



# *damazine*

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## Silk Road

J.S. Absher – United States

*“Silk Road” describes a fictional encounter between Islamic and Christian cultures in Cappadocia, an area in modern Turkey famous for its underground fortresses and cities, where citizens would hide from invaders for months at a time. The bulbs at issue were plants from Central Asia that became available in Europe, often at very high prices, only after the fall of Byzantium in May 1453.*

i.

The city fell. Wealth and comforts vanished.  
Jasper and sard were pulled from the walls  
and the gateposts and tossed on the bonfire.  
No longer was there an Empress to regret  
she had not more orifices to please  
her faithful subjects. Alone, in unlit cells,  
religious knelt, *Come, Lord Jesus, hammer  
into pieces the stone of retribution.*

A group of *xenoi* entered the central market.  
We come from Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara  
(they said) by way of Baku and Jerevan,  
bearing over mountain and plain fritillary,  
hyacinth, turban ranunculus. We offer  
our perennial splendors in exchange  
for little offerings from your walls — those  
small sweet smaragds green as the winter sea.

The noblest *xenos* took from his camel a sack  
and with his own hands upended it.  
Bulbs came tumbling out, dirty and shriveled.  
What sort of splendor is this? an old man asked.  
It's true we are starving, our wives and daughters  
have shaved their heads, our oldest boys been seized  
to fight our own kind. Though we wait for death,  
we will not trade our walls for bags of onions.

ii.

The next day, the traders returned, openly  
armed. They searched the whole city to find  
someone to barter with, but found it deserted —  
the porticos where the Old Men debated,  
the courtyards where children ran and women  
spread skeins of dyed cloth to dry in the sun,  
the armory, the mint, even the guardhouse.

From the tower of St. Sophia,  
a solitary bird called *pit-pit, pit-pit.*

With saber and scabbard the strangers prized  
the jewels from the wall. They kicked the bulbs  
across the marketplace like horse turds.

iii.

Before moonrise the people of the city  
had slipped through a door hidden in the cellar  
of the old man's house. They wondered at the doorposts,  
carved like nothing they had ever seen  
outside a dream — enormous tusks furred  
and stained with age, or the thick hair between  
their mothers' legs. They entered an ancient place  
of labyrinthine cul-de-sacs, loopholes  
for arrows, kettles for boiling oil,  
and cistern, stable, chapel, and granary.

Too restless to stop, they took an eastern passage.  
Unnumbered rooms. An endless corridor  
that did not always connect the same rooms,  
but floated in the darkness — now debouching  
in the looted treasury of Ecbatana,  
now descending in somnolent slowness  
to lapis mines near Firgamu, at last  
rising in waking spirals till they could feel  
the heat of the sun beating the desert floor.  
The old man stamped the dirt  
and cried out like a rooster, *Aru! Aru!*

iv.

The *xenoi* above them rode their Bactrians east,  
slowed by the bags of jewels. They stalled in the Desert  
of Lop. Their sleep was troubled by noises  
in the earth — the shuffling of feet, the mumbling  
and cursing of old men. By day they heard  
voices blown in the sand, the strains  
of dulcimers and drums, the clash of arms.  
Water ran out. They ignited dung to melt  
those little stones as cold as the winter sea.

The noblest *xenos*, lured by the strange noises,  
wanders into the dunes. In the distance  
he sees a field, it must be a field of home,  
as bright with lilies and anemones  
as skeins of dyed cloth drying in the sun.  
His lips are gummed shut with thirst.  
*I will weave a basket of reeds* (he thinks),  
*I will fill up the basket with corms and bulbs*  
*plump with moisture, firm as a virgin's breast,*  
*and those I do not eat and drink today*

*I will take to the next oasis to trade  
for gems of the finest water — citrines  
as big as apricots, rubies as red  
as the burnt-out eyes of my companions.*

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*J.S. Absher (<http://jsabsher.bluedomino.com>, <http://twitter.com/jsabsher>) lives in Durham, NC. His chapbook, *The Burial of Anyce Shepherd*, was published by *Main Street Rag* in 2006. Work from his full-length manuscript, *The Travels of John*, has been nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*.*

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## Downriver Detroit (or The Woman Who Thought I Was Muslim)

K. Biadaszkiewicz – United States

I wear long skirts even though I am not completely certain there is a God.

The breezes are strong along the river, so I often wear a head scarf to keep my hair from tangling in the wind.

Walking along the sidewalk in Wyandotte on a hot and windy afternoon in July, I saw a car approaching. It was the only car on the road, and as it approached it came closer and closer to the sidewalk.

Then the window opened, and a young woman with long blond hair wearing a skimpy top and a sneer I won't soon forget turned her head at me and as the car slowed down and came very close, she made that tongue sound at me, stronger than spit.

Then I heard laughter and the car sped away and I was alone again. Sometimes when your throat hurts from being sad, your knees give out, and that's what happened to me, but I caught myself against the brick wall of the beauty shop, and didn't fall.

I am an intelligent woman. I know about history. Not only here, but in England and France and Mexico. I did it in school. In the Southern United States, until recently, it was considered sport by some white people to drive a car close to sidewalks where African American families, dressed in their best clothes, were walking to church. While the driver steered the car close to the sidewalk, someone threw mud or paint from the car at the people on the sidewalk, ruining their clothing. Had my mind been working clearly on that blistering hot and windy July afternoon, that is what I could have remembered: a sort of intellectual diversion that sometimes can clear the mind. But it was not working clearly.

All I remembered was that there are many things in my life that I don't understand. Injustice, for instance. And throats and knees. Knees are not connected to the throat. There is no reason why they should have given out the moment my throat froze. I have a throat that quick-freezes at every opportunity to be hurt. I am way too sensitive.

