

# GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE

POEMS



# SAFIA ELHILLO

Girls  
That  
Never  
Die

*Poems*

Safia Elhillo



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“I’m hanging out / partying with girls / that never die.”

—Ol’ Dirty Bastard

“ *the one with violets in her lap*  
*] mostly*  
*] goes astray”*

—Sappho, translated by Anne Carson

## FINAL WEEKS, 1990

Hours before, the night outside is black as my grandmother's hair, its newborn moon in Sagittarius, & in the Maryland house my mother is twenty-three behind a winning hand of cards as the water darkens the length of her skirt. December now & friends still call her العروس, the bride, eleven months married & the shock of it not yet settled behind her eyes.

∴

Morning & the baby has not come. Milky winter sun in Sagittarius. I should mention there was a husband, twenty-seven

—

I can hardly imagine it, a boy that age, my father.

I cannot picture him in the room, though his work for years to come will absorb him into countries that smell of blood. Maybe he is in the room now, not yet a specter. I sketch him in but do not know where to put him—maybe in the corner, back rigid against the white wall. I cannot imagine them ever touching. I smudge him out, correct the still-wet scene. He is outside, long-limbed in a hard plastic chair. My mother called him *Jack* & this is my only proof they were in love.

∴

My mother is almost my mother now,  
darker color of the noontime sun.

• •

In the waiting room I should also place my grandparents,  
elegant in that old overformal way of immigrants,  
my grandfather's shirt never without a collar, lush neatness  
of the afro against his head. My grandmother could  
pass for a film star, hair black & feathered down her back,  
any suggestion of curl or coil since burnt away & set  
every morning in hot rollers. Her eyebrows tattooed as they  
have been all my life, blue-black parentheses.

Both of them older than the independent state of the Sudan,  
my grandmother thirteen years its senior,  
my grandfather a January child of unknown birthday  
though the colonial offices record it as twenty-six  
years before his country is born. They are placid companions,  
their courtship cooled amicably into a sort of siblinghood,  
& I have never seen them touch so I cannot imagine it now.  
He paces the cool length of the hallway.

• •

One hour & thirty-nine minutes past noon, that final diluvian  
push & I am outside, full head of wet hair, pomegranate  
creature cawing that little animal sound. Pronounced a girl  
& named for a dead great-aunt, the birth certificate dated

& signed in ink. Back home I would have been known by my first two names, mine & my father's: Safia Yagoub.

The surname rarely used, but in the new country the paper demands a patronym. Anglicized, the *ال* becomes a looser *el*.

*Hilu*, meaning sweet, strange unserious allonym of that first great-grandfather. & crowded together on a single line, marked FIRST NAME, our names, mine & his. Safia Yagoub.

Little echo of that forgotten epithet, that once-loved man, of *Jack*. & though I am not named for my mother, we match: Safaa, noun form of my adjective. Our shared first syllable.

Closest I have ever seen them, him & her, almost touching.

# ORPHEUS

Mold blooms on the yogurt, furring the edges  
in ancient colors. My body is something I have worn

for other people. Even five years ago  
I would not recognize myself today, married, gallon bags

of animal bone and corncobs in the freezer to boil for stock.  
I am far away from the cities of my girlhood, cool concrete

of their stairwells. The new therapist wants a list of compliments  
I'd give myself on behalf of those who love me,

and all I can come up with is *resourceful*. For a time I believed  
myself in love with Orpheus, which only meant I loved

what I could make if I were free from what happened to my body.  
That man who would never touch me, kept distant and without danger

by the barriers of fiction. Then I believed the work would save me.  
I have no real use now for those Greek myths, their dead girls,

women raped by men and animals. Today the door is locked. Today

nobody is outside. Muscle cramping mid-lap in the dark blue water.

Now I embroider flowers in dim colors in my new country of flowers,  
clumsy stitches through the stencil of an orchid, remembering

my younger mouth pressed to a flute, unable to release the breath.  
I'd liked that he was a musician, fingers long as spring onions.

As a child I ruined my sweaters, the sleeves tugged down to cover  
my hand before touching any doorknob or handling coins.

Teenaged, loitering, urgently lonely. The cotton t-shirts curled  
at their sliced hems. Now I am thick-fingered and practical

as my mother and her mother, smell of bleach against ceramic.  
Gone is L's humid little apartment, violent stain on the bathroom tile,

a bottle of crimson nail-polish shattered long ago and leaving  
streaks like blood. Her dirty living room where I slept

for nights on end, though my own apartment was nearby, cleaner—

I can't imagine them, the poems that softened the hearts of gods,  
the poems that changed anything.

That night, metal of the fire escape against my bare legs, I accepted  
my first cigarette and she allowed me to tell the entire story

without using the real words. The night cooling and gathered close.  
The way nothing ever feels truly clean

in summer. And all I know about Eurydice  
is that she died. My every other fact about her is about him.

# PROFANITY

1

i know ninety-nine names  
for my god & none for my [     ]

a failing not of my deity but of  
my arabic    not the language

itself rather the overeager mosaic  
i hoard    i steal    i borrow

from pop songs        & mine  
from childhood fluency    i guard

my few swearwords like tinkling  
silver anklets    spare & precious

& never nearly enough to muster  
a proper arabic anger    proper arabic

vulgarity    only a passing spar  
always using the names of animals

i am not polite      i am only inarticulate  
overproud      of my little arsenal

a stranger blows a wet tobacco kiss  
through the window      of my taxi

& i deploy      my meager weapons  
[dog]      [pig]      [donkey]

& finally      my crown jewel  
i pass my tongue across my teeth

crane my neck about the window  
& call      [your mother's                  ]

2

now i know the worst profanity  
what men use when they need to curse one other  
to cut

word i only know as a swear  
*your mother's      your sister's      mine*

in arabic the word hisses  
traps the tongue between the teeth

spits

word so similar to an english kiss  
turned to venom by inflection  
to rot in the mouth

site of shame  
birthplace of the profane

but what word can i use to call my own

how     without disgrace  
can i name my innocent parts  
my wounds

i am saying if asked in arabic  
i could not tell you where i open

# HOW TO SAY

in the divorce i separate to two piles                    books: english    love songs:  
arabic

my angers    my schooling    my long repeating name                    english    english  
arabic

i am someone's daughter but i am american born                    it shows in my short  
memory

my ahistoric glamour    my clumsy tongue when i forget the word for [ ] in  
arabic

i sleep            unbroken dark hours on airplanes home                    & dream i've  
missed my

connecting flight            i dream a new & fluent mouth full of gauzy swathes of  
arabic

i dream my alternate selves                    each with a face borrowed from  
photographs of

the girl who became my grandmother    brows & body rounded & cursive  
like arabic

but wake to the usual borderlands    i crowd shining slivers of english to my  
mouth

*iris crocus inlet heron*    how dare i love a word without knowing it  
in arabic

& what even is translation    is immigration    without irony    safia  
means *pure*    all my life it's been true    even in my clouded arabic

# YASMEEN

i was born      i was planted  
at the rupture the root where      land became ocean became land anew  
i split from my parallel self i split from      its shape refusing root in my fallow mouth  
the girl i also could have been      cleaving my life neatly  
& her name / easy / i know the story      & my name / taken from a dead woman  
all her life / my mother wanted      to remember / to fill an aperture with  
a girl named for a flower      cut jasmine in a bowl  
whose oil scents all      our longing  
our mothers /      our mothers'  
petals wrung      wilting  
for their perfume      garlands hanging from our necks

