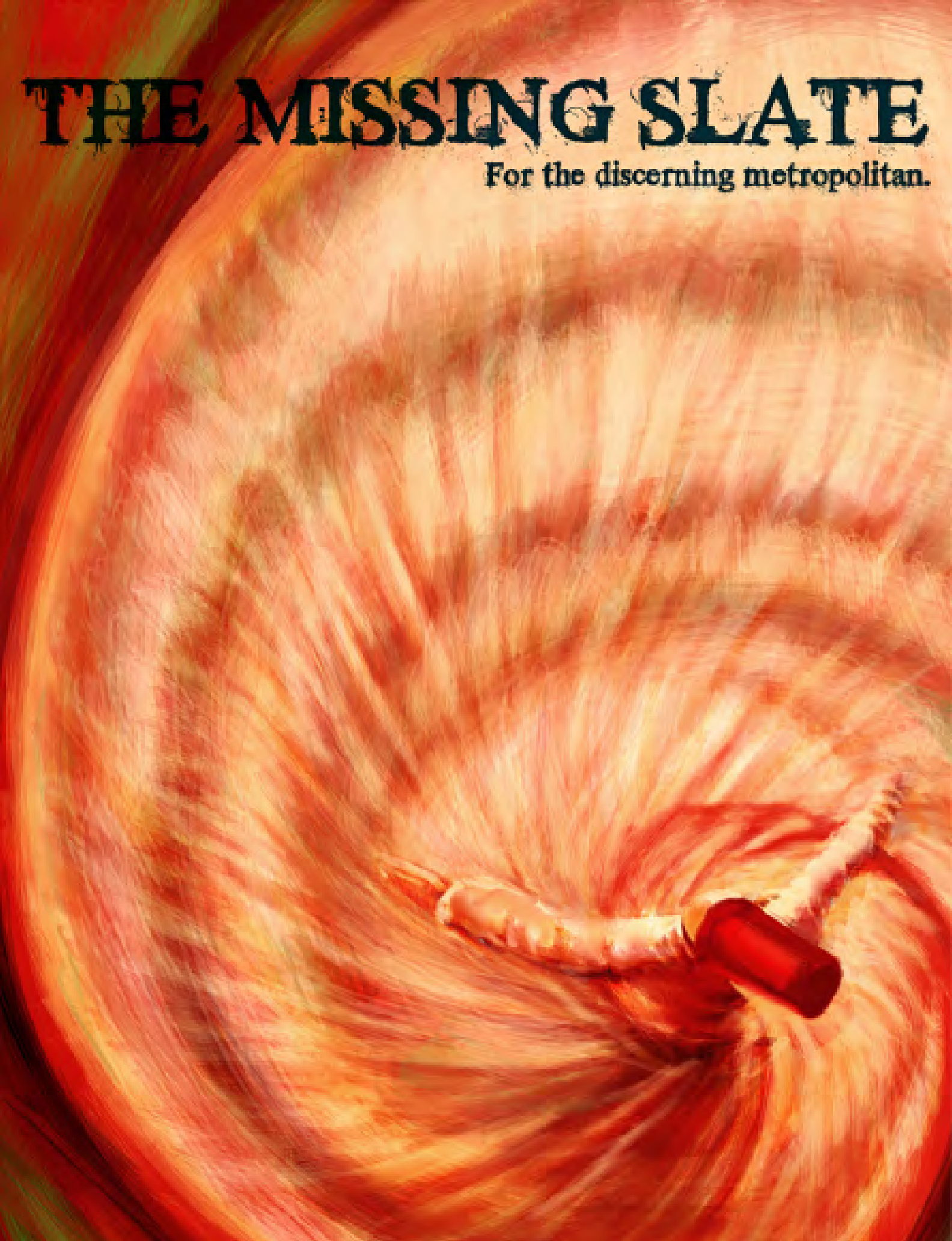
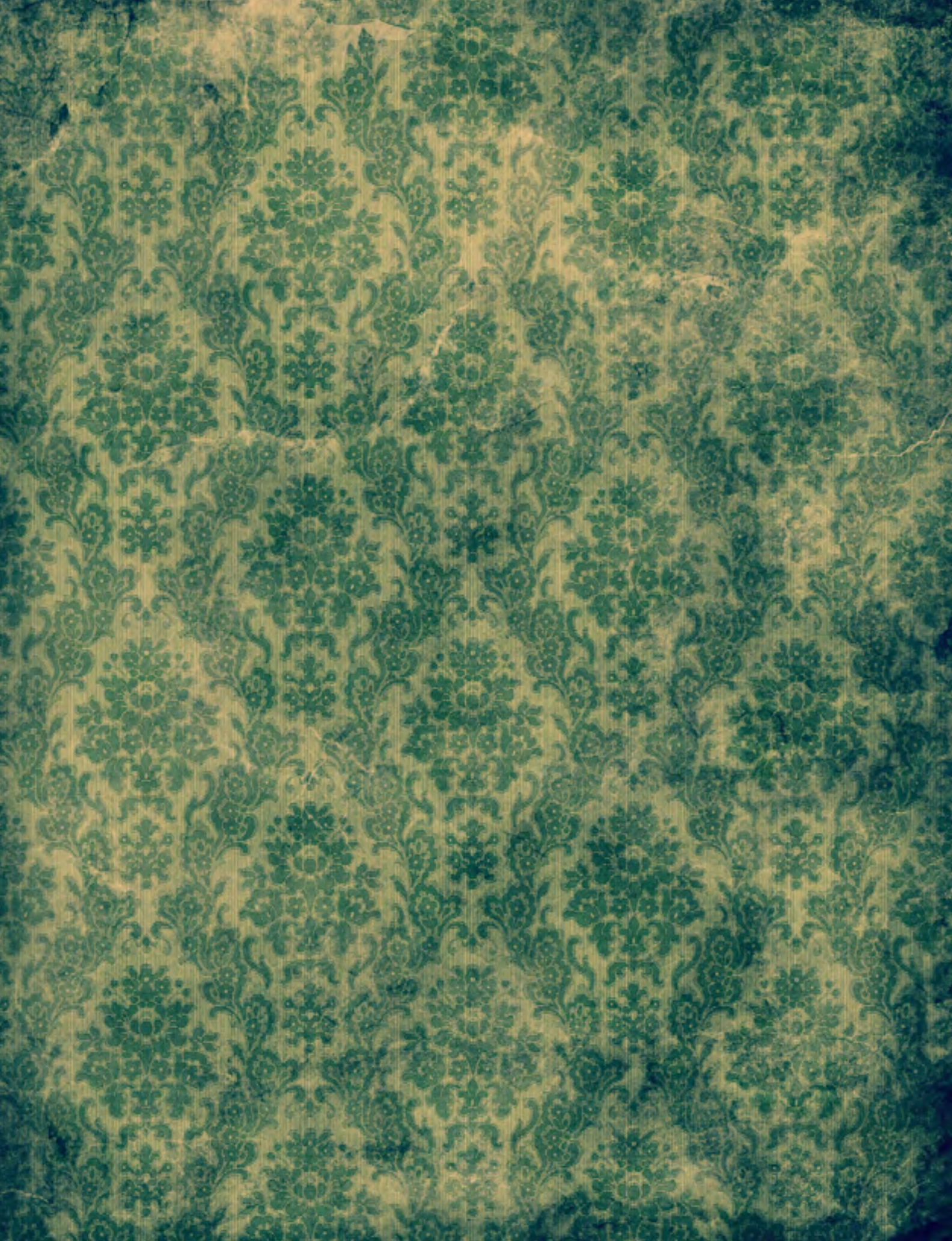


THE MISSING SLATE

For the discerning metropolitan.





“

Your old tutor did you a great disservice, Mr. Kynaston. He taught you how to speak, and swoon, and toss your head but he never taught you how to suffer like a woman, or love like a woman. He trapped a man in a woman's form and left you there to die! I always hated you as Desdemona. You never fought! You just died, beautifully. No woman would die like that, no matter how much she loved him. A woman would fight!

~ Jeffrey Hatcher, Stage Beauty

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A WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Readers,

Some might argue that for an almost all-woman team of a magazine run by a woman, sexual and emotional power plays, such as they may be for a group of introverted editors like ourselves, must play somewhat of a part... because where you have a female majority, “surely” that’s par for the course. But you would be wrong.

I think the reason the magazine has been as successful as it is, is *because* of its female-centric team, in a world which, as we are so often reminded, was once reserved solely for men. Don’t get me wrong: this isn’t an “anti-man” tirade — what would that even look like, anyway — I think men are fascinating creatures... as long as they’re not trying to pigeonhole women into box-sized categories.

Many of the essays included in this issue focus on that line of thought from Maria Amir’s essay on body image and the male gaze (*Cutting through the Fat*), especially relevant in a tabloid culture whose bread and butter depends on the use of Photoshop (applied generously to women with “a little excess” either way), which has naturally contributed to a false sense of perfection for girls today. In her essay *Reclaiming the Narrative*, Sana Hussain writes of how Pakistani Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai’s female characters use sex to their advantage in subverting men, a thread both Ghausia Rashid Salam and Tom Nixon pick up in *How Faerietales Stole Female Sexuality* with a dissection of how faerietales set the dialogue for the treatment of women represented in the arts, and *The Gaze of the Voyeur* which moves the discussion towards cinema and the male gaze.

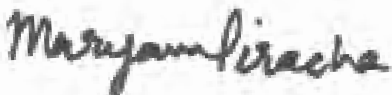
All that isn’t to say the modern woman lacks power — we’ve got women in all sorts of fields including those more traditionally ruled by men (hello, gamer gals) — but, as argued by Mahnoor Yawar in *Losing My Fandom*, the battle is still an uphill one felt acutely in a genre that should favor the marginalized and underdogs. Aaron Grierson rounds off the discussion with an essay on online dating and the emotional power plays at work for children of the next generation — is technology facilitating an absence of real emotional connection when “love” is just a Skype call away?

Continuing our literary focus on countries and following on from our well-received features on emerging British, Pakistani and Indian writers, we feature some truly fascinating literature from Lebanon in an issue guest edited by Marcia Lynx Qualey (who joins us from ArabLit, a daily blog on Arab literature). Included in this issue is fiction from Elias Khoury, Hassan Daoud, Hyam Yared, Jabbour Douaihy, Alexandra Chreiteh, Najwa Barakat and Iman Humaydan, with poetry from Bassam Hajjar, Etel Adnan, Abbas Beydoun and Wadih Saadeh, with a special introduction by Ms. Lynx Qualey and Yasmina Jraissati.

Power plays, both emotional and sexual, are what anchor this issue and I hope — in however small a way — that our words resonate within you and become the change this world so desperately needs.

Happy Reading!

Sincerely,



Maryam Piracha
Editor-in-Chief



Artwork by Ira Joel

READING LEBANON, READING THE WORLD

An introduction to the Lebanese literary feature

By Marcia Lynx Qualey and Yasmina Jraissati

Literary traditions from the area we now call Lebanon have been shape-shifting for a thousand years and more.

Although poetry was the region's first love, the modern novel began to coalesce with the brilliant and peripatetic Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's four-volume novel *'Leg Over Leg'* (1855). *'Leg Over Leg'*, recently translated by Humphrey Davies and published by NYU Press, is a monument to Lebanon's place as a crossroads, interweaving as it does both Western and Arabic story-building techniques. Al-Shidyaq was himself a shape-shifter: raised as a Lebanese Christian, he traveled widely and later converted to Islam. Although he writes that he was not a "chain man" — that his novels were neither linked directly to those of the past nor meant to directly influence the future — his wit and inventiveness stand out as a guiding literary light.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Lebanese novelists were experimenting with a variety of different techniques. The most popular author was almost certainly Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), who left Lebanon as a student and spent much of his life in Egypt. Zaidan wrote fast-paced historical novels that were under-appreciated by critics and scholars, but have been read and loved by generations of fans both in their original Arabic and in translation.

Egypt was home to most of the mid-twentieth century's big Arabic literary stars: Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, and Yusuf Idris. But when the 1960s generation authors in Egypt were challenging these earlier novels, experimenting with meaning and form, so were '60s-generation authors in Lebanon, led by experimenters like Elias al-Diri and Youssef Habchi El-Achkar.

Also significantly in 1960s Beirut, publishing houses were flourishing. Books that couldn't be published in other Arab countries for one reason or another often found their way to Lebanon, which established itself as a capital of Arab publishing. This notably enriched the Lebanese literary scene.

From the middle 1970s to 1990, civil war disrupted life and the course of Lebanese

“ This special issue gives a small glimpse of a rich vein in contemporary Lebanese literature, which addresses universal questions of memory, identity, violence, and gender. ”

writing. Massacres and bombings disfigured the Lebanese landscape. Yet this boiling crucible also brought the world some of its most celebrated contemporary novelists: Elias Khoury and Hanan al-Shaykh (writing in Arabic), Rawi Hage and Rabih Alameddine (writing in English), and Amin Maalouf (writing in French), as well as many more. These novelists draw both on contemporary forms and on deep Arab literary roots, ranging from the sophisticated wordplay of 10th century Iraqi poet al-Mutanabbi to the page-turning savvy of the *'Thousand and One Nights'*.

Some Lebanese authors, such as world-acclaimed Elias Khoury, were part of the fighting for a time. He wrote his novel *'White Masks'* (1981) and the novella *'Smell of Soap'* (1981) during the country's Civil War. An excerpt from *'Smell of Soap'* has been translated by Ghada Mourad for the first time for this issue.

Khoury once told interviewer Sonja Mejcher that he used to put his life as a soldier and his life as a writer into separate categories, but that his views changed with *'White Masks'*, when he began to be critical of the war. "It was then that I discovered that my work as an intellectual and as a writer is, first, important and, second, meaningless, cannot be done, if I am not critical of the situation I am living in."

The country's civil war, which ebbed and flowed from between 1975-1990, is still a major issue pulsing under the literature of the country's



Dear Abby by Kenneth Steven

leading contemporary writers, including Hoda Barakat, Iman Humaydan Younes, Najwa Barakat, Rabee Jaber, Alawiyya Sobh, Rashid al-Daif, Hassan Daoud, and Jabbour Douaihy. Many of these writers are included here, and many are the authors of award-winning novels: Douaihy's *'June Rain'* (trans. Paula Haydar), was shortlisted for the inaugural International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2008, and Daoud's *'180 Sunsets'* (trans. Marilyn Booth) was longlisted for IPAF in 2010. Etel Adnan's *'Sea and Fog'* won both the 2013 LAMBDA Literary Award for Poetry and the 2013 California Book Award for Poetry.

This issue is not entirely focused on novels. Alongside the excerpt from Adnan's *'Sea and Fog'*, poems by leading Lebanese poets Abbas Beydoun, Wadih Saadeh, Bassam Hajjar have been translated by the extraordinary Egyptian poet Maged Zaher.

In recent years, a new generation of Lebanese authors has arrived. Their writing — and in some cases, illustrations — grows apart from the war-marked imagery of their predecessors. Among them are: Hilal Chouman, Hala Kawtharani, Sahar Mandour, Alexandra Chreiteh, Lena Merhej, and Mazen Kerbaj. Alexandra Chreiteh is included here, showcasing her sense of humor about the overlapping worlds in contemporary Beirut in *'Always Coca-Cola'*.

Most of Arabic literature's major writers are still little-known in English. Many are translated, but few reach the wide readerships that they deserve. This special issue gives a small glimpse of a rich vein in contemporary Lebanese literature, which addresses universal questions of memory, identity, violence, and gender. We also point the way to where readers can find much more.

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY SUNSETS

By Hassan Daoud, trans. Marilyn Booth

From the author: The characters in 'One Hundred and Eighty Sunsets' don't belong in any way to this place called Zahraniyya where they live. They came to this place, twenty or so miles from Lebanon's capital city Beirut, fleeing their areas of origin, because of the war, or the wars, and here they are, in houses new to them, houses being built there. All the while, they are building resentment and hatred toward each other as if, in their turn, they are getting ready for their own coming war. Amongst these characters are Salma, the alluring young woman who shows herself, revealed breasts and all, to the young men; and Taysir, who sells birds and is mentally challenged; and the two brothers who have lived in Zahraniyya for twenty years of indistinguishable days in the shop their father bought for them. The first excerpt below is narrated by the elder of those brothers, and it opens the novel.

Beirut, 2009

Although twenty years have gone by since my arrival in Zahraniyya, where I still live, it's as though I've realised only now that there's no cemetery here. It dawned on me suddenly, cutting short the unruly flow of thoughts that compete for attention when we're trying our cunning best to dodge insomnia. That is to say, I had no warning at all, no inkling, no thoughts in my head leading in that direction. I guess it just detached itself from the crowded jumble of fancies and images, coming forward like a passing word, like a sentence some fellow said to me in the course of my day, a string of words I didn't hear properly at the time and so the phrase hung there, waiting for the right moment to release its full impact on me. When it did, it flipped me over onto my back. I would go to sleep in that position now, and not on my stomach or either side. My eyes were open wide, trying to make out how much light, or darkness, surrounded me in this room.

No one has been buried over there, in that cleft that cuts between the two hills, a steep incline where nobody has yet built a house. Lying in bed, I mused how, if they wanted a cemetery for themselves, they would have made one over there. Or they could have built it here, on this patch of ground separated from the building I live in only by a lane too narrow for me to even park my car. This bit of land is still vacant.

It's been left to itself, no one building his house here either. The sun has scorched the soil so thoroughly that it has left only blackish sand. I often catch myself thinking that the debilitating heat pulsing through me must rise from the warmth it gives off.

There is not a single grave in all of Zahraniyya. That is to say, on the land surrounding the houses that are toward the sea, the only ones where you'd find gardens in which trees and flowers have been planted. Anyone driving by can see that those houses have been around long enough for at least one of the people living there to have died — indeed, for one inhabitant from every house along there to have died. After all, only a month or two after we arrived I saw with my own eyes that coffin hoisted on the shoulders of the men who slid it into one of the waiting cars clustered there.

It was a woman, my brother told me. When I asked him whether she was someone we had seen alive, he and I, he told me she'd been confined to bed long before we arrived.

