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Please Inside-Out This

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Tara Shanti Waudby

M.A. University of Northern Arizona, 2000
B.S. Arizona State University, 1997
B.A. Arizona State University, 1997

December 2014

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*She'd seen something so plainly
in this tiny toy that was fully invisible to her child,
two realities existing side by side.*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*

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Preface

From a street devoid of life and color, I enter through a wooden door into a magnificent garden of overgrown flowers that tower above me: golden sunflowers, fuchsia hydrangeas, red poppies. Hummingbirds whirl. Bluebirds tweet. An owl spins its head, and panthers lie purring in the sun.

It is a dreamy memory that lingers in the corners of my memory. I didn't actually wander the garden of lazing panthers described in H.G. Wells' story "A Door in the Wall." Yet, my memories are shaped by my childhood readings and imaginings as much as by actual events. Sometimes, I'm unsure of what is real and what is not, what is dreamt and what is lived, what is written and what is experienced.

My colorful interior world surfaced in fourth grade when I spent each recess walking the periphery of the playground alone, hoping that my stealthy footsteps would speed up time. I hoped that if I kept my movement slow, no one would see me stalking them. How I wished to flip on the monkey bars, play touch football, clap my hands rhythmically with a girlfriend while singing, "Big Mac, filet-of-fish, Quarter Pounder, French fries..." However, I was a transplant, the new girl just moved to Arizona from Sweden. Though my singsong, "Hallå, I am from Sveden and my name is Tara," might have been charming if I had had the blond hair and blue eyes of my mother, I simply provoked laughter and ridicule with my odd accent and Mexican/Native American looks.

In those first few months of America, I had three simple desires. I wanted to know all of the words to Madonna's "Like a Virgin." I wanted a Michael Jackson glove. And I wanted a pair of neon jellies, which my mother would not allow, stating that plastic shoes were

unacceptable and would damage my feet. Instead, I wore my foreign accent and my foreign skin, an outsider in the country of my citizenship.

I spent my first year in America as a bystander, witnessing the lives of others, uninvited to participate. This was also the time that I began writing. In fact, I have stories, poems and children's chapter books all written in those first years in America, and yet, I have no recollection of writing them. The workings of memory and the perceptions we hold based on our remembered experiences serve as my primary source of inspiration for this thesis.

“Seven Addresses to the Lord” speaks of one such remembered experience that many would disbelieve. The poem is inspired by a moment I shared with God in the red rocks of Sedona when I “levitate [and] float momentarily” (lines 51, 54-55). Though many would argue this moment did not happen, it holds significant truth for me, which is why it begins the third section of this thesis, in which the poems speak to realization and discovery. “Time Out” is another poem that describes a moment of truth, a moment of imperfect motherhood. It, too, is included in Section III to showcase the time that I discovered freedom in admitting my flaws as a mother. Though both of these poems are intensely personal, they reveal my vulnerability about religion and motherhood. In so doing, I explore perceived truths and share an alternate perspective.

My solitude in fourth grade was partially due to my extreme shyness and inability to assimilate into mainstream American culture. I eventually did learn the words to “Like a Virgin,” and many other songs for that matter. The Michael Jackson glove quickly went out of fashion, as did neon jellies. Years later, I found a pair of platform jellies. I wrestled with buying them in the store. In the end, my mother's voice held firm – plastic is not for feet. Some truths still hold true. Most don't, and this serves as the second inspiration for this thesis.

The reason I am interested in the idea of truth as perception is based upon my expatriate experiences. I have the great fortune of being born to parents from different continents, of different religions, and of different values. I have lived among Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. I have lived in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America, and at this stage, have spent more years abroad than stateside. My children are British and American, but believe Kuwait is home. I feel more American as an expatriate than I have ever felt living in the States. In some ways, I have been standing on the periphery for most of my life, not only as a third-culture child returned home in fourth grade, but also as an expatriate living in Sweden, Taiwan, and Kuwait. My lack of a single identity has enabled me to identify with many, and thus, I observe life from multiple perspectives.

Hence, I am both witness and bystander. I am a detached observer, much like John Millington Synge, who moved to the Aran Islands to write about the people of the islands. Although he was Irish himself, he never “loved his own people too much, so as to be unable to see what was grotesque and silly and consequently most human in them” (Sullivan 243). Though my own identity and connections are more diverse than Synge’s, I share with him the ability to connect and disconnect, to understand a culture without romanticizing it. It is my lack of a single identity that informs my work, and I hope to show the reality of places and experiences, rather than the stereotyped or sentimentalized ideas many hold based on media and memoirs that show only biased half-truths.

Carolyn Forché addresses the idea of truth in her writing about poetry of witness. She states:

A poem...cannot be judged by simplistic notions of ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth to life.’

