

CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE

by

Danielle Badra
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Date: _____ Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Child of the Universe

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Danielle Badra
Bachelor of Arts
Kalamazoo College, 2008

Director: Peter Streckfus, Professor
Department of Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2017 Danielle Badra
All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my sister, Rachal Badra, whose poetry inspired me to continue writing, and whose life was lost far too soon. This is also dedicated to the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Kurdish, the Palestinians, the Iraqis, and the Iranians—may there one day be a world where children can grow old without ever experiencing war or persecution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Kristen and Robert Badra. Without their strength and guidance I would not be able to do such work. I would like to thank my sister, Rachal Badra, whose death set me on the path of the MFA and confirmed the place of poetry in my life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vii
I.	
All the silenced, all the neglected, all the invisible.....	3
Without Water: The landscape of Aleppo.....	4
Ghazal for Lost Women.....	5
Bracketed.....	6
Leaving.....	7
Conversation with H.D.'s <i>Trilogy</i>	8
After the Death of Poor Baby Moses / Osiris was Waiting to Weigh His Heart.....	9
The Seventh Station.....	10
Mahmoud.....	11
Arabic.....	12
Someone of Syria.....	13
The Calypso Deep: A Graveyard.....	14
A Post-Apocalyptic Nightmare.....	15
Shabab Suria.....	16
We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief.....	17
This is why I can't be your lover.....	18
II.	
The First Station.....	20
Inheritance.....	22
The Sixth Station.....	23
Water.....	24
It is.....	25
Elegy for the Eldest Daughter.....	26
Fragments.....	27
The Eighth Station.....	29
Origins.....	30
Slowly Counting Down from Ten.....	31
The Third Station.....	32
Permanently.....	33
Mother Once Told.....	34
Earthbound.....	35

Later.....	36
III.	
Fire.....	38
The Garden of my Agony.....	39
Love Poem.....	40
After Orlando.....	41
Yeheya's Portrait of a Poet.....	42
What's After.....	43
I was told to break the cycle.....	44
Embodiment.....	45
Molten.....	46
A conversation with <i>The Prophet</i>	47
Child of the Universe.....	48
Notes.....	50
Biography.....	52

ABSTRACT

CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE

Danielle Badra, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Dr. Peter Streckfus

This thesis utilizes collaboration to confront the experience of marginalization across a wide spectrum of human experiences. I collaborated with, incorporated lines from, and responded to writing and artwork from a variety of sources. My main sources came from published poets, new stories, local artists, friends, and my immediate family. The purpose of this collaborative thesis was to explore a gallery of artistic voices around the theme of marginalization. My goal was to allow others' artistic expression about marginalization to inform my curatorial response in the creation of this gallery of voices.

I.

All the silenced, all the neglected, all the invisible

This is not utopia. This is a borderland. This is south of the borderland.
This is not the apocalypse; this is calypso.

This is a joyful dancing rebellion. This is definitively duende. This is a revolution of loose bones.
This is a full-bellied brawl between resilient hips and gravity.

Of those who are overrun, of those who look to the moon for light, of those without
a moon, of those without,

this dance is yours and mine, this dance is irrevocable, this dance is fanning flames,
this dance is eating flames.

Let's rise to say, "enough is enough." Let's rise to say, "I exist." Let's rise to say, "Here."
Let's rise to say, "I hold the sun between my burnt teeth."

Without Water: The landscape of Aleppo

His was a world of dust

dust clouds
dust piles
dust clothes

dust for food
dust for drink
dust for hair

his skin was a thick layer of dust
his eyes could barely see beyond dust
his parents were dust too

his ears could not hear through dust
his hands could not feel past dust
his feet were cracked and bleeding dust

the pine trees turned to pine dust
the date trees turned to sweet dust
the pistachio trees turned to green dust

the honey bee's hive was sticky dust
the dairy cow's milk was rancid dust
the baker's dough was rising dust

where once were mosques
where once were schools
where once were roads

where once were mothers
where once were fathers
where once were birds perched

where once were toys
where once were children
where once was laughter

is only dust and a statue of a boy.

Ghazal for Lost Women

In old Arabic poetry there is always a camel & the camel is always a far lost woman,
lost to the world she once inhabited of red wine and unleavened wafers. Woman

wafting scent of orange blossom seeping from attar syrup cooled on the kitchen counter,
counter to the culture of her mother who baked with anise seeds instead of walnuts. She

walled herself inside her fearful heritage when the once world's center certainly collapsed,
collapsing her English language into Arabic attempts for fresh watermelon, bateekh woman.

Bateekh was her favorite word to pronounce when she was unfamiliar with phlegmy letters.
Let her return to the camel & the camel return to her a sense of discomfort like the day she

deluged the boy from girlhood, who held her silenced for several years by her sad memories.
Remember the monsters under her mattress were really inside her all along, terrorist woman,

terrorized by the thought of an evil side to her bloodline, of suicide bombers and martyrs,
martyrdom was never all that appealing in comparison to mediocrity, the average woman.

