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Please Find Yourself a Space

i have lived under four Canadian prime ministers, three oil sheikhs and one african dictator one proclaimed in the name of the good old stock that barbaric practices need to be reported one demanded that i either salute him as the Father of the Nation or say goodbye to my real father the oil sheikhs watched as hundreds of our black bodies drowned in the arabian sea

black bodies, drowning, after extracting black gold for golden robed white princes under the golden arabian sun *inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon*

truly we come from God and truly to Him is our return

the eye of the All-Seeing bore witness to all this the fruitless flight of black bodies to yemen, then lampedusa, then emerson before the world knew of migrants lost at sea:

some of us drowned some of us died on the way so some of us could find a place to belong

between the sun-tanned-leader-of-the-free-world's not-anti-muslim-muslim ban and the peaceful conclusion to a presidential election in my old homeland there was the opposite end to prayer, at a mosque and the violent transfer of six golden souls to the hereafter *assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah* God's peace and blessings be upon you forgive us forgive us forgive us you are welcomed here you belong here

a prime minister wept and a nation tried to look away a prime minister wept and a nation tried to look away i speak 3 languages but have forgotten how to dream in all save one this this this is the hidden price of being welcomed of seeking welcome the undeclared rate of belonging of finding a pace to belong

all across this country in basements, in creaky attics, in condo closets and
ravine-abutting backyards are treasures unknown except to those who are
welcomed here:

the languages of first dreams the memories of first steps the extravagant
hand gestures of grandmothers passed down like heirlooms only to finally
lie buried forever under the frost

this land's brief summers do not come to all things

depending on who was blown up or shot up or torn apart somewhere on the globe:

some days i pay more to belong some days i pay less

some days fortunately/unfortunately, i pay nothing at all a club

in the city of lights, is lit up with gunfire:

i tone down the soulful head-thrown-back laughter i inherited from women with voices like
songbirds outrage and grief mean something different when white bodies are being counted

a bus blows up, in the city of the blue mosque: i learn somehow to take up

as little space as possible on the streetcar

as the big man sitting next to me plant his foot right on top of mine and jams an elbow against my
ribs as if to say "go ahead, i dare you to make a move, i dare you to make my day"

a school is shot up, in some small town I didn't even know existed:

i utter a new type of cognitively disordered prayer –

Ya Rabb please please please let them not be

any of ours muslim ours black or brown ours immigrant ours refugee ours at

the same time i pray, if it must be one of ours, let *us* be the victims, dear Lord, count *us*

among the dead, this time, let them be *ours*

because this is the price to pay to truly belong it's in the politely racist chats on

AM talk radio it's in the politely intellectualized normalized hate speech on the

six o'clock news and yet no one i actually know ever tells me anything except:

you belong here you

are welcomed here

so i learn to laugh out loud only at home and i learn to
breathe as imperceptibly as possible and i learn to dim my
eyes, my smile and finally i learn to constrict my own
eternal soul and now everyone knows i have what it takes to
truly belong **Please Report Suspicious or Unusual**

Behaviour

Have you had the talk?

Not the one about the birds and the bees

Not the one about the seasons of change

Between girlhood and womanhood

Not the one about how to make shaah

The right way

A little sweet a little spicy

A little something from somewhere else

Because that is the true mark of a lady

None of those talks

Not the talks with scripts perfected

Over generations

Not the talks embedded with the sounds and tastes and scents

Of the places our women gathered

To shape one another

None of those talks But

this talk:

The talk in which my mother tongue

Finds itself misshapen into unfamiliar forms

Forms of fear sculpted onto feverish prayers

This talk:

The talk in which the vowels and the consonants of the language

I associate only with love and laughter and playful, cutting banter Find themselves marshalled into stringent forms

Forms of fear sculpted onto feverish prayers

This talk:

Kiddo

Promise to always text when you leave home and get to your destination

Even if it's broad daylight

Promise to always say your prayers of exit and return

Promise to always text when you leave your destination and return home

Even if it's broad daylight

Promise to always say your prayers of exit and return

Promise to never stand at the edge of the subway platform

Never ever stand even close to the edge of the subway platform

Promise to never stand at the door of the streetcar

Or at the top of the stairs

Or sit beside an angry face

Promise to check the reflections of people behind you as you walk past building exteriors

Even if it's broad daylight

Even if it's broad daylight

Promise to always say your prayers

For no advice benefits without prayers

Promise to stop and give the beggar his due

Even if it's in the dead of night

True safety is found in relieving another's needs

Promise to disregard hateful words
Life is too short for heeding hate
Promise to never say sorry for the space
To which your breath gives life

