

Nourishing The Roots



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To Sarah Hegazy,

To our shared history, our familiar pain, and our single dream.

To a dream that still tenderly suffuses our hearts with love, in a world that has yet to understand the way we love.

We are switching places: from readers to writers, to document our history, your history. We are reminded that there are women just like us in the world. That we are here; we have lived, loved, reflected, and dreamed.

We mourn your parting, and vow to do you justice in a world that was unjust to you. Justice for you is justice for ourselves, our lovers, our friends, and our companions. We refuse to erase your history, your life spent in a country you loved, a country that ended up rejecting you and banishing you. You were here, like us, with us, in the streets of Alexandria and Cairo, listening to Umm Kulthoum in your favorite café, loving, dreaming, yearning, suffering, feeling angry, resisting. You were here.

We miss you, and we follow the traces you left behind.

An Introduction by Ikhtiyar

We started working on this issue a mere few months ago, but from where we stand right now, it feels like that took place during another lifetime. A world completely far removed from the one we inhabit right now. A world that was turned upside down, rattling us about violently, before we got used to our new conditions. The fact that the publication is being released in 2020 already implies what we, as editors, writers, and translators, went through while working on this joint (romantic) project. The more pressing and difficult questions were imposed on us this year, about politics, justice, revolution, public health, production, class privilege, and gender-based violence, the more we remained committed to the completion of this project of ours.

This issue includes work from feminist writers and poets from Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, and Sudan. On the public and personal level, we have faced, as you did, major struggles and pain, all taking place in an intense moment of time. We will probably spend several years attempting to process what happened during this period and the impact it has had on us. A global pandemic; isolation; seclusion; changes to everyday routines, work, and family relationships; revolutions; economic crises; fires; and devastating corruption-induced explosions, all of which happened directly to us or near us to different degrees. We experienced loss and pain with the death of relatives and acquaintances we lost to a cursed disease that appeared seemingly out of thin air, and with the death of those we lost to suicide, our companions who were at their most vulnerable in the face of the current climate of depression.

One of our writers lost her father and then reached out to us again after a few days. Another received our feedback as she sat by her sick mother's bedside at the hospital, staying there until she recovered. Another was detained while on the sidelines of a frustrating revolution. She sent us her apologies, withdrawing her participation in this issue. She later rejoined us the moment she'd had a moment to breathe. Those of us who were grieving would disappear for days or weeks, then would resume communication, discussion, writing, and opening up. We, the editors of this issue and the larger Ikhtiyar team are incalculably grateful to each writer, translator, and illustrator who took part in this, despite the weight of the current circumstances, and gave a part of their souls and time to produce this equally serious and entertaining production of knowledge. Hopefully it will give our readers something valuable to carry with them, something to lighten their load in the midst of these end-of-world times. We are extremely proud of all of you.

This issue sparks a discussion on identity and literature. We search for the possibility of the existence of a feminist, emancipatory, queer literature capable of shattering the patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony over our Arabic literature. We wonder what this literature looks like and how to determine its criteria and draw representation politics into it. For this reason, we scrutinize literary works in which we can make out glimpses of familiar faces and bodies, and reflections of lives, desires and narratives that are often marginalized, erased, and denied to us. We are looking for roots, for history. Or we create them with fresh new writings.

Literature has always been a mine of lost, hidden, and runaway identities. In literature, we see people who are similar to us, even if just in minor details that we thought were

uniquely ours to carry and hide. We eavesdrop on the lives of the protagonists of stories and poems, hoping to find a trace of something that represents us, to find in their words something to describe our complex feelings that we are unable to reveal no matter how many times we've tried. Hoping against hope, even if for a mere few minutes or hours, that we are not alone. We search between the lines for us. We dig up and remove the layers upon layers of ambiguity imposed by censorship on writers, to find the underlying messages that touch us, and we hope our interpretation of the text did not stray too far from what the writer intended, that we managed to cross the bridge of human communication and understand the embedded texts and hidden underlying messages. Even if we did stray too far, what of it? It's our interpretation and our reading experience.

So, we are discussing them here. The act of writing and the act of reading, and what they represent for the identity, the identity of whoever writes and the identity of the one who reads. Many writers, poets, and theorists—usually feminists—have left us with works that they wrote about themselves and their feelings towards other women, feelings that were not necessarily permissible in patriarchal societies that feared women and their energies. They eloquently wrote about the world, their worlds, about hidden experiences, and about those loud inner voices. They worked many secrets into their texts: secrets of fragility, strength, and strategies of stubbornness and resistance. Secrets that reveal their identity, but hide them from the eyes of censorship boards. These secrets are received only by those who understand and experience them.

They played with metaphors in different ways, leaving telltale signs for those who have been repeatedly told that they are crazy, hysterical, sick, deviant! We listen to the lines attentively, but the meaning is hidden and the writer's intention is encrypted. We examine literature and history, and hate that we sometimes come up with nothing but a yawning void. They write, giving their suppressed identities the chance to breathe, and we read, giving our identities breath. We look for ourselves in those stories, memoirs, and letters. We are the ordinary, the real, the non-heroines, those who were not created out of the fantasies of men: an image reduced to unconditional sacrifice and giving. We are not the love interests of their songs. We are not angels nor demons. And our identities most certainly cannot be reduced to the roles of the mothers, wives, and daughters of men.

At the beginning of this issue, we present analytical readings, either a review of a famous literary work or an engagement with the life and works of a particular writer. In some of these writings, female writers weave essays that are a combination of criticism, poetry, and personal fiction, as if creating conversations they often had with their favorite female writers, delivering messages that are extremely delicate, sensitive, and personal in nature, and never not political.

This is followed by queer Arabic literary and poetic texts, which we publish in belief of the importance of breaking the numerous barriers of publishing and participation, in the modest hope of providing spaces for literary publishing that are more open to all. We conclude the publication with an inspiring translated text, which collects responses from feminist and lesbian writers to the question «Who do you write for?» Let us enjoy delving into their brains and getting a glimpse of their imagined audience. Let us learn about the richness of the writing experience, especially feminist writing, from female writers who preceded us by four decades in far-off countries in the North.

In conclusion, we would like to sincerely salute and celebrate those texts that have not yet been born, that were buried before they could see the light of day, or were born only to be hidden away, or lost their connection with their writer prematurely. Texts that were supposed to be part of this publication, ideas we received and believed in, but did not make their way to final draft form—yet. We hope to someday see them published and read. To witness their impact.

Celebrating unfinished and unpublished texts may be unconventional. Some may believe that they should not be celebrated in an introduction, that that might take away space away from introducing already completed texts. But we believe otherwise. We realize that we suffer from systematic structural discrimination and violence, which deplete us and rob us of our energies and our time. This systematic discrimination threatens us all the time with harsh punishments. Just the thought is enough to make one want to kill their imagination themselves, before it takes its rest and reveals itself and reveals us. How many women have wanted to write but couldn't? How many feminists, lesbians, bisexual women, transwomen, and transmen have been possessed by their own demons or the demons of others and were prevented from expressing what they saw?

When we explore the possibility of producing queer literature and creating spaces to publish and distribute it, do we think about how that intersects with class, race, and gender? Do we think, when we discuss the possibility of producing queer literature and creating spaces for its dissemination and distribution, of the intersections of class, race, and gender? Do we ask ourselves with all honesty and seriousness why we don't read more works by poor writers? Dark-skinned writers? Writers that don't abide by heteronormativity? Is it because they don't exist, or we believe there's a lack of talent, or that they're lazy? Or for reasons more structural, rooted, and complex than that? We believe that a discussion like this is at the heart of the topic at hand.

To write is to have a voice, an existence, a presence, a present, and a documented history. For all of this to be erased, is for us to be wiped out and future generations deprived of any connection to a group of humans who shared their worries and aspirations. It means they will suffer as each of us has suffered for years without hope or desire in a fake world, in which we have to pretend to be something other than our true selves. We write to tell our truth, to water our roots that have been clipped and continue to be systematically clipped in front of our very eyes. They do this, so that no seed will burst forth. They ban us, and if we resist, they erase the traces that we left behind. We write and publish in order to revive these traces, and because we refuse to stay and not plant our roots.

The editorial team



Searching for Queer Desire: A Letter to Alifa Rifaat

Written by : Hend & Nadine

**Hend and Nadine are two Alexandrian queer women
who translate, edit, and write for a living.**

“There are many mysteries in life, unseen powers in the universe, worlds other than our own, hidden links and radiations that draw creatures together and whose effect is interacting. They may merge or be incompatible, and perhaps the day will come when science will find a method for connecting up these worlds in the same way as it has made it possible to voyage to other planets. Who knows?”¹

Dear Alifa/Fatimah,²

I have been searching for you, for your story, piecing different narratives together. Sometimes I search with a sense of urgency, a scrambling even, as if my life depended on it. Other times, I search meticulously; picking apart the pages, the words, the stories. Almost as if I was searching for myself, looking for a semblance of meaning in an “unknown world.”

When I admitted to myself that I am in love with my bestfriend and she admitted it to me too, I found myself looking for our story everywhere: in other people’s stories, in novels, in movies. It was as if I was searching for a home, a haven, a safe place, a common shared history with women like us: women who love women.

I would search intently, read between the lines, as if I was rewriting other people’s stories in my head, I would grab at meanings, create something out of nothing.

A few years ago, my sister came home with a collection of used books that she bought. I was looking for something light to read. I found a thin book, a collection of short stories in English with the title “Distant View of the Minaret” written by you. To be honest, the cover and the blurb on the back of the book had an Orientalist tone that made my stomach turn. The translator’s foreword used words and phrases such as, “lifting the veil,” “traditional Muslim society,” and “special authenticity,” like an anthropologist of old, squinting through a magnifying glass held over non-white societies. That being said, I had a bit of free time on my hands, so I figured, “why not?”

And then in one of your stories, in what I thought was the most unlikely of places, I found a trace of a familiar desire: intense, passionate, in the shadows. The characters had Arabic names. The story unfolded in a house situated on the banks of the Mansoura Canal. The story happened in this country. Here. Home. Two women. Lusting, loving, exhaling pleasure. I saw bits of myself in both of them: the human, respectable wife of a government official, seen by society as one thing, feeling turmoil on the inside. And the other woman:

1 Rifaat ,Alifa” .My World of the Unknown “,Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories ,p.61.

2 Alifa Rifaat was a pen name used by Egyptian writer Fatimah Rifaat.(1930-1996)

snake, djinn, other. Sneaking in and out through a discreet hole in the wall. Disappearing right before she can be glimpsed by others. Imagined but tangible, breathable, real.

