KOUKASH REVIEW

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A Guide for Nourishing Dust

Lara Atallah

Often, at night, my grandmother is handing me
the keys to her house in Beirut,
asking me to watch over it while she's away.

Last night, her house was in Safad.
Limestone surrounded by olive trees
with the sun drenching every room.

She gives me a plant. With her tired eyes,
asks me to care for the soil so
it may care for us when we return to it.

No country marks a face
except to mark the time it
spent burning the roots from under its people's feet

No shadows escape the velocity of exile
caused by maps drawn by hands
eager to own what wasn't theirs to claim.

In Virginia my partner makes arrangements for her aging father in Michigan during a pandemic under mandatory quarantine.

Holly Mason Badra

In front of the red evening sun
You confess you are not okay.
I spoke to your father last night.
Over the phone, I listened to him
Watching Jeopardy. 86-year-old Baba
In the hospital for a month now.
He only retired last year, a professor, and this
Is how his body thanks him.
He tells me that “Life
Is just a high class form of Jeopardy.”
I write this down.
He says he is now on a “perpetual sabbatical.”
I write it down.
This is how he thinks of his time.
“A sabbatical being a pause, rather than
Retirement, being an end.”
He’s taken me in as a daughter
In ways my father cannot.
You press the crosswalk button
With your elbow. Your silhouette

Leaves the sidewalk.
I try to keep up.
The man who waxes poetic,
Who breathes philosophy,
“Oh, double jeopardy,” and
Then static.
Forgets I’m on the phone.
What he had to say about this global crisis:
“We are living in an interesting time.
The gift of silence to surprise us all.”
I tell you it’s okay to not be okay.
The land claims the sun. The sky
Holds the night. At home
You feed Cora a bite of watermelon.
She barks as another dog passes the window.

before we go out to dinner, i braid my grandfather's hair

Devi Sastry

the comb splits
his silver like a hand
dipped in water,
makes a hundred rivers run
skull to shoulder.
his sideburns arch,
unbridled branches
shadow his ears,
picket the pigtail,
clusters stubborn
as his left thumb.
he says, be gentle.
i gather three
tributaries, make
them meet again.
at dinner, crumbs
gather in the crease
of his shirt. his belly
globe and ocean, store
for sesame shrimp toast,

Okra

Rina Malagayo Alluri

Cross-legged on the floor
curved blade under
hand
slicing
as others
fell trees from the land.

Feet still beneath saree
her gaze lifts to the door.

aubade of remembrance

Jenna Hamed

Rising with morning only
good tidings sun
opening as a
shyly blooming lily scented
so sweetly, whispering
whirls to whining sounds
of idhkar asaba7,
train rocking me
in fluid motions of
back & forth

لا إله إلا هو هو هو هو هو هو هو هو هو
blessings of my day start here

هو هو هو هو هو هو هو هو
stand clear of the closing doors.

The Dinner Party

Holly Mason Badra

Lifting your shirt, you point
to the scar along your ribcage.
A childhood accident.

I have waited, patiently or not.
The guests have left the party.

Burnt low now, when you
pass to me, our fingers
touch cinematic.

The night is listening.
You whisper habibti.

I have waited, patiently or not,
flipping a coin on this.

The lights flicker
or maybe my eyes.

Containment

Sara Elkamel

∴

She wears his hand around her neck the way she wants it; open—a thing catching the light.

∴

Forgetting the number of flowers to tuck below her pillow for solstice, she leaves peels of red onions and dreams of her mother's old breasts—a yawning brine spring.

∴

Immeasurable is the spring.

∴

Playing the dream backwards, the woman plucks pulverized hibiscus from her gums like meat.

∴

We all rewind our mothers to locate the earliest sounds of loss.

∴

The salt in her eyes.

∴

On the longest day of the longest summer, shadows lift from the earth as half-done songs.

∴

Around her neck, his hand hangs limp as she calls every living sound and its wife.

Agua

Marisol Moreno Ortiz

Estoy enamorada de la agua.
The waves know this.
They see me lift *su estrella*—a glistering blanket

to
warm
sorrows,
wash
them
away.

The silk never wanders off from *mi piel*.
Its alexandrite eyes blink around my neck in the lamplight *de la noche*. But the waves cannot

subside
the
saudade
en
me.

I live in a haze, *pero el agua* takes me into

an
ameliorate
moment,
dream
in
a
penumbra
where

there is no doubt—the wish que *yo* necesito.

