

A READER'S COMPANION
for
Lauren Camp's
One Hundred Hungers
Tupelo Press (2016)

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Award citation for *One Hundred Hungers*

“I was impressed by the cohesiveness of this collection, by the ease with which it moved between themes of exile, displacement, and uneasy assimilation into North American culture, and by its ability to tell a family history without resorting to autobiographical clichés. . . . The book is inventively structured, mixing personal lyrics with a series of short, gnomic, and haunting vignettes that seem to reside almost outside of time. Of course the particular diaspora from which the book derives—capturing the experience of an Iraqi-Jewish immigrant family—makes for a still more complicated stance, one of exile within exile.”

—David Wojahn, from his Dorset Prize judge's citation

Biographical note for Lauren Camp

A native New Yorker and now longtime resident of New Mexico, **Lauren Camp** is author of two previous books of poems, *This Business of Wisdom* (West End Press, 2010) and *The Dailiness* (Edwin E. Smith, 2013), winner of the National Federation of Press Women's Poetry Book Prize.

Her poems have appeared in *New England Review*, *Poetry International*, the Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *Slice*, *Boston Review*, *Zócalo Public Square*, *North American Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. She has also twice guest-edited special sections for *World Literature Today*.

Her poetry has earned a number of accolades, including the RL International Poetry Award, the Margaret Randall Poetry Prize, and the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award, as well as finalist citations from the Sheila Margaret Motton Book Prize, The Lascaux Prize in Poetry, Best of the Net, *RHINO*, *Western Humanities Review* and *Southern Humanities Review*.

Lauren has had work commissioned by SITE Santa Fe, The Studio Museum in Harlem (NY) and The Museum of International Folk Art (NM), and her poems have been translated into Mandarin, Spanish and Turkish. She is a Black Earth Institute Fellow, a staff writer for *Poets Reading the News*, a freelance writing teacher/mentor and a veteran producer for Santa Fe Public Radio, where she hosts “Audio Saucepan”—a global music program interwoven with contemporary poetry.

Two essays by Lauren Camp about *One Hundred Hungers*

“Surrendering to the Unsaid”

from *World Literature Today* (January 2013)

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/surrendering-unsaid#.U2boLK1dUww>

For nearly two years, I worked on poems about my father's early years in Baghdad. Every now and again, I slipped an occasional question to my dad, hoping that he would help me access the sphere of his life that came before I knew him. My questions were delivered mostly via email because my phone and in-person queries went unheard.

For generations, the Jews of Iraq were peers with their Arab neighbors — equals in civic life, finance, the judicial system, commerce, and other arenas. There was peace in the land. My father might have seen some of this, and if not, his father certainly did.

After World War I, the British Mandate defined territorial limits, which mashed up ethnic and religious groups in the country. Suddenly, the Arab Sunnis and the Shi'as were a little too close for comfort, and power struggles followed. As if this wasn't problematic enough, during World War II, the leadership of the country aligned with Nazi sympathizers; the Jews were doomed.

My manuscript *One Hundred Hungers* began to feel more substantial when I learned of one particular incident, the “Farhud,” which translates literally to “the dispossession.” This two-day massacre—looting, raping, arson, and killing of the Jews of Baghdad—took place on June 1 and 2, 1941. My father, the eldest male in a Jewish family, was nearly six years old. I wanted to know, from him, what his homeland was like. I wanted to hear him describe it.

But Dad either shunted my questions to other relatives or, more frequently, ignored my requests. I was careful not to probe into dark areas. In fact, my questions were designed to be light: *Who took you to school? Did you wear uniforms in class?* I asked for the smallest details I could imagine that might open him up enough to tell me about the culture he'd left sixty-two years ago. I never asked about the pogroms, the hatred, the choked relations between Muslim Arabs and Jewish Arabs.

Other parents relent if you push hard enough. People have told me this. After all, what person doesn't like to tell his stories? But, honestly, my father is different. Doesn't matter if I ask the right genealogical question, the one that I suspect will magically launch him backward in time, exploring old alleys and riverfronts. Doesn't matter if I sit at his feet and look up expectantly, adoration in my eyes. None of that works.

My father just won't speak about any of this. His greatest interest is Now.

After two years of gentle inquiry, I realize that he has probably forgotten much of what he may have tried to suppress all those years ago. I'm sure long-hidden viewpoints and discomforts stop meeting you if you no longer go to the corner to find them.

On the day I was wrapping up the manuscript, checking commas and semicolons, and every last fact and Arabic word, I was riddled with uncertainty. Because Arabic isn't my language, I had trusted others on translations of terms. The answers that came back to me from various sources were jagged and mismatched.

I wanted a person, one person only, to iterate the thick sounds of Arabic. I wanted, after all

my imaginings and research, to “hear” the language. I called my dad on his cell phone. He was in the Ikea parking lot in northwest Philadelphia. I was worried that he would be angry about my needling, but I sucked in my breath and asked him to count from zero to three in Arabic.

The words came forward, blown from the back of his throat, pushed in ways I hadn't imagined. Even though he voiced what I had written down, the words seemed different, the language immediate and alive.

I asked another question: *Is this how you say date trees?* He affirmed, pronouncing the words thickly.

He answered three questions, maybe four. I felt lucky. His words matched or differed from what I had written. That didn't matter. I trusted what emerged from his mouth. I chewed those words, pulling flavors from them. I repeated back to him, and he laughed at my inability to cough out such harsh sounds. I swallowed—and they became language, food.