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# TAXONOMY

i go to meet the poem & it will not meet me

so long as i believe i am owed

i call it by the name i learned first      شعر

which always sounds to me like      شعر

without their vowels they are the same,

the poem & my brother's hair

these days the longest i've seen it since we were children

it curls around his ears & for that sweetness i have no name

though i must still write it down because otherwise i will forget

as i have forgotten so many others

words i mean & also the suffix built in to mark my labors

specter, daughter, agent noun attached to the verb of my origins

a sheet dotted with blood, a thumbprint against the dotted line

& even if i am not tender i must tend

& though i am only part water i wait

& like any number i numb my vulgar parts

the word as i learned it first just means *girl*

my mother's girl, grandmother's grandgirl

garland of egyptian jasmine

we call my grandmother's grandmother *nena*

which might not be her real name but i never thought to ask

& before hers the names for me go silent

& i do not know what to call those women

my great grand others, my agents, my tender nouns

the name i am owed will not meet me

though i fast until the corners of the room crowd with specters

though my body swells with the volumes of this blood,

though i spilled it

though i read that family honor is in the body of the girl, i spilled it

i overflowed & was called a flower

i grew up mapless & was pointed to a maple tree

i shrank my own body until the blood stopped coming

until i dropped my every suffix & woke up to the sheets still white

# INFIBULATION STUDY

I will begin by writing a sentence about cutting. I will begin by writing a sentence about silence. I will continue by writing a sentence about cutting. I will proceed to ask the question about cutting. I will proceed from this point without euphemism. The question is about the clitoris. I call my cousins in turn. I ask the question about the clitoris. I will begin by writing a sentence about the clitoris. I will begin with the assumption that we each continue to have a clitoris. False. We do not talk about this. I will begin with speculation about our mothers, that each continues to have a clitoris. False. We are never to ask. In the silence, my youngest cousin asks if our grandmothers were cut. We were meant to proceed without euphemism. The Arabic, however, does not allow it. The Arabic, cut by euphemism. We do not use the word *cut*. The word we use, left intact, is *purified*. I will ask. I will begin. I was born & allowed to mature uncut. I was born with a clitoris & remain uncut. I was born unnamed & upon arrival was given my orders. I was born & named for a woman who died. The Arabic here allows for nuance. My name, ours, is not the same as the word we use to mean *cut*. That word, conjugated, is the name of one of my grandmothers. I will not ask her the question. I am told she does not remember.

# POMEGRANATE

Because I am their daughter my body is not mine.  
I was raised like fruit, unpeeled & then peeled. Raised  
to bleed in some man's bed. I was given my name  
& with it my instructions. Pure. *Pure*.

& is it wasted on me? Every moment I do not touch  
myself, every moment I leave my body on its back  
to be a wife while I go somewhere above the room.

I return to the soil & search. I know it's there. Buried  
shallow, wrapped in rags dark with old & forgotten rust,  
their discarded part. Buried without ceremony,  
buried like fallen seeds.

I wonder about the trees: Date palms veined  
through the fruit with the copper taste of cutting.  
Guavas that, when slit, purple dark as raw meat.

I have to wonder, of course, about the blood orange,  
about the pomegranate, splayed open, like something  
that once was alive & remains.

# POMEGRANATE WITH PARTIAL NUDE

i know my history

the ocean froths over my thighs  
so cold i taste metal

three coasts away from the airport road  
seven countries from my garden city  
& then of course the water  
of course its copper taste

pomegranate in my throat  
color of all my sisters  
color of all the girls i know

their names peeled & sucked  
their names spit like seeds from car windows  
their names clinging to every lower lip  
to every rupture

sun sets on the pomegranate city  
& where are my sisters  
where have they gone?

## INFIBULATION STUDY

what is to border but to cut	say it	say it as you mean
thin membrane dividing	the world &	the world of men
a body i can claim &	a body to be forgiven	its breach
a body to be sliced like festival lamb	a body named for what it	daughters
both of them my blood to clot	both of them my gnarled	protest
to my many mothers i only ask	the thin membrane of their	girlhoods
when we became the officers of men	students of purity for	men
whisperers of spells & prayer & ruined name	wielders of scalpel &	sharpened rock
to cut away what frightens men	i only ask about the	knotting sugar
to uproot the fine down of hair	making slow velvet of	our bodies
answer me	what is it to	border
which knives are for the animals	which ones are for	the girls
who drew the first blood	answer me	
who hurt you	who hurt you	
who drew the matching wound	who made the first	incision

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# ISHA, NEW YORK CITY

i should want to survive

to outlive

my particular beauties

i should want to survive

long enough to forget

ever wanting to be touched

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# MEMOIR

In winter I'd pierced my nose & prepared to move to that city to be an artist, & late in the summer I did. Hours of highway then the sudden clog of one-way streets, sweet stink of garbage overflowing in its bins. In the new city I was not marked. I named myself & was believed. I wore blue eyeliner & allowed musicians to court me, parade of freeform dreadlocks & perfect tattered white tees. I met him the day I returned from Cairo, seven in the morning at a diner because my body thought it afternoon, because he never slept.

I lived on the twentieth floor & the wind sounded like crowds of women screaming. For years I loved him & could not keep the secret. I rode the train at any hour in any direction. I broke dawn in stranger's apartments, someone always singing, someone always unearthing a hidden guitar. We slept on each other's floors & never asked. Dollar pizza darkening a paper plate, our bodies crowding the F train, crowding the Lower East Side.

The thrill of a party where no one went home, hours in the park colored by the changing light. The long walk from uptown to the village. We were like children left to govern ourselves, cheap metal blooming green against our skin in the heat, cups of mostly milk & sugar, singed taste of the coffee underneath. I harbored every day the fear that he would die. I

held my breath when I passed cemeteries, ladders, any naked, flickering bulb. I pierced six more holes into my ears, tended each summer to a new infection. I wore Doc Martens until my feet bled & never broke them in.

I thought I'd stay forever. I thought we'd all live. More than I wanted to make anything, I wanted to stay alive. More than the thick stink of the summer, our knotted and painted bodies filling the train car with noise. Left alone I'd collapse for days into bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, feeling the ache of my fingernails growing long, my chemicals going sour. I only wanted sleep. I did not want to die. So I left. It was six years to the day, an apartment I'd loved. I escaped, I think, with my life. Because I loved him I look up, every few years, his name to check for an obituary. I tend to my infections, salt water & clean cotton.

There is so much I have forgotten, so much I did not think to record. My shorter hair. Those first moments after waking, my eyes still shut, trying to remember where I'd slept. I look through photographs, our younger faces filling the frame, our bodies always touching. I did not think of it as a time to survive. I thought we'd all still know each other, & that we'd all still be alive, meeting years later to retell the story, exaggerating every detail, the cartilage fully healed. I set the table as if someone else is coming. But I got to the other side. I left everyone behind.

Don't ever go into a room alone with anyone. Even if they're family. Our mothers' first warning & the start & finish of our sexual education: Desire as violence, desire as cause for harm. Turning away from kissing scenes on television & thinking, *you're hurting her*. Older now & still afraid, we kept quiet for years & when the quiet was breached it emerged that we all had been. Lacuna where the word should be, not even a euphemism in its place. All the verbs I know name the doing as undoing. & I work every day to forget the word *virginity*, but without it I don't know how to tell the story. Alone in a room waiting to be touched & hoping it will not hurt. Alone in a room waiting to be hurt & hoping I do not die. Clamping tight around the bruise & tending it. Dirigible animal inside me fleeing, only the allium taste of sweat. Wet to the elbow in sour dishwater beside our faraway mothers, cruel kings of our girlhoods, from whom we thought we wanted freedom, from whom we needed care. Our mothers who were girls before us, afraid before us, raising children into the fear. When I was hurt I cried like a child for my mother, for what she must already have known. & who she could not tell. For what I will not tell her.



