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Safia Elhillo

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# THE JANUARY CHILDREN

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# THE JANUARY CHILDREN

*Safia Elhillo*

Foreword by Kwame Dawes

*University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London*

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The January Children are the generation born in Sudan under British occupation, where children were assigned birth years by height, all given the birth date January 1.

\* \* \*

أسمر : /as-mar/ *adj.* dark-skinned; brown-skinned

أسمراني : /as-ma-ra-ni/ diminutive form of أسمر

How many centuries deep is your wound?

—Adonis

## CONTENTS

Foreword by Kwame Dawes	<i>ix</i>	the last time marvin gaye was heard in the sudan	<i>12</i>
asmarani makes prayer	<i>1</i>	first interview for the position of abdelhalim hafez's girl	<i>13</i>
vocabulary	<i>2</i>	the lovers	<i>14</i>
<i>Sudan Today</i> . Nairobi: University of Africa, 1971. Print.	<i>3</i>	talking with an accent about home	<i>15</i>
to make use of water	<i>4</i>	first adornment	<i>16</i>
[did our mothers invent loneliness or . . .]	<i>5</i>	callback interview for the position of abdelhalim hafez's girl	<i>17</i>
while being escorted from the abdelhalim hafez concert	<i>6</i>	bride price	<i>19</i>
application for the position of abdelhalim hafez's girl	<i>7</i>	old wives' tales	<i>20</i>
abdelhalim hafez asks for references	<i>8</i>	date night with abdelhalim hafez	<i>21</i>
talking with an accent about home	<i>9</i>	first quarantine with abdelhalim hafez	<i>22</i>
origin stories	<i>10</i>	self-portrait with dirty hair	<i>23</i>
a brief history of silence	<i>11</i>		

watching arab idol with  
abdelhalim hafez 24

self-portrait with the  
question of race 25

second date 26

abdelhalim hafez wants to  
see other people 27

red moon night 28

self-portrait with  
yellow dress 29

others 30

alternate ending 31

[& what is a country but  
the drawing . . . ] 32

late-night phone call with  
abdelhalim hafez 33

republic of the sudan /  
ministry of interior / passport  
& immigration general  
directorate / alien from  
sudanese origin passcard 34

talking with an accent  
about home 35

talking with an accent about  
home (second take) 36

second quarantine with  
abdelhalim hafez 37

portrait with asylum 39

talking to boys about abdelhalim  
hafez at parties 40

biopic containing lies about  
abdelhalim hafez 41

asmarani does  
psychogeography 42

why abdelhalim 43

self-portrait with lake nasser 44

abdelhalim hafez asks who  
the sudanese are 45

the part i keep forgetting 46

talking with an accent about  
home (reprise) 47

third quarantine with  
abdelhalim hafez 48

final interview for the position  
of abdelhalim hafez's girl 49

self-portrait as abdelhalim  
hafez's girl 51

portrait with abdelhalim hafez  
with the question of race 52

lovers' quarrel with  
abdelhalim hafez 53

portrait of abdelhalim  
hafez as orpheus 55

glossary 56

everything i know about  
abdelhalim hafez 57

Acknowledgments 59

Notes 61

## FOREWORD

“atlantic got your tongue?”

*Kwame Dawes*

There is in Safia Elhillo’s *January Children* a mythic enterprise rooted in historical and political fact that reminds us inevitably of Salman Rushdie’s project in *Midnight’s Children*, where he inscribes into the imagination a sense of nationalism that is fundamentally an act of assertive imagining. For Elhillo, the January Children of Sudan, those she describes as belonging to the “generation born in Sudan under British occupation . . . all given the birth date January 1,” mark the transition from two traumas—that of colonialism and that of the postcolonial struggle for a sense of identity and place. But they are a people, a coherent body that can be traced, critiqued, celebrated, and, importantly, imagined. An act of erasure, thus becomes a source of the imaginative act of regeneration:

verily everything that is lost will be  
given a name & will not come back  
but will live forever  
 (“asmarani makes prayer”)

But where a novel might engage this subject from a distance, this collection of poems immediately avoids that. Elhillo is writing within the lyric tradition that is giving shape to a new African poetics that finds a way to engage the traditional lyric while not losing sight of a poetics that could be

called political, engaged, and ideologically aware. Elhillo's speaker is fully present as the voice in search of meaning when faced with the challenges of migration and nationalism, and the complications that come with broader gender issues. In this sense, her collection explores themes that are critical to her senses of self, of place, and of identity.