Promise to tread lightly on this Earth
For the entire Earth is the mosque of our Beloved
Promise to stand firmly when in the right
Promise to yield to the gentlest truths

Promise to always be aware of the hearts around you
For all hearts are constantly turning
According to the will of their Lord And
the one who hates today
Can surely love tomorrow

This talk
This talk
This talk

Have you had this talk yet?
How does a loving mother
Say to a child
You are dear to me
And what is meant to be will be
But we must have this strange talk
Because my heart is full
And the wisdoms of the old talks

Will not avail you here **love me – love me**

not i love this country it's a secret gushy

mushy heart-aching love but it's complicated

the place i call home was someone else's

home before and first before and first

and it's still someone else's home

now and always now and

forever

and no one asked them if i could come here and make a home in *their* home

no one bothered to ask them and i don't know what that makes me except

maybe another land grabbing arriviste no, exactly another land-grabbing

arriviste

and yet i can't help but love this place this place where my daughter was born

this place where my true faith was born this place where every cell in my

blood and in my heart was remade and reborn

this place i can't help what it's done to me how it has made

itself so dear, so tangibly achingly dear to me i can't quit my

love for this place this place i can't help what it was before

and what it is now this place this place that was someone

else's home before

before and first

and is still someone else's home now

and always

this love has never been pretty it's never been un-complicated i've benefitted

and thrived while the same people who were here before, whose land this is,

whose ancestors' resting place this is, whose birthright this is, have endured or

thrived and yet, i too have given so so many tears and reams of self-respect to
this place

and by God how i love this place! even as it draws
me into its guilt even as it wraps me up in its
shame even as it promises to move forward to a
tomorrow that's always the same as today

dear God how can i not love this place? how can i not
love the lakes and the rivers of this place?
the trees and the meadows? the
waterfalls and the flowers?
the safety and security of this place? dear God,
the safety and security of this place! all the
innumerable blessings of God in one place!
Truly God is Beautiful and He loves Beauty

and yet this land was someone else's first
and before

it is still someone else's now and forever and i find myself tangled up in this
love-knot of the displacer and the displaced where too many like me came and
became a part of the brokenness of this place

but is it brokenness to want a place that's mine?
a country that's mine? a land that's mine? a flag
that's mine? fireworks that are mine?
a national anthem that's mine and with all its flaws still raises the hair on my arms
because it mentions God who is the meaning of home?

and so i struggle with the great horrors of this place the
mighty weight of the great wrongs of this place as i
struggle with wanting to declare my love for this place
because i have no other home but this place

and i sit here like a hypocrite
with this love and this guilt all
wrapped up in this place **The**

Time a Foreign-Born

Endodontist Mansplained

My Own Child's Name to

Me At A Clinic In

Mississauga every single time a somebody from somewhere asks kiddo
her name and she gives it to them and they ask "so...where are you
from?" simply because i'm standing there beside her and they can't
explain the "mixed up foreign" business going on with the two of us
because of the deliberate amalgam of perfected Somali and English i start
speaking as soon as the inspecting looks and the quizzical head tilts that
greet us simply because we are

me in the too-bright-for-you-but-not-for-me hijab tapping my foot like we haven't got all day for
this and her with the luscious locks and the easy smile that comes when the sun is all yours and
you know it her with the scruffy boots and the poised feminine swagger of distilled Somali
loveliness confidence and challenge passed down through an unbroken chain from Hooyo to
Hooyo to Hooyo and she says: "we're from Turun-uh" in that tone which heaven created expressly
to teach stupidity its own name

i delightfully watch the pitifully tiny gears in
their incredibly small thoughtless heads
painfully turning to comprehend the
complexity of the two of us the heaven-made
pairing of the two of us every single time that
happens is the last time that particular
somebody from somewhere

will ever see this

"mixed up foreign" business and dare
to ask "so, where are you from?" **The**
Gift No One Else Wanted they say
you've rigged this life but not in our
favour gifting us with this colour
loved least of all to stand out in the
midst of all creation:

endless acres of deepest black ebony sable covering the
earth as the blanket of night covers the sky and like the
innumerable stars laid out across the heavens if a solitary
one should go out who is there to notice but You the
dimming of a single light of yours?

