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Aberration

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ABERRATION

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Virginia Leslie Clark

May 2015

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Virginia Clark

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Virginia Clark". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

05/01/15

ELC Honors in English
 Applicant: Virginia Clark
 Sponsor: Dr. Elizabeth Wade
 Project Title: Aberration
 Course: English 470 Multi-genre Seminar

Aberration
Author's Note

A deviation or departure from what is normal, usual, or expected, typically an unwelcome one.
 [OED]

I am fascinated by irregularities: the point where the narratives diverge, where the thread unravels, where the path falls away. I am compelled by distortion, of a sort. The telling and retelling of a story we all know, the details forever changing. What remains steadfast in this? What can we latch onto?

Optics. The failure of (reflected or refracted) rays of light to converge to a focus; a defect in an optical system leading to such a failure. [OED]

There is the narrative, but also the frame of the narrative. How do we process our facts or our fiction? There is always a method to this, a careful deliberation in the order of elements so they might be seen a particular way. I am concerned with the representation of narratives, how the framework, structure, and form of a piece may inform our perceptions of reality. I am interested in the teen facing unfamiliar conflict, the adulterer becoming a martyr, and the believer losing faith. I am propelled by uncertainty, by coloring reality in one light, and then changing the light source altogether.

An abnormal state of mind; temporary impairment of reason or intellectual function. [OED]

I have seen a tension in the self, how the external realm may interact with the internal realm, or how the public sphere may infringe upon the private.

The poem in this portfolio, *Asclepias syriaca*, navigates self-infliction and spirituality in the context of adolescence. Though the content stretches across an eclectic assortment of subjects—botany, Biblical narratives, Greek mythology, ancient medicine—the poem remains centrally focus on the construction of self.

Similarly, the historical fiction piece “In the Telling” demonstrates the anxiety that arises in a heavily monitored self. Such anxiety can only extend into the cultural transposition of a narrative, as a story may shift and change in its telling.

In the nonfiction piece “On Performance,” we are faced with a tension between the candid self and the performative self. It raises questions of identity and action; it asks how much of the self

is artificially constructed, and what portions of the self are ever truly organic.

The action or an instance of straying or wandering away from a proper course or position; a deviation or divergence from a straight or recognized path. Also: displacement, translation. Obs. [OED]

In religion and society, we are expected to follow certain paths. There is a pre-existing narrative, and we are to align ourselves with it. The characters or speakers of the pieces do not always align themselves with these guides. They dissimilate from the roles they are expected to fill. They deny societal understandings of gender, they fight against hierarchies of power.

Astron. An apparent displacement of a celestial object from its true position, arising from the combined effect of the observer's motion and the finite speed of light. [OED]

The pieces in this portfolio are concerned with deviations and imperfections. As such, they themselves are not wholly without flaw. With “In the Telling,” for example, I worry that I have not properly critiqued Antony Thomas’s exoticization of Misha’al bint al Fahd al Saud. I worry that I myself have romanticized her in this narrative, in an Anglophone text designed primarily for Western audiences. But still, extensive research has gone into her story. I have written her with care and consideration, and of that work, I am still proud. It is not perfect. I know this. But I plan to revisit it, to mend my errors.

These are all still works in progress, works I hope can be bolstered and polished given the right context, audience, home. They are not perfect. But neither are they meant to be.

Asclepias syriaca

I.

My father snaps a milkweed pod off the
stem, green and unopened, skin rippling
with pores. Pocketknife in hand, he divides
two walls to reveal slick strands of white.
He lets me count the seeds, young teeth still small.

II.

Half god, half nymph, sliced open from the womb
of his dead mother, Asclepius heals.
Wisdom arrives by way of the serpent,
secrets of the earth made known by forked tongue.
Skill arrives by way of the centaur, who
leads the demigod in remedy's art.
So two paths of knowledge converge.

When Athena gifts Asclepius with
two vials of blood, the physician may
select the blood of the left side, lethal
poison, or blood of the right, life-giving
elixir: dead men will breathe once again.

III.

I am thirteen years old and in love
with a saint, a Latter Day Saint,
though my mother does not approve.
I am my own Israel, I am my own prophet.
I think these things will save me. I think
this is what I want.

IV.

But Asclepius grows too powerful,
and for this, Zeus smites him by thunder—
rogue half god waxing into full god, not
thinking of the nature of the world, not

seeing balance in death. So death swallows
the physician, and all is right again.

