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## Please Inside-Out This

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Please Inside-Out This

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

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B.S. Arizona State University, 1997  
B.A. Arizona State University, 1997

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*She'd seen something so plainly  
in this tiny toy that was fully invisible to her child,  
two realities existing side by side.*

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*

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## Preface

From a street devoid of life and color, I enter through a wooden door into a magnificent garden of overgrown flowers that tower above me: golden sunflowers, fuchsia hydrangeas, red poppies. Hummingbirds whir. Bluebirds tweet. An owl spins its head, and panthers lie purring in the sun.

It is a dreamy memory that lingers in the corners of my memory. I didn't actually wander the garden of lazing panthers described in H.G. Wells' story "A Door in the Wall." Yet, my memories are shaped by my childhood readings and imaginings as much as by actual events. Sometimes, I'm unsure of what is real and what is not, what is dreamt and what is lived, what is written and what is experienced.

My colorful interior world surfaced in fourth grade when I spent each recess walking the periphery of the playground alone, hoping that my stealthy footsteps would speed up time. I hoped that if I kept my movement slow, no one would see me stalking them. How I wished to flip on the monkey bars, play touch football, clap my hands rhythmically with a girlfriend while singing, "Big Mac, filet-of-fish, Quarter Pounder, French fries..." However, I was a transplant, the new girl just moved to Arizona from Sweden. Though my singsong, "Hallå, I am from Sveden and my name is Tara," might have been charming if I had had the blond hair and blue eyes of my mother, I simply provoked laughter and ridicule with my odd accent and Mexican/Native American looks.

In those first few months of America, I had three simple desires. I wanted to know all of the words to Madonna's "Like a Virgin." I wanted a Michael Jackson glove. And I wanted a pair of neon jellies, which my mother would not allow, stating that plastic shoes were

unacceptable and would damage my feet. Instead, I wore my foreign accent and my foreign skin, an outsider in the country of my citizenship.

I spent my first year in America as a bystander, witnessing the lives of others, uninvited to participate. This was also the time that I began writing. In fact, I have stories, poems and children's chapter books all written in those first years in America, and yet, I have no recollection of writing them. The workings of memory and the perceptions we hold based on our remembered experiences serve as my primary source of inspiration for this thesis.

“Seven Addresses to the Lord” speaks of one such remembered experience that many would disbelieve. The poem is inspired by a moment I shared with God in the red rocks of Sedona when I “levitate [and] float momentarily” (lines 51, 54-55). Though many would argue this moment did not happen, it holds significant truth for me, which is why it begins the third section of this thesis, in which the poems speak to realization and discovery. “Time Out” is another poem that describes a moment of truth, a moment of imperfect motherhood. It, too, is included in Section III to showcase the time that I discovered freedom in admitting my flaws as a mother. Though both of these poems are intensely personal, they reveal my vulnerability about religion and motherhood. In so doing, I explore perceived truths and share an alternate perspective.

My solitude in fourth grade was partially due to my extreme shyness and inability to assimilate into mainstream American culture. I eventually did learn the words to “Like a Virgin,” and many other songs for that matter. The Michael Jackson glove quickly went out of fashion, as did neon jellies. Years later, I found a pair of platform jellies. I wrestled with buying them in the store. In the end, my mother's voice held firm – plastic is not for feet. Some truths still hold true. Most don't, and this serves as the second inspiration for this thesis.

The reason I am interested in the idea of truth as perception is based upon my expatriate experiences. I have the great fortune of being born to parents from different continents, of different religions, and of different values. I have lived among Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. I have lived in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America, and at this stage, have spent more years abroad than stateside. My children are British and American, but believe Kuwait is home. I feel more American as an expatriate than I have ever felt living in the States. In some ways, I have been standing on the periphery for most of my life, not only as a third-culture child returned home in fourth grade, but also as an expatriate living in Sweden, Taiwan, and Kuwait. My lack of a single identity has enabled me to identify with many, and thus, I observe life from multiple perspectives.

Hence, I am both witness and bystander. I am a detached observer, much like John Millington Synge, who moved to the Aran Islands to write about the people of the islands. Although he was Irish himself, he never “loved his own people too much, so as to be unable to see what was grotesque and silly and consequently most human in them” (Sullivan 243). Though my own identity and connections are more diverse than Synge’s, I share with him the ability to connect and disconnect, to understand a culture without romanticizing it. It is my lack of a single identity that informs my work, and I hope to show the reality of places and experiences, rather than the stereotyped or sentimentalized ideas many hold based on media and memoirs that show only biased half-truths.

Carolyn Forché addresses the idea of truth in her writing about poetry of witness. She states:

A poem...cannot be judged by simplistic notions of ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth to life.’

It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confession, by its

consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth. In fact, a poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred...As such, there is nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being 'objectively' true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence ("Carolyn Forché: on a Poetry of Witness").

