7-27-2020

Great Sand Sea

Nada Sewidan
Portland State University

Recommended Citation
Sewidan, Nada, "Great Sand Sea" (2020). *Dissertations and Theses.* Paper 5562.
https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7436

Great Sand Sea

by
Nada Sewidan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
Paul Collins
Justin Hocking, Chair
Leni Zumas

Portland State University 2020

Abstract

This is a collection of essays regarding land and identity tied with the personal experiences of my family's immigration from Egypt to America.

Table of Contents

Mother America

I only remember hands pulling me to reach the terminal on time.

It was me. My brother. My mom. My father left months before to "set-up our lives" as he called it. I was eight or nine or ten.

My mom herded us outside of the airport and waited for my dad to pick us up. I wore a bright pink bomber jacket, I imagined a gust of wind could help me fly. That the jacket with all its inflatable glory might take me soaring. I imagined that's why my mom bought it.

My mom looked around for our ride, the noise of cars honking familiar to her. Dad said he'd pick us up, he'd be right outside with a red car. He said we couldn't miss it.

A slight wind shook the green palm leaves against the blue sky, clear from smoke and clouds. I stared hard. The palms overshadowed me. Blue was too blue. The roads too clean. I missed home right then.

My dad arrived in a red mustang, the one with the black convertible top that rolled back when you wanted to feel less like a middle-aged man.

I got in the car first, toward the back.

"It's nothing like Cairo," my dad said in his offbeat English. He looked amused with himself.

I turned to my mom then.

Safety was my mom. Uncertainty was Mother America.

***

As children we moved around different parts of the Middle East. Often, one or both parents flew out to the next new place to secure housing, jobs, and schooling and left my brother and me with our grandma.

Most of what I remember about growing up in Cairo was our flat, the balcony facing east out to the pyramids, and if you looked far enough, you could see the largest one of the three emerge from the desert sand and hover above the other flats in the madina. Sometimes as a child I looked out and pictured my young body at its tip looking over the rest of the world. Most times though, I'd sit in the balcony and look out for my mom.

***

It is late afternoon. I'm outside in the Cairo madina courtyard with my neighbor and schoolmate, Ahmed. The sun is sharp, so I sit in the shade of a large mulberry tree, our tree.

Ahmed begins to climb up the trunk of it, fitting each foot into a groove and ascending slowly. I look up to see how far he has climbed, then I look past him to the sky. It is bright orange and I think for a long while about its color. I feel a slight sadness at the sky. It is a lonely sky and I want to bite into it.

"Catch," Ahmed says, throwing a small mulberry down.

I reach my hand up, but the mulberries fall to the ground. “Throw more down,” I say to him. He does not look down, but stretches up further until he reaches the top of the tree.

I recall a dream from the night before. Ahmed and I playing in the madina. A man working at a small kiosk at the entrance of the madina handed us poppers as a present. I was not happy. Ahmed knew this and chased me around the madina, setting off each of the poppers. The last popper was too loud. I fell to the ground and covered my head. My body started shaking. Ahmed carried me to a nearby mulberry tree and promised to never light a popper again. I sat in the crook of this mulberry tree with my head on his shoulder until I awoke. This dream is recurring; it is always Ahmed and we always end in the shade of a mulberry tree. Sometimes the poppers turn into bombs.

I do not understand these dreams, but when I awake suddenly, I always search the flat in the dark for my family.

“Ready?” Ahmed says to me.

I do not move from my seated position, but reach up to the sky awaiting the small mulberries’ descent. Ahmed smiles and throws down as many as he can. I sit still, my hands outstretched as the sky rains down mulberries. A few land in my hand but immediately bounce off. A few also stay.

I start to eat them.

“Save some for me, I’m coming down.” He climbs halfway down the tree and then jumps off, landing beside me. When we run out of the mulberries in my hand, we eat

off the ground. It is late afternoon and the sun is starting its lonely descent. I am six years old.

***

When my mom returned from her first visit to America, she arrived at our flat carrying large black luggage filled with presents. We all sat around the bed, an Arabic music video playing on our small television. I kept adjusting, the white sheets rough under my legs, the metal frame of the small bed hitting the wall as I moved. My mom first pulled out the Hunchback of Notre Dame and an accompanying princess doll—the hunchback was for my brother, the princess for me. I wanted the hunchback. She pulled out other toys and presents and with each one, my excitement rose. She waited until the end to reveal the last present. She told me to close my eyes. I did. I could feel the room watching me. I knew this was going to be special. I heard the quiet shuffle and crinkle of the gift and once she laid it on my hands, I felt the satin thickness of it. I opened my eyes then. It was a pink bomber jacket. It was too big for me at the time, but I wore it always. I let the brightness of it color me.

The next morning I wore my pink jacket and left the flat in search of Ahmed. I ran out into the courtyard and yelled his name until he came outside onto the balcony. I jumped up and down, the jacket soaring with me.

***

I'm walking hand in hand with my mother when she stops at the kiosk at the entrance of the madina.

"Salam Alakoum," she says, picking out a chocolate bar and soda.

"Alakoum Salam," he responds. The man's wife is sitting beside the kiosk, her black hijab wrapped tightly around her hair. She is wearing a long sleeve blouse and long, dark pants. It is summer and the heat is unbearable. My mom is also wearing something similar. I am wearing the pink satin jacket and long pants. After we exit the madina, my mom turns onto a narrow street. Underneath the shade of alleyways, we hide from the city and heat. Along the walls are shuttered windows lining the brick and concrete.

Whenever my mom was in town, we went on these walks, the quiet of the chaos emerged on those hazy afternoons in the summer, each alley different from the one before it. My feet clicked on the stone paths and she held me all the way down to a final destination.

I didn't live in Egypt for very long, unlike my mom who'd spent a majority of her life there, and I didn't visit every summer like my brother. All I'd known of Egypt was something of a childhood dream: picking mulberry in the piazza in front of our Cairo flat. Or walking down the boardwalk along the beach in Alexandria stopping for cotton candy and shawarma. My grandma holding me with one hand, my brother with the other. I rode a microbus filled with women in hijab, honking its way through crowded people, watching a man hit the tiny bus with his hands, yelling.

***

The night before I left for America, Ahmed and I got married on the cobblestone steps at the entrance of our part of the madina. The bodega lights behind us and my toilet paper veil spilling down around me. He took my light body and unraveled the toilet paper only to ravel it back around me. His brown eyes kept looking at mine and his hair always had specs of sand settling at his scalp. I know that because I put it there. He'd let me chase him around with a handful of it and once I caught up to him, I emptied whatever hadn't escaped from my fingers into his hair.

We stood hand in hand after our makeshift ceremony.

"I'm coming back in a year I think," I said this as a matter of fact.

He nodded and pulled me forward, skipping around the madina.

***

"My heart hurts," I told my third grade teacher in my elementary school in Riverside during my first week in America.

We were lining up on the bungalow against the wall. I felt the pulse of my chest underneath my pink jacket. I had difficulty taking a breath in and once I did, it felt as though the oxygen disappeared somewhere inside me, unused. I raised my hand then. My teacher didn't understand what it meant to have a heart hurt. A chest hurting, that's a serious physical thing, and I think if I told her that she would have responded differently. Instead she ignored me. "A heart is not a chest," she must have thought. She didn't know what I meant to say was *I'm having a panic attack*.

***

My small body jammed against thousands of people slamming into one another, a slow moving sea of sinners. My mom wore a hijab around her hair and a loose-fitting black garment to cover the rest of her body. She dressed me the same way. My father wore a long loose-fitting white garment that covered his body. My brother was dressed the same as him. I was six years old when my family and I made our journey to Mecca, a sacred city in Saudi Arabia where as Muslims you must travel and walk around the Kaaba seven times. This is where most of the repenting is done. *Al-kaʿbah,* which translates to cube, is exactly what it sounds like. Erect in the middle is a large black box with brown patterns lining the top quarter. The structure rests at the center of *Al-Masjid Al-Ḥarām*, the sinner's mosque, the house of God. When Muslims normally pray five times a day, they point their prayer mat to the direction of the cube, even if someone is as far as America, they find the vague coordinates and direct their prayer.

Muslims must visit Mecca once in their lifetimes; it's indoctrinated as part of the five pillars of Islam. During our pilgrimage, I was a small thing among the people, and thinking back now, I wonder what a six year old had to repent.

***

She sat across from me on a wooden bench, her long, blonde hair falling softly on the table. I was watching her eat a cookie, it was an M&M cookie and I wanted it. Heather was her name.

I usually ate lunch alone. My hair was long and black and curly, and I always wore the same black pants, t-shirt and pink bomber jacket combination.

I pulled a sandwich from my lunch bag and dug out a book I didn't quite know how to read. My teacher said if I wanted to get better at English, I should try and read as much as possible, looking up words I could not understand in the dictionary. Every break I borrowed a book from the classroom and read as much of it as I could.

Heather got up and walked over to where I was seated, handing me an M&M cookie. I looked at her confused and slowly reached my hand out to grab it. She smiled. She wore a bright yellow tank top and long shorts and sandals.

"Aren't you hot?" she asked, looking at my jacket.

I didn't respond.

The next day when I approached my usual spot, I found her sitting with her friends. I turned around to walk back to the classroom when I heard her call my name. She pointed at the seat beside her and asked if I wanted to join them.

I walked over slowly, sitting a little further away from the rest of the group. Again, she left me an M&M cookie and she did so every day that year. Heather became my first friend in the U.S., and I spent so much of my time trying to be like her.

***

My mom signed my brother and I up for "Friday school" during our first month in the U.S. Friday is significant in the Muslim culture; it's the day where people join each other in the mosque to perform the evening prayer in person. A community on its knees—a collective, silent worship.

She placed me there with other 1.5 geners in an attempt to keep my faith alive. The Quran presented in English and printed on white paper. If I had to pinpoint a moment when my Arabic began to slip it's possibly when I attempted to swallow the readings of the holy book in a foreign language, a tongue not my own. Eventually, the Arabic cursive forming from right to left grew unfamiliar, English as its slow replacement. As my slow replacement.

I stopped going to Friday school—the white paper of the Quran stuck with me, though. El Aha, the familiar prayer, sometimes, even now, I still recite it in the quiet. I no longer consider myself Muslim, but there's still something about the familiarity of it, the comfort of relatability.

As I got older, I left Islam in pursuit of Christianity, but I eventually stopped believing in that too. Going to church always felt like going into someone else's home, and going to the mosque felt like going to a home that no longer exists.

***

When I think of Egypt, there aches memories. Little places, moments. I see clothes lining the metaled balcony. I see the cobblestones. Each house a different color. I walk hidden alleys and let the quiet of it settle on me, the main street only feet away. It's all reminiscent of Egypt. You can hide in its corners and the city disappears. I see children walking the pier of old town with gelato, and right then I recall a memory, my grandma walking on the boardwalk in Alexandria. All I'm missing is salt air and wind.

***

I’m not sure when the longing began, the looking through to the child certain and hopeful, a time when everyone looked like me.

What does it mean to have culture shock? I think of America and its visible sky, and Egypt a dull sepia, a light desert and fog, a 5,000 year old cityscape.

***

I think of it often—memories act as a sort of delusion, a noonday dream of desert sand and poignant sun. The me playing then, the me seeking now. When I think of Egypt, I wonder who I would have become—the white toilet paper veil of my childhood transforming into a hijab, the boy who may have become a husband, the marriage in a mosque.

***

Sometimes I don't feel like I belong to my body, the slow moving air into my lungs and out seems manufactured. There's a dissociation when I listen too close, each breath a reminder of this distance. The more I am aware of my breath, the more I want to push it out, all of it. One loud exhale, and I'm free from it.

***

The sun glowed up above. I zipped my pink jacket tighter, pulling the hood of it over my head. My brother stared outside the window, his hands tapping on the door. My father maneuvered through traffic and drove on for an hour until we reached Riverside. On the way to our new home I didn't think of the process of assimilation that would soon follow, like learning a new language or adapting to the new culture. Nor did I expect how difficult it would soon become, this renegotiation of self. Instead, I looked out in bewilderment and confusion and all I saw was possibility.

***

Oftentimes, I feel there are two of me, both running parallel like lines. Both selves are mirrors for a certain audience. There's this gnawing energy, my other self pushing into skin into muscle into bone.

Where a memory starts

The repetition of his name in my head, even when I'm not looking for him. It emerges quickly. Washing dishes, music on low, his name floats in at moments, and slams in at others.

Sometimes in the quiet of my bed, when all I can hear is the occasional car drive down 82nd, or the wind move the trees, some branches clinking my window, his name will repeat itself like a mantra. There's always a follow-up. I think: *Where is he? What is he doing? Why the subtle pain when I look too close?* Memories of him emerge differently each day. I can feel what's brimming rise. One memory falls into another and another until they all fumble out slowly.

&

I can't quite pinpoint my earliest memory of my father. I remember my uncle in a white button-up shirt and black slacks bringing a Cadbury bar. He carried a briefcase as we climbed the cobbled stone steps to our flat in Cairo. I don't know my age then.

There, a vivid memory. If I had to guess, I was eight. On the seventh floor of our flat in Alexandria was where all the toys of my youth lay. The furniture wrapped in hard see-through plastic and dust. I can't say why we decided to stay over, not uncovering the furniture. We only slept there once on the ground until the next morning. I lay on my bedroom floor surrounded by a toy airplane so large I felt my small body could shape-shift and fit inside the painted plastic window. My grandma pacing in the other room as she always does, whispering to herself. I could always feel her disdain, even

when I couldn't understand why. My brother was there beside all the toys. I cannot find my father in this memory.

Another memory, a motorcycle with my dad in Marsa Matrouh, a beach island two hours outside of Cairo. My family vacationed there a lot, though, I only remember them fighting, and my dad throwing my young body in the ocean back and forth like an inflatable ball across to my aunt. I'm convinced it's why I grew scared of the water. I rode on the back of my father's rented motorcycle that night, sobbing hard over the sound of sputtering engine and speed.

I think the motorcycle was blue.

There was no seatbelt and if I think more about it, I never wore a helmet. Later, I'm told it wasn't a motorcycle, just a tiny scooter that never went past 30 miles per hour.

I don't remember if any of this was true. It feels true. The motorcycle was a scooter and the flat never existed, it only blended sullenly with all the places we'd moved over the years, each house taking form of the other. I can't trust my earliest memories, I can only trust the feelings that emerge once I think back to the first time my father held me; it may be a figment, but the feeling, I'm convinced, cannot be fabricated.

&

Some of my family say I'm like my dad. His nose, pointy, rounding out at its end. The early graying black strands of his hair. His eyes, sometimes almost black. The way he laughed, booming with fake confidence. My dad often played the piano, usually Arabic music, the sounds of Abd El Haleem Hafaz ringing low on the nights he was

home. He'd place my light body beside him on the bench facing our chipped, brown piano keys made of ivory and position my hands gently over them. "Just listen," he said. I followed his hand. I was always good at imitating.

