

Border

I am in repose,
as my wife reads a poem about war

the last thing I need
is for the tanks to advance into my bed

Bullets have made numerous holes
in my dreams

You put your eye up to one of them:
you see a street
its skin whitened with snow
if only it did not snow
if the borders between the streets and the bedcovers were clear

Now the tanks have crossed the trenches into our bedsheets
and one by one they enter my dream:

I was a kid
my mother washed the dishes
and my father returned home with his black mustache
When the bombs poured forth
all three of us were children...
The following pictures of this dream will tighten your chest
Shut your eyes
Put your lips on this little vent
and just breathe
Just breathe
Breathe!
Breathe!
Damn it!
Just Breathe!
Breathe!

The doctor shakes his head
The nurse shakes her head
The doctor wipes the sweat from his brow
And the green mountain chain
on the screen
turns to desert.

Translated from Persian by Ahmad Nadalizadeh and Idra Novey

Kaveh Akbar

Learning to Pray

My father moved patiently
cupping his hands beneath his chin,
kneeling on a janamaz

then pressing his forehead to a circle
of Karbala clay. Occasionally
he'd glance over at my clumsy mirroring,

my too-big Packers T-shirt
and pebble-red shorts,
and smile a little, despite himself.

Bending there with his whole form
marbled in light, he looked like
a photograph of a famous ghost.

I ached to be so beautiful.
I hardly knew anything yet—
not the boiling point of water

or the capital of Iran,
not the five pillars of Islam
or the Verse of the Sword—

I knew only that I wanted
to be like him,
that twilight stripe of father

mesmerizing as the bluewhite Iznik tile
hanging in our kitchen, worshipped
as the long faultless tongue of God.

Copy

He just sat inside of me
searching me
searching my world
searching inside of me for the world.
He plucked a word from deep within my folds
and placed it on his temple
his brain decaying.
He sprinkled words
from his mouth onto my life.
The flimsy borders inside of me collapsed
my flimsy borders collapsed
I, a flimsy border, collapsed.

We were displaced.
I, a composite:
the world, searching, brains, life, borders, folds
decay, disintegration
and a second attempt at life
my second life!

Come breathe inside my death
we have been displaced
come breathe inside the world of my death
we have been displaced
come breathe the world within my death

There was always a word instead of me
that you could squander
on your temple
the laughter of your eyes

You, a copy from inside: words, waste, sawdust, death,
a vein through which you crossed my borders
a vein through which you crossed my borders!
You passed through my folds
you passed me by

Translated from Persian by Blake Atwood

Wake-up Call

I can see my mother, apron over her nightgown,
setting the table for breakfast, a stack of lavash
steaming at the center, honey and milk skin,
feta with fruit, chickpea-and-chicken mash
dusted with cinnamon. I can see my father,
already in his coveralls and cap,
filling a cup to the brim with hot tapwater
and emptying it into another cup

and emptying that cup into another
until all three are warmed for tea. I can hear
the kettle whistling and pull the covers tight
around my head, against the coming light,
for any moment now they will open the door
and lift the covers and find that I'm not there.

Glaucoma

The corn poppies came first
then the locusts
and after that the unravelling wind.
That was how childhood looked to you
before the dark water, before the thorns,
before the mountain range of a thousand mosques
cast shadow over those wild flowers.

First the poppies went
then grandmother
then the royal rooms grew shabby,
the photos of Oppenheimer, Lumumba,
the red furniture—everything went to the second hand shop.

Joyous accordions and flags of mourning,
Turks and Kurds,
little blue patterned headscarves—
all passed by in the street.
“By Appointment to...” the Princes, my father’s brothers,
was stamped on every cup and shisha,
my mother, first in line for Friday prayer, kept her back to me,
my brother joined the Basij.

First the locusts come, then the poppies
no
first the poppies went
then the locusts...
The hollow of the eye fills with snow,
the valleys of winter are white
then come the thorns and the dark waters....

The Hour of Execution

In the door's lock a key turned

A smile trembled on his lips
like the image of water dancing along the ceiling
from the reflection of the shining sun

In the door's lock a key turned

Outside
the carefree color of daybreak
moved like a wayward note turning and turning upon the holes
of the flute
in search of its home

In the door's lock a key turned
A smile danced on his lips
like the image of water dancing along the ceiling
from the reflection of the shining sun

In the door's lock
a key turned.

Solmaz Sharif

Safe House

SANCTUARY where we don't have to

SANITIZE hands or words or knives, don't have to use a

SCALE each morning, worried we take up too much space. I

SCAN my memory of baba talking on

SCREEN answering a question (*how are you?*) I would ask and ask from behind the camera, his face changing with each repetition as he tried to watch the football game. He doesn't know this is the beginning of my

SCRIBING life: repetition and change. A human face at the seaport and a home getting smaller. Let's

SEARCH my father's profile: moustache black and holding back a

SECRET he still hasn't told me,

SECTION of the couch that's fallen a bit from his repeated weight,

SECTOR of the government designed to keep him from flying. He kept our house

SECURE except from the little bugs that come with dried herbs from Iran. He gives

SECURITY officers a reason to get off their chairs. My father is not afraid of

SEDITION. He can

SEIZE a wild pigeon off a Santa Monica street or watch

SEIZURES unfold in his sister's bedroom—the FBI storming through.
He said *use wood sticks to hold up your protest signs then use them in*

SELF-DEFENSE *when their horses come*, his eyes

SENSITIVE when he passes advice to me, like I'm his

SEQUEL, like we're all a

SERIAL caught on Iranian satellite TV. When you tell someone off,
he calls it

SERVICING. When I stand on his feet, I call it

SHADOWING. He naps in the afternoon and wakes with

SHEETLINES on his face, his hair upright, the sound of

SHELLS (SPECIFY)—the sound of mussel shells on the lip of the
Bosphorus crunching beneath his feet. He's given me

SHELTER and

SHIELDING, shown it's better to travel away from the

SHOAL. *Let them follow you* he says from somewhere in Los Angeles
waiting for me. If he feels a

SHORTFALL he doesn't tell me about it.