

Poems

Dima Hilal

refugee

a refugee in the womb
I feel my world shake
every time my mother does
my sky moves
with her every sway

the bombs pound closer each day
and from rooftops
snipers aim Kalashnikovs
at the grocer
a woman's back
a child clenching her father's hand

a refugee in the womb
I feel my world shake
every time my mother does
my sky moves
with her every sway

the bombs pound close
as the stone eyes of men
who stalk the streets,
unforgiving,
followed by thundering shells
the sharp staccato of guns,
bathe Beirut in black

men with stone eyes
rip identities from trembling hands
Muslim, *ya allah*
Christian, *ya rab*
wrong turn
(unforgiving)
no return
(sharp staccato)
bathe Beirut in black

light a candle, mother
for those who've lost their way
follow the flicker of its flame
shadow's pilgrimage across walls
illuminate the way
for those swallowed by the night

I stretch my palm towards light
towards a city fragmenting
before it ignites

light a candle
help me find my way
to flowing milk and lullabies
to turquoise blessings and
freshly opened gardenias
I want to find my way

my mother paces
hands fluttering across her belly
like fallen birds
like a prayer uttered
without words, a hum
resounding against taut skin

*may this darkness pass
may new life begin
insha'allah
let this darkness pass
and new life begin*

homecoming

the heat reaches me first
before the scent of the tarmac
baking in midday sun
before the sight of a soldier
donned in green,
an ak-47 carelessly slung
in his arms like a child
in the uncertain cradle
of her father's embrace

the heat reaches me first
and I inhale
wish it into every pore
long for it to overcome me
this is Lebanon
this is home
familiar as the sound
of my mother tongue
lilting and true
and despite ten years of absence
I understand
despite ten years long gone
ten years
 long gone
I'm back home

blink and I'm immersed
in the sudden jolt of Arabic
everywhere
thick loops right to left
across every sign
the bakery, pharmacy, bookstore
boardwalk stretching
along the Mediterranean
in a race to the horizon

I'm back home
to swerving cars,
horns blaring, music thumping
cell phones in each ride
on every table
stashed in Gucci bags
and back pockets
ahlan! ca va? oui

home
to the sound of my name
pronounced right
tablah beat, tambourine shake
mint tea cascading into cups
ubiquitous kisses on each cheek
a fortune teller pressing destiny

into my palm

and despite ten years of absence
ten years
 long gone
I'm back home

yet I stammer
words catch
at the cusp of my throat
the words there
marhaba, ahlan, akhيران,
ya bahladi, there
but my tongue
thick and unwieldy
cannot form them
the shift from English
a bridge I can't cross

words simply evade
my lips not parting
like a kiss denied,
longing suppressed
language fading
in the amnesia of distance
year upon year dust settling
over halting conversations
blasphemous hesitations
the undeniable shame
amercaniye, ajnabiye,
foreigner

how do I slip back into a
language?
like clothes once familiar,
a second skin,
now outgrown and
uncomfortable
although shame always feels
tailored to fit on the first try

I awake every morning
scent of Nescafe,
the humidity on my skin
like a tattoo
visible, present

until one dawn,
jet lag and disbelief
now a memory,
I stir from sleep
Arabic still on my tongue
a dream tangible,
indelible, real
spelled out in my mother tongue
my accent flawless
each word effortless
I fling the covers off
reverberating with the ecstasy
of belonging, the relief
of finding my way home

and despite ten years of absence
ten years

long gone
I'm back home

Arabic on my tongue
Beirut beneath my pillow
a key to the Pacific
warming my pocket

qana: beneath an endless sky

in this land where water
once flowed into wine
crimson now stains
the cracked earth
beneath our feet

a reminder of the fine line
between miracle
and misfortune

as water stagnates
beneath rubble
putrid and unholy
we bow our heads
beads spilling through our fingers
a quiet, collective murmur
of words swelling into wants
pouring into prayer

*turn this river of blood
into water*

quench our thirst
and extinguish the flames
falling from the cleft sky
the relentless quaking
that shatters heaven
spilling shards below

*turn this blood
into a river of water*

drown our agony
and cleanse our dead
splash on rooftops
bicycles and streetlamps
overflow from grape leaves
and gently settle into puddles

*cover us with sheets
of flowing water*

tumble off eyelashes
spill into gaping mouths
bathe our bright faces
beacons of light
turned towards the endless sky