V.

And the Spirit of the Lord brooded over
the heart of man. And darkness resting in
the cavities of flesh burrowed deeper,
sin clinging to capillaries, black curse.

VI.

Power lies in milkweed, the ability
to cure, the ability to poison.
It is a healing herb, but a toxic thing;
there have always been two vials and I
have taken from them both.

I become stricken with grief over things
that will not matter—loving a boy
I should not love, failing a god
I should not fail. I had not prepared
for sorrow, for the dull desire of death.
I take scissors to my calf and open myself.

VII.

Herophilus, too, labors in healing
of a sort. Surgeon of the cadaver,
the man defies his present culture for
the sake of science. There are rules for how
a body should be treated, and skin, great
shield of the soul, should never be breached.
Still, Herophilus takes his scalpel
past the barrier: father of human
dissection, anatomy enlightened.

That you could take a thing apart and
understand it. That you could take a thing
apart and mend it. Miracle upon
miracle, I have made this body
a vessel, I have rendered it complete.

VIII.

My mother takes me to see a therapist.
 He is an older man whose collar
 is too tight for his neck. He asks me why
 I have done what I have done. I tell him
 something false. It is not the real reason,
 I think. What is then? I wonder. I know
 that I know, but I cannot find the words.

IX.

When Abraham provides his sacrifice
 The Lord demands a calf, a goat, a ram,
 each three years old, each divided in half.
 The good servant obeys and Elohim
 delights in the offering. Abraham
 is rewarded with land for four hundred
 years of his descendants. Thanks be to God.

Behold: the dissection of self. Sever
 the soul from the spirit and spirit from
 flesh. May bone and marrow separate here.
 And so the two paths of knowledge diverge.

The calf became a hollow pod that I
 could still explore. One slice and then twelve more:
 cuts shallows, precise incisions, faint scars.
 Here I am Lord, your living sacrifice—
 let us form a covenant around this.

X.

When the therapy does not work,
 my mother takes me to the pastor.
 She holds an aviary in her backyard,
 parakeets and hoopoes chirping brightly.
 She tells me suicide is the most selfish of acts.
 I am unsure of how to respond. I had not
 been meaning to die. I am too much
 a coward, and for that, I am ashamed.

XI.

When the prophet Elijah challenges
 Ahab, king of Israel, those four hundred
 and fifty prophets of Baal come forward
 to cleave the bull for the offering, to
 light the fire by worship, by dancing,
 by shouting, and slashing themselves—blood spills
 onto earth. They cry out, but no answer.
 They suffer, but in vain.

XII.

What is there to be gained in the cutting,
 the opening, the releasing, this mutation
 of the body? If I could scrape away
 the skin, then could I rid myself of me?
 Could I carve the self into a better body?
 Could I mold a finer soul?

XIII.

Feeding the five thousand, Jesus breaks
 two loaves. Division for the sake of provision.
 Marvel at such miracles and bless the hand
 of the Lord. His Spirit moves as wind.

And so divided, I sought to be whole;
 I sent myself to prayer, believing in
 the laying of hands, the speaking of tongues—
 that all these things might mend the fractured soul.

XIV.

“A shoot will rise up from the stump of Jesse;
 from his roots a branch will bear fruit.
 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and of might,
 the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.”

This was the passage given to my mother

by the visiting prophet—a living, breathing man.
She went because she sought knowledge.
She hungered after truth, cried out for change
because I could not change for her.

She read me the passage when she got home.
Stunned, she said “My grandfather’s name was Jesse.”

And I knew that I should have been that shoot
though I wasn’t close to sprouting.
I was still the lifeless stump,
the hollow pod laid bare.

XV.

Autumn will come and the milkweed will need
no knife for splitting open, no human
hands to crack the skin. The shell will peel back,
silken pappi will spring forth, boasting
seeds now dark and pointed—and that cold
and reckless wind will scatter all remains.

In the Telling

I had always dreamed of a love like this. That I would be Scheherazade, and you, Shahryar. That the threat of danger would always be present, but escapable. And instead of a different story every night, I would tell you the same one a thousand and one different times, a thousand and one different ways, and I will never tell you which one is real, if any of them are real, if you or I are real.

COURT TRANSCRIPT
TRIAL FOR MISHA'AL BINT FAHD AL SAUD
JULY 14, 1977
JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA

Q: Your highness, you are married, are you not?

A: By law, yes.

