



Sukoon

Arab-Themed Art & Literature

Volume 6 | Issue 2 | Winter 2023



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 reflect 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.



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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:

PALESTINE WILL BE FREE.



MARIAM, KHIYAM, LEBANON, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR

LATE AND SOON*

Rushing as we always are
waves over freeways and fiberglass,
whir of what we must
and would and will
loud, continuous. Until we weren't.

The children aren't asking
what happens next anymore.
Strategic plans are temporarily tabled.
Our skies are clearing though we gaze
as through sepulchral veils. The air

over our digital heartland suddenly breathable
while so many lungs labor against collapse.
What's the expression? Water water
everywhere and not a drop. Did you hear the one
about the soldier who stopped a man

in front of his own house?
For the pandemic crackdown, not the usual
violence. We are at war; this is the new language.
Did you hear the Italians singing
from their balconies? And the Chinese before them,

clanging pots and pans in the desolate night
we're still here, we're still here
while the rest of us crisscrossed
the world in our airplanes, kiss-kissed
and watched on and off until

it landed. This is the new language.
A prince is quarantined, a tyrant tightens
the stranglehold of sanctions, a king has ordered
door-to-door delivery of bread, dignity, social justice. Whir
of the now-language clutters meaning.

How will the unhoused shelter-in-place?
What water is there in Flint? There is an image
of a girl from Idlib circulating. She holds a sign
that says *we have no soap*
we have no water. There is an image from Gaza.
Are you the one in the camps or the one viewing images
of them on a screen? The Olympic games are postponed
but the news offers graphs of death tolls
with the phrase *now leads the world.*
Winning winning

We'll get through this. Rent is due,
governors are shopping for masks, somnambulant nurses
wear garbage bags for shields.
Teachers aren't assigning any more dystopian novels.
There's a meme about a Kurt Cobain song

that perfectly diagnoses our condition. Did you see
the one with gladiators, the voice-over chanting
an Arab grandmother's elixir: *Lemon Juice! Cumin! Anise!*
People are so clever. Lonely, too,
but this time together. Or at least

lonely in unison gathering silences
in smaller circles, waving at each other
through the glass. Now, Love
means staying away. Gangs
of monkeys are retaking the streets

of beach towns. How cacophonous
the silence of one night can be. Are you still
watching the press conferences? They never say
anything that will save us. Read, instead,
about dolphins swimming in Venice canals.

Did you notice how many people
now listen for the dawn chorus?
They're looking up sparrows and finches,
looking for the binoculars they kept in the attic.
Maybe it won't matter, if it all turns soon,

if one of us is gasping and a beloved
can't touch their forehead or stay by their side.
Water water deep breath bird song
We lay waste
our powers. This is the now language

at the end of old time.

**Notes:*

*The title "Late and Soon," and the line "we lay waster our powers" are
borrowed from William Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much With Us."*

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

SELF-PORTRAIT AS ONE WHO DOESN'T SPEAK ENOUGH ARABIC WITH THE CHILDREN

An accolade, the language and its possession,
this is made clear early on. It wasn't my first language

either, my famed American
pronunciation gaffes remedied

by embarrassment and the windfall
of an early change of address. In the 80s there were kingdoms

to be built and Arabs
with American passports to build them.

And there was my own
relentless want.

Let this be the real accolade or
the embarrassing truth. I wanted

to master what was taught, to bend it
to my own will, to belong. I loved

as only an outsider can.
Then, in a world of my own making,

when my daughter's first globes of sound
began to take shape, only Arabic

arrived to meet her. Anchoring
into the self at last, I thought. The nursery rhymes

and animal circus and field guide
of our days. For a while

there was a common language
between us but it disappeared

as we spoke it.
Even the ones who know me best ask why

and in the question there is a plea
and an accusation.

*There was once an olive grove they say There was
once a trove of stories they say How will she pray*

for you when you die?

Even the ones who love me ask why

and the question becomes a siege—
just me and lughat el-dhaadh and the future

alone in a shrinking room.
Because a language forged

of Friday rituals and funeral prayers
is a fragile structure, a long-distance

romance. Spice cabinet of
words to round out or heat up

an estrangement. Funhouse-mirror-language
enlarged and warped to parrot parents

or caricatures of the not-self and lavish
inherited nostalgia on cities and cuisine.

subhanallah fasooliya habibi
Each of us, just wanting to belong.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

SILLAGE

I lay my brown flesh beneath summer sun,
allow my erasures to form an entire continent.

When I speak of continents—which is to say,
when I speak of bodies being drawn, fused,
and then broken apart—I speak of an ancient
song, perhaps the oldest one of all—of how
things are born, only to drift.

Driftwood isn't
just form, but also mood—a Joan Baez song
floating in from absolutely nowhere; nostalgia
dancing into the opening song at a wedding
while the young couple drown themselves
in love and other deceptions; an early lover
walking past the window of a café in which
you sit, drawing sketches of the past from
a capricious memory.

In memory, Esperanza
and I down G&T's as though they're going
out of style, over at the Left Bank, toasting
the predicaments of a lasting friendship,
before heading on over to one of the hooker
bars on Al Maktoum Street to hear a Filipino
band play bizarre, beautiful covers of Kiss,
Metallica, and you aren't going to believe this,
Neil Diamond.

In the skies over Damascus,
diamonds scattered like bullets across this
riddled myth, staring down upon what a city
once was, mediating on how things are born,
only to drift.

So many things drift—words,
plans, chimera, skin.

In this given skin, I've
held faith; I've held it close as the world has
burned; I've held the scorch; I've held each
octave of touch, whispered and screamed,
in the arms of yearning and other such
things.

It's a deep, delicious thing, listening
to Peter Cat Recording Company in the
soft, fading jazz of light rain and smoke.

It isn't just smoke and mirrors, the Italian
passages of The Godfather—it's obsession,
lavished with a certain Sicilian chiaroscuro
—where even a bullet becomes an act of
God.

Sitting at a bar with God, somewhere
in the old half of the city, and she tells me
I should be in love, since I have so much
love to give.

I scrawl love on the table,
embrace it with my brown flesh, thinking
of a distant summer sun, considering
how erasure could ever form an entire
burning continent.

SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA

IN THE CITY, THE POET IS A RAINDROP

We arrive over the dapple of migrant waters,
to be taken elsewhere, and elsewhere. Cities
that belong to rivers and seas are always
on the verge of departure. Here, the cusp of
seasons halves everything—half-bloom,
half-mist, half-truth, a few words written
in the throb of lazy traffic, halfly. As a child,
I would obsess over bridges, thinking that
each led from one country to another.

I was wrong, of course; each only leads
elsewhere, and elsewhere. For countries,
you need papers, documents of life, evidence
of being, and most crucially, need. Need.
Does summer need its paperback writers,
its poets on the verge of elsewhere? Hardly.

Our waters are rising each year. Some
of our cities will be nothing but folklore.
A song that sends children to sleep. Skin
of an elsewhere myth. But everydayness
exists without much fuss—the flinging
of newspapers, tossing of eggs, birds on
drooping wires, a goodbye kiss. Should you
hold back, knowing that each elsewhere
is on the verge of departure to elsewhere?

Hardly.

SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA



KEFA, GAMBIER, OHIO, 2018
BY RANIA MATAR

ARAB DAUGHTERS

for sarah

behind resting eyelids She dreams:
her toes kissing salted foam
of gulf waters.
tears: a prayer to Allah,
from the lamented side of the Dead Sea.

in Salmiya, girls should never
position their mouths in cracked smiles.
sharmoota, will be your new name,
if you laugh too openly, revealing a pink tongue.

a street sweeper mourns,
bony elbows swaying, collecting
remnants of someone else's homeland.

binti,

you carried crevices of earth between
two hands:
creating al dunya.

SOPHIA AL BANAA



**ARAB SPRING, GOUACHE ON BOARD, COLLECTION
OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB**



RAYVEN, MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR

THIRTY

Who will I teach? For months,
I knelt beside the bed
In silence.
I didn't speak to my father—
Could my neighbors hear the howling
From beneath my skin?
When I won back the world in the lottery,
We still had to kiss
Behind the bushes.
Will I always be the child?
Would I want to be a better person
If I had my brother's life?

I know no one will come after me;
I teach her my language in splinters.
At the wedding, we hold hands
And watch them dance *khigga*.

CHRISTINA NAHRIN YOSEPH

UPPER MESOPOTAMIA, 1933-

The sky hung above the hill,
A white canvas under a hush
Of static. Not even the sound
Of the birds' wings
Settled on the horizon
As they flew overhead.
When the men finally returned,
They brought a blueprint
And jackhammers. One of them
Struck the hill and hit
Exposed bone. Another struck:
This time, another bone
And a howl from below.

CHRISTINA NAHRIN YOSEPH



JANA, LA MAISON ROSE, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR



YARA, CAIRO, EGYPT, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR

FOCAL POINT

∃

a gun toted at the moon
shoot—falling rocks, the sea turns blue
BLISTERING over Aphrodite's birth-place a land left [theft] with no persons

∀

we become the birds, cyborgs dug min 'ard evolution : : passage of time
moves through you become a bastardised version of self/human crawling
out Akira's bombed out tunnels

E

the queues are endless in this country.
wars waged over the focal points of lands, for a good time he pours oil on
me before we victory-starve

∅

habeebi, the gun is aiming for the moon. are you as scared as I am?

C

the dishes are washed, fruit sliced opened, will ur mouth glitch static?
hums of silence and cigarettes, perfume of coffee dipped in cardamom
cyborgs with beating hearts
true / false? WHERE WERE YOU WHEN

⋈

crack the moon open pomegranates falling outwards
along the sea-ground shore birthed in teita's garden there is a
hope if I throw myself off Aphrodite's cliff right?

■

I loved you from the moment fariouz opened her mouth,
notes pouring out into the rivers
somewhere, that has to count for something¹

¹In Mathematics ∃ symbolises 'there exists'; ∀ 'for all'; ∝ 'proportional';
E 'element of'; ∅ 'empty set'; C 'complement'; ⋈ in linear logic is used to
denote a intensional disjunction; ■ is 'end of proof' however, in this text is
adjusted to represent for 'end of all'

DESTRUCTION OF MOMENT THE UNDO

(to be read from right to left, after Marwa Helal)

/it on down rained has that everything of weight the from /chest this unburden
our relocate we do how /memory the /smoke the / un-inhale wa/un-remember
unending this un-continue bs /sky the to back us give aw/ يا أرض us un-birth/ :hearts
around skirt /we do how /us un-expose wa/womb the inside body this resettle / labor
without /:day your was how wa /-of spite in/:conversation in/blood of pools the
comes what wa / :mind your cross it does often how / questions the upon touching
mnih /:mnih enta/:blast the after

YARA GHUNAIM



WOMEN AGAINST THE NIGHT, GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

IN THIS GAME THE MUSCLES REMEMBER, AND REMIND

in memory of the Beirut Blast

1. i

have
heard
the

loudest

sound

of *2. and*

after

all

how

much

3. **no more** do

sound

can

ears

carry?

