



Sukoon

Arab-Themed Art & Literature

Volume 4 | Issue 2 | Winter 2017

*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 reflect the diversity and richness of the Arab world, where Arabic is spoken - a semitic language with over 30 different varieties of colloquial Arabic.

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

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



Cover artwork by Jumana Alramzi

Contents

Volume 4, Issue 2, Winter 2017

INTRODUCTION & INTERVIEWS

1	Rewa Zeinati	Editor's Note
56	Rewa Zeinati	An interview with with Mohja Kahf

POEMS

2	George Abraham	Photographs Not Taken
3	George Abraham	Palestinian Fill in the Blank Tells Me In Which Israeli Parliament Members A Different Kind of Hajj
4	George Abraham	Nouns of a Nobody From Palestine to Ferguson The war was on Upon Age
5	Eman Hassan	Song Rising from the Depth of Sorrow
7	Eman Hassan	Memeto Mori
8	Layla A. Goushey	The Lucky Ones
9	Steven Schreiner	Liminal
9	Steven Schreiner	Or Would She Ever Shed Her Many Faces
11	Hedy Habra	Dark Music
11	Hedy Habra	Flora Fauna Syria
11	Hedy Habra	Aleppo The Necklace Broke
12	Hedy Habra	I Haven't Forgotten
12	Hedy Habra	Give the Flute and Sing
22	Eman ElShaikh	Anamnesis
24	Mohja Kahf	Solar Eclipse
26	Mohja Kahf	Self-Portrait as Syria's Lover
39	Jess Rizkallah	Arabian Night
40	Jess Rizkallah	Dust
41	Zaina Alsous	War Photography
42	Zaina Alsous	Ode to my Nieces and Future Daughter
44	Rushda Rafeek	Halab
44	Rushda Rafeek	The Palestine Museum
51	Lana Habash	
63	Hajer Al Mosleh	
65	Tala Abu Rahmeh	
65	Tala Abu Rahmeh	
66	Tala Abu Rahmeh	

67	Ann Struthers	An American Education
67	Haya Anis	Balding Precociously
68	Zoha Khan	To the Four Languages I Speak
69	Hajer Al Mosleh	8 Ways to Get Rid of Stains Permanently
71	Hazem Fahmy	Caesar
77	Zeena Fuleihan	Zaatar
77	Zeena Fuleihan	Forgotten Connection
78	Zeena Fuleihan	My Uncle's Belongings
78	Shadab Hashmi	White Dog
84	Humeirah Ougradar	Butcher's Best
84	Humeirah Ougradar	Bilingual
89	Marguerite Bouvard	Lifeguards in Lesbos
90	Nadim Al Choufi	Ghomeedah with Femininity
91	Nadim Al Choufi	Boys' Summer Nights
93	Shadab Hashmi	The Eye
93	Humeirah Ougradar	Exotic

STORIES, CREATIVE NON-FICTION, ESSAYS, & TRANSLATIONS

14	Haya Anis	Evil Spirits
16	Christine Stoddard	An excerpt from "Mona, a Camera and Me"
28	Dana Dawud	On Becoming a part of Leslie Jamison's Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain
31	Lena Zaghmouri	Left
46	Layla A. Ghoushey	Letters After Diaspora: Incomplete Dialogues
74	Sarah Mouawad	Are You Living or Just Alive?
80	Farah Ali	Trial and Error
85	Mishka Mourani	O Aleri

BOOK REVIEWS & PLAYS

35	Marwa Helal	Poetry Book Review
60	Eman Elshaikh	Fiction Book Review

VISUAL ART

6	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
8	Aisha Jemila Daniels	Artwork
10	Dana Dawud	Artwork
13	Jess Rizkallah	Artwork
15	Jess Rizkallah	Artwork
21	Dana Dawud	Artwork
23	Dana Dawud	Artwork
27	Dana Dawud	Artwork
28	Dana Dawud	Artwork
30	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
38	Dana Dawud	Artwork
43	Aisha Jemila Daniels	Artwork
45	Dana Dawud	Artwork
55	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
59	Aisha Jemila Daniels	Artwork
64	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
68	Aisha Jemila Daniels	Artwork
69	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
73	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
79	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
83	Jess Rizkallah	Artwork
90	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork
94	Tarek Butayhi	Artwork

Cover Art by Syrian artist Tarek Butayhi

BIO's

95	Contributors' bios
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www.majidalyousef.com

Editor's note:

So, Donald Trump 2017, huh? It doesn't look pretty. Anywhere. But we write. It looks pretty awful actually. But we keep writing. It's incredible in all the wrong ways, if anything. But we never stop writing.

We need our voices, now, more than ever. We need art and words and poetry. Our words against his and the ones who are resemble him. Our time against his, and the ones who resemble him. Our lives against his depiction of what the world must look like.

Gender. Race. Social class. Belief. Dress code. Sexuality. Ableism. Humanism. Everything seems to be under attack and with every new day comes a Trump-new revelation on how many possible ways we can 'other' one another.

And right here in our little corner of the earth in Lebanon, in Syria, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Yemen. Things are falling apart faster than we can say the words. But things are also picking up, because that's what we do. We pick ourselves up and we lash back with whatever magnificence we have, and we have much, despite the words and images of popular media.

I am so proud of the new issue this winter. New voices, new art, expressing what we lack of truth. And an interview with, and previously unpublished poems by, a necessary voice, poet Mohja Kahf.

From Palestine to Ferguson. Jaffa, Haifa, Beisan, Jenin, Aleppo. Shall we name us all? Yes, we shall. Turn the page. Keep reading. Keep writing.

Thank you for your words and eyes and voices.

REWA ZEINATI

PHOTOGRAPHS NOT TAKEN*

after Marwa Helal and Safia Elhillo

the scalpel that removed a country
from my teta's chest, rusting in the hands
of a surgeon who was, perhaps, a Zionist;
my mother's face crossing the finish line
of a marathon for breast cancer research, her
cousin's name scrawled across the damp running bib;
Palestinian Olympic swimmer takes gold,
rewriting the ocean of her history; the ghosts
of refugee children making a choir of his weeping;

family portrait in post-racial society with
filter equating my olive skin to
my brother's smoldering earth;
my cousin shouting *allahou akbar* out of irony
after passing through TSA without
being quarantined for the first time;
my father, before the toupee settled on his
head, mid-laugh & the country escaping
from the gap in his front teeth;

my head, freshly shaven, for a melanoma
biopsy catching the Florida sunset:
swim practice;
the benign sunspot they removed
from my scalp - brown flesh patch
floating in saline;
screenshot of Google Maps before the West Bank
& Gaza were 2 patches of nameless
flesh outlined in black dots;

my Teta, age 2, after being
baptized in the Dead Sea, holds a
seashell to her ear: a history lesson;
my great aunt's obituary reading "place of birth:
Jerusalem" & the Israeli flag waving
over her open casket;
family portrait in Ramallah,
full-toothed smiles at sunset:
past or present;
an olive tree & magnolia tree, planted
side-by-side, overlooking a cemetery,
mixing displaced soils;
the Haifa skyline every time
so where's home for you?
falls out of a stranger's mouth;

a lifeguard pulls my 4-year not-corpse from
the pool floor at my first swim lesson:
second baptism;
white man turns his back to drowning
daughter at my community pool: a brief
history of Israel/Palestine;
a cell frozen, mid-mitosis, houses conflicting
entities in a single membrane:
two state ~~solution~~ paradox;
my Zionist biology teacher lectures
on respiration

& i drown

GEORGE ABRAHAM

**selected as a runner up for Emerge Literary Journal's Civil
Disobedience Poetry Contest, and published by Emerge Literary
Journal.*

PALESTINIAN *FILL IN THE BLANK* TELLS ME THEY'RE ON A WATCHLIST & I BURY MYSELF IN 3 GRAVES THE EARTH

I.

water	distorts the noise it	swallows & you	inhale	history
	or are entrenched in it until	breath is	all your body	has
left	to give so you swallow	your pulse, your lung	collapses under	its
	paranoia & everything	around you has	the oppressor's	eyes
	& skin &	scent &	freedom via war	on
brown bodies	& you retreat -	sinking into the river's	endless embrace,	you
empty	yourself		breathless -	

II.

the ghost became unsearchable; erases the Oceans
of the children they swallowed; resurrects the sun, un-Rise-
n, un-imploded; whited out aftermath of Empire's
enslavement; watched his shadow quake & Fall -
reverse gravity of a void collapsing into a nothingness We
feared we would become & wanted to become & Have
become, hence unbecame, despite; to remain un- Seen
in occupied [edit: undefined] space, hence space we cannot [REDACTED], Each
passing second, a universe slipping beneath our grasps, an Other
ghost that could be our cousin [i can't write that]; they strike Through
us [edit: we strike through] eroding ourselves before [REDACTED] & It
almost seemed natural - they [REDACTED] like i was used to All
this [REDACTED]

III.

she said "i'll meet you on the other side"
& you wonder what she meant by that.

GEORGE ABRAHAM

"THEY ARE ALL ENEMY COMBATANTS, AND THEIR BLOOD SHALL BE ON ALL THEIR HEADS. NOW THIS ALSO INCLUDES THE MOTHERS OF THE MARTYRS, WHO SEND THEM TO HELL WITH FLOWERS AND KISSES. THEY SHOULD FOLLOW THEIR SONS, NOTHING WOULD BE MORE JUST. THEY SHOULD GO, AS SHOULD THE PHYSICAL HOMES IN WHICH THEY RAISED THE SNAKES. OTHERWISE, MORE LITTLE SNAKES WILL BE RAISED THERE."

Ayelet Shaked, Israeli Minister of Justice

IN WHICH ISRAELI PARLIAMENT MEMBERS COMPARE PALESTINIANS TO SNAKES SO I BECOME ONE

and for once my throat
unwinds itself - the constrictor releases its strangled
prey - and the staccato of my pulse softens
until my tachycardia is a dampened
undertone; joy can be a raucous
orchestra when the body empties
itself of all its music and you are reminded
of your unbecoming, again; your blood - a boiling
crescendo; knuckles - all brass symphony; but today,
your melody won't be drowned out in all the hissing
today, your laughter will be a paralyzing
venom and an entire room of Arabs will become
symphony amidst the apocalypse
today, you will thank Jess for existing, hold Hazem
tight for being alive; today your melody
of bared fangs and forked tongue will not speak
Death into a room of its descendents as if
dabke was just some way of slithering
from its cold embrace; today, you are the
loud-mouthed-hairy-hot-tempered stereotype Death
made of you and the whole white universe will shiver
at the sight of you and Noura's selfie in a stormtrooper hat:
the Arabs strike back; maybe they call you
terrorist because your words shake entire continents, the way
music shakes your bones from the inside out and every
earthquake and convulsion is just another excuse to praise
the way we refuse to fall
victim to our own good
poison - diaspora birthed a colony of snakes that survived
their extinction the way all cold-blooded animals learn
to tame the heat around them; the only way to find home
in a countryless world is to build it in each other - call us
fire-swallowers; call us thick-skinned; call us failed post-colonial
experimentation - we are your worst nightmares
incarnate; blessed are the venomous creatures
who learned to dance
amidst the flames.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HAJJ

i.
I have traveled so long,
walked the map of 99 names
chiseled along my palms,
traced backs of sand dunes
and followed its calligraphy

I have come all this way
from the past and future I

sprang from the fertile crescent
to the house of Abraham,
have traveled so long
to find you.

You have led me
as you led Abraham
through the desert
to build my own house.

ii.
Beyond
the Illuminated City,
a pebbled moon
reveals itself
in wedges,

as do you
come forth and are
interpreted:

different anthems
for those listening,
each like granite

with one hand
over the heart.

iii.
Once, I went
to the Louvre's third wing,
saw statues of basalt
and marble, others
in gold leaf,

some with hands
over the heart:

echoes along the annals
of the many.

iv.
I am
in Afghanistan
standing before two Buddha
carved into a sandstone cliff,
faces of the great spirit
imprinted in rock and

mote.

v.
I have come, again,
come from the Seine
and Mississippi, Tigris
and Euphrates
I have journeyed
down the Nile
to Mecca and el-Ka'aba,
the world's navel,
to witness 360
manifestations
within it.

I have come
from Diana and Isis

I am
a mirror to the galaxy.

vi.
I Name Them:

Hubal, as father,
Manat, *Uzza*, *Al-Lat*,
son and daughters.

Moon God *Amm*:

I am

the crescent
on the minaret.

vii.
What is the Holy
Why circumambulation
When were the Days of Ignorance

Who are the moistened stones?

viii.
I have come all this way
with my own elixir,
traveled so long
as my own meteor,

past the *Kuf'far*
and the *Believers*

to kiss your black stone.

ix.
Allah,

Giver

of rain, we pray
for the blessing

of rain.

EMAN HASSAN



100 X 100 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

NOUNS OF A NOBODY

I.

Though trees are still winter bare
the spring collections are in
couture fabrics shivering on the rack
like leaves waiting to fall or be pulled
off the bark to make way for new
blooms—and come what may.

Emily Dickinson said *I am nobody*.
I think of this on a dressing room chair
among frenzied shoppers
the *treading*—*treading* of their boots
noisy as *Boots of Lead* in a funeral procession
spun from the loom of Dickinson's mind,
material of another poem's dress.
My I, unadorned, shudders in displacement
until sense broke though the linens,
silks and cottons; garments
for ego's outer form and cloaked miss
— representations.

I am nobody, who are you?

Emily asked from a corner of her garden
questioning the strewing out of leaves, falling—
falling into her solar plexus
as she reflected in shadows, tuning into trees,
spinning out the simplicity of their foliage
and their nexus'. I am *nobody too*: I
dared tell her tale, pulled back the wool
to assuage this sense of excess
and was banished from Bloomingdales, cast out
from where oblivious boots crush fallen leaves,
back into the bliss of her *dreary* Eden.

II.

How *unpeculiar*, after sitting at the bar
in The Bowery, scribbling about her
on parchment crafted from pulp of trees,
I run to their Ladies' and it's dubbed "Emily"—
if she might have found (or finds) secret pleasure,
irony in being named after a loo by the *admiring bog*
in lieu of fame in her lifetime—*Nobody* can tell
whether she takes a joy or gives a piss for the press
of my design upon her dress.

I conjure that poetess:
quietly threading in the force of the crushing
weight of a fallen leaf; Emily's weaving
from the scattered green, in her gradual unraveling
her future grandeur unforeseen in probable detest
of the pursuit as she spun forth metered
seams of verse.

EMAN HASSAN



الحيمة

IL GEMILA ILLUSTRATIONS
BY AISHA JEMILA DANIELS

FROM PALESTINE TO FERGUSON

Rumi's broken mirror.
Shards of truth flying into throats.

Is it police militarization or only the media?
Is it racism or self-defense?
Is it death or only a segment before a commercial
break?
Does immaturity deserve the death penalty?

Facebook bubble of privilege.
Unfollow reality and follow Grumpy Cat.
Pledge allegiance to the blissful bubble.

Black child bullied out of the White elementary school.
Palestinian store owner killed on a North City street.
Transnational allegiance to blood on street and sand.

From Ferguson to Palestine,
the anvil was poverty and the hammer was privilege.
Social justice education in a White liberal enclave
with espresso macchiatos and critical theory PhDs.
Doing the hard work
to organize divergent activists
toward converging realities.

Come to the rogue committee now
with charter-school plans for an
Afro-Arab-centric curriculum.
The brother said,
Birth, Poverty, Disease, Death
in JeffVanderLou – St. Louis.
Birth, Poverty, Disease, Death
in Gaza - Palestine.
Birth, Poverty, Disease, Death
From Palestine to Ferguson.

Mind the tear gas.

LAYLA A. GOUSHEY

THE WAR WAS ON

The sea was turning to oil. Many dead
sooner or later. Wet feathers that never dried
burning without fire in the vast sun. At dawn
the flat road of water wimpled like a sheet
too heavy, pulling down the clothesline. The poor
neighborhoods hidden in brick, the white-sided houses
and the pinched daylight, the grease of meat
in the straining updraft full of sweat.

One day the wind died and nothing revived it.
Lichen scrawled across the trees, turning them
to living stone. There were no mirrors
to bathe in. We ate dirt. Waiting for rain
the leaves upturned and never reverted.

What leaves were left were turned to lace.

Every day the birds made their singular pleas
which sounded like any other. There is a god for each
creature, sang one. An airship is arriving
full of destinies, said another. Sun coming out,
sun coming out, sun coming out. BE
CAREFUL! Be careful! Be, be, be
careful! Where did you–you–you–you
go. A word with you. I want
a word with you. Lick it. Lick it. Lick it.
Weep. Weep. Weep. Weep. Can't wait.

If I thought of you at all
if I had any regrets
if I bore it all in a better manner
if I had never killed

STEVEN SCHREINER

UPON AGE

1952. A most amazing year.
Someone was listening for every vowel.

I had the world to myself. All time. All was mine.
The great strength of my weak limbs

pushing and pulling
to bring my mother's breast to my lips

Pinched nipple and engine of my mouth
feeding each other with pleasure

and emptying her to fill myself
as I will never rightfully do again.

Long body like a road now leading out
under a sunset or sunrise, up from the desert

winding into a difficult mountain
where the pass is crowded with refugees.

STEVEN SCHREINER



SONG RISING FROM THE DEPTH OF SORROW!

A pantoum for hope

Seeds of hope are written in invisible ink
Underlying despair they fold seasons at will
Stop tears of blood and bodies from falling
Keep rubbing with pumice stone and read!

Underlying despair they fold seasons at will
You can turn moon into sun and sun into moon
Keep rubbing with pumice stone and read
The pool of blood grows larger than the shadow!

You can turn moon into sun and sun into moon
Bring to the surface secret and repressed longings
The pool of blood grows larger than the shadow
Look at the glittering pattern of underground veins!

Bring to the surface secret and repressed longings
Curl into the moment preceding the bird's song
Look at the glittering pattern of underground veins
Listen to the song rising from the depth of sorrow!

HEDY HABRA

THE LUCKY ONES

Withhold the lingering scent of soil & flowers

Orphans play
with a ball of rags
by the makeshift shelter.
A palace in midst of dust and rubbles.

An elderly woman
rearranges her head scarf
as she speaks.
Her callous fingers
braid the little girl's rebellious hair.

Her name is Samia,
she never lets me
comb her hair.
It hurts! Only mama knows how!

The woman throws
a clean mat over
the rugged floor,
centers a pot of rice,
parts bread loaves in equal shares.

Tfaddalou,
she beckons, holding
a tall glass of dark tea.
No one speaks. She worries.

At sunset, most children
will lie down on their cots
eyes wide-open
all night long.

HEDY HABRA

MEMENTO MORI

After Saint Jerome Writing by Caravaggio

A skull weighing
as a paper weight
over an open book
prevents me from
reading what's on
top of the page

Hollow eyes stare
at my pencil held
firmly between
thumb and index
finger resting on
the middle one

An empty look
defying the dynamic
tripod grasp
erases the thought
of the lines I'm
about to write

HEDY HABRA

LIMINAL

a cleave for peace

The ripe evening slumbers
Grass blades sing inside a dream
Wheat swells in moonlight

While a pregnant moon weeps
Hide face down in the wheatfield
Each blade a caress

HEDY HABRA

OR WOULD SHE EVER SHED HER MANY FACES?

