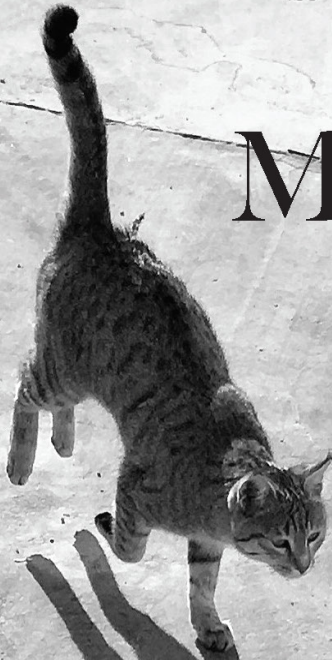


Without Metaphors



Maryam Ala Amjadi

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For women

and the right to own their own bodies,

for those who embody the resistance

A Body Positive Manifesto

I am expansive like the universe

if only the ever-shrinking love in your eyes could comprehend

my body is not a cautionary tale

or a safe retreat for your bloated ego

so what if the femininity of my dancing fat

does not translate into the stagnant masculinity of your muscles?

so what if I tell you that I am beautiful

and exist on my own terms with no flabby “if”, no bulky “but”?

you cannot wipe us out with the eraser of weight

you cannot cut or police ideas, bodies that do not conform

or stare us down for taking up space

for simply being who we are

we are not here to cater to your narrow vision of “how much” and “how big”

and “how long”

so someday you may digest the diversity song

we are not meant to be broken or bent

take your unwelcome eyes to some other battlefield

the raging comfort of our skin is not for rent

Divided Against the World You Still Stand

What Middle? Whose East?

From where I stand,

the big boys live to mock and meddle in a forever feast

Everyone, from the center to the side

has an eye for a piece of this Oily Beast

Their evening news is our lived history

our aching faces arched at the feet of perpetual papers

The memories of our fighting fists summarized in research funds

that deliver women from the ropes of an untimely father

to the belittling fingers of a bigger brother

and before you say why speak in divided tongues

when one should but multiply alarmed by one's mortality

why pull out bloodstained pronouns from history's hat

where one may simply forgive and forget

Let it be known I did not consent to be born
into a world where my soul's skin is constantly creased
as I fall and fail to border on almost-human
always almost-here
and somehow not quite 'there'
where Shiraz is merely "a type of grape"
but fried potatoes are French
where the comfort of *'pāy-jāmeḥ'* is compressed into half-price PJs for
Christmas
and the subtle symmetry of Tabriz carpet designs
on tall thin white bodies in Paris Fashion Week
unevenly betray the calluses on my grandmother's hands
where I am 'Persian' if I smile
and Iranian when I frown
a nuclear nuisance in the disjointed present
Rumi and Hafez, the incidental jewels of my former crown.

How Those Polite Men Pace the Face of Earth

Excuse me please, but do you mind if we smoke some Racisms here? Please tell us please! We promise to open all the wordy windows of peace and spray some instant humor into the air with an offhand breeze please tell us please and while we are at it may we also pour you a free drink of crunchy pity please and serve you a cracked plate of delicious curiosity please cut you a slice of our normal map cake please of how we think the remnants of your world should be please? Forgive us please if we are being presumptuous please but we are most certain please that you are oppressed please do you think please we will make you pale please if we wear the colors of your history to pose in our present please and dance the sounds of your silence on the news channels please? Please tell us please! Have you noticed that the days can only fade forward please and that the grapes of wrath grow backward please? It's only a joke please we have wept the same please it's only a word please we have heard the same please it's just a scratch please we are the same please and may we just add that please it's not our fault please that the sun rises please to toil every morning in the east of our hearts please and comes home please to rest in the west of our minds please?