It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confession, by its

consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, a poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred...As such, there is nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being 'objectively' true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence ("Carolyn Forché: on a Poetry of Witness").

My poems serve as evidence, not simply of my own experience, but of the experiences I have witnessed in my life overseas. In my wanderings, I have come to believe that common sense, and ultimately truth, is culturally loaded. There is no "truth to life," and often, a poem may be the only proof or "evidence" of an event. Thus, the poem becomes hugely important as a record of human experience.

In my poems, I attempt to record these moments, particularly in Section II, whereby I recount several of my observed experiences. "High Tea in the Desert" portrays a typically Arabic way of doing business. Regardless of the place, be it a palace or a construction site, business is conducted over tea and small talk. Relationships are the single most important element in the Gulf region, and thus, taking time for tea in a dusty and deserted construction site symbolizes the respect that exists amongst Arabic businessmen. "Abaya Dance" tells the story of another encounter, the contrast of powerful women and how they behave in public and private. Unlike a common Western stereotype, which indicates Muslim women are subjugated and oppressed, my encounters in the Gulf region allow me a different perspective. I actually find the women to be quite domineering, controlling, and powerful, despite the choice of some to wear the abaya. Thus, these poems reveal an alternate representation of Arab life.

Many of my poems are couched in the imagery of my life, mostly the deserts of Phoenix and Kuwait, but also the forest of my Swedish childhood. Seamus Heaney has inspired me to

use this imagery of landscape to explore the topics of what happens in those lands, both to myself and to others. He writes about Ireland and his personal experiences, often in childhood, and he presents poems that are also political and deeply meaningful. He places his readers in beautiful imagery of land and experience; yet, his poems speak volumes to the troubles of his native land, and he often explores an alternate side of a controversial and heated conflict.

“Desert Freeze” attempts to draw on the landscape of Kuwait while also commenting on Western interests in the region. The hills and markets of Taiwan provide the imagery in “Lee, Anna,” though the poem is also about tradition, youth and familial loyalty. The forest of Sweden holds both joyful and traumatic memories, and this, I recount in “*Cardamon Stuga*.” Like Heaney, I attempt to use the landscape as a backdrop for a larger story.

Eavan Boland is another poet I admire deeply. Both she and Seamus Heaney are masters at mixing fact with fiction, creating a narrative from myths or obscure facts. Heaney uses this technique in “The Bog Poems,” wherein he imagines the lives of the murdered citizens buried deep in the bogs of northern Europe. Boland is a master at re-creating well-known stories into completely new tales, essentially turning common allusions inside out. “The Pomegranate” is one of my favorite poems, in which Boland references the story of Persephone’s kidnapping to symbolize her own journey from childhood to motherhood. Boland also uses imagined events to present a version of truth, as in “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me,” a poem that draws on the speaker’s second hand telling of events. In this poem though, the speaker quite literally draws attention to the imagined by saying “And no way to know what happened then— / none at all—unless, of course, you improvise:” (lines 23-24).

Much of my work draws on this technique of fictionalizing factual events. All of the poems about my father re-imagine known facts to create a deeper narrative, while also

incorporating my perceptions of the events, such as in “The House My Father Took” and “*Min Pappa*.” I don’t know if my father “held me close and sang” (line 21), but this imagined detail creates a haunting image to close a gruesome scene. Little is known of my grandfather, though I do know that he did starve himself several times in opposition to British Colonial rule in Malaysia. In the same vein, I imagine my father’s life on the streets based on stories he has told me coupled with my own experiences in his home city and with other immigrants in various lands. In “Homecoming,” I recount stories my friend Nadwa has told me, filling in the truth with details from the news or my imagination. Thus, Nadwa embodies several people and her story is universal to the conflict in this region. Ultimately, my truths incorporate half-truths and my experiences are colored by my perceptions.

In my present experience as a mother, I often hear the phrase, “Mama, please inside-out this.” Though at two and five, both of my girls can dress themselves, they still have trouble turning clothes inside out. In teaching them how to solve the problem themselves, I help them reach into the sleeves or pant legs, grasp hold at the end, and pull through to the other side. In so doing, I realize that in order to turn something inside out, one must literally dive in deep, grasp hold and come out on the other side.

With this collection, I ask the reader to look beyond assumption and step into another perspective. Part I speaks of myself as witness. I am witness to my own experience, as a daughter, mother and adult, and this section contains the most personal poems of the thesis. Part II speaks of myself as a bystander. I am an onlooker, and though the observations are mine, I am imagining the stories and lives of others. The facts of what I see are written into the image of the poem, but the story is what I, as an outside observer imagine. I am a bystander, looking upon the lives of others, and because I am detached, I can sometimes see what others cannot. Hence, I

attempt to uncover the stories of others with a truth I want to explore. Part III speaks about realization. These poems are about the truths I have uncovered in my experience as witness and bystander. Though they are about my truth, I hope they will also be about the reader's truth. Here lies my attempt to answer the multiple sides of truth, to uncover and recover what I have experienced and observed, and to illuminate the idea that truth is not right or wrong. It is simply perceived reality based on where one is standing.