4. i wish

only

to listen.

to hear things i have not permitted to invade me.

6. but

write

these

words

and an ad

for a violent

game

c/rashes

into

m ^y

the mi.dst

of

5. no

decisions

will

be

made

for

Nocturnal Waltz@

and there are gun#shots

and@# there are gun

shots

and i am about 3 ft in mo run

into my mother

's arms

inside

inside

where there

are

no

glasses

lesser

danger

inside?

PERLA KANTARJIAN

BACKWATERS

i went to my first pub at sixteen.
i thought i had broken the spell.

in the prismic hustle of Gemmayze
years before the Beirut Port exploded he

made me shoot down shots
of tequila before he tried to kiss

me. said it felt wilder. i
didn't understand. i

only felt. in his arms as delicate
as sky shades after sunstorms in

ripped jeans and winged eyes.
he said he found me in the face

of all other girls. i could
not understand. i did not want to.

understanding it
would be presage to

something else. something
wilder. men in their twenties

want wilder. i had read they
like younger girls so they

could control them. father
their thirsts. shoulder

their curling limbs. he
gave me a blue pill before

he took me to the
Mediterranean. said he picked it
out to match

my favorite color. even the
setting. you see. i had to drink it down and

wait for the sensation i was
to love. he said. it was 3:30 am

and waves were crashing.
and the waves that were

crashing inside me
still get me seasick

PERLA KANTARJIAN



MUFFLED SHOUT, GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

IN SOME MOMENTS, I FORGET

In others, I open a chat with a friend lamenting what percentage of people our age are leaving Beirut. The chat is in June 2020, the last word is 'disaster,' and she's still pondering her options.

I wonder how much feeling is stored in rock, how the word 'broken' smells and whether my city reeks, if back then – whenever 'then' was – sorrow was a choice, how privilege tastes metallic – as one might describe blood, whether anyone can look at a pink cloud again and think 'pretty.' How we scatter across the world as if a bird could reverse building her nest, each one of us twigs, dislocated.

And sometimes,
I hear joy. It is no less simple than
a phone call, or a voice note.

Every now and then I'll vow
to learn physics, to figure out how
the airwaves carry your voice.
I'll then gather them into my pillowcase
and hold them until I fall asleep.

RIWA SAAB



SYRIAN MIGRATION SERIES, GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

CREATING IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND FORMS

AN INTERVIEW WITH HEDY HABRA

BY LENA MAHMOUD AND LAYLA AZMI GOUSHEY

Lena Mahmoud and Layla Azmi Goushey discuss the intersections of place, language, genre, and medium with Hedy Habra, multilingual author and visual artist.

Lena Mahmoud & Layla Azmi Goushey: What initially drew you to creative writing? What has motivated you to stay with it?

Hedy Habra: I was an avid reader from a very young age and was lucky to have access to my older siblings' libraries. As a child, I used to rewrite fairy tales, always changing the endings. And, because I went to a French school, my first love was for the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. When I came to the United States, I was still writing poetry in French. After completing a BA in Spanish, I earned an MA and MFA in English and started writing poetry and fiction in English. Later on I earned an MA and a Ph.D. in Spanish and my critical work was mostly in Spanish. I wavered for a long time between my passion for criticism and creative work, but I realized that they weren't incompatible, but instead cross-pollinate and complement one another.

LM & LAG: Do you find certain languages work better for different writing genres? Do you translate your own work into other languages?

HH: I think that in every language it is the writer's art that makes a given piece successful, regardless of the genre. I feel comfortable writing in French, English, and Spanish, whether it is criticism, poetry, or fiction. Sometimes I would work on a poem in three languages at the same time, and keep revising back and forth. With each new metaphor born from the challenge of going from one language to the other, the revision becomes endless and turns into a process of osmosis to the point that I sometimes would lose track of which piece was the original.

At first it was challenging to "translate" an experience initially lived in French and Arabic into English. But after a few years I switched entirely to English. Later on I started writing and publishing poetry in Spanish and came full circle to writing poetry in French again. I have compiled a bilingual manuscript of selected poems that I translated from English into Spanish, and vice versa, but I had to put it aside ten years ago because I was working on other projects. I hope to find time to revise it for publication.

LM & LAG: You designed the cover for *Taste of the Earth*. Did you design the covers for any of your other books? How do you believe your visual art and written art influence one another?

HH: I painted the artwork for my three poetry collections, and I'm grateful to Paul Sizer for designing the covers. I designed the cover for my short fiction collection, *Flying Carpets*, around an upturned Turkish coffee cup since reading in its dregs is a recurrent leitmotiv. There is a tight connection between the cover art and the content of my books. For *Tea in Heliopolis* I painted the terrace of the Heliopolis Palace Hotel before it became the Presidential Palace because it symbolized the bygone era of my youth in Heliopolis, Cairo. For my ekphrastic collection, *Under Brushstrokes*, my painting of a woman bathing in the midst of lotus leaves and flowers, with empty spaces corresponding to the silences in poetry, hinted at the hidden meanings under every brushstroke. For *The Taste of the Earth* I chose to paint the Eye of Horus, which for ancient Egyptians symbolized the six senses that are developed in an extensive section titled "Meditations Over the Eye of Horus."

When I have a hard time writing, I try to express myself with shapes and colors. I probably write mentally while I'm painting, but it is mostly the other way around because I have a passion for visual art and constantly write ekphrastic poetry. Whereas *Under Brushstrokes* was inspired by male and female artists, I am putting the last touches to a new ekphrastic poetry manuscript focusing primarily on a diversity of women artists.

Over the past ten years, since I started studying Chinese ink brush paintings, my aesthetics have changed because, for the Chinese, visual art and poetry are interchangeable. I feel that each one of my paintings ends up telling a story that was perhaps concocted in my subconscious as a result of aesthetic emotion. I plan to write a collection of poetry inspired by my own paintings where each artwork is [placed] next to its corresponding poem.

LM & LAG: When you begin working on a new piece, how do you decide which genre and form you will use? Have you ever changed the genre and form of one of your texts during revision?

HH: I think that at times the poem itself imposes the form it wants to embody, as though it were leading the way, and it becomes a process of discovery. I have often tried to break a prose poem into verse and played around a long time with the line breaks, or vice versa. On the other hand, I have found out that using a form a priori helps because it forces us to be concise and spend more time on the symmetry of the lines. The form is a guide, leading us into unknown paths. Although it requires more effort, it is rewarding. I love writing prose poems, pantoums, Malaysian haibuns, or the *anima methodi* sonnets based on the poetics of mirroring, all of which I used a lot in my latest collection, *The Taste of the Earth*. As for my short stories, I began writing magic realistic stories as a result of my love for Latin American literature.

LM & LAG: You have lived in various places in the SWANA region, Europe, and the United States. Did writing help you cope with adjusting to unfamiliar environments? And how do you believe readers can see the influences from these regions in your writing?

HH: I always kept a journal documenting everything I would do and read as well as some recurrent dreams. And from time to time I'd leaf through its pages, highlighting the thoughts, epiphanies, and images that maintained the initial power that compelled me to record them. Such a self-reflexive process helped me find continuity and was a source of inspiration for numerous poems.

Every place I've lived in created linguistic, cultural, and physical roots as well as strong relationships that I've maintained over decades. Poetry tries to make sense of such fragmented thoughts and memories and establishes connections. In each country there is an array of things one learns; fauna, flora, gastronomy, language, art, architecture. All of it, in a very unconscious way, melts alchemically like within a furnace and performs a transformation. It is through reading, writing, and revising that we get to know ourselves and make sense of the world. But this process also helps transcend everyday reality and enables us to inhabit a parallel world that can be constantly reshaped by the imagination. I think that intuitive readers, according to their own cultural and literary background, will follow these regional, linguistic, and literary influences in my work.

LM & LAG: Who are some authors who have had the biggest impact on your writing?

HH: This is a very hard question to respond to because I have studied literature in several languages over the years and it has become a slow and continuous process that I am not necessarily conscious of. I have numerous books of contemporary authors that I admire and can't mention lest I'd forget someone. But there are authors that I constantly reread like Oscar Wilde, T.S. Eliot, Theodore Roethke, Charles Simic, Li Young Lee, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Mark Doty, to name only a few.

I have always loved Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Aragon, Proust, Flaubert, and Bachelard, as well as international authors such as Orhan Pamuk, Adonis, Dante, Italo Calvino, Dino Buzzati, and Alessandro Baricco, among others.

When I discovered Latin American Literature over the past decades, I fell in love with the writings of Mario Vargas Llosa, on whose narrative I wrote numerous essays and a book of criticism. Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, Rubén Darío, Octavio Paz, César Vallejo, and Pablo Neruda are authors that I greatly admire and that have also had a great influence on my work.

For more information on Hedy please visit hedyhabra.com



SYRIAN MIGRATION SERIES 5, GOUACHE ON BOARD,
COLLECTION OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

FROM CIVIL WAR TO WORLD ART

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN ZUGHAIB

BY SUKOON EDITOR REWA ZEINATI

Rewa Zeinati: Helen Zughaib, your work has been widely exhibited in galleries and museums in the United States, Europe, and Lebanon. Your paintings are included in many private and public collections, including the White House, World Bank, Library of Congress, US Consulate General, Vancouver, Canada, American Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, the Arab American National Museum in Detroit, Michigan, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, among other places. You've served as Cultural Envoy to Palestine, Switzerland, and Saudi Arabia. The John F. Kennedy Center/REACH has selected Helen as a member of the 2021 Inaugural Social Practice Residency. Her paintings have been gifted to heads of state by President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Tell us how you got into art, what inspired your path? How did your journey begin? Did you feel supported along the way?

Helen Zughaib: How did my journey begin...well after being evacuated from the civil war in Beirut, Lebanon in late 1975, I ultimately ended up in Paris where I completed my secondary school. Initially I was so traumatized I could not even walk around the block where we lived as I thought I would never find my way home again. I actually have not thought of this memory for a while until the other day I spoke about it on a virtual panel of artists sharing our stories and path to becoming an artist.

