

Would it be okay if we told a story? Hoda Tawakol and Me

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Wäre es in Ordnung, wenn wir eine Geschichte erzählen? Hoda Tawakol und ich

FATHERS I
(THE HOLE, OR A BEGINNING THAT TOOK A PART OF ME)

Between *the* horizon is a line
A border that separates us from them.
or so Baba told.

If we were sanctioned to the outside
We would have realized it all an illusion
Like the color of the sea and sky
Masquerading in shades of azure and cerulean,
or ultramarine,
when it were all but as “clear” as *the-so-called*
thin air.

We spent years looking at the horizon
From behind panes of glass that burnt our
eyes.

Twenty years of burning sea
Of trenchant grass
Of dead sea.

Just looking
Turned our eyes opalescent
a white color of the gods.

Gods whom we did not know
God whom we have yet to meet
Arched atop mountainous fire

It was said
That scaling the edge of
where they lived, turned bodies—
scorched bodies into ash.

That’s why they called the place we lived,
one of the undiscovered “wonders of the world.”
As if to wonder,
To sit in bewilderment
Obliging with the prescription of the Fathers
To read of the Earth
But never to enter it
could offer salvation to our souls.

To sever
To offer

To offer is to sever.
To sever
To offer

Fathers in Northern Africa
and the Eastern Mediterranean
exist as mere metaphors.
Fuel to the State apparatus.
Keeping kids on the tender of a hook.

Behind the Haze of where he stands
He, counting the social consequences of our actions
Like currency—
Weapons that will be lodged in the Fire.

If we came from fire,
Where are/were the breaks?

Between skin, keyboard and screen,
where if not for us, then for me,
would I find, the crackling skin, to be set,
to press the liberate button?

Burnt To Life?
From human, to animal?
From plant, to soil?
From Mother to sun?

EN I used to begin every essay with a poem. My mother was a poet of some renown in Egypt where I, and she, were born. That was until a psychological breakdown subsumed her when I was eleven years old. I was the eldest of four children, all born cis male, living with our father in a small, two-bed, prefab house in a desert plain on the outskirts of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, having arrived as fresh meat from the United States, where the shape of a dream of life had not taken on contour or form. As I was born on Mama’s birthday, I decided to carry on the tradition of writing poetry as a discipline.

The discipline of punishment finds its brute force for Brown and Black kids of my generation—those born in the early 1980s, those who maintained the last vestige of promise for so-called expat “boomers” in African countries such as Egypt, those who managed to “maintain appearances” but who struggled to make ends meet—as a regulatory practice. Such was the case for the four of us who hustled up and down between top and bottom bunk beds and onto the floor. Discipline is an astonishingly peculiar word. Discipline is falling in love. Discipline is routine, maintenance, hygiene; it is getting up in the morning. Discipline is aspiration—not only for advancement with regard to wealth, but also for wellbeing, and thus for the apparatus. It is the shield, the *makeup* to mask one’s own despair or—in the case of my mother and my grandmother, who once served as a maternal surrogate—the mask became the means to hide their manic depression, a disease that killed the creativity of them both and thereby ended a dynasty of famed creativity in Egyptian film, music, and letters.

In my attempts to map this absence, this rupture from history, I have come across several artists, notably women, and queer artists who often speak of the multiple “mothers” in their lives. After the death of my grandmother in 2023, I sought to gather archival material about her legacy, only to find myself at the center of an embittered familial battleground that left my wounded bones back in hotel rooms watching my family members amid plumes of smoke on the Saudi-owned Rotana TV-channels. It is not widely known, but in May 2004, in a conspicuous deal, the privately-owned Saudi company Rotana was sold 70% of Egypt’s film heritage. It was issued the original film negatives of over 800 film prints from the National Film Archives—a public resource.¹ One of the largest national cinemas in the world—the often-mythologized Hollywood on the Nile, the cultural artifacts of the most populated Arabic-speaking nation in the world at the time—now belongs to the same country which held us hostage in that prefab house.

