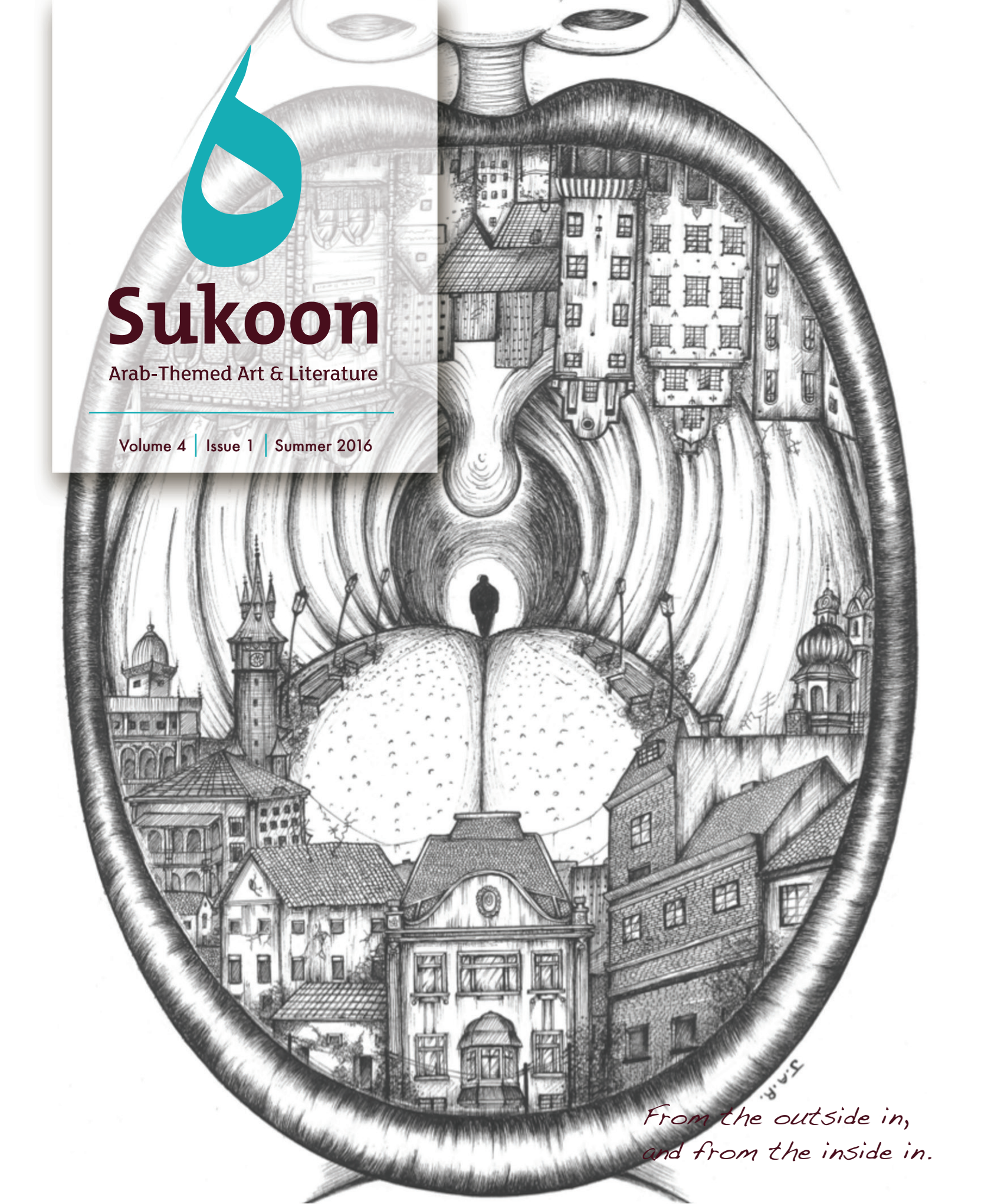

Sukoon

Arab-Themed Art & Literature

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | Summer 2016

From the outside in,
and from the inside in.

Sukoon is:

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

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

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

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

Cover artwork by Jumana Alramzi

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Cover Art entitled "Trying to Look for the Right Words" by Joumana Al-Ramzi

BIO's

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

Editor's note:

Ramadan. Kareem.

The month of fasting and giving and forgiveness. The month of charity and introspection, and family iftars, and Arabic series. Many, many Arabic series. Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, a mix of all, or a dubbed version of something Turkish.

Beirut is the embodiment of noise during the day, so rushed and anxious, but so hushed after the call to prayer. For a few hours, after the sun sets, the streets grow still. Those who fast, along with their non-fasting or non-Muslim friends, are home with their families, preparing their feasts, their humble iftars, their soups, their atayef and kellej desserts.

Here in Mar Elias, the area where I live, the main street is lined with several sweet shops. A little before the call to prayer, the men begin to heat the cooking oil in deep large pans, to fry the ashta-filled pastries while all those fasting gather to wait in a long line (or disorganized circle) of sudden customers.

Well, not all those fasting. Some are simply waiting. Some are waiting in street corners, and along dirty sidewalks, at traffic lights; waiting for a bite to eat, a drink of water, some sort of human recognition or attention or mercy. With children at their chest; sleeping, drugged, or tired. The elderly, the amputated, the broken, the refugee. They walk among us, the blind, our bellies satiated. Overwhelmed. Wasteful. This is Beirut. This is Lebanon. A tiny dot in the giant, unseeing, Arab world.

And there is ignorance and lavishness and the wrong kinds of prayer here too. There are car bombs and street bombs and suicide bombs and empty neighboring wars and empty local feuds and invisible women and invisible men and children with guns taller than themselves. With every issue of Sukoon, the blood continues to rise and spill and the grief goes on.

The antidote for the soul, if nothing else? Poetry and storytelling and art. Basically, the right kinds of prayer.

Mouths wide open telling truths, whichever way we understand them. Wide open with words full of language and life and compassion and pain. And uneven homes and streetlights and a single human walking alone. Lost, or re-imagining.

A wide open mouth, like the image I decided to include as the cover for the seventh issue of Sukoon, by Kuwaiti-Russian artist Joumana Alramzi. The first poem I decided worked perfectly with the image is entitled "Dayaa'" by Palestinian-American poet, Lena Khalaf Tuffaha. *Dayaa'* is Arabic for loss.

"In my language
the word for loss is a wide open cry,
a gaping endless possibility.

In my language
the word for loss is a long vowel stretched
taut and anchored between behemoth
consonants, reverberating—
a dervish word
whirling on itself
in infinite emptiness
the widening gyre,
the eternal motion of grief."

And yet we keep doing this. We keep writing and inventing and creating. To what purpose? To what end among all this chaos and loss? To stay alive long after we die? No. Maybe to really live as long as we are still alive. To hush the sounds of shelling and gender discrimination and racism and homophobia, and every form of hate everywhere, not just here; to shout a long open cry through love and art, while we can. The best way we know how. With every issue of Sukoon, I renew my faith in the fact that we still do.

REWA ZEINATI

DHAYAA'

In my language
the word for loss is a wide open cry,
a gaping endless possibility.
In English loss sounds to me like one shuddering blow to the heart,
all sorrow and absence hemmed in,
falling into a neatly rounded hole,
such tidy finality.

In my language
the word for loss is a long vowel stretched
taut and anchored between behemoth consonants, reverberating—
a dervish word
whirling on itself
in infinite emptiness
the widening gyre,
the eternal motion of grief.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

EATING THE EARTH

And to the flour
add water, only
a thin stream whispering gathered
rains of a reticent winter.

And to the flour add oil, only
a glistening thread snaking through
ridges and ravines of what
sifts through your fingers,
what sinks, moist and burdened
between your palms.

And in the kneading
hinge forward, let the weight
of what you carry on your shoulders,
the luster of your language, shade
of your story press into the dough.

And to the dough bring
the signature of your fingertips, stretch
the canvas before you, summer linen
of wheat and autumn velvet of olive oil,
smooth like a map
of silence and fragrance,
of invisible terrains of memory.

And on the dough let the green leaves
fall, drenched
sumac stars flickering among them
shards of onion in their midst.

Scatter them as the wind would
or gather them in the center of this earth
and fold them into the tender embrace
of the dough, cool and soft beneath their bodies.

And make a parcel of the dough,
filled with foraged souvenirs,
fold them in, and then again,
let their silhouettes gaze back at you.
Recall found treasures of hillside
wandering; flint, thorn
blossom and a hoopoe
feather carried home in your skirt.

And to the flames surrender
the bread, gift of your hands.
Grasp its tender edges and turn it
as the heat strafes and chars
this landscape you have caressed.
Some grandmothers sing as they bake,
others speak prayers.

And let the edges bristle to the color
of earth, let the skin of the bread scar.
The song of zaatar simmering
in its native oil rises up
and time evaporates. You are young
again, it is spring
in the greening valley.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

* *zaatar* – wild thyme native to the Levant

INTIFADA PORTRAIT
For Ramzi

I have a Palestinian friend
who drinks coffee with me once in a while
and tells me stories of the Intifada.

"Who can erase those days from the memory of time?
The land will never forget our footsteps
pounding against bullets and tear gas.
My skin remembers it."

I grew up watching it on the news,
the nightly accounting of young broken bones,
the women in sensible skirts
and the boys in kuffiyehs
who all woke up one morning and had enough.

I have a Palestinian friend
who lived that rainy winter
stone to stone
who swayed over the hairpin edge of death
who shouldn't even be here today
to talk about it.

I have a Palestinian friend
whose eyes are like two pools of olive
oil about to ignite.
They swarm with stars as he tells me
about his Intifada portrait.

"The Israeli soldiers showed it to me in jail.
They have cameras that can get a close up
of every pore in your skin!
Shit! Is that really me?
I was flying
above the black smoke
from the burning tires…"

He leans over his coffee cup,
"…a stone in my clenched fist,
ready to strike!"

His eyes narrow now,
his voice drops to a low rumble.
"Who is going to erase that
from their memory?"

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

GONE TO FEED THE ROSES

"More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world." – Edna St. Vincent Millay

Unseasonably warm today, and green
pierces through January earth saturated,
earth that shifts like a lover, wrestling silent
nightmares deep into darkness.

Four years ago we embraced, sleep-
walking through the moonlit square,
four years ago our slogans were winter
coats and our throats were bonfires.
How our words dissolve in tear gas,
how the thorn of who our neighbors are
pierces without warning. What
happens next is only human.

Unseasonably light today, no clouds to obscure
glass eye of the sun staring at us
docile winter-worn wanting
for anything that tastes of spring –
we'll sip poison if it's served in pretty teacups.

What is that poem? Something about roses,
I can't recall but I know a woman wrote it.
I know it as a mother
knows in her bone marrow
that a child who has gone missing from the street
hasn't just turned the corner to chase after a stray ball
but has been taken,
knows in her bone marrow,
with the dirty fingernails grip of certainty,
that the child will
not return breathing.

I can't remember the poem
about roses and witness,
the delirium of all that perfume
ornamental blades of thorns
petals like mouths writhing muted
for the fallen as they scatter,
trampled underfoot.

I know she was a woman,
that poet who wrote of roses,
just as a woman marched to the edge
of memory, four years after
a dream soured into nightmare
with a wreath of roses,
her words trickling out of her head
a rose-red poem spilling on the streets of her city.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

in memory of poet Shaymaa Sabbagh, poet of Alexandria, killed on the 4th anniversary of the Egyptian revolution.

Gone
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

MEMORIES OF GRANDPA, MAN OF THE ORCHARD

By Zahra Hankir

I first met jeddo (grandpa) in August 1987. I was just three years old, but I have this distinct memory of him hurriedly running down the driveway of his humble orchard-home in Zahrani, barefoot, in the pouring rain, to embrace my

mother. He hadn't seen her since just before the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon in 1982; they'd barely communicated in the interim. Tears were streaming down his face as he held her.

Osman "Abu Nasser" Antar was born to Zahra and Mahmoud in Sidon in 1929. He was the fifth of eight other siblings — one sister, and seven brothers. His father was a trader and a landowner who worked between Palestine and South Lebanon; he managed his finances poorly.

When jeddo was barely 11, my great-grandfather unexpectedly passed away, leaving the family of ten with very little to survive on. My grandpa was consequently forced to leave school to provide for himself, his younger siblings, and his mother.

When I think of jeddo, it's almost always of him sitting on the ground, in front of a pile of ripe oranges that he'd picked from the bustan (orchard) he tended to, with a kuffiyeh wrapped around his head, dressed in his khaki work clothes.

He'd often have Fairouz, Umm Kulthoum or Mohammad Abdul Wahab playing from a little radio in the background as he carefully arranged the oranges into crates to be taken to the market.

Sometimes, when he was in a particularly good mood, he'd have classical Arabic ballads blasting from my uncle's parked car as he worked, or he'd hum their tunes whilst feeding the chickens in the coop.

Jeddo was, to my mind, a man of the land. To him, the land of the orchard was life, and he was rarely away from it.

Jeddo started picking fruit and crops as a young boy. When it was blossoming season, he'd wake up at the crack of dawn to head to the orchards with his brothers, where they'd stay for days until they finished their jobs, before returning to the city. For hours on end, they'd toil away at the land, guarding the crops and irrigating and picking the oranges and lemons.

When jeddo's father passed away, working at the orchards to the south of Sidon would become his primary source of income, and ultimately, his profession. He quickly took on a reputation of being one of the finest men of the orchards in his area. He upheld that reputation for more than six decades, working the land with a sense of pride and ownership that left almost everyone he came into contact with in awe.

Jeddo would eventually join the city's trade union, hosting meetings for the tens of men of Sidon who, like himself, worked in the orchards. Once a week, grandpa would line up the chairs in the garden of the orchard he tended to and along the private road that led to it. The workers would congregate to discuss the affairs of the union.

Grandpa would eventually become treasurer of the union, a role which would see him travel between Sidon and Damascus and which would earn him a mention in a historical book on the southern port city. Those meetings at his boss's bustan and the crowd they attracted became so notorious, that political figures from Maarouf Saad to Nazih Bizri would compete for jeddo's support; the meetings often involved political discussions that would translate into votes.

My mother's childhood home in the south of Lebanon was simple. In the middle of a beautiful, modest-sized orchard, it seemed cut off from the rest of the world. The walls were worn and cracked, and the beds, which I'd share with my aunts, were stiff. In the summers, it was unbearably hot, and in the winter, unbearably cold.

But in between trips to Lebanon from the U.K., I thought of that small home as a vast palace full of treasures, and of my grandfather, as the king of that palace.

Every Sunday after we moved back to Lebanon in the mid-nineties, we'd congregate at the bustan in Zahrani for extended family lunches. They almost always consisted of kousa mehshi (stuffed zucchini) — my grandparents' favourite — or dishes that my brothers and I would request, such as grandma's homemade pizza or wara' 3enab (stuffed vine leaves). Grapes dangling from the vine leaves that jeddo had grown himself were picked for dessert.

Before and after my rebellious years at college (sorry mama), I cherished those Sundays. Specifically the moments following lunch, when my grandparents would move to the living room to watch the news on a tiny black-and-white TV set. Teta (grandma) would lie down, weary after cooking a feast for at least 10 people, and jeddo would sit upright in his chair, with his rosary beads in one hand.

On his other palm, he'd almost always rest his head before dozing off, drifting in and out of sleep. Sometimes he'd briefly wake up to smack a mosquito on his arm or leg. It always made us laugh, how he'd fall back to sleep instantaneously.

Like clockwork, Jeddo would then head back to the bustan, where he'd work until the sun went down. Before we'd leave to Sidon, he would load up the trunk of the car with oranges, lemons, bananas and assorted vegetables that he'd grown and picked himself. The scent of orange blossoms at the bustan was so dense, it stayed with us for hours after leaving.

Growing up, we'd heard multiple legendary stories about jeddo. Some of them, he told us with a chuckle. Others, we heard from teta or mama or our uncles. We learned to suspend rational judgment on the veracity of the stories.

A donkey once kicked jeddo in the face, breaking his nose instantaneously, he told us. Despite the pain it caused him, he almost immediately repositioned his nose, straightening the broken bone, he said. It's a story he'd share repeatedly over the years, explaining to my brothers that they should be abadayat (good and strong men).

Jeddo's surname, Antar (the name of a legendary Arab poet and warrior), sometimes seemed poetic, like he'd strived, throughout his long life, to live up to it.

In another one of those stories, jeddo had apparently killed a poisonous snake with a shotgun — despite being paralysed with fear — at the age of 13.

The snake's skin was so tough, the bullet wouldn't go through it with the first shot. He was said to have killed the snake with the second and last bullet: by shooting it straight into its mouth.

Jeddo was notoriously handsome, even as an elderly man. As a teenager, he was acutely aware of this, constantly using his looks and charm to flirt with girls.

But grandpa was also a poor man, who spent most of his days working for very little. In his downtime, he'd loiter the streets with his older brother and best friend, Saleh, who worked in the orchards with him. Realising they couldn't capture the attention of girls in their shabby work clothes, they once decided to save up some money to buy a nice shirt, to impress them. They'd take turns wearing it.

One of those ladies was Souad Yemen, my grandma. Jeddo first caught a glimpse of her in town, while he was still in his khaki work clothes. She was taking a stroll with grandpa's aunts — the wives of her uncles — and her great beauty struck him, he'd tell us. Instead of saying hello right away, though, he ran home, showered, put on the smart shirt and trousers, and hurried back to town to join them. This was a lady jeddo wanted to impress.

A proud woman, teta ignored him all evening.

Teta was extremely rigid with jeddo at first. She did not like men who flirted so ostentatiously with her, and she would never, ever flirt back. My grandma was, my mother says, "brought up like a princess," having been extremely spoiled by her father. But jeddo wouldn't give up on her. He befriended her father, despite the fact that he was scared of him, and eventually secured a job at his bustan.

Teta would warm up to jeddo eventually. One summer's afternoon, when the akadinia (loquats) were in season, she invited her friends over for lunch.

Jeddo, at the time, was working in the bustan — picking the loquats — when teta's friend brought a tray over to him, with a message from Souad: she wanted some of the fruit. He arranged them for her in an intricate pyramid, before sending the tray back. They married shortly afterwards.

Teta's mother, dismayed by the match, said her daughter would spend the rest of her life washing grandpa's work clothes.

Years earlier — when my grandmother was still a teenager and my grandfather a lad — teta and her girlfriends would frequently meet up to catch up and gossip. During one of those meet-ups, grandma's friend said in passing that if a girl recited a certain prayer, she'd see her future husband in her dreams.

Shortly after their discussion, teta did indeed dream of jeddo, whom she had hardly noticed at the time. In the dream, he was leading a donkey with saddles on both of its sides. One of the two saddles was heavier than the other, and jeddo spent the entire journey trying to balance the two. A fitting premonition, if there ever was one.

Jeddo and teta had a wonderfully complex relationship that continually teetered on the edge of complete collapse. Despite living humbly, they struggled financially during the first fifteen years or so of their marriage. Having already left school against my great-grandma's wishes, teta provoked the ire of her mother when she married jeddo.

But in between the stresses that weighed them down — they had two very ill daughters — they also shared some private, playful moments, away from their six children. They had a secret little cupboard at their orchard home that they'd constantly replenish with treats, including the finest nuts, snacks and drinks.

When my mother, Mariam, was born, she contracted typhoid fever. Frantic, grandpa took his ill child to the only doctor in the city, quickly burning through the little money he had. He needed 5 liras, the doctor told him, to purchase medicine urgently needed to treat my mother.

At first, jeddo sought an advance from his employer, but the man refused. He'd loaned his brother money to buy a cow, and requested repayment, but he said he was unable to hand over the funds.

Off jeddo went to a café in the old city, where he ordered tea, and sat in stubborn, sombre silence for hours. The owner of the café approached grandpa, asking him what was wrong, and jeddo — proud man that he was — couldn't bring himself to speak the entire truth.

"I've forgotten my money in another pair of trousers at home," he told the shop owner. "I need 5 liras to buy medicine for my sick daughter."

The shopkeeper, who knew of jeddo's plight, handed over his day's earnings, which added up to 17 liras — all the money he had in his apron. When grandpa refused to accept the money, claiming it was far more than he needed, the man insisted he take it all.

My mother maintains, till today, that it's the combination of the shop keeper's kindness and jeddo's determination that saved her life.

As the problems mounted, teta and jeddo decided it would be best to go their separate ways. Though the divorce wouldn't last for long, it was something of a small disaster for the family, the effects of which would linger for years.

Grandpa, stubborn as he was, would claim he was saamed (steadfast) when people would say he should take teta back, as they were clearly still in love with one another.

Teta would eventually return from Damascus, where she stayed with her family during the divorce, and jeddo couldn't help but soften up.

The divorce lasted less than a year, but it's a period of time that jeddo would look back on with great regret and remorse, until the day he died.

During the Israeli invasion of 1982, the IDF would infiltrate the South, eventually reaching Zahrani, where my grandpa and his family lived. Stories circulated that the army was patrolling the surrounding areas, so jeddo had instructed the family on how to behave should the inevitable happen, to ensure their safety: He would act cordially, and the children and teta would remain quiet, indoors.

An Israeli army contingent did indeed reach the bustan, as they neared Sidon. Upon encountering jeddo, who was terrified but composed, they asked for water. The senior officer, who knew Arabic, got to talking to my grandpa about his family, and jeddo told them that he had a daughter who was married and who lived with her husband in Ireland.

