



Sukoon

Art . Poetry . Prose

Volume 2 | Issue 1 | Winter 2014



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

Sukoon is:

an Arab-themed, English language, online literary magazine; the first of its kind in the Arab region, where established and emerging artists, poets and writers of short stories and personal essays, publish their original work in English. Writers need not be Arab, nor of Arab origin, but all writing and art must reflect the diversity and richness of the cultures of the Arab world.

Sukoon is an Arabic word meaning "stillness." By stillness we don't mean silence, but rather the opposite of silence. What we mean by Sukoon is the stillness discovered within, when the artist continues to follow the inner calling to express and create.

A calling that compels the artist to continue on the creative path for the sole reason that he/she does not know how not to.



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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:

It wasn't planned, but Sukoon, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (which is technically issue 3) seems to have attracted the ladies! A coincidence, yes, but I'm delighted by the men too. Proud to be sharing an enlightening interview with internationally-acclaimed poet Sam Hamod, and including a wonderful longer poem of his, "After the Funeral of Assam Hamady," first published in 1971 by Perishable Press. A timely poem chosen for this issue for its celebration of prayer; a poem that expresses indecision and curiosity; a true cognizance of what religion is about, as opposed to the horror and revulsion we've been witnessing on the news and reading about in the paper every single day during the past couple of years, at least.

Nada Faris, a Kuwaiti spoken-word poet, also laments the kind of radicalism that has overtaken the region, in her poem "Fortified Axioms."

I am amazed by the voices brought together in the third issue of Sukoon and pleasantly surprised by the collective consciousness taking on its serendipitous form, as Lebanese poet Hedy Habra and American poet Olivia Ayes have both submitted meditations on alphabet and language respectively, each in her own striking way, and without prior intention.

Poet Celia Bland's ekphrastic poem "Madonna Bomb" imagines the slow final moments of a female suicide bomber who is about to cross a checkpoint. The image that inspired the poem is part of a collaborative project between poet and artist, entitled the *Madonna Comix* (forthcoming in 2014). The artwork itself is by Dianne Kornberg, an internationally-acclaimed photographer and artist.

Coincidentally, the protagonist in Laura Gillman's piece "The Awakening," is also a female suicide bomber who is far from convinced by the mission she's on. I'm pleased to share another long fictional story, "Intifada Love Story" by Susan Muaddi Darraj; stories set in Palestine, in Syria, in Iraq. Stories about occupation and indoctrination; I can't decide which is worse of the two, can you?

Issue 3 includes intricately stunning art by artist Mayda Aridi Katechi, whose pieces are as close to human nature as they are to daily truth; perfectly mirroring the details and dimensions of our everyday journeys. Look at a piece a second and third time and be sure to find new details you hadn't detected before.

It also includes poems about Egypt, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon. Poems about mothers and daughters and cab rides and museums. A poem

about detached in-laws and the unpredictable nature of healing. We have photography; images seemingly casual, yet carefully shot, in Turkey, in Lebanon, in various cities in the US, by Lebanese physician Chadi Zeinati, whose appetite for imagery celebrates palate and place.

The cover photo, of an “arm” of a crab strewn on the beach, was shot in Boston in 2010; an image which I felt mirrored the fragmented and broken reality of the Arab region nowadays. Yet the shore, though concealed from the image, represents that much needed hope for change and renewal.

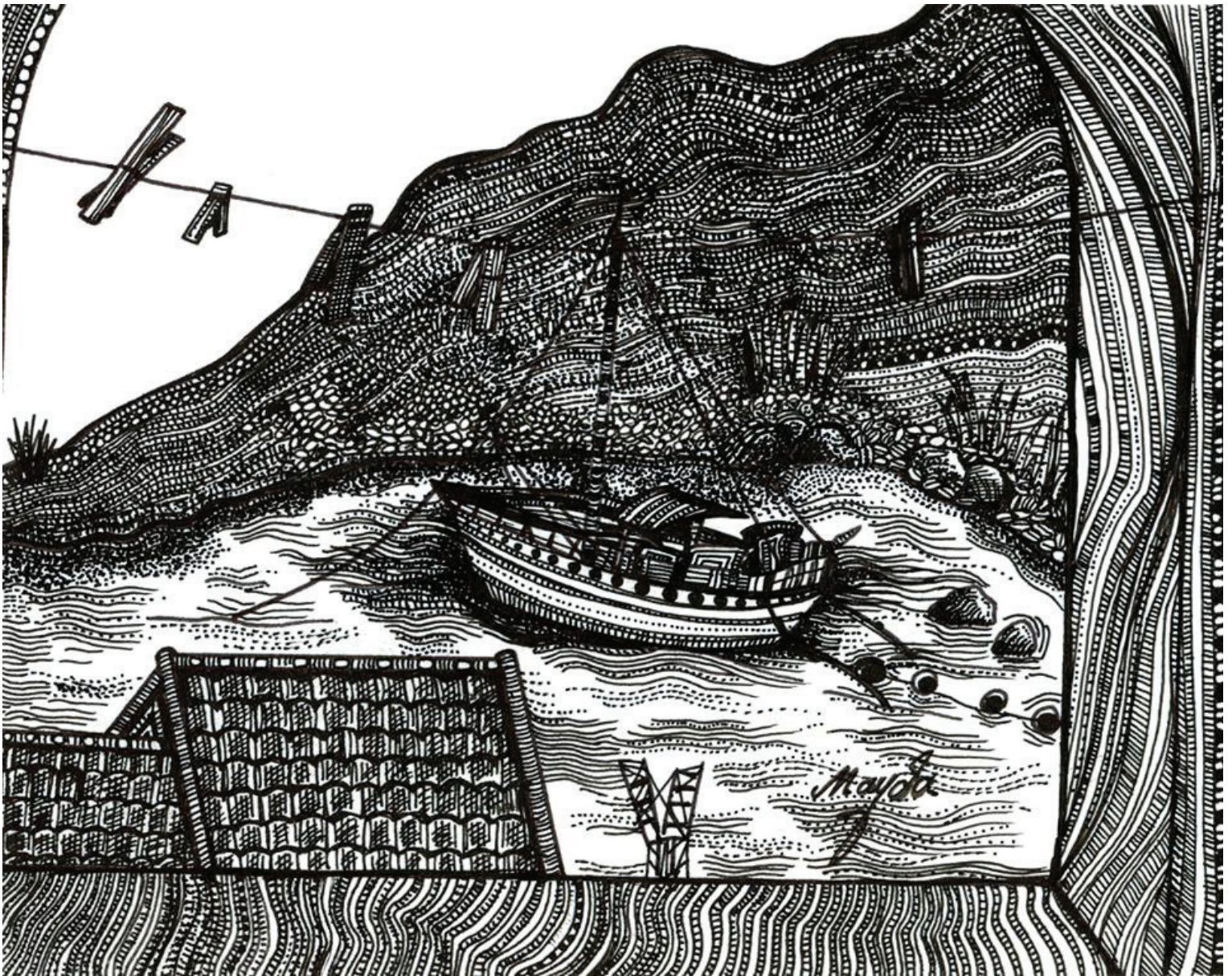
Speaking of palate and place, in the heart-breaking poem “Why So Syria?” writer and performer Jamal Iqbal writes, “In Syria the children still seek spring, / They don’t care if it’s Arab or United Nations / For them spring is just a season when the snow finally melts and the air finally smells and you look for the Baharat Mshakale before it becomes dry again.”

The issue also includes a found poem by Pushcart Prize- nominated Lebanese poet Zeina Hashem Beck, whose own reading of the news on Syria has taken the shape of her poem “What Refugees Miss,” using exact lines from the article she had read. Zeina’s poem reminded me of the sentiment initiated by William Carlos Williams’ “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” *It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die*

miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

Indeed. Indeed they do.

REWA ZEINATI



Balcony View, India Ink - 10 x 8cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

Meditation over Phoenician Letters

Words couldn't remember their birth at the dawn of times in Jbeil, Byblos, the oldest inhabited city in the world, or how they espoused a soft paper made of goat, sheep skins bearing symbols worth their weight in precious gem. Words danced under the skin, carving their way into the soul, escaping the walls of meaning, still retaining their sounds.

I.



Aleph for ox marking furrows in parallel lines, erect like that first letter initiating the article, *al* for *aleph*, the one and only of its kind, encompassing all meanings.

Beth, *bayt* for house as bosom, womb, *al bayt*, where families gather around the homemade meal cooked over a hearth, often bearing a burning dot under the cast iron tray.

Gimel for camel, ships of the desert, *al gamal*, battling dunes as waves head bent, back curved under chests filled with gold and spices, eyelids heavy with the secrets of Timbuktu.

Daleth for door, half open *dal* hospitality leading to *al dar*, a heart with open valves to transfuse friendship, erase boundaries, a steaming stew's scents welcoming you in.

He for a window's delicately laced wood, musharabiyehs filtering the sun, letting the wind in, *al hawa'* from each cardinal point, allowing *al hawa's* ethereal love to hover along the walls.

II.

Waw for hook uniting letters forming words or setting the tone as a vowel, mouth in awe for wow, *al waw*, asking for more, doubled in the depths of *noor*, the light, and *osfoor*, the bird.

Heth for stones erected for lamentations, *al heith*, separation, veiled with graffiti, muralist paintings, a wall to be destroyed, leaving only its pillars for memory.

Yodh for *yad*, a hand for lovers hand in hand, for building, cooking, painting, hand shaken in a peace agreement, asking for a daughter's hand, granting her hand. Would a girl's hand always belong to a man?



Kaph for palm, applause, *al kaph*, life lines filled with expectations, holding a wealth of cherries or raspberries, a measure for caresses, a palm filled with water to quench your thirst.



Lamedh, *lam*, for unattainable desire, frustrated springs, a liquid lambda, flowing stream filled with lost opportunities, forgetfulness, yearning to settle down on the shores of earthly hope.

III.



Mem, the letter *mim*, conjuring water: *al may'* droplets of dew, ripples or waves, ambrosia, gold nuggets buried in deep wells for the desert voyager, Andalusian fountains whose crystalline notes echo *al oud*.



Nun for the letter *nun*, for the tail of *al thu'ban*, curling up into itself, an uroborus, *nun*, marked at times with a dot for its piercing eye, the end and the beginning, a restless eel leaping out in foaming spirals.



Ayn for eye, a lidless eye lined with Kohl, right inside Fatima's palm, a blue amulet conjuring *al ayn*, the evil eye, the Sight that opens the gilded gates of consciousness.



Pe or feh, *al fam* for mouth lined with carmine lips to surround love words, the kiss, the silence, the breath, opening and closing the door to the soul, the spirit of life or death.



Qoph, *al qaph* another sign for palm, or *al qird* for monkey: it once was a gird for three monkeys, *al qouroud*, spinning the wheel of fortune, the one on top flaunts a fleeting crown, but his luck is changing, unless he'd master the wisdom to say nothing, see nothing, hear nothing.

IV.



Resh, for head, *al ra's*, harboring inner thoughts, true feelings under hats or veils, the mirror we wish to present to the world, the leader or dictator, the crowned hero or the beheaded.

W

Shin for tooth, *al sen*, losing one in a dream means the passing of a loved one, losing them all at once is the end of love. A tooth can be a sign of strength, a serpent's fang, or a way of identifying a skull.

X

Teth spins the thread of life around *al takht* for bed, and *al tamar* the palm tree, the fabric lovers' sheds are made of, its dancing fronds inspire tales that conjure the simoon, measure the inclination of the wind, drift into the unknown under sand storms.

Ǝ

Samekh for fish, silvery scales glittering in circles, *al samak*, intangible, mercurial, like words whispered in the dark, slippery oaths and good omens in dreams, harbingers of cornucopia when they rise from the bottom of your Turkish coffee dregs.

ז

Zaiyn for a sword shaped as a sickle, a scimitar, *al zayn*, perfection, as the number seven and the mandala circle, infusing inner beauty and grace for *al zahra*, a white blossom delicate as jasmine, or *al zohoor*, an orange tree bursting with blooms.

HEDY HABRA



Lebanon, 2007
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI



What Refugees Miss

(Found poem for Syria)

In Syria, nothing is boring
everything has meaning and memory—
the flowers on my balcony,
the birds I used to raise on the roof,
falafel, my art studio
the grave of my mom and my dad and praying
for them and asking for their blessings and forgiveness,
the sign that says 'Welcome to Syria,'
my mother's cooking,
my first husband and my second husband.

I want to draw a heart on my bedroom door,
a flower on my neighbor's door,
and on my friend's door a sun,
turn on the faucet and drink.

ZEINA HASHEM BECK

Diversity

The variety of fauna and flora
into the crucible of a wild bush
resembles Di[verse] veins
of the same body.
Unity's logic finds its synopsis
in the diversity of fauna and flora—
a handful of tools not reserved for
the zoologist and the botanist,
but also musings for poets too.

ALI ZNAIDI

Grass, India Ink/Acrylic- 26.2 x 40cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI



Slippage

I'm forgetting my name, and how it's spelled,
that alphabet blurred by years of usage,
letters tilting like the time-warped script
in my mother's worn-out phonebook,
its cover encased in a layer of heat-warped plastic.
I'm forgetting the person I used to be
before I got lost in the dust-streaked pages
of brittle phone books with dead-end numbers.
I've forgotten how to dial phones that aren't rotary,
that circular whirr and click
humming the cadences of people now dead.
I can retrieve the dead, their faces and stories,
but I've misplaced their voices. I can't recall
the addresses inscribed in my mother's cursive
page by page in the grimy volume
I threw in the trash when she died.
But I remember the spasm of regret that rippled through me
as I opened my hand and released that store of names,
noting how the body bears the current of memory
as if it were a phone line.
I recall my mother's knuckled despair,
that legacy that haunted me with the lure
of forgetting, till I became so successful at amnesia
I could not recall the way back to myself.
I think of all the people who wrote me letters
of condolence after my mother's death,
those tissue-thin pages that whispered
from a distant land. By now,
they won't remember me. If I call,
they'll rifle through their aging memories
as if through a card file, trying to place me,
we'll stay on the line a long time,
breathing heavily into the slippage of silence,
unwilling to say goodbye.

LISA SUHAIR MAJAJ

Primal Touch

My newborn's skin was so satiny to the touch
I worried my hangnails would catch and rip her.
I bent my face to her downy head,
brushing my lips against her skull's soft curve,
bones soft and unmolded, hair damp and wispy,
the odor of birth still emanating from her,
sweet and musty, as if from a new-baked loaf.
But hunger had other agendas. Her wail pierced my body,
sent electric cramps through my still open womb,
milk sparking through my nipple as her toothless gums
clamped down and pulled, flooding us both
with the essence of life. It's the primal touch
we don't remember that shapes us.
The first time my daughter opens herself
to another's caress, will her body recall that torrent
of love, life-force expanding in a milky rush
as I drew her body to my body and gave suck?

LISA SUHAIR MAJAJ



California, 2013
Photo by
CHADI ZEINATI



Carla's Personal Story- India Ink- 28 x 18.6cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

IN THE CAIRO MUSEUM

So many towering things
in that dusty country:
pyramids, columns, obelisks
and three-story Pharaohs,
one granite leg extended
as if to crush us.

A relief, then
these seated scribes
lining the museum's glass shelves –

small enough to fit the palm,
legs akimbo, a kind of love
in the hunched shoulders,
tiny hands poised mid-glyph,
each stylus lost to the ages.

