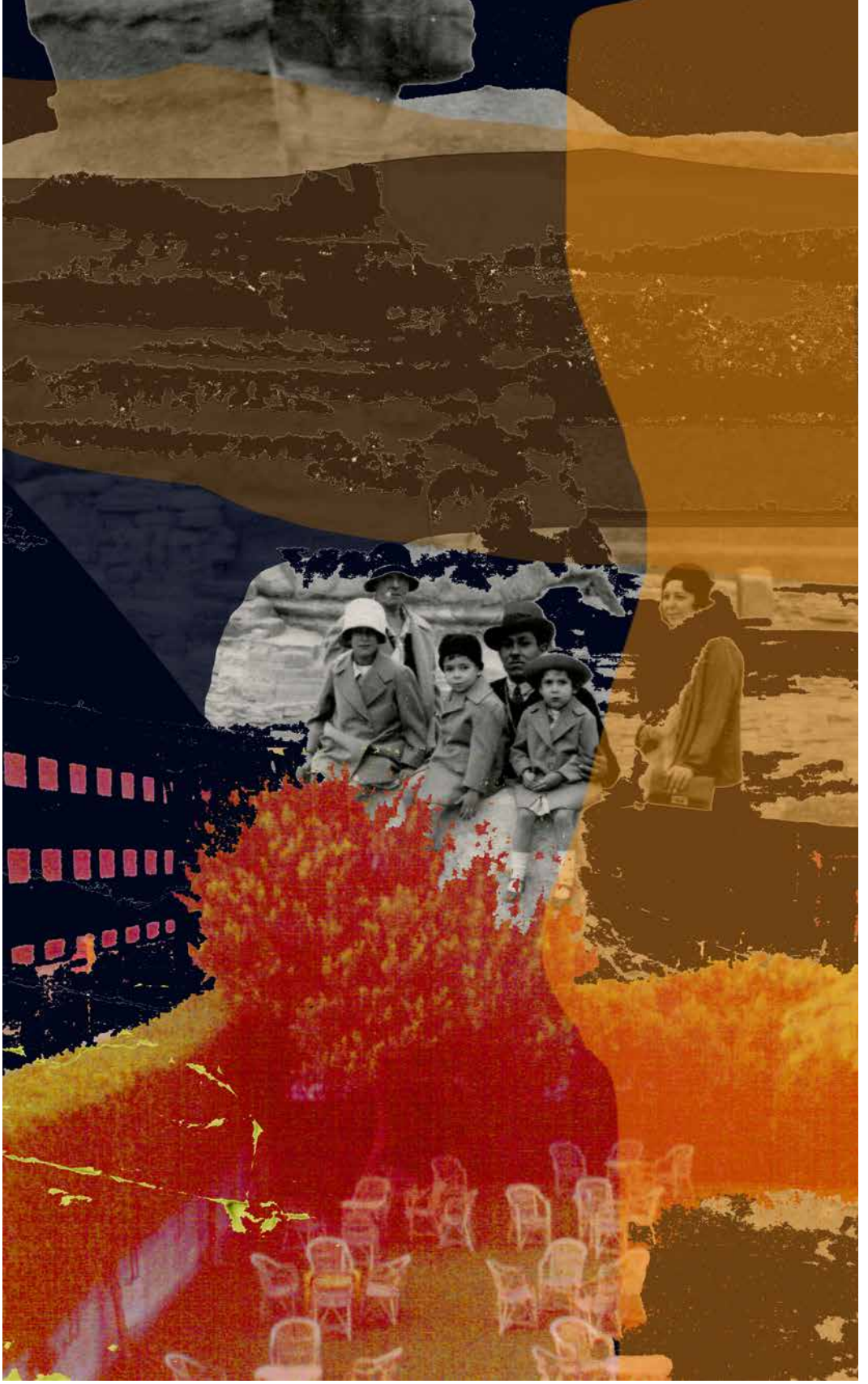

POLLEN and FRAGMENTS

The Poetry and Beekeeping of A. Z. Abushâdy

Joy Garnett

Poetry dissolves foreign existences into itself.
—Novalis, *Blütenstaub* (*Pollen*)