Jeddo continued conversing, attempting to conceal his fear, unsure what else he could do. He said he hadn't been in touch with my mother for months, and that she'd surely be worried about the family's safety. The Israeli officer asked for a contact number, and promised he would soon call my parents to convey to them that jeddo and the family were indeed safe.

Weeks later, my father, then a doctor at a hospital in the U.K., was told, while he was at work, that he had received an international phone call. A man claiming to be an Israeli officer told my dad that his wife's family was safe. Shocked, my father reasoned that it was a prank call, and hung up on the man.

It wasn't until 1987, when my mother first saw jeddo on a trip back to Lebanon after the invasion, that she and my father came to realise it was indeed a true, and somewhat remarkable story.

Among jeddo's most endearing qualities was his sense of humour. When I was about 15 or 16, and still a tomboy, he told me I should "wear high heels every now and then," because I'd started looking "more like my four brothers" than a young lady.

In his final years of life, he'd occasionally ask someone to bring him a pocket mirror. He'd then peer into it seriously, before saying, "TOZZZ" (fart), and handing it back over with a chuckle. He'd do the same when he'd see photos of himself as a younger, handsome man.

But jeddo's most captivating quality was his sensitivity. I'd seen him cry multiple times. While he did indeed live up to his surname, he found no shame in exposing his weaknesses.

Every time I'd leave Lebanon after visiting, when I'd say goodbye to him, he would break down into tears, saying he was frightened it would be the last time he would see me.

Each time, he would ask me to take care of my mama once he'd pass, because he could see mama in me, and mama was special.

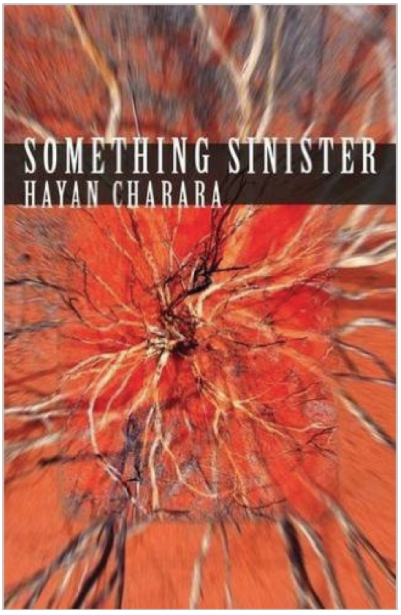
After my teta passed away in 2010, jeddo would constantly speak of her, how they met, and the love they'd shared, tearing up each time. Occasionally, he would say, endearingly and with a chuckle, that being with her was a lot like the "taming of the shrew."

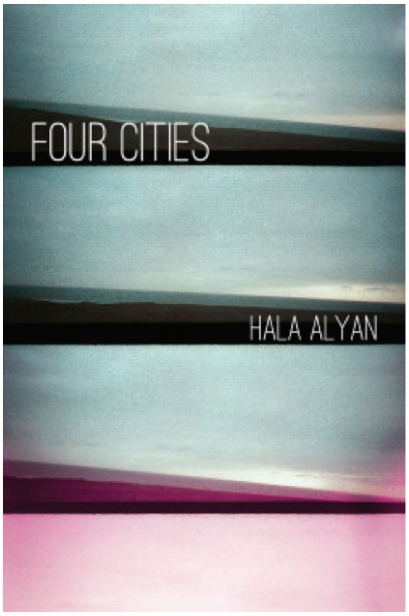
When jeddo was bedridden, toward the end, he had a picture of teta taped up next to where he rested his head, on the wall. We'd often catch him looking at it with a sense of guilt and longing.

Osman Abu Nasser Antar passed away at the age of 87, on February 4, the same date as teta's birthday.

TWO POETRY BOOK REVIEWS

By Marwa Helal





Something Sinister by Hayan Charara (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2016)

Literary heavyweight Hayan Charara returns with his first poetry collection in ten years: Something Sinister. The work is haunted by the voids of family life; the contradictions of a pious father:

> Ta' Ha', Ya Sin, Sad, Qaf.
> God of my father, listen:
> He prayed, he prayed, five times a day,
>
> and he was mean.

The loss of the speaker's mother and his desire to reconnect with her in any way results in her spirit becoming a strong presence throughout this work:

> My silence alone provoked her into
>
> saying, "I wasn't dreaming."
> And if she had doubts
>
> about God or the afterlife or seeing
> our mother again that night

she believed.
As for me, I was simply jealous.

I loved my mother and let her death
ruin my life, yet she

never showed up, no matter
how much I drank

or smoked or banged my head
against the walls.

Charara holds nothing back as he navigates the most interior locales of the personal: dreams, hallucinations, the space between his head and the wall, loss, aching, violence and anger. His is a new take on what it means for the personal to be political. The title poem deconstructs the 'us and them', the 'hearts and minds', the 'you're either with us, or against us' of the post 9/11 era. More than that, it is about an individual who is of both the us and the them, (whatever that means) and all of its complex implications. That is the interiority of Charara's work. Here the personal is personal and the political is merely an afterthought, a bystander. In fact, Charara seems to hold the fleeting above all:

What does a ten-year-old
do with relativity? Or
the concept of infinity,

or a theory of everything?
And if the Big Bang and every
instant since turned out

to be a single everlasting
moment under the sun—
so what?

The final poem: "Usage" is a book within this book; a dense eight-page single-spaced mini-opus on dismantling the very fabric of America through its primary language and the impact of its usage on our lives. This last poem (and the book as a whole) should be taught in every English-speaking classroom.

Charara's other titles include The Alchemist's Diary and The Sadness of Others.

Four Cities by Hala Alyan (Black Lawrence Press, 2015)

Alyan establishes herself as a poet to keep an eye on with her second collection, Four Cities, traversing her expansive geography and vernacular through these poems. From Venice to Aleppo to Gaza and Detroit, this collection is a journey through lands, the terrain of emotion and the surprises any traveler knows you can never plan or prepare for.

> Gaza. I'm sorry. Beirut. I still love you like an arsonist.

This is the poetry of the new world, where Oklahoma juxtaposes Paris. The immigrant's child, the refugee's child has traveled the world and returned with these words:

> Baghdad. Twenty six years and you still make me cry. [...] Istanbul. Marry me. Dallas. I pretended I was Aladdin turning the soil over and gasping. [...] Gaza. I'll tell you where I've been.

Alyan succinctly and surprisingly captures the interior lives of women in both hemispheres while giving us access to the dreamlike quality of being an outside observer among extended family back home. In one scene, "the same Turkish soap opera/ is on the television set," and in another, "I can show you a city torching itself./ The sea eats the sea like firewood."

A recurring theme in Alyan's work is the body as paper. If that is the case, then this work is the body folding and unfolding into a world map made of the poet's words, as every season in every city seems to be contained in this work.

From "Portrait of Love as a Series of Dreamscapes":

> There are butterfly trees in cities now,
> flurried bodies
>
> strung from branch tips.
>
> Mammoth oaks shimmy
> with the bristling of wings.
>
> No one sweeps the carcasses when they fall.

Alyan's surprising turns and musical, evocative language will leave you wanting for her next collection, HIJRA, forthcoming in August 2016.

Alyan's other titles include ATRIUM and HIJRA (forthcoming 2016).

The Listener
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

THE CHILDREN ARE SILENT

The children have learned to be silent.
They look through you,
their eyes older than their faces.
They carry their small bodies like suitcases
that they can pick up or put down.

They think their mothers are great engines
that can go on and on,
mile after mile, as if each day
is just another road, as if insanity
can be out-walked.

Their fathers follow like blown sand,
collars flapped up against history,
their cupped hands reddening
as they pull the small hope
of cigarette smoke into their lungs.

The children may never speak again.
They have gone beyond words,
grown beyond hope. They know that
all the leaders just sit at the same dark tables
and look at each other.

FRANK DULLAGHAN

A LIBERATION

"This shell, it turned out, landed smack in the middle of the Jabaliya cemetery"
Josh Glancy reporting on Gaza in The Sunday Times, (UK) 27.07.14

I don't suppose it was any trouble
to them, leaping into the air like that,
smithereened, baring their bits
to the blasted air. Of course, they came

crashing back to earth, scattered, mixed-
up, not knowing who was who.
But for that while, they were high.
It must have felt like the End of Days,

the Assentation, come upon them,
dancing together, all tooth and grin,
their bones blown towards heaven,
the first to be liberated from Gaza.

But just as quickly as they were lifted,
they were let down – isn't that
how it always is? – their internment
heaped upon them again.

FRANK DULLAGHAN

HAMDAN STREET

You will find him in one of the small alleys
behind Hamdan Street, a narrow shop,
the pavement broken outside.
Inside it is bare, a blank counter, a door
into the back. His day starts at 6am.
There is nothing electric
about his iron. It is traditional,
heavy, charcoal filled. Another man
wouldn't last an hour. But he drives it
all day, nosing it down the pleat
of a dishdash, smoothing the wrinkled age
out of a sheet. He lives in the heat
and the steam. At 8pm he stops, eats
rice and vegetables, sometimes goat.
He sleeps under the counter. He is proud.
He is the Iron Man of Abu Dhabi.

FRANK DULLAGHAN

PUBLIC BATH

Bright, white light on Independence Day.
Hot July 4th at the pool. Solitude in a
crowd. Water drips. Fountains burst and
bubble from a hole in the ground, and I
remember Aya Baradiya, a Palestinian
woman, buried by her uncle to cover her
shame.

I dodge the selfie-sticks of adolescent Roman
conquerors. Their DNA bequeathed from
middle-aged Dads via Paul's journey to Rome.
Their little chromosomes once voyaged
between Rome and Jerusalem along the Way
of the Soul.

In the drowning Mediterranean,
little refugee boats are baby-filled
with desperation, while in Saint Louis,
a woman in a burqini floats
with her kids at the pool.

Brown bodies, white bodies
meander on the lazy river. Pudgy
curves and love handles spill out
of bikinis.

Sun-starved skin and varicose veins are revealed.
Hats: white, green, blue, with wide brims, conceal a
child's urine in the pool.

I emerge from the depths, and a breeze
evaporates water from my skin.

A cooling liberty repels the sun's tyrannical heat.
I am cleansed with the Enlightenment, with
individualism, with secularism, with female
brazen dignity.

I glide on supple little waves.

It is my independence day.

I wash the shame from my skin,
but the filth of privilege remains.

LAYLA GHOUSHEY

REFUGE

Soon after my uncle's family knocked on the
door of America, he stood on his new home's
porch with a television in his arms. They were
migrating from the transitory flat to the house,
where Siti would enter paradise years later.
But that time had not yet arrived and, when
he knocked,

no one came.

Perhaps the women were swabbing the floor of the
kitchen, or rinsing the bathtub with bleach. Maybe his
children were disrespecting him. They knew that he
would never find a steady business in this country.

He would get a job at a grocery, but
throw down his apron when asked
to bag at the checkout line like a
half grown kid, not like a man with a
wife, three kids, and a mother at
home.

Perhaps he already knew my
aunt would be the breadwinner
and that he would lose himself
in Palestinian tragedies
broadcast to his living room as
he sipped his mother's tea.

He threw the idiot box onto the porch, and
the screen shattered into a million pieces.
My aunt opened the door and found him,
lost in America: broken, scattered,
sheltered-in- place.

LAYLA GHOUSHEY

Buyoot
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

NOTHING BUT ALEXANDRIA

By Marina Chamma

Ten minutes were left for the express train to make its final stop into Alexandria's Misr Station. For most of the two-and-a-half hour ride from Cairo, Rania's head rested on her spotless, single-paned first class seat window. While she didn't care for the luxuries of cleanliness and comfort on this trip, she had not been given much of a choice.

"A lovely lady like you travelling second class? Impossible!" the jovial middle-aged ticketing clerk at Cairo's Ramses Station had told her the day before, as she tried to buy a regular one-way ticket to Alexandria.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you," she smiled, trying to keep her cool, "but I don't want first class." The clerk reached out for the booklet of first class tickets regardless.

"This is a first class ticket that will get you there in less than three hours!" he proudly exclaimed, as if the standard travel time to Alexandria couldn't even escape Egypt's obsession with haggling. Rania frowned, unconvinced.

"Besides, second class is only for Egyptians," he triumphantly noted, ending the need for any further discussion. All the Egyptian movies Rania had watched as a teenager in Beirut had not been enough to keep even a short conversation going in the Egyptian dialect. Her colloquial Lebanese crept in soon enough, making it impossible to fool the natives. But being Egyptian or not wasn't only about language. Luckily for the ticketing clerk, however, Rania had neither the time nor patience to argue about the definitions of a foreigner and whether she could even be considered one.

Rania had looked aimlessly out of the window throughout the ride. She took in as much of the hustle and bustle, the slums and crowds of the Cairo suburbs as her eyes could handle. Once out of the city, the vastness of the Egyptian hinterland was much simpler for her eyes to absorb. But the landscape was anything but monotonous, both arid and dusty, fertile and green, depending on how close the fields were to the bounties of the Nile.

Only after the train made its second to last stop at Tanta Station on the Upper Nile Delta, halfway through the trip, did the vast panoramas suddenly disappear. Rania could see nothing but Alexandria in front of her, without even closing her eyes. Its wide boulevards, chaotic narrow side streets and corniche - whose view into the city was blocked by endless rows of shiny new buildings, suffocating the remaining arabesque-styled villas that had yet to be brought to the ground. The way she saw Alexandria was drawn from the history books she read, the random documentaries she had watched and occasional dreams that were frighteningly lucid. No matter how different the city turned out to be from that of her imagination, she knew that once she arrived to Misr Station for the very first time, took a taxi heading northeast towards Al Ibrahimiyyah district and walked up Qena Street, she would find her grandmother's house, just as it had been left and just as she had imagined it, waiting for her to bring it back to life.

As the train left Tanta Station, Rania suddenly felt a frantic urge to go through the neatly stacked contents of her brown leather messenger bag, most of which had been gathered during the past month. Handwritten notes scribbled around an improvised family tree going back to the 1860s. A list of family friends of her maternal grandmother with Levantine, Greek and Italian-sounding surnames with what would have once been their phone numbers and addresses in Alexandria. Rania knew she would be lucky if any of their descendants still lived there, let alone if anybody in the neighborhood recognized their names. The names of friends and relatives of her maternal grandparents who once lived in Cairo, whose numbers and addresses were also decades old. It was impossible that everyone had left without a trace and she would knock on their doors on her way back if she had to. Copies of the obituaries of her grandparents taken from three local newspapers, with nothing more than dates and standardized shallow epitaphs with post-mortem reverence for the dead. Photocopies of land deeds and a random collection of black and white passport pictures and colored family pictures delicately arranged in a rice paper notebook, every picture on a separate page. Delicately folded and placed at the front of the stack was a copy of the letter that had made the trip inevitable.

Barely one month had gone by since she had found the letter. Wandering at home on a lazy Monday evening, Rania stumbled upon a cardboard box everybody has in that ubiquitous dusty little corner of their attic. Mom must have thought it was filled with my faded teenage mementos and sent it here with the movers, she thought. The box was bursting at the seams and most of its contents came tumbling down as Rania removed the lid. There was everything from her baby pictures, souvenirs from family vacations, birthday cards from aunts and uncles, cassettes sent by her cousins as recorded letters and a small plastic box with two of her intact milk teeth. She found one of her favorite pictures of her mother as a fashionable, single 20 something year old, posing on a balcony overlooking an endless sparkling harbor she didn't recognize. As she kept going through the box, five pages of elegant cursive handwriting

suddenly fell into her lap from an envelope that was placed upside down. It was a letter to her mother and aunt Mona from her grandmother, written shortly before she had died. Coincidentally, Mona, the keeper of the family history and only one who would help her decipher what she had just found, would be visiting her in Beirut in a couple of days. Rania didn't believe in signs, but if she did, she knew this is exactly what one would look like. It was a sign that she was ready to get her answers, to start uncovering the truth.

Rania's maternal grandmother Rose and grandfather Hani were third generation Lebanese living in Egypt, their own grandparents having escaped Mount Lebanon's simmering sectarian warfare of the mid-1800s in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire. They formed part of the community of Levantines, Greeks, Italians and other Mediterraneans, who settled primarily in Cairo and Alexandria, and made these metropoles so cosmopolitan. Each of these communities preserved some of the features of their countries of origin and never let go of their attachment to it. Together they forged a unique identity, a blend of Egyptian and the best and worst of their own cultures brought together in Egypt, their ultimate home.

Rose was born and raised in Alexandria and Hani in Cairo. They had met in Beirut, both back in the motherland for a month-long summer vacation with their respective families in the late 1950s. Hani couldn't take his eyes off the charming brunette who had walked past him in one of downtown Beirut's most popular confectionaries, while Rose was immediately captivated by the young man's mischievous smile and captivating stare, more than compensating for his unassuming physique. The fact that they were both from Egypt and their families knew of each other only facilitated their relationship. After a six-month courtship, involving crowded afternoon gatherings in Beirut, lunches in Cairo and long strolls on Alexandria's harbor, they got married and Rose moved to Cairo. Their two daughters were born and raised in Cairo, Rania's mom married early and moved to Beirut, while Mona stayed until her father died.

Rania was ten years old when her grandfather passed away in 1982. How she and her mother had hastily flown into Cairo from Beirut on a stormy winter night, and rushed to see Hani for the very last time, was one of those memories that remained intact in her mind. For the next two days, Rania was confined to her grandparents' apartment in Cairo's Heliopolis district, left under the supervision of relatives she had never met. She realized something was wrong when strangers started flocking to the house, all dressed in black, paying their respects in an eerie silence and heading out the door quickly thereafter. Only hours after the condolences were over, Rania and her mother took the first plane back to Beirut and Mona was sent to Boston under the care of a distant relative. Rose sold the family's Cairo apartment and moved back to her native Alexandria into her parent's house with an unmarried sister and cousin. Mona had begged Rose to settle in the safety of America instead, but she had adamantly refused. It appeared as if Rose couldn't stay in Cairo after her husband's death nor could she live too far away from it either.

For Rania and her mother to go to Alexandria to visit Rose was never an option. They would go to Athens, Paris or Limassol to meet instead, or Rose would come to Beirut whenever a lull in the always precarious security situation allowed for it. The bond between grandmother and granddaughter was kept alive and strong through phone calls and letters, sometimes accompanied by pictures other times with checks, a grandmother's gift to her one and only niece at the time. Back then, Rania was too young to ask why couldn't her grandmother send less checks and let her go visit her in Alexandria instead. Even if someone was willing to explain, Rania wouldn't have understood the answers anyway.

During one of many visits she had taken to visit Mona and her family in Boston throughout the years, Rose died of a sudden heart failure days before going back to Alexandria. Her wishes were granted and her body laid to rest in Alexandria, far from her daughters but as close as she could to her husband in Cairo. Rania had just turned 20 and had been two weeks since she last talked to her grandmother. Rose's unexpected death was a blow to Rania that took

years for her to recover from. The fact that she couldn't lay a flower on her grandmother's grave in Alexandria to bring some closure made the healing process longer and as an adult, made the mystery of her grandmother's life, and subsequently that of her grandfather's, even more intriguing. With nobody willing to answer her questions, Rania sometimes resigned herself to the idea of never knowing and living with her self-adapted version of the truth instead.

But it wasn't always easy. The physical similarities she and Rose shared, her mother's occasional slip of tongues of "you look so much like your grandmother" or "Rose would've said the same thing" only increased her frustration about not knowing. Her desire for the truth was intensified by what she felt was a conscious attempt to keep the truth away from her. "I don't know" or "ask Mona," Rania's mom always used to say to avoid her questions. Rania knew there was more to her grandmother than her never-ending pool of family anecdotes, and more to her grandfather than her austere memories of when she last saw him. As she grew older, Rania also realized that this thirst for the truth was becoming a quest for something very personal, for discovering part of her own roots, to better define who she really was. While most Lebanese, especially those whose families had emigrated to faraway lands, went back to Lebanon to uncover their roots and with it some of their identity, Rania knew she had to take the opposite route and walk out of that little nation to get what she wanted.

Suddenly, the letter appeared. It was a treasure buried right beneath Rania's eyes, one she had never in her wildest dreams believed even existed. The letter read like an abridged family history and will of sorts, as if Rose knew that whatever took her far from her home and late husband, even a trip to see her daughters and grandchildren, would one day suck life right out of her. Attached to the main envelope was an unmarked envelope filled with black and white and colored pictures, individual and group pictures of what looked like better and happier times. Based on the date handwritten on the back of them, the last one taken was a colored picture of Rose before her last trip to America. Her allure exuded a faded yet pure and simple elegance, but not enough to erase the melancholy radiating from her stare. Yet she stood tall and proud, resting on an ornate black iron railing of a balcony, overlooking a harbor that Rania also didn't recognize.

Rania was absorbed in her thoughts, but could have sworn to have heard the first of several bilingual announcements that their final stop into Alexandria's Misr Station was approaching. She pushed her mental rewind button one last time, wanting to make sure everything was intact in her mind before getting off the train.

Barely ten hours after landing in Beirut and Mona was already resting on Rania's cough, getting ready to be interrogated. She knew this was bound to happen one day but just as Rania, didn't quite know where to start. Before opening their first bottle of white wine, Rania had already put their second to chill in the fridge. It was going to be a long night.

"I told you I found the letter," Rania announced, "the one nobody ever told me about and pretended didn't exist." Rania untangled her feet and walked up to a small drawer at the far end of the living room. Mona watched as Rania brought back two envelopes attached to each other. She was surprised they had remained almost intact, with their clear blue tint, bright red and navy diagonal borders and "Air Mail" and "Par Avion" emblazoned on the bottom left corner in bold.

