



**A watermelon must  
be listened to**



## IV.

clinical inquiries into pitch,  
auscultating the sweetness of love,  
thinking of love, and mealiness of  
the heart.  
i have enough knuckles to bear it.

that one’s a good one.  
oh, that one is better.

here sweetness sweetness,  
here sweet sweet.  
clack clack, clog clog, kang kang,  
marimba. skin skin skin.  
what is skin and what is rind.  
shhhhh says the camera.  
quiet while i see.

(is there quiet?)

oh sweet, styrofoam when i get you  
home. fabric. paper, plastic, tape, tear,  
rips, slurp, chomp, chaw, loot, loot it  
of its insides, slick chaw, jawing up in  
the night, but sun is dripping.  
quench quench quench.

halve, and halve, and halve, and snap  
and digestion follows no geometry,  
is not a decision to make.

fingers spread or fingers clenched?

grandma drank the juice like soup  
from her bowl.

They Put in Their Stomach a Summer Watermelon  
Manar Moursi

On hot July days, those who had returned from Kuwait to spend the summer months in Cairo’s cooler nights would invite their friends and family once the temperatures dropped. The friends or family would arrive late, around 9 or 10pm, often with a watermelon, priding themselves for perfecting their techniques of selecting the best one by checking its skin color. The underside of the watermelon, the part that touched the ground, had to be buttery to dark-yellow in color. The friends or family would laugh about selection failures. Those who had returned would sit on their hard-earned, prized balconies, in their new apartments in Nasr City which they had finally bought after 15 years of labor in Kuwait. Now that they had accomplished their dream, and their children were about to leave for college, they no longer knew if they should stay in Kuwait or move back to Cairo permanently. Why they left and why they stayed, would become a life-long haunting inquiry. This inquiry on where to settle was dutifully passed down to their children.

The more red, rather than coral-pink, the center of a watermelon is, the more likely it will turn out sweet, but not only sweet, sweet and grainy in texture — hence the expression *miramila* in Egypt to describe perfect watermelons which means sandy. This unexpected connection between sand and sweetness has always pleased me. On the flip side, if your watermelon is more pink than blood red, it’s called *araa’* — bald — and as I grow bald now, this association of baldness with a lack of sweetness — and a lack of utility — since a *battikha araa’* is simply not edible — disturbs me. Many years ago, I went to a dermatologist on account of an eczema attack. As he examined me, he said that he thought I had come to visit him to discuss my thinning hair and forthcoming baldness. I was aware my hair was thinning, something I had inherited from my late mother, but I did not realize that I was going to be completely bald as a result. To convince me to start using Rogaine immediately, Dr. Ibrahim used a simile that has since stayed with me. He said: “You’re still young Manar, the more you wait, the more your scalp will become like a desert and we all know how hard it is to reclaim agricultural land once it is fallow.”

On the dating app Hinge I see a profile with the by-line: “Dating me will be like eating a seedless watermelon.” In the market in Montreal I find seedless “personal” watermelons. They are smaller watermelons that have been genetically modified to be kinder to lonely folks like myself who will have to carry them back home and consume them alone, but are also too lazy to spit out the seeds. The black watermelon seeds, which have been edited out for the convenience of North American consumers, are actually considered to be highly nutritious, rich in amino acids, proteins and vitamin B complex. When I think of vitamins, I always think of Mimi. Mimi, the only grandmother I ever met, insisted on the importance of vitamins so much that all my drawings as a child always included a giant human sized vitamin. I would typically label them: Girl. Boy. Vitamin. Perhaps in the abstraction of what a vitamin meant to me, it became another body that transcended gender, that was similar and equal in size and stature as girls and boys. Mimi had lost her daughter Magda to brain tumors when Magda was 17. Some part of Mimi likely blamed this loss on malnutrition, and vitamins haunted us like a lingering ghost.

When my sister is in a good mood, she punctuates her sentences with *battikha* instead of fullstops, as a joke. Egyptians dub anything a watermelon that raised expectations, but failed you. The political transition in Egypt after protests overthrew Hosni Mubarak in 2011 is one such watermelon. So were the apartments in Nasr City, emigration, Rogaine, and vitamins.

Manar Moursi is a researcher and artist from Cairo. Her artistic work comprises the fields of installation, performance, photography, artist books, video, and writing.

Old Man With A Melon  
Supratik Baralay

Exiting my flight from Delhi, I stood at the immigration desk, where the officer asked whether I was “with them”, gesturing with his chin towards the raucous gang of Indian men waiting in line behind me. “No” I said. He stamped my passport. As I loaded my single suitcase into the back of one of the taxis waiting outside, I asked the driver who was assisting me whether he saw many other Indian travellers. “Many” he said “looking for entertainment”. As the conversation went on, I learned about the well-known and well-frequented sex-tourism route between Delhi and Tashkent: the horny male youth of India’s middle-class would travel, scoping out sex-workers who were deemed fairer-skinned than those back home. This explained the suspicious and judgemental glances that would be flung my way in every city by everybody. I was neither the correct kind, nor the right quality, of visitor. Any Silk Road charms began to unravel quickly.

