

Hind SHOUFANI

Public Readings

For Suheir Hammad, gorgeous.

This is how poets are born.
Sit in back rooms of secluded structures while a single mic blasts
your sorrow from where you buried it
dredges everything you hid to fill this damp
room with minerals precious
that feeling
of coming home to a place you never knew
you never knew you could love this hard
listen to open veins reading the personal
a light wraps bodies tethered free
shed the person you wore in the sunlight outside
or a nighttime laugh you sent out to the city before
this room becomes all of Manhattan
and her windows.

This is how love is spun,
glance into the eyes of someone you could touch beyond hands and skin
repeat words wordless burrowed you could flood out
a kiss has you grappling for a dictionary of terms uncoined
and one day, a poem, a poem comes to you, says all you can ascribe
to one moment, one person, fills a universe
complete

you know, this is what I wanted to say
this is what I have always wanted to say.

The person you love understands
or not
but no matter
firmly in its place poetry has rooted explanation
this is real
this is the life blooms
fits
is seized
deciphered and true.

This is how a poet is born.

Open Love Poem

(To the memory of the brave and brilliant poet/activist, June Jordan, upon reading her inspiring essay "Besting a worst case scenario," describing her fight with breast cancer)

this poem is a call to arms to trace our
fingers free on the edges of that wound

you wrote about
that wound left unhealed oozing
anger from your
right arm
right armpit
right breast redundant
removed
absent
malignant
that right hand magnificent
which you could no longer move
which was terrifying
like someone had plunged a hole in your chest and snatched
out your voice, ripped the veins open and left
you to slowly leak to dying a silent
death,
your words perhaps unwritten unheard
decaying
but you
you with that fighter breath
you found those fingers we all needed
you moved again
you spoke again
you traced that poem
on my open wound that closes with your
thoughts that are
healing
and now you are gone, and i never got the chance to say
Thank You
for these words,
for the open friendship
you sought in all of us, after all
this agony, after all these wars you lived
after even all these women you saw
the women bleeding

and i am not black, and i am not dead, and my
breasts are ripe for kissing, for feeding,
for kneading
i am not trying to understand
what bus seat is appropriate for me
but how they could have ever thought your voice would be silenced
or forgotten
your scars of mastectomies
and essays and degrees earned by rage, and an assertion that
you are here, and you are the new now, and
all that woman that leaked from all your stitched up
places, a rivulet
unstoppable, an ocean awaits
your courage
your poems a bible for those searching
for common meanings to

the notion of love
how i wish i could have held you, i would have
seen a smile and shaken a hand
and traced a finger over those scars
you were sure would never heal
the veins you thought would never stop seeping

Poet Activist Woman Lover American Mother Teacher
Witch

i bury your words in my interior treasure
i retain forever that hope you died for
i yearn
i mourn
my own mother
whom you would have loved
Palestinian, Teacher, Reader, Sister, Lover, Friend
Witch
and heroine of my wanderlust dreams
in tracing the tubes inserted in her heart, up her nose,
and throat, to let the poison spurt in and out of those now
flat chest surfaces where motherhood remains
and will ever be,
in cleaning those wounds visible
that breath i remember softly quietly fell and rose
and fell again
those sutures not holding together my family
falling apart below
at unspoken seams
and now
ten years later, for your book
i Thank You,
i invoke your words as prayer,
as a blessing for the countless women whose
bodies are reborn into violence
inner
and who edge closer to inward driven fear
and that terminal word
Cancer
how my mother would have loved you,
how i loved cleaning her wounds that are solid
that are real

in your coffin now you are safely a shrouded memory
a sentence of such power and
resistance daring
such simple beauty
in face of a struggle we all need to heed
such blunt honesty
and i Thank You
on this lonely morning
i memorize the words on these pages you left us
despite my wounds inside invisible

despite tears loitering in these eyes
that do not always see
and yet i see
i see you are a brave woman
a vessel of love in unspoken rapture
please,
i want to be your Sister
Daughter
Friend
Student
Poet
Palestinian Comrade
Kindred Warrior
Witch
and i promise you
my wet eyes are still open
and my heart is burdened
but, like yours
it's free
it's free