Mona closed her eyes for a moment. She clearly remembered how she had hand delivered the letter to Rania's mother two months after their mother passed away. They had opened the letter together and spent the rest of the day laughing and crying, wondering how things went so wrong and how their lives would have been if they hadn't.

"We don't pretend it doesn't exist," Mona said calmly, "but what do you expect your mom and I to do with it after all these years?" Rania stared at Mona in silence. "The letter is what's left of our history. Look at it as you would any other history book, you read it, learn from it and try to never forget it."

"But what about justice or at least telling people the truth? Why did I have to know by mistake? Don't I have the right to know too?" Rania said, frustrated that she had to even justify her right to know.

"Well, now you do," Mona drily replied.

"Oh goddammit Mona, they're my grandparents too. I never really knew how grandpa died, nor why we could never go to Cairo, nor why Rose had to move to Alexandria. She died and it was all completely over, as if they only existed as your parents and my grandparents, not as human beings on the face of the earth in their own right."

Mona nodded in silent approval.

"So there's nothing left in Cairo, right?" Rania asked.

"Yes" Mona replied, trying hard to stay calm. "Mom sold the house right after Dad died. Hani had no siblings, so nothing is left." Rania knew Mona didn't like to talk neither about Cairo nor her father too much, they were two wounds that had still not healed after all these years. It was because of how Hani died so unexpectedly, and the way she was snatched out of college in Cairo and siphoned off to Boston without with no choice but to comply. The wound remained so deep, exacerbated by stories of how much Cairo had changed since she left, that Mona had refused to go back since.

"What about Alexandria?" Rania continued, "is there anybody left there, a relative or neighbor of Rose, do we know if there is a house or at least know where it was?"

"Addresses and names of relatives and friends are in the letter," Mona said, "but they haven't been verified in decades. Everything else I know Rose told me during the last years of her life."

Rania stared at Mona with her eyes wide open. She was waiting for Mona to corroborate in her own words what she had read about in the letter. Mona took a deep breath and went on.

"I think about it more often that you think, so does your mom, but then we forget. The same happens after the questions I get from my own kids or from your mother, because of your own questions. Sometimes it hits me, the need to know the truth, for someone to account and to bring closure to us all. But then I think it much better for time to heal and take care of it for us."

It was hard for Rania to fully comprehend her mother and aunt's ability to remain so passive in the face of their father's death and Rose's struggle to live a relatively normal life afterwards.

"But what about Cairo? It's part of who we are as a family. Don't you feel like you want to go back? Don't you feel part of you belongs there?" Rania asked, voicing her own questions on her identity and belonging more than a concern for those of her aunt's.

"When it comes to the bond with the place we grew up in," Mona explained, "you do suddenly discover this desperate need for a sense of belonging. The need to belong not only to a place, but to a certain space, culture and time, no matter how far that place is or how detached that culture may be from the one you now consider your own. Still, it has to exist and be protected in a safe place in your mind. Without it, there's a part of your soul that is missing and constantly restless, wondering around with no place to feel at ease. I may never go back nor see it again but know that the Egypt to which I belong remains in a safe place in my mind and that's all that matter to me now."

Rania already knew the answer to her next question, but decided to ask anyway.

"Would you come with me if I went?" Mona looked away, her nostalgic stare quickly turning into something bordering on anger. Without looking back at her niece, Mona's initial answer was simply silence.

"Shou?" what, Rania asked, "What do you say?"

"Rania, do you think this is a game? There is nothing to see there," Mona's tone clearly irritated, turning back toward Rania, looking intensely into her eyes, hoping to make herself clear. "I know I will barely recognize Cairo if I ever go back, let alone Alexandria." Mona reached out for her glass of wine, took a slip and went on.

"You asked if there was anybody left, a relative, a neighbor or a house. I don't really know and I'm not sure I want to find out. Relatives would have surely passed and their sons and daughters probably don't care about the past. Old neighbors may have already forgotten or still saddened to even think about it. If Rose's house it still standing in Alexandria, it probably no longer belongs to us, just another lovely old house, like they don't build them anymore, with a breathtaking view of the Alexandria harbor. So it's probably best to keep things as your grandmother left them, in that letter and in our minds."

"But what if..."

"What if what!" Mona shouted, starting to regret having allowed the conversation to go this far. "Neither Alexandria nor Cairo are anything like the romanticized image you must have of them," Mona continued, angrily. "I've come to terms with that and with fate itself, that my dad is gone, however that happened, and the way that mom dealt with it, no matter how much I agree or disagree with it. I've kept the family memories instead, the happy and sad ones and will leave my kids with those same memories and nothing else."

"I want to go," Rania whispered, partly to avoid another furious reaction from Mona and also because she wasn't quite sure what she would do there herself. But there was something she felt she had to see or try to find. A road she had to walk up, someone recognizable she would bump into and talk to, who would tell her stories that belonged to her family that were still missing from that history book Mona mentioned. She believed and somehow knew that her grandmother had left the letter for a reason. It wasn't for them to reclaim any material goods, but to start uncovering the truth and part of her own past with it.

Her aunt looked at her, then turned away so that Rania couldn't see her and smiled. Mona knew that no matter what she said, she wouldn't be able to change Rania's mind. Her stubbornness is truly like Rose's, Mona thought, and maybe that letter was meant for nobody else but her.

My Beloved Girls,

Something tells me I should write this letter once and for all before it's too late. I've always felt that every day that passes since the day your father left is a luxury I have done nothing to deserve. You and your families are the only thing that has kept me going, but that will all come to an end soon. I hope it will.

There are things I was able to tell you and others I was never able to gather the strength to say. I hope this will be the first step for you to get to the truth, to fight the system that caused us so much misery, but without fighting the country or its people that we are also a part of. By the time you are ready for this, Egypt would have changed so much from the one we knew, that you would need to have to come to terms with that too.

They killed him, I know they did. The results of the autopsy became a state secret only a handful of officials knew the details of. Ghassan told me Hani was killed and I believe him. I never dared called him again to ask for details, after the last time I saw him at the hospital, for fear of putting him in greater danger than he already was in. Your father wasn't alone. They all had something big planned, as big as the damage and corruption they saw unfolding in front of their eyes every single day they went to their public offices for the past ten years. Hani seemed to be the weakest link and so he was eliminated. They had set their eyes on us too, in case we got anywhere near wherever they buried him or if we tried to make some noise about what happened. Part of me died the day he did, the rest slowly melted away

at my powerlessness to bring him justice or from knowing that I wouldn't be able to lay next to him the day I died. The safest would have been for me to leave Egypt, you both had already been taken care of, but Alexandria was the farthest I could stay from him, even if it meant that they could come after me and silence me one day. I am sorry for not having done more to keep his memory alive or for not letting his death go in vain. I hope you will, I guess it's never too late.

Know that everything you ever wanted to have, know, read and see is at home in Alexandria, 59 Qena Street. You'll know where to find it if you ever decide to go back, to open the wounds of the past, even after all these years, to bring justice, closure or whatever you believe is right, you are his daughters after all. And if you're asking whether it's safe, I would say that by the time you see this letter again and are ready to go back, so much time would have passed that it would be more than safe to go back. Go back for him. Even if it means you will not recognize your country nor your city, not find the spirit that made us who we are, or its soul, part of which meant it was the entire world in one place...just go to see me, to go to find him, go back for him...

Rania could no longer remember how many times she had read the letter. All she knew was that it had only taken these four paragraphs to convince her that she was going "back for him" and Rose, no matter what it took.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be soon arriving to Alexandria's Misr Station. Please make sure to take all your belongings..."

Rania's nerves began to take hold of her senses and she couldn't stand still. She stood up to get her carry-on luggage from the overheard compartment and didn't sit back down. She opened her messenger bag one last time, making sure she had not left anything on board. She doubled-checked on her unbound notes neatly stacked in her bag's outer compartment. Mona had finally agreed to cooperate and gave her everything she either had on paper or could unearth from memory. She was staying at a small bed and breakfast, close to where her grandmother's house once was, initially booked for a week, though she already felt she would need more than that.

Rania slipped her hand into a smaller compartment of her bag and without looking took out a medium-sized black and white picture. It was the earliest picture she had of Rose, wearing a dark v-neck dress slightly above the knee, sculpted by a wide leather belt and brightened by an imposing pearl necklace. She looked straight into the camera, with a look of refreshing beauty and witty charm. Standing next to her was a shorter and darker man, with the most mischievous of smiles and captivating of stares, soon to be her husband. There were no guarantees that anybody would recognize the couple in the picture, but there was no way Rania would ever go to Alexandria without it, without them.

Before the train took a sharp turn left, as it prepared to make its final stop, Rania got a fleeting glimpse of the sea. It was a different kind of Mediterranean to which she was accustomed to see in Beirut, but it was somehow familiar. She was already hit by a feeling of deja-vu, of having been to or at least seen this wide stretch of Alexandria's harbor somewhere before.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Alexandria, Misr Station."

Study of Solitude
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

FOR THE STRANGER WHO KNEW HOW TO PRONOUNCE MY NAME

Tell me how it came to be alla-win
for you. Understand: my father let me say it

wrong until I was fourteen and burying
my Jido. I loved the part where we each

said a Fatiha into a handful of dirt and dropped it
onto his newest silence. Do you also know

the Fatiha? It reminds me that we prefer
to feel beauty and fear close

to one another. I think this is how
it happened: Jido got into bed and didn't

think of Mecca or of morning, and when I
found my father on a prayer rug

for the first time, I knelt beside him
and said, alla-win, alla-win, alla-win.

NICOLE OLWEEAN

PEACE BE UPON YOU, O PEOPLE OF THE GRAVES

Assalam alaikum yaa ahlil kuboor. My ancestors,
I haven't come to you for words.
My tongue and your tongues have known
different shapes for God, for amygdala.
My body has less grace than one who knows
her own soft history unabridged.
Can you give me this, a string to hold?
Can you hold this, this other end,
so that it hangs not limp in the dirt?

NICOLE OLWEEAN

Born Among Mirrors
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

By Eman ElShaik

Shame, Revolution, and Identity: a Review of Saleem Haddad's Guapa

The story and the novel both begin with shame. Rasa, a twenty-something queer man living in an unnamed Arab country, awakens to the vague but uncomfortable awareness of a shameful encounter the night before, when his grandmother caught him and his lover, Taymour, in the middle of a furtive passionate encounter. Rasa, the narrator and protagonist, begins his narration wondering about shame, or eib, an idea which reverberates powerfully throughout the novel.

But eib is not quite so simply collapsed into notions of shame, and as the novel unfolds—its frenetic and potent energy taking place within the span of a single day—Rasa interrogates the idea of eib and its tyranny over his life. "Taymour's name is embargoed under a cloak of eib," Rasa thinks. "The closest word for eib in English is perhaps "shame." But eib is so much more than that."

Eib confines and nurtures Rasa, at once concealing him and revealing him, and throughout the novel, many distinct but overlapping tyrannies converge in Rasa's life, begging overthrow. As the events progress, Rasa circles elliptically around questions of revolution, identity, shame, and narrative.

Saleem Haddad's debut novel is a text which brilliantly complicates the many oppositions we have inherited, unsettling them and interrogating their salience: public versus private, east versus west, gay versus straight, revolution versus apathy. The various threads are split apart and reconstituted adeptly and seamlessly, converging into a rich and moving story of a young man confronting the numerous iterations of his own power and powerlessness.

Guapa the bar, like the novel, is a nexus of optimism and frustration, a place of trauma and healing, confinement and freedom, climax and anticlimax. It in this bar where Rasa first meets Taymour, where he watches his friends dance in drag in the basement, where he plans revolutions with his friends, and where they collectively lament its abortion. It is in this and through this that Haddad vividly inscribes a microcosm of our modern life and all of the promiscuous possibilities and oppositions that populate it.

We enter into Rasa's whirling, precipitous subjectivity, which hurriedly flits between urgent political disasters and unfurling love affairs and long leisurely excursions into the reservoirs of his memory. Yet this narration is neither cloyingly well-arranged nor laboriously jumbled, and so Rasa's reality comes alive effortlessly, revealing all of the traumas and joys which inhabit Rasa's world. We fall floridly into the sweet and fragile intimacies between Taymour and Rasa and endure Rasa's harrowing encounter with the police. The tenor of the narrative is at turns buoyed by the exuberance of an incipient revolution and dampened by its anticlimax.

Yet through the disorienting present, the turbulence of past events is also palpable. Through these jarring moments, Rasa relives his estrangements: from his secretive, domineering grandmother, who presides over his small, diminished family with tight lips and tight fists; from his late father, who had cautioned him against fighting for change; from his absent mother, who chopped an endless supply of onions at the kitchen table to subsume her tears and ultimately left him behind. Haddad weaves these instances together with skillful and sincere prose.

It is the specter of the failed revolution that haunts the story, and Rasa vacillates between resignation and anger. It is unclear whether the failed revolution belongs to Syria, Egypt, Tunisia or to another country—or perhaps to no country at all—and it is this lack of specificity that imbues the revolution—and the novel—with a plausible deniability. Is the revolution real or imagined? Was it on the right or wrong side of history? Without the tapestry of history as a backdrop, one does not know if the revolution warrants condemnation or mourning, which both frees the revolution from scrutiny and demands it be subjected to it.

The novel is permeated with urgent political questions, though they are not met with incontrovertible answers. Haddad smoothly floats these considerations in the air but provides no explicit resolution for them. Nevertheless, the reader is nudged along to certain conclusions which eventually collapse in on themselves, leaving the reader in a sustained state of precarity.

If the personal is political, in Guapa, the political often recedes into the personal, with tense and calamitous political situations often punctuated—and superseded—by Rasa's personal turmoil: his obsession with his withdrawn lover, his worry about his grandmother's perception of him, his latent anxieties about his absent parents. Rasa wonders if his private life is realer than his public one, since his public self elides so much about himself and the true nature of things. And yet he wonders if shame and lost love are ancillary bourgeois concerns, imagined prisons as opposed to non-metaphorical ones. Tied up in this are questions of narrative, and Rasa does not grapple with narrative inertly. Rather, he is strategic in the very way he translates (and mistranslates) between languages and worlds, misinterpreting and omitting as a way of relating a politics.

As these tensions animate Rasa's world, he questions the various identities through which he experiences the world, the oppressive force they exert upon them, and how to adjudicate between then. Rasa feels his homosexuality marks him in his home country, trying out different idioms to encompass his queer identity, experimenting with the words gay, shaath, louti, and khawal. And though his queer identification is at the forefront of most of his life, he becomes primarily an Arab when he goes to America. It is there that he begins to understand that the social contract of eib, the decorum and collective sensitivity that it entails, could sometimes become a refuge from the lonely individualism and the sharp, discrete personal spaces of the western world.

It would be a mistake to see all of Rasa's struggles separately—nor can they be extricated from one another. Indeed they all flow together and sublimate into one another in the way human tensions often do.

Haddad's debut novel is more than a captivating coming of age novel. It is a story which could easily lapse into stereotypes and cliché, but Haddad does not lose his brisk, bright, and perceptive voice. Guapa submerges the reader in the complexities and tangles of a liminal queer Arab subjectivity and all of its undulating contingencies. It does so while being not just politically attuned but politically revelatory. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of Haddad's novel is its unique allegory; it is unique in that it is an allegory that demands the reader observe the world around them but is not didactic about what they should see.

Lost Corners
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

TUYA'S RIVER

Prelude to the Great Tsunami of July 21, 365 A.D.

By Lukman Clark

Papa taught me to count in the Roman ways and told us to always speak Latin, in or out of the home, though it was Momma who gave us our Egyptian names.

True, day to day, it's Roman things that get you by. Measures of weight, distance, money. Numbers of things possessed or wanted. Then there is time, with divisions of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and so on. Each of these has a name; the name fixing it and making it more real somehow. And everyone knows the Latin words for such things.

Papa was always telling my sister and me that knowing numbers and the names of things is more valuable than anything else, especially if one day he could not be here with us. I did not, could not, know what he meant by that, but I think he was right about this. I mean, mostly Papa was right but other things are good to know, too. I'm pretty

sure that even what is Roman has to be part of something bigger.

Besides numbers, Papa taught me a little how to read. Then I learned some more on my own. People in the marketplace have come to know I am good in this way. They ask for my help with reading and writing, despite my age.

My name is Tuya. My sister's is Tem. Our Momma named us this way because she never wanted us to forget that we were Egyptians – that we are Egypt. The land. That's what she told us when we got older.

Tem and I were born in the Year 70 A.D., anno Diocletiani*.

Diocletian* is dead now, along with a couple of other imperators that came after him. This is what Papa said around the time me and Tem turned eleven just a while ago. I remember he looked at each of us then with sad eyes below his short haircut and, with his voice breaking a little, said the world was changing too fast, but for me it seems time moves too slowly and I will never grow up and I will always be in this place where I remember having lived my whole life with my twin sister.

Oh, yes, my sister and I are twins. She came out of our Momma just a short time after me. Momma says Tem almost didn't make it because she didn't start breathing right away. Tem has that extra finger on her left hand though and the midwife told Momma maybe that's what finally helped her, but that she should try to not let people know about it.

As though the midwife herself wouldn't talk. I know she did because people stare and whisper. Even about me. Twins, you know. Or maybe it's something else, but I don't mind.

I'm glad I have my twin sister. Funny, even though we are twins, we have always been opposites of each other. I am lighter. She is darker. My hair is reddish brown. Hers is brownish black. I talk a lot. Tem is the quiet one. Those who know both of us say I am the more practical, too.

Over a month ago, like I said, we passed our first decem anni by one year more. Ten years plus one together. Me first. Then Tem. But together.

Many children do not get as far as us, I know. Women are always losing their babies here and it must be the same everywhere. Papa told me how he was the third baby his momma had had. One came out blue and dead; the other came out with too many arms and legs, so was taken at night to be left on a hilltop. That really made Papa the first, like me; the oldest brother, like I'm the older sister. But he had four more after him. Three sisters and one brother. I just have my sister Tem. I love her and am glad she was not left out on a hilltop – but I think she's enough.

Papa says he is more than four tens old. Quadraguinta. That seems a really long time to me, but somehow I can't think of Papa as old. I mean, he doesn't seem old to me at all. I just wonder where he is though.

"Back before your mother and I met, I was just a foot soldier. The army came through our village in my father's land of Macedonia – the birthplace of the Great Alexander – looking for conscripts. You remember where Macedonia is, right?"

"Across the big sea!"

"Yes, Tuya-miau, across the big, big sea. Mare Nostrum. Good girl. Well, then they shipped myself and another hundred or so conscripts off to serve under the Dux Aegypti. Tem-Tem, it's your turn to tell me what that is."

Tem only stared at the floor and didn't say anything, so Papa continued his story. I don't know how many times he had told it to us, but I never tired of hearing it.

**Emperor Diocletian began his reign in 284 of the later Christian calendar; thus, the girls' birth year was 354 anno Domini.*

"Well, Dux Aegypti is the Egypt Command. So, having never been at sea before, I got terribly ill –"

"And you barfed your guts out over the side but it was OK because it fed the hungry fishes, right?"

"Exactly right. Unfortunately, our sea passage was not without incident. A few men fell overboard but the ship's pilot would not change course to find them. Then after the third sunset–"

"You all tried to take the ship and turn it back!"

"My Tuya, you know your Papa would never do something like that! Nor would most others. Nevertheless, the few experienced soldiers on board quickly got matters under control and the leaders of the rebellion were dealt with severely."

"They were dragged behind the ship in the water so the sharks could eat them up! Right, Papa?"

By now, Tem was faking being asleep. She woke up soon enough though when Papa paused to drink from his cup, then jumped off his lap and ran to the kitchen where Momma was making preparations for tomorrow's breakfast.

Papa continued.

"Things went smoothly after that trouble. No one dared try anything again. Once back on land in the port of Alexandria, I quickly recovered from my sea-sickness. Then, as luck would have it, I was marched here to Heliopolis with a detachment of other soldiers. All of us part of the 5th Macedonian Legion, mostly patrolling the streets and alleyways of the city. Just our being around usually keeps the peace during the day.

"Night patrol though always has been the worst. Drunken men and women in and out of the taverns brawling and screaming. People killing each other in the streets and on rooftops. Spouses who normally did not have to face each other by day, quarreled once both at home after dark – too often with evil effects for one or the other and too often for any children they might have."

In anticipation, I stayed quiet. The best part was about to come.

"Thieves did what thieves always do, too; especially the bands of roving youths, brigands who as often as not would taunt and attack us soldiers. It was while dispatching one infamous gang cornered in a dead-end alley – something we had well thought out and planned as part of a night round-up – it was then that I found your mother."

So, because of my smart soldier Papa – now optio, not just munifex – that's how I know a lot of what I know. The rest I find out for myself.

I can keep track of how more than ten tens or so kinds of different birds live around our river parts. For each kind though, they number too many to count. I mean, if you could even count them when they all fly up so beautifully together. Their wings glint in the day sky like the stars do in the night sky. I think sometimes the way they group or cry must have some hidden meaning. Really, I think they do talk to us in their way. Some people say they are messengers and that we just need to learn how to listen or read their signs.

I try.

Tem says that birds are just birds.