Living in Paris and studying art history at school, I discovered that so many of the amazing paintings I was learning about, were within walking distance from our flat. I was determined to be able go study them and find my way home again. Ultimately several times a week I would go to the Jeu de Paume Museum to stand in front of the incredible paintings of Monet, especially his series of the sun coming through the Thames River in London. I think it was around this time that I decided I wanted to become an artist.

My parents definitely supported my decision to pursue art as a career, absolutely! I am very grateful that they did.

RZ: We'd love to hear about your experience growing up and how it influences/ed your work.

HZ: Growing up in the Arab world was so inspiring thinking back on this now. The patterns that surrounded me in our home on tiles, ceramics, rugs, textiles I believe all became part of what inspires me even until today with pattern being a strong feature in much of my work. I loved the two-dimensionality of those shapes and patterns and even in more figurative work, the paring down and simplified shapes appealed to me combined with such brilliant color.

And we were fortunate to live in places with incredible museums and collections of art, that my parents dutifully dragged us to! And of course, I am so happy they did.

My parents also collected work by Iraqi and Lebanese artists that I also grew up loving and being inspired by. Sadly at that time, they were not included in our art history studies. I think this is slowly changing as our world becomes smaller and more global.

RZ: Tell us a little about the children's shoes you've been painting - what inspired the project and what did you hope to achieve by it?

HZ: I love this question. Yes, the children's shoes began in 2015 at the height of the massive displacement of primarily Syrians, fleeing their country in search of safety. I could not stop thinking about those most vulnerable, the children, enduring unthinkable journeys, crossing borders, cold, hungry and scared. I had been working on this series of painted shoes when little Aylan Kurdie was found dead on the shores of a Turkish beach. It was painfully ironic that I had been working on that series when this tragedy occurred. The series continues until today, as the refugee crisis also is sadly ongoing and now larger than ever, including Afghanistan, Haiti and of course Central America on our own border here in the US.

RZ: Has the global pandemic affected your view of your own work, your identity as an artist, and/or has it informed it in any way?

HZ: The pandemic afforded me valuable studio time. I was able to work uninterrupted for long stretches of time, a luxury that is slipping away as we inch toward “normalcy” again. My identity as an artist remains the same but I would certainly say that the inequities of how the pandemic hit some communities harder than others created for me even a stronger sense of empathy. In other words, I grew along with the pandemic, which of course, coincided with the global Black Lives Matter movement which took hold at that time. And, of course I was keenly aware of the pandemic striking the refugee camps and centers across the world, certainly unable to cope with covid in cramped conditions and medical supplies being so limited.

RZ: You won the Evelyn Shakir Nonfiction Award in 2022. Mabrook! We are so excited for you! Tell us how this book idea started and how it developed?

HZ: I know!!! Thank you so much!!! I still cannot believe it! I am so grateful for this recognition for our book. And so pleased we won in the non-fiction category as these stories were actual events and traditions that my father experienced and shared with us over the years.

The idea came to me at a time when we were living through the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiment that prevailed in the months that followed that sad event and misconceptions of who Arabs were abounded.

I was approached by a gallery for a solo exhibit and thought wouldn't it be interesting to actually paint each of my father's stories. The story and my painting exhibited side by side so people could learn about life in Syria and Lebanon, traditions and values that are reflective of a shared humanity as opposed to the divisive rhetoric so loudly shouting at us from our televisions and newscasts.

So our book began in about 2003 and continued until 2015 when we had our last story for the book. It had long been a dream of mine to be able to present to my father, HIS book, his legacy for my brother and my sisters and me, and now his grandchildren. That dream came true and was a moment I will never forget as I ran to my parent's place and watched as he cracked open the first book we received from the publisher. It was emotional.

RZ: How important is art in an increasingly fast-moving, digitized, consumerist world?

I think that good art can make us slow down. Good art makes us think. Good art creates dialogue for exchange of ideas, of growing and learning about others' perspectives and lives. Good art can also bring us beauty and joy. Good art above all creates empathy for the “other.” Good art hopefully lets us learn from past mistakes and horrors so we might not perpetuate them upon one another again.

RZ: What advice, if any, would you give aspiring artists everywhere?

I would say follow your passion. Remain authentic to yourself. Your story is unique to you. Share it with us. We want to hear what you have to say. Do not give up. Be open to any door or window that opens to you. You never know where it might lead to, something amazing is around the corner!



FARAH, AABEY, LEBANON, 2020
BY RANIA MATAR

GIRLHOOD, PERFORMANCE, AND POETRY: AN INTERVIEW WITH GHINWA JAWHARI BY LENA MAHMOUD

Ghinwa Jawhari, winner of the Radix Media's Own Voices Chapbook Prize and author of BINT, discusses the impact and power of language, poetic forms and evolution, and familial influence and collaboration with Lena Mahmoud.

Lena Mahmoud: Much of your debut chapbook BINT analyzes how we use language, particularly Arabic, English, and French. What drew you to this theme, and what makes poetry an effective medium for it?

Ghinwa Jawhari: The conception of the project was rooted in the titular bint, the Arabic word for 'girl' and 'daughter.' Colloquially, bint can mean 'virgin' (the implication being 'unmarried, so still a daughter, not a wife'). I was interested in the intersection of those definitions, particularly as they relate to our relationships with our families, our romantic partners, our countries, and ourselves. By virtue of being born a bint, you're subjected to all of these meanings. The title is also deceptive in that same sense: because that identity is impinged on you by others, the bint in the poems strives (we can say fails, manages, deliberates, reimagines) imperfectly toward that identity.

It is interesting that you mention French too. Including that colonizing language was meant to articulate a kind of prerequisite for identity, for trauma. The grandmother's French in the poem 'jamais' foreshadows the speaker's own code-switching in English. Implicit in 'jamais' and other poems is the understanding of your own otherness, how you appear to the world around you. You understand that you are misunderstood, and language is a way to reconcile that, however haltingly. The poems with Arabic titles ['tazahar,' 'baladi,' 'shahwa,' 'tammuz'] offer the same identity questions in a more intimate landscape. There is the anxiety of trying to reconcile all of your selves and perhaps recognizing how it shifts. Language is so closely enmeshed with our psyches, our being, our thoughts, our dreams. I remember wondering once if my thoughts were in Arabic or in English and I couldn't articulate it completely. That said, the sparseness of poetry, the focus on individual words, helps these themes come across.

LM: You have noted that your father was an early influence on your development as a poet, particularly his gift for memorizing and reciting verses that you say has earned him the moniker zaghloul. What impact do you believe memorization and recitation have on both the poet and the audience?

GJ: Memorization allows for vivid performance and improvisation, which written poetry cannot do. By virtue of its medium, BINT is static. Much of the performance, sound work, and phonetic ideation came from hearing my father recite his own verses in Arabic. My hope is that BINT reaches the audience it was written for, just as my father dedicates and curates his odes to those around him. That said, I'm happy with the notion that the poems are being read by different eyes and voices.

I'll mention that performance poetry that's 'good' is usually written to be performed—in my experience, poems that I've read to an audience always did better if I wrote them to be read aloud. You gain a lot there: engagement, dramatics, pauses, laughter. But you do lose a lot too. I remember writing a poem in 2017 for an open mic night in Cleveland, at the Happy Dog near campus. I mention it because it was very specific to that event: the audience members were all BIPOC students, so I wrote a brilliant take-down poem for an appropriating, abusive white ex. One of the sections referred to our hairy bodies as Arab women: "[...] i am incapable of softness / my people bristly—out of courtesy, he hasn't seen me unshaved because my body as a teen would've put that peach-fuzz goatee to shame / he's been trying to grow it out since 2015 / since 2009 i've been dripping hot wax between my thighs in an effort to look like the pre-pubescent white girls americano jacks off to all the time / he doesn't know what it means to be an anomaly. he throws his few inches in the face of every metric women he's met [...]" The reception was dependably wild each time I performed it, including at the Nuyorican in New York after I moved. But I do consider that a poem like that, as rowdy and glorious as it is on stage, omits the nuances of written poetry. It is written for me to read it to you, and part of your enchantment with it is because I am delivering as a character. So in BINT, I wanted the conciseness and language to communicate intimacy, something you sit with alone because it's speaking only to you. The bint is anyone, and all of us—that's the point.

LM: Do you believe how and what types of poetry you write has evolved over the years? If yes, how did your writing evolve and what were the influences for the change?

GJ: I think there is more care and bewilderment now. The poems are personal. My early work wanted to take on the world—you know, when you're 20, you're seeing problematic systems for the first time, and a lot of your writing wants to dismantle them through indignant grandiosity.

This doesn't mean they can't be beautiful. One poem I wrote years ago narrated the arrival of humanity to mother earth, in the form of a stork dropping off a bundle to a sleeping woman: "in seven days you'll wake to find / the tight bundle, no larger than a termite, / has multiplied. colonized. burst through your / womb to your back, set borders and mapped with / flags. mined your bones to light small lamps within / these same mines." At the time, the poem implied misogyny is implicit to humanity since our birth. Those poems are still meaningful to me, and I feel they are quietly brilliant in their own right, but the poetry I write now is far less presumptuous. I'm focused on the internality of our humanity and cultures: the spaces and thoughts we take with us to sleep. I want to ask questions that I feel confident to answer based on my own experiences, and BINT captures this internal monologue without pointedly dredging up "big world" themes.

I'll add that my current project, on the Phoenicians, is a mixture of both modes of writing. I'm excited to see that interplay unfold.

LM: You state that some of the narratives in BINT are fictional and others come from your personal experience as well as those of people close to you. What inspired your decision to blend fiction and nonfiction? How do you think the mix affects the chapbook?

GJ: BINT is a chapbook about Arab-American girlhood, and at the center of our coming-of-age are our own narratives and fantasies. The parts of the collection that were fictionalized attempted to reconcile a dreamscape (the poems 'shahwa' and 'instead a palace' come to mind) with a very vivid and present reality (such as 'autonomic' and 'counterfeit'). Violence was concurrent with intimacy. Growing up as a hyphenated American, as a girl, thrusts you into violent and complicated spheres. Much of your growth comes from navigating the imbalance. I wanted to capture as much of that balancing act as I could.

LM: Your sister Nesreen Jawhari created the beautiful cover art for BINT, and it is an image of you sitting in the chair where you wrote the book. Did you ask her to do the sketch or was it her idea? What about the image made you choose it for the cover?

GJ: The pose was based on a poem in the chapbook, 'boy crush (ii)'. In it, the speaker attempts to sit on a chair the way she saw a man do at a New Year's Eve party. The poem is rife with gendered symbols (the sequined dress, the lying, the closet). It's a poem about bodies and who they belong to. When the speaker is seated in the chair, her legs apart, she notices that she can't mimic the boy's body exactly. It "belongs" to him—whether it's because her body belongs to a man, or because the body she wants or imagines is a man's body. Her recognition marks a turning point in the collection, which is why it's at the end. There is reclamation in that "whatever," a kind of insistence that she is what she is. And besides, a New Year awaits.

