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# Women Gathered on Flat Rooftops and Thumprints in Black Coffee

Sana M. Amoura-Patterson  
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WOMEN GATHERED on FLAT ROOFTOPS  
and THUMBPRINTS in BLACK COFFEE

by

Sana M. Amoura-Patterson

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Gerald Shapiro

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2010

WOMEN GATHERED on FLAT ROOFTOPS  
and THUMBPRINTS in BLACK COFFEE

Sana M. Amoura-Patterson, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Gerald Shapiro

*Women Gathered on Flat Rooftops* and *Thumbprints in Black Coffee* is a creative dissertation that examines the lives of Arab women living in Jordan and Arab immigrants living in the United States. The first portion of the dissertation, *Women Gathered on Flat Rooftops* is an excerpt from the early portion of the novel by the same name. These first 53 pages provide the background of the characters and highlights aspects that are culturally specific to the women of the stories. For example, issues of arranged marriages, funeral practices, women's custody rights are all illustrated through these early stories. The early portion of the novel provides the situation as well as the structure of the overall story. While the situations that the women in this portion of the novel experience are specific to contemporary Amman, Jordan, the fundamental concerns of women addressed in this novel are cross-cultural.

The second portion of the dissertation, *Thumbprints in Black Coffee* is comprised of poems that reveal the Arab-American immigrant experience. Most of the poems included in this section tell the story of various members of the author's own family and demonstrate how Arab-Americans are torn between two worlds. The longer poems were conceived from interviews with the author's father and aunts who were raised in Palestine and Jordan, but have lived most of their adult lives in the U.S.

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For my father, Mahmoud Amoura, and his sisters, Faeka, Siham, Seena and Leila

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## Part I

### Seena

In my sister's house, I am the free one. Those kids of hers with their own kids coming in and out all day. Eating. Yelling. They think they are free, but they are not. They act like I am an idiot, a child. They have no idea who knows what. From Fatima, it is OK. She has always been the boss. Moving close to the ground, so solid like our mother's shadow— everywhere. But even she is not free to love and pray. She is too busy moving to see and to feel. She does not know God the way I do. I have heard her and her husband at night. Grunt and creak while I am rolled up in a clean white sheet. I take comfort in my own small body rolled into a tiny space. I do not have to parcel out my body and soul. I am completely given to God. She spends her time with her hands always moving. I watch her. She cannot stop. Her mind is full like a kitchen drawer. She doesn't hide her real self from me. Nobody pretends to be their best selves around me because nobody sees me. They talk in front of me—like I am someone who cannot hear and will not tell. I do not pray for them. My sister Fatima I still bring into my thoughts but her children are different. Instead I pretend they are not here. I am pure. I can become weightless. Floating above the round melons they store under my bed. I think Fatima knows I am closer to God than any of them. She knows but does not tell. She can't help herself from coming into my room at night when the scratchy record starts to call us to pray. She does not say anything. She just comes to me and we unroll the rug. We kneel and let the words take over. Swimming in the words of God that surround us there is no separation of us then. She is not a mother or wife. She is not my sister. She becomes part of me. She does not have a heavy foot when she prays in the dark. This is how it is most nights,

but now the house is crowded again. Her daughter is back and my sister is dark, heavy and small like a metal ball. I feel the weight of worry she is carrying with her she only releases when she is praying. She wants her daughter to open herself, but Mariam slams herself shut. She is a locked trunk of secrets and holds her bathrobe tightly so no one sees.



### **Fatima**

“Alhumdul Allah.” Fatima sat up in bed, looked in the mirror, and thanked God for one more day. She moved off the bed slowly without disturbing the jagged rhythm of her husband’s labored breathing. As usual, she was the first to move across the concrete floors of her flat to the corner kitchen to start boiling water for the coffee. Her daughter Mariam and her granddaughter Baria slept in the extra bedroom—two single beds pushed together. Her grandson Yasser slept in the living room on the couch. Her sister Seena, who slept just across from the cramped kitchen, was curled up in a corner on her bed snoring despite the morning sunlight that penetrated the fragile curtains in her room.

Fatima looked out the small kitchen window from her flat high on Jabel el Taj—one of seven hills that surrounded downtown Amman. In the early sun she saw the shopkeepers pulling up the metal doors to open their stores and the thin street sweeper making his way along the sidewalk with his straw broom. A young mother walked with her daughter who looked to be about four or five years old. Fatima was surprised she did not know the woman but recognized her younger self in the mother covered with a long, black robe, and a white scarf that concealed all her hair and drew attention to her face. The woman walked solidly looking straight ahead, only breaking her pace periodically for a glance at her daughter. Even from three floors above, Fatima could see the smile the woman had for her daughter who held onto her mother’s hand and skipped along in a pink, ruffled dress.

Mariam, her first child, was now 52 years old, but Fatima felt only moments from holding her hand in the street. She imagined herself with her daughter’s small hand in her own and wished she could direct her daughter so easily again. She knew Mariam’s

children would get up soon, so she decided to talk to Mariam now. Baria and Yasser would be fiercely defensive of their father despite his indiscreet infidelities and his blatant irresponsibility.

“Mariam, come sit with me,” Fatima gently nudged her daughter from sleep, careful not to wake Baria who was sleeping next to her mother. Mariam groaned but obediently rose and followed her mother into the hallway. “Coffee?” Fatima whispered. Mariam slowly looked up at her mother to see her looking intently.

Mariam followed her mother through the bedroom door and slowly up the concrete stairs to the roof. Fatima placed the heavy tray onto the unsteady table. She poured the thick, black coffee into a small cup and handed it to her daughter who quietly accepted it—keeping her head bent and avoiding her mother’s eyes.

“You’ve been here two days now, but you haven’t said anything. How long are you planning on staying?” Fatima usually initiated these conversations with her daughter in a seemingly innocent manner, but Mariam only shrugged. Fatima tried to smile, but her disappointment was still apparent in her eyebrows that remained pinched. Fatima became impatient whenever she encountered her daughter’s passivity.

“You know you are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I enjoy having the house full. In fact, I was just remembering when we first left the refugee camp, and we moved to Jabel el Taj. Wherever I would walk, you and Nahid, Hassan and Mahmoud would be running between my legs. I didn’t know how we were going to eat, but I felt so much hope...” She began one of her talks. If only her daughter could see her as an example. What did she need to say to motivate Mariam to be strong? Why couldn’t her

daughter learn from her experiences? She had been strong. Why didn't her daughter see this?

"I lost your brother Hassan and your sister Nahid that year. Of course I felt terribly sad, but I couldn't feel sorry for myself and mope around. I had to keep going for you and your brother..." Fatima continued leading to the key point of the story, "You know, men are physically stronger than women, but women are the emotional strength of their families. If I had not been strong when your father was weak, we would have been defeated for good. Self-pity is only a luxury for the rich."

Fatima watched her daughter mechanically nod and continue looking into her cup of coffee. Mariam looked beat and Fatima wondered again how her daughter had failed to learn to hold her place with men. Fatima herself had only been a little over sixteen when she married Mohammed, yet he did not run her. He had worked in the rock quarry and brought home money, but she had always run the house. She divided the money and spent it. She arranged her children's marriages and continued to advise them after marriage. Fatima knew her family depended on her motherly insights and endurance. But for over thirty years, Fatima had watched her lively, eldest daughter dwindle in an unhappy marriage. How had she failed her daughter? Fatima felt sweat gathering on the edges of her scarf and her throat begin to tighten. She couldn't let Mariam's quiet mood bring her down. How would she help Mariam if she too started to feel defeated? Fatima forced her attention back to Mariam and asked, "Did Braheim send you?"

"No, this time I left on my own," Mariam continued to look into her coffee cup.

"Left?" Fatima felt hopeful.

“No, Mother, I didn’t ‘leave Braheim,’ I just left to come visit you.” Fatima knew her daughter was trying to distract her. Mariam did not meet her mother’s dark eyes when she spoke and she fidgeted pulling her worn bathrobe tight around her thick legs and careful to keep her large chest covered. Mariam’s shoulders relaxed for a moment and Fatima sensed Mariam struggling to say something. Fatima leaned towards her hoping for some detail that would help her understand. But just as Mariam looked as though she were about to open up, Fatima touched her daughter’s shoulder and Mariam pulled away.

Mariam looked directly at her mother and asked, “Why are you so surprised? You’re the one who used to encourage me to stay. Remember, in the beginning, when his mother thought I was bad luck because his sister was killed in a car accident almost a *year* after our marriage? You encouraged me to stay and work it through.” Mariam’s voice was quiet but direct, and it made Fatima feel small. Mariam rarely spoke this way to her mother and Fatima felt the sting of her accusation.

Fatima moved slightly back and sunk inward. Why did her daughter only find an assertive voice to use when she spoke to her? Remembering those early days of her daughter’s marriage made Fatima feel tight again with guilt and humiliation for her daughter. She remembered holding Mariam while she cried recalling her mother-in-law’s endless picking—checking the sheets of her bed in the morning to be sure she and Braheim were having sex.

Mariam continued, looking her mother directly in the eye and raising her voice beyond the quiet hush of morning coffee, “I know you cannot understand how I can remain loyal to Braheim or his family. I know you want more than I am telling you, but

there isn't anything to tell." Mariam was now looking away from her mother's pained expression and spoke to the crack in the concrete floor in front of her mother's small feet. Quieter, but still avoiding her mother's face, Mariam continued, "Leaving him now won't change that I've been married to him for 35 years. It won't restore my children's respect for me."

Although Fatima disliked Braheim, she still felt injured when Mariam reminded her of how terrible life had been with him. "Maybe I was wrong to give you such advice? Do you think I was wrong?" Fatima quietly pressed. Fatima's eyes were now pleading for reassurance. Fatima was looking at her daughter but began thinking about Braheim. He was not without his charms and good looks, but he was perhaps generous to a fault. What made him attractive to others was what had appealed to her so many years ago. Braheim could not refuse a stranger anything. He carried other women's groceries home and paid for other children's candy when he had nothing for his own children. His generosity with others was what caused every business he started to fail—the video store, the repair shop, the salon. And perhaps what damaged his marriage to her daughter most was Braheim's inability to confront his own mother. He refused his mother nothing, and she ran his life, her daughter's life and the lives of all four of their children. Like Fatima, Braheim's mother Saira was a matriarch, but she lacked compassion. Fatima knew she wasn't always hard. When they were both girls in Haifa, they had been friends. Saira was the elder and would braid Fatima's hair and let her help when she would tend her mother's plants. But she was different now. She was calculating. Although she rarely saw Saira anymore, when she did, she would talk endlessly about her home in Haifa—exaggerating her own family's wealth and position. She would rarely ask about others

and would pat Fatima's hands as a show of sympathy for how sorry she felt for her poor position after they had left their homes. Saira would brag about fabricated accomplishments of her children and tell Fatima how much she loved her while treating her like a pitiful relationship to whom she was bestowing some kindness. Becoming refugees had been hard on everyone. She knew people it had changed. In Saira's presence Fatima would be reminded how losing one's country forced people to reinvent themselves, but the kind person Saira had once been seemed to have disappeared completely. How could she have known Saira, who had once been modest and kind would be such a demanding mother to her daughter?

When Mariam spoke again, Fatima jerked as if she was surprised to see her there.

"Braheim is starting a new business, and I am going to be helping him. Since Yasser is in high school and Baria has just graduated, he wanted me to help him keep the money records for a small grocery store near our home. Now that the fighting has stopped and the money is better in Lebanon, we think this is a good time to try another store." Mariam's voice was softer now—soothing and gentle.

Fatima hesitated, but then allowed herself to feel comforted by her daughter's lighter tone and hopeful words. Perhaps, Braheim, after all of these years, was capable of becoming responsible and respecting her daughter. "Well, that's good news. Is that what you want? You know, you can stay here for a while," Fatima encouraged her daughter again, but this time the intonation in her voice did not sound desperate, and Mariam, with relieved laughter, responded lightly to her mother's suggestion.

"I can't hide in my mother's home now." After a long pause, Mariam looked directly at her mother, "How have *you* been? Is Seena getting worse?" Fatima

recognized her daughter was changing the direction of her inquiries, but she allowed it and the two women continued their visit about Seena's health and Mohammed and the new neighbors downstairs. When they began to hear some stirrings from the rooms below, Fatima and Mariam moved from the sunny roof into the tight kitchen to begin filling small bowls with apricot jam, olives, oil, and zater to place onto the large silver tray. Fatima called for Yasser to fetch some bread for breakfast.