Still, despite her crankiness, I try to follow what kinds of birds come and go with the seasons, wondering where they go and why they return. I watch for the long-legged ones like the diver birds, the Great Cormorants, the pink-backed pelicans and cranes that come in winter. Usually they don't lay eggs here, but they come back with young birds, so they must make babies in the other places they go off to. Some kinds of geese and ducks, quail, kingfishers, shrikes and kestrels do all nest with us though. Some stay here all the time; others take their surviving children away across water or desert when seasons turn.

One bird, a dusky-shaded brown and green ibis, flies in to visit its cousin called Pharaoh's Ibis with its striking,

black-fringed wings. I like pretending that our stay-at-home ibis invites its distant relative in for lotos and beer in exchange for stories of far-away lands.

Like I said, many other birds stay here all the time, just like we do. The benu, egrets and bitterns; doves and pigeons; cuckoos, owls, crows and bats; black kites, Horus falcons, vulturinum – all seem to like it here well enough. But, like the ibis, they have winged cousins calling on them year-round, while no one ever comes by to see our family.

The way I remember the different kinds is like this. I might make one kind of nest for one kind – in my mind, of course – and another sort of nest for a different bird. Or I see them moving in a particular way in the sky in my mind's eye, individually for some and in flocks for some others. Certain birds I remember by seeing them doing a showy mating dance, or challenging one another with puffed out chests and ruffled feathers, or fluting a few sad notes of a song, or swallowing a frog.

This is all useful because along with what Papa gets from the army, birds provide part of the livelihood of our family. Me and Tem have been coming out with throw sticks, hoop nets and small ground nets to catch them since we were old enough to sit quietly in boat or blind – first with Papa; later with Momma when Papa started getting called away more and more. Because Momma has other things to do, later it was just me and Tem going out on our own.

Other birders, either singly or in groups, hunt with arrows, javelins, slings, clap-nets and long net fences. Some use tethered bitterns with their eyelids sewn shut to trick curious apedu with the decoys' pitiful cries.

I do well enough without such deceits.

I say this because in recent months, Tem has come out less and less. When I ask if she will accompany me in the reed boat that Papa made for us to cover more of the river bank, she stiffens her back and shoulders, saying she needs to stay home to help Momma. She says seeing that I am the one who likes sitting out under the hot sun with the flies, gnats and crocodiles, why don't I just go by myself? Then she turns and walks away. I don't know what has gotten into her, but if all she's going to do is complain and scare the birds off, she can stay home sweeping the dust from the floor and washing down the walls with that nasty natron.

Speaking of crocodiles, I don't know what Tem is so afraid of. They never have bothered me. It's like they don't even hear or smell me. I am less than a shadow to them, I think. Besides, there are a pair of hawks who always seem to fly low overhead as a kind of warning for me to get off the river and, sure enough, then something you don't want `round comes around. One time, one of the hawks dove right down to the back of my skiff and took off again. It happened fast but when I turned to look all I could see was the hawk flying off with a cobra in its talons.

Another time I thought I heard something coming from the papyrus thickets and though both hawks tried to warn me away, I went in to have a look. What I found was dead bodies of people. I didn't think animals had killed them, because no animal I know of puts heads on stakes. After this, I always listened to my hawk friends.

One day, as usual, I had been out since before dawn. That's the very best time of day. I was on the alert and gliding downstream in the reed boat along the thick stands of papyrus growing down to the river's bank and into its shallows. The boat is like a second home to me. Though small and narrow, I feel safe in it. Protected. So much so that I sometimes nap in it under the shade of the tall reeds. At such times I might dream that the river is a path snaking warmly through a shadowy forest like those Papa speaks of. I am very familiar with this path. Just as I am with the river that dreams along with me.

But, as much as I like to daydream, I do have things to do. Things like checking the simple traps I have learned to make and set from watching birds' habits; putting up nets; trying to locate nests by the hungry cries of young birds.

Like I said, sunrise is the best of times to be out and about on the river. Life there is stretching, shaking the night off and getting ready for the new day. The birds are waking to sing praises to the sun. They are hungry from their night fast and tend not to pay much attention to a little inops-girl, quietly drifting with the current.

So, as the sun stretches its arms out, its hopeful rays warming the air and chasing away the river mists, I unwrap a piece of bread to chew on to quash my belly rumblings. From around a weedy sand bank, a coot family – the mother bird and seven grey, not fully fledged young – come up to my boat, curious, I think, about my breakfast. I break off a corner of bread and toss it on the water, whereupon the adult snatches it up. I throw several more pieces a little forward of my skiff, while slowly taking up the handle of my hoop net. By now the chicks have joined the fray for my bread, which gives me the chance to bring my net quickly over the lot.

I'm not fast enough due to nearly losing my balance. I succeed in catching only four of the young. The mother and the rest of her brood run across the water's surface in a flash, beyond my reach, splashing and squawking noisily along the way. All that commotion puts an end to any sneakiness I may have enjoyed, so I quiet the little birds, stow them and turn about to pole back upriver toward home.

On the way, I think it's too bad that I didn't get the mother. Besides being plump, her black feathers seemed especially shiny and healthy. I could sell them to the clothiers to dress up their wares.

Or use them myself.

I collect feathers of different birds and have used these to make a cap that is formed tightly to my head. By gradually bending the longer feathers from falcons and the like, I can shape them to my head without breaking the spines. The way I wear the cap is with the notches to the front and the quills in the back. I use the smaller fluffy feathers to fill in and cover the quills like a fringe. Tem wants me to make her one, but says she wants one where the feathers stand up – not laying flat like mine.

The day is warming up quickly, so I need to unload my morning's catch, which has grown with the addition of a huge, sharp-jawed turtle, a clutch of dozens of round, white turtle eggs, and three quail from my set traps. The heat will spoil both birds and turtle eggs, already attracting an army of flies to the basket where I have stored them – the seven birds with their necks wrung. Also, though the turtle hides in its shell when I rap it sharply with my pole, it keeps coming out to try to escape over the side of the boat, making it all the more necessary to hurry back.

Quayside at the town market, I climb the embankment and am happy to immediately sell the turtle for its meat and shell to a fish broiler my Papa knows by the name of Felix. As two of his helpers carry the creature from my boat and away to slaughter, he laughs with his hands on his hips, saying, "You must be a child of Anukis to be able to subdue such a beast without losing all your toes and fingers to its rapacious jaws!" I smile up at him, sweat dripping down along my nose, and reply, "My Momma prays to Dedwen to accompany me at market, so that I may be paid well for my work."

I cock my head a little to one side and give Felix the Eye, just to see if this has any affect on him.

With that, he bursts out with a guffaw and puts a generous sum into my outstretched palm.

I slip the coins unobtrusively into the leather wallet held at my side by a rawhide string across my bare chest, just as Felix scrunches up his nose while looking down at my other hand holding the covered basket with the dead fowl. He raises his eyebrows as though to ask about the odor insinuating itself over that of the fish, cooking oil and offal in his sector of the market. I advise him that my luck did not stop with turtles, so I had better move on to where people eat real food. I'm not quick enough to dodge a light slap to the back of my head that knocks my cap askew.

Our market, like most run by the Romans, is laid out in a grid fashion with different numbered sectors, each with its assigned products. Papa had explained that this made it easier to control what was sold by whom. Because the Prefecture also set the prices for every type of commodity, it makes it easier to locate and fine cheats, largely because sellers keep their eyes on other sellers in their sector. The aisle ways crisscrossing and joining the sectors are wide and vendors are supposed to keep them clear of their goods. Papa also told us this is so that soldiers can move with speed through the market when there is any trouble.

As many vendors, not just fishermen, bring their wares by boat, quayside is Sector One. It is from here that I then walk east, away from the river, through the vegetable sector. Onions, radishes, leeks, cucumbers, figs, grapes, cabbages, turnips, melons all reach out with their fresh scents to grab at my growling stomach as I pass. I walk fast to get through to the fowl and poultry sector to finish my business.

Farmers and market workers I have known for years call out their greetings to me. Customers haggle, despite the administration's price controls. Small groups of squatting men drink tea, play with their 20-sided dice and natter. Women laugh and scold their children.

Drool slips from one corner of my mouth as my stomach rumbles and I wipe it away with the back of my hand. The dank, gamey smell of the river on my hands puts my hunger down.

My straw basket is lighter; my purse heavier. The leavened barley bread smeared with olive oil, bean paste and garlic sits well in my belly. A small belch serves as a flavorful reminder of my well-deserved meal.

Just as I am heading for one of the latrine areas outside the market perimeter, a commotion starts up in the poultry and fowl sector behind and to my left. Although the spice sector and prepared foods sector are between me and it, I see shoppers and shopkeepers alike drifting that way and crowding around what is beginning to turn into something more than a scrap. I know this will quickly draw soldiers to keep the order, which means people are going to get hurt.

Later, I found that Timothy the live goose monger had gotten into an argument with a customer over something. The customer at one point pushed Timothy hard, saying that Christians like him were just brainless goose shit and ought to be thrown into the river for the hippos and crocodiles. Timothy then slashed out with a short-bladed butchering knife, cutting the man's arm, while calling him a pagan son of a temple whore. At this point, others in the crowd began taking sides. Christians against pagans. Pagans against Christians. Jews in it just for a good argument, like so many others looking to have a little sport to spice up their dull lives so they might brag in the taverns.

Papa says it doesn't pay to stick around to watch brawls like this because you never know how big they will get or how violent.

"Movete! Movete!"

That would be soldiers coming at double-time, telling people to get out of their way. There are just two of them, each strong and grim-faced; each carrying his light, round catra shield and short sword, with a puglio on his belt. The crowd will be no match for them and I know that this promises to be yet another of what Papa calls "bone-breaker containments." Although necessary, in the end it will give fuel to rabble-rousers to stir up more hatred against the Prefect and his soldiers.

The pair jogs along the aisle where I am, so I jump off to my right side. A baker's apprentice – an older boy I have seen before called Peter – trips me and follows that with a shove while calling me "bird brain."

I try to keep to my feet but can't. Falling, I want to yell something at him but my first angry flash gets instantly crushed when my head hits the edge of the baker's wagon.

Hard.

The ceiling I see is the one I see every night before falling asleep and every morning when I wake up. The bed feels like my own and that I'm under my favorite linen coverlet with animal pictures on it. Cooking smells tease my nose and stomach, drawing me from muddled dreams.

Tem's voice. "Momma! Her eyes are open!" Then quieter to me. "You're going to get it now!"

"Daughter! What you done? People say you fight again in market! What me tell about wrestling market boys? Letting them put hands on you! Just wait! I tell you Papa!"

"Papa?"

I'm confused.

Momma says that I snuck into the house while she and Tem had gone out to do the laundry. She says I was asleep when they returned; that I didn't wake up all the rest of that day and slept the night through, as well. She found me in my bed and says nothing she did would stir me. Tem says she even sat on me and pinched me, but that I didn't notice that either.

Because of all the scrapes on my face, chest, arms and legs, not to mention a huge red knot on the side of my head, Momma says it's proof I'd been fighting. And most likely met my match this time. While I do fight when I have to, most boys know to leave me alone. But I remember that I hadn't fought with anyone, just that I'd been pushed down.

I try telling this to Momma – Tem is standing behind her and looking around at me like I'm some kind of fool – but she is having none of it.

"All time you on river make your brains cook. You lie to me all you want but me not your fool. So! Get dressed and eat something. Least you show some good sense putting wallet under big bed. Looks like good day you had from what you bring home. Just lucky no one steal all."

Money always has a way of softening Momma's anger.

She brings me a thick, hot porridge and a handful of berries to eat. I sit on the edge of the bed trying to collect myself, with the bowl in my lap and my feet on the floor. I stir the berries in with the porridge and start eating. With the first taste of warm food in what I guess is a couple of days at least, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Momma sits with me and gently rubs some of her calendula ointment onto my chest. I yelp when she touches my left nipple and looking down it looks like it has been practically scraped off.

I should be fighting mad about this. But instead of thinking of how to get back at Peter, I'm feeling suddenly that life is really good. I tear up and clasp Momma's forearm.

Sitting with Momma beside me on the bed, I think of how Tem and I each have a bed of our own, which is more than most kids we know have. The beds are just plain wood frames with short, squared legs, but they get us off the ground. Leather straps interlace and fasten to the side rails and a double layer of rush mats helps make the beds more comfortable. We use wood blocks with a cushion to pillow our heads.

Momma and Papa have a bigger bed because, of course, there are two of them. The legs are much heavier and turned by lathe. They are higher than mine and Tem's, too. It also has a pluteus or headboard with horses' heads carved on each corner. Papa loves horses. They have a down-filled mattress and a long down-filled bolster as their shared pillow. It's nice to lie on their bed when they let us.

I think it is safe to change the subject now.

"Momma? Is Papa back?"

"No. Soldiers at garrison hear nothing yet. Eat. And stop you worry about him. None of that make him get home any sooner. And Tuya – just so if there speck of truth in lies you tell, me tell you stay away from boy who hit you. Momma forbid you go back to hit him. Next you know, you kill someone. Then what? You understand me?

"Tem! That two times as much for you, so stop eye-rolling! One day eyes go fall out of oh so pretty head. Then roll right out door. Bye!"

Momma pulls Tem to her.

"You both sweet desert foxes of mine. I love you. Tell Momma you going stay clear of market boy."

Momma gets up and leaves me alone on the bed. Tem follows her out like a young coot.

My Momma comes from far up the river, from a place called Kush. I like when she tells me and Tem about what it was like for her growing up and how different river life is from so far away. She says she was much poorer there, so I'm sure that's why Momma likes the extra coin I bring in. It helps the family, along with what she makes as a medicine woman, especially when Papa is away on patrol like he has been now for half a season. When he is away like this, we have to wait for what the soldiers call their salary.

Momma first came to Heliopolis when she was "fourteen floodings old," as she says. Her father brought her along on a trading expedition that was supposed to make his fortune but he took ill with vomiting and diarrhea. A river sickness that killed him within just a few days. His partners said nothing when grandfather first complained of fever and tremors. They installed him at a cheap inn and bade Momma stay to put cool compresses on his forehead. A day later, grandfather's cousin and their new leader – for grandfather had been the master on the journey downriver – told Momma they would carry out the trading and once finished come back for her. That was the last she saw of them.

Momma was kicked out of the inn the same day her father died. She had no money and no idea what had happened to her father's body.

She would never say what she did to get by after that, except that some time later she met Papa.

It's the third week of May, what some of Momma's friends call Opet. She went out with them to visit their dead relatives' sepulchri. Though Momma doesn't know what happened to her father's body, she says she honors his spirit at one of the cemetery shrines. She brought lots of perfumy flowers home.

Tem started her menses. Not so very sweet smelling. She had been complaining for some time about how her nipples hurt and I thought for sure she was just looking to take attention from me because of the way I had gotten grazed up. Now that she has started bleeding, I do notice that she also has a pair of walnuts beginning to pop up.

I always thought I'd be the first, like I have been in just about everything else. But, no, Tem is getting hit with the titty stick before me and is really letting me know about it. All she has been doing is marching around the house as though she is leading a procession down the temple avenue, flaunting her greening womanhood.

The scent of her blood at first made it hard for me to fall asleep at night. That and her moaning from cramps.

Momma gives her a borage tonic for the cramps and has shown her how to make cloth pads for catching the blood. I will make sure I am out on the river on laundry day.

Eight days after Tem's menstrual blood has stopped flowing, several of Momma's friends come by to visit. Momma explains to Tem that the women want to give a special Moon Ceremony for Tem to help her crossover to being a woman. They say it is a kind of celebration just for young girls like her and that it is very, very secret.

Why hadn't we heard of this before? I mean me and Tem? We know all about cunni and tits and how to make ourselves feel good, and how could we not know about bleeding when every woman around us has had her monthlies while we were growing up. We had watched Momma wash out her rags and put them up to dry, while telling us all about the pestis. So it was like something you never wanted to happen to you, but still you looked forward to it just to know what it was like and be able to tell your own stories about it.

Poor Tem. Now she knows. But she is getting something special now, too, and I am not going to be a part of it. We've always done everything together, so this is hardly fair. I go back to my bed and when I am sure I am alone, I lift my linen and try to see myself down there and talk to whatever spirit might live there to tell it that it is time for me to join my sister, so we can do this Moon thing together.

Instead, I have to watch as the women come for Tem and Momma in the dead of night. All of them, including Momma and Tem, are painted with strange markings on their faces and everywhere else that I can see. I wish now I had made that feathered hat for my sister. She tries to keep a solemn look on her face, but I can tell she is very excited. I am told I have to stay behind and that I had better not try to follow. My time will come, they say.

After dawn, when Tem returns, she's crying and groaning in pain, while holding her lower abdomen. Maybe this is not such a good thing after all.

Momma gives Tem something to drink that puts her to sleep, but she still moans and pumps her legs slowly, like she's trying to get a foothold on to something solid. Meanwhile, Momma busies herself in the kitchen. I go up to her quietly. Tears are running down her cheeks, so I cough a little to let her know I am there. She turns and when she sees me, she opens her arms so we can hug.

Now I'm crying and I ask Momma what happened? What did they do to my sister?

Momma takes a few moments to compose herself, then takes me to a bench where we sit side by side. After a few deep breaths, she starts talking, not looking at me just yet.

"Thing start so beautiful! Tem your sister excited so. Me, too. All walk for hour to place of trees. Secret place where women already make safe circle. Circle have special magic showing earth, air, water, fire. Tem told stand in center then all we women stand around holding branches of fire. We sing for gods to bless Tem, we all, we families and world. Was such celebration just like we say."

"It sounds nice, Momma."

"Was nice – but then all changed. One woman from me home, upriver, go by name of Saka'aye, after olden times queen. Everyone call her Saka and have much respect for all know she able speak direct with gods. So. Saka drink magic water from Look-Ahead Gourd, she fall to ground, no hear, no see no one. All we think Saka must be talking with spirit and we pray she come back, bring good news and bless our Tem."

Momma is breathing in fast, little breaths by this time, so she stops to get herself together again. I already know that things could not have gone well or Tem would not be in the state she is in, still fretful in sleep.

"What did Mother Saka say, Momma?"

"Such bad luck for our Tem! When Saka come back, she say because of Tem's number six finger on left hand, she must do special work as kahin –"

"What's that, Momma?"

"Oh, me think it what some around here call manti. Someone like Saka herself."

"But that doesn't sound so bad. Aren't they healers, too? Like you are with all that you know about herbs and medicines?"

"Yes, dear Tuya, like that. This not the bad news though. Saka go on and say spirits no want our Tem bear any children. Ever. So, it then Saka tell us hold Tem down and she reach inside one hand, pushing down outside with other – and she break Tem's womb neck. Bend it so no man's seed find place."

I can't speak. I'm nearly exploding inside. Things are moving too quickly. I want to run away. Instead, I cry.

Although her menses had ended before her dedication, Tem bled for several days after her "celebration" but it has stopped now. I have been helping Momma nurse Tem along. Actually, once she could talk, she yelled hoarsely at Momma and told her to go away. Tem is better today but is still shaky, so I hold her up sitting to give her broth and medicines to drink. I wash her and keep her clean in other ways. She lets me brush her hair and asks me to sing to her, which I do in a low voice while stroking her head.

I think Tem is going to be all right. Some things are going to take longer to heal though. Momma says she has known of women who had this done to them, but they had asked a midwife to do it after already having a baby. Tem did not ask for this but now it's done and that's that. After a while, I'll talk with her to get her to talk to Momma. It sounded to me like Momma could not have done anything to stop what Saka did and I see that she feels really bad about it. Tem's tears have dried up but Momma's haven't.

Because we're well into the month of June, I tell Momma that I need to get back out on the river. Caring for Tem has kept me away from my work and, besides, I need to be by myself to think about all that has happened. I don't remember anything every being this bad in our family before and don't see how they can get any worse.

Usually we do not see vultures this far north. Papa says they stick to the deserts east and west of Heliopolis, or farther upriver where it is dryer; though I have seen them on the ground a couple times before, making dinner of dead animals. Mostly crows take care of such things. That's why I was surprised to see a pair of them making wide circles over this area. They stayed pretty high up in the sky, going around and 'round, shaping an invisible snare over the city. Because they did not come down, they must not have spotted any remains. It was more like they were waiting for something to happen, for something to die.

This is on my mind as I make my way home from the river and the market. I only made a little money today as a result of my mind not paying attention to bird sounds and what they mean. There were some dead birds in my traps, but those that had not been mostly eaten by other animals were too far gone to even think of selling. I did reset my traps and I will go out tomorrow to check them.

Coming up to our house, my shoulders slump down and I am feeling tired. I don't feel like seeing anyone, not even Tem or Momma – but there are people standing outside our gate. One of them is holding the bridle of a horse.

Papa has always talked about finally being able to buy a horse of his own. He says this would make him an eques, so that when he retires in a little while he could become someone important in the city, letting him make more money than his military pension will give us.

Did Papa finally get a horse when he was on this last patrol? And is he home now?

I go through the gate, with a quick look over my shoulder at the beautiful horse; then through the main entryway. Momma is sitting with a strange man, while two other men stand close by. These two glance my way briefly, but go back to the conversation between Momma and the stranger. He is military and from what Papa has told me about insignia and uniforms, he looks to be high ranking. Probably a centurion. That means the horse belongs to him, not Papa.

Though I have to pee, I hold it in and listen to what the man is saying to Momma.

"...so, you see, you are not really a Roman citizen. The one you call your husband was and your two daughters are citizens by birth, but Kush is not a part of the Imperium. I am sorry to have to be the one to tell you this."

"But I tell you, I married to citizen. To soldier like you and two men here."