I shouldn't try to explain things I don't understand, like why, if people make that tongue sound on TV, I am supposed to think they are stupid; but if a girl with a blond pony tail leans out of an SUV racing toward me on the sidewalk and makes the same sound, I am supposed to think there is something wrong with me.

I personally like sounds without words. It encourages people to try harder to understand one another. Nobody understands me.

I am stupid, wearing a long skirt on such a hot day. I guess you could say I was inviting that girl or someone like her to hurt me by making the sound, but I wasn't. It's just that I like to wear long skirts. I like the way they swish when I walk. I like the way it's safe inside them.

It's funny, though. I mean, my not being Muslim, and still getting hurt by somebody who was ridiculing me because she thought that's who I was. What's funny about it is that I still got hurt.

My throat got clogged up with sadness. Don't ask me why, because I don't know anything. As I said, I'm not even sure if there's a God. All I know is that everyone at one time or another is filled with sadness. This makes us all the same. It is what we do next that makes us sing out our own sounds.

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*Stories, poems, and theater scripts by K. Biadaszkiewicz have been published and/or produced in Europe and throughout the U.S.*

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## It Seems a Lifetime Away

Stephen Cribari – United States

It seems a lifetime away, the desert, where  
every tent opened inward, offering  
olives and wine to those traveling, asking  
in return only, Who are you, What's the news,  
From where have you come. In the desert we were  
free and there was nothing, nothing but the wind  
and the voice of God resounding everywhere,  
each grain of sand a song ("Here. Here. I Am here"),  
and the inescapable sun ("I Am here"),  
and the inescapable thirst ("I Am here"),  
yet always we found, or were found by, water  
("I Am here. I Am here. I Am always here.")  
and the wind abrading our bodies with sand,  
until the choice to journey on was a prayer  
and each step onward our act of worshiping.

We are a nomadic people. We exist  
to know and to follow our nomadic God  
who is everywhere, to journey toward a home  
that we have never left (that is everywhere)  
and we are faithless when we set down ourselves  
with a confusion of images and signs  
and tangles of arguments that require  
God speak man's language in order to be heard.  
Images cannot contain the emptiness

of the desert, rhetoric cannot replace  
the music of the sands moving in the wind,  
and no amount of safety, riches, power  
can justify our losing the poetry  
of our God singing to us in the desert.

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*Stephen Cribari teaches at the University of Minnesota Law School. His recent work includes* *Massage Therapy (forthcoming, Chest), Il Veduto dal Croce (forthcoming, Oracle), You Should Have Seen It (Best of Tigertail), the verse play* *Fingerprinting a Corpse (The Playwrights' Center Monologues for Men), and the play* *Radio Traffic (with Don Judges, Center for Independent Artists).*

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## Pink Lady

Najiyah Diana Helwani – Syria

Elsie kept her best hat on the little table by the door and put it on last, so she could check her completed look in the mirror before she went out to meet the world. Its wide, soft pink brim was adorned with a sheer grey net and a flower on one side. The flower was a maroon and grey rose. Elsie knew maroon and grey roses didn't exist in nature, but she thought they should.

The pink hat was Elsie's trademark. A great find, it was the only thing that had made last summer's trip to Eureka Springs worthwhile. Her husband had always loved the Ozarks, and Elsie tolerated the canoeing and deer-head-covered mantles once a year, for his sake. She'd found the pink hat at a quaint little boutique near Basin Park, and it was one of a kind. She'd never mentioned to her friends that it was a *consignment* boutique, but they didn't need to know.

Elsie checked her reflection one last time, patted her pin curls, tightened the pink belt on her grey trench coat, drew on her grey gloves with the pink buttons, and headed out the door. The rubber stoppers on her pink pumps kept them from clicking on the ground. Nothing trashier than a woman who click-clacked down the street. Elsie shook her head as she thought of that insufferable checkout woman at Metcalf's Drugs, who wore bright red lipstick, teased her hair and click-clacked with the worst of them. Trashy women were lower on Elsie's list than those hippies who had started showing up among the Sunflower State's young people, wearing bell-bottom jeans, long hair, and all manner of strange tattoos.

Elsie thought about taking the Impala, but decided to walk. She hated fighting with that infernal garage door, and the café wasn't far. Maybe she'd even stop in at Marge's for a few minutes and ask after her brother.

Marge had been a couple of years behind Elsie in school, but they'd grown up in the same neighborhood and had spent many a long summer evening playing jacks as little girls. Marge's brother was in Topeka at the VA hospital. He'd been sent home after he'd broken his arm and his hip falling out of a helicopter that was taking off to pick up wounded men somewhere in the jungle. Elsie thought some broken bones were a heck of a lot better than flying into enemy territory. She hoped Marge's brother was doing well enough to feel better but not well enough to be sent back to the fighting. She'd seen on the television that the war had spread all the way to the desert now. That didn't sound any better than the jungle to her.

Elsie was surprised when the door chimes didn't jingle to announce her arrival. She always looked forward to hearing their soft pinging when she entered Marge's flower shop. They reminded her of the wind chimes that used to hang from her mother's laundry line, keeping her company on wistful afternoons while she hung the laundry and dreamed of being swept off her feet by Mr. Right. Which she had been when she was 22. But today the chimes were silent, and Elsie found Marge slumped in a chair.

"Margaret! What's happened?" She rushed over to her friend.

Marge didn't even raise her head.

“Marge! Can you hear me?” demanded Elsie. “What’s happened? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

“Not today, Elsie.”

“Marge, look at me. You are in your shop. In your nightdress!”

Marge seemed to grow irritated. “Stop it, Elsie,” she insisted. And then more gently, “I’m fine. I just don’t feel well today. I think I’ll close up early and go home.” She looked weary.

