

Death in Al-Hasakah

1.

She needs to stop writing this "Fatima," this half-born poem that won't let go of her, that robs sleep and troubles her days. Careful not to disturb the man whose mother is named Fatima, she slips from their bed, carrying her pencil and Moleskine pad to the bathroom. How often has she, Jaydee, sat on the toilet, scribbling, thrilled that finally she'd broken through to the heart of the poem, only to wake next morning to garbage, text scrawled by some stoned, deranged stranger? The damned thing has too many moving parts. Fatima was the Prophet's favorite daughter. Fatima, Portugal, was the site of Virgin Mary floating above a wheat field, the town having been named after a Muslim woman no doubt kidnapped and raped by a crusader knight. And in every corner of the United States sits a church called Our Lady of Fatima, its pews filled with parishioners who hate Muslims. What on earth does she want to say? This is not her kind of poem. Why won't it leave her alone?

There are other disturbances. He, Jibril, cries out in his dreams, flails his arms and legs, wakes her when the unfinished poem doesn't. And for good reason. His mother is ill and far from his reach.

After a string of rough nights, Jaydee finds an e-mail from Harriet Badges of the Stanford faculty about "the White House matter." Will Jaydee join her and other poets in declining Ms. Bush's invitation to the dinner symposium, the one about Whitman, Dickinson, and Langston Hughes? This is January 2003. A war is coming. "Given your status," Badges writes, "a refusal from you will pack great punch." Instead of attending, says Badges, poets will be submitting a packet of antiwar poems to Laura Bush. "Would you be kind enough to send one or two as part of the effort?"

And this Badges has the temerity to copy the e-mail to many of Jaydee's friends and colleagues. It's too early in the morning for this manipulative bullshit. But no, she won't fire back an e-mail. Jaydee, hugging the robe he keeps at her apartment, smelling his smell, sits for a while, sips coffee, and watches dawn break over the Hudson. The warehouses on the Jersey side glow pink. "Their fifteen minutes of prettiness," Jibril has said. He, thank God, is still



asleep. She'll take her time and answer on heavyweight embossed stationery, using a Parker fountain pen.

Dear Harriet,

I don't write "political" poems — it's not my way — so I couldn't contribute if I wanted. But I must ask what all this will accomplish. As you must know, I interact with Ms. Bush from time to time. She is not her husband. What's her crime? Asking us to break bread and chat about that antiwar poet, Whitman? Harriet, you could submit a billion poems and the invasion will go on. "Poetry makes nothing happen," Auden said. As I tell my Barnard students, squeezing politics into poetry is like driving a concrete truck over a delicate bamboo bridge. It kills the art.

The horror of the coming war will strike closer to me than you can ever possibly imagine, but I shall not submit a poem for your effort, and I will not decline the White House invitation.

Warmest regards,
Jaydee Reese

On February 6, 2003, the *New York Times* reports that after learning of the protest, the White House "postponed" the symposium. The press secretary is quoted: "While Mrs. Bush respects and believes in the right of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions and believes that it would be inappropriate to turn what is intended to be a literary event into a political forum."

"Shock and awe" starts in March with a rain of bunker-buster bombs on Baghdad. They think they know where Saddam's hiding, but he's not among the children, women, and men found under concrete and twisted rebar. At the end of that month, cancer shows in Fatima's right breast.

2.

Squatting to meet their eyes, Laura Bush reads to a circle of first-graders. "See that squiggly gold up at the top of the husk." She points to an illustration of cobs on a stalk. "That's the corn silk the



poem was talking about." Laura stands now. "Like this stuff," she says, patting Jaydee's blond buzz cut. The class laughs, as students did a week before when Laura, at a different school, patted the same head.

"And y'all know who my tall friend is?" Laura, in a lime pantsuit, wraps an arm round Jaydee's waist, pulls her close. "This is Jaydee Reese, the poet laureate of these entire United States."

"Good morning, Ms. Reese," a young woman at the rear of the room leads and the class repeats singsong. Jaydee manages a cheery hello, though she could do without being petted like a cat. Laura's eyes widen as she explains Jaydee's "high station," her appointment by the Librarian of Congress, her pedigree as the daughter of a Rock Island, Illinois, factory worker. As she turns her head, Laura's blue irises vanish in the sunlight, yielding, the poet will tell Jibril, a hint of crazy — robotic black pupils over a smile in clown red.

Laura seats herself in a pint-size chair while Jaydee steps up to read another corn-related poem: "'Ol' man Simon, planted a diamond. / Grew hisself a garden the likes of none . . . / Pure gold corn there, / Blowin' in the warm air . . .'"

When Jaydee finishes, Laura pitches the importance of reading, speaking more to the TV-pool camera than the children. "Now go on and film those good-looking people," Laura says, and the cameraman pans to the black and brown students of Paterson, New Jersey.

