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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