I ask the reader to let go of belief and give in to imagination in order to discover something new. In his story, "The Door in the Wall," H.G. Wells explores truth and reality, juxtaposing the imaginary world of a child with reality, until he ultimately questions which is true. Going through the door, one experiences "lightness and good happening and well-being," and to the main character the door leads to "immortal realities." As I attempt to uncover the multiple versions of my own reality, I hope to inspire my reader to "open the door in the wall," enter the garden of purring panthers, and experience the bliss of discovery.

I.

Birthright

When my father won a limbo contest
that gave him rights to the Hopi Nation,
he finally became a “real” Indian,
the North American kind,
the kind he fell in love with thirty years before,
on his first trip to Phoenix
in winter of '75 – the year I was born.

Each winter, my father would return,
buy Levis to sell on Stockholm streets
– the ever connected *Indiaan* – hailed by Turks,
Arabs, Spaniards, as he strode proud,
garlanded in Turquoise and Kachina Dolls
to adorn his Hindu Temple.

Christ, too, entered my father’s temple
as did we, my sister and I, to endure his ritual.
Pink lipstick to the forehead – a makeshift Bindi –
ascending chant while he danced in circles,
ringing bells in an ever-growing fervor,
hands and forehead bowed to the floor –
in worship of Vishnu and Christ and Kachina.

We would sigh and roll our eyes.
We did the same on the streets of *T-Centralen*
when our father, *Indiaanen*, would speak
to his immigrant friends. We’d search the crowd
for signs of anyone we knew, ready to duck
our heads, answer them in Swedish.

As we approached one or another of his posse,
my father would growl at us both
through a smile pasted wide:
“Remember, to say I’m American Indian.”
I disguised my silence with a casual stance,
hip thrust outwards, head cocked sideways,
showing I was too bored to listen
to immigrants banter on the streets.

**Indiaan* – Swedish for Indian
T-Centralen – Central Stockholm

Cardamon Stuga

I.

Those characters all lived
in *Cardamon Stuga* – Blue Beard,
trolls, witches and my old friend
Boogeyman – I knew *he* was real.
We met that dark night in Kuala Lumpur.

In the King's Forest, I would skip,
moldy bread in hand, towards the duck pond
nestled among mile-long tree trunks,
my forest floor a charmed collection of
beetles and fire ants,
fallen logs and pine cones.
Dappled with dense-leaved sunlight,
I squatted, peered under rocks at
wiggling life, careful never to leave
the forest floor upturned.
And there was *Cardamon Stuga* too,
the shuttered cottage – a “witch's” home –
at the edge of the forest and the sea,
where we dared run towards
the porch and flee with gleeful shrieks.

On those summer days,
I could forget the midnight knocking
of my drunk father.
His sobbing and screaming
while I huddled over my sister
under the table.
The cottage entered my dreams at night.
I always knew *he* was standing
behind those peeling green shutters
watching.

The Path to Nowhere always ended
with a picnic in a field of buttercups
that bent with a lilting sea breeze
while ladybugs and bees reveled in nectar,
avoided our glass jars filled with leaves and sticks.
They, too, took refuge in the blueberry thorns of
Cardamon Stuga.

II.

Now a mother, I can almost forgive
my father my first memory.
The early evening shadows were dim
under streetlamps. He trudged uphill
struggling to carry my screaming
two-year old self, ready to drop me home
with his sisters – strangers to me –
on our visit to his homeland. My father
aching for an alcohol-soothed night.
I can empathize – almost.
He asked if I saw the man up ahead
and to my nod continued with
 “He is the Boogeyman and
 if you keep crying, *he* will take you.”
My wailing continued at higher decibels.

All that darkness lived in *Cardamon Stuga* –
shuttered so tightly it could not breathe,
no sign of life on any of those summer days.
A cottage that stood neatly boarded, yearlong,
despite peeling paint,
faded wood.

**Cardamon Stuga* is a cottage set near the sea in the public lands of the King’s Forest in the suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden. Among the children who live in the suburb of *Lappis*, it is thought to be haunted and inhabited by a witch.

Awake in the Night

This wintry wind echoes wildly
through narrow tunnels
of too high concrete blocks

screaming, pushing at panes
so hard it knocks on the reaches
of my dreams, hovers until I wake.