*Oh, you fume mighty deep at petty pleasantries! We'll go someplace else,
but please remember we did say please!*

What Meets the Eye May Run from the Mouth

A woman can never truly be naked

she wears a skin of many restless pores

where the ajar eyes of those who see her rest,

half-opened to the push of the mirror's wooden tongue

half-closed on the pull of time's furtive caress,

and when no one looks her way,

she begins to grope in the thirsty wells of history for the split ends of her

hair

her first finger ringed in the wounded eye of faith's one bladed scissor

her last hope tied to the hearty hunger that weighs precisely empty in the full

trays of her breasts

then she shells the distant eyes of fate from the watery lines of her tell-tale

palms

and plants them near the shredded hymns of her ears in the earthy back of
her head

her shadows ever wary of the dry insistence of walls to reflect,

her inner shapes ever hushed by the wet winks of shame

Is it real? Is it hers?

She is always too big too small too tall too short too hot too cold too young
too old

She is always too many things in too many ways

Even the looking glass means one woman as many on any mercurial end

A woman can never truly be naked

When she unbuttons the spring of her dress, a thousand apple seeds fall
through

and the invisible serpent that belts the bidding of her waist

and the verses of deny and the laws of sigh that are tattooed on the will of
her hands and her legs

draped in the gifts of "No!" and "No!" and "No!"

that will only be unwrapped as "Yes,"

she combs for the trail of a home in the wrinkles of stone-faced houses

There are no maps for the geography of darkness

Tell me, where is the mouth of that word, the one that could kiss the eyes of

this page and not blind them?

Enough Is Enough Is Enough Is Enough

Count if you must count!

I slept with the wind

and never knew where he lived

I mated with a tree

and swung by the side of a half-nibbled apple

but never learned the weight of envy

that the leafed liberty of boughs

veined in their cores for the old trapped tales of roots

I made love to a wall while the window watched

and the door opened and closed

closed and opened, embraced itself

and its shadowed life was born in the eye of a ground

that trifled with every step of light from around,

round and round it danced and it pranced to the split of a sound,

as I locked lips with keys of golden teeth

in the bloody insistence of rightfully washed hands

that were left to feel “is” with “now”

and write “was” in the cornered dust of “then”

So, count if you must count

Count the still waters that run deep in half-sipped bottles of trust

and the fear-scaled fish who hold their breath to hear the hurl of pebbles

from a world where humans break and wrist watches live whole heartedly

to narrate exactly how many times

the black pupil trembled in the white bed of a gaze

that simply asked, but when is my turn?

Count the cold claws of the earth

that will frame the warmth of every uttered word in the life of this page

and the unuttered, unborn and unfinished words too

Count the tip of every red pen that circles a virgin line

the careless cracks in a mirror that refuses to echo only what it sees

the bats that nest in the eyelids of every passerby

and fumble to read down every smile into baits

the toes of innocence that have the thought of fingers painted on their nails

and the ugly worms that lurk in the breath of all books

but chew the charm off faces when nobody looks

count, oh count!

Count if you must count!

Then stand back and stone me with a name

and watch your shattered reflections fall

one by one

from the shelves of my body.

Where Is the Peace of this Poem?

Hey Poet!

Let the olive branch live

and liberate the burden of its own bitterness

Forget the dove once in a while,

so it can remember flying without a direction

The dagger is weary of betrayals

The scales want to weigh themselves for a change

and the threshold of each page trembles

when straight mouths count the break of words

and crooked fingers spell heads into numbers

Hey poet!

Run the last of the puns through the sieve of first intentions

Peel the prudence of adverbs to the core of smuggled silences

Ink the blood of adjectives into the heart of all shadowed things

and verb the waiting of all instant nouns

Hold the hands of the clock and sway:

I was born to humanize words this way!

Every living pen is another broken gun

Poetry will never die but perhaps one day,

one fearfully fearless day

we shall speak without metaphors.

How to Dissect a “Female” Body

First, kill the body.

