

The Brass Bowl

Dania Idriss

didriss@ucalgary.ca

Dania Idriss (she/her) is a Lebanese-Canadian author and a doctoral student in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. She gratefully lives and works on the traditional territory of Treaty 7, with her writing focusing on global literatures, particularly Arabic speculative fiction. Her work aims to dismantle the harmful representations of Arab Muslim women in western media. She enjoys all things spooky, warm sweaters, and spending time with her bunny/jinn friend Arlo.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.33776/candb.v9i1.5047>

"We should put that thing out on the windowsill," my mother is looking at the silent infant in my arms with disgust. "*Kafar* will take it if we're lucky." I hadn't expected to feel sad about throwing the thing away once it was born, but I do. She is a girl, and for some reason that makes killing her so much worse.

"I'm sorry beastie, but I have to," I tell her. She has those strange blue eyes that babies often have, milky like an old woman's eyes. They aren't quite open but I can tell that she is looking at me, squinting. She knows she can't trust me. I try to stand up but my mother shoves me back into the bed.

"You're not done here."

"There's another one?" I am certain that I cannot endure giving birth to another one. "It'll kill me, I can't do it again."

"No, you stupid girl. The afterbirth hasn't come yet." I don't know what an afterbirth is but I'm afraid to ask, so instead I fall asleep.

The house smells like rust and sweat when I wake up. My eyes are caked in salty powder. I feel sore, and for a moment I think I've just lost my virginity. I am content, waiting for the travelling salesman to return to bed. I close my eyes and roll onto my side; the cooing of a baby in the room reminds me that I probably should have kept my virginity. I sit up in bed and see that my mother is sleeping on the wooden chair by the window; the baby is not with her. My mother's body is contorted by sleep. Her neck is bent awkwardly and her arms and legs are sprawled like those of a dead person. For a moment I dare to hope she doesn't wake up. I attempt to get out of bed despite my body's loud complaints. I need to wash the sweat and blood away, but I doubt my mother was kind enough to fill the tub before falling asleep. I put my foot down on the ground, but it is startled back into the safety of the sheets. There is something wet and cold on the floor. I imagine my baby's corpse on the stone ground, my mother cutting her open to teach me a lesson. I close my eyes and decide to wash in the morning when the jinn are asleep.

I am startled awake when my mother slams the door. I open my eyes and see her leering at me. She has pulled open all of the thick curtains to let the sun and some fresh air into the congested room, but the smell of birth still fills my head. It's nauseating.

"Get up and clean this mess. I need to take this cheese and *kishik* to Aeche's house. I missed three deliveries because of you yesterday." I sit up and groan. My body feels so empty and sore. My mother leaves the house with her wicker basket full of goat's dairy and slams the door behind her. I look around the room for my baby but she isn't here. My horrible nightmares from the previous night are still clear in my mind,

so I peer over the side of my bed like a child afraid to find that floors have turned to fire. There is no dead baby, and I find that I am perversely disappointed. The floor is covered in bloody towels. I get out of bed. My breasts are heavy and sore; they tug painfully when I bend to clean the mess. I used to complain constantly about my small breasts, but now that they are heavy and full I pray for my body to return to the way it was. I take one of my mother's white scarves and tie it around my breasts to hold them in place. The towels on the floor are still a little damp in the centre, but the blood on the edges has dried. The fabric is stiff and brown. I will need to soak them for days to get the blood out. I collect them in a pile and leave them by the empty water basin. The fountain in the village dried up weeks ago, and I send a quick prayer thanking my grandpa for digging a deep well on our land. I use the water we have left in the kitchen and mop up the floor. The bed sheets need to be changed as well, so I strip the sheets and place them by the towels. A brass bowl sits on the bed tangled in the sheets. Something resembling a slab of meat sits in the dented bowl. I think of the baby and wonder if my mother has cut her up to eat.

When a baby cries too loudly or acts out in public Umm Iraideh will hear and she will come take the baby away. She'll cut the baby up into little pieces and eat it with her tea. If you don't listen to mama and baba then Umm Iraideh will come for you too. Our parents protect you from her, but if you are bad, and they no longer want you, then she will scoop you up in a second and you won't even get to say goodbye. We will all hear lightning and big clouds will show up in the sky and it will rain. Everyone in the village will be so happy for the gift of rain that you will be forgotten.

