

Barzakh:  
The Search for an Egyptian-American Absurdism

by

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وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Barzakh* is an original dramatic work that follows an Egyptian family of six as they prepare to pack up their belongings and leave the coastal village of Kawthar. Written in the style and tradition of Absurdism, specifically that of the Theatre of the Absurd, the play attempts to communicate the psychological violence Egyptians often experience, due to the oppression of the Egyptian state. An essay, *On Writing Barzakh*, outlines the development of the play and the influence postcolonial work had on its writing process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated first and foremost to every Egyptian, both in the homeland and the diaspora, who has suffered from and/or been marginalized by the violence and repression of the Egyptian state. We are still here.

This project would not have been possible without the diligent support and resources I have been privileged to receive from both my advisers and the College of Letters. I would like to thank the department for providing me with the freedom and trust to do this project with significant independence, while all the while providing me with indispensable guidance.

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For all these folks I say: وان غبت سنه, أنا برضه أنا, لا اقدر أنساك, ولا لي غنا, ولا اتوب, عن حبك أنا

BARZAKH

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by

Hazem Fahmy

## **WRITER'S NOTE**

### On Audience:

This play is primarily intended for an English-speaking, Arab-identifying audience. This is not today that non-Arabs are excluded from the experience rather that they must understand that they are guests in someone else's home. In other words, they are more than welcome here, so long as they take into account who this space is intended for.

To that end, no effort can be made to tone down the usage of Arabic in the play nor to provide any further context to its setting or events.

...

### On Casting:

If possible, every member of the cast should be an Egyptian-identifying person. If not, they should be Arab-identifying. If not, they should be West Asian, South Asian or African-identifying. If not, they should identify as a Person of Color. Under no circumstances may a white person play any role in this play.

The actual gender of each cast member need not correspond with the gender of the character they are playing.

Whoever plays SAFIYA must also play TEITA and whoever plays MALIK must also play GEDO.



## **THE PLAYERS**

*Safiya*

*Amal*

*Malik*

*El Captain*

*Gedo (Grandpa)*

*Teita (Grandma)*

*Ahlan*

[Lights up, slowly. Night time. We open on a chaotic scene; the aftermath of a great, big party. We are in the coastal village of Kawthar, to the north of the Egyptian Delta, not too far from Rashid. What remains of the festivities is scattered across the stage; confetti and tacky party hats litter the floor. There is a ginormous, birthday-style, banner that reads: "HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY!", hanging above the stage. Below the banner, the Egyptian flag hangs horizontally. Up-stage is bordered by a pool, which will act as both the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile. At least one side of the pool reaches backstage so that it is possible for people and objects to enter and exit through it.

From a door in the theatre itself, not backstage, a young woman, SAFIYA, enters. She is holding a generic-looking suitcase in one hand and a book in the other. She walks towards the center of the stage where she sits on a plain bench to the side of which she places her suitcase. She is wearing a bright-red feminine galabeya and her hair is untied. Her nose is buried in a large travel guide on Egypt. We cannot necessarily see the title of the book but we can clearly see the corny Pharaonic cover; either a picture of the Pyramids of Giza or a close-up of Tutankhamen's sarcophagus. As SAFIYA reads quietly, a corked bottle floats along the water from backstage, towards up-stage. SAFIYA looks up and looks down, before looking up again excitedly. She lets the book drop on the floor next to the bench and rushes towards the water. She takes the bottle, uncorks it, and pulls out what appears to be a ticket from inside. She observes it curiously before yelling out...]

SAFIYA  
Mother!

[Enter AMAL, SAFIYA's middle-aged mother. She is wearing a blue galabeya with a complementing head wrap (not exactly a hijab as it does not cover her neck). She is holding a household plastic tub.]

AMAL  
Eh?

[SAFIYA looks at the paper in her hand, ponders for a moment, before slipping it into her clothes.]

SAFIYA  
Nothing.

AMAL  
Eh?

SAFIYA  
I said nothing, mama.

AMAL  
I heard you

SAFIYA  
Walahy?

AMAL  
Don't be smart with me.

SAFIYA  
Walahy.  
[Beat.]  
Have you packed yet?

AMAL  
No, habibti, I'm already packed.

SAFIYA  
Are you sure?

AMAL  
I might be. Come help me.

[AMAL begins picking up the trash left by the party on stage and placing it in her tub. SAFIYA goes to the other side of the stage and picks up trash as well. Once she has a lump in her hands, she goes over to AMAL, empties the tub, and puts her trash instead. AMAL does not seem to notice. They repeat this several times. Though they pay no attention to them, neither the bottle nor SAFIYA's book and suitcase are touched at any point in this process.]

After a while, AMAL seems to be getting frustrated at how slowly she is cleaning up the stage, but still does not notice SAFIYA's emptying of the tub. She motions for her daughter to follow her and she walks in a circle around the stage, picking things up along the way. Every time she adds something new to the tub, SAFIYA throws something out.]

AMAL

Do you ever feel like you're being followed?

SAFIYA

Only by the Moon.

AMAL

Eh?

SAFIYA

El Amar, ya mama.

[Beat. AMAL appears confused.]

Nevermind.

AMAL

Don't mind if I do.

SAFIYA

Doop-da-dee-doo.

AMAL

You never liked classical music.

SAFIYA

Om Kalthoum was never my strong suit.

AMAL

I don't like it when you sing.

SAFIYA

Neither do I.

AMAL

You have a beautiful voice.

SAFIYA

Someday, I'll write it down.

AMAL  
I can't read.

SAFIYA  
But you can smell.

[AMAL is about to speak when she stops and smells the area around her. She looks back and sees that the trash is still there. She exclaims loudly in anger, pushes SAFIYA aside and speeds around the stage, collecting every last bit of trash in her tub. Once she sees that the stage is clean, she exhales in relief, walks over to the water and dumps the contents of the tub into the sea. She then scoops the empty tub full of water and walks back over to SAFIYA.]

Seeing the tub full of water, SAFIYA runs backstage and returns with a bag of laundry. They sit down together, SAFIYA begins pulling out blazers and dress pants from the bag and hands them to AMAL who proceeds to scrub them in the tub. Beat.]

AMAL  
That was a long time ago.  
[Beat]  
Before you were born.

SAFIYA  
But not bred.

AMAL  
Oh, never.

SAFIYA  
Have I ever-

AMAL  
Swam?

SAFIYA  
Sunk.

AMAL  
Oh.

SAFIYA

But that was a long time ago.

AMAL

Oh, yes.

SAFIYA

I like the Mediterranean just fine.

AMAL

It is very central.

SAFIYA

Do you remember?

AMAL

What?

SAFIYA

When?

AMAL

Eh?

SAFIYA

Ha?

AMAL

You're much too young for that.

SAFIYA

You age well.

AMAL

Oh, yes, I remember. What day is it today?

SAFIYA

Friday, I think.

AMAL

I know that. What's the date?

SAFIYA

The twenty-third, I think.

AMAL

I know that. What month?

SAFIYA

[Gasps.]

It's not Ramadan, is it?!

AMAL

I don't think so. I can't fast when I'm travelling.

SAFIYA

Okay. What day is it?

AMAL

I was sure it was Wednesday.

SAFIYA

Are you sure?

AMAL

I was sure.

SAFIYA

What are you now?

[Beat. AMAL lets go of the clothing she's washing. Begins counting to herself.]

AMAL

Wahid. Etnein. Talata. Arba'a. I was right!

SAFIYA

Were you?

AMAL

I think so. What day was it again?

SAFIYA

Something tells me it's Friday.

AMAL

Well, I know that. Did you pray today?

SAFIYA

I might have.

AMAL

What day of the month is it?

SAFIYA

It might be the twenty-second.

AMAL

Might as well be.

SAFIYA

What do you think?

AMAL

[Beat.]

I'm fairly certain it's the twenty-fifth.

SAFIYA

Well, I know that.

AMAL

Walahy?

SAFIYA

I don't like swearing.

AMAL

It never liked you much, either.

SAFIYA

Ahha.

[AMAL gasps and slaps her. SAFIYA does not seem to feel pain.]

AMAL

Have you lost yourself?

SAFIYA

I can't seem to find it.

AMAL

Let's look for it then, dear.

[They get up.]



SAFIYA

But it'll be morning soon.

[AMAL gasps and pulls SAFIYA down to the ground again, hushes her.]

AMAL

Not so loudly.

SAFIYA

I do not fear the Sun.

AMAL

That's silly, have you ever seen a solar eclipse?

SAFIYA

I don't think I have, are they friendly?

AMAL

For some people, but there are no panels here.

[They return to the laundry.]

SAFIYA

That's why we have power plants.

AMAL

I'm not ready to go nuclear just yet.

SAFIYA

You don't have to!

AMAL

We're leaving at dawn.

SAFIYA

Dawn is dull.

AMAL

That's deniable.

SAFIYA

I wouldn't deny that.

AMAL

Get yourself a newspaper.

SAFIYA  
I'd rather use the internet.

AMAL  
We'll pick up a copy before we leave.

SAFIYA  
[Excitedly.]  
Which one?

AMAL  
Preferably one in print.

SAFIYA  
I can't write.

AMAL  
I never wanted to.

SAFIYA  
I want the Moon, is that too much?

AMAL  
What is that?

SAFIYA  
El Amar, ya mama.

AMAL  
What else is there?

[Enter MALIK, SAFIYA's younger brother. He is dressed in full beige military attire. His face is clean-shaven and his hair is cut short. He is holding a generic suitcase, identical to that of SAFIYA's, which he sets down besides his sister's. He enters from behind them.]

MALIK  
Pompompompompompompom.

[He stops. Beat. AMAL claps excitedly.]

AMAL  
Again!

MALIK  
Pompom.

AMAL  
Again?

MALIK  
Pom?

SAFIYA  
[Coldly.]  
Oh, hello.

MALIK  
Ahlan!

AMAL  
Wa-sahlan!

SAFIYA  
What brings you back so soon, brother?

MALIK  
To answer that question I would have to rely on pedagogical policies proposed by peoples long before our population purposed to patrol itself. See Narmer, or for more recent examples, consider Nasser's children. I suppose a better way to put it would be to break down the oral structures of saturation for such methods prevent us from performing what prudently must be accomplished, accepting of course, the theory that we are all prudent and powerful in our own natural right. Saad Zaghloul made good points, of course, I was there. Hence, rightfully, I resign my doubts as to whether a down-to-earth duo daintily dancing on the fringes such as our frames may in fact be capable of facilitating a fathomable, if not, factual fear of the forsaken. Jahanam is not so difficult to imagine, but extraordinarily difficult to draw. This was forged elsewhere and, in earnest, I hope to hamper any further attempts to frolic in this sturdy, wet sea. I have no intention of capturing Cyprus again.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA

That wasn't a question.

MALIK

Then I don't have to answer.

Then I don't have an answer.

[MALIK pulls out a box of matches. He begins lighting matches and throwing them in the water.]

AMAL

What brings you back so soon?

MALIK

Has it really been that long?

SAFIYA

We're not actually sure.

MALIK

I came as soon as I can.

AMAL

How was the train?

MALIK

Which one?

SAFIYA

Didn't you come from Cairo?

MALIK

No, I'm from here.

AMAL

A rural boy.

MALIK

Through and through.

AMAL

Whoop-dee-woo-woo.

SAFIYA

Are there trains in Cairo?

MALIK

Only when they want to be there.

SAFIYA

When's that?

MALIK

Eh?

SAFIYA

Ha?

