

**First Days: August, and: Advice
from the Predecessor's Wife, and:
The Explosive Expert's Wife, and:
Test**

Shara Lessley

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“In 2009, my husband and I shared with friends and colleagues news of our then pending move to the Middle East. Given the region’s political climate and its representation in Western media outlets, our announcement was met with both apprehension and excitement: What would it mean to reside in a constitutional monarchy? How would I fare without speaking Arabic? As expatriates living in Jordan, would we be safe?

“Now over a year into our stay in Amman, I continue to confront myths about the Middle East—as well as its realities—on a daily basis. *The Explosive Expert’s Wife*, the manuscript-in-progress from which these poems are taken, aims to not only examine and dispel the darker fears and prejudices associated with the region (Advice from the Predecessor’s Wife’) but also to celebrate the beauty and mystery of a place where spring brings black irises and ‘even the olive trees breathe/green.’ The counterparts to such expat poems are those featuring stateside explosive ranges (‘Test’), government labs and American terrorists like Eric Rudolph and the Unabomber.”

Shara Lessley is a former Stegner Fellow. Her awards include an Artist Fellowship from the State of North Carolina, the Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellowship from the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, an Olive B. O’Connor Fellowship, the Tickner Fellowship and a “Discovery”/*The Nation* prize. Shara’s poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, the *Cincinnati Review* and *Alaska*

Quarterly Review, among others. Her collection *Two Headed Nightingale* is forthcoming from New Issues Press in 2012.

First Days: August

Black irises are vanishing like the wild
lions of Iraq that trampled the reeds
to drink among the narrow-waisted
grasses. Black irises are disappearing;
across Karak the desert larks have fled.
Not even the olive trees breathe
green, and dust thirsts for the wall-
walkers’ spit. Day by day, the forecast
bends our foreheads to the ground:
like firelight on a woman’s half-turned
face, the sun bears down
and down. All the city’s blown
a fuse—or so it seems. My mother calls
again, worried by what she’s seen
on the nightly news: drought and more

drought, tensions rippling across
the Middle East. A month or two
elapses, more the same: salt
gathering in the damp black sleeves
of women harvesting fields of salt;
sand clinging to bits of sand
on sand-colored buildings, coating roofs
the color of chewed bread. Nights
stalled at the screen, I strain
to hear the call to prayer—
what is it Amman's abandoned
streets are trying to say? The skyline's coal.
The sun's half coming up. How quickly
it licks each shadow—fence's crest,
branches of grapes, the patio chair,
even me—into place. The *adhan*
begins again. The temperature's
rising, my throat's too dry to speak.

Advice from the Predecessor's Wife

Amman, Jordan

Learn Arabic—your husband won't have time.
At *Carrefour Express*, aisle one is the tax-free line.
For poultry, go to Sweifieh (the Palestinian
chicken man's shop); pig, on the other hand,
is impossible to find (frozen pork sometimes
turns up at the co-op). *Basha* _____'s
wife is pregnant with twins; expect to host
a spa date or two for his mistress. Never make
eye contact with local men. Read *Married
to a Bedouin*, the *Expert Expat's Guide*. (Skip
Queen Noor's book—she's from the Midwest.)
During Ramadan *Crumbs'* breakfast is the best;
everything else is closed. Never ride
in the front of a taxi with an Arab. If you're
near the Embassy, avoid hailing a cab (security says
we're sitting ducks). Help in Amman
runs cheap: hire a driver, a maid, a cook.
Mansef is made with lamb or goat, and stewed
in a hearty *jameed*. When dining with royalty,
keep conversation neutral. At private parties
be prepared to be the only woman in the room,
save the staff. Look the part, but don't
show cleavage. Lipstick is fine. Laugh hard
(but not too hard) at Colonel _____'s
dick jokes. Know how to properly cut and light
a cigar. When talk turns to politics, smile
and nod, then say something obscure
in Arabic—your husband will give you the cue
(the Jords will think it cute). Never ask
a woman how long her hair is
under the *hijab*. Don't call anyone
but your husband *habibi*. Explore the souks;
steer clear of the mosques. All Arabs hate dogs—
walk yours after dark; comb your yard
for poison and traps. Close your drapes
(Western women are common victims
of peeping toms). When moving among crowds,
expect children and strangers to stop
to stroke your hair. Always carry your passport.
The number-one reason a man's relieved
from his post? His wife's unhappy. Avoid this
from the get-go—get a hobby! Play tennis,
take a class, or find a job. (The field's leveled
for spouses: here, education and experiencẽ
equal *nada*.) The work week runs Sunday to
Thursday; your husband will clock in Saturdays,
Fridays, too. Pack at least four ball gowns;
stock up on shirts with sleeves. Gunfire means
graduation, or congratulations—a wedding's
just taken place. Don't be disturbed by

