



Recorded Events

Title: 2010 Seattle Reads 'Secret Son': 'Unrolling the Grape Leaves'

Chris Higashi:

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I'm Chris Higashi, the program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. And thank you all for joining us for this evening, Unrolling the Grape Leaves, readings by local Arab American writers, Samar Abulhassan, Ghida Sinno, and Maged Zaher. Today's event is part of Seattle Reads Secret Son by Laila Lalami, who was born in Morocco.

Let me just say briefly what it's about. This is a story of a young man, Youssef, who has grown up in the slums of Casablanca with his mother. He has believed that his father was a poor, respected school teacher, but then he finds out that his father is actually alive, a wealthy businessman living in Casablanca. So he sets out to meet him, and he does. He's welcomed into Nabil's sort of sophisticated and corrupt world for a time and then rejected with really disastrous consequences. So what you have is you have the worlds of rich and poor and modern and traditional in this struggle for identity. So I think of it as a story about the kinds of things that turn young people, disaffected young people to religious extremism.

So this is the 12th year of Seattle Reads, the library's widely emulated one book community reading and discussion program. Since we started this thing, literally hundreds of these programs have been done around the country and internationally. So we're grateful to the Wallace Foundation for funding since its inception.

Additional support this year from KUOW Public Radio, from Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, and a new partner this year, Seattle Arts & Lectures. So we also thank The Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs to our independent bookstore partners, Elliott Bay Book Company and University Book Store. And finally to the Seattle Public Library Foundation, whose support makes possible so many of our free library programs.

So Laila Lalami will be here in Seattle, May 6th through the 10th. She'll make six public appearances to talk with readers about her book. The library's main event is Friday evening, May 7th, and then she'll close out the series with an appearance in Seattle Arts & Lectures literary series on Monday, May 10th. So we are looking to all of you to help fill those 2,500 seats.

Okay. So prior to Laila's visit, a whole series of programs, panel discussions, films, Arab story times, and I think a special day that we're calling Arab Cultural Day with a focus on Morocco. That'll be at town hall, downstairs. Activities for children, mint tea and desserts, storytelling, henna, and so on.

So now I'll introduce the three writers that we're going to hear. I'll introduce all of them at once, and then we won't interrupt the readings. So first, Samar Abulhassan earned her MFA from Colorado State University. She's born to Lebanese immigrants, raised with multiple languages. Samar is especially committed to helping young people trust their own experience of the world through their writing. She works as a programming coordinator for 826 Seattle, the nonprofit writing center, and as an instructor for Seattle Arts & Lectures' Writers in the Schools program. She's an alum of Hedgebrook, the wonderful women's Writers Retreat on Whidbey Island. She's the author of two chapbooks.

Next will be Ghida Sinno. Ghida was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. She works as development manager for the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas. Her repertoire includes coordinating the Arab Heritage Month at the Richard Hugo House and producing an Arab film festival at the Broadway Performance Hall.

Ghida has been the recipient of grants from Artists Trust and Barbara Deming Memorial Fund. She also has done a residency at Hedgebrook, and she was part of the 2008 Jack Straw Writers Program.

Ghida earned her BA in English from UCLA and her MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington. Her work has appeared in Seattle Review, Many Mountains Moving, and Westwind Review.

And then finally, Maged Zaher was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, where he earned his master's of science degree in structural engineering, specializing in computer aided design. He earned his master's degree in computer science from the University of Akron.

Maged has worked at large software companies, including Microsoft. His poems have appeared in Columbia Poetry Review, Exquisite Corpse, Tinfish, and other magazines. He's the author of two chapbooks, and his debut collection called Portrait of the Poet As an Engineer was published in 2009 by Pressed Wafer. Okay, so here is Samar. Thank you.

Samar Abulhassan:

The title for this program, Unrolling the Grape Leaves, emerged from a conversation among Ghida, Maged, and I as we reflected on what it meant to be bilingual and writing specifically as Arab Americans. Annoyed by the tendency in a lot of bilingual writing to fall into nostalgia or overemphasis on, say, signature ethnic food, we imagined a silent film in which two friends sat side by side and unrolled a giant pot of stuffed grape leaves. With nervous or nimble fingers, the friends would separate the dark olive leaves from the parsley rice mixture until two piles remained, a heap of torn grape leaves and a mound of aromatic rice flecked with tomato and onion.

This cinematic and somewhat aggressive impulse resulted from a core feeling that Arab American writing, like any other writing, be free to document the slippery self or write into whatever the individual landscape presented without being overly burdened by nostalgia or whips of heritage or family recipes.