Both of my sisters—Maggie and Nesreen—are very talented artists, dancers, musicians, and singers (out of the three of us, I am the least talented!). I can rave about my gorgeous sisters for days. I adore them. We were all discussing the cover in the beginning. Nesreen just happened to be in New York in August, when the chapbook was accepted for publication, so we started brainstorming together. Maggie made the point of keeping illustration closer to the viewer (I wanted it to be very far away initially, so that you couldn't see the details of the face). We thought to include the mirror, but that felt pointed and angular. My sisters both had several ideas and they were all incredible. Eventually my partner, a designer, helped us come up with the final pose: the angle of the shot, where the hands were placed. At the end she said, "Yes, this makes me want to open it." My only ask was for the cover to be pink. I'll add that the team at Radix Media has been a dream to work with because they truly gave me free reign to create the chapbook the way I imagined it.

For more information on Ghinwa please visit ghinwajawhari.com



GENERATIONS LOST, GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

SHAPING STORIES AND IDENTITIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ZEYN JOUKHADAR BY LENA MAHMOUD

Zeyn Joukhadar, the award-winning author of the novels *The Map of Salt and Stars* and *The Thirty Names of Night*, discusses creating and transforming stories and discovering characters' authentic voices through the exploration of marginalized histories with Lena Mahmoud.

Lena Mahmoud: When did you first start writing? What made you decide to pursue it as a career?

Zeyn Joukhadar: I've been writing since I was in grade school. Novels were my escape and my haven, so much so that I first tried my hand at writing one when I was 9. I always wanted to write as a career, but as the child of an immigrant, I was taught early on that an artistic career was a luxury closed to people like me, so I got a PhD in epigenetics instead. Years later, after I figured out I couldn't see myself in science for the rest of my life, I was still writing. After I left academic science, I gave myself six months to a year to figure out what to do next. In those six months, I wrote and revised the book that would become *The Map of Salt and Stars*.

LM: In 2018 you published your debut novel *The Map of Salt and Stars*, a dual narrative of preteen Noor's experience as a Syrian refugee and Rawiya's medieval mapmaking apprenticeship disguised as a boy. What was your inspiration for this novel? What do you think about how the novel has been received?

ZJ: My inspiration for the novel was mainly a question that kept repeating itself as the situation in Syria worsened: in what ways can I show up for my communities, and what do I have to offer them—especially as a Syrian American person born in New York City? I decided to tell a story about the importance of the stories we tell ourselves, the importance of creating our own narratives instead of allowing ourselves to be defined by the narratives of others. When I started writing *Map*, I was tired of seeing Syrians, Muslims, Arabs, and especially refugees spoken about, or spoken over, or spoken for, but never allowed to speak for themselves unless their stories fit an acceptable narrative. I wanted to write something that spoke to other people living in the Syrian diaspora and offer an alternative to those Ameri-centric narratives. I wanted to remind others in my communities who have lost history, family, place, and even language of all we still have left.

LM: How has writing, publishing, and promoting *The Map of Salt and Stars* influenced your second novel *The Thirty Names of Night*?

ZJ: After I wrote *Map*, I started to see all the things I hadn't had the courage or the language to talk about. I'd hinted at Khaldun's bisexuality, for example (yes, he's queer!), and at the ambiguous legibility of both Rawiya's and Nour's gender when they disguise themselves as boys. With *The Thirty Names*, however, I found myself writing something more raw to which I had even fewer answers. Just as with *Map*, writing *The Thirty Names* required a work on myself, both in terms of accepting myself as transgender and also of learning more about the history of Syrian American communities from New York to the Midwest, the history of queer and trans people of color in America, so many histories I needed to understand in order to better understand myself.

In a way, every book I write is really a gift I give to myself. Every novel stems from me trying to grow as a person, trying to show up for and be accountable to the communities that sustain me

LM: In your prefatory essay to an excerpt of *The Thirty Names of Night*, “Love Letters to Those Who Come Before Me,” you write that changing the protagonist’s gender identity from a cisgender woman to a transgender man altered the plot of the novel. Do you find that it is more effective to begin a story by thinking about character rather than plot? What has been the most effective way for you to explore your characters’ identities in the drafting stages?

ZJ: The best way to explain this is that the main character, Nadir, was never a cisgender woman; he was always a nonbinary transmasculine person. I just didn’t know that when I started writing.

For me, there’s no way to make the plot come together until I have a solid understanding of who my characters are and what they want. With *The Thirty Names*, it was very much a tug of war, a series of drafts in which I was trying to figure out how to push the characters to act on their desires. Nadir felt especially suffocated and afraid; it wasn’t until I realized that he was transmasculine that I was able to create the situations he needed to come alive on the page. The plot, as always, unravels from how my characters try to solve the problems I give them. Nadir’s being transgender is not a “plot problem,” just as my being trans is not a “problem” in my life; it’s just who the character is. But as in life, you can’t show up authentically and be known by others until you are free to honor and express your emotions, your joys, your pain. For the character of Nadir, transitioning is part of his character arc, but also as in life, it’s just one facet of a much more complex journey he undertakes involving history, chosen family, grief, the unspoken dreams of his ancestors, his relationship with art, and much more.

LM: Both of your novels required an extensive amount of historical and political research, and for the second one especially you had to look into marginalized histories like the one of Little Syria and those of “queer and transgender histories erased in the name of survival.” You write about visiting museums and interviewing some of Little Syria’s former residents in “Love Letters to Those Who Came Before Me,” but what other strategies and processes have you developed to research for your novels? How do you feel about the research process?

ZJ: I enjoy the research process because it guides and shapes the story I want to tell. I try to lean heavily on primary source material; for example, for *The Thirty Names of Night* I listened to a lot of oral histories for the historical parts of the story. I continue to research as I revise, too. To me, the research process is never really over—it’s true that you have to start drafting at some point, but you uncover the information you are missing as you write, so I never presume to know everything.

LM: What advice do you have for aspiring writers, particularly those who come from marginalized groups?

ZJ: It can be hard not to let the narratives other people have been telling you about yourself all your life creep into your work. It’s really easy to slip into the story you think you’re supposed to tell, the one you know other people will expect and understand, rather than telling the story as you know it. Make sure you know who you’re writing for, even if it’s just yourself. Keeping that audience in your mind as you’re writing will keep you honest.

Try to fight the urge to explain; the world will push you to add explanations later. Try to stay as long as you can in that place of truth without judging yourself and see what comes out. Let the feeling of telling the truth be your guide, even if it feels like you’ve strayed into territory where words don’t suffice. Know that there is someone out there who will read your words and feel less alone.

For more information on Zeyn please visit zeynjoukhadar.com



THE PLACES THEY WILL GO 24 PAINTED CHILDREN'S SHOES IN ACRYLIC GOUACHE
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB



ALAE IN THE GOLDEN WATER, KHIYAM, LEBANON, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR



EID AL SALIB (STORIES MY FATHER TOLD ME) GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

MARCH 2020

after Anna Akhmatova

The far-away siren outside the window.
A kitten purring, sleeps unaware.

A family is seated. A silence shrills
beneath the talk of a day's work.

Each will take to their room
again tomorrow for the same.

"Where has my lover gone?"
the lipsticked soap actress wails.

"Who will tell the truth?"
the frenzy-eyed newsman asks.

A jumbo tin of evaporated milk sits
beneath the counter, curded into yogurt soon.

More than ever, the family listens.
They are wary of the joy of song, and dare not touch.

The mother covers her mouth when cooking, careful
to wash the spoon after every cautious taste.

KAMELYA YOUSEF

A BALLAD

soundtrack: bandaly family – do you love me

Do you love me do you do you

X I am corrected by my phone

Do you love me so you do you

or

do you love me so you do me and

leave

the next day?

A lover calls, emergency voice:

let's talk.

I get the thunder in my chest

that rained outside my window

when I was seven—

despite this I tell him:

Sure come over

but I have an interview this evening

with the photographer

who comes to open mic

and smokes cigs with me

in the fuzzy big city rain.

He says he'll be quick.

My lover asks me:

questions without question marks

like:

You're going to

make me unstable, right.

You don't have a job, right.

I stay silent

and let him show me

his cards.

I didn't even know we were playing

a game.

It doesn't count.

A partner is a best friend and

a foundation

like a salary.

You can't be that, right.

Please call me

naïve but

I didn't even know we were allowed
to think about people
as biweekly check deposits and automatic
withdrawals into savings accounts
to save each other for
a rainy day.

It's rainy and I walk to the subway.
FaceTime call with Sitti Um Hafez:

I'm walking to my friend's house.
Is this a special friend?
Tata, all my friends are special.
Get a special friend with a job.
Do you mean husband, Tata?
*Yes, Kamelya, I'm going to die waiting
for you to get married.*
You'll be alive forever, Tata.
You'll meet all my husbands. They'll all
have jobs. Promise.
Love you. I'll FaceTime you

tomorrow.

Again, again,

I am a lover
scorned.

Actually, a lover scorned is my rising sign.

My sun is
sadness,

it shines on me

every day,

reminds

me I'm alive
and I say hey,

me? I'm dead bro.

This other me is alive

rising.

KAMELYA YOUSEF

L-VE POEM

At 3:13 PM on our twelfth day
you almost basically said
you wanted to marry me.

*

In a film essentially about Arab
death, Godard said it would take a whole
day to tell the story of one second.

*

Let this be an offering for the ones
who Love in a village way.

*

In those minutes,
I stood on a ground that would not sway

I tried to fall a little I trip
on Purpose
Sometimes to know I can.

I fall indeed
but do not get lost in an unmappable place
beneath these inky waters.

I bathe and swim
In this

Oasis in a
droughty place.

Seven times
I run between the door and the mountain
of clothes
in my apartment. I dance.

A water springs through

Fake hard wood
Floor.

