

Refraining from Desire: Trish Salah's "Ghazals in Fugue"

by Malcolm Woodland

Trish Salah is a Lebanese-Irish-Canadian poet, and a fully transitioned male-to-female transsexual lesbian. It might thus seem unsurprising that so remarkable a range of discursive thoroughfares intersect in her first volume of poetry, *Wanting in Arabic*—postcolonial and diasporic discourse, transsexual discourse, queer discourse, feminist discourse, and post-Marxist economic and political discourse. This brief description already makes the intersection sound rather dangerous, though I should make it clear that my purpose here is not to imbue this essay with an aura of risk and adventure; my own position, in fact, is that of a rather pedestrian literary critic, observing this discursive intersection from the safe vantage of a footpath—the footpath of poetics, and, more particularly, of refrain and repetition. My initial question is a distinctly formal one, directed to the ten “Ghazals in Fugue” that appear early in *Wanting in Arabic*; it concerns the presence of a form as strict and conventional as the ghazal in a volume otherwise dominated by a more “radical” or avant-garde free-verse poetics, a poetics of puns, of semantic drift and indeterminacy (especially in the use of pronouns), of radical and unbridgeable gaps and elisions, of temporal and syntactic discontinuities, and of the free play of fantasy and irreality. I will argue that Trish Salah’s manipulation of refrain in her ghazals is entirely consistent with the book’s dominant poetics, with the particular stances it takes toward the complexities of transsexual, postcolonial, and diasporic personhood, and, above all, with its thematization of the unpredictable operation of desire. “Ghazals in Fugue” explores just what it might mean for a transsexual, postdiasporic subject to find herself *Wanting in Arabic*, and shows how poetics of refrain can articulate or even embody that meaning.

Before turning to the poems themselves, however, some theoretical exposition is necessary. To return to my initial metaphor, it seems advisable to provide readers with a map of the discursive thoroughfares that intersect in Salah’s ghazals, and of the footpath

from which I have observed their confluence. Beginning at a point far removed from Salah's poems, I will indicate the individual trajectories that lead these discourses to their intersection in "Ghazals in Fugue." And since this introductory [page 35] project is itself complex, it seems advisable here to provide the map with an index—to inform readers that the essay will first discuss the ghazal's history and form; that it will next consider some relevant theories of refrain; and that it will then establish the potential functioning of refrain in postcolonial and transsexual context. Finally, the essay will show how that potential is realized in Salah's poetry.



The strictest version of the ghazal, which originated in seventh-century Arabia, consists of a sequence of thematically and syntactically autonomous couplets, each of which makes use of a refrain and a rhyme. In a ghazal's first couplet, the refrain appears at the end of each line, and the rhyme immediately precedes each refrain. In all succeeding couplets, the rhyme and refrain appear only at the end of the entire couplet—i.e., at the end of its second line. In the most common version of the ghazal, the refrains take on an unusual function in relation to the thematic and syntactic autonomy of each couplet, since the poem has no unity other than the purely formal or verbal unity provided by the refrain. This function would be diminished, of course, in a *qata*, a much rarer form of ghazal that permits both thematic and syntactic continuity among the couplets, and is thus more amenable to the "Western insistence on unity" (Ali, "Rebel's" 76) that the ghazal normally frustrates.¹ The *qata*, interestingly enough, is Salah's preferred form, and I will eventually suggest why this less obviously disjunctive version of the ghazal might hold a particular significance in a transsexual and diasporic context. Salah's more conventional formal preferences also distinguish her work from what we might think of as a Canadian tradition of ghazal-writing—a tradition in which the autonomy of the individual couplets is preserved, but the unifying device of refrain dispensed with altogether. This tradition includes John Thompson's *Stilt Jack* (1978), Lorna Crozier's recent *Bones in Their Wings* (2003), and, significantly enough, Phyllis Webb's queer-oriented *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* (1983). Clearly, this body of work sets into relief the implicit cultural politics of Salah's formal choices; but I wish to defer consideration of this matter to the essay's concluding remarks, and begin instead to map the footpath of refrain.