AMAL

Children! I have a headache.

SAFIYA & MALIK

But, mother-

AMAL

I can't work like this.

[AMAL empties out the remaining water in the tub in the sea, collects the laundry and leaves. Beat. SAFIYA brings the bottle to MALIK.]

SAFIYA

I found something.

MALIK

What thing?

[She begins, he interrupts.]

What thoughtlessness! Anxiousness floods you, habibti; like waves on a spiky shore. This isn't Alexandria.

[She begins again, and he interrupts her again.]

But if it were, I'd ask you if you wanted any ice cream.

Then again, we have no time for that. We're leaving soon.

[He throws the bottle away, she catches it before it falls.]

SAFIYA

You're just jealous.

MALIK

Habibti, there is violence in your language.

SAFIYA

I just want the Moon back.

MALIK

Who?

SAFIYA

El Amar, ya Malik!

MALIK

Oh.

[Beat.]

The dust isn't so bad.

SAFIYA

I don't do cities like you.

MALIK

Just wait for the dawn.

SAFIYA

Dawn is dark.

MALIK

Perhaps the other way around?

[She almost interjects, he interrupts her.]

Preposterous. Death cannot be dawn lest we sink in the sea  
and come out an island. We can talk about Cyprus, but  
otherwise, I can't say I particularly care.

SAFIYA

[Cradling the bottle.]

I miss the Red Sea.

MALIK

What's wrong with this one?

SAFIYA

It's too close.

MALIK

No such thing.

[She leaps up and gets uncomfortably close to him.]

SAFIYA  
Remember back in seventy-three when the Israelis broke  
through the line?

MALIK  
It was the other way around, sister.

SAFIYA  
Wait.

MALIK  
What?

SAFIYA  
Which line?

MALIK  
Depends when.

SAFIYA  
[Places the bottle back besides the bench.]  
What about now?

MALIK  
Now?

SAFIYA  
If not now, then when?

MALIK  
What?

SAFIYA  
Ha?

MALIK  
[Laughs manically. Beat.]  
The Republic calls on you, dear sister.

SAFIYA  
How much will that cost me?

MALIK  
Have you charged?

SAFIYA  
I can't find my charger.

MALIK  
No! That's not what I mean.

SAFIYA  
That's mean.

MALIK  
[Sighs.]  
Take the call.

SAFIYA  
Must I?

MALIK  
Yes.

[SAFIYA sighs. MALIK raises his hand to his head like a phone speaker.]

MALIK  
Ring! Ring!

[Startled, SAFIYA raises her hand to answer.]

SAFIYA  
Hello?

MALIK  
As-salamu alaykum.

SAFIYA  
Masa' El-noor.

MALIK  
Ha?

[Beat.]

SAFIYA  
Let's start over.

MALIK  
Okay.



[Puts his hand in position again.]

Ring! Ring!

SAFIYA

[Startled again.]

Hello?

MALIK

Hello, yes, this is Tahrir.

SAFIYA

The Square or the Complex?

MALIK

Bit of both. We'd like to speak to Ms. Safiya, please.

SAFIYA

This is she.

MALIK

Splendid! We're delighted to inform you your papers have been processed and your visa will be delivered to your doorstep within the week.

SAFIYA

[Legitimately confused.]

But...I haven't applied for any visa?

MALIK

You didn't? Well, never mind then. May we speak to your brother then?

SAFIYA

Of course.

[She hangs up and picks up the speaker again.]

Ring! Ring!

MALIK

[Picks up, startled.]

Yes?

SAFIYA

This is Tahrir, the Complex. Who am I speaking to?

MALIK

This is officer Malik.

SAFIYA

Oh, please hold. We have the wrong number.

MALIK

[Yells.]

But this is Malik!

SAFIYA

Yes, we know. We are the wrong number. One moment.

[She turns her face away from the speaker.]

Beep. Boop. Beep. Boop. Hello?

MALIK

Yes?

SAFIYA

Yes, we know this is officer Malik.

MALIK

Is this Nasr City?

SAFIYA

Hush! You're a captain now! No need to speak so loudly.

MALIK

Captain?! Since when?

SAFIYA

This morning. Didn't Tahrir call you?

MALIK

Didn't even leave a message.

SAFIYA

Well, we just got the call this morning, from someone higher up. Would you like to speak to them?

MALIK

I'd be delighted!

[Hangs up then picks up.]

Ring! Ring!

SAFIYA  
[Picks up.]  
Yes?

MALIK  
Is Captain Malik there?

SAFIYA  
Yes, basha! Right here.

MALIK  
Please tell him we need him immediately back in Cairo.

SAFIYA  
Now?

MALIK  
No, you can tell him later. Good-bye.

[MALIK hangs up. SAFIYA follows suit. Beat. SAFIYA plays with her galabeya, looks at her nails. MALIK lights and throws another match.]

SAFIYA  
I think they want you back in Cairo.

MALIK  
Why didn't you say before! I'll be off now. Salam.

SAFIYA  
Salam is usually better.

[MALIK is about to exit when AMAL enters from backstage and stands in his way. She is holding an identical generic suitcase in one hand and a bag of sunflower seeds in the other.]

AMAL  
Habibi, do you have a jacket?

MALIK  
Mother, do you know what season it is?

AMAL  
[Beat.]  
Not really.

[She begins eating the seeds.]  
But you never know when a storm could hit.

SAFIYA

Ha?

AMAL

A storm is a violent disturbance of the atmosphere, with strong winds and usually rain, thunder, lightning, or snow. But there is no snow in the Arab Republic of Egypt so we have to make do with the thunder the lightning and the rain, rumbling down on us, ramifications for the relished.

[AMAL walks over to SAFIYA. She puts her suitcase next to her children's, sits on the bench with SAFIYA and they loudly eat the seeds together, throwing the shells on the ground.]

MALIK

Silence is revolting.

SAFIYA

Revolutionary.

AMAL

Really?

SAFIYA

Mother-

AMAL

Monster.

SAFIYA

More?

AMAL

Morbid!

MALIK

Too morose, I think.

AMAL

[Nods.]

Thoroughly.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA  
What a thoughtless day.

AMAL  
Dawn is almost here.

SAFIYA  
Dawn is done.

MALIK  
Not always.

[Beat. They continue to eat loudly.]

SAFIYA  
I don't care much for rhetoric.

MALIK  
Hush.

AMAL  
I hear it, too.

MALIK  
Such violence.

AMAL  
Help me, yabny.

MALIK  
I will till my bones chill, yamma.

AMAL  
Excellent! Get me out of here.

[AMAL hands the bag of seeds to SAFIYA and gets up to stand behind MALIK. He pulls out a gun. With his arms around AMAL, he escorts her off-stage.]

MALIK  
[To SAFIYA, as he leaves.]  
Stay safe, sister. It's a dangerous day.

[They exit. SAFIYA continues eating the seeds. Beat. Suddenly, an inflatable boat is hurled onto the water. She is not shocked by this. Moments after, EL CAPTAIN, SAFIYA's middle-aged father, enters through the water following his boat. He sports a white disheveled navy captain's attire, with a great shaggy beard and a tattered navy captain's hat. He is also holding an identical generic suitcase which he adds to the pile of his family. He climbs up on stage and examines his surroundings.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Masr!

SAFIYA  
Masr.

EL CAPTAIN  
Tahya Masr!  
[Beat.]

This is the village of Kawthar, yes?

SAFIYA  
I think so.

[He tries to bring his boat out of the water, but struggles greatly. He continues talking as he tries to do this.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Kawthar.

SAFIYA  
Cordially.

EL CAPTAIN  
Click.

SAFIYA  
Click.

EL CAPTAIN  
Click. Click.

SAFIYA  
Click. Click.

EL CAPTAIN

Click.

SAFIYA

Click?

EL CAPTAIN

Remarkable. Your naval navigation is most impressive. Where  
did you learn?

SAFIYA

My father taught me.

[He finally pulls the boat out of the water.]

EL CAPTAIN

Enchanté.

[Beat.]

Did I?

SAFIYA

Yes. You took me to the water and wouldn't let me leave.  
This is why I hate the Sun.

EL CAPTAIN

And the Moon?

SAFIYA

All the same.

EL CAPTAIN

I don't like similarities.

SAFIYA

El Amar, ya baba!

EL CAPTAIN

Never heard of him.

[Beat.]

Do you still live here?

SAFIYA

Does anyone live anywhere?

EL CAPTAIN

Don't get historical on me, young lady.

SAFIYA

If I was being historical I would've told you that Mohamed Naguib was put under house arrest in 1954.

EL CAPTAIN

People exaggerate all the time.

SAFIYA

Vraiment?

EL CAPTAIN

Avec plaisir.

SAFIYA

[Points to the bottle.]

Do you know anything about this?

EL CAPTAIN

How long has it been there?

SAFIYA

Does it matter?

EL CAPTAIN

Time teems with torturous tumbles. I don't miss Suez. Did you know I rode the sea till it called my name? Friends find me easily. Ha! Chinese cell phones can try and invade the market all they want. Courant dans la rue sans couleurs. I am a pilot of the pantomime, but only when its pertinent. For example, given my obsession with grilled fish, I am now out of my element, but I'm also enriched by this enigma. Enthralled. Encompassed.

[Pokes his head backstage.]

Behold a palm tree, did you know it was there?

SAFIYA

Sometimes I hear whispers in the night.

EL CAPTAIN

[Upset.]

I am your father.

SAFIYA

[Gets up.]

Would you like a tour of our village? We have fascinating



sights and rich history. You can find whatever you're looking for here, even yourself.

EL CAPTAIN

I've been looking for some Greeks. Alexander doesn't count.

SAFIYA

Well, not really.

EL CAPTAIN

Really?

SAFIYA

Unless you count Cleopatra.

[They laugh manically. Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN

I found myself a long time ago and it was not a pleasant experience.

SAFIYA

Mother says I was born under moonlight.

EL CAPTAIN

Oh, did she?

SAFIYA

[She sits back down.]

The tide is cruel.

[EL CAPTAIN appears hesitant, as though he is about to say something. Is about to speak then stops. Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN

[Rapidly.]

I submerge my hands in sea water every day or so. My old 'hawi said the salt will heal us, hydrogen and hormones.

Horoscope for the hungry. I clasp them and wish for a better morning, a more moderate sun, yet wake up on my back the sky barking in my face.

SAFIYA

Better than a dog.

EL CAPTAIN  
Better than a door.

SAFIYA  
They say water will be the end of us, but we're already  
made out of sixty percent water, so I wonder what's the  
difference.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Gasps.]  
I'll tell you about difference!  
[He huddles close to her.]  
Have you ever noticed how seagulls and sparrows suck on the  
same earth worm, but not with the same beak?

[Beat.]  
Have you ever seen a *Carcinus aestuarii* and *Pagurus  
bernhardus* fight for the same house?  
[SAFIYA begins to answer, he cuts her off].  
I think not! Because the former makes its own house while  
the latter carries it, like a burden, burning for the ages.  
Agile beings all around. Lupus. Felines. Galloping with the  
wind and worse, they howl at the Moon and I moan for my  
helplessness.

[In anger, he kicks his own boat. SAFIYA does not react.]

SAFIYA  
Helplessness is in the method.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Laughs manically.]  
I know only of merchants.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA  
I like looking to the sea.

EL CAPTAIN  
The sea sees all.

SAFIYA  
Such is water.

[Beat.]

What's it like beyond the sea?

EL CAPTAIN

Beyond all you can see.