Our sudden son
Abrahamic cherubim
parched,

in illuminate laminate Light Bends
onto His knees in desert dust
Prays on the rug

—I got it Online
it's really soft you should try it
I give it Five stars—

Then miracled Water oracled light the sky opened and I

I make a playlist of the feeling of you
I build a mansion for you in my mind
I write a detailed itinerary for our life
 a long list of the lists
I will list to you in my own voice one day

In a mermaid city after we visit
our Cousins in The Sky We
Drink the arak of the Moon
Cheers over a plate of raw
Liver at our table in the sky
maybe A little bit of salt I will
Eat you without salt I will
Drink casks of the tears of your Past
Have my coffee with your Salt
I would eat a bundle of Hearts
Suck cardamom seed
a little bitter For your favor
Be the little gristle in my teeth a little Why
don't you let me sink
My soft in your —
Call it a — call it a —
Call it — a cant say that yet
But call it salt

I will salt you forever
In dinner on my heart
Two healths for your
Mind if I eat you with salt

and give You a liver

Call it a map
Let us lick off our fingers
the text of it Let it sit

A tattoo of
A falling

Salt

KAMELYA YOUSEF



LEA, LA MAISON ROSE, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2019
BY RANIA MATAR

STILL

Stomping feet,
red, white and green flags lifting in awe.
Chants of anguish
filling the streets.
People gathering,
hearts bursting first in hope
then in grief,
throats sore from screaming,
legs frozen
in fear,
eyes clouded,
in tears of smoke.

Then,
stillness.

Parked cars
crowd the sidewalks
that feel no footsteps.
A lone kaak seller
wanders the streets,
his customary call
echoes in a city
that seems alive only
with birds, whose songs are finally heard,
with cats, whose wails are
never-ending.
While doors
remain shut.
Families within,
watching, listening, waiting
for any news of
change.

The hours of digital clocks
make no sound.

Across highways,
and over mountains,
the endless fields
of green wheat,
the yellow daisies
that burst from the earth,
the tenderness
of orange blossoms,
have faded into
the dried thorns of summer.

But.
Still growing,
black berries and fragrant gardenias.
Still boiling,
coffee, thick and bitter, into porcelain cups.
Savored with
dates wrapped in
delicate buttery shells.
Still loving
the eyes that wrinkle into smiles
above colorful masks.
Still enjoying,
the sounds of laughter that carry
across screens.
Reliving stories
that still can be heard
beyond walls.
Still alive,
with love
that can be felt
Anywhere.

MAHA ZAWIL



ALAE, RAMLET AL-BAYDA, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2020
BY RANIA MATAR

PALESTINE

Beauty
is elder frying salty
cheese under a blue sky and gifting
me the larger half. A mother baking flatbread
at sunrise, fanning smoke over coals with cardboard.
Oil swirled atop beans. Parsley omelet. Cardamom coffee.
Wild sage in tea. A grandmother's back mountained with herbs,
hiding under watchtower's shadow. Generations harvest olives.
Gardening is holy scripture. Pruning, a sacred contract, in land where
children vanish over less than a stone. Reservoirs siphoned from tongues
for date plantations. Bedouin shepherds jailed for herding in the Jordan
Valley. Fields reserved for Israeli shooting drills. Peacekeepers guard
Yanoun, near Aqraba, walk perimeter, eyes wide for settler danger.
Hills glow jade and amethyst at sundown. Partridges scuttle from
golden wheat, undulating like an ocean, lion's roar. Clothesline
snap, snap. Gazelles prance under saffron clouds. Partridges
scuttle. Ancient olive groves rot from the outside out,
worn as a Gazan fishing net. In spring, dessert
greens. Bedouin children laugh, braid
flowers, crown strangers
in light.

PAULA KAUFMAN



PLANTING OLIVE TREES WITH JIDDU (STORIES MY FATHER TOLD ME), GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB



COMING TO AMERICA, (STORIES MY FATHER TOLD ME), GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

STATE OF THE NATION

The Near East/ West Asia/ The Levant

Mesopotamia/ The Mediterranean/ The Holy Land

MENA/ SWANA/ The Middle East

Arabia/ Greater Syria/ The Orient

Beyond the books exist places with many names, attached to peculiar shapes whose lines zig and zag on paper, crafted by men with guns and tanks.

The result: cartographic representations of the boundaries of our existence.

We continue to subscribe to identities embedded in times and decisions we were excluded from, then point to those maps, composed of those same erratic lines, lending credence to the political vision that invented them.

Some of those names were concocted expeditiously with the stroke of a pen on a spring afternoon, ten decades ago, satisfying the Occidental infatuation with taming the exotic.

Are we, therefore, hostages of history, trampled by alien forces that haphazardly arranged lands and peoples, and assigned to us names that we are forced to uphold or are we complicit in embracing the configurations that were intended to mark our passage into “modernity?”

At minimum, we reside in a state of ambivalence, comprised of a nation of names by virtue of imposition.

TAREQ A. RAMADAN

CHANGING SIGNS IN A LAND THAT REMEMBERS

Mythology demands ideological servitude/ like an adhesive applied to the heart.

Landscapes meant to lure you in/sensationalized in the political discourse.

Roadside announcements in different languages/ symbols of the hegemons displayed on aluminum.

Evoking feelings of every kind/you are left to ponder what is and what was.

TAREQ A. RAMADAN

PASSPORT

Material evidence of where we were that tells only part of the story, with chronological brevity, containing a photo from a moment in history that will inform the future.

Worn out documents, papers bearing novel aromas and stamps bearing unfamiliar scripts, lone signatures, handwritten dates, incoherent scribbles made by officials, coats of arms impressed with ink that may be the only souvenir we depart with.

Symbols of the states that adorn our maps, embedded in fifteen or twenty small pages that we take with us whenever we leave the premise, carrying it with us to the home that will become or becoming a relic of the home that once was.

Circumnavigating the globe in search of something different, while traversing multiple realities in the span of hours, hoping that the next place is somehow more promising than the first.

Each time, offering the new land our faces and our prints, so that it remembers our encounter forever, entering proof of who we are with rapid keystrokes, while we are processed.

We live in a world composed of people and papers where we must verify our disposition to the rest, prompting the question- do we verifiably exist to those people and to those other places without a *passport*?

TAREQ A. RAMADAN



THE FALLEN MANGO II

When my father says *mangoes are the nectar of Egypt*
I imagine him
searching through the desert with his two brothers
carrying jugs of water on his back
and picking the heads off of scarab beetles
until he finds the perfect mango
and squeezes all of the pulp out
into his dry mouth. I imagine
my father as a child
riding his bike
through Khan el-Khalili
and talking to a street vendor
in a language I do not understand
because it is in his blood
to bargain
for the prettiest mangoes.
My mother says she used to climb 30 feet
for the juiciest ones
and throw them down to her five siblings
under the tree
like a cluster of hungry birds.
But when I imagine Hunger
I see a mango falling
out of the sky,
a crowd of children
who have already eaten.

ATHENA NASSAR

COMFORT FOOD

The comfort of home is making *Margah*
like momma used to
Grocery stores lacking

International foods span more than one aisle
The taste of homeland undercut,
By Baba's "This Is America"

Dolma, Arrias, Khemah— days of preparation
Make way for brisket, collard greens, and grandma's sticky buns

The comfort of home
Split by
The languages of sustenance

When classmates complain
Of stinky
Lunches

Momma now only cooks
The gentrified comforts
Of Baba's blackness

The comfort of home
Is monolingual

TAMARA AL-QAISI-COLEMAN



SANA'A AND WAFa'A, BOURJ EL BARAJNEH REFUGEE CAMP, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2017
BY RANIA MATAR

IN DJIBOUTI*

Dedicated to the many thousands of Ethiopian migrants risking their lives to get into Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. May the road rise up to meet them, may the wind be always at their backs.

In Djibouti...
you must wear shoes,
if you have some,
to cross the bladed lava.
There, where all motion's
burnt out,
taken from the flowing rock,
they've left discarded plimsolls
shredded rubber —
green stripes
fading by the desert road.
There's a water bottle, too,
left on a hillside —
the crater rim, where the view
of the salt lake
whips into your eyes.
But in any case,
what could they possibly have left —
to carry —
after walking from Ethiopia?
Would they have seen,
along the way,
how there's one island for the devil
and another for his wife?
Or,
would they have taken
a broken-topped volcano stone –
impertinently offered –
capable of holding
only one small truth?
Would they have seen
that dark star in the egg?
Did it split open, too,
for a line of thin men,
drowning in thin air?
Did they notice, too,
how there's no way back, here –
no return
to all these footprints?
There's a man,
a woman,
a child,
stuck fast –
still too far south
for any Gate of Tears.
But on they walk —
still walking —
still walking from Ethiopia.

JONATHAN GORVETT

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LETTER TO MY UNCLE, VETERANS DAY, 2019

you carried your name like Caesar
your shock of silver hair thicker than your accent

didn't betray your native land
you whispered your story only to those who listened
sun shining on your swarthy skin
you said that gypsies kidnapped you when you were a boy
pierced your earlobes with impressions of an eastern tribe
mementos of a motherland

in America you drove the big white Cadillac
& drank Seagram's 7 crown whiskey
but your heart desired that fertile valley
echoing through your Phoenician veins
debossed earlobes a reminder of your lost tribe

then you heard the bugle call to battle
against those who ruled over
our land of arak, milk & honey
they lured you into trenches
but without truffles, cognac or croissants
our cousins conscripted to fight
on both sides of the War to End All Wars
wrestling hand to hand
their forced march into a foreign army
to be
chair à canon cannon fodder
a miasma of poisoned gas
bloated their bellies strangled their lungs
the bugle blared for Arab land
but you weren't warned

a prized sacrificial lamb bleeding at the Sykes & Picot altar
of constructed spheres of influence and secret deals
a startling piece of double dealing
how could we believe that their racial conviction would lead
to political freedom?
the generals said they didn't order you to fight
but to die for the Great War
300,000 from the Levant
laid their bodies down in Gallipoli's mass grave
facing west instead of east
no one knows their names
dreams died with dead men inside the burial pit
promises perished under their bloodied boots
boundaries tailored into tattered territories

carved and butchered lands lay like slaughterhouse sheep
villages burnt renamed
identities lost stolen
thieves prowling in the night histories colonized

In America you drove the big white Cadillac
& drank Seagram's 7 crown whiskey
until your American flag draped coffin
joined the echo of your boxed eastern tribe.

KATE DAHER



CIEARRA, WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA, 2018
BY RANIA MATAR

THE COMMONER BY MOHAMED KHOUGALI

Part I

I wake up with stimulating conviction. This is the woman I am to spend the rest of my life with! As for the dream itself, it has run its purpose and has long decayed to tracelessness in a dimly lit memory chamber in my mind. Absolute and resolute, I must ask for her hand in marriage. All I know of her, her name; Leila, that she practices palates and is active in civil society. It was at one of these society meetings that we became acquainted, she wore excellent tan Derby shoes. The conversation was esoteric but coherent, talks of tradition and personal experiences. This was some 8 months ago; I haven't spoken to her for four. I lay in bed and allow the thought to wallow with the other possessive and obsessive lusts that are now reduced to whimpers where once they were as profound as this. And this one does seem out of place; like oil and water, it would seem, for proper fusion there would need to be a stir. I leave it as is. But maybe at a microscopic level, oil and water may find a nexus; under this stimulating conviction is crippling futility that's to be found in the nexus between Leila and say... Thuraya. Heigh ho! It is either this or continuing to stare at the four walls indefinitely. Proceed with zest!