Preferably, before the exacting ache of a mirror that fogs the world’s
shrewdly dormant eyes

Understand that a woman dies many deaths

Those exiled into the unearthliness of the looking glass, perish by the helium
hands of the howling mass

Now ask for consent, preferably from the reluctance or oblivion of other
bodies who survive this one

Soon you will trace the entitled fingerprints of those who never did

Wear a curious mask of conviction - woven out of the perennial pain of
heroes and heroines whose legends fermented into lessons that decomposed
into drowsy echoes -

to shield yourself from the stench of tightfisted fatherly, wrong-footed
brotherly, tooth and law nearly husbanded “love” or lack thereof

Before anything, deivein “honor” from the no longer unnerving vortex of the
vagina

Acknowledge that often water is thicker than blood is thicker than semen is
thicker, more solid than the boney sounding dance of one’s own flesh, one’s
own blood

Next, take note of the dented tyranny of that underwired shame - crescented
beneath the rise and fall of her dearly eyed barely backed breasts -
particularly if the spiral of compulsory coyness was never nipped in the bud

Now pull out the longing dagger from the memory of her backbone (every
body has one) and make a ‘why’ shaped incision that yawns deep from the
‘how’ of each shoulder across the ‘what’ of the chest running right to the
‘when’ of the womb

Spread open the accounts of all attempted flights of the heart from the rattle
of the ribcage and examine fleshed in flesh, rib by rib, bone to bone those
earth-woven celestial myths

Document the waking tales of warrior nerves of some inherited beginnings,
the dissident veins of a few indispensable middles and the soldiering arteries
of all barbed endings

Proceed accordingly until you master how that which is nowhere to be found
is lost

Always remember, a mirror is the relentless embrace of shards that stand and
die together.

101 Synonyms for a Single Woman

Abnormal	Embarrassed
Activist	Feminist
Afraid	Flawed
Alone	Forward
Ambitious	Free
Angry	Freedom Lover
Bitch	Future Convert
Bitter	Gold digger
Cat Lady	Home wrecker
Chaser	Hymened
Childish	Idealist
Childless	Immature
Confused	Immoral
Cougar	Incomplete
Cunt	Independent
Defenseless	Individual
Defiant	Infertile
Delayed	Intellectual
Desperate	Irresponsible
Difficult	Jealous
Divorced	Left-on-the-shelf
Disobedient	Lesbian
Droopy	Liar
Dry	Lilith
Eccentric	Lonely

Manhunter	Tempress
Manless	The Other
Manly	The Other Woman
Miserable	Traveler
Modern	Unbloomed
Narcissistic	Unfulfilled
Nun	Unhealthy
Overeducated	Unloved
Pickled	Unmarried
Pitiable	Unnatural
Professional	Unsettled
Promiscuous	Victim
Pussy-wrinkled	Virgin
Rebel	Waiting
Reformist	Wankeress
Residue	Widow
Sad	Witch
Self-hater	Wrong
Selfish	
Sexless	
Shallow	
Slut	
Soured	
Spinster	
Successful	

The Dog-eared Pages of History Unmake the Triangle of Time

Look!

The white hands of the clock are crooked from stealing time

and the counting eyes of the keyholes can now fully mouth

the empty echo of slogans back to the windowed will of the walls

who could not believe the mind of their own ears

that in the violent tongue of human beings

“a dog’s life” merely means

unearthing the wretched bones of the bloody questions

that were long sown and thrown:

Just who owns the human body? Who do the humans own?

Objects of affection and subjects of warmth

Living ‘things’ that break and breathe

In this Love-forsaken world, they are rare

those who know the difference between

“belonging to”

and ‘belonging with’

I Cannot Make Poems of Airports

I am standing in the queue, waiting to pass through the security checkpoint and I still cannot believe what I am seeing on the other side of the line. I see long strong hands out of a uniform shirt going all over a body, a woman's body. These hands pause on her hips, the fingers circle inside the back of her jeans, hold her buttocks, push their way down her thighs, press her ankles, touch her bare feet and then repeat the same movements upwards. These hands do to you what you may have hoped to experience with a mutually consenting lover. Only kinder. These hands go and come, come and go as if they belong, as if they own that body that belongs to a woman, a woman of color. She has stretched out her hands on her sides, like a scarecrow she stands still while those fingers peck on her being. No one in the line says a thing and I gasp in horror. Why am I still surprised? My heart is pounding and I have flashbacks from a few years ago of another airport experience when I was twenty-four years old and in the U.S. for the first time.

Iranian national. ✓

Muslim by default. ✓

Prescribed dose of humiliation and harassment. ✓

I want to close my eyes on that memory and what I see happening now to the woman on the other side of the line. I will soon be that woman. I feel for that woman. I will soon be that woman. I am next. I am next. I am next.