[Enter GEDO, SAFIYA's grandfather. He is dressed in a long, brown male galabeya, and a matching thick wool beanie. He is wearing large black sunglasses, but it is not actually clear whether or not he can see. In one hand he holds a cane and in the other an unlit shisha. It is important that it be clear that he is being played by the same actor as MALIK, but that he is also a markedly different character.]

GEDO

Did somebody say: "Beyond all you can see"?

SAFIYA

Gedo!

[She puts aside the bag of seeds and rushes to hug him.]

Can I help you with anything?

GEDO

Yes, dear, please relieve me of this cane.

[She takes the cane from him and guides him with his now free hand towards the bench. She lays the cane by the bench.]

GEDO

Could you get me a light as well?

SAFIYA

Hadir.

[She rushes off-stage. GEDO and EL CAPTAIN are left alone.  
Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN

Are you hungry?

GEDO

[Holds up the arm of his shisha.]

I have apples.

EL CAPTAIN  
Not watermelons?

GEDO  
It's not the season.

EL CAPTAIN  
It never is.

GEDO  
That's not true. We had seasons in my time.

EL CAPTAIN  
I don't care much for monarchy.

GEDO  
No one does anymore.

EL CAPTAIN  
How do you feel about parliamentary republics?

GEDO  
I feel alright.

EL CAPTAIN  
Salamtak.

GEDO  
El Afw.

[From backstage, SAFIYA audibly sneezes.]

GEDO & EL CAPTAIN  
Bless you!

[Beat.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Where's your suitcase?

GEDO  
Can't seem to find any.

EL CAPTAIN  
Why are you here?

GEDO  
I was about to ask you the same.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Upset.]  
You are my father.

GEDO  
Well, that makes one of us.

EL CAPTAIN  
Are we together?

GEDO  
Not for long.

[Enter SAIFYA. In one hand she holds a handle of ice cubes and in the other a pair of tongs. She carefully places the cubes on GEDO's shisha.]

GEDO  
Thank you, dear. There is but one truly serious philosophical problem.

SAFIYA  
[Sitting down beside him.]  
Piracy?

GEDO  
Yes! Consider the Somali Pirates. They have no way to make it up so far up the Red Sea, yet they occupy so much of the imagination.

EL CAPTAIN  
I don't care much for imagination.

GEDO  
[Smoking his shisha.]  
Well, you don't care much for anything.

EL CAPTAIN  
That's not true.

GEDO  
Your boat doesn't count.

EL CAPTAIN

Fine.

SAIFYA

Gedo, do you have any presents for me?

GEDO

No, habibti, you're much too old for that.

SAFIYA

[Upset.]

But you're much too young.

GEDO

This is true, I don't have much time to waste. In fact, I must be leaving.

SAFIYA

Okay, will I see you next Friday?

GEDO

Only if it's not Wednesday.

[He picks up his cane and shisha and walks over to the boat.]

Give me a ride, yabny.

[EL CAPTAIN rushes over and helps GEDO get into the boat. He then pushes it from behind off-stage.]

GEDO

Salam!

[SAFIYA returns to the bag of seeds. Beat. Enter AHLAM. Clad in full makeup, she is dressed in a dark pencil skirt and a deep blue blouse. She has a red satchel slung around her shoulder and a matching bright red suitcase which she puts down, but keeps by her side.]

AHLAM

You're still here?

SAFIYA

Looks like it.

AHLAM  
I won't look.

SAFIYA  
You don't have to.

AHLAM  
Neither do you.

[Beat.]

SAFIYA  
Would you like a party hat?

AHLAM  
Sure.

[SAFIYA looks around and realizes that she cleared them all earlier.]

SAFIYA  
It doesn't look like I have anything.

AHLAM  
That's okay. I have one.

[AHLAM pulls a party hat out of her satchel and hands it to SAFIYA.]

SAFIYA  
Thank you.  
[She puts it on AHLAM's head, steps back and looks at her.]  
Much better.

AHLAM  
I thought so, too. I brought you something.

SAFIYA  
I thought I did once, as well.

AHLAM  
It doesn't matter.

SAFIYA  
Are you sure?

AHLAM

I'm sure the Nile flows from Uganda.

SAFIYA

It was Ethiopia last month.

AHLAM

No, that didn't last long. I want to believe in  
meteorology.

SAFIYA

I want to want you again.

AHLAM

What's stopping you?

SAFIYA

The wind's strong today. We might get rain later.

AHLAM

I won't be here to see it. Bother.

SAFIYA

Do you get bothered anymore?

AHLAM

Not so much. Maybe. In the morning.

SAFIYA

I haven't seen the morning, yet.

AHLAM

I hope you don't.

SAFIYA

Do you?

AHLAM

Dawn is coming.

SAFIYA

Dawn is-

AHLAM

It's not.



SAFIYA

No?

AHLAM

I suppose not. I prefer AK-47's to M16's.

SAFIYA

What do you support?

AHLAM

I'll tell you next year.

SAFIYA

Who do you support?

AHLAM

Have you been to Downtown?

SAFIYA

Which one?

AHLAM

Whichever's further south, I guess. I have something for you.

SAFIYA

Yes! I almost forgot.

AHLAM

So did I.

[She reaches into her satchel and pulls out a corked bottle, similar to the one SAFIYA found earlier.]

Here.

[SAFIYA uncorks the bottle and looks inside; it appears empty.]

SAFIYA

It appears empty.

AHLAM

[Surprised.]

It is?

[She takes the bottle from SAFIYA and looks through the

cap.]  
Such a waste.

SAFIYA  
The garbage man doesn't come any more.  
[She moves towards the pool, sits on the edge and dips her  
legs in the water.]  
Where were you?

[AHLAM picks up her bottle and sits next to SAFIYA.]

AHLAM  
When?

SAFIYA  
Whenever.

AHLAM  
I lost my memory, I suppose. It happened so quickly after I  
left.

SAFIYA  
So you did leave?

AHLAM  
What makes you say that?  
[Beat.]  
I looked for you, you know.

SAFIYA  
I don't care much for Europe.

AHLAM  
Neither do I, anymore.

SAFIYA  
I wasn't there.

AHLAM  
Where were you?

SAFIYA  
Here, I suppose.

AHLAM  
I wish you were.

SAFIYA  
Walahy?

AHLAM  
I'll miss you. When are you leaving?

SAFIYA  
Soon. I'm worried I haven't packed enough, though.

AHLAM  
Smell your clothes.

SAFIYA  
[Does.]  
What about them?

AHLAM  
Think of your parents.

SAFIYA  
I try.

AHLAM  
Think of your brother.

SAFIYA  
Do I have to?

AHLAM  
[Throws her bottle into the water.]  
See?

SAFIYA  
That's the river.

AHLAM  
You don't see?

SAFIYA  
I hear more than anything these days.

AHLAM  
Listen to the radio every once in a while. They have  
English commentary now.

SAFIYA  
Begad?

AHLAM  
Ah, walahy.

SAFIYA  
Auzubillah.

AHLAM  
Don't get poetic on me now.

SAFIYA  
If I'd wanted to get poetic, I would've told you Darwish is  
a hack.

AHLAM  
Hold my hand.

SAFIYA  
[Does. Beat.]  
I don't want much anymore.

AHLAM  
That's not true.

SAFIYA  
It is true that Farouk wanted a talk with the Germans.

AHLAM  
How would you know?

[SAFIYA jerks her hand away and gets up. She walks away  
crossing her arms.]

SAFIYA  
I have to go. Rock the boat. Big time.  
[Beat. Turns towards AHLAM.]  
Come with me?

AHLAM  
Sure, but you can't ask any questions.

SAFIYA  
I don't like answers. They dry my throat.

AHLAM

Would you like a drink?

SAFIYA

Yes, a glass of water, please.

[AHLAM motions to the water.]

No, not that kind.

AHLAM

What else can we break?

SAFIYA

[Thinks for a moment.]

Have you ever been to Sinai?

AHLAM

Wouldn't dream of it.

[SAFIYA picks up the first bottle from the floor and begins picking up strewn-about seed shells and putting them in it.]

SAFIYA

What about Luxor?

AHLAM

Loathsome.

SAFIYA

Legitimate.

AHLAM

I feel really rattled.

SAFIYA

Do you want some wine?

AHLAM

[Excitedly.]

Always!

SAFIYA

I don't have any.

AHLAM  
[Sincerely.]  
Thank you.

SAFIYA  
Of course.

AHLAM  
Cheers.

SAFIYA  
Keep your eyes on the prize.

AHLAM  
I'm sorry you had to see that.

SAFIYA  
I've seen enough.

AHLAM  
[Gets up and nears towards SAFIYA.]  
Not quite.

SAFIYA  
Take a deep breath.

AHLAM  
Okay.

SAFIYA  
Why are you getting so upset?

AHLAM  
Change the subject.

SAFIYA  
Go for it.

AHLAM  
Okay, are you making healthy choices?

SAFIYA  
I have turned enough leaves over in my life for a forest,  
or at least an oasis.

AHLAM

We're a long way from Toshka.

SAFIYA

Always have been.

AHLAM

I did what I did.

SAFIYA

I didn't.

AHLAM

It wasn't your choice.

SAFIYA

Nor yours.

AHLAM

You wouldn't know.

SAFIYA

You don't know what I know.

AHLAM

I know you don't know what I know.

SAFIYA

Thank you.

AHLAM

I know I shouldn't.

SAFIYA

I tell myself to stop thinking about you.

AHLAM

You can't think of what you don't expect.

SAFIYA

What should I have expected?

AHLAM

Healthy choices.

SAFIYA  
Did you make one?

AHLAM  
I think so.

SAFIYA  
And here we are.

AHLAM  
And there we were.

SAFIYA  
You left and I laughed.

AHLAM  
Really?

SAFIYA  
Who is your favorite president?

AHLAM  
Oh, I don't know, I liked Fouad just fine. Who's the  
current one?

SAFIYA  
I'm not a newspaper.

AHLAM  
If you were, which one would you be?

SAFIYA  
Any one works fine really.

AHLAM  
I hear they come in different sizes now.

SAFIYA  
It all fits just the same.

AHLAM  
How's your brother?

SAFIYA  
Alive.



AHLAM

Well?

SAFIYA

Well, what?

AHLAM

What about your father?

SAFIYA

Both seem to be doing fine. But I haven't seen much of them lately.

AHLAM

Why is that?

SAFIYA

I'm mostly here with you.

AHLAM

Most definitely.

SAFIYA

Indubitably.

AHLAM

Impossible.

SAFIYA

Why?

AHLAM

I can't be what you need of me.

SAFIYA

I need nothing.

AHLAM

Not here.

SAFIYA

Not now.

AHLAM

Dawn is coming soon.

SAFIYA

Do you have a plane to catch?

AHLAM

That's the wrong question. You never knew how to look for answers.

SAFIYA

I find them in shells, but also seeds. It really depends, or at least it should.

AHLAM

Shush.

SAFIYA

Shout.

AHLAM

Shoulder.

SAFIYA

Shield.

AHLAM

Shining.

SAFIYA

Shimmering.

AHLAM

Close your eyes.

[SAFIYA does. AHLAM moves in towards her and kisses her on the cheek softly. SAFIYA keeps her eyes closed. AHLAM exits. SAFIYA opens her eyes and does not react to AHLAM's absence. Beat. She exits. Enter MALIK followed closely by AMAL. He appears nervous. AMAL is holding the same tub as before, but this time it is filled with the clothes she had been washing. As she walks around the stage, she lays them on the ground.]

AMAL

What do you mean the train didn't leave?

