KOUKASH REVIEW

Issue 1 / 2022

ISSN 2835-0561

ISSN 2835-0561

From the Editor

I am so grateful for the support Koukash Review has received from the community and humbled by the generosity of my fellow artists. You've made this dream possible.

This magazine seeks to publish underrepresented voices from the Pan-Arab/SWANA diaspora. We are indebted to our predecessors (the pioneers of Mizna come to mind), who have carved space in the literary landscape for endeavors like ours. Koukash is an intimate project for me, a forged legacy: the maiden name of my maternal grandmother.

Samya Koukash was born in Lebanon in the 1950s, just at the cusp of the country's Golden Age. An orphaned girl, she would be denied an education in her childhood and married off as a young teen.

Because I was raised in the United States, all that I knew about my grandmother (or my heritage as a whole—Lebanon, the Arabic language, the Druze faith) I learned from my mother. And because she was already inscribed in my heart with the weight of allegory, my grandmother seemed otherworldly to me. I was enamored with her during our summer visits: this stunning, sharp-witted creature who loved the thrill of a day trip, shopped in abundance, dressed up for parties, and donated often to widows and children. She was deeply spiritual, in tune with another realm; Her famously prophetic dreams still live on in all three of her daughters. She believed in the karma of good deeds. She listened to Sabah and Abdel Halim on cassettes, kept the television on in the background of her day's work, danced whenever the urge struck. She loved fluffy, white cats and brand new clothes. She wore heels everywhere. She kept an impeccably clean flat though the doors to the balcony were always open, letting in the scent of pines from the adjacent hill and dust from the bustling street beneath.

In her later years she kept a garden. In a photo from the 2000s, she stands next to the pinkest flowers I've ever seen, turning their velvety leaves for the camera. She's in an oversized, open button-down. Her hair is freshly highlighted, her vibrant lips and eyes set on the person behind the lens. She has a smile that you agree with immediately—as if "Isn't it beautiful?" could be captured on film.

She passed away in 2017, a few months before I became the first in my family to graduate with a professional degree. I did not get to say goodbye. I did not believe I'd ever need to. I was that accustomed to her status as an immortal, existing alongside everything I knew about my people or myself.

Perhaps her ethereal quality is also what made her seem unreachable, or foreign, as if we did not exist on the same plane. She could not write her own story in her own words, so to what extent could I actually *know* her? Who was I in her lineage? I was never more ashamed of my Americanism than when I would speak to her on the phone. Language might have played a role in that loss, but I felt ruined in a less obvious way—guilty of my opportunities, unworthy of the life denied to her and her daughters. What would make their sacrifices worth it? It's an absurd thing to consider. Even now, though I worship my own mother, exalt her words as anthems, consider paradise a moment at her feet, I constantly doubt my Americanized love is enough.

I started Koukash as an ode, an effort to write literacy and art into my grandmother's legacy. But the guiding vision for the work is rooted in what she has come to represent to me: the plight of women, the underrepresented, the exiled, the nearly forgotten. And so in an almost perfectly circular way, this has come to include those like me, too: the diaspora.

Ghinwa Jawhari
January 27, 2023
Brooklyn, NY

Title	Author
& love still means whatever it means once it's over	Isaam A. Zeibak
A Guide for Nourishing Dust	Lara Atallah
before we go out to dinner, I braid my grandfather's hair	Devi Sasty
A Woman at the stake remembering that in Shakespear's Julius Caesar the street poet / Was also killed for crimes he did not commit	Yasmine Rukia
The Dinner Party	Holly Mason Badra
aubade of remembrance	Jenna Hamed
Okra	Rina Malagayo Alluri
Containment	Sara Elkamel
Agua	Marisol Moreno Ortiz
pigeonholed	Hanna Kherzai
In Virginia my partner makes arrangements for her aging father in Michigan during a pandemic under mandatory quarantine.	Holly Mason Badra
Third Culture Kid I	Isaam A. Zeibak
The most vulgar word you can think of	Alexandra Millatmal
sizdah bedar / 13 outside	Hanna Kherzai
when my mother discovered a box of tampons in my bag	Rewa Zeinati
Santa: A Haibun	Lauren Bo
Sword-shaped Heart	Farnaz Fatemi
Seventeen	Rewa Zeinati
I Name the Eight Muscles of My Tongue	Farnaz Fatemi
Untitling	Sarah Aziza
Jasmine	Jana Amin
Photography & design	Natasha Jahchan

& 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

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.