Q: And your spouse is Prince Aziz?

A: Correct.

Q: How long have you been married?

A: A year and a half now.

Q: When did you first meet Khaled Al Shaer Mulhallal?

A: Three months ago.

Q: Under what circumstances did you meet?

A: We met in Beirut. A mutual friend. I was attending the Beirut Women's College. Khaled was attending the American University.

Q: What is the nature of your relationship with Al Shaer Mulhallal?

A: He is my love. And I, his beloved.

[The council erupts. A minute passes before order is regained. Misha'al's grandfather, Prince Muhammad bin Abdulaziz, is watching. His face darkens, mouth contorts. With the wave of his hand, he could stop the affair. He could allow Misha'al, his favorite grandchild, to go free. He has the power to do so. But we do not know if he will. A move like that would point to his softness, his bias. He must maintain severity. His must maintain all dignity.]

A: Men and women of the court, I have something to admit. I have committed adultery—

[The court again erupts, men barking louder and more frenzied than before.]

A: —I have committed adultery, I—

PM: HALT.

[For a moment, no one dares to breathe. Prince Muhammad has spoken. He signals for a recess and motions for his granddaughter to come speak

with him. "Misha'al," he says. "If you stay silent, there's nothing more the court can do. They cannot accuse you. Without four male witnesses or eight female witnesses to the very moment of penetration, you cannot be convicted. But if you say 'I have committed adultery' a third time, then not even I can save you." His voice is steady, his face is stern, but the slightest twitch around the eyes gives him away. Misha'al cannot look at him. "I know," is all she says. She returns to the stand.]

A: I...

[The court waits in silence.]

A: ...have committed adultery.

END TRANSCRIPT.

Let's travel back four months earlier to Beirut. When Misha'al leaves her Saudi home for university in Lebanon, she does not think of how this might change her. She is not prepared for this landscape, for all things new, for all things unexpected. She does not consider how this city, with such a European aesthetic, such Western ideals, might mold her view of the world. She never thought she might form opinions on politics, or religion, or philosophy, but in Beirut, these things make sense. From such a distance, old customs lose their power. From such a distance, it is easy to become oneself.

Nineteen-year-old Misha'al is happy here. She is popular among students and teachers alike at her school, always brimming with kindness and generosity. Her curiosity is insatiable. She takes up philosophy, classics, music theory, literature. She falls in love with the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. She studies all sorts of subjects from all sorts of books. She even teaches herself domestic skills like ironing, mending, cooking – the sorts of things she's never had to do for herself as royalty. At these last three, she is atrocious. But her stubbornness prevents her from giving up.

The one skill is she has mastered—and spectacularly so—is dancing. Nearly every weekend, Misha'al goes out to one of the local clubs with her friends. She has an impeccable sense of rhythm coupled with a remarkable sense of style. This is how she meets Khaled.

The lights grow dim though no one set a finger on the switch. The music from the live band slows down, air thick as pudding. Sweat drips from Misha'al's neck, hair clinging to skin. She exhales, and finds her breath again just as the guitar picks up a little. It's unusual, she thinks—a kind of Aeolian scale, perhaps Lydian? The tempo quickens, the melodies grow complex, and Misha'al dances, trying to match the pacing and style of the strings. She catches the eye of the guitarist and smiles. Khaled smiles back. So begins the greatest tragedy.

We do not have much evidence of what those early days were like. We know that Misha'al was a romantic, that she must've fallen hard. We imagine her buoyant and light, floating through life, her studies falling to the wayside.

We invent personalities and appearances for Khaled, the nephew of the Saudi ambassador in London. Perhaps he was strong but silent. Or maybe he was gregarious and charming. Did he wear his hair long and tied back? Or was it short, straight, and buzzed close to the scalp? We don't know. The details, in truth, do not matter. Still, we try to form a scene. We picture them walking down the pier together. We imagine them eating rice pudding from a local vendor. We envision the two as happy, we see them laughing, and we see the obvious signs of affection: the stolen glances, the blushed faces, the brushing of hands, all of these things predictable, all of these things expected.

I imagine us walking the streets of Montmartre, passing the Moulin Rouge and heading up the hill to La Basilique du Sacré-Cœur. In a crowd of so many people, we would not stand

out. We could exist together as any other couple. We could become Parisians, and forget where we ever came from, forget that the tongue we will speak in is not our own, forget that the sanctuary we will stand upon is one we cannot claim. At such great heights, these trite things will not matter. At such great heights, we might climb toward transcendence.

