Sukoon

Arab-Themed Art & Literature

Volume 5 | Issue 2 | Summer 2018

From the outside in,
and from the inside in.

Sukoon is:

an independent, online literary journal. It is Arab-themed and in English. *Sukoon* publishes poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, books reviews, plays, interviews, and occasional translations by writers and artists from the Arab region, and/or by writers and artists who are not of Arab descent, but have an Arab story or art piece they would like to share.

Through literature and art, *Sukoon* aims to refelect the diversity and richness of the Arab world, where Arabic is spoken - a semitic language with over 30 different varieties of colloquial Arabic.

Sukoon is an Arabic word meaning "stillness." What we mean is the stillness discovered within when the artist is in the midst of the creative storm.

Sukoon is also a phonetic symbol used in the Arabic script. ه

Cover artwork by Dima Nashawi

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Sukoon would like to thank Dubai-based calligrapher and artist, **Majid Alyousef**, for Sukoon's unique logo design.
www.majidalyousef.com

Editor's note:

The cover art for this new edition is by Dima Nashawi and the piece is entitled "It's a Sad World." People hugging the small, round earth and crying over its loss, its devastation.

I found this to be the most fitting cover page for these awful times. The most fitting summary of our current experiences, wherever we may be. Where are we going? What further damage can we inflict upon ourselves? How do we never learn? How do we just keep taking, taking, taking. Stripping the world of all its natural wealth, resources, possibilities. We never seem to stop. These wars, this greed, this occupation, this humiliation.

Every year we move towards a sadder, more complicated world. A more consumerist, gluttonous world. A divided world. A toxic, tribal world.

How much longer can the earth stand us?

But every day we create art. We speak up against this. We try. It's the only way to try and make sense of the madness.

In this tenth edition we have stories about home and homelessness, about family and food and the growing revolution in our bellies. Poems about language or leaving. About anscetry and the first death we've ever experienced. Poems about war and poems about other poets.

We will always have stories and art, and we will always have poetry.

And we will always, always, always, have Palestine.

#palestineisthecapitalofjerusalem

REWA ZEINATI

CITYSCAPE
BY NARA

ADAB

The rug matches the vase.
The women fit in like trees in a forest.
'Check your socks match.'

Invasive floral perfume, pendulating
earrings mock the minutes you must stay.
'Say: Alhamdulilah you are fine.'

Your chai-pouring skills
are observed with mock indifference.
'Always take a biscuit.'

Over the rim of their cups, they appraise
the servility in your teeth,
and the forgiveness in your hips.

HANAN ISSA

LUGHA[1]

An assured composition,
the confident guttural 'gh',
haloed,
the nur[2] of Allah's language

eviscerates fruitless scratchings,
plaiting words of Welsh or French,
inept,
tangents lost in shamed prayer.

A wounded bird,
its upward basking curtailed,
flailing,
I implore with my patchwork tongue.

HANAN ISSA

QAWWAM

My consent is a silence ignored
beneath layers of laws piled like dirty laundry.

"Please, sister, stand on this pedestal just below me."
"But, brother, jannah is at my mother's feet not yours."

You always held the hijab too tight,
as a noose leashing me to your stories that begin with:
In the Name of Allah.

Clipping my wings so my gaze lowers from the stars,
favouring those who repeat after you - 'In the Name of Allah, I love to look at the ground.'

But you forget Allah says my body can house two hearts
and my love is much fiercer.

HANAN ISSA

[1]Arabic word meaning 'language'
[2]Arabic word meaning 'light'

ENCOMIUM FOR MIROSLAV HOLUB

At last you prove there is a secret society
of railroad worker poets, switchyard geniuses
sweating grit under bibs of grease, soot

laureates at dusk. They stand at attention
along sidings from Ustí nad Laben to Decin,
facing endless fields of mustard and hops.

On our way to Dresden, they float down
the Elbe past hems of poplars. Stout as a buoy,
one pushes himself offshore, blind

to demons, current mayhem, and appears
at Holešovice in boots alive with minnows,
a rhododendron caught in his lapel.

Another recites poems to seer mice, travels
to the sage fields of the Eighth Millennium
and returns on a seat of cabbage leaves.

STEPHEN ERIC BERRY

LEANING IN
BY HANANAH ZAHEER

THE FERRY

By M.R. Azar

Karim sat in a dark corner at the edge of the port, his legs dangling rhythmically over the silent water. His time on the Island was coming to an end and soon the ferry would carry him back to the mainland.

"I've never seen the sea so calm," he thought.

He tried again to remember why he had come to this place but became distracted by his muddy boots. They cast shadows that floated like ghosts over the rippling tide. He leaned forward and saw a strange face staring back at him through the mist that slept on the water's surface. It beckoned to him and his heart burst as though he was falling for a moment. The sea now seemed to hold for him a different meaning than it once did. The clear azure world that had once inspired wonder and a thirst for life had given way to a world of shadows and death.

The Island has been a refuge for wealthy mainlanders for centuries. It is a place for them to sink their feet into the warm sand and feel the cool breeze sway against their skin. A place to gaze at the boundless blue sea and colossal mountains that jut out from the earth, shimmering with lights from the ancient villages. A place to stare in wonder at the moon, suspended against the blackest night sky as it projects a rippling silvery bridge that is swallowed back into the sea before dawn.

The mainlanders still came but others had begun to follow–always after dark. The mainlanders did not know, nor care to know, where the newcomers came from. Some said they materialized from nothingness. Others rumored that they crossed an unseen bridge over the horizon when the moon was at its brightest. Few observed that the exodus started when the storms became more devastating and more frequent, when the droughts and wildfires consumed vast swaths of land, when the seas became sewers, and when the armed men arrived. Either way, misery brought them here and misery consumed them.

The daily ferry was the Island's lifeline to the outside world and the only means of transportation for passengers, vehicles, and supplies. It was also where the affluent mainlanders, destitute newcomers, and hordes of humanitarian volunteers, Karim among them, converged.

Near the ledge where Karim was sitting, colossal spotlights illuminated the night and guided the horde of exiles over the short bridge into the ship's bow. The ground rumbled beneath him. This was a dismal place. Hundreds of distinct brown faces melted into one another, forming a single faceless mass that trudged forth somberly but deliberately like a funeral procession. A shared yearning bound them: that this journey, which had started and would end differently for each of them, would finally just come to an end.

The horn blared, signaling the ferry's imminent departure. Karim grabbed his duffle bag and made for the ferry. The line was flowing with urgency as the passengers hurried to board before the ferry vanished into the dark horizon, taking the promise of a worthwhile life with it.

"Where do I get my room key from?" Karim asked the ticket collector.

The man replied with a heavy accent: "Follow the signs to the concierge and they will give you your room number and keys. It's in the compartment after where they are kept."

Karim noted the strange description and proceeded to follow the man's instructions. He walked through the cargo hold, gawking at its unfinished facade, chipping walls, and steaming pipes. He marched up a long flight of stairs that led to the first passenger compartment. He entered the chamber and his eyes were struck by the orange-brown hues that erupted from the outdated wallpaper and carpeting. This chamber was completely barren and dilapidated.

Through the flickering lights, he made out the crude camps that lined the corridor. Each colony staked its territory using piles of tattered bags, ripped suitcases, and other artifacts of a grim life.

This must be where *they* are kept, he thought.

As he weaved a twisted path around the pitiful travelers, a shudder came upon him like a sudden, cold rain. Guilt. It had become a frequent companion, and when it visited, Karim embraced it like an old friend. He revered it and found in the pain it brought a sort of retribution that might balance the universe and bring some justice to a wholly unjust world. Guilt, he thought, was penance for the comfort of his warm bed while his brothers and sisters rotted in dirty hallways and cold stairwells.

Why did he come to the Island? What good had come of it? These people were coming long before he arrived and would continue coming long after he departed. Their struggle was indifferent to his existence.

He would soon be back in suburban Virginia, back to his upper middle-class life, back to staring at a blank laptop screen between sterile white walls that closed in a little more each day, back to his tall red-brick rowhouse on a quiet street lined with white cherry-blossoms and red maple trees, back to his elegant girlfriend, Amal, whose soft shapely legs he constantly fantasized about. Soon, the memory of his time here would fade and be forgotten like a childhood memory.

From this self-reflection sprang a terrible self-loathing. In himself, he began to see the privileged volunteers that he despised because, unlike him, they did not come from across the horizon and, to them, the newcomers were no more than stray dogs to be saved. They descended on the Island with extravagant clothing, raging parties, and penetrating vanity. By the end, it was their own souls that needed saving. Ah! This was a wickedness born unto him, an original sin, one that he could not wash off or repent for. Only a holy savior could offer salvation, but he was not a religious man and so no atonement was to be had for him.

Karim finally reached the end of the hall where two large double doors led into the passenger compartment that was off limits to *them*. He took a step inside and it was as though he had stumbled through one of those Magical Doors. A burst of light exploded before his eyes and the walls bellowed with a Hellenic blue-white. A large central staircase with a marble face and railing carved with floral festoons led up to the bedrooms. Cafes bustled with fat patrons dressed in summer linens and harsh clinking glass. He had reached the mainlander compartment.

A young woman in an elegant costume and deliberate pose greeted him. "Some Champagne, sir?" she said, drawing out the pronunciation of Champagne longer than it needed to be.

He did not want Champagne. He wanted escape from this awful spectacle. He scarcely could react before feeling a noose tighten around his throat and a boulder crush his chest. He whispered through his teeth, "No, thanks," and hurried up the stairs to his room.

The keys fumbled in Karim's trembling hands before he unlocked the door and entered. The room had a low ceiling and a king bed next to an antique oak desk with some writing material. The bathroom sat in the rear. He threw his bag on the floor and sank like lead into the bed to calm his nerves. He woke up to the siren sound of the ferry launching from the port.

"Why did I come here?" he thought again.

Karim always had trouble controlling his thoughts and feared into which murky alleys an unfettered mind might lead him. His mind was on a long chain that night, and it battered against the silence that consumed the room. He could endure no more. He leaped up and reached for the writing material to jot down his thoughts, hoping to banish the ghosts that had followed him from the Island with a pencil.

Keeping a journal made him feel better. He could project onto its pages those feelings which he could not share with Amal. She knew him to be a warm and affectionate person. She had explored his soul like a garden and often found herself lost in it.

But obscured behind the winding grape vines that sheltered her skin from the sun, behind the blossoming gardenias whose fragrance showered her body, behind the gentle chirping of the birdlings that made her heart radiate, raged a storm that Karim hardly could quell. His soul was wounded, and the wound was festering, gnawing at his insides, and rotting his soul. The walls that a lifetime of detachment had erected inside of him seemed to be crumbling. But the writing made him feel better.

After scribbling several pages, Karim stumbled upon a revelation and, with it, a renewed vigor. The dim room brightened to his eyes and the low ceiling lifted.

"Yes, that's what I'll do!" he said to himself and plunged like a deer through the arches back down into the dilapidated chamber where they were. He would find his atonement by joining his kin and suffering with them.

Karim made his way onto the deck where the moon hung high behind the clouds and the winds rattled. He thought the fresh air might reinvigorate him and indeed it was to him like jumping into the cool ocean on a hot day. He encountered two young brothers, Ali and Moussa, who were kicking a deflated soccer ball back and forth in clothes that had seen better days and shoes that showed their toes. A stray kick sent the ball rolling towards Karim and he performed tricks by spinning the ball on his finger like his basketball coach had taught him. This pleased the brothers very much and they ran to him, trying to imitate his moves, and he taught them how to do it.

Moussa, the older of the two, mastered it on the second try, but Ali struggled with his tiny fingers. The older brother was very patient with Ali and gently guided his finger beneath the ball to teach him. Moussa always looked after Ali. His dad made him promise and Moussa took the responsibility very seriously. They laughed together, and, for a moment, the kids forgot where they were and where they had come from.

But they could not escape their past for long and started with the story of how they arrived on the ferry. They were unaccompanied minors who had made their way from their village under the care of a human smuggler. Their month-long journey saw them riding an overflowing Volkswagen bus, northbound towards freedom. They were ransomed, robbed, and threatened, but gravest of all, fought off the sex traffickers that prowled behind every corner. Moussa protected his younger brother along the way like the bravest knight.

Ali described the cramped bus with its frame rattling uncontrollably as it raced through the tranquil desert. The passenger compartment nearly came apart from the chassis over every hill that it was not designed to pass at these speeds. Only the occasional glow of cell phone screens and cigarette cherries illuminated the endless blackness. The driver did not need any lights–he made a living crossing this desert.

The passengers sat consumed in silence, scarcely holding on to their sanity as they agonized over what might be lurking in the darkness. Ali and Moussa, and everyone else on the bus, had seen the videos. They knew what atrocities awaited those who were caught. Then, blinding lights pierced the darkness through the rear window, interrupting the uneasy quiet. It was a patrol car according to the driver who recognized the headlights. Their luck was boundless tonight, the armed men only asked them to turn back.

The caravan attempted the crossing again the very next night. And there it was at long last, a welcome sign and the final stretch before freedom from the treacherous place they came from. They had finally made it.

Ali turned to Karim in whose familiar face he saw his father's eyes. He asked him through tears that washed the dirt off his face: "Did you come from the bad place too?"

"No, uhm, I'm just a helper", his voice crackled. These words brought with them a surge of self-contempt that made Karim's stomach turn. The cold wind was no longer pleasant to his skin and the children's voices turned to screeching chalk. He wished them luck on their journey, hurried back inside, and never saw them again.

Inside, he came upon a young man sitting on the floor carefully polishing a pair of Nike basketball shoes as though they were a new BMW. Karim kneeled next to him, complimented his "kicks", and asked him if he played basketball.

"Yes, I am captain of my team back home", the young man replied with a quiver in his voice. "I hope I play again soon."

"I play basketball too. Maybe we can play together when we get to the mainland."

The man with the Nikes explained that he could not play on the mainland because he had no clothes to wear. He told Karim about a cold night a few days prior when the angry winds struck relentlessly against the boat that carried him to the Island. The boat looked sturdy, but only looked so. It swayed from side to side as the terrible waves crashed against the frame, drenching the passengers and filling the hull with water. They seemed to stand still against the wind despite the full throttle of the engine. They were carrying too much weight but what ballast was there except for their bodies and the few valuables they carried?

After eight hours into what was meant to be a four-hour journey, they were still too far away from land. The engine had stalled several times, stranding them in the middle of this watery graveyard. They were cold and wet in an overloaded coffin and the sounds of children crying and women wailing were muted only by the howling wind.
They made it to within 100 meters of the shore before the boat ran out of gas and the engine shut down for the last time. The boat had been accumulating icy water for eight hours. Without the thrust of an engine, they could only pray for the waves and the wind to propel them towards the rocky shore. Though they were so close now, the dangers persisted. How many others had the cruel black sea swallowed under the same circumstances?

They had no choice but to toss all their bags and suitcases overboard. Everything. Most of them carried only their most precious belongings. Everything else had been lost or stolen somewhere along their long arduous journeys. Those who had packed their cash, passports, or jewelry in their bags were out of luck. Everything was to be tossed overboard immediately–their time was running out.

The barefooted man refused to toss the one small bag that he carried. He couldn't. Fellow passengers lost patience and snatched his bag to lob it over. He managed to grab one thing before it sunk into the abyss–his Nikes, the same Nikes that he now clutched against his chest as he retold this chilling tale. This was the last remaining artifact of his old life and Karim started to understand the care he gave to it.

After finishing the story, the man turned to Karim and embraced him. To this person, an impossible journey had finally come to an end and he wanted to share his relief and his joy with a friend who had endured the same. The familiarity of Karim's look, his voice, and his language would do at this moment. He found comfort in their shared struggle and in the raw human connection that it created. Then he pulled away and asked Karim: "Did most of your things survive your journey?"

The words wouldn't escape Karim's mouth. A terrible shame again bubbled up from his heart and he knew he would no longer find peace in this world.

He hurried onto a secluded corner of the deck away from the accusatory eyes that he imagined were pursuing him everywhere on this ferry. He saw in each of those eyes the reflection of the devil that haunted his every thought, mocking him for the injustices that he could not make right.

He found himself in a state of singular loneliness as though, to his eyes only, all the colors had dissolved from the world. Despite the howling winds and the roaring engines, he could only hear the metallic whisper of his conscience.

The final chain of his sanity crumbled and the ghosts led his mind into that darkest alley from where he knew there was no escape. He looked down into the water and saw that face once again beckoning to him. This time, Karim's fingers gently released their grip of the railing and he plunged into the cold bitter darkness below. Here, Karim could suffer alongside his brothers and sisters forever and his guilt washed away into the sea.

PAST AND PRESENT
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

VIEW FROM MY WINDOW
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

BRAVE
BY DIMA NASHAWI

HOW TO MISS A PLACE YOU'VE NEVER BEEN (DIASPORA BLUES)

1. talk to your father. listen to the anger beneath his words.

   listen to him miss a place he's never been.
   learn: this is what it sounds like.

2. read about the bodies in the place you've never been.

   read their joy and the way
   they try to walk like free people
   through borders between the streets,
   walls through the aching chambers of their hearts.
   feel the borders in your streets. feel the walls inside your heart.

3. eat a piece of baklava. taste every flake of honey,

   feel every nut between your teeth,
   fitting in the cracks,
   surviving between mountains of bone.
   taste the layers.
   this is what it tastes like to be in the place you've never been.

4. name it.

   keep naming it,
   and as you keep naming it make it more specific.
   shrink it.
   pinpoint.
   name it: palestine.
   name it: hebron in colonized, al khalil in truth.
   name it: that building on that street.
   name it: home.

5. learn the language of the place you've never been.

   taste the words on your tongue.
   do they taste like honey?
   do they taste like baklava?
   are they stuck between your teeth?
   do they taste like anger?
   do they taste like home?
   min wen inta?
   inta min palestine?
   min wen inta:
   where
   are you from?

6. don't try.

   you don't
   have to.
   you will feel it.
   you will have felt it your whole life
   that something is missing,
   that that something is you,
   that you are renting,
   that you will never be able to buy.
   that the ache in your chest has a name-
   name it.
   name it palestine.
   name it al khalil.
   name it that building on that street,
   name it that smile on that face,
   name it that word from that tongue,
   name it that dirt on your tongue,
   name it that feeling in that heart,
   name it your heart.
   name it your place.
   name it home.

FARGO TBAKHI

PALESTINIAN MORNING AFTER

in desert sunlight even brown boys feel divine. even, yes,
with olive pits between our teeth.
yes, even as my fingers believe they must be roots.

geography makes historians of our feet; in the morning,
i will remove the blanket from my legs and slip
quietly away. as i do. as we do.

where does my body go when im asleep? perhaps it flies
across the world, can linger anywhere it likes: perhaps the air
contains no checkpoints. perhaps the air contains no roadblocks.

even, yes, my grandfather's home. yes, even
the absence we call motherland. even every village and every
uncultivated grove. even the negative space we call country.

the soles of my feet make poor historians.
they cannot seem to learn
the proper names to call the ground they kiss.

even, yes, as skies are orange. even as sunlight
leaches away like
melting ice. yes even as it dwindles.

this impossible unity, delicate
as varicose veins, delicate as a peace accord. it is your breath,
sweet, filling my ear. it is

a miracle,
this belonging i find in my secret morning.
slipping quietly away, stepping outside to the clouds parting

this sudden feeling of sunlight on my skin,
this feeling of being
divine.

FARGO TBAKHI

DISTANT BURN
BY HANANAH ZAHEER

POETS TENDING TO THE ACHES OF EMPIRES

When you are broken-boned, heaped upon
the deadly alloys of power, retching
on the saffron and citruses of our own
planting, remember how good we were with
salvaging beauty, blunting edges with imagination's
cotton kiss, remember the night-boats to villages
of authors of the past when you didn't leave your bed,
locking tealeaves in summer lotuses that open
with the brave clove of the moon in your cup

Naming the hungers in Hangzhou

Twice-seasoned soup at dawn, along with shreds
of hot puff-pastry and steamed rice before
beginning the business of the day with
a naked quill and an innocent scroll— the
Hangzhou Tea Merchant puts the moonrise to
shame in his lifting of delicate burdens,
distilling an epoch's hunger in his poem.
Though empire prospers, and even commoners
may eat more than thirty kinds of vegetables and
seventeen types of beans, there are aches borne of hungers.

The poet, an apothecary in Nishapur

pounds the finest husks, seeds, barks and roots. Soon,
the Mongol conflagration of forest and field,
library, mosque and hospital will feed
an ashen history. He wraps salves in torn
pages of poetry. The mauve blooms and leaves flicker
their last as the wind brings carrion-burning stench—
Gathering saffron to make tea for ailments of the heart,
Attar is lifted by birdsong: *in remembrance*
of God, hearts find serenity, the ringdove
repeats. Wings folded, she tends to the poet's ache.

Rumi reads *The Conference of the Birds*

and pens: "Attar has traversed the seven cities
of Love. We are still at the turn of one
street." An exile from Balkh to Anatolia,
the Mongol invasion forces him West—
On the way: corpses eaten by stork, kites,
porcupines. What was the text of the sweet
basil of Samarkand? What did the hoopoe
behold after a lifetime of flying
through the *valleys of quest*? The birds of the book
travel East, Rumi finds the ancient beloved everywhere.

Tomb of Al Ghazali

The rebecs, musk roses, onyx towers,
diamond-encrusted ewers are gone, as are
the artisans, the ink-and quill-crafters, translators,
navigators, perfumers, tyrants, ascetics,
and the teahouses and mosques and madrassas
where the Sufi taught how to find the Divine
without seeking ownership of piety. In the decay,
melon vines and jasmines sweeten
with the sage, gardenias run wild. In the
sunken ruins, mynahs, the irreverent pilgrims, chirrup.

SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI

SAFIA'S SEA – COVER
BY DIMA NASHAWI

SAFIA'S SEA – CRYING
BY DIMA NASHAWI

FOR FEAR THAT MY PARENTS WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND MY POETRY

I no longer write poems about self-love because I figured it out.
Now, I write poems to tell my loved ones that I see beauty as far as the edge of their silhouettes.
That when trains are delayed I feed on their war stories and bathe in their jokes.
This is to say they have built me a fortress with legs and a thumping heart and hair that
stands on end when morning bows before the hours.

I have known the imposters, took the time to kiss their cheeks and taste their words.
Their pithy left my tongue sour. They wear secondhand capes of culture, bought off those
that could no longer afford to keep it and dance to songs they did not write.

Culture is not a subscription.
Culture cannot be whittled down to knowledge reaped from a book.

Culture is cutting fruit in the palm of your hand
and sipping rosewater to ease the stomach.

Culture is sleeping four to a bedroom because nobody gets left behind.
Culture is generators visible like lighthouses
and filling the soap bottle with water when it is running low
and cutting the toothpaste tube in half.

Culture is not a lover to be fetishized and worshiped
rather a stubborn child screaming over all that you do
but when the day is over you hold them close, reminded
that the earth is always moving and holding onto something
is mercy and reckoning boiled holy warm.

My mother reads me poems in Arabic and I watch her hands painting skies
and swatting gnats. Her eyes look up to see if I am understanding. I do not
understand the words, but the crack in her voice I understand. Her drawn out
syllables and gaping mouth, I understand because my mother colored
my childhood with poetry every time she prayed the rosary by candlelight
and every time she made me wait in the laundromat for hours, so long
that I memorized all of the vending machine options and their corresponding
numbers (Fritos A4). My mother wrote me a poem every time she locked
the door and drove slow and fried fish on Friday.

