

YOU MY BLOOD

I.

I picture your faces, the way you all sit cross-legged on the rug, splitting melons into the night. I want to capture the air between our eyes, the way it feels settling. Exactly like baby powder.

Something like the way you my blood taught me to crack sunflower, pumpkin, and cantaloupe seeds. We placed each one carefully between our lips. Yours cracked clean down the middle; mine disintegrated into pieces that got lodged between my teeth. It made you all laugh: my *American mouth*. But it made me think of digging, and gold, and excavations—the way I sought the seed with my tongue, separating the salty shell from the meat of each small seed.

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At first, I could not sleep in the middle of the day. I was still wide-awake when you rose from your afternoon naps. It was thrilling to be in Tehran; having left before I knew it was important to commit certain details to memory. How in the gloaming, the last lines of sleep disappeared from your eyes as you drank the *chaiee* from the saucers, the *narbakee*. I left before I'd learned to hold a *narbakee* just with my thumb and middle finger, so that as the tea cooled, I could inhale its steam. I now fumble with the saucer, the hot tea; I am different from you in every way that matters: a child who greedily eats one sugar cube after another. I relish the gritty ache. It's as if I have never tasted anything sweet. *My God*, you exclaim, pinching my chubby cheeks, *how very fat you've grown*.

There are weddings, parties, picnics, and trips to the Caspian. White fish fried on burners set up in rented seaside villas, a large pot of lima bean and dill rice steaming. Americans would call this cuisine *earthy*, and only now do I understand what that means. I think you loved us most then—when we returned that first time, after eight years away. My mother had aged, gained weight. She blamed it on America. She worked sixty-hour weeks. There was no time to sleep in the middle of the day, no time to separate hundreds of tiny bones from the flesh of white fish.

In a corner of the villa, my grandmother pulled my mother aside. "Save your money. What are you thinking buying all these gifts? They will only want more. Goldfish eat until they explode." But my mother was bringing

back pieces of America in running shoes and Wrangler jeans and pantyhose and fountain pens. Eight suitcases full of America for you who could not get out. My mother did not listen to hers. She didn't know that in two years, she would return unexpectedly for her mother's funeral. That's the last thing she remembers about my grandmother. I remember how when my grandmother got out of the shower one day, she closed the door behind her, squishing the baby chick I'd bought off the street for ten cents. He was dyed green. I'd named him Junior. Junior's stomach came up out of his mouth; blood pooled into his eyes.

II.

Walking out of Mehr Abahd airport and into the arms of you my blood, I feel woken. I fall asleep with the rising sun.

Two days later, I've forgotten the airport and can only think about how the sun blackens my right arm hanging out the front passenger window of my cousin's Kia, as we joyride around Tehran. The smog in the air comes off black on the white tissues I use to wipe my face. I think of that, too—the sun, the smog, and the white tissues blackened by my face in Iran. But mostly, I think of you sitting cross-legged on the rug, splitting melons and cracking sunflower seeds into the night.

Once, the sun had a place on this flag, and a lion baring a sword, too. But that flag was taken down in place of another, the year of my birth. I think the new flag looks like a bunch of parentheses, one set enclosing another. Then you say: "*Bismillah-eh Rahman-e Rahim*...in the name of God.... The word on the flag is the word for Allah. And He is not for joking."

Many things, I learn, are not for joking. Now that I am older, I cannot wear shorts on the streets. My girl cousins turn in embarrassment when they see my legs, newly muscled and hairy. They cover their own heads with headscarves. Suddenly, I am made aware of the authorities: the Komite, the Pasdaran, the Basiji, all lurking outside your homes, waiting to kidnap me. You try to scare me with the assumption that fear will keep me safe. But you do not understand that this time, I've returned with an appetite. Nothing scares me. I am American. I have rights. I am hungry for a newly reclaimed past, the political conspiracies of Iran. I know about Mossadeq, about 1953. No, I don't see a contradiction in claiming two countries, two histories. I am American. I am hungry. This makes me dangerous. A liability to you my blood.

When I sit to write the words, I think of the mosques in Qom and Mashad, the caves of Hamadan, the bridges of Esfehan, the monuments of Shiraz. There is a landscape, a distinct architecture to your words, your poetry, and I confess this to you my blood. It makes you laugh, this newfound zeal for Iranian history. What's your problem, man? What about PlayStation, Hollywood, MTV? I keep a journal made of recycled bamboo. Sadly, I have begun to write my own poetry.

