

Maitha Al Suwaidi

Spoken-Word Performance Audio Transcription

Maitha: I want someone from the audience to pick a number from one to three.

Audience member, quietly: Three.

Maitha: Three? Thank you.

Three.

On the day of Arafah, Baba climbs the palm tree. My palms shield my eyes from the July sun. The birds make do with the silence preceding the *adhan*. Maghera pushes Baba off the ladder.

I am 21, and Mama no longer knows how to shield me. She tells me about the thing, her midnight sickness, and men's anger issues. My aunt does not know why bad people live good lives. Baba thinks I look childish when I leave the house in Ninja Turtle socks and Marvel T-shirts.

I am 21, and I cannot stop men from looking at me. I do not know why bad men manducate good women. Bad men are like vampires.

I am 21, and my mother no longer rewards my good behavior with gold stars and floral stickers.

I am 21, and [Arabic phrase] rings in my head like an emergency siren.

I am 21, and I am convinced that womanhood is shame, running down my legs, running down the halls of my childhood home.

Now pick from one to two.

[Audience laughs]

Maitha: Two.

Man in audience: [laughs] Pick another number after that!

Maitha: Two. Silence.

Two. [laughs]

She died, watching the eclipse, shame running down her legs.

She lived, mistaking abuse for [Arabic phrase], a foolish Disney princess [speaking in Arabic]. No place has longed for the crook of her nose. No place has longed for the weight of her world.

I cannot describe those places to you, for I am not a poet. I am a woman. And this is not a poem. It is a trauma dump. This is not a poem, for it will never see the light of day. This is not a poem, for the story has consumed me whole.

We have one left, so: one.

I will not make the bed nor rid the plant of her dead flowers, nor call my father when I have a flat tire.

I will not lucid dream tomorrow, nor admit to my grandmother that I hug men maybe more times than my own father. I call him Mother's husband when I dissociate, but she does not need to know this.

I will not listen to music while fasting, nor climb the palm tree before Maghrib, nor wear my natural hair during Eid or in front of men Mother calls strange.

I will not remember to pray five times today as *ṭahāra* brings me to my knees. They bruise like withered leaves.

My mother does not need to know this, but I fear the stench of silence. It coats the walls on days like this.

Thank you.

[Audience applauds]