Summer 2003 has begun. Jaydee is present when Laura reads *Book! Book! Book!* to children in Chattanooga, and *Giggle, Giggle, Quack* in Honolulu, and *That's My Dog!* to a group of Head Start kids at the Raleigh-Durham Airport. Jibril's sister, Farah, writes from Baghdad that their mother has acute pain in her right knee. She worries that cancer has spread to the bones, but "these days in this place, you get a CAT scan only in your dreams."

3.

Their affair has spanned four marriages: Jaydee's two, his failed one and hobbling second. He's said, "The affair *is* our marriage."

She's written poems for him, to him, about him, tracking the form and rhythm of works in the Berber languages and Arabic. Over the years, he's recited to her by heart the poems of his childhood by Si Mohand, Yusef-u-Qasi, Ali Amrouch, Hadj Mohand Ouachour, writers unknown to her colleagues. The collection that won her a Pulitzer, *Almond Trees*, she openly dedicated to his father, Khaled, killed in the Algerian War of Independence when Jibril was twelve.

His job makes trysts easy. He — "Gabriel" to partners and judges



with no taste for Islamic names — leads their trial teams, and the firm puts him up in luxury apartments across the country. They'll meet next in Manhattan, at one of her favorites on Central Park South. She remembers the place from last summer, with that island in the kitchen. "It's like the sea," she said, tracing the cool blue quartzite with a finger. Close, smelling of Acqua di Gioia, he put down his cabernet and in one motion lifted her onto the stone. And slowly he slid her pleated skirt up her legs, kissing as he went, brushing her thighs with his curls.

Late August, she calls from O'Hare, her palm on one ear, shouting over a noisy concourse.

"They're calling my flight, honey, in a couple minutes."

"I'll talk fast."

"Your mother?"

"She and Farah are heading west, best I can tell, in some ambulette from hell. She went Fallujah to Ramadi — this much I confirmed. Next, Haditha and Rawa to Al-Qa'im if connections work. I say *if*. Deserts, bombs, bullets. Then, crossing into Syria at Al-Bukamal and after that, *inshallah*, we somehow get her over the Turkish and Greek borders."

"Her status?"

"Who knows. Dead if she stays. Maybe dead if she gets out."

"Don't think that."

"What's the latest on your end?"

"Last week, in that East L.A. school, Laura handed my written request to that Murphy, the aide with the overbite. I gave everything — your mother's name, address, medical condition. The fact that her son is a U.S. citizen. Today, I got nothing from her, and from Murphy, politeness with no substance. A vague comment about the matter 'being with State.'"

"I don't understand this. These people are in the business of doing favors, no? You took her side, right? You must remind her that she owes you. The Syrian border we can do. But passage through Turkey and Greece — this is impossible without clout."

"I'm trying, Jibril." There's a long pause. "Jibril?"

"Maybe you're not trying hard enough."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know, Jaydee. That you value approval of people like her so much that you forget me —"

"That I what, Jibril? That I fucking what?"

"Calm down."

"Don't you dare —"

"Or maybe you trust her too much. You see her with these children, it softens your heart, and you forget what she is. She is



her husband, Jaydee. Made of the same stuff. You have to imply to her that you'll be next in line with a political poem, only this time on the front page of the *New York Times*."

"Stop it. Stop yourself."

She tells him they're calling her flight, hangs up, and presses through crowds and lines to the gate, trembling when she shows her boarding pass, drawing a full-body pat-down from security. On the plane to New York, she's sick in the bathroom. The flight attendant slaps the door, asks if she needs help. "Ma'am, please. There's a line out here." He's never doubted her that way. Not in twenty-eight years. Was that grief speaking? Or is he done with her, a woman old enough to be called "Ma'am" by a young flight attendant? It's all she can do to wash off her blouse and get to her seat.

At her Riverside Drive apartment, she ignores his apologies on her answering machine. Late that night, failing to reach him at his place, she leaves a message. "Jibril, I see Laura tomorrow. And I shall try my best." She cuts herself off, wanting to forgive but unable.

Late into the night, she can't help but work on "Fatima." It's become an angry poem, she thinks, brushing her teeth before she tries sleep.

4.

"FLOTUS moving," a Secret Service agent whispers into his sleeve as he navigates easels and plastic mocks, making his way to the front of the class. They'll be on their way in a limousine caravan to an East Harlem elementary school.

"Next week," Laura says, gazing out the car's tinted glass, "maybe we do tomato poems at that Baltimore school?" Jaydee nearly blurts out a line of Pablo Neruda's ode, but censors herself, he being too tomato-red for Mrs. Bush's blood.