Critical discussions of refrain almost invariably insist on the impossibility of what Marianne Shapiro calls “total recurrence” (10); since any recurrence of a refrain always includes the difference marked by that “*re*,” a refrain’s second (or later) iteration can never replicate the exact semantic [page 36] force of its previous iteration(s). According to Shapiro, the reader of a sestina inevitably “becomes involved in a spiraling extension of the words, without establishing for any one of them a simple, fixed meaning” (4); and for the critic Joseph Conte, the pantoum’s “contextual shifts also prevent any line from having a single determinate meaning” (184). In these comments, the impossibility of “total recurrence” is anything but a defect or limitation; rather, it facilitates the constant creation of “fresh energy or perspective” (McFarland 179) or of an “optimum density of reference, in which each return accrue[s] new meaning,” as John Hollander puts it (77). Yet Hollander’s formulation concerns just one pole of a hypothetical “referential scale” (77) of refrain to which he briefly alludes in “Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain.” At the other end of this scale are refrain-poems in which “each occurrence of the danced-to burden increases its redundancy, and tends to collapse it into a univocal sign” (75). Hollander limits such an effect to “purely musical” refrains of the “fa-la-la” variety, so that “total recurrence” of a refrain’s meaning could occur, paradoxically enough, only when meaning never “occurred” in the first place. But even if such perfect repetition is impossible, a refrain might still be marked by a *desire* for “total recurrence.” When Mark Strand suggests, for example, that the villanelle, with its “elaborate system of retrievals [...] does most to suggest recovery” of some lost object (126) or offers a “repudiation of forward motion, of temporality, and, finally of dissolution” (126), his words seem to betray such a desire; and this desire might persist even after its impossibility has been fully acknowledged. Strand’s comments suggest the possibility of reading *all* refrains in terms of desire, in terms, that is, not just of nostalgic desires for perfect recurrence, stability, or for the past itself, but of desires for change, transformation, variation, and so on. To think in such terms is to acknowledge an ambiguity or ambivalence at the heart of much refrain, since even poets who seek to maximize a refrain’s semantic variety can only do so against a background of recurrence and sameness. Refrain, in other words, may be marked by conflicting desires for both difference and identity, and it might make sense to interpret any given iteration of a refrain in terms of the relative weight of or balance between these conflicting desires, and in terms of the ironic tensions they may generate.

Since Salah’s ghazals (as well as other poems from *Wanting in Arabic*) deal explicitly with postcolonial and diasporic experience, it is

necessary to ask how refrain and the conflicting desires encoded therein might function in relation to that thematics. It makes sense to think in terms of the “nativist” and “hybridist” tendencies that many critics have noted in postcolonial [page 37] literature. Refrains that remain as close as possible to their original meaning might lend themselves to the “postcolonial longing for an original home” (85) and the “nativist quest for a unitary source” (87) described by Jahan Ramazani as a feature of some postcolonial writing. Each return to a refrain would articulate a desire to return to a particular place and/or culture. In contrast, refrains that develop the greatest possible semantic (and sometimes lexical) variation might do so in the name of “hybridity” or “interculturality.” According to Homi Bhabha, texts that embody these conditions do “not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent”; instead, they “renew[] the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space” (7). For hybridist poets, cultural identity “is not a fixed essence [... or] a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (Hall 226); such poets “acknowledge that this past has been transformed irrevocably by colonialism and modernity” (Ramazani 10) and know, too, that the products of retrospection will thus prove “ineluctably intercultural” (42) rather than culturally pure. For Bhabha, the returns of the hybrid text have been purged of all nostalgia, resulting in “an iteration [of the past] that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent” (227) and thereby becoming “part of the necessity, *not the nostalgia*, of living” (7, my emphasis). These texts articulate an active desire for the newness of the in-between and for the possibilities of transformation that take place in the interactions of past and present. Clearly, the inevitability of semantic variation permits refrain to embody such processes of cultural refiguration and reinscription in a particularly concrete way; just as persons or cultures find themselves transformed through colonial, diasporic, and postcolonial imposition and recontextualization, so refrains change their meanings when they are transported to new contexts or have new contexts imposed upon them. Refrain lends itself to *both* of these postcolonial stances toward the cultural past.