Guidebook to forgetfulness

it is ugly
the sudden nature of grief, smirking at
months of jaunting in daily spheres oblivious
to what you thought to be
forgotten
or not needed as remembrance
that one smile that had to be
photographed from your youth
slides adjacent to this present hole in my center
a colorless imprint on that stain of loss
permanently stamped on this
grand theft of
only you
how the wisdom of the earth confounds
deludes into ever thinking
of reconciling this absence
this malice
with solace
you shadow days in the silence of any given night
and i
have

spent
years
without you, shoved on by grief immense,
by grief antagonistic, by grief
intolerant
by grief unmoved by pleas
by grief never benevolent
i have spent years dancing
to private dirges,
face aging,
radiant above
an undercurrent of hate rotten,
a torrent, sometimes merely a semblance of
this small stream, this steady flow,
constant drainage it is this
cesspool of tears stored out of the sight of others
an army of mourning marching at the gates
of this hell i harbor
in this state of hate,
and i miss you,
and i miss you,
and i have spent years
asking no one
all the possible
questions
looking for the manual, the method, the instructions.

Daily Bread

I thought to write a dirty poem
one about fucking and sucking
and lips pouted
licking
cigarette butts left in ashtrays flowing
about the grit edged into our teeth
grinding TV screens that
enlarge year after year to devour
us with all the porno sacred

I thought to write about the harsh
words we dismiss
the bitter words
we utter
the basic daily bitching
we mutter
I thought to remove all splendor
to strip my thoughts brutal

I thought to describe fast food containers after our sleepless night
I thought to show you the bruises I gathered in the restless morn

I thought to write about bombs
and limbs bleeding
and eye sockets gouged
and entire nations massacred

I thought to write in words that do not rhyme
that have no flow
words that reek like scum
words about what we have become
you, enslaved by your cocks
us, enslaved by history
by the goddamn army checkpoints
and the barbed wire streets
the machine gun blocks
Arab students dumping art for rocks
burning tires to inhale black death
like your eyes

I thought to write a dirty poem
like your heart

like many others I can name
like the ones who rule this jungle
we call home
my breath to them money whoring
my smile a mere game

I thought to write about hate
and children dying as we speak
I thought
and thought
I thought through the whole violent day

there is nothing to say

your eyelashes are curved long on your cheek
you sleep
it is silent
and I love you.

Bodies

Kissing you is
a
deep sea dive.

How are they named? Those long drops with no equipment,
when all your armor is will
your weaponry is lungs
resilient, when you bank only on the hope that legs glide
way out to open water wind sun streaming
to oxygen needed
to life outside, persistent,
to inhaling, to exhaling, to dreaming.
Kissing you is
a deep sea dive, a
pulse, a throbbing
journey
a pilgrimage to quell needing
hips thrashing, protesting this space, not immediate
enough to destination
ocean floor,
salt of you to flavor
this heat in morsels
the beating waves slap against our teeth,
seeking
kissing you is dizzy heaving
is rampant is whirling is a dervish of intangible coded
letters that have lost all
meaning
kissing you is a deep sea dive
looking for bounty, looking for bones of ancestry, looking
for refuge for seclusion for purity
kissing you makes me a heathen
makes me speak in tongues
of foam
frothing over with desire, squeezing shut the dam
you bombed to splinters all the
wayward
feelings
kissing you is a deep sea dive, inflicted by a world
condensing to become a fragment as small
as this wet sound we make
lips mesh
healing.
Kissing you is a deep sea dive,
and what do they call them? The heavy falls built solely on hope,
the hope enables rising towards light before
bodies disintegrate,
reeling,
the body, kissing you, reveals all its secrets.

There is no hope here.

Kissing you is a deep sea dive, and I am a woman deluged,
a woman capsized, wanting
nothing but to offer you a treasure trunk, a trove of
myself,

a woman intent on the sole miracle of breathing.
There is no hope here.