# ON EID WE SLAUGHTER LAMBS & I KNOW INTIMATELY THE COLOR

i ride an uber spilling the last of the day's ginger light  
driver handsome enough to pull listening sounds as he chats

our talk is casual at its center  
but at the edges i taste an old brittleness  
memory of something burnt

he circles his mouth to an electronic cigarette  
& its vapor braids into the earth & vinegar smell of sweat

*you are muslim* he tells me  
not a question & i nod  
smile at his smoke-dark eyes in the mirror

i count the prayer beads  
strung in a necklace from his rearview  
ninety-nine & perfect  
glossy & unworn

mine are sandalwood  
& leave their perfume

when cabling through my fingers

*drink? smoke?*

he demands an inventory of my wickedness  
in the way men of my faith think me immediately theirs  
daughter & sister & wife  
always a test & never asking my name

in the rippling mirror  
my head uncovered  
extra button undone from my shirt  
i know this exchange & its right answers  
a blink & head shaken no

he squints his endless eyes  
at a red light he turns  
counts what he sees in my face

& the light drips in to share our ride  
new vermillion along our bodies

i blink again & measure his disbelief  
i am tired in the new dark  
& ready to confirm whatever he decides i am

for a moment of quiet  
moment to rest

my loosened hair smells of coal  
floats over the backseat like smoke

# A RUMOR

say i was a girl with more triggers than eyelashes  
say every hand on my body that heard no & remained

was a husband to be rid of through a process of paperwork  
say like a good muslim girl      say they all were a kind of husband

say the imagination of wedlock was a cure  
for the dark & copper taste

say he was a good man he would never      say his listening  
gaped like a fasting mouth      say i must not have said no

or say he would have heard it      say if i didn't keep so quiet  
they would know what i meant

say it could be heavy & shining like the quivering sadness of fish  
say i could not tell my mother      say the doors of my girlhood

were locked tight to keep the hands out      but say they trickled in  
through the gaps say i was raised to be untouched

& say i was touched      say everywhere the world enters me

leaves behind a wound    say because i love shame

i am ashamed to have been hurt    say the aching makes a low hum  
at the base of my remaining life

say my disgrace becomes my obsession    say i roam for days  
at its borders    touch it to my tongue

# MODERN SUDANESE POETRY

my husband works his fingers  
into the knot muscled against my spine & my dead  
stay dead my hair a knotted cursive language  
my ligature my grief barely literate my amulets  
knotted around my neck & wrists my language  
my language cursive & silent glottal & knotted  
& scarring the cheeks of my dead adorning the hair  
of my dead tallow in their braided hair  
i read the books in translation where is the poem  
& circle every word i know acacia lupin  
sandalwood & ash they ululate my dead  
they squat like brides over clay pots of smoke  
a yolk suspended in each open eye & some  
in truth are not dead my dead & i am who  
is lost who is not counted among the living  
the poem is not owed me i was wed in all the colors  
of my dead the reddening the borrowed gold  
i wrote the poem in translation i wrote the poem  
in the loophole i wrote the poem in cursive  
i snarled it i picked apart the threads & wove a shroud  
i was wed in it i unfastened i broke my fast with apricots  
furred like the ears of my dead i looked laterally

for ancestors    i descended left & right    i read the book  
in arabic    knew each letter & its sound    & did not  
recognize the words for tallow    for ululate    my dead  
my languages    my ligatures    smoke in my loosened hair

# GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE

a girl embroidered

a girl teeth bared locked inside a photograph

a girl dances to the same coiled song can never leave

keeps her looks outlives the other guests

filled up with all her teeth never returns from the party

is never heard from again is everywhere

Forgotten But Not Gone

cries into your drink & returns it to you

makes you say her name salt in the well kills the whole village

# BAD GIRL

[a bad girl]                      they will spit at my sentencing  
but i was not bad at being a girl      i thrilled at it  
i excelled at smallness                      at smoothness  
at epilation by sugar & the folding away of smells  
dousing oil into my underarms                      my underwear  
my cottons bone dry                      my every virginity  
sweet & rotting                      jasmine piled into my lap  
i wore every white dress      i was primed to show blood

# SELF-PORTRAIT WITHOUT STITCHES

i was hurt i wasn't i saw it  
on the internet licked yogurt  
from a spoon while the girls  
described their blood hot seizing  
the cotton of a sheet i am speaking  
from the cut place from my other  
mouths do not believe me for i  
was never cut or i was hurt but  
never sewn or i wasn't i want  
-ed it i didn't i screamed i didn't  
i bit down i bled i didn't i click  
through pictures of the girls moonfaced  
thick-cheeked still fastened to the  
roundness of childhood consider  
the softness of my jaw my face without  
angles without edges i covered  
i covered i didn't i cried i came to  
i click & learn their names incant them  
i learn the names of the stones the theory  
it wasn't me i think of all the ways  
we match it could have been it  
couldn't consider the cut place thick

liquid of citizenship spilling from  
my many mouths uncut my many  
uncut mouths



# THE ANIMAL

i was a child greedy in my skin hungers      my stomach  
churned by festival meat      the lamb in the courtyard

with its necklace of rope      gone & in place of a memory  
pools of its blood in the dust      where i played barefoot

with the cousins      wearing the small boys' alallah  
for which i cried      until mama habab sent for the tailor

crisp pinstriped jalabiya & its smart striped trouser  
i took great care to keep it pristine      & cried on days

it was taken from me to wash      twisting on the line  
like my truer body      now i am the farthest

i've ever been & the fabric tears      canopy of fig trees  
arranged in place of mothers      i face homeward & feel

once again that i am longing      for my uniform to return  
from the water      that i am waiting for the animal i took

care to name      to wake & nuzzle its wet face into my hand

i wake on festival days            & reach for something to wear

& find only that bright chiffon    that irritating clanking of bangles

i wake on festival days to the smells of charring animal

& no one to accompany me to the prayer    no one to look

upon my naked feet    no one to touch me at all

# PASTORAL

if we ever again meet i have a story about persimmons  
to make you laugh, how i mistook them for tomatoes.  
i have a story about bay leaves, plucked from the side  
of the road, one forgotten & crisped perfectly, dried  
at the bottom of my purse. i want to show the way  
california inflects my speaking, california in its frankness,  
long seasonless line, clear clauses, the bay & the lake  
like parentheses. days like an orange peeled  
in that unbroken spiral.

i place inside me figs & nectarines, gnarled tomatoes  
of the season, limes split & salted to eat like we did  
in childhood, collected as cousins, faces always sticky  
with fruit. our parents in forgotten shapes among  
their siblings, wearing their first faces, bickering  
at the table. the way i tell the story i am outside looking in,  
but in the photographs we are indistinguishable,  
us children, enormous eyes & unbrushed hair,  
a drooping sock, dressed in each other's clothes.

in the memory we are a single organism, our hundred  
legs & arms shining with vaseline, our feet the color

of dust, in motion. when we meet again it will be  
as strangers, & i will offer my story about persimmons  
to show my absent mind, my great forgetting, & i imagine  
you are polite as we have all grown up to be, laughing  
into the air between us.

