



Sukoon

Arab-Themed Art & Literature

Volume 5 | Issue 1 | Winter 2018



*From the outside in,
and from the inside in.*

Sukoon is:

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

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

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

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



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



Editor's note:

#PalestineisthecapitalofJerusalem

PALESTINE IS THE CAPITAL OF JERUSALEM

The cover art is by Lebanese artist Zena Assi, and is entitled "Al Kouwa fi yad al mar2a" which translates into "The power is in the hand of the woman."

Yes.

Happy 2018 and all the coming years after!

Massive thanks, appreciation and love to all the artists and writers and poets who have trusted Sukoon with their wonderful, and always, inspiring work.

Did I mention that Palestine is the capital of Jerusalem?

REWA ZEINATI

ORIGIN STORY

i was born to refugees,
i was named a miracle still, they wait
for something greater than
what i know how to be.

i'm alive, and therefore enough.

i have space for an extra organ
that never came home
and every year the sea levels rise.

or i have a twin that never followed me out of the womb,
is still stuck where a shrieking echo
comes down on a mountain village and the telepathy between us
is a gold thread so warm, it hums.

i'll never know its language older than the polaroids
falling out of my mothers mouth older than the lute
in my father's whistle

or mama gave birth to me & i came out a hyphen
i was born the big hand on a clock

or i was born an arm with a hand at both ends
taking both lands back at once, like they're mine

or i was born an arm with a hand at both ends
holding a knife maybe i am a knife,
always spinning slicing
at roots and fruits i graft into the hollow
where the ancient humming organ
never made its home.

maybe i am building this organ myself.
maybe this organ will be my country,
where i'm from. no
where i'm really from

where every language is light
pouring out of me. everything it touches
is greater than what i know how to be
& everyone i love
is safe here.

JESS RIZKALLAH

NOTEPAD FRAGMENTS

with thanks to ocean vuong

i am always searching for the moon. maybe
instead of blood, i am full of moths.

أنت القمر في حياتي
you're the moon of my life

summer solstice: when fireflies hatch from the empty wombs of bullet cases
when everything is softer unfolding from the tree trunk dusk of the throat, i wonder
how many times has arabic let
a lover down easy?

last night i had tears in my eyes for jido
but for the first time in months they were
of laughter

he wrote ghazals & still lives
in their meter somewhere on the wind.

i want everyone to be honest about their longing, to face it where it lives
in the space between losses
the only space we get.

one day i will write a ghazal
when it stops feeling like
a wind tunnel

الزهور تتفتح على لسانك
flowers bloom on your tongue

the last few people i cried about will never know
the alternative(s):

i am two paper cranes

i hand you one of them you smile
but do not extend your hand
you do not water my plants when i am gone
all the windows closed,

ذبول اسمي في فمك
my name wilting in your mouth

i sing like grackles do under the high notes of bulbuls
i ride the coattails of their stories at dusk when the fireflies
distract you from my ankles

a room with no wind

so i keep singing.
i just
want you
to know i love you
forgive me.

JESS RIZKALLAH

ON PRACTICING MY ARABIC

i fumble with the prayers i found baking
in the hot tar of my mother's womb when
she couldn't seal it in time for my arrival.

i know that the tongue forms first
if the tongue was ever something formed,
not found and not ever really mine,
always a fractured leaf or ripped out
throat of a warda, and always thorns.
of course. the opposite of an echo.
sharpness wanting to be flesh
but tearing flesh in its attempt.

this language
already a pearl, will never trust
me with a qasida. it doesn't
need my love.

JESS RIZKALLAH



CITYSCAPE
BY ZENA ASSI

TERRORISM

"isn't all of this ugly though?" i say to the young israeli vet || i know he has risked nearly everything to break silences || but i'm skeptical he will ever stop occupying || he speaks of settlers as if he not one himself || of the military as if they have not been carving green lines through palestinians all along || we are looking down upon the nets over the marketplace in hebron || where jewish settlers throw trash and rocks and their own shit || onto the heads of palestinians || and besides the voice of our tour guide || the only noise to be heard across the village || are jewish cars moving down shuhada street || the only bodies free || are stray dogs

words i must tell you || do not have the same meanings here || *al-khalil* is hebron || *shubbaak* is a prison || *sayyaara* is a vehicle for apartheid || *kalb* is an animal with more freedom than palestinians || *shaari'* is a walk of shame || *souk* is a dump for your enemy's shit || and out the mouth of a palestinian with a thick accent || the english word "tourist" || sounds like the word "terrorist" || and "terrorist" like the word || "tourist"

"don't the settlers want to live in a beautiful place? || why live here at all || if it's not beautiful?" i ask || i can see our tour guide is confused || my questions come out stupid, obvious || "the security makes the settlers feel protected," he says || maybe for the tenth time || and gestures to the windows that palestinians || must live inside to make their colonizers || feel comfortable on a car ride down shuhada street || but —that's not what i'm asking

i want to understand how can you can live so incubated || you don't even see the walls || and barbed wire || and shit in your line of vision || at what point do the walls fold back || melt into your landscape || your own geography || that your body itself || becomes a wall too

at the end of the tour || the former soldiers take us to meet issa amro || how gracious and kind of them || finally letting a palestinian speak for himself || issa shows us the only weapon he has ever owned || language || i have already told you || words are different here || from the ears of a settler || issa's weapon is more violent than a bomb || he believes in a different world || and when this one passes || as he assures us it eventually will || words will be restored to their rightful meanings:

al-khalil will be a thriving city that once survived the worst of apartheid
shubbaak will be a portal to palestine
sayyaara will take its owner on road trips through freedom
kalb will be a dog, just a dog, and not a name for an arab
shaari' will breathe the memories of martyrs long gone
souk will smell like home again

we board the tour bus out of hebron || and i leave feeling self-righteous || my weapon of choice is poetry after all || i will never search for words through the barrel of a gun

yet || how quickly i forget that || on this land || poetry makes a terrorist out of me too

GABRIELLE SPEAR



THE SOUL ATTIC
BY PAULA CHAHINE

CHAMBER MUSIC

You say thalamos, I say thalamus
and hypostasis, I fancy, is invention
as the mother of need. For everything a body
and in our version of Willie Pete
few babies make it out of nativity complete.

To seduce you, reduce you to myself, corrode
myself at the anode for you, tremors
for holy water, Hagar's hands and feet,
I pant and plead "Gather,
gather," in a dead language.

The dead split in two: one camp
house-warm their graves with the living's
carnation and chrysanthemum while in the other
children hide and seek in ice cream coolers
of vendors turned morticians.

To wait out burial
the body rusts the neighboring soul.
Or sits in the needle's eye,
not chasm but chiasm that holds off
incoming thread and helps another through.

I'm staying right here. You go
look for horses that bait the initiate
who neglects the peace
forged between beasts. I'm staying right here
with all I have on loan

as tone flickers
its penultimate oxygen pair. You go
be the beginning.
It was already the beginning
when love was one of its traits.

FADY JOUDAH

ECHO #1

One right move
no place to go

we goat through tombs
eviscerated of their residents

It was lovely
to see you defeated after dinner

with splanchnic blood
shunted from your brain's hollering terrain

lovely the wet ashes
of your voice the evagination

of palm-sized cantaloupe
our conversation

of a year ago has changed
the body has changed

our guest
that hosts us

FADY JOUDAH

MAQAM OF PALM TREES

for Rahim El hajj

His amphibian torso
to leg ratio a frog's

or imitation (fiddler) crab
soluble salty rubber of two waters

at the confluence of steady eddy synapse
in a museum's dark room

his triceps' fat pressed to hers
she in her movement

he in his stillness
what the moving know about stillness

the still don't know...She asks
Are you a Sufi?

Is all my longing
born equal to your ears

the devil's a devoted angel
with personality disorder

or what will we do tonight? He says
I'll make us coffee and tea

we'll play chutes and ladders
and in the morning

we'll feed a bale of turtles
and a bevy of swans

our bagels on a deck
settled in lake-drought mud

where I was born...She says
Then maybe a heron will join

and leave us a calamus
so big it can wound

FADY JOUDAH



RICOCHETS 1
BY ZENA ASSI

BLACK GIRL FREEST GIRL ON EARTH

she throw arms to sky
& grow wings. her ascension

stronger than chains.
stronger than rage & this magic

carry her to god. & god shine
through her as she rise. & the spirit

consume everything else,
& cleanse as sage do.
it is always you, sista, who raises me

from the dead. praise your music, your poultice and ointment. this. this is black girl
magic. that a sista's song could bring back what i mistook for crucified. that a sista's
touch could resurrect hope from the grave it made of my body. your voice a harmony
with every scream i swallowed last night, humming in my throat until my voice box loses
what was stiff & dances.

i'm at a gathering of sisters - they look like me. frankincense and lavender curling out our
ears. the glory of heaven through our teeth. our scalps dripping with sweat, rosemary;
eyes full of tears. & this the only place

i deem holy today. black girls sing out the ancestors' names like a prayer for rain.
libations crash down to earth from a bottle. we let the first tears fall in these months of
blood. we drench ourselves, we let ourselves be glory. we become the heaven we pray to.
we become a mercy, a split in the sky & the earth

does not drink our blood today. only our fresh water. only joy that is deeper than
us. only gospel like a small river cutting itself into the ground after a storm. i let myself
feel everything that we are today. & i feel no fear when i look into my eyes & see

rain.

NOOR IBN NAJAM

SCAR // STORY

my scars are an invisibility cloak. no one will look

at a ghost's flesh // no one wants to see flesh's ghost
my scars are skin-memories // textured melodies
passed down // child to woman
hide the child inside the woman // hide the story inside the scar

and no one will ask about them

NOOR IBN NAJAM

ODE TO MOUTH

the plump cupid's bow pink and brown
black hair above
bathing in the light of a glowing lotus
ring hanging from my septum.
the sloping upper lip uneven, its asymmetrical
spread as i smile. the big beige teeth,
peekaboo-shy. the smile, mouth
closed when it wants to be pretty.
the pursed lips that come natural
when it's kissing or impatient or tense.
the lips easily parted. the involuntary
pout. the lines of the skin, how they bathe
themselves in rouge for a night out.

NOOR IBN NAJAM

IFTAR WHEN SHE KISSES YOU

rise as a crescent moon. bite her lip
as you would a date. break your fast
on her brown honey

NOOR IBN NAJAM

THE WOMEN IN MY FAMILY COOK

don't cook while you're upset. you'll poison the food with your anger
- my mother

A woman dark as silence cooks her well-earned rage
down like collards. An off-white woman, pumice-skinned, simmers
resentment in a pressure cooker - tender lambflesh, made ready to eat
by bitter steam, water of cloves, of allspice,
of salt agitated into the air. When the nightmares slunk
between my sheets, I roughened
as my hair, silk scarf torn
from my head by the thrashing, pillows of cotton
scratching at my follicles. I tossed and turned
like water, agitated. I told my mother
that my sleep was haunted. She said, perhaps not.
A ghost is just another mirror
pointed into your mouth. What had you eaten for dinner?

NOOR IBN NAJAM

ONE-TRACK MIND

you tattoo & pierce
& swallow all these
hormones into
yourself you make
your body into
something Allah
can't name you
want these crystals &
tarot decks you want
life as you see fit &
not life as we have
always practiced we
have always bent
our women at the
knees & waist & now
you are telling me
you are not even a

woman have you
lost your mind is
woman just a gift I
failed to give you
this thing I tried to
share with you
something we could
cup into our hands
& wash our feet
with my love my
language heavy with
Allah with things

I could not give your
baba he refused to
believe I could not
give your sister she
does not speak my
language these
things I could have
given you *habibi*
why you do this to
me *albi* why you
speak for me *Tayati*
why you want to
make your teita cry

NOOR IBN NAJAM



RICOCHETS 2
BY ZENA ASSI

FAVORITE SWANA POETRY BOOKS OF 2017

By George Abraham

As 2017 comes to a close, I cannot help but reflect upon the words of Kaveh Akbar: “we are living in a Golden Age of poetry.” The poetry world is alive & thriving, but I think there’s further dimensionality to this statement outside of today’s exciting breakthroughs in poetic craft. We are living in a day and age where poetry is becoming increasingly diverse, with poets of color subverting euro-centric norms and traditions; a day and age where my children will grow up actually being able to see themselves in English Literature.

In comprising this list, I have chosen to use the word SWANA, i.e. Southwest Asian/North African, as an identifier to not legitimize the term “Middle East” for its white colonial undertones. I also chose this term because, while there may be some linguistic & cultural threads among SWANA narratives, this term allows space for this unification simultaneous to the complexity of individual narratives, as we are not a monolithic entity. That said, I am proud to present my favorite SWANA poetry books of 2017!

1. *Louder than Hearts* by Zeina Hashem Beck (Bauhan Publishing LLC)

Louder than Hearts, for many reasons, is the perfect starting point for this list. Being an Arab-American reader, I felt like I could both live & die with these poems; the relatability of poems like “Ode To My Non-Arabic Lover,” is very different from that in “3Amto.” In the former, Beck writes, “how will I ever translate my Arab anger, my alliterations, those rough sounds that scratch their way out of my throat, which you will merely find sexy?” and gives voice to an annoyingly familiar fetishization. The latter is a portrait of an elder family member with cancer, and is written in a voice that is eerily familiar, interspersing of Arabic and English throughout phases of sickness & dialogue with different family members. While both pieces left me feeling simultaneously breathless & rebuilt all at once, Beck’s poetry shines in its ability to encompass a versatile array of emotions, which paint a portrait of her experiences which is not only visceral, but human. The urgent drive of this work is felt from the very first poem, “Broken Ghazal: Speaking Arabic,” and the book never loses momentum thereafter. Even through the manuscript’s conclusion, Beck’s imagery never ceases to surprise and captivate; for instance, Beck writes, “for a moment, it seemed the bird was choking, the fish diving upward for air. By this I mean do you see us dance?” at the ending of her piece, “Piano,” which was arguably my favorite in the book. With *Louder than Hearts*, Zeina Hashem Beck has produced one of the most exciting, dynamic poetry collections I have read in a long, long time.

2. *The January Children* by Safia Elhillo (University of Nebraska Press)

“verily everything that is lost will be // given a name & will not come back // but will live forever.” So begins Safia Elhillo’s *The January Children* – a book I have not been able to stop thinking about since the beginning of the year. Elhillo’s lyrics are haunting in a manner that is both fluid & immortal, weaving across time, and language. From portraits with famous singer Abdelhalim Hafez, to erasures from interviews with members of the Sudanese diaspora, Elhillo gives a multiplicity of languages to diasporic wounds, in a way which questions her very relationship to the English and Arabic languages themselves. Elhillo writes, “the lyrics do not translate// arabic is all verbs for what// stays still in other languages,” and “no language has given me // the rhyme between ocean & // wound that i know to be true,” hence turning questions about giving language to displacement & trauma into questions of language itself. This collection simultaneously develops a lyrical reclamation of self & body, of praise, despite; Elhillo writes “our mouths open & a

song falls out thick// with a saxophone's syrup" and finds a music amidst the sorrow. In perhaps my favorite work in the book, Elhillo writes "& what is a country but the drawing of a line i draw thick black lines around my // eyes & they are a country & thick red lines around my lips & they are a country" & so a reclamation of the body becomes a reclamation of everything the body was born into. *The January Children* is the type of book that transcends time & space; the type of book that will still be taught in classrooms decades from now; the type of book I will pass onto my children & their children & their children to come.

