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A. Contemporary American Literature: How it begins

Contemporary American Literature or the modern American literature starts generally after World War II. As one of the most diverse nations in the world, the United States has different events in regards of the time and place of the Contemporary Period of American Literature. This literary period has a wide range of issues and styles so that there are no sufficient perspectives to make lasting conclusions. That is why it is not easy to categorize American literature since the end of World War II. However, it is said that contemporary American literature has characteristics that clearly identify or reflect the multiculturalism of contemporary American society. Then, it is very important to not let aside the several events in order to have a general background of this period.

To begin with, the Civil Rights Movement was a political movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern of United States (1955-1965). There were many efforts to fight against racial oppression and abolish the institution of slavery. Secondly, the Vietnam War occurred during the Cold War and lasted from 1959 to 1975. The purpose was to impose communist system over the entire nation. It took place in Vietnam, Southeast Asia and it has been said it is the longest military battle in the history of the United States. Thirdly, all over these years, United States has been the attraction of many immigrants who want to succeed in that land, and to achieve their "American dream". According to BBC NEWS, immigration has been always present in US history; and the immigration flow to this country has first accelerated after the French Revolution and during the 19th century. Hence, American ports are full with German, Chinese, Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants.

For a half century, immigrants from diverse cultures have sought freedom and opportunity in what is now the United States of America. Challenges are inevitable as immigrants adjust to life in a new country, with a new language, and as their new neighbors become acquainted with them. The writers among them recorded their experiences in letters, journals, poems, and books, from early colonial days to the present. Marie Arana stated in her essay 'Today, one in four among us has a strong tie to a foreign past. More than one in five was born elsewhere or has an immigrant parent. We are a nation of many voices, myriad histories — a hotbed of artistic possibility. It is little wonder that from this vibrant and variegated culture, a new American literature has sprung' (eJournalUSA,4). Among those immigrants some of them came from Middle East countries which called Arabs.



II. Arab American Literature

Arab American literature was already growing by leaps and bounds in the late 1990s, but the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacking attacks fueled a rise of interest in all things Arab and Muslim and helped broaden the mainstream appeal of poetry and prose by American authors of Arab descent and the work of Arab immigrants who have settled in the United States. An Arab is not identical to Muslim of course. But because Islam and other Samawi religions which their bibles are called Zabur, Taurat, and Injil came the first time in the region of Arabia, so it is sometimes difficult to let go of an Islamic identity to an Arab. The early years of the twenty-first century have seen the publication of a spate of new works of Arab American fiction and poetry, autobiographical memoirs, anthologies, and a growing body of literary criticism of this emerging body of work. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism has continued to limit the number and range of works that have been published, prompting increasing numbers of Arab Americans to create venues of their own to present works of literary and cultural production. The definition may change as this emergent genre matures, but for now, it includes poetry and prose by Arab immigrants residing in the United States and American writers of Arab descent, regardless of the "Arabness" of the content. That includes writers such as Mona Simpson and Samuel Hazo who are of Arab descent but whose work does not significantly touch on "Arab" themes.

Contemporary Arab American writers are heirs to a group of poets active in the 1920s that was known as Al-Mahjar or "the immigrant poets," which included writers from Lebanon and Syria such as Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy. Some wrote in Arabic but collaborated closely with their translators. Others wrote in English, embracing more fully the culture and language of their adopted country. Together as a group, these writers are credited with sparking an interest in immigrant writing among the mainstream American audience (Abinader 2001). Rihani, whose works include *The Book of Khalid* (1911), *The Green Flag* (1911), *The Quatrains of Abul-'Ala'* (1903), *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), and *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* (1921), is often described as the "father of Arab American literature," and one of his most notable accomplishments was to introduce free verse to the formulaic and traditional Arab poetic canon around 1905 (Abinader 2000, 1).