In the North German city state of Hamburg, a friend who had orbited the planes of my heart as I ventured from the heart of one country to another would soon reach out via telephone, ushering me through corridors of an imagination as unkempt as it was rich in detail. The London-born, Egyptian and French Hoda Tawakol, who came of age between the interstices of my life and that of my parents, was working on a film of her own that she wished to discuss. The first part was reserved for private viewing only. The first section revolved around stitched Super-8 films that unfolded largely in the style of a home movie. They were of Tawakol’s mother, Honey, whose death in 2021 had come as an unexpected jolt. Not long after the lockdowns induced by the global

Honey, Hosneia and me, Spain 1971 /
Honey, Hosneia und ich, Spanien 1971



Honey and blue sky, Spain 1978 /
Honey und blauer Himmel, Spanien 1978



pandemic of Covid-19, Honey was gone. Tawakol had only just begun an interior act of reconciling her art and life with the story of what she refers to as that of her “three mothers.” These figures constitute the orbitals of her development and also include her late grandmother, Toutou, and well as her late child-minder, Hosneia.

Set to This Mortal Coil (Elizabeth Fraser)’s rendition of Tim Buckley’s infamous “Song to the Siren,” Honey appears as a complicated, multidimensional character. Her penchant for sociability, for keeping up appearances, elides whatever might lay beneath. Depicted through pictures of layered light that flicker and refract across what I assume to be the waters of the Mediterranean Sea bordering the south of France, each scene haunts with its languorous howl. Martin Aston, writing in 2011, speaks of the “Song to the Siren” as a “haunting” “lure” —two resolute descriptors that find route in Tawakol’s art.² On occasion, the light of the screen becomes so bright that it leaks from the subject, forming an abstract painter’s image pane. Like my own mother, Honey held several private pursuits. A talented painter, Honey’s most evocative portraits were of faces situated amid a vanishing shroud. Looking at them collectively, there is something painfully

Toutou smoking on the balcony, Spain 1977 /
Toutou beim Rauchen auf dem Balkon, Spanien 1977



self-aware in them, such as appears when gazing at a self-portrait by Gauguin as Christ or one of the several myths that he would weave from the insights acquired as a “Sunday painter” during his previous life as a stockbroker.³ But unlike Gauguin, Honey would never gain full control of her story nor, necessarily, do we.

Hoda Tawakol’s childhood, looked at in pictures, might seem pitch-perfect at first. Study the interstices between the frames, and the absences begin to reveal prospective chasms. Sediments of sandcastles unspool eerily constructed wounds that require suturing. Tawakol, who can be found as a child playing on beaches in Alexandria and Spain, possesses a kind of diasporic of longing, a seat of untended melancholy that the Lebanese artist and poet Etel Adnan would endeavor to reclaim as a seat of agency in her “surging” poetry, seeking a “vanquished search for the vanquished” or an “exile from an exile” in her poignant, personal articulation, despite her own unrelenting zest and curiosity for all that life and art had to offer her.⁴

Our parallels and efflorescence from the same *constituted* site of origin bear some similar points of traction. Poetry was disciplined out of me at age eleven. Hoda’s earliest memory of making art, of drawing, was to begin at the age of eleven. As she matured, the necessary practicalities of surviving led her down a path into a business career to help sustain her family. Her art was never to become secondary; but certainly it was disciplined out of the forefront, out of her sightline in order to offer support to the expectations put upon her by Honey, a woman whom Tawakol, aged five, greeted as a stranger.

In a second chapter of her working film project, her grandmother Toutou becomes a point of fixation. I immediately connected with this character, not least because of her name. After I was born, my own mother was compelled by my father to quickly become pregnant again so that she could birth a child who would be naturalized as a British citizen—a

feat that would not materialize. She miscarried twice. When my brother, Yousef, was born two months premature as a jaundiced, emaciated baby, I—sixteen or so months old and devoid of the traditional faculties of speech—anointed him “Toutou,” which continues to be his nickname to this day.

The similarities between our two Toutous perhaps formally end there. My Toutou, frightened and shy like me, gave me a strength initially. We shared a bed in our early childhood. We slept head to toe, and I used to pack his school lunch. By the age of fourteen, he wished to turn his lanky carcass into a temple of muscle. He became aggressive, then religious, before he cooled. He’s known as the “playboy” in our family. “The hot one,” “the buff one,” “the favorite.” He loves to be in front of the camera, to claim space, to seduce—even though his aptitude for putting together words was, until he became an obsessive autodidact, rather limited. Hoda’s Toutou, contrarily, likes to take a backseat behind the camera—which is why, when the camera lands on her in the second installment of Tawakol’s film project, she is often found shooing our gaze away from her; but that coyness belies a smile which often cracks wide-open to create a temporal lodge amidst her frames.