Third Culture Kid I

Issam A Zeibak

Your Father said
‘Your language is a bastard

its accents & phrases
humiliating, your choices

soap or filth.’

to be a purity or
tough as dirt

even your name
was his

choice for who
you’d become

yet your tongue, born
without a border

owning nothing
borrowing everything

is as it ever was

before the world
had its words

& love still means whatever it means once it's over

Issam A Zeibak

when the sheen of the broken glass on the ground
is a miracle in the morning light

the city gnashes sparrows' songs
the music still sweet between its teeth

my heartbeat, a 5AM car alarm
wailing & alive in the alleys & streets

& family somewhere
forgetting my face yet keeping my name

& I remember
the motes of dust still dance without the sun
suspended
like sleeping criminals
all innocent
in their dreams

Seventeen

Rewa Zeinati

When he felt that he fell
in love again, years and years

later, he began to listen
to ancient love songs in front

of his wife who turned
a deaf ear and continued

to chop the picked parsley leaves,
considering what else she could

do with such a sharp knife.
He listened closely to the words

of Abdel Halim and dreamed about
the impossible girl in the Cup Reader

whose wild gypsy hair traveled everywhere.
Remembered himself at seventeen

then looked at his watch.
Saw his seventy-something-year-old

hands and began to cough.
Took comfort in recalling

that he hardly drank, never smoked,
took care of health and wealth

then he turned up the volume
and began to sing.

when my mother discovered a box of tampons in my bag

Rewa Zeinati

it was my last summer/ and she was visiting/ and I was standing in the same room at the time/ she seemed calm/ but in my mind she might as well have found/ a

perfectly rolled joint/ half-smoked/ or a neon wrapped condom/ so before she even asked/ i volunteered/ that my roommate had left it there/ it was hers/ not mine/ as if by/

disowning the object/ I could somehow erase/ the offense/ of pressed cotton that swelled like a womb/ with the weight of blood and tissue and skin/ i understood then

that this bullet-shaped plug/implied many things to our young mothers/ who passed it down to their daughters/ who were supposed to believe all of it/ and pass it down

to theirs/ like a family recipe/ or a great-grandmother's pendant/ it meant broken curfews and dimly/ lit nights in closed rooms/ with unfamiliar windows framing

the dawn/ meant too much West/ poured into our heads/ meant we didn't care/ about that kind of future/ who'd wonder about our past/ confused/ by how our bodies

just knew/ how to let things go/ how to make up for death/ when it didn't give life/ or wasn't ready/ or didn't want to/ and that we were free

to decide what goes into that body/ and when/ so my mother tucked/ the box back in where she found it/ and zipped up my bag like a mouth/ full of all the words she meant to say

but didn't/ and walked out of my room / and asked me firmly/ not to follow/

Untitling

Sarah Aziza

It starts with dreams: vague visitations in the night from your grandmother, now over ten years dead. You wake in a weightless body, a sense of being underwater. Fragments of memory break like seafoam at the surface: the impression of her arms, sagging and sinewy at once. Her sudden hugs. Her particular scent of rosewater and sweat, cardamom and cooking steam. You stumble out of bed, startled to see your grown woman's body; in your sleep, you'd felt so small. You squint, make coffee, pour yourself into a blazing, dry day. The dreams continue; you step around the word ghost.

Then, one morning in the shower, you fall apart. The sobs wrack you so hard your partner rushes in. He hugs your wet body as you hear yourself whimper, "I miss her." You close your eyes, lean against his soaking shirt, imagine his embrace as hers.

Your reflection wavers in the mirror, alive with flickers of another face. A now-familiar feeling, your skin too tight, a quivering that scares you. You can't remember how to sit. You ask yourself how others do it, strut around as tidy, two-legged things.

You feel your edges are dissolving; even in your apartment, you are not alone. Parents' voices gurgle inside the fridge. Sittoo's hand on your back in the instant before sleep. At the stove boiling water, you are suddenly surrounded: cousins with dark, jumping curls and Hello Kitty sweatsuits, swordplay with skewers of shish tawook. The crooning adhan like a breeze, surprising you from behind. You wade through the presences to reach the bath. You've gone amniotic, trying to sink into the too-small tub.

A writer, you now avoid the page. Reality is leaking. You sense the approach of long-dammed truths, a coming spill. The weight building. Your body a sudden levy, threatening to end. For years, words were what you used to enforce distance, filling space with narration, your Author Voice perched above the fray. You fear your pen's betrayal, to find it inscribing rather than obscuring you.

You've always held back your "I." It's not avoidance. Simply, there's no story to you. You're a child of the "ever after," your parents' happy ending. The Hero's Journey was your father's, the man who crossed an ocean to separate you from his past of tents and hunger, his murdered homeland. His very body declared him as a story—dark skinned, different, legible—while he yearned for anonymity. But you, crowned blonde, born on the blessed soil of "Amreeka"—your life would be a dreamy nondescript.

