

Jean

'You are Welsh first!' my nan always says,
though she can't speak a word of it.
Kids in her school got a rap on the knuckles
for every 'll' caught whispered in the playground.

Growing up, it was Rosie stories at bedtime,
sinking into her softly warmed marshmallow divan.
We woke to grateful chirps outside the window
since Nan always left out bread for the birds.

She liked bringing us breakfast in bed.
Doorstop toast, butter sliced thick like cheese,
cut into not-quite-triangle shapes
'cause she nibbled the burnt edges first.

Cheeky kids – we still mimic her Valleys voice,
tricking her into saying the shahadah
or asking her to call my dad a kalb.
She swears she has no idea what it means.

Nan prayed with us once. In a room full of women
wrapped in susurrant cotton and prayers.
She stood next to me, head bowed,
enamoured of the quiet loyalty of another tongue.

Ten Men

We say *timman* for rice, not *ruz* like other Arabs.
I heard a rumour that the word came from the British.
When Iraqi farmers refused to feed the colonisers,
shipments of Ten Men rice arrived from India.
Heaved onto the backs of men, stubborn as hakaka,
with sweat on their faces and revolution in their hearts.

'You are next,' the bags of rice teased. Like the Ten Men,
my great-grandmother came to Iraq on a boat.
An Indian bride for a soldier whose eyes turned further east.
Although my great-grandmother's skin mimicked belonging,
the faces around her used letters she couldn't pronounce;
she ate bitter noomi basra, craving the fiery comfort of home.

She gifted her daughter with Indian features
and the knowledge of biryani that burns your tongue.
My family were taught to turn their eyes westwards,
settling on my mother – a lighter bride for the bloodline.
They try to bury the story of a woman who sang Hindi songs.
Triumphant, they nickname my palest sister 'Snow White'.

Croesawgar

In 1966 Jeff Edwards was the last survivor to be pulled from the rubble of the Aberfan mining disaster in Wales. He was eight years old.

In 2016 Omran Daqneesh was pulled from rubble in Aleppo, Syria, after surviving a Russian airstrike. He was five years old.

His face is covered in dust
as they pull him out of the rubble.
Confused, he looks for the familiar reality
that existed moments before he was buried alive.
He searches for his friends –
so impatient to start the holidays –
but his childhood died that day.

Fifty years later, another boy emerged,
face full of blood, dust and sorrow.
His blank stare engulfed the world:
the voyeurs of suffering
in a painful echo of the past.
But the past is a foreign country,
as LP Hartley says.
With foreign food, and foreign ways,
a foreign language,
as different as Aleppo to Aberfan.

A woman from Syria said,
'Wales reminds me of home.'
This place full of fields, farms
and beaches commands you
to belong. Daffodils and rugby,
choirs and coal have caricatured us
into an image as convenient as Lake Australia.
But what about the niqabi woman
speaking Welsh on the bus?

The *ch* of both a Welsh
and Arabic tongue has faced rejection here
and every time someone forgets
the name *Llyn Bochlwyd*,
a piece of the *Mabinogi* disappears.

Last year, 325 refugees were settled in Wales.
Carmarthenshire welcomed fifty-one.
Swansea thirty-three.
Merthyr Tydfil zero.
The Town of Steel made the names
Dowlais and *Cyfarthfa*
known across the world.
Its industry smelted the imagination
of innovators like Isambard Kingdom Brunel.
'The place where modern Wales began.'

But the air turned toxic in the Town of Steel:
pathogens and overpopulation.
'Jobs! Jobs! Where are the jobs?'
Steel men with idle hands.
They hung their heads,
faces dirtied by white not black dust,
trying to forget how useful they could be.
Shedding the coal and the iron
like a refugee loses their cloak of belonging.

Now, turning inwards,
they blame difference for their downfall
and vote to Leave, to close, to reject.
Blinded by misfortune,
proud to remain unaware
that those seeking refuge
have suffered for their own sunken black gold.
It too promises and poisons their veins
as much as Midas' trove.
Can't they see that both are fossil fuels
buried and baked beneath the earth
for greedy hands to grasp and
entomb their unwilling dead?

What difference is there between the suffering
of Jeff Edwards and Omran Daqneesh?
Pulled from rubble,
smothered in dust and blood.
'Wales reminds me of home,' she said.
The dream of belonging sits beneath our soil.

The strength that clings to Welsh language
will not fail by reaching past daffodils and rugby,
proudly pointing to a map, declaring,
'This is the land of *croesawgar*.'

Offa's Coin

*In 2018, eight-year-old Saga found a 1,500-year-old sword
in Lake Vidostern, Sweden.*

Of course, it was Saga who found the sword.
Girl goddess of seeing and poetry.
I cried when I heard how an oracle girl
had unearthed a piece of history to puzzle us.
And oh, how the sword saga binds our stories.