The Explosive Expert's Wife

He comes home from the range scorched in dirt;
home from the office, a stain on his suit.
His nails are chewed.
He enters the house without saying a word.
He's jet-lagged again. He's got blast-
dust the length of his forearms and hands.
Back from Sa' dah, he's got sand in the shanks of his boots.
He says, *Sorry I'm late*. He's come home
just to pack—a guard's found C4
stashed in a DCA trash can.
He needs a haircut and shave. (*It's been one of those days.*)
He says, *Th is won't show up on the news*.
He's been sorting evidence. He has fresh
orders from the president.

He says, *I do this for us*.
They're booby-trapping pizza boxes and books;
they're rigging plastic cars so kids will trip the switch.
They're something else, he says.
He's on edge again.
He promises to be home by six; he promises not to miss
the latest round of tests. He's holding
a daffodil-tulip mix. He shakes his head: *When*
did we run out of limes?

He claims *it was pilot error*
He claims *no one knows*. He asks, *Did I get an urgent message*
from Colonel So-and-So? Straight from the Pentagon,
he makes one drink after the next.
He wants to know what's for supper.
He asks if the oil's been changed.
Screw what Fox and CNN say: *It's perfectly safe*
to travel by train; screw what happened
on the southern coast—
the casualty count could've been higher.

He's leaving for Kabul again;
this time for sixty-five days.
(*It's better for us than Baghdad with overtime and haz-pay.*)
He'll need shaving cream and toothpaste, fresh undershirts and socks.
He'll need a ride to the drop-off point
near the strip mall's outlet shops. He's filthy
from hosing the tech team's hazmat suits. He's going
to take a shower. Friday, they're predicting
snow: *Be careful*, he warns, *the roads will all be slick.*
He gives thanks—*The chicken tastes just right.*
The dog jumps on his lap.
He strokes my arm, asks, *Later tonight?*
Napkin crumpled, he pushes back his plate—
Now tell me everything, he says,
about your day today.

Test

I know the secret hemispheres of
snow, the turns you take on the road
to the explosives range in the dark.
Miles from our yard morning breaks;
you're prepping the day's fourth shot.
Ice melts from the hollowed chestnut,
white in my mouth, white its thorn
of frost. Stained gray with powder,
you crimp a blasting cap, jam it
inside the Claymore mine. The snow
pack collapses: 700 steel ball bearings
shattered across the turf. A hawk
sputters overhead, noisy-winged
machine patrolling the smoke
stripped thickets. Half after three
the sky goes gray. Chill in the air
up my back as the shovel uncovers
a vole frozen on our lawn's south edge,
its eyes locked in shock, as if caught
in your blast's last path. I don't know
where the dead go, only that
you promise to make it home

by supper, the hem of your pants
singed with ash. Down on your knees
surveying the ground—asphalt four feet
deep blasted into parts—you note where
damage takes its greatest toll. In another field,
I dig a cold, damp hole. Ice snuffs
the maples, my agitated heart.

The Ted K Archive

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