Egyptian by birth,
monumental in his own way,
my father-in-law was silent
as any stone Ramses,
would not speak to me
for half a decade.
Yet, that May afternoon
in those airless halls,

the dynasties fell away
with the sound of his voice.
*Clara, come see –
they mummified their cats.*

Fouad has lived seven years
in his own tomb now.
I smooth fresh scrolls
of papyrus across
my alabaster knees,
head bowed, waiting,
my pen casting a shadow
the length of the Nile.

CLAIRE ZOGHB



Back to Front- India Ink- 13.5 x 10.9cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

OPEN LETTER TO A CAIRO CAB DRIVER

You aimed your dented cab at me.

The small flame of my bare head
must have drawn you,
my pale Western skin wrapped
like a mummy in linen
despite the summer heat.

I still see the rusted grille,
your ancient teeth, laughing.
Your tin *hamsa* swung from the rearview mirror,
but what would protect *me*?

There to view your country's antiquities,
I forgot about you once inside the museum,
taken by Tutankhamun's treasure –
galleries of alabaster, silver and turquoise,
his golden death mask.

Where are you today
now that cabs no longer circle Tahrir Square?

On the rooftop, hurling bottles of fire
onto those risking everything
for better lives?

Or rubbing shoulders with freedom
in the streets, in the white winter light,
whipped by men on stolen camels?

Perhaps you were simply bored
that scorching afternoon eleven years ago.

But know this – I saw you. I saw you.

CLAIRE ZOGHB



Weeping Sun - India Ink- 24 x 24cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI



by DIANNE KORBERG, from the Madonna Comix Project

Madonna Bomb

There are no words to describe the way she hunches
uncomfortably, belly resting on thigh, key turned on and she
cannot turn it off, working the brake with her other foot; it's hard
to see into the distance, sitting like that.

She drives a dichotomous street,
the blood flowing in and out, birth and death, every turn
leading to this one and a line of Hummers, the check point
where she must slow.

They will not like her duct-tape mittens
(as if her hands were very cold) but she cannot roll
down the window with her hands stuck at 10 and 2.

Is it very hot inside her womb as she moves
faster down the street we all travel?
Does she press the foot taped to the gas with
eagerness or with dread?

She has ever eschewed the first person pronoun,
savoring "I" like a phosphorescence that fades before passing her lips.
It's all the same, isn't it, whether she was dead before
or after impact?

Did she cry, "My God, my God!" or merely "Mary!" ?

Turn your hands up to heaven.
Let the eyes of your palms, flaccid now
as the maws of lilies,
look to those clouds.

What passes there casts shadows
that move away from where they're going
and towards you.

CELIA BLAND



Syracuse, NY, 2012
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI

Fear: a sequence

i. huru حر free

Wet blossoms litter the sidewalk. Birds are pecking
at humus for a meal. The wind determined to move.
This city has not broken my heart. It never will.

This morning, I awoke from a dream about walking,
after I'd lost my shoes. There was the bluest ocean,
a window from which I could see but not touch.

Last night you cried on the train, about loss,
about potential for more loss, about how you spent
the day crying and sleeping. Even painful stories
are beautiful—a purple Harlem sunset.

ii. Ijumaa الجمعة Friday

We take the dusty side streets to Giza Necropolis—
during Ramadan, the guard we bribed turned his head
as we rode our horses through—the money, tossed down.
Prayers reverberated along the angled slopes, the stone blocks.
There is only faith and waiting. Perhaps the calls are heard—
dusk at Tahrir Square, calmness six months after, vendor, flags—
Spongebob and The Scream masks, a KFC. We do not revolt
against this—the risen bread and dough dipped in honey
insufficient to feed our hunger. It is liberation we want—
empires taken and re-taken.

iii. tafadhali تفضل please

She cried for hours when she heard—forehead on the shoulder
of a friend. *I do not want to leave—I'm happy. I want to keep learning.*
The following week, three matrons in black *abayah* and *niqab*
floated through the school's gravel driveway—she *must*—
but she can stay until June. We will have the wedding in August.
Do not be afraid, child. He will take care of you. He will love you.
You will be ready.

iv. hatari خطر danger

In 1962, John Wayne starred in a movie filmed in Tanganyika.
A rhino rams against the vehicle. A giraffe fails to escape.
The enemy we hunt for sport, not unlike the police officer
with his black baton, adding invisible bruises to a man's ribs—
a drunk, perhaps, a thief—mwizi. The smell, a nauseating
mix of dirt, sweat, and blood. His face is open—a red flower
in bloom—reprehensible, the only purpose to withstand.

v. mahali محل place

"There are no slums in America like here," he says.
Filipino movies opened his world—"How can this place
on the other side of the world have the same problems?"
Favelas, al sakan, gecekondou, ghetto, villas miseria, shanty—
all the forgotten, the mothers unbroken, unwilling to give
to death—no needles of heroin in their arms, no children
whose lives are now unguarded. On nights when you can hear
music and laughter out of her mouth—revising the melancholy
into song, you can almost believe forgiveness.

vi. asubuhi **صبح** morning

Rage, dear. We understand. We lay our bodies against the cold cement floor. We believe, as you do—the winds punching the trees, the rain pummeling horizontally across our faces, the shores rising to the height of hills. We cannot prevent disaster—only wait. Tomorrow, the sun and sky will return to touch us gently, apologizing with a poem. We'll thank the wet earth between our toes, the bodies you've given back to us, absolved. We will remember that we do not belong to ourselves—

vii. furahi **فرح** happy

Freedom is not the same as escape—I already knew that night—her mouth on mine—you, somewhere in another dream, the quiet of fir trees, her arms, a mountain whose mist still welcomed sunshine. Far—and soon an ocean, a desert between us. Remember that you belong only to your wants—*how else will you build your walls? Is it safe there?*

OLIVIA AYES



In Hiding, India Ink - 18.9 x 23.5cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI



Türk Bükü, Turkey, 2011
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI

Intifada Love Story: 1988

By Susan Muaddi Darraj

When they came, they stayed on the rooftop for seven days. Nobody knew it would be that long, not at first. They came because of the demonstration in Ramallah, said Jamil's father. He'd been the one to see them from the salon window, as they'd trudged up the walkway, their backs loaded with olive green duffel bags, their shoulders embraced by the leather straps of dusty AK47s. Four *shebab* killed in that protest, including one of the boys from Jamil's history lecture class, and twenty arrested, they'd heard. All the villages were on lockdown.

The thumping of boots on the house's flat cement roof could be heard most clearly in the kitchen, despite the insistent humming of the old refrigerator and the loud coughing of the pipes. On the first day they were there, the heavy thuds shook loose bits of plaster from around the light fixture to the floor, like a light coat of snow that Jamil's mother sent him to sweep. Four, Jamil thought. There must be four of them up there. He counted their distinct footsteps and patterns of shuffling – one guy had a light, quick gait, while another plodded like a giant with thick, flat feet – as he lazily swept the powdery plaster into a pile, then pushed the small hill into a dustpan. Since his last sister had gotten married, household chores had come down on his head. The usual bad luck of being the youngest, the last egg to be plucked from the coop.

He put the broom and the dustpan back in the pantry then turned on the sink faucet to rinse his hands. The pipes groaned then backfired sharply, and he smiled to realize that the footsteps above his head froze. He dropped the grin when his parents rushed into the kitchen.

"It's just the pipes," he calmed them. They knew that, of course; the pipes always made that horrible cracking. His father exhaled and sat down at the table.

"Go talk to them," Jamil's mother urged her husband, her hands picking on a hair of scratched wood on the table's surface. With her thumbnail, she pushed the line out at the sides, until it tore a sliver of wood off and chipped a crescent out of her polished, pink nail.

"And say what?" Her husband seemed annoyed, like someone who thought himself clever but was easily beaten at a game of cards or *tawla*.

"I'll go," Jamil offered.

"No! God forbid," his father replied, standing reluctantly, petulant at being pushed to the task. "This is my house."

Up he went, trudging up the cement steps off the balcony to the flat roof, calling, "*Salaam, salaam! Shalom, shalom!*" as he neared the top. Jamil and his mother sat down at the table to wait, interpreting the noises – the stomps, the scrapes – above their heads. No shots fired, no yelling. That was good, at least.

When his father returned, Jamil could see the anger in his face, and the sweat that made his hairline slick. He sat down and croaked, "Water," to his wife.

After he gulped down the small glass she filled for him, he told them, "Four or five days. They said it shouldn't be longer."

"Why our house?"

"It's the biggest on this side of the hill. They can see everything from up there."

Only later did he mention the rest of it. He admitted it nervously, like a confession wrenched from his guilty conscience by a priest. "They want us to stay inside."

"We have to?" asked his wife sharply.

"And if we leave?" Jamil muttered. "What? Will they shoot us?"

His father slammed his hand down on the rickety table, catapulting the glass to the floor, where it shattered like a spray of ice pellets. His mother rolled her eyes at Jamil – that was the first glass from a new set, sent by her sister in Michigan, to break. "They shot *four* boys in Ramallah!" his father shouted.

After his father trudged out of the room, Jamil started to sweep up the glass shards from the floor, but his mother took the broom from him. "My turn," she said. "And keep your mouth sealed. Let this glass be the only casualty this week."

They played backgammon for the first night, sitting on the grape-colored, velvet-upholstered sofas in the formal salon, where they never sat casually. Tonight, though, his mother seemed not to care when Jamil's father took out the J&B bottle, set a glass on the coffee table, settled on the largest sofa and opened the game board. Poor game board, Jamil thought, almost hysterically. Before tonight, its function had been to serve as a decoration in the room, its inlaid dark wood, in a geometric pattern, accenting the stuffy furniture. It had been set casually, like a movie prop, on the side table, to make it look like they played every day, to add to the aura of their perfect family: Father, a retired schoolteacher; Mother, a beauty in her day; and Son, a top student and soccer player – Tel al-Hilou's model unit.

The phone buzzed steadily that first night. Their friends and neighbors, the Ghanems, called first. "I can see them from my bedroom window," Mr. Ghanem reported. "Little kids with guns. These Israelis – what? Are they sending children to monitor us?" The old woman, Miss Salma, on the other side, could see them from her bathroom window: "Six rifles, but only four soldiers. They have a little stove, and they're taking water from your roof tank with a metal pitcher." She asked if she could bring them any food, but Jamil's mother said no. It was better to wait and not cause problems. "They're probably nervous, and a nervous boy with a gun is no good thing."

"They don't look nervous to me," Miss Salma replied before she hung up. "But let me know if you need anything. I'm not afraid."

For most of the morning of the second day, Jamil's father fretted that Miss Salma was implying that he was. "I carried her brother's body on my back when we buried him," he said angrily to nobody in particular. "She had better not be calling me a coward." Jamil's father lived his life worried about gossip, and as much as he claimed to despise old women with free time, he also feared their storytelling.

His wife soothed him, saying she'd only meant that they wouldn't bother an old woman. He reminded her of the girls who had been arrested in the demonstration three months ago, and the one who'd been released – pregnant – to her parents. "It's like the French in Algeria," he muttered. In his bedroom, Jamil listened, and while his annoyance with his father was blossoming, he was nevertheless sinking in the quicksand of his own worries. Being trapped in the house was upsetting his parents, who had to survive each other as well as the soldiers, but it threatened to suffocate a seventeen-year-old man.

The bedroom, large and square and white, had only become his when his last sister had gotten married. Years ago, he'd shared it with her and two other sisters: four children, crowded in one room, sharing the bathroom with their parents. When the house had been built eighty years ago, his father once told him, it didn't even have a bathroom. The third bedroom had become the bathroom when Jamil's parents had married. His mother – whose family had been the first to hold a wedding in the new hotel in Ramallah instead of in the church hall, like everyone else – had insisted. That

left them with only two bedrooms, because she needed to keep a salon as well, to receive visitors properly.

Now it suddenly felt like the room, the whole house, didn't belong to him anymore, like the soldiers on the rooftop could come in and take this too. As he lay on his bed, listening to his parents' nervous chatter in the salon and the faint scrapes on the roof above his head, Jamil imagined that the soldiers would never leave. What if they stayed up there, nested, made the rooftop and the house their base, and Jamil stayed locked in this house forever? He'd never finish high school, never get married, never have children.

His thoughts spiraled like a hawk, seeking prey, until they centered and swooped down, as they inevitably did, on Muna, the Ghanems' daughter. She would be home from school in a few hours and he could see into her living room from his bedroom window. He hoped she would signal him, even call, perhaps, pretend she wanted to give him the homework assignments he'd missed the day before, just so he could hear her voice. And if he could glimpse her sheet of black hair, her eyes from the window, it would end this terrible day happily.

In the other room, his parents had started up another game of backgammon. Jamil napped, not knowing what else to do until dinner, but his thoughts were filled with Muna: Muna next to him in algebra class, Muna secretly holding his hand under their white robes during their confirmation ceremony, Muna being attacked in a jail cell by a soldier wearing thick black boots, Muna collapsing in his arms after he'd broken in, kung-fu style, to rescue her. He awoke in a sweat, noticing that it was four o'clock, hurried to the window. But all the drapes in the Ghanem's house were drawn. Of course they were. Jamil didn't blame her father. They had three daughters too, just like his parents, but he felt like a castaway nonetheless. There would be no communication today.

Dinner that night was meatless, since his mother hadn't been able to go to the butcher. Lentils and rice, a tomato-less salad since they couldn't even go out to their own garden. "The last of my cucumbers," his mother murmured like a mourner as they ate. "I suppose we can't even go to the shed to get some pickled jars from our shelves?" His father didn't reply, and she didn't raise the subject again. They ate as usual, in the formal style she always insisted upon – quiet, cloth napkin in the lap, salad first. She baked a tray of *haresia*, since all she needed was the sugar and the tahine and the wheat, and they ate it as their dessert.

In the middle of the night, in his bedroom, he heard laughter above his head, two loud stomps, and a man's explosive guffaw. He tried to fall back asleep, imagining his head so heavy that it sank into the thick pillow, but there was a pull, a tension in his neck that wouldn't relax. He gave up, instead switching on his lamp and pulling Muna's letters from his bedside drawer, where he kept them hidden under his old comic books. Every note she'd ever scribbled to him as they stood in line, had her younger sister discreetly palm to him – hastily written notes on napkins, plain notebook paper, on the pale blue sheets she'd used for half a year in tenth grade, all there in a bundle, organized from first to last from sixth grade, when their eyes first connected during Sunday mass, to two weeks ago, when she'd passed him a textbook in the library with a note tucked behind the table of contents. "All my love – mim." Always signed with her initial, a simple circle – م – but the tail curlicued with a flourish, so secretly and lovingly. Whenever he saw a *mim*, in anything – a store sign, in the newspaper, in Mubarak's and Shamir's names, even – her face appeared, making the ugliness of it all more palatable. But her last letters were so insistent, and he hadn't answered them. Girls, he'd thought. Always needing confirmation, something official, some way to prove how he felt. Why? Why couldn't she accept the bare facts – she liked him, he liked her. Official things were in the distant future. He drifted off to sleep, wondering why Palestinians girls needed every little emotion clarified, every feeling uprooted.

He woke up in the morning, on the third day, startled, the letters under his chin, to the sound of yelling from the roof. An Israeli accent, speaking Arabic – "Shai. Bring shai. Four cups. Now." The voice was so close, and then he realized it was in the house.

His mother scuttled by in the hallway, glancing in anxiously as she passed. He shoved the letters back in the drawer and hurried out, pulling his robe over his shoulders and licking the sleep off his teeth. His mother had put her small teapot on the stove and was digging in her canister for peppermint. His father walked in off the balcony, cursing.

