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Writing Sample

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Ubah Cristina ALI FARAH

Two stories

A Dhow Crosses the Sea

When my grandma died it'd been many years since I'd seen her, so I didn't cry when she died in Eyl, where she'd always lived. Rather, I was surprised, because the same night, that of her death, I'd dreamed of her. It was the first time since I moved to Europe that my grandma had appeared in my dreams. Actually you could say that she hadn't appeared to me at all; I had conjured her up the very night of her death.

In my dream my grandma was washing pieces of fabric in the sea and she was serious, as she'd been all her life. When I woke up, I'd remembered her upright and tough as a tree trunk, her guntiino tight around her waist, a red handkerchief at the nape of her neck. The memory was similar to a posed photograph, my grandma perched on a post, completely still; the sea swirled around her even though she hated the sea.

I had a friend at the time and I told her about the dream and about my grandma, I didn't say it in a way that was special, or ceremonious, or dramatic, I only told her what had happened. My friend was silent for a bit and then said, in a special and ceremonious and dramatic way, that a strong bond must have existed between us for me to have had that dream.

I thought about our bond and thought that maybe it was unfortunate to not have a bond, just as it was unfortunate that my grandma had only appeared in my dreams after such a long time.

So I called to her and saw the ocean I'd seen as a child and heard again the demons hidden among the rocks hissing my name. I ran far away without turning back, with my name in my mouth, to where the incense was lit and the jinni couldn't grab me.

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I'd called to her, my grandma who had distanced herself from the sea because she didn't love it. She showed me the road to climb to Eyl Dawaad, hidden in the valleys, a short distance from the Eyl Badey coast from which pirates sail nowadays. She pointed out the village where my father had been born, the one where he'd always promised to bring me, she pointed out all of it, and a river crossed it, and there was an abundance of animals and milk.

Her village, upriver, had nothing to do with the sea.

My grandma distanced herself from the sea and appeared to still have her firstborn held tight to her chest, while she told me about her young husband and the shipwrecked dhow. She swung her arms and sang a song that everyone knows: doon bad mareysa, badda doon baa mareysa, mayddi bay sittaa, mayddi iyo malmal bay sittaa, a dhow crosses the sea, a dhow crosses the sea, carrying incense and myrrh, carrying incense and myrrh. Vessels loaded with skins and animals set off from Eyl Badey, only to return filled with dates and rice. Her husband was a young merchant who perished at sea when my grandma was expecting her firstborn daughter.

And in that same Eyl, hidden in the hills, my father had been born. His name is af dabeyl, mouth of wind, for his flowing voice and prodigious memory.

He hadn't been born in my Mogadishu of white houses, as white as bones picked clean, like wrecks on the coast. My grandma only went to Mogadishu to visit, because she would never leave Eyl, she would never leave her house, she would never leave the village of fresh air in the hills, rich with water and animals. I'd never been to that village, seen her house, or swum in the creek. I'd only cried one morning, for my father's broken promise—he'd left for the North when I wasn't looking.

In Eyl, which was just a village, they say that luxurious cars are driven around these days and that men show gold coins between their teeth. My father no longer dreams of old age in the hills, rich with dates and milk. His mother left an empty space in the valley. They also say the coastline is infected and that children are born without mouths.

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The coast's ecology had been distressed for some time. Its natural wealth destroyed, its equilibrium broken. You could get stained with tar walking across the sand, or get cut by an aluminum sheet.

They told us about kids who ran into the sea for a ball, and were absorbed into the waves in the blink of an eye. This time, those responsible weren't the jinni, nor the man-eating sirens among the rocks, but sharks, most terrible and voracious, sometimes captured, dragged onto the beach, and then crushed by the enraged crowd.

At the start of the eighties, the Mogadishu shoreline was hit by a two-fold tragedy. Aid money gave us a new port and a very modern automatic slaughterhouse, where beasts were decapitated and blood spilled in the direction of Mecca.

To make space for the bigger ships much of the barrier reef was destroyed, while poisons from the slaughterhouse leached into the sea.

From the broken barrier, attracted by the smell of blood, the sharks entered, crazed, and pressed towards shore. The ocean, once filled with sponges and shells from multicolored pools of butterflyfish, now only delivered amputated bodies and the smell of death. The country was dismembering itself.

*

The sound of the ocean, its roar, is the leitmotif of my childhood.

The ocean seethed like molten lead. It could disfigure your heart. In the sand, your feet became roots of water and of iodine, your bones accretions of silicon and salt.

My ocean was a pool of red shells and saturated sponges, a secret cavity of jellyfish and sand dollars.

Since the war and exile of 1991, Mogadishu, a city of dazzling lights and excavated walls, is a city whose streets I no longer remember. I didn't see the sea for many years. When I saw it again, it was in Sabaudia, south of Rome. Some laughed because I thought that the tide would swell within hours. Don't put your towel near the water—the sea will take it away. The waves in Italy, they told me, don't eat everything.

The sea in Italy, it doesn't even recede.

You have to cross it to get to the stronghold, you have to cross the sea in between, the Mediterranean Sea, the White Sea to the Arabs.