Then I asked a final question, a phrase that is in the last poem of *One Hundred Hungers*. I asked, *How do you say, “I'm sorry?”*

I waited as he wandered his Arabic memory, as the sun rose and set on the Tigris. “I don't know,” he said, without emotion, before turning to a subject on the surface of today, something he cared about now—a cheap sofa, or a cup of coffee. “We never said that.”

Kitchens as Prayer

from *Elsewhere Lit* (November 2015)

<http://www.elsewherelit.org/blog/2015/11/29/one-hundred-hungers>

Two of the poems that were published in *Elsewhere Lit*, “Kitchen” and “Butter and Prayer,” are from my book *One Hundred Hungers* (Tupelo Press, 2016) ... a work of imagination, research and myth about my father's childhood in Baghdad and my interaction with the rituals, food and language of his Jewish-Arabic culture. I want to look at two aspects of these two poems: style and use of food.

I've written many poems with traditional lineation and stanza breaks in *One Hundred Hungers*, but these two poems employ more unusual formatting. “Butter and Prayer” is a prose poem. The words continue; the food keeps coming. There is no break. I use prose format a number of times in *One Hundred Hungers* to shift the rhythm of the book.

The line breaks in “Kitchen” follow the breath, or where I think the pauses should be. There is no regularity—for example, a first line that drops off with the word “But” and the subsequent, long pause that the break requires of the reader. The following stanza lets my grandmother have her extended period of action before the next stanza comes in with a sharp interruption, an italic, declarative request. The statements in the final stanza are sharp, immediate, short. All past tense.

I began these two poems to capture the relationships between family members. Food appears in these poems, as it does in many within the book, because food was central to every interpersonal interaction, religious event, or celebration.

My grandmother, who was in an arranged marriage at fourteen to a much older cousin, and pregnant at fifteen, spent all of the years of my childhood preparing food for her extended

family. We let her. I only remember one aunt helping in the kitchen. Others of us brought in dirty dishes to be cleaned or set the table. We didn't do much.

At least one time (and this is strictly hearsay), my mother asked for the information to recreate a few dishes at our house an hour away. My mother was a decent cook, but not a creative one. She didn't love food, or need food, the way my grandmother needed it. For my grandmother, food defined her place in the family structure. It was her identity—she was the one who cooked the magnificent Arabic dishes, the nourishing, extensive spread.

My mother did everything best when she knew precise details. She needed a road map, whether she was building a cross-stitch sampler or meatloaf. I don't know if my grandmother created those recipes that my cousins and I came begging for. Or if they were handed down, and she followed them until they were in her. I don't know if she ever changed them. (We wouldn't have appreciated that.) My grandmother was not a fighter, not contrary in any way, but she wasn't about to give up the one thing she had.

Perhaps—in fact, most likely—the only way to master that kind of beautiful meal was to cook large quantities again and again. Excelling at it meant dedicating attention to the preparation. Every Friday night, year after year.

“Butter and Prayer” is both ode to my father and a tribute to Arabic food. As I worked on *One Hundred Hungers*, I tried to include every crystalline memory of spices and hunger, all the foods I loved, and the feeling of deep satiation. All these foods that I miss in my adult life, foods I may never taste again.

That pomegranate, for example, stands in for every chance I had to share a connection with my father. Perhaps we broke open a pomegranate together a half dozen times. Maybe it was not even that much, but I was the only one in my immediate family who liked that fruit. It was enough for me to sit with my father and peel back the pith, and dig our teeth and faces into the seeds. That food holds love for me; it holds a special affection because it holds the emotional fragrance of father and daughter.

Interviews with Lauren Camp

Interview in *Drunken Boat*

“Witness the Hour: Conversations with Arab-American Poets Across the Diaspora” with Claudia F. Savage

(note: online interview includes photos and audio clips)

<https://medium.com/drunken-boat/witness-the-hour-conversations-with-arab-american-poets-across-the-diaspora-85707e11798c#.609c2tc6z>

Claudia F. Savage (CFS): The poet Alice Notley once wrote, “If I tell you/ you’re suffering,/ will you believe me?” In *One Hundred Hungers*, you expose your father’s boyhood in Baghdad (including the *farhud*, the “dispossession” or massacre of Jewish people that took place on June 1 and 2, 1941) even though he doesn’t talk about it. In the poem, “Variation: Let’s Pretend,” you say:

*Let’s pretend you tell me what happened.
How you lived in the city two streets from the river...
Let’s agree that you’ll tell me the details.
Please. You have to remember every flake
of the air and the furrows of danger.*

This excavation and piecing together of history is like a slowly shared secret. If the poet keeps asking, she’ll get somewhere needed. Can you talk about that notion of seeking and discovery?

Lauren Camp (LC): My father was not at all forthcoming with his history. Though I tried again and again to get him to tell me even the smallest and dullest moments of his early life, he stayed silent. Alice Notley’s quote seems to fit him. Did he know he was suffering...? Was that a layer of his truth?

For a while, I was convinced that I couldn’t possibly write what I wasn’t told, what I didn’t understand. All the pluralities of his life; I had no idea what some of them were! Eventually, as if it were a dare, I began to write what I didn’t know. That not knowing was a topic I could own; it was a topic I *did* understand.

Moving forward, I asked many questions—of myself and through research, and left my Dad alone about his history. I took what was available to me. What I couldn’t find, I did without. What I couldn’t do without, I imagined. I gave the fierce blanks language, and the words gave me a sort of perception.

CFS: The quality of movement in these poems approaches a longer form. But, they remain separate but entwined, mirroring the exile and migration of your family:

*To England to Israel to places with windows of light.
Uncles and aunts spilled across ocean ...*

How did these fragments of narrative cohere and disperse?

