

Umm al-Arabi

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"*Yaa' Umm!*" I say. You are a bird.

I enter our conversation

broadly sweeping through your tweed

coat, your petite handbag. "*Tasharaafna,*"

which is to say, "I am honored

by your presence."

While this morning jasmine is

and everything else besides,

I am hurried.

You, all elegant and ambling,

sit on your smile for

a time until I settle in.

Your withered frame a delicate

statuary, huddled in

herringbone, a silk scarf.

What harm is there in reaching

for a dark gloved hand? I wander down

the road of your exile.

Between us, the flat mile of

a table where the coffee is; where

the war is, both black and harsh. We

drink from both, speak of neither.

"*As-salaam aleikum!*" Can you
repeat yourself? Between us,

the flat mile of a table. Is the world
so much smaller than you remember?

My eyes trace the ridges
of your teeth, where the tongue
strikes in certain phrases. The flash

of gold from wire on a bridge, the
corners of your mouth keeping
secrets. The throaty sound you make,

while you stretch American tongues
to fit Arabic words, your breath
clean as a bell jar.

I wander down the road your exile is,
Iraqi woman of the Dhod. Mother of all Arabs, I wonder
which words cease being useful when
you're in your cups; which words fail

to meet the sum of things.

Do so many flowers wither, these garlands
we heap upon one another, this

jasmine morning of so many greetings, while the world
is charged by lesser men?

May you be at ease among family!

Between us, the flat mile of a table
 where the coffee is, where
 our exile is, both black and harsh. What harm

is there in reaching for a hand, while
 this morning of a thousand lights
 unfolds the shadows in these ram-battered cups.

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