Elsie didn’t know whether to be satisfied with that answer or not. She went to the sink and brought Marge a glass of water. “Do you want me to call Henry?”

“No,” Marge said, sounding a bit more like herself. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Well.” Elsie hesitated. “If you say so. I’ll call you at home after the meeting, all right?”

“That sounds good,” agreed Margaret.

Disconcerted, Elsie looked back over her shoulder as she left the shop, still wondering if she should call Marge’s husband. Just as she turned her head back around she ran smack into Janice, that dreadful cashier from Metcalf’s. I shouldn’t have thought about her this morning, Elsie mused. I jinxed myself!

Janice smiled that big fake smile of hers — the one that often revealed smears of lipstick on her front teeth. They were clean today, though. Elsie plastered a smile onto her own face.

“Where’re you headed, Mrs. Atchison?”

“Setty’s Café. We’re having our League of Women Voters meeting there today. The fall fundraiser is coming up, you know. We have a lot to do, so we’re meeting twice a week.”

“I was just on my way to the cafeteria as well!” gushed Janice. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Well, that would be nice, Janice. How is Paul?”

As Janice prattled on about her husband Paul and his gardening exploits, Elsie realized she was stuck with her company until they reached the café. At least there she’d have an excuse to take her leave and would be able to escape gracefully. Elsie snuck a look at Janice’s clothes. She was wearing a pantsuit! Elsie knew Janice was short on taste, but *pants*?! Her polyester shirt was belted at the waist, no doubt setting off her big behind from the back, for the benefit of any men who might find themselves in her wake.

“Pardon me?” Elsie realized Janice had asked her a question.

“I said, did you hear about Mrs. Duncan?” asked Janice again, seeming for some reason anxious.

“No, what about her?” Elsie narrowed her eyes. She didn't think Janice, of all people, had a right to be gossiping about anyone else, but on the other hand she didn't want to miss out on whatever drama was unfolding; she might be able to take the news to the LWV meeting. Not to gossip, of course, but to share her concern for Livvy Duncan with the other ladies.

“She passed away last night,” said Janice reaching out to touch Elsie's back. She tried to keep her shock from showing too much.

“Oh, my goodness,” she tsked. “She *has* been sick for a while, though. Kidney problems, you know.” She made sure her own knowledge of Mrs. Duncan was not completely trumped. Then Elsie was quiet for a moment. It really was a shame about Livvy, poor thing. She was an elderly lady who was rather new in town. She wore bifocal glasses around her neck and was always trying to knit a scarf or something, but no one ever saw any completed project.

“Well, they said she went in her sleep,” Janice consoled them both. “Thank God for that.”

“Yes, thank God for that,” agreed Elsie.

They had arrived at the café.

“Can I help you find a seat?” Janice asked. Elsie raised her eyebrows at the heavily made up face of her companion.

“Why whatever for? The ladies of the LWV are right over there!” Elsie pointed to her friends and edged away from Janice. She greeted the group, most of whom were still mingling and chatting before sitting down to begin their meeting. She removed her gloves and sat down in the nearest chair. “Afternoon, ladies! I hope you're all enjoying this lovely weather. I just came from Marge's. She's not herself today — have any of you talked to her?”

The ladies blinked at her, some of them looking uncomfortable. One of them spoke. “Good morning, Mrs. Atchison! We haven't seen Marge today.”

The rest of them were still looking at her oddly. “What?” asked Elsie, looking around to see if there was something shocking behind her.

Janice approached again.

“Mrs. Atchison,” she said, dripping with sickly sweetness. “Please let me find you another seat.” She put one hand on Elsie's shoulder and offered the other one for her to take.

“What's going on here?” demanded Elsie.

“There are some other residents who would enjoy your company over here,” Janice cooed, and Elsie looked where she was pointing. Three old women she didn't know were sitting at a table, one of them in a wheelchair.

“Who are those women? I don't know them! Why can't I sit with my friends? What's gotten into you, Janice?” Elsie was beginning to edge from irritation into fear.

“You remember these ladies, don't you Mrs. Atchison? Mrs. Harmon is your roommate and Mrs. Summerville is your activities partner.”

“Yeah, and I'm Lucille Ball,” the wheelchair lady said in a husky voice, and laughed a convulsive laugh that segued into a violent coughing fit.

“Sit with them today, okay? The LWV ladies are serving lunch now, so they'll have to meet with you later.”

Elsie gave a last bewildered look but sat down heavily in the chair that Janice indicated and looked back at the ladies of the LWV. They were all wearing the same kind of slutty pantsuit as Janice. Some of them had hair nets on, and they were indeed serving lunch to the people in the room.

Elsie looked down at her hands for a long moment while her companions continued to eat. Then she sat up, replastered her smile and straightened her ragged pink hat. “Did you ladies hear about Mrs. Duncan?” she asked.

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*Najiyah Diana Helwani is the author of the acclaimed young-adult novel Sophia's Journal (available from <http://www.muslimwriterspublishing.com>.) Her articles have appeared in Azizah, Q-News and M-Voice magazines. She teaches English and writing in Damascus, Syria, where she lives with her husband and six children, and is currently working on her second novel. Najiyah can be contacted at [tellnajiyah@gmail.com](mailto:tellnajiyah@gmail.com).*

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## Egypt, Allah, and the Nubian

Karen Hunt – United States

There were many times during our travels that my sister Janna and I agreed that our parents should be jailed for child endangerment. One of those times was in Egypt. What were we doing in a country that hated us, right before a war? Of course, we didn't know that the Six-Day War was about to occur. I mean, we weren't fortune tellers, but all the signs pointed to some sort of violent explosion, and we had naively driven our powder blue VW van right smack into the middle of it.