My poems serve as evidence, not simply of my own experience, but of the experiences I have witnessed in my life overseas. In my wanderings, I have come to believe that common sense, and ultimately truth, is culturally loaded. There is no "truth to life," and often, a poem may be the only proof or "evidence" of an event. Thus, the poem becomes hugely important as a record of human experience.

In my poems, I attempt to record these moments, particularly in Section II, whereby I recount several of my observed experiences. "High Tea in the Desert" portrays a typically Arabic way of doing business. Regardless of the place, be it a palace or a construction site, business is conducted over tea and small talk. Relationships are the single most important element in the Gulf region, and thus, taking time for tea in a dusty and deserted construction site symbolizes the respect that exists amongst Arabic businessmen. "Abaya Dance" tells the story of another encounter, the contrast of powerful women and how they behave in public and private. Unlike a common Western stereotype, which indicates Muslim women are subjugated and oppressed, my encounters in the Gulf region allow me a different perspective. I actually find the women to be quite domineering, controlling, and powerful, despite the choice of some to wear the abaya. Thus, these poems reveal an alternate representation of Arab life.

Many of my poems are couched in the imagery of my life, mostly the deserts of Phoenix and Kuwait, but also the forest of my Swedish childhood. Seamus Heaney has inspired me to

use this imagery of landscape to explore the topics of what happens in those lands, both to myself and to others. He writes about Ireland and his personal experiences, often in childhood, and he presents poems that are also political and deeply meaningful. He places his readers in beautiful imagery of land and experience; yet, his poems speak volumes to the troubles of his native land, and he often explores an alternate side of a controversial and heated conflict.

“Desert Freeze” attempts to draw on the landscape of Kuwait while also commenting on Western interests in the region. The hills and markets of Taiwan provide the imagery in “Lee, Anna,” though the poem is also about tradition, youth and familial loyalty. The forest of Sweden holds both joyful and traumatic memories, and this, I recount in “*Cardamon Stuga*.” Like Heaney, I attempt to use the landscape as a backdrop for a larger story.

Eavan Boland is another poet I admire deeply. Both she and Seamus Heaney are masters at mixing fact with fiction, creating a narrative from myths or obscure facts. Heaney uses this technique in “The Bog Poems,” wherein he imagines the lives of the murdered citizens buried deep in the bogs of northern Europe. Boland is a master at re-creating well-known stories into completely new tales, essentially turning common allusions inside out. “The Pomegranate” is one of my favorite poems, in which Boland references the story of Persephone’s kidnapping to symbolize her own journey from childhood to motherhood. Boland also uses imagined events to present a version of truth, as in “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me,” a poem that draws on the speaker’s second hand telling of events. In this poem though, the speaker quite literally draws attention to the imagined by saying “And no way to know what happened then— / none at all—unless, of course, you improvise:” (lines 23-24).

Much of my work draws on this technique of fictionalizing factual events. All of the poems about my father re-imagine known facts to create a deeper narrative, while also

incorporating my perceptions of the events, such as in “The House My Father Took” and “*Min Pappa*.” I don’t know if my father “held me close and sang” (line 21), but this imagined detail creates a haunting image to close a gruesome scene. Little is known of my grandfather, though I do know that he did starve himself several times in opposition to British Colonial rule in Malaysia. In the same vein, I imagine my father’s life on the streets based on stories he has told me coupled with my own experiences in his home city and with other immigrants in various lands. In “Homecoming,” I recount stories my friend Nadwa has told me, filling in the truth with details from the news or my imagination. Thus, Nadwa embodies several people and her story is universal to the conflict in this region. Ultimately, my truths incorporate half-truths and my experiences are colored by my perceptions.

In my present experience as a mother, I often hear the phrase, “Mama, please inside-out this.” Though at two and five, both of my girls can dress themselves, they still have trouble turning clothes inside out. In teaching them how to solve the problem themselves, I help them reach into the sleeves or pant legs, grasp hold at the end, and pull through to the other side. In so doing, I realize that in order to turn something inside out, one must literally dive in deep, grasp hold and come out on the other side.

With this collection, I ask the reader to look beyond assumption and step into another perspective. Part I speaks of myself as witness. I am witness to my own experience, as a daughter, mother and adult, and this section contains the most personal poems of the thesis. Part II speaks of myself as a bystander. I am an onlooker, and though the observations are mine, I am imagining the stories and lives of others. The facts of what I see are written into the image of the poem, but the story is what I, as an outside observer imagine. I am a bystander, looking upon the lives of others, and because I am detached, I can sometimes see what others cannot. Hence, I

attempt to uncover the stories of others with a truth I want to explore. Part III speaks about realization. These poems are about the truths I have uncovered in my experience as witness and bystander. Though they are about my truth, I hope they will also be about the reader's truth. Here lies my attempt to answer the multiple sides of truth, to uncover and recover what I have experienced and observed, and to illuminate the idea that truth is not right or wrong. It is simply perceived reality based on where one is standing.