My brother was sixteen, that age when finding companions is a matter of urgency. Within a month of our coming here he had already been inside one or two of those houses. He told me that nothing separated those people from the sea unless it was those sharp rocks that made our feet bleed if we walked across them barefoot. But they could see across the rocks to the whole expanse of sea beyond, as he reminded me. 'The sea, it's like the sea belongs to them, as if it is an extension to their houses, since no one can walk along between these houses and the sea if it means having to walk on those rocks.' We could see how blue the water was too — a vast, intense blue — from the wide glass façade of our shop. But when we were at home, above the shop, if we wanted to get a glimpse of the water we had to go to the very end of our balcony, squeezing ourselves into the narrowest part of it.

We couldn't see the ocean from where we lived over the shop because the other flat, which was also above it, obstructed our view and left nothing to reach us but the salt and the dampness. Not long after our arrival my brother started repeating that they had cut us off from the sea breeze, as he slid his



Domestication - A View from Prison by Brett Stout

“ He told me that nothing separated those people from the sea unless it was those sharp rocks that made our feet bleed if we walked across them barefoot. But they could see across the rocks to the whole expanse of sea beyond, as he reminded me. ”

elongated fingers across his forehead to wipe off the sweat. As if it was them, the people who lived in that flat, who were standing between us and the moving air. He hated it that there were so many of them, which made it harder to get everything straight. It took the two of us a long time to figure it all out: who were the full brothers and who were half siblings, and which children were the two sons of the eldest brother, Atif. ‘They came to Zahraniyya before we did’, explained my father on the day we arrived here. He was showing us the shop that would be ours, and the living space above it but on the back side of the building. ‘You can see the ocean from the shop, all day long’, he said. Yes, that’s what he said so long ago, I remember it, but after that, and ever since, we imagined how lovely the view of the sea must be for the people who get to see it from there, from their broad balcony which was half as big as the interior of a flat.

But the ground floor was entirely ours. We didn’t have to share it with anyone. That first time I went through the front door, which my father opened with some keys he carried on him, I assumed that the huge front area made up the entire shop. It was plenty big enough for what we would be doing. When we went deeper inside, I couldn’t imagine what real use my brother and I would ever make of these rooms. Two of them were so enormous that I had never seen such a space behind any door. I did think they resembled the storerooms that old-time merchants used to put up for housing their wares safely. They were high-ceilinged rooms, two floors

in height. In each there was only one small window, set very high in the wall and too narrow to cast more than a dim, meagre light across that immense emptiness.

The cement tone of the walls made the place even gloomier. After we moved in I started seeing the walls as heat magnets, like the sand outside that the sun had burnt black. Laying the keys in my hand, my father observed that no doubt my brother and I would paint the walls soon. My brother — who was fearless about speaking his mind in front of our father even though he was younger than me — said that whoever built this place spent all their money on creating outsized rooms. Behind his jocular words he was finding fault with my father’s insistence on keeping us there, letting us know how lucky we were to have these two enormous useless rooms. It was as though he intended to make us understand that he was giving us a shop and a place to live not just so that we could make a living now, but for our entire lives.

Only now, twenty years after we came to live here, it dawns on me that there’s no cemetery here. Still lying in bed, I reason that if I didn’t see this before, if it never crossed my mind, it must be because we take places as they are; accepting them, we engross ourselves in what we find. I started picturing myself as I have been here, moving amongst places but hardly covering any distance since they are so close together, getting out of my car only to climb back in and, the moment I’m behind the wheel, feel it sinking under my weight. And then I sense how cramped and constrained my actions have made me. It’s as though there is nothing more to life than this constant shuttling from place to place, none of them more distant than three minutes’ drive. Even so, I find myself heading for the car every time, preferring the ease of it to the fatigue of walking. But this is what everyone in Zahraniyya does. ‘No one walks here’, I was told once by someone who arrived in this neighbourhood before I did.

They’re all old cars here, and they were already old when their owners bought them. I see them emerging from their narrow parking spots on either side of the street, waiting for a car or two to pass before edging out to stuff themselves — always for a very short distance — into the long line of cars snaking along in both directions. It was this endless queue of vehicles that seduced my father into buying

the shop, situated exactly here, for us. It meant that my brother and I were forever waiting for the next car to turn out of the queue and stop opposite our shop, and for the driver to get out because he meant to buy something from us.

That our living space and our workplace were so close by, separated only by a few stairs, helped lighten the burden of insomnia. I could climb out of bed, put on my outdoors clothes, which I'd hung on the window knob or draped over the high-backed chair in my room, and run down to our shop to open it. At night passing cars were rare, but I could keep myself alert and engaged thanks to the strong light flooding from our façade window onto the street. I could entertain myself watching a man climb out of his car merely to ask me what we were selling. Like me, he was eager for distraction. 'Had he come a long way?' I would ask, appearing unconcerned about whether he was there to buy something or had come in only to give his legs and feet a rest from sitting for so long in his car. To keep him there longer, sometimes I found myself getting up to rinse yesterday's residues from the little Turkish coffee pot, telling him that coffee tasted especially good at this hour.

Our shop and the rooms in which we live haven't changed at all since the day we took the keys from my father, twenty years ago. That is, we never did paint the walls, which no one before us painted either, nor did we enlarge the windows in the two enormous rooms behind the front shop. We didn't repair any of the damages of time, either. The outside wooden window shutters, onto which direct sunlight fell relentlessly for most of the day, began to splinter and crack, and then the wooden frames began to warp and come apart so that the two shutters no longer closed properly together. The sink, which began to split, we left as it was. We didn't do anything about the porcelain toilets which showed permanent black rings where the water collected after emptying. In our first year here I said repeatedly to my brother that we must keep our home clean and well-appointed like the homes women manage. That's the way he wanted our home, too, and that's why — a few days after we arrived — he bought two lamps made of fancy glass that he placed to either side of his bed, and over it he hung a painting of a woman with long loose hair and bare shoulders playing a small stringed instrument. In that first year he was the

“ If we were to paint our walls a different colour, my brother would say, it would be as though we were pointing accusing fingers at our neighbours whose walls would remain as drab and colourless as ever. ”

one who was always arguing that we must give some thought to the décor in the shop. He was the one who painted the bars that were no wider than the rulers we used at school but went almost all the way up to the ceiling. These, too, remained their original colour, ugly as I see them now, and cheap-looking, as if we hadn't paid almost half of what my father left us to acquire them.

Sometimes I wonder whether maybe we would have made a better life for ourselves if people hadn't been the way they were in Zahraniyya. I am thinking of the people living 'above the road', where our shop and home sat. If we were to paint our walls a different colour, my brother would say, it would be as though we were pointing accusing fingers at our neighbours whose walls would remain as drab and colourless as ever. He was referring to the inhabitants of the flat next to ours. 'We might as well be saying to people, "Look how dirty they are",' he would say, raising his arms, hands reaching to each side to show me where there'd be colour and where there'd be just a dirty grey. As for the space separating our front doors, we couldn't have half of it clean and the other half soiled, and we couldn't put up a wall to separate them halfway.

JUNE RAIN

By Jabbour Douaihy, trans. Paula Haydar

On June 16, 1957, a shoot-out in a remote Lebanese church left two dozen dead. In the aftermath, the town was torn in two. Jabbour Douaihy's 'June Rain' reconstructs the day through the viewpoints of various people whose lives were altered. The excerpt that follows is taken from the first chapter of the novel.

They didn't tell us what happened until the next day. They let us sleep through Sunday night unawares — upstairs, on the top floor of the east wing, where the smell of the nearby river and the dawn calls of the *muezzins* entered through the wide open windows. There we distracted ourselves on hot June nights by watching the few cars that passed through the market streets and observing the arguing of the lazy, mischievous, loud-mouthed boys getting back at the diligent kids with thick glasses who teachers were always putting on a pedestal.

It was almost seven o'clock when the headmaster entered the classroom followed by the school doorman. Those of us who were fighting back sleep, and there were many on that Monday morning, lifted our heads. Frère Ambroise would not have brought in Jamil al-Raasi if this were about the poor results of the mathematics exam, or what he might have heard about our plans to mix pop lyrics into the Latin chants of the local Maronite and Catholic families who attended church at the school on Sundays. Those were the kinds of infractions the headmaster dealt with in that French of his, studied with the harshest words. His tone confused us, even more than the names of the tropical birds and desert reptiles he would dole out to us, in plural and in singular form.

Jamil, despite his slight build and silent nature, was the school's eyes and its link to the outside world. He negotiated with demonstrators when their chanting leaders in the front lines pushed too close to the school gates across from the Copper Market in the hope that for once the school would be shut down and the students allowed to join in their angry protest against the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt. He lent money to students in emergencies and relayed brief messages to the boarders from

their parents: 'Eat well, Anise, and don't sneak out of school to go and hang around in the streets. It's not safe out there...'

When parents came to the city to shop or to pay their mortgages at the government offices, they would visit Jamil to give him things to deliver to us, like goat's cheese or aniseed fritters. It was to him and him alone that such matters were entrusted, matters we felt were impossible to convey in French. That language, whose symbols we struggled to decipher in those books with the depressing illustrations and which rolled fluently off the tongues of the Frères in their black habits, referred, in our view, to things from another world that had no counterpart in ours. As for our own affairs and our own names, they had their own language that was part of them and came from them. And that is why it was Jamil al-Raasi who leaned back against the doorframe and said in a lifeless tone, 'Barqa kids, pack your books...'

Those were the kinds of things he was entrusted with — announcing to the Muslim children an extra day of holiday just for them on Eid al-Adha, or to the Orthodox Christians at Easter, or to dismiss the kids from the snow-covered mountain villages two hours early. His announcements were met with shouting and whistling, as the teachers in charge momentarily relaxed their supervision. As for us 'Barqa kids' the news of our early dismissal struck the older ones among us speechless and the younger ones with a silent joy that the week had been messed up already, along with concern about the bad news that was no doubt going to sting us soon.

When we heard Jamil al-Raasi's announcement, we didn't rush around making a racket and collecting our things the way the recipients of such announcements usually did. Despite our silence, Frère Ambroise couldn't help barking out his orders — 'No noise in the stairwells!' — mostly in French, confirming our suspicions that he only pretended not to understand Arabic to trick us.

The headmaster seemed to be trying to restore some of the school's decorum, which had been compromised when he conceded to set us free, most likely after hearing how vitally necessary it was for us to leave. A sudden silence fell upon the hundreds of day students who were flooding into the school. They looked us up and down, as if seeing us for the first time as we crossed the playground with our belongings on our backs. We tramped past the lit-

“ As for our own affairs and our own names, they had their own language that was part of them and came from them. ”

the wooden stage, the place where Davidian the photographer had got us to line up alongside our teachers for our commemorative class pictures. We, the children of Barqa, wouldn't be appearing in the end of year photos that ill-omened year of 1957. As he led us to the gate, Jamil remained silent, despite our impulsive questioning and our little hands tugging on his shoulders and nearly tearing his jacket, until finally, like someone ridding himself of a heavy responsibility, he said, 'Ask Maurice.' The bus driver.

Jamil was right to hand the matter over to Maurice, because the bus driver was from our village. Jamil, on the other hand, was from a distant village way out in Akkar, near the Syrian border. Maurice was the one who took us to our families, once a month at most, whenever the school was pressured to release us. The longer we stayed away from the vicinity of the town, the safer our parents felt we were. As Maurice sat watching us get on the bus, he gripped the steering wheel and stared into space.

'Maurice!'

He too did not answer.

We called out to him, we questioned him using every tone of voice. Maybe he didn't want to say anything within hearing distance of Jamil al-Raasi — a 'stranger' — who was supervising our departure and making sure we behaved as we crossed the few metres between the school grounds and the bus, parked beside the gate out in the nearby circle that Jamil was also in charge of supervising.

'Maurice! What's going on? Where have you come from?'

Twenty questions, each with its own particular urgency, failed to pry a single word out of Maurice, or even a wave towards the back of the bus or one of his usual glances in the mirror to make sure we were under control and all accounted for. It wasn't until the last one of us had climbed aboard

the bus that Jamil al-Raasi shut the rear door, repeating timidly to us like someone about to reveal everything he knew, or as if offering one final word of advice before saying his last goodbyes, 'Take care of yourselves.'

The moment Maurice heard the door slam shut, he started the engine and took off, without making the sign of the cross. We didn't fight over the window seats or push our way towards the long bench seat at the back of the bus where we liked to put our legs up and stretch out, trying to undo all those hours of sitting properly in the classroom.

At first Maurice was preoccupied with getting out of the city. He seemed to be using the difficulty of passing through the narrow streets as an excuse for not answering our incessant questions. Trying to justify not answering us, it seemed, he showed excessive agitation as he swerved to avoid hitting the fruit carts and liquorice juice vendors or the acrobatic delivery boys cycling through the traffic delivering orders of hummus or fava beans to their customers. That day Maurice kept quiet, didn't gripe about all the chaos in the wheat market. Nor did he curse the porters who obstructed the road, heaving under their loads. He didn't even lose his patience when a horse cart got stuck between the produce crates and blocked traffic. All of that, in his opinion, and as he so often preached to us about, was clear proof of the inability of Arabs to win wars, though he never indicated whether he was happy about their losing or pained by it. But that morning Maurice appeared unable to speak as he laboured with his short arms to turn the steering wheel around the successive sharp bends on our way up towards the American School. At any rate, we felt that, for the first time in the entire history of his driving us to our homes, Maurice was not in a hurry. Nor were we, as I recall.

We passed the last of the scattered buildings along both sides of Al-Arz Street and made a turn at the water storage tank. Now that we were on a flat road and the driving had become easier, the time had come for him to start telling us why he was taking us home on a Monday. But just as soon as the high mountains, still wrapped in a light morning fog, appeared, we heard his sobs. We suddenly realised that he was not going to talk, and so we stopped asking questions and began watching him in the rear-view mirror, usually his means for



Whispers by Jihane Mossali

“ We didn’t fight over the window seats or push our way towards the long bench seat at the back of the bus where we liked to put our legs up and stretch out, trying to undo all those hours of sitting properly in the classroom. ”

supervising us. His big green eyes were the colour of apples, the kind my grandfather wouldn’t let us pick, always telling us that they hadn’t ripened yet.

The plain leading to our village unfolded before us while Maurice wept. Those of us who were seated by the windows poked our heads out to catch the breeze and enjoy the view of the olive trees as they receded behind us, back towards the city, breaking the monotony of the plain. As the plain stretched before us, we looked around and counted each other. There were eighteen of us in various grades, but not all of us were from Barqa. Two strangers had slipped into the fold. Actually, their parents lived in our town, but they were still strangers. Jamil al-Raasi didn’t differentiate them from us. They lived in Barqa, but they were not Barqa kids. They chose to ride with us and risk facing whatever dangers were in store for us, rather than sit at those gloomy desks at school.

Maurice wept as if he were all by himself and not being watched by all our eyes, as if it were between him and himself alone. Our neighbour, Maurice. He hadn’t been blessed with children of his own. I used to see him after he dropped everyone off, sitting beside his wife on a wooden bench under a jujube tree, as if waiting for evening to fall, a small radio at their side blaring Mohammed Abd al-Wahhab songs. Maurice was the first person I ever saw cry with total abandon, never wiping his tears, letting them pour down his cheeks and drip onto the steering wheel. That kind of weeping only happened in romantic movies like the ones the older schoolchildren often

skipped school to go and see at the Roxy Theatre. Maurice’s green eyes looked very big in the wide mirror. While he wept, we watched in total silence, discovering for the first time all the rumbling and hissing sounds that were usually muffled by our constant yelling as we rode in Maurice’s tottering bus.

The only thing that drew our attention away from Maurice was arriving at the steep mountain pass where the houses of the town, clumped together on top of the hill and still engulfed in the white fog rising from the river, came into view. After slowing a little before the final stretch, he drove us down with the brakes screeching until we could see the steel bridge and the crowd that had gathered around an army tank; a soldier wearing a helmet painted with camouflage colours peered out of the turret. There were only women and soldiers. I saw my aunt standing among them. She was wearing a red dress and her hair was dishevelled. Most of the women were dressed in black. I didn’t know why they had sent my aunt rather than someone else to pick me up. I assumed my mother and father were occupied with whatever was happening. I saw her from a distance, angrily shrugging her shoulders with her arms folded across her chest. There were around twenty women huddled together and a small band of soldiers scattered on and around the bridge. When we got off the bus, we heard one of the soldiers telling another, with their rifles strapped to their shoulders as they looked at the muddy water, how the snows had been late to thaw the year before and how the river had flooded, sweeping the stone bridge away, so a steel bridge had been built in its place. I tried to ask my aunt what was happening, but she shut me up. She put her hand on my mouth as if I had committed a crime. The women took off on foot, accompanying the schoolchildren to the town. It was a strange procession. My aunt took me by the hand and led me along. I remember I kept looking back, wondering what some of my schoolmates were going to do. They were still standing there waiting with the soldiers because no one had come to get them. No one had come for the two strangers. Perhaps their parents hadn’t expected their sudden arrival. I don’t know why I was worried about them, since, being strangers, they were not in any danger.

LESS THAN A DROP



Eanie Menie Miney Mo V by Kenneth Steven

Is air enough
For us to split a cold kiss

Darkness damages desire
Living is less than a drop
Don't waste your whole body
Now

Bullets miss the head
That sleeps on your chest
Bullets miss the mouth and the nipple

Hands see
Then we touch so we don't get lost

This is your mouth
The chubbiness of the armpit
The curvature of the thigh

And this is my fear

Why your hands read my thoughts

~ *Bassam Hajjar, trans. Maged Zaher*

THE ATHEISTS OF PARIS

(I)

I had to push my hands away from each other
To push my eyebrows too
The darkness said
What do you hold onto son?
Why your tongue is black
Said the bird:
Because I looked at dirty water
Because we can't remove the clouds
As we remove the mud
Because clouds are barren
They spit and maybe piss from above

And we can't separate the dirty laundry
From our tears
Or leave the dead's tears in their sheets
I had to push my eyes away from each other
To push my eyebrows too
Why are you are so pissed
Said the parrot
I can't break up the no from the yes
There is some space here
But my heart and my mouth in one place
My heart and teeth in one place
In the same area, in the same hole
Work and support each other

(II)

The Black man said
I came from the jungle
The Russian man said
I came from snow
For me, I had no problem finding an answer
I came out — undoubtedly —
From the black sand
That I raised in my mouth

~Abbas Beydoun, trans. Maged Zaher

OTHER LIVES

By Iman Humaydan, trans. Michelle Hartman

Mariam, a Lebanese Druze who has moved with her English husband to Kenya, returns for a brief stay in Beirut, the hometown she left fifteen years before. There, she must settle accounts of the past, take care of the house to which she is the sole heir since the death of her husband's brother during the civil war, and revisit family history.