Sweden has buried many Muslims
the world remembers as Viking.
Relearning Allah-embroidered shrouds
that adorn with definition in every careful stitch.
They embraced the ancient and the old divine

seeking eternal life across continents,
death-dreaming of both Jannah and Valhalla.
Is it harder to imagine dark-faced Vikings
or golden-haired warriors sujooding
to the God of sand and Bedouins?

Cardiff rebuilt the Peel Street stones
after the war sandcastled that Tiger Bay taqwa.
Abdul Hamid's restoration is remembered
though you may pray there not knowing his name:
salam, to you, leaving kindness as your legacy.

Middle Eastern ballast bolsters Ebenezer's walls.
Just down there past the job centre, look!
Long may you live, stubborn rocks from possibly Palestine.
And a church built by no churchman: 'the fairest abbey'
has the skilful 'saracen' Lalys to thank.

Lord Henry Stanley rebuilt the walls of Llanbadrig
out of holy love. When he traded cross for crescent,
he blended protection in the blue stained glass.
So don't forget that his shahada testified change
in his heart for the heavens, not the soil underfoot.

And it was Offa's coin that buried 'la ilaha ill Allah'
in Welsh soil. Some days I choke on that coin:
stamped with a sign somewhat foreign, somewhat forged.
We speak the stories that fit best. So I think
I'll write Saga's sword belonged to a Muslim.

My Body Can House Two Hearts

We say *qalbayn* for 'two hearts'.
Pumping parts through crimson sea.
Tied to lands history split,
I've tried to fit uneasily.

A blazing of blood combined.
Obsess, rewind, frustrate me,
say between two stools I fall,
those boundary walls formed early.

But my body is enough,
gently tough, stretched agony.
Growing a love embracing,
rejecting patriarchy,

no need to shame my peers
or let my fears rat-race me.
Two hearts my body can hold,
so I mould my legacy:

to make space enough for all,
standing tall, I rise, breathe free.
Two hearts – a strength none can take;
love's a lake and the world is thirsty.

Arabic Dancing at a Wedding

It can be awkward at first: hesitant
tottering heels start forming a circle.
To relieved cheers and the *zaghrouta*,
confident dancers flow into the centre,
swaying, arms up, to Nancy's beat.
We don't dance like the white girls.

No Orientalist bellies ripple;
here, it's all about that butt
and the bigger, the better.

Tying scarves around our hips,
laughing, sweaty, shaking our tits.

On the edges sit older women,
preferring to watch and remember.

Our waists curl hypnotic like smoke.

Twisting hands of flamenco, ballet, bhangra.
Breathing this carefree moment, so vulnerable.
It is here our sexy holds the gaze unburdened.

Beauty and Blood

The Hammar is a marshland area in Nasiriyah, Iraq. Saddam drained the marshes in order to control the Marsh Arabs.

Capel Celyn is an area in North Wales that was flooded in 1965 to provide a greater water supply to Liverpool...

Imagine they drained the Hammar
to flood Capel Celyn: an exchange of tears,
displacing people like chessboard pawns.
Part the whispering reeds' soft curls
and watch smatterings of life drift lost.
As the little Welsh town fills with water,
hear the pained goodbyes of women
who tattoo each other's stories in secret.
History is always the beauty and blood.

Watching him eat strawberries

kills me. That familiar ache
in the left side of my chest,
conjured by that smile,
the twin of his dad's delicious face.

He has no idea. I can't breathe because of the sweetness:
the sunlight,
the strawberries,
his face.

It isn't spectacular.
We are sat in the kitchen
with the washing machine
for mood music.

There's a line of dirt under his fingernails. Today, he is
an explorer,
a gardener,
a pirate –

turned forager, scouring
the kitchen for snacks.
He settles on the strawberries
just as I knew he would:

a poetic fruit. I don't know if the moment would be as perfect
with a banana,
an orange,
or grapes.

But I want to stay here,
with his dirt-filled fingernails,
juice trickling down that little chin.
Wallahi, I want to stay here.

Glossary

Lands of Mine

Hen wlad fy nhadau: translates as 'the land of my fathers' and is the title of Wales's national anthem. Most will remember singing it in Welsh lessons or from watching a rugby match. It's ironic that Wales is the land of my mother, not my father, hence my use of the reverse term: *hen wlad fy mamau*.

Al Askari and *Malwiya*: are both mosques damaged by ISIS during their occupation of parts of Iraq. I painted a watercolour picture of the Malwiya minaret and imagined walking up the spiral pathway, but it doesn't look like that will ever happen.

Baba: In secondary school all my friends would call my dad 'Baba', thinking it was his name.

Hiraeth: *ah, hiraeth*. Along with *cwtch* it will go down in history as one of those words we managed to peddle across the border. Some people say it means homesickness, others say it means longing. According to my Welsh-speaking poet friend Grug Muse, who I trust in all things, it simply means to miss something.

Mishtaqeen: 'I miss you'. My mum and nan speak so fondly of my maternal grandfather George that it sometimes feels like I met, loved, and lost him when they did.