I ask the reader to let go of belief and give in to imagination in order to discover something new. In his story, "The Door in the Wall," H.G. Wells explores truth and reality, juxtaposing the imaginary world of a child with reality, until he ultimately questions which is true. Going through the door, one experiences "lightness and good happening and well-being," and to the main character the door leads to "immortal realities." As I attempt to uncover the multiple versions of my own reality, I hope to inspire my reader to "open the door in the wall," enter the garden of purring panthers, and experience the bliss of discovery.

I.

## Birthright

When my father won a limbo contest  
that gave him rights to the Hopi Nation,  
he finally became a “real” Indian,  
the North American kind,  
the kind he fell in love with thirty years before,  
on his first trip to Phoenix  
in winter of '75 – the year I was born.

Each winter, my father would return,  
buy Levis to sell on Stockholm streets  
– the ever connected *Indiaan* – hailed by Turks,  
Arabs, Spaniards, as he strode proud,  
garlanded in Turquoise and Kachina Dolls  
to adorn his Hindu Temple.

Christ, too, entered my father's temple  
as did we, my sister and I, to endure his ritual.  
Pink lipstick to the forehead – a makeshift Bindi –  
ascending chant while he danced in circles,  
ringing bells in an ever-growing fervor,  
hands and forehead bowed to the floor –  
in worship of Vishnu and Christ and Kachina.

We would sigh and roll our eyes.  
We did the same on the streets of *T-Centralen*  
when our father, *Indiaanen*, would speak  
to his immigrant friends. We'd search the crowd  
for signs of anyone we knew, ready to duck  
our heads, answer them in Swedish.

As we approached one or another of his posse,  
my father would growl at us both  
through a smile pasted wide:  
“Remember, to say I'm American Indian.”  
I disguised my silence with a casual stance,  
hip thrust outwards, head cocked sideways,  
showing I was too bored to listen  
to immigrants banter on the streets.

\**Indiaan* – Swedish for Indian  
*T-Centralen* – Central Stockholm

## *Cardamon Stuga*

I.

Those characters all lived  
in *Cardamon Stuga* – Blue Beard,  
trolls, witches and my old friend  
Boogeyman – I knew *he* was real.  
We met that dark night in Kuala Lumpur.

In the King's Forest, I would skip,  
moldy bread in hand, towards the duck pond  
nestled among mile-long tree trunks,  
my forest floor a charmed collection of  
beetles and fire ants,  
fallen logs and pine cones.  
Dappled with dense-leaved sunlight,  
I squatted, peered under rocks at  
wiggling life, careful never to leave  
the forest floor upturned.  
And there was *Cardamon Stuga* too,  
the shuttered cottage – a “witch's” home –  
at the edge of the forest and the sea,  
where we dared run towards  
the porch and flee with gleeful shrieks.

On those summer days,  
I could forget the midnight knocking  
of my drunk father.  
His sobbing and screaming  
while I huddled over my sister  
under the table.  
The cottage entered my dreams at night.  
I always knew *he* was standing  
behind those peeling green shutters  
watching.

The Path to Nowhere always ended  
with a picnic in a field of buttercups  
that bent with a lilting sea breeze  
while ladybugs and bees reveled in nectar,  
avoided our glass jars filled with leaves and sticks.  
They, too, took refuge in the blueberry thorns of  
*Cardamon Stuga*.

## II.

Now a mother, I can almost forgive  
my father my first memory.  
The early evening shadows were dim  
under streetlamps. He trudged uphill  
struggling to carry my screaming  
two-year old self, ready to drop me home  
with his sisters – strangers to me –  
on our visit to his homeland. My father  
aching for an alcohol-soothed night.  
I can empathize – almost.  
He asked if I saw the man up ahead  
and to my nod continued with  
    “He is the Boogeyman and  
    if you keep crying, *he* will take you.”  
My wailing continued at higher decibels.

All that darkness lived in *Cardamon Stuga* –  
shuttered so tightly it could not breathe,  
no sign of life on any of those summer days.  
A cottage that stood neatly boarded, yearlong,  
despite peeling paint,  
faded wood.

\**Cardamon Stuga* is a cottage set near the sea in the public lands of the King’s Forest in the suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden. Among the children who live in the suburb of *Lappis*, it is thought to be haunted and inhabited by a witch.

## Awake in the Night

This wintry wind echoes wildly  
through narrow tunnels  
of too high concrete blocks

screaming, pushing at panes  
so hard it knocks on the reaches  
of my dreams, hovers until I wake.

A crying baby? Not mine,  
asleep in her crib.  
I have already huddled

close to her heart,  
watched her chest rise.  
*What If* it screams,

*What Now* it whispers,  
demanding space  
in the shadows and shades

of my mind. Sit straight up,  
listen to this howl creeping  
slowly through our

cracked cement block,  
slower than the wind  
that rushes past.

What howl is this then?

## The House My Father Took

It was not the first thing he took from her by force  
when in an *Absolut* rage deep in the night, my father  
became the third arm of Shiva, holding his own flame of  
elimination. Outside, drops of spring thaw kept time

with Shiva's drum, a slight ripple of movement in a  
frozen moment. My mother stood still in the doorway  
while my father woke my infant sleep with a knife  
to my throat. Only he dared jar the silence:

“If you don't, I will.”