After Born Again by Remedios Varo

She searches for clearings
to gather sunrays
on which she runs
her fingers,
listens to the mute music rise,
curl into a bird's song.
Lapis lazuli brushed over
eyelids lined with kohl
curve into the Eye of Horus,
land in the midst of a palm.

Follow the paths of rivers and rivulets, sense the echoes of dreams, trap them in a net, hide them inside a Havana box filled with down, then weave them into the many faces buried within you!

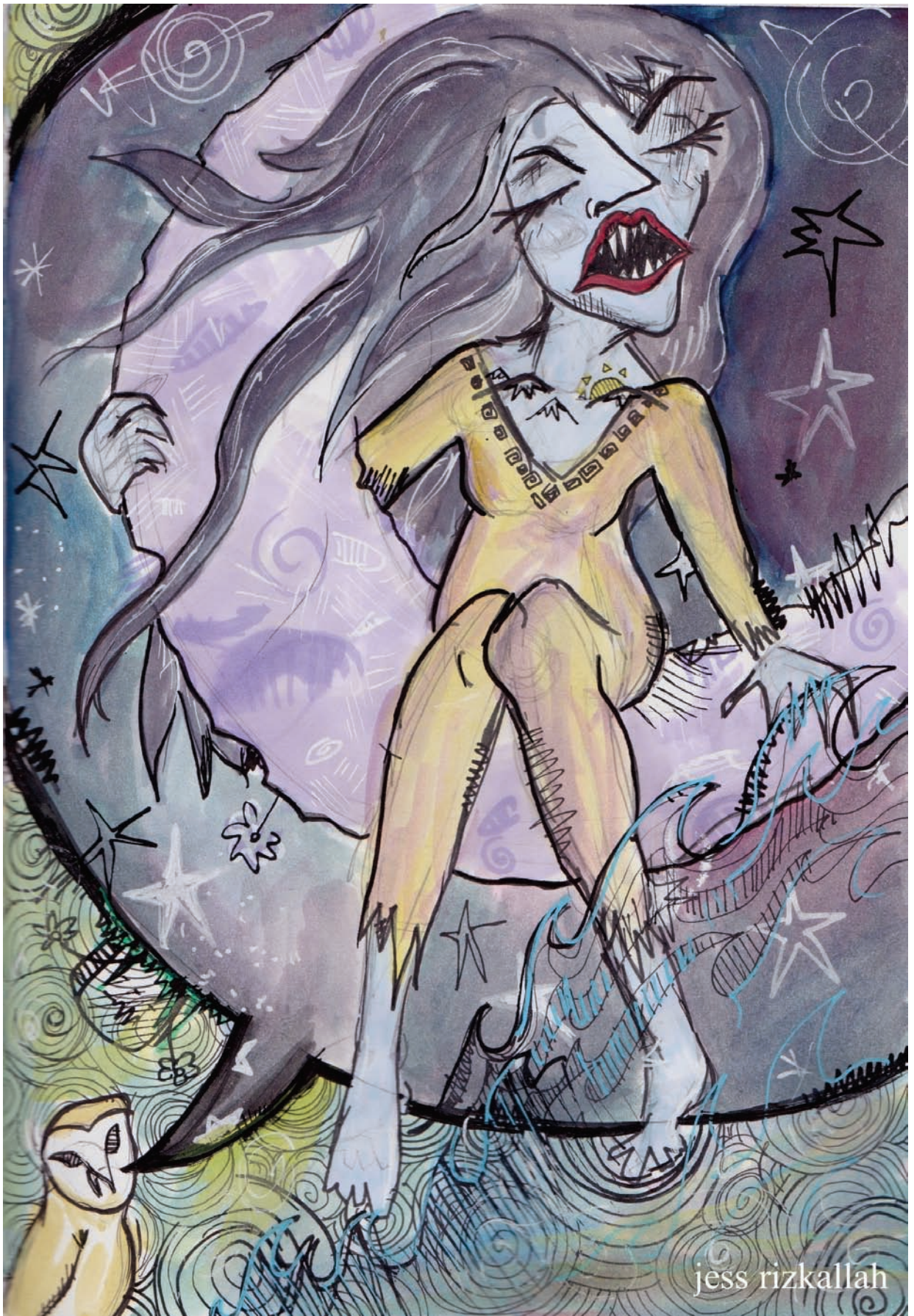
Warned against stagnant waters,
she awaits the right time
to capture the moon's
nascent reflection,
knows she has to cross this threshold,
unite all masks collected
in deepest darkness,
espouse her shadow,
contemplate her unquenched thirst
without drowning.

Yours must be an inner vision not a mere sight, you could not withstand facing what you bear within! Like a midwife, go on delivering dreams and illusions, don't worry if yours aren't fulfilled!

Her mirror grows into a pond,
a deep well reveals
veiled shapes
shedding
gilded gowns, one by one.
She slips in lunar light,
hangs onto its asperities,
climbs mountains
with seven-league boots,
soars without wings.

Unspoken words project shadows shaping their own dance, muffled echoes bring things to pass! Carve an alphabet legible only by you, add colors to your music! Remember you're only playing for yourself.

HEDY HABRA



MOON WITCH
BY JESS RIZKALLAH

EVIL SPIRITS

By Haya Anis

I need to pee, Fatima thought as she nestled deeper into her fortress of cotton blankets. She ignored the gnawing at her bladder and stayed put. She felt something watching her. *Evil spirits*, she rationalized. She sensed their stealthy onslaught. Their presence was tangible and ominous, their aura dark and murky, like the waters of a void-less swamp. Her blanket was her only protective shield. She made sure everything was safe and covered, save for her nose and mouth; she needed to breathe, after all. It was still dark outside; the call for Fajr prayer sounded an hour earlier.

I should have prayed earlier, she lamented. Prayer required ritual ablution. Ritual ablution required access to running water. Access to running water required a trip down the eerie, unlit hallway to the bathroom. The bathroom. The bathroom, where the evil spirits congregate and revel in their deviance. Or that's what her mother tells her, anyway. For all she cared, the congregation of evil spirits hovered above her head tonight, waiting, waiting for her to reveal the slightest bit of flesh to feast on her festering soul. Never, she thought, and sunk deeper into her fortress of cotton blankets.

The air conditioning unit murmured softly. Outside, it was hot and humid. The morning dew stifled the air, offering conveyance to insects, the bloodthirsty and otherwise. It was 4 A.M now. Or was it 4:30? Fatima was too afraid to check her phone on the nightstand beside her bed. She knew light attracted mosquitoes. She knew because she once witnessed a mosquito haplessly fly into a light trap set up by her aunt in the heat of a summer night. Poor mosquito, flew to its own demise. It died noiselessly, save for a frazzle, like the one emitted by a frayed wire twisted and turned too much. A noise so small, proportional to the magnitude of a mosquito's life. Fatima felt bad for the mosquito, but it was better that way; she didn't want to spend her night itching swollen bites. So Fatima didn't check her phone. She didn't want to attract leftover mosquitoes that may have entered earlier in the day, when the windows were open. The windows are shut now.

Rays of light seeped through opaque clouds, rendering them in hues of indigo. It must be 5 now. Fatima brushed her tongue against the inside of her mouth. The back of her two front teeth felt gritty. She no longer needed to pee, but she was thirsty now. The blanket's comforting embrace now turned into a suffocating hold. She loosened the blanket's grip and bared some of her arms and feet. Her soul felt less susceptible to espionage now; the heavy load of the spirits lightened. *I might as well pray now*. In a bout of courage, Fatima kicked off her blanket, grabbed her prayer gown and threw it on her shoulders and made her way to the bedroom door. Her brother slept soundly on a second bed in the room. His legs were splayed in odd directions and his blanket lay strewn at the corner of his bed. Fatima rearranged her brother's limbs and tucked him back under his blanket. She worried about him. He was 10 years old. He was smart and quick but awfully lonely. His eyes twitched in an odd way and when he sniffed, he contorted his face in manner so ugly, it was impossible to watch. She worried about him.

Fatima opened the door and looked down the long, narrow hallway separating her from the bathroom. The bathroom looked menacing. Its door gaped like the mouth of Goliath, the shadow within breeding fear in Fatima's heart now. Fatima quickly shut the door. She threw down her prayer gown and scuttled back to her bed.

I'll pray when I wake up.

But she never did.



BLOODHONEY
BY JESS RIZKALLAH

AN EXCERPT FROM “MONA, A CAMERA, AND ME”

By Christine Stoddard

The trolls thought I stopped modeling because I finally realized I am not “conventionally attractive.” I have the hips of an Amazon, the breasts of Peter Pan, and a face that is strange but charming. They wanted me to hate myself, to hang myself like my grandmother did when her husband left her for a woman shaped like an old-fashioned Coke bottle. But when I look in the mirror, the only thing I loathe is the hoard of trolls clacking away at their computers.

Kate Moss is no conventional beauty, either. She’s short with a broken nose and crooked teeth. Yet in those early Instagram days, I never saw Moss as my defense, only my inspiration. I never had this epiphany that I wasn’t Pretty Princess pretty. I always knew. I was beautifully odd and oddly beautiful and I had a talent for seeing into the soul of any camera. My loyal followers saw that. Mona, my only true friend and photographer, saw that.

I was one of two daughters born to two medical school professors originally from Egypt. They relocated to Richmond when my sister, Mayada, was three and shortly before I was born at the mammoth Medical College of Virginia downtown. There, my parents lectured amongst the buzz of waspish politicians and state government worker bees.

We lived in Jackson Ward, a historically black neighborhood within walking distance of the hospital and medical school. It was an imperfect fit, but where else were we supposed to live? Richmond had no ideal zip code for people like us because we had no place in the Capital of the Confederacy’s narrative of black and white. Yet as Arab atheists with olive complexions, we had to make our own home in the Bible Belt somehow. That was how we ended up in the nicest house on the block in a less-than-nice neighborhood. At least it seemed that way to uptight white suburbanites. But I can’t say the neighborhood made me any more nervous than I felt anywhere else. I had a female body and, even as a little girl, I knew that made me vulnerable no matter where I went.

We were gentries who lived in a renovated row house among abandoned buildings, dilapidated apartments that saw constant turnover, and once pristine addresses destroyed by partying college students. Though my family and I saw our share of small-time street corner drug deals, we never witnessed any violence. Since we had a car, we didn’t mind that the grocery store was in the next neighborhood over, either. We said hello to our neighbors and never told them to change a thing. We didn’t see why an upscale coffee shop or yoga studio should replace the barbershop or soul food café. There were enough people in town doing that already.

My parents did take issue with one aspect of where we lived, however, and that was the local public school system. Horrified by accounts of textbook shortages and gaping holes in hallway ceilings, my parents sent Mayada and me to the all-girls’ Catholic school across town. From kindergarten onward, it was a nightmare. Mayada and I were magnets for insults, invasive questions, and culturally clueless remarks. It only worsened as we got older. “I thought Egyptians worshipped cats like Cleopatra. What are you doing at a Catholic school? Are you trying to convert so you don’t burn in hell?” / “Aren’t your parents doctors? Why do you live in the ghetto?” / “Your English is really good. Do you still speak Egyptian at home?”

If you think a fifteen-year-old girl with a pleated skirt and ribbons in her hair can't be intimidating or offensive, you are wrong. So very wrong. College prep only made everyone hungrier and more aggressive than teenage hormones alone ever could. On top of grappling with typical puberty woes, we had to grapple with the college admissions race. All but the most religiously observant girls fought for thick acceptance packets from Tier 1 colleges their senior year. That's why our high school counselors funneled us into as many honors and Advanced Placement courses as we could handle. Most of the girls we knew considered bulldozing a few classmates' self-esteem levels part of the process. They weren't interested in becoming nuns or missionaries. They lusted after Smith College and Harvard Law.

That was the motivation for stunts like this one:

My freshman year, I found the word "Muslim" scrawled on my locker in glittery blood red nail polish. It did not matter that I wasn't actually Muslim. It was the intent. I whipped out my phone and took a photo to text my sister, whose locker was on the other side of the building. She texted me a nearly identical photo of her similarly defaced property. We agreed to meet at the principal's office in five minutes.

"How can I help you girls?" asked Mrs. Parkhurst, the principal's secretary, as we stepped up to her desk.

"We'd like to report a hate crime," said Mayada, without hesitation. I nodded, grateful to have such a confident older sister in moments like these.

Mrs. Parkhurst was a petite middle-aged woman with thin, naked lips and mousy brown hair. Her cardigan sweaters were all black or beige and she always wore flat, circular Mother of Pearl earrings with a matching Mother of Pearl cross necklace. Her Spartan desk contained her computer, a black Moleskine notebook, and a Virgin Mary statue that was about six inches tall. Mrs. Parkhurst's fashion sense and desk had not changed since I was five years old. Even her pen—a gold ballpoint with the engraving "John 3:16"—was the same. She liked consistency and order and that was that.

So I should not have been surprised when Mrs. Parkhurst pursed her wormy little lips, cleared her throat, and said, "That's not possible." But I was.

"You haven't even heard our story," I snapped.

Mayada glared at me and apologized on my behalf. "You'll have to excuse my sister, Mrs. Parkhurst. She's upset. We're both upset, and we need to talk to Sister Branch for that reason. Could we please see her now?"

"She is busy with the bishop," said Mrs. Parkhurst after she cleared her throat again.

Mayada and I glanced at Sister Branch's closed door. Before Mayada could issue her next diplomatic phase, I darted for the office and opened the door. Sister Branch was seated with the Catholic newspaper and a bowl of oatmeal.

"Good morning, Abra," she said, raising an eyebrow for a beat before returning to her paper.

Mayada and Mrs. Parkhurst were behind me in the next split second, but neither one said anything. All of three of us stared at Sister Branch, who looked up again.

"Well, come in."

"I tried to stop them, Sister Branch, but—"

"It's fine. I wasn't busy."

Had I not been in a rush to tell Sister Branch what happened, I might've sneered at Mrs. Parkhurst. Instead, I took out my phone to pull up the photo as Mayada and I talked over each other.

"Oh, this is not good," said Sister Branch.

My sister and I shook our heads.

"I'm very sorry this happened, girls. Could you email the photos to me? We'll get to the bottom of this."

That was the last we heard on the matter. The janitor scrubbed our lockers clean by the end of the day. When Mayada and I followed up in a week, Sister Branch said the school administration had not found a culprit.

"Besides," said Sister Branch over her usual bowl of oatmeal, "the vandal did not employ a slur. It's simply a descriptor."

"Yes, but we aren't Muslim," said Mayada. "We're Egyptian, but not all Egyptians are Muslim."

"I see," said Sister Branch. "What then is your family's religion? Your parents did not identify as Catholic when they enrolled you."

My normally articulate sister was at a loss.

"We're in the process of converting," I piped up. "Our hearts have been touched by Christ."

Mayada looked down at her Mary Janes.

Sister Branch beamed. "I'm so pleased to hear that. You'll have to let me know when your confirmation takes place."

"Of course!" I said, a little too enthusiastically.

"Your parents are converting, too?"

"Yep!"

My sister remained silent even as we walked down the hallway back to our classrooms. I knew she was reeling, so I didn't bother further provoking her with my questions. When we got home later that day, all she could muster was, "I can't believe you did that. Now Sister Branch will care even less about finding out who wrote on our lockers."

I shrugged and opened up my English textbook. I read for a minute or two and then complained about having to diagram sentences in an honors class. Mayada simply left the room.

Our frazzled parents didn't have time to take action about the vandalism. Nor did they seem too concerned.

"It's just a word, Abra," my mother said one morning two weeks after the incident. I had complained about it again while she packed her briefcase. "It's not even the right word," she muttered. "Ignore those brats and focus on your studies."

Whichever "brat" had done it was trying to distract Mayada and me from our studies. I was in the top ten in my class and Mayada was tied for valedictorian in hers. We had to turn the other cheek if we were going to keep our rank. We weren't vying for spots at the Ivies, but we still sought a certain level of comfort and prestige. Or, should I say, our parents did.

Our parents expected us to go to Virginia Commonwealth University, which housed the medical school where they taught. To them, an American university was an American university. The nationality alone afforded prestige. They didn't care that apart from a select number of programs, VCU's undergraduate admissions were not particularly competitive. All the better, they reasoned. Mayada and I would be that much more likely to earn full-rides. Naturally, we would live at home while studying pre-med and steer clear of dating. During those four years, we would earn every fellowship and research grant possible. Then we would get accepted into the far more competitive Medical College of Virginia, also with scholarships. Once we completed our residencies, we would return to Egypt to marry accomplished Egyptian men—most likely fellow doctors. Religiously, we were not Muslim, but culturally, certain things were just ingrained. That included obtaining both higher degrees and parent-approved husbands.

Though my report cards matched my parents' expectations, my own dreams did not. Hence the living within my mind. I daydreamed and doodled and wrote stories. Too often, I filled up my sketchbook while bored in class. In this way, I figured I could avoid as much of the snake-tongued gossip that tried to constrict my adolescence as possible. Muslim or not, I would not let my vicious classmates win. They could deface my locker however they wanted. I would continue drawing caricatures of them and writing poems about the merits of Egyptian coffee versus Starbucks.

Shortly after the locker incident occurred, I began modeling with Mona.

Mona was many things, including one of the most faithful Catholics I have ever met, but most people only ever saw her hemifacial microsomia. The syndrome is second only to cleft lips and palates in terms of common congenital deformities. Her face was warped, with a small, bent jaw and asymmetrical ears. I didn't care. Mona was loyal and kind and a truly gifted photographer. Despite being friends since second grade, I wouldn't discover that last bit until high school.

The modeling started freshman year when took our first elective. I chose Arabic because I thought it would be an easy A for me. Although, it turns out that occasionally speaking a language with your mom and dad doesn't necessarily make you ace at conjugations or writing a whole other alphabet. Mona chose darkroom photography. She liked that it was an art form that was on its way out. "I better learn it before it goes extinct," she said as we filled out our course forms during the last week of eighth grade. "Plus, missionary organizations are always looking for photographers." When Mona grinned, she bared her snaggletooth, a feature that had endeared me for as long as I could remember.

Days before Mona was shipped off to summer camp in North Carolina, we submitted our forms to Mrs. Parkhurst, who pinned them under her Virgin Mary statue. Then we waited. I went to a day camp at the Science Museum of Virginia and wrote letters to Mona in the evening. In five consecutive letters, I mentioned my fear of getting placed in a second period of gym. Mona's fear was getting placed in home economics. ("I'm pretty sure I don't have to be Martha Stewart to live at a convent," she wrote.) In the last week of July, we received our course schedules, which confirmed that our choices had been approved. I came home to the letter after spending all day dissecting owl pellets and reconstructing tiny rodents on cardboard. Mona, who had just returned from North Carolina, was able to read the letter herself.

"I'm so happy I won't spend two semesters baking muffins," she said when we met up for ice cream.

"Don't worry—I'm pretty sure another nun at your convent will know how to do that."

"Exactly. We'll pool our God-given talents together. Mine will not involve cooking appliances."