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,
peking duck, every
unforgotten line

of Omar Khayyam, Brecht,
Tagore. all recalled
in measured tone
with wine stains
on his breast pocket,
sesame seeds
in his mustache.
        he dips a broad finger
                in the glass,
         makes it sing.

A Woman at the stake remembering that in Shakespear's Julius Caesar the street poet / Was also killed for crimes he did not commit

Yasmine Rukia

Among the politic   I am an easy target
With children on my hip,   father on my back,
my husband's name   the only proof of success
I   the poet   a woman
          begging in the streets for   ears   dipped in honey
Likes Caesars own Cinna   cut & blackened   for conspiracies
               inherited by proximity
Back to the garden   its mass exodus   of x-tin knowledge
My words heralded   only   in tandem
of tragedy   or man's fleeting mercy
Have you ever encountered
          the devil eating with his left hand   a naked stake
unmarked by love   or light
Ignited   by Jupiter's   own jealousy
               This cigarette
Is where
          I draw
               my last   breath
            this funeral pyre   a pulpit
                         holds
   free verse:
   lo & behold   heaven lies   and truth claims   the scorched earth
                                             under   my escaped feet

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.

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 هو
stand clear of the closing doors.

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.

Containment

Sara Elkamel

This poem was realized with the support of Mophradat's Writing Sabbaticals program.

.:.

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.

pigeonholed

Hanna Kherzai

The urban doves coat his taxi door
Like supplicants gathered together
All of them amassing him in a feathered hug

The same creatures in every photo I've seen of Mazar e Sharif's Blue Mosque
There is this picture of a woman amongst the birds there
The blue of her burqa same as the walls
And I can imagine the way her eyes are closed
Can see the shadow of her rocking in the hip hop beat of the taxi in front of me
Two souls bound by the breadcrumbs in their hands

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.

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

The most vulgar word you can think of

Alexandra Millatmal

my father calls me American when
he doesn't agree with me

I remind him that he is, too
he says it isn't the same

he's right, of course
so I say

what about Gulali,
studying for nursing exams
in her third language?

what about khoharam jaan,
turning into a teenager in secret
over online tunnels?

what about the new baby boy,
born safely amidst death
to our sighs of relief?

he says American
as an antithetical

whenever he says it, I think of summers

growing up without him
Fourth of Julys

when the farm town around me
would balloon with visitors

lined down main street to watch
    a parade of cheerleaders and hot rods
        and National Guard members
            rolling across the brick in their tanks.

sizdah bedar / 13 outside

Hanna Kherzai

On the 13th day, our Persian blood
Obligates us to open all the windows.
Wash every rug and hang them from the rooftops.
(Let all the neighbors know we pledge allegiance
To carpet weavers in Herat.)

The birds are waking me up again.
This is why the year begins in Springtime.

We are a superstitious people.
Make the day good or it will follow you for 364 days more.
It is not enough to let the past haunt us.
Regret can, too, be a verb.

Chase out the bad luck
By running from the regular parts of our lives
And instead spend this day of all days
With the plots of grass reflected in our little pieces of sky.

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/

فول بلدي - شربل

Santa: A Haibun

Lilou Bo

We were 13, maybe 12. In history class learning about the Vietnam War. Our teacher was an old white man in his 60s at least, with a white beard and pot-bellied gut. He was on the verge of tears, voice cracking as he spoke about the friends he lost to the war. He had won the lottery. As his friends marched off one by one, he stayed. His number was never called.

We were young and melanated. Distracted by our changing bodies, by an emergent hunger to see and to taste skin. Through the window, the hot sun cast striped shadows of the blinds across our baby faces.

He had been pestering me all semester. That scrappy boy. Sole black boy in a white class. Default clown just trying to survive. He'd flick my right shoulder and kick my desk. Use my own hair to tickle my neck. Whisper in my ear to get me to look up from my notes. Remind me I was a nerd and make slimy suggestions that I could be something more. That I had potential.

That day, he patted his lean, dark knee:

Hey, sugar lips. Babe.
Come sit here on Santa's lap—
The sun set too soon.

Sword-shaped Heart

Farnaz Fatemi

From Sister Tongue (The Kent State University Press, 2022). Used by permission of the Publisher. All Rights Reserved.

