

## **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 woow 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**

Error 404 Page Not Found

## **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*