My family is meter and measure and would hate this poem
because, "aren't poems supposed to rhyme?" but still I send my brother
every basketball ballad I find, because are we not spun from the same hands,
calloused and marshmallow?

(There is nothing tepid about upbringing)

Maybe one day they will lose the tops of their heads
to something radical and begging, like I am lost in their story,
forever attempting to write their fingerprints into cities
sprawling and forgiving.

PHILIPE ABIYOUNESS

BY NARA

THE HOUSE BETWEEN TWO RIVERS

By Christina Yoseph

Recently, my girlfriend and I met up with our two closest friends from law school to catch up over drinks and pizza. She and I left school after completing our first year, so when the four of us get together, our conversations usually abide by a similar format: how is school going for them, how is life going for us, and what drama have each of us missed out on between hangouts?

Because we're all nonwhite and of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, related topics likewise arise. On this particular Friday night, our friend Doug, who is given to discussing the ways in which his socioeconomic background has shaped the person he is today, went into greater detail on the subject. In describing the false comradery his peers sometimes attempt to forge with him simply by virtue of their shared Asian-ness, Doug said, "They're rich but because their parents were working class back in the day, they think they know what it's like—well, I'm still living it."

When we all get together, we talk about white folks and their ignorance. Doing so seems natural because we're all children of diaspora. Doug's parents are from Vietnam. Our other friend Chase's parents are from the Philippines. My girlfriend and I are each mixed-white: her mother is from the Philippines; my father is from Iraq. We bond over our brownness. We are alike, yes. But we are also not, and in more ways than I had taken care to analyze up until that point—because we had all gone to the same school, because we all dressed the same, and, in many ways, because we all looked similar on the outside.

Aside from the fact that almost no American-born person perceives me as Asian, Doug's comment applied perfectly to me. I had heard, read, and engaged in countless dialogues with friends of color about colorism, but this was different. Yes, skin color was very much a factor in Doug's economic background.

But there were so many other factors influencing his family's status, their inability to move up in the ranks of a society that classifies Asian folks, in one fell swoop and in all their cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, the "model minority." His parents emigrated from Southeast Asia. His mother struggles with mental illness that she never received help with, and his father is a veteran dealing with the fallout of his service in the Vietnam War.

Whether he intended it to or not, Doug's comment acted as a mirror for me. In recent years, I have begun to consider—and needlessly dissect—the economic struggles of my parents and my grandparents. I have gone so far as to mistakenly attribute, if only partially, my inability to fit in with some of my former friends, who'd descended from several generations of well-to-do white folks, to these struggles.

Moreover, this dissection has confusingly coincided with my inability to suppress painful yet critical realities that have informed my identity: my American-facing upbringing has been more white-coded than it has anything else. For example, although my parents guarded me ferociously against school bullies, they were each conspicuously hands-off when it came to the taunting I was subjected to by my white classmates post-9/11.

My father's side of the family, in many ways, fits the ideal immigrant narrative nearly to a T: Christian, hardworking, and constantly vocalizing their gratitude for the country that gave them a chance at a better life. While they do not favor Republican politicians who push Islamophobic agendas (a phenomenon far more common in the Assyrian American community than I was once comfortable admitting), their relationship to politics in the United States is complicated. In Iraq, they were a religious minority, and although they live in America, they still feel connected to their community back home, and to their complex relationship with a religious majority the U.S. has branded the enemy.

In short, my family's desire to seamlessly blend into the fabric of America has rendered them apolitical in certain ways—particularly because it has required that they differentiate themselves from a religion whose adherents we in the U.S. consider inherently dangerous.

I believe it is this unique condition upon which my family's assimilation has been predicated that has prevented us from engaging in meaningful discussions about our individual experiences with xenophobia, though I am certain I am not the only one who has experienced it—especially considering my brother and I are the only ones on our dad's side who are "mixed." In fact, en route Greece in 2006, my parents, brother, and I were subjected to a lengthy TSA inspection. When I brought this up with my mother a few weeks ago, she couldn't quite remember the incident.

My mother was raised by a family to whom adopting and abiding by American customs was imperative. Her father is a racist, and although she works harder than anyone I know to challenge the toxic beliefs she was taught, my grandfather was an abusive and controlling man, and many of his prejudices made their way into her ideas about the world.

I was, at first, offended by what I had initially interpreted as her refusal to acknowledge a memory which was so vivid and shitty to me for the nonsensical way in which it crystallized my state of otherness: the agents had searched my belongings in an effort to determine whether I was carrying anything dangerous aboard—to determine whether I, at age fifteen, travelling with my white mother, was dangerous.

But then, I realized that this experience for my mother hadn't been sandwiched by other disorienting moments of xenophobia. This moment wasn't even about her. And because my mother and I have always been so close, it was easy for both of us to ignore the ways in which xenophobia affected me, because I was of her. She could pretend that ugly things like white American suspicion of American-born, part-nonwhite folks like myself didn't apply to me, because I came from her, and she and I were cut from the same cloth, and being viewed with contempt or suspicion simply for being had never been her experience, so how could it ever have been, or ever possibly be, mine?

Being so close with my mother while simultaneously nurturing this unspoken part of my lived experience because it is uncomfortable, because it is what separates us, has created a painful disconnect in our relationship. I think it has been more comfortable for my mother because it does not disrupt the course of the conservative American way of living she was raised to believe is proper.

However, she and I have been talking about these experiences, about our differences, and about the lack of understanding that has permeated not only our relationship, but her upbringing, and she is exceptional in her willingness to open her mind and to embark on a mountainous journey of learning and unlearning, all on her own, despite the chorus of naysayers by whom she is surrounded.

Last year, when I told her about how my Trump-supporting coworker said she "understood" that Americans don't want people from my dad's country coming to the United States because "they're the ones doing most of the bombings," my mother suggested I complain to HR and management or quit after seeing how unhappy I was with the hostile work environment.

My father's reaction, on the other hand, was silence. Certainly a thoughtful one, but silence nonetheless. While I had raged about my coworker's comment—and about other such comments made throughout the office in the aftermath of the election—my father's reaction to my experience was subdued and made me feel a bit like I was howling my frustrations into a void. However, the sensation was not new to me, because I had long been aware of the vast differences between our experiences with otherness.

Internally, my family has abided by its culturally conservative traditions, inherent to which, on both sides, are religion; my father's side of the family is Assyrian, and my mother's, Greek Orthodox Christian. Though I am in my late twenties, bringing a male partner as a guest to a family function on my father's side is still out of the question (marriage would need to seriously be on the table).

My being in a queer relationship, then, is, to put it mildly, out of the question on both sides. Although the United States lags far behind dozens of countries when it comes to the acceptance of queerness, both of my parents' ethno-religious backgrounds are still significantly less forgiving.

For a time, I opted to dis-identify with my Assyrian heritage. This is due to the fact that—to put it lightly—I don't get along with my dad. My issues with my father are deeply personal and I will not explain them here. My unhealthy relationship with my father has long served as a source of insecurity for me when it comes to my Assyrian heritage: because he is cut from the same cloth as his family, and from their community of friends, I am not close with them either.

The nonexistence of my relationship with my father and his family has often made me feel stateless. This feeling has been compounded by the fact that there is often pressure on the children of diaspora to offer family members unconditional acceptance, love, and understanding under the basic premise that "sticking together" is crucial to our survival.

What gets left out of this equation, however, are important relational nuances, such as abuse, and the ways in which it is coded (for example, along the lines of gender and sexuality). And while some might choose to forgive family members who impose abuses of that nature upon them, I am absolutely against the concept of pressuring others to do the same for the sake of preserving one's heritage. In short, I do not believe that one has to compromise their own psychic survival in order to maintain their cultural and ethnic ties. That being said, while I am not by any means close with my Assyrian family, I have valued learning about our history.

Before my grandparents brought my father and his siblings to the U.S., they were wealthy. When they did arrive here, the adjustment, which involved a lengthy financial struggle, a severe climate change (from Baghdad to San Francisco), and a loss of community, led to my grandmother's developing mental health issues that to this day have, unfortunately, gone untreated. Eventually, however, they recovered financially and became economically stable, with my grandfather making a living for their family as a wine and spirits salesperson.

I cannot say with certainty whether anything else factors into my father's family's ability to achieve the "American dream" as much as the tax bracket they belonged to in Iraq. In revisiting my misplaced belief that my parents' meager beginnings—of which I was only a part until I reached puberty—were critical to my experience as a nonwhite person, I am reminded of a bit of wisdom bell hooks insisted upon when my partner and I went with some friends to see her speak at my alma mater: the institutionalized violence done to people of color is predicated upon, above all else, capitalism.

At first, I had trouble wrapping my mind around this concept; admittedly, I was skeptical, as questions about racial profiling by the cops and Homeland Security percolated through my head. It took learning about the foundations of our country and understanding that they have not been eradicated, but rather, that they have merely mutated to disguise themselves as examples of "progress" for me to grasp the what hooks was saying.

The successful employment of money-making schemes—like our country's private prison system and unilateral wars that begin and end with our invasion of countries in the Global South—requires know-how on the parts of our country's wealthiest members (such as the heads of arms dealing companies, for example) when it comes to choosing scapegoats. Members of our country's white majority who do not stand to profit off of these systems are nonetheless determined to see that genocide is done to these scapegoats, either through incarceration, deportation, or murder. They subscribe to the patriotic rallying cry, *Keep our country safe!* (read: white).

The point is, my failure to understand the reality of hooks' claim—instead willfully conflating my brownness with that of my friends', whatever our economic backgrounds—equated to my trying to force a square peg into a round hole. When my brown friends made comments about my seeming white, my liking white things, or my not being a *real* brown person, I felt an infuriating mixture of confusion and anger which only ever distilled down to resentment, because I couldn't understand where *their* resentment was coming from. They all knew that I was white, yes, but they also knew that I was Assyrian.

More than half of them had initially asked, *Syrian*? before I'd explained that no, this was different. I thought, *You don't even know what I am and you're telling me what I'm not*? Many of them didn't speak a lick of their own native tongues—and true, I barely speak my own, but I fought my insecurity over my lack of fluency with regularity, reminding myself that it was the result of my parents not sharing a common language, that I was shy growing up, and that learning a language as an adult is hard enough as it is, let alone one that is practically dead. It drove me even crazier when folks who were similarly light-skinned or ambiguous—or even white-passing!—made these sorts of comments. *What the fuck*? I would think. *You and I are not different*. But in reality, we were. We are.

Before my family and I moved to our Pleasantville-like neighborhood, we were living in a smaller, lower-income town. Nonetheless, my brother and I wanted for nothing, and as far as I knew, my childhood was the stuff dreams were made of. All the adults on our street were friends; so were the children. We had block parties regularly, and there was a true sense of community. I was a child living in an idyllic, multicultural neighborhood. And because of this, the differences in skin color between my childhood friends and I didn't matter.

But once I changed schools, they did. Because I was new, and because I was a question mark—not only not white but unfamiliar for my not-whiteness—my new brown classmates and I didn't seem to have much in common. I was, however, excited to find out that we liked a lot of the same music. Like me, they had grown up watching shows like 106 & Park. Every once in a while, one of us would get excited because the other was singing a song that the other liked. Otherwise, we really just didn't have much in common.

Admittedly, most of the music I've become meaningfully attached to throughout my life has been introduced to me by someone that was important to me at some point. While I do hold dear some of the songs and artists people from my past have shared with me— because I see music as a reflection of one's personal growth, which necessarily includes their community—my music tastes have evolved significantly. For example, because I grew up listening to hip hop and R&B exclusively with my closest childhood friend, the combination of (mostly) losing touch with her over time and having no friends who listened to such music resulted in my listening to it far less as I aged.

I eventually made a friend in junior high whose music interests skewed "alternative," and it was through her that I was inducted into the overwhelmingly white punk rock community. At the time, I was barely a teenager, and I didn't perceive the music I listened to through the lens of skin color. I liked my new friend, and she was the only one I had, and I liked the music she liked. It was new to me. And no one I was hanging out with in Pleasantville liked the music that I grew up listening to. Looking back, this switcheroo in my taste in music made sense—though some of the albums I grew up listening to remained fixtures on my playlist.

My tastes simply changed as a result of my environment. I was suddenly surrounded by mostly white kids whose parents had evidently filled their heads with shitty ideas about folks who didn't look precisely like them. The music I listened to and the cable television shows I watched as a teenager, for example, are the results of my upper-middle class upbringing which, despite by no means being reserved for white folks, I see now are white-coded. But being a member of a minority that was foreign even to the other brown children rendered me even stranger to the white children.

However, I wasn't properly assimilated into my own family, on either side, either. I was truly an island. But I didn't want to be. Enter my "white girl music," introduced to me by my white friends. Nonetheless, I felt it spoke only to me, to my complex brown girl feelings, and to my experience of feeling isolated in my brownness while coming of age in a white world. TV was my best friend, providing me with all the refuge I needed as I learned to make sense of my family's abrupt and drastic ascendance into the upper-middle class.

Even when some of my brown friends from my hometown and I reunited in high school, they were no longer interested in my friendship: I had officially and sufficiently whitened up. Even though I was perfectly happy with my new friends, it stung, and I couldn't understand what had changed in two short years; although we had ceased to correspond via phone and email nearly as regularly as time went one, we had once been so close. I'd expected them to be as excited to see me as I was to see them. Throughout high school, I witnessed them maintain their friendships with each

other and expand their peer group, never making an effort to include me. The sting became a dull ache that was increasingly anchored in a nagging curiosity: What happened? But eventually, it all made sense.

My being called a white girl is in part a reference to my having light-skin, my being white-passing, and my being mixed-white. But it is also largely, I believe, a reference to the socioeconomic class from which my family and I hail, and the ways in which I carry myself.

I am not, never have been, and will likely never have to be familiar with so many of the institutional barriers that have been erected before some people of color at every turn when it comes to attempting advancement in our capitalistic society. The discrimination I have faced in relation to my nonwhiteness has not come in the shape of institutional and therefore capitalistic barriers, but rather, for the most part, in the form of completely manageable micro-aggressions.

I erred in living first, by believing that these micro-aggressions put me on the same plane of experience as my light-skinned peers simply by virtue of the fact that our skin tones were similar, and second, by becoming resentful when I felt judged by them because I felt entitled to spaces that were theirs despite my undeniable class privilege.

I am well-aware that racism and xenophobia do not come with one-size-fits-all approaches: dominant classes have come up with coded language and systems, for example, that apply to specific cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. In other words, I am not saying that the xenophobia I experience—whose undercurrent is that Middle Eastern and North African folks, particularly if they are Muslim, are dangerous simply by virtue of their national origins—is the same as that an East Asian person might experience.

In this way, of course, it is possible that not all of the folks who have deemed me white could have understood my experience of being othered, just as I could not have understood theirs. However, I did not want to share my experience with them, because, again, I felt as though they were judging me, positioning me as a member of the dominant class.

My partner told me about a song called "Don't Call Me White," which is basically what I was screaming in my head whenever I felt that way. I was screaming, *Do you know how people fucking see me*? But truth be told, I really don't know how people see me. A lot of the time when I look at myself in the mirror, I don't know how *I* see me. It's a strange sensation, because for a time, I felt secure in my nonwhiteness, in my "mixed"-ness, in my me-ness.

But my lack of understanding as to exactly *why* I wasn't the same as my peers—why our brownness didn't magically render our experiences unequivocally identical—and my failure to examine the resentment it cultivated, separated me from my own experience with nonwhiteness. I had rushed out of my vaguely country, inland bubble and straight into drawing a false equivalency between myself and my peers solely based on our skin color—and the result was a lack of clarity. Eventually, I begun to feel that I had only ever been imposing on the identities I had once claimed as my own.

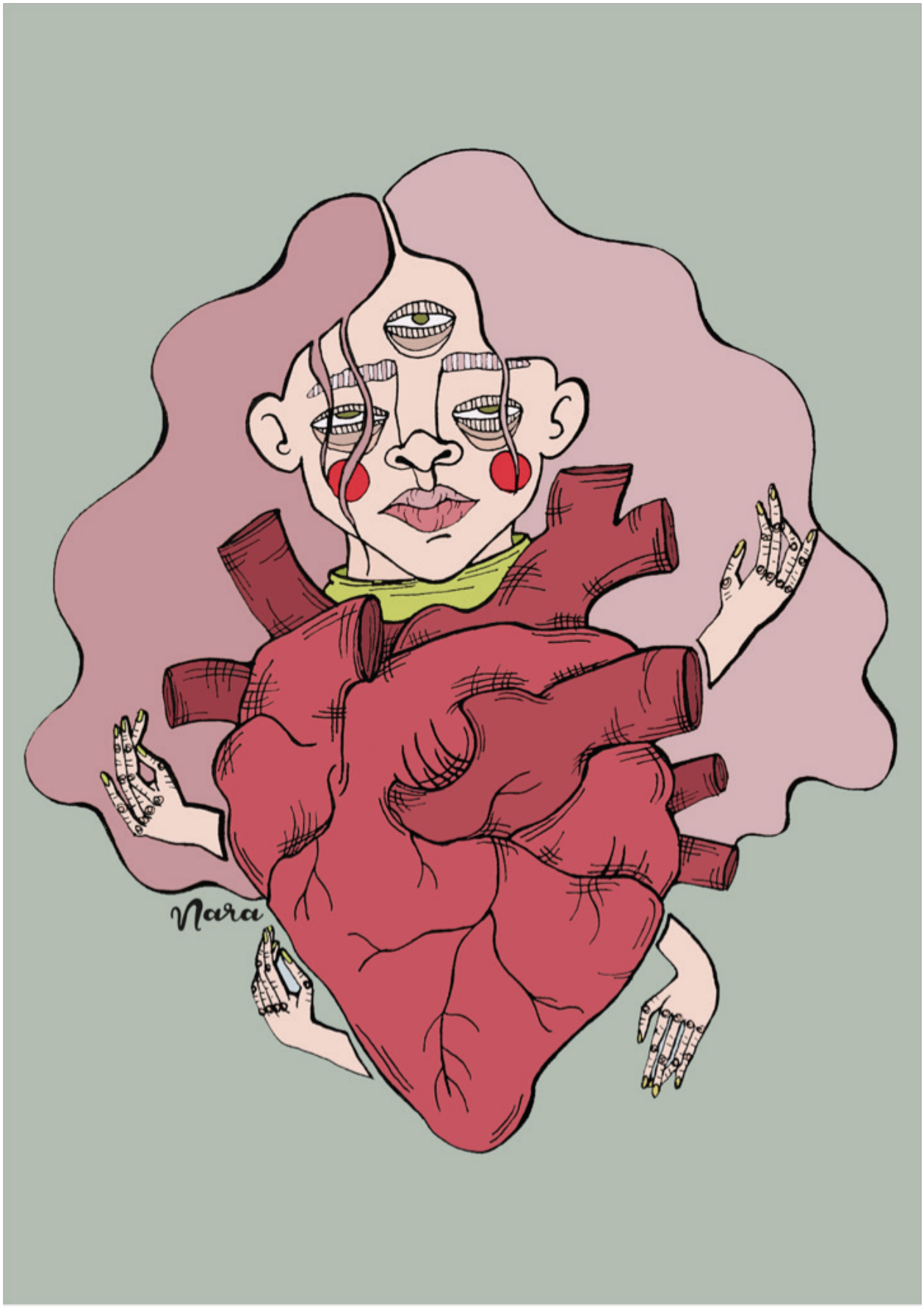
I was angry at not ever having had anyone to share my shitty experiences with—not even within my own family. And now, brown people were making me feel like I was white. I guess if I'd realized sooner that they were perhaps taking note of more than my skin color, I would have let my guard down—and engaged in a much-needed release of this resentment—much sooner than I did. What I learned eventually was an invaluable lesson: in order to see yourself, you have to see—perhaps not first, but simultaneously—more than just yourself.

Earlier this year, I wrote a personal essay while I was still in the thick of my resentment over feeling excluded from communities of color. Reading back on it, my bitterness jumps right off the page. But I don't cringe as much as I'd expect to while reading it, because navigating white America—particularly without any frame of reference for how to claim agency over one's diasporic and queer identities—is tricky as fuck.

I am grateful for the loved ones I do have, like my mother, my friends, and my partner. I am always learning from them, and they, from me. They trust me enough to mine my own experiences and to independently evolve my ways of thinking. They care for me enough to extend their patience to me when I am growing, even when I take my sweet time doing so—though they may not have had the same luxury.

Whether Doug intended his comment to resonate with me or not, it undoubtedly sent me into a tailspin of self-reflection. And although I don't know if I will tell him so, I do know his words have changed the way I interact with others, even if this change is barely perceptible. His remark catalyzed somewhat of an epiphany for me, and I can only wonder how my externalized lack of perspective has grated others, and for how long.

One thing is for sure: if my friends and loved ones can be soft with me, then I can be soft with me, and with them too.



BY NARA

I SWALLOWED A PEACH SEED AND NAMED IT ثورة

An Oum Kolthoum song plays
in the background,
the sound of my dishwasher
interrupts its flow.

alf leila wa leila

This song reminds me of cigarette filters,
arak, figs,
my grandfather peeling peaches,

Being Arab.
I have always found comfort in searching
for meaning:
so, tell me, please, what does it mean to be an Arab?

In the west of Syria,
there is a village called Talkalakh.
You might still find our small home there.
The floors are half cement, half cold tiles
And my grandfather would wait
many months for the peaches.
Small; orange; velvety
skin and flesh
are words that have become
reminders
of tyrants that cut down peach
trees and occupy homes
– yes, you heard right:
This, too, is an occupation.

Skin and flesh
are words that have become
reminders
of terrorists that rip
bodies apart from the top layers
right through to the bones.

All in the name of stability, security
Arab unity. The nighthawk yawns.

Remember how I told you
I find comfort in meaning?
so, tell me, please,
what does it mean to be an Arab?

After you give me an answer,
I will tell you a little secret
when the next jazz band gets on.
Poems of wars and migration
and grandparents and old cemented homes
and grape trees
have started
to taste like crushed Panadol
on the tip of my parched tongue.
"I am sick of them,"
I will whisper when the saxophone is loud –
"And, maybe, bored?"

In my dreams the peach trees
camouflage the small house
and I suck the fruit's seed.
It's bitter. Bittersweet.

I swallow it down.

The Oum Kolthoum song
sounds like a broken record
of a memory we made up
when we couldn't see ahead of us.

(Forgive me
if I have become sick
of romanticism.
But I prefer the sound of the dishwasher
rinsing my spoons and forks.)

When my grandfather died
last year
in Dubai,
– a refugee –
the roots of the grape trees
quivered
like the lips of a lost daughter
looking for her mother
in between the alleys of a
grocery store.

I had made it a mission
to find my grandfather's green eyes
in the Dubai skyline.
Perhaps, they were in between
the skyscrapers he hated so much.
Perhaps, they were the lights
that flickered like flames.
Perhaps, they were the specks of
dust; the grains of sand
Traveling across what is left
of the lonely Dubai desert.

"Come," I would whisper
to the grains of sand.
"Let me lock you in my hands
pack you in my pockets
and take you with me to Lebanon,
Right through to the Syrian borders."

This time round,
I will stick my tongue out at the posters
Of He Who Shall Not Be Named.
I am six years older than the last time
you used to scare me.

All my grandfather ever wanted
was to be buried in Syria
underneath the honeysuckle mildew,
maybe even the mold.
That which rots is better than bright lights
that never burn out.

Have you noticed how skyscrapers in Dubai
are constantly being built over?
The flickering lights are dizzying,
and the grains of sand slip
from my fingers
and I cannot seem
to find green
eyes.