"Yes, that is all well and good, but you see the laws say that soldiers cannot officially marry. Of course, we realize that they take up with local women all the time, and in your case, a foreign woman."

One of the standing soldiers smirks and makes a knowing nod to the other at this. I want to kick him.

The centurion continues, "That is why I have to tell you that you may no longer live in this house. Legally this property belongs to the army. It was requisitioned for use for our officers when the 5th Macedonian Legion first came to this province. "

That was nearly a month ago. Everything has changed since.

Papa is missing and the army says that if he did not desert, he must be dead. The centurion told Momma that he had ordered Papa and a few other soldiers to go to the army fort at Dionysias to oversee equipment distribution as a result of some irregularities. As this fort is at an oasis in the Western Desert, it is known that there are bandits and Bedouin in the area. At the time, there also had been rain storms and at least one big dust storm. Only one man from the group Papa led made it to the fort. He reported that he thought the others had drowned when water suddenly washed down a wadi to their night encampment. It missed him because he was squatting behind a bush and some distance from the others in order to relieve himself.

When word had gotten back to the centurion, he gave the surviving soldier a field promotion, directing him to take Papa's place.

We spent the next several days sleeping in friends' homes, usually on the floor because we had to leave our nice beds behind. When I think about those... those novi sleeping in our beds, it makes me feel hot and broken inside.

It was strange the way we left. The new soldier's family just barged in and took over, bossing us around and telling us to get out. As we went out the gate like beggars, Tem turned around and stared at the house for some time. As though called, the family all came to the front doorway and seemed to be waiting for Tem to say something. And she did have something to say – but I have no idea what she said or in what language but it sounded like a curse. More than that, she said it so loud that passersby made a wide arc around us, a couple of Christians crossing themselves as they did so.

I have a new respect for my sister and told her so.

Momma had saved some money, so she found us a small, single room to the north of our old home. She said she did not want to live near our old place for fear that she would burn it down in the night and the army would know who to come looking for. She also said this is just temporary, until she can arrange for us to go upriver back to where she came from. Despite the betrayal by her uncle years ago, she is sure that there are cousins who will take us in until we can get back on our feet.

Meanwhile, we are making do here in this tiny room. The man she rents from says she can use the courtyard to cook in, as long as she keeps it clean. Fortunately, he is not around much but there is a woman he keeps that looks in on us every now and again. She seemed sympathetic when Momma told her our story but has not offered any real help.

I keep hoping that Papa will show up and take us away from all of this. It won't matter if he is still in the army or not. I don't give a cockroach's ass for the army at this point.

What with Papa missing, losing our nice house and Tem's agonies – these are just part of our troubles, it turns

out. Though Momma has money saved up that she keeps well protected, I still need to help out with supporting the family. The walk to my skiff is now longer, given where we have relocated. All of my traps and snares had been damaged or taken, so I have had to redo all of them. The worst thing though is when I bring my day's catch to market, people act like they hardly know me. Even Felix.

I always thought that we were good friends because of the way we joked with each other. When I saw him for the first time after everything bad started happening, he said he had heard about Papa and that he was really sorry. The thing is, he said all this in Greek. We always spoke before in Latin. Papa encouraged us to use the Roman tongue and learn Roman ways. Of course, there are a lot of people here from around where Papa came from and they use mostly the language from there – as do most others for that matter. So it's not like I grew up not being able to understand Greek. But now everyone in the market, including Felix, only speaks to me in Greek.

Not only that, they don't pay as much as they used to for what I bring in to sell. I'm still trying to figure all this out. Meanwhile, I speak Greek. Even at the place we now call home.

Momma sighs and shakes her head, but her gaze is hard and determined when she thinks I'm not looking. All in all, I wonder how she can stay as calm as she does. A lot calmer than me, for certain.

Because the river waters have been rising, Momma says we must leave for the south soon. Her plan is that we will travel by boat as far as Thebes; from there joining a caravan to Meroe. She says we have to be ready to leave quickly, so we find a cheap inn close to the water where the river people stay, for once a boat has its cargo loaded the craft master does not wait around.

It has been several days since we came to the inn. I go every morning to talk with the boat owners, craft masters and crews because I want to know what the river is like to the south. It's hard to say who's telling the truth and who's stretching it just to scare me or impress me, but I'm getting an idea of what we can expect. It will be different.

Momma comes down to the docks later in the day to check with the progress of a certain boat and its cargo. She has made a small advance to its master, who is dark like Momma, and has agreed to take on cooking and cleaning chores once underway. He assures her that the material he is waiting for is likely to arrive any day.

Momma says this man's word is good.

It is the twenty-first of July when Sirius the Dog Star joins the Sun at dawn during these hottest days. Before we go, I feel the urge to visit my old river haunts one last time.

I run towards the market quayside in hopes of finding the old reed boat Papa had made for us. It is there, hidden still in the papyrus reeds, so I climb in and catch the current to float downriver.

On the water, I begin to relax. By the time I catch my breath the eastern sky begins to brighten and a few birds are making their morning songs. This day I feel like they are singing not just to make the sun rise but also for me. I am as much a part of this place as are the birds. They are letting me know that just as they nest here, drop their still supple eggs to warm them beneath soft-feathered breasts, then greet the blind hatchlings into the world of the river, that this place has been my nest in a way, too. Though I may be curled inside a shell of my own and my eyes may yet be closed, light begins to penetrate my lids.

I think: It must be time for me to hatch, to learn to fly, to soar on my own. Things will be different now. They have to be.

Poet 2
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

HALF A SANDWICH

By Haya Anis

"Taha, yallah, wake up! It's five, you'll be late for school!"

Behind the slightly translucent skin of his closed eyes, Taha felt his mother's silhouette moving about his compact room, scuttling, opening curtains. A sliver of blue morning light fell upon the chipped wood of his headboard. There is no way it's 5 o'clock, he thought, as he trudged across the room and into the ancient bathroom. The spindly legs of the timepiece hanging in the hallway indicated it was only 4:30. He sighed; it was not unlike his mother to do this. She woke him up everyday after completing her fajr prayer so she could resume her own sleep until eight, after which she went to work and only returned home late at night.

Taha mourned the lost minutes of rest as he pulled on his uniform, tattered and yellowed with age. His mother's low snores diffused through the small apartment. Before leaving, he rummaged through the kitchen for his school sandwiches; his mother had prepared none. He looked for a pound or two she may have left for lunch money on the dining table but found nothing. Taha gently shut the apartment door behind him, locked it and placed the key in his breast pocket – he would endure another foodless day.

It was a ten-minute walk from Taha's home to his school on Omar Lotfy St. A blue darkness lingered behind the demure rays of sunlight. Paper lanterns, hung and forgotten since last Ramadan, swayed back and forth, wet with morning dew. Street vendors set out their merchandise, whispered in supplication for a profit enough to feed their children for the day. Taha strolled along the cracked sidewalk, brushing his hand on the crimson handprints decorating crumbling buildings. It was calm and peaceful – pedestrians had not yet crowded the streets of Alexandria and cars were pleasantly dormant.

By the time Taha had reached the rusted gates of Sidi Gaber Preparatory School, a few mothers had already arrived with their children in tow. The mothers wore long, faded gellabiyas that hung tightly across their mirthful bellies. They assailed their sons with slippery kisses and forceful hugs before reluctantly allowing them to leave. Taha was 11-years old; the fact that his mother never dropped him off to school or told him she loved him no longer bothered him. But every once in a while, he unwillingly craved the loving grip of those seemingly devoted mothers.

His own mother was old, with thin gawkily pointing arms. A patch of scraggly hair lied atop her ovular head, accentuating the long, protruding nose and hollow eyes. When she pointed, the saggy skin of her finger sunk like the skin of a rotten peach. Taha never saw much of her, on account of her long working hours, and when he did, a burdensome silence was always present. The reason behind his mother's apparent detachment he understood; his father left them five years ago after he received a work offer in Libya and never returned or wrote to them. Suddenly, it was her responsibility to raise a child. But Taha could never remember a time when she was happy, when she loved him, even when his father was around. To him, she was always old, always mirthless, always working.

After a morning assembly and the first two classes of the day, the children ran into the dusty courtyard, where they spent their short free period. They quickly devoured their food and rushed to play soccer with a ball so old it was a miracle it didn't crumble under the vigor of their feet. Taha sat back with his friend, Salah, a small, fragile boy with crooked eyebrows, black eyes framed by square glasses, and a floppy bowl hair cut.

"Do you want some of my sandwich?" Salah asked, when he saw Taha sat silently, arms limply wrapped around his empty stomach. Taha never borrowed anything from anyone unless he was certain he could promptly return the favor. He knew it would be a long time before Salah got his half a sandwich back. But Taha was hungry and tired. He nodded in acceptance and waited for Salah as he tore his sandwich in two. Despite the stale bread and acrid cheese, Taha ate the sandwich with astonishing velocity. It tasted of defeat.

The walk back home was always more difficult; the sun was directly overhead and bore down on Taha's small back. The city of Alexandria was fully awake now, congested and heavily packed as it was. Women hung the washing in their balconies and spoke fervently with their neighbors. A few men sat by the local coffee shop, cursed angrily at the loss of their wives, their jobs. When Taha thought of the borrowed sandwich he wouldn't be able to return, he sulked. Why can't my mother just feed me, he thought. He writhed with anger and regretted his moment of weakness that cost him his dignity.

Taha spent his evening completing his homework and staring out the muddied window of his room. When he heard his mother turn the key and slowly enter the apartment, he feigned sleep; he didn't want to see her. She plopped her heavy-sounding bag on the frayed couch of their living room and called out his name. When she heard no response, she walked into his room. Taha shut his eyes even tighter. She walked to his bed and sat quietly next to him.

"*Rabena yehmeek ya ebny*. God protect you my son," she whispered. She caressed his cheeks and gently kissed his forehead, then silently left his room and shut the door.

QUESTIONS OF HOME AT THE ISRAELI SEPARATION WALL

Arabic quote spray painted on the wall which roughly translated into
"I fell in love with a land that is on its deathbed, now what?"

Barbed wire and the sea
Ahead
Chain-link fence and home
760 and growing
You told her you loved her while she was on her deathbed
And now what?
That you wouldn't forget her?
And then what?
There is a 350 km cement wall in your face
And honey, love fades
The Occupation
Soap and water inside your skull
Shake till you become the one who left
The one who never was
And she, she lays there
On her death bed
Waiting for the skies above to clear
And for you to wake up from this coma you're in
And find her
Still breathing

DIMA MASRI

This Side of the Wall
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

SINGULAR NOTES

This lamenting is not
discordant pianos. It isn't heavy

metal elevator music,
blocking out daybreak cacophonic

twitter. My knees like glass
shatter beneath trees, dissolve

between sonic pulse
and static, AM/FM frequencies.

Fracture in quiet.
Across the World Wide Web.

Branches scold in wind.
My shattered chords

seek assemblage against
dystopian backdrops, browse

Sheet Music for Dummies
manuals, self-paced how-to's:

Play the Guitar in 3 Days
Dismantle a Planet in 4 Decades

Do you remember
driving under a blue moon rise

we slapped our thighs, sang
remember elevators?

Just tell me where do I click now,
what operatic notes to pitch

or drop, over the ground
for us to listen

I can't make up my mind:
are these voices yours

or mine?
I can't tell, over and over

and over the shriek
of a garbage bag in the back

car seat. Oh the static.
Oh the sounds we heard. Do you

remember: we slapped
our thighs, singing, *remember birds?*

EMAN HASSAN

A WOMAN NOT PAID IN A YEAR

Banu Begum, 2008

Shuffles through the halls of Adan Hospital Is armed with a mop
Does her daily rounds in over-sized janitor hand-me-downs
Scans empty food trays for leftovers Grabs anything salvageable
Pushes around a bucket full of dirty water Carries
bulging eyes that burn with hunger Wonders if anyone can
hear her stomach churn Grinds her mop as she
Imagines spaghetti Carbonara Has no illusions anyone sees her
Daydreams of her village mango trees of gorging on sweet flesh
Wants to know why people in Kuwait are okay with this
Wonders if it's ok to take the dregs of my shampoo bottle — hasn't had any
in under a year Can't understand why she left Bangladesh
hoping for better Will have toothpick arms Is wound
taut as mouse trap Is trip wire Is waiting to be tripped
Guzzles warm Pepsi from half-empty cans forgotten in waiting rooms
Works 14-hr shifts Can't believe I can
see her Whispers about Bangladeshi workers deported
kicked out for going on strike Shares a cot with two other women Sleeps
in shifts Wears a hijab because *Clean Co.* makes her Believed
lies *that visiting recruiter* told her Still loves a man she knew at sixteen
Wants me to take her to America Wears hard lines around
a gaunt jaw at twenty-six Translates her name
as *Great Lady* Is a bone shard
spiked under a sternum.

EMAN HASSAN

OCCLUSIONS

1- What we leave out.

I know something of that clank,
nickels and pennies in my mouth,
of times they rust at the back of my throat
making me think of rosebushes
along my back yard wall,
my urge to clip their unruly babel of leaves
down to their original stump
and I am lost
among the shrubbery of my own language,
held back by arbitrary branches.
At night I brush twigs from my bushy hair,
pull thorns from under the tip of my tongue.
Makes me think of my grandmother,
when she turned seven, seeing speech
as perception, announced
to her immigrant mother there will be no more Polish
spoken in the house again: only American.
She taught me how to swear in her maternal
tongue, often spoke of how Great Nana Julia
would scream
long strings of words
at her husband, in a language my grandmother
didn't remember, those monosyllabic and compound
phrases, just recalled the cuss words
arbitrarily passed down.
My mother tells me this one night as she nods off, smiling
at an image of her grandfather Stanislaus, mumbling

as he stands up for dramatic pause, looks down
at his screechy wife, then flips his hearing aid off.

2- Loose change.

Sometimes people in the old Kuwaiti
market mistake me for American,
which I am, but also one of them,
unlike my British brother in-law,
who teaches Arabs to speak English
there at thirty-five dollars an hour,

his price half the cost
the institute he once worked at
charged for his cockney.
Even my brother in-law can hear
my own words as different, almost off-key,
like my sisters, softer on the gutturals
and heavier intonations. Yes,
I tell him, yes, I am lost between
the diphthongs of one language
and another, among three-pronged
Arabic, its roiling lyric, and Anglophone
Latin, who's various roots twist
and branch plural versions,
British or American English, yes,
I am lost in my own lack
of singular linguistic socialization.

Who are we, peering out from a construct of sentences,
giving them jingle and form? Who can put a price our coins?

3- What we take for granted.

At the T-Mobile branch I single Elton out,
his unmistakable lilt: Elton is Chaldean,
from the land of Babel and Sumer.
Has never been, but once wanted to be
an interpreter in Iraq because the money,
he heard, was good. When his manager steps
back into the store Elton stops being
familiar, cuts the conversation, says loudly
he was born in Michigan,
explains how my new messaging service
will let me text Kuwait
at forty-five cents a pop.
Elton pronounces Kuwait
like the noun is made out of money:
his associated value with the word
reminds me how we both take for granted
the wealth of a multiple language.
Elton reminds me of my Kuwaiti father
who never took the name of the Lord in vain
but praised it, who often switched around
compound words in English, saying
towel paper or stew beef. He took for granted

I would be proficient in Arabic,
Often dismayed at my syntactic variations.
I took for granted our last conversation
mostly because of the shock,
as we watched the broadcast about Nick
a kidnapped US contractor on TV,
too stumped to speak.

What we leave out, or take for granted. What we take in vain.
The way they held a knife under Nick's throat, ululating His Name.

EMAN HASSAN

AS ONCE I WALKED

Tyre, Lebanon 2016

The eyes of men no longer fall
on me, (my worn body,
my gray hair), but shift

dip and roll, seek and crest
on Mediterranean skin, smooth
as polished cedar, black
hair deliciously whipped,
waist sashed, hips wide.

These young girls don't think about pain
shooting their knees, don't shuffle
but walk
their soft
ne'me walks,
despite so many broken
shells tucked among the alluvium.

Who would ever guess
that one September, decades ago,
I, too, meandered
this very coast,
awaiting my homme galant.
snow and oak trees.

MARSHA MATHEWS

SWEPT AWAY

These are the colors of a country
rippling below its glorious flag,
not red, not green, not black or white
but yellow, bright yellow, only
bright yellow jumpsuits sweeping
through the streets, rippling

in the car-stirred wind, jumpsuits, not
men, hard to tell them apart, their Asian
faces, indistinct as accumulated
refuse they sweep into overfed refuse

bags; hard to tell them apart
bright yellow garbage bags
bright yellow jumpsuits
both branded with
interchangeable company logos:
Clean-Co *Tanzif-Co*

branded by equally interchangeable bloated bellies:
over-stuffed garbage sacks
hunger-puffed jumpsuits
blurred in the mechanical breeze of passing cars:
Mercedes *Jaguars*

passengers zoom by, unmoved, refuse
to notice the exchangeable bags
acknowledged only through the daily gift
of trash: empty candy wrappers
cigarette-butts or soda cans: daily bread
collected by an invisible hungry man.

So that the duress of an empty yellow sleeve
does not disturb, you roll up
your windows at the traffic light,
look right through the bodiless dress, as you
must, fluttering beneath palm trees, sweeping
out debris of the day, eating dust.

These are the colors of a country
rippling below its glorious flag.
A collective dirty secret.
A state. Colors of Kuwait.

EMAN HASSAN

THE TEST
By Craig Loomis

The government is planning to study a project that will identify homosexuality through a clinical test, which will be added to the list of medical tests one has to undergo to obtain a visa. If an individual is tested as a homosexual that person will have an unfit stamped on his medical report and will automatically be disqualified from the visa application.

"That's it? We've done all the blood tests?"

"Afraid so."

"An urine?"

"Same."

"Feces? Don't forget feces. Nobody wants to look at the feces."

"Lah, lah, we've looked at everything. There's nothing there."

He drums his fingers on the tabletop, until, "There must be something we missed. All that drips or oozes, or . . .? Something, Sah?"

It is late, and except for a small desk lamp that pools a weak yellow light across the desk, leaking ever so softly onto their legs and arms, the rest is grayblack lab. It is a bedroom-size government lab with a gang of steely machines neatly arranged around them. A Bunsen burner bubbles over there, a gassy blue flame flickers here. The many computers are at rest, ghostly gray and eyeless. A twinkle of tiny blue lights means one of the machines is thinking. And although the signs are clear, no smoking, the one wearing three gold rings is smoking a cigarette, flicking ash into a paper coffee cup. They wear white lab coats with nametags: Dr. Mohammad and Dr. Abdullah. Reams of paper full of charts and graphs and long columns of numbers cover the table. And so, the one continues to smoke while the other drums his fingers along the tabletop.

"Now what?"

"Yes, indeed, now what?"

"They want something reliable, something accurate. A test that can be applied at the airport if need be, in some back room, something with instant results. Sah?"

The smoker nods to this. Somebody, somewhere is talking too loud. Both of them look around to see how that is possible if they are on the eighth floor and they are the only ones in the building, and it's late, and . . .

"How about an X-ray?"

"X-ray?"

"Sure, of the pelvic region. That might turn up something."

"X-ray?"

He picks up a chart, reads it, turns one, two pages before dropping it back on the table. The sound of someone, somewhere talking too loud grows weaker, then louder, then disappears. Blue lights twinkling.

"How about a lie detector test?"

"They'd lie."

"Of course, but the test would catch them, Sah?"

"It would have to be a yes or no question. Lah, lah, we need something more solid, more medical, something like a pregnancy test. Something we can see, something that does not take a specialist, a doctor, a PhD, something that

says red for positive, blue for negative. Something like that, like a pregnancy test, Sah? Either you are or you aren't, there's no in between. You see?"

He gently lifts the vial of blood from its gleaming steel holder, asking, "And when do they need this test?"

"It's top priority. The director even used the words 'national security priority'–just like the movies."

He fingers the vial of blood, and there is a police siren and then another, and then, back to the hush of a late night lab.

"My grandmother swears that a person's face tells all."

"Face?"

"Tells all. Actually, it's the eyes."

"The eye color?"

"Lah, lah, of course not." Taking a long puff from the cigarette, filling the lamplight with a newer, brighter fog. "The space between the eyes is what she's talking about. She says the greater the space between a person's eyes, the more, . . . the more suspect that person is. You see? She says everybody knows this."

"The more suspect? Your grandmother says this?"

"Nam, 82 years old this month," he says proudly.

"And you believe her?"

He shrugs, saying, "All we would need is a tape measure."

He holds the vial of blood up to the lamp light, peering to get a better look. "Again, what did he say about this blood?"

"The director says it's the real deal. Says this is a sample we can use. He says it's genuine, authentic. Those are his very words, 'authentic blood' from, he said, a most reliable source."

Turning the red vial this way and that, until the two of them are looking at it together, squinting into the soft light.

"Where did he say he got it?"

Done looking, he quickly slides the vial back into its metal holder. While the one lights another cigarette, making a new smoke, a new fog, the other begins to stack the many papers into one neat pile in the center of the table.

"I didn't ask."

