

Words from a Broken World

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Abstract

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Words from a Broken World is a collection of stories and poems grown from conversations with Somali women in diaspora who are in search of a sense of belonging and a desire to convey both transnational and cosmopolitan identities. The aim is to give these women a voice and a sense of liberty by helping to tell their stories. The work is a collection of poems and stories from women who have fled from death and violence; myself included. It puts forth words from a broken world that many of these women would not dare to share publicly, but were willing to trust me to tell on their behalf. The women in these stories and poems escaped acute hardship and faced the truth of lives that had been forcibly displaced by war and culture. The characters in these stories are refugees or asylum seekers; some still unable to return home. Many of these women have built new lives for themselves in parts of the countries where they had never been. Because of their communities and clan identity, they are now relatively safe. But all have endured agonies of

separation and loss. These are stories that are painful to read, and some might find them shameful to norms of cultural sensitivity. But pain and suffering are something that Somali culture will never confront on its own. As a writer, I struggled with the ethics of talking about certain specific events, but decided that it was more important to share the truth than to protect cultural sensitivities. Most of the poems in this collection come from my own autobiography; most of the prose comes from other victims of injustice, from the narratives of characters who were never allowed to share their own stories.

Table of contents

Words from a Broken World: Poetics Statement

Creative Works

The Dangerous Departure

Checkpoint

Maternal Mortality

After the Election

Bride's Price

Fabulous Afro

1992.

Violation

Letter to Hunger

Facing Misogyny

Wordless Man

Emotionally Constipated

Death Land

Fragments of A Dream

Hooyoo (Mother)

Shame Coating My Body

Neonatal Code Blue

Between her Legs

Memory Haunted by a War

To Undo Death

Fuck Eggplants

Words from a Broken World: Poetics Statement

Words from a Broken World is a collection of stories and poems grown from conversations with Somali women in diaspora who are in search of a sense of belonging and a desire to convey both transnational and cosmopolitan identities. The aim is to give these women a voice and a sense of liberty by helping to tell their stories. The work is a collection of poems and stories from women who have fled from death and violence, myself included. It puts forth words from a broken world that many of these women would not dare to share publicly, but were willing to trust me to tell on their behalf. The women in these stories and poems escaped acute hardship and faced the truth of lives that had been forcibly displaced by war and culture. The characters in these stories are refugees or asylum seekers; some still unable to return home. Many of these women have built new lives for themselves in parts of the countries where they had never been. Because of their communities and clan identity, they are now relatively safe. But all have endured agonies of separation and loss. These are stories that are painful to read, and some might find them shameful to norms of cultural sensitivity. But pain and suffering are something that Somali culture will never confront on its own. As a writer, I struggled with the ethics of talking about certain specific events, but I decided that it was more important to share the truth than to protect cultural sensitivities. Most of the poems in this collection come from my own autobiography; most of the prose comes from other victims of injustice, narratives of characters that were never allowed to share their own stories. In some cases, it was taboo for women to talk about sexual violence, rape, and abuse. Instead of seeking the help they desperately needed, these women felt ashamed. There was no safe space to help them fully comprehend the harm caused by the traumatic experiences they were processing. At the time, they may have been too afraid to admit

to anyone the prejudice they faced. But all of these women have one thing in common, they were victims of cultural practices in which women were poorly treated. War was a setting that intensified the prejudice even more, allowing these women to be treated as non-human. Sexual violence and physical assault often go unreported because most people are afraid to confront their perpetrators. With regard to rape violence, women and their families fear being shunned by the community; families are silent because if a girl has been raped her existence loses its validity, and her life has no "market value" for the purposes of marriage. In this way, society as a whole takes part in the perpetration of sexual violence. And this is sadly not a shocking occurrence in some parts of Somalia, where I am from.

As a little girl, I watched as these darkneses surrounded me; I felt death floating around me, promising that it would not leave until it had taken away those I loved. I felt helpless, hopeless, and terrified. Writing was a safe space, a place I would go to lose myself. At the age of seven, I decided to write my feelings in a notebook because that was the only way I knew how to express my pain and love. Writing has spoken to me more than any other aspect of life. It became the only way I knew I could communicate to the world.

Eleven years ago, I moved to the United States, and found that writing in one language was not enough to express how my struggles and pain were different from anyone else's. I was not able to communicate the words in English alone; some Somali words had no English equivalent, others felt foreign to me when spoken in a different language. I knew every story in my imagination had to be released on the page. I wanted the letters and words to dance freely. Thinking about my poetics and reflecting upon my writing, I realized that this was the beginning of a deeper passion for writing and expression. I hope to give a voice to these stories that will allow them to be free.

This collection of poems and stories was challenging to write because they come from a vulnerable place in my world. Through the pieces in this collection, I invite you into the broken world of a twelve-year-old girl who had her life shattered by gang-rape; I invite you into the homes of women who no longer have a place to call home; I invite you into hearts that are beating for hope. What I attempt in this collection is to capture the uncapturable. I also discovered some parts of myself while I was writing this collection of stories and I share these aspects of my soul with you, both the good and the bad. I invite you into my displaced home and into considerations of lost bodies and displaced identity. I challenge and confront the truths of women in the diaspora. I have attempted to embed into each piece in the collection the pain, senselessness, fear, and fragility of the self. Each poem and story presents the face of a woman who was a prisoner in her own world, body, and society. As a black girl that grew up around struggles and suffering, I hope my writing can be a road map for people to reach and speak their truths. This collection of short stories and poems is designed to communicate to the world without feeling fear or hopelessness. I hope that each word on the line of each page can heal and reach out to those who know what it means to lose identity, to lose a loved one, and to experience pain. Each of the pieces in this collection explores the pain of women in various roles in life: wife, daughter, mother, and sister.

POETICS CONSIDERATIONS

Everybody has a story and history. I picked ten such stories, shared with me in conversation by women who endured painful trauma. These women revisit the raw memories and suffering they faced. To accompany these stories, I wrote ten poems that are inspired by my own

autobiography. This combination allows trauma to be processed, gives these women space to find strength to share their experiences, and gives me a space to share mine, too. It takes courage to tell a distressing memory, and witnessing these women's courage shows that they are not only brave, but also whole. And so, in sharing their lives for this collection, these women learned that they could face anything; as they saw their fear minimized, they found courage to see this as an opportunity to free themselves from the hurtful memories. I sat with each woman individually and typed their stories as told. These ten stories and ten poems come together to powerfully represent a cultural and political reality that is not reducible to any one person, even if each experience is unique in its challenges and experience.

On autobiography as a way to anchor experience

I think it is important for the reader to identify with the agony, grief and loss experienced by the characters in these works. Emotions are a global language that is shared among all. I want my readers to imagine the past that created the present self of each woman. This is a starting point for the journey of the narrator to reclaim their voice(s). This is a discovery of the truths about the past that my earlier self could not see or admit. These stories took place in the past, often during childhood or adolescence, at times where the characters were incapable of understanding all that was happening to themselves and to those around them. Also, a younger self often does not have sufficient information to understand their own past. This is a dialectic between the self of the past and present. Who was I? Who am I now? How did these events affect my life and theirs? These are questions I'm trying to unpack through the series of events in this thesis.

On Poetry as a medium for truth telling

For me, poems have always been a vessel that allows an event to be free; poems can capture the density and depth of a moment. Poems go beyond the lines of description and lift all restrictions of thought and emotion. With all the limitation in life, poetry allows me to break free and ignore the rules and regulations of the everyday. Poetry helps me understand the significance of the words themselves. The truth about poetry for me is that poetry makes it possible to understand the emotional dimensions of experiences, to help the reader recognize the emotional and historical meaning of events. Through poetry, I am able to explore multiple aspects of feelings and events, which allows the reader to engage these in greater depth. My intentions were to take the reader on a journey to understand the complexity and density of the events.

On Biography and writing about the lives of others

I want my work to be inclusive of the voices of others and liberating for the people behind those voices. I grew up around women who shared similar life events. The stories I share are stories that were only told in small spaces; no one ever spoke of them in public settings. Many of these voices didn't have a safe space to free themselves from the traumatic events that haunted them for years. These stories are those of voices confronting the past, accompanied by the present voice of the narrator who is engaged in a search for a language to liberate herself and others. I try to find the language which will express what these women unconsciously know and feel but do not yet have a language to express. My goal is to find a voice, a language which will not only tell

the events of the past but help them to come to terms with that past, to reveal what it means to know themselves in the present.

On narrative as a way to engage the stories of others

I decided to listen to the way each individual talked about their own life events. I realized that there was often a battle between the external self and the internal self, and there was a journey in finding the language to convey the events. To the best of my ability I kept the authenticity of their stories in my writing. I didn't need to make it feel real because these were already real events that were very raw. My goal was to find language to deliver on the realness of the events. These are not stories about success; they are about confronting pain and cultural and political restrictions. These works are journeys towards reclaiming identity, power and control.

