Izdihar, or: The Flowering

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Essays

Shake it, little one
and dance
Of dank piss you stank
Cloves, ginger and henna flower
your sweet fragrance

—Levantine folk incantation collected by
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One day in my early twenties, as I was stuck in one of Beirut's eternal traffic jams, I peed my pants. I found myself emptying the entire contents of my bladder on the seat that now would need professional cleaning. That day, the traffic jam aggravated my bladder, but this secret event was also the beginning of my obsession with wetting myself, which possessed me for over ten years. Since that day, I have had a perpetual fear that the accident would repeat itself. And it has.

I consulted a urologist about my condition only once. He filled my bladder with two liters of water. I was able to hold in the water without any leakages or accidents. After examining me, the doctor explained that he filled my bladder with more water than a normal bladder can handle, and he suggested that what made my bladder hold so much liquid was that I felt ashamed of peeing in his presence. Seemingly, I was afraid to reveal my awful condition, and so my bladder automatically pulled itself together, to not divulge its secret. The doctor speculated that my potty training as a child was incomplete, and that I had never adequately learned to heed the social conventions of urination. He said that he had seen many in my condition, chronic pissers with bladders that have no regard for rules or conventions. Still, he was optimistic that retraining me to pee in a socially acceptable manner would not be difficult, and that the probabilities for success in most cases are rather high.

I found it insufferable to try out the routine, which he scribbled onto his prescription pad, for more than one day. What did it even mean to train myself to accept the authority of social conventions? What were these conventions that I could trust in the wake of the end of the Lebanese Civil War? Which convention of Lebanese society could I even rely upon? When the war ended, I was in my mid-teens. Like many of my generation, I did not find any reason to submit to any law or accepted rules of our violent society. Drugs were our tool for rejecting authority and formed the basis of our friendships. They were the silent signifiers of our rejection of social frameworks that were forced upon us from the various powers, be they familial or public. We

would chat about our psychological deviance as if depression and obsession were heroic qualities we aspired to. I did not share my bladder issues with my friends, nor did they share with me their own issues with the authority of shame. I did not follow the doctor's orders. Instead, I began the journey to search for the cause of my out-of-control bladder rather than the solution.

My life's instabilities as a young Lebanese, Palestinian, Sunni girl living in the southern suburb of Beirut, Dahiye, at the time of the Palestinian massacre in Lebanon could be one of the reasons. Doubtless, the conditions in our family are also a central cause. My mother grew up in a family known for being mentally disturbed, and as I have found on the Internet, incontinence is hereditary in most cases. I began visiting various psychologists. I found that they were not so interested in a grown woman who pisses herself. Every time I opened the subject, I would go home with a feeling that they did not know what to say, as if the subject was a bigger taboo than I thought, even for them. Only one old psychoanalyst in Norway on the brink of retirement entertained it, saying compassionately, *ydmykende, this must surely be demeaning for you*. I had heard the word before, but I did not understand it properly. I looked it up in the dictionary; the word expressed a mix of humility and humiliation. In a language still new to my tongue, my consciousness found its way to a word for something I was feeling but hadn't yet had language to express.

I moved from one word that expressed my feeling about my condition to a novel, relating it to a complex political situation upon reading Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*. All the sex and piss in the novel were godsends. The text helped me decipher why I peed myself. Bataille interprets pissing as a sexual gesture that rejects the bourgeois basis of the family in the inter-war period, and casts it as a form of revolutionary violence that expresses its rebellion through a violation of bourgeois chastity and its hypocritical virginity. Bataille's characters delight in golden showers and satisfy a sexual appetite freed from laws governing the body, through giving free rein to pissing on the bourgeois uptightness of mothers that know nothing about their children's lives. Bataille's characters are like mammals that urinate to mark their territory and reclaim space. Like Simone, Bataille's perverted protagonist, my peeing was a symptom of refusing to socialize within the bounds of what parents and social norms deemed acceptable good girl behavior. The story initiated a self understanding, but I still could not put into words the roots of this lowly condition.

