What's in a Name?

Anida Yoeu Ali

My name is
2,000 years of history present in 1 body
3 decades of civil unrest awake in 3 syllables
5 letters dense of Birth Blood Islam Peace Khmer Story
2 letters away from 'Refugee'
1 letter short of 'Home'

My name knows my mother labored
screaming for hours
only to mourn a year later
as she buried her sorrow.
A baby boy
empty of breastmilk
born into famine *instead* of family.
(2 letters and war separate the difference)
My mother buried the pains from her first labor
along with her grief, knowing
her son had learned the word for hunger

before he was able to call her 'mother' or speak her name.
She labored a second time and my name was born.
My name unexpectedly inherited first child honors.
My name echoes the same *shahadah** whispered to early newborns
carves legacy into intricate ancient mountains
and escaped from a land kissed by American bombs

When you say my name
it is a prayer a mantra a call

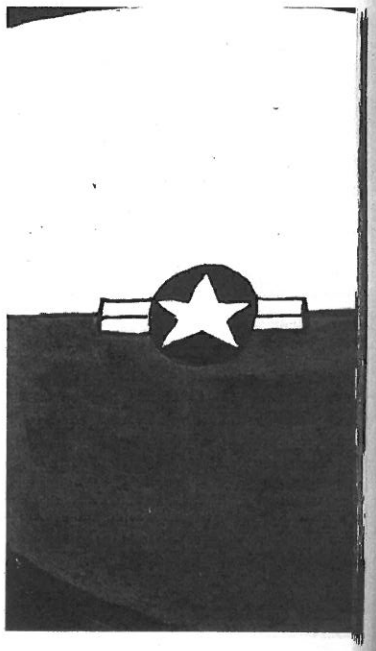
when you say my name
when you whisper it
when you cry it
when you desire it

I respond.

Before countries bounded themselves into borders
before cities became governments
even before the nations of hip hop
it is the original call and response that all people claim.

I take issue with *your* inarticulate mangling of my name
she refuses to disintegrate into a colonized tongue.

My name survived racism before she knew what it was called.
A small child sinks deeper into her seat
into her shame

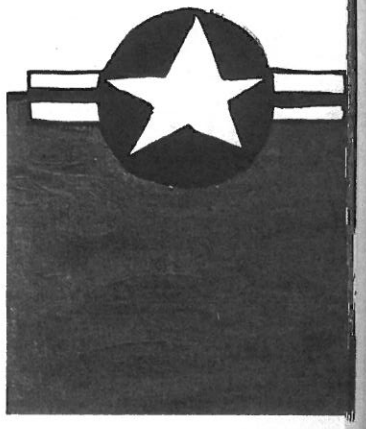


into her difference
into *their* laughter
into *their* stares
into *their* sneers
into a classroom of white kids
with white teachers
with white tongues
with perfectly pronounceable white American names
like Katy, Courtney, Jennifer,
Michael, Bobby, Doug,
Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Nelson
Mr. How-do-you-say-your-weird-name again?
Miss I'm-sorry-I-just-can't-seem-to-say-it-right!