Gibran, who was prominent among the early Arab American writers and kept company with U.S. literary figures such as the poet Robinson Jeffers and playwright Eugene O'Neill, eventually became one of the most popular authors in the United States. Gibran was born in Bsharri, Lebanon, in 1883 and emigrated to the United States in 1895, living first in Boston and later in New York. His works include *The Madman, His Parables and Poems* (1918), *The Forerunner* (1920), *Sand and Foam* (1926), and *Jesus, The Son of Man* (1928). His opus, *The Prophet* (1923), has been translated into more than 40 languages and has remained a top seller for Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., for



more than half a century. For many years, it was the best-selling book in the United States after the Bible, with some eight million copies in print (Abinader 2000, 2; Orfalea and Elmusa 1988, xvi). The U.S. Congress recognized Gibran's contribution to American arts and letters in 1990 by authorizing creation of the Kahlil Gibran Memorial Poetry Garden in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated by then President George H.W. Bush in 1990. It remains the only park dedicated to a writer in the nation's capital.

Despite Gibran's immense popularity, the first serious anthology of American poetry to include his work was *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, published in 1988. He remains revered by ordinary people and literary critics in the Arab world, but Gibran has been scorned and dismissed by the literary establishment in the United States. This may change after the release of a feature film about Gibran's life being made by Arab American writer Rana Kazkaz, whose screenplay has already won a national prize.

From the late 1940s through the early 1980s, there was little self-identification by writers as Arab American, although strong independent poets and writers such as Samuel Hazo, D.H. Melhem, and Etel Adnan established their reputations in this time period. Elmaz Abinader, an award-winning writer herself, says these writers "distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization(and) later donned the cloak of the Arab American identity" (Abinader 2000, 3).

She describes them as a bridge between the two generations, as well as between Arab American writing and the American literary canon. For instance, Melhem, theauthor of the first comprehensive study of African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, helped mainstream Arab American literature by organizing the first Arab American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984 (Abinader 2000, 3). Adnan created her own publishing company, The Post-Apollo Press, which has helped ensure publication and distribution of many works by Arab American writers (Abinader 2000, 3). She also served for years as president of the Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc., a writers' group founded in the early 1990s.

Several important anthologies and periodicals have helped generate interest in Arab American literature over the past decade, including *Grape Leaves: A Centuryof Arab-American Poetry*, published in 1988 by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, and *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings By Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, an anthology of unusually frank essays and often jarring poetry published by Joanna Kadi in 1994. Kadi's anthology gave voice to a community she dubbed "the most invisible of the invisibles" and paved the way for candid discussions by and about Arab American women. *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999) showcased poetry and prose by recognized writers and introduced a host of newer writers, including Hayan Charara, Mohja Kahf, and Suheir Hammad. The editors encouraged cross genre experiments, asking poets to send in fiction, and essayists their



attempts at drama: "We wanted to know what adjustments Arab American writers are making, both in their own self-image and the understanding of their Americanness, now that their Arabness has become more visible and is gaining a seemingly lasting presence" (Khaled and Akash 1999, xiii).

Poet Nathalie Handal's collection, *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), was published by Interlink Publishing and has sold more than 10,000 copies. Michel Moushabeck, who founded Interlink in 1987 to introduce more Arab writers to the U.S. public, described sales of Handal's anthology as a "phenomenal" achievement for a book of poetry in the difficult U.S. market (Shalal-Esa 2007).

Another important collection, *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*, followed in 2004, published by Mattawa and coeditor Pauline Kaldas. In addition, the work of an increasing number of Arab Americanshas also found its way into broader anthologies of women's writing and other postcolonial collections.

Barbara Nimri Aziz, a journalist, also deserves credit for establishing Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc., or RAWI, in the early 1990s. The organization has grown immensely since its inception and now includes over 100 Arab American writers and maintains a Web site that features member profiles and original writing.

In 2000, writers D.H. Melhem and Leila Diab compiled an anthology of the work of RAWI members, and the group has begun hosting annual literary conferences to further promote Arab American literary production. Playwright Kathryn Haddad founded the award-winning journal *Mizna: Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America* in 1999, facilitating publication of the work of hundreds of Arab American writers and visual artists whose work might not otherwise have seen the light of day. In addition, the new Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, has also begun hosting annual conferences on Arab arts and culture, another important venue for discussion about and presentation of Arab American literature.

Together these efforts have contributed significantly to the emergence of a rich and growing body of Arab American literature, and they are making this literature increasingly accessible to scholars and students in disciplines such as English, comparative literature, American studies, and women's studies. In addition, these collections have helped to create a national community of Arab American writers, many of whom had felt isolated within their own regional communities. The emergence of this community has helped fuel more collaborative projects and remains a key driver behind conferences and other events that showcase and encourage Arab American literary production.