On the day of the execution, July 15, 1977, a large crowd gathers in the square of justice. Misha'al is covered in black polyester – even her eyes, yes, even her hands. The heat is unforgiving at this time of year, the humidity unbearable in the coastal city of Jeddah. She does not have to worry about whether her tears will be seen, and this, small as it may be, is a comfort.

The name Misha'al means *lantern, light, source of light*. The name may be used a verb, *to flare*. This is how it appears in the Holy Quran, Surat Maryam, verse four: “He said, ‘My Lord, indeed my bones have weakened, and my head has flared with white, and never have I been in my supplication to You, my Lord, unhappy.’” The executioner shoots her left temple and her soul flares out from her body.

Khaled, meanwhile, has been made to watch her death. He has been tied up and thrown around, kicked in the stomach, the shin, the head. He is muttering furiously under his breath, trying to commune with God, if it is not too late at this point, if his prayers will be accepted on uncovered dust.

They say his head never did come completely off. Five blows to the neck with a dull blade, and still, the head remained attached, just sloped over to one side. The name Khaled means *eternal, endless, immortal*.

I could feel the sun in your neck. And every time we touched, jasmine sank into our skin. What if I had known, then, the exact place you would've been cut? My fingers had grazed the line of your beheading so many times. I did not know then what was to come.

And what if I told you that none of this was true? That Misha'al did not attempt to mend her own clothes, that she did not like Jean-Paul Sartre, that she had never read a book on philosophy in her life? What if I told you she had never gone to university in Beirut at all? That, in fact, no college shows even the slightest trace of her presence in the years she should've been there?

British journalist and filmmaker Antony Thomas begins his investigation of the story after hearing one version of events at a dinner party in the fall of 1977. He conducts a series of interviews with various witnesses or involved individuals in order to ascertain the truth behind the princess's death. The end result of his research is the 1980 docudrama "Death of a Princess."

The film makes its debut on April 9, 1980 in London. The film is banned in Denmark, Turkey, Malaysia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, and, of course, Saudi Arabia. Its representation of the country is less than favorable. This is the perfect kind of story to spread throughout the West by means of empty cocktail chatter. "They'd kill just anybody over there. Did you hear about the prince who issued his own granddaughter's death?" "Sure, the women cover themselves, but didn't you hear about that princess? An adulteress! Modesty my ass." "They may be rich, but they're going to hell in a hand basket."

What Thomas discovered was that the princess was not put on trial. There was no decisive evidence for her alleged crimes of adultery. She did not attend the Beirut Women's College. Her privileges for traveling had been revoked. She had not met Khaled four months prior to the execution in Lebanon, but three weeks prior to the execution in Saudi Arabia. Most humiliating of all, she wasn't even executed in the square of justice, where even petty criminals are punished – she was killed in some abandoned parking lot. There is no dignity in this.

When we learn these facts, we begin the impossible task of unraveling the single thread of truth from a tapestry of falsehood. There are as many different accounts for the princess as there are interviewees in the film. On top of which, most of the “interviews” are not true interviews but the makeshift replications of the original conversations Antony Thomas held. The dialogue here is too rehearsed, too comfortable. Stage actors, trained to be loud and expressive and over-the-top, feel like phony, out-of-place caricatures in this made-for-television feature. If there exists some element of truth here, it is nearly impossible to dissect from the layers of invention and reinvention.

That I had divided myself into twelve beings, that we were all alive at the same time and all died at the time. That each was a distraction from the other, that all of these accounts were true. I am not sorry for these things. I will not apologize for the limitations of a system, for injustice in the name of Islam.

According to Thomas, Misha'al did not meet Khaled in Beirut, but in Jeddah. She saw him on the television playing guitar. She saw him and wanted him, simple as that. So she wrote a note to the boy:

“Khaled al-Sha'er Mulhallal, an urgent letter has been sent to you at the [redacted]. Please pick this up a half hour before closing on Wednesday afternoon.”

She sent it with the chauffeur to take to Khaled. The plan, of course, worked.

I asked for you and you came. I was stripped of power, but still, I could control you. I could tug at your hair, and you would turn to me. You would love me, my throne resting on your lips.

