BETWEEN THE LINES:
Identity and Belonging
2020

iwp
International Writing Program
Acknowledgements

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[chat.txt] Between the Lines: Identity and Belonging 2020

10:01:03 From Alisa (she/her): snaps to the writers of BTL: Identity and Belonging 2020 for being real to your writing, to yourselves, to each other, even when we had to go virtual in response to the global pandemic of COVID-19

04:54:09 From Alisa: so that this important manifestation does not disappear forever, i’m trans(re)lating you here (Missaghi 2020)

06:14:13 From Caitlin (she/her): What I know about BTL is this: it is vulnerable, engaging, and sparks a love for writing that can easily feel lost in the day to day. What I know now about virtual, Zoom BTL, is that you’ve all helped make this BTL special — with your love of pizza, the plethora of animals that made guest star appearances in the background of bedrooms, and how you supported each other.

07:01:20 From Alisa: To Everyone (privately): in my limited experience with Zoom, it was a surprise to discover that the chat bar is no longer visible when viewing a recording of a BTL meeting! Prior to BTL, I also did not really understand the extent to which the chat is not a distraction from the speaker or main scene, but rather as you have taught me, a means of significant cross-engagement in a virtual space that otherwise inhibits our overlap. Power to the margins! In a virtual BTL, you have created joys and strengths in distinctions and overlaps. Instead of sunrises we shared lit up boxes, a dance party in ^^^ punctuation, and silent snaps so deep we all could feel them. I hope you will return to these expressions of support and enjoyment, knowing that you wrote, and were written about, as tandem hearts in the silences and spoken words.

07:04:20 From Caitlin: Thank you for sharing this space with us. This belongs to you.

11:59:23 From Alisa: I loved BTL so I married it (Olivarez 2018)

References Cited:


From Hana Hafeez: So good Mariam
From anya (she/her): go judy!!
From Ruth Thomas: YAYYYYY JUDY!!!!
From joseolivarez: Judy snapped with this one
From anya (she/her): go judy!!
From Hana Hafeez: can we add that to the Spotify playlist
From Poupeh Missaghi: “mess of ribs... miracle” WOW
From Hana Hafeez: can we give a short intro to the piece or something
From Hana Hafeez: https://writetheworld.com/groups/784/
From Cathy Ritter: BEAUTIFUL
From Matthew Zhang: https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
From Matthew Zhang: WOW
From anya (she/her): barss
From Hana Hafeez: https://writetheworld.com/groups/784/
From Cathy Ritter: BEAUTIFUL
Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian

14:32:33 From Poupeh Missaghi: Ethan, the intimacy comes through so well!!
14:32:35 From Madeline Mitchell: https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
shared/175995/version/350365
14:32:41 From Hana Hafeez: LETS GO MADELINE
14:32:42 From Joseolivarez: good work, Ethan
14:32:47 From Caitlin Plathe: so good!
14:32:51 From Hana Hafeez: Good job Ethan!!
14:33:36 From Ruth Thomas: Slam!!!!
14:33:57 From Anya (she/her): chills omg
14:34:16 From Joseolivarez: There are a million ways to stay alive!!!!
14:34:30 From Dani Sipp (she/her): I felt the emotion, tearing up a bit
14:34:33 From Mariam Khan: goosebumpssss
14:34:36 From Poupeh Missaghi: "mess of ribs... miracle" WOW
14:34:38 From Joseolivarez: that was great Madeline
14:34:38 From Anna: Hana, Norma, Ruth, Mariam, Matt, Ethan, Madeline, Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian
14:34:41 From Caitlin Plathe: wow YES
14:34:44 From Hana Hafeez: oh my lord that was SO good
14:34:48 From Poupeh Missaghi: so so good Madeline
14:34:51 From Finn Yekple: so good
14:34:56 From Madeline Mitchell: asdkjagh thank you
14:34:56 From Anya (she/her): go judy!!
14:34:57 From Ruth Thomas: YAY!!!! JUDY!!!!!!
14:35:02 From Joseolivarez: Judy snapped with this one
14:35:05 From Anya (she/her): ^^^^
14:35:26 From Hana Hafeez: I love that part
14:35:37 From Joseolivarez: Ring around the world/ pocket full of sorrows!!!!
14:35:57 From Ethan Han: Wrapping this in nursery rhymes though... genius level
14:36:01 From Joseolivarez: math club lol
14:37:01 From Joseolivarez: !!!!!!
14:38:30 From Caitlin Plathe: !!!
14:38:31 From Anya (she/her): barss
14:38:36 From Anna: Hana, Norma, Ruth, Mariam, Matt, Ethan, Madeline, Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian
14:38:39 From Madeline Mitchell: *snapssss*
14:38:42 From Poupeh Missaghi: So good to hear you read JUDY! superb
14:38:46 From Hana Hafeez: can we add that to the Spotify playlist somehow
14:38:47 From Joseolivarez: fantastic
14:38:50 From Dani Sipp (she/her): https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
shared/176002/version/350397
14:38:51 From Joseolivarez: Let's go Dani
14:38:57 From Mariam Khan: yasss Roomie
14:39:03 From Ruth Thomas: Yay Dani lets goooo
14:39:07 From Anya (she/her): hypee
14:39:08 From Hana Hafeez: Go dani!!!!
14:40:29 From Joseolivarez: "snaps"
14:40:32 From Matthew Zhang: wow
14:40:52 From Madeline Mitchell: goosebumps....
From Poupeh Missaghi: The power in the repetition of “I know”s
From joseolivarez: The repetition and craft in this artwork is top notch
From Mariam Khan: your voice is slaying
From Judy (she/her): ^
From Ethan Han: the emotion...
From zelda: Beautiful
From joseolivarez: wow
From Caitlin Platte: so many snaps
From Madeline Mitchell: WHEW that last line
From Mariam Khan: THE ENDING
From normamakki: Absolutely amazing Dani!!
From Matthew Zhao: My goodness
From Anna: Hana, Norma, Ruth, Mariam, Matt, Ethan, Madeline, Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian
From anya (she/her): snaps for days
From Ruth Thomas: daaaaaaaaaang
From Hana Hafeez: Im speechless
From John F: Well done.
From John F: https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
shared/175941/version/350368
From Ethan Han: CHICKEN
From Matthew Zhang: Lets go johnnn
From Ethan Han: POPEYEYESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS
From joseolivarez: Come on John
From Matthew Zhang: YESSIR
From joseolivarez: lol
From joseolivarez: This is amazing
From Madeline Mitchell: “all-new Popeyes Chicken Sandwich®.”
From Mariam Khan: THE order
From anya (she/her): angry moms have the most powerful vibes in the whole world
From Ethan Han: ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
From Ruth Thomas: Crisis averted XD
From Dani Sipp (she/her): I want chicken now
From Anna: Hana, Norma, Ruth, Mariam, Matt, Ethan, Madeline, Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian
From Dani Sipp (she/her): thanks john
From Hana Hafeez: AHAHAHA im hungry
From joseolivarez: me too I’m hungry
From Poupeh Missaghi: yes John! well done
From Anna: I’m a vegetarian lol
From Ethan Han: #jerkwithchicken
From anya (she/her): I’m also vegetarian haha
From lan Cavaunah (His, Him): #jerkwithchicken
From zelda: https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
shared/176060/version/350361
From joseolivarez: Shout out the vegetarians in the group
From joseolivarez: let’s go Zelda
From Poupeh Missaghi: the list:)
From Ruth Thomas: the part about your nana is so sweet:
From Poupeh Missaghi: “a desire for life greater than living” beautiful
From Ethan Han: coco vibes
From joseolivarez: It would taste like lemons!!!!
From Ruth Thomas: ^^^^
From Hana Hafeez: “I wrapped the blanket of friendship too tightly to breathe” I felt that
From joseolivarez: the ending is so good!
From Matthew Zhang: Powerful
From Anna: Hana, Norma, Ruth, Mariam, Matt, Ethan, Madeline, Judy, Dani, John, Zelda, Anya, Ian
From Caitlin Platte: so so good Zelda
From Dani Sipp (she/her): “A collection of toys gifted on nameless holidays” dope line
From Poupeh Missaghi: so good Zelda, yes
From anya (she/her): https://writetheworld.com/groups/767/
shared/176061/version/350371
From anya (she/her): !!
From joseolivarez: Yes! Let’s go Anya!
From Matthew Zhang: Let’s go Anya your poem is fire!
From joseolivarez: shout out to writing workshop
From Matthew Zhang: This is about to be heat
From Dani Sipp (she/her): ^^
From Hana Hafeez: im so excited I LOVE yours
From joseolivarez: bars
From joseolivarez: Even the intro is bars
From Ethan Han: say THAT ten times fast
From Poupeh Missaghi: So powerful, Anya! You go!
From Matthew Zhang: sheesh
From Farin Tavacoli: woooo
From Madeline Mitchell: WOW
From Caitlin Platte: wowowo
From Hana Hafeez: YESSSS KILL IT
From joseolivarez: let’s goooo
From Dani Sipp (she/her): God I love this and how you connected it
From zelda: so good
From anya (she/her): thank y’all <3 <3 <3
From Dani Sipp (she/her): Cmon Ian!
From Ethan Han: les go my guy
From joseolivarez: Come on lan
From Dani Sipp (she/her): YES YES
From Ruth Thomas: OH DANG
From Madeline Mitchell: go off lan
From zelda: got em
From anya (she/her): mans did not hold back
From Matthew Zhang: lan spittin
From Dani Sipp (she/her): ^^
From anya (she/her): this
From Dani Sipp (she/her): Y000
From anya (she/her): on god
there are only grandmothers left in my family
because the men smoked themselves to death.
cigarette butts in Atlantic ashtray
F-2 visas and fucking yellowtape borders
journey to the west like 孙悟空 before
我快忘掉中文了. 可我没忘我爷爷
because there are only grandmothers left in my family
they make us remember
there are only nieces left, and daughters
and no smoking in the kitchen or the men scold us for poisoning the food
but now there’s chinglish in the kitchen and ropy scars collect on
burnt skin hot oil love & labor
tough skin
callouses caked in spices
fat babies are a gift we say gongxifacai for flat noses and thin eyes
cause when there are only grandmothers left in my family,
we finally get a seat at the table
“I know everything”