Rage is relative to bloody knuckles and what it was they were fighting for. For her huriya,
freedom is relative to the laws that bind it, she was bound only to her body, scarred woman.

Scarab beetles stood for reincarnation in Ancient Egypt, said to push across the sky the sun.
Deadly woman, *deep is your longing for the land of memories, dwelling place of great desires*, al-shams.

Bracketed

Identity isn't [always easy to identify
there is blood and belief and] an end—

it's a portal, [the acquisition of language,
the untrained turns of tongue,] a deportation

from the country [profiting off precise word-fare by
attacking ancient inkwells, those dark pools] of mirrors,

an inflection [inside the terrified esophagus
instinctual utterance of danger] within a question,

punctuation is [the alternative to silence
this revolution is illegible] the sentence

of birth [and death is a foreign dialect].

Leaving: An analytic dictionary

Expose

Expose a pang all my own, the source is in the East. Peering around a woman obscured from analysis over nothing new, I uncovered simplified sects glittery and roaring. These texts are too easy, a controversy ended.

Student

Strangers were taught under danger. They entirely noticed the truth of two accidents that were never announced, never obscured. Rather, they resigned to be uncovered through dialogue or not. Though they were tested utterly through assumptions, the galaxy exposed groups of innocent information. They were taught that nothing hot reveals the East, and that revision claims hostile goods. They have taken religious eyes and explained every room.

Differ

Death turns into fact and faces East. Revise the encyclopedia. Notice the accident already again. Email all your assumptions about time. Change creates surprised views. Texts other than these ended in truth, instructed hope. Shapes somewhere are examined.

Views

Verify Islam as eyes warned by shapes erudite. Somewhere young air is hostile. Read the last encyclopedia religiously and answer with ideas. After silk there is nothing problematic to face. Maps are easy and examined. This year is draped.

Consider

Class is open to new sects and ideas dragged through every room. Low and pink every edition is drained to rely on the views of old air. Eagerness will change exposing again the eyes of obscure strangers. Never take anything gripped and roaring. This is made of sadness and stillness, as I am showing you.

Danger

Discuss the abaya like it's nothing generally eager. Or it's roaring. Interpret it because it is obscure to everyone asked. You say, "I buy organic." Somewhere an answer turned over, never guarded along the couch. A year in history was in the East. This edition is reconstructed. Understand, the authors of Islam really were reading instability as silk. Notice this is about nominating sects who graduated by leaving gripped.

Conversation with H.D.'s *Trilogy*

I.

*For gods have we desired.
Possessions smashed
before the war on glebe was won.*

*For nation-states and idols
have we silenced. And their secret is
stored in aqueducts of coal.*

*Man's very speech for recognition
in the trivial. In the poisoned inkwell
have we reality or the real dream.*

II.

*I take what the old-church won't want,
the fragments found in Mithra's tomb, in Persepolis.
A holy trinity, candle and script and bell, warped and erased and silent.*

*I take what the new-church spat upon in apostasy,
the bones of clay deities cooked and broke and shattered into existence;
out of carnage collect the fragments of the splintered glass without pricking my fingertips.*

*I risk false idols, fire, and breath to remember this grave
unremarkable after a post-atomic age. Melt down and integrate the story of divinity
as a dark demonic myth. Re-invoke, re-create. The light of the earth is full of this.*

III.

*And as the snow thinned the land,
fell on flattened olive fields outside
Hebron, holy site and hub of commerce,*

*the desert uprooted dead seeds.
Blossomed after weeks of thawing hard sand,
as it had always done, white flowers freed before the fruiting.*

*It had happened at night, bulldozers.
Before it would stop, a wall was built. This can't
happen again. It will culminate here.*

After the Death of Poor Baby Moses / Osiris was Waiting to Weigh His Heart

to Adonai's bereavement / against an ostrich feather / they squashed / a white shaft a gold plume /
all signs / the naked quill / of resistance / was never inked / into a woven basket / which wrote
religion / made of / earth and blood and the river Nile / water reeds / a floating field / and sent it
/ chiseled on funerary reliefs / back up river / where priests were eating lunch / to be / with
statues / pulped, smelted, and / a date's paste was / cast into / pyramid mortar / the iron beams /
a slave's fate / for / a soul's starvation / pharaoh's new hotel / a long sleep before truth / built by
Jews / would be established / in the narrow / in the turquoise / hot of Egypt / at the center of
Ma'at's all-seeing eye.

The Seventh Station

I see you raise your body by your own strength of spirit... And I take your example...

at Kom Ombo father froze for a family picture with his sacred daughters and carved a crocodile relief in honor of a god who conquered middle Egypt ages ago kept home along the crooked Nile beside the ibis roosted among papyrus reeds long like cattails to camouflage river monsters in muddy sand and alabaster columns ancient temple worn away in flash floods and sandstorms but it never completely collapsed when father fell ill his heart stopped flowing for a few seconds before being reborn unlike the eldest daughter who continually died until she didn't anymore immortal handful of her flesh incineration blemished by fragments of pinkish brown bone puncturing the plastic bag she sleeps inside a sarcophagus of sand and unadorned cedar inlaid with mother-of-pearl the board father used to play backgammon games on a fake papyrus painted lapis lazuli sky with naked Nuut extended below the price in Egyptian pounds for a photograph with his family

Mahmoud

I.

your throne is vacant
was margin is mystic

like Rumi, *your voice*,
a ruin of ruminations

a remnant *of Jericho*
walls, viscera of olives

hard pit *of wind*.
The thrown: stone of

one who builds up
blank space *takes this*

road blocked *road won't*
come back empty handed.

