

Vermeer in Baghdad

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Picture Credit: Ayman Mroueh

Light comes through the closed window,
harsh desert light,
the small panes making patterns
on the bare whitewashed wall
behind a seated figure.

Desert light, not cool, luminous, North European light
which caught the yellow and blue dress of
Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window
as she held it in both her hands, absorbed;

or that which fell from a high window
on Woman with a Pearl Necklace
as she lifted the strand, looked
in the large mirror, smiling, pleased;

or, as wintry light illuminated the broad
forehead of the Milkmaid, who poured
with such attention a thin stream of milk
into an earthenware bowl.

This desert light is closest
to that in *A Girl Asleep*.

In her shiny, pleated, red dress
she rested her head on her hand,
elbow on a cluttered table;
the light from a half-closed door
just catching her face.

But *The Woman Sitting in a Chair*
wears black. Only her face, with dark
eyebrows, and her large strong hands,
a silver ring on one finger, are uncovered;
one hand is over her mouth
her eyes closed.

We know her story.
She is not sleeping.

Zakiya Abd, sitting alone
in this bare sunlit corner, is mother of Beyda
who has disappeared.

What does Zakiya see
behind those closed eyes?
She says, "Whether she's alive or dead,
I just want to find her."
What words would pour out
if she hadn't pressed a hand across her mouth?