All of my life, I’ve been told that I am going to be the one to “save” Gary. My hometown.

She’s a beauty. At times.

At times she can be cruel, revealing truths to me that should’ve stayed hidden.

And, at times, her wind can send the trees into a frenzy. A forest of them, rushing about all at the same time. A coordinated, yet, belligerent dance.

And in those 15 to 20 minutes of nature camaraderie, in which I have nothing but the rugged oaks and lively creatures around to accompany me, I can look around me and almost grasp the meaning of this. I know why the birds sing, why the trees rustle, why the apple must come back down when thrown up into the air.

I know why everything must have a beginning, I know why everything must also have an ending, I know why the final entity created life.

I know where each planet in our solar system came from, I know why the moon has so many craters. I know what’s in the 95% of ocean space we haven’t yet discovered, I know what would happen if we were to discover them.

I know why my city looks like this, I know why the houses on one street all lay abandoned. I know why, in one house, the mother yells at her daughter for wearing the “wrong” clothing. I know why the little girl cowers when the man walks by, I know why she flinches every time someone raises a hand towards her.

I know why every time she walks into school she has that sullen look on her face, I know why the insults from the little black boys don’t hurt as much as they used to. I know why she barely fights back when picked on.

I know why she tries her hardest to appease everyone, I know why she believes she must be the best.

I know why she believes she must carry the entirety of the world on her brown shoulders.

It is because when the world never allows you a chance at ignorance or innocence, you must abide. As the apple must come back down when thrown up into the air, so must the black girl.

The trees stop rustling. The birds stop chirping. The clouds hide the sun once more, and I am left with that frustrating and irritating feeling. That feeling when you know you know something, but it feels as if your brain is willfully silencing it. My hands grasp for the words, reaching as far as they never have before. But when I bring them back down, I’ve caught nothing.

Another black girl held down by the world she carries.

Another apple lays in the grass.
My love is a constellation of brown stars in a milky white sky. It is a soul truly listened to. A bug carefully cradled: close and content. The feeling marred only by a black oozing contempt.

Pencil shavings and old spice deodorant are outweighed by self-doubt. It’s infuriating.

My sadness is anticipated and ugly and painfully peaceful. It is a phone call. It is backbreaking sobs and an old poem.

The poem goes like this: the free went on listening to the romance of trees. Forests have an unconscious talent for love.

Even blindfolded with linen you can feel the life of that beneath your fingertips.

That reminds me. I wish for only two things. First, to be as light a breeze that carries sound across the greenest grass you’ve ever seen and second, to smell pencil shavings and old spice deodorant.
Flutters. Glistens wet like a cicada wing. Something buzzing, hidden behind the teeth. Here, the tongue curls its mianhae’s, bows under its mothae’s, and we say mis-pronunciation has never been so graceful. But American tongues are sharp, restless things.

They like drowning syllables, or slicing names down the center, yolk oozing from the wound. When Americans speak, their mouths are full of our mul. Our names. Your name. Yours, daughter, thin enough to be both a wing and a blade.

