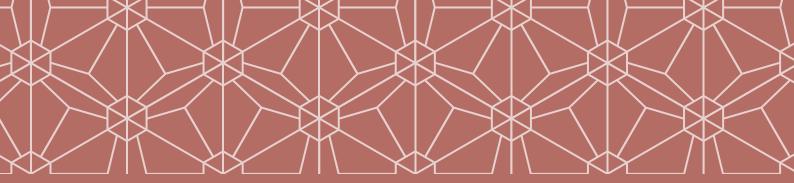
middleground

A MAGAZINE FOR MIXED IDENTITIES, STORIES AND VOICES.





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Editor's note

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fourth issue of Middleground. The past year and a half have been difficult for most, and while the world slowed down and came to a halt in places, many of us were left with time to think, reflect, introspect.

The pieces you'll find within these pages are the fruit of these contemplations. You will find work that interrogates the ways in which language keeps us apart, or analyses the impact our parents can have on our identity. You will also find softness in the features of our loved ones and candid childhood memories.

We are not going to sugarcoat this issue: it gets heavy at times. It deals with tricky themes. But it is also full of whimsical work, beautiful and uplifting. And this is just what our community is — pain might be an emotion a lot of us are united through, but our strength and love shine through, and so we power on.

We hope this journey is kind to you and we hope to find you invigorated and empowered on the other end. Take your time with this issue. Swirl it around your mouth like a sour sweet turning to honey on your tongue. Allow yourself to join each artist in their introspections. And maybe, by the time you're done reading, you'll find yourself changed, too.

Happy reading, The Middleground team

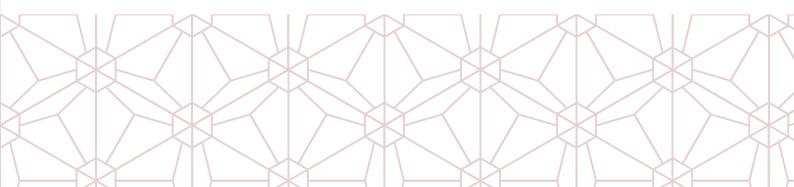
Contents

HERE ON PURPOSE AND

Gabrielle Behar-Trinh	1
GABRIÈL Yvwh Elohim	8
[EXEUNT] Fannah Palmer	9
DANCE AND MOVEMENT Laura Barker	10
HABLÉ Reina Davis	
DRESS UP Forrest McGarvey	
FRIDAY BLESSINGS AND DOREEN G. FERNANDEZ Alicia Rodriguez	.16

PEACEMAKER	10
Lata Nobes	18

ELLIPSIS AND POPSICLE ALLWITHSTANDING Camryn Chew	20
WE ARE HERE AND THERE AND THEN Lee-Won Fulbright	
AZIZ Nasimeh B.E.	26
UNTITLED Leyla Moazzen	28
IN BETWEEN TWO WORLDS Amira Alsareinye	
ANTIPODE Rhiannon Ng Cheng Hin	
SELF-PORTRAIT Jessica Brown	33



Here on Purpose

People in Vietnam like to ask if my father is black or white and I know the reason for the question but let's just cut to the chase:

What you really want to know is whether or not he was a soldier

and what you really want to know is whether or not it was consensual

and what you really want to know is whether or not I am here on purpose.

Context is everything after all.

My father was born in Egypt but wears his skin, on some cool days, the colour of whitening powder.

Does that make him white?

Does it matter that he comes from a family of nomadic Middle Eastern Jews, that they all traded sambusek for citizenshipthat the truth is even a DNA test will never tell you the whole truth?

Unless the truth is simply a humming flashlight,

spiralling over contested territories cut-up by white men who have a habit of sprinkling lives like confetti on birthday cake—

now let them eat each other.

I believe that last names and skin colors always matter, but tell me what to do about that time when we crossed borders

when they told me to step aside while they handcuffed my father,

for nothing other than being born in a place he has no connection to and perhaps, there lies the real sadness not knowing if he is lying

when people ask where are you *really* from?

It's part of the exchange for safety in this country, baby.

Don't get yourself so worked up, he shrugs.

When they ask about my father

what they really want to know is does your mother love your father,

or was it just for money?

l don't know much but l know this: if it was for money, my mother is a crap investor.

