

the mosaic rooms



CONTEMPORARY CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD

Fiction From Art

Author Fadia Faqir was commissioned to lead a creative writing workshop, 'Fiction from Art' in March 2013, in response to the *Last of the Dictionary Men* exhibition.

Here is a selection of the work created.



Prayer on a Slanting Ship

But does a daughter ever forget her mother? And her father? Which memories does she draw from, like drawing water from the deepest well with a spider's thread?

You have another mother, he says. And one day I will go back to her.

She does not write letters, and you flirt with the idea that she is *ummiyah*, though they tell you she has a degree in accountancy. Counting the time, counting the days...your image of her is filled in by the stilted photographs, the TV and the rare reminisces of your father.

And if I close my eyes, and cast my mind back, do I see him? The cheap trinkets for your siblings, the perfunctory questions about health and family, the creature comforts that keep him away, keep him with her...

He decides to bring one of his daughters over and you are struck by her cleanliness, and beauty. Eyes that seem too large in a small, frightened face. *Sarah*. She says.

Here it is cold and green and the sea never humid. And people have blue and green eyes, like mountain village people. There is no athan, and mosques are houses, and only those who board ships are truly family. But father prayed even on the rocking ship - and even when your brothers and sisters long forget and let inexplicable socialist leanings grow a full-fledged red, you pray. And count the names of God like echoes of home.

Your mother does not like the friendship between his other daughter and yourself. She is suspicious of her quietness in front of male guests, which transforms to sudden, outrageous laughter when she is alone, or with you - and her hair, which she grows like a tree, rubbing oils and perfumes into it daily, trailing about the house in long skirts and sweet, smoky, pungent aromas. Sarah tells you about a hot place, where trees that curl up when you touch them grow - on the bed you giggle and tell secrets, as girls do, intoxicated by her smile and her scent. And you - tentatively, on a quiet afternoon - ask your father about his memories.

He has just returned from a night away and he is tired, watching the news listlessly. Politics, he says. But he acquiesces. He tells you a story about Adnan who died two nights ago – at first you are disappointed: where is the arid desert of Sarah’s stories, the fragrant flowers, the days at the beach, the snakes and palm trees? Instead:

Years ago we agreed to take a boat out, after we retired, and go back.

A dream.

How can a man forget his country?

He had a girl waiting back home, and I had a wife and child.

But the years went. And now we are here. And he died.

The best man. The sweetest man.

Sarah tells her – you never find out how she knows – that your father took Adnan out on a boat two nights ago – in a wheelbarrow. As they had agreed, they set off in a boat. Your father lights a cigarette (you see him now), and watched the sun rise out from the sea, the faintest blush of humid, morning heat flushing his cheek.

They told him: Stealing a body is a crime. But, he argued, the sea stole their lives away – why did the police care, now? What did they care? He had been so contrite and confused they released him without charge. His wife fussed over him as if he were a child. Sarah and you watch. And Sarah begins to cry. She runs up to her room; you feel tears run down your own cheeks. An encyclopedia drops from the bed, page open towards the end (*Yemen, Aden*), annotated with drawings of flowers and vines and love hearts and girls with long, thick hair.

You dream about the sea. Two women are rowing a small boat as your father smiles. He closes his eyes and passes away.

Your mother wakes you earlier than usual – *she has died, that’s why Dad is acting weird. Be nice to Dad, okay? No more questions about the past.*

But he tells you himself: His other daughter died of hepatitis, on the same night as Adnan. There is no end to his sorrow. Sarah. He says. He hadn’t seen her for five years. She was to marry, and give him his first grandchildren. With death came the hard-pressed suits, the callous women chatting in the kitchen whilst cooking. One of the men starts reciting the Quran loudly. You stare at your mother to find her confusion, but her face is a mask of careful blankness.

She becomes an archivist, a photographer, a free lancer – a failure in the eyes of all. And she finds, in the pile of documents coolly moulding on the floor, the memories captured in pictures she died for as a youth. She goes out with men who are invariably dark, with those tellingly long, curling lashes, bright, yet brooding, humorous, yet cool. *Arab?* Her friends quiz her. *Arab?* *So much more than Arab*, she answers. The word *secret* envelops the conversation. Her father does not know. Her mother smiles when she sees her. *London*, she says, stars in her eyes. *The city*. These men do not respect her, and she fears it is because they sense the other side of her (Welsh and flaxen and taut) will not let her embrace them – a stutter, a hesitation over every *I love you*.

She prays occasionally, now. She has no time for the whisper of memories from that distant land. The city carried her far away from family or the trailing thoughts of a “home”; everyone is a stranger, a foreigner, here. She curls against the easy definitions she learns, and easy phrases like *hybridity*, *cultural amnesia* and *mimicry* become her war cry – she tries hard not to think of her father coming home, kissing her mother gently, smilingly, not wanting to be anywhere else on the entire globe.