Turquoise-tiled domes, lofty minarets, and regal *ivan*-squares in Samarkhand, cool madrasas in Bukhara, the mighty walls of the old city of Khiva. After a life spent in Delhi, its environs dotted with the reminiscent architecture of the Mughals, descendants of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Uzbek warlord Babur, the impact of such quintessential central Asian monuments diminished quickly. The cavernous Soviet buildings that housed the wet-markets were a novelty, but their cacophonous hum, the jostling of bodies, and most products, were familiar too. And yet, it was melon season: late autumn in a country culturally enamoured by the fruit. Every market I entered sold dozens of varieties, in greens and yellows, small and many times the size of my head, smooth, striated and knobbly, watermelons, musk-melons, winter melons. Little wonder that Babur complained in his autobiography of Hindustan that “there are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, no musk-melons or first-rate fruits....”

Around two weeks into my journey, field research completed documenting the mud-brick Khorezmian fortresses of the last centuries BCE and first centuries CE, I had decided to drive for three hours further northwest, deeper into the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, to the city of Nukus. Here, the Savitsky Museum, founded in 1966 by the Ukrainian archaeologist and collector Igor Vitalyevich Savitsky, is well-known among art-historians and hipster tourists for its vast collection of avant-garde Soviet artworks that were rescued from censorship at the metropolises. At the edges of empire, works of Constructivism, Cubism, and Expressionism, especially those produced either in Central Asia or by Central Asians, were gathered, hidden, and eventually displayed. And it was my first encounter with Soviet Orientalism. Remarkable paintings with well-worn tropes: Uzbeks working in fields and marketplaces, women in bright traditional clothing, textiles and thick-carpets with floral designs, and all the produce of the land, especially grapes and watermelons. Kipling and Thackeray, the paintings of John Frederick Lewis, of Eugène Delacroix, I saw them all.

One painting in particular struck me: on a dark yellow background, was the portrait of a gaunt old man, with sunken eyes, dark wrinkled skin, and a wispy grey beard, all consumed under the shadow cast by his enormous brown and white cloth turban. His shoulders are draped in a plain crimson garment and he holds up his two hands sideways, their long spindly fingers cradling a thin slice of yellow-green melon. Enfeeblement and exotica entwined. A tour guide told me that the painter was one German Jeglov, born in 1935 in Baku, graduating from its art institute in 1963, then from the Moscow printing school in 1969, before returning to central Asia, and passing away in 2010. I looked up again: the man’s face is dour as he stares down at the meagre fruit. His frown accentuated by his prominent furrowed brow, crows-feet, deep “smile lines”, and the taut sinews in his neck. This time I saw the aftermath of Soviet imperialism: desolation, destitution, and despair. Proud Socialist Realism, the celebration of workers, industry, the Union, carefully replaced by a resistive Expressionism, with its chaotic and feverish brushwork summoning the anguish of its subject. Shaped by empire, embodying it, and even replicating its practices, an artist tries something different. That day I moved away from the painting wondering whether this troubled act of defiance, this complicated attempt to reshape the narrative, was a success. Now I appreciate that even the attempt to see differently is enough.

Supratik Baralay is a historian of the ancient world and story-teller. He grew up between Bombay and London, and now lives in Cambridge, MA.





**Watermelon Whispers**  
Daphne Xu

I know how to pick the best watermelon. Don't ask me how; my memory isn't great and I'm not good with words. We used to buy one watermelon a day in the summertime. My dad would spoon it from his half directly, while my mom took an ice cream scoop and prepared watermelon balls to snack on with the other half. She would place them carefully into stacked plastic tupperware and pour the juice over the top like sauce on a fish.

Whenever I'm on the hunt for a watermelon, I find myself bringing my ears close to watermelon piles and rolling up my fingers to knuckle tap as many of them as I can. I love to discern their potential sweetness, and to have my intuition be proven correct.

A hollow resonance indicates juiciness. And an oblong shape indicates the time it has taken to ripen. Hold the watermelon, because a watermelon grows too heavy when it is overdue. Those watermelons sound flat when you smack them with your palm; their insides whiten as their juice dissipates. The perfect watermelon still feels alive. It is preserved in the state where it vibrates when touched, and its insides are bright red. Each bite is half liquid, half solid. Too soggy, crumbling red, and it's no good either.

On May 8th, I went on a quest for the best watermelon in Toronto's downtown Chinatown. On May 11th, I shared sounds from my quest with friends who are good at listening — musicians, poets, a psychiatrist-in-training. Oles Chepesiuk, Yoyo Comay-Newman, Manar Moursi, Fan Wu, and Justine Yan helped me translate sound into language, resulting in the composition I-IV (red) throughout this issue. To listen to the original audio:



Daphne Xu is an artist and filmmaker from Toronto exploring the politics and poetics of place. Her creative practice engages observations of the everyday and of contested landscapes. She is a fellow at the Harvard University Film Study Center (FSC).

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Contributions by Bill Black, Claire Mullen, Daphne Xu, Julia Sharpe, Manar Moursi, Parker Hatley & Cameron Zarrabzadeh, Pauline Shongov, Supratik Baralay

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