But yes, I admire the valid question considering the context: the divorce rate in America is up

a whopping 50 percent and when you are ten years old

and you watch your father slide manila

across kitchen counter

scraping paper against wood so loud the table bleeds

and your mother begs you to beg your father to undo it to undo it to undo it,

you will also ask yourself the very same question: am I here

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on purpose?
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Conversations With God

GABRIELLE BEHAR-TRINH

There was always this rule in my friend's Catholic home: No eating until Jesus, Thank You For This Meal.

My friend rolled her eyes. You know she's Jewish, she said to no one. You don't have to make everyone pray.

Jews believe in the same God we do, her father intercepted. Then looked at me. Stern. *We're waiting*.

I closed my eyes. Hashem, I apologize to you now for praying to Jesus.

I'll make it up to you next week in Hebrew school, I swear.

And while I'm here, Buddha, I'm sorry to you, too, for being afraid.

For how I shrivel and shrink when Mommy prays to you, remembering father's lesson to never bow at the feet of statues.

As you can see, BuddhaHaShemUnidentifiableBeing, I'm not really sure who I'm supposed to address. Also, do I take off my shoes?

To be honest, I'm not quite sure if either of you even truly—

Amen. Christmas dinner is served.

In the first grade, Ms. Something-Someone asks the class

to describe a thing that is always there, but cannot be seen.

My hand shoots up, filled with pride. But I learn I am wrong when my teacher replies, blankly

We don't talk about God at school.

Turns out The joke was on me

She was giving us a science lesson—

the answer was air.





[EXEUNT]

they almost forgot from here: a moon surface, but red; from sky: so many holes, for death and for the people they forgot.

we waved from the bottom of a maze without exit -[EXEUNT everyone]we could have called out but eyeless are earless. they got up and left.

we saw what they saw now: a deep deep nothing, reaching to the back of a curtained wall, but we saw it /turned on its side/ (like lying in bed watching a projection of something you knew vertically before.)

the Ancestors, I think, were searching too, in a different way, their horses leaving strands of mane on moonstone. they funnelled down between the rocks and we, we, we we almost forgot to catch them, but we needed them, for curtain.

Dance and Movement

LAURA BARKER

*Trigger warning: mentions of child sexual abuse.

Let's say you're six. You're six and your mother's not home. Not that this is a problem. She is your mother but she is not your keeper, and sometimes you must spend time apart. It's actually a stage of separation. She leaves you and one day you will leave her, and you both must use this time in between to practice being left. This time she's gone and you're left with your father, and she doesn't know anything that happens. Even at this tender age, you're old enough to know that she doesn't know your experiences without you telling her. But let's say you try so hard without words to make it obvious to her, and let's say she doesn't get the message. Let's say you get punished, in fact, for being sullen. For not jumping to greet her at the door, for not running to her as soon as she calls you to wash the dishes or wipe the table or clean the stove.

Next time she leaves, you seal off your heart and make like you don't care. You don't even notice when she comes back. You don't tell her what happened in her absence. You don't tell her anything in fact. You take a vow of silence. You don't talk to anyone for a year. You keep waiting for someone to ask you but no one asks you, and unceremoniously you begin talking again when the inconvenience of not doing so outweighs the spiteful satisfaction you take from your own silence. You eat her cornmeal porridge with your hands, the way she does it, and not with a spoon, the way he does it, but aside from this, you could belong to either one of them.

She takes a Dance and Movement class. You live in a small godforsaken town and she is the only Black woman in this class. She wears a leotard. She looks so beautiful it almost hurts and you want to put your hands over her body in the shiny fabric for far longer than she will allow, so you ration it out: little touches, with time in between tickles on her arm, your face against her neck, your hand sometimes, infrequently, on her tummy. Her breasts barely fit in it, she complains, but you think they look lovely, fat and rich like river fish. One day you will have breasts and you will wear them long and heavy on your chest like she does. "When will you be back?" you ask her.



She laughs. "When the Dance and Movement class is over," she says. When The Dance and Movement Class is Over is not a time of day you're familiar with. When The Dance and Movement Class is Over is much later than you imagined. When The Dance and Movement Class is Over is heavy into the evening. The sky is getting ready to fold up into night. Water lies in wait for daybreak, crouching at the bottom of grass stalks, ready to be dew, and only then she comes home.

You want to tell her everything. What happens when she is not there, but all she cares about is the chores that have not been done. She is still wearing her leotard. You watch her buttocks undulate in Spandex and wonder if she lets the other ladies at the Dance and Movement class touch her ripe belly. Not ripe with pregnancy. The two of them never touch. Ripe with juicy fat she lets you put your hands over if you catch her in the mornings. All the women in her family have the same body. Pads of flesh protecting their thighs. Big long breasts and a spinal curve that makes physiotherapists wonder if they should intervene. You cannot picture her jumping about undignified with the other ladies. She must have done something else. Rolled on her front and twitched from side to side like she does when she's reading.