a million souls folded into a million times
ten billion more what difference does a
boat wrecked wretched on the ocean
spilling its unwanted burden take from
that countless number of yours?
endless acres of deepest black
ebony sable spread across the

surface of the sea bluest of blue

this sea of yours

if ten thousand times ten sink below the surface

gasping their last amidst these waves of yours

across this vast earth of yours at long last on

their lips the holiest name of yours who is there

to notice but You the drowning of a multitude

of yours?

they say you've rigged this life but

not in our favour gifting us with

this colour loved least of all a

million souls folded into a million

times ten billion more every one of

them a child of the primordial

father deepest black ebony sable

every one of them with a name this

one: a rose that one: a ruddy hilltop

him: the sky's vastness her: the

ocean's stillness

such a great portion of life snuffed out by

this other creation of yours

who is there to notice but You what

is done to yours by yours?

mourn me like you mean it

there are dear ones countless
hundreds thousands millions
unnumbered whose last
breaths will never be
memorialized in headlines or
endless newsreels but their
coming unto God will be
heralded by the Angels
countless tens of thousands
hundreds of thousands
millions upon millions
innumerable descending from
the Heavens

this we know so forget what those without hearts
have to say about who is to be mourned in the
light and who is to be buried without tears pay no
heed to the cacophony of their false heralds say
prayers from your heart and tune in

to the sweet Takbeers of
the Angels as those dear
souls ascend to our
Maker eternally joyful
eternally at peace

It's Never Just a Subway Ride

Look sweetie

That sign has your name on it

Let's take a photo with you beside it

Cheesy-cute

Better not

We're the only ones on the street

Who look like us

And well...what would people think?

Wouldn't it be cheesy-cute

If we stood on this bridge And took

a photo of you pretending To touch

the top of the CN Tower? Here, go

stand beside that little girl

And smile

Better not

We're the only ones on the street

Who look like us

And well...what would people think?

Our favourite bakery

Packs everything in plain white boxes

Tied with plain white string

Sent off in plain brown paper bags

The best way to conceal treasure

Is to camouflage it with plainness Wrap it up in plainness

Hide it in plain sight

There's a long queue at the subway platform
We're sitting on a bench by a pillar
Everyone's placing their backpacks and bags on the floor
But not us
Better not us
Definitely not beside the pillar
We're the only ones here
Dressed like us
Carrying a plain brown paper bag
And well...What would people think?

"Please report any suspicious activity to TTC personnel": the male voice is obviously a recording
But his message never fails to transform
The post-workday zombies into hyper-vigilant
Suspicious-activity-ferreting-ferrets
What a lot of red ferret faces
Surrounding our brown, human faces

I'm worried about the man standing next to me
He's wearing the kind of jacket I've only seen
On previews of Duck Dynasty
And more recently, the nightly news clips about the Soldiers of Odin
His nose resembles that of someone who has seen the business end of bottles and fists
Red
Raging
Unpleasant
Dangerous

Mom is he... a "militia"?

I tell her with confidence:

He's can't be a militia

This is Toronto

The only thing people are packing

Is a high degree of irritation

Concealed under their strained faces

I can't help looking at the man

He wears a giant compass where his watch should be His

boots look like combat is their business

He has shoulders like boulders

And hands like small holiday hams

I struggle with the urge to say "howdy"

And ask about the trailer park

And what it's like to have a daddy who beat him

With a belt but then lovingly took him hunting

You know, typical things

Subway platform small talk

But there are too many ferrety-faces around

So the urge stays trapped within my brain Underneath

my scarf

The best way to conceal anything

Is to camouflage it with plainness

Wrap it up in plainness

Hide it in plain sight

But seriously who needs a compass badly enough to wear one?

Maybe a duck hunter?

Maybe a militiaman?

Maybe he's an American?

Maybe he's just a really devout Muslim

Who needs to find the Qiblah five times a day?

But there's an app for that now Besides,

does he look *Muslim*?

Maybe *I* need to call the TTC and report this?

Maybe *I* need to my mind own business?

Maybe *I* need to control my own thoughts?

The best way to control anything

Is to confine it

Wrap it up

Hide it

Pretend it doesn't exist

But what about the ferrets?

I feel them closing in

The pretend deity from the TTC has another message from on high to save us:

“Someone has been taken ill. Help is on the way. The train will be delayed. Apologies.”

The spell is broken

The ferrets return to their dens

Yet there they are hidden in plain sight

The best way to conceal anything

Is to camouflage it with plainness

Wrap it up in plainness

Hide it in plain sight