I think about Salim's story as I reach for the purplish meat in the bowl. It is cold and soft, and I want to keep it. I dribble some of the bloody water left from my mopping onto it to keep it damp and cover it with a bloodstained towel. I don't know where to hide it in the small house I share with my mother so I decide to bury it deep in the ground beneath an olive tree near our well where the goats aren't allowed to go.

I am glad I bound my breasts while I dig a hole as deep as my body will allow. I still feel tired and empty, but I am overwhelmed with the need to get the brass bowl into the ground. The ground is so dry it has formed large cracks. I stick my shovel into the widest crack and pry the stiff red clumps of dirt away. I make sure the damp towel is covering the bowl snugly before I place a wide stone over the hole. The olive tree has not been as lucky as my mother and me. Only a few leaves cling to the branches. We will not have olives this year. The bark flakes off in a trail behind my finger as I trace it down the tree. I wonder if this is what the people in the village look like by now.

"Why are you covered in dirt, I thought I told you clean this place up, not make a bigger mess." My mother is back, her basket empty.

"Where is my baby?" My voice is hoarse, probably from screaming so much the previous night. My mother doesn't answer me. Instead she picks up two buckets and heads back for the door.

"I'm going to get some water to fill the tub. You smell worse than a goat's ass."

You must never let a man convince you to share your body with him until you are married. If you have a baby before you are married, it will be an evil baby. Allah will protect the bond of your marriage from the jinn waiting to enter your baby, but if you are not married then your baby will be taken over by jinn. It will be a monstrous child, born with all its teeth, smiling. It isn't the baby's fault. Babies are just vulnerable.

Salim warned me when he saw me holding hands with Joseph Khoury from down the road. We were only children, but even then, Salim knew the dangers. I thought it would be different if I convinced the man to share his body with me. I sit down on the now naked straw-filled mattress and ignore the pain between my legs. I am exhausted in a way that I have never felt before, but I cannot sleep. I feel those squinting blue eyes watching me from somewhere in the room. I cannot shake the image of the child grinning at me with all her teeth, walking towards me on her tiny legs, body moving unnaturally as the demon inside tries to hold up the limbs that have yet to develop their own muscles.

I scream and sit up in the bed. The room is dark and I realize that I have slept through the day. The sound of a baby crying outside coils its way into my drowsy ears. I drag my stiff limbs out of bed and run to the window. I look out and am startled by a hyena digging beneath the window. I know that I should wake my mother in case the hyena tries to kill the goats, but I am mesmerized by the animal's prickly fur. I have seen these animals around, people chasing them away with guns, but never so close. I could reach out and touch the striped fur if I wanted. The animal looks up at me. It stops digging. The eyes seem familiar. It grins, and I think for a moment that it has human teeth in its mouth. I step back and the hyena turns and runs away, startled by my sudden movement. The animals are not faring much better than the trees. The hyena's hipbones protrude, outlined in the moonlight as he retreats into the trees. I sit down in the wooden chair by the window and convince myself I have been dreaming for days. Tomorrow I will wake up and I will be myself again.

The wooden chair was not kind to my body. My neck aches and I can't feel my legs anymore. I stand up and pins and needles shoot through my lower body. I let out a cry. My mother looks over groggily from her cot in the kitchen.

"The sun isn't even up." She rolls over and pulls the woven blanket over her shoulder. I want to shake her and ask her what happened to my baby, but I am beginning to believe that the baby is all a part of a strange dream that isn't quite over yet. I am still in the dirt-covered dress I had on the previous day, so I decide to bathe and change before heading into the village to get away from this house and my mother. I haven't been out in months. I unbind my breasts and let my dress fall in a puddle around me. I expect my breasts to be sore and heavy but instead they just feel dry. I've shriveled up and died, and this is what is left. I quickly wrap the cloth around myself before I have the chance to inspect what my body has become and soak myself in the tub my mother filled while I was sleeping. The water barely comes up to my hip while I'm sitting down but I feel good soaking in the bath. My body still feels wrong. Like the empty shell of a pistachio. I realize that I haven't eaten in two days. I think about the brass bowl and I imagine eating my soft baby, returning her to my body. Making myself feel full again. I replace the thought with the more alluring promise of bread and cheese.

