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## Note the Ghosts

Among the More-than-Living in Iraq

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**ABSTRACT:** A series of creative non-fiction short stories based on ethnographic interviews and participant observation in Iraq from 2014–2022, Kali Rubaii's reflection asks: what is a toxic affect? In these stories, war-torn ecologies are packed with living and non-living beings that emerge in the floor of a mosque, in a graveyard, from a pillow, a toilet, and construction sites in Iraq.

**KEYWORDS:** Iraq; Living and non-living beings; Occupation; Toxic affect; War

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## Note the Ghosts

### Among the More-than-Living in Iraq

KALI RUBAII

So many war-torn ecologies incorporate the kinds of more-than-humans that secular and Eurocentric discourse denies as existing or mattering by describing them as imaginaries or symbolic forms. From crocodile kin to the serpent who spawns fog, these different forms of existence refuse incorporation into vocabularies of Western theory.<sup>1</sup> For example, Marisol de la Cadena's book *Earth Beings* is based upon the author's moments of disconcertment that push the limits of political, environmental, and ontological understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Often classified as 'spiritual' or 'supernatural', these forces and beings are common arbiters of ecological (im)balance and mediators of malevolent/benevolent

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1 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

2 Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

relations between human beings and their environmental worlds. Sometimes they *are* the environment, as is the case of Turtle Island (North America) or Grandfather Crocodile (East Timor), and sometimes they are the sacred origin of human bodies, as is the case in Christianity.

Such beings are integral features of war-torn ecologies, which always incorporate more than simply the biomechanics of life-producing relations. Anyone who has lived among them knows that *non-living* more-than-humans are just as agentive as living ones — some, like heavy metals, cause cancer, while others, like minerals, are curative. They can also be more-than-material: ghosts, for example, are more-than-living but less-than-dead. They often haunt, warn, or physically injure.<sup>3</sup> Diné skinwalkers are transform. Brazilian umbanda requires a human host through incorporation. Sometimes non-living, non-material, more-than-humans seek revenge or rebalance.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that all people accept such forces are ‘real’, or that all cultures codify them as part of their ontology.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, many do not ‘believe’ in the encounters they experience, or the stories told by others because of this. Yet many do. Whether central to human narration, or ephemeral in their presence, these beings and forces

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3 Sebastian Castelier and Quentin Muller, ‘Gravediggers Claim Ghosts Haunt World’s Largest Cemetery in Iraq’, *Al Jazeera*, 10 September 2019 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/9/10/gravediggers-claim-ghosts-haunt-worlds-largest-cemetery-in-iraq>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

4 See Farhan Ghanam, *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) on the Evil Eye’s role in burning down businesses whose owners do not share with others.

5 Mayanthi L. Fernando, ‘Supernatureculture’, *The Immanent Frame*, 11 December 2017 <<https://tif.ssrc.org/2017/12/11/supernatureculture/>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

are important ones for understanding the affective components of ecological worlds, and for the political potential of collaboration or confrontation with them at the seams of violation and repair.

#### TOXIC AFFECTIVE ECOLOGIES OF WAR

At its points of combustion and along the tendrils of its underpinning economies, war makes atmospheres. War is an atmosphere. Nuclear tests go ‘boom’ once, but the world is never the same. Strontium in our teeth tells us so. So do Nadya’s dreams, which make her wake up screaming years and years later. The fog of war is not always a fog. The uranium mined in Diné country toxified Diné people’s bodies.<sup>6</sup> It also travelled. Maybe some of the same uranium reached Iraq in recent decades. Who knows, exactly? That is the point; specificities get diffused into the atmosphere. Some of those diffusions are ephemeral. Some are fixed.

In scholarship of the Middle East, the concept of ‘war ecology’ often refers to environments transformed by decades of intensive military violence. A war ecology is one shaped by war such that the interdependent webs by which new lives are made — and deaths are deemed meaningful — become fundamentally entangled with military remnants.

