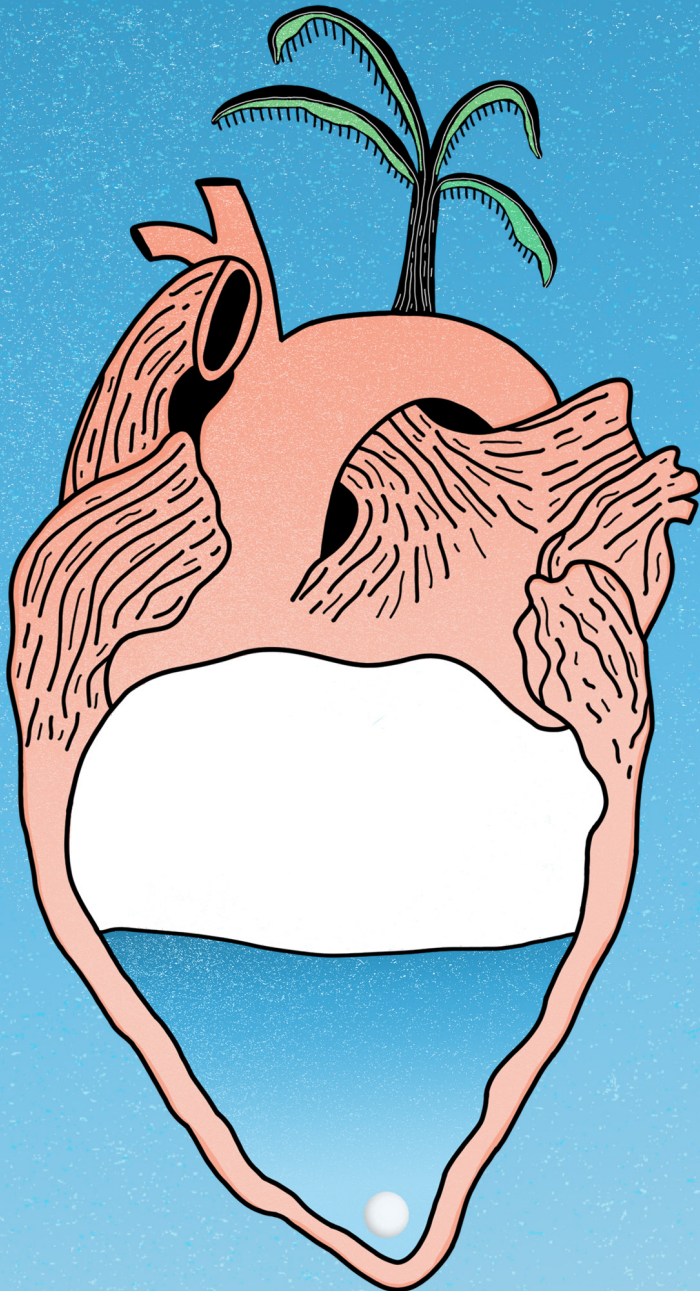


Between Two Islands

ما بين جزيرتين

Poetry by Bahrainis in Britain



Between Two Islands
ما بين جزيرتين

A project produced by Ali Al-Jamri
www.alialjamri.com

ISBN 978-0-9934460-4-7

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Illustrations: Fatema Al-Fanar
Layout Design: Eman M
Printed in the UK by No Disclaimers

This anthology was made possible thanks to financial assistance from Arts Council England and Liverpool Arab Arts Festival and supported by Young Identity.



Supported using public funding by

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Between Two Islands
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Introduction

Within these pages is the first communal expression of a Bahraini diaspora identity. Britain's tight-knit Bahraini community, whose roots date back to at least the 1970s, has thus far largely been overlooked in British culture. Perhaps it is no surprise — hailing from a country with some 600,000 citizens and a land mass smaller than Greater Manchester, we are few and far between.

“You're the first Bahraini I've ever met” is something every Bahraini has heard in the West, even from other Arabs. It is a statement that places on us the burden of having to act as sole representatives of our country. Shall I tell this person about the tastes of my granny's feasts, the smiles of my extended family? Shall I explain how ancient Bahrain was to the Sumerians a Garden of Eden, a place of immortality, yet today we have no fresh water? Or shall I mention the haunting dreams of a nation, the sting of tear gas, the bloodstains no soap can wash?