Here, we don’t need to care for America. Grandma’s living room is so warm it is almost inside of us. Here, we’ll sit in a circle speaking bad Korean, playing hwatu, and listening for the wisps of our ancestors’ laughs that slip wetly, like wings, against our cheeks.
[START ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]
/APPROACHING FOREIGN STAR SYSTEM/
/YELLOW DWARF STAR/
/4 SOLID PLANETS/
/4 FLUID PLANETS/
/TWO BELTS OF MINOR OBJECTS/
///INITIATING QAS THRUSTER BURN///
//PLANETARY ANALYSIS//
/ONE OF THE SOLID PLANETS IS NEARLY CERTAIN TO HAVE A NATIVE BIOSPHERE/
/DO NOT ATTEMPT XENOFORMING/POSSIBLE TECHNOSIGNITURES IDENTIFIED/
/MORE DATA NEEDED/INITIATING TRANSFER ORBIT/
//PLANETARY ANALYSIS WILL CONTINUE WHEN YORREX 3 PROBE IS IN ORBIT//
[END ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]

[START ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]
//NATIVE CIVILIZATION HAS BEEN UNDER ANALYSIS FOR THE LAST 33 PLANETARY CYCLES/DATA ACQUIRED IS AS FOLLOWS//
/NATIVE LIFEFORMS ARE TERRESTRIAL CARBON-BASED BIPEDS/OXYGEN BREATHING/
/TECHNOLOGY LEVEL: POST-INDUSTRIAL, PRE-SINGULARITY/
/CULTURE: HEAVILY FRAGMENTED/TRIBALISTIC/
/BIOSPHERE: INCREDIBLY DIVERSE, BUT UNDER THREAT DUE TO INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY/
/THEIR CIVILIZATION POSSESSES BOTH ATOMIC WEAPONS AND FOSSIL FUELS/HIGH EXTINCTION RISK/
/THIS IS LIKELY DUE TO THE FACT THAT THIS SPECIES HAS YET TO ACHIEVE EVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE B-4/
/INTERFERENCE MAY BE NECESSARY/MORE DATA NEEDED/
/AWAITING FEEDBACK FROM MISSION CONTROL/
[END ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]

[START ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]
///QUERY///
//THE NATIVE SPECIES OF THE OBSERVED PLANET IS ON THE PATH TO EXTINCTION/ THEY HAVE YET TO DISCOVER EVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE B-4/INTERFERENCE MAY BE NECESSARY, BUT WOULD BE DISRUPTIVE TO THEIR CULTURE/ASSISTANCE REQUESTED/ CONTINGENCY SCENARIO AX-4 CONFIRMED//
[END ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION]

[ANSIBLE TRANSMISSION RECEIVED]
MISSION CONTROL: WE HAVE REVIEWED THE NATIVE CIVILIZATION OF THE OBSERVED TERRESTRIAL PLANET AND HAVE DECIDED THAT INTERFERENCE IS REQUIRED. IN ORDER TO AVOID CULTURAL DISRUPTION, THE PROBE IS TO TRANSMIT THE FOLLOWING MESSAGE

LIFEFORMS OF PLANET EARTH

WE HAVE OBSERVED YOUR SOCIETY AND CULTURE FROM ONE OF OUR DEEP-SPACE PROBES

YOUR CULTURE IS TOO FRAGMENTED TO SURVIVE THE POST-SINGULARITY ERA

THIS MESSAGE WILL BE ENCRYPTED WITH 7 CODES, ONE FOR EVERY CONTINENT

YOU WILL HAVE TO UNITE TO UNCOVER THE BLUEPRINT FOR IMPERATIVE B-4

THIS WILL BE NO SMALL CHALLENGE, BUT THE REWARD IS IMMEASURABLE

WE WISH YOUR CIVILIZATION UTMOST PROSPERITY
[END RECEIVED TRANSMISSION]
Last night, we dreamt of youth that swung in the pale glow of a setting sun, snubbed the ticking hour, scrawled crayola across the wall, wished happily on the brightest star, chalked hopscotch through the neighbor’s yard, and thought life a swing and sky perfect for cloud catching.

Today, our hearts confess that quarters smell like fairy dust long forgotten. It is now. We yearn for a photo, a snapshot. We think we’ll sign it ‘in loving memory of children swinging at dusk’ until we don’t and the end arrives .. but then, tomorrow dreams to be a better day.
When writing about Middle Eastern people always make sure to include labels such as ‘terrorists’ and boaters (‘fresh off the boat’) in your title.

An appropriate book cover should only include women either wearing head-scarfs or the over-sexualized belly dancers and/or men wearing a tarboosh. Anything other than that would be non-inclusive.

If you are considering writing about a Middle Eastern country, make sure to choose the most war-torn area you can think of. Syria would be a good choice, but since I am from Lebanon—I have more experience, and am better equipped in refining your book in that area. Lebanon is exceptionally hot in the summertime, and typically smells of burned garbage. The streets are filled with older men persuading you to buy their merchandise—in order to sustain a living, but you can go ahead and describe them as “scamming and overcharging you.”

