

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dania Ayah Alkhouli: Two Poems

Dania Alkhouli · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

Survivor

To have survived and to be a survivor
are two very different things.
Survived – past tense.
An anchoring of expectations:
Being done. Okay. Healed. Fine. Moved on. Over it.
Never allowed to ache at the ghosts
pulsating beneath your scars.
Survivor – present tense.
An ongoing process:
Moving forward instead of moving on. Forgiving,
but never forgetting. Blaming yourself
even harder when you fall
in love with another man
who proves himself destructive too.
They don't come with labels—
warning signs and red flags.
They come with their trauma.
Stories of what they survived,
and I almost hear survivor.
I think resilience, which means strength, which means man.
I want to caution against generalizing.
To leap and hope that net of trust will appear,
but I forget what I want may not
be what I need, and they are more than ready
to capitalize on that.
Survivor or survived,
the world doesn't give a shit.
Just expects you to grow thicker skin.
Doesn't teach others to stop clawing at those skins.
I don't tell the world
most days I still wake up in anxiety—
amnesia holding my tongue hostage.
Wondering who caused the ache

in my heart this time.
 Grabbing my phone like it were oxygen,
 or the answer to that question.
 Checking to see if any of the men
 from the black hole that sucked my life,
 reached out to tell me they miss me.
 They're sorry. To assure me
 it was actually their loss, not mine.
 Even the new "new man" is more absent
 than present. A trademark.
 I awaken at such random hours
 I don't believe in sleep anymore.
 Some days it's past noon,
 other days it's before the trash is picked up.
 I can hear the trucks pull in
 and I remember watching them
 early Tuesday mornings before school.
 They looked like ballerinas to me.
 Big blue ballerinas,
 gracefully dancing across black pavement.
 Picking up what we deemed worth throwing out.
 I saw treasure in our own trash.
 That's probably why I'm a poet.
 The ability to see beauty in any element of life,
 even trash.
 Even men.
 *

This Ability

A child with a learning disability will always have that disability.
 —American Psychological Association

I am growing
 into the second half of that statement—
 more disability than child.
 More rewriter than student.
 More hopeless than creative.
 Twenty-two years and I thought I was wearing this label,
 turns out it is wearing me.
 Even therapists struggle to help
 me undress from this. This anchor
 weighing me down from reading
 analog clocks and complete sentences.
 A disorder that rearranges the order
 of words and numbers before me.
 Scrambling the psychology of processing
 information others swallow with ease.
 Brains are born far before we are;

when the fetus begins curling
forward into position.
When neurons are magnetized
to their final destinations.
A competitive sport,
where only the fastest survive.
Because any neuron that does not find a home—
somewhere to settle and thrive—
is pruned out by its environment, and then destroyed.
And any neuron that escapes its demise
becomes mine—the excess clutter
forever disabling.
And like those neurons, I too compete
for a space to thrive
in this world so eager to prune and destroy
what is not fast enough.
On those days, when I am the pruned
but un-destroyed, I become the rage
brewing at the core of giving up.
Knocking knuckles against my skull;
hoping the vibrations are violent enough
to rewire this short circuited brain.

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