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American Looking: A Collection of Personal Essays on the Middle East

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American Looking

A collection of personal essays on the Middle East

Joint Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature
Of Bard College

By

Genevieve Chiola

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Thank you,

to my parents, for tolerating the angst

to my friends, for being the most worthwhile form of procrastination

to Susan Rogers, for four years of wisdom

to Dina Ramadan, for toughening my skin

to Sophia Stamatapoulou Robbins, for complicating every 'answer'

to Bashar, for being unexpected

to Renad, for welcoming me

to Bard College, for never being easy

to James and Christine, for the hell of it

to Jerry and Christina, for making it all possible

and to the graduating classes of COVID-19 everywhere,

for being in it with me.

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Introduction

This is a collection of personal essays which revolve around the geographic region of the Middle East. Roughly speaking. More accurately, this is a collection of essays that are theoretically grounded in concepts of the Middle East. Particularly concepts of the Middle East as constructed, deconstructed, and rebuilt in the mind of an American (me). Instead of being helplessly hindered by the inevitability of my perspective as an American, these are essays that attempt to put my American perspective in the cross-hairs, making it the very topic of the essays themselves. I do not have the authority to write any reliable truths about these places and these people and to try to do so would be to risk perpetuating misrepresentation, generalization and oversimplification. Many of my forebears have felt entitled to write with this kind of authority, and a long history of harmful Orientalist literature has been the result. Western scholars in every field have long been at work constructing a closed-circuit interpretation of the Middle East and the people who live there as uncivilized, backwards, unintellectual, entrenched in spiritual tradition, all the while shrouded in exoticism and mystique. Today, the modern American

adaptation of this kind of thinking is clearly present in ahistorical surface level political analysis of the Middle East, and the persistent misunderstanding and over-emphasis on the role of Islam in every question. These kinds of analysis lack nuance. These representations were once the tools of colonialism, and they continue to perpetuate colonial logic into the post-colonial era.

I am not trying to contribute to this lexicon. I am not trying to tell any story that is not my own, or speak out with any voice other than my own. This is all I have. The truth nevertheless remains that I have long been subject to representations of the Middle East that are ignorant, fear-based, and steeped in lingering power structures of colonialism. While I am engaged in the process of unlearning this mess, this work is only a part of what will likely be a lifelong process of re-learning. It is possible and even likely that some remaining ignorance has snuck in and colored these essays. I am a comfortably middle class white woman who was raised in the United States, this is who I am as I write this. This is the body and mind I have with which to access the world around me. I have had the privilege of traveling to places in the Middle East, experiences which have educated me and which make up much of the material I write here. I have also had the privilege of spending four years majoring in Middle Eastern studies under professors who have dedicated themselves to the undoing of these harmful misrepresentations. But nonetheless, understand that what you read here is coming from someone who carries some ignorance, and always trust the voices of people telling their own story over the voices of white western Americans such as myself.

These essays explore what it means to look out at and interpret the Middle East and the people who live there from the perspective of an American. They explore the forces that work to shroud a clear and honest view. They ask what it means to look and listen as an American and

re-interpret 'looking' as something more than a passive act of perception, acknowledging that looking and interpreting can have an impact on our subjects, particularly when we are looking out from a position of power and dominance. They explore the fact that, often when we look out and we believe we are seeing the truth about something outside of ourselves, what we are really seeing is some truth about ourselves being reflected back at us.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that all of the work that has gone into the knowledge production of the concept of the *East*, by the *West*, was work that was going into producing and constructing a concept of the *West* for itself, by contrast.¹ The West constructed, understood and produced itself as civilized, developed, intellectual, dominant, through representing and understanding the Middle East as opposite and inferior. This is why we perform the process of othering, in order to articulate and understand ourselves more clearly through opposition and contrast. It is always a project rooted in egotism.

To honor the foundational thinking of Edward Said, I will end this introduction with this thought: While these essays are ostensibly about the Middle East, really they are about me. Only me. It doesn't matter how much I try to write about someone else, anyone else, at the end of the day, what I have written can only reliably tell you about me.

¹Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 1978

Looking Through Glass

I slid down in the plush seat, stiff with discomfort, as the uber driver maneuvered the mud with a persistence that was either the daring of naivety, or the hardened grit of the practiced. I couldn't tell. The low-riding sedan had more pluck than met the eye. Rattling down the street it's wheels gripped the edges of massive swirling puddles, pushing onward. The three of us sat as still as possible in the back, limbs bouncing non-consensually with the terrain, anxious for any sign of frustration from the sliver of our driver's expression that was reflected back to us in the mirror. His eyes and the bridge of his mouth. He looked to be in his 30's, perhaps younger. This slice of mirror, our only medium of communication and interpretation, revealed nothing. His interiority was entirely masked. His eyes stared ahead, inscrutable, and his shoulders bounced casually. On we went.

Squeezed in the back seat, we exchanged pointed, nervous glances. We, all three of us American and studying Arabic among other things at the American University in Cairo for the semester, theoretically could have ventured a word with our driver, stretching those muscles stiff

from confinement to a classroom, feeling the foreign shapes in the open air. But what words would we even choose? This was not a simple matter of,

“amil Ey?” (How are you?). Or,

“Shukran! ” (thank you).

Or our choppy version of letting the driver know he could stop.

“hena mashi, hena taiba.” (Here fine, here good).

The nuance of our anxiety was not easy to translate, even in English. So I stayed quiet and stiff, searching the rear-view mirror as if I could glean the information I needed from memorizing the creases in his forehead.

“Should we even be here?” I wanted to ask. But I imagined the confusion that would ensue if I tried to speak this. I wanted to tell him to just drop us off right here, right now, to avoid any potential damage to his car, to avoid his potential anger as the road only seemed to further degrade from here. I looked around from within the containment of the car at this place we had come to, and I felt my foreignness with such a paralyzing acuteness, I barely dared to breathe. I wondered if he did stop here would I even be able to coax my body to exit the safety of the vehicle, or would I be crippled by the icy sensation of being an object completely and utterly out of place? Would my feet sink too deep into the mud, leaving me flailing? I honestly didn't know. So I didn't speak or move, and the only sounds remained the disarming rattling of the car, ill-equipped for this road and yet persisting under the direction of our stoic uber driver.

Everytime we ventured out of the microcosm of our campus, I could feel every inch of my skin as if it were an awkward, ill-fitting canvas, stretched and pulled over my bones, every breath that rose and fell in my chest felt like a proclamation of my presence, an announcement

that I didn't want to be making. I wanted to slip by unnoticed, another number in the crowd, but my feet always seemed to be stomping. Right now I felt like my skin was blinding onlookers even through the glass of the car window. Existing here without being a piece out of place was impossible.

Mary was seated beside me. She and I investigated each week, doing our casual research to see where we should venture. There was a mass of other international students of European origin, who often went on outings together into the city. We instinctively avoided joining, turned off by the spectacle of such a grouping. All that blonde would dilute the authenticity of the experience. But we gathered intel from their adventures and then quietly followed where they had stamped the week before. This week we followed where they had been once again, to the Monastery of Saint Simon, more casually called the Cave Church, located in Manshiyat Naser, a district of Cairo.

Manshiyat Naser, where we found ourselves now tumbling up a steep hill, around a narrow turn, splashing in deep pits of mud and wondering whether our driver was bitterly cursing us for placing our uber location all the way at the end of this road, wishing he had dropped us off at its beginning and left us to walk.

“I don't know how much I really care about this church, but this, ‘garbage city,’ I had mused the other day, “that seems fascinating.”

We had been sitting among the palms on the grand gardens of the AUC campus, water fountain bubbling at our feet. We had learned that Manshiyat Naser, where the church was located was where the city's informal yet essential garbage collectors had settled. Primarily a

population of Coptic Christians, they had built the church we were headed to, carving seats and stage into the stone formations at the peak of their city.

We crowded our heads around Mary's phone, watching our GPS dot as it inched along on the Uber app. I was uneasy, hoping we had selected the right location. The city around us had morphed into an architecture of stacked brick and trash bags. The buildings looked like haphazardly assembled boxes, uniform dusty brick but misaligned, as though they had all been arranged in a perfect grid and then the earth had shuddered a sigh and everything had been shaken slightly off its center of gravity. The uniformity was disrupted by a patchwork of windows, some paned and framed, some just voids, square holes in the wall. The street before us stretched out and up, wide enough to accommodate cars passing back and forth and people on foot. On my right, a side alley so narrow and cramped as to give the impression that the two buildings were only precariously upright, leaning in towards each other and blocking out the sun. Clothes hung like tinsel and streamers. And everywhere lining the sides of the buildings, peeking out of windows, piled into trucks, being trampled underfoot; trash. Big plastic-burlap sacks of trash.

I imagined what the place would look like without the lumpy crowds of plastic and burlap stacked and shoved, spilling over. It would appear hollow, I think, a brick skeleton. All this color, all this mess, all this visible evidence of life, itself a structural support, perhaps if all of it was removed, the brick would crumble too. Mary and I had agreed that it was this imagined spectacle of crowding waste, and seething poverty that made us curious. But perhaps morbidly so.

This was the *real* Cairo I thought, looking at the moving picture inside of the window frame, while I sat quiet in the theatre. The car interior smelled of polyester and plastic. Ever

since I was a young child, I'd sought the view out of a backseat window. I'd climb in content to hear the click of the seat buckle and feel the pressure of the strap, holding me in place, in stillness, while the world did the work of rushing up to meet me. I'd squirm in the confinement, twist myself into impossible positions, upside down, sideways, feet up. I'd press my face against the glass, hard, as if trying to break through it and be part of the outside, discontent with my enclosure, the stale air blowing from the vents, the borders to my vision. But I would feel a creeping apprehension upon arrival, the unbuckling, the opening of the car door and the blending of air, so that the sanctuary of the inside of the car was now in continuum with the outside. Suddenly, there were things to be done, places to walk, people to talk to, a world to touch and smell. Suddenly, not only was I perceiving the world, the world was able to perceive me. A world that had ideas about me, a world that could touch me with those ideas of myself. And the thoughts that I had let spin out wildly from my mind, unthreatened make-believe of the world that was flying by, would collide unceremoniously with the wall of fresh air that invaded when the car door was opened and the seal was broken.