King David (or Dawud) in the Quran commits some unspeakable sin. We aren't told what it is in explicit terms, but scholars believe the sin refers to the Biblical account of Bathsheba. Woman bathing on the roof. Woman called into king's quarters. Woman's husband killed in

battle. David lifts a finger and the world acts as he wills it to act. He moves fantasy into reality, and does not have consequences to face. The hand of God is still upon him. His descendants will be blessed.

But Misha'al was not a king. Even worse, she was not a man. Her affairs could not have been forgiven, they could not have been overlooked. She knows she can't live with this for long. She has to scheme up some solution. The amira or princess that appears in the film tells us this:

“There's a popular beach 20 miles from here. The family has a chalet there. She persuaded her mother to let her go for a midnight swim. The boy was waiting for her. She left a set of clothes on the beach to fake a drowning, and she went with him. There's a small hotel five miles further up the coast. That was their hiding place.”

And I am looking out onto the ocean. I watch myself dive into the waters, and I do not surface. The sea swallows me whole, it does not consider me. I am watching my airless body fall to the seabed, the tide taking me farther and deeper. I can see it: the self devoured by black fin barracuda, by white tip sharks, sharp teeth, soft bodies, and I will be salt.

Four days passed, everyone searching for some trace of a body, but coming up with nothing. Before she left, she gave a letter to a maid that was not to be opened until a full week had passed – well after she and Khaled had made their grand escape from the country. But the search went on. The maid panicked. That letter was the only clue they had, so she handed it over. It was just a note to her mother not to worry, explaining that she was leaving and that she would be fine. But after the news was out, the borders were alerted. The princess and her lover were caught at customs. Of this, the amira said “She could have traveled under the veil with the passport of a servant, any woman. We have a saying in Arabic: ‘A thief isn't caught unless he wants to be caught.’”

This is the story we've been told before, the one we've been made to believe, the one we want to believe. It is the story of a woman falling in love with a man she shouldn't love, a

woman who is married to another man, but not by choice, never by choice. It is the story of a woman who is just old enough to be a woman, a woman still bound to tradition and expectation and law. It is the story of a princess, the story of a king's niece, the story of one who denies her riches and royalty for this, this longing grown wild, this sanction gone soft. It is the story of a woman who selects her love and therefore her death. This is the story. We know it to be true.

On Performance

You Can't Take It With You

The actors on stage are not in love with the people they should be in love with. Alice is not quite smitten with Tony. Tony appears to be smitten with Alice, but he is more in love with the sound of his own voice, breathless, honey-dripping resonance into air. Ed looks longingly at Boris, but Ed is married to Essie and reportedly straight. Besides, Boris is too busy gazing at Penelope to notice any other affection. His eyes dart across to meet hers, visions colliding in spectacular measures. Paul, husband of Penelope, tinkers with some fireworks and does not notice this optical affair.

I think this is where it begins, but which beginning, I do not know.

What We Gain in Repetition

At acting camp, we are told to do strange things. Two of us are called up to the front of class. Firstly, we are to lock eyes and maintain constant contact. Secondly, we are to pick a phrase and repeat it. Person A will say this and Person B will respond with this, and this singular phrase will be made into full conversation. I am called up to the front with a girl named Maeve.

“You are wearing a white shirt,” I say.

“I am wearing a white shirt,” she says.

“You are wearing a white shirt?”

“I am wearing a white shirt.”

“You are wearing a white shirt!”

“I am wearing a white shirt!”

The conversation is made out of inflection, pitch, tone, variation. It is made out of our facial expressions, our physical stances, our gestures. The phrase loses meaning. At some point, it becomes entirely vacant vocalization, and we do not know how to use it. It feels strange to stare this intently at someone for so long. I feel as though I am seeing a face for the first time: how the mouth bends, how the eyes shrink or widen, how even the ears seem to move with speech.

“You *are* wearing a white shirt.”

“I *am* wearing a white shirt.”

“You are wearing a *white* shirt?”

“I am wearing a white *shirt*.”

The time in front of the class feels interminable. It takes only so long before we begin to run out of variation. Maeve wants to get aggressive with this. She wants to yell and shout and turn this into a full blown argument, but this is not where I want to go. I render my voice soft, smooth, calm. I speak quietly. I turn the phrase into a meditation, an incantation.

“You are wearing a white shirt.”

I am telling her of an ocean far from here. I am telling her how I have dreamt of it, how I have I waited for restitution.

“You are wearing a white shirt.”

I am telling her of past loves. I am telling her of a golden boy, I am telling her of how flowers sprouted in his name.