I think of my little dog and how he pees himself constantly. His relationship to space is extremely troubled. We adopted the dog after we found him on Facebook. He is missing a leg because of an accident we know nothing about. He lived most of his life moving from family to family, and his last owner did not divulge the reasoning for this exhausting moving around. I found out that no one wanted to keep him because he is a major pisser, and worse still, unlike other dogs, he pees where he sleeps (and also where I sleep). I deduced that he must be traumatized and that we in the house would have to learn how to handle the situation in whichever way possible, and that at the very least, this dog would teach us how to adjust to our trauma. I reckoned that through taming his out-of-control bladder, I would learn how to tame myself.

Do I wet myself the way Iraqi poet Muzaffar al-Nawab pisses on the police and Arab rulers? Evidently, he likes pissing on others to humiliate them – a well-known act in the handbook of

political violence. This is what Israelis do to Palestinian prisoners and what Syrian torturers do to their detainees. They piss on them like dogs piss to mark a place – they turn the body into a place. By urinating on you, the torturer occupies the space that you used to identify (before being tortured) as your body. He is a dog, and you are a place. And both of you are the property of the tyrant and are under his command and at his whim. Yassin al-Haj Saleh writes in his book about the concept of the atrocious: "Humiliatory torture aims to manufacture a memory, or impart a lesson that will never be forgotten." You are the tyrant's property, and only dementia may help you forget.

I have never been tortured by police authorities. Yet, my persistent incontinence shackled my soul and made it subservient to the super ego, that self that is not I; rather, it is the power that managed to occupy my soul and became I, transforming some of what I know as my body and myself into a hotbed of power over which to exercise its violence. I will remain in the shadow of this super ego.

One of the characters in a short story by Haytham al-Wardani writes in her diary that disasters leave their mark on words. Words carry scars that trap the original meaning beneath a meaning woven by the disaster. "I" no longer indicates "me," the first person, ever since the super ego displaced me from myself, occupying the contents of my psyche. A friend of mine read some of my scholarship. While reading, he digressed and said: Rana, your super ego has incredible power over you. I became agitated when I heard this comment. I understood that what I was trying to articulate remained hostage to the authority of others, but where is the path to my pen's liberation so that I may perform my work as a scholar as I am supposed to, and produce new meanings, ones that originate from me?

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I rotate Izdihar's ring on my finger. I move it to a finger that is too thick for it. It is an involuntary movement; each time I am agitated, I begin to fiddle with the ring. I try to unpack the symptoms of my life's agitations by resting on the feeling of permanent suspicion that this ring on my finger generates. Ever since I found it lying abandoned in my father's house, I have been intimidated by its effect on me. I never liked my grandmother, but when her ring found me, it decided to become a part of my body. It wore me instead of I wearing it, and moved from finger to finger for ten years, until my little dog went missing two days before my move back to Oslo with him, and twelve hours after the explosion of Beirut's port. After a very long hour of searching, I found the dog, but in the process I lost the ring. After Izdihar's ring wore me for a whole decade, it decided to get out of my life and stay in Beirut while my dog and I moved out.

Izdihar wet her death bed. This made my mother quite anxious, particularly after my grandmother was moved to Gaza Hospital in Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut. My mother did not trust the nurses there. The hospital, like the city whose name was transplanted onto it, lacks everything that makes it healthy or that can bring about healing. My mother reads this essay and calls me on WhatsApp. She says that the hospital in Burj al-Barajneh is called Haifa, and that Gaza was the hospital in Sabra camp until the notorious Sabra and Shatila

massacre in 1982 when it was wrecked and became nothing more than a derelict building where homeless Syrian and Palestinian families live today. The details were mixed up in my head, it seems. I will not edit the correct name of the hospital back into the essay. I prefer it to be named Gaza rather than Haifa, for that genocided city forces me to say its name. It rips apart my memory, and its earth rips open to swallow us up along with all our cities.

