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## Feast

Malack Al-Haraizeh  
*SUNY Oneonta*

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# Feast

I always dread the night before Eid. It is always a disaster.

Picture this: A girl is digging through her closet that is packed with too many clothes she does not claim but must always choose from. There are dresses, blouses, mountains of cardigans, and undershirts littered on the floor. Sometimes the girl is in the closet with her fingers gripping the clothes so tightly she creases the fabric. Sometimes she'll be standing in front of the mirror, willing herself not to cry in front of her mother. And sometimes you'll find her sitting on the floor amidst the clothes that don't ever seem to fit her right, always feeling smaller than they make her look.

Eid is an Islamic holiday that occurs twice a year. In English it means feast, festival, holiday. We celebrate Eid Al-Fitr, the Festival to Break the Fast, and Eid Al-Adha, Festival of Sacrifice. After a month of fasting, Eid Al-Fitr is always an exciting day where we come together and stuff our faces.

At its best, it is the most peaceful, joyful day of the year. We wake up at dawn when it's still dark outside, but we feel energized at the prospect of seeing all of our cousins. Text messages of "Did you leave yet?" and "When are you coming?" are already being exchanged. At the mosque, I sit on the carpeted rug between my female family members and try to find a peace I haven't felt in a long time. Afterward, the women and I go to find the men, and we all shake hands and kiss each other's cheeks. This is a big deal for a family where bickering and insults are our only displays of affection.

Finally, we meet at my aunt's house and *feast*. On the small dining room table, there are colorful plates of every Middle-Eastern breakfast dish you can think of. I have a big family, and we all huddle around the table; there are hands everywhere trying to make grabs for the food. The adults get to sit at the table, and the cousins are usually on the floor of the living room, putting on a Marvel movie that no one actually watches. The house is loud with

conversation and laughter. We eventually stand to receive our gifts—twenty dollars from each family. Before we head off to see a bunch of distant family members whom we don't really know, my cousins and I walk two blocks to the 7-Eleven to load up on snacks and slushies.

This is both my favorite and least favorite day of the year.

At its worst, it is the most stressful, demoralizing day of the year. We wake up at dawn; my brothers throw on their suits and gel their hair, ready for the day in minutes. I wake up an hour before them all, agonizing over my outfit. In the dim lighting of my room, I'm pulling my undershirt down to ensure it won't add an extra layer to my body. I pull out two kinds of footwear: boots or heels? *Heels make my legs look elongated and slimmer, but boots will cover the length of my leg more so I can get away with the tight leggings under my dress—but they make me look stumpy. Heeled boots are definitely on the checklist for next year.* I pick up the boots. I can never decide on whether I should wear belts: do they over-emphasize my curves? Or will they make me look thinner in this loose dress? Which crime will they forgive me for? I leave the belt on the floor, and move on to the next decision.

My thoughts spiral in this way because, when you're a woman, you need to anticipate every critique, and choose the battles that will be the least damaging to your family's reputation. There will be scrutinizing eyes, pictures, and judgements. In this culture, women are their bodies and nothing else. An ill-fitting top brings shame upon you and your mother until you can correct this wrong the next Eid—and in most cases, not even then.

At its worst, I'm sitting on the carpeted floor of the mosque, barely able to breathe in the packed women's section. The men have the bigger room—all able to freely walk around and take up space. I wasn't built to take up space. I make myself as small as can be, which is a lot harder to do when you're not small. The women never fail to remind me of this.

At its worst, I eat less food than my male cousins, because I'm afraid of getting bloated in my outfit. Before me lies a long day of posing as my best self, and I did not plan for my outfit to accommodate extra weight. At the 7-Eleven, I buy a water bottle and a Reese's. I try not to worry about the breakfast or the candy, because there is always a quick fix.

"That's all you're getting?" my cousin asks.

"We have to see a lot of people after this," I say.

A look of understanding dawns on her face. "Right." She's carrying pretzels and a small package of chocolate donuts in her arms. She puts the donuts back on the shelf. "I'll just get this."

The guilt sits heavier in my stomach than the candy.