A truck dips into a puddle before us, and traffic seems to get clogged up ahead. Laundry hangs on lines out of windows a few stories up. Colors that keep each other company out of necessity, convenience. Neon children's t-shirts, alongside a floral print. Bright red and a blue dulled by use made unlikely friends hanging up in the air together. Just as pops of striking green and blue burlap trash bags among the otherwise beige and brick draws the eye, an accidental element of design.

Cory, another American student at the University, within the shell shock of our first days of arrival, had gushed about the beauty around us. He was eager to explore and found aesthetics

everywhere. He would cite the visual symptoms of poverty and failing infrastructure; beggars in tattered clothes with missing teeth, trash and various other waste on the street, buildings decaying and tangled electric wires, all fascinating and beautiful to him. They marked difference; they were his reminders that he was somewhere exotic. His thinking was not unfamiliar to me. I remember being younger, and having the specific yearning to go somewhere where the clothes hung from lines out of windows to dry, as if this was the mark of a truly exotic destination. I remember being thrilled in Ecuador at the sight of these dangling garments, when in reality, all this signified was the absence of a dryer. I reveled in it.

The woman who had washed and hung these clothes is nowhere to be seen, but the clothes sway slightly in the air, resisting inanimacy. They are the everyday, the worn, the washed, the wrung out and hung, unassuming witnesses to the intimacies of this city.

We turned a steep corner and barreled up an incline as the car's engine seized. Then the sky opened up. We were at the top of the city, and the road ended. The uber driver looked back at us briefly, raising his eyebrows questioningly and gesturing with a nod at the large rock structure up ahead. We leaned forward, alert at the sudden interaction. We nodded and mumbled our assent, fumbling over our words, and he pulled over. I opened the car door. A click and a wave of new air. The church was carved into the rock before us, a grand enclave built by the Coptic Christians who made up the Zabaleen community. It was an architectural masterpiece. We spun around in place, our necks craned back. There was no one to see us look foolish in our awe. The place echoed with emptiness. It seemed almost impossible that we had arrived here, scaling the steps of this amphitheatre-like space, spacious and silent, after the

ingrown road that had led to it. It was obvious now, of course the driver had always been confident in where he was going. This was quite the location.

It was grand and spotless. Elevated in space and in prestige, it seemed. It was hard to imagine that the same people relegated to trash collection, living in the dust and debris below us, had carved this place of worship into the stone with their hands. While I felt more comfortable here, noting that the few other people we saw were sporting large camera's and backpacks, I wondered if I was welcome. Unlike the streets of Zabaleen, this was built to be a spectacle for the eyes. It felt less like the living breathing organism that was the city, and more like a static object. I didn't feel like my gaze was imposing, or even perceptible here.

We decided to walk back. It felt like a bold decision. It was a different place out in the open air with the sound of our feet hitting the ground accompanying us and mingling with shouts and the general rustle of life bumping up against itself down in the city. We stepped over bottles and squelched plastic shards into the mud as we walked, and I was surprised by the lack of odor. For all the mud and debris, I didn't feel unclean. I had expected the immersion in the mess to be more assaulting to the senses, perhaps.

A gaggle of young children walked parallel to us a few paces ahead bouncing off of each other as they forgot to focus on the mechanics of their own bodies, and instead turned their heads to gaze at us. They watched us with big eyes that did not waver, or look away when they met mine. They were so easy to watch. While I gave polite nods and smiles when adults passed, I

was careful to not look for too long, not betray my curiosity. The children had no sense of the imposition of my gaze, they were no strangers to expressive curiosity. My gaze only made them smile and giggle.

They approached us and spoke in long inquisitive streams of Egyptian Arabic. They wanted to know if we were Christians like them. They gestured to our wrists, asking if we had something, and it took us several minutes to realize they were asking about tattoos. We were unfamiliar with the word in Egyptian. I said no. Mary explained to me that maybe they were referring to the traditional tattoo of a cross that Copts get on their wrists to signify their identification. Eventually the girls veered off into an alleyway, waving goodbye as we continued on the main road. A little taste of culture. Small and manageable.

I was glad to be walking, moving more slowly through this microcosm, taking in what I could. Yet, I didn't know how to contend with my own witnessing. I had come to witness, which perhaps was better than a complete avoidance or a complete ignorance, but what was the appropriate way to witness a garbage city? I looked out into this landscape with eyes that couldn't separate the architecture from the commerce. I could distinguish a building brick from a plastic bottle, but they seemed equally immutable to me. Trash seemed to permeate, making a home for itself wherever there was spare space, sprawling and settling in. The bottom floors of stacked structures left open like a garage and filled with stretched bags reinforcing the illusion that the trash was inseparable from the buildings themselves, essential to their structural integrity. It seemed eternal, stagnant in space and time. The brick, the trash, the clothesline, and the people walking back and forth to unknown locations, all flattened by my eyes, stacked atop

one another in no particular order, figures on a canvas all rendered with the same paint, a two dimensional sprawl of color and light. A mess.

And yet, surely this garbage moved with precision and art. Surely the people I watched navigate their way through the landscape were functioning among a finely tuned mechanism of moving parts that I was unable to perceive. The plastic bottle had been tossed in that particular pile for a reason. It wouldn't remain there for long. This trash, which looked haphazard and static, was actually in-network and constantly en route elsewhere. Like a waterfall, which appears to one as a stationary fixture in a landscape, but whose molecules are perpetually in motion, changing, refreshing, moving onward towards something else. All this hidden, even as I left my own footprints all over it.

The Zabaleen awake early in the morning and from their settlement at the edge of the Mokattam Hills disperse out into the neighborhoods of Cairo with the efficiency of a well-oiled routine, collecting trash from sidewalks, stoops, and climbing up flights of stairs to get to people's doorsteps.² It is said that the city of Cairo has no organized waste management infrastructure, as if the residents of Manshiyat Naser are unseen, their work, by virtue of being freelance, becomes a feature of the sidelines. While there is no government funded or facilitated waste management, the Zabaleen sustain themselves with thoroughness and organization, their

² Iskander, Mai. "Garbage Dreams." Iskander Films. 2009.

livelihoods dependent on the precision and care with which they handle that which the city throws away.

After traversing the city collecting each scrap of what others discard, they return to this space. Equal parts home, community, city, factory. They spend their days sorting what they have gathered, and processing it into recyclable material. This requires separating, chopping, sifting, and then ultimately repackaging, and the waste that enters the city is quickly processed out, sold to recycling centers, and the rest brought to the landfills. The breadth of expertise required to keep the currents of waste flowing through the settlement is expansive. Packed into this settlement called a slum, a title of degradation, chaos, and squalor, are men, women and children who sustain themselves on what others deem no longer useful, relying on their intuitive understanding of the city of Cairo and a practiced, finely-tuned knowledge of recycling.

I only learned of all of this later, sitting in front of my computer. I learned about the foreign trash collection companies being hired by the city, and slowly, quietly taking the trash resources of the Zabaleen, and in turn, taking their livelihood. They get up earlier and earlier in the morning, to be the first to the trash.³ The companies, infiltrating. They don't know the city like the Zabaleen, they scour it with impersonal hands. They treat the garbage like trash. They do not recycle like the Zabaleen do. Yet, their kind of 'expertise' is recognized in ways that Zabaleen expertise is not. Their expertise has a corporation's stamp on it.

³ Iskander. "Garbage Dreams." 2009.

If you look up any of the following names, ‘Manshiyat Naser’, or the more crude, ‘Zabaleen’ or ‘garbage city,’ sites aimed towards the more ‘gritty, adventurous tourist’ are a majority of the results. Learning of the commerce of the city took deeper digging. Atlas Obscura features this location in an online piece, and I recall the Atlas Obscura book my father gifted me. “An Explorer’s Guide to the World’s Hidden Wonders.”⁴

Obscura calls it,

“somewhat of an off-the-beaten-path tourist attraction for adventuresome individuals.”⁵

A blog poster to another site, GloboTreks, writes,

“we both agreed that we *had* to see Garbage City. And so we did.”⁶

They *had* to see it. And so they did. All these websites, all these representations of the city by people who seemed to have shared in my curiosity, and who had scratched the itch.

They’d put on their stained pants and headed down to the underbelly of Cairo to smell the putrid smells, see the rot, and get their hiking boots muddy. They recommend it to others as a way to get a sense of another side of Cairo. The *real* Cairo.

The travelers’ blogs which seemed to be suggesting that it is the chaos, the smell, the squalor of a life made unlivable by trash, that the gritty explorer should seek to witness. The *realness* of a life lived consumed by stench made Zabaleen a destination. But poverty is not the story the city holds, and for a mere traipser through the walls keep their secrets. The clothes, hanging on the line, don’t reveal their intimacies. The plastic bottles appear eternal, the burlap sacks fixtures in the architecture. Seeking the *real*. The raw. Thinking the story will be told to

⁴ Tawsam. “Cairo’s Garbage City.” *Atlas Obscura*, Atlas Obscura, 10 Oct. 2011.

⁵ Tawsam. “Garbage City.” 2011.

⁶ Norbert. “Garbage City: The Side of Cairo No One Wants to See.” *GloboTreks*, 15 July 2019,

you if only you assault your senses and step in puddles, you leave with nothing but muddy boots and an empty photograph of chaos and mess; brick and mud with splashes of color.

They *had* to see it. They had to *see* it.

Mary and I, aside from our admittance that we had the curiosity of the garbage city, had stayed quiet on the matter. I didn't know where to put my curiosity, what to do with it. I carried it with a degree of shame and secrecy, a sense that this curiosity did not deserve to be satiated. I was afraid of the way those traveler's blogs spoke directly to me.

