

From Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of  
Contemporary Arab American Poetry. Ed.

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*Suheir Hammad*

Suheir Hammad has been described as "a new voice with an authentic blend of language that's her own," and her poems have received wide acclaim. She is the recipient of an Audre Lorde Writing Award, an Emerging Artist Award, and a Tony Award as an original cast member and writer for Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. Hammad's poetry often engages "culture, conflict, and consciousness," which is not surprising given her background. Born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, she immigrated to Brooklyn at the age of five. She travels abroad frequently, as a poet and activist, and has read her work at universities, on the BBC, on NPR, and in prisons. Her books include the poetry collections *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *ZaatarDiva* and a memoir, *Drops of This Story*.

belly dancer private dancer  
venus hottentot laundry girl  
vessel emasculating princess

don't wanna be  
your erotic  
not your exotic

### First Writing Since

i. there have been no words.  
i have not written one word.  
no poetry in the ashes south of canal street.  
no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.  
not one word.

today is a week, and seven is of heavens, gods, science.  
evident out my kitchen window is an abstract reality.  
sky where once was steel.  
smoke where once was flesh.

fire in the city air and i feared for my sister's life in a way never  
before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us.

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed,  
the plane's engine died.  
then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.  
please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone  
who looks like my brothers.

i do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill.  
i have never been so hungry that i willed hunger  
i have never been so angry as to want to control a gun over a pen.

not really.

even as a woman, as a palestinian, as a broken human being.  
never this broken.

more than ever, i believe there is no difference.

the most privileged nation, most americans do not know the difference  
between indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus.  
more than ever, there is no difference.

thank you korea for kimchi and bibim bob, and corn tea and the  
teenteel smiles of the wait staff at wonjo smiles never revealing  
the heat of the food or how tired they must be working long midtown  
shifts. thank you korea, for the belly craving that brought me into  
the city late the night before and diverted my daily train ride into  
the world trade center.

there are plenty of thank yous in my right now.  
thank you for my lazy procrastinating late ass.  
thank you to the germs that had me call in sick.  
thank you, my attitude, you had me fired the week before.  
thank you for the train that never came,  
the rude nyer who stole my cab going downtown.  
thank you for the sense my mama gave me to run.  
thank you for my legs, my eyes, my life.

the dead are called lost and their families hold up shaky  
printouts in front of us through screens smoked up.

we are looking for iris, mother of three. please call with any  
information. we are searching for priti, last seen on the 103rd  
floor. she was talking to her husband on the phone and the line  
went. please help us find george, also known as adel. his family is  
waiting for him with his favorite meal. i am looking for my son, who

was delivering coffee. i am looking for my sister girl,  
she started her job on monday.

i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for  
evidence of compassion. any evidence of life. i am looking for life.

4. ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, "i will  
feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my  
friends feel the same way."

on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt.  
i offered comfort, extended a hand she did not see before she said,  
"we're gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad." my hand went to my  
head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi  
children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie  
with fake sport wrestling for america's attention.

yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to happen, let's  
not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second i felt resentful.  
hold up with that, cause i live here, these are my friends and fam,  
and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad  
people, do not support america's bullying.  
can i just have a half second to feel bad?

if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to  
mourn and to resist mass murder, i might be alright.

thank you to the woman who saw me brinking my cool and blinking back  
tears. she opened her arms before she asked "do you want a hug?" a  
big white woman, and her embrace was the kind only people with the  
warmth of flesh can offer. i wasn't about to say no to any comfort.  
"my brother's in the navy," i said. "and we're arabs."  
"wow, you got double trouble." word.

5. one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers.

one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.

one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.

one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people.

or that a people represent an evil.

or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page.

we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh bombed oklahoma.

america did not give out his family's addresses or where he went to

church. or blame the bible or pat robertson.

and when the networks air footage of palestinians dancing in the

street, there is no apology for hungry children who are bribed with

sweets that turn their teeth brown. that correspondents edit images.

that archives are there to facilitate lazy and inaccurate

journalism.

and when we talk about holy books and hooded men and death,

why do we never mention the kkk?

if there are any people on earth who understand

how new york is feeling right now,

they are in the west bank and the gaza strip.

6. today it is ten days. last night bush waged war on a man once

openly funded by the cia. i do not know who is responsible. read too many

books, know too many people to believe what i am told. i don't give a fuck

about bin laden. his vision of the world does not include me or those

i love. and petitions have been going around for years trying to get

the u.s. sponsored taliban out of power. shit is complicated,

and i don't know what to think.

but i know for sure who will pay.

in the world, it will be women, mostly colored and poor. women will have to bury children, and support themselves through grief. "either you are with us, or with the terrorists" meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored. meaning we got the loot and the nukes.

in america, it will be those amongst us who refuse blanket attacks on the shivering. those of us who work toward social justice, in support of civil liberties, in opposition to hateful foreign policies.

i have never felt less american and more new yorker—particularly brooklyn, than these past days. the stars and stripes on all these cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first not family members, not lovers.

i feel like my skin is real thin, and that my eyes are only going to get darker. the future holds little light.

my baby brother is a man now, and on alert, and praying five times a day that the orders he will take in a few days time are righteous and will not weigh his soul down from the afterlife he deserves.

both my brothers—my heart stops when i try to pray—not a beat to disturb my fear. one a rock god, the other a sergeant, and both palestinian, practicing muslim, gentle men. both born in brooklyn and their faces are of the archetypal arab man, all eyelashes and nose and beautiful color and stubborn hair.

what will their lives be like now?

over there is over here.