Meanwhile, there are weddings, dowries to amass, children to send to school. The economy is bad, joblessness at an all-time high. My mother understands. She continues to pay; my dead grandmother's advice has still not sunk in. There is always more work in America, more hours in a week, more lines of credit. She has continued to gain weight and still blames it on the United States. But Allah is great, she says, and you echo it. I am silent. Before I leave, I give my laptop computer to my cousin with the Kia, my CD player to another cousin, and my CDs to yet another. I cannot wear Wranglers in such heat.

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III.

With each return, I learn that your love is not without condition; this is not a terrible thing to know. Perhaps this is the way of the world. Perhaps this is the price we pay for living in America. Perhaps it is politics, the economy, and not your hearts that have grown hard to us.

This time my mother and I return with four suitcases. We scramble at check-in to lighten our load so as not to pay extra. There are different rules, longer lines. We are forced to take off our shoes and explain our trip during additional "random" screening. As I watch Americans remove their shoes, I think of Muslims taking off theirs before entering a mosque. I can't think of the word to explain this causality, but I am certain there's cosmic humor in it.

In America, prices have risen. Debt collectors fill up our answering machines. Now when I sit to write the words, I see the disappointment in your eyes. How instead of carrying your gifts away, treasuring them as you once did, you leave them there, in the middle of the living room, as if they belonged to someone else who will come and claim them. To me, at night, in a corner of the living room, my mother evokes her own mother.

Of course, we do not say these things aloud. There are still manners, hospitality. Instead we take to the parks, where families picnic, children laugh

like mules. We spread a rug beneath us, cracking sunflower seeds into the night. Past two, maybe three, if the moon is brilliant. The summer seems to stretch on and on, heavy now, unkind, and inhospitable, dry. Still I cannot tolerate it.

My Kia cousin pulls me aside. You're older, he tells me, and should know about the things men never say to women. When I'm silent, he clarifies: what a man does outside the house is his own business. I agree. He digs into his pocket and pulls out two pills—both blue and imprinted with an "S." For Superman, he says, smiling.

He takes me to underground parties in high-rises uptown with views of the rounded Elbourz. Officials have been paid off, but still there are lookouts on the lower levels. Anything you want, my cousin says from behind me, indicating the two pretty, bleached-blond girls dancing in the middle of the room. He hands me a Jack Daniels and another pill. In a different corner of the apartment, a gelled and spiked man asks if I am having fun. I tell him yes. Surprised? he asks. I nod. *Here not so different than America, yes?* Then, as an afterthought, he pulls out his cell phone and shows me a video of five guys taking turns fucking a girl in the ass. *No blood this way, you understand?*

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IV.

Away from you my blood, in a small room in Indiana, I forget the Farsi word for spoon and all the terms of endearment, until I see your faces again and remember to say "*aziz-eh-man,*" or "*jahneh-man,*" my dearest, my life. I remember the taste of *lavash*, and feta stuffed with walnuts, and *sabzee ghor-dan*: parsley, cilantro, chives, scallions, and red radishes, washed down with cold, crisp watermelon. I become aware of my tongue rolling around inside my mouth, as if it's searching, excavating.

My mother tells me that my Kia cousin has disappeared. Left his wife and two children one day and didn't come back. My family suspects glass. I remember his advice from several years back and keep quiet about the ecstasy, the parties.

I watch the blurred, pixilated videos of protests from across the world. Hundreds of thousands are marching in the streets, green bandanas wrapped around their heads and arms and waists like belts. Outstretched hands flashing the peace sign, arms linked in arms, the sway of bodies in the street like something has ruptured, the bloodied faces, the broken cars, rocks, batons,

and chains. Young people, my mother says, as if that's all she can manage. Young people.

I remember once driving across Tehran in the middle of the night with my Kia cousin. He said, "As long as you're living there, they will not bomb us." What a thought! As if these words could move anyone's heart but mine.

I am angry at having to write this. To feel the weight of all you my blood, every day as I bring food to my mouth.

I know you hunger for a spoon and needle, a very small flame.