My father appears as a sort of romantic. Romance really is a central theme in Egypt and among Egyptians. Abdel Halim Hafez often sang of such romance. Perhaps, that's why father played his music often. He played one song in particular called Ahwak about a man tormented by the absence of his lover that he sends his soul to reach her. There was an ache every time I heard my father play this song: even then I knew he was not capable of loving like the men in these songs.

&

My dad often had a hard time getting out of bed. My brother and I gently moved ourselves into his room, the world would be up as he lay sleeping. Some days he awoke with a kind smile, a welcoming of sorts. Most days though, his anger erupted once he noticed us there eager for him to rise. He yelled at my brother and refused to emerge from the room. I don't remember a time when my father read to me.

A father, I learned, can be both alive and dead.

&

My mom told me a few years ago about the first time my dad held me. I asked her one night if I ever died or *almost* died.

"You were only an infant," she said. "I needed time to rest and asked your father to watch you. You wouldn't stop crying."

She was in the other room, my loud shrieks a reminder that I was still alive.

My dad couldn't stand the sound of it.

My mom woke up suddenly because I stopped crying, fear gripping her because she had no faith my dad could coddle me into a silent lull. She rose from bed to meet my dad in the living room. He was standing, slightly panicked at my blue body against the wood of the brown patterned couch. He'd thrown me against it, according to my mom, in an effort to keep me quiet.

"I just wanted her to stop crying," he told her.

I stopped breathing, a pale thing strewn against harsh fabric. My mom gave me CPR and revived me as my dad watched crying. Her recollection of that night sparked something in me, a sort of buried agony over someone broken. I thought, even as an infant, a small, fragile thing wasn't enough to love.

&

Watching classic Arabic movies with family was once a tradition when I lived in Egypt.

On the television screen a black and white movie always played. My mother and father gathered around it watching an old love story unfold. It was always a love story, some sort of epic romance. The premise was always the same too: a nice man is down on his luck and he meets a beautiful, complicated woman suffering some sort of tragedy. In these types of movies, the two characters find love and comfort in each other, batling great obstacles to achieve happiness. I found myself glued to the television screen,

studying their love stories. Usually, in these movies, happy endings were rare. The two lovers were almost always separated, either by death or circumstance. If they were alive, they would spend the rest of their days in great torment. There was no real reconciliation or a happy ending. After the movies finished, I wailed loudly at my mother. Somewhere in the drama of the moment, my child self conflated the films with reality. When I looked up at my parents, I asked them to heal my hurt heart.

These films still feel like a betrayal to the happy endings of American films that I'm used to. Perhaps, though, the endings of Arabic films feel more true to history than the ones with happy endings. I think maybe some part of me may have known that as a child, and it's why when I looked up at my parents, I felt a great separation would come.

&

I was eighteen years old the last time I saw my father before he disappeared. We sat in the living room of my mom's California home. I hadn't seen him in a while. He had been living in Kansas with a woman I couldn't bring myself to call a stepmother. I had step siblings I didn't know about either. I think he was actually with another woman at this time, though.

Sitting there, my dad seemed smaller, thinner maybe. Still the same brown eyes but with darker circles underneath. Lips brown from smoking. They used to be red. Yellow, calloused hands. They used to be less worn out.

I didn't know where the memories began and where my present stopped, but sitting there with him an image kept playing in my mind. I was seven years old and stood

in the middle of our flat in Saudi Arabia with my cousin Hadeer. My dad on the piano playing “Ahwak” as my mom and my uncles settled on the couch. The song started and so did we. We danced around the small living room to the sounds of the piano as my dad sang the words. I was laughing as I spun around in my blue dress, my long black hair dancing along with me. My mom was clapping along as my cousin and I gripped hands and spun even faster. I fell to the ground first and covered my face long enough for the spinning to stop. My dad was still playing his music, and I was still laughing. Even when the world was spinning and the ground fell from beneath me, I heard my favorite song and the words brought me back. I got up and danced again. Every time I saw him, I thought of the song and blue dress.

&

I was maybe five years old. My dad came home one night from where he’d been. He often stayed out late. Maybe with friends or other women or drinking. My mom awakened to the sound of his stumble into the kitchen. I heard it too. I woke up and ran to where he was, his long, broad body overshadowing mine.

My mom came out then and told me to go to my room. I looked at my dad and he shook his head and told me to go too. I didn’t want to. But I ran and hid behind my bedroom wall, and I thought to myself, after mama and baba talk, I’ll run back out.

That's when it started. The door to my brother's room flung open, and I heard his fast footsteps on the wooden floor. I got up and followed him. My dad was behind our glass dining table and my brother was behind him.

"Get me the knife," he told my brother. "Get me the knife."

"What are you going to do with it," my voice not loud enough. "Khaled don't do it."

My brother did walk into the kitchen and dig through the drawers for the knife. He seemed calm. My dad followed him and grabbed the knife from his hand. I stood there in the middle of the living room looking back to where my dad was and tried to yell, but my voice never seemed to get loud enough, not over the screaming, not over the sounds of falling silverware and glass. No one seemed to hear me. My mom was on the other side of the room throwing chairs at him, picture frames, anything she could get her hands on. She was doing it out of defense, I understood that, even then, I understood it.

My dad grabbed the knife out of the kitchen and came after my mom. I ran to my mom then and tried to hold her.

"It's ok, habibi," she said.

My dad pulled me off of her and threw me aside. I weighed nothing.

I watched him threaten my mom with the knife, his long, broad body overshadowing hers.

I heard him whisper to her, "I hate you."

I saw him grab her face with his bony hands.

"I'm not going to kill you in front of the kids," he told her.

&

My mom always threw extravagant birthday parties for my brother and me. There are photos of me standing amid a table of homemade party food. The Mediterranean pizzas and fries on display. Among them was a large chocolate cake, also made by my mother. This cake was in the shape of a log, with green frosting coloring its surroundings. This type of birthday, with the log cake, was a tradition. In it, my extended family stood beside me. I wore my favorite blue dress and a smile overtook my small face.

The photos that I hold now in my room are ones from the last birthday I would have before moving to America, and perhaps where I also last felt a sense of belonging.

In a writing exercise, I'm told to reflect on the photo and imagine myself as the child again. "What would you say?" The professor asked.

In this imagination I tell the girl, *"This is what love means."*

&

My father is a con artist, and one of his most consistent cons was obtaining a green card. When my mom went to file for the naturalization process, he decided to come along. They were already divorced by then, although he assumed having children made him entitled to it. They sat there as the lawyer explained the lengthy process and how it would take years before any of us could become citizens. I imagine he went through all the stipulations, being a model citizen among the most important. It was then that he looked at my father.

"My advice to you," he said to my mom. "File without him."

"What?" my parents both responded.

"If you want a chance at this green card and a citizenship, he cannot be associated with the application. He will ruin it."

I'm not sure if the lawyer knew about my father's previous cons, but if I had to guess, it's because my father broke his temporary visa. The rest of the night he toggled between yelling at my mother and trying to sweet talk her into going against the lawyer's advice. He told her he loved her and us more than he could bear.

My father was seeing a woman named Monica. She lived in a large two-story house, the kind with wooden floors and stained glass windows, with several roommates from the university, the one my father briefly attended in America. Once when I went to visit this woman, I saw her sitting on my father's lap drinking a beer. Seeing a woman in the thralls of my father's arm was not a rare occurrence, but from my knowledge, at the time my parents were still married. Monica stuck around after my parent's divorce and eventually became my father's second wife. She thought it was love. He saw an older white woman who could give him the only thing he wanted at the time. They eventually moved to Kansas where my father met his third wife. The promise of love is perhaps his greatest trick.

&

I often told people my father was dead. I think what I meant to say is he wasn't coming back. When I ask my mom about the scar on my left eye she calls it a birthmark. I don't know why I don't believe her. In the mirror, I watch it like a scar. I know that's not how scars look—scars are raised, sewn together with thin fibers, you can trace their outlines and edges. My mark is part of my skin, but everytime I look at the red splotch, I think of the times my dad hit me.

&

When I lived in Cairo, my friend Breem showed up one night with a new bike, tasseled with pink ribbons. She rode it through the madina, the white wheels rolling against cobblestone, the pyramids rising behind. I begged her to ride it, watching her as she swept by the bodega, a basket hanging with a note from the flat above. I knew the note well—a list of grocery items. I watched the shopkeeper many times take the note, gather the items and place it in the basket with a handwritten receipt, giving a thumbs up once it was ready. The basket holder rolling it back up to the flat.

When Breem finally agreed to let me use the bike, she insisted I couldn't ride it alone. She told me I either sit on the handlebars or get my own bike and learn how to ride it. I opted for the first and once I got on, Breem paddled hard and fast.

I fell not too long after, a deep gash on my knee exposed muscle and pools of red. My hand was filled with parts of my skin and blood. Breem went to get my grandma who I was living with at the time while my parents traveled. Once I was moved upstairs, she disinfected it with rubbing alcohol. I vomited on the ground and begged her to stop. My

grandma waited three days before taking me to the hospital. When she finally took me, the doctor stitched me up and gave me medication to fight off the infection and high fever that developed. A large scar now lives on my left knee and if you look close enough, you can see the fibers sewn together. This was the second time I almost died. I longed for a father then, even if it meant being held by the same hands that once, for a brief moment, killed me.

&

When my father says he loves me, I do not believe him. To me, love is the greatest word of all, so much so that I have become obsessed with it, continuously attempting to define it, understand it. When he says he loves me, I suspend it in time, breaking down how and why in this moment he could love me. Those three words coming from him stir something in me; in its poetry I hear longing, pain, happiness; I smell the grape leaves on a summer afternoon, I think of the boy who dressed me in white toilet paper and married me in the madina, the pyramids rising behind us. I also think about hope, that maybe he's capable of love despite the evidence against it.

&

My father took care of me only once for a month while my mom was in Egypt. When my mother returned, I looked skinnier to her, paler, patches of dirt on my face, arms and ankles. When she reached in for a hug, I sobbed until sound could no longer come out. She felt the back of my head, my hair matted beyond repair. When I think of what love means to my father, I keep returning to this memory.

&

Egyptian movies and songs have a lot to say about love, the greatest of these messages being love is torment. But America introduced me to an alternative. When I moved, I became obsessed with Tim Burton movies, especially *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Corpse Bride*. Something about loving in death and shadow, a seemingly deserted plane palpable with grief and darkness awakened by bright light and mystery. In his central characters, there's a sense of fragmentation and alienation; they often appear as monsters. There's a searching, a straddling between reality and existence and love and death. In an interview with *Cut Magazine*, Burton said he chooses monsters because he believes they are kinder than the living, more heartfelt—the idea that what appears monstrous can be reformed by love and perhaps then, the monster can belong.

When a Name Means Nothing and Everything

My brother came home one day after his first week in a U.S. elementary school and told me he was renamed. He said this casually, like it was a small rite of passage to belonging.

“I said my name is Khaled and she struggled with it for a little bit,” he said. “She pulled me aside after class and asked what would be an easier name for her to call me.”

He told me that she asked him to pick it out, like you’d pick your outfit in the morning, choosing what suited you best. The next week when he came to class, she took roll. She didn’t struggle with his name then. She claimed it with confidence. “Kyle,” she'd said pointing at my brother. He told me he smiled when she said it.

My first day in third grade I sat in front of the class, my pencil lined carefully next to my notebook on my wooden desk. My teacher called roll out loud, stumbling slightly at my name. She mispronounced it and my ears instantly perked at the way it sounded. *Naaaaduh*—the D sounded thick on her tongue, the A deep and revolting. I raised my hand for her to call on me, for me to tell her she'd said it all wrong. "It's Nuh-dah." I would have said it slow at first, slow enough so she could hear the way it truly sounded. She didn't call on me though, she passed on to another name as quick as she could. She didn't make eye contact with me the rest of the class period.

*

A name is a reflection of identity, of race, family, and culture. There is a long standing tradition in American history of renaming immigrants, handing them new identities at the door to freedom. Some people renamed themselves, some were assigned names. The Ellis Island myth, which states immigrants' names were changed, negates the idea that officers at the gate changed the names of immigrants to something more convenient. Misspelled, yes. Mispronounced, yes. Made up completely, no. But still, there are accounts of people who traced down their genealogy and found their family name was different prior to their ancestors' immigration.

*

I sat in the Citizenship office, my mom standing in line a few rows ahead. The ceiling and walls were white and computers lined the inside of a glass window at the front of the room. I wore a blue-jean skirt. My hair in a ponytail. I kept crossing my legs, one leg over the other until I stood up and sat back down, up and down.

It was hours, surrounded by what felt like hundreds of people before my name was called. I got up fast and followed the lady into an office. The desk was as wide as the office and empty as the rest of the room. It’s not a desk someone lived at.

“These are routine questions,” she told me. It was only a short while later that she congratulated me, her voice holding no emotion.

“Your citizenship is approved,” she said.

Before I got up, she asked me one more question.

“Do you want to change your name? It would make things easier.”

Make what easier, I thought. She asked it like a name is a movie you can stop watching, walk away from and not think twice. I declined. She looked up at me from the documents her eyes were scanning, she asked once more. “Are you sure?”

I walked out feeling a little less American than before.

*

Sahar, my mom, stood at the front of the courtroom among the wooden benches and tables. It was a quick procession. She was waiting to hear the judge's final response, eager to move forward with a new identity. The judge, I'm sure of it, gets hundreds of cases of people requesting name changes. She never told me she was changing her name, I guess it didn’t matter to me at the time. Twelve years old and the only thing I ever called her was mom. Years later in our living room, I asked her why she did it. She told me it was easier.

“For who?” I’d asked.

She said it was for her. She didn’t want to repeat her name out loud to everyone who asked confused. She didn’t want to retell the same story: *I’m from Egypt; Yes I moved here not too long ago; My name means late nights; No, I don’t know why my mom named me that.* When she’d changed her name, her coworkers said it sounded better. I think they meant it sounded normal.

Her light eyes traced my face; she could tell from the way it twisted that I didn't think it was a good enough reason. I thought, none of it is a good enough reason to change who you are.

*

My mom sat me down one night after I told her how many people thought my name meant nothing, a Spanish translation to a non-Spanish girl. I heard it ever since our move to the U.S. Everyday my teacher called roll and said my name, not the way my family said it. My teacher drew out the A sound and with every class and with every person who called my name, it lost its authenticity.

My mom told me it was raining the night I was born, hitting heavy through thirteen hours of labor. She could see it outside her hospital room window. The next morning when she looked outside, half tired, she said she'd focused on the dew drops that had landed on the outside world. Each plant coming to life, anointed with droplets called Nada. She told me my name means rain, or depending on how you looked at it, it's what rain leaves behind.

*

I read somewhere once that only 720 people in the U.S. have been named Nada since 1880. The remaining Nadas of the U.S. are 91 years old or dead. I'm not sure if this is true, but Nada feels like a lonely name.

