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Cover Page Footnote

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LORI DABBAGH

ON MY 40TH BIRTHDAY

I have learned to hate
stuffed grape leaves and baklava, too.
God only knows
I never learned to make them right.
I preferred to buy the canned kind
or the ones on a bakery tray
so I could put pen to paper.
How did I know it was a mortal sin
not to spend all day rolling the leaves
and all night watching them simmer in a pot
on the stovetop?
I should have been stoned to death
for serving my guests
store-bought baklava.

The heavy syrup still tastes like vinegar
so bring me a plate of plátanos instead--
the green and the yellow kind as well
fried in olive oil.
Comfort me with flan and arroz con dulce.
When I scream it's ¡Ay Dios mío, ayúdame!
And six sisters come running
from Santo Domingo, San Juan, Guadalajara,
Bogotá and even Brooklyn and the Bronx
while the mother hangs her hatted head
and intones, Ay qué cuerpecito lindo, qué pelo suave.
And the brother holds my arm
so I don't fall on the ice
in front of the tienda
on the day of
la llegada de los Reyes Magos.

The Magi came bearing gifts
and the hat-wearing mother
whose pot of rice and beans
is an offering unto itself
comes out of the kitchen at our approach
and smiles at the six sisters who know
that the leaf-rolling, baklava-baking
Arab Martha Stewart y algo más
would have let me slip and fall.

The brother tells me
to keep on serving la comida hecha,
his frozen hand locked in a testament
with mine--
his cinnamon to my confectioner's sugar.

Ay ay ay . . .
Arab women bearing pots of grape leaves
and trays of baklava
are far, far worse
than Greeks bearing gifts.