.....

### Baria

Baria heard her grandmother whisper to her mother and had feigned sleep. She rolled over to face the white walls and gathered more of the blankets around her as her mother had obediently slid out of bed. Now that she was alone she let her eyes focus on the photos on the dresser. They were pictures of her cousins—her male cousins. And the photos didn't look much like them. They were all serious pictures, not at all the boys she knew who gossiped on the roof and teased her. She pictured them walking in the streets with their arms around each other. Everyone was growing up. Baria sat up and looked closely at Ziyad's picture in his military uniform. His eyelids were just low enough to keep the light from making his green eyes shine. He looked sad in the picture and it made her sad too. She rolled over again, contemplating staying in bed all day to avoid her mother.

Lately, all she did was argue with her. She closed her eyes to shut out the image of her mother down on her knees begging Baria to take the exams in July and to not return home with her. It was horrible watching her mother humble herself so, but Baria refused to be manipulated. Even with her eyes squeezed shut she could still hear her mother's plea, "Study, please, please, for the love of God. Go to the university. Live with your brother in Amman. Don't come back with me."

Baria felt sick thinking about the college exams coming up in three weeks. She was not prepared and there was no way she was going to be. She hated school. She loved to read, but not the old poets and Arab scholars. Instead, at night, she would read romance novels. The familiar landscape bored her, and her imagination lived in cosmopolitan settings where men felt confident and took care of the women they loved.



Only a few summers ago, her cousins Ziyad and Moayad had joked about marrying her, and she had retorted that they would never be able to afford her tastes for silks and chocolates. Although some of her male cousins had already gotten married, they still seemed like boys in many ways. They brought their new wives to live in their parents' homes, but little had changed. They still gathered together in the evenings on the street corner coffee shop and made the same kind of jokes they always had.

Baria looked under the crumpled sheets and ran her hands over her smooth, flat stomach. She touched her swelling breasts and smiled, imagining Maher's hands caressing them. Maher was beautiful, and her grandmother back in Lebanon was making plans for them to be married sometime during the next year. She was done trying to convince her mother. She didn't need her approval; her dad and grandmother would agree, and that was enough. Her mother would have to come around. In Lebanon, although her grandmother had been sick, she had kept Baria's matchmaking a priority. For several months she had been talking to the other women in their neighborhood, and after several meetings over coffee, nuts and sweets, she had already secured an informal promise from Maher's mother. Maher was 25 and already he had been helping his father in the auto shop for several years. They would live with his family for a couple years, and then they would get their own flat.

Baria heard the clanging in the kitchen and groaned as she flopped her long, thin legs over the edge of the hard mattress. They would be calling for her soon. She pulled on the jeans that were lying on the floor, put on her bra, and found a clean, long-sleeve blouse to wear before walking out into the sitting room where her grandmother Fatima was clearing space to set the large tray.

“Good, you are up,” her grandmother’s voice was too eager. Baria was always aware that her grandmother Fatima was her mother’s ally first and frequently reminded Baria to be more respectful and helpful.

“Good morning, Tata,” Baria returned, “do you need me to get bread?”

“No, no, your brother already went. You can help your mother with Seena.”

Baria reluctantly walked to Seena’s doorway to see her mother wrestling with her wiry, belligerent aunt. Baria had been reminded on numerous occasions to be kind to Seena. Her mother had told her that her Aunt Seena, who was now nearly 70, could not help the way she behaved because she had suffered from typhoid when she was seven, and had mentally been a child her entire life. When they were kids, Baria and her cousins would tease Seena sometimes to watch her grab at her clothes and throw a fit. But now Baria found no humor in her sick aunt. Seena was stubborn and pouty and Baria tried her best to simply avoid her as much as possible.

“Do you need help?” Baria asked her mother.

“No, I’m alright.” Mariam looked up from her bent position over her aunt and tried to smile at her daughter.

“Okay,” Baria shrugged. If her mother wanted to be a martyr and deal with Seena alone, it was fine with her. Baria went back and sat on the couch with her grandmother.

“Your mother doesn’t need help?” Fatima asked skeptically.

“No, she’s fine.”

“So, how’s your studying going?”

“Okay.” Baria hated these conversations, echoes of her mother.

“You know,” her grandmother continued, “if you get into the university here in Amman, you can live with me instead of your brother and his wife. You’d feel uncomfortable in their new house, and I could use your help with Seena.”

Simultaneously, Yasser entered the front door into the sitting room with several loaves of bread in the plastic bag he was holding, and her grandfather opened his bedroom door and shuffled over to Baria with a tired smile.

“My habeebti!” her grandfather exclaimed as he opened his stiff arms waiting for a kiss. Baria couldn’t resist smiling at her grandfather. Baria loved her grandfather, a slow, quiet and gentle man.

“Good morning, Jedo.” Baria kissed him on the forehead before letting him squeeze her tightly.

Mariam, holding Seena’s arm, entered the room too. Baria was relieved the conversation with her grandmother was over. As they dipped bread, her grandfather and brother were silent while Fatima and Mariam fussed over Seena who, after crossing her arms stubbornly for several minutes finally ripped off some bread and began to eat by keeping the bread close to her mouth and taking small bites.

When Baria rose to help her mother with the plates, Mariam shooed her away with her hand. “No, you go get cleaned up. I don’t want you to waste your time with this. I’ve got this,” she said nodding toward the dishes and Seena. “I want you to have time for yourself...to study.” Mariam smiled as if they were in total agreement about her taking the tests.

As Baria showered, she considered the outrageousness of her grandmother’s offer. Why would she prefer to live on Jabal-el Taj in her grandmother’s flat caring for Seena

and being a housemaid? She shuddered when she thought of washing Seena's gnarled feet before each call to prayer. Her brother and his wife lived near the university where young couples were living modern lives. They went to movies and met their friends in cafes. Everything was different in the newer neighborhoods in Amman. Even her brother's bright patterned dishes were a contrast to the chipped stained dishes of her grandmother's house. Her sister-in-law, Kareema, was only two years older than she was, and Kareema was the mistress of her own house. Baria loved visiting their house, but her grandmother was right. She didn't want to be an intruder. She wanted her own life. She looked forward to cleaning her own home, caring for her own children and holding her husband at night in their own bed.

Baria spent the afternoon alone in the bedroom she shared with her mother. She decided she would follow her mother's advice and take some time for herself. She was done fighting with her mother or grandmother. She would take the exams, and after she failed, there would be no other choice for her than to marry. In the meantime she would enjoy the reprieve from daily chores and allow her mother and grandmother to feel good about talking her into studying. They could imagine her working out proofs while she traveled far away from torn curtains and chipped dishes in the company of a handsome man.

.....

### *Mariam*

After bathing Seena, Mariam spent the afternoon with her mother shopping for food and then chopping vegetables and rolling grape leaves for the late afternoon meal. Mariam felt herself becoming more ill each day. Her breasts hurt and she tired easily. Even breathing was becoming more difficult. Although she was tired and her body ached, Baria loved grape leaves, and Mariam wanted to reward her. Mariam felt a little guilty for raising her voice to her mother earlier. She wanted to talk and laugh with her mother again. She wanted her mother to enjoy her company and not feel compelled to lecture or guide. She loved her daughter and mother so much, but it seemed they only saw what they expected to see when they looked at her. She felt like she was disappearing piece by piece and was becoming merely a character type to nearly everyone around her. She knew her daughter saw her only as an obstacle, but she prayed that in time that would change and her daughter would thank her. Mariam indulged in the fantasy that after she herself was gone, her daughter, Baria, would reflect on the wisdom of her good advice to wait on getting married. One day Baria would be grateful to have the options an education would give her. Maybe her daughter would be a doctor. Maybe she would eventually have a husband and children. She liked to think of Baria living in a home of her own rather than merely being an occupant of a husband's home.

She hoped someday her mother would stop seeing her as weak and appreciate her kindness rather than see it as a flaw. Mariam admired her mother, but she did not want to be her mother. Earlier, in the shops that lined the street below her parents' flat, Mariam had followed her mother who clucked at wilting parsley and shook her head at the general state of each store.

“What is this Abu Ali? Are you trying to kill my husband? This meat looks like it would give me worms!”

Mariam marveled how her mother could transform herself into a regal queen looking over her troops as she made her daily visits to the small stores outside her home. Mariam laughed to herself remembering once when her sister-in-law had referred to Fatima as an actor. Every day on Jabel-el Taj was a show and she their chief performer. Mariam followed her mother through each small store catching up with the owners and patrons sometimes making excuses and apologies for her mother’s demands.

“Why do you contradict me?” her mother scolded as they left Abu Khalil’s drugstore. “You make me look like a crazy lady when you tell him the store is very nice when it was filthy. He needs to clean it—for himself and for everyone else who walks in there.”

Fatima’s words were angry, but Mariam thought she looked more like a sulking child than a 71 year old woman, and she quickly moved to comfort her. “I’m so sorry, Mother. You are right. The counters were dirty, but I felt sorry for him. Next time I will not dismiss you.”

After one block, Fatima was herself again discussing the possibilities for visitors during Mariam’s stay. Mariam knew there was more than one way to be strong. She was strong by being patient. She did not want to be a dictator like her mother or heaven forbid, her mother’s mother.

In the afternoon as they sat at the eating table, Mariam and Fatima cut the veins out of the wet grape leaves, rolled them tight and squeezed. The leaves stained their fingers as they worked while Mariam tried to shut out her mother’s words and instead

listened to the sounds of her voice which was quick and certain. The rhythms were lively and musical and Mariam enjoyed feeling safe in her mother's strength. While the grape leaves simmered and the cauliflower soaked, Mariam leaned against her father on the couch and read prayers to Seena.

Later, when Mariam was alone on the roof, she looked up at the night sky and then closed her eyes. She tried to remember the curves and lines of her mother's face. She imagined the warm, dry feel of her father's thick hands and reminded herself how much she had enjoyed the evening after dinner when two of her sisters, Emelle and Bessma, and her brothers' wives came over for coffee. Yasser and her father had the spent the evening playing cards, and Baria had agreed to stay in Amman for the exams without further argument.

She would keep remembering all of this after she left. Mariam knew this would be her last visit to her mother's house. Braheim's mother was becoming less mobile with her arthritis, and her husband's family had decided she should be the one to take care of her since she lived in her mother-in-law's home. She was going to have to attend to her full-time now. She would care for her mother-in-law until she could no longer stand. It would be months before Mariam could visit her own family again. She expected by then it would be too late. She was already feeling weaker and her chest throbbed with each step she took.

Before getting into the bath that night, Mariam undid her bra and let her sore breasts hang. The lumps in both of her breasts had become enlarged and her breasts were bruised. She was surprised by the slight smile she saw in her own image reflected in the bathroom mirror and felt strangely excited by her secret. Braheim no longer touched her,

and her children who had fed on those breasts, were now gone from her. Her body was entirely her own. She cupped each breast; the skin had become thick and swollen with even some occasional bloody discharge. Mariam felt stronger than she had in awhile as she lowered herself into the warm water.



## Part II

### Seena

I do not like my nephew Omar. He is loud and silly. I watch him sometimes in the afternoon when Fatima is hanging clothes. I go to the edge of the roof and look over. He has a shop underneath our flat, but he is usually in the street talking and laughing. I have seen him talking to that skinny girl. She is a cat—picking up scraps of other people. She watches my nephew but then pretends she doesn't. He chases after her when his wife is not near. When Omar's wife Leila walks down the street, she too talks to everyone. She likes people to see her. They sometimes touch each other in the street so everyone can see. This is not right, but the quiet cat is worse. She hides from people in the shadows of her father's store. She doesn't want anyone to see her. I see her, but she does not see me. She does not think to look up and see those above her watching her. Leila is loud. She tells jokes and makes everyone laugh. Her children run around like lice, but she is also soft. Sometimes she sits with me and my sister. I let her brush my hair and sometimes she sings when she does this. But Omar is never soft. Last week I scratched him when he tried to pick me up. He doesn't understand that I am older. I am his aunt, but he tried to pick me up to move me to my room when I did not want to go. Fatima is my sister, but I do not have to obey her when she tells me it is time for bed. I am an old woman. He should not think he can move me like I am a toy on the floor that needs to be put away. So I scratched him hard so blood came off of his neck. He put me down and yelled at me, but Fatima saw he was wrong and told him so. I don't think he will try to pick me up again.