Of course, Salah’s ghazals demand that I also map the complexities of transsexual identity in relation to the “referential scale” of refrain and its hypothetical poles of “total recurrence” and “optimum density of reference.” Salah’s ghazals mirror the tension between “transsexual” and “transgender” identity, between those who move from one sex to another, and those who combine genders. It may help to think of refrain in relation to memory and the distinction between “passing” and “being read”—between, that is, a transsexual living in a new sex without arousing any suspicion as to previous identity

(“passing”), and, on the other hand, a transgender “hybrid” person whose history and current identity include a change of sex (“being read”).² Those who make the second choice sometimes prefer to identify “as neither male nor female [...], neither straight nor gay” (Bornstein 4); they tend to see the open declaration of their in-between status as a way of questioning or undoing essentialisms of sexual and gender identity; and they may be motivated by “a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity” (Butler 8). But memory becomes somewhat paradoxical for transsexuals who choose to “pass” *and* for those transgender persons who prefer to be “read.” Jay Prosser reveals the first of these paradoxical functions when he argues for the validity of a common transsexual metaphor—that of a “core self” (79) that has been “trapped in the wrong body” (68). This “core self,” in fact, serves as the locus, medium, and object of what Prosser calls “a kind of transsexual memory” (83) that makes sex reassignment itself “a nostalgic return to the sexed contours that should have been” (84), a paradoxical “recovery of what was not” (84). It is within the framework of this paradoxical or fictive memory that a certain kind of transsexual autobiography becomes possible. According to Prosser, “[t]he retrospective structure of autobiography” (103) in these cases has a mutually reinforcing relationship with “the integrating trajectory of transsexuality” (101); in such written recollections, “the transsexual splits are rejoined into a singular autobiographical subject” (123)—that “core self” that somehow persists beneath the changes and yet is only truly found, experienced, and embodied *after* the surgical divide.

Prosser does not exactly embrace a conventional essentialism of sexual identity. He bases his validation of the “wrong body” metaphor on the work of Didier Anzieu, who argues for the importance of a primary, sexed body-image constructed from the data provided by the sense of touch; and he does not diminish the paradox involved in the self’s capacity to believe in what is still a constructed image (though constructed from sensory data, rather than discursive practices). Yet it is precisely this metaphor of “wrong embodiment” that Kate Bornstein rejects in her critique of “passing.” Crucial here is her argument against the integrative use of “memory,” an argument she supports by showing the extremes to which these integrative autobiographical tactics have sometimes been carried:

I was told by several counselors and a number of transgendered peers that I would need to invent a past for myself as a little girl, that I’d have to make up incidents of my girl childhood: that I’d have to say things like ‘When I was a little

girl... [...] Here I was, taking a giant step toward personal integrity by entering therapy with the truth and self-acknowledgment that I was a [page 39] transsexual, and I was told, ‘Don’t **tell** anyone you’re transsexual.’
(62, boldface in original)

Bornstein’s reference to “integrity” points to the other paradoxical use of memory within the transsexual context. “Integrity,” for Bornstein, is a matter of openly acknowledging both synchronic and diachronic divisions, gaps, differences, a matter of refusing to elide incommensurabilities and interstitialities. Bornstein prefers to describe her identity “as a cut-and-paste thing” (3) or “as neither male nor female” (4); she identifies herself as “a girl who used to be a boy” (9). Memory, as such, does not ensure autobiographical continuity or integrity; it becomes a disruptive force, producing and foregrounding disjunctions and gaps. In both cases, the implications for refrain are complex and ambiguous. If refrain is a mode of remembering or of inscribing the activity of memory in the text itself, it would then have the potential to serve *either* the desire to “pass” *or* the desire to be “read,” depending on how the individual chooses to construct his/her particular narrative, tropes of identity, and so on. And it is not clear which pole of the refrain-scale—“total recurrence” or “optimum density of reference”—would best embody either of these poles of trans experience. Would the thorough transformation of a refrain be analogous to transsexual “passing,” or would it make the differences of transgender identity all the more visible?