I am captivated by your main character's world. Months fly by, but we are barely filled in on the background events. I am engrossed instead, as is your main character, in the love affair with the snake, who appears to her one sunny morning in the garden. I learn that she has children, but I'm not introduced to them. Her husband is only glimpsed in the background, the reason behind her relocation from Cairo to Mansoura. Sometimes he is a source of guilt. When she yearns to see the snake, guilt propels her to tell her husband about its existence, prompting him to board up the hole in the wall from whence the snake first emerged. You never give her or the snake proper names. They are only referred to as "beloved" by one another. Your protagonist slips in and out of these worlds: she spends half of the day furnishing her house and the other half consumed by her relationship with her beloved djinni snake.

I, too, like the snake, slipped in from one world to another. Between a world of invisibility and another of visibility. My body is nonexistent in one world, only there in physical form, performing societal duties and expectations. While in the other, I'm unravelling and becoming, exploring the contours of desire. You depict a sharp divide between the two worlds, whereas mine are always colliding, as I become more and more unable to perform invisibility. The remaining gap between the two worlds has become saturated with anger and bitterness. I think about the other day, sitting in the bathroom, crying, heart broken after having a heavy conversation on the phone with my girlfriend, my mama outside, humming, oblivious to my pain. I am struggling to be present, to pretend I am okay. I am tired, were you?

Were you torn between two worlds when you decided to adopt the pen name "Alifa", in an attempt as I read, to spare your family the shame of being recognized as a woman who wrote about sexuality "unapologetically"? How did your two worlds meet and how did they diverge?

Some things seemed to come easy to you. Religion and desire coexisted in the same world. You depicted a love interwoven with holy verses from the Quran. The djinn snake, appearing in "beauty's most perfect form," the form of a woman, blessed Allah and in the same breath extolled the virtues of her lover. I was always told that faith and desire, especially queer desire, could not intermingle. They were destined to be on opposite sides of the boxing ring, locked in an endless, pugnacious struggle. To see your depiction of a "halal love,"

one blessed by the almighty Himself, a love that did not shake the throne of Al-Rahman, that shook me to the core. To see sex as nourishment rather than sin, as holy, rather than evil, it was a revelation.

But part of me is greedy. Part of me wishes the djinn had taken on the form of a human woman with soft skin, warm lips, hungry eyes. Part of me wishes that she didn't come from the "world of the unknown." That she came instead from this tangible, messy reality. A woman you could touch, smell, taste. But I understand that maybe you were limited. Maybe this was the only way you could depict two women in love.

Maybe the metaphor extends beyond the body of the snake as the unknown. Maybe you were talking about your body. Growing up, my body felt unknown to me. Alien even. When I touched myself, it was always with a layer of clothing separating fingers from skin. And we both come from a society that doesn't exactly encourage self-exploration. Did you feel the same way? Did you shrink the vast terrain of your body so that it wasn't readily visible? Did you simultaneously marvel and recoil at the wetness between your legs, the arch of your hips, the roundness of your breasts? Maybe one of the women needed to be a snake, so she could guide the fingers of her mistress to every corner of her body, to slither down every bump on her skin, to teach her how to read and love herself. Maybe the snake is the woman, and the woman is the snake. Who knows? I wish you could tell me. I was never one for ambiguity. I'd make you a cup of shai bil laban, bring a packet of biscuits, and you could explain every intention and choice you made.

I yearned to read you in Arabic, imagined what it would have been like if I grew up having read your story and others like it, if you hadn't been erased, censored. I looked for the original text, in bookstores, online, but everytime I asked, people would ask in confusion, "Who is Alifa Rifaat? Is she a new writer?" I discovered that you were well-known only in other countries. Your books often read in English, commissioned by publishing houses that favoured Orientalist tones. I felt like I lost something all over again. I learned of you, but couldn't find you. I found scattered pieces of you here and there. An article that described your works as "controversial", another about your life (or what's known of it), who you married, when you were born, where you lived. What I wanted was a diary of your thoughts, ideas, and hopes, in your words, not mere lists of dates and names.

Who were you though? I spend my time making up stories, did you have a lover masked as a "best friend", a story that was similar to mine. Did you lust, love, desire a wom-

an? Did you wish for a different story, something beyond your immediate reality? Was that why, the only way you could imagine loving a woman, she had to be from a parallel reality, a world that is beyond your immediate everyday.

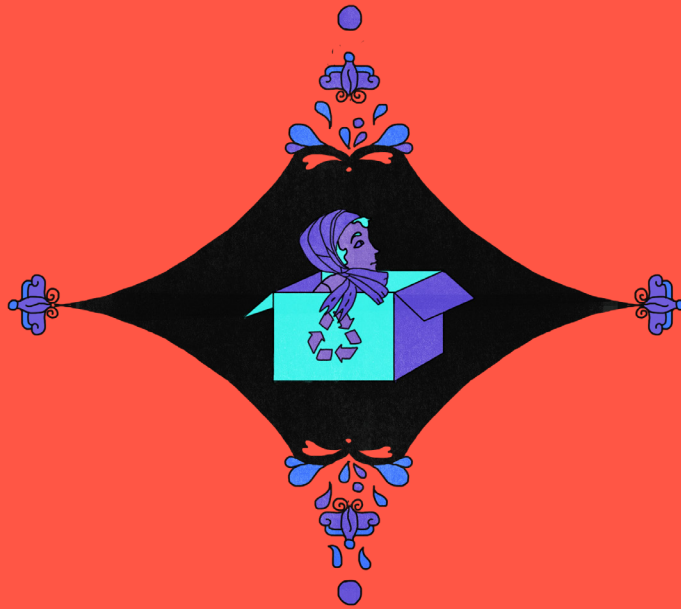
I continue to play this game of guessing and writing, and rewriting your story. I do the same with myself, erase and rewrite, torn between visibility and invisibility. A tug of war between worlds that are constructed by others, and the ones I create for myself.

When I was young, I imagined that there was a box inside of me that I needed to fill. In trying to figure out who I was, I hunted for things here and there, little things I related to. I was trying to create an archive that would help me understand the world. I tried to fill it with stories that I can touch and see and smell. Stories that I can breathe in with familiarity. I tried to fill it with neat stories, those that fit together, that were consistent, but in the end, it was filled with contradictions and messiness.

I am left with this text though, a translation of a story you wrote in the same language that I grew up in, a reminder of what was translated and erased.

I wonder where you are now. I hope it's a world without pseudonyms, fear, or guilt. A world that is more familiar than unknown.

**Much love and peace to you,
A reader**



Torrid Love or Classist Violence?

Complicity with Narratives of Discrimination
in *The Smell of Cinnamon*

Written by : Roula Seghaier

Translated by : Nermeen Hegazi

Roula works on issues related to labor, immigration, and gender. She dreams of one day dubbing children's programs. She writes sometimes, and lives in a state of existential crisis always.

Writing could be a reductionist activity, as it revolves around the modelling of reality, desires, and individual and societal needs through a linguistic medium. Writing could also be an exercise of imagination and creation, through which we document lives and create legendary heroes out of ordinary people. Through writing, we could also seek revenge against enemies: shrink them and render them into nothing. We could strip them of their humanity or give them the gift of flying. Writing has the power to do all that. It could allow us to find traces of ourselves, pressed between the pages of history, or imagine ourselves in the future. It could also erase us completely, as if we have never existed: queer, rural, migrant women, sex workers, transwomen, domestic workers, women of color, brown, and black women. Except for a few texts, which never gained international fame, we have been ignored and erased. Until the day came, when politics of representation forced our inclusion; they sprinkled us into the stories, like spices on a dish, or like secondary characters that help fulfill the fate of the main protagonist in its incongruity with ours. For the ends justify the means, and there is no harm in including our incidental roles should they serve the purpose of developing the main character. Thus, non- normative characters made their way into the public sphere mostly narrated in the languages of the Global North.

But we do not settle for these crumbs. As queer, trans, impoverished, racialized, migrant, refugee women and women from the Global South, we look for our stories between library shelves and the lines of prose and poetry produced in our countries. We search for them to find ourselves, to know that we have a heritage and history archived in Arabic, tracing the stories of our regions replete with intimacy. We look for them in ink on paper, as the stories of our ancestors, or our oral history, is often not as valorized within the status quo as the written word is. Instead, oral history is dismissed as gossip, or “hens’ talk”. We search for legitimacy, for “evidence” or “proof” —something women have always been asked to present, as the burden of proof always falls on the shoulders of those who have the least amount of power, as if the absence of evidence is not enough evidence of historical disempowerment and silencing. While searching for ourselves in the faces of protagonists written by pens held like magnifying glasses on our lives, we often find a stealthy and voyeuristic

desire to “uncover the hidden” or to express “daring and boldness” of writers who self-Orientalize as a “saviors” when checking all of the identity boxes for the sake of “diversity” in writing. Oftentimes, these identity boxes hold no importance to us. We then look for runaway images of characters that flee and defy the hegemonic norms, for they might, albeit barely, alleviate some of the representational injustice inflicted upon us. And we hope to find the said characters written by women.

For the purpose of writing for this issue, I searched for women who loved women, whether in public pronouncement or in secret, and who left written traces of their relationships. I found *The Smell of Cinnamon* by Samar Yazbek³ on every list of queer novels from the region, as if it was a classic. It was celebrated after publication for allowing readers into “closed worlds forbidden from publicity,” at least according to the blurb on its cover and the literary reviews that embraced its queerness and presumed non-conforming to norms. I picked up the book and read the words of the blurb more carefully: the novel was about “the relationship between a *lady* from Damascus and her *maid*” where “the relationship transforms into a game deftly played by the maid, as it becomes her only way to recover her lost humanity.” I reread the sentence and it reeked of a smell: not that of cinnamon, but of nauseating rot. I was not hastily “judging a book by its cover.” Rather, the marketing blurb relied on the power narrative: a bourgeoisie “lady” has sex with her «maid” and feels either proud or victimized that the latter has become imbued with presumed humanity.

Sometimes writing that describes sex between women is crude and explicit, or “bold,” as some progressives like to call it, when, in reality, it is merely a shallow contribution to the objectification of women’s desires for male readers, who imagine our bodies and feelings as vessels for satisfying their voyeurism. And if these texts do not satisfy the gaze of the reader, then they would appal those deeming queer relationships as illegitimate, all while validating that these connections end in destruction, death, or insanity. It is as if the writer is declaring that no space exists for queer women in novels’ pages, nor is there one for them in real life

³ Samar Yazbek is a Syrian writer and journalist .She was born in Jableh ,Syria ,in ,1970 and studied Arabic literature at Latakia university .She has written in a wide variety of genres - novels ,short stories ,film scripts ,television dramas ,film and TV criticism ,literary narratives.

and in our societies. Exploitative queer relationships exist, and so does rape among women. Crude sex that entertains voyeurs more than it satisfies the women engaging in it exist, and so do platonic ass-rubs. Sex among women can be corny, nauseating, desired but unspoken or refrained from. Everything exists in queer relationships, for this review is not an attempt to revindicate them. What is unfair, however, is that it is only this sex that exists in the minds of writers, and nothing else.

