

Sisters' Entrance (Selections From) By Emtithal "Emi" Mahmoud

Bullets (Pg 100)

My father's voice yanked me awake
My brother had been shot.
I had never felt fear like that:
waiting for that first breath on the other side of the line at a
hospital half a world away.

The thing we had been fighting for the past 11 years had
reached the capitol and burrowed itself into my next of kin.

I am 21 years old and I know more about death than about
living

My life experiences revolved around massacres and
funerals. I know how to start revolutions, but

I don't know how to give in to this thing called youth
because I know how it ends.

I called my brother an idiot and he said, *live free or die*. He
said, *freedom is a question of life*;

If you do not reach for it, then you are not alive.

INTRODUCTION

From Refugee to Ivy League College Student to World Champion Poet, and now Goodwill Ambassador—24-year-old Emtithal (Emi) Mahmoud advocates for the cause of refugees through her poetry and incredible experience.

*Despite death-threats and repeated attempts at silencing, Emi continues to shatter long-standing stereotypes both at home and abroad. Her debut collection of poetry, *Sisters' Entrance*, has lifted the voices of women and girls, reaching across languages and barriers. Selections from *Sisters' Entrance* by Emi Mahmoud*

People Like Us (Pg 2)

Memories of my childhood live
between the rings of sand around my ankles
and the desert heat in my lungs.

I still believe that nothing washes
worry from tired skin better than the Nile
and my grandma's hands.

Every day I go to school
with the weight of dead neighbors
on my shoulders.

The first time I saw bomb smoke,
it didn't wind and billow like the heat

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from our kitchen hearth.

It forced itself on the Darfur sky,

Smothering the sun
with tears that it stole
from our bodies.

The worst thing about genocide
isn't the murder, the politics, the hunger
the government-paid soldiers

that chase you across borders
and into camps

It's the silence.

For three months, they closed the schools down
because people like us are an eyesore.

The first month, we took it.
The second, we waited.

The third month, we met underneath the date palm
trees,
drinking up every second our teachers gave us,
turning fruit pits into fractions.
On the last day, they came with a message
Put them in their place.

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We didn't stand a chance.

Flesh was never meant to dance
with silver bullets.

So we prayed for the sun to come
and melt daggers from our backs.

Lifted our voices up to God
until the clouds were spent for weeping
and the sand beneath our toes
echoed with the song of every soul
that ever walked before us.

I hid underneath the bed that day
with four other people.

Twelve years later and I can't help but wonder
where my cousins hid when the soldier
torched the houses,
threw the bodies
in the wells.

If the weapons didn't get you,
the poison would.

Sometimes they didn't want to use bullets
because it would cost them more than we did.

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I've seen sixteen ways to stop a heart.

When you build nations on someone's bones
what sense does it make to break them?

In one day, my mother choked on rifle smoke,
my father washed the blood from his face,
my uncles carried half the bodies
to the hospital,
the rest to the grave.

We watched.
For every funeral we planned
there were sixty we couldn't

Half the sand in the Sahara
tastes a lot like powdered bone.

TRANSITION

In addition to the million refugees already in Uganda, over the past 12 months, an average of 1,800 South Sudanese have been arriving there every day. More than 85% are women and children who continue to speak of barbaric violence occurring in Sudan. Armed groups burn down houses with civilians inside, people are killed in front of family members, and women and girls are sexually assaulted.

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Head Over Heels (Pg 54)

They hand me the microphone as my shoulder sinks under the weight of this dress; The woman says,
The one millionth refugee just left South Sudan, can you comment?

I feel my feet rock back and forth on the heels my mother bought Begging the question,
do we stay, or is it safer to choose flight?

My mind echoes through the numbers:
One million gone, 400,000 dead in Darfur,
two million displaced
and this lump takes over my throat as if each of those bodies found a grave right here in my esophagus.

Our once country—
all west, and south, and east, and north— so restless, the Nile couldn't hold us together and you ask me to summarize?

They talk about the numbers as if this isn't still happening,
As if 500,000 didn't just die in Syria,
as if 3,000 aren't still making their final stand at the bottom of the Mediterranean,

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as if there aren't entire volumes full of factsheets about our genocide and now you want me to write one?

Fact: we never talked over breakfast because the warplanes would swallow our voices.

Fact: my grandfather didn't want to leave home so he died in a warzone.

Fact: a burning bush without God is just a fire.

I measure the distance between what I know and what is safe to say on a microphone. Do I talk about sorrow, displacement? Do I mention the violence? How it's never as simple as what we see on TV? How there are weeks' worth of fear before the camera is on?

Do I talk about our bodies? How they are 60 percent water, but we still burn like driftwood? Do I tell her the men died first? Mothers forced to watch the slaughter? That they came for our children? Scattering them across the continent until our homes sank, that even castles sink at the bite of the bomb?

Do I mention the elderly? Our heroes—

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too weak to run too expensive to shoot?
How they would march them hands raised, rifles at their backs into the fire?
How their walking sticks kept the flames alive?

It sounds too harsh for a bundle of wires and an audience to swallow; too relentless, like the valley that filled with the putrid smoke of our deaths.

Is it better in verse? Can a stanza become a burial shroud? Will it sting less if I say it softly? Will the pain leave when the microphone does? If you don't see me cry will you listen better? 30 seconds for the sound bite and now 3 minutes for the poem. Why does every word feel like I'm saying my last?

My tongue goes dry, the same way we died—becoming ash without ever having been coal. I feel my left leg go numb and realize that I locked my knees, bracing for impact.

I never wear shoes I can't run in.

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Mama (Pg 108)

I was walking down the street when a man stopped me and said,

Hey yo sistah, you from the motherland?

Because my skin is a shade too deep not to have come from foreign soil

Because this garment on my head screams Africa

Because my body is a beacon calling everybody to come flock to the motherland

I said, *I'm Sudanese, why?*

He says, *'cause you got a little bit of flavor in you, I'm just admiring what your mama gave you*

Let me tell you something about my mama
She can reduce a man to tattered flesh without so much as blinking

Her words fester beneath your skin and the whole time,
You won't be able to stop cradling her eyes.

My mama is a woman, flawless and formidable in the same step.

Woman walks into a warzone and has warriors cowering at her feet

My mama carries all of us in her body,
on her face, in her blood and

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Blood is no good once you let it loose
So she always holds us close.

When I was 7, she cradled bullets in the billows of her robes.

That same night, she taught me how to get gunpowder out of cotton with a bar of soap.

Years later when the soldiers held her at gunpoint and asked her who she was

She said, *I am a daughter of Adam, I am a woman, who the hell are you?*

The last time we went home, we watched our village burn,
Soldiers pouring blood from civilian skulls
As if they too could turn water into wine.
They stole the ground beneath our feet.

The woman who raised me
turned and said, *don't be scared*
I'm your mother, I'm here, I won't let them through.

My mama gave me conviction.
Women like her
Inherit tired eyes,
Bruised wrists and titanium plated spines.
The daughters of widows wearing the wings of amputees
Carry countries between their shoulder blades.

[So . . .] Don't talk about the motherland unless you know that being from Africa

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means waking up an afterthought in this country.
Don't talk about my flavor unless you know that
My flavor is insurrection, it is rebellion, resistance
my flavor is mutiny
It is burden, it is grit and it is compromise
And you don't know compromise until you've rebuilt your
home for the third time
Without bricks, without mortar, without any other option

I turned to the man and said,
*My mother and I can't walk the streets alone back home
anymore.*
Back home, there are no streets to walk.

SOURCE INFORMATION

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AWARD HISTORY

MN State Qualifier