



## Battery Dance Company Collaboration

IWP Participant Texts

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# The Arab Spring

Taleb Alrefai

I am an Arab, I carry Arabism with me, in the color of my skin, in my eyes and in the way I pronounce my words.

I carry it under my skin and in my heart-beat.

I carried it since the day I was born, and still do in my everyday living, and will carry in my future life.

I carry it in the future hiding around the corner, and await it eagerly hoping for it to be as bright as the sun in my country.

Here in the United States of America, when people know I am Arabic they ask me: "Which Arabic country are you from?"

When I reply that I'm from Kuwait, I receive a look, and sometimes a question about my Kuwait, so I say: "Kuwait is as small as a heart, as large as hope, embraced by the sea, & surrounded by the desert. It thrives on love for freedom, democracy and peace. Since the Kuwaiti people arrived to the ports of Africa and knew through their sailing vessels the darkness of the seas that took them to the ports of India, they realized that life is ought to be lived with the other, and the other is what makes life more livable, and the nearness to this other is the nearness to life itself. Also nothing unites people as peace and love do."

But when some people here, in the United States of America, know that I am Arabic, they ask me hastily: "What about the Arab Spring?"

I hesitate before answering. But I say "Spring on all the earth, and on dormant villages that lie on the slopes of the wide Arab countries, is the season of blooming flowers, the season of flower scent, the season of green color which is the symbol of life and hope, and this confirms that spring is the season of love."

How can love be without flowers and without fragrance and without life and without hope? But the Arab Spring, with its loud cry, is the season of freedom. It is a season that the Arab peoples waited for, for so many years and decades. They were long years in which they experienced hunger, oppression, injustice and pain. Throughout these long years, the Arab peoples tolerated the intolerable. These peoples are like their Arabic camels, they could tolerate a lot in the desert, but when angry, their anger has a crazy and destructive effect; such is the Arab Spring.

"Tunisia" set off the initial spark. What goes on in a person's head while attempting to burn himself? What desperation drives a human being to burn himself to death?

What pain this person must have lived so that life for him becomes death, and death becomes life? Was it the strange ring to that sentence "Ask for death, you shall be granted life," in the head of the young Tunisian man Mohamed Bouazizi the moment he set himself on fire.

The Arab peoples protested in their revolution, like roses in their spring, protested to repeatedly shout out in front of the world: “Freedom. Freedom.”

And teach the peoples of the world a lesson, as their throats became inflamed with screaming: “The people want to overthrow the regime.”

In exchange for freedom, young & old, men and women of the Arab peoples sold their lives cheap, for the sweet taste of democracy. They exchanged their lives for a tomorrow that holds goodness, justice and peace for them and for their children. They said to the world: “What is the value of life without freedom?”

Photographs in their demonstrations and martyrdom, transported to the whole world the meaning of sacrifice for freedom.

Yes, one can live without freedom, but would then be locked in a cage of a miserable life, and with time will be transformed from a human being to a living organism that simply lives for nothing but to live.

Yes, the Arab Spring was a burning and stormy spring, and green was never its color. In fact, the red color of innocent blood was the overwhelming color over all colors. But, when did freedom ever arrive without a precious price? When did democracy ever descend on people from the sky? This is the law of life, every item has a set price; a cheap item has a cheap price, and a precious item has a dear price. Because freedom is a top priority to a human being’s life, its price is life itself. Yes, sometimes superpowers like the United States of America interferes, to sow democracy in one country or more, but it is forgotten that democracy can only be seeded by its own peoples, planted by its own peoples, guarded by their eyes and hearts.

But once democracy flourishes, its goodness spreads to all, the near and the far.

The Arab Spring was sparked with the beginning of 2011, and this fire quickly spread to all Arab countries, and until this moment many Arab peoples are still struggling for their freedom, and are still offering great sacrifices to embrace a democracy and a decent life they have dreamed of for so long.

I came to you from a small country, but it has its root in the soil of history. I came to you from Kuwait, which was founded in 1613, but since its birthday it’s been living freely, and enjoying democracy. It lives under the umbrella of a fair Constitution. These facts put together, is what makes Kuwait different from the many Arab countries, and makes me feel proud when I say I am an Arab, I am from Kuwait.

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**Taleb AL REFAI** (fiction writer; Kuwait) has published seven collections of short stories, a play, a number of critical works, and four novels, including the controversial [The Shadow of the Sun] ( الشمس ظل ) in 1998. His 2002 [The Scent of the Sea] ( البحر رائحة ) won the Kuwait National Award for Arts & Literature. Trained as an engineer, Al-Refai has since joined the staff of the National Council for Culture, Art and Literature, where he manages the Culture and Arts Department. His articles appear regularly in the *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Jarida Kuwaiti* newspapers; in 2009 he chaired the Arabic Booker Prize for Fiction. He participates courtesy of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

# Hello, Ellis

Genevieve L. Asenjo

‘Hello, Ellis, hello, Oyster Island! How is the Statue of Liberty?’