"I like your leotard," you say.

She smiles and lets you watch as she peels it off like a satsuma's skin. You are not hers, not really, and she is not yours. Not really. But you are only six, and for now you can pretend.

Hablé REINA DAVIS

I've practised meeting your mother a hundred times at least.

Mucho gusto, Señora me llamo Reina

l met your son Google Translate: l met conocí *conocí tu hijo* <u>Did you mean</u>: conocí a tu hijo. Shit. I start again. *Trabajo al Centro de los recursos para mujeres.* Now say it faster so it sounds normal. *Trabajoalcentrodelosrecursosparamujeres* my tongue trips between the "l" and the "r" *mierda*.

I think of all the kids who travel to Mexico for spring break and joke that the only Spanish they know are the curse words. A summer vacation here and there makes you sunburnt voyeuristic and fluent however. The day I met your mother my Spanish sunk to the pit of my stomach to be digested and spat up against the throat. (Heartburn/ache) *m...mucho g...gusto* the breath quickens.

We stand. Longer than we should. Her son looks for her card as I look for the words Google Translate: empty vacía

ok bye.

Her English hit the jugular a bi-lateral/lingual/liminal laceration. I'm so sorry, I said. "You got the accent wrong try it correctly" he says against a tv static backdrop. A paused sex scene of a film riddled with the shadow of subtext (*indistinguishable Spanish*). The teeth sealed shut the jaw ached.

"No, I'm too embarrassed, I already messed up, I'm dumb" I say. He replies "You aren't dumb, just stubborn, now say it correctly." The throat dries *soy terco* I'd rather be stupid "you just have to learn it."

I sit there staring at my grandfather hoping he can point at something and I can decipher what he needs before he grabs it himself. I write all his birthday cards in Spanish so he knows it was never shame that kept me silent. *Feliz cumpleaños, abuelo -your hita* always with the "h".

Stop explaining simple words to me. I know those. I'm not white. No, I don't know. No what did they say. No. No I don't know. I'm not white. No, I don't know. No what did they say. No. No I don't know. I'm not white. No, I don't know. No what did they say. No. No I don't know.

I spend fifteen minutes a day with a little green owl to teach me the words my grandparents use to pray with. "No one talks like that." "We don't say it like that." We. As if I am playing a part. /infiltrator/*farsante*\.

l wonder if there are words you will not give me for the fear l cannot truly understand them.

A disappointed sigh with each harshly translated	me llamo Reina
Spanish love song.	yo conocí a tu hijo a traves de amigos en comun
l understand completely.	trabajo en el centro de los recursos para mujeres
Me llamo Reina	en la Universidad
yo conocí a tu hijo a traves de amigos en comun	
we met at a party three years ago	otra vez
we fucked for a month	otra vez
we parted	
we grew.	l'm sorry
Our hair and	tell your mom l'm sorry.
our spirit.	
Reconexión	
he holds me in his living memory	
like once practiced dance steps.	
Light on the feet and	
heavy on the soul.	
His skin shares songs of	
a personal revolution.	
He tastes of fire and the midnight hour.	
Do you feel the words I don't have?	
Google Translate: embarrassed	
avergonzada	
Google Translate: shame	

vergüenza

Dress Up Forrest mcgarvey





Friday Blessings



Doreen G. Fernandez Alicia rodriguez

Peacemaker

LATA NOBES

In the picture on your mantelpiece from 1982, your father looks down with jacket, cap, and thick moustache, like 'Lord Kitchener needs you'.

I want to place the frame face down, save him bristling at the brown girl in his living room. He wanted you to find someone who'd iron your shirts,

bake cakes, prune marigolds like your mother did. Righteous, she would hand you white feathers when you cry yourself to sleep.

NATO soldier, your shaven face is soft, smiling, but I see your white fingers reaching for my skin. I cover my eyes, waiting for the echo of the gun.

Rejected, you withdraw, yell out, and when your father doesn't come you take his rifle and you run with it, like Tommy pushed into the Somme.



Ellipsis CAMRYN CHEW

How deep do I have to dive into control before I become the white man controlling me.

l'll lick salt from his distress let him dub me docile yielding beer-spill-sopping floor-grazing ripe-to-bang China Doll.

