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## BUST OF A PUGILIST

EDWARD SALEM

In a narrow Gaza City side street,  
a woman in a bandana sweats over a pot,  
plastic chairs and fold-out tables against  
a building's cinderblock wall.  
A young man eats by himself.

Another woman shuffles over  
in a flowing olive abaya, reaches her hand  
into his plate and snatches three grape leaves,  
stuffed with ground lamb, rice and herbs.

*Sorry*, she mutters, and crams them into her mouth,  
flashing a gold tooth, and rushes away.

The woman in the bandana walks over and  
wordlessly scoops more onto his plate.

In a bathroom stall at Cairo International Airport,  
squeezed between suitcase and backpack,  
the young man uses a black marker to draw a detailed  
portrait of the grape leaf thief's face  
on the inside of the smooth metal door.

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In America, lawnmowers wake him.  
 The ascending sound effect of Skype wakes him,  
 ending with a pop like someone sucking  
 their hooked finger and yanking it out.

In a darkened window, he stares into his  
 night-colored eyes till his reflection frightens  
 him, dissolving into a partial abstraction  
 as though peripheral vision were predominant  
 and staring ahead a cross-eyed blur.

He slips out of his room, walks past homes,  
 a drugstore, and a park named Freedom Hill  
 where he stands before a decommissioned tank,  
 stout and grotesque as a real-life Jabba the Hutt,  
 and beside it, mounted on a broad white pillar,  
 angled toward the sky like a tipped hat, a fighter jet.

Standing beneath it, looking up, he feels  
 as insulted as being shown the sole of a shoe.  
 He reads their emblazoned plaques,  
 lit by spotlights in the warm night.  
*The urge for destruction is also a creative urge.*

He walks home, like a passenger  
 in a predetermined life.

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In a dream,  
 an extremely long acupuncture needle  
 is gently inserted in the center of his forehead.  
 The acupuncturist hangs a black silk flag  
 over the long needle,  
 as if raising a party tent.  
*This is your best chakra.*  
*I don't know.*

No, it is.

In a book of ancient Greek art, he sees himself  
 in a deformed, noseless face of old stone—  
*Bust of a Pugilist, circa 330 BC.* A young man  
 lays on the floor, bathed in sunlight, scars  
 like dried figs shriveled across his face.

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In the night, he walks under billboards  
 and the buzzing white light of gas stations,  
 past an Asian Corned Beef  
 take-out restaurant in a former McDonald's  
 sloppily painted hot pink. Off Woodward Avenue,  
 strung across the top of a small, boxy white-brick  
 building, a dark green, upside-down banner  
 reads, in blocky italics—*1ST AMERICAN  
 MOSLEM MOSQUE, Established 1912.*  
 There's no one to explain why it's upside-down,  
 only a racist prank to guess at.  
 The one-story structure has likely been  
 vacant for years, the parking lot in fine shape  
 for *kintsugi*, all cracks and faded yellow lines.  
 The neighborhood used to be called  
 Chaldean Town, though it held  
 Muslim Arabs, too.

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In the center of the garage, which he uses  
 as an art studio, a large, jittery moth  
 flutters at the light. He feels beholden  
 to its life, this incidental moment where  
 the recognition of his unwanted power  
 intrudes on his evening plans, the ethical

considerations as annoying as an ad he is forced to watch. He tries to shoo it out, waving his hands like he's trying to waft a high smell, not wanting to trap the moth overnight where it'll die from hunger. What do moths eat? Maybe the bright orange near-microscopic spiders he sometimes finds moving across a page in a book, or the arm of his outdoor chair.

He moves closer, careful not to get too close. He's at it for ten minutes when the absurdity sinks in. He shuts the garage light, but the moth clings to a wall. He almost shouts at it, this life form delicate as ash. With a weight in his heart as if it were a dog on a rope abandoned in a hot attic, left to gnaw the rafters, mouth dry with splintered wood— he closes the door and leaves. In the morning, he searches the corners of the garage floor.

Before dawn at Freedom Hill, before joggers with cell phones and senses of civic duty huff little clouds that disperse across their white faces, he pours gallons of black paint over the lawn.

When he returns hours later in nylon shorts, black paint shines in the hard morning light, a slick black reptilian skin, like an oil spill without consequence, objectively beautiful.

In his bedroom, he writes the Surah Al-Isra in marker across the white slats of his blinds. He orders a chrome, portable stripper pole

and wraps it in a spiral of barbed wire.  
 He spray-paints the garage door with blue  
 crescent moons, red flowers, brown moths,  
 the outline of the Kaaba. He makes a stencil  
 and spray-paints 1ST AMERICAN MOSLEM  
 MOSQUE around the city at night,  
 upside-down and kelly green.

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In a dream, he awakes in Gaza, city soundscape  
 careening through the window. He sits up in bed,  
 and in peripheral vision—the jolt of a person  
 in his room. The sharp pain of a beard hair caught  
 in his gold necklace—his heart  
 when he sees his mother sitting at his desk,  
 rolling grape leaves, watching him  
 while he slept. He throws off the covers.  
 She's not there, the way a dream runs away  
 as you try to stay in it. He scrambles to put on pants,  
 goes out to the bare hallway, calling for her, her name  
 as foreign in his mouth as a flea in the nook of his eye,  
 burning as salty fingers dig it out.

He rushes upstairs to an empty apartment,  
 and another flight of stairs and another empty  
 apartment. In the hall is an overturned  
 lawn mower, clumps of wet grass stuck to its blades.  
 He flips it over and hears fluid sloshing inside.  
 The gasoline stinks, he yanks the cord, but it doesn't start.

*Where are you? I don't see you.* Barefoot  
 on the hot tar rooftop, he looks out  
 at the panorama of Gaza City, silent, sprawling.  
 In the logic of the dream, the thought that appears

in his head is her answer back— *Habibi,*  
*you were never looking for me. This life is just*  
*an experience. You don't have to feel so helpless.*

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Outside the screened open window,  
the neighbor loudly mows the lawn.  
Refugee dust strands float in the glass  
of lukewarm water on the nightstand.  
Sunlight filters through the Quran  
inscribed on the blinds.