



PACIFICUS

A Literary Magazine



VOLUME 2

ISSUE 21 APRIL-JUNE ISSUE
A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION





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A Literary Magazine (Print & e-Publication)

Volume II, Issue II | A Quarterly Publication

ISSN (Online): 3082-4079 | ISSN (Print): 3082-4060

Publisher: Binas Publishing

Email: binasbookers2013@gmail.com



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THE STUDENT WHO PAINTED SILENCE

The halls of the old Education building at Sulu State University stay pretty quiet. Inside one classroom, a course called Arts Application was happening. That silence felt a bit different there. It was heavy and felt like it meant something. Professor Elena Vargas was used to it. She told her students that art does not always have to be loud or bright. It can live in the gaps where people hesitate. She said silence is its own language.

Karim Abdullah was a student who didn't talk much. He gave very short answers. He did his work in groups but never gave ideas of his own. He tried to take up as little space as he could. Most of the other kids thought he just didn't care about the class. Vargas saw something else though. Karim always turned in his art on time. It wasn't fancy or full of tiny details. It just felt like it had weight. He never talked about what the pieces meant.

One day Vargas gave out a new project. She told them to make something they could not say out loud. They could use any tools they wanted. The room got noisy as people started planning. Karim did not say a word. After class, Vargas went up to him. She asked if he had any questions. He said he knew what to do. She asked if he understood himself. Karim waited a second and said not totally. She told him that was fine because art helps people understand.

Karim didn't start the project for a few days. The other students were already painting and building things. He just sat and looked at a blank canvas. People started whispering that he didn't know what he was doing. Vargas did not get involved. She just watched him. On the fifth day, he showed up early with a box of charcoal and some rough canvas. He sat by the window and started drawing. He didn't stop for hours.

Vargas stayed late while he worked. She asked what he was making. He said it was something he had been carrying for a long time. The next day he gave her the drawing. It was a large piece done in black and white. It showed a classroom full of kids. If you looked close, you could see the details. Some kids were drawn clearly. Others were starting to fade away. In the corner by the window, there was a person you could barely see. The air around him looked like it was pressing in. There were no words on it at all.

On the day they had to show their work, Karim stood at the front. Vargas asked him for the title. He said it was called The Student Who Was Never Heard. The room went very still. One kid asked if the drawing was about him. Karim said it was about more than just himself. No one knew what to say. Vargas told the class

to look at it again. She said silence shouldn't be confused for not being there. She told Karim he showed everyone something they usually ignore.

After class, some students finally went up to him. They didn't judge the work. They just wanted to talk. Some said they didn't realize how left out he felt. Others said they thought his silence meant he had nothing to say. Karim listened to them. He still didn't talk much, but he stood up a bit straighter. He seemed more like he belonged there.

A few weeks later, his drawing was in the campus art show. It had a new title called Voices Without Sound. People spent a long time looking at it. It wasn't because the drawing was complex. It was because it felt real. One teacher said it felt like the room was looking back at itself. Vargas found Karim watching people look at his work. She told him he didn't just draw silence. She said he made it speak. He didn't give a big smile, but he nodded because he finally understood. Silence wasn't invisible anymore. People could finally hear it.

