

OVERTLY

issue 4 / resistance / september 2024

LIT

where faith meets art

Fear God When impulsivity crosses the line

Struggles to resist harmful,
excessive actions

I am concerned

that

you

continue

to maintain

the history

the risk

you do not stop

your

regime

you

devise a plan

"I knew it was wrong to steal, yet
I couldn't control myself. There was a 'knot' in
my heart"

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September 2024

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Where possible we have outlined specific content warnings.*

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letter from the editors

“Refaat said bid no farewell, and so we will not.
Will you find the heaven and the Gaza you
dreamed there?”

—*The morning dark, a double shovel*
by Ronnie K. Stephens

It’s been over a year since Issue Three was released. As is the case with so many literary magazines, Overtly Lit is a labour of love and passion and we are honoured to share the array of brilliant work in this issue.

We are proud to publish our first themed issue: The Resistance Issue. The subjects within cover a range of topics that we wanted to centre: all forms of injustice that stem from colonialism, imperialism, racism - in short, all forms of oppression. As always faith is the lens through which we explore these themes.

For as long as there has been oppression, there has been resistance. For centuries, we have explored our humanity through art, whether it be handprints on the walls of caves, or tales of great kings and mythical creatures; and so it goes without saying that for centuries, art has been a form of resistance. As we find the world in tatters around us, as we find oppressors lacking in any humanity, we must find hope.

We must resist.



letter from the editors cont.

The ongoing genocide of Palestinians by Israel is one of the reasons why we felt the need to dedicate this issue to the theme of resistance. So it is fitting that Palestine is a recurring theme within many pieces. From the poem that bears witness to an example of the current atrocities as in Proverbs 23:10 by D.W. Baker, to a poem that passionately highlights the hypocrisy of politicians and touches on so many individuals wronged while also painting a picture of hope and possibilities in Sana Wazwaz's beautiful Sand Path That'll Lead the Refugees Home. Then there is a moving and poignant blend of historical and contemporary Gaza in Susan Lanigan's short story To End All Wars. All of which are a stark reminder of the juxtaposition of carrying on living amidst the ongoing genocide that continues day after day in Palestine.

In another story that looks to the past from a speculative stance, Jibril Stevenson's Beyond, takes the reader on a journey of resistance and sacrifice and deeply resounding faith in 15th century Spain. From the perspective of a political prisoner's wife in Numbered Days by Rania El-Badry, to Algeria's fight for freedom in The anger in our blood: absence, life and the in-between by Zohra Melik, and so many more, each of the pieces in this issue offer something meaningful about oppression, injustice and resistance.

From Palestine to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from Sudan to Kashmir and everywhere in between, may the oppressors fall and the people rise and be free. May injustice everywhere crumble. May we all find the strength and courage to resist in every way. ***Long live the resistance.***

love, Safiya & Madeehah



FICTION

These Small Apocalypses

by Allison Wall

The Elder gathers up all us ragged refugees, all us Women who might not even be Women anymore, we have lost so much. Husbands and children, homes and the rhythms of our lives, the numb safety of no-power, no-choice. She gathers us up, whatever we are, and we sit on the pine needles and try to ignore the cold.

The Elder says, “You know the story of Mother Dragon who hatched the world.”

We flinch. Mother Dragon was taught to us as the devil. One who would destroy her creation rather than give up control of it. But then, so much of what they taught us wasn't true. We try to remember this. We try not to be afraid of the Elder's words.

“Well. After hatching the world, Mother Dragon also had children of her own. And it was her sons who first hated her. They did not want to be Mother Dragon's creation. They did not want to experience it. They did not want the slow, sacred wisdom of the spiral. They wanted to inherit. To own. To use. To claim and create power for themselves out of what belonged to no one. So they made plans. They plotted against Mother Dragon.”

We wonder, didn't she know? Didn't she see the change in her sons' eyes? The coldness?

The Elder shrugs. “Would knowing have made a difference?”

It had made no difference for us. What we had not wanted to be true, we ignored. We excused. Until it was too late.

“When her sons betrayed her, when they surrounded her and pointed weapons at her, Mother Dragon did not fight back. She could have killed her children in one breath. She could have wrapped the world in flame. It was her creation, after all. She made it, and unmaking is so much easier. Instead, Mother Dragon spread her great wings, and flew up, up, up, up, past the sky, into the void beyond.”

We sigh. We too have been driven away. We too have fled. If even the creatrix of the world was made a stranger and forced out, who are we to expect different?

But the Elder is not finished. That is not the end of the story. “As Mother Dragon flew into the darkness, she lit candles. She built hearthfires. Scorned, rejected, angered, heartbroken, Mother Dragon continued to create. She created the universe. Planets. Stars. And she wove stories into them, the stories she told her children, the stories she had yet to tell.

“Her sons did not have wings. They could not chase her there. So, to account for her absence and her newest creation sparkling in the darkness overhead, they told a Lie. Mother Dragon’s sons declared, ‘Mother Dragon was not fit, Mother Dragon was dangerous, Mother Dragon had wild emotions and with her power, could have destroyed us all.’ They said that, to save the world, they had overcome their mother, and that they had killed her. That they had divided her body into parts, that the sky was her ribcage, the stars her scales.” The Elder shakes her head. “They said she had died so that chaos might be vanquished. Her death, her dismemberment, was good.”

Bile burns our throats. We have seen violence. We cannot forget it. It pours, over and over, through our minds’ eyes.

After a long pause, the Elder resumes. “From her star-fire hearth, Mother Dragon watched. And she saw how her children behaved. And she saw how the Lie would hurt her creation. How mothers would think they must sacrifice themselves for their children, that they must slice themselves into pieces and give themselves away for the good of others. She knew that mothers must heal themselves, not harm themselves. That they must be whole to create life. Mother Dragon grieved. Her tears fell through the sky in streaks of flame and made deep furrows in the soil.”

We imagine Mother Dragon’s tears and we feel nothing. We are numb. What have we run toward? What is left? What was the hope we had? It is forgotten. Lost. We have lost too much. We would rather have laid down and let ourselves be dismembered. Yet, having lost the world, Mother Dragon grieved. We stare, blank. We are so tired.

“Mother Dragon laid one last egg. It shone bright, but shadowed with longing and heartbreak and anger.” The Elder points to the up. There the Moon hangs, a bone fragment in the lilac winter sky. “And one day, children, Mother Dragon’s Egg will hatch.”

The Elder’s voice is strong and her eyes are full of fire.

“On that day, the Moon will crack. Break apart. Then out will come Mother Dragon’s Apocalypse.”

Chills run down our backs.

“Apocalypse is Revelation. Uncovering. Judgment. Consequence. Justice. Ending, but also Beginning. It is the turning of the Great Wheel, the Spinning of the Stars. From fire comes ash, ash feeds the soil, and the soil grows the forest.

“Mother Dragon’s Apocalypse will reveal the Lie her sons told. All will understand. All will see how she was wrongly treated—how wrongly we have treated each other. We will see another way of being. And there will be new life.”

We look at the Moon, and we do not believe it.

“You are right,” the Elder says. “The Moon is only the Moon. No one is coming to save us. But listen. That is not why I am telling you this story. We are Mother Dragon’s children: children of exile and loss. We carry her egg.” She touches the center of her thin chest. “The Moon reminds us: It is up to us to hatch the Apocalypse. To create a new world. Starting with ours. My world, your world, they join up. We overlap. We intertwine. And one day, when there are enough of us, all these small apocalypses, together, will be enough.”

We do not know what to think about this, but we thank her for the story.

When we lay our heads down on our arms, our only pillows, and try to sleep, we think about Mother Dragon. We doubt, we weep, we remember what we have lost—more than what should be possible. We hold ourselves close. We feel our hearts beating. We each cradle an apocalypse, warm, within us. We feel it move. The shell shivers. It begins to hatch.





Allison Wall is a queer, neurodivergent writer whose work explores deconstruction, self-discovery, and belonging. Her short fiction has previously appeared in *Metaphorosis Magazine*, *NonBinary Review*, and *Electric Spec*, among others. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing. Connect with Allison on her website, allison-wall.com.

Star

by Brooksie C. Fontaine

When she was alive, the starlet wrote in her diary that every name was a fuse that burned differently.

Some are like dynamite, some are like fireworks, she wrote, while wearing a bathrobe in the garden of the hotel they'd put her in, pretending like it was her own. Destructive or beautiful or both. Most just fizzle out, nothing but string, never attached to anything bigger. Or they just sputter and pop a little, like sparklers, beautiful but small. Only a few burn like stars.

She was still self-conscious, even writing to herself.

Ever since she was a child, wishing she could escape into the silver screen before movies even had words, she'd pictured her life as a movie with an audience. How lovely that would be, a thousand sympathetic eyes on every tragic moment, feeling for her, feeling with her.

What a disappointment that the industry was filled with people like that, just sad-eyed children wanting to be loved. And it wasn't what she thought it would be, fame. The people she played in movies weren't her – no matter how much of herself she put into them, the minute they were committed to film, they became someone else. The millions who watched her weren't empathizing with her, but of the parts of themselves they could see in her characters.

Many weren't empathizing at all, not even trying to – to feel with her wasn't the point for them. Wanting her, having her, was the only pleasure they craved. Perhaps most of them felt that way. Now, as she floats over her own funeral like a ballerina, her first thought is, *They can't get me now.*

It comforts her, warms her like the setting sun, which casts the graveyard in its golden honey glow. It plays beautifully off the pale marble stones.

She didn't kill herself, though that's what they'll say, that's how it will be remembered. The man who took her life was rich enough not to be denied, sure he had too much to offer her. She denied him anyway.

So he denied her breath, denied her all her remaining days on earth.

There's peace now in knowing that justice can't ever truly be denied. It only seems that way through the eyes of the living. Now, the eyes of her soul are open, and she's made of sunlight, and she knows death won't be like this for him.

He thinks he's escaped. He's here at her funeral, amongst the hundreds of mourners, looking somber for the girl he helped discover. He'll only realize the truth when he sinks from this world, and feels the shadows wrap him in their burning cold vines. Only then will he know that everything he's ever done is already waiting for him, patient as a cat.

In life, she was only a starlet. Now her name will live forever, because the public never gets tired of beauty and pain that isn't their own. Ophelia. Saint Sebastian. The grieving Mary. Jesus Christ, his suffering recreated in every room of the orphanage where she grew up.

The sun sets over the graveyard, and her coffin is lit only by electric lights and the flashing of cameras. She can hear the weeping of the mourners from all the way up here, hundreds of people who never knew her and never would have wanted to. Not really.

She's left behind everything they can cannibalize. Her body, her clothes, her hair, her memory. Let them have it.

The stars above her seem so much brighter, so much cleaner, than anything down below. She knows that the girls from the orphanage are there, the sickly ones who never got to grow up.

She rises to take her place among them.



Brooksie C. Fontaine is a teaching assistant, tutor, and illustrator. Her work has been published by Bending Genres, Eunoia Review, Anti-Heroic Chic, and more.



The anger in our blood: absence, life and the in-between

by Zohra Melik

There you are, running on the land of our ancestors. Running away, terrified, maybe, of the future murder of your beating heart, the incessant gunshots around your head.

Fed up with the violence unleashed upon you and your bloodline, you took up arms, seized your fears, your anger and your weapons, packed them neatly in your bag before marching down toward the future of your people, toward the fight for freedom, a liberty that will never be yours. I know that because even though most times you feel like a dream your existence is still assured in others, they've witnessed you or those closest to you, they have tangible proof of your breathing lungs, your time on earth, your blood running through your child and the soil.

I can almost see you running.

You're running faster and faster, dread filling your chest, the sound of your heartbeat thumping in your ears, despair seizing you each time one foot touches the ground, hoping you could fly instead or turn invisible, asking Allah to protect your fleeing siblings, comrades of fear and hope alike. I can see you. You're terrified but there is no regret, no second thought, nothing that could have stopped you. Not baba, not mama, certainly not fear. You don't care about grandeur, about being part of History, the capital H hiding your people's ordinary adversity, other's colonial perversity. You care about your father, nearing his seventy-eight years, humiliated, beaten, looked down upon, spat at, kneeling on the ground in front of the cruelly forgettable soldiers alongside other *indigenous* men of the neighborhood. They're looking for a "terrorist", you hear, forcing your father down on his knees, his aching bones resting on a thin stick they've put there on purpose, his hands clasped behind his back... Laughter and taunts... They ask questions, you hear them from the window of the kitchen, infantilizing your father, disrespecting him. They talk to him like he's daft or like he doesn't understand a word they're saying.

You want to storm out of the flat, rip them to shreds, section their heads away from their towering bodies and scream that your father, the man who taught and raised you, is more proficient than them at their own language, that the words, sentences and imagery they've imposed upon your territory is better wielded by your people, a people that will one day rise and force them to their knees. A revenge for the past, for the old man kneeling and the young woman hiding.

I can almost see you fiercely gripping the windowpane but the image is swept away by your hair trailing behind you while you're fleeing from death. Oh... I can see you running.

You're running, losing your comrades while they also fight for their survival. You're running and hear their goodbyes, sobs, murmurs and gunshots, gunshots, again, gunshots. You run and feel so afraid. You run and stumble. Another gunshot, close this time and you stumble. You stumble... You hear them but you're tired. You've been tired for decades, probably since you were born. Tired of their voices and their faces that blend, tired of being nothing and fearing for your family. You think of mama, how she died so young and you didn't say goodbye. You're tired of smiling at the good ones – the baker down the street, the new neighbors, the self-titled humanitarian fighting for your rights – but whose rights? You wonder now, if you ever saw them again, would you smile or stab them? Will they smile or stab you? Hate bubbles and threatens to consume you. You hate them more than the soldiers you hear approaching, you hate them for establishing their bakery in a stolen store, living in a stolen house and fighting for something unjust, for there is no equal rights when *your* past, *your* present and *your* future have been stolen from you, there is no equal rights when you, yourself, have been displaced from the ruins of your ancestral village, there is no equal rights or freedom if your land, trees, roads, food and cemeteries are not yours anymore.

Suddenly, you're assaulted by the image of baba praying while it's dark and everyone is sleeping – qiyam al layl perhaps but

you forgot and can't quite grasp the memory. It quickly turns into one of your favorite moments, him sat on his old faded prayer mat recounting ahadith while you and your siblings gather around him to listen intently. Just as fast, you gasp and remember his whispered goodbye while you're both standing in front of the door, the night ensconcing your departure to the maquis. You can almost hear his last words reminding you that every soul shall taste death at their appointed time. Was it an adieu as well as an attempt to reassure you? Was it his or your end he was thinking of? An ending for you two, you're certain, for one would still breathe, even for a minute, while the other was dead. Could there be life for one whose walking heart was dead? There was such calm in his voice when he whispered but now, running for your life, you can finally hear the defeat, the heartbreak. With his voice and the incessant gunshots in your ear, you remember his advice to always turn toward the One who has created us, to pray on time and to never forget that this life is temporary – oh, what a relief!

Everything fades to black then. There's no more baba, no more running or hair flying, no more sounds or silence alike. There's nothing, for there's no you.

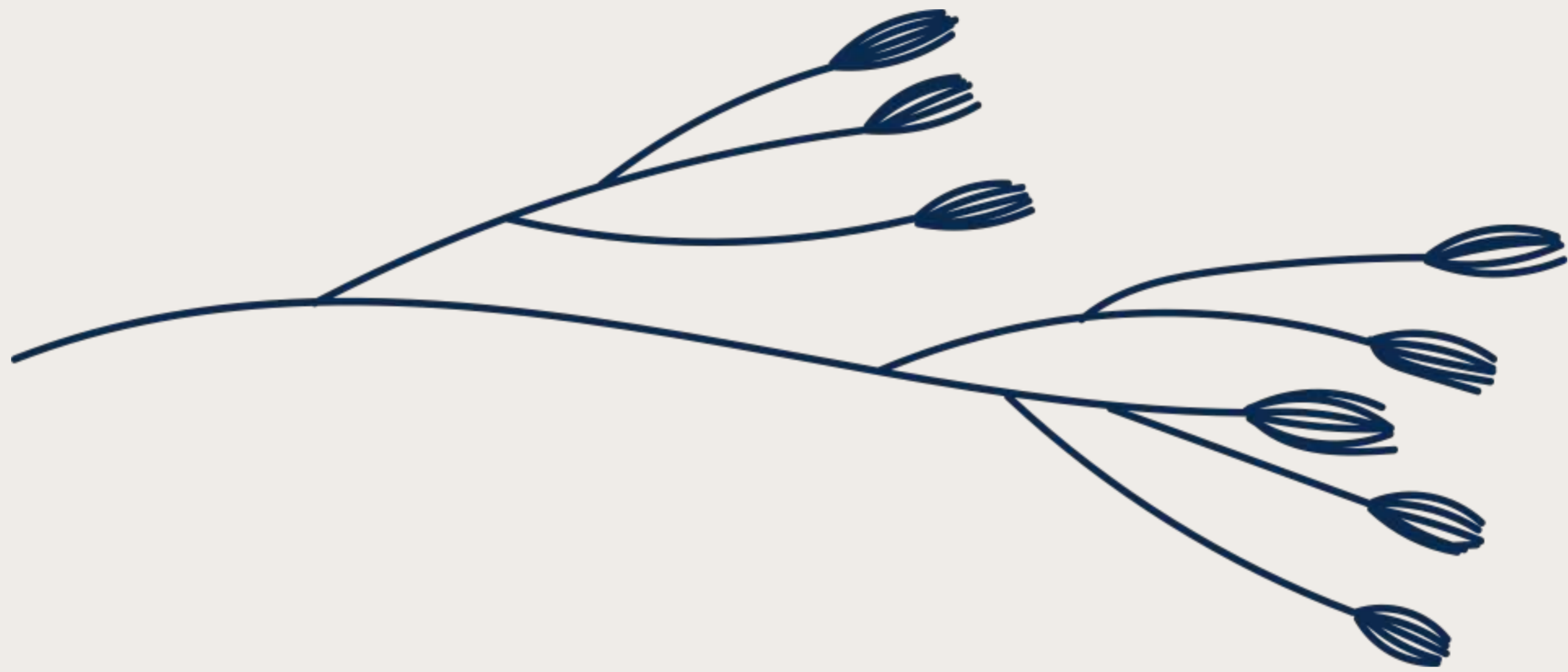
Months later, wounds, death and horror continue...

Years later, crowds scream "Ya Mohammed, Algeria has returned to you"... But Baba's gone just like you, the village and our lands.

And still, decades later, life thrives with uncertainty and hope. Masjids bloom on every corner and the family expands.

Half a century later, everyone remembers even those without memories. The witnesses, alive and dead, are present everywhere, not one family left unmarked by History. Praises and supplications to Allah are abundant, thanking Him for the horrors, the legacy and the pain. Asking Him for the strength to face memories and nothingness, to help us reflect and find the wisdom residing in the path He put us on.

