

Ramadan Letters to Myself and My Strangers, Written in Passing

1. night prayers

our days begin with night
the fast is broken against *maghrib adhan*
it takes more than hunger & thirst to break our egos
more than worship in rows to invite stillness into our turmoil
those who toil the night away, their rightful stars
denied them by streetlights striking their windshields
pause briefly
night shift, shoulder to shoulder with day shift
lines shuffling, drifting, correcting alignment as they come and go
some forgot their prayers but souls know
when they are spoken to, even those who have not prayed for years
return to seek their beloved mistress
the pregnant night
that births forgiveness

2. frequent flyers

you know your tribe made it when your holy days
are splashed across grocery flyers
Ramadan Kareem! discounted: dates, *naan*, *roohafza*
no gnocci no ackees no potato pirogies
our pantries defy their plateful assumptions
not land-locked in some eastern palate
and whaddyamean *eastern?* east of who?
hey where's your muslim food
dunno; I gave him Timbits

3. *basmalah* in white

I'm at my most reverent in the forest, but
go try and find a relevant God in cities
parallel parked human landfills, teeming
look down, don't look up
dried holy ghost stains, sidewalk shrines to street dreamers
gradient walls of subsidized anthills, their seams rusting with love
yet I seem to still see people among masses
signs of God in absence
we call them negative spaces, denying
we cannot breathe without them
in lines left blank, we ink-drop our prayers
in change rooms, under staircases, behind benches
afraid they will find our God
if we don't keep Him in hiding
and type our *basmalah* in white
on secular pages, like:

4. overheard at the mosque

rumpled baseball-capped white man hangs out
as if webbed in the entranceway of the masjid
asks a skinny tall black man with leopard-print plastic bags for food cash, but
there's food here tonight, brother
you come here, brother, tonight, I take care of you
know what, imma even hook you up with a cigarette
only one though, I can do one pack a month, that's one a day
you hear me? I look after you
what time? after maghrib
not your first year, you know how it works man
remember, you're with me, brother
you'll be looked after

5. *(alhamdulillah)*

alhamdulillah when they ask me, but my gratitude feels in brackets
children are trials as much as blessings: the sudden tears, scream powered
in redness I read anger, read hatred in eyes shuttered
we can only read children through grown-up language
through filters of loneliness and frustration
i love him but there are moments about this I do not love

say: *(alhamdulillah)*

think of sister Malake: she's waiting
to meet her six unborn children
full souls, departed after the fourth month
and those before, the imam told her, turned into birds in *jannah*
alhamdulillah, she says, she feels a mother
children's deaths propel us to our own graves and back
we spend the rest of our lives saving up good deeds
so we can buy our children toys in heaven

6. that mandatory meditation on hijab

my headscarf excites the oddest assumptions
makes my Russian sound Arabic to fellow parents in the playground
and when corrected, oh sorry!
as if caught assuming the worst of someone
a half-scarf once got me tried in Farsi
when my accent is tired, I get Bosnian
baggy pants from Nepal get me *are you Turkish*
salwar kameez almost passes me
the daughter-in-law they had once wanted
where you from? but ... there are Muslims there?
yes, there are, but you must have noticed by now
there are Muslims here, too

7. travelers

travelers are excused from *jumuah*, though I suspect that
we are tourists; we pray in a garden rotunda
finding the *qibla* with an iPhone compass
checking prayer times on the *adhan* app
shop this prayer: our rugs are SIGNE \$3.99 @ IKEA
even at the Falls we can't even, we hold our rectangles up
collapsing the waterfall and its ferocious secrets
into bits/bytes, instant viewfinders for our digital afterlives
entomb with us this rainbowed miracle
before a living mountain, we turn
to sighing stones
oooh aaah wooow whoah
we see that it can kill us, snapchat its image so it goes mayfly
go back to poisoning the rivers, ex-colonized turned settler accomplices
wannabe allies well-meaningly fumbling
Anishnaabe names in our land acknowledgments
if it's any apology, the Creator we worship is not imported
He had always been yours

8. those who will write

we had come from places of beauty
we had left behind cradles of culture
wars began before us during or after; our displacement
began long before that
the whole world is our refugee camp
we already know who will rewrite our history
even our peace is woven out of necessity
stitched together with shame and denial, exiling
the inconvenient along with their grievances
tracing back to us by the thread of sorrow
for our dead and theirs
ours will be heroes, theirs can be martyrs

what a great county we had, remember?
after all our blood shed
safer to hang a few, and blame the dead
our children can marry the children of those we
sieged, and bombed, and killed
they should be too busy chasing their offspring
through cultured ruins, starved beauty to
stop & question us

9. 4 a.m. fractions

we spend a third of our life asleep
longer, groping in darkness
our Prophet said:
a third of the stomach for food, a third for drink, a third for air
what fraction of conversation is for words, what for silence?
have I lived life's third or half already or more than half?
we do not center our lives around their end, the way dying people do
are we not all dying?