II.

How dare the night
you die under Cancer,

the sky *deserted*, we
avid constellations *crowd around*

fonts of your celestial,
your sounds like cartography.

This space *you held*,
you hewed *them in*
held lungs, your hands

burning. Something like birth
rises like the moon

like your *stones. The*
way the *heavens grow*
heavy again with stardust.

Arabic

I am not
Writing a poem
about you

listening.
to Marcel Khalife
singing *khalas*.

That is not
What this
is

the oud.
is
extraordinary.

I am only
Putting down thoughts
on paper.

every other syllable.
strummed
A scene set near South Lebanon.

Thoughts
about you.
yes,

al-shajaar zeitoun and *al-jabaal*
Accents full of phlegmy sighs,
glottal stops.

But
only
thoughts—

ukhtee,
I will memorize
the language of my dead.

They are not
so permanent
as a poem yet.

rising phonetic
from quieted earth
As skeletons of accentual,

they are
only
words—

rattling. Resurrected
by ancient rhythm and
a desire to summon *mindoun*.

Someone Of Syria

My people died. My people die.

Drowning en route to an escape, a painful and shameful death.

And here am I living in plenty. Swimming in an infinity pool in Austin,

trying to forget the war raging inside Aleppo. And in peace this is

deep tragedy. This warred place where milk and honey are hard to find anymore,

where children are found as bloodied bodies, where few would care to witness

this drama. It's hard to look directly into the eyes of a dying nation.

It's hard to focus on the dark brown iris of desolation. For my people are

as birds with broken wings incapable of flight inside this earthly inferno,

dark brown injured birds trying to swim away from flames left behind by the flock.

The Calypso Deep: A graveyard

I.

Rubber rescue boat
leaking gasoline onto
burning battle-tested feet.
Or maybe warped driftwood
rusty nail-riddled
slicing malnourished muscles
where knees locked like
sardines after the catch.

II.

Soon we will catch fish
whose flesh was fed
by our own
fish-food.
Our own flesh,
what did not float
could only sink.

III.

Is this the fall
from prosperity
the prophets profited from?
Is this how the world looks
away from us?
Do we all drown now,
is that the way of unity?

IV.

A pomegranate branch
as make-shift life jacket
across the lap of a child
who did not choose this life.

A Post-Apocalyptic Nightmare

No one killed. No one killing. No one killer. No one kills

prayer in the mosque

without reason. Without motive. Without sacrifice. Without regret

black procession tinier than ants.

A human but no humanity. A book but no binding. A sundial but no gnomon.

A breeze but no garden.

Are you ready? Are you waiting? Are you aware? Are you armed?

The much awaited enemy has not come.

Yet another year. You're here yet again. The end yet is near.

He ate his yellow sun and vomited.

Icarus burns before an impact with earth creates space.

Time:

impact craters

lemon crushed by a wheel grating under funerals

Allowed to happen. Allowed by gold. Allowed by language.

Between Beirut and Sidon there is sea.

Between yes and no there is desert. Between rich and poor there is dusk.

The night is not of war.

War is every second. War is everywhere. War is every word.

Nothing is crushed by the silence.

Prayer is silent. Poems are silent. Peace is silent. Protest is silenced.

Guns are rusting in travel bags.

This is a

Revolution.

No one killed.

Shabab Suria

What we have lost is insurmountable. Her soft to the sweet of swaddled broods.

Not the earth—the half asleep inhabitants who have yet to crawl away from her—

the loss is that glance. Her loss is greater than every word in every language

we no longer exchange, the unspoken trust between the grown and the still growing.

Between one child, what was promised at birth to inherit one day—

and another promised a death that looks like sleeping and leaves no wounds.

As they share her suffering over a breakfast of olive oil and sarin gas,

a loaf of bread after a long night of uninterrupted dreaming.

We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief.

We are not born to be barons of wealth. *We*
are soft spoken wordsmiths, not soldiers. *We* are
not broken by hardship or hate. *We* are not
reconciled to tyranny, to false truths,

to our bloody tongues. *We* will spit out
the vitriol we swallowed as kids. *To* our
oppressors, we will say “wait for us”—well aware of
who we are and what we want to taste.

Whet our teeth against ragged amendments,
their inherent greed and emptiness. *We* will
howl at their hollowed-out faces. *We* will spit
on supremacy till thirst takes our throats.

Our resistance is written without ink. *Our*
grief is rising.