Major themes in the works of contemporary Arab American writers include heritage, family, food, hybridity, gender, exile, assimilation, alienation, nationalism,



displacement, and the horrors of war. Although many of the earliest Arab American writers were men, including the famed poet and artist Gibran Kahlil Gibran, many of the emerging contemporary writers are women, and the entire body of current work is clearly influenced by feminism, postmodernism, and a deep sense of connection to other communities of color.

Twentieth-century Arab American writers focused mainly on the genre of poetry; they were led by such writers as Naomi Shihab Nye, Lawrence Joseph, D.H. Melhem, and Samuel Hazo. These writers were followed in the 1990s by Hayan Charara, Nathalie Handal, Suheir Hammad, and David Williams. In *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004), co-editors Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa cite a sense of isolation felt by Arab American writers even within their own communities and suggest that the lyric poem afforded writers a safer "way to speak as individuals to individuals" rather than representing a larger bloc (Kaldas and Mattawa 2004, xi). In a climate of negative stereotyping about Arabs and hypersensitivity to any criticism of Israel, many Arab American writers may have found it easier to express themselves in the abstracted way that poetry makes possible.

Majaj notes that the poetic compression of the lyric mode favors vignettes rather than narratives and "moments of insight over sustained analysis" (Majaj, "New Directions" 1999, 70). Poetry remains popular, but Arab American writers have increasingly turned to prose narratives and plays to tell their stories. Burgeoning cultural production by Arab American writers may also have come as a reaction to an increasingly hostile environment characterized by anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism spurred by the 9/11 attacks and the continuing war in Iraq. The political and social situation of Arab Americans in general has worsened since 2001, civil liberty violations are up, and stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood films and the media are more prevalent than ever. Long invisible on the American literature scene, Arab American writers are now responding to growing interest in their lives and simultaneously trying to set the record straight. Increasingly, that includes performances on the stage. For instance, San Francisco-based playwright, screenwriter, and

actor Betty Shamieh has written over 15 plays, including *Roar*, and Iraqi American Heather Raffo won wide acclaim for 9 *Parts of Desire*, which has been performed around the world.

Although earlier literary works were haunted by a deep sense of nostalgia, contemporary

Arab American writers are wielding their pens to chronicle decades ofracism, oppression, and marginalization in the United States, and to begin uncovering the particularities of their own ethnic histories. They are also beginning to address conflicts



within a beleaguered ethnic community. These conflicts were largely ignored during the ethnic identity politics of the 1970s that focused mainly on a trinity of African American, Asian American, and Latino writers.

Collectively, Arab Americans have been subject to decades of racism, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and hostility in the United States, a phenomenon which has made some Arab American writers wary of discussing issues that could deepen already debilitating stereotypes about Arabs in America. For many years, the real or perceived need for unity among a beleaguered minority has hampered an honest discourse by Arab American writers about patriarchal structures, arranged marriage, and other controversial topics. Stereotypes are still prevalent, even in the academy.

Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj published a collection of essays on the transnational reception of Third World women writers, a project that grew out of their frustration about just this phenomenon. They noted that even when they were invited to panels, certain discursive, institutional, and ideological structures preempted their discourse and determined what they could and would say. Any critique of Arab society or culture they seemed to utter would confirm the audience's vision about "the patriarchal, oppressive nature of Third World societies," but when they challenged these stereotypes, they were accused of defensiveness and their feminism was questioned (Amireh and Majaj 2000, 3).

Reaction from within the Arab American community can also be fierce if it perceives any kind of attack or challenge to its prevailing social and familial structures, especially from one of its "own." Many fear that candid discussions of problems within the community could be further used against Arabs in the United States. At the same time, mainstream publishers have tended to encourage what critic Steven Salaita calls "stories of escape" and other plotlines that reinforce existing stereotypes while remaining skeptical about the marketing prospects for more complex tales that do not fit into such neat categories (Shalal-Esa 2007).

Contemporary Arab American writers are concerned with dispossession, exile, loss, and grief, but rather than sinking into an abyss of introspection, they envision possibilities for taking action, seizing power, and building alliances with other groups. One thread that unites these newer writers is a conscious decision to identify as—and with—communities of color. They claim the margins as their native soil and honor the inherent contradictions of their identities. Their works see identity not as a fixed essence but a social construction, a product of the multiple and overlapping forces of geography, historical moment, gender, ethnicity, age, and class.