War ecologies preserve the scars of political violence.<sup>7</sup> They even give their own testimony. For example, babies born with birth defects in Iraq testify in their own unique way that, as Dr. Majid says, ‘something is wrong here.’<sup>8</sup> If

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6 Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

7 Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

8 Kali Rubaii, ‘Birth Defects and the Toxic Legacy of War in Iraq’, *Middle East Report*, 296 (Fall 2020) <<https://merip.org/2020/10/birth->

multinational corporations know the political trick ‘dilution of pollution’, then war’s evidentiary ecologies of war speak back.<sup>9</sup> They re-aggregate seemingly disparate phenomena.

War has shaped Iraq’s ecologies deeply. Many of the Iraqis I spoke to during my fieldwork described enduring environmental maladies, from plant crops and livestock with malformed parts or tumorous growths to contaminated water. Perhaps most notorious as culprits are the wastes of military base-making and post-war ‘reconstruction’: US burn-pits alone incinerated everything from vehicles to computers.<sup>10</sup> Expended ordinances not only litter the landscape, they are also circulated by people selling the metal for a living. US military intervention in the early 2000s heavily damaged Iraq’s diverse ecologies with an onslaught of toxic inundation, compounding the toxic legacies of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) and the Gulf War (1990–91). Toxic war materials are now embedded in Iraq’s landscape, and in the bodies of the thousands of people living and dying with cancer, congenital anomalies, asthma, and preventable infections. Toxins are similarly embedded in the water, air, and soil; and they travel through exchanges of life-making processes across generations.

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defects-and-the-toxic-legacy-of-war-in-iraq-296/> [accessed 12 November 2022].

- 9 Kristina Lyons, ‘Chemical Warfare in Colombia, Evidentiary Ecologies and Senti-actuando Practices of Justice’, *Social Studies of Science*, 48.3 (June 2018), pp. 414–37 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312718765375>>.
- 10 Kenneth MacLeish and Zoë H. Wool, ‘US Military Burn Pits and the Politics of Health’, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1 August 2018 <<https://medanthroquarterly.org/critical-care/2018/08/us-military-burn-pits-and-the-politics-of-health/>> [accessed 12 November 2022].

But toxic legacies are not only material; they are also affective. What makes a place toxic? What makes a world unlivable, and what does it mean to be there nonetheless?

As depicted by Iraqi writers and poets like Sinan Antoon, Hassan Blasim, and Ahmed Saadawi, and by ethnographers like Hayder Al Mohammed, horror, mourning, and loss are central components in Iraq's affective ecologies. The following stories depict how toxic legacies haunt Iraq's landscapes, particularly for people repeatedly displaced by the material conditions of war.

If we generally recognize what a material substance is, then what is a toxic affect? These stories are non-fiction, based upon ethnographic interviews with Iraqi people in 2014 and 2015. Inclusive of actors like jinn and ghosts, who do not receive much credit for their participation in ecologies of war, these stories are testimonies to the diffuse forms of horror people confront as they live out the many forms of 'toxic' war.

NADYA'S DREAM ABOUT HER GHOST BABY  
(CONSTRUCTION SITE. MIRAWA, IRAQ. 2014)

I crept up on you, squatting on the flat concrete slap, dusty from being new and unfinished. It makes you sneeze, very quietly, into the cheap, scratchy fabric of your sleeve. A shiver ran through you, in spite of the heat. Stagnant heat, thick for moving, thick enough to climb up, into the highest parts of the sky and then dive into, coming to a fast 'eeeeerch'! Just above the floor. I think my dive pushed the air a little, and whisked out your fire. You cursed. You flicked the lighter, striking an orange glow for a second try. I squat right across from you. I blow a puff of air, like it is a birthday candle. I whisk the light out. It gives you the shivers, stagnant air that suddenly moves when you try to make a flame.

