black. I try not to think what this might mean. A solitary casuarina tree clings to the cliffside just below where we sit, its flat-topped shape like a candelabra without the candles, reminding me of the squat, typhoon-twisted pines of Fukuoka. I gulp some water and offer Sipin my canteen, letting the girls finish it.

We resume our climb with Sipin just above me, looking down and pointing toward the next foothold like a beckoning angel in a William Blake drawing. I keep my eyes on Sipin's face. It is calm but intent. I feel oddly detached, as though my slow progress up the slick mountainside is a minor part in some allegorical drama. Step by step, root by root, handhold by handhold, I seem to be ascending a dream-staircase, stairs so real they fuse with the mountain. "Put hand here," Sipin says, and my hand closes over the next tree root before she finishes her sentence. "Put foot there," she says, and my foot is already reaching for the next knob of rock. Somehow I've adjusted to the girls' rhythm, or they to mine, all six of us climbing in slow motion like legs of a single spider. To my surprise, I no longer want to be anywhere other than where I am at this very moment.

I forget to be afraid. It isn't that I've conquered my fear; I simply believe in my guides. In their own element, these five little girls, who seemed shy and awkward on the school ground yesterday, now seem so wise and self-possessed, so infallible, that I obey them without fear or question. Perhaps I'm learning, as if for the first time, what it means to trust and follow.

At the top, I pause for a few breaths of damp, icy air, my muscles trembling with relief, my feet balanced uncertainly on a narrow ridge of earth. I look down, but all I see is white. We're inside a cloud. Yet I am certain of the way I've come.

COLLEEN KINDER

Blot Out

FROM *Creative Nonfiction*

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them [when they go abroad]. That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed.
>
> —Quran 33:59

YOU CAN PRETEND you're in a tunnel. You can make believe you have on blinders. You can stare 100 yards in the distance at a random point. You can walk with urgency or purpose. You can look prickly or preoccupied. You can wear an iPod. You can make a cell phone call. You can fake a cell phone call. You can write a text message to no one.

These are the ways foreign women get down the street in Cairo. These are the tricks they share, the ways they teach me to "beige out," as one woman put it, to fog up the glasses, whenever outside. Outside is the sphere of Egyptian men. Men run markets, crowd alleys, fill every subway car but the very middle one, marked by a huddle of headscarves. Females are scarce on Cairo's streets, and those who do appear seem hurried, like mice suddenly exposed in the middle of a room, rushing for cover.

I'm a journalist, here for just one month. The only thing I have to do inside is write about what I see outside. In short: I can't coop myself up in Cairo. My very first day, unsure of Egypt's codes, I played it safe and tied a silk pink scarf around my face. In the mirror, I looked like a little girl dressed up as the Virgin Mary. Covered, I felt safe but no less overwhelmed. On too many streets,

mine was the lone headscarf weaving through tight teams of men. Their stony gazes felt like scorn.

I ditched the headscarf once I met American women living in Cairo. Covering my head wasn't necessary, they laughed. People knew I wasn't Muslim. I was obviously a Western woman, and, yes, that meant unvirginal here, and, sure, that aroused disapproval—all of which I should get over, quickly, and just focus on getting down the street.

I get down Suleiman Gohar Street by staring hard at middle distance. Sometimes, I practice the Arabic words for "left" and "right"—*shmal, yamin*—to the rhythm of my footfalls. And sometimes, in the blur of my peripheral vision, I catch sight of a black ghost—an Egyptian woman draped from head to toe in dark fabric—and I wonder what it's like under there, dressed in *niqab.*

The *niqab* is a headdress that covers not just the hair, but the face, ears, and neck. Paired with a long black tunic, the *niqab* leaves nothing exposed. A narrow, tight-threaded grille covers the eyes. The woman underneath can see out, but no one can see in.

Controversial in the West, the *niqab* was banned in France, seen as a means of repressing Muslim women—"a walking jail," said one French politician. That was my first read on the *niqab;* I felt sorry for the women in that brutally hot costume, imagining possessive husbands and overbearing fathers. But the Western objection to the *niqab* presumes that being seen is a freedom women desire. After walking alone as a blond, nonvirginal, youngish woman in the streets of Africa's most densely populated city, where almost everyone is a boy or a man, and looking, visibility is the last thing I desire. The *niqab* begins to tempt me like a secret passageway—a way to be outside without actually being seen. At the end of a month in Cairo, nothing sounds more liberating than erasing myself from this place.

