

good names for loneliness

War and I are not on a first name basis

War knows my mother though

Almost had a taste of her

War knows

you forget a country slowly

drag it out your teeth

Let it leave scars that fade

Like all remnants of what brought you here

leave in the night

let this palestine seal itself off behind you

don't look back

At how it looks like that dream

where your childhood home is burning

and you are made of water

and you sit

and watch

Cover it in a layer of rose water

Give it a good name

Call it memory

back home

Baladna

Habibi

Hayati

Assefa

Say it is the only place that will ever love you

List every time it tried to kill you

and know

all that kills you is what loves you

Teach your children to clean their hands on door frames

Teach them prayers for holding breathes

Know that

when my mother first moved to America

she asked

where are all the soldiers

where are the busted wrists
where are the old men caught in check points
Know

Occupation is a ghost i live with
A settler in my family's home
I greet him at the door
Make him tea on the stove
He breathes down my neck and i smell
The blood of my sisters
The split open orange groves
The buried bridges
My people used to cross themselves holy once
I see how he tears open their skin
How rain is a bitter thing
It traces our lips like bad omens
There isn't much rain in ramallah now
They cut all the trees
My sido says
They are trying to steal the sky
We have been made a thirsty people
Most days
My mother wakes up with her mouth dry
She wakes up early
before she can remember
Whose memory she is living in
When I'm away
I send her a song
In old arabic
About a beautiful garden
That once was
She cries in the car
tells me later
How she misses living in a world that sings her to sleep
How she is afraid she cannot be recognized
With her america tongue
With her children
Who roll their eyes

But do not roll their rs

My mother hates that she thinks in english now

i wonder

if she thinks of me in english

if this means

i am already forgotten

You know what they say

You can take the girl out of the holy land

But you cannot take the holy out of the girl

Cannot erase the communion in her skin

the way her hands reach for home when she speaks

how the camel's back breaks in her throat

And the old blood fills her capped teeth

From that bad dentist in jericho

how

My people have always been sacrifice

we are the world's lesson in humility

look at all this damage we've done

at this guilt we spoon feed our children

show them their reflections in pools of blood

serve them an american meal homemade

with all the wrong spices

tell them eat

You know how much worse it could be

what if we never left

that cursed land

where even the earth learned to reject us

Somedays

I wonder if my face would look different

had i lived under the moon i belong to

been baptized with the same water

my mother drank from

if i knew every arabic word for home

But I only know one

Um

(mother)

I know what the opposite of belonging tastes like

how it is a bad meal you eat everyday
how it rots your stomach
tears holes through your empty
your half grief
you're not brown enough to be in mourning
not white enough to be at peace
So

 feed me grace in the candlelight
 teach me forgiveness
for my two foreign halves
my lost boy limbs made of old panic
 always

Walking in circles

 Give me an arabic way of saying my name that does not sound
like begging

Give me good names for loneliness

serve me good news on a tea tray and call it a response psalm

read me that verse
where Mahmoud Darwish says
on this earth, we have what makes life worth living
and isn't it true
isn't it always the dead
who teach us how to breathe

sumac on my sidewalk wounds

And za'atar in my hair
Big from san francisco fog
And pieces of sun in my teeth
From that childhood of gold brown and clumsy
And all the times they said stay out of the sun
You don't wanna be dark like your mother once
And how i said
I'll be anything like my mama

Sumac
Presses through red scrapes on my fingers
That pure spice
Always leaving grains to hold onto
Be dragged out with
We're small
We're frizz haired
Mama scrubs us down in olive oil before baths
We smell like cooking pans and
good care
And friends come over and ask why we we have salad dressing in
the bathroom
And i can't explain so i show them
My hair
And how smooth it is
And how loved it is
how thick
I write every day back then
Little spice baby
watercoloring her thoughts in thick blue ink like her baba at work
With his note pads
His manual calculator that types up on coiled paper
And how he only uses blue pens
I write til my hands stain in the chub creases
And there's a soft spot in all my stories
Where i forget what the characters look like
Where i try to make them look white

And erase their features entirely

Sumac

Once used by middle eastern healers as red medicine

Once licked off the fingers of gods

Once sinful

Comes from a flowering plant

A bloom of new chances

I carry it under my skin and it warns

The whole room of its presence

Blushing me over when i don't want it to

When my wholeness can't help but be known

We don't speak of how it is sometimes poisonous

Sometimes kills when the flowers

Turn white

I don't speak of my father

And his fear of everything

Of my brother and his big lips and easy lies

Or my sister and her american excuses

Or my hands and how they always love in the wrong language

How they still stain black and blue

But i believe less in the words now

I don't speak of my mother

And the sadness i never thought she could have

How she left

Everything

And it shows

They tell me i look white

Mixed with something that is not holy water

Old men tell me i don't have arab features

And by this

They mean i am beautiful

And i hear nothing but insults

They tell me i am foreign to every eye

No region will claim me

And this nose

And that's good

They hear my name and wonder how my mother was so cruel to gift
me it
Give me false expectations
For cleanness
Make me strange in every mouth
I eat sumac with my fingers
You're not supposed to do this
Too many spices and your mouth can't remember anything
And how tragic is it to be
An almost lover to my own culture
A permanent outsider of the home i live in
And my messiness lives with or without
Spice cabinets