The Smell of Cinnamon is no different. Its fame stems from its main premise: a love story between a *lady* and her *maid*. The novel was acclaimed for its bravery of explicit portrayal of the events happening in the closeted lesbian world of Damascus. Reviews admire that the writer depicts this world “without shame.”. However, the shame, which lack the reviews celebrate, is imputed to the visibilizing of “lesbian love” and the *maid’s exploitation* of her employer. It is not the shame of trivializing sexual and economic violence by cloaking it in marketable lesbianism, a shame we need to feel. It is not the shame that we ought to feel towards proposing ideas such as “reverse exploitation,” similar to “reverse racism,” misandry as opposed to misogyny, or other types of nonsense. ***“Who was Alia? Was she really her maid? Who was she? She knew who the lady of the house was, and she doesn’t remember when they exchanged roles.”*** The book pushes us to examine the wrong questions, because wrong questions do exist in spite of the efforts of political correctness.

Samar Yazbik is undoubtedly a master of her craft. She is adept at depicting the most intricate voyeuristic moments in both low-income and bourgeois environments. Her knowledge of the contextual details of the history of the neighborhoods in Damascus is enormous. She is, undoubtedly, a linguistic titan. Her characters are also complex and multi-layered, and her writing is engaging. The only doubt there is in her ability to give each character their due when it comes to depicting relationships between women. The criticism here centers her depiction of an exploitative relationship between a woman-employer and her domestic worker as queer love.

This delusional love takes place between Hanan el-Hashimi, a wealthy middle-aged woman from Damascus, and Alia, whose last name we never learn for she is a nobody

whom Hanan purchases to put in her service. As if it isn't appalling enough, their presumed love is framed as one-sided, a love in which Hanan receives the shorter end of the stick. The novel, peripherally, notes that one of the two "lovers" bought the other from her father when she was a child, as if from a slave market or trafficking endeavor. The novel glosses over these events and tells the reader that Alia now exploits her mistress to obtain her "humanity". It is made implicit, from the book and the blurb on its cover, that there is no way for Alia to obtain the said humanity except through having sex with her mistress. This implicit notion is purely classist. It is similar to the patriarchal premise that men who take part in "corrective rape" subscribe to, when they boast about curing lesbians through the magic powers of their dicks. Alia lacks humanity, apparently, and Hanan el-Hashmi's body is a boat that carries her over to it or a vessel through which her humanity is shaped.

There is an evident Bourgeois bias: the book endorses the idea that sex with the rich(er) and high(er) classes is a form of class infiltration and social mobility toward a better life. If only such "better life" was translated into a bottomless bank account or a bulging wallet, it would have been a clear transaction in which material–sexual toil would be exchanged for material–financial return. But the rich classes consider sex with them in and of itself to be an adequate reward, one that transports us from our marginalized existence to a place where we receive "emotional" sufficiency and pleasures that satisfy our lacking souls and characters. In this sense, we derive our "humanity" from the dicks and pussies of the bourgeoisie.

Alia's character is dressed up as Cinderella. The novel goes on to convince us that Alia magically transforms into a queen at night, only to turn back into a maid at the crack of dawn (p. 17). But this is not a fairytale in which the good fairy Hanan and the poor maid Alia, share a night of festivities and celebration before reality takes its course. So, «**Who is Alia? Is she really her servant?**» Hanan al-Hashmi asks many times, as if she is enlisting the help of the reader in thinking of a solution to this puzzling dilemma. The answer is clear, however: Alia really is her maid. An domestic worker forcefully trapped in illiteracy and the private sphere: a fate imposed on her by her employers as Alia was forbidden from leaving

the house and from reading books (P. 29). The opposite would have been inappropriate for a maid. After years of working for Hanan, Alia realized that she only had service clothes: she **“only had blue jeans and a white shirt. Other than that, all the clothes stuffed in her locker were for sleeping or working at home”** (P. 30). This comes as no surprise because the employer confined Alia to domestic and sexual service.

When she was a child, Alia did not allow the boys in her impoverished neighborhood to «rub her ass.” She lived in Al-Raml neighborhood, where opportunities for the oppression of women and children were rife. She was aware of what sex and rape are, seeing as she stabbed the rapist her paralyzed older sister and her own rapist when she was 10 years old. I will not assume that she was a rash or clueless child when Hanan bought her. She was instead very sharp. Life has taught her all forms of self-defense, as escaped many sexual assaults as a child living in the dumpsters. However, she was not spared the evils of Hanan al-Hashimi and her husband Anwar, the **«decadent crocodile.»** I do not assume that Alia was blindly led toward sex, nor was she **“fascinated by [the] magical worlds»** hiding inside her employer’s vagina. Rather I believe she was led to all this knowingly. However, her knowledge did not necessarily help her survive nor wield power. For “knowledge is [not] power” if you do not possess power itself. This is what men, like Francis Bacon to whom the quote belongs, did not know. Nor did Friedrich Nietzsche know that as he thought his existence derived from his thinking. These men lived their lives against historical materialist arguments, forgetting their privileges and believing they obtained them through their own merit; that their thinking is a product of their genius rather than our shared experiences and our different positionalities. They thought that their intellectual authority translates into matter, that their ideas precede matter. It escaped them that their own material privileges empowered them to spread their ideas. Knowledge is not power, then, in the absence of power itself, despite liberalism’s tireless effort to convince us to pull ourselves from our bootstraps. It tells us that our intelligence will enable us to ace capitalism and lead decent lives, and that our failure is the result of our inaction and stupidity, or that education will save us from sexual exploitation unlike illiterate girls, as per Taha Hussein’s morale in *The Nightingale’s*

Prayer.

Knowledge may help us anticipate the tragedies that will strike us. It may allow us an escape; seconds to close our eyes to not see the catastrophes. It can help us absorb the bitterness and push through so we do not break. That is all. We do what we must do, what our context allows: we protect ourselves, our resources, or our families. We are abused, and we do not report it. Or we are raped, and we hold our silence. We are not to blame, and there should be no pretense that knowledge could protect us from all of this. The fact that Alia did not stab Hanan al-Hashimi when the latter led the *maid*'s fingers «**to where she wanted**», in the bathtub, and when she played with her body and forcibly kissed her, then kicked her out when she was done, is not evidence of Alia falling into a torrid and passionate love with her employer, which the novel tries hard to convince us of.

It is possible that Alia is attracted to women. It is probable that she enjoys having sex with her employer, but that does not automatically make their sex consensual. Survivors often report that, in some cases, their bodies unwillingly respond to sexual stimulus when raped, which creates a dissonance between what and how they feel. They doubt their sanity and feel ashamed to speak that what happened to them was not consensual. In Alia's case, the power dynamic is not in her favor, and she knows very well that «**all she has to do is simple: obey**» (p. 44).

Consequently, it is insulting, at best, that this relationship is portrayed as a "game" that is being played by the young domestic worker. Worse, it legitimizes violence. Alia escaped the streets, but not the household, because the streets, despite their cruelty to women, queer, and impoverished people, is safer for her than the home of her employers. The private space in which we seek safety is oftentimes the most dangerous place for us.

Hanan al-Hashmi's obsession with Alia is condescending and coming from a place of superiority. She thinks that Alia's headscarf is attractive, for it makes her into the cliché of the unwrapped candy, un-feathered chicken, or an intact watermelon. Hanan unwraps her candy, however, because she is too progressive to want a veiled child maid. However, Hanan herself appears to wear some sort of a head cover, but it holds different symbolism.

Hanan finds Alia's hijab to be exotic, while her head cover is normal, not drool-inducing. Sometimes she tells us that Alia's face is «**sculpted more precisely and more beautifully than what is necessary for a maid.**» She also tells the reader that she admires the look in her eyes, in its difference from the normal servants' gaze: "**ranging between dull sadness and patient grief.**" Other times, she describes her as dark-skinned, skinny, a slut, and "**an ugly beggar**" (p. 14). In the end, she is a «**servant with no name or family**» (P. 21). All these comparisons are drawn between Alia and Hanan, the maid's vessel towards a lost humanity.

«**The abrupt taste of betrayal**» overwhelms Hanan al-Hashimi when she catches Alia red-handed giving a hand job to the «**decadent crocodile.**» She tries to persuade the reader, in her long monologues, that Alia betrayed her and their love. Fact of the matter being that Alia is «**an ugly beggar,**» both the knowledgeable narrator and Hanan believe that the domestic worker must have seduced the animal. If his tiny excuse of a cock does not erect out of a desire for his wife, then how would it for an ugly maid, except if she had exercised her cunning in every way possible in order to get the flaccid piece of meat of this old geezer to stand erect?

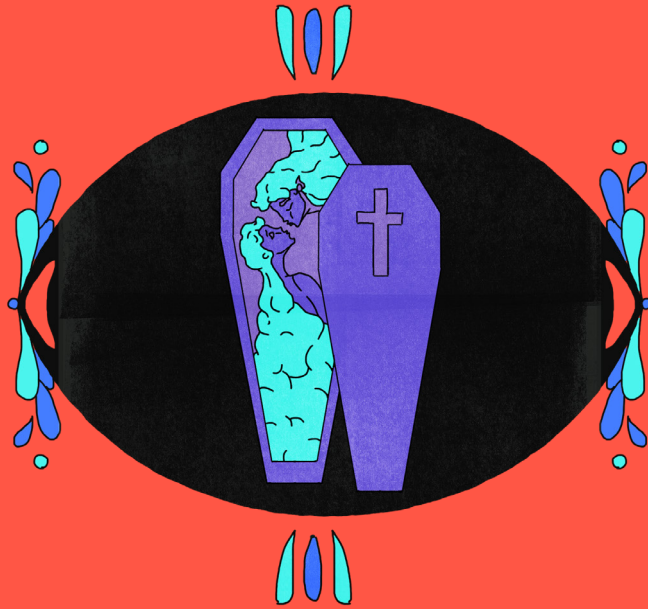
The novel really does pose genius questions, as if there is no other possible explanation to the unfolding events, except for a passing mention of Alia mumbling an old adage her mother used to tell her as she was being fired: "**Better any man than no man at all.**" That man, Anwar, heavily hovered around her chest, like his wife, yet they both believed themselves to be innocent.

While the novel imbues Hanan and Alia's relationship with contrived romance and alleged love, all lesbian sex/relationships, in the novel, fall under one of two categories: either "burning passion" if characters belong to the same socio-economic class, or "disposable" if they do not.

Hanan summarizes her relationship with Alia, after a vicious cycle of deluding the reader into believing there were romantic feelings between them, when she says to herself: "**They are just fingers. I can replace them with others**" (p. 22). With this she returns Alia to her realistic place, where the working class is exploited and reminded daily of its dispos-

ability. This story is not about women who love women, but women who take advantage of other women. Anwar is not the only “**decadent crocodile**” in this plot. Hanan could give him a run for his money.