# THE CAIRO APARTMENTS

The cousins as barefoot children floating out of polished rooms. Together we clattered between floors in each other's jalabiyas, spectacular games of hide & seek, three floors & a roof to search. I can't remember if we made the songs up ourselves, *where is the bride's house? Ali Alloy prayed his prayers boarded the boat worked his labors*. The specter of our adults in the mornings & nights, their strained & hushed voices. Our grandmothers were beautiful & suited to exile. Enormous coifs of blackened hair. Silk scarves only for driving. The eyeliner tattooed, eternal livid stain on the rim of each eyelid, bare faces forgotten in childhood. Our mothers were less glamorous & always tired, always at work, wore bluejeans, cool hands that carried us to our beds at night. I loved exile & the close quarters it afforded us. I loved it enough to stay gone when all the others went home, moved on, unlatched their shuttered houses, beat the carpets & kissed their neighbors & cried. The apartments were emptied. I return to Cairo years later & look for our child-ghosts kicking a ball in the corridors between unfinished buildings. The time Almustafa tripped & opened the skin of his palm on a fallen brick, how I wouldn't look up from my book to see what he was trying to show me, how he wrapped the bloodied hand in a dish towel & pressed down until our mother came home. I cannot find us. I more closely resemble now the young parents that corralled us, creased & shot through with sadness. There will be no children of my own to carry to their waiting beds. & the city that belonged to me has gone, was never mine, I dreamt it, I wrote it down, invented it,

made all of it up, everything but the smell of corn roasting sweetly on the street below. The carved wooden shutters. Motes of dust arcing through the light. A workbook splayed before me, strained cursive in the feminine conjugation. Why I didn't look up. He didn't say he was bleeding. The shopkeeper remarks that I look very clean for a Sudanese. Ya samar ya samara. Ya asmar ya asmarani. Upper Nile. Silt color. Who taught you to speak Arabic like that? I don't know where the cousins have gone. I don't know what countries we've settled for. I imagine everyone back home, that they might have been playing for hours without me. My brother still with the faint stripe of a scar down his palm, remembers the stitches were done without anesthesia. The doctor telling jokes to distract him.

# ZAMALEK

Late August, what I've always understood  
to be deep summer, crisp again in the aftermath

of the heatwave, the fires still burning distant  
redwoods, though I am once again wearing

socks & a sweatshirt to sleep. I pull a blanket across my knees  
& try to remember the particular scents of all my loved ones:

my grandmother in Chanel No.5 & hair warmed through  
to release its curl. Instead I remember the smell of my own hair

burning for years of school photographs, dark sheet of it arranged  
around my shoulders. I remember the puffed sleeves & white collar

of the uniforms at the British school where I spent most  
days silent, in awe of the Egyptian girls & their glamor,

with my own hair braided into a single thick sausage,  
its outward curve against my sweating neck. I am nearly

certain we will never again meet. Those were days

of chicken hearts by the club pool, with the classmate

whose mother was a known actress, their hair reddening  
in the sun. I think often these days of Egypt,

dusk blotting the day's heat, sweat cooling & raising the hair  
on my arms. & of those girls, the children of the rich,

whom I spent my earliest days orbiting, before returning home  
to describe to my grandmother the particulars

of their carpets & plates. I was forbidden from returning  
to Noura's house after she was given first a dish to eat,

chicken scallop & french fries thick as my uncles' fingers,  
& only when she was finished was I offered her leftovers.

I wonder if she's still alive, if she too is afraid, the night around her  
swallowing its handful of degrees in Celsius, while she remembers

an earlier self & the other characters in the story, whether  
she remembers me as one of them, whether she as well is wondering

if I am one of the ambient names eaten by this virus that reminds us  
of the faces of the forgotten, too late.

I don't know why I remember her tonight, & all those girls,

the sleekness of their uniforms, something always not quite right

about my own. & the one day a year for which I'd burn  
for hours beneath a dryer, hurt pink of my scalp, to arrive

with shining curtains of hair for the photograph. In my isolation  
my braid grows to new lengths it hasn't seen since childhood.

My skin clears & I tilt my face into the steam of cardamom  
floating from the clay cup. Tomorrow I will lose them all again,

those girls, those years, my childhood of uniforms & expatriation.  
I have forgotten them already, even tonight,

my memories offering no faces, barely scent. I know only the scents  
of my new life, distant smoke gnawing at an ancient tree,

cut apples in the morning. I do not want any of what I've lost.  
I want only what I have now, to keep it.

# GENEVA

It's 1999 & I remember the school bus in silence except for the song whose lyrics list the names of women, its endless loop that year. In school I track the brief switches into English, enough to overhear about my clothes, my strangeness, testimonies from gym class that I run "*like an African.*" By silence I mean that I did not speak the language, a trait that found me in the early countries & remained. & in gym class I tug myself away from the steady rhythm of the group jog, ask my body to *go* & it does, *faster* & it understands my language. What has changed, what is different about the girl in that story? The language of the asking? The language of the body? I say *run* & she unfurls roots, *faster* & she starts to cry. In our group text, Basma says *I grieve most for our younger selves.* That cloistering, that cosmic silence, the belief that if we were told in any detail what we weren't allowed to do, we would take from the details instructions for the doing. Told only, instead, *don't. Never. Good girls don't.* Older now & tending each keloid, everything we allowed to be done to us in silence. To ask for help would be to speak & of course we never spoke. *Go.* See her, running, little bird in full possession of that body. Little animal, *faster*, untouched. Of course I tell the story because I fell. Going too fast & tripped, shot forward, projectile, a hand put out to brace my pitch. Hot spread of nerves registering the breaking bone. Iodine, gypsum, plaster of Paris. Months later, clean slice through the shell of the cast, & my freed arm, grown used to the weight, floating upward like a balloon, like a hand raised to speak.

# TONY SOPRANO'S TENDER MACHISMO

I know him: Three buttons undone  
down the baobab chest,  
quiet humility of the wisping hairline.

I watch him cup a face in his great paw to kiss a cheek,  
exact manners of my first beloved men,  
sturdy & brokenhearted as cattle, my uncles,  
watches matting the thick hair of their left arms,  
brother-aged & fathering into my empty spaces.

My father was gone & into that great room  
they poured, big-shouldered boys, hot streak  
of anger at each center. I was a child wealthy  
in shoulders to climb, swung from arm to heavy arm,  
tender booming of my name in that chorus  
of approving mouths.

Gifts shining & breakable in their hands:  
fairy-science of the music box, tiny chime  
of each earring, bracelets narrow & silver  
as their silent, injured wives.

I am their smart girl & they are proud.

I watch him, my uncle who is not mine, thirteen years  
after the show stops airing, & I love him  
like the child forgetting her abdicated father.  
He smiles like I delight him. My love justifies  
his every crime.

I pretended not to hear how they talked  
about bitches & goldiggers,  
the news stories with hurt girls naming  
their injuries, consensus that they are lying,  
that they must have been asking for it.

I am home from college & stepping into  
their amber scent of cologne & old sweat,  
their wounded animal smell, their every tender misogyny,  
for a quick kiss on the crown of my head—

Now their girlfriends are my age, now younger,  
& now the news about the famous predator floods the screen  
& when one uncle changes the channel & mutters about a setup  
I watch the flood take that room of piecemeal fathers  
where I've kept them installed for years.

