An NPR Book of the Year
One of *Time* Magazine's 100 Must-Read Books of the Year
An Electric Literature Best Nonfiction Book of the Year
A Recommended Read by
The New Yorker and *New York* Magazine
Longlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Awards

"*I'll Tell You When I'm Home* . . . examines with a poet's precision the many ways in which storytelling is rooted in matriarchy, carrying messages between mothers and daughters as a means of survival. . . . In such scenes of compelling intimacy, the author's narrative gifts shine through, the brief fragments making for quick, propulsive reading."

—Safiya Sinclair, *The New York Times Book Review*

"[Hala] Alyan's poetic prose encapsulates miles in each sentence and paragraph; joyfully, revisiting a passage is another chance at uncovering a new gift. Her nonfiction narrative voice allows the poet in her to shine, especially as each chapter is told in a series of short glimpses weaving together past and present, the old and the new Hala. . . . With *I'll Tell You When I'm Home*, Alyan has created a record, a story to communicate with those departed and those new to life."

—Meredith Boe, *Chicago Review of Books*

"[An] affecting memoir . . . [that] bears the emotional weight of the events that preceded it: infertility, miscarriages, a strained marriage, and exile."

—*The New Yorker*

"A story of telling stories. Moving from interrogations of Scheherazade's myth to reflections of family lineage and to the frustrations of conceiving with a surrogate, Alyan charts the complications of building a life in the midst of personal transformation. . . . [In *I'll Tell You When I'm Home*], Alyan confronts the countless ways we hide and expose ourselves, both as writers and people, in an effort to make sense of our lives."

—Isle McElroy, "The Best Books of 2025 (So Far)," *Vulture*

"In this vibrant, poetic memoir, Alyan unpacks her difficult journey to motherhood and many facets of her past. . . . A poignant exploration of suffering and wonder and a portrait of a woman on the cusp of bringing a new life to her world."

—*Booklist*

"[A] lyrical memoir that explores the trauma of fractured identity."

—Bethanne Patrick, *Los Angeles Times*

"In her lyrical and deeply personal memoir . . . [Hala Alyan] explores loss—both ancestral and immediate with tenderness and clarity. . . . Alyan's writing doesn't offer easy answers; it gives voice to the ache and beauty of diasporic existence."

—Tejashee Kashyap, *Vogue Arabia*

"The memory of past wars, their imprint on the personalities of the people swept up in them, and the slow festering of unhealed wounds help shape the psychological landscape of Palestinian American author Hala Alyan's moving, kaleidoscopic memoir, *I'll Tell You When I'm Home*. . . . What fascinates in this memoir is Alyan's own story. . . . Her hard-won sobriety, her professional accomplishments, and the life she has built in the US still leave her wondering: What of all this will her child inherit? In lieu of an answer, she offers up this book, a record of loss and hope."

—Leslie Camhi, *4Columns*

"An exploration of the art and act of storytelling itself: to bear witness, to locate that which has been lost, to heal and to wound. . . . Alyan also brings her considerable literary strengths as an award-winning poet and novelist to the memoir, imbuing the language with such ravishing beauty that the reader will resist moving too quickly through the book."

—Jennifer A. Howard, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

"A smart, immersive, and life-affirming memoir set in the space between generations: those who have passed and those who aren't yet."

—Eliana Ramage, Literary Hub

"A story of the violence of exile over generations, a profound desire for motherhood, as well as surrogacy, addiction and the importance of remembering. The book is also a rumination on the nature of memoir and the often impossible attempts to reclaim and understand one's past. . . . It is a story of war and loss—of country, but also of friends, lovers and ultimately her marriage. . . . [Alyan's] memoir is a series of vignettes that go back and forth in time, in a writing style that is frantic, questioning and lyrical, designed to help the reader enter the darkest corners with the writer, almost inside her consciousness."

—Razia Iqbal, *The Guardian*

"With this beautiful and intimate memoir of a life in the embrace of stories, Hala Alyan weaves the fine threads of torn and fragmented lives into an irresistible, intergenerational tapestry. I was spellbound from the first page."