3. *the magic my body becomes* by Jess Rizkallah (University of Arkansas Press)

In a similar spirit to Elhillo's book, Jess Rizkallah's *the magic my body becomes* does the work of building countries. Rizkallah writes, "i was born an arm with a hand at both ends// holding a knife maybe i am a knife, // always spinning slicing// ... // where the ancient humming organ// never made its home. // maybe i am this organ myself. // maybe this organ will be my country, // & everyone i love// is safe here." The urgency and velocity of Rizkallah's imagery is not lost at the expense of tender, intimate moments; in one poem of a larger sequence of poems in the voice of her mother, Rizkallah writes, "never forget that softness is strength, unflinching// against the knife and it is also the knife," and creates a space in which softness can be a revolution. Softness carries the weight of inherited trauma from the Lebanese Civil War in the family portraits throughout Rizkallah's manuscript; in "when they ask me who i pray to," she writes, "saint of the lemon tree his father put there... saint of the blue peaks by the ocean where we began// saint of the way we say *what* again," and paints the softness of her family in a light that is nothing less than divinity. But at the core of this manuscript's heart is the body, in all its imperfection, in all its holy: "Ghada says, the spine is a river the rest of you will always return to."

4. *I Am Made To Leave I Am Made To Return* by Marwa Helal (No Dear/Small Anchor Press)

Marwa Helal's debut chapbook, *I Am Made To Leave I Am Made To Return*, was such an immaculate success that it sold out within days of releasing. Helal is not afraid to take risks with form, from "[[:'...' :]] (REMIXED," written after Phil Metres' abu gharib arias, to "if this was a different kind of story i'd tell you about the sea," a poem which repeats that phrase for its entirety with different emphasis, and even "poem to be read from right to left," written in the Arabic – a poetic form Helal invented. Helal's work not only subverts expectation, but actively resists & decolonizes both the space it takes up and the space it cannot occupy. For instance, in the poem "photographs not taken," Helal writes "the light the day i left; mezo's big toe// before i left; all the dawns i slept through// before i left; my own face// looking back at his// before i left," and constructs a portrait of an inaccessible past; a space which is definable but not constructible in some sense. A similar use of negative space is seen in "the middle east is missing," which uses the Oulipian beautiful outlaw form to bring an extra dimensionality to the physically missing "the middle east" in this work. Helal's *I Am Made To Leave I Am Made To Return* proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Helal is one of the most brilliant, and necessary voices in American Literature. If you missed your chance to buy this chapbook, stay tuned for her first full-length collection, *Invasive species*, forthcoming with Nightboat Books.

5. *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* by Kaveh Akbar (Alice James Books)

"I've given this coldness many names thinking if it had a name it// would have a solution thinking if I called a wolf a wolf I might dull its fangs," writes Akbar in the titling poem of his manuscript, "Calling a Wolf a Wolf (Inpatient)." This manuscript is divided into 3 sections: Terminal, Hunger, and Irons. The first (Terminal) throws us into the world of the speaker, taking us from an intimate portrait of praying with his father wherein Akbar writes, "I knew only that I

wanted// to be like him,// that twilight stripe of father// mesmerizing as the bluewhite Iznik tile// hanging in our kitchen, worshipped// as the long faultless tongue of God," to moments of rage and confusion: "it felt larger than it was, the knife// that pushed through my cheek," begins Akbar in "Portrait of the Alcoholic with Home Invader and Housefly." Akbar's voice shines not only in these personal, intimate moments, but even in writing outside the self. His poem, "Heritage," written for Reyhaneh Jabbari, an Iranian woman who was hanged for killing a man attempting to rape her, gives voice to an erased history: "there is no solace in history this is a gift// we are given at birth a pocket we fold into at death goodbye now you mountain// you armada of flowers... despite all our endlessly rehearsed rituals of mercy it was you we sent on." Akbar's work interacts with spirituality, as it intersects with not only his family and culture, but with addiction as well; his poem "Thirstiness is not Equal Division" begins with the lines, "I swear to God I swear at God I won't// mention what He does to me." Poems like this and many others in section II (Hunger) are haunting, intimate portraits of addiction & its cyclical, resurgent nature; Akbar writes, "at twenty-four my liver was// already covered in fatty// rot my mother filled a tiny// coffin with picture frames," and there is never a moment when this urgency is lost on us as readers. As the book draws to a close, Akbar reminds us that sometimes healing is the hardest route of all: "I won't lie this plague of gratitude// is hard to bear I was comfortable// in my native pessimism... I had to learn to love people one at a time," writes Akbar. I am left with no words upon finishing *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*; it is rare that a single book can haunt, live, and breathe with me as much as this book does. Kaveh himself once said that we were living in a golden age of poetry, and to that I say, "yes, Kaveh Akbar *is* the golden age of poetry."

6. Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing by Charif Shanahan (Southern Illinois University Press)

The word stanza is derived from the Italian word for room; I'd like to think of Charif Shanahan's book as a collection of rooms, brought under one unified house, wherein the rooms themselves travel fluidly through space, time, and history. Each room is decorated and structured in its own manner; some rooms are even left empty, such as part III of "Homosexuality," a suite of poems where each is a small vignette of the speaker's experience in a different city. Some rooms are brief but haunting & beckoning return; for instance, in "Little Saviors," Shanahan writes, "So many men playing god. // Father left a wounded child// Cavorting in the public bathroom.// So many holes being filled" and creates an entire universe, a specific smallness, in just four lines of text. Shanahan is aware of shifts in perception & landscape as he invites us into each room. In "Self-portrait in Black and White," he writes, "If I said I did not want to live anymore, // Would you understand that I meant *like this?*... I see in colors because they are always so much// A part of the problem," and the entire perceptual universe of this poem is given a new meaning. Many of Shanahan's poems deal with the intersection of blackness and queerness within the context of SWANA culture. In "Asmar," a poem written for Safia Elhillo, Shanahan discusses some of the difficulties with internalized colorism: "Our mothers tell us we are not like them: *les Africains sont la bas!*// Our mothers defend what oppresses them...// Our mothers defend an idea of a self that is not their own." *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing* transcends space in a manner that is both timely and timeless; every time I re-enter this collection, I come out with new meanings and insight. Shanahan's book is absolutely required reading for everyone reading this list.

7. Water & Salt by Lena Khalaf Tuffaha (Red Hen Press)

Lena Khalaf Tuffaha's *Water & Salt* is also a manuscript that fluidly travels through space & time, from Palestine where the speaker would "coax fruit from the trees, press it into liquid gold," to Damascus wherein a poem about a dowry chest, she writes, "paradise, carved meticulously, mother-of-pearl inset into a landscape of wounds," to Jordan where Tuffaha

writes “every day we are picture-perfect in Amman,” and beyond. Tuffaha also travels backwards into history, saying “we travel back so that you can become who you are.” Tuffaha resurrects historical wounds in poems like “Intifada Portrait,” which is about her conversations with a Palestinian friend over coffee; Tuffaha writes, “who can erase those days from the memory of time? The land will never forget our footsteps, pounding against bullets and tear gas. My skin remembers it,” and gives the readers access to memory of an erased history, a history the land will remember even when the body cannot, even when the oppressor writes it into nonexistent. Tuffaha also meditates on the generational distance between these historical wounds in “My Mother Returns to her Childhood Home,” which ends with the lines, “we are not from here anymore. We too will die on foreign shores.” But amidst the memories of diaspora, Tuffaha finds nostalgia, light, and comfort despite the traumas; images of war and displacement are given weight and presence simultaneous to the familiar nostalgia in the smell of zaatar, the grinding of coffee, and the harvest of an olive tree. In one of my favorite poems of the collection, Tuffaha writes, “I love to tell you where I am from. I look forward to the moment when the nine letters I utter evoke a contortionist’s masterpiece on the faces of polite company.” There is power in naming our narratives, in naming history, in giving these things the name they earned, which is not always the name they are given. Tuffaha’s collection is the language diasporic readers, especially of Palestine and Syria, need, today and every day.

8. My Arab World & Other Poems of the Body by A. T. Halaby (jubilat)

Halaby’s chapbook, *My Arab World & Other Poems of the Body*, also contemplates the weight and distance of diaspora. Halaby writes, “Lebanon// I can hear your love// I came for your gifts// Take this fury from inside me// I want to be filled with you.” And while there is a longing and desire to belong & to know the separated homeland, Halaby approaches this topic with newfound excitement and wonder; she writes “a beauty I haven’t met// but I’m curious about your form// a ghazal, whirling like a leaf...// a ghazal told me// ghazals are all around me// like a wind storm,” and brings to life a poetic wonder amidst the inaccessibility of home’s sounds. Halaby does the work of making every question about home a question about the body itself; “what does a home do for the body,” Halaby questions. In the opening poem, which is one of my favorites of the entire collection, Halaby writes “these hands// want// Arabic, its body// its everything,” and later continues to say, “I don’t// know// how// to put// Arab// in a // familiar// space.” One of the qualities I love most about Halaby’s chapbook is its ability to make space for softness within the context of diasporic bodies; “Degrees of The Delicate and Body” opens with an image of “the space between// your // lips// as they stop// after my name.// This measurement// of your body// is what I feel// I will// become.” The short line-breaks and fragmentation, in this poem & throughout, force the reader to pause & slow down to take in the narrative in its most authentic form. *My Arab World & Other Poems of the Body* were part of a limited edition print run of 50. If you missed your chance to get these immaculate poems, stay tuned for Halaby’s forthcoming work; she is most definitely one of the voices within Arab diaspora whom I am most excited about!

9. Bone Light by Yasmin Belkhyr (Akashic Books/the New-Generation of African Poets Series)

As is usually the case with SWANA people, this too is something to end in light. *Bone Light*, a chapbook of prose poems from the New-Generation of African Poets Box Set, undeniably positions Yasmin Belkhyr as one of the most urgent, and necessary voices of our diaspora and generation. In one of the most memorable and intense opening poems I’ve read in a while, “Surah Al-Fatiha,” Belkhyr draws us into the world of *Bone Light* through a portrait of her earliest memory of seeing a goat slaughtered in her house. Like many artists on this list, Belkhyr interacts with distance and diasporic wounds; she writes, “I was sick every visit... I would cry and everyone else would tsk, murmur American. Once, I kissed

someone and I'm afraid it ruined the world. I've learned that it's not what you do with the knife – it's how you hold it after," and the question of diasporic distance becomes a question of the body. In "Eid Al-Adha," Belkhyr writes "When I speak of bodies, I mean: there is too much inside of me. I mean, burn the car and all its histories." The body, within the context of cultural & gendered violences, comes into question through various means, including that of myths and retelling of religious stories; the haunting ending lines of "& the song of the crow shrieks" read, "In myth, they called the dead girl River and she bled and bled and bled." Belkhyr shines best in her ability to hone in on single moments, albeit wounds or praise, and expand them into an entire universe of complexity. Every word and lack thereof is precise, and not a bit of momentum is lost anywhere throughout this spectacular manuscript. In the final poem, Belkhyr writes, "the story begins and ends here, a mouth unopen, the girl buried as she is born," and gives voice to historical, ancestral, and ever-present erasure. Belkhyr's voice is doing the work of country-building, and carrying an ancestral weight despite an active erasure. I will never stop thinking about these poems.

10. The Future

As this list draws to a close, I want to mention some of the SWANA books I am most looking forward to, rounding out 2017 and entering 2018, are Ruth Awad's *Set to Music a Wildfire* (Southern Indiana Review Press), Noor Hindi's *Diary of a Filthy Woman* (Porkbelly Press, 2018), Hazem Fahmy's *Red//Jild//Prayer* (Diode Editions, 2018), and 2 chapbooks forthcoming from Leila Chatti: *Tunisya-Amrikiya* (Bull City Press, 2018), and *Ebb* (New-Generation African Poets Series, 2018). We are living in a truly exciting era of poetry, and I know there are people reading this list who needed these books as much as I have. Bless every SWANA poet for existing & writing in spite of colonization & everything this language has taken from us. Bless every word, every page fragment, every unsung lullaby that refused to burn.



PUT IT IN A COSTA ESPRESSO TIN
BY ZENA ASSI

BURJ KHALIFA, DUBAI

The silver spire
 pierces the heavens
 in search of God?

or is it a dazzling monument
 to exuberance & vision
sheer joy—

slender oh so slender
 spun
 up & up
into the burning
 blade of desert sky.

Under night's indigo dome
 lights jewel
the mirrored planes—

but I love its ethereal mantle
in day's rippling heat—

 the lightness—
 as if
itself of shimmered air.

GUDRUN BORTMAN

SHOUTS IN THE DARK

The muizzin's last note of *isha*
 drifts
over the flat roofs of Bahrain,
 melts away
into humid dusk.

One by one they climb the steps
up to the summit of their homes—
these protesters of Pearl Square.

 Bullets drove them
back into their dusky shelters.
They bolt their gates—

but cloaked in a mantle of pitch,
 shadows in purple darkness,
they cup their hands, call out
to one another, rooftop to rooftop

their defiant voices
 rise and fall
 across the city of Manama—

ALLAHU AKBAR, ALLAHU AKBAR—

Spring blossoms in desert night,
 fragrance of jasmine,
 the bellow of lions.

GUDRUN BORTMAN

LOOKING FOR CAMELS

The Al Hajar mountains of Oman steep and fractured
press up along the road sharp rock arid
cleaved canyons below saw-tooth summits.

On our way from our son's wedding
my once-husband drives his now-wife beside him
my daughter small grandson and I in back

sated after days of palm-shaded wadis crumbled
towns walking the shore of the Arabian sea.
Only the camels we promised Eli are elusive.

It is the time of shuttered shops deserted streets baking
under the midday sun silence deepened
by birds sleepy chirps in the palm orchards.

We skirt the mud brick wall around a village
long left behind. The ruin of a watchtower offers a patch
of shade. We pull up to a small group of men sheltered there

roll down our windows. One of them approaches dressed in
traditional dishdasha embroidered cap. *Camels? camels?*
He looks at us with incomprehension slightly amused

and we feel foolish. *Ok Ok sukran thank you*
and move on our little group
in air-conditioned comfort laughing together

a long way from bitterness and hurt. Mountains quiver
in the heat bougainvillea tumbles over walls
as the road takes us back to Muscat the plane home.

GUDRUN BORTMAN



THE FLY
BY ZENA ASSI

RANDA JARRA'S *HIM, ME AND MUHAMMAD ALI*

A Review By Eman el Shaikh

Randa Jarrar's *Him, Me, and Muhammad Ali* is brimming with nostalgia. Not the inert kind, that encloses and preserves memory in amber-colored warmth, but the disruptive kind, that threads everything with an aspiration for the distant and interrogates memory persistently. The thirteen short stories in this collection are threaded with a potent, cutting nostalgia: nostalgia for the wholes that now lie fragmented, for other spaces and times, for faltering imaginings, for possible worlds that never existed. This nostalgia is promiscuous, recruiting history only to watch it dissolve in an array of contingencies and tensions.

This collection of stories palpates and trembles around these tensions. Pleasure and grief weave together to create an intricate sensory synthesis. Faith and doubt play together dialectically, peeking out, whispering to one another, and being tucked away when they cause too much mischief. This balancing of tensions does not result in a permanent anxiety. Rather, Jarrar masterfully draws upon them and inflects her writing with humor, surprise, and elegant subversions.

