

A Cairene Winter:

The season is mild but not welcoming in this city of inelegant decay.

The asphalt I walk on is cracked and dirty, the air browned from smog and dust. I step past the corpse of a kitten, then shudder at the sudden blast of an amplified car horn right next to me, followed by shouting from the junk collector driving his motorcycle-powered wagon.

Everyone I pass -- pedestrians, vendors, beggars, the cooks at the sandwich place -- all stare, some discreetly, others looking me up and down with gaping mouths. My scratched throat retracts and ignoring the gaze of a dozen eyes, I lower my mask to blow my nose into a tissue found folded in the pocket of my coat.

Here, I am the *other*, too often mistaken for a spy.
Yet as the traffic lulls for a moment, I pause and ask myself:
if the winter sang in raw air through our voices,

might we together become
trumpets?

Letter to al-Jafir:

You say your mind is a prison.

My first instinct is to demolish its walls, or rather
to slam my fists against steel and muscle and cinderblock until
blood coats the bars and soaks down to the foundations;

my second, to creep up behind the warden,
slit his fat throat and snatch the keys from his pocket.

The law itself is odious, but I save my hatred for the judge
who delivered the sentencing.

I wonder if the fear of death and some vicious words on your mother tongue might
make him suffer as you do.

No. If I yield to this third impulse, not even my passport can protect me.
My imprisonment will be literal!

...and we know that there is **always** vacancy
in the dungeons of the Middle East.

Iconoclasm:

My myth has birthed a dozen melodramas, but I am no Philistine god
appeased by minor offerings.

I would accept the title of angel, although in truth the wings sprouting from my back
are neither black nor white:

they are mirror-like, for in place of feathers sprout knives
to slice the bars of bamboo cages.

I alight again,
and my beauty terrifies you.

Remember This (to a Boy from Madaba):

When at last your fears cease their flood, they will stream yet more feebly
than your country's ravaged namesake.

And should you choose to return to those famous, salt-choked shores
claimed as proof of our shared damnation,

they will know no brighter sun than yours.

A Thousand and One Gardens:

Children of the Nile, I know how much you suffer:

how the whips have scarred your backs,
how the sandstorms have stolen your voices,
how you swallow glibness to fill the voids in your hearts and in your stomachs.

I am only a foreigner here, privileged yet not powerful,
not a prophet to preach nor a *jinn* to grant wishes,

but in my mind, I will plant for you
a thousand and one gardens with palms and bougainvilleas,
so that you might rest in the shade unworried,
crowned with floral wreaths of scarlet and gold and magenta.

Please forgive the meagerness of my offering.