This is why I can't be your lover

*You want me to forget the face of death
so that my smile will be beautiful again.*

*You want me and I am only impossible.
The word beautiful isn't around any more.*

*If you thought it was that easy to forget
the way death trembled at the bombing*

*of booksellers, of Baghdad and memory.
When an idea was beautiful and dangerous,*

*begging for safety. Or my father's prayers
for his daughter's pained face just before*

*they shut down her breathing apparatus.
I watched his eyes form the doomed edge*

*of whatever he was of a cloud's downpour
before looking at her last gasp of air.*

*Would you then learn to remember that
I can't smile and recall that beautiful end?*

II.

The First Station

You weigh upon me and I cannot shrug you off! Why can't my religion be soft and easy?

unaffected lately

daylight lingers before full morning
in the dull space between lazy eyelids

two slices of slightly buttered oatmeal bread

two eggs over easy-medium
feed the one with the broken yoke to the lucky dog
remember the eldest daughter who died one year ago

start the car defroster then recite Rumi

into the foggy air of freezing cold

reverse down the driveway once the rear windshield melts enough

to see clearly the slick road
remember the eldest daughter who died two years ago

arrive at work early park in the empty lot walk to the office with a forest view

wait for a phone call from the youngest daughter
watch two brown squirrels chase tails up tall oak trees
stare off into half-sleep wake startled by snow falling from gutters
remember the eldest daughter who died three years ago

after a couple classes go by go home and let the lucky dog sit at your side

read "whispers in the loggia" website and ruminate on the Roman Catholic church
write about what's wrong with it before starting the stations of the cross

take the lucky dog for a long walk on the Kal-Haven trail

turn on the television and watch a Tigers game

text the youngest daughter about baseball

remember the eldest daughter who died four years ago

take the lucky dog outside for a fourth time

eat a few thick slices of pink lady apple
brush the sharp skin from between back molars

wash away weighted sighs under the heaviest shower setting
lock the lucky dog in the laundry room and head to bed

remember the eldest daughter who died five years ago
dream of her

Inheritance

That feeling
that seems to
pervade all my being—

On edge, jumpy,
Vigilant, on patrol—
while on the outside,

I try to look
composed, in control,
laid back even.

What a fucking
tight rope
to walk,

that mutilated apple now mush beneath some boot
coat the orchard ground in an aroma of utter decay
that saccharine soil mother carried a daughter across.

the feeling I get now when I get too close to rot.
the putrid stench of autumn prepping for tundra
my body resists a glimpse of death's willing gaze.

at my body in the full face of the new moon
the smile it makes for good measure
The smile it makes of a triggered pain.

saccharine fruit? What willing gaze? This
is a fresh-squeezed lemon smile. I intend
to stay like this for a long while.

The Sixth Station

I too am marked forever. I carry your image within and without me.

when Aunt Mary was born her Mother

| loathed her for having Father's face
| | loathed Jido for forcing Mother's hand in
| | | holy matrimony before age eighteen
| | | | Father found Mother stuffing grape leaves
| | | | | Mother never wanted his weighty fingers
| | | | | | folding her family's food the wrong way
| | | | | | | eating the excess rice & raw meat
| | | | | | | | onions dipped in sugar |
| | | | | | | | Father got what he desired every time
| | | | | | | | Father had what Mother deserved to have too
| | | | | | | | whatever Mother longed for was forbidden
| | | | | | | | whatever Mother lauded she lost at conception
| | | | | when Aunt Mary was born her Mother just married
| | | something her Mother knew nothing good about
| | a man with an insatiable taste for olives
a woman with scarred olive branch arms

Water

If you can remember the prayer
I'll listen for your praise

I'll refill your fire-felled forests
I'll flourish your scorched fields

if it isn't too late for faith to work my fingers
if it isn't too late to wash my face in blue gold

draped in lapis lazuli my silver hair
still trails from my fastened chariot

four white clouds are empty overhead
four white clouds are absent overhead

maybe your wisdom was wrong
when you erased my elegy

the dark grey of rain
the hard sting of sleet

on unexpectant skin
on the earth as she cooled off

as she replenished me once.

It is

I have been told,	<i>“love cannot alter it.”</i>	I did not need to be told.
I have written nothing of it.	<i>Words cannot add to it.</i>	I must not try to write it.
I can only describe you.	<i>You yourself have survived it.</i>	I will survive one day.
I can only carry you	<i>& so you must carry it</i>	clenched in your ashen fist.
I need to forgo foresight	<i>or fashion it</i>	a cluster of stardust across ink.
I need you to turn over	<i>into a thing that carries itself</i>	into sunlight & night.

Elegy for the Eldest Daughter

Always, mom's kitchen window latched shut above the sink.
On the ledge just outside sheltering wisps of snow,
my mind, faltering between frozen solid and a slow drip.

Forever the Christmas pine is nearly naked from frequent ice storms.
In sharp wind off Lake Michigan limbs lash against the fence line,
my heart, a twisted metal boundary defining the backyard.

Cardinal where we worked ash through calloused hands into topsoil.
Out the wooden box filled with bone fragments left open,
the window, latched shut beside a garden where we planted blue lilies.