'Hey Leila! Hope you're keeping well and safe. How've you been?' The text reads. Now, how will I begin to explain my feelings towards her based on a dream that I don't recall? I wonder if she believes in ha- 'Hey Noah, I'm good thanks. Not bad, just quarantined (insert appropriate smiley face here). How about you? What are you up to these days?'. I LOVE YOU; LET'S GET MARRIED NOW! Was sanely translated to 'yeah, it's crazy! I'm chill, not much just getting some reading done. Is it tough in Sudan? How are your family taking it?' Unscathed, I successfully managed to muster the appropriate amount of blaséness, keeping my feelings at- 'I'm stranded in Istanbul at the moment, Sudan's closed their airports (another appropriate emoji here). Mom and dad are good alhamdulillah. Oh, what are you reading? And where are you at the moment?' My love for her remains resolute, even after her questionable spelling of mum, you beautiful Americanised Sudanese parvenu! 'That's terrible, is everything okay? Who're you staying with? I'm in London at the minute. Reading a bit of Ibn Khaldun'.

'Oh no, everything's fine. Staying with some friends, girl trip! Is it interesting?' Is Ibn Khaldun interesting?! His Muqaddimah is a key document that cemented the concept of vizierate, nuanced the concept of Asabiyyah and is perhaps the greatest work in humanities ever produced, you majestic, enchanting philistine! 'It's alright, he mentions Sudan in it haha. How have you been keeping busy?'

'Nice! Not much, just binge-watching shows, need to be more productive!' I wonder if she felt compelled to say that. Anyhow, I have laid the appropriate ground work, now to confess my dying love! 'It's pretty good! Awesome possum. Are you free for a chat, I hate texting haha'.

'Gimme 40 minutes, about to have Iftar'.

I wait. Phone rings. Her tone was more dynamic in text. "Hi Noah, Ramadan kareem, hope you're well."
"Salam Leila, Allah akram, I'm well thanks. How's Istanbul?" It's a process.

"It's nice, but everything is closed! There're so many cats here! It's such a beautiful place!" She replies.

"Yeah, it's all well and good until they start replacing us, and demand reparation for all the laser chasing and reflective mirror sorcery!" I suggestively laugh. She mimics. It's time! The wooden horse is in place, I repeat, the wooden horse is in place! "I had this super weird dream, it's crazy!" I have a tendency to morph my accent whenever matters

of the heart are addressed, "I don't know how kosher it is, seeing how it's Ramadan..." She goes suspensefully silent. "No! It's.. it's nothing like that or whatever" or was it? "It's weird 'cus I don't remember the dream exactly, but umm... it's super, sort of, compelling me to do things. You know what I mean?" I've suspended my efforts momentarily.

"Do you mean... dream interpretation...?" Dream interpretation!? What am I some sort of Sufi mystic? I wish to marry you because of an unmemorable dream. No one gets me.

"Not quite... Okay this is going to sound weird, and wallahi I've never had this happen before, so bear with me. I had a dream, one that I cannot remember, after which I had this impossible impulse to ask you... to marry me! It's mad!" That suspenseful silence again. Perhaps that's a good thing. The feeling is reciprocated, through some spiritual alchemy our souls are- "Umm... that's... and you don't remember the dream?"

"Nope. I told you it's weird. But I had to at least let you know, I don't know, curiosity..." The reciprocal alchemy was clearly defected!

"Okay..." Mute reaction. "It's not weird, I think all of us have strange dreams that we think mean something to us. Try to remember what it was." Understanding. With that I break into a monologue.

"Okay. I think when we communicate, maybe there are multiple dimensions to our engagement. So, for instance, we could be talking about politics or something, but while we're talking, our micro expressions and body language, and even semantics and word origins may reveal more than what we wish to disclose... As in, if I use the words 'cool beans' our brain registers that as belonging to a certain zeitgeist that the other person may find attractively familiar. Or our expressions may indicate a certain savoir vivre, one that allows us to comfortably express ourselves without having to explain the significance and influence of our milieu. And I think our brain configures some sort of algorithm to exactly who seems attractive to us. Maybe that could be it... My brain is kind of slow, took 8 months." I end the monologue with a nervous chuckle.

"Okay. Maybe... Is that what you think happened? And also, what does that mean?" She replies, still thinking about it. "I mean... it's a theory in a place where one doesn't exist. And what I mean by it is that, for example if I were to say something like-

"No, as in what does it mean for you? What do you want to do with this theory?" She pungently asks. I take a deep breath and stall. Centre stage, the lights are on, all I need to do is speak honestly. "I don't know. My mates say I intellectualise things as a defence mechanism to make things complicatedly digestible. Maybe it's; I like you, and being in this box for too long has catalysed my need for emotional validation. And because I like to complicate things, only a fantastical, grand, poignant expressive and abstract message can animate me to reach out to you, and talk to you emotionally. Genuinely." Genuinely. I've always been vividly aware of my neediness for emotional validation. By far one of my more unattractive and destructive traits.

"Okay." She replies. Silence. "What I don't understand is, why me? We haven't spoken for a long time. Plus, it... it was all platonic." She broke the silence.

"I couldn't answer you, honestly. But like I said, it could just be something intangible." I conclude. We stay in silence for another long moment then continue talking. Generic and soothing, the conversation was. I was under the duvet, with just a small opening for a draft, and whenever she talked, my mind would reconstruct an image of her. Spacious and flawless forehead, big dark brown eyes, straight bushy brows, curly black hair, none expressive full lips, a wide jaw. Whenever she talks for a while, I doze off to a daydream where we walk into Ozone restaurant in Khartoum and I lightly graze her hand, she in turn holds my hand and purposely interlocks our fingers. I squeeze and draw her hand closer and purposefully kiss it.

The conversation was dynamic, she has one brother, I have two; she prefers the winter, I prefer summer; she had cats, dogs and birds as a child; I had horses; she wants to be a doctor, I want to be a politician; she prefers Royal biscuits, I prefer Barakat. We did agree on one thing; we both like horror movies.

We continue to talk. Always at ungodly hours. The conversations have trespassed beyond their appropriate perimeters; questions about favourite colour, early attachments, juvenile rebellions and unsuccessful relationships have all been exhausted, fully. In the continuum, we have matured from the embryonic stage, but have not yet reached foetus. Occasionally prompting pauses and artificial segues so not to prematurely discharge and project thoughts and expectations. She once asked me "what is the worst-case outcome of this?" And I, transfixed with the image of kissing her hand at Ozone, replied uncensored "if this was not to work out".

Part II

Weeks go by, and we spoke mostly every night. We got to know each other better, and finally had an argument. Where she called me an elitist for suggesting that movies are lower tier forms of entertainment than books. I replied with "abrudi" (calm down). The call was then unceremoniously and instantaneously disconnected, I believe it may have been the poor connection.

The more we got to know each other the more structured our engagements became, of course losing its fantasy. A typical motif to my dating cycle; the next stage would be recession. However, this was different; I spoke, mostly, with absolute emotional honesty, and laid my feelings bare. Not the easiest of tasks; 'opening your kimono' to another person reveals the constructed decency based on biased, but positive, reinforcements. It was my belief that emotional honesty was to sanitise my rather tainted past, and help me break from this purgatory of consistent failed attempts at togetherness.

First day of Eid. To balance the prematurity, we've recently become quite inexpressive in our talks. After all, we haven't yet met physically in our new relationship form. Our conversations were concocted mostly of humour, some politics and some culture. My family, it turns out, were persecuted by hers some decades back; the dictatorship of the proletariat. "Eid Mubarak and may all your wishes come true Leila!" Opening niceties.

"And you. Wishing you and your family health and prosperity. How's your day?" She asks, her voice was upbeat. It was night time.

"Not too bad actually, spent the day calling relatives. People I haven't spoken to in a long while reached out, it was delightful. Except, I had the rather ominous 'alsana aljaya a'rees inshaAllah' (next year a married man, God willing). Which is always..."

"Yup. Likewise. And I'm older than you, and a woman! so imagine..." All I can think about is: I MUST NOT CALL HER KHALA (aunt) "I can't even. It's mad! Have they started calling you khala yet?" Well done. The word has two meanings in Sudan; aunt in the literal sense; or a spinster, which is apparently a bad thing.

"Oh, that stage has come and gone. I've reached the bayra stage." I leave that to the reader's imagination. Chuckling "apart from getting chastised, what else did you get up to?"

"Umm... spoke to friends and family mostly, ordered my Eid jalabeya (dress), but can't even go out. This pandemic..."
"Yeah... Crazy."

We continue talking. Mostly Eid themed topics. While previously I'd go into a trans and romanticise 'us' whenever she would talk, the pixy dust has now worn off and at best the conversations are chronological. We speak and occasionally I break into a monologue, but never as zealously pretentious as previous ones. Even the impetus seems to be getting more and more fatigued, its zeal no longer propels me to similar distances. And whenever she spoke, the question 'is this comfortable tedium?' would echo around in my head, electricized by the vacuousness of thought. Uncomfortably thinking about my unfaithfulness to the dream. We hang up a little past midnight. But, as structured as our conversations was, I am still ravenous for more conversations.

In all our talks, even the most superficial ones, there was an addictive and fluid emotional connection. Sometimes these emotions were confronted directly. It was brave. She once told me "I'd want to be in a relationship where I can express my emotions. It's comfortable." At this point, we didn't call it a 'relationship', but her sentiment was nonetheless indicative. For me, that emotional connection was transformative, I replied with an equally indicative sentiment. Transformative. The cycle was made redundant, or at least was starting to lose its absolutism.

From one pull, the potentiality of a recession and cycle conformity surfaced a certain dormant hysteria. From another, was the novel comfort. I could call this person at night with all my insecurities and vulnerabilities, and she'd vindicate and engage without the vulgarness of humanist empathy, but with the collectivist fetishism of our frail existence. So ridiculous a fetish, it manifests in the form of satirising, and welcoming, sadomasochism. In the dialectic of these two pulls were flouting thoughts.