In the act of writing fiction, writers often elude questioning, on the basis that they are often implicitly assumed to be neutral in relaying a story and therefore unaccountable of their literary choices because art does not require justifications. Art is hence assumed to convey a unique, singular experience of a person, and to not necessarily speak for everyone or make blanket statements. There are two reasons behind this assumption: creative writing as a leaway for a writer to impute the plot to a “muse” or an “inspiration” and realistic writing that delegates the responsibility of the writer’s words to their imputability to “the facts of life.” Both narratives of the freedom of inspiration or the confinement of realism are not only used to protect the writer from criticism, but they also disseminate political and societal values and force us into ready-made boxes, declaring one of two things: This is one unique experience, produced from the imagination of the writer, and they are not obliged to justify or represent the character in a non-normative manner, or this is a realistic experience that the author faithfully conveyed. So, «shush». The problem with *The Smell of Cinnamon* is not that it deals with characters or relationships that may be queer. On the contrary, we are not obliged, as queer, impoverished people, or people of color, to produce innocent and sanitized love narratives that are palatable to the public taste and are free from violence, exploitation, and heroism. It is not only possible but necessary to write about exploitative queer relationships. The problem here is two-fold: the way *The Smell of Cinnamon* frames an exploitative relationship as a torrid love story, and that the novel is celebrated as a liberating book. What is worse is that it is considered a queer-friendly book depicting our worlds. The critique is simple: a text that does not liberate us is not liberating.



When a Lonely Heart is Just a Queer One

Written by : Nour Kamel

Nour Kamel is a writer and editor of things, and was shortlisted for the Brunel University International African Poetry Prize (2020). Their chapbook Noon is part of the New-Generation African Poets (Sita) series and their writing appears or is forthcoming in Asameena, Anomaly, Sukoon, Rusted Radishes, Khabar Keslan, and Voicemail Poems.

Dear Sue—

**Unable are the
Loved—to die—
For Love is immortality—
Nay—it is Deity—**

Emily.

My kinship to Emily Dickinson extended only to her poetry and her as a poet. I never felt kinship with Emily Dickinson herself; I was told to feel pity. Told: here is a woman no one understood, a woman who didn't want people to understand her, who shut herself off from the world, never loved or was loved and only ever pined for death. A gothic and romanti-cized fantasy in place of any person Emily could ever be allowed to be. When I thought of Emily, I thought of a lonely recluse, a forlorn, self-imposed shut-in who passioned deeply, yet waited for death rather than live. The world was too much. The world refused to contain all the parts of her it didn't approve of. She shut herself in to keep herself. When she died, they took her anyway.

**This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—⁴**

I live in Egypt, a vast geographical distance from where Emily lived and died. In a British highschool and British university, I was taught by others about her surrounding history, poetry, culture, and words. Later, I would learn about her on my own from a virtual web of information that is limited, still, despite its ability to connect and share knowledge because I hadn't been given whole parts of her story. I will probably never see or place in my hands anything of hers that was physical: her poems, her remaining letters and papers. Anything actually Emily. I will only ever have things that have been shaped and rewritten by others, regurgitated back to me through them first.

**To own a Susan of my own
Is of itself a Bliss—
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
Continue me in this!⁵**

4 Maria Popova" .Figuring ".published February2019

5 Maria Popova" .Figuring ".published February2019

Through *Wild Nights with Emily* – a play-turned-movie by Madeleine Olnek – and the slew of articles it spawned, I discovered everything I was told about Emily was wrong. Emily had a long-standing and well-documented (yet subsequently erased) love affair with her childhood friend and future sister-in-law Susan Gilbert. Olnek, herself a lesbian woman, tears through the heteronormative framework that had trapped Emily for so long and redacted Susan entirely. The movie shows an Emily entirely human and relatable and queer. She was never anyone’s tragic romantic fantasy except those who decided to make her so to make her more palatable. Her relationship with Susan was never hidden, just ignored.

***Her breast is fit for pearls,
But I was not a “Diver”—
Her brow is fit for thrones
But I have not a crest,
Her heart is fit for home—
I – a Sparrow – build there
Sweet of twigs and twine
My perennial nest.*** ⁶

All her longing and energy and love, despite what I’d been taught, was not wholly directed in a heterosexual way. Her play with gender, her play with structure, her influence on modernists and what would become stream-of-consciousness style, were all things I felt kinship with in her writing, yet I felt distanced from her real-life *life*. I feel betrayed and misled by academics and the literary world (ruled by white people) who *chose* to paint her as a loveless recluse who never married and therefore never loved, never lived her full potential as ‘woman’ in a heteronormative world. But like Sappho, Emily’s poems were never geared towards just one sex, she always wrote to whoever she loved and longed for. a lot of the time, it was to Susan she wrote.

***To miss you, Sue,
is power.***⁷

Emily’s poetry was heavily edited after her death, and her love letters to women changed

6 <https://americanqueer.org/poetry/>

7 <https://americanqueer.org/poetry/>

to address men instead or erased entirely. The majority of her poems were published after her death because no one would publish her when she was living, her writing not quite fitting the style of the times nor bending to the fancies of the men who decided what was and wasn't worth publishing. Far too often across history has this happened to great women artists. How many have been made to live the lives others expect of them, their art and true lives never acknowledged fully? Their words taken, or erased, or changed to fit societal molds and expectations, only to then be profited off of by others?

Mabel Loomis Todd – her first editor to collate and publish Emily's poems
Erased as much of Susan as she possibly could
A Susan who was wife to Austin Dickinson
Austin who was lover to Mabel, and Mabel who so loved
The recluse of Emily who refused to ever see Mabel—

The Emily who loved Susan.

*Wild nights
And buried history
Of women – loving women
And not tearing each other –
Up – everything tidy –
Covered up.*

*Someone who has a lover –
A woman lover and loves her –
Can never be hidden forever
Or made to be 'in love' with any man
She just happened to write letters to.*

***I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –⁸***

Emily was queer, in every historical sense of the word. The mythology around her was that she was misunderstood – and that was entirely by design, but it wasn't Emily's. She wanted to be known and understood, she wanted her words published and read. As Emily's posthumous and self-appointed first editor and publisher Mabel Loomis Todd made Emily publishable by removing every trace of her queerness, thereby making her an unknown, a mystery in the process.

8 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52197/i-dwell-in-possibility466->

The dead have nothing to fear. Neither did the living Emily. She sent out her words and yearned like every writer to be published. No one wanted her 'queer' words, her new style that didn't rhyme, and her gendered name.

*Where is respect for the dead?
Why now – over a hundred and thirty
Some years since she existed –
And wrote words – Why
Does it come to light – to consciousness
To queer poetics
Being allowed – to be queer poetics?*

*Til the almost 21st century
Before a woman saw another woman, fully
And told us she loved – a woman?*

I guess – we all know why.

*To the women who erased, the women who ignored
And to the women who love women
And let Emily love them – too –
In front of the whole world.*

None – will ever know her.

*Who better to make a myth – indeed
Then a silenced and unvoiced woman poet?
To create from her words the narrative of a woman
Love scorned – lusting for love, never fulfilling it?
Whose words – cut up – put back together –
Were made to support this?*

***Success is counted sweetest
By those who never succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.⁹***

*Historians knew. It is something
– Apparently – hard to miss
Unless you're really not looking for it –*

9 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45721/success-is-counted-sweetest112->

*Unless you cannot imagine anything outside
What you want of Emily – her life to be
Like her family – like her obsessive documentarians
And those who would fall in straight love –
With a dead girl who wrote words of longing for love –*

*But always had it. Just not the way
her or Sue –
could have ever been – together.*

***Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —¹⁰***

*Death, the myth – and immortality.
How would she want to be remembered?
No one anticipates erasure, but it is a fact
A given of death. Posthumous infamy
Is phenomenon unaccounted for, nor
Does its shape ever look the same.*

***Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.¹¹***

A lack-of-love, though love in many forms was there, became her pseudonym, her calling card. The queen of lonely hearts turned black from lack of love. She would become the goddess of unrequited love, of being ignored and lost and unloved because of some *disad-*

10 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant1263->

11 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47652/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death479->

vantage in the shape of our society. Emily was never disadvantaged. Emily needed, alone, to unshape society for herself. Society and those around her saw this as an affront, specifically a female one. Who can unmake society alone?

***Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory—
Both in one package Iain
And lifted back again—
Be Sue—while I am Emily—
Be next—what you have ever been—Infinity.*** ¹²

I have reclaimed Emily as my own. If parts of her life that resonated with mine hadn't been hidden for so long, would I have read her more deeply? Afforded her more of my time? I will now – I give her words more weight and seek them out, thirsty for what I may have read as queer in them but was told could not have possibly ever been there.

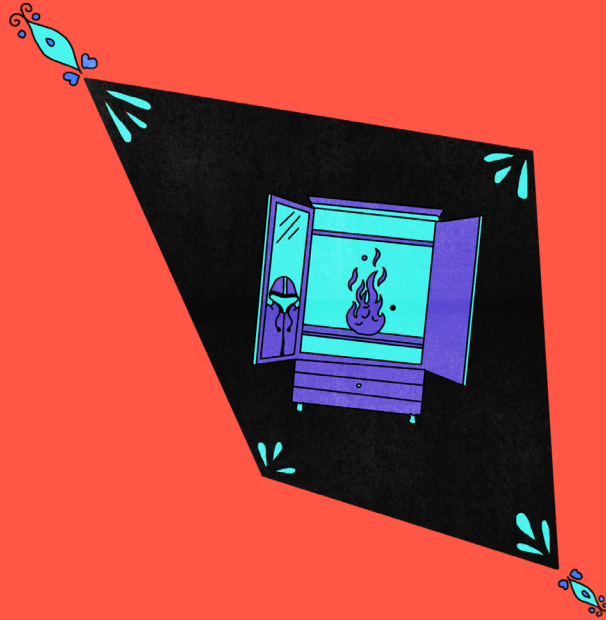
I was told that she could never be quite understood and that some of us should never try. But we persist, we shift, we take a hundred different looks and stick with our conviction – that we have always existed. Some of us will never stop looking for ourselves in history, because more often than not there we are – staring back out at ourselves, our kin, our kindred. Ancestors and descendants who survived, in spite of it all, and lived their lives as full as we try and find ways to live our lives now.

***I have intended to
write you Emily to-day but the
quiet has not been mine I send
you this, lest I should seem to
have turned away from a kiss –
If you have suffered this past
summer I am sorry I
Emily bear a sorrow that I
never uncover — — If a nightingale
sings with her breast against
a thorn, why not we
when I can I shall write –***

Sue ⁻¹³

12 Maria Popova” .Figuring “.published February2019

13 <https://:americanqueer.org/poetry/>



Within us, against us.

A reflective interpretation of the twenty-one
love poems of Adrienne Rich

Written by: Mai Abd El-Hafez

**Mai is an african feminist, passionate about spiciy food and
cats, and dislikes writing a Bio about herself.**

***No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
our animal passion rooted in the city.*** ¹⁴

Every queer love story is inherently doomed; this is what we are taught. Every queer life is doomed, destined to remain in the shadows where nothing grows, to eventually disappear leaving no trace of our own history, queer kins, elders, or stories of life lived with multiple complexities.