Astray
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

BARCODES

اقرأ - the First Word. In His Name. The last book shut on us.
The lesson?
Angels speak in imperatives, could teach us a thing or two
about saying what we really mean.

subtext: a naar hung from the highest shelf/ of our ribcage/mark where a wetness dots
space/between thumb and mouth/journey to & from/isra & mi'raaj/you left a teeth mark on
the butter/of my wrist/

Four by four makes sixteen. ضرب to multiply is to beat. In my old tongue.
We are striking numerals together, hoping for a spark to feed one
of our mouths. Turn each uvula into a burning chandelier. .

subtext: a dress of skin lost from an ankle/licked dry into an plate/watch me outwit this dunya/
with each finger snap

Five or twenty five. Both days spent on the big bed.
So BIG I wanna drown in it.
A bed is a country and your nape's salt weight on a freshly changed pillow
a contradiction. I have named each checkpoint a 'birthmark' or something else permanent.

subtext: waiting for my father's phlegmy cough/meaning yes/she is no longer a walking hazard sign known as
daughter/ take her from me/ take my blessing and run with it

Seven. The seventh son died of treatable causes. An uncle still sees his face in the youngest.
Meanwhile, I am still auditioning for this country's approval.

subtext: i am tired of counting/in a script that folds my lungs/draws a an exhale from the
centre of ه mouth/ but mostly/i am just tired

عشرة remains the same in all languages. Imagine that kinda consistency
in a man/border of your choosing?

MOMTAZA MEHRI

DIEUETMONDROIT

He, the cart-carrier, Kalahandar boy.
wrapped in sweat's fine sheen, shalwaar rising and falling
like a raised flag (white)
or a collapsed lung (right?)
A Khaleeji sun to glue a man's eyelids together.
Dubai hasn't met an afternoon she couldn't choke. Not yet.
Watch him weave though a human maze,
a mule load weight on his shoulders.

Take of me what you will,
but pay me. She understands this language. A life in fine print and remittances.

She, in a black abaaya trailing, a spray of folded jasmine,

and three shades darker still,
a sugar-free Coke lulling the back of her throat.
Watch breath frost a window's glass. From the inside,
an aunt barters gold across a counter's gloss.
Outside, a man glistens in all the worst ways.
Between them there is so much,
and so little, but mostly,
Her Majesty's cardboard pulse, blushing
from the inside of her travel pouch.

In the back of a yellow cab marked 'occupied',
twin windscreen wipers part their thighs,
and she tastes

the accident of her birth.

MOMTAZA MEHRI

THE NIGHT WE ALL WATCHED TALAL MADDAH DIE ON TELEVISION

The stage of keys became a footnote. An underline
to a dashboard heavy with cassette tape wonder.
We go backwards to go forwards, a shared madness.

His last words a dream of palm trees and a grazing breeze.
The Scholar. The Throat.
Makkah's Golden Boy turned into a knot of eyebrows, clawing at collar,
a fit of nerves. A crowd yelps,
checks his pulse, hears the whole of the Hijaz held
from a thread, and your sigh, softer still frosting the glass of a TV screen.

Later, the confirmation. They always come too late. A heart attack.
Newscaster slips out of the standardised into yarhamu hu' llah
into may he rest in the highest gardens.

Your mother, too, conducts her own ritual
from the mourning bed of the plastic-wrapped settee,
all too familiar with the sight of a man's body
crumpling into itself.

The new millennium takes another innocence from us.

MOMTAZA MEHRI

THE SECOND TIME I WATCHED TALAL MADDAH DIE ONSCREEN (REPLAY)

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</div>          <search>enter: الاصيل سويعات

