

SPRING 2010

# KARTIKA REVIEW

## MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



**ELMAZ ABINADER**

Men carried tables, women covered them. From the basement, from the shed, a folding table from the closet, pushed together where their heights didn't match and tablecloths had to be laid end to end, patchwork quilt of Lebanese brocade and mother's handmade lace. We sisters were still in our church dresses but the brothers were allowed to take off their ties as they set up tea trays and card tables in the living room and dining room, going in and out of the house carrying extra chairs.

*Our people* were coming. A small chill of excitement ran up my legs. I loved the smothering fog of the crowd who would soon arrive and fill our house. The collection of our cousins and aunts and uncles were nothing like the people who lived in this small Pennsylvania town. They were not the ladies from church in stiff hats or the families who circled the card tables when my mother hosted a Bid Five Hundred card party. Our people arrived with kisses, boomeranging the walls with Arabic choruses, grabbing us in large hugs, throwing our faces one side, then another, and back—three huge kisses, Lebanese style.

*Our people*—relatives from around Pennsylvania and Ohio, from other small towns with factories and mills where the fathers worked and where trains ran right behind their houses across to Bethlehem Steel. Cars filled the street from our house all the way to my father's store in town, up Cannon Hill, down Deep Crease. No one from Masontown except for my Aunt and her family was

invited to these feasts. The neighbors who stood on their porches, hands on their hips, witnessed the gathering of priests and uncles and aunts; children and babies. These visitors looked like us, dark and shady, dressed in Jackie Kennedy suits and dangerous high heels, cheeks blushed red, and chins powdered light. They came smoking cigarettes, carrying cookies and letters from the old country.

On the other side of our door was Main Street with the slow Sunday traffic, the roads leading to my school, to the store, to my piano lessons above the McKay's Furniture, to the coalmines and Girl Scout meetings, but no one from town approached the screen door with the metal S in the grate on the screen.

On our side of the door, we circled the table laid with roast lamb and yogurt, humus and tabouleh; filled our plates and bellies. Tiny cups of muddy coffee, diamonds of baklava passed around chairs in a circle. We yelled in a language no one knew but us. Read letters from far away drawing tears and memories. Music played and we danced in lines along the few open spaces of the living room and dining room. Time passed into night. Others in town basked in the rays of the Ed Sullivan Show. We leaned on each other full and complete. We inhabited this place and nowhere else on earth existed.



**Elmaz Abinader's** books, *Children of the Roojme*, *a Family's Journey from Lebanon* and *In The Country of My Dreams...* , as well as her play, *Country of Origin*, illustrate personal lives of Arabs and Arab Americans negotiating hostile terrain, cultural polarities, and geographic and social displacement. Her other works, *32 Mohammed*, *Ramadan Moon*, *The Torture Quartet* and *Messages from the Siege* provide an articulation of the effect of political ctions on personal lives both here and in the Middle East. The Oregon Drama Critics cited *Country of Origin* for its excellence by awarding two Drammies to the play and to the composer of the music, Tony Khalife. Other awards include a PEN Award for *In the Country of My Dreams...* and a Goldies Award for Literature.