—Naomi Klein, author of *Doppelganger*

"A roaring cyclone of memory and imagination and harrowing tribulation. Surrogacy as metaphor for exile. Exile not as a dream for a better life but as a concession, a begrudging necessity. Gaza, San Miguel, Beirut, New York, Damascus—traveling with Hala Alyan's prose is a thrill. *I'll Tell You When I'm Home* feels as rich and supersaturated as contemporary consciousness itself—I can't stop talking about it."

—Kaveh Akbar, author of *Martyr!*

"A powerful, magnificently haunting memoir from a writer I always want to read. It's great luck to live in a time when Hala Alyan is writing. Get ready to be astonished."

—R. O. Kwon, author of *Exhibit*

"Gorgeously written and compelling, *I'll Tell You When I'm Home* connects the threads of personal and family histories as its author prepares for motherhood. Hala Alyan is a writer of astounding talent."

—Lisa Ko, author of *Memory Piece*

"This memoir of pregnancy loss and surrogacy is frantic, intimate, brutal, tender, and beautiful. Over the arc of a pregnancy by surrogate, the poet offers up her fragmented heartbreak and kaleidoscopic life. I kept gasping, wanting to close in around Hala, to protect her across time and space from the sharp edges of mother-need inside a body that cannot birth a living baby. She wants her readers in the wound with her, inside the stories that don't get told enough, inside the body-mind of a displaced woman struggling to create something bigger than herself. Brilliant."

—adrienne maree brown, author of *Loving Corrections*

"Hala Alyan writes with sinew and tender force as she masterfully braids the delicate filaments that make a self—body, home, labor, loss—in such a way that the reader can never again disentangle them. This book is a gift, an offering of abundant beauty, full of deep insight into the intricacies of motherhood."

—Alexandra Kleeman, author of *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*

"An exquisitely written and unforgettable memoir about what it means to live with the violence and theft of exile, and one woman's devotion to restoring her daughter's inheritance through the power of narrative."

—Nadia Owusu, author of *Aftershocks*

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A Memoir

Hala Alyan

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For Leila

I do not see in this night
other than the end of this night.
Mahmoud Darwish

Imagine you must survive / without running?
Ada Limón

The month is May. It is 1948. A girl named Siham is fifteen years old. Her village is al-Majdal, she lives in a seaside house with her siblings. Her father travels for months at a time, buying and selling textiles and garments to other coastal towns and villages.

Two hundred miles to the north, in Damascus, a girl named Fatima lives in a house with marble floors and a courtyard filled with basil and oleander plants. Fatima is the middle daughter, the daughter of a sheikh, a man of God who will stop speaking with her when she elopes with a stranger in twelve years. Fatima wears her hair short and bobbed, speaks French, will have three daughters, but only two will live. She will leave Syria in a decade.

Siham will leave al-Majdal this month. This week. Tonight. What does she pack? A dress? A notebook of dried flowers? Her family will live in a house in a new town, in a neighborhood in Gaza, Haret el Daraj: the neighborhood of stairs. They will be the lucky ones. When Siham marries, it will be a man from the camps, she will have son after son after son, an army of sons, six of them, and only one daughter, the second to last. Siham will leave al-Majdal tonight. She will leave and there will be a crescent moon or half-moon or no moon. She will leave and the soldiers' voices will fill the street and sea and sky. She will never stop hearing them.

They brace themselves to leave. For the length of a dirt-packed road, the burning rubber of airplane tires, a new city, then another. These two women, not yet mothers, not yet my grandmothers. It will be thirty-eight years before they meet in Kuwait, their adopted home, their children marrying, the wedding in the banquet hall of the Holiday Inn hotel in Kuwait City, both the groom and bride wearing white, another five years before all that too is gone, before one stays, the other leaves. The Palestinian one will be buried in Syrian soil. The Syrian one in Lebanese soil.

✦

More than seventy years later, I wake from anesthesia. I am in a white hospital room in Manhattan. The nurses have apple juice, crackers, news of an incoming snowstorm. I tell one of them she's beautiful. I tell the other I'd been dreaming of green mist. *It's gone, right?* I ask, but nobody answers.