So instead,
I listen to broken records
And running waters
Over and over,
alf leila w leila
– I clutch my core –

The swallowed peach seed
is nestled there.
alf leila w leila

You might think spring is over,
but wait till you hear my song.
It is not about wars. Or cemented homes.
Not even about how I will stick my tongue out at
He Who Shall Not Be Named
(although I will)

It is about the peach tree
growing inside my belly.

NUR TURKMANI

RAIN
BY HANANAH ZAHEER

BAGRAM THEATER INTERNMENT FACILITY PRISONER NO. 421

My name is Dilawar, he said to me, write this down:
I was an unschooled man, a shepherd from Yakubi. My teachers
they were the rocks and goats and whispering wheat.

I was twenty-two, weighed 122 pounds, and I stood
five-foot-nine and drove a taxi across a heaven
called Afghanistan. My Toyota Corolla, my pride and treasure

I drove it to Khost City for gas money – gas to bring
my three sisters home for Eid al-Fitr. On the way back
the road took us into a hell snapping with red fiend stripes.

I spent the first night chained to a fence, metal teeth chattered my name.
Soldiers threw stones at me, the air was cold, the morning endless.
My head, they covered it with a bag, I could not breathe. They gathered

around me, put knees into my belly, into my groin. They
chained me to the ceiling. My hands turned to stone, my shoulders
abandoned their sockets. Down rained blows to my knees.

I could not stand, so they threw me into a table, I cried out,
"Where are you my God?" I dreamt of a scarecrow, his arms
tossed by the wind. In his knee, my knee, the bruised

face of a man appeared, a drowned man under a river of ice.
His blue lips formed words, and the words said, Go to sleep.
I prayed to my God and watched the current drift him away.

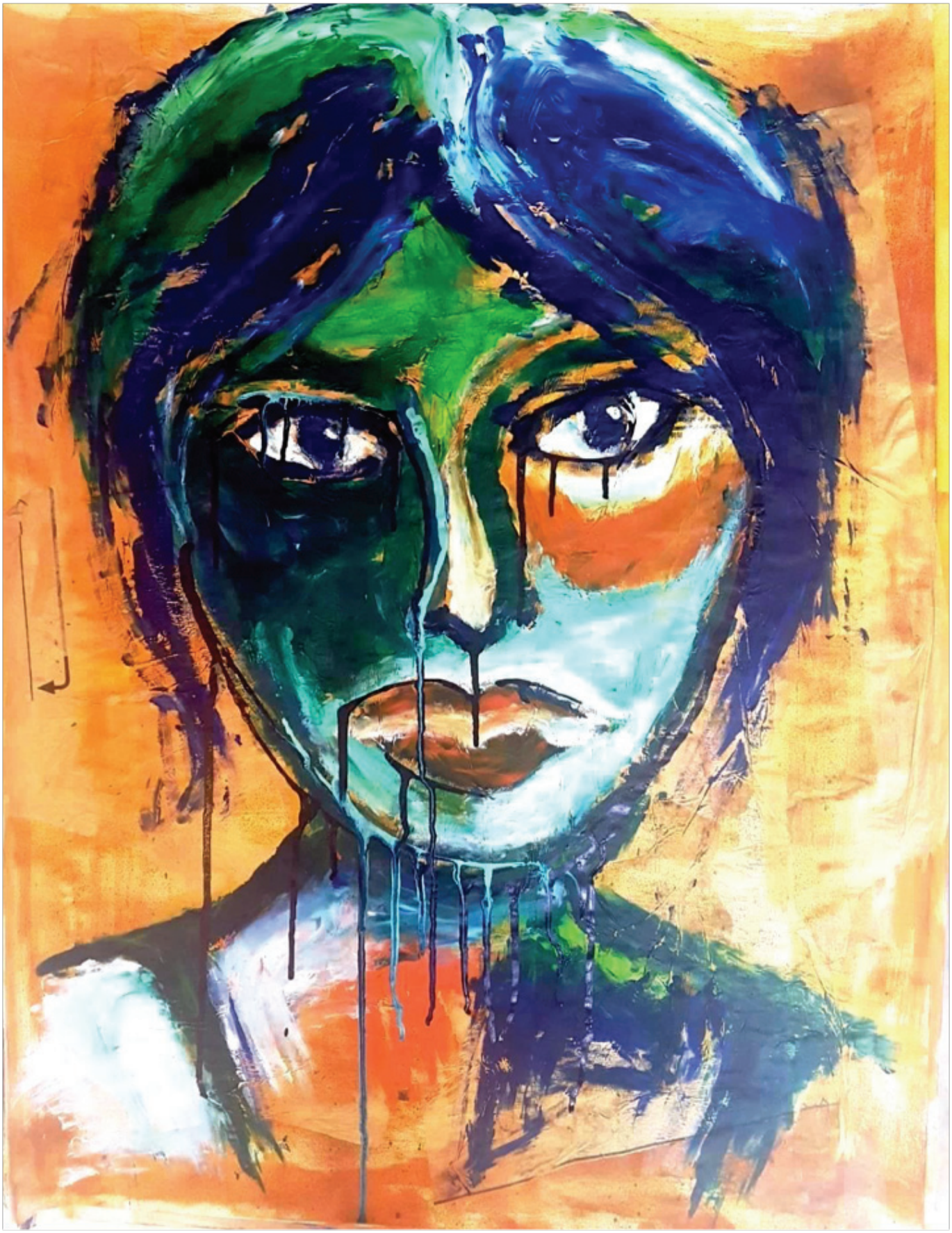
On a frosty highway of static, across the belly of a snow cloud
I heard them say, Had I lived they would have amputated
my arms and legs, beaten by demons into streamless ponds.

I see my wife and daughter Rashida standing by a fence, outside
four steel walls hung with black and white stars. But they are still,
still as no living creatures can be still, improbable as wind

binding a wheat field to a vow of silence. From somewhere
and nowhere, I hear the strings of a dilruba cry out my name,
a name that means Brave. A name that means, Now I move without

effort. A name that means, Here is a man who soars without shame.
A man stripped of the mocking beards of goats, and stones, and fields.
A man who hears wheat whisper, Roam with us and be free.

STEPHEN ERIC BERRY



FACES COLLECTION, MIXED MEDIA ON FLIPCHART PAPER
BY FADWA AL QASEM

THE MOMENT BEFORE BY JASON MAKANSI

Reviewed by Eman Elsheikh

It is difficult to tell when Jason Makansi's debut novel *The Moment Before* begins, and that is perhaps its greatest strength. Ultimately a story of estrangement between a father and daughter, with geopolitical intrigue and an incipient love story propelling the narrative forward and back, *The Moment Before* is a prism refracting multiple perspectives strewn across time and space. Though one could rearrange the chapters into a chronological unfolding, the novel instead takes us through various openings and closures, peeking into the intervals of history to see the lives disrupted, reordered, or disappeared. Makansi uses clear, agile prose to layer one life over another, showing the tragedies and the pleasures that can arise in the overlap.

This layering breathes life into the banal, showing the force of ordinary violences and calculations. Makansi masterfully calls the reader to reimagine the small lives lived in small places and their place in bigger tectonic shifts, showing the ways in which history is both grand and overarching but also constituted by fine and granular moments. He adeptly draws the currents pulling together these moments, showing that meaning can persist in randomness, that arbitrariness can ultimately be unforgiving and trenchant.

Yet Makansi does not paint a uniformly bleak tale of loss in a pitiless world. Despite the heaviness of separation and the tragedy of living as a political "externality," the novel maintains a palpable buoyancy, a hope that emerges from Makansi's precise maneuvering of scales. Ultimately, the slippage between scales of significance remakes and redirects the flow, creating openings that keep hope afloat.

Though the stories within the story open up into one another in touching ways, the novel was philosophically muddled, and at times, heavy-handed. The distant Arab locales are seen as uniformly war-torn, corrupt, and violent, black holes that draw everything into their oblivion. Even in the lives of Arab Americans, nothing Arab is salvageable but baklava, deep-set green eyes, and a slightly golden complexion. Though the book held out the possibility of giving new texture to the lives of Arab American immigrants, at the end there is little learned about these communities than their entrapment in decades of war and the nostalgia for the spiced foods and syrupy sweets of the homeland. The ultimate feeling is hollow, ricocheting between bitterness and saccharine nostalgia but achieving limited depth.

However much the insensitivity of global political institutions, the indirect violence of war, and the precarity of the immigrant speak to our current shared reality, it is not quite enough to carry the characters to actualization. The novel does not collapse under its own complexity, but leaves the reader wishing for a fuller, more sensitive exploration.

BY NARA

GREAT COAL BEDS OF SOME WORLD

The sky is blue where blue was ash and soot,
another fire is beamed from screen to air.
We learn of it and gasp and choke. On foot
we rush to learn of darkness from the stare

of actors in some film. Yes, we got jokes,
the politicians desperately inept,
so why'd we want the show to end? The croaks
that seep in to our shade are frogs at best,

the gasping cries of dying kids at worst
but get real, they're frogs. The soot is raining,
that ought to put an end to fires that burst
from clickbait. I'm good, I'm entertaining,

I'm good at entertaining. Lovely chumps,
what suckers, we keep begging for more lumps.

GLENN SHAHEEN

TOTAL BODY DISRUPTION

Big hairdos and radiation suits.
Things we'll never see. Look
at all these perennial movers in
this balding town, perched on
the slalom of… is it riches?
I've felt regret for every last
light turned out in every empty
apartment I've left. Snapping
cables, wayward snakes from
a charmer's broken basket. Any
suit is a mistake, hazmat or
biz-caz. Disaster's dirty scope.
A just society if you believe in
errors, or moxie, or a paste-pot
of precious tongue meat from
the youngest calves. Tablecloth
magicians leave no glass complete.
Dust in my eyes is always confetti,
I'd like it to be. Some whip-born
chain, something heavier to lash
against ourselves, comfort in crush.

GLENN SHAHEEN

BY NARA

BY NARA

DROWNING BY CHOCOLATE*

When we first got in,
it felt warm and welcoming.
The chocolate syrup was hot and sticky.
It beat the biting cold outside.
We licked our fingers and recited the shahada:
There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet.

The taste of chocolate cheered us up.
Our spirits slowly started to rise,
as we waited for the truck to get going.
Soon we'd be on our way
to safety and freedom.

Someone made jokes about over-dozing on sugar.
Sami said, "This chocolate better be halal or we'll be damned."
I said, "*Allah Ghafurun Rahim*":
God is all merciful, all forgiving

For hours, we held on tightly,
each man resting one arm on the rim of the tank,
the other on his neighbor's shoulders.
Our bodies, and fates, were now connected.

We exchanged stories about Syria,
the families and friends we left behind.
We cursed the regime for the hardships and the humiliation.
We talked about the future.
Perhaps we would find jobs in London.
Perhaps we would make a new home in the strangers' land.
Yes, *in-sha-Allah*, we would start all over again.

Then the limbs started to give out,
as we struggled to remain afloat.
We watched our sweat
dripping into the pool of chocolate.
I promised myself I would never eat chocolate again.

The conversation slowly died out.
With every moment that passed,
I feared death—drowning—by chocolate.
I prayed that no one would call Nayla "the idiot's wife".
The old man, Abu Ahmad, started to weep.

The truck never budged.

One by one, we climbed out
of the sweltering tank.
The last man had to peel off his shoes
as we fished him out.

We licked our gooey limbs
and took off running
under the starless sky—
our dreams of a better life
silently drowning
behind
us
in
a
tank
of
melted
chocolate.

NADINE A. SINNO

*Sadly, this poem was inspired by a real news story I read on BBC in March 2015 about a group of Syrian refugees

BY NARA

A HOSTILE WORLD

By Jihan Shaarawi

Part 1: The Eternal Dupes

The Boy's father sat on his small wicker chair staring at the newspaper that was brought from the capital. The Boy's parents managed to send The Brother to the capital to join the public university. Every weekend, The Brother took a bus back to the village with tales of the soon-to-be revolution. That day, The Brother brought back news of The Monarch's supposed diplomatic trip to England where he was spotted spending his days with European models at high-end bars.

"He is spending the people's money on alcohol and whores! He should be hung in the streets!"

The Father was known in the village for his short temper and quick tongue. A year earlier, The Father told his employer that he was a "slave driving son of a bitch who should go back to England and fuck that sheep that he calls a wife." The Father disappeared shortly after the incident and was returned, two months later, bloodied, boney, pale, and thrown amongst his neighbor's apricot trees. After the incident, The Father only spoke his mind at home and sent his children to fight his battles.

When rumors began to spread in the village that the CIA had entered the country in support of the Liberation Officers, The Boy was sent to a nearby village where it was said that there lived a man who taught English to children. On his first day of English class, The Boy's mother dressed him in his finest clothes, a cotton button down shirt with holes, dress pants that had to be rolled up at the ankles, and leather shoes that flapped when he walked. The Boy's father licked his palm and used the saliva to contain The Boy's frizzy curls.

"Listen to me! You speak to your teacher respectfully! Don't stare at walls when he speaks! Don't pick your nose! Remember not to mention why you're really there. Say you want to learn English so you can work on one of the British farms. Don't you dare mention the CIA!"

The Boy's mother carefully tucked in his shirt.

"Baba? What's CIA?"

His father struck him so quickly it almost escaped his mother's eyes.

"He has the brains of a donkey. You bore me a donkey!"

"Enough! What will the Sheikh think if you bring him a bruised boy?"

The Boy's mother splashed cold water on his face in an attempt to soothe the blow.

"Stop crying! You're not a baby anymore!"

They paid The Neighbor 5 silver coins to take The Boy to the next village. The Boy sat on his neighbor's cart (pulled by a small, weak, donkey) amidst the crates of apricots. Every now and then, when The Neighbor wasn't looking, he took one and stuffed it in his pockets. It took forty-five minutes to arrive to the village and by then his pockets bulged at odd angles. This village looked identical to The Boy's village except for the long line of young boys at one of the huts.

"That's hut," The Neighbor pointed towards the assembly of boys, "I'll be back in the afternoon to take you home."

Every weekday, The Boy travelled to the neighboring village for his English lessons. His malleable brain picked up the language quickly and he was soon teaching his younger sisters. The Father requested The Brother to bring back English newspapers from the capital. They all huddled around The Boy as he read each word carefully. He often made up the sound of a word if he hadn't learned it yet.

Upon The Monarch's return from England a huge demonstration was held in front of the palace. The Father decided that there couldn't be a better time for a family vacation; so they packed some clothes and headed to the capital. They all stayed in the room that The Brother rented with another young man from their village. The Brother was studying engineering at the public university and was poised to be top of his class. He spent most of his days studying in a corner of the room. Every time The Boy passed by him, he glanced at the paper to see what his brother was studying. It was on the second day that The Boy realized that it wasn't equations that The Brother was scribbling down; he was writing poetry. The Boy waited until The Brother fell asleep to steal the sheets of paper. The next morning he presented the papers to his father.

"I pay good money to have you study in the capital and you spend your days writing poetry? Your comrades are busy protesting and risking their lives and you're sitting in this room writing rhymes! This is not the time! You know who writes poetry? Rich Europeans. Because their lives are perfect so they have to make up something to keep it interesting. Liberate your country first and then you write poetry."

The Father lit a match and held it to the papers. In silence, the family watched the pages burn. When the flames had engulfed every word, the father led everyone to get ready for liberation. They needed to be at the square in time to see it all. When they reached the square, The Boy's father lifted him onto his shoulders.. Crowds of people swarmed out of every side street and with each step it became harder to move. Scattered amongst the crowd were British soldiers on horses. They held rifles in plain sight—as a message to the masses. Students stood in the frontlines of different groups as they spilled in from the streets that snaked into the square. They left The Mother at home with the sisters; a protest was no place for the feminine. The Brother hadn't spoken a word since his father burned all the pages of poetry. The Father insisted that burning the poetry would be a good opportunity to transition into manhood. He leaned on The Brother's shoulder as he walked, using him as a cane. He screamed of the injustices done to him in captivity. The Boy had never seen his father so happy. The boys attempted to keep up with the slogans:

"Monarch Monarch of our hearts! May your kingdom fall apart!"

"Our bread is stale, our lives are cheap, go to hell you stupid sheep!"

On the ride back to the village The Boy's father could not contain his excitement. As each new passenger entered the bus, he retold his story of protest. Some listened in amazement; most ignored him.

"Be careful," the mother whispered, "you never know who these people are. We can't afford to lose you again."

The Father couldn't care less and for three hours he repeated his story. The father continued his political musing throughout the ride home, on the walk from the bus to the village, yelled them at all his neighbors, and finally through dinner, and the ritualistic post-dinner tea with milk.

"You know, I feel as though this time the British will go back to that hole they call The West!"

The Mother accompanied tea with her nightly card readings. The hearts symbolized love and marriage, clubs were money, diamonds were family and home, and spades symbolized career. The Boy sat in front of his mother waiting for his future to be revealed.

"Split the cards with your left hand"

The Father sat on his chair, slurping his tea.

"You know, they say that the CIA pays two hundred pounds a month for interpreters! Two hundred! Can you imagine?!"

The card formation was made up of 2 spades and 3 clubs. The Mother interrupted The Father's rambling:

"There will be much change in your family life. This change will show you the path to your career."

"He will become a politician for the government of tomorrow!"

The Boy gave all his attention to his mother. She stopped her reading and smiled, "my brave boy, my beautiful prince, darling love of my life, I could read you the rest but it doesn't matter. We all know you will be great. Go to sleep." That night there was three short knocks on the door, barely audible. The Mother was a light sleeper and they woke her instantly. She shook her husband awake.

"Someone is knocking on the door."

The Father jolted awake.

"What time is it?"

He fumbled through his small pile of possessions until he found his watch; 1:45 am. The knocking picked up energy.

"Do you think it's the officers? Do you think one of the people on the bus said something? Why don't you ever stay quiet? These children need you!"

"Shut up woman. If they were the officers they wouldn't need to knock."

The father slipped on a robe and opened the door. The outside darkness covered the face of the visitor. The father's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he made out the figure of a young student, an acquaintance of The Brother. His shirt was covered in dried blood.

The Boy woke up two minutes before the knock on the door. He felt a chill from the open window and it woke him. When he heard his parent's frantic voices he crawled on his belly to where they sat. His mother held her head in her hands as she slid slowly to the ground. The student, whom he recognized from the demonstration, attempted to sip the cup of tea but his unsteady hands wouldn't allow it. His father was stoic. The Boy watched The Father rise out of the chair, walk towards the open door, and out to the fields. The Boy abandoned his hiding place and ran after him. No one in the room noticed his presence. The Boy used his arms to protect himself from the cold as he observed his father, on his knees beside the wall separating his field from the neighbors. Rotten apricots fallen from the neighboring trees surrounded him. His father picked them up one by one and threw them as far as he could. Threw them towards the British plantation; threw them towards the capital.

Theme 2: Conspiracy

"Bend down and spread your cheeks"

The Lieutenant flipped the switch of his flashlight and aimed the light into the exposed anuses of the prospective cadets. The building was large and discolored. The plot of land once housed the most loyal of The Monarch's followers, but upon The Liberator's command it was torn down and turned into The Military Academy. In the eight years since The Monarch was overthrown, The Academy doubled in applications. The Liberator filled the youth with the hope of nationalism.

After his brother's death, The Boy soon decided that he would abandon his father's dreams of CIA and become The Cadet. His father died shortly after The Brother's death. The people in the village whispered that, because of his inability to deal with the older brother's death, he slowly killed himself by slipping poison into his own tea every night.

"Died of a broken heart," his mother always said, followed with a sigh. When he announced his decision to become a Cadet he was met with the approval of all but his mother.

"Nationalism is a tricky disease, my son."

The Mother's words couldn't sway him. He made the decision the day his father labored through his last breath.

"Stand straight and put your pants back on."

The Cadet did as he was told without hesitation. The Lieutenant walked in front of the line of recruits.

"If you've made it this far that means you are now Cadets in the esteemed Academy. Our Liberator tore down the symbols of oppression that plagued our beautiful country and built strong, new, and reliable walls. You are the generation who will keep our Liberator's vision alive through the decades. In your hands lies the hope of the future. Never again will we let our nation fall into the hands of an oppressor and never again will we remain silent."

The Lieutenant stopped in front of The Cadet.

"Lift your arms over your head."

The Cadet did as he was told.

"You're skinny. What does your father do?"

"He's dead, sir."

"What did he do before he died?"

"He was a farmer, sir."

"Very good. Very good. Farmers are the souls of our nation. How did he die?"

"He died of a broken heart after the oppressors killed my brothers."

"Yes. Tragic. Why are you here Cadet?

"To make sure the population of this wonderful nation is never oppressed again."

"Perfect. I like your energy."

The Cadet's new routine woke him at 6:00 am. They ran for one hour, followed by two hours of standing in formation. Those who fainted or complained of the heat were forced to run for another hour. The Cadet never complained of the heat. The Lieutenant attributed it to his pure farmer blood. After formation, they were served breakfast. Usually beans but sometimes in winter they were given lentil soup. This was followed by General Command and Staff courses. They were served dinner at 7pm and given a free hour. At 8 pm all Cadets were expected to be in their bunks.

It was during the free hour between dinner and bunk time that The Cadet developed a new method of entertainment for his comrades. Using his mother's technique of card reading, he would predict his fellow cadet's futures. One evening The Cadet's bunkmate, decided to test the truthfulness of The Cadet's skills. The Cadet revealed a future full of love for his bunkmate.

"Alright, I'm slightly impressed. But if you really are as good as you say tell me what my girlfriend's name is."

The bunkmate was unaware that he had a tendency to whisper her name in his sleep.

The Cadet paused for moment, for dramatic effect and then spoke her name. This caused a stir in The Cadet's unit and he soon became known as the master of cards. It was a few days later when one of The Lieutenant's lower ranking officers came for him.

"Where is the cadet with the cards?!"

All fingers lead to The Cadet.

"Follow me, The Lieutenant wants to see you. "

The Cadet raced through all the scenarios in his head. Since the ouster of The Monarch, gambling had been declared illegal. Perhaps, The Lieutenant thought he was encouraging the rise of gambling, thus calling for the disrespect and—ultimately—the rise against The Liberator! He knocked softly on the newly painted door.

"Come in!"

With a click of his heel and an exposed palm, he saluted The Lieutenant. The room was painted a dull grey-green and contained one brown desk, two wooden chairs for guests, one leather chair for The Lieutenant, and one portrait of the Liberator hanging high over The Lieutenant's head. The Lieutenant fanned himself with a nationalist magazine, "The Capital Weekly".

"Sit down."

The Lieutenant waited until The Cadet was settled to continue talking.

"I hear stories that you're quite the fortune teller."

"We only do it for fun, sir. It's nothing serious, sir."

"No need to make excuses."

The Lieutenant opened his desk drawer and revealed a deck of cards. He pushed them in front of The Cadet. In silence, The Cadet stared at the deck.

"Go on. Show me my future."

The Cadet scanned The Lieutenant's face for signs of sarcasm or anger. There were none.

"Ok. Please separate the deck into two piles using your left hand."

The Lieutenant followed his orders.

"Pick out fifteen cards using your left hand."

The Cadet laid out the cards in the formation his mother taught him. All the Aces were drawn.

"I see money. Lots of money. There's money in every aspect of your life. You see, the club symbolizes money. It's crossed here with the jack who could symbolize you or maybe a male relative. It's also crossed here with the diamonds so there is money involved with your home and family."