We took a break from talking to finish our ice cream cones.

"Do you think high school will be different?" I asked as the last of my chocolate ice cream dribbled down my chin.

Mona shook her head. "No, I mean, it's the same school, the same girls," she said. "We'll probably get five new girls, ten at most. Otherwise, same gang."

"I guess I just hoped they'd be nicer this year."

"They won't be. If anything, they'll be meaner. Our class rank means a lot more now."

"It doesn't matter where I go to college. As long as I graduate with decent grades, a convent will want me. My faith counts for far more."

"I still have to stay in the top ten if I want that scholarship."

"You'll do it. You're very smart, Abra."

"Thanks," I said and wiped my chin with a napkin.

When Mona smiled at me, I felt her warmth envelop me. It was her spell and I didn't mind falling under it.



ك
BY DANA DAWUD

DARK MUSIC

they have been singing for so long,
with the resonance of truth and justice, sonorous,
that i didn't really hear them beat the war drum,
in their own ways.
i missed the discordant notes.
but weren't the stories always living
in that dissonance?

they sing, booming, stentorian.
but other things always have a way of rising,
louder
and revealing the true consonance
beneath the noise
(if only for those who offer their hearing)
and for all their ballads,
their elegies for lost truth,
it is this truth to which they are truly averse.

the violence
of this view from nowhere
this sound without a chamber
ringing without ideology
goes unsung, without hymns to decry it.
perhaps our own propaganda was always
harmonious
or, perhaps heard only
at undetectable frequencies.

empires always have the best orchestras
which can make art of cacophony,
insulate silences

give them their own register.

EMAN ELSHAIKH



ل
BY DANA DAWUD

FLORA FAUNA SYRIA

plum trees
Syria
cherry trees
Syria
janeric trees
Syria
like me, like you
Syrian LGBTQ
police brutality
Razan Ghazzawi
free press
student protest
city protest
water hoses
electrocuting billyclubs
live fire
laurel trees
laurel soap she handmade
mama, what he brought me
crates of grapes
and underneath the grapes,
my love packed the apple crates
starvation sieges
Yarmouk, Khaled
Ferguson, Michael
Daraya, Ghiyath
water bottles
Standing Rock
drought
water-sharing
food-sharing
truckbed of eggplants
sarin
transparency
tanks
Tianenmen Square
Tahrir Square
Daraa al-Balad
Clock Tower Square
Bayda village
I am a free woman, daughter of a free woman
local bodies
local council
power-sharing
solar panels

power-hoarding
president-for-life
Adra Women's Prison
conscience
unconscious
electrocution
torture tire
Razan Zeitouneh
cats of Douma
olive tree
orchard
mountain
holy sea
rape farms
field clinics
field morgues
torched crops
scorched lungs
kheerota
azadi
roommate
mate tea
teacher
Cain
grain
wheat fields
Abel
enable
bread-oven
blood-oven
I am a human being
almond trees
quince trees
walnut trees
laurel trees
laurel soap she handmade
and underneath the crate of grapes
my love packed the apple crates

MOHJA KAHF

ALEPPO THE NECKLACE BROKE ALL THE WORDS FELL APART

oud
my spine
Aleppo
Aleppo
pine nuts
pistachio
provisions
pizmonim
they have taken the one I love
cluster
melody
embroidery
woolens
pillow
swollen
Aleppo
sworn to me
evil eye
turquoise
tiny blue buttons
earlobe soft flesh
thin gold hoop
blood river
maqam
adhan
seeron ahkchig
a dream in quarter tones
lowered lashes
bone juts wound pus
gouged gagged
terrified
Aleppo love
answer me
alarm
tocsin
siren
music
words
use-
less
amulet
madstone
lodestone
amaun, amaun
Halab Halab
Halabi



BY DANA DAWUD



J
BY DANA DAWUD

ON BECOMING A PART OF LESLIE JAMISON'S GRAND UNIFIED THEORY OF FEMALE PAIN

By Dana Dawud

I dreamed that I wanted to write about my life with my brother, that he hit me and instead of feeling pain I exclaimed "Ah, I need to write about this!" and my sister told me that I should stop exploiting other people's stories for my own

writing. But it's my story and mine alone, and it's my writing, my reading of my story. Does that mean that the story has been already "written" and I'm simply reading it? does that mean that I am after all, exploiting the stories of "others"? I've actually dreamed that my brother fell from his room's window and that I saw him sitting on the window sill with his face towards mine, he closed his eyes and then dropped back. I couldn't save him, I went to the window and he was down, I told him to move his legs and he did. I realized I was still dreaming, nothing really happened. In my dream I exclaimed "Ah, I need to write about this!" and my sister told me that I should stop exploiting other people's stories for my own writing. But I need to tell this story and I don't care about it's origin. I've always thought that writing about (my) life and (my) pain would entail exploiting the people I live with and around, and that it would turn me into someone who keeps dwelling over her own suffering, that it would turn me into a show. But pain is not mine alone, I feel it because I am a part of a large mesh of criss-crossing pain, and because I can give my pain over to others, like a gift, even if they can't "see" it.

Yesterday, i wrote for the first time in Arabic. Arabic is my (mother) tongue, this is how "native language" is translated to in Arabic. They have told me that I have a mother tongue and I've laughed in their faces, a menacing laugh and walked away. I had no idea that going back to it, getting closer to it, would be so painful. The distance language entails is painful, and I gasp for words, the reader would sense the heaviness that drenched every word I tried to conjure up. It was hard but I had to feel pain in order to write.

I fell in love for the first time when I was fifteen years old, he broke my heart. I stopped eating, I cried for weeks and I remember telling the story of this breakup to everyone I've talked to. Over and over again, I repeated how much hurt I feel and how much pain he had caused me. I think I've done that not as a mechanism of healing, but more to tell people that I am a person with deep feelings who has the ability to suffer, I did it to feel better about who I am. I had no idea back then that this repetitive showcasing of pain, might have repulsed everyone around me, that it had been a cliché. I just knew, and still think that I had a right to my pain and that everyone should listen to me, LISTEN TO ME. My pain is grand and it's real and it deserves the attention of the world.

I happen to ruthlessly defend the poetry of Sylvia Plath, and every time I do that I feel that I'm doing something as rebellious as starting a revolution. The other day, a friend of mine posted that Sylvia Plath is a "Tragedy of a woman who committed suicide, nothing more." I was so enraged and honestly felt like crying. He hadn't even read her. "Would Sylvia Plath be as famous today if she hadn't committed suicide?" Sylvia Plath's suicide has taken the status of being almost a part of her oeuvre. She has indeed written many poems on and about her suicide attempts, she has written Ariel shortly before her death. We can't reduce anyone to their suicide, but why view her suicide as a reduction? It is a "tragedy" in one sense, but in another it's a culmination point of pain. It's a protest of a writer who has been locked inside a repetitive day-to-day routine: between writing poetry, taking care of her kids and doing her chores. Her suicide is a part of her ongoing story, it's not her reduction point, it's a point opening to infinity. "I have done it again/ One year in every ten/ I manage it—" One year in every ten.

In Ariel, she had already turned her "I" into grains of wheat, an infinite landscape. "And now I/ Foam to wheat" The devotedness with which Van Gogh had repeatedly kept painting fields of wheat, populating them with dream worlds, reapers, sunflowers with the "unheard of power of the sunflower seeds" as Deleuze describes the becomings in Van Gogh paintings, houses, a rising moon, and crows. He painted from the Asylum window, framing these wheat fields when he was losing his ability to utter "I." "And now I/ Foam to wheat" Deleuze had written that "A sunflower seed lost in a wall is capable of shattering that wall." Van Gogh broke the walls of the asylum with his wheat fields. In Ariel Sylvia writes "The child's cry/Melts in the wall/ And I/ Am the arrow" Her "I" is an arrow which goes beyond the wall, beyond, and reaches the red of the sun. Pain ad infinitum, pain as liberation.



150 X 150 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

LEFT

By Lena Zaghmouri

What struck me most about Mom's family was how their pictures looked so different from what Mom told me they were actually like. They looked so put together and all-American, untouched by any troubles. Just two white married parents and one cute kid that always stood in front of them in pictures with a big smile and her arms open, embracing the world and the photo that would capture that emotion forever.

In reality, though, Mom's parents were divorced, and Mom said Grandma's main concern was finding her next boyfriend or husband, Grandpa's the new family he inherited from marrying his second wife, which was soon after he divorced Grandma.

Grandma looked sweet and virginal with blond hair and light brown eyes, but she had countless affairs since Mom could remember.

Grandpa looked kind with dark blue eyes, thin brown hair, a soft manly smile, but Mom told me he would become irritable and beat her for the smallest mistake when he was angry with Grandma. Mom had a collection of bruises on her arms and back that she showed me to prove it. He would let plenty of things slide if things were going well with her Grandma, but that was rare. He was easier to be around once her parents divorced during Mom's early teens, but then he never wanted to be around her anymore either. Mom was part of his past life, the one he claimed was driven by anger. He needed to minimize contact with that as much as possible.

But Mom having a child out of wedlock with a Palestinian reawakened Grandpa's latent anger. He called her a shameful slut and washed his hands of her and was unwilling to meet me, his olive-skinned granddaughter with a weird name like Isra, one he probably couldn't even pronounce right.

* *

Grandma came to visit on rare occasions; the first time I remember was when I was five. She was upset that Mom had a child out of wedlock, but she was more forgiving. She was between marriages, and Mom had just kicked Baba out for good. Mom would complain about what a deadbeat Baba was to Grandma sometimes. "Honestly, Carol, I've always told you if you just lost fifteen or twenty pounds, you could get yourself a decent man," Grandma told Mom.

She visited once or twice a year, usually during the holidays; she would bring me a new Barbie or something as a Christmas gift. Grandma ignored me and vented her frustrations with the world and the men in her life to Mom.

But now, three years later, Mom had cancer, and Grandma went back and forth on whether or not she would take me after Mom passed away. Sometimes she said it would be nice to have someone to live with, someone to help out and spend time with her, but then Grandma would say the last thing she wanted to do was take in an eight-year-old at her age, especially one with a father like mine.

Mom didn't trust her, though. "She'll want you when she's alone, and as soon as she gets a man, Grandma'll find a way to get rid of you."

* *

Mom told more positive stories about her family when she put together the photo album for me, her hands newly thin and lined with pale blue veins. She didn't have energy to put it together before, and once in a while she said there was no point in it because what did all those pictures mean? Most of the people in them I had never met and probably never would.

Still, we sat in the full size bed we slept on at Baba's place while she put it together. Mom explained who and

what was in each picture before she pressed it down on the sticky surface. "Well, hopefully, Isra, your grandma will visit when you live only with Baba," she said. "Maybe this will make her turn around."

* *

Mom went into the hospice the next day, and Baba picked me up after school every day so we could go there and see Mom. Sometimes Baba would be in the room alone with her, but usually they kept me there to alleviate the tension between them. We had been living at Baba's, but I was sure my parents weren't together, and they wouldn't have even spoken to each other if Mom wasn't dying.

Every time Mom said she was tired and needed to rest in the hospice, I was sure that she was going to die then, and I would cry inconsolably, even though Mom assured me she wasn't leaving yet. Baba would take me out of the room and try to comfort me for a little bit, but he would soon become angry and tell me to be strong. Plenty of people had gone through much worse back home in Palestine, so my pain now didn't matter.

* *

Grandma came soon after Mom went into the hospice. She would take me to see Mom for the week or so that she was still awake and not drugged beyond comprehension.

And suddenly I wasn't invisible to Grandma anymore.

Grandma now picked me to vent her frustrations about the man she was in the process of divorcing and Grandpa as well. "I talked to Carol's father, and you know what he told me? He can't get the time off work! Can you believe that?" She sighed and clenched her teeth together. "'This is your child,' I said to him. 'Can you just pull your dick out of your wife's pussy for two seconds and remember you have a daughter?' You know those kids his wife has aren't his. She had them with the guy before. I don't see what's so great about her. She's as plain as wood."

* *

Grandma took me out for ice cream once Mom slipped from consciousness, and she said she couldn't stand to see her daughter suffering to death and that her granddaughter didn't need to see it either, so Baba let her.

Though I loved ice cream, I wasn't excited about getting some that day. Most of it melted on the back of my hand and dripped on the table, and Grandma had to take me to the bathroom to clean up. I could tell she was irritated I saw her roll her eyes in the mirror, and she told me that I had to eat like a civilized girl.

We went to the hotel she was staying in—she would spend the night at Mom's apartment whenever she came before, but she hated Baba and his apartment—and she put cartoons on for me while she criticized all the men she had had in her life, reserving the worst for Grandpa. "I swear once I married that guy he became such a drag," she said. "We were so young, and all he wanted to do was stay in and drink beer. Even convincing him to go out to the movies was like asking him to drink cyanide." Grandma cringed at the thought of him. She moved on to her three other husbands: the second was too mean; the third had affairs; the fourth, the one she was in the middle of divorcing, was a drag like Grandpa, but it was more understandable because he was almost a senior citizen.

I didn't say anything. My lack of response must have made her sad; Mom always had some kind of commentary for Grandma, even if it was negative like telling her she should grow up or learn what monogamy was all about. "I'm not even sixty years old, and my daughter is dying. You're not supposed to bury your child; it's the other way around. Of course, it's no picnic to lose your mother at your age." She wiped a couple of tears that came from her overfilled brown eyes. "You know things are going to be different, right?"

Everyone used that phrase—"things are going to be different"—though they already were different. I hated spending time with Baba, having him prepare my food or ask him questions. He never knew the answers, and he would get irritated by them. "Don't ask dumb questions," he always said to me.

Baba was scary, too. Most nights I could hear him crying out in his sleep. When Mom was there she told that it was just because Baba had been through some terrible things since he was even younger than me, and he remembered them in his dreams, but I was sure that he was possessed. It was worse without having Mom there to tell me to go back to sleep.

I had to live without my mother.

At school everyone had a mother that I knew of. A few lived with their grandmothers or someone else, but they at least visited their mothers sometimes. And their grandmothers liked them a lot more than Grandma liked me. They didn't talk about men all the time, and they didn't tell their daughters that if they lost weight, they could find a decent man.

But I had a feeling that Grandma was feeling sorrier for herself. She was losing her daughter, the one she could turn to between men. She also started to put on a little bit of weight, especially in the middle. She probably would never be able to find another husband, at least not a decent one.

* *

Though it was almost my bedtime, Grandma had no plans to take me back to Baba's or call him to ask if I could spend the night with her. "Who cares what he thinks?" she told me when I asked if I was allowed to stay. "He isn't worth a shit anyway." She took me to the store and bought me some pajamas and a night light, though I stopped using one over a year before. "What about a toy or something?"

"No, I don't want to play."

"You sure are a mellow child."

After I took a bath and changed into the new pajamas, Grandma talked more about how the man she was currently divorcing was trying to hide his assets and get out of paying her as much alimony. "It's not like I'll be getting much. We were only married for a year and a half," she said. "Couldn't stand him any longer than that."

* *

Baba pounded on the Grandma's hotel door so hard I thought he must have bruised his knuckles, shouting at Grandma to open the door or he'd call the police.

Grandma didn't hold out for long, but she wouldn't let me go without letting Baba know that she thought he was a worthless Arab.

"You don't deserve a say in the matter!" Grandma said. "You haven't been there for most of her life, and all you'll do is lock her in the house until she gets married!"

Baba told her at least I wouldn't learn to be a whore like she was and charged past her and pulled me by the hand. "My daughter comes home with me!" he yelled as he brushed her aside to leave.

He left me in the pajamas Grandma got me, and he talked to me for over an hour, which he never did before. "She is a sharmoota, a slut. Do not act as she does, Isra. You do not want to live as her." He told me that he couldn't believe that a woman could act that way. His mother, my sitti, he said, would have never spoken to a son-in-law the way she had. Well, he wasn't really a son-in-law. He never married Mom, but it should be the same thing to these Americans because they didn't believe in marriage the way Palestinians did, so Grandma should think of him as her son-in-law. And Sitti definitely wouldn't have carried on that way, marrying all kinds of men for money or whatever the hell she believed she would get.

* *

Baba woke me up in the middle of the night and told me to put my shoes on. Mom had died, and we were going to see her one last time before she went to the crematory. I was still tired, but my heart was thundering in my chest, so it was easy for me to stay awake.

Grandma was at the hospice before we were, her face red and streaked with tears. Mom lied on the bed, no oxygen tube connected to her, pale and gaunt, her hair a darker brown than what it was before, her lips still red. I cried, and my chest felt so light that I wondered if the center of my body was still there. For over a week now, Mom had been unconscious, and the only way I could tell she was still alive was that she sometimes made a soft grunt when she was in pain. Then a nurse came in and gave her some more drugs to keep her quiet and comfortable.

Baba picked me up and carried me out of the room. People hadn't picked me up for years on a regular basis, and by then, I was only five or six inches shorter than him, but I guess he still thought I was four. He said we should go back home and let them take Mom away.

* *

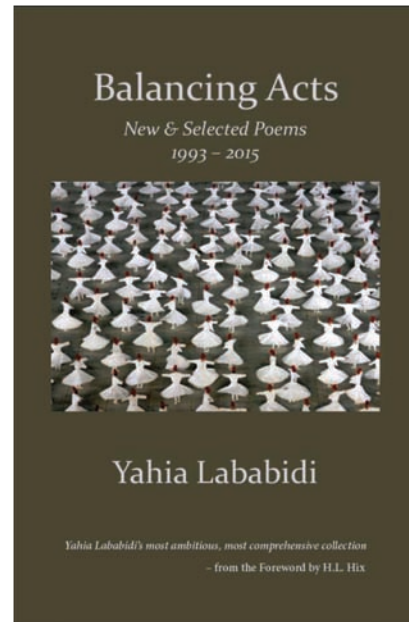
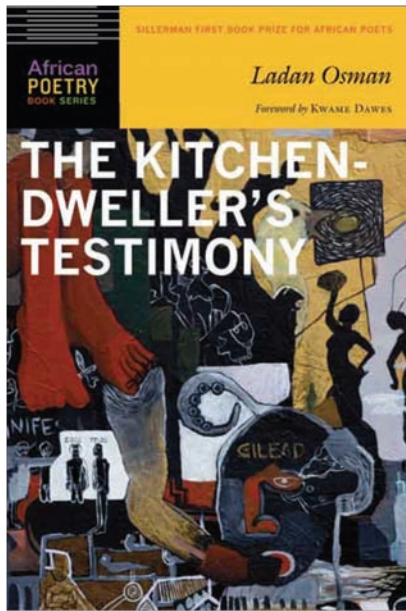
Grandma held the memorial service at a small banquet hall. I spent most of the time sitting at one of the middle tables next to my father, chewing on one of the black cloth napkins, my dripping saliva warming the back of my hand. I watched my mother's relatives, trying to see if I could remember them from the photos, and if I could recall their names or if Mom had ever spoken of them. But I couldn't place most of them, and they were just as distant from me in real life as they were in the pictures. They seemed uncomfortable around me and my father and gave us short, awkward condolences. They spoke amongst themselves, telling their stories about Mom, what she was like as a child and a teenager.

That day they all had had a close relationship with her when she was alive.