We'd crossed a choppy sea by ferry from Greece and were excited to reach Egypt. Egypt! Land of the pharaohs, pyramids, enchantment, romance — ha! It took forever to get off the boat, even with the self-appointed "official" who'd attached himself, demanding \$10 for his services — mom grumbling that it must be a month's wages for him and what a thief, dad saying it was worth it just to get off the boat. And it was, since our "official" physically assaulted any other "official" who dared to come near us, and try they did, a barrage of them with raised angry fists, yelling in that guttural language that was all punches, nothing soft and measured, yet still I had to admit somehow fluid and melodious. What a relief to get into our van and on the road, with the metal and windows of our vehicle giving a fake sense of protection from the guards armed with machine guns patrolling the streets, glaring at us as if we were the enemy. And apparently we were. America was on the side of Israel and so we must also be destroyed. On every street corner the grainy voice of Nasser spouted from P.A. systems, denouncing Israel, accompanied by frenzied applause from the crowds.

My oldest brother Davy, ever the contemplative philosopher, frowned thoughtfully. "That's where we want to go after this, right, to Israel?"

Dad nodded.

I looked at Janna. She looked at me. And I knew she was thinking the same thing: child endangerment. We sank down low in our seats, thinking maybe we could disappear and no one would notice us. Maybe, just maybe, we'd make it out of this country alive, just like we had the others, if we were very lucky and didn't attract attention.

Not attracting attention was impossible for a family of giants. I was almost eleven and already I was 5'10", taller than many of the men in the countries we'd visited. When our family of six walked down the street or into a room, we attracted far too much attention, of the uncomplimentary variety — raised eyebrows, whispered words, disbelieving curiosity. It made me want to slouch, for which I was severely reprimanded by my dad. "Stand up straight! Slouching doesn't make you look short, in fact, it draws more attention because you're trying to hide it. Be proud, one day you'll be glad you're tall."

With much grumbling, our parents dragged us out of the safety and anonymity of the van, where we would have happily stayed, insisting we visit the Montazah Palace, or as mom described it, "the summer dwelling of fat, foolish, and fatuous Farouk," whoever that was. I didn't ask because then she would have prolonged the lecture and the visit.

We walked through the dressing rooms and very impractical cavernous baths and visited the daughters' bedrooms, starkly plain, and the sons' suites, the exact opposite.

“Humph,” said Janna. Suddenly all those tales of the Arabian nights didn’t seem so romantic anymore. The reality of life in this country was proving nothing like my imagination had thought it would be.

Walking back to our car, we saw that a crowd had gathered around it. They were pointing at the sticker on the back window that said, plain as day, for everyone to see: USA.

We’d all gotten used to the sticker, a requirement for foreigners, and I can’t say I’d ever really thought about it until that moment. None of us had. But now, the implications of that sticker were huge. Far from being anonymous while inside the van, we were broadcasting to all these people that we were from the country that they hated with a hatred beyond reason, a hatred inspired by their hatred of Israel, the country they were about to attack. In fact, they’d probably attack us immediately because, after all, we were standing right in front of them, probably looking aggressive due to our unusual height, so why not?

I grabbed my dad, almost in a panic. “We gotta get out of here.”

“Don’t be silly,” he said and marched right up to the van.

The crowd parted before us and suddenly, they were all smiles, nodding graciously, holding out their hands to shake ours. Friendly, they were all friendly, no guards or machine guns among them, telling us how they loved America. I felt ashamed.

We drove to Cairo via the desert route, a dismal, arid, and dusty road lined with flat-roofed mud dwellings or tattered tents and here and there a camel or a donkey, dejected and tattered as well. It was a frightening drive, with checkpoints, impossible to tell which were official and which weren’t, as if anyone could decide to set up a checkpoint to make a bit of extra cash, and you better pay them. What happened if someone didn’t have cash, I wondered? Not a pleasant thought. I was glad my parents seemed to have enough to keep handing it out, not without a good deal of haggling, which seemed to exhaust and frustrate my dad, who rarely ever got frustrated and never got exhausted.

Along the loneliest stretch of road, suddenly, an officer jumped out of a moving army truck just ahead of us, imperiously flagged us down and jumped into our car. He was young and not bad-looking, except for his flowing moustache which made him look ridiculous instead of imperious. Unsmiling, he rode with us into Cairo, asking questions all the way, especially what we thought of Egypt and Nasser. He even demanded that each of us children give him an opinion.

David, Janna, and I all said we didn’t know enough about Nasser but thought he must be okay.

Jon glowered at the officer and said, “Shoot him,” imitating the sounds of a machine gun.

A horrified moment of silence ensued before the officer barked a stilted laugh and said, “Ah, the little one, he hasn’t learned his manners, has he?” He frowned icily at my parents.

I reminded myself to strangle Jon when we got to our hotel, which turned out to be the Cairo YMCA. Not the lap of luxury, but at least it was right across the street from the Canadian Embassy, the flag with its maple leaf a very comforting sight.