"Very good Cadet. Very good. Go back to work now. "

Two weeks later The Cadet was called back into the office. Before he could salute The Lieutenant interrupted him, "Come in. Close the door. Sit Down."

The Cadet settled into one of the wooden chairs.

"What did you see in my cards last time you were here?"

"Money?"

"Do you know what happened to me?"

"No sir."

"Last night someone broke into my house. They took everything. All my money. All my wife's jewelry."

"I'm- I'm sorry. I couldn't tell if the money was coming in or out."

The Lieutenant opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out the deck, "tell me what you see."

It was from then on that The Lieutenant revealed his secrets to The Cadet. Confiding in his fortuneteller, he told him of all the plans. He told him of the foreign hands waiting to sabotage the nation. He told him of the former supporters of The Monarch who waited in small European towns for their chance to rise again.

Part 3: Forbidden Fruit

It was with The Lieutenant's trust that The Cadet went on to become a Lieutenant himself, a First Lieutenant, Captain, a Lieutenant Colonel, and finally The Colonel of the ninth regiment. All this was achieved in the span of ten short years using minimal bribery and almost no torture. As the youngest of his rank, The Colonel compensated his age with seriousness and a large mustache.

The former Lieutenant, now The General Major, held his eighteenth annual "Liberator's Officers Celebration of Freedom, the Nation, and Justice: in Honor of the Martyrs of the Liberator's Liberation of the Nation from the Anti-liberation Tyrant" banquet. It was there that The Colonel managed to charm The Ministers of Interior, Exterior, and Culture into marrying his younger sisters. The Colonel's family was thus promptly moved out of the village hut and into villas that once belonged to The Monarch's aristocracy.

The eighteenth banquet marked the first year in which The Liberator could not attend. His wife claimed he was in "poor health". The General Major laughed loudly, "Poor health! The man is an unstoppable machine! Not even the CIA could bring him down. Though, as we all know, they tried and failed."

The guests sipped their imported alcohol and nodded knowingly. It was during this moment of great admiration for The Liberator (and his inability to die) that The Colonel entered, family in tow. The General Major beamed with joy.

"My boy! My cadet! My fortune-teller! Our honored and esteemed Colonel! Come! Come! Have a whiskey! Juice for the women of course."

Ever the extrovert, The Minister of Interior left his wife's side (without a hint of hesitation) in order to catch up with The Liberator's cousin's daughter. The Minister of Exterior, the more introverted of the group, rejected the whiskey and settled for water and a corner of the room with his wife silent by his side. The Minister of Culture was not present.

"My Dear! Where is your husband?! How I miss his gracious and cultured presence at my banquets!"

"I'm afraid there's a soccer match today. He couldn't miss it."

The large room, covered in beige marble, surrounded by peeling wallpaper with a flowery pattern, was furnished entirely in Baroque style. Tassels hung from extravagant blue armchairs, a large dark wooden dining table stood in the center of the room with carved figures running down its leg, and a crystal chandelier with a lime green tint illuminated the grand hall of the mansion. The Colonel sat upright in one of the armchairs. He watched his sisters socialize with a world that was once exclusively his. His mother, whom he still lived with, was at the buffet table loading her plate with tiny sandwiches. He squirmed at the sight of her gluttony, at the thought of her cracked and overworked hands tainting the golden, fluffy, smooth surfaces of the miniature food. It was at that moment, as one sister scolded her husband's wandering eye, another silently sipped her guava juice, the youngest flirted with the high-ranking Generals, and his mother filled her mouth to the brim with bread, when The Colonel began to feel that he needed a mate. He spent the last ten years living almost as a hermit, obsessed with rising in the ranks.

Twirling his mustache he surveyed the room. Most females in attendance were the wives and daughters of his colleagues, untouchables. The only remaining women were the embarrassing creatures he called his family. The whiskey warmed his insides and he began to doze off.

"Would you like more, sir?"

A young servant lowered her eyes as he snapped back to reality. She looked young. She couldn't be older than twenty. The Colonel didn't care much for age; all he could see were her eyes. They were blue. He had never seen a servant with blue eyes. He licked his mustache as he allowed himself to take in all of her body.

"Sir, another drink?"

The Colonel did something he hadn't done in years: he smiled.

"Yes."

The girl poured him a glass and with a quick smile she moved on to the next military man. The Colonel, reeling from the encounter, zigzagged to The General Major.

"Who is that servant girl?"

"She's mine. I hired her after The Field Marshal's wife found herself enraged with jealousy and kicked her out. Some peasant girl I believe."

"I will marry her. Please arrange it."

The General Major, in a fit of hysterical laughter, spilled the remains of his whiskey on The Younger Sister's dress. The Younger Sister, who had been allowing The General Major to pour whiskey into her guava juice all night, giggled in ecstasy.

"My boy, she's just a peasant girl. You're too good for her."

"You forget that I was once a peasant boy."

"Different times my Colonel. Different times. But I suppose we could train her as we did you. The only problem would be her age."

"Change the birth certificate?"

The General Major caressed the youngest sister's arm and gazed with longing at her chest. He waved The Colonel off.

"Yes yes! Easily done! Come here tomorrow night and we'll arrange it."

The Colonel, in a drunken stupor of lust, searched for the servant girl amongst the guests. She reminded him of the girls he grew up with in his village. Their simplicity always attracted him. She was nowhere to be seen. The Colonel pushed through the crowd of Ministers and Generals until he reached the kitchen. At the counter stood the girl, her loose black outfit covered every inch of her body and a light black cloth hung loosely around her head allowing soft strands of her dark hair to fall out. At the sound of The Colonel's entrance, she turned.

"More Whiskey?"

"No. You. I want you.'

"I'm sorry?"

"You're coming home with me tonight."

"Is The General Major exchanging me for another girl?"

"You're my wife now."

The Colonel lunged towards the counter in an attempt to wrap his arms around the helpless child. She screamed and ran towards the hall; he pursued. The sight of the hall stopped the lovers in their tracks. All the guests stood in silence, staring at the grand entrance. The Field Marshal was reading from a paper.

" -It is with deepest regrets that we announce the death of our Liberator, our savior, and our nation's father,"

The sisters screamed in despair and fainted into their husband's arms, the youngest into The General Major's. The Ministers and Generals began to silently pray into their whiskey glasses. The Colonel reached towards the servant girl as she tried to use this opportunity to escape. He pressed her head into his chest, she tried to pull away, but he pressed her head tighter against his chest.

Part 4: Disaffection

Report For the Beloved People of the Nation on National Salvation and the Incident of the Fundamentalist Attacks on the Beloved Nation:

We, the cabinet of the military council, hereby issue this report to clarify and create an honest and transparent account on what transpired on the 14th day of April.

Since the death of our beloved Liberator the nation has found itself infested by the disease of fundamentalism. These fundamentalists spoke in the name of religion when, in fact, they merely used religion to topple the pillar of the state. As we all know, the nature of their hate and violence began shortly after the death of The Liberator when they decried The Successor's ascension to power. They used the Western ideal of 'Democracy' to accuse our dear Successor of being an unworthy father of our nation. They gathered in squares and chanted. This, being an innocent act, was allowed to flourish due to the kindness of The Successor's heart. He, being aware that they were simply mourning the death of our most distinguished and revered Liberator. The events that took place are almost too tragic to write. However, it must be mentioned that these poor fundamentalists brought it upon themselves.

Who are these fundamentalists and how can you spot them?

They are usually in groups and disguise themselves as students or hardworking men and women. They claim to be thinkers and artists, yet are never seen at any of the national theatre events nor do they participate in the annual "Portrait of the Nation" award.

Why must we be wary of them?

Using the same rhetoric as the English who colonized our nation, these fundamentalists use 'liberal' ideals that go against this so-called "religion" they follow. If they were truly pious people they would understand that the Successor has been blessed by God's will. How can these pious people not recognize salvation?

What happened?

The fundamentalists finally revealed their true nature and attempted to attack the state. Using concealed weapons and makeshift tear gas; they spontaneously attacked our brave young policemen. The state had no other option but to act quickly! Gunmen climbed on the roofs of civilian houses and were prepared to shoot anyone on the ground. So we were obligated to send the tanks in. They also had three bombs hidden in residential buildings! Thankfully the state was there to defuse them. Many have accused the state of using excessive force. However, I'm certain the judiciary will understand this need on the state's part to maintain justice and liberty. Tragically fifty-three fundamentalists perished in the events that unfolded. Many were trampled in the stampede that their own colleagues created. Some were even used as human shields by their more cowardly counterparts! These deaths were not a result of the state's violence, as some would suggest, but negligence on the part of the fundamentalists. The remaining threats were apprehended and sent to an undisclosed location. There, our young Lieutenants in training will interrogate them and, if God wills it, we shall have a safe and healthy state.

Thank you and May God and The Successor bless you,

The former Colonel of the ninth regiment, Interim Field Marshal.

Part 5: Charade of Doom

After the Incident report was signed, the former Field Marshal was asked to retire and The Colonel took over. They say this new Field Marshal is a man of integrity, not afraid to make decisions and take charge. When asked what should be done with protestors, the then Colonel's answer was "make them disappear." This gained the respect and admiration of all his colleagues and it was unanimous that he must be the new Field Marshal.

The Field Marshal leaned on his dark wooden desk. A portrait of The Successor hung above his head. It was only a year into his time as Field Marshal that the generals and ministers filed into his office one day. They locked the door behind them and all vowed secrecy. They filled him in on the plan, they told him the reasons, the necessity of it. In one short hour they planned the execution of The Successor, promising the Field Marshal that if he went along with their plan he would be named the new Leader of the nation.

The plan was executed quickly and flawlessly. The Field Marshal received the news from a young lieutenant.

"The Successor has been shot at the national parade. Fundamentalists have been apprehended."

The Field Marshal stood, and with no hesitation, began walking down the hall. The young lieutenant (a nephew from the youngest sister) walked at his heel.

"Boy, you're sweating on my boots. Go home to your mother and tell her to buy a pretty dress."

The Field Marshal's villa was larger than anything he could have imagined as a boy. The halls were surrounded with doors, all leading to dark rooms that smelled of dust and cleaning product. They only used half the rooms in the house. He passed the kitchen where his wife slaved away making meals, though he brought her dozens of servants. He climbed up the wooden stairs. He passed his daughter's room, where once he found a boy with a hand under his daughter's blouse. That boy was later sentenced to six months in prison for indecent exposure. He passed his son's room where once he found a boy with his hand down his son's pants. That boy was later sentenced to six years in jail for debauchery. He finally reached the room at the far end of the second floor hallway, his mother's room.

His mother had gone deaf and blind in her old age. They say her blindness was caused by the venom of a snake that the CIA planted in her garden. They say she went deaf because the CIA planted a bug in her ear in order to spy on her son. They say The Field Marshal, ever the hero of the nation, stabbed her ears.

The Field Marshal opened the door to her room. It creaked. She sat in her usual spot in the middle of the king sized bed. His mother, who never adjusted to a life of luxury, threw out the furniture she didn't need. All that remained was the bed, the side table and a closet. Every time The Field Marshal walked into the room he remembered her imperfection, his embarrassment at her peasant manners, her inability to change. Immobility and excessive card reading caused her to develop a hump. Yet, even her hump lacked perfection, it was slightly off center. Her hands ran over a deck of cards as she split them with her left hand. He moved slowly so he wouldn't startle her. He sat near her; the mattress sank and creaked under his weight.

"Who's there? Don't hurt me! Don't you know who my son is?"

The Field Marshal edged towards her and ran his fingers over hers, their signal that it was him and not a fundamentalist. She smiled and felt his hands.

"My boy! My beautiful, powerful, wonderful boy! Let me read your fortune!"

"We had him murdered. Do you know what this means?"

"My delightful little Cadet! How I love you!"

"This means that I will be the new father of the nation. I can finally be what your husband could never dream to be."

She ran her hands over the cards frantically.

"I feel hearts in these cards. You will find love! Love everywhere! It crosses over with diamonds! This love will give you wealth! Oh my brilliant Colonel! You will take over our amazing nation!"

The Field Marshal looked at the cards, there were no hearts to be seen. He stroked his mother's hair.

"I can't wait until you die. The last piece of my youth will die with you."

"Oh my boy! My darling Cadet! My brave soldier! My adored Colonel! My revered Field Marshal! Our nation's beloved Dictator!"

His mother wept for her love and devotion to her son and thus for her love and devotion to the nation. The Field Marshal picked up a bowl of soup left on the side table and fed his weeping mother.

They say the CIA filled the mother's soup with miniscule amounts of arsenic until she finally died, taking his memories of innocent youth with her.

BY NARA

HE SOUNDED JUST LIKE ME

His voice was a park swing in the sunshine:
My fat toddler legs poked through the holes in the seat
I giggled free as I swung
Hair trailing like smoke behind me.
Eyes up to the sky
His voice was birds flying in formation to fresh climes
Wings spread, they did nothing but glide.

He sounded just like me.
But he said things that I could never say.
He spoke of bombs and war
And children who know nothing
But all the terror they've seen -

I spoke not of those things.

It was nightfall between cobbled streets.
At a pub in a village, between hills of green;
Northern England.
I was introduced to him because
We were both Syrian.

He said, "oh, we always find each other, don't we?"
What did he mean?
I had been searching for him in places he did not hide.
The olive of my skin crouched under the white;
Sheepish to claim his heritage as mine.

There's a baby in the corner of the pub, wrapped in blankets
While her mother smokes a spliff with the midwife
Out in the street.

A farmers daughter asks my voice where he's from:
"Syria" is followed by silence.
Funny how the world goes quiet
When talking of places where noise won't cease.

It's this uneasy laugh in exchange for the kind of scream
That begs back to life a child crushed
By the house of her mother's old dreams.

We squished and tugged at the word 'safe'
As if it were play dough
And he were the father I only know by name.

"Safe, is West Aleppo
Where there are gunshots freckling the walls,"
The tun tun tun of machine guns mark out a dado rail
(Unlike the one in the hallway of my mum's home
Where dust won't settle long enough
Before she's hoover-ing the stairs
And polishing the phone).

"It is safe," he says
Because East Aleppo no longer has walls to mark.
The bombs pulled down homes
Built by the same hands
That shared ma'amoul between these stones,

And you wonder why they won't leave?
This clay is made of pride and dignity
It shivered when brought to its knees.

He spoke to me of bullets
That skimmed the backs of his friends
As they talk casually
"What is another bullet at times like these?"

He spoke like me.
In the way that my words linger
In the gaps between themselves
Like we're holding notes ~
Every breath contains songs our ancestors wrote.

He spoke like me.
But he spoke words that I could never say.
He spoke of children who had been raised by war
"They think the rat-tat-tat-tat of gunfire is normal."

Normal is the easiest thing to believe.
Normal is what you always see.
Normal teaches you how to be.

He was charming
(Almost more charming than me).
His eyes were a deep Syrian green
I fell pregnant
with an identity I've always been.

I am a seed of Syria that blew to the West
And grew like a crab apple tree
But my fruit is of Syria
I sound like Syria
I laugh with Syria
I cry for Syria
But how dare I cry at all?

He sounds like me
Until he speaks the language I don't speak.

And then?

I watch him leave.

LISA LUXX

BY NARA

MARYAM, THE BIRD

The veil is lowered at night
Rashid prefers her like this
Trash hidden from sight, though it's harder to hide
The effluvium of petrol and hot garbage
Perfuming the cluttered roads.

She is a city of secrets.
She is a masquerade ball.
Tethered to the old but born new
Taboos break in her corners.

Birds surf the wave of the Adhan
As it wails in a rise from the Mosque
In formations they turn and curl the rush -
    A fountain of peace from the mouths of men
    Who'll lean into the back of their taxi cab
    And press sticky harem into your skin.

Skin
That becomes prison;
A trap
For the woman stuck inside.
Weighing heavy, it turns to armour:
Sisters are warriors aligned.

Skin bearing cracks become roadmaps –
This is why wounds needn't mend.
Together we weep when the door is closed
So we can growl when it opens again.

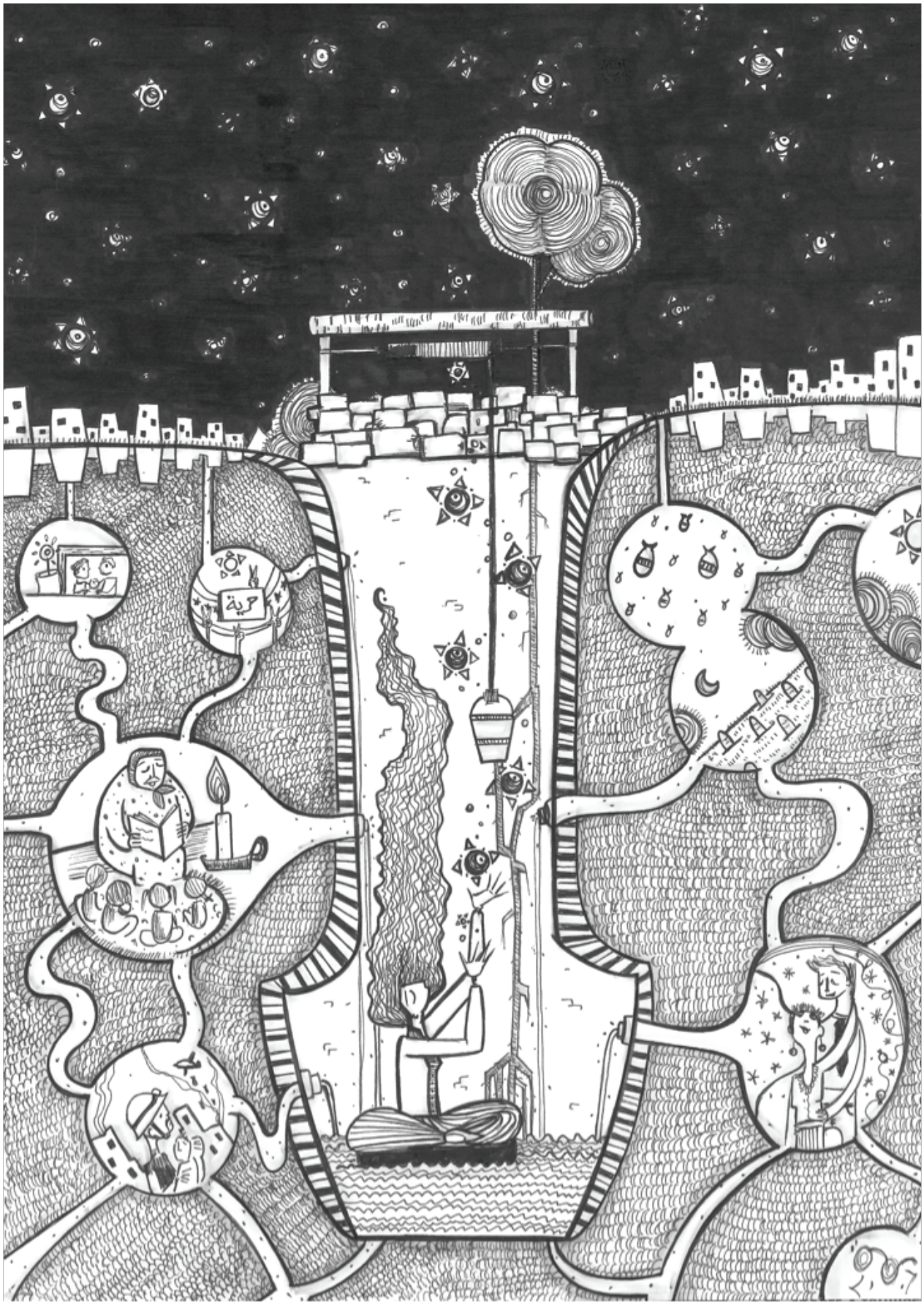
By my side, there is she.
Habibti, my home in this city.
Among the cats that weave the streets,
The kittens hiding in bushes
And the lion circling the edge of the country

She gently fixes the aircon.
Placing pomegranate plates and cinnamon tea
Beside my cramping womb, and bleeding ovaries.

I listen to the water cooler make a beat
In response to her warm hands.
A silhouette. Stretching her neck.
Crouched between the light and me.
From the room next door I cry -

For we women who are capable of taking flight
When no one ever taught us to fly.

LISA LUXX



7 YEARS ANNIVERSARY
BY DIMA NASHAWI

ART IN THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM

I remember when there used to be art in the hospital waiting room,
Courtesans and forests,
Chughtais and Impressionists
They were beautiful, scenes of life in an ugly place,
for those who glanced upon them
Portals to escape
I'm outside

Now they've been replaced

With photos
of swords and boxes
verses and axes
tattered slippers and black velvet backdrops
And crowds gather before them
For a glimpse of storied weapons
with the blood wiped clean,
Shining bright in museum lights
To remember death
in a hospital waiting room.

MAHNOOR BARI

DANCE OF CHIMERA 1
BY NADA AMMOUS

IN A MANOR OF SPEAKING*

By Nadia Hassan

A few lines into the paragraph she realized something. Her nose was warm. She looked up to see the sun shining through her sad urban-grimed window. Heart skipping a beat, she gave a silent fervid prayer to Ra.

The weeks of dismal weather had taken their toll on her psyche. She felt the chill all the way to her soul, and anything her eyes fell upon cast a dull melancholic shadow. Not that Fulton Manor was doing her psyche any particular favours. It had been a little over two months since she'd been admitted and her skin still prickled at every sound. Sit in isolation long enough and you become hyper tuned to a spectrum of aural stimuli that gnaw at your senses each to its own frequency. The disembodied wails, the creak of the floorboards as patients shuffle along past her room, the tick-tick-tick of her bedside clock…but far worst of all, the soft disingenuous rap at the door before the doctor steps in.

