

Broken oud

by [Aaron Brown](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue

*On the willows there  
We hung up our lyres  
—Psalm 137*

I bought it when I was seventeen along the streets of Amman,  
instrument store smelling like pine, humidifiers belching steam.

It rode between my legs on Egypt Air, a child I cradled when changing planes.  
In a dark room, once home, I tuned its wooden pegs, cursed as they untuned.

I plucked a few plaintive notes, slid my fingers down its unfretted neck:  
I was no Munir Bashir—no notes sounding lament. Mine were first attempts

at hearing how one note slides into another, the call to prayer  
meandering between octaves like a trash bag in sandstorm wind,

a scale Mozart never knew. When I crossed oceans, the oud  
rode with me again until I found my new home

where I strummed its strings into the night, notes  
becoming melodies. But one night, so tired, I lifted myself

into my college loft—forgot its presence there—and woke  
to find it on the ground some eight feet down.

When I raised it, the neck, the headstock, the rounded belly  
where deep notes dwelled, disintegrated in my hands,

pieces like hourglass grains: the time was up.  
It waits in my parents' house, closeted,

zipped-up in a black jacket sleeve. There was a time, like now,  
I did not play it. A time, like now, I didn't have it with me—

forgotten in a home I fled because of war.  
But I could still hear its rhythms, its music

reached me then, led me to fly three thousand miles  
across the middle sea and Libya, brought me home

to find it in an abandoned room, floors dust-covered in a looted house.  
I ran my hands around its varnished hull, positioned my fingers

for the first few notes—I played a song of return  
I can't remember now. Place the instrument in my hands again.

Watch how my fingers falter.