Very early in the collection, Elhillo reminds us that she is negotiating cultures, geographies, and languages, and these negotiations define her relationship to the idea of exile and the idea of home. For her, separation by wind and by love become one and the same because of the peculiar nature of Arabic, and yet there are sonic contradictions, where "home" and "stuck" are one and the same and yet profoundly separate. Elhillo does not demand that we have command over Arabic—instead she unveils the possibilities in the linguistic intersections that are part of her aesthetic. At the same time, it is a deeply personal concern of the immigrant who reprimands herself for forgetting the Arabic word: "/stupid girl atlantic got your tongue/" ("to make use of water"). The quarrel with self is intensely complex because it is rooted in the geopolitics of exile. It is a world for her in which her "blue american passport" somehow separates her from the ability to empathize with those she has left behind: "*do you even understand,*" she asks in "to make use of water," "*what was lost to bring you here[?]*" Indeed, very early in the collection she lays out the condition of colonialism and exile. Her grandfathers "do not know when they were born," and she is one of the daughters "full of all the wrong language" who spend their time wondering if it is appropriate to pray in a language other than the one that they should have learned.

She finds meaning and grounding in her fascination with the late legendary Egyptian musician, Abdelhalim Hafez (1929–77), who functions as an imaginative construct, a source of fantasy that is sensual, yes, but that is profoundly related to her sense of her identity. She speaks to Hafez, quarrels with Hafez, offers accounts of his life and death, quotes from his lyrics, and positions him as a necessary bridge between her mother, her grandmother, and herself throughout the collection. And in all of this, Elhillo is fully aware of the contradictions inherent in this act of fandom,

and it is this complexity that allows her to explore her sense of identity. For Elhillo, this identity is inextricably connected to her language, her politics, her race, and her gender. She confesses to him her alienation and her failure to be Sudanese enough, but she also speaks to him of the way he allows her to feel a part of the imagined sense of nation: “i heard the lyric about a lost girl i thought you meant me.” It is Hafez who she tells that “my mouth is my biggest wound”; it is he who hears her confession that she is being objectified by the orientalism of white men who ask her to say their name in Arabic. All of this, along with the sense of trauma within her body caused by her movement west to America, becomes part of her “application for the position of abdelhalim hafez’s girl.” Her sense of self is part of an ancient narrative when offered to Hafez: “mine is a story older than water.”

At the same time, however, it is clear that Hafez offers her a special opportunity to trace a personal history that takes her from Sudan through Egypt and Geneva, but which, at the same time, makes her think of what she looks like and how she finds her sense of self. In the cleverly inventive “callback interview for the position of abdelhalim hafez’s girl,” the second of three, Elhillo makes brilliant use of the strange elliptical possibilities inherent in dialog to complicate her sense of self. She first identifies with men—as if she is a man, and then it is clear that she is speaking about the men that form part of her life, and thus she is speaking about her tenuous relationship with Hafez: “haunted men/dead men/men marked to die.” When pressed, she confesses yet again, that she imagines herself to be the girl that Hafez is singing about. The exchange is marked by a certain evasiveness. The interrogator pushes her, but she is not willing to be tied down. Hafez’s girl—the one in the song—is brown, and the question of black and brown becomes of particular importance here. Elhillo does not make it easy for us as we consider how we fantasize and how we form our senses of desire and identity:

*then you do think you're the girl from the song*

i guess i see the parallel i am brown like her i am always halfway gone  
like her i'm not as cruel but i have tried it's just like the lyric says

i can't sing but it goes طمنوني الأسمراني عملة إيه الغربة فيه  
reassure me how is the  
brown girl what has distance done to her

At the end of the poem, the person answering the questions asks her own question: “does that answer the question[?]” She knows that it does not. She has avoided the question. It may well be because she does not have an answer. But Elhillo wants us to see the flawed nature of this speaker—her unreliability.

For Elhillo, Sudan is a place of conflicting ideas of belonging, but it is also, for her, both a place of grounding and a kind of leaping-off point. She manages to write about Khartoum with a tenderness shaped by her connection with her family and her people as a whole. In the poem “origin stories,” she describes the ritual of her grandfather handing her a mango. It is a beautiful moment that ends a poem in which she is suspicious of the ways in which she is welcomed by her own people who wonder if she has come to stay or to visit. Here is Elhillo at her best—managing to combine a sense of history, place, identity, and disquiet in elegant language:

in khartoum's bright yellow morning my grandfather brings me the  
season's first  
mangoes & tells me it is time to come home they are firm &  
green but on  
the inside all sunlight i use my hands & spill the juice all down  
my front i fill  
my mouth & i do not answer

Her grandfather is putting the pressure on—he is something of a prophet in the moment. She eats the mangoes messily, but she does not answer her grandfather.

The fact is that “returning home” is never uncomplicated, and it is certainly not made easy by this ritual gesture of giving a granddaughter the first fruits of a harvest. Khartoum is the site of its own kind of trauma, and the woman is at the heart of that trauma—the woman and the artist.