*

One day my brother stopped going to high school altogether. He'd rise out of his bed every morning and sneak into the bathroom, wait for the house to quiet down, for Mom to leave before he'd reemerge and walk back to his room. He'd stay home alone

usually. I asked him years later why he stopped. He never gave me a straight answer. It wasn't until the last time I asked that he stuck his brown eyes in line with mine, "I was tired of feeling different."

It was following the 9-11 attacks. It started with him missing a few classes, not showing up to social events at school. Eventually though, he withdrew completely. His round face shifted too. He didn't smile as often and when he did, it was tired. The black circles under his eyes became more apparent. He didn't sleep. He told me he'd lie there and think about what they'd do to him in school. Another fight. Another suspension. Another crowd crossing the green field at lunch and punching down his nostrils until they bled.

*

After the Citizenship office, when I'd first received confirmation of my citizenship, I had a heightened awareness of my name. I'd repeat it quietly to myself, practicing the way it sounded. I'd imagine I was someone different hearing my name for the first time. I wanted to hear the way it sounded to others, for me to unlearn it, for it to grow unfamiliar on my tongue. If I could only hear why my name sounded so strange, I'd understand why people saw me differently. I began wondering how different I'd be if I didn't have a name that rang as foreign as my skin.

*

My brother sat across from me on the green wool couch of our childhood. I felt time could rewind with our words. His dark curly hair piled high. His beard an extension.

His brown eyes were soft and his hands rested on the couch armrest. He had a smile of faith, one that leaves as fast as it comes.

"Have you heard of DJ Khaled?" he said. I laughed, my hands folded in on each other, my brown hair skirting the top of my ribbed, black shirt. Of course, everyone has heard of him. His music I can't remember, his name though, it sticks in my head. I think it sticks in the minds of the masses.

"If I'm being honest with you," he said, leaning in closer. "If I'm being honest, I changed my name back to Khaled because of him. He made it sound a little more normal now, a little cooler, didn't he?"

Kyle reclaimed his name—It is Khaled, he said, watching the way my dark eyes moved to the loud sound of his voice.

"I thought you wanted to be Kyle?"

"I once felt like that, but I realized a name doesn't change how people see you, it only changes how you see yourself."

Change your name all you want, it doesn't change the way you look. The beard long and threatening, the salt and pepper of his hair curled loud for everyone to see. Brown skin as an armor. His figure stood regardless of what he was called, Kyle, Khaled, sand nigger, terrorist.

All those years ago in his elementary school when his teacher assigned him Kyle, he heard acceptance, but changing his name didn't change the color of his skin or his foreign tongue.

After leaving high school it took awhile for him to admit his name with confidence. He reclaimed it, like reclaiming a lost soul. He said, "It is Khaled," but I saw in his eyes a subtle pain.

*

Most of my family who moved to America were also renamed. Amr became Ryan, Marawan became Adam. Khaled, my uncle, became Hal, and my father, Magdi, became Mike. Although, my father would go on to rename himself many more times than I could count.

*

My mom wore her hair in a brown ponytail, the frayed tips of blonde visible at its bottom. Her fair skin glowing with light freckles. If she didn't have her accent, maybe changing her name was all it took to make her white. I asked her if she ever regrets changing her name because even though she changed it for everyone who didn't know her, her family began calling her Sara. People who called the house called her Sara. Sara overtook Sahar in the first ten years of our big move until Sahar became as foreign to her as to anyone.

She learned to unlearn her name.

“If people still call me Sahar, I hear Sara," she said.

It was then I wondered if my mom knew what moving to a new country would do to us. How different we’d feel from the rest. Many times I asked my mom why we moved, her answer was always the same: “For a free life.”

In Tahrir

It is dark. The street lamps let off a hazy glow. It is quiet and still and lonely. The way an empty desert appears beneath a bed of starlight. A large military tank idles in the middle of this street. This tank, dull brown and gre, blocks the majority of the road, its gun turret pointing toward the entryway of the madina. Two men lean against it, cigarettes dangling from their mouths. Wrapped around them are loaded rifles, the sort of rifles meant for war.

My mother and brother have recently arrived in Egypt, weeks following the great revolution. They are in our old flat on the seventh floor and want to leave for dinner. They walk down the flat into the alleyway.

No one is out.

They walk for only a few moments before the two military men notice them. These men raise their rifles slowly and fire one shot, two shots, three shots into the sky. These are called warning shots. It is past curfew and no one is allowed outside.

They both run back down the alleyway into the flat and shut and lock the door.

"What happened here?" she asks. It is the sort of question one wishes had a simple answer, like when a glass breaks or when one wakes up from a dream.

***

At the time, I didn't think anything of it. I was sitting in our living room alongside my mom and brother in our Temecula home. I came home from where I'd been to a loud TV screen fixed on a news channel playing and replaying footage of protesters in Egypt marching through streets. Me, worlds away, nestled in the safety of our United States democracy watching Egypt rise. The anchor kept calling it a revolution.

***

We will fill the world with our poetry

Our words will stand in the square

And they will be like bullets in this war

People gathered by the millions in downtown Cairo's Tahrir square. Plastic sheets and tents covered the surrounding grounds laid among sand and pebbles. I'd seen it on screens, through videos from family back home, from live news reports and documentaries. Each square inch of the place was packed with bodies raised against the night sky onto dawn. It didn't matter—Muslims, Christians, poets, singers—the people stood together chanting along in what went down in history as one of the greatest revolutions.

The revolution was initially sparked by President Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak's declaration—that he planned to remain in office and the presidency would be passed down to his son. Following a three-decade long ruling, the people of Egypt wanted change from corruption, injustice, and poverty created under his regime. On January 25, 2011 the people took to the streets, dispersing among alleyways, wide and open spaces, and roads in what is known as the "day of rage." Protesters populated downtown Cairo and small towns all over, eventually all funneling into Medan el Tahrir. The revolution's square. The people raised their country's red, white, and black flags floating like sheets in cold air. The cheers and chants were louder than bullets. After 30 years of ruling under a false pretense of democracy, in a dictator-like fashion, the people of Egypt wanted to break the corrupt system wide open. They were all willing to die for it.

Freedom is for everyone.

Freedom is for everyone.

Freedom is for everyone

The country had erupted all at once.

***

The wind flutters the rugs and shawls lining the desert ground. Women and children are seated on the dirt and broken cobblestones. My mother pulls my hand, walking faster.

"Alabaster!" A woman shouts, moving her seated body back and forth. She is dressed in black, her hair covered in hijab.

"Hand-made clothes," another woman says.

There are many lined up, one next to the other. Some of those selling knick-knacks and souvenirs are small children. A young boy with brown shorts and a torn t-shirt is selling lemon. His siblings all sit beside him. This boy appears older than the rest.

"Ms. buy some lemons, please." He talks with urgency. "I need to feed my siblings."

I turn to look at his siblings once more, before being pulled away from the street and out of the alleyway.

I was too young to understand what it all meant then. I took it as a forever part of Egypt. But I know it is wrong to call it normal.

***

It started peacefully, as most protests do, but devolved with secret police raiding the streets—throwing bombs, shooting the public. If you were protesting, you were willing to die. People were forbidden to speak poorly of the government, and those who did were beaten, killed, jailed or disappeared.

***

There was a man who lived in front of our flat when my brother and I were kids. My mom would walk downstairs every morning and bring him breakfast, bread and beans mostly. She brought enough to feed his kids, too. And every time, she told me, every time he'd kiss her hand and cry. Egypt is filled with people like that man, with children and women and men who survived hungry and sleepless. What does one do with this injustice but spark a revolution.

***

For the first time in our lives, we couldn't be silenced, we reclaimed our freedom, and we dreamt that one day all of Egypt would be like Tahrir Square

Mubarak was not willing to step down, he simply delegated power to Omar Suleiman, his vice president, but he still remained in office. Mubarak thought that people would perceive this gesture as him stepping down, but the country already saw and knew Suleiman as a figurehead meant to appease the masses. They've been fed manipulation before at the hands of Mubarak and this was not different. Egyptians knew if Mubarak

remained in office, true change would never come. And so the people of Egypt kept returning to the streets until he abdicated the office and left Cairo.

The night Mubarak stepped down from his presidency, the vice president, Omar Suleiman, announced it on television. His face solemn and defeated. That night Egypt grew louder as people stayed out late into the night cheering, fireworks and flame throwers lighting the night sky. The days before and during the revolution, the people of Egypt banded together as a society, camping in the square, sleeping on plastic sheets in the cold air waiting for change. Tahrir Square changed Egypt completely; it became a place where people could rise up against oppression and win.

In the days to come, the country surrendered itself to the military who promised to move into a state of true democracy. The army functioned as its own entity with its own set of powers, which made it the most powerful governing voice at the time of the revolution.

***

Tanks are parked on the streets of Cairo. The soldiers dressed in camouflage, patrolling the city. One of the tanks is marked by graffiti from protesters. Curfew draws near and the city begins to disappear. Along the walls are hand painted protest signs and more graffitti. A famous revolutionary artist named Ganzeer paints a mural of a man on a

bicycle carrying bread on his head. In this painted image is a large army tank, its gun turret pointing forward.

There were moments within this revolution when the army didn't appear as threatening, where people playfully rode on top accompanied by soldiers who felt like celebrities, smiling at the absurdity of it all.

***

It was a Sunday afternoon. I asked my brother where my father was during the revolution. I asked for one reason only. To see if he, an opportunist, was up to his same old tricks.

"In Alexandria, probably scamming someone," he said.

***

After watching the revolution unfold from our television screen, my mother reached out to as many family members as she could. I sat on our green couch and watched her dial phone number after phone number. It was late into the evening when she finally stopped. I reached my hand to hold hers, and watched her cry. I did not understand those tears, not as I do now. She had lived through a great war and understood its destruction. What is a revolution if not a great war.

***

During the days of the revolution, the people of Egypt united with one another. When the call for protesting first began, no one knew if their neighbor would show, if only the college youth would lead, but one Egyptian after the other appeared at protest sites with their flags and signs and voices until millions of people filled the streets. Men and women. They danced in circles, clapping along to each chant. Poetry and song are an age old tradition in Egypt, to fight with poetry and music and words was to hold the greatest fight of all.

Still, there lives a looming sense of a dictatorship. A feeling of a false freedom, as though the worst is yet to come.

***

The road is empty. The sky grey and heavy. I'm pulling onto 4th Street when my brother calls. His voice is tense and unassuring. It is early in the morning where he is, too early for him to be up.

"People are protesting again," he says. His voice sounds defeated. "Same situation, different year."

I have nothing to say.

"There is something else," he tells me. "Our cousin is missing."

"What do you mean missing?" I ask, pulling the car over.

"He was protesting when the secret police caught him. No one knows where he is."

It is 2019. My brother is in Egypt and I am in Portland. People are protesting in a demonstration held in Tahrir Square as a result of the citizen's dissatisfaction with the standing Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Our cousin was taken by police and held without bail or notification of his whereabouts. As the protests in the country escalated, news outlets such as *Al Jazeera* were banned from entering the country and reporting on the protests. My brother tells me it's because he thinks the government fears what the news would lead to—a repetition of history. I know it's only a matter of time before Egypt erupts once more.

When he tells me this, I feel this longing, a need, to see Egypt living a free life. But it is haunted.

Ways of Scamming

The walls were made of dirty white paint over cracked concrete, a small desk living in the center of the room, two black chairs adjacent to it. My father set up a small office in a rural part of an Egyptian town named Abu Hummus. It wasn't the first time he had done this, construct a fake office from the little to no money he had, and from what I know of my father, the floor schematics were always similar.

***

When I visit Egypt, I like to be close to the river. To sit on the retaining ledge and watch the gentle Nile in its motion. I think of the ancients who sailed it. At night the Nile appears black and the air around it is still and thick. It feels safe, like if I wanted to, at any moment I can escape into it. In ancient Egyptian mythology, the Nile was considered a sacred river, a being that felt such emotions as happiness and anger, guided by gods like Osiries and Hapi and Isis. When the Nile was happy, the river rose enough to cultivate the land, producing food and vegetation. When the Nile was angry, though, it caused a famine, starving the very people that worshipped it.

***

Out of a population of 100 million people, one of three Egyptians live in poverty.

***

My dad's business models were built off one major truth—people wanted out. It was simple really: money in exchange for my dad's connection to the United States. Money in, visa out. He built a clientele off his knowledge of the American immigration system. He knew English, he'd lived in the United States and he had connections with people there—he seemed more qualified and credible than other scammers who set up shop. He knew the system from the inside and so he knew how to twist its language.

***

Half up front, half when you get the visa. It takes a few months, six months tops. Don't worry, I've got connections. Your application won't be denied. You have me working for you. Better pack your bags soon. Have you told your family? Yes, it's on its way. What will you do when you get there? You should go to New York first. Yes, you'll find a job, it's easy. Ok, I don't know what the hold up is. Let me call. No, I spent the money already. No, it's not coming. Sometimes it happens. Not all applications get accepted. I can try again. I'll need more money. No, there's nothing else you can do. Save up and come back again. I'm sure it'll work the next time around. I can't help you. Stop calling. I said stop calling.

***

To get out, an Egyptian needs to adhere to strict conditions when applying for a U.S. visa. I'm told that an Egyptian resident must have a consistent job, at least 100,000 Egyptian Pounds saved, a stable home and family. These stipulations are to gauge if they're a flight risk. My brother told me this when I asked about why a friend I had in

Egypt couldn't come visit me. He told me he thinks some of these rules are unwritten, that immigrants are always going to be seen as a flight risk, especially when they come from countries like Egypt. To get out, they need to already have the conditions they are searching for.

***

I don't know who this man was or how he looked or what his hopes and dreams were. All I know is that he lived in the same rural town where my father set up shop. I imagine this man to be tall; I'm told he was in his early 40s and had a family: a wife, two kids, and a brother. I think he was handsome, dark hair, dark eyes. I imagine him as a nervous man climbing up the few steps into my father's office. I imagine him stepping in and sitting on one of the black chairs facing my father's desk.

His palms are a little warm. He looks at my father and asks him about a visa, how much it might cost, it's five visas total. He thinks it's like a bank, a hefty deposit for a little bit of freedom. I imagine my father responding, telling him 25,000 Egyptian Pounds. The man's entire savings, his whole fortune. I imagine my dad leaning in, elbows sharp on the desk, saying, *a small price to pay for a way out.*

***

Con artists exist everywhere—they are sociopaths, preying on the vulnerable. When I think about the state of Egypt, though, I think maybe some are just desperate people. My brother told me all of Egypt had gone to sleep and woke up the next day to an economic collapse. Inflation rates doubled from 8 IE to 17 IE for one American dollar. It

was unforeseen. He told me the middle class in Egypt was disappearing too, or already disappeared. He told me that in Egypt, the poor wake up poorer.