“My daughter, do you want the English to take our inheritance?” she asks me after I came back, when I’m trying to help Olga out of bed and walk a little over to her wardrobe. By this, she means Chris and also his children from his two previous marriages.

She says this while advising me to register the house in the name of male relatives on my father’s side. This is the very same predicament Nahil finds herself in. Her desire for a male heir when it’s impossible to locate this heir, means that she’s not prevented from giving me what’s mine.

She opens the drawers of her wardrobe and takes out a bronze key ring with five keys hanging from it. She also takes out documents and property deeds. She gives them to me, saying with great sadness that the Zuqaq al-Blat house has become my property now after Salama’s madness and the death of Baha’, the only male heir. She’s still waiting for Salama to come back, when I tell her about his situation in Australia she says that I’m complicating matters and exaggerating the picture of his mental state. No doubt he’ll be cured when he returns. Doctors here are better, she says, as soon as his feet touch the ground in the airport he’ll feel better.

Nahil doesn’t ask me what I’ll do... if I even want this inheritance or if it means anything to me. Of course it doesn’t cross her mind to bring me a man, as she did with my father, to marry him to me so that I could be blessed with a son to carry on the family name and the family home. However this won’t ever happen even if I produce one thousand sons. My son won’t carry my name. Indeed from the beginning my name will be lost in the same way that I lost it myself after I married. Many years separate me from Nahil, of course, but the issue of the name and the inheritance in our two different times remains the same. A young woman still leaves her

family home to go to her husband’s home and family all alone, denuded of everything, even her name. Thus, you have to have a male to pass on an inheritance. It must be a boy. The presence of a girl is useless, even one hundred girls. This is not only about our times today, but all times. Why is Nahil so concerned about a male heir? Isn’t she a woman? How should a woman be expected to defend her own burial when she is still alive?

Nahil’s contradictory qualities perplex me, though I always guard a giant love for her deep in my heart. Isn’t it she who teaches all of the girls in the village how to read and write, when she’s a young woman teaching in the French girls’ school? In order for her to complete everything she wants to, she comes up with a clever strategy in a closed society in which it’s easier for a father to have his daughter die than to say that she’s learning how to read and write.

She opens a sewing school though she’s never held a needle and thread in her life. She says that she wants to teach the girls in the village about housekeeping and the domestic arts. Sewing is one of these. At the time, being able to sew is one of the qualities that would make a girl a sought-after bride. Nahil commits herself to sewing, convinced this is her calling, and asks to teach the girls for two hours a day in her parents’ house. She devotes the big salon with its view of the main road to teaching sewing.

The families go crazy when she asks the girls one day to come with a chalkboard to write on. They visit Nahil’s father in protest and ask him about her teaching their daughters to read and write. Her father calls her in to ask her about this and she comes in the room, greets the girls’ families, asking them about their crops and their relatives. She then invites them to stay for a bit longer, presenting them with sweets that she’s prepared herself.

She tells them that she’s teaching their daughters the letters connected to sewing, cutting garments and housekeeping only because they are necessary. As for the letters connected to love and rejecting customs and traditions, “That’s monstrous... clearly not!” She tells them that she is like

them, i.e. like the families, she would never sanction *educating* their daughters!

She's a strong woman. Despite this strength, her husband Hamza keeps his relationship with a woman from Zahleh secret for more than thirty years without her knowing. When Hamza dies, Nahil forgets everything bad about him. She mourns him, cries over his corpse, and asks for forgiveness for him. The truth disappears at the moment of his death. It's as though this truth is erased; it becomes absent at that moment as though it had never been, as though it hadn't ever been there to start with. When I try to remind her of things about Hamza and his love stories that she did and didn't know, she starts repeating, "Oh Abu Ibrahim...Oh Abu Ibrahim, what's all this talk?" trying to get up from the chair which each year starts seeming bigger and bigger than her emaciated body.

Her magic powers don't mean that she knows about Hamza's movements. He keeps telling her that he wants to store up ice and sell it during in the summer to merchants and people riding on the train between Beirut and Damascus who stop in the 'Ayn Soufar station. Selling ice in Soufar stops after refrigerators started becoming widespread, the train also stops and there isn't a station there anymore. But Hamza keeps on saying that he works there and Nahil keeps up the appearance of believing him. After his death, she finds lots of letters amongst his papers as well as verses of poetry and love poems that perhaps he intended to send to the woman who he loved. But this all remains in his leather suitcase, preserved with care in the wooden cupboard above the door. This life of his doesn't prevent Nahil from going, after his death, to a photography studio to have color added to his photo and hanging it on the wall.

The day we leave for Australia, Hamza's colored photograph is still hanging in the middle of the living room. By talking about him, Nahil keeps his presence in the house strong. Sometimes I think that she's making Hamza into a fairytale hero—a man everyone fears, especially my father. Nahil makes sure he's still ever-present in the house, she always recounts stories about him and keeps his picture hanging in the living room.

After his death, Nahil takes the original black and white picture to Harut, the photographer, near our house in Zuqaq al-Blat, and asks him to color it.

“ Why is Nahil so concerned about a male heir? Isn't she a woman? How should a woman be expected to defend her own burial when she is still alive? ”

In the beginning, Harut is perplexed by Nahil's request. He tells her that men never ask to change the color of their photographs, only women do. Nahil insists, almost losing her patience, "Hamza entrusted it to me and died, how can you know what he would have wanted?" She takes his small cloth belt out of her bag and gives all the money in it to Harut, saying, "If you don't know how to color it, I'll take it to Vicken." Vicken is the owner of a studio near AUB. She doesn't want Harut to choose only the colors he wants for Hamza; she wants all the colors.

She stands in front of him with the picture in her hand and starts describing the color of the shirt that he's wearing in the picture, the color of the trousers and also of the tarboush, though they all seem to be the same color. Before leaving the studio, she wants to be sure of everything. Every time he shows her a colored photograph taken from the black box behind the curtain, she shakes her head disapprovingly and asks him to redo it. Harut colors my grandfather's cheeks red, and his lips too, so he looks like a clown dressed up in a fighter's clothes. As for the weapon that looks frightening in black and white, in the new picture it seems to be made of plastic, the kind children carry when they're playing war.

The male line in our house ends with my brother's death. Nahil's repeated complaint is no use—she wants more male children for my father, but my mother Nadia refuses to have more than two children: my brother Baha' and me. She's afraid that another pregnancy would end with the baby dying and so she refuses to have a big family. She's carried this with her from her own childhood; it's a fear that she's been living out from the first time she gave birth; it pre-dates even her marriage to Salama.

THE SMELL OF SOAP

By Elias Khoury, trans. Ghada Mourad

In this excerpt from Elias Khoury's previously untranslated novella, 'The Smell of Soap', the narrator goes to the cinema with a girl he just met. As they watch a documentary on the musician Jamil Al Haddad, the narrator fantasizes about the hours that will follow the film and also remembers his years as a member of an armed militia in Beirut.

We rushed into the movie theater. The lights had begun to dim and darkness to surround us. The moment of darkness that precedes the lights emanating from the screen is the most beautiful of the film. Darkness, she by my side, her laughter still ringing in my ears, and Genghis Khan's picture filling my eyes. But I don't spoil the movie for her, and she doesn't look at me. She looks at the screen where we see the director's and the actors' names and a background image of a man lying on the ground with his lute at his side, and loud music. But she doesn't like war, and I think if we asked Genghis Khan whether he liked war he would say no. Or he would light his pipe, sit cross-legged, and start to discuss the future while smoke blew out of his mouth and nose. And I am ready, ready to talk to her in better words than his and without smoke, but she doesn't want to listen and I don't want to speak. I want her. I want this long black hair. I want.

"What did you say?" she asked

"Nothing, nothing. Yes, have you been to a cemetery?"

She asked me to lower my voice. She said that she hadn't been to one, and she didn't ask me why I asked her.

The screen is gleaming with lights. The old man walks. He is old. He carries a lute in his right hand and walks in an almost empty road. The old man looks around, stands in front of a shop, talks with a group of men gathered around a backgammon table, then continues on his way. A voice like his fills the screen, as if he remembers, but he doesn't. He speaks about the wedding, speaks about Umm Kulthum. Umm Kulthum is the greatest singer. That's a singer. She stands four hours in front of the microphone while thousands of men moan and

kneel before her.

A side snapshot of Umm Kulthum.

A panoramic snapshot of the stage where she stands. Voice and applause.

The old man approaches the stage. The same man, but he is younger now. His back is not hunched. He doesn't hold a cane, and he moves forward. Umm Kulthum goes on singing and squeezes a white handkerchief. He reaches the stage. Umm Kulthum looks at him. She stops singing. Silence and a distant roaring mingle with the man's footsteps on the floor. The old man climbs to the stage. He approaches Umm Kulthum. Umm Kulthum holds his hand. He advances and kisses her on the cheek. Umm Kulthum speaks. Umm Kulthum says, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the greatest composer, Mr. Jameel al-Haddad." Hands clap, music gets louder. Jameel al-Haddad approaches the orchestra holding the conducting baton in his hand. Umm Kulthum sings "I Forget You" while he dances with the baton in front of her. His face crimps while she sings. Loud applause as though coming from the bottom of the valley or as if it were an echo. The old man walks and the sight of Umm Kulthum falls gradually off his shoulders and vanishes. He reaches the front of a building. From the way he enters the building he seems to be living there. He climbs dark stairs.

The motion is slow, I said to her. She placed her finger on my mouth to shush me. I took her hand in mine, squeezed it, and looked into her eyes glistening amid the darkness of the hall. She was looking at the screen. I raised her hand to my mouth and kissed it. I pulled her hand as I thought I heard her moaning. The moaning increased. My head drew near her face. I looked at the screen.

The man is lying in bed, moaning. It's an iron bed, and it makes a broken squeaking sound. The man reaches for the radio and turns it on, then he lowers his eyes. Umm Kulthum's voice rises.

"It looks like we're going to watch a movie about Umm Kulthum."

She didn't reply.

The voice retreats and starts to decline. The

“ She stands in front of the theater’s entrance in her short skirt, her elongated white face, her hair tied behind her back, and her eyes, colored in the midst of this darkness, and laughs. ”

same man turns back into a young man. Here he is standing in front of a table while the voices of the commenting employees ascend. We understand that he is an employee, and that he is inviting them to a concert where he will play his lute. We understand that they are laughing at him as he stands in front of the table and raises his hand high as if to say something, as if he is giving a pep talk. Applause begins. Applause, and he in front of the audience holding the lute. It seems that they are in a house. Jameel al-Haddad sits on a chair and croons softly. Hands rise holding glasses of arak. A little table on which there are plates of cucumbers and peanuts. Men, only men. There is one woman who comes and goes. She takes ashtrays and brings plates full of something that looks like food. The man’s voice starts to rise. It seems as if he is singing. We cannot distinguish the song with precision. Then we understand gradually that he is singing Umm Kulthm. “I forget you, Ya Salam.”The audience screams, Allah Allah!. He takes his glass and drinks a sip of arak. A snapshot of his face where we see a carelessly shaven beard. The man turns in his bed. He didn’t take off his clothes. He lies fully clothed. He seems hallucinating or talking in his sleep.

I don’t understand what he is saying and don’t dare ask her. I do not care about this man. From the very first moment I felt hatred towards him. This sagging body, this face, this nose on the verge of falling, this death. He doesn’t look like anything. Or maybe he does look like a discarded skull. And then why doesn’t he die. Do we need a movie to see him die. Or does the producer need this man’s death to make a movie. For this reason I don’t like movies. I only like that moment when darkness falls on the hall. I turned my face away from the screen and looked at her. She was placing her hand under

her cheek and watching the movie. I didn’t take my eyes off her, but she seemed not to feel it. Then she turned around and shook her head. I extended my hand to her long hair. She dropped her hand from her cheek. I held her hand. She left her hand in mine, my fingers in hers, my hand under hers, my thumb in the palm of her hand. I feel the glare coming out of my eyes. I feel I could carry her and fly. I feel her flying. She stands in front of the theater’s entrance in her short skirt, her elongated white face, her hair tied behind her back, and her eyes, colored in the midst of this darkness, and laughs. She falls, she almost falls. I hold her from her waist. She flies. We go into the dark hall to see this old man who doesn’t die. I am ready to kill him so that this movie ends and I take her. Where shall I take her? To my room. She will tell me that my room is not clean. She will see the piled clothes on the floor. No...when she enters I will run to clean up everything. I don’t want her to see, and I don’t see. I only see her. I see her only. My hand in hers, her hand drops a little. Her hand is on her knee. I flip her hand. I want my hand to stay in hers, with my hand underneath. This way I get to touch the knee. Her hand resists. Her hand rises, holding mine. She brings my hand close to her mouth, kisses it, returns the hand, presses, and pulls hers.

The man moans in his bed. It seems that he fell asleep, or he is in a semi-coma. Soft music of improvisations on lute. The same place, the same room, but the furniture is different. A table, and on top a sewing machine. Many chairs and hanging clothes. A young man of about eighteen, a woman of around forty, and a girl of ten. The young man is this elderly man, the woman his mother, and the girl his sister. Noises of sewing machines and conversations. The young man works on seaming a dress. The girl plays with a doll by clothing and unclothing it. The lute is in the corner, and a woman talks about the dead father and about poverty. The young man doesn’t answer. He hums a tone. The woman says something. The young man throws the dress and starts shouting loudly. The door slams behind him.

A snapshot of the mother’s face on the screen.

A snapshot of the mother holding her daughter and kissing her.

Another snapshot of the mother’s face that begins to shrink. Above it the face of a man of about fifty fills the screen. The young man walks in the streets



Artwork by Ira Joel

“ Do we need a movie to see him die. Or does the producer need this man’s death to make a movie. For this reason I don’t like movies. I only like that moment when darkness falls on the hall. ”

alone. The streets are narrow and the vendors’ voices. He stops in front of a seller displaying a basket full of beads, pictures, and knives, and shouting, “one pound, one pound.” The young man continues walking. He enters a narrow street, full of neon-lit names of women. It seems we are in Al-Mutanabbi Street. Sounds of quarrels and a man running without anyone heeding him. The young man enters a semi-bare room. A big couch, and he sits alone and waits. He lights a cigarette. His eyes on the ground. A woman wearing transparent clothes comes near him. The young man takes off his clothes. The woman lies down on the bed. The sound of the radio rises with the news bulletin.

“General Sarrail visits the Maronite Patriarch in response to a congratulatory visit the latter made to His Excellency.” The young man sits on the edge of the bed. The woman, half naked, laughs. She tells him that he is still small. He doesn’t raise his head from the ground. The mother is home. The fiftyish white-haired man is dining alone with her. He puts his hand on hers. The woman pulls her hand. The young man enters the house, doesn’t greet them. He sits in a corner, takes his lute, and the sound of the lute eclipses the dialogue.

The old man walks alone in the street. He knocks on a door. Another old man opens. He enters, puts aside the lute, and they play backgammon.

My hand on hers, she turned her head slightly. My hand fell on the neck. I would take her and she would come. She entered the bathroom, closed the door behind her. Water flowed. I took hold of the knob and turned it. Her voice said, No, please don’t come in. I fell back a little, then opened the door. She stood naked in the bathtub. Soap covered her.

I went forward, she turned her back. My hand on her back, my hand in the soap, I was in the soap. I stayed next to her under the falling water. She ran away from the bathtub, wrapped herself in a towel, and left. I went out after her. We drank coffee. I drew near, she moved away and away. And I sat on the bed while she was there. She stopped, got closer. I saw her bare feet on the floor. I saw her colored eyes and elongated face. I saw her hair as if running towards me, as if with me. She stood facing the sink and started washing the dishes. Leave them, I told her. The faucet opened, the water splattered her face, and I stood aside and smoked. I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but I was afraid of her answer. She would ask me, And what it means that you love me? And I would not know.

My hand on her long hair, her head reclined towards me, my hand extended to her neck, I felt her heart beats while she stretched on my fingers. I drew closer, kissed her cheek. She turned around as if to tell me that she wanted to watch the movie, but I didn’t understand anything from this movie. I didn’t understand the old man.

The old man plays backgammon. The old man yawns. Two old men yawn. Ten faces yawn. Big noses full of little hairs. Yawning noses. They open up and make sounds. Teeth and faces.

But why doesn’t he die. I know that he will not die now, because if he dies the movie ends. When the hero dies the movie ends. When my father died nothing ended. My father wasn’t a hero, and this is not a hero. My father died and this one will not die. Perhaps he will die at the end of the movie, but this is not certain. I think that if the hero doesn’t die at the beginning of the movie, his death becomes useless.



Artwork by Ira Joel

HEY ALLEN GINSBERG, I THINK THAT THE FAN IS ROTATING

Listen Allen

I am on the curb and my cigarettes ran out
I open my eyes and close them
Sometimes I recall that night when we wiped the spit from the mouths of the dead
Then we descended the stairs together
And took a walk by the sea

The fan is rotating now
And I like to think that the air is a nice squirrel while I lean on myself in the corner
Witnessing my knee falling asleep
The fan is rotating now in my head Allen
And my mouth that looks like a newsstand
Is adorned with silence
Some teeth inside it dies like an animal
And one day I happened to discover patience under a tree
And I talked about the soul in a simple car
While we walk parallel to the river

The smoke Allen
The smoke, and beautiful rings
And on the other side, on the shore
The sand stands by itself
And sometimes the fish bring it a rock
To sit on
Is this a respectful scene?
In my hands a murdered day
And I want to bury it quietly

~Wadih Saadeh, trans. Maged Zaher

THE GAZE OF THE VOYEUR

A race of peeping Toms

By Tom Nixon

In his piece on Michael Powell's much-maligned, career-imploding *Peeping Tom*, the late Roger Ebert stated "*the movies make us into voyeurs. We sit in the dark, watching other people's lives. It is the bargain the cinema strikes with us, although most films are too well-behaved to mention it.*" *Peeping Tom* was a rare exception in 1960, and despite careering disastrously into Box Office oblivion along with its maker, it helped pave the way for a cinema more conscious of the scopophilic impulses underlying its appeal. The onset of the digital world has changed the way movies are created and experienced, but if anything the theme of voyeurism gains in relevance as all-seeing cameras become commonplace and smaller, easier to hide. Nowadays, horror films in particular regularly indict audiences, punishing them for indulging their most transgressive desires and refusing to let them remain mere spectators, safe in a bubble of darkness.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 classic *Rear Window* was the first to dive headlong into these murky waters, starring James Stewart as an incapacitated photographer (both leg and camera broken) who lurks behind the blinds with a telescope, held captive by the narratives unfolding in the windows of an adjacent apartment complex. He becomes obsessively invested in one of the (perceived) stories he has witnessed and tries to exact power over events using a surrogate, receiving advice like "*we've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change.*" Of course, Stewart is physically incapable of going anywhere, but what's our excuse? *Rear Window* was the first to openly consider the ethical and psychological implications of gleefully prying into other people's private lives.