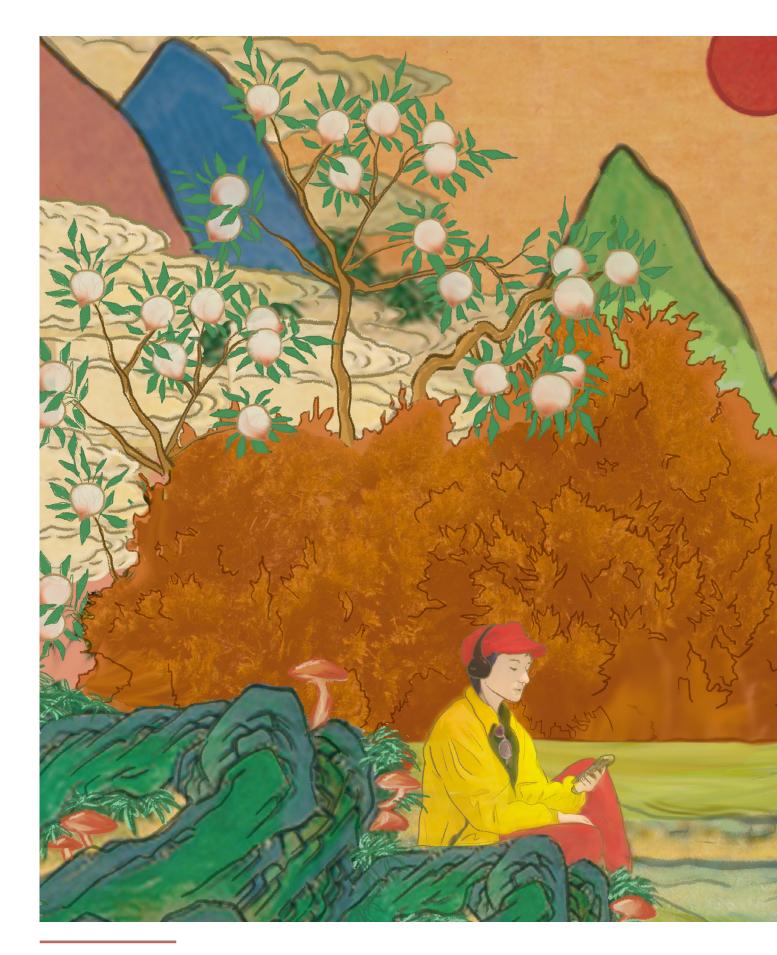
I did not become this character, I learned it from my mother.

Popsicle All-Withstanding

Acquiescence tarnished my schoolyard innocence. I like things that don't stain. Air, water, minutia, not your words.

In someone's dream once there was a sound almost like the one you made when all humankind broke over river flew and wept across oceans.

At least we still have these frozen novelties to anchor ourselves, away from the noise.



We Are Here and There and Then LEE-WON FULBRIGHT





HANA



RACHEL

LEE-WON FULBRIGHT



KARINA



LEE-WON

Aziz

NASIMEH B.E.

I don't talk about this much, but Aziz was my best friend before the whole incident went down. We used to play in the stream behind my house, dressing frogs in daisy necklaces and grass sarongs. She sang these old Persian tunes – she was a crooner, that one – and I'd eat my *khormeh* and tap my feet along. I wasn't much of a singer, but I sure loved her tone.

Anyway, we were about 10 when it occurred. It was one of those sticky-sweet summer days, when Mamanjoon had given us *noon-va-paneer-va-hendooneh* to eat, and we'd abandoned our shoes on the bank, dipping toes in the crystal flowing by. There were minnows, of course, and a bird or two, maybe a *parastoo*. But nothing seemed out of order.

Then it happened, seemingly without pretext, but knowing Aziz as I did, I bet she'd been planning something for a long time. "Hey Shirin," she said, and I looked over to see her small frame straddling the water, a smirk on her face and a glint in her dark eyes. "Watch this." Then she lifted her arms, grinned real big-like, and turned into a fish.

I swear to you on those summer scorchers that's what I saw. One minute, she was this lanky pile of olive flesh and sarcasm, and the next, she was a shimmering rainbow fish – so like Aziz to choose some mystical aquatic creature and not a normal one – gliding through the bubbles coursing by my feet.

I was aghast, of course – less over the fact that she was a fish than that she hadn't let me in on this plan at all – but before I could so much as yell out, *sheytooni!*, she was gone.