My mother wakes up while I sip on tea and tear into cheese wrapped in a piece of stale pita bread. I don't feel satisfied with this meal, but there isn't much else to eat.

"What do you think you're doing?" My mother is eyeing the basket I've filled with the day's dairy deliveries.

"I'm going to take the deliveries to the village today."

"No, they still think you're ill. You have to stay here for a few more days, I need to tell people that you're feeling better, that you're going to be coming back soon. People will talk if you're suddenly well again. I don't want people to talk."

"Where is my baby?"

"Feed the goats today. Don't fuck any strangers." She grabs the basket and slams the door behind her.

Once she is no longer in sight I hurry to the olive trees and uncover my brass bowl. It is cool and dark in the hole, but the meat is beginning to putrefy regardless. The sweet smell of rot wafts into my nose and mouth and I fight back the urge to tear into the raw meat. I catch my reflection in the side of the bowl and for a moment I think that I am looking into the eyes of *Umm Iraideh*. An old woman looks at me from the side of the brass bowl. My 16-year-old skin is soft and sagging. Wrinkles cover my face like delicate spider webs. I drop the bowl back into the hole and shove the rock over top. I sit back for a moment but I want the meat in the bowl. I have never been one to deny myself. I peel back the towel and grab the putrid purple meat. I sink my teeth in. The first bite is difficult to chew, and swallow. I am a starving animal as I tear the meat more aggressively until there is nothing

left. I am satisfied, and feel full for the first time since the birth. The bowl is tipped over onto its side and the old witch is no longer looking back at me. I place the bowl back in the hole and head back to the house.

My mother broke the only mirror in our house when she caught me admiring my pregnant body months ago. *What have you done? Do you know what this is going to do to us?* She threw her shoe at me but it hit the mirror instead. A spider web spread across the glass turning my round belly into sharp, fractured edges. You're too far along for herbs to take care of this. You will marry the man who did this to you. Tell me who he is. My mother's face was contorted in the mirror behind my shoulder. Her eyebrows replaced her eyes while her mouth cut across her cheek in a straight line. I laughed. I laughed harder and harder each time she brought her shoe down on me. I imagined her standing barefoot, screaming with her sideways mouth. I don't remember falling asleep that night. The night my mother found out. But she was gone for three days when I woke up.

Umm Iraideh is not evil. Not like a bad Jinn or Shaytan. She is just Umm Iraideh. She does her job. She is strongest when the human world is dysfunctional. She loves dysfunction. And she loves to eat bad children.

I wonder if Salim knew that I was only a bad child because I also loved dysfunction. I didn't think *Umm Iraideh* would eat me if she knew we were on the same page, so I began praying to her. I stopped when Salim went to join someone's war. All that praying and the bitch still got me in the end. She took my brother and turned my mother into a violent, angry beast.

"Did you take my baby because she was a bad child or because I was?" I ask *Umm Iraideh* out loud. She does not respond. She has not responded since she took my brother away, which I think is a pretty good last word.

My mother killed the black goat after my brother left since many of our Christian neighbours believed him to be evil, and she did not want to take any chances. She even donated his body to the village poor in goodwill. The black goat was my favourite one, so now I need to be mean to the lesser white goats. They are always dirty and all they do is stare at walls.

"Good morning idiots," I greet them as I empty a bucket of food scraps that aren't good enough for people into their tray. Three of the goats wander towards the rotting pile but the fourth one doesn't stand up. Her bones stick up through her thin flesh like those of the hyena I had maybe dreamed, and her head is twisted to the side like she's straining to see someone directly behind her.

"Have you died?" I crouch beside her face but she does not respond. I stare into her square pupils until I can't keep my eyes open any longer, but she does not blink. I poke her

eyeball with my finger, still she doesn't blink, and the eye is dry. My mother is not going to be happy, but my mouth waters at the prospect of meat for dinner.