Interestingly, the very thing I did not want to write about in this intro has parked itself here. But if writing is a site for whatever emerges, the point is not to drive the grape leaf or any other seemingly grandmotherly concern out of writing. In fact, as I write this, I'm flooded by some memories picking grape leaves with my mother in the alley behind the house, then emptying out gigantic white pillowcases onto the picnic table and removing protruding stems, making tall piles main side down to prepare them for cooking.

Once grape leaves are blanched, it is hard to keep them all intact. It is normal to have a pile of torn or mangled leaves, some of which are then hopefully used to line the sides of the pot and cushion the stuffed grape leaves during the cooking process. Sometimes these torn or seemingly incomplete leaves would leave me with a sense of anxiety, what to do with them, how many to throw away.

To be bilingual is to not be a master in any language. This has also left me with a deep respect for the fragment, the piecemeal, the delicate. I am hoping to offer a mosaic on the page, a conversation among broken hearts, seeming distances, or fleeting bits of experience.

So I'm going to read a little bit from my first two chapbooks and then just a little bit of new material. And this first chapbook is called Farah or Farah.

And the one thing I want to say before I begin is it started as an exploration to document the experience a young girl has hearing multiple pronunciations of her name. That one version begins in association with paper, another with fabric, stretchy, unformed, learning to trust.

First, grasp a new sound with little effort, the larynx adapts before it realizes the thing foreign. It's not really pronounced that way. How's it really pronounced? It's really pronounced like this. Imagine a room full of Farahs, tugging at their ears and spilling out of their seats to intercept imminent inflamed pronunciations. I am getting up and shutting this far out not to invite in something more milky, but rather to filter out fathers who insist on pressing out the breath between flowers. Later, unrobe them, tug at their chests, trace their faces unharmonic not to unsound a howl. If you don't trust me, I can't help you.

At the school intersection we meet anew, for the guard and bright apricot crosses you to ensure your safety, mouthing an articulation your parents did not intend, can't anticipate the springs between floorboards. Farah's aunt calls her on the other side of the street smiling. Witch winds scrapes, witch whistle blow, motion amplifies and dissipates.

When Farah stretches out her arms to meet her, the palms meet at a distance, brewing a heat, as if to contain a flying, furry animal. What the ear once spurns, the softer version swells up. It is given self-esteem. Illuminate contrast, adjust your name to a shape her vocal cords are capable of making. The effort, if it does not trigger a slideshow of the ways in which you have been slighted, invites a chance score that is neither ancestral nor contemporary.

These next few pieces are from a chapbook called Nocturnal Temple, and they are set in New Mexico, where I spent about nine months living and working at a Buddhist monastery.

Imagine your mother reading all the words you have ever written. Literate or illiterate, weaver of dresses or boots, eyes, smell, skin, your words in her nap sack, even though she breathes next to you, your failure to imagine indecipherable. Hunger vacant with foghorns, a missing protein thread.

When I can no longer listen to her words, I pluck out the vowel sounds and pin them to the clothesline outside my window, watch their hearts beat. I want to contest when anyone says language is poisonous. Even in the seams of small talk, watch her fingers weave something else.

Halfway through each meditation period, something like a bell and a whisper, posture. Adjust the pain pressing into my kidneys. Shards of a dream. I am at a monastery near a littered beach with several Arab women who take up entire couches to themselves, drink sugary mint tea while smoking cigarettes. Eyes marked with black liner, the air thick with laughter. We go to the beach to lift dirty foam cups from the sand. Red scarves tied around the neck, whipped from the wind. No one speaks during the day.

From my window, I watch her wash her delicate blouses. To illustrate the gentle care she received, she recalled an incident in which a woman visited her hospital port late at night and, with a flashlight, drew blood while she was asleep. Our phone call kept dropping, so we call each other back to mend the abrupt endings.

I noticed a sweater draped on the line outside. One gray weathered sleeve puffs with the breeze. Jason explains, "You don't bow before the officiant, stay on her wings, and then appear to appear at the same time." Isabel relays the travails of her imaginary children, a schoolhouse full of them. One goes into the mountains at night, worrying her.

While in remodeling, scratches on floor rearrange, cushions lifted to attic, threads on top visible to allow imperfections. Burn thumb at altar while lighting a candle, service versus no service, shoes line up thunderstorms. We sit alphabetically silent. The mosquitoes don't move.

Small bands of light circle her feet. In chasing the temple, what am I after? A vast mark on canvas, a sky untainted by plot. Each day, the floor is washed with vinegar and water, mopped in long, smooth strokes. This is your assignment. Trust, don't blacken all activities. Caress each event like the Butoh dancer follows the white balloon, as if this is all there is, a circle infected by helium shaping a stage. Witness her pauses, terror, disappointment, glee. She stops to saturate a corner. We quickly wipe the footprints infused with sweat before the procession begins, nocturnal temple.