"Sons of dogs, may their mothers burn at their fathers' funerals – coming into my house! May the blackest plague swirl around them and kill them!" he fumed, his chest heaving even as he pulled four teacups from the pantry. "I should put some rat droppings in their *shai*, those bastards. Too bad you are too perfect of a home keeper," he muttered, consoling his wife, and even Jamal could see his father had now exploded sufficiently, released his anger, and could focus on calming his wife's anxieties. That's how it was in their home: the privilege of emotional outbursts always were awarded to his father before the others could share it.

"The roof is one thing, but to come into the house!" his mother said shakily, steeping the tea leaves in the pot, pushing them down with a fork she pulled from the sink. It seemed to Jamal, standing in the doorway, leaning on the wall, that the water boiled languidly, slowly, and their nerves bounced like the leaves in the simmering pot. "They just walked in like they own it!"

"Sons of dogs," his father muttered again, pulling a tray from the rack. "Are we servants now, as well as prisoners?"

It was left to Jamal to carry the tray up to the roof. His mother had started to do it, only to be yelled at by her husband. "My wife is not a waitress for the Israeli army!", but she wouldn't let him ascend either, because his temper would get them all killed. "Send Jamal," she finally said. And so up the cement steps he went.

He reached up above his head and knocked on the roof door, calling "*Shalom!*" as his father had instructed, listened for the mispronounced "*Idfa!*" and walked through, pushing upwards, finally planting his feet on the cement roof and raising his eyes, to see a rifle pointed at his heart.

"You brought four cups?" asked a voice to the side, not owned by the curly-haired, rough-shaven teenager holding the rifle. The tray trembled in his hand and Jamal had the sense to steady it with the other.

"Yes," he answered the Voice, his eyes focusing for some reason on the fingernails of the soldier – lines of black tucked deep in the nail bed, the knuckles below caked and peeling as the fingertips playfully drummed the trigger.

"Put it down," instructed the Voice calmly. "Right at your feet."

He did, and looked to the right. The Voice's owner was younger than he thought, perhaps Jamal's own age, his face and neck browned by the sun. Eyebrows like even rectangles, separated by a slit of brown skin. A chipped front tooth.

"Get the fuck out of here. And tell your mother to make us sandwiches for lunch."

Jamil left, the gun still pointed at him, although he understood now that the initial splash of fear had dried off his body – they would laugh to themselves later, over and over, about his expression, imitate his reactions to pass the time.

His father roared, and his mother groaned, even as she began to pull the bread from the cabinet. When Jamal took it up to them, there was no gun now, only four pairs of eyes, four foreheads greasy and sweaty from the hot sun, four pairs of parched lips. They made Jamal break the corner off one sandwich and eat it, then the Voice took the small tray from him and they began devouring, not caring whether he'd descended or not, as they sat around the water tank.

Jamil stood awkwardly, feeling oddly like an intruder on their meal, despite the fact that they were gnawing on their hummus and pickle sandwiches while perching on his father's – his grandfather's – rooftop. He looked over the ledge, down into the courtyard, where the gate of the old chicken coop, long unused, swung lazily, unattached to the wall. Further up, he saw the metal doors of the old well, which they hardly used anymore.

The Voice licked his fingertips and picked up the fallen crumbs like a magnet attracting metal shavings, while the Gun paused, thumped his chest with a closed fist and burped. Jamil saw their guns leaning casually against the water tank, the large cylinder he'd helped his father install a few years ago. It caught the rainwater and stored it, a reserve right there on the roof, a modern development his father loved and was proud of, no longer depending on his well as many of their neighbors continued to do.

Across the street, in the window, a movement – small, quick – attracted his attention. A curtain pulled back at the Ghanem's house, then dropped hastily. He waited, wondering if Muna had seen him, but the curtain stayed in its place. He looked back at the four soldiers only to find the Voice staring at him.

The Voice handed him the tray, cracking, "You have pretty neighbors," in his rough Arabic. Jamil grabbed it as the others chuckled. He hurried down the steps, spent the rest of the day quietly reading and re-reading the three-day old newspaper, filled with turmoil that was meaningless in light of this moment. Riots in Jenin. A suicide in Lebanon, a girl jumped off her balcony. King Hussein is feeling better, the Queen says in an interview with the New York paper.

That night he dreamed of himself in black ninja pants, his hands slicing through the air, breaking noses and cracking collarbones, defending his love. He woke up, sweating hard, his hands searching for the comfort of the bundle of Muna's letters.

On the fourth day, Jamil worried that he might scream at his mother, who was obsessively fretting over her inability to hang the laundry on the lines. Or at his father for his bluster, promising between TV viewing and snacking to slaughter the army with his bare hands. Jamil opted to be even more alone than he was: he spent most of the morning watching a crackly videotape of a king-fu movie. It was in Chinese, as far as he knew, dubbed into Russian, or Polish, or something, but he didn't care. He could still follow the slow, angry glares, the face-offs, the jumps, kicks, and flip – the anger and its release. He knew every move by heart, had his favorite moments of the carefully choreographed fight scenes. But even that grew wearying, so he went into his room and spent the afternoon looking through his books. What were his classmates doing now? He lay on the floor in front of the low bookshelf. His sisters' old textbooks filled half of it, and all the family's other books – some inherited, some borrowed, the old Bible, some funeral memorial booklets of old people he didn't know, a couple of photograph albums – sat dutifully, side by side, like victims condemned and waiting at the gallows. He pulled a battered, creased literature textbook, his eldest sister's name scribbled in the front cover. *Literature of the Globe*. He opened it to the contents: "The Ancient World," "The European Middle Ages," "The Islamic Golden Era." He turned to this section: he read Moses Maimonidis, scanning the biography: a Jew. Nobody had ever told him that. Back to the contents: "India and the Subcontinent." Tagore: he flipped to this section, and read "The Punishment," about a wronged girl who stubbornly accepts her unjust sentence without a fight. Picked up the old newspaper again: some stories he missed... food riot in Thailand. George Bush elects his new cabinet. The girl in Lebanon again. Enough victimization. He felt confused, his world was not right. He skipped dinner and went to bed early.

On the fourth day, they ran out of bread. Jamil told the Voice, whose beard and mustache were thickening, that they were out of almost everything else too: milk, butter, eggs, vegetables.

"Tell one of your pretty neighbors to bring it," he replied gruffly. "And we need more tea."

"How long will you be staying?" Jamil asked boldly, but his only reply was a glare. Irritated by the casual reference to the Ghanems, Jamil repeated the question, regretting it instantly, feeling in that second that he had betrayed his father, his mother, his priest, Muna, including his own intelligence. The Voice rushed to his gun, reaching the tank in three strides,

spun and pointed it at Jamil in one fluid motion, while one of his comrades watched casually. While the gun centered on him, Jamil still saw irrationally another soldier to the left, behind the Voice picking his teeth with his fingernail.

“What did you ask me, you filthy dog?”

Jamil felt surprised by how smoothly the Voice cursed in Arabic. How did he learn it? This question circulated persistently in his head as he stared, for the second time in his seventeen years, at a gun aimed at his heart.

“What did you ask me?” the Voice was shouting now, and when Jamil still did not reply – did he learn it in the prisons? – the Voice lifted the gun skyward, perpendicular to the flat roof, and with a casual contraction of his index finger, punctured the cloudless blue sky with a single bullet. He just deflowered the sky, Jamil thought, and wanted to burst out laughing at his own insanity.

A small silence, and then Jamil sensed several things at once – a curtain pulled back, two sets of panicked footsteps below, his own heart pausing in its beats, a desert in his throat.

He moved to the steps to block his parents, to show them he was fine. His mother dragged him down by the hems of his pant legs, then by the shirtsleeves, to the kitchen, ran back and locked the balcony door, and, despite his protests, searched every inch of his face, arms, and chest. “Are you sure? Are you hurt?” she muttered over and over, not listening for his responses and reassurances.

The phone rang and his father, his face gray, his tongue quieted for once, answered softly. “We are fine, thank God,” he said robotically into the phone and hung up, but it rang again almost immediately. Six more phone calls followed.

That evening, Jamil sat on the couch, reading the newspaper yet again. The story of the girl in Lebanon startled him out of his reverie, as if he hadn’t already scanned it ten times. Suspected rape, an uncle, fourteen floors, cement courtyard. The church wouldn’t bury her because it was a suicide. Sadness flooded over his body again, and he stood abruptly, asked his father to play tawla out of sheer desperation to fill his mind.

After playing several rounds to soothe his father and himself and after eating every seed, nut and pastry his mother placed before him, after they’d all gone to bed, to empty his own heart, Jamil wrote a long letter to Muna.

The next morning, the fifth day, shortly after dawn, old Miss Salma hobbled over to their front door. Jamil’s mother opened the door quickly and let her in. She carried two plastic sacks of her homemade bread, a jug of milk, and a block of cheese wrapped in cloth.

“God bless your hands, Miss Salma, and may God bless our lives with your presence for many more years,” Jamil’s mother said, accepting the sacks without the usual feigned reluctance and disappearing into her kitchen.

“Come here, Jamil,” Miss Salma said, sitting down heavily on the velvet sofa, her thick ankles ballooning out under the hem of her blue dress. Her diabetes was worsening, he could tell. Her legs were like heavy slabs of meat, pushed into her shoes so tightly that the front bulged out against the leather tongue. Her mottled blue calves and shins looked like a world map. “Are you alright, young man?”

“I’m fine. They didn’t touch me,” he replied, putting a small side table next to her as his mother called from the kitchen that she was boiling tea. He walked to the kitchen and took from his mother a small dish of watermelon seeds and a glass of ice water.

“Those bastards stared at me as soon as I came out of my front door,” she said, cracking the seeds expertly between her teeth and spitting out the shells into her palm. Jamil grabbed an ashtray and put it before her politely. “They leaned over the roof and watched me all the way until I got here and knocked on your door.”

“Sons of dogs,” Jamil’s father grumbled from where he sat on the other sofa, his arms folded across his chest. “That other boy in Ramallah died yesterday. They couldn’t find a kidney.”

"They had one, but they couldn't get it in. And a new checkpoint around Ramallah, did you hear?" Miss Salma asked.

Jamil's father shrugged. "All I hear, my dear lady, is this news from you and sometimes whatever I can get on the radio. Our newspaper is a week old. The only thing playing on TV are soap operas. We could have a full-out war, but Abu Ammar would find it only suitable to play Egyptian soap operas for us!"

"Sugar in your tea?" asked Jamil's mother, and Jamil wondered, ludicrous as it were, whether his polished mother would always fret over etiquette and appearances even in the midst of an apocalypse. While the world burned around them, she might spend precious minutes wiping down the silverware or folding napkins. Yet, while it irritated him, this image also soothed him; there would always be order, as long as his mother was around. Women, he felt, brought stability, like Miss Salma who'd arrived and solved their problems with her bags of bread and cheese, like Madame Amira, the former nun who lived on the other end of the village, who threw herself on top of boys so the army didn't drag them away.

"Two spoons," Miss Salma said. "You know, they're closing the schools, no?"

"What?" Jamil asked, panicked into joining the adults' conversation.

"Oh yes, all the schools in Ramallah will shut down, starting tomorrow. Seven o'clock curfew."

"But not here in our village," Jamil clarified.

"Well, be prepared," she said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Yesterday the principal of the middle school called and asked if they could use my cellar as a classroom if they need to. All the villages are making back-up plans."

During the rest of her visit, Jamil barely spoke, feeling fretful and anxious. As she prepared herself to leave, he suddenly decided on a course of action. He rushed to his room, grabbed the letter, and then returned, insisting on helping the widow at the door. Sure his parents were not listening, he pushed the letter into her bag, asking her quietly to give this to Muna, Mr. Ghanem's oldest daughter. Not Huda or Lena, but *Muna*.

"Miss Salma..." he stammered.

She smiled and whispered, "Trust me, young man. Nobody keeps secrets better than me." And with a wink she was gone.

Jamil sat at his bedroom window that evening, having just delivered bread and cheese to the roof. His parents watched the new Egyptian soap opera on the television, but he knew they weren't paying attention. His mother was knitting a sweater for him that he didn't need and his father leafed through one of Jamil's calculus textbooks, for lack of anything better. "If they need schoolteachers," he'd told Miss Salma, "I'll come out of retirement. They will need math teachers."

He thought back to Muna's last letter, which he'd memorized by heart – it seemed like she'd written it and slipped it into his satchel years ago and not just two weeks – and her insistence that something be made clear between them. She wanted an answer. Why had he interpreted it so badly? She was right – there was no time to be lost anymore.

It was nine o'clock, and he peered out the window. Across the alley, the curtain moved aside, although the room inside remained dark, as he'd instructed in his letter. A pause, then the curtain fell twice, and was still.

Yes.

"God bless you, Miss Salma!" he said to himself.

The soldiers left on Saturday night, the seventh day, while they were sleeping, slipping away in the dark, leaving crumpled napkins and dirty tea cups next to the water tank. Sunday morning, they woke up and realized they could

attend Mass. He would see Muna, make plans. They could do a long engagement, marry when they'd finished college, lock it in now, rather than search for a bride later. Or maybe they'd just marry this summer, and attend classes together. Why waste time? There was no time anymore, and nothing was certain.

Jamil hurried into the bathroom to shave, scrubbing his face with a soapy rag. The water pipes creaked as the water flowed, and Jamil looked more closely at the water as it pooled in the white basin. A horrible thought came into his head at the same time that he heard his father cursing from the kitchen and footsteps stomping up to the roof.

His mother rushed into the bathroom, shrieking, "Don't use the water, Jamil! I think they -"

"I know. I thought as much." Jamil swabbed his face with rubbing alcohol, ignoring the sting and his watering eyes, then climbed up to the roof and stood over the water tank, staring down into it with his father. An empty bucket, which Jamil had never noticed before on the roof, lay on its side next to the tank. "They were using it," his father kicked the bucket, "as their bathroom, and then dumped it into our tank before they left."

Jamil stared down at the waste floating in their modern water tank, and suppressed the nausea creeping acidly up into his chest.

"Goddamn animals," he screamed. There, the anger did it. The anger quenched the nausea. His father was right to always vent.

He knew what to do. This week had made him into a man, with a man's problems and solutions. He walked down to the cellar and fetched a metal tin and a long rope, then strode down the courtyard steps to the well. He hadn't visited it in a long time, but he knew his father always opened it before a big rain. He pulled back the old, metal door, and he let the rope slide down its stone-blocked sides, the tin clanging, echoing, as it clunked down. The well was deep, deep, deep in the earth, and not as vulnerable as an open tank on the roof. The well was old, but could not be contaminated.

As he carried the bucket of icy, clear water to the house, he calculated how much it would cost to empty the roof tank, to sanitize it, and then how long it would take for the rains to refill it. He'd look for a job soon, start earning some money. Before he stepped through the doorway of the house, he glanced over at the Ghanem's window. He would see her today, no matter what, in church, would see, maybe touch, the black ribbon of her hair.





Boston, 2010
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI

Language, Music, Prayer

INTERVIEW WITH POET SAM HAMOD

BY REWA ZEINATI

RZ: A prolific poet, a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, a critical political writer, a healer, an editor, a professor, a blues musician and singer, a spiritual, multifaceted and interfaith religious Muslim leader who ran The Islamic Center in Washington, DC; founder of the internationally acclaimed, Third World News in Washington DC, Ph.D. from the famed Iowa Writers Workshop where you taught and studied—your teaching career also spanning over Princeton, Michigan, Wisconsin, Howard and more—and since the 1960s you've published ten books and have appeared in over 200 anthologies of literature worldwide. You are the founder of Contemporary World Poetry Journal- publishing distinct and diverse international voices in poetry. What drives you on?

