

Mother's Milk (full chapter from novel Boiling point)

Nisrine Mbarki Ben Ayad

Translation: Egan Garr

With a kebab wrap in his right hand and a green Fernandes in his left, Fouad shouts, "You've gotten to be a real pain in the ass, *a sahbi*. Get therapy or some shit." He looks at me out of the corners of his eyes like I'm not actually worth looking at, which makes the whole thing worse. A young blond mom bikes by with a kid on the back, heading towards Rembrandt Park. The kid's sucking on his middle and ring fingers. My mom would've slapped that habit right out of me, tenderly but firm. A red balloon is tied to the kid's wrist. The balloon drifts behind the bike. The mom on the bike frowns at me and Fouad, a typical look when we're together. Shame comes over me, shame about the shame because I don't know what I should actually be ashamed of. It's her look that does it. Only white people see a danger Fouad and I embody—even though Fouad was molded straight out of compassion. The entire human race can fit in his heart. And he lives up to his name. "Bro, what the fuck is up with you?" he says. "It's your mother, *mamak*."

I had told him about the recurring nightmare I had again a few days ago. I drowned in milk, a breastmilk sea. But he doesn't know what I dreamt about last night—that goes beyond any imagination. It's already changed my life and I can't take it much longer. "Always on about your mother and milk, *a zebbi*, and now I'm constantly thinking about your mom's tits, what the fuck? Deal with that shit. It's your MUH-ther. Hello?" His eyes dart around us. "Okay okay, *yallah*, what're you gonna do? Nothing. She's gonna be your mother for the rest of your life. Full stop. *Yallah*, what do you want? She kept you, carried you for nine fucking months in her body, with everything that came with that, pushed you out into the world and raised you with love. You get what I'm saying?" He leans on the corner of the Postjesweg and the Hoofdweg, one knee raised.

Fouad's outlook on life is one of admirable gratitude. You should be thankful, your mother gives birth to you, she went through excruciating pain to get you here, and then she spent most of her life raising you, and raising a kid means offering up twenty years of your life, he says. If you still believe in paradise and want to go there, then the only way in is under your mother's feet, heaven's gate and she's got the keys. I don't get why the gateway to paradise has to be there, one of the grossest parts of the human body. There must be some great metaphorical wisdom in this, but right now I don't see it. In other words, if I keep going like this I'll end up in hellfire, seeing as my mother and I are water and fire. I'll burn in the all-consuming, scorching, eternal flames of hell. I see myself hanging from hooks by my eyelids over blue, unrelenting flames, pins nailed into the balls of my feet, hanging upside-down naked, roasting. Not to mention the demons all too happy to tear you to shreds with their claws and attack you with torches, a Jeroen Bosch brought to life.

What Fouad doesn't know is I'm trying to eliminate all duality from my life. That whole theory of heaven and hell will drive you mad.

It's impossible that this so-called gateway could lie beneath the feet of my dictator mother. Dictators and paradise don't go together—there's a semantic divide between the two that can't be bridged. I refuse to believe it, not under Khadija's feet. So much for paradise, then. In my head I always call her Khadija. It's easier to think about her that way. It was only after her father, my grandfather Tament died, that the dictator in her really came to life. As if grief over his death turned into revenge on the world. Maybe mourning or deep sorrow is the great secret of dictators. Grandfather was a soldier, veteran of the French Foreign Legion, and she was his favorite. He named her after the great love of his life, a woman he never married because the Second World War broke out and he left with the French. When he returned, Khadija was the wife of his friend Mhend. He gave his best years to the Europeans in Vietnam, and in Germany he lost his heart a second time to a German nurse at the front. In 1952 Grandfather was shot in the left shoulder during the Battle of Nà Sản—it just missed his heart—and after that he became a nurse. He was no longer needed as cannon fodder; instead, he was to look after cannon fodder in Diên Biên Phu until it was over. He died ten years ago in his beloved neighborhood Sidi Bernoussi, where Khadija was born. Like the blocked veins of grandpa Tament, her love has narrowed ever since.