I was in love with my grandfather's books. They bore traces of use and the passage of time, and I thought this made them especially beautiful. Some of them were dog-eared with annotations in the margins, and others were old and crumbly with Arabic calligraphy on their covers. There were a few gilt-edged tomes that had badly foxed pages and tipped-in plates protected by a layer of tissue. Holding these books in my hands, I thought about who I was and where I came from.

I didn't know much about my grandfather, and I relied on my mother and aunt for information. There was only so much they could tell me. I knew he was an influential figure in Egypt's poetry scene of the 1930s and 1940s, and since I wanted to be an artist and a writer, I dwelled on the fact that we had a poet in the family. What else did he do? He was a doctor and a beekeeper. He founded poetry societies and beekeeping clubs. He published magazines. I came across a scrap of paper with his sketch of a flowchart for a beekeeper's library that was never realized. He seemed to relish working on many fronts at once. I hoped I had inherited something—anything—from him.

My mother kept her collection of my grandfather's books in her sewing room. I used to think that by examining them I might get a better sense of him, but his tastes were too

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catholic. He had an appetite for poetry and literature, but he also read books on botany, medicine, travel, and history. He inscribed his name—A. Z. Abushâdy—in all of his books in both English and Arabic, and I came to recognize the shape of his signature long before I learned to read the language. His handwriting was compact and uniform, even more so than my mother's, and I wondered if this neatness was a reflection of their personalities or a family trait that had passed me over.

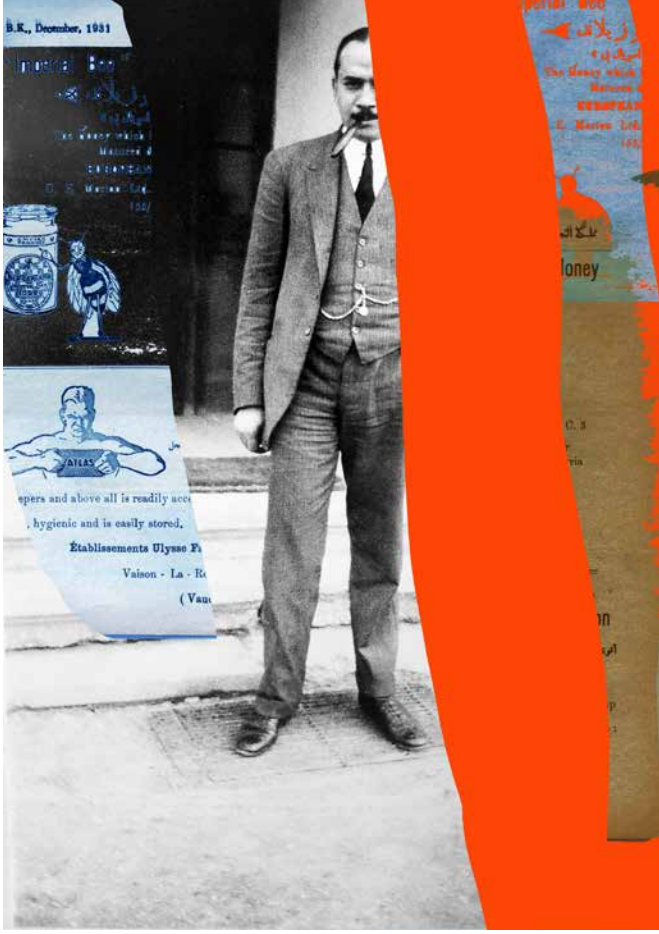
My mother's family photo albums of Egypt sat on the same shelves as her father's books. Some snapshots were faded and yellowed, while others were crisp and clear, as if they had been shot recently. I would pull out the albums one at a time, and sit on the floor and flip through them. Who were these people? How was I related to them? These were questions that my mother, the youngest of her siblings, couldn't always answer. My aunt, who was the eldest, knew more, but she lived far away.