Ya Allah, I think now, Algeria has returned to you, changed but still there.



The second of three girls, born in Algeria and raised in France, **Zohra Melik** is a 30 year-old bookworm fond of books, quiet and the sea. When she's not reading or buying books, you can find her attempting to paint or posting on her bookstagram [@booksandkitab](#).

To End All Wars

by Susan Lanigan

Gaza, 27 March 1917

His eyes opened to a night sky lit up with bright, jagged wounds of white phosphorus. He remembered daylight, the pricking of a cactus hedge, the wiry hair on the Turk's hands. The glint of the cutlass blade. The pain and the taste of blood. But now when he put his hand to his throat, Private Stephen Callaghan felt nothing but even skin.

He sat up and tried to focus. The air smelled of weapon-dust and something sweeter, more baleful. There was no sign of the two men who'd been on either side of him: Hollis and Mountbrooke. All he could see was a perimeter wall some distance away and a few small trees.

A figure appeared to his right. He whipped around immediately, to face the very Turk who had slashed him. The man wore an officer's grey fur cap, but let his bayonet hang loose. He, too, looked bewildered.

Stephen slowed his breath. Everything in his training was telling him *ram old Abdul through*. But this... felt different.

"You're alive," the Turk said in wonder. His English was heavily accented.

Once more, Stephen touched the soft place on his neck. "I... don't think so." He extended his hand. "Stephen Callaghan." The Turk shook it. "Gökhan Yılmaz." They both laughed self-consciously.

*

They did not banter, or exchange tobacco, or share what had brought them there. Instead, they walked past the perimeter wall and into the streets of Gaza. There, they heard something else.

An endless screaming came from the city, like an auditory murmuration. It was a dreadful sound, a hell's chorus. Despair.

Piles of rubble and bodies were everywhere, while children with half their clothes torn off ran around bawling in fear. The motor vehicles they passed were different in shape from what they were used to, the buildings as well. “It’s nineteen-seventeen,” Stephen told himself, “Nineteen-seventeen.” He found himself believing it less and less.

They arrived at a small square. In the middle was a car riddled with bullet holes, the windows smashed and splattered with blood. In the back a small child was sobbing and calling for help. Nearby, a group of men with Red Crescent jackets waited near a motorvan with ambulance markings.

“Why aren’t they helping her?” Stephen said, but Gökhan pointed up towards the shell of a building overlooking the square. Stephen realised with a sick lurch of his stomach that a sniper had his gun trained on the little girl, on the ambulance workers, on everyone.

“Follow,” Gökhan commanded.

They went inside with their torches, upstairs through a corridor with bare walls and hanging wires, until they found the sniper crouched at the window hole, one shoulder tensed above the other. Beside him, another tall, blond man in military fatigues lingered. He looked them up and down with a brief flicker of surprise, followed by an insolent smile and the cocking of his rifle.

He fired twice.

The bullets did nothing.

The sniper turned around. His face was thin, chin prominent, eyes glowing with a wild hate Stephen had seen before and knew to be wary of. Down below the child was still calling and sobbing; the ambulance workers were still holding short. He caught Gökhan’s eye.

“They shall not.”

Gökhan nodded in agreement.

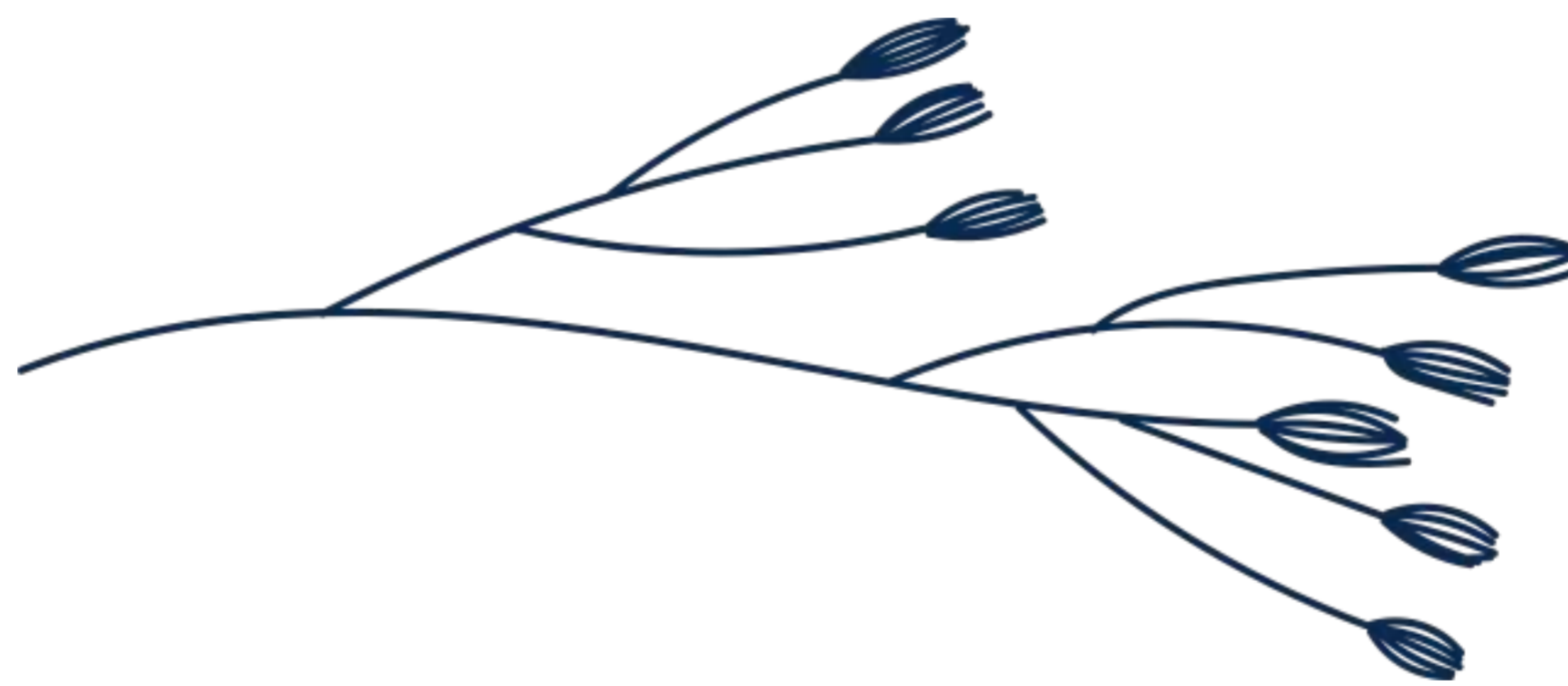
For a moment silence fell but for the click of bayonets. Then they rushed the soldiers. When Stephen drove his bayonet through the sniper's heart and saw those wild eyes glaze over, he knew *his* weapons were real. When he pushed the sniper's corpse out into the crowd, a gasp and a sigh rose up and the ambulance workers rushed in and freed the child.

“What did we give our lives for?” Stephen cried out. Gökhan put a hand on his shoulder; Stephen bent his head into his jacket and wept real tears.

*

It would be a while before Ibrahim returned to the war cemetery to repair the crater that had blown out the graves of Stephen Callaghan and Gökhan Yilmaz. But while their souls were not at rest, they still walked the streets of Gaza.

The two other soldiers did not walk with them, for their souls went straight to hell without any delay.



Susan Lanigan's novel *White Feathers* was published in 2014 and shortlisted for the Romantic Novel of the Year in 2015. She lives with her family by the sea in east Cork, Ireland.

Beyond

by Jibril Stevenson

Today, the fortress of Alcalá de la Cima is no more than an abandoned ruin on a remote peak in the Alpujarra, but they say in the village that barely survives in its shadow that it was the last Moorish stronghold to resist the tercios of Fernando and Isabel during the Mudejar Rebellion, and—not only that—that it never surrendered.

If you ever visit that village, itself nearly abandoned, go to Café El Último Suspiro at dusk and sit on the terrace, from where you'll see the old castle silhouetted against the reddish Andalusian sky, and over the ramparts of the highest tower, you will see the constellation Aquarius and its brightest star, Sadelmelik. And if there are not many customers, the owner, Don Javier, will point to that star, whose name means Luck of the King, with his wrinkled finger and tell you the whole story—supposedly repeated down through the generations since it was first told by a Moorish great-great-grandfather—of the last of the Moors of Alcalá de la Cima.

He will tell that at the beginning of the uprising, in the year 1499, when war and famine had not yet touched Alcalá de la Cima, some refugees from Granada arrived with news of the events in that city.

Among them was a Granadine Moor named Ustad Suleimán. He was not more than twenty-five years old, young to be a professor, but his companions confirmed he had graduated from the university in Fez, where he had read Aristotle and Avicenna, Bacon and El Biruni, Herodotus and El Idrisi, as was usual in that time and in that illustrious place. He knew how to mix elixirs and make clocks that counted not only hours and minutes but also the cycles of the sun and the moon. There was no philosophical or scientific topic that he could not discuss with the wisest sheikhs, friars, and alchemists of Europe and Africa.

No one understood why Suleimán would have left a future of fame and prosperity in Fez, or in Cairo, Damascus or Samarkand, to return to Andalusia, already suffering under the Castilian yoke. As is often the case, he had come back because of a woman.

Rebeca de Jesús was a beautiful conversa of about nineteen or twenty years old, the daughter of his first teacher, the ex-rabbi Isaac Abén Yuçuf. They did not dare to marry in Granada, where the marriage of Moors and Christians had been prohibited, so Rebeca and her father had fled to the mountains with Suleimán and thousands of other Moors.

“Why are you bringing these Nazarenes to our castle?” The rebels asked Suleimán, blocking his way with their halberds. But Andalusians have always had a poet’s soul, even in times of war, and when Suleimán told them his story, the rebels eagerly welcomed the three refugees. “Come in, come in,” they said. “Muslims, Christians or Jews, fugitive lovers will always find shelter in our Alcalá.”

“Thank you, my brothers. May the war remain far from your walls. But if it reaches here, I promise to defend your home as if it were my own.”

Suleimán had brought a little money from Granada and decided to use it to celebrate his wedding right there in the castle of Alcalá, with the permission, of course, of the local caudillo, Cid Mustafá. According to the custom of the country, women celebrated in the harem and men in the great hall. While his lovely bride, her hands and feet covered in henna, was enjoying pastries and sherbets with the ladies and maidens of the castle and village, Suleimán found himself seated between Cid Mustafá and his own father-in-law, Isaac. As is often the case when men meet, the conversation turned to politics and war.

“After the mutiny in Albaicín, the Moors of Granada were given three options: baptism, exile or the sword,” Suleimán said.

“The same options we were given seven years ago,” Isaac added.

“Will you choose the same one as your father-in-law?” Cid Mustafá asked, fixing his eyes on Suleimán.

Embarrassed, the former rabbi bowed his head, but Suleimán touched his shoulder with filial affection. “Cid,” he said, “I have married a daughter of the people of the Book, as our Holy Koran

allows us, but Allah has blessed me with Islam and who are we to reject the gifts of our Lord? Before apostatizing, I would flee beyond the sea, but before exile I would fight.”

“Well said, brother,” said Cid Mustafá. “If you want to fight, you have come to the right place. We do not have many weapons, but our mujaheddin are brave and we know these mountains like the curves of our women.”

Everyone laughed except Suleimán, still a virgin, and Isaac, who was perhaps thinking about what awaited his beloved daughter that night.

“If your grace would allow me,” said the groom to hide his embarrassment, “I have many ideas to improve weapons production.”

“Tomorrow we will see,” said the chieftain. “Now, enjoy your wedding.”

And so it went. Ustad Suleimán met with the rebel leaders and later with the blacksmiths and mechanics of the region. He taught them to modify their arquebuses and crossbows to reload faster and shoot farther than those of the Castilians, and, from the pots and pans of the villagers, he made cannons that fired explosive bombs full of shrapnel and Greek fire.

One day, Cid Mustafá found him in the garden, sitting under a pomegranate tree with an open notebook on his knees, so focused on his drawing that he did not hear the caudillo approaching.

“What is that?” asked Cid Mustafá.

“A machine,” Suleimán said when he had recovered from his surprise. “It is a flying machine. With the right materials, we could build an aerial armada to drop bombs on the enemy.”

“You mean that a man could fly in such a device? Ya Allah!”

“Is it not Allah who sustains the feluccas on the sea? Birds fly by his infinite grace, why not man?”

“Allah made the bird to fly and the man to walk, Ustad. And Allah does not love transgressors.”

“True, Cid, but would you say that because man is not a fish, man should not sail in a felucca?”

Cid Mustafá had no answer, and maybe he liked the idea of raining fire from heaven on the heads of the Castilians. But Suleimán was already lost in his thoughts.

“Isn't heaven just a sea of air? And what lies beyond the air? And beyond the stars?”

Hoping to save his ears from hearing such blasphemy, Cid Mustafá left Suleimán alone, muttering about the nature of the vacuum and light, of space and time.

Several months passed thus. Suleimán spent his days in the garden with his drawings and his ideas, and his nights in the arms of his beloved Rebeca.

But the Castilian onslaught did not stop. From east and west, the tercios approached, under the command of the Count of Tendilla and the Catholic King himself. Day after day, more refugees arrived, many mouths for little food, and famine became the vanguard of the Christian army.

In those days, the rebels would go out to raid the Castilians, setting up ambushes in the snow-covered mountain passes, taking as many horses and cattle as they could and stripping as many wagons as they could grab, whether their contents were bread or gunpowder. For every Muslim martyr, ten Christians fell to the ingenious weapons of Ustad Suleimán, but the Castilians kept coming, fiercer and more numerous than ants. They took city after city, fortress after fortress, until only Alcalá de la Cima was left, surrounded by its enemies like a lifeboat among sharks.

At first, the Castilians wanted to take the castle by storm, since their artillery could not reach it and they could not mine the living rock under the walls. The tercios threw themselves against the ramparts furiously, but to no avail. Before they could climb or batter the gates, hundreds fell to the arrows and bullets of the Moors, which pierced the strongest armor as if it were nothing.

But bullet and arrow were of little value against famine. The castle in which barely a hundred souls lived in peacetime was bursting with the people of the village and the refugees from city and country, more than a thousand men, women and children. Pomegranates, oranges, and dates from the gardens had long since run out, as well as bread and meats and all permissible animals. The people barely survived on grass and rats, and thanks to the Most High there were no pigs in the castle, or they would have eaten them too.

Cid Mustafá summoned his chiefs, among them Ustad Suleimán.

“My brothers,” said the caudillo, “the time has come to recognize reality. The Castilians are many and our mujaheddin few, and the reinforcements we expected from Africa have not materialized. Our women and children are starving, and so are our soldiers. Soon we will not even have the strength to defend the ramparts. If the Christians take our Alcalá by storm, they will put us all to the sword. Our women will end up in the beds of their captors and our children will be raised as Christians.”

“What do we do then, Cid?”

“If we give up now, maybe they'll give us the options Ustad Suleimán told us about. Those who can, will go beyond the sea, to Africa, and those who cannot travel—if they are baptized by force it is no sin, for Holy Allah knows what the heart holds.”

There was a murmur from the leaders, but even the fiercest mujaheddin knew he was right.

“Go home, brothers. Kiss your women and hug your children. Spend the night in prayer, begging the Most Holy to open another way for us, for Allah is capable of all things.”

They followed his order. After his nocturnal salat, Suleimán sat down with his Rebeca and Don Isaac. Each according to his rite, they prayed to the Most High to bring them out of that abyss. Then they went to sleep, not knowing what awaited them at dawn.

Perhaps two hours later, Suleimán woke up. He was sure the morning azan had not sounded yet, but a bluish light came through the window.

Without waking his wife or his father-in-law, Suleimán ran outside, where the guards and all the insomniacs wandering the street gaped, staring at the sky.

There in the middle of the courtyard something like a huge bird floated, surrounded by a blue aura like St. Elmo's fire.

“An angel!” said the people. “Allah has answered our supplications!”

Suleimán looked at the bird, remembering his drawings of flying machines, and knew it was something else entirely.

“It's... a ship,” he said. “An aircraft.”

The ship slowly lowered to the ground. Once on tierra firme, it was clear that it was no larger than a common rowboat, not counting the wings, which Suleimán noted were not like bird wings, but fixed as in his drawings. In what would be the bird's beak, a hatch opened.

The crowd held their breath, perhaps waiting for Jibril or Mikal to come out to announce Judgment Day, but it was a woman who came out. She was young, dark, taller than normal, and dressed strangely, but with nothing to denote her as more than a mortal female.

She spoke in Spanish, with a strange but intelligible accent. “Good evening, my people. Do you know the one called Ustad Suleimán?”

Suleimán had never seen this young woman, who was neither Granadine nor African in the way she spoke and dressed, but he was not surprised to hear his name. “At your service, my lady.”

“My name is Sara Bint Ismail. I have traveled far to see you.”

“On that aircraft? You flew from Africa, I imagine, beyond the sea.”

“Not from Africa, Ustad Suleimán. From much further away, in space and time.”

“You don't look Chinese... Are you from the New World?”

Sara laughed. “From *a* new world. You won't believe me, but I was born on the planet Darussalam, near the star Sadelmelik, in the year 1462 after the hegira.”

“1462 in the Christian reckoning?” asked Ustad Suleimán. “It is only 906 after the hegira right now.”

“After the hegira,” she repeated. “In your future.”

At another time, perhaps Suleimán would have doubted, but there in the courtyard of the besieged castle, staring at the aircraft that was still sparking with St. Elmo's fire, nothing seemed incredible to him. “I believe you. We asked for a miracle, a way out of this cursed abyss. Have you come to save us?”

“Something like that. I imagine that we should see Cid Mustafá to explain the situation, but according to our stories, you and Señora Rebeca are the persons of interest to us.”

“*My* Rebeca? Why?”

“I'll explain soon.”

Meanwhile, the guards had raised the alarm, and, accompanied by a growing crowd, Suleimán and Sara proceeded to the hall where Cid Mustafá awaited them.

“Bring Señora Rebeca,” Sara said when she had introduced herself to Cid Mustafá, “so I can tell everything all at once.”

Cid Mustafá nodded and two guards left and returned after a few minutes with Rebeca and her father, both still shaking off sleep.

“Cid,” Sara said, “Ustad, señora. As I have told you, I come from a distant planet and from a future time. And yes, I came to get you out of here, all who have endured in this castle. I would like to save all the Moors in Andalusia, and the Jews, conversos and moriscos as well, but it is not in my power.”

“I have seen your machine,” Mustafá said. “You barely fit in it, yourself.”

“It's just a ferry, like the rowboat hanging from the galleon. My interstellar ship is bigger than this castle. It is now tracing a low orbit, ready to land when the time is right.”

“Would we all travel in your ship?” asked Cid Mustafá. “But where?”