Grumbling and glowering, I returned home without my cousin, where the family descended on me in a frenzy. *Where's Aziz?* Not here. *What do you mean, 'not here'?* She turned into a fish. *A fish?!* A fish. *Ay, joon!*

Within a matter of minutes, the authorities were alerted and search parties organized, and people went out on the hunt in hopes of finding my elusive, rainbow-colored relative. Mamanjoon swore on



Mashad that Aziz had gotten away because of modern culture. *This land, kids these days*. But I knew it wasn't that. I knew what it was. I knew it was our house.

Maman and Papa would say otherwise for days, but what did they know? They were never around. Our house, with its deep layers of carpets tunneled between cavernous, calligraphy-lined walls, where aunts and cousins and seconds and thirds passed through like foreign ghosts, bearing gifts of sweets and gold and t-shirts emblazoned in an ancient tongue. Our house, where rice was cooked to an orange crisp and stories of "home" implied somewhere so far-flung, so distant – lord! It was enough to make a young gal crazy with longing.

Sure, I'd thought of leaving too, plenty of times, but I wasn't like Aziz. I couldn't just turn into a fish on a whim – that was her strength. Yes, Mamanjoon would say, but you're smart, and I was, all bookish and studious. Truth be told, though, I was jealous of Aziz, and that's why I clung to her like light on a lightning bug, tagging along on her every adventure. When we were princesses, we were princesses together; when we were sultans, we ruled in equal measure. Split right down the middle – that's how I liked it.

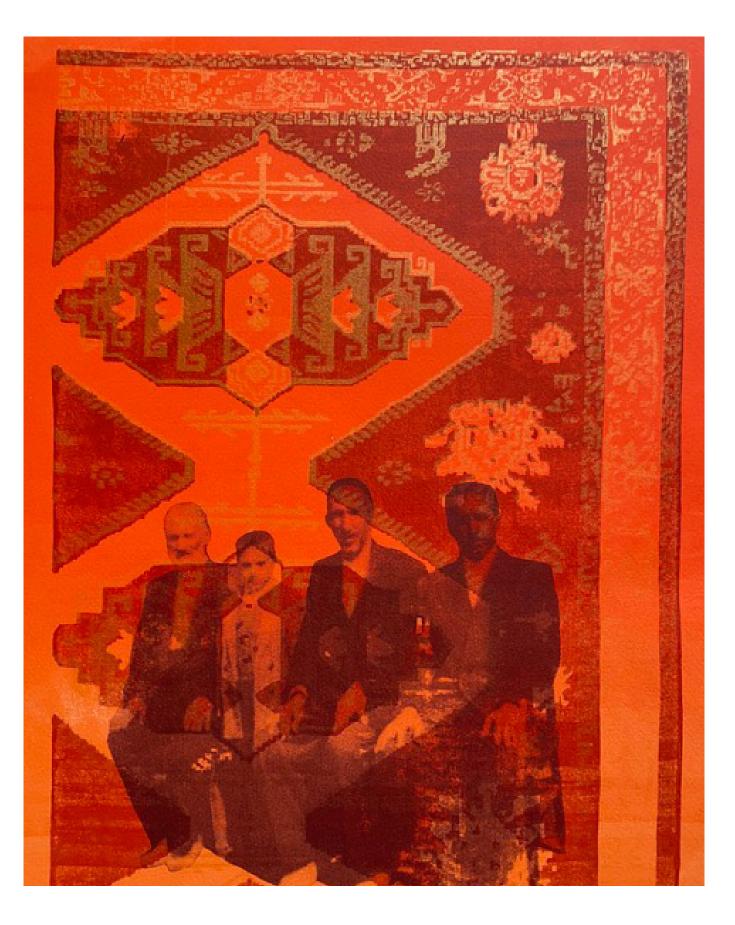
So it came as a mighty blow when Aziz went rogue and solo like this. I was upset and annoyed for sure, but more than anything, I was jealous. Jealous of her recklessness. Jealous of her courage. Jealous of her strength. And most of all, jealous of the land I was sure she'd returned to, where honey and pomegranates paraded down the streets, and distant parents were replaced by Mamanjoons cooing over every pillow and serving *ghormeh sabzi* in every room.

It only took a few days for Aziz to return, boasting and so proud of her journey. I kept quiet while Maman, Papa, and Mamanjoon *oo*ed and *aw*ed and cooed and fawned over her homecoming. I kept quiet while they chastised her for leaving and gave her *jat-khali* after *jat-khali*. I kept quiet when she came into my room one night and sat silently for a while before gently saying, "I'm sorry. I had to," then left.

