

2017

Sans Fin: Language of Loss

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Sans Fin: Language of Loss
Algeria, Paris, and Syria

by
Lane Jennings Proctor

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2017

Approved by

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Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my parents for letting me leave home the summer after my freshman year at Ole Miss in order to study abroad in France for one month. That was the start of my love for traveling and hearing the stories of others. It was also the beginning of my journey to discover that I can venture out into the world on my own and still find my way. So, thank you, Mom and Dad, for supporting me in every trip I've taken to study and work abroad in the last four years. Secondly, I'd like to thank my thesis advisor and previous professor, Dr. Matt Bondurant. Though he may not realize it, his literature classes are what convinced me to be an English major, to never stop analyzing and observing the world around me, and to explore my own writing style and potential. I'd also like to thank my professor, Dr. Anne Quinney, who worked with me throughout all of the research for this thesis in the fall of 2016. Originally it was to be an academic thesis and Dr. Quinney advised me in my research process that eventually inspired me to write fiction. Thanks, Dr. Quinney, for sticking with me. I'd further like to thank Jacques and Dominique Cormier for sitting through long lunches and coffees, answering every question I could come up with about Algeria and its history. Your patience, especially with my limited French, kept me encouraged and inspired to write many of these pages. I'd also like to thank the Honors College for graciously funding this trip to Paris to talk with the Cormiers about Algerian history. Much of my thesis is inspired from the research and interviews I conducted while there. Lastly, I'd also like to

thank the Honors College for the constant challenges it has brought me over the past four years, which have also been some of the most rewarding accomplishments.

Abstract

This is a hybrid collection of creative pieces that I have written in order to try to capture the feelings associated with loss and oppression. These pieces are only loosely related thematically and are not one single narrative. I especially wanted to focus on female characters who become disillusioned with their lives, find they have no real agency, or that they cannot truly write their own narratives. Through research on the Middle East, mostly focusing on Syria, and a close friendship with a Syrian refugee while I was studying abroad in Paris, I found the inspiration and ideas for many of the pieces in this collection, such as the short story, *Ola*. Through a semester of research conducted on the history of Algeria and the Algerian War of 1954-1962, and through a close friendship with a Frenchman from Algeria and his wife, I found the ideas and inspiration for my stories *Amina* and *Marwa*. None of these stories reach conclusions, nor do I think they really ever could have. I wrote fragments of these women's lives to create the impression of a perpetual and shared story of loss.

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Introduction

In approaching my thesis, I had several deep sentiments, acquired through my studies and experiences in college, that I wanted to translate across the page so that my readers might feel them as well. They were abstract feelings but because of my academic courses and experiences throughout the last four years, I felt like I had acquired the tools to evoke them through my writing. At first I planned to do an academic research thesis but I quickly realized that I wouldn't be able to capture the same sentiments through non-fiction as I would through close introspective stories about individuals. Thus I chose to take my research and my literary knowledge and create fictional accounts of what I perceived to be true depictions of individual lives. I wanted to provide my readers with perspectives on historical and present day social and political events through the eyes of individuals. I didn't want to give facts and make claims. I didn't want to report news or events as we often see flash across headlines in papers and news channels. I wanted my readers to be on the ground, in the confusion, and to be able to experience the events, conditions, and characters through the personal insight of my narratives.

Beginning with my freshman year, my Honors 101 and 102 courses challenged me to read critically and consider the significance of literature from all perspectives, starting with language. For example, Dr. Dyer, my Honors 101 professor, taught me the singular importance behind the language itself. I began to shift my reading process from exploring only what I read at face value to dissecting it word for word in order to see the

complexity of the “big picture.” Moving on from those beginning honors courses, I had a rather indirect approach to discovering what it was that I wanted to major in. I took art history, piano, anthropology of the Blues culture, French, and several southern studies courses, along with all of the prerequisites for liberal arts. I was lost in terms of what I wanted to specialize in but I was discovering a love for learning. It wasn’t until my junior year that I was sure I wanted to be an English major.

My indecisive nature turned out to be a gift in this case because I received a very interdisciplinary education. I began taking the skills that I learned in every one of my various courses and applying them in the others. I began to link themes, ideas, and knowledge from different subjects, time periods, and cultures and this skill that I developed continues to enrich my learning experience today. It has engrained in me a sincere curiosity in learning, and this curiosity is what led me to begin studying the Syrian and Algerian Wars. I knew that to thoroughly learn about these subjects, I needed to approach them from as many angles as possible. And so I went to lectures, spoke with people who had first-hand knowledge about them, and read fiction and non-fiction covering the wars and time periods from different perspectives.

Throughout my time working and studying abroad I discovered my ability to connect with people vastly different from myself. I spent three summers and a semester in France and was impressed by the number of cultures and sub-cultures that I was exposed to through the people I met. One significant friendship I had was with a Syrian refugee. He challenged me to ask questions that could be posed from every side of an issue. He very much influenced my thinking process in researching and writing this thesis. I hope that this hybrid work will at least to some degree evoke the compassion,

skepticism, and curiosity that has driven me in this writing process. Behind these strong sentiments, I believe that greater truth or truths can be discovered. What I've learned through my literature and creative writing courses is that fiction has the capability of evoking truth that cannot be spelled out in black and white. It's never perfect and can always be interpreted in various ways, but those aspects themselves are symbolic of the nature of truth; it's elusive but never unattainable.

This is a collection of short stories, poetry, non-fiction, very short fiction, and a translation that I wrote in various stages throughout the last year and three months. In the beginning, I never anticipated that they would all thematically relate to one another, but I found that I was consistently drawn to writing stories about people, mostly women, who become disillusioned by their worlds or realities. I wanted to relate a feeling of loss, of helplessness, and inescapability. Each piece had its own writing process leading up to it but all were heavily influenced by my time studying abroad in Paris from January to August, 2016.

The first story, *Amina*, is the result of the research that I conducted fall semester of my senior year. Originally, I planned to write an academic research thesis on the Algerian War, under the advisory of Dr. Anne Quinney. I became interested in this history due to a friendship I had with my landlord in Paris in the summer of 2016. I stayed with him and his wife after renting their spare room through Airbnb. Jacques Cormier, the husband, works from home as an architect and so we spent many afternoons together chatting in his small kitchen over *biscuits* and coffee. Jacques's parents moved to Algeria as a young couple and that's where Jacques was born and spent the first five

year of his life, before having to move to Paris after independence. He lent me books to read and told me stories about the war from the *pied noir* and metropolitan French perspectives. He showed me the impossibility of determining one right and one wrong side of the chaotic war. When I returned to the United States, I read the dense book on the Algerian War, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* by Alistair Horne, and I was further intrigued by the innumerable layers of complexity producing this war: history, identity, prejudice, nationalism, pride, hatred, racism, and the list goes on and on. From there, I read novels by Assia Djébar, a Muslim Algerian writer and professor, and Jean Brune, an *Algérie-française* journalist and political activist. I wanted insight on the war from opposing angles. The story, *Amina*, is predominantly influenced by Assia Djébar who has written many novels about the oppression of women. I wanted to create such a story on my own in order to begin this series. *Amina* is also largely an historical recount of Algeria before it is a fictional story. I wanted to build a personal story into the vastness of the country's history. Its history serves as a symbol of the tendencies of human nature that drive some to limit and dictate so many lives.

One important note that I'd like to stress is that throughout my research and writing, I have always been very wary of ventriloquizing through my characters. I did not want to push an agenda or bias through their narratives but rather to offer a sincere portrait of their personal experiences. My refugee character in Paris can perhaps be considered political but those aspects are true to what I heard in conversation. I have not inserted my own political beliefs into these stories. I also admit to not being able to relate to the individual experiences of these women in terms of life circumstance, family, religion, and culture, but I have tried to translate them truthfully across the page to the

best of my ability. This is evidently a creative thesis and I am not attempting to argue or discount another claim or opinion. I simply want to tell stories that take place in different countries and at different time periods while highlighting the universality of suffering.

My next story, *Marwa*, came from my wanting to capture the elusive nature of the Algerian War. While I conducted research and spoke with Jacques Cormier about his experiences and understandings of the war, I always found aspects of the history enigmatic. The “sides,” militias, affiliations, secret groups, and intermediaries always left me asking questions to which I could never find clear answers. This is one of the reasons that I want to continue studying the war after I complete this thesis. There is so much more to learn. I wrote the story, *Marwa*, because I wanted to write a narrative of a woman caught up in this setting, but I also wanted to introduce yet another covert group working its own angle in the conflict. I wanted to enhance the feeling of mystery, the feeling of *what’s really going on behind the scenes*, and I hope that this short story makes my readers wonder and leaves them unsatisfied in the end, still wanting to know more.

Lost, Welcome, Honte, Inexistence, and “An Apology for Carelessness” are four short stories, or perhaps rather scenes, and a poem, which combine to draw a portrait of an experience that I had in Paris. They are certainly not non-fiction, but are still highly depictive of the friendship I had with a Syrian refugee whom I met in my French class. He taught me about his culture, about how he felt stuck in Paris, and about his and his friends’ and family’s perspectives on the Syrian War. I myself grew disillusioned as he explained to me his interpretation of what is really going on behind the war. Before coming to Paris, he was a history guide in many museums and geographical locations in

Syria, so he would dive far back in his country's history to explain present day events to me. Today, he feels defeated and hopeless in regards to the fate of his country.

My conversations with him about Syria led me to go to a lecture at the American Library in Paris. The speaker was the well-known international war journalist, Janine di Giovanni. She spoke about her new book, *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches from Syria*, and spoke intimately about the relationships she made with Syrians of different social statuses and religions across the country as she conducted her research. She did not shy away from talking about the gruesome and unimaginable crimes and hardships that these people faced and still face. The lecture ended with her explaining to a woman that she truly believes the country will be partitioned in the end by the powerful nations who have been running a proxy war; that there will be no peace. That's not to say that she didn't also fault the Syrian government, but she certainly outlined the complex layer of players involved, internally and externally. I read her book that summer and had hundreds of more questions for Samer, which he simply had no way of directly answering. Naturally, I thought back to these moments of questioning while researching the Algerian War.

These four scenes and poem are meant to capture a refugee's experience through his own eyes and those of a naïve American girl studying abroad. The poem, "An Apology for Carelessness," is an apology from the American student to her Syrian friend and his country. It's written in French because I wrote it while I was abroad. It essentially aims to broadly illustrate the tragedy of the war and the tragedy of mankind to have generated such a catastrophe for so many people. The research and relationships that motivated these stories were equal motivation for my last story, *Ola*. I again wanted to

narrate a woman's life, caught in the turmoil of war, while also emphasizing the confusion by adding another underground network. My goal was to create the impression of paranoia, mystery, inexpressible emotion, loss, and tragedy. I wanted her personal downfall to perhaps resemble the fate of deterioration which di Giovanni anticipates.

In regards to format, this collection is purposely stylized in hopes of further generating a feeling of loss, confusion, and ambiguity. My stories are fragmented and do not come to clear or final conclusions. I have included dialogue and words in French without providing translations and there are certain words and aspects of these wars, especially the Algerian, that my readers won't recognize, such as the "OAS," or *l'Organisation armée secrète*. I didn't want to spell out the meaning behind the foreign language, the religious references, or the concepts pertinent to the war and its time period. I intend for the unexplained aspects of the story to not only add to the obscurity of the work, but to also emphasize the complexity of war, religion, and culture. I want my readers to come face to face with language and concepts that they don't know and must think about and learn on their own, much like my characters are forced to face the unknown and make sense of it. As for my citation choices in this work, I did not choose to parenthetically cite my quotes in MLA format. This is first and foremost a creative, fictional collection of stories. The academic format of MLA citation, in my opinion, would take away from the fictional aspect and the aesthetics of the collage style. I have provided a List of Works Consulted page for my readers to reference the literature and films that heavily influenced my writing, and I have provided the MLA citation below each photograph that I used in order to give the photographer credit. Each time one of my characters quotes someone, they note the original speaker. The quotes and scenes that I

have inserted in between my stories and at the beginning of several are intended to set the tone for the following story and guide my readers' interpretation or thinking process while reading. Every inserted epigraph is meant to contribute to the overall impression on the reader.

This is certainly not a happy or uplifting series of works. But I do hope that my readers will find it honest and engaging. Perhaps the biggest tragedy in these women's lives is that they can't hold on to passion as something to keep them going. They flounder in their worlds with nothing propelling them forward except for external factors. I also had the goal of illustrating an interconnectedness between the characters and their suffering through the repetition of certain character names, imagery, and themes. It serves to create the overwhelming sensation that history does repeat, over and over again. We are all one people in one world and though it can prove to be hard to break down walls and truly see another who is not the same, we all have the capability of empathizing with, and on some level relating to, the suffering of others.

In many ways, this thesis is the culmination of all of my experiences in the last four years—from honors courses, literature courses, creative writing workshops, two study abroad experiences, heartache, friendships, hard work, to independence. I found my own voice throughout it all and I also found a respect and curiosity for all other voices. I realized that sincere and open communication is how grand ideas are generated and come into fruition. This is a skill that will always be needed in our world of prejudice and diversity. Having studied literature for the last four years, I have been exposed to history, cultures, ideas, politics, social issues, and the general human condition from all around

the world. It's my education in language and literature that has increased my capacity for understanding and integrating complex information. From Postcolonialism to Postmodernism to Southern literature, Medieval, and beyond, I have developed a love for and curiosity in people, knowledge, and ideas.

