

Elizabeth Hays Tussey

Babel

His English is clipped to bits, but it becomes him like a fashionably bad hair cut. It amuses her to watch his eyes trip from right to left turning over bits of his obtrusive new vocabulary. The English words are foreigners in his mouth and they give themselves away like clumsy tourists. He has lived in Pittsburgh for three months now. Upon his arrival, he impulsively signed a sublease for an overpriced apartment in the Southside of the city and settled his possessions around the mismatched furniture of the absent owner. In Pittsburgh the roads are lined with a perimeter of filthy, unmelted snow, filled with the refuse of three months of hard winter. As it melts it reveals strange treasures. With each increasingly warm day, pen caps, flip-flops and hubcaps are surrendered to the steadily rising river. In Saudi Arabia it is already summer. Only a few months ago, he and his friends burned days running through the heat of the streets and driving their cars down the neon boulevards of Riyadh. At night they sneaked out to the desert with duffel bags full of Black Label liquor, purchased for thirty Riyals a bottle from unsmiling men who peddled their goods from large black vans. In the summer in the city, his pretty mouth formed words that were intrinsically embroidered and ordered to perfection. The careful craft of his language drew women to him without effort. He feels impotent in America.

He meets her in the PPG Plaza where the ice skating rink stands in the winter. He is in a black hooded sweater in spite of the first nice weather of spring. He stands out among the Pittsburghers who, having finally emerged from cocoons of ski jackets and galoshes, were celebrating the weather with shorts and tube tops. She asks him if he wants dinner.

"One, dinner, yes. Thank you," he says. He has learned to snatch up words the second they leave her lips and turn them into his own. This careful act of linguistic theft has been his method of survival from the moment he changed planes in Amsterdam that January. He wears the apologetic smile of a foreigner. He has learned to smile and nod an awful lot, even when he doesn't understand the words he is hearing.

She was the first American to converse with him beyond initial politeness. They met on his first week in America when a car accident on Stanwix Street took out an entire power grid on the South side. Everyone in their neighborhood stood outside, huddled in small groups. They were the only two not part of a group. At that point his English was limited to "hotel," "car," "please," and "thank you." He explained through broken words and hand gestures that he knew nothing about the city. She was

more patient than the customs officials, her eyes were kinder than the driver that helped unload his luggage, and she seemed to possess an uncanny understanding of him, or perhaps what it meant to be a foreigner. In the darkness, they walked through the city. The skyscrapers were black and glassy in the night, looking very much like monoliths from some forgotten civilization left to gather the dusting of snow that had fallen over the city. Being alone among groups of people in moments like this tends to have a bonding effect on complete strangers. Later he fumbled his way past the language that separated them and threw aside the nervousness of living alone in a different country. He was an interpreter of bodies, bony shoulders and tired eyes. Her features spoke their own words to him of longing and insomnia. With this understanding he began to speak with her. She listened and spoke back, never growing frustrated or raising her voice when he did not understand her. For this he is eternally grateful. He is naked and new in America. Even though he sees faces on the street much like his own, skin his color, he is distinctly different from those men. He knows his gait is short and his back straight, unlike the easy slouching way that these Americans have. But these men talk loud, do not look before crossing the street and have a loping way of walking that he does not want to imitate.

Today their meeting is casual, and he knows that it is most likely the last time he will ever see her. His apartment is packed, and he has already given her the two small plants he had bought to keep him company. The next morning she is taking him to Pittsburgh and he will fly to the opposite coast to complete his English learning program. Together they walk to Primanti Brothers, where she buys him a bottle of Iron City Beer. She has learned long ago that he does not eat *halaal*, that he occasionally smokes weed, and that he has not seen the inside of a Mosque since he came to Pittsburgh. Once when she offered to drive him to Friday prayer, he laughed very sadly and shook his head. In his deviances she recognizes her own voided faith. She is sure that the apologetic gaze of the saints is just as cold and detached as the white painted ceiling and slightly imperfect mosaic designs of his mosque. He never tells her that he still prays five times a day but does not feel the overwhelming presence of Allah before him as he did in childhood, and she does not acknowledge that her prayers are a meaningless babble.