SH: Rainer Maria Rilke, the great German poet said, "You do not choose poetry, it chooses you." In my case, I feel that he was correct, that and in the plans of Allah, I became a poet and continue to write; not all by my choosing. If you had asked me when I was young, or even in my early 20s if I'd like to be a poet, I would have said you were crazy.

I am driven by the desire to do the things I want to do, and to add positive things and matter to society. I also feel very blessed. As for my journals, I founded them, Third World News (a weekly and bi weekly newspaper in Washington, DC, which I founded in late 1980-81, I started that newspaper because I felt there were no media voices for the Arabs or Islam, but then I also found out that other third world people needed a voice, so I included those from South America, Asia, Africa and elsewhere); my websites, www.todaysalternativenews.com was a child of Third World News online, but I also used it to speak against the West's wars against Islam and the Third World, especially the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I started the two literary sites, Contemporaryworldliterature and Contemporaryworldpoetry so that we could publish good quality writers in their own script from around the world. I want to be a "world poet," and want to publish world-class writers, not just ethnic or weak writers who "lean" on their culture but do not write good poems within or about it.

Incidentally, I have a strong background in rhetorical theory and practice, and even published a paper many years ago, on Arab and Islamic Rhetorical Theory and Practice, A Brief Overview, in 1963.

RZ: Your poetry is rich in language, music, prayer, sound, smells, and scenes, from your country of origin, Lebanon, as well as the Middle East. How difficult/easy was the transition from Lebanon to the US, where you adopted a new culture, new music, new sounds, smells, scenes?

SH: Actually, I was born in Gary, Indiana, but in the house we were in Lebanon, but outside our door, we were in America; thus, in my life, I always lived in at least 2 worlds. I never saw them as a conflict, but as an asset, they complemented one another as far as my vision and understanding was concerned.

I grew up with poor parents, my father and mother ran a boarding house hotel; we lived there and shared it with 40 men from around the world. The men had come to work in the steel mills and railroads around Gary and Chicago. So, I got to hear all these foreign Slavic, Spanish, Polish, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, Indian, and other languages as a child, until I was 5 years old. Then my father opened a business in an African-American area, where I heard the blues, and learned different American dialects until I was a teenager when he left that business.

I've loved all the Arab sounds, smells, foods, music, culture since I was a kid; we used to go to a small mosque in Michigan City, Indiana many Sundays where we'd learn Arabic and hear discussions about the Qur'an and Islam. My grandfather, Hajj Abbass Habhab, was the first émigré to America who went on the Hajj from America. Thus, I had a strong Islamic, Arab background. Later, in the 1960s, my father, Hajj Hussein Hamode Subh, aka Sam Hamod, built a mosque, Mosque El Amin in Gary, Indiana; it became the founding home for the MSA Muslim Students Association, and that later morphed into ISNA. In the 1980s, I became the Director of The Islamic Center in Washington, DC, when it was the focal point of Islam in North America.

I enjoyed it all, all aspects, the good and the bad, but I always trusted in Allah no matter what happened. I learned this from my mother, Zinab Habhab Hamod, though she was no Hajj, she was always a Hajj in her heart and had the strongest belief and appreciation of the gifts of Allah of anyone I've ever met, and I've met hundreds of thousands of Muslims and others, but her example and wisdom sustained me through the best and worst of times.

RZ: How has being uprooted from a home country shaped your craft?

SH: My poems come from my heart and experiences; I might see a line or a word, then suddenly a poem starts to come through me. All my life, I've always lived in the USA and in Leb'an, though I wasn't there in person all the time, I've always kept my heart there; thus, there has been no split in me, just double vision, and more. But, I do get upset when I see the fighting between groups in Lebanon; when I was young and went there, everyone was a "cousin" or "brother" to everyone else. Let us hope this fellowship and brotherhood returns, not only in Leb'an but elsewhere in the Muslim and Arab world.

I am very influenced by what I felt were the great poems of Islamic Spain, Lorca, Darwish, Rumi, Neruda and those who write from their hearts of justice, love, passion and the beauty Allah has bestowed on mankind in the world.

RZ: You've said once, *At times, I want to speak only of poems, not of "ethnic poems."* But in truth our ethnicity helps shape the way we see and the way we write—so it is a part of what our poems are made of. But a poem cannot lean on its ethnicity in order to keep from falling—a poem must be a good poem on its own. What makes a good poem? What makes great poetry?

SH: Yes, I still hold with that statement; we should not "lean" on our ethnic background, but use it as a source, so that it informs who we are, and the emotion should come through in the passion of our poem, but we should not think that a poem is good just because it speaks of our ethnic background or concerns.

As to what a good or great poem is:

A good to great poem should give you an insight, but must be ineffable, that is, no matter how much you like to explain the poem, it will be more than your word, because of the way it moves with language, sound, smell, feeling and the way it makes you feel and realize something in a way that is deeper than you have felt or understood something before reading that poem. A poem may be great if it is only 2 or 3 lines long, or 30 pages long, length is not a determining factor;

Great poetry can be seen in the work of Lorca, Darwish, Qabbani, Adonis, Neruda, Hafiz, Rumi, Hikmet, Eluard, Borges, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and such American poets as the late James Wright, Ethridge Knight, Robert Hayden and such poets alive as Amiri Baraka (no longer with us, may he rest in peace) and Sonia Sanchez.

RZ: After attending Law School at The University of Chicago then returning to Gary to open The Broadway Lounge, where you hired blues giants such as B.B.King, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Red Foxx, and others to perform, you must've been saturated in African American culture where jazz and blues took center stage. You play jazz and sing the blues professionally yourself. You were a poet who carried a 38, a 32 and a 25 calibre Browning. When did you decide you needed to shift gears and change paths? And why?

SH: I went into the bar business in order to keep my father from going back into that business. He had killed a man in self-defense, but I was afraid if he went back, someone might try to take revenge on him, even though he had not been at fault. I didn't want to open the bar, but my father insisted, so I left law school to protect him and our family. I enjoyed the people, the musicians, and I enjoyed singing with them, because I'd grown up with blues music and jazz. But after 2 years of that I decided that I should leave and become a professor. We had an offer to sell the bar, but my father didn't want to; he wanted to take it over, so I gave it to him and left, feeling I had done all I could do and felt that if I stayed, after time, someone would either shoot me or I might shoot someone because the economy was getting worse, and I felt myself getting "cold" inside, and I didn't want that to happen. It was good, but like other things in my life, I decided it was time to move on, and I'm happy I did; it was for the best.

RZ: While growing up, who shaped and affected your writing the most?

SH: I think it was listening to the stories the men all told us at the hotel, my immigrants from South America, Mexico, Europe, Asia, friends of my father from the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, etc.), and the Americans, especially those who were “hillbillies,” from Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina and Louisiana, as well as stories from my uncles who served in WWII, and the other immigrants I met while growing up. I think the sense of hearing stories, so that I was driven more from “hearing” and “speaking” the sense of “voice”, rather than reading literature that shaped my way of writing. Interestingly, I started college as a business major, but changed into Speech Communications in my junior year at Northwestern University; thus, I have always been more attuned to the oral tradition than the written tradition. But, if you look at the history of great literature, the best poetry always survived best when it would stand up through hearing it aloud (Whitman, Homer, Shakespeare, Keats, Darwish, Lorca, etc.).

Also, with the voice, you always listen for the emotion; then, as a poet, you want to get that emotion into your poems.

I think that music also influenced the way I write; there has to be a lot of rhythm and music through language in my poems. I say this because English is a flat language and you have to create the music in your work to make it come alive. The poems for Ella and Joe Williams, “Joe Williams at the Blue Note” show best what I’m talking about in terms of music; the poem, “Dying with the Wrong Name” best exemplifies my work within Arab/American/Islamic culture in terms of language, food, etc. as does “After the Funeral of Hamad Assam” (originally published by Perishable Press, *After the Funeral of Assam Hamady*), where the Muslim prayer, *Al Fati’ha’* is in the middle of the poem and necessary to the poem. I deal with the cultural matters in other poems such as “Lines to my Father.” etc.

RZ: You are a descendent of Muslim Lebanese parents, where your faith played a large part in your writing. You were also open to many religious experiences like the Moorish Science Temple and various Muslim sects. How important is it, as an artist, to be open to so many different faiths and cultures and belief systems?

SH: It was always in my nature to learn what I could about everything, whether it was someone else’s culture, religion, food, music, or how to change a washer in a faucet or how to build a house or fix a car. I’ve been taken always by the fact that so many of the world’s great religions, have all pointed to One God, as I’ve found most people are pretty good people; thus, I see the good, and the similarities among people and religions, not the differences.

RZ: What inspires you?

SH: Everything, especially being alive. Each day, each event, different people, different moments, different lines, different poems, stories, songs, sunsets, birds, trees, walking, making love, a beautiful smile, a child’s laughter—just all the things of life inspire me. The poems come from everywhere, but behind it all is Allah. Even doing this interview is inspiring in its own way, but it’s hard to choose poems to send you. You always want to send your very best, but you hope that your next poem will even be better, and at times, the poem that come next is. Great love and great tragedy, and the possibilities of love and beauty are all inspiring all the time.

RZ: Why did you feel it necessary to establish the platform: Contemporary World Poetry Journal?

SH: As I said earlier, I wanted a truly international journal with excellent writing. [We] had a good response from all over the world with the platform and the other one, www.contemporaryworldliterature.com

No one else had done what we did, but I hope they do; the more good poetry and literature in the world, the better. We never compete with anyone else, only with ourselves to do the best we can, and hope that others add to the beauty and literature of the world, so that we all gain. It is my hope that your magazine will prosper and grow, and grow and grow.

RZ: What do you think of Arab writers who can only write in English? Do you think they owe their heritage the ability to express, and the insistence upon expressing, themselves in Arabic as well?

SH: No, I think a writer should write in the language he or she is most comfortable in. I've seen too many who want to write in both languages, but one or the other is stilted. Your first major language that you hear or speak or work with seems to work best. Even among translators I've known, they work best in one of their languages when they write poems or stories not in all. Of course, there are exceptions, but generally I've found this to be true.

And, because I prefer to be a world class poet, of Arab Muslim extraction, I don't want to be limited to be just "an Arab or Muslim poet"; I feel Lorca, Darwish, Neruda exceeded their ethnic backgrounds to be great poets, not just Spanish, Palestinian or Chilean poets; we of a certain background, and we carry that within us and it "informs" who we are, but we are also of the larger world, and must live in the larger world, not be restricted to where we came from; as poets, we must travel poetically as Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo traveled in the world.

RZ: What are you working on now?

SH: It seems I'm trying to finish my memoirs, and have part of them done, and will send you part of it if you wish. The first part is called, "At the Broadway Lounge," but other parts are underway.

But poems keep getting in the way, as does spring, the beauty of each day, just walking in the sun, or swimming or reading or just the daily matter of keeping up with bills, taxes and life. But I don't want to miss any of this.

But my major focus now must be on finishing my memoirs otherwise certain things about Islam in America, Hon. Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Farrakhan will never be known, or certain Islamic organizations that preceded the MSA and ISNA, etc. I have this obligation in my life, and inshallah I shall be able to finish it well.

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

SH: Journals are important if they are good; if they are mediocre, then they are a waste of trees and time, and they add to the distractions of life.

RZ: What advice would you offer emerging writers? (Or musicians for that matter!)

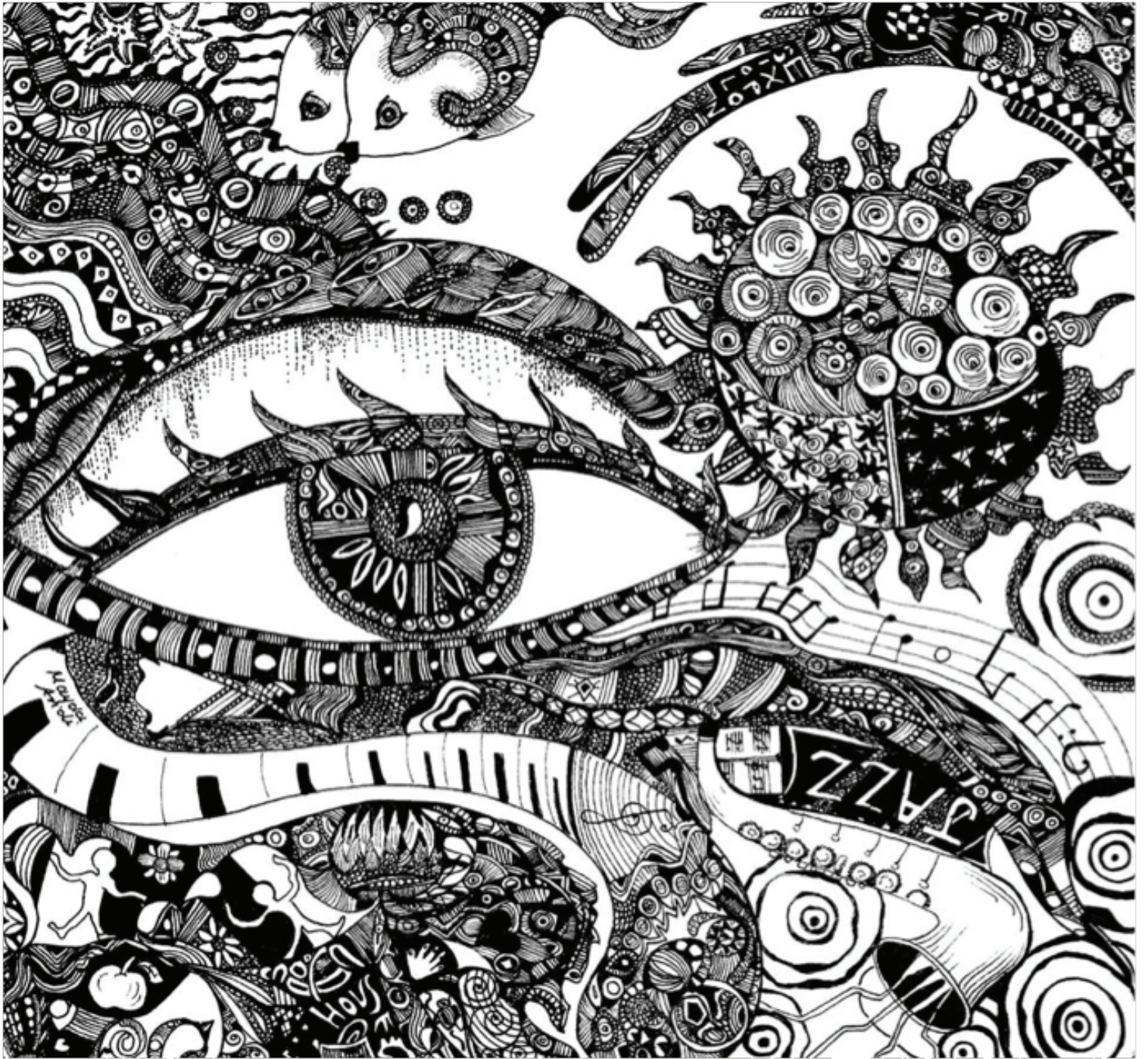
SH: Hope for Allah's help in whatever you do, and always write or sing from your soul. To become a great writer or musician, you have to have something to say.

Thus, I'd say it is better to live a lot, not go from a B.A. to an MFA because you will rarely have had experiences deep or varied enough to become a good or great writer.

If you listen to B.B.King, Muddy Waters, Joe William, or hear or read Lorca, Darwish, Neruda, Baraka, you will know they've lived that life, they are telling you their life, their deep experiences, not some novelty or technique, but something from their soul.