ON INTELLECTUAL & ARTISTIC CONTEXT

I struggled to find stories that were similar to my experiences of injustice, or at least what I had grown up around. I searched for books that I could use to help define myself, and I was happy when I found the complexities of myself and others adequately represented in poetry and non-fiction literature. I was intentional, searching for Black authors who provided a tangible point of reference to learn about myself, and more specifically, Black women authors. I was hungry for books that were able to explain and display different faces of trauma and to discover the identities that were shaped by traumatic experience. I found myself especially in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya Angelo's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Both women

write about lineage, sexual abuse, servitude; there is a throbbing to the pain of injustice they share. This is what I had been searching for to give a voice to women who had survived similar injustices.

On Tony Morrison

As I was reading *The Bluest Eye*, I was moved by the text. This book was relatable to me because of the understanding it shared of a black girl finding her actual black identity. To find an actual identity means to discover that one is not only skin. This novel unravels black identity through the language and talking about the political and social standards. It is important to understand how society has framed the construct of black identity. This book was thought-provoking, and it made me think about the world we live in today and how damage from the past still affect us today. The novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio, tells the life of a young African American girl named Pecola who grows up during the years following the Great Depression. We learn in the story that Pecola's mannerisms and dark skin are consistently viewed as ugly. There is a scene of sexual abuse, but it seemed reduced in importance, maybe because of the need to keep the focus on issues of racism and race. Overall the book was full of pain and agony and suppression.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is comparable to *The Blues Eye* in the sense that it discusses how slavery is destructive to identity. *Beloved* grounds the world of the story. The story of *Beloved* takes place in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and provides a deeper understanding of the institution of slavery. Moreover, fragmentation is a huge element in the novel because it challenges the reader to not only understand but to enforce the idea that the past is lingering to

the future. I also thought the confusion was intended to make room for interruption. The part where Seth kills her daughter to protect her from slavery was especially moving for me, as were the parts of the book focused on mother and daughter dysfunction and the damaging effects that slavery had on families. This book was hard to read because it brought forth the issues of PTSD as well as emotions of hope and violence. Toni Morrison is one of the artists that inspired my writing because she brings forth the black struggle and the pain that follows it.

On Maya Angelou

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a story told by a younger version of the author who experienced a series of events of sexual abuse, identity crisis, and racism. In this story, issues of race and identity come clearly into place. One part that really stood out to me while reading the book was the fear of lynching, which feels somehow very similar to the issues of police brutality against black people today and the flawed system that enables this violence. This book was inspiring because she describes lynching in a way that was so vivid, fearful and moving for the different types of pain and trauma and sexual discovery that she described.

Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* is a collection of poems that celebrate women, poems that are intriguing and made me feel grounded. Reading these collections of poems gave me an incredible feeling of power as a black woman and as a woman in general. "I know why the caged bird sings" is the plain racial discrimination between the Whites and the Blacks. Maya Angelou uses symbols throughout the poem, one that stood out to me is "free the bird" is a symbol of the whites and "caged bird" is the oppressed blacks. Her words pierced my brain, and her voice was so loud I couldn't hear anything else. These poems encouraged me as a writer to

write a compelling and powerful. I was struck by the power that resides within these poems, and the beauty of her words that would move anybody. As a writer, that's what I aspire to do.

On Octavia Butler

Parable of the Sower novel is a story of a post-apocalyptic and afro-futuristic world. This novel speaks about religion, destruction, and the balance between truth and contradiction. The story takes place in the future. It focuses on the end of times for the earth due to climate change. It discusses issues such as class and greed. Lauren the main character has a hyperempathy disorder and shares ability to feel pain along with other sensations. The thing that stood out to me is that Lauren's hyper empathy syndrome was caused by her mother's drug abuse and her father's denial about her condition. The contradiction with her condition is that even though it forces her to feel empathy, she's is willing to kill to get rid of the pain. This novel was a great dystopian read. I was struck by the complexity of feelings such as empathy and pain presented in this book. I became hyper aware of the ways that social violence can create strange paradoxes of different feelings for each individual.

Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" is a complicated short story, but it was intriguing to read. "Bloodchild" is a story about an alien planet to which Terrans have escaped from the disasters of their native Earth. The aliens can't carry a child and must use a male Terrans as carrier. Later, the Tlics use a form of narcotic to seduce the Terrans and develop familial bonds with their hosts, a strange love-hate relationship which foregrounds the conflict. In the story, Butler plays with gender roles making the standard patterns in gender the complete opposite. The male characters are the ones carrying and giving birth, and the women were the ones that were the

heads of household. This story completely redirects traditional aspects of life and gender stereotypes. This story built my sense of imagination and opened my mind to the possibility of men being able to take on the role of woman and vice versa. In our society, it is rare to see a woman lead the household, but this story tells the possibility that it could be otherwise.

On artistic inspiration

I take inspiration from the work of Morrison, Angelou, and Butler for the ways they create women with strong characters, capable of navigating violent and complex experiences. Morrison and Angelou were particularly important to me because they also gave me strategies for sharing stories of real trauma. I have always wondered how to layer the voice in my writing. In a story, voice is what makes the reader connect. I have always wondered how some writers were able to create characters with a distinct voice that makes them unique.

ON POLITICAL CONTEXT: BLACK BODIES & CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

My work responds to a society and culture where black bodies are silenced and are constructed to serve a white man's story without being granted any real story of their own, unless it ends in loss or sacrifice. During slavery black bodies were required to negotiate their servitude. The bodies of black women were desired to be gentle, used for sex and to deliver children. Many slave owners would practice their sexual fetishes on black women. Women as young as thirteen were beaten and raped. While we may think of our current society as post slavery, the resulting social, economic, and political inheritance of these actions have deeply affected black women in

American society. Stereotyping, the delimiting and often negative generalizations of Black bodies and their culture has a history dating back to colonial years. Stereotyping continues to manifest in society after slavery. Most African American women, if not all, have been subject to victimization by stereotyping in mainstream American culture. I ask, what is at stake in the way that black bodies are misrepresented in American culture?

What about the white male as monster?

For the sake of argument, I would like to look at the white male as the monstrous. Society victimizes women and makes a woman as victim of the monster. Freud asserts that men see women as castrated, the vagina that swallows and leads them to be castrated. Why do men stereotype women to the extent of dehumanization? In her book *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbra Creed states, “As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality” (3). Women’s sexuality, bodily waste and gender difference presents a threat to male power. According to Creed, “Whereas Freud argued that woman terrifies because she appears to be castrated, man’s fear of castration has, in my view, led him to construct another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator” (7).

American culture is quick to label Black women as angry creatures, contributing to a society where black bodies are being diminished daily. Watching the president’s assault on women has reaffirmed for me how white male dominated society is building a culture that is dehumanizing, humiliating and oppressive. I am more alert to black bodies representation in media now more than ever just because the dehumanization became a reality that most black bodies are forced to live with in the 21st century. The president of the United States made a clear

statement about how he feels about women. According to Frida Ghitis, “in the "Access Hollywood" recording, when he boasted "you can do anything" to women when you're famous: "Grab them by the p----y". This is evident in the portrayal and dehumanization of women’s bodies in the twenty-first century. Many of these stereotypes spill over to the mainstream media. African American women are portrayed as minorities. The image of black women in the news is pervasive; they are more likely to be presented as a danger to society — the primary image depicted as women who live below the poverty line, misuse the welfare systems, take advantage of child welfare to collect payment through fraud. Often their intelligence is questioned. Then black women are forced into the black angry women stereotype. Therefore, these women become desensitized about their feelings to avoid judgment. Often their emotions are not shown outside their comfort zone. As a result, the accumulated emotions will eventually explode. With all that emotional battle they are judged. Once seen as the angry black woman, she always will be nothing but an angry black woman. As a consequence, all her values, aspiration and opinions are dismissed. But really in this exchange it is the white man who is the monster.

On race and racism

As defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), race is not biological (like we often assume it to be); instead, it is socially constructed. Racism is depicted as the daughter of Mother Nature, with a need to ascribe deep boned people, to humiliate and destroy them. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln stated, “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.” Yet the Abolitionist Movement and the Civil War were moments in which slavery and extreme racism influenced the thinking and behavior of many White individuals and oppressed

People of Color. With the success of ending slavery, many advocates pushed to end racism through anti-racism movements. It is important that future educators are knowledgeable about these movements to understand the recurring problems that plagued the efforts of these movements so as to improve their advocacy for students.