10. pledge of allegiance

you proclaimed you will not bury them, as if
denying a simple prayer to corpses is the latest proof-of-outrage requirement
we've done it all, called out kicked out reported denounced preached
now we have to pledge allegiance to the flag
chanting: we will not bury them!
let evil-doing remains find another compassion
I do not blame you, you know our reality:
to touch them is to be told: there, come & claim
your baggage, dead terrorists thus less their and more ours
so they can beat us over the head with their bones
though none could stop them
becoming oppressors, no soul
shall bears another's burden

their graves will be darkness
the graves of evil-doers are darkness
but ever since the raven scratched the earth
someone still has to bury them

11. the apology for the crimes of illegal black/brown bodies

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12. alignment

about this alignment
it strains me, too, having been raised a left-to-righter, but
we have to train ourselves to ask who aligns us
lines us against the wall, always picks us out in the line-up
gives us their lines, so we can lie like them
divided people into right left center, leaving non-aligned
scrambling, and when they justify
themselves, you can't help seeing the gaps in their argument
so much rhetoric; the dragging cursor of
social formatting

13. kerosene

I'm buying a second-hand kerosene lamp and the girl
apologizes for the newspaper wrap
pages and pages of faceless naked flesh
femme-sections beheaded, pimped for camera
via their bodies, mine and hers, too, are degraded
profanity lingers on us like news ink
efword as common as comma
we talk too much to notice the aftertaste
we gotta be ill, lit

14. charging

my child cries in sleep, clings to my warmth
a mother is furniture, linen and pantry
a whole apartment in a body
he finds home in me always
I find home in myself only
when loved or when calling God, lips set to silent
and a tremor expands in my chest
text-message from God
(my heart is on vibrate)
say: I am near
the terror and ecstasy of proximity
charged full with
light upon light

15. cracking

Ramadan is half-gone and my heart, still half-dead
swinging from handy to helpless from idealist to blankness, layered with ennui and fatigue
to prevent the cracking
though hearts are stronger than trees
son & I have identical scabs on our right toes
mine from picking at dead skin
his from dropping a can of brined jackfruit
he shall heal, but not me
every day, I pick at the scab
we cannot heal if we don't let ourselves be
the world will not let us be ourselves
we must carry our cracks in the open
like the bark of a tree
and remember that we are both growing

16. women talking at starbucks

at High Park Starbucks, women come and go
talking of diets & yoga & Ellen Degeneres
mostly one talks and the other nods
I wonder how often I am that woman, or that woman
the cottage steals my time, my money, my family
do you say no to people I say no at the drop of a hat I complained about Donald Trump in one
paragraph and we finally got rid of the plastic bags at the restaurant plastic is terrible
styrofoam is terrible we use a lot of aluminum foil
where are we supposed to sit and talk when we are fasting?
parks mall mosque public library (but you have to be quiet in the library)
I don't mind the drama I like the challenge of turning people around I'm planting a seed
should we get a latte for mom
our Prophet said: if all you have in your hand
when the Day comes
is a seed, plant it
what is the point of having a phone if you don't answer it this goes over my head you should
have told me not to use MapQuest
two different women, one pushing, the other shaking her head in denial
I wonder how often I am that woman, or that woman
caterpillars crawl across my screen at the park
refraining from ill speech is
the fasting of the tongue

17. fitra

we found his new favourite picture book on the curb
wheels and diggers and tractors
he drags it 'round violently, pulls pages from the spine
outward, splitting the cardstock, brings me a ripped corner, like
look! waiting eyes asking
mama, make it grow back
it's already in him, our *fitra* is supposed to long for divine
but is this, too, a part of our *fitra*?

to tear each other down
to rip the things we love
being loved was never meant to be easy