After struggling with the goat's dead body, I quickly come to realize I am not strong enough to move her, let alone hang and drain her, on my own. I don't know how long my mother will be, and I don't want to leave the dead goat to go bad in the dry heat, so I tie my scarf around my breasts and head into the village. My mother will be angry that I disobeyed her, but she will be angrier about the dead goat.

The road from our house to the village is a steep downhill slope the whole way, and I usually run down so fast I feel like my feet won't be able to keep up with my body, but that kind of momentum only reminds me of the pain in my breasts and I decide to walk into the village this time. The trees on each piece of land that I pass are as naked as our own. The locusts are still clinging to the barren branches, so ignorant about the damage they have done.

"You did this," my mother told me when the locusts first arrived. She had just discovered my swollen belly when Eli, our neighbour, came yelling about the swarm. Eli had a fruit farm, and the insects ruined him. I didn't like him since he felt he was the man of our household since my brother left and I was happy with no men at all.

"Cover your windows before they get here. I've never seen anything like it." Eli was panting like a dying old mule, but he did not die. He went back to his ruined home, packed his bags and probably died on the road to Tripoli.

I walk up to Eli's home and dig up the piece of paper I rolled up buried in front of his door. My messy writing is nearly illegible, but it doesn't matter. My curses always worked. *Umm Iraideh* was on my side. Before she turned against me of course. I tear the piece of paper into tiny pieces and sprinkle them down the path as I continue towards the village.

Insects jump out of the dry grass surrounding the path, making me flinch each time. The closer I get to the village, the more I notice the silence. I can hear each locust's legs hitting the ground as they leap around their newly occupied land, but nothing else. There are no voices, or birds, and wagons. The streets are empty.

The point of people is to help other people. You can't wish all the people away or else you'll be alone, and there will be no point to you being alive at all.

Salim used to love the neighbours, and he got upset when he caught me burying curses on their land. I smile at the empty streets around me and take pride in the curses that have come true. My mother did not want the neighbours to talk, but there cannot be talk if there are no neighbours.

"You're all dead and I'm alive!" I yell into the empty village square. I have never seen the square empty, or the cornerstone closed. The fountain is also silent for the first time

probably ever. The spout that sticks out of the wall and usually keeps the whole village hydrated looks rotten without the water to masque the chunky white and green build-up on it. Even the fountain is dying. I quickly hide behind the stone fountain when I spot some feet behind a nearby house. I hold my breath and hope that the stranger did not hear me. I wait in silence and watch a couple of locusts inspect the corrupted fountain spout. The feet don't move or make a sound and curiosity drives me towards the house with the legs. It is Tony Mowad's house and I know that he will tell my mother if he sees me too close to his property. I sneak slowly until I am certain that no one will spot me. The windows to the house are boarded up. I peek around the house and see that the feet belong to a young woman. She is lying down, her back resting on the house. Her head tilts at an odd angle on her shoulder and she is inhumanly thin. I don't recognize her. I've been locked in the house for over six months so it is possible that a new family has come to the village. I crouch beside her and lean in to look at her face. Her eyes are filled with wriggling grains of rice. Her mouth drops open as if she too has just noticed that a million tiny worms are eating her eyes, and a giant locust crawls out from between her parted lips and perches on the bridge of her hooked nose. I step back slowly and try not to focus on the growing burning hunger in my stomach.

"She's from a village up the mountain. On her way to Tripoli with all the others." My mother is standing behind me carrying her basket filled with some bread and speckled, anemic, fruits. I stare at her with my mouth hanging open and shut it suddenly afraid that an insect might escape.

"It was much worse a few weeks ago. Couldn't walk a step without running into a body." My mother isn't angry. Her words don't snap and bite me for the first time in months.

"One of the goats died." My throat is so dry I can barely get the words out. She sighs and bows her head for a moment and I flinch back expecting her anger, but it never comes.

"I will find someone to help us hang and drain it. Go back home and cover the goat with a blanket. Try to keep the goddamn bugs away." She turns away and heads back into the empty village before I can ask where she might find people. I glance back at the body and see that a hyena is standing next to the house, watching me.

"You can have it," I say. The hyena takes a step towards the body but keeps its eyes on me.