My grandmother started wetting herself towards the end of her short life. She died at the age of sixty-one after hearing news that her eldest son, who had escaped to Baghdad after the massacres perpetrated against the Palestinians by the Lebanese Shia militia Haraket Amal along with the Syrian intelligence services, had disappeared. His disappearance made his mother literally lose her balance completely, fall and break her hip. She died a few weeks later. I recall that my mother took us to visit her in Gaza Hospital once. The hospital, like all the places in the camp, had the smell of several layers of mold piled up with abandonment. If you die in Gaza, it means wretchedness has triumphed over you and your life, and that your dignity will remain trampled even after your death. And because you are a wretched Palestinian, even your death may be stripped of its dignity. For example, there is no guarantee that your grave, if you get a grave in the first place, will not become a garbage dump more vile than the heap of humiliation dumped on you while you were alive.

The smell of shit takes me back to my grandmother and to memories of my mother's family in the camp. Everything there smelled repulsive. Even the people there reek of those gasses. My mother explains that water comes to the camp mixed with sewage, and none of the inhabitants manage to escape that smell when they bathe. They are literally full of shit. This is not a smartass way of cursing them. The stink of political discrimination manifests itself as an odor that blocks the imagination and occupies souls, to turn foul language and foulness into a daily reality that aims at destroying the ability of Palestinians to insist on their right to a decent life. Their lives are full of shit wherever they live. As part of their intimidation of Palestinians, the Israeli army floods Palestinian neighborhoods with shit. During the 2021 riots, the Israeli occupiers hosed Palestinian parts of Jerusalem daily with shit water, which the military knows as "skunk water," spraying the streets and the walls with what the Palestinians call the *kharrara*, or the shitter. The goal, of course, is to force Palestinians to leave by nauseating them. The gasses stick to the walls and streets, imprisoning people inside their homes out of disgust.

The death of my grandmother in Gaza hospital was drawn-out and marked with long bouts of continuous weeping that would overcome my mother after each visit. She would cry three liters of tears each time and would only tell us fragments of what she had witnessed in that cruel place. My mother would share these fragments only to tell us in a roundabout way to leave her alone with her grief. These fragments would come back to me years after my grandmother's death; they deliberately stay silent rather than speak. Crushingly silent. We do not speak of atrocious things except in signs, and always in very few words. They say that this silence is a symptom of trauma, for the intensity of the pain ties the tongue. Trauma makes speech incapable of expressing itself as action. What we say does not heal or is unable to connect the body's pain to the incessant, wholesale violence around you. It is a pain that drains you. It humiliates the body, and thus inhibits

the tongue from divulging, and you only become manifest to yourself in a sterile loneliness that does not articulate itself, but is as clear as old pee stains on fabric. Some of this silence saves face and hides the fragility of the body from the cruelty of the world. “What is there to say anyhow?” For the sake of saving face, we implicitly agree to stay silent about what happens to the body as a result of society’s cruelty. Silence that is generated from the shriveling up of language and the rupture between meaning and words. At best, what we are capable of is hysterical fits. They commit all kinds of bodily humiliation, from torture to rape, in order to stain our psyches and render our lexicon a wreck under which our bodies are buried.

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There is a phonetic connection in Arabic between motherhood and slavery. The word for mother (*umm*) and one of the words for a female slave (*amah*) share the same root. Yet we cannot find any trace of this connection in the Arabic lexicons, or any acknowledgement of the functional similarity between those two archetypes: the mother and the slave. The lexicographers (until today, men) put the two words in two different lexical entries, as if they are purposefully attempting to conceal the semantic connection by burying the phonetic relation. They place *amah* under the trilateral root *alif-meem-alif* instead of the doubled *alif-meem-meem* and so separate it from *umm* for no good reason. The lexicographers do not even take the trouble to explain the semantic relation between the slave and the root she was placed under, a relationship that is otherwise universally made evident between words and their roots in Arabic lexica. The *amah* loses her way in the linguistic desert like Hagar after she was expelled by Umm Isaac, Sara, from the family fold.