Do you remember, Mama, my first birthday party? The candles were the kind that sparkle like little firecrackers. You blow them out, and they light back up again. Over and over and over. I wanted to touch the flames, and you [...] holding me back while I squirmed against your arm, you laughed so hard when you blew them out, and they came right back up again. Your teeth were as white and shiny as the moon. Those nights were hot nights. July. We slept up on the roof, and the moon got so bright, so round. You dropped a cloth over my face to cover my eyes. I slept with my naked body out in the night air, and my head covered. In the morning, when the sun was big like a blood orange, I would crawl to Baba's legs — he slept with them up like triangles — and lay down underneath in the shade of his knees.

There is no roof on this house. It is unfinished. You call it a construction site. The others call it a house. Baba has called in some of his neighbours' debts. Money is coming soon, and you will move to a hotel. It will be cramped, but a fan will blow at night. I cannot follow you there.

Shivers all the way down. That is the thing about unfinished buildings like this. They are not already filled with jinn. This one doesn't even have a roof. But when you step out back to pour out a small plastic bucket of dirty soapy water, after you wash clothes and hang them on a wire outside, you see something in the dried cement. A handprint. Toddler size. When you gasp, I can feel part of myself pulled into you. Your lungs make a squeeze, and I struggle, tug, to pull myself out. You breathe out a rattling sob. I escape you. Your chest aches. You lay down to nap.

Mama, wake up and play with me. I climb the air and free fall, making wind against your cheek. It only soothes you in your sleep. So, I race through the room knocking against things, but the sound is mild. Your face is so tired, so hollowed out by loss.

I blow on the small flame you made, under the cooking pot. I blow and blow until a spark leaps off and scuttles across the concrete floor. It dies out. I blow and blow again, until more sparks fly. One single spark catches the hem of your abaya, down by your ankles.

I chase it, and blow softly. It kindles and grows, spreading a line of ember-orange like an infection, moving outward. It hits the stitching of gold, where a leaf is patterned into the side of the skirt to cover the seam of the side. The leaf blossoms into a flower, and makes the unfurling sound a flame makes when it breaks open at first. It does not wake you right away. Then it does, and you leap up, like a black flame yourself. You scream and stamp at the flower.

For a moment, the flame makes a wave of clear heat, and you stop everything, with large eyes. You can see me, my face, through the heat. You say my name like a question.

Then it is an emergency again. You reach toward the two plastic jugs in the corner — one for water, and one for fuel. You pour a jug over your head trying to put the fire out. Only, it is not water, it is fuel. The flame laps up the fluid like a ravenous cat. It consumes you. As the flower ignites your hair, you look calmly into my face. Then those bright white teeth appear. Is it a smile of joy, or the flames pulling the lips back from your face?

'Habibi', you say. 'My baby.'

As with so many toxins, like alcohol or fuel, this dusty air can transform the texture of a place. It can build atmospheres. A toxic relationship, a toxic environment, a toxic meal. Toxication renders harmful that which is essential to survival. Toxication makes certain places hostile, like the concrete walls that shelter and displace Nadya at the same time. Incomplete places are, after all, both inhospit-



able and a refuge. Nadya was not the only woman to warn me of how hostile these incomplete dwellings could be, even as she was deeply attached to remaining in this one. Iraq's toxic ecology includes certain absent children, who inhale and exhale 'brown breath.' They remain. They depart. As do we.

THE JINN IN THE TOILET  
(CONSTRUCTION SITE. MIRAWA, IRAQ. 2015)

Don't go in there. That is a bathroom only for men now. We built a new pit for women on the other side. That one has a jinn. All these women in this house are suffering from it. Since the invasion, since 2003, there are many problems with reproduction. These women all have trouble with pregnancy. Me, I am a crone. I do not worry. But these are young ladies! They are married, and it is their joy to have children. They conceive, and even for a long time, they carry. And then, suddenly, there is a spontaneous abortion.

So that bathroom in there [...] a jinn crawled in and it waited. Each time there was an abortion, it took the blood and the clots and built a body for itself. It is a jinn made entirely of blood clots. It makes the 'toilet' bubble. It wants more blood, so it interferes, stealing phases from the women's cycles. If you go in that bathroom, everything will become erratic.