Its debris includes the stories I kept quiet,  
everything that was done to me that I will not tell them.

Includes every word tossed about to name women,  
how we all thought they didn't mean me.

# SUMMER

Summer of failed hairlessness  
of clogged follicles inflamed

In the afternoons I ride the bus  
thighs newly bare & sticky against the seats

Though I am not allowed, I wear shorts  
I am left for hours alone

Light of the computer  
blue in my oil-slick face

Summer of danger  
Summer of want

My body swells in shapes  
I do not understand

I am hungry for touch  
& ashamed to be looked at

In the silence I know

something is coming

The blood comes & comes  
clasps itself to denim, to sheets

The afternoons are still with heat  
humid as a strange man's breath

& when it happened  
I watched flies coating old fruit

Metallic layer of bodies,  
their frenzied feeding

The long afternoon of my life,  
long life, long season of rot





# SYROS

Roads spiraling upward, whitewash of the houses,  
little island in late May. My friends & I descend  
in our hundred shades, three airplanes & a ferry  
to arrive, our rumpled linen clothes & earnest smells.  
Sleepier than the neighboring islands, their nightclubs,  
here we rent two tiny creaking cars & flush beneath  
every curious stare. We drive over cobblestones older  
than my surname, landscape of scrubby trees & bougainvillea.  
Stark lapis of the waters, narrow streets crowded  
with battered cats, one-eyed & carnivorous. The sea still  
clinging to the chill of late spring, too early to ease into summer.  
We swim dutifully & emerge shivering, to slippery plates  
of cuttlefish, cola in the glass bottle, sweetened with real sugar.  
Each hunted in the country we departed, we came to crowd  
a shared house, shared perfume of its plumbing, taking turns  
in the mornings frying eggs. In loose arrangement on the beach,  
we sit mostly in quiet, a book tented over each sleeping face.  
& in the town square in the evening, I let my breath go still,  
looking up into hundreds of lit windows like stars. I lean into  
sun-warmed rock, cooling in the night air, & think in another life  
I'd be a historian. & then it comes to us, in English, its inflections  
unfamiliar so I think at first it's Greek. Here, at the opposite end

of the world. *Niggers. Niggers.* & it was called to us by children.

# TERRA NULLIUS

First a blue room in a quiet house, cooling as the sun sets. Though they live with her parents this is not my mother's childhood home, the house old but new to them, bought cheaply from a Greek man bankrupted by gambling & drink. To be born in the country of my origins would be to have killed my mother. Suggestion of Cairo, short miles away & with better hospitals. She shakes her head. America. I uproot her & she crosses the water.

Nairobi, Cairo, Geneva, Dar-es-salaam. I see the world without understanding what I am seeing. District of Columbia, Brighton. First the meeting of two rivers, then a city where they join. I am old enough to choose a country for myself, but by now I do not want one.

Now my mother on the far end of a phone line, *I am thinking about going home*. Thirty years away, & it is still there on the other side. My cousins trickle back as if answering a summons. A house on a street named for my third great-grandfather. Children borne under that watchful eye.

Now a little apartment where my flowers die & I leave them there. I take the pills & every month a simulation of that blood. Nobody's country. It rains & the roof leaks, the ceiling darkens. The forest burns & I know it, that carbon smell, from somewhere else. Then the quiet of the tile, cool ceramic against my back. Then my body in the water displaces the water.

# SUDAN, TX

*Land of the Blacks*, they named my country—  
at the driving school my instructor seized the wheel  
when I continued to drift into the left lane, not yet taught to regard  
the great machine as more of my body. My first years here  
I would grow alert, as if called, thinking it was that name I heard  
being spoken, of our dark concentration of bodies, only to learn  
it is a kind of car, the sedan, blackening the air with exhaust,  
waste gases I imagine to be named for the act of depletion,  
tired lungs of the car sighing for rest.

I say *they* who named my country & don't know to whom  
I refer—British, Ottoman, Egyptian, crossing the threshold  
& declaring, *This land. Black*. Everywhere the smell of metal,  
known to me only as the copper smell of blood. I did not pass  
that test & have since forgotten what I learned, thirty years old  
& still unfit to drive, *to drive* as in *to thrust*, *to plunge*, to learn  
the responsibility of great violence. Machine in which I sit  
& become a hazard, meaning *danger* but also meaning  
*chance* or *venture* or *fate*.

Its etymologies claim Arabic, al-zahr defined as *chance* or *luck*  
though I only know it as *flower*. *The Arabic* which also names

my country, Jumhuriyat al-Sudan: Republic of the Blacks.  
In the elevator a woman draws her child closer to her side,  
handbag flattening between them, when my brother & I enter  
& smile, threatening great violence. I learn of a Sudan in Texas,  
population 958, named by its postmaster who never said why,  
& without the prefix Bilad, meaning *land of*, the name of the city  
is *Blacks*. In the photographs it could be anywhere, long flat stretch  
of road, power lines & grass. But I want what I am promised.  
Thick cough of exhaust, then the great machine arriving,  
my body sighing for rest.

# TAXONOMY

because i cannot find the words

because i know only euphemism for my tenderest part

i name that absence of a daughter

in the feminine tense

*lacuna caesura*

in the tradition of naming girls for absence

*safia pure*

or the grandmothers' grandmothers whose names i never asked

because i cannot find the words

or because i will not speak them

those words i will not speak them

because language coarsens through my teeth

because *demur* lives inside *demure* but inside of *restive* is *rest*

because i want to contain my own solution

i should want as well to dissolve

# BORDER/SOFTER

& then how boundless could i make my life  
which for all its smallness still exhausts me

balancing act of all my margins all my conjugations  
of cannot    if i live through the night i will bleed

into all my edges until i am no longer a stroke  
of some careless man's pen    *after*

*a particularly liquid lunch [ man ] was said  
to have created [ country ] with a stroke of his [ implement ]*

& isn't a map only a joke we all agreed into a fact  
& where can i touch the equator    & how will i know

i am touching it            & where is the end of my country  
the beginning of the next    how will i know i've crossed over

# ODE TO MY HOMEGIRLS

smelling of orange rind    of cardamom  
most beautiful girls in the world    *wake up bitch*  
    *we're getting waffles*    *you can keep crying*

*but you're going out*    my marriages  
my alibis    my bright & hardy stalks  
    of protea    & all i know of love i learned

at thirteen    dialing basma's home phone  
by heart    to three-way call whatever boy  
    so that weeks later    when the phone bill came

only basma's familiar number beside the time stamp  
clearing my name    basma herself staying awake  
    for hours    to hang up the phone after

you who send pictures of your rashes  
to the group text    & long voice notes  
    from the bathtub    your laughter echoing against the tiles

you who scatter the world's map    piling into  
cheap buses & budget airlines    four of us asleep

in my dorm bed    six of us overflowing  
my studio apartment    false lashes for weeks after  
like commas in my every pillowcase    you clog my toilet  
    & admit it    you text me screenshots  
  
from the gucci fashion show    *getting rich*  
    *so i can get u this*    & when i lived alone  
    & that man followed me  
  
one night home from the six train  
    up lexington    & into the hallway  
    tried for hours to break open my front door  
  
you took turns from all your cities    & stayed  
    overnight with me on the phone    for three days  
    snoring & murmuring in your sleep



# GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE

perhaps a cow  
some gold  
for a girl

carried kicking from  
her father's house

from her father's name  
& slung over a shoulder

& passed  
to another

whose belonging will name her  
will give her form

girl like water  
shapeless without the bowl

girl perhaps cut  
perhaps in the pharaonic way  
sent off to be split

girl as paintbrush  
sent off to stain a sheet

perhaps by cover of night  
perhaps the husband is old

& the girl a child  
legs clamped tight  
as if by stitching

perhaps his brothers  
perhaps his cousins

men as ropes  
as chains

brought in  
to peel the girl like young fruit

the pith still bitter  
still clinging to the rind

# ELEGY

see her: little cousin, little sister, sparrow-boned, alive.

i want to turn to firewood everything that hurts her.

i do not have the verbs for what i need for her.

i needed them myself & was not protected.

i want to make ash of this world that did not protect us

& from that nourished soil sprout one better.

at the kitchen table we eat a glutinous stew

with our soft hands, submerged to the second knuckle

& she is telling me a story & she is telling it quickly

short chirp of her laugh as she tries to mold from it the joke,

the old story of our girlhoods; the ways we haunt

the houses built to keep the world out, to keep us safe;

the ways we still were hurt; the ways we could not tell anyone

what was done to us; the ways we swallowed blame, smooth pebble

in the shut mouth; the ways we could not tell our mothers

when we needed them the most. i see her & i am fourteen,

i am twenty-two, i have been badly hurt. i see her, little mouth,

bare-faced & vulnerable. i see her & don't know where to begin.

1,000

My roommate one year in college  
would say of my smallness  
that any man who found me attractive  
had a trace of the pedophilic

& I would shrink, newly girled  
twenty-one with my eyebrows plucked  
to grownup arches, sprouting back  
every three weeks in sharp little shoots.

Already men have tried to steal me  
in their taxis, corral me into alleyways  
of the new city. Already the demand for my name  
though no one ever asks how old I am,

though no one ever did. I feel creaking  
& ancient in the repetition of it all.  
I feel my girlhood gone for generations  
my entire line of blood crowded

with exhausted women.

Their unlined faces frozen in time

with only a thickness about the waist,  
a small shoot of gray to belie the years.

I make up names to hand to strangers at parties.  
I trim years from my age & share  
without being asked, that I am fifteen,  
seventeen, & no one blinks.  
No one stops wanting.

I am disappeared like all the girls  
before me, around me,  
all the girls to come.

Everyone thinks I am a little girl  
& still they hunt me, still they show their teeth.  
I am so tired, I am one thousand years old.  
One thousand years older when touched.

# SUMMER TRIANGLE

say i formed a body of clay around  
a clot of dried blood  
i formed a body of dirt & water  
i formed a body of water around red earth & cracked clay  
i formed a body polluted by want  
most of it not mine

i formed a body purified by name  
washed in the white water of my grandfather's blind left eye  
washed with my grandmother's feet in ablution

i formed a body to be left behind  
to be unzipped & discarded  
to return to perfumed aunts  
arranged in jagged sleep  
waking only to tie systems of jasmine into my torn hair

i formed a body suspended in utterance  
named & undone & named again

*girl lacuna specter throat*

*throat [say it] bloodstain sheet [name it]*

i formed a body darkened by blood  
the moon tugging its irons from my shameful parts

i formed a body & swam  
inelegant laps in rising water  
temperate as the first womb

& always ships darkening the banks like blood  
& always water dividing the world  
god's country clotting out between my legs like silk

# PALIMPSEST

i wear the dead girl's clothes

all my adornments pulled from the bodies of animals

ambergris & musk & tallow

i smell it in my hair

i stink of my every mother

my fingernails bright & rotted in henna

my fingernails kneading raw lamb & dried onion

i wear the white & mourn

i wear the amulets bound in leather

i write it down

to dissolve into water & drink

i did not stand bare before a mirror

i did not invite the eye

i did not surrender to the drum

beaten to pull dark spirits from the bodies of women

mesmeric dance

mesmeric twist of the cigarette smoke

i did not smoke

i burned the sandalwood & recited

i burned the sandalwood & memorized

i waited in the dark for something to fetch me

# HARDER/BORDER

my each & every name my casing a border  
my body my mouth my failing tongue a border

my grandfather milk pooling in his hopeful eye  
[say it] i lost a language & grew another border

spoiled milk my curdling citizenship my liquid  
spilling citizenship my missing names a border

poured everywhere & drying in the yellow morning  
my body is touched & i claw the air for my borders

i misplace my homeland mispronounce my mother  
tongue [again] [louder] [harder] [border]

imagine my mirror mouth its boundless dark all  
my alternate selves better broader bolder border

louder thinner [say it] though purity is [i know]  
an invention she bleeds blacker brimming border

my grandfather's girl matching milk [صافية] pure

citizened & born backward imagine me softer border

# ODE TO GOSSIPS

i was mothered by lonely women  
some of them wives

some of them with plumes of smoke for husbands  
all lonely

smelling of onions & milk  
all mothers

some of them to children  
some to old names

phantom girls acting out a life  
only half a life away

instead they clatter copper kitchenware  
with their bangles pushed up the arm

their fingernails rusted with henna  
& kneading raw lamb with salt  
with coriander





# GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE

i cover my shoulders in a photograph so the hissing will quiet

i cloister my vices

    i maintain my weight

        i never cut my hair

i am asked to change my dress

i am asked to line my eyes

never an order only the slight apology

    [people will talk]

i am asked to take down the photo

    i am asked to anonymize my lover

stop showing my teeth

    cover my knees

        shave my legs

            stop wearing red

                start wearing makeup

                stop wearing lipstick

stop being photographed at night

people will talk  
what will they think?  
what will they do with my name?

∴

بنت ناس /bint nas/ *n.* daughter of People; girl with a Name; unbroken yolk  
as reputation; daily maintenance of Name; girlhood governed by Tongues;  
reputation as system of value; virgin; sane; oiled & brushed; fluent; chaste &  
shy; reputation as condition for Name; reputation as condition for  
daughterhood; reputation-shaped urn;

;name;

∴

They cut the hair of disgraced girls so I cut it myself.

Took the razor to it myself. I wanted to feel the bone, its hardness,

untouched skin against its newborn curve. & thereby purified

I slept, only to wake the next morning to it returned, the same

puffed braid I wore throughout my girlhood. The baby hairs

brushed down with cream. Two thick elastics like the knotted ends

of sausage. & again in the mirror I made the cuts, fat tufts drifting

like feathers to carpet the cold tile. I walked everywhere with scissors,  
left hair on buses & at parties, cursive scrawls in other beds, handed it  
in fistfuls, stuffed in pillowcases. Whole braids still bound with their elastic,  
curled in commas on the pavement behind me, scattered like acacia pods,  
my ellipsis, my thousand confessions.