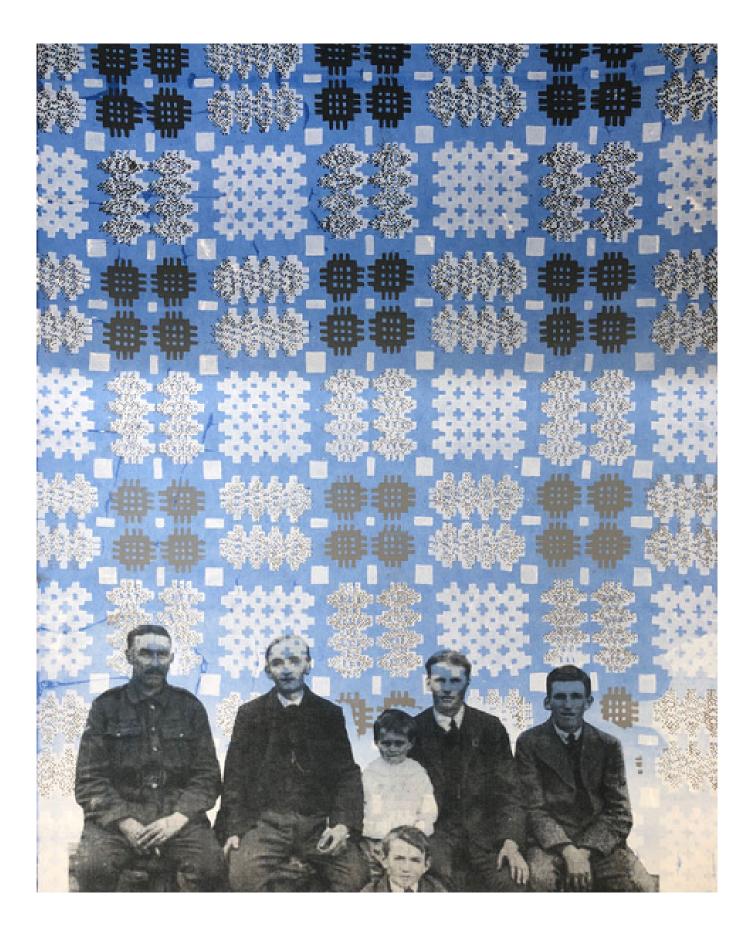
I kept quiet while we grew apart, went to separate states for college, and watched one another's triumphs and failures from a distance. I kept quiet, and I never fully spoke about it, but that whole fish incident was the reason we started drifting, and the very event that drove us apart.

Even now, years later and growing as I've grown, I can't shake the feeling that she went there, to the land we'd never known but knew we came from, and I could never quite forgive her for it. Still can't. Don't think I ever will.

And what's more, I still can't turn into a fish.



Untitled Leyla moazzen



In Between Two Worlds

AMIRA ALSAREINYE

In between the walls of *Abuela's* house, filled with the amazing smells of rice and tamales, my tiny body cuddles in between her tender loving arms. I search for the right words to tell her in between my thoughts. The millions of thoughts that occur in between a quarter of a second. Thoughts like: if the tamales were halal, I could eat them, and how can I tell her all the feelings that I have inside me?

But when I try to come up with a Spanish phrase, all my brain can remember is Arabic.

I remember when *Tayta* comes to visit from Syria, and how she braids my hair, and seats me in between her and *Jido*. I remember the time I spilt *Tayta's* coffee on the carpet and began to cry. I remember when I had chickenpox and couldn't sleep so *Tayta* offered me a spot in the bed with her. And when I attempt to speak again, I I have all the words except the ones I need.

And I lose them, my grandparents, on both sides, without understanding even one story. Stories betrayed by my own ears, incomprehensible to my mind, my tongue unable to respond. What stories did I miss out on in between all those years I had with them?

It isn't until much later that I am able to hold a conversation in Arabic. Still, I am offered gifts in the form of Spanish words when I need them least. I am prompted by my aunt not to wear certain colors of hijab because they will make me look darker. I am assured that I am "not Mexican". I take these suggestions, questions, and unsolicited advice the only way I can: with forgiveness. Still, it hurts that blood cannot recognize blood, or chooses not to see all of me. But then they spoil me, and drown me in affections: *habibty, omri, Amara* and *Amoura. They* cook the most delicious *wara-eneb* and a most heavenly fattoush. And in the cold dead of night, I am covered by more blankets and tucked in as if I was still a child.