Many people, including Abraham Lincoln, were anti-slavery, but not anti-racist (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012). With the "stereotype threat" there is concern that an individual may be negatively evaluated due to negative stereotypes about their racial group. I feel this directly relates to concerns about teachers treating students differently based on their conscious/subconscious predetermined idea of potential success for a student. Society reinforces an idea that black bodies will not succeed and therefore some educators end up failing to give the support and attention to all their students equally and predispose a child's fate based on stereotypes. Even though most teachers would easily share that they are anti-slavery, when their actions treat black bodies differently, they show that they are not actually anti-racist. I have experienced stereotyping firsthand; I was told by my counselor, who is White, in high school that girls of color like me most of the time don't make it to college. Between her words I felt like she was saying that there is no reason for me to work hard in high school and worry so much about my grades. I told her that I wanted to go University of Washington when I graduated high school; she said that I shouldn't really aim for it, and I'd have a better shot at another school. Our own biases and prejudices affect the way that we think, feel, and behave around other people. We make judgments about others through our socialization, and we then discriminate based on our prejudices. Everyone has prejudices and discriminates others one way or another, but they are less visible than they might have been throughout history; they are more subtle and are usually kept to one's self for worry about being ridiculed for them, or they are often learned

unconsciously, and the person is not aware of them. Sensoy and DiAngelo say, "This action is subtle- as subtle as avoidance and disinterest. However, this lack of interest is not accidental or benign; it is socialized and results in not developing relationships..." (34). These discriminations and prejudices then lead to the oppression of black bodies and the privilege of others. If a non-dominant group of people is being discriminated against, for whatever reason, it may be more difficult for them to get a good education and then a lower paying job, while a dominant group will not experience this discrimination and may have access to better quality education and a better paying job, leading to privilege. Usually, dominant groups are the ones enforcing the oppression of non-dominant groups. When it comes to schooling, this means that students who belong to non-dominant groups are more likely to be discriminated against and are more likely to attend schools that are less funded and are of worse quality than students of dominant groups who are more likely to receive a better-quality education. Students of dominant groups are more likely to have come from families who have had the same kind of privilege and can afford these privileges for their students; this widens the gap further. I had to wonder if there is, in any case, to truly break the cycle of one group's privilege over another.

Role models

When I think of black bodies in American society, race and gender inequality are whispered often; excluding black women bodies are the first thing that comes to my thoughts. The wage gap and the stereotypes of black women in the entertainment industry is a symptom of a more significant issue that is causing these black bodies to be invisible and devalued in media culture as performers, producers, and directors. Black bodies often asked to be cast for stereotypical

characters. Walking around with black body means to be immune bones breaking, tooth cracking, skin bleeding. It means to be alert at all times because one might never know when they can walk by the wrong person who can take their life away in an instant.

I have been interested in why some of the black bodies in the mainstream media have been praised more than others. Why were some of these black bodies affected by the stereotypes ,and others not? What strategies have led them to a larger and more diverse audience? Through media I want explore how black bodies were represented: in particular Serena Williams and Michelle Obama. These black women are independent and successful and yet with all these qualities they are still not safe from stereotypes.

Serena Williams is an African American professional tennis player. The Women's Tennis Association ranked her world number one. At a recent tennis match she caused an uproar in the media. The media was quick to label her as “sapphire,” the angry black woman. As viewer I saw a black woman who was defending herself from a white man. Serena’s outburst resulted in a fine for showing anger on the court. Athletes express their emotions often, whether it’s an expression of irritation, tears, anger or happiness. Men tend to show more anger and fight other athletes and their aggression is normally ignored and tends to be overlooked. Serena is a black woman who had to be disciplined because she expressed her anger. Williams received a penalty for calling the empire a “thief” and a code violation for coaching and later received a fine. Samantha Schmidt (2018) claimed that “Williams found that 56 percent of white men felt free to express anger, compared with only 40 percent of women of color and 44 percent of white women. Sixty-two percent of white men said they are not penalized for being assertive, compared with only 46 percent of women of color and 48 percent of white women.” White men today are still

disciplining the black body by telling it how it should feel and what emotions are appropriate to be expressed. This is evident in the portrayal of black women's bodies as monstrous. For example, the recent political cartoon (Devic, 2018) of Serena Williams (illustrated by a white European man) represents her as "mammy", an animal with a magnified body, nose, and eyes, rather than the woman she is. This speaks to the internal issue of men being intimidated by the power women hold.

Michelle Obama was no exception from the stereotype labels. She was the First African American First Lady, an intelligent, successful African American woman. Michelle was quickly categorized as the "angry black woman" based on her physical traits. Her facial expressions during Obama's campaign came across as an angry black woman. Her curvy body led her to be looked at as overweight woman. An Andrew Breitbart's websites posted a cartoon of an overweight Michelle Obama eating a plate-full of hamburgers and saying: "Shut up and pass the bacon!" The "mammy" is masking weight in this case. The black body perpetuated as overweight, dark-skinned, large features, portrayed as unattractive even with a woman who exhibits some of the stereotype, again here she is activating not only one but two by being herself. Black standards of beauty have been ignored and pushed aside for many years. Historically black women had to define their own standard of beauty because the white dominated society had ignored the beauty of black bodies. It is an interesting dynamic when the general society of the country is struggling with obesity, but a black body is more likely to be shamed for body weight. In a speech in Argentina Obama, told the audience that she dealt with "teachers who didn't think I was smart enough and would call on the boys instead of the girls, even though the girls had better grades" (Umah, 2017). Obama was sexualized by men who made her feel as if she was only an object

and it was this incident that led her to self-doubt. Because of her curvy body Obama was criticized with the stereotype of “jezebel.” Obama states, "messages that said that, as a girl, my voice was somehow less important. That how my body looked was more important than how my mind worked. That being strong and powerful and outspoken just wasn't appropriate or attractive for a girl" (Umah, 2017).

Race, like gender, is a social construct that we use in order to categorize people; it is not biological, black bodies are lumped together as a minority and white people are considered the dominant group or the majority. But no one should be judged based on their skin, features, or body shape. How do we end the stereotypes and change our views on race? In order to end this unwholesomeness in society, we need agency, to understand and look beyond visible difference.

Shades of Difference

One source of inspiration for this challenge is *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon. This book explores and profoundly penetrates the alienation, Colorism and diaspora and its outcomes of such impact on those of opposite sides of the spectrum. Fanon (1952) gives a small window of a broader issue; he focusses on the Caribbean during the French colonial period and the impacts following the imperialism. The settlers influence the colony in many ways, and that can be a constructive change and can add to those colonized. For instance, French protectorates colonized Morocco and the French-influenced them culturally and academically. Moroccans widely speak French to this day, even though they received independence in 1956, the French strongly implemented their language to the point that it is actually considered to be the first language of Morocco. Another positive outcome of French colonialism is that the French helped boost

Morocco's economy and many other beneficial influences from the French. However, there is much more a country loses from getting colonized, and that is what Fanon focuses on bringing forth.

It is important when the writing is personal, and the author can emotionally relate to what they are writing about because the reader develops a sense of trust with the author. Fanon conveys that in his writing, he shares how he was part of the French Caribbean colony of Martinique. As a child, he was brainwashed to disassociate from his black side and tune in with the French culture. This can be profoundly dangerous because before the American Civil War, many black people who were light enough to 'pass' as a white were passing as white for many reasons. Some people passed for social convenience, and some passed because they had internal issues of not having a sense of belonging; they wanted to feel accepted and appreciated. Fanon assigned the responsibility of his alienation to the French. Fanon also discusses the same concepts of black people always being compared to others: "The Antillean does not possess personal value of his own and is always dependent on the presence of 'the Other.' The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, or less competent than I. Every self-positioning or self-fixation maintains a relationship of dependency on the collapse of the other" (Fanon, 186). Black people are always made as less than, and they are in constant search for approval and acceptance from others. He examines the psychological damage the constant comparison imposes on black bodies. It also constructs an emotional dependency; he further explains that the strategy is to strip all of the essential components of the identity to create reliance and support from the colonists. There are no easy answers but there are many lived realities.

Final Thoughts

The issues of race and colorism are ongoing battles. I would like to end with a statement of appreciation for Fred Moten who, in *Black and Blur*, proceeds with a relentless cutting into the metaphysics of modernity, so as to reveal its wound. This place—where Moten meditates and where my work aspires towards— is the crawlspace of Harriet Jacobs, “above the main floor of her grandmother’s house, where she confined herself for more than seven years in order to escape mastery’s sexual predation.” (69) Moten’s interventions into continuing, critical conversations about anti-blackness and the analysis of blackness speaks to me and my poetics. In his preface—which I take as my final thought—Moten states, “it hurts so much that we have to celebrate. That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much. Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study.” In my writing, I try to bring forth the pain and, following Moten, try to find ways to celebrate it. I think that is a way to regain power and own our truth.

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Words from a Broken World: Creative Thesis

The Dangerous Departure

Tahrib, Tahrib, Tahrib, I couldn't sleep because all I was thinking about was this 50/50 chance of dying or making it to a safe place in the world. Like an unlucky baby bird falling from the nest, I was getting closer and closer to death. Walking around the streets of Hamar was like playing Russian roulette. Everyone knew that leaving home meant taking a risk dying; it was not a safe to step a foot outside. Women were getting raped, kids were brutally killed, and men shot in the head. I knew my home was not a home. I knew that I couldn't hide inside my home anymore. Death was approaching. If I stayed in my house, the militants would've broken in, raped me, and killed me. I was not safe between the walls of my house. In the hours before a person dies, their organs shut down and their body stops working. I was dying every second from fear, I was fed up, I didn't want to die slowly in my own house. I had decided to go out and face death, fight for my life and the life of my child.