It seems almost shameful to sully these abstract speculations through contact with something as commonplace as the mere body of a poem. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, my speculations so far result from such contact. And clearly, further contact is needed if this essay is to resolve the uncertainties that emerged at the end of the preceding paragraph. *Wanting in Arabic* is certainly a text that wants to be “read” *as* transsexual, rather than to “pass” as an *écriture féminine*: it refuses to conceal the trans-ness of transsexuality; it meticulously avoids the standard transsexual tropes (such as “wrong embodiment” [Prosser 69]) and indeed any of those aspects of “autobiographical form [that] ensure[] the continuity of the subject as a signifier” (Prosser 123). *Wanting in Arabic* embodies and exposes the discontinuities of trans identity. In so doing, it takes a political stand on the proper role of memory. Like the speaker of “Pandora’s Machine,” it ignores all advice to “*keep it closed*” (47). It locates and keeps open the gaps within language and within transsexual experience, often marking them physically in the text: [page 40]

sorry i cut you

out

up we all drift

(32)

Salah's wordplay on "cut" articulates both the gaps and divisions that occur when friendships end and when the birth-sex self ceases to be—the latter, of course, resulting from the cutting done to the transsexual body in the operative process. The physical spacing of the words makes those gaps literally visible; in slowing down the reading process, it also facilitates multiple readings ("i cut you," "i cut you / out," "i cut you / out" and/or "up," "up we all drift," and so on). The spacing of "i cut you," in contrast, brings the "i" and "you" of post- and pre-operative selves into close proximity, even as the pronoun shift and (appropriately enough) the verb "cut" hold the two apart. These techniques, along with narrative and syntactic disjunction, all serve the aim of making trans-ness visible in terms of its disjunctions.

Salah's refrains have the same effect. But at the risk of seeming determined to refrain from ever discussing those refrains, I want to turn to some crucial tropes that are caught up and refigured in the operation of refrain in the eighth and tenth poems from "Ghazals in Fugue"—tropes of death, resurrection, and haunting. These tropes also appear in the refrain-free "Reading *The Book of Suicides*," where Salah insists that "A change of sex is not a suicide note / Or, it goes across death" (21); in the same sequence, we learn that the one "who is dead is a different dead / Or word for who is a rose, has arisen" (22). This figuration takes on a peculiar doubleness in a transsexual context: it keeps the former self alive, but only as that which is no longer alive and no longer "part" of the present self; the one "Who is dead" persists only as an old "word" for the new self, "a name that we stumble over, apologize after" (22).³ That reduction of the pre-operative self to mere object or empty sign is also marked by the way the first-person speaker relegates the former self here to a third-person status. Memory takes on a counter-intuitive or paradoxical role in this context: it questions or undermines the "continuity of the subject as a signifier" (Prosser 123). The transgender text that figures the before-after relationship through terminations, gaps, and discontinuities uses memory to keep the trans-ness of transsexual identity visible. Rather than merely widen the usual autobiographical gap between remembered and remembering selves, Salah's text produces a strange displacement of that gap. For Salah, the surgical gap does not just interrupt the undeviating trajectory of a single life-line; instead, it throws the post-operative life-line onto a different trajectory [page 41] from that of the pre-

operative line, though one still parallel to the pre-operative trajectory; the gap lies, that is, between one horizontal line (the pre-operative life) that “ends” its left-to-right trajectory, say, at midpage, and a second, parallel line (the post-operative life) that *begins* its left-to-right trajectory at midpage (just above the first line’s end). To remember across the surgical divide as Salah does is to reveal that displacement. Such is the effect of the tropes of haunting that dominate the fifth poem from “Reading *The Book of Suicides*,” which concludes with the observation that “Sometimes the dead are found wandering / Wordless, and dismembered, failing to recollect” (23). As a figure for memory, the trope of haunting still signals the persistence of the former self, but it includes the knowledge of that self’s death and absence and displaces its phantom persistence to a space *outside* and alongside the present self. In Salah’s particular formulation, the spectral dead remain uncommunicative and dis- rather than remembered subjects, unsexed rather than resexed; no longer living, they may “fail[] to recollect” but can be recollected by the transsexual at the other side of the surgical divide. In the figuration of the sequence’s sixth poem, the former self remains in a “crypt” (23), inaccessible and unknowable except as that which has become unknowable. These tropes signify Salah’s refusal to “pass” as a woman in her text, her refusal to say “I am a woman” or “I am a woman who was once wrongly trapped in a man’s body.” Instead, she permits herself to be “read” as a transgender woman who was once a man.