What's interesting for me now is to look at my work and think about where it fits in a literary context. I can't place it in one exact category or another but I do see characteristic elements of the literary movements I have studied. For one, Postmodernism has been the most influential literary exposure I've had in my English studies. I was immediately drawn to its complexity. For me, Postmodern literature is complicated and real in a way that creates that *ah-ha* feeling on behalf of the reader. It's the sense of raw accuracy about the human condition without trying to define it. This literary movement is evocative of not only my personal experiences growing up in the 21st century but also of the historical events of the Syrian and Algerian Wars. The paranoia, the sense of loss and hopelessness, the existential experience of losing determined meaning behind labels and names, the disillusionment, the interconnectedness and the questioning—these are the complicated qualities of Postmodernism whose influence I couldn't escape in writing the following stories.

In regards to other literary influences, my Postcolonial literature course this semester has added to the focus on language in my stories, especially in *Marwa* and *Amina*. I wanted to capture the frequent presence of the native or dominated population grappling with finding their own voice in a foreign language. Through my study of Postcolonial literature, I've witnessed the loss of identity or sense of self when forced to take on another language.

“One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien,’ yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.”

- Raja Rao, preface to *Kanthapura*

I wanted to not only create this sense of language altering one’s life story and identity, but also the various dynamics that are generated by language differences. For instance, in the four scenes set in Paris, I wanted to capture the role of language in a foreigner’s life that is often unnoticed by the locals around him. In the four very short stories, Samer finds refuge in speaking his own language to himself and he finds hopelessness in language ever being enough for him to feel like he fits in. This idea, seen in not only his story but others in this series, was drawn from postcolonial literature, such as *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. Language or education will never be enough for a person to feel like he is truly accepted into a culture or people that is not his own. The Algerian War was a war on colonialism and the Syrian War could be

considered a proxy neo-colonialist war. Through my exploration of Postcolonial language dynamics, Postmodern authoritarianism, existentialism, and individual pursuits of acceptance and understanding, I'd like to believe that my stories draw upon multiple literary styles, producing one unique voice. And my hope is that this voice is enough to stand on its own.

“Every night I am tormented by the muscular effort of giving birth through the mouth this way, this silencing. I vomit something, what? Maybe a long ancestral cry. My open mouth expels, continuously, the suffering of others, the suffering of the shrouded women who came before me, I who believed I was only just appearing at the first ray of the first light.

I do not cry, I am the cry, stretched into resonant blind flight; the white procession of ghost-grandmothers behind me becomes an army propelling me on; words of the quavering, lost language rise up while the males out in front gesticulate in the field of death or of its masks.”

Assia Djebar, *So Vast the Prison*

...shadowy shape that is enshrouded, never tearing off the veil and even our skin with it if required.

- Assia Djebar

Amina
On Algeria...

Authoritarianism is a cause and effect of the human condition. It perpetuates cycles of oppression, disconnect, injustice, and violence that is itself a result of the inherent nature of humans to long for something indeterminable. We feed off of the ignorance of others in order to erect a semi-reconstruction of what it is we think we need to feel whole. An authority, say a leader of a country, thrives on the disconnect between his people and his rule because that allows him to divine a god-like appearance or status influencing their lives. He can do no wrong as long as he has this reputation. When the frontier between his people and his rule is torn down, that is when the rebellion erupts and the cycle shifts, only to be replaced by another who will learn this very same strategy. An authority often takes away the identity of his people by compromising their voices under the burden of a foreign language.

My name is Amina and I am 44 years old. I was born in the Casbah in Algiers, Algeria in 1938 to a middle class Muslim family. The Casbah is the Muslim quarter of the city and I glided through the stone-stepped alleyways in my white hijab and dress, following along under the loom of awnings and laundry hung out to dry from third story windows. If you have been to Venice, it has much the same feel of winding through a maze, narrow between the old stone walls of ancient buildings, people sitting on stoops close enough to touch the bottom of your slip as you pass by.

Today, I live in London, England. I live a quiet life, mostly found gliding up and down long rows of books, breathing in their scent, in the Maughan Library. Some days I feel completely hollow as all I wish to do is read. Almost all of the books I read have to do with my origin as an Algerian woman from a country that's written and has had rewritten its history many times. So many times, that I go back over and over again to try and find the things I feel lost.

In Algerian culture, and much of the Arabian culture, women are elements of the cycle of authoritarianism and are suppressed by being kept from knowing too much. They are rarely granted the supreme authority of writing their own narrative. They experience inferiority in an everyday style, which has pushed them to form sub-cultures of female connectivity to survive the day. They sit in whispers among each other, in the back room, to feel the glorious spirit in speaking unbridled among each other. They slip out of their hijab, drink warm tea, and speak their minds. At the end of the afternoon, they wrap themselves solemnly and cross out into the street to return home. Never can they fully let go of their prison, the chains about their feet, following their steps, hovering over their heads, their prison is indestructible. I myself was chained inside this prison, locked tight and mocked in silence.

But, I digress. I want to tell my story and the story of the women who have stood beside me. While I sit down between two bookshelves, my toes reaching the start of the next, the maroon carpet stretches across the expanse of this floor and no one is around. I can think and feel in this silence and in this silence, I can relate to you some of the history of my country... A long history that shaped short lives. A long history that spun its way into a web of war in the mid 20th century. This was a war between people, ideals and

pride. There was no place for uniforms or rules here. It was a time of an unleashed defiance that escaped no one.

The Algerian War of 1954 to 1962 was the culmination of inferiority complexes which arose in the preceding decades. It was the result of a land which has been claimed by so many others since the Berber natives lost their power in the 9th century BC, when Carthage put an end to the Berbers' self-rule. In the centuries to come, my people saw the rule of the Romans, Vandals, various indigenous tribes, the Byzantine Empire, Arab Muslims, the Fatimid Dynasty, Spain, and the Ottoman Empire.

In the beginning of the 19th century, a dispute that stemmed from frustration over an unpaid debt between France and Algeria led Charles X of France to invade my country in 1830. Much of the country resisted but France renewed their drive to take Algeria and invaded Constantine, the last major independent city, in 1837. Abd al-Khader was still the Berber leader symbolizing the hero of our native strength and desire for independence, but in 1848 Algeria was declared French. European immigrants flowed into the country, half French and others mostly Spanish, Italian and Maltese—the *pieds noirs*.

The *pieds noirs* feared my people and we feared them. The difference is that we were at their mercy. I've read something of Albert Camus in which he says:

[the *ped noir*] is born of this country where everything is given to be taken away... here is a race without past, without tradition... wholly cast into its present lives without myths, without solace. It has put all its possessions on this earth and therefore remains without defense against death. All the gifts of physical beauty have been lavished on it. And

with them, the strange avidity that always accompanies that wealth without failure...

The *pieds noirs* had an inferiority complex under the shadow of metropolitan France. They were a people who came from mostly lacking backgrounds of poverty and hardship, having moved to a new nation with the hope of having something of their own. With the power they assumed over our “inferior race,” they began to feel entitled. We, the natives, the ones who had been with this land since the beginning, were the “anonymous figure” onto which the *pieds noirs* could project their general resentment and superior standing. They feared our men with their multiple wives and saw them as virile monsters who could see the white women when the *pieds noirs* were not permitted to see their women. They feared our numbers, our birthrates, and our religion, and so they chose to see us as a non-race, non-humans. The well-known historian, Alistair Horne, whose dense works I love to read, states, “The pied noir would habitually tutoyer any Muslim – a form of speech reserved for intimates, domestics or animals – and was outraged were it ever suggested that this might be a manifestation of racism.” To call us *bicot, melon, beni-oui-oui, figuier, or sale raton* was to attach an association to us that would render it unnecessary to consider offering human compassion. It was a curious blindness, in which we were to them as dogs, that would come to prevent us from ever reaching compromise.

One of France’s most visionary governor-generals, Maurice Viollette, warned Algeria:

When the Muslims protest, you are indignant; when they approve, you are suspicious; when they keep quiet you are fearful. Messieurs, these men

have no political nation. They do not even demand their religious nation. All they ask is to be admitted into yours. If you refuse this, beware lest they do not soon create one for themselves.

It's a fickle thing, a man's heart. When what stirs inside a man cannot find its place in the world around him, it will drive him to do desperate things. We are all searching for a place where we feel connected and accepted, a place where the inner workings of our souls can express themselves in our physical world. When we cannot express that inner room inside our hearts, we build ourselves up to feel empowered in another way. We look at the people whom we can't understand or make to understand ourselves and we dehumanize them in an effort to diminish the vastness of those whom we cannot reach. My country, split between the *pieds noirs* and the Arabs and soon the metropolitan French, was a heightened illustration of this—different origins, different religions, different customs, languages, skin colors, conventions, dress, and the list goes on. This was a breeding ground for desperate acts.

So, we have reached the year of 1954 and this is where my story begins because I want to share the part of my life that took place in this war of terror. You've now seen that my country has undergone the rise and fall of rule and leadership to the point that my origins as a Berber woman are somewhere lost deep within me, covered by the turmoil of suppression and oppression. As a child, I listened to the tales of Abd al-Khader and I felt a part of something bigger than myself. My grandfather whispered the tales of honor and bravery and my mother scolded him from across the room, but his stories opened up a place inside my heart that began to ache with emptiness. I tucked my coarse hair behind

my ears and leaned a bit closer to his tired face, hoping to see in his eyes the same emptiness, reaching further and further back until the rope ends and I'm pulled back to our warm kitchen and the smell of my mother frying merguez sausage for our Saturday meal.

It was 1954 and the protest groups of Messali and Abbas were strengthening in numbers and motivation. Let me remind you that this was a war which lasted eight long years. There was insurrection, defection, betrayal, death, and unfathomable violence on all sides. What I am looking to explain is what I believe to be the root of the conflict, the very core of it, which can be found in all of us. A kind of prison which materializes in the face of oppression. I will give certain details to shed light on my own story, but I cannot give you all of the complex particulars of this war. A war with no lines, no boundaries, is like trying to see order in the pebbled dust which blows day and night on the beaches of Oran.

Like I said before, I was born in the Casbah; it was the maze I grew up in until I was 16 years old. When I was 16, I moved with my family out into the *bled*, a mountainous countryside region, where we had a longtime family friend. My much older brother had been killed in arbitrary gunfire following the uprising at Sétif. My mother had said she would not forgive him if he went, but he left.

At night in our new home in the *bled*, I would sit on my bed with my bare feet touching the cool tiles below. I could hear a song in my head; it was always the same. I longed to go home, to return to Algiers, but my mind jumped from the scattered images of my childhood and I knew the *bled* was safer. I had to redo another year of the same

schooling I finished in the previous. This was a poor place and many Europeans, most of whom were teachers, had left out of fear of violence from rebel groups.

After four long years, I moved back to Algiers to start my higher level schooling at the age of 20. I was to study literature at the University of Algiers and clean the rooms at the Saint George hotel at night. I lived with a cousin on my mother's side of the family who had two young boys. It was chaotic inside the home. At that point, I couldn't hear my song anymore. I had left it in the *bled* a few years before. It danced somewhere along the mountain crests, falling slowly with the leaves of the deciduous trees and nestling under cover of the mint green moss. One day, when I was 17, I had been walking home from school and saw a black mass slumped in the roadside culvert. I drew closer to inspect it. What I saw was the remains of a man, twisted and formed to make the more gruesome, and that was the day my faint song whistled its last breath.

I convinced my parents to let me move back to Algiers because of my cousin. She was family and she also told my mother that she knew a handsome boy who was interested in marriage. I thought nothing of the boy but my mother was convinced and my father nodded approval. Into my second week of school, I began to feel like I had the whole world spilling out of the pages before me. Each night, I began to write my ideas into a loose leafed notebook. I would write and then I would sit, suspended in the anticipation of all I could do, all I could have. Suspended is an appropriate word. I hung in my deferred desire like an apple frozen at the peak of its ripening. I didn't know where I would go or what I would do after my three years in university but I also didn't want to find out. This was bliss and I knew things were changing all around me that would try to stop me.

On October 3, 1958, I was married to Yacine. He was scrawny and brown pimples peeked out below the hair resting above his brows. My mother and father had come to Algiers that summer and given me the ultimatum of marriage or returning to the *bled*. My cousin had another baby on the way and there would simply be no more room for me. It was a quiet wedding.

Two months later, Yacine was taken in the night while we were sleeping. He was tortured by the *Algérie-française* army, returned before I awoke and as he sat, crouched on the wooden chair pulled away from the dining table, I watched his fingers twitch and great tears fall with his running nose down onto his smeared tunic. For weeks after this, Yacine couldn't have a conversation with me. He never went out and when I returned from class he was sitting in the same position I left him in. At times he would yell and curse, saying that I was doing this and that incorrectly. One time, he became so angry with me because I would not respond to him that he crossed the kitchen floor, rummaged in a drawer, and took the scissors to my braided hair; it fell in one thick strand down my back and onto the floor below. I stood silently stirring the Tajine. The tops of my arms went numb and that was all.