Perhaps her mind flashed back six months, when he lay  
on the tracks of the metro and she stood above him,  
her body heavy with me, wondering how to save him.  
Maybe she wished she hadn't. The house he demanded

with such force stood in Sonoran sands. Slump blocked  
with a carport and three small bedrooms. My father  
still held the knife. Time expanded from Vishnu's belly  
as he molded the world with his deep exhale. Perhaps

my mother wished this Hindu god to expel breath faster, inhale  
this dream for another. As she moved pen across papers,  
signing the house unto my father, he withdrew the knife,  
leaving only the faintest imprint. Then, he held me close and sang.

## *Min Pappa*

My father wondered if his father  
had found the death of his choosing  
– hunger strike, a political statement –  
when he returned from his search for water  
to rooms stripped clean of life.

At twelve, *min pappa* moved  
to the streets of Kuala Lumpur  
to wander the markets in search of scraps:  
his best chance the Hindu temples on Fridays  
where he could scrape coconut meat clean  
from the heap where they lay broken in ritual  
– a symbol of broken ego.

I don't know when *min pappa*  
next saw his father. Maybe  
upon his return home  
in my infancy when his father spat  
at my blond mother and ordered her  
from the family home.

We stayed anyway.  
Another Colonial oppression  
that dishonored Grandfather's sensibilities  
and a traitorous son  
consumed with a Golden

West that, still, cannot see past my father's  
gnarled hands, diseased white splotches,  
frizzed long hair. *Min pappa* left  
an education and higher Caste for the streets,  
he says to work. But his memory  
works like his language;  
he speaks only in fragments,

Tamil, Hindi, Cantonese, Swedish –  
broken English his most fluent tongue.  
I know he once hid under a bridge in Singapore  
as the Chinese Mafia hunted for him  
and that with one family he traveled  
to New York and found beauty in blonds  
and Capitalism and that was his end  
to Asia.

“*Indiaanen*” say the Swedes  
when *min pappa* walks through the streets,  
for in Stockholm he is known among other immigrants  
for his Native roots, though none know  
he earned this status by winning a limbo contest  
on the Hopi Nation.

\**Min Pappa* – my father in Swedish

## From Sunset to Sunrise

I wake up in the dark.  
Watch the sun rise over the Gulf,  
a crimson, orange, reddy sky –  
so much color  
between the hour of dark and light.  
Then, again, brown for the day.

In the horizon, sea and sky join  
to one colorless mass. Each day  
we say good morning  
to the dirt lots below, the lorries,  
a few scattered palm trees,  
and dusty mounds of bricks.  
This is what my child sees.

No wonder she stepped gingerly  
on the grass this summer,  
afraid to stand on green blades  
after a lifetime of concrete and sand –  
her childhood missing in color.

But this is a city of night.  
Shops open until midnight,  
dinner after nightfall,  
children visit the seaside  
under a moonlit sky.  
While we slumber  
under a Western timeline,  
locals live by the night.

City lights transform sand-colored buildings  
into a skyline vivid and bright.  
I wake up in the dark.

## Naming Day

Eliot coined *Shanti* “the peace which passeth understanding.”  
I agree – I have passeth my own understanding;  
my uncertainty gives way to analytical fugue.  
*Ni xiang tai duo*, the Chinese say.  
Yes – I think too much.

*Tar Baby* suggested Jessica’s mom  
as I longed to belong in an America of nicknames,  
of lemon-lightened hair, of neon jellied shoes.  
I complied through middle school and beyond,  
though somehow  
it never felt quite right,  
not like *Jessie*  
or *Jess* or *J*.

My mother called me Tower of Peace,  
a name I wore with private pride,  
unwilling to divulge my whole name – *Tara Shanti*.  
Too foreign.

*Tara*, the greatest Variable,  
for who is she – star goddess,  
Druidic mother goddess,  
the wife of the monkey king?

I choose Earth –  
loamy richness that gives way to fresh stalks of spring  
while it nurtures the aged banyan of my heart.  
No, I am not that wise.

Today, I feel more like a Lake Reed,  
hollow and bowing, not of my own device.  
A gust of air could knock me down – breathless.

\* *Ni xiang tai duo* – in Chinese the literal translation means “you think too much.” However, this is meant to describe those who overanalyze things.

II.

## Blood Norms

### I. Immigrants

At the Kuwait International Airport  
blood drains from the luggage carousel:  
puddles, pools, collects.  
Smearred with footprints  
and luggage wheels  
as waves of African migrants  
grasp at their imports –  
cardboard boxes  
spilling over with thawing  
carcasses.

### II. Slaughter

Carcasses bought from a *souk*  
of splayed limbs and entrails  
as in Spanish bullrings  
*toros* bleed  
from wounded blades,  
slowly dripping lives  
onto earth stained red.