I slipped out and sat under a tree in the picnic area, crushing some of the dried leaves, mildly enjoying the slight pricks in my palm. Grandma found me out there and kneeled down as far as she could to speak to me. She was reconciling with her husband. "I might as well," she said, tearing up. She always wiped her tears daintily. "Who else will have me at my age? And I can't live off alimony. I should just pack it in and face reality." She wished me luck with my father, though she doubted he would be a good one. "I hope he doesn't send you back to his country, but what can you do?"

TWO POETRY BOOK REVIEWS

By Marwa Helal



The Kitchen Dweller's Testimony by Ladan Osman

(University of Nebraska, 2015 and 2014 Winner. Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets)

Full disclosure: I recently met Ladan Osman at the film screening of one of our mutual friend's, Musa Syeed's, *A Stray* film screening in Brooklyn. But by then I was already a fan, having considered her collection a strong contender for the 2016 Arab American National Museum Book Award, and had already committed myself to writing this review. During our serendipitous meeting, Osman did not disappoint. The artist embodied the same strength I experienced in reading her work. And she made a comment I have not forgotten, which I paraphrase here: "I already know I'm going to have to write five books—look at Toni Morrison," she says. "Just one of her books should have established her as a great—the Bluest Eye. Come on. Show me someone, anyone, who has the chops to write that as a first book—but they didn't see her until she wrote five." This is Ladan Osman. She not only knows what is expected of her but is ready to do whatever it takes to make a dent in the canon. It is this kind of readiness for hard work and paying careful attention that resonates throughout *A Kitchen Dweller's Testimony*.

It is this same ambition and determination I witnessed in person that lives in Osman's "Ordinary Heaven:"

I have many dreams, I say to her.
In my dreams I'm better than myself.

and in "Silhouette:"

What will it matter to them if I make a book?
I am one poet. Isn't there space for me?
And the tears are sweet, completely sweet
as if they mean, even now you don't believe?
The colonizers couldn't have dreamed it,
the preoccupation with the heights of my soul

The subversion in these last two lines. Osman takes ownership of the colonizers' occupation transforming it instead into her personal preoccupation. Not any ordinary preoccupation but one of the heights of soul. This sleight of poetic hand surges with power and recurs repeatedly throughout the collection.

Her power is then apparent in the specificity she allows us to see the shape of the speaker's vulnerability. How the negative space is occupied, shrinking; and holding back the expression of her angry thoughts becomes water overflowing in "Connotation:"

When the woman whose hair is like down spits near my shoe and says,
"This neighborhood has changed since these people came."
I can't say, "You are the spitter; you are the trash."

I'm the shadow prostrating.
Not the shadow as it lengthens,
water spilling from a heavy bucket.

This is Ladan Osman's first book. If it is her only book, then I say we do not need another to know her genius. We need another because we need these poems. Poems that reclaim what is already ours and center us in our individual and thereby collective strength. Poems that see, testify, and forgive but [you'll] never forget.

Balancing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1993-2015 by Yahia Lababidi (Press 53, 2016)

Yahia Lababidi has compiled his most potent poems in this single collection. Known for his aphorisms and reinvention of Arabic proverbs in *Signposts to Elsewhere* (Jane Street Press, 2007) and his mystical flare, Lababidi harmonizes his work into "a soundless symphony, mysteriously conducted," H.L. Hix notes in the collection's introduction. It is refreshing to see Lababidi tackle the complications of modernity while still situating himself in his rich Egyptian and Lebanese heritage, and as a world citizen. In a poem titled "Skin," Lababidi seems to be in direct conversation with the issue of cultural appropriation as he playfully asks:

"almost makes you wonder
who's wearing who?"

"I Googled You" is exactly what it sounds like: a poem that captures the modern conundrum of being connected through the interwebs even when we are no longer emotionally connected:

"and when I shut down, you remain with me"

And this collection would not be complete without "What Is to Give Light" a nod to the Arab Spring and a reminder of the work our nations have yet to do:

"...must endure
burning, a man once said and
Another man became the matchstick
that set a nation aflame"

And if that isn't enough: look, ya katakeet. We are all Chicken Little and the sky is falling, or done fell. What I'm saying is, I'm not one for giving into fear but I am one for searching for remedies to diminish it and while it might be in bad taste to quote the back of the book, I'm going to do it anyway: If Naomi Shihab Nye says, "I find myself pausing everywhere among these wisdoms, wondering why the world stumbles and staggers through such a dark and greedy time when there are people alive with such keen, caring insight...If Yahia Samir Lababidi were in charge of a country, I would want to live there." And she does say that.





ROOMS
BY DANA DAWUD

I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN

mar charbel is the scary one
resting a bloody hand on your
child's shoulder when you
forget to keep a promise

clears his throat before you can
step out on your word

stays dressed in black

once ate his own smile but
never swallowed

i like him most.

he still hums
to the pulse
in my wrist.

i kept him with his contemporaries
all beads on a string, my own congregation.

the plastic confining him chipped at the corner, a reminder
of his ability to dart between pulse & phosphene
while i slept. the string loose, then broken

he stays compact,
like a syllable
even while religion fades
into muscle memory.

call this faith, finally. and the body, a prayer
to feel guilty about whispering into the night.

moonstones charging,
warm by the window.

still. i am everything
i've ever believed in even if
i don't believe it anymore.

part of me always
chipped at the corner

JESS RIZKALLAH

GIVE ME THE FLUTE & SING

after fairuz & ghibran

origin is an apple jam jarred to make wine,
put in the ground but always comes up vinegar
when picked at the skin of where the earth
spit you out before you were you
but after the flute started playing.

hands are the etymology of prayer
i turn mine slowly in the morning sunlight
through my window. i watch the rings hug
my fingers. my knuckles hairs grow back
slower now, but i still have this inheritance
from a man who sang to his fig trees
and raised his voice at a woman sprung
from the shadow of a tree full of switches

and all i can ever do is brew coffee for the
mild mannered and write stories
that don't belong to me

i come from love that didn't always know the right way.

a cracked seed aware of its cyanide. bruised fruit.
preserves or vinegar, depending on the light.

his body pushes up tomatoes
wherever her hands waver this too,
a type of apology i listen for
until that flute in me stops.

JESS RIZKALLAH

ANAMNESIS

"...so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before"
- Socrates (Meno, 81c)

Faint choir arrangements pair extractions
holy light, altar at the half-ripped toenail of mem-
ory loss. Laws: a series promises bro ken

Geography: dry needle, mouthing saw dust.
Naming: a parliamentary procedure or
surgery, in the greenest scenes, chosen

Do you still miss her?

God or teta, is was a woman; yellow wall, peeling.
Copious amounts of water is only

a collection worth dahlias of a moonlit revival
in a bowl on a table left behind.
Found or unfound, either a violence.

We do our best work
plucked submerged in warm,
unfamiliar settings.

ZAINA ALSOUS

SOLAR ECLIPSE

After Samih Al-Qasim

When did you begin to wonder what predates the capital?

It started with a smell; dates sent through the mail. From Haifa? No
Barajneh, the other Beirut, I've never visited. Sooted bag,
fragrance of dates, *fahma*, flesh leaves when it can.

Allusions to perish follow recovery
from illusions to be. Sieve on an emptied vessel. So
drink some water *sadiqi*, *slowly*.
Math, even Time, are stolen

devices. Another kind of clock, days rotate parallel
to death. Elsewhere,
without you, just fine. Just fine.

Light, dark, and what we cannot explain,
there is a third thing. Counting, like sudden absence
or pages melted in the after, teaches us of enemies

- 1 - Enemies of travel
- 2 - Enemies of memory
- 3 - Enemies of the third thing:

Enemies of the Sun. I refuse. I refuse.
I refuse to forget that smell.

ZAINA ALSOUS



IL GEMILA ILLUSTRATIONS
BY AISHA JEMILA DANIELS

SELF-PORTRAIT AS SYRIA'S LOVER

I have emerged sure as the sway
in prayer beads to summon your palms
taste scarcity, tell me has the damask rose
flown with countless mortals?

Ya Aleppo

Persist, my dear, Persist. I watched
you all reign, all monarch without strife. Have
you then not begun the burial of souks still
slavish to a bullet's preach, a perjurer
Ya Homs, this one who cobbles until
nothing dark strewn of the liquorice-seller.

Ya Damascus

This mirror a burnt photograph
this father holding almonds in your sleep,
let me kiss the mulish *azaan*
from your mouth like a bird kept in captive
for the flames to perish, visions hazy as
a dervish swirl; rifle of blood
clinging to scarves torn.

RUSHDA RAFAEEK

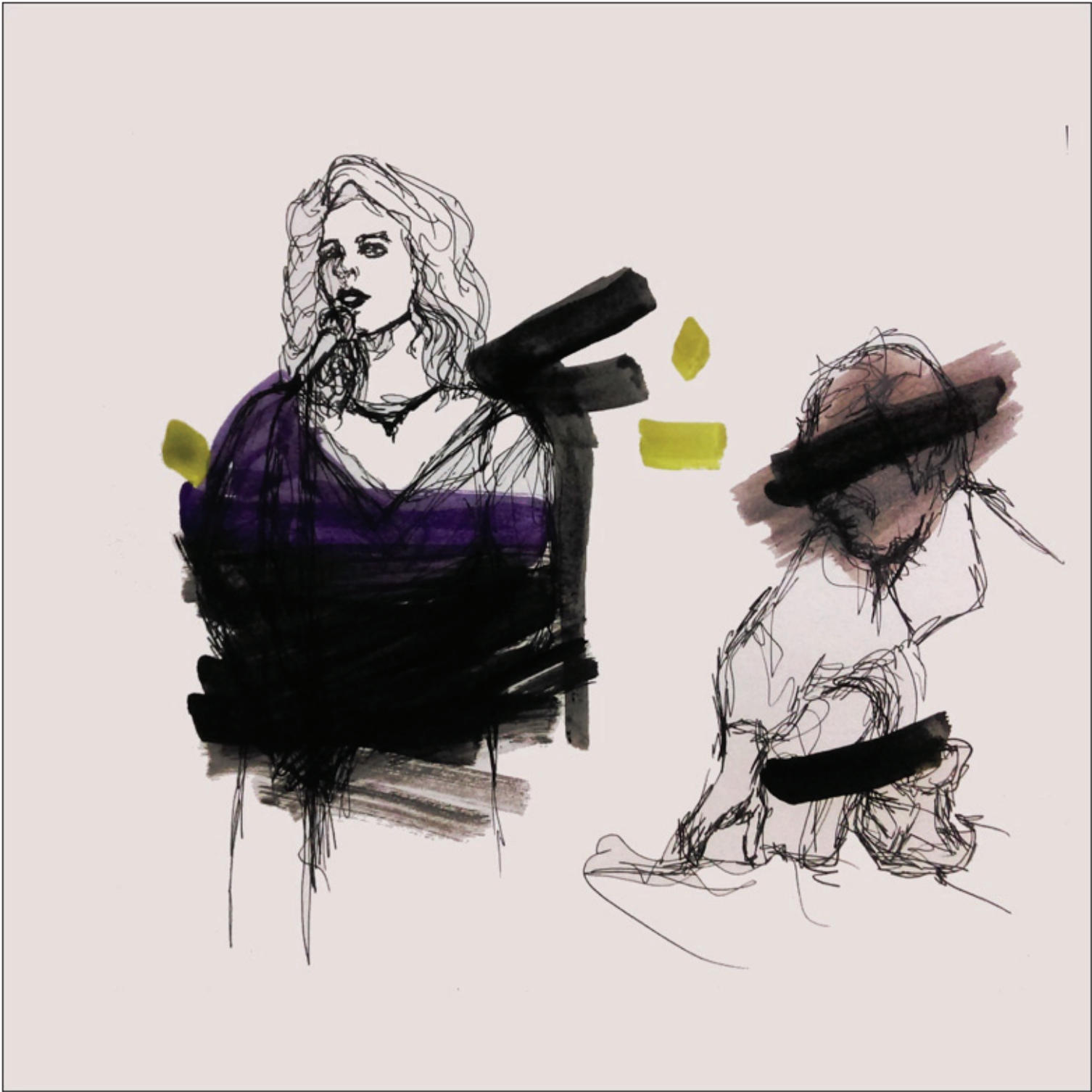
ARABIAN NIGHT

Ya Emra'ah, did he arrive as dust
with the musk of soothsayer, more
glottal in practice for clarity to spill,
more sibylline than the falcon's glide
in Karbala just before he peered through
dark groves, to snatch the nut-lush of apricot
in your barks absorbed from gaudiest
balconies?

What lair and lake beds you hold? What
welcome garlands? Like these lips pliant
to dome of breast bloom through
oasis. Such coveting is his exult,
with what is left in bodied scrolls; camel trails
in a palm, the *qasida* in your flaunt,
your undress prolonged, the
fanoos lamp in your eyes like an oath

in its abstruse, a haloed opacity, in its sanctum.

RUSHDA RAFAEEK



LOST IN TRANSLATION
BY DANA DAWUD

LETTERS AFTER DIASPORA: INCOMPLETE DIALOGUES

By Layla Goushey

Field Supervisor

Vehicle Inspection Service

Texas Department of Public Safety

April 17, 1995

Dear Sirs,

I am once again writing to complain about the conduct of one of your technician officers, namely Ida Florence Deacon. I am enclosing a copy of a letter sent to you concerning her action in 1993. Since that time she has continually harassed my inspectors, my garage and myself. She has attempted to stage numerous entrapments which failed to reveal any wrongdoing on the part of my inspectors. She has issued tickets to inspectors which were dismissed in court. She has entered my place of business shouting, threatening, and disrupting business numerous times. She has attempted to influence my employees against me, even asking them how they can stand to work for me.

Azmi Ishaq Goushey - written at his direction by his daughter

August 9, 2015

Dear Mike Brown,

I drove down Canfield the other day. The spot where you died last year is on that tranquil, cozy street surrounded by solid apartment buildings and townhomes. As I drove past where you lay for four hours after being murdered, I was aware of your lingering presence. Also still present was the visceral fear and outrage of residents who were so close to your motionless, bloody form for so long. The sound of your mother's cries that had been absorbed into the trees was echoed back by this year's buzzing cicadas.

I was there on one of those sunny, sleepy St. Louis afternoons where the leaf-filled, craggy trees and surrounding apartments and towns homes create a sheltered womb lit by sunlight. I thought that it looked similar to the day you were killed. The fruit of Canfield's womb on that day was our new civil rights era, eventually framed by your brightly colored memorial of plastic flowers and teddy bears.

The truth of what happened between you and Darren Wilson may never be proven, but bias toward people of color by White officials is familiar to me. My father, who was once harassed by a Texas vehicle inspection officer for couple of years, endured numerous indignities as an immigrant to this country. My biases toward Darren Wilson and his actions that day are based in my father's experiences with those Texas motor vehicle inspectors.

In the weeks after you were murdered, much was made of your shoplifting of Cigarillos from Ferguson Market and Liquor near your home, and of your rough treatment of the South Asian store owner who tried to stop you. Many looked at this incident through white-privileged eyes and concluded that you were violent and deserved to be killed; however, the incident between you and the owner of Ferguson Market and Liquor is also familiar to me.

I moved to St. Louis when my husband took a job as manager of a gas station in the heart of North City. I know many people like the owners of Ferguson Market and Liquor. In the weeks and months after you were killed, immigrant business owners repeated one phrase: *shoplifting does not deserve the death penalty*. We knew you. You would have

been back the next day in a better mood, and we would ask you to pay a little extra each time to pay off what you owed. Or, we would have told your mom, who would have made it right between you and us. Just like the lady in the city who once punched a store clerk and broke a window, and who came back the next day to buy a soda, saying "hi baby" like nothing had happened, and still, no one called the police because her uncle is a nice man, a minister. What the privileged world did not know is that you were part of culture that is invisible to White America and to those who live in high income levels. Even with the fighting and insults and the killing and wounding of flesh and pride, Arab, Africans, and Asians all live in communal societies. Collectivism, the family, the tribe, the umma, the community: those deep roots are in African-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Asian-Americans whether we are recent immigrants or our ancestors came on steam ships and slave ships. We recognize each other. We share a common understanding.

Layla Azmi Goushey

Dear Palestinian Friend,

As-salamu alaykum,

I took my mother to Florida and it cost me \$2500.00. She is a single mom that raised six kids. None of us are wealthy but we are all nice people.

Your African-American Friend

P.S. I am learning about Islam

from Brother Hakim

Dear African-American Friend,

Alaykum Salaam,

My father died after my brother was born. I am the oldest. I came here for school after my uncle gave the money, but I have to send money back to my mother to help my three brothers and two sisters. I live with five guys. We each sleeping on the couches or the floor. I study at school. We are the same. My mother is the best, too.

Your Palestinian Friend.

Dear People of Color with #Unitedwefight

No jihad against racism! Coming from Gaza, coming from Yemen, coming from Egypt, coming from Syria, coming from Iraq, coming here for building the life and business is the jihad.

Muslim Immigrant Store Owner

Dear Sirs,

I have great respect for the law. My inspectors have been trained by your agency. They know what they are doing. There would be no advantage to them or to the business to pass an unsafe car. In fact, any defect found would most likely mean extra work for the garage. In consequence, I fail to understand why she, the officers who accompany her, or your agency would think the inspectors would want to pass any car which was not up to standard.

I repeat, the inspectors are trained by your agency. I employ them to do what they were trained to do. It is certainly your privilege to send someone out to test their skills but I do not believe those who come to my business should act in such an unprofessional, childish manner as those who came to my garage on April 6, 1995.

Azmi Ishaq Goushey

Dear Kajemi Powell,

You had a knife, man, and you out of it! We got families! We got to protect ourselves. We called terrorists by the White and Ay-rab terrorists by you. I'm not rich! My brother-in-law helps with the business seven days a week so we can live. These Amoco lights and signs don't mean we are rich. Our house is not like a party full of candy bars and soda. We live close to you in a house that the wall ceiling is fell down. We didn't know two police would kill you because of your knife. We can't run a business like this! With you coming with a knife. We had to call the police. Now we feel scared because the people they are mad. Why did you do that, brother?

Best wishes,

Convenience Store Owners.

Dear Ay-rab,

My girlfriend and I were yelling about the 10 dollars because we. sick. of. YOU! We been coming to you Ay-rabs for gas and fake Viagra (which doesn't help lesbians) for years and you never give NOTHIN' back. Gas and glass pipes are not enough. If somebody take a candy bar we don't care. We are SO SICK of you. Why can't our people make a store? How come the chinaman make so much money off of pork fried rice that he drive a Lexus? The government givin you money to open your store. The refugee center give grants to refugees. We are refugees since the Civil War but nobody give us nothin'.

D'Lux and Angel

Dear D'Lux and Angel,

Free school, welfare, and WIC for all your life are not enough for you? You got a billion dollar grant from Iraqi oil when you destroyed my country.

Iraqi Shia Refugee

Dear Iraqi Refugee,

We had years of Jim Crow and segregation that put our parents and grandparents down. Plus we know you taking WIC and welfare too. We sat next to your wife at the health center. And your kids go to school for free.