Once in our room, we threw open the long French windows and stepped onto our balcony to find spread below the most incredibly confusing, noisy, colorful city I had ever seen and have ever seen since. At our first opportunity, we left the YMCA to walk the streets, a nerve-racking assault to the senses. Donkeys, camels, chickens, pedestrians, bicyclists, merchants hawking their wares, vans, dilapidated trucks, and rickety smog-pelting cars all vied for space on the streets and sidewalks. In fact, the sidewalks seemed to be equally considered a place on which to drive as were the pock-marked streets. A constant barrage of horns, angry voices, barking, bleating, and braying animals left me confused and disoriented. Once, I almost ran into an Arab in flowing robes riding a bicycle and balancing a huge tray of newly baked bread on his head. The bread smelled delicious and I was hungry, distracting me from realizing until it was almost too late that he was coming right at me and I was squashed between the side of a food stand and an enormous man who refused to budge. The cyclist yelled I can only imagine what foul swear words, clearly intending to mow me down if I didn't get out of his way. At the last minute I threw myself against the fat man with all of my skinny might. He yelled angrily, too, teetered for a moment before toppling over, the cyclist missing me by an inch. I managed to retain my balance and didn't dare wait around for the fat man to get up. I ran, slithering in and out of the crowd, finally coming to a stop at a street corner. Frantically, I looked up and down for my family, relieved to see my parents' heads bobbing high above everyone else's about a block away. They, too, were looking for me. I jumped up and down and waved and yelled, my voice making no dent in the cacophony surrounding me. But they saw me and waited until I caught up with them. It was one time when I was thankful for our height, admitting that it did serve a good purpose when lost in a strange city among a hostile crowd of gun-toting maniacs and hit-and-run bicyclists.

The next morning I so badly craved a shower that I braved the common bathroom with the broken lock, stationing Janna outside to keep me safe. By that stage in our trip, I had experienced so many horrific bathrooms that the Cairo YMCA didn't faze me at all. The only odd thing was that there wasn't actually a shower stall. The shower head was almost directly over the toilet and water ran into the toilet bowl and onto the surrounding stone floor, where there was a drain for it to flow down. Only, of course, the drain was clogged with debris. Who had thought up such an insane design I couldn't imagine.

I almost opted for using the sink, which was what I often did in extremely disgusting situations. But I really wanted to feel that water running down my entire body so I turned the shower on and stood for a few brief moments of luxury. Life was pretty basic, I thought, if I found this experience luxurious. I was an expert at taking very fast showers, not wanting to stay a minute longer than necessary, and I was out in a flash, stationing myself so that Janna could take one, too.

When finally we made it out of the city to visit the pyramids I began to think that maybe Egypt wasn't so bad after all. This was the land that I had dreamed about. It still existed, here in the desert, away from the insanity of politics and government and press of bodies and modern life. Our guide was the all-time champion pyramid climber (very cute, observed Janna, as we were both obsessed with levels of cuteness in young men) — five minutes up and two minutes down. I stared up at the massive tomb of Cheops. There was something sacrilegious in racing up and down the pyramid and winning prizes for it.

"Thirty years to build the tomb," said our guide. Such a mystery, I thought. To build a tomb for one person, well, a god, I supposed. All that trouble, people enslaved and dying so that one pharaoh could live forever. And yet, it was magical, looking at it rising to a point that

pierced the azure sky, and then entering the tomb and walking up the low ramp into the burial chamber. Frightening and magical. All the people from that time were gone, turned to dust, but the pyramid lasted forever. Or at least as long as forever lasted on Planet Earth. And the Sphinx, just as sly and supremely noble as I had ever thought it would be.

Afterwards, we rode Arabian horses and camels across the desert and I thought, yes, this is wonderful. I love this! It was worth the craziness that we'd navigated in order to get here. That's how life was, you had to go through craziness if you wanted to reach the special places, the magical, mystical places, because they weren't right there, obvious, for everyone to see. They were hidden, like the tomb of the pharaohs, needing to be searched for and found and experienced all the more for the difficulty of getting there.

Into the inevitable bazaar we went, back to the press of bodies and onslaught of sounds and smells after the quiet serenity of the desert. Forever after I have loved the desert — any desert, in any country, anywhere.

My mom bought a camel saddle, for what reason, I can't imagine, since I doubted we'd be riding camels when we got back home to Los Angeles. But it would probably look nice in our house and I could show it to my friends as proof that I had ridden one. My parents got a newspaper and discovered that we came from the gangster state of the USA and Israel was our gangster stooge. We found a Russian bookstore with books all in English, all published in Moscow and all very cheap.

Surrounded by those wonderful English words was like food after starvation and we devoured them eagerly, at least until Mom decided to embarrass us by complaining to the Russian clerk about some passages in a geography book.

"Excuse me," she said, rather too loudly because the bookstore was one place that wasn't noisy. "How can you publish this rubbish? How can you claim that in America 'a few billionaires live in palaces and control and exploit the country, compared to the rest of the people who live in miserable shacks crowded into narrow streets with no trees?'"

The clerk remained stone-faced and claimed not to understand English. My mom shook her head in disgust and fortunately decided not to continue the one-sided debate. We all walked out — or rather stalked out, which is probably what it looked like, although we didn't mean it to. But it's inevitable when six extremely tall foreigners leave a store all at once, slamming the door behind them, which we didn't mean to do either, as the door was broken and almost fell off its hinges.

Leaving Cairo behind, we traveled south along the Nile to Luxor and the Valley of the Kings.

"Not many foreigners travel this road," said my dad proudly.

Trust my dad to find the least traveled roads in the world. And truly, along this tortuous road of four hundred miles, we only met one other foreign traveler — going in the opposite direction. We waved and honked, feeling more isolated and alone for having seen him.

Gone were the army trucks and the screaming voice of Nasser. Instead, stretched before us were endless fields, the grain being cut with short knives, then gathered into sheaves and taken camel-back to the threshing floor where it was formed into circular mounds and threshed by camel or water-buffalo power. After that, or so my mom pointed out, the heap

was winnowed by hand, the glistening arc of straw blowing away with each swish of the fork. Then, the grain was scooped by hand into huge bags and hoisted onto camels to be sent away to market.