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You arrived just a few days after his touchdown on cold Chicago tarmac. He had hoped for a son, named you Tariq before your birth, but when he held you his heart melted anyway. It warmed him through midwestern winters as he bent his everything to this: that you'd leap over the questions his broken English posed. In his head he wrote your story in future tense, imagined you with your grammar just right, the country pronouncing you indistinguishable from the rest.

So he clipped his own speech to avoid confusing you, pruned his past and cut his name in half. He cheered on the Bulls and later Bush, told you to never doubt the country that gave him freedom. Saying there was nothing you couldn't be—as long as you were American.

American. That word full of promises and omissions. Outside it, a kingdom of banished things: the exuberance of a language so harsh and opulent it moves your whole being when you speak. The riot of aromas wafting from your Sittoo's kitchen. The dusky flesh of fig breaking against your teeth, the honeyed meat of your uncle's garden filling your mouth with bursts of summer. The rich smell of the desert as it cools in falling dusk.

A universe. Unnecessary weight. The ocean floor littered with what he shed as he made for that shining shore. As you grew, these gifts would come to you obliquely, washing up in bedtime stories and summertime visits, half-understood. Things to taste, but not to your fill. Tucked inside your body. Unspoken.

Until now. Until you at last put yourself before the gaping page and meet the flood.

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You write of your Sittoo's spice jars. Compose line after line about her hands. You fill paragraphs with your father's prayer rug, his one good thobe, the camel-bone box he brought you from Jerusalem. The long-distance phone calls. The receiver thrust to your ear. Fast-talking Arabic through static like transmissions from outer space.

There are no family photos of these things. The camera was reserved for other tokens, the framed instants you know as your past: sunlit playgrounds and lop-sided snowmen, homemade Halloween costumes and your mother's roasted turkey. An American Childhood, your small, towheaded body posed in snowsuits, pajamas, jeans. Photographs tucked inside your father's suitcase on trips back to the Middle East, postcards from a golden life,

carefully composed for their viewing pleasure. Mashallah, our Amreekiya cousin. How blonde, how white! All of you, orbiting that imagined country, its generic gravity.

But now the photos seem to warp, as if a front for something sinister. You look again. Your Little League regalia, your father beaming in a Cubs cap and jeans. You recall the practices with your father as volunteer coach, lobbing pitches with a boyish grin. Good eye! like he'd heard white parents say. His excitement intensified his accent, and suddenly you remember how dark and hairy his arms looked in the Illinois sun. The special kind of glances the other parents threw his way—this nice, brown man who didn't go to church, who was rumored to worship a strange, nocturnal god. The way your daughterly adoration was tinged with embarrassment, a desire to protect. How you hustled on the field, wanting to prove—something.

There are other gaps between the camera's shots. The first time you saw the disgust on a white face at the sight of your Sittoo, seated barefoot on the floor. The wide eyes of that Nice Lady, peering down—No English at all?! The laughter of Katie, your only friend in grades one through three, as she mocked your grandmother's homemade clothes, her round body and balding head, the gibberish you shared. The way you scoured PBS for signs of home, for families like yours. The shame like a second skin. The clenching lesson that there were parts of you to hide.

That lesson has never left. The vigilance of a body holding a truth that can't be spoken—that this is not a country that loves difference, not in the way they like to say. A body that remembers what the mind has banished: a life before the armor.

As you write, your fingers still on the keys. You stand and walk out the door,

down gray winter streets. The freezing air pricks your skin. In a dark bar window you see a form: a woman tall and straight, black coat, blank stare. Diligently unremarkable, trained for a lifetime to be uncomplicated, narrowed, unthreatening. Is this what it looks like, to be given Everything, and to hold on to it?

***

Your own home back then felt like a harbor of secrets. Filled with things you feared to love: the clinging smell of garlic, Sittoo's roasted animals, Baba barefoot on the floor. Adel Emam films and Umm Kalthoum. Greasy fingers instead of spoons. You knew these were not the right choices, your body tensing as you craved. You grew practiced at hiding your difference from others, but soon, their eyes began to follow you home. Your own, conflicted cringes began. You dabbed at hummus and za'atar, watched Sittoo make wudu, feeling furtive, torn. As if later, on the playground, the other children might sniff out your truth—weirdo.

You found ways to imagine an escape, falling in love with stories of orphan children. You sank into the fantasy of a looser, freer life. The weight of family, all that complicated love, traded for a blissful void. Unmoored, self-defined, slipping through the world with no history, nothing to explain.

Your parents had their own version of this fantasy. They too yearned for a void—America's oblivion, its boasted power to swallow histories whole. They saw your family as present-tense, their pasts consumed, mingled in that fabled pot. In this telling, there was no language for the parts that would not melt. They simply spoke over them, angled their lenses for the image they'd decided to believe. A willful liquifying.