In New Orleans, there’s a bar oyster named Desire. That’s where I first heard of you actually, Ellis, in ‘The Song of Annie Moore.’ I thought, this must be what jazz is, what blues is, really.

Also ghost. So let me tell you a story:

‘Why do you want to come to America?’ The Immigration Officer asked, after The TSA, after The Customs, after The U.S. Consul in Manila. I know Annie was from Ireland and now a monument – a tale. Anyway, before that, my grandma said, ‘You are sad because you have many dreams.’ As if to prove her wrong, I remember answering: ‘For Broadway, bookstore, museum.’

Desire is an oyster you pay for in a fancy restaurant.

So when I glimpsed the Manhattan skyline and felt the breeze of late spring on my skin, I murmured: this. *This must be why they jumped ship.* ‘Fresh from boat,’ they called of the Filipino old-timers who grew the lands and seas of Hawaii and California and suffered miscegenation. No monuments for them, Ellis.

In the subway from JFK, I wondered how a country that loves rap could fear Blacks.

But, and yet, we love you, Ellis. You, Oyster! We, still, do. So much.

In Des Moines, I slept over in the house of an old woman married to a US Navy veteran. Man, co-patrolled our shores when Marcos was president (No surprise why most of your senior citizens know Imelda and her thousand of shoes.). She cooked rice and pork. Zip locked it so I could microwave back to my base in Iowa City where I watched over CNN Obama and Romney debate on foreign policy.

This morning, when I finally landed in your shore and there was no oyster, I turned my gaze to the blue open skies. It passed through the Statue of Liberty, the Monument of Annie Moore, and when it lingered in the horizon down to the waves, I heard the stomp of thousand feet. A hip hop of *this, consider this: to grow a bigger heart.* Then, as if startled by squirrels on the grass, I resolved to have a nice day, Ellis.

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**Genevieve L. ASENJO** (fiction writer, poet, translator; Philippines) is the author of four books including *Lumbay ng Dila* (The Melancholy of the Tongue), winner of the country’s 2011 National Book Award. Her short stories and poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies. She translates into the Philippine languages Kinaray-a, Hiligaynon, and Filipino, and is the founder-director of *Balay Sugidanun* (Storytelling House). She is Associate Professor of literature and creative writing at De La Salle University-Manila. Her participation is made possible by a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

# SALTED MEAT (JERKY)

Luis Bravo

Exit from the shoreline: no return  
those ground breaking waters  
losing yourself in other lands  
...born again?  
tasting another fruit, falling apart  
keep the fire, dig roots out...

if the mist of sea salt

the child reads on the shore  
timeless calligraphy of the foam that says:  
“the sea gives, the sea steals”

if the time is curling

yellowish body of fever  
an unholy shadow grows inside  
like night, el cuarto de Bodegas  
casts a booty of pearls  
a tablecloth with crumbs for rats

if a belt of poverty

“praise the Lord, o praise the Lord...”  
hallelujahs of screaming theater  
where gentlemen in gray suits and iron ties  
scan to find the nonbelievers

if a bible belt

“applause for the losers who came here today”, says  
the plastic smile- combed hair of the announcer

if a TV is eternally on

“hallelujah hallelujah He loves you”,  
the Lord en pantuflas opens heaven’s door

if the need cries a river

“how do you want it? raw or about to happen?”  
tongue brings a sea of saliva into the cavity  
you may not talk while chewing, did anybody not teach these people?

if two peals of crow

the tango is mestizo, you know:  
the afro beat of the drum,  
the sacred German accordion digging at the quilombo  
lunfardo of prisoners speaking new songs

if words scatter the circle of salt

the nascent whore at the bar asking for fire  
the giant woman at the isle lights the torch of the free.

