif, Amir and I stand still, like three sterile testicles.

Mostafa’s farmland is green and spacious. Lazy cows chew grass all day long. They’re secluded far away from the sheep and goats. I don’t know why Padar chooses to bring me here. Sometimes, I wonder if he mistakes me for a boy.

I spot one sheep from far away. It reminds me of Lamb Chop from *Lamb Chop’s Play-Along*. I’ve never found any animal attractive, but this particular sheep is an exception. It’s white, fluffy and plump. Its pink ears hang perfectly down its face. The teenager side of me wants to pet it. Luckily, Kâkâ Farhad spots a sheep that’s fluffier and plumper. Lamb Chop is off the hook, at least for now.

Holding the animal by its fore- and hind legs, Kâkâ Farhad places it down on its side. “Allâhu Akbar, Allâhu Akbar. Bismillâh Arrahmân arrahim,” he repeats.

Padar pulls out his qibla compass and places it on the ground. “The qibla is that way,” he says, pointing east. Aside from butchering an animal, my family also prays in this direction five times a day.

For a short period, the animal tries to escape. From afar, I can see a tear dribble down its face. Animals aren’t as dumb as they look – at this moment, it becomes clear to them that they’re drawing their last breaths, and they submit themselves.

Padar hands Kâkâ Farhad a bottle of water from Alif’s bag. The



thirsty animal takes its last few sips. Again, it tries to fight and then willingly submits. Padar holds the animal's hooves together as Kâkâ Farhad lifts its head. When he makes the niyyat to slaughter, he utters, "Bismillâh."

With a sharp knife, Kâkâ Farhad slits the throat.

The blood flowing out of the animal is tranquilizing. I imagine every tension in my body releasing itself into that stream of blood. Even though the eyes are still moving and there's slight movement in the feet, I find myself lost in the deep red colour, a fascination I developed thanks to Shabnam. The aura of blood is so overwhelming that I can almost taste it.

Padar is drenched in the animal's blood, too. While it is hung up to drain, Kâkâ Farhad wipes the blood from his forehead. He passes the ragged towel to Padar, who then wipes his scalp, neck and forehead. Watching them pass a wet towel back and forth is more nauseating than watching the animal being cut open.

Padar unfolds a newspaper and places it on the prep table, then Kâkâ Farhad takes the animal by the legs and places it on the paper. There's something strange about butchering an animal that brings them closer. The younger brother does the dirty work, and the older does the bitch work. Whether Padar likes this is another story.

"My hands are bloody," Kâkâ Farhad tells Amir. "Go grab my bag of knives from the car."

Amir runs to the car, panting so loudly that even the animals can hear him. "I can't find it!" he shouts.

"You're just as useless as Mostafa's knives," Kâkâ Farhad shouts back. "Check the glove compartment!"

Overworked from the jog to the car, Amir decides to walk back, slowly, with the knives.

“Run! Astaghferullâh!” Kâkâ Farhad says. When disappointed by their children, white parents say, “Jesus Christ.” Muslim parents, on the other hand, say, “Astaghferullâh.”

Kâkâ Farhad pulls out his knives and places them neatly on the ground, from biggest to smallest. His knives are so sharp, you can lose a finger just by staring at them for too long.

Cutting through the wool is always the toughest task. Regardless of how sharp the knife is the outer coat doesn't peel off easily. After the rib cage is cut open and the internal organs are removed, the animal is chopped and layers of fat are trimmed. Finally, the animal is put into oversized garbage bags before it's transferred to a wheelbarrow and jammed into the trunk of the car. No part of the animal goes to waste in our household.

Slaughtering an animal according to Islamic practice is arduous. “Islam is the only religion that provides detailed responses to every matter pertaining to man's life,” Mâdar would always say. There was no disputing, for even something as banal as slaughtering was thoroughly laid out, step by step, in Ayatollah Sistani's exhaustive text *Towzih ul Massâel*. Get even one step wrong and you'll be left with a harâm carcass.

First, the animal must be alive and fully capable of running away before it's slaughtered. And it's important that the animal is given a drink of water to show respect for both the animal and its Creator. Second, the slaughtering process is to be fast and efficient, so that the animal doesn't endure a long and painful death.

The incision, which occurs only on the throat, must be made with a sharp blade that can easily cut through the carotid artery. But right as the blade sits on the animal's throat, the phrase *Bismillâh* must be said, which is the third step. It's this utterance that separates halal meat from what Mâdar calls "Jewish meat."

Why does a thirteen-year-old know so much about slaughtering an animal? The answer is simple. I was born into an obedient Muslim family, which means that the moment our bodies can digest solid food, we're lectured on what makes an animal harâm and halal, a topic that isn't always black and white. In my diligent and overcautious family, everything has to be purchased from halal meat shops.

"Sunnis take everything so lightly. I've seen a few whisper 'Bismillâh' under their breath before eating the meat that's purchased from sinful grocery stores," Mâdar would always say. Being Shia meant being stricter, which is more favourable to my odd mâdar.

Then, there's one animal that's harâm at all cost. This animal is the pig, which I've always dreamt of eating. The smell of bacon is my nemesis.

"Since we're here, I can use one sheep for my shop," Kâkâ Farhad says.

"Then let's hurry. Like you said, we're pressed for time today," Padar says.

\*