There were people in the snapshots that I did recognize, including my grandparents, aunt, uncle, and mother. I followed the three Abushâdy siblings as they grew from infants in Helwan and Port Said to urchins in Suez and Cairo, awkward teenagers in Alexandria, and elegant young people coming of age in New York City.

Earlier photos show my youthful grandfather- and grandmother-to-be sitting in a garden in the English countryside where they lived for nearly a decade, or posing against a backdrop in a professional photo studio. Some snapshots show them working in an apiary. It is said that they met on a London bus when he was a medical resident and she was heading to or from an art class. She was a chain-smoker and a bluestocking, the black sheep of a family of labor organizers, and one of twelve children. He was a doctor and a poet, the only son of a powerful Egyptian lawyer and a family of well-known artists and literary people. She was a few years older than he was. They indulged in a wry banter in their letters. I don't think he approved of her smoking. She despised the fact that he never took a vacation. They argued about money.

My grandparents got married before leaving England for Cairo. They brought with them their fox terrier, but my grandfather left behind his lab equipment and most of his books. Egyptian customs officials confiscated the few boxes of books they managed to carry with them, along with his poetry manuscripts. He never got them back.

By the time the war ended, my grandmother was dying of throat cancer (she was a devoted smoker to the end). My mother, still a teenager, was taken out of school to care for her. She said her father wanted to find a cure in America, but my aunt said it was his politics that drove them out of Egypt. They buried their



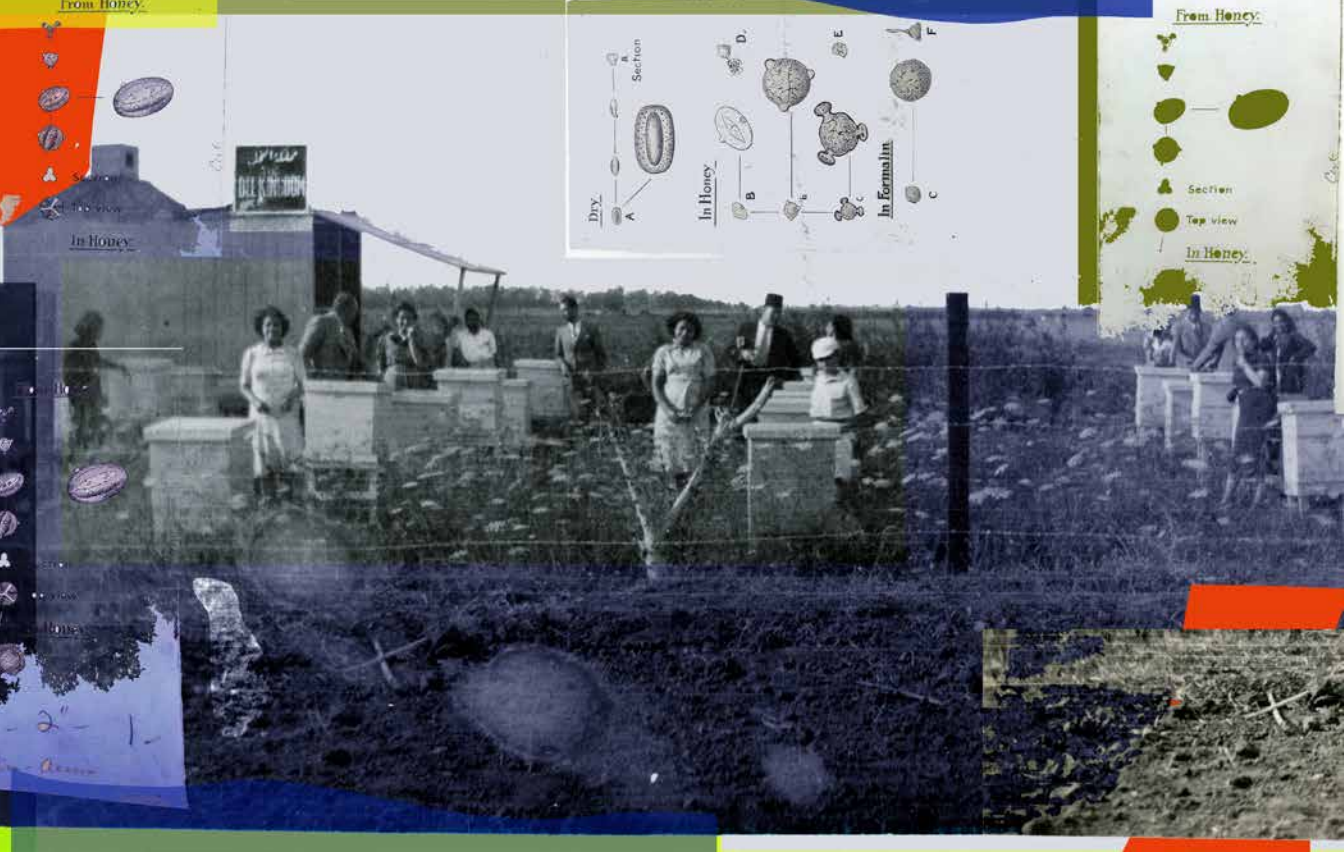
mother in a borrowed grave in the Coptic cemetery in Alexandria and set sail for New York in April 1946, a few months later than planned.