The next best thing to do is to read good writers, great writers, and listen to good and great music, whether it be blues or Um Kulthm, or Fairouz, or listen to a mountain wedding music in Leb'nan or Morocco, or Turkey, an "atabee", or "taksim" or whatever that will grab your heart and soul, then go on and live, and then write.





Me, Myself and Eye, India Ink - 17.8 x 19cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

After the Funeral of Assam Hamady (For my mother, David and Laura)

Cast:

Hajj Abbass Habhab: my grandfather

Sine Hussin: an old friend of my father

Hussein Hamod Subh: my father

Me

6 p.m.

middle of South Dakota

after a funeral in Sioux Falls

my father and grandfather

ministered the Muslim burial

of their old friend, Assam Hamady

me—driving the 1950 Lincoln

ninety miles an hour

“STOP! STOP!

stop this car!”

Why?

“STOP THIS CAR RIGHT NOW!”—Hajj Abbass

grabbing my arm from the back seat

“Hysht lyat? (What’re you yelling about?)”—my Father

“Shu bikkee?” (What’s happening?)—Sine Hussin

I stop

“It’s time to pray” —the Hajj

yanks his Navajo blanket

opening the door

“It’s time to pray, sullee

the sun sets

time for sullee”

my Father and Sine Hussin follow

obedient

I’m sitting behind the wheel

watching, my motor running

car lights scream by

more than I’ve ever seen in South Dakota

the Hajj spreads the blanket

blessing it as a prayer rug

they discuss which direction is East

after a few minutes it’s decided

it must be that way

they face what must surely be South

they face their East, then notice

I’m not with them

“Hamode! get over here, to pray!”

No, I’ll watch

and stand guard

“Guard from what—get over here!”

I get out of the car

but don’t get to the blanket

My father says to the others:

“He’s foolish, he doesn’t know how

to pray.”

they rub their hands

then their faces

run their hands then

down their bodies

as if in ablution

their feet bare

together now

they begin singing

Three old men

Chanting the Qur’an in the middle

of a South Dakota night

Allahu Akbar

Allahu Akbar

Ash haduu n lah illah illilawhh

Ash haduu n lah illah illilawhh

Muhammed rasoul illawh

In high strained voices they chant

Bismee lahee

a rah’manee raheem

More cars flash by

*malik a youm a deen
ahde nuseerota el mustakeem
seyrota la theena*

I'm embarrassed to be with them

*en umta ailiy him
ghyrug mughthubee aliy him*

People stream by, an old woman strains a gawk at them

*willathouu leen—
Bismee lahee*

I'm standing guard now

*a rah'maneel raheem
khul hu wahu lahu uhud*

They're chanting with more vigor now
Against the cars—washing away
In a dry state
Hamady's death
He floats from their mouth
Wrapped in white

*Allahu sumud
lum yuulud wa'alum uulud*

Striped across his chest, with green

*Walum yakun a kuf one uhud
willa thou leen*

His head in white, his grey mustache still

Ameen...

I hear them still singing
As I travel half-way across
America
To another job
Burying my dead
I always liked trips, traveling at high speed
But they have surely passed me
As I am standing here now
Trying so hard to join them
On that old prayer blanket—
As if the pain behind my eyes
Could be absolution

1970

SAM HAMOD

*First published by *Perishable Press* in 1971
and later anthologized in *Settling America*
in 1974



Turk Buku, Turkey, 2011
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI

Fortified Axioms

Iraqi tanks and airplanes bombed my country,
on the 2nd of August,
of the year 1990,
when Saddam Hussain claimed
that he wasn't invading Kuwait,
but reclaiming it.

Today,
It's not tanks or missiles
that rip Kuwait to shreds,
rending its fabric like Hulk Hogan's shirt,
but dogma
and envy.

Wearing their axioms around necks
like gangster bandannas,
they blazon clans with colors
and bifurcated turfs.

Their holy propaganda
turns children into collateral damage
and their women into breeding machines.

For this war spills more
than mere blood on the street.

Venues of creativity or leisure,
appear as favorite features of
demonstrations of faith,
where the effacement of the possibilities
for determining
the verity of these events
precedes the actual act of
religious submission.

These gangsters don't establish
Islamic foundations,
but dismantle,
and boycott
all others.

Our fathers founded a port city
and imported men and women
from various countries,
multiplying our creeds and ideologies
yet remaining steadfast
in their identity,
for as they had been Muslims in the seventeenth century,
so too they remain today.

So why fear freedom of expression
and blame it on a faith
that urged critical engagements
with outdated statements
imposed without negation?

Bil hujjati wa alburham
was what I heard
when I learned about Abraham.
Bil hujjati wa alburham
was the sword
the Prophet wielded
to his deathbed.
Bil hujjati wa alburham
is how I can
identify myself as Muslim
and not by blood pacts and mayhem.

NADA FARIS

Feed the Hungry

In the sixties
America sold us a fable
about a marvelous technology
that produces nutrients
and claimed
to feed
the hungry.

But we weren't told
of the toll
of the dream
that seemed sincere then

when they seared the cost
of production
declaring all cans cheap.
Abundance
became the newest motif.

And we,
like always,
bleated like sheep,
but unlike our heifers
who inadvertently graze
on matter
unfit to feed bacteria,
we consciously agreed,

and called for widespread speed
to feed the hungry,

and ended up feeding
the idle,
the fatigued,
who eat their boredom
from plastic containers
and tip waiters
for adding steam.

They called this revolution
Green.

They should have called it
Invisible
for the privilege
bestowed on agribiz corporations
that rob nature of its resources.

And the globalization
in the eighties,
the nineties,
and the new millennium
helped secure production of food
for firms
well beyond tax brackets
with zip-codes in different continents.

I dread
depicting the consequence
of terminating
the flow of global shipments.

And now,
rumors flitter
about our electricity and water
and the proper
manifesto
to convince us
to sell both
to the highest bidder.

NADA FARIS



Passion, India Ink/Acrylic - 31.5 x 40.5cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

Overheard

I have been lavishly gifted with a pain
as thick and rich as oil paint
By pushing it around the page
I have learned to make Art

YAHIA LABABIDI

Dystopia is -

Utopia is -
dystopia.
Dynasties of displeased and diseased nations,
all eagerly await the arrival of salvation.
Complete nonsense keeps you hydrated.

Liquid lies you gulp.

Dante's fire could not scorch your sins, but it will seal your cuts shut.

Generations of pacified manikins stand tall and proud and our women are
shrouded.
Groundless accusations against me for crimes against humanity and yet I
will stand until I am naught but a mound,
bang.

Dystopia is -
your contemporary heaven, where 72 virgins are raped.

Glitter and gleaming gold.
We chase the dream.
We chase the glow.
The capitalists have left us
nothing Mr. Marx.
Yet we chase, we always chase.

Exchanges

*Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round in
another form. - Rumi*

What unexpected turns our losses take
in winding their way back into our arms:

an absent lover returns as many others,
a nation forsaken in the shape of a new life;

poems might take the place of mothers
and friends gone come back as a wife.

If Love were not always a step ahead
how would it ensure we kept up the chase?

YAHIA LABABIDI

I try not to be politically charged and furious,
and try my hand at something a little more poetic and beautiful,
I feel a sense of pride in this failure, while she goes to sleep
in the sewers.

He will throw a party in your honor tonight at the grand castle of Gatsby.
Or in a brothel filled with the finest prostitutes
Oh pardon me, our gold permits us much more, the finest escorts.
Serbia or Siberia or Yugoslavia or Ukraine.

If you fancy something a little darker we have an array of South
Americans, você fala Português?

We will celebrate in honor of your sleep, in
honor of the sewage.

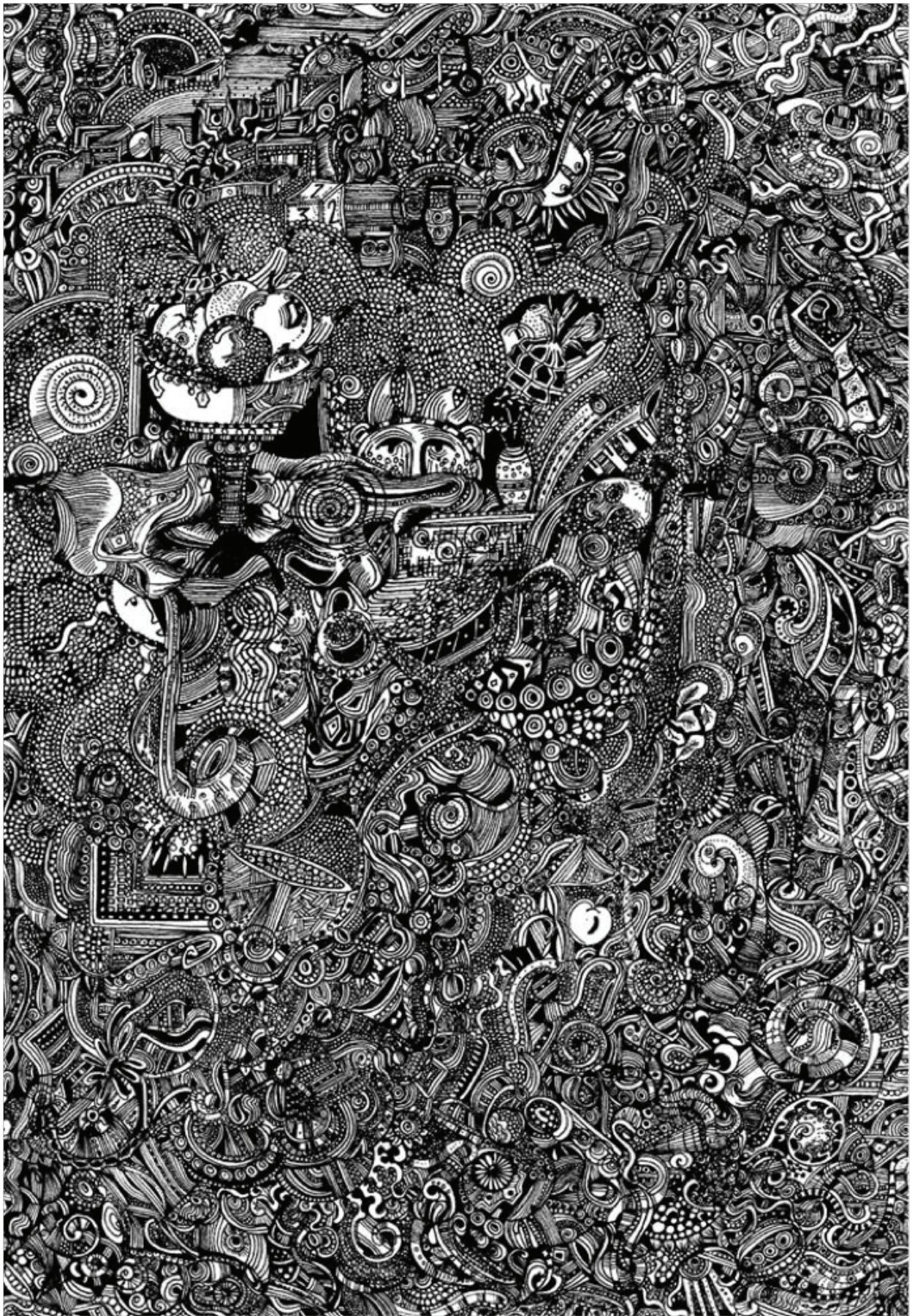
In the palace perhaps, with his harems that feed him grapes,
while she is chained to his seat.
But some like the men, oh the men I tell you.

Don't be a fool to your religion.

I fail with pride and I rant, I rant about injustice.
How I despise that word, in a world so full of beauty.
What an ugly word to see written before you, what an ugly word to speak.
When beauty lies in every battered eye you see.

NADINE SAYEGH





Doodle Mania, India Ink - 22 x 29.2cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

The Awakening By Laura Gillman

Aakifah awoke before dawn, listening for a sign that her mission was imminent. She heard nothing at first. She wrapped her bed cover tightly over her body in a fruitless effort to calm the quivering that began whenever she remembered the malfunctioning of Umar's bomb belt. "It's useless," she thought. "It will stop, gradually, if I just get up."

She quickly reached for her *abaya*, frowning as she pulled the black robe over her jeans and tee shirt. She was still unaccustomed to sleeping fully dressed. Ever since the midnight raids and arrests had started several years earlier, she feared being caught in her nightgown. She pulled her *hijab* back, revealing an expansive forehead that lengthened her smooth oval face and accentuated the fineness of her facial features. As she tucked under the veil some long strands of chestnut hair that had fallen loose with her tossing and turning, she drew a sharp breath.

Through the cardboard thin walls of the two-story house, she could hear her colleagues at work. The house sat at the end of a block of identical dwellings, arranged in such close proximity to one another that they were almost touching. "Would the racket wake up the neighbors," she wondered. There was a shuffling of paper. "Hasan must be studying the maps to determine possible entry and exit routes, but he is folding them and then opening them again." There was a clamor of coins falling. "Habib is clumsy. This morning is different though. Had they fallen accidentally, or had Habib brushed them off the table?" There was a clacking. "Anwar normally grabs a handful of ball bearings from the crate to tape into the vests. Today he must be picking them up and then throwing them back into the crate. Was this a burst of nervous energy—a reaction, perhaps, to a new development?"

She pulled on the running shoes the Al Qaeda trainers in Syria had bought for her, tying them in a double knot. "If today I am going to redeem my brother, I will have to complete his martyrdom operations without a misstep."

Aakifah had been at the safe house for a week, occupied with domestic tasks. In the mornings, she would leap energetically up the two flights of stairs to the roof to hang the wash out to dry, testing the physical strength she had gained. She would carefully cover the wet garments with a sheet of plastic to prevent them from becoming coated with the fine particles of hot sand that blew relentlessly in the summer months. "The exercise routine had been grueling," she thought. "But the sessions that centered on a particular maneuver—how to walk with up to forty pounds of explosives around her torso with a natural posture and gait, how to make a fake fall appear like an accidental one, and how to walk across a plaza without calling attention to herself—had paid off." She recalled the lesson on muscle memory encoding from her high school life science class. Two years had passed, yet she remembered as if it were yesterday. "I'm in the long-term memory consolidation stage. Thanks to the training, I can perform these tasks unconsciously. No brain activity in my motor cortices is required."

Aakifah had by now settled into a routine at the safe house. After meals, hers in the kitchen and theirs in the workroom, she would collect the dishes, washing and drying each one carefully by hand before stacking them on a shelf above the sink. Her deliberate movements were a demonstration of a natural attentiveness to detail. Aakifah thought of mama.

"Aakifah, you are a natural physician, like your mother," she would say smiling, whenever she had a moment to review her homework with her. "You are the devoted one, watching and listening as you carry out your tasks. This will help later. When weighing multiple alternatives, you will know how to shrink the improbable possibilities to negligible levels." Aakifah took it in, not sure what mama meant, but hoping some day she would.

Besides washing and cooking, Aakifah also went to the market, once even by herself. On that occasion, she left early, making her way through the winding, war torn streets of Ramadi's Tameem neighborhood, al Qaeda's last refuge. She purchased fresh tomatoes, garlic and parsley for a stew of poultry and rice. With on and off again electricity, animals had to be slaughtered on the day of purchase. The butcher plunged his knife into the chicken's jugular vein. After plucking the feathers, he pulled out the viscera and threw it onto a mound of entrails rotting in the gutter. The drone of the flies drowned out the hawkers' cries. Aakifah watched as the steamy trail of blood from the bird merged with the blood left from previous slaughtering, flowing underneath the feet of the shoppers that ventured out for food, cigarettes and other household items. A young man was standing on the street outside the market, selling gas out of huge drums from his pickup. A long line of men carrying large plastic gas cans had already formed. In a stall nearby, some men were haggling over a gigantic satellite dish.

