

WATER & SALT

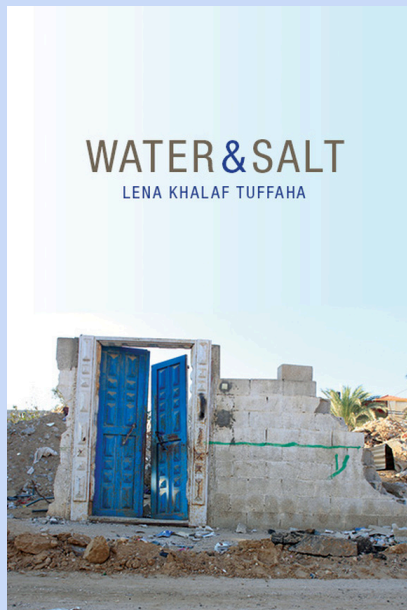
LENA KHALAF TUFFAHA

Welcome to this resource on Lena Khalaf Tuffaha's debut poetry collection [Water & Salt](#). If you'd like to keep a copy of this hyperdoc, click "File" above, and select "Make a copy" under the drop-down options.

This hyperdoc has [introductory material](#), [videos](#) of specific poems, [note-taking suggestions](#) for specific poems in the collection, [two writing prompts](#) inspired by Water & Salt, a variety of [approaches](#) for understanding the work as a whole, several discussion [questions](#) from #THEBOOKCHAT held in November 2020, and [links](#) to other resources like this one.



Click on the images below to see Tuffaha's publications and her bio.





Click the screenshots below on the left to view & reflect on four poetry readings

MOUNTAIN, STONE

Read by the author: Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

What are your initial reactions to this reading? Any image or line that stands out, any shift in the tone that surprised you, etc.

GERANIUM

By: Rainer Maria Rilke

Read by: Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

What are your initial reactions to this reading, Tuffaha's homage to a poet that inspired her? Again any image or line that stands out, any shift in the tone that surprised you, anything that emerged from her own voice.



On [her website](#), Tuffaha explains that "Running Orders" (39) was the the first poem she posted on her personal Facebook page, a poem written "at a time when [she] was losing faith in words". How does viewing of this reading, with multiple readers, inform your own reading of the poem on the page?



Okay, same poem, different context. Consider your reactions to this public unannounced reading. How / can poetry work in public? How do you think Tuffaha would feel about her poetry being read like this?



Drop by drop, grain by grain

Before you consider the work as a whole, have your students take a critical and curious look at Tuffaha's craft by means of individual poems. By soliciting first impressions in these small ways, you will be able to read the entirety of *Water & Salt* with your antennae attuned to her project, her subject, and her genius. [Here is a single-poem analysis](#) by Hayfield Secondary School English teacher Brian Hannon, and [here is a reflection](#) by poet [Naomi Shihab Nye](#) about a single Tuffaha poem that might serve as models for you.

Click one of the journal banners below for **an individual Tuffaha poem** (the two *Taos Journal* images take you to two different poems). Read your assigned poem carefully, making note of any poetic techniques or devices that contribute to the overall meaning of the poem. Be prepared to share your ideas with your classmates, for example:

- ☐ How would you describe the attitude the speaker of your poem has toward her subject? What words or images make this **tone** explicit?
- ☐ What is the function of each stanza in the poem you chose? What words or images stand out in each **stanza**?
- ☐ What is the argument of the poem that you chose? What does the speaker want you to believe or do or ponder as a result of the poem? What words or images make that **argument** explicit?

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Writing challenge #1: The poem on the right (“Drowning” on page 35 of *Water & Salt*) is modeled after the poem on the left, “Toxin” by Bei Dao. For a reading challenge, you might discuss what about the Dao poem might have inspired Tuffaha’s homage. For a writing challenge, follow Tuffaha’s example to create a work of your own. A twelve-line poem, with successively shorter stanzas, introduced by single- line stanzas. [By the way, [here is a different translation](#) of Bei Dao’s poem, with access to the poem in the original Chinese!]

The words / phrases Tuffaha draws upon from Dao:

- Line 1: breath catches short
- Line 2: window
- Line 4: music of a
- Line 6: it’s yesterday’s [...], its love
- Line 9: I take this moment
- Line 10: give me another [...]
- Line 11: I’ve made a [...]

Toxin

tobacco's breath catches short

an exile's window aims at
deep-sea wings released into flight
music of a winter's day sailing closer
like a flag shedding its colors

it's yesterday's wind, its love

remorse deep as the fall of heavy snow
when a stone reveals the end result
I take this moment to weep for the rest of my life

give me another name

I've made a disguise of misfortune
shelter from the mother tongue's solar blaze

Drowning – Lena Tuffaha

After Bei Dao's "Toxin"

Autumn's breath catches short

A mother's window open to
light marbling in leaves
music of a world in vivid decay,
a lifeboat shedding its cargo

it's yesterday's currents, it's love

sorrow dark and bottomless as the ocean
when a ship collides into the present
I take a moment to bury my hopes for tomorrow

give me another history

I've made a shroud of belonging
a refugee tent pitched in the mud of memory.



Writing challenge #2: “Naming It” (94) is the penultimate poem of *Water & Salt*, a poem driven by the **repeated assertion**: “I love to tell you where I am from.” The tone is not simple--few things in Tuffaha’s poems are, after all. Each stanza seems to confirm that the poem is as much about a listener’s **misperception** of where the speaker is from as it is about the speaker’s own love of telling us.