Her words plague me. They walk down the sidewalk with me, they cleave to my legs and chest, I see them everywhere: in the grocery, the lecture hall, my writings, my dreams. And then there's m-i-l-k. That seemingly simple four-letter word is a disease, a virus. I can't hear the word anymore, much less breastmilk—everywhere it lurks, we never see it but like the Mossad it's there. Pregnant women are all over the place and babies too if you look closely. An infinite gamut of babies, babies under pink blankets in car seats, babies tied to the bellies of their fathers, babies in strollers pushed by grandpas and grandmas, babies in the park, babies in cafés, babies buried inside the jackets of their parents. Women are constantly having children. Four children are born every second on average. Four children every blink of an eye, four every time I blink: four babies, four, four more babies, what a production. Another four, let's go, and another four again—can you believe there are so many, two times four. And then there's the milk my mother uses to drive me mad. Three times four. It started a few years ago during a fight, when she told me I nearly killed her when I was a baby. That thought has nagged at me ever since, the feeling that there's a dormant mother-killer living inside me. Before I knew, I was normal and happy, nothing was wrong. Since that infamous argument, I've quit drinking milk. Never again will I drink milk from any living creature, and that also means no pie, no cream puffs. All the animal milk we drink is breastmilk. Stolen mother's milk that has found its merry way into our desserts, popsicles, cappuccinos, lattes, and macchiatos. My chest hurts. I haven't told anyone about my new dream, except of course Karim, she knows everything, Karima Chris is my beloved, my greatest love, and maybe the only one who really knows me. I call her Karim.

In the dream I told Fouad about, I drowned in a milk sea. One single plank was floating on the sea, but there was a baby lying on it. Everywhere I looked was white, endless milk. I drowned in it. There was no moped at sea. Horrifying. Because it also got inside me, I swallowed it in. It was terrifying, I said. He was curious about breastmilk's taste, but it was too much for him. Milk and breasts and udders, because those are also breasts, only they hang under pets and farm animals. If all the four-legged mammals stood upright, their udders

would be breasts—but then there'd be four. Anyway, milk and breasts, an inseparable bond. Some animals have two, like people. Goats, for example. But a cat can even have eight and a cow has four. Physiologically speaking, breasts are there to produce milk, and all those breasts, big or small, have mammary glands and nipples so she can feed her young—if a female mammal gives birth, that is. Every single one of them potential and wonderful milk factories straight out of Mother Nature, it's insane. There are more breasts on Earth than people: 4.1 billion women (men are in the minority), which means 8.2 billion breasts. Unbelievable.

Karim also has two breasts, 32Bs, the perfect shape and size. Not that I have anything to say about it, but I think they're beautiful. Karim doesn't care for them. She says they're just another part of her body. I love everything about her honey-brown body, beautiful just as it is, with a scar above her collarbone, the black baby hairs on her neck, back and arms. And those tiny perfect feet that carry her, not to mention her muscled back with those two dimples below. My favorite human ever. Still that pain in my chest. Whatever fills your mind becomes real, freaking scary, seriously.

"Don't think about that stuff. It'll make you crazy," Fouad says like he's read my mind. "Listen, your mother loves you, that's what matters. She'd give her life for you. All mothers do that, it's just the way they are. That's what you should be thinking about, forget the shit she says to you. You know how they are. When you're home tomorrow she'll cook up something you like, that's her love language right? Mothers are the only people in the world who would give their life for their offspring. We'll never be able to compete with that, and you should ignore the shit she says for that reason alone. She's just frustrated she's not allowed to drive right now. Your mother's heart is fucking big, *a sahbi*, it's like an ocean or universe." Sure, an ocean I drowned in, an ocean with no shores or driftwood, and there I am at her mercy, an ocean of powerlessness. That can't be the point of parenting. My new dream aside. Crazy for sure. Crazy-making. But I can't say that to Fouad. He doesn't care about breasts anyway. They're just body parts to him. Really, he couldn't care less.