7. all day, across the river, the smell of burning rubber and limbs floats through. the sirens have stopped now. the advertisers are back on the air. the rescue workers are traumatized. the skyline is brought back to human size. no longer taunting the gods with its height.

i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never known pain that needs to spread like that. and i cry daily that my brothers return to our mother safe and whole.

there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.

there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting, but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

affirm life.

affirm life.

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life.

From Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of  
Contemporary Arab American Poetry.  
Lawrence Joseph

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Lawrence Joseph was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1948. His grandparents, Lebanese and Syrian Catholics, were among the first Arab emigrants to Detroit. He earned degrees from the University of Michigan, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Michigan Law School. Before moving to New York City, where he practiced law and eventually joined the faculty at St. John's University School of Law, a position he has held since 1987, he served as law clerk to Justice G. Mennen Williams of the Michigan Supreme Court. Joseph has been called "the most important lawyer-poet of our era" and his poems have been described as "tough-minded, compassionate," and of "great dignity, grace, and unrelenting persuasiveness." His books include *Shouting at No One*, *Curriculum Vitae*, and *Before Our Eyes*—collected in *Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos: Poems 1973–1993*—and a fourth collection, *Into It*. He is also the author of the prose book *Lawyerland*. Joseph's work has been widely anthologized, and his honors include fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize. Married to the painter Nancy Van Goethem, he lives in downtown Manhattan.

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It's Not Me. It's

Ed. Hayan Charara. Arkansas:  
Arkansas UP, 2008. 153–55.

After I witnessed stabbings  
outside the gym, after the game,  
I witnessed fire in the streets.  
My head set on fire in Cambridge,  
England, in the Whim Café.  
After I applied Substance and Procedure  
and Statements of Facts  
my head was heavy, was earth.  
Now years have passed since I came  
to the city of great fame  
The same sun glows gray on two new rivers.  
Tears I want do not come.  
I remain many different people  
whose families populate half Detroit;  
I hate the racket of the machines,  
the oven's heat, curse  
bossmen behind their backs.  
I hear the inmates' collective murmur  
in the jail on Beaubien Street.  
I hear myself say, "What explains  
the Bank of Lebanon's liquidity?"  
I think, "I too will declare  
a doctrine upon whom the loss  
of language must fall regardless  
whether Wallace Stevens  
understood senior indebtedness  
in Greenwich Village in 1906."  
One woman hears me in my sleep  
plead the confusions of my dream.  
I frequent the Café Dante, earn  
my memories, repay my moods.  
I am as good as my heart.  
I am as good as the unemployed  
who wait in long lines for money.

## and Nigger

in the house in Detroit  
in a room of shadows  
when Grandma reads her Arabic newspaper  
it is difficult for me to follow her  
word by word from right to left  
and I do not understand  
why she smiles about the Jews  
who won't do business in Beirut  
"because the Lebanese  
are more Jew than Jew,"  
or whether to believe her  
that if I pray  
to the holy card of Our Lady of Lebanon  
I will share the miracle.  
Lebanon is everywhere  
in the house: in the kitchen  
of steaming pots, leg of lamb  
in the oven, plates of kousa,  
hushwee rolled in cabbage,  
dishes of olives, tomatoes, onions,  
roasted chicken, and sweets;  
at the card table in the sunroom  
where Grandpa teaches me  
to wish the dice across the backgammon board  
to the number I want;  
Lebanon of mountains and sea,  
of pine and almond trees,  
of cedars in the service  
of Solomon, Lebanon  
of Babylonians, Phoenicians, Arabs, Turks

and Byzantines, of the one-eyed  
monk, Saint Maron,  
in whose rite I am baptized;  
Lebanon of my mother  
warning my father not to let  
the children hear,  
of my brother who hears  
and from whose silence  
I know there is something  
I will never know; Lebanon  
of Grandpa giving me my first coin  
secretly, secretly  
holding my face in his hands,  
kissing me and promising me  
the whole world.  
My father's vocal cords bleed;  
he shouts too much  
at his brother, his partner,  
in the grocery store that fails.  
I hide money in my drawer, I have  
the talent to make myself heard.  
I am admonished to learn,  
never to dirty my hands  
with sawdust and meat.  
At dinner, a cousin  
describes his niece's head  
severed with bullets, in Beirut,  
in civil war. "More than  
an eye for an eye," he demands,  
breaks down, and cries.  
My uncle tells me to recognize  
my duty, to use my mind,

to bargain, to succeed.  
He turns the diamond ring  
on his finger, asks if  
I know what asbestosis is,  
"the lungs become like this,"  
he says, holding up a fist;  
he is proud to practice  
law which "distributes  
money to compensate flesh."  
Outside the house my practice  
is not to respond to remarks  
about my nose or the color of my skin.  
"Sand nigger," I'm called,  
and the name fits: I am  
the light-skinned nigger  
with black eyes and the look  
difficult to figure—a look  
of indifference, a look to kill—  
a Levantine nigger  
in the city on the strait  
between the great lakes Erie and St. Clair  
which has a reputation  
for violence, an enthusiastically  
bad-tempered sand nigger  
who waves his hands, nice enough  
to pass, Lebanese enough  
to be against his brother,  
with his brother against his cousin,  
with cousin and brother  
against the stranger.