There is nothing but desert and oil in the Middle East. Describe how the male protagonist embarks on an unpleasant journey, enduring the dusty wind and hot breeze that blows through his freshly combed hair. Discuss how he gives up so much from his Western lifestyle to move there, in order to find love perhaps. Arranged marriages are obligatory and intermarriages between cousins is tradition. This gives you the perfect opportunity to continue your romance plot: the male protagonist saves the female who does not wish to marry the second-cousin she has despised since childhood.

For more extensive research make sure to refer to resources such as the Disney movie Aladdin. If you are still having trouble coming up with more scenarios for your book, just take a look at other non-middle eastern authors who have written novels of such—through their perfect set examples, you will be better equipped in mastering your new novel.
peaches turn to crescents – stacked
smoke rising – kitchen fan convects
clock clicks steady unlike last night’s
rain drops which broke the july heat

if you lose your umbrella you’ve got
to stay inside – follow the rules take
one step then the next – then follow
the creak of a clock’s arms’ bend
bend at the left – make sure your step
clicks steady against the pavement
streetlamps stammer rays of orange
and they mix into the cereal bowl.
An overfilled water balloon is bound to pop.  
A shaken up coke bottle will no doubt release foam.  
A heavy plastic grocery bag is destined to rip.  
A delicate glass jar stuffed with too many rocks will shatter.

A popped-water balloon soaks its wielder.  
A foaming coke bottle pours sticky sugar over someone’s hands.  
A ripped grocery bag cracks the eggs as they fall onto the ground.  
A shattered glass jar covers the floor with hazardous, sharp shards.

But like how many things work in life  
The outcome is determined by the response.

Placing the water balloon over an open field before it pops  
Will soak the grass, not the wielder.

Holding the coke bottle over a sink before it’s opened  
Will pour the foam down the drain, not over someone’s hands.

Bringing the grocery bag to a table before it rips  
Will place the eggs on that safe surface, not fall to the ground.

Putting the glass jar into a large container before it shatters  
Will stow the sharp shards away, not cover the floor with them.

For humans,
Writing is the open field. Writing is the sink.  
Writing is the table. Writing is the container.

A human who has bottled up more emotions than they can handle within them  
Is guaranteed to crack  
Is guaranteed to erupt as those emotions rise  
Like magma in a volcano.

But remember  
The outcome is determined by the response.

Because expressing your pent-up emotions through writing  
Before you crack  
Will bring sunshine out over the open field where the water fell, to let the grass grow  
Will turn on the sink’s faucet to wash away the foam and cleanse your hands with fresh water  
Will cook the eggs on the table into hot, delicious scrambled eggs with bacon on the side  
Will piece together the broken, glass shards into a glass sculpture – a work of art.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is why I write.
Jisung stumbled after Chan, rubbing at his eyes furiously to get rid of any remains of sleepiness. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the expressions of the other members gathered around the couch. He wasn’t quite sure what he had expected, but this definitely wasn’t it.

Hyunjin and Jeongin looked as if they’d been crying, like Chan, eyes red and puffy with the occasional sniffle. Seungmin and Changbin had their arms around Felix, who seemed to be having some sort of panic attack. He was shaking and wouldn’t respond to any of the calming things that the other boys whispered in his ears. And Minho…Minho was sitting a few feet away from the others, on the floor. He raised his head when Jisung entered the room, and Jisung felt a wave of shock course through him at the extreme despair and defeat written across his boyfriend’s face.

Tearing his eyes away from the upsetting sight, Jisung turned to Chan. “Hyung, what the hell happened? Why is everyone acting like this?”

Chan bit his lip. “Sung, what do you remember from last night?”