An Albert Heijn truck stops in front of us on the Postjesweg. A boy around eighteen gets out. He spots us and smiles. People rarely smile when they see Fouad with his cap on, holding a soda can. But under that monobrow is a boy made of soft pink pudding. Gay boys clock each other right away, and Fouad has the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen—big, green-brown—they look right through you. The Albert Heijn boy carries a crate full of groceries to a door. He's tall and lanky, looks like a Gijs: tall, well-groomed, and blond. Every Gijs has something with their hair. He sets the crate down at a door with practiced ease. He's on the phone talking too loudly. White Dutch people are the noisiest people I know. You can spot them at any airport anywhere in the world because it's like they've been drinking: talking, laughing, yakking loud. They talk and move like they've always owned the world, like all the space is theirs. Even abroad they move around like their presence is fact. Most have no sense of humility. Born in Flanders, Karim understands this better than anyone. Their large size definitely does not help them move through the world in any nuanced or discrete way. Even their motor skills betray their violent demand for space. Oafish and excessive. My mother would say they were never wrapped or swaddled as babies, and that's why they make

uncontrolled movements—arms that flap too loosely, legs that plod rather than walk, heads rotating like nothing else on Earth exists except for them. Gijs winks at Fouad and rings the bell. Fouad squints at me like he feels sorry for me. “I’m going home, man. Sociolinguistics is waiting.” He walks away and glances at Gijs. I watch him leave, and he turns around and shouts, “You’ve got to stop. You’re actively participating in trauma, *a sahbi*. Do something. Psychologist, therapy, appointment, face your demons, ok? *Yallah*, later.” He winks back at Gijs and keeps walking. Not his type. Me and my dream stay behind next to a trashcan. That man’s discipline kills me. He never misses a lecture or fails an exam. Summa cum laude in his sights.

In the dream, I held a sweet-smelling baby with black hair in my arms. Karim sat beside me, beaming. So far so good. And then it happened. The baby started to cry and I started to nurse her. I literally felt milk coming out of my body and nipple and it was all quite normal. Can you imagine? WTF? Khadija has infiltrated me down to my pores. I woke up this morning soaking wet and told Karim about it. She laughed and said it was “adorable”. She also said it was a good dream because it’s about time—she believes that nature will produce more and more human hermaphrodites and my dream is an omen. A drop of white liquid came out of my nipple when I was standing in the bathroom. I thought I was going insane. I tasted it to be sure what it was. It tasted sweet. It was actually milk. Madness!

The front door of the house where Gijs is standing opens. An elderly woman wearing knee-high socks and a light blue apron opens the door. My grandmother also wears an apron when she cooks. It’s white with green embroidery, الطرز الفاسي الحر, she always says, only grandmother’s has spots of turmeric and a zippered pocket on the front that’s always full of money. The old woman’s apron has big, dirty grease stains; she doesn’t eat turmeric like grandmother or cook bleach into the food. Effortlessly, Gijs lifts the heavy crate and follows the woman inside.

I left home this morning after a massive argument with Khadija. She asked me to drive to Lelystad to pick up her silver Prada pumps from a friend who had borrowed them. I said I couldn’t because I had a meeting at school with my thesis supervisor. That was the last straw. She lost it. I think I might be starting to despise her as much as I despise milk. Reluctantly, I dial her number.

“Mama?”

“Aalow”

“It’s me,” I say.

Silence. She’s still mad.

“*Labbes?*” I ask.

“*Chkoeen?*” she says dramatically. She knows it’s me of course.

“*Ana, Aziz.*”

“Aziz? I gave you the wrong name.”

Stab number one. I swallow the pain and repeat in as normal a voice as I can, “*Labbes?*”

“*Labbes?* Seriously? Are you mocking me? Why are you calling me, anyway?”

“How are you, Mom—”

“As if you care. And anyway, you had your meeting—or did you forget?”

“That was this morning.”

“I don’t forgive you, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“Why are you so mad at me?”

“Why? You have some nerve to call me and then ask why I’m mad.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“*Kifech*, did you forget all about this morning?”

“I simply couldn’t drive you—”

“*Chouf*. I don’t feel like doing this.”