For a time I thought I was the only Bahraini British poet and felt that pressure to represent my people singularly, until I reconnected with Taher Adel, whose poem *These Seas* opens our anthology. I thought, finally, an ally! How many of us are there out here? And what will happen if we came together to express ourselves?

Through January and February 2021, fourteen Bahrainis met weekly to learn and write poetry. While a few of us were already poets, most of us were not: we have among us NHS doctors and health practitioners, students and engineers. For many, it was a therapeutic space where we could engage issues we rarely discuss, even in our own community's spaces. We explored our relationship to our dialects, families, homes, beliefs, experiences, and environments. Old relations reconnected and new friendships were formed. It has been a breathing space we didn't know we needed.

Most importantly, we discovered a confidence to assert ourselves. The liminal space we migrant communities inhabit is often painful: we are

made to feel foreign in both home and host cultures, constantly forced to explain our existence. But this in-between space is ours to control.

That's precisely what we've done in *Between Two Islands*. The poems within these pages are in a mix of English and Arabic. The unique *Bahrani* identity, distinct from Bahraini and marginalised in Gulf literature, emerges explicitly and implicitly in many of the poems. We make no attempt to translate or annotate ourselves. To the British reader, our references may seem novel, but to us they are soulful. To the Bahraini reader, our words may read unduly westernised, but we are exerting ourselves on the western language. We are here not to explain, but to express ourselves.

Duality and reflection are recurring themes in *Between Two Islands*, embodied forcefully by the sea. The “reincarnated pearl diver” in *These Seas* dives “headfirst into ancestral seas”, opening us to a dialogue with our cultural inheritance that echoes throughout the anthology. Yet the sea is ambiguous: the poets of *Buying A Ticket*, *Two Islands* and *Remember* — among others — find themselves lost in its waters, shunted around in their search for belonging. The scars of the past decade are acutely felt in *20_02_2021_Updated.xlsx*, which mourns the men on death row and their dehumanisation as statistics. Meanwhile, in *Legacy Hands* we are offered a clever ghazal that speaks both to a year of Zoom calls and a yearning for the homeland. Firm ground is found in the Arabic poems, from ارض النخيل to the lemon tree in لعب. Birds glide across the poems, at home in both the sky and trees — as, perhaps, we wish to be.

You, our readers, are invited to read the poems and taste their rich flavours. Should you enjoy them, take note — for we who call two islands home, both Britain and Bahrain, have more to say.

Ali Al-Jamri
Editor and Creative Producer

These Seas

A reincarnated pearl diver
diving headfirst into ancestral seas
finding pearls that resemble faces
each dive is one summer holiday
two decades claimed until I have enough
for a necklace that proves I am from here
no longer a tourist with virgin eyes
but one that has memorised
the graveyard, and where to find
each ancestor, their bleary tombstones
rising in and out of centuries
like dolphins, these seas
are what makes us Bahrani.

These seas smell of fishing boats
and Gadoo-stained fingers.
These seas sound like waves of
mosques blaring not far apart
and the clanking of coins
in my grandmother's purse
enough to buy a whole family
smiles.

These seas feel like wrinkles
of old age, waves and waves
for they have spent too
much time here, roots like veins
flowing into one another,
a seabed of love and pain.

These seas look like a painful utopia
and we look like longing birds.

We, the opera of the lost.