Three weeks later, Yacine was taken again but I didn't know by whom. His mother was living with us at the time and when he didn't return for weeks, I moved back in with my aunt, promising to take care of the children and stop my classes, and his mother moved in with her family. I slept on a makeshift bed at the foot of my little cousins' bed. I knew Yacine had been working with the FLN. His family had connections in Cairo and the FLN had hopes he could get an arms supply through his wealthy friends in Egypt. I had a friend from school, a French girl whose family moved to Algiers in

1946 because her father received a leading job at the university. Yacine mistrusted her but I had insisted that she visit at least every week. She curled her hair and painted her nails red. She walked like the bounce she put in each step was something to propel her forward, ahead of anyone who walked beside her. When she spoke, I took note so that I could add new wishes to my notebook later in the night. I wanted her path, having lost the feeling of mine. A few years later, I found out that my friend had told her boyfriend, then the son of a captain in the French army, about Yacine's connection with the FLN. She hadn't even known his role, or so I'd thought. I had heard her speak against France so many times that I thought she must be quite progressive in her thinking. She was friends with me after all. I thought she believed in assimilation and equal rights. Her attitude toward France and her old life in Paris was of such distaste, but I took that to be her neutrality and I was wrong.

My life continued. I worked for my cousin, practically raising her children as she suffered from postpartum and was always in and out of long spouts in bed. Her husband had left to fight with the FLN, somewhere tucked up away in the Aurès. Fine lines etched across my face and my notebook was one day simply thrown out with other useless things. The tales of courage I was told in the kitchen, the literature of Sagan and Baudelaire, and the deep rhythm of my grandmother's Berber language, fell away into the night, leaving behind the stretched wound of my inner longings. I ordered my daily tasks perfectly, one after the other. But I could never avoid the unplanned moments, the times where everything stopped and I had to look down at my hands and feet to think of what to do next. In these moments, I felt the weight of centuries of others shaping the lives of my people suspended in their own dreams, waiting for the day to be let free to

run and chase them. I felt the weight of all the women silent with the cooking spoon, turning the stew over and over in its pot, a weary song perhaps slipping up into their mind from somewhere between the breast and belly. And with this weight heavy resting, I'd like to pass the story along to another.



Gandini, Jacques. *Alger De Ma Jeunesse: 1954-1962*. Nice Cedex: Editions Jacques Gandini, 1995. Print.

Woman begging in the street in downtown Algiers.
Inspiration for the story and character, *Marwa*.

You say that suffering serves no purpose. But it does. It serves to make one cry. To warn against what is insane. To warn of disorder. To warn of the fracture of the world.

- Jeanne Hyvrard

Marwa

Algeria, June 1957

I used to sit at my corner and watch the heels click by; sharp pointed clacks against the cracked sidewalk which stretched from my feet to the gutter. A guard stood down the way, protecting a government office, perhaps from the likes of me. His helmet covered his eyes and he was so still throughout the day that sometimes I forgot I always had company. He too stared out at the world passing by in front of him. Waist coats and fluttery handkerchiefs and long blousy dresses and shiny silver buttons painted the people who flashed about. Women would lift their eyes just enough to glance at me; they would look but wouldn't see.

I shifted from my left hip to the balls of my feet. When my feet began to ache, I would rock back onto my bottom and the heat of the sidewalk would press through my skirt. If the dirty white veil, which covered the top of my head and most of my body, slipped even a little up further past my forehead, I felt naked and yanked it back in place. I kept a paper cup beside me at my feet and a black leather briefcase which used to be my son, Yacine's. His wife, a young girl, moved in with a friend from her university as I assured her that I would join my family further west in the city. I didn't have family in the west, but I moved this way because I didn't want her to see me, crouched and desperate on the street corner. I had been dependent on Yacine, whose father had been killed months before. Yacine was taken about three weeks ago and I didn't know where he was. In the street, the people kept hurrying past. I must have been a terrible sight.

One day, a woman dressed in black, wearing a chapeau and black heels with two straps around each ankle came up to me and pressed a silver coin into my palm. She was wearing black fingerless gloves and so her skin brushed against mine. She stared clear and deep into my eyes. I could feel the other people staring. She pulled back, winked, and made her way down the street. I reached to drop the coin in my paper cup and stopped when I realized that it wasn't a real coin. I brought it close to my face and strained to read it. Around the beveled edge was a message written in Arabic: *Blind people walk about but you sit and see. 18 Rue Borély-la-Sapie.* That street wasn't far from my corner. I thought this message wasn't meant for me and that the woman had pulled it out of her coin purse by accident. But the way she had pressed it into my hand, touching my skin with her bare fingers, and winking as she walked away. Her heels didn't click off but glided purposely.

I looked around and could feel the world looking back. I felt the soldier down the way turn his head slowly in my direction. Then, at that moment, the earth barreled and rolled within and something erupted up and out spilling over into the street at the bottom of the hill. I clapped my hands over my ears dropping the silver coin, and I heard my heart beat just inside the left and right edges of my skull. Smoke and ash and debris projected into the oncoming traffic. The screaming of people and ambulances didn't come fast enough to avoid the eerie silence that ensued. An uncertain quiet settled over where I could see the popular student bar, *Otomatic*, had been. It was now decimated into a pieced together pile of rubbish, concrete, and dead; arms and legs, spliced and cut faces, blood drying in dust on the sidewalk. One man stood straight with his right hand resting on top of his head; he fixed his eyes on a brown loafer blown off and resting empty.

Bystanders looked about feverishly, searching for who was culpable. I worried that I would be taken in for questioning. I emptied my paper cup into the briefcase, clinking coins fell together in the bottom, I threw the odd coin in too, having spotted it on the ground beside me, and I briskly made my way up the opposite streetside carrying away from the scene.

All I could think was *18 Rue Borély-la-Sapie. 18 rue Borély-la-Sapie.* As I continued on, staring at my shoes jolting out from under my skirt with each step, I realized that that's where I was headed. I rounded a corner and saw the address a block down the street, the even numbers carrying down the left side. I saw the number 18 and squatted a few doors down in front of an old warehouse garage. I had an excuse to be sitting along any street. I set out my paper cup and rubbed my hands back and forth across the tops of my thighs. A man came out of the apartment across the way, walked towards me, turned slightly to his right, and entered the door under the number 18. He was a businessman, dressed in coat and tie.

Perhaps five minutes passed and he exited the building, headed the other way down the street, stopped in his tracks, swiveled and came to my feet. He stopped and hovered so that I glanced up as he winked and continued down the sidewalk. I scooped up my paper cup, threw it into my leather bag and approached the door. I was buzzed in immediately and ascended the stairs, not knowing at which floor to stop. As I reached the fifth and last floor, the door swung wide and a woman dressed in an egg blue dress motioned for me to come in. She kissed both my cheeks as I stood there unresponsive. She let out a crisp laugh and flicked her hair with her wispy hands. I wanted to stand

guard and appear cold but there was something about her that I trusted. I asked, “Who are you?”

“Who am I? Why who are you?”

“Don’t you know who I am?”

“How would I know you when we have never met?”

“But I have this coin and there were two people.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

The lines along her mouth creased as she smiled. I caught a glimpse of a man sitting at a desk in the room that opened at the end of this hall where the woman stood too close to me. I heard sirens again in the street. The woman followed my eyes and she turned to lead me into the salon. The man’s left hand raced furiously across the paper, occasionally stabbing into the inkpot. I hadn’t seen anyone write with ink since I was young.

“Dominique, please, the others. I have to hurry.”

“Coming,” she replied as she crossed the room, pulled two volumes off the shelf and placed them beside him, opening to a certain page. I looked around the salon. The walls were lined with maps and writings and drawings which were all yellowing to one degree or another, curling up at the corners with old age. There was a gentle hue of a soft red throughout the salon. Two mustard velvet chairs sat facing one another at the far end, with a table resting between them, a plate of half eaten cakes and crumbs. Books were in tall vertical piles surrounding the man’s desk, and books were littered across the room, filling empty space, holding down a stubborn corner of the rug that wouldn’t lie flat.

“What is he writing?” I asked Dominique.

He replied, "I have to copy everything down. I need all of these Arabic texts copied into French and sent down to the vault."

He said this to me as if I was the vault-keeper. Dominique turned and said, "My name is Dominique and this is Jacques. You are indeed Marwa?"

"Yes, my name is Marwa. Can you please tell me what's going on, *madame*?"

"Come with me."

She led me through another doorway, cut in half so that we had to hunch over to fit through the bottom opening. We entered a beautifully ornate room decorated with modern furniture. There was a single bed, a porcelain claw foot bathtub, and a vanity all enclosed by shelves of beautiful trinkets and old leather bound books. The sun shone into the room and I watched the particles of dust float through the rays that ran and touched at the foot of the tub.

"I don't understand what I can do for you."

"We want you to work for us."

I looked around the room thinking it would be easy since it's so small but that the dusting would present a rigorous daily task.

"I don't have any experience cleaning another's home but I was the head of my own for many years."

"No, we want you to work for us as an aid against the OAS."

I shook my head with quick jolts. I opened my mouth to start off about my life as a naïve and innocent beggar. I was so afraid of being pinned as a certain political follower and then taken in for questioning. Everyone knew that questioning had become a euphemism for forced and false confession. But this woman looked at me, her pale green

eyes not once wavering from mine, deep and brown. I started to back toward the door and in that moment she winked at me like the others and said, “*Blind people walk about but you sit and see,*” in my native tongue. I’ve never liked attention. I shrugged my shoulders. The sun crawled behind a cloud and the room muted to gray.

“How can I be an aid?”

“We want you to work in the Casbah throughout the day, dressed in traditional white, and listen to what passes in the streets at your feet. We need you to be our eyes.”

“Listen to what? My daughter-in-law, Amina, might see me and force me off the streets into her home.”

“That won’t be a problem. Amina hasn’t stepped foot in the Casbah since your son disappeared.”

“I—I don’t—my son...”

“We have to know everything in order to be good at our job.”

“Okay, I can listen in the streets.”

“*Très bien.* In the late afternoon, when the sun is soon to set, you will go to a home at *4 Rue Abderames*, change into modern European dress and return here.”

“I’ll never get around the exterior controls.”

“Yes you will. You will have the look, you will speak your best French, and you will assert yourself boldly like an aid of the OAS.”

“I thought I was to be your aid against the OAS.”

“You are. But we don’t exist. As soon as we exist out there, we will be something else entirely.”

She crossed the room and knelt beside the bed, opening a drawer underneath it and laying fresh clothes on the vanity stool. She told me she was late for an appointment and that I should bathe, dress, and dinner would be served in the room adjacent to the salon. I nodded and she left through the bottom half of the doorway, shutting it behind her. How long it had been since I was enclosed in a room by myself. I relished in the intimacy and limits of the four walls and found excitement in the innumerable objects around me. I walked to touch the rough spines of the colored shelves and then I saw a paper framed in glass with a gold, beveled rim. I looked closely, taking it down off the shelf, and saw that it was an old invoice. I didn't understand how it could exist here in this room. The date, the style, the amount. The French had originally owed America money for corn grain, and American had later sold the loan to us. Our *dey* had then reminded the French merchants of this debt, and Charles X invaded us to not only avoid paying his due but to conquer our nation altogether. This kind of avarice grows in any opening crevice of opportunity; such was the way that Algeria added French to its long list of nationalities. I wanted to touch this historical document. I wanted to feel it in my hands, to feel the effect it's had on our country every day for over a century: A debt owed by the French to the Americans. It is we who have paid.

I set the frame back and knelt to run a hot bath. As I slowly slipped my hijab over my head, past my ears and off my shoulders, I smelled my foul stench. I hadn't realized my state underneath my veil. Embarrassed, I wrapped it in my skirt and pushed all my clothes into a neat pile in the far corner. As I stepped into the bath, still filling with deliciously warm water, the porcelain bottom moaned under my weight. I held onto the sides and lowered myself down, submerging one part at a time. I thought about

Dominique's words, "...as soon as we exist out there, we will be something else entirely," and I felt the pads of my feet seize with the sharp pang of nerves under my shifting weight. Who was I becoming in this room, in this bath? I submerged myself completely, my head propped up along the slant of the back of the tub and I gazed at my navel, ever so slightly emerging above the line of water. I hadn't washed myself, or been naked, in over three months. I heard Charles dropping books down onto the wooden floorboards. I felt on the very edge of slipping under the water and out of sight.

As the bath went from lukewarm to cold, I forced my way out of the tub, pulling at the sides of the croaking porcelain. I stood there, stark naked, my feet still submerged in the tub, as I looked out at the maps nailed to the edge of bookshelves around me. I thought about where I'd want to go; I closed my eyes and was back on the trundle bed of my family's home in the mountains. I drew in breath that wasn't filled with other things, breathed by other people. My grandfather sat at the end of the bed telling me news of Algerian heroes fighting for independence. Then I heard someone pull shut the double windows in the salon and I stepped out, dried myself and slipped into the traditional long white veil that Dominique had set out for me. It was exquisitely done by way of needlework along the hems and a white pattern danced subtly along the connecting lines of cloth. I heard Jacques push back in his chair from the desk and leave the apartment with a loud click of the door behind him. I cracked open my door, now realizing that the top was truly only more of the wall. I stepped into the fading light of the salon and a man swiftly entered, switching lights on in his wake.

"I am Sebastian. Very pleased to meet you. I will accompany you for dinner if I may."

“You want to eat with me? Very well, I’ll follow.”

