

Tala (Ode to the Girl-Palm)

When I ate the fruit of the date palm delivered fresh
to me from an oasis in the empty quarter, admired

the gilt-twined bag the fruit lay in, & hesitated to disturb
this wonder of Arab irrigation, fruit-bat pollination, & desert patience,

I knew why fathers send their daughters to the West
with kilos of dates: *sukkary*, *khudry*, *segai*, heavily wrapped

& suspicious in luggage; the care in the fruit meant to last us in places
where trees drop all their leaves & appear dead to the eye.

I eyed my gift, portioned myself one to eat on a balcony casting a cool
shadow over sand speckled with blood & feathers from a wild falcon kill,

knew I could have sent that falcon into the sky to feed, knew
that to the East, in the oasis, young girl-palms were sheltering,

growing, while men in white bathed & dressed them,
named them, then let the desert raise them.

Passing Twenty-One Palms

The beach,
to get to the beach, first
persuade Father to forsake his Friday,
then profess *wallab*, all the homework
will be done: the memorization, the recitation,
the courtly *fusha* dialect will be sung.
& when he is assured, the driver will be told.

The driver
will pack a truck with canisters of gasoline
for the generator & set off on Thursday to sweep,
dust & de-home the cabin of scorpions; through the City,
along the Ottoman gate & past the decay of one
of our early hotels until the new highway ends,
then guide himself by old oases while the odd, wild
camel walks in the distance along an intuited trail.

The beach
lingers all week in the mind,
soaked in soda & the falsetto of the latest Wham
single smuggled from the West, freed of an ankle-
length uniform & Deen teachers preaching hellfire
& meathooks. The beach, after you pass the twenty-one palms
there is an abandoned palace the color of the sand,
the crisp, buff sand — turn any distance the horizon
is the same sand, it molds the peninsula
pushing its people to the plateaus & coasts.

The coast,
our tiny cove, clogged by reefs, thickened by salt:
wave-less, sand-less. To get to the rusted gate,
have the car horn announce us & watch the iron
door open at last — both sides folded back flat
so the Ford can get through — to see blue
on the horizon after packed sand & flickers of mirage:
we lock toes into water & read only books for hours

Translation

On our beach the sea offered nothing.
Never flexed from opaque to translucent.
I walked sometimes to our boundary,
the Red Sea sailing club: the families there
sailed past our lagoon & saw things I wouldn't.
Now I walk a Gulf in the pre-maghrib
to a generous waterline delivering
fishing line, lighters, bottle caps &
an empty jute bag of basmati rice.
White mollusks the shape of polished grain
arrive from the water, I heard their name
translated as "the tooth of the sea"
by local fishermen. With so many teeth
broken, the waves work hard to speak.