Jisung furrowed his eyebrows. “Uhh…not much. I remember working in the studio with you and Changbin–hyung, and then staying late to finish my verse.” He looked at the floor sheepishly before adding, “And I might have had some of the soju that Changbin–hyung keeps in the mini-fridge. Who brought me home? I was planning just to crash in the studio…w–what?” Jisung stuttered to a stop at the look his bandmates were giving him.
You knew everything
At least that's how it felt through the eyes of a child
Then you fell for that boy From that “class for smart kids” The night by the oak tree when he asked you to be his you realized life was perfect and love was real
So you knew it all
Police in your house
You slid past to your bedroom and locked the door You learned that terrible things don’t look so terrible when you cover your eyes And now you must be grown up
Since you know everything
until you didn’t get a role in that show and knew You were destined for mediocrity.
So you decided to
Spend a year with a boy you didn’t like much So you learned maybe you should put yourself first And as you cried out goodbyes you knew it all
But You’re sent away from home so leave it all behind as you pack up your bags Easily closing from lack of commitment You learn life can be unbearably light when its served on a silver platter
You must have preferred the unbearable weight Because you returned home
Where a grave reminds you of when you left your pet in the sun And learned how much hurt you cause
Just as you knew it all
You kissed a boy who must’ve misplaced your name Because he left almost as soon as you drove home Then you knew how much hurt you receive
And as you biked that evening with the suffocating smell of flowers You cried from your suffocating love for the world
Because then you understood until
Another forest paved over and another murder by police and another election controlled by the wealthy and another policy hurting the planet
I realized
There’s so much I don’t know
Someone trudges through the night. It’s a husky darkness, the kind for lovers - but not the disloyal ones, for the streetlights burn away opportunity for secrets. The moon smiles kindly, like a mother promising forgiveness before confession, and the individual’s mouth tastes of deception. Slung in their arms is a clementine bicycle that had at one point been the prized possession of their neighbour, and later, a nuzzling post for their dog.

The dog has fleas.

By the logic of the universe, this means the santé of the individual is questionable, especially given that their brain is a squashed loaf of bread.

Still, they trudge forward, lungs burnt out, feet sore. A good distance behind them, a child squats on the ground, petulant. Her nose is an impossibly small thing.

"Come," they urge.

"My bicycle."

With wheels flatter than a computer screen, punctured by an aforementioned dog’s canines, the child has fallen into ko; peddling long enough to realize the innate issues in their vehicle’s architecture, then hating their gait long enough to rekindle hope.

As someone who isn’t a mother, this was decidedly the least endearing event of their existence. As if disgraced by the individual’s inability to coo at something instinctually adorable, the streetlight above their head exalted its last breath. And for the first time in years, the night curls forward, stooping low to drape over their shoulders. There’s a tree in front of them, speckled with blushing blossoms, branches frail and thin. It resembles a geisha, with a single bruised eye in the center, brown and dead.

Temptation whispers. They reach out, fingers on the flower, heart beating erratically, breathing suddenly laboured.

And to the eyes of pure moonlight, the blossom glows pink.
Nothing left but a shared first name I know
they’d take it back if they knew who I am, what I am.
Or her daughter’s eyes would go wide like
I had forgotten what God says.
Like I’ve tainted our sacred Christmas Cookie recipe
having frosted it with the colors of a flag for no nation
am I forgetting the words of the prayers they’ve taught me?
The comfort and cool of Holy Water lovingly tapped upon my forehead?
I remember being told of my Great Grandmother’s patience
How she was kind
And I hope she and Granny wouldn’t renounce me from beyond the grave.
Granny already gave me heat for being too quiet.
But would she have taken that over how I use my words now?
Chocolate irises, midnight lashes
Skin immune to the Sun and his wrath
Its youth preserved in years of otherness
And words that have no English equivalent
My mouth never could form the right shapes
For Khan and khala
But it can make the right words to cure the plague of injustice
These are their gifts to me
Time-worn and hardly ever what I wanted, but probably what I needed
Never the destination of Santa’s ever-disputed sleigh
In place of his red-and-green-wrapped-joy I received resilience and fight
And five dollars from each family on Eid
First, you book your ticket only after talking to your family overseas.
Then, you must pack your essentials: clothes, toothbrush, undergarments, and of course, her stuffed animal.
Then you must pack for your family gifts: perfume, clothes, medicine, toys, and a special something for your favorite relative.
Then you print your tickets and grab a ride.

At the airport, you have your daughter assist you before your layover lands in Dubai. There you reconnect with your old friend while you wait for your flight. She discusses your final destination. You brush it off— it’s just talk.

Finally you arrive, but your trip is not over. You meet your hosts and have a great summer. Every week, you watch the president try to calm down his people. You look at your old wedding dress & photos. You reminisce about the past, when you ran in those halls as a youngster.

Two weeks before you leave, you hear a “BOOM!” You tell your daughter it was the TV, but she is not naive. Again, you visit all your favorite places, as if it was the last time.

It’s time to leave, but it’s different this time. Your daughter comforts you as you cry saying goodbye to your childhood and family. You feel guilty that you have a plane ticket to the U.S., but what can you do? Plus, it will all blow over soon. Right?

Finally, you land in your daughter’s country. Upon knowing that you came from Syria, you get pulled aside for a “random security check.” Now you’re restless. But you quietly get picked up so your daughter can prepare for school. Your summer trip of 2011 is over. You ask your family if you should begin searching for tickets for the following year.
They do not answer.
You were the one who was kind when I failed,
Who refused to jeer when my ideas fell flat.
So different from all the others,
Who laughed,
And then forgot me.