A crying baby? Not mine,
asleep in her crib.
I have already huddled

close to her heart,
watched her chest rise.
What If it screams,

What Now it whispers,
demanding space
in the shadows and shades

of my mind. Sit straight up,
listen to this howl creeping
slowly through our

cracked cement block,
slower than the wind
that rushes past.

What howl is this then?

The House My Father Took

It was not the first thing he took from her by force
when in an *Absolut* rage deep in the night, my father
became the third arm of Shiva, holding his own flame of
elimination. Outside, drops of spring thaw kept time

with Shiva's drum, a slight ripple of movement in a
frozen moment. My mother stood still in the doorway
while my father woke my infant sleep with a knife
to my throat. Only he dared jar the silence:

“If you don't, I will.”

Perhaps her mind flashed back six months, when he lay
on the tracks of the metro and she stood above him,
her body heavy with me, wondering how to save him.
Maybe she wished she hadn't. The house he demanded

with such force stood in Sonoran sands. Slump blocked
with a carport and three small bedrooms. My father
still held the knife. Time expanded from Vishnu's belly
as he molded the world with his deep exhale. Perhaps

my mother wished this Hindu god to expel breath faster, inhale
this dream for another. As she moved pen across papers,
signing the house unto my father, he withdrew the knife,
leaving only the faintest imprint. Then, he held me close and sang.

Min Pappa

My father wondered if his father
had found the death of his choosing
– hunger strike, a political statement –
when he returned from his search for water
to rooms stripped clean of life.

At twelve, *min pappa* moved
to the streets of Kuala Lumpur
to wander the markets in search of scraps:
his best chance the Hindu temples on Fridays
where he could scrape coconut meat clean
from the heap where they lay broken in ritual
– a symbol of broken ego.

I don't know when *min pappa*
next saw his father. Maybe
upon his return home
in my infancy when his father spat
at my blond mother and ordered her
from the family home.

We stayed anyway.
Another Colonial oppression
that dishonored Grandfather's sensibilities
and a traitorous son
consumed with a Golden

West that, still, cannot see past my father's
gnarled hands, diseased white splotches,
frizzed long hair. *Min pappa* left
an education and higher Caste for the streets,
he says to work. But his memory
works like his language;
he speaks only in fragments,

Tamil, Hindi, Cantonese, Swedish –
broken English his most fluent tongue.
I know he once hid under a bridge in Singapore
as the Chinese Mafia hunted for him
and that with one family he traveled
to New York and found beauty in blonds
and Capitalism and that was his end
to Asia.

“*Indiaanen*” say the Swedes
when *min pappa* walks through the streets,
for in Stockholm he is known among other immigrants
for his Native roots, though none know
he earned this status by winning a limbo contest
on the Hopi Nation.

**Min Pappa* – my father in Swedish

From Sunset to Sunrise

I wake up in the dark.
Watch the sun rise over the Gulf,
a crimson, orange, reddy sky –
so much color
between the hour of dark and light.
Then, again, brown for the day.

In the horizon, sea and sky join
to one colorless mass. Each day
we say good morning
to the dirt lots below, the lorries,
a few scattered palm trees,
and dusty mounds of bricks.
This is what my child sees.

No wonder she stepped gingerly
on the grass this summer,
afraid to stand on green blades
after a lifetime of concrete and sand –
her childhood missing in color.

But this is a city of night.
Shops open until midnight,
dinner after nightfall,
children visit the seaside
under a moonlit sky.
While we slumber
under a Western timeline,
locals live by the night.

City lights transform sand-colored buildings
into a skyline vivid and bright.
I wake up in the dark.

Naming Day

Eliot coined *Shanti* “the peace which passeth understanding.”
I agree – I have passeth my own understanding;
my uncertainty gives way to analytical fugue.
Ni xiang tai duo, the Chinese say.
Yes – I think too much.

Tar Baby suggested Jessica’s mom
as I longed to belong in an America of nicknames,
of lemon-lightened hair, of neon jellied shoes.
I complied through middle school and beyond,
though somehow
it never felt quite right,
not like *Jessie*
or *Jess* or *J*.

My mother called me Tower of Peace,
a name I wore with private pride,
unwilling to divulge my whole name – *Tara Shanti*.
Too foreign.

Tara, the greatest Variable,
for who is she – star goddess,
Druidic mother goddess,
the wife of the monkey king?

I choose Earth –
loamy richness that gives way to fresh stalks of spring
while it nurtures the aged banyan of my heart.
No, I am not that wise.

Today, I feel more like a Lake Reed,
hollow and bowing, not of my own device.
A gust of air could knock me down – breathless.

* *Ni xiang tai duo* – in Chinese the literal translation means “you think too much.” However, this is meant to describe those who overanalyze things.

II.