These tensions persist, exploding the life-worlds Jarrar brings forth and yet binding them together. And it is in this and through this that Jarrar's meditation on Arab identity arises. She shatters Arab and Arab-identity identity and lets the fragments speak and refract kaleidoscopic life-worlds that Jarrar makes palpable. Her characters are too abundant to be collapsed into single subjectivities, and so they overflow, replete with tentative imaginings of belonging, dreams of flight, grand visions to capture the moon, small hopes to survive another day, and triumphant subversions of inherited trajectories.

Though Jarrar's use of magical realism is striking, her imagination lives most visibly and profoundly in the writing of the ordinary lives of Arabs and Arab Americans, which through her beautiful, poignant, and witty writing are wrought as a very different kind of magic. There is magic in unexpected and partial love affairs, in strategic mistranslations and omissions, the switching (and inventing) of fortunes, and the persistence of the pursuit of pleasure. And pleasure is the most magical aspect of these stories. Across nation, class, gender, and age, one can trace a commitment to—indeed, an ardent belief in—pleasure, which often sits alongside and converses with many “familiar oppressions” in order to give birth to this set of marvellous stories.





PUT IT IN A QUEEN MARY'S TEA TIN
BY ZENA ASSI

WINNER OF THE ETEL ADNAN POETRY PRIZE 2016

INTERVIEW WITH ARAB-AMERICAN POET AND ARTIST, JESS RIZKALLAH BY REWA ZEINATI

RZ: Congratulations on winning the 2016 Etel Adnan Poetry Prize! Tell us a little about your collection, and how you came up with the title.

Jess Rizkallah: Thank you so much. The collection is made up of poems I wrote during and after a lot of firsts in my life: first time living away from my family, first loves, first heartbreaks, first loss of someone close to me, and all of that interacting with the inherited stuff that manifested in very new ways for me when held under the stress of entering adulthood. The timing of the acceptance was perfect, too. Right at the end of a lot of things in my life, and right before I moved to a new city and started at a new school. I'm so happy it worked out that way. I'm not used to closure I don't have to make up myself! I'm very thankful I get to look up to Fady and Hayan after working with them. They helped me come up with the title *the magic my body becomes*, after a line in one of the poems in the book. At first I was resistant to this title because that's what it is to be a woman sometimes, feeling sheepish about owning the power of your experience in a world that doesn't take you seriously when you're speaking your body and complexities with your own mouth. I thought "is this too feminine of a title?" but then I thought "who cares if it is? if the title turns someone away, they weren't going to listen to anything I'm saying anyway. it's not for them anyway."

RZ: You posted once on Facebook not too long ago that you didn't want anyone to ask you what you'll be doing after you graduate. So... what will you be doing after you graduate?

JR: Betrayal! Just kidding. I don't know. I've been doing publishing and editorial work for eight years now, so hopefully something there. I really hope I'll make a good teacher. I visited my family recently. While the water simmered on the stove, my Teta went outside and under the full pisces moon, picked rosemary for our tea. I remember thinking "why the fuck do I live so far away from my family?" The scarier the world gets, the more frequent that thought is.

RZ: You mention that your poetry has appeared, among other places, on your mother's fridge. Tell us a little about your family's response to your creative path/growth. This question comes from my personal Lebanese experience of the cliché that most every Lebanese parent dreams of seeing their child grow into a doctor, lawyer or engineer.

JR: Lately I've been thinking a lot about the (upheld binary) difference between Lebanese sons and Lebanese daughters, and my being one of two daughters in a son-less nuclear family is impossible to divorce from my answer because I've found it tied to every expectation someone has had for me. Gender is always a shadow trailing behind my name: it's a pretty traditional Lebanese thing to think that this is just a cute thing I'm doing to pass the time until a doctor or whatever wants to marry me. I'm lucky enough that I can recognize this and laugh in its face, instead of letting it hinder me. This is because my mother supports me and countered every sexist lesson the world tried to teach me. In turn the rest of my family has become supportive, too. (for which I'm grateful and full of love.) Busting your ass to prove yourself feels like an Arab kid rite of passage. To answer your question more directly: I do think my parents held a small hope that writing would just be a hobby, but I literally have no other skills, so writing was always going to be it whether anyone liked it or not. There were definitely a lot of "or not" periods growing up but overall and overwhelmingly, I always felt supported by the only people it really mattered to be supported by. I also feel really lucky that my family lets me share their stories inside my own. This was a hard answer to phrase, I don't want to make anyone mad, but I feel it is important to be honest, and I know you must know what I mean.

RZ: Lebanon or USA?

JR: Both.

RZ: What are you reading right now and why?

JR: Right now I'm reading *The Whale* by Philip Hoare because whales are the most fascinating creatures on the planet, I'm convinced they're aliens. They feel too cosmic to grace us with their presence on Earth, yet here they are and I want to get a closer look.

RZ: Who are your biggest literary and artistic influences?

JR: Sandra Cisneros, Kevin Devine, Lady Lamb, Lynda Barry, Frank O'Hara, Sylvia Plath, Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Safia Elhillo, Tiffany Mallery, Ada Limón, Mckendy Fils-Aimé, Franny Choi, so many friends, so many witchy creative femmes on the internet.

RZ: Crayons or ink?

JR: Ink

RZ: How important are literary journals in your opinion and/or experience?

JR: They're so important. I want to know what everyone is saying and feeling at all times because otherwise I don't know how I would get out of bed and face the world we're all trying to fight for. I've made so many friends in the poetry community through the network of literary magazines we all read and contribute to.

RZ: Why Pizza Pi Press?

JR: I can't sit still, I always need to be making things and I always need to be collaborating with other people. I wrote Pizza Pi Press on the back of a messy zine I made in college, kind of as a joke. Like "ha! it looks like this silly thing came out on a press!" but then I kept getting more ambitious and my friends wanted to join in and now it's my favorite thing to be part of and I hope we continue to grow and remain a platform that amplifies those who feel silenced elsewhere. Also, I really love pizza.

RZ: What advice/insight would you be compelled to offer other young writers?

JR: Read as much as you write, maybe even more. Read people of color. Don't be mean to yourself. Write even when people around you make you feel like you're wasting your time. Keep a journal with you at all times and don't beat yourself up if you're not always writing pages and pages of work. Even just a thought a day is an entire world you've recorded and that's so cool if you think about all the possibilities waiting to shoot off into a million synapses as you turn that thought over in your head before going back to the page. Think of your journal as an archive and every word an artifact of substantial magnitude. Don't stress out about getting published - social media makes imposter syndrome feel more urgent than it used to be, but social media doesn't show us all the nights where even our favorite writers feel stuck or defeated or sad or on their seventeenth straight episode of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Flaming Hot Cheeto Dust* stuck to their face.

RZ: What are you working on right now?

JR: I just threw all of the contents of my closet and desk into the middle of the room and I'm not leaving my apartment until it is once again habitable and just as ready for this new season as I am. Thank you so much for making room for me at *Sukoon*.



I CAN'T BREATHE 150X150CM
BY PAULA CHAHINE

WOMEN

We sit in an upstairs room
where the air conditioner wheezes

a lackluster attempt
at cool. It barely rustles our seven

floor-length cloaks of black
hanging near the closed door.

Arabic coffee steams. Our thimble-like cups
half-full with golden-yellow, stirred

saffron, perfume of cloves. Cardamom
making thick

the heat-damp air
that Septembers us by the sea.

TARA BALLARD

AGAIN

Dressed in black, a circle
of women sip from cups

of bitter coffee. No one
speaks as evening takes

shape in what is now
empty. I tilt the porcelain,

and grounds drift from
thumb to index finger.

I mourn with the other wives,
back turned to my husband

who drinks of a different kettle,
remembers the same man.

TARA BALLARD

5:09 AM

The Adhan releases us
from sleep, remembers
us to place.

Cool under
bedroom fan and duvet
blue as above
will surely come, we
curl against one another
without clothing like
we are once more near
the beginning:

our legs and arms
nautilus. My husband, his hands
he travels across my skin
as I am mud and he
river. We shape
in the room's dark.

Grains of sand
fold at the window sill,
cling to pulled security shutters
as we again immerse
in ritual waking.

Today one
hundred and thirty
mortars will fall south
of here. Fifteen missiles will break
the border. Evacuation
will continue.

TARA BALLARD

HABOOB

You will smell the sand before it arrives.
It will wake you from sleep, tugging at window panes
like an orange blanket over the sky.

Your breath will catch. You might find yourself
thirsty, but the water bottle on the nightstand won't
quench.
You will smell the sand before it arrives,

and even though all windows are closed,
grains will filter through and on and in
like an orange blanket over the sky.

The front door begins to rattle and shake, heavy
frame of wood accosted by desert. Wind grumbles.
You can smell the sand before it arrives,

but all you can do is sit up in bed, stare
as the tide washes across your world
like an orange blanket over the sky,

and you think of pharaoh and the ninth plague
as you breathe in this different breed of darkness.
You can smell the sand before it arrives
like an orange blanket over the sky.

TARA BALLARD



LES GENS PAUVRES SONT PLUS BEAUX
BY PAULA CHAHINE

THE QUARTERTONES OF ZULEIKHA

By Laila Malik

1

Naaji's oud won't tune properly tonight. I drop three quarters in his case and stand on the side, waiting.

It's his back-up, he explains apologetically. He snapped the stem of his good one tightening the strings. It must have been a hard day.

Where you live, he asks. Alone? With family? I nod yes, because it is easier to be a good Muslim woman before a good Muslim man if you live with your good Muslim family.

He smiles and brushes his fist against his heart. But alone, he says. I avert my gaze to the unremitting subway traffic. I want him to sing.

I want him to sing, but he left his duct tape at home, and has no mic stand. I offer to hold his mic for him. He is touched. He wants me to know.

I have 44 years, he says. You same my daughter. Please. You help me find wife. You see Muslim woman. I want to marry.

Insha'allah, I say. I want him to sing. I want so much for him to sing.

2

When Yusuf's message comes it is like the other shoe dropping with heavy finality on my summer. I have spent months avoiding email, heart sinking miserably with every ring of the telephone, patiently reasoning with Ma across the oceans. Surreptitiously sneaking glances at the photo they have sent me, of a serious and not unattractive young man with quick-bitten fingers.

He must be very busy, I say. Med school is no joke.

And maybe he has a white girlfriend, I add, not quite under my breath.

What did you say, Ma asks sharply.

Nothing, nothing. Just people are very busy. I'm very busy.

But, you know, not too busy.

Salaam, he writes. This is not my habit. Perhaps we could speak. Here is my number.

It is two days before the guilt forces my fingers.

Dear Yusuf, I type a little defiantly. Ok. Here is my number. I am often home in the evenings. Best regards.

I dream of him the night before his first phone call. It is the first of a series that will punctuate the milestones of our relations.

I don't always wear a headscarf, I hasten to clarify, lest my photo suggest some other brand of piety.

I don't always wear a beard, he quips back.

So he is not the *mullah* I expected. Perhaps I am not the *mullah* he expected.

You're not what I expected, he confirms.

Nor you, I reply warily. Apparently this is an animal of an unforetold variety. Apparently we have begun circling.

We talk about school, literature and film. He phones dutifully. Dutifully I pick up. We talk religion, philosophy and current affairs. He is a fan of Jorge Luis Borges, and is a pessimist, he says, in the existential sense. I make a mental note. He is on a media fast. He would like to meet, because the telephone is disembodiment.

We take measurements and make calculations, and cities and schedules notwithstanding, we agree to a place and time.

He is horribly, abominably late. He is hours upon hours late so that by the time I enter the café I am eaten half-dead with anxiety. Still, my jaw falls a few graceless millimeters when he stands to face me.

He is pretty, and I am embarrassed to look. A slow panic expands in my throat.

We take our seats at the rough-hewn wooden table, and commence grim pleasantries. He refills my glass every time it approaches empty, and my mounting fear makes me so thirsty that I am grateful beyond words for this simple kindness.

Perhaps I should have looked in the water before I drank it. Perhaps I should have searched for a floating vision of the future, a warning *surah* dancing on its surface, or simply the bubbling signs of a brewing tempest. Perhaps I should have sniffed it for poison seeds crushed to powder, mixed in with the anis.

I do none of these things. I close my eyes and drink the water. I will do the same weeks later, when he feeds me orange segments in the half-light after kissing me. I will continue in this way, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, so that I will never know when the taste of his mouth and oranges gives way to nicotine and cold air.

3

I sing along with Naaji, even though I don't know any of the lyrics, even though my Arabic is clumsy and childish. I wail with melodic abandon against the roar of the subway trains. I have a brilliant talent for delivering gibberish with profound emotion.

Wiping sweat from his brow with a dirty rag, he asks, what you feel you hear oud?

I shrug uncomfortably and stare at the escalators.

Happy? You feel happy, no? Sad?

Happy, sad, I nod yes.

Naaji stops strumming and gestures for me to come closer.

You listen. You same my daughter. I know you. You love old song. You love oud.

You come my house. I make you private lesson. I live alone. Six months you learn, same me. I same your father.

Thank you, Naaji. I will ask my fiancé.

What?

My husband, I will ask my husband.

His circle-ringed eyes darken.

What husband? He asks.

Mine. My husband.

Ohhhh, he says, revelation dawning, new lines appearing at the corners of his mouth.

I think you alone.

Husband, he says, lost in rumination over the word. *Husband*.

Maybe make problem. Maybe make jealous, he muses thoughtfully.

Yes Naaji, I think to myself, my husband who stubbornly refuses to exist will certainly be jealous of your toothless paternal advances.

I'll ask, I reassure him. Maybe he won't mind.

No, he exclaims suddenly. I tell you! You don't tell husband! You come my house, learn. Later you learn, you make surprise for him!

I can't do that, Naaji. He won't like it. He'll be angry with me.

4

What are you up to, I ask, fooling no one with my carefully calculated throw-away tone. It's been weeks. I don't know what to think. I'm thinking like a house on fire.

Nothing much.

There is an air of grim finality in his voice. Perhaps he means "Nothing much of any good," or "Nothing much to do with you." Perhaps he means "I'm busy studying," or "I'm busy with my buddies/another woman/sitting alone in the basement drinking vodka and playing video games". There are so many varieties of nothing much, and I am temporarily stumped into silence contemplating them.

But I can't really talk right now.

Oh, of course, I say quickly, because it is stupidly obvious that now is the absolute worst possible time to chat, no one in their right mind chats right now, how does sometime next year work for you, or better yet what about never?

Right, well, ok.

Yeah.

Ok, so -

– it's just I was planning to be in your neck of the woods next week.

Oh, cool. We should meet up.

Right. Well, I'll give you a call then.

We meet in the high-rise condo I have borrowed for the occasion. After exchanging awkward pleasantries, we step out for food. We are impeccably polite, we are a tribute to our families. We are polite with the precise violence of surgeons. We return to the apartment with pizza.

And a bottle of wine.

I, who do not drink, have declared it a date on which the abandonment of certain principles occurred. In the interests of higher causes. So that one way or another I will finally have something to tell Ma the next time she asks.

We eat. We drink. We play cards. He freezes if I move too fast, or too close. Oh brother, my brother. I swim ever deeper in a sea of confusion.

It gets later. Flying in the face of the convention of moral turpitude, we continue to maintain perfectly respectable relations. We say goodnight without the least suggestion of lingering questions, and chastely retire to separate bedrooms.

I wear a blood-red dress the next day, for courage.