### III. Renewal

Earth, red-glowing as the lanterns  
of Taiwanese markets  
where pork liquid spurts into popsicles  
of blood and children gnaw  
with pleasure fried claws and pull  
fish eyes hanging by filament  
strands. Ecstasy.

### IV. Conception

Snake writhes  
in soothsayer's gnarled hands,  
milking poison into glasses  
before he slices it from head to tail. Men  
seeking virile potions swallow venom  
mixed with blood and Galleon.

\**souk* – Arabic for market  
*toro* – Spanish for bull

## Deportation

One night, there was a riot in the Rooster Coop.  
I watched from ten stories above  
as orange flames of a hundred fires  
interrupted black silence,  
and men hung from windows  
flailing.

Clothes took flight from the rooftop.  
Mattresses – slashed – spilled their guts onto packed dirt.  
Paper scraps fluttered, in no rush to land,  
even though heaved from windows  
with angry force.  
The night sounded a steady roar.

In the morning, the building sat empty,  
the ground littered with belongings of the Coop.  
Bright shirts torn to rags,  
charred bits of paper.  
Whole living rooms  
splintered and splayed on the ground.  
No more life in that squared concrete block.

I don't know where the men went.  
I don't know what time they left.

For three years, that building sat empty.  
I would stare from my window  
into a stillness filled with ghosts  
of discontented workers and rubble.  
Recall the anger  
thundering through that night.

Then one day, the cracked panes were replaced,  
and laundry hung from the sill. Waving in the breeze.  
Beckoning with fuchsia.

\*In *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, the author uses the metaphor of the Roster Coop to describe the social system of India. The roster coop is a place of darkness and depravity, and the coop is controlled by a select few who possess the wealth. Most interestingly, the people of the roster coop do not support one another. Rather, they enable inequity by treating each other as badly as they are treated.

## Homecoming

On one trip home to Palestine,  
Nadwa stood  
at the checkpoint border  
over the River Jordan  
forced to rummage through all the luggage  
searching for a child's missing shoe.  
Her children sobbed inside the car,  
faces mashed to the windows,  
while the guards berated Nadwa  
for her chaotic packing,  
insistent that  
the missing shoe  
was an act of terror.  
She pleaded.

Once, she flew via Tel Aviv  
with her five children  
and elderly parents.  
Even on American passports,  
Israeli border patrol  
refused them entry  
to their homeland – still –  
after all these years.

The difference, argue some Americans,  
between Ireland and Palestine  
is that the English were never  
threatened annihilation.

But they don't know my friend Nadwa,  
American born to Palestinian parents.  
She shrugs as she tells me of new  
atrocities each year,  
always the first to ask how I am,  
what I need, how she can help.  
For years she would exhaust her finances,  
place Dean & DeLuca kitchenware  
in our mailboxes, the lone  
High School Sunshine Committee  
and her secret *Happy Birthday* to us.

Each summer Nadwa goes home  
to a land separated by thick fences  
surrounding newly built Israeli settlements

of American summer homes,  
fences that hide the ramshackle streets  
of the West Bank.

The Israelis don't allow Nadwa  
her dollars or dinars, brought  
to support her local economy. Instead,  
force her into new neon shops in the Settlements  
to buy the batteries she needs on most days  
to power her home. Each day  
her family swelters in the dry heat,  
their water shut off in midday hours.  
Daily brownouts bake them well.

One night after the evening meal of Ramadan,  
in her parents' home that overlooks  
the bright lights of a new Settlement,  
her family relaxes over board games and banter.  
The red point of a laser,  
scanning across the room,  
then focused on her father's forehead  
dead center –  
peppered backdrop to their holy celebration.

*"Ptzatzot lagabot."*  
Israeli guards playing a different game  
on their lazy watch.

*\*Ptzatzot lagabot* – in Hebrew, this literally means bombs to the eyebrows, but it is used as a slang expression to say great or fantastic.

Lee, Anna

My father, President Lee Teng Hui, is dying  
under the stark white light of a single bulb.  
I sit inside a winter-dampened concrete building  
alive with three generations housed in junk,  
my family unable to let go  
of even the box of their 1970s toaster  
or any other item or idea, for that matter.  
Outside, the *Kuomintang* mourn the death of the KMT  
and the anti-Mao movement, bear witness to the man,  
my father, who kept the hope of Chiang Kai Shek alive  
until today. I peer at the masses from a curtained window.  
Flashes of coy glint in a briny pond, frenzied  
as wind and rain whip through rice paper panels  
caught in the dragon fire of tradition.  
As I am caught. I struggle to escape  
the viscous threads of conformity, stand smothered  
behind sooty panes and a sky gone gray  
from neon lights that flash day and night  
above traditional markets of blue trucks  
hung with pork entrails and baskets of squawking roosters  
soon to be chopped for dinner.  
"Face" lives only among the dying,  
youth mingles only with its same red, blue and purple-haired self.  
My gray strands falter.  
*Bin Lan* trees carpet bamboo hills.  
Red juicy spittle streams down,  
casts aside clods of earth.  
Mountains disintegrate  
as traditions degenerate.  
My father dies.  
My hair turns white as I turn my back on youth,  
embrace his dying legacy. The DPP takes power anyway.  
*La meis* (spicy girls) launch his funeral procession  
by shedding clothes from a truck papered in flowers.  
White-clad mourners follow,  
paid to wail.

