Don’t Forget to Count Your Blessings

A response to the work of Christina Hajjar
by Banah el Ghadbanah
In libnan I am wanted & in soreeya I am wanted & in falasteen I am wanted
And when I see others piece together bits of home with coffee grinds & table cloths I feel
wanted in a new kind of way.

What is worse: being there, knowing the beauty, knowing the pain, and slowly forgetting or
never having been at all? What if your parents had to flee in the night and all they took was
the wrong things? A lime green samsonite and leathery shib shib, no romantic photographs
or golden earrings?

I went to a butterfly garden yesterday. The person running the sanctuary gave me a newly
formed butterfly, fresh from her metaphorsis & ready to fly. I opened the container expecting
a dramatic entrance into her destiny but instead she just stayed in my palms. “I forgot to
mention,” he said, “they have to rest first. They don’t just take flight.” He told me to make a
wish and I wished I could be whole, more than anything. I take these freedom wings & the
thick shisha smoke in my throat and remember a song I don’t know the words to. It’s
celebratory, a wedding dance, a zaffeh full of clapping and sheepskin drums. I picture myself
in a village, but it’s also a dusty city and still somehow feels like the sea. I am wearing tetas
old galabiya, the one she custom fitted for me.

I love this one, the hand embroidered threads the color of bougainvilleas & green plastic
tablecloths. I miss eating on the floor with the big round seiniya and my baby cousins on my
feet. I miss the mansaf and the burnt bread and the strange purgatory otherwise known as
Amman, a majnoune city for displaced people and daughters of refugees.

Teta asks me if I am fasting and without skipping a beat I lie and say Of course! & she
instantly knows. Like all the women in my family, she can see through walls and programmed
deceit.

I call her to ask about the right way to wrap the grapeleaves from the wild, how to swaddle
the lamb & rice. She says You’re my child, everything you do is a part of me. When she says
that I know there was a part of her that escaped the gender binary long ago and became an
artist in the foothills of a faraway place across the sea.

Making freedom in constrained & tight spaces, the women of our region protest with roses
from underground bomb shelters while the colonizing forces obliterate the forest. The olive
trees and the jasmines agree with their strategy, a new kind of story, a gentle breeze.

I lived someone else’s dream for seven years. It was a grand performance. Each year I shed
another layer of my skin and took seven deep breathes in.

A slow metaphor sis
A slow metamorphosis
And so what remained? A plastic tablecloth. A misprinted memory. A shisha hiccup inside my lungs. The grief still lives there like an unborn creature. I wanted waterfalls and open sky and I found a cornerstore with no olive oil. It was okay though. I looked inside myself at the end and recognised some kind of being was there. I climbed out of my body and into the stars, rested on the moon for a few moments before returning back into the depths of the sea. When it got to be too much pressure, I returned to the shore with a bucket of seaweed and tangled roots, the tentacles of an anemone wrapped around me. I found Teta again, she told me I was her child. I told her she was my heart, ancient, tender, and sometimes mean. The coffee cup tells my fortune: a mermaid in the mountains searching for home in the sky. I spray rose water on my face in the mornings. My brother says he is American only, but he wants a shisha for his 18th birthday. Lemon & mint tobacco. On the lonely days we remind each other of the sunset & the palm trees of a faraway place. I sip in the smoke & the goddesses whisper quietly:

Don’t forget to breathe
&
Don’t forget to breathe
Christina Hajjar is a queer femme first-generation Lebanese-Canadian artist, writer, and cultural worker based in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty 1 Territory. She is passionate about collaboration and skills-sharing as tools of community-building and resistance. Her practice considers domesticity, labour, and place through diaspora, body archives, and cultural iconography. She is a 2020 PLATFORM Photography Award winner, co-founder of Carnation Zine, and creator of Diaspora Daughter, Diaspora Dyke zine. Hajjar was a 2020-2021 curatorial intern at the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba and a 2020-2021 recipient of the Foundation Mentorship Program at MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art). Learn more at @garbagebagprincess and https://christinahajjar.com/.

Banah el Ghadbanah is a nonbinary Syrian poet raised in the u.s south. Zhe is wanted for 50 million lira by the Syrian government for publishing a viral video about Syria’s human rights abuses. Banah is the recipient of the 2021 Diverse Voices Prize from Dzanc Books and will publish zir first book, syrena in space, with Dzanc in 2022. Banah has a PhD in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego in Ethnic Studies. Zir research investigates the freedom schools Syrian women open under siege and examines the role of the arts, such as poetry and theatre, in those spaces as a tool for transformation. Zhe received B.A.'s in Comparative Women's Studies and Sociology from Spelman College and has a masters in Ethnic Studies. Zhe is published in Afghan Punk Magazine, Acting Up: Queer in the New Century Anthology, Sukoon: an Arab Themed Magazine, the Feminist Wire, Aunt Chloe, As/Us Journal, and many other places. You can follow them at @banahghadbanah on Instagram to get in touch.