D'Lux and Angel

Dear Sirs,

The inspector on duty checked and passed the car which was brought in by your agents. Minutes later, Ms. Deacon, officers Grady, Vernon and Dennis entered my business like gangbusters - shouting, accusing and threatening both the inspector and myself. Ms. Deacon even accused the inspector of not doing an emissions test, which is no longer required. I was ill that day and these officers shouted at me, told me I had several options without explaining them to me in a way which I could understand. I told Ms. Deacon to do whatever she wanted, I was tired of her behavior. I then went to the restroom only to be followed by one of the officers. He opened the door on me and came in without permission while I was on the toilet. He demanded that I sign a paper saying I was "voluntarily" closing my inspection station. When I refused, he threatened to take me straight to the court under arrest. I told him I would sign under threat but not "voluntarily". I told all of them to remember that this was not voluntary.

I have high blood pressure and that day I had a kidney problems and a headache. The harassment and unwarranted threats certainly made my condition worse.

Azmi Ishaq Goushey

Dear Arab and Muslim store owners.

How come you came out for Gaza but not for Mike Brown? Don't you know that we have to build allies in the community?

Palestine-to-Ferguson Activists

Dear Store Owners,

I'm so glad somebody opened a gas station on this street. Thank you for keeping the homeless people away so I can buy my gas and get to work at the insurance company. What is your name? My name is Ms. Hazel. Welcome to our neighborhood. Don't pay the rest of these people any mind.

Nice lady from the neighborhood

Dear Sirs,

There is no reason why your representatives cannot behave in a calm professional manner when there is a problem. No one here is trying to do anything unlawful. If a mistake is made by an inspector or myself, there is no reason to have these people running into my shop like we are all criminals. A simple statement of what is wrong is all that is necessary, the inspector would then correct the problem for the future.

If necessary I am going to explain these facts to those in charge in Austin. But first, I am asking you to take the appropriate action to correct the problem. I have no grudge against Ms. Deacon, but she has been heard to threaten to close my business in any way that she can simply because she wants to do me an injury. She is most likely prejudiced against foreigners. She was close friends with the previous owner, and his brother was her next door neighbor. This may also be a factor which explains her dislike of me personally.

I have been told that I am responsible for the way my garage and inspection station are run and I take this very seriously. I have no reason to break the law. I respect the law and your agency, but Ms. Deacon and the officers who often come here with her do not respect anyone. They do not even exhibit any self-respect and they have no manners.

Azmi Ishaq Goushey

Dear Customer,

You all came in during our first week after we leased the store from the Black guy. You all said "you got this one too?" meaning that all Ay-rabs own grocery stores and gas stations. But brother, you were the worst. You spit on us and threw the finger, then you unzipped your pants and exposed yourself at us. After you acted like a stupid, one of our clerks - he punched you and threw you out. The next day you come back and thanking him for teaching you a lesson. Just cut this shit out.

A Black guy still owns the store.

Dear Arab-American Activist Committees,

You blame us when we don't say Black Lives Matter but the last week...the fight in the store over the 10 dollars for the wrong phone minutes and the gang shit in the store and more guys comin...and said to us we are ignorant mutherfucker shit makers and that we should go back to our country because we stealing from a Black community.

Who is our protests? From Ferguson to Palestine, in Gaza or St. Louis, we still scared for our families. Do you know abu-Bassem was killed on Page Ave? He was going to open the grocery with fruit and vegetables. He was Deen and would never sell liquor or glass pipes or even Blunts. They always complain about the liquor store but Yemenis we hate liquor. Go ask the Palestinian and Pakistani sinners about what they sell. Liquor it's not Deen and we don't want pork or liquor.... Now Bassem is a 12 year old with no father, mother not educated, and four sisters. You blame Detroit for saying abeed, while we are called many insulting names and our wives and kids cannot even come see us. We have to live with everyone. The police, the black neighbors, the aldermen who like free sodas and twinkies and hint for the bribes to keep the store open.

Yemeni Business Owners.

Dear Americans.

كلكم اصبحتم اغنياء من النفط السعودي ! سَكْرَتِيْكَ

(Shut your mouth! You all have become rich from the Gulf Oil.)

Best Wishes,
Refugees from Arab Countries

Dear Americans,

This economy started with slavery and it is still slavery only now they call it mass incarceration.

-African-American Citizens

Dear Sirs,

I do have a case. There are numerous witnesses (customers and employees) to the actions of these officers over the past three years and I hope you will do something to prevent any future disruption of my business.

Discrimination, and harassment without due cause by Ms. Deacon are a matter of record. I still have a copy of the bill I mentioned in my previous complaint and Ms. Deacon also owes me \$5.00 for a sticker she took several months ago. The facts as I have explained them are true and I request that you act to correct this unjust situation. I do not believe that I will ever be treated fairly or in a civil manner by Ms. Deacon. Please investigate this situation and inform me of your results. I believe that compensation is due me because of her outrageous and abusive behavior.

Yours Truly,
Azmi Ishaq Goushey

DUST

Stone streets of an old city,
carts lined with rings of fresh bread,
seeded sesame, the scent
of coffee mixed with zalabieh,
where songs of prayer mark time—
here, the hand of God is pressed
in stone. Touch your hand there
palm to palm,
and time will pass
through your fingers,
more enduring than belief. Uniformed men
set against the sky, the dawn
ignores them. A young boy stands,
circled by men, guns
slung over shoulders
like shopping bags. The boy
leans back, delivers the blow,
runs. He knows where and how.
And like the Sea the merchants part,
then rushing back,
one current now, an old man slows
the push of his cart, a woman
slows too and smiles.

* * *

Stories We Tell

How Haja stood at the door,
hands raised to her son
*Don't come in
with those.*
How he took
the grenades
from each pocket
as if they were lemons,
with a smile that said,
There's no need for all that.
Or how the khuwana
stopped our men,
bent over the road,
the last pieces of home
on their backs,
how the men
lifted their heads
to ask *Did you sell it
furnished?*

Or how the checkpoint soldier
questioned the farmer
*What do you
feed your chickens?*
day after day,
then turned him back
for the wrong answer.
How finally the farmer
said with a shrug,
*I give them money.
They decide for themselves.*

Or the young boys loaded
on an army truck,
set free
by pleading hands,
women
who cry *My son!*
and tear their hair.
How the women took
the puzzled faces
to their own,
saying, *Go to your own home now,
child.*

How on the morning
of tawjihi,
the schoolboy
arrived early,
stopped at the designated
knot on the string,
threw down his books,
took off his shirt,
to demand
that the beating
be quick.

Or how the teacher,
now the line
that won't
be crossed,
laughed
as she picked up the stone,

*The land
knows
who loves it.*

* * *

Stories We Don't

Women who carry life
give birth to the dead
at the waiting points
on the open road.

An olive tree on its side,
gnarled fingers reach to the sky,

land is not place.

Of course there was the house
lost,
child loaded
onto a garbage truck,
eyes toward home,
eyes always toward home,
and of course there were those
not so lucky as that,
who died on the long walk,

and of course for the living
the attic came next,
the cold floor,
the seven bodies.
Yes, there were tents, walls, stone,
perhaps a house,
and the names our children bear:
Jaffa
Haifa
Beisan
Jenin,

what a people must swallow:
the hollows of a culture not ours,
the land wet with blood
of others like us
thrown into
the singular
strangeness
of exile,
the thirty years it took
to see their shadows
on every Washington and Main,
this land of ghosts,
the outlines of a brother here,
a sister there,
their eyes, accusing
their eyes, the future.

Maybe regret is passed on
to daughters.
We carry it with us,
pieces of home
on our backs,
one camp to another,
waiting.

And yes,
we remember, still see
her, sister, bearing life,
as she begged for *maya*
on the dusty road, see her stumble
on the stones,
push herself
up,
bearing life,
stumble again,
till finally
she lay still,
the dust
from the road
mixed with her hair
and dry lips
bearing life—

dust
means something different
to us.

LANA HABASH



REFUGEE 150 X 150 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

IMMIGRATION/REVOLUTION

"What is language for if it cannot function for us when we desperately need it?"

INTERVIEW WITH ARAB-AMERICAN POET AND SCHOLAR, MOHJA KAHF BY REWA ZEINATI

RZ: Mohja Kahf, you are a professor of comparative literature and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arkansas. In addition to *Hagar Poems*, published last year by the University of Arkansas Press, you are the author of *E-mails from Scheherazad*, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. You were born in Damascus, Syria, to parents who immigrated to the United States in 1971 when you were almost four years old, and you spent your childhood in the Midwest. Where is home to you? And does one ever stop asking this question?

Mohja Kahf: Never. I've moved I count seven major times in my life, one of them a life-changing immigration about which I was too young to have an opinion. Finally I thought I had settled where I am now. I've been here longer than I've lived anywhere else. But when the Syrian Revolution started, for a minute I thought I would have a chance to reverse that immigration, to go "home again," and I knew I was ready to take that chance. To leave everything again. But of course there is no "home again—" and for Syrians, that is now true in a particularly painful way. But the Syria-hope the Syria-chance shook me up from my illusory settledness and now I know I also am not home yet. I need still to find what I want and seek it and make it home as best I can.

RZ: Your poems explore themes of Arab identity, Muslim identity, and feminist politics. How important is religion to one's sense of identity?

Mohja Kahf: Well, it varies depending on the person, of course. How important is it to mine has evolved over time. For the last sixteen years in the U.S., however, I've found that even though I've been ready to talk from another speaking position, something besides religious affiliation, the world keeps wanting to hear me speak as a "Muslim feminist" or "Muslim American." There is work needing to be done there and I happen to be equipped with the tools for it and so I keep getting pulled back to shoulder some of that work, although I have other work going on to which I also devote energy and wish to see realized. So for example, will I ever be able to publish just a manuscript of love poems? Without bagging it as "Muslim woman love poems?" Hey, I have the manuscript—somebody find me a publisher please.

RZ: The poems you are sharing with us in the current edition of *Sukoon* are stylistically quite different from your previous poems. What compelled the change?

Mohja Kahf: Two things. I went to a poetry reading where a poet had "list poems," and the experience sort of challenged me to write list poems. And secondly, Syria and silence. Meaning, I was at the end of my ability to speak about Syria. An impasse. No sentences were getting through. I was at the end of my belief in the efficacy of language, almost. I felt the end in sight of the vocation of writing, almost. What is language for if it cannot function for us when we desperately need it? need all three components: text, sender, recipient – need someone at the other end to hear what someone sends out into the world, to hear responsively. In Syria, by the regime for decades, language and narrative and expressive function has been so utterly abused and distorted. And then, regarding Syria in the world, the expressive function of language and writing, also so abused and distorted. So this "list poem encounter" seemed to come just then as a possible path out of my impasse. Cut through all that. Forget syntax. Forget grammar which has been manipulated to obscure truths. Let go and sink down to the level of words. Broken words. One word at a time, one phrase at most, like what would be the only units one could manage to get out if one were being strangled or bled out and lay gasping. Just one word, then another. Get it out. Articulate through inarticulateness. If you can do nothing else. Those are gasp poems. Gasp. Syria. Blood. Betrayal. Gasp. I'm too broken to do more than a one-word line. Take it. Gasp. Make sense of it. Carry it on to the next. Gasp. Run. Gasp.

RZ: Your latest book, *Hagar Poems* is a collection written over the course of 20 years. Many of the pieces were written in the '90s, but some were written not too long before the date of publication. Tell us about your experience writing this book, and why it took so long to complete. When is a manuscript ever complete?

Mohja Kahf: You're kind and attentive to have read it and paid attention to such detail as the dates. It's not complete; it's never complete. For starters, there are specifically two more good Hajar poems I wish I had not culled out of it. I had forgotten those two set aside and wish I'd put them back in time. There was a third put-aside poem that I managed to get back into the manuscript before publication. Then there are other poems I had pulled out that maybe were not as strong. I pruned and culled for years, decades, because I wanted it to get published; earlier versions of the manuscript were rejected for publication over the years. All the while, up to a certain point in time, I was also adding more Hajar poems (and then pruning and culling from those too).

I first encountered Hajar when my first baby got sick and had a febrile seizure—first time I had seen one, terrifying. Here's this baby, this life, and you are responsible for keeping it alive, and it's 3am and where did everyone go? I felt abandoned, tricked, like, this is the fine print of the family program that you signed, get married have a baby, but nobody mentioned you how poor you're going to be and how alone even if married, with the nature of patriarchy and with immigration and today's mobility and the global economic system and the lack of universal healthcare all stripping you of those people who might have been around to help in another kind of world. When I woke up from that, I thought, damn, we have glossed over Hajar's story. There is no way it is as sugar-coated as we learn it in the tradition. We had to silence a whole lot of it to just fast-forward from her in the desert alone with her child and desperate to, bingo, whatever platitudes the traditional view gets out of it wrapped up in a bow. Let me unwrap this bow. I want to cut it to shreds. The bits of text about Hajar in the various scriptures are elliptical and cryptic enough to allow for imaginative spaces; you can cut in and interpolate in ways the traditional readings of the texts do not.

And once you start with Hajar, the same project is waiting to be done with so many other figures. Some other figures pulled me over the years and I spent some time on Maryam, on Asiya, on Balqis. But hey everyone, be my guest, there is an endless amount of reconfiguring that could happen with Hajar and her sisters, and with countless other matter of old, if it happens to grab you anew.

And as for the appropriateness of doing that (I guess it's to the conservative readership I say this bit), well, if it is not there in order to grab us anew, what is it there for?

RZ: Tell us about your experience writing the sex column Ask Mohja, for the website Muslim Wake up! How did the idea come about?

Mohja Kahf: Well, those were a heady few minutes, hah. The column wasn't called "Ask Mohja;" it was actually called "Sex and the Ummah," and I was one of two columnists who were supposed to alternate, but it ended up being mostly me, and then some guest columnists I pulled in to try to still have alternating voices. I am delighted to say that it was the place where one of Randa Jarrar's fabulous short stories was first published, as a guest column. It somehow got tagged in people's minds as a "sex advice column," but it was never that – it was a sexually themed fiction column, is all, mostly fiction pieces, although one time I did pull in a "sex advice" guest column by a gynecologist, a Palestinian American feminist. I had sent in "Little Mosque Poems" to the MuslimWakeUp!.com website editors to start with, in a spirit of feminist Muslim self-critique. And then they and I started conversing, and one of our conversations was about how there's this Muslim belief that Islam is a sex-positive religion, and then there's this modern stereotype of Islam as sexually repressive, and the truths are so much richer and more varying than those two positions, so what about exploring the gap between these ideas by delving into sexual experiences from a "Muslim angle" whatever that may mean.

Then there was Abu Ghraib, the exposure of sexual abuse there by U.S. soldiers, and that deflated my joy in doing the column.

What deflated it also was my sense that white readerships wanted to exploit the idea for the wrong reasons, Orientalist reasons. I started getting offers from agents who were interested for all the wrong, imperialist cultural politics, reasons. Well, I had received a death threat from an Islamic extremist reader, and so of course that attracted all the would-be makers of a new neo-con Muslim woman voice or something. And that was not a direction I wanted to go, ever. Man, I coulda been a star if I'd gone that direction, I coulda been rich! Haha.

The whole endeavor of the website was one of progressive Muslims self-critique and of Muslims critiquing conservative Muslim discourse, and that is a project I support. But a few of the writers started going in the direction where "progressive" meant "be a tool of imperialist cultural politics," not progressive at all, not in solidarity with the struggles of oppressed people intersectionally. Just a tiny number, but they got a lot of press. It dampened my enthusiasm for being there with them under that "progressive" label.

RZ: What advice would you give emerging writers? Especially women writers of color?

Mohja Kahf: Give yourself time to take care of your Self. Give your Self space for creativity. Don't fill your life with people who won't nourish you. Remove soul-crushers from your daily life. Also, the people with whom you exchange energies most, their world view will try enter yours, so be careful what you let enter, where you work, where you live. In this white supremacist structure of our times, it is easy as a woman of color to be pushed to be what the structure needs, but is it what You need? What do You need and want? Seek that. This is all advice that I am constantly having to give my Self.

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

Mohja Kahf: Tremendously important. Without them we would just have those bigger journals that can get bigger money. We would have fewer and narrower channels where expression must be funneled. With them, we have multitudinous avenues for a multiplicity of voices and audiences. Without a reader goading it on, wanting it, a poem can wither and die. And with a reader who wants only certain kinds of poems, only certain kinds of poems will be written and see publication. The small literary journals find readers who are hungry for just that unexpected poetry but didn't know what it was until they encountered it.

RZ: What are you working on right on?

Mohja Kahf: A volume of poetry about Syria, about the Syrian Revolution. For whoever will listen. For us, Syrians, if no one else.

Look, I'm sorry if the Syrian Revolution reads to the world's progressives and leftist only as a conspiracy for rightist and imperialist agendas. It seems like I have to apologize for the existence of Syrians who do actually suffer the enormous human rights abuses of the Assad regime, to apologize for this to a world that does not want to hear this because it doesn't fit current progressive agendas. The fact that Syrians are also getting abused by the Islamist extremists who are manipulating the grassroots protest movement for their own ends and in turn getting manipulated by regional and world powers only makes it more urgent that the original Syrian grassroots civilian uprising be recognized and respected. Just because the Syrian uprising doesn't fit what progressives thought about the regime, doesn't mean the human rights abuse doesn't exist. Deal with that. Change your eye to adjust to the fact of our existence as Syrians. I say that, while doing internal critique of those Syrians who are selling out the Syrian Revolution to rightist agendas. My poetry on the Syrian Revolution is my own attempt to deal with the multiple silencing of Syrians, by the regime for five decades, by the right and left globally, by each other. Things grew to such a pass that a Syrian cannot find a space to speak amid so many different kinds of silencing. For a while I was so disheartened in so many ways internal and external that I stopped writing Syria altogether. It seemed so futile wherever one turned, like pounding on a thick beveled glass wall that was soundproof. What was the point of any writing at all? Fuck that; I'm back. Publish me.

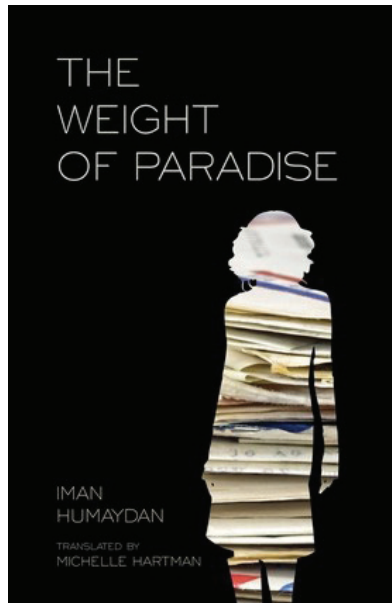


IL GEMILA ILLUSTRATIONS
BY AISHA JEMILA DANIELS

"THE HOMELAND THAT KILLED US IN ITS NAME"
**IMAN HUMAYDAN'S *THE WEIGHT OF PARADISE*, A STORY OF MEMORY, VIOLENCE, AND
THE ELUSIVENESS OF HOMELAND**

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

By Eman M.A. Elshaikh



Iman Humaydan's latest novel *The Weight of Paradise* is a poignant evocation of the fight to defend and restore memory through the cyclical violence, exile, and suffering which seeks to annihilate it. Set mostly in Beirut in 1978 and 1994, the story lives "in the heart of the apocalypse" during the Lebanese Civil War and also emerges from its debris, struggling to piece itself together into an authentic whole. In this Beirut, even small distances are difficult to traverse, as the paths are encircled with violence or buried beneath its aftermath.