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**Luis BRAVO** (poet, essayist; Uruguay) has published eleven works of poetry in book form and as multimedia, most recently *Árbol Veloz* [Swift Tree] (2009) and *Tamudando* (2010). Bravo's poems have appeared online and in print, in Latin America and Europe; group works can be found [here](#). His essays have appeared in a variety of anthologies, magazines, and other publications; he has also published four volumes of criticism. He teaches literature at Universidad de Montevideo. His participation is courtesy of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

# Nomad

T.J. Dema

How long will we sing  
Must we scream  
This song  
When the only constant thing  
Is the snowed in sound  
Of our own names, raging  
Lost to the Atlantic  
Of bodies swimming in sync  
With an unseen sea

For days, weeks now we have seen  
No sign of sand or shore  
We have left yes  
But our bodies cling to themselves  
They crave the memory of walk  
And touch and dance  
They refuse what is foreign  
What passes for food, water and air  
In here

We are none of us archers  
sure of our aim  
We remain uncertain  
As the quiver that is our foreign voice

What will they ask us  
-ask of us  
To shed silver or name  
A craft? For us this is the same

And if you had ever known faith  
You would have known us  
Giving our blind god, inclement  
Land up to the air  
A change of temples, praying all day long  
Voices berating, begging the sea  
To journey us  
Home or here.

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**TJ DEMA** (poet; Botswana), a founding member of her country's spoken word movement and a member of Sonic Slam Chorus, a former chair of the Writers' Association of Botswana, and runs Sauti Arts and Performance Management. An editor and anthologized poet, she has produced a multilingual CD, "Dreaming Is A Gift For Me," featuring twelve Botswana poets. This summer she took part in the Cultural Olympiad's Poetry Parnassus in London. She participates courtesy of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

# Apparitions of the Great Hall, Ellis Island

Alisa Ganieva

Bony and swollen under the armour of trunks,  
Brimful of evidences of past, scraps of shed memories,  
Tense and excited, ready to cut their way  
Through the throng of thongs, thighs and thoughts  
To the glistening thrive  
Beyond the earthshattering passage,  
Where the border lies.

Squeezing and sifting, like kitchen processor,  
The invisible gear of fate  
Is kneading the paste of future,  
The heavy dough of new generations,  
New blood. And feeling the spooking freedom  
The passers are carrying the message –  
- Hope of many dyes.

Ridding yourselves from cocoons of previous masks,  
Shaving the bristle of sorrows, emptying the brains,  
Unbuckling the clasps of old myths,  
Shaking off the dust of blunders and licking away the sweat,  
That smells of fear and failure,  
Be confident, try to manage,  
Just venture. And laugh. And rise.

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**Alisa GANIEVA** (fiction writer, children's writer, critic; Russia) edits *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* weekly supplement *ExLibris*. Her stories, articles, and reviews have been widely published and anthologized. In 2009 Ganieva won the Debut Prize for her novel *Салам тебе, Далгат!* [Salam, Dalgat!] written under the pseudonym Gulla Khirachev. She is also the winner of the Gorky Literary Prize (2008), *October* magazine's award for literary criticism (2009) and Triumph Prize for fiction. Her second novel *Праздничная гора* [Holiday Mountain] is due out later this year. She participates courtesy of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.



## On a Phrase by Emma Lazarus: “imprisoned lightning”

Christopher Merrill

*Way air*, the flyboy called as lightning flashed  
Around the plane plummeting through the clouds.  
One flight attendant fell into the lap  
Of an aid worker sent home from Darfur  
For her refusal to inform the guards  
Where she went after dark. Another broke  
A wine glass in the galley. And a third  
Pounded her fist against the bathroom door,  
Ordering a small boy to return to his seat.  
The passengers held their applause for the pilot  
Skillfully navigating through the rain  
Of arrows firing from below. They came  
From the far reaches of the imperium,  
Fleeing war, flood, or famine, carrying  
All their belongings in a single bag  
And their imagination—language, memory,  
And stories to embellish and retell  
Until somebody thought to write them down  
Before they were forgotten: words to free  
The lightning taken on the fly, which traveled  
From the wing tip and down the fuselage  
To exit through the tail, illuminating  
The contents of the cargo hold—suitcases,  
Books, mail, and the exotic animals  
Which would not make it past the customs agent  
Feeding treats to his beagle at the gate.  
The clouds against the blue-black sky glowed red.  
The flight attendants pulled themselves together.  
The boy ran to his mother, rubbing his head,  
While all the passengers began to clap,  
Loosening their seat belts. The flyboy winked  
At the aid worker, who gave him a look.  
*Way air?* she said. The light was everywhere.

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**Christopher Merrill's** books include four collections of poetry, *Brilliant Water*, *Workbook*, *Fevers & Tides*, and *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; translations of Ales Debeljak's *Anxious Moments* and *The City and the Child*; several edited volumes, among them, *The Forgotten Language: Contemporary Poets and Nature* and *From the Faraway Nearby: Georgia O'Keeffe as Icon*; and five books of nonfiction, *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War, Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*, *The Grass of Another Country: A Journey Through the World of Soccer*, *The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War and the Age of the Refugee*, and *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*. His work has been translated into twenty-five languages. He has held the William H. Jenks Chair in Contemporary Letters at the College of the Holy Cross, and now directs the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa.