My grandmother’s enslavement to her children offset her erasure as a person with independent needs when her husband was assassinated. The manner in which he was killed, with the political and national connotations it carried, bestowed upon him a glamor that comes with the halo of martyrdom. He died for the cause and left his wife with five children, the youngest of which could not yet walk. My grandfather was a hero, a patriot, a man of principle, a martyr. Mahmud Chreih mentions him in his book *Paradise Lost*, which gives validity to the tales my mother tells about my grandfather’s generosity and his popularity in the camp. As for his widow, Um Nizar, she was known as a whore in Juret al-Tarashiha, the Tarshiha alley, and all over Burj al-Barajneh Camp. When her husband died, my grandmother was in her late twenties. Beautiful, slender, white, soft to the touch. Her murdered husband had spoiled her, and she seemed to think that after his death she would manage to maintain this pampered life. Her son would catch her behind the door kissing a man that supplied her with fabric. Another son would hear kids at school whispering rumors about his mother. My maternal aunt tells legends about my *teta*’s erotic appetite and her early marriage. She said that my grandfather married her at the age of 15 to shield her honor from gossip. After the hero died, it seemed to the relatives that Um Nizar was aimlessly wandering, searching for another body to fuse with. They were not mistaken.

I introduce her as a whore to regain something of her longing to break free from the prison of widowhood. I had to discover through writing this text that my Teta's never actually practiced

sex work, for such work did not seem logical after I tried to make sense of all the facts I gathered about her. But I grew up between adults that used to label her thus. Many do not like Izdihar. One of them told me over-the-top stories about her sexual decadence to detract from her value and to avenge themselves for her notoriously foul temper.

I prefer these tales of scandal to my memories of Teta's. I could have remembered her as a servant, even if I never once saw her scrub the toilets of the well-to-do. When my parents became business partners and my mother's class status was upgraded from poverty to relatively better economic conditions, she began employing women who would mop up the dirt from the corners of our house. We lived with those women whom we hardly got to know the way they got to know us. Language barriers notwithstanding, the women who lived with us and kept our house had little time to spare for chit chat under my mother's stringent hygiene standards. When they did share intimate stories with us, they usually came in snippets about fatherless children and poverty that forced them to work in the households of others. Did Izdihar work as a servant? I don't know for sure. When I asked my mother, she denied her mother having ever worked in the houses of others. Mother, perhaps like me, prefers to not remember what her mother worked as. What I recall is that Teta's often talked about the wife of Sami al-Khatib and how she would call for her to help cook a dinner party or that General Khatib was craving her baked *kibbeh* or *moghrabieh*. Her food was honey, like the piss of angels.

General al-Khatib, who was later known as the High Commissioner of Beirut during the era of the direct Baathist occupation of Lebanon, previously held a high position in the branch of the Lebanese intelligence service responsible for the Palestinian camps, known as *al-Maktab al-Thani*, or the Deuxième Bureau, during the reign of Pres. Fouad Shehab in Lebanon in the fifties. In his biography that was published by *al-Akhbar* newspaper after his death, months before the outbreak of the Lebanese Uprising in 2019, journalist Nicholas Nassif mentions that after the attempted coup by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party against Shehab the officer at the time then Lieutenant Sami al-Khatib was the one responsible for interrogating the leaders of that party. He was a brute of a torturer, as the article mentions. After my grandfather Mohammad's arrest, for being one of the party's Palestinian leaders, Izdihar went to al-Khatib looking for her husband. She learned from him that her husband had been killed by mistake before he reached the interrogation center. A blow to the head by the butt of a soldier's rifle killed him. Al-Khatib apologized to her, saying that he had only asked for him to be summoned for interrogation and had never ordered his killing. To make it up to her, he asked his wife to employ her in his house as a cook, for Izdihar was a master chef, as everyone who tried her food knew. Her name itself helped as well. *Izdihar* means flowering, and thus prosperity. Surely her name would bring him (and her) good fortune, and the prosperity it implies would reflect back on him too.