In Salah’s eighth and tenth ghazals this metaphor operates in conjunction with refrain. The first of these poems is bookended by the following lines:

The body continues, despite the dead; how close
 We do come, at times, to that slowness. As close

Our bodies oscillate, minutely, always.
 [.]
 I remember the body continuing, despite the dead
 Close as choked inside. I remember what comes after this.

(17)

The mechanics of memory implicit in refrain are heightened by the last couplet’s self-conscious remembrance of the first’s tropes of memory, and by the repeated reference to the body’s continuity. Yet again, the effect is of a strangely displaced disjunction: despite the rhetoric of continuity and the closeness of the nearly interiorized “dead,” the “I” who speaks and the [page 42] body that “continues” remain separate from the departed male self. Furthermore, Salah’s tendency throughout

the book to refer to the lost male self in the second and third person offers good reasons for placing particular emphasis on “I” in the last sentence cited above—that is, it is “I” who take on the task of memory from this point on, not “the dead.” Salah’s manipulation of her refrain-word also demonstrates how memory brings the difference of trans-ness to light. The refrain-word itself—the adverb “close” (unvoiced “s”)—plays with ideas of resemblance and proximity (rather than identity or continuity) between present and past, male and female, pre- and post-operative selves. And in reiterating this refrain, Salah offers resemblances rather than exact copies—“close” becomes “disclose,” “encloses,” and “closes” (close, but no cigar). Dare one think of Salah as some sort of verbal reconstructive surgeon, physically altering her refrain-words and the body of the ghazal itself? The result, at any rate, offers one answer to the question that concluded my introductory consideration of transsexual refrain: these refrains make difference and transformation visible in the text, so that semantic variation reveals rather than conceals trans-ness. Salah reminds us that a change in appearance involves a change in meaning. The poem’s final couplet proves particularly complex in this regard: it restores the refrain-word to its original form and meaning, but displaces it to the beginning of the final line so that its status as a refrain becomes uncertain. The technique seems emblematic of the disjunctive force of memory in a transsexual context. Finally, the trope of haunting itself becomes a revenant in the last ghazal of the sequence, where it forms part of a meditation on another crucial refrain-word—“be”:

Still, on the Viaduct, weighing between fear and a wish.
I could walk away. In fugue, wreath round what used to be

Our same haunts. Falling, as some boy I once was did. Dead,
Or twinned, becoming rumours crescent now, to Araby.

(18)

Many details in these lines remain cryptic; but what does remain in the open is the transgender disjunction that makes it possible to speak of a particular kind of “contrapuntal” life, a life lived “In fugue” with the memories or spectres of “some boy I once was.” Another kind of counterpoint is articulated across the break between the first two stanzas as well, when the speaker, having “set out to find you”—which I read as the former, male self—wonders what it can mean for that self “to be // Shear density of absence” (18), with a suitably cutting pun on “shear”; the past self hovers strangely [page 43] and precariously between being and non-being. And the variations on the refrain-word explore the constant shifts in what it means to “be” once the idea of a stable, fixed identity has been put in question by a transgender context.

The meaning of “being” depends on context, and context is always changing.