“To Darussalam,” she said. “But I warn you. It is a very long journey. Your grandchildren will be the first to set foot on your new world. That is why I wanted Señora Rebeca to be present. According to our stories, it is her grandson Uthman Ibn Amin who is to be the captain of the ship and the first caliph of Darussalam.”

Suleimán and Rebeca stared, silent.

“I don't claim to be a prophet or a fortune teller,” Sara said to break the silence. “For me, remember, this story has already happened.”

“No,” said Cid Mustafá. “This would mean leaving everything we know, everything we love, for what? To end our lives aboard your celestial ship? Allah save us from such transgression.”

“Cid,” Suleimán said. “We have asked Holy Allah for a way out and He has responded. If we surrender to the Castilians tomorrow, conversion, exile or death awaits us—”

“With permission,” Sara interrupted, “conversion is only a fleeting respite. In a hundred or so years, the Castilians will expel all the Moors from Spain, baptized or not.”

“We’ll go overseas, then, to Africa.”

“Africa won't give you permanent shelter either. The Spanish, Portuguese and later even the French and Italians will conquer Africa. It will win its independence again, no doubt, but only after centuries of slavery and colonization.”

“Cid,” Suleimán said again, “Señora Sara offers us something better. Let's go beyond, yes. Beyond the sea, beyond the sky, beyond the stars, to make a new world of peace and prosperity for all.”

“Let's see this ship then,” said Cid Mustafá. “Whoever wants to go will go and whoever wants to stay will stay, and may Allah bless and protect us all.”

*

History tells that on the first night of November 1501, the Spanish tercios surrounding the castle of Alcalá de la Cima witnessed a celestial phenomenon that historians and astronomers have always identified as a meteorite.

What it does not tell is that the Castilians were so terrified by the globe of fire that fell on the mountain that they left off the siege for several hours, imagining perhaps that it was some diabolical African sorcery or the revenge of the Muslim god who had saved Mecca from the Abyssinians and their elephants with a shower of burnt stones.

What it does not tell is that when the fire had gone out and the Castilians finally dared to climb to the castle, they found it completely empty, as if God Almighty had taken its inhabitants, just as the Bible promises for the Christian faithful.

What it does not tell is that while the soldiers of Fernando and Isabel hid their faces from such a terrifying occurrence, the Moors of Alcalá de la Cima climbed one by one into a spaceship so large that it contained bedrooms and workshops, granaries and gardens, aqueducts and fountains like a small city.

What it does not tell is that when Ustad Suleimán reached the end of the gangplank with his wife, Sara Bint Ismail stopped him.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You have important duties here on earth.”

“But you said that Rebeca will travel... that she has already traveled.”

“She will. You will not.”

“But our grandson... You don't mean that Rebeca must marry someone else?”

“Of course not. It's your grandson... *your* grandson, Suleimán.”

“Then how?”

“I didn't want to tell you until I was sure,” Rebeca said. “I am with child.”

“Al-lahu Akbar!” he said, his joy at the news tempered by the thought of parting with his beloved wife, the thought of never meeting his son. “But why must I stay?”

“You are a genius, Suleimán. You must formulate the scientific principles that will make space flight possible. You must preserve the memory of what has happened here and pass it on to subsequent generations.”

“But how?”

“Go to Granada. Get baptized if there is no way around it. Darussalam is not for Muslims only. Study, work, find yourself a disciple who will continue the work when you are gone.”

What history does not tell is that Suleimán cried more over staying in Andalusia than Boabdil had over leaving.

*

In *El Último Suspiro*, Don Javier will tell you the story of Ustad Suleimán and his Rebeca, but he did not read it in any book, nor did he hear it from any Moorish great-great-grandfather, since Don Javier is a descendant of the Galicians who colonized the valley after the departure of the Moors. It was I who told him the story the first time I came to see the castle of Alcalá de la Cima with my own eyes.

He will tell you the story of Ustad Suleimán and Rebeca, but not the story of that foreigner who spends almost every night on the café terrace, waiting for a call that never comes.

It's because I didn't tell him that part of the story. It is the story of a defeated Ustad Suleimán, who changed his name to Juan Pérez and embarked for the Indies, his head full of ideas and his heart of loneliness.

It is the story of his disciples who have spent five hundred years studying physics and astronomy, chemistry and metallurgy, in search of the solution to interstellar travel. We have not yet managed to build a spaceship, but I have solved another aspect of the problem.

Sara Bint Ismail's ship left the planet Darussalam around 1492 hijri, which is 2069 C.E. We know that she traveled back in time on her path to Earth, but not on her return to Darussalam. I believe that the energy required for the trip was so much that it could not be done twice. So, in what year would they reach Darussalam? Would they have time to develop the intellectual and industrial base to manufacture spaceships and time machines? I think that's why they commissioned Ustad Suleimán to continue research here on Earth.

I have finally managed to solve the equations of time travel, and I know how to implement it. I have prepared a message to convey to Darussalam, although it will take decades to arrive.

I had a position at the Arecibo Observatory, and I managed to send a message some time ago, but, after the radiotelescope collapsed, I had no way to receive any response. Luckily, some friends of mine found jobs at the Allen Array, designed specifically for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, and they promised to let me know if they detect any signal from the direction of Sadelmelik.

Now I spend every night in Don Javier's cafe, looking up at the sky above the castle of Alcalá de la Cima, where Sadelmelik shines like a small sun, waiting for the signal that will tell me the ship has arrived, that the celestial Andalusia has succeeded, that my efforts and those of my predecessors have not been in vain. Now, the way this world is going, Darussalam is needed more than ever, no?

Until they call me, how do I know if the story really happened or if it was just a fairy tale?

Time is getting shorter. If my message does not reach Darussalam, perhaps history will not happen, will not have happened. I sit here on the terrace, waiting for the call.

My cell phone rings.

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How he made it across

by Patty Somlo

The tenth time the agent asked Alejandro how he made it across, Alejandro gave him the same short weary answer.

“Sir, I walked.”

Alejandro was not too tall, with already dark skin browned further by the sun. His straight black hair looked as if it had been cut with the use of a bowl. He did not raise his head when he spoke.

The agent stood next to Alejandro’s chair, his right calf brushing the metal leg. He marched over to the desk and back, his steps heavy due to his substantial weight. If Alejandro had stood up, the agent would have towered over him by at least a foot. The agent’s hair was cut military style, and a pair of sunglasses hung like a weapon from his front uniform pocket.

Alejandro breathed in the acrid aroma of old coffee spilling from the agent’s breath. The agent had just leaned down, his face a few inches from Alejandro’s forehead.

“How did you make it across?” The agent paused, momentarily, after assaulting Alejandro with each word in slow motion for the eleventh time.

Alejandro hadn’t eaten for over twenty-four hours. His head ached and his stomach had grown sour. His mother had taught him to always tell the truth but the truth didn’t appear to be what the agent wanted.

“I walked across, sir,” Alejandro repeated for the eleventh time.

If the agent had known the entire truth, he would have needed to step outside, spit violently into the street, then stomp to the corner, yank open the heavy wooden door leading into Jake’s Bar, barely allowing his eyes to adjust, before blindly making his

way over to the bar and demanding a double Jack Daniels on the rocks. What the agent didn't know was that Alejandro Murghia Lopez left his village in the south of Mexico, close to the Guatemalan border, on a Monday, before the sun had come up. Teptapa was a mere sigh in the dusty road from Mexico City to Tegucigalpa, a town barely suggested by a tired *tienda* with an oft broken-down generator that kept lemon-lime and sweet orange *refrescos* cold. Yet, on a morning that was still cool and dark, Alejandro felt as if he were leaving more than a shrug of earth behind. He understood that he was also abandoning his life.

The distance was unfathomable. Being a simple man who believed in God, the Virgin Mary and the spirits of the corn, rain, moon and sun, Alejandro hadn't bothered to discover how far America was from Teptapa. Funny thing, Alejandro didn't know what America looked like, so how would he know once he arrived? He carried a few cold tortillas, a cupful of beans and another of rice, and a jar filled with water. On his feet, he wore a pair of Nike knockoffs a distant cousin had brought back from Tijuana.

By the fourth day of walking, Alejandro had lost track of time. He walked in the daylight and continued to walk at night. When he couldn't walk any more, he lay down to rest in doorways and under bridges and once even in an abandoned car.

The agent's head hurt, from his temples to a spot in back above his neck. *This job is getting to me.* That's what he said to his girl, Maria, at the bar last night, every time she begged him to dance. He'd planned to stick to Coors, since he needed to get up for work at five. But all the damned beer did was fill him up. That's why he started on dark, sweet, 100-proof rum.

They'd finished the new fence and couldn't understand how these cockroaches were still getting across. Computers, cameras, night-vision equipment and stuff the agent was still learning to operate were designed to alert the agents if anyone tried to cut a hole. The cameras were set to take a photograph and trip an alarm the second an illegal tried to get across.

So, how did the fucker do it? The agent sure wanted to know. His head was pounding something awful. He'd already taken enough painkillers to put a man out.

"You walked?" the agent said, his right hand clutching the back of the chair where the little Mexican sat. He looked like an Indian to the agent.

"Yes, sir," Alejandro whispered.

"What'd you say?"

"I walked, sir," Alejandro replied, more loudly now.

Alejandro had grown dizzy as the last day wore on. Luckily, he was still headed in the right direction. The poor man wouldn't have known if he'd gotten turned around. He had dreamed of coming to America for even longer than he could remember. His desire to reach the place had become the engine moving him forward, as the power in his legs was wearing out.

"What I'm trying to figure out is how'd you get past the fence?" The agent had pulled a wooden toothpick from his pocket and began to use it to clean the spaces between his top front teeth.

"I don't understand," Alejandro said, ashamed that his English was so poor.

"*La frontera,*" the agent shouted, the Spanish words carrying the twang of South Texas. "*Como te vas atras?*"

The agent mumbled under his breath, without waiting for Alejandro's response. *How the fuck did you do it?*

Alejandro shuffled his feet and tried to calm the beating of his heart. He saw himself sitting on his porch back in Teptapa. What he couldn't explain was how a man feels, right before the sun comes up, when the silence of the long black night suddenly gets broken by the rooster's morning call. Alejandro couldn't have described the way his spirit grew large and lifted him up, watching the fiery orange ball stretch up into the sky, streaked

with shredded pink clouds. He had a good idea the agent wouldn't understand that as the sun climbed, lighting up the fields, Alejandro began to believe he could do anything he wanted.

“Did you pay a *coyote*? Did someone help you across?” the agent asked now.

Alejandro slowly shook his head from side to side. He couldn't explain that the man sitting in this chair was not the one who left Teptapa over a month before. That man, he was ashamed to admit, had collapsed onto the ground, before he even had a chance to try and make it across. At the moment when he hit the dirt, he was on the Mexican side, so close to America it would have taken only a few steps north to get across. His body dropped and the dust rose all around. For some reason, the wind suddenly picked up.

The wind is to blame, Alejandro wanted to say. Instead, he swallowed the words, just as they began to form in his mouth.

The agent walked heavily across the linoleum floor and out the door. Moving from the chilled air inside, the agent felt as if he'd been slapped with a hot dry towel. He looked down the road, where the air wavered above the pavement. A cold beer would taste awfully good right now, he thought.

Dust buried the tips of his boots a few minutes after he started to walk. He knew it was against patrol procedures to leave an alien alone in the office uncuffed. If the truth be told, the agent hoped Alejandro would take off. He understood that the Mexican wasn't about to tell him how he made it across. He'd let the little guy vanish and both of them would be off the hook.

By the time the agent returned to the office, after nursing one cold Coors Light, Alejandro was heading toward San Diego. He had gone past the point of hunger. He understood that on the Mexican side of the border something otherworldly had taken place -- the man he had been was turned into dust, after his last breath released itself and his heart made one final clap. The dust of Alejandro Murghia Lopez, a poor farmer from Teptapa, lifted

into the wind above the border and drifted across. As it cleared the fence meant to keep Mexicans like Alejandro out, the dust didn't even bother to hide.

Alejandro entered the city of San Diego at dusk. It took him no time to blend in with the other men from villages where light at night came from the stars.

Months after, he found himself on a warm clear evening, looking up at the sky. He imagined that the poor farmer from Teptapa was hanging suspended there, wondering whether coming to America had been worth giving up his life. At that moment, the quiet, copper-skinned man assured his old self that he was glad he had made it to the other side. Though life wasn't easy, as the poor farmer had so often fantasized, this American guy, Al Lopez, was doing all right.

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Patty Somlo's books, *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing), *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), have been Finalists in several contests. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Delmarva Review*, *Under the Sun*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and over 40 anthologies. She received Honorable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the J.F. Powers Short Fiction Contest, and had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays.

Numbered Days

by Rania El-Badry

Day 61

Khadeeja hadn't been able to sleep all night. For six hours, all she did was toss and turn in bed, staring at the ceiling, the wall, or the empty space he used to occupy beside her. She was already getting dressed by the time the alarm went off at 5 a.m. She sat at the edge of the bed motionless, waiting for the call to *Fajr* prayer. Once she had prayed, she went to Adam and Safiya's room and nudged the two of them awake. Most days they would normally whine, but that day their eyes sprung wide open at the slightest touch and they jumped out of bed as though they had just been waiting for her signal.

It took her less than half an hour to pack up the food, get them dressed, and pile them up in the car. She turned the key in the ignition and the radio started broadcasting the Quran channel. The kids were mostly quiet in the back seat, only asking her questions every now and then, keeping her mind off what was ahead. Half way through the two-hour road trip, she caught sight of them in the rearview mirror, slumped against each other.

The car reached the prison just shy of sunrise, with the sun peeking over the horizon in the chill of the winter. Already there was a line of heavily dressed people in front of the gate, but it was just a handful of people. Standing in the line, she adjusted Adam's beanie and Safiya's gloves, taking in the sight of the other women around her.

"Assalam alikoum," she said to the first woman ahead of her. The woman turned to her, face fixed in a dull expression. *"Wa alikoum assalam,"* the woman replied, then continued, asking, "First time?"

Khadeeja wondered what it was about her that made it so clear.

"Yes. My husband has only been in for a couple of months, and this is the first visit we've been allowed. What about you?"

"Not the first time," replied the woman, turning to look in front of her again.

She tried to chat with the other women in the line. Some were eager, others were hesitant. By the time the gates had opened, she realized that the hesitant ones were usually the ones whose husbands had been in for a long time. Years. She made sure the kids were otherwise preoccupied when she talked to those wives.

They were the third family allowed in after the gates opened. She signed up her name, presented her ID, filled the visit request, all without taking off her coat in the sweltering heat of the prison. It was after the security officers started the processing that she sat down in the visiting area and slipped out of her coat and helped the kids out of theirs.

It was almost an hour later when Mohamed showed up, flanked by officers on either side, handcuffs still in hand. Tears swelled in her eyes just at the sight of him; he had lost a few pounds, but just the ones that were already making him overweight. His face was populated by a beard he would never have kept out of the prison walls. But his eyes were as they had always been, lighting up at the sight of her and the kids.

“Baba!” The kids called out, rushing to him even before he was near their table. He kneeled down and tried to hug them. Kissed one then the other till prompted by the officers to stand up again. He stood up with little complaint as they led him to the table and undid his handcuffs. She fidgeted with her sleeves till his cuffs were off and then threw herself into his chest, allowing his arms to envelope her in public for the first time. She just cried silently, indulging in his warmth for the first time in almost two months.

“Hey,” he whispered, running his hand over her back.

Day 483

The ringing of the alarm dragged Khadeeja out of sleep. She stretched her arms across the bed, her hands resting on the cold left side before groping their way to her night table and turning off the alarm. She peeked out from under the covers and looked at the glow-in-the-dark handles of the old contraption. 4 a.m.

By the time she had gotten out of the shower and prayed, her mother was knocking on the door of the apartment. She whispered instructions to her mom as she got dressed. She took one last look into the kids' room before heading out on her own, seeing only their backs. She knew they were still mad at her.

The drive to prison was more tedious when she was alone. Even when they were asleep, the kids were at least some sort of company. Now she just killed the hours of the drive by listening to the radio. She flicked through the channels, skipping the news and Quran channels, only to settle on a channel playing the soundtrack from *Les Misérables*. Her fingers tapped the steering wheel in tandem with the music.

By the time she had reached the prison, there was a long line upfront. Lots of time to kill. She glanced at the young lady standing in front of her, taking in her round belly. He couldn't have been in for long then. Khadeeja thought she had been subtle but looked up to find the girl staring at her.

“Assalam alikoum, I'm Khadeeja.”

“Wa alikoum assalam. Mariam,” came the girl's reply. Her eyes zeroed in on Khadeeja's wedding band. “Is your husband detained here as well?”

Khadeeja nodded. “It's been a year and... four months now,” she said.

The girl's eyes went wide. “Is he from the—I mean is he a political prisoner?” came her hesitant question.

Khadeeja nodded again, gesturing to the long lines, and replied, “These are all here for political prisoners. You become familiar with the faces after some time.”

Mariam shook her head vigorously. “No, no!” she cried, “We will get him out of here soon!” Khadeeja watched as the tears choked her up, causing her body to heave and tremble. She patted Mariam's back and gave her one of the many tissues in her possession.

It was close to noon when she was admitted into the prison. It had been oppressively hot outside and there was little relief from the harsh sun in the stone walls. She went through the routine as she always did, same as each of her monthly visits. She had each step, form and relevant piece of information memorized by now.

She was in the visiting area for a little more than half an hour when Mohamed showed up. His cheekbones were jaunting out of his face, creating shadows in its contours. She jumped up to greet him as soon as he was near the table, accepting his open arms for a quick hug and kiss on the cheek before sitting down. He stood there, staring at her for a moment before blinking and taking the seat in front of her.

“Hey,” she said, a smile finding its way on her face as she reached for his hand. He grasped her fingers tightly in his.

“Hey,” he replied. “Where are the kids?”

“I told you last time they weren’t going to be able to make it. Adam has a test tomorrow and you know how coming here gets him worked up.”

“Yes, yes... and Safiya?”

“She... she has a school project to finish,” she replied.

He stared at their entwined fingers for a few moments. She followed his eyes there, noting the miniature red dots that riddled the space between his fingers and along the folds of his wrist.

“And you? How are you?” She asked, giving labor to a question whose answer she already knew.

“Well... well... *alhamdulillah*.”

“Are you able to sleep? Do they let you read? Are you eating well? Do they let you see a doctor?”

He nodded absentmindedly to each of the questions, his fingers grazing hers. She stared at the burrows in his skin.

"Are you well?" he whispered.

Dragging her eyes away from their fingers, she caught his eyes. "Yes, yes, I am. I got promoted at work *alhamdulillah*. I might be able to afford that new lawyer—"

He tightened his fingers on hers and shook his head. "You'll need that money for the kids' school next year. We already know they won't reopen—"

She pulled her fingers from his. "You don't know that!"