No film has more closely examined this question than the afore-mentioned *Peeping Tom*, which follows serial killer Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm) as he films attractive, terrified women in their death throes, murdering them with a knife attached to the tripod of his camera. Powell's film ingeniously foreshadows Laura Mulvey's controversial but influential feminist essay entitled '*Visual Pleasure and*

Narrative Cinema', providing an extreme example of the "male gaze" which pervades Hollywood cinema. Her theories are built on Jacques Lacan's beliefs about the structure of the psyche, especially this idea that recognising the object of our own look as looking back at us extinguishes our desire and causes anxiety, whereas remaining unseen allows us to indulge in the infantile pleasure of looking. Mulvey claims that these neuroses afflicting the male ego have caused movies to traditionally present women as passive objects to be looked at, with their appearance and influence upon the narrative coded as such. Women are denied agency, defined only in relation to the active gaze of the male viewer, or male characters with whom the viewer is encouraged to relate.

Mark in *Peeping Tom* was raised by a scientist father who routinely recorded his son's responses to fear, and these feelings of terror and emasculation — of being-looked-at — still grip him. He uses cinema as a weapon of power, re-creating his upbringing with him re-cast in the dominant role, his victims mere objects of his camera's gaze, unable to look back at him directly. Indeed, Mark has fitted a mirror to his camera, so the victims are forced to watch themselves die instead of seeing their killer. "*Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at*", says John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, and Mulvey concurs that even female viewers must watch most films through the prism of the male perspective. Powell meanwhile forces us to inhabit the perspective of the killer, showing us the murders through the lens of Mark's camera to analogise spectatorship with participation, highlighting our complicity by implying our voyeuristic impulses are no different from Mark's. We are asserting power over the object of our look.

Hitchcock's most personal film *Vertigo* examined his noted penchant for dreaming up female characters who serve as idealisations of male desire, be they damsels in distress or *femme fatales*. Always a transparent (though complex) auteur, Hitchcock's films exhibit an array of Freudian patterns, and he is rumored to have fearfully fetishised women — Tippi



Alice by Jihane Mossali

Hedren infamously accused him of being controlling, possessive and misogynistic on set. Other male directors have riffed on his trademarks; notably Brian De Palma and Dario Argento, who pulled Hitchcock's most lurid subtext to the forefront and crafted discomfiting, often grotesquely gorgeous tapestries of meta-cinematic symbolism, exploring the nature of the gaze via a veneer of seedy exploitation. Stephen Soderbergh's indie breakthrough *Sex, Lies & Videotape* openly addressed the idea of cinema as a way for impotent men to get off, while Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* introduced audio surveillance into the conversation. Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue* brought voyeurism into the medium of animation too, documenting a failed celebrity's mental breakdown via the gaze of a metaphorical stalker — something David Lynch expanded on three years later in *Mulholland Drive*. Others to overtly explore the theme include Patrice Leconte, Michel Haneke and Francois Ozon.

Meanwhile, a great number of female filmmakers have become associated with Mulvey's belief

that this patriarchal cinema needs to be disassembled and rebuilt anew, breaking from Hollywood norms in an attempt to cultivate an active female gaze. Though they should not be pigeonholed as mere feminist filmmakers (some deny the term applies at all), directors such as Agnes Varda, Chantal Akerman, Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat and Sofia Coppola have configured fresh ways of seeing which deviate considerably from conventional male-oriented models. Akerman's game-changing masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is particularly instructive in its defiantly neutral, decontextualised portrait of a woman inhabiting a domestic space, exemplifying Mulvey's goal "to free the look of the camera into its materiality and space, and look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest", and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms."

Tom Nixon is a senior film critic for the magazine.

HOW FAERIETALES STOLE FEMALE SEXUALITY

Where the author negotiates sexual power plays in the arts

By Ghausia Rashid Salam

I like to revisit movies, TV shows, and books. It's fascinating to see how my perception changes over time, and it's particularly interesting to relive childhood experiences as an adult. Take, for example, "Family", an episode from the fifth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Willow's shy Wiccan girlfriend Tara is visited by her family. Her father, the epitome of a stern patriarch, reduces her to a stuttering, nervous wreck. Legend goes that when the women in her family turn 20, they become demons and Tara's family arrives with the sole intention of taking her back home, since Tara is still practicing magic. "*The women in our family had demon in them. Her mother had it. That's where the magic comes from,*" her father explains. "*She belongs with us. We know how to control her... problem.*" It is implied that she was "allowed" to go to college away from home under the assumption that she would "get over" the silly magic phase. But when Tara declares she has no intention to leave, her cousin Beth lectures her, telling her she's selfish to live her lifestyle while Tara's father and brother fend for themselves. After an epic battle with the demons of the day, it's Spike (vampire and occasional good guy) who figures out that the tale of women being demons is just a family legend "to keep the ladies in line." And Tara, for the first time in her life, is happy in her own skin.

The tradition of exerting control over women in narrative is an almost time-honoured one, dating way back to ancient faerietales. Disney may have cleaned them up for children, but at their root, faerietales were intended to control female sexuality, to impose morality upon women and curtail their independence. '*The Sun, Moon, and Talia*' for example, is Giambattista Basile's version of '*Sleeping Beauty*' in which the protagonist is raped and impregnated in her sleep. She gives birth and awakens to thank, fall in love with, and eventually marry her rapist. Even older versions of '*Red Riding Hood*' involve Red getting raped by the wolf (thus, her cataloging of his body parts explained, and our collective childhood ruined.)

The debate on female morality under the control by male editors goes back a long time in the field

“ Jane Austen’s heroines, “bold” as they are, reflect a role reversal from the women of traditional faerietales. ”

of feminist cultural scholarship. The origins of modern debate on the subject can be traced back to Alison Lurie in 1970, with her then-controversial essay, '*Fairy Tale Liberation*'. But despite Lurie's efforts in bringing the issue to light today, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were far from silent on the discussion of faerietales and female sexuality. Writers such as Jane Austen and Emily Bronte recognized the gender construct in faerietales and used this knowledge in their own stories. Jane Austen's heroines for example, "bold" as they are, reflect a role reversal from the women of traditional faerietales. Christina Rossetti's '*The Goblin Market*' is a racy poem about the social controls of female sexuality, with a heroine taking charge of her own body, and ending with obvious insinuations of incest between the two sisters.

Be that as it may, it is important to note that we have only begun to reclaim the narrative from Charles Perrault, the brothers Grimm, and the rest of the patriarchal lot who turned female characters into regressive, submissive creatures by subjecting faerietales and folk tales to the male gaze. It is important not just to explore how faerietales are responsible for the way we see female sexuality today, but also to see how a masculine editorial control over a historically matriarchal narrative was institutionalized in the first place, and the original, less misogynist narrative lost to the ages.

Transgressive faerietales serve only to reaffirm gender stereotypes; Susan Brownmiller argued that classical faerietale characters such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella condition and train women to be rape victims. As horrific as that statement might sound, it is true. Sleeping Beauty is kissed by a prince while she is asleep. Snow White, in her enchanted sleep, is brought back to life by a

complete stranger, with a kiss. She *owes* him her life and thus cannot tell him that he is violating her, this is the message children get in the guise of “true love”. We often read of rape cases where a woman realizes years later that she was raped, because we have learned to operate inside a socially perpetuated victim mentality. In *‘The Trials and Tribulations of Red Riding Hood’*, Jack Zipes points out how, throughout history, Red has been subjected to a reinforcement of the cultural ideology of the middle class. Thus, morality became intertwined with female modesty, chastity, the exaltation of the mother, and the inculcation of the Madonna/Whore complex in ambitious women.

We see this last aspect play out in contemporary pop culture all too frequently. Whether it’s a typically misogynist South Asian soap opera, or a Taylor Swift pop song, the trend remains the same. Women who are modest, humble, submissive, and who endure myriad hardships tend to get their happy endings, whereas women who take charge of their own destiny are “harlots” with insatiable sexual appetites who eschew monogamy. What are these but contemporary attempts to curb female sexuality?

Forget mainstream media or pop culture, look to society itself. Men are lauded for their masculinity based on how many women they date or have sex with, but women everywhere will talk about needing to hide their sexual history from prospective partners (as evidenced by advice columns everywhere).

Researcher Jack Zipes confirms that authors such as Perrault and the Brothers Grimm altered the course of faerietales by removing references to female power or sexuality, thereby projecting the male fear of sexuality. Perhaps this is why in feminist circles, sexual liberation is embraced as a form of empowerment. And why not? Whether you’re sex-positive or sex-critical, can we really deny that body autonomy is anything but empowering, especially in a patriarchal setup that aims to suppress every aspect of female sexuality? In this specific narrative, the male perception is valued and the subject of all tales, reinforcing a heterosexual, patriarchal social order wherein the woman altogether becomes a mere passive plot device to tie the man’s tribulations neatly together, and to provide the man with a prize at the end of his heroic trials of manliness and strength. As such, the female perspective becomes irrelevant.

“ Whether you’re sex-positive or sex-critical, can we really deny that body autonomy is anything but empowering, especially in a patriarchal setup that aims to suppress every aspect of female sexuality? ”

Anti-porn feminist Catherine MacKinnon wrote, *“Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality. Man fucks woman; subject verb object.”* While she wasn’t talking specifically about faerietales, her words do ring true for the subjugation of women in various narratives. The sacrifice of women, whether as mothers, daughters, sisters or wives, is a trends that has been repeated in mainstream media since, well, forever. The problem here is not with sex or sexuality, but rather, that one form of sexuality is exalted while another is suppressed. As long as the hetero-normalisation of mainstream media continues, the narrative will favor the masculine bent, leaving female characters to chase their ever-so-elusive happily-ever-afters.

This is not to say that faerietales cannot, or have not, been reclaimed, in music, writing, or television. Neither does female sexuality remain something to talk about in hushed whispers, or something to blush over. Notable mentions in favor of the cause include Angela Carter, who focused on reasserting female sexuality, breaking away from oppression of women under the male gaze. Artists have taken on the traditional direction of faerietales — Dina Goldstein offers a darker twist on endings with her happily-never-after, while Herr Nillson’s street art, though it glorifies weapons and often borders on cruel, offers another image of Disney Princesses bearing arms. Illustrator Rachel Wise’s depictions of classical female characters, such as Cinderella burning down her house or Ariel chopping off her tail to replace it with cyborg legs, allow for reclamation of empowerment, even through moral and ethical ambiguity.



Big Bad Wolfe by Jihane Mossali

Gillian Andersen stars in *The Fall*, a TV show about a female detective who loves sex and doesn't hide it. When judged for seducing a policeman, her character snarks, "Woman subject, man object... it's not so comfortable for you, is it?" The TV show

Once Upon A Time offers a more female perspective into the once-oppressive classical faerietales. In shows like *Elementary*, the narrative changes as a female Watson transforms the internal machinations of a traditionally Orientalist, misogynist Sher-



the hyper-sexualised Irene Adler of the BBC series *Sherlock*, this female antagonist is witty, sexual, and lethal, and it's a combination of all three that sends Sherlock crashing. Even as long ago as *Buffy*, as the Wiccan lesbian character Willow struggles under a spell, her new girlfriend simply says, "*I think I know how magic works now. It's like a faerietale,*" and kisses Willow, destroying the power of the hex.

Even in contemporary cinema, we see offerings like *Frozen*, loosely based on Hans Christen Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. While the cartoon does away with much of the original tale, *Frozen* offers a more complex, multi-layered character to viewers instead of just a stock evil queen; you may not agree with her actions, but you can understand, and perhaps even sympathize with her point of view. Moreover, it gives you a Prince Charming, only to reveal that he's the bad guy, not the knight in shining armour. True love's kiss, expected to come from the prince to save the day, comes instead in the form of sisterly love. It's a clever way of subverting the traditional prince-as-saviour happy ending, and providing a more feminist message to children.

Not much has changed, and yet, much is changing. Events around the world such as the Steubenville rape, the Delhi gang-rape, the Dubai rape victim jailed for reporting her rape: these all serve as evidence that rape culture still thrives, that female sexuality is still considered worth controlling, even by violence, if necessary. But amid all the campaigning to end slut-shaming, rape culture, homophobia, there has been a shift in the representation on mainstream media as well. The shift grows more visible by the day. While Hollywood may still be churning out unrealistic expectations of romance in fluff films, the existence of more intelligent television shows and artists to counter the impact of such regressive gender stereotyping is an encouraging trend, and one that helps fretting feminists sleep easier.

lock Holmes and single-handedly takes on Holmes' judgment of her sex life and occasional sexism. On the other hand, a female Moriarty first seduces Sherlock, then destroys him, then re-enters his life as he begins to heal, only to almost ruin him again. Unlike

Ghausia Rashid Salam is Articles Editor for the magazine.

SPOTLIGHT ARTIST: OMAR GILANI

Interviewed by Moeed Tariq



Omar Gilani talks about how pursuing engineering for nearly ten years helped him in his photorealism art. Many think the logistics of engineering doesn't go with the fluidity of the creative arts – in this interview with Creative Director Moeed Tariq, Mr. Gilani turns the adage on its head.



Q

Can you re-call your earliest drawing?

A

One of the earliest drawings I remember making was a portrait of my family with color pencils, which I did when I was three or four. I remember trying to “shade” it by smudging the color on their faces with my fingers. My grandmother then gave me my first drawing lesson, one which holds me in good stead to this day.

Q

Did you want to be an artist growing up? If so, why the deviation into engineering?

A

Yes, a career in the arts was always a dream. Unfortunately I grew up in Peshawar, where such a vocation is usually considered fanciful and unrealistic. I chose Engineering mainly to keep the folks off my back and because it is a “solid career with good employment prospects” (their words, not mine). But

the pledge I made to myself way back then was to keep my artwork going – a pledge I kept up through a Bachelors’ and two Master’s degrees in Technical Engineering. I don’t feel like I missed out; the engineering education injected just enough nerd in me to balance out the inherent airheaded craziness.

Q

As a person who has now been regularly meditating for over a year now, you have still not branched out into abstract art. Do you think the two are connected?

A

I wouldn’t say they are connected. Meditation is primarily a tool to clear out mental cobwebs and mute annoying internal voices. After that anything can be meditative, be it abstract art or polishing your shoes. What I enjoy is photorealism and color play. I haven’t branched out into abstract art mainly because the engineer within does not approve of me expressing myself in nebulous blobs of abstraction.



Q

Do you go through a certain thought process or research technique before starting new pieces?

A

Yes there is an indirect process at play. It starts out with a very simple mental visual: a rickshaw robot, a springtime date, Jinnah as a gangster, a dancing dervish – and then I let it simmer in the back for many hours, sometimes days, until it speaks to me again. I’ve found that I can’t force the birth, the best effects are organic, and so I wait until I hear from the idea again. When it feels ripe, I pounce.

For the portrait work that I do, it is very important

for me to capture the right colors, vibrance, and mood based on who I’m drawing. There is more to a person than anatomy alone; each person has an essence, and I love the process of trying to express that essence through color and light.

Q

Where do you draw your inspiration from?

A

One of my main inspirations through the years has been the brilliant Gulgee. When I was a kid, I watched him paint one of his calligraphic names of Allah, and I was in awe of the process. It was transcendent,



instinctual, magical, the way his brush carelessly danced across that canvas. I remember walking through his house in Nathiagali as a child and being blown away by the different mediums of art that he was a master of. And he achieved all of that after an engineering background. He has inspired me to dream big, and for that I am forever indebted to the great man.

Q If you could illustrate any existing body of literary work, which one would it be and why?

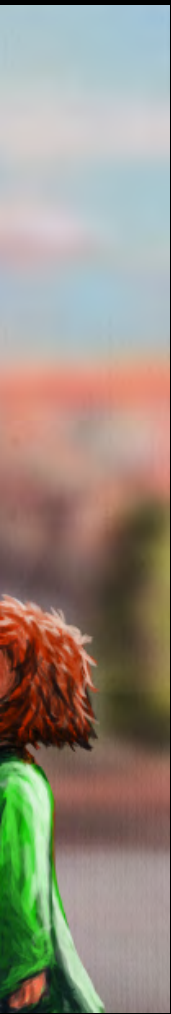
A I've always wanted to give *'The Adventures of Umro Ayaar and Amir Hamza'* a shot. That is incredibly rich literature, fascinating, detailed, and mystical (like the Tolkien universe on an Acid trip), and the Persian style of art which would be required to do that world justice is gorgeous. Definitely a project I'll be giving more time to in the future.

Q You have recently begun work on your first cohesive collection of work which will then go up for public viewing at a later date by way of your debut exhibit. Can you discuss the con-

cept and theme?

A I have a couple of exhibitions in the works. Without going into too many details, I'll just say they represent a more positive take on our culture, our heroes, our society, than is considered normal here [in Pakistan]. I am a big proponent of a good old laugh as being a cure-all for many ailments, and I feel like we've kind of gotten bogged down of late. To our detriment, we've rejected levity in favor of somberness, and that sucks in my opinion. I'm hoping to present a different perspective through my artwork, one which says that no matter how bad things get, we can always choose to smile.