I first heard of Tahrib from the television. I saw my neighbor who fled from the war to Australia, talking about the life and how they had traveled there by a boat. At last they made it. Listening to their stories have giving me hope. I thought about my child's life, I wanted to be in safe place where I can provide for my family. Tahrib is not the normal

travel people go on, Tahrib meant being on a boat for weeks if not months. I was aware that it was the boat of death. Only the lucky ones make it alive. It was the journey of uncertainties.

I reached out to a Mukhalas, which is the person who connects refugees with illegal paperwork. These men are considered the most dangerous men in Somalia, they are nasty men who often sexually take advantage of young girls who are desperate to escape the war. I had sold everything I got to pay them for the Tahrib. I collected six hundred dollars and gave it to the Mukhalas to take me and my son to Europe. Friday afternoon, I walked to their office that was in an abundant house so I can get the time and place of departure. I carried my child on my back and hoped I would make it to the next boat because many people don't even make it to the boat leaving Somalia. Often death comes sooner than we anticipate.

I didn't sleep all night; the day had come too soon. It was Monday morning and I walked out with my son wrapped on my back and bag of clothes in my hand. I was the only one left from my family. Everyone I loved is under the dry soil. I was sad leaving behind the house I grow up at. It was a misty all around our neighborhood. The city was covered with fog. The houses on the other side of the road looked hazy. It was a foggy morning; I could see our milkman cycling along the road and continuously ringing the bell. This was the last time I see him cycle through

my neighborhood. My heart was broken, I didn't think leaving behind the broken pieces was so difficult. I looked up and even the rays of the sun couldn't pass through the fog. However, the light created a stunning halo. I didn't pack much because the boat was too small. I was only allowed to bring a change of clothes and money and a carry on. I made sure I took my mother's picture it was my most precious possession. Her picture was the only thing left from the war. The boat was straight out of children's book. It was part of a small fishing fleet, painted in stripes of blue. I have always dreamed going fishing with my father, it never crossed my mind Tahrir would be the reason why I will get on a boat. They were clear about not bringing anything heavy weight. The boat was small it could only take fifteen people but the Mukhalas over crowd the boat. There were over forty people, young men, kids and women.

I was not leaving anything behind beside a woe.

"Listen you all, make sure you all spread evenly on both sides of this boat. If you scale more on one side, we will drown," the captain said. Everyone spread evenly, on the imbalanced boat. I held tightly to my son, and I prayed to god to watch over my son.

The real horror began two weeks into the journey, people ran out food and the boat captains were very cruel, shouting and

throwing things at people who couldn't bare the hardship of the journey. Some had fell asleep but never wake up.

My son was getting weaker and weaker, his mouth was getting drier by the time. As mother the only thing I thought about was saving my son's life. I was afraid he would die from thirst; I've decided to wet his mouth with my saliva. Fever had attacked his body. I held him tight to my chest and kissed him, his tiny hand was squeezing my hand. I knew there was no looking back. My child had falling asleep and never woke up. I was in disbelieve, I witnessed my child's birth and I witnessed his death. I waited for him to take his last breath, I held him closer to my heart and tears ran down my face. The transitioning between both worlds is the same. I waited when he was born to take his first breath, entering life with joy. His death was similar expect his existed life and left me broken into pieces. Death has always been floating around me, but this was the moment I experience the arc of life, I have never felt so strongly.

I had wrapped my child with my Garbsaar (a traditional ankle length scarf). The journey was long, and I couldn't keep my child on my lap. We were told that if someone dies during the journey, they were not going to have a proper burial. The captain stopped the boat, it was time for me to leave my son in the bottom of the sea. I kissed him for the last time and slowly placed his body in the sea. I watched the sea swaddle his body.

I was only left with a frozen piece of time, I watched him until the sea swallowed his tiny body. The blue ocean was not blue anymore.

Checkpoint

I have never been back to Somalia since I left in 1990; I was always curious about what the country of my birthplace looks like now. The moment my flight (The United Arab Emirates) lifted off from the Sea Tac International Airport enroute to Somalia was perhaps the most overwrought moment of my life. I was scared of the unknown and the uncertainty that was waiting for me, but I was filled with joy when I thought about being with my mother after twenty-three years. I put my head on the window and looked down as the plane raised higher, Seattle was getting further away with the speed of the plane. The plane moved onto the runway with a gentle gliding motion. As it picked up speed, the plane lifted up, I didn't even notice how I got pushed back into my seat. A few minutes later, the plane leveled out. I watched the roads, cars, and houses shrink in size as the plane raised. For some reason I couldn't hold my tears back; for the first time in my life I had left my children to go visit my mother, who I had not seen in years. I was afraid of leaving them behind. I had never left my children. But I guess there is a first time for everything. I wondered and wandered in my seat; my thoughts were wrestling in my head. I was wondering if I will ever come back to this city and be able to be with my children again. Somalia is a country that is trying to reemerge from

decades of a conflict. Subsequently, I had been hearing about the bombings and violence from mainstream media outlets. I was only concerned about my safety there as a Somali-American and you feared that you might never return to see you children because you might not make it home.

The guy that was sitting next to me passed me a napkin and asked me if I was okay.

"Yes, I'm okay. I got emotional because this is the first time, I have left my children," I replied to him as I wiped my tears.

"I'm sorry, I'm sure they will be okay," he said.

The thought of them just made me unable to control my tears, and I was overloaded with so much emotions. But knew that leaving Seattle was one of the best decisions I had ever made. The main motivating factor of my trip was being with my mother again.

After fourteen hours of flight I had landed in Dubai (a city in the United Arab Emirates). I spoke fluent Arabic and it helped that I been watching Arabic shows for years which had helped me maintain the language. I had had gotten in a taxi and went to my hotel. After I had rested for couple hours, I decided to go into the city to buy gifts for my family back in Somalia. I was mostly excited about shopping for my mother. I come from a very poor home, my mother didn't have much, but she raised me to

be a hard-working woman. When I left Somalia and migrated to Saudi Arabia, I was only a fourteen years old girl who never left her small town. I didn't know there was another world outside my neighborhood. The reason I had made that big transition is because my mom couldn't afford the school tuition, uniform and the daily lunch. My mother and I had agreed that I needed to move to Saudi Arabia for work. I was sent with my auntie who had lived in Saudi for years; it was only right to live with her. I was the only child my mother had; I remember the sad tears in her eyes that night when she agreed to send me away. The hard circumstances of life had separated us.

I have worked years at different jobs and raised all my children. I was proud of the woman I had become, but I had felt trapped in a vicious cycle, where I was only living to pay bills. However, I knew what hunger was, I never stopped working because my dream was to go back home and take care of my mother, I couldn't wait to spoil her with gifts and love. My last memory of my mother is how she loved smelling good. She had this floral scent that filled the house. Her favorite was Oud (oud is valued strongly perfumes in the Middle East). It frequently comes in different forms. My mother loves the oil based oud. It's an aromatic and complex scent and it has a warm sweetness mixed with woody and balsamic scents. Her sister used bring back

different ones for whenever she visited us. I was overjoyed to buy her favorite Oud.

Two thousand eight hundred kilometers, and four hours later, I landed in Aden Adde International Airport in Somalia. The airport itself was small, and people were in horrible conditions. Older men and women rushed to the arrival to offer to carry the luggage. I couldn't contain myself. I felt extremely sad seen these elders carrying heavy luggage on their backs for less than ten dollars. I had rejected the elder woman offer. But I had given her the change I had. Cultured shock had hit me instantly. I walked towards the exit to only lock eyes with my mother. I recognized her smile from far, I ran into her arms covering her with kisses. I wanted to melt into her. Living in Somalia for so many years had taken its toll on her physically, she had aged and so did I.

I was not the teenage girl who left her. In her arms I felt the at peace, seen was like a surefire that alleviated what pained me for so many years. Being with mother was a dream that come true.

After two weeks of my arrival, I had decided to take a bus across the country to go visit my father. It was oppressively hot and humid. Every couple minutes I had to gather my breath. My mother and I got to the bus station and got on a bus that is headed to Budhubo (is a town in the southern Gedo region of

Somalia). This is a small town that inhabits cultivated crops on the farms, the residents of this lead a pastoral lifestyle. I was excited to be on the farm side of the country. I had to dress according to the modesty norms of the country. Women were required to wear a niqab, which covers all the body and face. It was not realistic to wear a long heavy gown in the piercing sun. I thought I was going die from a heat stroke but the fear of being whipped was overshadowing the heat. The drive to Budhubo is a risky trip. Al-Shabaab is the largest militant organization, their organization is based on a rigid interpretation of shariah law. They are often at every checkpoint, blackmailing travelers into paying a travel fee. No one refuses to pay because they will kill everyone in the vehicle if the request of the payment is denied.