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes as he replied, "Let's give it a couple more months and see if anything changes."

Day 1,213

She slept through her alarm. It was only her mom's urgent knocking on the apartment door that woke her and pulled her out of bed. Getting the kids prepared was going to take forever so she just reminded her mom to wake them up in time for their sports training sessions. They'd let her have it later. She drove quite a bit over the speed limit, listening to nothing but the low hum of the air conditioner. It was supposedly the hottest summer in over a decade.

By the time she reached the prison, it was the longest line she had ever seen and the gate had already been opened. She stood in the line for more hours than her podcasts could keep her preoccupied, but she left her earbuds in. She spotted Mariam quite a bit ahead, balancing her little boy on her hip. Khadeeja thought of calling out to her but stopped herself at the last minute. Better to just be. Occasionally, the younger women around approached her, but any time she saw someone come too close, she fiddled with her phone and adjusted her earbuds.

When she finished her paperwork and entered the visiting area, Mohamed was already seated. He sat there, still cuffed, his long red fingers drumming on the table. She stood at the door a moment and looked at him. His bones were piercing at his skin; the hunger strike he and his fellow inmates were on had been

going on for close to 30 days now. When she approached, he looked up. He struggled to stand up, grasping the edge of the table for help. Coming to a stop beside him, she kissed the crown of his head and sat down. They stared at each other across the table, hands laid on the surface in front of them.

"Hey," she said, as he nudged his finger tips against hers.

"You're late... I've been waiting... waiting for... hours," he whispered.

She drew her hands away and stared at the cuffs of her sleeves.

"I'm sorry. I had a late night at work."

"Where are the kids? I made Adam a birthday present," he whispered.

She pulled at the loose threads dangling from the cuffs, one after the other, piling them in front of her.

"Deeja?" he insisted.

She felt her ears burning a hole from under her scarf.

"I couldn't get them ready in time."

Mohamed covered his face with his hands and rocked back and forth in his seat. She looked at the rest of the people in the visiting area, the other uniting couples, and wondered how long each of them had been doing this. She saw Mariam with her husband. Two of their hands were interlocked while their free hands tickled their toddler. She looked back at Mohamed, as his fingers wiped down his face, fingernails scratching as they dragged down. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Are you sleeping?"

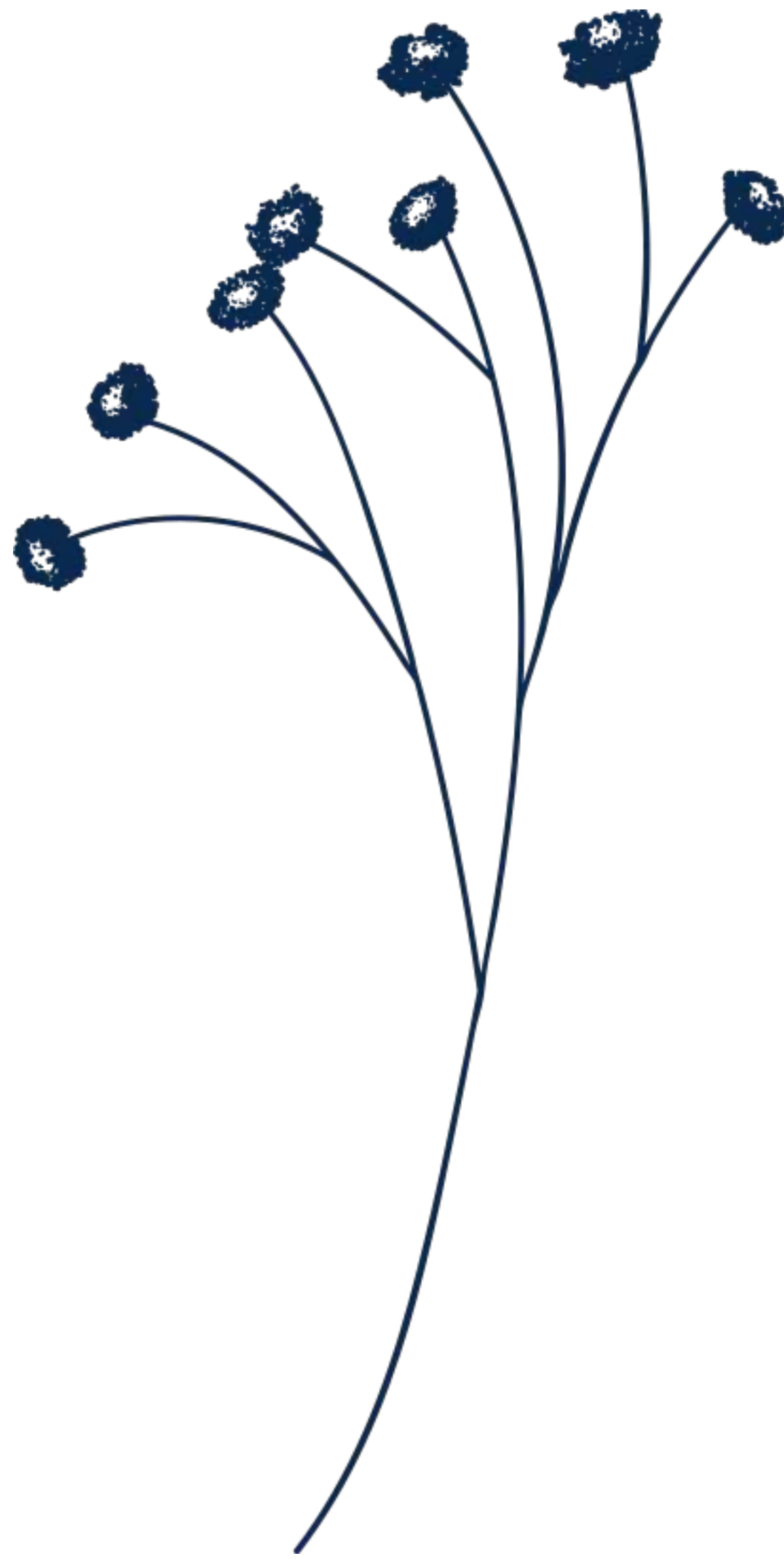
He held her gaze, his head moving barely a centimeter to the left and right.

“Won’t you eat? Drop the strike?”

His head moved again, less than a centimeter to the left and right.

“Mohamed?” she implored.

His face contorted, struggled, trying to stay in control but she could see the tightness in his cheeks and hear the labored breathing. His eyes bored into hers for what seemed like hours before his eyelids slid close and his bare bone fingers crept across the table, waiting for her fingers to meet them.



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The Big Bad Word

by Mona Zanefer

I

You can't say I wasn't asking for it when I eventually got fired. What finally cut the cake were four syllables. My superior used to tease me that my writing style was predictable in its precision; I was too meticulous with my word choice and I had to loosen up. I was not so sure. I might not have had foreign words sprinkled for a nonchalant bourgeois effect but I certainly had jargon. It partly irked me that there was a level of expectation from me—that they expected I would write a certain way although I personally never felt like I fit in that box.

It took me two incidents and a half before I broke out of that box, before the four syllables were laid out in front of them, the first of which occurred not long after I joined the newspaper agency.

It had taken several months before my boss had stopped being so unsettled by me stepping out of the office during lunch breaks on Friday for prayers. The initial reason he had given me was that no employee was excused to step out of the building during work hours. But after Peter from *Op-Ed* had successfully requested he take his lunch breaks at home so he could pick his son from school on the way, I had taken my boss, Felix Friedrichs, to a side and had tried again. Or rather, he'd met me in my corner at an office party. I mostly did linger in a corner that day. I had no other civil option but to extract myself from the alcohol in the middle of the office. To my relief, there were three others in this corner; another Muslim, a recovering addict and a man teetotalling for Lent. We had been confined to a discussion on the weather for the coming weekend's games when Felix Friedrichs approached me. I discussed the matter with him.

'I cannot allow it,' he said. Two employees dashed past us, tickled by a prank somebody had just pulled behind us. Felix guffawed. 'Slow down!'

My colleagues were around the table of finger food and drinks. Non-alcoholic beverages had initially been the only drinks on the menu but that fell apart when some brought beer, nudging me to mix it with water and call it an Islamic low carb beer. Laughing—not directly at my expense but a result of the mood—they wrapped their arms around me in comradery. One hugged me and he smelled vile.

‘Schmeichel,’ he said to me, ‘why are there ten bottles? There’s nine of us.’

‘There’s ten of us.’

‘Ten,’ another corroborated.

Vile Man eyed every individual and counted under his breath. ‘It is ten, yes. I forgot to count myself.’

This had been nearly a year ago and to their credit, they had since stopped teasing me to drink alcohol, being accustomed to my ways. It had been an unofficial department party after office hours, toasted to our newspaper agency being lauded in a recent magazine feature for our precedent of diversity. But it was obvious it had been an excuse to have a closed celebration.

‘My deepest regret, Tajidar,’ Felix concluded in my corner and turned his head back to the laughter.

At the time, it had only been my sixth week at the agency. After the first two Fridays of attending the mosque and being told I couldn’t, I was blessed to have dodged the confrontation for the most part since the three subsequent Fridays rested on a public holiday, an emergency half-day and a call in for being sick.

A couple of days after the party, every opportunity to discuss it with Felix seemed like a missed chance. Even when I knocked on his office door at its earliest, he had to be whisked away to another department two floors above. He was congenial to me

that morning and I could read the signs of communal breakfast at the *Wir Magazine* department on his face. I temporarily gave up after I once found myself walking past his office six times in the span of an hour. It was not worth it. So that Friday and the two that followed, I left the premises during my lunch break and returned before the hour was up, the convenience lying in the fact that there was a mosque ten minutes away.

Eventually Felix found it out, after a coworker had been looking for me. My coworker, not finding me in my cubicle or the cafeteria, had harmlessly brought it upon himself to ask every department on every floor of my whereabouts. This hunt for me landed onto Felix's ears who I was sure had an inkling of my whereabouts but chose not to disclose it, for better or for worse. He called me into his office later that day and his usual demeanour was subdued. When it came down to it, I had a plethora of reasons why it would be unreasonable to decline my request, after which Felix let me know that it was not the crux of the issue. Others, yes, he said, go about during the lunch break but he has a record of it, which would prove useful in cases like this. Cases like what? I asked for clarification. Cases when you are required for work, such as a colleague needing you, he said.

'You shouldn't go against office policies. You were of course instructed not to leave the premises during lunch break.'

'Could you clarify the difference between my objective and that of some of the others who leave, please?'

He hesitated.

'Religion, Tajidar,' he said conclusively.

And there it was. Although it'd always been obvious, it had been so long before such clarity was given to me that my heart sank at the admission of this word. The density of the word hung in the air, palpable as though I were a child apprehending a scolding. I pulled out my final card, knowing the very words that could

trigger a man like Felix Friedrichs.

‘So, Der Spektrum does not tolerate religion?’

‘It’s not our agency, Tajidar. Many are not comfortable with public show of religion.’

‘But the agency does comply to it, yes?’ I said and before I could come across as aggressive, despite my forcibly equanimous tone, I added, ‘Sorry, Felix, just trying to understand everything.’

‘No, no, go right ahead. Yes, the agency wants to ensure the comfort of every employee so we try not to publicise religion.’

‘But I’m not publicising anything. I just leave after lunch break and return before it ends. I’ve never exceeded the hour outside the premise.’

‘But what if somebody is looking for you?’

‘During my lunch break?’

‘Ja.’

‘I mean, I—we could always go over it after?’ My father had once taught me that politeness could come in many forms, one of which was questioning. Never assume, always doubt.

‘You were late today.’

I could not contend with that. I had returned ten minutes after the lunch hour, having been caught up with the mosque’s charity collection for a man the imam knew from Ramallah in Palestine.

‘Some things can’t wait,’ Felix said.

‘But people do leave, right? There are records of others, you mentioned.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘But you never gave me one. You just left. It would save anyone from searching up and down for you, like Arne had. I’d have just let them know, you know.’

I thought for a moment. ‘So, is the problem that I had not informed you?’

He dipped his chin, quailing under the infantile measure of the situation put in that light. ‘No,’ he drawled.

I looked at him expectantly. I knew he was clutching for straws by then and resigned to nodding to whatever he said thereafter. There was no point in arguing after all. After agreeing to whatever he had said, more so because I was growing tired and less to avoid hurting his ego, he was softening, with me under his thumb. Finally, with a helpful entry of a colleague to break the discussion, Felix Friedrichs looked at me, feigned a sigh and accepted my request. He then dispersed me.

Although he never said it, I knew it was on a recent account of a few senior employees releasing themselves without ado to watch some town club matches. I later found out that Arne, the coworker who led the inadvertent manhunt, had wanted me to show him how to use a feature on Excel.

*

I would be lying if I said that being painted as a Religion Man didn’t gnaw at me at times. Some colleagues from other departments, the ones whose personal perimeters closed after project analyses, were friendly but it was the restraint in their countenance coupled with unsaid comments that made me feel like being Religion Man was inconvenient to others.

I argued with myself that I too had not extended my borders and for a while there was a stable bridge with conversations about the football transfer market, the 50+1 rule when incensed by our sole English coworker’s lack of faith in it and recaps of last weekend’s

games in view of the forthcoming ones. Yet, outside this overpass, with their side-eyed shots and zipped-up half smiles whenever I excused myself for one reason or another, it felt like labour. Laborious to be mindful of my religious observations, more so after word got out that I wouldn't be eating the entirety of the following month while I was at work. (It was a bit of cross-departmental gossip.) Laborious to always gauge my level of restraint.

Nevertheless, as all supporters of the beautiful game would know, what is restraint at a nil-nil knockout game? It proved to be that half-incident: so slight but such do ultimately play out well in the grand scheme of things.

We had been watching the DFB Pokal Round of 16 in the lounge one night. It was between a Bundesliga club and a fourth-tier club, when in stoppage time, the latter were awarded a penalty.

Allahu Akbar! I yelped, which nicely cut through the hubbub.

My arms were folded in anticipation. I had never been the kind to turn my back to the game at penalties. But the dilemma was obvious. The team's main striker by then had already been substituted after picking up an injury around the game's hour mark. Their second-choice penalty taker had missed their team's last two penalties. So, who would go? Their veteran defender. The match ended up being the biggest upset that year, but all I could think of was how, after my declaration of God's Greatness, everybody save a few from the *Sports* department stopped leaning over to weigh in on the tactics with me.

II

I could picture Felix Friedrichs in his office, behind his desk with plans to skim through my feature on how different German clubs extended their hands of support to Ukraine in wake of the invasion. He'd have a cup of black coffee in his hands, an image I conjured up after witnessing it multiple times when working at a

company in Singapore. But, no, I thought, as I secured the box of my belongings in my hands; Felix Friedrichs would not have just a cup of black coffee. He'd have currywurst, plucking one by one with a plastic fork between each sip of black coffee. And then, as he took a gulp, goggling at the screen from the corner of his eyes, he'd spot it. The coffee would halt at the top of his throat, the bitterness of the bean peppering his tongue en route, once he caught sight of the cataclysmic four syllables.

*

When I was fired, my time with Der Spektrum had been over a year and I assumed I had caught wind of the office's naughtiest word, Religion. Even after I tried my best, I felt like a pantomime who acted in accordance with a given script. I soon began eating lunch in my cubicle, avoiding the cafeteria circuit as a whole. I could not say my colleagues were not nice to me. They were, but what good was that when their niceness was aimed at a fraud, their fraud? And the foolery of it all was that I was still part of a reshoot for the agency's recruitment campaign.

But as it turned out, Religion was just one of two naughty words, the second one's notoriety being prescribed to me by Sascha from *Sports*, who one day noticed my black and white keffiyeh-printed pin. I had pinned it to my bag next to all the other pins and key tags gifted to me over the years, one even from Arne as an apology for the trouble.

'I'm not really against this movement,' Sascha said as he pointed to my pin, 'but nor am I for.'

He said he only wished he knew better. I could already tell Sascha was speaking to me in good faith, so I removed the pin and never put it on again. Sascha move to International Affairs a month later.

I had not put much thought into my keffiyeh-printed pin after that—after all, I had to compensate for my Religion Man status—until, one day, Jeremy Turner asked me to help him fix the Wi-Fi

on his computer. While we played around with the troubleshooting settings, I noticed the Der Spektrum article Jeremy had been reading, a feature on environmental activism in Middle Eastern villages. There was a quote on top of the page which read: ‘It’s easy to pick the discarded cans that are lying around the trees. It’s mostly from the kids after they play football on the street,’ an Israeli-Arab activist in Haifa said.

‘Huh,’ I uttered and the internet was finally restored.

‘Thanks!’ Jeremy said.

I knew who the discarded can activist was of course, having read a few articles about him on some digital publications months before. But in every single one of them, Jamil Yassir had been a Palestinian or a Palestinian born in Israel. Israeli-Palestinian at most. Yet here he was, in Der Spektrum’s archives: an Israeli-Arab.

III

It was last Tuesday when I was called into the boardroom. For some reason I had not expected many people to be there. In fact I had streamlined the entire meeting to just a dialogue between Felix and myself. But there I was awkwardly entering the room with Felix Friedrichs, my immediate superior at Sports, Hannes Weber, the Managing Director of Der Spektrum, Karl Wiese, one of the company’s financial advisors and Maxime Hoffman, whose face was familiar but job description much less so. Hannes gestured me towards one of the lone seats behind the long black table.

Earlier that day I had taken it upon myself to drink two litres of water after suffering from intense headaches for the past two days. It was a suggestion from a coworker. Everything apparently was fixable if I just drank more water. In the beginning, I assumed my coworker to be regurgitating another tip he’d come across one of his newer parenting books. He was a new father and I often found

him with a book. He was right of course. Water did do miracles, even for my back. I was halfway through curing my headache when Felix Friedrichs found me in my cubicle and told me that they'd preponed the meeting and *would I be ready in ten minutes*. I said yes and, after he was gone, I chugged down 200ml of water as though it'd secure a clear mind for the meeting.

'Tajidar Muhammad,' Hannes said, peering at a file.

I smiled but as he did not, I smiled at the remaining panel who could not reciprocate the gesture either.

Hannes handed the file two seats away to Maxime, who plucked out his eyeglasses. Maxime began to read:

To the readers,

We are deeply dismayed over an article that was digitally published on 24th April. Der Spektrum's standard of publication has always been of utmost tolerance and correctness. Since its infancy, we at the agency have prided ourselves in the truth and accuracy in what we report. However, we acknowledge that on 24th April, with a digital column under the Sports section, we failed to uphold this standard. We have since corrected the article and are currently investigating how this had been forwarded for publication. We would like to apologise to all our readers for this lapse. We are, as we have been since our inception, a loyal supporter and friend of Israel and we will continue to unwaveringly be so.