***

It didn't take too long for my father to convince the man to give up his money and as two, three, four, months passed, the man grew impatient. He'd show up to the office unannounced, pacing around the desk asking when the visas would arrive. He'd call my father once a day and tell him he'd need to see progress, see email correspondence, see his applications, see his future.

One day the man showed up again, although this time he looked resigned and as my father rose up from his chair to meet him, he could tell from the way the man's face twisted that the scam was up.

I imagine the man's face looking pained. I imagine him taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. I close my eyes too. In my head I think I hear their conversation.

Where are the visas, Magdi?

Don't worry, come on, sit, sit down. I'll get you some tea.

I don't want tea, I want my visas.

I was going to call you today, the applications got denied.

I want my money back.

I don't have your money, I used your money to try and get the visas.

I want my money, Magdi.

It's gone.

All of it?

All of it.

The man finally gets up from the chair, his dark eyes red. His heart beating fast. He'd lost all of his money, his family's money. He thinks about his two kids. He thinks about his wife and brother. He thinks of all the promises he made to them. Each thought growing darker, each breath growing shorter.

The man lingers at my father's door, leaning against the frame.

He clasps his shirt and tries to breathe.

He can't. He thinks of his daughter and his son and his small flat by the water. He falls to the ground. The last person he looks at is my father.

***

Have I told you about the Felucca? A small boat, five Egyptian Pounds, that's less than 50 cents to you. It plays ridiculous music and sails on the Nile for fifteen minutes. It's what the locals do for fun as a family. They sit on the boat that flashes green and purple and blue from the outdated disco ball and they dance. They laugh too. I was on the boat watching it happen with my cousin and her husband as they passed me a small wrapped paper, in it peanuts and sunflower seeds. I munched on it, the sound of the music filling the river. The boat doesn't go very far. In it you feel small, but anything for a chance to sail the Nile.

***

My father is believable and funny and thinks that "stupid people" are God's gift to him. He said it to me once when we were on our way to the marina. It was during Eid and my dad wanted to take me somewhere he knew I could get cheap knick knacks. As we approached the gates into the marina, a guard stopped us and asked us to pay a fee. My dad didn't want to though and quickly responded with a stern voice to the officer in the white uniform, "I'm the captain of the ship departing in fifteen minutes, let me in." The man saluted him and my dad shifted the gears of the Volvo and sped into the parking lot. He laughed the whole way in. I asked him why he did it. That's when he told me, "if you're stupid enough to get conned, then you deserve to get conned."

***

It's a winter night, I imagine my dad outside of his office locking up. He begins walking to his flat, wrapping his blue scarf a little tighter around his neck. The air is cold and maybe it's raining, the moon reflecting on the dark clouds. It's a rural small town and so no one is out. I think I want him to do it. A van pulls up behind him, I think the van might have been white. It trails him until the end of the street corner. My dad is no longer visible on the main street and is walking through the alley. I think I want him to do it. He's almost to his flat, he lives on the 4th floor. Three men get out of the van and follow my father, feet on broken cobblestones break the silence. I think I want him to do it. My father turns around and sees them approaching, he knows. I think I want him to do it. He

runs. I think I want him to do it. The men run too and they're faster. They grab him by his blue scarf and pull him closer. I think I want him to do it. My dad is choking. My dad falls to the ground. I think I want him to do it. The men grab his body and throw him into the back of the van and they speed away from the alley onto the main street and they're taking him somewhere and they're not even sure where yet. I think I want him to do it. There's one more person in the van. This person is a man and he punches my father. Again, he punches my father. The man now has blood on his hands. He's the brother. I think I want him to do it. When the van stops, two more people enter. One of them is a woman and she's in a hijab. She seems to be crying. The brother kicks my dad awake and tells him to get up. I think I want him to do it. My dad also starts crying and pleads, he asks what they want, anything, he'll give him anything. The brother pulls my dad up and chokes him, I think I want him to do it, he says he wants to kill him. I think I want him to do it. He says my dad took away someone he loved. I think I want him to do it. He yells heart attack. He yells where's the money. I think I want him to do it. He says the kids don't have their father and they don't have food and they can't afford to give him a proper burial. I think I want him to do it. The brother pulls out a knife then and brings it to my father's neck. I think I want him to do it. But he doesn't, I think I want him to do it. I think I want him to.

***

There's a story about a father who threw his children from the bridge above the Nile River because he couldn't feed them. Or a woman who hung herself outside of her

shop the morning following the economic collapse. One man shot his sons and himself. Another story, another man, he shot his daughter. Some even die in their sleep or due to untreated medical complications. Each police report stated a similar cause of death, though none of them can afford to live or eat and so death was the only way out.

***

Ways of scamming:

An Egyptian man meets and falls in love with an American woman. This man has brown eyes, bovine and ordinary. He's gentle and handsome and kind. There's a brilliance in him, a humor filled with sarcasm and wit. His name might be Amar. He holds her hand and tells her he's never met anyone more beautiful. He might tell her she is the only person he can think about and he doesn't know how to live without her. He also tells her to take him back with her.

A vendor sits on the desert ground in front of the pyramids. He sees a visitor and asks if she wants a picture with a camel. She asks the price. He tells her not to worry, he'll give her a good deal. The joke is on her though. He doubles the price.

Kids carrying souvenirs and knicknacks approach a woman eating lunch, one of the kids is carrying a baby, the other one has one eye, the other girl is missing a limb. The woman feels a pain in her chest and hands them a $20 bill. The kids disappear and meet each

other at another location. There's a ring leader, an adult man, he takes all the money they've collected.

A father approaches his daughter, she's American. He's not. He lives in Egypt and wants money, so he cries and tells her he's poor. He tells her he can never have the life she has so she owes him something. The daughter feels like she owes him too. The father uses the money she gives him to set up a fake visa office.

***

Tell me a story about a poor man and I'll tell you about the streets of Egypt, humble and dust and magic. I'll say, have you met Abass, he's a man dragging a horse and a ton of fake and cheap breakables around for the tourists. At night, he sleeps on the black concrete of paved desert. He knows English but he's never been to school. It's a buyer's and seller's language. Oh, he's kind, but he'll try to upsell, but it's not really an upsell, you see a 100 IE to him is $3 to you. So give it to him. Let him eat.

***

Feluccas are what the ancient Egyptians used as funeral boats. They placed the dead in them, releasing it to sail the River Nile into the afterlife. When the boat reaches the edge of the real world and just before it crosses into the afterlife, a line of gods

appear. The ancients believed that each god judged the dead separately before granting them access to eternity.

The poor never made it to a funeral boat, instead they were buried in the sand beneath the desert. I wonder if a line of gods wait for them too. I also wonder about the man, if he made it to a Felucca, one last chance to sail the River Nile.

Great Sand Sea

The Sahara, the largest sand desert in the world, spans over one million square miles. When I think of the Sahara, I think of long drives through the emptiness; I think of the tribes that live in its crux, of how nothing and everything can exist at once. Within it lies other deserts, each with a different name for the different forms it adopts. The white desert is known for its bright white sand, while the black desert contains volcanic sediment that paints the rocks and rubble a charcoal color. Hills of darkness. There's also the blue desert that lives within the Sinai Peninsula which lives in the larger Sahara. The blue desert is hills upon hills thirty feet high covered in blue stones. The Arabian desert is near the Nile and reaches as far as the red sea, in its mountains there's oil and bedouin villages. Then there's the great sand sea—dunes and mountains and sharp winds, a tempest. About 90 percent of Egypt exists on this desert.

Before my father returned to the desert, he once lived in America. He's the reason my family and I immigrated from Egypt. Prior to our big move, he applied for engineering school and got in. My dad could assemble an entire computer in less than a day if he wanted to. I often found him with a screwdriver and computer parts scattered across the floor, a cigarette never left his mouth. He stared hard at the parts and moved one piece into the next, an artist building a sculpture.

I used to think my dad was the smartest man in the world.

When he moved to the U.S. he landed in the city of Riverside, California and lived with roommates from college. My mom, along with me and my brother stayed behind as he set up housing for all of us. As months went by, he stopped calling my mom, stopped responding to messages, he always blamed it on the distance, it being hard to talk from across the world. When my mom finally got a hold of my dad, she told him to come back. Her voice was shaky, her small hands wrapped around the telephone. He said no and so my mom followed him to America instead. When I ask my brother about why we moved years later, he tells me it was because my father wanted a better life for himself. *You either come to America or you and the kids can figure out your lives there on your own. You either come to America or we get a divorce. You either come to America or tell the kids to forget they have a father*. Of course, my mom had told us a different story.

Long ago the desert was alive. This phase only really existed within a span of a few millennia, but in it there was vegetation and consistent rainfall. Giraffes and other animals lived and survived and flourished. There were pools and pools of water. In the Sahara's timeline, following the burst of liveliness, harshness descended upon the valley.

Science states that evolution and climate change brought on the true colors of the desert. The desert was always meant to be doomed.

Ancient Egyptians knew how to work and live on desert, though. They created a whole civilization off the uninhabitable by mapping out the strengths and weaknesses of the land. There was the red land, a network of different types of deserts, and black land, the strip of fertile ground located by the banks of the River Nile. Beauty living in harshness—I think the ancients knew this about the desert, and so they built their empire on dust.

When I was younger and still lived in Egypt, my family frequently drove between cities, either from Cairo to Alexandria or from Alexandria to Sharm El Sheikh. Sometimes we drove for days in our small four-door sedan past the borders of Egypt, as far as Saudi Arabia. The drives were always in desert. I sat in the back with my brother, my mom and dad in front. I rested my head against the window and watched the pavement blend with the darkness of the desert. The drives were always at night, where my brother let me lay my head on his shoulder as I dozed off. Sometimes the only two awake were my dad and I. He had this ability to drive for long periods without needing rest. He played Abdel el Haleem and sang along quietly, the same song he played on the piano, the one we all danced to. Even when the car fell still, I would catch him looking at the black road ahead. He seemed more human during those drives. A man contemplating

his destiny and existence among the quiet lull of the road. Someone capable of looking past his own body into the great sand sea.

The blue desert is remarkable to me, not because of its back story—a manmade desert created by a Belgian artist named Jean Verame following the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. The artwork was meant to symbolize peace, so Verame painted a line of the largest rocks and boulders blue, a marker of harmony along the two borders. But, no, that's not why I long to be in that desert. There is something about the color blue among sand, a stark positioning, a reminder that even in the desert, the blue stones rise and color the desolate. In the desert, one can stumble upon peace.

When I visited Egypt in the summer of 2019, my brother wanted to show me the country as a tourist would see it—a mysterious place, inexplicable and romantic, just as it is doomed. Some days we sat at a coffee shop on the Alexandria Coast. The air tasted of salt and the sun lay quiet ahead; I rarely feel sun like that, harsh and sharp and comforting. We visited this particular coffee shop when we needed to escape from our family, spending hours, sometimes the whole day safely tucked at a table by the ledge overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Sometimes we stared out into the large body of water, other times he'd take a nap under the warmth of the sun and thick air. Most of the time, though, I asked him questions about our dad.

Tell me something about dad

What would you like to know?

Tell me something good.

He's funny, but don't go looking for something else that isn't there.

Do you think things would have been different if he wasn't deported?

Dad chose to leave.

I first heard the story of my father's deportation out of the United States when I was a teenager. My mom told me in passing that my father was pulled over by the police. He was driving in Kansas where he lived with his fourth wife when an officer stopped his car and asked for identification. At the time, my dad broke his Visa and was considered an illegal immigrant. My father apparently tried to sweet talk the white Kansas cop into letting him go. The original story goes, my father was thrown in jail and then taken to the airport and sent back to Egypt. My mom said he couldn't say goodbye, her light eyes seemed a little hurt. *He couldn't say bye because they didn't give him a chance.*

In the great sand sea of the Sahara lives four of the world's largest sand dunes. Mountainous figures that exist for miles on end, a soft sand piled endlessly. Sometimes

the only signs of life are the winds and sand storms. They come at dusk howling at emptiness, a sharp whistling pushing into air. Everything seems louder in the quiet. Even then though, I wouldn't mind getting lost in it, lie on the deceivingly soft ground and float.

The true story of my father's deportation didn't reveal itself until almost a decade later. My brother tells me this at the cafe by the shore because I'm old enough to know now. My paternal grandma passed away in her sleep while my dad was still living in America. My aunt called my father and told him what happened and that it was a tragedy he never got to say goodbye. I think she asked him to come home for the funeral but he said he couldn't because if he left the country he wouldn't be able to come back in. Months went by until his sister called again, this time informing my father that he was left a sum of money as part of an inheritance. My father clung to the word inheritance. The only stipulation is that he had to be in Egypt to receive it.

The next day he turned himself in, said he was undocumented, that he had broken the visa and was living here for over ten years. He was assigned a lawyer, one that could help him build a case to stay in America. No one quite understood why he refused assistance from this pro bono lawyer. *You have your family here*, he was told. *You can stay here with their help*. When one is deported, the flight out of America is paid for. My

dad knew this; he wanted to leave the country without paying for his own ticket. He's nothing if not a man who follows money.

Both stories of my father's deportation had one thing in common: he never called to tell us he was leaving the country indefinitely. Sometimes I think I was never worth a goodbye. Though, from what I know of con artists, they never give the jig up until absolutely necessary and my father had a long way to go before that became true.

You are walking in sand, the desert moving, its sepia body infinite. You look out and see empty and dry and dust. The pyramids hover around you. The heat hurts your face and you move your hand up to shield your eyes from the sweat and sting of summer. You're smiling, though, and keep walking. You and the desert are endless.

At dusk, you look up at how the desert sky changes, leaving faint strips of blue, purple. Fire fire. The desert is alone and so are you, but something in the quiet of it holds you there.

When night comes, it has no light for you, no sound, only the slow moon rising above. There are no howls or cars or people. There's a stillness and the desert turns into ocean, black and immense and indistinguishable. So you swim.

From above in space, the desert a sea of fire.

The more I try, the more I find myself writing outside of my own body. Sometimes I think it's because I don't want to make space for him on the page, or in my

memories. Sometimes though, I think I'm writing to him, or worse, as him. When I asked my brother why my dad is the way he is my brother couldn't give me the answer I wanted. To me, I wanted something redeemable, like desert that somehow became survivable, even in its harshness it let life in. *He's always been this way,* I hear my brother saying. *He'll always be that way.*

When I think of something that is alive, I think of full trees and plants, of rivers and oceans and people, of cool air, and warm sun. I don't think of the desert. What exists there now are species that have learned to adapt to the extreme conditions. There are cheetahs and birds and camels; the Fennec Fox, the least studied of all the foxes; sandy colored coats. There are scorpions and silver ants and desert crocodiles hiding in caves and buried in sand. These species are painted with the same color coats as the desert, so they hide in plain sight. I think of them as deceivers and survivors, powerful enough to survive the harshest of conditions, smart enough to deceive their prey.