In the flaps, door blushed open. Why does one awaken all others? She says, "I'm losing all reference points. A fugue or a fragment. What do I leave out?" News from foreign corridors. During the zikr, no native speakers, just syllables flattened. Lost my constitution at each threshold. Brink of clear eyed, nothing to utter, a flat sheet whipped in thunder.

Oh, enchantress, how to locate words before words. Blank yellow eyes faced me in the lineup. Long tapered fingers took down one bloodied close pin after another, blew away genetics, crumpled my sculptures of bird wire, redirected me to the sky. With wooden sticks, we were seated for hours. From pointing so long, outstretched arms numbed into wonder. Upstairs, a wasteland of birds, precise patterns land. In Rome, there were various kinds of prophets the frame keeps abandoning.

And finally, I wanted to read a few pieces from the Red Diaries, which I've been working on as of late. My mother did the pilgrimage to Mecca this last fall, and so that was factoring in. And there was also an arsonist in the neighborhood I was living in, and so there were many buildings burning down around me.

One: I build a lighted house and dwell inside. Without the post of fluency, I build them a home inside a book. Tie a red ribbon around the pipes to free the trapped areas. I drag a garden hose and water into the night. In this neighborhood, there are small fires and big ones, carcasses of cafes and theaters and restaurants. Your mother about to embark on a once in a lifetime pilgrimage.

Two: A child lifts a pomegranate to his ear, imagines planets, fist fights, seeds of wondrous villages. Mother, who are your fellow pilgrims, those you brush fences with? My skin hums next to his. Decades of wounds soften by tender collapse and slumber. My mother sends my sister-in-law out for scentless soaps.

Three: Touch his knee, taste my mother's archaic tears. Beneath my palms, electric presence of machines and pharmaceuticals, chemo drip. My eyes follow the horseshoe-shaped stitching on his head, which seal a reservoir, threads of phone conversation with my mother in which she tries to get me to grow my hair.

Four: Between my rib cage and my belly, like the soft part of an infant's head, tooth edges. We gather words together, let them live together for a while, then dissolve them. Nothing to stamp out, nothing to stomp on. Place phrases under water glasses. In Saudi Arabia, it is crawling into Saturday. My mother has gathered pebbles.

Five: This morning woke with the weight on chest. Last night dreamt of my death, California storms above my remains. The sentence on a journey no longer circling in on its subject, but I press on its insides to force an expanse. Skin boils, a gash, a streak of impulsive behavior.

Six: For months, I cannot hold food down for more than a few days at a time. I grow more careless with my umbrellas. Sickness death pilgrimage, it turns you into a baby. From far away, I trace the skin of her suitcase, feel its weight against my chest, expand and lighten.

Seven: Spreading, I can no longer discern your deep sea lament and mine, longing for your lost siblings. I leave, enter into, press against my edge, which if one less snot or a crawl uninhibited or palm suspended or jump or arm sore from giving or pinky swear. Flex of color and dream. Funfetti cake on paper plates balanced on the laps of your friends, the marrying couple.

Eight: I was always swallowing my words, afraid to speak. The young woman asks, "How do you spell refugee? Mother, there are no prescribed prayers here. Communication in any language is permissible." In the dark room, what wanes and swells, a sudden struck. His body weight presses into me, shuttles me into private corners, dismantled, flickers of wellbeing.

Nine: The kids I am working with at the cancer center arrive and depart with little notice. I do not memorize their coats. When we sit down to have an experience with language together, I am aware of words hovering at the lower lids, a fragment or an eyelash. Mother, your spine in a different country, sea of faces. White garb to insist we deliver our faces to each other, scruffy or clean, pores wide.

10: Mother, walk around with a hand in the small of your back. Body knotted from preparations. I do not know how she swallows or walks. Convince me to sit here. I eat out of silver bowls, dull, roasted vegetables, tamarind rice, one half of the summer fig perfectly ripe. A chronic pain which fumbles with its return mask. I loved his hands, which formed their own knitting club, steering toward an esoteric language all their own. That's all.

Ghida Sinno:

Hi, I'm Ghida. I'm the non-poet of the bunch. The only thing I'll say about the whole grape leaves thing is that really it's our way of wanting not to work with the traditional construct of the immigrant narrative and to just let our Arabness, whatever that is, show up in its own sweet way on its own sweet time. So when I start a story, I like to write, I like to start from wherever I want and not because I'm an Arab or because I have something to say about the Middle East crisis, which I don't.