SNAP!

Just Like That.

Over time you somehow melted me,
Removed all the layers I had on.
Until I stood bare before you,
Terrified that you would be gone.

But you just smiled and grabbed my hand,
“It doesn’t matter I already knew!”
And led me up a special hill,
“That I reserved just for you.”

As you sat there gazing on that hilltop you told me,
“Oh, what a beautiful view!”
And I agreed readily enough,
For I was looking at you.

We kept on sharing moments,
We unveiled ourselves more and more,
And somewhere along the way,
I thought I might win my lonely war.

But then the others came back,
And they yelled, “Who is this girl?”
“You’re only worthy of a gray rock, idiot!”
“Not this gleaming pearl!”

So even though I felt all this,
I slipped on my mask again,
Left only a dark curtain for you to see.
For I realized that you deserve so much more,
Than somebody like me.
to be syrian and palestinian is to be the daughter of two displaced parents, never knowing when you’ll see either again.

my mother’s house has been looted and overrun by thieves, and the police won’t do anything to help despite the blatant law violations, because they’re being paid off by the occupants.

my father’s house is splitting apart at the foundation, wood splintering and tearing the residence in two, and termites have taken advantage of the chaos.

my options are limited: on the one hand, illegal occupation, on the other, a civil war,

and yet i’ve always felt more welcome in the black, green, white, and red, than i’ll ever be under the red, white, and blue.

it’s a twisted game of whack-a-mole—every new place we pop up, we are shot down.

segregated and denied opportunity in kuwait, shoved in refugee camps in jordan, demonized in america.

i’m tired of being called a terrorist when i’m not the one bombing the middle-east;
i’m tired of being labeled antisemitic for simply wanting back my relatives’ rightful home.

(imperialism is still illegal even if you give it a frilly name like “zionism”)

indeed, my history is engraved in oppression, suppression, and transgression.

my ancestors had to claw their way out from under stones, had to survive being pelted by colonizers and dictators, for me to sit in my lofted bed and write about it, resting my back on pillows stuffed with privilege.

what do you call survivor’s guilt when you never even had to survive it yourself?

news images of dirt-streaked children in tattered clothes are the only connection i have to my homelands, too young to remember much about one, and legally unable to even visit what remains of the other.

i don’t want to keep writing poems about war instead of ones about teenage love but if i don’t pen the past who will?

when i say where i’m from, i often earn a sympathetic grimace or confusion in return, (“palestine? don’t you mean—?”)

but that won’t stop me from happily brandishing my identities on my sleeve—literally, i wear bracelets of both 24/7—and inciting comment riots on tiktok as i raise awareness.

to be syrian and palestinian is a lot of things, but it also means being a warrior, and that’s something to be proud of.
It’s 5:45 AM on a winter’s day in central Illinois. The air outside is bitter cold: air temperature in the 20s, wind chill in the teens.

Endors-toi.

But I can’t. The day’s work has just begun: a 10-minute drive awaits, then an hour in the weight room, then breakfast before starting the school day. After school, a grueling swim practice, then dinner, homework, lights out, repeat. It’s a grind.

C’est fatiguant, ça.

Yes, it’s certainly tiring—the days are long and the nights are far too short—but it’s also an energizing way to live. Full of activity, full of action, full of interaction.

I arrive at school, forge a path through the swirling wind, and make my way into the weight room. My friends are there waiting; we warm up, work hard, then stretch out in the dark on the gym floor. We’re tired and sore, but it’s a good tired, a good sore. We tell our coach goodbye and head for the showers. The quiet banter of camaraderie fills the morning locker room as we dress and prepare for the day. I am one of the last to head up the stairs for breakfast.

Prends un beignet, maintenant.

Not a good plan. The donut will make me sleepy for my first class and sluggish at the swim practice in store this afternoon. I forgo the donut, the bell rings, and I trudge to my first class.

The day rolls on, class after class, until the final bell rings. The halls are packed with students rushing to their lockers and out the door into the still-frigid afternoon air. I find my ride and we drive to the pool, talking on the way about the spring play and our next swim meet.

As anticipated, it’s a tough practice, made better by the post-workout protein bar—a tiny moment, but one that I savor. I drive home, eat dinner, finish homework, and collapse into bed.

Endors-toi.

I give in to fatigue and close my eyes.