In the *Birder's Dictionary* I read about a bone
near the bird's heart, called xiphoid,

meaning sword shaped. My fingers reach for my ribs.
If my father's anger were shaped like his swimming pool

instead of a sword, he could sink down
under the surface and listen.

I could return my sword-shaped heart
and pick out something else.

If my husband's pain were cup shaped,
he could add milk, then drink.

I'd cut out my tongue
and grow a more tender one.

If the martyr's vision landed on his mother's oleander,
he could soak up the rich scarlet of its flowers.

His mother could join him. They could stare and exclaim.
I could dream up a new language

to speak to martyrs.
If all the fathers could find themselves

on the maps they're born with, they could free their eyes
to look that way.

I would wait on the road, ready to paint a ruby
X to mark their spot.

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.

I Name the Eight Muscles of My Tongue

Farnaz Fatemi

From Sister Tongue (The Kent State University Press, 2022). Used by permission of the Publisher. All Rights Reserved.

agnost

I was slow to understand
the phrase, "I speak for myself."
How to believe what I want to say.
Half of my tongue a late bloomer.
The tongue has eight muscles
which move it, four for shape,
four for direction.

diatom

Before I am five I have the sounds
of two alphabets in my mouth
but after I am five speaking is exertion.
I choose English. My aunt pinching
my cheek sits sullen in the back of my mouth.
My grandmother's loving questions lodge
between my canine and molar, a throb.

saltcells

My mother utters lines she believes
she needs to: words formed in her lungs
at birth. Her life unfurls in sentences,

dictation, as-told-to's.
What does she find in translation?
Into English and Spanish and German
Italian and Czech? So many tongues.
Can she remember herself with just one?

allium

My sister's mouth says more than I do,
exhales vivid holler, calls us all
to hear. I hear her and forget the taste
of my own sorrow, imagine I'm healed,
my suffering surpassed.
It was always this way.
I don't remember how it happened.
My sister's mouth: my answers.

lipid

I might have reminded myself
to ask question after question,
talked over all the voices
who seemed not to listen.
If I had known this as a child
I might have ached less for company.
I wanted to know things so I asked.
Not everyone felt this way.
As cells slough off in the mouth
they leave traces behind
to be sopped up or swallowed.
I don't change. I will always
want to know.

chalk

This muscle tells my secrets,
if they're told, cupping truth
to keep it close, prevent it
from being swallowed. It knows,
though sometimes it doesn't know
it knows, what the limits are to telling.
I want to speak in a room where
someone might always be yelling.
How fast to let things out. Who to
talk to, what danger lies underneath.

brine

The place that remembers things
the mind might not have learned.
Tart shame of thinking too hard
about myself. Metallic swig
of betrayal. Like my girlhood
fears, it lives unnamed.
Still it spills what it knows.

slack

I learn to taste the truth
in secret. Give over to mute bliss.
What is silent dwells on the names
it gives each of its selves,
lets them linger
to get them right.

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.

| | |

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.

|||

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

Jasmine

Jana Amin

"Marriage is like a besieged castle; those who are on the outside wish to get in; and those who are on the inside wish to get out." — Arabic Proverb

"And there is a city in my heart where you are its only population." — Arabic Quote

I fall in love with Cairo first: the dust dancing at dawn, minarets soaring above the pinkish brown horizon, my grandfather's sheesha puffing out cloud after cloud of smoke.

Trailing my grandmother on her Friday errands is when I first discover my home, amidst traffic jams and street harassment. At eight, maybe nine, I walk into a tree of jasmine, a cascade of ivory petals falling by my side. A man makes eye contact with me, shouts "Amara." Beautiful. I assume he is referring to the jasmine, but when my grandmother tugs me closer to her, I realize he is talking to me. We are helpless, the quickening of her, our pace gives us away.

I start thinking about love.

I am at my grandmother's, designing my wedding dress, when I witness one of my grandparent's fights. My aunt, then around 25 years old, had come home at 3 AM the night before. My grandfather was sure she was with a guy. My grandmother begged him to leave her alone. She would take care of it, make sure there was no

guy, and have the situation handled.

“This isn’t the first time,” I hear my grandfather say sternly. I remember peering up from my piece of paper, my hands sore from gripping my white pencil so tight.

He slaps her, and I hear my pencil drop, in shock. They must realize I am there only then, for my grandmother runs to her room sobbing, and my grandfather flees the house, the door slamming behind him.