Back home in the States, I cover when I leave and uncover when I arrive, and in between those moments, I at least recognize that I am allowed more than one identity. Allowed to escape the boxes that I am placed



in: oppressed, repressed, extreme, savage. Even after all these years, I am still confronted with fearful eyes, the fear quickly changing to animosity and resentment. I used to smile in exchange for their furrowed brows, sometimes prompting confusion, other times realization. Recently I have been surprised with words of affirmation from strangers.. "We need you in this country." "You and your children are beautiful." And at the occasional spoiling by Mexican old women referring to me as *mija*, I swoon and feel at home, remembering my *Abuela*.

And I escape for moments in time, when I feel comfortable around people who do not judge my words nor what I wear but just offer a space, a place, in between their hearts.



oceanside markets foam on the hour's brim, open on Grand-Baie, on a hot creole breeze

where lemon pulp trails on your sandals. rupee satchels rustle, all burlap and metal

vendors arrange their fruit, wicker stalls sip tidal light, the alley overhung with roses

this is an ecology. does an ecology defy soundwaves is it mine to miss? does it exist after the aisles

vacate, after truck doors slam, after I re-learn the self from which I was born running?

at the antipode, I have tried to love the cold, these houses dulled on tepid skies, this slated city

where children writhe like crocus buds fossilized in ice, I am many terrible years

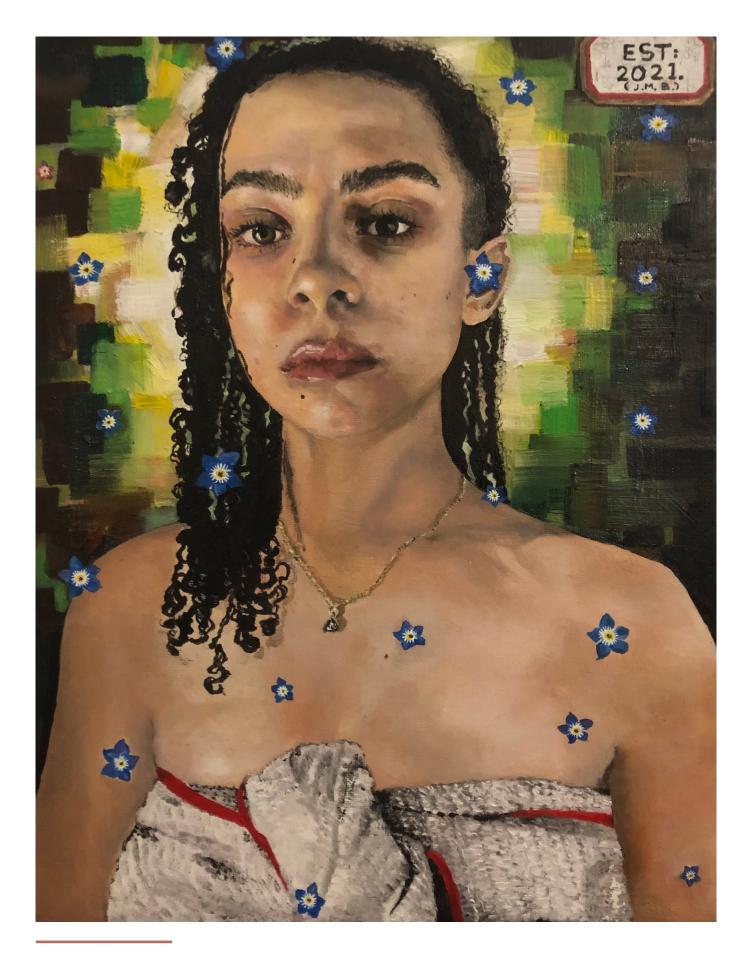
away from sun, I am watching flame trees oscillate on the lake disintegrate

vanishing points merge on my eardrum, salvage clouds, loosen their husks from serrated

shorelines, pry each thread apart search for coins clinking on tile, fabric rumpling

dholl puri sizzling in oil, soundwaves return as static on a stale current.





Self-Portrait Jessica brown

Contributors

Amira Alsareinye descends from two cultural backgrounds, Syrian and Mexican, while she was born and raised in San Antonio. She graduated from the University of the Incarnate with a B.A. in biology in 2014. She enjoys writing poetry as well as fiction and non-fiction stories. She creates surreal floral escapes and cosmic figurative paintings mainly in acrylic and watercolor.

Laura Barker is a writer, artist, and facilitator. She runs an LGBT black writing group in London. Her work has appeared in Apparition Lit, midnight & indigo, and The Other Stories. She has guest edited for Apparition Lit, and her YA novel Picnics was shortlisted for the Faber Andlyn (FAB) Prize.