18. praise the loft

a gutted church on our corner, praise the loft!
the exterior kept for its rustic charm, filled with insulation foam hardwood vanity cabinets
blackout curtains, praise the loft!
sad and pretty but sad first
Toronto's oldest remaining mosque lives in the shell of a church
the oldest mosque is no more, sent into early obsolescence by growing pains
we are tight as fists only while few as fingers
bulldozers are making *tawaf* in Mecca
cranes tower over minarets, metallic *alifs*
among added creature comforts, spliced outposts of corporate idols
with every sacred stone turned, its echo in heavens cries, *no!*
and maybe they'd pave paradise, like the song goes
but you can't pave a place you cannot go

19. strangers

they had met minutes ago over *iftar*
left, laughing, in the same Uber
turned out they live a block apart
origins place us farther, but we would never find each other
if we stayed in one place
we have transit neighbours, standing with us on busses and trains
street & shop neighbours waving, reminding us
our child has grown taller
all those we love were once strangers
in strange lands or hidden inside our wombs
it was nice to meet you and maybe next time
we can move together

into sincerity
glad tidings to strangers

20. *adab al-nar*

all day I read about the fire
the sight of it! column of hell
corner-cutters, are you not, at last
frightened of infants suffocated in the arms of their mothers
come to point you out with their little fingers
the day the Earth crumbles?
whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it
families perished whole, their bodies burned
but from the moment I saw
the towering flames, I knew
they are not the ones
in the Fire

21. grief on Facebook be like

#prayers #nowords #love  

22. God on the internet

we have to be dead to be heard and then some
my grief for them is not the paralysis of a bystander
they are the relatives I failed to meet, their hues and tongues vary
yet I know the meaning of their names
so go on facebook, display your grief
tight-knit online world loads the heart, stretches empathy thin, plays tricks on the mind
because I am her tonight, but am I not also all other dead women
those dumped in rivers named by their ancestors
our allyship is continuously corrupted, our sympathy policed
I have no doubt God is omnipresent but
is God really on the internet?

what about the un-shared dead?
who is mourning them?
why read and re-read and re-read the news
#prayers, in lieu of praying
waiting to be moved, instead of moving
truth is, what I hunger for are stories, a storyteller
is always combing rubble for stories
this world will gaslight us
the narrative we write for ourselves are
smoke without fire
we are writing our way around
our greatest fear:
the grain of disbelief
we suspect of resting
inside our doubt
the fire whose fuel is men & stones
God, too, is a Writer

23. qadr

died too young, life cut short, taken before her time
shoot volleys of blanks at the sky, blame an indifferent God
washed with dirt and tears and minutes of silence
with hardship comes ease
indeed, with hardship comes ease
even when we despair, at every dark turn
we are blessed
he escaped war to find a better life
without escaping *qadr*
no soul knows what tomorrow will bring and no soul knows
in what land it will die

24. paypal

in Ramadan, the rewards are multiplied
even the selfless are strategic
paypalling *sadaqa* in the last odd nights
online giving is easy, looking at the poor without having to look them in the eye
digital pieces of their lives are nominal, stock photographs
paypal denies you that smug fuzzy feeling of *look I am such a good boy* when the loonie
hits the bottom of a tin can, or garbage bags of your rags and
crates of canned beans (with lard) are herded to warehouses for Christmas
later, it starts: *in reality beggars make millions what if I enabled an addict if you think of it*
poverty is really a state of mind
easily, charity followed by hurtful words turns
invalid

25. fasting

there are things you cannot fast from
the colour of your skin, the violence it meets:
the blunt, the sharp, the smirk
the unacknowledged occupation of your land
no fast from *allahu akbar*, though sometimes we tone it down
to whisper, lest neighbours hear in it war cries
no fasting from double-consciousness
though how many shudder just so at the cries of *freedom*
no fasting from the pursuit of justice, the wandering stranger
our battles will sap us before suffering ceases
we pray to God for justice; it is easy for God
when righteous rage floods the throat
say: I am fasting, I am fasting

26. ummah

I still have my husband wear light-coloured shirts to *taraweeh*
so that he is clearly visible to drivers
I still let my child roam the grey carpets of our *masjid*

in the soft shadows of solidarity notes, sympathy flowers
hand-made postcards from synagogues, temples, churches
my boy rides on shoulders of his *ummah* fathers
swings from the arms of his *ummah* mothers
climbs the wooden steps of the *minbar*
preach, baby, preach
we find our strength in white-clad bodies circling the Ka'ba
like white stars that circle above us
reassured of our smallness against their vastness
the world is our mosque—
still, when the stars make *tawaf*
we can't help but feel like
trespassers

