

IN JORDAN'S NORTHERNMOST PROVINCE

for the Middle East's first all-female demining team

Women go down on their knees
hovering above a mapwork of metalwork, brushing
dust from cluster bombs like ash from flatbread.
Delicate metal-filled bomblets glisten, scaring off
the crows. In fields where men once braided their hair,
a wife trades her niqab for goggles
and armor, sifting the topmost soil
from behind her rake. She knows the mines
never sleep. She knows better to fear
the snakes, scorpions, heat,
her brother's pasture where running
water dislocates the dragon's teeth, toylike
mines disguising themselves as butterflies
and yams. Shepherds herd their sheep
in restricted fields, their daughters more afraid
of sniffing dogs than the cross-shaped pressure
plates lying in wait. Today begins
where yesterday ends: brushes, detectors,
mallets, and stakes prodding twenty square meters
grain by grain, searching for wires
attached at the pull switch. And the ragged
finch perched on the fencepost,
does it prophesy something
among the fruit trees—a thimble-
sized device, perhaps, its firing pin needling
a young boy's eyes? Who knows what
the ordinary arbor holds. Hundreds of
underground cages ready to unloose the clay-
more birds in air, their blackened gullets canting
for the boy's mother, now downed
among the silent grasses, as if unclasping a barb
from her stocking, or bending to sweep back
the wild herbs clutched at her jilbab's hem.

FIRST DAYS: AUGUST

Black irises are vanishing like the wild
lions of Iraq that trampled the reeds
to drink among the narrow-waisted

grasses. Black irises are disappearing.
Across Karak the desert larks have fled.
Not even the olive trees breathe

green, and dust thirsts for the wall-
walkers' spit. Day by day the forecast
bends our foreheads to the ground—

like firelight on a woman's half-turned
face, the sun bears down
and down. All the city's blown

a fuse, or so it seems. My mother calls
again, worried by what she's seen
on the nightly news: drought and more

drought, tensions rippling across
the Middle East. A month or two
elapses, more the same: salt

gathering in the damp black sleeves
of women harvesting fields of salt;
sand clinging to bits of sand

on sand-colored buildings, coating
roofs the color of chewed bread.
Nights stalled at the screen, I strain

to hear the call to prayer—
what is it Amman's abandoned
streets are trying to say? The skyline's coal.

The sun, half coming up. How quickly
it licks each shadow—fence's crest,
straggle of grapes, a patio chair,

even me—into place. The adhan
begins again. The temperature's
rising. My throat's too dry to speak.

THE EXPLOSIVE EXPERT'S WIFE

He comes home from the range scorched in dirt;
home from the office, a stain on his suit.
His nails are chewed.
He enters the house without saying a word.
He's jetlagged again. He's got blast-
dust the length of his forearms and hands.
Back from Sa'dah, he's got sand in the shanks of his boots.
He says, *Sorry I'm late*. He's come home
just to pack—a guard's found C4
stashed in a DCA trashcan.
He needs a haircut and shave. (*It's been one of those days.*)
He says, *This won't show up on the news*.
He's been sorting evidence. He has fresh
orders from the president.

He says, *I do this for us*.

They're booby-trapping pizza boxes and books.
They're rigging plastic cars so kids will trip the switch.
They're something else, he says.
He's on edge again.
He promises to be home by six. He promises not to miss
the latest round of tests. He's holding
a daffodil-tulip mix. He shakes his head, *When
did we run out of limes?*

He claims, *It was pilot error*.

He claims, No one knows. He asks, *Did I get an urgent message
from Colonel So-and-So?* Straight from the Pentagon,
he makes one drink after the next.
He wants to know what's for supper.
He asks if the oil's been changed.
Screw what Fox and CNN say: *It's perfectly safe
to travel by train*. Screw what happened
on the southern coast—

The casualty count could've been higher.