I want to thank my friend Linda who's here today because she edited the story for me. She volunteers all her editing time, and I appreciate that because we bilinguals need someone to make sure it's all in English.

This story is about a woman who is making her first late night show appearance. It's called A Patriot Acts, A Patriot Acts. Soon it will be her turn to walk on stage to stop halfway across and wave, to deflect attention from her below national height, and then head to where the couch is. The comedian, the show's second guest, will stand up, give her a peck on the cheek and offer her the hot seat. She will kiss him back, sit, and immediately, immediately cross her legs and brush her hair back so as to lift the audience's gaze off her padded thighs, which are [inaudible 00:21:52] not ones befitting a primetime appearance, and focus it on her blue eye, black hair combo.

She will then take in the host's welcoming comments, flirt a little, giggle, and stifle the giggling with a sip of water from her mug, which she will then place back on the table and wait for her cue to launch into the personal anecdote she, the producer, and the publicist had agreed on, something about her silly habit of not changing her light bulbs until they all go out and she really can't see anymore, not even herself in the mirror. She will then cover her face with her hands while the audience laughs, brush her hair back with her fingers, and turn to the host and flirt some more until he asks her the one question everyone loves to ask, which is how many television sets she ended up with after her ordeal, which serves as the cue for her to draw the audience in by asking them to guess.

She will then reveal the number, and the audience will gasp. While the audience is exhaling, the host will grab a copy of her book and place it on the desk for the camera to close in on. Then flipping through its pages like it's something that ought to be recycled, he will offer that she was too young to write her memoirs and too young to be a doctorate.

He will say something to the effect of, "Yikes, I think I've read only one book since college, and that's my autobiography." As she's dispensing her reply, he will abruptly extend something that resembles a shark's tale, but which is really his right hand, thank her for coming, thank them both for coming and the audience for tuning in.

For now, she sits in the green room, in a [inaudible 00:23:27] evening dress and stilettos, occasionally looking up at the muted television screen where the comedian who had been keeping her company seconds ago is now simultaneously on stage and inside the television. Upright and confident with his glistening bald head and inverted triangle physique, he is a veritable joke dispenser to a friendly and well-trained studio audience.

She ponders unmuting the television, but something stops her, and she continues staring with delight and despair, as if at an aquarium. It's good enough for now that he appears poised and relaxed, almost sedated, considering the terror attack she just nursed him through.

Stand-up comedy, she concludes, is the only profession, if one can call it that, where one's physical awkwardness and distinctive mannerisms are an asset if played right. There's honesty in it, and maybe that's where the difficulty lies in the nudity, a nudity, even television, its editing machines, have to abide by. You can't mess with somebody's monologue once they managed to make it onto the stage that is, and he almost did not.

"Are you okay?" she'd asked him as he bent to the floor and dry heaved, his freshly yanked-off tie resting behind him like a circus instrument. "Not a good time to talk," he said, grabbing a bottle of mineral water from the tray in front of him. "I understand," she said, scanning the room for a potential vomit receptacle, until her eyes settled on a small waist basket in the corner. She stood up, walked over to it, picked it up, and placed it closer to where she was sitting. This made her feel prepared.

The comedian was now cradling his face and his arm, as if in delayed response to one of the years many tragedies. She had no idea who he was, but then again, standup comedy was not her thing. For lack of anything else to do, she grabbed the remote and raised the volume of the flat screen. The host, who had a habit of fiddling with a basketball while on stage and then shooting it when a joke bombed, was running through his monologue.

"Well, it looks like the president isn't doing so well. His ratings are down, the war in Iraq is a mess, and members of his cabinet are under investigation. It's getting so bad that White House staffers became very worried when he ordered a bowl of pretzels to be delivered to his study." Laughter spilled from the audience, sanctifying a twirling of the ball on the host's fingers.

She too laughed despite herself, as if fighting a hiccup. Four years and two wars later, the president's blunders and lies are once again the stuff of jokes. The nation's anxiety having been successfully expelled onto other nations, like kicking out of bed someone who had been keeping you up and again going back to sleep.

"Turn it off, please," yelled the comedian standing up abruptly. "I can't listen to anyone else's monologue right now. Please?" He was tall, bulky, and not much older than her.

Startled, she picked up the remote and muted the TV, regaining composure rather swiftly, for the gesture of lifting the remote and manipulating the small screen tickled her to no end. It had become, she decided, her life's objective correlative.

When the screen went black, the comedian instantly dropped to his knees, as if a response to a gunshot and began tying his fashionably dilapidated tennis shoes.