### **Fatima**

Omar and Leila had been married since she was 18 and he was 20. Now, 15 years later they had three children that lived with them in a three-room flat a two minute walk from his mother's. At 33, Leila was still Fatima's favorite daughter-in-law. Leila was quick. She was playful with her children and with other people's children. But she was a hands-off mother who smiled often and shared many hours of cracking salty pumpkin seeds between her teeth and drinking coffee with Fatima. While she always wore her white scarf over her hair and a lightweight black cloak over her clothes whenever she left her home, her clothes underneath were handmade and stylish. She was still an attractive woman and joked with most of the storekeepers residing on the top of Jabel el Taj. She'd ask about their daughters and sons, reprimand them for not treating their wives better.

Omar often entered the room with a show of great affection kissing his wife's hand and boldly tapping her butt when she would walk by him. She would laugh and scold him while clearly enjoying the attention she still held. She was the unofficial matchmaker of the neighborhood. The young girls admired her youthful spirit despite her age and three children. Leila floated unlike so many of the mothers her same age who shuffled down from their apartments occasionally to purchase bread or hummus from the falafel stand when they were too tired to grind the chick peas themselves. The young men trusted her like a big sister. She would tease them about school or girls.

Leila was one of the few women on Jabel el Taj that was not 10 years younger than her husband. She and Omar had married for love and even 16 years since they decided to marry, they still appeared to have a relationship that was loving and generous

despite their poor dwelling and lack of economic prospects. Their relationship was the one that girls used as a case for romantic love and it was a convincing argument for anyone who had seen them tease one another and laugh in public. But that was before this past spring, before she left her husband and children and Jabel el Taj.

### Leila

How could she return to the neighborhood? How could she not? Leila tried to trace back to the moment when something had changed between them. This was the third Monday she was waking up in Irbid in the double bed she was sharing with her youngest sister. Despite how hurt and angry she was, she missed waking up next to Omar. His broad chest and strong arms had always made her feel safe. She missed her daughters Ruba and Lemma and her son, Ziad. She knew they were fine. Fatima no doubt was feeding and caring for them. Leila tried to think back to when Omar started bringing up Hibba's name. Hibba was his friend's daughter. Hibba was 20 and had been the source of much anguish for her parents. Hibba was not interested in getting married. She had never been an exceptional student, and her government exam was not even near acceptance level despite her having taken it three years in a row. She was little help to her mother and had very few friends. Leila hadn't disliked Hibba, but she had certainly never been impressed by her. Even as a child, Hibba had been sulky and quiet. She could recall Omar defending her at dinner several months ago when he mentioned that she had refused to even meet a man her parents thought she might find interesting.

*“She has every right to not want to meet that man. Leila, I would think you of all people would understand.”*

*“I only said that that one shouldn't be so picky. My God, she is like a little mouse. She hardly smiles when people wave to her. And she certainly is not nearly so beautiful as her mother. If someone is interested, she should at least respect her parents enough to consider the match.”*

*“Leila, you can be so hard sometimes. Hibba is a beautiful young girl and if you took time to talk with her as you do most, you would see that.”* Leila was wiping her son’s face that was covered in a mixture of white yogurt and rice but stopped mid-swipe to put her hands on her hips as Omar continued...

*“Maybe you don’t care for her because she doesn’t seek your advice like all of those silly kids in the neighborhood. You like being the queen---“*

*“That is not true---I just give advice when people ask me for it. You are being very mean tonight—“*

*“Sorry, sorry, I just think maybe Hibba is not like the others. She is special and takes time to understand.”*

*“So you understand that moody child?”*

*“There you go again judging her! I just think she has more going for her. If you would talk to her, you’d see that.”*

*“Believe me, I have tried. You don’t think I am as nice to her as anyone else on this street? She hardly looks at anyone. There is something not quite right about her and I feel sorry for Ahmed and Saira for having such a troublesome daughter.”*

*“Well, she talks to me. She just wants more than her family wants for her. You remember how we felt...”* and with that Omar stood up and moved behind Leila who had returned to wiping down Ziad before pulling him out of his high chair. Omar hugged Leila who did not lean into him but continued to lift Ziad towards her to hug him and only turned to face Omar after setting Ziad down gently swatting his diapered butt and watching him scoot off.

Omar reached for Leila again, *“Come on my sweet, I didn’t mean anything. I just feel sorry for the girl and thought maybe you could work your magic with her.”* This time she did not pull away. She gave Omar a small smile and shrugged.

*“I am just surprised how defensive you are of Hibba since she has caused your dear friend, her father, so much grief. But if you are asking me to talk to her, of course I will.”* She allowed Omar to hug her but as soon as he released her, she joined her daughter Ruba who had started to clear away the dishes.

That was the first time she could remember Omar had brought up Hibba at the dinner table. It must have been September. Leila remembered the girls sitting at dinner still wearing their school uniforms. Leila wondered how many other people on Jabel el Taj had seen what she had not. How had she not seen that Omar had brought Hibba into many conversations in the past several months? Often times they seemed to argue about something that she couldn’t even recall later. She had tried to talk to Hibba, but that skinny girl always slipped away and avoided her.

Now it was June already. Leila could tell her little sister was no longer in bed although she was facing the wall. The light on the walls indicated it was already late morning and the house was quiet. Her father and brother had already put in a few hours at the garage. Her mother and little sister were probably outside in the garden. No one had woken her. They had said little since she arrived two weeks ago with a suitcase and asked to stay for a while. Her family, like most people, liked Omar. He was friendly and filled a room with his smile and jokes. She felt paralyzed in the bed. Maybe she would never be able to walk again. Every morning since she had been back at her mother’s house felt like this. She would awake confused about where she was, and then like her

own personal movie, the film would start up again replaying the scenes and conversations of the past month beginning with Seena.

At dusk one evening she escaped the routine chaos of Fatima's house to sit alone on the roof. She hadn't even noticed Seena was on the upstairs patio. Leila could hear the children playing and arguing downstairs. It was early May and warm enough for all the windows in the flat below to be open even after it got dark. They were playing a card game and Fatima and her daughters were drinking coffee and reminding the kids to keep it down. On the roof after dark was the only quiet place that night and she needed just one cigarette before heading home with her own children and putting them to bed. She had just lit her cigarette and had started to exhale when Seena spoke and made her jump back.

*"You know he wants another..."*

Leila laughed at her own fright and moved toward the shadowed form she knew was Seena. *"What did you say, Dear?"*

*"He wants another."*

*"OK, who is 'he'?"* Now that her eyes were adjusting to the dark, Leila could make out Seena's face a bit and thought she could see her crooked teeth because she was smiling. Leila was gentle with Seena. She would make her tea and even hold her hands and smooth her hair when she would get wildly upset and start yelling and cursing her sister. But Seena seemed different now. She seemed controlled, and maybe even cruel. Despite the darkness, Seena's eyes seemed bright, alert. Seena's thin lips were pulled tightly over her crooked teeth that were barely visible.

*“Your husband with fat hands...”* “Seena drew her white robe tighter around her and settled onto the bench. Leila moved in closer.

*“Seena, what did you say? I don’t think I understand.”*

Leila was surprised when Seena turned to face Leila and looked directly at her.

*“I think you understand me better than the rest. You know what I’m saying. Your big husband—the one who snores next to you while you sleep—my big nephew who pinches your bottom. He cried like he did as a little boy when my sister and his sisters told him, ‘no.’”*

*“You saw Omar crying? When was this?”* Leila was only inches from Seena’s face. Leila could smell her sour breath. Leila wondered if she could hear Seena’s bones rattling together or was it her heart which she realized was beating so loudly the children’s voices sounded muffled and far away.

*“Go and ask him. Ask him why his mother and sisters told him they would never support his decision. Ask him why they told him he was acting ridiculous.”*

Leila noticed her cigarette was no longer lit, but she crushed it out anyway on the concrete floor. She suddenly felt she had to get away from Seena.

*“Seena, I think you are confused. I have to go home now. It’s getting late.”*

*“Ask him... ask him,”* Seena giggled as she chanted this and Leila stumbled over a small table as she made her way to the stairs towards her children, towards home.

As Omar admitted to wanting to marry Hibba, he leaned over and hugged Leila, resting his head on her shoulder. Although the kids were already in bed they continued to whisper as they laid on their own bed in the dark. Leila felt stiff while Omar seemed soft



like one of her own children needing comfort before returning to join the other kids in a game of kick the ball.

*“You know it had nothing to do with you. I wanted to help the girl. I wanted to help Ahmed. I thought you might appreciate the company and the help a second wife could bring. Think of all she could have done with the kids.”*

*“Please stop.”* These were the first words Leila had uttered in over an hour. She could tell Omar was surprised and hopeful that she finally responded. Her throat was felt so tight she was even surprised to hear herself make a sound. But the room returned to silence and she could make out in the dark that Omar was leaning on his side now looking at her, waiting for her to say something.

What could she say? He had made the decision to marry Hibba and had spoken to his mother and sisters about it and had not mentioned it to her. No doubt Ahmed thought this would be the solution to his Hibba problem and Omar thought this could make him look generous, like a big man in the neighborhood. My God, did everyone on Jabel el Taj know? She must look like the most foolish woman on their street.

*“Please. Please say something,”* Omar was nearly begging and she knew if she didn’t say something soon he was going to switch from being submissive to being defensive and angry.

First came the heavy sigh and then, *“You know I did nothing wrong. For God’s sake, there is room for four wives on my passport! It doesn’t matter anyway. I am not going to ask the girl or her parents. It is a non-issue, so please do not make a big deal about this when it isn’t. You are going to draw attention to yourself and our family if you*

*start carrying on. I simply thought of it as a possible solution and discovered that now is not the right time.”*

Leila didn't know what to say. Was he asking for forgiveness? Was he embarrassed that his mother had told him the family would not support this decision? Had Fatima refused her son's wishes because she knew it would hurt her daughter-in-law, or because he simply could not afford a second wife and it would become an embarrassment? Leila wanted to ask these questions, but she couldn't even sit up. She felt pinned to the bed and could hardly swallow.

Omar got up, grabbed his cigarettes from the nightstand and left the room. She could hear the front door shut and his footsteps become softer as he moved down the hallway outside.

Leila could finally breathe again. She got up and walked to the bedroom where both of the girls were asleep in their single beds and Ziad, was moving the blankets with his balled up fists before settling into a comfortable position. Leila gently moved back the sheets covering Lemma's small body, and got into bed with her arms around Lemma and fell asleep to the soft sound of her daughter breathing.

Leila looked at the other side of her bed she now shared with her 12 year old baby sister. Her father was kind, but in the evenings when he drank his tea and smoked the argelee, he would recall Omar's good traits. *“He is a solid man,”* he would remind her. *“So, he is not so successful with money, he is kind. He is a good father. Think of why you chose him. He is still that man.”*

Leila's mother was not quite so supportive of Omar or of Leila. After the first week she found ways to incorporate proverbs or maxims into every conversation. “We

live with our choices,” Leila’s mother would say about the vegetables she had picked up at the market, while Leila understood that her mother was also referring to the choice she had made to disregard her parents’ wishes to let them find her a husband who was older and who could be better able to provide for her. More directly she would remind Leila, “*Men live with their egos,*” this Leila knew was both an excuse for Omar (he was a man and therefore couldn’t help himself) as well as an insult toward Leila (if a husband received ample flattery from his wife, he would not seek the attention of another woman). In her more comforting moments, Leila’s mother would simply offer a proverb such as “*stretch your legs to fit your quilt.*” None of this helped relieve her feelings of betrayal or the anger she felt about having to leave her children behind because a mother could not take the children from their father’s family. She wanted to stay in bed and imagine Ziad lying on top of her napping. She wanted to brush Rubba’s hair and braid it or even just to smell Lemma’s neck or hear her giggle. How could she leave her children? How could she remain with Omar? She did love Omar; it was what made the pain so bad. She knew she wasn’t enough for him, or that he wasn’t honest about his feelings for Hibba. Now, it was ruined. How could they return to what they had? Who would she be? If she didn’t return, how could her children ever forgive her?