\*President Lee Teng Hui was the first democratically elected president of Taiwan. As President, he represented the *Kuomintang* or KMT, the party, led by Chiang Kai Shek that fled Communist China in 1949. The KMT supports eventual reunification with the mainland. One theory states that while he was the Chairman of the KMT, Lee Teng Hui was secretly supporting local Taiwanese home rule. The DPP is the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan and a symbol of the Taiwan independence movement.

## Abaya Dance

After dinner, ushered downstairs,  
we dance the Arab dance.  
Behind a carved wooden screen,  
their backs to us, male musicians  
play the *samra*, traditional clapping  
accompanying their *oud*, *mirwas* and *tablas*.  
We dance lively and frenzied across the floor.  
Hips sway in a forward sashay across the room,  
hair slung from side to side,  
breasts and shoulders shimmying.

We dance and laugh  
in this room of women –  
Western and Arab shed inhibition  
with tongue rolling “loolooloolos” –  
the celebratory shriek of Arab women.

Even Mrs. American Ambassador takes a turn  
with a very clumsy shoulder shimmy  
set against the rhythmic, pulsing hips  
of our hostess, recently named by Fortune 500  
the most successful businesswoman  
in the Gulf region. My modest title  
allows me invisibility in this room  
of powerful women, but I too  
can sashay across the floor.

As evening closes, we gather our wraps.  
Some, like me, exit as they are. Others  
shroud themselves in black. First,  
the long folds of the hijab, wrapped  
around and around the head and neck.  
Next, the abaya,  
black veil that swirls to the feet.  
One wears the *niqab*, leaving only her  
monsoon lids to stare straight  
into the night.

My bared arms tell no more  
than her underthings. I have seen  
what lies beneath her abaya:  
a Victoria’s Secret lacy garter  
under a slinky red dress.

And still, a lone strand of hair  
skirts the barriers of her shawl,  
attempting to be seen?

The blackened guise dances  
as she moves beneath,  
but the sheath cannot veil  
what her body knows.  
Allure in an illicit culture.

\*Abaya – the black robes in which some Muslim women cover themselves so as not to entice and attract male attention

Hijab – the head scarf that some Muslim women use to cover their hair

*Niqab* – the scarf some Muslim women use to cover their faces, keeping only their eyes visible

*Samra* – traditional Kuwaiti dance and song routine involving drums (*tablas* and *mirwas*), traditional clapping and singing; the *oud* is another instrument important in Kuwaiti music

## High Tea in the Desert

Discarded planks and slabs of stone  
litter this parched, unpaved earth  
reaching towards the Gulf.  
Like a ghost town of the West  
this construction site idles,  
emptied for Friday morning prayers.

Bamboo scaffold struggles  
under the weight of concrete,  
while water tanks like watchdogs  
guard empty doorframes. Bricks  
awaiting construction amass  
as cairns of an ancient civilization.  
Rods of rebar glint in the sun.

Phantom hammering punctures the air  
as a rooster struts towards a tarred road.  
A silver trimmed Mercedes dances with heat.  
Awaits starched white robes  
adorned with the checkered halo of Kuwait.  
Three men, sat under an unfinished stoop,  
with tea and a *shisha* pipe.

Stances dropped in casual banter  
as if they aren't sitting in the desert,  
in a site rife with construction,  
chickens pecking the ground  
at their feet.

## Desert Nights

FADE TO NIGHT

EXT. KUWAIT – MOSQUE – EMPTY DIRT LOT

I listen to my Iman's voice call across the Night; his joins haunting echoes of another Iman.

### IMANS' ECHOES

*Allah, Akbar...Allah, Akbar...Allaaaaaaaaaaaah, Akbar*

I watch men stream across empty lots, side by side, prayer rugs in hand.

After Day, in the lighting of Moon  
Night wakens under a prayer to call  
hush to Day, time to commune

with Night, windswept under starry dunes.  
Night twinkling sky rise and fall tall  
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.

A sliver of moon rises over the empty dirt lot. Only rows and rows of shoes hint at life.

INT. MOSQUE – LARGE DOMED ROOM

Men in hundreds face Mecca: bending, bowing, chanting.

INTERCUT: ARIZONA – SONORAN DESERT

Night falls, desert inhales deep, exhales long the scorching heat of Day.  
We lie on our backs, wander the Milky Way bursting above us.  
Life pulses beneath sand – scurrying creatures. Cacti drink deeply as petals open.

Crescent rise bright as an evening loon's  
long mournful cry, fatally calls  
hush to Day, time to commune

with crisp nighttime sky softly spilling its tune;  
desert flowers reverse Night and Day, open petals  
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.