"I've always wanted to do that," says Maryanne, a horse rancher who raised two children in Cairo, when I ask her to venture out in *niqab* with me. Years ago, she had this idea herself—she and every American woman in Cairo, it seems. I proposition teachers and journalists and a belly dancer from Los Angeles, and discover it's a common fantasy; a few women have already done it. "You feel like you're getting away with something you shouldn't get away with,"

says Abby, a foreign correspondent. Egyptian women, I hear, have their own history of mischief in *niqab.* Women cheat on exams in *niqab;* women cheat on husbands in *niqab;* some prostitutes go to work in *niqab.*

Kate is the only person who tries to talk me out of my plan. The editor of *Egypt Today* and an American whose expertise is Muslim culture, Kate is worth listening to. She argues that even women in *niqab* get harassed, treated like meat, ass-grabbed. That's not the point, I tell Kate. I just want a break, I say, a break from being so seen. I want to hold Cairo in my gaze.

There's a place in this city where I long to do the looking. Every Friday, there's an outdoor market—a teeming antique, junk, and exotic animal market. In guidebook write-ups, there's usually a warning for Western women (e.g., "be accompanied by male friends in order to feel more at ease"). This is where I want to pass invisibly, I tell Kate. At the great Egyptian *souq.*

"But you don't speak Arabic," Kate says. She's worried someone will try to converse with me and that my silence will give me away.

I consider Kate's point on my routine walk down Suleiman Gohar Street, where I'm heckled on average once a block. Erase the color of my skin and hair, screen the green from my eyes, hide my face, cover my neck, cloak my shoulders, wrap my arms, bury my chest and waist and hips, shroud my knees and calves and ankles, let the fabric fall straight down to the roofs of my plain black shoes, and it's hard to imagine what a man in the street would have to say.

Tori is the one who says yes. A young yoga instructor with flaxen hair and deep dimples, Tori has more reason than most to blot herself out of Cairo; she looks like California. I once rode the subway with Tori and watched tendrils of attention wind around the pole she gripped while looking only at me. The "I'm on a mission" walk: that's how Tori gets down the street.

To hide under *niqab,* we must first find one. We try Ataba, a shopping complex that's Vegas-bright on a Tuesday night. There's no clarity at Ataba on what's a street, what's a store, what's a lot, what's a place where cars won't hit you. Finally, we find a dingy mall where a man on the third floor sells the full getup. I watch this man's face closely as Tori tries it on, receding under layers of

jet-black fabric. He's not amused. He's not bothered. He just wants to make a sale.

The sale is made, and we head to the subway, passing a woman in *niqab* who's sound asleep on the ground by her tarp of fruit. "Look at that," I say, pointing like a kid. I can't help it; the idea of feeling relaxed enough to fall asleep outside in this furious city—even when cocooned inside all those layers—is just unfathomable to me. But we don't have to fathom. We have the material. We can get under there ourselves.

Tori presses down the camera's shutter, but nothing happens. The camera refuses: SUBJECT IS TOO DARK. I am the subject, and I am too dark. I am darkness with a slit for eyes. Only when we leave Tori's dim bedroom and stand in the kitchen will my camera cooperate. I still can't tell whether the person in my photos is Tori or me.

The *niqab* has one too many layers. There's the priestly tunic and then a ninja-like veil that fastens right above the ears, covered by another veil with an eye screen. Our worst-case scenario—that the *niqab* will slip off in a crowded, male, outdoor scene—feels quite likely now that we're in costume. If I don't grip a handful of my long tunic, it's going to trip me. Plus, my vision is confined now—a forward tunnel, subtly dimmed. Though I do notice Tori slip a water bottle under her cloak.

"I have this fainting problem," she says.

Tori and I are headed to Cairo's largest outdoor market, and she thinks maybe I should know that my companion will slip out of consciousness if she gets too parched. I decide against telling Tori that I, too, have a fainting problem. Mine is a new fainting problem: All that doctors can tell me is that anticipating stress and pain may trigger it. Fear is another trigger. I fear fainting. Fear of fainting recently made me faint. I try not to think about triggers and fears as Tori and I step outside. We pass from her dim living room into an entryway, where the slam of an upstairs door and heavy footsteps send Tori rushing like a crazed ninja down the staircase. She leaves me on the landing, grasping for a fistful of fabric and the courage to move quickly in *niqab*.

Mahmoud, my driver, has been waiting outside. He's actually the driver of an American woman who assured me, jotting down his

number, "There's nothing wrong with hiring a babysitter." I dislike being babysat, both as a traveler and as a woman, but Tori and I agree that a jam-packed subway car is not the place to go in our loose-fitting disguises.

I tried to warn Mahmoud, who speaks taxi English, before I disappeared inside Tori's apartment that I would not look the same when I came back out. I would be in *niqab;* I would be bringing another woman, also in *niqab.* Did Mahmoud understand he would soon no longer see me? I didn't think so.