Eyes dark with sleeplessness I wear a red dress, and grimacing I drink something red, and use a foul word in a flash of red anger, and from across the table in the half-empty restaurant finally I say what is this.

Nothing, he says. He says nothing.

He does not say:

I am still in love with her, whatever she did, whoever she is.
I am racked with a fury that is still cooling; it may take centuries.
I miss my mother, long-flown.
I will never love you.

He says only:

I don't know. I might not know in six months.

I say only, I will have to think.
Yes, he says. Please think.

We go back to the apartment and over cards I dare him to cry. Come on, I say cruelly, bitterly, be a man. He considers this. He concentrates. I giggle, and he is offended.

Playing with my silver bangles, careless now, I ask rude questions. About God and faith and practice. About prayer and profanity. Do you know the Quranic story of how Yusuf quaked against Zuleikha's desire, I ask. Are you a coward like your namesake?

And then finally he does cry, for god and his prophet, for perfection, fleeting and elusive, and for a million other things he never tells me.

I listen to him probe a strange old ache, and when he stops I walk him to the subway. Then I come home and sit in the dark in the apartment of a stranger, watching my heart grow old.

5

You happy you marriage?

I gaze out over the empty tracks.

Ah. You not happy. He Arab, your husband?

I shake my head.

Canadii?

Nod.

Why you don't like him?

It's not me, Naaji. I like him fine. He doesn't like me.

My non-existent husband who won't allow me to learn oud at your house doesn't like me.

WHY? He bellows without warning. You young, you beautiful! Why he don't like you?

The insolence.

I don't know, Naaji. I wish I knew.

6

Naaji is playing one level above where I stand waiting for my train. I can hear the strains of his oud, his melancholy voice singing the same two lines of the only song he ever sings.

I will not go to say hello. He knows enough about me now.

And I can hear him from here.

7

I think. I think furiously, I think foolishly. I make lists, I count my steps. I count my breaths.

I research *Maqam*, the traditional Arabic system of melodic modes. *Maqam* means place, location or position. I ponder the seventy two heptatonic tone scales, with their major, neutral, and minor seconds. There are no fixed frets

in Western music.

I take detailed notes with a sharpened No. 2 lead pencil, comprehending none of it.

8

Will you write down the words of your song?

Naaji's fingers are surprisingly stubby for a strings man. His nails are dirty. He works something manual by day. Sorry, he says, pushing some cardboard toward me for me to sit. His handwriting is a scrawl. English would be hard enough, I'll need help with the Arabic. Who can I ask?

How you are? How you husband?

I smile wide-eyed and helpless.

He left me.

He stops writing.

He left you? How he left you? Where he go?

I have no idea.

He don't say nothing? He don't tell where? Where you are stay? You need something?

No, I'm ok. I went back to my father's house.

Ah. You go you father. He nods with sage disappointment.

Why he go, he wonders aloud, and turns back to his oud.

9

From one day to the next, he disappears.

There is no trace. No one I could ask. Phone disconnected. You'd think that with this network there would be some way I could find out. But you can't ask without telling. The rules are strict, and I chose them.

Ma is indignant but glad to be done with the never-ending suspense, this story that arced ever-heavenward.

Good riddance to bad rubbish!, she exclaims. Onward and upward! Plenty of fish in the ocean!

Thank you, Ma, I say.

But I'm done with fish.

Naaji is gone, too. I've checked for him in all the usual spots, but day after day I find him replaced by a Chinese accordion player who smiles beatifically as he plays polka renditions of *The Wedding March* and *Happy Birthday To You*. I leave a ten-dollar bill in his tip jar, and when he asks for a request, I pull out Naaji's note, grimy and crumpled from the depths of my pocket.

Scanning the paper, he nods sagely. As I step into my subway car, the haunting accordion strains of Disney Aladdin's *Arabian Nights* follow me.

10

I don't know what I'll do now that I'm free. Maybe I'll build a boat and sail it west until I reach the Indian Ocean. That way I won't have to talk to anyone along the way. That way I'll still remember my questions by the time I get to God, and we can have it out once and for all.

And when we're done with our chat I'll make a new home someplace where no trains run. I'll buy an oud, and find a teacher. We'll speak strictly in quartertones. I'll learn the real lyrics to all the old songs, and when I howl gibberish from the depths of my heart it will be because I chose it that way.



THE SMILES
BY PAULA CHAHINE

AL JUMAIL

He casts a bone carpet, this god,
scattering seashells on the desert floor,
moving oceans without
meaning to.

Cross-legged, vacant
– or at least, without malice –
he sits and he lifts and he folds,
annihilates and begins,

and then again,
comes to an end
and then again,
comes to a beginning.

But this toiling god doesn't rest,
here in the dust of workers' buses,
heading for the towers.
He does not sit and stare,
out at the fish traps, beyond the stony hook line
waiting for the tide.
He does not walk, out on the flats before the village,
or wait beyond the curling edges
of lost letters,
wealed with time and a circling age,
faded on a mud wall, dying in the hand.

Instead, he passes on here unblinking,
at the village of Al Jumail;
he does not see it now un-form,
disintegrate the day.
He passes too, the winter hours
rolling like milk, sinking into distant sea,
clouding the Gulf
– the pit between nations.

And there, amongst the garbage and more seashells,
silver, cobalt, purple
– reflecting without will –
there amongst the ruins, too,
he passes, unseeing, the short stems and glabrous shoots
of succulent samphire.

"Pick the small leaves," says Rashid, as we follow on behind.
"Those are the best, the best for eating."

So, no – it's true, we are not steeds,
panting across the old ground,
striking sparks, pressing home the charge.
But we have, for all our sins, moved on,
across the infinite pattern
from where the fish once teamed, there in the wadi,
the rivers flowed from jebel to still dreaming sea.
And we, too, were woken once by warhorses,
teeth biting at the leather, breath in the cold air – winter of
Arabia.

And were we not still well-made for this,
parted by the hours and stars,
a guide for the newly born,
now living in the susurrations of the waves,
the village tensing before the tide?

It is dawn again.

Out from our ruined house,
we walk to the line
– we brothers in suspicion –
and bend by the pool,
waiting for the catch.

JONATHAN GORVETT



MEN AND THEIR TOYS
BY PAULA CHAHINE

A SHORT BUT THOROUGH HISTORY OF A SMALL COUNTRY'S POLICING

By Craig Loomis

There are more and more reports these days of people impersonating police officers, of these pretenders stopping people on side streets, in alleyways, and demanding to look at their IDs: "Step over here, away from the road, now, show me your ID, your cellphone, and by the way, how much money do you have? Show me." All the while waving something like an official silvery badge in their face, a holster without pistol strapped to their waist, but sporting nothing like a uniform, no black cap, no epaulets, because, "I'm undercover, of course." If these pretenders get caught by the real police, who have the bigger silvery badges along with leather holster and gun, not to mention an official policeman's uniform with stylish black cap, these fake policemen will be grabbed, slapped, maybe even kicked, before they are thrown into the backseat of a police cruiser, all the while having to hear: "It's people like you who give us a bad name, you and your kind, no wonder they don't trust us. People like you." Here is where the pretenders will say they are sorry and that it won't happen again, and it was just a joke, *sah*; a bad joke that doesn't mean anything; 'I promise, and by the way, officer,' peering at his nametag, 'don't I know your cousin Ahmad in Salwa?' But never mind, because no matter what they say or do these pretenders end up in jail for a night and a day, just to give them a hint of what real policing is all about. And of course they have to surrender their fake silvery badges with IDs, and, "We'll take those holsters, too," that they got from a friend of a friend, and by the way, "Next time it won't be a simple night and a day in jail. Know what I'm saying, *sah*?" Secretly, the real policemen feel flattered that anyone would want to do their thankless job; of course the stealing money part is unacceptable. "Which reminds me: hand over the money you stole from that Indian fellow."





LES PETITE CHOSES
BY PAULA CHAHINE

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

By Kathy Shalhoub

My father once told me that women were all the same; they made promises they didn't keep.

I was a freshman sitting cross-legged on my dorm bed holding the receiver to my ear.

"They're full of bullshit," he said. I couldn't remember his face but his voice sounded so much older than his fifty-seven.

It sounded like someone else's and very far away.

"I really will come see you this summer," I said again after his declaration. I was ready at last.

"Whatever. Happy Birthday. I love you," he said.

I didn't reply because I didn't want to lie.

I am four years old and I'm a Princess. Dad is the King. In a house of six people I see only him. My brother and sister are invisible. My mother is at work and *Teta*, my grandmother, busy in the kitchen. We sit on the marble steps that connect upstairs with downstairs. He soothes my knee where I have fallen. A dark blue bruise is brewing beneath the skin. The tiles are cold. He picks me up and carries me up the stairs.

"Is my Princess okay?"

I am safe and warm in the throne of his arms so I smile and nod.

"You know, your Grandfather was a Count," he says. His English is accented. "You have blue blood. Royal blood," he says, his chest swelling and his eyes looking deep into mine. *Teta* passes by and rolls her eyes.

I lift my chin an inch higher. The blue knee makes sense now. Some months later, I am in the garden carrying a box of tools for my brother. It is too heavy and my hands are sweaty. It starts to slip and I can't hold it. I drop it on my ring finger and the finger splits open. I bleed crimson.

I am five years old. I am bouncing on my dad's leg and laughing. The TV is on and a blonde Miss Universe struts around the stage with her diamond crown. The perfume of tobacco on his fingers is warm and delicious.

"You will be Miss Universe one day," he says, gripping his pipe between tea-stained teeth. Maybe, but I have yet to see a Miss Lebanon on the show.

But when he lifts me up and sits me in his lap I feel like Miss Universe. I am loved. That summer we are on the beach, me in my one-piece stripy bathing suit and blue floaters sucking at my arms, him in his Speedos. He is so tall and handsome. His hair is dirty blonde. The tips curl perfectly around his ears. Golden body hair sparkles on his bronze skin. He gives me change and lets me go buy a Merry-cream. I feel like a grown up.

I hurry back to share my ice-cream with him but he's not on the slippery white benches that surround the pool. His blue towel is still damp with sweat. I look up and scan the tall hairy bodies all around. I see the back of a man in Speedos standing near the wall overlooking the crashing waves. The oil on his bronze skin glistens in the sun.

He is talking to Miss Universe in a tiny turquoise bikini. The chocolate and vanilla swirls melt onto my hand and drip down to the hot cement.

I am six years old and it's been a long, sticky summer. The electricity is out again. This is normal in Lebanon. It is late afternoon and my sister and I have exhausted our list of games. Mom is still at work. Dad is awake and better today.

"Get changed," he says. "Let's go outside and take pictures."

My sister doesn't want to participate. I run to change out of my nightie and into my new ballet outfit. Outside in the dimming sun, hibiscus flower in my hair, I am the most beautiful girl that ever existed.

"My prima ballerina," he says.

I preen.

That school year I begin ballet classes - a gift from Aunt Hoda. At home after class, I dance in front of the mirror, sing to myself, do a *plier*, a *pirouette*. My father wobbles in the doorway.

"You want to be ballerina?" His voice sounds strange.

"Yes!" I screech, and jump at him to pick me up. He squats down instead.

"Then you gonna be a poor starving artist all your life," he says.

Dad likes taking photos but he is an engineer. We are poor anyway.

I am seven years old and we are in the red-tiled kitchen. My father is very angry with my brother for not eating his tomatoes. The number of tomatoes does not equal the amount of anger. My brother puts a slice of tomato in his mouth and gags immediately. It's a texture thing. My father thinks he's being difficult. He undoes his belt, and in one move whips the leather from his pants and across my brother's back.

My brother flinches but says nothing. I run out of the kitchen and into the living room. My father comes to find me. I shrink into the corner of the couch. He sits next to me and drops an arm across my shoulders.

"Don't be scared." He knows I am because I'm crying. "I would never hurt you."

I know he wouldn't but I am sad for my brother, and relieved it's not me.

A bottle of Smirnoff and a row of beer bottles later, my father staggers into the kitchen in his underwear and grey robe. It feels like he's been away for a long time but there's war and I know no one can travel these days. I hurry in after him wanting us to spend time together. I want to hug him but hang back in the doorway. He struggles to open the refrigerator, sways in its mist, still gripping the handle while he scans the inside.

He stoops and plucks the bottle of French's mustard from the door, wobbles, spins a little then falls on his bum, legs spread out. Laughter bubbles over his lips.

I do not go closer. I do not look into his face. I do not hug him. I focus on the bottle of mustard he still holds. It is very yellow. The King begins to fade and his Princess does too.

I am 10 years old. The man standing next to me outside is my father. I am crying because there's a dead kitten on the concrete underneath his car. Or maybe I'm crying because Teta died so recently. He pats my shoulder like a baby pats a dog. Stiff. Awkward. Pat, pat, pat. We both seem disconnected, an old toy put together with improvised pieces.

"It's okay, I'll take care of it," he says. "Daddy will always be here for you."

He hasn't been anywhere else, but I still miss him. I have never called him Daddy either. I take his words and carefully wrap them up. I put them inside my heart where they still burn.

A few months later, Aunt Hoda is dropping me off at home after a day at her place. A Red Cross ambulance is parked outside our house, the siren is off but the orange lights are spinning. Something happened to *Teta*? No, *Teta* died months ago. I sprint inside. A man is lying facedown on the floor next to my parents' bed.

Mom tells me he's going to hospital to get better. After that I sometimes see his name embroidered into towels I help mom hang outside. Then one day the towels stay home. I don't say goodbye and I don't say I love you because I don't see him again. He is back in his country, getting better.

My father told me once that women were all the same, they made promises they didn't keep. I don't know if he was talking about my mother or me but in either case, he was right.

I was an engineering freshman sitting cross-legged on my dorm bed holding the receiver to my ear. I couldn't remember his face but his voice sounded so much older than his fifty-seven. I promised him I would visit that summer. Winter got there first.

TIMELESS FLOAT

I found love
In the cardboard hands of beggars
Throwing roses, rose petals
Through the windows of my car
Like it was my wedding
And I was engaged to the night

I found love
In the young hands of a homeless child
As she clenched unto my curls
Staring
Stating
"sha3ratik ma3karona"
I hear laughter
I laugh with her
Because this hair has been called broomstick
Far too long
Under the sweeping breath
Of people who don't deserve clean ground

I found love
In the chaos of raouche
And its homeless, stress, mess
People cursing traffic in distress
Time is relative, Einstein said
Clocks ticking slower when we're in a hurry
To clocks ticking quicker
When we want to hold hands longer
To clocks ticking quicker
When we need a last goodbye
To clocks ticking quicker
When 48 hours is a bomb
An explosive threat
Ready to demolish my city
The innocent and guilty equally
This is the only equality Beirut knows
The un- strategic death

Time is a car attempting
To catch its own headlights
Moving closer in sight
Of its own brightness
Only to never reach it
As it moves further away

The garden in my car becomes vast
How long are these roses going to last
Before time withers them
Petals falling
One by one
With the rotation of the sun
Like grandmother's withering
Heat under my skin slithering
As her petals
Fell to the earth
Her summer was gone; it was autumn
Every petal is a new disability

Petal 1: Cane
Petal 2: Wheelchair
Petal 3: She asks me the same question again
Here I know she's a planet ready for her orbit
As her words skip her mind
Seep through lips
Spinning in circles

When they found out about me
Time became every morning
Waking up, a walking target
Close the faucet
Putting armor on before brushing my teeth
Bullets around my waste
As I walked through hallways
Clenching my fists
As I resist
And I insist
To never change until they aim
Aim and shoot
Shoot through my skin and bones
I have a lot of blood
To spill

Time is relative
How fast we run
Before they catch us
Deadline
How long it will take
For my mother to break
In her empty bed
Deadline
Absent from my working father
Paying tuition that are getting higher
Deadline

Time is relative
Pulsating like electricity in wires
We are all buyers
Of the reality we find suitable
12PM Deadline 12AM deadline
Origin of the word "deadline"
1864
American civil war
Boundary which if crossed prisoners were shot

Look around
The world is a grid
Horizontal lines
Vertical lines
Equator –
Even as a kid
I knew, we knew
Not to step on the fault lines

I run towards the water
The abused oxygen

Fills the gaps between the cells of my face
They detach in denial
Of time
Of existence
They are now alone
Fighting against the wind
Like a million accident impacts
The density of a thousand drowning suns in flesh
Releasing my body from structure

I run towards the water
I jump
 In the water
Leaving the garden of withered roses
The raouche noises
Behind.