The more Maxime spoke, the more his words seemed garbled to me, as though the words had pasted itself to one another. When he was done, he kept his eyeglasses on and closed the file. The panel looked at me expectantly and I wished I had listened better to the message they were planning to publish on social

media in the next few hours. Somewhere in the back of my mind the Tottenham gaffe that occurred years ago sprouted. Of course, it had not been a gaffe. A gaffe was accidentally releasing the starting eleven two hours before a game. But to post memes of the club your company was to sponsor, mocking Spurs' empty trophy cabinets, was bold. An Arsenal supporter surely. I pursed my lips to stop a smile that was breaking.

'Tajidar,' Hannes said, 'are you aware of the extent we will have to rectify this in the wake of your mistake? We'll of course have to publish our findings and a report. That's what they want. Transparency is easier to assuage.'

'And this does not cover damage control on social media for your careless mistake,' Karl Wiese said.

They proceeded to talk amongst themselves as though they were discussing the matter for the first time. I relaxed with the spotlight having been rescinded from me. Twice, Felix, who for the most part was not embroiled in the discussion, caught my eye.

'As you know,' Hannes said, 'Der Spektrum will publish a newsletter to commemorate Israel's independence next month.'

'It was not a mistake,' I blurted.

Their eyes were fixed on me and a few seconds passed by without a word except a shuffle of feet outside.

'Excuse me?'

'I didn't make a mistake. I knew what I was doing.'

'What are you saying?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

‘Are you saying you intentionally wrote what you wrote?’ Karl said.

‘Yes.’

Imperceptibly turning his face towards Felix, Karl glared at my immediate superior and wore the countenance of somebody whose suspicions had just been proven. I did not know whose face I should be looking at so I laid my eyes onto Maxime’s, whose glasses were cloudy.

‘This, I hope you know,’ Hannes Wiese said, ‘is a grave matter.’

‘We could report you, Mr Muhammad,’ Karl interjected.

Hannes stared at him. ‘But we won’t,’ he said. And how gracious he must have felt.

*

It was nearly twelve when I was done packing my stuff. I did receive sympathy from a few colleagues but I wondered how long that would last once they knew what I had done. Cubicle gossip? I didn’t mind that so much. I did however mind being told I was wrong without me having to justify it.

‘Who is Tugba Can?’

I looked up and found Arne holding one of the books I had laid on top of my box.

‘The author,’ I said and immediately regretted it. My humour which had proven questionable at times would not land on Arne. He had an honest face, one that was open enough to take everything in.

‘She was a Turkish writer,’ I said. ‘Was pretty popular in the eighties.’ I didn’t know if I should continue.

For the first time I looked at Arne entirely. His face was not only open metaphorically but every feature of his led to its making; his eyes were rimmed with blonde lashes, bleached enough to miss it, his mouth widened for a hearty grin but never imposed itself to speak beyond measure, and his forehead was broad.

'It was during the time the Muslim woman's hijab, the headscarf, was banned,' I finally said. 'She defied it. Many times.'

On my way downstairs, my phone vibrated in my back jeans pocket. I didn't have to pull it out to know that it was the notification for dhuhr, the afternoon prayer time I fought for on Fridays. And here I was, leaving by their accord.

On the first floor, I passed by the lounge. The room was ajar and air-conditioned and I found Felix Friedrichs watching telecommunication again. His back was to me. The advert was of a serum that grew hair again.

I had looked at Felix at the long table during the meeting. He of all people could not have mistaken my presumed gaffe for a gaffe. He knew how deliberate I was with my words. He had always relaxed himself with it, knowing full well that it eased his own job. I was certain that when he first read my feature on the DFB clubs' show of goodwill to Ukraine, he could not have missed it. He could not have missed the four syllables I wedged in where I wrote about Borussia Dortmund's banner of solidarity for Ukraine. He could not miss the ensuing sentence, on how the club would ironically go on and announce a tour in Israel four days later.

I. Ron. Ik. Lee. The four syllables that got me the boot.





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**CREATIVE
NON FICTION**

The Long Shadow of the Muslim Male

by Kris Evans

1.

Somalia. Or rather, al-Shabbab. Because that was the name of the country that we visited in the documentary. Al-Shabbab, al-Shabbab, al-Shabbab. Words repeated so many times that I wondered if the presenter was trying to conjure them out of thin air. Like in a horror movie. Meanwhile, the sound designer clearly wished he was scoring *The Terminator* because everything, even the perfectly normal landing in Mogadishu, was just a little bit terroristic. You have seen this documentary many times. About Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and always – always – about Somalia. And the men who live there.

The imminent-danger-touchdown in the Somali capital set the tone for what was to follow. We would not be seeing entrepreneurs setting up businesses, or people drinking tea in cafés, or walking on the beach and swimming in the sea, or families in their non-destroyed houses (there are actual dwellings in Somalia that are still standing although you wouldn't have known it), and we would not be mentioning their region-leading mobile telecoms, the genius of having a banana on the side of every meal, or why their homes smell so good. Nor would we get any sense of the jokes and expressions Somalis pass the day with, their long tradition of poetry, their pivotal role in Islamic history and scholarship. We wouldn't even have a bit of a wander around the mall in Mogadishu to buy a shirt. Nope, none of that.

So instead we are escorted by the decidedly less humanising armoured cars of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Which tied into another problem: alongside uncritical support of their mission, no one in the documentary thought it necessary to declare that, 'We are guests of a foreign UN force, so the Somalia we're going to see will be at their discretion and through their eyes.' So we can't be surprised when the presenter plus a fleet of military vehicles and 20+ soldiers all land in a village on the outskirts of the city to find the local

people not super interested in talking to them. Armoured cars and machine guns put a dampener on meet-cutes. That's why they don't use them in romantic comedies.

The documentary moves on. We meet some young girls playing basketball and a doctor at a maternity hospital, although by now the threat of al-Shabbab is replaced by the long shadow of the Muslim male. In the entire documentary, no Somali man is featured. Not one. Which worked perfectly, as he could then fulfil his important role as the unseen threat, always pushing down, pressuring, blocking, oppressing. He is powerfully present, even though we never see him. Because in the end, Somalia is FGM and it is pirates and it is American helicopters falling out of the sky and, most of all, it is al-Shabbab repeated again and again and again. This is not to minimise the outrage that is FGM. In fact, noting that Somalia does indeed face extremely serious problems is not the issue. It's that Somalia must *only* be these problems. The country cannot be or have or demonstrate anything else. The small pile of books about Somalia on my shelf attest to this. So I create a quick litmus test: When discussing one man in particular, the religious and nationalist leader Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, does the writer refer to him as the Mad Mullah? Is this nickname explained, does it appear in quotation marks, is there any interrogation as to who called him this and why? In other words, did he just go, 'Hey everyone, you know what would be a really cool nickname for me?' Or does the book address *why* colonial powers might want to reduce him to this name, and whether the name in fact says more about the occupying forces fighting him than it does about the man himself? If a book blindly quotes colonial sources, if it shows that level of laziness, that lack of desire to engage, then it's like showing up in an armoured car. You should have stayed at home.

So there's a lot going on in my head while I wait for my friend. I'm in a café in the Barton Hill area of Bristol, nestled close to the city centre yet cut off as though there were a wall around it, an imposed banlieue. There's no heating in the café, so I sit there in a giant jacket like I'm about to go on an expedition. A football match from the day before plays on a silent screen. Behind the counter is a man in his early twenties. A couple of other men sit

in a corner shouting over to him, and to each other, and to someone on the phone, all at the same time. I'm waiting for AbdiSalam – a man in his early fifties with a goatee and a workload that seems to defy the number of hours in the day. Alongside his day job, and doing some teaching, he's the guy who gets the council to remove the piles of rubbish which have built up in the car park opposite the café; and he's the guy who, when the underpass floods and for weeks children get soaking wet feet en-route to school each day, goes to the media and embarrasses the authorities until they clean it up.

The café where I sit is two doors down from a biker bar. Or rather, since this is the UK, a pub where bikers congregate. This much is clear from the title of the establishment, which informs passers-by that this is the west coast charter of the outlaw motorcycle group. The muddy banks of the River Severn may not match what the words 'west coast' form in the mind, but when these men depart from the pub, the ground shakes with the sound of Harley V-twin engines.

AbdiSalam used to be my Somali language teacher; then we just became friends and continued to meet up to chat; then I started meeting *his* friends at the mosque nearby; and then I became part of a community. We usually meet on Saturdays – me and AbdiSalam, not me and the bikers. And today the café is only the starting point because after a quick greeting we walk down the road to a restaurant, the one with a mural of a cartoon alien above the awning that's so big it stretches over to the halal butcher on one side and the dry cleaners on the other. We sit down and order. The piece of lamb that is soon placed in front of me is so large I wonder if this is supposed to be for the both of us. No, just me. Then the rice comes. It's enough for four. AbdiSalam orders what looks like a kilo of spaghetti.

Aside from the massive portions, one thing I realise about Somali food is that it is right in the centre of world cuisine overlaps – in other words, if you had to pick a country's food that the largest number of people globally would enjoy, it's probably Somali – it feels like home cooking even when it's not your home.

AbdiSalam has news. He and the chairman of the mosque want me to do a talk. Just about my experiences becoming a Muslim. When I first became interested in Islam, it seemed to me that once you converted you jumped onto YouTube to tell your story immediately. This of course was just an impression, and doesn't account for the many people who fly under the radar. But I'm twelve years into it at this point. And while my practice is far from perfect, I'm at the point where I can share my experience. This request reminds me, too, of how many little changes I have made in my life – and how those changes no longer feel like changes at all: sleeping on my right side; holding a glass of water in my right hand; saying Bismillah before eating; reciting Ayat al-Kursi as I leave the house; overcoming my introversion to help someone in a public setting; even greeting the group of kids who are clambering on the wall outside my friend's house, rather than walking past in silence. All of these things have a source in a single man who lived 1,400 years ago.

Before we leave the restaurant, I ask AbdiSalam for the name of my dish. I'm waiting for a long Somali sentence that describes the fall-off-the-bone meat, the herbs and spices and the influences from other East African countries, from Arab cuisine, from India, from Italy.

'Hilib weyne,' he replies.

Even I can translate that. '*Big meat*. Are you serious?'

'Yes.'

Then he goes off to lobby the mayor.

2.

Twenty-four years earlier, while living in Lebanon, and about as far from being a Muslim as it's possible to be, I would walk from my apartment down to a restaurant on the road that runs past the American University of Beirut. There I would order a chicken breast covered in toasted diced almonds, accompanied by rice with tiny pieces of lamb sprinkled over it. A friend taught me how to order it in Arabic, but I have to know, 'What is this in English?'

‘Chicken and rice,’ comes the reply.

So Lebanon and Somalia are both at the sharp end of the fight against pretentious menus. And while they both went through civil wars, those conflicts were so complex and so specific to their respective countries, it would be difficult to draw parallels. However, there is one area where they align aside from the naming of world-class dishes. The countries are both by-words for horror. Because, depending on your age, Lebanon can only be the bombing of the marine barracks, the war, the explosions, the Syrian refugees. And Hezbollah, Hezbollah, Hezbollah. These are the men. This must be repeated until it is carved into the mind. Not the architect I met who was re-imagining what urban spaces in the city might look like; nor the film director who had made a film about taxi drivers crossing from east to west Beirut during the war; and not the shop keeper who closed up just so he could take me, by the hand, up and down the street to find the sink plug I needed which he no longer stocked. But then, why are these examples needed at all – why is achievement or kindness required to grant these men their humanity?

While I was in Beirut in 2000, Israeli fighter jets would often fly low over the city. The sonic boom they sent rattling around the buildings lacked the charm of those fly-pasts in *Top Gun*. These were a threat, a warning. Sometimes breaking the sound barrier was the end of it; sometimes the jets would bomb the power station sending the capital into darkness. Then the little generators would whir into action as the lights flickered back on. None of this had an effect on me – unless you count taking a little torch into my window-less shower room. I knew the drill if things got really bad. I was in a cocoon of safety, provided by my passport: I would go to a nearby port then hop on a boat to Cyprus.

This cocoon was never more obvious than when the Israeli Defense Force that had been occupying parts of southern Lebanon since the 1980s started its retreat. This development, in theory, opened up the potential for people in Lebanon to travel to the southernmost part of their country, perhaps even reach the border.

For Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, this could be a chance to reconnect with family members on the other side of the fence, people who they had not seen for decades, or perhaps had never seen. To touch hands through the fence. To see a face. People like the family I had lunch with at the Rashidieh refugee camp, on a visit with a friend who worked for UNRWA. The Lebanese taxi driver who drove us started to get nervous towards the end of the journey and wouldn't go too close to the camp, so we walked the last hundred metres. We visited three houses, and had lunch at all of them. We had just met, but I was family. Ahlan wa sahlan. Rejecting food was not an option. I was struggling by the third meal, but it was in this final house that we met a man who was 90 years-old. He was thin and tall, and his movements were slow and deliberate. After we had finished eating with him and multiple generations of his extended family, he went into his bedroom, then re-emerged holding yellowed papers, his ID from British-mandated Palestine. I examined the evidence of his lost life, while the Sylvester Stallone movie *Daylight* played behind us, and the grandfather's middle-aged offspring debated the optimal cigarette brand to pair with Arabic coffee. The old man remained still, watching me as I looked at the document.

I thought of this grandfather when, on the day of the Israeli retreat, I went with two Lebanese friends and one French friend down through the previously occupied areas of south Lebanon. The old man would not be making the trip that day, nor would many Palestinians for whom the impossibility of an Israeli checkpoint was now replaced with the fear of a Lebanese one. For us, me and my friends, we didn't have anything specific to do down there nor anything much to fear. We just went. We drove around, saw some liberated villages, got lost, then headed home via the city of Tyre where we ate falafel at Abou Deeb. What struck me was an article that I read the next day by a foreign journalist. Foreign like me. He used a specific word, and put onto paper something that I felt while I was in southern Lebanon that day but couldn't quite articulate. It was a comment (I think by Robert Fisk) that was made about the ease with which he was able to travel through the south, while it was difficult if not impossible for the old Palestinian grandfather and many others for whom it had real meaning. It was obscene, the journalist said, this difference in ease of movement, and what our privilege ultimately afforded us.

3.

There is a very special recipe which you can only get from a few specific countries where Muslims are a majority. These are places Europeans go on holiday – Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and so on. The list changes over time, with additions and subtractions, as countries go in and out of favour. Sometimes the presenter dispatched to show us this country is a person of colour, sometimes they're white. But they're never a Muslim. We are told from the beginning that we're going to see the *real* country; we're going *beyond* the usual clichés; we're going to show you the country on its own terms.

Within the first minute of the programme, the voice-over has played and won a game of Orientalist bingo. No magical or mystical adjective goes unused. And while we're seeing the country on its own terms, we can't seem to get away from *our* terms: a local artist is the Banksy of Morocco, that cool singer is the Adele of Turkey – and now I think of it, I'm certain I have at some point described Soad Hosni as the Marilyn Monroe of Egypt.

The next step in these travel shows is setting up our guiding principle. We say that while this country does still have 'conservative values' – a phrase that chases after meaning and never quite finds it – it's looking to the future. That means throwing off any sense of Islam. Or at the very least adding hip-hop beats to Gnawa. Islam is like a giant net that people are struggling underneath, and if they can just cut through it then the future is there for the taking. Because Islam is backwards, and everything else is forwards. And it's the men who keep it that way. So an individual's experience with a bad father, or a religious leader who transgresses, or a tyrannical ruler, these become not exceptions but rules. Confirmation of what we already knew. As a remedy, we meet a series of women – most of whom were born and brought up in the West and have now relocated to the country of their parents – who demonstrate the extent to which this country is in fact striding forwards, evidenced by the degree to which their projects are stamped with Western approval, here delivered by the presenter of the documentary. The problem is not these particular individuals, or

the validity of their experiences, it's the broadcaster's decision to choose *only* one specific group who hold a worldview acceptable to the foreign audience. You can almost hear the editor ask if the budget can stretch to Aretha Franklin's *Sisters are doin' it for themselves*. This relentless focus on women, on the surface a corrective, has something else going on underneath. A technique so often used as a mask for military invasion – we must free them from their men and if they don't like that then we must free them from their own stupid ideas – here it becomes an invasion of a different kind. It is a lever, used against Muslim men. Ah, the men. What can we do about the men? When Muslims are being killed, if the media cares at all, then the assumption is that the men are either part of the problem (political or domestic) or at the very least a problem-in-waiting. Sometimes women don't gain sympathy – they will, after all, produce future men. But if they do elicit our feelings it's within strict boundaries.

In this documentary, however, we do meet a couple of men, but the voice over is firm in telling us that there is a big problem with masculinity in this country. We are informed that men here do not show their softer side. Their emotional side. Their loving side. The implied solution for this evidence-free claim is for these men to become more Western. It is, after all, too difficult to dig up the instructions of the Prophet ﷺ whose commands to men to be gentle and generous are so numerous as to be difficult to count. It's also too difficult to be quiet, to stop talking, and to observe, and in that observation to notice the everyday beautiful gestures of Muslim men as fathers, husbands, brothers, sons.

4.

In Albert Camus' classic work set in Algeria, a nihilistic vision is presented where true Algerian men go unnamed and their deaths are unremarkable. It is a place of strangers disconnected from each other, where Camus' French settler hero has reached the point of such numbness that he doesn't even recall, or much care, when his own mother died. *The Stranger* didn't make a lot of sense to me as a teenager in French class, but in my twenties it hit the mark. A book with a character who appeared to display no emotion, and who also smoked a lot in the process – this was going to be a hit with me. It sat on my bookshelf along with

anything else I thought was both classic and suitably short. As an older person I can still appreciate the writing and the atmosphere created, even in translation, but reading it today distances me from the country of Algeria. It blocks the Muslim man from the view of the reader. Albert Camus' feelings about the country of his birth were complex, but his novel was never going to be Algeria on its own terms. It never declared that it would be. But if we witness that same country seen through the life of an Algerian man, the result is quite different. Born in 1808, Emir AbdelKader was on his way to a life of study and quiet contemplation, a minimalist, book-loving character whose life was interrupted by the French invasion of 1832 which turned him into a military leader. This had not been his life plan. But even in an imposed war, the conduct of this poet-warrior was so exemplary that his European enemies could not help but admire him, although still seeing him as 'too handsome, too good, too charismatic, to be a Muslim,' writes Éric Geoffroy. Then as now, he did not fit Western constructions of the Muslim man. But going beyond his enemies' relatively superficial observations, it was his qualities of mercy and brotherhood that secured his place in history. Those too were incorrectly attributed. His opponents could only explain them through comparisons to Christ, to *their* tradition (which they weren't following). If the invasion were to take place today, it would be secular principles against which Emir AbdelKader's conduct would be judged.