MALIK  
I never said that.

AMAL  
What did you say?

MALIK  
I forget.

AMAL  
Well, you're still here.

MALIK  
Yes, the train didn't leave.

AMAL  
Well, why didn't you say that earlier?

MALIK  
I didn't have time, the train didn't leave.

AMAL  
Malik, habibi, they are calling for you and I asked them what they needed but they didn't answered and now I am here looking for you, but really I am looking for the shoreline, but really I am looking for a labor I can liken to the history I found the other day under my bed sheets.

MALIK  
[Beat.]  
Are you well, mother?

AMAL  
Yes, dear. They are calling for you.

[MALIK begins folding the clothes AMAL has thrown on the floor, but does not pick them up.]

MALIK  
Can they take a message?

AMAL  
I'm afraid not. They can't write.

MALIK  
Can they speak?

AMAL  
I'm not sure.

MALIK  
Should I go?

AMAL  
Only if you want to.

MALIK  
I am a captain now.

AMAL  
Mind you-

MALIK  
It doesn't matter.

AMAL  
Only if it has to.

MALIK  
I love you, mother, but sometimes I am truly sundered.

AMAL  
You and me both.

MALIK  
It must be the Sun.

AMAL  
Sometimes.

MALIK  
Somewhat.

AMAL  
Have you seen your father?

MALIK  
Who?

AMAL  
El Captain.

MALIK

Me?

AMAL

The other one.

MALIK

[Without pointing in any direction.]

Him?

AMAL

Not that one either.

MALIK

[In the same tone and gesturing.]

Him?

AMAL

I suppose.

MALIK

I think Safiya did. She told me he went to Cairo looking  
for a government.

AMAL

I have a government.

MALIK

As do I.

AMAL

Oh, me too.

[EL CAPTAIN enters.]

EL CAPTAIN

I remember when I had a government.

[AMAL gasps. She rushes towards EL CAPTAIN and pushes him  
to the ground. MALIK yells in fear and attempts to hide  
behind the bench.]

AMAL

Where were you!

EL CAPTAIN

[Standing up without much reaction.]

Out at sea, dear.

AMAL

A likely story.

EL CAPTAIN

I found myself in the water again.

AMAL

Well, at least you found something.

EL CAPTAIN

Have you forgotten?

AMAL

Gone is the goulash.

EL CAPTAIN

I used to be rustic, face majestic with the sight of a fresh beard. Look at me now, body bent by the weight of the water. Salt coming out of everywhere. Hasbi-Allahu wa Ni'ma Al-Wakil. My nose smelled the sea once, now it only finds bitterness.

AMAL

Bottomless.

EL CAPTAIN

Love me again, Amal. Do you remember those days?

AMAL

I remember when they told us about Sadat. I didn't know what to think.

EL CAPTAIN

The water will wash you off fine.

AMAL

The water washes nothing. Cleanliness is for the clandestine. I find clarity in this state.

EL CAPTAIN

I find solace in mine.

AMAL  
Mingled.

EL CAPTAIN  
Mammoth.

AMAL  
I mouthed the sun as you sped off.

EL CAPTAIN  
Certainly.

AMAL  
Solemnly.

EL CAPTAIN  
I know of different waters, dear. Depth so delirious, they  
distill you.

AMAL  
Dastardly.

EL CAPTAIN  
Indefinitely.

AMAL  
I don't think so.

EL CAPTAIN  
But I know so.

AMAL  
This is the land of the roosting. Birds call to me in the  
morning and I throw my footwear back. In return, they cry  
for me, lay their tired bodies outside my window. Once, I  
held a nightingale in my arms and asked it to love me like  
my children once did. It gasped and groped, but I was  
stronger. Now you know why we never walk on graves, why the  
sand is also unforgiving.

EL CAPTAIN  
Please, dear, I don't like it when you talk politics.

AMAL  
Neither do I. I also don't care much for the economy.

EL CAPTAIN  
I did, elsewhere.

AMAL  
Not there.

EL CAPTAIN  
Nor here.

AMAL  
Anywhere.

EL CAPTAIN  
Even here.

AMAL  
Heroic.

EL CAPTAIN  
Harmony.

AMAL  
Hardly.

[She begins unfolding the clothes on the ground, answering him as she does this.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Harrowingly.

AMAL  
Hither.

EL CAPTAIN  
I loved you once, habibti.

AMAL  
Logical leanings. Lurid lessons.

EL CAPTAIN  
No, not like that.

AMAL  
Lingering lasting. Lower losses.



EL CAPTAIN

No.

AMAL

Northern Neanderthal. Night nestlings.

EL CAPTAIN

Amal, no.

AMAL

Never noted. Notorious national.

EL CAPTAIN

[Shouts.]

No!

AMAL

[Startled.]

Well, you don't have to get all worked up about it.

EL CAPTAIN

I worked once and it was not a good time.

AMAL

Factory. Farm. Seaport.

EL CAPTAIN

I swam for days, you know.

AMAL

Years, actually.

EL CAPTAIN

Yearning.

AMAL

Youth.

EL CAPTAIN

What for?

AMAL

Fortitude.

EL CAPTAIN

Fatherhood.

AMAL  
Of the sort.

EL CAPTAIN  
Swish.

AMAL  
Swash.

[They hold each other and begin dancing, twirling around the stage. MALIK is still hiding behind the bench. Beat. Enter TEITA, SAFIYA's grandmother. She is dressed in a flowing light blue galabeya, with her hair in a loose hijab. She holds the same cane as GEDO's, but actually uses it. As with GEDO, we can see that she is being played by the same actor playing SAFIYA, but that this is also a different character.]

TEITA  
I heard music here.

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN continue dancing, going around TEITA as they speak with her.]

AMAL  
We were so quiet, mother.

EL CAPTAIN  
Did you make a sound, dear?

AMAL  
If I did, I didn't hear it.

TEITA  
What about that child over there?

AMAL  
Which one?

TEITA  
I don't know. I can never tell them apart.

EL CAPTAIN  
Child!

[MALIK rushes over and embraces TEITA.]

MALIK  
Teita!

TEITA  
[Hugging him back.]  
Are you hungry?

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN stop dancing.]

AMAL  
I don't think that's such a good idea.

MALIK  
But, mother-

EL CAPTAIN  
[To MALIK.]  
Listen to your mother.

TEITA  
She never does.

AMAL  
You wouldn't remember.

TEITA  
Habibti, Mahfouz's work will be dust in ten-thousand years  
and his name will be forgotten.

EL CAPTAIN  
I should sure hope so.

MALIK  
So what?

TEITA  
He's just jealous.  
[She pulls out a wrapped candy from her pockets and hands  
it to MALIK.]  
Here.

[MALIK excitedly unwraps the candy and eats it.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Merci.

TEITA  
Not today.

AMAL  
Tomorrow?

TEITA  
Don't let me start with you.

EL CAPTAIN  
Then end.

MALIK  
I don't like your tone.

EL CAPTAIN  
I can see from your medals.

MALIK  
Don't meddle with me.

EL CAPTAIN  
I'd dare not.

MALIK  
Teita, would you like to leave with us?

TEITA  
I'd rather stay without you.

MALIK  
How about we go for a swim then?

TEITA  
You're much too young for that, dear.

MALIK  
It's perfectly legal.

AMAL  
I don't care for politics.

EL CAPTAIN  
I did.

TEITA

Movements fail all the time, dear, it's not your fault.

EL CAPTAIN

I blame the government.

AMAL

Which one?

EL CAPTAIN

I'm not sure, actually. I haven't seen Cairo in years.

MALIK

Oh, I was just there.

EL CAPTAIN

How was that like?

MALIK

Fine, thank you very much. They made me captain. Are you proud?

EL CAPTAIN

As a pickle, soaking in juice. I've always loved a good plate of torshy. This is the happiest news I could've received today.

MALIK

Thank you very much. You are too kind.

TEITA

Ah, but what kind?

MALIK

[Stands up straight.]

Military.

EL CAPTAIN

[Follows suit.]

Myself, I am nautical.

MALIK

Ah, man of the sea?

EL CAPTAIN

Sea of man.

AMAL  
Everything in between.

TEITA  
I'd rather be on the edge.

EL CAPTAIN  
Egged?

MALIK  
Where are your medals? Let me go get them.

[EL CAPTAIN is about to exit to retrieve his medals, but MALIK interrupts him.]

MALIK  
I rode on a boat once.

EL CAPTAIN  
How was that like?

MALIK  
Rocky. I remember the waves were not too pleased.

EL CAPTAIN  
Perhaps you upset them.

MALIK  
Perhaps, but perhaps my captain was not very good.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Angrily.]  
How dare you? I have never been more insulted.

[AMAL moves towards EL CAPTAIN and attempts to soothe him.]

MALIK  
I have never been more insular.

[TEITA does the same for MALIK.]

EL CAPTAIN  
Do you even know what it means to be a captain, child? You got your promotion yesterday and you think you can compare.

MALIK

I compare nothing except that which is before me. Sometimes  
also what's behind me.

[The tension escalates.]

EL CAPTAIN

Don't be a fool. The sea is behind me.

MALIK

I disagree. I believe I am over it.

TEITA

I wish I could be over the sea!

AMAL

Don't we all!

TEITA

You don't, dear.

AMAL

Don't I?

EL CAPTAIN

No, dear.

AMAL

[Lets go of EL CAPTAIN.]

Dead dogma.

MALIK

[Tries to soothe AMAL.]

Dearth.

TEITA

In dirt.

EL CAPTAIN

Demise to those who would demote me.

MALIK

A real captain would never fear such trivialities.

EL CAPTAIN

Easy for you to say, you're not one.

[They're close to exchanging blows now.]

MALIK  
Am too!

EL CAPTAIN  
Amorous. Saying it doesn't make it so.

MALIK  
Acting it doesn't do much better.

EL CAPTAIN  
Bothersome!

MALIK  
Bewailed.

EL CAPTAIN  
You can find me on the sea, sir. Then we'll see what's  
what.

AMAL  
What?

TEITA  
Worrisome.

AMAL  
Wanting.

EL CAPTAIN  
I tire of this wanton aggression.

MALIK  
Assertive.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Angrily.]  
Have you ever felt the cool steel of a ship as she carries  
you on her hard back through the raging Mediterranean? I  
sure haven't. I hear it's quite an experience.

MALIK  
[Angrily.]  
Have you ever fought in the trenches of Sinai or Yemen,



struggling to survive while eliminating your enemy? I'd like to. I hear it's quite exciting.

TEITA

Exceptional. Quite the exuberance.

EL CAPTAIN

I have more of that in my hat than this fool does in all of his uniform.

MALIK

I have more uniform on this body than this idiot has in his entire boat.

[TEITA is visibly shaking from the exchange at this point. She moves around attempting to get away from the screaming.]

EL CAPTAIN

Bastard!

[AMAL is now between them.]

MALIK

Bozo!

EL CAPTAIN

Backhanded!

MALIK

Brat!

AMAL

Archetype!

EL CAPTAIN

Amicable!

MALIK

Amphibian!

EL CAPTAIN

Phosphorous phony!

MALIK

Futuristic feline!

AMAL  
Fathomless!

TEITA  
Stop!

[Everyone halts besides TEITA. She rips off her hijab and becomes SAFIYA again. Without saying anything, she motions for everyone to leave. They nod and silently leave. SAFIYA is about to exit as well, but looks back at the stage before she does. As she sighs, AHLAM rushes on stage and they crash into each other.]