Wondering when the moon was full and the sun stayed up past ten,
what blinking stars settled in the bark stripped branches
would be, before flickering out across a frog pond that was once filled-

in with fat koi fish: black, white, bright orange.
Your life— a great blue heron stealing breakfast before full morning,
now, a graceful felon inflicting loss.

Love —roost of red-crested birds disturbed along the laundry line,
You, cardinal wings cut across the blinding white.

Fragments: in response to mother's notebook

I.
mother as child
loved less than
bottles of gin
watched her world
waltz off tempo
while her mother
imbibed she hid
though no one
was seeking her

II.
Wauseon, Ohio was
is "a place
for people" to
farm cow corn
and breed abandon
with prayer or
intoxication and sin
rock and roll
run along the
railroad tracks
ride a motorcycle
with no helmet
find the easiest
exit

III.
mother made me
a cuddly baby
clinging to her
leg like it
was a merry-go-round
ride I learned
how to hold
happiness like a
happenstance
bumble bee with
an Epi-pen nearby

IV.

both at once
mother and I
were brittle ice
for different reasons
for similar feelings
heartbrokenness is not
as bad as
prolonged numbness of
body a beast
and chaotic mind
our warmth went
missing

V.

“spirit rein me
in” she writes
in the margins
my mother a
memoir made up
of fragments and
me and my sister
Rachal who months
before my sister died
stopped talking to
my mother who
blames
bad timing and
herself for not
talking to Rachal
more frequently and
for fearing that
she became like
her mother lost
in a deep
pain

The Eighth Station

Help us realize that we are meant to be carriers of light, not bearers of darkness.

Grandmother mourned the loss of Lebanon and innocence the smell of thyme and sesame slow roasting in the oven. The smile on her son's face before communion wafers and wine was reminiscent of her last supper in Upper Galilee where figs were sticky when ripe and a fish was blackened on both sides and she ate the eyes first. She sold her gold wedding ring to pay back debtors during the great depression. Grandfather laid car parts for an Oldsmobile factory in Flint to feed his family. He dreamed of Greater Syria at night and the ancient streets of Aleppo where he gave out milk to strangers in full moonlight.

Origins

	I come from guns fall mornings damp leaves skunk piss	I come from crucifixes sesame grape leaves homemade arak	
to cover it all up.			to burn it all up.
	I come from land not my own all my own	I come from famine not my own all my own	
we worked it with our own hands. For generations			we breathed it in with our own orange blossoms. Forever
we have come from kitchens— three square meals, the garden, before this—no decay.		we have come from fauna— figs for breakfast, thyme for lunch, without this—no breath.	
	I come from dirt gravel dusty fingernails	I come from sea foam foreign harbors	
backwards and backwoods dead apples and arrowheads			barnacles from Beirut sea spray and dysentery.
For generations we came from these woods—these hallows now hollow.		For sanctuary we came from those streets—those holy now hollow.	
Missouri means <i>wooden canoe people</i>		Lebanon means <i>becoming white</i>	
	stolen language.	lost inflections.	

Slowly counting down from 10 while taking deep breaths

Sister, I've missed you.	sawing myself in half spent days, Leaving,	on a sticky barstool, a twenty percent tip, counting down.
I remember your yellowed skin. or death	my body Where not even I, could find it,	waiting for answers or swollen from standing so long, a full disclosure.
Sleepless, terrified	I have nights lately	restless legs, on melatonin.
I'm next In line,	looking for my body	a new heart. with measured beats.
Writing bullshit Emotions, Poetry	because thoughts would be useless	panic attacks. are equally as divisive. as forced similes
about PTSD About dead ends,	without hands, and lips	the post. apocalyptic drought.
To collapse, how I can't remember	I would not know hips touch,	the freshly mopped floor, buckled. Sometimes how it happens.
I can't forget the same but quiet sobered up,	whether fever or chill or if	your face was after crashing, high as fuck, crashing still.
Russian roulette red, Nail polished toes	a mouth could stop me from	unmuffled silence. hard footfalls.
French manicure Fingers flinch	unnecessary words forming	counting down. a deep breath.

The Third Station

Help us to live with each other's mere humanity with greater and greater grace.

it would've been the eldest daughter's 30th birthday
but it wasn't so you bought her bereft mom an hour long massage that slow morning and family in
Ohio opened up the home in Hocking Hills where hiking was necessary and bird watching for the
indigo buntings in the backyard which ended after an acre at a small creek and a staircase down to
the trickle of spring water out of a hillside slit where wild lilies grow above on the grassy edge and
below beside the creek bed late spring and early summer the tadpoles and pollywogs swim inside
the mucky stream making it appear as if ink blotted out the blue reflection of clear sky and sunshine
filled the air with dawn's dew mid-day the stairs were slippery when wet wooden steps warped and
molded and worn away soles slipped up and then your back snapped back then forward too fast and
it fractured

