



Source: Robin Wright and Josh White, 'Saudis may attend Mideast conference', *Washington Post online*, 02/08/07.

Tags:

Writer/s: [Hannah Chiswell](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Her objects were normally held aloft. She, I will call her 'she', is a part of them. Their work is her body. I cannot mention her name because she is I or because she has too many names, none of them believable. Her objects and names wear and tether her. Her manner wears and tethers her. She is this. She is fiction. She speaks between languages and in no language. She has words to spare, plenty, and yet none. Her handwriting deteriorated since 1950, when she moved away. She no longer knows what it looks like. That is: the frame that she has for knowing what it looks like no longer exists. That is when I meet her. I am a part of that frame that destroyed her handwriting.

While she waited to become a part of my picture, my interrogation, I tried to see her with my peripheral vision, believing this would hold a greater truth. I saw her carrying opium sticks for her grandmother, I saw her teeth set in her bone, I saw her silk dresses, rice and tights. She saw me doing it. There, she said, these are the things you hold on to. These are the things you need to let go of. You pick up on these things that contain an absence. It can be summed up like this: I came home one day and there was a stranger sitting there. That meant I had to leave. The other people, your cousins, my mother, your father, they were there. I came on the train. That is the end of it. None of it revealing anything in my mind, but I am blind to what is happening because I do not know what I'm seeing, or rather, my frame is not hers. She, in the state of naked life, is infinitely patient. I am not. She can wait, twisting the sweet wrappers and making coffee. I can't. She is a part of that fog between us, both figure and apparition. I am a part of that fog for her. A more distant fog, I am gone from her story.

Her objects destroy and repair her hands. First the documents: deerskin marriage certificate, passports—two of them. Then the food items: walnut, rose water, eggs and bacon. Then the spiritual items: religious texts, pamphlets. They are what she carried, what she hides.

They give me a frame through which to see her body. Her history. What's inside this one? I ask, holding up a closed case, paper light. It's something I'll give you in the future, she says. Can you show it to me now? I say. I'll show it another time, she says. But what is it? I ask. She holds up the curtains and sets them on fire, blaming me. The materials in her house are all flammable. There is so much paper. I manage to put out the fire quickly. That's how I answer her, that's how she answers me.

The first thing between us is the future, not the past. It is withering away inside her so that she can't practice piano or play piccolo any longer. That is what is to come, a forward-leaning answer, I will not keep that alive, she says. I struggle to understand where she makes her ambiguities, they seem so ordinary. It is because she does not have words for these things that she has the objects. She says where there is movement, move. But she does not live by this. She uses everything, saves everything. She does not live inside her thoughts for very long. I say when was the last time you waited for something? She pauses. But this gap is as close as I get, as close as I ever get.

I've been looking for some sort of a forecast, I tell her. I want to say that her things, her objects are not useful. They are withering her. This religion you're in, I say, it's not fashionable, do you know that? She says fashion has no bearing on politics or on inner life. I tell her that the stuff in her head needs an aspect of style, has she ever been anyone else, tried to be someone else? I ask. I warn her. I feel that she has a good skeleton that will never let her down, it is the softer tissues I worry for. Can I add to her objects, introduce some new? Would she take them in and begin to live by them too? Could she start to throw things, move things? She never answered this.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Hannah Chiswell.*