SAFIYA  
Oh, hello.

AHLAM  
Hell, oh.

SAFIYA  
Hell.

AHLAM  
Oh.

SAFIYA  
How is the Moon?

AHLAM  
You mean El Amar?

SAFIYA  
How should I know?

AHLAM  
Same old, same old.

SAFIYA  
Mold.

AHLAM  
Everywhere.

SAFIYA  
Even here.

AHLAM  
Especially here.

SAFIYA  
A herd.

AHLAM  
Heard what?

SAFIYA  
Your voice. In the waves.

AHLAM  
I called for you.

SAFIYA  
Like the wind.

AHLAM  
Welded with the sea.

SAFIYA  
On and on again.

AHLAM  
Yes.

SAFIYA  
Jest.

AHLAM  
Not so much.

SAFIYA  
Just enough.

AHLAM  
Exactly.

SAFIYA  
Tentatively.

AHLAM  
Always.

SAFIYA

You keep coming back.

AHLAM

You keep saying that.

SAFIYA

Have you seen the population census? I have no place for  
you here.

AHLAM

Nor I you.

SAFIYA

Nor you nor I.

AHLAM

I've missed you, Safiya.

SAFIYA

I've missed the wind and the wailing.

AHLAM

You wail enough on your own time.

SAFIYA

[Hops across the stage.]  
Is that true?

AHLAM

I check in on you sometimes.

SAFIYA

Somewhere.

AHLAM

No. Here.

SAFIYA

A herd.

AHLAM

No! Here!

SAFIYA

Herald. Have you heard the news lately?

AHLAM  
Noteworthy.

SAFIYA  
Nothing.

[They begin running laps around the stage.]

AHLAM  
Have you swallowed salt recently?

SAFIYA  
I don't have water. I fed on dawn.

AHLAM  
Dawn was dull.

SAFIYA  
Is it not anymore?

AHLAM  
As are you.

SAFIYA  
Azure and assured.

AHLAM  
Of what?

SAFIYA  
Of the moon and the waves. Of a farfetched place.

AHLAM  
You rhyme when you're nervous.

SAFIYA  
And you lie when you're not.

AHLAM  
Noted.

SAFIYA  
Morbid.

AHLAM  
More morphed.

SAFIYA  
Were you?

AHLAM  
I suppose.

SAFIYA  
What sent you?

AHLAM  
What bent you?

SAFIYA  
Sand.

AHLAM  
No.

SAFIYA  
Summer.

AHLAM  
Neither.

SAFIYA  
Perhaps a whisper.  
[She stops. Beat. AHLAM stops.]  
Do you ever wonder if you're a pebble by the sea floor?  
[AHLAM is about to respond, SAFIYA cuts her off.]  
Personally, I prefer rivers.

AHLAM  
For what do I owe the pleasure.

SAFIYA  
[Hopping across stage.]  
Pleasantry only got me so far.

AHLAM  
Enough with me.

[They steadily walk closer to each other.]

SAFIYA  
You were never far.

AHLAM  
Further.

SAFIYA  
Father.

AHLAM  
Fathom.

SAFIYA  
Phantom.

AHLAM  
Found.

SAFIYA  
At last.

AHLAM  
I've missed you, habibti.

[It seems as though they are about to kiss, but SAFIYA walks away.]

SAFIYA  
For some time now, I have been pondering the possibilities of investment, of turning some odd hundred acres of sand into some odd hundred moneys. Preferably in pounds, but yens may also work. For example, I can move into any fringe neighborhood of any city, let's say Port Said, and, next thing you know, I am being followed.

AHLAM  
[Getting excited.]  
There's always something or the other!

SAFIYA  
[Thinks for a second, gets demotivated.]  
What use is it now? I am here. You are there.

AHLAM  
And I have not a single care.

[AHLAM approaches SAFIYA. She gives AHLAM her back.]

SAFIYA  
Caress.

[AHLAM gives her a back massage.]

AHLAM  
Coffin.

SAFIYA  
That's not how we say it here.

AHLAM  
Taboot.

SAFIYA  
Taboo

AHLAM  
Not necessarily.

SAFIYA  
But indefinitely.

AHLAM  
Time passes faster than I remember.

SAFIYA  
Have you been to Suez?

AHLAM  
I'm not a ship.

SAFIYA  
I'm still breathing.

AHLAM  
I'm glad.

SAFIYA  
Gallant.

AHLAM  
Garden.

SAFIYA  
Unguarded. Oh! Can we plant white roses?



AHLAM  
Surely anyone can.

SAFIYA  
But we need water.

AHLAM  
What do you want?

SAFIYA  
[Spreading her arms dramatically.]  
Worldliness.

AHLAM  
Such a difficult way to die.

[SAFIYA turns around to face AHLAM. They hold each other and kiss. Beat. They move apart.]

SAFIYA  
What day is it today?

AHLAM  
I had my ticket set for Friday.

SAFIYA  
But you're still here.

AHLAM  
Yes, it must be Wednesday then.

SAFIYA  
You should leave.

AHLAM  
Should I go left?

SAFIYA  
I don't care much for directions.

AHLAM  
I'll buy you a compass someday.

[AHLAM exits. SAFIYA sits down on the bench and continues eating the seeds. Enter MALIK with a small radio under his arm. He does not notice that SAFIYA is wearing the same

galabeya as TEITA now. He sits down next to her, neither looks at the other. Beat.]

MALIK  
Radio?

SAFIYA  
Ooh! I wonder what's on?

MALIK  
The lights. Somewhere. Somehow.

SAFIYA  
They must have paid their electric bills.

MALIK  
Who?

SAFIYA  
Ha?

MALIK  
It's on!

[They both huddle by the radio waiting for something to play. A loud static sound is heard. They listen for several moments before MALIK changes the channel. They do the same but this time SAFIYA changes the channel.]

MALIK  
No use?

SAFIYA  
No me's either.

MALIK  
I'd rather not.

SAFIYA  
I know me already.

MALIK  
So do I.

[He changes the channel again. Fairuz's "Shat El-Iskinderiya" (Coast of Alexandria) comes on, and they

listen intently for a few beats before turning the radio off.]

SAFIYA  
Coast.

MALIK  
Coaxed.

[They begin tapping each other's palms as though playing a schoolyard game.]

SAFIYA  
Shore.

MALIK  
Sure.

SAFIYA  
Sea.

MALIK  
Seed.

SAFIYA  
River.

MALIK  
Render.

SAFIYA  
There.

MALIK  
[Gets up furiously.]  
I don't want to play this game anymore.

SAFIYA  
But we always play it! Every Tuesday you stop by my bench  
with your radio and we listen to Fairuz and the wind-

MALIK  
This is serious.  
[Beat.]  
What day is it today?

SAFIYA

I hope it's not Saturday.

MALIK

Are you keeping the Sabbath?

SAFIYA

I'm a Friday kind of girl.

MALIK

I would.

SAFIYA

I word.

MALIK

[Approaches the water.]

Have you tasted the water this morning? I found life in my gurgling. I spat it out and the world spoke through me.

SAFIYA

Throw me.

MALIK

I won't.

SAFIYA

I'll swim.

MALIK

I'll sink.

SAFIYA

I'll sin.

MALIK

I think not.

SAFIYA

I think still.

MALIK

I pray not.

SAFIYA

I fear prey still.

MALIK  
Silly.

SAFIYA  
Song.

MALIK  
Sought.

SAFIYA  
Sword!

MALIK  
Where?!  
[He looks around, can't find any.]  
Come with me.

SAFIYA  
Where?

MALIK  
To Cairo. I think I have another promotion coming up.

SAFIYA  
We're leaving soon. Besides, you got promoted last week.

MALIK  
And I will next week as well.

SAFIYA  
But this is this week now.

MALIK  
Now?

SAFIYA  
Never.

MALIK  
So you won't?

SAFIYA  
I will.

MALIK  
I'm disappointed.

SAFIYA  
I'm dissipated.

MALIK  
I can help you. There's enough pain to go around.

SAFIYA  
Enough for me.

MALIK  
Throw it in the sea.

SAFIYA  
I'd sooner throw myself.

[EL CAPTAIN's boat is thrown on stage. SAFIYA and MALIK regard it in a puzzled manner. Beat. Enter AMAL.]

AMAL  
I once saw a black and white taxi crash into a shiny new Lada and I asked them if they needed help, but they laughed the night away and I was left with nothing but a somber Moon.

SAFIYA  
[Softly]  
Amar, ya mama.

AMAL  
Not now, dear.

MALIK  
I hear it calling.

AMAL  
Then maybe you should leave.

MALIK  
Maybe I should.

SAFIYA  
Shuffle.  
[MALIK walks to a far corner of the stage and gives his back to SAFIYA and AMAL.]  
Mother.

AMAL  
Yes, dear.

SAFIYA  
Don't call me that.

AMAL  
Will I call you by your name then?

SAFIYA  
I may not answer.

AMAL  
No one ever does.

[AMAL sits in the boat. SAFIYA sits on the bench.]

SAFIYA  
Now that's just not true.

AMAL  
This place was built on red bricks, you know. Now it's  
something else.

SAFIYA  
As am I.

AMAL  
Might I?

SAFIYA  
Might, you.

AMAL  
Come back.

SAFIYA  
Unlikely.

AMAL  
I can't leave your brother.

SAFIYA  
Nor do you need to.

AMAL  
I remember when I needed things.

SAFIYA  
When was that?

AMAL  
Some time ago.

SAFIYA  
Ages.

AMAL  
Again.

SAFIYA  
Aromatic.

AMAL  
I can smell it in the air.

SAFIYA  
The air is coarse, mother.

AMAL  
As it is everywhere.

SAFIYA  
Not there.

AMAL  
Where?

SAFIYA  
When.

AMAL  
Hell or high water.

SAFIYA  
I'd rather get to heaven.

AMAL  
One day, child.



SAFIYA  
Chance.

AMAL  
A dastard.

SAFIYA  
Demented.

AMAL  
Demonym.

SAFIYA  
I am a Kawtharian, am I not?

AMAL  
I am of Kawthar. I wish you were more nationalistic, dear.

SAFIYA  
I don't care much for anthems.

AMAL  
Not all countries have one.

SAFIYA  
Courtly.

AMAL  
Common.

SAFIYA  
Count your blessings.

AMAL  
I do it in my sleep.

SAFIYA  
This country slept once, right?

AMAL  
I wouldn't remember.

SAFIYA  
Neither would I.

AMAL

How does it go again?

SAFIYA

[Thinks for a second.]

Ya Masr, oumi we sheddi el heil-

AMAL

[Getting up from the boat.]

No, that's not right.

[Gets up from the bench and sits in the boat. AMAL sits on the bench.]

SAFIYA

What do you remember?

AMAL

Sadat's body.

MALIK

[Moving closer to them.]

Where was I in all this?

AMAL

We live by the sea.

MALIK

A likely story.

[MALIK joins SAFIYA in the boat.]

SAFIYA

The tide grows weary.

MALIK

Shall we sail?

AMAL

No! You children are not ready! This is not the time.

MALIK

Hardly.

SAFIYA

Heroic. I live for your voice, mother. What happened to Om  
Kalthoum?

AMAL

The acoustic's aren't right.

MALIK

We'll build you new ones!

AMAL

Out of what?

MALIK

[Looks around then looks at the boat.]  
This perhaps!

AMAL

Perfect!

SAFIYA

No!

[Beat.]

Come with me.

MALIK

Where?

SAFIYA

Do you remember Farouk?

MALIK

Silence!