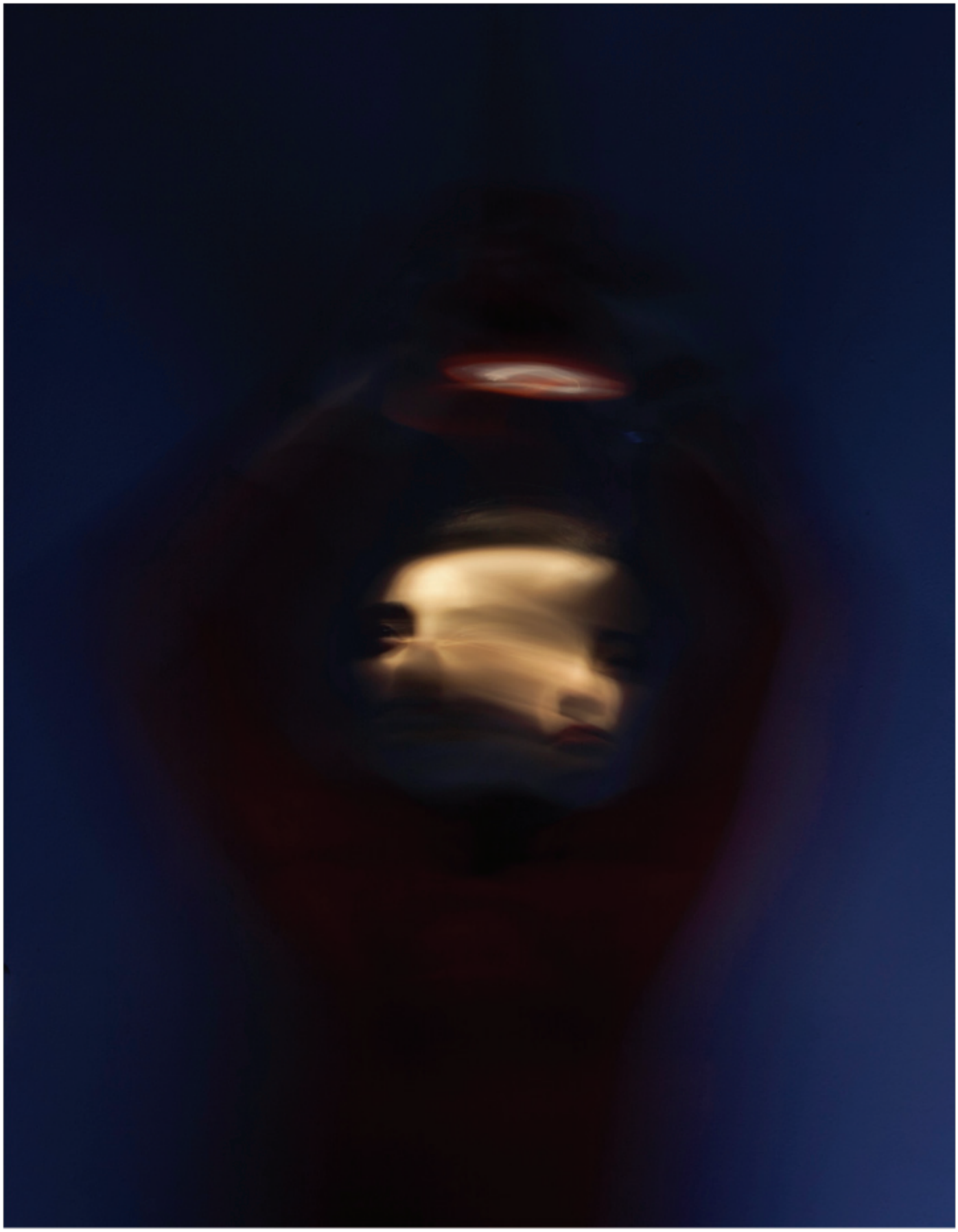
Hollowed out of any propriety, that knock reverberated upon every synapse. Unbidden. Like everything else at Fulton, unbidden and forbidding. She languished, walled in and out. Walls upon walls, from the sickly cream coloured variety of her cell, to those that paced the halls. For at the Manor, residents and staff alike were locked in, personal prisons hewn from the chaotic, the orderly, and the government sponsored.

Dr. Antrobus had come to see her that morning. Lost in thought she had not heard the knock, but soon felt a hand alight on her shoulder and a faint, measured voice say "Emily?" She had recoiled violently, hair standing on end as though magnetically drawn to this sudden presence in the room. He had given her something for her nerves again. Sitting across from his patronizingly wan smile, she watched his face shift and mutate, sometimes taking on disturbing shapes of inhuman metamorphosis. All equally self-important though. He occasionally looked down at his notepad and scribbled a few words, nodding with masterfully feigned empathy. Once, under the influence of yet another dose of "nerve calmers" she had conjured up an image of him scribbling himself into a rabid frenzy, and then poking out both his eyes - a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. For you see in spite of his outwardly professional demeanor, Emily could sense that Dr. Antrobus was repulsed by her overactive mind. "The voices" as he called them: a sinister possession necessitating expulsion.

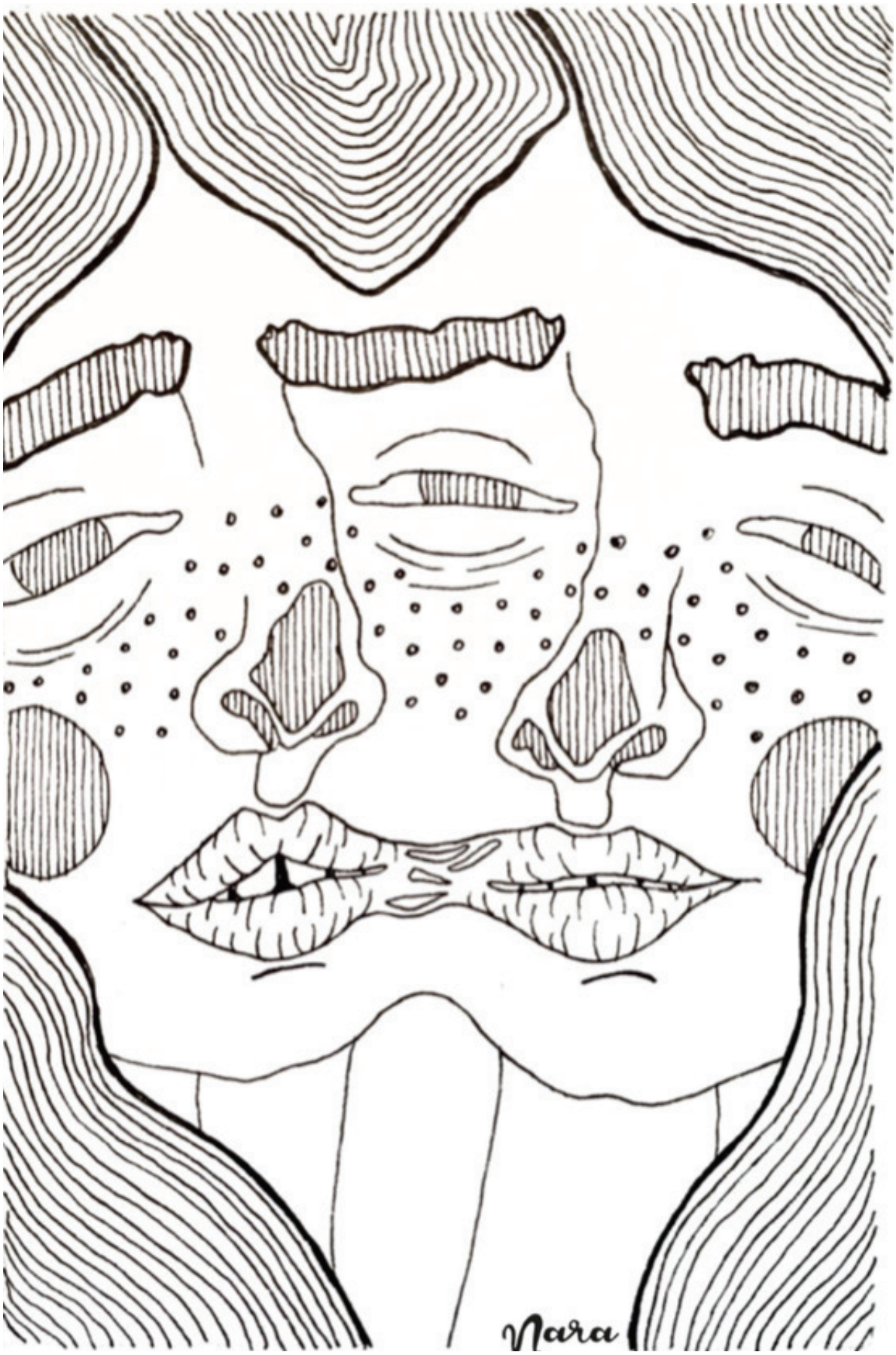
The voices – she could not remember a time before them. Even as a child her mind would whisper to her of things both merry and macabre. As she grew older, the world consumed her. Overwhelmed by the cruelty, violence, imbalance and impermanence, her brain became a battlefield upon which theories warred and fell. Where fear and hope danced around a fiery pit of burning questions. The onslaught was unbearable at times, but Emily had long since fraternized with the pain.

Headache…first thing she notices as she comes to, a dull throbbing at her temples. She winces as she opens her eyes and they try adjusting to the sunlit room. The ceiling is stained in one corner from recurring damp. Her attention turns to her body, which she is now aware of as being heavy, as though gravity had been kicked up a notch. As she attempts to raise her arm she senses something peculiar…the counterforce is acting from above. She tries to sit up but finds this completely futile. Unsettled, she looks down… and sees the straps, wrapped tightly around her body. A cold sweat breaks over her as terror sets in. She screams then – primal. Arms chafing on the restraints, she desperately tries to dislodge from her bondage. Tears streak down her face; she thrashes hopelessly, willing herself to tear out of her body, her reality. As the sound of orderlies walking briskly in begins to permeate her senses…remembrance. Her last session with the doctor had not gone well. There had been a defiant confrontation, which was met with a grim decision that she was past the aid of conventional medication…treatment would need to be stepped up. An outburst, she's being pulled away from a scowling Antrobus, held fast, pinned down and then, yes…much like this, a feeling of sudden numbness, drowsiness, faces swim above her. Emily sleeps.

** inspired by Sir Tom Stoppard's "Darkside." Related photography by Nada Ammous.*



DANCE OF CHIMERA 2
BY NADA AMMOUS



BY NARA

FRAGMENTS OF LIBYA

By Nour Naas

The air is hot and heavy when you walk out of the plane and you know that you are finally home because you should not be smelling cigarettes this deep inside the airport, but you do. The windows are big and the sun is pouring inside and it looks like no one ever sweeps the tile floors because what would even be the point? Everyone is carrying sand between their toes through and through. The employees are all wearing sandals, even the ones with guns, and you realize that you have never actually been to an airport like this. You realize that there is only one place that can feel like home, and it is right here, in this liminal space where we are always parting and uniting and making promises and breaking them again and again and again. The security officers and the men at the information desk are slumped against the walls, blowing smoke into the faces of men, women, and children. No one seems to mind it but us. It is our first time back in three years, and our first time back after the civil war, and we are directed into an office where three men are standing in either corner, staring us all up and down. I think it is because we have American passports, that we are brought in for questioning. Mama already told us not to say anything before we even landed. Our accents would give too much away, and we do not know what that would mean for us. So Mama talks, and Jalal and I just stand there and listen. The country has been rattling with violence since the war began, and there are signs of it before we are even outside of the compound. Plainclothes security officers have AKs slung across their shoulders, and there are bullet piercings on the off-white walls and the ceilings. The sense is different now, but it never stops feeling like home. When we head outside, I catch a boy about my age smiling at me, and I look away, but I must have smiled, too. Khali picked us up from the airport and drove us home to Hay al Andalus. On the way, we do not drive past one block without passing a revolutionary mural – murals reminiscent of Omar al Mukhtar, of Libyan resistance against Italian colonialism. In others, Gaddafi's face is squashed under a boot; red, black, and green fill in quotes in calligraphic script by resistance leaders: *we do not surrender, we win or we die*. There is even a mural of Che Guevara near the Internet cafe we begin to frequent when the cable at home grows too unreliable for what we are used to.

Hnena and Jdeda are home and Mama is crying again, kissing their hands and their foreheads and caressing their heads, holding them like she is afraid she will never see them again once she leaves, and my heart is so full and it feels like I made it to the place that I have aimlessly been running toward for so long. By some stroke of luck, I am finally home. I have a place here and it is bizarre in the most beautiful way. This agonizing absence of homeland, followed by return, makes me want to feel and smell and hear everything and so I take off my shoes and let my feet sweep the hot sand. I kiss Hnena and Jdeda and I kiss my uncles and smell Khali's cologne that he probably bought in Rome and I am tickled by their rough mustache against my cheek and I kiss my aunties and we hold each other for a long, long time, until they feel like they have compensated for all the years they were exiled from my life when I am in America. I run up the four flights of stairs with the black railings until I am finally opening the door to get out again and I see the city, a city that looks like everything and everyone was made from the earth. There are construction workers a few houses down, and I am with Sijoud when they wave in our direction and smile. We smile back and return our salutations. I do not feel like I have been away for all this time. It feels like these men working the house, like Hnena and Jdeda, like the boy from the matar, have been holding this story for me, just waiting for my return. I want to stay here forever. I beckon to Sijoud to go for a walk with me, and she seems as excited as I am. We go back downstairs and beg our mothers to let us go out until they finally do. We are only allowed to walk around the block once, then we have to go back inside. Aunty told Mama that a lot of girls have been getting kidnapped since the war ended. There are even gunshots and they come at random times of the day, so I am already grateful for this walk and no one is out now in the neighborhood but I get happy when I see somebody because I am home I am home I am home. And no one is sitting on the block, waiting for me to walk by to ask me where I'm from. Everyone already knows. My hair is curly and frizzy and the humidity is making it bigger like it is a flower that is blooming and that is when one of the men on the street calls me shafshoofa, but I do not mind. I do not even know what it means until my cousin laughs and fills me in.

I love everyone here like we are all family. This is exactly what it feels like. I am imagining my life with him and him and her and them and us and I want Mama to stay here. I want her to tell us that we are not coming back to America. She is talking about the possibility of this happening, and I am already talking about cutting up my passport, of throwing it into the sea. Mama tells me not to make jokes about that. The country is too unreliable, she says. We could be stuck here forever. But I do not miss America. Everything I miss, everything I have missed, I am finally here for. Sammy's wedding is going to be at the end of August and this is the first family wedding I am going to be here to go to.

I am looking at Khaltu Sharifa and her body is moving like someone is shaking her in a fit of rage. She is not able to drink from her small glass of water without spilling the half of it first, and that is when Mama weeps. Mama told me stories about Khaltu, stories that I have a hard time picturing in my head because the only picture I have is the one that is in front of me now. Who was she before? There is a piano in her house and it feels strange to see this, but I am not sure why. Khaltu has dozens and dozens and dozens of books that decorate the walls of the house. My favorite thing, though, is the painting of Omar al Mukhtar right by the doorway to the living room. Khaltu's husband left her and her kids. I do not know the whole story, but it makes me sad because Khaltu did not deserve to be left. I stare at her, trying not to stare too long, trying not to stare in the wrong sort of way. Khaltu tells me she loves me for the first time, and my heart goes in a circle. I do not know what or who I am or why or how she loves me, but I am flattered and I want to tell her that I love her, too, but for some reason I do not think that she will believe me. I am spending most of my time there talking to her caretaker, Zaytouneh. She is from Somalia and she speaks English, so we talk. And I ask her lots of questions and we only stop our conversation when it is time for salatul maghrib. Zaytouneh tells me that she is trying to get to Europe. She is trying, but what she really wants is to find her way to America. She says, Libya is not my final destination.

We leave Khaltu's house and the sun is so close that it is beating our backs. I look out in the distance because I see water and I think I see rocks too but I'm not sure. Mama laughed the kind of way that you do when you are sad. They are not rocks, it is trash that people dumped on the rocks, sitting for the water to pick it up tonight. A lot of things are different here but it is home. And I am learning how to love it in a different way because you just cannot love Libya in the same way that you did before the war happened, because people changed, the country changed, the landscape changed. I am falling asleep to the sounds of bullets but the gunshots and the fighting is happening so routinely these days that it is impossible for me to be afraid anymore. Hada al haya.

I am sitting on the beach in Khoms biting into the peaches that I washed in the ocean. I am standing tall on the rooftop breathing in the air of Hay al Andalus. I am buying that pink-beige mumtaz brand ice cream from the guy next door and my skin is all sweat and the heat is making it taste better than it probably actually is. I am sitting in al dar al arabiyyeh eating kusksi with usurti and nothing else matters. There is no war, no murder, no refugee camps, no kalashnikovs, no gangs, beyond this moment.

I am here.

We are home.

11 ROSE AVENUE

By Vineetha Mokkil

I always walk slow, head lowered, eyes on the ground. People think I have a stoop, an odd misalignment, probably inherited from either one of my parents. "Poor you," the mothers at school would say, tousling my hair as they breezed past, clutching their perfect offspring's hand. My teachers had a different take: it was all a matter of will power. My willingness to take charge of my life. "Stand up straight, Yasmin," they advised, briskly. "Look around you. Make eye contact with people, child."

I did nothing of the sort. Lay low, stay invisible, make no waves: my survival strategy from the start. It worked. The bullies at school left me alone. They wanted a meaty target and I had no flair for drama. None at all. When cranky children – or adults – are spoiling for a fight, they expect to get their money's worth. Swords must be drawn, blood spilt, insults exchanged. A shooting match is no fun if your enemy won't pick up a gun.

Middle school, high school, college – my strategy worked everywhere. The move from high school to college, a rough phase for many of my classmates, was no hassle for me. I was ready for it. But my grandparents went into a tailspin at the time. The school was familiar territory, the rambling white-walled building, a landmark of sorts in old Delhi, was a few blocks away from our home. No surprises lurked in those sunlit corridors. No shadows my grandparents feared.

Change, for better or worse, was my grandparents' worst nightmare. They worried constantly about what the future would bring. Spent sleepless nights, held whispered conferences behind my back. College was the big bad world – the long subway ride to the city, my freefall into the unknown.

"Be careful, Yasmin," my grandfather warned me, tugging at his grey beard.

My grandmother said she was praying for me. Allah would protect me in his infinite mercy.

To hear them talk you would think I was being shipped off to war. Nothing I said calmed them down. My jokes fell flat. My reassurances turned to ashes in the blaze of their anxiety.

All that worry for nothing. I coped just fine. My strategy of keeping to myself was a winner. Nobody bothered me. And I made sure not to bother anyone. Lectures and coursework took up most of my time. Between lectures, I parked myself at the library, a red brick building nestled in a quiet part of the campus. I checked out boatloads of books with my new library card. What did I read? War sagas, family dramas, thrillers, contemporary fiction, the classics. A rich medley of voices rang out in my ears. I slipped under the skin of characters, revelled in their secret histories. Stories opened up new worlds. Stories made the world new for me.

* * * *

There were a few other students who, like me, were regulars at the library. We formed a silent fellowship. A smile and a nod were all we exchanged, but our shared love of books shone through. One wintry morning, when the sun was nowhere to be seen, a tall, bespectacled boy walked into our midst, clutching a pile of books. I looked up at him from my seat. The books he held, close to his chest, were written by my favourite authors. I'd read them all.

"This place is an ice box," he said, flopping down next to me.

The ancient heaters inside the library hummed. He was right. The heaters, propped up precariously against the walls, were no match for December's bite.

"I hate winters," the boy said, scrunching up his face.

The librarian glared at us from behind her desk. This was a silent zone. Did we need reminding?
"I'm Neel," he whispered.

"Yasmin"

We shook hands. His hand was warm and toasty inspite of the chill.

Neel and I ended up leaving the library together, chatting like old friends – about our favourite authors, stories we loved, books we planned on reading, classes we liked, professors we loved to hate. My internal floodgates swung wide open. Words came tumbling out of my mouth on their own.

Neel, a second year literature student, was a free man that morning. He had no lectures to attend. "I'll walk you to the lecture hall," he said, following me down the shaded, tree-lined path.

I had a poetry lecture to go to: the Romantics, with their odes to Grecian urns and doomed loves, called out to me.
"Do you live nearby?" Neel asked.

"Takes me two hours to get here"

"Where's home?"

"Old Delhi"

My grandparents' home, my home, was in a part of the city with a colourful history: emperors held court there, palaces and forts graced the skyline, wars were won and lost. Ruins are everywhere. The past haunts my neighbourhood like a spectre.

Neel's world was nothing like mine. His parents had an apartment in Greater Kailash in south Delhi; an upmarket neighbourhood, all glitter and glam.

"My dad's a journalist," Neel said, his face flushed with pride. "The man eats, sleeps, and breathes stories."

Jeet Bhattacharya had a formidable reputation. His investigative reports took on politicians, industrialists, the country's kingmakers. Taking on the powerful was his specialty. His work brought him awards and glory, but it left him, and his family, wide open to risk.

"He never tells me what he's up to," Neel complained. "I get to read his stories when they get printed – like everyone else. Everything's a secret with him…He says it's for my own good!" Neel and his mother had learnt to live with it. No questions asked when his phone shattered the quiet at midnight. No details demanded when he disappeared, for days, to follow a lead or chase after a source. Restraint didn't come naturally to them. Mother and son had mastered the art, over time, to keep the peace.

Neel had many more stories to tell, and I was a willing listener. But we were out of time. We said goodbye outside the lecture hall, where students stood around in groups, busy talking on their phones or checking messages.
"See you tomorrow – at the library," Neel said, giving me a goofy smile.

I wished he was a first year student, who took the same classes as me. I wished we could go on talking on all day.

*****

My grandparents were god-fearing people. They prayed five times a day, kept every fast, donated to charities generously. The Koran was burnt into their souls. They could recite every line in the holy book. Allah's laws were sacrosanct. Allah's word their command. With every breath, they strived to be worthy of him.

I liked to think of Allah as a benign presence, a fuzzy cloud floating over our heads. I was no doubter. I believed in him, but fear of his disapproval didn't rule my every move. Call me a laid back devotee if you will. I skipped my prayers at times. Fasts were optional as far I was concerned. Sometimes I kept them, sometimes I said no. I didn't think Allah would mind.

My grandparents despaired over my attitude. My grandmother kept nagging me about it. She started off peaceably, grew more riled as she went on, and turned into a fire-breathing dragon, warning me of the multitude of horrors that awaited me. We argued. Tore each other apart. Retreated, hurt and angry, into our separate silences. My grandfather's approach was more subtle; his warnings were couched as parables, beautifully worded, beautifully told. Lecture or parable, the moral was clear: heaven's gates let in only those who worship Allah wholeheartedly. My devotion was lukewarm. I didn't qualify.

Finally, we declared an uneasy truce, my grandparents and I. Fed up of the battle, they took a step back, let me worship as I pleased. It was my life after all. I had the right to make my own choices – and pay for my sins when the time came. Neel laughed the whole thing off. He was an atheist like his father. God did not figure in his vocabulary. Religion was a fiction cooked up by a deluded human race. God, a childish fantasy, a fairy tale.

"Don't waste your time arguing about god," he said. "Life is too short"

Neel was no believer, but he was fascinated by my grandparents' faith. He bombarded me with questions: how often did they pray in a day? Did my grandfather visit the mosque regularly? Did my grandmother wear a hijab? Like his father, Neel was hungry for details. His curiosity was a genetic trait, an inherited craving. If something interested him, he wanted to know everything there was to know about it. He hunted for information in libraries and archives, read magazines and newspapers, trolled through websites, asked people a million questions. He would go to the end of the earth to dig up a fact.

"Curiosity killed the cat," I teased him sometimes.

"Which cat?" he'd ask, taking off his rimless glasses. "Give me a name, please"

My grandparents were amused by Neel's jokes. They laughed at the things he said, which I shared with them, word by word, at the dinner table. The mention of his name made them smile. They were keen on inviting my witty friends over for a meal. Lunch or dinner – my grandmother would cook up a feast.

One night, I mentioned Neel's father to them in passing. A report he published had set off a political storm a couple of weeks ago. The investigation uncovered a multi-crore scam involving campaign finances, triggered an enquiry, and landed two corrupt ministers in jail. The political elite was shaken. Bhattacharya had pulled off another journalistic coup.

My grandparents' stiffened at the mention of his name. Their smiles vanished. The tension in the air, the silence mushrooming over the dinner table, all of it surprised me.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Do you know Neel's father?"

"No," they shouted out in one voice.

"You sound upset"

My grandmother snorted. "I can't stand journalists. Always making trouble for others. Asking too many questions. Barging in where they're not wanted"

My grandfather's voice was thick with hate. "Twist a rumour out of shape, pass it off as the truth – that's their job"
"But Neel's father…"

My grandfather cut me off. "Eat," he ordered, pointing at my plate. "Dinner's getting cold"

My grandmother had cooked her famous biryani that night. The recipe was a secret, guarded zealously over the years like a family heirloom. The food deserved my full attention, but the burst of flavours on my tongue couldn't erase the memory of my grandparents' outburst. Their loathing for journalists seemed personal, visceral. Why? What old wound had I raked up?

*****
September segued into balmy October. Crisp breeze, mellow sunshine, glorious days, not too warm or cold. Leaves turned from green to gold. Autumn painted the city amber. On Diwali eve, I got an invite to a party at Neel's house. His mother hosted one every year, to which his parents' friends flocked, high on festive cheer.