CUTTING THROUGH THE FAT

Skinny or fat – your right to choose

By Maria Amir

“A woman watches her body uneasily, as though it were an unreliable ally in the battle for love” ~ Leonard Cohen

It often strikes one as odd how our appearance serves as a tangential extension for our being. No matter how hard one tries to locate their “essence” outside of their body and in their mind or dubiously soul, it is usually a futile exercise. We are each a composite of our hands, feet, height, nose shape and bulging thighs just as much as our personal philosophies and ubiquitous quirks. It is a perpetual struggle trying to define, confine and eventually achieve... that elusive “perfect body” and this quest is made no easier when the entire world appears to have a say in what constitutes “perfection”.

I once participated in a rather extraordinary confessional during my study stint abroad. The enterprise involved standing up in front of a class and highlighting what we each considered to be our most significant physical flaw. The class was designed to help us trace the roots of where our physical complexes originated... i.e. media, family, society et al. It was a grueling venture and the eventual goal of being able to overcome one’s self-loathing was not entirely achieved. I discovered that my massive behind, meaty thighs and crooked nose were not all there was to me, but they were certainly all that stood between me ever approaching the chance of a relationship. “Fat” is a state of mind, just as much as a state of body and essentially, body image is most important when you actually let your body become your image. Self-awareness does not always lead to self-acceptance but it may well be a good first step on the road to refinement.

For a great many of us, body image is the psycho-sexual key to navigating relationships. Our appearance denominates so much of our “appeal”, not to mention our “stock value” in the pecking order. Body image is used both consciously and subconsciously by all of us to get what we want. Honesty demands that one acknowledges that none of us are eventually above weighing the metrics of appear-

ance and its importance simultaneously. Let’s face it, in the romantic scheme of things today, the expression “she has a great personality” is practically an insult.

In fact, it is the many myths about the importance of personality and charm, wit and intellect that debilitate the discourse on sexual politics today. Most feminists hope to locate their primary identity in the “smart-but-still-sexy” column rather than the “sex-bomb-who-needs-nothing-else” column, and yet this is not exactly how modern courting works. There are rating scales for attraction and most of the “a number 8 walking towards you at your 9-o-clock” references do not factor in personalities until well into the third date. The question to ask here isn’t one of cynicism but rather of plagiarism — what is considered “sexy” today, when “sexy” can be sold in a bottle, splashed on a magazine and cloned by both girl and guy friends in their respective cliques? When it comes to appearances, is it the fact that we settle for a prescribed definition of how we should look over who we should be, thereby ensuring that the standards for social intercourse will essentially be generic, even plastic?

Personally, I have found that navigating the appearance matrix is debilitating but often necessary. It is one thing to pin your hopes on having a relationship where appearances don’t really count, and it is another to be bitter about relationships because you discover that they often do.

I have always been one of those girls who expanded horizontally rather than vertically: in my twenties I was told I needed to “lose a few pounds”;

“ “Fat” is a state of mind, just as much as a state of body and essentially, body image is most important when you actually let your body become your image. ”



The 14 Guage Hydration Machine' by Brett Stout

in my late twenties, I was “overweight”, but somewhere over the past few years I traversed that invisible line between being overweight and fat and finally landed firmly in the “fat” zone. The first thing I noticed was that even the peskiest of relations tend to stop commenting on your weight once you actually are “fat” rather than just getting there. Essentially, you are now beyond help and somehow deserving of quiet sympathy. This isn’t to say people won’t still comment on your appearance but suddenly, they begin to look at your personality more. Perhaps the most annoying pro-choice synonym I have discovered for being fat is “bubbly”. As if the extra poundage somehow magically morphs into excess humor and verbosity.

The reason for my exposing this transition is the exploration of social interaction. I have always

“ Perhaps the most annoying pro-choice synonym I have discovered for being fat is “bubbly”. As if the extra poundage somehow magically morphs into excess humor and verbosity. ”

resented the idea of being known more for my appearance than my intellect and yet, like most people, I cannot help but gauge other people by the conglomerate of their personalities and appearances. For years I have oscillated between wanting to lose weight and not caring... as long as I was not unhealthy. Then there was the self-righteous resentment I felt when I actually lost weight and suddenly people who had known me for years began to find me attractive. Where was I before? Or did my new jeans size mean a shift in personality? It made me crave the security blanket of excess poundage that kept them away. Layers of fat, somehow serving as a social shield, kept me out of a game I wasn’t ever quite ready to play. I find body image to be a self-effacing and simultaneously self-negating negotiation.

That said, there is a perverse sort of apologism involved in the whole debate. There is simply no getting around the fact that being overweight is something in an individual’s control and thereby “choosing to remain fat” speaks volumes about a person’s state of mind. Sure, there is an integral part of many of us that simply “doesn’t care enough” but mostly it is cowardice that prevents the will to change. Personally, I am someone who has always tended to dream more about my next meal rather than my hypothetical, future boyfriend and so my weight gain – while never appreciated – has never been top priority either. Still, the idea that the extra pounds somehow make me unfit for entire life experiences is a tad jarring. I suppose it all really boils down to that old cliché “Real beauty is on the inside... yes, that’s just something ugly people say”. For who is to really judge whether using one’s looks to get ahead in life is any less crucial or indeed, noble, than using one’s wit or intellect and all the other logical an-

“ It is those of us who fall for perfection that need fixing, not those who posit it. ”

chors locked away in our personal armory.

One often hears the expression “feminine wiles”, a tangential reference to an alleged mystical power that women exert over men. It began with Eve and an apple and then the Ancient Greeks introduced sirens. In all examples where women use their apparent attractiveness to exert influence over the opposite sex, the overarching narrative is regarded as scheming. As if the odds are somehow stacked against the other side and hapless generations of men are merely “seduced” beyond their control into attending to every female whim. In the battle of hormones versus hegemony, the former wins... or so we are told. But what of battles where the bets are stacked from the get-go? Why is it that appearances still play such a front-running role in sexual power plays? Men and women planning their wardrobes meticulously to cultivate a personality before they leave their rooms: smart, casual, smart-casual / bohemian, chic, boho-chic / grunge, geek, grunge-geek. Glasses to look smart, purple hair to look edgy, tattoos to look unique and so on. If appearances are nine-tenths of personality then how is it possible to actually deduce personalities in today’s interactions? And when one does come across a rare person who cares about their appearance in “proportionate” proportions... how do you set yourself up in comparison? Sexual power politics rests on partners being able to read each other, but if we are merely reading the front the other has cultivated rather than the personality they are concealing, how effective is the exercise?

Take any setting — a bar with a woman looking for a guy to buy her a drink; a quiet girl in a crowded class hoping a boy will notice her; an awkward teenager hoping his crush will reply to his wittily worded letter rather than his Facebook profile picture... how far does personality last today, when it has become near impossible to separate it from the injunctions of appearance? Not just physical appearance, but the appearance of personalities cultivated with just as much care as one’s wardrobe.

Body image is key not so much in how much



The Remission of Guillotines and Chemical Formulas
by Brett Stout

value it is given by those around us, but also in how it debilitates us in valuing ourselves. There are some who manage to use it to their advantage, a shield of sorts that allows their real selves to shine through because they no longer feel the pressure to look perfect all the time. There are others who cripple their selves trying to look perfect and thereby minimize any tangible sense of self. We are always setting standards and simultaneously setting stumbling blocks for ourselves and others each time we weigh in on the “right” kind of pretty.

Tina Fey pegs such beauty myths rather beautifully in her autobiography ‘Bossypants’ (Little, Brown and Company, 2011) when she says “But I think the first real change in women’s body image came when JLo turned it butt-style. That was

the first time that having a large-scale situation in the back was part of mainstream American beauty. Girls wanted butts now. Men were free to admit that they had always enjoyed them. And then – what felt like moments later, boom – Beyoncé brought the leg meat. A back porch and thick muscular thighs were now widely admired. And from that day forward, women embraced their diversity and realized that all shapes and sizes are beautiful... Aahahahahah. No. I'm totally messing with you. All Beyoncé and JLo have done is add to the laundry list of attributes that women must have to qualify as beautiful. Now every girl is expected to have: Caucasian blue eyes, full Spanish lips, a classic button nose, hairless Asian skin with a California tan, a Jamaican dance hall ass, long Swedish legs, small Japanese feet, the abs of a lesbian gym owner, the hips of a nine-year-old boy, the arms of Michelle Obama and doll tits.”

Truth be told, it's a hard barometer to escape, surpass or circumvent – the idea that we pre-date before our form, that we are all people before we are physical, that we need not wait for perfection before we can expect romantic fulfillment. That unlike Hollywood, real life need not always show the pretty people ending up with other pretty people, while the rest scramble with the leftovers. How does one begin to believe that love, sex, relationships and all the variants in between are founded on interaction and that this interaction is not entirely rooted in appearances? Appearances can be affected, improved, effaced and even discarded when interactions deepen. Psychoanalyst Paul Schilder, first coined the term “body image”ⁱ in 1935. Schilder acknowledged that society had always placed great value on beauty but also that society's definitions of what that meant often changed. Moreover, Schilder put forth the idea that a person's own perception of their body and how they “owned” their appearance held great weight in whether they were considered attractive.

We see it everyday, hounding us on television. “Perfect” faces. “Perfect” bodies. “Perfect” personalities. The Clark Kents and Chris Hemsworths, the Kim Kardashians and Lana Langs. It is those of us who fall for perfection that need fixing, not those who posit it. The idea of perfection is unattainable and, generally, that is its appeal but for those of us who can appreciate a challenge and a challenger, let us have the courage to choose the game less played, with players flawed, passionate, eccentric and exciting.

“ In all examples where women use their apparent attractiveness to exert influence over the opposite sex, the overarching narrative is regarded as scheming. ”

For women, let us have the courage to pick a man without needing or wanting to fix him. Without needing him to look like an Adonis or wanting him to buy us a princess cut solitaire. For men, let us take a page out of Courtney E. Martin's bookⁱⁱ “You know what's really sexy, powerfully sexy? A sense of humor. A taste for adventure. A healthy glow. Hips to grab on to. Openness. Confidence. Humility. Appetite. Intuition... smart-ass comebacks. Presence. A quick wit. Dirty jokes told by an innocent looking lady. A woman who knows how beautiful she is.”

There is, after all, both attraction and power in imperfection over pretty, petty, pretention. But modern culture, media and mannerisms are doing a great job of diminishing this by positing what is acceptable in appearance in such absolute terms that individuality is generally second-place. Individuality is often considered our generation's most blatant apologism, reserved for those who cannot compete in the “looks race” rather than those who refuse to. How is it that, when it comes to relationships, the most obvious sexual plays are also the most powerful ones and they are always all about judgment?

Why is it that we always wish to be loved for our flaws while still retaining the right to judge others for theirs?

(Endnotes)

i Schilder, P. ‘*The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*’, International Library of Human Psychology, Routledge, July 30, 1999

ii Martin, C.E. ‘*Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body*’, Free Press, April 17, 2007

RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

Exploring sexual power plays in Ismat Chughtai's short stories

By Sana Hussain

“*Chullu bhar paani main doob marna*”, which roughly translates to “*drowning in a handful of water*” is an Urdu proverb used to humiliate someone guilty of committing an utterly shameful act. This would also have been the expected response of most twentieth century Indian women, were a police officer to turn up at their doorstep carrying a summons announcing charges of obscenity against them. Most women aren't Ismat Chughtai. A warm milk bottle for her baby in one hand and the text of the summons in the other, Ismat Chughtai, with much derision and ridicule, dismissed the whole affair. Even the threat of being taken to the police station (a veritable scandal for any “respectable” family of the subcontinent) only made her relish the prospect of seeing a place she had always wanted to see. The episode concluded only after Chughtai, seeing both her husband and the police officer exasperated and exhausted, relented, and acquiesced to fill out the required paperwork but only after she had fed the baby. The police officer waited in the living room while she did.

Other than exemplifying the characteristic insolence and brazenness that would forever be associated with the writings of the feminist iconoclast, this incident reveals her inimitable talent of turning concepts of morality and respectability, social mores, and traditions, on their head. Being charged for obscenity by the government would have elicited a different response from someone other than Chughtai, but then Chughtai, much like her characters, excelled at subversion. Though the twentieth century literary world of the Indian subcontinent was not an especially welcoming place for women writers, Ismat Chughtai, fierce, passionate and strong-willed, triumphed over societal and cultural barriers to become a feminist icon in the Urdu literary world. She broke the culturally acceptable mould of a “respectable” Indian Muslim woman and inspired the future generation of women writers by fearlessly writing about taboo and unmentionable topics like women's sexuality, lesbianism and prostitution.

If being an educated and enlightened woman who chose to write wasn't a departure from tradition itself, the content of Ismat Chughtai's writings

“ Chughtai's women emerge as strong and empowered characters, maybe not in the prescribed sense of the word but in the only way their circumstances and conditions allow them to be. ”

sealed her reputation as a nonconformist. Observing the vulgar intricacies of the Kafir-Musalmanti¹ relationship through the innocent lens of two young children, her short story ‘*Kaafir*’, questioned religious and cultural mores; something that earned her much ill will from her peers. She reflected the society's hate through the exchanges between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl; their constant name-calling and prophecies of each other's damnation, indicative of how society conditions hate from an early age. Things change again after the two elope, even as they continue calling each other insulting names, along with statements like “*I'll give you mehr²! My salary is only slightly less than yours*”. Such overtly feminist ideas, no doubt considered heretical in most of India at the time, coupled with her intense disregard for religious and social dictums, and her unabashed directness about sex, sealed her reputation as a rebel in twentieth century India.

Sex is a recurring and unmistakable motif in Chughtai's stories. It is used by both men and women, to oppress and wield influence. ‘*The Homemaker*’ shows how women extract benefits by offering their bodies to men. The character of Lajo, a gamester who works from time to time as a maid in people's homes, and who acknowledges that her “*body was her only asset*” tactfully and convincingly makes a place for herself in Mirza, the male-protagonist's home, by catering to his sexual needs and playing to his oedipal tendencies. Mirza, a bachelor who was

famous for squandering his money at brothels, is incredulous at the idea of keeping a “whore” in the house. Yet his many protests fall on deaf ears as Lajo determinedly takes over his home and kitchen and appoints herself as the mistress of his four walls. The morning after they consummate their relationship, Mirza appears abashed and coy, whereas Lajo is triumphant, having secured complete control over the house and the man who owns it. Again, in ‘*Terhi Lakeer*’, the protagonist Shama can feel the scales of power shifting as her cousin walks off with her bridegroom. Writes Chughtai: “*But when the bridegroom started walking away with Noori, Shama had this feeling in some corner of her heart that Noori hadn’t been sold, but that instead this man who had clasped her to his breast was about to place chains on his existence. This very Noori, this young experienced girl, will dig her claws into his beings in such a way that he will abandon the world, and handing her his reins walk on the path she chooses for him*”³. While sex and the use of a woman’s body are the tools used to oppress and subjugate her, Chughtai’s stories show women taking back some of the power and exerting it for their own benefit. Her women emerge as strong and empowered characters, maybe not in the prescribed sense of the word but in the only way their circumstances and conditions allow them to be. The needs of these women — monetary, sexual and emotional, drive the narrative of Chughtai’s stories. This is reflected through the actions and words of many of her heroines in ‘*Ismat Chughtai Lifting the Veil*’ (Penguin Books India, 2009, trans. by M. Asaduddin). As in ‘*Vocation*’, the protagonist succinctly says, “*Chastity is something that one woman trades for livelihood while another gives her life to protect. Eventually this is the trump card she uses at all critical moments.*”

Though her female characters occupy a central position in the stories, Chughtai does not romanticize them, nor are their relationships with men romanticized. The young teacher in ‘*Vocation*’ after being scandalized and passing many judgments on her neighbor, the sethani⁴, comes to a practical conclusion — that the sethani was doing what she had to in order to survive. Comparing the demands of each of their professions she thought, “*The sethani tempted her clients with her get-up for the sake of livelihood. I also do the same — making myself presentable when I go to the court of my clients. The only difference was that my intellect was a squeezed*

“ The Chughtai woman takes ownership of her own body, rejecting the customs and edicts to satisfy herself and get what she wants. ”

out sugar cane while the sethani was a pitcherful of nectar. I sold my brain and she her body!” The relationships between men and women in these stories too, lack romance and idealism; Chughtai breaks the archetypes of the dutiful and passive wives, and presents marriage as a matter of physical and material convenience, without glorifying it as a sacrosanct union.

In fact, the institution of marriage in Chughtai’s Indian subcontinent is perhaps the best perspective from which to observe the sexual and emotional power plays between men and women. The Nawab in ‘*The Quilt*’, treats his newly wedded bride like a piece of furniture that he has brought into the house, and ignores her emotional and physical needs and looks elsewhere to fulfill his own needs. In ‘*The Homemaker*’, Lajo too suffers from the same fate after she agrees to marry Mirza. Following her marriage, she loses her agency and influence; the charms and flirtations that Mirza once found endearing in his mistress, were now inappropriate and improper for his wife. Lajo, an experienced woman, might have perhaps predicted that marriage would curtail her freedom; though she was generous to a fault in loving Mirza, “*the need for marriage totally escaped Lajo.*” The stories show how both Lajo and the Begum Jan are forced to adapt to a standard of morality and traditional values, while their men folk are free to carry on their sexual exploits without the fear of societal censure. Chughtai however, does not allow her heroines dissatisfaction and depression; both women find in themselves the courage to defy tradition and satisfy their desires. Begum Jan looks towards her maid servant Rabbo whereas Lajo also courts the mason’s son Mithwa.

In stories like ‘*Vocation*’, ‘*The Quilt*’, ‘*The Homemaker*’, ‘*Touch Me Not*’, and ‘*Tiny’s Granny*’, Chughtai questions why men are given the liberty to explore their sexual passions, whereas their female counterparts are forced to pretend that they are void



Eanie Meanie Miney Mo IX by Kenneth Steven Sherill



of any desires. These prejudices, she points out, are not just perpetrated by men but by many women belonging to “respected” families as well. In ‘*Vocation*’, Chughtai exposes this fallacious conception through the character of the *sethani* whom the protagonist treats with disdain and contempt throughout and professes in the first line “*I was sure she was a courtesan*”, and who turns out to be a member of her own “reputable” family in the end.