Months later, I sit in a bagel and dumpling cafe in New York City, watching a woman wearing a white chef's coat finger dough into plump dumplings through a glass display window. She did not look up from her hands as they stretched the dough, spooned in the minced filling, and then twisted each bundle closed. My eyes watch without my mind, her deftness a hypnosis. We are in the same room, the glass that separates us does not go all the way up to the ceiling, but rather rests between us. It does not strike me for some time that perhaps the transparency of this glass means that she can see me too. I forget, as it is so clearly signified to me by this glass, that she is the one on display, and I am the one who is meant to be watching.

The glass is only a whisper in the air, yet the remove is palpable. We are not the same; I am here, and she is the woman behind the glass. The glass invites me in, while keeping me out. It's

transparency begs me to look through it, and it's solidness makes that looking safe. Perhaps for her. Definitely for me.

It eventually occurs to me that even though glass was built here and she stands on the other side of it, perhaps she does not want to be watched, or seen at all. Perhaps she wishes the glass would crystallize into solid stone and leave me staring at a wall.

I think about all that I have been invited to look at. Guidebooks urging me to put on my adventure pants and trek down to see the mountains of garbage, and the folks who sift through it every day. People's craft displayed behind glass, for me to peer through. Authenticity packaged neatly and presented to me for consumption. The *real* world at my fingertips, in small palatable doses of course, designed for my convenience. Uncomplicated.

As we walked, we came upon the puddle that the uber had splashed through on the way here, and we hugged a strip of land miraculously keeping our feet dry. A middle aged man, bearded, wearing slip-on sandals waited for us to inch our way across, on the other side, nodding, before deftly using the same passage with much greater ease and speed. His face was weathered, and his hands calloused. He went on his way. All around people walked this way and that, performing tasks, carting bags, hollering greetings and other things to each other. I watched each pass by. Going somewhere.

We were observed too. I wondered what they saw.

Should we even be here?

When we reached the end of the road, the uber was waiting for us. We slid into the air conditioning with a sigh of relief. The city began to rush by through the window, people's faces blurring on the other side of the glass. I shut my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat. I'd seen enough for one day.

Lines on a Map

The scraping of chairs feels too loud as this assortment of people gathers on the cement stoop of the library. The settling of dusk has washed the village of Mas'ha in a thick quiet. A dog barks now and again. We are three girls from America, three girls from Palestine, and two from Russia. The boys have all dispersed now though there is a whole gaggle of them, all Palestinian, many local to this village. It's dark now so they've gone to their respective homes, as it's generally not seen as appropriate for men and women to stay up and chat together into the night. Renad in particular has been concerned about the attention we are drawing here, which is in contrast to the nonchalance and general rebelliousness she freely dishes out at Bard in New York where we both go to school.

“This is a conservative village!” She presses, “People will gossip, and then they won't want us to come back.”

While no one else feels the weight of this anxiety, she did grow up in this village so we speak in low voices, and stick to our stoop.

It's been a few days now and the few feels like a lifetime. The village library that lies up the flight of stairs behind us is one room lined with shelves of children's books, and temporarily foam sleeping pads lie in imperfect rows spreading across the floor. It is tradition that the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative volunteers camp out in the library. BPYI has been coming to Mas'ha for 10 years, after a Palestinian student at Bard college founded the program. Students from Bard NY and other Bard affiliates come together with students studying in Jerusalem, and locals in the village to co-create and facilitate 'workshops,' (in a loose sense of the word) which delve into themes and topics that are relevant to students, giving them the space and the tools to think about and discuss challenging and sometimes painful things.

The workshops are over for today but will begin again tomorrow. So we've gathered, as we do nightly, for our own round of conversation. Everyone looks tired and a little greasy around the edges. Stray hairs are peaking out of the edges of hijabs, which have been loosened. No boys are around.

The sky is not fully dark. We are secluded from the main street by a wall, but a lone street-lamp peeks over the top of the barrier, washing everything in a thin orange. I take in what light is available, unblinking. I've been unblinking since I arrived, at Ben Gurion airport in Israel, only to be immediately ushered across the border into the West Bank.

On the drive the boundaries between the two countries had appeared simultaneously porous and abrupt. The landscape morphed incrementally as I left Tel Aviv. The highway ramps leading us away from Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, Israel were lined with rows of manicured palms. There was more green than I had expected.

My first thought was, *Shit, this looks exactly like Florida.*

But as the crowding of the city diminished, so did the green. I began to be able to see the form and shape of the land, with less architectural interruptions. I could see farther than I expected, the land spread out before us like great plains, wide and open. Surprising, considering the hills which bubbled up and staggered under the surface. Humble homes clustered at the crests of hills, their form pressed right up against the sky; building mountains with angular silhouettes. I began to notice minarets emerging from each distance throng and bustle. Singular, dignified, united. They rose like extensions of hills themselves, like an arm reaching up from a body, with one finger extended and straining to just barely graze the heavens.

I knew little of it; just shapes and light and timbre. As my eyes absorbed the torrid landscape for the first time, the Israeli settlements marching in militant lines along hillsides seemed no more alien to me than anything else. Their whiteness, the way they sat pristine and empty-looking told me nothing, and I looked on passively, without turning my head, as they drifted in and out of my line of sight.

Leaving the stoop for a moment, Renad goes into the kitchen to grab some cups and a water bottle. She comes back also porting the huge tub of hummus we had picked up at the grocery store the other day, and she slaps a pile of bread down next to it.

“Eat.” Renad is the appointed leader, and she is scattered, but she keeps us cared for.

Before we left the US for Mas’ha, she had given us the talk.

“Do not say Palestine. Don’t say it.”

She was talking about going through customs at the airport in Tel Aviv. If we told them the whole truth, they were going to ask a lot more questions.

Be casual. Be vague. Don’t lie if you don’t have to, just omit parts of the truth. Do not say Palestine. Don’t say it. Exploit the assumption that your whiteness signifies Jewishness.

I’m visiting some friends. I’m going to be exploring Jerusalem, touring, hanging out.

I’m just a carefree white girl who wants to have a killer vacation.

I didn’t have to say any of that, when I finally approached the customs desk. I had my passport opened to the appropriate page, and my customs paperwork slipped in beside it, and I handed it across the linoleum counter in one practiced motion, contorting my face into a wide-eyed smile that I hoped was both innocent and carefree. The young woman in the kiosk deftly took the bundle, expressionless. Her eyes flicked up at me, and rested on my face for one breathless moment. White, blonde, American. Her fingers tapped something out on her keyboard, and she handed me back my passport without a word. I blinked, and she turned her head towards the next person in line.

And now, here I am, on the wrong side of the wall, having left Israel in the dust. The dust and the lush green of palm trees.

There are footsteps beyond the curve of the driveway, and then Ahmed saunters around the corner. He is a co-leader with Renad, who sighs when she sees him. Clearly Ahmed is flagrantly unconcerned about the comingling of the sexes. Renad and Ahmed are both local to the village, and have known each other most of their lives, though Ahmed has remained here while Renad left for the US.

Ahmed is a fountain of charisma and ease, expertly quaffed, and smelling of cologne; just enough. He almost doesn't seem to fit here among brick and dust, a scrap of trash floating by his shoe in the breeze. I wonder if he cultivated that persona on purpose, if he wants people to have that thought. Renad says that he applied to come to Bard, to run BPYI just like her, but she got the scholarship. After I learned that, I saw him differently. His persona wasn't quite as sturdy a facade.

He grins, as he sees heads turn at the sound of his footsteps. He likes the attention. I don't like giving it to him, fueling his insufferable charm, but I just can't quite help it, and can already feel a healthy color brighten in my cheeks as his eyes brush over me. I'm not the only one struggling to resist, though Renad is the most unaffected. She knows Ahmed. She doesn't trust him, and she most certainly does not blush when he walks into a room.

Renad is a firecracker. She is fierce and loud, and will endlessly tease anyone who will tolerate it. She wears a hijab, and sometimes her head is wrapped up in flashy silk and floral, sometimes a beige jersey fabric, sturdy and practical. She's scattered and chaotic as an organizer, but commands attention effortlessly, in a way that the rest of us can't. Her watch is a joke; literally. All the numbers are jumbled to one side, as if they've come unhinged and fallen, and across the face it says, "Whatever, I'm late anyway." She never spares herself in the mockery. Ahmed is not spared either, though she bites with less warmth,

"Look who's come crawling back," she says to Afnan, giving him a side eye as he approaches.

I had just met Afnan, here in Mas'ha. She and Nadeen, who is seated beside her, are palestinian students at Al-Quds Bard, a satellite school within Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. Al-Quds being Arabic for Jerusalem. Or Jerusalem being Hebrew for Al-Quds, depending on what side of the wall you're on.

Afnan dresses with professionalism and style. Her polish came as a surprise to me. Another person who didn't seem to fit here. She doesn't have any of the airs of ruggedness or grit that I expected. She is feminine and mostly gracious, though has also complained copiously about the fact that the mattresses (the ones arranged for us on the floor of the library) don't have sheets, as if we are victims on the frontlines of an egregious injustice, and must stand up and speak out. Similarly with the lack of a proper breakfast. She's a natural organizer, and has strong opinions that she makes palatable, but also known.

Nadeen stands out, and I wasn't immediately sure she was Palestinian when I was first introduced to her. Someone asked her at the beginning, and she responded like she was used to

the question; with resignation. Yes, she's Palestinian. She's also Christian. The reason she stands out is her hair. It is big and wild and free, and her brown curls are bouncy and draw attention. The children in the village notice and often think she's foreign, and though I had the same thoughts, I know to filter myself while the children do not.

Three of us including me are from the U.S., Mary, dirty blond hair shaggy and cropped up around her face, is wearing her usual casual attire, a loose short sleeve button down. Muted lavender this time. Marlaina, with a shock of shiny black curls pulled into a practical ponytail. We are clearly foreign, along with Margo and Masha from Russia, who both have long flowing blonde hair, and blue eyes. We stand out, undeniably. I feel like we impose ourselves, simply by walking out onto the street as we cause people to stop, and look, and wonder. *What are they doing here?* I wonder if they feel that gaze returned, upon their own skin, as we look at them and wonder. We are each a bit reduced to our external markers of identity as we brush past each other on the street, informing ourselves of each other through only glances.

