

Othered

Ruffles, crashing waves of rosey-nude chiffon
flattened, pinned, with not four or two, but exactly three pins.
Allah likes the number three, it's odd.
In, in they go
firmly, sometimes scraping my DNA
like my mama's manicured nails, as they rub Indian Gooseberry Oil
into my thick, black locks
a smell of oily, sweaty
afternoons with rain hitting the balcony,
kissing the mud,
and birthing a scent
of glowy Jasmine and ladybugs waiting to bud in the
humid air of Islamabad that carries the Azaan
from the neighborhood minarets.
Calling to rush to a higher power
to decompose the plastic of the world in our dreams.
Will she find out I scissored a hole in my right eyebrow?
I promise, it was in earnest.
How can I
not have
my mother's perfect eyebrows?

Perfection, you see, is my family's song.
Mama's personally designed leopard curtains
to match with the paired creme leather sofas.
Her hair, permed and set even under her hijab.
Papa's endless nights I do not remember
proudly selling *complete* air compressor systems
for an American company,
in a world across the Atlantic,
in a country with my Ammi's stories.

On her lap, in her hand, a set of brown beads.
My Ammi. Small whispers of prayers with each click
of the beads.
The clicks of the beads roar
against the street vendor's call.
"Potatoes for 32 rupees!" without bargain.

Puddles from the monsoon rain in the deepening pothole,
peeping with reflections of the floating sky,
and cycloning street,
and marching schoolchildren with Milo stains.

Click, click, click

Whispers of prayers
turn into a deafening shower of rain
planting seeds
of vines that turn into thornless ladders,
flowering stories and memories with each step.
Put your head through the ladder, and see the memories with me.
Of my sister taking all the kitchen utensils
 hiding them in her toy truck.
Of Mama gritting her teeth so hard on the Ferris Wheel
 that they bled.
Of my Ammi jumping off the roof of her house
 on a dewy night in Ramadan of 1947.

She tells
stories of brown and white men
that came
made decisions
I did not understand.
The only mixing of white and brown *I* knew
was that of vanilla and chocolate in my Cornetto Ice Cream Cone
that my mom didn't even let me eat, because I would get a cold.

When men came,
when my Ammi ran,
leaving behind the Indian soil she knew.
The crescent of Ramadan peering
from behind the clouds.
The neighborhood dog singing
Iqbal's tune
sending the wind to cool the sweat as she
jumped over the roof
 gripping two dates to break her fast with,
skipped across the street
 where her brother played cricket,
hopped over her Quran teacher's bloodied corpse
 plattered on the ground,
made the Final Leap
 over the Line of Destiny.

A Line that the British drew
obligingly.
A child's puzzle pieces,
cut with a butter knife,
glued together,
like the world map, chewed
into a spitball.
Growing into a lopsided beast
breathing, speaking,
in a gibberish language
I grow to understand
better than my own.
Telling me
to bend and present
my tongue in a platter
of Kohi-i-Noor.

Present my platter, I do.
I learn the English alphabet.
My ladder consists of these letters.
Mama tells me this ladder will get me places.
I dream in Lizzie McGuire and Hannah Montana.
I only shop from the stores that sell *imported* jeans.
My Ammi continues counting her beads at 4 am.
One egg, Blue Band margarine and bread.
Blue China Teacups with fading blue
and growing yellow.
She continues
telling her stories.
I ask her to kindly translate.

Lines of people with faces
brown, white, black.
Is this the Day of Judgement?
Light-brown faces with dark-brown arms.
I wonder which foundation they used?
And could I try it?
Everything is so loud in America,
empty-loud like Mars with Texan dunes.
And I am from Venus.
With sandstorms of dreams of aspiring immigrants,
where perfection is not a choice.
It is God's answer.

Why do people care so much that Michael Jackson died?
The immigration officer cries, stamps my Green passport.
I read
Exotic.