It's been said that the Sahara is unforgiving, a vast and empty ground deemed uninhabitable. The heat alone was never meant to touch a body. But it was also once a place alive with plants and grass and water. When I walk in the desert I think back to what it once was. It's hard to imagine, but I know that place existed, I think it still does. It's where desert meets water. Oasis among dust. I think it's odd to label the Sahara unforgiving. The desert never did ask for forgiveness.

1–7

1.

Find a nice woman on a Muslim dating app or in-person. This woman should be Muslim, maybe above 30, widowed, divorced or if you're lucky, a European or American citizen. Make her laugh. It's simple: use your charm to disarm her. Tell her quirky jokes about yourself to seem more human. Effortless.

***

It is night and the deck is quiet. I sit at a table by the ship's edge, looking down at the Nile. The water is almost black, and I try to gauge its depth but cannot. I do not know what it is I am looking for but I fear the river has no bottom, something endless and haunting and suspicious. I want to disappear in it.

"Ms. would you like a drink?" There is a bartender. He is tall and thin and speaks to me in Arabic. He asks again, this time moving closer. I look at him and shake my head.

He brings his hand to his chest, "Okay, if you need anything, my name is Amar." He half-smiles at me and slightly bows.

"I am Nada." I don't know why I tell the man this, but I know I don't want him to leave.

He is young, looks about my age, and appears kind.

"You're Egyptian, I can tell by the shape of your eyes." He looks at me and I can see the almond shape of his.

I smile and respond in Arabic, but he laughs at the sound of my voice. “Oh, but you do not live here?”

I am surprised by his question. “How can you tell?”

“Your accent, it’s lovely, but it’s not Egyptian.” He moves closer and notices the book on the table. It is Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water*. The cover is of a woman’s bare chest, two brown nipples at its center. “You’re American?”

I do not like his question. I pause, “I am also Egyptian.”

He pulls out a chair and sits next to me, “May I?”

I nod. He is handsome. His eyes are brown, and his face is oval and clean-shaven. He can tell I want to talk. It is midnight and no one is out.

“Why are you back in Egypt? In Aswan of all places.” He shifts his chair to face mine.

Aswan is dry and unbearably hot in the summer, but it is where a great majority of ancient Egyptian relics and other monuments are preserved. My brother and mother booked a seven-day cruise on the Nile, sailing from Cairo to Luxor and then Asawan as part of our trip to get me reacquainted with the country. I do not feel like explaining this to him, though.

“Do you ask everyone you meet these questions?”

He leans in closer. “No, only people I want to know.”

Another man dressed in a suit appears on the deck. He is bald and older. His name tag signals he is some sort of manager. Amar jumps from his chair and moves back from the table.

"If you'd like anything else Ms., please let us know."

He walks back to the bar and begins polishing wine glasses. He stares at me from where he's standing. The manager is a few feet away from him, scanning the deck. Amar begins closing down the bar and I take it as my cue to leave. I grab my book and walk across the deck to the stairs, the manager eyeing me with suspicion.

"Good night Ms." he says, forcing a smile.

"Wait, Ms. Nada." I turn around to see Amar quickly approaching me with a tab. "You forgot to sign your receipt."

I didn't order anything, and as I'm about to explain that it must be a mistake, he pushes the receipt into my hand.

In English, the paper reads, *Tomorrow, same time, please?*

I grab the pen from him and sign, *Yes.*

***

The first day my father met my mother, he said he fell madly in love with her. He arrived one day at her flat after being invited as a suitor. My father took one look at my mother and couldn't stop thinking about how beautiful she was.

“I wasn’t in a rush to get married,” my mom told me one night after I asked her why she chose my father. “But I was 28 and my parents were worried I would soon be unmarriable, so they arranged it.”

“Why dad, though, out of all the men who loved you before, why him?”

“He made me laugh,” she said, looking down at her hands. “And he promised me a good life.”

“He had money then?”

“No, I paid for my own dowry and I bought the flat myself. He promised he would pay it back once he got settled at his “fancy” new job. He never did.”

***

2.

Tell her you can give her the world or whatever she asks for. Call her on the phone, be consistent here. Maybe tell her how much money you have and property you possess. Be careful here. You must slip it in naturally in conversation. For example: Tell her you drove [insert fancy car] to the shop today because it needed maintenance. Or maybe say, “I tried cleaning the house today, but it’s too big for a lonely man like myself to do it alone.” Then, if she buys it, tell her you bought her a present. It’s nothing big, just something small you saw and it made you think of her. Tell her you’re thinking of buying another home if you get married. Make sure to add, “when the right woman comes

along." Do not in any circumstance reveal too early that you've been married six times or that you're running from the law.

***

While teaching in Libya, my father grew close to one of his students, a 21-year-old girl attending the extension school he worked. My father was 60 or older at the time. This woman was younger than me and feared for her future and life in Libya. My father made a proposition to her: he would marry her and get her out of Libya to Egypt, where, and according to my father, a life of luxury awaited her. He promised her a nice house and a quiet life away from the violence and inescapability of the place they now both lived.

***

It is my second night in Aswan. I walk to the deck and order a small coffee before returning to the same table to read. There are a few more people out than the night before. It is 9 p.m. A young waiter approaches me and drops my coffee off. He appears to be in his early 20s.

"You like to read a lot, don't you?" He looks around before he asks this.

"Yes, I do." I smile, thinking the conversation is over.

"I can tell, I see you all over the ship reading while everyone else is in the pool or with their families. But you, you like to be alone." He looks at me after he says this, his eyes brown and gentle.

"I . . . I don't know what to say," I tell him.

He clears his throat and apologies to me quickly. “Sorry, I don’t mean to say that. Let me know if you need—.”

Amar appears behind him and puts his hand on his shoulder.

“Leave the nice lady alone, huh, Mahamed,” he says.

Mahamed rolls his eyes at Amar and pushes his hand off.

“Goodnight Ms.,” Mahamed says before leaving.

Amar looks around before pulling a chair beside me. His arm rests on the back of my chair.

“Want me to get you something else to drink besides coffee?”

“Like what?” I look down at the book in my hand and fiddle with its pages.

“Like juice! We can do orange or apple or pineapple, anything you want really.”

I look up at him. “Do you . . . mix anything else with the juice?”

He smiles and leans in closer. “You want what the foreigners drink?”

I like the way he says foreigners, as though I am not one of them. “I think so?”

His voice is low. “Do you want a mojito?”

I laugh at how he whispers it, as though drinking is the great sin.

He laughs too. “Shhh . . . you’re going to give yourself away.”

***

.The living room was warm, the summer heat and sun invading our small flat. Outside, the city appeared expansive and desolate. There were no trees or plants or grass, instead sand and dirt covered the majority of the grounds. The sun beat down harsher

than usual, the sky a dull orange. From the living room my parents can hear the bombs detonate, piercing the air in an otherwise empty town. The grounds shook.

"It's getting closer," my father said, pulling us in closer. Both my brother and me huddled underneath the table between my father and mother.

"We should leave, Magdi, we need to get away," my mom said to him. "The bomb shelter isn't enough anymore."

There were no flights out of the city, and so they drove on in a car through the rest of the night into Jeddah, where a ship was waiting to take us from Saudi Arabia to Egypt. There were no rooms available, so we spent the rest of the week on the deck with other Gulf-War refugees watching the city they love crumble. I was a newborn at the time, but there, above the ship in the middle of the sea, was proof of a family before the height of the con artist.

When I ask my mother what it is she finds special in this memory, she says she is reminded of the way he held onto us.

"He seemed so worried," she said, "so full of love and fear."

***

It is a full moon tonight. There is no cool breeze and the air is warm and still. People begin to clear out of the deck until only Amar and me are left. The only sounds are the clinking of wine glasses from the bar and the sway of the river against the ship. Amar looks around before sliding below the bar and onto the main deck. He rolls the

sleeves of his white collar shirt and removes his apron, tossing it somewhere behind the bar. I try not to look at him, but there is something familiar about the way he moves.

He is still near the bar when his phone rings. I shift my gaze away from him and to the Nile. It doesn't take long before he's behind me.

"We're officially closed for the night Ms." He approaches the rail in front of my seat, leaning against it, and lights a cigarette. Marlboro Red. He smiles a wide smile and moves closer.

I shift in my chair, trying to put space between us. My face feels hot. I realize why he seems familiar. The stench of cigarette smoke pushes into my lungs, and I'm suddenly sick.

"Want a cigarette?"

"No, I don't like the taste of it."

He takes the cigarette and drops it on the ground, stepping on it. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. Please forgive me."

I give off a half-smile but still feel uneasy.

Amar looks behind me and nods. I turn around to see Mahamed and another man I have not seen before. It is now midnight and we are the only ones on the deck.

Amar shakes the strange man's hand and introduces him as Ahmed. He ignores Mahamed.

Mahamed looks concerned. "What are you still doing up here?" he asks me.

“I didn’t want to leave and no one kicked me out,” I respond. “Besides, I like making new friends.”

Mahamed senses my sarcasm and laughs a little. He asks about my day and my book and my family. He tells me he really likes my mom from the few conversations they’ve had and pulls out his phone to show me pictures of his family and sisters and a few of the pottery pieces he’s made. I want to laugh because I can see where he wants to take the conversation.

“May I ask, are you married or engaged to someone?” Mahamed asks this quietly, quiet enough so Amar can’t hear. Amar is busy talking to Ahmed who works as a tour guide in the city, picking up families from the ship and escorting them to the sights and back. Ahmed has a gold chain around his neck and he’s wearing a white button-up and black pants. In fact, all of them are dressed similarly. I am in all black.

“No I'm not seeing anyone. What about you, are you married?” Mahamed smiles at my answer.

“Oh, no not me. I can’t afford to get married in the traditional sense.”

“Can’t afford it?”

“You have to have a certain amount of money for a dowry and to buy a flat to move into. Either that or the woman’s family won’t approve. That’s why I’m looking for someone who’s not interested in those traditions.”

“What about Amar? Is he married?”

He looks disappointed in my question, but answers.

"No he is not married, but he almost was. He couldn't afford it either. His ex-fiance's parents gave him a year to get a dowry together, but working here doesn't make that kind of money, so she left him. It really broke his heart."

I feel a slight sadness, but keep smiling at Mahamed. I begin to think of him as a friend.

"It's hard to feel like you're not enough," he gestures to the ship, "like this is all you'll ever be."

***

3.

Say sweet things to her. This is important and must be genuine. Don't come on too strong here. Tell her you've been waiting for someone like her for a while. Or tell her, I feel like you complete me. Tell her she is the cure to your unhappy days. Remind her that she is beautiful. Tell her if you could, you'd marry her today.

***

I imagine this Libyan woman from my father's school to be beautiful, with dark hair falling past her shoulders. Eyes hazel and worn. A hijab loosely placed around her head.

I imagine she stayed behind one day after class, my father inching his way toward her.

Come with me, he might have said. *Come with me and I'll take you anywhere in the world.*

The young girl might have remained quiet, mulling the idea over in her head. She surely did not love him, but what is love when she can have freedom.

My parents won't approve, she might have said, looking up at him for a solution.

We can run away together.

***

Ahmed and Amar pull their chairs around Mahamed and me so we are all seated in a circle. It is 1 a.m. and Amar and the rest of the men keep looking at the stairs leading down to the rest of the ship. I look too, nervous someone would see us. Ahmed pulls out a cigarette and offers it to me.

Amar pushes his hand away. "She doesn't smoke."

Ahmed then pulls out a joint and directs it toward me, "Would the American like hashish instead?"

Amar is about to push his hand away again when I stop him, "Yes, actually. I can go for some weed."

"She is Egyptian too, not just American," he says before grabbing the joint from him. He pulls out a lighter and places the joint in my mouth. He lights it and winks.

It is 2 a.m. and we are still on the deck. Down below, two policemen are at the entrance of the ship, guarding it. We pass the joint around until it disappears. We all feel high and I start getting paranoid. I look at the door and imagine my mom there, dragging me by the ear and telling me how ashamed she is of me. *This is not how a decent Egyptian girl behaves.*

My mother asked me while walking by the Nile River the night before if I wanted to get married to someone from Egypt. I have never fallen in love with a Muslim man. My mom asked me many times before if she could set me up with one, and when I refused, and instead dated Americans, she told me they would have to convert to Islam in order for us to marry in a mosque. He would have to court me first, but under strict supervision. Once we were engaged, we could be by ourselves, but never in a home or a room or a car. But I didn't want any of that. I wanted the freedom of a serendipitous meeting and to know I could love this person as they were.

Amar notices my anxiousness and moves closer to me.

He starts to wrap his arms around me but then stops. "Is it okay if I do this?"

I smile and lean my head on his shoulder, "Yes."

He moves his hand on my head instead and holds it there. He no longer feels like a stranger. It is a clear night and I look up to the stars.

I want to live in this memory, to float in it without the burden of self or the knowledge of tomorrow.

I wake up with a headache. The morning light pushing through the curtains of our cabin. My brother and mother are getting ready in the next room. I grab my book and head upstairs to the deck and find a crowd gathering by the pool. I walk back downstairs and sneak into the closed, empty ballroom. I sit on a large chair facing the Nile and pull the curtains open. I am the only one in the room.

"It was nice talking to you last night." Amar is standing with a mug of coffee. He hands it to me. He is wearing a bright blue shirt and black slacks. His day uniform.

"Yes, it was. It's the first time on this trip I didn't feel like a foreigner." I tell him this and watch his eyes, trying to figure out what it is he wants from me.

He looks around the ballroom and steps closer to me. "You're not a foreigner," he says. "You feel like home," his voice shaking at the word *home.*

When he says this, I do not believe him and look down instead.

"Would you like to go out tonight? Show you my favorite coffee shop in Aswan?"

"What time?"

"My shift ends at 10, I'll meet you on top of the stairs by the dock's gate where the police officers stand watch."

***

4.

Is she still with you? Good. Now, you must propose an engagement. Tell her you'd like to ask her hand in marriage. If she's above 30, she'll agree. You know this. You visit her and you charm her with the way you make her laugh. You take her out to a nice restaurant and demand to pay for dinner. You tell her, and listen carefully, that you will take care of her from here on out. If she gives you a shy smile, you've won.

***

My father married the young Libyan girl on paper before taking her away from her family. He prepared a passport for her, one he most likely bought off of someone. This passport had a photo of a hijabed woman, a black veil covering the rest of her face. They may have decided to run away in the morning, before her family awoke. My dad might have set up a meeting location for her. When she arrived, he grabbed the small amount of luggage from her and both headed to the airport. He handed her the passport and waited for her to veil her face. They passed through security, the woman was never asked to remove the veil.

***

It is a few minutes past 10 p.m. and I'm standing at the dock's entrance. The streets are busy with people, and traffic has not slowed. There are blue lights overhead lining the lamp posts, and the glow from it reminds me of DreamLand, an Egyptian amusement park we used to go to as children. There's a sea of people standing on the docks, some talking, some eating street food. I feel safe here.