"Sorry," he said, looking up, "I could go back to my dressing room, but I was feeling a little claustrophobic in there." She nodded. "If I leave," he continued, all of his features shifting sideways at once, as if someone had italicized his face, "I might not be able to find my way back. Too many hallways." "That's totally fine," she said, standing up and extending her hand. "I take it your Mike Peck. I am-"

"Oh, no, I know who you are," he said immediately moving toward her, still on his knees. This always made her feel slightly unreal, as if she was in the witness protection program and one after the other, her fellow Americans were uncovering her identity. She smiled.

"I'm a huge fan, by the way," he said, grabbing her hands. "Thank you." "What you did was fucking kick ass." "I didn't do anything," she said, goosing her neck an inch, repeating a phrase she'd used ad nauseum, noting that her choice of emphasis has been progressing like the movement of a symphony from didn't to do to anything and feeling panicked, as if she was nearing some kind of end.

"Yours was one of the boldest moments on television. If you ask me," he insisted, grabbing her hands and nubbing her knuckles vigorously. "That's a very generous way of putting it," she responded, pulling her hands back, thinking this man has suffered in his life from his excess mass, from not being able to gauge and advance the limited space his body required him to seize from others and from not knowing what to do with this space once he's in it.

"Is this false or real modesty?" "It's not modesty at all. How about that?" "Good one, good one," he said rather loudly. "Is this why you're here with the civilians and not in your dressing room?" "Actually," she said, look around her, "it didn't occur to me to stay in my dressing room, but I can go back if you need some space." "Not at all. I've been looking forward to meeting you. I'm told the football player will ramp up the ratings for us." "He's not staying for the whole show, which is good because I have no idea who he is." "I don't know who he is either," she said, sitting back. She doesn't know who anyone is because she doesn't watch television, which is irony of all ironies how she got here.

"You'll have to forgive me. I'm very nervous, very nervous," he said. "I waited all my life for this moment, and now it's happening, and all I want to do is smash each and every bottle on this table into that circle on the red wall." "It's an ugly mural, for sure," she said, "And I can certainly understand you're being nervous." She really didn't, not personally, not viscerally, not anymore, nor could she really relate to the potential cardiac arrest, her own unsolicited breakthrough having got her off guard during an interview over a much more serious national news show after which her meretricious fame had raged like a bull with her on its back for the next four years.

Now, after having pushed so many buttons, she's on promotion autopilot, as they say, to the point where she has started accepting the idea that being on stage is very predictable, whereas real life is not. She watched, case in point, as the comedian unbuttoned his shirt very quickly, as if the monologue inside him had caught on fire.

"I need to do this," he explained, lunging to the floor for what looked like pushups, "or else I'll explode." "Feel free," she said, factoring in the secret behind his disproportionately bigger upper body. "You know," he said, his body bobbing up and down, "for a while there, you couldn't joke about anything or anyone, and now that thousands and thousands more have died, it's quite safe to laugh. Someone please let the comedians out of their cages. Ha-ha-ha, it's all so funny now." "It didn't stop you people from joking about me," she thought to herself.

"I want you to know that I never once made a joke about you. I never once made a joke about you. For one, I was out of the country, I left in a hurry, and two, I wouldn't have because that's not my shtick." His uncanny sense of timing prevented her from saying or thinking any further. "You never really know who," he continued, "in this country, what will work and what won't. It's really part of the thrill of living here, of being an American. Things seem to slip from big to small and small to big without any criteria or any explanation. Take the Y2K scare, for instance, big to small. Anthrax scare? Big to small. The bride who ran away? Small to big. And on and on and on."

She nodded, observing his hands prematurely wrinkled from the weight they were being made to bear. "My theory is that it has to do with the Constitution and the law of unintended consequences. I used to joke about the Constitution all the time way back when when you could still joke about the Constitution, before it became a religious document. Let's see, the right to free speech and the right to bear arms. 'Watch out, everybody,' said the mailman, 'I have a gun.'"

She chuckled despite herself. "You like that one, huh?" he said, twisting his neck to look at her. "These days though, the humor pales in comparison to the incongruity. I mean 9/11 even. You look at where we are now and you're like, what happened? How did we get here?" "You're asking me?" she said indignantly. "You're the first category, by the way," he said consolingly, "from small to big." "You can say that again," she whispered, reclining back and closing her eyes. Small to big, yes. And the little that is left of her smallness continues to recede, licked by time and circumstance.

