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Be A Crossroads
For Mehrina

By: Tala Khanmalek

To survive the Borderlands you must live sin fronteras be a crossroads.

-Gloria Anzaldúa

when they ask you
where you're from, tell them
you're a constellation. say,
I am a group of stars,
each a particular place but
all connected
through me. tell them you are
a recognizable pattern
of divine being,
named after your great-grandmothers,
Mina and Mehrangiz.
every time someone says
your name, they invoke
your ancestors.
every time you
call on yourself, you remember
who you are. they will try
to rename you. if they call you
what they want,
don't worry. no one can erase
your memory.

you descend
from lands on the way
to the sea, from relatives
in many tribes.

Yazd

The hottest north of the gulf coast, Yazd was a Zoroastrian city-center during Sassanid rule. I've been there and so have you. When you were Fakhri, my grandmother, you lived in Yazd with Babbaye, a wealthy scholar over ten years her elder. You touched the clay brick architecture and stood with your eyes closed between wind towers to feel the guided breeze on especially dry days. Known for its immunity to large battles, the city is a holy oasis of gold between the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut deserts. This is where others flee, those displaced from war, too poor to move further away from home.

Ahvaz

Built on the banks of the Karun River, Ahvaz is the meeting point of multiple ethnicities. Your kinfolk in the south Khorasan province speak Persian, Arabic, and a dialect specific to their village. When they tell you that Iran is homogenous, teach them about the particularities of your tribe in Ahvaz. Tell them that African peoples were here, were

always in Iran. Tell them about the sugarcane plantations, now factories, in Khuzestan. Sugar is in your blood; you know the flavor of it well, that pleasurable sweetness within the bounds of pain. Your sense of taste alone, detecting global histories of racial slavery long before Portuguese slave ships sailed across the Atlantic, when West African women were forced across the Sahara, sold in Persia and later, the Muslim empire. When they tell you Islam is homogenous, teach them about your great-grandmother's traditional tattoos. The visible marks on her face, a sign of piety, beauty, and sacred wisdom. Tell them about your mother's tattoos, about your own.

Shiraz

Also built on the banks of a river named Rhoodkhanaye Khosk, Shiraz is a city of gardens, of arts and letters, of dreaming. Hafez and Saadi, Saadi and Hafez; you've visited their tombs but they weren't the only poets from Shiraz with knowledge of the heavens. There were women too, like Mehrangiz and your grandmother Heide, both of whom were born and raised here. You are a poet, as are your parents. You are a scientist, as was Heide. She knows about the molecular structure of nature, and studied the circular formation of cells like your grandfather Fakher. Unlike him, she understood that not all nations construct upward to the sky. This she taught your father. A concept from ancient religions that worship the exclusive powers of women, that grow plants with our nutrient rich blood—something your grandfather Mahmoud did without knowing why, something I do and you intuitively began to do without instruction.

You are from big metropolitan cities like Tehran, Houston, and Los Angeles. You are from underappreciated cities with long legacies of resistance like Oakland. You are from cities often forgotten yet imprinted in our subconscious like East Lansing and Kingwood. You are from unrecorded cities in Georgia, places none of us have seen or ever will. You are from back roads and escape routes. You are from generations of runaways, people who ran towards freedom, people who fought to survive, people who stayed and died.

You are from oil.
You are from water.
You are salt
of the earth, and
you carry home inside you, inside
your true name.