

yalla habibi  
yalla habibi  
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yalla habibi

pöemK in Zarabęzi.

nadia f. alamah

## From Poets:

"In a time when we're finally finding the platform to embrace our wholeness unfiltered, it's such a delicious experience to relish in Nadia Alamah's debut poetry chapbook, Yalla Habibi." - **Lady Narrator, OC**

"The beauty of this book is in how easily it connects with the reader. Yalla Habibi [...] welcomes the reader into its pages." - **Glen Birdsall, Flint, MI**

"[Yalla Habibi] really opens a door to a different world for those who have never heard/seen/met with this type of culture. I'd encourage anyone to read it and it continuously impresses me!" - **Mouminat Damer, OC**

Yalla habibi

pöemK in 3 arabëezi.



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*for everyone who's ever been asked,  
which feels more like home?*

*the heart surpasses any border.  
anyone who asks has yet to know.*

---

*"wen la2aakoum habibi/salimouli 3aleh/  
taminouni el asmarani/  
3amla eh el ghourba fih?"*

*- Abdel Halim Hafez*

# Yalla habibi

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i made you baklawa

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## letters// ya teta

Ya teta,  
center of  
the family labyrinth,  
keystone if  
removed would  
shatter the temple

ya teta,  
made of wisdom  
you'd stop a  
mage in his  
tracks with your  
know-how,  
with a cure for  
everything, even  
heartache.

bas no matter  
how much you  
tell us,  
I'd still choose  
career over kids.  
I'm not ride or die  
like you.

maybe I won't queen  
an empire, bas bi sara7a  
as much joy as it brings you  
a life without making  
would end me.

still we have the  
same conversation  
of table-tennis words  
which ricochet off  
everyone's brains  
without sinking in,

and yet the joy in your  
eyes, sparkling with sun,  
after months without  
overshadows all else.



## letters// dear 3rab men

he who stands  
when his wife enters  
the room forcing  
all to acknowledge  
she who is queen  
among her court

crazed and outraged, he  
stormed the French embassy  
in his red pajamas demanding  
his pension for having fought  
as they denied him all the same,  
the bottle he took to in his shame.

a velvet suit worn  
in Kuwaiti summer  
because it was the only one  
he had and he dressed  
to impress, to bring  
something to his family.

elder, married too many times,  
fell in love with the maiden-she  
relinquished his most precious  
commodity, his name  
and took hers to have her by his side.

//

these are the legends i must live with.  
these are the men who gave and took,  
brilliant and burning, flames in the wind.  
this is the only side of the story to have survived.  
this is the torch i won't pass on.  
where are the women in our stories?  
mine were threatened with gasoline.  
mine stayed in the shadows.  
i am not yours to take.

unless you take my name too?  
then we'll talk.

## letters// ya mama, ya baba

ya mama, ya baba  
ma badi koun doktora,  
i swear after seeing  
scars and rashes in  
medical books, there's  
just no way. in truth.  
your dreamcloud  
sunflower, sunshine  
moonbeam in another  
alternate reality unawares of  
rent, i shine, no, thrive  
in the light of the arts,  
i crave the pen and paint  
and stories above all else.

could it be expected otherwise  
after the epic adventures of  
muhammad and musa? rebels  
of the people. khadijah the strong?  
khawla bint azwar? after  
grand retellings of our own  
legends? trips to the library?  
all else in between?

your doctor girl i'll never be.  
i fell long ago for a life of  
travel, stories, bohemian  
splendor, and if only  
i had the sense to be as  
practical as you. now i'll  
struggle for it, as once  
promised, but at least  
i've learned from you.  
years since, we've made  
our peace. now all's left to  
convince is everyone else.  
(teta.)