He took me into the kitchen, through the swinging door, and a soft wooden table, whittled throughout with initials, names, and curious sketches, sat with high candles burning over mountains of old wax. I seated myself at Sebastian’s request and he fluttered about the kitchen setting the table before me and preparing our plates. I had never been served by anyone but my mother. From behind my left shoulder, he set an exquisitely painted plate before me, heaped with saffron and raisin couscous, smelling of fresh mint. He sat down across from me and we ate in silence. He was reading what appeared to be manuscripts, perhaps those that Jacques had copied. I tried to make sense of some of the carvings in the wooden tabletop. I saw “Yacine” written across the edge of the right side and began to cry. This cry I had come to master. It gave no hint to the outside as my composed exterior remained just so. I tore off a piece of the *baguette* resting between us and excused myself from dinner. He looked at me confused, but offered a kind smile and wished me goodnight.

I ran another bath to wash my street clothes. I looked down at the white cloth absorbed and floating in the water like soiled silk in a cloudy broth, subdued and limp. I laid in bed on my back facing the ceiling, counting the holes in the old wooden beams. I had never seen a ceiling like this. I wished to be upside down so that I might lie between the beams, just barely fitting the width of my shoulders and the curve of my hips. I would lie still and flat like that, wait for the world to pass by on the streets outside, in the rooms below, and then I would swing down, take my clean robes, and find myself in the greenery of the countryside, dry and crisp.

I thought more about what Dominique wanted from me. I thought about my feeble French and having to dress in European clothes. I thought of myself and the straight hollowness that felt gaping wide as I considered these tasks. The OAS was a secret army. What did that make us? The OAS wanted to oust metropolitan French who had taken over control from the Algerian-French who had taken control of my people over a century ago. I wondered which group I would fall into once I played this role. I spoke my French aloud into the darkness of my new room and a stranger spoke back to me. A stranger spoke my words and they echoed back in my mind like foreign whispers, twisting and tickling the back of my throat, rushing in and rushing out in one motion. I fell asleep to this breathy noise in my ear and a dream flickered into color in my mind like the start of an old film reel, casting images onto a matte screen.

Then I felt a wet soak between my legs, a stagnant, damp sensation which made me cold all over. Rigid with my face frozen in one idle expression of horror looking in on me through my eyes from the outside into my inside, into the gaping hole, wishing it bigger with its stare. The wetness crawled down my legs and I scratched furiously at my thigh. I laid shivering and naked under the covers. I had never slept nude before but I had no choice. The clock read only half past one. I lifted the sheets up and saw the bloody stain of a woman's burden. I quickly stripped the bed and threw the sheets into the soap water with my other clothes. I took the long back-scrubbing brush and stirred the soiled cloth like a merguez stew. The smell of French perfumed soaps and my filth rose above the water relentlessly, filling the room with a choked stench. I stood naked in the center of the room, knees bent and back hunched over, stirring and stirring my clothes, the steam rising just barely over the lips of the tub. I wrung out the cloth and hung them on a

wire rack I found pushed behind the headboard. Crawling back into bed, exhausted, I fell asleep at once.

In the morning, Dominique brought me strong coffee sweetened with cardamom and msemen cakes covered in butter and honey. She said nothing about the sheets and clothing drying on the rack but left quickly, knowing that I was undressed beneath the duvet. I ate slowly and put back on the dry white dress and veil. I stepped out into the salon and Jacques was again copying things down.

“How did you learn Arabic so well?”

Without looking up at me he said, “My mother’s family is Jewish. They moved to Algeria in 1890 and immediately started teaching themselves Arabic. They wanted to live their lives here without inhibiting relationships and business with other Algerians. When the French granted the Jews more rights than the Algerians, my family was forced out of their home in the Casbah by threats, some from their closest friends. Over time, they have been able to build back their relationships, but only because they know how to talk to the Arabs. It’s important not to force others to speak your language in their home.”

I nodded, unsure of what to say. Dominique fluttered into the room wearing a white silk blouse with red silk cording along the collar and seams. Her equally red lipstick shone brightly as she crossed in front of the window, the sun at her back.

“Okay. Let’s get to work. Marwa, I’m going to drop you off near the Casbah on my way to the courthouse. You’ll walk the block to the north entrance and spend the day soaking up as much information as you can. At noon, lunch will be served to you at the same address I told you to return to at dusk: *4 Rue Abderames*. I told them not to make

you saffron couscous; I'm sorry about last night. Sebastien should have used my other recipe..."

"No, no, *madame*, it was not the food. But what shall I listen for in the street?"

"Anything you hear. I want you to come back with whatever information you can, no matter its importance, and Jacques or I will write it all down."

"Yes, *madame*."

The sun glared relentlessly that day. The ocean breeze was no match for its heat in the Casbah. I sat in the doorway of a closed down shop to steal a bit of shade. Two hours had passed and nothing interesting. Across from me a lazy dog slept, indifferent to all that passed by. The iron bars of the second floor balcony creaked in the breeze as the laundry swung back and forth resting on the window rack. Children scampered throughout the Casbah like it was their own labyrinth in which to scheme and play. They harassed the occasional old man, stumbling and smelling of alcohol. The FLN gave treats to the young boys who ran around and tormented Arabs drinking and smoking. Two weeks ago, I heard one was forced down a steep stairwell by a crowd of children mocking and yelling as they circled around him. He landed at the bottom and couldn't move until his grandson came. One young boy sat down the street from me and spat on women's shoes as they walked by. Another boy caught him spitting on his mother's skirt and he threw the basket of bread at him that his mother had just purchased at the bakery. She scolded her son and pulled him away down the alley and inside their home. The other boy sat and licked his lips as he took a bite out of a fresh semolina cake. At noon, when I was close to dozing off, I got up and walked with my briefcase to Dominique's address. I

knocked four times and thumped the door with my right foot like she'd told me and immediately a plump woman opened the door and whisked me inside.

“Bonjour madame! Bienvenue chez moi. Vous avez faim, non? Moi, j'ai tellement faim.”

I looked around and noticed that there were no other rooms besides this small kitchenette with another soft wooden table top and folding chairs. The table reminded me of my grandmother's in the *bled*. I would pin sheets up along the edges of her table and stay under there all day long, feeling hidden from everyone and everything. I would lay back against a coral colored bolster pillow that I would take from the sofa in the salon when my grandmother was in her garden. My dolls were there with me and I'd trace the blue tiled floor with my pinky finger until I had counted every one. Eighty-four tiles fit under that table and sixteen nails lined the inner planks of wood underneath. Those were the moments when I felt safe and sat and daydreamed until my grandmother would call out, “Yacine, dinner is served but I cannot find your granddaughter, nor my serving spoon!”

I had always taken her wooden spoon under the table with me to ward off the monsters I imagined lurking on the opposite side of my diaphanous castle walls, cream sheets from the linen closet. My grandfather, Yacine, would come into the kitchen and crouch down to make shadow figures with his hands outside of my tent. I would bury my giggle in the belly of my doll until he'd slip his hand under the sheet and I'd hand him the wooden spoon, and he'd cry out to my grandmother his miraculous discovery. I'd quickly crawl out and announce that it was I who saved the day and found the spoon, not he, and

he'd whisk me up and over his head and we'd run through the salon in circles, just like that.

I watched this woman set the table and shook my head as she held up a bottle of wine to me. She smiled and cheerfully poured herself a glass.

"Please sit. Let's eat."

"This is very kind of you. Do you live here?" I pulled back a chair and sat down across from her.

"Oh yes, I've lived here for two years now. The Org sent me here about two years ago. I know it's not safe but when I go out, I wear the veil and I sleep in a room behind the wall just over there in the corner."

I turned and didn't see how she could get to another room through the concrete wall.

"Anyway, I've known Jacques since he was a little boy and I bullied him into letting me come here to assist with people like you."

"Did you say the 'Org'?"

She chuckled and said, "Oh yes, that's what I call our little group, but that's just me. Dominique is very firm about there being no label on the work we do."

I realized she had already eaten half the food on her plate and I stuck my fork into the *haricot verts*, smothered in butter and garlic. Steam rose up to my wrist.

"Are there other women like me listening in for the Org?"

"Oh no, Djamila was our last aid and she's not with us anymore."

Her voice got low as she told me this and I wondered where Djamila was. Something about the way she twisted in her chair made me stop from asking. Instead I said, “My name is Marwa by the way. What’s yours?”

She sat up a little straighter and said, “Sophie. *Enchanté*. I have a feeling we’ll be spending quite a bit of time together. Also, noon is a good breaking point in the day to write down the things you have seen and heard throughout the morning so that you might remember everything when you return to Dominique’s. There’s a notebook over there in that cupboard that all the other women have archived their memories in. Feel free to make use of it if you find it helpful.”

“Thank you, I will.”

We finished eating and her clock on the wall dinged at 13 *heures*. I slipped back into my sandals at the doorway and headed further up the street, this time to find another shady spot. I felt like people were watching me curiously as I left Sophie’s house but I kept my head low and let my feet carry me up the slanted walk. I took my crinkled cup out of my briefcase once more and squatted under a striped awning only to be quickly shooed away by the shopkeeper. I went deeper into the Casbah and finally rested on a staircase half shaded by an adjacent building. I felt like the two buildings on either side of the stairs leaned close together at such an alarming degree that I might be swallowed up completely if one rock should shift at their base. I stood back up and felt dizzy. Men kept exiting a gated entrance into a beautiful courtyard about 20 meters away. The buildings making a perfect square around a flowing fountain in the center climbed upward with vibrant turquoise and rose painted columns, arches racing across to frame the outside corridors. I watched another man leave and behind him the door did not click back to its

lock. I sidled down the sloping walk of wide shallow stairs and creaked the door open enough to slip through. I walked up to the fountain in the center and sat along the bricked wall enclosing it. I was gliding my fingers along the mossy side of the wall submerged under the water when I heard someone speaking to another in a hushed tone. I turned so that my back was to where I felt the voices coming from and I listened closely.

“You mustn’t tell anyone. You know that would be the end of my marriage to Nazim. My family will disown me as well. If you love...”

“*Arrête, arrête, s’il te plaît.* I can barely understand you when you speak in such a fever. I’m not going to tell anyone. But you need to consider which secret would be worse for your family to know. Are we not your family now?”

All I could hear next was the woman beginning to cry. The man cursed and started down the steps. I grew afraid and ran to the steps on the opposite side of the courtyard. I climbed up slowly and watched his figure emerge and disappear over and over behind each column until he clicked the metal gate behind him. I could hear the trickle of the fountain down below and the sniffing young girl retreating back into her home. A baby cried from the inside of a room down the hall from me. Tired, I slid with my back against the wall down to the ground of the third floor breezeway. I almost dozed off when I heard a group of men debating with one another in the room behind the wall I rested against.

“Yacine doesn’t have long.”

“He knows that, and you know that he knows that, so why are you really here?”

“I came to see how you are. Her parents complain day and night about you. They don’t know what really happened and I hate that I can’t tell them.”

“No, you can’t. And I’m fine. We’ve got one more to wire and then the girls will come.”

“Who is it this time?”

“I’m not sure. Friends of Ahmed. He knows what he’s doing though.”

“He didn’t last time.”

“That was the girl’s fault. Wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Well we’ll all be watching closely this time. Don’t let the dance slip a step.”

“I know this dance better than anyone. Give me another day for the last one and then I’ll start the music.”

“Okay, one more day. I’ll be back tomorrow around the same time. See you.”

I hadn’t moved since I heard them mention the name ‘Yacine.’ My stomach clenched and I quickly set my cup beside me and lowered my head close to the ground. The man who came out stopped and sighed when he saw me cowering outside the door.

“Women always trying to get something, huh?”

I didn’t say anything as he dropped a couple coins into my cup. I put my hands together and nodded in his direction. After the gate closed, I looked up and noticed the sky had grown darker. I picked up my things and hurried back down the alleyway to Sophie’s place. I got lost and it took me thirty minutes to find her door again. The boy on her street had eaten all but one piece of his bread by then and before he could spit on my shoes, I hopped to the other side to continue down. Sophie let me in quickly saying that I was late and shouldn’t wait so long to return next time. She undressed me like a nurse and I stood in my *culottes* shivering in the heat. I could feel Sophie looking at me, at my skin. I quickly turned and took the clothes from her before she could ask me questions. I

stepped into a tea length pastel skirt and buttoned up a cream blouse. They fit me perfectly and I was no longer surprised. She handed me a shopping bag from an Arab trinket shop and told me it held three pieces of rococo yellow china. It was my prop. If only she could also provide me with a French accent, the plan would be flawless. She wrapped my dark hair in a colored scarf and I looked like I was embarking on a tropical vacation or going to dine with the women on *le front de mer*. I nodded at myself in the mirror, breathed in deeply so I felt the elastic of my brazier pull against my chest, and walked out the door. I knew Dominique would be waiting where she dropped me off that morning.

The exterior controls had become quite strict since the bombings had occurred now twice. But there was no way to confine the disdain that bulged at every border of the Casbah. People were finding other ways to meet and execute their plans. The Casbah was like a clandestine fortress hovering over the shiny Parisian style buildings of downtown. I reached the front of the line for people waiting to exit and the *gendarme* smiled at me.

“Now where might you be headed little lady?” I had to have been at least twice his age.

“I’m headed home for the evening, *monsieur*,” I said in my best French. Short and to the point.

“And where’s home for you?”