There is a pandemic. I have to walk myself to the elevator. Outside the building, Johnny is waiting in an Uber and I get inside. I don't say a word, just watch the skyscrapers, then bridge, then river. At home, there is Gatorade and soup. There is a daybed, a window, a money plant. I am supposed to sleep. I am supposed to watch bad television, take Tylenol, not make any big decisions. Instead, I wait for his office door to shut, then open the laptop and search my inbox for "surrogate." I make the choice like so many others: hotly, impulsively. I email the coordinator a single line: *I'd like to proceed*. There is an application they'd sent me months earlier, before I'd decided to try again: two more attempts at carrying, at the blue cross of a positive test, the sour gummies for morning sickness, the blood tests every three days.

In as much detail as possible, tell us about your infertility journey.

✦

I am still woozy from the drugs. I keep misspelling words, clacking the wrong letters. But I don't stop writing until I'm done, until it's all on the page: the last two years, the doctors, the surgeries, the blood work, the frozen eggs, the tiny embryos, the bleedings. There is a story and I tell it. It will be circulated among surrogates. I will be matched with someone in two days.

✦

For as long as I can remember, I've been obsessed with the *you*. The *you* in songs, the *you* in poetry. The *you* that—even unaddressed—exists, folded inside any writing. Every book written, I remember realizing as a child, had an audience in mind. "Artists are people driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide," D. W. Winnicott once said. There is a *you* even when we pretend there isn't.

✦

Winnicott also famously said: "There is no such thing as a baby; there is a baby and someone else."

✦

There is the self and there is audience. There is the self and there is *you*.

✦

It was the second March of the pandemic and, on the daybed of my living room, I emailed the Canadian surrogacy agency. For years, I'd gotten pregnant. I made recordings in the early weeks. I ate lentils. I prayed. Then the spotting would start. The doctor's tight voice. The cycle would begin again. But this last one had been different. I'd heard the heartbeat. I'd heard it fast. I'd heard it slow. Then I heard nothing. There was just the slow breath of the doctor, then her still face in the darkened room. I'm so, so sorry, she said, and she was, I could tell, and for a second, she looked at me and I looked at the assistant, and then I

cried, but I didn't feel anything. I just cried because that's what the moment called for. I was an almost-mother, my legs askew, relegated back into not-mother. The doctor looked at me like I should cry and so I did.

♦

I played Scheherazade in high school. It was my junior year and there is a tape somewhere that I cannot for the life of me find. I remember I wore red. There were sequins. It was some sari thing, culturally inaccurate, but the theater instructor—a Mexican American woman with beautiful hair—clapped when she saw it. I was the frame of the play. It was a reimagining of *One Thousand and One Nights* and I would come in and out between scenes.

♦

"For Scheherazade more than anyone else represents the ancient frame-tale tradition," writes Heide Ziegler. The archetype of Scheherazade is centuries old, called upon in film, literature, visual art. In some ways, it is a cop-out, the easy framing device, the story outside the story, the nose pressed upon the windowpane. The reassuring maternal voice lulling us into imagination. It organizes, it streamlines, it grounds.

♦

The school was in Brummana, a mountainous town in Lebanon. Some students boarded there, and I was always a little jealous of them, how adult they seemed. Some evenings they were allowed to leave campus, alone, like grown-ups, with plans and dinners and monthly budgets. There were different sections for the girls and boys, but it still seemed scandalous to me that they all slept in the same building, mere floors from each other. It was my eighth school, fifth city, and third country in ten years. The campus was gorgeous, a fact I didn't appreciate until much later, founded by Quaker missionaries in the 1870s, and there was a meeting hall, and a gathering once a week, where we would sit in

silence for several minutes. The buildings were red-roofed, and we were perched on a mountain, the city and sea in the distance. After the small town in Maine, this was my favorite school, the one where I felt most like a person. My closest friend was half-British, and I loved her fairy-tale blonde hair, her accent, the way I felt younger with her than I had in my childhood. I reinvented myself in that high school; I wore thick eyeliner and band shirts and started listening to Nirvana and Soundgarden and Hole. I smoked cigarettes, made up a boyfriend, and had the kind of friendships teenagers on American shows did.