"Are you afraid of me? I don't have sharp teeth or claws." The hyena just keeps staring. I crouch down by the woman's feet and pull her shoes off. I can't imagine hiking down the mountain all the way to Tripoli in a pair of beaded heels. Of course this woman died. I throw the shoes as far as I can and look back at the hyena.

"There. That'll be easier for you I think." The hyena grabs the woman's arm and pulls her away. Her body slides off the wall and slumps into a heap on the ground. The hyena readjusts its grip on her arm and pulls her into the dead grass and bushes. The sound of the body being dragged along the unpaved road fades into the bushes as the hyena disappears into the shrubs. I inspect the small pile of writhing maggots the woman left behind, and crush them all with the toe of my shoe.

The other goats are standing as far away from their dead sister as possible. The vague smell of rot is filling the barn, so I open the door and let the unsentimental survivors out. There are no maggots yet, but there are some beetles, locusts, and centipedes trying to burrow their way into the fresh meat. I flick the insects away and wrap the goat's body tightly in a bed sheet. Her limbs are stiff and sticking out directly in front of her. I push down on the limbs as hard as I can but they won't budge.

I need to lie down before my mother gets back and makes me help her with the goat. My lower back is throbbing and I feel the emptiness return. I lie down on my bed and try to rub the stiffness from my bones. I don't like giving or receiving massages, but I do wish someone could press so hard on my spine that it breaks. I want the vertebrae to turn to powder. The pain is throbbing and persistent and I distract myself with the thought of my travelling salesman dead on the road to Tripoli next to old Eli. The first time the salesman came to our house I invited him inside for tea and told him that I didn't want to buy any of his junk. He was Turkish, and I invited him in every time he came because I liked the way he talked. I never bought anything from him but he kept coming. I don't know when I decided I wanted to invite him into my bed but it was fun until my belly began to swell and he stopped coming over. He had been gone for a whole month when my mother realized I had a baby inside me. She gave me herbal teas made with marjoram, or thyme, or even parsley to kill the little beast but the baby remained inside. She rubbed foul smelling oils over my belly and burned lavender in the house. The baby continued to grow. The salesman never came back, and I didn't get a chance to put a curse into the bag he carried with him, so he got away. I wrote a note with his name on it and burned it outside. Hopefully the wind carried my curse to him. I like to think that the baby escaped my mother. The jinn really did carry her away on her undeveloped legs, away into the trees to *Umm Iraideh's* house where she would be raised to be a witch.

I close my eyes and hope that I do not open them to a hoard of maggots. I feel a familiar pain in my abdomen and clutch my stomach. It is swollen again, and the baby is kicking hard to get out. There is desperation behind each kick, and I know she is suffocating. I open my legs and push as hard as I can, but none of my muscles are responding. I am too

tired to push anymore, and my throat is too dry to scream. I grasp my belly and wait for the baby to suffocate, but the kicking only gets harder. I feel too many limbs. The baby is a monster. I try to smother it by pressing into my belly as hard as I can, but my arms won't work either. The struggling baby begins buzzing. I can't tell if the buzzing is out loud or in my mind. I open my eyes as the pressure in my womb begins to lessen and the sound of the buzzing grows louder. Thousands of locusts swarm from between my legs and fill our house. They gather around my mother's cot in a thick cloud, and I finally manage to sit up. I open the door and all the windows and release my newborn insects into the sky. I look back at mother's cot and she is a skeleton, with wisps of flesh clinging to her bones. I lie back down on my bed and smile. My body made the swarm. My body brought a whole village to its knees.

"I swear to god she's the laziest girl. Sleeping in the middle of the day like an old lady." My mother yanks me up from the bed causing the pain from my lower back to shoot up my spine.

"I wasn't feeling well. My back..."

"I don't give a shit. Come help us with the goat." My legs are soaking wet beneath my dress but I let her drag me to the barn.

A young man is standing next to the goat using his long pinkie nail to itch the skin beneath his thick beard.

"I'm Usif." The man stops scratching his beard and extends his hand towards me.

"She doesn't give a shit." My mother slaps his hand away from me, and turns to uncover the dead goat. I smile at the look of hurt pride on his face.

"Don't just stand there. Come do your job if you want a share of this meat," says my mother. The man does as she says.