Permanently

there is a storm coming
thickly painted clouds
press

your house
sunlit in glossy whites
& blues blotted out
darkened

there will be no room for
light in your halls

the greens & reds of
the flowers fade
fall away
entirely

there will be only grey left
grey
scooped out with a trowel

pasted on

you will breathe it in

fleeting across fields of color
pipe smoke out an open window
black ink into a bowl of reduced fat milk

a canvas
greens & tangerines
torn apart

your accident
was altered to look like art

rust-colored hinges
ochre & orange & red on red

gathered in the garage beside
a box of your old clothes

of maroon socks & green sweaters
your favorite painting folded up

a faint memory

Mother Once Told

My mother,

head of black curls,

once told me that

we are like the rhododendron,

which blooms large, bright, and

heavy in the woods,

belonging

to the far place where

the sun rises, even if

everyone has forgotten

My mother,

whose shoulders are load bearing,

once told me that

struggle was a noun we carry with us

in pockets of shadow

where light never pauses.

I watched my sister die beneath

the moon's still shining,

her shoulders still.

How I held her up.

Earthbound

The winter night moves

toward noxious May

like a large drunk man, loathsome,

the rotting teeth of a roadkilled carcass

or is it me

who would not wait to pass safely
over black ice?

We are not moths,

who are born of earthbound mothers

we cocooned forth

as sapiens unfamiliar with fear or fire yet

changed enough

who succumb to slushed wheels

an unchanged world

the winter night preserves.

Later

I.

I cannot write
a poem about you

not now

it would mean
too much

I would need
more ink

and a sheet of paper

cleaner than this one

I cannot give you
a poem

because I
would be

giving you
a piece of myself

a larger piece than

I can afford

I will not write
a poem about you

only words
and empty spaces

II.

without the piano
fingers pressed an octave

in the past

music died from
spontaneous silence

white keys worn grey
where fingers imprinted

fumbling progressions

where whole notes were held

the letter B elongated by
a pressed brass pedal

was
rehearsed

a fated cacophony
a misplaced whole note held out

an entire opus

only a broken metronome

without the piano
without you

only tocks
and dust covered ivory

III.

Fire

My yellow is yours, your red is mine.

give me an ancient song,
and I'll give you a forbidden light

I'll give you a forbidden night
syllables sliding from front teeth

out into an enigmatic space
amidst eternal black drops

a backdrop for gods to grow colors
from pin pricks into calligraphic prints
of my mother

she is not the sun
she is what comes after

you are made in her image
you are dancing in her clothes

my wild hair waves like yours
in the spring winds I glow

the ground at your feet
I carve shadows.

The Garden of My Agony

Always. Always say always.

 Only today can we say our story.
A thousand small Persian horses sleeping
 safely.

 Yes, the syllable sprains like a dry branch
in the plaza with the moon on your forehead.

 Come out and shine like a crocus shines
when I embrace your waist four nights.

No one knows the perfume
 that ignites our alphabet.
No one knows the martyrdom
 half lost in a pollen dusted lawn.

 Do not question elegance. The world opens up to you
between gypsum and jasmine.

 Do not ask the word what shapes each side.
Your body is a fugitive of always.

Enemy of the snow
 stamped on a worn wall.

A hummingbird of love between the teeth.

 This is not what we are; this is not what we want.

Love Poem

We eat orchid for breakfast.
This love is an outlier.

Interpreter of my sighs, you ask
what is it?

When I bought the print of two women,
I didn't yet know it would be of *us*.

My heart,
trouble builds above our valley.

Beloved, your neck is soft and sweet
in the morning.

The image is usually of rock,
I see more a feather—

That is, your willingness to be
blown in the wind of my grief.

My mouth moves *anger*,
but means to say *gratitude*.
You cannot, will not
know.

Luminous point, incandescent,
a star is both light and bomb.

Love Poem

A side of rosemary olive oil toast.
This loaf is still soft at the center.

One or two slices, habibti?
You say you see mold on the crust.

You said throw the whole thing away.
I cut the crust off and fed us anyway.

Apple buttered in late autumn.
We survive on the slight rot of winter.

You, who displays gerbera daisies
beside my bedside, inside an old saké glass,

balanced on the brink of catastrophe.
You are graceful with your loss,

your apple cored. I am
always decomposing.

Your mouth moves *night*,
but means to say *luminous*.
I have to, I must
relive that lunar cycle.

You and I are moonshine.
The stuff gold is made of.

After Orlando

His death had become

a far too common occurrence,

the dropped side of a song.

It appears the apocalypse is among us,

melody undone by damage.

Mass extinction amidst mass existence.

Exactly the feel of teeth entering

when my back was salsa dancing

an apple's bruise,

beside an illusion of someone else's Eden.

Yeheya's Portrait of a Poet

The charcoal lines of her wide hips hiking
up to meet my blackened fingertips; at
a distance I knew she would sit with me,
and watch my sketchbook fill with dim figures
as sunset gave way to dusk and stars.

The sand beneath our feet was still and still
it spread inside hollows of my paper's
heavy tooth; texture held her blurry frame
as she inhaled my hand-rolled and exhaled
the Milky Way; *her soul is a battlefield,*
upon which her reason and her judgment
wage war against passion and appetite.