Chughtai’s women are sexual beings, unashamed and aware of their desires and uninhabited when it comes to gratifying them. There are many layers to these characters and their actions. Complex and deep their desires and inhibitions, triumphs and predicaments, are presented by Chughtai in light of Indian culture. They are part of a patriarchal, conservative culture and to some extent also comply with its values; however, they rebel out of an unabashed openness about their own sexuality and their ability to recognize the double standards that exist in the sexual relations between men and women. The Chughtai woman takes ownership of her own body, rejecting the customs and edicts to satisfy herself and get what she wants. She expresses the desires and fantasies that until then remained unexpressed, while tacitly demanding equal rights and better treatment for herself. Perhaps not much different from the twenty-first century woman or the versions we aspire to be.

(Endnotes)

i Offensive terms used in the subcontinent for Hindus and Muslims respectively.

ii Dowry, in the form of money or property that a bride brings with her when she marries.

iii Dawn, [“Ismat Chughtai: The Inner Worlds of Educated Women”](#)

iv *Sethani* is the Urdu word for a mistress or madam

ALWAYS COCA-COLA

By Alexandra Chreiteh, trans. Michelle Hartman

'Always Coca-Cola', Alexandra Chreiteh's debut novel, was described by Words Without Borders as "a razor-sharp commentary on how young women in Beirut today are buffeted by the alternately conflicting and conspiring forces of hegemony, capitalism, and patriarchy." Abeer Ward, the novel's narrator, belongs to overlapping and contradictory social circles: a mainstream conservative family, a circle of adventurous young friends, Beirut's communalism, and global consumerism. In the excerpt that follows, Abeer is with her family.

When I finally reached the landing in front of the apartment I was panting from exhaustion and my shirt was damp under the arms with perspiration, producing an odor like a fishmonger's shop at noon. I planned to wash as soon as I entered the house, but the women sitting on the living room floor detained me. I had to shake their hands, each woman one by one, and kiss each one three times on her cheeks, then ask each one about her health—even though I knew that the health of every single one of them was good and nothing was wrong with any of them! This process of delivering greetings lasted a long time because, as usual, there were a large number of women present. They successfully exploited their numbers to increase the productivity and speed of lunch preparation and had divided the discrete tasks involved amongst themselves.

This process was now reaching its climax: my mother Hiba and my grandmother Naziha were preparing balls of kibbeh, and my father's sister Nahid and her three daughters were chopping tomatoes and parsley, and my father's other, recently engaged, sister Nuha was peeling onions and crying because they were so strong, and my father's third sister Niemat and her two daughters Zaynab and Hala were peeling potatoes, which my father's brother's wife Hanadi cut up to fry in oil later. As for Dareen, the wife of my father's other brother, and her daughter Ulaa, the two of them were drinking coffee with Ru'aa, the fiancée of my father's third brother, and also with my grandmother's neighbor Siham, and her son's wife, whose name I tried to remember but couldn't.

These women had brought their children along to my grandmother's house, just as they do every Friday, and the number of kids in the apartment was approximately the same as the number of inhabitants in a small village.

Today this village was packed into a three-room apartment—it has an entry hall, a living room, and a bedroom. The population density had reached a level that would shock the United Nations bureau responsible for the world's overpopulation problem. But the overcrowded numbers of children wasn't the worst of it—the worst was the roar emanating from them, loud enough to wake the Companions of the Cave from their deep slumber. Despite their desperate mothers' attempts to calm them, the children were jumping and screaming and running through the house without stopping or tiring. It was as though inside them they had limitless energy, exactly like the Duracell battery that keeps on going and going and going...

This roar had gone on for much longer than the mothers could stand, their anger toward their children exploded and was incarnated in my uncle's wife Hanadi, who got up from the floor where she was sitting to impose some order. She found that she could only conquer by dividing and so she split the kids into two groups. She sent the first to the shop on the ground floor of the building owned by my grand-mother's elderly neighbor, telling her oldest son, whom she appointed as the group's leader, to buy her sanitary pads, "Buy some Always!"

"Always?" I asked her curiously, after the first detachment of children had marched off to execute her order.

She replied that she's embarrassed to buy them herself from the mini-market near her house because she's too shy to speak of such intimate things in front of the three young men who work there. So she prefers to buy them from an old man, like the one who owns the shop on the ground floor of my grandmother's building. I reminded her that it's not she who'll feel embarrassed in either place anyway, because her son's the one who's buying the pads for her.

But Hanadi didn't hear me because she was

“ I reminded her that it’s not she who’ll feel embarrassed in either place anyway, because her son’s the one who’s buying the pads for her. ”

busy with the second group of children; she had ordered them to sit in a row on the sofa and keep silent—under threat of getting smacked with a slipper that she had taken off and waved right in their faces to assure them that she wasn’t joking.

And just like that, the noise died down; I could no longer hear anything but the women’s chatting, the loudspeaker on the minaret of the nearby mosque and the sound of the television, which was broadcasting a song called “Tannoura” (Oh, Why Does She Shorten her Skirt?). But my grandmother wasted no time in turning off the song after the azaan started, causing a group mobilization of the women sitting in the living room, who instantly suspended their activities and headed all together to the apartment’s one sink to do their wudu’.

Now I myself had intended to head toward the very same sink just seconds before the azaan started so that I could wash my armpits and get rid of the smell of rotting fish radiating from them. But I didn’t get there in time for two reasons: firstly, as soon as the women heard the azaan they rushed to the sink like cars speeding down the highway, cutting me off with blows from their hips and elbows, practically crushing me; secondly, at that moment, my cousin Hala grabbed my right arm and dragged me away into the bedroom.

In the bedroom, she told me in a whisper, “Abeer, I don’t want to get married!”

Stupefied, I asked her, “What did you say?” For it had really shocked me—in fact it shocked me a great deal more than it should have—I felt as if she was saying to me, “Abeer, I’m actually a man!”

Even though she hadn’t given her reasons for her lack of desire to marry, I immediately connected her statement to a possible confusion about her sexual orientation—something that I had wondered about for a long time, without ever openly saying anything to her. My evidence for this was her long-

standing refusal to get married.

This refusal has really infuriated her family, but for a different reason—Hala had already reached thirty years of age and thus was only a few steps away from the point of no return from the hell they call spinsterhood. This caused her mother acute pain and embarrassment and everyone took part in adding to this pain and this embarrassment, first and foremost my aunt Nahid, who had married off all her daughters a long time ago and who always says to Hala’s mother,

“Isn’t it a shame that this flower will wilt before any-one’s inhaled its fragrance?”

Though this flower—i.e., Hala—really had begun to wilt, that doesn’t mean that no one has desired to breathe in her fragrant scent, for potential grooms have been flocking to her family’s house in droves from the time she reached a marriageable age—they sought her out as if they were flies and she the blue light that would zap them. But Hala’s response was always the same, even as time kept passing. To every single one of them, she would very simply say two words, never three:

“Ma baddi!” (meaning: No!)

She would pronounce these two words, lifting the palm of her right hand in the air and turning her face to the side to emphasize what she had just said, as though she were one of the princesses in the stories of *1001 Nights*, who won’t consent to marry unless it is to a man who truly deserves her. Now the man who truly deserves her is the strongest in all the land: he’s always prepared to go to the ends of the earth for her sake, to launch wars against all the other kingdoms and make the grandest of their leaders bow down at his feet as confirmation of both his absolute power and his everlasting love for her.

But none of these potential bridegrooms confirmed his everlasting love for Hala or launched a war, even a small one, for her sake, not one of them even protested against her rejecting him or got down on his knees to beg her to reconsider, as she would have liked in her dreams. And so she was left disappointed every time, but she wasn’t too sad about it; in her opinion these disappointing men weren’t worthy of her anyway, since they weren’t ever real men. For her, this was the root of the problem—she always used to claim that the reason she refused to get married was her search for this “real man” and her dissatisfaction with anything less!

Tracking him down is no simple matter. He'd be a rare find, because this is an endangered species! His kind is on the brink of extinction.

This is what Hala always used to tell me, without providing any detailed information about this breed, or the criteria that she used to distinguish "real" men from other men—the only thing that I knew about real men is that they didn't cross her path.

But as circumstances would have it, when she was thirty years old, a man of this rare breed finally did cross her path and asked for her hand in marriage. And she refused. And he insisted, so she accepted. The wedding planning came on like a sudden torrential downpour in the most arid desert after a drought that has lasted for years, when everything that's wilted suddenly comes alive. Hala herself came alive in the eyes of her aunts and uncles on both her mother's and father's sides, and to the rest of the extended family, too. To them she had become a flower blooming at the peak of its maturity, a prize blossom to be plucked, smelled, and enjoyed.

So this flower finally surrendered her hand in marriage to her knight in shining armor, who came to her riding atop a rented white 2007 Cadillac, in place of a white horse. According to Hala, this knight, whose name happens to be Faris (meaning knight in Arabic), he is everything that she had dreamed of and desired—and more.

"So what's the problem, then?" I asked her.

"The problem..." Hala began, but was silenced just as quickly by my grandmother coming into the bedroom to do her noontime prayers.

My grandmother's entrance at that moment was the commercial break that interrupts a film on television, giving the viewers a chance to move away from the screen for a moment without missing anything. Her intrusion let me escape from Hala and her story for a second and go to the bathroom to escape from my sweaty shirt.

After I had traded my shirt for house clothes and put on some perfume, I returned to the bedroom, where my grandmother had already finished her prayers. But she didn't leave the room as I expected and instead started organizing one of her wardrobes, though all of them are always perfectly organized. Her sudden organizational frenzy prevented us from continuing our conversation, which annoyed Hala, who wanted to talk so much that she

“ She then explained that Faris wasn't actually the knight in shining armor that she thought she had found. In fact, she had only found a poseur knight[...] ”

was on the verge of exploding. When she could repress this urge no longer, she grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to one of the corners of the room, saying very loudly,

"How long have you gone without plucking your eyebrows? The hair on them is almost as thick as the shrubbery in Sanayeh Park!"

I was about to say that the shrubbery in that park could hardly be called thick and that the few shrubs growing there could be counted on one person's fingers and toes. But I resisted because I noticed that Hala wasn't listening to me and had started searching for the eyebrow tweezers. After she found them in a drawer, she came right up close to me and started plucking the grass growing in this "garden" out by its roots. She used this as a pretext to whisper into my ear the story of how her wedding plans were failing without arousing our grandmother's suspicion—grandma would try to figure out what we were talking about straightaway if she realized that we were hiding something important from her.

This actually was something important, or the tone of Hala's voice at least made it seem like it was. She brought her face so close to mine that our lips were almost touching and I could feel the warmth of her breath on me, as she whispered, "That low-life despicable man! Thank God I found out what he's really like before the wedding!"

She then explained that Faris wasn't actually the knight in shining armor that she thought she had found. In fact, she had only found a poseur knight and she had discovered this pose exactly two days before, when they were hanging out together in one of the bars in Gemmayzeh. Late that night, two men who were clearly drunk came over to their table. One of them started to curse at her fiancé for no reason. The other came up to Hala and tried to put



Gracek by Omar Gilani

his hand on her breasts. Instead of getting the man off her, as she expected him to do and he should have done, Faris bent his head so that it was almost hidden underneath the table and not a single sound crossed his lips except the chattering of his teeth.

“He was afraid!” Hala whispered to me, shaking her head. She added, in serious distress, “He

turned out to be a *tante* in the end! A sissy! A fag!”

She then plucked a bunch of little hairs from my right eyebrow in one violent motion as though taking revenge on the universe that had sent her a fag fiancé, and I shouted out in pain.

FOG

Today, in the coldest place in the universe (a couple of degrees above absolute zero), 2 beams of protons collided at CERN, Geneva. They approached, at a tiny scale, what happened in the first split seconds after the Big Bang.

How can one, under a splendid sun, and with intimate news about the universe, be desperate?

On one hand, yourself, only your self. On the other, the ocean, immense, given to itself, and probably to you.

Pergolesi's *Salve Regina*

In all innocence the fog is touching the tip of the trees. The forest is silent. It doesn't mind its invasion by such a light substance. Lighter than a dance, than a hand.

This stepping out into the fog — this sudden coolness on the face, this diffused environment ... the body responds, then lets go.

The sum total of all human sufferings is civilization too.

Away from the ecstatic zone, it's not rain or fog that falls on their eyes, but blood. To each his/her tormentor, to each his/her victim.

A rainbow is making a shield between me and my thoughts.

Au fur et à mesure

We're left with a panic fear. If we had wings we would have flown, but airplanes have become versions of the living-room. The dying-room.

Regularly, only the fog can change the world.

But the fog is cruel. Its sponginess absorbs one's inattentiveness. Stepping out from the Night Palace, Joanne Kyger comes face to face with the Pacific's depth in that obscure journey.

Into that fog and not to "where and what." Any life is too short to matter. Earth sweats humid air. We're summoning bits of love in order to float in this weather-event whose silvery substance engulfs San Francisco regularly...

Prisoner of his wife's madness, a man remains in his room until daylight comes to hurt his eyes. Later, heavy masses of fog move over a beginning sunset.

If you're willing to reach the divine through memory's workings

— go through that fog. Let time run its course. Listen. If nothing happens, it would mean that you reached the invisible.

My eyes liberate a flat and moving surface that wants to travel along my decisions.

I say the sea is overwhelmed by its waves. Breathe into it your thoughts, and it will remember you.

Death and life are similar in so far that they're each a thin layer that hides the incomprehensible.

Would mind dominate Being where gods failed?

Invisibility reigns supreme. Why do we ignore the reality of the given and need to look beyond it?

Archeology is the recurrence of the past into the present. We didn't leave the gods, they did us.

There's no tension in a late sleep on the beach. The world penetrates the lungs and elevates the mind to the only rest it can experience.

In the meantime, the waters beat against an alien construction and the heat invades the city.

The forest spreads its thickness on a map. Entering head-on to where each tree has a shadow is to enter the future.

A forest is equally a little universe of solitude where one's impulses grow tall as trees, but also are as imprisoned in immobility.

When time is new and over here an ill-fated tide advances on the mind ... tomorrow has nothing to do with what preceded it.

We spend a life-time running after our life, running into that soft wall, looking for the energy to die.

But sometimes we're distracted ... we're visited by Nature's own doings, by her capacity to absorb our will, to give us oblivion.

I am immortal not because I have been, but because I am.

The sea is beating like a heart, heading into a sloppy moisture. At this encounter's frontier, a turbulence from outer-space asks to participate.

I would — as I usually do June and July, when the weather is warm, and deeper California hot — come to the Pacific shore to join the cosmic fog-event in its transfiguration.

A steady fog has sent fishermen to harbor, coastal birds into hiding, the foghorn, to silence.

To be trapped in the fog is different from being lost in the forest. Breathing is most concerned.

We are the world reflecting on itself, a medium, exalted, discarded.

Love enters the arteries and speeds up the heart.

Only in the fog do I feel complete.

Time and fog escape our grasp. But when I drive through a visiting cloud, though limited to a (blissful) moment, I negotiate directly with a cosmic happening. I domesticate an impersonal part of nature.

Time is my country, fog is my land.

~Etel Adnan



THE BUS

By Najwa Barakat, trans. Luke Leafgren

Najwa Barakat's 'The Bus' is the story of a group of strangers who share a long bus ride, gradually revealing their stories and their secrets. During a police inspection, the grisly discovery of a severed head on the bus prompts mutual recriminations and soul-searching. The excerpt that follows is taken from Chapter 27.

“Wouldn’t it be better to confess immediately? Will they even believe me when they discover the truth? Tomorrow, when they look through my impressive file, I’ll be the prime suspect. Damn you, Mu’awiya! What prompted your tongue to start lying the minute you got out of prison? But how could I guess I would come back and find myself accused of the crime committed by that black cat? It’s strange: you spin a little white lie, then you plunge into its bowels, like prey wrapped in the tentacles of an octopus.

“I told them. I warned them time and again. The idiots! If only they hadn’t taken her with us on the bus, we’d be safe now. Isn’t the price I paid over so many years enough? If only they had left her behind when she began complaining of the labor pains, she would certainly have remembered her accursed bag, and we would’ve thrown them both out in the street. Those damned hypocrites! They claimed they were performing an act of charity. But they’re just like scorpions: as soon as you trust one, it jabs you with poison.

“Women—damn! They ought to be crushed like insects! The bitch! She pretended to want to get back to her village after losing her husband at sea. I bet my life she got rid of him in order to make way for all the other men in the world. Poor guy! She disfigured him and chopped him up like a dog, like a lamb to the slaughter. The animal! If he had been a real man, he would have sent her to that same fate first. Damn her! Damn all women! There’s no trusting them. Damn all of you too! If only I hadn’t gotten on this bus. If only I had been a little late and missed it!”

Mu’awiya al-Matmati gnashed his teeth in rage and annoyance. He felt he was being stabbed at that

very moment, but not a single drop of blood flowed out due to the amount of pressure he put on himself to keep from exploding in curses and abuse. He felt ants running over his legs. He tried to shift his position, but bumping into the feet of the driver, sitting opposite, made him pull back. He crossed his legs, resting his elbows on his knees.

If they interrogated him again tomorrow, he would reply, “Does it make any sense that I would be punished for all those years, and that I would commit another crime just days—no, hours!—after being set free?” That was actually a very convincing argument. What’s more, he wasn’t a wandering killer who roamed around killing whomever he liked. What did he have to do with strangers? The crime he had committed had cost him a life sentence, reduced to just thirty-five years because of good behavior. That’s what they told him. Some of his friends said it was from overcrowding and an inability to house the new inmates being arrested by the hundreds.

It had happened when he was twenty-four, and now here he was at sixty. They would believe him. He would say he had carried out that crime against the person closest to him. So he had an excuse, a pretext, a motive for murder. As for that severed head, he would attest that he had no connection to it at all, neither near nor far. Of course, they would believe him. Certainly. Without the least doubt! For where in the world would he have gotten to know the owner of that head—in prison?

Dear God! When he had taken that step and crossed over the few centimeters separating prison from life, he stopped, looked up at the sky, and whispered, “Congratulations, Mu’awiya! Perhaps now you can spend your remaining years in peace and quiet in your village in the south.” He had thrown away that bag of things reminding him of those dark days and then set off towards the square, hoping he might still catch a bus to take him where he was going. When he came across the driver’s aide calling out for passengers even though the bus was behind schedule, he had taken that as a good sign, indulging the hope that his misfortune was beginning to turn into good luck.