This is what struck my trip to Budhubo, after half an hour of driving we got stopped at a check point. A younger man most likely in his early twenties approached the driver side, he was carrying a large weapon in his shoulder, his face was covered but his eyes were showing no mercy. He was used to killing people every day. No one has ever met a member of Al-Shabaab and liked them. They were only cold-blooded heartless killers in the eyes of every citizen. My mom and were sitting next to each other.

"Don't get scared N, make sure you don't show a sign that you came from outside the country," my mother said.

"Okay, Mom," I said.

I was terrified as I had never seen this group in person. I only used see them in the mainstream. The young man and some other ones, ranged in age, had come to the vehicle. I could feel the driver and the rest of the passenger get nervous. Next thing I know, men were screaming at us, pointing their rifles and swiveling tank guns in our direction. They asked the driver to pull to the side of the muddy road. This was not a good sign. They demanded that we all get off the bus. They were searching for individuals that work for the government.

I can hear my mother praying in a low voice.

"God, please protect us from these evil people," she whispered.

Guns were pointed at us as we all exited the bus. I was drowning in my sweat, the heat and my burned nerves were making my body weak.

They put in on like on the side of the road as they were questioning the male passengers on the other side of the road. The sun was directly over my head, I was on the verge of fainting. My mother had gotten up to fan me. One of the AL-shabab men walked towards us with a gun pointed at us.

"ma xaad sameyneysaa (what are you doing)?" He shouted.

"way kulushahay ina qabowgi (I'm trying cool her off)," said my mother.

"sit down woman," he said.

I kept looking down because my heart was beating against my chest, I was prettified to my core.

"istaag (stand up)," He said.

My knees were weak. I was glad I was wearing a niqab so they wouldn't see how my lips were shivering from fear.

"miyaad kulushahay (are you hot)?" he said.

I kept my composure straight.

"haa, waa maalin kulul (yes, it is a hot day)" I said.

He looked me in the eye as if he is counting the last moments of my life.

"sida dabka jahannamada (how about hell fire, what do you think that looks like?" He said angrily.

"ilaahay ha naga badbaadiyo Naarta (may god protect us from hell fire)," I strutted.

This was test for me, he spoke Somali to see if I was foreigner. If I had failed the speaking test, I would've been captive, and they would use me to blackmail my family to pay. My uncle had died two years prior because we didn't have the money the requested. He was a victim of blackmail; they had killed for money. If had said the wrong thing or any suspicious behavior occurred from anyone, it would have resulted in a blood bath.

After three hours and half in the ruthless sun, I was happy to walk away from that checkpoint with my mother.

Maternal Mortality

I have always loved the new pages of a notebook. I wrote the date cursively, and my name marches evenly in the center of the page. The spaces are always even, commas curl after each sentence. Because once I start, I don't stop on the first page. I never erase the first page. Never. Because it's the only time I don't have to think about how I feel. When I get to the middle, all you see is crossed lines, missing words, and holes that have been made from my tears.

There is a side of me missing in the past, the human side, the mother's side. I heard that childbirth was the hardest thing a woman can bear. Is childbirth a dangerous act? I liked to think that there are conditions that make childbirth a dangerous act. Since the collapse of the government and the several devastating droughts and famines, my land has been impaired. Lack of access to health care and prenatal care are common issues every pregnant woman faces. Lack of handwashing led to lives lost.

It's 6:00 am, on a Saturday morning. I'm here sitting next to my cracked window, the morning breeze sipping through the crack.

"Good morning," said Z.

"Good morning," I replied.

"Your stomach looks tight," She said.

I looked down on my stomach and smiled.

"I've been feeling contractions since last night, but it's not painful."

"I think you will go into labor in the next couple of days, my daughter," she said.

I was nervous, but I did not let my fear of labor cloud my happiness and excitement to meet my son

I took deep breath and said, "I can't wait to see his precious face."

Four days later.

"Someone, please help me," I screamed.

Z rushed into the room. "I think it's time to deliver this baby."

"Spread your legs," said Z.

Here is the moment I have been waiting for months, I counted the days and weeks, and time has come. I took a deep breath and pushed, I followed my body, I had this urge to push again, I took another deep breath and pushed my child. His head was out.

"Take another deep breath and push again," said Z

Z pulled the rest of his body out of me; she placed my second son into my arms before even cutting his umbilical cord.

"Congrats!!" You gave birth to a boy," said Z.

She placed my son on my chest, and his face was so beautiful. He was warm, wet, soft, and smelled sweet.

"Why is he not crying Z?" I asked.

Z wouldn't make eye contact with me.

"Is my child sleeping Z?" I added.

She wouldn't respond to me.

"Why is my child not making a sound?" I screamed at her.

"Listen, honey, I don't know how I will explain this to you."

She stopped.

"This is a stillborn child; this child died weeks ago," she added.

This explains why I have been sick; it explains why my body was getting weak.

I held my son in my arms for two-and-a-half hours, singing and humming to him. I wrapped him in his blue blanket I knitted for him and placed him next to me. I walked to the fridge and placed the frozen food all on one side. My son was small; he took up about a quarter of the freezer.

It's dark in there. His eyes were closed, I made sure his hands were tucked in. I kissed his tiny face and closed the freezer door.

I traveled in the dry wind

Battle

Bloodshed

Combat

Conflict

Fighting

Hostility

Strife

Strike

Struggle

Warfare

Here I stand alone

and

I refuse to wait for so long only
to meet grief.

It was not my plan to hand you over to death.

I didn't get to experience the gentle touch from your hand.

Craving

Desire

Famine

Greed

Longing

Lust

Starvation

Yearning

Ache

Appetence

Emptiness

Vacancy

Void

Want.

I placed my child in the hands of death because childbirth
in this land has been made dangerous.

After the Election

Its 3:11 AM Tuesday morning, I have a fucking assignment, so I must rush for my 8 o'clock class. This is typical me: I love doing my work late. I do a better job late at night than midafternoon. I know I should be sleeping, but I know what works best for me. I make my way to the kitchen; I normally try to not crack a sound because I love letting others sleep in peace. I make dark coffee to help me think.

6:11 AM

I don't know where time went but I have to get ready for my class. I can still hear the silence in the atmosphere. I turn on the TV so I can see what the traffic is like even though they always lie. First thing I hear: "Let America be America again." I was trying to comprehend how this man made it to election day. As people across the country flock to their local poll locations to vote in a historic presidential election, it's difficult not to think of the broader implications of the election: how we interpret certain rights and responsibilities, how we understand the truth of the issues, how we may hold ourselves accountable as citizens in a democracy, and how we may define America—the good and the bad, the political and the personal, the historical and the current.

It's 7:11 AM

Here I am speeding on I-5 south while praying I don't get pulled over. I don't turn on my radio like I normally do every morning. I want to listen to the silence in the air. This silence I am hearing. I feel as if I am the only one moving on this earth.

7:50 AM

It's this long walk from the parking lot I don't enjoy. Here I am waiting at the cross walk to get to the other side of the street. Window rolls down, "you fucking shit go back to your country." I keep walking because that is something, I have become immune to.

9:11A.M

Letter to America after 9/11

What do you know about this hijab and the skin under it?

What do you know about my hair and why I don't flaunt it?

You think this scarf defines me? You think it hides me? Well I'm right here.

Front, center, and in your face. That's *my* place, not hidden and I'm not going to shut the hell up. I'm going to tell you how it is. I'm not some towel head, not some muzzie wuzzie

going take it. Not going to get down on my knees for you and beg please for you.

Because I don't need you and your bigotry. What do you know about racial profiling?

What do you know about jihad? You stand there shouting every day, "Why can't you be like us?" But why do I have to say my pledge when no one else does?

Does this scarf have to be red white and blue? Why should it be? Why do I have to look like you? Why I got to be like you? Think and see and feel like you? What do you know about terrorism? What do you know about planes and towers? This isn't a game! This is real! This is fear! You think because I'm Muslim I've got a bomb under this scarf? Where'd you get that idea? From the nightly news? From the views of the church down the street? From your school? Folks down the road, parents, kids you think you know?

You don't know *ANYTHING*! You think I'm oppressed? I will show you oppression!

I will show you what it's like to be hated. I will beat you down! I will strike your hate with all the strength of my people! And then. Then I will show you what love is.

I will show you what it's like to be respected and honored. I will show you what it's like to be hugged and when my sisters say "welcome" to you, you will know it's true. And when we give

to you, we expect nothing in return, and we know that we will receive even less

And still we say, "I love you."

I am just a normal girl who wants live peacefully.

12:15 PM

At an early age, it is very hard for a black person to live and have a happy life without being disrespected and segregated from whites. People of color were fighting for years to have equal rights and have a normal life just like whites do. Many lost their lives and their dearly loved ones to have equal rights. That's what a non-Muslim and person of color fought for back in the days. For me it's a slightly different experience. I stand from a different point of view.