AMAL

Somber.

MALIK

I won't accept this.

SAFIYA

You don't have to.

MALIK

That's a silly idea.

AMAL

So was seventy-three.

MALIK

[Gets up from the boat.]

Why is that?

[AMAL is about to speak, but instead walks up to the pool, picks one of the floating party cups, fills it with water and hurls the water at MALIK's face.]

SAFIYA

Wafting.

[MALIK, silent, simply walks off stage without responding to either of them. From the other side of the stage, EL CAPTAIN enters.]

EL CAPTAIN

Alhamdulillah, I thought he would never leave.

SAFIYA

I want to leave.

EL CAPTAIN

Don't we all?

AMAL

Allusions.

EL CAPTAIN

No?

AMAL

Good riddance.

EL CAPTAIN

Ridiculous.

AMAL

You were always.

EL CAPTAIN

I wanted the water.

AMAL  
As did I.

EL CAPTAIN  
You didn't when the ship was sinking.

AMAL  
Sought after.

SAFIYA  
Mother-

AMAL  
Not now, child.

EL CAPTAIN  
Father-

AMAL  
Not now, child!

SAFIYA  
When?

EL CAPTAIN  
A long time ago. We were clad in chainmail. Then they came with guns. I was there to see the monarchy. I was there when men still spoke in hushed tones amongst themselves, afraid of who might be listening. Have you ever seen a Philosopher Rex up close? It is a gruesome sight. Teeth bared. Eyes squinting. Aflaton never made much sense in translation. I was there for it all. A sight for the silence. I speak now when I can.

AMAL  
I've been speaking before you and it hasn't done me much good.

EL CAPTAIN  
It won't.

AMAL  
Will it?

SAFIYA  
Whimsical.

EL CAPTAIN  
What would you know?

SAFIYA  
I know you saw Nixon in seventy-four. I know he waved to  
the crowd and you smiled.

EL CAPTAIN  
Similes.

AMAL  
Salutations.

SAFIYA  
Salam.

AMAL  
I greet the land when it lets me.

SAFIYA  
It's the other way around with me.

AMAL  
Funny little mix-up.

EL CAPTAIN  
I've seen plenty of those. Once, I saw a chamber being  
mistaken for a chicken. It flapped its wing and bared its  
golden beak. Its red eyes flared with fury. I feared for my  
life, but went in anyway.

AMAL  
Amorous.

SAFIYA  
Amateur.

EL CAPTAIN  
Auzubillah. Have you ever even had a job?

SAFIYA  
Once. I kept it in my pocket where it smiled at me and

kissed me by the morning light. This was before I learned  
to fear the Sun.

AMAL

Find solace in your sustenance, child. The sun gives what  
it gives and takes what it takes.

EL CAPTAIN

I tried to do the same, but to no avail.

SAFIYA

Try again!

EL CAPTAIN

Oh, no, it's much too late for that now.

AMAL

Dawn is coming.

EL CAPTAIN

And Dawn is death.

SAFIFYA

[Saying it perplexedly.]

Everyone knows that.

EL CAPTAIN

Indeed, everyone does know that.

AMAL

I'd argue everyone seems to know that.

EL CAPTAIN

But by virtue of them seeming to know it, does that not  
give them the adequate means to adequately know it.

AMAL

I don't know.

EL CAPTAIN

What do you know?

AMAL

I know I sang the anthem every day in school. I saw the  
flag waving, bright crimson in the sky. I wanted to go out

like that, with the poise of a cosmic thing, too elegant to  
pass away quietly.

EL CAPTAIN

I'm a man of my own water.

SAFIYA

I have never heard of such a thing.

EL CAPTAIN

Nor will you. We don't discuss such matters here.

AMAL

Where?

EL CAPTAIN

[Rushes over to her and places his hand onto her mouth.]

Bas! They'll hear us.

AMAL

[Slapping his hand away.]

Let them. Those who seek me know where I am.

[AMAL joins SAFIYA in the boat and holds her tightly.]

EL CAPTAIN

I admire your motherhood.

AMAL

You should try it sometime.

EL CAPTAIN

In another life, perhaps.

AMAL

[Rushes over to him and places a hand on his mouth.]

Hush! They'll hear us.

EL CAPTAIN

Are you sure?

AMAL

Yes, everyone knows that.

SAFIYA

Indeed, everyone does know that.



AMAL

It is quite known that everyone knows that.

SAFIYA

I have never known anyone who did not know that.

EL CAPTAIN

I did not know that everyone knew that.

AMAL

Would you like to know why?

EL CAPTAIN

When?

AMAL

A long time ago.

SAFIYA

[She tries to jerk the boat forward with her legs.]

Far away?

AMAL

No, it was right here.

EL CAPTAIN

Are you sure it wasn't over there?

AMAL

Where?

SAFIYA

By the sea?

AMAL

I don't see any sea.

SAFIYA

That's because you're looking at the water.

EL CAPTAIN

Yes, you need to be looking at the salt.

AMAL

I have seen enough salt in my life.

EL CAPTAIN

Yes, but have you tasted it?

AMAL

Not recently.

SAFIYA

Can I make you something?

AMAL

What kind of thing?

SAFIYA

Preferably edible.

AMAL

I'd rather not.

EL CAPTAIN

What do you usually eat?

AMAL

Usually my words. They move around in my stomach, but I  
thank them for it.

SAFIYA

Sometimes they even politely respond.

AMAL

Only children do that.

EL CAPTAIN

I didn't know children did things.

AMAL

Oh, many things indeed. Safiya, show him what you can do.

[SAFIYA stands up and begins waltzing with an invisible  
partner. She dances around AMAL and EL CAPTAIN.]

EL CAPTAIN

I see.

AMAL

Where?

SAFIYA  
[Still dancing.]  
There!

AMAL  
I don't see it.

EL CAPTAIN  
Look closer.

AMAL  
I'm trying.

[AMAL approaches the water and looks down steadily. She touches it with the tip of her toe before scurrying back center stage. SAFIYA stops dancing.]

SAFIYA  
What is it, mother?

AMAL  
I saw something horrible in there.

EL CAPTAIN  
[Seriously.]  
Was it your reflection?

AMAL  
Something like that. Can the Moon refract?

SAFIYA  
El Amar, ya mama. And only when it's sad.

EL CAPTAIN  
I was sad once.

AMAL  
As was I.

EL CAPTAIN  
What happened?

AMAL  
[Ponders for a second.]  
You first.

EL CAPTAIN

Fine. The Israelis invaded Sinai so we waited six years  
then took it back. It was very cathartic.

[Beat.]

Yourself?

AMAL

This place isn't as it used to be.

[Enter MALIK. He is dressed in a blood-red belly dancing  
costume. The skirt is long and the chest piece is over his  
military shirt. As soon as she sees him, SAFIYA yelps,  
rushes off stage and comes back with a goblet drum.]

EL CAPTAIN

Who are you?

MALIK

I am your son.

AMAL

I didn't know that.

EL CAPTAIN

I might have.

AMAL

You should have told me.

EL CAPTAIN

This look suits you well.

AMAL

What a delight.

MALIK

Thank you, they ordered me to do it.

AMAL

Why the hell would they?

MALIK

Why the hell wouldn't they?

SAFIYA

[Clears throat. Everyone looks at her.]

Shall we?

MALIK

Of course.

[He raises his hands in formation. SAFIYA begins banging the drum and MALIK begins dancing to it, following the rhythm perfectly, swishing his hips at AMAL and EL CAPTAIN.]

EL CAPTAIN

Most excellent.

AMAL

Most experiential.

EL CAPTAIN

I applaud.

AMAL

I'm appalled.

[AMAL and EL CAPTAIN get down on their knee around MALIK, who continues to dance to the drum beat, and pull stacks of seashells from their pockets. One by one, they begin flicking them at MALIK. SAFIYA's playing increases in intensity and MALIK's body follows suit. The speed increases until it crescendos. MALIK ends the dance with his arm spread wide, hands convulsed and upright. EL CAPTAIN and AMAL stand back up.]

EL CAPTAIN

Wonderful!

AMAL

Wicked!

EL CAPTAIN

I am lost for words.

AMAL

I've found the ones I need.

EL CAPTAIN  
Do you have them?

AMAL  
Not on me.

MALIK  
[Curtseying to both of them.]  
Thank you, both. So much.

SAFIYA  
[Putting the drum aside, gets up and begins clapping.]  
Bravo! What an exquisite debut!

MALIK  
[Turns sharply around to face her.]  
Silence!

[They all grow silent. MALIK looks from SAFIYA to AMAL to EL CAPTAIN. Beat.]

MALIK  
The oasis through the date trees. The date trees in the  
oasis.

AMAL  
[Approaching him.]  
Do you need a drink?  
[She holds his hands, turns them upside down and drops  
them.]  
They look fine to me.

MALIK  
[Crosses his arms.]  
Ahha. What would you know?

[Face unchanged, AMAL slaps him across the face. MALIK does not react.]

AMAL  
Ask the water next time.

EL CAPTAIN  
Or the fire.

SAFIYA

Where?

MALIK

[Throwing his arms in the air.]

Here! It's all here.

SAFIYA

I've never heard of such a thing.

AMAL

Audio.

EL CAPTAIN

Audacious.

AMAL

Well, we won't stop you.

[Holding one another, AMAL and EL CAPTAIN exit. EL CAPTAIN rushes back in and drags his boat out. Beat.]

SAFIYA

You look well, brother.

MALIK

What?

SAFIYA

Wild.

MALIK

Woeful.

SAFIYA

Wilderness.

MALIK

Wanton.

SAFIYA

Wilding.

MALIK

Wondrous.

SAFIYA  
Wilder.

MALIK  
[Beat. He sits on the bench.]  
Sometimes, I wish I could just be civilized.

SAFIYA  
[She joins him.]  
Have some manners.

MALIK  
Matter of fact.

SAFIYA  
I don't like facts.

MALIK  
Funny.

SAFIYA  
They slip between my fingers like dew at dawn.

MALIK  
Dawn is decadent.

SAFIYA  
So come with me.

MALIK  
Where?

SAFIYA  
I don't know. Tell me, do you prefer the Mediterranean or  
the Red?

MALIK  
Neither. One's too European. The other's too Arab.

SAFIYA  
You need an ocean.

MALIK  
That sounds fun.



SAFIYA  
Wait till you hear it up close.

MALIK  
Here?

SAFIYA  
No, there.

MALIK  
Where?

SAFIYA  
I don't know.

MALIK  
Let me know when you do.

[He gets up and is about to walk off stage when SAFIYA  
grabs him by the arm.]

MALIK  
Ha?

SAFIYA  
Halt.

MALIK  
Should I?

SAFIYA  
Only if you want to.

MALIK  
[Ponders.]  
Give me a reason.

SAFIYA  
How about oil? How about Shiite forces moving as we speak?  
How about a burning cathedral? What of this dress?  
[Points to her clothes.]  
What of that?  
[Points to MALIK.]  
What about the air force? Siwa? Fossils in Wadi El Natrun?  
[Desperately.]

Faloukas at the bottom of the river? Iblis in the township?  
Privatized sight and sound? Chahine's dead. All this, and  
you stand with two feet? Fire in your eyes? What of mine?  
What of Little Armenia? I see the Sun, brother. I see the  
Sun and the Moon and they see me back, call me by my name  
as it is. Be sinful. Hear that nightingale. Faten would be  
proud. Look at that horizon. Won't you be horizontal with  
me?

[Beat.]

MALIK  
Goodbye.

