

Dinnerview: Safia Elhillo

written by Danielle Susi | February 7, 2019



Safia Elhillo is the author of *The January Children* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), recipient of the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets and a 2018 Arab American Book Award. Sudanese by way of Washington, DC, and a Cave Canem fellow, she holds an MFA in poetry from the New School. In addition to appearing in several journals and anthologies, her work has been translated into Arabic, Japanese, Estonian, Portuguese, and Greek, and commissioned by Under Armour and the Bavarian State Ballet. Safia is a 2018 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellow, and was listed in *Forbes Africa's* 2018 "30 Under 30". With Fatimah Asghar, she is co-editor of the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me* (Haymarket Books, 2019).

Here, she talks about favorite meals in and outside of the home, the ritual of a warm drink, and her one true love: pickled turnips.

On her all-time favorite meal:

I have a staying-in answer and a going-out answer for this. At home, my favorite meal is my mom's slow-roasted leg of lamb (dal3a), which has been our go-to special occasion meal my whole life. Like, we have it on Thanksgiving instead of a turkey. It just hangs out in a low oven all day and when it comes out it's falling off the bone and you could cut it with a butter knife (though I mostly use my hands). We'll eat that with ruz mafalfal, long-grain rice that we'll toast before steaming it, then tossing with pine nuts or almonds or something but it's also wildly delicious just by itself or soaking in the gravy from the lamb. And to balance all the textural richness we'll have a simple little salad which is just tomatoes chopped up with some raw yellow onion and seasoned with salt, pepper, olive oil, and lime juice. That's what "salad" is to me—I don't care even a little bit about lettuce. This little tomato situation is the only salad I pledge allegiance to. It's so simple but like perfectly zesty and fresh and satisfying and I could eat it every day—actually I maybe do eat it almost every day.

My going-out answer is the Szechuan chicken wings at Mission Chinese—they're so spicy that your mouth goes numb for a second and then if you take a cold drink of water during that numbness it kind of feels like the water is just suspended in nothingness your mouth and it's a wild sensation. Cool science stuff aside, these are my favorite chicken wings and I eat a lot of chicken wings, but these are the ones I DREAM OF. These are the ones I crave every day. I first tried them on my first friend-date with my friend Fariha, who is now one of my besties. We'd been email pen pals for a while and then we were going to be in New York at the same time, so I met her at Mission Chinese and she ordered us a bunch of stuff for the table. Everything was amazing but these wings changed me. And now whenever I'm in New York and feeling spendy, I'll convince a friend or two to come eat these wings with me.

On what the light looks like during her favorite meal of the day:

Dark outside; low, warm light inside. I grew up eating dinner pretty late—like, 8-9ish, and I still think of that as dinnertime. I often prefer to be alone but I like to eat dinner with company—I think nighttime makes me a little sad, just in general the feeling of the day ending makes me a little sad, but that feeling is remedied, at least temporarily, by a raucous dinner table crowded with people I love making too much noise.

On snacking while writing:

I like a warm beverage while I'm writing, but I rarely eat anything WHILE writing. I've started switching over to writing in the morning, so I'm usually drinking a cup of coffee then. Around 2pm or so, I'll switch to tea, and in the evening it's usually just hot water. I drink a lot of hot water in general because I am always cold but don't necessarily always have the bandwidth for a flavored drink.

On her go-to late-night snack:

PICKLED TURNIPS. My one true love in this cruel world are pickled turnips. I love them. I am passionate about them. I will go through an entire jar in one sitting and deal with the consequences afterwards. They're great in like a shawarma sandwich or falafel or whatever, anything rich and fried and meaty that needs brightness, but just by themselves they're so sharp and refreshing and salty and briny but also not the way olives or other pickles are—they aren't intense, just, like, zesty and bright. Also they're beautiful and hot pink. I love them so much.

On her food quirks:

This isn't so much about digestion as it is about ritual, but I always feel the need to drink something warm after a meal—coffee, tea, hot water. But other than that I'm not a particularly quirky or picky eater, and I'll try mostly anything (except pork because Islam etc etc).

On her final meal request:

Honestly, all the stuff listed above—the lamb, the wings, the rice, my beloved pickled turnips, and also so many grape Hi-Chews that I maybe feel a

little sick after but it doesn't matter because the prompt is that I die after this meal anyway right? Eating this with my rowdy loved ones at a big round table (it's important that the table is round). Or by myself in some warm early-afternoon light with a book propped up in front of me.