✦

There was a terrible king named Shahryar who learned his wife had been unfaithful. He then resolved to marry a new virgin every day and have her beheaded by the time dawn came. This, his logic assured, meant he'd never be dishonored again. Enter Scheherazade. In some versions, her father—vizier to the king—offered her only after he couldn't find any more noble-blooded virgins. In others, she volunteered. Then, night after night, she told the king lush, intricate stories about lovers and sailors and genies and birds. She cleverly timed a cliffhanger with each dawn. The morning would arrive and her tale would stop. The king, eager for resolution, would keep her alive for one more day, to hear the rest of the story that night. *When does she sleep?* I remember thinking as a child. This stressed me out. Then, rereading it recently, I realized that she'd borne him three sons during these years. *But really*, I thought, *when the* fuck *does she sleep?*

✦

At some point during the play, someone missed their cue. I was alone on the stage, my line lobbed and nothing returned. I waited. The audience waited. I could hear my heart pound in my ears. I repeated my line. Nothing. Finally, I started to complain to the audience about how unreliable the character was, about how you had to do everything in this

life yourself. The audience laughed. The magic of the moment endured, the suspension of disbelief unbroken. It mattered so much to me that I was able to keep them believing.

✦

The king kept her alive. Day by day. Night by night. After one thousand stories, on the thousand and first night, she told him she had no more tales for him. By now, we are made to believe, he'd fallen in love with her. She'd become mother to his children. She's told him every story she had. He let her live.

✦

There was a stone courtyard in the Brummana school. It was where people loitered during break, a cafeteria stand at one end, cedar trees surrounding. There was a large handball pole and every now and then, the cool guys would get restless and hoist someone up like they were crowd-surfing them, only there was no crowd, no surf, only the poor guy being lifted, his legs gripped apart by the other boys to meet the pole. They would do this in front of everyone, a dumb peacocking for the girls, and we would watch, even dumber, giggling and sometimes letting out fake cries of protest. One afternoon, they did it to one of the quieter boys, and he fought like hell, thrashing like a shark, so hard they swerved and banged his head against the metal. We all saw it. Later, the principal interviewed each of us individually. We all lied. We said he'd fallen. We said the guys—the cool ones, greasy haired, druggy—had had nothing to do with it.

That same courtyard, when I was a few months into the school. I don't remember what I was doing, probably telling some story, laughing at something too hard. I'd made friends, adjusted to their temperature, to what they liked, what they wanted. This was my spiel. It was my playbook. This guy Elie watched me for a minute before saying, so only I'd hear, *You try too hard*. He said it nonchalantly, casually, like commenting on a bird.

✦

After the play ended that night, the director hugged me hard. She laughed. You did so good, she said. I don't think anyone knew it wasn't on script.

✦

Sometimes, when I'm being bad, overspending, overpromising, I'll tell Johnny, *That's future Hala's problem*. Weeks later, faced with the consequences, an irritated friend, a credit card bill, I'll say aloud to myself, *Goddammit, Hala*. I don't know when this started, this bifurcation of self, the overt naming of it. There is the Hala who acts and the Hala who pays, and they somehow seem discrete, some hyperbole of dissociation. I've always spoken aloud to myself, since childhood. Not words or admonishments, but full conversations, in distress, in excitement, when puzzling through a particular overwhelm. I speak in full sentences, like I'm on a late-night show, trying to dazzle even my dumb self with wit and insight.

✦

For my prom, I found a lavender dress in one of the only thrift stores in Lebanon. It was long and floaty and I had to get the top hemmed in. When I tried it on for my family, my sister, Miriam—still a toddler—made a little house of it, hiding behind my legs, flouncing the tulle in awe. You can wear it someday, I told her, and she laughed and danced around the room. Years later, my cousin Layal wore the same dress to her prom. We filled it out differently and I felt a little jealous seeing it on her body—boobs where I had none, flat where I was hippy—like seeing an ex on the arm of a new woman. I asked her to save it for me. I had a vision, for a long time, of dissecting it into its beautiful, wispy parts, of making something with the tulle and silk: curtains, wall hangings. The last time I asked my aunt after its whereabouts, she looked at me blankly.

The houses have been emptied. The storage rooms have moved. There have been two wars. The elders are dead. I was as stupid as my question.