Toutou gave birth to Honey, Hoda’s mother, aged sixteen. She lived in Frankfurt, and when Hoda and her brother were mere toddlers, she took them in while Honey continued to live a pseudo-bohemian life in Paris. On the face of things, she may have appeared strict, but a closer inspection of these scenes reveals an enticing flaneuse who was exacting in her propensity for love. She nurtured a space where boundaries existed, where mealtimes where abided by, where play was sanctioned as a form of social development. For Toutou, the cosmopolitan facets of life were boundless with regard to all things. She travelled with the family across Europe to Southeast Asia and spent extensive periods in Spain—the corridor between the historic cultural planes of Europe and Northern Africa. Considering Tawakol’s superstitious



Toutou with white coat, Prague 1972 /
Toutou mit weissem Mantel, Prag 1972

nature, not to mention her fascination with myth and its potential for world-building, it feels apt to consider the parallels between the historic seat of Andalucía or Al-Andalus, its rich heritage, and its architecture from Cadiz to Cordoba to Seville, which hark back to an era where cultural heterogeneity and its coexistence seemed possible. The moments we lose sight of create imprints that leave a deposit beyond any comprehension of consciousness.

I am chain-smoking on the balcony as the train rushes by, asking Hoda when she began her full-time career as an artist. I am watching the final section of her film. I am crying for the loss of my youth. I do not tell her this. I learn that after the birth of her second child, Tawakol was overcome by a fervor to commit to the fullness of her creativity. She enrolled in an art school in Hamburg and quit for good her full-time job as an executive working, not ironically, for a skin- and body-care company. Let us not forget that skins are the metaphorical shields adorned by mothers, often materializing as protective shields. In patriarchal society, these vestiges prescribe and delineate the formation of a life—an existence that far too often suppresses a woman’s right to engender her own path of work, to indulge in creativity, or even to be seen. Thus, the entanglements of Hoda Tawakol, her “three mothers,” and my own person, as well as their alignment in the convening of this space of language, converse here in a staging—the first public platform for the narrativization of these stories. Here we are engaging in a gradual act of threading, and by proxy of disentangling, for that is the practice of art, and in turn, of life.

Now Hoda’s skin, her body, and her mind were hers to contour and contort, an aspect that was evident in early works which resembled torsos and masks—appendages, and bodies distended, vessels pulled apart from their seams, as if the paintings of Tracey Emin and Francis Bacon had come to life under one roof. Of note during this focused period were works such as in the “Hole” series, 2008 and the “Cut Out” series, 2008-ongoing, which at first look akin to patterned mandalas—vestiges to offer relief. Look again, and they turn out to be methods of camouflage in the construction of various masks. These have been created by accumulating likenesses of the artist’s face, which she traced and mapped, developing works such as Hoda Cut Study N°1” (→ 86).

Rather than serving to obscure the artist’s person, the

construction of these skins is hybridized with contours gleaned from the various skins of figures from across the expanse of popular history—from the artist’s mothers through to super models and iconographic pop figures such as Iggy Pop. The result is a suite of face coverings that speak to what the artist and academic Zach Blas refers to as a theory of “collective” opacity, as is evidenced through his own distinct project of queer faces, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–2014).⁶

The conception of the body as a weapon, as a site of attraction and danger, one of relief and estrangement, of salvation and perpetual confusion, would become the driving force in the artist’s practice over her twenty-year career. The gendered attributions and annotations of flora and fauna, the codification of racialized and embodied gender stereotypes in social media, pop culture and mainstream media, become points of fascination and fixation for Tawakol, who studies the semiotics of these spaces.⁷ The artist gathers her reflections in her studio and often manifests these ideas initially as drawings with pencil, ink, salt, dye, water, or whatever materials are available at a given moment. She has used the metaphor of a “pressure cooker” waiting for the ideas to brew, to stew, until they are unrelenting in their cause, purpose, and pursuit.