LC: More than anything, they came together through music. All the Baghdad sections follow the sound of the oud, the lyre of the Middle East. As I listened, I revised childhood memories and particular incidents and every membrane of story I was offered or could gather. I wrote my fragments into lines that replicated the bends and flares of Iraqi music. I wanted, ultimately, for the poems to resonate with a place I'd never been.

But other poems didn't fit with the mythical, ancient music. For those, I relied on my natural affinity for jazz. I have a long history with this most American musical form—as both a visual artist depicting the seminal jazz musicians in shape and pattern, and as a public radio producer and host. The kinetic shifts of the genre are comfortable to my ear. I like the tension of having my words and phrases be both independent and collaborative. The poems in *One Hundred Hungers* are likely a confluence of these two musical forms.

CFS: Your book melds the experimental next to form, pantoums near just one-line on a page. In *World Literature Today*, you said, “One of the truly bright spots in jazz is each proclamation of something that came before—the hint of a previous tune, quoted, then turned on its head.” How does this notion of re quoting, changing form, and the notion of improvisation play in your work?

LC: Because *One Hundred Hungers* is built on limited information, some of it almost repeats. But, in fact, it doesn't. It changes. The story shifts. The narrative goes forward and then undoes, and that undoing gives a new chance to assemble a truth. In a jazz concert, when a musician quotes a tune from the canon, those in the audience who know that tune are given a gift. We get to perceive two tunes together: the range of the new landing magnetically on the old. It's delicious.

CFS: The poet Naomi Shihab Nye once said, “Politics involves the dignity of daily life. To me, politics is how somebody carries himself or herself, regardless of the surrounding situation.” In this book, and in your previous one, *The Dailiness*, you focus on single moments that allow you to sink into another's life. Do you consider that witnessing a political act?

LC: The individual perspective has always compelled me. The emotional place I live is the psychology of another and also of self. I'm not as comfortable in groups. There is so much stimulus in those situations, and I rarely know how to take it all in. One-on-one, I'm able to attend to a small behavior or issue, and the very human reactions to that.

I often wonder if I am political enough, but I know that a singular perspective helps each of us better understand the epic. It doesn't work the other way around. We can't break down the story of a whole community because we can't put a face to it, but we can expand from one to many.

CFS: Yes, I think most poets echo this feeling of overwhelm and need to focus on the singular moment. The poet Carolyn Forché has said that the sharing of experience (even when painful) puts the focus on community, rather than on the individual artist's ego. The interplay between

your experience as the daughter of an immigrant and your reflection on your father's experience has us traveling past one life, into another and back again, as in the poem, "Who Other" that reflects first on yours:

*Most afternoons after school, she runs through a blister of houses ... Tudor land red dog
land fire station siren land of wailing careful light ...*

And next to it, your father's:

*Smell of orange, bitter ceylon.
There was only the boy
and his laughter only low houses and doors
drawn closed from the alley.
Only Iraq with its dark birds.*

History folds. The poet's father, his and her relatives, the larger voice of his Jewish community in Baghdad and back again. Father and daughter grow together, change, and echo. Can you talk a bit about this echoing form?

LC: I crave simplicity, but it doesn't suit me. I am most engaged when a work can act on multiple, complex levels. When I first tried to structure the manuscript, the contents included only the poems of my father in Baghdad and those of my childhood, told as myth. I separated them—one half of the book to this subject, and the other half to the other. That structure didn't work at all.

The arrangement became its own project, and one that settled to its current form only when I had finalized the "Variations," the poems that explore the limbo spaces of indigestible information, those spaces of hunger. I decided to tell the story in the same way I lived it: echoing, fragmenting, returning.

CFS: In two pages of *One Hundred Hungers* you have a list of names. Just names. They remind me of names read before Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, or names listed at Holocaust memorials. What about these italicized lists?

LC: Oh, thank you for asking about these two pages. These beautiful names...! They are the names of some of my ancestors, many of whom I never met. My father's extended family was sweeping, and relatives lived so far away.

How to best remember them but to voice them, to give them weight in my mouth, to praise their very existence. They are names of individuals and as such they have life experiences, which we aren't given. Even so, I hope those lives, and what they might have been—their accomplishments and hardships—underpin all the space on these pages, and bleed out into the rest of the book.

CFS: Having them placed in the book the way you situated them, encourages us to recite them, too. In terms of language, for my family, Arabic has been diluted through the generations, but food remains the method of cultural connection to Lebanon. Everywhere in *One Hundred Hungers* is feasting, a need to fill the mouth and body with that connection. In "One Hunger

Could Eat Every Other,” you say:

We eat for years and years. We eat like beggars ... We eat the road they took to get here, the many myths they left behind ... The thick line of life is all hunger. We eat as the sky recedes to countless diaphanous layers. We eat as logic, loyal. Knowing it will end ...

The act of eating is a desperate one in your book. If you stop, you say, your connection to your father, your family and people will end. Can you talk about that desperation?

LC: The ritual of eating spanned every single gathering—even on Yom Kippur, when we fasted (except for the Cheerios that one of my cousins taught us to sneak into our pockets). Each year on Yom Kippur, the tangle of belly hollows continued until the massive feast, when our demanding appetites were again allowed to consume.