Al-Khatib was a police chief confronting a revolutionary coup and he was like the political cock in Jean Genet's play, *The Balcony*. Like Genet's cock, Sami al-Khatib was seeking glory and *izdihar* in order to tighten his grip over people. He did in fact flourish in his profession, for he was crowned a minister twice. Doubtless, Teta Izdihar's *mulukhiyya* helped him stoke the appetites and the imaginations of his guests at dinner parties, extending to him some of the prestige Izdihar had

inherited from her high-class upbringing in Tarshiha, in the north of Palestine. I recall how my grandmother's face would light up each time she told my mother that she had been called to cook at the minister's house. Not once did she think to poison the food and avenge her husband. Al-Khatib's wife called her to work intermittently for them over many years. During the holidays, she would donate old clothes to her or gift her a whole can of ghee from Hama, and other such items that helped her feed and clothe her children.

In Marxist literature, one will not find concepts that are capable of describing an employer-employee relationship so brutal. The burden it placed on my grandmother is not unique, for it is the kind of labor relation that is central to the savage political economy of our region. This kind of relation for menial labor grinds down the soul and is widespread in economies that are clientelistic, colonial, and enslaving. These labor relations promote inequality and create violent binaries that render people apart. Palestinian workers inside the Occupied Territories are called traitors if they work in an Israeli settlement or participate in building the apartheid wall. What shame is this born of a hand whose owner has no other choice in the confrontation with need, where the only recourse she or he can take to feed hungry mouths at the end of the day is this betrayal? Izdihar's love for her children might have been what forced her to swallow her pride and suck in the pain of losing what was rightfully hers, and compromise to secure basic necessities for her children.

So this is why I prefer to imagine Izdihar as Irma the whore in Genet's play rather than a cook in the kitchen of the dickhead. In whoring there is some of that coyness that she sometimes permitted herself but was forbidden from practicing. Coyness suits her better than her enslavement all those years at the house of her husband's killer.

The narratives of grief in the camp always revolved around what was lost for them when they were driven out of Palestine. Endlessly repeated tales that spun off each other about bygone glory, wealth, lands, influence, prestige contrasted with the moment of exodus: barefoot, they forgot their slippers at home and they had nothing with them except the clothes on their backs. We were just going away for a day or two, the women endlessly recounting, often slapping their faces in lament. The rancid smells in the camp dominate the tales of the high stature of the Qiblawi clan, my grandmother's family, in Tarshiha before they were dispossessed of their homes and displaced from their land following the Nakba. My great-grandmother was strong, rode horses, knew how to shoot a rifle; Izdihar's father was the town mayor and passed on hundreds of *dunum*s of property there. Tales overflowed with jasmine and orange blossom, as if the narratives exerted themselves to overcome the smell of shit that hangs on the walls and lives in the tap water.

When I finally visited Tarshiha a few years ago, my memory dominated my senses. The smell of the camp overwhelmed my sense of smell and my nose was blocked from smelling the refreshing air of the town. The olive trees scattered over the hills facing the house of my mother's maternal cousin, they reminded me of the haphazard web of electric cables above the alleyways of the camp. These cables short-circuit every year and can reduce human bodies to charcoal during

the wintertime, when they snap under the weight of the heavy rains and thus drop gratuitous death on the people of the camp. The homes of our relatives in Tarshiha are spacious, and their financial situation is nothing like that of their family in Lebanon. They are strangers to us, these relatives. The political and historical connection is more obvious than the family ties. The uncanny resemblance between this stranger-cousin and my own maternal aunt shakes the foundations of my limited understanding of family as I knew it, the one with a house in the camp. It was in Tarshiha that the Nakba finally took hold of my consciousness decades after the fact. My concept of home was unhinged from revolving around the camp, and was finally expanded to include the Nakba as a tangible event, not as some trite tale of victimhood we were spoonfed as children, "lest we forget." After my visit to Tarshiha, I began to understand home as revolving around the axis of the Nakba as its historical rupture. Only now could I unpack how this rupture had become part of my senses and seeped into my pores, deforming the flesh under my skin.