He's leaving for Kabul again,
this time for sixty-five days.
(*It's better for us than Baghdad with overtime and haz-pay.*)
He'll need shaving cream and toothpaste, fresh undershirts and socks.
He'll need a ride to the drop-off point
near the strip mall's outlet shops. He's filthy
from hosing the tech team's Hazmat suits. He's going
to take a shower. Friday, they're predicting
snow. *Careful*, he warns, *the roads will all be slick*.
He gives thanks—the chicken tastes *just right*.
The dog jumps on his lap.
He strokes my arm, asks *Later tonight?*
Napkin crumpled, he pushes back his plate—
Now tell me everything, he says,
about your day today.

of my bra. Who was it who said in order to sleep one must feel
safe? I stared at the wall's gray, sponge-shaped smudge

an hour (maybe two) trying to piece the night together
remembering a headless roach will live a week before it dies

of thirst. Now, the gravelly click of the jeep's wheels
rambling down the road. Eight months we've lived

in the Middle East, have yet to reach the night I dream
the embassy bombing at Kabul: half-buried, you hold

what's left—some fabric scrap, a woman's burning sandal.

THE ACCUSED TERRORIST'S WIFE

The house foreclosed, she's gone
to his father's home carting
her things, a pair of his shoes, their only

daughter, sons. Water springs
from the outdoor pump, a parasite
hidden in each clear drop (however

she washes her face, it can't come clean
enough). Cross-examined, the dailies
claim, he won't shut up. The sky's

too bright for such news. His mother
chooses a room, draws its curtains
and blinds, begins her thousand-

hour prayer. Whatever happens, happens
to their children. Meeting the first time
beneath this very tree did they agree

they'd known each other as many
years as leaves? She was fourteen—
Abida's age. Their youngest's latest

game is dizzying himself by spinning
rings, then collapsing half-sick
in defeat. The world unreels

another day. The almonds' seed-
coats are too sweet. Newsmen stalk
the cordoned lane. Afternoons

behind the well, she beats
a bedroom rug till none can tell
it's her cries that fill the streets.

PETRA BY NIGHT

28

A thousand candles light the Siq. I grieve
the West, its disinterested ear. Bedouin
song, as we reach The Treasury:
that tale in which the travel-weary
trader asks that her heart be weighed
on an ancient scale. As sand-
stone once led the Silk Route
I am led here, where mineral
rock still reads like marbled
paper offering some proof
of constancy to the god
men thought ruled this city:

DuShara—

god of the mountain, god of air,
god I was not named for
but can almost sense—tonight, a
breath,
a shape, this copper
eclipse of moths
alighting in my hair.

THE EXPLOSIVE EXPERT'S WIFE

29

Though I woke again to sand, that morning
smelled of cut grass. You'd been called to Aqaba,
a cabdriver killed overnight: rockets misfired
by Egyptian insurgents. Still, things fell
into order. The endangered irises inflated

at daybreak past Madaba, black on black,
their swordlike leaves facing east. I hoped it
impossible: your trip, extending itself. *All's well*,
you kept calling to say. Then Saturday,
police shot a hyena near Shafa Badran;

today, an unidentified toddler found
wandering in Wihdat. For weeks, tremors
come in waves from the Baptismal Site.
No explanation for aftershocks rattling the air—
no earthquake, no thunder, no explosion occurred

(Thursday's official word), not a cylinder of gas
set off. Where have these months gone?
The world is twice as long as wide, I remember
reading in a book that likened sorrow to
a sack of fruit. At night I can't sleep.

I can't sleep: the rain has ceased (or what I hear
as rain). It won't be long. Two
more days. I think of purgatory—bright
magnesium flare—seven angels strung in a tree.
This morning, a woman begging outside

Jounia Pharmacy. She has kissed the lips of
her husband, her daughters, her God.

She has oiled her body, ground powder to draw
youth back to her cheeks. The pharmacist
shoos her off, returning to his half-stocked

shelves of cotton balls, diabetic test strips.

He takes the slip I pass him, careful to avoid
my hand. She's not sick, he insists, *not sick*. The woman
shifts from her mat of stone. The air conditioner
blasts its simple refrain. *Come home*.

THE MARINE BALL

Landmark Hotel (formerly the Radisson SAS), Amman

Not lost on me this room whose chandeliers
and walls blew out, killing thirty-eight.
(One belt failed to detonate.) But tonight

it's tuxes, floor-length gowns—the past,
some distant report. We toast. The youngest
corporal cuts the cake with a sword. My father

volunteered for war. How I hated the entire
Corps for things he bragged he did to girls
my age near Đa Krông. Now, just six recruits

stand between us and the faceless master-
minds we're trained to dread. My husband
takes my hand. Lights dimmed, the floor

fills as the music turns soft as a woman
paid for, then passed from man to man.

in the hand she shielded
 behind her back, while the other
 took the sweetened knot of fruit
 between her lips that found
 their way to his.