27. *rahma*

I water the plants daily but they only grow when rain falls
love needs a moment to take root
the wall says YOU'VE CHANGED
we change, too, but the walls around us are changing faster
they favour refurbishment over *rahma*
take this parkette on Dundas West, flanked by low-income housing
they've put new benches, trails of tree stumps, painted the playground
cemented an inclusive welcome message at the fenced entrance
new condo probably paid for it, and I believe in the transformative power of layouts, but
when you pour money down poor throats like concrete
what watering can: no *baraka*, no *rahma*
sure free country, but a block-wide LCBO across from the Salvation Army shelter
and shiny glass store with pedestalled upscale bong and crack-pipes
for those unpoor who will never get called crackheads
sure I like me an organic market and a good latte, but
God knows I'm so angry on behalf of so many
pushed like dirt into gaps between blocks, unmarketable

stretch marks between cities and suburbs
so many lived & loved in walls built without love
and died not of hate but indifference, incompassion
writing about it feels like a watering can
thrown at a tower-high fire
we say rest in power, we want to keep fighting
no peace without justice, we want them our banners
doing their part, but they've already done it
we just haven't done ours
souls that have suffered deserve to rest
so rest in *rahma*

28. 4 a.m. counting of prophets

the prophet most mentioned in the Qur'an is Moses, *dit* Musa
a woke stutterer, showed up and called bullshit on a high-budget magic production
today's exodus is in orange vests, on rubber dinghies
Israelites crossing unmarked borders
met with hand-made signs: NO REFUGEES
forty years of rice and lentils from UNHCR
Musa may not even make it that far though
with that mouth on him, pharaohs
gonna gun him down; see, just another angry n-gg-r
there's many a musa, living in food deserts
there's many an ibrahim calling fools out on the internet
there's many a shamed and shunned maryam
many a hajar looking for clean water for her kid
many a jesus counselling junkies in alleys
many a joseph getting degrees hoping to fix the system from inside
many asiyahs standing up to their abusive men
many a noah collecting organic heirloom seeds
there are many muhammads too
(though not as many as bear the name of)
we are not our names we are our actions

seriously, though
if Moses was alive today
would God send him an iPad?

29. twenty nine on thirty

this Ramadan left faster than last one
I still say twenty-eight though it's twenty-nine
next year i'll be thirty; years are merely road-markers
but our parents are aging and dying
grand-parents dying or dead already
we are not ready; we turn one-eighty
to look for guidance in our children
answers ashen from fires of sunset
we sift for in the fine dust of sunrise
the blessed guest is packing his bags
we travel one-way; he travels in cycles

30. *duniya*

we make home in this world
minute by minute, it erodes
strong, scabbed trees, scarred cities, scattered diasporas
shoulder-to-shoulder lines
our hearts were not meant to feel home here
we trek through the desert of our lives
on bleeding feet
our deeds piled high onto wheelbarrows
we are asylum seekers
mapping our own way through *duniya*
casting nets of doubt and prayers

we are beads on a string
duniya flicks us in its *dhikr*

we are many things
on our desperate journeys
travelers, strangers
searching
rahmatullah
rahmatullah
rahmatullah

glossary

Adhan: *Call to prayer, consisting of vocal chants*

Alhamdulillah: *Muslim supplication meaning – praise be to God – used in times of thankfulness and contentment*

Alif: *First letter of the Arabic alphabet ا*

Allahu Akbar: *Muslim chant meaning – God is great – often used as a cheer*

Baraka: *Blessing*

Basmalah: *Islamic notation meaning – in the name of God – said prior to anything to add spiritual benefit*

Dhikr: *Remembrance of God through chants, prayer or good deeds*

Duniya: *The physical world – in contrast to the spiritual realm*

Fitra: *The natural inkling or tendency of all living things*

Jannah: *One of the Islamic names of paradise*

Jumuah: *Friday – literally means: Congregation – referring to the congregational prayer and sermon on Fridays that majority of Muslims attend*

Maghrib: *Name of sunset prayer*

Minbar: *Pulpit, Pedestal*

Qadr: *Destiny*

Qibla: *The direction that Muslims pray to; the direction being the City of Makkah in Saudi Arabia*

Rahma, Rahmatullah: *Mercy, Mercy of God*

Sadaqa: *Alms given voluntarily*

Tawaf: *The action of people circling the Kabah in the city of Makkah*

Ummah: *Term for the collective Muslim people but can also just refer to a group of people*