I hadn’t expected him to ask me this. “That’s none of your business, *monsieur*. Now I’d like to return to my husband who is waiting for me if you don’t mind.”

“What’s in your bag?”

“China, *monsieur*. I collect it.”

He stepped closer to me and dug his hand into my bag, beneath the tissue paper covering the delicate pieces. He seemed satisfied. I took a step forward and he stopped me with his hands, placing them on my waist and patting me down. I had never been touched like this by any man other than my husband. My skin crawled at his indecency but I stood stoic and marched through the gate when he nodded me off. I started to run as I turned the corner and almost collided with Dominique's car. I pulled open the door and fell into the front seat with my bag.

"Mon Dieu, what's happened Marwa? Are you alright?"

She wrenched around to look out the back window and check for someone following me.

"Les gendarmes sont insupportables," I said.

"Yes, I know. I'm glad that you're safe. Let's go home."

At her mention of 'home' I grew hostile. She tried to chat about Sophie and what we had for lunch and I muttered a few words of response in Arabic. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

We arrived at *18 Rue Borély-la-Sapie* and I slammed the car door behind me, shaking the feeble frame of the little car. Dominique seemed to pay no attention and we climbed the stairs to the apartment. Sebastien let us in and gestured with his finger that we not speak. I looked at Dominique as she walked down the hall. I followed her into the salon where five men sat and stood in a circle near the fireplace. It was late spring and a rather warm night but the fire burned steadily as they spoke. I noticed Jacques was visibly upset.

"Qu'est-ce qui se passe?"

Dominique planted her right hand on her hip and her nude heel turned out like she was posing for a photo. The four men beside Jacques paid no attention to her.

“I said what is going on,” she demanded again.

One of the strange men turned to her and said, “*Madame, s’il vous plait*, try to be reasonable and leave us to our business.”

Dominique tapped her heel. “*Vous êtes chez moi, monsieur.*”

Before the man could respond, Jacques looked at me and said, “Dominique, they want only to ask me about the new novel I’m working on. I’ve assured them that it’s wasting away in the garbage bin somewhere, all twenty pages that were doomed from the start.”

I kept silent as Jacques’s eyes bore holes in mine. Dominique laughed and said, “Oh that old project! You men are here about that? Jacques hasn’t been working on anything for weeks now since. I’m sorry to waste your time. If you don’t mind, I’ll show you out.”

Another man turned and lightly tapped the screen over the fireplace. The flames darted in competition with one another, climbing up the narrow chimney. He turned and looked at me, “And who is she?”

Dominique replied whilst grabbing my arm affectionately, “Why this is a kind woman who has sold me fine Arab china for years now. I invite her for dinner every month or so.”

“What kind of china?”

I remembered the bag in the hallway. “I can show you sir, if you like.” He sneered at me and the other four turned back to Jacques.

“Political writing is *interdit* as you know, without our review.”

“Oh yes, yes, I know very well. You don’t have to worry gentlemen.”

The man kicked the screen once more and the four of them turned to leave.

Sebastien grabbed one’s coat and they clicked the door quietly shut behind them. We all stood silent for a moment, waiting for the men to descend the stairs.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Marwa, there are eyes and ears everywhere. Always remember that.”

I thought to myself that I’m now one more set of eyes and ears in this city, waiting and listening to learn about others’ secrets. My grandmother always told me that it was never worth it to look into someone else’s *vie privée*.

Jacques said, “Sebastien had warned me they were coming and so I tucked away my manuscript and set out an old one that I’d copied twice already. That’s what they burned in the fire.”

“Frankly, it’s ridiculously dramatic that they burn anything at all.”

I was so exhausted that I went into my bedroom without saying anything. I could hear Jacques and Dominique still bickering about the ordeal from the other side of my wall. I started a bath to drown out their petty French and I began to hum to myself a melody that my mother used to sing while brushing my hair before bed. I got in the bath and felt my body melt away in the hot water. The lamp by my bed lit the room with its soft glow. I glanced again at the books surrounding me, the tiny glass human figures sitting at the edge of one of the shelves and looking out at the room. This is all they know. The art behind so much history. Dominique knocked once and entered immediately. I twisted in the tub to cover myself as best I could.

“Oh no matter, I’m not looking. I need to go ahead and write down what it is you saw and heard today, please. I’m very tired and would like to go home to my husband.”

I draped the washcloth over my breasts and nodded. I was terribly uncomfortable with her perched on the bed, pen and paper in hand.

“Well, truthfully, I didn’t see or hear anything that has to do with the OAS.”

“Oh I didn’t think that you would hear anything explicitly concerning the OAS, but I still want to know the little conversations you heard. Behind those are where the interesting facts can lie.”

“Okay... well I heard a French man and Arab woman fighting. She spoke in a broken French with Arabic stuck in her phrases at strange times. I had trouble understanding what they talked about but it was very intense and secretive. I believe she was sleeping with him and that she’s also married. An adulterous relationship no doubt.”

“A French man in the Casbah... Are you certain that’s what they were speaking of?”

“Yes, yes, because she mentioned the ending of her marriage and I believe mentioned that if the Frenchman loved her then he wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“D’accord...c’est tellement bizarre entre une femme arabe et un homme francais,” Dominique muttered to herself and I worried about whether or not I was right about the couple.

“Okay, what else?”

“Well there were many women out shopping for groceries and other things. I didn’t catch much of their conversation though because you know the women speak so softly between one another. It’s like they already know someone is listening.”

“Nothing else at all?”

“I did hear another conversation between men, in the same building as the couple. I wandered into this nice courtyard to sit by the fountain. It was terribly hot today. When the Frenchman came down the stairs, I ran to the other side of the courtyard and climbed to the third floor, afraid he might think me a trespasser. So I sat down on the exterior corridor and began to hear the conversation of two men in the apartment behind the wall where I rested. They seemed to be friends because one mentioned that his wife’s parents have been asking about how the other is doing. But then there was also a strange dynamic because there was something the other wasn’t allowed to tell anyone, much like the other couple I heard. Then they talked about a dance that was going to happen soon and one told the other that he needed only one more day, but that he wouldn’t mess up the dance. Perhaps it’s a celebration for a wedding, hosted by the FLN. You know they have to conduct those in secret now.”

“A dance? *C’est curieux.*”

“Yes, I agree. It was all very strange indeed, I suppose. There was mention of another man—Yacine—was his name.”

I looked at Dominique and she was staring at me. I shifted in the water and realized it had become quite cold. I shivered and thought about my son.

“That’s all I have to report, Dominique. One lovers’ quarrel and talk about a celebration.”

Dominique thanked me and left the room. I hurried out of the tub and under my covers. Sebastien must have made my bed back with the clean sheets while I was away. I

thanked Allah for bringing me to this place. I was warm in my bed, stretching out naked under the covers, free and alone.

The next morning, I realized I hadn't eaten since my meal with Sophie. No one brought me coffee and cakes. I wandered into the kitchen and the flat was silent. There was half a *baguette* wrapped in paper. I smashed a gooey dried date into a big piece I'd torn off and ate it quickly. I walked back across the salon to another door and pressed my ear against it. I assumed it was Sebastien or Jacques's bedroom but I wasn't sure. I heard nothing. Then something crashed to the floor in my room; a high-pitched clatter. I rushed across the wooden floorboards, my long shift dress Dominique had given me to sleep in dragged across the red patterned oriental carpet. I ducked through my door and immediately saw that nothing had fallen. My window was broken. I picked a large dog bone up off the floor. Flipping it over in my hands, it read '*Béni-oui-oui, arrête de chercher*' in red letters. *Arrête de chercher*... What do they think I'm looking for? Who knows that I'm staying here. I heard a knock at the front door and ran to close off my room. Someone opened the door and I heard them walking around the salon, lifting and tossing around Jacques's books and papers. His heavy steps slow and even. The person stopped right outside of my painted door. A fake door to a real room. I crouched behind the bathtub as there was nowhere else to conceal myself. One knock and the door swung open.

"Marwa, are you here?"

I turned around and Jacques stood holding two books under his left arm and a plate with a croissant in his left hand, eating and speaking to me like my son used to.

“What are you doing on the floor?”

“Nothing. I, I thought you were someone else.”

“Who?”

I handed him the dog bone and he shook his head as he read the insulting message.

“This wasn’t meant for you, Marwa. Three other women have stayed in this room, have observed and recorded what goes on in the Casbah for us. Those women, like you, all lived here and had their own pasts and connections to things they’d rather have left behind. One’s son had defected from the FLN and was working as a *harki* in collaboration with the *Algérie-française* military. The FLN didn’t like that and they captured and tortured him. But his sister who was with us at the time was desperate to find him. She spent her time in the Casbah asking at every door if anyone knew anything about her brother and then one day, she went missing too. I don’t know who threw this bone though.”

“Did they kill her brother?”

“Yes, yes they did in the end.”

“Okay.”

“Where’s Dominique?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen anyone all morning. I thought I would be going back to the Casbah like yesterday.”

“Well that’s what I would presume. Here, I’ll take you. Why don’t you get ready.”

I dressed and thought about the women who had worn these clothes before me, dressed in this same room, laid awake in that bed, wondering about the things they’d lost.

Back in the Casbah, the sun was milder, playing behind clouds, in and out of hiding. Jacques had given me a short list of three addresses that he wanted me to spend time near today. The first was far into the southern top half of the labyrinth. My foot ached as it rubbed against the worn side of my left sandal. Finally I reached the address, an old heavy door, dark brown-red in color, with an arch above it and a grate through the semi-circle. Large bolts lined the inside and outside frame of the door and I thought it was a bit excessive. Perhaps it was a cellar door leading down to a wine cave beneath the building. I waited for two hours, leaning and sitting against the opposite wall a few yards down the alley. Two men, three young girls with an older woman, and one little boy passed by me. That was all. I petted a lonely dog and after my stomach began to ache, I made my way back to Sophie's place. We ate again but Sophie was more somber than the day previous. I could tell she had already had two glasses of wine before I arrived and she finished the bottle while I told her about the men who came to see Jacques yesterday. She barely commented.

I left again around 13 *heures* and went to the second location listed on Jacques's paper. I found myself outside the same building I'd gone into yesterday, just up the alleyway from Sophie's. I waited for someone to exit, crouched by the door begging with my cup, and then caught the swinging gate and hurried inside. The fountain was flowing and a few birds flew above the top of the enclosed courtyard, flying in and out of each other's course like a synchronization. A door slammed a few floors up and I heard someone begin to march down the stairs. I pushed my briefcase under my feet and sat poised at the fountain. A blonde man walked toward the gate without noticing me. I

thought maybe he had to be the Frenchman from yesterday. I got up and climbed the stairs again to where I had heard the men talk of the dance and their friend, Yacine. Someone slammed something metal onto a table inside. It was loud and I heard a man sniff loudly.

“No Nazim, it won’t do to have it Wednesday; it has to be tomorrow.”

“Okay, fine. It will be ready tomorrow but Yacine hasn’t prepared the girls yet.”

“Yes I have. I spoke with the three of them last night.”

That voice. That was my son’s voice. My son, Yacine, was speaking to these men inside this room. I touched the wall and my stomach dropped. My mind raced with how I should go about revealing myself.

“Yacine, they need to be more than just prepped. These are highly explosive. One miscalculation with the timer and that’s their life. We have to hit these exact three locations at the exact right time. Do you understand the importance of their role?”

“Yes, of course I understand. This isn’t my first dance, Nazim.”

The hair stood up on my arms. A wedding party washed in red flashed through my mind. Why were they talking about explosives? I jumped to the image of the man staring at the lone shoe laying in the street in front of the *Otomatic*. Who was behind that? I thought of the FLN like I thought about the rowdy boys who harassed people carelessly in the street. They were other mothers’ sons, not mine. I glanced down and noticed that my left sandal was worn all the way through. Someone cracked open a can inside.

“Okay, let’s reconvene tomorrow morning at eight sharp then.”

“Okay, fine. See you.”

I panicked and pulled my veil further down over my face. I bent lower and lower to the ground, until my nose practically touched the tiles. With my left hand I gently shook my paper cup and I muttered a morning prayer under my breath. The two men passed by me without a remark and I heard them leave through the gate below. I took off my left sandal and made my way back to Sophie's place, slowly maneuvering through the alleys so that I might not run into my son. I wondered if my boy had really been arrested after all. One of his friends had told me and it didn't occur to me to think otherwise. I wondered if Amina knew all along what he was up to. What is he doing with these violent men? The dead and broken bodies scattered throughout broken rubble and jagged glass. It was a cemetery scene in my mind.

I reached Sophie's, carrying my left sandal, and changed into another skirt and silk blouse, leaving without taking the notebook from her to write anything down. She forced a bag of china into my hand again. Jacques was waiting for me where Dominique had been yesterday. I floated like a ghost toward his passenger side. We rode off and I didn't respond to his chattering questions. He didn't follow me up to the apartment when he dropped me off, but Dominique was waiting for me in the salon. I told her nothing but the mundane conversations about produce deals and recipes that I heard talk of in the street. I mentioned the dog that had curled up at my feet, hungry. I mentioned the heavy, dirt-red door that I watched intently for two hours, with no result. Disappointed, she wished me good night. I walked into the kitchen and a covered plate of couscous was waiting for me. I ate by myself at the small wooden table. Taking a sharp knife from the drawer by the stove, I etched deep lines across "Yacine" carved in the table until it read nothing. I scratched quickly at my thigh. I felt so uncomfortable under all these layers.