She tries speaking to him with what little Arabic she knows, and he laughs at her pathetic attempts at glottal stops and the pharyngeal sounds that turn to gibberish in her mouth.

“No, no. It comes from the throat,” he says. He plugs her nose for her and laughing, she tries again. Arabic sounds guttural and rich. It reminds her of the thick Turkish coffee he drinks; black and congealed and ready to tell a fortune. She speaks her English with the grammar of a native, a poor Frankenstein’s creature of a language. She has the ramshackle grammatical construction of one who speaks without understanding the alchemy of her own language. She wants to cover his mouth with hers and invite the careful script of Arabic to curl around her tongue.

After the taxi ride to her apartment and arms touching on the brass trailing of the stairs, he does. Their mouths connect in a spontaneous, somewhat clumsy swoop towards each other. Her hand instinctively moves to the back of his neck, pressing his lips hard into hers. He fumbles with the door, his arm still encircling her waist, to press her against his chest. They stumble into her apartment. The floor of her living room is covered with papers and books that look old and water damaged and well loved. He recognizes a recipe for falafel scrawled upon one of those free writing pads from a doctor's office. Her bedroom smells like a library. They pause, their bodies pressing into each other against the wall. He touches his nose to her, smiling and drawing in a shaky breath. She leads him into the bedroom where they lay together, fully dressed. He slips a hand just inside the waistband of her jeans and lets it feel the border where her waist becomes her hip. They come together almost instinctively, feeling the warmth of each others' bodies through clothes. She unzips his hooded sweater and he hooks his thumb around her belt loop. Language knows no barriers with his hip angled against hers.

"Please talk so I can sleep," she says. He begins in English and she stops him. The Arabic in him spills loose, something that has been silenced and lay dormant in him for the past months. He lets words run loose, senseless at first, but she does not know this. She does not know it but he tells her how he sat at his mother's feet during the final months of her illness.

She was a very successful and well-known interior designer in Riyadh. She often came back to their house speaking to their father about the gilded marble floor bathrooms and fragrant courtyards in the houses of some of the Saudi princes whose homes she decorated. She could make pomegranate trees sprout out of sink drains and ivy curl around headboards. His house bloomed with her artistry, and he and his three brothers ran wild through the dream world she created for them. They slept at night under the twinkle of imitation stars that she had worked into the ceiling, and when they woke the morning light was turned to indigo, ruby, and violet by the stained glass windows she fitted into the room when he, the youngest, was born.

He pauses and watches as a ghost-like moth batters its body against the window. Her head is heavy on his chest, but he does not mind. After a few minutes the words continue to come, slower and thicker than before.

When the cancer comes, the live ivy in the house withers. Some of the little stars burn out without her careful watch, and dust gathers in places where it never did before. He and his brothers are out in the country to catch hedgehogs when the news comes. He cups one in his hand, gently stroking the soft fur on the little creature's belly when his brother calls for him. He comes over a hill to see the impressive figure of his father, always in a clean, white thobe¹ standing in front of their car. His father is supporting himself on the open car door, sobbing and reaching out for the

¹ A long white tunic traditionally worn by men in Arab countries.

hands of his sons. He turns away and studies the kind face and miniature features of the hedgehog in his hands. It struggles and he reluctantly releases it, not wanting to return to that house that was not a house, without her there. He dreams of her, skin dry and hard, and her hair a thin, feather-like layer upon her head. The dreams chase him out of the mausoleum house and over the ocean.

As he talks, those ghosts of withered flowers and fallen false stars lose their grip on him. That abysmal feeling of loss somewhat lightens as he speaks of his dead mother in this girl's apartment.

Her own English seems to rattle in the air and for a moment she forgets that she is in her own country. She tells him about the boy that damaged her.