Salah’s concern with the paradoxically disjunctive force of memory helps make sense of the relationship between refrain and desire in some of the other “Ghazals in Fugue”; it suggests, too, that a particular kind of desire may motivate the text’s self-transformations. It seems advisable, then, to consider first the concept of desire that operates throughout *Wanting in Arabic*. That concept of desire is essentially Lacanian; it seems strongly analogous to the radically “queer” desire that Tim Dean locates in Lacan’s texts, an understanding of desire as “insatiable” (47), originating in “excess rather than lack” (249) and hence “essentially pluralistic” (249). Salah reminds us that “desire can’t help but wander, remainder itself” (12); she insists that “*you must confide in strangers / desire strangers’ desires*” (32); she acknowledges that “a changeling” is “no more intransitive than / sex, for instance” (85) and that “we all drift” (32); and the free-verse “Ghazals for Sharon Cohen (Dana International)” present a speaker who is “errant, as in love” (84). But for Salah, there is more than just desire at stake here: desire is not something wielded and mastered by an autonomous individual, but an errant force to which the individual is subject. In one sense, a trans identity is an identity radically open to the movement of an always errant and excessive desire. Therefore, one might see in Salah’s texts something like the concept of desire and identity that Judith Butler locates in Kate Bornstein’s work—an understanding of “desire itself as a transformative activity” that makes the “pursuit of identity [...] a transformative exercise” (Butler 8). In *Wanting in Arabic*, desire can become a “hunger for trans-position / [that] makes even imperfect substitutions / preferable to a body at rest” (55). When body and self are opened to transformation through transsexuality, they embody the non-proprietary movement of desire itself: “*If your skin is becoming, a bell of desire, words ring out of you, blow away, / truths sure, but you never hit your own*” (54). Here, it seems that for Salah desire operates, as in Lacan, “outside the appropriative and incorporative vectors of the ego” (Dean 55) in a way that continually fissures the ego or casts it adrift from itself. Desire is a “passion” that “circles, surrounds,” and “Goes airy and unseen the better to enter // you and I” (11); it is an “outside” that enters and transforms an “inside,” opening a double relationship in which the self may both “be eaten and eat” [page 44] (11). Salah’s poetry consistently articulates the trans-ness of desire in terms of the trans-ness of transsexuality, and vice versa.

This double articulation becomes entwined with the theme of

memory and the operations of refrain in the first of the “Ghazals in Fugue”:

From her home wander love’s uncanny away, you!
Is it past: whose to tear memory away, you?

Stolen upon thought, “I’ll not see the end of this.”
Ya aa’yni, turn your gaze from me away, you.

A girl’s hand may stop unexpected, bleeding over
What, wrest, was—eye to eye, between, a way, you...

Fall mistaking what looks she tosses for salvation.
Beware such boasts, what they give too freely away, you.

Unhinge the doors, with talk of children, your double, war;
Send memory’s limbs flailing. Who cast peace away, you?

(13)

The first line situates the poem in relation to the central concerns of the ghazal tradition—love (especially illicit love) and desire; and it conceives of both in terms of the thematics of departure and errancy encapsulated in the refrain-words, “away, you!” and in the imperative “wander.” This concern with errancy reappears in the second couplet, where the permanent transitionality of “I’ll not see the end of this” remains in harmony with the speaker’s refusal to be fixed as the object of an other’s desiring gaze—“turn your gaze from me away, you.” But between these two encounters with the drift of desire comes the counterforce of the first couplet’s second line, with its skepticism about departure and errancy. It not only acknowledges the persistence of memory, but also makes the first couplet as a whole articulate a contradictory and in-between stance, one that moves forward into errancy while remaining attached to the past. The role of memory in this double articulation of trans-ness appears with particular force in the poem’s third couplet, which moves from an encounter with the preoperative “what, wrest, was” to a rethinking of identity, desire, and the possessiveness of the “gaze” (mentioned in the second couplet) in terms of a shifting, non-possessive trans-ness—“eye to eye, between, a way, you...” Memory’s open acknowledgement of one locus of trans-ness (the past/present gap of transsexuality) reveals its relationship to a second (the transformative [page 45] force of desire). And—to move the discussion to a formal level—if the couplet’s first line refuses to forget the physical transformations of transsexuality, the second *embodies* trans-ness by both remembering and re-membering or transforming the refrain when “away” is cut up to make “a way”; it

makes transformation visible in the poem and articulates the relationship of that visibility to memory. If “away, you” asks us to think of desire and refrain in terms of departure and errancy, the altered return of these words remind us that trans-ness is only visible as trans-ness when it refuses to erase its own past; it reminds us that the errancy of desire cannot be known as errancy unless it retains some memory of what it has left behind.