THE EXPLOSIVE EXPERT'S WIFE

Sky Gate: the abandoned observatory at Wadi Rum

The astronaut's suit smells like spent
 gunpowder, the magazine says, meaning
 the moon is the after-

math of war, or perhaps
 it's the scent of satellites

orbiting long-dead stars. In a dark pocket
 of the universe we walked the wind-
 shaped dunes that hissed

like cosmic ice. I thought
 I knew the limits of sadness

in this world, but the tent's fibers
 glistened like a meteor's pale tail and
 behind the curtain,

I realized the veiled
 scope had kept its vigil

for some time, wide eye pointed
 toward Earth's illusory dome. It would be
 months before I heard you drag
 your packed bag across
 our marble floor to catch

a red-eye bound for the city where
 the explosion's embers burned for days
 after the attack, before

the reporter on scene said
 the crew freed

the woman's husband by detecting with
 a tiny machine his still-beating heart
 as he fought for air. That night
 in the desert there was
 nothing to stop us from

going in. We entered, undressed. If
 there's a passage between this world
 and the next, let it begin
 in that dormant tent.
 Should darkness fall

I'll meet you there.

VERTIGO: BOSTON / THE MIDDLE EAST

March & April 2013

snow and snow: (a trimester to go): and sleet,

a half block to Boylston: I fall (I fall
 hard) crossing the street: strangers

help me to my feet: *I'm fine, I'm fine*:

my ungloved hand: *snow and snow*:

begins to bleed: my hip,

my knees: (what kind of mother am I?)

padding through snow and sleet to read
 poetry at the public library: (I should

rest): (I should be in bed): my mascara's

running (ice silvering the trees): my ears

ring *snow and snow*: someone calls

my name: I grip the podium, hear myself

recite some phrase about

a bird, thinking *please, please* (daughter

move, daughter kick!) give me something,

anything: small cardinal

downed in sleet: outside,

IN JORDAN'S NORTHERNMOST PROVINCE

November 2008: In an effort to ensure the safety of more than fifty thousand city residents and villagers, the Middle East's first all-female demining team begins clearing a bomb-infested region along the Syrian border. *Dragon's teeth* are landmines designed to maim rather than kill.

FIRST DAYS: AUGUST

The phrase "bends our foreheads to the ground" echoes lines in Federico García Lorca's "The Silence."

MINE WARFARE

Celebrated by Muslims worldwide, the "Festival of the Sacrifice" (Eid al-Adha) marks the end of the Hajj and honors Abraham's willingness to surrender his son as an offering to God. Holiday traditions include prayer, the exchange of gifts, donations to the poor, and the slaughter of an animal.

IN ARABIC

For Ghadeer Darawsheh.

LETTER TO BRUCE IN PARADISE, INDIANA

For Bruce Snider.

THE MARINE BALL

November 2005: Terrorists execute coordinated attacks on three hotels in Amman, Jordan, killing more than 60 and injuring 115. At the since-renamed Radisson SAS, suicide bombers target a wedding reception in the Philadelphia Ballroom. Among those murdered are the fathers of both bride and groom.

DAWN AT THE DEAD SEA

In Genesis 19:26, God punishes Lot's wife for looking back toward Sodom by transforming her into a pillar of salt. Wisława Szymborska's poem "Lot's Wife" poses a number of reasons why she turned to face the city, including the loss of a "silver bowl." The cave where Lot's daughters fled after Sodom's destruction, and then later seduced and became impregnated by their father (Genesis 19:30-38), is perched on a barren cliff in Jordan overlooking the Dead Sea.

STRAWBERRIES

In 1995, more than eight thousand Bosnian Muslims, mostly men and boys, were systematically massacred and buried in mass graves. After fourteen years as a fugitive former military leader, Ratko Mladić, accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, was extradited to The Hague. According to the Old Testament, in order to save her city and its people, Judith seduced and beheaded the Assyrian General Holofernes.

VERTIGO: BOSTON / THE MIDDLE EAST

Boston Marathon Bombing, 2013 (3 killed, more than 260 injured).

THE LONG FLIGHT HOME

Details regarding the “human plank” as a test of faith are taken from *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*.

FOUND POEM: NO JOKE

A Google search for the “world’s most offensive jokes” produced the poem’s basic plot and punch line.

LETTER TO RANIA IN AMMAN

For R. H. Ma’ani.

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