### Part III

#### Seena

My mother is here, I can smell her smoke. I am a little afraid of her, but she has never hurt me. She makes me feel like an equal because everyone is afraid of her. She is like a wave that washes everyone down but scrubs us all clean. When she is near I know that nothing can hurt me that nothing will make her weak. She must be an old woman because she is my mother and I am old, but she is always the same so I do not think she can die. She is too powerful. She does not like others to be weak around her. So I sit up tall when she is with me. When she looks at me, she sees me. But sometimes I am afraid she sees me too much. Once when I was a little girl, she let me try to smoke her pipe. When I coughed and coughed because the smoke burned my throat she laughed and kept laughing even when my father scolded her. I worry that she knows what I am thinking. She seems like a spirit that can make people move the way she wants, but she is not a light spirit like me. She is solid like a stone that no one can lift. She will keep Fatima and all of her children straight even though they like to bounce like rubber balls all over the place. I am glad she is here to see what they do, to keep my sister strong, to see me and make me real.

### Zarifeh

When Em Ali learned that Fatima's husband had died, she stood up and went to her room to pack a small bag and then walked out the front door of her son's house. She hailed a cab and ordered the driver to take her to Fatima's house in Amman three hours from her home in Irbid. No one thought she would come. She was old and detested funerals. Zarifeh, or as everyone referred to her, Em Ali, was the oldest member of the family. She had outlived some of her children and most of her 12 sisters. She had even attended the funerals of some of her grandchildren—the young ones who died shortly after birth. She was the fourth of her father's large family of all girls. When she was born, her father decided he was tired of waiting for a boy to help him farm, so he raised her like a boy.

She had rolled her own cigarettes since she was twelve and sometimes she smoked a pipe. She loved to tell the story about when she beat a neighbor boy in a peeing contest when distance was all that mattered and she insisted that he not touch his penis during the contest. She wasn't even certain of her exact age, but she married late and must have been over 90. She was certainly the oldest living person in the family. While some said she was broken after her eldest and favorite son died five years before, her young grandchildren were still intimidated by her unwavering confidence. She knew the children were frightened by her, and she liked it this way. She didn't enjoy negotiations with children and appreciated that they jumped when she told them to move. She was more like a man than a kindly grandmother. Even her children had always called her Em Ali, the revered title that indicated she was the mother of Mohammad, rather than a more endearing "Tata."

Because her son's family did not know where she had gone, they spent the evening calling neighbors and looking through the streets of Irbid for her and were unable to warn Fatima that her mother would be attending the funeral. Therefore, there was no one on the street to meet her taxi and help her up the flight of uneven concrete steps to Fatima's front door. When she rang the bell, Baria was surprised to see her at the door and was unprepared for the sight of her great grandmother's tall and slightly bent frame. Zarifeh offered no other greeting than to accept Baria's obligatory kiss on the cheek and tell her great granddaughter, "Get me a cup of coffee."

Even when one was prepared for Em Ali, she had a startling affect. She had suffered from small pox as a child and had lost the use of her left eye because of it. Baria avoided looking at her eye lid that drooped to cover the white and glassy eyeball that remained in the socket. Her skin was scarred with indentations on her cheeks as well. Zarifeh knew the children would sometimes imitate her when they thought she could not see them. They would close their left eyes and bark orders to the other children playing on the roof. She didn't mind. She in fact enjoyed that the children treated her like a mythical figure. She had no interest in being like the old grandmothers who received sympathy from the young children. She detested pity and much, much preferred that they straighten up when she walked into a room. Baria attempted to take the bag Em Ali clutched in her fist, but Baria was brushed away, so she instead hurried to the kitchen to heat the water for coffee.

Zarifeh fell into the chair in her daughter's sitting room. The dusty drive in the back of the cab took longer than she expected. The imbecile of a driver kept making stops along the way at roadside stands to pick up figs, bananas and shoes he no doubt

thought he could sell for a profit when he returned home. After the third stop, she got out of the cab to have a cup of coffee and a smoke at the makeshift café next to the road. The driver had not seen her get out of the cab and looked startled when he walked past her with rugs rolled up under his arm. When Zarifeh caught his eye she waved him over to her. He hesitated for a moment uncertain whether to unload the rugs in the trunk of his car or walk directly to her. Her look took away any option than to immediately walk towards her. He stood awkwardly holding the rugs under both arms and leaned his head toward her. She smiled and motioned for him to sit. After setting the rugs on their side, he took a seat and started explaining, “These rugs and fruit are for my father. He needs these things for his home, and I do not like to disappoint my family...”

Zarifeh had heard enough. She put her hand up, her hand directly in front of his mouth.

“Please, do not explain. I want to show you something.” Zarifeh was still smiling and motioned for him to come closer so he could hear her speaking softly. When the driver’s face was only inches from her own she asked him in a whisper, “Do you see that woman over there?” She was pointing to a beggar woman with a tattered black robe holding a metal cup sitting on the ground and rocking back and forth. The cab driver looked at Zarifeh again a bit confused and nodded. Zarifeh waved for him to come close again and continued, “Go fuck her, don’t fuck me. If you stop again, I will not pay you.” The driver jerked back and looked directly at Zarifeh who was still smiling. As the sky was darkening her face was partially shadowed with strange light and he wondered if he had heard her correctly. But he did not speak again. Instead, he put the carpets in the back and helped her into the cab. The cabbie’s shopping was finished. He did not speak

again until he was winding up the hill of Jabel el Taj to check he had the correct address. When he stopped in the street outside Fatima's flat, he attempted to help Zarifeh with her bag, and she took it from his hand in exchange for the fare. Unsure of how to help her, he stood there in the street dumbfounded until she told him, "leave."



### **Fatima**

Em Mohammad was alone when Fatima walked into the dark sitting room having endured an entire day of people hugging her and crying and eating. Fatima had just pulled off her black scarf when she looked up and saw her mother fanning herself.

“Em Ali, how long have you been sitting there?”

“I just got here, and told your granddaughter to get me some coffee. Sit, sit...”

Fatima smiled a little at seeing her mother. There would be no excessive sympathy from her and she was grateful. After a day of hugs and tears, she could finally stop comforting others.

“So, what are you going to do?” Em Ali asked. She never eased into a conversation and the fact that Fatima had discovered her husband dead and cold lying next to her just this afternoon was no reason for Em Ali to act differently.

“My sons will provide for me. All of my boys are good and will continue to give me money.”

“I am not so sure what you say about my grandsons is true, but I do not mean that.”

Fatima felt she needed to defend her sons, particularly her youngest son, Omar. Fatima suspected her mother was referring to him when she made this last remark. She herself worried about him because he was thirty five and still borrowed more money from her than he gave.

Em Ali clarified, “I mean about your sister, Seena. I know your husband wasn’t a great help, but it will be too much for you to care for her without anyone else in the

house. You are getting to be an old woman yourself these days, and you are not like me. I did not prepare you for that.”

“I think the two of us will be fine. I am stronger than you think. My sons live close and they check on me often. I also get some money from the U.S--Mahmoud, Camlee and Siham send me some money every month to help with taking care of Seena. I couldn't accept their money if I wasn't doing the work.”

Em Ali only grunted. When she spoke about the children she conceived from her second marriage, she did not call them her children but Fatima's siblings. Many people inside and outside of the family knew that she married late because her father did not want to let her go and she preferred working in the fields beside him to being someone's wife. But when Em Ali was nearly 30 she married a man she met on her own when she was buying supplies in Haifa. After having a son and while she was pregnant with Fatima, he was killed in a street fight. Her husband's brother insisted on marrying her to follow tradition and to keep the family honor. Since her own parents agreed, she reluctantly married the man whom she would at times call “a half screw.” This insult referred both to his inability to provide for her financially and his inability to perform sexually. While her children from this marriage were well-cared for and well established, she never took much pride in them. Even as she spoke to her daughter, Fatima, she did not refer to them as her children but as Fatima's brothers and sisters.

“She should be your brothers' responsibility any way. You should send her to one of them and move into your eldest son's home. He is a doctor. He can afford you, and you will be able to help when they have babies. Is his new wife pregnant yet? She

looked so skinny I wasn't sure she would be able to have kids." Em Ali made this last remark with some disgust.

"Please keep quiet," Fatima gently scolded. "Areej is sleeping in my bed with Adnan."

Baria walked in with the tray of coffee and some biscuits before Em Ali could respond.

"Put the coffee down, dear. I can pour it myself. Go now so I can talk to your grandmother."

Baria set the tray down and looked at Fatima to double check if this was OK, and Fatima patted her hand and nodded. Baria went to the living room to set up a bed on the floor.

"Areej is pregnant," Fatima continued as Baria left the room. "She has been having some difficulties keeping food down, and she has been very tired. She has slept most of the evening..."

Em Ali cut Fatima off with a look that said she had no interest in women who carried on about their pregnancies. "If you don't think your brothers will step up, and you are not going to take my advice, then maybe it is time Mariam leave her husband and live with you. Her husband is wound up so much in his mother's apron strings, I can't imagine she would be missed there. Maybe she could be some help to you?" Em Ali did not wait for an answer. All of Em Ali's questions were statements and she continued, "Where *is* her mother?" Em Ali asked as she nodded towards the door Baria had just exited through, and returned to the subject of Mariam: "It is hard for a girl to lose her father especially when her own husband is hardly a husband."

"Fine, you know...the same." Fatima kept her eyes down as she began to drink from her own cup of coffee, afraid her mother's one eye would see that she was not being

truthful. Fatima was now regretting the decision she had made to keep Mariam's death from her. There was certainly no point in upsetting her. Fatima's own guilt about Mariam was about all she could handle. This was probably why she had never been able to tell her own mother that Mariam was gone. She couldn't say it, and so she decided not to tell her mother. If Mariam was still alive to someone, then in some way she was still alive somewhere. Fatima knew that her mother felt kindly towards Mariam, her oldest grandchild, and Fatima's grief was so great that she could not bear to spread it any further than necessary. The funeral was in Lebanon anyway since she was buried with her husband's family. What was the point? Fatima felt defensive as she tried to recall why keeping this from her mother seemed like the right thing to do at the time. She had spared her mother this terrible grief of Mariam's death. She wished she could imagine Mariam still alive. In a way Mariam was still living because Em Ali was looking for her to walk into the room.

Fatima could remember the night she learned Mariam was dead. Her son had come to her home and awoken her and Mohammad the night he got the call about Mariam. Fatima had not even known she was sick. Even now, eight months later, she was still shocked by her daughter's absence. For the past eight months she had barely been aware of the children that were right in front of her. She had wondered during the past day if she had missed the signs that her husband was ill because she was constantly thinking of all she could have done differently in regards to Mariam. He had spoken even less lately than he usually did, but she had assumed it was because he too was grieving, and who can put words to the loss of a child? There are no words that can help.

Fatima felt heavy and, despite the coffee, she wasn't sure she had the energy to stand up, let alone find a place to put Em Ali up for the night.

"I need to sleep. I put Areej and Adnan in my room. I couldn't have slept in there tonight anyway. I am sleeping in the girls' room. You are welcome to the other bed. I know it isn't much, but Baria changed all the sheets in the house today. It is a small bed, but it is clean."

"Go on. I want to sit for a little bit in the quiet house. Please don't act like you have to care for me like I'm an old woman."

"Of course." Fatima reached into the end table drawer and pulled out an ashtray and a box of matches and placed them in front of her mother. Fatima smiled a little as she moved into the small room next to the one she had shared with her husband for over 40 years. She knew Em Ali would have more questions and more advice tomorrow, but it would have to wait. As she turned out the little lamp next to the bed, she decided she would not get up when the call for prayer beckoned. She would try to sleep through it for once and leave Seena to do the praying for both of them. She wasn't sure she had anything left to say to God anyway. Fatima had felt empty praying since Mariam was gone. What kind of God was this to keep taking what mattered most to her and leaving her only the morning to start washing, cooking, and caring for others? No, she did not have the words now to pray anymore. There was nothing left to say.

