

FOUR CITIES

HALA ALYAN



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Johnny,
who changed everything

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Music

The Japanese woman plays with a beatific smile, spotlight bluish on the stage. In between songs she tells us about her father, who once found a black cat and named him *Sparrow*. The violin dips and rises in her hands. Tiny hands. Like creatures skittering up and down the long sweeping neck. Across the table, a man touches my fingers, but I pull them back, rebraid my hair. The waitress brings us clams, open-chested, brothed in lemon. I eat with urgency. The bread is good. During the intermission, the man asks about the music and I am uncharacteristically honest. *It makes me sad*. The man is confused. *Like rain*, I offer. In Beirut, when the gunfire began, we blared hip-hop music and dragged furniture away from the window. We poured vodka in iceless glasses. One girl drew with red ink a circus tree while the rest of us huddled on the balcony, mimicking the soft *oh* of a Georgian accent. I sponge lemon with the crust of bread and wait for the slow music to begin once more. I want to love this man, his hands and his questions, to explain the malaise of Mediterranean rainfall, but I made promises once and yes, darling, yes, damnit, I remember: our mouths shy beneath the display of bombwork, the muffled light of fishing boats, the debris, the cats—always—mewling.

I

Encounters

The snapdragons bloomed that night.

Every year, the people cluster around the skating rink,
the tree, the carnival lights.

I think you met me on a ferryboat in Paris,
one hundred years ago.

We are the island in the distance.

A storm forks the city into three. Beirut never
saved me. Balconies overlooking
sea, every sky a brittle eye, here where the muezzin
sings only for the dead.

I wore yellow. You saw me and thought of gardens.

Weather

Lately, I've been dreaming of
an elfish girl diving for lungs.

She is my granddaughter.
In the dream I am always cold and

she comes to me with purple hands.
I exclaim, fret, upend a basket for soap,

but only find chalk. She laughs.
You said to bring you something radiant.

Birthday Art

Not jungle, but pastel, the color
of the first bruise paled
beneath the second. Mama,
I want to be a woman of dusklit
mosques, of ginger prickly in tea,
steam netted for a lover. Sky
becomes circular, spans itself
like hair. Hair, thickets, copper
with pollen: the mouth is a
key in the shape of echo. Rouge,
coral, center the suns. He
terraces bones for invisible
gods, blackening with
shale. And then a stream,
chromophilous water. Rinsing
the form, nipples dark as
coins hidden in a silk purse.
The backcloth is spent, another
flimsy dream about a doll
factory in Beirut, sirens lighting
the empty birdcage. My dream
self tastes the Turkish coffee:
graphite. Some treetop
ornaments with paper cranes
dangling from wires until wind
rustles all that white into a
froth like steam or cresting wave.
Like something spilled.
On a bed. Where bodies dance.

All morning, the fight:

my eyes elsewhere, and the god you invoked.
The souk will burn tomorrow. Where did we bury
the moth? I am meant to keep quiet about the lemongrass,
growing godless and wild from even the slimmest cracks of sidewalk.
In December, the museum is garnished as a bride.
Something awful has happened here: a lost electricity.
Two men wander my street. The collapse was three years ago.
My belts hung loose around hipbone. Our faces lanterned.
We never grasped that city, even as we sat in her toes,
kissing. The men do not write. I am to them a toxin,
a liar with the canvassed truth. I touch the sassafras and cry.

Sisyphus on the Letterhead

In ghosthood we sparkplug car radios,
startle the living with static

and bluegrass music. With banshee hair
I found you testing the microphone,

roping cable wires as rain glazed
the Village into an ornament.

God lives in the marshland.
The Mediterranean slides her ugly,

green tongue towards the city and you
sleep against the window

of an airplane. What is your decoy,
your empty thing? Cutting a deck of cards,

or waking pyretic to dawn. Equator
beneath a patch of horses. Fate,

that handsome word, was us eating
baklava. Magician's secret:

beneath mirrors are hideaways. Always.

Push

Gaza. I'm sorry. *Beirut.* I still love you like an arsonist
Venice. When that glassblower put his lips to the glowing pipe and I
followed his breath into an ornament I understood grace.
New Orleans. Faintly biblical. Swelter and melody and staircase.
Boston. I found the bird already dead crooked nest scattering the
pavement and for days all I saw was that constellation of bones.
Aya Nappa. I cannot hear your name without thinking war and ship
and two moons before coastline. *Tripoli.* It was whiplash.
Rome. When I think of my future self she is walking your piazza
wearing something yellow. *Wichita.* The car rides
through your highway backbone. Always a thunderstorm.
Gaza. I'm sorry. *Ramallah.* Thank you for the applause.
Seltzer water and tableh player. Tomato and bread. Thank you for the
balcony. *Dubai.* I forgot a scarf a silver ring a tube of lipstick.
The rest you may keep. *Aleppo.* Forgive me my litter. My uneaten
rice. My abundance of light bulbs. *Baghdad.* Twenty
six years and you still make me cry. *Doha.*
Starlit eels and honey water. I miss those colors. *Istanbul.*
Marry me. *Dallas.* I pretended I was Aladdin turning
the soil over and gasping. *Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Beirut.* You are
cherry end of cigarette. Push and tunnel. How can you fit so much?
 Norman, Oklahoma. No one calls me Holly anymore.
 Brooklyn. Sixty-two books and mistakes. You showed me
where to sit. *Dublin.* Someday. *Damas-*
cus. Nothing is as dangerous as an unlit match. You taught us that.
Paris. By beauty I meant that bridge. My brother's legs over the
water. *Jerusalem.* Only you know what I am capable of.
London. I wasn't ungrateful. *Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Manhat-*

tan. Myself in that nightclub. A paper crane with a beating heart. Do not wake her. *Bangkok.* I ate your fruit salted. Shrines of gold and sugar. *Beirut.* I bruise as easily as you do. We are both anemic veins and unbrushed hair. *Gaza.* I'll tell you where I've been.

Let Me Put It This Way

A woman sits
with black draped
across her shoulders
and an eastern moon
blinking white above her.
All day she sifted
through rubble for the gleam
of her mother's silver, knife
or ladle to rinse in the river.
Her child lies beneath soil,
sharing rain with tree
roots. A woman sits
with black draped across her
shoulders. She lights a cigarette
and exhales a feather of smoke.
Says, God,
God is greater.