The end of the now and here was following us as we walked the dark streets of Cairo late at night, like Adrienne and her partner. Two small young bodies maneuvering the garbage, danger, and uneven pavement in a city that we've come to hate and love. Two young lovers concealing their femininity in similarly oversized hoodies. My bag contained Adrienne Rich's book, 'The Dream of a Common Language'. I've come to know Adrienne through her essays as a lesbian feminist writer, which led me to her poetry. I was mesmerized, devouring every word as if spoken to me and by me through time and space. One of the works among the pages of the book is twenty-one love poems -- a collection of sonnets following a relationship like the one I came to find myself walking into. We paced the streets of Cairo, late at night, talking about a mutual love of literature, daring for the first time in our young lives to dream of a better future here, not somewhere else. The world is changing, shifting, and maybe, *just maybe*, we could then imagine a love like ours moving in the sun.

***I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,
you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
our friend the poet comes into my room
where I've been writing for days,
drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
and I want to show her one poem
which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
and wake. You've kissed my hair
to wake me. I dreamed you were a poem,
I say, a poem I wanted to show someone***

Non-queers love to ask, 'when did you know?' As if 'knowing' meant allowing ourselves to imagine a life, a future, a love, an acceptance. To *know*, we need to be able to imagine this sexuality, this feeling, and this desire in a city that won't allow it, not even in words. I never dared to dream of poetry that would talk about us -- not as fantasy, not as sub-text; poetry that was integrated in our ordinary, everyday lives. Messy rooms and alarms reminding us to collect ourselves back into the closet.

Armed with new words, my goal changed from just existing or barely surviving, to following the trail in history looking for our roots. I searched between the lines of books written in my own language for similar experiences, refraining from the assumption that they didn't

14 All quoted poetry in this reflective piece is from Adrienne Rich's Twenty-one love poems ,published in January .1976 URL :<https://genius.com/Adrienne-rich-twenty-one-love-poems-annotated>

exist before us, that they didn't leave a history. For us lonely queers out there, to imagine a future we need proof of past resistance.

Poetry was never a central part of my library. My library was mostly fiction, where I'd be the many lives and protagonists of the writer's mind, and nonfiction, where our lives would be mere theories. While reading Adrienne, I realized that I actually loved poetry but felt betrayed by it. And even when I'd come across a poem where queer women's desires and love were present, they'd be masked by a metaphoric image or vague sub-text, or viewed from the gaze of men spying on our lives through voyeuristic keyholes.

Do whatever you can to survive.

You know, I think men love wars . . .

And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds

break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,

and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms

Gradually, our daily late-night walks became shorter. Our feet were already exhausted, protesting the effort of long daytime marches led by our collective hope, anger, and heartbreak. The book of poems was left behind on the bed we shared. I couldn't risk losing it during the long shifts of standing alongside the women and men volunteering to come together and counter mass sexual assaults -- in response to the initial shock of finding out women were raped and attacked in a place that demanded freedom.

Women among the crowds were betrayed by their ostensible femininity into the hands of mobs, enforcing the reality that was once dismissed in the modest hope that equality somehow applied to our femininity, that calls for freedom and security included us. While fighting back those vicious attacks, Adrienne would repeatedly visit me, reminding me of the beauty of love until the next call for help, as I ignored the intruders' fingers sneaking their way into the most intimate of spaces and erasing the loving touch of ecstasy from the night before.

I covered the screaming girl's body. I can't recall anything but her screams and the complete lack of air. I tried to cover her without touching her. If she knew who I *really* was, if she saw in those hands embracing her the many other women embracing me back, would she pull away in disgust and horror? Would our shared femininity absolve me in her eyes? Those questions were left unanswered.

I wished for Adrienne to have been there with me so I could ask her, 'How did you manage to survive all of those years without being consumed by bitterness?' But she left us in 2012. I wished I were somewhere else, in our bed, reading, escaping this reality. I wanted my home.

centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;

and we still have to stare into absence

of men who would not, women who could not, speak

to our life—this still unexcavated hole

called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.

The library has been my home since I was nine, reading the words of Oliver Twist asking for more soup. I learned to ask more of words and less of life.

Words were my shield against the adults trying to mold me into the box of what a 'good girl' should be. A good girl doesn't read as much, maybe just enough to receive the kind of education that would lead to a career, and certainly not one that would lead her to question the world she lived in. or as my mother used to say "Indulging into words and literature will ruin you!"

Queer women don't have the luxury of ignorance; we can't afford the comfort of ignoring the complexities of gender clashing with desire. Some of us like to pretend we'd be safe if we didn't look down at the danger staring up at us, waiting to swallow us back into oblivion. Words like 'oppression' translate into a swift pull of the hand before touching another in public. Meanwhile, the whole discourse of liberation is co-opted into the image of a yearly celebration, and rainbows have become a commodified symbol that lost its meaning, waved by corporates in the streets of New York and prosecuted in the streets of Cairo. They contain every color that reflects white bodies, leaving the black and brown ones -- the disposed and discarded -- watching the parade pass them by and stomp its dancing feet on their oppressed, tortured, and murdered bodies.

***Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these***

How can you love a body so similar to the one you are taught to hate, taught to feel ashamed of since birth?

Sometimes love and trust seem like unnatural feelings to me, a language I've learned through repeating love songs since I was a child passionately making out with my own reflection in the mirror, the same mirror where I learned to avoid my eyes looking back at me.

I read Adrienne thinking of hands I trust. Many come to mind, like the closed fist of a father crashing against the face of a mother; and hers, less strong, less angry, striking back, hitting nothing but air. Hands are nothing but a threat, a true reminder of the violence that the world likes to call 'love'. I examine my own hands, a mix of my mother's and father's. No wonder I learned to punch walls early on in life.

A queer love is a daily struggle not only towards accepting love, but also trusting that open palms head towards us to caress not slap, that those same hands won't tear us from the inside out. I don't trust hands out of the fear that a father of mine or hers might leap out, unleashing the same anger over and over. Similarities and parallelisms are aesthetically appealing, no doubt, but how can I stop projecting and feeding the same shame?

***when away from you I try to create you in words,
am I simply using you, like a river or a war?
And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
to escape writing of the worst thing of all—
not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
but the failure to want our own freedom passionately enough***

One thing I've always trusted was words -- dancing against the whiteness of pages that were once blank. Falling in love meant a deep desire to write about the beloved. I used words like I used bodies, until I mastered the art of hiding in plain sight, not between the lines, but among the words.

Once I dreamt of clear, powerful words like the many I used to come across, younger me would think a diary with a heart-shaped lock was enough to hide. It ended with a funny story of my mother reciting back my words and phrases in mockery, stopping me dead in my tracks as I headed back to where I kept my beloved journal, only to discover even locks betray secrets...with the right amount of force.

I couldn't stop writing, I just learned to hide better -- until I met a woman who told me to *write us*. It sounded like *I love you*, many nights spent next to her sleeping body, shaking it awake so she could *read me*, and while she read, I would carefully study her features, expecting her face to betray her and show disappointment, and for my mother's giggles to fill the room, 'Who do you think you are? Naguib Mahfouz?' Many drafts have been saved, but I still don't trust locks or passwords...only the art of hiding in my own words.

***but I want to go on from here with you
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.***

When I read more stories similar to ours, they are a much-needed validation, but the more I read into them, the more I feel like there is no hope. The stories of queer bodies have become synonymous with trauma, and I can't help but wonder if we could imagine anything beyond that trauma, rejection, and fear. Are we so busy fighting reality to be able to imagine a future?

What is queer without the trauma? Our trauma is our passport, as Yasmin Nair eloquently put it, and acceptance driven from pity is not equality. Being seen only in the light of our trauma does not allow us to be people with flaws. It's a closet within a closet and I fear that in order to be accepted as queer women, we only exhibit our wounds but never our truth.

The desire for acceptance follows me every time I try to write. I am truly afraid of writing. It's easier getting angry at those men and women who aren't courageous enough to write about themselves than demanding the same from myself.

I am afraid of writing or sharing my drafts...of naming my own existence. I hope that someone else would do it instead of me. Even my own tongue betrays me in this moment, speaking in a colonizer's language, different from the one I dream and ache in. I keep repeating almost on a daily basis (to anyone who would listen) arguments in favor of the power of language and the importance of naming things, but at the same time, I lack the words to name *us* or even myself. What we have are words that can only represent a single layer at a time.

***I'm waiting
for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water
for once, and show me what I can do
for you, who have often made the unnameable***

nameable for others, even for me.

‘Write us’, the words echo through my mind among sisters, comrades, lovers, and women carrying the same fire of forbidden desire; with will to live bigger than the world and stronger than hate. *Write us*, say you were a witness; it was not all shame and broken dreams. Write love stories so strong they turn darkness into gentle shade, closets big enough to host parties ; the art of living in the belly of the beast. Write the good, bad, and ugly of a community so similar yet to different, the traces of the ones we lost to death, illness, and despair, and the ones who taught us we could only survive together.

Sometimes among the dancing bodies of women, I hear the music echoing through time and space: we are not the first and won't be the last, as the world is trying hard to tell us.

As a queer woman who has nothing but words, I still fear my own desire; my need to archive this history like a fire burning inside, consuming me, extinguishable only by accepting the longing and craving of the flesh, mind, and soul.

***I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp***

As for my late-night walk companion, our path separated, cracked into two by the weight of love and hate. When I am asked what happened, I usually reply, “time happened.” Sometimes I still follow our footsteps through the old streets at night, tracing the past through lines of poetry in my growing collection by Adrienne, other poets, and writers; annotating my own lines in pencil where words cross paths with my life, drafting my own and hers, letters exchanged in times of ecstasy and heartbreak, and poems that were once read out loud in bedrooms like incantations protecting a world of hope.

The book is six years old now, the fortress built of books and poems is not strong enough to keep the outside world from seeping in names and faces of women dragged through the streets and into prison cells for daring to dance, to be women; faces and names of the fallen queers, of a community, turn sour. When I think of my mother now, I think of the strength it took her during those times to stand in front of my young eyes and receive those blows but never fall to her knees, the same strength that was easier for me to label as weakness. I saw only her weakness. In recognizing the similarity not only with my mother but also my myriad of lovers, I've come full circle. I've acknowledged that survival is an art, mastered by women in a country and world that keep hitting and calling them weak for not being able to hit back.

And when I read Adrienne, I now dream I could read it to my mother, the first woman I learned to hate and love. I want to ask her, ‘Did you know the risk of words? Is that why you didn't want me to write?’

As for this city, I think of six years that propelled me from dreaming of the perfect text and writing love letters to drafting five goodbye letters delivered after leaving, because the world was too heavy and the only way out at the time was dreaming of voluntary, endless sleep rather than waiting for the worst end; one of a life without hope, normalizing all the ugliness and violence, and turning words into nothing more than ink on paper.