Rust devours these limbs,
metal sinks into sand,
and kissing you is a deep sea dive I am unprepared for,
a hunt I have no chance of succeeding.

I am a shipwreck of myself,
decaying,
disappearing.

One Zero

my hands propel themselves
tears have forced the fingers to seek asylum
i do not want to write

ten years since i last saw your eyes close
silent trickles
moisture
i knew not where your private thoughts were
your heart beat in white sheets
toes restless,
beeping screens
hushed whispers
telling me you can still hear us

we still played music for you then
and i do not want to write

i lose the letters on my way here
palms dry neck arched back stiff
gut clenched in fear
hate too at the ten years gone by
since your coffin was open
eyes closed
and in mine tear after tear after tear
of anger
i do not want to write

yet the fingers are pushed forward
by winds that howl
and wail
and sneer
gusts of your absence hurtle me
whispers only i can hear

and i do not want to write
it has been ten years

i would
give up all the sentences ever possible
throw away another ten hard years
sacrifice the solace of memory
if only
i could have you back for one more day
one more stolen moment
to say
we love you

i do not want to write tonight

and you,
mother
my beautiful mother

you are not here

All that may not happen

i may never know who you truly are
or what paths of secret devil
schemes and voodoo magic
brought your face
to my smile

i will not retrace the journey
to this gift of your arms
tonight
and i may never sleep till death
by your laboring flesh
but for the promise of pleasure
uninterrupted
in your cadence by my side
at all the motion
repressed or broken wild
this promise of soft vapor
is worth a thousand words
of a debt i now
owe

i owe you lines of kisses
and poems of inconceivable wealth

for now
i offer the
sacred nothing i can offer you

fingers to clasp
silence with every morn's dew

a memory of
my calm breath in the night

for the record

For my students who cared about their world.

I could not tell if her panties were red
the video-clip was amateur, reality as some choose to make it
fuzzy, replayed on screens
our hearts betrayed
the red seeped from wounds in forbidden places, i
could not breathe, she crawled to hide
in muffled cries, nowhere to go
that open space of fury she inhabits

We sat in silence and watched her head get
cracked in by a brotherhood of kin
and by unsanctioned love, and by family that lunged
stones instead of hugs
creating shrouds of honor and revenge in death
i forced air softly,
in and out, counting
to not vomit
please,
i cannot vomit

Try to stem those hateful tears i gathered
we witnessed
the descending darkness that circled these
cries of savages who barked out
Animal Animal
they named her
huddled in a ball protected by her arms that have once held
a man who loved her, a virgin still, perhaps
a young carcass bludgeoned pulpy
by family in throes of religious idiocy
maybe she and her man were not from the same sect
or political party
or country
maybe she accepted the universe wide in her young heart and
found the cage in her Arabian desert
had locked her tight, it was too late
bars around her aplenty
fervent insanity and years of patriarchy, the absence of a kind

merciful God
in their eyes of fire holy
incanting my damnation
and madness, and insecurity, their demons forcing acts
of lunacy and yet they dare call her, and
her young sacred love
heresy

And now
all is once again proper
family honor intact
restored from the bleeding thighs of this young daughter
i wonder if her name was Mariam or Fatima or Leila or Hannah
what is her smile like, beyond the view
of her matted hair, that heavy head lolling
oblivious, arms squeezed
curled up burning on the coals of history
Animal Animal is what she becomes
her last beat of a heart meets with expiry
without ever having understood
how a family can do this
how love can lead to such suffering
where did it come from
all this apathy