I studied classical Arabic in Montreal at McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies. I wasn't any good at it, but neither was anyone else. Each semester, the class got smaller as people dropped out. It was torture but addictive, and I stuck with it to the end like my grandmother and her smoking. I conducted research on my grandfather at the institute's library, where a whole new world of literary backbiting revealed itself to me. I learned that he was celebrated for launching an experimental Arabic poetry journal called *Apollo*. As far as his own poetry was concerned, he was monstrously prolific and introduced content and forms that were unusual or unheard of. But his work was uneven; apparently he was not good at self-editing. Some considered his poetry to be too European influenced, while others found his romantic tendencies to be retrograde. Nearly everything he wrote went against the grain.

To my surprise, the institute library had *diwans*—collections—of his poetry. But I couldn't penetrate Arabic verse and would have to rely on translations. I could read it well enough to decipher the inscriptions, which were to my aunt; she had donated his poetry to the library. What I didn't discover until many years later was that while my grandfather was forging new paradigms in Arabic poetry he led a parallel life in beekeeping. It took me a while to figure this out, since the criticism and chapters on modern Arabic poetry barely mentioned his work as a bee scientist. But I thought it obvious that my grandfather's bee science was connected in some meaningful way to his poetry.

In 1919, just a few years out of medical school, my grandfather was granted four British patents for beehive improvements. One was for a removable aluminum honeycomb foundation and another for an artificial incubator for queen rearing. Among his earliest and most successful schemes was a bee research institute and apiary called the Apis Club where he put these inventions to good use. He structured the Apis Club, which was headquartered in the countryside near Oxford, as a cooperative. I found a document that counted its membership subscriptions in the tens of thousands, and I tried to imagine so many beekeepers. He launched a magazine devoted to bee husbandry called *The Bee World* (which is still published today as *Bee World*), in which he penned impassioned editorials promoting skill sharing among beekeepers to overcome class divisions.