Nasimeh B.E. is an artist and writer based in the U.S. Her work has appeared in The Rumpus, UpWorthy, and at zine fairs across the country. Being of mixed Iranian and American heritage, much of her work explores liminality, and the spaces between. She is currently an artist in residence at Freya, a community space in Seattle, and recently finished her first book. Learn more about her on her website, Nasimeh.me, or across social media: @Nasimehehe.

Gabrielle Behar-Trinh (she/her) is a writer currently based in Vietnam, born and raised in Southern California on native Tongva Lands. Her writing often explores themes of identity, home, and longing. She's been published in Diacritics and Okay Donkey, and some of her work was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize. She is the daughter of immigrants. Jessica Brown is a UK-based artist of Jamaican and British descent. Since graduating from five years of engineering study in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged her to return to creating artwork in her spare time. Currently, Jessica is expanding her portfolio and defining her style with particular emphasis on portraits, colour theory and social commentary. Identity forms a large part of her inspiration and exploring mixed race identity makes the development process a cathartic one. To see more of her work head to her Instagram @jessicamaybrown.art.

Rhiannon Ng Cheng Hin is a Scottish-Mauritian writer currently based in Canada. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Gutter, PRISM International, Arc Poetry Magazine, and The Malahat Review. She was the recipient of 2020 The Writers' Trust of Canada Mentorship Award in Poetry, and recently completed writing her debut poetry collection.

Camryn Chew (she/they) is a mixed-race emerging actor, writer, director, poet, and meme page admin. Their work has previously been published in Overachiever Magazine, Loves Me Zine, and The Hearth Magazine.

Reina Davis is a mixed-race Chicana from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a recent graduate from the University of New Mexico obtaining Bachelor's Degrees in both Women's Studies and Chicano studies. Reina is an active poet in her community. She is continuously inspired by her family, and hopes to utilize her writing and visual art to connect herself and others through creatively amplifying the importance of identity, introspection, and empowerment. **Yvwh Elohim** is an untutored Black artist from Florida. He is 27 and has been painting for 3 years now. God told him how to begin his journey and he hopes his paintings inspire countless more.

Lee-Won Fulbright is a Korean American artist from Kāne'ohe, Hawa'i'i. She is interested in visual storytelling and the intersections of family, gender, and mixed-race identity. Through multiple digital forms, her work seeks to create representation of mixed-race Korean people and to preserve ephemeral connections: cultural, familial, intergenerational, and identity-based. You can see more of her work and contact her at leewonfulbright.com.

Forrest McGarvey is an artist and writer currently residing in the San Francisco Bay Area. In his interdisciplinary practice, he examines how we use objects, materials, and media to define our selves in our heavily technologized moment. He is interested in the constructed relationship with media and technology, and its effects on perception, culture, and performativity both on and off screen. His work has been featured as both an artist and a writer in multiple print publications and exhibitions across the Pacific Northwest. He received an MA in Visual and Critical Studies and an MFA in Fine Arts from the California College of the Arts. Forrest also holds a BFA in Fine Arts from the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University. Leyla Moazzen is a Bristol-based printmaker whose work combines joyful colours with layered patterns. She is fascinated by ideas around dual-cultural identity and the interwoven narratives that emerge from liminal experiences. Her work focuses on woven history and personal narrative, and she is fascinated by layering colour, texture and pattern to explore these themes. All of Leyla's work contains hand-drawn elements even when there are quicker computer-generated techniques that could be employed. She puts this down to a belief that hand-drawn marks are more personal and immediate, but it might just be because drawing is her very favourite thing to do! You can see more of Leyla's work on instagram @leyla_prints.

Lata Nobes is a poet, songwriter and theatremaker born in South East London. She is of mixed Indian and Welsh heritage. Her work often explores difficult, visceral topics such as sexuality, alcoholism, depression, and human relationships with nature. She has performed spoken-word poetry at various locations including The Albany, Deptford, and her poem The Music recently featured in English Touring Theatre's online production of a new play, Open Mic.

Fannah Palmer is an emerging Dutch-American writer, currently finishing an MA in writing and editing. Her work has previously been published on Red Fez and Expanded Field. She is working on an experimental novella at the moment.

Alicia Rodriguez is a Filipino-English artist and zinemaker living in Norwich, UK. Her work draws from this mixed heritage, with a particular focus on folklore and iconography. More of her work can be found on Instagram @aliciamairodriguez.



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