INTERCUT: ARABIAN DESERT - RAMADAM – FULL MOON

Moon rises early here, larger than Sun. Measures time. Speaks softly, fervent whisper, yielding power. Wait – watch – life lived by Moon.

Closer to earth, this Moon swoons.  
Rises at night, eager to send once and for all  
*its* hush to Day, time to commune.

Daytime will wither and fade sometime soon  
and Night with its dark will cast a soft pall  
after Day, in the lighting of Moon.  
Hush to Day, time to commune.

III.

Seven Addresses to the Lord  
after "Eleven Addresses to the Lord" by John Berryman

1

These days, I speak only  
to you, not  
of you.

2

As a child,  
I loved looking at the wide river,  
Moses floating along in his basket,  
his mother peering through the bushes  
in my *Illustrated Children's Bible*.

3

Then, you were, and still are,  
in my imagination,  
a cocooned man,  
kindly in smile,  
hanging upside down  
from the clouds as a bat hangs  
from darkened eaves.

In your feathery wrap, speckled black,  
only your face is known to me –  
the rest sheathed in your reddish-brown robe.

Your face never seemed upside down.  
Yet, then, as now, I wondered how,  
hanging upside down,  
your beard could lie flat against your face.

These were my questions then:

Why do you hang from clouds,  
just watching?

Why doesn't your beard  
fall upside down into the air?

Do you ever get a head rush?

4

At Vespers chant

*Deus, in adiutorium meum intende*  
*Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina*

you hang  
from billowy, white clouds  
ensconced in feathers.

5

In Gothic churches,  
I wander through the  
Stations of the Cross.  
Try to get a sense of you.  
Light a candle.  
Kneel against a front pew.

I am sorry to be in your holy  
house without you.

You always seem to find me elsewhere.

6

What the reddened mountains whispered  
against the setting sun  
the brush afire below.

What the carpeted hills of bamboo murmured  
green hues intensified  
under golden skies.

7

Sitting on Red Rock  
I levitate.  
The sound of cicadas  
elevates to a thunder  
and I float with you –  
momentarily –  
my God in the feathery wrap  
my friend in the clouds.

*\*Deus, in adiutorium meum intende. Domine, ad adiuvandam me festina* – the opening lines of Vespers chant, meaning “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.”

## Austerity Measures

An older man fears nothing. *I am at the end of my life*, he says but admits his children are worried for themselves, for their children. Curiously, he is not worried for his children's children. *We have 20 gallons of water saved*. And still, he washes his vegetables, very carefully, in water contaminated with radiation. *We wash them well*, he says, unaware that he is now soaking his vegetables in radiation; unwilling to lose the freshwater he has stored, he bathes and washes his food in 100% radiated water. So do his children. So do his children's children.

\*Austerity measures is a common European Union phrase made popular after the 2008 economic downfall whereby governments attempt to significantly reduce spending to decrease national debt. The hope is that everyone will curtail their spending and become more frugal. Austerity measures are hugely controversial, partly because governments are cutting spending by reducing pensions and other benefits.

## Desert Freeze

It isn't as if your marrow can tell your state,  
the marrow that sits frozen inside your bones  
during winter's freeze, despite lying buried deep  
under wool blankets made of Bedouin sheep.

My landscape is dotted  
with Bedouin sheep who gaze still at the roadside  
or lie like fleece boulders on mounds of earth  
with taut curls from the heat of rain  
grazing on brush carpeted with dust.

My landscape is dotted  
with overcast hues against browned land  
stretching towards the Arabian Gulf,  
littered with pipeline, carrying oil as sluggish  
as my blood which flows in this freeze.

My landscape is dotted  
with a sea housing rigs  
that sink over a week  
as the blood of one nation  
is pumped into the blood of another.

## High Heeled America

That hole distressed us all – one hole  
in the soft pine floors from the time  
my mummy had worn her lone pair of high heels  
in our new Stockholm central apartment.

As a treat, Mummy would unwrap the shoes  
she had brought home one afternoon.  
*Far too expensive*, she would say, as we sat  
on our shaggy white rug to ogle their luxury.

She would fold the tissue gently  
before placing the lid back on the box,  
but not before I inhaled deep. Often,  
I would sit cocooned in the cupboard

breathing in their leathery smell.  
Tawny dreams sprung from those shoes,  
American dreams like the circular shopping malls  
I would describe on the playground after summers

spent *home*. Being American gave me clout,  
though it also isolated me, always an interloper  
with my *amerikanska mamma* and my *indiaan papa*.  
That hole, a hole in our perfection. Still, the shoes

excited us, made Mummy an elegant lady,  
like JR's wife bedecked in perfumed elegance –  
another too dear expense – while Mummy told tales  
of how we came to be in Sweden: her two yellow suitcases

stolen in Switzerland, one for each of us we believed,  
though we didn't exist yet – anywhere. Her tales  
of girlhood trickery swept us into a world of  
small town drama and American wishes.

America wasn't as glamorous as her reveries, but  
those shoes stayed in the box, moving from apartment  
to house, still storing that early enchantment, even though  
by then, Mummy wore heels every day.