Blood Norms

I. Immigrants

At the Kuwait International Airport
blood drains from the luggage carousel:
puddles, pools, collects.
Smearred with footprints
and luggage wheels
as waves of African migrants
grasp at their imports –
cardboard boxes
spilling over with thawing
carcasses.

II. Slaughter

Carcasses bought from a *souk*
of splayed limbs and entrails
as in Spanish bullrings
toros bleed
from wounded blades,
slowly dripping lives
onto earth stained red.

III. Renewal

Earth, red-glowing as the lanterns
of Taiwanese markets
where pork liquid spurts into popsicles
of blood and children gnaw
with pleasure fried claws and pull
fish eyes hanging by filament
strands. Ecstasy.

IV. Conception

Snake writhes
in soothsayer's gnarled hands,
milking poison into glasses
before he slices it from head to tail. Men
seeking virile potions swallow venom
mixed with blood and Galleon.

**souk* – Arabic for market
toro – Spanish for bull

Deportation

One night, there was a riot in the Rooster Coop.
I watched from ten stories above
as orange flames of a hundred fires
interrupted black silence,
and men hung from windows
flailing.

Clothes took flight from the rooftop.
Mattresses – slashed – spilled their guts onto packed dirt.
Paper scraps fluttered, in no rush to land,
even though heaved from windows
with angry force.
The night sounded a steady roar.

In the morning, the building sat empty,
the ground littered with belongings of the Coop.
Bright shirts torn to rags,
charred bits of paper.
Whole living rooms
splintered and splayed on the ground.
No more life in that squared concrete block.

I don't know where the men went.
I don't know what time they left.

For three years, that building sat empty.
I would stare from my window
into a stillness filled with ghosts
of discontented workers and rubble.
Recall the anger
thundering through that night.

Then one day, the cracked panes were replaced,
and laundry hung from the sill. Waving in the breeze.
Beckoning with fuchsia.

*In *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, the author uses the metaphor of the Roster Coop to describe the social system of India. The roster coop is a place of darkness and depravity, and the coop is controlled by a select few who possess the wealth. Most interestingly, the people of the roster coop do not support one another. Rather, they enable inequity by treating each other as badly as they are treated.

Homecoming

On one trip home to Palestine,
Nadwa stood
at the checkpoint border
over the River Jordan
forced to rummage through all the luggage
searching for a child's missing shoe.
Her children sobbed inside the car,
faces mashed to the windows,
while the guards berated Nadwa
for her chaotic packing,
insistent that
the missing shoe
was an act of terror.
She pleaded.

Once, she flew via Tel Aviv
with her five children
and elderly parents.
Even on American passports,
Israeli border patrol
refused them entry
to their homeland – still –
after all these years.

The difference, argue some Americans,
between Ireland and Palestine
is that the English were never
threatened annihilation.

But they don't know my friend Nadwa,
American born to Palestinian parents.
She shrugs as she tells me of new
atrocities each year,
always the first to ask how I am,
what I need, how she can help.
For years she would exhaust her finances,
place Dean & DeLuca kitchenware
in our mailboxes, the lone
High School Sunshine Committee
and her secret *Happy Birthday* to us.

Each summer Nadwa goes home
to a land separated by thick fences
surrounding newly built Israeli settlements

of American summer homes,
fences that hide the ramshackle streets
of the West Bank.

The Israelis don't allow Nadwa
her dollars or dinars, brought
to support her local economy. Instead,
force her into new neon shops in the Settlements
to buy the batteries she needs on most days
to power her home. Each day
her family swelters in the dry heat,
their water shut off in midday hours.
Daily brownouts bake them well.

One night after the evening meal of Ramadan,
in her parents' home that overlooks
the bright lights of a new Settlement,
her family relaxes over board games and banter.
The red point of a laser,
scanning across the room,
then focused on her father's forehead
dead center –
peppered backdrop to their holy celebration.

"Ptzatzot lagabot."
Israeli guards playing a different game
on their lazy watch.

**Ptzatzot lagabot* – in Hebrew, this literally means bombs to the eyebrows, but it is used as a slang expression to say great or fantastic.

Lee, Anna

My father, President Lee Teng Hui, is dying
under the stark white light of a single bulb.
I sit inside a winter-dampened concrete building
alive with three generations housed in junk,
my family unable to let go
of even the box of their 1970s toaster
or any other item or idea, for that matter.
Outside, the *Kuomintang* mourn the death of the KMT
and the anti-Mao movement, bear witness to the man,
my father, who kept the hope of Chiang Kai Shek alive
until today. I peer at the masses from a curtained window.
Flashes of coy glint in a briny pond, frenzied
as wind and rain whip through rice paper panels
caught in the dragon fire of tradition.
As I am caught. I struggle to escape
the viscous threads of conformity, stand smothered
behind sooty panes and a sky gone gray
from neon lights that flash day and night
above traditional markets of blue trucks
hung with pork entrails and baskets of squawking roosters
soon to be chopped for dinner.
"Face" lives only among the dying,
youth mingles only with its same red, blue and purple-haired self.
My gray strands falter.
Bin Lan trees carpet bamboo hills.
Red juicy spittle streams down,
casts aside clods of earth.
Mountains disintegrate
as traditions degenerate.
My father dies.
My hair turns white as I turn my back on youth,
embrace his dying legacy. The DPP takes power anyway.
La meis (spicy girls) launch his funeral procession
by shedding clothes from a truck papered in flowers.
White-clad mourners follow,
paid to wail.