One time the younger one, she was pregnant, very well. She went in that bathroom, and there was a rumbling in the pipe, and she felt the cold chill of that jinn around her. There was a loud noise, and she slipped off the bricks on the floor. She slipped and fell on her belly, and twisted her ankle. She fell so hard she lost the baby.

Beware of that jinn, my dear. It steals children from women. But for the man, it is okay. It is safe.

The jinn is not interested in water or shit. It only builds itself out of blood clots, out of babies that are not full. So stay away, and go around to the other side of the house where it is safe.

The toxic is an immaterial force that makes its form out of bodies. Tumours. Cancers. It steals blood supplies. It takes flesh. It invades, outlasting people by consuming their bodies. War does not destroy everyone all at once. It takes time and moves slowly. Iraq's cancer rates are high. The rate of birth defects is high. Spontaneous abortions. Infertility. Things that make life travel across generations move under the shadow of an ongoing war. For so many, the echo, the shadow, is the main event. What does it mean to sit under the shade of these shadows, and to listen to these echoes?

#### THE GRAVEYARD

(ROUTE FROM SAQLAWIYA TO SULEYMANIA. 2015)

In Iraq, people visit graveyards. It is one of the places where things make sense, where the ghosts and the sorrow can be aired, where the suffering can be allowed to breathe. The poet Sinan Antoon jostled my elbow once at a talk in New York, 'Iraq needs some time for the ghosts to breathe'. I like Sinan for embracing a period of necessary negativity. He reminds me of Frantz Fanon a little bit.

Now, Hameed and I are alone. We have hustled through the checkpoints and the dusty road. We replaced a punctured car tire on the side of the long, straight highway. We made it to his village. And we have done this magical thing he taught me: fertilizing a date flower by inducing it to nectar with an onion. I have never seen a flower cry like a human eye, but it did. The way men cry when they are trying to be masculine, wet and nearly overflowing. Not a trickling line, or anything close to a torrent. It was enough. The pollen stuck to the

stamen. The dates might just make it, if they are given the chance to fruit.

Now we are driving away from the date plantation, back toward Kirkuk. The booming sound of war is so faint it might just be my memory making me think I can still hear it. That is, maybe, what a ghost feels like.

One stop, on the way back across the dry landscape. Here, past a simple hump of dirt, is a small graveyard. I love Muslim graveyards. They often do not mark names and dates, or use marble headstones. They are simple rocks, marking the presence of a body, working hard to unmoor the index of a thing from the thing itself. This is a headstone, not a person. This is an image of a thing, not the thing itself. There is no mistaking the material thing for what it is meant to index.

Hameed kneels down by a stone. He visits someone regularly here. I notice that he has headed toward the smaller graves.

There are graves for so many little people. That is, in the end, the real echo of war. The cholera. The diarrhoea. The meningitis. The miscarriages. The heart defects. The asthma. All treatable things under ordinary conditions. All deaths. 'Maybe some of the children here were shot', Hameed says. 'But I don't think so. That is not how war usually kills children. It does it more like torture. From sicknesses and slower things.'

He does not touch the stones. I can see from his hands that he wants to, but he hesitates. He takes his tentative, earthen hands from where they hover over the stones, and instead places them formally, like a soldier acting out a duty, in the shape of an open book. Palms up. Palms slanted inward. And as he recites a passage of the Quran, I look off into the distance, trying to be respectful of his private ache.

I see rows of wheat. I see black smoke from a distant oil refinery. I see the land ebbing into a faint green where the Euphrates curves in the distance. I see green, but that is just the index of the thing itself. I do not see the water. It is not the green I love, Hameed reminds me, it is the water the green tells me is there...

'What are you doing?' He catches me staring away. His palms break their magnetic hold on each other, and open up a wide space. He is making a room for me to step through. He is gesturing like a butler to the hallway of stones, lined up one after the other. 'Bear witness!' he says in English, then turns back to his prayer.