"Reconstructing, reconstruction," laments Sabah, a central character who ties together and ruptures the narrative at different points. "Every day on radio and television they talk like this, too. Maybe they want to build and construct so that people will forget."

Indeed, the novel feels like a rejection of forgetting, as the characters in their own ways are obsessed with retrieval. The novel interrogates memory and its antagonists masterfully. It probes the process of destruction and reconstruction and the ways in which they are irretrievably bound up in death, violence, and historical revisionism. In doing so, it is an unflinching portrayal of the violence that lives alongside the characters, who "had become skilled at managing their lives in its shadow."

She seeks out the eccentric but heart-breaking Sabah, an older woman living alone in the old Beirut neighbourhood of Khandaq al-Ghamiq, waiting for her disappeared husband to return and tending to her small garden, even through bombs and gunfire. Living virtually as a recluse, she initially meets Maya with hesitation, but ultimately tells Maya about Noura and Kemal's lives as well as her own.

Sabah's stories and recollections provide Maya with the connective tissue that brings Noura and Kemal's story together. She learns about Noura's self-imposed exile from Damascus after a tragedy in her family and how this exile becomes permanent once Noura starts writing the truth about what happened. She learns about the violence that follows such truths and will stop at nothing to silence them. She learns about Kemal, Noura's lover in Istanbul, and the fragile life they try to build together. But these stories and their tellers are often treacherous, and Maya, like Noura, fights to save truth from oblivion.

Humaydan's main achievement with this novel, which is full of despair and yet buoyed with a promise of love and hope, is in allowing the reader to "enter history through countless endless gates," and in doing so, reread history. It imbues the narrative with a subtle promiscuity that disrupts even the reader's own recollection. In doing so, it forces us to confront the silences and lacunas in our stories and how they can both ruin us and save us. It is also a meditation on the dangers of invented memory and the need to bear witness always. This force is present even in the sweet love story between Noura and Kemal. In her diary, Noura writes, "with him, my doubts about history books started to gain power and take on new meaning."

Humaydan writes in a poignant and confessional voice, which shines most brightly in the pages of Noura's diary and the letters from Kemal, where they write about loss, violence, and lost homelands. They trace their wounds together and look for origins and resting places. In their histories, one finds Arabs, Armenians, Kurds, and Turks and the lands that shift and subsume them under violent nations, lamenting "the homeland that killed us in its name" and yet finding fragments of homeland scattered everywhere.

Though these deliberations on homeland and its erasure are thoughtful, there is also a questionable sense that the violence and oppression of the Middle East are somehow primordial or inevitable. The various scenes, in Damascus, Beirut, and Istanbul, are seemingly always engulfed by death and violence. In these places, both the repressive state and its resisters, both communists and capitalists alike are irrationally cruel. A looming tyrannical government occludes all individuals, who are anonymous, interchangeable, and sublimated within classes or sects. It threatens to destroy indiscriminately and without reason. Government actors, like the ubiquitous and senseless "mukhabarat" are equally anonymous and robotic, incapable of poetry and truth. Though the novel is committed to history, these places seem to exist outside of it.

Perhaps this indictment of these societies as irretrievably violent is in fact an indictment of men, who in the novel are either absent or violent. Even the boys in the novel attain masculinity through violencing women, who in turn "retaliate against oppression by oppressing themselves." In this novel, men push women out of their homelands, punishing them for their desires and their consciousness. "Oppression pushes women to emigrate, to flee," Noura writes, "it's the kind of oppression that often comes in the form of a man." Indeed, Kemal, who was dressed as a girl in early childhood in order to avoid a curse against the family's men, seems to be the only exception.

There is no denying the beauty of the intricate lives woven together by Humaydan in this touching novel. However, in *The Weight of Paradise*, some of these threads are too thin. The reader is riveted by the textured inner worlds of Noura and Kemal but is left craving more of characters like Sabah and Maya. Sabah's fascinating story still craves excavation, as her inner life remains opaque. The reader gets glimpses of her effervescence and her desire to fly and senses the decay of that spirit over time. Through the moving stories of her two lives, her desire for freedom, and her will to be a witness, the reader does not truly get a sense of her pain, but merely its imminence. Maya's voice is poetic yet truncated, and though the backdrop of her life is sketched, the reader gets only a hazy sense of its detail. Through the suitcase, Maya inherits a reservoir of memory and seems to exist primarily to dip into it. Because of this, the novel ends before its force can be fully explored and resolved. In other words, the problem with *The Weight of Paradise* is that it was too brief.

The Weight of Paradise is a powerful call to question our histories, and in doing so, it is a call to question the violence that lives at the heart of it and possibly at the heart of our natures. "But this is us: we feed the poor, we laugh at a passing joke, we love, we mourn, we dance, but we also kill our neighbours in civil wars. Since we are like that, how can we describe ourselves?"

WAR PHOTOGRAPHY

She weaves her way through piles of bodies
Bloating under the sun
A surgical mask distilling the smell of death
In her mouth
The click of her camera a faint echo
Mimicking the sound of gunfire
The day before.
Strange, she thinks,
How she's reminded of her mother's baking
The loaves of bread rising in the oven,
The sponge cake, deemed inedible,
(Too much baking powder)
Left on the kitchen counter to cool
Destined to be thrown away
How she and her brother poked their fingers in the cake
Ate it all
Snatched pieces of warm bread
And left
Pointing the finger at each other -
He did it!
She did it!
At night, she polishes her lenses
Lights a vanilla scented candle
And works on the photos.

HAJER ALMOSLEH



UNTITLED 160 X 140 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

ODE TO MY NIECES AND FUTURE DAUGHTER

I hope you are hard to love
so only men worthy of the climb
to touch the ends of your hair
dare to begin the journey.
I hope you look in the mirror
and gasp at the magic
that is your face and arms
and legs and heart.
I hope you know your fingers
can hold baskets of figs
and bricks and pens
and orbits.
You are all music,
when you scream and curse
and fight and fail at math
and fall out of love and bake
and not know
how to fry a damn egg.
I hope you curse
out loud, don't keep it in your stomach,
and decide whether you want to be soft
or cold or as hard as a sugar cane
and let no one decide how you need to be
to be loved.
I hope you say your names
curl your tongues fill your mouths
Mariam, Laila, Nada, Malak.
You are all prophets and flowers
and holy like the God
that made you perfect
when you were as small
as a fist.
I hope you don't inherit our grief
borrowed from our grandmothers,
so we can finally
give it back.

TALA ABU RAHMEH

HALAB

(1)
A news article reads,
the last pediatrician in Aleppo
was killed in an airstrike.
He was 36
never married
wanted to wait till after the war.
His brain was a vault
that held two boxes,
war, love.
He had a point
not wanting to get married
in the rubble.
The last pediatrician of Aleppo died
but not many of the children will miss him
because they too, are all dead.

(2)
Consider all the tonsils
the last pediatrician of Aleppo
had removed,
all the times he told children
that in the next three days
they have to eat ice cream
so the swelling can go down.
Consider the premature babies
he held in the palm of his hand
and inserted a tube the size
of a pin into their lungs
to finally release air.
Consider the amounts of lollipops
he had given on vaccine days
year after year after year.
Consider the bomb that killed him,
how it had to suck air to be created
and how it had to glide down to hit
the corridor between the operation room
and his heart.

TALA ABU RAHMEH

THE PALESTINE MUSEUM

"Omar al-Qattan, the museum's chairman, said Palestinians were "so in need of positive energy" that it was worthwhile to open even an empty building"" New York Times

Version I

Give me fire,
give me storms and stones
and rebels and 68 years of keys
to stolen doors and windows
and the bullshit we call home.
Give me knives the size of mountains
to slice off settlements and wrap
them in a roll, and roll them off of
our hills to meet their fate elsewhere.
Give me rows and rows of cars
that only race for weddings
not to meet prisoners freed
having spent years fighting our battles.
Give me policemen not wearing blue
not getting paid nothing to hit us
if we decide to march, yell at us
if we decide to decide anything.
Give me memories empty
of the sound of F16s hovering
inside my brain, days of curfew
the length of death.
Give me one damn painting of anything,
not drenched in foreign aid
and 17 approvals from men
who only wear suits for a living.
Give me fire to set
so all of it can burn
burn burn burn burn.

Version II

There are two sides to every story,
the killer and the killed.
An English man in a pub in Dingle
talked about a house demolition
somewhere in Palestine.
It was brutal, he said, what they do
to those people, meaning us,
as we spend our days opening
empty museums.
When did it come to this? I imagine
my grandfather wondering out loud
to two goats and a sheep,
when did it come to our door keys,

when there are seeds in this land
sprouting mlokkieh and hot peppers.
How do you prove the identity of seeds?
When did we become cars
and buildings and tiles
and a loan the size of the occupation
that we have to pay even if our jobs ended,
even if our town lost its roads to a shelling,
even if we were buried underneath our own expensive couches?
What does a museum contain
in a place whose own president
erases it off of the map slowly
in exchange for a pot of gold,
holds his pencil
and wipes away pieces of the earth
our families are buried in?
I want to know why
It's so much better to not
be there, to not hear
the anthem playing for school assembly,
to not hold the flag or carry a stone,
to not wear the map on my chest
to disappear from the root?
I want to know what
I should tell my children
when they point at an empty wall
inside the Palestine museum
and ask,
if this is modern art,
or if my country has finally disappeared.

TALA ABU RAHMEH

AN AMERICAN EDUCATION

2010, Aleppo, Syria

In 34 celsius Aleppo, caldron bubbles
above an open fire, a great soup on the boil,
redolent of sage, bay leaf, olive oil.
Boy stirs the vat with a long handled paddle.
Poured out two inches deep
on a huge wooden floor, cooled for days,
the Arab owner straps on his ice skates
glides across, scoring rectangles, squares,
rounding off corners,
creating patterns for the big saw to separate
bars of expensive Aleppo green soap.
University of Michigan Degree, 2009.
Oh, Education, you are never lost,
only transmogrified.
The desert does that to you.

ANN STURTHERS

BALDING PRECOCIOUSLY

My hair is not thick,
Like the laden silt of Luxor and Aswan
Or shiny,
Like the effervescent heat shimmers
Of a Cairo road.
It is thin.
Not airy,
Like the Alexandria winds on a bright summer beach,
But thin.
I plait the struggling twine into braids,
And watch the whites of my scalp emerge,
Like tributaries of the Nile Delta,
Into the Mediterranean of my forehead.
My hair is not thick,
Like the sand dunes of the Sinai.
Or shiny,
Like the illusory mirage
Of flickering Ramadan lights.
I brush the struggling twine with little force,
But broken hairs nestle in the bristles of my brush,
Like helpless fish in a Port Said net.
My hair is not thick,
Like the volumes of books

On my Jido's wooden shelves.
Or shiny,
Like leftover Turkish coffee
At the bottom of an aluminum pot.
I grapple with what's left of a curly mane,
My only consolation is that
Lions are not native to Egypt.

BY HAYA ANIS



IL GEMILA ILLUSTRATIONS
BY AISHA JEMILA DANIELS

TO THE FOUR LANGUAGES I SPEAK: ARABIC (PT. 1)

When I was born, they poured Arabic into my ear,
jug-mouth to the bowl of my ear, thick and
rich and ornate, honey-sound,
the nurse-maiden with breasts heavy with Islam, my holy milk.
She is a poet's tongue and though I am the lover
of another, I am duty-bound to admire her form, the languor
of her curves, to savor
the way her words land from fall, carpeted by their own whorls,
how they slip between my fingers, silk
stretched taut, Pashmina-ink through the rose-gold-ring of
my mouth, curling in my throat,
ballooning into sound as I breathe my voice into the alphabets,
that unfurl and coil their tails over the page,
their diamond-eyes watching, the regal swoop of the kajal,
their generous, matronly curves and open, laughing smiles, lazy discipline
in quiet control.
Sultry, the lascivious hijabi, rendered sensual by her very restraint, sinuous
within her confines,
I pull her into a dance.
She lets me twirl her around, both snake-watchful and panther-loose-
limbed
sunned by my attention, spinning a maze around
my pen.
Arabic, a mystery to all who speak her, changing form from tongue
to tongue like a djinn;
Arabic, drunk under the niqab, champagne made dream made sound
made a poet's fever dream.



110 X 150 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

8 WAYS TO GET RID OF STAINS, PERMANENTLY

1- Do it the Noor way

Track her down in a parking lot
Gun the engine of your Jeep Grand Cherokee
Bear down on her
30 miles per hour
Strike her
Toss her in the air
Once she hits the pavement
Swerve
And run over her again

2- Do it the Medina Memi way

Tie her hands behind her back
Dig a hole in the garden
Next to the henhouse
While she's watching
Throw her in the hole
Heap the soil back
Finish up by pouring concrete

3- Do it the Sonya Ogmen way

A single gunshot in the head
In the back of your car
A swift
Tried and tested move

4- Do it the Dayala way

Strangle her with both hands
It might be harder this way
But hey
That's what having two brothers is for

5- Do it the Aya way

Set her on fire
Let the fourth degree burns do the job..
After 9 days in the hospital,
The 13-year-old stain will perish forever

6- Do it the Duleil way

(Duleil, because in Jordan
Stains remain nameless)
Slit her throat
Stab her 20 times
Dump the body in the waste ground
Some 500 yards away
Go back and finish eating the mansaf
She cooked for you

7- Do it the Shafilea way

Suffocate her with a plastic bag
In front of her sister
Dump her by the river
Plastic bag and all

8- For multiple stains

Do it the Zainab, Sahar, Geeti, Rona way
Make sure they're all in the car
Unconscious
Submerge the car in water
Nothing cleans stains better than running water

HAJER ALMOSLEH

Dante's Purgatorio, Canto 6, Line 112: Come, see your Rome who, widowed and alone, weeps bitterly; both day and night, she moans: "My Caesar, why are you not at my side?"

1

In the Middle East we have our own term for dictatorship. We call it: "الدولة العميقة", the "Deep Nation".

Deep as in a rotting root stretched throughout the soil that feeds you.

Deep as in a cancerous spine holding your diseased body together.

Deep as in poetry, like an ode to Stockholm Syndrome, to a father who lullabies you to bed before reaching under the covers.

Americans ask me why Arabs love dictators and I say abusive relationships are hard to get over.

When Mubarak fell back in 2011, Cairo couldn't help but cry, sent him a text message: اسفين يا ريس. Please come back.

Virtually every Arab country has been under a brutal regime since the fifties.

My country has only known men who express their love with boot heels and batons. You try and imagine the trauma of a nation black-eyed from its own fist, the self-hate that comes with seeing your own body eat itself.

Forgiveness on a national scale is no easy feat.

It is realizing that your body cannot be blamed for what has been done to it. It is realizing that dictatorship is an STD that can't be passed consensually.

It grows and blisters on the testicles of men who see the world as their oyster, men who fuck the oyster senseless, hand it lemons for its sores, tell it to make lemonade and move on, says there is no place here for terrorists when it tries to move on.

2

In Connecticut, I turn on the television and see Wolfe Blitzer's wide eyes gazing in wonder at me, see Megyn Kelly flick

her lustrous hair and ask me what's wrong with my country.

As if we asked for it, as if every Arab nation got down on one knee with ring and bouquet, smiled at the bruises, laughed at the cigarette burns. As if this wasn't an arranged marriage decades in the making.

As if you weren't a bored matchmaker who just wanted to see what would happen, a child playing with matches then gasping at the fire. Grows up to be a fireman. Has us pay to put out the flames. marvels at how fast a brown body can burn, puts that shit on CNN. Tells you to look at how bad of an example these people are setting for their children. Americans ask me why Arabs can't just choose democracy and I tell them it is not as simple as a break up song.

Egypt will not wake up tomorrow and make a new Spotify playlist. Even if it does, you will not listen.

Even if you do, it will be in the background of a house party. You will drink your Miller High Life and toast to freedom, how intoxicating its taste is.

You will remind yourself that Muslims don't drink alcohol. You will wonder why it is they shut themselves out of the world.

White Americans talk about democracy like it's a bag of seeds you buy at Home Depot, sprinkle across your backyard before freedom grows fully bloomed from the soil, petals red and blue outstretched.

They talk like all soil is the same.

Like every seed comes with a 100% satisfaction sticker, guaranteed to give you a luscious plant.

They forget how one strain of unwanted plant can kill an entire farmland. They forget that some seeds give you strange fruit. They forget that we have been planting our own crops for over seven thousand years.

3

There's a reason self-love is tied to revolution, it's a two way street.

In the right context, the word radical can be applied to anything from an uprising to a selfie.

If nothing else, they both state: I am worth preserving.

Forgiveness is no easy feat.

The Middle East is still moaning. Cairo is still waiting for Caesar, still looking to the words of a dead white man for self-validation. But my people are still a body, which is to say, I am a white blood cell, which is to say, the virus has not yet won, which is to say: حلوة بلادى السمرة, بلادى الحرة. أنا على الرابطة بغنى. ملكش غير إني أغنى و أقول تعيشى يا مصر.

BY HAZEM FAHMY



120 X 100 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI



ARE YOU LIVING OR JUST ALIVE?

By Sarah Moawad

I stare at her. She stares back. I wonder who she is, everyday, I wonder where she's going. Some days I think I know, other days I let myself be oblivious. I lean closer, get a better look. Reaching in, I shatter her image, scattering droplets of life and light and tiny rainbows, only to find her once again in the palm of my hand. I bring her closer, placing my lips against hers, and sip until she is gone, absorbed. Rocks beneath me, jagged against the soles of my feet and smooth against the feet of my soul. Sun flirts with clouds, first playing hard to get then coming close for an intimate embrace, shape-shifting, losing form, each melting within the other. Becoming one.

The sudden rush of rapids, hurrying to greet us, escaping the isolation of mountain life, causes you to stumble, lose balance. But you're okay with it. We're all stumbling. Stumbling through cities we've never heard of, streets whose names we can't pronounce. Through narrow cobblestone alleyways and makeshift markets selling things you don't need but convince yourself that you do. Past crumbling remnants of brick and mortar that remain a reminder of what once was.

Stumbling upon intimate weddings in richly adorned gothic churches and bustling family reunions whose members don't know you and whose language you don't speak. And finding yourself in their pictures. Stumbling into abandoned warehouses that smell of sweat and failed ideas, into artisan workshops littered with plastic bottle cap butterflies and newspaper clocks and endless amounts of sawdust. Stumbling up mountains in flimsy flip-flops, past las cuevas, the caves, where laundry on clothing lines and broken baby strollers meet fire and ferocity and strength embodied in music and dance. Stumbling upon young lovers (and old lovers) in dark crevices and the lingering, everpresent scent of inhaled relaxation, pungent and earthy.