Outfit shopping for these big events is a Middle-Eastern girl's nightmare. I attempt to try shopping at the mall first, even though it usually ends with a wistful sigh about what can never be. We fantasize about wearing the cute, short dresses in the store despite the hard truth that we wouldn't look like the mannequins anyway. My cousins and I like to joke about this.

"Sometimes I think Allah didn't make us skinny because he knew we'd feel confident enough to wear things like *that*," my cousin laughs, longingly looking at a revealing black dress on a tall, impossibly skinny plastic woman. Sometimes we forget mannequins aren't real and that we are.

I wonder what my cousin really believes. Is it that we don't wear what we want because we don't feel confident in our bodies, or that we don't feel confident in our bodies because we've been conditioned to hide them?

In our culture, we must dress "modestly." There is not a clothing store in America with decent dresses that fully cover the following areas: full chest coverage (heightened to at least mid-collar bone), anywhere between half and full arms, and full leg. This article of clothing should not be tightly fitted or accentuate your body. The ideal piece of clothing is one indicating you have no body, but if you *did* have one, you'd be a petite girl.

After the inevitable failure of shopping for clothes, we go back to our closets to sift through years' worth of hidden gems that either provide ample coverage or are easy to adjust (For example, if the material is light enough, it can be worn with undershirts, cardigans, jackets, or long leggings.) I try on outfits for hours, and don't have a say in what I wear. The party usually consists of me, my body, my mother, occasionally my aunt, and my objectification.

This routine sucks the life out of me in ways unimaginable. I try on outfits that do not work for one reason or another. My body is presented to my family to be judged. I am screaming internally. My mother pulls and tugs at the fabric.

"If only this were bigger," she says through gritted teeth.

"Why can't you just lose weight?" She pulls the fabric up to my neck with all her might.

"This would be a lot easier if you cared about your looks more." She drops the fabric with a heavy sigh to reveal cleavage that won't disappear.

"Try the next one."

Last year, my fifty-year-old aunt was ridiculed and attacked by my uncle because the pants she wore were "too tight." Essentially, you could see that she had legs. My uncle spoke to my mom first. "Can you talk to your idiot sister about her clothes? She's such a moron."

To this, my mom responded, "Your sister is a *hebiela*; even Malack knows to wear a long *thob* over her outfits."

I'll never forget the accusations that came with "your sister," as if she was too shameful to claim. I'll also never forget the fleeting pride I felt when my mother mentioned me, and the quiet shame in the wake of that pride.

Age does not allow us to escape from this. I learned that day that my body will always be monitored by the men in my life. I wonder if I'll ever have a choice in how I present myself. If I'll ever be strong enough to walk away. If I'll ever have the autonomy I have so desperately wished for my entire life.

This lack of autonomy, this obsession to comply with the rules and look the best, has led to a ten-year struggle with disordered eating.

When you are taught your whole life that your body should be hidden away, you start to believe that your body isn't worth being seen. When you agonize over your body being seen, you resent it for existing. And when you resent your body for existing, you might will it to disappear entirely.

This became my ultimate goal: shrinking enough to disappear entirely.

There's a fine line we have to walk, an impossible balancing act. We have to layer our clothing without looking "too plump." We have to wear outfits that are fitted enough so that we appear slim, without being fitted to the point where we look promiscuous. Clothing should be loose enough to be modest, but not so loose that it looks like a curtain.

Here's the thing: it's a lot easier to accomplish this if you're already thin. If you have a slightly protruding stomach, bigger thighs, or a heavier chest, this fine line is not attainable. More precisely, if you have an average growing girl's body, this is not attainable. I did not understand this as a young girl. My mother made sure of this.

At twelve years old, I was hyper-aware that men and women were going to scrutinize my body, and it was my responsibility to make them approve of what they saw. The first person to do this to me was my favorite person in the world.

It confused me when my mother lectured me on having a full dinner, and then criticized me for eating too much. Often, I desperately wanted to ask her, "where do you think the food goes?" I wanted to ask other questions, too. Ones that seemed to have no answers.

