

On Waking, from *It's Time*

Marjorie Lotfi

Baba has told Marjorie about the importance of her dreams, how in the Lotfi family it's the dreams you can remember that are often premonitions. Baba's own Baba, dead years before Marjorie was born, still speaks to him in dreams. Years later, she'll refuse to drive after dreams of a crash, she'll call people and somehow, she'll already know they're unwell. So when Marjorie wakes from her recurring dream one morning in Ohio, and remembers that Baba's still stuck in Iran, she knows better than to tell her mother.

In the dream, Marjorie, her brother Kamran, their mother, and Baba are living in a cave. It's not a hospitable cave, but the kind you might walk into out of curiosity on a hike. They're camped far enough from the entrance not to be seen from it, but close enough for air, and to judge any changes in weather. Baba gets up every morning and lights the fire he'd tapped out the night before, for fear of discovery. *It's only safe to build a fire in daytime* he says, as he does every morning, even though they're miles from the next village.

When the fire gets going, it's warm enough for her to rise, to move away from the bodies of her mother and brother, still sleeping. She watches Baba as he dresses for work, slowly tying his tie, patting down the red dust from his suit jacket.

Please don't go today, Baba.

Zeebah dochtar, he says without looking up, *I have to go to work. I'll be back later.*

She notices that his briefcase is untidy, with papers sticking out at all angles, some even on the verge of falling out. This is so unlike Baba – he's such an overly tidy man that in the dream, Marjorie wonders if she's dreaming.

But Baba, she says, *I had a dream.*

He stops what he's doing and sits beside her on the stone floor.

Tell me, he says.

He looks tired. *But you told me never to repeat –*

It doesn't count with me, he interrupts. *I have the same dreams, remember?*

Okay, she says, unsure.

She takes a breath.

And another.

She tries closing her eyes.

Marjorie Joon? he says gently, *I have to go to work. Tell me quickly.*

In the dream, she starts, we were living here, in this exact cave. And the outside was dangerous.

She doesn't want to go on.

And?

She knows she has to say it before it's too late.

In the dream, Baba, you left one morning for work. You were dressed in the same clothes that you're in now, even the same tie.

He waits a few seconds before sighing, and then standing up, as if he knows what's coming. *And what happened?* he asks, looking away from her towards the entrance.

In the dream, she says quickly, her voice cracking, her face suddenly burning with the tears on the way – in the dream, Baba, at the end of the day – you didn't come back.

Marjorie Lotfi

Marjorie Lotfi was born in New Orleans, moved to Tehran as a baby with her American mother and Persian father, and fled to the US during the Iranian Revolution. She settled in the UK in 1999 and has lived in Edinburgh since 2005.

Marjorie was joint winner of the inaugural James Berry Poetry Prize in 2021, and her first book-length collection *The Wrong Person to Ask* (Bloodaxe Books, 2023) is a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation.

Marjorie is one of the British Council/UNESCO Cities of Literature 2024 ILX 10 'Rising Stars of UK Writing'. Her poetry has won awards, been published widely in journals and anthologies in the UK and US (including *The Rialto*, *Gutter*, *Ambit*, *Magma*, *Rattle* and *Staying Human*) and been included in *Best Scottish Poems 2021* and in London's 'Poems on the Underground'. She's currently finishing a memoir about her interrupted childhood in Iran and subsequent arrival in a small town in Ohio.

A former corporate lawyer in New York and London, Marjorie later founded the Belonging Project (considering the experiences of refugees with over 1,500 participants) and is now Co-Founder and Director of Open Book, which runs over 1,000 shared reading and creative writing workshops each year across Scotland.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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