Leaning forward in her plastic chair to reel us in, it was Afnan who expertly turned the conversation. Like a deft politician, she guided us where she wanted us. She spoke like she was on the campaign trail, as she outlined her opinion in the cadence of fact, with a composure and practiced passion. Her voice was loud, but measured. She spoke with a knowing that words could be wielded like powerful precision machinery; you must keep a steady hand but you can cut deep and straight and leave your mark. I had no choice but to listen, and when I glanced away from her momentarily, I noticed that all faces were alert and leaning in. She had captured us.

“People are ignorant,” she said, “they do not understand.” Her English was clear, with an accent resting delicately on the syllables, like a decorative flourish.

“They do not know the history. They do not know the experiences of the Palestinian people. They do not know. They do not know the way things actually are. This is the problem.” She paused, and her words rested in the warm air.

I was aware of her eyes on us, and the attention made my throat tight. I knew distinctly that she was tailoring her speech to us, the foreigners in the group, particularly the Americans. We were the ‘they’ that did not know, and she had been given an opportunity to share with us, and she wasn’t about to squander it. I felt the thin illumination from the porch lamp hitting my face like a spotlight, so that it shone white in the darkness. I felt clumsy and much too big, as I readjusted in my seat, and my chair scraped unpleasantly against the concrete.

“We are not seen as people. We are not given the rights of people. It has always been this way, that is how the Israelis have always treated us. This is why it is an occupation. This is why we cannot coexist. This is why we need our own state.”

She knew when to leap and dance over the words, using repetition to keep rhythm, and she knew when to slow, and step heavy with each word, as if wanting to leave footprints, tracks in the conversation, tracks through our minds. She speaks only the obvious, I would later realize. Spokesperson to Palestine, she invites no nuance or particularity.

I thought about how she made herself this spokesperson, invited me to look at her, examine her, see her, and transcribe her experience over the landscape in order to understand it. How she had made herself an example, and wrapped it up neatly for me, for easy transportation back to the States.

I thought about the day before when we had been shuffled out to look at the man whose house had been split by the wall.

Every day it was, “Maybe today.” “

“Maybe today we’ll go see the man whose house was split by the wall,” or,

“This afternoon, after the workshop, we’ll go visit the man whose house was split by the wall,” or,

“Tomorrow, tomorrow we’ll go and talk to the man whose house was split by the wall.”

He took on the quality of myth, and legend. He grew larger and larger than himself as we were time and time again promised this pilgrimage out to the fringes, where a frontier had declared itself in cement and wire, yet it had crumbled at the feet of this man standing on his doorstep, nothing but a fixture of soft tissue; unmoving.

We finally walked out to the outskirts, a whole crowd of us, spilling across the middle of the street making cars slow to a creep and go around us, heads turning. We were a colorful bunch, Palestinians and foreigners all stepping on each other's toes. The land sloped up as we

left town. Eventually it felt as though we were at a height above everything else. I turned to the right, and found myself at the crest of a sloping cliffside, surveying the collection of hills that made up the landscape, rounding off into the distance. The clean line of a highway, bordered with street lamps lay at our feet below. It looked markedly different from the land it dashed across, the cars confined to it were in a world to themselves. If I could have reached out and brushed a distant minaret with my finger, I couldn't have touched this highway. I imagined it stretching away from us as I reached a hand out. Mahmoud, one of the boys from AQB came up behind me.

“Settlements.” He said.

We approached the destination. The wall kept us in. And yet there was a doorway and no one watching, and Renad walked up and unlatched a gate. I didn't understand if rules were being broken, but everyone acted like it was protocol, and we walked through, and entered a space in between, a space surrounded by wall.

He was average height, and we all crowded into his patio as he brought out a tray of tea and biscuits. Renad translated, as he was ushered out, and perched on the edge of the table. The words droned out of him. He said much more than she translated but one thing stood out to me, as I listened, and watched him. He was tired. Tired of telling people his story. Tired of resisting. Tired of us. I felt so uncomfortable, crowded into his corner of the world, watching the blinking of his eyes, and the fidgeting of his hands as he spoke, to try and get a glimpse of this elusive concept of 'occupation.' It was all around us, erected in walls and settlements that

sprung from nothing and riddled the land, and yet I was still waiting to see it. Waiting to hear gunshots, and see the blood. But this man's skin was whole, no visible punctures where his life was leaking out, or none he wanted to reveal to us. Just a house surrounded by a wall that made the sky smaller. I felt like I was still on the other side of this wall, even as I was face to face with him, examining his wrinkles.

We filed out of the gate onto the other side of the wall, like children leaving a picture show, and we were back on the inside again. As we walked past the view of the settlement highway, this time on the left, it didn't seem as far away now, or as unyielding. I thought, perhaps I could reach out and touch it after all. Mahmoud, and Renad, and a few of the other boys had gotten way up ahead, their forms getting smaller as they sauntered down the road. I heard their voices drift back to me, laughing and teasing, across the chasm of space. I quickened my pace to catch up, but they were too far away.

On our little cement stoop, the air was slowly cooling, yet Renad felt red hot next to me. I could feel the vibrations of something erupting up from her chest, and, jostling and crowding in her mouth. Eventually she interrupted Afnan's measured sermon.

“We are always resisting. Being a Palestinian, it means I am always resisting. Or Palestine will disappear. They will just erase it completely. That's what they want.”

They were the Israelis, and as she continued to spit out the word with vitriol and visceral disgust, throwing it away from herself as she enunciated it. As I watched her boil, it seemed like her anger spread out from her, and it didn't halt at the Israeli's. It crept right up to their walls, and then seeped into the concrete, and disintegrated them at the base. I wondered if her anger seeped out all the way to me, in my little corner of rural USA. If her anger could creep under and dissolve walls, surely it could cross oceans. I looked up into her face, wanting to show her I was here, I was listening, I was on her side, but she wasn't looking at me, she was looking at some point off beyond me with a hardened stare, and I didn't feel like her warmth was reaching me any more, instead I felt cold for a moment, and wondered if I should go grab a sweater. Crazy, as the day had been burning just an hour or so before.

It was the first time I heard Renad give her monologue. It struck me then, the passion she gathered inside herself and thrust outward as she spoke. I felt like I was privy to something raw and real. It mattered, to be sitting here with her and listening to her emotional unburdening.

I would hear it more times in the next few years as I continued to work with Renad for BPYI. In dinner discussions with other American students at Bard. In a Q and A after a film screening, she'd reignite the fire. I became familiar with it, just as you become familiar with any of your favorite performances, and you begin to notice new details, inflections. You notice how they dance over the same lines with the same inflections, when they pause for effect. How they play to their audience.

“You have to go to Jerusalem.” Renad would later insist. We had to see it while we were here. Mary, Marlaina and I were on board. Renad then told us that she herself couldn’t go with us. Neither could Afnan. Or Ahmed, or Mahmoud. Or any of the Palestinians. They all had Blue ID’s, which allowed them to exist and move in the territories delineated as the West Bank, but not Israel. I was baffled. Renad reminded me that she had flown into an airport in Jordan, while I had flown into Tel Aviv.

“I need to apply for permission to enter Jerusalem. It would take too long. Not worth it. You go anyway. Really, you should go.”

So we did. We breezed through checkpoints where men in uniform milled about with big guns casually slung over their shoulders, sometimes peering through the car window.

“You are Jewish?” Our driver asked.

“No.”

“Today, you are Jewish.” He said. We approached a checkpoint, slowing a line of cars, and he turned to me, in the front seat laughing robustly,

“Remember, look Jewish!”

On the way back we drove past ominously red signs with this warning in large white print in Hebrew, Arabic and English,

“This Road Leads To Area “A” Under The Palestinian Authority The Entrance For Israeli Citizens Is Forbidden, Dangerous To Your Lives, And Is Against The Israeli Law.”

I wondered at the quotation marks peculiarly positioned around the A. I didn't understand their intentions, but they read like scare quotes. Laws and delineations on paper that the land did not actually mold or conform to, I thought as we sped past the sign, and the hills continued to slope and fall before us in gentle waves, without a hitch.

I remember looking up Palestine on a map that first week of my freshman year, after I signed my name and email address for the club registration. It's so small, I thought. Nonetheless, the lines on the map were just lines. They were thin and black and solid and familiar and they spoke with confidence, filling me with assurance so I shut my phone off and set it down, moving on to other things. Palestine was this place, and it was not that place, and the map had told me so.

As I listened to Renad's voice, I was glad I was sitting, for I felt dizzy with my own weight. I remembered the map and now the lines blazed behind my eyes, deceptions etched like knives into the skin of the earth, leaving scars.

Now Ahmed, always the charmer, took the stage for the final act.

"It is so important that *you* hear our stories." He said and he looked at each of us Americans. I still felt special when his eyes arrived at mine. He didn't literally wink, but it seemed suggested. He was good at that. He spoke right to us, put us center stage. It wasn't just important to speak

the experience, it was specifically important that *we* were the audience. This moment, here, with us and them, it was significant. And then he spoke the undercurrent out loud.

“You are Americans.” The way he said the word *American* made my skin itch a little bit, like it wasn’t really mine, but something I had draped over myself. He said it like he could see and know more about me than I knew about myself, or ever would. Perhaps he could.

He seemed to want engagement, so I nodded instinctually.

“America is rich and powerful, and you can go back, and bring this back, and you can tell people how it really is here. The occupation, how the Israelis take our freedom, they take our land. You can convince people, *you* can tell people the truth.”

The truth. Somehow, the truth in my hands, the truth in the hands of someone wrapped in the skin of an American is a potent force. Ahmed seemed to think so. His voice had become almost imploring, which was an unsettling hint of vulnerability from him, who usually spoke with a slick of protective arrogance layered over his words.

The truth.

