

By Monira AL QADIRI

Forgetting the Desert

*We are the feeders if we are able
We are the destroyers if we are cursed
We are the opposers if we so please
We are the descendents if we desire it
We are the deserters if we are angered
We are the takers if we allow it
We are the tyrants if we are obeyed
We are the determined if we are forsaken*

Section of the pre-Islamic Mu'allaqah (Ode) of Amr Ibn Kulthum, 526-584 AD

In the desert landscape, time and memory function in strange and mysterious ways. A specific tradition emanating from sand itself commands us to perpetually forget, to only live in the here and now, because the treachery of the dunes will take everything away in an instant, and to remember is to destroy oneself. We must forget homes in which we once lived, places we visited, people we met, and even our dearly loved ones. It is too much to bear on our hearts to keep these memories, only their constant erasure will keep us sane. Show no emotion, shed no tears, just continue on with life without questioning your fate. Do not visit the dead or write names on their graves, for their place of burial is impossible to rediscover. The only ancestral keepsake you will have is borne on your own title: Monira-Mohammed-Issa-Ali-Yousif-AlQadiri. A collage of father's and

grandfather's aliases, most of whom you know nothing about. Only the utterance of their name fulfills a slight trace of existence. Even today, when the desert has lost its power to technologies that shield us from its harsh ways at every direction, its rough texture is still somehow embedded onto our skins and bodies. Now, we not only encourage the ongoing erasure of history, we purposefully conceal it and manipulate it, so that others may not know or find out what has come before. This oppression of nostalgia has had its consequences, none of which are cathartic or rewarding.

So then, is there a way to access the debris of emotions lost over the ages? What is the medium that acts as the vessel to reveal these obscured recollections? Although abstracted and disembodied from their original context, in our region, ancestral memory's primary home can be found within the language of poetry and song. Within these magical words, a resurrection of thought occurs, one that transcends time and space. Lost homes, lost loves, and lost desires suddenly confront us, with all the majesty this audio-visual medium commands. The music of the orator's voice combined with the images contained inside his words creates a tapestry of wonderment that adapts itself to any given moment in time. Still, it is only the language of men. As the towering totem in the center of Arab society, the man is seen as the receptor and messenger

of the entire range of human emotion. He is the purveyor of all experience, the gatekeeper of memory, the explorer of the universe of thought. In order to partake in his world, one must contort one's body and mind to accommodate his masculine ways. And so, some of us flirt with this act of ventriloquism in order to feel powerful, in order to feel vindicated, in order to become the orators of time ourselves.

The Reading of Ghosts

In Japan where I resided for a decade, the cult of ancestral worship is strong. Ancestors reveal themselves in shrines inside the home, in elaborate cemeteries, in bedtime stories and in all definitions of self. There is a sense continuity in the narrative of kin, be that enlightening or burdening to some. Remembrance is an unshakable duty, a higher calling, and most of all symbol of one's familial honor. The loss of this personal history is a calamity, a source of terrible trauma, and also signals a coming vengeance from the netherworld. Ancestors, both known and unknown, must be revered or else awful things will occur.

These revelations of ancestry always take the form of an absolute metaphysical presence that cannot be questioned: Ghosts. Ghosts are, and always will be, at the center of society's ritualistic imagination, a concrete being that

embodies a true form. Here, ghosts do not constitute a part of a specific religious belief system, or some fictional children's fable; they are part of the construct of reality itself. And they can be summoned and conversed with, if a person with the right abilities is consulted. As a foreigner, I grappled with this concept of "truth" as I had nothing to equate it with from my own background. In the beginning, I found it strange, bizarre and even comical, but with time the heavy handedness with which these phantoms of times past assert themselves on society came to impress, and even intimidate me. The certainty of their invisible existence became somehow a palpable experience I could understand.

Perhaps borrowing from this distant ethereal being's conception could remedy the desert's oblivious plight, I thought. Perhaps by displacing the ghosts to my own geography they could act as vessels for the revelation of a decimated antiquity, where remembrance is seen as sin. In a place where "no history" is an enforced status quo, conjuring my tribal ancestry from the harsh plains of southern Saudi Arabia could illuminate some of what has been lost to us, and to our sense of self. Maybe by doing so, our bleak future can flash in technicolor before our very eyes, jolting and bouncing like a floating night club in the sky.