Back in my room, I pulled my clothes up over my head. I didn't bother running a bath tonight. I was exhausted. I slid under the cool sheets and goose bumps spread across my bare skin. Tomorrow, people were going to die if the dance was done right. I picked at my fingernails under the covers and thought about the black underside of my left foot dirtying the white sheets. I knew I didn't belong here in this room. My son had been free and operating with the FLN while I sat begging in the street. I wondered if he had ever walked past me, turning his head so I wouldn't see him. Did Dominique know his role in this? She must have. *We have to know everything to be good at our jobs.* She must not have children or she would have told me the truth of the whole matter. I stared up at the beams once more and wished that I could hide safe between them. I turned off the lamp and laid in the dark.



Gandini, Jacques. *Alger De Ma Jeunesse: 1954-1962*. Nice Cedex: Editions Jacques Gandini, 1995. Print.

Aerial view of the Casbah.

‘Wars have no memory, and nobody has the courage to understand them until there are no voices left to tell what happened, until the moment comes when we no longer recognize them and they return, with another face and another name, to devour what they left behind.’

-Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*

Inexistence

I kicked my loafers off behind me as I entered my fifth floor walkup apartment. I was waiting in Paris; I had been for 2 years. My apartment smelled like old wine corks, something the tenant before me collected obsessively. Drawers and nooks and crannies around the 18 square meters were overflowing with the things. Smelling of a rich acid, yet pleasant ripeness of saturated corks, left from past nights of celebration and solitude. I wanted to turn them into something. Some craft to keep my hands busy and to take this memory of the man before me and turn it into something concrete. I would want someone to do the same for me. I wanted something lasting, undoubtedly connected to my life and what I had and was planning to do with it. But, I sighed and walked into the bedroom, threw my worn briefcase onto the mattress without a box spring and sank down onto the floor beside it.

I was working in a carpentry firm for a friend of my father. I had no idea what I was doing but after two years of that kind of work, your fingers start to itch to create and build and measure. I used to sit on the floor of my apartment, look around, and plan out the renovations I would do if I were to stay there permanently. That's all I did though, was wait and plan. No one ever thinks that his family will be scattered and stuck in different countries to build and live their lives separately. I grew up sharing a single bed with my younger brother, my parents asleep in the room on the opposite side of the wall, my sister sleeping adjacent, and the kitchen down the hall where we all five gathered in the evenings to talk about our days and shoot marbles across the wooden floorboards,

under the dining table while my mother stirred the soup and scolded us for getting under her feet. I was accustomed and built for closeness, a chaos of people crowded and socializing in a small room. Grandmothers pinching cheeks and kissing faces all at the same time. Connections between young and old, sharing the same blood, customs, heritage, language. This is what I would dream of while I renovated my apartment in my head, filling it with family and friends, talking quickly and loudly and taking each other in their arms.

I wasn't even forging my own history at this point. I sat and waited, day-dreaming in order to pass the time. I didn't live in Paris; I lived in my head. My family was out there somewhere with the same memories of shooting marbles but that was all we had, the memories; so I sat and smelled the corks.

Lost

The chalk board sent a trill down my back, under my woven and rewoven wool sweater my grandmother had given me six Christmas seasons ago in her tiny village in southwestern Syria. The professor underlined *Les presentations orales* on the green board and my pencil jumped twice as it hit the old wooden boards of the fourth floor classroom. A stifling classroom. Heat poured in from the radiators and the windows sealed off the passage of fresh air. Sardines have felt more comfortable. I thought about my dirty t-shirt underneath my sweater and decided not to take it off. I looked around the room at the other students who whispered and darted their eyes around at the oral presentation announcement. Nine Americans, one Vietnamese, me and a fellow Syrian, Georges. He had changed his name for convenience.

The professor asked a question and the young girl sitting next to me, dear thing, she gave an answer to something else that could have been asked but was not. The teacher tried to mask a smirk and then, looking uncomfortable, repeated the question. The poor girl slid down in her seat, murmured something in English and rummaged through her purse on the back of her metal chair. The growing flush in her cheeks added to the heat trapped beneath my *pull*. I needed to work on my French vocabulary. She leaned slightly toward me and whispered, *Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit?* I don't know why but I responded to her in the best English I could and said, He asked where in the world you want to visit most. Her round eyes widened and, looking sheepish as she realized her mistake, she said, I would choose the Middle East.

I curtly nodded and turned back to the board, taken off guard. This clumsy, green-eyed American girl chose my land. The professor stopped writing on the board in order to stare at us in dismay. *Arretez de parler s'il vous plait*. She smiled at me and began to copy down the board into her notebook. We continued on through the mundanity of conjugations. I was learning a language which was to be my own. It was to be the way I would make friends, interview for jobs, order in a restaurant, haggle in the market. I didn't have a facility with learning languages. I spoke French and lost myself in concentrating on correct pronunciation, correct syntax. I would walk home at the end of the day, climb the seven flights of stairs to my studio apartment, make a cup of tea, and talk to myself endlessly in Arabic, simply to feel the words filling up the air around me.

The professor, Pierre, handed out the homework photocopies, a faint bell dinged in the courtyard below and we were free to go. The girl beside me gathered her things and turned toward me, smiled an impossibly white smile, and wished me a good afternoon. I cheerfully replied, perhaps a bit too cheerfully, and she was out the door.

Day two. The government was paying for me to take these French classes. They were strongly encouraged because I was going to have to prove myself in front of a jury in levying for a French passport. If you can speak French, then you're halfway there. I'm not sure where "there" is; somewhere between home and landless. Pierre thumped his briefcase down on the center of his desk. I saw papers inside through the worn holes in the reddish brown leather. He stood before us, a sly look in his eye, running his hands down the soft fabric of his corduroys. *Bonjour tout le monde*. He began with an exercise

in which he went around the room asking each of us a general question and then corrected our response. He came to the girl next to me, Sophie. He asked in French,

When you were little, what did you dream of growing up to be?

Her eyelids drooped slightly and she glanced up.

Je voulais être artiste.

Pierre hesitated and then responded in earnest, *Bah vous êtes artiste, mademoiselle.*

She gave him a sad smile and thanked him, twisting the fringe of her scarf over and over again between her slender fingers. She murmured something in English and I strained to understand.

Day three. I wore a crisp button-down shirt and slacks. The other students in the class looked at me and glanced among each other. It was only day three. It was as though they didn't recognize me or could no longer place me in whatever preconceived notions they had. Sophie came through the doorway, breathing heavily from the never-ending stairs. Her hair was soaking wet and her face glistened from the rain. Pierre demanded why she hadn't worn a coat or taken an umbrella and she responded saying that she didn't realize it was raining until after she had left her flat for school. She apparently lives on the fifth floor and six flights of stairs were out of the question. She looked towards me and smiled.

J'aime bien ton veste, Samer, she said to me as she arranged her things.

The rest of the class chatted, rustling papers and staring at phones. I still had five minutes before the starting bell. I took out a wrapped chocolate that I had saved from a

café I went to the day before. It was the little chocolate that the server puts on the saucer beside the espresso. I thought it was wrapped beautifully and small enough not to draw attention. I held it in my right hand, nestled inside my pocket. Sophie saw a text from her mother and said something about how late at night it was in America. Pierre darted into the bathroom and I set the chocolate in front of her. She kept her head down for a moment and I said, I don't like chocolate, but maybe if I give it away, I'll be as sweet as you some day.

I knew my English was clear and correct. She looked embarrassed and I regretted giving it to her. She said thank you and avoided looking at the rest of the class, staring up at us from their phones. The day passed as usual. I had sweated through my button-down shirt and so after the midday pause, I had to keep on my wool coat. Sweat collected under my bangs and I hoped she wouldn't notice. The final bell rang and as everyone rushed to leave, she turned to me and spoke quietly so Pierre wouldn't hear her speaking English.

Samer, would you be interested in getting a coffee or lunch with me this weekend? I'm trying to learn about the Middle East and I have a lot of questions.

This is not exactly where I thought the conversation was going, but I was content regardless to go with her somewhere outside of the classroom.

Of course. Is it for school?

No, I want to know about where you come from.

Welcome to the World

She ordered a *café allongé* and I took an espresso. My spoon rattled against the side of my saucer as I placed it down. I took my wrapped chocolate and placed it before her again. She nodded and let out a breathy laugh. Then she leaned forward and I could see the freckled brown specks in her green eyes.

So, my first question is, was Assad always like this? I mean, when he came into power was he this ruthless and violent?

Oh, er... well what are you referring to by ruthless and violent?

You know, like he uses chemical warfare, torture, and bombs on his own people.

The Assad Regime is in the middle of a massive war in which it's difficult to discern the sides, especially for people who are not from my country.

And how exactly did the war start?

Sophie, this isn't something I can sum up for you in one sitting. This war dates back centuries. Sure, it officially began five years ago, but it's the result of a long history. And I also highly advise you to take a look at your own country and its role in the Middle East.

America is trying to help the people opposing Assad. We're trying to support and empower groups who are fighting against Assad and ISIS, right?

America and other countries, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have fueled this war for years leading up to it. These powerful governments meddle in our affairs in

order to create problems that will then need to be 'fixed.' It's a way of preserving colonial rule.

I don't understand. You think that the US started this war on purpose?

Among other powerful countries, yes. These countries want our resources, our oil, and they intervene in our politics in order to create fragmentation, dissidence, and mistrust among our people and governments. Then you get rebel groups, factions, nationalists, defectors, and, from the outside, we look chaotic, like a group of small children fighting and in need of a mother to call an end to the play date. My country was strong. We are intelligent and advanced. Our communities were close-knit, warm, social. Now that doesn't exist. And we're paraded on front pages and highlight reels as utterly broken or worse, as unfamiliar dark faces of violence. That's not my country.

Are you sure the US is a part of this? What I've read and seen is that we are doing our best to stay out of your business as much as possible, while also sending aid and reinforcing the groups against Assad.

Sophie, it's all a big game. A big game for money and influence. If someone creates the problem, I can't bring myself to praise them for trying to fix it. And what has your country really achieved in trying to help us? No amount of aid in the world is going to make a difference for Syria anymore, not as long as we continue moving in this direction.

So, how will the war end? What has to happen in order to fix this?

At this point, I don't see the war ending. I see my country being divvied up between the highest bidders, under the guise of helping the helpless. Others come, draw our borders, set up governments, and expect us to appropriate ourselves to this new

lifestyle. It's just like learning a new language. You have to make it your own. You can't modify yourself to fit into it, but that's what will be expected of us. Someone's nation, lifestyle, language... all of those things make up a person, and that's how they express themselves, identify themselves. You can't erase that.

So, what will happen when they draw new boundaries and take over the power?

I don't know, Sophie. Something I'm sure we've seen again and again.

Honte

I watched her closely, wondering if maybe I had said too much or had been too honest with her. Her face was clouded in disappointment. Just then, a drunk man whom I had been watching a few tables behind Sophie got up and spun his way through the tables, kicking legs and swiveling chairs, walking up to us. In a dragged out English slur, he said,

Miss, you don't have to do this man any favors.

Sophie looked at me and again he spoke.

Vous êtes charmante mademoiselle. You really with this guy? Stop doing him favors. He needs to go back to the desert where he came from anyhow. You think this pretty girl likes you, *monsieur*?

I shook my head at Sophie and told her it was okay and not to do anything. I flagged down a waiter and he quickly took the man back to his table at the front of the terrace. He sat down while reaching for his bottle of wine and knocked it to the pavement with a loud shatter. The whole terrace stared and looked back at me. My face flushed red and Sophie's eyes teared up. She apologized and asked the waiter for the check. I felt nauseous and the back of my neck burned with heat. It didn't matter how many French classes I was to take; I would never feel at home in this country. Sophie leaned forward and asked,

Would you ever go back to Syria?

If it was safe enough, I would pack my bags and leave today. This isn't my home here. Everything is gray and people rush about without even acknowledging each other's existence. They worship the concept and ideas of things and forget to appreciate people, relationships, family, community. I could never marry a French girl for instance, especially a Parisian. Here you get married and it's like a mutual agreement with a footnote at the bottom saying that you're both welcome to opt out when it becomes inconvenient. Where I come from, families stay together. We spend time with each other, laugh, learn and grow together. Loyalty and faithfulness are what we worship because that's what keeps us connected and strong. I don't see that here in the same way as I grew up to know it. I see people running around like ants with their heads down.

But you can't think that about everyone. That's unfair.

Maybe so, but I don't know how I would ever be able to make this my home. Right now, I'm in a holding cell, purgatory really. And I don't know how long I'll be here. You, you can go home tomorrow if you like. You're on vacation. Me, I'm stuck here. My passport gets me nowhere, I have almost no money, and the rest of my family is scattered.