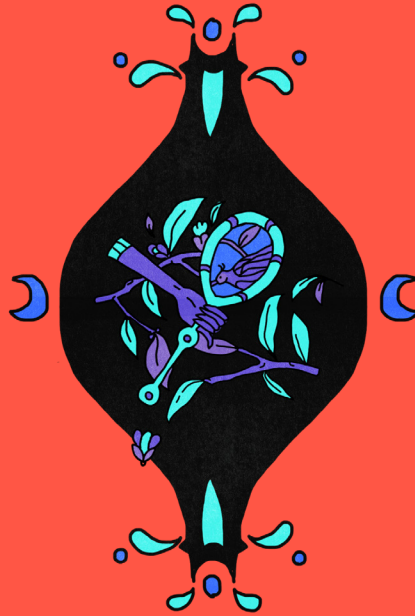
***this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us
within us and against us, against us and within us.***

I grew to understand Adrienne more to see her as a human and not only a poet; to appreciate the words hidden between lines rather than label it as cowardice, as if the risk were less real for those who whispered; as if their tongues were not cut off like mine for reclaiming the nameless and faceless generations.

And so I wrote, thinking of many hands drafting words that won't see the light of survived lives and hearts that dared to love until they could hear themselves shatter; words travelling to the two young bodies walking the streets of a cold city that promises hope and a better future, validating the present.

Here I am, here we are; living, springing out from the concrete, following the scent of desire, marching to the drum of heartbeats that can't be stopped. And wrote, guided by poetry of a woman who believed in radical vulnerability and tenderness.

***If I could let you know—
two women together is a work***



The Proof of Love

written by : By Samah Gaafar
translated by : Nermeen Hegazi

Samah Gaafar is a translator and art researcher at the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC). Her work appears in many print and electronic publications, in addition to independently published books. Some of her translations include, Rebel Music by Hisham Aidi, The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, On Hashish by Benjamin Walter, and Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston. She also consistently translates and publishes poems and letters and work in English on her blog Al-Harakat.

“I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully armed; I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold, And I announce an end that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation.” —Walt Whitman

When my friend asked me to write a piece for this issue, when she asked me with love if I would like to write about the letters I translate and post on my blog *Al-Harakat*¹⁵—letters beloved for their directness, subtlety, nearness, and distance; letters I spent a long time reading, reading about, preparing to translate, and attempting to explore—I did not hesitate to accept.

I wondered what I would write about, however. I wondered if what I would write would do the letters justice. Justice to how I felt about them, at least. Justice to the deep love that saturated them. Oh the pain and hell we go through when we find ourselves caught up in our desire to do justice to our love for something!

I also realized that writing about what we love allows the world to share that love with us. I know that translating and publishing these letters to begin with is an invitation to the world to partake in this love, but to write about this love itself is a step further down the road of revelation and communion.

In some of those letters, I found my siblings in ingenuity. We shared together the visible and veiled pitfalls of raging patriarchal societies. With them, I also experienced those premature lives, presented to us by the world on a plate of arrogance, questioning our intelligence, for the mere reason that we were born with a “flower” between our legs (because we have to trim and mold ourselves to suit the pious fantasies of honest porn consumers).

In a letter to Anaïs Nin,¹⁶ Henry Miller¹⁷ wrote,

15 [Al-Harakat is a blog that publishes texts translated from English .http://alharakat.blogspot.com/](http://alharakat.blogspot.com/)

16 A Cuban-American writer.

17 An American author and artist.

“I say this is a wild dream—but it is this dream I want to realize. Life and literature combined, love the dynamo, you with your chameleon’s soul giving me a thousand loves, being anchored always in no matter what storm, home wherever we are. In the mornings, continuing where we left off. Resurrection after resurrection. You asserting yourself, getting the rich varied life you desire; and the more you assert yourself the more you want me, need me. Your voice getting hoarser, deeper, your eyes blacker, your blood thicker, your body fuller. A voluptuous servility and tyrannical necessity. More cruel now than before—consciously, wilfully cruel. The insatiable delight of experience.”

I believe that art is that wild dream; everything that results from it afflicts my soul with that abundant wildness. It makes me confront my fears and the fears of others, but at the same time it liberates me from those fears and forces my mind to think. In every one of its forms, I see our lives abstractedly. The life of the lover and the beloved. The meeting of the similar and of contradictions. The accepted and rejected. What is prevalent and what has been dethroned.

It makes me think about my whole journey. The beginning. It started with the music my parents liked, with watching the joyful musician, with the unique essence, Khader Bashir,¹⁸ saying in a televised interview dating back to the seventies, ***«When I admire myself, I like to pretend I’m a bulbul. Why not? Aren’t they a lovely sight?»***

I feel like art is similar to that feeling: admiring one’s self and unleashing one’s imagination. Perhaps Emily Dickinson¹⁹ said to herself: ***“I will be a bulbul. I will admire myself, and I will bestow upon you a lovely sight, unique writing, and complete abandon. And throughout all this, you will fear and despise my identity. You will strip my feelings of their causes. You will hand them over to the reader—the reader for whom you erased my life as I knew it. And you will do all this as I lie in my grave!”***

18 Khader Bashir is a Sudanese singer. Considered to be one of the pioneers of singing while playing a riq, Bashir has a special school when it comes to style, composition, and performance.

19 A queer American poet.

For a long time, I knew that I would see the world through the lens of art. Perhaps through a painting by Chaïm Soutine,²⁰ spitting lovely torment into our faces, or through a haunting book by Gloria Anzaldúa,²¹ exposing me to an eternal labyrinth, or through a story devoid of the violent, hypocritical motive of political correctness, or through a film that carries death as a message of welcome, farewell, and familiarity as in *The Battle of Algiers*,²² or the night ritual,²³ Aicha Kandicha,²⁴ Lalla Meera,²⁵ and Sidi Moussa²⁶: the spirit of the sea, who inspired blues and jazz in a world with a craft that is devoid of the love of comrades ... the eternal love of comrades, but it will never be complete without Walt Whitman.²⁷

I love all the arts. All forms and artists. From among them all, I chose translation as my profession. I translated everything I loved: poetry, fiction, hip hop, poems, boxing, philosophical and academic books, mysticism, photography, cinematography, and the great letters exchanged between lovers. My interest in these beautiful letters is multi-layered. Letters fascinate me, and I think letter writing is the most intimate form of writing. In letters,

20 A Russian expressionist painter.

21 Gloria Anzaldúa is a queer feminist Chicana researcher and writer.

22 *The Battle of Algiers* is a historical Algerian war film produced in 1966, co-written and directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, starring Brahim Haggiag —as Ali La Pointe—and Jean Martin and Saadi Yacef.

23 The Moroccan night ritual is a spiritual ritual similar to zaar in Egypt, Sudan, and other countries. One of the most prominent rituals of the Gnawa night is the initiation of the “custom.” It is a general announcement of the initiation of the «night.” The Gnawa roams the various alleys, streets, and squares, wearing different colored «capes» and traditional dress, decorated with shells, taking advantage of the opportunity to dance to the rhythm of drumbeats and «krakebs,» until the period of «Koyo» (the children of Bambara) arrives, which signals in the Gnawa custom to start the ceremony. The official Gnawa Night. The drums are put aside and replaced with the «Guembri” or “Hejhouj.” The «teacher»—who is familiar with all the stages of the ritual—begins to play it. The Gnawa perform solo dances, with the exception of «two meals» in which four of them perform a group dance. [Reference link](#).

24 Aicha Kandicha a possible alteration of the title of the noble lady Aisha the Countess ,Aisha Moulat Marjeh)Lady of the Swamps (Lalla Aisha ,Aisha al-Sudani or Aisha Kandisha ,a genie in Moroccan folklore .Even just uttering her strange and frightening surname Kandicha curses the person who utters it .She is one of the souls who is summoned during the night ritual.

25 Lalla Meera is one of the spirits) djinn (that are summoned during the Gnawa night ,and she is the spirit of Magnaj that loves activity ,laughter and perfumes.

26 Sidi Moussa is the spirit of the sea ,one of the Moroccan night spirits as well .Sidi Moussa is blue ,symbolizing water and the oceans.

27 An American poet.

we find the purest of human emotions, such as in a letter by the American novelist Raymond Chandler²⁸ in response to a letter of condolence that he received after the death of his wife,

“I have received much sympathy and kindness and many letters, but yours is somehow unique in that it speaks of the beauty that is lost rather than condoling with the comparatively useless life that continues on. She was everything you say, and more. She was the beat of my heart for thirty years. She was the music heard faintly at the edge of sound.”

Or in Patty Smith’s²⁹ letter to her late lover Robert Mapplethorpe,³⁰ in which she said,

“The other afternoon, when you fell asleep on my shoulder, I drifted off, too. But before I did, it occurred to me, looking around at all of your things and your work and going through years of your work in my mind, that of all your work, you are still your most beautiful. The most beautiful work of all.”

I was able to see in the two letters what happens when human emotions are not forced. Someone lost his beloved and expressed that with the utmost simplicity, misery and appreciation possible, nothing more!

I love the queer messages that artists exchanged throughout the ages, and I always felt the need to translate them. Perhaps, because I realized that the world was never fair to feelings it did not understand and an identity that it could not refute or kill, but was often able to marginalize and disdain. The world is not merciful to any of them. It never understood them. Perhaps it is also because I belong to marginalized groups and I believe—though not completely—that I understand the struggle. I understand it because I am a black woman from a Third World country who has often been marginalized and scorned in various ways.

28 An American writer.

29 A pioneer off punk music.

30 An American photographer.

In an excerpt from a letter to her sweetheart, Susie,³¹ Emily Dickinson wrote,

“I need you more and more, and the great world grows wider, and dear ones fewer and fewer, every day that you stay away—I miss my biggest heart; my own goes wandering round, and calls for Susie—Friends are too dear to sunder, Oh they are far too few, and how soon they will go away where you and I cannot find them, don’t let us forget these things, for their remembrance now will save us many an anguish when it is too late to love them! Susie, forgive me Darling, for every word I say — my heart is full of you, none other than you in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me.”

In this letter, Emily did writing justice. She did love justice. She did our different feelings justice. She did our perseverance justice with her sincerity. She did our feminism justice with these sentences. I realize that outside these sentences we suffer on a daily basis and on many levels, but I have taught myself—among many other tricks of survival—to envelope myself in my feelings and not surrender myself to anything else until reality forces me to the contrary. I could say the same about Violet Traviolo’s³² letter to Vita Sackville-West,³³

“Be wicked, be brave, be drunk, be reckless, be dissolute, be despotic, be an anarchist, be a religious fanatic, be a suffragette, be anything you like, but for pity’s sake be it to the top of your bent— Live—live fully, live passionately, live disastrously if necessary. Live the gamut of human experiences, build, destroy, build up again! Live, let’s live, you and I—let’s live as none ever lived before, let’s explore and investigate, let’s tread fearlessly where even the most intrepid have faltered and held back!”