## 3arabi, ingleezi or 3arabeezi//

Qamara, ya qamara  
why are you sad?  
the tears ebb &  
flow into streams  
that chase the tides,

so what if 3arabi was your first, then second?  
3asfour,  
you fluttered about in  
singsong oumi & abi,  
oblivious to the distinction  
of pancakes from labneh,  
Qur'an from Queen  
hijab & abayah from jeans?

that it slowly slipped from  
its home, a light burning at your throat  
and now the words don't go  
any further past tongue and now

english is more homely?  
3ayouni don't fret, we're a product  
of transplanting, even as  
the years pass we struggle, in our homes,  
to remember the mother tongue

and yet it's still part of you, always  
such that when you are in great need  
to speak your roughest heart  
it cascades into being,  
uninhibited wings unclipped  
mind barrage of whirlwind quips

and then, even you know this:  
that 3arabi, ingleezi or 3arabeezi  
you're never any less than  
our daughter.

## yalla habibi//

yalla habibi,  
it's time to go.  
we've waited long  
enough, if we stay  
any longer we'll  
miss our flight.

yalla, habibi.  
i know you want  
to stay but as  
much as here is  
home, ours is much  
farther away for  
now and we're  
glad you think of  
here as home too,  
because it is yours  
for as long as you

remember how to  
get here, you'll find  
your way back in  
the end.

bas for now, it's time  
to say goodbye.

habibi, take these  
letters with you  
but wait until you're  
a bird before  
you read them okay?  
yalla, meshe.  
i'll see you soon.

yalla, habibi,  
another year passes



and yet a year feels  
like ten every chance  
we get to speak.

our family knows  
the ropes of  
the long distance  
game. i guess that's  
why it's not so much  
trouble for me,

to go and leave  
you here. but i  
promise, it won't  
feel that long, okay?

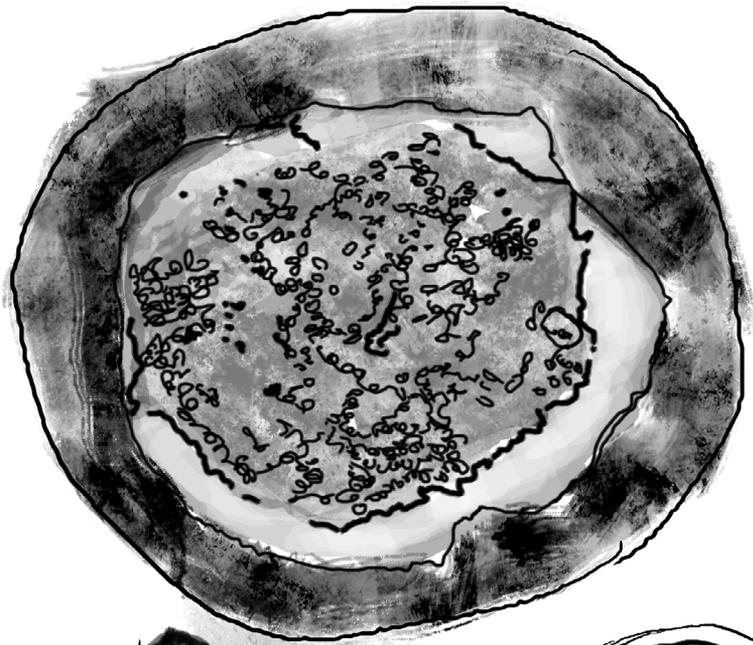
time will fly quicker  
than you can say  
whatsapp.

i'm restless, another  
journey calls, a chance  
to change,  
a lifetime of chances,  
of time turning ever so  
slowly and yet,  
i blink and it's gone,

the years, the memories,  
our carefree summers,  
gone with the sunsets,  
as much as i chase its  
chariot, like sand it  
will only slip from  
my grasp.

freedom is  
fleeting, as soft and slick  
as its feathers.





