

NADIA HABIB

Always

This question always follows
the naming of my homeland—*Egypt*.
Have you ever read Durrell?

some hocus-pocus *Justine* and a world
dripping with genteel perversions.

That Alexandria is not mine.
Mine has a boundary between sand
and foam line imprinted with
crayfish and laughter and bile.

1962

*My swimsuit is tarred at the bum
I pick a it but it's stuck the
Stella beer vendor ambles by
behind him the woman with the
plate of limp cucumbers—they
drink warm beer I eat warm
cucumbers on the scalding
sand and know we can cross the
line into the water where it's
cool but our heads much like
Alexandria's only get licked.*

It's always hot here and you're always
delirious, that much is predictable
in August.

At night
the men play backgammon,
the women listen to the radio and
drink tea from tiny gold-rimmed glasses.
The lovers walk side by side
at the edge of the corniche,
no hand holding—this is *Egypt*.
No one goes onto the sand.
No one goes near the water.

1977

*The night-sand is cool and doesn't burn
familiar but now an outlander, I've lost
remembrance*

The water is mooring another Durrell.

The water is mooring another Durrell.

1992

Women only occupy the sand, men the water.
It's hot We can only swim fully clothed, they
make
concessions—we may wear white, if those
who own us are progressive. Two men
dressed in shorts, t-shirts, sandals, and
the trace of prostration, guide their wives
through the gardens at
Once the site of Montaza.
Farouk's summer The women are covered in black
from head
palace. to toe, no concessions. I wonder, but
don't ask, if they can really see through
their black veils. We are all here to see
the sights. I think of
Durrell. Farouk.

And the water is mooring another

And the water is mooring another

Nadia Habib lives in Toronto with her son Alexander.