To think that someday, a day will come when she will no longer recall the misery of an afternoon when, much younger in age and in wisdom and unable to eat or sleep, she drafted a short essay about the World Trade Center almost a week after it vanished in which she expounded on her refusal to watch the footage of the attack on television and called on all three major networks to cease the senseless, endless repetition.

In the essay she wrote: "The tragedy, shocking though it was, didn't surprise me as I am aware of the planet's geopolitical urgencies and America's lopsided foreign policy, especially as it pertains to the Arab world. When my neighbor rescued me from the storage room and told me what had happened, I felt immediate emotional fatigue, the grief and the sadness of destruction and the sorrow of personal failure. As it turned out, my neighbor was looking for her photo album of pictures from her last trip to New York. We both sat down and looked at the photos, hoping to stay in the basement for as long as we possibly could."

To her shock and awe, the piece was accepted for publication in National Weekly, and then from there flew like a small insect of her own creation from one computer to the next in the inexplicable phenomenon otherwise known as the worldwide web. And if it wasn't enough, several weeks later, on Halloween to be precise, a television producer called her up and invited her to discuss her ideas on the You Said It segment of his news magazine. He said the essay had obviously struck a chord, and that it is imperative that the media offer a variety of perspectives, and that she was one such powerful perspective. "My audience," she said, "will love you." "My audience," he said, "will love you."

Standing in her living room in her crafty pencil sharpener costume, she was stunned at the quickness, seeming sincerity, and politeness of television, a medium she dismissed since her adolescence as a waste of time and minds.

The stable sentiment she would go on to highlight in her book despite her editor's opposing of the idea. "Let me first say," she wrote in her introduction, "I am one of those irritating individuals whose genuine dislike of television is always interpreted as intellectual self-importance. Pop culture references elicit no reaction or excitement from me, like taking a vision test and not recognizing any of the letters. At the mention of one, even during serious conversation, I am forced to shake my head like an imbecile. The truth of the matter is I am very outdoorsy and studious person, two traits that seem to exclude sitting on a couch and staring numbly at something trying so hard to grab your attention. My suspicions were

conferred when later on in life, I read the Origin of the Species and discovered, to my great relief, that there was nothing in it to suggest that we were destined for three hours of television viewing a day."

She has come to know that paragraph by heart, and she has chosen to read it at bookstores on her book tour, and at each talk, she had to stop and think, as if in a moment of prayer of that one sentence that her editor had forced her to drop two days before her publication date. "This was the burgeoning of my political consciousness, of becoming aware that television was a choice that human beings have made, that in the rapacious desire for narrative, instead of listening and telling their own stories, they chose a third party to do the telling. And by third party, I mean a complex capitalist web of competing desires and interests, which has served to undermine the small tube's original premise, if there ever was one."

"It was too much," the editor had said of the sentence, which now lay dormant in her computer, quietly consuming its memory in one of the many versions of the manuscript. "We wouldn't want to punish our readers for clicking on their televisions once in a while."

She lifts one foot and places it on top of the other, catching sight of her pedicured toenails squared to perfection and made three-dimensional by several layers of mayo polish and which now looked like little television sets.

If she had to pinpoint a beginning, it had to have been that cloudburst that had appeared and exploded over on her way to the Halloween party, a phenomenon so rare in Los Angeles for that time of year that it could have only meant the end of one world and the beginning of another. A rain so pointed, its wetness so disturbing, it only served to highlight the newness of her surroundings, a city full of flags, like whether they were on sale, and faces full of fear like it was a new tax law.

It forced her to find an unsolicited refuge in the surreal phone call. The producer's [inaudible 00:37:02], she had to concede, had been some kind of index that the United States of America wasn't going to close in on itself anymore, that it had already dared to. That if television was willing to think and entertain, then the nation would certainly, at least, think about thinking while being entertained.

Sure, she told him the next morning hungover and no longer a pencil sharpener, she would be happy to share her insights, and that she saw this as her obligation really to her country, in the non-military sense of the word, of course, since that same country was now seeing it as its duty to reconfigure the map, starting where the poor people of Afghanistan now live. Thank you.

Maged Zaher:

Hi, my name is Maged Zaher. I want to say happy birthday, Doc. Hey, thanks Chris, and thanks for the public library for having us here. I'm grateful, and I'm grateful to be reading with Samar and Ghida and grateful for our friendship.

Anyway, we agreed on commenting on the whole unrolling the grape leaf thing, and Samar was the only one who did the homework, and I have something to say about the Middle Eastern crisis; I will just save it to myself.

But the key point was, as both Samar and Ghida explained, was there is a standard immigrant narrative, and that not to censor it, it is actually good, but in the meantime, if it becomes the only

narrative that is out there, which is referring to food, ethnic food, and stuff like that, it becomes a problem because that is what becomes expected. Here, Arab American writer entertain us by telling us Arab American things like the food you eat.