*President Lee Teng Hui was the first democratically elected president of Taiwan. As President, he represented the *Kuomintang* or KMT, the party, led by Chiang Kai Shek that fled Communist China in 1949. The KMT supports eventual reunification with the mainland. One theory states that while he was the Chairman of the KMT, Lee Teng Hui was secretly supporting local Taiwanese home rule. The DPP is the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan and a symbol of the Taiwan independence movement.

Abaya Dance

After dinner, ushered downstairs,
we dance the Arab dance.
Behind a carved wooden screen,
their backs to us, male musicians
play the *samra*, traditional clapping
accompanying their *oud*, *mirwas* and *tablas*.
We dance lively and frenzied across the floor.
Hips sway in a forward sashay across the room,
hair slung from side to side,
breasts and shoulders shimmying.

We dance and laugh
in this room of women –
Western and Arab shed inhibition
with tongue rolling “loolooloolos” –
the celebratory shriek of Arab women.

Even Mrs. American Ambassador takes a turn
with a very clumsy shoulder shimmy
set against the rhythmic, pulsing hips
of our hostess, recently named by Fortune 500
the most successful businesswoman
in the Gulf region. My modest title
allows me invisibility in this room
of powerful women, but I too
can sashay across the floor.

As evening closes, we gather our wraps.
Some, like me, exit as they are. Others
shroud themselves in black. First,
the long folds of the hijab, wrapped
around and around the head and neck.
Next, the abaya,
black veil that swirls to the feet.
One wears the *niqab*, leaving only her
monsoon lids to stare straight
into the night.

My bared arms tell no more
than her underthings. I have seen
what lies beneath her abaya:
a Victoria’s Secret lacy garter
under a slinky red dress.

And still, a lone strand of hair
skirts the barriers of her shawl,
attempting to be seen?

The blackened guise dances
as she moves beneath,
but the sheath cannot veil
what her body knows.
Allure in an illicit culture.

*Abaya – the black robes in which some Muslim women cover themselves so as not to entice and attract male attention

Hijab – the head scarf that some Muslim women use to cover their hair

Niqab – the scarf some Muslim women use to cover their faces, keeping only their eyes visible

Samra – traditional Kuwaiti dance and song routine involving drums (*tablas* and *mirwas*), traditional clapping and singing; the *oud* is another instrument important in Kuwaiti music

High Tea in the Desert

Discarded planks and slabs of stone
litter this parched, unpaved earth
reaching towards the Gulf.
Like a ghost town of the West
this construction site idles,
emptied for Friday morning prayers.

Bamboo scaffold struggles
under the weight of concrete,
while water tanks like watchdogs
guard empty doorframes. Bricks
awaiting construction amass
as cairns of an ancient civilization.
Rods of rebar glint in the sun.

Phantom hammering punctures the air
as a rooster struts towards a tarred road.
A silver trimmed Mercedes dances with heat.
Awaits starched white robes
adorned with the checkered halo of Kuwait.
Three men, sat under an unfinished stoop,
with tea and a *shisha* pipe.

Stances dropped in casual banter
as if they aren't sitting in the desert,
in a site rife with construction,
chickens pecking the ground
at their feet.

Desert Nights

FADE TO NIGHT

EXT. KUWAIT – MOSQUE – EMPTY DIRT LOT

I listen to my Iman's voice call across the Night; his joins haunting echoes of another Iman.

IMANS' ECHOES

Allah, Akbar...Allah, Akbar...Allaaaaaaaaaaaah, Akbar

I watch men stream across empty lots, side by side, prayer rugs in hand.

After Day, in the lighting of Moon
Night wakens under a prayer to call
hush to Day, time to commune

with Night, windswept under starry dunes.
Night twinkling sky rise and fall tall
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.

A sliver of moon rises over the empty dirt lot. Only rows and rows of shoes hint at life.

INT. MOSQUE – LARGE DOMED ROOM

Men in hundreds face Mecca: bending, bowing, chanting.