Twenty years later in Egypt, my grandfather launched a bilingual Arabic and English bee science journal called *The Bee*



Kingdom, which attracted an international readership. The New York Public Library was a subscriber, and they have nearly the full run, from January 1930 through October 1938. I spent a few days there looking through them. Among the editorials, botany columns, and bee disease articles is a surfeit of illustrations, cartoons, and photographs. Some are intended as decorative, while others show portraits of famous bee men and beekeepers at work. A number of the pictures show children—my mother, uncle, and aunt—helping with beehive inspections. Around 1930, my grandfather founded a society much like the Apis Club called the Bee Kingdom League, which included local beekeepers, scientists, teachers, and ministers from Egypt's department of agriculture. It held its meetings in the rambling old villa in Alexandria where my mother, aunt, and uncle grew up, and its members continued to meet after my family left Egypt and long after my grandfather's death in 1955.

Since he wasn't licensed to practice medicine in the United States, he had to look for other kinds of work. He served as a US correspondent for a Cairo-based newspaper but was soon let go over the harsh, undiluted nature of the news about Palestine he delivered from his American sources. He worked at the United Nations in various capacities and wrote and produced radio plays for the Voice of America's new Arabic culture program. While the US government didn't harass him or censor his work, the Arab expat literary community in Manhattan was as thorny and insular as the scene he'd left behind. But he continued to write. He published a poetry *diwan* in 1949 and chapters and papers for bee science publications until the end of his life. Photos from that period show him as a portly balding man with wire-rimmed spectacles and a wide-lapelled suit. He sits in an Adirondack chair reading or writing, a beehive visible behind him. In a group photo, he brandishes a cigar as he strikes a pose with members of the Bronx Beekeepers Association, and in

another series of photos he and my mother don protective veils and conduct a hive inspection in a woodsy clearing. In one snapshot, he smiles and sings as he plays the piano. I've tried to make out the title on the sheet music, but the photograph isn't sharp enough.

Recently, in New York, I took a series of beekeeping classes. I didn't intend to become a beekeeper, but I thought that if I could absorb the reality of beekeeping, I might better understand my grandfather's work. I hoped to be seduced by bees and not just the idea of them. I learned that beekeeping is an ongoing fight against predators, parasites, and disease. To become a beekeeper, one must fly in the face of almost certain failure. To give oneself to beekeeping is to embrace the unending cycle of life and birth and death. Beekeeping is animal husbandry and science turned spiritual. Beekeeping is flowering plants and unkempt fields and honey. Beekeeping is poetry.

I asked my aunt how they were able to afford to leave Egypt and come to New York right after the war. She said she often wondered about that too. She said her father had inherited a parcel of land in the Delta in a place called Khorshed, and that he started an apiary there. She believed they made money by selling honey from their bees. I asked if they had a brand name or a label, but she couldn't remember. They would bring the honeycombs home from the fields on a donkey cart, and my grandmother would put them in a centrifuge and extract the honey by hand. I found a snapshot of women in white working an overgrown field peppered with beehives. A toolshed sports a large sign with "The Bee Kingdom" written in big block letters. Two of the women face the camera, smiling. There is nothing but greenery for miles.

Acknowledgments
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Digital collages by Joy Garnett, 2019. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Joy Garnett served as arts editor for *Cultural Politics* from 2005 until 2016. Her writings and artworks explore the archive in its various forms and include a long-term project around the legacy her late grandfather, the Egyptian poet Ahmed Zaky Abushâdy (1892–1955). Her chapter "The Lost Narratives of A. Z. Abushâdy, Poet and Bee Master" appears in *Cultural Entanglement in the Pre-independence Arab World: Arts, Thought, and Literature* (2020), based a paper she gave at the Centre for Advanced Study of the Arab World, University of Edinburgh. Garnett's work has been shown at the Whitney Museum, MoMA-PS1, FLAG Art Foundation, and White Columns (all in New York), Milwaukee Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Craft Portland (Oregon), Boston University Art Gallery, and the National Academy of Sciences (Washington, DC). Her writings have appeared in *Full Blede*, *Rusted Radishes*, *Virilio and Visual Culture* (2013), and *The Artists' and Writers' Cookbook* (2016). She lives in Brooklyn, New York.