“The meeting’s been in the calendar—”

“Leave me be and live your life, ok? Just like you’ve always done. You were different than your brother and sister. Even as a baby you looked at me like you knew exactly how the world worked. And what child walks at nine months? Did you know that? That you walked at nine months. That’s when I knew you weren’t normal—”

“Come on—And no, I didn’t know I walked at nine months. Isn’t that a bit early?”

“Not early. Abnormal. A baby’s body isn’t built for that. You scared me to death—I thought you were a ghost. I came to check on you, and suddenly there you were standing on two legs, out of your crib.”

“Mom, I was a baby. You’re being unfair.”

“You know what, Mr. Ben Barka, don’t call me mama anymore. *Nta hmaar ou bak hmaar.*”

Stab number two. If she mentions “donkeys”, then she’s really mad. She loves donkeys.

"You do whatever you want without asking me, even though you live here, and you refuse to do anything I ask of you. Please. You're an adult and your girlfriend doesn't like me, and she's Algerian!"

“Seriously, are you really saying something about Algerians? That meeting with my thesis supervisor—”

"If I didn't need you, I wouldn't have asked, you should know that. You know because of the operation I can't drive for six weeks. I'm dependent and I hate it. But it's my own fault, because you can't rely on a dog. What am I saying, at least a *kelb* is loyal. Luckily I still have

two other children. What's more important, your meeting or me? *Ewa*? Emine is right. I should have stuck to one child. I understand her much better now."

"Mama, don't exaggerate. I just couldn't do it. I already had an appointment. You're being dramatic. *Ayeeqti*."

"Dramatic? Have you seen how good she looks? I look like her mother. She's four years older than me."

"Emine exercises every day and goes to bed at ten o'clock, Mom. That has nothing to do with children."

"Are you an expert on pregnancy all of a sudden? You're just like your father. Who's the dietitian here, you or me?"

"You, of course. I don't know why Emine looks so good. I don't think about it. Maybe it's genetic. Please leave Dad out of it, and Karim too, for that matter."

Every time she mentions Papa she scares me. He barked for three days straight once. We thought he was joking or fooling around, but he said it came over him after they fought. She had cursed him. Khadija was a *shrifa*, a power inherited from her mother's side, so you had to be careful around her.

"Karima, her name is Kar-ri-ma, and your father is also a dog!"

"Mama, I'm done. I'm gonna hang up."

"Emine looks like that because she only has one child. You know what, you're a grown man, it's time. Come and get your things tonight. Time to leave the nest and spread your wings." She hangs up.

During our famous first argument, she told me that I had been breastfed for a year and a half. She wanted to stop when I was nine months old, but I wouldn't let her. I was greedy. She had to go to the hospital. Then it stopped. She's told this story three times already, as though I had committed a crime. I know nothing about it, I can't even remember it. Suddenly, Gijs is standing in front of me.

"Got a light?" he asks.

"No, man. I don't smoke," I say. Then I ask him, "What's the craziest order you've ever delivered?"

"Six months ago, 180 cans of tomato soup with meatballs and 48 loaves of rye, all from the same brand. This woman only eats tomato soup and rye, day in, day out. She orders it every six months. And every four weeks, she also orders 12 liters of milk and 12 jars of applesauce, also from the same brand. Crazy, right?"

"Do you sell organic goat's milk?" I ask him.

"Dude of course we do. You know how many kinds of milk we have? Whole milk, semi-skimmed milk, even camel's milk, sheep and goat's milk, horse milk, Amstel milk, organic

milk, fresh milk, and UHT. And then there's soy milk, almond milk, oat milk, coconut milk, rice milk, sunflower seed milk, you name it. We're drowning in milk, bro."

"Thanks man."

"See you later, gotta go," says Gijs, and he leaves without smoking.

Goat's milk is the closest to human milk. It has less lactose and is easily digestible. A baby drinks an average 500 milliliters of milk a day. I guess I drank 1,000. That's double the average amount a baby drinks in the first six months of its life. In one year, I would have drunk 360 liters at most, and in a year and a half, 540 liters.