∴

i was twenty-four & almost died & nobody knew  
*i was [fourteen][sixteen][twenty] & nobody knew*  
i was sick in my heart in my blood i fainted the train  
*i was [ ] i fainted the [man]*  
started moving i started to empty from my body while it fell  
*started moving i started to empty from my body while it fell*  
everything suspended & viscous i fell very slowly  
*everything suspended & viscous i fell very slowly*  
i had time to name it before a stranger caught my weight  
*i [could not] name it [& keep my name] a stranger [ ]*  
& later i kept quiet told no one i knew what they would think  
*& later i kept quiet told no one i knew what they would think*  
i knew what could be said i knew what stories form  
*i knew what could be said i knew what stories form*  
when bodies float into the tracks before trains i fell

*when bodies [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] i [ ]*  
& was caught & the next day brushed my hair & dressed  
*& was [not] caught & the next day brushed my hair & dressed*  
loosely & chastely & went on hollowing all mouths of my name  
*loosely & chastely & went on hollowing all mouths of my name*

∴

i obeyed & still  
i covered & still  
i prayed & still  
i stayed home & still  
i dressed loosely & still  
i plaited my hair & still  
i was unpainted & still  
i was a child & still  
i was an adult & still  
i moved cities & still  
i lived with roommates & still  
i lowered my eyes & still  
i cut my hair & still  
i was polite & still  
i was silent & still  
i was alone once  
i was lonely  
it was dark  
it was daylight

i was a girl & like the girls i knew  
i bruised i bled i died

∴

سمعة /sum·'a/ n. reputation; shared root with سمع /su·mi·'a/ n. hearing; as  
in; i heard that man's daughter was seen [ ] while wearing [ ] such a  
shame with that complexion that hair she could have been [ ]; i heard that  
man's daughter smokes cigarettes & opens her mouth to laugh such a shame  
she must not have a father; i heard that man's daughter is no longer that  
man's daughter & cannot close her legs; i heard that man's daughter lost her  
People lost her surname when she lost her [ ]; i heard that man's  
daughter was never a daughter has no People has no reputation has no Name;

∴

what small freedoms could i exchange for my name for my Name

for the sound people make when they daughter me for my cage for my

سمعة for what people hear in the absence of my cloistered body for the

sentencing after [i heard] for the sentences locked away before my name

my Name pries itself open my name my Name prized above my body above

my mouth my name shrouds my body magnifies its every act my cage

my Name my cage my reputation my unbroken yolk my unstained sheet

my cage my stage my blood my sheet my

∴

But what if I will not die?

What will govern me then?

How to govern me then?

What bounty, then, on my name?

What stone

What rope

What man

will be my officer?

# FOR MY FRIENDS, IN REPLY TO A QUESTION

I'm okay. And, of course, I'm not,  
but I go through the motions. I wake up  
to the alarm's howl, even when the word  
in my body is *no*. I dress in livid colors.  
I blacken the hairs of each eyebrow. I bake  
& braise & pickle. I write & read & lose  
hours to the blur of the television. I sit  
for hours in the bath, my skin puckering.  
I don't know if I'll ever go home again.  
I don't know who I've seen for the last time.  
The Arabic comes back to me in streaks  
of paint, verb forms & vocabularies  
I may never again have occasion to use.  
My days smudge into one another & it's not  
that I am afraid. It's as if I am watching it  
all happen below, & I am somewhere above  
the room, wondering if the rice is burning.  
I am somewhere above the room, watching  
my new aches, watching the news as if  
I am reading it in a novel. I look up  
the names of people I knew in childhood,

learn their new & angular faces, their  
faraway lives. My grandfather pixelates  
into a smile & I work my creaking muscles  
to replicate it. I do not ask if we will ever  
meet again, I do not ask him to read to me,  
or for anything that will make me long.  
I dull it with sugar & oil, with cooking shows,  
with sleep. I sleep twelve hours each night  
& in my dreams I am fleeing a war, in my dreams  
I am touching the faces of my friends, we are  
each one of us touching, & even in the dream  
we are afraid.

# RED NOTE WITH A LINE BY OL' DIRTY BASTARD

If you read this in red don't think I didn't survive. Every day I go missing:  
One eyelash at a time or sometimes all at once. & in the absence of disgrace I  
walk in & out of rivers & wear my good silk. My good clean unburnt body  
dripping in the honey light. I sprout leaves. I bear fruit & self-sustain. I tread  
water. I flake the moon for my boundless hair & another grows in its place. I  
am sistered but never again to a dead girl. Nowhere, ever again, is there a  
dead girl. Somewhere our wounds seal; our stitches fall away. Somewhere a  
rope turns & our feet never touch the ground. Somewhere a song plays &  
names us with each touch of a needle to the shining surface of its black: *I'm  
hanging out / partying / with girls / that never die*

# GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE

a girl buried  
to the chest in red earth her wrists

bound beneath the soil  
with twine a crowd gathers

to father her its infinite  
hands curved loosely around

a stone small enough  
that no single throw is named

as cause of death no single  
hand accountable to the blood

a girl undaughter unnamed  
unfaced undone from the lineage

her photographs pulled already  
from bookshelf from walls a father

among the hands his pebble

streaked with quartz    the first to rise

to carve the air & arc    toward the girl  
the rootless tree    faceless & erect

& perhaps the stones    twisting  
like fireworks    the girl

their nucleus    rise    & rise  
for a time    opposite of rain

opposite of hail & perhaps the silence  
a beat too long    & another

another    & then a rustling  
of wings    above the girl

a flock    thick mixed cloud  
of avifauna    partridge & nightjar

& golden sparrow    & avocet  
& lapwing    & every other sort

of plover    & ibis & heron & gulls  
though the sea    is far & to the north

& the minutes pass    & the girl is untouched

& each bird in its beak      tongues a stone

# NOTES

## FINAL WEEKS, 1990

This poem was written in response to a prompt from Louise Glück to write a poem that takes place the day you were born, in which both the time of year and time of day must be clear. The final line is after a line by Warsan Shire: “I have my mother’s mouth and my father’s eyes; on my face they are still together.”

## ORPHEUS

This poem is built of scraps of poems written during a 30/30 in August 2020 with Hala Alyan, so while these poems are not “after” poems of hers in the conventional sense, I believe them to be shaped by the presence of her poems in my inbox during the time of their writing.

## PROFANITY

The first section of this poem is published in *POETRY* as “self-portrait with profanity.” The second half is published in *FUSION* as “ode to swearing.”

## HOW TO SAY

This poem is written after Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “In Arabic” and originally appears in the Academy of American Poets’ *Poem-a-Day*.

## YASMEEN

This poem originally appears in *POETRY*. This poem was also the kernel of an idea that later became the novel-in-verse *Home Is Not a Country*. I found Tyehimba Jess's book *Olio* incredibly instructive when I was working with the contrapuntal form.

#### TAXONOMY [I GO TO MEET THE POEM... ]

This poem originally appears in *Pleiades*. The line “family honor is in the body of the girl” is based on a quote from an anonymous source in the *Vanity Fair* article “You’re Essentially a Prisoner”: *Why Do Dubai’s Princesses Keep Trying to Escape?* by Vanessa Grigoriadis. The original quote is “family honor is within the girl—her virginity is the family’s honor.”

#### INFIBULATION STUDY [I WILL BEGIN BY WRITING A SENTENCE... ]

The first draft of this poem was based on a drama therapy intervention called “doubling,” where the therapist listens to a client tell a story, then repeats back an interpretation of parts of the story, followed by “if this is true, repeat it, if it is not, correct it.”

#### POMEGRANATE WITH PARTIAL NUDE

This poem bases its title on what I think is the title of a painting called “Pomegranate with Female Nude” that I thought I saw in a book about Salvador Dalí once and wrote it down, but now I can’t find it. I wrote this while listening to the song “Ph City Vibration” by Burna Boy, and the lyric “south side of the river of the garden city” found its way into the poem as the lines “seven countries from my garden city” and “sun sets on the pomegranate city.”