*\*amerikanska mamma* – Swedish for American mother  
*indiaan papa* – Swedish for Indian father

## Time Out

Yesterday,  
in an attempt  
at socks

my babe rocked and roiled  
so deep into my chest  
I lost my wind,

then my temper.  
And even though  
hers was a game

of laughter and smiles  
my rage exploded  
with a pop

that sent her *thwack*  
into the rails of her crib;  
round eyes

shocked silent  
for seconds.

I walked away.

## Side-Impact

We decided to leave  
the day the baby died.  
Not ours, and yet,  
a death that stunned us still.

Strange how we both knew this was the end.  
Me, in a hospital, attempting to “support”  
two of my faculty, my husband  
awaiting each of my fragmented texts:

“Baby dead...  
criminal investigation & autopsy...  
grandmother doesn’t know...”

I hesitated to enter the waiting room, afraid  
to intrude on their grief, instead  
averting my gaze to stare at white walls  
as they pried the dead baby from its mother’s arms

and she wailed “Evidence?” As they carried out  
a neatly wrapped package of hospital blue scrubs,  
taped into a square. Two policemen  
to carry out a dead two-month old.

I thought that was the worst of it  
until they wheeled in the grandmother  
– oblivious to her deed –  
she smiled loopily and asked about the baby.

Her wails could be heard throughout the  
hospital when they told her.

“Your baby...  
I would never hurt your baby...  
I didn’t mean to...”

Words on refrain until the police  
escorted the keening mother  
from her own mother’s grief.

I arrived home spent – grateful  
and angry. She chose her mother  
– mentally ill and drunk  
with a history of seizures –

over a nanny from the third-world. Grateful  
and guilty for my own two (both left  
with strangers only months old – both fine)  
and something new, an insight birthed

from sorrow. A knowing deep  
within that nothing – ever –  
should intrude on instinct.  
My vacant stare a mask

for the images I didn't want to see.  
The baby on the floor, a trickle of blood  
and vomit running from his mouth;  
no visible marks to explain his slack body.

Cause of death unknown –  
named by the Kuwaiti police  
an “accidental kill case.”

## Arab Exile from Al-Ramla, 1948

*This is the place, you could say  
to yourself. This is the house  
with two histories. The house with  
the lemon tree.*

- Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree*

I can still recall the rooms of our house  
built by the men of our family,  
the long corridors that form a square,  
each wing housing a generation.

I can still recall the outdoor kitchen  
where Mama and my aunties  
spent hours cooking in brick ovens  
under the shade of our date trees.

But it's the lemon tree I can still see.  
Feel its fruit in my hand, wince  
at the first drops of juice on my tongue –  
bitter then sweet.

Each year it blossomed,  
heavy with fruit. Its juice set aside  
for hummus, tabouleh, tea.  
Its flesh rendered for sweets and cakes.  
Our goats fattened themselves on rinds.

Despite our exile, we hear reports  
that our lemon tree still stands  
gnarled and curled  
older than my father  
older than my father's father, even.

*They* tell stories now of how we fled.  
Ours a city deserted,  
doors left open to refugees  
who moved in while fires still burned in our stoves.

*They* tell stories.  
But I remember our fathers talking  
underneath the lemon tree, choices  
weighing heavy on their farmers backs.

Our fathers waited for allied soldiers,  
waited to negotiate peace,  
waited for the firing to stop.  
But they came  
unexpected  
upon our fathers  
who sat in makeshift trenches,  
shovels in hand.

When our city fell  
they halved the country.  
Still, it is *our* home. Still,  
it is *our* lemon tree.

## Paddywagon for the American Tourister

Our bus driver on the road to Dublin,  
a Kerry boy from Dingle sporting  
a hot pink Hollister hoodie and  
a distinct lack of tourist facts, tells

us that, *basically, Germany runs  
most of Europe*, hence its size  
on the 100 euro bill. I jolt upright  
at this thought, and even though

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's  
austerity pleas often run across the BBC,  
his off-shoulder shrug strikes my fancy,  
as if everyone accepts German

authority. Funny, they didn't get such  
dominion with two world wars. Despite  
his misplaced logic, Stephen manages  
to impart a smorgasbord of Irish

lore to this American tourister: the sheep  
they moved off the rolling hills of green  
to film *Braveheart* because Ireland is  
cheaper than Scotland, the sheep

in Dingle that outnumber the people  
twenty to one, the 11.2% Irish  
unemployment rate – told with another  
casual shrug of the shoulder. When I look

at the 100 euro bill to check the size of Germany  
in proportion to other EU countries,  
the map is set to scale. Germany is no larger  
or smaller than it is on any other map.

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## Vita

Tara Waudby was born in Stockholm, Sweden to an American mother and a Ceylonese Tamil father from Malaysia. She received her undergraduate degrees from Arizona State University in 1997 and her graduate degree from Northern Arizona University in 2000. Currently, she resides in the Middle East where she works as American school administrator.