



# Wrapping the Grapeleaves



**A Sheaf of  
Contemporary  
Arab-American Poets**

Edited by  
Gregory Orfalea

INTRODUCTION

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Contemporary  
Arab-American Poets

Edited by  
Gregory Orfalea

*for Evelyn Shaker -  
a true believer, fine  
scholar & friend -*

*Gregory Orfalea  
11/11/84*

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee  
Washington, D.C.



## INTRODUCTION

When a people leaves the dry, hot lands of civilization's oldest cities (Damascus, Byblos, Jericho) and finds itself in one of the youngest countries on earth—what happens? For one thing, poetry. Like mint in a wall-crack, poetry sprouts from such ruptures of sensibility. *Argeeleh* smoke has been challenging the air-conditioner for a long time, and it is the purpose of this gathering of poems by Arab-Americans to evidence that confrontation.

Arab-Americans may be more inclined than most to ask the question—Is it right to isolate a poetry based on ethnic origin? Why? Arab-Americans are descended from a people which lived on the crossroads of the East and West, and their heritage is uniquely international. They know well that poetry is one of the few human means to break through barriers of race, religion, nationality, and language.

Still, is there not something interesting, even exciting to cull from poets who have diverse concerns, but whose common heritage can touch tensions and loves particularly felt (though not solely) by Arab-Americans? When a teacher wants to imbue her black students with a sense of pride, she might read them Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, or Countee Cullen. If a history teacher wants to evoke an emotion to Japanese-Americans who were forced to live in internment camps during World War II, he might read Lawson Inada. There exist poetry anthologies for virtually every American ethnic group: black, Hispanic, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and so on. To date, there exists none for contemporary Arab-American poets.

This collection—the first of its kind for Arab-American poets since Khalil Gibran wrote in Boston in the 1920s—is intended as a sampler. Kamal Boullata, distinguished Palestinian artist and critic, is editing a full-scale anthology of Arab-American poetry soon to be published as a book.

Anyone who has been to the Middle East knows the remarkable richness of Arab poetry and its direct impact on daily life. Poetry for the Arabs is not reserved for the dainty or academic—as in the West—but used on important occasions as a connector of people.

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the permission given by the poets to reprint poems from their original publications:

"To My Mother," from *The Quiet Wars* (Sheed & Ward, 1962), and "For Fawzi in Jerusalem," from *Blood Rights* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), by Samuel Hazo;

"Generation," and "First Snow," from *The Neon Distances* (Golden Quill Press, 1980), by Joseph Awad;

"Lines for My Father," from *Dying with the Wrong Name: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1979* (Anthe Publications, 1980), by Sam Hamod;

"Letters to My Mother," from *A Bowl of Sorrow* (Greenfield Review Press, 1977), by B.M. Bennani;

"My Father and the Fig Tree," and "Grandfather's Heaven," from *Different Ways to Pray* (Breitenbush Publications, 1980), by Naomi Shihab Nye;

"A Gift You Must Lose," from *The Antioch Review*, and "The Bomb That Fell on Abdou's Farm," from *Abraxas*, by Gregory Orfalea



For instance, while at a funeral in the farming village of Ar-been, Syria, I witnessed a poet-grandchild of the deceased read a poem as the wood coffin was lowered into the freshly-dug grave. The poet—and not the priest or imam—said the last words of farewell and tears seemed to flow to the rhythm of the poem's inflections. Earlier, at a *hafli*, a tremendous spontaneity occurred with cousins jumping up chanting unplanned poems as salutes to the American travelers, or praise to the hoop of the night. The Arab poet, or singer, invokes the night as a Muse before unraveling his imagination. Too, there is the Arab tradition of *zajal*, where poets try to outdo each other in extravagant imagery, a kind of poetic duel which serves a popular entertainment.

A James Dickey or Robert Frost reading at a Presidential inauguration is a rarity in the U.S.; for the Arabs, such a conjunction of public ceremony with poetry is practically required. A politician-poet in America (as in the case with Eugene McCarthy) is considered an oddity. In the Arab world, diplomat-poets like Nizar Qabbani of Syria, Ghazi Alsaibi of Saudi Arabia, and the late Palestinian Kamal Nasser are common.

