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October Lambs

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OCTOBER LAMBS

The tenth of October, the sky overcast, sultry with the storms that leave the palm-lined street strewn with huge fronds, the pale green Mediterrenean roaring almost like a proper ocean, its usual gentle swell lost in the winds that stir these nights with thunderless heat lightning. Everywhere, the fall's the time for raking. Only here it's unripe dates and fat fig leaves, brown and curled like fists—not the red and golden blaze of maples, sycamore. The rake looks strange beside my swim suit, flesh I cover when I haul stuffed bags outside the gates, careful not to shock the families headed for the beach, girls with their hair wrapped in Muslim scarves, the maids from the richer houses with their white *safsaris* draped on heads, knotted across a work dress. Some herder's descending Byrsa Hill with his sheep and goats cropping whatever grows outside the walls surrounding villas, in suburban Carthage, where the ruins of Dido's city and the Romans who sowed her streets with salt still sprout between the Arab homes. I see lambs with the ewes, new-born size, still suckling. Lambs in October, the seasons confusing as Arabic books printed back to front, in this country I have never learned to read.