In “a brief history of silence,” Elhillo recounts the murder of a singer who plays secular music, the beating by the police of a violinist (his instrument is destroyed) whose sin is likely the fact that he is playing secular music, and finally, the shutting down of all the bars and clubs, and the banning of all music that speaks of the bodies of women. These brief accounts of totalitarian repression are not simply theoretical but are shown to be deeply personal. Her parents fail to enact a sensual meeting because the club in which they are likely to meet is raided. The title of this poem is rich with conflicting implications: “the last time marvin gaye was heard in the sudan.” The hyperbole is intentional—this is supposed to be funny and tragic at the same time. But all of this is her way of contextualizing her conflicted sense of home. At stake are the things she values.

So even as she recognizes and longs for the sense of belonging that she associates with home, with the idea of return, she is also wrestling with her body, her sensuality, her desire, and all that is contained in the idea of blood. Her blood is rich with a combination of defiance, shame, and the notion of her beginnings, her senses of power and place. By speaking to Hafez, she is able to explore this sensuality. Desire is a source of wounding for her—and Elhillo writes this complex of images of wounding throughout the collection with deft skill:

here i am little dagger ready  
to make a home in your shirt pocket  
answer me answer me  
(“first interview for the position of abdelhalim hafez’s girl”)

It is clear, though, that Elhillo locates her grounding of self in the conflicted relationship between herself and her mother and grandmother. These narratives of bodies, of memories, and of the ways in which they encounter beauty and negotiate its implications, represent one of the recurring themes in the collection. At each turn, we observe the speaker closely observing the other women in her life. Some of the women are specific—her mother and grandmother—and in that dynamic she is interested in lineage and the ways in which she becomes the inheritor of trauma and the ways to

cope with that trauma. She finds points of connection, and yet she finds points of departure. Her connection to Hafez happens when her mother is fleeing from her father and from their home in Egypt—in many ways, she seeks a romantic possibility, a place of being loved tenderly, when she sees the trauma of separation. When she thinks of her grandmother’s personal history—getting married at age seventeen to a man she had only met in a photograph—Elhillo considers her grandmother’s pressuring her not to wait too long, and she admits that “we outgrow our beauty.” But her community of women extends beyond her mother and grandmother. It extends to her “biglegged” aunts, to the women whom she lives among, the ones she observes carrying out their rituals of henna painting and the sipping of hibiscus tea during Ramadan. She too will paint her skin, and she too will watch her hips swell. Here the separations brought on by generational differences are tempered by the connections defined by gender. The “old wives’ tales” are funny, it is true, but Elhillo does not present them with derision. She hints at their questionable politics by her use of repetition, but she is never dismissive of them. Her collection engages in this balancing of engagement and distance:

spraying perfume on your hair will turn it gray     a black cardamom seed will cure any ache     white toothpaste will cool a burn     a man will make your hips big     braiding your hair before bed keeps it from falling out in the night     caramel removes body hair     wearing shorts is an invitation [men like biglegged girls]     spraying perfume on an open wound will clean it     wearing your hair loose invites the evil eye & it will fall out in the night     a pierced nose means you are ready to marry     a small chest means you are not eating enough red meat     walking too much will shrink you [men like biglegged girls]     castor oil will make your hair grow back     a prayer bound up in leather will protect you from the evil eye     a prayer dissolved in water casts a spell

Of course, there is some humor. In “self-portrait with dirty hair” Elhillo creates with pure brilliance an elaborate drama of loyalty, sensibility, sensitivity, and the management of generational and cultural difference within

family as her mother, her grandmother, and Elhillo's speaker negotiate the matter of what to do with her hair. The situation is comic but edged with emotionally troubling questions. In the end, however, we are left with the unsettling humor of a lack of closure and a certain resignation: "i wear my hair big & / loose & free of the straightening iron to my cousin's wedding & / grandma says *you might as well have just shown up in pajamas.*"

Elhillo recognizes that her sense of self is shaped by the ways in which she sees her mother and her grandmother as much as it is by the ways they see her. In her reflection on the television show *Arab Idol*, she becomes aware of the racism in Egypt, and she sees that the idea of "brownness" is a complicated one. She describes being told in the street that she looks too "clean" to be Sudanese and then recalls one of the judges, a Lebanese singer, Ragheb Alama, declaring that "sudanese women / are the ugliest in the world." The declaration is traumatic enough, but the true pain is her confession that she starts to believe the singer. And the idea takes her to her grandmother in a moment of domesticity—she is washing her legs before prayer. The speaker does not say that what she sees is something ugly, but the implication is there. And so, with blunt calculation, she presents the reader with the discourse of race in the worlds she knows that are touched by Arabic culture, in a poem called "self-portrait with the question of race":

عرق: /'i:riq/ *n.* race; vein; *SUDANESE COLLOQUIAL derogatory*  
african blood; black blood.