“ The crime he had committed had cost him a life sentence, reduced to just thirty-five years because of good behavior. [...] Some of his friends said it was from overcrowding and an inability to house the new inmates being arrested by the hundreds. ”

Before that, he had passed by a shop, and he couldn't stop himself from going in and asking a question, just to reassure himself that things were still the same and hadn't changed during the long time he was away. There, he was overwhelmed by a desire to do something that would remind him, after such a long time, that he could move and act like everyone else. He asked for a certain amount of sugar, feeling an enormous pleasure. To tell the truth, it wasn't the pleasure of it that drew him, but rather the need to take care of something that was still stuck in his memory. He carried that sugar like someone who had finally found the key that would make his life seem not at all a waste. For he felt he had gone out to buy something not thirty-five years ago, but just a few minutes, and as soon as he finished his errand, he would go straight back where he came from.

She was truly beautiful. That was his first experience with marriage and passion. Young, beautiful, and with a smile that gripped your heart to see it. That melted your heart to see it. Sweet, white, soft-skinned—and a bride. Just like sugar. Afterwards, he started forbidding her from going outside because he couldn't bear the looks men cast in her direction when he was with her. So how could he endure the looks they would cast when he wasn't there?! He locked the doors, windows, and walls upon her in order to ease his mind and be able to go out. And she kept smiling...

Like the sun. That smile burned him like the sun. It blinded him. He didn't understand where it

came from and what he could do to make it go away. He couldn't take it any longer. He cut her off. He isolated her. He made her into a hermit. He made her into orphan. He cut off her roots. He stripped away her leaves. He extinguished her. He pressed her. He compressed her. She kept smiling. It wasn't visible. But he guessed it was inside. Behind her mouth and eyes. Underneath. In the bottom. It flowed slowly. It circulated. It nested in the corners. It piled up. Like a disease. It glittered with a dazzling sparkle he couldn't grasp.

What made her keep smiling? He stripped her of all her possessions and her makeup. He shredded her clothes. He sold her jewelry. He pulled her hair and cut it off with a knife. Her locks fell like mutilated snakes twisting on the floor, letting her scalp shine through.

And now? She got up. She came back with a broom and a bucket. She swept. She washed the floor. He saw her smile glide over her shorn head and slide down her back. Why didn't she scream? Why didn't she cry, complain, beat her head against the wall or some hard object? What enabled her to stand up to him? What gave her this power, this tyranny? She would kill him if it went on like this! She would be the end of him.

And now? He abandoned her. He kept her away from his bedroom. He made her sleep on the floor. And her smile, which he didn't see, pursued him and came to his dreams in the form of demons. Like the sun. Like fire. Like a genie. Until it stole his soul and destroyed him.

One day, she made tea for him at his request. It tasted bitter. He grew angry and cursed her. He looked for more sugar but didn't find any. He said he was going out to buy some, that he might be gone for a while to visit some friends. And he went out. He didn't lock the door. He dug carefully and set the trap for her. Then he went away and hid, watching from afar.

And now? The door remained fixed in place. For minutes. She didn't appear. He began to feel reassured. Then he was afraid and waited some more. And the door opened. He smiled in joy at what would emerge. And she came out! She fell into the trap! She remained standing on the patio under the walnut tree. Frozen in place. He didn't see her eyes or the direction she was looking. What made her stand like that? Had she come out to get a breath of fresh

“ Why didn't she scream? Why didn't she cry, complain, beat her head against the wall or some hard object? What enabled her to stand up to him? ”

air? Of course. And what harm was there in that? Where was the fault? He walked away. He stopped, doubtful. Hadn't she gone out to see someone? For someone to see her? Who? He turned around and ran until he reached the house.

And now? She was seated in front of the mirror. In her hand was a green walnut shell that she was rubbing on her puckered lips. Her mouth became scarlet like an aged red wine. She hadn't betrayed him. And here she was making herself up for him. She was alone. There was no fear in her eyes. No shadow of disturbance or surprise. He approached. He kissed her. She jumped and drew away. He approached and grabbed her. She stood, frozen in his hands. Cold, like ice. He blew his hot breath upon her. She didn't smile. He asked, "So who were you making yourself up for then?" She didn't say she was making herself up for him, that he was her husband, whom she desired and loved. Her tears flowed down. He slapped her. He struck her again. She stopped crying. He was powerless. Was she provoking him? "Who was it for then, you whore, if not for me?" He started hitting. Perhaps she would utter a word or a groan, or cry out to protest her innocence, with a complaint, with some curse. At least let her say something! He kept hitting her until she was covered all over with a deep crimson, like her lips stained with the walnut.

And now? It was finished. She lay stretched out in a pool of red. Her ears and mouth were bubbling blood like a fountain. It subsided. It died away. Fate and chance. Destiny. It was fated for her to die at his hands. And if she had been innocent, he would not have been struck blind, and he would not have started beating something that seemed like a ball between his hands. He would have found a reason, just once, for that smile of hers.

And now? Tomorrow they would suspect him

in connection with that lopped-off head. There was no doubt. Hadn't he already committed an act of murder? How would he make them understand? They would add, "Someone who kills his wife because she puts on makeup might kill a man because he doesn't like how he looks." He would answer, "If you were in my shoes, you would have done exactly the same thing. I don't regret what I did. It was the hand of fate that chose me to carry out her destiny. Indeed, I don't regret it. Prison is no shame. Prison makes a man."

They set me free. And they kept that lunatic who drove me crazy with his talk about "the struggle." If he only knew I had adopted his stories, he would have been happy, rejoicing and thinking that my getting out of prison was like him getting out. He made me miserable with stories about his friend, Jameel the Baghdadi. I learned them like the back of my hand. I made these hypocrites listen to them as though they were scribbled on my palm or engraved on the open book of my memory. What's the difference? What I said wasn't a lie, even if I was lying. Even if the other guy was lying and fabricating all his military exploits in "the struggle." What fault is it of mine that they believed me?

I lied. And they believed me! They honored me! They left me alone! If I had confessed the truth to them, would they have treated me that way? No, by God! People are scorpions. As soon as you trust them and reach your hand out to touch them, they jab you with poison.

And now?

LOSING MY FANDOM

On female geeks and their fight to stay visible

By Mahnoor Yawar

There is no doubting that we are, historically speaking, in the prime of geek supremacy. More than three quarters of the highest grossing films in Hollywood belong to franchises involving science fiction, fantasy or superheroes. Storylines focusing on geeks and adaptations of fantasy and graphic novels continually dominate the airwaves, year after year. While sales of print books drop all over, there are more critically acclaimed fantasy and sci-fi books in the market than ever before. Nerds like Steve Jobs, Steven Moffat, Joss Whedon, George R. R. Martin and Mark Zuckerberg have become the ultimate cult symbols. The geeks have, at last, inherited the Earth. But have they also inherited its more insidious societal biases?

Last year, Carolyn Petit, reviewer for gaming website Gamespot, rated Grand Theft Auto V as one of the best video games of 2013. She rhapsodized about the game's graphics, its astounding improvement in controls, and the sheer beauty of the game design overall. In addition to naming it "editor's choice", she gave it a whopping score of 9.0 based on being "one of the most beautiful, lively, diverse and stimulating worlds ever seen in a game."

Things took a different turn, however, when she ventured towards exploring the sexual bias and misogynistic undercurrents within the realm. "Characters constantly spout lines that glorify male sexuality while demeaning women, and the billboards and radio stations of the world reinforce this misogyny, with ads that equate manhood with sleek sports cars while encouraging women to purchase a fragrance that will make them "smell like a bitch." Yes, these are exaggerations of misogynistic undercurrents in our own society, but not satirical ones. With nothing in the narrative to underscore how insane and wrong this is, all the game does is reinforce and celebrate sexism."

The gaming community went berserk. The review received over 20,000 comments, many of which hurled a litany of verbal abuse and personal threats directed at Petit herself. Tens of thousands signed a petition demanding she be fired from Gamespot. Her entire credibility was called into question over

“ “It’s GTA. Of course it’s misogynistic. Fuck your feelings.” A commenter on popular gaming website Gamespot ”

the sheer audacity to nitpick, while one commenter dismissed her saying, "It's GTA. Of course it's misogynistic. Fuck your feelings." Her perspective, informed far more broadly than the average gaming enthusiast, was essentially invalidated by those claiming superiority over the medium.

This came in the same year where, according to statistics, over 90% of the lead characters in cinema were men. An even greater number failed the Bechdel test. The year's top grossing franchises geared towards geek appeal included brand new installments of Iron Man, Thor, Wolverine, The Hobbit, Star Trek, and even G.I. Joe, with the additional entry of Man of Steel into the fray. With the notable exception of perhaps Catching Fire (the second offering in the Hunger Games trilogy), not one of these movies features a primary, non-token female character with a role more pivotal than one serving as (potential or actual) love interest to the lead male character, or just to be "fridged" so the lead can exact his mighty revenge.

There is no shortage of dismal narratives, either, from female cosplayers who have been subjected to varying degrees of harassment and body-shaming at conventions for years. They are forced to compete in visibility with a barrage of images purposely designed to appeal to the male gaze — from the physically impossible contortions on comic book covers to the large-breasted anatomical anomalies featuring in video games. Image after image of falsely enhanced and misrepresented avatars are shoved down everyone's throat as the only acceptable visual identity for women. In turn, the women who partake in these events are either excluded (as "fake geek girls"), or objectified (as "booth babes"), ergo



Artwork by Ira Joel

conveniently shut out from actively participating in the very public space that exists to nurture their chosen community.

This overwhelmingly hostile attitude towards women at conventions and in online communities, the overall dearth of female representation in popular franchises, and an absence of marketing strategies geared to sell popular culture to women forces one to ask the question: why is everyone so afraid of female geeks?

Psychologists have long studied the variety of gender micro-aggressions directed at this particular subset of the community, but they are now faced with the more damaging subcategory of micro-invalidations. The systemic misogyny embedded within the geek community is more detrimental because it seeks to homogenize a community that found its roots in acceptance. What do we make of such a community that so aggressively enforces invisibility on its most outspoken subset? And so quickly rises to attack and intimidate the ones who

“Women who partake in these events are either excluded (as “fake geek girls”), or objectified (as “booth babes”). ”

dare to raise issues?

Female geeks have quickly become a marginalized community within a once marginalized community itself. Their sense of belonging is consistently questioned by the far more visible male geek population. Women are subjected to greater scrutiny in terms of sheer knowledge of the fandom they choose to subscribe to, and are made into lesser members of their community. Rachel Edidin of Dark Horse Comics explained this false sense of entitlement as thus:

“Geek culture is a haven for guys who can't



Artwork by Robert Rauschenberg

“The systemic misogyny embedded within the geek community is more detrimental because it seeks to homogenize a community that found its roots in acceptance.”

or don't want to fall in step with the set of cultural trappings and priorities of traditional manhood in America. At least in theory, geek culture fosters a more cerebral and less violent model of masculinity, supported by a complementary range of alternative values. But the social cost of that alternative model — chosen or imposed — is high, and it's often extorted violently — socially or physically. The fringe is a scary place to live, and it leaves you raw and defensive, eager to create your own approximation of a center. Instead of rejecting the rigid duality of the culture they're nominally breaking from, geek communities intensify it, distilled through the defensive bitterness that comes with marginalization. And so masculinity is policed incredibly aggressively in geek communities, as much as in any locker room or frat house.”

As such, it would be inaccurate to say that geek misogyny exists in a vacuum. Surely it is but a subset of a much grander, much more inhibitive otherization of women in society at large. The visibility of women in public spaces and discourse threatens a hitherto unimpeachable masculine dominance within every aspect of culture. Therefore, to preclude any competition with women for valuable social capital, the overwhelming male majority disqualifies them from the field altogether.

Even marketing executives are responsible for reinforcing the prevalent narrative. Market research for all these franchises know that the male community is where the money comes from, so profit margins would be maximized by narrowing down the target audience. Doing so will inevitably involve appealing to a preexisting superiority for the target group over those that are excluded, essentially selling male power fantasies and alienating female buyers. This cultural reinforcement of an already prevalent trend is as old as capitalism itself — advertising doesn't manufacture the “boys club” narrative from scratch, it piggybacks on it and helps it grow. Women are appeased instead with an exclusive product line of their own, slathered in pink and sparkles, that wouldn't interfere with the existing marketing strategies. It is a moral and ethical misdirection, sure, but it is part of a cycle that society created for itself.

This does not absolve any creator of blame, though. In a panel last year that included Gerry



by Ira Joel

Conway (creator of *The Punisher*), Todd McFarlane (*Spawn*) and Len Wein (*Wolverine*), Conway claimed that, “the comics follow society. They don’t lead society.” But this is ignoring the considerable power that creators and industries wield in the construction of societal culture. As writer Alyssa Rosenberg put it, “The decision to stay within the narrow lanes of your own fantasies is a choice, not biological determinism.” Testosterone-laden fantasies may have been the genesis of the superhero genre, but surely story structures have evolved enough to discard the idea that good writing has to make any concessions in order to be more inclusive. In writing female characters, there exists a spectrum beyond the duality of the “damsel in distress” and the one-dimensional “strong, emotionless warrior.”

The imbalance of this very representation — the lack of material with realistic views of masculinity and femininity — lies at the core of the social anxiety behind geek micro-invalidations. Men feel the need to adhere to this unwritten code of conduct, while women are measured against the idealistic physical standards afforded to them by media. In turn, women are told to strain the very limits of their emotional bandwidth by ignoring the abuse, suffering in silence, or rejoicing in the fact that we are significant enough to garner such attention. Are those really our only options? Indifference, shame or celebration?

Media critic Anita Sarkeesian (of *Feminist*

Frequency) very aptly christened this attitude as the “gamification of misogyny”, referring to the backlash against her Kickstarter campaign that involved creating abusive Internet games, with harassers awarding each other virtual points for lashing against her. Being part of a subculture does not waive the necessity to be critical of it. Being aware of the damaging tropes being perpetuated in a certain cultural milieu does the very opposite of limiting its view and its fanbase — it only lends further intellectual credibility. It is high time that the social acceptance of geek culture trickles down to within its own ranks, and being self-critical aligns with a greater acceptance of the diverse definition of the term “geek” itself.

(Endnotes)

- i Gamespot, Review of *GTA V*
- ii IO9, “The Myth of the Fake Geek Girl”
- iii Think Progress, “Legendary Comics Creators Dismiss Sexism Creators”

Mahnoor Yawar is Deputy Articles Editor for the magazine.

THE CURSE

By Hyam Yared, trans. Michelle Hartman

Hyam Yared's 'The Curse' (La Malédiction), is the story of Hala, a young Lebanese woman born in 1970s Beirut who is stifled by her Catholic-school upbringing, coming of age while the country is under threat of Syrian invasion. This excerpt comes from pages 121-124 of the novel.

Poisoned from birth by emotional subservience, my husband learned very early to give up any losing battles in advance. If a classmate so much as scratched him, his mother would move earth, sea, sky and concrete to come into his large Jesuit school like a fury. Mocked by his peers, he would run and hide during each of these visits, that deep within himself he actually truly wanted. He would try in vain to burrow under the first post he found, making himself small, hoping that the earth would open under his feet and swallow him up, but he remained visible to his mother's eyes. She walked across the big courtyard, got down on his level, kneeling with open arms. Frozen for a moment, they stared at each other before the son threw himself into her arms. Because of being embraced everywhere, the son was eroded little by little, his features giving way to maternal love. The first time that I saw him, he had no eyes, nose or mouth. I didn't find this questionable at all. To be faceless seemed beneficial to me, and more effective than all my attempts to tumble into invisibility. I would have liked to know how to find something that I could trade for his peace of mind.

My country also had this same foresight and stopped resisting the Syrian takeover, out of fear of losing its very last bit of selfhood. Because of Turkish-Syrian-Israeli-American-French-Palestinian-UN invasions, my country—infantilized by its history of being put under these various forms of guardianship—suffered from an overlay of identities, that it wore like an orphan throwing herself into the void, indiscriminately. Under these invaders, it had a hard time forming an image representative of all its minorities. Without them, the cacophony proved even worse. Arab identity. Phoenician. Modern Lebanese. Syrian-Lebanese. Incapable of forming a collective history without sinking into disharmony, divested of its image of itself at the least

“ [M]y country—infantilized by its history of being put under these various forms of guardianship—suffered from an overlay of identities, that it wore like an orphan throwing herself into the void, indiscriminately. ”

sign of friction, Lebanon was always on the lookout for a saviour who could give it a less brittle cohesiveness than its overload of affect, adoption, protectorate. It was ready for anything, so long as people still showed an interest in it. Even an invasion seemed providential. It posed as the victim of that which seems vital to its balance. From Lebanon's point of view, Syria never stopped invading it. From the Syrian point of view, Lebanon never stopped letting itself be invaded. Consistently exposed to others' schemes, infantilized then trained into dependence, this “child-country” suffered from the denial of its selfhood, passing from one father to another.

In the blur of their rarely articulated suffering, my husband and my country joined together. Their shame at growing up without a face—to no longer remember it—is only equalled by their kindness. The more they lost their features, the kinder they were with their classmates, the more obedient with their masters, the more obsequious with their neighbours. Searching for the backing of someone stronger, bigger, more of a mother, more of a father, more of a protector, Lebanon little by little was shrouded in the emotional reflexes of the colonized person who is devoted to his own self-negation.

“A bunch of incompetents, that's what we are,” my mother said watching the eight o'clock news. She lamented that the country was being led by “morons, good for-nothing, pathetic, losers. Nothing but scum”. Both nouns and adjectives spurted out.

Fadia lamented that the country's national im-



Eenie Meanie Miney Mo III by Kenneth Steven

age was so low. “Because we are constantly berating each other we end up believing it. My father has treated the neighbour’s son, who belongs to an opposing party, like such rubbish that in the end he resembles a paralyzed, stammering receptacle. The son lies around our building’s courtyard for days on end, sitting on a chair without moving. He’s even afraid to think. When he does speak, he stumbles over every word. My father takes advantage of this to lay into him. Sometimes, the son pisses his pants. He’s just like this country. By stumbling so many times, it puts itself at the mercy of greed and invasions. This country isn’t too young, it’s prone to crumbling.” Then she fell silent.