I hate parties. Faking a smile all evening, making small talk, bonding with a bunch of strangers – where was the fun in that?

"Come say hello to my Mom," Neel said. "Take off soon as you get bored. She won't mind"

"Can't I drop in another day? When there's no party?"

"Ignore the guests. Talk to me, talk to Mom. Problem solved!"

He looked so hopeful, and so desperate, as if a no from me meant the end of the world. I was flattered by the attention. Also, curiosity prompted me to say yes. From everything Neel told me so far, every funny story and anecdote he shared, I had painted a mental picture of his mother. I wanted to check if I had got it right. Would my picture match the reality? She turned out to be warm and friendly, effortlessly witty, queen of the wicked one liner. Dressed in a flowing red tunic and black trousers, she circulated among the guests scattered on the lawn and in the living room, chatting, laughing, making sure everybody was well fed, and happily drunk on wine.

She pulled me aside to give me a hug. "So glad you came," she said, holding on to me like a long lost friend. "Neel talks about you all the time"

Neel grinned at us from across the living room, lit with flickering diyas and delicate paper lanterns. The air pulsed with dance music: a heady beat, hard to resist. Nikhil rocked back and forth on his heels, raised his arms above his head, swayed like a tree in the wind. His dance moves were limited. What he lacked in dance skills, he made up for with his taste in music. Nobody's perfect!

He gave up on the dancing in a minute. "My dad's headed home," he said, walking up to me. "I got a text from him. He's on his way"

"Don't hold your breath," Neel's mother warned us in a deadpan tone. I couldn't tell if she was joking.

The living room had filled up. There was a lot of talk and some crazy dancing, and people had made a game of cracking jokes about the host's absence.

"Jeet forgot his own party? Son of a bitch!" someone shouted out.

"I'm cleaning out his stash of Scotch"

"He's deep undercover. Wandering the countryside in disguise"

Nikhil was not amused. He ignored the laughter, checked his phone for messages, kept the faith in his missing dad.
"Come see his study," whispered to me. The two of us slipped out quietly. Neel led me down a long corridor that led to his dad's study, a huge, high-ceilinged room lined with bookshelves. I liked that there was very little furniture in there. No leather sofas and glass-topped tables, no cabinets and clunky fittings, nothing but a desk and a straight-backed chair, angled next to the window.

Neel pointed at the bookshelves. "Take your pick. Borrow anything you like. Dad won't mind"

The books sat on their perches, meticulously shelved, watching us like old friends. I felt at home in their company. Maybe this was the reason I ended up staying at the house for longer than I had planned. Close to midnight, when I called for a cab, the party was winding down. Some of the guests had already left; the rest were on their way out. Neel's father was still missing. The jokes about him had dried up; it was too late; the guests were too drunk; the party had gone off fine without him.

*****

Two weeks after the Diwali party, Neel showed up at my doorstep, unannounced. My grandparents and I had just finished Sunday lunch, a grand meal at our house. The food put me in a pleasant daze. I went up to my room to take a nap. While I was drifting off to sleep, the doorbell rang, making me jump. I heard the sound of my grandfather's footsteps. The front door creaking open. Voices. My grandmother's raspy cough.

My grandfather called out to me from the living room.

Reluctantly, I made my way downstairs. Visitors who ruffle the lazy calm of a Sunday afternoon are either idiots or sadists. If I had a choice, I'd bar them from the house. My grandparents were too polite. They entertained anyone who showed up.

I did a double take when I got to the living room. Neel was seated on the couch and my grandparents stood around, fussing over him.

"What're you doing here?" I blurted out.

"Walking tour," he smiled sheepishly. "A bunch of us came to old Delhi this morning for a tour"

Tourists were bussed into old Delhi from the city to give them a taste of the local attractions: historic ruins, ancient emperors' tombs, open air markets, street food stalls. Everywhere they went, they went in groups, sticking close to each other like flocks of nervous penguins. I tried to picture Neel tagging along with the pack.

"What will you have?' my grandfather asked him. "Lunch? Tea? Something cold?"

"I'll make you a cup of elaichi tea. Nice and strong," my grandmother announced.

Their hospitality surprised me. They played hosts as if they had no memory of Neel's father's profession and their disgust for it. Separating father from son came easy to them. Neel was my friend – a nice boy, a harmless student. They were not blaming him for his father's faults.

And so the afternoon stretched into a long, chatty evening. Neel discovered that my grandfather was an amateur astronomer, an expert on the stars, the planets, all the known galaxies. He bombarded my grandfather with questions. My grandfather was delighted by his interest. Left to themselves, they would've stayed up all night talking about the universe and its mysteries. I was the one who broke up the chat when twilight faded and neon lamps, orange and bright, blinked like fire flies. It was getting late. Home was a long way off for Neel.

"Better get going," I reminded him. "Don't make your parents come looking for you"

"Dad's not home," he said, strapping on his backpack.

"How about your Mom?"

"She's cool. Never makes a fuss"

"Tell her I said hello"

"I will"

Neel promised to visit us again soon. He thanked my grandparents for the tea and the homemade snacks, for putting up with his barrage of questions about the stars and the planets. He couldn't wait to be back for more.

* * * *

A month later, during Ramadan, I invited Neel to our *iftar* feast. My grandmother outdid herself that evening: mutton biryani, *khichda* with a side dish of *bhuna gosht*, kebabs, mountains of *tandoori* rotis, deliciously sweet *phirni* and *halwa*. The spread was big enough to feed the whole city.

Neel praised her cooking with every mouthful. "*Gosht* never tasted so good." "This biryani is fantastic! Please can you share your secret recipe with me?" "The kebabs are so soft. They melt in my mouth." "I can't stop eating the *phirni*. Keep me away from it, plea….se…"

My tough-talking grandmother melted. "You made my day, dear Neel! Feels good to be appreciated," she said, rolling her eyes at me and my grandfather.

Our appreciation was more of the silent kind. Neel's praise was an ocean, churning without stop; ours a steady stream, flowing quietly by.

"Ate too much. Greedy pig," Neel groaned afterwards.

We were in the living room, the two of us. My grandparents were out of earshot. They had shooed us out of the kitchen, insisting on doing the washing-up themselves.

"Your grandparents," Neel asked, clutching his stomach. "They've always lived here? In this house?"

"I came to stay with them when I was a baby"

"Didn't your parents live here too?"

"No"

Neel sat up straight. "Where were they?"

"In America. That's where the accident happened," I said, repeating the story I had heard from my grandparents a hundred times. The details were etched in my heart. The details were written in my blood. My father at the wheel, my mother seated right next to him. A moonless night, strong winds, snow pouring down from the sky, my father losing control, the car skidding off the road and crashing into a tree.

"I'm sorry," Neel mumbled. "I'm so sorry"

"I was asleep at home. My parents left me with a babysitter that night"

When they heard the news, my grandparents caught the first flight to Philadelphia. Through the fog of grief they wandered, signing papers, making the funeral arrangements. They brought me back with them to Delhi a fortnight later, swaddled in a fluffy white blanket, a blanket my grandmother still keeps, faded and threadbare, in an old trunk at the foot of her bed.

"You miss your parents?" Neel's asked, softly.

"How can I? I have no memory of the time we spent together. I have no memory of the accident. My life, as I remember it, has always been here. In this house, this city, with my grandparents"

I felt so tired I was shaking. My breath caught in my throat my stomach hurt as if someone had gut punched me. The floor shifted under my feet the walls shimmered like flimsy paper. The world spun too fast flinging broken bits of the past

the present the future at me. Nothing solid to hold on to. Nothing built to last. I leaned back against the cushions and shut my eyes against the light. Time to be quiet. Time to be still. Neel and I had done enough talking for the day.

* * * * *

A week after the *iftar*, there came a Monday morning when Neel was not to be found on campus. A sudden vanishing act; no texts, no call to tell me he was taking the day off. I looked for him everywhere: in the library, the lecture halls, the canteen, where the smells of breakfast, lunch and dinner hung around in the air. I checked the auditorium, a tall, domed behemoth, built to impress. In there, a group was busy rehearsing a play. About a dozen people sat around, watching, criticizing, shouting out suggestions. Neel wasn't among them.

I gave up on the search and went to class. My attention wandered for the rest of the day. I worried about Neel's silence. I tried not to conjure up a string of horrible reasons for it. After classes, I headed to the library to finish work on a paper. Realizing I was making ridiculously slow progress, I picked up my bag and walked out into the white hot evening. The sun was a flaming disc in the sky. Everything withered under its glare.

"Yasmin!" Neel's voice made me jump. He popped up in front of me, on the tree-lined path, a living, breathing apparition. His clothes were crumpled, his chin covered with stubble. His eyes had a wild look, red-rimmed, and lined with dark circles. Had he stayed up all night? Starved himself?

"We need to talk," he said, looking away from me.

"About?" I asked, mystified.

He pointed at a bench, sheltered by a swaying weeping willow, angled away from the path. We walked there, side by side, in silence.

Neel didn't speak up. It seemed to me like he was searching for the right words to soften the blow. I wanted him to stop hedging and give me the news, no matter how ghastly, how heartbreaking it was. Waiting was agony. It made me sick.

"I'm sorry," he said, finally breaking his silence.

"For what?"

"For asking too many questions. For wanting to know you better. I shouldn't have gone looking…"

"What's wrong, Neel?"

"11 Rose Avenue – does that mean anything to you?"

"No"

"That was your parents' address. The Philadelphia house"

"Where we used to live before the accident?"

"There was no *accident*," he spat out the word like a curse. "No car crash, no snow storm, no ice on the streets. Your parents set off a bomb on a bus. They strapped on a bomb, got on a downtown bus, killed 20 people and blew themselves up"

I stared at him, without blinking, like I was seeing him for the first time. His features looked all wrong: eyes too wide apart, nose too big for his face, weak chin, thin lips, mouth twisted in a sneer.

"Your grandparents lied to you," he said, gripping my arm tightly. "They made up a neat story. The storm, the drive, the accident – all lies. You were a just a baby. You'd believe anything"

I broke free of his grip. "Stop. Stop feeding me lies. You're the liar, not them. Your dad snoops around. Not them"

His eyes were wet. "I heard it from my dad," he said, wiping away his tears with the back of his hand. "There are news stories, case histories, reports he checked. He knows what he knows. We can't change the facts"

"I don't believe *him*. Or *you*"

"Ask your grandparents then. Ask them if it's true"

What choice was I left with? I had no memory of Philadelphia. No memory of my parents' life or their last moments on earth.

Neel leaned in closer, his voice a whisper in my ears. "Please don't hate me," he sobbed. "I never meant to hurt you with this."

BY NARA

UNTITLED

Traditions in carry-on bags/ carried on backs/ now become furnishings/ with unfingered holybooks/ failed wallhangings/ in 1 of 2-familyhome's livingrooms/

Make one word for livingroom/ no// one word for 2 familyhome livingrooms/ make one word for family/ home/ one word for un holybooks/ unholy fingerings/ making walls/ with failed paintings/ I'm waiting/ make one word/ for furnishings on backs/ furnishings in bags/ bags of tradition/

Bags become words in failed painting traditions/ bags become word for family/ become word for home/ become word for living/ become word for room/ become word for 2 families' home living-room/

JENNA HAMED

LEARNING MY LANGUAGE IN THIS CITY

After Mahmoud Darwish's *Identity Card, Ana Arabi*

and do I offend you

my presence: I make noise in a loud room, like I broke something, broke silence, broke code, broke space,
I sit inside the mess I made, write it all down, call it poetry, my next manuscript,
I call it what I want, but it's still wrong,

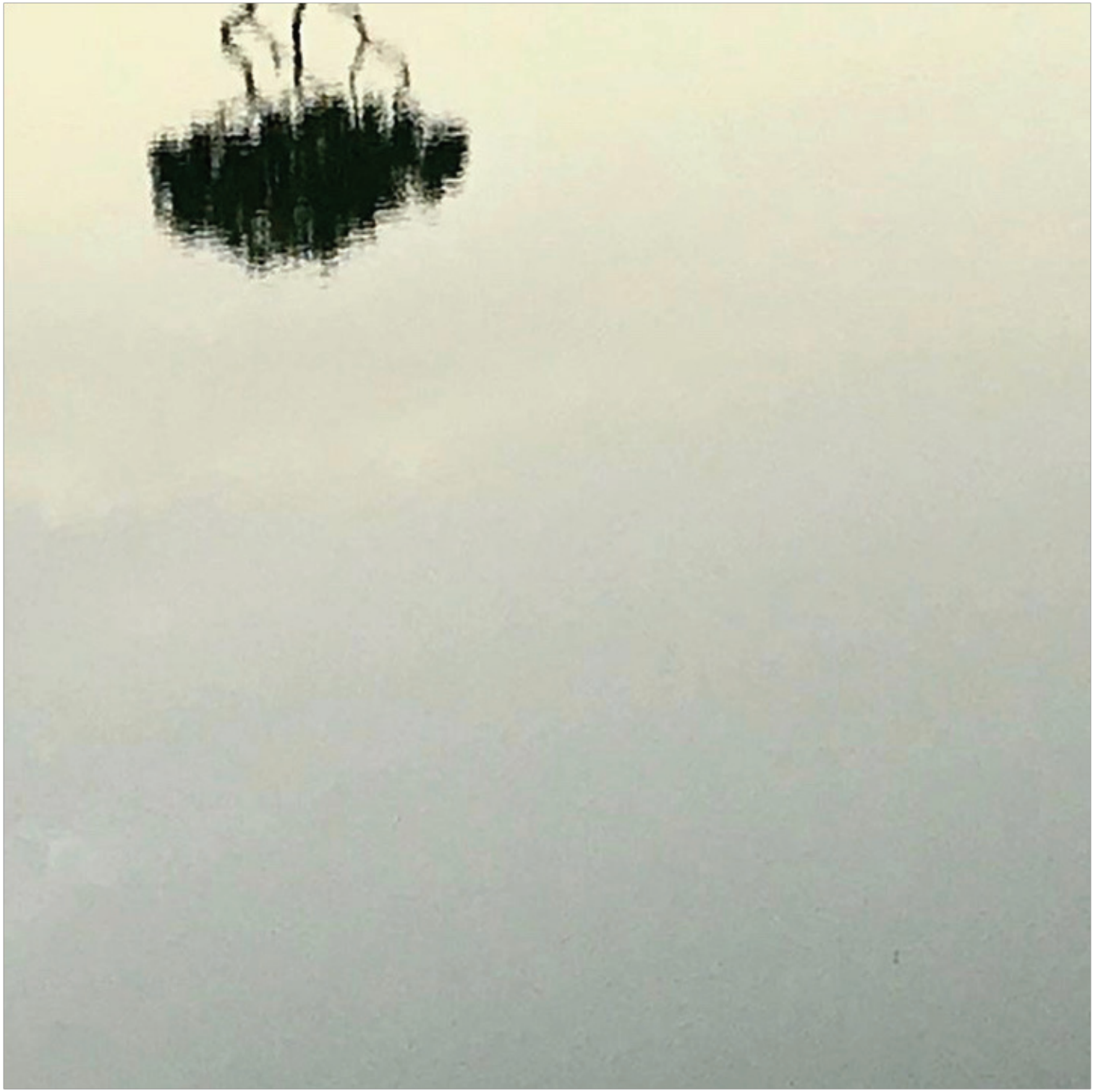
and do I offend you

my blue eyes: my blue eyes stare, my blue eyes, my blue eyes are the wrong blue, my blue eyes, my blue eyes aren't yours, my blue eyes my blue eyes, mediterranean blue, my blue eyes stare at you, does that offend you,

and do I offend you

my stop is 8th street: I don't take up too much space in this city except when I wake and my arms stretch so far they ask me if I can reach their families back home, I count the square feet in my bedroom, my bed touches two walls, my history drawn on three, we don't think about who came before us anymore so I reach back to touch the hands that built this home, the hot black hands, the bleeding red hands, the empty white souls sitting under roofs, I never liked this place anyway,

JENNA HAMED



MEMORY ON WATER
BY HANANAH ZAHEER

SKIRTING THE LIMITS

By Mohamed Tonsy

I have a problem with refrain, and what it entails. It makes me uncomfortable. Claustrophobic. It's otherworldly because it implies a natural order to the restriction, unlike self-control, which is a choice.

I'm driving through the desert at night with my friends in my 4x4 to the coast. Our bikes are dismantled in the trunk. They rattle from the undulations in the road and I feel their restlessness. If you ride them right not even human limits will apply to your body, or your mind. Farida sat next to me for the first half of the drive, then settled in the back behind me to sleep. Ahmed is sleeping, his head leaning against the window, reclining next to her. My Angel is stroking my hair, her hand in mine, never out of arm's reach. Simple pleasures. Omar is in the passenger seat drooling. Little refrain.

A bit of hash and coffee helps my concentration; it animates the road for me. I do not need to sleep. No overindulgence; little refrain.

The road is dark. Desert swallows up light readily, leaving nothing but blackness as far back as I remember. My memory lapses. Hills and sand dunes like waves hide the horizon, limiting my vision of where we came from and where we're going. We traverse the geography of our minds with nothing to stop us, but our own human limitations, finding that what we can perceive is more than what we can see. To not lose myself in the dark I practice refrain.

A jackal invades the road and my vision. I swerve, then get us back on the road. Thank God for coffee and reflexes. A minute later Omar says that we have to watch out. The words spill out of his mouth.

"Yeah, thanks." I tell him.

"Was it a jackal, or a dog?"

"A jackal."

"It looked like a dog."

"You're high and your eyes are half-closed. You thought Ahmed was a dog a while ago."

"I remember that." He says, nodding knowingly. No refrain.

Driving down a one-lane highway at 150 km/hr. I'll have to slow down because of flood damage to the stretch of road coming up, I mouth to myself, so my Angel, my Despair and my Demon sitting with me will somehow remember if I don't, or maybe the words and my breath are part of the sand dunes now and are rolling specks of sand into new and random places that make complete sense, but only to it.

I turn the fog-lights on as my Angel squeezes my shoulder, her freckled arm animated, coming out of the dark. She traces my lips with her thumb. I bite it lightly, then bite harder, she pulls it away and taps me on the head, telling me off. Bad dog. Omar is nodding off, drool runs down his jacket (but not onto my seats) and Ahmed sleeps in the back, huddled up in his jacket. Refrain.

"I'm a blind cyclist," Omar says, words slurred. "I ride downhill in the night to get to the peaks of mountains, from the lowest corner of the Earth, from that valley there and when I open my eyes, I'm still in the same place."

"If you're 'blind' then you won't be able to tell the difference, now will you?"

"Stop being annoyed. It's making me feel tight-chested. And sick."

The car hums on and the bikes rattle excitedly in the back.

"Duuuuunes." He says. I can hear the shape of his mouth in his pronunciation as the sound reverberates off of the small confines of the car and I start to feel nauseous.

"Maybe if I bring the horizon closer, I can look over it? Just to check that limit of my list."

"If you do your job more often, ride, train and race like you should then maybe you can check it off your list. You'll get over the horizon the right away. What're you doing now? Assuming what's there? What do you know?"

"I just want to look under the desert's skirt," he says dejectedly, expecting rejection. "I can't do that while racing, I'm not like you."

He swallows something back audibly. Must've be an effort because he's hyperventilating now. I press down on the accelerator.

No fucking refrain.

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

"I'm sorry about last week's race."

"You threw that race out the window."

"Hey..." the Angel says.

Ahmed opens his eyes for a second, submits to the scene, despairs, and falls back asleep.

I cannot see Demon's reasoning. He keeps wiping his mouth and can't even catch the drool. He wants to look under the desert's skirt when he can't pull back the veil in his mind; glass reconstituting sand.

"Stars moving, circling overhead. So what is time if stars can fly this quickly? Am I outside of time?"

You were out of time. Lagged behind in the race, put the entire team back, couldn't do what we trained to do. There's only one skirt that doesn't take practice to get under. "We'll blow the competition's skirts off, isn't that what you said?"

Silence. Just that whir of wheels, which turns into a grind as I turn right and turn the fog-lights off, and slow down so we don't tip over. Fucking refrain.

"It must've been easier to blow her skirt off."

The Angel moves to nudge him awake, pull the veil of darkness from his eyes, but we're in the desert at night. Doesn't get darker than this.

"Those blue panties—" I start.

"—with white stripes, and a bow." He finishes my phrase with me, but comes out in first place somehow.

The Angel's white top is almost luminous in the dark. Her hands over her eyes, and I can't think of anything more ironic. I shake my head as the rolling sand blurs. I blink hard, it clears up again and so does my head.

She waits then passes her hand over my shoulder. It lingers, dizzying me. Claustrophobia clouds my mind, as if her hand on my shoulder is what will keep my head from floating away. I shake it off, and lean forward over the wheel. Tunnel vision in the car's headlights that I will never reach the end of.

"I'm going to throw up," Omar says.

I press the brakes, he jumps out the door, throws up, falling to his knees. We're a point of light in the darkness. The dunes seem closer in the darkness. A tangible limit now. I can hear the vomit flowing from the Demon's throat and crashing upon itself in a pool in the sand. An inelegant oasis. Unnatural. Sand would never make a sound like that by itself. Demon can't help himself.

The Angel gets out of the car, looks at me with her head bowed down. I wave my hand dismissing her. She walks over slowly to the Demon on the ground to help him. Sand would never make a single sound.

I close all the doors. She looks up at me trying to understand what's happening as I climb in the car, turn it around and drive out of the desert.

"Never makes a single sound," I tell despair. It would've taken too long to explain. They'll have plenty of time to see their limits as the darkness lifts and descends upon them again, and now with no choice but to see just that. I hope they don't miss it. 100 km into the desert. And back out again.

When we get to Dahab, I park at the Laguna, strip down and walk slowly into the water feeling the cold embrace of it. Ahmed is still asleep.

I leave all my baggage in the car and swim out. Dawn sets upon me, lifts up the veil and in that moment of clarity, where the first light transforms the dark mountains surrounding me into discernible, even if blurred edges. Waves dance around me in small clusters devouring me whole in the early morning pre-light. I sense the limit being driven closer.

I swim out further till I can only see the rolling sea, barely the beach. My car is a distant memory as I see nothing beyond the lattice of the surface of water, and I sense Despair waking. He looks out to sea, sees neither Angels, nor Demons, but just a man and he says, "Lost all sense of my self. This must be the shore. How long have I been sleeping?"

Dawn lifts mountains from the darkness they were about to drown in without making a single sound that would rise over the rumbling crawl of the waves. A low chorus. Just in time. And for once my head is clear.

BY NARA

"LOWER PARADISE ROAD"
By Sahar Mustafah

She refused to exit the car that her son had borrowed from his white roommate. She was convinced they both smoked marijuana. One year and she barely recognized him with his hair grown out and jeans that hung below his waist.

An apartment on Lower Paradise Road seemed a less auspicious place to start over.

"Yamma, it's only a street name," her son said in his loosely slipping Arabic. In one hand, he clutched the classified ads, thick red circles bleeding through the page. It was full of bold-faced words and acronyms she did not understand. In his other hand, he thumbed the screen of his mobile.

The bombing had gutted her school building, her classroom unrecognizable: no traces of desks, or the painted sea mural, or her books, or their laughter. Nothing left to imagine what it had once been.

She'd escaped before children she knew—her female students, the boys who sold cups of creamy sahlab at the market, the Hamdan twins who lived next-door—were executed alongside their parents. Before chemical nerve agents.