The past decade has also seen the publication of several important memoirs by Arab American writers, including Edward Said's remarkable 1999 autobiography *Out of Place*, a moving story of exile, displacement, and an identity forever torn between



languages, places, and even ways of thinking. Said embarked on the writing of the memoir after being diagnosed with cancer, and his writings represented a deliberate attempt to reclaim and record his brilliant memories of the lost landscapes and communities of his childhood, many of which literally no longer exist. The book gives the reader an intimate look at the forces that shaped one of the most important intellectuals in recent memory, narrating his often painful experiences as an immigrant, an exile, and ultimately, an outsider.

Naomi Shihab Nye's book, *Never in a Hurry: Essays on People and Places* (1996), Suheir Hammad's *Drops of This Story* (1996), and Diana Abu-Jaber's foodmemoir, *The Language of Baklava* (2005), further illuminate the rich diversity of Arab American lives.

Aside from selected individual reviews, it was only in the 1990s that one could identify any serious tradition of Arab American literary criticism, aided largely by the work of a few "pioneers," including Lisa Suhair Majaj, Therese Saliba, Nathalie Handal, Evelyn Shakir, Mohja Kahf, and Elmaz Abinader. One excellent example of the serious scholarship emerging is *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist* (2002), which provides a comprehensive look at Adnan's literary and artistic accomplishments through analysis and close readings. Its authors, Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh, have elevated the genre of Arab American writing to a secure place within U.S. academic circles and helped situate it for English-speaking readers. In addition, their work to gather and disseminate secondary sources has helped spawn public appetite for more Arab American writing. Another notable book is *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: A Pioneering*

Call for Arab-American Understanding (2004), a book of scholarly essays compiled by editors Nathan Funk and Betty Sitka to explore the work of this prolific early Arab American writer.

The U.S.-based journal, *Al Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts*, launched in 1993 by Elie Chalala, has also been an important force facilitating the study of Arab and Arab American texts. *Al Jadid* includes timely book reviews, translations, and a host of original articles on topics ranging from music to theatre, books to journals, fiction to fine art, poetry to performing arts. It provides a forum for continuing scholarship and acts as an important bridge connecting Arab American artists to the Arab world.

II. Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye, born in St. Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother, is an accomplished poet and essayist who has also published several children's books and two novels for young adults, *Habibi* (1997) and *Going*, *Going* (2005). Nye has also played an important role in showcasing the work of Arab writers and artists in



various anthologies, including *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East* (1998).

Although her Arab heritage is an important factor in her work, Nye's writing draws on and reflects a wide variety of cultural contexts and sources, including the American Southwest where she lives and the many places she has traveled. Saddeka Arebi, a Saudi Arabian scholar, has also done important work to claim a positive and separate space for Arab women writers, citing an important Islamic concept of "middleness" or *Wasat*, and concluding that being in the middle "does not have to mean 'between-ness,' being torn or on shaky ground, but can be a firm and advantageous position from which one can see both sides more clearly" (Arebi 1994, xi). Nye has inherited this sense of empowerment present in the concept of "middleness," and it pervades her work. In contrast to some Arab Americans who feel fragmented because of their bicultural identities, Nye developed a feeling even as a young child that her "difference" was "always a strength. You were free" (Nye 2000).

This sense of detachment calls to mind Abdul JanMohamed's use of the term "specular border intellectual," a person he defines as being equally familiar with two cultures but unwilling or unable to be "at home" in these societies, subjecting the cultures to analytic scrutiny rather than combining them (JanMohamed 1990, 97). For instance, Edward Said, the late Palestinian American scholar, wrote that he always felt he belonged to both the Arab and the Western worlds, "without being completely of either one or the other" (Said 1993, xxvi). Nye's poetry often gives one exactly this sense of standing somehow apart. In a poem entitled "Over the Fence," she addresses the lack of fit that sometimes plagues people with a bicultural or multicultural heritage, staging the poem as a dialogue that takes place between

two neighbors over the fence that divides their properties and lives. Nye yearns for the steadiness of having lived one's whole life in one town, perhaps even one house, as her neighbor has. But the neighbor sees Nye's life as far more exciting than the yawning tedium of her own, with each day marked only by her husband's departure, when "the world clicks shut/like a little dead door" and with the endless cycle of dirty dishes to wash (Nye 1986, 69). Even the plants seem more glamorous on Nye's side of the fence, where purple iris "float their silken heads"; on her side, the neighbor sees her rose as "a stick forever" (Nye 1986, 69). For her part, Nye refuses to be put on some pedestal for her worldliness, concluding that she would gladly "take one tongue if it fit me." She doesn't consider herself any more fortunate than her neighbor. "I say no one is lucky. We have faces, they get old," she writes, reminding them both of their common frailty as human beings (Nye 1986, 69).