Fatima awoke to the sounds of cats fighting below her window in the alley that separated her house from the schoolyard one street over. For a moment she thought she was awakening from the afternoon nap and started to sit up. But then she heard her house in motion, teacups and saucers tapping. She then remembered her husband's cool, solid

body next to her just the afternoon before and fell back down onto the bed. Never again would she feel his sturdy hand on her back. Who would tease her out of her bad moods? She didn't feel like crying, but she also didn't feel like she could swallow.

Then she heard her mother. She heard coffee cups and conversation in the sitting room outside her door. Her sons Omar and Adnan had come to the house yesterday to help her wash Mohammad's body. His body was so cold. She thought of how she had foolishly warmed the water they would dip the small towels into before washing him. His body was awkward and heavy, but at the same time, it seemed hollow. Mohammad's body seemed like that of a stranger and she had felt embarrassed going over his body with a wet cloth. Fatima had wondered who cleaned Mariam's body.

After they wrapped Mohammad's body in a cotton sheet, Omar and Adnan had carried his body to the Mosque only a block away where all the men in the neighborhood would pray over it. This afternoon the Imam would call the prayer for her husband before they took the body to the cemetery. Her children and grandchildren would then come back to the house and eat and talk. Some would stay for a couple of days to make sure she was not going to kill herself or fall apart. They would return to their own families and lie next to their own spouses. Then it would be over. Just like that, she would be alone. She would have Seena of course. She would always have Seena. For now the house was starting to move. She could hear her mother talking to the children. She could hear coffee cups tapping the saucers.

Fatima closed her eyes. Her body felt heavy. Maybe she was paralyzed. If she couldn't move, she wouldn't have to bury Mohammad. With her eyes closed, she saw an image of Mohammad as he was years before—muscular and smiling, leaning against the

side of her parents' stone house. Her throat tightened. Fatima quickly opened her eyes and forced an image of him dead in her bed into her mind. She could not afford to start thinking back—getting sucked under. She had a husband to bury. Her mother—oh God her mother! Where had she slept? Had she slept? How would she explain Mariam's absence without lying? She couldn't. Fatima could hear others in the house and a baby crying. Small plates sliding on a tray. Whoever was in the next room must be eating breakfast. Areej opened her door. Fatima closed her eyes and feigned sleep. Breathing deeply, she hoped Areej would leave.

“Em Adnan, Mama...” Areej said as she gently shook Fatima.

Fatima didn't move for a moment, but Areej persisted so Fatima decided to continue her act and feigned slowly waking. “Yes, dear.”

“Are you OK? Adnan wanted me to check that you were OK in here. Your mother is here.”

“Yes, I know. I saw her last night. What is she doing?”

“Talking to the kids. Leila is here too. They are all in the sitting room. Leila made breakfast. You must eat.”

Leila was back! Fatima was relieved and grateful. It had been three weeks since she had seen her daughter-in-law. Leila was more like a daughter than her own daughters Emelle and Bessma. She normally had coffee with Leila every afternoon. Fatima opened her eyes wide and smiled a little. “OK, I am up,” she told Areej as she rolled over onto her side and pushed herself up to the sitting position. Although she was short, her feet easily touched the floor since the bed was so low. Areej was still standing there, looking

down on Fatima. Fatima liked Areej but expected her to go and was irritated that she continued to wait and watch her.

“Go on...I will come out and eat in a minute.”

“Em Adnan,”

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

“Your mother. She is asking about Mariam. What should I tell her?”

“Nothing.” Fatima felt suddenly alert. “I will talk to her. Just go. I’ll be out soon.”

Areej reached to help Fatima up, but Fatima brushed her hand away and Areej knew she better leave.

Fatima put on her robe and slippers. She would say hello to her mother and walk directly to the bathroom, take her shower and be ready to walk to the Mosque to begin the procession. This issue with her mother would simply have to wait. Fatima hesitated at the bedroom door before opening it. She could hear her mother telling the grandchildren about the time she nearly split a man’s head open with an ax. “...it was so shiny, round like a watermelon, and his back was toward me. So I lifted the ax over my head...”

“Mama! That’s enough of the story for today.”

Even Em Ali looked surprised when she saw Fatima standing in the bedroom doorway.

“Good Morning,” Em Ali said as she pushed the children sitting at her feet in a gesture for them to go their grandmother and greet her. Em Ali scooted her body back into the seat where Fatima had left her the night before and took a long drag from her cigarette.

Fatima hugged her grandchildren and glanced at her mother.



“No, I am sorry Em Ali, keep on. Just please, today another story.”

Fatima then saw Leila who had stood up when she entered. After kissing both cheeks, the women hugged each other for a long moment. Fatima felt herself relax in Leila’s arms. Fatima couldn’t bear to ask Leila if she was back for good. For now she would simply hope. She wasn’t sure if she could handle her own sadness and Omar’s; he had been moping around and turning up at every meal for the past month. Fatima pulled back from Leila and they looked into each other’s eyes. That terrible sadness mixed with the relief of seeing one another after such a difficult absence. Fatima began to move toward the bathroom when her mother started...

“Fatima you must start the day by going to the mosque. It has been nearly 24 hours. The time is moving quickly...”

Fatima did not look at her mother again, but quickly moved to the bathroom.

After showering Fatima went back to her own room and brushed her long, thin hair. Although it was still wet, she put it up and looked at herself in the mirror. More black. She was not looking forward to wearing black for another 40 days. She had just started wearing her flower prints again after Mohammad had insisted. Her gentle husband who rarely asked anything of her had taken her hand on the roof at the end of the summer and said, “Please, my love. You are my flower and I need to see you in bright colors again.” She didn’t want to stop wearing black at that time, but she also didn’t have it in her to argue, so she started wearing her everyday clothes. At the time she was irritated with Mohammad. Fatima felt he was telling her to move on as if she could simply put on a different dress and forget her eldest daughter. She was glad now that she had not

refused him this small request. Fatima reached for the black, cotton robe and put it on. She then pulled out the silk, black scarf and covered her head.

Just as Fatima was about to leave her bedroom, she looked back at the bed she had shared with her husband. Areej had made the bed differently than she would have. Areej had tucked in the bedspread instead of leaving it loose like she would. The pillows were arranged differently too. Fatima sat down on the satin cover and ran her fingers over the smooth fabric. It would never be the same again. Her life for over 50 years—suddenly rewritten. Mohammad would never tease her again or rub her forehead with his rough fingers. Gone. Why was she still here? She felt a moment of panic as she considered the possibility of living as long as her mother. Maybe she would become like her. Maybe she would tell the same stories again and again about her own youth. What stories would she tell? She never tried to split a man's head open or challenge anyone to a peeing contest. Fatima leaned over and kissed the spot where Mohammad's head would rest every night and every afternoon. She whispered "goodbye" before getting off the bed.

She knew then she would not leave this house. She would stay and take care of Seena alone. She would not be like her mother and live in her son's home. Adnan and Areej were good; she enjoyed seeing them, but she would not let them take care of her. They would surely resent her. Seena needed her. They understood each other and Mohammad would still be here in the walls. In the dark, she might still be able to imagine him lying next to her.

The house seemed quiet. When Fatima opened her bedroom door she saw her sons, sitting with her brother. They all stood up as she stepped into the room. Fatima smiled at her brother and asked, “Where is our mother?”

“She is finishing in the bathroom. She’ll be ready shortly. Don’t worry about her today,” he reassured.

Anticipating her next question Adnan offered, “Seena’s on the roof with Areej and Baria.”

Looking now at Omar, she asked, “and your wife?”

“Leila went home to make sure the children were ready. She is going to meet us as the mosque.”

Em Ali exited the bathroom dressed in all black except for her scarf which was a starched, white piece of fabric she let hang on either side untied. “Let’s go,” she ordered. They all looked at Fatima so she moved through the front door of her flat and called up to Areej and Baria to bring down Seena. Seena was talking and Fatima took her hand. They went down the steps to the street where they proceeded up the block to the mosque. There was a large black car in front of the mosque in which Mohammad’s body must have been carried.

Fatima was not expected to say anything and she was grateful. She had nothing inside her. Adnan went inside while they waited by the car and the Imam began the prayer. The driver got in the car and Fatima, sons beside her, she began the procession to the cemetery. In the shops that lined the street, she could see people stand in the doorways to show their respect. Some even joined the procession up the hill to the cemetery. Although the cemetery was only a half mile away, and she had walked it many

times, the slow, rhythmic steps made her feel like a Bedouin struggling to move forward without a destination. Before they reached the cemetery, the Imam had finished the prayer, but no one was making a sound except Seena. She could hear her mother trying to quiet Seena, but she continued to hum some unrecognizable tune. Adnan then read a prayer from the Koran. Fatima could not concentrate on the words. The afternoon was sunny and warm for an October afternoon. The dust was being kicked up by a breeze that kept her robe moving. She looked up and scanned the group. All of her children except Mariam were there. All of her grandchildren were there too. Everyone was quiet, even the babies. She wondered what each of them was thinking with their heads bent. Then she saw her mother. Fatima stopped as she caught her mother's eye. She wanted to look away but couldn't. Her mother's gaze seemed to pin her down. Like a magnet she was drawn to her mother's face.

She knew; Mariam was gone.

Em Ali, having communicated her message, pulled away from her daughter's gaze and looked at the dirt in front of her. Fatima could not stop looking at her mother. For the first time in her life, she saw her mother was crying. For the first time, her mother looked frail. Fatima did not know how long she stared at her mother who did not look up again. Fatima only took her eyes off her mother when Adnan tapped her. She grabbed a handful of dirt from the bucket he was holding and dropped it in the wood box that held Mohammad.

Fatima could not remember the rest of the day or how they made it back to her home. She knows they had food and drink that her daughters and daughters-in-law prepared, but she could not recall any specifics. What she does remember of that day

after the funeral was finding her mother in a corner of the roof alone and her mother's tears falling on her motionless hands. All her mother said was, "I must be an old woman now, if you kept this from me."

Fatima looked at her mother who had never seemed to age and saw her rapidly grow old in front of her. Her head was bent and her shoulders shook. Her hands that lay helplessly in her lap looked small. Fatima knew too that what she lost would never be recovered. Mariam was now dead as was her husband. For the first time she had to acknowledge that her mother was indeed mortal and old and would die as well. Her throat and heart were so tight she hoped for a moment that she too would be unable to breathe again. She hoped she could die right there on the roof under the bright night sky. She held her breath for moment. So little separated her from whatever came after her life of babies, meals, and baths. As her lungs began to expand, she knew it was not her time. Her mother did not lift her head again, so Fatima took off her scarf and wrapped it around her mother's shoulders and began her slow descent to the rooms below. Her work was not done.

## Part IV

### Seena

There is a stranger here now. She is dark and small. But I do not think she is like me. I cannot understand her. The sounds she makes are jumbled—it doesn't matter since she rarely speaks. I hear her barely crying at night when my sister is asleep and the house is quiet. I feel sorry for her, but I do not like her. I pray for her, but I do not want her near. She tried to help me wash. But I could not get undressed with her in the room. I can tell that Fatima was mad at me when I yelled at the stranger to leave the bathroom. I tried to hit her little arm like a twig, I might have broken it if Fatima had not grabbed my hand and told me “no.” My sister calls the dark girl Shandra, but she has not tried to wash me again. She is usually quiet, but I can hear her if I listen closely. She talks to herself, but I do not know what she is saying. I do not want her in my room, but if we leave the house, I can tell that she has been in there. The bed sheets are pulled tightly when I return. A couple of times Fatima has left me alone with Shandra. My sister will lock us both into the house and she takes the key with her. The first time she did this, I was scared and shut my bedroom door and prayed until Fatima returned. But I think Shandra is as scared of me as I am of her. She hides when my sister is not home, so I do not care if we are left together any more. I wonder why my sister brought a non-believer into our home. I know she does not pray when there is a call for prayer, and she never covers her hair. She wears only white shirts that do not cover her arms. I cannot think why my sister would challenge God in this way. Maybe this is a test of my faith. I will continue to pray for her since she does not know the words.

### Fatima

Fatima wondered if bringing in help was such a good idea after all. Shandra had been in her home for nearly three weeks and Fatima still felt unnerved by her scurrying in the corners of rooms like a little mouse. While Fatima was not tall, just 5'2 and thick around the middle, Shandra, the Sri Lankan girl the service had sent over, made her feel large and awkward. Shandra's little hands and feet looked like those of a child. Fatima found it hard to believe she had given birth to three children.