Ibn Rashiq, the eleventh century scholar and critic, puts priorities this way: "The ancient Arabs wish one another joy but for three things—the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet and the foaling of a noble mare."

Curiously, American poets of Arab heritage are far less "central" to their communities than they would have been in the old country. Arab-American elders stress the business spirit. Nevertheless, when I had the privilege of presenting an evening with Arab-American poets (four of whom are printed here) at a political convention in 1980, the response was overwhelming. The audience was magnetically attracted to the poets; obviously, the great Arab love of poetry had not been drained from New World veins!

The poets here have many interests other than their ethnicity. For instance, Samuel Hazon's moral distillations contemplate life on a Metroliner, a 747, as well as autumn leaves and World War II comrades. Sam Hamod has many humorous poems, and poems of love and longing. Naomi Shihai Nye has produced a delightful cycle of poems on Latin America. Imaz Abinader is concerned with the solitude of the metropolis. Joseph Awad's religious poems remind one of the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century. In my own work the themes of living on the edge of America—Far West and Far North—have spellbound me. Some of Ben Bennani's reflect on love and romances lost and won.

But there are themes that Arab-American poets do share. The primacy of family to the poet's selfhood is omnipresent. In fact,

one might not be exaggerating to say that for poets of Arab heritage, family is self. This is in marked contrast to Emersonian "self-reliance" because with the Arabs, reliance on the network of family was a key to survival. The sometimes extreme familial closeness has led to poems of a kind of super-empathy, where identity blurs; the tensions between generations are heightened by the unprecedented independence of youth in America. A fine example of this occurs in the poem (unfortunately too long to print here), "After The Funeral of Assam Hamady" by Sam Hamod. The youthful Hamod describes his embarrassment and awe when his father demands that their streaking car be halted for prayer. The Hajj rolls out his rug—in the middle of South Dakota!—and bows toward Mecca.

What does it mean to be of Arab descent? What was lost (or gained) in mixing with America? After removing grape leaves from the ice-box which remind him of his dead father who picked them, Hamod tries desperately to re-study his Arabic, "though it seems so late." Bennani contrasts the "saffron suns and listless seas" to an American November with "tears and moon at the windowpane." America is variously seen in the poems here as a place of "cement sentiments," "Columbus' mistake," where "palms stand tall in the smog." But it is also a land where snow falls like "visible love."

The homesickness in many of the poems is not merely nostalgia. There are conscious efforts (and not so conscious forces) that revive ancestors and Arab culture in the present: figs are "emblems," a medal from the Damascus street of Gold is the gold surf off California, and finally, the poet. If loss of family means loss of self to the Arab-American poet, love can reincarnate the dead in the soul of the living. Hazon makes this clear at the end of "To My Mother," and it is implicit in the shocking immediacy of Hamod's "Lines to My Father."

Inevitably, some poems here address the Arab-Israeli crisis. Note the different tones and approaches to America's one-sided Middle East policy found in "To Fawzi in Jerusalem," "The Bomb that Fell on Abdou's Farm," and "Letters From Home."

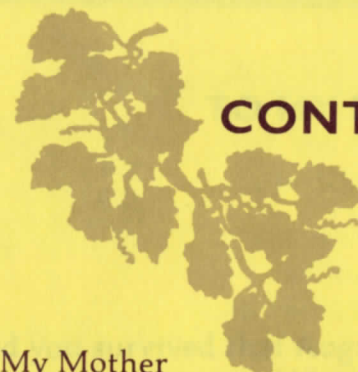
You will find the Arab love of fruits and gardens in these poems, and a sun both oppressive and life-giving. Greens have always been somewhat miraculous to the Arabs, as if the world were assumed more sand than water (Babylon's Hanging Gardens were a dramatic testimony to the fact.) Tendril-like Arabic calligraphy is also evidence of *horror vacui*, or fear of a void, and in Arab civilization gardens were a primary way of filling that vacuum. Here are grapes, pistachios, mint leaves, okra (*bamiyeh*)—and the "gift of Allah," figs.



It is harder to cite what, if anything, Arab-American poets have learned technically from ancient Arab prosody. The poets are typical American-free-verse advocates, the dominant mode in the West for most of this century. Certain favorite Arab figures of speech, such as *tibaq* (use of opposite meaning words in the same line) occur in such phrases as Hazo's "the battlefield of any bed," and Awad's "praise unspoken." Hazo's play with repetition is not unlike that found in a classical Arab *qasida*. The situational drama of Arab poetry can be found in Hamod's work. I have spotted *jinas* (homonyms in close proximity) in Arab-American poetry and internal rhyming (*tarsi*) seems fundamental to many of the poems here.

There is little doubt that Arab-Americans can take pride in the richness of their heritage and the life of the emotions in these poems. This collection is only a beginning. Hopefully, these "grape leaves" will whet your appetite for the full meal.

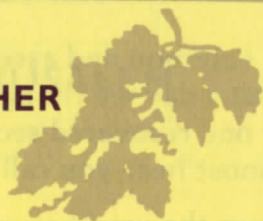
## Gregory Orfalea



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## TO MY MOTHER



Had you survived that August afternoon  
of sedatives, you would be sixty-three,  
and I would not be rummaging for words  
to plot or rhyme what I would speak to you.

Tonight I found a diary you kept  
in 1928, and while I read  
your script in English, Arabic and Greek,  
I grudged those perished years and nearly wept

and cursed whatever god I often curse  
because I scarcely knew one day with you  
or heard you sing or call me by my name.  
I know you were a teacher and a nurse

and sang at all the summer festivals.  
You made one scratched recording of a song  
I often play when no one else is home,  
but that is all I have to keep you real.

The rest exists in fragile photographs,  
a sudden memoir in my father's eyes  
and all the anecdotes of thirty years  
remembered like a portrait torn in half

and torn in half again until a word  
deciphered in a diary rejoins  
these tatters in my mind to form your face  
as magically as music overheard



can summon and assemble everything  
about a day we thought forever past.  
For one recovered second you are near.  
I almost hear you call to me and sing

before the world recoils and returns . . .  
I have no monument, my beautiful  
to offer you except these patterned lines.  
They cannot sound the silentness that burns

and burns although I try to say at last  
there lives beyond this treachery of words  
your life in me anew and in that peace  
where nothing is to come and nothing past.

**Sam Hazo**



## FOR FAWZI IN JERUSALEM

Leaving a world too old to name  
and too undying to foresake,  
I flew the cold, expensive sea  
toward Columbus' mistake  
where life could never be the same

for me. In Jerash on the sand  
I saw the colonnades of Rome  
bleach in the sun like skeletons.  
Behind a convalescent home,  
armed soldiers guarded no man's land

between Jordanians and Jews.  
Opposing sentries frowned and spat.  
Fawzi, you mocked in Arabic  
this justice from Jehoshophat  
before you shined my Pittsburgh shoes

for nothing. Why you never kept  
the coins I offered you is still  
your secret and your victory.  
Saying you saw marauders kill  
your father while Beersheban wept

for mercy in their holy war,  
you told me how you stole to stay  
alive. You must have thought I thought  
your history would make me pay  
a couple of piastres more

than any shine was worth—and I  
was ready to—when you said, “No,  
I never take. I never want  
America to think I throw  
myself on you. I never lie.”

I watched your young but old man's stare  
demand the sword to flash again  
in blood and flame from Jericho  
and leave the bones of these new men  
of Judah bleaching in the air

like Roman stones upon the plain  
of Jerash. Then you faced away  
Jerusalem, Jerusalem,  
I asked myself if I could hope  
for peace and not recall the pain

you spoke. But what could hoping do?  
Today I live your loss in no  
man's land but mine, and every time  
I talk of fates not just but so,  
Fawzi, my friend, I think of you.

**Sam Hazo**


## GENERATIONS



See how he loves me.  
Sunlight racing  
Down the front porch steps,  
He flies into my arms,  
Engulfing me like summer  
In a small boy's eyes—joy,  
A joy I father  
His head nests on my shoulder,  
Dusksoft,  
Darkening my vision.  
I would die for him.  
He hangs on tight  
As if I might.

**Joseph Awad**





## FIRST SNOW

Parents far asleep in the next room,  
 The boy creeps out from high-piled quilt and blankets,  
 Vamped by a ghostly silver window light.  
 Cheek against the icy glass, he gawks  
 At white from nowhere filling all the night—  
 The streets, the roofs of porches, the black trees—  
 A living white, alive with minute winks  
 And sparkles, wheeling endlessly  
 In the widening silence; not a sound to start  
 The spirit from its perfect wonder. (Wonder  
 Is praise unspoken.)

Now they are far asleep in frozen hills.  
 There have been blazing summers, a great war.  
 And all the skylines of his world have changed.  
 Cheek once more against a winter window,  
 He wonders at the silent white descent,  
 Wife asleep in the room, the children grown  
 And roaming skylines of their own tonight  
 (Be with them, Lord). It is as if no years  
 Or war or neon din had intervened,  
 As if the boy had never left the window,  
 As I watch the snow falling forever in the darkness  
 Like visible love.

**Joseph Awad**



## LINES TO MY FATHER

*(On the Death of My Father, Gary, Indiana, 1967)*

My Father is watching over his mosque, silently  
 He hovers now, praying;  
 My Father is sitting on the step watching,  
 Holding his chest where the bullet entered his prayer;  
 Holding on, the maple trees blurring in his eyes,  
 He cannot rise, he is praying as his blood comes,  
 My Father is planting maple trees beside his mosque,  
     digging each hole  
 Carefully, patiently, knowing the trees will grow,  
 He is watering the grass outside his mosque at 3 a.m.,  
 His work is done; now my Father covers the grass  
 with love.

My Father is moving East, to Lebanon, eating kib'be,  
     his

Mother offering him grapes and shade,  
 He is walking in the mountains, drinking water;  
 My Father is sitting on a park bench beside me  
 Taking the air, watching my children in the grass,  
 He is talking of water,  
 Trying to rest,  
 But he must go his mosque waiting.  
 My Father, dreaming of water when wakened,  
 When I found him, had only blood in his mouth.

**Sam Hamod**



## LETTERS TO MY MOTHER

Good morning, sad priestess  
 & a kiss for your wet cheek.  
 It's me! Sinbad  
 your senseless son who  
 many moons ago  
 took off on his fantastic voyage.  
 Don't you remember how he packed  
 the green morning of home  
 inside his faded bag! What finesse  
 stuffing his clean underwear  
 with little bundles of dried mint leaves.

I'm alone now.  
 The smoke bores the cigarette  
 The typewriter is bored.  
 My pains are birds  
 searching for a nest.  
 Yes, I've known women in America:  
 cement sentiments  
 & beauty carved of wood.

Greetings to our large house  
 to my bed & books  
 to the children of our block  
 to walls we decorated with chaotic writing  
 to lazy cats sleeping on windowsills  
 covered with lilacs.

Twelve years, now, Mother  
 since I left Tangier.  
 November is here.  
 He brings his presents pressingly:  
 tears & moans at my windowpane  
 & November is here.  
 Where is Tangier?  
 Its saffron suns & listless seas?  
 Where is Father?  
 Where are his eyes  
 & the silk of their look?  
 Where is the open yard  
 of our large house?  
 Carnations chuckled  
 in the shade of its corners.  
 Where is my childhood?  
 I dragged cats by their tails  
 across the open yard.

I'm alone now.  
 My pains are birds searching for a nest.

**Ben Bennani**



## MY FATHER AND THE FIGTREE




For other fruits my father was indifferent.  
 He'd point at the cherry trees and say,  
 "See those? I wish they were figs."  
 In the evenings he sat by my bed  
 weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.  
 They always involved a figtree.  
 Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.  
 Once Joha was walking down the road and he saw a  
     figtree.  
 Or, he tied his camel to a figtree and went to sleep.  
 Or, later when they caught and arrested him,  
 his pockets were full of figs.

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.  
 "That's not what I'm talking about!" he said,  
 "I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth—  
 gift of Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the  
     ground.  
 I'm talking about picking the largest fattest sweetest  
     fig  
 in the world and putting it in my mouth."  
 (Here he'd stop and close his eyes.)

Years passed, we lived in many houses, none had  
 figtrees.  
 We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets.  
 "Plant one!" my mother said, but my father never did.  
 He tended garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,  
 let the okra get too big.  
 "What a dreamer he is. Look how many things he  
 starts and doesn't finish."

The last time he moved, I got a phone call.  
 My father, in Arabic, chanting a song I'd never heard.  
 "What's that?" I said.  
 "Wait till you see!"  
 He took me out back to the new yard.  
 There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,  
 a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the  
     world.  
 "It's a figtree song!" he said.  
 plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,  
 emblems, assurance  
 of a world that was always his own.

**Naomi Shihab Nye**



## GRANDFATHER'S HEAVEN

My grandfather told me I had a choice.  
Up or down, he said. Up or down.  
He never mentioned east or west.

Grandpa stacked newspapers on his bed  
and read them years after the news was relevant.  
He even checked the weather reports.

Grandma was afraid of Grandpa  
for some reason I never understood.  
She tiptoed while he snored, rarely disagreed.

I liked Grandma because she gave me cookies  
and let me listen to the ocean in her shell.  
Grandma liked me even though my daddy was a  
Moslem.

I think Grandpa liked me too  
though he wasn't sure what to do with it.  
Just before he died, he wrote me a letter.

"I hear you're studying religion," he said.  
"That's how people get confused.  
Keep it simple. Down or up."

**Naomi Shihab Nye**



## A GIFT YOU MUST LOSE

How long before light welds us together?

Palms stand tall in the smog,  
old owls at the neck, taller  
than little grandfather  
whose clever coal eyes and hands  
worked the embroidery machine.  
Three years have passed and the palms  
are still tall, the smog still burning  
the lungs. What has changed  
is my chest, wheezing at the sight  
of a St. Christopher's medal  
hanging in a jeweler's window.

No safety in numbers for Wahib.

In the Damascene Street of gold  
he showed us the sheets from London  
no thicker than spacers in a printer's rack  
gold blades too dull to shave with.  
Talking pistashios under our nails  
we drank dirt coffee, waited patiently  
while Wahib, eyes quick and black  
as coal, hammered and boiled  
the gold, cooked with a desert wind,  
coaxing it into *Mary Our Mother*  
with a steel needle. This medal

given to grandfather he gave to me



when we returned to America. Gold burned  
 into my breastbone the dry  
 almond village, the no-legged beggar  
 on the median in Beirut, flies  
 loving our slaughtered sheep, heaps of cherries full of  
 worms, the shepherd  
 flute crooked with blood.

Bright eyes and hands  
 embroidered with scars  
 wound around my neck as medal  
 and not once taken off. Wahib,

Wahib, why did you go off

with your family for a Sunday  
 by the river? Why is the river  
 still burning? The tank took no day  
 off for God and God veered.

The halftrack ground you and your  
 twin baby girls. Now, they will never  
 know evil. Only your wife remains  
 mutilated for her mirror

And grandfather? He died breathing  
 water in the war of his lungs.  
 He died as you with children around him.

What is there to say now?

Last week at the Pacific  
 a wave pulled the Mother-in-Gold  
 over my ears and I dove and dove  
 for hours. In the gold surf I dropped to the knees  
 the sun hammered

it hammered me.

**Gregory Orfalea**

## THE BOMB THAT FELL ON ABDOU'S FARM



The Phantoms approached, we were told,  
 like warps in the sky, like gossip  
 gone real, aimed in steel  
 at the eyes of the village.

All the farmers and farmers' boys ran  
 to the rooftops and watched,  
 for it was terrifying  
 and beautiful to see a wedge  
 of silver up from the South.

And they began to fall with a  
 vengeance, under the anti-air-  
 craft that ringed Damascus and the  
 villagers whooped for there seemed  
 a magic field around their fields.

Until a cow-shed flew in red to the sky.  
 And a mother milking collapsed  
 in her milk. The milk ran pink.

Next door, in my great-uncle's newly-  
 irrigated fields, a bomb fell.

The mud smothered it. The mud  
 talked to it. The mud wrapped  
 its death like a mother. And  
 the bomb with American lettering  
 did not go off

Water your gardens always. Always.

**Gregory Orfalea**



## LETTERS FROM HOME (To my father)

Everytime you weep, I feel the surface  
of a river somewhere on Earth is breaking.  
You wipe your eyes as you read aloud  
a letter from the old country. From the floor  
I watch the curls of the words through the sheer  
pages. Your brothers and sisters have gathered  
around you. I don't understand the language  
but feel a single breath of grief holding this room.

Your mother tells of her weakening body.  
She walks to the church but cannot leave  
the village. When you sat with her,  
I recognized the common colors of your skins.  
You wanted her forgiveness for your absence  
but did not ask. She took you to her closet  
to show you the linens she had gathered  
which had already yellowed. Her hands seemed small  
through the lace. She did not understand why  
you hugged her shoulders.

She tells you of the refuge people have found  
in the village. Others have gone to Paris.  
You have a niece who is a doctor, a nephew,  
an architect. Your own children seem like nomads.  
They sit in scattered apartments. You can't see  
your three daughters gazing from their windows,  
or your three sons pacing the old wood of their rooms.  
Yet you write to your mother, they still pray

You visit your mother now when you can.  
Each summer you cross the Mediterranean;  
each summer you stand behind her house  
looking into the sea, hoping she does not die  
this time. And when these letters come, I run  
my fingers across the pages. I hope I can learn  
the words you have come to know

**Elmaz Abinader**





## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

SAMUEL HAZO was born in 1928 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania of Assyrian and Lebanese descent. He has published 12 books of poetry (the latest, *To Paris*), a highly-regarded study *Smithereened Apart: A Critique of Hart Crane*, and works of fiction, including a novel, *The Very Fall of the Sun*. His omnibus collection of *Once for the Last Bandit* was nominated for the National Book Award in 1973. The founder of the International Poetry Forum, Hazo teaches at Duquesne University. He and his wife, Mary Anne, have a son.

JOSEPH AWAD was born in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania in 1929 and raised in Washington, D.C. He graduated from Georgetown University, and studied at the Corcoran School of Art. In 1980, he published *The Neon Distances*, a book of poems. Of Lebanese and Irish background, Awad is general director of public relations for Reynolds Aluminum Company, and is current national president of the Public Relations Society of America. He and his wife, Doris, have ten children and live in Richmond, Virginia.

H.S. (SAM) HAMOD was born in 1936 in Gary, Indiana, the son of Lebanese immigrants. His father was a *Hajj* and constructed two of the first mosques in America, in Gary and Michigan City. Dr. Hamod received his doctorate from the University of Iowa and has taught at the Universities of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pittsburgh. He has also written for both commercial and educational television. The author of eight books of poetry, Hamod's most recent is *Dying with the Wrong Name: New and Selected Poems* (1980). He has two children, and currently lives in Washington, D.C.

B.M. BENNANI, 35, was born in Lebanon, has lived in Morocco and is now an American citizen. He edits the literary magazine, *Paintbrush* and Ishtar Press, and has taught at the University of Wyoming, State University of New York, and Northeastern University. His first book of poems is *A Bowl of Sorrow* (1977), and his translations of Palestinian Mahmoud Darweesh's poems, *Splinters of Bone*, were published in 1979. In 1982, he will publish translations, *Four Arabic Poets* (Unicorn Press). Currently, he teaches at the University in Bahrain.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE was born in St. Louis in 1952 of an American mother and a Palestinian father. Her first book was *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), and she recently won a National Poetry Series Award for *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982), chosen by Josephine Miles. She is a noted folk-singer whose recent album is *Lullaby Raft*. A graduate of Trinity University, she resides with her husband, Michael, in San Antonio, Texas where she is active in the state poetry-in-the-schools program.

GREGORY ORFALEA was born in 1949 and raised in Los Angeles, California of Syrian and Lebanese ancestry. He has degrees from Georgetown University and the University of Alaska, has worked as a university teacher, journalist, editor, and political activist. He has written a novel, and collections of short stories and poems. A volume of poems, *Pictures at an Exhibition* was published in 1977. While contributing articles to *Middle East International* and other publications, he lives in Washington, D.C. and is at work on a novel concerning the Palestinian "exodus."

ELMAZ ABINADER, 28, was born in Carmichaels, Pennsylvania of Lebanese immigrant parents. She studied under Philip Levine at Columbia University (where she received her masters degree) and is now a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska. Ms. Abinader has taught at Marymount College in New York City and now resides in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her work has appeared in *Nimrod*, the *Greenfield Review* and other literary magazines.

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