It's no small relief, then, when Tori and I come down the street, clutching each other like grannies, to see Mahmoud watching. I lift my hand to wave, and he does the same. Tori and I climb, without a word, into his back seat.

How is Cairo so quiet today? Fridays are always subdued, but never like this. You could hear a scarf hit the ground in Cairo today.

"Esmee Tori," my friend introduces herself in a breathy whisper. "My name is Tori."

I would love to know how all this unfolds in the mind of our driver-babysitter. Is he drawing, in his imagination, a face to match the voice of the new presence in his car? Thankfully, there's no sign that we've spooked Mahmoud. On the contrary, he's on our side, telling Tori in Arabic that we forgot gloves. Women in *niqab* wear black gloves. All we can do is bunch up our sleeves now. I look over at Tori. There's only one thing to look at: her eye screen. Tori's eyelashes have poked right through the mesh.

The hardest thing is not speaking. I keep wanting to say things to Tori while we walk down a street crowded with goats and men about to shear them. But talking is the surest way to expose ourselves, so we say just a few things, like "Hold my arm" and "I'm still nervous" and "I feel things slipping" and "Shh," adjusting gradually to the new code of silence. We are entities that waddle and watch but do not speak. We waddle carefully and watch hard. I watch the faces of the men who pass and seem focused on goats alone. I watch them tug the ears of goats that bleat as if they know it's shearing day. Everything about this feels precarious. I feel things slipping—and by "things," I mean veils, both of them, neither of which I can fix now, because the car is far behind us and

Mahmoud has opted to stay there. Still, I'm so tempted to say one last thing aloud to the entity floating beside me like a steady boat: "Nobody sees us."

What they see, all they see, is *niqab.* They see *niqab* move; they see it has a twin; they see caution, codependence. There's nothing more, though, to take from our image. Onlookers quit looking. Passersby pass right by. They beige out, resume daydreams or scan the air for other things, things with color or curves or noses. I watch it happen over and over through my eye slit, scrutinizing the gaze of every person we walk by. And no matter how many people look bored of us, no matter how many eyes gloss over, I'm paranoid about the look that somehow gets in. I'm reading every face, ready for a mouth to open, a finger to point. Instead, the first gasp comes from inside my veil when Tori and I pass a full-length mirror in the furniture mart and neither one of us appears.

It's easy to fall into reverie when you're not speaking, when you're staring through a slit, when you're dividing focus between your feet (*step with care, step with Tori, do not step on the hem*) and your head (*stay, veils; stay, veils; slide a little slower if you cannot stay*), plodding and plodding, past the aisle of toilets, the doves in cages, the Qurans on tables, bikes on train tracks, cassettes on dirt, heaping mountains of defunct remote controls. This *souq* lies on the edge of a cemetery, under the shadow of a raised highway. The market will go up in flames mere months from now, a fire sparked by a car accident; within a year, the entire city will be ablaze in political protest. But no one this Friday morning knows any of this. Today is about trade. You can buy hawks here. You can buy hedgehogs here. You can buy 1970s exercise bikes here. There's a man who swallows shards of glass, another who sells busted keyboards. It all blends together like a long and lovely hallucination, a market I dreamed up, letting boundaries blur, as dreamers do, letting the *souq* be two things at once, as things in dreams—behind the curtain of closed eyes—can be: squalid and splendid, treasure and trash.

If Tori speaks up, it's only to comment on the breeze. Tori loves breeze. When a rare gust of air makes it under her *niqab,* she thanks it aloud. If I speak up, it's to wish there were some way to take photos. My clunky camera—impossible to wield under *niqab*—is in the car, and this place is my photographic wonderland: antique mart meets junkyard meets unregulated zoo. The clashes are incredible. The clashes are so Cairo. And my photographer fantasy—invisibility—is all but granted here. I'm free to stare, to focus, ogle, dawdle—tortured to have all those new powers but not my camera.

Powerless to capture the *souq,* I ask it questions. I ask this *souq* the same question I ask all public places in Cairo: where have you hidden the women? And because there are things that qualify as girly here—pink berets and floral perfumes—I feel more entitled than usual to ask my stubborn, Western question. A grizzly looking man walks by with a rack of little girl dresses slung over his shoulder, and I let the clash—lace against stubble—amuse me. And over by the table of ladies' underwear, a few male buyers stand perfectly still, riddled with indecision (what color? what size? good lord, what cut?). I stare at their unmoving profiles and want to freeze them, right there, in a perpetual puzzle involving women's underpants, until they agree wives should be let out of homes.