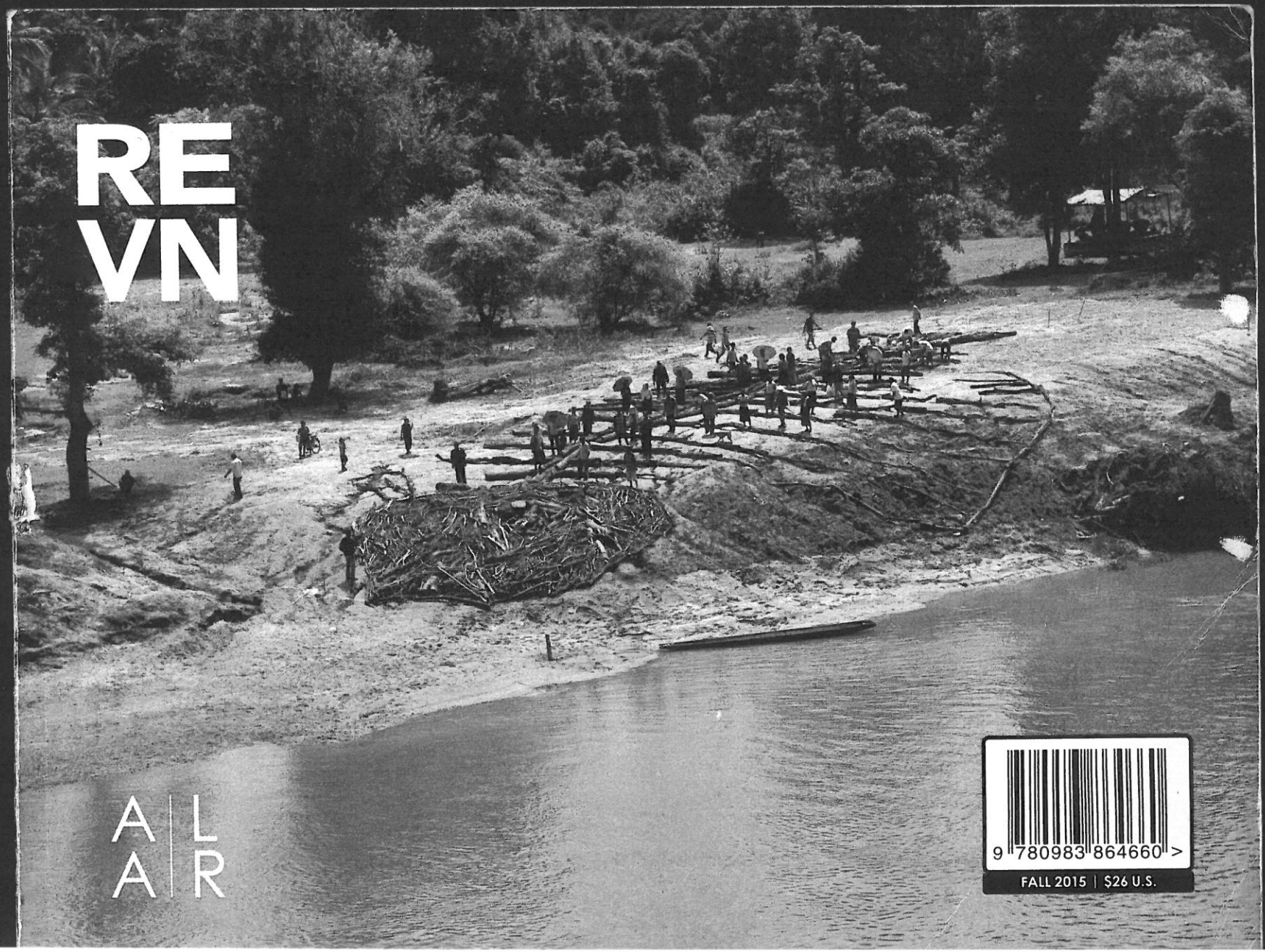
Every mispronunciation is like a mouth shooting bullets
the spit of syllables building from a gullet turn barrel
triggering *precise* memories attached to *precise* feelings
like shame inflected in my parents' broken English
and the guilt of witnessing daily sacrifices by my mother and father
their dreams and youth slaughtered for money, food, *my* perfect English.
Every misplaced tongue targets *my* foreignness, *my* un-belonging, *my* vulnerabilities.
So when I get angry or curse you for your mispronunciation
Please don't tell me I can't do that
Don't tell me to take it easy
Don't scold me afterwards for making a point of it in public
Don't downplay my childhood wounds
Don't shrink me down any further
Please just listen.

Allow me to own this one thing:
The rights to my name.
to say her correctly
to have her said correctly
to come when she calls me
to come to her defense
to live up to her
to honor her legacy.
She is my only refuge when I am stripped naked.
She is my bloodline to mothers who have labored before me.
She is My Name. The echo of Home I long to remember.
My name is Anida
daughter of Surayya
who is the daughter of Abidah
who is the daughter of Fatimah
who is the daughter of a woman whose name I do not know
who are all daughters of Hawwa
daughters of life
sisters of survival
women of resistance
daughters of the earth
water
breath
fire
dreams.

**shahadah*—A Muslim's declaration of faith



REVN



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