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INTERVENTIONS

# Like Wildflowers through the Smallest of Cracks

**Janine Mogannam**

*Publishing note: "meditations in an emergency zone" and "sacred city" were originally published in* Writing the Walls Down: A Convergence of LGBTQ Voices*, ed. Amir Rabiyah and Helen Klonaris, Trans-Genre Press (2015).*

These poems reflect my experience as a diasporic Palestinian contending with not only the current genocide, but a lifetime of silencing, trauma, and struggle with split identities, as well as the endurance and revolution found in community.

As a queer femme of color, I have found myself forced to navigate spaces and code-switch for survival, orienting myself towards white normative culture when in white-dominant or "professional" spaces, including some queer spaces that are not specifically BIPOC-oriented. Being a librarian, I know that the closer to whiteness I appear, the greater credibility I will be given as an information professional. That applies generally to any BIPOC person operating in the Western/white-dominated world. As a femme person, I know my ability to "pass" affords me privilege similar to that of orienting myself toward whiteness, and yet it also invisibilizes me to my own community and to those outside of it. To be clear, I am not interested in passing for anything other than what I am, even now as it appears more dangerous than ever to be who I am. And yet, our survival often demands this of us: not necessarily a denial (although, sometimes), but a leaning away from identity, a reframing of the self as neutrally as possible, to escape scrutiny, oppression, or assault.

Being Palestinian adds unique layers to this experience, especially today. I and so many of my community have been forced to constantly explain and apologize for our origins, a bizarre and unnecessary shame imposed by a society that is at turns ignorant, biased, and hostile. Yet within my Palestinian community there is judgment for social nonconformity: I don't speak Arabic well, I am queer and child-free, etc. It is worth saying, however, that historically I have felt less threatened for being queer in Palestinian (American) spaces than for being Palestinian in America/the Western world, or being queer in many parts of the U.S. That is certainly not the experience of every queer Palestinian and is certainly influenced by my position as a second-generation Palestinian born and raised in San Francisco. However, it is important to note, what with the racist and

Zionist pinkwashing messages robotically echoing the sentiment that queers shouldn't support Palestine because supposedly we would be murdered if we stepped foot there. (I have been several times and am still alive.) So, I use poetry to contend with intersectional identity and assert my voice in a world that wants my silence. In "little wings," I utilize the "cut-up" poetry form, with the addition of certain words and phrases interpreted as loose mathematical equations, to navigate the challenges of loving oneself and others and finding wholeness as a person of multiple maligned identities, asking how it all adds up, or not. Can g/God be found in the equation?

Being a diasporic Palestinian living on someone else's indigenous land is also an essential factor in my consciousness and my writing. How do I live and write both in honour of my own indigeneity to an occupied land (on which I do not live but to which I am inextricably connected), and that of the people whose land I occupy (where I reside, but that is not mine, and that is constantly mutating through the ongoing colonialist project)? In "sacred city," I attempt to find home post-9/11 in a city I was not raised in and I feel does not want me—a military town of "post-conservative emissions" "beribboned in yellow"—while acknowledging that I am a guest in a place of "imaginary borders" and "luminous blue" waters that is sacred to its Indigenous residents, silenced and oppressed on their own land. Unsure how to belong or to make things right, I take refuge in connecting with nature and my own indigenous origins to stifle the urge to seek "death or freedom" in the ocean that has always been a part of home to me.

Similarly, in "meditations in an emergency zone," I draw inspiration from Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency* to illustrate the experience of a diasporic Palestinian visiting Palestine, the place of my indigeneity, while simultaneously feeling a sense of belonging and othering and questioning whether I am an illegitimate Palestinian by virtue of my Americanness. It also contends with the trouble of being a visitor in one's homeland (visiting East Jerusalem, drinking 'arak and dancing in Ramallah) while Palestinians living in this "emergency zone" are facing constant oppression and violence. What is home to any Palestinian while Palestine is still occupied and so many of us are displaced? Or do we find home in ourselves, one another?

I also write to recognize community joys and struggles, increasingly disregarding the eye and ear of those who cannot relate to or sympathize with our experiences, while offering an opportunity to be "called in." "Ghosts," the most recent of the pieces here, written in the fall of 2023, during the early weeks of the current genocide in Gaza, begins with scenes many can relate to: watching the genocide unfold through our smartphones, in our homes, feeling helpless to do anything substantial about it, sick with one's own comfort while one's people are dying. And yet when I find myself unable to speak, I remember our sumud, the resilience and resistance inherent to Palestinians. The poem shifts toward speaking to Palestinians ourselves, reminding us that we have been here before and always survived; that today we may be ghosts but tomorrow, inshallah, we will become balls of light; that we will always "grow like wildflowers through the smallest of cracks."