Every memory brought back a table, plates of food and then empty plates, reaching across others, the noise of my cousins. We were all built of the same stuff: desire. I didn't think of this as troubling. We would walk in the door and Aunt Linda would say, “Lauren, I made tongue for you,” or my cousins would go straight to the cookie jar, the chopped liver. Food was the planet around which we spun. We drove an hour to be with family. We ate with family, and the children ran off and played, and then we left.

My father had limited interests. So with him, eating allowed me entry to the place of his heart. Or so I thought, somewhere in my cells. What could I share if I stopped taking half of the pomegranate, or anything else?

CFS: In the poem, “I am practicing now” you say:

*Now, your real language tongued by chance
Writhes and rises from you. A reliance on the throat,
the region wet and thick. Such wreckage.
To my ear, the rough places are beautiful, nourishing.
Say anything. Never stop saying anything ...*

Peter Cole, the American translator of Hebrew and Arabic poets, once said that “the instant I see those large, lickable Hebrew letters cutting into the page or flying off of it—I'm happy. There's a kind of literary *umami* that the classical Hebrew releases ... A certain tang.” What does the sound of Arabic evoke? How has that language fueled these poems?

LC: Whether those relatives at my grandparents' immense table were speaking anger or love or something in between, the sounds of Arabic were a kind of nourishment. We ate those sounds while we ate my grandmother's *kitchri* and other foods. My ears and mouth were full simultaneously. I don't understand the language, but Arabic was part of what clasped me to that time. It was frighteningly rich in the best possible way. When I hear it now, it's like a singing in my ribs. It fits my body. It fills it.

CFS: Yes. You are also a visual artist who works with fabric. The layout of your book—with poems about you written next to ones of your father, with short vignettes mixing with poems, and pages with just one devastating statement—seem a deliberately rendered collage, with

texture reappearing over and over. Time is layered and interwoven. How does your visual work inform your poetics?

LC: I spent twelve years as a professional visual artist, writing occasional poems on the side and also broadcasting a radio show. (These days, I've semi-retired from visual art to focus on teaching, producing good radio, and writing.) Over and over back then, my three interests collided: sound, shape/color and language. I couldn't keep them separate or pure.

One Hundred Hungers is constructed much like my artwork and my radio show. It is layered and obsessive. It echoes itself in its patterns, and then rearranges—bumps and shifts and spills—in ways I hope readers don't expect. Sometimes, my artwork presented a particularly knotty problem. I'd proceed in a direction, only to find that my resolution was not the right path. When chance pulled me left or right, or made me stop entirely, or made me draw a red box, those were the times the artwork seemed most dynamic. These sorts of surprises surfaced often in shaping *One Hundred Hungers*.

CFS: I'd like to end with your poem, "Why Dad Doesn't Pay Attention to Iraq Anymore:"

*You can all stop asking about the Abu Ghraib torture
and how he felt when the pictures were published
of men in long hoods. He was traveling
the white rim of traffic from New York
to the city of brotherly love,
stopping for donuts (cream-filled) ...
He sees the circumference of dates.
Unsaid words pile in dunes ...
All he wanted was some portion of yes
and stay, those phrases no one could pack.*

This poem's power steps through the rhetoric of our current political climate about people of Arab ancestry and focuses instead on your father's grief. How has this collection helped you respond to the barrage of negative media surrounding Arab people?

LC: *One Hundred Hungers* offers up its diaspora in a conditional mood. The story here is my father's, and the truth is—he would rather alight on his life in the present. Perhaps I am disobedient within our American culture. I am proud to claim that I am Arabic. I don't believe I should hide it.

The media gives us frighteningly limited narratives of Arabic peoples. I hope to enlarge the conversation by this expression of one family's identity and culture. I hope that *One Hundred Hungers* liberates what's real by offering nuanced ways to look at our Arabic community. I hope it spoils the doubts.

Interview in *Elsewhere Lit*

(Nandini Dhar and Dena Afrasiabi, editors; interview posted February 6, 2017)

<http://www.elsewherelit.org/blog/2017/2/6/interview-with-lauren-camp>

Elsewhere Lit (EL): Your book involves multiple perspectives, spaces and voices. One of the significant choices you make, is not to use the lyrical “I” persona. Instead, we get a very resonant “she.” What were the reasons behind such a choice?

Lauren Camp (LC): I was too familiar with my own story. I realized that if I shifted some important perspectives, I had a chance to find the richness in it. I began by writing the daughter sections of the book, allowing mythological elements into certain vignettes I wanted to hold close in memory. I also switched to third person. Both approaches gave me necessary distance to witness my earlier life and to reflect on some of what I experienced. The result is semi-autobiographical, but I enlarged the parameters of who I had been.

EL: Food plays a central role in your book. And, we have often thought, food is a tricky thing to engage with for a writer who claims any kind of ancestry that's not strictly white and European. In other words, there is a danger of exoticization that lurks in our use of food as lynchpins in our stories. Yet, food makes so much visible in your work. The way we read it, food brings onto the open a lot of histories that have been silenced politically. What did it mean for you to make food such a central metaphor in your work? Especially since the word “hunger” is there in your title, and coming to think about it, even your poems which we accepted for *Elsewhere*, had such strong food themes.

LC: Food is so often the element that brings people together, whether those people are families, friends or lovers. We gather around moments of cooking, serving and eating. Our ancestry is in the ingredients that our mouths know as nourishing as much as it is in a specific language or family rituals or how we spend Saturdays or the music we listen to and the books we read. I didn't know many of these things about my heritage, so the table became my main source of history.