In Tarshiha, the word "home" fissured Palestine into two: this Palestine and that Palestine. It became one of the *mudāddāt*, or contronyms, words in the Arabic lexicon that have two opposing meanings, like the word *ʿalil*, which I used when writing this text in Arabic to describe the refreshing air of my ancestral hometown. *ʿAlil* can denote both a state of ailment and invigoration. The destroyed Qiblawi household now uncannily stirred up feelings of familiarity and alienation. This family that remained in Tarshiha managed to disrupt the very limited narratives I had about my Palestinianness and forced me to face up to the other possibilities that could have been available to my family members – Izdihar's offspring – had the Nakba not taken place, or had they been able to remain in Tarshiha where their mother was born and raised. I ask Izdihar's cousin about why (and how) her immediate family remained in Palestine whereas mine left for Lebanon to become refugees. Her response is disarmingly straightforward. Her family walked east whereas mine walked north. As simple as a few kilometers, new borders were drawn between the two countries. The historian Adel Manna writes about the pamphlets that the Israelis air-dropped on Tarshiha, in which they threatened the townspeople with a massacre if they did not evacuate their village at once. They all abandoned the village. Some became refugees and others became what we call '48 Palestinians, the ones who managed to remain in Palestine after the Nakba and were given Israeli citizenship.

Izdihar was thirteen at the time of the Nakba. Her parents did not teach her to read or write, instead they taught her cooking, sewing, and other things they believed to be useful to make her a better marriage prospect. They deliberately intended her to be *ummiya*, illiterate, to prepare her to play the role of *umuma,* motherhood, a role she would inherit from her mother, her mother's mother, and the mother of all the mothers that came before them. *Ummiya* she would remain, called thus for she would remain created in the image of her mother, and to speak her mother's tongue. This is the concrete tongue that has no recourse to ink or pens or any of the tools to rupture the umbilical cord binding it to the mother. She was taught only housework in preparation for her future as an *amah,* a house slave to her husband. *Sois belle et tais-toi*. Be pretty and shut up. This is not a specifically Arab, Tarshihi legacy; it is also common in many other cultures. To ensure your silence, because your voice might give your husband a headache, your

family kept you illiterate, and vowed to your cousin before they married you off to him that you will be obedient.

In ancient Greek, both *amah* and *umm*–slave and mother, along with children, house and the entire estate owned by a man come under the concept of *oikos*, which is the etymological cognate in English for *economy.* The economic health of the family depended on these pre-assigned gender roles of slave and master within the family. In this economy, illiteracy (ensures that the woman is restricted to being *amah*, or enslaved to her husband, *umm*, or mother to the children) provided stability and prosperity (*izdihar*) to the family and lifted its social standing. As for marrying her off to her cousin, my grandfather, this ensured that the property would not be taken over by a stranger, for whatever Izdihar inherited along with her other siblings would remain the property of the Qiblawis to add to their wealth and prestige. Today, Tarshiha is annexed to the neighboring settlement Maalot, existing only through the hyphen that conjoins them.

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I remember my grandmother mostly as a seamstress slaving away at her small sewing machine, saving her meager wages to send money to her sons who were studying medicine in Russia and Bulgaria. Only one of them managed to graduate. I was seven years old when he returned to Lebanon, back to the camp. He tried to practice his profession and discovered that he was banned from it because he was Palestinian. I recall how frustrated he and my mother were when they realized that he would not be allowed to practice as a medical doctor. His only option was Gaza Hospital. He began working there. He lived in the same house with his Russian wife and his mother. Poor Svetlana, how badly my grandmother treated her. Quarreling day and night in their cardboard house in Juret al-Tarashha. Teta continued to work and help out with the household expenses. She always worked. How else could her sons have made it to Eastern Europe? The problem was that her work was considered one of her faults. We never talked about the jobs my grandmother worked. From the smatterings of conversation, we knew that sometimes she was a servant, other times a cook, and often a seamstress. So bleak was her work. She labored for the sake of her children, and got to keep nothing for herself except backaches, poor eyesight, and rheumatic hands. And when she sought pleasure with her body, she discovered her relatives to be her worst enemies. Bleak, so bleak was her life.