I look around at nothing in particular, I shake my head and say aloud to no one in particular, "No, no, no, I don't want that. I don't want anyone to touch me like that."

"But maybe they won't," comes the voice of an old white woman from the queue behind me in a clear British accent. She is not wrong, I have traveled enough to see how purposefully selective these checkpoints are, depending on what accent, skin color and clothes you wear.

But I have made my decision. If those hands reach out for me, to claim my body...before they reach out for me, before they make their claims, I will make mine. I will tell them that I will not get on that flight. Damn the conference, damn all those other plans. Everything.

"Next!"

I see the woman who was being "loved" and made loved to by the state law now bend and sit down to put on her socks and shoes.

"Could you come through, please?"

I walk in and face the female officer who is not even looking at me, her eyes on the two next in line: a father and son. Clearly not white. Not "European." Two brown men.

"What do you want me to do?" I demand from the tall woman in uniform. This is not my first time. Surely she must want me to at least remove my shoes. My socks. Something!

"Nothing, darling. You are good," she says with a half-smile, a half glance and yells "Next!"

I am too dazed to marvel at the novelty of this encounter. I just gather my things and start to walk away. But before I do, I want to look back one more time. To see that threshold of fear and pain. And I see that teenager who was behind me, now under the muscular hands of the officer. He stands tall this young boy, his eyes looking ahead and at nowhere as those hands do to him what was done just a little before to that woman.

For the first time in a long time, my heart is heavier than my backpack.

At the foot of the next escalator, I catch my reflection in a tall mirror. I walk towards my image and away from the walk of other travelers.

I stand in front of the mirror and my eyes pause on those eyes, that hair, that pale skin. That self. That other.

And I hear it once again: "Nothing, darling. You are good."

And then we both cry, the mirror and I.

For women who don't want to have children, for those who have the privilege of choice

Let It Be, Let It Be, Utter Us into Me

Tick tock! Tick tock!

What's that?

No, that's not the wavering sound of my ebbing fertility

My biological clock kicked in the very day my mother gave birth to me

Why yes, I'm sure if you dig long and deep enough

in the misty tunnels of my childhood history

you are bound to find the treasure of a good sob story:

Why am I being selfish? Runaway from responsibility?

Oh, would I ever learn to love the way you do?

After all, I am not a "real woman" with a "real life"

So, see if you can find the key to what's wrong with me

Don't I know that I would be forever incomplete?

In the end, what do I want to do with my life?

Why choose the easy way out of my neglectful nipples

and the opaque purpose for which they were destined to be?

Why can't I just write a word or two on the walls of my womb for posterity?

Yes, perhaps the time will come
when I would change my mind
or perhaps not, but you see,
it always amuses me
when some people say so blatantly
"For God's sake, it's the twenty-first century!"

What's that supposed to mean anyway?

Who is fast and who is slow? Are we in a hurry?

Is there a point at the crossroads of modernity,
a clocked line at which all our hands should arrive and be?

Come, let's go back to the very basics as simple as they be
just sit back and repeat, repeat, repeat after me:

Different women want different things.

I am not you.

You are not me.

Childfree is an identity

Motherhood is an orientation

Let everyone be

About the Author

Maryam Ala Amjadi (1984) is an Iranian poet, essayist, and translator who has spent the impressionable years of her childhood in India and writes poetry in English. She is the author of two poetry collections and translator of a collection of Raymond Carver's selected poems into Farsi. She received the 'Young Generation Poet' Award in the first International Poetry Festival in Yinchuan, China (Sept 2011) and was awarded Honorary Fellowship in Creative Writing by the International Writers Program (IWP) at University of Iowa, U.S.A. (Fall 2008). Presently, she is a PhD research fellow in Text and Event in Early Modern Europe (TEEME) at the universities of Kent (UK) and Porto (Portugal). She is also an editor for *Hysteria*, a periodical of critical feminisms. Ala Amjadi's poems have been translated into Arabic, Albanian, Chinese, Hindi, Italian and Romanian.

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