I walk like a reluctant voyeur past each stone. I take in the graveyard. I step through small prickles of dead grass Velcro-ing themselves to my ankles. I stop suddenly. I think I hear a strange laugh and feel a small, playful presence behind me. I turn, half expecting to see a creature like a fox or a rodent. I see nothing.

I walk on, trying to focus on the sombre alignment of graves. 'These are children!' I hear myself think in an emphatic whisper. But my sobriety is irked by the presence of something impish behind me, breathing on me, making the feeling of laughter ring in my head. I am annoyed and turn quickly this time, hoping to catch the glimpse of the trickster child behind me. (I am sure there will be a little boy who has popped out from somewhere, curious and giggling.) I am ready to be asked for money. But again, no one is there. I am absolutely certain this time that I felt something tugging on my skirt. Hameed's eyes are still closed. He is in mourning. I do not know for whom or how many we have stopped here.

I turn to the place in the air where I feel a presence. 'I feel you. I know you are there. Please leave me alone. I am trying to be sad.' I say it in a whisper,

not wanting Hameed to think I am hallucinating. But, as if in answer, I feel the smack of moving air against me and am overcome by a giddy, rising laughter. I cannot contain it. It bursts out of me, using my lungs for its own exodus. I am laughing so hard I keel over, with my hands on my knees.

I can see the scene from outside of myself: an Iraqi-American woman cracking up in the middle of a sea of small baby graves. It is a hideous scene. I am embarrassed. Hameed calls the laughter 'dry crying', and doesn't seem to think it is strange.

'What was that?' I ask him in the car as we drive on.

'Maybe it was a ghost. But I am a pious man. I only believe in God.' He winks. I know Hameed believes in ghosts.

'Did you mean to introduce me to it?'

'Maybe', he winks, again.

'Was it your child?'

'Does it matter?'

(A little! I think.) I study the side of his face. 'Yes. It matters.'

'Good.' He tilts his back on the driver's seat headrest, which is covered in a mesh of wooden beads. He looks satisfied.

To recognize is not enough. Solidarity might require more. My body overtaken by another, just a little; Hameed introducing me to something, or someone, but not fully acknowledging it; the movement of air against and through me. I am no longer bearing witness; I am the technology of a ghost. Hameed is repurposing my form, or rather, offering me up for repurposing. I came, I said, to bear witness. But bearing such witness unwittingly pushed laughter that is not laughter out of me. The ecology of affects is [...] toxic.

THE PILLOW STORY, BY YOUNG DINA: PART I  
(DOHUK. 2014)

It is easy to imagine the sound of a heartbeat. You can just listen to your own. When we were more alive, more connected to things, the sound of my own heartbeat was the only thing I feared. Now, Ya Allah, it is the only thing I don't fear.

When I was very little, before I met you, I was afraid to lay my head down on my pillow. Each time I did, I heard the merciless crunch, crunch, crunch of many tiny little elves with many tiny pickaxes, hacking away at the snowbank of my pillow. They were digging their way up, trying to escape from underneath the weight of my head. I knew they suffered when I lay my head down, because if I pressed my ear softly over the pillow and suspended the weight of my skull, the sound of their labour diminished. I feared that if I fell asleep, they would succeed in the night, hack through the pillow, and climb into my ear.

I used to worry the elves would whistle while they worked, just like in the cartoon about the seven dwarves. If I let them tunnel through my pillow and climb one by one, hand over hand, into my ear [...] then the whistling of their work and the stabbing pain of their picks and the feeling of something in my ear would make me crazy. I would run around screaming like the old woman in our neighbourhood who lost her mind when they delivered her son back to her drooling and incontinent from electric shock torture. But that was in Saddam Time. Now the sons are born this way from the start. Or, if they are healthy, they are hunted by militias and stripped of their IDs and jobs and even their high school diplomas.

