

“Grandfather’s hands” and Other Poems

Grandfather’s hands

Your grandfather’s hands were brown.
Your grandmother kissed each knuckle,

circled an island into his palm
and told him which parts they would share,
which part they would leave alone.

She wet a finger to draw where the ocean would be
on his wrist, kissed him there,
named the ocean after herself.

Your grandfather’s hands were slow but urgent.
Your grandmother dreamt them,

a clockwork of fingers finding places to own –
under the tongue, collarbone, bottom lip,
arch of foot.

Your grandmother names his fingers after seasons –
index finger, a wave of heat,
middle finger, rainfall.

Some nights his thumb is the moon
nestled just under her rib.

Your grandparents often found themselves
in dark rooms, mapping out
each other’s bodies,

claiming whole countries
with their mouths.

Old spice

Every Sunday afternoon he dresses in his old uniform
tells stories of the men he shot, the women he saved.
No one believes him.

Thirty years ago he was spat at from a balcony,
a young immigrant who climbed the building
with triumph under his tongue
to come back with blood on his shirt
and a look in his eyes no one could recognise.

His daughters sometimes ask him to dance.
His laugh is gravel, his knuckles are unmarked graves.
He married his first love, she still has long curls that
reach the small of her back, sometimes he wraps
the strands around his hand like rope.

He smooths old spice into coat lapels,
can load a gun underwater in under four seconds,
cries while listening to Suulfe and Dhuule,
has a framed photograph of the old president.
He used a Swiss knife on his young bride,
sobbed as he held Italian linen between her legs.

He is dying like an old flag.
This summer he wants to go back home,
no one knows how to tell him
that it won't be the way he left it.

Questions for Miriam

Were you ever lonely?

Did you tell people that songs weren't
ever the same as a warm body or a soft mouth?
Did you know how to say no to the young boys
who cried outside your hotel rooms?
Did you listen to the songs they wrote,
tongues wet with praise for women like you?

What sweaty bars did you begin in?
Did you see them holding bottles by the neck,
hair on their arms raising as your notes hovered
above their heads?
Did you know of the girls who sang into their fists
mimicking your brilliance?

Did they know that you were only human?
My parents played your music at their wedding.
Called you Makeba, never Miriam, never first name,
always singer. Never wife, daughter, mother,
never lover, aching.

Did you tell people that songs weren't the same
as a warm body or a soft mouth? Miriam,
I've heard people using your songs as prayer,
begging god in falsetto. You were a city

exiled from skin, your mouth a burning church.
I've carved my own body into
districts, rioting my throat sore.
Your songs fed starving women, Miriam,
quietened the need to hate my own body.

Tell me – who kissed your mouth silent?
Who helped moan the songs out of your stomach?
Did you ever spit out blood?
Were you ever silent for days?
Were there months when your husband
grieved your voice? Did you ever hate them,
the arms thrusting out of crowds?

Did you ever hate us,
the banshees in the audience,
little girl dervishes in their small living rooms,
dish cloths tied around our heads
swirling like their skin depended on it?

Did we want too much of you?
Did our love make it hard for you to sing?

Did you ever write drunk elegies for your heart?
Were you too embarrassed to sing them for us?
Was your strength a showpiece of staccato and timbre?
Did you howl belly up in rented rooms, open suitcase,
air thick with cigar smoke and roses?

Miriam – you, who we made sing at her own funeral,
was a song warmer than a body? Were you
more lonely than those sobbing over your cassettes?
And can you forgive us if we still want
your voice singing us out, at our own funerals?

Tea with our grandmothers

For Basil

The morning your habooba died
I thought of my ayeyo, the woman
I was named after, Warsan Baraka,
skin dark like tamarind flesh,
who died grinding cardamon
waiting for her sons to come home and
raise the loneliness they'd left behind,

or my mother's mother, Noura
with the honeyed laugh, who
broke cinnamon barks between
her palms, nursing her husband's
stroke, her sister's cancer and
her own bad back with broken
Swahili and stubborn Italian,

and Doris, the mother of your
English rose, named after
the daughter of Oceanus and Tethys
the Welsh in your blood, from the land
of Cymry, your grandmother who
dreams of clotted cream in her tea
through the swell of diabetes,

then your habooba Al-Sura,
God keep her, with three lines on
each cheek, a tally of surviving,
the woman who cooled your tea
pouring it like the weight of deeds
between bowl and cup, until the steam
would rise like a ghost.

Glossary

Habooba – Arabic word meaning beloved woman, used as the word for grandmother in Sudan.

Ayeyo – Somali word for grandmother.

Macaanto – Somali term of endearment, meaning sweetness.

central line is red, circle line is yellow

I can't compete with your home.

I cannot become sky and soil, hot tarmac and airport taxis.
I cannot hug you like your uncle, burly embraces filled with baritone Arabic.

I don't know your alphabet, I can't remember the words you teach me,
I can only listen to your stories.
write about your memories.
sometimes cry for silly, stupid, British reasons.

but I can't compete with your home.

I am not mountains nor am I back roads.
I am not the singing woman with the sugar voice who knows all of your
alleyways.

I can't say I know how you feel, I don't know my country like that.
don't know its hot air in my face, haven't felt it under my feet.

I'm jealous that I can't be homesick.

and it hurts that I know
that me and my London can never be enough for you.

Translating fire

My uncle Olol was named after the Somali
word for fire. His actual name translates thickly into
its worst moment. When it is at its most hungry,

before soot or smoke, after flame, after
it buckles, spits, licks whole houses down,
squats over entire cities, how it can burn
things from existence.

Or the irony that his first wife on hearing
that he had left the country and married again,
drank lighter fluid and swallowed a match.

I want you to imagine how his name
took advantage of every breath in her body,
how he reduced her to ash from the inside out.

Now take all these things my love
and use them selfishly to describe
either the burn of being away from me,
or the bearable heat of being touched.