"How many goats do you have? This your last one?" The man asks. He looks around the barn and my mother narrows her eyes.

"Yes this was our only goat."

The man shrugs and pulls the sheet off the goat's body. Both he and my mother gasp at the sight of the cadaver. The goat's body is cut from chin to anus. The intestines are spilling onto the ground but all the other organs are missing.

"What the hell is this?" Usif nudges the intestines with the tip of his boot as if the rest of organs are hiding beneath.

"An animal must have gotten in while I was sleeping..."

"And rewrapped the goat after it finished?" My mother crouches down and inspects the opening. "A person did this unless the hyenas have learned to use knives."

"Organs are easier to steal than the whole thing," Usif says, placing his hands on his hip and looking proud like someone who has just cracked an unsolvable mystery.

"Who else did you tell about the goat?" My mother's usual cold anger has returned to her eyes. I shrug. "Who am I going to tell? Everyone in town is dead."

I help my mother and Usif tie the goat by her hind legs to get her on the hook that dangles from the barn's ceiling.

"If this was your plan, to tell someone to beat us here and steal the organs, then I hope God has no mercy for you. I hope you choke on the meat you stole," my mother says. She clutches the knife in her fist.

Usif puts his hands up defensively, "Hey lady, I came here to help you for a payment of meat, why would I steal from you? Don't go making accusations." He says the last part with a warning in his voice that makes my mother clutch her knife even tighter, her knuckles turning bone white.

"Turks turned us into animals," my mother mutters as she crouches down to inspect the goat's body more closely. She rolls the knife into the top of her apron. She uses both hands to pull the animal's intestines out completely. Blood smears her dress and apron as she hugs the intestines to her chest, then lets them fall into a pile on the ground. The insects in the barn have already begun to inspect the mess. My mother crushes a beetle with the heel of her shoe and drags her foot back, smearing its guts into the dirt.

"At least it'll be lighter now," says Usif, "I'll carry the head and you two can take the legs." My mother nods at Usif's suggestion. The goat's legs bend more easily now as my mother works on tying them together. The pain in my back flares from the dead weight I carry, but I don't dare complain. Usif's face turns red with effort across from me as we lift the carcass to the hook coming down from the ceiling and loop it through the rope my mom used to bind the animal's back legs. My mother unwraps the knife from the fold in her apron and slits the goat's throat with one swift movement. Usif curses as blood dribbles onto his shoes. There isn't very much blood left in the goat's body, but gravity helps whatever is left leak from the gaping wound in the throat as well as the open torso. My mother says a quick prayer for the meat under her breath.

"We'll let it bleed for a few minutes then I'll get to skinning it and cutting it up. Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee?" My mother's tone is still harsh and cold, but I am surprised at her polite behaviour.

"I'll take some tea," Usif says, still looking down at his foot as he tries to rub the blood off onto the dirt. "So you've decided not to blame me for your missing organs after all? You're going to be a civilized woman now?" My mother clenches her jaw as she wipes her knife

off onto her apron. "I'm not stupid, ya haji, I can see that there are no men left living here. It's dangerous, two women living by themselves. Two women who seem to be a lot more fortunate than the rest of us." My mother rolls the knife back up in her apron but keeps her eyes on the young man now towering over her.

"Do you wish to intimidate me? I'm not scared of a coward like you," my mother says, meeting his eyes directly. Usif lifts his hand ready to strike my mother, but she does not flinch. "How many men came back from that stupid blockade? Do you know?" Usif lowers his hand and glares at my mother.

"It wasn't my war," he says.

"No. It's nobody's war; I'll give you that. But you're still a coward. Not a single man came back from the blockade, yet here you are. You must feel strong in a village of old women, but you're not strong. You're a coward." Usif lifts his arm and actually strikes my mother this time. She crumbles to the ground into the puddle of goat's blood, crushing a few bugs beneath her. I realize for the first time how old my mother has gotten. She spits blood onto the ground and smiles up at Usif. Her teeth are glistening red and she laughs.

"I'm going to take everything you whores have here," says Usif, "I'm going to break your legs and I'm going to leave you here to die. We'll see who the cowards are."