After the 9/11 attacks Muslim Americans were treated with repudiation, suspicion, and violence. All of this made me feel extremely out of place because of my skin color and my head scarf. Being a girl and Muslim, I can relate to this topic. In this country, it is not easy to be someone like me. It is not easy to walk in a class room full of non-Muslims, and it is hard to work at a place and know that some of my coworkers don't associate with me because of the head piece I wear. It is difficult to feel safe when I see questions in people's eyes and being called a terrorist just because I am Muslim.

12:28 PM

My understanding is that because of African slavery in America, Black Muslims and non-black-Muslims are at odds; sadly, now there is that to fight against. It is hard for a non-Muslim to be understanding, and respectful toward a Muslim person. However, it is harder to deal with the nonblack-Muslim. It is hard to link Black people on this topic positively. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, but misunderstood by many. A common misunderstanding made about Islam is that Muslims are terrorists and savages and only kill innocent people. Society never tries to show to non-Muslims what Islam is about, and doesn't show that it is the religion of love and peace. The truth is completely different from what the society claims to be.

12:35 PM

An additional problem I must deal with is racism from Muslims in America that are not African. There is that fracture between the Muslims that are from other areas in the world that are not Muslims, there is that inner racism going between Muslims from Africa non-Africans.

As a Muslim woman, I see and experience the racism that comes from other Muslims that are not African. Arabs Muslims

tend to be racist toward Africans because Arabs were never slaves for a white person and they still look at Africans from the lenses of racism. Even though we all are Muslims and in the same religion, Arabs believe that they are more worth of the religion and that they are better at it when that is not true.

12:43 PM

I grew up in Saudi Arabia where people of color were called slaves. Teachers loved seeing their native students do their best and get the good grades. Even though I was an outstanding student my intelligence was always questioned. At that time, I never understood that my skin color was the issue and that I was always looked down upon because of how I appeared. In Middle East schools, they never cover the history of Arab-African slavery which left me with the question, why was I treated differently than others.

12:49 PM

Being black in a white dominant society is hard and harsh, on the other hand being a Black Muslim anywhere else is difficult. It's a big battle of racism, discrimination and fighting for rights and privileges.

12:51 PM

Many live lives without being aware of what society puts them through. My thought on racism was misinterpreted; I thought that racism was a human instinct or some kind of reaction of the dominant group of our society that is in all humans that is also demonstrated in all animal groups globally. I was just a little kid watching nature programs where one group of animals used physical force to secure their territory from another creature, and there's a fight, and that is because they have an instinctual feeling of competing with others, knowing that their arrival means an increase in competition for resources. So, skin color is something that's different in all humans, so that indicates that this is the area where they differentiate themselves from the other human beings.

12:58 PM

On the subject of Islam, there are many Muslims all around the world that use the holy books "Quran" against us. People like al-qayda and al-shabab tearing the peace that all Muslims and the religion of Islam resemble. At this time of continuing crisis, the American people and their leaders must understand that those who would use violence and terror in the name of Islam are heretics and hypocrites. They are criminals, not clerics. Their actions contradict the teachings of the Holy Prophet of Islam, who wrote, "Whenever the prophet of God sent

forth a detachment, he said to it, 'Do not cheat or commit treachery, nor should you mutilate or kill children, women, or old men. And there is a specific prohibition in Islamic law that bans killing by stealth and targeting a defenseless victim in a way intended to cause terror in a society. Those who are manipulating others outside of the Islamic religion; they give this picture of horrible and disgusting images, and the ideas to profit and benefit in their own selfish ways.

America claims that we have the right to practice whatever religion we want and made it part of the amendment, but they also inconspicuously blame Muslims for every violent act that happens. For example, when violence occurs and it's a black person, they say that it's the fault of drugs or ignorance, but if it's a white person they say he/she is mentally ill. As soon as it's a Muslim it automatically becomes a terrorist act. Ever since the 9/11 attacks everyone now believes that even though every Muslim might not be a terrorist every terrorist is a Muslim. Although the US claims that it's a free land that has equality, when a Muslim is at the airport, they are put aside for further questioning more rather than any other race and religion. This society is feeding stereotypes into the minds of the public, saying the Muslims are violent terrorists and saying their holy book, the Quran, promotes violence. I strongly disagree with dominant society. I disagree with these selfish

and ignorant people. Islam promotes and spreads peace and unity. No one should be judged based on someone else's action; just because one shares ethnicity or even religion. Imagine being in place where the society cannot understand how they are treating you.

Its 8:00 PM, my husband and I eat dinner. Here is this silence again, like the silence before the storm. But I am not afraid of anything, I can tell how anxious my husband is, but I can't have seemed to be understanding what I am feeling.

9:30 PM I just had to go to bed.

6:30 AM, I no longer hear the silence. We have a new president. I see America awakening to their nightmare. I hear the anger, see the tears and fear and every one's eyes. Good Morning America, I have been here the entire time.

Bride's Price

Have you ever wanted to run away from your family? I think many of us would say, "No! Never!" out loud to others, because that sounds so terrible and selfish. But maybe some of us have had those feelings before. Feelings that well up from a deep and dark place within us that tells us that things would be better if we left, if we ran away, and didn't look back.

Last month I was only paid three hundred Saudi riyals.

As I walk in the burning sun in the driest place on earth at summer temperature that raises to 50 °C (122 °F) here in Jeddah. I moved from Somali to Saudi Arabia to work abroad as seventeen year old refugee girl. My family didn't have much, not even enough to feed eight of my siblings, and I moved to Jeddah (a port city in Saudi Arabia). I moved to this city with no money in my pocket, but the Somali community helped me find shelter and get a job. In July 1990, my brother Mohamed moved to Jeddah working as car wash man. He carried his red pocket full of soap and ripped towel asking people in parking lots if they would like their car wash. He was too proud to wash cars for rich people; he had difficulty excepting our living condition. Mohamed decided to marry me off to a businessman from Oman. I didn't know the guy and had not even met him before the wedding day. Mohamed arranged the marriage, and of course, it was not

for my sake. He wanted the *Maher*: a mandatory payment, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, to the bride's family at the time of marriage, which legally becomes her property. Mohamed didn't ask for my opinion about the guy or the amount of the money I should be asking.

"Get ready Leyla, the guy and I have agreed on the date for the marriage."

"But I have not even met the guy; I don't know him..." A shudder passed through me.

He looked at me with his eyes they got so big like they were going to fall out of his head.

"We need the money, Leyla! Sooner or later you will get married, and this guy wants to marry you. We can't pass on an opportunity like this." He looked angry that I even asked.

"But Mohamed." He cut me off.

I could feel my heart breaking in my chest as I sat on the bed, silently.

"Saturday, you will get married, and don't you dare show this guy that you were not interested. Put on your red lipstick and smile in his face." He screamed in my face.

I sat on my bed hopeless, not knowing what to do.

I wasn't the only girl that got married the way I did. This practice was fueled by poverty and a lack of education. My

brother's attitude towards this practice is the norm that is rooted in gender inequality, and the belief that girls and women are somehow inferior to men. Families that live in poverty marry off their daughters as a source of income, and some girls believe that marriage is the only solution to have a better future. Girls as young as twelve years old get married off to men who are thirty years old and above. Families take this opportunity to reduce family expenses by ensuring they have one less person to feed, clothe, and day to day living. Mohamed sold me to a guy as a way to repay debts and manage his life.

I got married in the middle of an old living room with one liter of Fanta and a small cake. My price was two thousand riyals. I cost less because I was younger and uneducated.

Mohamed and my buyer negotiated the price. I wouldn't call him my husband because I was only a transaction.

"Mohamed, three thousand is a lot," he said.

"Two fifty is my last word," mumbled Mohamed.

Without my consent, I was sold to a man I didn't know. My bride price was two thousand and fifty riyals. Mohamed received the payment shortly after the marriage contract. My buyer took me to the hotel he was staying in that night. He didn't even ask my name. I didn't even know what his voice sounded like; I was scared. I sat on the side of the bed; he sat next to me and kept

getting closer. I got up quickly to avoid his touches; the blood rushed to my head.

"Don't touch me, please!" I said. He didn't listen to me and pinned me to the bed.

Between my legs

lies the pain

Tears water the pillow

Body to body screaming lust

forbidden love behind the veil

The veil that covers my papilla has to fall

my innocence end at the tip of his lips

traces of his fingerprints on my inner thigh

Yearning for the forbid love under the night.

Fabulous Afro

It has been a strenuous 3,366-kilometer journey from Somalia to Syria. My family and I were fleeing civil war in Somalia. They were recently forced to leave everything behind and rebuild their lives - yet again.