An Apology for Carelessness

Une Pierre dans la guerre

Si j'étais cette pierre
Je roulerais sous les controverses
Les gens haineux me causeraient un chagrin
Le temps fait l'histoire qui les bouleverse

Si j'étais cette pierre
Ma place serait en Syrie
Je regarderais les gens qui se battraient
Pendant que je pleurerais en face de la tragédie

Si j'étais cette pierre
Je n'aurais pas de pouvoir
Comme les jeunes qui tombent dans ma rue
Leurs avens ont tous disparu

Si j'étais cette pierre
Je souhaiterais toujours la paix
Comme le soleil qui me réchaufferait
Et aussi une omnipotence d'intégrité

Si j'étais cette pierre
Je ne pourrais pas vous aider
Je crois que la plupart de monde se sent pareil
Et en leur nom, je veux vous dire « désolée. »

Each language has its own take on the world. That's why a translation can never be absolutely exact, and therefore, when you enter another language and speak with its speakers, you become a slightly different person; you learn a different sort of world.

- Kate Grenville

An Apology for Carelessness

A stone in the war

If I was this fated stone
I'd flounder in the controversy
I would grieve in watching the hateful people
Time makes the history that moves them deeply

If I was this fated stone
My home would be in Syria
I would watch the people fighting one another
While crying at the site of their tragedy

If I was this fated stone
I wouldn't have any power
Just like the children falling in my street
Their futures all at once disappeared

If I was this fated stone
I'd always wish for happy peace
Just as the sun warms me inside
And also for integrity on every side

If I was this fated stone
I wouldn't be able to help anyone at all
I believe that most of the world feels this way
And in their name, *I'm sorry* is what to say.

I chose to translate this poem because translation itself is symbolic of the need to look at situations from the other side, to explore the world from another's perspective, because in doing that, we are opened up to entirely new experiences and knowledge, enriching our comprehensive understanding.



“War means endless waiting, endless boredom. There is no electricity, so no television.

You can't read. You can't see friends. You grow depressed but there is no treatment for it and it makes no sense to complain – everyone is as badly off as you. It's hard to fall in love, or rather, hard to stay in love. If you are a teenager, you seem halted in time.

If you are critically ill – with cancer, for instance – there is no chemotherapy for you. If you can't leave the country for treatment, you stay and die slowly, and in tremendous pain. Victorian diseases return – polio, typhoid, and cholera. You see very sick people around you who seemed in perfectly good health when you last saw them during peacetime. You hear coughing all the time. Everyone hacks – from the dust of destroyed buildings, from disease, from cold.

As for your old world, it disappears like the smoke from a cigarette you can no longer afford to buy. Where are your closest friends? Some have left, others have died. The few who remain have nothing new to talk about. You can't get to their houses, because the road is blocked by checkpoints. Or snipers take a shot when you leave your door, so you scurry back inside, like a crab retreating into its shell. Or you might go out on the wrong day and a barrel bomb, dropped by a government helicopter, lands near you.

Wartime looks like this.”

Janine di Giovanni
The Morning They Came For Us: Dispatches from Syria

*Oh my other self, my shadow, my one so like me,
You are gone, you have deserted me, left me arable
Your pain, a plowshare, turned me over and seeded me with tears.*

- Ancient Arabic

“War is the destruction, the skeleton and the bare bones of someone else’s life.”

- Janine di Giovanni

Ola

It was a Wednesday and I was chalking a math equation on the board for my teacher to see my own division method. I liked to contradict what she thought was best. I crossed out the five to carry it over and a deep, bass blow cut the sound of scratching chalk a second before the ceiling buckled and the board shattered into large pieces, taking me with it and covering my body. In that moment, I thought not of my mother, not of my brother, but of a beautiful scarlet dress I’d seen in a shop window a week previous. It had purple cording down the side to accentuate the woman’s figure. I wanted to have my moment in it, to be seen. I looked at the scarlet blood showing itself on the faces of my friends, streaking from foreheads and broken skin. They all wanted the radiance of the dress, but I thought to myself that I would have it. And so I curled my toes under and let the wave carry me down until darkness let me take my leave.

He didn’t come for me, but I like to think that he chose me. I awoke gasping for air, and thought to myself what is that miserable noise and who is desperate enough to resort to it. As more of my senses awoke with me, I was terrified by the sounds I was making. I let loose a culminating cry and was asleep again in my bed of rubble. I felt him, Samer, lifting the heaviest debris off of me and his hands were warm as he pulled me close to him. He wiped his face on his sleeve and his lips brushed the top of my head.

Everything was clear now, down to the dirt I saw caked under my fingernails. His hands were strong and moved swiftly. He drew me tighter and we pushed and pulled together, through the opening in the rubble. I came into a bright clearing and inhaled sharply, I was inundated with what I wanted most. The clean air swelled in my chest and I grew dizzy, letting go again into the darkness. I could only guess what Samer whispered in my ear as I drifted off to sleep.

I was perched on the faded tire by the laundromat down the street. I played a humble song to the inner ringing of my ears. I knew nobody else could hear my song, but I watched them dance about, poking and pulling at my burning skin. Someone wrenched open my right eyelid that had dried shut with blood and I was pulled out of my musical daze. My mother's face appeared and for the first time, she lunged to embrace me in public.

Ola, ola, ola, is all she managed to utter at first.

I watched Samer's back as he walked away toward the school again, and I then began to wail. It smelled like gunpowder and burnt hair, some of my own. I couldn't understand my mother's race of words past my name, but I felt her urgency as she leaned forward to correct my hijab and the rest of my twisted dress. She pulled me to my feet and rushed words to Allah in gratitude. We shuffled down the street toward home and I played the song again in my head, black patches breaking my vision, fading in and out. My mother, not a small woman, lifted me up each stair before we reached our door, and I saw Elias peering out with his face of tears. Inside, I dropped to the cushions and closed my eyes as my mother tended to me. Perhaps an entire day later, I awoke to the sun splitting off of the decorative orb hanging down from our painted ceiling. Elias slept

soundly in my mother's makeshift bed across the room and, because I knew immediately that she wasn't in the apartment, I felt in my breast that something was wrong. She wouldn't have left me after what had happened. I sat up to look over the dining table and into the kitchen, a sulfurous taste in my mouth. A woman was asleep with her chin on her chest, slumped against the opposite wall, her feet crossed politely.

A note rested across her thighs. Clumsy as I moved my aching body, I crossed the narrow room to reach for it without waking anyone. Before I stretched close enough, she awoke and grabbed my wrist, her eyes white wide. I released a sharp breath and she released me, putting her hands together, apologizing. She adjusted her patterned hijab, handed me the note, rose and darted toward the door as I called after her in question. The note did not read my mother's hand but it did tell me that she had left to assist the bakery owners in tracking down more flour. She had sent the timid woman to watch that I slept and awoke safely and in adequate health. The letter apologized, declared her love, and someone else had signed her name as well, missing the extra loop she put in the first and last letters. I puzzled over this forgery but trusted my mother in helping the local bakery that we had relied on for as long as I could remember.



I used to stand in the ornately tiled threshold of this corner bakery holding my mother's embroidered bread cloth, waiting my turn to clink my two pounds on the counter and take the warm flat loaf. I'd pinch off the end to feel it soak in my mouth, and no one would eye me. The smell of the fresh baking bread, glittered with sweet sesame seeds, came out in great plumes of exhaust from the side of the stone building. Inhaling deeply, I was giddy as I felt nourished, passing back around the corner. I would return

home, unwrap my hijab, and my mother would tousle my hair when she saw the missing bite in the loaf. Her cheeks plumped with her smile as she set the bread aside and continued to ball together the kibbeh we would fry for dinner. I knew her smooth cheeks were warm and beautiful. I could close my eyes and remember. Now, far beyond the days of kibbeh, she was gone. Production had slowed and the neighborhood could no longer rely on having bread. We had all grown thin. She had left 38 days ago, one day after my school was destroyed, and I went to the bakery every day to ask for news of her.



The days started to run together after my accident; maybe it was Tuesday. I rustled the hem of my skirt to try and settle some of the dust back onto the dry ground but it wouldn't settle. It clung to me, highlighted on the black cloth. I looked ahead in line and was surprised to see an elderly woman with white knuckles gripping my mother's familiar embroidered bread cloth. How did she get that? I looked back down at my feet in an attempt to appear unobservant, modest. The hem of my skirt pressed lines in the dust as I shifted from one foot to the other. My own weight cracked the dry bottoms of my feet standing in line hour after hour. Some particle caught in my eye and I stiffened my shoulders as I felt the quick mild wave of nausea across my front, the moist chafe of sweat between my thighs, clinging to my panties. Hour four and the sun was almost at its peak in the sky, rattling with fragmented gun shots far in the distance. Each woman in line glanced quickly among ourselves, connecting at the eye, before looking back down or off at nothing, emitting no explicit fear.

I drew my mind back into my private world, swirling my foot in the dust below. The thought of the smell of fresh round loaves felt inappropriately harmonious with the

oven-trapped heat beneath my skirt. The line stretched on because it had yet to relinquish one waiting woman. Again, I heard the disparate shots, far enough away. They seemed reluctant as they drew on. I lifted my head to observe the women, once surely vibrant and full of life; now defined by the gray skin of their tired faces. I recognized the woman who brought me the note of my mother's departure, but she didn't notice me. We all itched to talk to each other, to discuss something cheerfully mundane. The slate dimmed windows of the bakery mocked our consistent return each day. The street was quite empty stretching away from our line, a straight road broken up by piles of rubble, a burned-out car, grimy cloth blowing in the wind off of caught nails. The image of my home, once an affluent neighborhood, swelled a nostalgic lump in my throat.

Looking toward my school's remains further down the road, I remembered the day it became collateral damage. The shrieks of teenage girls rang in my ears again. That day I was in another dimension, a separate world from the one where my mother sat quietly in prayer in our living room. That morning I had been deafened by the blow and as my head felt stuffed with cotton balls, I could hear my mother's prayer like archaic lyrics in my head, the monotonous prayer, like a song, and what I saw in great red flashes. Then, nothing but darkness. Something had taken me out of the scene and into a dream, only to awake again to my mother rushing toward me.

I stopped the memory short and turned away from my school, slumped and crumbling. I lifted my gaze up and in the direction of the line. The dancing colors of the bread cloth, still gripped in the old woman's hand, caught my eye and I thought of my mother. As long as I jumped from image to image in my mind, I could effectively pass the time. I tried to remember the shape of the scar along her right cheek as she would

braid my hair, neatly tucking in the wandering pieces, looking back at me in the rimmed mirror. What had she tried to tell me by her face? I lost something in the reflection as murmurs escalated at the front of the line. Murmurs grew to cries of painful ululations escaping the chapped mouths around me. The women's eyes turned upward as if the bread was going to fall down from above into the dust. It was pitiful and I wished they would stop. As I had learned to expect, no business that day.

The woman who had watched me sleep, carrying with her the news of my mother, appeared behind me and I saw that almost every woman turned in my direction. Her white skirt had browned at the bottom with every step kicking up dust. I could see that she was once a very elegant woman under her bright rainbow-colored head scarf. She hadn't tried to hide her customary clothing that day, as she had before when clad in a sordid gray dress. The woman looked at me almost reverently and she said,

Ola, I did not know that your mother would have to leave. Please forgive all of us.

She said this with short and quick noddings of her head down toward my feet. I felt ashamed and my face burned as I felt the eyes of the others focusing on me. I didn't know any of these women. They were not from my neighborhood, my childhood, my family's friends. I wished at this moment that I was not so tall because looking down at her made me feel like her leader. I said,

Miss, you do not need to apologize to me. But how did you come to know my mother?

Ola, your mother came to the bakery almost every day. She reaped what she sowed and she shared it for all of us, she said as she gestured toward the other women. This bakery is how we survive and your mother is as bold and magnificent as the Yazidi

Peacock Angel. So, my dear, thank you from the heavens above and the ground below, because your mother has left us a path where there was none, and I know she will come to find her own.

I grew angry as she compared my mother to her satanic idol. My mother helped the bakery with production. What paths? I didn't want to disenchant this Yazidi woman who had watched over me in my mother's place, but I said,

We all have our path and it will lead us to what it will. Goodbye, Miss. I'm sure I will see you here again tomorrow.

Goodbye, Ola. Today is my last day to wait, for I received word just this morning. But we will see each other again. And for that day, my name is Farrah.

I thought to myself that the heat had rested in this woman's head far too long or perhaps this was common rhetoric for her religion. I nodded my head and turned to face the others. Defeated women drifted away back to their homes, I eyed the woman with my mother's cloth, showing my dissatisfaction of seeing it there, gripped in a stranger's hand. The beautiful embroidery: I cherished the intricate weaving of rose and violet, stowed the colors away under my skirt, then soaking up the noon sun. The sun saturated the colors on the cloth, burning brighter in contrast to the dreadful brown hue of the landscape. I missed the artificial heat of the blue tiled bakery. Then, the scattering gun shots again, perhaps ten blocks away. It was time to turn in. I looked up and realized that I was the only one still standing in line. What had I been waiting for? Farrah's words hung in the air. I stood there, obstinate; such solidarity that the dust should have thanked me. I looked ahead down the street that led from the corner I had rounded so many times. I could sense my brother watching from the window of our third floor apartment. But

how did that woman get my mother's cloth? I started toward our home. I was to arrive with nothing but fresh dust to be swept out the window in the morning. I calculated my steps, my feet burning as I tried to measure how much and where I could manage the bulk of my weight. The balls of my feet were strongest. I tip-toed up the stairs and imagined that I was floating, a graceful ballerina. My brother turned to me as I slid the door ajar and back; he was a scrawny bird looking up at his mother; he was looking to me. I maneuvered across the pieced boards and knelt beside his lithe frame. Such an emotive frame that it could be cut out and placed in a romantic painting of a listless boy looking out of the castle window, eyeing the length of the running river beyond his kingdom. How misleading one's appearance can be. The kingdom was corroding before his eyes.