I pick up my pencil and scribble over the outline of my wedding dress. All I’m left with is a white piece of paper. My dream wedding is already being erased.

I don’t see my grandfather touch my grandmother like that ever again. Maybe he simply doesn't do it. Or maybe I become good at coloring in white, ignoring them, their problems, their love. I hide in the furthest corner of their house every time their voices rise, rummaging through pictures of my grandparent’s wedding day as I realize their love is the longest love I know.

I save my white piece of paper, slip it under my Dora the Explorer coloring books and math worksheets. It is a reminder of my confusion: if long-lasting love is broken, why does everyone so desperately seem to want it?

|||

We are searching through each other’s memory, busying ourselves at the annual family Eid gathering.

In my head, my cousin Salma’s memory is as clear as sky blue, while Adam, my little brother’s, is a fuzzy brown. Salma knows a lot about our family. Adam knows very little. Kids, among them Salma and Adam, come and go, some excitedly

sprinting into the room, others gleefully skipping out. Out is the crowd of adults we try to chart. My grandmother says there are fifty-five at her house. I am convinced there are more. They seem to hover everywhere, relatives greeting each other, picking at triangular cheese-stuffed sambousek, rearranging white plastic chairs in the salon.

As hard as I try, I cannot tell who is married to whom. My mother tells me to look for visual cues; hand holding, shoulder clinging, small pecks on the cheek. I spend 20 minutes staring at the crowd of Egyptians before me. There are absolutely no visual cues. Egyptians are not public about love.

So, we rely on group knowledge instead. We add couple after couple to our family tree, each branch more surprising than the last.

“Who are these people?” I first think. Then, “They are married?”

| | |

My mother is spinning me around, my sequin-adorned dress keeping up with every turn, twist, twirl. We are giggling hopelessly in the dining room, waiting for my birthday guests to arrive. I don’t know it, but this birthday—my tenth birthday—is the last I will celebrate in Egypt.

Travel-themed cupcakes stand in a straight line on the table, a pile of fake passports stacked beside them. Signs pointing to Japan, Germany, Argentina, Peru decorate every wall.

I ask my mother if love looks different in those countries, and she smiles down at me, grabbing a fake passport and whirling me in circles until we reach the door, where my international school friends await. “Do you love any of them

differently?" she asks. I never respond, just open the door, my birthday girl sash greeting everyone. My friends and I hum along to Amr Diab and Justin Bieber. I forget all about love while we sing along to declarations of it.

| | |

Love seems different in the United States, where couples stroll down the streets of Milton hand-in-hand, kiss each other at the mall, embrace at the doorway of my 5th grade classroom.

I am scandalized, or at least I know I should be. In a few years, my aunts will force me to leave the room for a sex scene, and I'll pretend not to know some of my friends are having it.

But for now, I'll lie about Caroline and Ben slow-dancing together in the 6th grade, turn a blind eye to friends' first kisses in the 7th, bend the truth about boyfriends and breakups in the 8th.

I am at a sleepover with one of my best friends when I realize I've never seen members of my family romantically kiss, or hug, or even hold hands. The exception, I think to myself, are the stacks and stacks of photos from the weddings and honeymoons of my grandmothers, mother, aunts, and family friends. In my head, I can hear the cameras clicking, the couples moving closer together, the photographs memorializing a love I never got the chance to know.

It is at that sleepover where I first hear the concept of date-night. We must be around 11, maybe 12, and her parents come into the living room where we lounge on their couch, exchanging secrets. They smile at me, then her, turn towards each other, explaining that it is time to go, date-night awaiting. They kiss in front of us. My friend rolls her eyes, unfazed. "They do this all the time," she says to me, her

apathetic tone one of teenage embarrassment.

As we play Never-Have-I-Ever, I imagine them outside, on a bench, his arm wrapped around hers, their palms intertwined, both taking in the sticky Boston humidity.

We don’t hear them tiptoe into the house that night, put down the car keys, laugh their way to the bedroom, but when my best friend and I wake up that morning, there they are: in the kitchen, making us pumpkin bread and pancakes for breakfast, singing along to songs she and I have never heard. I feel I’ve fallen into one of the Hollywood rom-coms my mother turns on during the anniversary of my parents’ divorce. My best friends' parents have never felt more foreign, different, American.