After a prolific act of purging, years of ideas unfurl; the form of the artwork is pulled and pared back. Indeed, the very trick of “enclosure” is a slippery edge that the artist is constantly playing with—maneuvering back and forth along a continuum of the surreal and the sublime. In her now iconic “Mummies” series, such as *Mummy N°11*, 2020 (→ cover), the rounded voluptuous forms of the female body are contained in a table-top presentation, resembling a diminutive version of a sex doll, among other associated motifs. It exists here to be appreciated, never to be touched. Nylon, rice, fabric, and resin craft the silhouette of this body, swelling any archetypal physique. The nipples of Tawakol’s mummy are dislodged, wayward, disjointed. Tranquil, colored thread and rope is strung and arched around the centerfold of the body, offering guardianship, sanctioning it as protector, never allowing it to live untethered or alone. Our faithful mummy, in the end, may serve as a lure of desire; but it will never be able to roam the Earth of its own free will.

It is at this nexus that I find myself swimming in the palm grove of Tawakol’s mind and eye. Lures, which are traditionally utilized in the desert to train falcons, are instead used by Tawakol as a vessel to experiment with embodied forms of womanist aesthetics, such as in *Lure N°28*, 2023 (→ 108). Composed of layer upon layer of soft fabric, wadding, luminous materials, and sequins, the artist’s dangling, unfurling body, which hangs outside of the Georg Kolbe Museum in Berlin, suggests a queer alternative to the heteronormative, masculine sport and business of falconry—one that is often associated with indigenous communities, including the tribal people of the Arabian Gulf.⁸ What would it mean to move outside the encampments of the “lure” that we have come to know all too well, in favor of a form of sensualized luring—which, in this case, serves as an opening to a distinctly diasporic form of female visibility?

I embrace Alice Walker’s concept of “womanism,” which seeks to argue for the courage and the audacity, as well as the self-assurance, that are necessary in order to be with, to work with,

and to create space for other women of color, without working against men, but instead by co-existing with them.⁹ Living in France, Tawakol recalls her earliest immersive encounters with cinema being with Federico Fellini because his female characters eschewed easy categorization and were allowed to indulge in their eccentricities, as well as to be unabashedly feminine.¹⁰ She makes particular note of how their womanliness strung into the skin of the ostentatious scenography gave credence to a new way of looking, one that eschewed narrative hierarchies of the male and female gaze.

The threshold of gender is a motif that appears in varying guises and with different tonalities throughout the artist’s career, such as in *When the Dates Turn Red* (2015-ongoing) (→ 22). Here, the mutability of palm-tree gender (which is traditionally indiscernible in the first three to five years of the tree’s life) is brought to expression in a game of playful cultural vernacular. Specifically, the artist explores the cultural associations and codification of the female gender, along with the sense of anxiety that looms with it. A loose-lying, bulbous date palm, red. It dangles, astray. In another, the body of the palm extends upward to what resemble two arms that could sit in for the arms of a boxer about to enter a caged fighting ring.

As in much of Tawakol’s art, there is a stirring cinematic impulse. The mise-en-scène, such as in her large-scale work *Feed Me the Milk of Your Eyes N°5*, 2024 (→ 106), an overhead fabric piece, serves to set a scene. It is a shield, a skin, an agent of protection. In its title we have a summoning, or a warning. Superstition and its needs. Our wants, they are unrelenting.

The insistent desire to probe, to deeply examine, and to disentangle material culture routes us through Tawakol’s art. The codification of how to root through to the route, however, returns us back to Hoda’s film about her “three mothers.” Some of the first works that preoccupied my imagination in Tawakol’s oeuvre were her seemingly pristine “nude” figurines. They can be conceived or

understood as cousins to her “mummies.” They are amputated bodies put on display. Figuration without a face. Actors without legs. Their presence, nonetheless, is entirely embodied. Their cumulative sensibility is inspired by the physical manifestations of the women whose porous DNA runs through hers—the women who do not resemble her on the streets of Hamburg, where she lives and works today. The women who appear in movies, in cinemascope, in wide-screen, in fantasy sequences—women akin to her three mothers.

I am led to the final sequence of Tawakol’s film, which focuses on Hosneia, who helped care for Hoda up until the age of six. After this point, Hosneia had to leave Frankfurt for Egypt, to marry. She is more dark-skinned than the rest of the family. I wished to ask Hoda whether she could be from the “Al Saeed.” I held my



Hosneia at the beach, Spain 1971 /
Hosneia am Strand, Spanien 1971



Hosneia and me in the car to Spain 1972 /
Hosneia und ich im Auto nach Spanien 1972

Toutou and Honey, party in Frankfurt 1969 /
Toutou und Honey, Party in Frankfurt 1969



breath. In the film, it is the late 1960s, and Hosneia is dressed in what now resembles Afro kitsch—orange bandanas, patterned dresses, and unusually shaped shades. Hoda refers to Hosneia as the proxy, the womb, whose touch, whose hold, proffered life and connection, the sense of a home base. Her devastation at Hosneia’s impending departure left Hoda in wanton ache.