We moved to Syria to have peace and stability. We escaped the bullets that have put many of my family and friends six feet under. Syria has hosted my family and many other Somali refugees. The Somali community in Syria consists mostly of women and children. Although some were fortunate enough to receive remittances from their families living abroad, the rest of us rely on aid from the United Nations (UN). We were one of the fortunate families there because my father lived abroad, and he made sure we had food on the table. However, what he was sending us from money was not enough. To make ends meet, my older brother dropped out of school so he could work and provide for us. I have always looked up to him because he is the father figure in my life. The sources of income and education were limited in Syria for the Somali refugees. All we needed was food and shelter, but there was more to life. Going to school in Syria meant never receiving a degree under my name. This was a time when opportunities for Somali refugees were few and far between.

1992

We moved to Syria to only have peace and stability, but I discovered that I was different in the heart of Damascus. I was enrolled in public school that was predominately Syrian citizens. I was the only dark skin child in the class. Every Monday was the mandatory hygiene checkup.

I stood in the line with rest of the students.

"Hey, you. Black girl don't you stand in front of me, move to the back," said Mahdi.

I dragged my feet on the ground and stood behind him. I can see the teacher coming down the line.

"Mahdi, show me your nails?" She reached for his hands and smiled.

The teacher directly looked at me and reached for the pencil in her hair.

"Amal, your hair is breaded I can't tell if it's clean or not. Put your hair in a ponytail next time," she said.

She took out a pencil to look if my hair was clean, and with smirk on her face she walked away.

"Hey, nappy hair, all the girls with nappy hair die," said Mahdi.

"You are lying!!" I shouted at him.

"Yes, all the girls that have your hair are ugly and they die." He said.

"Shut up, I spent hours washing my hair; and styling it."

I wasn't lying about it. I spent hours on the weekend doing my hair; I rinsed and spun my brain out.

I got upset because both the teacher and my classmate seemed disgusted at me. I thought to myself, I did take a shower so why are they disgusted by me. I thought my braids were ugly because all the other girls had their hair straight.

It wasn't too long when I realized that I was in a landscape that made the hair of the back of my neck stand up from the intense Arab gaze. I was a black Somalia girl in an Arab land; I was not wanted by the Syrian students. I walked alone in the hallways for years and I sat alone at lunch. No one wanted be friends with me because I was samara (tan). I was in a land where twists were not allowed. How pitiful.

I walked home after school and cried the whole way. I have decided that I will go home and take shower for a very long time.

I walked in the house and my tears were covering my brown cheeks.

"What's the matter with you Amal?" said my mother.

I ran to her and buried my face in her warm chest. My mother is an affectionate, wizened woman with an easy smile and a twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh, my baby! Who made you this upset?"

I felt safe and loved in her arms. No place in the world could have made me feel more at ease.

"Mom, is it my fault that my hair is curly?" I asked.

"No, no, why do you say that Amal?" She asked.

"Mom, Mahdi told me that all the girls with curly hair die." I kept on crying.

My mother hugged me tightly.

"Amal, my baby your hair is beautiful, it is curly and beautiful. God sent you with curls that roll like DNA strands. Don't you know that your curls are a pleasure my love" said my mother.

"Even he. He wants to bury his nostrils into the heady bare fragrance of your silent curly oath. He can hear your thoughts; he can see your humor that's so rare." She added.

"Am I not ugly mom?" I asked.

She lifted my chin up and said, "you are unique, your beauty is rare, Amal."

My dear,
curly hair girl,

you exhale exotic energy
your curls are wrapped with love.

Your curls are soul from African live

"Why does it stand up?" they ask.

This is the question that irritates you, right?

Because to them uniqueness means ugliness

remember

Even if they said your hair is kinky and curly, big and
ugly.

the roots of its leaves grow out of the stem that is your scalp,

what a wonder.

you are only a harmless refugee girl, trying find her way back
to peace

Why are you dying after person's beauty?

love your long wild and fluffy fabulous afro.

Violation

"Allahu Akbar" Allah (SWT) is the Greatest. Salat Maqrib is being called outside my window.

I hear my father's steps coming towards my door.

"My daughter, can you go downstairs and get the groceries from the deliverer?"

"Yes, Papa." I replied with a smile.

It was one of my chores to help carry the groceries and help around the house.

From the third floor I walked down the hallway into the staircase. There was the guy that delivered our groceries standing at the end of the staircase. I see the sugar and the rice bags that weigh heavier than me but, as young girl I was trained by my father to carry heavy objects. I took step after step, but I noticed that the delivery guy had this wicked smile; something had felt wrong.

"Here you go, young girl." He reached his hand with one of the bags.

I got closer, but I could feel my heart slamming against my chest. Something felt wrong in my heart. I reached for the grocery bag halfway, and he grabbed my hand and threw the bag. I fell down from the last step.

He grabbed me by my arms and dragged me behind the staircase, I screamed. He put his hand over my mouth and started to undo his pants. I was seven years old; I had never seen any man's body part. Fear rushed through my veins, not knowing what exactly was about to happen I froze. I knew the feeling of danger. This was danger. That's all I had to understand.

"Touch it. It won't bite you sweetie. It's a yummy candy." He said lustfully.

Then he began making perverted comments to me.

I kept fighting to escape him. With all my will power, I tried to have him not touch me.

I screamed, and he hit me.

"Shhh, stay quiet little one, you know God asked me to come to you so you can play with it! I'm going to talk to God..." He said.

He closed his eyes while I was still pinned to the wall. That was my chance to run, I bit his hand, and he let go of me. I ran as fast as I could. He ran after me, but I kept running and screaming with everything in me. I was on the second floor, and I couldn't dare to look back. These stairs that I used go up and down with joy turned into a dark alley. I felt alone and without protection. I kept running up the stairs with tears going down my cheeks. I looked back and all I could see is fear and emptiness chasing me. I stood in front of our door,

collected my breath and wiped my tears, I walked in and my mom looked me into the eyes and she instantly knew something was wrong. My mother grabbed me by my hand and dragged me into my bedroom shutting the door behind her.

"What's wrong with you, child?" Said my mother.

I couldn't speak, I looked her in the eye and tears poured down my face.

"Wha.. what's wrong with you, momma?" She said.

I told her what exactly had happened. I don't know why my mother thought I was hiding something from her at that time. She pushed me into the bed and took my white underwear and checked my vagina. I didn't understand why, but I felt ashamed.

"Did he touch you down there?" She asked with anger in her tone.

I was scared and still shaking from what I had just experienced. I felt as if it were all my fault and that's what my mother was implying.

"No, Momma." I replied.

Anger coated my face; I was angry at her because she thought I was hiding parts of the story.

"Don't dare mention this to your father! Do you understand?" She screamed, walked out and slammed the door behind her.

I felt numb, I felt like a shell. All my feelings - the hurt, shame, anger, guilt, sadness, and confusion were all locked away, locked in my little body.

Letter to Hunger

June 16th, 2019

Dear Hunger,

I'm the hungry child at war with you. I am nearly three million people who are uncertain when they will eat their next meal. Hunger, you have been residing in the bottom of my belly as an animal pushing at my sides. My body is hurting under the cracked soil. Here I am trapped in a boney frame; hunger you had been driving my mind to invisible space. You are affecting me in various ways. Your chronic diseases are at my doorstep waiting to attack. I can't cope another night with only prayers and tears I can't cope another night, can't live another day with only my saliva. You deprive me of water. My ribcage is meant to protect my chest cavity, but you've made your home there. My vital organs lie underneath, my delicate heart and little lungs, they are almost yours. I lay here counting my ribcage, feeling each of them as they pierce through my skin. I fucking want you to know that you are an angry ruthless cold-blooded killer. You recognize the weakest of us. I am a silent prisoner with no walls within my body bowing on my knees asking to be free. This famine in my tank can't make me a member at the bank. In this

land there is hurt that lives buried under the dry planet. My friends were put on a boat because the ocean is safer. I guess finding food on the other side is more promising. Maybe you are my fate, maybe I was meant to suffer.

I will find my ocean soon, and be rid of you. Child.

Facing Misogyny

I knew my turn was coming soon. I felt the stares of my mother and aunt plotting my cutting the night before. Female Genital Mutation (FGM) is standard practice in my community; every girl I knew had gone under FGM. This practice was the men's issue, men thought that this practice would control women's sexuality. Girls were cut to increase their marriageability. I believed that if men said no to FGM, there would not be such a cruel ritual. Somalia is a deeply patriarchal society that believes women's sexuality needs to be controlled. The community believes that if a woman has not undergone FGM, it means she is not capable of controlling her sexual desires.

My mother walked into my room as I was getting ready for school.

"Your grandma will come to pick you up from school today." I could feel my heart aggressively pushing against my rib cage and I knew the time had come.

Words couldn't come to my lips. I usually walk from school to home alone. I knew that my grandma was only coming to escort me to the house.

I usually enjoy my time at school, but I spent the whole day staring at the clock.

Before I knew it was time to go home. There was my grandma standing at the entrance of the school.

"Hello, baby, how was school today?" she asked.

"It was okay, grandma." I didn't feel like carrying the conversation with her, and I was too focused on all the fear that consumed my body. My mouth was getting dry and the more we walk closer to home, and I can feel my feet getting weaker.

"Today is the day you will get cut, my dear." said my grandma as we approached the house.