In this alien world, unlike any I had ever known, everything was made of mud: houses, water pots, simple irrigation mechanisms, even the people it seemed to me. Every so often we came upon a wayside refreshment stand, a ragged awning with nothing much else to advertise it, and thirsty as we were, we dared not drink from the mud water pots. Everyone from the surrounding area seemed to be congregated at these stops, bartering, gossiping, laughing.

The road often became no more than a dirt camel path and, once, ahead of us was a donkey-drawn flatbed filled to overflowing with field workers, waving at us and making a terrible racket, swaying back and forth and all but falling out. Heaps of tatters by the roadside meant someone was lying down, taking a nap. Often, out of nowhere a swarm of children would arrive, running by the side of our car, yelling for money and candy. If we stopped, faces pressed against the windows, with those behind the lucky ones in front pushing and jumping up and down in order to see. And if we were brave enough to actually get out, hot bodies pressed against us and I came face to face with girls my age with thick dark hair and open mouths, staring wide-eyed, as if I was a movie star. Often their luminous brown eyes were filled with flies licking the moisture from the corners. It made me ill and I wondered why they didn't flick them away. I tried once, unable to resist reaching towards a girl and I suppose she thought I was going to hit her. It almost started a fight. But with hand motions, I managed to explain what I wanted to do, and she laughed at me as if I was no longer a movie star but had become very stupid. The flies were everywhere, though, and I wondered if I lived there if I might just give up after a while and let them explore and drink from my eyes, too. I supposed that if I had grown up there, I would be used to it. It made me shiver. No, I would never get used to something like that. It led to disease and even blindness, didn't they know? But they didn't know. And I couldn't tell them because they wouldn't understand.

At last we made it to Luxor, excited to stay in our only experience of a first class hotel, the Savoy.

"It's the only option, so mom and dad have no choice," said Davy with great satisfaction. All of us agreed that this was going to be the best night of our lives thus far.

"First class means luxury!" announced Janna, as we entered the exceedingly impressive and massive front door of the hotel.

What a disappointment. The air conditioning didn't work. The toilets didn't work. There was no hot water. But do you know what there was? Bugs! Lots of creepy, crawly, great big bugs of every possible variety. And mosquitoes. Killer, kamikaze mosquitoes.

"I wouldn't mind so much," said mom severely, "if it weren't for the Nasser folders that they have on the bedside table. Listen to this!" And she read from the folder that Egypt is the wonder of the world for its beautiful blending of the past with the even more glorious present.

I agreed with the wonder of the past, but the present was more like a nightmare.

That night, the air was so hot and suffocating, we dragged a mattress out to the balcony hoping for a breeze. There was no relief from the mosquitoes, though, which brutally attacked us and buzzed in our ears, worse than Chinese water torture. But it was beautiful and mystical and I didn't regret being there. My last impression before sleep finally claimed me was of the Nile bathed in moonlight, the savage barking of wild dogs floating across the river.

The next morning the magic was gone. I was covered in mosquito bites and itching horribly. Jon was the worst. "It's your young, tender skin," said Davy.

"I hate this place, I wanna go home!" cried Jon.

I was beginning to feel the tug of homesickness, too. I hated that feeling and when it came, I knew it brought with it a depression and resentment towards my parents and a longing just to be back to a normal life. I missed my friends. What was I doing in this horrible place, covered in bites, my stomach aching because I was scared of getting sick from eating the food, so all I did was eat bread and get constipated? At least my stomach wasn't bothering me like it had in Spain where I had thought I was going to die.

When the Nubian approached us in the hotel lobby, offering to sail us in his boat on the Nile, our parents said yes. I felt like saying no. It was so hot, the bites on my body so annoying, I just wanted to lie down somewhere and drink mint tea and sleep.

"Ah, you can be relaxing on the boat," said the Nubian, as if reading my mind. "Never you see anything so beautiful, so peaceful."

Somehow his noble, graceful movements and quiet, melodious voice silenced further protests and off we went.

Once on the boat, I forgot all about my homesickness. It was always like that, terribly homesick one moment, yearning for comfort and familiarity and then suddenly, an onslaught of extraordinary beauty, sites, smells, and sounds hitting me, and exhilaration would overcome my depression. I wanted to float along forever, the breeze that I had so craved filling the sail and gliding us forward, bringing relief from the still heat of the shore. The boat was old but sturdy, as if it had sailed back and forth since the days of the pyramids and no storm or drought had conquered it. The man was as sturdy as his boat, but thin and sinewy, the veins showing on his forearms, so shiny black against the white of his robes. Everyone outside the city seemed to be thin, not the kind that came from starvation, but from eating healthy food in moderation.

The view before me was laid out in parallel lines of flat, stark color: first, the muddy water, then the dusty yellow earth, followed by hazy hills and above, the sky, so blue it hurt to look at it. Such a contrast of colors layered one on top of the other, it made me want to paint it. And the breeze, soft and sweet and wonderfully welcome after the sweltering heat of Luxor.

I loved it, loved it so much! I imagined what it would be like if I stayed and everyone else left. I would have adventures up and down the Nile, the Nubian teaching me what to do, guiding the boat, meeting the tourists, and then at night, going home to my little house on the banks. Okay, that wouldn't be so nice. But the sailing part, yes! Nodding in approval at my enraptured expression, the Nubian waved me over. Jon was already with him, learning to

steer the boat. My parents wore expressions of delight, sitting with their backs against the side of the boat, my dad's arm around my mom, both of them talking and laughing quietly. Janna was lazing on the deck, soaking up the sun, while Davy was hiding in a shady spot, a white cloth over his head just like a native. Davy hated the sun.

The Nubian's robes flapped in a sudden breeze and he grasped them between his teeth as he took the wheel back from Jon and expertly steered. I wondered how he put on his turban and if he didn't get hot under it. Anyway, what *was* under it? Hair or a bald head? I didn't dare to ask.

