



Laila Halaby

THREE POEMS

i got missing
in my bloodline

drip-drop
blood
that tick-tocks
itself
into today

before birth
I got taken away
brought back
that's a lot of travel
for a fetus

my sense of home
is raw
home as place
as mother
friend
lover
when it goes away
my body's officials
flip out
consult blueprints

try to calm the systems

stolen homelands
 set off alarm bells
 deafening
 I stagger around
 for days
 a stupid puddle
 of woman missing

why do my thoughts muddle
 skin stings
 prickles
 up and down my spine
 why
 have I never
 been able to shake
 the weight of
 absence
 informs me
 absence
 is me
 an inverse
 impossible
 invisible
 I

a disappearance

my poetic voice
 packed itself
 in the corner of the closet
 overflowing the plastic tub
 where I store all of my
ethnic clothing

I walked back into America
in jeans
and a hoodie
practical
confident
with as much right
as anyone
no fluff or extraneous adjectives

my feet
swallowed by thick socks
ugly shoes
have I lost my grace too?
jitter-brain
can I no longer sling words together?
no more clotheslines
of color
and rags

cold bites around me
nips at my layers
my breathing
folds in on itself
I see those Gaza kids
sharp angles
bright smiles
lost photos
now dead
I do nothing

my words
are asleep
this cold morning
in a string of cold mornings
snoring with the dog

the days fly along
blood of Black boys

on their wings
I do nothing
my younger son
struggling
parts of his amazing self
falling by the wayside
I do everything
nothing helps

normal people say
get off the worry bus

seated
eyes closed
palms upturned
rest on my knees
peace visits
in whispers
it never stays
instead
the souls of dead boys
lie across my lap
in stacks
souls reduced
to permeable
plywood planks

sometimes
when I swim
I feel that calm
breathing
peace
nothing-but-this-moment

and the spirits
of suffering boys
by my side

used to be

gold bangles hung heavy
 from my wrists
 weighed me down
 (I always lost at darts)

rings on my fingers
 colors on my toes
 and scarves
 I was gypsy shiny

used to be
 I'd sit for hours
 with forever friends and the world's problems
 everyone had accents
 and most sat at the edge of leaving

used to be
 I'd lie
 when people asked about my family
you can't handle the truth
 I'd think

*

these days
 I'm always walking

Adidas footwear
 disguises desert feet
 bones sticking out sideways
 calloused edges
 no matter how much I sand and soak

skimpy undershirt

tiny skirt
 the dog by my side
 you'd never know
 I wandered around
 Arab villages
 in full dresses

you'd never guess
 that those other footsteps
 carry my heartbeat
 while these only transport my body

nothing wrong with that
 feet gotta mark the planet some way

my arms
 shaved for smoothness
 ache as my hands grip
 long-stem clippers
 fight the thorned mesquite tree
 my hands go to bed
 callused and crooked
 wouldn't accommodate
 any of those rings
 or golden bangles

would you know
 that these same arms
 used to ache
 from kneading bread?

doesn't matter
 the past is the past

there is no happily-ever-after

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my children
 will never know
 the Eastern me
 the one I packed up
 sent away
 when my husband
 jumped ship
 they've forgotten
 the clinkety gold bangles
 and long dresses I once favored

they won't remember
 the quiet me
 the sit-at-the-table-for-hours-with-friends-and-a-pot-of-sweet-mint-tea me
 the stay-too-long-in-a-marriage-without-love me
 the anything-you-need me
 the always-food-on-the-table me
 the never-curse me

they only know the impatient American me
 of undershirts and jeans
 and silver hoop earrings
 the answer-any-question me
 the in-your-face me
 the curse-in-traffic me
 the bad-choice-in-boyfriends me
 the fierce and loud and sometimes crying me

they don't hear my tongue dance in Arabic
 only crackle
 when I am telling them to do something
 that gentle Eastern me
 is lost to them

maybe lost to me also

Laila Halaby is the author of two novels, *Once in a Promised Land* (a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection; named by the *Washington Post* as one of the best 100 novels of 2007) and *West of the Jordan* (winner of a PEN/Beyond Margins Award), as well as a collection of poetry *my name on his tongue* (Syracuse University Press, Spring 2012). Halaby was the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship for study of folklore in Jordan and holds two Masters degrees from UCLA in literature and Loyola Marymount in Counseling. She has spent the last several years marrying her two professions and currently works as an expressive arts program coordinator with refugees. She has taught creative writing at the Southern Arizona Veterans Hospital in Tucson as well as worked as a therapist with homeless youth and young adults.