My muse in the bubbles
The ocean rushing into me
To find a shore
On every organ it attempts
Yet decides to set

Timeless
Stillness
Eternal float.

LYNN SAAD

BEIRUT

Beirut's eyes are the windows
Of bombed homes, fallen stones
From the civil war

Beirut's eyes are the windows
That are covered by the filth of the plastic sheet
Too sun- stained to stay intact
Filthy enough not to be touched
Filthy enough for you to lust
Over its undressing
Wondering what skin resides
Behind this plastic
The breath of missing families
Creating sanctuaries
In the worn out walls

My mother's eyes look like
The coffee cups after the *basara*
Put them down to be read
Drip
 Drip-
 -ping thick caffeine

Mother relied on fate
She read me like a coffee cup
Soon to be washed
From the way I dressed, how I walked
The coffee stains of me
Resembled the veins of my city

Beirut's borders are barriers from the blasphemy

My father reminds me of 2\$ bread
Bread placed in the freezer
It is cut by bending it
The bread of life
Too cold to be eaten
As it turns into 100's of crumbled specks
Roaming with the rest of the dust

Beirut's borders are barriers from the blasphemy

But a woman loses her virginity
By a cotton ball purchased from a pharmacy
The intrusion of the unnatural
The intrusion of the independent
The fear of a woman not existing to be unraveled
That day I wanted to
Swim in the Mediterranean just to make it the red sea

Beirut's borders are barriers from the blasphemy

Beirut is us
We've drowned 7 times too many
Stretching our arms from Sour to Tripoli
Hoping we would stay afloat

Beirut is us
We the street signs
Broken enough to tilt left
While we state right
The coercion of thoughts
Of whether to leave this country or not

The absence of the yellow light
Imagine the absence of the yellow light
At an intersection
Our eagerness to get everywhere
Would crash without redemption
One green
One red
The impatient would die

No change happens overnight
Like my mother
Like my father
Like Beirut
Let us lift the filth of the plastic.

LYNN SAAD

LOVE, WAR, IDENTITY, HOME

INTERVIEW WITH *BITTER ALMONDS* AUTHOR, LILAS TAHA BY REWA ZEINATI

RZ: Lilas Taha, congratulations on winning the 2017 International Book Awards for your book entitled *Bitter Almonds*, published by Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press. Tell us a little about the process of starting the idea for this book, up until the moment it was published and then nominated for an award.

Lilas Taha: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about my book and writing journey.

As a child of a Palestinian refugee father, I always wanted to *tell* the story of what happened to his generation—scream it out loud, if I could. Anger and frustration at the injustice of it all accompanied me through the years, much like most Palestinians who grew up watching their parent(s) try to move forward, while clinging to a land—a world—often described as *perfect* or *magical*, yet unreachable. Living in exile, my father carried his Palestine in his heart and managed to plant its seeds in mine and my brother's. Hope flourished, and I arrived to adulthood determined to do the same for my children.

On my father's last visit to me in the US, however, I saw something different in his eyes, a lack of luster, something was missing. After being displaced three times in his life, hope deserted him. That realization hit me very hard, and I struggled to engage him, to bring him back from the brink of despair. It pained me to see him that way; *knowing* he would not return to his beloved Palestine. So I started writing about his familiar world, involving him in discussions and challenging him to express more, talk more, remember more. Our daily sessions, when I read to him what I've written the night before, became our time together. We argued a lot, stepped into dangerous emotional zones often, and sometimes, we sailed into happy places. I wanted to create characters he could connect to and care about, and describe events as he and others in his generation experienced them, not as history books recorded them. That was my goal, and that's how *Bitter Almonds* was born.

It took me a year to write the story and I was on my final edits when a lady, who had read my first book *Shadows of Damascus*, attended a writer's event in Kuwait and mentioned my work to one of the editors present. At the time, Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press was under the umbrella of Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishers. The editor got in touch with me, and I sent her my manuscript for *Bitter Almonds*. A publication contract followed. The book was released worldwide, translated into the Norwegian language, and will come out in Arabic translation January, 2018.

Being nominated for, and winning, the 2017 International Book Awards in the Multicultural Fiction category provides wonderful exposure and is definitely the icing on the cake.

RZ: Your novel is thematically, among other things, about displacement and exile. How do these themes tie into your own life and experiences?

LT: I grew up in Kuwait among a mix of Arab nationalities. I spent most summer vacations in Syria with my mother's family and my father's relatives who settled there after their removal from Palestine in 1948. I was fortunate to absorb all cultures, but there was always a sense of being in transition, functioning in temporary mode: living in one place where my parents worked (Kuwait), visiting another where most members of my family lived (Syria), and yearning for a land I never experienced (Palestine).

With the Gulf War, I lost the patch of stability I was floating on. Through difficult circumstances, I ended up in a new land (US) speaking a different language. I pursued my studies, married a wonderful man—a Palestinian—and tried to build a secure future and a family. Eventually, my parents joined me, but by then, they had to resettle again (Jordan). And after the war in Syria erupted, some members of my mother's family also became refugees. So displacement and exile were persistent companions in my life.

RZ: You are an electrical engineer by training and you mention that creative writing is your passion. Why didn't you pursue this passion earlier on?

LT: Ever since I was a child, I've written short stories and personal reflections, but always in Arabic, and I never really entertained the idea of publication. I kept it as a hobby as I earned my engineering degrees and raised a family. Writing took me to my comfort zone, a respite from the stresses of life, and it stayed as a personal escape tool.

When the sad events started unraveling in Syria in 2011, the uncertainty and worry about my relatives frustrated me to the point that I started writing a story to reflect my emotional upheaval, but I used the English language for the first time. With persistent support from my husband and friends, I joined a writer's guild and read parts of the story to the mix of writers. Their feedback was surprisingly positive, which encouraged me to keep writing in English and, a year later, I had a published novel. *Bitter Almonds* came next accompanied by my desire to join writers who shine a light on the Palestinian struggle and other issues pertaining to the Middle East for readers in the west.

I can't see myself *not* writing. In an irrational way, I think of myself a girl hugging her security blanket. I hope to be able to stay on this writing track, perhaps publishing original works in Arabic, too.

RZ: What was/is the most terrifying part about your writing journey? Its beginning, or now? Or both?

LT: I don't think it is the beginning. When I started this journey, I really had no clue what the writing and publishing worlds are like. Don't they say ignorance is a bliss? I can relate to that. I just pushed forward, learning as I go, and the more information I gathered, the more aware I became of how rocky this path is. After all the hard work I pour into a book—my baby—I let go of it for readers to judge and criticize. There are no training wheels to gradually lift from its bike, no kindergarten to slowly remove it from my care. Once my book is released, the baby suddenly becomes an adult.

Therefore, I'm in constant learning mode. I want to produce a better product, a higher quality book, a more expressive novel. I don't believe there's an end of a road for a writer. There's no ultimate goal to reach. That in itself brings me to the terrified state.

RZ: Your book is dedicated to the loving memory of your father. Tell us a little more about that.

LT: I've explained how I started writing *Bitter Almonds* to engage my father. Sadly, he passed away about three weeks before I signed the publishing contract, so he never really knew I got the story out. But I believe he is smiling at me from his special place up above, perhaps with a new twinkle in his eye.

RZ: You've moved around a lot while growing up. What or where is 'home' to you?

LT: Although I have many places where I feel at home, in my mind and heart, the absolute definition of *home* has always been Palestine, a place I had only heard and read about growing up, but didn't have the chance to see until fairly recently as an adult. Palestine holds a powerful grip on my emotions and imagination.

My Arabic dialect is colored by my mother's Syrian accent, and sometimes I surprise people when I passionately talk Palestinian, even have my sincerity brushed aside because of it. That infuriates me. The *feeling* of being Palestinian has been talked about in so many ways, and written in plenty of poetry, wonderful books and articles. Yet, I think it's an indescribable *state of existence*. All we can do is hold on to it, try to creatively express it, and pass it on to the next generation.

Just as my mother instilled in me her fabulous culture and values, of which I am very proud, my father did the same, and the both of them together created a special environment independent of the geographical location where we actually lived. My husband and I tried to do the same for our children living in the US.

Spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually speaking, Palestine was always, still is, and will forever be my true home.

RZ: Would you describe *Bitter Almonds* as more of a political story or more of a love story? Or maybe love is political anyway?

LT: I would describe it as a human story at the center of a political pie with a slice of love, a dose of culture, a pinch of history, and a dash of hope. I don't believe that romantic love solely transcends borders and politics, for I see love of country and homeland is just as enchanting.

RZ: Are any of the characters in your novel based on, or inspired by, people you've met or know personally?

LT: The simple and straight forward answer is no. There isn't a specific character based on someone I know or met. But I used my experiences with the people in my life to see my characters with clarity and shape them to the way they turned out. My father's personality was very complex, and I borrowed some of his traits to create both Omar and Marwan in *Bitter Almonds*, so in a way, their combined personalities were inspired by some of my father's attributes. Additionally, I've always admired the sincerity of my teachers, and the ingenuity and strength of the women in my family, starting with my mother's ability to always see the big picture. I drew on all of that to develop the different female characters in the book.

RZ: You were born in Kuwait to a Syrian mother and a Palestinian father, and you left for the United States after the Gulf War. Tell us a little about your experience living in the US, in terms of identity, exile, "otherness" and/or belonging.

LT: Although I was exposed to the western world as a child through trips to Europe that my parents took us on, I experienced cultural shock just like every immigrant who arrived to the New World. At first, everything was difficult. I missed moving within a big homogeneous community. The little things I took for granted became very important and even essential. I longed for the smells, sounds, and tastes of the Middle East. I remember I had a panic attack the first time I talked one-on-one with my professor when I was studying for my master's degree.

As time went on, I eased into American life, graduated, married, and moved to another state to start a family. My husband and I made the effort to keep our children within a sphere that combined mainstream America and the Arab American community around us. Furthermore, living in the big mix of ethnicities and backgrounds of the US helped me to assimilate while proudly maintaining my cultural heritage.

The sense of being an outsider diminished, but it didn't completely disappear. I'm thankful for that. I know where I belong, but of all the places I lived in, I'm not sure where I don't belong.

RZ: What advice would you give budding writers who might be afraid of pursuing this path?

LT: Don't write as if someone is looking over your shoulder. Write what you want, more so if it is difficult and thorny. Write what is begging to be released, and be patient, for a writer's vehicle moves slowly. Don't let your ego stand in the way of improvement, and always, always, seek honest feedback.

RZ: Which writers were you influenced by while growing up? Which writers are you drawn to now?

LT: Growing up, I read most books by the known Arab geniuses, namely Naguib Mahfouz, Ghassan Kanafani, Taha Hussein, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Anis Mansour and many more. I also read a good number of the translated literary classics for western writers like Earnest Hemingway, Agatha Christie, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Leo Tolstoy to name a few. As I gained more command of the English language, I re-read those classics in English, which provided me with additional levels of enjoyment and different angles of understanding for the same books.

Currently, I'm drawn to Arab writers such as Susan Abulhawa and Saud Alsanousi. Other writers I like are Khaled Hosseini, and Jodi Picoult.

RZ: What are you working on right now?

LT: I'm working on two novels in parallel. Something I haven't attempted before. One is a sequel to my third novel, which will hopefully come out next year. The plot is current in time and it deals with American Palestinians connecting with their roots and themes relating to resistance.

The other novel I'm working on explores a rarely touched topic of Palestinian life, and is entirely set in the Middle East.



PUT IT IN A STARBUCKS COFFEE CUP
BY ZENA ASSI

THE JORDAN VALLEY

My Palestinian grandfather's roots
—olive, lemon, orange, date palm—
spread wide and deep. He carries them
wherever he sits, perching on feet and knees—
tends to them with the memories only he keeps.
They always grow westward and, in his home in the
Jordan Valley, thirst for the river they can almost
reach. At night he finds a soft stone, lays down his head.
I see his roots in my mother, the way,
silhouetted, her bones catch the sun.
Under translucent skin, sap and bark and buds grow out—
her arms, her hands, her fingers. In the soft spring,
leaning over the edge of the balcony facing westward toward
the land of broken promise, she drinks in the sun's bloom.
But I am at best a quarter farmer. All I know
is summer harvest. Guiltless juices run down my chin,
knot my hair in clumps, stain my fingers
tangerine. Later, I will wash myself.
I will not know how my grandfather smears his face
with sticky fingers, how he stands there in the sun,
brown and earthy, face streaked brown and gold.
I will not see his breathing, his soft chant:
al-watan. home.
I have gone too far west, too far to watch anything grow.
The land of dreams, for me, is simply the land of dreams.

AIYA SAKR

BEDDING THE SUMMER IN MY AUNT'S EMPTY APARTMENT

Downstairs, my parents care for my
Egyptian grandmother.

In the apartment above them,
a stopped clock reads 8:47. I do not know
when it stopped. On the door
to the bedroom in which I sleep
I find a warning in withering crayon:

"Malak's room

Rules:

1- ~~kn~~ knock on the door before entering.

2- Whatever you play with put it back
When you are finished."

and an afterthought in the bottom corner,

3- take off Your shoes. Inside

the room hang a purple crystal chandelier

—a seven-year old's shiny possession—

and a hand drawn chart of Qur'anic
chapters, gold stars halfway down.

There are no ghosts here; my dead
uncle followed his wife and daughter
back to New Jersey seven years ago.

I walk barefoot on the dusty floor, soak
the calcified showerhead in vinegar,
leave clean marks over faded spines
of books, titles in Arabic and English
in bookcases under dust,

and toss sheets, like swarms

of eager seagulls, off

of chairs and leather couches.

On the phone yesterday—Malak

is going to UC San Diego.

In this building, three

of four apartments—belonging each

to an uncle or aunt—

remain empty.

In the summer they are alive again

and loud with the clapping

of children's sandals on marble steps,

with the slamming of front doors that inhale them and exhale them,
laughter and half-heard Arabic in the stairwell.

In the one remaining apartment where my parents live,

they have given my grandmother my room.