When I look back on my childhood as it intersects with shared moments in my father's family, every single instance involved food (even those that required fasting because fasting requires a later feast). Food was the conduit for the past to settle with the immediate now. All of it moved around that very long table in my grandparents' New York home. The history traveled between the dishes, and landed on my plate, serving by serving. Food generated laughter, arguments, gender-specific identities, preferences, connections.

The food in my grandparents' house, which was made almost single-handedly by my grandmother (and maybe an aunt), was exotic, but at the same time, familiar. It was those mouthfuls I had every second or third Friday that made me feel connected to a culture that was not otherwise discussed or much exhibited.

EL: You write about such divergent spaces—the desert, the trains, the river and even Wall

Street. Yet, in spite of the poems commenting on these open spaces, the central emphasis on your book is on the domestic space. More specifically, the kitchen. Kitchen becomes the space where mothers or grandmothers acquire or lose their voices. Kitchen becomes the space where silences are broken and the children come to wonder about the spaces left behind. To what extent was this a conscious choice?

LC: It was not a conscious choice at all ...

The kitchen in my parents' home was a gathering place. It was yellow, which made it like many other suburban kitchens. We did homework there, and my mother made meatballs and tuna noodle casserole there. It was not a particularly interesting place.

In my grandparents' home, the kitchen was the domain we walked through to get to the central gathering place: the dining room and its grand table of plates and bowls, candles and foods. The kitchen was cluttered and bubbling over. My grandmother's kitchen wasn't a place to assemble.

I didn't understand how important that interior space was, how it was the heart from which the countless dishes originated, how it was what allowed us to go out into the world feeling cared for. It was a place of labor, a place I entered only to dry some dishes, and then, only when commanded to do so. It was a place I went through to reach the back door. It wasn't a place I revered, but in retrospect, I realize my grandmother was a wizard, shaping her quiet love into nourishing meals for so many, so frequently.

EL: Would you consider silence and breaking of silence to be central themes in your book?

LC: Both forms of communication certainly reoccur continually in the book. Both were resources for information and omissions. From them, I gathered particles of details. In a way, I think both silence and the shift away from silence made up the most tender parts of my childhood. On some level, I was forced to understand the wounds by not seeing them and not asking about them.

EL: We have been especially moved by your poems "Letter to Baghdad" and "Peripheral Vision." Read together, they reveal such a complex political history between Middle East as a region and United States—wars, empires and imperialisms, colonialisms, anti-Semitism. In your poems, you offer us readings of this complex history through an individual's feelings, journeys, often explored through images of silence. Were you ever daunted by the profundity of your themes as you were writing this book?

LC: I wasn't nearly as daunted by expressing the history as by infiltrating the silence. The history meant study, which is comfortable to me. I like the work of research. For a long time, I was very focused on getting the scope and details correct.

The hardest part of the book by far was the challenge of expressing one individual's feelings. I was unsettled by the effort of trying to capture my father's story without having his input. That challenge stopped me several times.

EL: In "Letter to Baghdad," you write "he showed me a word for the boy he once was/and he

showed me this Arabic word and in this way I knew/this was the most authentic mourning I would ever see” and in “I am Practicing Now,” you write “So many syllables saturated with flavors of mourning” and “Words don’t stick right. They emerge mournful and curled/as if stirred in the wrong pot.” Indeed, language as a form of mourning is a theme that runs through many of these poems. Could you talk about how this theme informs your own writing?

LC: Mourning was invisible, but somehow embedded in the air that held a language I don’t understand. It lined every plate on the table, the way my grandparents struggled to speak English, the way my father filled with riddles. As I was writing, I wanted to experience the burden of a lost beginning. I wanted to know—bodily, emotionally—what it felt like to be unable to fully claim a country as one’s own because a part of that soul belonged also to another country. Where does one stand when their feet touch both sides of a dividing line?

EL: In your poems, another way of mourning the loss or absence of language is to locate narrative in the body or in food. In “Marriage,” for instance, you write “With sweat, I / write corollaries and unknown vocabulary, right to left, on the warm skin / of his thigh, rub my thumb under his ear.” And in “Devour,” you write “The trick of each meal was how it explained its sweetness / This was the story she ate every day.” It seems, however, that the narratives written on the body are not quite legible and the consumption of narratives doesn’t quite satisfy the hunger for language and for the places language carries with it. Could you elaborate on the relationship between hunger and narrative as it relates to this book?

LC: No matter how I search, I cannot get the story I most crave: my father’s. My solution, undertaken with the writing of this book, was to allow the undertow of imagination and research to help me develop a sensory awareness of a place I’ve never been and a time to which I can’t return. Baghdad doesn’t exist the way it did in my father’s childhood, and even if it did, my experience of it, as a visitor and as a woman, would be different. When I couldn’t get the feel of the country despite what I had researched, seen or heard, I wrote listening to the oud and its long mournful lines.

Shortly before I answered this question, Donald Trump signed an executive order banning Muslims from seven countries, including Iraq, from entering or re-entering the U.S. He redoubled his vow to build a wall, excluding Mexicans from entering the U.S. Suddenly, many people are discussing the very personal realities and dangers of being immigrants or the children of immigrants. It is not just our stories that hang in the balance, but our ability to claim a place. Our ability to feel safe in whichever place(s) we deem “home.” This country is vibrant because of the many other cultures that emigrated here. Our country has been imprinted in remarkable ways with narratives from elsewhere. It would be a travesty to exclude any of them.

I often say that *One Hundred Hungers* is about my father. It is not a book *for* my father. It is for anyone who has a connection—recent or distant—with another place. For anyone whose history is unsatisfied. We all need to be able to affirm our places in the world. We all need to feel safe to look back or around. We must champion the diversity of customs and tradition that exists in every window on every block in every city and rural area around us.