Tiny vessels run like interstates across his arms racing under flesh and disappear into muscle. This boy has blonde hair and the veins on his arms protrude and pulse with potential energy, the energy that so often releases itself upon her body, mottling her skin like camouflage.

She speaks of the weary process of emptying her apartment of his possessions while he sat on the kitchen floor crying and hugging his knees. She still lives in the same apartment, but tonight she plays with a curl of hair behind another man's ear. She rests her chin on his head and tells him with a small laugh that the only food she could keep down for a month was apples.

She spends Saturday mornings driving through the many neighborhoods of Pittsburgh looking for farmers markets. She tastes the skins of Fiji Apples, whose pulp melts into her dehydrated mouth. She takes a dozen Macintosh apples purchased from a vendor in Montour and cooks up an enormous vat of cinnamon applesauce that feeds her for a week.

Her hands run from the soft skin behind his ear to the hollow of his neck, where she lets her fingertips feel his pulse.

The first show of menstrual blood comes a week after she finally cleaned the apartment of every relic of his existence. She had emptied the refrigerator of the pita bread and hot sauce that he loved. Overcoming a curious and self-destructive urge, she sacrificed the long-winded and unread note he had left her, the last one in a series of apologetic and recycled promises of change, to the incinerator shoot. She bleached the floors, scoured the shower with Comet. She vacuumed the short blonde hairs off of her bedroom floor, but she could do nothing about the frighteningly hollow feeling she felt in the latitude that ran between the ridges of her pelvic bone. That last terrifying possibility kept her from sleep for nearly two months. For days on end she stayed up till dawn, accompanied only by the dark-eyed silent film stars on the Turner Classic Movie channel. She had never been so happy to feel the dull ache, find the streaks of blood that had soaked through her jeans. She doesn't feel embarrassed, walking the block from the bus to her apartment, nor does she lament the soiling of a rather expensive pair of Express jeans. Her body finally breaking itself out of the shock of abuse returns to its natural

cycle and evaporates the webbing she imagined might exist between them forever.

He continues to speak even when she closes her eyes and he thinks she is sleeping. He had seen death come into a marketplace when he was nineteen. There was glass in his hair for weeks, and he still carries small pock mark scars on his shoulder.

He sees men pour out of the building like small, dark salmon swimming up the stream of smoke. Their figures are bent, the features of their faces undeterminable. Upon the initial blast his hearing is reduced to a dim echo. He is thankful that he can't make out their gargling shouts. A man comes to stand at his side, and they are silent together and watch as the police cut the men down. The man says something to him that his tin-lined ears do not understand. He turns and walks into the first restaurant he sees, and promptly retches into a trash can. He sleeps in white for a week and keeps a chain of prayer beads tightly wrapped in his palm. He wakes every morning with the impression of the prayer beads in his skin and the small indentations comfort him, reminding him that his body still lives. His fears are irrational, and at his core he knows this, but he still has glass under his skin.

By the light of the TV she sees the small imperfections of his face: the slightly myopic eyes, the small scars that make a Morse code pattern across his left cheekbone. The intimacy they shared lingers in her mind, and she knows it will remain long after he is gone. One lover's hands felt her fragile collarbones, and she so often felt dread as they moved across all the other small bones in her neck. But this gentle man puts the side of his head to her stomach and the feel of each individual hair brushing her skin sends tears down the right side of her face. The terrain of her mouth is changed, the English mixed with Arabic and coming back into her very own voice. She matches her breath in rhythm with his and soon falls asleep.

In the morning he wakes up early and leaves for California to complete his English program. She drives him back to his apartment to pick up his luggage and they drive in a comfortable silence to the Pittsburgh Airport. There are planes flying in all directions of the compass, their black silhouettes slipping silently into the chalky cloud cover. He stands before her with his back to the security gate. There are no tears, or even an exchange of addresses. They kiss on the mouth with mutual warmth and understanding, and he continues his path through security and towards another edge of the world.