

ghosting the ghetto

for Steven

In their third floor brick flat, the one tucked into the asphalt folds of Warwick Farm, past *El Toro* motel, down where the winding road straightens out opposite takeaway tucker, my grandparents were rebuilding Lebanon, and no one seemed to mind. Every Sunday we made like pilgrims in Holden Commodores, traversing highway homeland

to bicker and eat. As adults renewed rivalries, we kids splashed in the Abraham River, once known as Adonis, an ancient baptismal turquoise that cleaved through the hallway. Sometimes the country changed with us & we climbed Mount Lebanon in the lounge, cooling our bodies beneath old olive trees.

The tapestries were gaudy, the TV a small cube in the corner, and smoke was forever on the air. In that, metaphor & country are one. As with every hajj, there were too many bodies and the door was kept open for us to spill from, an ecstasy of difference. In this, metaphor & Arab are one: no lone place can hold in its small clay hands so many rivers

and no Ark can contain us, whatever scripture commands.

In adolescence, the *Kaaba* flowered between us, a black square lotus edged in gilt across the sides, doors of gold gleaming in afternoon light. It made ants of us and the mountains and rivers, the motels and convenience stores. Now we spoke by rote, prayers half-memorised in the sacred hours of the insomniac, sinking budding secrets

and the kinds of questions that can unmake family.

When the girls started to stand apart, trying to hijab their modesty, we saw *jamarāt* all around us, & lined our hands with bits of rock to hurl at the devil. Only the walls were a mirage and it was our cheeks which split beneath thrown stones. Later, it made perfect sense to learn that in 1627, a gutter was added to the *Kaaba*

to protect it from flooding. Or perhaps to stop it from blooming.

Before my grandparents began to recreate Lebanon out of ruined cartilage, someone should have checked if they were students of history, or if they knew their way around a map. Beirut became Bondi became Liverpool, & the local creek behind the cricket pitch drowned the old rivers, and new names blessed our flesh, like Nike, Adidas, and Reebok.

Someone should have checked if they knew a flower could replace the house of god.

Boys have no business with god, except where he can be found in the slap of hard feet on concrete, in the seismic collision of shoulders and hips lunging for the try line, or the throng & buzz of bees and wasps among long grass and thin weeds; or sticky lips locked on lips in the secret space beneath houses. Boys have no business with god

until their bodies lengthen and sin begins to stick to their tongues.

Soon after, our weekly hajj halted. Our family became families and rupture became familiar. In this, metaphor & Middle East are one. In the long months away from that imagined country, I heard of an older cousin, a name hushed by others, a man in love with men, and in his absence I saw my future: who knew you could ghost the living?

Who knew you could bury the ghetto in forgetting?

I am unearthing yesterday, ungathering this bouquet of quiet, reappearing in inches. Lebanon was left incomplete in Warwick Farm, & everywhere else we went the ragged tops of mountains peeking out of windows; the Sacred House in fragments, in bloodied bits of stone, in black and gold petals on the floor. Though the builders are gone, they left the blueprints in my skin, every alley & every river, every ghost & every ghetto.

**The Kaaba is a building at the centre of Islam's most holy mosque Al-Masjid Al-Haram, in Mecca. It is the building all Muslims pray towards, and to which they must journey at least once in their lifetime, which is called the hajj. The Kaaba has many names, including Sacred House, House of Allah, House of God in Heaven, etc.*

*** As part of the hajj, Muslims perform a ritual known as the Stoning of the Devil, in which they throw stones at three pillars known as al-jamarāt.*