How could this person not be orthodox? How could she not follow the same cycle journey as others? I must be right! A recession must follow! If not, what does that mean? I'm wrong? Deeper even, the dream was true. The dream must have been a reaction to my isolation. Was it more sinister than that? Was the dream more than just a dream? More than just a reaction?! I must suffer so that she becomes orthodox, so I can fit the dream into my meaning. But more than that, I must feel absolute masochism, otherwise I am another statistic who found 'the one' through unique circumstances. A commoner. Oxymoron. If it was just a dream, then she is just another. If it was more than just a dream, then I am just another. Both outcomes degenerate to despair.

More than that even, what will I do with my 'more-than-otherness'? My extraordinariness. If I were to sever, this is the masochistic act of evolving. Or was it the sadistic act of subjugating? Or the frailty of my character not to address emotions bravely? These thoughts are just thoughts. Time to take action. I must sever. I must sever! Simply because the choice presented itself. If I continue, surely, I'd regret not severing. And how brave is it of me to sever at a point, when the pixy dust has just now settled. If I wait longer, I am a coward, and have chosen out of experience not conviction. If I have severed prior to, it was my sensitivity towards euphoric emotional synergy. How brave!

On one occasion, she promised to call me the next day, this was after Eid. The next day was quiet, so was the day after, and the day after that. During which, I became neurotically melancholic and filled with despair. I know what's to come. At the end of the third day, she finally sent me a message saying 'Hey, sorry for not texting. Are you free for a call later?' though the text sedated some of the despair, I still haven't replied. It's now the 4th day. The historic cycle would demand lethargic correspondence, sporadic and non-punctual replies. But even this was not to be. I must reply with the same significant magnitude the moment demands! Demand for severing. I must shout and jump and scream and cry! I felt it. I must do all these and more! I felt the pain wash over me! I was about to degenerate to despair. At the precipice is the place of complete serenity. Both, the security of falling back to her warm emotional embrace and the commitment to plunge forth into loathsome pseudo uniqueness, are aminate in comfortable irony.

Alas, I must even deny myself this indulgence, it was too cowardly. I have to make the choice. I lay in bed; the thought becomes enflamed and surrounds. How am I to do this? With extreme prejudice! I will not cower behind excuse; I am the villain.

"For you not to text back for a couple of days is interesting. I have laid my feelings bare, I shared with you all that I can without filter. I know it's not because you were busy! It's because people like you are criminals! People like you entice a person to open up, and through villainous tactics, use these vulnerabilities to distribute power. Favourably to yourself. You want power over me, you want me to be dependent on your vindication of my emotions. You are not unique in these missions. Many more have tried to reach this position; you have successfully reached further than your predecessors. Congratulations. But I'm afraid you cannot go beyond this point, it's over between us! You are cruel and undeserving." This is the voice note I sent at 0311 am. It came out so naturally, I was possessed. Ventriloquized by my emotions. It wasn't what I intended. I lay there heavy hearted and in a free fall from the precipice.

"And another thing! In all my relationships, the others were all attracted to me because of emotional connection. All of them have weaponised this to occupy more land. You do the same. You did the same! I want to ask you: why?! What else do people want? What else do you want? I'm sure you'll say that I am psychotic because of this indignant nonsensical rant! But I know you! I've known you before. Why do you do this? What else could you possibly want?! More than emotional connection?!" After this second voice note, I switched off my phone. Out of fear from her response, and from my possessed self.

Part III

That night I barely slept. Constantly distracted by the urge to turn my phone on. Physically, I had to stop myself. Every couple of minutes, as if electrified, I gnash my teeth aggressively, clench my sheets and flex all my muscles till I find myself arched-backed. What have I done? What have I done?! There is no going back now. I've committed to the fall, I cannot undo. *Que sera, sera.*

I negotiate with myself to turn my phone back on after a 24-hour period. Agonisingly, I wait. Sluggishly reread Dostoevsky, attended a Black Lives Matter protest and leave the television on while an array of foolish actors try and entertain me, to no avail. Finally, the 24 hours are over and I turn my phone on at 0328am. A bombardment of messages and notifications appear on my phone. Covid 19 has infected such and such... Total deaths in England due to Covid 19 is such and such... Notifications from groups, and individuals filled with scripted niceties, the majority of which I do not reply to. Then, almost teasingly, Leila's name pops up: 'Can we talk about these voice notes? If you want to that is.'

As soon as I read the text, a novice anxiety enters the mix. One that was never felt before. That text. Why is she not as enraged as I was? Why is she understanding? Is she mocking my commitment to the fall? No, that's ridiculous. Maybe it's not the fall, maybe she understands me. Maybe it's more than just a dream, maybe she understands. Ha! Yes, continue to think this way so she can have more control over your emotions.

I get an epiphany, which stems from the novice anxiety, that I, the son of former aristocrats, require emotional validity because nothing else is precarious. Maybe to actually connect with someone, they need to see me bare, limping and vulnerable. Maybe, it's a bizarre privilege to want emotional connection. Maybe that is where my precariousness and vulnerability stems from. Let me tell you, this is no privilege! It is as gut-wrenching as any act of begging! Let me tell you! It is as humbling as any demeaning act to provide. Does she know this? Does she consider herself privileged to see me at my most vulnerable? Or does she not? And is confused because we were wholesomely 'expressing our emotions', now this rant?!

I reply with a simple 'call?' Before I can place the phone next to me in bed, it rings. I ecstatically pick up. "Hey" she sombrely says.

"Hi." I reply with conviction. She allows some time to go by, to ensure that I have nothing to say.

"Okay, so I need to tell you a couple of things" her conviction more absolute than mine. "Firstly, I don't like the way you talked to me. Let's agree never to talk to each other that way again." Again?! Is there room for reconciliation? I reply with an agreeable and docile "okay".

"I understand that you treasure emotional validity and connection, but if you have problems with me or us, call me. We've talked about your extreme passion, and my lack thereof, is this where its coming from? Do you think I'm not opening up? We've not yet met! How can I be that open with you if we haven't met yet? I've told you I liked you, but that's about all I am able to feel from here. Also, you mentioned previous love interests; do you compare me to them? That's not healthy for you or fair to me. Right?" She worked as a school teacher on her free time.

I made a few noises to signify my attentiveness. After she was done, I am completely transfixed. Every word more powerful than the next. She was brave. At least braver than I am. A belligerent man clinging to the concepts of existential exceptionalism. As if love and togetherness happen to everyone else, but me. Sadistically hitched to the idea of the undeserving, some Übermensch penetrating the façade of convention, disaffected by humanism. As soon as I am affected, I need to ablate and sterilise through violence and detachment. But here she is, reaching her hand out. How? How can she be so calm? More importantly, she wasn't indignant at my petulance, she knew I was such and such and calmly engaged with me anyways. She did not mention the two days. I expected her to call me psychotic for my reaction simply because we haven't spoken for two days. She didn't.

"I am sorry for my tone, and the words I used." I've regressed back to childhood. Even after I said that she replied with the empathic "can you tell me what you feel? What do you mean by favourable power distribution?"

I stutter for a whole minute before I produce a coherent sentence. "I've noticed a familiar pattern. Whenever things are going well with someone, there's that moment when they withdraw, forcing me to reciprocate and the togetherness rapidly deteriorates. I think, whether we saw each other or not, you've allowed me to express my emotions authentically, more so than any." I then whisper "I was hurt, and I am not justifying my actions, I was hurt that this now has to degenerate." Silence.

"Maybe I should've texted you, at least to let you know I was safe, if anything. But this is one of the reasons why I don't like long distance relationships. I need more than just phone calls to develop with someone." As soon as she said that, I felt the ground getting closer, my fall was about to reach its final destination. "I think maybe we should shelf whatever this is until we meet. I maybe going to Denmark later on in the year, if the restrictions are eased. Let's meet there." Silence.

"Okay." I finally reply. We stay on the phone for 4 minutes, uninterrupted silence. I then whisper submissively "is it okay if we stay on the phone for a bit?"





MIDNIGHT PRAYERS, GOUACHE ON BOARD
BY HELEN ZUGHAIB

Artists' /Writers' bios:

LEENA ABOUTALEB is an Egyptian and Palestinian writer, primarily searching for fruiting trees to sleep under. She can be virtually located @na5leh on Twitter.

SOPHIA AL-BANAA is a Kuwaiti American, Muslim woman who has spent her life between Kuwait and South Carolina but now lives in Philadelphia, where she is a social worker and therapist.

TAMARA AL-QAISI-COLEMAN is a bi-racial Muslim writer, poet, and artist. She holds a dual Bachelors in Creative Writing and Middle Eastern History. She is the Editor-In-Chief of Defunkt Magazine. She is a 2021 Desert Nights: Rising Stars Writers Conference Fellow through the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University. She was a featured performer at The Museum of Fine Arts and Houston Grand Opera's event "The Art of Intimacy" on January 16, 2020. Her fiction, poetry, essays, interviews, and translation publications can be found or are forthcoming in (Fiction) Crack the Spine Literary Magazine, Scintilla Magazine, Paper Trains Journal, The Bayou Review: The Women's Issue. (Essays, interviews, and translations) Glass Mountain, Volume 21, Dead Eyes Literary Magazine Volume .01, and Defunkt Magazine. (Poetry) The Houston Review of Books, The Bitchin' Kitch, and Poetically Magazine. Her visual art can be found in Cosumnes River Journal, Sonder Midwest Review, Wordpeace Magazine, and The Blue Minaret Review.

KATE DAHER is of mixed-Arab heritage and has long felt a connection to her ancestral lands. She is a retired social studies teacher, activist, and humanitarian who has traveled several times to Palestine and Lebanon. Her writings have been published in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs and Blue Collar Review.

SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA writes poetry and fiction from lost hometowns. His fourth book—*A Moveable East*—arrived in early '21. A fifth book, and third collection of poetry—*All These Streets We've Known By Heart*—emerged in October '22 via the independent publisher Red River. Siddharth's literature has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Prairie Fire*, *Epiphany*, *Rogue Agent*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. He has read in cities like Bombay, Lucknow, Mandalay, Galle, Paris, Istanbul, and Dubai. Siddharth serves as Editor, Visual Narratives with *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, but calls the Indian city of Poona home. You'll find the writer on Instagram @citizen.bliss

DR. LAYLA AZMI GOUSHEY is a Professor of English in St. Louis, Missouri. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a PhD in Adult Education: Teaching and Learning Processes. Her research interests include Arab American history, literature, and culture. Dr. Goushey's creative work has been published in journals such as *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Mizna*, *Sukoon*, *FIYAH*, *Strange Horizons* and the *Anthology of Arab American Creative Non-Fiction*. She has published on popular media sites such as *The Middle East Eye*, *PatheosMuslim*, and *Jadaliyya*. She is the editor of *Baladi Magazine*. Follow her on Twitter @lgoushey and/or @BaladiMagazine.