♦

But what of that first night in the king's quarters? In the myth, it is Scheherazade's sister Dunyazad who asks her for a story. This allows Scheherazade to begin spinning her tale in the king's presence. He becomes spellbound and she gets to live to see the first morning. But there are no accidents. It is a set-up, the first of many. Scheherazade had asked her sister to join, and perhaps it is this detail I love the most about the tale. This little subterfuge, the confidence behind it. The whispering of femme voices behind male backs. The plotting that demonizes women and saves their lives.

♦

Nobody understood my grief over the dress. I'd wanted it saved as a memento, yes, but I really wanted it for the tulle itself. I wanted my sister to take it apart, reconstruct it; I wanted a daughter to find it and make it her own.

Everything we had was lost, my mother would say of the invasion in Kuwait.

She meant the furniture, the clothes, my toys, all but a handful of photographs and pieces of jewelry. This refrain made me miserly with objects, a burgeoning klepto: everything could disappear and so everything became contraband. I'd love a library book and hide it under my pillow for months. I'd steal neon erasers from classmates, hair ties, holographic stickers. I'd sometimes look at photos of our life in Kuwait, my first birthday party, my parents' wedding, and think to myself, *this is gone, this is gone, this is gone* about the pale blue couch, the red majlis cushions, the ridiculous hat I wore. I felt owed, as though I could call an army—Israeli, Iraqi, American—and demand reparations. Where are my mother's pearl earrings? I'd imagine myself asking. The ones she wore at her wedding. Where is my grandmother's brocade? Where is

that wooden armoire, those cream-colored curtains, the archive of our lives?

✦

There is another reading of the Scheherazade archetype: "the first female psychotherapist in history."

✦

I moved back to America after college to become a psychologist, to train for thousands of hours with children, asylum seekers, substance users, immigrants, incarcerated men. I sat on seven-hundred-dollar couches, in school offices, in hospital clinics, took notes, nodded, asked, fumbled, as people talked about their lives. Look what a story can do, those years showed me. Look how it can keep you stuck—patterns of longing, heartbreak, addiction—and look how it can liberate you.

✦

Scheherazade transformed the passive female listener into a storyteller, catharsis-bringer, therapist. She told and her telling rehabilitated, or we are asked to believe: the bloodthirsty king subdued, healed, even capable once more of love and trust.

✦

Since childhood, I've been aware of audience. We moved constantly—from Kuwait to Texas to Oklahoma to Maine to the United Arab Emirates to Lebanon—and this allowed new stages, tabulae rasae. I was a girl who fucked even when I didn't. A girl who dated even when I'd never kissed. But I loved the invention of that high-school self best of all: that girl of sixteen, seventeen, who'd learned from her previous subterfuges. She asked a grungy-haired boy to prom. She made an art film and left the room when it screened. She was magnificent: sly and muted, she lied better, stole better, learned what it was that people wanted and gave it to

them. Often what they wanted was something to do with *themselves*, a mirror smuggled in the form of a story.

♦

Nobody knows where the story of Scheherazade originated. It has roots in Sanskrit, Persian, Mesopotamian tradition. The earliest tales are traced back to India, with conjecture of an Arabic translation in the eighth century. Stories kept getting added on, decade after decade, century after century, city after city, the ultimate game of telephone, an exquisite corpse of epic proportion.

♦

That high school kid Elie was right. I was too keenly aware of audience. I made other people my kings. I experimented selves on them: this red-clad girl in the spotlight, this teenager dragging lavender tulle in sand after prom. I studied them. I learned their desires. The only thing I liked more than power was giving it away, being at its mercy. This was the tableau I was most comfortable with: performing for a king, awaiting my sentencing. Tell me I'm loved. Tell me I'm enough. Tell me I nailed the part. Tell me I'll make it to the morning.

♦

The thing about reinvention is it has, as its precondition, erasure. Something needs to be erased to be replaced with a shinier, reinvented version. Only a self can't be fully erased. It just gets buried, a grave beneath a grave, a skeletal hand poking through the dirt of your own interment. Never gone. Never disappeared. Just dormant.

♦

The myth of Scheherazade is anonymously authored. In 1948, the scholar Nabia Abbott discovered handwritten fragments of the Arabic

manuscript. She dated it back to the early ninth century. It was titled *Kitab Hadith Alf Layla*.