Edward’s Sunday shortbread also crumbled at the least touch. The ingredients don’t stick together well, he explained cursing the mediocre quality of products from the corner grocery. “What recipes

need is some kind of binding agent,” Edward said, mixing his cake dough. No binding agent would be able to overcome the difficult cohesion of the minority groups making up the pluralism of this country. Otherwise, there are just sowers of discord who claim to be saviours. In history class, Fadia explained to me, “In politics, as in life, you aren’t ever saved but rather indebted.” Lebanon paid its debt. In looking to be saved, it perpetuated the servitude against which it measured its powerlessness, weapons in hand. Its instability allowed predators, clothed in benevolence, to swallow it like a boa constrictor swallows its prey after having paralyzed it. Divide to better rule. Neutralize the desired object before devouring it. The predators waited for the country to call on them before taking it in one mouthful. The feast of saviours.

#DigitalLove

by Aaron Grierson

Sexual activity has always been a constant for humanity. Not only as our method of reproduction, but as a form of entertainment as well. For a history nerd, the oldest stereotypical medium of sexual media that I'm personally familiar with would be French lithographs from the 17th and 18th centuries. I say stereotypes because, while true, it's unlikely that the French were the only ones producing such things. And while modesty was generally pushed to the forefront of European history, I get distinctly bemused by the likelihood that there were cave drawings tens of thousands of years ago that depicted such material.

Now, as far as socially-acceptable mass-media goes, there are seemingly endless shelves of romance and erotica novels to keep the "reading public" entertained, that is to say, if they are not occupied through other mediums. Such themes permeate pages well beyond old-fashioned publications, stretching into fanfiction posted (mostly) on the internet, or personal fantasies that are kept entirely private. However, not all these works of fiction are carnal. Some, it would seem, no matter how many centuries old, were intended to be satirical or inflammatory. The physical intimacy, while important, is seldom the sole element involved. Regardless of their original purpose, these stories can be easily skewed by modern readers as an ideal to be sought out, not as a work of fiction wherein some ideal fantasy is being brought to life. Like our depictions, we have developed different ways of being close to one another, not just in an emotional or an "I can text this person whenever I want" way, but also in a deliberately physical way that might make someone like Plato laugh at us. This is especially true when the fantasies of our fiction are impossible to consider as being able to cross over into reality.

The reminders might come with an ad on YouTube, or as an inappropriate email that gets flushed to the spam folder, but sooner or later, it permeates through our consciousness and social respectability. Of course, online dating is a horse long since beaten to death, and perhaps it's a comfortable subject for the adult, or "adult" (like myself) reader, of these pages. However, it may be more difficult com-

“ It’s a wonder children maintain normal sleeping patterns, less because of late hours, and more because they probably sleep within ten feet of their cellphones and other gadgets, if not falling asleep mid-textersation. ”

ing to grips with this rapidly ubiquitous subject especially with regards to our children, siblings, or the youth of our world in general.

Yet it is undeniable that their experience too stretches beyond the realm of fiction. We may not take it seriously but humanity has entered into a realm where creating countless new relationships is more the rule than the exception. So much so that I ponder when the idea of the "high school sweetheart" morphed into the "chatroom sweetheart" or the "Facebook sweetheart", or more generally just "the sweetheart I've only ever Skype'd with".

For a long time philosophers, ethicists and science fiction authors have contended with the question of where exactly humanity begins, especially in view of rapidly evolving digital technology. To a cynic, falling in love with someone on the internet might sound like a preposterous premise. Yet with e-dating websites this is obviously not only accepted but encouraged and facilitated, having evolved into a social service that often comes with a monthly subscription fee.

So where, then, might the optimist's opinion on such matters lie? Is humanity the true medium of the message, and the technology merely the apparatus which facilitates our communion with other people? Or is humanity perhaps just something so innate that it cannot help but be active no matter which way we present ourselves? I certainly don't



Rained Over by Sheri L. Wright

have an answer to these musings, so I hope that you, dear readers, were not expecting me to deliver one. This youthful techno-romance seems to be growing in popularity and meaning, which simultaneously manages to blur the lines of traditional relationships, especially the unwritten laws concerning physicality and emotional connection. Such expansion comes paired with items or methods of communication that become all but infamous in the wider world.

The present obsession, without comparison, is cellphones and tablets. Generation Z and beyond are becoming obsessed with them en masse. Constantly texting, it's a wonder these children maintain normal sleeping patterns, less because of late hours, and more because they probably sleep within ten feet of their cellphones and other gadgets, if not falling asleep mid-textersation.

But the plague of cellphones, or smartphones, as we've convinced ourselves to call them, goes well beyond text messaging. In the last couple of years,

internet access on one's phone has become the norm. And while it is a premium service with its own often hefty charge, it is nevertheless an expectation for people to have access to it anytime, anywhere, anyway.

This constant fervor (for some people, at least) has to do with social connections. Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, perhaps even e-dating profiles. We live in a world where a person can be in their bed but access almost anything in the world, and feel totally alone while doing it. This, I feel, is exactly why there are so many people who can't help but set up all of their social media on their phone, and then check their feeds compulsively. Perhaps it is this very energy that forms intimate connections without the personal contact. The heart is bared not on one's sleeve, but at the tips of one's fingers. And so often, perhaps without the intent of doing so, our souls devour such contact, assimilating interaction with one or more digital individuals as an expected normality

“ I ponder when the idea of the “high school sweetheart” morphed into the “chatroom sweetheart” or the “Facebook sweetheart”, or more generally just “the sweetheart I’ve only ever Skype’d with”. ”

of daily life, sometimes to the point of causing stress or discomfort should any given day be an unexpectedly quiet one. This feeling, certainly for the inexperienced, is similar, at least subjectively, to the pang of missing a loved one or a close friend we’re used to interacting with regularly. As much as I imagine children undergoing such emotions in this example, the same could easily be said of an adult, no matter the age or romantic experience(s). It might not be a matter of text messages, it might be the lack of a phone call, or the unanswered Skype conference.

Despite its ubiquity, I still have trouble coming to terms with this sort of technological revelation as do many others, I imagine, and therein lies the axiomatic importance of this development. Like most relationships, so much relies on faith and not only in the other person, but the meaning in the technologically-mediated situation the two people place themselves in. What I mean is that the participating parties believe that the “e-relationship”, regardless of how casual or romantic (or neither) that they are maintaining, is real, and not an elaborate sham.

Such devotion, such hope, in my eyes can only be described as one of the pinnacles of faith, not of organized religion though perhaps something equally important and deep. It’s that sort of clichéd story you hear in a rom-com, or at the altar of a friend’s wedding, regardless of their religious beliefs, although digital trust, no matter how deep, is never quite as profound or tear-jerking. But as is the case with most real relationships — whether with a deity or another person — devotion may diminish as attention wavers to other aspects of life, leading to a serious, or perhaps series of deficiencies amongst the various other facets that constitute everyday life, which may be giving up or taking all the power in

a relationship, making all the demands or none (as the case may be). Perhaps there is some mediation involved, but nevertheless an individual eventually finds themselves without a social life in the old fashioned “going out with people” sense of the phrase. A purely digital relationship can become a fetishization of the idea of a person thrown atop a pedestal which one then hangs off of, like a monkey staring at the world’s largest banana. While this may lead to contentment for some people, so much time-consuming attention really ought to be left to the world of fantasy; stories that can be picked up or put down at a moment’s notice, instead of becoming a harmful force in one’s life, enforced by loneliness or shyness or an inability to socialize in the sort of large gatherings where one meets people.

Yet this recent phenomenon is totally acceptable, until there’s an intervention. It’s important to bear in mind that I don’t just refer to the vanilla “oh we’re totally not dirty people” (even if that may be true) sort of intimate relationships. I mean straight from the hardly touching one another to the “we probably need to sign a waiver for this stuff” sort of interplay. And I warn you, dear reader, this exists. I think some part of us accepts that a lot of people have some pretty strange kinks in their sex lives. But some take it to the extreme: there are people out there that want to be violated, albeit in a controlled environment. To elaborate, rape fantasies are a desire some people have, and be it through textual roleplay or through deliberate planning, some seek to physically facilitate it. At first, this might sound like an awful joke, but I am utterly serious. I shudder internally every time I hear of a rape fantasy, no matter how facilitating the internet is for such sorts of fantasies; maybe that’s what bothers me most about them... or perhaps not. Online or in the flesh, with a trusted partner or a total stranger, the oxymoronic nature of “consenting” to be raped is not lost on me. For all that social networking provides the illusion of connecting people, personal security is still an issue when you’re transitioning into an intimate (in one capacity or another) relationship with a Skype sweetheart. But continuing in line with my earlier comments about faith, I think it’s safe to say that such trust, be it contractual or otherwise, is its own pinnacle, though I believe these cases should be questioned severely.

Regardless of the scenarios people find themselves in though, there is an undeniable emotional



Private Property is Theft by Brett Stout

“ The plastic screens simply appear to make such exposition an easier task for many people, as though a weight has been lifted from their conscience, freeing them of worries that may otherwise cause them to crawl inside their internal shells. ”

bond growing between increasing numbers of people across our ever expanding digital networks. It's not all about love, or even about friendship. Largely it is an individual's desire to be accepted for who they are, and who they can be. The plastic screens simply appear to make such exposition an easier task for many people, as though a weight has been lifted from their conscience, freeing them of worries that may otherwise cause them to crawl inside their internal shells.

As much as many of us might want to think that distancing our social interactions through technology is a step backwards as far as social and personal development goes, I would have to argue that it cannot be a step backwards so much as to the side, at the very least. It's not total freedom, and can do just as much harm as it can good, but the benefits are, for most, completely undeniable. If technology allows people to be more honest about themselves, I would say that's the most emotionally liberating thing a person, especially perhaps, a younger person who feels heavier chains, can experience in this age. Bear this with the proverbial grain of salt. I've never been one to prescribe a single solution and this is certainly one of those cases. I would even go so far to say that, however useful it may be for some individuals, I hope that it never becomes the only way; I fear if it did we would lose touch with part of our humanity.





CONTRIBUTORS TO THE SPECIAL SECTION ON LEBANESE LITERATURE

Guest Editor

M. Lynx Qualey writes about Arabic literature for a variety of publications, including *The Chicago Tribune* and *Women's Review of Books*, and she edits the daily blog *Arabic Literature* (in English) at <http://arablit.org>.

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Authors

Najwa Barakat was born in Beirut. She has written five novels in Arabic and one in French. An English translation of her novel, *'Salaam!'*, will be published in the autumn of 2014. In addition to her work as a novelist and a journalist in written press, radio, and TV, Barakat organizes workshops to train young Arab writers.

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Born in the village of Noumairieh in southern Lebanon in 1950, **Hassan Daoud** moved as a child to Beirut while retaining links with his village. Educated in Beirut, he studied Arabic literature at university. His journalist career has spanned thirty years, including through Lebanon's civil war. He has written for *al-Safir* and *al-Hayat*, and most recently has been editor of *Nawafidh*, the cultural supplement of the Beirut daily *al-Mustaqbal*. He has authored three volumes of short stories and ten novels, and has appeared in English, French and German translation. He is widely respected throughout the Arab world, and his work *'180 Sunsets'* was longlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize.

Jabbour Douaihy was born in 1949, in the northern Lebanese town of Zgharta. He obtained a PhD in French literature in France, and taught literature at the Lebanese University of Tripoli. Douaihy's *'June Rain'* was among the six finalists for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, or Arab Man Booker Prize, held at Abu Dhabi in March 2008. Douaihy is also the author of *'Rose Fountain Motel'*, *'Chased Away'*, and *'American Neighbourhood'*.

Iman Humaydan Younes is a Lebanese novelist, short-story writer, and freelance journalist. She has published two novels, *'B as in Beirut'* (Interlink Books, 2008) and *'Wild Mulberries'*, both of which received wide international acclaim and were also published in French and German.

She has also written the nonfiction work *'Neither Here Nor There: Narratives of the Families of the Disappeared in Lebanon'* and has conducted and published studies on environmental and development issues in post-war Lebanon.

Elias Khoury, born in Beirut, is the author of novels, literary criticism, and three plays. He was awarded the Palestine Prize for *'Gate of the Sun'*, which was named Best Book of the Year by *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and a Notable Book by *The New York Times*. Khoury's *'As Though She Were Sleeping'*, *'Yalo'*, *'White Masks'*, *'Little Mountain'*, *'The Journey of Little Gandhi'*, and *'City Gates'* are also available in English. Khoury is a Global Distinguished Professor of Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies at New York University.

Hyam Yared is a poet and novelist, born in Beirut in 1975. Her second novel, *'Sous la tonelle'*, was shortlisted for the Prix du roman arabe, and she was selected by the Hay Festival as one of the "Beirut 39," a group of the 39 best Arab authors under 40.

Poets

Etel Adnan is the author of numerous books of poetry and prose, including the ground-breaking novel *'Sitt-Marie Rose'*. She is a recipient of a 2010 PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles National Literary Award. Both her paintings and texts were included in *documenta 13* in Kassel, Germany, in 2012. In the spring 2013, the CCA Wattis in San Francisco mounted the first retrospective of her visual work. She lives between Sausalito, California and Paris.

Abbas Beydoun is a Lebanese poet born in 1945, near the southern town of Tyre, who graduated in Arabic Literature from the Lebanese University, Beirut. He directs the cultural pages of the daily newspaper *Al Safir* since 1997, and pens many articles critical of Arab politics and fundamentalism. His numerous poetry collections include *'B. B. B.'* and *'A Ticket for Two'*. He has also published a novel entitled *'Frankenstein Mirrors'*.

Bassam Hajjar was born in Tyre, southern Lebanon in 1955, and passed away in 2009. He obtained a philosophy degree in Paris, and started working as a journalist in 1979. Hajjar is one of the founding members of the renowned cultural supplement of the Lebanese daily *Al Nahar*. Some of his numerous poetry collections include *'The Works of a Very Quiet Man'*, *'The Story of the Man Who Loved the Canary'*, *'A Few Things'*, and *'In Praise of Treachery'*.

Wadih Saadeh is a Lebanese-Australian poet and journalist. He has published numerous collections in Arabic,

and been translated into English, German, French, Spanish and other languages. His 'Most Likely Due to a Cloud' was once described by Mahmoud Darwish as "one of the most important collections of poetry I have read in recent years."

Translators

Marilyn Booth holds the Iraq Chair in Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. She earned her D.Phil. in modern Arabic literature and modern Middle East History from St. Antony's College, Oxford. She has taught at Brown University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and American University in Cairo. Her third monograph, 'Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: Writing Feminist History through Biography in Fin-de-Siècle Egypt', is forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press. She edited 'Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces' (2010), and a Journal of Women's History issue on 'Women's Autobiography in the Middle East and South Asia' (2013). She has translated many volumes of Arabic fiction and autobiography into English, including Hassan Daoud's 'Ghina' al-batrik' ('The Penguin's Song', City Lights Books, 2014) and writes and speaks on the challenges faced by literary translators of Arabic. Her next monograph will be a study of early Egyptian-Lebanese feminist Zaynab Fawwaz's life and works.

Michelle Hartman is associate professor of Arabic literature and language at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University. Her main area of research is modern Arabic literature, specializing in Lebanese women's writing. She also co-translated, with Maher Barakat, Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib's acclaimed novel 'Just Like a River' (Interlink Books, 2002).

Paula Haydar has translated several novels by leading Lebanese novelists Sahar Khalifah and Elias Khoury. She won the Arkansas Arabic Translation Prize for her translation of Khoury's 'The Kingdom of Strangers'.

Luke Leafgren is a lecturer in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, where he also serves as the Allston Burr Resident Dean of Mather House. His first two translations, 'Salaam!' by Najwa Barakat and 'Dates on My Fingers' by Muhsin Al-Ramli, will both be published in 2014.

Ghada Mourad is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature and a Schaeffer fellow in literary translation at UC Irvine, working on postcolonial literature in the Middle East and North Africa.

Maged Zaher is the author of 'Thank You For the Window Office' (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), 'The Revolution Happened and You Didn't Call Me' (Tinfish Press, 2012), and 'Portrait of the Poet as an Engineer' (Pressed Wafer, 2009). His collaborative work with the Australian poet Pam Brown, 'Farout Library Software', was published by Tinfish Press in 2007. His translations of contemporary Egyptian poetry have appeared in Jacket magazine and Banipal. He has performed his work at Subtext, Bumbershoot, the Kootenay School of Writing, St. Marks Project, Evergreen

State College, and the American University in Cairo, among other places.

ARTIST BIOS

Brett Stout is a 34-year-old artist and writer. He is a high school dropout and former construction worker turned college graduate and Paramedic. He creates controversial and eccentric art while mainly hung-over and breathing toxic paint fumes from a small cramped apartment in Myrtle Beach, SC. His artwork has appeared in a wide range of various media from small webzines like the 'Paradise Review' to the 'Oklahoma State University Medical School Journal'.

Pushcart Prize and Kentucky Poet Laureate nominee, **Sheri L. Wright** is the author of six books of poetry, including the most recent, *The Feast of Erasure*. Wright's visual work has appeared in numerous journals, including 'Blood Orange Review', 'Prick of the Spindle', 'Blood Lotus Journal' and 'Subliminal Interiors'. In 2012, Ms. Wright was a contributor to the Sister Cities Project Lvlds: Creatively Linking Leeds and Louisville. Her photography has been shown across the Ohio Valley region and abroad.

Steven Sherrill, writes, paints, parents, teaches, and makes a little music in and around Penn State Altoona. He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Fiction in 2002. Steven has authored the novels 'The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break', 'Visits From the Drowned Girl', 'The Locktender's House', and a collection of poems called 'Ersatz Anatomy'. More info can be found on his website: www.stevensherrill.com.

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The Female Body has many uses: a door-knocker, a bottle-opener, as something to hold up legs, to squeeze the brass legs together, to bear torches, life victoriously, and raises aloft a ring of marble heads. [...] It does not flow into this country or crawl in, suitful after suit, with its teen legs.

She's a natural resource, and those things wear out so quickly they used to. Shoddy goods.

~ Margaret Atwood, *The Female Body*

ny uses. It's been used as a door-
as a clock with a ticking belly,
ampshades, as a nutcracker, just
ether and out comes your nut. It
us wreaths, grows copper wings
eon stars whole buildings rest on
esn't merely sell, it is sold. Money
that country, flies in, practically
ful, lured by all those hairless pre-

a renewable one luckily, because
quickly. They don't make 'em like
S.

male Body



THE MISSING SLATE

For the discerning metropolitan.