I am left wondering if that is what love is, but I refuse to give in to that definition. Maybe, I think, that is what American love looks like. Maybe I am simply not American enough to buy into it.

|||

A few years later, I convince myself that love isn’t what I should be worrying about, but men are. I am on a flight from Jordan to Egypt, recalling my Uber ride to the airport—the one where a stranger asked me to marry him, come back to Jordan to find him, planned out my life for me with him.

I’d found it funny, or maybe amusing. I do a good job of convincing myself so. But I am quick to remind myself there are only three other women on this flight, so I withdraw the uncertain smile from my face, snuggle against the window, align my breathing to the newest Taylor Swift love song.

I can't fall asleep. My mind is inundated with worries, worries passed on to me by generations of family members, worries that I realize are slowly becoming my own.

It is on that flight that I become hyper-aware of the men around me, and soon, I am terrified of most of them. I am at the right age by then—14—and I start learning how to simultaneously appear passive and possess what I think is total control.

On other flights, seated next to men like my Uber driver, I'll force smiles with my eyes, use my broken Arabic to answer all their questions, think of an emergency plan in my head. I'll appear outwardly submissive, agreeable, amicable.

Between receiving gifts and declarations of fidelity, I'll find myself comforted by the flight path projected in front of me. Soon I'll be home, on land, in Cairo, protected by the chaos of hundreds of people packed into a street meant only for cars.

|||

I develop my first real crush on an Egyptian-American boy in the 6th grade, and it is then that my confusion around love, boundaries, and expectations begins.

We vaguely understand what love is. And we both have an idea of what hob, or at least, the respectable version of hob, means. But will we mix the two definitions, choose one and not the other, fear both and do nothing?

We have a flirtationship—that's what my friends call it. But I am sure he does not and cannot like me. Because he is not like the Egyptian boys asking for my hand

in marriage at every corner of the street. He comes from a good family, prays at least twice a day, follows his parents' guidance. I become sure any type of love is irreproachable.

We cannot get married at 13, and love without marriage is haram, forbidden, so what are we doing?

I turn to middle school match-making as a distraction for the next two years, letting go of my 6th grade crush in the process. Match-making feels like an investment in love,or the idea of it, even if that love could not be further from my own.

I am content with my match-making career until the eighth grade, when my two best friends help me fall for Joseph, an American, one who wears a cross around his neck. They compel us to sit at the same table together at study halls, talk to each other at assembly, say hi to each other in the hallways.

He and I text each other, his friends and mine mediating every "Hey" and "See you tomorrow!"

One day, his friend steals his phone and asks if I'd kiss Joseph. I know it's over then, and sure enough, two weeks later, I hear Joseph has finally gotten his first kiss from a girl outside of school.

Part of me is hurt, but mostly I am relieved to have made it through another situation. My friends don't understand, but I'm happy everything is resolved, excited to go back to my unassuming love life. The safe lack thereof.

| | |

I hear my mother mention the words “Jana” and “dating” in one sentence at a seventh grade welcome party. She is talking to parents of kids in my grade, many of whom have additional children in high school. They are discussing when they’ll allow their kids to date. My mom delivers her classic line: “Boys are a distraction. There are more important things to focus on.” The parents murmur in agreement, and most agree high school is an acceptable time to date. But my mother looks concerned. “I don’t think I’ll let Jana date until after college,” she says, and I laugh when the other parents laugh, knowing that they think she’s joking, knowing that she could not be more serious.

It doesn't take me long to come to terms with her expectations. And I tell my friends the truth, that I don’t feel the need to date before then, that I would rather not get married before then.

I think they think I’m crazy, but luckily they’re crazy enough to nod their heads and rattle off the names of boys in our grade. “Marry them?” they ask, before we all devolve into hysterical laughs. “Never,” we say, and I am sure we are all on the same page.

|||

I’ve made it through a year and a half of my private half boarding half day high school unscathed when I suddenly find myself fixing the pink scrunchie on my head in anticipation of my math and history study sessions with Zach. The switch happens gradually at first, but when I realize I know his birthday and he knows mine, my friends say there is no going back.

It is a Friday afternoon. Orange and pink hues criss-cross our wooden table, one

half of the library already dark. Laughter tumbles out of us, bounces around the empty building, slides down the spiral staircase.