INTERCUT: ARIZONA – SONORAN DESERT

Night falls, desert inhales deep, exhales long the scorching heat of Day.
We lie on our backs, wander the Milky Way bursting above us.
Life pulses beneath sand – scurrying creatures. Cacti drink deeply as petals open.

Crescent rise bright as an evening loon's
long mournful cry, fatally calls
hush to Day, time to commune

with crisp nighttime sky softly spilling its tune;
desert flowers reverse Night and Day, open petals
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.

INTERCUT: ARABIAN DESERT - RAMADAM – FULL MOON

Moon rises early here, larger than Sun. Measures time. Speaks softly, fervent whisper, yielding power. Wait – watch – life lived by Moon.

Closer to earth, this Moon swoons.
Rises at night, eager to send once and for all
its hush to Day, time to commune.

Daytime will wither and fade sometime soon
and Night with its dark will cast a soft pall
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.
Hush to Day, time to commune.

III.

Seven Addresses to the Lord
after "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" by John Berryman

1

These days, I speak only
to you, not
of you.

2

As a child,
I loved looking at the wide river,
Moses floating along in his basket,
his mother peering through the bushes
in my *Illustrated Children's Bible*.

3

Then, you were, and still are,
in my imagination,
a cocooned man,
kindly in smile,
hanging upside down
from the clouds as a bat hangs
from darkened eaves.

In your feathery wrap, speckled black,
only your face is known to me –
the rest sheathed in your reddish-brown robe.

Your face never seemed upside down.
Yet, then, as now, I wondered how,
hanging upside down,
your beard could lie flat against your face.

These were my questions then:

Why do you hang from clouds,
just watching?

Why doesn't your beard
fall upside down into the air?

Do you ever get a head rush?

4

At Vespers chant

Deus, in adiutorium meum intende
Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina

you hang
from billowy, white clouds
ensconced in feathers.

5

In Gothic churches,
I wander through the
Stations of the Cross.
Try to get a sense of you.
Light a candle.
Kneel against a front pew.

I am sorry to be in your holy
house without you.

You always seem to find me elsewhere.

6

What the reddened mountains whispered
against the setting sun
the brush afire below.

What the carpeted hills of bamboo murmured
green hues intensified
under golden skies.

7

Sitting on Red Rock
I levitate.
The sound of cicadas
elevates to a thunder
and I float with you –
momentarily –
my God in the feathery wrap
my friend in the clouds.

**Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina* – the opening lines of Vespers chant, meaning “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.”

Austerity Measures

An older man fears nothing. *I am at the end of my life*, he says but admits his children are worried for themselves, for their children. Curiously, he is not worried for his children's children. *We have 20 gallons of water saved*. And still, he washes his vegetables, very carefully, in water contaminated with radiation. *We wash them well*, he says, unaware that he is now soaking his vegetables in radiation; unwilling to lose the freshwater he has stored, he bathes and washes his food in 100% radiated water. So do his children. So do his children's children.

*Austerity measures is a common European Union phrase made popular after the 2008 economic downfall whereby governments attempt to significantly reduce spending to decrease national debt. The hope is that everyone will curtail their spending and become more frugal. Austerity measures are hugely controversial, partly because governments are cutting spending by reducing pensions and other benefits.

Desert Freeze

It isn't as if your marrow can tell your state,
the marrow that sits frozen inside your bones
during winter's freeze, despite lying buried deep
under wool blankets made of Bedouin sheep.

My landscape is dotted
with Bedouin sheep who gaze still at the roadside
or lie like fleece boulders on mounds of earth
with taut curls from the heat of rain
grazing on brush carpeted with dust.

My landscape is dotted
with overcast hues against browned land
stretching towards the Arabian Gulf,
littered with pipeline, carrying oil as sluggish
as my blood which flows in this freeze.

My landscape is dotted
with a sea housing rigs
that sink over a week
as the blood of one nation
is pumped into the blood of another.

High Heeled America

That hole distressed us all – one hole
in the soft pine floors from the time
my mummy had worn her lone pair of high heels
in our new Stockholm central apartment.

As a treat, Mummy would unwrap the shoes
she had brought home one afternoon.
Far too expensive, she would say, as we sat
on our shaggy white rug to ogle their luxury.

She would fold the tissue gently
before placing the lid back on the box,
but not before I inhaled deep. Often,
I would sit cocooned in the cupboard

breathing in their leathery smell.
Tawny dreams sprung from those shoes,
American dreams like the circular shopping malls
I would describe on the playground after summers

spent *home*. Being American gave me clout,
though it also isolated me, always an interloper
with my *amerikanska mamma* and my *indiaan papa*.
That hole, a hole in our perfection. Still, the shoes

excited us, made Mummy an elegant lady,
like JR's wife bedecked in perfumed elegance –
another too dear expense – while Mummy told tales
of how we came to be in Sweden: her two yellow suitcases

stolen in Switzerland, one for each of us we believed,
though we didn't exist yet – anywhere. Her tales
of girlhood trickery swept us into a world of
small town drama and American wishes.