Now, get a notebook and a timer. **Think of where you’re from**--in your notebook, make a list of how it’s understood, how it’s misunderstood. Think of the world’s “playlist” (line 13) of where you’re from--in your notebook, make a list of images or stereotypes or media accounts of where you’re from.

Now, mindful of those notes, set your timer for four minutes. Imagine an actual listener, someone who’s never walked where you’ve walked, never seen what you’ve seen. Now **write for four minutes** to that person about where you’re from--begin with the words “I love to tell you where I am from.”

After four minutes, skip a line. Now **repeat that process** two or three more times, always beginning with the sentence “I love to tell you where I am from.”

What is the story you need to dispel about where you’re from? How can writing dispel it?

[[Graffiti photo by Dan Meyers](#), [cityscape photo by Toa Heftiba](#).]



Here are a few ideas, any one of which can give a reader an accessible and thoughtful entrance to the collection as a whole.

Palestine and political history:

Let's be honest. This region of the world is difficult to understand, and voicing an opinion on this part of the world can lead to misunderstandings. Perhaps before having students address this topic, outline some norms for having difficult discussions (such as [the four-step plan](#) outlined on page 10 of Teaching Tolerance's Difficult Conversations guide), and direct students to [reputable history sources](#) about the area. Now, for Tuffaha herself ...

How does [this journalistic account](#) complicate or confirm your reading of "Running Orders" (39)? "They call us now / before they drop the bombs" (lines 1-2).

How does [this encyclopedia entry](#) on the word *Intifada* complicate or confirm your reading of "Intifada Portrait" (43-44)? "I have a Palestinian friend" (line 1).

How does Tuffaha's account of the United States' presence in Palestine complicate or confirm your sense of America's stated [security goals](#) in & [vision for](#) Palestine? See specifically "Superpowers" (58), "Exceptional" (60), and "National Security Advisory" (68). "[N]one of this is carpool-appropriate conversation" ("Superpowers", line 7).

Palestine and family history:

Tuffaha populates *Water & Salt* with grandmothers & uncles, specific houses & neighborhoods. In what ways do these **domestic details** disrupt the single story you might have brought to this collection about Palestine?

Many of *Water & Salt*'s poems focus on traveling--either being forced into exile from Palestine or returning to Palestine after a long absence ... even a **journey** in the mind and heart back to her origins. In what ways does this collection give you a new lens on the archetypal journey narrative you might have seen elsewhere?

Tuffaha brings her heritage, her family, her people to life on the senses, sometimes by means of imagery related to **food and ritual**. How do her food-and-drink-focused works complement her "political" poems? In what ways do these cultural and domestic moments make you think anew about food & family in your life? What deeper political meaning is stirred into the content of poems like "Blue Morning Music" (49) or "Instructions for Making Arabic Coffee" (72)?



Form:

Water & Salt is divided into three **sections**. What unites each of these sections as a distinct unit? How does the third section “Amulets for the Journey” (pages 65-96) serve as an appropriate resolution?

Anaphora in a literary term meaning the **repetition** of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines in a poem. Tuffaha doesn’t deploy anaphora exactly, but it’s close. Consider carefully the effects of the repetition Tuffaha uses to open stanzas in any one of the following poems: “Upon Arrival” (15), “Time Travel” (17), “Circling the Dome of the Sky” (28), “Mountain, Stone” (36), “Naming It” (94).

Readers of *Water & Salt* will notice the way that certain poems, certain actions in the collection cannot be resolved easily. Consider carefully the effects of Tuffaha’s choice to craft the following poems **ending in questions**: “Intifada Portrait” (43), “Again and Again” (45), “Ruin” (47), “Blue Morning Music” (49).



Further reading, suggested by Tuffaha herself:

- ❑ [Jewish Voices for Peace](#)
- ❑ Palestine Solidarity Committee of Seattle maintains [this site](#) for readers interested in a timeline and history of the conflict.
- ❑ [Voices from A Promised Land: Palestinian and Israeli Peace Activists Speak Their Hearts](#) by Penny Rosenwasser
- ❑ [Palestine](#) by Joe Sacco
- ❑ [After the Last Sky](#) by Edward Said
- ❑ [The Question of Palestine](#) by Edward Said

#THEBOOKCHAT Questions, November 8, 2020:

WU What’s the most political work you’ve taught, and how did it work for you & the class?

Q1 What detail or image or subject of Tuffaha’s poetry will stick with you, and why?

Q2 What sense of Palestine is confirmed or challenged by this collection?

Q3 How does Tuffaha’s poetry compare with stories of cultural heritage you’ve encountered before—either those you’ve taught or those you’ve inherited?

Q4 How would you describe the arc or path of the collection as a whole?

Q5 What topic or text would *Water & Salt* disrupt or complement in your curriculum? What activities do you see working well for students to discover meaning in this work?

For more shareable hyperdocs like this one compiled for #THEBOOKCHAT by [Scott Bayer](#) & [Joel Garza](#), [click here](#).

[Here](#) is a Google Slides presentation/lesson created by Brian Hannon you can use for in-person, hybrid, or virtual teaching. For many more lessons like this, check out the [LMS Voice Curriculum Database](#).

For more shareable #TeachLivingPoets resources from Melissa Smith, click [here](#). [Pre-order](#) Melissa's book, *Teach Living Poets*, forthcoming with NCTE in Feb 2020.