Many face the White Sea. But from my coasts, on the Horn of Africa, before reaching the White Sea some brave the ocean on a dhow. They want to know if it's really necessary to go so far.

*

If you go to the waterfront many women will want to tell you their story. Some entered the sea and arrived at the other side. Some want to enter it. Others wait for a son, who left a few days earlier, a brother, or even a beloved. They look at the horizon and point out the sails or the passing motorboats to the swimmers. They want to know how big it could be, how many the holds and decks will contain, of their children, their beloveds, their siblings.

One of them twirls her arms, she lifts them to the wind and laughs. Her name is Dahabo and she has a friend next to her, they say they're inseparable. They were shipwrecked together and they will never enter the sea again.

The dhow was so full and there were people, dressed up, carrying all their riches. Dahabo knew them all and had told them to dress lightly. The boat capsized very

close to the coast, and everyone yelled everyone else's name, grabbing hold of anything they could find to stay afloat. She'd distanced herself in the dark, because she knew how to swim, she was born in Baidoa, and had learned to swim in the river. She'd distanced herself because when someone is drowning they drag everything they find down with them, anything for another breath. It was night and she heard voices calling her name. Then one of the others got closer, and it was the friend whom she wasn't very close to yet but she was calling out her name, help, don't let me die. Dahabo, who was holding on to a rock, had said, I'll help you, but promise you won't drag me down under, then she threw herself back into the sea to show the way. The friend swam after her and together they waited for the perfect wave to push them onto the rocks. After they'd been lying there for a while, stretched out and chilled, the ships arrived, shining their bright lights. Those on board, seeing the women wet and shivering, asked them to take off their clothes.

So, Dahabo says, cupping her hands over her chest, she was embarrassed because she'd forgotten to put on a bra before leaving. Her breasts are no longer those of a young woman and Dahabo found herself topless, without a bra, in front of the guard ships. So, she repeats, still holding her hands over her chest, she always tells all the women they must not forget to put on their bras before leaving.

Translated from the Italian by Hope Campbell Gustafson

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Punt Rap

I have been hanging out with them for a while now. Mauro says that I'm weird. What am I doing always following him around? That's what guys do, not girls like me who were always top of their class. So, what's gotten a hold of me? I've had it, I tell him, I've had it with being a good girl. Anyway, if I miss a few days of school, no one will notice. And what about that little notebook of mine? I need it, he knows I write poetry, I write poetry or light matches, everyone knows that.

In the morning I sit waiting on the wall, I'm used to getting up early, because of school. The guys, they get there a bit later. I like seeing Mauro arrive with his baggy clothes and his dazed look. "Wassup?" He asks me, by now he knows that he can find me there.

I sit on our bench, always the same one. Bus M, the Flaminio stop. There're lots of people. I like to think of where people are going. But I also feel a little lonely. I don't

know where to go, but it is the same for the guys. Every day we think of a country, because as far as our country goes, I'm not sure if I would like to go there right away. Perhaps I'll go in a while, as Mauro says, to live there for good.

On our bench, when I cannot think of poems, I buy a box of matches at the store and I light them, one after the other, and I watch them slowly burning. People stare. The first time Mauro saw me doing this, he said: "What's wrong with you?" But then with him, these girl things don't work, or at least it seems that way.

Just like the other day, a blond girl our age passed by and they started to sweet talk her and she laughed even if she pretended not to be interested.

So that's it, I don't know what to think because he is always with a different girl. He really can't stop himself and it's not because they dump him. He keeps saying that Italian girls like blacks because they know they are good in bed and that he, when the time comes to get married, will marry a woman from his own country.

He tells me this and he smiles. So, I wonder, when will it be time to get married and what does he want to do first?

Freedom he says, he wants to be free and not be tied down, life on the street is hard and until he has a real job he doesn't want to have responsibilities, and while we're on the subject, I'm beginning to be a pain

So, when am I going back to school? A few more days and it will be spring. I want to feel some hot sun on my back.

- "How much are you ripping me off for today?" Mauro asks the barman

- "What do you mean, ripping you off? You owe me what you owe me. I don't cheat you!"

here we go again, another fight.

But I must keep quiet and try to get out of their way, otherwise Mauro will send me away for good this time, he keeps saying that he wants no girls hanging around.

Two Wednesdays ago for instance, there is this friend of his whose mother has not been feeling well for some time so he had to come back from Toronto. He has been living there for three years. I couldn't take this guy any longer because he was such a show off. He kept speaking English and every few minutes he'd say "you know", what a drag, but I wouldn't dare say anything to Mauro.

He sits there and sucks up all the fucking rubbish this guy tells him. The Canadian guy talked about how cool it was to be in America, how the brothers there knew how to get whites to respect them, and that rap was cool stuff and he would start singing and all the guys around admired him, and they had him translate the words. Certainly if Mauro looks up to him, everyone does because the other guys, deep down, always do what he wants.

In short the biggest bullshit the Canadian said was when he arrived one afternoon with a Cuban friend of his. Always blacks, because they want no whites, and this guy had wonderful dread locks that everyone touched.