America wasn't as glamorous as her reveries, but
those shoes stayed in the box, moving from apartment
to house, still storing that early enchantment, even though
by then, Mummy wore heels every day.

**amerikanska mamma* – Swedish for American mother
indiaan papa – Swedish for Indian father

Time Out

Yesterday,
in an attempt
at socks

my babe rocked and roiled
so deep into my chest
I lost my wind,

then my temper.
And even though
hers was a game

of laughter and smiles
my rage exploded
with a pop

that sent her *thwack*
into the rails of her crib;
round eyes

shocked silent
for seconds.

I walked away.

Side-Impact

We decided to leave
the day the baby died.
Not ours, and yet,
a death that stunned us still.

Strange how we both knew this was the end.
Me, in a hospital, attempting to “support”
two of my faculty, my husband
awaiting each of my fragmented texts:

“Baby dead...
criminal investigation & autopsy...
grandmother doesn’t know...”

I hesitated to enter the waiting room, afraid
to intrude on their grief, instead
averting my gaze to stare at white walls
as they pried the dead baby from its mother’s arms

and she wailed “Evidence?” As they carried out
a neatly wrapped package of hospital blue scrubs,
taped into a square. Two policemen
to carry out a dead two-month old.

I thought that was the worst of it
until they wheeled in the grandmother
– oblivious to her deed –
she smiled loopily and asked about the baby.

Her wails could be heard throughout the
hospital when they told her.

“Your baby...
I would never hurt your baby...
I didn’t mean to...”

Words on refrain until the police
escorted the keening mother
from her own mother’s grief.

I arrived home spent – grateful
and angry. She chose her mother
– mentally ill and drunk
with a history of seizures –

over a nanny from the third-world. Grateful
and guilty for my own two (both left
with strangers only months old – both fine)
and something new, an insight birthed

from sorrow. A knowing deep
within that nothing – ever –
should intrude on instinct.
My vacant stare a mask

for the images I didn't want to see.
The baby on the floor, a trickle of blood
and vomit running from his mouth;
no visible marks to explain his slack body.

Cause of death unknown –
named by the Kuwaiti police
an “accidental kill case.”

Arab Exile from Al-Ramla, 1948

*This is the place, you could say
to yourself. This is the house
with two histories. The house with
the lemon tree.*

- Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree*

I can still recall the rooms of our house
built by the men of our family,
the long corridors that form a square,
each wing housing a generation.

I can still recall the outdoor kitchen
where Mama and my aunties
spent hours cooking in brick ovens
under the shade of our date trees.

But it's the lemon tree I can still see.
Feel its fruit in my hand, wince
at the first drops of juice on my tongue –
bitter then sweet.

Each year it blossomed,
heavy with fruit. Its juice set aside
for hummus, tabouleh, tea.
Its flesh rendered for sweets and cakes.
Our goats fattened themselves on rinds.

Despite our exile, we hear reports
that our lemon tree still stands
gnarled and curled
older than my father
older than my father's father, even.

They tell stories now of how we fled.
Ours a city deserted,
doors left open to refugees
who moved in while fires still burned in our stoves.

They tell stories.
But I remember our fathers talking
underneath the lemon tree, choices
weighing heavy on their farmers backs.

Our fathers waited for allied soldiers,
waited to negotiate peace,
waited for the firing to stop.
But they came
unexpected
upon our fathers
who sat in makeshift trenches,
shovels in hand.

When our city fell
they halved the country.
Still, it is *our* home. Still,
it is *our* lemon tree.

Paddywagon for the American Tourister

Our bus driver on the road to Dublin,
a Kerry boy from Dingle sporting
a hot pink Hollister hoodie and
a distinct lack of tourist facts, tells

us that, *basically*, *Germany runs*
most of Europe, hence its size
on the 100 euro bill. I jolt upright
at this thought, and even though

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's
austerity pleas often run across the BBC,
his off-shoulder shrug strikes my fancy,
as if everyone accepts German

authority. Funny, they didn't get such
dominion with two world wars. Despite
his misplaced logic, Stephen manages
to impart a smorgasbord of Irish

lore to this American tourister: the sheep
they moved off the rolling hills of green
to film *Braveheart* because Ireland is
cheaper than Scotland, the sheep

in Dingle that outnumber the people
twenty to one, the 11.2% Irish
unemployment rate – told with another
casual shrug of the shoulder. When I look

at the 100 euro bill to check the size of Germany
in proportion to other EU countries,
the map is set to scale. Germany is no larger
or smaller than it is on any other map.

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Vita

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