There's a place, a kind of vortex at the Friday *souq,* where six different mud paths intersect. Bird vendors meet jean sellers meet spice men meet fish delivery boys meet two blond imposters under *niqab,* who sooner or later, like it or not, must enter the vortex. It's impossible to know how trafficked the vortex is until you're down in it—yes, "down," for the vortex is a dip. We—all of us—converge with the push of gravity. A Tweety Bird blanket hangs high over the fray, too high for anyone to grab. Right when my foot has found the outer banks of the dip and I am climbing out, a hand finds my ass and squeezes hard. I wriggle, shove ahead, and nearly take Tori down.

It's the first time anyone's groped me in Cairo. Kate was right. Men don't need a figure or face to treat a woman like meat. Someone with imagination pushed right through the *niqab.* We exploit our anonymity at this *souq,* and so does some guy's hand.

Back on level ground, it becomes clear that someone's following us. Tori veers us down an alley toward the cemetery, hoping to lose the stubble-cheeked man, but he keeps up, asking in Arabic, over and over, "What are you doing here?" In a whisper that she hopes hides her accent, Tori says, "Leave us alone." I don't speak Arabic. I just sweat. My *niqab* is gaining sweat weight. Tori leads us deeper into the City of the Dead, a maze of mausoleums, until

finally the accuser falls away. Again: Kate was right. There were reasons not to do this. The man was ready to yank Tori's *niqab* right off.

Nothing, though, can spoil this *souq* for me. Not the sweaty fabric, not my fury at men, not my indignation on behalf of women, not a veil slipping, not an ass grabbed, not even a stranger who wants us shamed. There are places that feel like the answer to the question of why we travel in the first place, why we bother to trespass, crossing the lines that look like fences. This place is one of my few.

We're leaving, reaching the homestretch. We see Mahmoud looking straight at us, bless him, as if he's been scanning the edge of the market for twin black blobs ever since he lost sight of Tori and me hours ago. Still, Tori can't wait to reach the finish line to say aloud what she enjoyed most about wearing the *niqab*. I think of the other American women who wear blinders, who beige out, who stare at a random point 100 yards away. I'm sure they would all nod, as I do, when Tori says the best part was looking strangers square in the eye.

We collapse into the back seat of Mahmoud's car with a tremendous ruckus. We phew and sigh and breathe air like people who just crawled out of graves. We yank down veils and suck down water, making the transformation back to Westerner, back to blond and green-eyed, with a quick yank.

I watch Mahmoud watch Tori become Tori in the mirror; I catch him smile as he sees for the first time the dimpled cheeks that match the little voice. Tori later tells me how strange this was—not because she caught our babysitter peeping but because she wanted to introduce herself all over again, *"Esmee Tori."*

Mahmoud is ready to drive off, but I can't yet. I cannot leave without taking pictures. Tori, knowing I need a companion, offers to come. And so we head back into the *souq* without coverage, straight into what, at our approach, now sounds like a motel room full of male athletes who've just located the porn channel. I take Tori's hand. It's perfectly normal for people of the same gender to hold hands in Egypt, and I appreciate that fact in this moment because I need this hand. I need this hand like I might someday need a cane. Cairo is excellent at reminding me I cannot make it alone, and never more so than now: in the bright light and open

air with my friend, who looks as bare as I feel, with the shadows of men like a forest just ahead.

My fingers interlock with Tori's; our knuckles can't get any closer. Many things are yelled at us. "Big dick" is yelled at us. "Sex" is yelled at us. And so is a question: "Are you lovers?" Which I find interesting. Someone in this jungle of hecklers has noticed how tightly we're holding hands. He sees something in those interlocked fingers, and rightly so. If there's a place with the power to change my sexual orientation, would it not look like this? If there were a moment when I swore off men and partnered instead with my own kind, wouldn't it be now, as I walk back naked into the Friday *souq*?

Some men stare; others hiss. Gangly boys trail us and bleat the word *sex*. But because none of that happened, just moments ago, because the contrast is so stark, so ludicrous, I want to taunt back: "We were just here, fools!" If there were a way to gloat, how I'd gloat. I'd yank a veil out of my pocket, wave it overhead like a crazy lady, and let every ogler know, "You just looked right through me."

But it's my turn to look right through people. I pretend I see no ruckus, no fury, no storm. I scan the fields of junk and, before anyone can chase us away, shoot, shoot, shoot. A half-hour into this reverie, the reverie of looking through not veil but lens, I realize I have no idea whether the boys trailing Tori and me, flinging dirty words and sticking their fingers into my photos, are the same boys who began doing so 30 minutes back. That's when I realize I've beiged back out.

I once read that camels have an extra eyelid. It's a translucent cap that keeps out grains of sand. There are many reasons camels survive in the desert. They have special pads on their feet and humps of sustenance to go days without food. The way they weather sandstorms, though, moving through the desert at its most furious, is this secret lid that slides right down over the open eye.