The burden of black drapes from the desert
weighing down the miserable Muslim woman
on the news,
in the news,
on Netflix shows.
Do I need more red and blue chiffons?
I want to break the slate,
like Anne Shirley does on Gilbert's head.
Can I time-travel to the 18th century
with horse carriages and tea parties?
This writing on the slate
is in permanent ink
that bleeds through my hands
staining
my favorite, rosey-nude chiffon hijab
and water-permeable nail polish.
Wearing sound cancelling headphones
that filter in
only echoes
in a Fox News accent
of oppressing fathers, beating husbands, and Middle Eastern Draconian laws.
How would *you* like *me* to see my own father?

Quick hijab-check in the car mirror.
Retouching of my new matte Fenty Beauty lipstick.
Walgreens, set-course towards aisle three,
resisting urge to buy a new Maybelline mascara.
Piercing blue eyes suck in
my Iranian eyes,
Afghani cheekbones,
Arabic skin tone,
and Pakistani accent.
A blue I imagine that every Jane Austen character would have.

Does the moon stare at us during the day and we cannot tell?
My roommate is scared of the full moon.
I am not scared.

I am an iceberg from the Karakoram range,
left the Baltoro glacier in 2012,
now submerged in a man-made lake
across The La Villita apartments,
in Texas.
Still, I am *mostly* not scared.
As I glow the moon from above.
Until, ruffled eyebrows resting on blue
take on all shapes,
and the creased lines in between
deepen like the Grand Canyon.

Wrinkly hands put cough syrup back on the shelf.
Mama gave me lots of cough syrup when I was young,
I liked the sugary taste.
The blue-eyed arms snake into each other.
The puzzle-beast emerges.
Painted lips part.
Gulp, breathe, cortisol release.

The inevitable rain is about to burst, one-way clouds,
like all clouds
that only drench.
Slow cloud, this one is, indeed.
Like it's tired of showering
its blessings
upon us.
You need not speak slowly, I remind you.
Don't worry!
I constructed *my* ladder
with the *English* alphabet.
And no, I'm not being forced,
I appreciate your concern!
Can you guide me to where the Claritin is?
The one which will not make me drowsy?
I hate reading labels, and
I want to yell
but let's not forget, I'm a
hijab-clad woman in a Walgreens afterall.

I am gripping the shawl around me.
Imagine hugs from Ammi who doesn't

remember. Should she?
I grip tighter. The flames of the heater in front of me.
Burn into my eyes the image of prayer beads.
Beads that broke when we crossed the Atlantic.
Beads that ran and hid under my Aunt's bed.
Beads that I picked, counted, to be
exactly ninety-nine. One missing.
Should I remember?
I keep gripping.

Nights of Jasmine budding in the silence,
the aroma piercing the moon.
Moon which faded. Jasmine which we plucked.
Soaked in water, dried today,
forgotten yesterday.
Grip tightening, bristles brushing.
Drone strikes killing a Mohammed
somewhere in the hills I would see
from my study room window.
Don't worry, Obama said.
It was only collateral damage.

Sometimes I wish I knew the nuclear-launch codes.
I just think, it would be
a cool little secret.
Don't fear.
The only *jihad* I'm currently facing is
finding my shade
of light-brown
in L'Oreal.
Don't you want to be in on it?
You're telling me L'Oreal is on the BDS list?

Here, look.
A picture of me and my Papa, I perch on his shoulders.
A parrot soaring in the emerald-green hills,
conifers with clicking pine cones whistling.

A parrot I set free when I was five.
Why should anyone be in a cage?
I wonder if it's reached Antarctica?

It's 2012, and I think
the movie got it wrong.
My feet glued to the floor.
I refuse
to enter America
without my father,
who has been detained for seven hours.
I try to speak but only
choke on my ABCs,
vomiting an alphabet soup
with lipstick smears.
Mama tells me to loosen my hijab
and reapply
my lips.
The sun rises outside the airport window.
My parrot smiles from the outside.