I remain uncertain that the Western world deserves to know us in our fullness or is even capable of it. But I am certain that *we* deserve to be known, and to know one another, in all of our intersecting identities, with liberation right around the corner.

**little wings**

love (one) but confess sickness
then will her to nothing:
she is there exploding with want.

(god) will drop the (i) the eyes
each by each
+ do what to that body?

we wait.
we a small (god) / have what right to bomb?
could i wake into another world?

her (will) trips if (god) = night
+ the trapped are alone
she says she will wait

but all i write will soon blow away
*+ will any(one) want you then?*
(one) love (one) / and (one) let her be

after a voice bombs (will) into (god)
but nobody is bomb / is (god) in bomb.
i believe that wings = (god) in + (god) out

+ what little you would confess = so you be.
used hearts shall learn (will) in love too:
an out/think equation.

we won't always get better
we are the ones (god) names
(all their i) = a tiny confession / a voice bomb.

we can lack (will)
+ i still would love us
does confession make holy?

i (will) not.
there (will) be another (i) for bomb / for (god)
when (one) awakens into love.

**sacred city**

burning post-conservative emissions. cooling our simmer. endless summer.

bodies breathe. ribbons of green cut through concrete. i sit on cliffs with the light, look south. picture myself drowning in luminous blue.

silhouettes crossing imaginary borders. lost limbs. every breath heavy.
air smells false fresh.

remains of a real city. its namesake would cry. morning of light*:

my window to forgotten saints. only my television smiles. neighbors drown me in hostility.

the sun burns cool. (she has endured others.) the eucalyptus hate me.

i abscess concrete. exhale anxiety. sanity is lost to the horizon. self-conscious, concealing. breathe heavy. drown in thick air.

is the ocean death or freedom? salt city beribboned in yellow. inhale.

heat suffocates lungs. i dream burned freeways & scarred bodies.
the city smells of loss.

i drown. can't reach shore. body sacred no longer. the ocean a tangle. this sacred city:

searching and never finding.

*صباح النور

**Meditations in an emergency zone**
***after Frank O'Hara***

our bodies are made of war.

sometimes the kinetics are so intense
we can do nothing but wait.

oh mother mary. it is here
in your arms we are loved.

do not allow the ~~entrails~~ hemlines to drag on the ground.
please keep all decolletage covered for decency.

now we remember the tombs.
grandmother procured the key.
east jerusalem, we are free.

we sat in the gutters, here.
little baby bones. skull candy.
not only two thousand years ago:
today, now.

tonight the stars are outshone by ~~bombs~~ fireworks.
we drink anise liquor until everything is glitter.
dance like tribesmen under the moon. behold, jesus.

the burning is just a few miles away but ramallah
is a city of stones. it is oz. i cannot breathe.

i spit on the ground and the world turns.

**Ghosts**

I have become a ghost.
I haunt each room I enter. Cannot find anchor.
Can you understand? I am here, and I am not.
Floating between worlds of the living and the un-alive,
my mind crumbling like the homes, the shops,
the schools and hospitals and lives that once were. Dust to dust.

A child covered in ash and blood asks, Do I still live?
The adult filming him says yes, you are alive.
Clutching my phone, witnessing this boy's unraveling,
I do not know if this is truth.
How alive he must have been not long ago,
kicking soccer balls with his friends,
caring for neighborhood cats. Not this stunned shell of a child.
How many times in his very few years

he must have been called hayati, my life.
And if his family is no longer alive,
is he still somebody's beloved?
Is there anyone left to care?

I speak to the other ghosts through my phone screen, a funhouse mirror.
I love you, I say. I am you. I'm sorry. Please don't die.

Words gather in my throat like water
trickling from a rusted pipe. I can't stop coughing.
I will the water I sip to cross the earth and soothe a parched throat,
clean a wound, harmonize with formula to nourish a baby
whose mother is lying in pieces under rubble.
The people are drinking the sea. The sea.
The water is poisoned but my people will drink, will stay alive
by any means possible, even an hour longer, a day.

We have been rehearsing death all our lives.
Every Palestinian is practiced in this. We stockpile food,
guard our children's every footstep, hang talismans in every door frame.
Because we know the worst that can happen.
It is happening right now. And yet we are not destroyed.
Today we may fall but tomorrow we march.
Today I am a ghost but tomorrow may God
make me be a ball of light.

We choose life with each sip of water. Each embrace
of a loved one. Each dance, each ululation of joy.
Each meal lovingly prepared by hands
older than the occupation of the land on which they were born.
Each ripe olive and apricot picked
from a backyard tree, seeds tucked under clothing,

close to the heart for safekeeping. For just in case.
For later. Can you imagine?
Somehow, we keep looking to the future
even though it is constantly being ripped
from our grasp. We will not let go.
The stars ground us and illuminate our path.
Our lives are a speculative fiction but we persist.
Bury us and we will grow like wildflowers through the smallest of cracks.