The agency had not mentioned any information about Shandra's family, but Fatima had gathered that the three children in the photo Shandra carried in the front pocket of her skirts were her children. Fatima saw the picture for the first time when Shandra had clasped her skinny, brown fingers around Fatima's wrist and thrust it at her. Fatima had been surprised by the contact.

Shandra had been there for over two weeks and had yet to make eye contact with her that had extended beyond a quick glance. But one evening, after Shandra had boiled water for evening tea (*the only skill Fatima had noticed she possessed*), she interrupted Fatima's evening reading of the Koran. When Shandra handed Fatima a cup, Fatima looked up and into the unblinking, black eyes. Because they did share a common language, Shandra only nodded and then, without taking her eyes off Fatima, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the photo. Fatima considered for a moment if Shandra had put some kind of spell on her because she felt a magnetic pull towards the girl which did not allow her to look away from Shandra's black eyes. Fatima only felt released when Shandra turned her own gaze toward the photo. Fatima had no choice then but to look at the Polaroid in Shandra's claw-like hand.

Shandra was in the center of the photo holding a baby wrapped in a blanket. In the photo Shandra looked like she was struggling to perform the act of both smiling and holding the baby. She was pinned in by two boys in the picture as well--one on either side of her. The boy on the left was the older of the two and looked to be about nine or ten. He was nearly the same height as Shandra and had straight, thin, dark hair. His pants were stained and looked to be made out of some worn fabric. The pants hung unevenly and were being held up with a belt that to Fatima looked like a rope. The pants were too big for him, but then Fatima realized she didn't know how boys in Sri Lanka wore their pants. This boy was not smiling. He instead looked almost hostile or perhaps irritated with whoever was taking the photo. He seemed to be in the photo against his will and Fatima imagined the moment after the photo was taken he easily slipped off the white edges holding him inside the picture.

The other boy in contrast was leaning against his mother. He seemed to be claiming what little there was of her. He was younger, maybe five or six. He wore the same style of pants as his brother and also had Shandra's dark eyes, but his eyes seemed brighter since he was smiling. His arm reached around Shandra and baby and he looked pleased and proud. The Polaroid was probably not that old. Fatima recognized the flower print smock in the picture. It was one of the three tattered dresses Shandra regularly wore around her flat. However, despite being a recent picture, the photo looked worn and the edges were bent. There was no date on the photo that Fatima could see. Since Shandra was so aggressive in how she had thrust the photo towards Fatima while she repeatedly pointed to the children in the photo and then back towards herself, Fatima misunderstood and believed Shandra wanted her to hold the photo herself. However,



when Fatima reached for the photo, Shandra snatched it back and pressed it to her own bony chest protectively as though Fatima were trying to steal it from her. Fatima then understood that she was simply trying to convey that she, Shandra, was a mother too. She needed Fatima to know this. These children were hers. For the first time in two weeks Fatima saw Shandra—not simply as an irritant, a mouse, but as a girl or rather a young woman, a mother.

Fatima felt her own heart tighten and she patted Shandra on the shoulder.

Fatima's moment of tenderness did not last long. When Shandra leaned her head against Fatima's plump arm, Fatima stiffened. She reminded herself that Shandra was sent to help *her*. Fatima did not need another daughter. Fatima straightened up and began giving Shandra advice: "Don't cry like this—be strong—for your boys. They need a mother, not a crying little girl." She knew Shandra didn't understand her words but she spoke them anyway—firmly—as though Mariam was standing before her she had one last chance to get through to her.

Fatima's rebuke worked, because Shandra stopped crying immediately. She quickly slipped the photo back into her front pocket and wiped her face with the rag she had used to dry the cups in the sink just a little while ago and had left on her shoulder. Shandra then scurried out of the sitting room towards the kitchen to finish drying.

Fatima pushed Shandra and those children of hers from her mind and forced herself back to reciting the prayer from her Koran. She had never agreed to have live-in help. Her thoughts kept returning to the questions she hadn't thought to ask Adnan when he had brought Shandra home. She knew that Shandra was from Sri Lanka, but she had no idea how old Shandra was. Fatima hadn't even asked what religion she was but had

figured by the red dot on her forehead that she wasn't a Muslim. She also didn't realize how small she would be. Shandra wasn't any bigger than her twelve year old granddaughter. And Fatima certainly had not anticipated that Seena would be so hostile towards a stranger in the house. It was nearly impossible for Shandra and Seena to occupy the same room let alone expect Shandra to bathe Seena, the chore most exhausting for Fatima to perform.

All that occupied Shandra was a single piece of paper from the agency that gave instructions about how and what Shandra would be paid—10 JDs a month. It also included a contact person at the agency and a telephone number to call if Shandra was not cooperative with her assigned household. There was only one sentence that mentioned guidelines towards Shandra and it merely stated: "Abuse of live-in servants is not permissible by Jordanian law." There was no description of how abuse might be interpreted and Fatima wondered the girls living in households where men may take sexual advantage of a foreign woman without any family to protect her. Fatima wanted to think her sons would not be such type of men, but she wasn't sure. This upset her. Their father, *God bless his soul*, was a kind, good man. But he didn't talk much and she had tended mostly to the behaviors of her daughters and had left the sons' behaviors to him. After Omar's foolishness that nearly cost him his marriage to Leila, she had begun to wonder if she understood men at all.

Surely Shandra had married a man she believed would provide and protect her. She had given birth to three children for him. Yet, here she was in a foreign country where she slept on the floor, and all she had of her children was a battered photograph to hold on to. What kind of man would let his wife work like this?

While Adnan had instructed Fatima that the agency insisted the help need not occupy a bed in the family home—that she only need a be supplied a roll-out mattress and a space in the hallway to lay it out at night, Fatima went to bed resolved to move Shandra in her daughters' unoccupied bedroom. She managed to make the 50 JD's a month she got from her sons go a long way. She could afford to be generous by Shandra's standards. She was not, however, going to feel sorry for the girl. She need not think about the children in her photo or look at them again. She would offer a bed that was not on the ground and perhaps teach her how to clean since she clearly did not possess any skills, but that was it. Once Fatima decided how to proceed, she could finally fall asleep.

### Shandra

Shandra tried to avoid looking at the photo. She feared that she would be pulled under if she allowed her mind to drift back to her own home—to think about what her children were doing at that moment. Was her baby sleeping, crying...? She finally had a girl! She knew that her husband didn't want any more children and most certainly would not have allowed her to give birth to a girl. So she kept this last pregnancy a secret until she was so far along that no one would do the abortion. Looking at the photo was a gift she gave herself every night before she would go to sleep. She would stare at Sanjay, who insisted everyone call him Sam. He was so angry with her when she told him she would be leaving.

*"I'm the one who is supposed to leave from here!"* His words still echoed in her mind. He was eleven. He was as tall as Shandra and nearly a man, but she felt so tenderly toward her firstborn. Sanjay had cried so hard when he finally lifted his head from his pillow, his eyes were swollen and his breath was catching as he tried to tell her why he was sad and angry at the same time. Shandra felt guilty for his pain. She reached to smooth his hair that had become mussed, but he pushed her hand away.

*"I want to travel—to leave these streets of dirt. I am the one who is supposed to ride in a car, in an airplane!"*

Sanjay had been to a movie theater before, and he loved the Bollywood stars. He would watch western movies in one of the shops that sold films that were recorded in other places like America. Shandra had wondered if she should have limited the time he spent with their neighbor, Akbar. Akbar sold DVDs to tourists, rich people who owned movie players. Akbar had built something. He was the neighborhood hero. At first,

Shandra and her husband were grateful that Akbar let the boys watch movies in the shop after school. It was better than the boys playing in the streets. But the movies had become an obsession for Sanjay. He talked constantly about movies where people owned swimming pools full of clear water and lived in homes with staircases. He wanted all of this. He seemed angry so much of the time that he did not have these nice things he saw in the movies. He was also quite sure that even if he was the top of his grade at the mission school, he would never get to drive cars like the men in the movies he liked.

When her husband found out Shandra was pregnant, for the first time ever since she had known him, he raised his hand to hit her. She closed her eyes and waited for the slap, but it didn't come. When she opened her eyes, she saw her husband slumped in a chair, his hands covering his face. He was crying.

*“Why... Why?! We are working as hard as we can to send the boys to school. It takes both of us working nonstop to buy the paper and pens to buy one uniform apiece. How will we be able to keep the boys in the mission school? They will not be able to continue, Shandra. Do you know what you've done to this family?”*

That night they held each other in their tiny bed. He rubbed the bump on her stomach, but they did not talk. There was nothing to say. She had deceived him and she knew she needed to find a solution.

Two days later, as Shandra walked to the bus stop after work with one of the neighbor girls, her mind was still trying to reconcile her desire to have a daughter and how she had hurt her husband. The girl had been talking for two blocks before Shandra finally noticed what she was saying.

*“The agency said it is only for two years. I will get paid almost double what I am making here and I won’t have to spend any money to leave.”* Shandra was suddenly interested.

*“What are you talking about?”*

*“The agency finds you a home in another country and pays for your travel. The family I stay with will let me stay in their home and feed me. Don’t you see? This is the perfect solution. I don’t have to get married and I can still send money for my family. I can even see what it’s like in a country outside of Sri Lanka.”* The girl continued to talk about her about her mother, whom she had been complaining about for months. Shandra didn’t care about her mother troubles.

However, this might be her chance to make things right. She would wait until the baby was born, then she could go. She could leave the baby with her mother, and her husband could care for the boys. They were getting older. They could help their father and still go to school. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? She would have her baby and help the family. Two years would pass either way, but now there would be something to show for it.

When she first told her husband, he called her crazy. But since there was no alternative, he reluctantly gave in. However, he decided that his mother should move in and help with the kids, and Shandra agreed it would be better to keep the children together with their father. He softened towards Shandra again, but she knew he was hurt she had kept the pregnancy from him. At least now they had a plan and were making decisions together again.

Once the baby was born, Shandra didn't want to leave. But her contract had been signed and her mother-in-law was already living in her home. Her husband, who had originally disliked the idea, was now talking about how this home placement would be an adventure for her. Shandra could not stop thinking of all she would miss—her daughter's first words, her first step, her first solid food! Who would sing to her sons at night? And Sanjay—she hated leaving him so angry. He envied her adventure while she was terrified about this unknown world. All she knew was that she was being placed in an Arab country. It was a Muslim country and she feared how she would be treated. Maybe they would hate her? Maybe they would be cruel and mistreat her? She hoped Sanjay stayed in school and watched for his little brother. She hoped they would stay unchanged, as fixed as the photograph she carried in her pocket.

# Thumbprints in Black Coffee

By Sana Amoura-Patterson



## How to Write a Poem *(from conversations with my dad)*

If you want to write a poem about my experience  
 you will have to describe how a son was born  
 into a loving atmosphere between the village of al-Tira  
 and the city of Haifa. You would have to include  
 his good relations with olive farmers and business men.  
 Remind your audience that he was brought up  
 secure and with a lot of ambition  
 and tell how he was given an education  
 so he could become somebody and have all  
 the means to accomplish his family's dreams.

Then tell them that his education was disrupted  
 by immigrations to Jordan and then America  
 where he washed his dinner dishes in the bathtub  
 and his young wife learned to cook without an oven  
 or spices. You should include that they were happy  
 and hopeful. They named their first child *Aida*  
 which means *to return*. Shoveling sand and starting  
 school again was another beginning. Then tell  
 about the four children later when he lost his wife  
 and then gained a new wife and more children  
 and you know all of that stuff in-between and after.

You put in the dots of course. You write it into proper  
 English or poetry. I'm dumb.  
 Poetry is something I like, but I never got the knack.  
 I use it a lot when I speak, but I was never able to put it together.  
 I was serious. I was the eldest son of an eldest son.  
 I recited great Arab poets, but I was dry myself.  
 In fact, I was never attracted to art or music.

*But what about the Arabic tapes in the car?  
 The minor melancholy sounds we were forbidden to touch?  
 The songs you sang to when you'd drive us to school?*

Oh those? Noise. I just wanted the company.