                <search>enter: suwaycaat alasiil

                <search>enter:suwa3at alaseel
```

You find the video on a web corner, nostalgia-pungent and dislocated.
One comment thumbed into a dozen likes tells its own story.
Gives a context you didn't ask for. Hit replay and ignore. Try to.

التياع جمر على ضمأى همسة الوداع غير لي ليس واخيرا

This strum, this song, it can't be true. You've read it twice now, lingering
under the description box. He wrote this one, your favourite, after his youngest son fell
from a window. Apparently.

لوعة أعنف من وقت الوداع لم أجد يا حلو في كل البقاع

Was it a high-rise? Before or after crude oil bubbled into living rooms?
Before this heart-split we named modernity?
You are never sure, will never be. Know better than to trust what lies beyond a screen.
Trust only in what you've caught sight of.

On glossed-out, Beirut-set talent shows, they sometimes sing that final song.
There is always something damp and bottomless to each verse.
The contestant always looks nervous. This you are sure of.

MOMTAZA MEHRI

Anat and the Sky
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

TIME'S CHILDHOOD

Winter sunset splashes cardinal colors
over the ancient city carved from red
sandstone in the desert midway
between the Dead and Red seas:
Petra, now a tourist magnet, once
a vibrant capital and caravan hub.

The poet who wrote "rose-red city,
half as old as time" had spent no time
there; the carved walls would say
that 'rose-red' is a dull description,
and the rocks have no remembrance
of him, though they whisper tales

and secret stories of so many others
when you touch them, close your eyes
and say "there was, there was not."
The rock-ness of Petra belies the life
of a spirited city, with theater, homes,
treasury, the place of high sacrifice,

as well as a home to revolutionaries
fighting with white-robed Lawrence.
After climbing the steep, winding route
to the highest, most inaccessible carving,
the Monastery, the whispering rocks
chant other legends in the form of prayers.

The Bedu families who live in caves
carved into the slopes of Jebel al-Madhbah,
the mountain of the altar, can trace
their ancestry farther back than history.
The rocks look like them, and they
like the rocks: stunning and hard

and the poetry of their faces calls out
in a language before language,
in words before words, and you hear
deep inside you a lucid, luminal
song, swirling through the mountains
of this youthful city older than time.

KIM PETER KOVAC

Cut Down by the Sky
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

POEMS IN TRANSLATION BY IMENE BENNANI

MADNESS GRAIN

Scatter the grain of madness
Wherever you fly
To the east, to the south
At the land of those who fast
And are thirsty
In legends
Silent houses' afternoons
Plant the grain of madness
So that earth grows
Drowns in its spikes

Do
What they do not want you to
So that we pluck the wisdom of survival from
The world of leaving

AMEL MOUSSA

MALOUF

On the shelves

Poems

On the broken table
Malouf cassettes and Syrian mawals

In the cold kitchen
A good deal of Yemeni coffee

This is what I need
So that I suffer
And love

AMEL MOUSSA

THE CITY'S EARRING

The night will land
On my hand
Drowsy beautiful
Wearing my silver

Light will surprise me
In my drop-down gown
Like a hand groping water's depth
fumbling Its sapphire

Night will take me by surprise
While am taking off mother's shawl
Putting back grandma's bracelets

Stay with me
My closing of the door
upset the moon last night
Stay with me
embers end up in ash
when the clouds' choice

stay with me
for last night I got lost in a city
to which another woman
preceded me

AMEL MOUSSA

A POST-REVOLUTIONARY POEM

Nothing but the waiting
Not the least sign from the wind that blew
Everything here is dozing off
Just like the deferred sad evenings
The railways that forgot passers' murmurs
The white balcony whose windows forgot
The gold of eager dates
The maidens' cats whose steps became full of dust
The shopkeeper who understood nothing of power exchange
And the slogans written by the hungry folks
Whose fingers did not reach a single spike
The police station which was put to fire
And which became as pretended by the billboards
At the service of the people who 'want'
A woman asks a cop drinking to Arab revolution
About the revolutionary name of the coordinating committee
And the new Eid of the poor
The vendors of chard and sugar
The drunken men happy
With the spread of nonexistent security
A man signed a cheque for the United Bank
And was not put in prison
For the connection was down

The martyr's square with its red roses
And its blood deferred to post elections time

A lover with a peachy soul is waiting
For a man who promised to come and never did
She is wearing sunglasses and looking above
There is a flag that says:
Tunisia is fine…

Little children gathering paper in the west side
To light another fire…

FAWZIA ALWI

ILLUSIONS

They were here
Plotting against my roses
Confiscating clouds in the wild
They were when a hand held another
A diaspora
They were searing dust
Sterile palms
Whose pollen earth cursed
They were dead
They were, if earth's waters counted through epochs
Gloom
Begetting not a child
They were
when eagles flew in the wild
Ravens' feathers
Their eyes were pregnant with sins
Their words
Lies flowing under their chins
Time was when they counted fingers
A present that disowned its history
They were
When the forest's beasts come
To feast
A dog's memory

FAWZIA ALWI

IN THE PAINTING ON THE WALL

Handala,
the young refugee boy, stands
at the broken wall
and concentrates his gaze
in the direction of Jerusalem,
and he knows he will pass through
this stone that has opened—
and when he does,
he will venture to the other side
alone.
Though he knows
when he departs this land
he might never return,
he does not turn around. He never waves
farewell to the people gathered.
He knows his pause is enough.

Handala,
the young refugee boy, stands
gazing from the broken wall—
fathers, mothers, children,
and liberators have come
to wave flags, some wave hands,
and they know
he must cross into this freedom
alone. For they know his will—
they have all seen his face.

CHAUN BALLARD

FAR ENOUGH

In the 90s,
we unpacked the Middle East
in Latin America.
Somehow the Middle East can kick you so far
that you end up on the flip side of the world

We learnt Spanish
Allah became Dios
we went from Salam to Adios
Guada La Jara
became our favorite word

Our mixed tapes juggled
salsa with belly dancing
Our food home-
made Kanafah
and neatly folded Empanadas

Many kneeled
to my mum and aunts in hijab
thinking they were nuns

A Llama woven shawl went perfectly
with embroidered Palestinian thobe
because natives know the fabrics of home

You unpack the Middle East so many times
that it makes you want to lose your belongings.
Carnivals, sweet smiles, and Cochabamba
sounded good enough
far enough

LINA AL-SHARIF

I AM NOT LEAVING ISLAM JUST MY BODY

like the inside of my head
you can see out
but you can't go out
Louise Gluck

After he raped me
he bent me over in the shower
and washed my vagina
held the filthy condom
full of foreign white liquid
under the hot water
to kill the sperm

ensure I don't get pregnant
such care

strength
when he held me down
his penis
a warm blade in my body
no love in this touch, only

submission I did not choose
to a wrathful god
I deserted then

this body
he can have it, too
and turned
to my reflection
saying

I'm okay,
I'm okay.

RAWDA AL JAWHARY

PHOTO ABOVE MY BED

You, baby boy, smiling in the sun.
The home I left, what happened
there taught us to find ways
to leave, to shut
the door firmly, declare our going.
Not to endure

like our mother. She'd hold you
with one hand, a hanger in the other,
collisions of hanger and small body,
over and over.
We contained her beatings,
my father's temper.

One night he held my tricycle –
its pink streamers odd–
over his head, threatened
to throw it.

Our mother threw herself.
Held his arms to keep them,
her forehead on his chest.
No, she said.
Let me beat them.

Where bodies keep bruises longest,
where the mind no longer stands
hurt, I dig. I find —

I found you with the belt
used on you the night before,
acquiescence in your eyes —
themselves confused, roving —
caged animals. Then I knew
my helplessness, what torment
looks like.

RAWDA AL JAWHARY

UNTITLE

You kiss me gutted fish, tongue
spoons dead languages to my mouth
leaves me no breath. You kiss

me gutted fish
rubber flesh,
ribs ping against the gutting
blade your lost
languages pressed
to my throat
roses
or knives
your kiss

unhinges my jaw
if I were a snake I would swallow you whole

till you are through
kissing me
I'm waiting to breathe

you take
my small breast all
into your mouth,
then my lips where
your spit and
tobacco coil in the back
of my throat
like mint.
Suddenly, I want

water—back of my tongue
parched.
Your skin tastes good, like I
should approve, appreciate—
you lick my skin
with greed. Before

you, before
your stunted tongue,
my skin
was marked
by sun and dates
snow and oak trees.

RAWDA AL JAWHARY

DISTANCE

Dear Tayta,

I replay your voicemails and I remember your voice chiming with laughter. I remember your buzz of blessings, swarming on my skin. I still don't know what those words mean, but I carry their syllables behind my eyes.

I think of bending down to hug you. I remember your frame shrinking, the first time I felt the dig of your shoulders against my arms. The first time the eggplant bruises slid down your skin. Tonight I see you clapping to the music out of time. You always had the biggest smile in the room.

Dear Tayta,

Last week I bought an avocado. I brought it home and scraped my spoon against the peel until all the green was gone. It wasn't even Friday.

Almost one year later, hot chocolate still tastes like gray evenings and Hilda's afghans and nothing good on TV.

When they sent me your address book, I saw your scrawling and scribbling, the bursting margins and the crossed out numbers of the ones who left before you. I'll never be your kind of strong.

On the bus, I think of your every morning #5 Downtown. I picture you joking with the driver and laughing with the new best friend you made last week. You're the only one she has in this city.

Mejnooneh, I reread all of your cards.

In drugstores, I see your favorite foods and smile at the you-size aisles. I remember the time we lost you in Fred Meyer's. You loved hearing your name on the loudspeaker.

When I found out Brian Williams had been lying to us, I shook my head and thought to myself, "but he's just SO handsome." I know you wouldn't have said goodbye after fifty years of NBC. They don't show our news anyway.

At graduation, I flung your shawl around my shoulders and only one girl asked me about it. I didn't give her the answer she wanted. I just said, "it was my grandma's," because that's all that mattered.

You should see my cuticles. My nails are chipped and the paint is peeling, but don't worry, it's red. It has been for a year. This is the year of you.

Walking by the church downtown, I think of all your friends. Of you giggling and rolling grape leaves and bringing me along to luncheon. Don't worry Tayta, I still call them. It's been a year but every time they send their "hellos."

Dear Tayta,

After a year of running, I'm flying west next week.

The plane will part the sky like a zipper, uncovering mountains and valleys, farmland and cities and finally, the ocean in the distance. Outside, the mist will fall into my skin and my breathing will be easier in the damp. I-5 will carry me slowly northward. The roar of traffic will remind me of endless backandforth drives between places to call home. I will glance toward the Sound, reassured by the sandwich of mountains and ocean that have always cradled me. Skyscrapers, my childhood giants, will glisten with big-city, late-night furor and the stop lights will keep changing, even on empty streets. It will all be so familiar but it won't be home.

This time, we won't exit the freeway just north of that famous skyline.

I won't slide my key through the lock and catch you in the kitchen. There will be no za'atar casting a spell on the kitchen, waiting to make me smarter and stronger. You won't be there to tell me about the latest person you taught to say "habibi." When we leave, you won't stand dwarfed in the doorway, blowing bright red lipstick kisses until we disappear behind the corner.

But even as we drive past your exit on the freeway I will picture you sitting in your favorite chair, staring across the water at our peaks, waiting for the sun to rise and a new visitor to climb the stairs.

SARAH N. DILLARD

Beirut
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

THE ORPHANAGE

By Daniel Drennan

In Beirut, in the area of Achrafiyeh, in the neighborhood of Sioufi stands the orphanage, the *Crèche*, known as Azariyeh for the woods that are no longer there, and for the children who are no longer there; these no-longer woods of Azariyeh harbor fairy-tale-era connotations of dishonor, and sin, and illegitimacy; *uwlaad bi-Azariyeh*, *les enfants d'Azariyeh*; the bastard children of Azariyeh. And if you visit the Crèche you will find rooms unchanged since forever, empty now, quiet now, still now; you will ring, and you will enter, and there is the staircase up, and there is the hallway, and there are votives and statues and icons. And there as you pause is the room full of blue cribs, and white cribs, cribs made of wood, unchanged, practically unmoved for decades, here, a crib I lay in long ago, lonely toys and stuffed animals now filling the space formerly occupied by me, by other children, hundreds of children, hundreds and hundreds of us; there is another room just the same. There is a room with white metal cribs, slightly bigger, lined up back and forth; there is another room with toilets that line three of its walls, toilets so small as to verge on absurdity; there is another room just the same. There is a room with desks and chairs and a bigger desk for a teacher; there is another room just the same. There is a room for play, for running, for games; and another room, just the same. And there is a room with a small table and a small desk and on this desk sits a set of steel drawers that contain the blank paper forms on which were written the names, on which were noted the information, on which were spelled out in details belying their fabrication out of gossamer nothingness whole lives, spun stories of lives' beginnings, opening narratives stillborn in their creation, for all of the children who once filled the cribs, the beds, the rooms in this place, this orphanage, now barren, now deserted: papers marked with fictitious names, papers that pretend to show disparate events of varied locations yet all in the same handwriting—the dead giveaway, the false start. And here is the Italian version, and here is the English version, and here is the French; and here are the birth certificates, and here are the baptismal decrees, and here are the ecclesiastical edicts, and here are the approved name-bestowing documents, and here are the testimonies of foundling status, and here are the official adoption papers, one, two, three, four, five, six pieces of paper come from drawers arranged one over the other in efficient precision: and thus an adoption. On the other side of the same room stands a row of file cabinets, and within are arranged the procedured by-products, the dossiers of children now departed, their folders crammed with letters in airmail envelopes and pediatrician's notes and vaccination dates and wishes and blessings; files stuffed with missives and thank-you offerings and pictures showing countenances rid of smiles, posed out of context among estranging groups and beaming faces; these Children of Lebanon now farflung and distant, these pictures sent by proud parents and fabricated families full of hope and promise and new beginnings filling up steel file cabinets arranging the myriad lives of those given Egress, a Conveyance, an Exodus. And these gray metal cabinets elsewhere hold other stories, other dossiers, children who came back, sent back, perhaps too sick, or perhaps not wanted after all, returned, and here written in red, "deceased soon thereafter", and here, "child succumbed to illness"—an insufferable double rejection, an abjectly suicided reaction. And here, more yet still—the children refused treatment at nearby hospitals during the war, doctors seeing "no point".

And there is yet another room, and in its corner stands an inconspicuous steel desk with four small drawers half-full of worn index cards of faded pink and blue and green, and in ink the cards are noted with the names of children given over to the Crèche during a few scant years a few scarce decades ago, and here is the information about the original parents, and here are their names, and phone numbers, and addresses, and there, at the bottom of each card, is a blank area to note the reasons, stated plain, for the child's arrival. And if you are not careful you will start reading them, these cards, one by one, mesmerized; at first shying away, yet coming back and forcing yourself to look, to read, in the same way you forced yourself to walk down New York avenues to look at postered faces and read about the lives lost in those Towers now long gone; and you will look and you will read, and like those smiling faces that plastered the walls of Lexington Avenue you will again find a unifying element that brings an otherwise disconnected, disparate group of people together—a devastating event, a tragic happenstance, an infinitely sad vagary of destiny, a culmination of willed derivations pinpointed in one monstrous manifestation referred to as "adoption"—and you will look, and you will read, and you will hold your breath as you read: Child abandoned by parents, child has spina bifida. Child abandoned by the mother at the hospital in Zahorta. Child orphaned on the father's side, the mother has already placed the eldest in the orphanage's care. Child abandoned by the mother at the Orthodox Hospital which contacted us. Illegitimate child raised by a woman who has departed for America, and who has left said child, now 11 years old, with her godmother, who hereby abandons her. Child abandoned at the hospital Nôtre Dame du Liban in Jounieh. Child found in Furn Esh-Shebbak in front of the door of Mrs. X. Child orphaned on the mother's side, the father has four other children; cannot care for the fifth. Child orphaned on the father's side. Child born two months after marriage of parents who hereby abandon him. Mongoloid child abandoned due to his infirmity….Child abandoned, child abandoned, child abandoned, child abandoned. And you will stop, and you will feel a certain unease as you barely dare read more, you will sense a creeping disquiet as you deny each card its due, as you feel each card's presence in space marking just another of five hundred odd and sundry ways of abandoning a child. And for some useless reason you will try to maintain the order of these filings, for some strange reason you will try to keep a sense of reverence holding these cards, these lives, in your hands; and for some reason you will carefully replace them, and you will quietly close the drawers, hands shaking. And for some reason you will stand there utterly dumbstruck, your voicelessness loudly proclaiming how these nonchalant cardboards are, in their weight, crushing; in their banal bureaucracy, eviscerating; how in their fragile and forgotten state, these lives, annotated on silent pieces of discolored paper, approach something bordering brain-numbing apoplexy. And there is but this vast emptiness. And no ghosts dare haunt these halls.

Fly me to the moon
BY JOUMANA ALRAMZI

INTERVIEW WITH AWARD-WINNING AMERICAN POET, TRANSLATOR, SCHOLAR, AND ACTIVIST, PHILIP METRES

BY REWA ZEINATI

RZ: What does it mean to be an Arab American writer/poet? Or would it be more accurate to be 'labeled', simply, a writer/poet?

Philip Metres: Ever since I was young, I was marked as Lebanese or Arab because of my looks, and because everyone in my father's family or in our Arab Christian Church immediately welcomed me as one of their own. I've been told, ever since I was young, that some of my ancestors came from Bsharri, the same village as Kahlil Gibran, and that he visited them in Brooklyn. (We have the letter to prove it! The family also believes that he wrote The Prophet while staying with them at 290 Hicks Street, but I have seen no actual evidence of that beyond a mythic wish.) But what it means for me to be Arab American continues to evolve. It's never meant just one static thing. Often that's what happens to immigrants—the Old Country becomes an ossified image of a lost home, even when that home is constantly changing in their absence. For me, being Arab American means I don't forget that my people come from the Middle East, and that I carry their memories inside my memories, both remembered in the mind and carried in the bone. That I keep in touch with what is happening there, and that I constantly remind people that humanity has no national border. I'm always pleased when I hear Arab or Muslim names in the American public sphere—as artists, journalists, academics, writers, etc. It makes me feel like the United States is changing.

I've always felt a kinship with people of color, and particularly with recent arrivals to the U.S. Our experiences are all different, but I feel the Old Countries in the way they hold themselves, the way they move in the world. Being Arab American for me also means that I'm part of a great migration, that my ancestors were intrepid travelers. People, in the end, are not just a nationality. Nations are a temporary political fiction—albeit a highly-militarized and deeply ideological one. So many of us come from many directions, like the four winds. According to my genetic test, some Italian appears to be swimming in my Middle Eastern genes. I wonder who this Italian was. And also, there is some North African in me, some Maghrebi. And some sub-Saharan African. And I haven't even mentioned my mother's Irish and German roots. So I am a person of many migrations and journeys, all these ancestors traveling toward and within my breathing, my heart beating, my voice speaking, my hands writing.

RZ: Tell us a little about your experience translating Russian poetry into English. How did it all begin? How did (does) it influence your own writing?

Philip Metres: I'm still trying to answer this question for myself. The Russians would call it my fate. This past fall, I spent my sabbatical writing a 90,000 word memoir recalling the year I spent living in Russia during the period of economic transition (1992-1993), trying to retrace my steps into that decision. I'd gotten a Watson fellowship for a year-long independent study project called "Contemporary Russian Poetry and Its Relationship to Historical Change," which enabled me to live in Russia, translate Russian poetry, and meet and interview contemporary Russian poets.

One secret reason I went to Russia was that poets were powerful there, that poetry mattered to people there. To say poetry mattered to me is to understate the case by half. Reading and writing poetry had altered my life, had become my life, my secret life, the one that was mine that no one could see. Reading Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" simply confirmed what I already knew—that we were broken, and that headless sculptures admonished us to change our lives. Poetry had given me a way to clarify and transform my inner chaos, and the turbulence around me, into something almost beautiful. It mattered so much to me, and so little in this country, I'd wondered if I'd been born in the wrong nation. I'd been learning how the Tsar acted as Alexander Pushkin's personal censor, after Pushkin got involved with the

Decembrists; how Stalin sent Osip Mandelstam to his death in Siberia for writing a poem that made fun of him, and how Osip's wife Nadezhda committed his entire oeuvre to memory, to ensure that his words would not be forgotten; how Anna Akhmatova's heroic witness in poetry outlasted even Stalin; and how Russian poets in the Sixties—Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, and Bella Akhmadulina—declaimed their poems to stadium crowds; how Joseph Brodsky was subject to a "show trial" because he was a real poet and the State could not stand that fact. Poets in Russia seemed to be prophets and rock stars, revolutionaries and dissidents. I wanted to find out why. The truth was more complex than I could have imagined.

But it's true that translating and meeting those poets completely transformed my idea of poetry and its relationship to the political sphere—I became less interested in poetry as a political weapon and more interested in its alternate way of being, both part of but also beyond politics, or rather, beneath all politics. The primal ground of being. Translating poets like Gandlevsky and Rubinstein and Tarkovsky became an education in poetry's possibilities. I know the poets I've translated better than any other poets because I've lived inside those sonic language architectures longer than in any other poem.

My new book, Pictures at an Exhibition: A Petersburg Album, was occasioned by my return to Russia ten years after I'd lived there. I was flooded by memories as I walked around St. Petersburg, and I needed a way to write about returning to a place where I lived but never felt quite at home. There's something in me drawn to that feeling of being unhoused, exiled, wayfaring, lost. I can't explain it.

RZ: You've mentioned once that you hope that your 2015 poetry collection, Sand Opera, "can help be the start to a new conversation about the state of poetry, American life, and the role of Arab American literature in our ongoing cultural and political debate about U.S. foreign and domestic policy regarding the Arab world." Tell us a little more about that.

Philip Metres: The difficulty with poetry is that poetry readers typically resist politically-challenging work, and people interested in politics tend not to read poetry. (In a particularly dark moment, I lamented to a friend that I wrote a book of poems too political for poets and too poetic for political activists.) At the same time, every couple weeks, I get another email from someone who's just read Sand Opera and wanted to thank me. So I'm very grateful for the fact that it exists.

One thing I'm doing now is I've begun a Lenten observance. Every day I've been posting a poem from Sand Opera at www.behindthelinespoetry.blogspot.com alongside Scriptural readings and dialogue pieces by other poets, writers, artists, and activists. This dialogic, choral project has been a way for me to return to poems that I've always felt were only partly mine. Since so many of the poems were themselves documentary in nature, composed of found language, the voices of so many touched by war, it's almost as if the poems wrote me as much as I wrote the poems. One of the gifts of the Lenten observance has been that it occasioned my getting in touch with some Iraqi friends that I hadn't spoken to in years, to ask for their contribution. And they have graciously agreed to participate.

But it hasn't been without poignancy. One Iraqi scholar who has worked in the States for many years asked me about the project, and I mentioned some other Iraqi writers and artists who were participating, as a way to entice his participation. He said, well, that's good, but Iraqis and Arabs already know the situation. I assured him that there would be a number of Americans who also would be part of it. But to hear him say that, his voice cracking with the weight of sorrow he's carried for so many years, was heartbreaking. I heard in his voice the weight of a weary exile, unable to lay down his burden. Still trying to convince Americans of the humanity of his people, of himself.

Though I've felt self-conscious asking other writers to dialogue with my work, I'm touched by the robust response—as if people were almost waiting to be asked, wanting to add their voice.

RZ: "Art should remain subservient to politics." What are your thoughts about this statement?

Philip Metres: It's preposterous, but only slightly more preposterous than the American version of this statement, that art must remain free of all politics. Art is not art if it is subservient. Yet clearly art for its own sake is also a dead end.

RZ: In your opinion, what makes a good poem?

Philip Metres: Difficult question, because there's no arguing taste. But for me, if you cornered me, I'd say that it's a poem that retains some obdurate mystery, something unexplainable that makes me want to return to it, and is never quite exhausted by my re-reading.

RZ: Is one born a political poet? Or is all poetry political? (Or should it be?)

Philip Metres: I found it funny and sad that a fellow poet told me that he felt as if he should write more political poetry; as if it were somehow an obligation, a necessary evil to be part of the family of poets. That's the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie, for whom politics is something is necessary but dirties one's hands. That distance is also a fiction of privilege.

A truly memorable political poem is alive because its politics so inhere in the fabric of the poem that it is inseparable from the fact of its being a poem. It's damned hard to write real poetry of any sort, and doubly hard when it attempts to be political. There is a well-known Arab American poet who writes passionate verse for a righteous cause, and when his book came out, I hoped that it would be brilliant. Although I agreed with him politically, I found only one line in his entire book that I felt was truly alive. One line.

RZ: Is there room for poetry and art in a region that burns with absolute turmoil; where fundamentalism, religious figures and politicians have taken over home and street (i.e. the Arab region)?

Philip Metres: Of course there is room for poetry. Now more than ever.

RZ: How important are literary journals, if at all?

Philip Metres: They are the ongoing conversation that writers and writing are having with each other. Reading them is to sit at the table of that conversation.

RZ: What advice would you give emerging writers/poets?

Philip Metres: The same boring thing everyone else says, probably. Read contemporary poetry and writing, but also the classics (that which is ancient is most new). Read more than you think you need to, because one isn't original without knowing what has been done before. Don't be afraid to "cover" (or imitate or argue with) other poems and poets. Write every day if you can. Write as if your ancestors were listening. Write as if the unborn are leaning in to learn the future. Write only because you must, and then write with the joy of this impossible gift of sentience.

RZ: What are you working on right now?

Philip Metres: Every day, I'm doing this Lenten observance, which has returned me to scripture, to Sand Opera, and to the work of friends. But in terms of book projects, I've got a few that are simmering, that I hope will come to something: "The Flaming Hair of Fate" (the Russia memoir), "Shrapnel Maps" (poems on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), a book of translations, and a book of interviews with Russian poets.

CLUB X, BEFORE THE BRIDGES LIFT (TWO VIEWS)

Between the gaping double-doors of Club-X and two leather thugs,
a cardboard babe hoists head-sized steins before each suggested breast.
I want to enter, be hauled into the mouth, haul it all into my mouth.
Mandelstam: the way Tatars bathe their horses, lower your eye into what will
be. Across the street, at Neva's edge, a local artist watercolors the
Palace bridge, its wings splaying to twilight. Remember the eye—a noble,
but stubborn animal. The river's colors blur with each stroke, bleed into
shore. The waters rise. Everything wants to be flooded. Every empire
dies, entering its own dilated eyes.

PHILIP METRES

MY SIGHT, WHICH WAS MY POWER...
(translated from the Russian)

My sight, which was my power, now blurs
Two invisible diamond spears;
My hearing subsides, full of ancient thunder
And the breathing of the house of my father.
The knots of tough muscles slacken
Like grey oxen, lax in the ploughed field;
The wings behind my shoulders yield
No light when evening darkens.

I am a candle. I burned at the feast.
Gather my wax when morning arrives
So that this page will prompt you
How to be proud, and how to weep,
How to give away the last third
Of happiness, and to die with ease—
And beneath a temporary roof
To burn posthumously, like a word.

1977
translated from the Russian by Philip Metres and Dimitri Psurtsev

MY PROUD WOUND
BY ZAHI KHAMIS

RENGA FOR AHMED

"Cool Clock, Ahmed. Want to bring it to the White House? We should inspire more kids like you to like science. It's what makes America great." –President Obama

New twist on an old
crime: cops have now stolen time
from this child, maker

of clocks, the wizard of clocks
was handcuffed at school. Tick, tick

tock. Invisible
hands move across a white face
blind side, slow minds. They

made the phone call in the time
it would take to stop watch. Why

this race to caste blame?
Why the rush to post, hash, and
tag? So who's it? But

#coolclock, Ahmed. It takes a
licking and keeps on ticking

while war-torn families
land—dead, pulseless in the sand.
It keeps on ticking

in bunkers beneath black sites
in island prisons. Below

the rubble of homes
beneath drones dropping high-tech
loads, a new fangled

weather for a new kind of
war, sold from the White House

to us. And for what?
The circuit's closed. And if there's
a hoax—it's on us.

MARWA HELAL AND KIM JENSEN

MASR MOON

Kareema
always sits
on the stool
in the far corner
of my aunt's big kitchen
while waiting to know what she
is expected to do next. rayon kerchief
covered head, sweat beads decorating full qamar face.
looks at her hands while smiling wide innocent to herself,
hugs me tight tight, smells like older womens' worked dampness.
ten-year-old Kareema. eighteen-year-old me asks
about her whenever we call our cairo family.
surprise always clear on the hissing line.
she runs away at twelve – escapes
to home. aunt and uncle
shake heads, suck their
teeth. she chose
village over
villa.

our dear cousins never realize she was just a kid.

DONIA HARHOOR

THE IDES OF AUGUST 2013

mood matching miles
when he sketches
spain, i pass
baba's office en route

to supply closet's
fresh paper. arabic
pulls my ear.
it is ahmed –

u.s. citizenship granted
just 30 minutes
ago as helicopters
rain fire on

ramses square. sky:
storming grey blues.
earth: davis/evans
album cover red.

DONIA HARHOOR

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

It took me too many days to muster the courage
to pick up the newspaper with the front-page photo
of Abu Anas Ishara's three-year-old daughter
half naked, her sweet face held in a scream
of extreme pain and confusion
from yet another chemical shell
that landed on her house
enveloping her parents and her newly born
sister in dust and foul smelling
smoke. Her scream remains
without answer, with no arms
to hold her, no medical care in Marea*. Her skin
carries the map of a country that pundits
discuss from afar and disagree
among themselves according to their
own needs. But her scream will not
go away. Her pain will travel
like the clouds sweeping across
the sky and when it finds the open
chambers of a heart, it will be bathed
in tears, it will be answered by
a mother's loving voice.