Her son leaned against her side of the car and tapped on the windshield with the car key. She could sit in the same spot for hours—she had remained hunched in a bedroom closet for days when the artillery began. But now she would surrender to her impatient son. She adjusted her shayla and unlocked her door.

Upper or Lower Paradise Road. Surely there was some place for her in between.

A BARISTA WALKS INTO A BODEGA
By Nadia Khayrallah

Amongst all the incarnations of "what *are* you" not all of them are the prodding kind. Some are more of a hopeful "are you one of us?" I dread them only because I know that I'll disappoint (in both the no's and the yes's).

So this barista walks into a bodega. It happens quite regularly.

I hope you're not *too* excited to see my face, I think. This is what a colonizer looks like, sometimes.

I buy coffee with this dollar I got giving more expensive coffee to people who wouldn't come here. (Some of them also want to know what I am, but in a different way. They seem to think I'm *interesting*, but not *scary* like you or anything.)

I do it so that I can make *art*. You probably wouldn't understand it . . . I mean, I don't really understand it either, most of the time.

You switch up the language with hopes I'll understand. I could try to respond, but I'm afraid that will come out of my mouth is some fuzzy white noise. So I try to perk up my eyes and nod my head to show that I understand more than I know how to say. Not everything, but more than I can say right now.

SHATILA (BOSNIA)

Shatila
no light.
Parallel world.
Shaky, small paths. Sort of buildings,
dark and high. So high that they can't be seen.
Garbage. Mud. Waste.
Hasty walking kids with
Palestinian flags.
And fake guns.
Everything is
old. Haunting ugly past. People
never arrived in the
present.
Dirty feet. Tons of dirt
between finger and nail. Between
earth and dirt.
Broken teeth.
Symptoms of Nakba. A disease
called West. Ugly virus. called
Ariel. called Elie. called
Zionism. called Phonecianism.
Paralyzed. No
words to describe
this. As if
someone killed me. My soul
left my body. reason my head.
I feel DEATH.
I leave. I see
Beirut again.
Blurred borders
between two worlds.
The streets are open.
The sky is still there.
In Beirut. The sun did not set after all.
Parallel worlds.
I left the prison of the innocent
from Jesus' land and reentered the
free world of the unholy.
Plastic world. Fake lives. Dollars. And class.
This place is tattooed
on my chest. Home
engraved like
the bullet that did
not kill me in 1992

DANI BEIRUTI

JIDDO

Jiddo who through his own blue marbles
sees my grandmother
my namesake
in my eyes
whose chest heaves when he laughs
who has teeth like rocks
is grey socks
is blood sugar and needles
whose knees are swollen
whose hair is snow
who wakes up at the crack of dawn
who wears a necktie everyday
who comes on a plane to visit
who says, "I no speak English," in the airport
who would rather be on the seaport
taking out a boat
fishing on the bay
who teaches me how to play cards
who lets me sleep next to him when I am
scared
who watches the news
in Arabic
and falls asleep on the couch

MICHELLE ABOU-RAAD

TINTS OF RESILIENCE
BY DIMA NASHAWI

TEACHING TRANSNATIONALISM AS AN IDENTITY: EXPRESSIONS OF SIMULTANEITY IN *LOOKING BOTH WAYS: AN EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN JOURNEY* BY PAULINE KALDAS.

Layla Goushey

In her latest book, *Looking Both Ways: An Egyptian-American Journey,* Pauline Kaldas expresses the synchronous, connected, simultaneous experience of the transnational individual. Where distance once allowed Arab-Americans a certain amount of time to shift from their Western realities to their Eastern roots when communicating by handwritten letters and expensive long-distance phone calls, now with the benefit of communications technology and air travel, they experience a singular situation in multiple ways while contending with their own and others' multiple perspectives.

Kaldas articulates the subtle concept of simultaneity, of living in a transnational migratory space. She expresses this sense of simultaneity in her description of her experience during the Egyptian protests of the Arab Spring of 2011. She writes "As soon as the protests begin, I call my family in Egypt. All of them are staying at home, hoping that things will calm down soon.The emails and phone calls tumble into my house almost simultaneously with friends and colleagues asking about my family."

In physics, simultaneity refers to the perceived relation of events to each other. John Walker, founder of Autodesk, Inc. and co-author of AutoCAD offers a definition.

> One of the most fundamental deductions Albert Einstein made from the finite speed of light in his theory of special relativity is the relativity of simultaneity—because light takes a finite time to traverse a distance in space, it is not possible to define simultaneity with respect to a universal clock shared by all observers. In fact, purely due to their locations in space, two observers may disagree about the order in which two spatially separated events occurred.

Pauline Kaldas invites readers to understand the impact transnational simultaneity has on everyday lives and perceptions. For Kaldas, this phenomenon starts with a name. Her name. Soon after her birth, there was a hint of what was to later come. Her name, Pauline, was awarded to her after several days of thoughtful consideration by her relatives. Her parents were forward thinkers who were interested in new ideas and in the promises of the West. The name Pauline was suggested by her Aunt Vicky, who had studied French. While the name Pauline was an oddity in Egypt, it is familiar to Europeans and Americans. This name was meant to "satisfy the needs of tradition and modernity," Kaldas writes, "This name, with its foreign pronunciation, its removal from the Arabic language – still perceived as inferior in this post-colonial society – must have caught my mother's ear." She goes on to write "This name marked my place at the periphery of the world I was born into and which became mine." So, at birth, Pauline Kaldas was situated in a conceptual, simultaneous space at the border of the Western world that she would later enter and make her own, while still being immersed in her Egyptian homeland. From one vantage point, she possessed a unique name that set her apart in her home country; from another perspective, her name foretold her entry into the world her name symbolizes.

International travel is increasingly accessible to many people, but not everyone. Through literature, such as Kaldas' book, readers are inspired to consider how instant, global communications are impacting all communities, whether or not the reader is aware of the emergence of individual experiences of transnational simultaneity. These are important concepts for readers to consider if only to decipher how their experiences link with others in the world.

In the chapter "Make it Like the Recipe" Kaldas discusses her inability to follow a precise recipe. She explains, "Perhaps it's my winding life path that makes it so difficult for me to follow rules – there is always another way to get there even if it involves a lot of stumbling." She expresses transnational embodiment more fully as she describes a conversation with an Egyptian friend who tells her that her entire body transforms as she switches from English to Arabic. He says, "you become a different person with each language."

Those who express secure transnational cultural embodiments have spent extensive time in two or more countries as children or adolescents. Multiple language acquisitions contribute to their personal characteristics, and they embody transnational simultaneity by expressing themselves through multiple cultural norms. For multilingual and multicultural individuals, those internalized "different persons" mentioned by Kaldas' friend will have different views of the same events. They will find alternate paths to the same destination. Differing cultural understandings and interpretations live within transnational individuals and are also external to them, simultaneously.

After teaching teenagers and young adults for over twelve years, I have learned by trial and error that teaching writing and teaching Arab Studies requires a scaffolded approach. There is a well-known teaching axiom that says, "We have to start from where students are." Kaldas' work is accessible to readers who are new to topics in Arab studies, and to Migration, Diasporic, and Transnational Studies. She offers numerous well-told vignettes that can be launching points for richer discussions on immigration, on intercultural competencies, on the Arab Spring, and of Egyptian and Pan-Arab history. I will use this book to introduce readers to new ideas in Arab and Transnational studies, and I recommend this book to anyone who seeks a rich and enlightening literary experience.

SCATTERED
BY DIMA NASHAWI

IBN BATTUTA: REFLECTIONS ON MY TRAVELS*

An inscrutable yen for other lands,
wanderlust, piqued my budding soul
as desire takes hold of a man
when his lover is faraway.
I saw arrows loop and advance
on a map, marking out a quest,
an itinerary without end.

All the stirrings to go fused at once.
My body sensed the longing flow
in its veins till, one propitious dawn,
the fear that gripped my heart
that I would never see my parents again
never roam the streets of Tangier
and watch the waves break on its shore
yielded to the call of the caravan.

•

Within a year I arrived in holy Mecca,
where I hoped the pilgrimage would prime me
for a life of virtue. I saw much kindness
in the city, the poor were fed first at feasts,
and the air was laden with human perfume.
I ran into many a learned man, like my father,
devoted to debating the faith and to contemplation.
And I used my stay to study the Law—
the land of Islam was boundless,
one keen mentor kept urging,
while able judges were few.

Although I was forewarned
the pilgrim must not stray too far,
a seer in Alexandria had divined I would meet
a remarkable sage in India. After seven years
and many countries, his divination came true,
and soon afterward a sultan in resplendent Delhi
entrusted me with a mission to China,
and so it went, one place led to another,
as if I had become the arrow.

•

So much wealth passed through my hands,
countless gold and silver coins,
and large tracts of farmland. The sultan
showed much gratitude for my service,
and honored me at his sumptuous banquets.

But I was profligate and, being a stranger,
I paid dearly for unpopular verdicts.

I fell into debt, wrote the sultan a panegyric,
pleading with him to ease my plight.

I burrowed in my devotions,
prayed all night and fasted for forty days,
breaking the fast with only a mouthful of rice.
Those were the gladdest times.

But why did I bow to Mali's gold in old age?
I should have been a scrupulous judge
of my own demons.

•

The journey is a trail with a grammar,
and I trained my eyes and ears
to take note of only the facts
about both the humble and sublime,
a habit that spared me the detours
of emotions and adverbs.

Yet even a disciplined soldier cannot keep his poise
when an army of disordered images
assails him from all sides,

as happened to me in Shanghai.
In that great city, with clean streets
and shops packed with alluring silk
and finely crafted wares, I stayed home—
I had no patrons
the laws were not our laws,
and people's words were as inscrutable as their gestures.

Far flung, with no friends
or a woman to fortify me against the night,
I succumbed to petty notions
and began to waste away, lost force,
like a spent arrow.

And the past, instead of lifting me,
only weighed me further down.
I chanced in the market on a sage
from Ceuta, whose speech and scented beard
brought a wounding whiff of Tangier.
Then one night, tepid waves, like the waves
of the dark blue sea, fell and rose
over the surface of my spirit,
until I sank into raw, brooding melancholy.
I thought of my daughter in Cairo,
looking by lamplight at the maps
I had left by her bedside,
joking about how small the world was.
I was seized by a fit of tears,

and for many days I did not confide
a single word to my diary.

•

The many women I married,
or who shared a bed with me,
did it for my wealth and position,
and I could never pierce their core.
They all have drained from my mind,
like water from a date drying in the sun.
Except Qulistan, the singer from the Maldives,
the two thousand accurate islands,
shining jewels in the dark sea.

It is her voice that calls me,
her accented Farsi love songs
about the red hibiscus flower
and the seashell amulet moving
between a woman's breasts.
It is her voice that calls me,
undeterred, like a bird's.

I track her lips stroking my flesh,
without touching it, there and not there,
my heart beats out loud,
the man of law inside me loses composure,
and I leap, *majnoon*, mad,
and my drooping eyelids open wide.
I grasp at her shadow
and the dark turns luminous.

•

I write these reflections in verse
even though the holy Quran warns,
"The poets are followed by the errant."
For it is the custom among our authors
to feature poetry in their manuscripts, so as to vary
the rhythm of prose and please the reader.
And I had my own reasons. Once, after I left
Anatolia, I nearly froze to death in the wild,
but I was saved by passersby who took me to their home.
Regaining my strength, I pictured myself a poet,
instead of a judge handing out verdicts,
my quill scripting the beauty of that land,
the teeming caravanserai, the handsome men
and women, their steady gait, their warmth
toward strangers. I felt the song transporting me
to a range more sublime than a mountain peak,
all while I sat on a soft mat, in an embroidered vest,
as if holding a ceremony.

•

By this time, on my way to Granada,
the last bastion of Muslims in Andalusia,
I learned how travel was rife
with wonders and disenchantments
and I should expect the unexpected.

I bought a donkey and dressed modestly
to blend with the locals. I was delighted
to learn that the beast happened to be a descendant
of the one that had hauled the books and remains
of Averroes to Cordoba.

My mount ambled, mile after mile,
through hilly range, olive orchards,
and fields that had turned yellow
after the harvest of wheat.
We passed by cows taking a siesta
in the shade of pomegranate trees,
but hardly a human to be seen.

Those were the last days of Ramadan.
I was fasting, and had much time to contemplate:
How long could Granada stand the siege?
Would the sultan embrace my learning?
I mulled over the works of Averroes himself,
especially his opinions on medicine and law.
His philosophy, the source of his troubles,
was too abstract for a down-to-earth diarist
who strings facts, like goods in the *souq*, with no center.
The more I deliberated the more obsessed I became,
neglecting the poor state of my body and provisions.
Then a damned bandit's arrow scratched my right shoulder,
and my travails grew worse. The pain brought to mind
the words of Averroes, "people die of their medication"—
and, I reckoned, here was mine, the road.

Emerging out of a cave at midnight
I was stunned to see the donkey standing, frozen,
awash in brilliant light. Yet, the moon had set.
Was I hallucinating? Had a heavenly light
homed in on the beast on this holy night?
My companion never bared the secret.

Two weeks after the fast had ended
I arrived, in my last strength, at Al-Hambra.
There, I spent hours every day watching the dance
of water and light on the walls and ceilings,
water shining, and light in liquid form.
Their waltz washed away all my broodings.

•

After two score and seven years
after all the twists and turns
the arrows have returned to their quiver
and I feel joy coming back to Tangier.

My bones have grown feeble,
head ablaze with gray,
and my eyes, nourished on foreign sights,
hardly make out our old house,
or the friends who are still alive.

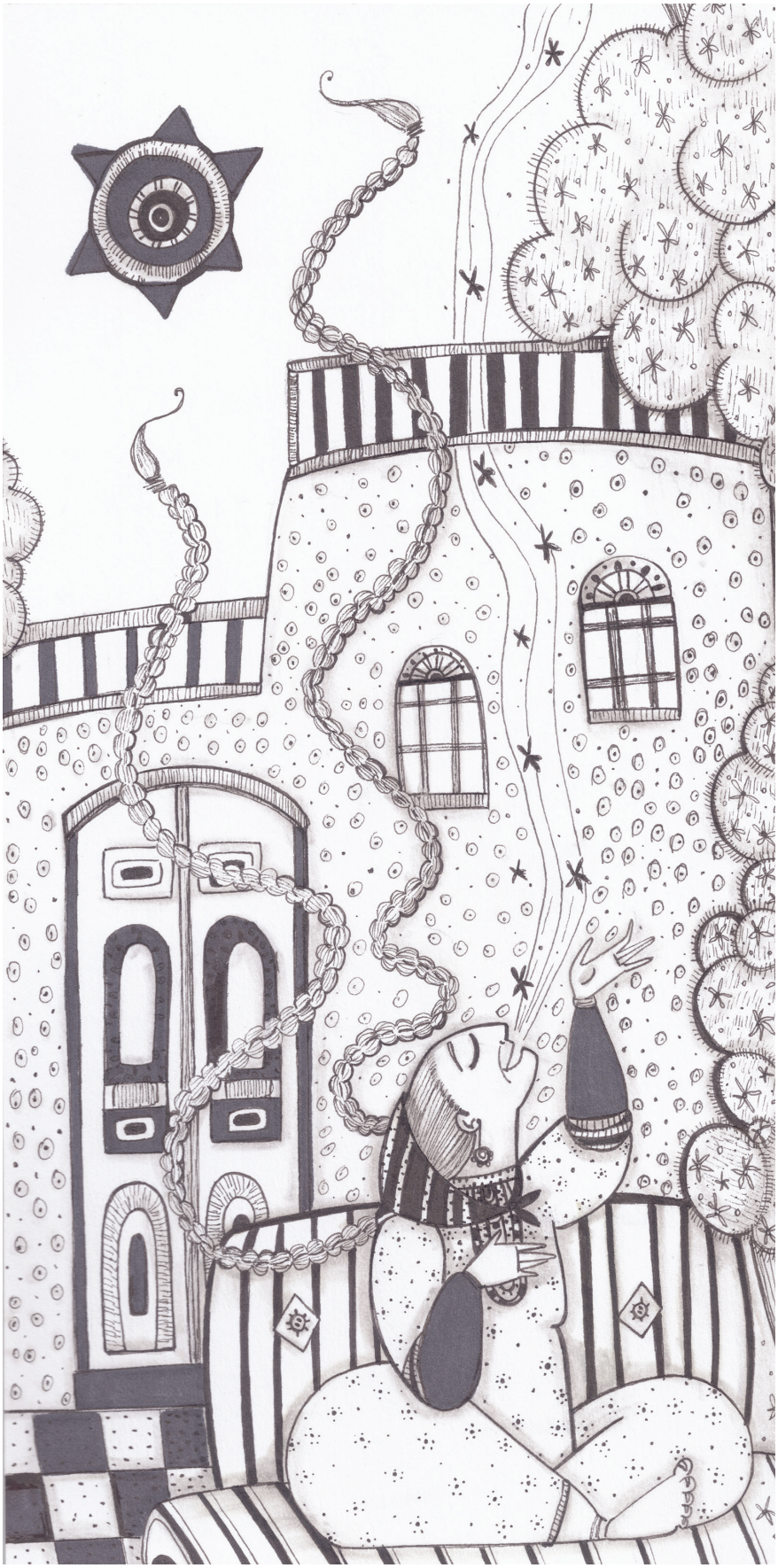
Still, this city beats with undying force
at the crossroads of the dream and the real.
The sea is as blue as the gulls fierce
the ships in the bay load and unload,
amplifying the cycle of days.

Strangers greet me with awe,
as if I were a keeper of some secret knowledge,
when all I do is share things I observed.
Some remain skeptical.
Once, after I told the story of the donkey,
I overheard a man whisper to his friend
that it was like a tall tale told by an old man
whose peers had all died. I understand —
my head is a mine of fairytales
from fellow roamers.

Memory is all I have.
The mind keeps wandering backward
and I remember as if looking down
from a mountain peak. The flux of forms
makes me giddy, sets me free,
even when it conjures hurt.
I trust that my travels were worth my toil,
yet only God knows if this record will endure.

SHARIF S. ELMUSA

*Ibn Battuta, a renowned 14th century Muslim traveler and judge from Tangier, Morocco. The record of his journeys has been the subject of numerous commentaries in various languages. The poem includes information from that record, but is mostly an imaginary take-off.



THE COUNTRY THAT LOST ITS SONG
BY DIMA NASHAWI

EATING PIZZA IN A RENOVATED HAMMAM IN GRANADA

was the closest I'd ever get
to that sensuous space envisioned
by Gérôme & Ingres.

Sunrays filtered through
star-shaped skylights
cast geometric shadows
over the tables,
broken lines drifted
across the dark marble floor,
a floor where odalisques' bare
skin was revealed by
the artist's brush,
the way Gauguin
unclothed his *vahine*.

The furnace once used to heat
water was perfect for baking,
the owner said *¡A pedir de boca!*

I was told as a child
the real story
behind these arched doors,
how after their ablutions,
families rested over
carpet-covered benches,
drinking dark tea & sampling
the same pastries my Aunt Zekiye
brought yearly
in her luggage,
all the way from Damascus.

Private spaces where mothers
could find a bride for their sons
making sure their curves
weren't fake,
measuring the fullness
of their chest
& the width of their hips.

HEDY HABRA

I HAD NEVER SEEN A DEAD MAN BEFORE

Until my father-in-law died that summer
in Tucson, Arizona

He seemed to sleep
in his suit and tie,
expressionless,
the color of death freezing
his shrunken features,
almost youthful in his eighties
as if an artist's pencil
performed a final facelift,
inverting lines
for a last farewell.

I knelt on the velvet
rest in prayer.
thinking of the fig tree
we once planted together,
of how he always
saved the juiciest fig
for me: "Here," he'd say
"this one's from your tree...
see how well I care for it?"

∞ ∞

I felt a pang in my chest,
leapt years and years back
to a January morning: a young
child, taken away for the day,
only to return to a house
filled with absence,
where all had forgotten
how to smile.
I was never told what had
happened that day,
in Heliopolis. "Your father
is in the hospital," they said.

I awaited your return,
week after week,
unable to understand
the silent procession,
charcoaled silhouettes
shading spaces
once forbidden to
our clumsy hands,
beveled doors
now wide-open,
black skirts hiding pink
damask silk, flowing
over gilded Louis XVI
chairs and Bergères
like a flock of Egyptian
ravens, threatening
my caged love-birds
placed at the balcony edge

HEDY HABRA

OUTTA HERE*

By Patty Somlo

The first time the officer told the boy to drop the bat, the boy began to walk forward. He was just under five feet tall, so the bat may have looked longer than it would have appeared, if held by a boy of greater height. The boy, people in the neighborhood would later comment, had dreamed of becoming a baseball player.

By the second time the officer ordered the boy to drop the bat, the boy had narrowed the distance between them. The officer wasn't aware that the late afternoon sun had started shooting rays directly into the boy's dark brown eyes. Traffic had grown heavy on Seventeenth Street, two blocks south of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, where the boy stood clutching his bat in a field infested with weeds and discarded soiled napkins and soda cups, outside an abandoned low-income housing project. The racket caused by cars and trucks passing made it hard for the boy to hear what the officer had been shouting. When the boy looked toward the officer, the bright glare from the sun made his eyes ache and tear, forcing him to drop his gaze.

Still, the boy continued moving toward the officer. Folks in the neighborhood would later claim that even though he had some disabilities – or "challenges," as some preferred to say – the kid was one of the friendliest and most sociable kids many had ever met. His mother worried about him for all the obvious reasons a parent fears for a child, and especially a special needs kid, but also because he had never learned to keep his distance from strangers, who might do him harm.

The third time the officer ordered the boy to drop the bat, the boy believed he had gotten close enough to hit the ball. He turned slightly to stand sideways and moved his feet eight or so inches apart, the way Billy "the Bomber" Boggs, the famous baseball player who'd grown up in the neighborhood and returned there to live after he retired from the game, showed him several times.

As he lifted the bat, the boy heard a loud cracking sound. No one saw what happened before or after that sound, but a second and third cracking sound followed. The boy was bleeding by then, so heavily it was impossible to see where the blood was coming from, and his short, somewhat pudgy body had fallen, and lay curled practically in the fetal position on the ground.

* * *

The shooting of DaVon Richards rocked the neighborhood, a principally African American enclave whose tree-lined residential streets fanned out east and west from MLK Boulevard. DaVon Richards, as everyone in the neighborhood knew, could not have hurt a fly. He'd been born fourteen years before with what his mother described as a sweetness almost impossible not to love. His intellectual challenges became more and more apparent as time went on. At first when DaVon went to school, some of the kids, usually boys, made fun of him. In those days, everybody referred to DaVon as slow. But DaVon didn't realize that he was being bullied and before long, the toughest kids began to look out for him.

In the first hours and days after the white police officer shot and killed DaVon Richards, firing three times, folks in the neighborhood felt numb. The police department claimed that DaVon, a black, intellectually challenged fourteen-year-old, had threatened the officer with a bat that could be used as a weapon. A memorial was started for DaVon with flowers, a handful of toys, including metal trucks, and several baseball gloves. Family, friends and people who lived in the neighborhood gathered in the weedy and trash-strewn field where DaVon had been shot. The media dutifully arrived, along with the mayor, city councilors and the area's congressional representative. Baptist minister Calvin Butler set up a stage, podium, microphone and sound system, then invited people to come up and share what they remembered about DaVon.

Ali Mansour, who owned the neighborhood's one convenience store, stood up first. People were surprised to see Mr. Ali, as the older residents called him, crying.