I turn around and see Amar heading up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. I notice his long legs. He is wearing black slacks and a white, buttoned shirt, the shirt untucked and sleeves rolled up.

For the first time since meeting him, I feel nervous.

"Ready?" He offers his hand to me, waiting for me to take it. I do.

He whistles loudly and a cab pulls up almost immediately. The cab driver looks suspiciously at us but Amar doesn't seem fazed. He opens the door for me and shuts it once I get in. Amar rides in the front.

He gives the driver the name of a coffee shop, but something he says after perks my suspicion; Amar calls me his wife.

The cab stops a few minutes later in front of another dock. There are no ships and I only see a set of stairs leading down to the Nile. I wonder where the people have gone.

Amar pays and extends his hand to me once again, leading me down the steps.

After turning the corner, we come across a hidden coffee shop, string lights line the front of it, and small tables are placed at the edge of the dock a few feet away from the Nile. Amar pulls out my chair and gestures to the place.

"What do you think? he asks. "I come here to read. It's open all night and sometimes I come on my break just to watch the Nile."

I look around at the coffee shop and wrap my hands around my stomach. "This is beautiful," I respond. "Thank you for bringing me here."

A small boy walks over to our table.

"Hi, Amar. Hi Ms."

"Hi, habibi," Amar responds.

"Two coffees, no sugar in one, and two waters."

"Ok, sir." The boy disappears behind the counter and I can see him start to make the coffee.

Amar pulls out his phone and turns the ringer off. He then shows me pictures of his mother and brother and friends. In one picture, his mom is laughing, part of her hijab covering her mouth. Family surrounding her.

He does not look at me when he says this, "she was sick for a while. I spent money I saved for marriage to take care of her. You have to do whatever it takes for family, right?"

His words pain me slightly. This *if one falls we all fall* mentality is different from the life I lead.

"Is your mom okay now? I ask.

"Yes, she is healthy," he smiles and reaches for my hand.

"You're really kind, you know that?"

I laugh and pull my hand away, "you don't even know me."

"Oh...you do not believe you are kind."

"No, I suppose I don't."

***

5.

Tell her you love her and can't wait another moment. You must marry her now, so you either marry at the mosque or marry on paper without the mosque. Then sleep with said woman.

***

Back in her home town of Libya, her parents woke up to their daughter's empty room and missing clothes. They may have called the police or the school where my father worked, even the airport. It wasn't long until a search warrant for my father's arrest was in place. By that time, however, the girl was in Egypt living with my father.

I imagine her arriving in Egypt, the veil still around her neck. Maybe she takes a deep breath in and lets out a sigh of relief. She might think: *I will find the life I am looking for here.*

***

It is 11 p.m. and we hail a cab back to the ship. When we exit the cab, he points at a small bench facing the river.

"Let's say goodnight there first?"

I follow him and we sit side by side staring at the Nile.

Amar appears nervous, his foot tapping against the metal bench.

"Nada, I want to ask you something?"

"Yeah?" I try to look at him but cannot.

"I want to ask your mom for your hand in marriage." He is slow and calm when he says this, but I am both sick and want to laugh.

"You're kidding right?" I ask this even though I know it is not a joke.

"No, I'm not. I understand you're not used to this, but this is what we do here. In order to date, we have to be engaged. What we are doing now isn't even right."

I feel an urge to vomit.

I take a deep breath.

"Are you looking for love? he asks. "Because if that's what you're looking for, I have it, I have a lot of it."

"I'm leaving back to America, there is no chance this could work, even if I wanted to give it a try."

He smiles. He has been waiting for me to say this.

"Then, take me with you," he says.

I look down at my hands and begin to understand why he seems familiar to me. This is not a friend. I have not found my kind of people.

I get up and walk down the stairs back to the ship. He follows me but I tell him to leave. I feel foolish but I am not angry. Hope, it is an easy thing to want and to fall for.

***

6.

Move her into your cramped flat. Ask her for breakfast and to think of it, ask her if she could clean the flat. It's filthy. She asks about the other house, the big one you mentioned. Tell her it's under construction. You want to make sure it's perfect for her. She will live with you from anywhere between three months to a year, but never longer than a year.

***

The young woman lived in my father's cramped flat for a few months before returning home to Libya. This made her his sixth wife. He was her first.

Seven women in total fell for his denatured smile and crooked jokes. His full-bellied laugh could trick God into thinking he was a good man.

***

My mother and father were married soon after they met. Every day before she agreed to marry him, he would show up to the house with flowers or chocolate and present it to her as some kind of peace offering for not being able to pay a dowry. They had a nice wedding, where my mom dressed in a ruffled white dress, with short hair and red lipstick, and my father in a suit, smoking a cigarette, his tux sleeves rolled up. When I look at the photos, I see my mom's shy smile, the sort of smile one puts on for an audience.

"Did you love him when you married him?" I asked my mom one night after looking at their wedding photos.

"No, I didn't, but if he was a different man, I might have."

I held her for a while after that conversation. I wanted to find my father then and punch him until he bled out.

***

Repeat steps 1-6

How to be a con artist

It is early morning. The sky empty, the town quiet. He wakes up and finds himself in an unknown alley. He looks around and recognizes he is still in Abu Hummus. The air is heavy and the ground beneath him is slightly wet, the way asphalt glints following rain. My father brings his hand to his head and feels the bruise throbbing beneath his scalp. He feels around his swollen face and tries to remember how he ended up here. Flashes of the white van come back to him, the brother, the wife, the knife against him. He rises slowly from the ground and pushes up against the concrete wall. Beneath him, on the ground, he sees his checkbook open, all his checks torn out. He leaves it.

He limps back to his flat, avoiding the main streets, trying to hide in case they return. His blue scarf is gone. His shoes are not on his feet. He hears a loud engine approaching behind him and freezes until the sound becomes more distant, until it disappears altogether. He leans against the concrete wall and vomits. He vomits again. In the morning light, he can see the bruises on his body; it's sore and stinging. My father does not call for help, he has no one to help him. He is alone with his body and bruises. It takes him twenty minutes to reach his flat, but stops before he enters. He falls to the ground and begins to sob. He does not think of the dead man, though, or the men that kidnapped him. He thinks, *I am alone. Will I ever find my way out?*

***

I often ask myself, in an attempt to define my father, what makes the con artist? It is a question that hurts me, but not because I am afraid of its conclusion. There was one answer I found from psychologist and writer Maria Konnikova that struck me. What makes a con artist: "A meeting of predisposition and opportunity."

In an interview with Cut magazine, Konnikova explained that a con artist can fall into one of three categories: a narcissist, who posses an overinflated sense of self; the psychopath, who does not possess a sense of empathy; or a Machiavellian, a master of persuasion and deception. But she does not talk about what happens when a con artist is all three.

In films, both Egyptian and American, the con artist is always painted as some type of suave, brilliant character. I think of the Ocean's Eleven series and Geroge Clooney pulling off grand heists that steal and con the rich. They are anti-heroes, adventurous, iconic. I am weary of these depictions, however, of the fascination and glamorization of the con artist, but it is only because I know a con artist. No one is rooting for his type.

***

A doorman is sitting in a seat at the entrance hall of the building. The building is simple. The entrance gates are an aqua green and the inside is all concrete. There is a small tattered rug placed in the middle of the first floor. This doorman sees my father and rushes to him.

“Sir, sir, what do you need,” he says. “ Let me help you.”

The man is gentle with my father, placing his small hand around his arm. He is wearing a long, white and blue striped, galibya, a sort of gown men wear.

“Thank you,” he responds. My father is up on his feet and begins to climb the four flights of stairs to his flat. He opens the door slowly, waiting to see if someone else is waiting. He inches his way into the flat, but cannot will himself to go in, not until he trusts it is safe. A few moments later he rushes to his room and begins packing his clothes. He only takes his clothes and leaves everything else.

My father searches his flat for the cash he had stashed and shoves it in his pocket. He thinks of the empty checkbook abandoned in the alley and again begins to weep, remembering the deal he made to the men who took him.

***

One night I sat watching a television show called New Girl, a comedy about a group of roommates. In one episode, one of the character’s fathers is introduced as a con artist. This father enlists his son, Nick, to pull off a con with him in an attempt to return money he had stolen from one of his son’s roommates, Jess. In a dark, open parking lot, Nick begins to sweat excessively, alerting the buyers that they are in some sort of con. Nick turns to his father and explains, he cannot lie.

A few episodes later, in another situation, Nick is asked by one of his roommates to pretend he is gay. She asks if he can do this even though he cannot lie. He responds asking for a back story. He says he is able to pretend because acting is not lying. When he

says this, I am reminded of Pinocchio's paradox; it's an observation of the semantics of language. If Pinocchio were to say "my nose is growing," and since we know Pinocchio's nose only grows when he is lying, then if the nose grows, the statement becomes true, which would not have caused his nose to grow in the first place, thus creating a paradox. However, if his nose does not grow, then the statement is false, which means his nose should have grown. I think of my father in relation to this paradox: can something be false if in some way it can also be true?

This is why cons can be easy to fall for. A person feels they will not fall victim to the cons of a scammer because they believe they can spot a liar—little to no eye contact, anxious behavior, inconsistencies in narrative. The issue is con artists aren't always liars.

***

I asked my father once why he was lying to a man. I don't remember who this man was or what my dad was trying to get out of him.

"Acting is not lying."

"What's the difference?"

"Acting pulls from something real inside you, something that once existed. Lying comes from nothing." He said this as he grabbed the empty air in front of him.

"What are you, an actor or a liar?"

"An actor, of course. I'm playing a part in a movie," he said and continued on.

If a con artist was a liar, he might appear sorry, and because he has to work hard at being sorry, one can tell that in fact he is not sorry.

If a con artist is an actor, he might also appear sorry, and because he once felt what it was to be sorry, then in fact he is sorry. The con artist, then, appears honest.

Cons are manipulations. It is getting as close to truth as possible. It is true enough. *I feel it is true so it must be true*. By this definition, one can suppose we are all con artists.

***

In the white van, the night before he awoke in the alley, he had a knife to his throat. This knife was sharp and sliced a superficial wound on his neck. The woman in the hijab convinced her brother to stop before the knife dug any deeper. The brother was weeping, while the men held my father down. My father was also weeping.

What about him, what about your future, what about the kids. The man pleads to the woman for a solution, but it feels like there is none. And they know no amount of blood could bring the dead back.

My father choked out a response and the man hit him.

Listen, listen, I'll do anything. I'll pay you back. I have my checkbook. I'll write checks for whatever amount you want.

You don't have that kind of money.

It doesn't matter. They'll come after me, not you.

The men shoved a recorder to my father's mouth, the knife still against him.

Confess. Confess everything you've done.

My father confessed into the recorder. He then pulled out his checkbook and signed empty checks, one after the other.

The man tore out all of the checks and shoved the checkbook back to my father. He then pushed the knife back once more, *If you try to cancel these checks, we will kill you.*

Grabbing his suitcase and wallet, my father flees his flat to Alexandria. He does not return to his visa shop.The brother cashed all the checks he forced my father to write and soon there's a warrant out for my father's arrest and he knows it. It's the second warrant. Checks for an account with no money in it falls on the issuer. He's now on the run from two warrants; I wonder if it'll all ever catch up with him.

***

My father was once offered a position in Libya teaching English in an extension school. Most of his students were young adults attempting to learn the language, hoping it would eventually lead to more employment possibilities. The country, at the time, suffered from a great war, the buildings stood among wreckage and rubble. My father

called one night to tell me the world was burning down and it was going to take him down with it. He sobbed into the speaker about the bombs going off in his neighborhood.

He said to me then: *I think I'm going to die.*

My first thought, *will he ask me for money?*

My father once called my brother and told him he was having a medical emergency. On the phone he asked and pleaded for more money. He felt like he was dying or disappearing or maybe having another stroke. My brother obliged. I'm sure there were a hundred more calls just like this one to other members of the family.

My father was fired from Microsoft.

"Magdi, you're a smart man, but you have to start dressing appropriately for work," his manager warned him. "We're not working a trash yard, ha?"

My father nodded and went about his shift. The next day he showed up in the same sweats-t-shirt combo.

My father used to trick the elderly into fixing their computer. He hiked the price, double that of any store, and convinced them it was the cheapest they'd find. The problems were always minor, but they didn't know any better, so they trusted him. It was a silly scam really, but he knew the one demographic that would fall for it amid a technological boom. His store was called PC Solutions.

My father dropped out of the university that brought him to America and bought a red Mustang the next day. The same car that picked us up from the airport on our initial arrival. He purchased it on the promise of the American Dream.

My father both worked a lifetime of jobs and never worked a day in his life.

***

There are different kinds of cons and con artists, each possessing a separate motive. There are the grand schemers, most notably, Gerald Blanchard, who pulled off a diamond heist at Austria's Schloss Schönbrunn. Blanchard gained private access and viewing of the Koechert Diamond Pearl because his wife and her father were considered VIPs. Upon visiting the museum with his family, Blanchard left a distant window open, one that will remain unnoticed until his heist in the days to follow.

What I find interesting in this particular heist is that Blanchard only thought of stealing the diamond because he saw an opportunity. Blanchard wasn't simply a jewel thief, because if that were true, he would have targeted the museum prior to his initial visit and would then have simply stolen the diamond and left. But Blanchard only thought of stealing it when he first saw it. Blanchard, instead, replaced the diamond with an almost exact replica. In fact, it was as close to appearing true as the original diamond,

the museum did not realize it was fake until two weeks later. Lying is the disappearance of truth, acting is a replica of the truth.

Cons aren't always as grand, most are simple, taking many forms. However, there is an underlying consistency between the cons: It all stems from some kind of truth. Some kind of opportunity. When I think of this, I think of the visa scam shops, and Egypt's endless opportunities.

***

When I ask myself what makes the con artist, the same question always follows: Do con artists feel remorse?

During a past visit from my father, I read him a few of my poems. He sat on the piano bench listening to my voice shake as I read it aloud. It felt like a confessional. After I was done, I looked at him to see if he'd understood the poem. There were tears in his eyes and he glanced down when he said, "Maybe someday I won't be the villain in your story."

My father is a great crier, tearful at his own solitude. *I am unloved. I am alone.* When he said this, I looked straight in his eyes trying to find the con man, the great actor.

I told my father once that I think I suffer from depression. He responded with an old cliche, “depression means you’ve been strong for too long. I would know. It's ok to be weak, Nada.” Whenever he said my name, I felt like I didn't belong to it. I find it odd for a con artist to suffer from depression. In fact, it worries me. I do not want to feel the great sadness of a villainous man.

***

Something haunts me about Konnikova’s answer for what makes the con artist: *a* “meeting of predisposition and opportunity.” *Predisposition.*

It’s a warm spring afternoon in California. I’m sitting beside my mom on the same green couch from my childhood. We’re sipping our coffee slow, breathing in the smell of it.