**Marea is an agricultural village in Syria*

MARGUERITE BOUVARD

ONE VERSION

story
of immigrant's
daughter: baba got no
fucks to give bout her diggin' roots.

transplant.

DONIA HARHOOR

GAZA STRIPPED

for Bilal Samir Eweda

Today
soldiers silenced
Bilal. Shot him while he
protested. The Prophet loved his
blessed voice.

DONIA HARHOOR

DAMASCUS TROILET

Rubble wedged between my toes when we stepped outside.

The night had been much too busy.

Next door, Mrs. Addem's garden wall crushes two varieties of jasmine and herself alongside –

rubble wedged between her toes. When she stepped outside

to breathe fresher air sweet with night-blooming perfume, her pride

had swelled, such lushness had taken long care-filled hours. Her death, though fragrant, had not come quickly.

She felt the rubble wedge between her toes and everywhere. When we stepped outside

we could see – the night had been much too busy.

DONIA HARHOOR

LIFTING THE MEDITERRANEAN SUN, JUNE 2009

Tartus, Syria

Fog in the harbor at Tartus,
stiff necks of great cranes swathed in grey veils.
Two small boats creep toward Award Island.
Ghost ships hang on the horizon,
waiting for the Harbor Master's permission.
They might be Phoenician craft, home from Cyprus
with beaten gold and alabaster,
or Antony's doomed fleet, although Antony doesn't know it,
or Crusader ships, the soldiers in their righteous armor,
ignorant of the silks of Syria, its carpets woven
with figures of carnations, roses, vines,
peacocks and antelope.
They might be loaded with today's guns.

And here I am on Munzer's modern balcony,
the automatic washer says shush, shush,
the waves on the shore say shush, shush.
I direct the morning's debut,
urging the sun,
and at eight o'clock the shepherd girl,
wrapped in her black abayah,
arrives on her donkey herding 100 brown sheep.

ANN STRUTHERS

IMMORTALITY, ALEPPO, SYRIA

Stonecutters and their sons
labor in sun that blasts color
from the buttery limestone. Each block
measured and fitted on six sides.

Boys who leave school
when they're 12 carry the quarry's blocks
on their bent backs to the tables
where fathers and uncles operate electric saws
that whir and whine; stone dust flies,
no goggles, no masks.

The artist comes and traces patterns
for the best cutters to carve out: palm trees,
lion on the lintel, Corinthian columns with acanthus leaves
twisted pillars, stone lace for balconies.
They are seekers, discovering grace
within what is solid, stolid, obdurate,
manufacturing the doors for its entrance.

I bring them the photos I shot
of them working. They boil tea on a gas ring
atop a squat bottle of mazoot. We sit on stone blocks,
add sugar to our small glasses of tea and stir.
They have no English. I say, "American,"
and point to myself, then to their work and say "quais,"
and they grin, nod in agreement, "Awah, awah, quais."

They know sun is hot, tea sweet,
labor endless, and they die at 45
from lung disease, leaving monuments
built to last 1000 years.

ANN STRUTHERS

TAKING A SECOND WIFE

Aleppo, Syria

Rula drove her father's second car,
a used Mukhabarat station wagon,
all over Aleppo, parked where she pleased.
Cops on the beat raised their hats to her.
Tight sweaters, tight jeans; she wanted to be
an American girl in a society that called her Disgrace.
An old friend of her family insisted
on taking Rula and me to lunch at the Sheridan.
He was forty, confessed his wife didn't understand him;
they hadn't had relations in years. He looked
at her longingly. She didn't look up, attacked
the rack of lamb before her. He said his friends
advised him to take a second wife.
Rula would never be a second wife.
Rula would never marry her cousin, either,
who besieged her with their grandmother's blessing.
A man can have four wives simultaneously.
even rich old liars.
We pitied him and his pitiful story,
and Rula winked at me, called the waiter,
ordered baklava for desert.

ANN STRUTHERS

THE HOSTAGE AS A POET

They fed his bloody thumbs to the hogs
because leaflets of Dickinson's *I held*

a Jewel in my finger rained from his balcony.
His blackened tongue and torn lips remained

nailed on a stake because he recited
Neruda's *I Crave Your Mouth, Your Voice,*

Your Hair as he crossed no man's land.
His father received a package with his son's

ripped iris wrapped neatly in a poem
by Akhmatova: *Inconsolable anguish,*

I hail your sting! / Yesterday died
the grey-eyed king. Father, beware,

your son's cracked ribs cage his seditious
heart. It's safe and warm and out of the way.

SHAHÉ MANKERIAN

GHAZAL

Baron Yamin Ghazal, our English Teacher,
changed his name to Mr. Yamin Yeats.
He converted during a civil war sabbatical

from school. When we returned to class,
he enforced the nom de plume. "Henceforth,
you shall address me as Mr. Yeats,"

he announced. "Baron Ghazal is dead."
We didn't understand. While the rest
of the class repeated after him:

"Go ask the springing flowers,
And the flowing air above,
What are the twin-born waters,

And they'll answer Death and Love..."
I searched for bullet holes between his velvet
fez and the hanging chain of his pocket watch.

SHAHÉ MANKERIAN

GHAZAL

Where there were trees in the garden—you'll see thistles.
No more seasons of rain—all that remain are thistles.

Behind you, O Adam, are flaming swords,
beyond you—a land of war and thistles.

Forecasters lie in dismay. They ask: Can a homeland be made of Cain?
Look! Abel's blood still clings to thistles.

Something like an evening then forms. Dust settles the first of two claims.
Victory is ours! declares the Sword. But what saith thou, O Thistles?

CHAUN BALLARD

HABIBATI

How many times will the clouds seek to hide themselves from the low thrum
of aircraft?
And how many times will the clink-clack of tear gas canisters vapor our tempered air?
And how many rubber bullets will wisp between hailstones and burning tires?
And how many generations will gather our grandfathers' fathers' promises like broken heirlooms?
And how many times will Mariam report live from Hebron?
And how many times will Zuzu and Brahim be hauled off to jail?
And how many stabbings and shootings will go on unreported in Jerusalem?
And how many impromptu nursery rhymes will be sung in Avne Hafez? Tulkarem?
And how long will we go 'round the prickly pear, the prickly pear, the prickly pear
before another childhood is taken?
And on how many corners will Abu Eli relocate his restaurant?
And how many times will I receive emails saying: We miss you. We miss
you, wallah. When will you return?
And how many prayers will be slung along the long lines of Like buttons
until my next reply?
And how many times will I say: I don't know. Insha'Allah during the month of harvest?
And how many times will you wonder if what I mean is during the harvest of olives
or the day of our Lord?

CHAUN BALLARD

PARIS

November 13, 2015

Tonight
the lights in the Eiffel Tower were switched off

and a mother tucked her child into bed
and bold flashes of red and blue showered the streets

and someone lit a candle
and six bodies flickered in the night

the seventh curled head, shoulders, knees, toes
his light never lit up—

with a weighted boom
light filled the air the way sound fills a stadium

and the birds fled their nest
the Eagles of Death Metal were playing

music so loud it could have been part of the show
machine gun-fire is a hundred Audrey Hepburns smoking in the dark

she takes a hit
these facts may be a bit out of order

the attack[s] were coordinated
the victims random

the Eagles of Death Metal were playing
a weighted boom filled the air

FORGIVENESS

It's often said that forgiveness
heals the heart, but once wounded
the heart never forgets the wound
or the scars that tighten across it;
nor does the heart lose its desire
to regain what it has lost.
Forgiveness is a house
with open doors and windows
and the voices rushing through the house,
leaves scattered on the wood floor.
When you forgive, demons
escape from your body. They ride
out on your breath like bubbles
or blinding rays of light. They sweat
from your brow. They spark
from your fingertips. They
walk out of your bones,
wearing your clothes.
When you forgive,
the sky grows denser and darker.
The map of your future
dissolves in your hands.
You bow your head
as though taking communion
or receiving a curse in a graveyard.
"Let it go," everyone says
but you have let it go
and yet it's still ringing inside you.
Forgivenesss comes when you least expect,
like a siren on a crowded street
or the crack before the ceiling gives.

JEFF FRIEDMAN

OLD GRIEVANCE

It comes back when you stare out
the window at the finches and chickadees
flying to the feeders, when you walk
under the failing white pines, when
you fall into a precipitous sleep, flee
one dream for another. It comes
back as something raw and peppery
caught in the throat, your eyes flushed,
the words helpless to call out.
"Better not to talk about it," one friend says,
"You might rip open the scar."
And another friends says
"When the same thing happened
to me, I just had to move on,"
but the same thing didn't happen to her,
and she curses the name of her old grievance
at least once in every conversation.
The old grievance plunges
through the window of your house,
falling into a daze on the floor.
For a while you watch at a distance,
unsure of whether you should cover
it with a blanket and carry it outside
or take a photo of it. Instead you open
all the windows and doors in your house
and hope that it will fly away. Because if it dies
on the floor, it will be an omen of worse things to come.
But the old grievance takes off with its powerful wings,
almost knocking you down, eager
to get away, leaving behind a large pile of feathers.
You lock the doors and windows
board up the broken one,
sweep up shards of glass and feathers,
but now another window breaks,
and there's the old grievance on the floor again,
this time sullen and fierce, its nails
gripping into wood, ready to rip into you.

JEFF FRIEDMAN

SCRIPTURE

And the earth was formless and void
save for the press of sunlight and desert
sand over which the hoopoe

hovered and the limestone hills
that carved forth a place for man.
And in the beginning was the land,

the olive and its branch, the crop
and crumble of soil, the pomegranate,
the grenade, and the blood shed.

And in the beginning—children,
prayer, the salt without sea, the haze
over worn oasis, river run dry.

In the beginning was the village
and the valley, the canister of tears
and blossom of bullet wound.

The beginning composed of protest,
the beginning of sackcloth and ash,
the beginning interrogation—

Where is Abel thy brother?

TARA BALLARD

REFUGEE CAMP

Cinder clouds billow
street-side. UN trash bins
offer up sun-soaked meat,

tissue, tomatoes. Rubbish
covers the scatter of rocks,
and frescos curtain concrete

homes and stores. One woman,
Kalashnikov in hand, fishnet
of black and white across her

shoulders. Beside her, the poet
himself stares unblinking. Nearly

thirteen thousand live here
today—
tea poured in a glass
far too small.

TARA BALLARD

OVER A FIRE, THERE IS A SMALL PEACE

I.
Tomatoes, olives, lemon juice and oil.
Fresh hummus with peppers, lamb and parsley.
Put pitas on the metal grate.

Check the flames' reach.

II.
We eat with Abu Muhammad, our brother,
but he is tired today. Business is no business,
like the olive tree and season of thirst.

III.
Together, we dip our bread and speak of weather
in the region: wars and rumors of wars, possibility
of a deep freeze, high winds.
We are quiet when
church and mosque cry out—evening is come.

TARA BALLARD

LACHRYMATOR

I.
From the Latin.
Used to force compliance,
to stop these young boys
from slinging stones, scaling
the turret-head, breaking through.

A stimulant to the corneal nerves.
Difficulty breathing, a burning sharp
within my eyes, nose, my mouth
and lungs. Riot control, a chemical agent

against walking the streets of town,
against dining at popular restaurants
known for diplomacy and kefta, against
reading the lines painted by child
poets upon the towers of concrete,
against this.

II.
It is a Thursday, mid-afternoon,
and there is no antidote.

I left my gas mask at home.

TARA BALLARD

OUT OF EGYPT SESTINA

We landed at night in Cairo, more stone
than city: its lights shuttered, desert
dust shrouding all but the Nile,
snaking a mirrory, fertile
path until the ascending Pharaoh-sun
lorded over his servants.

Our hosts recoiled when I kissed her hand— a servant!—
the child who slept on stone
beneath their elegant table, who hung their quilts in the sun
and hoisted them back full of desert
grit, a warning to fertile
green-crowded fields adorning the Nile.

And when sudden blackouts flooded the homes, it was the Nile,
vengeful servant,
who choked the High Dam with its fertile
mud, clogging the giant project in stone
as land shrunk into desert,
exposed to the tirades of sun.

There, a masjid's high ceilings hid the sun
and echoed my splashes, an ablution in sacred Nile
water, with the athan daring the desert:
You will not bury us. We are not the sun's servants —
past improbable pyramids, monument puzzles in stone,
past markets, fields and women that live to be fertile.

I massaged the Saudi woman's feet to make her fertile
as her husband's diamond ring glared in the sun
as if children would fill his eyes' stone
staring through hotel windows toward the Nile,
cursing the servants
who drove his cash-laden suitcases through the desert.

I feared to deliver a child in the desert
with its war against anything fertile.
But the water broke at dawn, and jubilant servants
witnessed our daughter's dazzling sun
burst forth swiftly as the Nile
whose flow created this land of treasure, heartbreak, and stone.

At the sun's zenith, we took off from the desert
like servants escaping a stone-hearted tyrant.
Our Nile-child threads a fertile promise through us, turning back

SIHAM KARAMI

THE WORD FOR DAWN

Fajr: the j a mere mirage, light on the tongue,
just melting into r, no vowel between,
bluing into nothing but a turning of the lips.
I hear it like a distant motorcycle,
its street lost in a cricket's heartbeat,
and I find it leaking tiny drumbeats from
my son's earbuds fallen from his ear,
buzzing in his sleep. Newborn wasps,
tinny, revving j's straight through the r's
that rise and thread their little lights
where teeth touch lips and feel the furry f's
a darkness, void, a space of hairy night.
A single hair-edge turning from the deep.

SIHAM KARAMI

Deserted
BY REEM RASHASH SHAABAN

CHECKPOINT

Gaza City, Gaza

I arrive via optimism, in the aftermath of Oslo,
into a roomful of bright teachers,

Welcome to my class on human rights theater,

for Palestinians who have known only its absence.
There are concerns, and then, much excitement,

over the abolishment of classroom rows.

No more first or last students; an equal footing.
On our last day together, a few students ask for my passport—

the men look terribly serious with long rifles
slung over their shoulders. In reality—

these are water guns borrowed from a teacher's son.

Our play is called, *Checkpoint*, they tell me.
Each day we live this way.

SUSAN RICH

WHAT WE WERE TAUGHT / WHAT WE HAVE LOST

One of us will never suffer, you promised
as if words were as simple as offering a car ride
for pistachio ice cream on Sunday afternoon.
As easy as turning on the evening news
to hear the fractured screams of a father—
his child killed by mortar fire.
You promised I would be loved in the way
only a father can say, like a spell uttered three times
in the garden with trellises of jasmine flower.
Dad, today I need miracle ice cream
for the boys on the beach in Gaza,
a soccer ball between them.
Their lifeless bodies haunt me
and more, the young faces of their friends.
You promised I would never suffer, father,
but imagine the families checking websites
for their loved ones, for the innocent dead, targeted
by the country we were taught to believe in.
Sometimes I still look for my friends Amjad and Samir,
boys who drove me to Gaza's shoreline decades ago,
dreaming of five star hotels, an airport.
Father, the day you were diagnosed in Boston, I dressed slowly
and then climbed back into bed, a green blanket
over my head as the bus exhaust rose up,
as the restaurant workers next door
picked stones from grains of rice,
speaking in a language as foreign to me as the future.
Now death arrives each night over Twitter—
the bluebird of death you might say.
And I think of your promise. Your face.

~for Ahed Atef Bakr, Ishmail Mohamed Bakr, Mohamed Ramez Bakr, Zakaria Ahed Bakr and Abraham Rich

SUSAN RICH

IN *OTHER WORDS* BOOKSTORE, I IMAGINE

the lives of the Women of the Word
and What We Leave Behind.

Secondhand volumes lined-up together

debate late into night's Mourning Hour.
On a side table, My Hope for Peace,

signed by Jehan Sadat and the Middle East

enters this quickly fading bookshop
accompanied by a phantom Lemon Tree.

Out-of-print mothers and daughters join in

as I turn the aisle, learn Drops of the Story
glimpse Naomi's, Words Under the Words.

Some texts are made for each other—

Travelling Rooms and After the Last Sky.
There's a developing interest in Water Logic

and the bestseller, What We Have Lost.

If I were to walk again through my life,
Down Roads That Do Not Depart

keep Half of a Yellow Sun in my shirtsleeves,

would My Happiness Bear No Relation to Happiness?
I lift Tomorrow's Tomorrow from the upper shelf:

Dear Memory Board, Dear Everyone's Pretty

and Nine Parts Desire, dear Musical Elaborations—
Open the Cloud Box. Taste the Olives,

Lemons and Zaa'tar; The Space Between Footsteps.

Redress The Butterfly's Burden, the Unreal and the Real—
The Question of Palestine.

SUSAN RICH

Artists' /Writers' bios:

LINA ALSHARIF is a Palestinian blogger living in Doha-Qatar. She is an MA student of Creative Writing/poetry at Lancaster University, UK, where she writes and performs poetry.

In addition to being a writer, **RAWDA ALJAWHARY** is a painter and lover of all things movement. She studies yoga, dance, and martial arts. She is putting her creative strengths to work in marketing and client-relationship management. She is currently working on a blog entitled, The UnTrauma Factory.

HAYA ANIS is currently a high school student in Alexandria, Egypt, where she was also born. She's lived all over the Middle East, in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. In her spare time, she likes to read, write, and learn new languages.

JUMANA AL-RAMZI is a student at Kuwait University. She believes that the best way of expression is through visual arts, especially when it comes from the subconscious. The image generally expresses the struggle of 'literally' looking for and finding the right words at certain circumstances, which is something that we all have experienced at least once in our lifetime. Born half Kuwaiti and half Russian in 1991, Joumana has spent all her life in Kuwait.

CHAUN BALLARD is a poet and photographer, raised in both Missouri and California. For six years now, he and his wife have been teaching in the Middle East and West Africa. He is currently a graduate student in the University of Alaska, Anchorage's MFA Program. He's had poems recently accepted by The Caribbean Writer, Grist: The Journal for Writers, Orbis: Quarterly International Literary Journal, and other literary magazines. His photos can be seen in the latest issues of Gravel and The Silk Road Review.

TARA BALLARD holds an MFA from the University of Alaska, Anchorage, and her poems have been published or recently accepted by Sukoon, The Southampton Review; Wasafiri; War, Literature and the Arts; Spoon River Poetry Review; and other literary magazines. For the past six years, Tara and her husband have been living in the Middle East and West Africa, teaching English in local area schools and traveling often throughout the two regions.

IMENE BENNANI is a Tunisian assistant at the University of Kairouan; currently finalizing her Ph.D on contemporary Arab-American poetry. Her research interests include Arab American literature, literary theory, and literary translation. She is also a poetry editor at KNOT literary magazine. Her publications include reviews on poetry collections and translations from Arabic to English.

MARINA CHAMMA is a Beirut-based political economist, writer and blogger at eyeontheeast.org. Her work has featured in a variety of online publications, including Your Middle East for which she is a regular contributor. Marina began her university studies at Sophia University in Tokyo and holds a B.A. in Political Science from the American University of Beirut and an M.Sc. in International Political Economy from the London School of Economics. She is currently working on her first work of fiction.

LUKMAN CLARK has degrees in Communication from UC San Diego and International Development from UC Los Angeles. He served four years in the U.S. Navy years, stationed in Vietnam and Morocco. Lukman has worked in executive marketing positions in financial services, oilfield equipment manufacturing, education, and arts and entertainment, domestically and internationally. His work of historical fiction entitled, In Her Own Words: The Real Story of Hypatia of Alexandria is due to be released in 2016. In this work, readers will discover not only a more humanized Hypatia, but also will get new perspectives upon the legendary Library of Alexandria, as well as other characters such as Theon, Bishop Theophilus, Synesius and even Bishop Augustine of Hippo. "Tuya's River" is a story adapted from Part One of the novel.

SARAH N DILLARD works as an Editorial Assistant at a publishing house in Washington, D.C. and for Mizna, a Minnesota-based Arab American organization that publishes a literary journal of the same name. She is passionate about art, social justice and good food and is inspired by her brilliant family and family of friends.

DANIEL DRENNAN was born in Lebanon and adopted at the age of two months. He grew up in Iran, Australia, and finally the United States, with four years lived in France as well. In 2004 he returned to Lebanon, and has recently regained his Lebanese nationality, setting a precedent for other adoptees to do the same. Previously he was an assistant professor of graphic design at the American University of Beirut. He is currently a research fellow at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at AUB. He acts as an advising member of Bada'el Alternatives, a Lebanese organization whose aim is to advocate for the displaced, dispossessed, and disinherited, with a particular focus on children. His writing on adoption has appeared in Al-Akhbar newspaper, Dissident Voice, Counter Punch, and Gazillion Voices web sites, as well as the newspaper and web site for Legal Agenda in Beirut. He has contributed essays to the books Adoption Reunion in the Social Media Age and Adoptionland: From Orphans to Activists. He has presented conference papers at the Adoption Initiative Conference (2012 and 2014) at St. John's University, and is a working member of its marketing sub-committee. He has also presented on the topic of class and adoption at the How Class Works Conference (2012) at SUNY/Stony Brook. A blog of his writing can be found at http://danielibnzayd.wordpress.com/

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JEFF FRIEDMAN is the author of six poetry collections, five with Carnegie Mellon University Press, including Pretenders (2014), Working in Flour (2011) and Black Threads (2008). His poems, mini stories and translations have appeared in many literary magazines, including American Poetry Review, Poetry, New England Review, The Antioch Review, Poetry International, Hotel Amerika, Vestal Review, Flash Fiction Funny, Smokelong Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, 100-Word Story, Agni Online, Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Sukoon, and The New Republic. Dzvinia Orlowsky's and his translation of Memorials by Polish Poet Mieczslaw Jastrun was published by Lavender Ink/Dialogos in August 2014. They were both awarded an NEA Literature Translation Fellowship for 2016.

LAYLA AZMI GOUSHEY is an Assistant Professor of English at St. Louis Community College in St. Louis, MO. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a Certificate in the Teaching of Writing from the University of Missouri - St. Louis where she is also pursuing a Ph.D. in Education: Teaching and Learning Processes. Her research interests include strategies of literacy instruction and histories and philosophies of American and Arab education. Professor Goushey's creative work has been published in journals such as Yellow Medicine Review, Mizna: Journal of Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America , and Natural Bridge. She has published articles of literary criticism and currently writes a blog titled Transnational Literacies at http://transnationalliteracies.blogspot.com/. Professor Goushey was the second-place recipient of the St. Louis Poetry Center `s 2012 Stanley Hanks Memorial Contest for Missouri Poets Published in Missouri Magazines for her poem, "The Box" which was published in Natural Bridge Issue #26. Follow her on Twitter @lgoushey.

ZAHRA HANKIR is a London-based Lebanese-British journalist and blogger who holds post-graduate degrees in newspaper journalism and Middle Eastern studies from the Columbia School of Journalism and the University of Manchester. From 2004 to 2006, she served as Editor-in-Chief of Outlook, the official student newspaper of the American University of Beirut.

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MARWA HELAL's poetry has appeared in Day One and The Offing. Her essays, reviews, and journalism have been published in Poets&Writers, the American Book Review, Entropy Magazine, and Egypt Today among others. She is an alumna of the New School's creative writing MFA program and participated in a Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation (VONA) workshop, the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Immigrant Artist Program, and Cave Canem New York City workshops. Marwa is Sukoon's Poetry Book Review editor. You can find her at marshelal.com or @marwahelal

KIM JENSEN is a Baltimore-based writer, educator, and activist whose books include a novel, *The Woman I Left Behind*, and two collections of poetry, *Bread Alone* and *The Only Thing that Matters*. Active in the peace and justice movement for many years, Kim's articles, poems, and stories have been featured in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Bomb Magazine, Rain Taxi, Al Jadid Magazine, The Baltimore Sun, The Oakland Tribune, Baltimore Review, Left Curve, Al Ahram Weekly, Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, and many others. In 2001 she won the Raymond Carver Award for short fiction; her recent doctoral dissertation is a new novel called Forget Jerusalem. She is associate professor of English at the Community College of Baltimore County where she is the founding director of The Community Book Connection, an interdisciplinary literacy initiative that demonstrates the vital connection between classroom learning and social justice issues in the broader community.

SIHAM KARAMI lives in Florida. Her poetry can or will be found in The Comstock Review, Measure, American Arts Quarterly, Unsplendid, The Raintown Review, Think, Alabama Literary Review, Antiphon, Right Hand Pointing, The Rotary Dial, String Poet, Angle Poetry, Möbius, Naugatuck River Review, and The Ghazal Page, among other venues and anthologies. Twice a Pushcart Prize nominee, she was a semifinalist in the 2015 Naugatuck River Poetry Contest, and blogs at sihamkarami.wordpress.com.

KIM PETER KOVAC works nationally and internationally in theater for young audiences with an emphasis on new play development and networking. He tells stories on stages as producer of new plays, and tells stories in writing with lineated poems, prose poems, creative non-fiction, flash fiction, haiku, haibun, and microfiction, with work appearing or forthcoming in print and on-line in journals from Australia, India, Dubai (UAE), the UK, and the USA, including The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Red Paint Hill, Elsewhere, Frogpond, Mudlark, and Counterexample Poetics. He is fond of avant-garde jazz, murder mysteries, contemporary poetry, and travel, and lives in Alexandria, VA, with his bride, two Maine Coon cats, and a Tibetan Terrier named Finn. www [dot] kimpeterkovac [dot] tumblr [dot] com

CRAIG LOOMIS has been an Associate Professor of English at the American University of Kuwait in Kuwait City for the past twelve years. During the last twenty-eight years, Craig has spent much of his time working and living in Asia, specifically Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and now Kuwait. He has had his short fiction published in such literary journals as The Iowa Review, The Colorado Review, The Prague Revue, The Maryland Review, The Louisville Review, Bazaar, The Rambler, The Los Angeles Review, The Prairie Schooner Review, Yalobusha Review, and others. In 1995, his short story collection, A Softer Violence: Tales of Orient was published Minerva Press in London; and, in spring 2013 Syracuse University Press published another collection of stories entitled The Salmiya Collection: Stories of the Life and Times of Modern Day Kuwait.

SHAHÉ MANKERIAN's most recent manuscript, History of Forgetfulness, has been a finalist at four prestigious competitions: the 2013 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition, the 2013 Bibby First Book Competition, the Quercus Review Press, Fall Poetry Book Award, 2013, and the 2014 White Pine Press Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in Mizna.

DIMA MASRI is a Jordanian-American writer, translator and poet of Palestinian origin. She is currently completing her BA in Arabic-English-German translation. Her poetry mostly deals with her search for a concrete identity between the hyphen of her nationalities. She also regularly writes for BarakaBits, a website committed to spreading good news from the Arab world.

MARSHA MATHEWS is an American writer and educator living in Dalton, Georgia. Her most recent book, Hallelujah Voices, presents unique voices of a Southwest Virginia congregation as they experience unexpected, pivotal moments. Her love poems, Sunglow & A Tuft of Nottingham Lace, won the Red Berry Editions 2011 Chapbook Award, and was published. Her first chapbook, Northbound Single-Lane, was released in 2010 by Finishing Line Press. This book follows the journey of a woman who finds herself suddenly single, with young children to care for. She leaves home and all she knows to travel north through Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia. Marsha's poem "Kidnapping Mary" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her story "Ride to the City" was honored the 2013 Orlando Prize (by AROHO) for Flash Fiction. Marsha is y writing a book Beauty Bound, which explores globally the human desire for beauty and the entrapment of beauty.

MOMTAZA MEHRI is a biomedical scientist poet and writer who remains unsure which world came first. Her work engages with inheritance/ psychosomatics/ugliness/urban zoos. She has been active in the zine/journal underworld for some time, featuring and forthcoming in Diaspora Drama, Hard Food, Heat, MediaDiversified, Puerto Del Sol, Elswhere and other delights. Anthologised in Podium Poets as part of the London Laureates longlist, her debut collection will be published in 2016. As a community worker and facilitator, she specialises in burning incense and bridges.

PHILIP METRES is the author of a number of books, including Sand Opera (2015), I Burned at the Feast: Selected Poems of Arseny Tarkovsky (2015), A Concordance of Leaves (2013), To See the Earth (2008), and Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941 (2007). His work has garnered a Lannan Fellowship, two NEA fellowships, fi ve Ohio Arts Council Grants, the George W. Hunt, S.J. Prize, the Beatrice Hawley Award, two Arab American Book Awards, the Watson Fellowship, the Creative Workforce Fellowship, the Cleveland Arts Prize and the PEN/ Heim Translation Fund grant. He is professor of English at John Carroll University in Cleveland. http://www.philipmetres.com

NICOLE OLWEEAN I am originally from Michigan, and am currently a second-year MFA Poetry candidate in the University of California, Riverside's Creative Writing program. My current project explores my own Arab-American identity, as well as Lebanon, which I know through story, and which is as dear as it is distant to me. My work has appeared in *Fishladder, Menacing Hedge, *and *Bird'sThumb.

REEM RASHASH-SHAABAN has an M.A. in Applied Linguistics from the American University of Beirut where she taught for 32 years. During that time, she served as Director of two programs: The University Orientation Program and the University Preparatory Program. More recently, Reem was the Director of English Language Programs at Phoenicia University. She is a Saudi Arabian married to a Lebanese and is currently working as a freelance educational consultant. In her spare time, she writes poetry and fiction. Her works have been published in The Potomac, Falling Star Magazine, The Rusty Nail, The Missing Slate, In Posse Review, Sukoon and Foliate Oak Review, to name a few. Her photographs and artwork have been exhibited at AUB, The Artwork Shop, and Zamaan.

Artist statement:
Art exhibit entitled, GOING, GOING, GONE?

Architecture is what gives each city its flavor and Beirut is no exception. Old houses reflect the history, culture and tradition of our ancestors. Unfortunately, most of these treasures are being torn down and replaced by urban monstrosities. Using photographs she has taken, Reem has created mixed media artworks enabling us to journey through time and relive the beauty of Beirut before it is gone.

SUSAN RICH is the author of four poetry collections including Cloud Pharmacy The Alchemist's Kitchen, Cures Include Travel, and The Cartographer's Tongue: Poems of the World (White Pine). Along with Brian Turner she is a co-editor of The Strangest of Theatres: Poets Crossing Borders and she has received awards from The Times Literary Supplement (London), Peace Corps Writers , PEN USA and the Fulbright Foundation. Rich's poems appeared in the Harvard Review, New England Review and Plume. Her work has been translated into Slovenian and Swedish.

ANN STRUTHERS poems have appeared in numerous journals including THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, POETRY INTERNATIONAL, THE IOWA REVIEW, and others. She published two collections and three chapbooks.

LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA is a poet and translator of Palestinian, Syrian and Jordanian heritage. She was raised on Fairuz songs and fresh pistachios from her grandparents' trees. Her poems have been translated into Arabic, Greek, Heberw, Italian and Spanish and have been read at anti-war events in Gaza, London, Tokyo and Toronto and across the United States. They have been published in International and American journals including Sukoon, James Franco Review, Borderlands Texas Review, The Lake for Poetry, Lunch Ticket, Mizna and Ofi Press Mexico. Two of her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize (2014 and 2015). Her first book of poems, Water & Salt, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press in 2017. She lives in Redmond, Washington with her family. You can read more of her work at www.lenakhalaftuffaha.com

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