#### INFIBULATION STUDY [WHAT IS TO BORDER BUT TO CUT... ]

This poem originally appears in *Gulf Coast*.

ISHA, NEW YORK CITY

A version of this poem appears in the chapbook *ars poetica* (MIEL, 2016).

MEMOIR

The first draft of this poem was also written during that summer 2020 30/30 with Hala.

[DON'T EVER GO INTO A ROOM ALONE WITH ANYONE... ]

This one too (the 30/30).

ON EID WE SLAUGHTER LAMBS & I KNOW INTIMATELY THE COLOR

This poem originally appears in the *Missing Slate*.

A RUMOR

This poem originally appears in *Barrelhouse* and was written at Cave Canem.

MODERN SUDANESE POETRY

This poem originally appears in *POETRY* and borrows its title from the anthology *Modern Sudanese Poetry* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019). It also appears in the *PANK folio Azza fi Hawak: a Collection of Sudanese Poetry*.

GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE [A GIRL EMBROIDERED... ]

This poem originally appears in *Barrelhouse* and was the first poem I wrote under this title.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITHOUT STITCHES

This poem is written after Tarfia Faizullah's "100 Bells" and originally appears in the *Poetry Review*.

#### THE ANIMAL

This poem originally appears in *American Poetry Review*.

#### THE CAIRO APARTMENTS

This poem originally appears in *The Atlantic* and was written in response to an assignment from Louise Glück to write a prose poem that uses conventional capitalization and punctuation.

#### ZAMALEK

This poem is written after Kim Addonizio's "New Year's Day." Another August 2020 30/30 poem.

#### GENEVA

This poem originally appears in the *Columbia Review*. 30/30.

#### TONY SOPRANO'S TENDER MACHISMO

Yet another August 30/30 poem, written after watching *The Sopranos* for the first time.

#### SUMMER

30/30!

#### TAXONOMY [WANTING WAS MY LANGUAGE FIRST... ]

An early draft of this poem was written as a commission for the program book for three works of Wayne McGregor's that premiered at the Bavarian

State Ballet in 2018. The poem was particularly inspired by the piece “Borderlands.”

#### SYROS

This poem is written after Jenny Xie’s poem “Corfu” and originally appears in the *Columbia Review*.

#### TERRA NULLIUS

This poem was written in response to another prompt from Louise Glück which, among other elements, required the word “then” to appear five times in the poem.

#### TAXONOMY [BECAUSE I CANNOT FIND THE WORDS... ]

This poem was written while spending a lot of time with Ladan Osman’s poem “Trouble.”

#### BORDER/SOFTER

A version of this poem appears in the *Progressive* and the section in italics refers to “Winston’s Hiccup”—“after a particularly liquid lunch, Churchill was said to have created Transjordan with a stroke of his pen.”

#### ODE TO MY HOMEGIRLS

This poem originally appears in *BOMB* and is written after Matthew Olzmann’s poem “Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem.”

#### GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE [PERHAPS A COW... ]

This poem originally appears in *POETRY*.

#### ELEGY

Another August 2020 30/30 poem!

1,000

A version of this poem appears in the Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-day*.

#### SUMMER TRIANGLE

The first draft of this poem was written in response to a piece by Laura Christensen, originally by the same title and since renamed "To Dwell Midst the Waves," as a commission for Laura's book "THEN AGAIN: Vintage Photography Reimagined by One Artist and Thirty-One Writers."

#### HARDER/BORDER

This poem was commissioned by and originally appears in *Art Papers*.

#### ODE TO GOSSIPS

An earlier version of this poem appears in *POETRY*.

#### GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE [I COVER MY SHOULDERS... ]

The third section of this poem originally appears in *Ambit*. The last section of this poem originally appears in *POETRY*.

#### FOR MY FRIENDS, IN REPLY TO A QUESTION

This poem is written after David Ignatow's poem "For My Daughter, in Reply to a Question" and appears in *Catapult*.

#### RED NOTE WITH A LINE BY OL' DIRTY BASTARD

This poem is written after Danez Smith's poem "summer, somewhere" and originally appears under the title "after" in *West Branch*, as well as in the

anthology *Women of Resistance: Poems for a New Feminism*. It borrows the line “I’m hanging out/partying/with girls/that never die” from Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s verse on the song “Ghetto Supastar” by Pras featuring ODB and Mya.

GIRLS THAT NEVER DIE [A GIRL BURIED... ]

This poem originally appears in *POETRY*.

For our younger selves.

For Basma and Awwad, every time.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I don't know how to end this. I can't believe this book is finished. I can't

believe it's going to be in the world. Thank you for reading it. Thank you for hearing me out.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sudanese by way of D.C., SAFIA ELHILLO is the author of *The January Children* and *Home Is Not a Country* and co-editor of the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me*. Winner of the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets, the Arab American Book Award, and the Brunel International African Poetry Prize, she is also the recipient of a Cave Canem Fellowship and a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. Her work has appeared in *POETRY* magazine, *Callaloo*, and the Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-day series, among others. Currently a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she lives in Oakland, California.

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# YASMEEN

i was born            i was planted  
at the rupture the root where            land became ocean became land anew  
i split from my parallel self i split from            its shape refusing root in my  
fallow mouth  
the girl i also could have been            cleaving my life neatly  
& her name / easy / i know the story            & my name / taken from a dead  
woman  
all her life / my mother wanted            to remember / to fill an aperture with  
a girl named for a flower            cut jasmine in a bowl  
whose oil scents all            our longing  
our mothers /            our mothers'  
petals wrung            wilting  
for their perfume            garlands hanging from our necks

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# INFIBULATION STUDY

what is to border but to cut      say it      say it as you mean  
thin membrane dividing      the world & the world of men  
a body i can claim &      a body to be forgiven its breach  
a body to be sliced like festival lamb      a body named for what it  
daughters  
both of them my blood to clot      both of them my gnarled protest  
to my many mothers i only ask      the thin membrane of their girlhoods  
when we became the officers of men      students of purity for men  
whisperers of spells & prayer & ruined name      wielders of scalpel &  
sharpened rock  
to cut away what frightens men      i only ask about the knotting sugar  
to uproot the fine down of hair      making slow velvet of our bodies  
answer me      what is it to border  
which knives are for the animals      which ones are for the girls  
who drew the first blood      answer me  
who hurt you      who hurt you  
who drew the matching wound      who made the first incision

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# ISHA, NEW YORK CITY

i should want to survive

to outlive

my particular beauties

i should want to survive

long enough to forget

ever wanting to be touched

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# TAXONOMY

wanting was my language first            i learned it as a child

waiting    water was my language first            watching women dye their  
hair in the bathroom at night

each turn of the moon tugs new blood            remembering [GIRL] married  
at sixteen

to join my other losses            *married* is the only word i know

stain of henna for a girlhood            though this does not feel like the  
conjugation

red clay where a father might have been            an action performed onto her

fluent in neither purity nor pollution            maybe not an action at all

& instead settled quietly at the borderlands            maybe one morning she  
was a girl & the next a wife

when i was born (not born) (i was planted)            not an action but an exile

into a damp alphabet of silences            to [GIRL] it was done at fourteen

& i want to ask whose children are children            clearing away her dolls in  
the afternoon

endless maw of that empty mouth            before her husband came home

what to name it    what to name            an imagined girlhood    untouched

i call out to whatever made me            a girl running outside    going copper  
in the sun

& the white moon resumes its quiet swim            imagining a girl    imagine  
nothing is done to her

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