“You are wearing a white shirt.”

I am telling her of the crows I have seen, how they spoke to me at dusk, how I swore I heard God's voice in them. *You are wearing a white shirt. You are wearing a white shirt. You are wearing a white shirt.*

The anger in Maeve's voice dissipates. She, too, grows quiet. She tells secrets back to me. Then, a shift. My tongue slips and I say "I like your shirt." Maeve doesn't miss a beat. "I like your shirt," she says back. We have both become "I" and we have both become "you." There is softness in this space. There is tenderness flaring from the skin of our lips.

Carousel

Act I:

Scene i: We meet and I decide that I will love you. I decide this because you are funny. I decide this because I notice how your voice changes when you speak to me. I am conceited and think this means you like me.

Scene ii: Tell me how this begins again: a word spoken aptly, a side glance, a cracked smile. Tell me where this alliance was formed, how the fort was crafted, the battalions made. Tell me I am not imagining this: that for the first time, you could see me. For the first time, I was real.

Scene iii: Of course you are in love with someone else. Of course she lives three continents away. Of course I had not considered this. I am devastated. I smile too wide. I laugh too loud.

Act II:

Scene i: If you have ever seen a faithful saint so devoted they forget themselves, their need for

food, their need for drink, this is how I bend to you. This is how I have always been in romance as in religion: vying for a love cannot be returned.

Scene ii: It grows feeble. The way heat saps life from the vine, so I am drained by you. You tell me of all the stories you will create, but you never begin the writing. I am tired of you. I am tired but I cannot help myself. Look, there: I see myself through a screen. “Stop, self,” I say, but I pass through the wall and become the televised version of me. It is a daytime drama and there is Vaseline on the lens.

Scene iii: At some point, she rejects you. At all points, you reject me. Eventually, I reject myself.

Act III:

Scene i: When it is time to leave, we do. I head west to a city where no one knows me. I am lonely here, but it is okay. You head west, farther. You are happy there. You are content.

Three days before Christmas, I stay at your house. You have asked me to come, though I do not understand why. Your whole family is there: your mother, your father, two brothers, two sisters, one brother-in-law. The family portraits are taken as I watch off to the side. Later, we sing carols. Your eldest brother thinks I will not know the words to *Away in a Manger* because I am not a Latter Day Saint. I am not made to belong here, but here I am. Your sister and her husband get in an argument. You tell me this is the first time you’ve seen them fight. The weather is unusually warm for December. We sit out on the dock. We stay up until four in the morning. I tell you of how sad I am, how homesick I am, how badly I want to leave. I had not been meaning

to, but I begin to cry. You do not know what to say or do except offer up some hollow apology.

Scene ii: Months pass. I date someone. I tell you. You are jealous.

Scene iii: Finally, finally you break. You cross the line into the daytime television drama. Your hands shake. Your voice wavers. It is everything that I have wanted. Three years have been leading up to this. In the time that I have known you, my hair has grown from short to long. On a carousel, we would've been horses. On a carousel, we would've been light.

For two weeks, we make-believe this will last. I am darling, you are dearest. At the end of it, you leave the country. At the end of it, we know the end will stand.

Glossolalia

Winter morning snow on the ground, it's five o'clock and I am wide awake and not warm enough in somebody else's house. My mother has been up in the dark for hours. She sits at the kitchen table, head bowed to the split-open bible, pages like two palms facing up. There is nothing to do and we are both jetlagged and shivering. I sit with her. In this moment she looks very, very old. Her hair is wires, her eyes soft like lambs'. I feel sorry for her. I feel sorry for myself because later that day, I will look in the mirror and I will see my own face, aged and tired as hers. Sometimes people think we are sisters.

When my mother prays, she only sometimes starts in English. Other times, she speaks in tongues *ourah yamenina kai, ourah yameninna kai*, this sacred word led by the Spirit, reserved

for God. This is a spiritual gift, as described by the apostle Paul in his letters to Corinth. In some Christian circles, this is a much sought-after gift. In other circles, it is called the devil's curse.

In the kitchen, we clasp cold hands together and pray. I feel the Spirit stirring in a way I haven't in a very long time. I speak in tongues under my breath. There is a rhythm in this, a way I can roll my tongue and allow it to move on its own accord. A comfort in not having to think of the exact words to say, but forming the emotion and letting it appear through the utterance. *Lord, I think, I am sorry for my doubting. I am sorry for my failures. I am sorry, I am sorry.* A kind of grief, apology, swells in my chest.