## Aunt Faeka's Roof

Jean and Dad and I spent the summer on  
the roof at dusk and wondered what we had  
and what we'd left behind in songs and prayers  
and leaves of grapes. I saw myself in girls  
and felt relief and envy too and knew

I could not return to a place where I  
had been absent so long and forgotten  
the words and the names; the faces like mine.  
Women waited and washed with quiet hands  
I had books and work; they had each other.

Most nights the women came to sit and talk.  
I strained to make some sense from sounds they spoke.  
They yelled and laughed and joked while it got dark,  
as girls ran through my bras still on the line  
and asked why I did not have children too.

In the dark the glow of coals would pulse as  
we would take our turns to talk and smoke.  
We'd listened to the young girls sing of love  
and I would envy their similarities  
more like my dead mother than I could be.

I wondered how my parents felt before  
they had six kids and if they talked on roofs. But  
Jean and I cannot get our dad to talk.  
More than two decades separate me from  
this place and my mother and her place.

Too hurt or too angry about losses  
a country and a wife three decades gone  
he doesn't speak of specifics but  
fills the air with smoke and warnings.  
He reminds us to study hard and save.

I urged him to go home to Palestine.  
But my father was afraid he would not  
find familiar streets but be a stranger  
in his hometown. So we stayed on the roof  
trying to remember what we never knew.

## Waiting for the 15<sup>th</sup> of May

I want my dad and aunts' stories  
about their exodus.  
I want to know  
how people leave  
home.

They tell me I know all this.  
I am a smart girl. I've read books.  
It is a sad story.

When I ask about leaving,  
my father insists:  
"I didn't leave Palestine.  
I was a student at the University.  
I came from Beirut to Amman.  
I did not leave Haifa.  
I never went back home.  
When I left to go to school  
there was no fighting,  
no division, no creation  
of Israel.  
I left in September  
that happened in May.  
I didn't go back."

But my aunts want to talk.  
They have lived together so long  
they speak simultaneously  
one voice over the other.  
Their sounds and movements  
harmonize as they make tea,  
cook and serve. Effortlessly they paste  
pictures together without seams:  
"by November our father  
sent our mother with the five  
youngest children to Jordan in a cab.  
He forced her. She did not want to leave  
him, but he could not work and worry.  
Perhaps our mother knew, but we did not.  
We played games in the day.  
She would cry at night. She did not  
know where our father was or what  
she would do with all of those  
children to feed and no husband.  
Every time people crossed out  
of Palestine they would comfort  
themselves with words, dates and times.  
*We will wait a week, six more days.*  
*We will get it back on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May.*

Our brother Salah left later  
in the fall to work and wait.

Our brother Omar crossed  
 the Jordan River on Christmas  
 pulling a stone crusher at night  
 and a pickup filled with all  
 he could carry:  
 our father's chair,  
 our mother's quilts.

But our father stayed  
 until the city fell.  
 At the end of April  
 he left Haifa in a small boat  
 for Acre. He left Acre  
 for Lebanon, Lebanon for Jordan.  
 Our father's faith was strong.  
 He left his money in the bank  
 and his trees in the ground. Certain  
 he would be back for the harvest.

He believed in God and the land  
 so he believed King Abdulla  
 would get it back for us.  
 Our father believed the new  
 king would send his armies  
 even though he had none.  
 He believed an Arab king was  
 better than a British one  
 even though they were the same.  
 So when the 15<sup>th</sup> of May  
 came and went, we continued  
 to pray because we  
 there was nothing else."

My aunts stop talking  
 but quickly fill the silence  
 with the clang of cups bumping  
 saucers and a tea kettle's whistle.  
 My father studies the tobacco  
 in his pipe and lights it again.  
 "Do you want to know  
 what I know?"  
 I nod of course.

"I know my father  
 grieved when King Abdulla  
 was killed a few years later.  
 My father grieved not  
 for the man but for the end.  
 He kept the scrolls, the deeds  
 to land he would not see  
 again, but he put them away  
 in the attic for later."

## After Prayers

In the dry afternoon, after the muezzin's call to prayers,  
my aunt Faeka climbs concrete steps to find me on the roof.  
I am visiting her the year she turns seventy-eight and has already buried  
her husband and her eldest daughter while she continues  
to bathe her younger sister: Aunt Seena, a seven year old  
living in an old woman's body.

Sixty-five years ago typhoid invaded both sisters' bodies.  
Most children died. Others were cured: the products of prayers.  
But my Aunt Seena is neither child nor adult. She is just old-  
a burden and a blessing. A reminder, as Faeka sits on the roof,  
of what is gained and lost, while her work and life continues  
even after a daughter and 62 years of marriage were buried.

She pats my hand and tells me of children dead but not buried  
miscarriages and misgivings that were once part of her body,  
then gone. She is not angry, but asks Allah why she continues  
to breathe and wake and wash. She gives thanks in her prayers,  
murmurs her hopes to plants in tin cans on the roof.  
She rubs the back of my hand, tells me she is old.

She married my uncle when she was sixteen years old,  
left her mother's babies to have her own. Buried  
ideas about school and work that could take her away from the roof.  
She looks at my book, tells me she wanted to be somebody  
who did something great, but she kept having babies, praying  
for them to be well and happy. She is nearly eighty and continues

to worry about children and grandchildren who continue  
to come. She has so many, and I have only one: a three-year-old  
still asleep on the bed below, unmoved by the loud call for prayers.  
At 35 I think he is all I may have. I worry he will be left to bike and bury  
Tonka trucks in the sand alone. I wish I had a younger body,  
more fertile, ripe like the grapevines that cover the roof.

My aunt and I sit quietly before the wind picks up again and the roof  
becomes crowded with cousins and their children, who continue  
to visit their mother, eat rice and drink tea. She nourishes their bodies  
with stuffed zucchinis and words of advice. Her children will never be old.  
She still holds them in her arms, her mind unable to bury  
her first memories of them. They will stay in her arms, in her prayers.

As the sun lowers on the roof, I feel a day older  
and know my aunt cannot continue to bury  
others. I hold her small body tight and silently pray.

## Bessma and Country Music

When Lyle Lovett sings  
 I think of my cousin's feet  
 thick from walking on concrete  
 carrying four kids and a husband  
 who walked out across the bridge  
 from Jordan to Palestine  
 looking for work eight years ago.  
 I haven't seen him for two visits  
 and I stopped asking when he'll return  
 and my sister Jean and I gave up  
 trying to understand how  
 my cousins buy food.

Instead, we take our turns  
 smoking from the water pipe  
 on top of my aunt's roof  
 while our shirts begin to wiggle  
 and flap as the warm afternoon  
 breeze picks up.  
 We sit on chairs held together  
 with wires that used to hang  
 in closets and a couch that used  
 to be inside. Now bricks  
 help hold up the unsteady legs  
 and springs poke through the place  
 where my uncle used to sit.

My cousins move in heavy clothes  
 between their apartments  
 and their mother's house.  
 All the men are gone, so we serve  
 ourselves tea with leaves, thick  
 coffee, nuts and sticky sweets.  
 We talk but cannot understand  
 our language. We nod  
 and smile and try to act out  
 our meanings, but Bessma and Emelle  
 cannot comprehend why Jean and I buy  
 books and worry about work. They ask  
 about Texas—a place we've never been.  
 They don't understand why we would  
 overlook a state so big and free  
 as broad as Bessma's feet.

Every morning is like this:  
 the sun lifts off the sand to dry  
 our clothes on the line. We roll  
 grape leaves and stuff cabbages  
 cut tomatoes and pray. And when  
 it's dusk the children crowd  
 on to the roof and fly  
 kites of sticks and strings that tangle  
 in TV antennas until little Mahmoud

sets them free again to hang  
suspended over the sand  
and ruins, homes and women  
on top of roofs.

Over kites and bubbling water  
the heat and the light retreat  
to the Mavericks and Lovett,  
Bessma and Emelle,  
my sister and me  
dancing between  
the wildly flapping  
clothes on the line.

**The Donkey at the Wedding**  
*for my father*

When I was ten my father asked me,  
“do you know why they asked the donkey

to the wedding?” I shook my head.  
I did not know, so I waited quietly.

My father continued with his own response  
“so he could carry the water and the tea.”

My father told us stories like this:  
lessons, riddles about donkeys or bees.

He would warn, “Eat honey for a year  
and onions for the rest. Or take onions early

and enjoy honey until you die.”  
My sisters and I would scoff at each story.

Old-world nonsense was not for us.  
But when he would claim to be a donkey,

we would all hug him and shout, “*haram*,”\*  
and he would smile, reassured and relieved.

\*an arabic expression of sympathy



## These are my Father's Stories

I.

“After a piece of shrapnel  
left a scar on my sister's face,  
our father moved the family to a house  
in the quarry. Our home against  
the rocks provided spaces to hide  
when Italian planes would sweep  
through at night, and the Germans  
would circle to hit us again.

We were in the way of our oppressors:  
our enemies and their enemies  
who couldn't pronounce our names.  
They made unstable kings from oil, sand  
and money--pieces on a chessboard.  
Palestine became a crossroad, a dangerous  
place to play. But I felt safe between  
World Wars and walls of granite.

Near our home Turkish troops practiced  
and when they were done, we straddled  
disarmed cannons and rode them like camels  
across the dessert. My cousins and I were  
strong because we had each other to fight  
in imagery wars and at night go home  
to our mothers' stuffed cabbage rolls  
and gardens of grapes and jasmine.

My parents filled me with their hopes:  
a doctor for the village so farmers  
wouldn't take their babies on the bus.  
My mother prepared me with silk shirts.  
My father gave me advice. Obedience  
and faith in my family and God. We knew  
that boundaries in the sand were arbitrary  
and would not last like the land we farmed.

But family and faith were not enough  
to keep us rooted in rocks and trees.  
We could no longer choose to ignore  
laws or curfews, air raids or uniforms.  
When my mother left with her children  
she locked the door behind her, but left  
the drapes she'd made, twisting in the wind  
waiting for her return.”

## II.

“In the summers my cousins and brothers moved from the city to the village. We left Haifa for al-Tira where we harvested wheat and barley picked watermelons and prepared for September. Before I went back to school, and on the weekends afterwards, we would harvest olives hitting branches without knocking off the leaves. Then we’d squeeze accordion baskets making music out of oil.

I would walk with my dad and he would speak to trees. He would listen as the hot wind filled the spaces between thin leaves. I heard the shifting winds but didn’t realize it was last season.

That September I left for school, and in November my mother and five children fled. She crossed between armies among refugees. But my father stayed to work, to watch, to talk to trees.

My father told me, “olive trees prefer deep, rich soil.” Their roots were long and firmly held the earth in place. He claimed some were as old as the Roman ruins still clinging to the ancient dirt and rocks. But, I didn’t understand. Our words were as different as the languages my daughter and I speak. But those trees and wind and dirt haven’t changed. They are still talking to my father--producing the same fruit, roots pushing ever deeper underground.

Later, after I left the old country, after my father’s death, I moved to a suburban Nebraska neighborhood, and I cut down a mulberry tree. The branches hung into my neighbor’s yard dropping messy berries, debris. I was trying to keep peace, to avoid trouble. But when I saw the branches crammed into ripping plastic bags, knowing my father would admonish that all things should yield to the branches of fruit trees, I felt ashamed.”

### **Thin Veils and Vined Grapes**

Charcoal pulses with each breath  
we inhale—making water bubble inside  
the water pipe while we take turns  
talking about men we let go.

We inhale, and water bubbles inside  
my two aunts--over sixty and virgins  
talk about men they let go  
remembering glances through thin veils, grapes and a touch.

My two aunts--over sixty and virgins  
remain curious about consummated love  
remember glances, black veils, vined grapes and a touch.  
Encourage us to drink and turn over our cups.

Curious about consummated love  
but too modest to ask—they smile and nod,  
encourage us to drink and then turn over our cups.  
A thumbprint in black coffee will reveal if we are happy.

Too modest to ask—my aunts smile and nod  
taking turns making the bubbles rise  
and continue to read our thumbprints in black coffee  
hopeful as the charcoal pulsing with each breath.

## Raw Meat

*Kibbi means raw*, Aunt Siham instructs  
with her thick forefinger as she presses  
the meat she ground with wheat germ  
firm in the palm of her left hand  
quickly smoothing out the sticky ball  
into a shell before filling it with pine nuts,  
onions, and more spiced meat.  
A football is formed ready to fry.