Is not love in its extreme form not normative? Is it not fanatic? Doesn’t it push us to

31 Susan Huntington Gilbert is a queer poet.

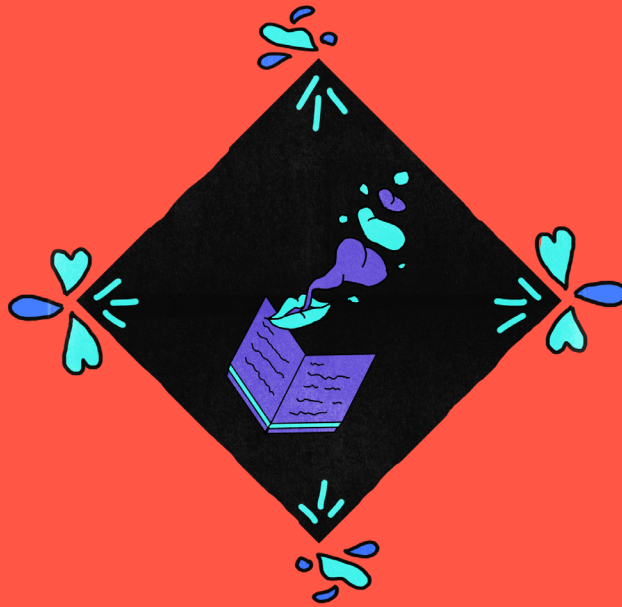
32 A queer British writer.

33 A queer British writer and garden designer

challenge life as we know it, the world as it wants us? Doesn't it introduce us to our bodies and their involvement in shaping how we feel about everything? Does it not satisfy that hunger in our souls? With every letter I read, a new door of love and a greater desire to understand the impact of that on every fragment of my body is opened within me. With every letter I relinquish moral accountability, a social pattern, a hierarchy, a distorted definition around me and others. With every letter I heal.

Translation protects me from the difficulties caused by writing: from feeling overwhelmed, from the fears that I have when I even think about it. I find solace in the writings that I read. For every feeling that I have, there is a poem, a letter, a short story, a novel or a song describing that feeling. My translation of these works is my way of expressing my gratitude with tremendous love. Despite all this, we need to start writing one way or another. We have to write, read, and share our stories. Perhaps writing is what we need to understand what is happening within our souls.

Reading what has been written was my way of finding out what was happening within me. Translating what I read was my way of remembering what I had to remember. That despite what we face as women, despite the burdens that the world has placed on our shoulders, despite the marginalization of our identities, feelings, and differences, despite all the rejection we received and will continue to receive throughout our lives, we are still capable of writing, reading, expressing, rejecting, accepting, understanding, and overcoming our pain with bloodied, fighting hearts.



We, the Interstices

written by : Farah Aridi

A researcher and writer from Lebanon, and a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research and creative interests and writings include the city in conflict, female and queer bodies in the city, socio-spatial justice, and techniques of power and social control.

In a little quiet bar in one of Beirut's old streets, I sit in seclusion, as is my habit, lost within my own white pages. With letters un-conforming, I try to trace the shape of tables and chairs, of conversations, of sounds of cutlery and plates being removed and moved, and of wafts of cigarette smoke and clouds of hot coffee. Today, I wanted to befriend my thoughts. I have always been consoled by my own solitude and words more so than any human presence in my life.

You sit at a nearby table. You write. You contemplate the smoke of your cigarette rising. And you smile, as if in secret, as if in pleasure. The colour red lingers on your fingers. It deftly spreads itself a little bit more every time your hand draws nearer to your lips. Stealthily, my eyes steal their glances at you.

As if reclaiming a denied right, I contemplate the eloquence your lips could move in red. I indulge in my contemplations and the imagined conversations occupying their space between us, all reigned by a redness, unrivalled. On the table with me sits my companion, an old book by Foucault. I sense your interest when you smile at him in intrigue. But at that moment, Foucault breaks his secret pact with you when you fail to light your cigarette anew. My time has come. With courage I never admitted I possessed, I offer you my lighter. You approach me. You thank me. Your hand is now at level with your mouth. A slim light casts itself on the details of your face. You catch me. You smile with gratitude and pleasure. But you do not move. I resist turning into a child in your eyes. I sedate my beating heart in feigned control as Foucault plunges in to the rescue of us both. You admit your interest in the French philosopher. And three hours wander across from us like a bat of an eyelid.

Our conversations settle at the bottom of our shared bottle of wine, fusing with the remnants of the last few drops, competing for colour with your lips. You share your recent writings with me. We relinquish the reality of the bar around us so that the few hours we spend together pronounce themselves a world more real. Another hour passes before you suddenly rise. 'Until we meet again', you say. And you leave.

I take my time watching you leave. I light my own cigarette, and I start waiting. The streets of this city resemble you; you are both worth waiting for – with every tread from my feet and with every line that I note down on pages which seem to have lost all structure upon meeting you. My words have become loosened, unfettered, undisciplined. I can safely say that today I write without any adherence to consequence. My father has always accused me of living in literature and through it. He has always been disdained by the fact that I do not seem to belong to the real world, that I dwell in between my lines, and imagery, and characters, and stories. So much so that they become my reality. So much so that I divorce the real, tangible world.

I write what I cannot live. Or at least, that is what I had thought. I used to receive his comments with pleasure and derision that I would hide too well. Ever since I was a child, I would await my father's diagnostic comments. He used to regard my poetry far off from what poetry should be, and my prose confused as it impinges on prose's forms and structures. You see, my father, with the assiduousness of a devotee, reveres literature proper, its confines of elegant grammatics, structures, rhymes and rhythms. But I blaspheme every

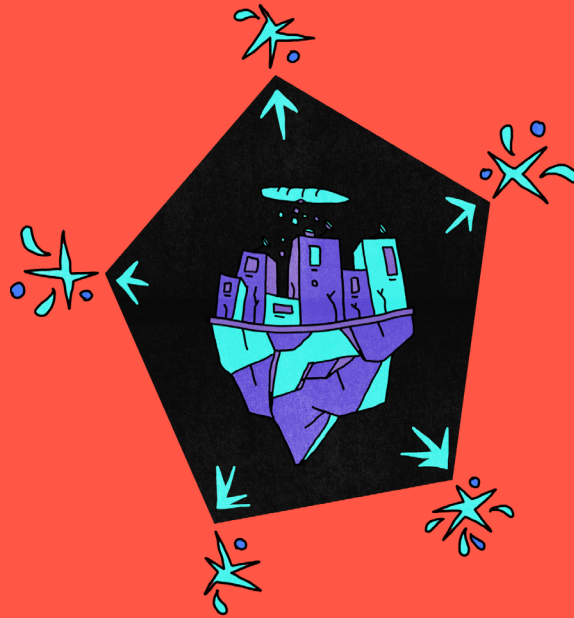
chance I get, breaking structures and forms that confine the literary content of a prose or poetic text, and constrict its movement and the flow of its imagery.

Today I am certain of the extent to which my father is at fault. Today, after meeting you, after longing and waiting for you, I discover that I can live my life the way I do through books and novels, the way I experience poetry, and even the way I write it. Today, I discover that I am free when I write, and that I do not substitute life by transforming it into a literary text. On the contrary. Each morning when my words flow in their novelty on a new white page, I am birthed anew. I tidy random thoughts, I scatter others rhythmically, and I gather what the dreams and the nightmares of the night before have left behind. I discover that I am closer to myself every time I add a new line to my little black book.

Today I discover how much you resemble my city and my poems, in the image best fitting to how I envision you: rebellious, free, beautiful. So I wait for you. I take comfort in absence. I indulge in waiting and I substitute you with writing through you, and at rare times in your name, and even more rare a time, about you. I search for beginnings to return to you, to find my way back to you. But by nearing you through writing, I get closer to the narrator and the writer in me simultaneously. The poetic I fuses with the creative process that engenders it so that all imagined possibilities become realised truths through articulation and transmutation. My eloquence conspires against me, so I transform my reticence and silence in waiting into interstices of speech, that my pen would no sooner infiltrate and tear apart and dissect. So I find us in the details. My journey begets no torment, but a pleasure of seeking what lies in between the lines and the stanzas, a pleasure in relishing the aesthetics of language, the eloquence of speech and meaning in hypothetical worlds. I write to strike out each line and start anew. Every beginning is potential for the discovery of an interstice, or an image, or a reflection. Every novelty is a meaning undressed and a contouring of the details of my becoming. My journey becomes transformative, a journey towards self-realisation and unsilencing, a journey towards writing over the secrecy that have always penned my thoughts and constricted it under pseudonyms and heteronyms and voices and a foreign tongue no one will understand should they find the drafts tucked in hiding under my bed.

You once told me that you started writing after listening to me performing at a poetry reading. You said I had inspired you. But you have never once written to me. That did not sadden me. On the very contrary. I do not seek to hold the burden of those to whom or for whom you write. I have no ambition in being turned into a fictional character you can control whenever she in turn takes over your thoughts and feelings. It is enough for me that I be an incentive, and an inspiration of passion that will sketch the beginning of a new poem or a new story. I have no ambition in being a heroine of a single story, or its victim. I cannot accept to be reduced into a mere possibility, submissive under a single strike of pen, or a single blotch of ink. I refuse to write about you for the same reasons. You shall instead be the multitude that contains my passion for writing and my obsession with beginnings, for worlds that do not resemble one another in anything, for worlds that have nothing in common save the fact that it is I who created them. So I move across them as I please. I sink in beginnings and recreate them. I reorder their events, their history, and their dates, like you do your lipstick, each day in front of your mirror.

I start anew each morning. I float around the first beginning which resembles you in its renewal, and my relationship with you. So that each time I see you, you resemble the first moment of creation, the first beginning: rebellious, fleeting, violent, soft, present, absent, eternally renewed, for you do not repeat yourself. A moment I wait for as I wait for you. Each morning is new. A thought that departed from the moment I first met you and branched out from there in multiple possibilities and along different paths – like the full redness of your lips when you speak, the wine streaks still stuck to our glasses intoxicating our conversations, and the voluminous drafts of poetry that we birth.



My Comrade, My Lover

Written by : Hashem

Translated from arabic by : Tamara Qiblawi

Hashem Hashem is a queer poet and performer based in Beirut, Lebanon. He has been part of feminist and queer organizing in Lebanon and the MENA region since 2009. Hashem holds a BA in Media Studies, and an MA in Gender & Sexuality Studies from SOAS, University of London. He has performed his poetry at different venues in Lebanon, Belfast, Mexico City and Kathmandu. In 2018, together with Baladi dancer Alexandre Paulikevitch, Hashem wrote and performed The Last Distance, a performance about queer embodiment and language. Currently, Hashem hosts a weekly poetry section, Bouyout, on Hammam Radio. His first poetry collection, Class Hatred, will be published in September 2020.