With dark skin that matches my own,

a flat nose and a heavy build,

my grandmother,

daughter of Cleopatra, sister of Um Kulthoum,
timeless and unstoppable,
has always shrouded herself in a distant empire.
Her loving booming voice asked questions on the phone—
as I imagine it shook the microphone, those early days of the Revolution
reciting poetry in Tahrir Square—
but left me no chance to speak. How are you ya albi, ya hayati
my heart, my life. My heart, my life.
She asked everybody that.
Her suitcases—I could fit inside,
her frozen duck none of us would eat.
She smelled like ripe mangoes and rearranged the kitchen
while my mother clenched her teeth.
Now my mother makes her salt-less food
and delivers it to teta's room.
Now I walk into that room and I am surrounded
by unfamiliar books, rows of medicine bottles, a set of false
teeth.
My grandmother naps often,
the lines of an age breaking her round face,
her heart weakened,
her dominion reduced to a single room
borrowed from a granddaughter.

AIYA SAKR

1. In the blur of a day, Mary the mother of Jesus
 waits for us in Jerusalem
 beyond rushing taxis and warm,
 sloshing water in plastic bottles. Mary who held
 to a date palm so tightly her palms
 must have bled as dates dropped
 from the heavens and the Archangel
 whispered in her ear—the name of her son.
 The likeness of mother and child now hangs
 everywhere
 high on the walls, face after face look down
 through us, the lonely priest and his rosary beads—
 as two staircases down—
 under underground—
 lanterns under arches
 hang.
 Though her tomb is ancient, set in stone
 unmoved for two thousand years, though we humble
 ourselves, crouch and bow our heads, though
 cracked stone shows how she lay—she has eluded us.
 We touch her only through warm letters under harsh light—stuffed
 into her resting place through cracks in the casing; cold glass
 we peer through. Whole pages, front and back, in scripts I don't
 recognize—lists of names: Alejandro, Aliana, Ayesha—someone
 has prayed for the Prophet's wife at the feet of the Virgin Mary.
2. In the blur of a day, past her four windows
 and rolling hills—
 past talks and interpretations, poems
 and dashes—those
 who know her and
 those who don't—
 Emily Dickinson, eternally half-smiling
 mother of poets, from her place plastered on the wall,
 that giant dwarfing us all, a daisy bigger than she
 blooming out of her chest, welcomes us to her home
 in Amherst, her center of the world.
 Her tombstone says she has been called back
 but we still find her here
 and we still leave her
 Queen Anne's Lace grown wild
 letters on colored paper
 pens and pencil—what poems were
 composed with these?—
 business cards
 one flimsy keychain that
 tells me to live the life I love.
 Everyone wants to
 leave something
 Here

RAINBOW STREET, JABAL AMMAN

On Rainbow Street, I run into Amman—
sitting on the steps
of that cobblestone staircase winding toward
the old city that sprawls beneath us
like a cat on its back, drinking in the
dying sun. Her light brown
hair catches the maroon twilight, and her round,
youthful face with its green eyes
is still striking,
and I want to tell her dark, concrete mascara
does nothing to mask the paleness of her face.
The *maghrib* call to prayer sounds
and she strokes my face, runs her fingertips
along the folds of my pink turban, my
exposed neck. Her hand lingers
and she says it suits
my face. She tells me
I am pretty and asks me
why I've changed.
My nails tap
cold stone as she tells me
how our love has ended—
I say God is love.
She laughs
and points at the moon—
waning—
says God is further away.
I say that's not what Abraham
meant. God was in
his dreams. She says dreams are
just dreams and then—I miss you.
I say I am catching a plane
tomorrow—
we walk back the length of Rainbow Street
past the dozen hookah bars—youth sitting
in swirling smoke.
past the falafel houses and the *shawerma* joints
Past the elementary school
and the The Good Book Shop.
Sifting through crowds of people
on the narrow sidewalk we
head toward First Circle
—that massive roundabout—
where yellow taxis hunt.

AIYA SAKR

UNPINNED

I am dazed from waking—the energy in the dimmed room and the flutter of the echoing chants of men, women, and angels alike, has willed me—against my will—to sleep.

In Damascus we are leaving
our *Dhikhr* circle of remembrance
when my father's sheikh:
that illuminated, ageless man in navy
robes, arm resting on my
father's for balance, seconds from
driving off, turns to me:

inna tareeqaki ila al-janna.

Your path is one that will lead you to
Heaven. Then he is gone.

Tomorrow

the steps of the Omayyad mosque, the pigeons and
the hushed noise and the calligraphy
of the walls of that barefoot courtyard,
will tug at me and I will choose
modesty. Tomorrow I will buy a
scarf and, for the first time, wrap
it around my head, once, twice,
under my chin, and up
pushing it back as my mother does
to smooth out the kinks. I will stab myself
pinning it in place, yelping and trying again,
tomorrow and many times after—
draped fabric will cover my neck,
ends cascading down my
shoulders, so only my face shows.
I will walk the streets proud and hot—
clumsy fabric slipping back, hair poking out
all over the place—my heart content, sure.

The day I call my grandmother
on the way back from Damascus—
my first *hijab*, a pink striped thing,
wound so tight it hurts my ears—
her quiet excitement rings through
the closing miles between us:

Mubarak. Congratulations.

Cousins, aunts, even my school principal
soon repeat it: *Mubarak*.

At thirteen it is a year before
I need to wear it; I have not yet
got my period.

At nineteen,

in a corner of the upper floor at *Zara Center*

at the three-day handmade bazaar—
I meet Debbie, the blonde American with
cropped hair. She displays
rows of colored bottles, newspaper flowers,
mosaic change-dishes,
plush owls on string, and
painted ceramic hearts.
She hands me one in navy
a daisy ribbon glued across
the front like a royal sash.
She says she admires
my devotion,
her own *hijab*
a modesty she
wraps around her heart. I
palm the heart she gives,
aware of the moment its coolness
turns to warmth, its sharpness turns
familiar.

At twenty-two in Utah,

My *hijab*, a pins-and-needles-free, fluid
thing, floats with the shifting currents
of modesty. Here, it has
slipped down my head,
rests around my neck.

Over a picture with my hair
exposed,

the first thing a friend
says to me in years,

in a small message on

Facebook, at the bottom of my screen—
I love you

and I'm worried. Don't forget
that *hijab* is your crown.

She does not see my *hijab* at all
and I don't know how to tell her
crowns grow heavy—
and hearts can bear the weight
of modesty.

The fifth time I wrap a turban
around my head,

in Logan, Utah,

my arms begin to ache.

Dozens of tabs open on Chrome:

Pinterest, YouTube tutorials,

hijabi fashion blogs, hipster travel sites.

Here, I buy new scarves I wrap around my head,
one side over the other,
knot them in the back,

tuck the ends into the turban,
against my head.
In the mirror,
I wonder if I should also wrap my exposed neck.
In two weeks I will be in Jordan and
I am reinventing my *hijab*.
I say I will not care about anyone's comfort
but my own. At night I dream of aunts and uncles saying
good Muslim. Bad Muslim.
You're your cousins' role model.
Come back to us.
At twenty-three in Jerusalem,
I am in al-Aqsa mosque.
Nearly two billion Muslims and I
have dreamt of the spirit of the Prophet hovering
in the open courtyard and wreathing stone *wudu'* fountains,
exposed wooden beams, the burnt and rebuilt *minbar* of Saladin,
laced in layers of visible history.
I am a neighbor from the country next door, the granddaughter of
exiles, yet as I lift my hands to start my prayer—
here
where the Prophet ascended into heaven—a hand reaches from the unseen and yanks me
out.
Her scolding voice pries, harsher than
the fingers that clutch at my scarf,
that rip it off —how can you not have *pins?*—
rearranging it so it drapes how it used to—
how it should.
I never see my sister-in-faith, my sister-by-blood,
she who has made me "right"
again.
When I leave al-Aqsa at dusk
I wrap my scarf into a turban again,
turn my head in one last farewell.

AIYA SAKR



SUPER MODELS
BY PAULA CHAHINE

DIPLOMACY 101

You will not know diplomacy until you sit across the table from your colonizer, addressing him with the tongue that he forced into your mouth, after he severed yours.

Please, don't try to convince me to feast on amnesia
while I watch those with no lineage grow fat off my mother's harvest.

The blood in veins echoes too loud to be silenced by your guilt.
I pledge no allegiance to your shame
nor will I shed another layer of skin to provide you comfort.
You already wear too much of me

Forgive me, I do not know the glory of mediocrity,
nor can I confess that fragility is my lord and savior.
I know nothing of the reprieve bought by weeping.
My eyes were bled dry at birth.
I have never known the luxury of having water to waste,
So pardon me if I drink your tears.

Do not speak to me of hunger until you have had to pick pride
from in between your teeth to feed your children hope.

Until you've had to bury babies in the midst of bombs and moving borders,
do not question the magic I must conjure, every day, for survival.

You will not know strength of character
until murderers come to the funerals of your fathers to deliver the eulogies

Please, I beg you, when foreign thieves break into the temple of your familiar
then baptize you 'whore', speak to me of forgiveness.
Tell me, then, the story, of 'not every' and 'not all'

Until the fear of shadows becomes the justification for the slaughter of your children
you will not know terror.
You will confuse him with your conscience, revise your history
and call him everything
but your own name.

CHRISTINE JEAN BLAIN

TILING AND CLEANING

By Ramez Awad

The crowd lay down on their comfy, homemade seats.

In the process of sitting down, the heads of both men and women were perfectly aligned.

They lunged at the plates filled with food, and emitted loud ululations.

And to the tune of ominous ghosts roaming around the TV room, they went silent, and listened to the news:

"The government has successfully completed the tiling of the Mediterranean Sea".

You can suddenly hear an eruption of "oohs" and "aahs" in admiration...and eyes were trembling.

Especially the tiler's.

PHILOSOPHICAL JILBAB

By Ramez Awad

-You say: "I think, therefore I am".

-Correct.

-And if I'm not thinking the way you think, do I still exist?

He mulled over that thought for a while, then found the answer:

-As long as you're thinking, then you still exist regardless of what you're thinking about.

-So what I understand and gather from what you just said, is a call for everybody to start thinking?

-That is right.

-Regardless of the way of thinking?

-Regardless.

-So as long as I'm thinking, therefore I am, irrespective of the way that I think.

-Yes; like I told you...

-Alright. I exist more than you.

-What do you mean?

-You're making a remark and you give this absolute, unequivocal touch. While in reality, it contains subliminal messages, stating that the Westerner such as yourself thinks the right way, thus, he truly does exist. And the non-Westerner such as myself does not think the right way. And therefore, he exists less. And it would be preferable for him not to exist at all.

As a matter of fact, I exist more than you could possibly imagine because I am honest. An you exist less than I am because you are a liar; you hide behind your insinuations centered around the patented "Me, me, me" western state of mind, insinuations wrapped under a pompous philosophical jilbab.

By saying that, the non-westerner stood up from his seat, the same one where René Descartes was sitting on in the park. His silhouette was dwindling down, but Descartes kept saying to himself, until this moment, ever since he met this non-westerner a while back: "While it is true that he thinks, but he does not exist".



THE SHIT WALL
BY PAULA CHAHINE

A GRAIN OF RICE THE SIZE OF SATURN

I am the most despicable human you can torture.

One day I will laugh on some train.

The trees around me will gallop as thirsty
hippopotami, as a war-locked beam,
as a pearl that snatches itself from the ear
of its wearer.

Someday, together, our eyes may explode on the train, where everyone
speaks Catalan. You and I are the reflection
of ourselves on the glass that stands
between movement and stillness.

The advice from the last face to me was: you must
cry, and you must stay a man.

I cried and cried and cried and cried,
but I was not a man.

I was your disintegrating skin from the whips
that ploughed roads in the snow of your chest,
I was an expressionistic painting on the wall of
your punctured throat as your memory
of a father who loved to feed you
the instant food was made; the Terebinth Tree
story that you read at middle school and was
a symbol of one's survival and the depression of another.

One time, I shall, black, visit the tomb of
my mother, black as her coal-heart which
died of her love for whiteness—even though I was never white.

On a piece of leather, the Lacandon woman shows me
a drawing of what she calls a "lord",
she says he can fly,
and swim in the mud as well.

I say: I announce him...

She says he may visit me one day and push
into my mouth a grain of rice the size of Saturn, and that
he may teach me Arithmetic and the names of Trees.

I say: I love him.

* The Lacandon are one of the Maya peoples who live in the jungles of
the Mexican state of Chiapas. Population approx. 1000.

ALAN IRID FENDI

COCKEYED BOY CAME CLOSE TO BEING A GENIUS

*He would be made of rubber
for children
to throw at walls, bounce
down stairs.—Kenneth Brewer*

Pushing one switch, he could
turn on two lights instead of one.
He was a sleepless bastard same as Tesla.
But his mother used to say:
one light is more than necessary.
He'd look around like a chameleon whose
focus never dims, whose brain never trite;
trying to monitor each trifle and every act;
he'd watch his mother read *As-Safir* newspaper,
and his father trim his nails over a greenish dish.
If he added one to one: the sum was *four*—
Businessman of the future, I'd cheer.

If you visited, he'd offer you candy in one
hand and leblebi in the other.
Simultaneously he read *Majid* magazine, and
watched *Al-Manahil* on the Jordanian channel.
(Abu 'l-Horouf corrects *rahim*: womb to *rahib*: spacious.
But my friend, trickster as he was, sees two B's; "*bahib*: I love,"
he whispers to the vacuum on his right,
from the left side I stretch my body to curl
behind him, and meet his words
so his face doesn't grow cold,
"her name is Reem or Rima.")

Every time I left their house, he'd kiss me twice on
the mouth, rather than once on each cheek.
He'd say: Your mouth is big; you will become a wedding
singer
one
day.

*The inspiration here is drawn from the eye disease I have,
Keratoconus.

*Abu 'l-Horouf a children TV character (featured on *Al-Manahil*;
an educational show) à la the American Letterman.

THE COLOUR-STERILE

Someone's phone is barking, but it's yours.
There is a clique of humans who decide your destiny—
none of them undetached from Sanity.
How do you remember your first day as a dragonfly?
Were your eyes submerged in just one scene?
Once you dozed off on the windowsill, smelling
daisies and cypresses while the kids made
dolls out of sticks and bottle caps. The gravity
(of shouts and colour of grass and blood) snatches
you by the Air's sleight of hand, repeatedly bashing you
against the window's glass. Since your first hours,
you realized your lust for the dewy meat.
All that soared in your needle-head:
"May the cruel transparency shatter; all I've known
wasn't more than inside."

ALAN IRID FENDI

GIRL WHO SPROUTED SCALES AND FINS

I heard about a girl who swam in the Sea for ten days
Searching for her father. He was dignified
And skinny; knew just that sole language of yelling.

She drank sea water (when she craved thirst).
She found no patriarchal smell or message in an Araq bottle.

All a body needs
To become a fish:
Sip the Sea, and swim
In it for eleven days.

ALAN IRID FENDI

THE RIVER

By Ruba Abughaida

Leila's hair was still static with sleep when the men marched into their town near Souq Wadi Barada. The boots on gravel were intriguing at first, like the scrambling vibrations as the school band began tuning its instruments, until Leila saw her mother's face change from lined resignation to darting terror.

She quickly went to her sisters who were peering out of the window. The men's faces were starting to become clearer when her mother dropped them to their knees on the cold tiles.

"Don't let them see you," she whispered into their necks.

But Leila had already met a pair of blue eyes through the streaked glass.

"Who are they?" Leila asked.

"Who knows anymore," her mother helped them up.

In the days that followed, the men wandered the streets with rifles tipped in their hands, and the town air felt thicker like the yoghurt that hung in cotton cloths over the kitchen sink. The blue eyed boy ordered the old man who sold cinema tickets to act out a film, then shot a neat circle of bullets onto the wall behind him.