I am a girl, so I have to worry about losing my mind. I heard them talk about this on the British media channel. They call it trauma. They say most children in Iraq saw family members mur-

dered before they turned ten. They say that we cannot plan the future. We cannot concentrate in school. We cannot sleep through the night. But I never planned, I never concentrated in school, and I never ever slept through the night. Those little elves were trying to break through my pillow, and my father always tells me that you are only paranoid if you are wrong, so I would stay up as long as I could, until long after the adults were snoring.

One morning, men broke through the front door instead of my pillow. They dragged my mum outside and arrested her. They said they would keep the women in prison until the men agreed to end their protests. My father said that protest was a democratic right. The police officer, who was holding my mother, spat on the floor of our house. My father told me it is rude to spit, even if you have sand in your mouth.

My father sent a lot of letters to different ministries in Baghdad, but my mother never came home. Um Ahmed brings us food from next door. Sometimes her granddaughter brings it over. Her granddaughter is very quiet and very shy. My father tells me not to be shy or quiet. Giving up a voice you have is like giving up a vote you are entitled to.

Um Ahmed has maybe been a widow since the war with Iran. Her husband went missing and was never returned, so my mother said to never call her a widow. But she is probably a widow. We don't say it, though. My father calls that an 'open secret', and says that open secrets are dangerous. But my mother said open secrets are how women get men to act decently, and that keeping people's secrets is polite. I am polite, so I don't call my father a widower even though my mother is missing. And I never tell anyone that there is a small army of little elves trying to hack their way through my pillow every night. They are fast. Whenever I lift the pillow, they are gone. Even though my father

says that 'eyes believe themselves and ears believe other people', he also doesn't agree with keeping secrets, so I am not sure. Maybe when we hear something, it is enough to know it is coming for us.

A toxic affect both warns and erases. It makes a nest out of absences, uncertainties, and anxieties. That which is unseen has its affects precisely because of this. Affect, after all, is known without being seen; felt without verification. A toxic affect evades a gaze, skips across time...

THE PILLOW STORY, BY YOUNG DINA: PART II  
(DOHUK. 2015)

You are back to visit! I got a little older, see? I experimented in the past years, trying to find the little elves in my pillow. My father gave me a stethoscope for my birthday, even though I never told him about the elves. He says I will be a doctor like my mother. I discovered that the little men pickaxing rhythmically in my pillow are actually my heartbeat pounding in my head. I discovered that it is possible to hear blood rushing in my body.

Bombs. They shrieked like the crazy old woman in the neighbourhood whose son came home drooling and incontinent. The first one I ever heard, I thought it was a phoenix. It sounded like a phoenix. It burned like one, too. It made a building in the distance puff up in smoke. But then my father shouted at us, 'Bombs! Get down!' He remembered them from the US war. I didn't remember any wars. 'You do now', he said.

This kind of war is called 'civil'. We put all our documents in a folder and I got to pick out a dress and three of my favourite books. We also put some food in a big sheet with a flashlight and a blanket. When we ran away from the phoenix, my father



looked like an old cartoon character of a peddler with a bundle on his back. I held on to his belt loop so I wouldn't get lost. Everyone was moving like animals being hunted. I saw all the people, my neighbours, but they did not stop to say hello. My mother says it is not polite to go past without saying hello, so I stopped and tried to be polite. No one seemed to hear me. My father said we were in a hurry and this was a special circumstance. Life-and-death is a special circumstance.

We travelled for a long time, and stayed with friends and family on the way out of our home. I saw places I have never seen! The river is wide, but the desert is wider. It opens up like a gaping plane and it does not have many tall buildings or many plants. I forget the colour green. I forget the smell of water. I forget feeding the animals.

And then, we are in a new place. I know it is a new place because we are not connected to things. We reach the limit of my father's realm. He does not shake hands and kiss the men driving the cabs, or the storeowners. They do not know him, and they do not know anyone who knows him. We cannot call out our family name and find someone to answer. We are ghareeb, strangers. When you are ghareeb, my father says, you need money to make things happen. When you are connected, more alive, you do not. Even now, people speak a different language. They speak Arabic, too, but also Kurdish. We do not speak Kurdish. When we open our mouths or show our faces, we show we are ghareeb.