Aakifah preferred the sound of bartering and the smells of the market to the martyrdom videos her colleagues had urged her to watch. "I was not recruited," she had reminded them, "I volunteered. I will not change my mind." She still remembered the scowl on Hasan's face when he received his orders. The Commander had personally granted Aakifah her wish to detonate an IED at checkpoint five, the site selected for Umar. Hasan's authority as a recruiter and scout had plummeted. But the day and time still had to be decided. Hasan was unflinching in his decision: Aakifah would wait until he gave her the word.

Aakifah tried to keep calm as she picked up items of clothing that had been left in the hallway and carried them to the washroom. A cell phone rang. The continuous rapping of the ball bearings punctuated the one-sided conversation and the stream of ensuing dialogue between her colleagues that tapered off into whispers. They must have heard her in the hallway.

Aakifah was bewildered by the intimacy her colleagues shared, emerging as it did out of a developed piety. What they lacked in intimate knowledge of each others' lives—their family life, their favorite sports, or where they had grown up—they had more than made up for in their unbounded devotion to a shared dream of the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate—the Caliphate, as Umar called it, of the Umayyads.

She walked down the narrow hall towards the voices that she had learned to identify from afar as she listened, minute after minute, hour after long hour, down the narrow passageway that ran through the middle of the dwelling. The timbre of their dialects produced a cacophony jarring to Aakifah's ears.

She recognized the handler's voice first. It was Habib, the Maghrebi. He also took care of the finances. She had to look closely at this muscular, yet fleshy young man with dark eyes to understand him. There were many words mixed into his phrases that were foreign to her. His voice sounded nasally.

The tall, lanky, boy, Anwar, the engineer, with the long slender, fingers and the big shock of hair on his forehead, was Saudi.

Then there was Hasan. She had always known him; he was a distant cousin. Hadn't he sat next to her at the last celebration of Eid al-Adha at her family's home last January? After the prayers he had come to her to extend the habitual blessing, "Eid Mubarek."

"Do you like Hasan?" Anisa had asked later. Aakifah didn't answer. Later, before falling asleep, she thought about how happy it made her to give and receive these greetings, in spite of the news of yet another disappearance of a son, brother or father. Then her thoughts lingered on the warmth of Hasan's sable eyes.

Aakifah lifted her right hand and gently pushed aside the thin, cloth curtain that gave a semblance of privacy to a large, semi-furnished room, now converted into a workroom. "Peace be unto you. May Allah strengthen all of you

in your work.”

“And peace unto you,” her colleagues responded politely, without looking up.

Steep concrete walls rose above the window frames, devoid of glass. One lit light bulb hung from the ceiling directly over the worktable. All she could hear now was the whirring of a small fan in the corner, dispatching hot air in a clock-wise motion.

“No matter how much I put things in orderly piles,” she thought as she surveyed her surroundings, “the room returns to its inevitable clutter.” Propaganda pamphlets and web-based products, the global jihadist propaganda videos and CD’s containing photographs of symbolic images, were scattered on a couch. On the cover of one CD she could see a photograph of a sun. She had learned in Syria that the image was to deepen her devotion to her regional identity and to the divine. On the floor lay some magazines featuring assault weapons. Various maps lay unfolded against the far wall behind the couch. Plastic encasings, sections of water pipes, nuts, bolts and washers, bent rusted nails and ball bearings, and different colored wires were piled up haphazardly in plastic crates located directly under the table. Some were scattered on the floor. In the far right hand corner was a cache of weapons. A bomb belt was spread out on the table. *Was it the small one, the one she had fitted especially for her in Syria?* Anwar was blocking it, his back to her. She couldn’t be sure.

In the first years of the Occupation, Aakifah had refused to pay attention as Ramadi became transformed into a wasteland. Locked indoors, she would not have to watch as the roofs and walls of the downtown buildings were blown away and the insides gouged out and blackened, converted into a mesh of concrete rebar and hanging wires. She removed herself when the family gathered around the TV to listen to the news of the alarming numbers of monthly casualties. She hung on to the belief that the Occupation was short-lived. Her older brother, Umar, would protect their family.

Aakifah’s confidence did not falter even after the midnight raid last year. The neighbors had warned them. Refusal to open up would only make matters worse. The American soldiers would knock on the metal gates at the entrance, then smash the rod securing them and barge in. “These are friendly visits,” the translators had explained to their neighbors with a smile, “—meet-and-greets.”

The pounding fell on their ears like thunder, jolting them awake. Umar had gone to the door, his eyes full of sleep. Huddled in a back room behind a curtain with mama and Anisa, Aakifah watched the soldiers point their rifles in Umar’s face. The one in command asked the questions while the others searched the house. “What is your name? How many people live here? Do you have any weapons? Have you seen any neighbors do anything suspicious?” He repeated the last question menacingly, “Have you seen any neighbors do anything suspicious?”

Umar’s silence, Aakifah began to sense, was taken as belligerence. But was it?

She heard footsteps up and down the stairs. A head poked through the curtain. A set of glowing eyes stared at her. “Were they angry eyes?” She looked again, now seeing a muscular, uniformed body bearing a rifle. Anisa’s nails were digging into her wrists. Her mind went blank, then hovered on a thought: If she blinked, would the soldier shoot her?

Suddenly, they were gone.

The women sat motionless for what seemed like a lifetime. Then, Aakifah roused herself up, along with Anisa and mama. Numb with fright, they got out rags and water and began washing away the soldiers’ muddy footprints. When Aakifah reached the front hall, she spotted Umar seated in a chair next to the door. His fists were doubled up. He would not look at her.

"Had he ever looked her in the eyes again?" Aakifah asked herself as she now looked at Anwar, trying to get his attention. "Anisa is right and wrong," she thought. "I am no longer the same as when Umar was alive. But it's not because I am depressed. No. It's because now I am once again listening and watching."

She quickly reviewed the weaponry in front of her: AK-47s, RPGs, sniper rifles, and IEDs were carefully stacked against the back wall. There were even two triple IED's. Several bomb vests were hanging from a cable that stretched across the room. "Our colleagues in Ramadi have refined their skills in the mechanics, size, and placement of the explosives," the commander in Syria had said to her, his voice tinged with surprise and admiration. Aakifah had nodded, as if this was not news to her.

Habib was stretched out on the sofa, a metallic box open in front of him. She had heard him adding up numbers and finally, jubilant, reaching a total: "175 plus 100!" She wondered, "Did it cost 175 dinars for her explosives and training? "But what was the 100 for?" Besides the *dinars*, there were Saudi *riyals* and *halala* coins, *dirhams* and dollars.

Hasan was on the cell phone, listening and nodding. She tried to get his attention by standing for a while in the doorway. Was he getting news about her mission? He looked at her with a blank expression, then gestured to a pot of tea on a hot plate in the corner at her immediate right.

With a deep sigh, Aakifah retrieved the teapot and carried it back to the kitchen. She then retreated to a small washroom adjacent to the kitchen and exited through a gate to an outside yard. Skirting around the bright red backup generator, she entered a makeshift shed. Her eyes fell briefly on the trench surrounding the structure that served to carry off human waste. Before pulling her jeans down, she grabbed a thin slice of lemon from her pocket. Holding up her *abaya* with one hand, she squeezed the rind with the other. Then, inhaling the citrus fragrance so she would not gag on the stench, she relieved herself.

After washing her hands and face in the small washroom, she was back in the kitchen, boiling water in a big pot. "How fortunate that the power is on and the generator will not have to be used," she thought. She hated the noise, the vibration and the smell of diesel. She poured the steaming liquid into a smaller pot in which she had placed heaping spoonfuls of loose black tea and some browned, wrinkled cardamom seeds she had found in a drawer. She set the tea, glasses, and sugar bowl on a tray and carried it to the workroom. She poured a cup for herself, thinking it would calm her, and then set the teapot back on the hotplate. Holding the cup in one hand and the tray in the other, she moved quickly back down the hall to the kitchen, spilling some of the liquid on her hand. It felt like fire.

Aakifah's chest began to heave. She steadied herself. "How different was this hovel from her family home, she thought, "with its spacious, lushly carpeted rooms, high ceilings and bathrooms with Western toilets." The traditional tea glass was, perhaps, the only object that was familiar to her. She noticed suddenly that it had the same cylindrical shape as the sections of water pipes her comrades used as containers for the explosives. These pipes fit snugly in the sheaths sewn into the vests. Claspings her small fingers around the glass as if it were a sacred object, Quranic verses scrawled upon it, Aakifah closed her eyes. She resisted an impulse to throw the glass, to free the light contained within it.

She thought of the verses Umar had read from the Qur'an during Ramadan, when he announced his wish to become a martyr. "Allah is the light of the heavens and earth, the parable of his light is as if it were a niche containing a lamp." The urgency of her mission seized her. She must liberate Umar from this stigma of a failed martyrdom!

The sound of the soft footsteps in the hall, the dull thud of the prayer mats thrown onto the floor and the clicking of a CD into a recorder snapped Aakifah back to the present. She carried soap and a small pot of fresh water into the cubicle below the stairs for the ablutions and then returned to the kitchen. She had parboiled the *ful ta girba* the night before. They would be tender not long after the first boil. She would then prepare the *bigilla*. Broad beans, chickpeas, and lentils were still among the staples included in the monthly rations, along with sugar, salt, flour, and soap. She had only yesterday gone to the trade ministry outlet to get her ration, loading it onto a small cart. The lines were long; it had taken her all morning. She then reached into her pocket, searching for the family rations card. Only she was left now to use it.

On the way home from the center, Aakifah had left two pounds of flour at the bakery, returning several hours later to pick up the *khubz*. As she took the plate piled with the little loaves from the cupboard, removing the dishtowel she had wrapped around them to keep them fresh, she recalled how her colleagues had been arguing when she entered the dwelling. There had been no whispers that time.

"The case is an anomaly," Anwar's voice was raised. "We have never worked with a woman jihadi before. It brings indecisions and headaches at every turn. Consider our commander's dilemma when he had to fit her for the vest. He had to consult the imam to make sure that physical contact with her would not contradict Sharia law."

"We must be of one mind," Hasan interjected. "Aakifah will remain in isolation—not from the general population, but from our daily operations. In Syria they followed a similar procedure with her. Aakifah should continue to go about the neighborhood as any other woman would. When possible, one of us will accompany her."

Aakifah breathed in deep gulps as she turned away from the counter and began to sweep up the sand that seeped in through the cracks in the floorboards and walls. "I'm always either locked in or locked out," she thought. "I don't know what is going on—even now, when I am volunteering for martyrdom! Still, perhaps I am fortunate in some ways. Umar had to wait much longer than me. Five months!"

She remembered the day. It was late September at the end of Ramadan in 2006. "Just a little under two years ago," she thought. Anisa had her arms around mother's neck; mother stood immobile, tears streaming down her face. She was silent. She had said many things to her children when she still worked in the women's ward at Ramadi General Hospital. That was before al Qaeda had taken it over to use as a site for their snipers to shoot at Americans and their new recruits, and behead the wounded Iraqi police who were taken there to be treated; before she moved the patients to a ward safe from sniper fire; before she had fled for her life.

Mama would return home late into the evening, giving thanks to Allah that father's cancer had taken him. She would share her day with her children, unburdening herself of the images that haunted her. "Ball bearings, nails, and wristwatches worn by the bombers pierce the necks and thighs of infants and school aged children, young wives and pregnant mothers, widows and grandmothers," she told them. "These will remain permanently lodged in the ripped tissue of the survivors."

Mama had grown gaunt during those years. She would fall asleep with great difficulty, only to wake up with a cry, stirring the family from their sleep more swiftly than the thunder of shelling, the rumbling of tanks and the deafening roar of fighter jet engines. "Why," she would scream out in a voice Aakifah did not recognize, "has al Qaeda seized the hospital?" Some nights Umar, Anisa and Aakifah would find her clutching her throat and retching; other nights she would hold on to a thigh, seized with spasms.

Umar had not responded to mama's question. But that night, at the end of Ramadan, he was eager to talk about the seizure of other buildings. "The Americans seized the police station. When it was bombed, they subsidized

the costs of a new one. Now that it is almost finished, it will be the source for our persecution.” Umar became stony-faced as he continued.

“The Iraqi police are not here to help us rebuild. Only a handful of schools and businesses have reopened. That is because they cannot function with the constant blackouts that the government does nothing to remedy or most likely causes. If the police are not participating in the mass kidnapping of professors at the university, they are doing nothing to stop them. Mama, Anisa was able to complete her medical degree. This is a different era. Aakifah will not be allowed to study medicine, nor will I be allowed to finish my engineering program. Resistance is the only solution. Should we sit silently while our jobs and pensions are taken, like what happened to baba? Should I be forced to do menial labor? I would rather die, fighting for what is rightfully ours. A resurrected Caliphate will restore order and security. It will allow us to once again be respected!”

Umar’s voice shook. “I have made arrangements.” Looking at mother and Anisa, he issued a directive. “You will leave for Syria and remain in hiding as soon as you can pack some belongings.” No one needed to ask what Aakifah would do. Inseparable from Umar, it was understood that she would stay until the end and then join her sister and mother.

The women remained silent in an effort to hide first their disbelief and then, slowly, their disapproval. Their eyes gave away their horror. Mama’s lips finally parted as if she were going to speak, but she stopped. “What reasons,” she thought, racking her brain, “could I possibly give to dissuade him of his argument of political and moral necessity? At this point, given his new affiliations, perhaps this really is the only way he can protect us!” She felt a wrenching inside. “Was Umar’s decision not unbearable enough, without now also having to leave her daughter behind? With the sacrifices he had made for the family, for Aakifah, did she have the right to take Aakifah away at this time, and leave him alone?” She mustered up all the strength she had and finally spoke, in a tone so low that it was almost inaudible, “One of us must stay to take care of the daily domestic tasks as long as Umar is here. I will figure out what to say to the neighbors. They will look in on Aakifah.”

Holding mama and Anisa tightly, Aakifah took a step closer to Umar. With trembling lips she collected herself, trying to understand his actions in terms of what she knew in her heart about her brother. Memories crowded into her consciousness—the summer he had taken her and Anisa to the action movie series in town; the time he had broken his leg in a soccer skirmish and she had kept him company at home and brought him meals when Anisa was away at school and mama and baba were at work. She remembered how he helped her rehearse for the tryouts for school plays at the arts school downtown and role played with her when she got a small part in *The Bacchae of Baghdad*. What about those long afternoons he spent with her, helping her with her homework before he even started his own! “Umar’s martyrdom will not be in vain,” she said quietly. “He will defend our people. Hasn’t he always?”

Aakifah recalled the high regard in which Umar had always been held in the family and in the neighborhood. When baba passed, and mama’s long hours at work increased, Umar had set aside his blue and white striped soccer shirt and matching blue shorts. He wanted more time to study, he told them. He wanted to take care of the family. It was Umar to whom Aakifah would often turn to ask for advice or help. No longer was he her childhood playmate. He had taken the place of baba. The neighbors also depended upon him, but for other needs. They knew who to call should a household appliance break. There was no faulty wiring or plumbing that Umar could not repair.

“He will be a fine engineer,” his parents had often boasted when the neighbors would come to summon him. Umar’s eyes would shine at such moments.

There was a click of the CD being ejected. The chanting had stopped. They would take a few more minutes to put away the mats. Aakifah returned to the kitchen to cut up the *khubz*. She placed the flatbread on a tray along with the *bigilla* and the tea and carried it to the workroom, setting it down on a small table in front of the couch. Returning to the washroom, she washed again and then went to the alcove under the stairs. It was her turn to pray. Her training in Syria had not improved her practice. Still, she would go through the motions.