Izdihar lacked even the curiosity to learn to write her own name. Was her brain so consumed by fatigue that it had shut down? Had its capability to be open to things she did not already know been smashed? I never doubted that Izdihar was smart. She was conniving and evil, and her eyes glinted with malice that transformed into thunderous snoring when she slept. Her culinary skills were regal, and hinted at a rare chemist's talent. She was steadfast in her obligations towards her doctor sons. She often wondered if she had to sell her gold bracelets to take care of their needs. But she never got over herself. Endlessly, she complained of never-ending bodily pains. She diagnosed herself with all kinds of diseases and prescribed herself all sorts of medicines. We were baffled by her deafening broken record. We hated having to share a bedroom with her, for she whimpered and snored and did not let anyone sleep a wink. She had to be the epicenter of

whatever room she was in, wherever she went. She had an incredible capacity to attract the attention of all eyes and ears. Like a black hole, she was capable of sucking all the air and matter out of any space. Aaaaaakh. If only she could have diverted a little bit of this energy into learning how to spell out her own name on a piece of paper: Izdihar, a name whose dictionary definition she could never live up to.

I sit in Beirut with my mother on her expansive balcony. I ask her about her mother and the family. She talks for a bit, then gets up to go back inside. She turns to me at the doorstop, and says *en passant*: family also means abandonment. She leaves me alone, breathless under the weight of her words. I tell my lover my secret to try to explain to her my childish behavior in our relationship. I tell her that I am afraid of abandonment. The possibility of losing love petrifies me and I would carry out several reckless actions so that those I love do not abandon me. Helene Cixious writes about how this relationship with the slave woman that we pass down to one another is an abhorrent fate peculiar to them. She says, the time has come to liberate the new woman from the old woman. But she does not notice the inherent difficulty of such a liberatory act. How do we liberate ourselves from those we love? What liberation is this when the jailer of the *amah* is the *umm,* the mother herself?

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I become vexed with the psychoanalyst I see to deal with my homesickness when I first moved to Oslo. She interprets my narrative about my family as having run away from Lebanon to get as far away as I could from the suffocating burden of my family. You escaped to Oslo, she says. I cannot bear to hear this remark, for I love them and I would prefer to be by their side rather than in the loneliness of this place so frozen over in its luxury. But today, after discovering in Izdihar a woman harkening from the patriarchal and violent history of the Levant, I repeat to myself what my therapist concluded about me and face up to my acts of avoidance.

At university, I ran away from my mother tongue to English because I did not find a language that I could inherit in Arabic. Who would I inherit it from anyhow? My illiterate grandmother or my mother who abandoned me with my younger siblings in Beirut, and moved to the Gulf for work? And what kind of mother tongue is this anyhow which has so very few women writing in it? It is easy for men to feel stifled by the anxiety of influence, to use Harold Bloom's term in his critique of literary history. It suffices for James Joyce or any other man to kill the father to become a respected writer. But for women, killing is not a helpful metaphor to employ as they are learning to write. They are the source of life, and life has its other metaphors. A woman needs to reclaim women from history, Cixous wrote. She must shake off the legacy of the old woman bequeathed to her, but in the same gesture, she must accept and internalize this historical mother as a woman that was subjected to patriarchy's violent erasure of feminine acts.

A slave she will be and a slave she must die. Is this not what we remember of Hagar, that she was a slave to Abraham? When Abraham abandoned her and his eldest son in the desert, leaving them to certain death, God did not intervene to save them. Hagar, the displaced migrant just as her name signifies, went mad running up and down the parched mountains of the desert.

She kept searching for water but could not find it. She placed her ear to the ground and heard a gurgling that was hard to place. A sound that would not articulate itself. She listened carefully and walked very slowly as she searched for the source of the sound. There was nothing among those grains of sand, so she let out a *zamzama,* a long murmur of incomprehensible words in a muffled voice resembling a low rumble, as she ran her fingers through the sand. The child was crying from hunger and thirst, and her breasts had dried up two days earlier. She erupted with fury at this Lord that left her here to die, while Abraham and Sara enjoyed the sweet waters of Palestine. Where is life, where is it, ye Lord of death? As she cried out, she stamped the ground with her foot, and a spring erupted. She called it "Zamzam" as a reminder of how her choked voice *zamzamed* out of her parched throat as she confronted death with her child. The birds began to flock to her spring to drink from it. A caravan of tribesmen also in search of water picked up what the birds were doing and followed them. Hagar refused to divulge the location of the spring to them unless they paid her a tithe. They obliged. After a while, another tribe looking for water passed by, and then another. And each one had to pay a tithe to Hagar before she led them to the spring. This went on for years, and with time, the tribes congregated and settled around what had become Hagar's estate.