### 3la rasi//

The beauty of  
3arabeezi is the  
golden rule of 3la rasi.

jiddo wakes before  
she can say tirwi2a  
takes the zaa'tar jar  
to the furun, stands  
like a gentlebird, his wings  
folded deftly at his sides,  
distinctive. a dove  
fawning over his dove,  
a hawk as the men prepare  
this queen of breakfast,  
mana'ish. slices the tomatoes  
and stirs the shai.

omar tells me there's  
an art to making it perfectly.  
you must heat the water to  
a certain point--only crystal,  
there must be music when  
it meets the glass, the sound  
as instrumental as the drink.

on a dearborn  
caravan visit, 3mo  
shows us his tomatoes  
growing crisp, green, lush,  
opens his kitchen cabinet  
doors to show baba  
he labels his spices  
all the same:  
"baba edame."

all of them live by 3la rasi,  
as we eat by the karam of their hands

## hummus/tabbouli/baba ghannouj//

when ppl find out im lebanese  
they say, wao! omg i lav  
hummus & tabulli  
som e will say baba gann oosh is  
my fave bbqsh 4 lyyyyffe

look at this beautiful byproduct of the  
capitalization on my culture  
while you gnosh on your deli tub  
of parsley and bulgur wheat, at best,

& down spoonfuls of  
your garbanzo bean paste  
like medicine instead of  
scooped lovingly with your  
first three fingers in its  
divine vessel-cone  
of pita (gasp! calories!)  
as hummus was meant to be loved,

ask yourselves how many arabs you know

and how many friends  
have made this food for your  
get-togethers & if they did  
how many made it bc it was expected  
& it's what people know  
ask

abt something other than  
hummus, tabbouli, baba ghannouj,  
falafel, shawarma, or baklawa.

will you wrinkle your face at  
bamieh? bazella w riz? batata b jej?

will you eat sauda with cinnamon and salt?  
will you try fatteh with  
lamb's foot  
and still say you love  
middle eastern food?

will you join the family table for  
foul? will you find the joy in ritual  
of food as the gatherer,  
and more than a centerpiece  
for interesting conversation,  
more than a shiny  
badge of uniqueness  
to collect with your  
garden buddhas &  
hot yoga?

I guess what I'm trying  
to say is,

if food is culture  
will you try to love all of my culture  
instead of the pretty bits?

will my own people still love  
our parents' food all the same?

will we celebrate our food or  
will we abandon it?

and my biggest question,

Will we ever get to be as American as  
dessert hummus  
or do the gates shut  
right after you've had your meal?

## **i made you baklava//**

because to me, you are  
sikkar & 3asal,  
your sweetness is  
the cooling nahr to  
quench my nar, ever-  
searching to slay,  
ever-restless.

i chopped pistachios  
with my knife so that  
with each cut, you would  
taste the shade of the  
cedars on a summer's day.  
the rosewater is for your  
cheeks, for the subtle  
reminder that kisses  
are a compromise when  
you must choose between  
lips or dessert. when you

taste mine, the temple  
ruins crumble, the mountains  
level with  
the fertile valleys once  
sheltered,

the salt of the  
ba7r lingers on our skin,  
i feel the sun's breath  
on the gentle breezes  
and become one with  
the wind.

you wonder why baklava  
makes me feel so strongly,  
but in truth it's the closest  
i can get to memories of qashta.



## family legends//

Our family  
is Legend with  
stories. We are  
a myth made of  
names.

those close  
calls recounted  
as we sat around  
teta, the ones which  
she & our parents,  
ensure are etched  
in the seams of our  
skin, the memory  
a web woven across

the threads of generations--

what they did,  
how we made it  
off of every last  
chance taken,  
every hope saved,

so that we don't  
forget, so that  
they are immortalized,  
& as life is now,  
it came with a price.

now these tales live tall  
in my head, and i wonder  
what all else we'll add, as  
we craft this elaborate map.

and then i remember.  
they, we, left everything  
for a new life here.

## **a short-fuse history//**

as much as i'd like to,  
it's not like i can  
sift through archives  
unraveling the ribbon  
intertwining generations  
and matri/patriarchal lines

first gen's, we're more like  
the short end of a fuse.  
so easily tampered with,

ready to set off a catalytic  
reaction crumbling archaic  
structures and rewriting the books

we'll be lucky if  
in two hundred years the names  
Zaki, Ahmed, Muhammad  
become interwoven so tightly in our  
spangled stripes and stars that  
we become inseparable  
from the John's and Doe's

we will hold hands with  
Gonzalez and Lee as we  
cut a new cloth for this flag

if we can take root before  
ICE gets too good at lawncare and  
razes this wildflower landscape  
leaving only the monotony of  
manicured lawns-- soulless, lifeless,  
the long-dead dream of  
an obsolete America.

but we can, and we will.

we won't let this stand,  
we will liquify and melt ICE  
until it is reduced to a puddle  
of bigotry piss and is washed away,

we will weave, and weave,  
until our children share lunch together  
with joy at the range of colors and spices  
that we've prepared for them.  
even if it means having a short-fuse history here,  
regardless of whether or not they feel  
pride at our presence, even if  
Muhammads switch to  
Mo's it won't matter,  
because we will be  
exactly where we set foot and said,  
this, here, is home, for now,  
this is where we stay.

i dream of my great-great-granddaughters  
finding my name tucked into an index of  
rebel poets and artists, devil-may-care dreamers,

to find my family a thread in their vivified tapestry  
of American names stitched from all corners of the globe,  
to see that their name and their face  
belong here just as much, if not more,

for them to assess that in our hand of their past,  
we are self-made archivists  
cataloguing the present,  
weavers of our story,  
leaving promises in the patterns

so that when their fingers feel the texture  
they are transported to  
our time, they will not forget our start,

and they will remember that  
as long as we live on and build our home,

together,  
our battles were not in vain.

our short-fuse sparks the  
first of several generations.  
maybe i'll never trace my  
family back through to its roots,

yet perhaps that's not the lesson  
i'm meant to leave.  
perhaps a fuse-short history  
is meant to let go  
of the notion that the past,  
tangled in its own mess,  
should ever define us.

## **glossary//**

3la rasi - on my head

3mo - uncle

3asfour - bird

3ayouni - my eyes

abayah - traditional dress

baba edame - baba's a good guy

ba7r - best place in the world

bas - but

bi sara7a - tbh

furun - bread/pizza stove

habibi - my love, but with 100 levels or types

jiddo - grandfather

karam - generosity

labneh - breakfast (yogurt)

"ma badi koun doktora"- i don't want to lose 10 more years of my life  
(and sleep) to school when blood scares me

mana'ish- the queen of breakfast (poem has a visual)

meshe- sounds good, general agreement

nahr- river

nar- fire

oumi & abi - my mama and baba

qamara- girl-moon (your face lights up like the moon)

qashta- like sweet cream ice cream, but better

sikkar & 3asal - sugar & honey

shai - tea

teta - grandma aka. the head boss

tirwi2a - the most important meal of the day

ya- oh

yalla 1. hurry up or 2. general agreement

zaa'tar - herbal mixture that goes on the queen of breakfast



**about//**

Nadia is a Lebanese American writer, poet, and visual artist originally from Flint, Michigan. Nadia has previously self-published *Awakening*, a selection of abstract prose poems from her online project *Everhart's Notebook*, & otherwise focused on creation of community-centric arts projects and workshops in Flint prior to relocating to the West Coast.

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**type notes//**The font used for the cover and inside title page is Siti Maesaroh. The text was printed in Ebrima. "Thank you" font is "Tahu!" by Rizal Khurasan.

**art notes//** All illustrations were created digitally by Nadia with use of her own photographs as references.

# Thank you!

شكراً! shukran!

YAY, you made it to the end! I truly hope you enjoyed the journey and the read, and maybe picked up a few new Arabic words along the way! I'm so happy to share this with you. This project took me hours of writing, rewriting, revising; drawing, fixing drawings and drawing again; making all kinds of changes to the poems, layout and book design from start to finish (literally, while I was getting it printed, I still made changes. Guess a poem really is never finished!)

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Nadia F. Alamah