Critical discussion of *One Hundred Hungers*

Adapted from *World Literature Today* (November 2016)

Expanded essay from a review by **Sarah Warren**

One Hundred Hungers is a book of exile, faith, and acceptance. Of flavor, desire, and violation. Poet Lauren Camp confides in us what feels like a timeless narrative, and her creative explication of an American immigrant story feels entirely new. In addition to exposing the experience of the cultural and religious Other, Camp also unveils several issues that are specifically female. As the granddaughter of Jewish Iraqi immigrants, Camp invites her reader to experience the oddity of diaspora within diaspora through evocative imagery and diction; a variety of portraits of differing people, places, and experiences; and direct interrogation of political (and personal) drama.

Without falling into any clichés, or any chronological reenacting of events in her family history, she unveils her Jewish-Iraqi heritage through a linguistic dance – as if her language were long scarves of bright-colored silks twisting around the arms and hips of an intoxicating woman. Camp does this in five parts, each pulling a thread from a different angle of the experience of fleeing one's homeland and settling anew. Before the five sections begin, Camp offers us the poem "Without Spectacle of Fading," which serves as an entry point for the rest of the book. It is as if the poet stepped in to teach her readers how to approach the poems that follow. From the first line, the poem invokes a mythological, ancient, and even omniscient tone as it says, "What time said first: / the sky is holy" (page xi). Like many aboriginal cultures, whose belief is that time is non-linear, Camp invites the reader to enter into a state that allows for a chronology that is more flexible; that is not concerned with the construct of time as we currently consider it. Camp has given us her own interpretation of a creation story, where the personified "time" ultimately chooses to

... sanctify

with rightful foods,
and all [the world's] people

who should want
for nothing.

What we discover:
wind-drift,

the heartbreak
of their fleeing

These short couplets establish an expectation: that we as readers will encounter a group of people who are seemingly protected by a divine source, as they should have "rightful foods" and

“should want for nothing.” What complicates this setup, however, is the expectation that these people will also experience hardship as in “the heartbreak / of their fleeing.”

The poem that opens the first section, “Each Strand Alters,” is titled simply “Seder,” and a perfect invitation to the book. The reader finds herself right in the middle of an intimate Jewish tradition—one that is a celebration in remembrance of when the Jews were freed from slavery in Egypt. We as readers are placed with the speaker's family, seemingly mid-ritual, calling out with her as the text reads, “*What will you give us? Where shall we go?*” (1). What follows are poems that present scenes and images of family, and of a young woman who attempts to understand her own body and place in the world. We are again invited to the family table (as in many poems throughout the book) in the poem “One Hunger Could Eat Every Other,” as Camp shows us plates of rice, raisins, string beans, and okra. The speaker says, “In this house, our lips envelop the bread, the egg yolk and honey, the bread of the yeast . . .” (7), steeping the reader in the delicious, personal moments of her home and family. What follows in the poem “Lighten,” however, is a portrait of what it means to reject one's own physical appearance—and because of where it falls in this collection of poems, seems to indicate that it may also be a rejection of culture, and thus a rejection of the experience and delight of meals according to the tradition in which she was raised. This poem is easy to identify with, for nearly all humans—particularly females. It clues the reader in to the territory of eating disorder as the speaker admits that she is “No longer willing / to violate herself, / she signaled starvation, / the insistent strategy / of appearance” (10). Because this poem and these words follow such intimate scenes of delicious foods, the reader is left, almost, with her own hunger—even sadness that the speaker would deny her body the pleasure of consuming something so beautifully prepared.

The second part of the book, “Draw a Door,” draws on darker and more sinister narratives and themes. Most shocking is the poem “Violation,” in which the reader witness first a sexual encounter, presumably when the primary character, “she,” was a teenager or pre-teen, followed by an intimate moment in what is presumably her recent past. The first line shows us that “In a museum, two boys lick her mouth,” where we are immediately clued into something that reads as intrusive and unnatural—even the hint of some sort of impending gang rape. The reader is taken aback by the presence of two boys, which somehow makes the scene even more violating. Later, as the unnamed “she” of the poem experiences an intimate moment with, presumably, a lover, the language Camp uses to describes the man as “rum-soaked” and herself feeling “stubble-squished”—the entire experience ultimately boiled down to “her grasp of confusion” (11). Much like the poem “Lighten” in the first section, “Violation” seems to function not only at its face value. It is a poem about personal sexual violation and dissatisfaction, yes, but because of where it falls in the book, these scenes of uncomfortable sexual experience may also subtly point to the violation of an entire group or location, perhaps her Jewish or Iraqi heritage – or both.

Shorter than the first two sections, “Goat's Milk and Velvet” acts as the terminal where one is caught in a layover. The section delivers portraits of anxiety with images like “scalloped red pieces of worry” in the first poem of the third section, “Worry” (41). There are literal travel poems that share both fear and bravery in lines such as “They grasped their worth in a suitcase / and boarded a plane” in the untitled poem on page 42. There is much meditation on the experience of nostalgia, as well, as anyone who has moved from one place to another can relate.