So the grape leaves symbolic here is like the tortilla in Hispanic literature, so the grandma doing tortilla and me remembering that. So we like grape leaf very much; we just not going to engage with it in writing. So how about that?

It's a good, freeing opportunity that in any minority literature, at one point of time, people just give up, or not give up, have more freedom to express themselves and their identity or not express their identity. Right now I actually don't care much about the Arab identity as the identity of like someone who's working in the corporate world. What does this mean? Okay.

So anyway. So I guess I did my homework now, so I can ...

The poet that I actually ... I always felt like the poems, my poems, the poetry for me was always a dialogue, was always a certain sense of fascination of other poets. That's how I came to poetry because I read something that I really didn't understand, but I wanted to be someone who write like that, who would do something similar.

And like my girlfriend suffers through that a lot, is like I have lots of books, and lots I sit there and read, and then I always come saying like, "Hey, have you guys discovered this poet? Is amazing." So I'm just going to just start by some of the poets I like.

[foreign language 00:40:21] is a poet who lived 2000 years ago. And I think if he is probably one of the few poets that poets who lived in this era that could be rivals to [inaudible 00:41:06]. This is probably a very existentialist poem who is saying like ... I'll butcher the translation. There's a good translation out in the web by Pierre Joris called [inaudible 00:41:18]. So just look for it.

I will start by one of the poets that I think the world of now. His name is Wadih Sa'adeh, and he is Lebanese, and he lives in Australia now. And I will read his Arabic poem and my just immediate translation. [foreign language 00:41:36].

So this is from Wadih Sa'adeh, something like that. I hope I didn't butcher the translation. I never dreamt that this would happen. A tremendous amount of years that I have to exterminate by hammer. All of this suddenly arrived, like a volcano that I have to instantly separate its dust. And I'm not sorry; I'm bored, and my hands are tired. Years, years, endless stairs, endless stairs just to catch an angel or a fly.

Days, whales, people who are not invited, kitchens, raw or grilled heads, vaginas, men's equipments, and dumpsters. All of these can be put in one cue, then squash their fingers. This is why the vision is cold, and we have to scream something else. Spirits are banal. You can overload the wings with a suicidal flock of birds, or unleash some sumo wrestlers on them, then watch and enjoy.

So that was Wadih Sa'adeh, who is a friend and someone who influence the next two parts that I'm going to read. This is Ahmed Taha, a poet that I really love, and a very generous person. I met him in Egypt a while ago, and when I was there, another friend of ours introduced us, and I went, visited Ahmed in his apartment, and he just got me into his library, and he said ... And I was just visiting for a couple of weeks and leaving. He said, "Take any books you want." I was like, "Wow." He said, "Yeah, I

can make up for them, but you're just leaving. Take anything." And he gave me about 20 books or something. He does that a lot.

He said, Egyptian poets always come, and he gives them a couch to stay, and they steal his books and leave. So he said, "At least I'm giving you these ones by my free will."

Anyway, Ahmed was involved in a Surrealist-Trotskyist movement. I don't know if he was involved or not. I think I can get him to jail saying that. A Last Dance with Anwar Kamel. As usual, I'll slightly disagree with you regarding who should die first: Marx or the husband of the woman I'm sleeping with. The general who is in khaki, or the general who's in jeans? Yet, we will agree before the night ends that everyone should die, and we will agree that we will organize everything whenever the time permits in the evening that follows your final departure.

Anwar Kamel Dies a Natural Death. So these poems were elegies for another poet. His name is Anwar Kamel. I always saw you lying on the road, bullets gathered around you like flock of flies. Meanwhile, your gray coat is completely open, and next to you was this dark featherless bird that moments ago used to be your leather briefcase before they removed your papers from it. Yet, you died an ordinary death that is similar to your last escape and similar to this awful type of death that we have in Cairo, Hejaz, Najd, and Damascus, out of hunger, overeating, laughter, and depression.

This canned death, this canned death that has already expired and can only bring vomit and headache, this death that can be defeated by aspirin and valium. You must feel jealous then of our surreal death coming from the desert, riding its camouflaged camel, with computerized rockets in its saddlebags, and in the distance between its head and its fingers, a bowl of the leftover fatta from yesterday's dinner.