Blog: <https://hashembeirut.wordpress.com>

Instagram: @hashem.beirut

My comrade, my lover
We practice love
We practice anger
And I can't decide which is more beautiful
You scream at me with love
You scream at them with anger
And I can't decide
When you're more beautiful

My comrade, my lover
The day they beat us with sticks
And sprayed us with gas
Our tears streamed
Armed only with bitterness
And poverty,
We laughed together
And you wouldn't let go of my hand
In the face of corrupt bullets
And it was all I needed
To know that we were one woman.

My comrade, my lover
Their banks fall
Their taxes fall
Their rifles fall
At your feet
As the heart falls
At the sight of your dimples

My comrade, my lover
I wish for a free country
I wish for a free body
So hold on to my senses
Hold on to my breath
And we'll build a city
That mirrors the seasons
That resembles love
That does not apologize before being

My comrade, my lover
They wish to slaughter us
To hurt us
So be my blood
Be my flesh
Be my name
Let us bind

A tender wound
A powerful wound
That opens to nothing but love

My comrade, my city
Insane and cursed
Buried in trash and rot
Baked in screams and sorrow
Falling on my neck like a guillotine
Like a tomb
But then it rises and rumbles
Like a throat
Enchanting
Like a jewel

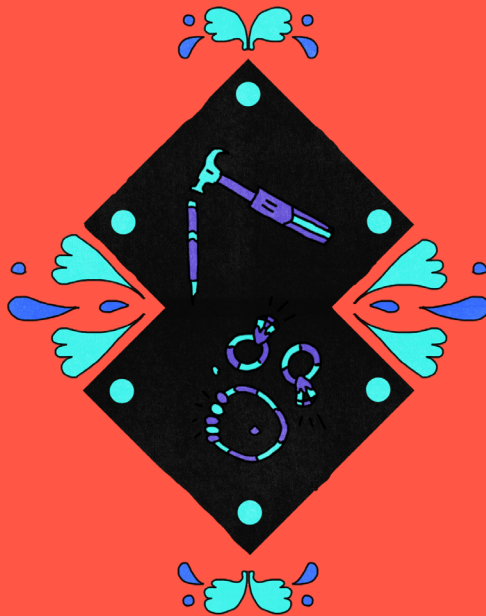
My lover, my lover
To be a pervert is to accept
This reality
To abandon the streets
To accept this truth
To call you – after all we've been through – a friend.
Perversion is to write banners thanking those who slaughter us
To write romantic verses for those who oppress us
Perversion, my love,
Is the smell of a sea we can no longer see
The smell of a palace
That muzzles our mouths
The smell of poverty
On the ports of fishermen
In the houses of workers
In the tents of refugees
The smell of deceit
In the vaults of banks
In half-hearted stances
The smell of defeat
In the eyes of a woman
burned, crushed
well before the crime
The smell of a lifetime
Crumbling in front of us
Like Beirut's old houses.

My companion, my lucky charm,
Would you heal my poetry that conquers me?
My people who ail me?
Would you become for me

A sun
A whisper, a cup, a dance,
That diffuses all bombs?
Become
An axe
That brings down all temples
Be my memory
Be my enchantress
That burns all chains.
Be an earth that I can plant myself in
And rain, so I might grow into vines, and figs and roses.
Be a street I can chant in,
Revolt in
To be victorious
Or broken.
Be a tongue for me,
Rebellious and vagrant
It says everything
And apologizes for nothing.
Become home, become oil
My daily bread
Become a drop of water
That rewards my fast
Would you become those things?
Because I would be
Everything you want me to be.

My lover, my lover
If two roads were to lead to you
I would take the longer one,
Does patience not make things more beautiful?

My comrade, my lover
Let us stand at the edge of this world
And celebrate, celebrate, celebrate
A love that will certainly happen,
A sweet world that will one day come.
My lover, my lover
Stand on my shoulder,
Feed the world's hungry
With the sweetness of your palm.



Shackles

Written by : Hashem

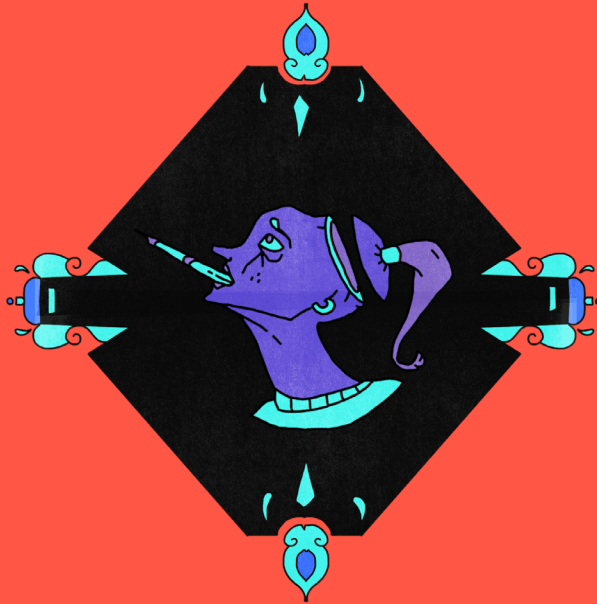
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Don't believe what they say
Life doesn't happen
Inside neat minds
And polite hearts
When I strip myself
Of my rings
I strip myself
Of elegant words
Of coherent sentences
I become
The mouth of an Arab
The mouth of a Barbarian
That knows no knife nor spoon
Hands that are free
Hands that can't write
But with a hammer and nail
I become
A secret path
A wild forest
That won't hide
Its dark corners
I become
A rebellious snake
That won't apologize
For its painful bites.



Untitled poems

Written by : Fanny/Nour Blikaz

Translated by: Samah Gafar

I'm an independent feminist activist from Algeria. I am 30 years old. I moved to Beirut 6 years ago. I started writing poems around two years ago, which came as a surprise to me, on all levels, including the linguistic. At the time, I hadn't had a good grasp on the Arabic language or its use. My personal experiences and intimate relationships prompted me the most to write. I was inspired by them, and I wrote and expressed feelings and thoughts that stayed with me at certain times. Most of my poems are about love and the pain of love.

(1)

Short breath, white pages
Short breath, dry pen
Short breath, flux anger
Short breath, companion soul
I'm obligated to write
About you, for you
Many lines of love, hate.

Madness, illness
I don't know
I'm terrified to be called crazy
And my sin is to be torn by a frantic love.

(2)

To the point of insanity
Stillness, quietness,
Stillness, quietness,
Wears me and covers my body,
A body that loves abstractness.
Emptiness stayed with me,
Dominating and abundant.

My existence is shaking in fear
Antipathy, forgetfulness,
Antipathy, forgetfulness,
Chasing me in my dreams
Punishing me in my past
So, I whipped my imagination
Repeatedly, arbitrarily,
To rest from my devastating torment.



WHOM DO YOU WRITE FOR? A COLLAGE

First published in Sinister Wisdom 13 (spring 1980); © with individual au

I write for people who feel that they are alone with their feelings. I also write for my friends, lovers and strangers. Right now I am writing for myself

- Stephanie Byrd

My «audience» has been women, in most cases, women who identify themselves as feminists, but also women who respond to the Judaism or the suburban experience in my work. Finally, I write for myself, from a need to grapple with my sister, my friends, my lover, my job. Though I'm certain I want my work. to reach BEYOND my own typewriter.

-Robin Becker

Basically, I've always written for myself My lifetime attempt to make sense out of a situation that makes very little sense, i. e., life under white boy patriarchy. When I began my journals my first year of college, I was creating a voice that understood somewhat better than I did the destructive chaos around me.

I write for other Black women who know first hand the chaos of which I speak and who are struggling in beautiful ways to change it. I also write for the Black women in my family who raised me and who did not have the chance to write themselves. Although I know that they would not necessarily agree with what I write, I am sure they would feel proud that I am a writer.

-Barbara Smith

I write for myself five years hence, as a critical guard against fine sounding images and impressive general statements that will make no sense to me later. My mother keeps saying plaintively, «I wish you'd write one book I could give my friends . . . I suspect my ideal reader is one who is already giving my books to her friends. I have no ambition to be socially acceptable or politically correct since the job of fiction is to deal with what is rather than what ought to be.

-Jane Rule

I write for anybody who elects to read my work. I do this with the hope that the message I am trying to impart, for there is always one, will come through clearly, and cause readers to think more perceptively, try to initiate changes, and learn to accept different races, as well as individuals within them.

-Ann Allen Shockley

«If God IS a curious green cat-then She shall see what She shall see “ I write for a curious green cat, I think. I write for a part of the self Since words can be received by different parts, I speak to a special part of the self-even when I am angry, remonstrating or some such- a self that is most pure, most honest, most sensuously aware or sensibly aware. An intermittent self; idealized perhaps but there somewhere in all us green cats. I'm pretty sure that in writing to this self I don't write for women only. But if I write for men it is not to please them.

- Jane Gapen

I feel I know Renee Vivien deeply from her poetry and am obligated to try to translate her work as well as possible. This I do for Her and for Lesbians who do not read French, and for anyone else who enjoys beautiful poetry.

- Margaret A. Porter

A long time ago an English teacher warned my class that we shouldn't think about going into writing seriously unless we craved it as much as we craved food and sleep. Hal I crave it as much as I crave vacuuming.

I honestly never intended to become a writer, but then I never intended to become a lesbian either, so it's interesting that one has followed from the other. I'm a writer because I'm a lesbian.

-Ruth Baetz

I write now for myself and for my sisters. If a few men can hear what I write, I am glad. Why do I still talk with men at all? (as in my book of dialogues, Remembering Who We Are). Because they sometimes put to me questions which I want to know my answers to. And because I do persist in believing that there is «a ghostly woman in every man» (as Adrienne Rich once wrote, though she now questions the term). It is a ghost unbelieved in by most men, of course. But when that ghost seems to me to put in an appearance, I talk with it.

-Barbara Deming

I write for other members of the various oppressed groups that I identify with .I write for women, primarily. Perhaps some of my writing is also for gay men. Among women, much of my writing is specifically for lesbians, some is specifically for black women, and some specifically for black lesbians. Sometimes I write a poem that is just for one other person. And of course I write for me,too.

I don't mind being read by people who are not members of the oppressed groups I am writing for, but they will have to make the effort. I'm not so concerned with trying to raise their consciousness as I am with providing material for us, for our culture, for our creation of a lesbian-feminist reality.

- Becky Birtha

I write for the woman who sent me a letter saying, «Your poems make me work so hard, but it's always worth it. «

-Susan Wood-Thompson

I write for my daughter. I know no fiercer demand for truth than hers, and through hers, my students› and all our children›s instinct and demand for it. I write for my responsibility to her: a strategy of words, that earth and life and difference continue.

- Joan Larkin