# Seed Of Water

Christopher Mlalazi

A seed shines bright  
In a near corner of the universe  
Beckoning us to hitch our pants  
Shoulder our hope and strike out step number one  
Followed hard by step number two  
And step number three

For we are the seed of water  
And stone and sky and our hearts shine  
In the constellations of iron will  
For a day never runs past  
Without a bright thought dropping  
Like fresh milk from the heavy udder of the earth

A seed smiles brightly  
In the bosom of the earth  
Between silt and water, lightning and wind  
Waiting for harvesters from the village  
To sleep out fear from their beating hearts  
And take the first step towards redemption

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**Christopher MLALAZI** (fiction writer, playwright; Zimbabwe) is the author of the novels *Many Rivers* (2009) and *Running With Mother* (2012), and the short story collection *Dancing With Life: Tales From the Township* (2008), which won the Best First Book award at the National Arts Merit Awards. Mlalazi's eight plays, including the 2008 Oxfam/Novib PEN Freedom of Expression Award winner "The Crocodile Of Zambezi," have all been staged. His poems and stories are online and in print, including in the Caine Prize's anthology *The Obituary Tango* (2006) and in *The Literary Review*. He participates courtesy of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

## ..... leading to the people

Pandora

pass it and then cut it  
cut it in hesitation  
cut it in continuous hesitation  
and cut it ceaselessly  
and cut it forever  
with a single hand  
with a plural hand  
with the number-one hand  
with a number of one-hands  
with tiny kiddy hands  
with shrinking wrinkly hands  
with waxy squashy hands  
with hungry bony hands  
with pinky healthy hands  
white hands black hands yellow hands  
if one wants to grasp something, one has to release something  
(not something but many things)  
the goose bumps  
the bitten nails  
the trembling heartbeats  
the clinging deep-roots  
the dragging bulky chains  
the wavering myths  
the time you drop all of them and hold a torch  
it's called liberty

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**Pandora** (poet; Burma/Myanmar) is the editor of the forthcoming [Tuning: An Anthology of Myanmar Women Poets], due out this August. Her poems have been anthologized in *Bones Will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets* (2012), and translations of her work have been published in international literary journals and magazines, including *Asymptote*, *Poetry Review*, and *Sampsonia Way*. She currently works for the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore.

# Percussion

Milagros Socorro

One month later my father would be dead.

That day he could hardly speak or stand up from his wheel chair, but he could dance.

With his eyes, with his exhausted head swinging in the air and with the music.

All his life was marked by Caribbean music. In the end he discovered Chichí Peralta and asked us to play the record over and over.

That day my brother and I danced around the table for him to see and he saw us with that half a smile, with his eyes almost closed.

He saw what wonderful dancers we were: how formidable a father he was. And how huge his heritage.

Suddenly he took the dvd case and started to rhythmically tinkle it. It was his last lesson of dance.

And life.

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**Milagros SOCORRO** (fiction writer, nonfiction writer; Venezuela) is the author of 13 books, including the short story collections *Una atmósfera de viaje* [A Journey's Atmosphere] (1990) and *Actos de Salvajismo* [Acts of Wildness] (1999), and the novel *El abrazo del tamarindo* [The Embrace of the Tamarind Tree] (2008). Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies of Latin American literature, and she has edited 12 literary collections. She teaches journalism and creative writing at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, is the editor of the online news portal *Código Venezuela*, and contributes regularly to magazines and newspapers. She participates courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas.

# The Stars

Stephanie Ye

There are stars whose light we will never see, they say  
Because the universe is constantly expanding, the stars  
Racing to all the infinite corners of infinite space, their light  
Too slow to ever make up the growing distance from our gaze.

This is why the stars shine lonely in the dark night sky  
Rather than merge in their multitudes in a seamless sweep of light  
And this is what you tell your children when they ask about the gaps  
In the family's story: We are all moving so fast and so ceaselessly  
Names, creeds, customs dropping away like so many light-years  
As we blaze our irrevocable trails into the unknown.

But at each of our cores burns the same strange, mad matter  
And though we might die never seeing the light from one another  
Maybe someday, somewhere, someone else will watch the night sky  
And see us all: Our starlight, forming our own constellation.

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**Stephanie YE** (fiction writer; Singapore) has been published in journals such as the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Mascara Literary Review*, and *Sci-Fi Short Story Magazine*. Her first solo publication is a chapbook titled *The Billion Shop*, published by Math Paper Press in 2012. She has worked as a copyeditor, arts reporter, and book critic for *The Straits Times*. Ye's participation was made possible thanks to a grant from the Singapore National Arts Council.