*People today are too afraid to eat raw meat*,  
she sighs and places a ball for me to shape.

But the meat sticks to my palm and slips  
between the cracks of my thin fingers.  
She laughs between the gaps of her teeth  
before reaching for a flat pan to press  
the meat into a neat sheet. With dry hands  
I place the pan into the oven.

## Walking Out

*Thursday, Sept. 4 2003*

Tubs of white cheese  
 curry, cardamom and tea—  
 chipped cups empty now  
 of thick, black coffee  
 the new owner won't  
 drink. Twenty years used.

Bells on the door  
 that welcome and warn  
 A place to enter—  
 an exit before going  
 on to your sister's roof  
 in Jordan—your silent family  
 -room in Omaha.  
 Three bells bang together.

My aunt's grocery store  
 is no longer  
 hers. Like her brother  
 and sister who stopped  
 coming in-gone too soon.  
 Left alone to pull  
 the *Open* light-switch on  
 now gone and off.

Before my aunt leaves,  
 she takes the prayer  
 off the register, then  
 she fills her purse  
 with almonds for luck—  
 Coffee conversations  
   still lingering.

With her sister's recipes  
 and a ticket in hand,  
 her brother's light touch  
 and heavy foot  
 follow her out.  
 Three bells bang together.

## My Father's Story about My Mother

“When we became refugees  
she was about 12 and I was 22.  
In '48 I went to Jordan; she went to Lebanon.  
But since she was born, I knew her.  
I used to baby-sit her. She was mine  
if I wanted her. But it was all just  
a grandmother, and mother's conversation.  
I never paid attention to it.

The girl turned out to be nice looking;  
but I was a man and she was a child.  
Later, when my brother Salah wanted  
to get married, things were not going straight.  
Our dad was sick, our house was not finished,  
and our business was not good. You cannot  
get married without a house, and we  
were just a bunch of refugees.

When my brother asked for Saira,  
my mother said “no.” She had been promised  
to me long ago, and Saira's demands might  
be more than my brother could afford.  
This did not turn out to be true. Your  
mother was too patient for six years  
of our life in here. She never complained,  
but my mother didn't know.

My mother asked instead for Saira's  
sister for Salah. Good enough for your uncle.  
But your mother was the eldest. She was  
blocking all her sisters behind her. So my  
mother agreed. She returned with two rings:  
'You make me happy if you take this ring.'  
But I was happy running around.  
I said, 'Who told you I wanted to get married?'

I didn't say o.k. I didn't say nothing.  
I said to my mother, 'You marry her  
since you asked for her. You marry her.'  
But I took the ring. I sat there.  
Every week your uncle wrote your aunt  
10 page love letters. Bullshit. And she  
would wave those letters in front of Saira.  
I didn't write anything.

Finally it went: the first year,  
the second year. There was nothing.  
I didn't see her. I didn't write her.  
After three years my uncle, Abou Tarek came  
to talk to me; *'They are upset  
you don't write. They will understand.  
You were not there. You did not ask.  
But you should release the girl.'*

I was now 31. Your mother 21.  
I went to see her, but at the gate  
her mother grabbed me by the hair  
and pulled me to the house.  
*'You, the one who doesn't have  
a heart—a stone instead.'*  
I sat in the living room  
and in came your mother.

She gave me a glass of orange  
juice and said, *'I have just one  
question: Do you want me or you  
don't?'* I didn't have an answer,  
so I stood up and kissed her.  
This kiss made her elastic burst  
and her panty hose have a run.  
Her face was all spotty too.

During the next year we finished  
our family house, planned two weddings  
and I wrote her 10 lines every month.  
We said goodbye to our families  
and boarded a boat to New York.  
That is all. You know the rest."

I know there is much missing.  
I ask again, *"is there anything else?"*

Only:  
"on a Saturday afternoon in the attic  
of our second house, on Poppleton  
I saw her sitting, smiling, reading  
those love letters again."

## Questions for My Mother

When did you realize you loved my father?  
What did you miss most about home?  
Did your mother make you bread for your trip?  
How long did it take to learn English watching soap operas?

Were you afraid to drive?  
Did you ever learn to like spaghetti?  
What did you tell your brother when you visited him in jail?  
Would you disapprove that I married for love?

Did I kick a lot inside your small belly?  
Did you like breastfeeding?  
Were you allergic to milk?  
Did you rub my forehead when I was sick?

Who was your best friend?  
What was your first memory?  
What was your last thought?  
Why did you panic when you were hit from behind?

What advice would you have given me when my marriage was hard?  
Would you have encouraged me to stay home or go back to teach?  
Did you stand up for yourself?  
How did you get what you wanted?

Did you name the baby you miscarried?  
What songs did you sing when you were alone?  
Did you have morning sickness?  
Am I a good mother?

Did you ever regret marrying my dad?  
Were you happy?  
When you weren't happy, did you get angry?  
Where were you when you learned that your brother had died?

What was your favorite movie?  
What was your favorite dish?  
Did you read magazines or just look at the pictures?  
Would my children's giggles have made you laugh?

Would you have read my stories?  
Were you like your mother?  
Am I like you?  
Did you kiss me  
    Goodbye?



## Pictures on Page 8

*(Omaha World Herald Sept. 24, 1966)*

Would it help to know she was hit from behind  
on a Friday afternoon around 2 o'clock,  
or that bacon sold for 59 cents  
at the Safeway store where she used to shop?  
Russians were testing rockets that week.  
Ted Kennedy campaigned in place of his brother,  
and Natalie Wood starred in *Property* condemned  
at the Astro in Technicolor.

But as microfilm blurs past me I stop  
looking for some new detail.  
In the library basement I listen  
to the clack—brittle film I know will fail.  
I want to know how my mother smelled—what she thought was funny  
But I rewind the film to the rhythmic smack  
of yellow, plastic memory.

## In Heavy Satin and Pillows

When my sister Dorothy was ten  
and I was six, our family moved  
from our pink house on Poppleton  
where we knew all the kids  
and used to play kickball even  
after the streetlights came on.  
In our new house on Leavenworth  
the neighbors pretended  
not to notice when our family  
arguments moved out to the lawn  
or echoed in the garage.  
They smiled and waved but always  
looked surprised if we stopped  
by for a miscalculated egg or a cup  
of flour.

After school and before  
we were needed in the kitchen  
to set the table or round up  
the other kids, we retreated  
to our new room upstairs.  
There we would try to resurrect  
our mother by looking hard  
into old photographs of her face  
that I began to see move.

When we were certain we would  
not be caught, we would reach into  
a second bedroom closet lined  
with cedar and filled with mothballs.  
We would carefully pull out  
all that was left of her marriage clothes:  
our mother's wedding dress and a heavy,  
pink satin gown. Taking turns,  
we would gently step into the dresses  
and become aware of every breath  
that lifted the layers of pink and white.  
The heavy folds of material  
would cover my skinny thighs  
and bunch at my feet. Our skin  
against the satin knew the same  
threads that had pressed against  
our mother's smooth legs.  
In those dresses, I thought  
my mother was close.

But when my nightmares began,  
our father took down the pictures  
of our mother whose eyes followed  
me around the room. My sister  
and I agreed to leave the dresses too  
after months of bad dreams had  
me curled up in her single bed.

Dorothy never refused or got angry  
but put her heavy arm around me  
every time and went back to sleep  
as though next to her  
was my natural place.

I finally felt only disappointment  
in efforts to find a mother  
I had nearly forgotten, and I  
stopped looking for her  
in photos or satin dresses.

Then, one recent morning before dawn  
between cotton sheets  
and under the heavy blanket  
my son whispered *please*  
and displaced me from my warm  
spot in the bed. His feet pushed  
against my legs as he adjusted.  
And as he breathed in deeply  
the scent of my pillow  
before curling his back  
against my chest,  
my mother was near.

## The Road to Damascus

I sit in the back  
 with Will on my lap  
 child seats an absurd luxury  
 like the decorative doilies  
 in the back window framed  
 by miniature pompoms  
 that frenetically jingle  
 to the rhythm of the *oud*.

When we hit rocks and dips  
 the driver looks back  
 trying to avoid meeting my eyes  
 while still checking to see  
 if we're ok. The late afternoon sun  
 warms the car windows--  
 a reminder of what awaits  
 outside the artificial cool.

Between Amman and Damascus,  
 wheat fields collide  
 and bow in the warm winds,  
 a reminder of Nebraska, where  
 farmers' feet never feel the dark dirt.

My son waves at a boy selling  
 Bananas, a shoeless farmer riding  
 a mule. They are too busy to notice  
 his chubby hand in the corner of glass,  
 and he does not comprehend  
 all that separates: the shoes and glass,  
 the man and boy  
 Jordan and Syria.

Just before the border we stop.  
 Our driver buys boxes of tissue  
 to ensure a smooth transition.  
 He straightens and turns down  
 the music. Illiterate and mute  
 I turn myself over to the driver  
 who takes my passports  
 and pushes for me in lines  
 that do not exist.  
 He emerges from the border windows  
 with stamps and a smile.  
 He is proud because he is good,  
 and we can go.

It is becoming dark as we pass from Jordan to  
Syria. I stick my head out the window  
and look towards the stars—my stars  
I do not call them by the names of ancient men  
or scientists. They are not fixed but free  
to roam the night sky between  
Amman and Damascus  
above Omaha and me.

## Looking Away

*For my father on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday*

It happens sometimes:

You look down, and when you look  
back up, the drive-in theatre,  
where you spent prom drinking beer  
with your friends in your '73 Montego  
is now an Albertson's where your  
student is the checker and eyes  
over the items you will later stuff  
under your bathroom sink.

Or a new Baptist church, with elaborate  
stained-glass windows, springs out  
of a cornfield on Sorenson Parkway  
on your way to a meeting.

Or your daughter, who suddenly  
learned to talk, scolds you  
for driving too fast when you're  
late to school, and your hair is still  
wet and you realize you're wearing one blue  
shoe and one black and you don't  
have time to stop back home.

So, Dad, I wonder--if I resist looking away  
and keep my eyes fixed on the brown spots  
on your hand, can I keep you to the end  
unchanged?

## My Mother's Song

*for my father on his last birthday*

I was nine when the water's laughter  
mingled with an old tune my mother hummed  
private like a prayer.

Her right arm pumped the well.  
Her left arm lifted the dress she'd made  
just below her knees.

The water from the deep darkness  
rushed down my mother's legs and feet--  
cold and clean, bright and quick  
back into unseen darkness.

The dirt from her garden,  
the vibrations of her voice,  
moved quickly downward--  
gone.

I closed my eyes  
to keep the image of her thick braid,  
her blue dress, the warmth of her hum.  
But new water replaced the old.  
Nothing could hold it.

I held up a towel for her,  
hoping she would not see  
the water on my face.  
My tears accelerated towards  
concrete my grandfather had poured  
long before my birth.  
Concrete that would last  
long after the water and  
my mother's song  
ceased to be heard.

## I Didn't Know

I didn't know I loved  
 the smoke from your pipe  
 your bent form washing dishes  
 watching you wait  
 for water to boil

your worn green bathrobe  
 the stains on your teeth  
 the brown spots on your hands  
 your disgust whenever I cried

I didn't know I loved  
 the stack of small plastic containers  
 you kept by your chair  
 to hold miniature chocolate bars,  
 dates, and dried apricots

The stories you told again and again  
 about donkeys and onions  
 thinly veiled lessons  
 we called lectures.

I didn't know I loved  
 the old man hats you wore  
 that still smell like you  
 the straw hat you'd  
 tip up on your forehead  
 whenever we went boating

I didn't know I loved  
 trips to Sam's Club  
 pushing the cart  
 or the stock pile of paper  
 products in your garage

I didn't know I loved  
 the straight lines  
 you used to cross off tasks  
 the wet zip-lock bags you recycled  
 the turkeys you'd buy on sale  
 to crowd your freezer

waiting for you to feel generous

I didn't know I loved  
 the sweet tobacco that stained your fingers  
 the suits you donned like costumes  
 whenever you went to the bank,  
 burns on the carpet  
 circling your chair

the jagged breathing  
 I wanted to end



the harsh commands  
and bells you rang to call us

I didn't know I loved  
your round forehead  
until I kissed you  
    the heat already receding