

Poemas

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Grandma I Never Met

Tell me the truth, Grandma I never met—
matron of pewter spoons and patchwork quilts,
watermelon pickles, corn husks, porch stoop at dusk,
mosquitoes thrumming a humid summer song.
When your Jeannie came home with an Ay-rab boy—
dark like Jesus must have been, though the minister
wouldn't admit it, and handsome, with piercing
mid-eastern eyes, but different, not quite folk
(though you didn't say it out loud, hushed Grandpa
when he muttered behind closed doors), did you think
of sand dunes, camels, men with cloths on their heads,
women in embroidered dresses down to the ground,
language flowing like foreign syrup on their tongues,
hands waving like a flock of sparrows about to land?
Or did you nod briskly in welcome, pull the corned beef
steaming from the oven, usher my daddy-to-be
to the table, pass the potatoes and buttered rolls?
Oh Grandma of farmhouse days and small town nights,
cornfields rippling in summer wind, ponies and strawberries
and ice cream sundaes and more love than was given you
to live, tell me the truth: if you knew I would be born so soon,
so soon after you'd gone, would you have waited
to meet me, called me your own dear granddaughter—
part Arab, part strange, but still all yours?

Night, Day

Night is day in another world.
My Iowa grandmother sleeps beneath the earth
she planted and reaped. Beside her lies
my grandfather who outlived, then joined her,
his tombstone's stern façade
an echo of the silence he meant as love.
A few headstones down lie my parents—
Palestine, America, the worlds between them
reduced to a clump of grass, a clod of earth.
On my side of the world I work late,
waiting for night to fall half a globe away,
for the moon that followed me home
to rise in another sky. Soon I will sleep,
my sky a tapestry of dreams and longing:
my lost ones alive again and filled with light!
When I rise, my friends across the globe
will be sleeping, their own dreams streaming
through the dark like comets, fiery trails
of memory lighting the patient dark,
night to day and day to night.

Ya ‘Amar

My friend sends me photos of children
lost to bombs, their still-living faces
shining like moons—ya ‘amar!—in hopes
I will write poems to keep them alive.
They are not lost, of course, but murdered,
torn to bits. Sometimes we hide in language
to make it through—though the children
had nowhere to hide and didn’t survive.
Searching for words to stem the grief,
I scroll through images, wincing at
fresh young faces, the smiling eyes—
people smiled in Gaza, I swear, despite
everything. The pictures are easier to take
than my news feed’s cruel contortions:
hands protruding from rubble, forearms
and legs inscribed with names so that
victims can be identified when beheaded by
the rain of bombs. The children laughing
into the camera, hugging siblings or parents,
clutching a toy or ball or schoolbag, demand
we refuse their destruction. Their shining eyes
gaze out, trusting those beyond the lens
to keep them safe, whole, alive. They do not
know, yet, how this will end: faces smeared
with blood, hands clutching soot, bodies
cradled in a ragged heap by grievors
who rock in anguished keening. At one
bombing site a girl lifted alive from
the moonscape of devastation cries out
to her rescuer, “Ammo, are you taking me
to the cemetery?” He exclaims tenderly,
“Cemetery, what cemetery! Look at you,
child, you are alive and beautiful like the moon!”
But beyond them, the lunar arc etched into
Gaza’s black and broken sky is barely visible:
ya ‘amar, the sky is so dark, ya ‘amar,
the light has left us, where is the moon?

Stutters for Gaza

Birds in Gaza have no songs.
Only shrouds. Like the white cloth
wrapping the babies, names scripted
in black marker, the children with names
scrawled on limbs and torso
to identify their divided parts
in death. Parents carry the pieces
in bags to the morgue. Mourners
dig mass graves, shovel earth
between bombs and snipers.
Confronted by long rows of bodies,
do we cry out or go mute?
We scream and scream for Gaza,
our throats splintered with glass.
We who still have throats.
We who still have bodies.
We don't know how to stop
anything. We search for birds
in the updraft of bombs,
wondering if their wings are singed,
if hungry people net them
for food. Everyone is frightened.
A cat in its owner's arms trembles
violently, like the toddlers videoed
after bombings, shaking and shaking.
We cannot stop shaking.
We, with our bodies whole, not in parts.
My friend writes, every tomorrow
is more bodies. I long to stop counting.
The desecration of arithmetic.
Multiplication. Division.
People in pain, ashen with hunger,
wish for the calm center of a zero,
that quiet nothingness,
the starving phoenix becoming ash,
its plumage trailing lines scrawled
by poets before their death.
Words that will not die.

Goodbye

Always knew it would come back
to haunt me. It was war, time was short,
the truck was leaving, and with it my hope
of safe passage from that besieged city.

She was in another place, phone lines
down, no time to search her out.

I had to flee, and so I did. I knew
the spool of time would never rewind,
that with that desperate leaving
I would lose my chance to bid farewell
before the bombs began to fall,
bludgeoning her eyes to darkness.

Where is she now? Would she remember me
if I found her? And if I kissed her cheeks
three times, Lebanese style, and called her
habibti, hayati, would she speak to me,
smile? Or would she turn away,
her life so changed, her griefs so far
from mine that there would be
no point in saying, even, goodbye?

Longing: A Ghazal

I reach for you in darkness –are you absent again?
Lost you are to my searching: absent again.

Since you died the nights are an ocean, vaster than death.
Why have you left me shipwrecked, hope stagnant again?

Come lie with me – your place in the bed lies vacant!
In dreams, that parallel world, you are lambent again.

At first light I cry out, straining for your echo.
The mourning doves reply, lamenting again.

I open my window: your roses are gleaming with dew.
I long for you, gentle gardener, valiant again.

Suhair searches the heavens, seeking a single star.
The star of night is missing—absent again.

Chant

Blue heron lifting over river light
mountain beyond mountain beyond mountain
above, a cascade of clouds—

March with its gray voice
rain sheeting down, driving birds to shelter
that lilt of light in your eyes—

memory blossoming
how you bent to the rose bush tenderly
illness hidden in you like a seed—

my heart in its prison of ribs
alone in the bed of grief
crying nightly to join you—

how we climbed sheer mountain paths
to flowering thorns, meadowa of cicadas,
our brown bodies a lip of honey—

the wild bees chanting

Harvest

It's a quarter to midnight.
October, harvest time.

My soul is laid out like a dried sheaf
of wheat, or barley: some common grain

gathered to sustain life
throughout bitter winter.

My soul is a twist of grass
plucked from the fields in June,

woven into a child's straw doll.
It's the braid of garlic strung up in the kitchen,

fraying with each pull and shuck
till the last clove is tossed into the stew.

Oh, soul, do you remember
how we danced and danced

under a dark sky awhirl with stars?
How young we were, and how beautiful?

Dawn will come soon with its threshers
to harvest the broken and the unbroken.

Stay with me till light reaps the fields,
laying the furrows open like hearts.