Kan yawma kan: roughly translates as 'once upon a time', but I prefer Zeina Hashem Beck's interpretation: 'there was, and how much there was'.

Jean

Shahadah: that thing you need to say before you die. If you aren't already familiar, you may remember this word from RE lessons in high school. It means to testify. I testify to my belief in Allah. I testify to my love for my nan, who is not Muslim despite being tricked into saying this many times during our childhood.

Kalb: as far as insults go, calling someone a dog in English is

fairly mild. Amp that up to calling someone a piece of shit and you get the context of using the word in Arabic. It sounds even better in my nan's Valleys accent.

Ten Men

Hakaka: really onomatopoeic word for the crusty layer of rice at the bottom of the pot. It is a delicacy in Iraqi culture and given to your favourite guest.

Noomi basra: dried limes. Bitter on their own but so tasty in Iraqi soups and stews.

Adab

Adab: manners are really important to Arabs. It sounds obvious since most people appreciate politeness, but there are particular manners to follow when visiting an Arab household. Things like always eating what is offered, which is tough if you don't like it, or always taking things with your right hand, which is tough if you happen to be left-handed.

Alhamdulillah: thank God.

Croesawgar

Croesawgar: welcoming. Croeso is one of the few Welsh words my Arab dad knows the meaning of, and that says a lot, I think.

Llyn Bochlwyd: so the story goes that an old grey stag escaped capture by swimming into the lake. Apparently it has been renamed Lake Australia on tourist maps for non-Welsh speakers' convenience. The erasure of language means the erasure of memory means the erasure of us.

Better Version of Bravery

Lynette: in 1988 Lynette White was murdered and three black and mixed-race men from the Cardiff Docks area were wrongfully imprisoned for her murder. It wasn't until 2002 that the real culprit, Jeffrey Gafoor, a white man, was charged and

incarcerated. I'd recommend the BBC Sounds podcast series Shreds for further insight into what is known as 'the UK's worst miscarriage of justice'.

Shahrazad: a character from One Thousand and One Nights. In a nutshell, she had to keep telling stories to save her own life.

Christine Blasey Ford: I remember crying out of frustration and shame following her highly publicised testimony against Brett Kavanaugh. Her courage in speaking out and the subsequent hate she received is an example I think about a lot.

Judge Rosemarie: is the perfect example of female interdependence and empowerment. She has used her privilege and position of power to provide justice for the survivors of Larry Nassar. She allowed over 150 'sister survivors' to give testimony during the court case. She is a queen. Look at her.

Si'luwa's Song

Si'luwa: is a mythical figure from Iraqi folklore with all the best bits of a river witch/selkie/mermaid/siren.

Hnak ma hnak: literally 'here not here'. A traditional form of opening for Iraqi storytelling.

Hufaidh: Iraq's answer to El Dorado. A magical floating island that glows in the dark and is overflowing with ripe pomegranates and buffalo... what's not to like?

Enheduanna: she was the earliest recorded poet in history and lived in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq).

Lugha

Lugha: the word means 'language'. I have a complicated relationship with Arabic. It is the language of the Quran as well as so many perfect words. It's also the language I associate with an unsupportive dad and corrupt Muslims. I taught myself how to read Arabic and part of me regrets not being fluent but part of me doesn't really care.

Nur: light. The light that guides you literally and spiritually. The light you see in people's faces when you connect. The light we all so desperately want to find within ourselves.

Offa's Coin

Sujooding: sujood is considered the closest position you can spiritually get to God.

Peel Street: was the first purpose-built mosque in Wales. It was bombed during World War II, restored in 1947, then demolished in 1997.

La ilaha ill Allah: if you aren't already Muslim and you say this, you'll become a Muslim and then it's bye bye bacon for you.

My Body Can House Two Hearts

My Body Can House Two Hearts: I've fallen in love with cynganedd, as much as I can with my non-Welsh 'patchwork tongue', and this is, in large part, due to Grug introducing me to Mererid Hopwood's wonderful breakdown of the ancient poetic form in *Singing in Chains*. *Cynganedd* is designed to be read aloud, so please indulge me by reading this piece out to yourself or anyone who will listen.

Qawwam

Qawwam: refers to the daily responsibility of Muslim men. Over time, reminding a man of his duties, as required by Islamic law, has been replaced by emphasis on his rights. True qawwam, however, is a beautiful, albeit rare, show of strength, love and loyalty that is hard not to admire.

Arabic Dancing at a Wedding

Zaghrouta: when done well the sound makes a statement of happiness and celebration; when done badly it sounds like a frightened turkey.

Paradise of Poets

Dijlah: the Tigris river.

Watching him eat strawberries

Wallahi: Arabs love a good oath, and the highest oath you can make is swearing by Allah's name. Commonly used to demonstrate a point: 'Wallahi I didn't eat your Snickers.'