I think about all of the little ways that I’ve been infiltrated with a perspective that has disguised itself as the truth. Even with journalism that does the hard work of interrogating mainstream truths, mainstream truth still is mainstream truth. It permeates. Hamas is a terrorist organization. I knew that truth. I didn’t even know what Hamas was, but I knew it was a terrorist organization. Israel is the rightful homeland of the Jewish people. Images of death

camps, and piles of the shoes of the dead have been used to brand that truth into my brain. Israel must be protected as the only democracy in the Middle East. Israeli values are American values. Israeli values are American values. The truth.

I had carried these truths around with me, and like a creature unknowingly a vessel for the dispersal of seeds which have latched onto its fur, or are making their way through its digestive tract, only to land somewhere new and take root there as well.

Listening to Ahmed as he handed us this dose of responsibility, made palatable by his charm, I wondered if he could see these ‘truths’ that had found crevices to nestle into in my brain, if I wore them on the outside. I wonder if he sees them and they make him angry, I wondered if he also has a fury that crosses oceans. I wonder how these ‘American’ truths act like filters over my eyes, so that when I look out from them at this land around me, and these friends in front of me, I still cannot truly see them. Like blindly watching Israeli settlements drift by on the highway without seeing them, and joining the thousands of Americans who travel to Israel and are unable to see the violence inscribed all over the land. Who do not truly *see*, but whose eyes instead bolster a more palatable version of the truth, by simply *looking* while uninformed. To see something sprouting above ground is not enough if you are not able to know whether underneath it are roots. It is not enough.

When I look at an Israeli settlement, and I see only houses on a hill, one side has won the scramble for my attention. When I look at an Israeli settlement and take the sparkle and glint of the rooftops as a sign of invasion, then another side has won.

The Palestinians before us, our friends who had taken the floor seemed to know that such a competition was afoot before I did. They were intent on winning. They knew their lines.

In Bethlehem, the wall rises up right in front of us, cement slats staggered in height, and winding into the distance. I imagine American money being trickled into concrete and wire, to erect this impasse for keeping the right bodies where they belong. Here, the grey is strewn with painted art. We can get up really close to it here, touch it even. I walk right up to it until my toes touch it's base and I can't move forward any further for the impasse. I cannot make out the pictures or the figures or the words anymore, with my nose right up against the concrete, all I can see are colors and light.

The settling of homes into the dirt and dust of a mountainside, the blending of cement and mud, blurring colors of paint and sky, the point of a minaret rising in silhouette like the crest of the mountain. The inseparability of a home from the land it sits upon is not some quaint or neutral observation, not here. It is not a metaphorical flourish, it is part of the truth. To not see it, is to not really be seeing much of anything at all. Just colors and light. Even when my eyes are closed, I can still see colors and light.

I see more now than I saw when I first arrived at the airport. I know what a settlement looks like. I've heard the words of my friends, gone to the places they have taken me, seen the things they have shown me. It was all real. Walls do rise up and split homes. Renad really is angry. The words are true, but tailored. Filtered down to the essentials, with bullet points and conclusions. The nuance of each person getting lost as they step into the spotlight in their role as The Palestinian, performing for the American.

Loose Shirts, Head-scarfs

I've got a woman's body. I've always got it, no matter where I go. Though sometimes it is not so glaring. Sometimes, my body is just *my* body, the places where it starts and stops, bends and curves, these are personal and particular. They are the way that they are because that's how I grew. I am not a *woman*, I am just me.

But sometimes, often actually, my body is a woman's body. Where it slopes in and out, where it begins and ends, even how it moves and sits, legs crossed. These are the products of Woman. My body is formed just so and it does these things because it is a woman's body, not because it is mine. Then, I wear my body like something stiff and foreign, and my movement feels brittle. It does not feel like freedom. It does not feel like choice.

When I returned to the US after spending a semester in Cairo and opened up my dresser drawers for the first time, my wardrobe overwhelmed me. All number of shirts which clung to my skin or left it bare. Shorts. Options. I had spent the semester living out of a suitcase with

sparse pieces carefully selected for modesty. A crisp linen t- shirt, white and buttoned all the way up to my neck, hanging over my body like a loose curtain. Skirts. A pair of pants that billowed out around my hips, and only came to close around my ankles. Scarves. Clothes for a body to swim in. I had stood before the mirror in my bedroom pulling at a floral top, first lifting it up over more of my chest, then tugging it down over more of my stomach, then again, turning and looking from different angles to see how much woman was showing. Agonizing over it.

There were patterned responses that I fielded over and over again before I departed for Egypt.

“Oh, wow, Egypt? So the Middle East? Please be careful...”

And then there were those who would take license to get even more explicit about their concerns.

“Oh you’re going to Egypt? As a young woman such as yourself? You’re going to attract a lot of attention, you are going to have to be extra careful, have you thought about that?”

Or simply,

“Oh, The Middle East? As a woman???” Incredulous. Woman to woman.

Conversations that didn’t thrust my body into the spotlight, identifying it as woman, these were hard to come by. And when I packed, I packed as a woman, my mother looking over my shoulder, making fearful suggestions, her voice thick with the lessons her body had learned, woman moulding woman.

It was difficult to distinguish any personal fear, from a reverberating fear that bounced from conversation to conversation, the air saturated with it. It was difficult to distinguish particular fears, from the vague fear that clings to me, always. Was I just feeling the sense of caution I'd already learned, the sense that keeps me keen and distrustful, and draws me into the circles of soft light dropped onto cement by street lamps?

It should be noted that I am not someone who is afraid of the dark. I grew up in rural Vermont, and the forest is deep and dark and full of things outside of the beam of a flashlight. It gives me a shiver sometimes, to be alone in it, but only because it conjures up thoughts of phantoms and spirits, dangers that dissipate with a few deep breaths.

I'm talking about that particular woman's fear. The fear that even as I occupy it, even as I look out from it, as I feel my heart beating from within it, that somehow my body will cease to be mine. A touch could do it. Or a look. Or a simple word or two.

Of course I carried this fear with me to Egypt. The first time I left the secluded campus of the American University in Cairo where I was spending the semester, I got out of the uber right off of Tahrir Square and I felt it. The streets were bustling. Usually bustling provides a degree of anonymity. City's are lonely, that's the trope, even with all those people. You can disappear.

I most certainly was not disappearing. There are few times I've felt more visible. I couldn't look at the people around me, and exercise my own curiosity without making wave after wave of eye contact. My skin crawled under the sensation of such visibility. It was not safe to be looked at, this was hardwired. I had a hard knot of resentment that started to coil in my chest,

at the men in my program who would saunter about the streets smiling, and engaging openly with strangers. I felt stunted by my own caution, my own distrust, it was like shackles around my ankles. Tight-gripped and unyielding.

I started keeping my eyes down on my feet as I walked through the city. Cracks in the sidewalk, and shoes. I would watch my shins peek out where my skirt split everytime I took a step and cringe at the sudden flash of bare skin, wondering if I should have worn tights. Was that why men were looking? I watched my bulky hiking boots, heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe, the rugged clashing with the elegance of the skirt, wondering why I hadn't brought more feminine shoes. Was that why people were turning their heads, because I had become a walking, talking stylistic abomination tripping over her muddy shoelaces and adjusting her saggy t-shirt?

A month or so after I met my friend Bashar, a fellow AUC student, he asked me one day as we walked across campus.

“Are those the kinds of clothes you usually wear?”

“What do you mean?” I knew what he meant, but I was embarrassed.

“Like, is this your style back in the US, or did you specifically only bring certain clothes to Egypt in order to dress more modestly?”

I stuttered for a moment. “I mean, these are *my* clothes, so I *do* wear clothes like this in the US.”

I wasn't being totally honest, so I finally conceded.

“Yes, you’re right though, I brought only modest clothes with me because it’s Egypt.”

and now I feel stupid. The students at this school are stylish, and their leggings are so tight.

“I thought so.” He seemed slightly smug. I regretted not packing those jeans.

There was a lot unspoken in that brief conversation. It felt like he’d caught me in my ignorance, in my stereotyping. Looking around at the students at AUC it was clear that I had overestimated the kind of modesty I needed to display. Some female students dressed modestly, or wore hijabs covering their heads, but many did not. I felt like a child in my loose florals. Admitting that to him, it made me feel even more clumsy inside my clothes. I wish I’d brought anything else. Just one tight shirt.

But when I returned home, I left my suitcase packed for a few days. I did my laundry eventually, and then lived out of that hamper. The dresser was daunting. When I finally ventured to open a drawer, I found a clingy white crop-top that I’d bought during my pre-Egypt modesty shopping, but had waited to wear until my return. It was so light in my hands. I slipped it on over my head, and pulled it down. I could get it down over my belly button with a sharp tug. By the time I had walked downstairs, it had risen, and I was tugging again. And again. There is a sort of amnesia to all of this tugging. Somehow, in the mind, the shirt remains a shirt that is expected to cover the belly button, each incessant adjustment required to keep it that way, remembered each time as the exception, or somehow forgotten all together. So the nuisance of

the tugging continues. It was strange to see the skin of my stomach, the way it bunched up when I sat down. It reminded me that I was a woman, and all that came with it.

I had a reunion with a good friend that night, flaunting the return of my freedom to show skin in true American style, and as we embraced someone took a blurry photo of our arms wrapped around each other, and our grinning faces. When I looked at the photo later, an insidious sensation started a slow creep through my bloodstream. The feeling was familiar, like an old dress packed away in the attic for the winter and forgotten, until it stumbled upon one day. It's musty, and wrinkled, and the fabric feels cold on the skin, but it still zips, and you sink backwards into yourself as you fasten that last button.

I looked at the picture, and I saw my own skin, and I thought about how everyone else could see my skin, woman's skin, the shirt having ridden up as my arms lifted to wrap around my friend, happy.

It was slow, waking up to this new thought that seeded and started to grow in my mind. Loose shirts. Tight shirts. Skin behind a curtain. Skin exposed to the air. It was slow growing because it was a sprout breaking through the cement of ideas that had already solidified. Ideas passed from woman to woman.