Hasan was waiting outside of the alcove when she finished. "Aakifah, you will eat with us today." Aakifah's heart leapt. This was the day she would see Umar in paradise! Then, she followed Hasan, deliberately, step by step. The sun was just beginning to rise.

The small group sat on cushions around the small table. Anwar and Hasan dipped the fresh flatbread into the bowl of fragrant bean paste. Aakifah poured the tea and then sat next to Habib, facing Anwar and Hasan. Anwar encouraged her to eat heartily. Habib chimed in. "Nourish yourself; the struggle is before us!" Finally, the silence in her presence was broken. The stories began. Umar had recounted many anecdotes to Aakifah after mama and Anisa had departed. Hasan's was about the Awakening movement.

"Ali, my comrade and childhood friend, joined the counterinsurgency in the first days of its operation. He was eager to get intelligence for us. We wanted him on the Americans' payroll. Ali shows up at the American headquarters base on the first day of its operations. He is heading through the main corridor to the dining facility for breakfast along with the other American soldiers and Iraqi trainees when he stops. He notices a young, freckle-faced American soldier scrubbing down some words scrawled on the wall. Noticing Ali's stare, he drops the scrub brush in his bucket, dries his hands off with a towel and shakes Ali's hand energetically, grinning widely. He points to the dining facility, then takes Ali by the arm to escort him to the dining hall. In the midst of the confusion of the disorderly lines, the jostling of the men as they find their seats and the echoing of the voices issuing instructions in English and Arabic over the loudspeaker, Ali returns to the hall and scribbles the still legible words on a piece of paper.

"It is a riddle," a fellow insurgent later tells him. "Why does an Iraqi smell so bad? So that even a blind man is not at a disadvantage in recognizing him."

Aakifah's cheeks grew hot. She looked down but shifted her eyes upwards enough to make note of the clenched jaws in front of her. Without warning, her colleagues began to laugh. Habib swung back his shock of hair, a snigger escaping his lips. It almost sounded like he was wheezing. Anwar's emitted a crude and boisterous guffaw. Hasan's laugh came in short spurts, like bullets. Aakifah felt a pressure in her stomach, welling up like a big wave. Her laughter was low at first like a moan and then became raucous. The men grew quiet. Biting her lips, she managed to finally stop. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve brusquely.

Habib spoke in a hollow tone, as if inside a tomb, "Ali's salary comes to three hundred dollars a month times eight months. That's \$2,400 funneled into our accounts."

Hasan pounded the table with his fist, raising his voice to a shrill pitch as the others listened and nodded: "How could we not smell? They have destroyed our sanitation system with their sanctions. If we are not maimed or killed by their bombs or sniper bullets, we are falling ill from diseases caused by filthy water. Now that whiskey-drinking, gun-toting sheik Sattar and his Sons of Anbar have forsaken us with their Awakening Movement—the *Sahawat*." His voice choked. They suddenly heard blasts go off close. The house shook.

"It's an IED malfunction," Anwar said, "but there is nothing to fear here. I have never had a technical malfunction and there will not be one today."

More anecdotes followed upon the heels of the first, each new one bolstering up the jihadis' courage more than the last. The stories, like the presence of the Americans, were a reminder that they were an ostracized people. In the telling and listening, the group's loyalty to each other and to the goals of the insurgency intensified.

Looking into their faces, Aakifah saw Umar. It was just the two of them now. Umar was exasperated with her slowness in helping him in his daily training. He finally broke loose with his grievances. "We are not saboteurs. We are resistance fighters."

"What is the difference?" Aakifah asked.

Umar's voice became hoarse. His broad shoulder muscles flexed. Sweat formed around his closely cropped hair.

"I am not...my colleagues—we are not committing treachery for the sake of destabilizing Iraq or harming its citizens. We are using violence as the only means possible to overthrow a greater evil. We are acting in the interests of our families, our people, our nations. We are acting against a global threat to Islam!" Umar had always had the air of a young student, eager to be successful in an oral exam. Words flowed out of him effortlessly. "I preferred to join the *shuhada* rather than sit and watch as our tribe is decimated or, what's worse, join the traitors. His expression suddenly clouded over. "If you had the habit of going to mosque you would know that the Qur'an promises divine rewards for those who fight in God's path. In times past, as the *hadith* proclaims, paradise lies beneath the shade of swords, today it lies beneath the shade of bomb vests! The mosques will open again and people will come eagerly; and our imams, hundreds of them, will regain their deserved prestige."

Aakifah's head snapped back. She dreaded Umar's disapproval. She dreaded even more the imam's gaze boring into her at the mosque. She shuddered to think of hundreds just like him. "The lech!" The epithet she hurled out when discussing the incident with her sister whirled in her head. She had never told her brother why she had stopped going. He had grown close to the imam in recent months. His words made her wonder, "When *had* Umar started reading and quoting from the Qur'an?"

Umar was lost in his own thoughts, oblivious to her silence.

"The traitors!" he spat, "Abdul-Malik, Ali, Jamal, Khalid, Samir, Selim, and hundreds just like them, signing up every month. How can they interpret the 'house visits' as a show of friendship when the Americans take advantage, once inside, to take young children and use them as bargaining chips? No, it must be for the money! How can they convince us, otherwise, to ally with them?"

Aakifah interjected, her words coming out haltingly. "Umar, some schools and businesses have re-opened. I have seen this with my own eyes in recent months when I have gone on errands with Mama and Anisa. It made me think that my wish to study medicine could still come true. Is it possible, as mama says, that the Americans are integrating our tribal members into the new security services to constrain the government-backed militias from taking justice into their own hands?"

"Impossible!" he shot back. "What can integration mean when they have put into power over us the very people who before were our subordinates?" A deep blush was burning itself into his cheeks, the same one she had seen at the end of the midnight visit, the last time he looked at her.

Aakifah suddenly remembered a deep blush burning itself into her own cheeks. She was eleven and Umar was fourteen. "That was six years ago," she thought, "the summer before the Invasion." They had spent the day on a rowboat on Lake Habbinaya during a family holiday, frequently jumping into the Euphrates to cool off. Back in the hotel room,

Umar, eyeing the pre-pubescent rolls around Aakifah's hips and the rounded belly that glistened as her wet shirt clung tightly around her, began his reproach. He spoke gently, in his new husky voice.

"You must grow more comely. Even now you must consider what it takes to be marriageable."

Aakifah, wincing, turned and snapped him with her towel. She made excuses—not to rebel as much as to get his attention. Umar slapped her. Aakifah pressed her hands to her face. Both cheeks turned a dark red. She turned away from him, her tawny eyes large with surprise. Before walking away, he spoke to her again, in the same soft husky voice.

"Aakifah, I do this for you, for your future."

Aakifah held her hands to her cheeks for several minutes, shivering in her wet clothes. She had his attention, and with it the certainty that she would always be able to count on his protection. Her school friends, Selima and Nadja, were envious.

"You are so lucky," Selima had responded when she told them of the incident. "If Ibrahim ignores me now," Selima questioned, "how will he become concerned for my welfare in the future?"

"Abdul and Abu Amir only speak to me to berate me or tell me what to do," Nadja added.

To Aakifah, her luck was like a shadow lurking behind her. She always had the urge to look back, to see if she was being watched. She developed a tendency to rely on the opinions of others, even when these flew in the face of her own judgment. She often wondered, "Would failing to live up to the ideal, through no fault of my own, cause this blush to permanently stick?" Her fear of such a possibility increased her resolve to match the ideal, yet the harder she worked at it, the more she feared failing. And the blush stuck.

She peered into Umar's face as he finally fell silent, spent by the admission. Then it hit her. "I know what he feels. It is this thing I have felt for years—the sensation of a monstrous thing living inside of me, gnawing at my insides, trying to get out, trying to show my true face. I don't cry out because I want to conceal it. This thing—it's bigger than I thought. It is gnawing inside both of us—and in the others—through no fault of our own. The monstrous thing has been called out....It has charged ...it's charging out....!" She sat down beside her brother.

From that moment on, Aakifah exchanged her despair and passive acquiescence for zealotry. She worked diligently by Umar's side, helping him train obsessively. On the day his colleagues came for him, he spoke softly to her, assuring her of his intent.

"There will be no civilians at the checkpoint at the designated hour, only the American soldiers and the Iraqi security forces. Allah be praised; Iraq must change." And he was gone.

The next thing she remembered was waking up on the living room carpet. Her neighbors were peering down at her, screaming, "Aakifah, Aakifah, wake up!" Where was she? Had she done something wrong? Her thoughts were jumbled. Then she remembered the cellphone ringing. It was a friend of Umar's, delivering the news of the premature explosion. Umar's bomb had gone off in the car. He and the handler were blown up.

During the weeks of her recovery, her own plight came back to her, fused with Umar's. The old, unanswered questions echoed in her head. "What if, through no fault of our own...?" She knew what she had to do. She had to rein the monster in!

Anwar's cell phone went off. Aakifah jumped, startling her colleagues.

"I'm fine, really," Aakifah said, her face ashen.

Anwar went up to the roof. He returned several minutes later. Looking directly at Aakifah, he spoke.

"It is confirmed then, what we had been suspecting all morning. The Americans are doing their search operations

in this neighborhood. They are approaching our location in their tanks and will cordon off the streets. With their snipers, they can kill us from two kilometers away if they don't bomb us with their mortars first. We must move—now!”

Within minutes, Aakifah had the bomb belt on. She had to take her *abaya* off first. Anwar was unable to ignore the swell of her breasts and the graceful curves of her waist and hips. His hands trembled slightly as he helped her on with the vest. He tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid direct contact. Aakifah suppressed a smile as she watched Anwar fix his gaze on her and then quickly look away at the wires. He ran them from the explosive to the trigger across the front of the vest, placing the trigger in Aakifah's left pocket. Then he began his instructions, “When you...”

“I know what to do,” Aakifah interrupted.

Anwar paused to help her on with her *abaya*, then proceeded to review the procedures of the detonation as if Aakifah had not spoken. “Put your hands on your lap or at your sides. At the right moment, raise your arms. More carnage can be achieved that way.” Hasan stared silently at the new assemblage, his dark eyes wide and solemn. She seemed much older suddenly. With the explosives inserted in the sheaths on the vest, she looked like she could be pregnant. Aakifah looked over at him. He smiled, his eyes wide, then turned away, looking at some invisible object on the wall.

Aakifah turned back to Anwar who seemed to be urging a response from her as they strode towards the entry hall and exited onto the street. “I have rehearsed these procedures a million times. It has consolidated into my muscle memory. I don't require brain activity in the motor cortices to carry it out. It is like walking for me or breathing.” Aakifah laughed. It came from her throat, tightening it. “I was a pre-med student,” she explained, as she saw their brows wrinkle. She said more words than she had in the entire week. With the vest on, Aakifah had become almost giddy.

Habib entered at that moment. “I went to the market to get fuel. I filled up the Opel.” He pointed to the metallic box under his arm. “I also picked up the weekly earnings from the vendor.” Aakifah turned toward him with a sobering glance. He seemed not to notice. “Why,” she wondered, “were people not just going to the gas stations?” They got into the vehicle. Habib sat in front. He had brought a video camera. Anwar was at the wheel. Hasan sat in back with Aakifah.

Once the vehicle was in motion, Aakifah leaned back. The thirty pounds of weight she carried around her torso felt natural to her after her extensive training. Suddenly, the car lurched. Aakifah snapped to attention, grabbing at the passenger door.

“Do you see those garbage bags and the dead animal there?” Anwar asked. “They could be rigged.” Falling silent, he zigzagged through an obstacle course of life and death.

Aakifah gazed out the window, taking in the world flashing by her. She noticed that businesses appeared to be open, many more than when she had gone out with mama and Anisa months earlier. In the light of the early morning sun, she saw a school that looked open. How could that be? It was too early. Some young men were carrying crates inside. Hasan opened the passenger window and called out to one of them. Aakifah looked at Hasan.

“We are storing ammunitions there,” Hasan explained. “We still have many storehouses that the Americans have not yet shut down.”

Aakifah leaned her head back on the seat. Habib was quiet as usual, clutching his cellphone. Hasan tapped on Habib's shoulder. “Make the call.”

Habib brought up a contact and clicked. “Now,” he said, and hung up. Several explosions were heard.

“What is that?” Aakifah asked.

“This is a coordinated mission.” Hasan said, sensing at this point that there was no longer any reason to hide

their plans from her. "Our colleagues are attacking the grids."

Aakifah was about to ask yet another question but at that moment they had pulled up to the checkpoint. Anwar stopped the car at a distance. Habib was busy turning on the video camera.

Hasan reached around Aakifah and opened the door. "I will post your wasiyeh on the website. Our fellow jihadis will see what a holy warrior you are."

Aakifah knew it would not be posted; she had not praised the jihadi struggle in her will. She had only spoken of the good deeds Umar had done as a neighbor, as a son, as a brother. She adjusted her *hijab*, got out and started walking.

Habib began filming her departure through the rear window. Aakifah scanned the scene as she took her first steps. There must have been forty people there. "Perhaps a third are civilians," she thought.

Then, abruptly, Aakifah went into action.

The survivors' testimony captured her automated movements. In their statement to the police, they described a stout woman, perhaps in her thirties, walking across the small plaza towards the checkpoint.

They could not know that Aakifah's mental attention was freed up, allowing her to create new indentations of thought in her neural network, since no brain activity in her motor cortices was required for her task. They did not see that in the time it took her to walk across the plaza, Aakifah realized that her colleagues' looting of gasoline caused the spikes in the cost of fuel. The prices they charged at the market undercut the costs at the pumps but still fortified the organization's coffers. And the number "100" that Habib had calculated? It represented the number of *dinars* they would each earn for completing the mission. From what she had overheard from their planning meetings, their monthly profits would surpass the counterinsurgents' salary.

By the time Aakifah had faked her accidental fall, her colleagues were long gone. The survivors described what happened next: the middle-aged woman tripped just yards from the checkpoint.

They could not detect that in the time it took her to fall and the policemen approaching her to offer assistance, Aakifah was creating more indentations of thought in her neural network. "The Americans had closed down the schools and businesses because her colleagues were using them as ammunition warehouses. Her colleagues were producing the blackouts, not the government."

At the end of their testimony, the survivors stated that the policeman reached out a hand to help the woman. "Her face was twisted," they said, "as if in a spasm of pain. She appeared to be looking beyond the policeman, at a group of boys in blue and white striped soccer shirts and matching blue shorts running in her direction."

They could not see Aakifah's hand, concealed under her *abaya*, slithering robotically into the left pocket of her jeans, nor the elasticity of her new thought patterns, stretching into the solidified ones as if they intended to break them up and supplant them.

As her fingers groped for the trigger, Aakifah noticed something different. What was it? The gnawing inside of her—it had abated. She conjured up the specter of Umar. How scruffy he suddenly looked. He was talking to her.

"There will be no civilians at the checkpoint at that hour."

She was eager to tell him her discovery. "Umar, mama was right. I know how to shrink the improbable conditions to negligible levels. You and your colleagues—you say you are resistance fighters, but you are really sabo..."





Lebanon, 2007
Photo by CHADI ZEINATI

WHY SO SYRIA?*

WHY SO SYRIA?

IN SYRIA, THE CHILDREN STILL SMILE.
THEY SMILE AT THE DIRT THEY SLEEP ON,
FOR THEM IT'S EARTH.
THEY DON'T KNOW HOMS FROM DAMASCUS FROM AMMAN FROM HAIFA.
FOR THEM, WHERE THEY DREAM IS HOME.

