

FADY JOUDAH

*Night Travel*

I.

A World War II veteran, on emergency room stretcher, told me  
He was deep in the ravine the night of Roosevelt's stroke:

He heard it on his hand-held radio, the night was damp,  
And in grief he dropped his grenade

Shrapnel up Freddie's rectum.  
*That was pain, doc, this is nothing:*

Gallstone suffering, bitter bile, foul wind.  
He was stationed in the Pacific,

*Kamikaze angels everywhere.*  
Each time he wrote a letter home,

He heard the sound Louisiana live oaks  
Make before rain.

II.

...but before this happened, night travel happened:  
*Alboraq*, the prophet's steed, carried him overnight  
What would take one month on camelback, from Mecca  
To Jerusalem. *Alboraq* is wingless, with camel hooves, torso  
Neither donkey's nor mule's, ruby tail, emerald forehead,  
Face of man, mane of pearl and steps wide as an eye's reach.

III.

Another WWII vet said  
His name was Jesus' brother, his job title,  
President of the Bank, in a hurry

To catch the late New York train,  
To buy the world some tractors  
And plough the good earth.

Bundles of green dollars  
Sticking out his pockets,  
I asked him to spell *World* backwards,

And he became furious. He demanded  
That in return  
I spell the word *yum*:

*Yeah, yum!* He screamed.  
*Wrong!* He said.  
*It's y-a because the m is silent!*

IV.

In Jerusalem, under the rock, then without a dome, the prophet  
Led all preceding messengers in prayer, and they let him,  
Because he was last among them and they were kind. Then  
Gabriel winged him to the heavens, or rather a stairway  
To heaven opened up and Gabriel became the prophet's footstep:  
In the 1st heaven, the prophet saw an angel, half fire and half ice  
Neither ice quenching fire, nor fire melting ice. In the 2nd  
He met Joseph and the women who sliced their hands instead  
Of onions when Joseph walked in. And in the 3rd, Elijah and Idris.  
And in the 4th, Aaron. And in the 5th, Moses. And Moses advised:  
*Whatever He decrees, ask for less!*

V.

One o'clock in the morning  
A police car pulled me over  
Into a parking lot  
Where a veteran in drunken stupor,

101st Airborne hat on his head,  
Slept in a wheelchair.  
The spangled swirling lights drew out  
My O-it's-him-again compassion.  
And after the flashlight  
And the accusation, which was true,  
The officer let me go

Ticketless, and left the veteran in peace,  
For an ambulance on the way,  
Where from the stretcher  
The veteran knows to shout:  
*Ask not who your country fights.*  
*Ask who you fight for your country.*

VI.

After the prophet's meeting with god, on his way down,  
Moses stopped him and quietly listened to the decree, then urged  
The prophet to go back up and ask for a discount  
On the number of prayers in a day. The prophet did, but god drove  
The number down by 10%. So Moses insisted that the prophet go  
Back up again, and up and down and up and down the prophet  
Went, god dropping 5 prayers each single visit, eight trips total,  
Until the prophet couldn't stomach it anymore: the pungent tree  
That bore every kind of fruit announcing god was near.  
Then it was said: *Let there be five!* And Moses still advised:  
*Ask for less, ask for less! We humans are not made for such things!*

VII.

Seven in the morning. I drive back home  
To an ambulance at my neighbor's door,  
The Pine Sol scent and her dead  
Body pulled out in an ambulance. I used  
To hear her tap away with rage

On an old black typewriter in the afternoons,  
Out in her metal-gated front patio whose jasmine  
Faithfully gave off the odor of barbwire flowers  
In summer—how the neighborhood kids harassed her  
While she pushed her cart back from the freedom  
Of the cereal aisle, her headphones on, until she screamed  
And they ran away laughing. She had 3 cats  
She called by name when it came  
Time to feed them. One she named after the city:  
*It's been three nights since we last heard her call.*