[MALIK exits. SAFIYA sighs. Beat. AMAL and EL CAPTAIN come  
skipping in.]

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN  
Hello, child.

SAFIYA  
Who are you?

AMAL  
Your parents.

EL CAPTAIN  
Parenthetically.

AMAL  
So they say.

EL CAPTAIN  
So do we.

AMAL  
Haven't we done well?

EL CAPTAIN  
I know I have, what about you?

SAFIYA  
I haven't done anything recently.

AMAL  
Well, that's just not true.

EL CAPTAIN  
Not at all.

AMAL  
You brought us back together.

EL CAPTAIN  
Tumultuously.

AMAL  
What a time.

EL CAPTAIN  
Truly.

AMAL  
We have you to thank, child.

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN  
Thank you, child.

SAFIYA  
It's not my fault.

AMAL  
It's fine.

EL CAPTAIN  
Forward.

[Holding AMAL, he lurches forward.]

AMAL  
Forever.

SAFIYA  
Khan is also dead.

AMAL  
But he wishes you well, nonetheless.

EL CAPTAIN  
As do we.

[Picks up the guidebook.]  
Have you read from this book before?

SAFIYA

I only read what I find in the sand.

AMAL

Well, we'll have to change that.

EL CAPTAIN

Quite instantly.

AMAL

And interestingly.

SAFIYA

I have no interest.

EL CAPTAIN

Oh, do you?

AMAL

I sure don't.

EL CAPTAIN

But I do sometimes.

AMAL

[To EL CAPTAIN.]

That's why I sought you.

EL CAPTAIN

Somber.

AMAL

Soliloquy.

EL CAPTAIN

Sonnet of the night.

AMAL

I prefer ghazals.

SAFIYA

If I write for you, will that be enough?

AMAL

Surely.

EL CAPTAIN  
Most certainly.

SAFIYA  
[Picks up the bottle by the bench and gets up to offer it  
to them.]  
Here.

AMAL  
Where?

EL CAPTAIN  
I don't hear anything.

SAFIYA  
Listen closer.

AMAL  
I'd rather not.

EL CAPTAIN  
I'd sooner not.

SAFIYA  
Then come with me.

AMAL  
I suppose.

EL CAPTAIN  
I surrender.

AMAL  
Would you?

EL CAPTAIN  
For you, I suppose.

[They kiss tenderly while SAFIYA still holds out the  
bottle. After they pull apart, AMAL takes the bottle from  
her.]

AMAL  
A worthy word.

EL CAPTAIN  
Truly poetic.

AMAL  
We will compose for a coronation.

EL CAPTAIN  
Candid corner.

AMAL  
Find me a coroner.

EL CAPTAIN  
Wouldn't that be nice?

AMAL  
Haven't we done well?

SAFIYA  
Will you come with me?

EL CAPTAIN  
Why, of course.

AMAL  
Now, why wouldn't we.

EL CAPTAIN  
I suppose we could find a reason if we look for it.

AMAL  
Where?

EL CAPTAIN  
Well, right here, of course.

AMAL  
I see no reason.

EL CAPTAIN  
I hear no reason.

SAFIYA  
Then it's settled, then.

AMAL

All land was settled at some point.

EL CAPTAIN

Even this.

AMAL

I'd rather you don't get so fired up, dear.

EL CAPTAIN

I'll try not to.

AMAL

I know you will.

EL CAPTAIN

I know you won't.

AMAL

Won't you?

EL CAPTAIN

I want to.

SAFIYA

Haven't you done well?

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN

We have!

AMAL

Quite well, actually.

EL CAPTAIN

I don't remember the last time I did quite so well.

AMAL

But now, I am done.

EL CAPTAIN

Derivatively.

AMAL

Quite dexterous.

EL CAPTAIN

Anthropomorphic. I looked for a unified anthropological theory once.

AMAL

Oh?

EL CAPTAIN

It didn't work out so well.

AMAL

Well, you never worked that much.

EL CAPTAIN

Hardly.

AMAL

As a matter of fact, I think I had it the hardest.

EL CAPTAIN

You did have a lot.

SAFIYA

Haven't you?

AMAL

Only when I didn't.

EL CAPTAIN

Only when she didn't.

SAFIYA

Didn't you?

AMAL

I did.

EL CAPTAIN

She did.

SAFIYA

Shall we?

AMAL & EL CAPTAIN

We shall!



[They move together towards off stage, but suddenly halt and begin walking backwards slowly, raising their hands up as they do so. Enter MALIK. He is still in the same belly dancing costume and is now holding the same toy gun from earlier aimed directly at them. He is walking steadily as though he is marching. As they talk, they circle around the stage in this position continuously.]

AMAL

Come now.

EL CAPTAIN

Courage.

AMAL

Compassion.

EL CAPTAIN

Countenance.

AMAL

Sustenance.

MALIK

Have you received your visas, yet?

AMAL

No, but I have a blessing.

MALIK

That doesn't do much for paperwork.

AMAL

Would you like some paper, dear?

MALIK

No, thank you.

EL CAPTAIN

How about some pompous?

MALIK

Another time, maybe.

AMAL

Tantamount.

EL CAPTAIN

I don't find this very tantalizing.

SAFIYA

[Nervously.]

Talk.

MALIK

The herb growing on the curb is getting on my nerve.

AMAL

Cut it off then.

EL CAPTAIN

Burn it down.

SAFIYA

I'd sooner see you burst than drown.

MALIK

That won't be necessary.

AMAL

Few things are.

EL CAPTAIN

I reckon not.

AMAL

I really don't.

SAFIYA

Malik, calm down and hear a song.

MALIK

It's quiet in Cairo.

EL CAPTAIN

Fair point.

AMAL

Quite light.

EL CAPTAIN

Blinding even.

AMAL

I wouldn't go that far.

EL CAPTAIN

I would just a bit.

AMAL

But not too much.

EL CAPTAIN

Oh, no. Just a bit.

AMAL

Tiny.

EL CAPTAIN

Tiring.

AMAL

Touring.

SAFIYA

Won't you touch?

MALIK

I touch only what I breathe. What is dead may never croak  
in the evening. I look forward to dawn and all its somber  
tomorrows. I find solace in the salvage.

AMAL

Sanctimonious.

EL CAPTAIN

Cerebral.

AMAL

I found my mind once.

EL CAPTAIN

How was that?

AMAL

It sent you its regards.

EL CAPTAIN

Send mine back.

AMAL  
Not likely right now.

EL CAPTAIN  
No, not soon.

AMAL  
Summon.

SAFIYA  
I seek words.

MALIK  
That never amounts to much.

AMAL  
Only because you don't add enough.

EL CAPTAIN  
Mathematics were never your forte.

AMAL  
I tried.

EL CAPTAIN  
I toiled.

AMAL  
What have you done, my child?

EL CAPTAIN  
What will you do when the Nile dries?

MALIK  
I'll use diplomatic force.

SAFIYA  
You won't. Trust me, I've tried.

MALIK  
Tentatively.

AMAL  
Traumatically.

EL CAPTAIN

We all have our demons.

AMAL

Have you seen mine lately?

EL CAPTAIN

I'm sure they're around somewhere.

AMAL

Let me know where they are.

EL CAPTAIN

Do you need them?

AMAL

No, but it would be nice to know they're there if I do.

SAFIYA

Lounge and let lounge, brother.

MALIK

I would, but living rooms are expensive.

AMAL

And we have been very grateful for that.

EL CAPTAIN

Truly.

AMAL

But now it is time we be gratuitous.

EL CAPTAIN

Grainy.

AMAL

Grotesque.

EL CAPTAIN

As the bottom of the sea.

SAFIYA

Have you seen the floor, brother?

MALIK

I'd rather not. I know a flash when I hear it.

SAFIYA

What of the dark?

MALIK

What of the candle?

SAFIYA

I fail to follow your rhetoric.

MALIK

[Sighs.]

If a candle burns at two ends surely this must mean we face yet another economic meltdown or as the falah would put it, a rather monstrous malady that threatens to mutate the very existence of our mutuality. If then, by the transitive property of being, we are all children of some sort, I must conclude that the only way to love, and truly love, is to listen to a treacherous tightrope slinging across a bridge, maybe Kasr El-Nil, in the afterword. Only then can a conclusion be conquered.

SAFIYA

Save and let save, brother.

AMAL

Salvation is juicy.

EL CAPTAIN

I run out of stock soon.

AMAL

Wring out the right.

EL CAPTAIN

Rupture.

AMAL

Orangutan.

EL CAPTAIN

Tangerine.

AMAL  
Pastrami.

SAFIYA  
Delicious.

AMAL  
And devious.

EL CAPTAIN  
Watch out.

AMAL  
Why? Does he have a gun?

[MALIK shoots AMAL. She cries in pain, before dropping to the floor, lifeless. EL CAPTAIN seems shocked, but remains silent.]

EL CAPTAIN  
What of my mother and-

[MALIK shoots EL CAPTAIN. He also cries out in pain, but slightly longer than AMAL did. It recedes into a rumbling groan. He falls to the floor besides her, lifeless. SAFIYA crouches in the corner, shivering.]

MALIK  
[Looking over their bodies.]  
Did you know the Russians almost brought a nuke to Alexandria? I prayed for the fallout. What lives may never sing.

[He looks towards SAFIYA.]  
And you? What of your sacred?

SAFIYA  
[Gradually and quickly growing calmer, she approaches him.]  
Forgive me, walahy, I haven't read enough recently. Give me my leave and I will go find a newspaper.

MALIK  
I think you missed the morning run.

SAFIYA  
What can I say? I feed the body that holds me.

MALIK  
So it goes.

SAFIYA  
So it always has.

MALIK  
It's well known, you know.

SAFIYA  
Only here.

MALIK  
No.

SAFIYA  
Yes.

MALIK  
Oh, no.

SAFIYA  
Indeed, yes.

MALIK  
Yearn.

SAFIYA  
Yellow.

MALIK  
Yet.

SAFIYA  
I wonder.

MALIK  
That's quite enough.

SAFIYA  
What of the wicked?

MALIK  
I know not.



SAFIYA  
Think harder.

MALIK  
That would be inadvisable.

SAFIYA  
Have you ever breathed air so coarse, you found yourself  
caught in its grasp?

MALIK  
I do miss Cairo.

SAFIYA  
Perhaps. But perhaps you also took the wrong train.

MALIK  
I couldn't have.

SAFIYA  
So to speak, of course.

MALIK  
Words aren't worthless.

SAFIYA  
Even in sentences?

MALIK  
I tried writing my best, and when I didn't succeed I  
decided to become a barometer.

SAFIYA  
Read me.

MALIK  
I struggle with language.

SAFIYA  
Then ask me.

MALIK  
I have orders not to.

SAFIYA  
Then make me.

MALIK  
I'd rather not.

SAFIYA  
I will not be stopped.

MALIK  
Neither will I.

SAFIYA  
But you will be sought.

MALIK  
Maybe tomorrow.

SAFIYA  
Maybe now.

MALIK  
Try me.

SAFIYA  
Triangular.

MALIK  
Untrue.

SAFIYA  
Untold.

MALIK  
Unnecessary.

SAFIYA  
Unfold.

MALIK  
Not now.

SAFIYA  
Always.

MALIK  
What do you want?

SAFIYA  
I'm not hungry right now, thank you.

MALIK  
Have you a match?

SAFIYA  
I light with my finger.

MALIK  
I'm afraid that won't do.

SAFIYA  
Very well.

MALIK  
Could be better.

SAFIYA  
I suppose.

