

1998

Mother, They Say

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Recommended Citation

Obaidullah, Abu Jafar and Carolyn Brown. "Mother, They Say." *The Iowa Review* 28.2 (1998): 103-104. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5023>

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Abu Jafar Obaidullah

MOTHER, THEY SAY

(February 21, 1952)

“There are so many pumpkin blossoms
the vines are sagging,
the sojno tree
is branching out,
I’ve spread the dal dumplings
to dry in the sun.
Son, when will you come?”
The letter was in his pocket,
torn and blood-soaked.

“Mother, they say
they’ll take away our words.
They won’t let us sit in your lap
and listen to your stories.
Tell me, mother,
how can I let this happen?
That’s why I’m late.
But I’ll bring home
basketsful of stories
for you.
Dearest mother,
don’t be angry,
it will be only a few days more.”

“Silly boy,”
the mother reads and laughs,
“how can I be angry with you?”
She makes coconut cakes,

this and that,
all sorts of things!
Her son will be coming home,
her tired son.

The pumpkin blossoms have withered,
storms have shredded the vines.
“Son, are you here?”
With bleary eyes the mother goes
from courtyard to courtyard
searching for where
the vultures have cut apart her son.

Now
the Choitro sun stings the mother’s eyes
and singes the vultures.
And then
she sits on the verandah,
husking paddy, setting some
aside to make puffed rice
for her son
when he comes, when he comes!

Now
dawn dew has filled the mother’s eyes,
love’s sunbeams have spilled over the hearth.

Translated by Carolyn Brown