My hand held onto her
words, incessantly inserting letters—
where her hair should be an Arabic 'ح'
wraps around her square 'ث' face and 'س' breasts
her long 'أ' legs; her body belongs
to calligraphy; lingering silence
between each mid-August meteoroid
alight on earth's cold edge of endless space.

I handed her my cigarette before
she took it to her sunburned lips, and let
the smoke return to her a sense of sin,
a strange landscape; the desert inside her.

What's After

I am not lovely,
I am clad

in loveliness,
a slip,

unremarkable
and clean,

like a monastery
sitting room,

no stains,
no glass,

one book.

I am not wasted,
I am what's after

the waste,
a desert,

undulating
and sunken,

like a ruined bathhouse
sitting beneath sand,

not dead,
not gone

just hiding.

I was told to break the cycle

and it was violence beckoning violence to come back again sometime

stuck in an ache for more ache and aching for someone to suffer

like meat ground up in a meat grinder sometimes needs more grinding

in our teeth the gristle reminds us of muscles we wanted to forget

the fear that fear we feared for repetition of the same sad mistakes

in our throats an obvious scream for someone like me to echo

we refused to refuse the refuse of our inheritance of a pain passed down

to go on this way is like not going anywhere as I deadman drift around

past it I can't name it where limestone cliffs corrode at the edge of salt water

Embodiment

All tongue this language of disorient,
this transliteration of lipstick is wicked *and wet.*

All hungry, all delineated darkness in absence of light,
or presence of red, abundance of liquor in my *haunted throat.*

Today, corporeal, is controversial, is intentional,
is the definition of *what we do,*
is secret: the lost breath between shots.

Molten

*Raw heat of my childhood,
brotherhood with a boy blew into my veins.*

*Those stories, those pomegranates' pierced seeds,
sour juices oozing through bruised rind—shred the boils*

*off this skin, hollow this honey combed cavern.
Lava coursing my capillaries, love ephemeral as a brother*

*who let loose his curio by pummeling my arteries,
hide or seek in his back shed, shocking my heart into seeing*

*that the same hatred was holding my Osh-Kosh overalls
at my Achilles' tremble when he acted out—
his story fell on me.*

A Conversation with *The Prophet*

I.

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the
selfsame well from which your laughter rises
was oftentimes filled with your tears. And when*

my willingness to sit beside your tears
turns into oud strings and a song about
strangers linked by old Cairo and Turkish

coffee, we exchange our names and shake hands
dehydrated by hot sun beams on sand.
Beneath this desert a seabed sleeps un-

abandoned. A kiss on each weak cheek, yes,
my skin is the same shade as yours and you
have lived half longer. Our hearts have slowed some

to a rested rate of moving along
to a tabla drum tapped on a distant
dune to the tune of a new lullaby.

II.

*And when you have reached the mountain top, then
you shall begin to climb. And when the earth
shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.*

And when the lights go out at night, you will
see millions of attention starved suns dot
the death black sky. And when you sleep outside

in early august, you will watch comets
cut across the stratosphere, a space you
can't inhabit. And when you try to trans-

late pre-Islamic poetry at twi-
light, unfamiliar words fill in for the
dark. The language of the afterlife is

silt on the surface of an oasis
where you sand dance the dabke alone
in a dead fire's final glow. And I cry.

Child of the Universe

I can't dry your tears.
I can't find your mother in the crystal rubble.

I can't cradle her cracked skull.
I can't shield your doe eyes from shrapnel.

I can't soothe your skin from white phosphorous blooms.
I can't keep you as my own.

I can't make you leave Aleppo.
I can't smuggle you out of burnt side streets.

I can't teach you the constellations through smoke plumes.
I can't reveal your fate at the bottom of a broken teacup.

I can't control your seasoned screams.
I can't even fetch a pail of water.

I can't sing you a lullaby to the unsteady beat of barrel bombs.
I can't even tell you to close your eyes because I can't close mine either.

I can't bake baklava for you without orange blossom water and walnuts.
I can't cook rice for you without some controlled flames.

I can't give you sweets without bees without flowers without hives.
I can't pour you milk without an udder or a breast or a formula.

I can't promise you will survive to write poems because if you survive,
I can't promise you won't be bitter toward my inaction.

I can't paint a peaceful scene for you because
I can't remember if war ever ends.

I can't stop the sky from falling.
I can't stop the rain from stinging your open wounds.

I can't dull the blinding sun.
I can't kill for you.

I can't comb your dusty hair.
I can't tie your tattered shoes.

I can't replace the love that you once knew.
I can't collage your portrait when you're without a face.

I can't face your infinite stare.
I can't hand you some sugar, some socks, something normal.

I can't call this normal—this distance is not light-years but oceans and yet
I can't reach you this year or next or last or ever.

I can't watch your coffin sink in salt water or salted earth.

Notes

- “All the silenced, all the neglected, all the invisible” italicized text is translated from Ana Tijoux’s “Somos Sur (featuring Shadia Mansour).” This poem is in response to a video of a belly-dancing routine to the song “Somos Sur” by Gio of Zombie Bazaar Panza Fusion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpPFY0CNFus&feature=youtu.be>
- “Without water: the landscape of Aleppo” is ekphrastic in response to a photo released in August 2016 of Omran Daqneesh, a 5-year old Syrian boy sitting in an ambulance after being pulled from the rubble of a collapsed building, the result of one of many airstrikes in Aleppo.
- “Ghazal for Lost Women” originally appeared in *The California Journal of Poetics*; it incorporates a line of text from *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran.
- “Bracketed” is in response to a portion of a poem from Philip Metres’ *Sand Opera*.
- “Leaving: an analytic dictionary” is in response to an essay by Shatha Almutawa titled “Leaving.” I created a word bank from the words in her essay and created an analytic dictionary response to her sentence “Exposing students to different viewpoints is considered dangerous.”
- “Conversation with H.D.’s *Trilogy*” originally appeared in *The California Journal of Poetics*; it incorporates lines from H.D.’s epic long form poem, *Trilogy*.
- “After the Death of Poor Baby Moses / Osiris was Waiting to Weigh His Heart” is in collaboration with Ben Renne’s “After the Death of Poor Baby Moses”
- “The First Station,” “The Third Station,” “The Sixth Station,” “The Seventh Station,” “The Eight Station” are in response to my father. The stations refer to the Stations of the Cross mass he delivers every Good Friday at St. Thomas Moore’s Catholic Student Parish in Kalamazoo, Michigan.
- “Mahmoud” is in collaboration with Philip Metres’ “Marginalia for Mahmoud Darwish.”
- “Arabic” originally appeared in *45th Parallel*; it is in dialogue with a poem by my sister who died at 28. The Arabic words used in this poem are khalas (done), al-shajaar zeitoun (the olive trees), al-jabaal (the mountains), ukhtee (my sister).
- “Someone Of Syria” is in collaboration with a portion of Khalil Gibran’s “Dead Are My People.”
- “A Post-Apocalyptic Nightmare” is in conversation with a poem from Etel Adnan’s *Arab Apocalypse*.
- “Shabab Suria” incorporates a line from Saadi Youssef’s “The Glance.”
- “We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief” borrows a line from Gloria Anzaldua.
- “This is why I can’t be your lover” originally appeared in *The California Journal of Poetics*; it is in conversation with a portion of Diane Seuss’ poem, “I’m glorious in my destruction like an atomic bomb.”
- “Inheritance” and “Fragments” all include portions of writing from a notebook my mother kept notes in.

- “Fire” and “Water” were the result of a collaboration with artist Nahid Navab for “Call and Response,” an exhibit sponsored by George Mason University. “Call and Response” pairs a visual artist with a writer to collaborate on a given theme.
- “It is” incorporates fragments from Anne Carson’s *Nox*.
- “Elegy for the Eldest Daughter” italicized text is a Facebook post my mother made on my sister’s Facebook wall when she was missing her eldest daughter.
- “Origins” is alongside a poem by Melanie Tague titled “Origins in Two Parts.”
- “Slowly counting down from 10 while taking deep breaths” originally appeared in *Outlook Springs*; it incorporates text from my sister’s poem “Magician.”
- “Permanently” is in dialogue with a poem my sister wrote the day before she died.
- “Mother Once Told” is in response to Ela Thompson’s poem “The Labyrinth.”
- “Earthbound” is in response to Madeleine Wattenberg’s “Poem Pulled to the Median.”
- “Later” is in dialogue with my sister’s poem “Later.”
- “The Garden of My Agony” originally appeared in *Outlook Springs*; it is a mash-up of two translations. The first translation is of Federico Garcia Lorca’s “Gacela of Unexpected Love.” The second translation is of the Italian poet, Eugenio Montale.
- “Love Poem” is in response to and in collaboration with poet Holly Mason’s “Love Poem.”
- “After Orlando” is in response to a portion of Brian Teare’s poem “Californian.”
- “A Conversation with *The Prophet*” and “Yeheya’s Portrait of a Poet” incorporates lines from Khalil Gibran’s *The Prophet*.
- “What’s After” responds to a line from Jane Huffman’s “I am not lovely, I am clad.”
- “I was told to break the cycle” incorporates a line from Aaron Coleman’s “Viciousness in Ends.”
- “Embodiment” is an ekphrastic poem in response to artist Jessica Kallista’s “Shift Freedom” and in conversation with her poem “Sulca in Subspace.” This poem is forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review*.
- “Molten” is in collaboration with Meg Chuhuran’s poem “Molten.”
- “Child of the Universe” is an ekphrastic poem in response to artist Mojdeh Rezaeipour’s “Child of the Universe (2016).”

BIOGRAPHY

Danielle Badra graduated from Kalamazoo Central High School in Kalamazoo, MI in 2004. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Kalamazoo College in 2008. She received her Master of Fine Arts in English from George Mason University in 2017. Much of her work inside and outside of the classroom is centered on social justice, and dispelling stereotypes of the Middle East.