♦

What do I want to know? I want to sit with Siham and Fatima, my grandmothers, on a park bench in Brooklyn or the marina in Beirut or Kuwait. These women who were once young, who are now dead. What I want to know are the stories they told themselves. What they told themselves to survive, to keep going. What stories they told their daughters, so that they might do the same.

♦

Of course I loved Scheherazade. She'd studied her shit. She was quick on her feet. She'd prepared for the role of her life before it started. She saw the world in terms of cliffhangers and incentives, what would hold others' interest. She knew what people wanted before they did. She understood the stakes of an untold story.

♦

And she was the best fucking liar around.

♦

The lies were necessary. They were how she survived, of course. What I'd like to know is: what stories would she have told if she wasn't trying to survive, but live? What is it to tell a story not out of fear but of love? Not to have to improvise to get through the night, but to tell a story—which like all stories is thousands of stories—steadily, unurgently, to an audience that isn't even here yet, but who you hope against hope is coming.

Preconception

***Levantine**; n. (Textiles) a cloth of twilled silk; adj. (Placename) of or relating to the Levant; n. (Peoples) (esp formerly) an inhabitant of the Levant; n. Anything pertaining to the Levant, the region centered around modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan.*

It once meant anywhere in the large swath of land between Greece and Egypt. The word narrowed. The word sucked its waist in.

♦

It rains the last night I'm in Beirut. This is 2019. It is spring and, by the end of the year, there will be a thawra, a revolution that lights downtown with hundreds of thousands of protesters. A year later, the pandemic will have started and, two years out, my grandfather will die in this very apartment, on a plot of land he devoted his life to. I'm a decade into living in New York. Each trip back feels stranger and sneakier, like I'm getting away with something. The city is unpleasantly rearranged year to year, a thief in the night closing DVD stores and opening glassy cafes

in their place. This trip has been melancholy at best. My great-aunt is dying, the family spending each afternoon in the ICU. Her daughter, torn about the Islamic ruling on DNR orders, has finally thrown her hands up, saying, *Someone else needs to tell the doctor. I can't*. That someone else is me. These are the moments I shine: crises, emergencies, a near-pathological calm slinking over me like a slip. I like being needed. I like the attention, but there's something else to it—the calm that reminds me of sharply made hotel beds, the satisfaction of order, a knife slicing cleanly into fruit. If I do something myself, I don't have to wonder how it was done.

✦

In French, *le soleil levant* means "the rising sun," "levantine" being a geographical reference to the east. By the nineteeth century, the word meant anywhere in the Ottoman Empire.

✦

The hospital overlooks the sea, though the ICU rooms have no windows. The building has recently been remodeled, all glass and sleek corners, and it reminds me of an airport. I haven't been in the sea in a long time. You don't swim, I remind myself as I wait for the doctor. My mother is asking him if we can move her aunt. She should be buried in Syria, my mother is saying. It's what she would want. *Mama couldn't be*, my mother tells me. *But we can get Nadia there in time*. Numbers are exchanged. A price named. There will be an ambulance in a few days. It will leave in the morning. It won't stop until Damascus.

✦

The word got a facelift in the mid-1800s. It took on a connotation. The Levant wasn't just a place; it was also a people, and a certain *kind* of people at that. A fickle kind of people. An in-between kind of people. The French knew where the sun rose, but they also knew where it settled.

This was more than astronomical: it was the natural progression of evolution, of civilization and culture. Everything, eventually, came west. To be Levantine was to be stilted, half-colonized, not quite there.

♦

It isn't just Nadia's dying. Beirut feels all wrong this time, a sweater too tight in the armpits. I keep trying not to cry. The trash is worse, a heavy smell in the air that nobody else seems to notice. I feel frantic when I go out at night. There is a bar from my college days, completely unchanged, and I'm jumpy the whole time. I keep thinking I'm going to see someone I know, and finally, unnervingly, I realize I'm afraid I'm going to run into *myself*, nineteen years old, torn shirts and bad bangs. That night I call Johnny and he is depressed and I tell him something to hurt him. I tell him I wish I'd never left this city. The rest is unspoken: to wish this is to wish never to have met him. The electricity cuts while we're speaking.