I feel myself leaning in towards him, breathing in his blue sweatshirt, watching his eyes trace the sun's imprint on my face. His dorm carries with it the subtext of a hookup, of blowjobs, of making out. That is not what I mean.

"I can't wait for tonight," I confess distractedly, reaching for my phone, interrupting his trance.

He does not move. As I straighten my skirt out, I refuse to look him in the eye, instead suggesting we go back to his dorm.

"My dorm?" he asks. "Really?" I am quick to nod, maybe too quick, because he clearly does not believe me.

"Jana," he says firmly, and I look at him, my pencil case flip-flopping to my backpack's side.

"Are you sure?" His eyes are soft and hesitant. It is not the plan he's expecting. My family would not approve of me in a boy's bedroom—I'm not sure I even do.

Doubt snips at my decision, but I roll my eyes wryly and point to the glass behind us. "You need a jacket," I tell him.

I drape that coat, his coat, on the seat next to me at dance concert, tonight having finally arrived. Intermittently fiddling with the jacket's silver zipper, I blush each time I am asked if the seat is taken. We have not hooked up, nor even held hands, but I feel embarrassed, ashamed, scared nevertheless. When a family friend sits two seats over, I grimace, my eyes scanning the theater for two open

seats elsewhere, my mind preoccupied with what the family friend will say or think or see. He is, after all, Egyptian, and we've known each other since before kindergarten. I worry he will think less of me when the night is over.

With the dimmed lights of each lyrical dance, I nestle deeper and deeper into Zach's shoulder. It's the closest we've been yet. I feel my curls gently brush against his sweatshirt. I can do this, I think to myself. But then, the lights come on. I immediately push myself away from him, sit up straight again.

We part ways at the end of the night, my fingertips resting on his shoulder for an extra second, reluctant to fully let him go.

We are both wondering what my boundaries are, what my mum will allow me to do, how much longer we can last; I'm terrified of being seen, touched, even walked anywhere. He stays patient, waiting, careful not to cross any of the boundaries my friends have warned him about.

| | |

Shame, embarrassment, and fear come before any of my crushes. Grant, Omar, and I sit in a triangle, each one of us on a couch, memories of our day at Squash Camp filling up the living room, crawling under the cabinet by the window, seeping into the vase of flowers between us.
I am struck by how platonic our gathering is. I do not have a crush on either of them. We're recalling Grant's five game match when the babysitter comes in. She is apologizing because she has to leave early. None of us blink. We are good friends, the conversation bouncing between us like the game of squash we witnessed earlier: fast-paced and energetic.

When Omar's mom picks us up, she is angry, shaken. She holds Omar and Grant

by their wrists and speaks quietly but violently. I get it. She doesn't want me to hear.

Our goodbye is silent, as is the car ride with her and Omar to my house. I still do not understand what is wrong.

I eavesdrop on her conversation with my mother and slowly piece together what they see: a sixth grade girl left with two seventh grade boys, alone, in a house.

I turn red as Omar tells me to ignore their conversation. I am ashamed of the entire ordeal.

“I’m sorry,” he tells me, and I know he means it, that he and Grant would never have hurt me, raped me, or broken my trust. But it does not matter. It is not a question of trust. It is a matter of appearances, of ‘what ifs.’ An old, inherited fear.

Grant, Omar, and I never have a conversation together again.

| | |

Years ago in Egypt, a BMW glides into the wedding ceremony, six hundred people with arms outstretched lining its path. Inside, I imagine he tells her he loves her, squeezes her hand, maybe asks if her halter-neck lace-trimmed gown needs fixing. They love each other—that, both mother-in-laws can agree on.

When the car reaches the end of its red carpet, I see my dad look at my mom and nod, asking if she is ready, shutting the black door behind him. She is. My grandfather receives her, slowly and carefully. I imagine her wobbling, the layers and layers of tulle making it hard to stand, let alone walk, her hands gripping my

grandfather's arm out of necessity.

In the DVD of their wedding that my family watches together when I am eight years old, I see my to-be parents whisper to each other, and laugh, again and again, the wedding reception seemingly revolving around their love. I remember wondering if they still love each other like that, but something stops me from asking the question. I might already know the answer, or maybe what I know is that I don't want to hear the answer.

Either way, I choose to commit to memory the DVD recording of their wedding. I remember the details of their honeymoon pictures, forget whatever their relationship looks like beyond the first dance and kiss.

