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Great-Grandfather's Nurse

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GREAT-GRANDFATHER'S NURSE

Alexandria, 1954

She is sitting on the terrace, holding
My small hands. Dressed in her whites,
She is the angel I have wished to touch.
Her laughter floats and falls around me
And becomes the house I want to live in.
Again, Marta, I say, again. She pulls me up
Clicking her tongue, her smooth legs
Brushing mine, and my face nestles
Into the easy scoop of her shoulder.
I smell the scent of flowers or spices.
Again, Marta, again. Upstairs
Where I do not want to go
My great-grandfather is sleeping
Through his pain and illness
And I am lucky, falling, falling
Over the landscape of Marta's legs.
My mother smiles and locks her arm
In my father's. My grandfather is winking
And whispering into my grandmother's white hair.
Krikor, he says, you little knave,
Krikor, you scoundrel, you little mouse.
And before I know what I am doing
I whisk the hem of her dress up,
Kiss her thigh and stand before her
Boyish and full of love.

Then what?

Confusion, shouting.
My great-grandfather waking,
Beating his cane against the metal bed.
Marta rising, climbing the stairs
Toward some retribution,

The oaths streaming down.
The terrace emptying out.
The *Alla aqbar* of the muezzin
Calling the faithful.
The minarets, the hot sun, the white city.
My lips full of fear and prayer.
My heart full of nonsense,
Never as young, and the sea,
The blue sea in the distance,
The cold, unimplicated sea.

BEETHOVEN: SONATA NO. 14

for Roma

You were at the piano playing the “Moonlight,”
A name Rellstab gave it when he heard
The Adagio, and remembered moonlight
Flecking the waves of Lake Lucerne.
But this was afternoon, in Boston,
The sun lighting up your apartment
Like a flare, your fingers laboring
Against a dead middle-C, and an A
Which twanged in its several pitches.
But it was Beethoven nonetheless,
Surviving the accidents of time
And circumstance, even the unlikely name.
Outside, three floors below,
The Asian children—Vietnamese, Cambodian?—
Recently arrived like the last of so many
Witnesses, were playing among themselves,
Squealing in their small voices to the ends
Of the street. You’d said you’d seen them
In winter, the girls in sun dresses and sandals,
The boys in short-sleeved shirts, as though
Their parents knew no changes of season,