As if this was not clear to me. I thought.

There was a guy and my mother waiting for me in the living room.

I told my mother that I did not want to do this procedure. She looked me in the eye and said, "every girl had to do this; it is better to do it when you are young because it will hurt less."

This was the ultimate lie; I gave in because I knew there was no way out, but I still tried to bargain my way out of it.

"But... mom, maybe we should wait till I'm seven."

I can feel her getting upset with me.

"Do you want to play with other girls?" she said.

"Yes." I said.

"Well listen then my daughter, if you refuse to do this cutting today, other mothers won't let you play with their

daughters, and men wouldn't marry you when you get older, because you are not mutilated."

Nothing she said was enough to convince me.

"But, mamma."

"Listen, child, we are not waiting." she shouted.

The older guy got impatient

"Listen, lady. I don't have time for this spoiled child. She needs to come lie down on this mat so I can do this and leave." he said angrily.

I glanced at my grandma for help, but she did not make eye contact with me.

I looked at the mat, it had dried up blood. That was the blood of every young girl that did not consent to this procedure.

The older guy got up and pulled me by the hand and forcefully laid me on the bloody mat.

I glanced at the dirty blade. The identity of the community was being forced upon me. This blade meant that I accepted the culture of this practice; this meant a violation of my human rights and abuse of my rights to health, security, and physical integrity. I knew it would take me longer than the average person to find my own identity.

I lay on the mat, helpless, and tears started to escape my eyes. The older guy did not wash his hands. He took my skirt off

and began examining me. He reached for the blade; I screamed
with all my power.

"Noooooooo, please!"

I wished for all to stop, but it didn't.

My pain was celebrated

traditionally I was corrected

My body was a shame

cutting was the only correction I needed, they said.

I screamed in the dark

Did you hear my screams?

I was handled

strangled

mangled.

Listen to the misery they created.

Ms.

Mrs.

facing misogyny

only to be controlled

My sisters

maybe

six

maybe

sixteen

Their age does not matter

to the men that are sculpting their

sexuality,

it is only right to say

they are being handled by monsters.

His blade ended her femininity.

Her future is macerated.

Wordless Man

For as long as I can remember I had dreams of a man, a tall, faceless and wordless man. It's been years now; this man has grown with me. It's a dream that would stand out to me, move me, haunt me and even confuse me for years to come. The sad part is that he became part of my life. He always comes back! I can feel his presence in my life. He continuously waits for happy moments to take my comfort away. I took some time to get to know him better, to understand the truth. He looks upon me with bitterness. This wordless man works against you, me. For many years now, I feel affected by his deliberate, malicious acts against me. Most of these dreams consist of running away from this man. Every dream starts with running for my life. After so many years I came to understand that he doesn't want me to be dead, but his goal is to torture me to my bones.

Emotionally Constipated

I found myself emotionally constipated.

I waited for October to come.

I watched the last leaf fall from the resilient branch into the unknown,

I waited for the wind to fly you to my feet

I hear the peace you bring to the earth

I smell your wet body caressing the earth. Oh, I can smell your woody scent in the air.

I searched for my sanity in you.

I waited for October to come; maybe a leaf will at last bring you joy

I watched you hang on the tree tightly. Begging please!

I watched a drop of the rain travel through your body.

Dark green, golden sunrise to a pale yellow.

As I walked through the forest, I watched you hang on the maple tree

I watched your body meet the warm ground; it was more breathtaking than you can imagine.

I once held tight too but letting go was more amusing than you think.

Sometimes we cling on to things that we think we need. It's time to let go. So go!

Have you looked at your golden colors? Have you realized how beautiful you are?

The wind is trying to embrace your softness, let it take you higher.

You are the symbol of fertility and growth.

You are the beginning of the universe.

You covered Adam after the shame of human nakedness.

You are a chance for others to start anew and amend their past mistakes.

Death Land

It/ became inevitable that this isn't my body/
Death /landed/ on my feet
reshaped my exactness
This war/ had constantly changed life
making my skin too dry, the enzymes/ that degrade desmosomes
cannot function properly,
Fear leads bodies to clumps of cells that shed together.
Dying/ as a single cell/ that shed invisibly.
My clumps can be seen as flakes in the ocean of death.

Fragments of A Dream

I glanced outside the window I saw it again. It was sitting at the ledge, as usual, but this time it was not scratching the glass. My eyes widened as I finally managed to make out more of its features. The other times the figure was burly. He was staring at me again; the unspoken words were loud silence. I could make out a pair of brown eyes ogling at me. His facial features matched that of a male human's, but its huge eyes were quite unnatural. The look he gave was rather sinister.

It was an unpleasantly cold winter's night; dark, mystifying, the moon was sheltered by the murky looming clouds. He opened the window. I felt bewildered by the inhuman looking creature, yet he was human!

I could feel the rush of blood on my body. I run, run, and run into dark hallway just to end up in front of his face again. He precedes to penetrate me with its intense scrutiny, making me suffocate. Now that I was the only one so close to him, I managed to notice his rather fiendish features.

Hooyoo (Mother)

Your brown hands have clasped on daily prayers

Your arched spine carried bodies for centuries

Your tears have saved me from thirst

Your wrapped proverbs like gifts, have walked me through this
thing called life

Your wise words satiate my hunger for knowledge hooyo

Shame Coating My Body

what does he know about shame?

He walked to the kitchen // where I was lying next to the stove

stepped closer to my sheets // his knees on the grey tile

Silence forces itself into my world

lying face down silently // from behind he injects himself into

my body

blood coats my thighs

what do you know about shame when you couldn't stop being

animal?

tears falling down to my breast

I close my sunken eyes

As my world got darker // darker

He inserts himself in me again // crushing my soul as he thrusts

harder and harder

Neonatal Code Blue

Three words that instantaneously bring me to my lowest, without a thought.

The sound of these words has put my soul 6 feet under, whenever they are uttered through the intercom at the hospital.

My body reflexively gives its undivided attention to hear those words, regardless of the agonizing pain I'll feel time and time again.

It's almost as if I yearn for that heartache, because it's the closest I am to my flesh, my heart, my son.

The photographic memory of the day I lost a part of me physically and emotionally, replays in my subconscious as often as I breathe.

Have you ever pleaded and prayed for the well-being and extension of another life over yours?

Have you ever watched a life slowly return to its creator?

I had a surge of vulnerability seep through every cell in my body.

My breathing, my thoughts, and my entire being, felt constricted.

I was in a dazed, half conscious state for days.

The thought of having a life that was gifted to you, nurtured inside of you, slipping through your fingers as you watch was the most debilitating feeling.

As a human, I was adamant I've felt almost every emotion known to man, I was brutally wrong. I could slowly feel the hairs on my flesh stand, my soul and being internally pleaded with my creator to allow for a miracle.

I could not find myself to utter any word. The thought of even speaking, or any form of communication was out of my scope and realm.

I starred at the nurses and physicians in a fixed daze as they handed me the worst news of my life.

"I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do" they spoke softly.

His precious tiny body curled up near my bosom and fit like a glove.

I caress his back slowly in a circular motion while his heartbeat fades to the verses of the Quran.

Being physically present, but mentally absent is an outer body experience one will never forget. I came to terms with death being the ultimate ending.

Only in that moment do we understand our sole purpose in life, to exist, then to parish.

Between her Legs

Her legs raised him

Her sweet nectar

tears water the grass

Body to body screaming love

forbidden love behind the veil

the veil, that covers my papilla has fallen

my innocence ends at the tip of his lips

whispers silent love to my clitoris

thirst for love

traces of his finger prints on my inner thigh

screaming for love

yearning for the forbidden love under the dark night

Memory Haunted by a War

The image of the blood splashing across my face.

Hot, pain flushed face

inhale the gunpowder; I can feel the gun smoke stream into my veins. Then I exhale the gun smoke.

Layers of blood coating my tongue

The taste of his blood cradles my tongue.

The smoke from black powder is thick and white and it tastes like steam and Sulphur with a hint of urine from the saltpeter.

Some of the worst shots are the ones that

aren't posed

To Undo Death

To

Undo

Death

Even

the

bodies that flee death are dying

How can we revive the dead?

put

on

a journey where the bleeding butterfly flies to the flowers

A twelve-year-old

Shukri Abdi

killed in the heart of her city

Her fragile body was found

in a river in the United Kingdom

Her lungs were filled with water;

the water she dipped her toes in

was the water that swallowed her body

with broken bones,

she was thrown in the river her generation escaped

Her bullies

were at the scene,

watching her blood vessels rupture.

The caged bird

was left battered

and bruised.

Now she's a statistic;

they

say

she

is

just

another tragic incident.

Fuck Eggplants

Our identities, fighting to exist.

She said I hate eggplants

She must not know about his plans.

Just when I thought she went to meet her maker

she was the undertaker.

We preach no violence, being not them, just we.

But cannot request to be seen.

She was chasing something.

either inches or miles beyond her grasp.