HEDY HABRA is a poet, artist and essayist. She is the author of three poetry collections from Press 53, most recently, *The Taste of the Earth* (2019), Winner of the Silver Nautilus Book Award and Honorable Mention for the Eric Hoffer Book Award; *Tea in Heliopolis* Winner of the Best Book Award and Under Brushstrokes, which was a Finalist for the Best Book Award and the International Book Award. Her story collection, *Flying Carpets*, won the Arab American Book Award's Honorable Mention and was Finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award. A twentyone-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the net, and recipient of the Nazim Hikmet Award, her multilingual work appears in numerous journals and anthologies. <https://www.hedyhabra.com/>

GHINWA JAWHARI is the author of the chapbook *BINT*, which was selected by Aria Aber for Radix Media's Own Voices Chapbook Prize. Her essays, fiction, and poetry appear in *Catapult*, *Narrative*, *Mizna*, *SPEAK*, *The Adroit Journal*, and elsewhere. She was a 2021 Margins Fellow at the Asian American Writers' Workshop, and is the founding editor of *Koukash Review*.

ZEYN JOUKHADAR is the author of the novels *The Map of Salt and Stars* (Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2018) and *The Thirty Names of Night* (Atria/Simon & Schuster, 2020) and a member of the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI). His work has appeared in *KINK: Stories* (eds. RO Kwon & Garth Greenwell), *Salon*, *The Paris Review*, *Shondaland*, [PANK], *Mizna*, and elsewhere, and has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He is also the guest editor of the 2020 *Queer + Trans Voices* issue of *Mizna* and a Periplus Collective mentor. *The Thirty Names of Night* won the 2021 Barbara Gittings Stonewall Book Award and the 2021 Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Fiction, and was a December 2020 Indie Next Book Pick; *The Map of Salt and Stars*, currently being translated into twenty languages, was a 2018 Middle East Book Award winner in Youth Literature, a 2018 Goodreads Choice Awards Finalist in Historical Fiction, was shortlisted for the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize, and received starred reviews from *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, and others. Joukhadar has received fellowships from the Montalvo Arts Center Lucas Artists Program, the Arab American National Museum, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Camargo Foundation, and the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

PERLA KANTARJIAN is a Lebanese-Armenian writer, journalist, and editor with written works appearing in over thirty publications including *The Hellebore*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, and *International Literary Quarterly*. Formerly, she was executive editor of *Carpe Diem*, the literary segment of Lebanese daily *Annahar Newspaper*. Her poem "but I am only fiercely dreaming" was recently selected as Editor's Choice by *Panoply* and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her poem "Half Woman, Half Starlight" was selected by the founder of the Lunar Codex lunar time capsule project to be among the artworks launched to the moon and archived on its surface in early 2022. She is the first Armenian and Lebanese artist to have artworks sent to the moon. Kantarjian is currently pursuing her MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia as the 2021 Sonny Mehta Scholar. Her website is perlakantarjian.com

LENA MAHMOUD is the author of *Amreekiya*, an Arab American Book Award winner, a finalist for the Louise Meriwether First Book Prize, and one of *Foreword's* "Four Phenomenal Debut Novels." Her work has appeared in *Sukoon*, *A Gathering Together*, and *The Offing*, among others, and she has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes. Visit lenamubsutina.com for more information or follow her on Instagram and Twitter @lena_mubsutina.

RANIA MATAR was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S. in 1984. As a Lebanese-born American artist and mother, her cross-cultural experience and personal narrative inform her photography. Matar's work has been widely exhibited in museums worldwide in solo and group exhibitions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Carnegie Museum of Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Rollins Museum of Art, Fotografiska, Institut du Monde Arabe, and more. It is part of the permanent collections of several museums, institutions, and private collections. A mid-career retrospective of her work was recently on view at Cleveland Museum of Art, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, and the American University of Beirut Museum.

In 2023, she will have 2 solo museum exhibitions of her recently published series *SHE* at the Huntsville Museum of Art and the Fitchburg Museum of Art. Her images will also be part of a traveling exhibition about Women Artists from the Middle East that opens at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Matar received several awards and nominations including: a 2022 Leica Women Foto Project Award, 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship, 2017 Mellon Foundation artist in-residency grant, 2021 (and 2011, 2007) Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowships, and a 2011 Griffin Museum of Photography Legacy Award. She is currently a finalist for the Arnold New Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture, the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition with an exhibition at the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, and for the Taylor Wessing Prize with an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London. In 2008 she was a finalist for the Foster Award at the ICA/Boston, with an accompanying solo exhibition. She published four books: *SHE*, 2021; *L'Enfant-Femme*, 2016; *A Girl and Her Room*, 2012; *Ordinary Lives*, 2009.

ATHENA NASSAR is an Egyptian-American poet, essayist, and short story writer from Atlanta, Georgia. She is the author of the debut poetry collection *Little Houses* (Sundress Publications). Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Academy of American Poets*, *The Missouri Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Pleiades*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. She is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Vanderbilt University.

YARA GHUNAIM is an architect based in Amman. She holds an MRes (Art & Design) from Cardiff Metropolitan University. Interested in finding intersections between humanities and architecture in general and between place/space and text in particular, her research concerns questions of the space and time of modern architecture and the ways in which that is dealt with in literature. She happens to write sometimes.

JONATHAN GORVETT is a journalist and writer who has spent many years as an international correspondent, with a particular focus on the Middle and Near East. He currently resides on Cyprus.

PAULA KAUFMAN is a writer living in Washington DC, where she is also a painter and teacher. Her work has been featured in over 20 literary journals. She wishes for a free and independent Palestine someday.

MOHAMED KHOUGALI is a Marxist activist and psychological practitioner. His main interests are politics, philosophy and psychology and the intersection between the three. Inspired by Roy Bhaskar, his current focus is on the intersection between critical realism and humanist psychotherapy. He believes, without elements of violence, psychotherapy is essentially an apologia for capitalism, a form of psychological obsolescence. Authors that Mohamed is fond of are Dostoevsky, Kanafani and Kafka. His inspiration, however, lies with what his mother introduced him to years ago: oral tradition. Words and sounds that graze the imagination ever so gently, yet their impact is life-long.

DR. TAREQ A. RAMADAN is a Jordanian-American anthropologist, numismatist, writer, and a consultant who works in immigration as well as in areas of cultural competency. He has spent the last sixteen years teaching Arab, Islamic, and Near Eastern history, culture, civilization, and contemporary society, as well as anthropology courses at Wayne State University in Detroit and at Henry Ford College, in Dearborn. Tareq also serves as the project manager for an Inkster, MI-based non-profit organization Project We Hope, Dream, and Believe, working to restore and transform the one-time Inkster home of Malcolm X into a museum. In 2022, Tareq was named to the Arab America Foundation's "40 under 40" list.

RIWA SAAB is a writer and performer across creative disciplines. Her work often explores the diasporic experience of building cultural bridges, what it means to unpack generational and familial baggage, and how to create space for pockets of joy.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA is a poet, essayist, and translator. Her debut book of poems, *Water & Salt*, won the 2018 Washington State Book Award and was a finalist for the Arab American Book Award. Her work has appeared in journals including *The Nation*, *Michigan Quarterly*, and *Poets.org Poem-A-Day*. Tuffaha's essay, "Muhammads in Gaza" won 2021 Best of the Net. Most recently, she has been the translator and curator for the *Poems for Palestine* series at the *Baffler* magazine. She has two forthcoming books of poetry, *Kaan* and *Her Sisters* (Trio House Press, 2023), and *Something About Living* (UAP, 2024), which was selected for the 2022 Akron Poetry Prize by Adrian Matejka. For more about her work, visit www.lenakhalaftuffaha.com

KAMELYA OMAIMA YOUSSEF is the author of *A book with a hole in it* (Wendy's Subway, 2022). The places she calls home include NYC, Dearborn, and Jibbayn and Shmistar in Lebanon. With an MA in English from Wayne State University and an MFA in Poetry from New York University, she currently teaches poetry at the City College of New York, edits poetry and prose, and facilitates workshops with her friends. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Sukoon*, *Mizna*, *AAWW's The Margins*, *1080 press*, and and and.

CHRISTINA NAHRIN YOSEPH is a California-based writer and artist of Assyrian and Greek descent. You can learn more about her and her work at www.christinayoseph.com

MAHA ZAWIL, a Lebanese writer, educator, and researcher living in Dubai, has been fascinated with books, reading, and writing from a very early age. She finished her MA in English Literary Studies from the University of York, UK, and her PhD in Comparative Literature from the Lebanese University.

REWA ZEINATI, a naturalized US citizen with Lebanese and Palestinian roots, grew up in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. Recipient of the 2020 Edward Stanley Award for Poetry, she is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Bullets & Orchids* (Corrupt Press, 2013) and the founder and editor of *Sukoon*. Her poems and essays have been published in various national and international journals and anthologies, including *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Common*, *AAWW*, *Guernica*, *Diode Poetry Journal*, *So To Speak*, among others. After spending the last decade and a half in various cities across the Arab-speaking region and the United States, she currently considers Metro Detroit her home. She loves the beach, the colors and scents of the Mediterranean landscape, cats, stand-up comedy, and arak.

HELEN ZUGHAIB was born in Beirut, Lebanon, living mostly in the Middle East and Europe before coming to the United States to study art at Syracuse University, earning her BFA from the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Her work has been widely exhibited in galleries and museums in the United States, Europe and Lebanon. Her paintings are included in many private and public collections, including the White House, World Bank, Library of Congress, US Consulate General, Vancouver, Canada, American Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, the Arab American National Museum in Detroit, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the Barjeel Art Foundation Collection. Her paintings are also included in the DC Art Bank Collection and she has received the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities Fellowship award each year since 2015. Her work has been included in Art in Embassy State Department exhibitions abroad, including Brunei, Nicaragua, Mauritius, Iraq, Belgium, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Sweden. Helen has served as Cultural Envoy to Palestine, Switzerland and Saudi Arabia. The John F. Kennedy Center/REACH, in Washington, DC, has selected Helen for the 2021-2024 Inaugural Social Practice Residency. Her paintings have been gifted to heads of state by President Obama and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. "My work is ultimately about creating empathy. Creating a shared space for introspection and dialogue. I ask the viewer to see through someone else's eyes, to walk in another's shoes. To accept the "other." To reject divisiveness. To promote acceptance and understanding and to reject violence and subjugation of anyone anywhere. To give voice to the voiceless, to heal, and to reflect in our shared humanity."