Memory and refrain take on a similar role in relation to the question of cultural identity: a particular way of remembering situates an individual or a text in the “hybrid” space between the nostalgia of nativism and the amnesia of total assimilation. In the third ghazal, the refrain “war” reminds us how a hybrid and diasporic identity can become the locus of an internalized warfare between past and present while also being entrenched in the politics of actual war:

Into the wilds, some cliché of the wilds...it’s not the war
We flee, north from Toronto—that year we’re not at war.

Gone to cottage like white folks, and compose queer idylls,
break
Our fast at the Colonial, stock up at Nassr; say that’s not
war.

With our weight in lebne, mint, parsley, burgle, beans for ful,
lamb
For kibeh, we beg no guarantee of country. Anything but war

Until the third bottle of wine, allows someone to ask
If, in Lebanon I am that man, if not, that war,

My father wanted. You want to know what bargains
With snow will I make? Were my cousins not in that war?

Would I not have been with them, at Sabra, at Shatilla?
Naïve to the war, I break all our glasses, this ghazal’s form,
smiling.

(14)

There is a peculiar doubleness to these refrains: they almost always frame war with a negative, identifying it as absent, past, or elsewhere, something to be denied; and yet its regular reiterations make it ever more palpably [page 46] present in the text. The text seems to be “fugueing” (in the sense of “fleeing”) from war only because war so doggedly pursues it; it is at war with war. Within that framework, the

meaning of war keeps shifting according to context: it is a metaphor for inner and interpersonal struggle; and it is actual war in Afghanistan and Lebanon. And the poem is strongly marked by other kinds of cultural doubleness or in-betweenness: the speaker and her companion go on vacation from Toronto with “[their] weight in lebne, mint, parsley, burgle, beans for ful, lamb / For kibeh,” all marks of an attempt to remember a Lebanese cultural identity; but the poem still describes them, ironically enough, as “[going] to cottage like white folks” and “break[ing] / Their] fast at the Colonial,” and the speaker later indicates her willingness to make “bargains / With snow.” There is a mingling, in other words, of different cultural attachments, attachments to past and present, east and west; the result is a mutually ironizing tension between resistance and adaptation, a mixed, in-between identity that is finally neither eastern nor western. When, at the center of the poem, an unnamed questioner insists that the speaker identify herself exclusively in terms that link her former male identity and her Lebanese heritage with military violence undertaken in the name of Lebanese national purity, her response is less naïve than she suggests. The displaced refrain-word “war” that “break[s] [...] this ghazal’s form” quietly declares war on the whole tradition to which this poem belongs. Salah’s ghazal becomes a kind of trans poem, a poem that makes visible both the remembering of a poetic origin and the willed departure from that point.

The seventh poem speaks again in its first two lines of a desire for cultural transitionality and drift: “In fugue or bastard ghazal, she is seeking no place like home. / When language becomes a girl, she speaks for a voice like home” (16). Home is not a place but a process, a way of speaking that merely resembles a home without *being* one. Furthermore, this poem is a “bastard ghazal” because it has a doubly uncertain relationship to the ghazal lineage. It uses its refrain-word—“home”—at the end of *every* line, thereby heightening the potential obsessiveness of the form. That doubling of the refrain would seem to bring a particularly intense nostalgia into the text, and yet the lines themselves are more often opposed to nostalgia. Salah’s speaker may not be in Kansas anymore, but she is determined to turn the nostalgic phrase “no place like home” against itself, and this seventh poem consistently questions the value of home (third, sixth couplets), or the forms of violence that may be involved in claiming a home (fourth couplet). It makes more sense to think of the operation of refrain here in terms of the transport or drift of words and selves into new contexts, a process [page 47] that continually transforms both the locus and significance of “home.” Salah’s manipulations of her refrain seem entirely in keeping with the words that open this collection—“Phoenicia Lebanon”; they are in keeping with her description of a

Lebanese father who “came across the Atlantic transformed” (3), of the Phoenicians as “ranging traders” (5), of a life lived “in the middle passage / *in the in between*” (5); and, finally, they suit the double articulation of cultural and sexual/gender identity that concludes the volume’s first poem:

- i am
a) Lebanese
b) lesbian
c) TV
d) all of the above
e) none of the above

(6)

Identity is presented as an unanswered question, a matter of multiple choice in which choice is refused and multiplicity kept in play.