We are *American* women. We've been blessed with a freedom that we can not take for granted. We are the blessed women, here in the West, the lucky ones. We fight our good fight against the damned Patriarchy or course, but we do not forget the oppression we have risen from, the oppression that others still sink into, grasping at the ledge where we solidly stand, their fingernails only scraping at the dirt under our feet.

Those other women in faraway places who have to cover their bodies with dark fabric, whose eyes can only peek through and absorb the world through a slit in the cloth. Women who must wrap their heads in scarfs and hide themselves away from men. Can you imagine if you couldn't show your hair in public? At least be grateful for that. We have more freedom than that.

My hair long and blonde, whisps caught by a breeze, this is what freedom looks like. It is my American freedom to let my hair down, and to show my skin to the sun in the summer. As much of it as I want. With a few exceptions. This is what liberation feels like. This is what agency over one's women-ness looks like. This is how we clasp our freedoms, and hold on tight. Wear whatever the fuck you want, girl, dress codes are the patriarchy in sheeps clothing, don't let them fool you.

In high school there was a two inch tank top rule. It made me furious. In 9th grade I wore spaghetti straps to school. It was a civil protest by about an inch and a half, for the sake of womankind. This shit runs long and deep in my bloodstream.

Which is why it was a massive upheaval, to have returned to the freedom of my crop top, my feminine power reinstated, only to fold it up the next day, tuck it into the drawer, and slip back into the comfort of that baggy button down that I'd worn in Egypt. It felt good on my skin. I felt good in my skin.

Lila Abu-Lughod is an anthropologist who has spent much of her career working closely with Muslim women. She has had the opportunity to understand and then depict to her readers the nuances of the female experience, particularly for those who are Muslim or living in places where that nuance is largely swept up and lost in the general expressions of pity and concern that

come from the Western world. Concern that is directly largely at the religio-cultural circumstances of these women, rather than political historical circumstances⁷. It is *Muslim* women who are oppressed, because they live within the oppression of *Islam*, the oppressive weight of authoritarian regimes and brutal dictators somehow lost in the background of the conversation. Muslim women are in need of liberation, what ever shall we do to help them?

She asks us to consider, in the title of her book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

Do they, really?

She writes about the various ways that Muslim women cover their bodies, veiling themselves in public spaces. In mainstream western feminist movements, Abu Lughod notes the significance of “veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom,”⁸ and she warns against this misrepresentation, adamant that, “veiling itself must *not* be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency.”⁹

It is uncomfortable to recognize myself so precisely in this critique of Western thought. It is uncomfortable to have the yardstick I've been using to measure my own liberation taken, snapped in half, and thrown into the woodchipper.

It is also uncomfortable to realize that I've never felt as comfortable in my own skin as I did when I was covering it. I realized when I returned to the states and started to think about my body again and all the old anxieties returned, that I actually hadn't been thinking about my body for what felt like the first time since I was a young girl. When I returned to the states, and

⁷ Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁸ Abu Lughod, *Muslim Women*, 786.

⁹ Abu-Lughod, *Muslim Women*, 786

continued to wear shirts that were loose, covering the shape of the body beneath them, I felt like my body was my body. Just mine, nothing more. It felt good.

Of course, there are always critical questions to be posed. Any conversation about women's bodies that may seem to be coming to a simple conclusion can easily be complicated. It's easy to problematize the sense of freedom that I felt being covered. Why did I feel that sense of comfort and security with my body under loose clothing? What does that say about my environment, and how women's bodies are seen and consumed, that it had to be covered and hidden to feel safe and free? It is surely not a glowing endorsement.

These kinds of critical questions are not new. They are vertebrae in a feminist's backbone. They are also the kinds of questions that lead the western feminist down the path towards concluding that the Muslim woman is a victim of her environment, and covers herself not out of choice, but out of necessity. These questions help set the foundation for the belief that the Muslim woman must be liberated, set free, unveiled and uncovered. This is not to suggest that I think these questions should be altogether forgotten, but they must be wielded precisely, should not be assumed to be rhetorical, and answers should not be arrived at universally.

When I returned, many people asked me if I had to wear a headscarf, being a woman and all, while I was in Egypt. While I forgive the ignorance of this question whenever it inevitably arrives, it's logic is corrosive. Embedded in the question is the belief that modesty and veiling are not individual, personal, and spiritual decisions, but are rather an enforced oppressive mandate. This is a logic that strips not only Muslim women, but a generalized category of Arab and Middle Eastern women of the personal agency that they employ daily as they make these decisions about their own bodies.

I am not a Muslim women, so my experience with modest dressing can not be compared to a Muslim woman's experience. The reasons why women Muslim women choose to dress modestly or veil are expansive, particular, and usually deeply spiritual, and I cannot pretend to fully understand them or live any replica of this experience. I am not part of this narrative. I am a product of the West, which looks to the East with a savior's arrogance. I am sharing a feeling of freedom that arose from being more covered, rather than being less covered, not to pretend to speak on behalf of Muslim woman, but to share an experience that disrupts the logic which undergirds the idea that Muslim women are suffocating under the oppression of their hijabs and burqua's. Perhaps many are breathing deeply and freely, an abundance of fresh, sweet air.

That summer after returning, I wore more loose, long clothing. My blue linen button down became a favorite. My body isn't a woman's body in that shirt, it's just my body. It moves and curves under the fabric with freedom, outside of the scope of anyone's gaze. It is mine, it is not anyone else's. My choices are not ones guided by spirituality, but they do feel deeply personal, deeply considered, and above all, right for me.

Sun-kissed skin still feels like freedom. Sometimes. But sometimes not thinking about my body, making it no one's concern, keeping it as my own and only my own, this feels like freedom too. Perhaps others find freedom here too.

The Palestinian

I had never felt more wholly American.

Walls of pristine, dune-colored academia rose on either side of us, as we walked through the courtyards of the American University in Cairo. Smooth tiles suspended us, our pampered feet forgetting the feel of the earth. Only in looking up, and finding the sky right where it has always been, polluted with light, was I reminded of what lay beyond. Otherwise AUC was its own planet, complete with its own orbit and gravitational pulls and we were inside, encased by its walls. This was our realm, the two of us and our precarious friendship. This strange hybrid space, sitting in the desert in the outskirts of Cairo, arches and domes constructed in the name and spirit of America.

The days were so hot that the evenings still simmered. It was disorienting to be sweating in the dark. Walking beside me he wore a jacket. I had never felt more distinctly American. Yet, it wasn't just my intolerance to the heat, or the way my white skin scorched in the sun, and

sweat through my t-shirts, while he stayed dry. It was him, and our conversations. It was all of it I suppose, but there was something particular about this. Me looking at him, looking at me, looking at him.

They say that about travel to faraway places. Or at least they say that here, in the United States. I've been hearing it my whole life; that you will discover more about yourself and where you come from in leaving than you ever could in staying. Discoveries about yourself and your own overwhelming and drowning out whatever you intended to discover about this other place, these other people. Maybe it's an American thing. We have a lot to learn about ourselves, and lots of surfaces can look like mirrors.

I think as we spent our evenings in conversation, I thought I was learning about him, this Palestinian boy in exile in Egypt. I was absorbed with the idea of him, a traumatized life, experiences made tangible in the flesh, yet still so unreachable to me, hidden behind inscrutable eyes. I was going to uncover him.

I met him in the hallway between the men's and women's dormitories on campus. He was a full time international student. I was on exchange for the semester. I was immediately intrigued by him. He was wiry, and sturdy, his skin light, but his features stern, and the darkness of his hair crowded his face. Eyebrows sat heavy over light glimmering eyes. That same hair, Jet black, grew thick and tousled on his head. He was either solemn or slightly arrogant, it was hard to distinguish. Withholding it seemed, even from across the corridor. Me, I was an obvious foreigner, strawberry blonde hair down to my hips, nearly translucent skin, dressed in bright colors and feeling like I was tripping over my own feet.

He was zipped up in a blue down jacket, and he held a pink flower, plucked from a bush on campus. It was dusk, the outdoor illumination had just turned on, everything outside of it's touch was falling dark. He stood on the tile of the walkway, twirling the flower in his fingers as he spoke familiarly to a friend of mine, Nada. Nada was full of warmth, and greeted me with an embrace, while he stood to the side. He did not introduce himself, so I did. I said my name, and I barely needed to open my mouth to reveal where I was from, as he guessed the United States immediately. When I asked him where he was from, he looked at me slyly.

“Guess.”

I examined him. He watched me. Strangers, we were already playing at some kind of game.

“Go ahead, take a guess.” A dare.

I thought for a moment longer. The stakes seemed high. “Lebanon?”

He shook his head, satisfied by my misjudgement. I'd lost this round. A friend of his walked by, and as his attention shifted, his tongue began to dance over Arabic too fast for me to understand, and I turned to Nada.

“Palestine?” Nada smiled. I was right.

He got the news that his game was over, and he was indignant. I couldn't possibly have figured him out on the second guess. I was satisfied with myself for having guessed correctly, particularly when he had seemed so sure that I wouldn't, as if Palestine was some forgotten place an American wouldn't think of it, or I wouldn't dare speak its name so cavalierly. I saw an opportunity to set myself apart, and I lunged for it.

I'm not *that* American.

I felt like I had been fending off spoken and unspoken assumptions about myself since my first day, and was ready to dismantle this one as well. I let him know that I had in fact *been* to Palestine, myself.

In my eagerness to relate to him, to distinguish myself, I didn't realize that the game wasn't over.

He seemed eager to hear where I had been in Palestine.

“Uhh, Nablus, Bethlehem, Jerico, Jerusalem...”

He continued to nod, keeping me listing, as if I was perpetually one away from the winner, long after it became clear that I had only visited the West Bank, until I petered out into silence. Then as if by sleight of hand, he whipped out the card you had kept hidden, waiting for the timing to be just right.