As they drive, Laura crosses her leg, pulls off a high heel, and begins massaging her foot. "I read your poem, Jaydee, about that crash." The poet turns to find a face she hasn't seen before. A steady, soft gaze in filtered light. No smile.

"I lost my father in that accident," Jaydee says. "I was asleep when he ran off the road, and I spent weeks in a body cast."

"I had my own childhood crash," Laura says.

"And all the ugliness they make about it," Jaydee says, shaking her head. She's read the gossip, that Laura, age seventeen, killed a boy with her car. After a long silence, they start across the George Washington Bridge. Their police escort pulls close, motorcycles roaring on both sides.

"Well, I thank you for that poem. It has been a comfort." Laura



pats Jaydee's hand. Now they're going down the FDR Drive, and Jaydee can't find words to plead for Fatima or imply a threat. "That's one dirty river," Laura says, looking out the window.

That afternoon, Jaydee reaches Jibril at the Hay-Adams in DC. She tells him she actually raised her voice to the first lady, threatened exactly what he suggested. She's never lied to him before, and he responds, she thinks, with his own lies, pretending to believe her, forcing himself to thank her. His mother and Farah, he says, are stuck now in Al-Hasakah, Syria. This time of year, there's sand in the air, and she has great difficulty breathing.

5.

At the close of summer, the White House, without explanation, cancels the remainder of the first lady's readings. Murphy doesn't return Jaydee's calls, and Jaydee ignores Jibril's calls until she cannot, until he leaves a message that his mother is dead and he needs Jaydee, not his wife, at the funeral.

6.

Fatima dies mid-September in a canvas tent at a UN camp in Al-Hasakah. Farah then drives to Damascus in a pickup truck, hauling the linen-swathed body. From there, she'll ship Fatima's remains, properly crated, to Algiers, the city of her mother's life before years as a guest worker, a music teacher, in Iraq. Jibril and Jaydee will meet her there and accompany the body to Tizi Rached, in the Kabylia mountains, the family's ancestral burial ground.

7.

With utmost care, she untwines her fingers from his and draws the airplane blanket up his chest. She loves his face — taut, dark, furrowed, with a nose, he once joked, that's Berber, not Roman. "The Romans," he said, "stole our noses."

Most of the first-class cabin is out — in sleep masks, snoring, ice cubes tinkling in their unfinished drinks. She cracks open her shade and finds, thirty thousand feet below, the night lights of some sprawling city — Barcelona? — glowing like a lava flow. She jots the simile in a corner of a legal pad bearing a final draft of her poem, a poem she wishes she never had to write.

Later, over the Mediterranean, the plane shudders, wakes her from a brief nap. He's still asleep, his eyes and lips compressed as if he were tormented by a piercing noise, a trumpet blown too



near. And he exhales a terrible moan, deep, in the register of his lawyerly voice. This poor man, she will tell his sister, mourns even in his sleep.

8.

They've remained awhile in Algiers, a city recovering from a spring earthquake. They drink espresso and gaze on Boulevard Didouche Mourad, in cafés with cracked facades, waiting patiently for their old connection to poke out like grass among the seismic ruins.

Through an NGO aligned with Barnard and Columbia, Jaydee has arranged a reading at the Maqam Echahid, the memorial honoring Algeria's dead in the war against France.

She'll wear a scarf, a lavender one he purchased for the occasion. A Palestinian poet, a young woman in silver hijab, will introduce her to the press and public as "Our Lady of Fatima, the poet laureate of the United States."

"For no good reason, my government slaughters Shia in Fallujah and Sunni in Tikrit," Jaydee will start. "Tonight, instead of bullets, we shoot poems from our guns."

She'll stand at the foot of the monument, a tripod of soaring arches. In front of cameras and a bevy of microphones, she will read her "Fatima," starting with the reconquest of Andalusia by crusaders — their rape and imprisonment of a girl from the Maghreb — and ending with the miracle of that child's apparition over a Portuguese field. She will recite first in Arabic, then English, her pages fluttering in a hot wind off the sea. Jibril, his hands crossed on his heart, will watch from the front row, and she will read the poem to him, for him. But her poetry will no longer be about him.

N. MARC MULLIN's fiction has appeared in *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Limestone Journal*, *Sliver Of Stone*, *Storyscape Journal*, *Superstition Review*, and *Willow Review*. His short story "Milkweed" was a finalist in Middlesex University (London) international fiction contest. Also, his short story "Miracle of the Cow" won an annual fiction award from *Willow Review*. He has published nonfiction in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. A native of the Bronx, Mullin drove a taxi and spent years as a sheet metal worker before he became an attorney specializing in civil rights and employment law. He has successfully argued cases in front of the United States Supreme Court and the New Jersey Supreme Court. His story "Death in Al-Hasakah" is based on *Fatima*, a novel currently in progress.