I reached to tousle his long hair, but he only coughed at the rustle of my skirt. I cringed and Elias said to me, A lady came to the door asking for the head of the house.

Did she have our bread cloth in her hand?

No, she was wearing straight blue trousers, though. I didn't know what to say and she left, saying that she would be back.

He shrugged as I looked at him. My feet ached and I crossed the room to sit on the cushions, soiled from nights that had too frightened Elias. He looked at me as he reached over for one of the cans of tomato sauce that I had been able to get the week before. He pried it with our makeshift can opener and I watched the two distinct veins bulge at his temples as he struggled. I held my breath, waiting for him to get it open. He seemed nervous under my watch. Why did he look so sheepish? A few months before he would have abruptly told me to mind my own business. But I continued to stare. He sloshed some of the initial liquid onto the floor with his wrenching and for a split

moment, I swear he looked at me expectantly, almost like an invitation, before he bowed his head to somberly lick it off the dusty floorboards. He sat upright again and avoided eye contact. The way his mouth distorted and his eyes darkened told me that he wasn't expecting himself to do that. I wiped this image of Elias from my selective memory. My mother had taken with her most of the meager savings we had. She must have needed it for her journey in order to provide for us later with the bread to come, but now, we were in need. I kept our last four pounds in my pocket to rub together. I swore to myself I wouldn't spend them until we had nothing left to eat and nothing to trade for more.



Our father, who had earned our living, had left us to join a faction of the rebel army a few months before my accident. I had been asleep and woke to the sounds of my mother holding back low grunts with a closed mouth. This was when we owned both sides of the apartment on the third floor. Behind the closed door I heard my father whipping my mother with what seemed his olive leather belt. In a low steady voice, he spoke to her and I strained to understand what was happening. The street lights cast a weary, greenish shadow into mine and Elias's room and I stared at the odd shapes and silhouettes of our things. In black, I could not answer which of our belongings made which shapes, though I knew their place in the room by heart. I heard another crack of his belt and I understood that he did not want her volunteering at the bakery anymore. I thought how absurd this punishment was for my mother's benevolence. A chair then screeched back and I shuddered in my bed. I heard her unbridled scream, like I'd never heard my mother speak before, and a deep release gurgled in the back of my father's throat. Something dropped sharply, and I heard the sliding downward of a brushing

sound, and then silence. In a panic I glanced quickly again at the cold shadows of our furniture, our art, our books, and I could not place anything. I heard the opening click of the side door and so I shut my eyes, rolled to face the wall, and the following day, my father was gone. I never again went into my parents' room, for my mother had it sold within the next two weeks. I never saw her weep and I knew that she continued to help the staff at the corner bakery. No one looked at us differently as tended to happen when the father left to fight. But I couldn't help but see inside my mother the archaic scream which had burned on her tongue, a deep and animalistic shrill, let loose for just the moment.

✱

Watching Elias eat, I wondered about this woman who came to our home. We hadn't had anyone visit us in over six weeks. Elias dropped his spoon and I said to him, Never tell anyone where Ummu has gone.

He glanced at me, indifferent and focused on his tomato sauce. He wouldn't have told anyone because we didn't actually know where she had gone. Out the window, we heard the reverberation of far-off military in the sky, ammunition released and winding downward blindly. I clinched my abdomen, his spoon quivered, and then silence again. The next day, I was resolved to break line and talk to the woman holding our embroidered cloth. I lied down on the cushions, grateful that my cumbersome layers shielded me from the soiled canvas. I heard the clink of Elias scraping the bottom of the tin can as I jumped from the picture of the listless boy in the portrait to the two-pound round loaves. The heat dried the layers of sweat and grunge around my feet, and I felt heavy, aware of my mission.

I awoke to the hollow rebound of gun shots. The shots alternated from one direction to the reciprocation of the other. Elias was still asleep in the little nest of blankets he'd made near the window. It worried me, his incessant need to be near that window, observing from his static position everything that passed in the streets below. He obsessed over people's everyday movement, complaining about the occasional inconsistency in someone's routine. He even scrutinized me when I stopped to sit outside of the apartment at the end of my day in line. Sometimes I'd sit down on the stoop to avoid returning to Elias without news, but sometimes I would sit, hoping that Samer would walk by. Usually this was when I was wearing my best skirt and I'd arrange it about me so that the paisley pattern at the bottom was fully displayed. Samer worked with a group of other men who rescued people from fresh destruction zones. A bomb would release into a plume of smoke and his team moved, quick and effective. His team was a crew of young men who had avoided recruitment or defected from one group or another. No experience in rescuing was necessary. Sometimes I wished to be a victim again, just to be saved. Samer was fearless in his handsome helmet. He had come for me when my school was bombed. I preferred the moments when I was unconscious because I imagined him, Samer, looking for me while I slept, unknowing. Every time I played this story in my head, it became more satisfactory. I enjoyed changing subtle details because, as they painted a lovelier story, I knew that that was what must be the truth.

Elias was very particular about regularities, wanting to keep his habits and others to keep theirs. If he knew that I often waited outside our building at the end of the day thinking of Samer and his smooth hands, hoping to see him crossing in the street, he

would be bewildered. I wanted so badly to share with someone the feelings that stirred under my skirt and danced across the sensitive skin under my opaque blouse, but I was supposed to turn a blind eye at my desire, seek purity and a closeness with Allah. Savoring the moments, lost somewhere deep in my desire, empowered me when I felt as if swimming backwards through dust. The anxious goose bumps were drawn away from my back and spread across my nipples with a sensation that forced my gaze downward in pleasure. No, Elias couldn't know my romance. He already looked so forlorn every time I peeked out of my blankets at sunrise, pretending to not have heard the morning call as he bowed down in prayer.

The sun was yet to fully rise. I enjoyed the quiet moment, looking around myself in the rich darkness. I felt less alone. After a few minutes, I heard a faint sound from the floor below. I thought maybe it was mother and reprimanded myself for wandering into flights of fancy. Mother was lost somewhere further away in the same darkness of early morning hours. But I did recognize the creak of our stairs. I was sure that there was someone in our building. My eyes raced around the room looking for something to protect myself and Elias. We had almost nothing but cushions, cans, and a few lasting items that I hadn't traded yet. There was the whispered echo of a knock at the door. It seemed as a dream. I looked over at Elias, his tiny body lost in the folds of his blankets. Was it a woman's whispering voice I then heard? My heart pounded in the back of my head. I stood and shuffled in the direction of the door. I peered through the crack where the door misaligned, resting on the broken hinge.

A woman peered back at me with a face I could tell she was making to appear unthreatening. Her light brown hair carelessly stuck out from under her hijab. I was sure

that she had the wrong apartment because of the way she looked at me, as though I knew something important. I caught glimpses of her clothing but everything was cast in strange shadows through the narrow crack. I had to flip from one of her eyes to the other. They didn't seem to match up.

Yes?

I am here to speak with Ola.

I am Ola.

Her face seemed to glow in the darkness. I scrutinized her every feature, trying to discern her objectives. She was young and I didn't recognize her as one of the women who waited in line. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so forthcoming with my name. Then, she slid a corner of something through the crack and I withdrew my bread cloth. How deliciously familiar it felt in my hands. I slid the door aside for her and motioned that she mustn't wake Elias. We sat without a word on the cushions at the furthest end of the room. Then, she spoke again.

I was given instructions to bring this to you. I wasn't sure if—

Do you know my mother?

Only that she is missing with some others. I believe that they made it across the border into Iraq and that is the last contact we have had with them.

But who are you and we? Iraq? No, you're mistaken, Miss.

I am confident, she said, that they will be taken in by our counterparts but it may take longer than expected because our bakery in Sinjar was targeted and they have moved their office elsewhere.

Why would my mother go so far away for flour?

Flour? Ola, she left with others because the bakery, the one that you visit every day, had been found out and was no longer a safe zone.

What are you talking about?

That bakery is known for harboring wives of defectors of the army, your country's army. Your mother is an aid and they were all in danger.

My mind immediately flashed to the line of women waiting each day, faces changing regularly. Who were they? Did any of us really stand there hoping for bread? Something sounded in the street below and the woman twisted the gold signet ring on her finger. I thought she must be confused about who my mother was. My mother had left to go get more flour to come back and feed us. Defectors were bad company. My mother was a very cautious woman; she would never have chosen these lost wives over her children. The woman watched me. She was patient but I could tell she didn't have time for this. I felt like a small child, frustrated with how slowly I was understanding.

I need to go now, she said. I am happy to have returned something dear to you. I hope it brings you pleasure. Please, don't look further for your mother. You don't belong in that line.

Where do I belong? My mother must return soon. I know she will.

I will do what I can for you, but you need to prepare for the possibility of not seeing your mother again before peacetime.

But there will be no peace.

I have to go now, she said. Behind the old school, two blocks from here, there will be a seller to trade for food this evening. Be quick and see what you can manage.

Goodbye, Ola.

Before I could respond, she slipped through the open door and faded down the stairs. The prayer call sounded and I felt ill. Elias stirred. But that woman was foreign in her blue trousers. What could she really know about my mother and our bakery? Elias rose to lay out his rug and begin his prayer. It was like I wasn't there. He prayed as if programmed, unthinking. He didn't even look at me. I had never felt so vastly alone. The kind of alone that swells up somewhere between your breast and belly. Nobody was thinking of me; but worse, nobody knew me. Nobody knew my futile commute to the bakery, my resentment toward my own brother for being hungry, the pulse under my skirt when I thought of dying and Samer coming, my uselessness and my inner ululations. Nobody knew me and I didn't know my mother. I didn't know the secret windings of inner circles operating around me and in which she centrally stood. I lifted my hijab and began to wrap it solemnly around my head. I enclosed myself and melted into the folds of my skirt and layered blouses. I had no mission any longer. No hunger, no pleasure in painting mine and Samer's future together. I wanted to solidify into a black mass of layers to be peeled back and from which I would be reborn into a world where the dust was blown into a great vacuum and the delicious plumes of the baking bread flow freely once more.

I did not need to resist my forbidden desires anymore. I would simply lay them down. Not even Samer's salvation would bring resilience. I was but one tiny particle floating outside of what everyone else seemed to know. Even Elias was connected to something bigger, as he knelt each day on his prayer rug. With my eyes wide open, I stared at nothing. I didn't need to pass the time. Time was superfluous when containing

no promise of something new to come with its passing. I prepared myself to never see my mother again.

I realized that Elias had finished prayer as well as another can of tomato sauce. He seemed to be asleep again. I rose and took the bread cloth, a reminder of my mother's connected duplicity. She had left me in oblivion, left Elias to look at me with his bulging eyes. Who was I to look to? I took the cloth, rubbing the needlepoint pattern between my fingers. Standing in front of the open window, I lifted it up with one hand and released it into the wind. The sunrise had cast the neighborhood in a soft light, everything simply iridescent. The cloth twisted, fluttered and flew up into the sky, and then convulsed, plummeting to the dirty pavement below.

Elias hadn't been asleep, and he watched at my feet. I heard weak whimpers emerging from his nest of blankets. I started toward him to offer comfort but stopped short. I couldn't bring myself to rub the back of my brother, clinging to his blankets as if he could feel his own body drifting away. I scratched at my thigh through my skirt. I wanted to leave. I started for the door and slipped out, down the steps. As I descended, I unwrapped my hijab in one flowing motion. I reached the bottom and the wind caught my hair; it tickled my scalp and I clawed at it furiously. Tears began to well and streak downward. I stepped off the stoop and fell to one knee with a biting pain, and then down onto the other. The tears ebbed and for a moment I felt the peace of early morning when no one else is awake. For once, I prayed for Samer to not come for me. The dreadful street was empty and in my mind the rubble and rock slid further off of the wrecked buildings like waves crashing down in a white foam. I looked toward the bakery corner and focused on the plastic mannequin, leaning at its leisure against the closed dress shop

window. It's caved-in eyes had been spray painted black and streaks of paint violated its ivory body. It stared at me, naked and shining in the rising sun. There was a pleasure in feeling my hair tangle into mats. I slid down onto my right hip and then succumbed to the filth in the street, looking upward at the old laundromat sign, now painted over in black and white. The neighbors' metal shutters were all yanked down to shut out the night and now the day.

I laid further, down onto my back. My bare head rested on the ground. My chest rose and fell and the tears started again but silently. I straightened the length of my legs and pulled my arms tight by my side.

I whispered, pressing my fingers into the grit of the road, You can come back now mother, Samer, Elias, anyone. I am still here, but I fear that I will soon disrobe and lay bare my naked flesh to this earth.

I wanted to let go and submerge myself in the dust, connecting with something greater. I spoke again as the sun burned red at the backs of my closed eyes, When we are reduced to bones and dust, should we really be raised up a new creation? Can you hear me mother? Inshallah.

I cannot.

I do not want to.

I want to run away.

I want to erase myself. Erase my writing. Blindfold my eyes, gag my mouth. Or else, let the blood of the others and of our people swallow me up naked! Dilute me. Root me to the spot, a crimson statue, one of the statues of Caesarea that later, much later, will be smashed to pieces and fall into ruin.

- Assia Djebar, *So Vast the Prison*

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