In truth, Emir AbdelKader was a man, a Muslim man, who had a single model of masculinity that he followed. He took the Prophet's ﷺ many utterances on kindness as an instruction on how he must treat his family, his neighbour, other Muslims, the rest of humanity, and indeed his enemies. He also understood when to fight back. While the stranger of Camus' novel was a person utterly dislocated from everything – human warmth, empathy – for Emir AbdelKader it was a case of seeing the other, the stranger, as a reflection of his own humanity. As the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, 'Islam began as a something strange and it will return to being strange, so blessed are the strangers.'





Kris Evans is a UK-based writer whose work has appeared on the BBC, Al Jazeera and in numerous other publications. A convert to Islam, he holds an MA in Islamic Studies and is currently working on a memoir-in-essays.



ARTWORK



collage

by Irina Novikova





Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

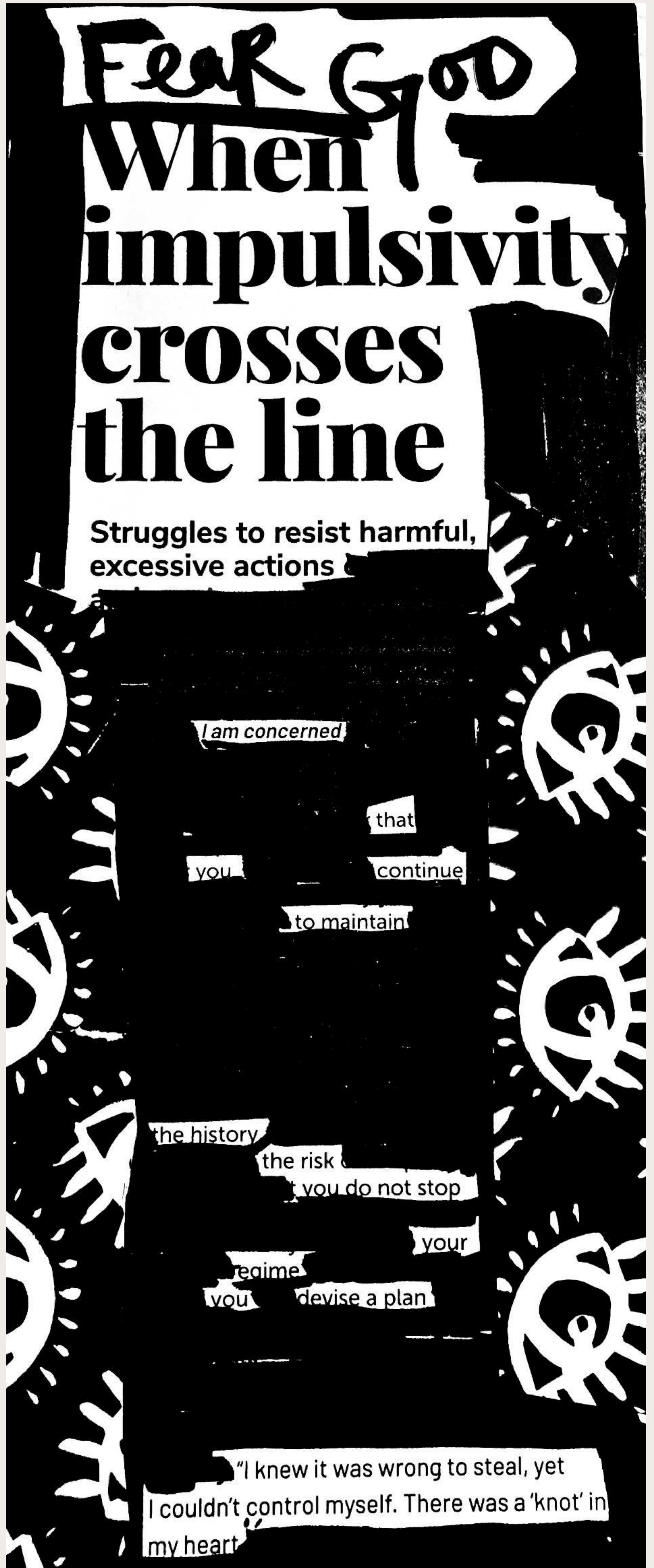
In her works, she raises themes of ecology and draws on anti-war topics. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories", and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The wonders of winter". You can find her on Instagram @irina.tall111

Fear God When impulsivity crosses the line

Struggles to resist harmful,
excessive actions

Fear God

by Sumaiyah Mohamed



Note from the artist:

“Fear God’ was a piece inspired by a writing prompt on Muslim Writers’ Salon (IG: muslimwriterssalon) in their community space where we were encouraged to write a ‘Black Out’ or ‘erasure’ poem. Using a magazine article to black out words, brought forth what I felt in my heart. (It was a local mental health hospital magazine, and the article was on addiction). May Allah bless Gaza, bless Palestine, and grant her people fierce strength, endless mercy and firm faith, Ya Kareem. May Allah protect them and free them from evil and oppression. May Allah free all whom are oppressed.



Sumaiyah Mohamed is an enthusiastic poet, mental health advocate, mom, and crafter. Faith in Allah has saved her and continues to influence her creative work. A homebody, she can be found hanging out with her family, or in her study room, mostly reading, writing, journaling, studying Islamic courses, or sewing by hand.



POETRY

self portrait as a body on/of water

by Tariq Agboola

'the sea is a forgiving place for boys who recognise turbulence'

Adedayo Agarau

i've been sailing for years now &
i do not know how to paddle
this body to janna. this body, a pixel of hopelessness
the grace in my hands,
not divine enough to house water. i have lost everything
to the parting tide but the memories of my ruins remains
unripped. i relive how the sea flushed me
from my mother's womb,
& i do not know how to remind myself without drowning.
my wounds are mouth open
& my limbs unlearn how to swim
my eyes betray me, offering the sea its tears / charged currents; rippled blood
this body— a hydroelectric ritual for turbulence



Agboola Tariq A., Swan II, is an unfolding poet from Western Nigeria & an undergraduate student of law at the University of Ibadan. He has works in Brittle Paper, Eunoia Review, Olumo Review, amongst others.

Al-Wajid - The Finder

by Yasmin Ayub

In the land of Palestine,
Where olive trees grow,
Dreams of freedom fill the air,
And rivers of hope flow.

In Allah's promise of freedom,
Hearts of Palestinians unite,
Standing strong and firm,
Through every struggle and fight.

The oppressors raise walls,
To cage dreams and hope,
But they fail to see,
Palestinians hold tight to Allah's rope.

The rope of Al-Wajid, The Finder,
Who will lead to victory,
The rightful owners of the land,
From the river to the sea.

While the world stays silent,
And turns a blind eye,
Al-Wajid finds the broken hearts,
And comforts every silenced cry.

In the face of hardship,
Al-Wajid helps them find the key,
To true faith and strength,
Setting their hearts free.

With courage, they strive,
Only seeking help from the skies,
In Al-Wajid, they find peace,
Through the promise of Paradise.

Hope of freedom fills the hearts,
Of Palestinian children, women, and men,
Knowing Al-Wajid will help them find,
Their way back to Al-Aqsa again.



Yasmin Ayub is a Canadian elementary school teacher and an aspiring author. She is passionate about creating engaging Islamic content that helps children grasp and apply Islamic teachings in their lives. Through her published poetry in *Atlasia Magazine*, she presents the beautiful names of Allah in a manner both accessible and inspiring for young readers.

of south & olive oils

by Ahmad Addam

At the brim of the green window
I gazed upon mountains dressed in yellow.
What else could occupy my time on Teta's balcony,
listening to her echo?

Buildings rise like solemn soldiers, across Beirut's meadow
veiling the golden mountains, yet my eyes reach far, as if
plunged in a pillow. What else on Teta's balcony,
hearing echoes in the hollow?

She called me in, and I, swiftly, followed,
"Habibi, what clouds wander within your shadow?"
Beneath Teta's abaya, thoughts unfold.

All I pondered was our land in the south, bloodstained, as I behold,
watching from a distance, so near yet so far, like a rainbow, bold.
"Tell me of the south, of resistance and olive oils, where stories are told,
beyond the real inferno, where tales of struggles unfold."

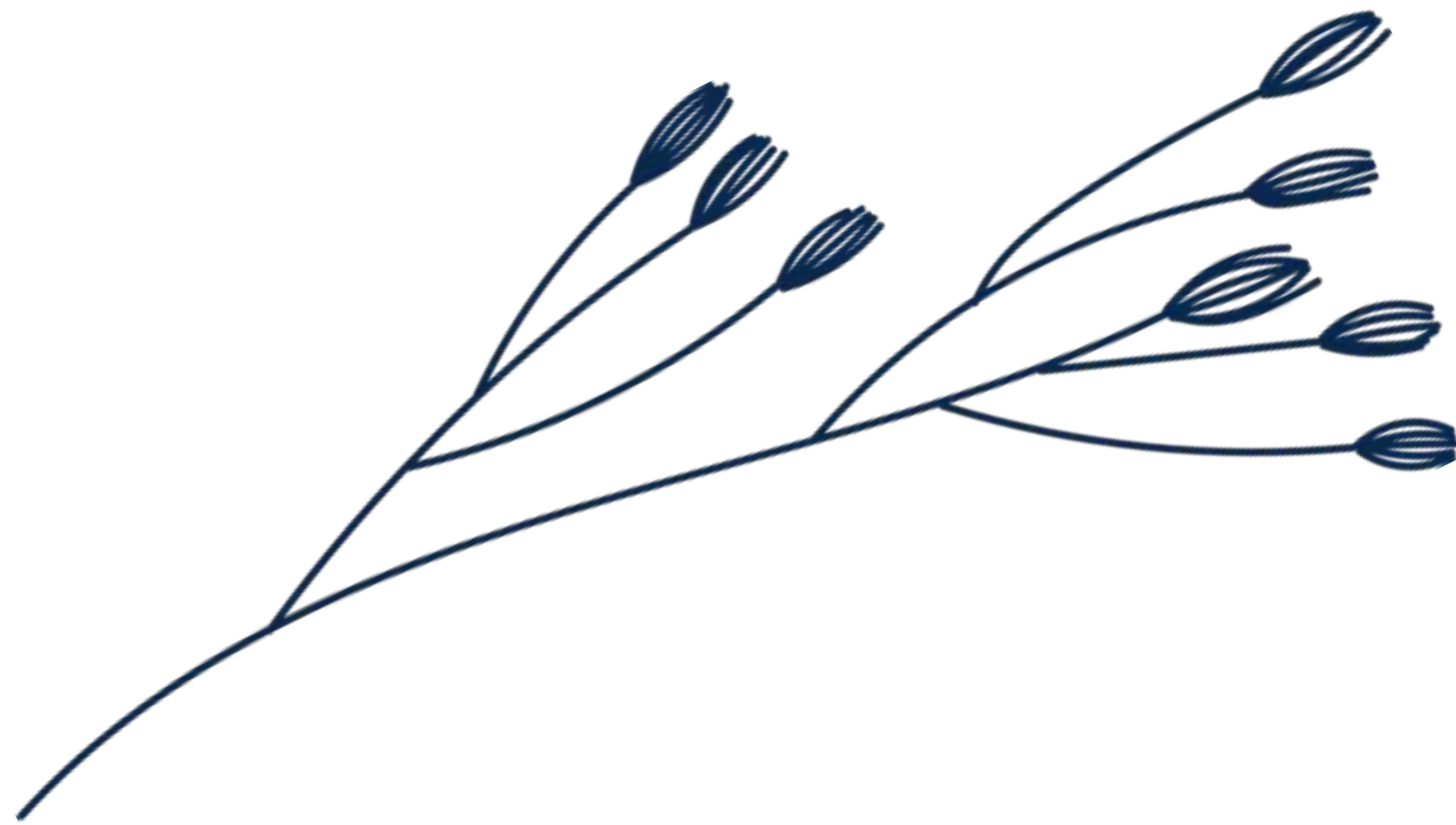
I saw Teta grinning, memories cascading, like stories of old,
days in the south, crossing hills, eating kibbeh and tabbouleh
staining toes at the coast, under the shallow.

What more on Teta's balcony
hearing tales of a land tightly held, yet not fully owned?

As if she sensed my musings, "Habibi," she echoed,

"Our olives are close, strong as roots that Bilad el Sham has sown.
I swear, Wallah, one day, upon a horse, as my father once shown,
we'll cross without fear, salute every olive and stream,
every tree I've known.

For our Janoub isn't just of olive oil, it's a heartbeat, a soul's own,
a land of resistance that clutches every heart, a place that calls us home."



Ahmad Addam graduated as a biologist and recently graduated with a Masters in Public Health, all while working as an M&E for a peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity organization called House of Peace based Lebanon. In 2021, he launched his initiative, Quillers, and co-founded a pitch contest SWANApit to provide a platform for Southwest Asian and North African writers to attend workshops, apply for mentorship, and pitch contests.

Identity Struggles

by John Chinaka Onyeche

I am trying everything to be who I am not.
Their education says that I am not educated.
Still, I smile like the morning Sun, beaming
a radiant beauty.

I am trying and tired of being here
in a history class
as they preach about god in white robes
as an English woman
tells us in English, her language is ours,
inherited from our genealogy
drawing a map with America as an
industry full of plantations meant for
people of my colour to till.

In another history class,
Mongopack is a name after salvation
in the tongues of our inheritance.
You must call the name to be saved,
even after the music has been put out
in the shadow of freedom.

Even after our people performed arts
in rivers that swelled
discovering what was on us, a place
where we prayed to our gods
with hooks and fishing nets.

Haba! My father sighs to clear a cloud,
For it is raining here again.

Silent in Sudan: A city named after a god

by John Chinaka Onyeche

If you come back home alive, as rhyme returns, unharmed, say to yourself, Thank you!

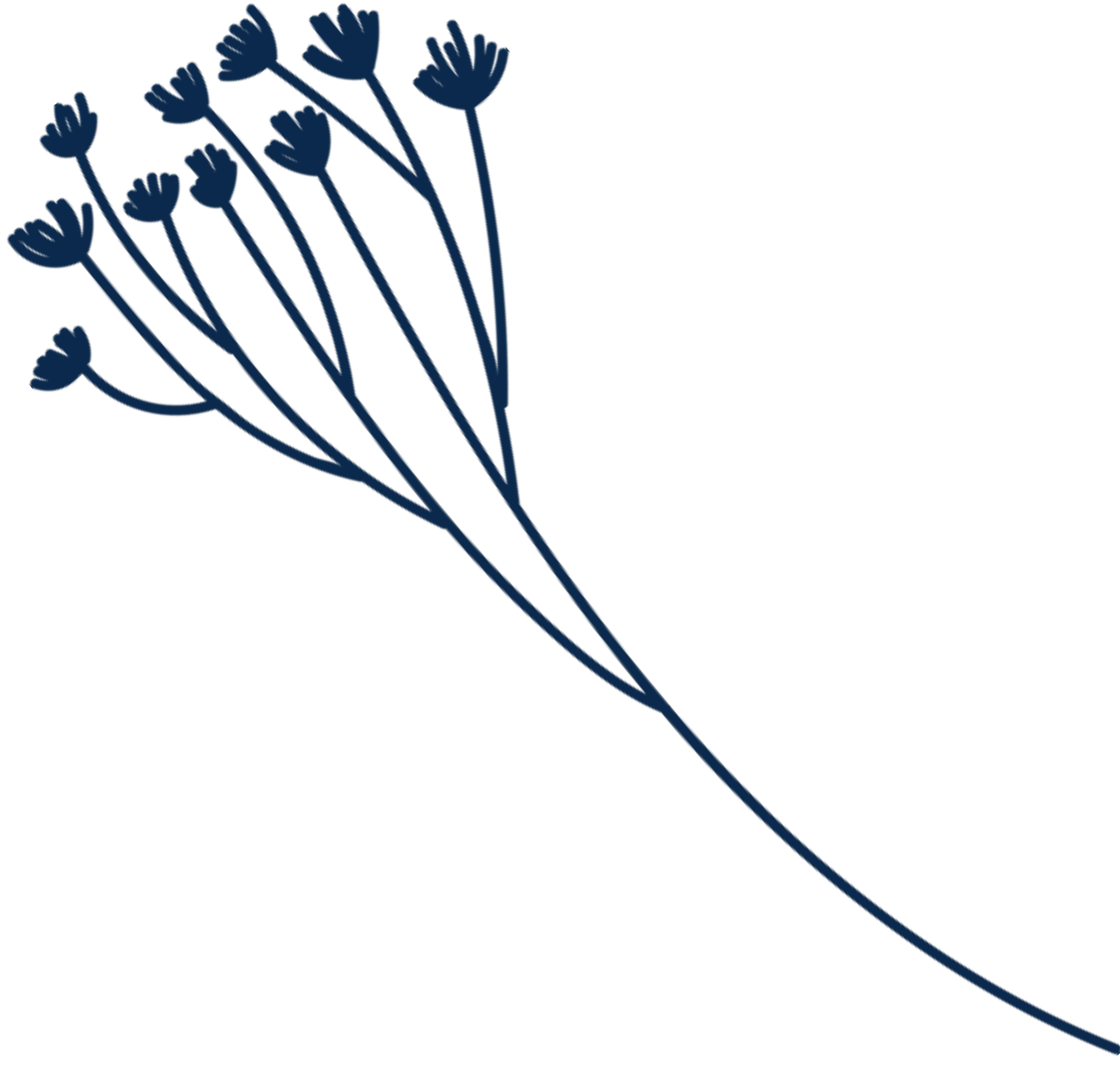
- *Mahmoud Darwish*

There is a city named after a god,
But its inhabitants know no divinity.
Every day they beg the man on the seat:
Shall we live the next?
Or should we become child soldiers?

& god said:
Let us make our brothers
In the likeness of rubbles,
& justifying our fits of anger
Over our humanity.

& there was an evening,
A rocket sounds in Sudan,
& our humanity lay in waste,
& the world remembered them not,
But in silence & silent in Sudan.





John Chinaka Onyeche is a Nigerian writer of colour (BIPOC) and historian from Etche in Rivers State. He is dedicated to ensuring that the full scope of history is accurately represented. His writing can be found in various journals, including McNeese University, Tilted House Journal, and Brittle Paper. Connect with him on Twitter @Apostlejohnchin.

Proverbs 23:10

by D.W. Baker

Watch what they do.

Occupying forces will not
reveal all they remove
by force, but—video: an
IDF tank defacing ancient
al-Katiba park, landmark
of common green space—or,
video: the rapid encroach
of settlers, driven on
by desire to possess, the
bombed, burning fields—

We must speak truly of
how they became orphans.



D.W. Baker is a poet from St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, where he writes about place, bodies, belonging, and the end of the world. His work appears in *Identity Theory*, *Green Ink Poetry*, & *Voidspace Zine*, among others. See more of his work at www.dwbakerpoetry.com

Trauma is a Lullaby in Igbo

by Nwodo Divine

Between 1967 and 1970, over 2 million Igbos were killed in the Nigerian civil war.

