



Set to Music a Wildfire



Let me be a lamb in a world that wants my lion

In the beginning, there was an angel with cloven feet who stood by me, and the angel said, *My wings are an ocean*, and its shoulders split until feathers fell around us. This is how you leave your country.

On the back of an ocean. Choked with feathers.

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If someone gives you water, drink. And if they hand you a glass of blood, tell yourself it's water. If they hand you a lamb and say *eat*, they will see a lion. They will call you *lion* when you walk down the street.

When the towers come down. When blood is the water they drink.

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When my belly sings with hunger, it's asking, *Will you die for an idea?* I dreamt I walked the shore of my country and each wave cracked like a bone. The sea of my childhood rattles with skulls, and their mouths—

agape with my name—drown its vowels, call me "S," say it's the name the sea spoke when I dragged my feet across an ocean and became somewhere new. I call my dead *Beloved* but they have too much

time for me. If I close my eyes, I see my father on the beach, his hands cupped for water. He says, *The dead are always thirsty*,

and I wake up in time to catch the L for work that hardly keeps me fed.

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Heaven, leave your light on a little longer. I looked for you on earth
and found my daughters. I looked for you and saw your stars strung
electric as sorrow and they wound my current across their backs

and carried me here, the middle of a grocery store parking lot,
the whine of flood lights burrowing into my capped head
and the black night ahead, and I think, *My God, will I ever not be*

surprised by what I can survive? The long country of my loneliness
stretched out before me, my hands heavy with the food I can eat—
I'm so full of honey in a time of war, winter in a land

I'm learning to love, in a land that won't love me.

Legend of Mount Sannine

Zahlé, Lebanon

He is the names of the missing or dead.
Smokeless fire, a bell with its tongue cut out,

bloodseed in the foothills,
the funnel of a thousand flies.

Habibi, he'll say, you have a home

*here in the barracks
here with me.*

My love, you'll meet jinn
more times than you know,

but to the mountains
that whisper and shake,

to the man who places bullets in your hand,
you're only blood. Blood that spills.

Surah al-Qiyamah: My Father Talks to God When Syria Occupies Tripoli, 1976

We are in the streets already, drawing lines in the dirt,
pulling gunfire into our breath. Does man think
You will not assemble his bones

when clouds climb and split like timber and bombs swarm
in smoke-stained light?

Our bodies' rungs and limbs are rail yard tracks—

immovable, tied to the land.

When men hunt each other, they call You different names,
sounds that sift into rock beds.

Listen: it's calling You, this river.

We drown in the streets beneath a joined moon and sun,
and still the earth shakes us from its hide.

Where can I escape? My arms covered in ash. The harbors moored with flame.

I love this fleeting world even

as I run through the streets, the heat slung on my back,
shots mottling the window where I bought bread,

and the voices follow—scratch of gravel, barking alleys and
smolder—I'm fluent in a new language when I'm this close
to the shopkeeper's body, his mouth full of red petals

that drip on the counter like a prophecy.

It ends like this: our time weighed like grain on a scale,
Your hands too full of lives like mine.

My Father Dreams of a New Country

Lebanon, 1978

America, I see through your glass—
I reach my hand and my fingerprints
are everywhere. Like leaves the gust blows in.

I don't have money to feed your fountains
or enough water that it's never a wish,

but America, I can't stop drinking you in.
Your trains, their freight like hours,
like the vowels cut from my name.

When will you learn my name?

I'm running to you but I can't get there
fast enough. I'm strung up on gridirons
and city lights. Aren't my arms tired of reaching?

Isn't my back tired of carrying this night around?
Be good to me like a summer rain, I swear I'm burning.

My Father Is the Sea, the Field, the Stone

I don't know what makes a country a country.
If the sea softening an edge of land is enough
to say, *This is mine and that is yours.*

There were nights in Tripoli
when there was room for us.
When the sky pulled up the wings of gulls

and we watched their bodies rise from the beach.
Days when I chased my sisters through the market
and we sailed through bright saffron scarves,

past barrels of grain and earthy bins of pine nuts.
And how I stood beside my siblings, all dressed
in clothes my father made stitch by stitch,

and held out my hands for the candy he'd bring
if work was good. I knew it was a lot to ask
and still I asked. Some days I'd swim out

until I wasn't sure I could come back.
The sun beat its indifference into my brow.
The water, its mercy. Why choose a coast

when my hands are stone?
Why a rifle when my blood is a field?
I carry these suitcases full of rain

because I can't take my country.
If it's a choice you want—I've never known
a world that wasn't worth dying for.