I text Karim. "Assel, can I stay with you for a while? Khadija kicked me out of the house, so I need to find somewhere else to live."

Karim lives in East in a roomy attic with her own kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. She texts back right away. "*Merhba a doeb*, don't worry!"

"I'll crash there tonight already, is that ok?"

"I have stuffed sardines from Nasser."

Every Friday, her father Nasser cooks fish he buys at the market. All the Maghrebis I know go to the market on Fridays. Even the ones in Belgium. Karim's uncle in Brussels, Ydder, does too. He has such an existential name, perfect for a professor. The last time we visited him, he made fish balls for us. Anyway, Friday is fish day. Karim always says exactly what I need. And nota bene, she doesn't drink breastmilk, no milk at all, not even oat milk.

"Aziz!" I hear Fouad calling in the distance. He's holding a wrapped, shiny pink heart-shaped box wrapped in a bow.

"Was that necessary, *a zine*?" I say to him.

"Stay with your own, asshole," he says with a laugh.

"Honey, you're so sweet!"

"For your mother, you pervert."

"*Kifech* for my mother. If anyone deserves chocolates, it's me."

"Go home and everything will be fine again tomorrow. Give her a hug and a kiss on her head, they love that, it reminds them of their parents. You know, nostalgia."

"She kicked me out," I say.

"My mother kicks me out every week, but she always takes me back. If she doesn't see me for two days, she calls all of you to find me."

"I'll pick up my things later and move in with Karim."

"All right, give Karim a hug from me, but first take this to your mother and then see what you want to do. Later."

In the grocery app, I order 1000 liters of organic long-life goat's milk. Tomorrow morning, while I'm having coffee, a delivery person will bring 1000 liters to my mother's door. They'll have to climb quite a few stairs to get to the third floor. She'll say she hasn't ordered anything, but the milk is in her name, so she'll accept it. More milk than she gave me in my early years. I'm very grateful for everything she has done for me, but I have to stay sane. Our accounts are settled for good.

I app Karim. "Bringing dessert. See you tonight."

"You're my dessert!" she writes.

"Elhob."

tongue

my mother deprived me of her language and herself
my infant tongue was left to the mercy of
harsh monastic sounds on peat
muttered prayers that warded off all things
residual slanging matches from invaders of old
old symbols on the tattooed chins of mothers mothers mothers
since then I have dragged fate along behind me by its crown

in my juvenile throat a cruel pact was made
an arrangement like that of divorced families
for the sake of the child
a togetherness that sanctified means from the days when ideals were gods
gods that protect those who make worthy sacrifices
sacrifices as flawless as incisors
I have drunk swollen milk from your many breasts
without really knowing who was who
in my windpipe you imagined yourselves Nimrod in Babel

لو كنت أؤمن بمفهوم الأمومة لو كنتن امهاتي

the syntactics were sown in neat beds

side by side

in my larynx

you carved symbols in my vocal chords
drove swords into the roof of my mouth
you pushed wings out through my ribcage
for a possible
exodus
in the cavity of my mouth you revived creatures
whose names were taboo
their sharp curled 𐤃𐤍𐤁𐤁 threatening daily to
to banish my uvula
hooves trampled eux and oui and kissed ې and م
for their flowing forms
to my head you sewed ears kneaded from your tones
ma tête lourde de votre promesses

I have abolished exile
on my tongue an orgy takes place
my uvula spits fire in distress my lips gently blow away borders
Germanic snowflakes dissolve
in ancient Semitic mountain-bastards
boundless marriages are forged every day between my cheeks
gliding smoothly like polished beads in a rosary
time
after time
after time

my tongue is split in its loyalty to North and South
my mother grows old and sometimes speaks her language
which I finally learned
from grandmothers who nourish the earth before drinking themselves