There was a slight jab in his voice as he finally said,

“Well, I'm from Gaza,” and stepped out onto an island all to himself. It felt like he had waited, let me think we had some footing on the same ground, only to pull away the curtain and reveal the oceans between us. I've never felt so wholly American.

Oh. Gaza. The dangerous part of Palestine. The don't go there, part. The part shot through with bombshells and bullet holes, the part drowning in sewage. Headlines upon headlines of devastation and ruin. He delivered the information like the punch line to a cruel joke, and then he said no more. He rarely said more.

That's what I remember about meeting him. When he later related to me his version of the story of how and why we became friends, he said it is because I laughed at his joke about

racism in the South of the U.S. He deemed me an acceptable white person. He decided to suspend his usual rule of non-association.

He had told me, “I’m not like the other people here, I’m not interested in the international students. I don’t make friends with them.”

Interesting, as he himself was international, a student-in-exile of sorts. Yet, it was clear he meant the white students, the evident foreigners, the European and American students who walked around in crops of blonde. Interesting also that he spoke of a ‘them,’ even as I walked beside him, pale as flour, international from head to toe. Somehow I’d managed to evade his categories, and avoid his dismissal. It is a point of confusion for me, that he spoke so often in this way, presenting such categorization of identity to me with scorn, identities that I so clearly fit into, yet I was exempt from the judgement. Initially it felt like a transcendence of identity. Race, nationality, ethnicity, falling away at the blossoming of our friendship, even as he fought to hold onto that which divides.

What nonsense that was. Really, we were deeply and entirely entrenched in our differences. Embroiled in our individual identities, watching as they collided with each other. His declarations of disregard for my kind were emblematic of the way identity permeated, the way in which we solidified into our separateness as we continued our friendship, like slowly drying cement.

We were sitting in wicker chairs, at the outskirts of the garden on campus, water bubbling out of a fountain nearby. We faced each other in the sun. He was leaned back in his chair, casual, squinting slightly. He would often look off to a point in the distance as he spoke to me about the way other people were. Other white foreigners. It was alluring to imagine that he was

looking out at someone else, someone over my left shoulder, who fulfilled those stereotypes, who we would both scorn together. It was deliciously gratifying, to reject America like that.

When he would squint off like that, it was easier to look at him. It's easier to examine someone's face without them looking back at you, into your eyes. Imagine things about them and their thoughts. I would construct his life in my imagination, in the space between his words.

A family squeezed into four walls stuck somewhere in all the mud and mess.

Articles I'd read, all I'd ever heard about Gaza collected in pools, and I dipped my fingers in it like it was paint, drawing your life in an imagined canvas.

You walk down one road and not the other, to avoid the sewage in the streets, and the smell. You're father comes home bloodied from altercations with the Israelis, and your mother wraps up the wounds with an old t-shirt. He returns to the resistance the next day. A bomb shatters the neighborhood over. A deep rage bubbles up inside of you, and a deep helplessness. Walls on all sides. Men in IDF uniforms carry guns. Sometimes you glare at them as you pass by. Sometimes you spit. Sometimes you throw rocks. Sometimes they shoot, and someone else is dead. Grief and rage coalesce. Trauma barrages you. Pain hardens. Open wounds scab over and scar.

When he squints, his eyes seem to harden, too. I wondered if I could catch a glimpse of Gaza on the sheen of their surface, reflecting from within him in the silence. I imagined that I could.

“I don’t really talk about it much.” He told me once. This proved to be true. Still, I watched for it. I waited for a glimpse.

We talked about all manner of controversy together. We disagreed often.

We would sit by the fountain and argue about the validity of the feminist movement, and the intrenchment of gender roles.

He told me that he respected his mother. “She is strong and capable, but I still believe that men have to be tough, and provide, and that belief isn’t just going to go away. It’s part of my culture in a way,” He pondered.

I waited for him to say something about Palestine. It always felt like we were one vulnerable sentiment away from it all spilling out.

We would sit under the awning outside of the cafeteria and discuss liberalism, and what you believed was the slow suffocation of political correctness.

“That’s so fascinating, that you think that way.” I would say.

“You are making me feel like you are watching me on a National Geographic program.” you said once. I cringed. “I’m sorry.”

I continued to watch his face, waiting for him to say something about Palestine.

Later, as we'd say goodbye, and I'd walk back to my dorm, I would think about the things we had talked about. I would consider his perspectives, fascinated by them. I would unpack them, color them in as the words of a Palestinian, fit them into my construction of him, all that anger at the world that I imagined bubbling under the surface.

It did come up once, casually.

“Of course, I want Palestine to be liberated from the occupation. Of course.” He said.

I heard Palestine, and I leaned in.

“But I think we have that responsibility to make that happen ourselves.” He was very serious, as he spoke.

“There are Palestinians who aren't willing to fight for it. Our people like to blame powers outside of ourselves, when really we are the only ones with the responsibility.

Whatever we don't make happen, we have no one but ourselves to blame for the situation it leaves us in. It makes me frustrated when I hear Palestinians get angry at others for our situation, but I feel we will continue to do this, and that it will get us nowhere.”

I was caught off guard.

“I mean, there are systems of power imbalance at play here that are keeping Palestinians oppressed. Global power imbalances.” I ventured. “It's not just a question of what Palestinians

are doing or not doing, it's about limitations to what they are even able to do. Right?" I stumbled over whether to say *they* or *you*.

He was quick to respond, surefooted. "People are not as limited as they think they are. It's just easier to play the victim, and not have to take responsibility, so everyone does it. But the reality is it's completely our responsibility."

I'd had experience performing the apologetic American, the apologetic white person, listening to righteous anger. I knew my lines. I knew how to humbly take responsibility for the United States, and all the havoc it had wreaked. I had been eagerly waiting for him to bring Palestine into the conversation so I could prove myself. But him ejecting all other outside forces, ejecting the United States from the conversation entirely? This I didn't know what to do with. It was uncomfortable. It felt wrong to me, what he was saying, yet it was straight from the source. It grated against my imaginations of his powerlessness, his helplessness to his circumstances. He was presenting an entirely different set of ideas.

It wasn't at all what I had expected.

"I don't want anyone's pity," He asserted emphatically. I distinguished what I was offering as empathy, not pity, reassuring myself that I was still one of the good one's.

He never did give me what I wanted. That view behind the curtain, into the mess and gore of Gaza. So, I considered him elusive. I understood him as a mystery, a closed door, a hard nut to crack. I'm not sure I was really listening, or even really looking at him.

It wasn't until later, after we said goodbye and I left Egypt, that I began to think more critically about why I had been so swept up in his Palestinian-ness. I had made it his definition, and his most essential quality, even as he directed me otherwise. I had indulged in a morbid sort of fascination through him, holding him in my mind as my access to this intangible spectacle of suffering which had suddenly been given flesh and bones and a voice. Something I could touch and talk to, play out and resolve some of my own American guilt with, by being the American who listened, the American who really saw, who really cared. The American who wasn't really all *that* American after all, exempt from accusations of ignorance, and misguidedness.

I think I thought I was learning about him, this Palestinian, but what I was seeing was a reflection of myself, the sheen on his eyes showing nothing of Gaza, but serving as two delicate mirrors for me to peer into. I'd never looked so wholly American.

On the Right Side

Earlier this year, my mother and I huddled into the creases of the couch; I'm home for January. The house is an ember of warm orange light enveloped by the bitter throes of a Vermont winter. We are on episode four. This one is called, "Strawberries." Sweet and sticky. A flicker of summer, perhaps?

A young Ramy walks back from the bathroom through the halls of his elementary school. The halls are empty, and he walks alone clutching his bathroom pass. He walks by one classroom, a row of scarlet red lockers, and then another classroom, and the sound of a

newscaster's measured voice fades in and out. A deep, ominous droning eases into the underbellow. Ramy keeps walking, a look of unease slowly contorting his features.

There was that familiar feeling, a chill creeping into my blood, sinking into my stomach. Like a heavy sort of *deja vu*, as if I'd seen this before. Bitter, not sweet.

"Oh shit, it's 9/11." I say it out loud, suddenly possessed with an assurance that doesn't quite feel like my own.

Ramy passes a teacher, sobbing into the arms of another. The drone intensifies.

"Oh man, I think you're right," My mom inhales.

Only then does he round the corner into his own classroom, and we see the familiar image on the boxy little tv. Grainy smoke pours from the tower, and the world is suspended for a moment, stopped mid heartbeat.

We had both felt that eery intuition before the show revealed itself. Something inside us had recognized that particular disquiet before the image of smoke, like we were privy to some sort of an American sixth sense.

The episode continues from there, and I am somber and alert, of course, the appropriate disposition for contemplating 9/11. It no longer felt as though this was the innocent act of

watching a sitcom. We were now participating in an obligatory American ritual of sorts, tapping into a collective memory, feeling our fingers over a ragged scar and shaking our heads at the senselessness. I had a sense of solid footing again, now that I knew the paradigm we were dealing in. The eery fog gave way to a crystal clarity.

It's a 9/11 story. We know 9/11 stories. 9/11 stories progress across certain arcs, arouse a certain range of sentiments, they follow certain rules. I know how to bow my head. I know how to remember. I've learned to, even without the memory.

But there was a twist. It's told from a new perspective, like we were standing atop some distant unknown peak looking down at the streets we frequent, finding them unrecognizable from this vantage point. Ramy, both the creator of the show and it's central character, is an Egyptian American, and Muslim, the son of parents who had immigrated to the states from Egypt.

This is not part of my 9/11 story. My 9/11 story, mere scaffolding pieced together from the vivid memories of others, injected into my bloodstream like an American vaccination, does not include the experience of Muslim's, or Arabs, or anyone from the Middle East. The cast of characters was complete without them. There were the victims of the attack, we mourned their loss. There were the heroes; Police, Firefighters, First Responders. We owed them our gratitude, eternally. There were the beleaguered yet steady American people, that was us. And there were the terrorists, that was the enemy. Hardly human.

And that's all. Curtain. Applause.

The show goes on. It's in the weeks post attack now.