"You wish to sail?" He gestured towards the wheel.

I felt suddenly shy. "I don't know how."

"So then I teach you, like your brother."

"She can't do it," said Jon.

That decided me. I grabbed hold of the wheel and felt the power of the boat beneath me as I guided it in a straight line.

"Good, very good," said the Nubian approvingly.

"Anyone could do it," said Jon, changing his tune.

I reminded myself, once again, to beat him up later. The thing is, I never did actually beat him up, I just fantasized about it.

"It's wonderful," I said fervently.

"Let me tell you of this Nile, so important for us," said the Nubian, his black eyes looking far into the horizon as if he saw the past and present all as one. "The king in reign of Rameses III, 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, he and all royalty sail down this Nile from Karnak to Temple of Luxor. In this most important temple rite, the king and his Ka, that is to say, uh, his divine essence created at birth, unite into one and he become divine being. Crowds, they cheer, be very happy, running beside this river. They be given much loaves of bread. Beautiful, happy celebration. So now, you, young lady from United States of America, you be queen, sailing in royal boat to unite with Ka, become immortal, yes?"

I liked that thought. "Do you believe those old stories, that they're true?"

The Nubian threw back his head and laughed. Nobody in my family ever laughed like that, so free and without restraint. "No. Yes. Maybe." He raised his hands respectfully to the heavens. "Many Nubians are Christians but I believe in Allah, one true God, merciful, compassionate, just. I love Allah. Allah speaks to me in wind, water, sky. I pray to Allah with the rising and setting sun. This is truth. This is what I know."

We continued to sail lazily along. The Nubian motioned towards an upturned barrel and I sat on it.

"I tell you a story, yes?" he said.

I settled down happily. To sail the Nile, listening to a robed and turbaned Nubian tell a story, what could be better?

“A man, he live in my village, born with crossed eyes, never looking straight. Always, the old ladies whisper, oh, they say, he has devil inside! They say if he look at you with one eye, the other looking in opposite direction, he steal your soul, taking it in one eye and out the other into underworld. For this reason, since a little boy until a grown man, he was outcast from village, sent to live in reeds and mud, no home. One day, a little girl, she fall in river and the cross-eyed one, he save her. You think the people thank him, yes? But no, only they hate him more. They stone him then, say he throw her in this river, try to drown her. No matter it not be true. You see, people for so long make him something evil, so it is impossible to say, oh, excuse us, we be wrong. So, when he show them how good he is, they just be more angry. The little girl, she grow up and move away from the village. She go to Alexandra, go to college. She become a writer, very famous. She write famous book about that cross-eyed man. So, I ask you. Was that cross-eyed man lucky or no?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so,” I said.

The Nubian threw up his hands and laughed. “Allah be praised! He was lucky! He become immortal, while all people in village just disappear to nothing. The cross-eyed man, maybe he suffer in this life, but he live *forever*. So I ask you if you rather have easy life and disappear to nothing, or suffering life and live forever?”

“Yes, I see,” I said, realizing that there was never a simple answer to any question.

It was hard to say good-bye to the Nubian. When the moment came he bowed solemnly to me, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. I bowed back.

“Allah be with you,” he said.

“And God be with you,” I said. We both smiled. Then he turned and strode proudly back to his boat.

That night, we strolled along the Nile and around the Temple of Karnak, just across the way. The moon was full and it lit the immense sandstone pillars, making the hieroglyphics glow as if with an inner light. Janna struck a pose, her chin jutting out arrogantly and declared, “I am Queen Hatshepsut, do not mock my golden beard, for I am a better ruler than any man!”

Davy shook his head in disgust. “Oh yeah? Your *brother* chiseled your name and face off of every surface on the temple. That’s what you get for trying to play a man!”

“Yeah,” Jon mimicked, and happily tried to sock Janna in the stomach, but she avoided the blow.

“You little —” Janna chased Jon, who ran into mom, almost knocking her down.

“Stop this instant!” she demanded. “Why, oh why do you have to do this? Do you see any other children acting as you are?”

We looked around. Nope.

“That’s because we’re from the evil United States of America and we haven’t learned proper Nasser etiquette,” said Davy.

Dad smiled. “Well, there’s something to be said for a dictatorship. It keeps the little people in line.”

Sitting outside on our balcony overlooking the Nile, swatting at the interminable mosquitoes, I asked my dad about Allah.

He was sternly emphatic. “If you believe in Allah you will go to hell. Allah is the devil and those who believe in him are deceived.”

“But our guide, he was such a good man, I don’t get it — I can’t see him in hell,” I argued.

“Karen, it doesn’t matter how good a person is. We’re all sinners. No matter how good we are, even if we only commit one little sin in our lives, that’s enough to send us to hell. And to worship Allah, well, Karen, you know that it is wrong!”

There was no arguing. But still I did. I always argued and I always heard the same response. Why did I keep thinking that maybe it would change? It never would. I had to accept the truth.

But long after I lay down, hot and sweaty and unable to sleep, I thought and thought about what it all must mean. If people do good and really believe, why should it matter if they call God a different name?

I thought of the royal barges sailing down the Nile and the rituals within the temple. I remembered the pyramids. The pharaohs had died and turned to dust. They had believed but still had turned to dust. They hadn’t sailed across the lake of the dead to paradise. Or had they? I closed my eyes and imagined myself in ancient Egypt standing on the banks watching the barges pass by. I was one of those little girls in ragged clothes running barefoot along the bank waving reeds and singing to the gods, catching glimpses of their radiant faces, stern and holy, untouchable by poor little girls like me; all those simple, trusting people with never a chance for immortality, celebrating the immortality of their pharaoh. It was the way of the world; some people were lucky and most people weren’t. Some people were chosen for immortality. It said in the Bible that few were chosen. What did that mean? What did it ever mean to anyone in any country, down through history?

