

ALI

Fear

I, too, feel like letting go of all that I think is true
Surrounded by thoughts and rhymes, style,
Taken into the free ocean of dreams and fantasies
I float atop the words I dread

I do not fear the words
I adore the waves that wash me away

Now I stand on land
With her I finally am complete
She is my poem, she is fear

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Everyone calls Ali “Kubba.” The affectionate nickname means “meatball.” He has a black bear’s rolling gait and a ready smile despite the depression he wards off with varying degrees of success. “From my perspective, Iraq has an uncertain future,” Kubba says. “I think I’m a part of this country. Maybe I’m not. I don’t see where I’m going. I fear for Iraq as I would a person: that it will die alone and unloved.”

He visited Baghdad, where his family still lives, over the winter break. “I saw one good thing, then ten bad things. Even simple things,” he says, “like someone eating ice cream and throwing the wrapper on the ground when they were right by a trash can, made me so angry.” He sees himself overreacting, but litter made him so angry, he broke his phone.

After the American invasion, his family moved him and his brother around Baghdad, trying to find safety. The brothers moved eleven times in one year. Kubba attended five different high schools. Just his name, Ali, can cause him trouble. His father forbade the brothers from going outside. Once, having received an envelope that contained a bullet, the family secretly and immediately moved. A friend of his was killed in an explosion near his school. His father moved the boys again. The new school was safer, but the road to it far more dangerous. Each week, on the way to school, the boys saw dead bodies, two

or three women's bodies at least. He and his brother couldn't sleep. The road to school always held a dead body. His father feared his liberalism would harm his children under Saddam Hussein's regime. He kept his books hidden. "Even now," Kubba says, "when I ask about those books, he says he gave them away." Only when he came to college at AUIS did he decide to "climb literature mountain." It is a difficult ascent for him: "I go for a while and then I fall down."

He discovered poetry when he followed a classmate to the library and watched him check out Taha Muhammad Ali's *So What*. He

stumbled across a TED talk about being "a word man." He liked joining the university's Jane Austen Club, him and "all the ladies." He doesn't know whether he is really a word man or not, but he loves the future of poetry as he imagines it: "unchanging, yet changing." He feels like he's known poetry for a long time, yet he has no idea "who it is. Or who is she? Poetry is a she. I think so." His friends think his enrolling in the poetry workshop was stupid. "You're a business major," they said. "You're behind in your classes. Why take this class?" He can't tell whether his countrymen are learning to read more books or learning to burn them faster. He shrugs again. "I don't force others to do things, but I give them gifts. I do things for them. If I read and write poetry, especially as a business major, I set an example that these things are important. If I truly feared words, I'd wish to be dead so I wouldn't hear people speak. I am thankful. I am. This is breathing in. Somewhere else, in the future, I will breathe out."



Photograph by Erin Trieb