As the wedding disperses before us, my parents narrate an off-screen version of their farah, their wedding. They explain it was a day of farah, and I'm confused until I realize the word for joyful pride in Arabic—farah—is the same word as "wedding."

I think about the pride and joy their wedding brought and I can't help but wonder what the devolution of a marriage must look like.

Is that a moment of farah too? I know the answer is no.

When my parents do get divorced, farah is not an emotion I hear thrown around. My grandmother is upset, convinced she has failed her motherly duties, left with two unmarried daughters and one unhappy with her marriage.

She knows my mother is better off without my dad, but she cannot—and does not—shake her disappointment for years. It becomes a source of many of our arguments, nights we spend shouting at each other. Me, asking her why a

husband has anything to do with one's quality of life; Her, wondering if I too will not get married, or worse, get a divorce. The prospect of two generations of "failed" women colludes any sort of understanding between us.

Years later, we will sit, leaning on the cold granite counters as snow delicately falls outside. My grandmother will seem calm, more reserved, as if taken aback by the magnitude of the natural world, in awe of what power exists beyond my—and her own—reach.
"SubhanAllah," she'll whisper. All Glory be to God.

On her phone, she pulls out a picture of her wedding day and places it between us. I peer at it, smiling. It's one I've seen over a hundred times; my grandmother's sweetheart neckline, my grandfather's tall, skinny frame. She looks happy. Maybe in love.

"I made a mistake," she says, and I lift my head. She is gazing straight into my pupils. "I married your grandfather."

I've never heard her say those words aloud before. Out loud, she's never acknowledged the woes of their 40-year relationship.

I clutch her hand tightly, almost apologetically, suddenly realizing there is a lot more to their relationship than I know.

As my grandmother speaks, I imagine the scene: Cairo's streets are cleaner then, but for the most part the city is unchanged. The apartment building I grew up visiting is her childhood home, and I see her, in my imagination, getting dropped off by a male classmate at 9 PM on a Friday. He is not her fiance. She's wearing a mini skirt, a red one in my head, and a diamond necklace her uncle bought from a trip across east Africa on behalf of EgyptAir.

She walks up to her bedroom, wishes her parents a goodnight, and wakes up to a call from her fiance. My future grandfather is breaking off the engagement. “I should have taken it as a sign,” she tells me. “He couldn’t handle me talking to another man. He clearly didn’t know what it meant to be a man.”

I pause my imagination to think of all the memories I have of my grandfather. Like my grandmother who refused to divorce him, I appreciate his presence in our life, but years and years of arguments with my grandmother in the foyer, followed by excruciating silence, makes me wonder. What would our lives, all our lives, be like if she hadn’t married him?

“We’ve all learnt from your mistakes,” I hear myself say, but my grandmother shakes her head solemnly, silently, the tears in her eyes just a sentence away from spilling over.

I know she’s thinking about my uncle, the way he speaks anger into the house, comes and goes with no explanations, blames my aunt for not having a son.

“Another mistake,” I hear her telling me.

Another generation, I think to myself.

| | |

The loveseat swing rocks back and forth, upsetting piles of jasmine in its wake. I am curled up to the right, watching white petals sway like ballet-dancers. I follow one to the ground. It rests at last, still as a discarded skirt.

Inside my grandparents’ house—where prayers, tears, and condolences create a soft hum of sadness—my family remembers my great-grandmother, her death so

recent that my father repeatedly refers to her in the present tense.

I know very little about her: that she got married at fifteen, had thirteen children, spent evenings threading necklaces of jasmine.

It's the way I'll always remember her. I feel her presence on the jasmine-scented white granite counters in our home in Boston, wonder if she's watching me blunder through more men than she'd ever had the opportunity to talk to. Does she hear me repeatedly ask myself if my life could be any different than hers?

We are three generations apart. This I know from my inability to make the necklaces she so loved, or grieve alongside the rest of our family, or silently wait on Egyptian men fully capable of helping themselves.

I pick at the swing. My bitten nails send shards of old paint flying in all directions. I don't know what I expect to find underneath decades of paint, but I suspect I want her to help restore my faith in love, in marriage, in relationships.