The Nubian lived a pure, simple life: devout, humble, without envy of others. Wasn’t this the secret of true happiness? To live simply and purely? To pray? To esteem others above oneself?

Yes, I thought, yes.

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*Karen is currently writing her memoir, Into The World, and has just finished Falling, the first book in her Night Angels series. She is the author/illustrator of nineteen children’s books and co-founder of InsideOUT Writers, a creative writing program for incarcerated youth in Los Angeles. Her greatest inspirations are her three children. For more information, view <http://www.karenalainehunt.com> or contact Karen at [wordpower4u@aol.com](mailto:wordpower4u@aol.com).*

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## An Engagement for Burning

Octavia McBride-Ahebee – United States

I took her  
lamenting  
protected  
within the boundaries of my burka  
buried beneath the world

I took Billie\* with me  
a haggard chorus of one  
a voice tied to silk and twisted hemp  
that cut my ears with a melodic charm

her stretched out words  
the ones that never stood to be sounded  
were an incantation  
pouring my despair across a crop  
drugged and lying in wait for me

she squeezed herself through an iPod  
a euphonious amulet  
energized by currents of expectations  
a gift given by a visiting girl from the West of Philly  
to encourage my heart  
a girl who came to Herat  
with beaded hair  
braided in the shape of a halo  
carrying the world in a Wal-Mart duffel bag

we are both Khadeeja  
the supposed complement of someone else  
she taught her sisters an ambitious grammar  
tied to a human history  
told through Holiday's songs  
amid the redolence of the musk-scented roses  
and orange blossoms  
in the hall of fields flushed with swaying poppies  
poppies naked in their fearless redness  
red like the hardened candy apples I lick through my cloth cage  
a cage with no delicious opening  
for my tongue to peek out  
and taste the world.

I will burn myself today  
when the sun is its most vain  
amid the opulence of candy-colored poppies

between the embrace of voluptuous pinning trees  
with Billie plugged in my ears.

I will pour from a returnable Coca-Cola bottle  
dinner's petrol  
over my whole existence  
and wish  
that someone  
with hands that are enlightened  
will rub the sweetness of honey into my wounds.

*\*Billie Holiday, American jazz singer*

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*Octavia McBride-Ahebee is a writer whose work has appeared in International Quarterly, The Faces of the Americas, Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora, Under Our Skin: Literature of Breast Cancer, The Journal of the National Medical Association as well as other journals and anthologies.*

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**Allenby Bridge**  
Tala Abu Rahmeh – United States

*To Baba*

To you sitting in the camp,  
you dove head first into the fight  
and I crossed home, tiptoeing  
around your blood.

Beyond this dingy river, flies  
grow thin and spread less noise,  
or maybe we become  
infested with love.

I would tell you that at home,  
sky opens up to contain your breath  
alongside your fiery spit,  
but I'll push it under the rug for gentler times.

Ramallah like every other city,  
doesn't house tents.  
Here there are no temporaries,  
our feet are planted amongst olive trees.

At the camp where children inherit  
an unfinished story  
the streets are too narrow  
to hold even your shadow.

Ramallah's children walk to school on the wheel steps  
of April's tanks, exchanging stories  
of bombings and boasting  
jailed uncles.

In the classroom, ancient  
Arabic poetry curls to avert bullets  
from the neighboring night.  
The land that's ours remains.

The blackboard  
doesn't dignify the checkpoint.

You.  
Your face still scarred with loss repeat  
the names till they grow heavy on your tongue,  
Yaffa, Haifa, 'Akka, Falasteen

Abu Kbeer:

where your mother gave birth to oranges,  
and your brother untangled the alphabets,  
was stripped and raped and now lies still.

I don't think about her every day.  
When I stroll to the vegetable market,  
I barely notice my own strawberries  
dressed in Hebrew.

Ramallah: the city of chaos and bread,  
houses my old winter clothes,  
and a bed fitted with sheets waiting  
for me to go back.

When I die: crushed with a missile or of heartache,  
my body parts will rest between fresh daffodils,  
and all the kind things I would have done will become prayers  
in an overcrowded funeral.

When you die, tinged with sadness,  
you will not be buried in your grandparents' graveyard.  
Their bodies were left out of a history cloaked  
by an oblivious enemy.

But these days Baba as sorrow  
builds itself brick by brick,  
I don't know who to feel sorrier for,  
you or me.

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*Tala Abu Rahmeh is originally from Yaffa and was born in Amman in 1984. After moving to Ramallah, living through the second intifada, and graduating from Birzeit University, she moved to Washington, DC to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing. Tala has received numerous awards for her work. She will be featured in the upcoming anthology 25 under 25, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye.*

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## Two Poems

Nasima Selim (Aulic) – Bangladesh

1.

at seventeen  
i was small, sad and blind

at twenty-nine  
happiness had returned before it died

at half past twelve  
the sun glares at these  
lonesome eyes

at midnight  
i am startled

the sky shall fall apart tonight.

2.

it's a long wait  
for someone i could love

from one end to the other

someone coughs in the dark  
i shiver in the alley  
the wait happens  
at a time

when routes were closed  
it rained for days

and a piece of paper flew  
from my uncertain hands

on it her name, age, and address...

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*Nasima Selim (Aulic) is a physician, writer, and poet. Currently she works as Lecturer at the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Bangladesh. She has a book of short stories in Bengali published by Pathak Shamabesh. She has written poems and short stories in English for local newspapers and magazines.*

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