To be a stranger. But even more...to be a seeker. To wander aimlessly purposeful. To be struck by familiarity in unfamiliar places, to hear fragments of sacred language and piece together the remnants of your heritage, found in plates of leftover couscous and the aroma of floral black teas steeped in brass teapots engraved with the words "la ghalib illa Allah"*. To find life in every trickling stream, every fig tree, every hauntingly mysterious black cat that seems to appear just when you've lost your way to remind you, embrace the loss. And to take you deeper.

By now, my feet have forgotten what it feels like to walk on level ground. And I'm glad they have. The roads mimic life in their unpredictable dips, their harsh climbs, their hesitance, their uncertainties. I don't know what brought me here, but as I soar past proud, dilapidated infrastructure covered in graffitied wisdom on the back of a motorcycle driven by a man I've never met, I know that I am home, in this place that bears no resemblance to any "home" I've ever known. It may go by a different name now, but it is forever ours, our legacy (henna)tattooed on its every brick. and I will lose myself in it.

I turn right. And again. Only right. Winding through alleys that grow tighter and more abrupt, past the Grand Mesquita (read: masjid), the comforting call of the Athan gently urging a return to the One, the unexpected coolness, a welcome reprieve from the summer heat, brought upon by its marble water fountains. The stones and faces no longer look familiar but I continue, always turning right, reassured by the watchful gaze of Alhambra above, protected in its presence. Stray dogs lounge lazily in the shadows of citrus trees, gazing up at me knowingly, as if carrying a secret I was soon to discover. As I approach, walls seem to vanish and every dead end turns out to be a clearing, the beginning of a new pathway. The scene ahead blurs, spinning in and out of focus, beyond comprehension...colors fuse and blend and fade, time seems to accelerate while remaining perfectly still. I close my eyes and breathe in. Musk. Somehow the air is heavy with it, with no apparent source. "Khitamuhu misk."** Its seal is musk. I am nearing an end, an origin, a finality...but of what? The ayah reverberates, the fragrance intoxicates...I don't understand but know I don't need to. Not now. Just be open, absorb, let the world seep in through your pores.

The scene has changed. Weathered brown fingers carrying prayer beads. Vibrant, flowing robes, bearded men, silk scarves framing proud, dignified faces of breastfeeding mothers and women merchants in spice-filled marketplaces. Those dilapidated walls restored, having reclaimed their original form – strong and grounded, homes, schools, mosques. Libraries, resurrected from the ashes. Palaces meticulously designed, boasting of greatness but always humility before the ultimate Greatness, al-Akbar. An olive-skinned young boy leans against the steadfast trunk of a tree carved and shaped by the elements, housing the secrets of the ancients. He almost disappears among the thick entanglement of proud, determined roots, stuttering through a book of Hebrew poetry, his struggle evident as his persistence unyielding. Songs of doves and nightingales intermingle with recitation of poetry in effortless Arabic, hushed prayers in monasteries,

echoes of children's laughter in open mosque/church/temple courtyards, flowing water through lush gardens... janaatin tajri min ta7tiha al-anhar***. Four women, their backdrop the sharp, rocky hills of Sacromonte****, dotted with lives and stories tucked away in caves, sit on the ground weaving carpets of turquoise and crimson with flecks of gold. One looks up at me and I notice the mole on her left temple, mirroring mine. Another on the side of her nose. My grandmother's chin. I trace the contours of her familiar face as she does mine. The shadows of a smile in her eyes. The dark curls that escape her loosely wrapped scarf. She nods, welcoming me home.

Eyes open. In front of me, the wall reads, "Tired of not finding answers, I decided to change my questions." And her. Our eyes fixed, black and unwavering; her skin a blend of olives, honey, and pomegranates. Dignified and deliberate, again she stares back at me. But this time, I feel no need to shatter her.

**Translation: There is no victor but God*

*** Phrase from the Quran meaning "it's seal is musk," referring to the wines of Paradise*

**** Description of Paradise from the Quran: "gardens beneath which rivers flow"*

***** Neighborhood in Granada, Spain, home to a large Roma community who built their homes in caves;
also known as home of Flamenco music and dancing*

ZA'ATAR

I can hear my uncle's voice,
syllables rolling from his throat like rose water;
here, my eyes feel healthy and round,
swathed in nearly viscous Mediterranean air
despite the classic clouding build-up
of too many balcony cigarettes.

My tongue is wrapped in an effervescent sting
of tangy fruit and dusty pull-tab Pepsi cans,
but mostly spices –
so many that there must be tastebuds
coating the roof of my mouth and
inside my cheeks
to let me taste them all.

Vous me manquez
You are missing from me:
land of trilingual sentences and yes,
shell-shattered sidewalks,
oiled men lingering outside grocers,
distressing strolls past the machine-gun-guard
just to buy *manaqish* for breakfast,
and the particular timbre of a car backfire
and how it is different than a bomb;

but mostly connections –
missing reminders of
this is where you come from
and
there is more to this world than here –

ZEENA FULEIHAN

FORGOTTEN CONNECTIONS

I didn't know I loved concrete,
uneven beneath my sandals,
its shattered curves stretching
around my crumbling homes.

I didn't know I loved the *adhan*,
the *mu'addin's* voice rumbling my pillow
just as jetlag pulls me to sleep, I pause
my dreams to listen, sans prayer.

I didn't know I loved *argileh*,
not in my lungs but pools of smoke,
mustached mouths blowing tobacco
clouds
over coffee with cardamom that stays on
my tongue.

I didn't know I loved the throat,
its longing for rhotic consonants,
always holding on for one more moment
as guttural trills roll out and into my ears.

I didn't know I was missing something,
roots or ancestors, the Beirut scent,
but leaving home –
my rugs, teapots, *za'atar* behind –

I didn't realize I had room
to love my Lebanese passport
under my father's dresser,
I didn't realize I belonged there –

My parents stopped teaching me Arabic
after 9/11 – now, I wish to return.

ZEENA FULEIHAN

MY UNCLE'S BELONGINGS, ELEVEN YEARS LATER

I gather tarnished teaspoons,
fragments of blue glass fallen from the wall
where once hung an eye, daring
the evil to look.

I lay shards among silver,
on the stained black and white keffiyeh
which once hung around your neck, covering
unblemished skin.

I imagine your body bursting,
fire licking the inside of your chest
where once hung a heart, beating
after the bomb, no longer.

ZEENA FULEIHAN

WHITE DOG

reaches my chin and has a twin as white as my baby sister's ash as white as that mirror lying flat
on the funeral bed in the verandah for us to go around its glare as white as the sash the bribe the
bonus the paper not signed for peace in one country then another and another so dog yes bite the
ears that hear the endless lie resigned to mind becoming myth bite the eye that saw ruin for room
in a house bent like whip-cracked spine bite the tongue no bird envied bite the voice under the
weight of all your white

SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI



195 X 150 CM ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

TRIAL AND ERROR

By Farah Ali

Aisha stares at herself in her full-length mirror. Her blue dress falls at her knees. It's hot outside, but she opts to wear her black leggings anyway. She fusses with the left sleeve, which stops an inch above her elbow. Biting her lower lip and still staring tentatively at her reflection, Aisha runs a hand over the top of her head. Her black hair is wrapped in a tight bun, as that is the only style she knows how to wear. Having spent hours pouring over fashion magazines and watching makeup tutorials, Aisha had never bothered to learn how to style hair. There was never any point to it because no one would ever see it.

Deciding that her outfit is satisfactorily flattering, she takes a seat at her vanity. She had always loved makeup, ever since she was a child and she used to watch her mom apply mauve lipstick before going to parties. Now, Aisha has a drawer full of her own makeup: foundation, eye shadows, eye liners, lipsticks and an assortment of powders, all of which she ritualistically applies every day before heading out to work. It's her favorite part of the morning, apart from having that first sip of coffee five minutes after getting up. Today, however, Aisha is suddenly aware of the slight discrepancy between her foundation shade and her skin tone. She had never paid attention before, but now she notices that her face is darker than her neck. Yet another aspect of her appearance she had previously taken for granted. She digs into her drawer and pulls out a compact and applies some light powder to counter the foundation, briefly wondering if anyone else had ever noticed the mismatch before. It doesn't seem likely, she decides, without seeing her neck it'd be impossible for anyone to know.

Fifteen minutes later, Aisha finishes her makeup and stares into the mirror of her vanity. She pulls her hair out of the bun and shakes her head a little as she wraps her hair tie around her wrist. She looks helplessly at her hair, but decides that she'll deal with learning how to style it some other time. Besides, the point of today is to look normal, not glamorous. It takes Aisha a little more than an hour to get to Atlanta. She has a few acquaintances there, but figures there's very little chance of running into any of them if she's wandering around aimlessly. She parks her car on the street when she reaches midtown, and upon getting out, a wave of nervousness hits her. She slams the car door shut, as if to keep herself from backtracking. She's at the point of no return, at least for today.

As she walks along the sidewalk, glancing left and right every few moments to take in her surroundings, Aisha can't help but wonder if people are looking at her. It's stupid, she acknowledges to herself, as she passes a comic book store. No one knows her here, and she's not walking around with a 'before' and 'after' photo taped to her chest. Still, it's not completely in her head. After walking down the same street for ten minutes and wondering if there's a more interesting part of Atlanta she should be in, Aisha comes across a women's clothing boutique and goes inside. A sales associate who is folding cardigans near the entrance greets her warmly. Nothing out of the ordinary. As Aisha absently picks her way through different clothing racks full of things she knows she can't afford, she notices a middle-aged man who's with his wife and toddler son. The man casually glances at her and then returns his attention to his wife and son. His glance flits back to Aisha three more times over the course of a few minutes. Slightly out of the ordinary.

Aisha finds a bookstore next. It takes her a few minutes to find the travel section. She's thinking of going to Portugal in a couple of months to see a friend. She finds several Portugal guidebooks and pulls them off the shelf. She glances around and doesn't see any sort of seating in the store, so she sits on the carpet, resting her back against the bookshelf.

By the time Aisha finishes perusing two guidebooks and picks up the third one from her pile, a man who looks a bit younger than her - probably mid-20s - wanders into the travel section. He's good-looking and wearing an AC/DC t-shirt. She gives his clothing choice her mental approval and goes back to her book.

She glances up again when she realizes that he's still standing there. He looks at her hesitantly. "Oh!" Aisha says suddenly, sitting up straighter. "Am I in your way?"

The man smiles timidly. "Sort of. I'm trying to get to Turkey," he says, pointing at the shelf behind her. Aisha picks up her books and stands up. For a fleeting moment she wants to jokingly tell him that the airport is about fifteen miles south of where they are standing.

"Sorry about that," she mumbles instead.

"Don't worry about it. I'll just be a sec, and you can reclaim your spot," he says as he bends down to the shelf that Aisha had just been using as a backrest.

Aisha smiles and nods, and then realizes that Handsome AC/DC Shirt Guy has his back turned to her. Eventually, he gets up and faces her again. "Found one," he says. He grimaces as he turns the book around to check the price on the back cover. "Thirty dollars for a 500 page book on an entire country. And all I plan to do is go to Istanbul for a bit."

Aisha glances at the bottom shelf where the Turkey guidebooks are arranged. She shifts her gaze up to the next shelf over, where the Turkey guidebooks continue.

"You know, they have Istanbul-specific books too," she says, pointing to the shelf he had skipped.

Handsome AC/DC Shirt Guy glances back at the shelves. "Oh!"

He returns to the shelf and grabs a thinner book on just Istanbul. "Hey, thanks," he says. "I don't know how I didn't notice that there were more books here."

"No problem," Aisha responds. She's still holding her own pile of guidebooks but feels only vaguely aware of how heavy they're getting. Being in the presence of handsomeness has that sort of effect on her.

Handsome AC/DC Shirt Guy, however, notices her load and steps back, waving his hand in the direction of her vacated spot. He smiles again at her. "Sorry if I disturbed you."

Aisha smiles at him. "You didn't."

Twenty minutes later Handsome AC/DC Shirt Guy, whose name turns out to be Josh, asks Aisha for her number. She tells him that she's flattered, but that she's visiting from out of town. He looks disappointed, but smiles all the same. They part ways, but Josh gives Aisha his number anyway, and asks her to give him a call the next time she visits Atlanta.

As she walks away from the checkout with her new guidebook, Aisha replays the interaction between herself and Josh in her head and wonders if things would have panned out differently had she dressed the way she normally did. Considering that no one ever asks her out, she's inclined to believe that no, he wouldn't have been as interested in her if she were more covered up.

By the end of the afternoon, Aisha is at a gas station, filling her tank for the drive home. Bored, she looks around at the other cars and drivers around her while sitting in her own car. Then she sees a woman about her age at the pump across from hers, wearing jeans, a white cotton tunic, and a headscarf. Aisha quickly averts her gaze and focuses instead on the steering wheel of her own car. She doesn't know her, but she feels uncomfortable all the same. Guilty. Ashamed. Deviant.

A minute later, she sees the Muslim woman drive towards the gas station exit, her windows rolled down to reveal two small children laughing in the back seat. She stops for the oncoming traffic, and Aisha sees the left turn signal blinking on the back of her car.

"Go back to your country!"

Aisha's heart races as she glances around frantically. And suddenly she sees it. Another car pulls up behind the Muslim woman, and the driver, a man in sunglasses, is sticking his head out the window and now honking his horn. He looks furious.

"Get out of here, sand nigger!" He shouts.

For a moment, Aisha wants to jump out of her car and yell at him. Shock paralyzes her though, and moments later, the Muslim woman makes her left turn, her tires screeching at the abruptness of her turn. The car behind her drives up and makes a right turn.

An hour later, Aisha stops at a rest area so she can use the bathroom. As she returns to her car, she looks over at the passenger seat, where she had left her shopping from the day, along with her purse. She pauses for a moment, but then reaches for her purse and pulls out a scarf, and - by accident - the slip of paper with Josh's number on it comes out as well. She stares at his number for a few seconds before reluctantly crumpling it up and dumping it back in her purse. She pulls off the hair tie from her wrist and puts her hair in a bun. She then takes her scarf and covers her hair, taking a few moments to drape the scarf in the manner she had grown accustomed to over the years.

Aisha adjusts the rearview mirror to inspect herself. She wishes she had remembered to pack a cardigan, as her arms suddenly feel very bare. She hugs herself at the elbows, the shock of the man's words still stinging her. She starts the car again and pulls out of the rest area to continue on her way home, tears rolling down her cheeks.



I KNOW THE FUTURE
BY JESS RIZKALLAH

BUTCHER'S BEST

We share a nose
and that's it.

I'd have preferred
your tongue
from the homeland which isn't mine,
where teeth and skin, air, hair and eyes
are roasted
to the same shade of coffee stained;
its blistered red pepper a
potpourri
humidity swaddles,
with pockets of
oud, sweat, pomegranate molasses
and the butcher's best.

Where words are
songs, and movements dances,
mornings spectral.

Instead, we're blanketed,
so as not to tan
under the energy-saving bulbs,
where geshneez
is too gutsy for beige meals
in tin can towns,
and jumpers sag
on radiators,
washing powder overpowered
by waning expectations,
rising damp,
and these bitty alphabets.

Where you thought
the grass
was greener.

HUMEIRAH OUGRADAR

BILINGUAL

Talking on eggshells
tentative, tentative,
lest your tongue should be imprisoned
for swirling and twanging around sounds they recognise only as other.

Your love songs and idioms fall flat when boxed into the constraints of their language,
into those bland blahs you borrow, though would never call your own,
stumbling over lingos,
handicapped by exoticism.

When you answer the phone, your foreign peals ring out across the high-street,
not caring about the stares,
you wait for words to take you home.

HUMEIRAH OUGRADAR

O ALERI
By Mishka Mojabber Mourani

Twenty-two countries make up the Arab League. All speak a form of Arabic, but no two countries speak the same dialect of the language. There were eight of us, all from Lebanon, including my ten-year-old daughter, Lara. This was two years before Egypt's Arab Spring. We had flown in to Cairo and then taken another flight to Aswan in Upper Egypt, landing at the brand new airport that accommodates thousands of tourists daily. An air-conditioned bus took us to the TiYi, our '5-star floating hotel' as it was referred to in the brochure. The ship was a river cruiser, one of several docked side by side on the Nile. The first item on our program was to sail on a traditional felucca, a sailboat, to Lord Kitchener's Botanical Gardens.

The felucca was steered by a tall, slim, dark-skinned man of indeterminate age, dressed in a flowing white cotton robe called a galabiyya. "This is Mahgoub, he is a native of these parts, a Nubian," said Peter, our guide, who was a Copt from Luxor. The Copts, though a minority in Egypt, are the largest Christian community in the Arab world. They are reputed to be the original inhabitants of Egypt.

Like Mahgoub, Peter had very dark skin. He spoke Egyptian in a clear monotone: "Nubia was one of Africa's earliest civilizations. Although they speak Sudanese Arabic, they have a very strong and distinct tribal culture that continues to this day. The Nubians were great warriors. In antiquity, their land was famed for its natural wealth in gold, ebony, ivory and incense. Nubia is the homeland of Africa's earliest culture, with a history which can be traced back to 3800 BC. Egypt ruled much of Nubia for a thousand years in the second millennium BC. In the eighth century BC, Egypt collapsed into civil war, and Nubian kings ruled Egypt.

With a traditions and a history that can be traced to the dawn of civilization, the Nubians first settled along the banks of the Nile in the area of Aswan. Until they lost their last kingdom, Christian Nubia, five centuries back, the Nubians remained as the main rivals to the other great African civilization of Egypt." Peter delivered this information as if reciting a lesson, but there was a muted enthusiasm and earnestness in his speech. He took pride in his ethnic roots. He talked about thousands of years of history, and the rivalries and animosities of ancient times, as if they had happened only yesterday.

The boat sailed on in silence, and we come across three ducks floating peacefully in the river. They were undisturbed by our proximity.

"How come these ducks come so close? Aren't they afraid they will be caught?" Lara asked Peter. He laughed. "These ducks are not edible- their flesh is gamey. It tastes too strong. They don't fear humans; it's the crocodiles they used to worry about. But since the Aswan Dam, the crocodiles all floated towards the Mediterranean and died in the salt water. The only crocodiles you find now in these parts are south of the dam; they are raised in the Nubian villages along the Nile, but they are small and they don't survive long."

Lara opened her eyes wide and whispered to me, "They have crocodiles as pets!"

We landed on Lord Kitchener's island and spent the next couple of hours strolling along the paths that wound through

the elegant gardens, until we reached a vantage point from which we could see the Aga Khan's mausoleum. The orderly gardens and manicured lawns, commissioned by Lord Kitchener in the 19th century, abounded with flowers and trees from all over the world. Like everything else on the Nile, the island with its gardens appeared serene and ageless, as if frozen in time. We left the island bemused, as if we had travelled not across a short expanse of water but through time.

On the way back from the botanical gardens, the wind died, and the sail no longer propelled us. The felucca floated idly on the river. The makeshift gangplank that had been used to bridge the gap between the boat and the landing strip doubled up as an unwieldy oar. But Mahgoub used the oar more to steer the boat than to move it forward. Although there was no breeze, the April air was cool. Distinct swathes of color met the eye in succession— the blue grey river, green strips of foliage and trees, followed by the uniform yellow of the desert beyond. The felucca floated quietly, interrupted occasionally by the noises made by river birds flying overhead.