Years before, I am thirteen years old and desperately seeking the gift of tongues. I have prayed with my mother and her friends on week day mornings when I do not have school. I have heard them speak in this manner, and I have decided this is an ability I want, a physical manifestation of blessings, of spiritual power.

So I fast. I drink only water. I lie prostrate and pray. I kneel and pray. I stand and pray. I raise my hands and pray. I am contacting the Holy Spirit. I am sending signals into air. And eventually, it comes: the Spirit dwells within me and speaks holy words through my mouth. I have been baptized by the Spirit. I am anointed by the Lord.

The youth pastor, Mrs. Bacchus, encourages my youth group to follow suit. We lay hands on one another. We speak, we sing, we pray together. Ebun gains the gift that evening, as does Jenna, as does Benjamin. Later, we are invited to one of the adult Friday school classes (Friday being the Sabbath in Saudi Arabia) to deliver testimony. One girl, Ashley, of whom I have never been particularly fond, speaks to her experience. She says God gave her the gift, and then took it

away, and then gave it to her again. An adult speaks up. “It is not in God’s nature to take gifts away. If He is truly the giver, then the gift will remain.”

At the University of Pennsylvania, some researchers studied speakers of glossolalia, the scientific term for tongues, with SPECT (Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography.) SPECT is designed to measure cerebral blood flow. In this study, the researchers discovered that the language centers of the brain are not used in glossolalia. Lights abandon the front lobes, the area dark and blank. But what does that mean exactly? For nonbelievers, it confirms the idea that tongues is incoherent babbling. For believers, it aligns with the idea that tongues is not controlled by the human body but by the Spirit. Either way, the evidence is the same. It just depends on how you stage it.

I am thinking of Mrs. Bacchus, who told us of her baptism in the Spirit. She had just left a Spirit-led service, and had decided that tongues was a gift she wanted. She told us of how, in the parking lot, she started making up sounds, producing whatever utterances came to mind. As if her pretending could make it real. Before long, she realized that she wasn’t commanding her tongue any more—that the Lord had taken over, that she was only a vessel, a mouthpiece, a puppet on strings.

Here is the improvisation: the vocal cords vibrating, the glottis spreading and constricting, tongue undulating, the lips rounding and unrounding. Though glossolalia bears semblance to many communicative languages, the language holds no semantic significance. There is rhythm, there is stress, there is tone, but there is no meaning.

When high school came around, I started losing faith. I had too many questions and not enough answers. I would read one verse, and then another verse would seem to contradict the first one. I wanted to believe. I wanted to stay focused and aligned, but I struggled. In church, I stopped singing certain lyrics. That was my grand rebellion. I could sing “His grace is enough” but I couldn’t bring myself to sing “for me.” It wouldn’t have been true. Some months, I would not accept communion. When my mother asked why, I would tell her that I had not cleared my heart beforehand. That I took communion seriously. And I did. I knew that if I wanted to pursue the Spirit, I needed that pursuit to be true, to be honest, to be real. I had be fully invested, or not invested at all.

I no longer call myself a Christian. It took years for me to get to this point, to become comfortable with my nonbelief, or at least comfortable admitting it. I do not go to church. I do not read the scriptures. I do not pray. But I can still conjure the gift of tongues. Though I know this is nothing more than a basic linguistic process, though I know there is no supernatural involvement, this is still something I cling to: some small gift of God.

I finally told my mother about my nonbelief the summer before last. I feared she would argue or begin lecturing me, but she didn’t. She held me and stroked my hair, both of us on the brink of tears. “Oh baby,” she said, “It’s like He’s gone away for a very long time.” I did not know what to say, so I didn’t say anything at all.

We Once Had

There is a border dividing past and present, pass and present these offerings to the place we once stood, to the home we once lived in. I used to breathe here, you know, and the earth would roll into a crest and rupture into an opening we could see through, right down to the

flaming core. A stone fell from my hand and vanished. A stone fell from your hand and shook the earth. Cracks in the surface. Shifting plates below.

Now, we do not hold such power. The earth has forgotten us. The soil abandoned us. We wade through land with feet of stone.

Our Town

We have given up the grand realization of life. We have taken it upon ourselves to become lower, to become level. We have chosen to live as plainly as we do. What does it matter? In the third act, we are all dead.