

Rābi'a Journal

Sarah Riggs

Blend I

It was in your hair

She wore morning glories

This taste and this joy

Down her back

Tastes like separation

They were torn between

Times of influence

Here a prison strike

One night turns into a thousand years

The Wall Street Journal covers it

Part of the Koran written into the cathedral

He went on silent meditations

They said Strumpf was a clown

The last of the thyme

He could be elected

He isn't outside it

We had heard all that before

But now it was flipped over

Give the treasures of paradise

Several people are listening in some rooms

The hours I spend with you

Scattered here and there

Mostly things were slow to change

Or else the change was not good

I am a stranger in your country

Toni said the extreme far right

Is coming for us

Blend II

The cupolas added later

And the mix of everything to rest

Cup, wine, and friend make three

Housed in the curve of microphones

My ears cannot hear your slander

The girl holding an instrument

It was about intimacy

It was about a sense of belonging

It was about change and determinacy

The identities were merging

Watch out for martyrdom as self-definition

And boxes to be opened like presents
Refugee camps too dangerous to set foot in
Always seeking various forms of utopia
They coasted in on feet
The locusts rose in a cloud
The bags were empty, a thousand or more
And were never seen again
And the streets cobbled
It's the biggest strike in history
The media are sanctioning violence

Blend III

The quickened relation of women to women
The number of trans writers supporting her
The accents and the energy of those accents
The heightening of the intonation
The heightening of tensions on the West Bank
Till a drizzle of tears fell on Rābi'a
The daringness of Megan's writing
Also of Abdellah's writing
Your name on my tongue is the sweetest word
The measure of the heightening

The quickness of the trigger
Her bravery in showing her face
A fierceness growing out of circumstance
A pacing and an opening
Bringing friend and friend together
Reaching after a place, here
And so they were certain for a second
That dizzying focus of attention
My soul, how long will you go on falling asleep
To let it go into the wireless
Synapses out of the body, the arm sore
The passage instantaneous and important
However the communication occurs

Blend IV

You belong as much to stories as to places
You round the fountain with clothes on
A tender history missed by the foreign eye
A half dozen faces watching
21.3 million, half Syrian and Palestinian
The words held in river, just letting go at the mouth
The waters rising, fear encroaching

It is like this, very akin, like to that
I'll open to you one spark
You are torn, led from there, a hand in Arabic
Take my prayer, devil and all
Poetry is not a luxury
She quoted Audre Lorde
A necessity of our existence
In love, nothing exists between breast and breast
You have to deal with people as equals
You can switch places and still belong
We should all revise our clinging to borders
My tears don't stop falling
It was this rather than that, an ear then
Nor can my burning eyes ever let me sleep.
When narratives act more efficiently than stars

Blend V

Peeling fruit in the Pharaoh's kitchen
Making an hourglass out of vulnerable bodies
Just like those Egyptian women
Holding the curve as a place to hold to
It was in those hands, creased and held out

Delivering some lines with ears to open after
A leaf already dropping, persons, not leaves
Your house is only a stone
You could not tell from the memories not said
The way to know, to try to listen before speaking
I am only a handful of dust
Autumn notes, letting go, letting be

"I took god out" was an early title for my emerging work with and on Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya. It's hard to imagine someone more spiritual than this renowned 8th-century Sufi poet from the region of Basra. But what I'm interested in is harnessing the strength and nuance of her energy to the present moment, as an alternative to Islamophobia. This involves weaving in and out of excerpts, drawn from Charles Upton's translations/versions in Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabi'a (Pir Press, 2004), with insights offered by Ted Byrne. The next stage (which I've just begun) is translating directly from the Arabic with a tutor.