

# Mejdulene B. Shomali

## Elegy for Zahra

### I.

her hands held mine the last time i saw her; her skin translucent above the veins and all but worn at the knuckles.

her hands, which are my mother's, taught us how to make lemonada from the abundance of lemons and not life's lack, to take something which the earth granted and transform it to such sweetness;

her hands, which are my sister's, nipped and tucked the fabric around our waists and shoulders, darting our plainness into beauty, sealing us at the seams with quick stitches;

these are the gifts of grandmothers.

### II.

the four of us sisters descend upon my grandmother's house carrying our kids and my parents along to find her sitting where she always sits, on the right corner of the couch facing the salon, where two of my mother's six sisters await us with fresh-squeezed carrot juice and shai. my grandmother's house remains the same but for her side porch which holds my grandfather's favorite bed and daily resting place, until he went to rest beyond where any of us could see him. gone, too, is the table with scraps of cloth, needles, and a sewing machine where my sitti, a seamstress, would work for hours before her eyes betrayed her. she is hard pressed to recognize us when we come in to greet her, so as we stream in, i stand next to her ear and tell her loudly who is greeting her, like i have seen my own mother do, until she hears me in the commotion outside and inside her mind. here is my sister, here is my niece, here is my mother. two major senses gone, she spends most of our trip just sitting with her hands in her lap, calling out to my eldest aunt to bring us more refreshments. once i asked my mother what sitti might be thinking in her quiet, blurry world and she says she's turning over all her little sensory losses, wondering if we are being properly attended to, hoping for more of us to come and see her so she can be assured of our safety. we sit a long time, taking turns next to her, holding her hands and running our fingers over her soft, wrinkled skin.

### III.

sitti asked about each of her children and grandchildren by name, taking the attendance of our accomplishments, seeking solace in words of our wellness, which after years was all she could really hear.

sitti called me buttah, told me i was beautiful when i was not. she carried groceries up the stairs, proving her strength beyond my mother's, even when she could no longer see the steps she climbed.

sitti made us knafa and kusa, hareesa and hilbah, tatreez and taffeta. her hands knew more about living than her body knew of dying, pushing past what every doctor predicted, stubborn in this as in all things.

sitti slipped into a coma sometime over night, her body catching up with her ears and eyes all things quiet quiet while her family bustled around her preparing for what we always knew would come.

sitti slipped into death last night, our world catching up with her body all things quiet quiet while the living bustle around us, unprepared for what we always knew would come.

## Recipe for Mansaf

You start with your Grandmother  
she makes laban in dry round briquettes  
that crumble easily and smell tangy like yogurt  
she sends them home to Amreeka with you  
in your suitcase amidst your zatar and your zait  
and your qahwa and so the whole thing  
smells like longing when you open it up  
back in your single bedroom apartment  
on your single bed, trying to remember  
the touch of her hands on your face like love

You get lamb from the grocery store  
it's packaged like Amreeka in plastic  
each piece perfect and processed in some plant  
the best you can do without your Baba  
as butcher and your Seedo's livestock  
still it smells like Mama's kitchen  
Between the ibhar lahmah straight from the iblad  
and the onions and the garlic you might be okay

You wait for the lamb to get hallit  
fall off the bone tender and blend  
the briquettes that have been soaking in water  
and are mostly dissolved with more garlic  
until it is as smooth as you can get it  
You get grumpy because it's not as smooth  
as your mother's or grandmother's  
but you don't know their magics  
resist the urge to strain out the little bumps of flavor resist  
the urge to drink it straight from the blender

When the lahmah mostly melts  
add the laban and watch  
it swirls and bubbles along the broth  
takes a bit to come together  
but once it gets to boiling there's no going back  
your store-bought lamb and Zahra's laban  
are stuck together like second generation  
immigrant children

Leave it on enough to cook the rice  
which is always too long  
even on the stovetop or if you are feeling sacrilegious  
want Sitti to sigh with disappointment and tell you  
"Ma fish feeha ishi ya sitti, sawwiha 'al gaz ahsan"  
you could try a rice cooker

For the full show get some 'shrak  
to layer the bottom of the plate  
or maybe you are too hungry for home  
so you skip that part along with the toasted  
pine nuts and almond halves sprinkled on top  
this operation was never as authentic as you dreamed  
but the taste, the taste is so right when you ladle  
the laban over rice and piece up the lamb  
for some in every bite and before long  
you are crying into your mansaf  
because Sitti passed out of this world  
just months ago  
and who will send home with you  
when you can't go home anymore?

I.  
There's scandal in the 'hosh  
which is what we call this family  
living on top of family that calls  
across the alley for breakfast, lunch, and coffee breaks  
Because my cousins are sometimes awful  
and my uncle is sometimes worse  
and he keeps hitting me up for cigarettes  
which I bought at the duty free  
of course nothing is free and everything is duty  
since I keep buying his tolerance with packs of camels  
the easiest of trades, which I think  
is what Kant meant when he proposed that the law of universals  
and the law of ends were never in conflict  
but don't quote me, I think I got  
the names wrong, amidst many other things

II.  
At the pool there was a group of boys  
16 years old, jumping around  
in elaborate shows of bravado  
unaware of their audience, just enamored  
with besting one another  
My classmates and I, we were too conscious  
of each other's lithe bodies  
to be so casually undressed  
As kids we crossed into the '48 for mar elias  
a bunch of us 14 and wanting—  
one of the boys tried to swim under me  
push his head between my legs  
hoist me on his shoulders  
I sealed my legs so tight he came up for air  
said to his buddies, "It's like a safe  
down there and I couldn't get in"

III.  
We ate falafel sandwiches from Ifteem  
bright green interior, crisped brown exterior  
inside a pita with hummus and shuttah and salata  
and it takes up my whole mouth with the taste  
pushing down through me like a root

into the cool ballad of the beranda beranda  
belcone belcone like my Baba used to sing  
and Mariam 'al istoooh'  
il sha'er 'am ilooh'  
she is hanging the clothes from the laundry  
all my private things just there for the whole city  
to see and il qalib majrooh' bedou . . . so much

IV.  
My mom puts out 'asha 'Arabi  
which is Arab supper  
which is eggs pan-fried in the butter baladi  
my Sitti made and apricot jam  
we made with the fruit of my Seedo's tree  
and pita bread from the bakery across the street  
there is also labneh which tangs on your tongue  
This one's made from goat milk and drizzled with olive oil  
but that could be from anywhere  
because now that my Tayta is dead  
I don't know who presses the olives from my family's land  
or even if we still own it  
after bad uncle sold it out from under his brothers  
we drink shai il ghazaleen  
with mint from Baba's garden

V.  
I count all the things that died since I was a girl  
the other dahlia  
the askadinia  
the lemon tree  
the yasmeen  
three of my grandparents  
and my uncle Fouad whose name means heart  
but it's hard to keep this heart beating when you are so sad  
you're not even sure what  
or who else you could stand to lose,  
min ghair shar,  
I hope to god inshallah that the answer is khalas:  
you don't have to let go of anything more  
but I think you all know me  
and we all know better *M*