Ramy gets up in the middle of the night in the haze of a dream and walks downstairs in a dark house. A cool light emanates from the kitchen where a man stands in silhouette. His features are long and sharp and shrouded in a dark scruff of facial hair, which contrasts against the crisp white of a turban neatly wrapped around his head. A radio crackles to life in his hand. A voice comes through the wires.

“Osama, are you in a good spot?”¹⁰

I feel a preconditioned chill at the sound of that name.

He takes a plate of ripe strawberries to the dining room table. He sits and contemplates one before inviting Ramy to sit, gently.

“I love strawberries.” He begins and the soundtrack cuts out, leaving only the slight hum of atmospheric noise. The fantastical moment is snapped into immediacy. It becomes intimate and mundane as young Ramy and Osama Bin Laden, infamous terrorist and enemy number one to the United States, sit at opposite ends of the dining room table. He bites into the strawberry and savors it.

“They only grow in warm weather. But soon, in a few months, it will be winter, and America will still have strawberries.”¹¹

¹⁰ Yousef, Ramy. "Strawberries." *Ramy*. season 1, episode 4, Hulu, 19 April. 2019.

¹¹ Yousef, "Strawberries." 2019.

He takes his time with his words. “Do you know how? Egypt turned their wheat fields into strawberry fields. So every year, Egypt grows thousands of strawberries. But they are not for Egyptians. People need wheat for bread. Do you see what I mean Ramy?”¹²

His eyes are piercing in the dark. “They have less bread. So Americans can have strawberries in December.”

“The world is dying at the hands of America, and the people here feel nothing. I gave them a gift. I let them feel something. To taste the blood we taste everyday.”¹³ His eyes were sad, and he did not speak with aggression.

When the episode ended, my mom and I sat in the dark for a while, our bodies sinking into the couch cushions. I felt like we’d been caught in the act. Rules had been broken. I wasn’t even sure that what I had just seen was allowed to be on TV for public consumption. It didn’t compute. I wasn’t sure one was allowed to question the narrative of 9/11 out in the open air, above a furtive whisper. Freedom of expression aside, these were rules that were unspoken.

What struck me the most was that, seated across from each other in the dim light, the young boy brimming with an innocent fear, and the most reviled terrorist of my time had each seen something they recognized in the other’s eyes. Bin Laden had been small for a moment, the

¹² Yousef, "Strawberries." 2019.

¹³ Yousef, "Strawberries." 2019.

distinction between him and a frightened child blurred out of focus, until he seemed like a child himself, simply wrestling with an acute and painful alienation.

He asked Ramy, "Do you ever feel like you don't belong?"

"Yeah sometimes."

"Me too."¹⁴ He looked thin and bare as he said the words.

Ramy tells me a story I have never heard before, even as he tells the story I have heard endless times. There's two sides to every story, but not *this* story, never *this* story. There's only one side to this story. We'll strip the vocal chords out of anyone telling the other side of the story. We'll play the Star-Spangled Banner through stadium speakers to drown them out.

In the shock and smoke, George W. Bush goes on air to address the nation.

"These attacks have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet unyielding anger."

He tells America how they feel, and in doing so, he also prescribes the appropriate emotional response for posterity, a posterity that will depend on his words and others to build for

¹⁴ Yousef, "Strawberries." 2019.

themselves a version of this essential American memory, without which, it seems at times, you cannot fully be an American.

“These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. [We will] find those responsible, and bring them to justice.”

Bush tells the story I know well, a moralizing tale of evil and good, and he tells us that we are on the right side. He complicates it no further. This is simply the truth.

Of course, there is critical thought on 9/11 that exists in the mainstream. The American public isn't a mass of blind nationalist fervor. The Bush administration often comes under fire for mishandling foreign policy in the Middle East in the years leading up to the attack, and for having information that they did not act on in the months prior. Bush was reviled by the adults that surrounded me in the post 9/11 years, as I slowly came into consciousness. I was trained to hiss when I heard his name spoken, out loud, perhaps as a sort of gimmick my parents could show off to their friends. Look, our daughter has political savvy, even at 6 years old she knows who deserves her respect and who doesn't.

Then Bush quietly retired, and reinvented himself as a quaint painter, just a man in his sunset years, endearing in his attempts at portraiture. We criticized, and then we also found room for humanity. He's harmless and kind hearted now that he's out in the countryside, wearing t-shirts and cowboy hats.

“The world is dying at the hands of America.” the figure of Bin Laden had said.

George Bush certainly had two such hands. Hands that saluted troops sent off to fight the so-called War on Terror, a devastating crusade of violence and misery. Hands now made innocent by paintbrushes.

Osama Bin Laden is not afforded such humanity. Never. Of course not. This is a hard-lined rule. I was certainly not allowed to feel anything for the man. I could follow liberal thought, I could be critical of the complexities of the political circumstances that led to 9/11, I could even question the dubious morality of American foreign policy, and find evidence that the administration had been inviting the attack for years. But to find the humanity in a terrorist, that was akin to treason. To empathize, well that was simply impossible.

Sometime when I was a little older, I remember the TV being on in the daytime, which is unusual, and it drew me downstairs. Osama Bin Laden had just been killed by the U.S. government. It was a triumph. They dropped his body in the ocean, at an undisclosed location. I didn't feel joy, or relief, or a sense of justice or patriotism. I just imagined a limp body shrouded in cloth sinking into darkness, bloating with salt water on the ocean floor. Bitterly cold, and completely alone. I wanted to peel back the imaginary cloth and see his face.

It is a tale of evil and good, and we are on the right side, no need to complicate it any further.

That sentiment started to feel thin, light beginning to pierce through in places that were weathering away.

Even in this story, our immaculate American tragedy, there is a darker side in which the United States is the villain. And the more one looks at the page, flipping it from one side to the other and back again, the more the two sides start to bleed into each other, pen marks leaking through, indistinguishable.

The United States tells this tale of itself, through the voices of our politicians, with the support of their zealous patriots. The call to plant the seeds of Democracy and bring forth Justice drives the ever noble America onward. In all of her deeds, there is a moral rudder. While it may be easy to find the veiled lies here, 9/11 serves as an impenetrable narrative. You cannot pierce the skin of this mammoth, not when 3,000 Americans are dead. It is untouchable. Thus it becomes the archetype, the scapegoat, the tragedy, all manner of tools with which to bolster the American image.

The anger and pain of the Osama Bin Laden that sits across from Ramy at his kitchen table, it is palpable and moving. It feels larger than him, as though he is speaking the sentiments of a people. This anger towards the United States, for the irresponsibility with which it wields its supremacy. For the carelessness with which it meddles, without regard for lives. As if some lives are second rate, characters that don't deserve representation in the story. For eating

strawberries in the winter, while other people go hungry. This is akin to the opulence of crooked kings.

I found it calming to finally hear this voice, unfiltered. It made sense. It filled in a glaring plot-hole which I'd been taught to ignore, but which always lingered like an itch. People don't just fly planes into the World Trade Center for no reason. They just don't.

Perhaps there is room for Muslim and particularly Muslim American voices in the mainstream story only if they spit up the same lines, choke on the same emotions, tell the story as we've all learned to tell it. Emphasis on the American. Hand over the heart, denouncing the actions of their brethren profusely, and following along with the story like the rest of us.

It frightens Ramy, the boy. After listening to Osama speak, feeling himself drawn in by the words, he recoils suddenly, adamantly denouncing the violence, alarmed by the momentary affinity he felt with this man, sitting across from him at the dining room table. What does that say about him, that for a moment, he felt an anger towards America? Perhaps he is nothing but evil too.

It angers me to realize that the United States has insisted on a version of the story that is so one dimension that it left a young boy feeling that he was caught between two options. He could either be on the side of good or the side of evil. He could either be an American, or he could be a terrorist. Any complexity he felt was simply a sign that he was leaning towards evil.

I feel angry for myself too, because I feel for Ramy. I feel that I have been manipulated in the same way. I feel that I have been lied to. Nobody told me the full story. We don't tell each other the full story.

When it comes to Muslim's, Arabs, or people from the Middle East, rarely does the United States broadcast the full story. Particularly in the post-9/11 landscape, which is the only landscape that I know. I am the beginning of a long line of generations that will not know a world before this event, which has become its own marker of time. The United States that has born and raised me is one that rebranded itself in the wake of this attack. Rebranded itself on the backs of the other. I've been raised by this country to, at best, dismiss and ignore the complexity of the Middle East and its relationship with the United States, and at worst, completely disregard the humanity of the lives of Muslims, Arabs, and people from the Middle East. It's the American way. I've been hearing arrogant oversimplifications of this place and it's people for my entire life. As if one word could ever describe the nuance that comprises anything that is human.

“It's all about oil.”

“It's Islam”

“It's all that Extremism.”

“It's Authoritarianism, that's what gets them into this mess.”

They become a collective consensus and begin to take on the veneer of truth. They infiltrate, they become the lenses through which we see, our vision limited by the frames. They are the stories we tell, that relegate the problem elsewhere, projecting it onto that nondescript other from those distant lands, far away from the pristine hands of America.

A Note

To a certain extent, a writer is powerless to dictate what a reader leaves with after picking up her work. I can't tell you how to think about and understand what I have written, it must speak for itself. What you deem worthy of carrying forward with you, that is ultimately up to you.

I will leave you with this. I hope that for my American and other Western hailing friends who may not have taken the time to consider the complexity of their relationship to the Middle East, or even realized that such a relationship existed at all, that these essays give a moment's pause. I hope that they find some resonance, and provide a space for critical self reflection. I hope that they prompt you to consider how you look at, interpret, and engage with the Middle East, and to interrogate the impact of these acts in relation to your positionality. And most of all, I hope you do not stop here. I hope you go forth with a curiosity and a desire to listen and learn directly from the mouths of people from the Middle East, that you seek out their voices, and practice a healthy wariness when it comes to any Western voice claiming to have authority on the matter. Even if it's your own voice. Especially if it is your own voice.

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