WHY SO SYRIA?

IN SYRIA, THE CHILDREN STILL PLAY.
THE ROCKS HAVEN'T BECOME ARCHEOLOGY YET, NEITHER EMESANI NOR BA'ATH,
FOR THEM IT'S THEIR PLAYGROUND.
THEY KNOW BREAD AND ZEIT AND ZAAATAR AND SOMETIMES A STOMACH THAT IS FILLED ONLY WITH WATER.
FOR THEM, JUST ANOTHER NEW GAME, Y'ANI LET'S PLAY REFUGEE.
Y'ANI.

WHY SO SYRIA?

IN SYRIA, THE CHILDREN STILL SEEK SPRING.
THEY DON'T CARE IF IT'S ARAB OR UNITED NATIONS,
FOR THEM SPRING IS JUST A SEASON.
THE SEASON WHEN THE SNOW FINALLY MELTS AND THE AIR FINALLY SMELLS AND YOU LOOK FOR THE BAHARAT MSHAKALE
BEFORE IT BECOMES DRY AGAIN.
WHY SO SYRIA WHEN FOR THE CHILDREN NEGOTIATION STILL MEANS ASKING JADDA FOR ONE MORE BEDTIME STORY
SINCE TOMORROW IS 'NO SCHOOL MORNIN'.
(OR WHAT WAS SCHOOL BEFORE IT BECAME A BOMB SHELTER.)

WHY SO SYRIA?

CUX IN SYRIA, THE CHILDREN STILL DIE.

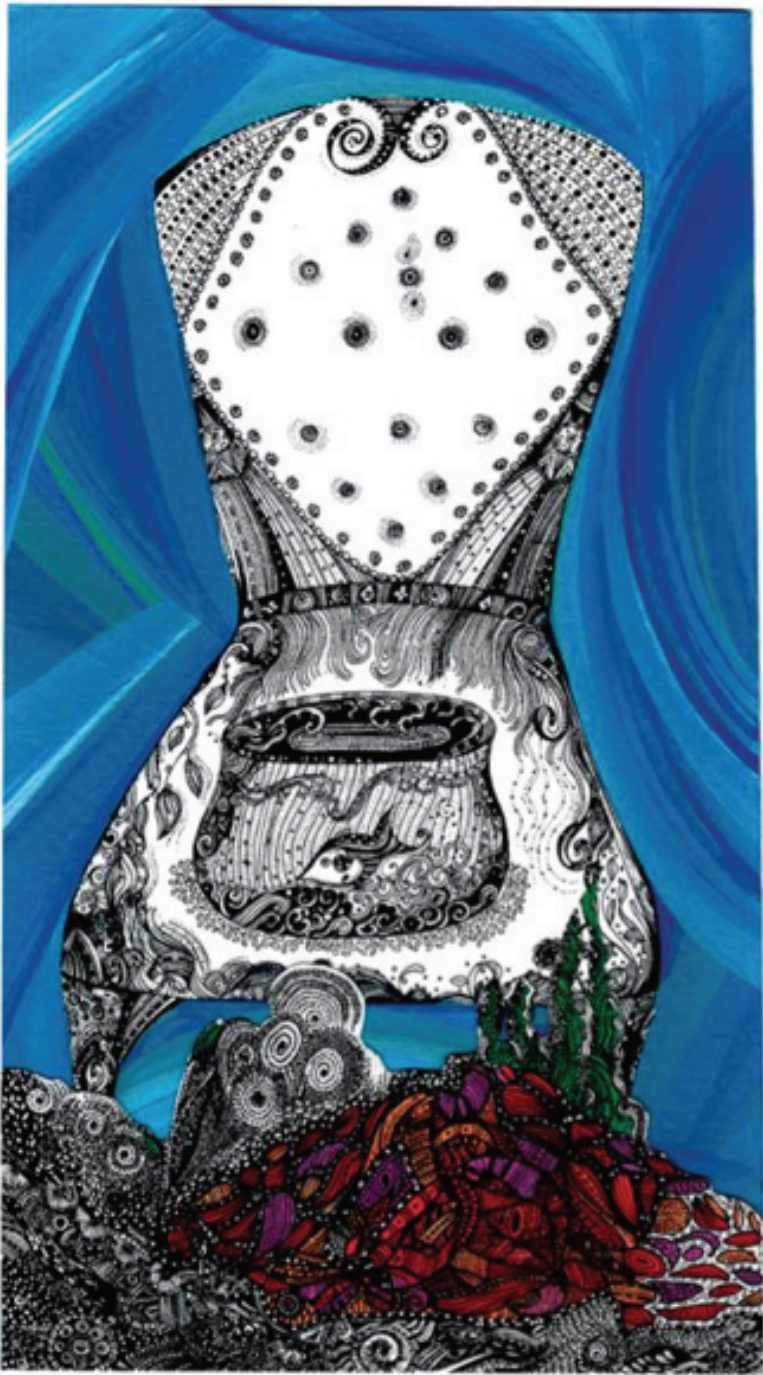
EVERY DAY. DIE. EVERY MINUTE. DIE. EVERY LIFE,
CHILDHOOD, DIES.
AND YET,
AND YET IN SYRIA A LITTLE GIRL GIGGLES MORE THAN SHE CRIES.
AND IN A TENT AT ZAAATARI RAED GETS ENGAGED AND REEM GIVES BIRTH TO A BABY SHE NAMES JAD.
(IT'S DEFINITELY NOT ABOUT JIHAD).
AND MAYA AND RANIA AND JABBAR AND JAMIL STILL WHISTLE WHEN CHRISTIANO RONALDO PRETENDS TO DIVE,
MAKING SURE HIS GEL IS STILL SPIKED!
IN SYRIA, HOPE STILL THRIVES. IN SYRIA, LIFE STILL LIVES.

THAT'S WHY, ANA SO SYRIA.

THAT'S.
WHY.
ANA.
SO.
SYRIA.

JAMAL. H. IQBAL

*FOR BREATHING NUMBERS - WHO TURNED ME TOWARDS HOPE FOR SYRIA.
WWW.BREATHINGNUMBERS.COM



Inequality, India Ink/Acrylic - 24.7 x 23cm
by MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI

Artists' / Writers' bios:

OLIVIA AYES is a queer writer, educator, and agent of change living in Tanzania. She has lectured at universities in the St. Louis area, as well as City University of New York. Her writing appears in *The Manhattanville Review*, *LEVELER*, *T/OUR*, *Sukoon*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Matador*, *Five Quarterly*, *Blackbird*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and elsewhere. She blogs at NOTES FROM THE MARGIN www.oayes.org.

Pushcart Prize nominee **ZEINA HASHEM BECK** is a Lebanese poet with a BA and an MA in English Literature from the American University of Beirut. Her first poetry collection, *To Live in Autumn*, won the 2013 Backwaters Prize and will be published in August 2014 by the Backwaters Press. It was selected as winning manuscript by distinguished poet Lola Haskins. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Nimrod*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Columbia Granger's World of Poetry*, *The Common*, *Cream City Review*, *Quiddity*, *Copper Nickel*, *Mizna*, *Sukoon*, and *Mslexia*, among others. Zeina lives with her husband and two daughters in Dubai, where she regularly performs her poetry. She is on the editorial board of *All Roads Will Lead You Home*, a new online literary journal by VAC poetry.

CELIA BLAND's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have recently appeared in *Witness*, *The Cortland Review*, *Poetry International*, *Spillway*, *Word/For Word*, *The Narrative Review* (where her poem "Wasps" was named one of the year's best), and *Drunken Boat*. Her fiction and nonfiction are slated for publication in *Green Mountains Review*, *Storyscale*, *Anthem* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. *Madonna Comix*, a poetry-and-image collaboration with visual artist Dianne Kornberg (with an introduction by Luc Sante), will be published in 2014.

SUSAN MUADDI DARRAJ is a writer who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Her first short story collection, *The Inheritance of Exile*, was published in 2007 by University of Notre Dame Press and was a finalist for the AWP Awards in Short Fiction. Her essays, stories, and reviews have appeared in a variety of forums, including anthologies, journals, and radio. Most recently, she co-edited a collection on teaching the work of Naguib Mahfouz for the MLA.

NADA FARIS is a Kuwaiti writer who publishes poems, articles and fiction in English. She is referred to as "Kuwait's Finest Slam Poet" for receiving back-to-back awards. In 2013, she was selected by the International Writing Program for a writing residency at Iowa University. She opened up for Silk (an American R&B band), and performed at The American University of Kuwait, Gulf University for Science and Technology, and London's Shubbak Festival. She presented her theory on Anglowaiti Literature at GELL's Creative Writing Conference and at Dar Al-Athar al-Islamiyyah's showcase of Kuwaiti Writing and Directing Talent. Faris has a BA in English Literature from Kuwait University, and is currently finalizing a Master's thesis in Comparative Literature. Her book, *Before Young Adult Fiction*, is a collection of award-winning pieces that shaped her writing voice. www.nadafaris.com.

LAURA GILLMAN is a professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Her formal training is in literary and cultural studies. She has authored two books and numerous articles on literary narrative and feminist theory. Her most recent book is *Unassimilable Feminisms: Reappraising Feminist, Womanist, and Mestiza Identity Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). In her writing, teaching and activism, she critiques culturally normative modes of thought that reproduce relations based on dominance and subordination, and strives to develop new ways of thinking and being that can effectively contribute to processes of global decolonization.

HEDY HABRA was born in Egypt and is of Lebanese origin. She is the author of a poetry collection, *Tea in Heliopolis* (Press 53 2013) a short story collection, *Flying Carpets* (Interlink 2013), which is the 2013 Winner of the Arab American Book Award's Honorable Mention in Fiction; and a book of literary criticism, *Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa* (Iberoamericana/Vervuert 2012). She has an MA and an MFA in English and an MA and PhD in Spanish literature, all from Western Michigan University. Her multilingual work appears in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Connotation Press*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Nimrod*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Drunken Boat*, *Diode*, *Cutthroat*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Cider Press Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Inclined to Speak* and *Dinarzad's Children 2*. For more information, please visit www.hedyhabra.com

SAM HAMOD is the author of ten books and his work has appeared in over 200 anthologies of literature worldwide.. He is a prolific poet, a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, a critical political writer, a healer, an editor, a professor, a blues musician and singer, a spiritual, multifaceted and interfaith religious Muslim leader who ran The Islamic Center in Washington, DC. He is the founder of the internationally acclaimed, *Third World News* in Washington DC. Hamod earned his Ph.D. from the famed Iowa Writers Workshop where he also taught.

JAMAL H. IQBAL first moved to Dubai a corporate rottweiler in 2008. His five years in the city, the longest among the dozen or so he has called home at some point or another, have managed to temper the temper, somewhat. As he multilives as an actor, poet, creative director, comic, writer, producer and performance artist he finds the rottweiler becoming somewhat hipster(ish). His poetic life a perpetual struggle between Rumi and Ghalib moderated by Eliot and Gulzar. He is a member of the Poeticians in Dubai and also reads regularly with other poetry collectives. First published when he represented India in *Word Collective's World Anthology of Young Poets - 1996*, he is also published in *Nowhere Near A Damn Rainbow - the Poeticians Anthology*. His stream of consciousness piece 'And Deep Our Hybrid Roots Lie' was recently published in the book *Uncommon: Dubai*. This year will see the publication of his solo poetry collection - *The Sonapur Diaries* in July, and his Travelogue - *Padmavati Colony & Other Stories* in November. His poem 'grey' has also been accepted for the *Singapore Indian Poetry Society's* next journal, later this year.

MAYDA ARIDI KATECHI was born in Lebanon and raised in the UK, where she spent most of her life. Cultural diversity has always been characteristic of her family and her reality is therefore a blend of contrasting influences that she both consciously and subconsciously expresses in her artwork. Mayda considers art as a way of making sense of the contradictions that surround her and as part of what is ever-changing and never constant. Currently residing in Greece with her husband and two children, Mayda continues to create new realities inspired by life. More artwork by Mayda can be viewed on www.mayda.gr or you can join her facebook page www.facebook.com/mayda.artwork

DIANNE KORNBERG's photographs and photo-based prints have been exhibited nationally and internationally and are represented in numerous museum, public and private collections, including the American Embassy in Belize, the Henry Art Gallery, the Houston Museum of Art, the International Center for Photography, the Princeton Art Museum, the Portland Art Museum, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Tacoma Art Museum. Two monographs of her work have been published: *Field Notes*, Photographs by Dianne Kornberg, 1992-2007 and *India Tigers* in 2009. In 2014, *Madonna Comix*, a collaboration with poet Celia Bland, will be released.

YAHIA LABABIDI an Egyptian-American thinker and poet, is the author of five books in four genres. His latest is *Barely There*, a new collection of short poems that touch on the life of the spirit. Lababidi has been recently featured on NPR, Al Jazeera and in The Guardian.

LISA SUHAIR MAJAJ is a Palestinian-American poet, writer, and editor living in Nicosia, Cyprus. Her publications include poetry and prose in over 100 journals and anthologies world-wide, three co-edited collections on international women writers, literary criticism on Arab American literature, and a prize-winning book of poetry: *Geographies of Light* (Del Sol Press 2009). She has taught, lectured, and read poetry at many venues throughout the US, Europe and the Middle East.

NADINE SAYEGH is a Palestinian writer living and working in Dubai. She studied Communication Arts at the Lebanese American University and is hoping to pursue an MA in English Literature. Nadine does not enjoy writing about herself in the third person. This is her first, and hopefully not last, time being published!

CHADI ZEINATI is a Lebanese Interventional Radiologist living and working in Los Angeles, California. He began to experiment with photography in Beirut, Lebanon in 2000 while still in college, "following in my brother's footsteps and using his analog cannon camera." He is mostly drawn to landscape and food photography.

REWA ZEINATI is the founding editor and publisher of *Sukoon* magazine, and the author of the creative non-fiction book, *Nietzsche's Camel Must Die: An Invitation to Say 'No'* (xanadu*, 2013), as well as the poetry chapbook, *Bullets & Orchids* (Corrupt Press, 2013). She studied English Literature at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, where she is originally from, and earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri, Saint Louis, USA (where she is not originally from.) Several of her poems, essays and translations have been published in various literary journals and anthologies in the USA, UK, Levant region and online. She lives and works in Dubai, UAE.

ALI ZNAIDI (b.1977) lives in Redeyef, Tunisia where he teaches English at Tunisian public secondary schools. His work has appeared in *Otoliths*, *The Tower Journal*, *streetcake*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Mad Swirl*, *Unlikely Stories: Episode IV*, *Red Fez*, *Carcinogenic Poetry*, *Stride Magazine*, and other ezines. His debut poetry chapbook *Experimental Ruminations* was published in September 2012 by Fowlpox Press (Canada). He also writes flash fiction for the *Six Sentence Social Network*—<http://sixsentences.ning.com/profile/AliZnaidi>.

CLAIRE ZOGHB's *Small House Breathing* won the 2008 Quercus Review Poetry Series Award. A chapbook, *Dispatches from Everest*, is forthcoming in 2014. Her work has appeared in *Connecticut Review*, *CALYX*, *Mizna: Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Crab Creek Review* and *Natural Bridge*, and in the anthologies *Through A Child's Eyes: Poems and Stories About War* and *Eating Her Wedding Dress: A Collection of Clothing Poems*. Twice a Pushcart Prize nominee, Claire was the winner of the 2008 Dogwood annual poetry competition. She is graphics director at Long Wharf Theatre.