As you drove bricks into her cracked frame
again and again you yelled the same old name
hiding your misery inner, that fear you can
never proclaim
Animal Animal
while my tears ran
trying to stomach this violence
trying to remain intact
to figure out
how your allahu akbar plays into this scene, how can it
how can you dare repeat it coupled in savagery
with your hearts, in your loins, around these arms of carnage
through your faces smothered with illiteracy
Thud Thud Thud
went the stone brick, into her
temples, cheeks, nose splintered, eyes sunk in
into her future, and her womb, empty and
robbed in an everyday
modern tragedy, and like some dark, surreal
comedy someone thought to cover her bare
ass, pulled up her skirt,
colored with spit and heartache and dirt
dragged through sand and sea to
salt this unhealed wound in my heart

and this is no animal kingdom documentary
no late night show of the wild
this is Iraq,
Jordan
Egypt
Africa Asia Europe and the States
these are my sisters, dead on soil and sand and kitchen floors,
abused
laid as waste
these are the stories of women
wide eyed and aching
restless, living in tension
nervously

This what happens when a man decides whom we can love
and how and when,
why i can share my body and under what rules,
bought or sold by a relative who is male,
bought and sold according to commandments written by
ancient men in popular books of mythology
bought and sold by 21st century fools
who think they know the tools
to handle me
who think they draw the confines of my captivity
and this is what happens when
a man believes he is excused
allowed, encouraged, or even just lightly rebuked, slapped
on the wrist for wanting further proof
of how honor has been reinstated now that
this whore and her stain of betrayal has been removed,
this is what happens when a man can
videotape my murder on his brand new phone cam
to later on brag and prove
we fucking got that bitch man,
we gave it to her right,
she deserved it, too
i got it all here on tape man, you can see her ass
a little, and there is tons of blood,
we got her good man,
it took fourteen of us, three bricks,
and some heavy boots,
we got her, we didn't even have to use the sticks.
Fucking whore, little cunt thought she would split
with him, we got her, little shithead
aint moving
another
fucking
inch.

.....

The red snakes of her sins
slither out across those dunes of hate
her blood is absorbed
to smudge this barren Arab soil around us
a smear of shame
i shiver
her spirit transcends into our tearful state
it invades the flinching pain in me
gut acrid in hate
it shoots up revolt in the clenched jaw of my anger,
it fumes up the air stagnant with cataclysmic power,
and i,
i want a weapon to bury you with motherfuckers
i want a saw to cut off
these arms you wield, you dumbfucks, my hands a blaze of fire
to char your frigid face
i want a hammer to hack out your entrails
i want a gun to blow holes where your balls might have been
i want to choke your misguided pulse, leave nothing
of life in you, not
even a trace
i want to chop that smug head of yours right off, and still even then
deep in your gut i want to smear
endless pain
and i want to say and say and endlessly exclaim
look at me, you murderer
check me out, you fucker
here i am, here i am
and don't you forget these words, ever

her life is not yours for the taking
her life is not yours for the taking

even your God says this to you in your gospels of hate
her dreams are not yours to command and rape and erase
listen to me
look at me
and i'll tell you this
from the dregs of history
from my own inner sanctuary
stronger than your sadist army
from the hard heart i carry within me

life will not go on this way
life cannot go on this way.

Soon enough, you will see, without the
sacred feminine powers at play
this world is in imbalance
and without acceptance and
tranquility
we will annihilate humanity

and in the ashes of a nuked world we once loved
tell me not brother of your holy wars
tell me not of honor in families adored and restored
tell me not of your male responsibility
her life is not yours for the taking
and you will not tell me
who to love and when and how
for love itself is a deity
and love triumphs no matter how many women you cleanse
no matter how many smiles you snuff
no matter how long it takes for you to
remember
that enough is enough and these women
who could be
your mother and sister and cousin and lover,
are all earth and her heavens,
are all the stars and their luster
they are the safety net that holds up the sky,
they are that soft whisper murmuring inside you, lost.

They are the daughters of life,
and at the same time
life's ancestry.

How could you then, in the light of day, that light that
God gave you to shine your masculine way,
how could you stray
how could you stay so deeply astray
how could you fear
how could you despise us so much?

The video clip ends.

I can breathe
and in me,
inside me, love
is tired and damaged
yet
picks itself off the kitchen floor, and through the soil
through the sand
of the promise of a new day
love
unfurls again in hope
a lotus blossoms
I pray
I pray
I pray