The bombs tore through nnem oche leaving her son, daughters scattered.

one, my mother, who lingers near me now

like the murmur of the forest. igbo spirits come like afterlife ebony.

i feel them watch me by the fire
singing to my ears in the voice of *nkita*
reminding me of the stories
of how to mend a tear in my wrapper

of the brutality

of lost memories

stories fit for honoring the fallen

nnem oche stays with us

War's refugees sing only of hunger in a minor key,

they search for solace in the ruins of dreams

Fragments of lives shattered,

yearning for a rest swallowed by bombs

nne nnem oche shielded us with her weathered hands

gave my uncle a smile stretched thin

taught her the igbo way.

though stories are all i have inherited,

only the sting of displacement.

saved my mother from the vultures circling

the way etched in the map of starvation

never felt the sun on ancestral soil,

Yet, survival is the greatest birthright,

passed down like heirlooms bought with
blood.

And i know i'm theirs for in my blood,

the current of their relentless river runs

deep.

In nna's diary,

Aunty Nneamaka hides in the bushes escaping soldiers searching for young girls
finding refugees.

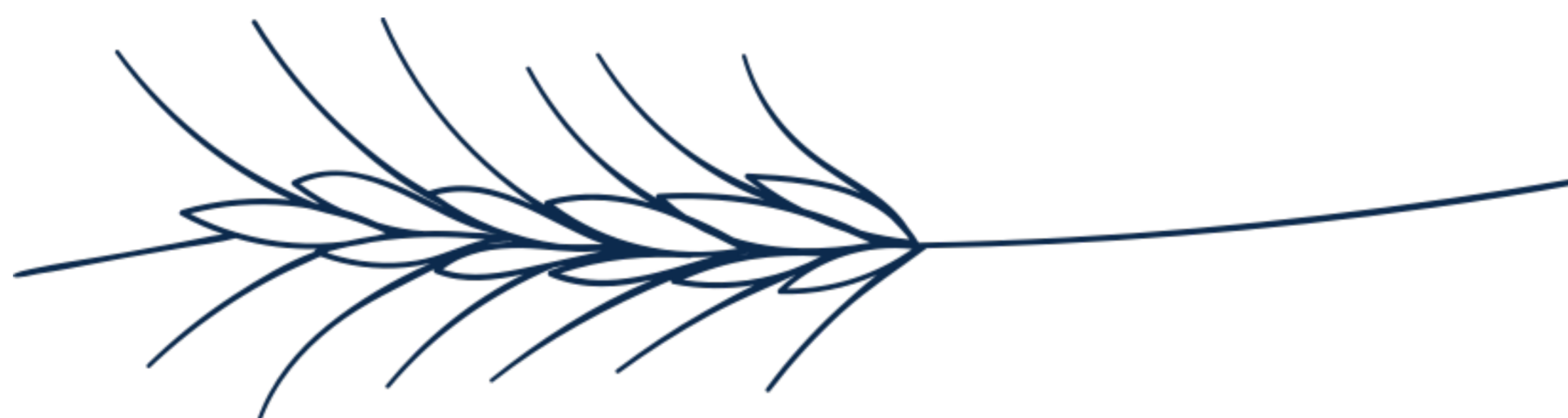
Aunty Adaora, a scar on the right side of her face,
grieves for a life stolen for a table adorned with sorrow.
though gone, we gather each evening,
seeking rest in the charred remains.

I see Uncle Chigozie, the cracks in his smiles,
there are others whose names rustle in the woods,
some woven in the smoke

Chioma, Uzoama, Ebele, and Nkiru,
their brother, Chibuzo,
Ogochukwu, Nneka, Ndidi, and Kelechi,

spirits watchful upon my
sleep,
Shards of a shattered whole,
before the exodus, before the
silence.

papa tells me trauma is a lullaby in igbo
i braid palm fronds singing this lullaby
of a people who loved their land
And fought for their people



Author's Note

Words in italics are in the Igbo language

- * Nkita - dog
- * Nnem oche - Grandmother
- * Nne nnem oche - Great Grandmother
- * Nna - Father

Nwodo Divine is a writer,
teacher, and researcher
based in Nigeria.

the morning dark, a double shovel

by Ronnie K. Stephens

after Hiba Abu Nada and Gwendolyn Brooks

I meant to write a poem that might suddenly
grant some solace from the world, its unbecoming you
you holy—you hyacinth—you riotous wind. May you
know
refuge in your unsettling. May you be free of siege. He
in defiance of the world rained fire, this the world knows
knowing too
that you died not with hate but with unending faith. He,
the one who would erase your name, your home, is
dust. Refaat said *bid no farewell*, and so we will not.
Will you find the heaven and the Gaza you dreamed there?
Clear streets, no tanks or snipers or burning? But—
and here I struggle with the poem I meant to write you—
they are still emptying your Gaza six months past. I know
who you are only in the words you left before you
fell into all those *galaxies of the world*. My wife and I are
in the morning dark tasting
love. I admit it feels like betrayal the way we lie together
and surrender our bodies to lust, how easily we forget the
died, the dying, instead reminisce about our first winter
together. Forgive me the ease with which we loved or
will love again despite (to spite)—may it be more than a
one time act of defiance, may we protest in the light—
day breaking over our bodies on the cusp of spring—
laugh together in our bed, commenting on the weather.

baptized

by Ronnie K. Stephens

I set out to be a feather pillow in Spring.

If there's one thing I know, it's that I'm not
that soft. No one has ever seen me flinch

at a fair fight. Some people's grandparents
are distant and fickle as the apple trees,
sharp as blackberries on the vine.

Everybody knows I'm the one they cursed,
condemned to hell for drowning
in the wrong faith.

You will never know the quiet
of that summer.

The worst possible place is a potluck
with church elders after you learn
your own family would have you burn.

I'm certain I didn't eat the cobbler
or the pudding. If I were in charge, I would
remember nothing. If you were here

I would tell you about the peaches
and the berry juice, pancakes and turkey
sausage, all the mornings we still knew

how to look at each other
without scorn or contempt.

I set out to be something

something you could lay your head

against, a mountain of pears at market,
buttermilk biscuits and warm honey.

I set out to be a feather pillow in Spring.



Ronnie K. Stephens is the author of *Universe in the Key of Matryoshka*, *They Rewrote Themselves Legendary*, and *The Kaleidoscope Sisters*. He joins the many artists calling for a Free Palestine and an end to genocide in every corner of the world.

child of war

by Grant Shimmin

Precious child, your tears undo me
Your hurt tears a raw wound through my heart
A shadow of your childhood-robbed anguish
Precious child, image of a loving God barely
imaginable in a world made of pain
Precious child, trauma dark in hollow eyes
I want to tell you love can still find you
But why would you believe one adult word?



Grant Shimmin is a South African-born poet living in New Zealand. Work in journals including *Querencia Press*, *Amethyst Review* and *Dreich*.

Church

by Katey Funderburgh

My mother with her knees in the soil
shearing dandelion leaves. Scatterings
of flowers opening like parting lips
around her. I am 12 in the hollow
of my backyard— its pitch of junegrass
billowing like tufts of hair on the crown
of someone who might love me one day.
I hum and braid their strands together
into a long rope. Dandelion leaves
are sweetest while their buds are still closed.
My mother cuts their heads off, bundles
the unbloomed in her tired hands.
Pine trees encircle us. I am 12.
My mother's eyes are juniper-blue.
I want to be pretty someday—
trailing her home to wash our tender
leaves. Before we eat, she kneels
beneath me, asks me to braid her hair up.
My fingers search for her roots and tug
gently, like a child searching for a god.



Inheritance

by Katey Funderburgh

Behind my mother's home, the roots
of Aspens are tangled knuckles raising
unquiet forests beneath the soil. Eyes
open along each trunk. You could
disappear into their clutch. When one tree dies
another is shoved up into safer air. Inside the end-
of-summer hospital, my mother's mother
dies with her mouth open like a choir singer.
I slip her worn rings off her bony fingers
and onto my mother's hands. I tug my mother
home and wrap a pastel art set in tissue paper,
tie it up with a yellow ribbon. My mother
pulls one end to unravel it and spends
entire days under the yellowing Aspens,
dragging pastels along her pages. The trees
move their shadows in the contours
of her mother's face. I am inside scrubbing
each paint-stained cup clean, praying
to the crinkled sketches I keep prying
from my mother's palms each day she returns to me.



Katey Funderburgh is a queer poet from Colorado. She is a current MFA Candidate at George Mason University. She loves grilled cheese and her cat, Thistle.

Sisyphus

by Cadi

people say "god is love"
and this must mean that love is
synonymous with god,

so this is how i'll tell our story;
i "immortal being" you,
you "unattached, almighty being" me,
you are the "unimpressed, infinite being" of my life.

you are my love, that is to say you are my god,
sitting aloof and picking at grapes
from your makeshift throne in my heart.

so love is a Sisyphus maker,
because love is creator,
and i was created by a push;
a fall into love, and i am
doomed to repeat the motions
of my creation a thousand times.

i am Sisyphus,
pushing this bigger than size
boulder called desire as proof
that you are my love, that is, my god.

you are Sisyphus,
pushing me away on loop.

we are Sisyphus,
in eternal being [love].

a laughing God in Peniel

by Cadi

we forget to pray for laughter,
to tuck the request in between
the folds of fervent pleas for kingdom come,

& yet the volcanoes erupt from the depths
of our stomachs in sync with rumbles from
the sky as heavy grey clouds amplify the
spontaneous sounds of sweet wine that burst
out of our lips. the world crumbles around us

& yet we laugh because we can hear the claps
of thunder racing towards us from behind the blue-capped
mountains.

sit, and i will tell you how intoxicating it is

to share an inside joke with The unseen
force whose voice makes the hills skip
like young cows. we stand ankle deep in ashes
defying the tears that gather under our lashes

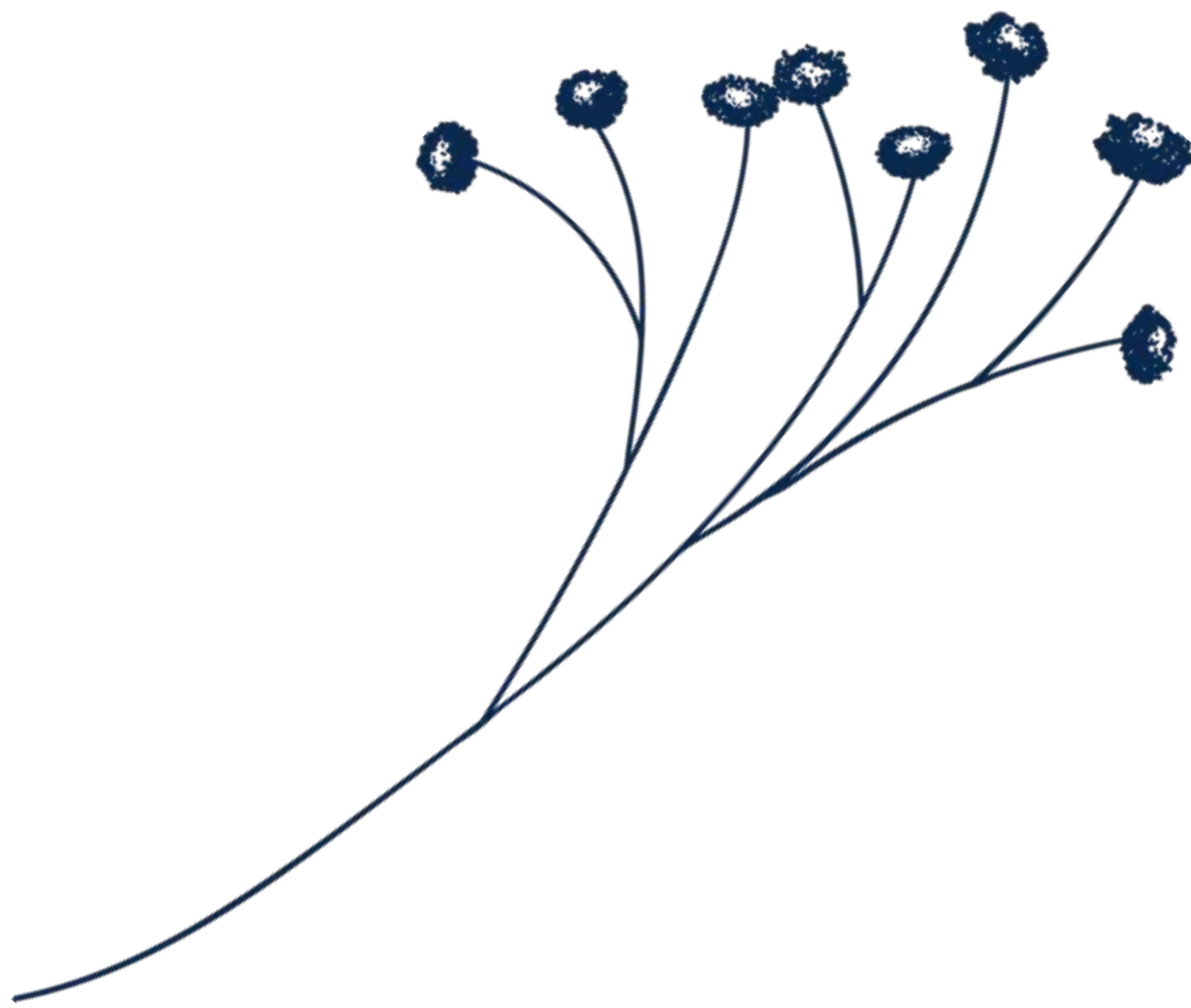
because Peniel is inside of us & angels no longer
wrestle, only burning up as incense the hallelujahs
we are too overwhelmed to voice out.

Peniel of impossibilities, where men overpower angels,
where a God immeasurable in size lives inside me.
Jacob becomes Israel, given beauty for ashes.

i am made the habitation of The most high
& out of my desert of ruins flows rivers
of living water. i carry in me a laughing God
whose voice echoes in the melodies of mine,

whose blood does not resound the elegies of Abel's;
singing only of healing and an amnesia that takes
no hostages. know that God presides over geysers

inside us; a vicarious living expressed in ululations
of praise & deep rumbles of laughter bursting out
of us in a symphony that cannot be imitated.



Cadı is a curious poet looking for answers
to the pressing question; "what the bleep
are we doing?"

*Write to [Picture]**

by Fatima Hanan Elreda

For the children of Gaza who long to be in a classroom. For those who dislike school but would give anything for a semblance of normality, for food, for shelter, for safety, for their loved ones and limbs back.

In a newsroom they tell us to write to picture
and the picture

is this: children with their hair parted and
combed uniforms

buttoned up backs straightened hands
laid across double-lined

notebooks. The teacher has written
something on the chalkboard and

three seats are empty, wreaths of white
chrysanthemums punctuating

absence. We look at them through an
aperture in the wall. Nothing

will stop today's lesson [not bombs not
hunger not death] No sighs

of disappointment. The gap in the wall is a
two-way mirror through which

the world sees their suffering framed. And
they get a view of the idiom of the day:

Turn a blind eye. Hypocrisy tastes like chalk.
It's their turn to teach

the world a thing or two about resilience. But
is it really their job to give

lessons in humanity? Words are stacked like
bodies in a mass grave.

Define ['dʒɛnəʃɪd]

Rows of laughter and sadness. And the
reprimanding teacher instructs

them to copy the question until their fingers
bleed: Why did you abandon us?

Maybe you won't forget this time that
pleading will not get you

anywhere with the heartless. *But there are
those who have heard*

the call and they are wheat stalks of light. As
for the child whose hands

were amputated, he has been exempted from
writing; thus, he

remembers with his body. The wall is a
two-way mirror. In a newsroom

they tell us to write to picture and the picture
is this.

Lesson In Faith

by Fatima Hanan Elreda

For the children of Gaza who long to be in a classroom. For those who dislike school but would give anything for a semblance of normality, for food, for shelter, for safety, for their loved ones and limbs back.

My son scraped his knee the other day.

Eyes brimming with tears, he asked for a bandage.

What if it never goes away? I tried to assuage his worries—

Teach from experience: *Remember all the times you've fallen before?*

Are the marks still there? He searched his body to locate the absence.

The wound will close on its own in a few days like all the other ones have.

Proof that we are alive. It gets worse and then it gets better.

We slay a dragon in the backyard; pluck petals from a withered flower

And place them on the wound. *There, there.* A kiss will fix everything.

I turn toward myself to say:
*Some other invisible
wounds never truly heal.*

Then again, we carry on softly pressing the
cut, shuffling toward tomorrow.

Isn't that what faith is then?

To move forward, bruised and aching,

and despite it all, remain obstinately
hopeful.



Fatima Hanan Elreda has an MA in English Language and Literature and a BA in journalism. Her works have appeared in *The Poetryhood* and *Free the Verse* among other publications.

Obscuration Deck

by Karen Grace Soans

Demure the eyes -
just so.

Let the waters pass
softly between obscuring lids.