“You’re like your father sometimes.”

I look down, “I know.” I presume she can see right through me now.

“You know?” She asks this as though she’s surprised.

“Yes, I know.” I feel ashamed. I think the jig is up.

“When I look at you, I see the artist your dad could have been. You both have the same glint in your eyes.”

I look up at her then. “He could have been a famous piano player.”

Sometimes I feel like I am my father. I feel this most when my mother asks me if I believe in God or if I'm Muslim; it emerges every time I hear my voice, the clear American accent; I feel this con artist rise when I see a beautiful woman and can't hold her; or when playing the part of belonging in a country that is impossible to belong to.

***

My father shifts and adjusts himself with every con. The crackle of a metamorphosis. I see him disappear ahead. I never looked before, not long enough to pinpoint the exact moment of disappearance, when the ever-present person ceases, when there's no person at all. I see his body bump against the desert ground, on the road to nowhere. Nowhere because the person also disappears. Nowhere because I will never think of him again. All he is will rise and fall and disappear.

When I think of my father, I see a lost man, a selfish man, a creative man, a smart man, but he is not a man capable of love. I have long given up on the idea of reconciliation, but still something begs me to remember him—a flawed man who once taught me how to match my fingers along the piano keys and listen to the way the sound rounded and rung out.

I'm not sure if I've ever known my father, to have examined his dreams and hopes, to know what it is he truly yearns for. I've cast my father as a synthetic man. But there is

a recurring dream that haunts me, one where we sit at the old cafe by the mediterranean shore, and I ask him what it is that makes him love sick. Almost always, in these dreams, he says “El donya.” The world.

I wonder if the man he conned to death haunts my father's dreams. If they sit across at the same small table by the shore. I imagine in this dream my father feels remorse, reaching his hand out for the man.

***

It is 2020, years after the visa shop scam, and the world is suffering from a rising pandemic. Millions of Egyptians are laid-off and cannot work.They do not have unemployment insurance and no way to feed their families. My father is living in a flat in Alexandria next to a small family.

My father and the next door neighbor are in the hall of the building discussing the virus, and the man confides in my father; he feels hopeless, like there is no way out of the financial ruin he is in. The morning light is shining through the open door and windows. My father moves closer to the man.

I can get you a visa out of here. How much money do you have?

Festival of Sacrifice

There in the desert groups of children gather, some barefoot on the sand and sharp pebbles. A butcher ties a cow by her feet and softly pushes her to lie on the ground. His pants are rolled into capris, the arms of his sweater pulled half-way up. From the way she looks up at the crowd, I think she knows what's coming. This cow is identical to the ones I've seen before, there's nothing special or extraordinary about her body. Her size is average, a standard bovine. Yet, I wish not to see her on a day like this.

"The streets of Egypt run red," my uncle tells me on our drive to a small, shanty town outside of Alexandria. "The air smells of blood." Outside the car window a sea of Muslims gather on the street. String lights line balconies of flats and homes and lamp posts. Neighbors and passersby greet one another, "Eid Mubarak," they say—Blessed Festival. My uncle points to the butcher shops, the animals hanging outside on hooks still dripping from the slaughter. "It's a tradition," he clarifies. Usually, residents and festival-goers will pick up their meat after the butcher has done the deed, but today is different. My uncle believes there's something extraordinary in watching the slaughter. But it's not just the slaughter we're going for, he reassures me, it's what follows. "It's a beautiful and kind thing," he says, speeding down the highway. "You'll see."

The Eid al-Adha, "Festival of the Sacrifice," emerged as an Islamic tradition from the Quranic story of Ibrahim and Ishmael. As the story goes, God commanded Ibrahim to

sacrifice his son Ishmael as a show of obedience. In the Quran, Ibrahim obeys God, readying Ishmael for the slaughter, but upon raising his blade, God replaces Ishmael with a ram, for the act of absolute obedience was fulfilled—to obey God unconditionally, even if it means sacrificing the ones you hold most dear. The tradition of Eid al-Adha is to honor the piety of Ibrahim by continuing to sacrifice an animal. Most of the meat is then donated to the poor and the rest given as a gift to family and friends as a symbol of friendship and reunification. When I hear this story of Ibrahim again during our drive, I think about Ibrahim and how he must have felt to sacrifice his son for God.

I was a child the first time I saw an animal carcass. Our family gathered on our rooftop home, the sheep's limbs tied with rope and hung for us to admire. Often, when the animal in line for sacrifice was healthy, they thanked God for its weight and abundance, as though God readied the sheep for the slaughter himself. I think this was my father's favorite holiday, perhaps one of the only holidays when he truly came alive. A death of an animal in exchange for a present father. I would have sacrificed all the sheep to be there with him in those moments.

I don't think I witnessed the live sacrifice though, and if I did, maybe some part of my brain shut it out, or maybe I thought how fascinating it was that an animal can bring a nation together, or maybe because all the important people were in the room with me that death didn't hold a place in my mind. If I were to go back to that memory, where the

rooftop was sparking with lights and stars and joy, I would walk up to the tied carcass and thank it for its sacrifice.

We drive for 30 minutes outside of the city and pull onto an unpaved road, the wheels catching and releasing dust into the air. When we park, my brother reaches for my hand and from the way he squeezes it, he can tell I'm anxious.

"Don't worry," he says. "The animals don't feel pain. There's a specific artery that when they cut into, immediately kills them."

Even though he tells me this, there is something rather unsettling about the ordeal. Logically, as a meat eater, I know animals are slaughtered by the millions, and I know our society survives off of it, and I also know the hypocrisy of it, to think I'm incapable of watching an animal die to feed the masses, but feast on its carcass later as though its blood was not my responsibility. But still, to eat it and not know how it got here is one thing, to watch it spill its guts for me is another.

My uncle steps out of the car and hurries to the butcher shop. My brother, mom and I follow him until we reach an open area filled with children and families sitting on the ledges bordering some of the shanty dwellings. These dwellings are humble and only a few stories high, with crumbling concrete and broken, seafoam green shutters coloring the outside. Some children are holding balloons, and I smile at the way they play with them, nevermind the dried blood on the ground.

"I can go get you a balloon if it makes you feel better," my uncle chuckles.

I roll my eyes at the comment but let out a smile. My mom grabs my face and squeezes my cheek.

"It's going to be good," she says.

I push her hand away. She dragged me here, something about needing to be in touch with my faith, or at least understand it. *Yes, mom,* I want to tell her. *Watching a man knife and gut an animal is going to get me straight with Allah.*

My brother and I keep our distance from the slaughter. "I think it'll be good if you see it," he says, "but you don't have to if you don't want to. I can keep standing here with you."

At the slaughter site, flies and mosquitoes start to gather around the remains of some of the previously butchered animals. I swat some away with my hand and reach to kill a mosquito that landed on my arm.

I couldn't stand summers in Abu Hummus. My mother and father took us to this small village town to spend time with my paternal grandmother. Often the smell from the nearby pond made my stomach turn. There were weeds and grass and mosquitos and flies and if I could, I would have swatted them all to hell. My parents didn't know it then, but I was allergic to the protein enzymes the mosquitoes injected to numb the sight where they draw blood. The problem with this village was it was full of these blood sucking bilbos and they feasted on my blood at night when I was tucked safely in bed. My dad told me I often cried out from the pain of the sting, my body imprinted with large quarter-sized

welts. One night my dad came pushing into my room. *What's wrong*, he said. *The mosquitoes are pulling my socks and it really hurts,* I responded, my child eyes full of tears. He then ran out of the room and I followed him. He grabbed the vacuum and pulled the telescopic handle out. *Where are they,* he yelled, chasing me with it. *I'll get them, I'll get those bastards*. We ran around the living room laughing. The two of us chasing those monsters into the night. *You're not getting my blood as long as my dad is around.*

While my uncle talks to the butcher about how to divide the meat from the kill, I decide to take a walk. I drift out of view from the crowd, the scene of the slaughter still fresh in my head. This was a particularly warm summer afternoon, and I get tired quickly. I notice the sun beating down on some of the roofless homes, the children chasing each other with dolls and toys. In the corner of my eye I spot a child riding a small dirt bike, with three more children behind him, their arms clinging around the tiny driver. A hijabed woman seated in front of her dwelling notices me approaching and eyes me carefully. I lean back against the concrete wall of a partially torn-down house and take a breath in, my stomach aching from the stench of blood in the heat and contemplate why I agreed to return to Egypt. I think of my mother and uncle and their desperation for my conformity to religious beliefs and traditions. They perhaps want me to know they are good people, and when I say they, I mean Muslims. Or maybe they want me to believe in something, that if I knew the reason behind the traditions, I'd come to once again love the

religion that built me. My mom's worst fear is my becoming an atheist. She asks me once curiosity and science and writing grows old and tired, what will be left of my soul to believe in? *Why live in an extraordinary world if you can't let yourself believe in its impossibility*. Perhaps what my mom cannot understand is that I moved to America too young, and my identity as an Egyptian or Muslim or American as I know it is a bit shattered, something like what an actor must feel toggling between the fiction of acting and the reality of being. All this time apart from Egypt, I was dragged back, my family pulling me into old traditions as though I never left. I wonder if they thought a two-week stay could undo all that America had undone in me these past years. I wonder if they thought two weeks was enough to make me Egyptian again.

The seated woman stands from the chair and gestures for me to come to her. I hesitate toward her and I can tell from her eyes that she grew concerned about my standing in the heat.

"Would you like to sit?" she says. "Please sit. I'll be back for some water."

I try to stop her to tell her it's fine, but she's gone before I'm able to. I look around and see that she only has one chair and that I counted five or six children running inside and out of the home. The door of her home is propped open so I look inside to find the dirt floor of the outside the same as the inside, pebbles and rocks and various sharp objects carpet the floor. I sit and wait for her and inside me something hurts, an ache from a small act of kindness.

The men assisting the butcher first place a blindfold around her eyes. I stand close to her and wonder the reason for covering them. The cow writhes on the ground, pebbles scratching the leather skin of her body. Two other men stand on either side of the animal, pushing her down as best they can. Crowds are growing in numbers. The butcher tries to quiet them: *it's time* he says, raising his blade to the sky. He then forces the neck of the girl up, pushing his blade into the major artery. He yells "Allah Akbar." He's meticulous as he pushes his knife further into her, a precision, an exactness akin to a surgeon. The girl squeals and wriths but the butcher keeps her steady. Blood spills from the carcass, a warm red pooling underneath the cow's body. He waits until the blood drains, seeping into the hot desert. It pools and pools, the body convulses, until all is still.

When we lived in America and after my parents divorced, communication with my father was often short and far in between. He rarely called and when he did, he didn't know how to connect emotionally. He'd ask me questions about my life but spaced when I responded.

One of those phone calls was in response to me denouncing our religion. My mom confronted me one evening as a teenager and recent high school graduate about my lack of faith and practice. She called my father in an effort for him to persuade me to return to God. One night, sitting in my room, the beige walls felt more threatening than usual. When I answered he sounded like he had been crying.

"Nada, why don't you believe," he said. "You know if you refuse to be Muslim, we'll have to disown you. You can't use our last name, it's a Muslim last name, and you can't use it." He said this all frantically, in one breath without pausing. He said it as though our very existence hinged on my belief of Islam. I found it odd for an estranged father to disown his daughter, as though estrangement doesn't imply a sort of disownment.

When I return to the slaughter site, I see my uncle and the butcher loading a tuktuk with the individually packaged meat, a simple package really, a regular grocery plastic bag tied into a knot.

"Ok, we're ready to go," my uncle announces.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To give the meat away, of course"

The tradition of the sacrifice shifted and changed throughout the years. People began picking up the butchered meat once the sacrifice was over, opting not to see the slaughter. My uncle tells me why he still participates in the sacrifice, why he pays a small sum to a butcher and why he watches it happen. He explains that it's hard to help the poor in Egypt because people don't know who is actually poor and who is a scammer. There are stories of men who scour the mosques, recording their names on a list, a long

assembly of names of people who require assistance. These men, however, don't belong to one mosque, but to many, collecting and pocketing as much as they can. My uncle also tells me that this takes away aid from the poor who actually need it. He says that giving money to the poor on the streets is hard because you can't decipher between the poor who actually need it and the con artists who exploit it. There are too many who are humble and poor, it's difficult to know where to direct efforts.

I wonder if my father performed any of these scams. I imagine him lining up at every mosque in the city.

"That's why I come here," my uncle says. "That's why I go to the butcher, I watch the animal getting sacrificed for the good of the masses, why I stand here in the heat and wait and why I ride into the shanty towns and hand them out myself."

A car takes us into another part of the village where a couple awaits us, a Sheikh from a nearby mosque and his wife. I enter the small dwelling into an office while my uncle and brother unload the meat. The woman asks if I'd like something to drink and at first I deny her, but upon her insistence, I resign and accept her offer. My mom sits across from me with a big smile on her freckled face, unfazed by the slaughter. My uncle and brother along with the Sheikh and his wife gather outside the small office. They run us through the plan: each person will provide us with a ticket in exchange for a bag of meat. This ticketing system ensures each person gets only one bag of meat, so as many people as possible can each get the opportunity to eat. Meat is an expensive food and often

people in these villages cannot afford to purchase their basic needs for survival, let alone a chunk of meat for dinner.

People begin to line up, the line extending around the building. I start the hand off, a bag of fresh meat for a ticket. “Tslam edaiky,” they say to me one by one. “Bless your hands.” The Sheikh's wife stands next to me and sees my bewilderment. She has kind eyes and looks at me with a tenderness of a mother; she tells me I’m beautiful, she says it’s the kind of beauty that exudes kindness, and when she says it, I can’t help but feel like a fraud.

The cow turned into 50 separated plastic bags, each bag weighing approximately 1 kilo or 2.2 pounds. It’s estimated that 1 kilo feeds about four people, so 200 people were fed by us that night of Eid al-Adha. Millions more throughout the Muslim world.

My dad was always deployed as the threatening father figure whenever my brother or I misbehaved. One time when we were kids, a wad of cash went missing from my mom’s purse. She’d first confronted my dad about it, both soon realizing it must have been one of us. As they were talking, I lurked in the bedroom my brother and I shared and saw my brother slip the cash in one of my dresses. I didn’t confront him then, I ran to try to tell my parents how my brother tried to frame me for the cash and that I was innocent. One of the first lessons I learned is the more you plead innocence, the less

people believe you. My father grabbed my wrist and yelled for my brother to get in the room. He told my mom to get the knife.

"You know what happens to thieves?" He asked me. "They get their hand cut off."

I pleaded and told him I was innocent, but he didn't believe me. I turned to my brother, "Tell him, Tell him."

My brother finally came forward. He ran into the room and grabbed the cash from my dress and handed it to my mom. I was sobbing hard, I already saw what my father could do with a knife.

"That's enough Magdi, let go of her," my mom commanded.