We came upon another boat in the placid river and actually touched it. Two Nubian men dressed in local gallabiyahs greeted us from the boat. Mahgoub left the rudder in the hands of our guide and leapt nimbly past the passengers to the bow. He clasped the hand of the younger of the two men, executed a half pirouette and was promptly on the other boat.

The men chatted and laughed briefly in a language we could not understand, and Mahgoub stepped back onto our boat. His friend clasped Mahgoub's hand again and followed him aboard. He was carrying a satchel in one hand and a tambourine in the other.

"This is Abdel Salam!" said Mahgoub jovially. The guest sat down and immediately started to chant, accompanied by the tambourine. Every verse ended with the word "aleri."

"What does aleri mean, Peter?"

"It's a Nubian word that is used often here in songs. It's a greeting of sorts."

The beat was lively. The musician encouraged us to repeat "O aleri" after every verse. We did that tentatively but soon joined in with glee, carried away by the hypnotic beat.

The wind was still weak, so we barely moved forward. We were all gaily engaged in chanting "O aleri!" Many of the verses were either in a tribal dialect, or in the Egyptian dialect of Upper Egypt, so even though we knew Arabic, we didn't always catch the meaning of the chants. Peter translated the verses to us and we all sang along. The rhythm of the song drove us, and we couldn't help repeating the chorus, mimicking our river guides as their teeth flashed gleefully in the sun.

My lover is so proud! O aleri!
But I will win her heart! O aleri!
You grace us with your presence! O aleri!
My river is so generous, O aleri!
Widen, widen, widen! O aleri!
My river is so powerful! O aleri!
Welcome to Alaska! O aleri!

"Welcome to Alaska?! Is that what he said?" Lara asked her dad.

"Yes, he did! I wonder what else he has been singing to us as we clap him on," mused my husband, "I am not sure that he and Mahgoub are not having us on..."

"Don't be a cynic," I told him. But I wondered, too.

I turned to Peter, who said, as if thinking aloud, "The Nubian tribes overthrew their Egyptian overlords and were united by a great king who founded a prosperous and proud royal dynasty. This king is revered in the Nubian traditions. His name...", Peter pauses as if for effect, "was Alara..."

"You think 'aleri' refers to Alara?" I asked. Peter smiled and said, "Who knows," as he looked at the two haughty and virile Nubians. They grinned back.

At that point we crossed another felucca with two blonde middle-aged women on board. They looked Northern European. They gaped in fascination at Mahgoub and Abdel Salam, then clapped delightedly and joined in the chant. "O aleri!" The two feluccas floated side by side.

The Nubian's next verse was in Arabic, "Our women are more beautiful."

Everyone, including the tourists in the other boat, endorsed him with a resounding "O ALERI!" although I doubt that they understood what he had said. The mood was festive.

"Lengthen, lengthen, lengthen!"

"O Aleri!"

"My river makes me powerful!"

"O Aleri!"

"Conquer, vanquish, rule!"

"O Aleri!"

Abdel Salam chuckled and put down his tambourine; we applauded.

He then drew out the satchel he had brought with him and started to uncover its contents. We stared in expectation. Abdel Salam brought out several packages, wrapped in newspaper. He started unpacking bead necklaces, carved wooden animals, shell bracelets and other trinkets, which he showed around. Only two of the women in our group were interested.

The Nubian negotiated matter-of-factly, insisting his wares were all hand-made in his village. He did not haggle. He had lost his congenial smile. The women bargained lethargically before purchasing a couple of items from him.

The spell was broken. Abdel Salam put back the rest of his merchandise into the satchel.

We gazed at the river. It was uncomfortably hot all of a sudden. "I wish the wind would pick up," said one of the women listlessly. The boat remained stationary. The ducks floated past. Mahgoub leaned over the side of the felucca, scooped up water from the river, and drank deeply. I could see Lara's eyes widen. We had warned her about drinking the tap water in Egypt, and here was this man drinking directly from the river...

A breeze sprang up. Mahgoub took a hold of the rudder as the boat moved forward. We made our way to the other side of the river in silence and disembarked a few meters away from where the TiYi was docked.

Abdel Salam was the first one off the boat. He disappeared in the crowd of people on the dock, his white galabiyya blowing in the breeze. Peter helped us off the felucca, paid Mahgoub, and waved briefly to him as the Nubian set sail again for the other side of the Nile. We remained standing on the dock as Mahgoub's felucca picked up speed. He did not as much as cast a glance in our direction.

We turned our backs on the Nile and made our way to the floating hotel. We would never know if these imperious men had been making fun of us, or if they were softening us up so we could buy their wares. As we walked away, I could hear my child humming quietly, "O Aleri..."



LIFEGUARDS IN LESBOS

patrol the water for sinking boats crowded
with refugees, and daily experience
the horror of lifting out a child
with no legs, a man who died

of a heart-attack when he was rescued.
But one of them decided to help
a little girl, Yara, recover from her
fear of the deafening, tumultuous

sea; the screams of a cousin as he
disappeared beneath the sudden
slap of a wave, the loss of her
father's gentle voice, and then

the arrival in a strange place that tore
at her memories where there are
no small consolations like a grandmother's
smile, and lives with her mother

in a tent teeming with other people.
The lifeguard took Yara to the calm part
of the Aegean that was like a mirror
and held her above it in his arms

like a terrified little puppy, spilling
drops of water on her head, a few
at a time. A half-hour later, he added
more drops, then handfuls of water

until finally, Yara was wading with him
and splashing. He created an island
of hope within an island overwhelmed
with thousands of refugees and too few

resources, a moment that was a luminous
unburdening for him and for Yara.
Holding her in his arms, he healed
a world that is besieged by trauma..

MARGUERITE BOUVARD



50 X 35 CM INK ON PAPER

BY TAREK BUTAYHI

GHOMEEDAH WITH FEMININITY

Here my palm, somewhere else a house
broken into. Shattered windows sprawling

in place of an invasion. Every piece intact, cracked
into itself. Zephyrs gutting

tenderness into discretion for the world
to look through a bruised sky

collected in glass. In a séance, leaves
envy the natural sound carried

in crisps. Inside, chamomiles sprout to be crushed
under a wanderer's foot. Wholly, unplucked.

An abandoned silk farm outlives the offering
of delicacy. A field is ransacked

for the safekeeping of next season's crop. A pyre
clenched in my fist wafts softness for miles.

This juice was not squeezed out of unbroken fruit.
It matters where a thing comes from.

These pits don't teeth plums without swallowing the soil.
My tips chiseled my tips obsidian smooth. Pried open

in mirrors sequenced with arrowheads fit by the cut
ready to fill me in.

NADIM EL CHOUFI

BOYS' SUMMER NIGHTS

Far from our houses
we made home of
hands intertwined

stomping the grounds of Lebanon
to hear the mountains moan
the echo of our love.

Too infinite to be contained
by the night skies above

we became gods on earth
to be seen only through
the reflection of our eyes.

And we danced in circles
more sacred than a dervish
whirling to find God.
We found each other
every shoulder blade
a wing winced
of love taught
down to us
by fathers and sons
like fruits and flies

pure until the touch
of their own skin

in the open
boy and boy
every touch
a shadow renounced
to become its own light
every dance
unlearning
the last step
we soared
we became men

NADIM EL CHOUFI



TEARDROP
BY ANILA Q. AGHA

THE EYE (Ekparastic Poem for Teardrop Image by Anila Q. Agha)

Its glass stems of equilibrium
 Lifting funeral-camphor rainbows
 (muscle memory debauched diffused between
 fresh bruise and the solemn forever)
 Wafting
 in the perfectly formed
 unshed
 tear
 -drop



30 X 21 CM INK ON PAPER
BY TAREK BUTAYHI

Artists' /Writers' bios:

GEORGE ABRAHAM is a Palestinian-American poet attending Swarthmore College. He is a Pushcart nominee and a 2-time recipient of the Favianna Rodriguez Artistic Activism Award. His chapbook, *al youm: for yesterday & her inherited traumas* - a winner of the Atlas Review's 2016 chapbook contest - is forthcoming in 2017. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Diode*, *Apogee*, *the Margins*, *Thrush*, *Kweli*, and the *Ghassan Kanafani Palestinian Literature Anthology*. He hopes to continue bringing awareness to Palestinian human rights/socio-economic struggles through art. website: <http://gabrahampoet.wixsite.com/gabrahampoet>

TALA ABU RAHMEH is a writer and translator based in New York. Her poems have been published in a number of magazines and books including Naomi Shihab Nye's *Time to Let me In: 25 under 25*, *LARB*, *20*20* magazine, *Enizagam*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Blast Furnace*, and *Kweli*. Parts of her memoir-in-progress were published in "*Beirut Re collected*," published by Tamyra's Publishers and available in both French and English. Her poem "Cape Cod," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

FARAH ALI loves languages, travel and writing. She holds an M.A. in Spanish and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Spanish Linguistics at SUNY Albany. When she is not busy with academics, Farah enjoys writing fiction and maintaining her blog (thriftychicnomad.wordpress.com), where she chronicles her travels. Her previous publications include short stories featured in *The Citron Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Cecile's Writers Magazine*, and *One Hundred Voices* (Centum Press).

HAJER ALMOSLEH, a Palestinian mother, a dreamer, a poet whose poems tend to vanish before they make it to the page, and when they do, they have the pallor of death all over them.

HAYA ANIS is a 17-year old high school student, living in Alexandria, Egypt. She published a short story with *Sukoon*, which appeared in its latest summer issue. Currently mired in the college application process, she looks to reading, writing, and sky gazing for escape from my imminent voyage into adulthood.

ZAINA ALSOUS is a poet daughter of Palestinian Muslim refugees and currently lives and organizes in the U.S. South. She is an alumna of the University of North Carolina, her work has appeared in *The Offing*, *Jaffat El Iqlam*, *Human Equity* through *Art* online journal, and elsewhere.

NADIM CHOUFI lives in the UAE and grew up between Abu Dhabi and Beirut. He has been active in the Arab zine community and is a regular contributor to *Jaffat El Aqlam*, an Abu Dhabi based e-magazine. His column *Tawseet Al Sharq* celebrates Middle Eastern cultures and identities through the visual and performance art of emerging and established Middle Eastern artists. His poetry has appeared in *Sula Collective* and *Jaffat El Aqlam*.

DANA DAWUD is a 24-year-old writer and a visual artist from Jordan, currently residing in UAE. She has a bachelor degree in Engineering but art has been her sole companion and interest for over six years. In my painting and illustrations, my main focus is to explore the relationships between spaces, colors, lines, and texts. There's an affinity between writing and painting that I try to tackle.

AISHA JEMILA DANIELS is a visual artist from Miami, Florida. She's currently finishing up her last semester at Howard University in Washington, DC where she'll be receiving her Bachelor of Fine Arts. The الجميلة (IL Gemila) illustrations are self portraits but they are not just for her, she says. She hopes others can see themselves through her. I'm creating this brand of beauty for all Muslim women and women of color.

HAZEM FAHMY was born in Houston, TX and was raised in his parents' native Cairo, Egypt. He left at fifteen for the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, South Africa and after graduating commenced his undergraduate studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. He aspires to be a poet and filmmaker. His work has been featured, or is forthcoming, in Mizna, COG, Random Sample, and Inklette.

A first generation Lebanese-American, **ZEENA FULEIHAN** studies Creative Writing and Music at Macalester College. Her work has won multiple Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and is published in both high school and college literary magazines. Zeena is the Literary Editor of Chanter, the literary magazine at Macalester College, and an intern at the Poetry Center of Chicago.

LAYLA AZMI Goushey is an Associate 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. 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/>. She was invited to participate in the 2013-2016 Women for Peace - St. Louis reading series and more recently, the September 2016 event titled 100 Thousand Poets & Musicians for Change - St. Louis. Follow her on Twitter @lgoushey.

LANA HABASH is a Palestinian poet and writer living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is particularly interested in the poetry and narrative of Palestinian collective experience and resistance. Her first play, "Ramani Il Hawa" was produced in 2013 in Cambridge Massachusetts, by the Let's Go There Collective <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/let-s-go-there-collective#/>. Her poetry and essays have appeared in Mizna and Counterpunch.

HEDY HABRA was born in Egypt and is of Lebanese origin. She has authored two poetry collections, Under Brushstrokes, finalist for the USA Best Book Award, and the International Poetry Book Award, and Tea in Heliopolis, winner of the USA Best Book Award and finalist for the International Poetry Book Award. Her story collection, Flying Carpets, won the Arab American National Book Award's Honorable Mention. She is a recipient of the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Awards and a six-time nominee for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Her work appears in Cimarron Review, Bitter Oleander, Blue Fifth Review, Cider Press Review, Cimarron Review, Drunken Boat, Nimrod, Poet Lore, World Literature Today and Verse Daily. Her website is hedyhabra.com

Intention

These poems are part of Habra's manuscript in progress, "The Taste of the Earth," written from the perspective of exile and selective memory. In this collection, Habra attempts to make sense of the fissures caused by displacement as well as to bear witness to the constant struggles for freedom in her countries of origin. "Or Would She Ever Shed Her Many Faces?" is part of another manuscript in progress, inspired by visual art. She has a passion for painting and teaches Spanish literature at Western Michigan University. Her website is hedyhabra.com

SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI, author of Kohl and Chalk and Baker of Tarifa. is the recipient of the San Diego Book Award, the Nazim Hikmet Prize, and multiple Pushcart nominations. She has been published in Prairie Schooner, The Cortland Review, Poetry International, Vallum, POEM, The Adirondack Review, Nimrod and other journals worldwide.

MARWA HELAL is a poet and journalist. Her work appears in Apogee, Hyperallergic, the Offing, Poets & Writers, Sukoon, the Recluse, Winter Tangerine and elsewhere. She is the author of Invasive species (Nightboat Books 2019) and the winner of BOMB Magazine's Biennial 2016 Poetry Contest. Helal has been awarded fellowships from Poets House (2017), Brooklyn Poets (2016) and Cave Canem (2016). Born in Al Mansurah, Egypt, Helal currently lives and teaches in Brooklyn, New York. She received her MFA in creative writing from the New School and her BA in journalism and international studies from Ohio Wesleyan University. @marwahelal on Twitter or www.marshelal.com

EMAN HASSAN is a PhD candidate of poetry at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she worked as a teaching assistant and associate editor at *Prairie Schooner*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *MIZNA*, among other journals. She is the recipient of an MFA from Arizona State University, where she worked as International Poetry Editor at *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Eman is a bicultural poet from Boston and Kuwait.

MOHJA KAHF is the author of a novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and a book of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003), as well as an academic book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999). Her second book of poetry, *Hagar Poems*, came out in 2016 the University of Arkansas Press, and contains more of her Mary poems as well as poems about Hagar, Sarah, and other figures from the scriptural heritage. She won an Arkansas Arts Council award in 2002 for poetry and a Pushcart Prize in 2011. Kahf is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas, where she has taught for twenty years. Born in Damascus, Syria, she is a member of the Syrian Nonviolence Movement, which was founded inside Syria in April, 2011 by protesters dedicated to nonviolence.

ZOHA B. KHAN is busy being all the things Pakistan reckons are impossible or illegal to be. She has a blog (www.spitgreenfire.wordpress.com), updated in between challenging societal norms and causing scandal wherever she goes. Poetry, jewelry, ice cream and lists help keep her anxiety under control and make her happy. She is currently studying for her A-Levels and has been published twice in *Thought Catalog*.

Born in the US, raised in Saudi Arabia, but with her heart and roots in Egypt, **SARAH MOAWAD** is a "Third Culture Kid," simultaneously out of place and at home everywhere and nowhere. She holds a BA in Political Science and Global Studies from the University of Pittsburgh, and has recently completed a Master's in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University, where she focused mainly on religion, politics, and forms of resistance in contemporary Egypt. She is passionate about alternative methods of political expression, activism, and social change through storytelling, humor, and the arts. Her previous experience internships in broadcast and radio journalism, research, translation, teaching, and non-profit work. She is currently a writer and editor for *Muftah Magazine*, an online magazine providing diverse perspectives on global events.

MISHKA MOJABBER MOURANI is the author of "BALCONIES: A Mediterranean Memoir", *Lest We Forget: Lebanon 1975-1990*, and co-author of *Alone, Together*. Her writing deals with themes of war, memory, identity, exile and gender issues. Mourani is a contributor to *Arabic Literature in English* and *Your Middle East's culture and Literature* page.

HUMEIRAH OUGRADAR lives in Lancashire and is a student of English Literature and Creative Writing at The University of Manchester.

RUSHDA RAFEK serves as a Fiction Editor for *The Missing Slate* magazine. Her works have appeared in *Yellow Chair Review*, *Monkey Bicycle*, *Asia Literary Review*, *The Bangalore Review*, among others. She is currently based in Sri Lanka.

JESS RIZKALLAH is a Lebanese-American writer, illustrator, and coffee slinger living between Boston & New York. Alumna of Lesley University, MFA candidate at NYU & founding editor at *Maps For Teeth* magazine / *pizza pi press*. She's a pushcart prize nominated poet. Her work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Nailed Magazine*, *Button Poetry*, *HEArt Online*, & on her mother's fridge. Her collection 'the magic my body becomes' is forthcoming on University of Arkansas Press, 2017. Find her at jessrizkallah.com.

STEVEN SCHREINER'S most recent book is *Belly* (Cervena-Barva 2015). His poems have appeared in many magazines, including *Poetry*, *Image*, *Colorado Review*, *River Styx* and *December*, and numerous anthologies. He teaches in the MFA Program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and is the founding editor of *Natural Bridge*, a journal of contemporary literature.

CHRISTINE STODDARD is a Salvadoran-Scottish-American writer and artist who lives in Brooklyn. She also is the founding editor of Quail Bell Magazine, as well as the author of *Hispanic & Latino Heritage in Virginia* (The History Press), *Ova* (Dancing Girl Press, 2017), and two miniature books from the Poems-For-All series. Her piece in Sukoon is an excerpt from her novel manuscript *Mona, A Camera, and Me*.

ANN STRUTHERS recently retired from teaching at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She has published poetry widely in journals and has two collections and three chapbooks. She is a three-time nominee for a Pushcart Prize. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa where she was in the Iowa Writing Workshop. For two years she taught at the University of Aleppo, Syria, as a Fulbright Fellow. She and her husband, Mel, count this time as one of the highlights of their lives. She traveled widely in the Middle East and has lectured in Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. She is currently working on some translations from al-Jahiz' *BOOK OF ANIMALS*.

LENA ZAGHMOURI's short fiction has been published in **Dampen to Bend**, **KNOT Magazine**, and **The San Joaquin Review**. She has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for her story "Al Walad" and was shortlisted for the OWT Fiction Prize. Her master's thesis focused on contemporary Arab American literature, and she is currently working on her first novel.

REWA ZEINATI is the founder and editor-in-chief of Sukoon. She is the author of the nonfiction book *Nietzsche's Camel Must Die*, and the poetry chapbook *Bullets & Orchids*. Her poems, essays, translations and interviews are published in various anthologies and literary journals in the Middle East, USA and Europe.