Wow, I mentioned food here. So this is a fellow Egyptian. I'm not sure if he's an Egyptian, it's Cavafy, Constantine Cavafy, is a Greek modernist poet who lived in Alexandria in the early 20th century. The City: It's most inspirational poem I read. You said, "I will go to another land. I will try another sea. Another city will turn up better than this one." Here, everything I do is condemned in advance, and my heart, like a dead man's, lies buried. How long can my mind remain in this swamp? Wherever I turn, wherever I look, I gaze on the ruins of my life here where I have spent and botched and wasted so many years.

You will find no new land, you will find no other seas. This city will follow you. You will wander the same streets and grow old in the same neighborhoods. Your hair will turn right in the same houses, and you will always arrive in this city. Abandon any hope of finding another place. No ship, no road can take you there, for just as you have ruined your life here in this back water, you have destroyed it everywhere on earth.

Anyway, maybe I should change pace a little bit.

How about, pass the light twice before noon and hit your head against the city map? Your mouth shall bleed while going down on a strange woman. Calm her, tell her it is the magnetic fields of her dreams. Bring a vector calculus book and draw her smile. She will think you are romantic and drink your Christian blood while erasing all the messages from your answering machine.

This is the last poem I wrote, actually, so I'll read it, and then I read a couple of poems from my book. Splitting a cardamon in two is almost a violent act. Now that I am threatened by everything, I can say

the truth. The wait staff are pierced and shy. And I'm looking for ways to work remotely and be radical about it. This is how accidents work: fitting one poem at a time into a mid-sized cab without disturbing the poetics of the passing cars.

So this is from Portrait of the Poet As an Engineer, and this poem I wrote, I swear, before September 11, I really did. It's called Detachment. The brown passengers of the 747 died while in a strip mall shopping for an apocalypse. Believe in cucumber or Ezra Pound, door knobs by the dozens. I'm saving your name for a happy ending, naming them. We shall forgive infinity and go down the winter path to deserted train stations and use 7-Eleven phone cards to talk to God in San Francisco, and we will stop believing.

And in surgeries, we will think of alternative medicine of heaven or hell and of train station operators losing their job because of God or market dynamics. And we will feel strong about everything, but nothing, nothing will change the inevitability of empty training stations or the mercy of doctors. But can we really merge these two worlds with one airplane trip? I promise, I will name my feelings.

My son Daniel is coming visiting me soon. So this is a poem for him that I wrote called Daniel as an Elephant. Claire is chasing dreamy firemen in my dream. No, this was Jackie's dream. The fire is real though. I'm in Atlanta teaching Daniel his first Arabic poetry line: [foreign language 00:51:14].

Daniel puts a shoe string in his mouth and tells me that he's an elephant, and I'm rearranging the animal's taxonomy for him. Earlier today, I emailed Heather about the poet as a fish. "Ignore my falling in love with you. I ran out of better things to do. So please disregard my overt compliments and continue being your charming self."


Mohamed tells me that I'm obsessed with language and that he likes my poems best when I'm falling in or out of love. I'm trying to convince him that God lives within the talks of syntax. God is form, love is the content or whatever. Mohamed is leaving to Cairo in two weeks, so we cut out the poetics and finish our beers.

So a couple of more poems. Okay, this is called I, Karl Marx declare my Inner Contradictions. Variation one: I, Karl Marx, remember that my comrades, whom we shared together the cigarettes, the whiskey, and the class struggle, had left me to my thoughts.

I turned to God: "Father, Father, why have you left me? The Roman counselor refused to offer me the plea bargain and drank my blood with the central committee. I told him, 'You shall see me again. I shall resurrect in the WTO protest. I will be an angry woman with pink hair. And when the city turns Republican, I shall offer my body and my blood to the last tear gas bomb holder. He shall kiss me on the lips, and they will crucify me again.'"

Variation two: I, Karl Marx, was not with the Russian troops in Prague. These were not my pictures on the tanks. I was not the grand inquisitor of Spain. I did not order the burn of the Jews, the Heretics, to protect the true belief and proletarian values. I, Karl Marx, am a descendant of the Pharaohs. But in case any of my grandmothers fucked a Greek, an Arab, a Persian, or a Turk, I might not be able to guarantee my ethnic purity.

Okay. I'll finish with actually really this honestly a love poem that is decent, so enough cynicism. This one is called Her. Don't let that white space scare you, even the decadence of artists. Your throat is



clogged with her name. You fall in love with the idea of her or the reality of her dualities. You tell her, "I'm from far beyond your skies." You tell her, "They are not kind here nor there." And you tell her that you will project your thoughts of ideal love on her and that you will overload her voice with meanings. Then you wait for her to touch you or leave forever. And silently, you take the far corner of the church and pray that she would stay. Thank you, guys. You've been terrific. Thank you.

Chris Higashi:

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