And how easy it was, after all, to lose track. To build a life around erasures. You told yourself it didn't matter if this friend or that stranger imagined the Middle East as dust and fire. That they'd never understand if you described the emerald dusk of the Jordan Valley, the diamond clarity of desert nights. So let them erase it all.

***

In college, you inhabit the story of Repentant White Person. It is not untrue, but is it whole? Does it make it worse, that you've forgotten that your childhood was brown? Your own kin killed by law enforcement, robbed by armies, erased in genocide—have you ever felt their weight? Another contradiction buried by the willful fairytale, blotted out by Ever After. Pray for Palestine, your father always said, his subtext ringing clear: But be glad that you're not there. God bless America.

Now, you survey your spoils—the degrees that made your father weep with joy, your hijab-less hair cut sensibly short, the weekly sessions with a psychotherapist. You wonder what parts of you your grandmother would recognize, and what she'd scold you for—too busy, too skinny, too solemn. In your dreams you visit her in her garden, watch her pick through the thick bramble of na'na that overtook your mother's pansies. The smell of mint lights the air, and her smile, gap-toothed and private, breaks your heart. You want to crawl into her arms.

***

In your inbox, a flattering email startles you. It's a young Arab writer, asking you for advice. It's 2020. You want to tell this person you're not sure if you've ever written a single whole, true thing. The irony blooms hot on your cheeks

as you remember how you came to New York City, so eager to be swallowed. To disappear.

You chose journalism over the arts you yearned for—classic immigrant-child casualty—telling yourself that any job working with words will suffice. Successful white men told you to build a platform, to create a brand. Leverage your uniqueness, they advise, but you can sense the footnote: *not too much. They call it your background. They say, It's so interesting, adding, like everyone does, You don't look Arab!

You had not yet learned the simple answer: Yes, I do.

Instead, you demurred. Like your father, you altered your name a bit, sanding off the edges. You dieted, drank, flirted—they call this networking. You discovered the limitations of diversity, found that every drop of color requires accreditation. Ivy League preferred. You learned to calibrate your ethnicity according to editors' finicky appetite for the Oriental.

It goes like this: the serious stories go to smug white men, some with degrees in the study of your people. You get the personal stories, the human interest pieces they paste next to photos of veiled women. You muffle your curiosities and rage, fit yourself into preordained shapes, gaining traction by your ability to intrigue but not offend.

Your voice is a white one, because these are the readers that count. It comes more naturally every time, built into your practice like the other rules of thumb: don't bury the lede. Use active verbs.What to tell this young person emailing you. Proudly Arab, wanting both to write and have success?

***

Sittoo passed away your first year in New York. In Brooklyn, you grieved a muted grief, alone. Muslim burials don't wait for overseas granddaughters; your father placed her body in the ground twelve hours later, under the Saudi sun. In Jeddah, the city of half your childhood, one you are just realizing you loved. You walked soggy streets alone, tearless and ashamed.

Back then, you believed that death meant the end of things. Too quickly, you ceased to think of her, to feel her blood in you. In the mirror, you could not see the strong jawline you share, her dark eyebrows spelling stubbornness beneath your blonde fringe. You overlooked the quiet ways she slipped into your days, the humble gifts she gave you. In the kitchen, your hands moved with her intuition. You shaped delicious meals by feel, your body telling truths you could not hear. But you ate without tasting, slept a dreamless sleep. How difficult it is, after all, to hear anything above the din of privilege.

***

As a child you yearned for a void. Later, you feared you were one. Going under feels like death at first, a dive into that nothing. You writhe and thrash until you learn to breathe. Slowly, you will come to let the waters hold you. You learn to feel what stillness is, all the safety there. The knitting back of memory. Slowly, a new body emerges, dense with its own history. All the bones for standing tall. A DNA of places, times, and names. Words will return to you, one by one. First, فطرة— that term for all that is innate, the tucked trueness of us, naked of apology.

Always, Sittoo hovers—she's often unseen these days, more infusion than figure. Much later, this letter begins to form. At first it is tiny, hard and gritty, a grain. It takes months to grow, accreting slowly in the dark, like you. It takes patience—there is no mastery, the pieces arriving out of order,

sideways, slick. You practice holding out your hands, open to receive.
On the page the words appear unwieldy, odd—things you've spent a lifetime trying not to be.

You think no one will want to read it.

And you remember, after all, it is addressed to only you.

A private glow,

disbelieving pride,

relief.

You see how these lines spell a new word. Your grandmother's name. حورية .
Mermaid, nymph, creature of two worlds.

And another: حرية