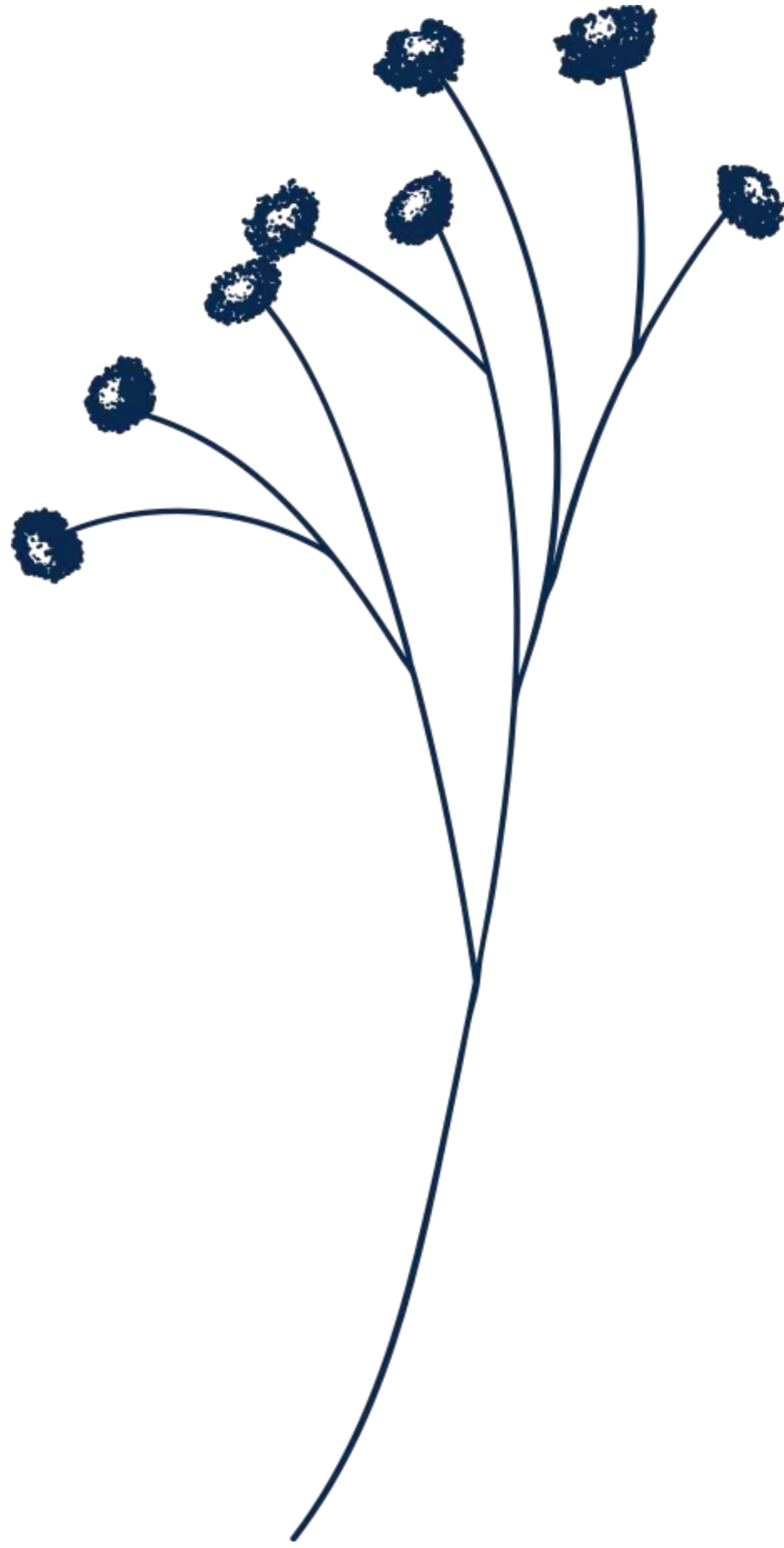
To observe -
to accept pain.
But I am tired of bathing in
Darjeeling tea and Kashmiri chili.

To observe -
to eat secrets.
But I am sick of swallowing
sweetened curry and vegetable rice.

To observe -
to accomplice.
But I am weary of hiding
the sun's kiss to accept yours.

To observe -
to accept who I am.
And where these feet may wander
but never find home.





Karen Grace Soans is an Indian scientist and aspiring writer living in Germany. She has a PhD in cell biology and uses the instagram handle [@doodlinscientist](#) to share her digital art documenting the highs and lows of experiment and discovery. Her poems can be found online at the [doodlinscientist.com](#). She received her first publication in *Nightshade Lit Mag*.

the skies of Waziristan

by Jaweerya Mohammad

“Now I prefer cloudy days when the drones don’t fly. When the sky brightens and becomes blue, the drones return and so does the fear.”

- Zubair Rehman, grandson of Momina Bibi

Momina Bibi searches through a stretching okra plant, standing on tippy toes, plucking and dropping them into Nabila’s tiny opened palms.

‘see how they are long and slender like your mother’s fingers?’

she is sixty seven and knows how to nurse life with arms that move swiftly, swaddling crying newborns, and a voice that blooms yellow and red poppies at the foot of mountains.

there are two echoing clicks and a plume of clouds mushrooms, coupled with loudness like the hills are crumbling, heart thrashing, Nabila sprints, feet still not quick enough to outrun the stench of singed flesh.

in the destruction, Momina’s old, frail body lies in
strewn pieces

beneath the same sky where just yesterday the children of Waziristan craned their necks to see kites paint strokes of peacock feathers above, and the sun spilled warmth on the backs of those who bowed during Friday noon prayer,

Momina,
did you, like my grandmother sing stories to your grandchildren of your youth?

about climbing the ancient limbs of trees and wading in azure rivers as fishes kissed the soles of your feet, about a time when the falcons flew with their wings blanketing the entire village?

and did Nabila ever realize she had your striking hazel eyes
before the lids curtained them for the last time?

only four suited congressmen listened to your son's loss.
the translator's voice cracked in the middle of converting his pain
into english,
and as the laws were debated, your family in North Waziristan held their breath,
sighing only for a second as they felt the first drop of rain.



Jaweerya Mohammad is a passionate educator, having taught Middle School English for many years. Her writing is shaped by her Muslim and first-generation Pakistani American identity. Some of her poetry has been published in the “Third Space Anthology by Renard Press and the literary magazine Muslim Youth Musings.

You can find more of Jaweerya's work on Instagram (@jaweeryajournals)

Maqluba

by Mediah Ahmed

meaning,
upside down
in Arabic, consider it
the national dish of Palestine.

People may disagree. Maqluba,
reminds me of my family,
reminds me of
home.

Home,
is an upside down
casserole consisting of layers
of rice, meat and vegetables,
cauliflower or eggplant—my father loved

his Maqluba with eggplant and lamb,
while the rest of us preferred chicken and potatoes.

To make home—sorry, to make

Maqluba

my father's way,

one needs:

4 medium eggplants, cut into thick slices

1 kg lamb, with bones, cut into medium pieces.

2 cups rice, rinsed

1/4 cup almonds

1/4 cup raw pine nuts

6 cloves garlic

1 parsley, small bundle, chopped finely

1/2 teaspoon 7 spices

1 teaspoon turmeric

Vegetable oil

Salt to taste

a recipe for home

1) In a large saucepan, fry eggplant slices in oil. Then place them in a strainer until completely drained.

Land drained

Destroying tunnels

Creating rubble graves

2) Heat 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil in a pan. Add in the pine nuts and almonds and cook over medium heat until nuts are roasted. Remove nuts from heat and set aside.

Aside

Hide in the corner

The beach is not safe

3) Place the meat in a pot and cover with water.

Water poisoned with innocent blood

Add in the 7 spices and cook until the meat is done.

Remove the meat onto a plate and reserve the meat broth.

Season the meat with some salt.

Salt in old wounds

Politics over humanity

Will it ever end?

4) Sprinkle the bottom of a deep saucepan with a little bit of rice. Layer the eggplants over the rice and then add the meat as a third layer. Spread over the garlic cloves and arrange the rice over the garlic. Add in the turmeric, salt and just enough meat broth to cover the rice.

Metal shrapnel splice

Through young and old

Not enough doctors

5) Place a plate upside down over the rice to prevent it from scattering.

Scattering.

Buildings fracture.

Mosques, Hospitals, University

6) Cover the pan and cook over low heat for 30 minutes, until the rice is cooked. Turn off the heat and remove the plate

Plate.

Is this the fate?

Isn't anyone going to help?

7) Place a large serving dish over the pan and turn the pan's content upside down. Lift up the pan slowly and you will get a "cake" with the arranged layers of Maqluba. Garnish with parsley and the roasted almonds and pines.

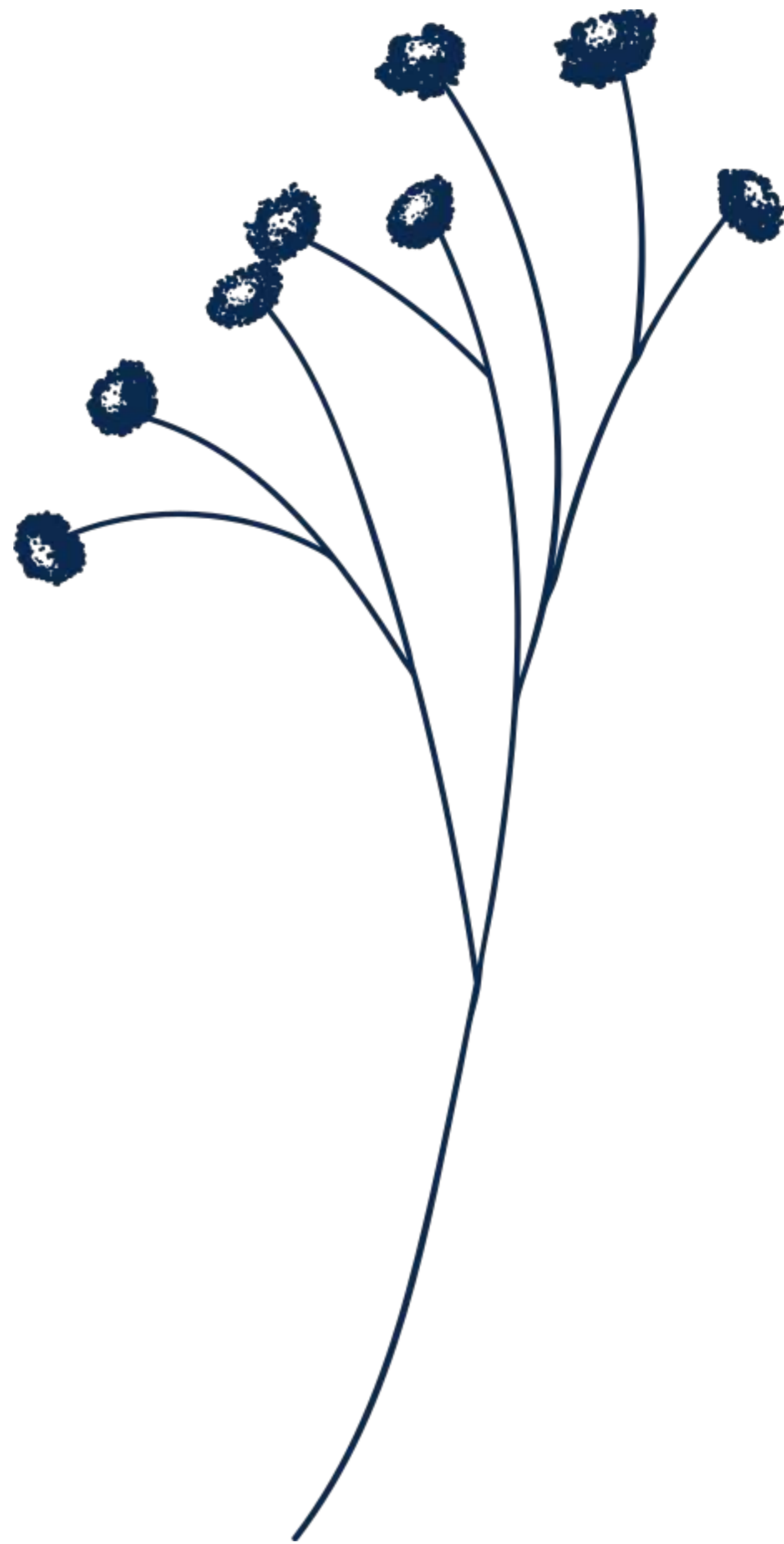
Pines.

Screams and whines

Of widowers and orphans.

8) Serve hot,
serve, upside down,
just like our homeland.





Mediah Ahmed, with an MSci in Astrophysics and a PhD in Biophysics, discovered her passion for theatre at Royal Court's Unheard Voices workshops, debuting "REPENTANCE" at ANGLE at the Bush. Her works feature in SALIDAA, Keats House Poets, Third Space anthologies, and the HEAR ME NOW anthology. Recently, she participated in the "GAZA MONOLOGUES" online solidarity event, and she is currently exploring her Punjabi heritage, resonating with the wisdom of the Punjabi Sufi Poets.

peace?

by Michelle Williams

I close my eyes and the world tilts
it's something I can taste
—metallic and vine
teeth pressed with rosemary
bruise-bloom kneecaps
while the soil awaits an offering

in my temperate undoing
a crimson penance soaks the earth
hyssop crushed in my fists
this breath demands more than I have

freedom's violence punctures
my harrowed tongue
supplication spills through
and I need to ask you
whose peace do you hold
not as the world gives but

please

where can we go from here?





Michelle Williams lives in Texas but misses the trees in Virginia. She currently works as a fraud investigator and spends free time listening to music and reading/writing poetry.

To Be a Pilgrim

by Liz Kendall

I do not wait for the scent to tell me.
I hunt and watch and haunt the hollows;
the damp-earthed shades by sullen water
and swift deep river alike. These places:
I know them and they know me.

It is not the swathes of daffodils
that lift my heart in spring. Look down;
ramsons are quietly rising and spreading.
Early in April the pilgrimage starts.
I faithfully tread the time-honoured paths.

With one well-practiced genuflection
I bow through the fence between graveyard and fields,
inviting myself into trespassing country.
The wealth of this land: it mocks its owner
with basket-length leaves and no earth left bare.

Here is the place where they come up all muddy.
Here is the place where they cling to the slopes.
Soon ramsons will ripple in waves with the wind-tide,
sending up clusters of star spikes in bloom,
but long before that I am there. I am there.

I come to witness the resurrection;
the shy spreading glimmer of green that, still young,
will call out with scent, assertive and vital.
Leading the wanderer down to the water.
Lighting the way with the sharp tang of life.

There is much to be said for arriving early;
for tenderly watching the moments before.
Willing the leaves to spread fuller and further;
waiting for ramsons to rise like a river
and wash through the woodland with riot and pride.



Liz Kendall's poetry is published by Candlestick Press, The Hedgehog Poetry Press, and in online journals including *Flights*. She has recently published a co-authored book of poetry, prose, and fine art photography, *Meet Us and Eat Us: Food plants from around the world*. theedgeofthewoods.uk.

Undeterred Desire Circle

by Mateo Perez Lara

crush me into a bright, acidic thing, peel back, a pattern emerges
its sweetness, its tang is beneath the lip. squeeze, tenderly,
breathe then blow me away palm me like pomelo, bloodied, he
who drank me, until there was nothing left, I'm a powder,
crushed into your water, I'm all you'll grow fleshed the fruit you
bear a tree carved into a witness, I pursue a reason to live, you
provided, you dictated across my syrupy pang, I have you and
only you but I'm unwavering as you gather me, pick me up,
distribute me as soil into a garden I never identified, or help
bloom, but I'll do my best to remain as you need, please, tell me
to open, please tell me to open, please tell me to open, I'll open.



Mateo Perez Lara (they/them/theirs) is a queer, non-binary, Latinx poet from California. They have a pamphlet of poems, *Glitter Gods*, showcased with Thirty West Publishing House. They have an MFA in Poetry from Randolph College. Their poems have been published in *EOAGH*, *The Maine Review*, *The Acentos Review*, and elsewhere.

Sand Path That'll Lead the Refugees Home

by Sana Wazwaz

I said *ENOUGH*
of the hecklers and the haters
and the flicked fingers and the Bibi defenders
and the *hey hey's* and the *ho ho's* and the
occupation that never seems to go because
Genocide Joe
cares about all the hostages except
the ones in the Open Air Prison,

I said *ENOUGH*
of the Nakba 74 and 75 and so on
[This Israeli Independence Day:
I hope Yaacov blows himself enough balloons
to send him flying back to Brooklyn],

I said *ENOUGH*.

So how 'bout this?

Hey, Genocide Joe:
instead of *pausing* the bombing,
or *feeling sad* about the bombing,
how bout you actually
end the bombing?

End the Nakba?
How 'bout that?

I want to end the Nakba.

I want to plant all our picket signs into the ground
and watch them grow and sprout
into every last olive tree
that's ever been torched to ashes;

I want these picket signs to become something

Your picket stick,
a spinning baton
swirling and signing “freedom”
into the air of Beit Lahm

Yours,

the ore of a Gazan fisherman
tasting unsoiled sea at last

And yours,

the cane of the headmaster
of the longest dabke line there ever was;

and we will dance

in a chain that’ll outstretch all the shackles of Israeli prisons put together.

I want our bright orange marshal vests,
to never again be the burial sheets of another Rachel Corrie,
I never want to see these vests again
except on a Eid day when Rafah is so jam-packed
that a mother fears she’ll lose her child
in the bakery smoke
instead of phosphorus—

there will be children
clutching maamoul in place of rocks,

there will be kites
to teach the doves how to fly again,

And mark my words—

I will link arms with every child
like a chain of Jerusalem’s sesame bread
and yes, we will dance
in a long-winding fence

for now there are no walls anymore

only a khalto,
to bake us some *legendary knafeh*;
knafeh that can stretch and patch
the swiss cheese map
back into an unbreakable atlas.

There will be food on this land
that'll make life worth living,

there'll be a teta
that'll sculpt a maqloobeh flip
into a refugee's lost sandcastle
on this land,
the only greenlines
will be acre upon acre of teta's fresh mint
and the only thing that'll camouflage
is the greenwash that used to poison it.

But never again.

Never again of the
greenwash and the
pinkwash and the poison;
Never again,
of the detainees and the
drone strikes and the death marches

Never Again will a child only be able
to come near an ice cream truck
when they're dead.

Never Again
will a teen's body be pumped with so much gasoline
that it becomes a cattle car
driving him out into exile,
Never Again
will a father's shoulders become the burial site
of his sons face as he cowers
into his paternal arms

Never again
Never again

I want to bring back Muhammed Al-Durrah to celebrate with us.
I want to bring back Mohammed Abu-Khdeir to celebrate with us;
I want to bring back Shireen Abu Akleh.
I want to pull 1,000 children out of the rubble to celebrate with us.

I will initiate the longest Zaffa line
to lead Ahmad Manasra out of prison
where he will turn his twist ties into oud strings
and we will play and laugh and sing
and play and sing and dance

And when we are done
we will take all the spoons of Gilboa prison
and we will dig
and dig
and dig
a tunnel to Ben Gurion's grave
and watch him turn as he realizes

the young have not forgotten

but for now,
for now I'm here
holding this picket sign
for the ninth week again.
And as the car horns cuss at me
I just want to disappear
and imagine the moment
Handala gets to turn around
for the first time
and we all get to see his beautiful face at last;

and I want that boy,
to gather all the children of Gaza
for a game of soccer
under a bomb-less sky on a Rafah beach
And I want that boy,
to kick that soccer ball
so, so far
until it engraves a sand path
that'll lead every last one
of our refugees
home.

Sand Path That'll Lead the Refugees Home was first published in The Augsburg Echo Newspaper in 2024 and the Reviving Sisterhood Expressions Blog in 2023.

A video of Sana reading this poem, will also be displayed for viewing on September 13th-January 2025 at the Colorado College Fine Arts Exhibition



Sana Wazwaz is a Palestinian-American writer, theater artist, and organizer for Palestinian rights. She is a member of New Arab American Theater Works' Playwright Incubator Program, where her debut play *Birthright Palestine* was performed in a staged reading in April 2023. Her work has been read for institutions across Minnesota, from Mizna to Reviving Sisterhood to New Arab American Theater Works. Her poetry has been published in Palestinian Youth Movement's Ghassan Kanafani Memorial Anthology. Sana holds a BA from Augsburg University in creative writing, and works as an administrative assistant at New Arab American Theater Works.

Thank you for reading!

Overtly Lit is a volunteer-run litmag. At the end of each issue, we normally ask readers to consider contributing to the magazine. However, for this issue we would like to ask you to consider donating to the numerous funds raising money for those living under genocide. You can find verified fundraisers via:

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