Enfin.
A woman,
Who only reveals flashes of her hands
The dust that flies up around them
The flare of a burning nail,
And occasionally the blur of a gold ring

worn down by pilgrimage
and sand
and children swarming around hot food
and dead sheep—

She erupts in a singular rhythm

A charred bomb crater in the Great Plains
A Sylvania 1953 flashbulb

A crack

and her body has spilled out into whey protein

engulfed itself in its own light
leaving an unmelted head and neckline

This woman that carries bits of lint and down on her eyelashes
And scares away fires with her walking stick
A REVIEW OF
MIGUEL
Miguel - Silverspring, MD
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“Un ratón muy mayor” Alfonso Cuesta (papa)
“Listillo” Amaya Beltran (mama)
“Hardworking and confident” Mrs. Zahner (Northwood High School Social Studies Department)
“Tries too hard to be funny”–Mr. Miller (Northwood Highschool Physics teacher)
“Pompous Jackass” Olivia Prouty (Ex Girlfriend)
“My messed up role model” Ben Dillen (Friend and younger brother of Sid Dillen)
“Makes people cry” Simone (student at Northwood High Student)
“Sleazy asshole” Alice Moller (friend)
“Muy guapete y graciosillo”– Maria Jose (abuela)
“Honest cuando le conviene” Catalina Ruiz (Girl he likes)
“A talented writer”–Mrs. Moten Northwood High School English Department
“Guapo como su padre” Jose Luis (abuelo)
“Filled with bad ideas” Miachel Dinkle (friend and twin of John Dinkle)
“Never backs down from a bet” John Dinkle (friend and twin of Miachel Dinkle)
“Un estudiante listisimo y encantador” Señora Torres (Northwood High School Language Department)
“Cool cat” Luniva (Girl I’m talking to)
“He’s okay I guess” Guillermo Cuesta (Younger Brother)
“Better when he’s drunk” Marcelo Lovo (friend)
“Confident but confusing, annoying but somehow fun” Bennett Forville (ex girlfriend)
“Will try to do the right thing eventually” – Gryphon Anderson (best friend)
“Travieso como su madre” Cristobal (Abuelo)
Poupeh Missaghi

Poupeh — nothing short of brilliant, fascinating, contemplative, speaks to the translator side, a thoughtful and fun teacher, an excellent educator, very passionate, wide-ranging, surprising, and when she starts speaking about a topic, she doesn’t stop explaining until she is sure everyone understands. Dr. Missaghi continues to inspire students to constantly learn and read more, to communicate their thoughts and thought processes, as well as listen and learn from Other’s and their experiences. Poupeh teaches through listening. She encourages everyone’s participation and makes her class an open-minded, welcoming place. Poupeh Missaghi is very insightful and a teacher who will open your eyes to new social perspectives. Poupeh Missaghi has also been described as a medium, her crystal ball shines with cultural depths once thought undiscovered. She knows your bias before you even tell her. Is it magic? Or a passion for truth? Fortune... Is being fortunate enough to have her as a teacher.
Mr. Olivarez is appreciated for how he always works to make each seminar a safe space for sharing & taking risks. Also known as José, he is conversational, with an educator side, patient, a good listener, relentlessly positive, optimistic, searching for new methods, wants to see how his students interpret a topic before explaining what he envisioned or meant. José is a teacher who cares and is always supportive... José has a very good poetry-reading voice. José Olivarez is hilarious, full of insight, amiable, extremely easygoing, and a teacher who will always understand your needs. In workshops he helps to build a space where learners can share their thoughts and work with support, encouragement, and helpful feedback from both him and their peers. José Olivarez is a fierce wolf, stalking each syllable with surreal style, quite a superior teacher, makes the students all smile. A fierce wolf for poetry, but inviting and soft as a puppy.
My mother has a missing index finger.
I remember when she lost it, it was a Friday
Fridays were never the same since
How could anything ever be the same?
In our world that walks along the edge of an endless cliff?
Like how the waves of a beach smooth the rocks, my family has shaped me into
who I am.
time creeps slowly and painfully. the waves recede, leaving banks of salt and lonely
stone
i grew older, and no longer found comfort and joy in things i had once before.
My face and my patience grew tired and weary but my heart became younger with
time.
I feel older every hour.
But the night is young so let’s raise the roof!
While the dew gathers on the grass
let the sun shine our pathways
where we are headed the ground gently cradles us
the time ahead is the time behind us and around us and beneath us and above us
the way we spend time says everything about our character. What we choose to do
with our finite time on this is the ultimate determiner of how important we are
Take a seat next to a bottle of simple syrup and a dying grape
Let me spin you a story in the dying light of the kitchen
just my voice and your voice and the frying pan sizzling
Sizzling and warmth and the warmth of companionship
and the summer
was ours.