I am not glass bottles
I am zaatar, always on the table
Gold green and salted
Like that sea we all come from
Where nothing lives
And people can't sink
And how they drained it white
And the last memory i have of my homeland
Is eating sumac
And fried fish
And tabbouleh
In a restaurant with arab waiters
In a seaside town
israeli owned
Where even the water
Tried to drown itself
And i learned how to
Pronounce my last name
When a child made fun of my accent
i saw
Two boys
on a raft, on the sea edge
Smoking cigarettes and burning brown

i wondered what brought them here
And they turned, asked each other what was i doing here and i was
too far
To hear But i understood
Only because i always know When i do not belong.

prayer to the palestinian saint who died on my birthday

I never knew
We could be saints
And yet here you are Made godlike
On the day i was a blessing
And yet
You were an ancient myth
And i am a new song
They never told me about you
In sunday school
I had to choose a white face
As my saints name
So god would recognize me
And maybe they didn't want me
Getting this close to holiness
And maybe
They didn't want that for you
But here we are
And you were a martyr
How fitting
Heaven's chosen arab
Was a sacrifice
How good of us
To donate our blood
To this holy chalice
For drinking
And they painted your name roman
Will i never know what it was
With the guttural sounds
Our people are sinful for
And teach me ya hayati
How to be a saint
-How to feed myself to lions
For a god that will not claim me
What good is it to be holy
If they write us out of scriptures

Make you a blistered thing
A false character
Not quite biblical
And you must know
How your people suffer now
How difficult it is
To trust this heaven
Where all our children live
And what is this burial of my own tongue
This denial of our hands
And our old world
And i know nothing of my people
How they lived
What praise they offered
And took
And what sin is it
To deny a person of her history
To claim she has come from hot air
And umbilical cords that do not lead to anything
you were praised
i did not know of this possibility
Of our skin turning gold
Of no blame for our suffering
And i'm tired of denial
Of the erasure in our good skin
I hope
I never again hear
My father shortening his name
Jawad
Which means messenger of god
generous one
To Joe
Which means
nothing
And watching no one question
This amputation of Allah's work
This is the last time

We let them call us nomads of the earth
Never leaving anything good behind
This is the last time
We let them call us anything
But sacred
The last time
I hear i am so unlike other arabs
And smile
that
I check my footprints
To make sure i am not here by fiction/ accident
And the beheading they sentenced you to
Death by rebellious tongue alone
How similar we are, habibi
The way we cannot stop speaking of our sun skin And the light we
refuse to stop seeing
You, believer
That an end to tragedy
Is written in our nature
Oh saint of my shared feast day
How we need you now
To feed us back
Our holiness

Binat

Israel's youngest
Political prisoner
Is released all in pink
With braids in her hair
Her parents collapse into her
And you would think
And this is not about political
Or Wall
Or Laws of Rubble
And handcuffs
And whether or not she had a knife
This is about twelve years old
And shiny black hair
And rose cheeks
And sentenced
This is twelve
And treated grown and terrorist
This is why did she even have a knife
What were the soldiers
With their assault weapons
Afraid of
And this
Is about childhood
About scraped knees
And flower prick laughs
About sticky sesame candy
foreign movies at the cinema
rolling mamoul with your teta
And mama making khubez in the morning
So the whole kitchen can smell like this
buying zaatar in a ripped paper bag
On the way home from school
reading english books and wondering
Why Americans have to make up monsters

And massacres

And I could mention here
Every kind of atrocity they force my people through
But what good is it
To make everyone uncomfortable
With your bloody heart
why
bring your dirty ghosts
To the dinner table
What good would it do
For me to explain death
With my hands tied
And clean
my mouth American
And safe
And how right
That she is released in the spring
When all good things come back
When the earth is ready to be loved again
And how Israel is a rusted blade
In my lungs
And how the world is so silent it hurts
What good is it
To wear cracked brown wrists
And broken teeth on a necklace
say look
At all this suffering
They put my people through
Look at how I wear it so well
And how
This was a happy ending
The child allowed to go home
Warrior of the broken playground
Made criminal of the soft skin
And the doe eyes

And here
I must remind you
A twelve year old
was released from prison
And she said
I am not scared
She said I hope that all political prisoners
Will be free
And
Her eyes
Were a prophecy
Of all
We speak ourselves empty
over
Mishan allah
What good is it to mourn
The repetition

And maybe
I should not say they
Or us
Or we
Or my people
Should not speak myself into a room
Locked
Where
I live in the keyhole

Maybe the goldness in my eyelids is an invention of mine
A love affair with someone else's moon
Maybe I am the whore in every house
Never cleaning my shoes at the door
leaving tracks of myself and how