"DaVon came to my store every day," Ali began, speaking haltingly because he couldn't stop crying. "He wanted to learn how to use the register, so I showed him."

Surprisingly, Ali then started to laugh.

"I must have showed him a hundred times," he said, shaking his head and smiling. "He couldn't remember how to do it. But he always wanted me to show him, so he could learn again."

Ali stepped away from the microphone to wipe his eyes. He blew his nose with a light blue handkerchief pulled out of his pocket and then came back to the podium, leaning toward the microphone and saying he was sorry. He stopped crying long enough to explain, "DaVon wanted to learn because he said he planned to open his own store one day."

The tributes went on throughout the afternoon and into the night. As speaker after speaker spoke about the loving boy, who unlike most people never complained, got depressed or had a bad word to say about anybody, something became clear to Billy Boggs. In middle age and carrying a hundred pounds more weight than when he'd gone almost overnight from being a poor black kid to a major league, high-salaried baseball player, Billy had long ago lost contact with his two grown kids. He had barely known them when they were growing up because he'd focused nearly all his time and attention on baseball.

A few years back, Billy had started spending time with DaVon, his mother being a good friend and DaVon not having a father around. Sometimes, Billy thought of DaVon as his adopted son. He'd taught DaVon to throw and catch, run and hit the ball. The bat DaVon had been holding at the time of the shooting and failed to drop had been a present from Billy for DaVon's thirteenth birthday.

The last speaker stepped down. Without thinking, Billy began making his way to the podium. He didn't have a clue what he wanted to say, but he slid the microphone up to his height and tapped the end to see if it was working.

He looked out at the crowd. The faces were black and brown, white and Asian. So many people had congregated in the field that folks were now spilling out onto the sidewalks. Some even stood across the street.

Billy still didn't know what he was going to say, but he continued to study the crowd. Then he let himself picture DaVon in his mind, wearing the Giants jersey Billy had given him, the one that had started to get too small.

He could see DaVon, concentrating so hard his forehead had wrinkled up. And then he remembered the thing DaVon nearly always did, whenever Billy sailed an underhanded pitch towards him. Just before DaVon stepped his right foot forward and swung the bat, he mimicked what the play-by-play broadcasters shouted when a ball was hit out of the park. "It's outta here," DaVon loved to yell.

The sun had set by the time Billy told that story to the crowd. He let them know that DaVon assumed he would get a home run every time he hit the ball. Billy asked the crowd if they had any idea what knowing DaVon had taught him. Following a few murmured and several shouted responses like, "Love, man," and "Joy," Billy answered, "No. It was hope. DaVon Richards taught me about hope."

* * *

It only took two weeks for Billy Boggs to raise enough money to build the diamond and buy enough bats, gloves, shoes and uniforms for all the neighborhood kids that wanted to play ball. The city council, with unprecedented speed, helped push through the required permits to have the housing project torn down and that vacant, weedy lot readied to become a new city park.

Billy recruited several police officers to coach in their off-duty hours. He wasn't naïve enough to believe, as some folks thought, that the DaVon Richards Park and the MLK Bombers would change the world, or even do all that much to address the deep-seated issues that ended up stifling and snuffing out too many young lives.

But as he prepared to swing the bat for the pitch to commemorate the start of the Bombers' first season and the opening of DaVon Richards Park, Billy Boggs smiled. The bat kissed the ball and Billy watched it sail, over the diamond, past the outfield and beyond.

Billy heard a familiar voice shout, "It's outta here." He used the back of his hand to wipe the tears away from the corners of his eyes. Then he looked up, imagining that the ball had just bounced and then stopped on the rough surface of a large and blindingly radiant star.

**Excerpt from Somlo's recently published collection Hairway to Heaven Stories by Cherry Castle Publishing*

RELATIONSHIP GOALS

When on good terms,
my parents debated the prices
of fruits and vegetables.
Love letters were sent in praise
of my father's excellent choice of
mint leaves and parsley.
Fights were coded in unsavory criticism
of my mum's punctured marrows and uneconomical
purchases of hard avocados and sour strawberries.
Reconciliations were held over a festive plate
of khobiza with nestling red chilies and puffy bread
after all, they know their onions.

LINA AL SHARIF

GHAZAL: MY MOTHER

I swear by the light shining from olive oil and the eyes of my mother
I hold no land dearer than the one of my mother

I roam faraway countries and pray to find a home
but I keep coming back to the map given to me by my mother

I wear the perfume of burnt orange rind and read the future in coal
I whisper my prayer, scream at my children; I become my mother

I close my eyes and hide thinking of running away
my daughter asks why the refugee boy is crying "where's my mother?"
I buy parsley I never use, cancel plans I never wanted to make
I forget recipes and repeat "curse me" as said by my mother

I chase a few poems after everyone goes to bed
pretend there's more to me than being a mother
but what's more than being like my mother?

LINA AL SHARIF

PRELUDE

By Racha Mourtada

He was vacuuming her mattress. It had never occurred to her to do that. Her friend had recommended a professional cleaning service but it had seemed overpriced, so she had shelved the project.

'There's a lot of hair,' he yelled, lifting the nozzle to take a look.

The implied accusation was aimed at her. She was, after all, the one with long hair… on her head, anyway. His chest hair wasn't prone to shedding during the night, although, there was that one time he had shaved it before bed. The next morning it looked like his side was infested with ants.

'You're supposed to turn it off before you do that.'

'What?' he switched off the machine.

'It might suck your face off.'

He grinned, and she could see him toying with the idea of testing the suction of the thing for comic effect.

She turned her attention back to her show and set the television to mute. She couldn't hear a thing, anyway. It was one of the episodes she knew by heart, but she got a kick out of making up more scintillating dialogue for the characters. This evening, it also took her mind off the fact that her feet were starting to pinch. She had on the kind of shoes that pinched your feet just by looking at them. Impossible architectural feats that made your eyes tear up with admiration, and then with pain once you slipped them on. It was the type of relationship that was a metaphor for life, she had decided. At least that was how she had justified buying them.

They were supposed to have left an hour ago. She had turned the AC off, and now she was starting to sweat. Walking over to the switch would be agony, and she knew that if she took her shoes off she would never put them back on.

'Sweetie,' she yelled, 'can you turn the AC on?'

The apartment fell silent, and he bounded up to the AC controls in his bare feet. His face was flushed, and his toes wriggled in appreciation of the cool floor.

'You're going to need to shower again.'

'What?'

'They're staying on for drinks. We can still catch up with them.'

'I thought we weren't going.'

'Why would you…'

'Ok… ok… just let me finish.'

The sun began to set as Operation Cleanse continued in the bedroom. The light that had nestled into the rooms started to slink back out the windows like a stealthy lover who didn't want to stay the night. She stretched her legs and put her purse on the floor. She had purposely left her living room windows curtain-less, one perk of which was seeing birds nuzzling on her windowsill in the morning. They weren't pigeons, she was sure, but something more elegant. *Only you would romanticize dirty pigeons*, he'd said, giving her a kiss on the forehead. She had found a crude nest a week ago with a single egg, rounder than she thought it would be and closer to the edge of the sill than she would have liked. Her mother said it was a sign of good luck. The egg wasn't there this morning, or the birds.

'Maybe it hatched and they flew away,' he'd said. He was kind like that. He'd also said that he couldn't imagine life without her, but then again, by his own admission, he had a very good imagination.

'Are you done?' She was suddenly too tired to raise her voice, willing it to carry over the thundering vacuum cleaner. She hesitated for a second, then eased off her heels with a moan of satisfaction that brought the noisy machine to a halt.

'Are you ok?' his voice sounded concerned, but he stayed in the bedroom.

'Yes. I took my shoes off.'

She massaged the balls of her feet and smile-grimaced as sensation flooded her numb toes. She padded into the bedroom. It looked like what she imagined a forensic crime scene might after the cleaners had come in and exhumed the place. Her mattress was a blinding white. She was certain it had been a shade darker the day she bought it. In his zeal, he seemed to have stripped the 'off' in the off-white, along with any traces of human friction.

"Like brand new," he said, smiling at her from the center of the king size bed, where he was kneeling - legs and arms wide open - like a freeze frame of a footballer sliding to his knees after the winning goal.

He leapt off the bed and scooped the dirty linen off the floor.

"I'll wash these."

She nodded and let him squeeze past her. His elbow, coarse and pointy, grazed her side in one of her ticklish spots, just below bra level, and she flinched. She used to massage her body butter into his elbows after he showered. He would clasp his hands on top of his head and she would cup his protruding elbows with palmfuls of the lotion, first rubbing inwards, then outwards. She would then turn around and he would dig his softened elbows into her bare shoulders, grinding away the stubborn knots that had been resurfacing more of late.

It was her bedroom, but she felt strange in it now that he had stepped out, as though she was violating *his* privacy. As though he had whispered something into the walls, traced a message on the spotless dresser that she wasn't sure she was meant to find. She switched off the light and walked back to the kitchen. She could see him in the laundry room, leaning the small of his back against the stuttering washing machine with a sigh of contentment as her striped duvet tumbled and rattled inside. She'd always felt bad that her hands weren't strong enough to work the kinks out of his wiry frame.

She opened the fridge, took out an orange and touched the cool peel to her chapped lips. She had a bad habit of chewing them raw, and she hadn't been as good about applying her lip balm lately. The sting of the orange's acidity always reminded her - too late - so had she had taken to rubbing the peel like a numbing cream on her lips. She

couldn't stand the lingering smell on her hands, though. It never came off, no matter how much she scrubbed.

'It's an orange smell!' He had laughed at her the first time she'd made this revelation, 'what's wrong with that?' He had plucked the orange out of her hand, made a big show of really getting his fingers into as he tore off the peel, buffed the backs of his hands and his neck with it, and then presented her with the naked fruit, half kneeling.

'M'lady,' he had said, eyes downcast.

He had peeled her oranges ever since, and with much less sarcasm.

'Heads up!' she said, tossing the orange in his direction. He caught it, gave her a thin smile, and playfully tossed it back. It smacked into the side of her head and rolled onto the floor. She picked it up, shaking her head 'it's alright!' as he sprinted up to the kitchen counter, apologizing.

Her fingers tingled as she ripped into the citrus fruit, its stringy white fibers electrified like the hairs standing up on her arms. He was saying something, in earnest now; they were finally going to talk. He'd left the door to the laundry room open, and if she concentrated, if she really concentrated on the hum of the machine, she could drown out his voice a little and replace the words coming out of his mouth with gentler homonyms.

A MURDER
BY HANANAH ZAHEER

Artists' /Writers' bios:

PHILIPE ABIYOUNESS is a Lebanese-American poet and theatre maker. He recently graduated from Drew University where he was awarded the Academy of American Poets prize which included publishing on Poets.org. He works at a Friendly's and enjoys writing poetry about his family.

MICHELLE ABOU-RAAD was born to Lebanese parents in Boston, MA. She attended Boston University where she studied international relations and Middle East Studies with a focus on forced migration. She now works at an international development firm in Washington, DC, on a project focusing on capacity building in the Middle East. She is also the Co-Founder and COO of Urban Refuge, an app that aims to help urban refugees and vulnerable individuals in Jordan more easily locate aid and services.

LINA ALSHARIF is a Palestinian poet living in Qatar. She writes and performs poetry. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Lancaster University.

A refugee by inheritance, a woman with a restless soul and a gypsy's spirit; a self-expressionist obsessed with play, adventure, exploration and making marks. **FADWA AL QASEM** holds a BA in English Literature (UK) and is currently studying Art Therapy. She is an artist, and an author with three published books in Arabic and three in English. She currently lives between Spain and Dubai, where she teaches visual journaling, and is working on her first novel. www.fadwa.com.

MIKE AZAR is half Lebanese and half Syrian, but was raised in the United States. He currently live in Washington, DC, where he works in finance. He studied economics at UCLA (BA) and international finance at Johns Hopkins SAIS (MA). He traveled to Greece in 2016 to volunteer with the relief effort in Athens and Lesvos, where there was a lack of Arabic speakers. He spent most of his time on the northern coast of Lesvos, where the team members were first responders (medical, logistics, search and rescue, etc.) to arriving boats. When he got back to the U.S., he wrote the published story as a way of dealing with his guilt and anxiety.

MAHNOOR BARI is Pakistani and grew up in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Dubai. After completing a BA in International Studies with a minor in Middle Eastern Studies from the American University of Sharjah, she moved to Karachi, London and back to pursue postgraduate study and a career in journalism.

SHARIF S. ELMUSA is a poet, scholar and translator. Apart from his academic publications on the culture and politics of the environment, and his translations of Arabic poetry and fiction, he is the co-editor with Greg Orfalea of as Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry. He is also the author of a book of poems Flawed Landscape. His poems and essays appeared in numerous anthologies and print and online magazines, including most recently, The Massachusetts Review, Mizna, The Indian Quarterly (India), Jadaliyya.com, Voxpopulisphere.com. Last October he was invited to the Belfast, Maine, Poetry Festival where he collaborated with visual artist Susan Smith on a multimedia show. Elmusa received his Ph.D, from M.I.T. and taught at the American University in Cairo for many years, at Georgetown University, Qatar, and at Yale University. He is Palestinian by birth, American by citizenship.

STEPHEN ERIC BERRY is a film-maker, composer, and a recipient of a Jule and Avery Hopwood Award at the University of Michigan. His work has appeared in Salamander, Third Wednesday, Soundings East, Puerto del Sol, and California Quarterly. In 2017, he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to be a visiting scholar at the "Emily Dickinson: Person, Poetry and Place" workshops at Amherst College. In the summer of 2018, his film "Clogged Only with Music, Like the Wheels of Birds" was screened at the Emily Dickinson International Society annual meeting in Amherst. He lives in Chelsea, Michigan (USA).

CARLA DAHER, NARA, is an illustrator and graphic designer based in Beirut. She mostly draws people. The ones she calls "mejillas rojas" (red cheeks) are very inspired by the west african culture she was born and raised in, in Cote d'Ivoire. She can often be found scribbling on her sketchbook, in coffee shops.

EMAN ELSHAIKH is a writer, poet, artist, and aspiring academic. She's interested in exploring revolution, political consciousness, exile, memory, and narrative, both in her research and in her creative work. She is currently an editor at Muftah magazine. ElShaikh has previously served as a judge for the Arab American Book Awards. She blogs at mataahef.wordpress.com and tweets at @mataahef.

LAYLA AZMI GOUSHEY is an Associate Professor of English at St. Louis Community College in St. Louis, Missouri. She currently sponsors the Global Studies Club at the Forest Park campus. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a Certificate in the Teaching of Writing from the University of Missouri - St. Louis where she is also pursuing a PhD. in Adult Education: Teaching and Learning Processes. Professor Goushey's scholarly work is focused on Arab and Arab-American literature and culture. Her dissertation research examines the teaching philosophies of 11th Century Islamic scholar Muhammad Al-Ghazali. Her creative work has been published in journals such as Yellow Medicine Review, Mizna: Journal of Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America, Natural Bridge, and Sukoon Magazine. She has published articles of literary criticism and currently writes a blog titled Transnational Literacies. Find her on Twitter @ Lgoushey or at www.LaylaAzmiGoushey.com.

HEDY HABRA has authored two poetry collections, Under Brushstrokes, finalist for the USA Best Book Award and the International Poetry Book Award, and Tea in Heliopolis, winner of the USA Best Book Award and finalist for the International Poetry Book Award. Her story collection, Flying Carpets, won the Arab American National Book Award's Honorable Mention and was finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award. An eleven-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, her work appears in Cimarron Review, The Bitter Oleander, Blue Fifth Review, Cider Press Review, Drunken Boat, Gargoyle, Nimrod, Poet Lore, World Literature Today and Verse Daily. Her website is hedyhabra.com

With roots in Jerusalem, Palestine, **JENNA HAMED** was born and raised in the metro-Detroit area, inspiring her lifelong work in critical art-making. She is a recently received a Master's degree in Arts Politics from New York University, where she focused her studies in the curation of Arab diasporic poetry and art. Residing in Queens, NY, Jenna is currently (re) defining her artistic and curatorial practice.

NADIA HASSAN is a British-Lebanese artist living in Beirut. Third Culture Kid navigating the wild, unruly playground that is modern day Lebanon. Forever in search of meaning, forever meaning to search. Nadia wrote this piece for Emily, the character she was playing in Sir Tom Stoppard's "Darkside". It started off as a way to connect with her, give her a backstory – a tried and tested technique for character development. Two portraits from "Dance of Chimera", a concept shoot by Nada Ammous and Nadia Hassan

SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI's latest book Ghazal Cosmopolitan has been praised by Marilyn Hacker as "a marvelous interweaving of poetry, scholarship, literary criticism and memoir." Recipient of multiple Pushcart nominations, the San Diego Book Prize for poetry, and the Nazim Hikmet Prize, she has published poems and essays in journals and anthologies worldwide, most recently in McSweeney's anthology In the Shape of a Human Body I am Visiting the Earth, Prairie Schooner, The Cortland Review, Wasafiri, Vallum, Poetry International, Rhino, World Literature Today, and Asymptote. She is the author of Kohl & Chalk and Baker of Tarifa, and has taught at San Diego State University as a writer-in-residence.

HANAN ISSA is a mixed-race (half Iraqi, half Welsh) Muslim poet from Cardiff, Wales. She is, admittedly, quite new to the publishing world of poetry but has been publicly performing poetry and spoken word for approximately 2 years. She has performed at the Wales Millennium Centre's International Women's Day events, at numerous events across the UK, as well as on BBC Radio Wales' Arts Show. She is the co-organizer of Cardiff's open-mic series entitled 'Where I'm Coming From'. Her winning monologue recently featured as part of the Bush Theatre's production 'The Hijabi Monologues-London'. She will also be a member of the judging panel for Warwick university's 'Two Chairs' poetry competition next spring alongside Mumtaza Mehri. Some of her collaborative work has also featured in Wales Arts Review and she has recently been commissioned to complete a short piece of poetry for a mural in her local area.

DANI BEIRUTI is a Yugoslav-born refugee, author, and teacher from Beirut. He completed his PhD in transnational american studies in 2018, with a dissertation about Palestine and the poetics and politics of intersectional resistance.

NADIA KHAYRALLAH is a freelance dancer, choreographer, and writer in New York. She has written for The Huffington Post, The Morningside Review, The Columbia Spectator, The Dance/NYC Junior Committee Blog, and Reductress, but most frequently plays with words on her blog www.NadiaInHerOwnWorld.wordpress.com.

LISA LUXX is a British Syrian writer, performer, philosopher and activist. Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, VICE, TEDx, BBC Radio Leeds and heralded as one of the UK's top four queer poets by Diva magazine. Her poetry and philosophy has been published by i-D, Tate Britain, New River Press, The Daily Telegraph, The International Times, Tribe de Mama (US), The Numinous (US), The Sunday Times and Sage Press (India).
Shortlisted for Peace Poetry Prize and Saboteur Awards Best Spoken Word Performer.
In 2016 she released a collection of poems and essays called The 4th Brain; a journey for connection through sisterhood, internet and revolution. "This work will be remembered long after we are all gone." - Salena Godden

VINEETHA MOKKIL is the author of the collection, "A Happy Place and other stories" (HarperCollins, 2014). Her fiction has appeared in the Santa Fe Writers' Project Journal, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, the Missing Slate and the Bombay Review.

RACHA MOURTADA is a children's book author and publisher, and an alumnus of the inaugural Columbia Publishing Course at Oxford University. In a past life, she worked as a biomedical engineer, UN researcher, and public policy analyst and once interned briefly in a men's prison for an NGO that rehabilitates inmates through radio training and production. She is currently working on a novel that she drafted on the Faber 'Writing a Novel Course' in London. The manuscript was a runner-up in the 2014 Emirates Festival of Literature 'Motengrappa Writing Competition', and was longlisted in the Mslexia 2015 'Women's Novel Competition'. Over the past year, she has developed a taste for trekking and took the first book produced by her publishing house, Luqoom, to the summit of Kilimanjaro (and, thankfully, back down).

SAHAR MUSTAFAH is a first-generation Palestinian American. Her short story collection Code of the West won the 2016 Willow Books Prize for fiction. Her first novel, The Beauty of Your Face, is forthcoming by W. W. Norton. She has taught delightfully misunderstood teenagers for over 20 years.

NOUR NAAS is a Libyan writer living in Vallejo, California. She is a VONA/Voices fellow and is currently at work on a collection of essays exploring her grief in the aftermath of her mother's death and the Libyan revolution. Her work has previously appeared in Catapult, The Establishment, and Libya Herald.

DIMA NASHAWI is an illustrator, animator, storyteller, clown and the founder of Memory Initiative for Syrian Culture (MISC). She creates visual art stories that reflect her own memories and stories from the Syrian collective memories. She interacts through her art with human rights issues around the world. Her main concern is to advocate for the prisoners of consciousness and the forced disappeared.
Dima is also a member of a clown theater company called "Clown Me In". The company uses clowning to spread laughter and provide relief to disadvantaged communities while exploring human vulnerabilities and providing individuals a way to accept them.
She is holding both Masters in Art and Cultural Management at King's College - London University and a B.A in Sociology from Damascus University.

REEM RASHASH-SHAABAN is a poet , writer, and photographer. After spending thirty three years teaching at the American University of Beirut, she decided to go back to her passion: art. Reem uses her original photographs to reconstruct a new view of life and cities and mixes collage, pastel, ink and paint in her effort to keep the culture, thoughts and traditions of people alive. She has held two solo exhibits in Beirut entitled " Going , Going, Gone," and " To Keep the Memories Alive" and participated in two joint exhibitions. Her latest solo exhibition, " The Qatar Series: Tradition and Modernity " was held in Doha, Qatar. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in international and regional journals. One of her watercolor paintings has graced the cover of Twisted Vine while her mixed media artwork has been accepted in Sukoon and Goat's Milk Magazine.

JIHAN SHAARAWI was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt by an Italian mother and Egyptian father. She grew up speaking and reading in three languages. In 2014 she graduated from the American University in Cairo with a dual degree in Sociology and English & Comparative Literature. After graduation she was admitted to Columbia University's MFA program, where she spent three wonderful years focusing on her writing. She writes mainly about Egypt and its politics and history. She's interested in combining the literary techniques of fables and folk tales with the realities of modern day Egyptian politics.

GLENN SHAHEEN is the author of four books, most recently the flash fiction collection Carnivalia (Gold Wake, 2018).

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PATTY SOMLO's collection Hairway to Heaven Stories was published by Cherry Castle Publishing, a black-owned press that honors the vibrant multicultural voice of American literature. Cherry Castle's commitment is to practice literary equality and to embrace work that is informed by the social, political and
cultural vigor of our times. https://www.cherrycastlepublishing.com/Â

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CHRISTINA YOSEPH is an emerging Assyrian-Greek writer and poet. Her work has been featured in Efniks, RaceBaitR, The Brown Orient, and Wear Your Voice. In 2014, she both graduated from San Francisco State University with a BA in Art History and presented at the fifth annual Feminist Art History Conference at American University. She currently lives in California with her artist-musician girlfriend, and you can find more of her work at christinayoseph.com.

REWA ZEINATI is a poet, educator, creative copywriter, Tedx speaker and founding editor of Sukoon. Author of 'Bullets & Orchids' and 'Nietzsche's Camel Must Die,' her work is published in a number of literary journals and anthologies in the USA, UK, and online. Interviews and reviews can be found at BBC World Book Cafe, The Common, FEN magazine, Mashallah News, The Luxembourg Review, UMSL Daily, Bird's Thumb, Emirates Festival of Literature, among others.

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