

When I was nine I lived

in the middle of a dormant volcano // Fell in love with a falcon trainer's son
named Waleed // Stole a glittery birthday hat from a street vendor in
Khormaskar // that I placed on the head of a beggar girl selling juri flowers
// Was called *samraa* for the first time // too dark // Mama scolded by my
aunts for not shading me // Stood in line next to Abu Bakr Salem's daughter
in a candy shop // who gave me gum wrapped in a cartoon sticker I kept
// in my notebook // Snuck into a boys-only classroom in Aden // to teach
them animal names in English // Saw a girl get snatched in a whirlpool //
right in front of me in the Red Sea // her body found miles away from the
port by fishermen // who probably thought her a mermaid // In Yonkers NY
my locker and backpack turned inside out // classmates teaming up to look
for bombs // I was two days returned not yet resettled // wearing a pink
practice headscarf the principal confiscated // for breaking school dress
code // Paired with Gina // the only other brown girl in school // said to
stink of something frying in a pan // so I slipped away from her side // told
everyone I was Dominican // In Yafaa where it was so sunny // my anklet
burned my skin // In Yafaa where the blue ceramic bathtub // held a giant
desert lizard

so I had to bathe
with bucket of cold
well-water beside it

Mining Cave in Dhamar

It's the shortcut through haunted caves that changes us, that and the stuffed filo-dough we're sent to deliver at witching hour. We're in the belly of a desert beast, some hardened wilderness, hunger-blind, the night the color of a drinker's liver and still we forge on. *Samboosa's* golden heat tucked into shirt pockets—we smell its crispy husk the entire way, told not to sneak a taste until we get there. Everything is swamped with it—the sand, rocky walls, even the giant daggers of limestone above are wrapped in oven-fresh odors, shimmering from cracks of feeble moonlight turned jittery from passing clouds, making us want to jump and graze a knuckle on one, lick it clean. The scent so intense our mouths drip with longing, our tummies thunder, make us crazed. Our purpose arrives like a call to prayer and we slink past zinc and silver, pebbles dotted like baby teeth, past spiders, bats and purple eyes, things that click when they scuttle, past carvings of names long gone—just for the fried *labma* inside, the unwrapped foil and sheen. Mules and men died chucking stones to form this narrow path we tiptoe on, their faces full-bearded and petro-streaked. We swear we hear *wawwas*, feel voices on our skin like two hands, wolves howling from behind, a soft wind smothered to sound like panting breaths, the dead that surround this place. Sometimes we step on animal bones, human fossils, the crunch beneath our feet reminding us of that first bite, sure to wake any jinn waiting for two little souls to steal, lead astray. We make sure to walk a straight line, hold hands, stay away from any man-sized mounds of dug dirt. We want only to make it through the darkness and death, to the kitchen table on the other side.

Yemen Storm

We watch for rain each evening:
the sudden, heavy cloudburst,
dry lightning—sound drowned
in a surging cyclone, flash flood,
our street a river of rolling water
without sewers to tame its rush.

My little sister and I stuck
on a mountaintop, our games
halted, waiting for the storm
to calm, each slippery step home
seconds away from plunging
into muddied pools below.

After, a boy with a broom arrives,
cleans all day and night and still
the house grates when we move.
Rusted corners rasp from our feet,
creak with the echo
of collapse. He sweeps the floors
of shards, soaked mice, lost things:
chipped glasses, a bent spoon,
a toy whistle. And my cousin

Waleed, resurfaced in a spill
of thick-brown water, drowned there
until his mother comes to drink
from him, suck river from his nose,
mouth, eyes in a practiced dance,
then spits it all out, reviving him.

He cough-sputters back into his body,
gets up to play again. Aunties squat
on wet roofs, shell pistachios, sift
through rice for weevils. Babies zip
around their ankles, flee the sun,
use their tented skirts for shade.

Inside, spiny-tailed lizards cling to cool walls,
everyone listening for the plop-
leak of water, leftover storm singing
on sala floors, the momentary quiet,
God pausing for breath
before His next shout.



Sara T. Gama, photograph

Yemen Pleated with Divine Origami

A little boy canvased in bug bites, old scab
above his right eye no one can explain.

You're overcome with the urge to umbrella him
with your whole body. He recoils, snail

shot with vinegar. All the children do
after their last hospital is bombed

to catch Houthi rebels. Mk 82 hits a school bus,
kills another 80, "wrongly targeted,"

mothers throwing themselves on the ground.
Fresh orphans, eyes blacker than a woman's veil

disappear swiftly, human soap bubbles.
The rest lie creased in city corners. Sooty lashes

flutter like dying flies. Ribs jut out, washboards
you can flick a tune on. Bodies tender as bog moss

wait quietly for their big black-out.

God, fold this country into a new shape,
pleat it softly with divine origami. Like this:

incense wrapped in foil making everyone's eyes
water, pretty cinders drifting over mountains,

smoke shrouding the land so all the bombs
miss, and when it's over, everything is left

with a blue shadow, soft and noble.
A child insistent to climb her father's shoulders

to watch. Him carrying her like Atlas
carried the world. Kids by the Aden sea,

faces salt-lashed, wondrous,
tumbling breathless and new.