I feel sorry for the big families, with so many people not-missing and not-dead who need a place to be and food to eat and water to drink. We have a little money. It is enough to buy a toothbrush and toothpaste. My father says that my teeth are very important. I am growing adult teeth, and I have to take extra care of them. Without teeth, you cannot eat. 'Baba, we need food to eat, too!' We

have enough money for food. We find a mosque for sleep. At the mosque there is always a toilet, a washroom, and a place to lie down and rest.

It is just my father and me. He tells me a heart has only so many beats, to use them wisely. When the time is up, it is up. I wonder how many beats my mother's heart has. When is it time to call my father a widower? Can a person be more alive and less alive, or is it a final moment, a last beat?

This mosque will not allow me to go in with my father on the men's side. My father calls it 'fanaticism' to expect that little girls live by the restrictions of women. My mother called it fanaticism to expect women to live by the restrictions of women. But these are special circumstances. My father gives up the voice he has. The women staying in the mosque take me with them to the other side. Some of the women wear all black from head to toe. They keep their heads covered even outside of the mosque.

My father is on the other side of a wall, and I sleep on the floor in the mosque as close to that wall as I can. One of the women snores very loudly. I am ghareeb all the way down. I am not connected to anything. I am just one single body with no ties.

When I laid my head directly on the floor to sleep, a chill of fear ran through me. There was no sound of elves with pickaxes chipping away at the snowy down of my pillow. There was no pillow!

It makes sense. My father says that destroying a habitat destroys a people. In Saddam Time they destroyed the habitat of the marsh in the south. In Maliki Time, they destroyed the city of Fallujah and sent us scattering like bugs into Kurdistan. They also destroyed my pillow and sent the elves away.

I know they are not really elves. They say the thing you fear now is the thing you will miss later. It is true! I know that the sound I miss is the sound of

my own heartbeat. This terrifies me much more than the fear that little elves might crawl into my ear while I sleep. I am not connected to things, even those little things that might tickle me or cause me pain or drive me crazy, like the woman whose son was returned to her drooling and incontinent.

I cannot hear my own heartbeat.

This is a special circumstance: I am less alive.

When destroying a habitat destroys a people, ghareeb appears as a toxic affect. For Dina, ghareeb is realized through an encounter with herself as she becomes disconnected, isolated, less a part of the landscape than before, along with those in her life. Absence becomes the condition of possibility for existence.

#### TOXIC AFFECTS

Ecologies of war are packed with living and non-living beings, with less-living beings and with more-than-living beings. 'Brown breath' rises from the floor of a mosque, from a graveyard, from the pillow, the toilet, and from the construction site. These sites of refusal and belonging are thresholds at the precipice of the vital, charged with intense and incommensurable feelings that make up the affective ecology of war.

War-torn ecologies cannot be reduced to relations of reproduction. The living manage relationships with a toxic war ecology through the atmospherics of everyday life, atmospherics shaped by the force of elves and jinn, ghosts and laughing breezes. These are the toxic affects of war, easily invisible or left to whispers or glances, hidden where they like to be, at the margins of the speakable. Toxic affects play tricks. They sap life. They take flesh. They give feeling.

They evade capture. They insist upon meaning for those lives which have been otherwise undermined as meaningless.

Note the ghosts. Anyone who has lived among them knows that *non-living* more-than-humans are agentive and powerful, affecting the quality, tone, and texture of meaning. They are fundamentally ecological, because they are infused in the relations and processes of making new kinds of lives by and through thick intimacies. Living in a war ecology necessitates building upon these intimacies, because they are embedded into the potential of survival.

Whether central to human narration, or ephemeral in their presence, these beings and forces are important ones for understanding the affective components of ecological worlds, and for the political potential of collaboration or confrontation with them at the seams of violation and repair.

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