Although Nye chafes at "voices chiding me to 'speak for my people," her Palestinian American heritage informs earlier poems such "The Man Who Makes Brooms" (Nye 1986, 36), while her outrage about the war in Iraq looms large in more



recent poetry. In one poem, an ode to "The Sweet Arab, the Generous Arab," Nye implores, "Please forgive everyone who has not honored your name." She paints a portrait of the "Arabs I know, generous to a fault, welcoming, with the same wish for a safe daily life as millions of other people around the world. Who packed the pieces, carried them, to a new corner. For whom the words rubble and blast are constants" (Nye 2005, 57).

Despite the frustration and grief apparent in her newer poems, Nye holds fast to a sense of agency and empowerment. Her heroine in *Going*, *Going* is a courageous teenage girl who rallies her friends and neighbors to boycott the growing corporate influences on her community and fight to save small local businesses. The overall theme is a metaphor for Nye's own effort to salvage the particularities of our rich divergent histories and avoid the generalizations and homogenization that Wal-Mart represents.

Blood

"A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands," my father would say. And he'd prove it, cupping the buzzer instantly while the host with the swatter stared.

In the spring our palms peeled like snakes. True Arabs believed watermelon could heal fifty ways. I changed these to fit the occasion.

Years before, a girl knocked, wanted to see the Arab.
I said we didn't have one.
After that, my father told me who he was, "Shihab"--"shooting star"-a good name, borrowed from the sky.
Once I said, "When we die, we give it back?"
He said that's what a true Arab would say.

Today the headlines clot in my blood.

A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.

Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root is too big for us. What flag can we wave?

I wave the flag of stone and seed, table mat stitched in blue.



I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
to plead with the air:
Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now?

Different Ways to Pray

There was the method of kneeling, a fine method, if you lived in a country where stones were smooth.

The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards, hidden corners where knee fit rock.

Their prayers were weathered rib bones, small calcium words uttered in sequence, as if this shedding of syllables could somehow fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long they walked like sheep.

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—
Hear us! We have pain on earth!

We have so much pain there is no place to store it!

But the olives bobbed peacefully in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.

At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese, and were happy in spite of the pain, because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage, wrapping themselves in new white linen to ride buses across miles of vacant sand. When they arrived at Mecca they would circle the holy places, on foot, many times, they would bend to kiss the earth and return, their lean faces housing mystery.



While for certain cousins and grandmothers
the pilgrimage occurred daily,
lugging water from the spring
or balancing the baskets of grapes.
These were the ones present at births,
humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,
forgetting how easily children soil clothes.
There were those who didn't care about praying.
The young ones. The ones who had been to America.
They told the old ones, you are wasting your time.
Time?—The old ones prayed for the young ones.
They prayed for Allah to mend their brains,
for the twig, the round moon,
to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one who did none of this, the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool, who beat everyone at dominoes, insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats, and was famous for his laugh.

Fundamentalism

Because the eye has a short shadow or it is hard to see over heads in the crowd?

If everyone else seems smarter but you need your own secret?

If mystery was never your friend?

If one way could satisfy the infinite heart of the heavens?

If you liked the king on his golden throne more than the villagers carrying baskets of lemons?



If you wanted to be sure his guards would admit you to the party?

The boy with the broken pencil scrapes his little knife against the lead turning and turning it as a point emerges from the wood again

If he would believe his life is like that he would not follow his father into war

Half-And-Half

You can't be, says a Palestinian Christian on the first feast day after Ramadan. So, half-and-half and half-and-half. He sells glass. He knows about broken bits, chips. If you love Jesus you can't love anyone else. Says he.

At his stall of blue pitchers on the Via Dolorosa, he's sweeping. The rubbed stones feel holy. Dusting of powdered sugar across faces of date-stuffed mamool.