When I look at these moving pictures, Hosenia reminds me of my youth in South Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Of growing up and seeing Black Americans in downtown L.A. wearing the Egyptian emblem of the Ankh. On the playground, and at school, they bore incredibly long dreads—perfectly braided hair. They had extensions, and they sported denim jackets festooned with broaches and badges of pyramids and other vestiges of our shared culture. I noticed these iconographic traits when I first laid eyes on Tawakol’s “nudes,” which resemble these characters, but without the material cloth.

Still, an unrelenting point of fixation preoccupied me regarding these naked vessels. I had been born male. Yet my life was one of embargo. My father threatened military school when, aged fifteen, I told him I wished to marry a man. Subsequent to this, life seemed even more perilous when he, the keeper of our domain, a surgeon, professed that he would amputate my genitals and transmute me into a woman. I ran away. First to Egypt, then somehow, back to Britain. They, the family, all followed a year later. But the reality of my person eventually severed us apart in the most harrowing fashion.

I have, consequently, lived the last twenty years probing what it would be like to have lived, or indeed to live as a woman. To assume an “acceptable” gender for him, for them. I have examined the female form and adopted the practice of being a “sitter,” in an active game of assuming “presence”—a means to discuss how I am received, perceived, and transmitted into the world. As I cast my eyes onto Hoda Tawakol’s *Nude N°30* (→ 79)

colored in luscious pink, magenta, and orange—her Barbie-like hair crystalizing as if into a palm tree about to adorn the world with new life—, I realize that something in me, too, assumes the identity of her “three mothers”—the dreamer that was her biological mother, Honey; the helpless vessel of Hosneia; and the rational self that was Toutou. In the end, life is a daily ledger of cumulative acts and their effects. What story do you have to tell, and what will you write? It, everything, it is all yours.

- 1 Al Jazeera (2004) “Acquiring Egypt’s Movie Heritage.” Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/5/24/acquiring-egypts-movie-heritage#:~:text=In%20March%2C%20Rotana%2C%20a%20company,to%20as%20early%20as%201935,24%20May%202004>, accessed 31 July 2024.
- 2 Martin Aston (2011) “Song to the Siren’s Irresistible Tang,” *The Guardian*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/nov/17/song-to-the-siren-classic>, accessed 31 July 2024.
- 3 Belinda Thomson (2010) “Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth,” in Belinda Thomson and Tamar Garb (eds.) *Paul Gauguin: Maker of Myth*. London: Tate Publishing.
- 4 See Etel Adnan (2018) *Surge*. New York: Nightboat Books, and Etel Adnan (2005) *In the Heart of a Heart of Another Country*, San Francisco: City Lights Books. For other discussions on diasporic longing, it is worth considering Edward Said (1999) *Out of Place: A Memoir*, London: Granta Books, and Samir Kassir (2004) *Being Arab*, London and Brooklyn: Verso Books. It is also worth consulting Nawal El Saadawi’s memoir, Nawal El Saadawi (2002) *Walking through Fire: A Life of Nawal Al Saadawi*, London: Zed Books/Bloomsburu Publishing.

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My Mothers, 2024,
Digitalized Super-8 films, 3 Chapters, 4 min 38 sec each /
digitalisierte Super-8 Filme, 3 Kapitel, jeweils 4 Min. 38 Sek.

- 5 Maria Rosa Menocal (2003) *The Ornament of The World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, New York: Little, Brown. pp. 1–12.
- 6 Patrick Jagoda, “Network Ambivalence,” *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture*, Volume 4.
- 7 For further discussion regarding the visual semiotics of image culture, my go-to text is always W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) *What Do Pictures Want?*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- 8 See the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*: <https://www.ijih.org>
- 9 Alice Walker, “Womanist,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp. xi-xii.
- 10 Conversation with Hoda Tawakol on July 27, 2024 via telephone.

Toutou and Hosneia at the Frankfurt Zoo 1969 /
Toutou und Hosneia im Frankfurter Zoo 1969



Hosneia, Frankfurt 1970 /
Hosneia, Frankfurt 1970