Translated by Michele Hutchison

flood

my mother regularly bursts her banks just like you
when the water's course between heart and mind is obscured

by mist or a short circuit
not only during the rainy season
summer and spring are also marked by sudden cloudbursts even raging monsoons

my brothers dig deep trenches to catch her in
my sister listlessly chops tree trunks with a sharp axe and builds dams
sisters-in-law gather their children and scream silently
before lifting their skirts to the knee
her sisters pacify on the telephone
seven at a time in mother tongue
her mother growls softly and licks the insane wounds
that nobody can see
while my mother hears multiple fathers talk at once

the grandchildren try to invite her to their birthday parties
but boundless water knows no grandchildren

rain is banned
doctors forbid the water's surface from reflecting
they cast overboard
all the ominous words they do not understand
shadow and dream are removed from the dictionary set down over the border

magical beings are numbed with morphine
my mother's force is unprecedented and spectacularly floods the country
dragging everything with it despite the army measures of love

banks are not for dreamers
the mind will be muted and drown in silence
beings will
swim free

we are water
we fear ourselves

a lover once asked me

Translation: Michele Hutchison

a lover once asked me to speak عربي avec lui
 I can't make love in my mother tongue

mon fils doesn't understand the half of what I say

I write papers in a *claiming* academic language that belongs to no one

at the publishing house, Safae and I discuss
 lovers in the language of our elderly fathers
 we smile and reveal our teeth like lovely lemons in the summer
 Canan and I text et on prie
 on est des branches qui se sont coupées des arbres
 my father is the gentle autumn just before I was born
 the low light the silence the transience

one day I see a person with a سنونو on their thigh
 a waiter with فرشات on his arm and a young woman with a ثعلب on her calf
 the way I love is the way I dream
 I need a noble being with a fleece and rosewater
 under the poplar tree
 to hold this body that carries who I am
 to cut stripes in my skin
 to put something sweet under my tongue
 to extinguish my mouth

I'd like to speak to you dans ma langue maternelle
 eat melon in front of an open fire and lick your fingers
 feed you lemon tart in bed
 tell you I want to mais je ne sais pas comment
 I
 can
 love
 in
 a
 لغة
 in which
 I'm still searching for my remains

Arabic: عربي
 swallow: سنونو
 butterflies: فرشات

fox: ثعلب
 language: لغة

Dragomana

Translated by Egan Garr

1

from her deepest interior a person pushes another
 self
 into the world
 in one tidal breath even a cry she serves
 brown sacrifices at history's alter
 defeats herself again and again
 because it's all she can do
 takes trains and crisscrosses this white continent looking for
 her genes in city walls
 sealed trenches mines
 or for a golden wolf to lose herself in

2

on n'écrit pas parce que on veut
 eerder om onze وجود
 te salueren that we survived

this is an archive
 – relics of lives that worked nights underground
 while the rest made love
 on spotless white sheets dreamt
 on soft down pillows bathed in dirt-lit cities –
 a living archive of moths
 sinners
 illiterates
 coal-ashed
 inventors
 infidels
 sun worshippers
 the saints

3

we return to our beds of blossoms
 vicious gentle make love
 with calloused hands demons asthmatic lungs
 we no longer nail our guttural sounds
 under our tongues
 the long أ alef became a short A from chaff
 separate the wheat from the chaff
 the ق qaf is complete cosmos of everything
 كامل كل

your liver has دائماً been a bat

your bones carry you until you stop longing
your mind wants to grow extinct crops
anything to feed the body
so it no longer needs to ask
wants in fact to know the hollow
كون كافي
and
and
and
our mothers will never bleach their skin again

4
winters I drink wormwood in my tea
polish my glinting scales
keep claws sharp and don't retract them anymore
I write our names on the body
just in case
a genocide flourishes on taxonomy
lists archives numbers
I build a necropolis for my friends
in the pattern of olive leaves

at the market an old woman
with a walker grabs my hand
she talks about the new batteries in her watch
her cassava
a Dutch field at the outskirts braids
our fingers
you talk about the dog on the island
we laugh but our brown-black skin burns
because we remember
I'm looking for the golden wolf you once were
you cry because that boy is hiding
and you run from the face of god

I fall
and know your crucifixion of me will be tender