Arabic brings together the two gestures of giving water to quench thirst and narrating stories in the same trilateral root *ra-waw-ya.* Hagar was to them a *rawiya*, their quencher of thirst – their thirst for water and for stories – and so gave birth to a new civilization. *Zamzamzamzamzam*. From that gentle, murmuring roar burst forth the spring around which the town of Mecca was built. Hagar's tale itself murmurs and *zamzams* between the lines of books. Her tale was written and rewritten by men, who distorted it the way they like to deviate the course of rivers. Hagar the single mother, the woman who built Mecca, was erased from her own tales, from the water she gave birth to. Only the story of her child Ismail was preserved. The thirst-quencher woman was dissolved in the narratives of men and their literary miracles, while she was reduced to her basic function: the slave-mother with the name *Hagar* that curses her to wander endlessly, forever lost in the exile it is signified by with nothing else in its semantic range. A name that signifies nothing except her life of misery.

All tales agree that misery is what awaits us upon *hagr*, which can mean exile, displacement, abandonment. Perhaps this is why no one likes to tell us how Hagar lived in exile, after being abandoned by her husband and lord. The reason may not be patriarchal at all, but is rooted in social instinct. The misery narrative is always what frames refugee stories of exile and forced displacement. If we speak of the successes of the protagonists, then we invariably place in the backdrop of these success stories the cruelty of being torn away from the family, the beloved, from friends, the homeland. Misery first and always, in spite of success, or even as the motivation behind it. The misogyny of the story is confirmed in other details, in the crap about Abraham's love for his son and slave, that man who is notorious for his readiness to sacrifice his own children to prove his loyalty to his lords, all of them. Hagar is said to have been buried at what became the entrance to the Kaaba and her son after her at the same spot. Our lady Hagar turned her grave into a pilgrimage site. All this circumambulation around the Kaaba is in fact a Hagarist ritual humming

and *zamzam*-ing in the collective memory of the *ummah,* or imagined community of Muslims.

As for Izdihar, she refused to be buried with her husband in the stately Martyrs graveyard. She asked to be buried next to her own mother in the ugly Raml cemetery, which, as its name suggests, is not much more than an elevated dirt pile. There, the remains of Palestinians cover every inch of ground.

In my early days in Oslo, I used to visit cemeteries regularly. I would stare at the grave stones and teach myself to spell and pronounce the names of the interred, so that I would not have to ask the living to repeat their weird-sounding names to me multiple times. As I walked between graves, I would console myself that I was to die in Beirut. No way should I have to be buried here next to Gunvor, Erling, Åge, Dag Finn, Inga, Ingeborg, Borghild, Gerd, and Valdis. And how beautiful are the cemeteries here, neat and manicured like the hairdos of the women in my country. I delight in pulling down my underwear around the graves and squatting down. The spirits that inhabit the place hit my *daghdaghan*, and my piss flows out copiously, and joyfully emancipated. After returning to Oslo the winter after the port explosion in Beirut, I took my dog to the workers' cemetery that is close to my house. I caught myself wishing to be buried here, behind the statue of the naked worker with his cock dangling in overwhelming nonchalance. I wish that some of his nonchalance would transfer onto my eternal presence in the soil. Here they will cremate my corpse, out of a Protestant pragmatism that prefers to restrict the space occupied by death in the city with a rising population density.

They will place my ashes in a small urn, and this urn will be interred in the ground. I will be alone here, like all exiles and emigrés, like all the other Hagars. My grave will not become another Kaaba unless I achieve tremendous fame from these writings. After I recite a spell, I will leave this graveyard and go to the great Aker River. I will open my thighs to Aker, and its water will crash onto me. My honey will burst forth and I will fade away from this woman and from that homeland.

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