So one of the guys asks him how he got them and he starts talking about something you do with the juice from cactus leaves, that makes terrific dread locks and since he was black everyone thought he knew all those traditions and listened to him carefully. So, the morning after the thing everyone decided to go to a place in Ostia, a place the Cuban guy knows, where there are cactus leaves like the ones he talked about.

Naturally they didn't want me to go along. The only way I talked them into it, or better, I convinced Mauro, was that I remembered something my mother told me of the time she was in Hargeisa. She says that when they were little they used to make some sort of tongs with used tin cans and that with those tongs you could pick cactus pears without getting pricked.

I told Mauro that if they let me go with them I would ask my mother how to make the tongs, even if I knew that I had to invent it myself, because my mother is not all there and what's more, she sure has no interest in this sort of thing.

So I tried all afternoon to make the tongs and I even cut my hand, and I thought why the hell am I doing this, messing up my hand, so that the Cuban and the guys who listen to him can avoid getting pricked.

But the following morning there comes Mauro, bobbing his head as he always does, holding it back a little, his clothes dangling and I can't help melting when I see from the look in his eyes that I did the right thing and then he says, "What are you having?" And he pays for me. Who knows where he finds the money, his mother is a maid and certainly doesn't give him any, she probably doesn't even make enough for herself and then there's his father, but who's ever seen him?

After I had drunk my tea, we went down to the subway and I felt good next to Mauro, he sat beside me and he squeezed me a little with his leg that is long and muscular, in fact they all call him "Mauro the giant" and I feel tiny when I am near him..

We got off at the Termini stop and then we took subway B and at the Piramide stop there is the little train for Ostia that takes about a half hour.

The Canadian was singing and the Cuban was having a ball and was laughing. I thought about how much fun he was having because everyone believed his bullshit, but I kept quiet, because I could see that Mauro, on the other hand, liked him and he was quite capable of sending me away if I complained.

Anyway, in the end, I was right. At that place in Ostia, along the sea front, there was a restaurant, but it was closed, so we had to climb over the fence, with the dogs that almost tore us apart us and even the police showed up

You can imagine how fast we were running, but in the end they caught us. Mauro says it is because he was holding my hand so as not to leave me behind and that is why they caught only the two of us.

The fact was he didn't want to put the blame on the Cuban for not finding the cactus. Instead, he said he didn't want me hanging out with them any longer because he had tried in a thousand ways to make me understand that street life is not for girls.

So, after that I went back to school. And deep down, that is what I wanted. Although I kept worrying about Mauro and the life he was living.

Then something strange happened. One day, I went to look for him as usual after school. He always hung out in the same places, but that day he wasn't anywhere.

So I went up on the Pincio, I like to go there and give myself some space to think things over, I think that's because of my African soul, because in our country we are not all one on top of the other like ants with chaos all around.

Some things are just in your blood.

After taking some deep breaths, I am about to leave, but this time I go down a path I never take and I see Mauro alone under a tree gazing into space.

I drop down next to him and I ask him what happened. He tells me that that morning he was wheeling and dealing when at a certain point a little old man went up to him.

In the beginning he didn't take any notice of him because little old men, as everyone knows, never mind their own business. But this one told him that he was convinced that Said, the legendary Ogaden warrior must have been just like him, so Mauro began to listen to him.

The little old man knew a lot about our country and says that there was a hero, a sort of chief that everyone listened to and that had driven the British and the Italians crazy in colonial times. They could never catch him and he used to leave poems behind making fun of everyone. And this little old man knew so many things, that he convinced Mauro to go along with him, because it was the 21st and on the 21st of every month he goes to the Botanical Gardens.

This botanical garden that apparently has always existed in Rome, even if we didn't know about it, is in Trastevere and on the way there the little old man kept talking to Mauro and Mauro was all pumped up because he thought this Said, who was meant to be like him, must have been a really cool guy.

So he kept asking the little old man questions and he replied telling him all sorts of things and when they reached the botanical garden he even wanted to show him a small plant that grows in our country: the incense tree. And Mauro, who knows nothing of all this, was disappointed, because they found the greenhouse closed and he screamed: "Why the hell do they keep it in a green house? And the little old man carefully explained to him that it takes a good climate like ours to keep it from dying.

So now here's Mauro alone under the tree and I asked him if his mother had ever told him the story of Gedi Babow the Giant who used to wear two big gold bracelets that

he buried under a tree. Gedi Babow, the same one who discovered incense and began to cultivate it in twenty valleys. And instead of saying, as usual, "What the heck are you talking about?" What do you know about it!" He tells me that the following day he wants to go see if they have opened the greenhouse and that he is kind of thinking of stealing that plant.

So we went, just him and me because this time it wasn't like the cactus thing. It was a really tiny plant, ash green, not very different from the others, but for some reason it seemed magical to us.

Mauro checks to make sure there is no one around, and then with his long arms he picks up the pot. And he begins to run through the plants holding the incense in his arms and heading uphill. Follow me, he tells me.

Translated from the Italian by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto
