POETRY

(new year as hunger, as hands, as a house with no doors)

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"Stress Lines" by Em Harriett

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i. the elephant in the room

at dinner, we eat in silence,
on plates older than us,

as father’s cigarette glows
like embers, its smoke

pressing the walls, like
a ghost none of us knows

how to name. maybe, a name
is just a broken porcelain cup,

in the mouth of those who
don’t remember. let’s take

a break

from dreaming and start
chewing down the catfish,

orange salad and chicken
broth, food that is made

of churned promises — i break
the silence, calling mother

to pass me the metallic-coloured
spoon, and ask what betrayal is.

she twists open the chilli jam jar, and
the air stings of yesterday’s tongue.

it’s when you can’t point to
where you're from, on the

news, the california fires
have never once ended since

2004 — the year you were born,
or the dirt your grandmother

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kissed. or maybe, from this
burn-mark, left there browning

on the half-sized paper map of
asia. neighbourhood fish markets.

*

in my dreams, the sky is
always on fire, redder than

the colors of mother's eyelids,
when she ugly-sobs at each

year's gathering. here, i look
through the table, plates chipped

as if our last names, and words
in mouth, ready to ask: is for

-getting also a kind of betrayal?
but i swallow instead, reminiscing

the time our car broke down
in front of the cemetery,

and mother cried the tears
she'd saved for the table,

the plates, and the
silences.

ii. theories of the bombs

on the second day of the new year, we wear red — and eat leftovers from last year: chugging down stale soups, breads, stews — as if the past tastes better when overloaded. the table still quiet. at the back of the kitchen counter, mother clashes the silverware; the tap runs continually like a forgotten language. in her head, she's writing letters to a future that does not know her name, begging: for a house to stand, a land to stay warm and a country to stay quiet. sometimes, i ask her what's with all this yearning? what is all this fascination with silence? she returns with silence, only to prove a point that is already senseless.

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inside this house,
the wallpaper peels
like old skin
trying to renew
itself.

*

we keep eating, the red tops now splashed with greases, chillies, and fish sauce. from the tv, the men have just bombed a village of 2,000. listen, somewhere from here, a man folds his daughter's cold body — a featherlight prayer — whispering *habibti, habibti* under his chasing breaths. the rubbles of their homes, just as broken. listen, the bombing never ends, it just changes its name and learns how to speak. which is me saying: it's not the bombs, it's the people, the commands, the voices.

*

listen, the boy
just turns 18
when he knows
the night, like
how he knows
his mother.

*

somewhere, a mother tells her child to "not look," to put hands over her eyes as they drive past an accident, as if that has ever saved anyone. somewhere, a child yanks the doll by the hair, hands as tight as a father's upon the trigger. which is me saying: all hands learn, some to hold and some to hurt.

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the house stands
still, grows ten
-tacles and grabs
the drunk men
by their ankles.

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iii. what the body dares to hold

back to before the fireworks; and we are waiting for the year to pull us down.
in the taxi, your hands on your lap, quiet as dawn. listen, i want to tell you:
love is just another house we keep on coming back to. once, you are
busy braiding your mother’s hair; she counts the streetlights you
drive past. this time, she doesn’t tell you to look away from
the accident; instead holds your hands, as if begging you
to not let yourself go. but this time, you remember once
she told you about her first snow — saying how
everything disappears when you hold it
long enough. what does that mean?
what does the body hold, except
the weight of time — vanishing?
listen, the year stays new
if we pretend it never
begins. how about
this, we press ears
to darkness, and
listen for the
growing
silence.

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