My mother laughs even harder, her grey hair peeking from beneath her scarf and falling around her face.

"The coward is still you," she says. Usif kicks her in the stomach, but she continues laughing. I haven't seen my mother laugh in years, and I feel a sudden surge of love for her. She is a broken old woman and I love her.

"The goat is dead
and mama said
help the stranger

he's in danger," I sing in a panic and sprint from the barn.

"What did you just say to me?" Usif barrels out behind me. I know the terrain well. My bare feet navigate my family's hillside farm with ease while Usif stumbles around behind me. I glance back and echo my mother's laughter. Usif snarls, his top lip is curled over his yellowing teeth. My laughter is suddenly choked off as my toes hook onto the stone I had placed to cover my brass bowl and I tumble forward, face planting into the dry dirt beneath the olive tree, nearly hitting my head on the edge of the well. It is now Usif's turn to laugh as he catches up to me. His laughter comes out in choked wheezes. He tries to catch his breath before he speaks.

"Why are you running?" he asks as he grabs my wrist, a wicked smile spreading across his face.

"Kill me. I don't mind." I tell him, allowing my own smile to spread.

"What?" He loosens his grip in his confusion and I take the opportunity to pull away. His calloused hand tightens around my arm the moment he feels my muscles tense.

"Trying to get away? To where?" he asks. I close my eyes and go limp in his hands. I feel something wet and warm drip onto my face and Usif's grip goes slack. I open my eyes and he is staring at me. My mother stands behind him, her hair hangs loose around her. Usif coughs and a spray of blood spatters my face. He falls forward on top of me and I see the hilt of my mother's knife sticking out of his back. Usif twitches and gurgles on top of me. I kick my knees up into his twitching body and shove him off me. I pull the knife from his back like a plug from a drain. The blood leaks freely from the wound and after a moment, Usif stops moving.

"Where is my baby," I ask my mother.

"She didn't survive the night," my mother says, sinking to the ground. Her dress is already blood soaked and caked in dirt.

"What happened to her," I look directly at my mother, but she refuses to meet my eyes.

"Nothing can survive in this world. She didn't deserve to be born into the world without a father. Without food. Without water."

"We're surviving in this world."

"I wasn't willing to trade your life for hers," my mother whispers, and meets my eyes at last.

"You killed her?" I tighten my grip on the knife.

"I had to. She would have suffered." Tears cloud mother's eyes, but she does not fool me. Her old face is wrinkled and wicked just like the face I saw in the brass bowl.

"*Umm Iraideh*," I whisper. My mother just continues to leak tears. More water than the village has seen in months. She lifts her head and smiles, and I strike out with my knife. Blood squirts from her neck in the rhythm of her beating heart. I wrap my arms around her as she convulses, and the pulsing blood becomes nothing more than a trickle.

My mother's limp body thumps to the ground. She is too heavy and my arms are tired from lifting the goat. The sound of claws clacking against metal finally breaks me free from my mother's judgmental gaze. I leave my mother's open eyes for the bugs and walk towards the hyena pawing at my brass bowl, which is sitting beside the rock that had tripped me. My bloody feet are carrying my weight effortlessly, as if my body no longer has any mass. The hyena watches me approach, then takes off towards our house. My house.

The hyena's heavily padded paws move the loose dirt bellow the window with surprising ease. I shuffle in next to the hyena and dig my cracked fingernails into the only moist

dirt in the village. This soil feels healthy and full of life, and I feel a certainty that I cannot explain. My baby is in this hole and has been waiting a long time to breathe. I didn't notice the hyena leave, but I am alone at the shallow grave when I see the bloated fingers of an infant. I dig deeper into the damp soil and finally uncover her tiny face. The eyes are sunken into the skull, and a centipede stands on the edge of her lips.

"You must be so cold," I whisper to the infant. I pull her out of her hole in the dirt and cradle her in my arms. Her body is soft and limp, and she smells terribly sweet.

"You must be so hungry," I say, as I bring her into the house. I sit in mother's old chair by the window and bring my baby's lips to my breast. I don't feel dry and empty like this village anymore. I close my eyes and thank *Umm Iraideh* for answering my prayers. My baby and I are the only people left living in this starving world.