Looking back now, I know he would never have cut my arm off, my mom would not have let it happen. He was scaring me into submission.

My mom sat me down one night to tell me about how I doomed us all. She steadied her voice and tried to remain calm, reaching her hand over to hold mine.

"The thing is, if you willingly convert out of Islam…" She paused to choke back tears. "In the Quran, if, as a family, we fail to keep you on the path to Allah, we fail as Muslims." She kept her light brown eyes on mine, "and if we fail, we all burn." She said this like she believed nothing else to be more true.

On our drive back into the city, my brother reaches for my hand again. “Thank you for coming,” he says. “I’m proud of you.” I feel silly when he says this but thank him anyway. Looking outside the window, I see the shops are all gated and closed. I see a family, a mom and dad, swinging in between them a little girl in a pink dress and tights, and though I can’t hear her laughing, I can see from the way she throws her hair back she is filled with joy. I think back to the sacrifice—perhaps to a Westerner it’s barbaric or archaic or even evil. I wonder if it’s evil too, and if I’m a Westerner now too because I think so. Something tugs at me though, pulling my thoughts to the idea of Middle Eastern traditions. There’s much tradition holds. Sometimes I think it locks us in place, fueling the same repetitive motions, our body and mind refusing to conform to anything outside of it. Sometimes though, I think traditions are what keep us alive, when I say alive, I mean living for something outside of us. Something unifying.

We still have a small amount of meat from the slaughter in the trunk for the second portion of Eid celebrations.

“Ready to meet the rest of your family?” My brother asks.

“Yes, I am.” I say it with confidence, but the same ache from before returns. I wonder about the cow, if it knew its fate when it stood restless in the stalls of the slaughter site.

“Dad will be happy to see you after all this time,” he finally says. “Don’t worry, I’ll be with you.”

Life Line

It's a Sunday afternoon, the sun to me appears disembodied, dispersed across the sky. I wait hand in hand with my mother on the street corner while my brother attempts to hail a taxi.

He reaches for me, "You ready, habibi?"

I nod and approach the cab. Two of the doors are without handles, and the front dash is missing. Inside it is an old man, greyed hair on top, broken teeth in his mouth. When he speaks I hear his gums.

"We're going to Life Line Cafe, how much is the fare?" My brother asks before he enters, eyeing the man.

The man half smiles, "Don't worry about it, I'll give you a good price."

"We are Egyptians, not foreigners. Tell me the price now." My brother says this as though he's lived in the city his whole life.

The man looks resigned and finally gives him a fair price. I enter the taxi and immediately lean against the window. I wrap my hands around my stomach and feel its ache. Outside, the streets are crowded, men and women and children zigzag between traffic. I spot a car ahead with two children sitting happily in the open trunk; they wave hello to me, laughing as school children do.

Belonging. Completeness. Wholeness. Home. Everyone possesses a desire to belong; it's called Maslow's theory of belonging; and in that desire to belong, comes the need for acceptance. In this theory, one can suppose that belonging and acceptance rely

on one another, as in you can't have one without the other. I once believed this, but driving down the Alexandria coast, this idea gnaws at me: what happens when a place does not accept me even when I feel I belong to it?

My brother tells the taxi to pull over and looks back to give me a smile.

"Dad is on his way," he says.

"Did you tell him about my rules?"

"He doesn't know you're with me, but yes I told him."

"I don't want him to touch me."

"He won't, I promise."

***

When my cousin Hadeer and I were young, I always stayed the night at her parent's flat. We shared toys, Legos especially, and we'd make homes out of them and move our Barbies in. We went to grade school together, in our white and navy uniforms and long socks. We'd stare in the mirror and I'd tell her we were twins. Her brother, Ahmed, always burst in her room and destroyed any Lego homes she built. He hid Barbies in the toilet bowl and blamed it on the ghost that supposedly roamed the flat. And every time I was there, I watched him burst into the room. My mom told me I used to beat him up because of it. I clawed a chunk of his hair and told him to leave her alone.

Inside these memories, I see a girl living among her cousins, in a home where she belongs. In those memories, though, my parents did not exist, not as they do now.

***

I laid in the fetal position on the small, blue couch of our flat the night of the festival of sacrifice. I do this often. I curl into a corner of a home and wrap my arms around my stomach. Usually, there is no real stomach ache. No real pain, as with a gut punch. But there are moments that beg this of me; when I cannot reach into my heart and hold it.

My brother and mother were fast asleep in their rooms, but I remained awake, taking turns walking to the balcony and looking overhead at the dark sky and then back to the small couch. I did this throughout the night, and in the pacing of it all, I kept thinking of my father, imagining what ten years of cons had done to his body and face. But knowing my father, when I saw him again, he would have the same cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth and a pair of sunglasses nestled on top of a full head of grey hair.

In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belonging and loving comes following a person's fulfilment of their psychological and safety needs. In this theory, if a child's needs aren't provided for, they grow into adulthood with less capability for loving

another, and perhaps, for loving themselves. I think of my father here and build an excuse in my mind—maybe the monster was born out of negligence.

***

Why is it that people are capable of such evil?" I asked my friend this at a busy coffee house on Glisan. I was writing about my father, attempting to make sense of his motives in an effort to find something redeemable.

"Sometimes, people are just like that," she shrugged. "Not everything has an answer."

I sat back and held the coffee mug to my face, biting it slightly. "Maybe...these people feel like they don't belong?"

"Maybe, or maybe they're just evil."

***

I step out of the taxi and walk up a small set of stairs to a table adjacent the shore. The air smells of salt, a favorite smell of mine. The place is crowded with families and lovers. A couple catches my eye. A hijabed woman drumming on the hands of her fiance. I know it's her fiance because she wouldn't be out with him if he wasn't. He leans in to tell her something, and she gives off a bellowing laugh. I smile at the sound and feel a pang of jealousy. Although, I'm unsure why.

My brother arrives at the table and sits beside me. “I’m going to get dad,” he says.

I don’t look up at him. “Okay...I won’t run away.”

He lets off a little laugh. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“Well, thanks for making me do this.”

“I know you’re being sarcastic now, but someday you’ll actually thank me.” He gets up and leaves the cafe. My mother’s eyes find mine and she extends her hand out.

“Nada, you don’t owe your father anything. Remember that.”

I look out onto the ocean and spot the boardwalk. The waves are calm and the water seems warm. The shore filled with people.

The boardwalk in Alexandria is one of the most famous places in the city. They call it Miami, you pronounce like you pronounce Miami, Florida. I visited this boardwalk about a hundred times during my childhood. My grandma took me shopping for bathing suits there, emerging with hot pink spandex after rummaging the shack. We sometimes grabbed ice cream afterward and continued our walk. When we got hungry, we bought shawarmas and sat on the sand, watched the sea push into people, let the salt dry out our skin. A sea of shadows in the sun.

***

It was 107 degrees. The air felt heavy and dry. My family and I gathered at the security gates of the mummy tombs in Luxor, waiting for our turn. Officers outfitted in white stood guard.

My brother pulled me aside. “Try not to speak Arabic around the guards.”

“Why? What would happen?”

“We’re using Egyptian passports. These sites are cheap for Egyptians and more expensive for foreigners.”

“Ok, but I am Egyptian, and I have an Egyptian passport. I don’t understand the problem.”

My brother looked at me with kind eyes. “I know that. But they might not. It’s better not to risk it.”

I walked past the security checkpoint and presented my ticket. The man eyed me carefully, staring at my clothes and uncovered hair.

“You look Egyptian. But your clothes aren’t Egyptian.”

“I’m Egyptian, sir.”

“...and you don’t sound Egyptian.”

“I’m Egyptian.”

“But I know you don’t live here.”

He finally pointed at the gatekeeper to let me in and moved on to the next person. When I entered the site our tour guide and rest of my family stood waiting. In my head, I replayed the interaction with the guard, trying to understand what he saw when he looked

at me, as though in an effort to belong to one country, I lost my ability to belong to the other.

***

"What does coming home feel like?" My brother asked me this on my way back to the Cairo airport.

"It feels like finding something that was lost."

I do not know where to go from here. It is like finding an old photo of your favorite memory that was since forgotten. A sense of nostalgia is awakened, but the memory itself cannot be relived.

***

A red double decker bus pulled up at a stop on the other side of the busy street. It's night and the air is warm and kind. My friend Wallah saw the bus and grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the street. There was no crosswalk and the cars sat idly, bumper to bumper.

"Come on, I want to show you something," she said, yelling for my mom and brother to follow along.

"What is it?"

"I want to show you Alexandria the way you're meant to see it."

"As a tourist?"

"No, as someone who won't take its beauty for granted."

We moved through traffic, dogging cars and people until we arrived at the bus. She paid for my fare, her hand still in mine, and pulled me up a set of narrow stairs to the top, above us a sheet of plain dark sky. When I looked down onto the street, I saw all the people at once. Some standing in front of markets with friends, some selling toys and swimwear and other knick knacks, some begging on the ground, some eating shawarma and ice cream. Straight ahead of me, I saw the Mediterranean Sea, dark and immense and indistinguishable from the night sky. There are moments, a pinpoint where a feeling turns tangible, like love embodied. This was the moment: *home at last*, I thought to myself.

***

At the airport security check on my way out of Cairo, the gate officer took his time with my American passport. He examined its pages and looked closely at my photo.

"Where are you from?" He asked this without looking at me.

"I'm from Egypt sir. I'm Egyptian."

He smiled and handed my passport back. "Don't forget where you come from."

***'

I sit fidgeting with the napkins on the table, taking turns looking out to sea and back at the entrance. The ache in my stomach returns and I feel a slight panic rise in my throat. I want to dishonor our agreement and leave. I try and say this aloud when I hear my brother and cousin in the distance. I turn around to three men approaching the table:

my brother, cousin Ahmed, and my father. My father's vision comes into focus and when he gets close enough to the table, he notices me. I see him stop walking. His eyes are brown, almost black. There are sunglasses on his head, his lips brown from smoking. His hair full and grey. He does not smile, but instead he brings his hands to cover a tearful face. He approaches quickly to hug me but my brother stops him.

"Remember our rules," I hear my brother saying.

***

The night I arrived in Cairo, my brother asked me for a favor. On the way from the airport to the hotel, he asked me if I would be willing to see our father.

"Isn't he on the run?"

"Alexandria is a big city and he leaves no trail..."

"I don't know if I can see him," I told him, hoping the conversation would end. But it didn't.

"Dad isn't doing too well health-wise," he finally said. "This might be the only chance to see him again."

I wrapped my arm around my stomach and looked outside the window. "Dad would die a fugitive."

My brother laughed and asked me once more, "Would you be willing to see Dad?"

I sat quietly for a while. “Yes, but there are rules. He can’t hug me. He can’t tell me he loves me or misses me or to keep in contact with me.”

“I understand,” my brother said. “I want you to see him so you don’t regret the chance at a last meeting.”

“How sick is he?”

“Not dying, maybe more like withering.”

“Is he still an evil man?”

My brother remained silent, contemplating the question.

“He has not repented for what he’s done. He still asks me for money. He still cons women...but he sort of has a part time job now, teaching people English, and if I pay him every month, he pretty much keeps his head on as straight as he can.”

“I don’t want to hurt.”

“I’ll be there with you, I promise.”

***

Some people learn to self-regulate when their basic needs for belonging and connectedness are not met. However, I wonder more about the people who were never able to self-regulate, stuck in a loop of impulse and consequence. This loop, I imagine, must be lonely. When I think of my father’s worst cons, this cycle comes to mind. A man lost and aimless. A man wandering the desert alone for eternity.

***

We all sit together by the sea. My mother and brother beside me, my father across. A cousin in the distance. The waves rise and fall, one after the other. I can't look at my father, but somehow, between me avoiding his gaze and him reminiscing, he makes me laugh. It's a big laugh, where my body bends and my hands clutch my stomach.

Works Cited

Asendorpf, J. B., & Motti-Stefanidi, F. (2017). A longitudinal study of immigrants' peer acceptance and rejection: Immigrant status, immigrant composition of the classroom, and acculturation. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 23(4), 486–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000155

Ault, Alicia. "Did Ellis Island Officials Really Change the Names of Immigrants?" Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 28 Dec. 2016, www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/ask-smithsonian-did-ellis-island-officials-really-change-names-immigrants-180961544/.

Baker, Raymond William, et al. "Egypt." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 17 Mar. 2020, www.britannica.com/place/Egypt.

Bellmore, A. D., Nishina, A., Witkow, M. R., Graham, S., & Juvonen, J. (2007). The influence of classroom ethnic composition on same- and other-ethnicity peer nominations in middle school. Social Development, 16(4), 720–740. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2007.00404.x

Chen, Angela. "The Art of the Con: Maria Konnikova on Scams, Grifters and Being Easily Duped." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 15 Jan. 2016, www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/15/maria-konnikova-interview-new-book-the-confidence-game-review-scams.

El Mansouri, Ahmed, "Competing Narratives: the Struggle for the Soul of Egypt" (2020). Dissertations and Theses. Paper 5363. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/5363

Hutson, Matthew. "Why We All Fall for Con Artists." The Cut, The Cut, 12 Jan. 2016, www.thecut.com/2016/01/why-we-all-fall-for-con-artists.html.

"Immigrant Name Changes." USCIS, 23 Sept. 2013, www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/genealogy/genealogy-notebook/immigrant-name-changes.

Keskin, Tugrul and Wood, Gary, "Sociology of Islam & Muslim Societies, Newsletter No. 1" (2008). Sociology of Islam & Muslim Societies Newsletter. 1. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/is_socofislamnews/1

Lyndsie Schultz (2016) Resisting Assimilation: Deliberate Acculturation by the American English Language Learner, Multicultural Perspectives, 18:2, 103-107, DOI: 10.1080/15210960.2016.1159100

Motti-Stefanidi, F., Pavlopoulos, V., & Asendorpf, J. B. (2018). Immigrant youth acculturation and perceived discrimination: Longitudinal mediation by immigrant peers' acceptance/rejection. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 59, 36–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2018.03.001

Natalie Thomas and Sumant Nigam (2018). Twentieth-Century Climate Change over Africa: Seasonal Hydroclimate Trends and Sahara Desert Expansion. Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Science, University of Maryland, College Park, College Park, Maryland. https://doi.org/10.1175/JCLI-D-17-0187.1

Plenty, S., & Jonsson, J. O. (2017). Social exclusion among peers: The role of immigrant status and classroom immigrant density. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46(6), 1275–1288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0564-5

Poverty & Equity Data Portal, World Bank Group, Apr. 2020, povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/EGY.

Ross, Rachel. “The Sahara: Earth's Largest Hot Desert.” LiveScience, Purch, 25 Jan. 2019, www.livescience.com/23140-sahara-desert.html.

Smith, Shahriyar, "Contexts of Reception and Constructions of Islam: Second Generation Muslim Immigrants in Post-9/11 America" (2017). Dissertations and Theses. Paper 3766. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/3766