♦

Nadia wakes up while I'm in her room. I have missed her twice: months earlier during a trip to Beirut when she left for Syria suddenly, and this very week. The day before I landed in Lebanon, she'd fallen unconscious. I had a voice note from her that very morning, saying we'd get lunch when I arrived. I'd never hear her voice again.

But she wakes up and the nurse coos and I take Nadia's hand. I take it and I tell her to squeeze if the nurse is hurting her. She squeezes. *Can you stop*, I ask the nurse. She kindly tells me she can't. *New plan*, I tell Nadia in my inconsistent Arabic. *It's going to hurt, but I'll be right here*. My mind sputters like an engine. She will be unconscious again soon. What can I tell her? I'm exhausted from jet lag, half-tanned from Doha, where I've just done a reading, my coat still smelling of my detergent in Brooklyn. I feel like a cutout, something collaged onto the moment from another one. Her gnarled hand in mine.

✦

In the end, I tell her what I'd want someone to tell me. I tell her not to be afraid. I tell her she can go if she needs to. I tell her we'll take care of her daughter, even though her daughter is forty. I tell her she doesn't need to worry about her daughter, or my mother, or anyone. I tell her she lived such a good life. That she lived it so well. I tell her that Allah is waiting and she was His all along, so there is nothing to be afraid of. I tell her we will speak her name for as long as we live. I read the Fatiha. I don't cry. At some point, her eyes flutter shut again, and I keep talking and I know I'm doing it for myself.

✦

Afterward I clack down the hallway to the doctor's office.

The family decided, I said. I—great-niece, not daughter, not sister. *If something goes wrong, we don't want her resuscitated*.

The doctor nods. *The family's decision?* he asks. I say yes. *Good*.

It's the best hospital in the country, but this is Lebanon. There are no papers to sign. No questioning of who I am, no request to see my ID. The doctor holds my gaze for a second, then nods. That night I dream we kiss.

✦

I first heard the word in college. It was a poli-sci course—my doomed major—and I wasn't the only blank face in the room. Only the thing is—that room was in Beirut. We were *in* the Levant. The pudgy white professor told us. He said it with finality and so it was so. I liked him. I'd run into him at an expat bar later in college. He was perfectly appropriate. He bought me a beer and told me I wrote well. He tapped my elbow, and said urgently, like we were being overheard, *I heard some things about*. He stopped himself. I buried myself in the beer mug. I knew what he'd

heard. I knew what everyone had heard. *You should maybe leave when you graduate*, he finally said. *To the States or something? I think you'd be happier there*. I could see how much he meant it. His red-cheeked face, lit up with a vision of me, a smooth new reputation, strolling the streets of Chicago or Oakland. No vicious rumor chasing me from year to year. No terrible ex. I don't know what the Levant was for him. A career move, a passion project, a sea of Arab faces taking notes while he told us about ourselves. Beery Fridays in Gemmayzeh, the beauty of that campus. He didn't speak Arabic. He was a good professor. He got to be abroad and not abroad at the same time; Beirut's great appeal. His face shone with earnestness in that bar. I was smart and I was hurting and this city wouldn't protect me. Not even with all its rising suns. He wanted something for me. I was used to that. I was a faux-broken bird, not as sick as I seemed, and somehow sicker than I realized. People wanted things for me all the time. And what they wanted for me wasn't here.

♦

I dreamt of the professor the other day. Fifteen years later, I am thirty-six, and he returns to me, someone I haven't thought of in a decade. He stood under an archway and said, *Why did you come back*, and as I opened my mouth to answer, he dissolved.

♦

But there is no Beirut this year. I'm older, in America now. I'm years into infertility. There is only the same thorough erasure of self, like a canvas painted over. There is only one wriggling amoeba of a truth: what I want for myself isn't here. Even if I'm not sure what *here* even is. The uneven floors of my Brooklyn apartment? The siren-filled blanket of the pandemic over the city? That smell of antiseptic soap and peppermint in the fertility clinic? It's more like time itself has become the trap and I don't know how to emerge. Days trudge by like aimless elephants, gathering around the watering hole of my one sad, tiresome goal: to lie