At night, in the dream world beyond the flashing lights of the city, the sea crashes over her – and she finds herself in a verdant land. There is no desert - there never was. There is Sarah, holding her every night, though they would never meet.

A question, like so many: does a daughter ever forget her mother? And does a father ever remain dreamless, after having his children die before him?

Sumaya Kassim

Do you see me?

Do you see me? Do you see the furrows on my brow? Do you hear the soliloquies they speak? "I had a wife, she died. Khalas."

Sitting in front of you politely, you ask meDid I pray, Did I ? How did I find the direction of the house of God on a moving ship that was supposed to be my home? Did I wait for the certainty that was my truth, did I wait to be called to prayer? Raising calloused hands to heaven and prostrating in submission to the Lord that made me BE. Who am I to question my erstwhile life, to die at sea, an unmarked grave to be my fate? "On many ships I lived alone." You shake my hand and you see only the quizzical complexity of my smile. My hands which moulded tyres, which painted doors, and shovelled coal. The colour of my blood is the same as yours. The hopes I had the same as yours. What you see of me, my story will remain untold, except for those who dare to travel beyond the confines of my identity, the colour of my passport the same as yours, whether it be red or blue or green. Did I uphold my self-respect? Yes I did, as the respect of my Yemeni grandmother with elegantly tapered face and tattooed lip. "The barrels on our ship were full of gold," sailing the Spanish seas calmness stirred my soul. To know that there was hope. "On many ships I sailed alone," with thoughts of love, of pain, of hope. The hope I saw in my lost children's eyes....the choked tears I tasted on departing. I feel the scratch of the Harris Tweed from Scottish moors of lavender, of blue, of green on Yemeni skin weathered through the vicissitudes of many lost but woven dreams. Each thread of identity an emotion which ran cold to carry me through the journey that was my home.

Do you see my crown? My beret, my scarf, my cap? I cover my head in deference to God, not that I may protect it from the heat, which I can bear, the heat that I can bear and the spirits of which I didn't partake. Yet the spirit within these bones is what connects us in time, as I now before you sit. You ask me inane questions to understand the parallel, which is your reality, and yet.....yet, I refuse to wear your label, your judgement or be your cause. Leave me to sit in front of my William Morris

wallpaper on my sofa upholstered by the Pakistanis, toiling in the dales. Are they allowed to eat Yorkshire pudding and mushy peas with their chips....or does that violate your sensibilities and allow the samosas and bhajis to become cold? I feel the rush of blood to my face as you ask me about my tribesmen. The Yemeni tribes of the North, the elders who shook their heads with eyes ablaze as they saw a generation lost to the colour of the Yen. The wizened men, in whose eyes you cannot see because the honour with which they live their lives, is matter only for myths of old.

Britain what made her great?

I did.

Great Britain did I make. And it made me the father, brother, husband, son that I am. The poet, philosopher, educator that I am. The Wordsworth, Plato, Aristotle that I am.

My dreams I released to float above the sea foam , like the droplets of the oceans, the sum was greater than the parts. The parts of you , the parts of me , the parts of what could have been , the parts that were. Yet here I am, here we are, I allow you to poke gratingly at the edges of my mind, the edges of my thoughts and through this two dimensional image , you hope to understand who I am. You see the sparkle in my eye, the tilt of my chin, the flare of my nostril, the inflated chest and you hope to know what it is that I lived. I lived a brother lost, a wife forgotten, a child disappointed, a father mourned and an identity forged.

Does the photo shopping appeal to your eyes? Do I need to be made abstract within the confines of your consciousness? I wear my honour on my chest and yet I have a right to say to you, "there is no justice in Yemen," I know, but does this deny me the right to sit in front of you and sip my Indian tea in my China cup and eat my sweetened Maltese biscuit?

Don't assign me to your collective memory as a piece, an installation. Look, look and hear the eulogy that speaks to your asexual imagination. Cry as a Yemeni for the dreams that were lost in the depths of the rough Japanese seas and breathe as a Yemeni for the Yemeni that you can be. I stand before you now the flicker of a

screen, the guttural “kha” the literal “sheen”, the disdainful but grating gesture of an Arab dream.

Leave me. Leave me now to be translated to the narrative that challenges the mainstream. The thorn that pricks, the thought that wakes, the thought that forms when there is peace. And yes I was a proud herder, an honourable farmer; a soldier of the soil on the fields of freedom before my eyes were burned by the flying sparks of hate from the foundry as I melted the iron of my dreams.

Sumra Khan