MALIK  
I sought.

SAFIYA  
And you were left wanting.

MALIK  
True.

SAFIYA  
Tantamount.

MALIK  
Tantalizing.

SAFIYA  
Get on with it.

[Holding the gun forward, MALIK moves a step to adjust his position, but he trips on his skirt and falls into the water. He screams and splashes about. Seeing the opportunity, SAFIYA grabs the gun and shoots him three times. MALIK's body lies lifeless. She breathes heavily. Beat. Enter AHLAM with another corked bottle. She does not seem to notice the bodies.]

AHLAM  
Oh, hello.

SAFIYA  
Hell-o.

AHLAM  
Not so much.

SAFIYA  
Nautical.

AHLAM  
Somewhat.

SAFIYA  
Will you soothe me?

AHLAM  
I will try. This is for you.

[AHLAM hands SAFIYA the bottle. As with before, she opens it and it contains what appears to be a ticket. SAFIYA holds it in her hands and looks at it intently.]

SAFIYA  
[Looking up.]  
Are you sure?

AHLAM  
I suppose I am.

SAFIYA  
I don't know if I can.

AHLAM  
It's really easy.

SAFIYA  
I encourage that.

AHLAM  
Yallah.

SAFIYA  
Step?

AHLAM

One.

[SAFIYA begins walking towards the theatre's exit door.]

Two. Three.

[SAFIYA stops.]

And so on.

SAFIYA

Do you know what day it is today?

AHALM

I never cared much for politics.

SAFIYA

Myself, I like geography.

AHLAM

Where?

SAFIYA

Wherever, I suppose.

AHLAM

Maybe I'll see you there.

[SAFIYA nods and looks back at the door. She is about to walk out again, but hurriedly turns back to the bench. She picks up her book, and looks at the pile of suitcases for a moment, before choosing a random one to take with her. She steps forward and exits the theater. AHLAM restarts her counting, but this time in Arabic. The lights begin to dim as she continues counting. In the dark, she continues to count for a few beats, her voice gradually lowering in volume. Finally, silence.]

FIN

## ON WRITING *BARZAKH*: THE SEARCH FOR AN EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN ABSURDISM

The seeds of this project were planted in the Spring of 2016. I was enrolled in Professor Matthew Tremé's *The Absurdity of Modernity*, a survey course that primarily dealt with the phenomenon commonly known as the Theatre of the Absurd. In addition, it also tackled various Absurdist texts, from Camus's foundational *Myth of Sisyphus*, all the way to more obscure, yet nonetheless influential titles, such as Osvaldo Dragún's *Three Stories*.

With the exception of Tom Stoppard's classic *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, I had not encountered much Absurdist work before this class. I discovered an odd clarity in these works: a resonance I had simply never found in more logical and linear theatre. There was potent familiarity in completely bizarre characters like Beckett's Pozzo and Ionesco's Fire Chief. As a bilingual member of the Egyptian diaspora, I found Beckett and Ionesco particularly engaging; the way their work used language and chaos to create a profound sense of alienation and disconnection felt eerily relatable. I then found myself asking: why had I not encountered similar work that spoke to my specific experience?

Absurdist techniques have, of course, travelled far and wide. In Egypt alone, writers like Tawfiq al-Hakim and Lenin El Ramly wrote in very similar styles to the Theatre of the Absurd. But their work did not commit nearly as thoroughly to the absurdity of reality as Beckett and Ionesco did. Their writing style certainly employed absurdity but was not exactly Absurdist. By that I mean it embodied the aesthetic style of

Absurdist work, but still operated with a certain level of standard logic. A prime example of this critical difference would be El Ramly's *A Point of View*, a play set in a nursing home for blind people. Though the play uses fairly standard techniques of Absurdity in the way it explores blindness both physically and conceptually, through both language and space, it ends with a didactic, indicting political message on the 'blindness' of authority.

I do not make this distinction in order to belittle al-Hakim or El Ramly's work in any way, rather to simply illustrate that it left me wanting in the same way the Theatre of the Absurd did. I craved the aesthetic and philosophical framework of the latter, but with the relatable cultural context of the former. This thirst prompted me to explore the possibilities of that combination in my own writing. My first experiment was in Professor Tremé's class. For our final, we were given the option to write a creative piece that would demonstrate our grasp of the concepts we had been discussing throughout the semester. I decided to write a short, two-scene play titled *Sisyphus El Masri*.

The title is a double entendre. On the one hand, El Masri is a common last name throughout the Arab world, on the other, it literally translates to 'the Egyptian'. The play reimagined Sisyphus as a common Egyptian man whose 'punishment' is to sit on a street bench and have small pebbles thrown at him for an indefinite period of time. Once the throwing stops, he must then collect the pebbles and dispose of them before sitting down again on the street bench. Of course, the pebbles get thrown once again. So on and so forth.

*Sisyphus El Masri* was a precursor to *Barzakh* in several ways. It was the first work I had ever written in which I consciously tried to emulate an Absurdist style for the specific task of communicating the violence and turbulence of the contemporary Egyptian experience. Secondly, it featured two characters, Safiya and Malik, that I would later use again in *Barzakh*. The former acted as a quasi-love interest to Sisyphus, while the latter was, of course, the officer who tried to arrest him.

Though writing *Sisyphus El Masri* was nothing short of cathartic, the work ultimately felt limited. With further study, I was able to identify that this doubt was due to my firm reliance on symbolism and didacticism. Malik, for example, functioned more as a symbol of military corruption than he did as a character in a space and narrative. There was a similar issue with Willie, the character I used as a representation of English colonialism. Though the language in which they both spoke was chaotic and contradictory, their political role in the play was nonetheless made explicitly meaningful. Hence, the play did not achieve the desired effect of a formally Absurdist work; one that does not attempt to provide any sort of solution to the chaos its subjects experience. The core of this project was to produce a work that could pay homage to the Theatre of the Absurd, but also speak directly to a contemporary Egyptian cultural context.

For most of the project, I wanted to write a 'Postcolonial Absurdist' play. As I understood the material at the beginning of the project, this meant that I wanted to write using the literary and theatrical techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd with the theoretical and historical framework of postcolonialism. In short, I wanted to produce a work that would find a home in both. But this desire seemed paradoxical. Absurdism, especially as practiced by the likes of Beckett and Ionesco, depends on lucidity and



spontaneity, and is not interested in being restricted by theoretical frameworks. And yet, the entire point of the project seemed to necessitate writing through a well thought-out theoretical framework of postcolonial Egypt. To solve this dilemma, I strived to further my understanding of my Absurdist idols' work.

In reading Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov, I was stunned by the specificity of each writer's take on Absurdism. This observation challenged my initial perception of Absurdism as a quasi-genre. Though the Theatre of the Absurd has enough overlapping techniques and sceneries to constitute some form of common ground, it lacks any sort of reproducible structure the way other, more established, theatrical genres, such as tragedies or musicals, have. Because Absurdist writing can only be produced through a lucid relationship with one's present, every work is extraordinarily particular to its author and the space they occupy in their time and place.

Every Absurdist work is a product of its author's relationship with their zeitgeist. In this sense, I began to think of multiple 'Absurdisms' as opposed to a single, definite notion of the style. Beckett had his *own* Absurdism, rising from his position as an Irish immigrant in Paris whose first language was not French. Adamov's Absurdism was specific to his lifelong long battle with mental illness, as well as its intersection with his upbringing in a wealthy family that would eventually lose its privilege. Genet's Absurdism would have been completely different had he been a heterosexual man who was never imprisoned for his sexuality. While each of these 'Absurdisms' rises out of a common philosophical school of thought and inevitably uses similar techniques, each one is ultimately its very own aesthetic and dramatic force.

This realization drastically changed my approach to the project. For much of it, I was trying to find a way to ‘update’ Absurdism and the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd, but the writers I had looked up so eagerly had already left me a process through which I could produce the work I needed to write. Whereas I initially thought that I had needed to diligently apply Postcolonial Theory to *Barzakh* in order to produce a ‘Postcolonial Absurdist’ play, I eventually realized that any postcolonial subject (actively concerned with postcolonialism) who succeeds at writing an Absurdist play has written a ‘Postcolonial Absurdist’ play. Ionesco did not need any concrete anti-bourgeoisie framework to write *The Bald Soprano*, he simply needed a familiar scene to subvert and an active concern with the English bourgeoisie.

Before this realization, I was working with the false assumption that the Theatre of the Absurd was not political. It was, in fact, extremely political, especially in the way each work evades a singular, definite meaning. The Theatre of the Absurd did not leave me wanting because it was not political enough, rather because its political response was to a socio-historical and geographic space that is not relevant to me as a diasporic Muslim Egyptian living in the United States. I realized that the key to my goal of an Absurdist play in my image required that I reject any sort of mechanical or structured way of writing *Barzakh*. Understanding this, I then refocused my efforts on a reflective process that would create *Barzakh*’s universe out of my own experience and reality.

There are two primary experiences that I wanted to reflect through the style of Absurdism in *Barzakh*: the political violence of the Egyptian state and the dilemma of immigration. Specifically, I wanted to contrast those two experiences with the intense patriotism that is ubiquitous in Egyptian culture. Egyptians love calling Egypt Om el-

Donia (the Mother of the World), yet have lived under militaristic authoritarian rule for decades now. This dichotomy leads to a profound paradox in Egyptian culture in which Egyptians will heap praises upon Egypt, describing it as the cradle of civilization and the biggest Arab country, but also lambast it for being 'behind' and undemocratic.

As such, many Egyptians will view immigration as a means of escape from the oppressive Egyptian state. But at the same time, due to the intensity of Egyptian patriotism, they will also view immigration as a grave loss, a permanent schism from the homeland that can never be healed. This paradox continues to define my own lived experience as an Egyptian abroad. On the one hand, I long to live where in my own country, in my own city, but on the other I do not have the capacity to be constantly at risk of state violence and censorship. This paradox is made only worse by the fact that I am a writer. Given the political and economic situation in Egypt, it is actually easier for me to write about and engage with Egyptian culture in the diaspora than it is for me back home. My university gives me access to resources my peers in Cairo do not have and I am not at risk of violent state censorship. Yet, I am also severely limited. Producing work in the US for publication in the US not only means writing in English rather than Arabic, but also writing about Egypt in absence, almost out of memory.

The choice to title the play *Barzakh* was in direct response to the liminal nature of this diasporic space. Appearing multiple times in the Noble Qur'an, *barzakh* is a classical Arabic word that means both the liminal space and time the human soul spends in the grave before Judgment Day, and the invisible line that separates salt and fresh water. This is way the sight of the play, the fictional village of Kawthar, is situated in the northern Egyptian Delta. The family we follow occupies a metaphorical *barzakh*, one of turbulent

transition, but they also live near a literal barzakh, the invisible line between the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea. As a space, Kawthar is an embodiment of my own diasporic stasis.

I wish to live a free and productive life, but I also wish to live in my own country. *Barzakh* is meant to occupy the space between these two irreconcilable desires, which is why it needed to be an Absurdist work. The choices I have made in crafting it, though mostly a product of rapid lucid writing, attempt to reflect the absurdity of this liminal space of political identity I occupy: one in which I am neither traditionally Egyptian nor satisfied with being American. To that end, the characters live in Egypt, but speak mostly in English. They desire to leave, but cannot seem to for whatever reason. There is no solution to this paradox, at least none that is clear to me at the moment. *Barzakh* does not look for that solution. It is an attempt to come to terms with the absurdity of that reality.

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