This morning we lit the slim white candles which bend over at the waist by noon. For once the priests weren't fighting in the church for the best spots to stand. As a boy, my father listened to them fight. This is partly why he prays in no language but his own. Why I press my lips to every exception.

A woman opens a window—here and here—

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placing a vase of blue flowers on an orange cloth. I follow her. She is making a soup from what she had left in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean. She is leaving nothing out.

Jerusalem

"Let's be the same wound if we must bleed. Let's fight side by side, even if the enemy is ourselves: I am yours, you are mine." —Tommy Olofsson, Sweden

I'm not interested in who suffered the most. I'm interested in people getting over it.

Once when my father was a boy a stone hit him on the head.
Hair would never grow there.
Our fingers found the tender spot and its riddle: the boy who has fallen stands up. A bucket of pears in his mother's doorway welcomes him home. The pears are not crying.
Later his friend who threw the stone says he was aiming at a bird.
And my father starts growing wings.

Each carries a tender spot:
something our lives forgot to give us.
A man builds a house and says,
"I am native now."
A woman speaks to a tree in place
of her son. And olives come.
A child's poem says,
"I don't like wars,
they end up with monuments."
He's painting a bird with wings
wide enough to cover two roofs at once.



Why are we so monumentally slow? Soldiers stalk a pharmacy: big guns, little pills. If you tilt your head just slightly it's ridiculous.

There's a place in my brain where hate won't grow.

I touch its riddle: wind, and seeds.

Something pokes us as we sleep.

It's late but everything comes next.

Shoulders

A man crosses the street in rain, stepping gently, looking two times north and south, because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.

No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo but he's not marked.

Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,

HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing. He hears the hum of a boy's dream deep inside him.

We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what he's doing with one another.

The road will only be wide. The rain will never stop falling.



Supple Cord

My brother, in his small white bed, held one end. I tugged the other to signal I was still awake. We could have spoken, could have sung to one another, we were in the same room for five years, but the soft cord with its little frayed ends connected us in the dark, gave comfort even if we had been bickering all day. When he fell asleep first and his end of the cord dropped to the floor, I missed him terribly, though I could hear his even breath and we had such long and separate lives ahead

The Small Vases from Hebron

Tip their mouths open to the sky. Turquoise, amber, the deep green with fluted handle, pitcher the size of two thumbs, tiny lip and graceful waist.

Here we place the smallest flower which could have lived invisibly in loose soil beside the road, sprig of succulent rosemary, bowing mint.

They grow deeper in the center of the table.



Here we entrust the small life, thread, fragment, breath.
And it bends. It waits all day.
As the bread cools and the children open their gray copybooks to shape the letter that looks like a chimney rising out of a house.

And what do the headlines say?

Nothing of the smaller petal perfectly arranged inside the larger petal or the way tinted glass filters light.

Men and boys, praying when they died, fall out of their skins.

The whole alphabet of living, heads and tails of words, sentences, the way they said, "Ya'Allah!" when astonished, or "ya'ani" for "I mean"—
a crushed glass under the feet still shines.

But the child of Hebron sleeps with the thud of her brothers falling and the long sorrow of the color red.

The Words Under the Words

for Sitti Khadra, north of Jerusalem

My grandmother's hands recognize grapes, the damp shine of a goat's new skin.

When I was sick they followed me,
I woke from the long fever to find them covering my head like cool prayers.

My grandmother's days are made of bread, a round pat-pat and the slow baking. She waits by the oven watching a strange car

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circle the streets. Maybe it holds her son, lost to America. More often, tourists, who kneel and weep at mysterious shrines. She knows how often mail arrives, how rarely there is a letter.
When one comes, she announces it, a miracle, listening to it read again and again in the dim evening light.

My grandmother's voice says nothing can surprise her. Take her the shotgun wound and the crippled baby. She knows the spaces we travel through, the messages we cannot send—our voices are short and would get lost on the journey. Farewell to the husband's coat, the ones she has loved and nourished, who fly from her like seeds into a deep sky. They will plant themselves. We will all die.

My grandmother's eyes say Allah is everywhere, even in death. When she talks of the orchard and the new olive press, when she tells the stories of Joha and his foolish wisdoms, He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name. "Answer, if you hear the words under the words—otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges, difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones."