sold by her father
to an old man just sixteen
on their wedding night

the furnace burned and
they slept but only she woke
groom poisoned by coal

in Iskenderun
her father finds a new man
for her to marry

from Lattakia
a car takes her south a new
Damascus baby

grown Beirut beauty
with two bachelor degrees
traded for a ring

matriarch Grandma
you kept your children alive
through Lebanon’s war

be proud of your strength
abused but resilient
deserving of praise

you wanted to choose
who your son could oppress but
he loved my mother

swallowing your pride
as you taught me to I am
born in Glendale

under your roof but
I am an American
dancing in your palm
GRANDMOTHER FROM SYRIA

Soft, young woman, the sun that browns your body
and dries your apricots and your laundry,
has brought you to the window sill of a stuffy home,
and filled your ears with the downstairs neighbor’s screams,
her brown face entangled in the branches
of the man she had to marry.

You sit in the sun and turn the radio louder,
even when you don’t feel like music.

Soft, young woman, the sun that browns your body
keeps you at the window sill,
the echo of each slap, each dish breaking
with the force of a falling tree, the man, the shop owner
opposing the tenacious roots of the woman, noisy neighbor,
doesn’t bother you,
you’ve learned
you only get a good beating when you’re bad.

My heart holds your stories,
I see your strong body, hear your rich, coarse voice,
bruised pomegranate, sweet and sure
like your neighbor, the sun, the music,
like your children and their children,
like me.
brushing hair
30 minutes every morning
seems silly now
war means no school

days outside
playing
parking lot soccer
sneaker soles thinning
rusty nail pierces foot
at least that day
there was no blade
against your throat

days inside
playing a game called
cowboys and Indians
that you called
“kieboys and Indieons”
until the day
you poked your neighbor
in the eye
with an AK-47

nights inside
the whole apartment complex
in one bomb shelter
packed tightly
like the canned hot dogs
everyone ate
not caring if they were halal

a year
passing like this
makes you miss the nuns
at Collège du Sacré-Coeur
who smacked your knuckles
with a wooden ruler
until they swelled
like juicy figs

your dad won’t leave home
but your mom will
taking you
and your siblings
to the states

a teenager
watching
Sesame Street
struggling
to understand
the difference between
winking and blinking
wondering
what this
“dawn’searly” light
is
that the white man
speaks so fondly
of