

# Iman Mersal

## *Four Poems*

[83]

### *Family Photo*

A woman and a child, pale because the photo was not cleared of the fixer. The woman does not smile (even though she did not know she would die exactly forty-seven days later). The girl does not smile (even though she did not know what death was). The woman has the girl's lips and her brow (the girl has the nose of the man who will remain forever outside the frame). The woman's hand is on the child's shoulder, the child's hand is in a fist (not out of anger but to hold half a toffee). The woman's watch does not work, it has a wide strap (out of fashion in 1974), and the girl's dress is not of Egyptian cotton (Nasser, who manufactured everything from the needle to the rocket, died years ago). The shoes are imported from Gaza (and as you know Gaza is no longer a free zone at all).

### *A Drink with an Arab Nationalist*

Thinking my courage would come in through the side door,  
and appropriately muddled for passing an evening as I wait  
under this colonial ceiling,  
an Arab nationalist walks in.  
Instantly white-haired, as if he came straight from battling the  
invaders in Tahrir Square,  
'The nation is burning,' he says, not 'Good evening.'  
And suddenly enveloped in smoke, I am coughing.  
At noon I had returned from a funeral.  
Now a trainee surgeon awaits me in a room whose cleanliness is  
exaggerated.  
Yet my courage does not come through the door,  
the despicable side door separating the ladies' from the urinals.

## *Love*

A man decided to explain love to me. Leftover wine, and noon is crossing over to the other side. He was doing up the last button on his shirt as darkness edged into the corner.

[84]

Directionlessness, like the moment the screen fades out, and the viewer has to start looking for the exit. In this way he decided to explain love to me, placing the glasses firmly over his ears while I was still naked.

The room fogged up when he said, 'Love is the search for ...' I opened my eyes to see hordes of Spaniards looking for gold in Chile. They were hungry and empty-handed, while a Red Indian hid, terrified, behind a rock. When he said, 'Love is being content with ...', my fingers started caressing a mountain of dark chocolate, while Ella Fitzgerald's wailing slipped into my ears. 'And it is happiness ...' Then I imagined absolutely nothing.

It must be that I never saw him again, because I don't remember ever asking him whether love was forgetting his watch by the bedside.

## *A Life*

This never happened in my parents' house, definitely not among those I thought knew me.

My life, which I have always failed to touch, to find a picture that brings us together, is next to me on the same bed. It opens its eyes after a long coma, stretches like a princess confident that her father's palace is protected from thieves, that happiness is under the skin despite the wars which never sleep.

That life into which more than one father crammed his ambition, more than one mother her scissors, more than one doctor their sedatives, more than one freedom fighter their sword, more than one institution its stupidity, and more than one poetic school its conception of poetry. My life which I



dragged behind me from city to city, gasping for breath as I trailed it, running from school to library and from kitchen to bar, from the nai to the piano and from Marx to museums, from my memory of how a body smelled to the dream of an airport lounge, from all that I don't know to all that I don't know. My life, which I failed even to make sure existed, next to me on the same bed. It opens its eyes after a long coma, stretches like a princess confident that her father's palace is protected from thieves, that happiness is under the skin despite the wars which never sleep.

[85]

In this way I woke up in a strange land the morning I reached forty, and if not for the fact that God never sent women messengers, I would have thought it was the first sign of Prophecy; and if not for my own temperament, I would have cited the words of Mahmoud Darwish about a woman who enters her fortieth year in all of her 'apricotness,' or the words of Milosz about the door that opened inside him through which he entered.

Before me is a line of dead people who died perhaps because I loved them, houses in which to have insomnia that I kept cleaning devotedly on holidays, presents I did not open when they arrived, poems I was robbed of line by line, so much so that I doubt they belong to me, men I did not meet until the wrong time, and asylums of which I remember only the iron bars on the windows. Before me is my whole life, so much so I could hug it if I wanted to, I could even sit on its knees singing, or wailing.

*Translated by Youssef Rakba*