The tastes, sounds, and smells of home are what seem to drive us into the falseness of nostalgia, and Camp presents this clearly throughout the third section as well as the last two

sections, “And Elaborate Matrix” and “Pulling Knots from the Future.” Camp weaves in narratives of ancestors traveling out of Iraq, of a girl learning what it means to be a woman and to be descendant of Iraqis, and what Iraq means to the main speaker of the collection—who we may assume is an adult woman. Most notably, Camp’s poems become increasingly more political as in the poem “Letter to Baghdad,” or in the poem “Why Dad Doesn’t Pay Attention to Iraq Anymore,” in which she writes, “The longest griefs are those we never look at” (54). The way this line punches the gut is that not only can it be applied to Iraq—whether from the perspective of one from there or one native to the U.S.—but also that it can be applied to every kind of grieving. This one line allows the reader a place in—a way to make the experience universal, even for those who do not have ties as close as the speaker or the primary character of the poem do.

This book carries the soul of someone with deep empathy, and one who understands what it means to be an outsider. The journey the reader travels with the careful guidance of Lauren Camp is full of rich language and imagery, and a soft hum seems to always be in the background. Perhaps, the sound of the oud or the gentle singing of a grandmother mixing ginger and tamarind in the kitchen. One can even envision the glossy red pomegranates, or taste the rice, raisins, and okra that make humble appearances. *One Hundred Hungers* truly inspires its readers to hunger for all of the things that Camp details about the cultures within the text, leaving only anticipation, now, for the next book.

From *Poet Lore* (Fall/Winter 2016)

Review by **Margaret Randall**

We are fed such a constant stream of information about Iraq, we may believe we know something of that country. Those of us old enough to remember the Jewish Holocaust may believe we understand the Jewish experience, or at least its darkest chapter. Those of us juggling whatever struggle between what we are told about our lives and how we feel, may think we know something about memory: its tenacity, erasure, unexpected barbs. Lauren Camp’s new book *One Hundred Hungers* demonstrates, patiently, line by line and page by page, that there is so much more to be explored beneath every surface.

Camp is an Arab-American poet, once an Arab-American girl growing up among the tastes and smells and silenced memories of an immigrant family. Her father is an Iraqi Jew whose boyhood in 1940s Baghdad ended abruptly when, faced with a changing society, he emigrated to the United States. What had been a place where Jews, Muslims and Christians lived lives of interaction and respect, had become one of danger, fear, motivation to escape if one was able. In a new country the women, especially the older women, continued to cook and serve dishes rich in sensual memory. But Camp’s father, as he reached for acceptance and success in his new home, began forgetting. His daughter spent years trying to get him to remember. These poems are the culmination of that effort.

This brilliant book, organized in a way that allows its singular story to unfold as few collections do, begins with the poet’s vain efforts to prod her father to speech, press him to utter the words she believes will free her own. He will not or cannot remember. Clues are dropped:

noticed or imagined. Stories reduced to a single word must stand in for images. Silences are too often called upon to explain. The daughter has never actually been to Iraq. And if she could travel there she knows she would not find the nation, neighborhood or even home that were bedrock to her father's life. The father has grown taciturn. What to do? How to pluck words from silence?

Camp takes the only route open to her. With enormous courage, she leans into her imagination, and words, images, appear. In the book's first poem, "Without Spectacle or Fading," she writes: "What time said first: / the sky is holy. // Nonetheless, / what time did first // was build / a land of hawk // and buzzard, / rounded contours, // huddled sage. / Among the wisdoms, ..."

In the section "Draw a Door," memory begins to split off into strands of imagination. Camp must push this imagination further, so it both satisfies her own need for answers and speaks intelligibly to the reader. That she manages this with such grace and power is nothing short of extraordinary.

The door has opened and what comes is a flood. But Camp has much more work to do, perhaps the most important of the multiple tasks presented and unfolding in this book. She must order the flood, make sense of it, select some words while letting others rest or wander off. *One Hundred Hungers* is firmly rooted in the poet's deep understanding of memory, how it expresses and/or denies itself, images simultaneously followed into past and future, and the family (generational, gender-related) relationships that frame it all. "Variation: Let's Pretend" (27), begins:

Let's pretend you tell me what happened.
How you lived in the city two streets from the river.

Let's suppose you begin speaking and you speak
until all the courtyards and terraces
of Baghdad tumble from your mouth.

And later in that same poem:

... Let's agree that I know
something was wrong.

The poem ends:

Let's agree that you'll tell me the details.
Please. You have to remember every flake
of the air and the furrows of danger.

Camp will not let her father, herself, or the reader off the hook. She pushes through her father's wall of silence, her own hesitation to imagine what she may know, and the risk we run when we agree to trust poetry. And these poems reveal process. As one follows another we accompany the poet on a journey of discovery that is nowhere easy or definitive.

Many poems in this collection give us images of the United States to which her father came, with its remnants of the Iraq he left behind. In “Disorder” (4) she writes:

He walked through the wall and door of absence,
And the sky gathered days. Goats and cows stood foolish and heavy in dirt.

In “First View of America” (72) she writes:

... Uncle met him, his footsteps stamped on Idlewyld tile.
They drove through a city affixed to the sky

Where buildings rose higher than one hundred *sejrah bi tamur*.
Dad's eyes must have extended. It was October, a sheet of leaves ...

... In Baghdad,
he left a single wrinkle in his room, but packed his accent

and passport. He dressed for a journey.
Drank a cup of belief
in the airport. Moved through doorways ...

By the time we get to “One Hunger Could Eat Every Other” (7), she has introduced us to a whole cast of family characters: “whoever appears, aunts from Toronto, Tel Aviv, London, South Africa. Distant cousins and uncles and business partners. We remember their names, their bruised pickled syllables. We'll see them again.”