“الله يسود ليلتك زي ما سود وجهك” “may god darken your nights / as he  
has darkened your face”

اسمرت: /as.ma.rat/ *v. FEMALE THIRD PERSON SINGULAR PAST*  
*TENSE* to tan; to get darker.

egyptian comedian mohamed henedi dresses as a sudanese man & sings  
“وسمرت وإتحرقت بس بطاطا” “she got darker / & burned like a potato”

[but your daughter will be fine but keep her out of the sun but do something  
with that hair or people will not know she is بنت عرب *daughter of arabs*]

Without announcing it, Elhillo is busy charting the history of the Sudan by tracking the relationship between her parents. In the 1980s, it is possible for them to be at a club, to be dancing to Motown music, and to be shaping what she describes as the “nostalgia of these nights / to hyphenate their children” before the gnarling effects of winters, which one presumes they experienced in America (“the lovers”). Indeed, exile, for Elhillo, is not merely the loss of a place that remains static, retrievable, but the loss of a place that has changed. The culprit is migration, though not just migration but the vicissitudes of time, political and social change, and much else:

i grew  
&  
my rift grew

&  
another  
sudan  
was  
missing  
 (“talking with an accent about home”)

Where Elhillo seems to find hope, it is hard-earned. Indeed, it is defiant, a willful act of resisting the overwhelming pressure of deaths and losses. There are recurring themes of loss that almost always include a brother who is somehow at risk or lost. He is associated with violence or the accusation of violence. Again and again, the men who are important to her are absent, but these absences are caused by war, by exile, by death. So that when in “self-portrait with yellow dress” she creates an anti-funeral song, it is one filled with transgressive gestures of the body (“i press my body to a man that i find beautiful”) and a reversal of tragedy—so that the brother becomes filled with light, and she, the speaker, lives forever, and manages to speak this hope into the world of loss that has consumed her: “play the song i love / into the space i leave behind.”

Perhaps it is this sense that her entire collection is a conversation with the dead as an act of mourning and defiance that lends the book a quality of perpetual and complex haunting. Elhillo is constantly drawn into the music of the worlds that have shaped her, and yet, she finds herself having intimate conversation with those she sees as lost. But the lost are only partially lost. Her poems and her imagination (which are represented in her capacity to dream all through the collection) are able to restore their presence. And this is how the January Children are granted an existence in memory, and, as it happens, in historical time. Her imagination, then, allows her to create alternate restorative realities. At times these alternate realities involve a yellow dress, and at times, they dismantle exile—she never leaves, and the dead do not die:

the dead boy is poured back into his body  
i try to leave home but the ocean bares its teeth  
& where i'm from is where i'm from & not  
where i was put it's morning & my grandmother  
pins hot colors to the clothesline i'm still on a date  
& the words *say something to me in arabic*  
fall backwards down his throat  
("alternate ending")

Every creative gesture restores her country, she says, and this is the defiance of art. And even as she reflects on her connection to Hafez, it is clear that invention defines even that relationship. He becomes a tabula rasa on which she can create her sense of value. His role is to eulogize all memory, and his occasional vagueness allows her to insert herself into his songs:

& anyone can be the girl he says browngirl & never says  
how brown he's been dead my whole life  
he's used up he's eulogizing home  
he's eulogizing my mother as a girl not yet filled up with children  
he sings & she's the browngirl

he dies before she's hurt      he dies before  
belonging      he belongs to no one country [same]  
he belongs to no one language [check my mouth]  
he belongs to no one      in this way he never leaves  
("why abdelhalim")

For Elhillo, Sudan is an invention, and yet it remains quite real, quite whole. It is a place to mourn as one mourns a lost place, and yet it is a place she can visit and a place that she is still able to call home. It is a place of memory, of history, and yet it is a place where the traumas continue in the present. Elhillo understands herself to be an African living in a world of great migrations, of cultural movements, a world in which her body has to be contended with in the various landscapes that she enters. In the end, she finds her solace in the songs of Hafez, the invention of Hafez. Some of the most moving poems in the collection are those that are addressed to Hafez. After a while, it becomes clear that the actual Hafez matters only when that figure offers her opportunities for emotional reflection. She asks Hafez if he does not think it odd that she and thousands of other women have learned how to love from a dead man. And when he reassures her with his song, a lyric that is clearly generic as all popular songs must be, she says to him:

look      i'm a sad girl from a long line of sad girls  
doesn't mean you can talk to me that way  
("lovers' quarrel with abdelhalim hafez")

It is not presumptuous of me to declare that what we have here in *The January Children* is the first sound of what will be a remarkable noise in African poetry. Safia Elhillo has already laid out in this collection a complex foundation for a rich and ambitious body of work. What is unmistakable is her authority as a poet—she writes with great control and economy, but also with a vulnerability that is deeply engaging. Above all, her poems are filled with delight—a quality of humor that is never trite but always honest and insightful.