She does not. Instead, the pool is glowing white, fallen petals lit up by LED lights, when I finally realize I've completely destroyed one half of the loveseat swing. It is time to go inside.

|||

After he divorces my mother, my father remarries twice. The first, I learn, is a broken woman who my father tries desperately to fix. She does not, cannot, trust him, the ghosts of men in her past overshadowing every interaction. I see my dad ache for her, searching for an instruction manual to put her back together, like the computers he brings back from the dead every weekend. But there is no manual for love. Arguments every night make clear he does not love her, and she does not

know how to love him.

I learn of their divorce on a weekday, sitting in Spanish class. But broken love no longer surprises me. I know of little else.

Still I relish in learning about el amor, memorizing words like coquetar, prometida, and boda with a feverish insistence. I desperately want to need them some day. I do not want to be broken like her. I long to love.

|||

My *hob* for Cairo is acceptable. Patriotic and commendable, even, so I cling onto it for as long as I can. I earn my family's praise, nonchalantly using Arabic proverbs and cooking Egyptian dishes. It seems effortless. The way love ought to be. But I spend hours mourning my life in Cairo when I know I should be celebrating my new life in the U.S.

My childish love for Cairo is what brings me closer to my short-lived crushes junior and senior year: all Egyptian boys.

But it is this same Cairo—my girl friends in Cairo—that continues to confuse me. Amal, Lara, Aya, Karma, and I are sitting in a circle. Nicki Minaj punctuates every silence in our conversation. Ahmeds and Tareks hover around us. They are all boys I have not kept in touch with, but I get caught up on their lives anyway.

Our circle is visualizing Maya and Fares on a date, apparently holding hands as they walk through Cairo Festival City together. They go back to her house, where she's lined her bedroom with candles and fairy lights. My friends don't explicitly say what happens next, but I understand from the way they look at each other. While Aya and Karma squeal as Amal continues the story, I am thinking of my

family, of the myth we'd all created together.

Somehow, I start to realize, I'd been made to believe boyfriends, dates, and bedrooms at 16 were for Americans, and Americans only. But Maya and Fares are both Egyptian. And the excitedly hushed tone of my friends retelling the story told me all I needed to know: this was not an isolated sample.

|||

Weeks later, I am sitting on my bed in Boston, my fingers separating golden brown curls from each other. Echoes of Super Bass sneak into my room, beckoning me to the window. My neighbors are having a party. Along one side of the pool, I vaguely make out the middle daughter, Sam. She is sprawled next to her boyfriend on a cream-colored reclining chair, and the sight of them together reminds me of Maya and Fares.

Thousands of miles away from Egypt, I try to answer my own questions about love. A scene comes to mind:

We walk, velvety hot chocolates in hand. I hold on to him, my block-heeled boots no match for Boston's black ice.

I imagine I don't tug at my skirt, wonder what time it is, fear being seen. I don't know how far we go, if we cuddle on the bench, kiss by the Charles River, or sleep together in his dorm.

But I know I don't have to will generations of worries away, memories of my aunt's love-induced suicide attempt and my grandfather's fights with my grandmother finally frozen in the past.

I never want to break his trances, and I don't need darkness to let myself be engulfed by him. He cares for me, for our community, for Egypt, whether or not he is Egyptian.

I no longer fall in love with Alberto, Julio, or Carlos. There is no need for Spanish telenovela boyfriends from shows like Velvet, Gran Hotel, Alta Mar—not because I am living my own love story, but because I see enough love, whole love, intact love, strong love, around me. Off screen.

He helps me stitch together fragments of that love. We create a mosaic made out of hob and amor, plane rides and weddings, divorces and disagreements.

We watch the seasons pass us by. I am not surprised when I realize we've been together for a year, or two, or five, or ten.

Our love does break down sometimes, but I don't go running to Cairo to fix it. The city may be my first love, but I know I can't use it as an escape from all love.

White petals of jasmine line the aisle on our wedding day. Tulle converts me into a wobbling bride like my mother in the DVD. Today, I am proud to be called "amar." Beautiful.

For a moment, I am back sitting with my grandmother by the window, watching the snow make its way to the ground.

But I am not afraid of having made a mistake. I let him clutch my hands and uncurl my ring finger.

We waltz our way through the night. I am still thinking about love.

Koukash Review is a new indie literary magazine featuring Pan-Arab/ Southwest Asian North African voices in all our brilliant hues. Honoring our traditions alongside our glorious revolutions, we imagine futures as vibrant as the stories we tell.

We encourage submissions from underrepresented voices, including those of women, queer and trans artists, and global diaspora.