In “One Hunger Could Eat Every Other” (7) food also takes center stage and will remain there throughout the book: “We eat for years and years. We eat like beggars. We eat to the bones and the edges of our plates. We eat the road they took to get here, the many myths they left behind.” It is with food, and Camp's ability to let us see the women in her family who prepared it *as they did*, that we learn some of this book's profound truths. And she traces the complexities of women and food to the next generations in these lines from “Lighten” (10): “... she held / her slight torso / in the raw bony winter, / wearing only the smallest / wardrobe of self.” Food remains from the old country as well, and often embodies a memory or remembered familiarity, as in these lines that end “Disorder” (4):

He consented to many slow steps and strange punctuation,
and now when he opens his palm, it's filled with dates.

Toward the end of the book's second section, “Draw a Door,” the poem “A Door in the Evening” (36) links silence and memory, reinvention and imagination, food and cultural essence, time and place, the poet's need to recreate her identity and the father's inevitable forgetting:

This house that filled us with thirteen varieties
of rice, brown boiled eggs, creases of language.

There was not a single sentence that was ordinary.
Tender lamb and copper pots;

a banquet every week, and we hovered.
The house was brick. Back door, side door.

Each of the reasons, the clutter of years.
I used to live *here*. I live *here*.

The beginning of forgetting comes quickly.

What more evocative way of describing the immigrant experience than these brief lines in the untitled poem on page 42: “They grasped their new worth in a suitcase / and boarded a plane ...”? And how vital it is for every one of us to understand the immigrant experience in these times in which so many sorts of immigration shape such great numbers of people?

The last two sections of *One Hundred Hungers* are “An Elaborate Matrix” and “Pulling Knots from the Future.” In them, particularly in pivotal poems such as “Why Dad Doesn’t Pay Attention to Iraq Anymore” (54–55), “A Woman of Valor” (60), “Letter to Baghdad” (62–63), “Infiltration” (70), “First View of America” (72), and “Expedition and Terrain” (76), Camp pulls together and makes full sense of the questions that have nudged and troubled her: coming and going, the places claimed by remembering and forgetting, the ways in which gender inhabits time and place, the identity she holds as a result of her father’s journey. I will reproduce the latter poem in full:

Her grandmother lost the last of her mind on a slow bus
picking over soggy roads. The girl saw her half-closed eyes,
how she was all the time repeated by Alzheimer’s. A single word,
the gauzy trip of description, each forgotten thread of herself stitched
into a chorus of childhood liturgy, a banner of Arabic—

and the small *hnnhh*, *hnnhh* of her breathing on the blank bank
around recall, facts falling from the old page of her face,
her language and courage, detail by detail, decaying.

Ma’a e-salamah. Goodbye. If the drape of a mind becomes pleats,
one thought covers another until the sum of memory is folded inside.

The foregoing, and many other poems in this collection, present us with the use of foreign words in English-language poetry. In this case the words are sometimes Arabic, sometimes Hebrew: the languages of peoples who lay claim to the same small swatch of land and who have been in conflict since as long as most of us can remember. When necessary, these words are defined in the notes found at the end of the book. To my ear, Camp’s use of these words works well; they belong to the rhythm of her poetry and their use never seems elitist nor stops the flow.

One Hundred Hungers stretches our grasp of war, loss, pain silenced by the need for assimilation, and social transplantation as it moves through generations. We discover that Iraq is so much more than what passes for news on our nightly TV screens. We learn that its people are culturally rich and complex. And we come to know the poet, product of Jewish and Arabic origins, stories and their silences, denial and discovery, fragmentation and a masterful ability to reweave lives. The book's last poem, "Variation: Visit to Iraq" (86) tells us:

why watch
 the salty runoff
 of the *dijla*

 that runs
 with tamarind pods
 wrung
 from the sky

 or why love
 the long-handled
 musk-pulse
 of language
 robing the streets

 or why turn
 brown eyes
 to heavy blossoms
 of light

 what if she stays
 here—

 a place chiseled
 from traces and fragrance

 where she shook out
 her heart

It is tempting to quote many poems and even more lines from this deeply fulfilling volume, but I feel I must resist that temptation because the only way to appreciate the overall statement Camp makes is to read the poems from beginning to end and in the careful order she has given to them. More than simply excellent poems, this book is an experience.

One Hundred Hungers is also book for always, a book to return to when we are tired of the ways in which our lives are squeezed into sound bites and fed back to us broken on a daily basis. It is also a beautiful book to hold in the hand; its design is perfect. The cover photograph, "Jannat, Barmer" by Gauri Gill from her series "Notes from the Desert," is a perfect fit. So is the book's overall design and typography. Tupelo Press is to be commended for this most recent Dorset Prize.

Links

Lauren Camp website:

<https://www.laurencamp.com>

Lauren Camp's *One Hundred Hungers* on Tupelo Press website:

<https://www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/lauren-camp/>

Poems

Two poems with audio in *World Literature Today*:

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2013/january/two-poems-lauren-camp#.UOtnponjnPZ>

One poem at *Toad*:

<http://toadthejournal.com/issue-52/lauren-camp/#1>

One poem at *Matter*:

<https://mattermonthly.com/2014/07/02/i-am-practicing-now-turning/>

One poem at *Pea River Journal*:

<https://peariverjournal.com/2013/12/10/lauren-camp-visit-to-iraq/>

Radio interviews:

On "Santa Fe Radio Café" (KSFR-FM):

<http://www.santaferadiocafe.org/sfradiocafe/2016/04/22/lauren-camp/>

On "Women's Focus" (KUNM-FM):

<http://kunm.org/post/poet-lauren-camp-one-hundred-hungers-0>