*How can I fill myself and empty myself all at once?*

*How can my body be mine when it is for everyone else's scrutiny?*

*Mama, how can I exist here and disappear at the same time?*

## Eid Al-Adha: Festival of Sacrifice

An image of me at 20:

My cousin's house is glowing; golden hues of the lamps are illuminating a family. The conversation is full of light bickering and passive jabs. The air is

euphoric in a way that only a holiday can be. Our voices are loud, loud, loud in the night. I leave to go downstairs, where my cousins are waiting with a movie, and as I do, I pass my uncle. He is staring at my black top, which is designed similar to a corset. It has thin straps, lacing that runs all the way to the top of the fabric, and the shape rounded at the chest. This isn't noticeable; I wore a black, long-sleeve undershirt and jacket to quieten it. After taking off my jacket, I hoped the volume of that night would overshadow the volume of my clothes.

My uncle's face morphs into one of disgust and disapproval. In this moment, I don't care. I am ready to tell him so. Before I can, my mother throws my jacket at me. She effectively silences me, and quickly appeases my uncle in a way I'll never understand. My mother chose the outfit. She was proud. I am the one who is shamed over a shirt, a body, an existence I have no control over. In this moment, the beauty of the night dies.

*It is said that Allah replaced the Prophet's son with a ram at the last moment before the sacrifice.* I am waiting for that moment in between, the space of time where the son exists and doesn't. Where he is embraced in safety as he goes to die at the hand of a parent who does not deem him enough.

*Mama, am I the ram, too?*

## Eid Al-Fitr

Fasting for Ramadan is one of the most important pillars of my religion. We are not to drink or eat anything (no, not even water) from sunrise to sunset, every day for a month. But in the hours between dusk and dawn, we feast to our hearts' desire.

Ramadan extinguishes any suspicions of my habits. Everyone is fasting, it's not just me. It lessens the guilt of it all. *I didn't eat all day, so I can have this.* And it sends me into a relapse after it's all over. *I could lose more weight if I keep doing this.*

Ramadan is supposed to make us grateful for what we have. We are to see our privilege compared to those with less. Don't get me wrong; it does. But it also makes my family more fixated on weight than ever.

My father walks into the door after ten hours at work. The first thing my mother does is cry out, "Musa, I only lost two pounds. It's been two weeks!"

My father, still covered in black oil and dirt that comes with manual labor, brags, "Yesterday, I checked and I'd lost six!"

"I hate you," my mother whimpers. "I'm not eating anything at night. I won't even have dinner—just a bagel."

At twelve, I took notes. I gathered that by week two, I should start seeing results.

This is the mindset that I get stuck in. When Ramadan is over, it's so easy to fall into a pattern. Do not eat; when you do, binge enough to throw it all up again.

We are supposed to break our fast on Eid. It signifies the end of Ramadan. It signifies the end of making yourself hungry. But the end of one fast always brings another. It is hard to break a fast that I crave. It is hard to break a habit I was able to justify.

## Eid

There is a group of girls standing together, all dressed up in dresses, pantsuits, and jumpers. They're laughing loudly, some of them hunched over themselves, red faced, holding their stomachs. They're glowing. They haven't seen each other in months, cousins close enough to be sisters who don't live nearby. Their excited voices echo loudly, and they don't care. They are in a bubble. Outside the bubble, men and women circle like vultures. They pick apart the girls, from their hairstyles to their shoe choices. They compare them—place them in a competition they did not consent to. So many girls, so many things to say. *I didn't realize she was so short. Why didn't she tame that hair today? That one's definitely the prettiest. Did she not even attempt to cover that butt? Wear looser pants. Disgusting. She has definitely gained weight. That dress is not flattering at all. Yeah, but the other one's dress is way too tight. She's too skinny--does the girl eat? Sick looking. She's better off than the other one, you couldn't cover that stomach if you tried.* They feast, and feast, and feast.

We leave. There is nothing left but chewed up bones.

I didn't want people to pay attention to my body. I still don't. At twenty-two years old, I feel the same way I did at twelve: I am incredibly small in the eyes of others, but somehow still too big.

The years are a blur of relapse, recovery, relapse, recovery. I have had to define my own sense of worth. I try not to associate the way I look with who I am. I'm trying to keep myself tethered here. I've always hungered for freedom to make my own decisions and freedom from the shame I've always felt about my body. The more I shed myself of these cultural constraints, the more I feel at home in this body. On my very worst days, I repeat a mantra that helps me breathe a little easier each time:

You are here.

You exist.

Let yourself be whole.