Salah’s refrains are consistently marked by a desire for hybridity or interstitiality in both cultural and sexual identity, for the doubleness of identity-in-difference and difference-in-identity; her ghazals remember the past to show how it has been transformed. The doubleness of refrain seems peculiarly suited to this thematics of the in-between, the both/and, or the neither/nor. And Salah makes the formal aspects of her ghazals signal this doubleness both by remaining faithful to the ghazal’s rules or norms and by sometimes deviating from those norms, remembering, dis-membering, and re-membering the genre’s conventions. There is an implicit politics of memory in Salah’s manipulation of the form, a politics wholly in keeping with her treatment of memory’s disruptive force in transsexual and postcolonial contexts. Something similar may lie behind Salah’s preference for the qata over the more traditional version of the ghazal, as is suggested by the enjambments at the beginning of the eighth ghazal:

The body continues, despite the dead; how close
We do come, at times, to that slowness. As close

Our bodies oscillate, minutely, always.

(17) [page 48]

The strongly marked enjambment between the first two stanzas plays in complex ways with the ideas of proximity and continuity. In this instance, by suspending a word for “proximity” and creating a break *within* rather than *between* sentences, Salah gestures toward continuity but creates a heightened awareness of gaps and disjunctions. Such effects could not be generated by the wholly self-contained couplets of

the dominant form of the ghazal.

But there is also a more general significance to Salah's mere decision to write ghazals. She is, after all, a half-Lebanese Canadian who has "never been to Lebanon" (3), "[does not] speak Arabic" (12) and is therefore "missing [her] father's tongue" (5)—the tongue of a father who himself "came across the Atlantic transformed" (3) and died at the age of 37. To be *Wanting in Arabic* is, for Salah, to lack a particular kind of relationship to a cultural patrimony; it is to lack the patriarchal language, and to lack the sexed patriarchal body that grants the subject a particular identity in relation to that cultural patrimony. Or, rather, it is to have refused that identity and that patrimony, and to have chosen something else—not simply a cultural and sexed "opposite" but an in-between space that challenges such binary thinking. The ghazal may be part of that patrimony, but the mere fact that Salah's ghazals are written in English already indicates the strangely doubled half-way point at which she writes. From one perspective, the English ghazal is the terminus of an eastward drift, a place where the English language and English poetry find themselves transformed by an ancient and "foreign" tradition. But from another perspective, the English ghazal is the place where a poetic genre of Arabic origin finds itself transported to a former colonizer's linguistic and poetic territory, recontextualized by the English language and Western culture. Salah follows a particularly complex route toward the English ghazal, approaching its in-between territory simultaneously from "West" and "East." To marry this already hybrid entity to the discourses of trans-ness is indeed to produce, to borrow Salah's own words, "bastard ghazal[s]," poems that remain illegitimate and transgressive in relation to the two cultures that authorize them.

Notes

1. For more detailed discussions of the ghazal, see Agha Shahid Ali's "Introduction," as well as the works of Ahmed Ali, Ralph Russell, and Muhammad Sadiq. [\[back\]](#)
2. There are some significant homologies between transsexual "passing" and the nativist **[page 49]** strain in postcolonial discourse, and also between transgender "legibility" and postcolonial hybridism. Many nativist and transsexual notions of identity share a belief in biographical and historical continuity, as well as in fixed and stable "core" identities; and hybridist and transgender discourses are united by their radical skepticism of such essentialist thinking. Yet nativist nostalgia and transsexual

“passing” do not map onto each other in any straightforward manner. In fact, the two are more like each other’s inverse or mirror-image. The *pre-operative male-to-female transsexual* is a female self colonized by a male body and by masculine codes of behavior, and seeking escape from both; or, she begins as a migrant or post-diasporic subject, always already dwelling in exile, in the foreign geography of a male body. [\[back\]](#)

3. Here, it may be worthwhile to note the difference between Salah’s trope and the one used by Kate Bornstein, who writes that she “died a virtual death” to be “reborn into the world” (94). Bornstein appears to think of sex reassignment in terms of cycles of reincarnation, in which the individual retains no readily accessible memories of previous lives. [\[back\]](#)

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