When Leila's mother gave her the shopping list for the day, three of them were standing by the door of Auntie Munira's shop. They let out leering whistles and filthy words as Leila fumbled through the basket of onions.

"Don't leave us out here without speaking to us. Don't make us come in there," they taunted.

Leila gripped an onion until it filled up underneath her nails.

"Get home as quickly as you can. Leave from the back door," Auntie Munira said Leila's knees started to shake.

"Don't speak to anyone," she ordered.

Leila ran, the hairs on the back of her neck rising, as the storm rumbled its warning across Mount Hermon in the distance.

"What happened to you?" her little sister asked when she saw her.

Leila took a breathe, air rattling in her chest, and smiled.

"Do you remember when we used to go to Wadi Barada in the summer?" she put her sister on her lap.

"Yes but tell me again!" the little girl wrapped her thin arms around Leila's neck.

"We would pack everything into the car when there was no school and the streets were full of people heading in the same direction. When we got there, baba and our brothers would rent a riverside platform then rig up the tenant awning to shelter us from the sun," Leila held her tighter.

"And then?"

"Then we would jump off the side making water bombs," Leila said.

"I remember!"

"We swam in the river until mama called us back to eat. Do you know that thousands of years ago people travelling in caravans did exactly the same thing? But the riverside was full of stalls and people and animals wandering around too."

"Which animals?"

"Horses. Maybe even dogs," Leila shrugged.

The next day the headmaster announced that the school had reopened. Leila listened to teachers and students swap stories about the men and the bombs. She exchanged details with her sisters once they were home, embroidering what she had heard if it seemed to lack lustre in the retelling. Her tale sent them into an imaginary frenzy where the men came through a mosaiced door from the past, marching along the old Roman road with Latin inscriptions that still stretched between Baalback and Damascus.

"We drove on that road on our way to Lebanon," Leila leaned in, "It was built that high up thousands of years ago to avoid destruction from the flooding river," she raised her arms above her head for effect.

At night in the bed that they all now shared although they didn't need to, her sisters moaned nonsense in their sleep and Leila thought of a different time until the night insects started to scream.

The next morning nothing came out of the drinking tap that flows into their kitchen from the Barada River no matter how many times Leila's mother tried.

"The tunnels are dry," she finally announced flatly.

The holes in the cliffs where the water usually gushed from were empty, weeds hanging limply out of them as though they had been trying to escape but failed at the last breath.

Her mother went out to talk to the neighbours.

"It was these men..."

"The river has been poisoned..."

"They cut off the water supply."

Leila distracted her sisters with stories. She spoke of how they once saw Ain El Fijeh, the spring from which the river ebbs before it stretches out seven limbed into the streams of Damascus. She told them about wading in with bare feet, balancing on the silky stones that settle along the bottom. They laughed at the memory of their mother cupping her hands over the icy gush before falling in.

In houses around town, the women turned the taps on and off until they started to squeak, metal grating against metal. It did not matter how many times they did this. Nothing came out, not even a few drops for hope. They looked to Mount Hermon for signs of rain but the sky was a topaz blue that filled up the distance and blended into the hot wind. As the afternoon slipped into a milky orange light and the sun balanced fiery above the horizon, they understood that this was one more thing that would alter their lives causing flutterings of destruction to fan in its wake. The river, sputtering at its source, had changed colour like the leaves of the fig trees outside their homes.

EGYPT : TO LIFT LAYERS (IN FOUR 99-WORD PARTS)

Vegetables

An old man swats hot flies in front of the metro station. He sells local lettuce, piled between four bushy basil plants.

A man and his son drive a cart with a skinny donkey. They plod up the noisy street, peddling peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, and onions.

A fat man sits smoking in a plastic chair at the back of his shop. His sons vend this season's vegetables, fruits, eggs, and sometimes perch fillets or shrimp from Alexandria.

There is a shiny mall with six floors, a three-D cinema, and a supermarket where imported, plastic wrapped produce is always frozen.

Revolution

Under the eerie dust-orange sun, the pulse of twenty-million people is the din of traffic horns. The street exhaust turns my snot black as I walk upstream, passing a blue toilet discarded on the stagnant banks of the Nile.

Six miles behind me, white smoke rises from the lips of angry Egyptians. The cupboard was bare. The boy was beaten. His father's face was scarred. The left hand is a tetanus-clenched, swiftly swelling fist. The right has two thumbs, bulky digits fumbling to light a fire. The pharaoh's mask shatters as the country explodes in a thousand directions.

wasn't more than inside."

Buildings

Across the ancient river, three-hundred-thousand naked slaves pushed massive stones up sandy ramps and positioned them as perfect pyramids. Those thick rock walls kept dead kings cool, their skin still taut and dry even after eons of robbers and sand storms knocked upon the doors. Across the car-lined street, three masons in shawar-kshamis smooth mortar over new apartments, molding un-plumb walls and crooked lintels to look as if they're square. They use a rusty, roof-top pulley to reel in their swinging iron basket, leaking sand and cement dust down upon the dried carcass of a kitten, flattened under bricks.

Power

Power comes from pushing stones. Your muscles grow and you discover how to align yourselves so that your burden slides easier uphill. I wonder if the slaves revolted, after pushing stones for years. I wonder if any ripple of distain was crushed, or if it was left to fester. After Tharir, people filled the square with brooms and garbage bags, and in one day the place was clean. The army moved the tanks, the burned out pick-up truck, the heavy cement barricades. But Cairo remained as dirty as before, the Nile still stagnant, and my snot still stained.

TRAYLE KULSHAN



LOVE BY PAULA CHAHINE

MIDNIGHT SNACK

My man's armpits
are peanut butter—
the creamy kind
They make my mouth sticky
&
his pecs are toasted wheat

MOHJA KAHF

FEED ME LIES LIKE BERRIES

You feed me lies like berries,
and I in the frilled frock
Mother warned me to keep clean
You tangle me in brambles
I come home with one shoe,
my camisole smudged
from your greasy paperbag grins
You dangle me on the ferris wheel
of a daredevil joy. You are a bad boy,
and I was a girl at her window,
alone and far from the feast

MOHJA KAHF

A MAN WHO WASHES MY DISHES

I love a man who clears my table
I love a man who knows how to use
a wire scouring brush on my pots
till they sparkle so
He brings out my shine

I love a man who washes my dishes,
making small soapy circles with his manly hands
around the curves of my delicate glassware,
sliding lathery down the slimmest stem

I love a man who moves patiently
around my kitchen, turning like a deft spatula,
remembering the places and purposes
of every latch, knob, and cubby

I love a man who takes responsibility
in the tired aftermath of a meal
down to the wiping of the last counter,
chasing the last honeyed crumb
into the moist corners of the basin,

neatly grinding the coiled peel of the final tangerine
He is not afraid to descend into the maelstrom of the disposal
and explore the sharp blades with naked fingers—
I love a man who washes my dishes

MOHJA KAHF

BIBI IRSIMEELI

Draw for me, grandma

Hold my pencil
between your arthritic fingers.

Show me Basra.

Show me the palm fronds swaying
over the lazy Shatt Al-Arab.

Show me the old man
pouring cool water over his courtyard.

Show me the dirty tomcat
who watched over you,
killed a desert snake while you were studying.

I beg you.
Give me one scrap
of your Iraq.

DANA AHMAD

I DREAMED A POEM OF YAFFA

I dreamed a poem of Yaffa
Photographs of the sea
Sepia-toned and ragged at the edges
Wrapped in worn cloth by hands that cut onions,
wiped tears,
and sliced through the waves of the Mediterranean
in a breaststroke unlady-like for her time

Hands that wrote in Arabic and English, and maybe a bit of French
A chalk-powdery cursive,
trailing slightly upward under the pressure of following through with good
intentions
On the black slate of the children's welfare centre
In the Seraya by the clock tower
(this, before the bombing of course)

Hands that knew by touch the required ripeness of marrow squash
(soft enough to hollow easily but firm enough to hold up to the yogurt
broth)
sold by the village women sitting on woven mats in the souq
Their thobes identifying provenance, their tattoos a confirmation of
belonging
Before provenance and belonging were words that we needed to know

Hands that reached out for the midwife when the babies came
Before he was wrapped in the white gown and buried in the ground beside
St. George's

All this and more was considered
while wrapping photographs in the tatreez tablecloth she had stitched in
her youth
in anticipation of marriage
and placed them with care in the suitcase her mother had given her as a
wedding present

A slight shudder rocks the apartment
and the smell of something burning passes through the window left half
closed
because of snipers

Through greyish smoke she observes the sea from her window
and considers - one bride to another
whether she will live to feel the sting of its briny saltiness again
measure distance in breaths taken and meters spanned from the shore

Or will she learn to measure distance through the faulty lenses of exile
Assisted by age
wrinkles
scars

Street names forgotten
Buildings destroyed
Neighbours disappeared

They said: The old will die and the young will forget
But somewhere suspended between youth and death
Not only have I not forgotten,
I remember what I have been told is not mine to remember

The sound of the nye echoing through orange groves at harvest time
The bitter taste of ash on my tongue, and the weight of a sea I cannot
swim in

The swimmer's hands of my grandmother, empty of bridal gold
Persistent in tracing a line on a map that points only in one direction:
home

ELSE KHOURY

LEBANESE RESTAURANT (LOVE SONG)

hey baby
won't you come back to the kitchen with me?
hey baby
won't you come back to the kitchen?

yala habibi, yala
yala habibi, yala

hey baby
hey friend
won't you come back to the kitchen with me?
yala habibi
come back
i have a bowl of pickled turnips for you
yala habibi
i have hot pita bread
and many fires in my oven

careful, my love
hot behind, hot behind
careful, my friend
behind

my baby, my friend
don't leave that cup uncovered
my friend, my darling
don't leave that bottle uncovered
my darling, my love
don't keep your heart covered from me

do not fear, my friend
come back to the kitchen
do not fear the heat
come here, baby
there are many fires in the oven
we will have more pita soon

my friend
i filled this lunch basket for you
yala habibi, yala

come back to the kitchen
my baby
my friend
my darling
habibi
is this tilapia crossed out?
is this sandwich to-go?
do not cross me out, my love
do not send me to-go, my love

habibi
did you take the shawarma when you should
have taken the kaffa?
that's ok, my friend
as long as they're happy
that's ok, my love
as long as they're happy

yala habibi, yala
won't you come back
to the kitchen with me
yala habibi
no there's nothing i need
i just want you back in the kitchen with me
no there's nothing i need
just to tell you, you are more handsome every day
no no there's nothing i need
just to ask, are there more like you?
how many more like you?
do they need jobs?
come back to the kitchen, baby
hey baby
won't you come back to the kitchen with me?

JACOB STERN

BABU'S SUNSET-BITINGS

Every Friday I visit my grandfather.
Nodding off in front of Arabs Got Talent
on a cheap IKEA armchair,
pot-belly full of halal burgers and pale chips -
nothing he craved was ever in his fridge
or even in the Muscat shops.

He rarely complained to me about anything,
except when my grandmother stopped
working and his parrot *Toka Toka*
keeled over. He sits imprisoned
in air-conditioning, falling
into hibernation, benumbed.

He dreams of Zanzibar, sinking
his teeth into chilli-sprinkled muhogo,
rotating his tongue round
lime-drenched mashakeek, drowning
in fresh pineapple juice.

When a package of vitumbua from Forodhani
arrived at his doorstep, he called me
lapsing into Swahili
voice cracking.

Babu - grandfather (Swahili)

toka - go away (Swahili)

muhogo - roasted cassava

mashakeek - meat kebab sticks

vitumbua - coconut rice pancakes

Forodhani - waterfront setting in Zanzibar outside the House of Wonders

HELEN FREEMAN

TAJWEED

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God the Most Gracious the Most Merciful

alif lam meem
quranic stutters
only
the divine can read
placed delicately
throughout
his verse
in the beginning
i mistook myself
for a prophet
but i am not
godly enough
born from his
image
or so he says
god created
el *alif* wa el *lam*
el *meem* wa said let there
be silence
el rahman
el raheem
denies me
alif
lam meem
a world of words
wa unmarked
breaths
how can i
find shelter
bi his
miracles
bi his *alif*
wa *lam* wa *meem*
lamma i'm
unworthy
bi god's eyes
of knowing them
intimately
because i'm
unworthy
bi god's eyes
of knowing him
intimately

ZEIN SA'DEDIN

NOMENCLATURE

i dream of the evil eye
mama writing *ismi*
in henna on her chest
i was never taught to bleed
ismi but i do
i dream of baba's face
somewhere singing
ismi always
singing
anyway
i dream of teta 's tea
smell of lemon lingering
on top of
jido
coffin closed sinking
into dirt
anyway
i dream of
mama still stained
baba still singing
ismi still *ismi*
i was never taught to bleed
this but i do
anyway
i dream of the dead sea
of *ismi* salt
wa wound
but my dreams never feel
like dreams
anyway

ZEIN SA'DEDIN

KISSING FAIROUZ IN AMMAN, JORDAN

fairouz bi your throat wa ana
gripped hips wa qahwa dregs
a new alphabet la your lips
so red ya albi bas a quick kiss
across el shubak please habeebi
soft heik still we haram bi amman
bossa or two la amman haram
amman maskeenah always left
wa ihna always leaving

ZEIN SA'DEDIN

ASKING FAIROUZ TO BE MY MUSE

ana homesick
for second hand stories of
mama's curls bi my lap
want to collect the fine lines
of her palms bi my eyes
ana want to trace the memory
of jasmine scented
streets across her
forehead ana
thick tongued wa slow drawl
bas a stutter stuck in time please
habeebti ana sentenced to kiss
kol tongue
but my own

ZEIN SA'DEDIN

MEDITERRANEAN GRIEF

ya aleppo ya aleppo ya albi ya aleppo
the only language we can speak is dust
caught between silence wa barrel bombs
language has abandoned you ya albi
Aleppo all blood wa bodies wa blood
wa more bodies kollik dam ya albi
words contain you zay coffins
buried at the bottom of the sea
where to from there ya aleppo
lamma jannah closed its borders
wa ma dal fee space in hell
allah has left you ya aleppo
pools of dam wa bodies wa
dam wa bodies day3een
bi el mediterranea

ZEIN SA'DEDIN



OUT OF MY MIND, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER
BY KATHY SHALHOUB

THE COURT HOUSE RATS BET AGAINST JUDGE STONE-FACE

after al-Jahiz

He was the high and mighty mucky-muck
of indiscernible, no expression.
We hangers-on watched, bet his luck
would turn, but no confession

moved him. We had almost given up.
Then, smarty fly on his proboscis
alighted, wandered, deigned to sup
corners of his eye, obnoxious,

but the great Stone-Face gave no ground,
no gesture and no recognition.
We stared, waited. He had to respond.
He couldn't hold out; capitulation

inevitable, surely he'd knuckle
under this attack, become like us,
mere mortals. We dared a chuckle.
He flicked his lashes—enough?

to collect from his supporters?
Oh, no, they won't pay up, not sure
they saw a flick so out of order.
To pay it had to be a gesture pure.

The fly, impervious, bit and bit.
Then our village famous icon
blew—his hands flew up and hit and hit.
We won, but it was sweetly wrong.

Our fallen pooh-bah judge admitted
"I see that I was vain and worse.
oh, I'm feeble now, committed
to being humble, from henceforth.

(However, he cautioned)

"The fly did not win; he's craven
Allah says, 'The fly's more obstinate
than beetle, prouder than the raven.
If anyone celebrates something not great,

(He pulled us all in with him.)

"that one will surely be condemned. It's written."
Thus, convicting the winners. Won, but also bitten.

ANN STRUTHERS

THE MEN OF MEDINA AREN'T ANGELS OR THE RIGHTEOUS NOSES

Al-Jahiz on Wine

Everyone knows the wine of the grape's
forbidden, but even Descendants
and Elders drank *nabidh*, date
wine that's legal, though Medina rants.

For the men of Medina, are so endowed
with remarkable noses! They sniff
out suspected scents, even on *thobes*
or an empty wine skin. One whiff

is enough. They break out their whips, their quirts
(Their intense devotion to strictest laws)
They beat the poor sinner his just desserts
And show no mercy, forget their own flaws.

When some man carries an empty wine skin,
if he's guilty of pious transgressions,
USE LOGIC, Medina: your body—a skin for sin,
it carries your organs of fornication.

ANN STRUTHERS

SAND STORM OUT OF EGYPT

Aleppo, Syria

No Cairo kitten, it roared out of Africa,
twirled across the Mediterranean Sea,
it's great maw open, hungry, yellow
and lion beastly, ready to lick
a city or a country.
A warning spate of sand
hurled against the garden wall. I grabbed the washing
before it ripped and sailed off to Saudi.
I had not believed the smashing they told me it could do.
But here it was, bellowing classic Arabic.

Then it unraveled, left
before I could completely curse it,
leaving its calling card beneath my fastened windows,
its hieroglyphics painted on the floor.

ANN STRUTHERS

SOLDIERS DANCING IN THE PARK, 2009

Aleppo, Syria

On weekend leave, but no money,
maybe enough to buy one cigarette
from the street vendor who sells
Marlboros from an open pack. Maybe
change for a can of Orangina.
The music is a small drum and the rhythmic beat
of their boots on the floor of the belvedere
where they dance on Fridays.
The old men on the benches
designed by the French, clap for them.
Small children at play watch,
little boys look longingly
at the uniforms.

That was the days of peace.
Now children and old men crouch in hallways.
In the streets, the dance is the dance of bullets;
the parks' fountains have collapsed in tears;
and soldiers have taken their guns
to shoot at each other.

ANN STRUTHERS

SEARCH

Mother once told me that my wakefulness took up
an entire room. That's why I live in the woods.

All the tree knows of cover is moss.
All the child in Aleppo knows of cover is run.
I cannot reconcile what's happening in the world.

Night leavens its darkness to make it heavier.

My country is now buried in hypocrisy and vile politicians.
There was a fog catcher who brought water to the poor in Lima.
I am looking for him to speak to our country.

DIANNA MACKINNON HENNING

Artists' / Writers' bios:

GEORGE ABRAHAM is a Palestinian-American Poet, Activist, and Engineering PhD Candidate at Harvard University. He is the author of two chapbooks: *al youm* (the Atlas Review, 2017), and *the specimen's apology* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2019). He is the recipient of fellowships from Brooklyn Poets and the Watering Hole, and the honor of 'Best Poet' at the 2017 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational. His poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in Tin House, Mizna, Puerto del Sol, Apogee, Anomaly, and anthologies such as *Bettering American Poetry 2016*, *Nepantla*, and the *Ghassan Kanafani Palestinian Literature Anthology*.

RUBA ABUGHAIDA is half Palestinian half Lebanese and grew up in Kuwait before living in the UK and Canada. Her story "The Sirocco Winds" won first prize in the Writer and Artists' Yearbook Historical Fiction competition. She's also written for Inkapture, On the Premises, Noah, Wales Art Review, In Travel, The Rusty Nail and Squalorly. She recently received a creative writing Mst from Cambridge University.

DANA AHMAD recently completed her MA in Near and Middle Eastern studies from SOAS, University of London. Previously she earned her BA in International Studies with a minor in English Literature from the American University of Sharjah. Her writing is mostly non-fiction. She's also currently in the process of publishing her MA dissertation titled "The Arabian Mission in Kuwait: Effects of Modern Medicine on Women's Healing Practices and Ideals of Womanhood".

ZENA ASSI was born in Lebanon, in 1974, Zena Assi lives and works between Beirut and London. Her contemporary work on canvas draws inspiration from the relations and conflicts between the individual and his spatial environment, society and its surroundings. The artist uses various supports and mediums to document and explore the cultural and social changes of her country. Her work takes shape in installation, animation, sculpture, and mainly paintings on canvas.

Many of her pieces were repeatedly shown in different international auction houses (Christie's Dubai, Sotheby's London, and Bonhams London) and are part of various public as well as private collections. Assi has exhibited in solo as well as collective shows across Europe, the Middle East and the United States of America including- Alwane gallery (Beirut Lebanon), Subtitled Apeal Royal College of Art (London UK), Artsawa gallery (Dubai UAE), Beirut Art Fair Biel (Beirut Lebanon), Abu Dhabi art fair (Abu Dhabi UAE), Espace Claude Lemand (Paris France), Cairo Biennale (Cairo Egypt), The Mall galleries (London, UK), Albareh gallery (Manama-Kingdom of Bahrein), CAP Contemporary Art Platform Gallery Space (Kuwait), London Art Biennale (London UK) and Venice Art Biennale (Venice Italy).

RAMEZ AWAD is a lebanese author, short-story writer and novelist...born in the year 1959...PhD laureate in Arab literature with an emphasis on Sufism and stylistics. Worked in the fields of scholastic and higher education, and currently working in the fields of academia, and the preparation, supervision and writing of educational and curricular books. Writer of research-based articles, poems and short-stories, all of which were published in numerous newspapers and magazines, such as "Al-Nahar" newspaper, "Manâfiz Thaqâfiyya" منافذ ثقافية and "Tahawwoulât" تحولات magazines etc.

Has published up until this moment 2 sets of stories: "Fî al-souhoul khârej al-qawâfel" (2002) في السهول خارج القوافل, and "kitâb al-fayd wa al-'awâred fî hatki 'astâr al-liberâliyyîn 'al-qawâred (2013) كتاب الفيض والعوارض في هتك أستار الليبراليين القوارض

Will soon print under his name a new set of stories, alongside a novel. The ensuing stories issued here will be a part of his new set that will be published soon.

TARA BALLARD and her husband have been living in the Middle East for over eight years, teaching English in local area schools. She holds an MFA from the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Individual poems have been published by Sukoon, One, Salamander, The Pinch, and other literary magazines.

CHRISTINE JEAN BLAIN is an Afro-Caribbean American writer, educator and performer but above all she is a storyteller. She holds a Masters in Public Administration with a concentration in Non Profit Management and International Relations. Poetry is the bridge that she uses to travel between these multiple realities. She is a former Hedgebrook Fellow, a Cave Canem alumna and a founding member of Dusks Daughters arts collective. Currently, residing in Dubai, UAE she is the author of *Lighting the Back Home*, a self published collection of prose and poetry. Her work can also be found in African Voices literary Magazine, Pa'lante on-line arts magazine, *A Lined Jewel*, poetry anthology compiled and edited by The Black Londoners Appeal and most recently *Afros: A Celebration of Natural Hair*, created and edited by Michael July.

GU DRUN BORTMAN grew up in Hamburg, Germany and moved to the US in her twenties. She is an artist, a garden designer and a poet. An avid reader, journal and letter writer all her life, love of language led her to poetry. She lives with her family in Santa Barbara, California. Her Egyptian daughter-in-law and her son's years of living in Dubai furthered her interest in the region.

K. ELTINAÉ is a Sudanese poet currently living in Granada, Spain. Her poetry has appeared in, Baphash Literary, NILVX, Ilyya's Honey, Ink in Thirds, Elsewhere Literary Journal, Peeking Cat Magazine, The Ofi Press, Poetic Diversity, Chanterelle's Notebook, Poetry Pages: A Collection of Voices from Around the World Volume IV.

NOOR IBN NAJAM is a poet who writes to survive. He is a Callaloo, Watering Hole, and Pink Door fellow, and all his friends' teita. When he's not writing poems, he's reading tarot, working on his herbalist practice, eating candy corn, or playing with his pet rats. Noor's work is hot like a tater tot and appears in such journals as Shade, Drunk in a Midnight Choir, and Winter Tangerine.

ALAN IRID FENDI is a Syrian poet of 24 years, and a refugee of 5 years. Since 2015 he has been living in a European country where light is slight, and rain loves to be around. Alan works as a secondary-school teacher of the language of that country, plus all the other subjects in the curriculum. You can read his poem *Chemical Air* at the New Verse News magazine.

HELEN FREEMAN published *Broken* post-accident in Oman. Since then she has completed several poetry courses and has poems in some online magazines. Brought up in Kenya, she now lives between Edinburgh and Riyadh.

JONATHAN GORVETT is by profession a journalist and economic analyst, working in the Middle East and Gulf region since 2005. His work has appeared in a wide range of publications, including the New York Times, The Guardian, Foreign Affairs, The Middle East, The Washington Report on the Middle East, and many others.

FADY JOUDAH'S fourth poetry collection, *Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance*, is forthcoming from Milkweed editions in the winter of 2018.

A professor of comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Arkansas since 1995, **MOHJA KAHF** is the author of *E-mails from Scheherazad* (poetry), *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (novel), and *Hagar Poems*.

ELSE KHOURY is an independent information and Privacy consultant. She lives in Canada but her heart remains in Yaffa. Twitter: @Yaffawiya

TRAYLE KULSHAN'S work received an honorable mention in the Pachas flash fiction contest at Foundling Review, is featured on the Proximity Magazine - True blog, and she is a regular contributor at Dubai Poetics. She attended the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts for Creative Writing and currently lives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where she is on the PTA and researches food sustainability in the desert.

DIANNA MACKINNON HENNING holds an MFA in Writing '89 from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Published in, in part: Naugatuck River Review, The Red Rock Review, The Kentucky Review, The Main Street Rag, California Quarterly, Poetry International, Fugue, Clackamas Literary Review, South Dakota Review, Hawai'i Pacific Review and The Seattle Review. Finalist in Aesthetica's Creative Writing Award in the UK, published in their Annual 2014. Henning has taught poetry for a number of years through California Poets in the Schools, several CAC grants and through the William James Association's Prison Arts Program which gave her the opportunity to teach poetry at Folsom Prison as well as at other prisons in CA. Nominated by Blue Fifth Review Dec. 2015 for a Pushcart. Henning has two previously published poetry books: The Tenderness House, Poet's Corner Press, and The Broken Bone Tongue, Black Buzzard Press. Her third book of poetry Cathedral of the Hand published 2016 through "Finishing Line Press." Dianna's Website: www.diannahenning.com

LAILA MALIK is a Toronto-based word artisan who dances with the ghosts of her Arab, South Asian and East African pasts. Her prose and poetry have been published in The New Quarterly and The Feminist Wire. Her work was short-listed for Event Magazine's 2016 Creative Non-Fiction Prize.

CRAIG LOOMIS has been an Associate Professor of English at the American University of Kuwait in Kuwait City for the last thirteen years. During the last twenty-eight years, he has had his short fiction published in such literary journals as The Iowa Review, The Colorado Review, The Prague Revue, The Maryland Review, The Louisville Review, Bazaar, The Rambler, The Los Angeles Review, The Prairie Schooner, Yalobusha Review, The Critical Pass Review, The Owen Wister Review, Five on the Fifth and others.

In 1995 his short story collection, *A Softer Violence: Tales of Orient*. London: Minerva Press was published; and, spring 2013 Syracuse University Press published another collection of his short stories entitled *The Salmiya Collection: Stories of the Life and Times of Modern Day Kuwait*.

JESS RIZKALLAH is a Lebanese-American writer and illustrator living in New York. Alumna of Lesley University, MFA candidate at New York University, and founding editor at pizza pi press. Her work has appeared in Word Riot, Nailed Magazine, Button Poetry, and on her mother's fridge. Her collection *THE MAGIC MY BODY BECOMES* won the 2016 Etel Adnan Poetry Prize & is forthcoming on University of Arkansas Press, October 2017. Find her at jessrizkallah.com. (this is the correct bio and Interview below)

LYNN SAAD is from Beirut, Lebanon with the privilege of having previously visited and lived abroad. Her inspiration as a writer is greatly due to roaming the streets of Beirut and their everlasting ability to initiate curiosity, rage and beauty. Both poems, *Eternal Float* and *Beirut* delve into the city and the notion of belonging and not belonging in one's society and identity. Lynn is currently a student at the American University of Beirut, studying psychology and politics with a minor in creative writing. However, beyond university life she finds joy in volunteering in artistic environments and performing poetry.

ZEIN SA'DEDIN is a Jordanian poet who has recently completed her BA in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Born and raised in Amman, Zein seeks to explore the boundaries of bilingualism within her work. She is about to begin an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Her work has appeared in the *Breakwater Review* as well as in 'Undertow: the 2016 UEA Undergraduate Creative Writing Anthology' and online at #NewWriting - www.newwriting.net.

AIYA SAKR is an Arab-American, born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and raised in Amman, Jordan. She is of Palestinian and Egyptian heritage. She holds a Master's degree in Literature and Writing from Utah State University. Currently, she resides in Amman with her husband and their blind cat, Shams. She was previously published in *Rusted Radishes* and *Scribendi*.

KATHY SHALHOUB, PhD. ACC., is a published author, a certified life coach and innovation consultant with a passion for helping people and businesses become more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial. Kathy is a global citizen, speaks 4 languages, has 3 kids and an insatiable appetite for books, learning, play and travel.

GABRIELLE SPEAR is a poet, organizer, and bookseller who currently lives in Queens. In the summer of 2015, she received Goucher College's Kratz Summer Writing Fellowship to write poetry and essays about Palestine. She was named a finalist in LUMINA Journal's 2017 Borders and Boundaries Nonfiction Contest and a Brooklyn Poets Fellow for the spring season. She is a proud member of Jewish Voice for Peace's New York City chapter.

JACOB STERN was born in Durham, NC and grew up in Charlotte a sensitive kid who cried at string music. He studied comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis, and theory exploded his mind. He now studies creative writing at University of Missouri—St. Louis.

ANN STRUTHERS, born and raised on an isolated Iowa farm, has been fortunate to travel widely. She has lived in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where she taught at Colombo University, and in Aleppo, Syria, at the University of Aleppo (both Fulbright Fellowships). Her work has been greatly influenced by these experiences. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals including THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, THE IOWA REVIEW, POETRY INTERNATIONAL, SUKOON and others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart prize three times. She has two collections and three chapbooks. This fall two new chapbooks are forthcoming, THE KINDNESS OF CROCODILES from the Wild Leak Press, and ALEPPO BURNING from the Head & Hand Press. Both chapbooks are prize winners. (latest bio- use this one)

LILAS TAHA is a writer at heart, an electrical engineer by education, and an advocate for domestic abuse victims by choice. She was born in Kuwait to a Syrian mother and a Palestinian father, and immigrated to the U.S. following the Gulf War. Pursuing her true passion for creative writing, Lilas brings her professional interests and social background together in her novels. She won the 2017 International Book Awards for her second novel, Bitter Almonds, published by HBKU Press in 2016. Her debut novel, Shadows of Damascus was published by SM Publishing in 2014. Lilas is the proud mother of two children.