Legacy Hands

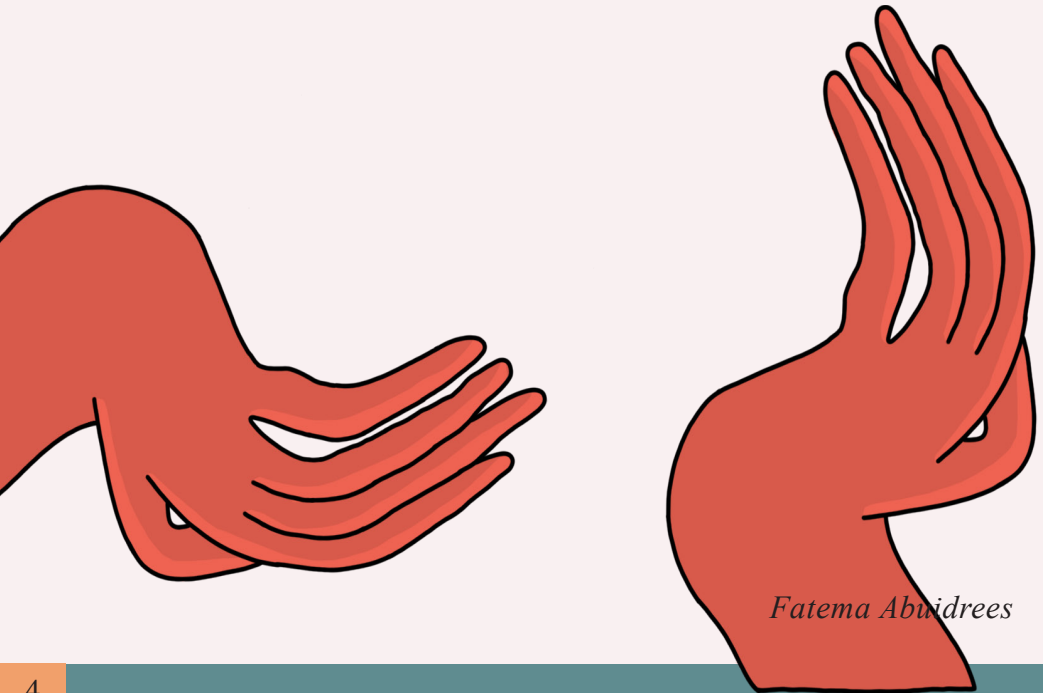
In our gated age of Zoom IDs and passwords, a legacy hand lingers
Raised to speak to dismembered heads, enduringly it waits, strained, it lingers

Names retired, authenticity desired, occasionally acquired yet not required
Muted pseudonyms attired residing in pseudo-nations admired, a legacy hand lingers

Smileys in apps rather than maps, suspended streets rather than tweets, *where is your legacy?*
Predestined searches, it's all blurred backgrounds in blurred places, a legacy hand lingers

Legacy dreams, here there are only expendable memes, typos and Microsoft Teams
Surviving GIF regimes, it's all hashtags, no heritage flags, here legacy screams, it lingers

In economised algorithms, a legacy hand stretches for Rainbow, *isn't there a meme for legacy?*
Surrendering the shoreward, it's all forwards in quest for legacy, a legacy hand lingers



Fatema Abuidrees

5100 Kilometres Away

I crave the warm scent of the ocean.
I'm sitting here 5100 kilometres away.

I long to restore my own Bahraini heritage
and engage in the cultural festivities.

Oh what I'd give to run through the countless acres of palm trees!
I yearn to return to that heartwarming setting,
where I feel that I belong.

I'd love to get a bird's eye view of what I had missed,
what I have yet to experience
and what I never knew.

I know that if I return, I'd cling
to the memories I make there
as if they were my last.

the west
an endless treacherous ocean, of brutality
vessels carrying thieves and killers
drinking from the skulls of my ancestors
Drinking Our Past
Our thoughts Our words Our existence
As they laugh and wipe their greed
With a dirty sleeve

they leave us empty
reading their past
thinking their thoughts
speaking their words

They smash my Oud and Nay
After stealing my tongue
Taking away any voice for my pain
Laying before me
A piano and a violin

I float among the waves
Trying to hold on
to something
that is mine
But everything is theirs

I implore my ancestors to
Teach me how to swim
So I could once again
reach land
so my feet can once again be rooted
in the ground
extended in the soil

My head as high as the minarets
My voice,
That of the Athan
الله أكبر الله أكبر

My soul, my veins spreading
Across the land
through every Bahrani woman, child and man.

Until then
I will drown
But I will come up again for air
With pearls
I will build my lanjah
Of fishermen
And divers
Where my name is my name
and my voice is mine
and my skin is engraved
with glorious calligraphy

And I will sail.

Destination: Home

Name: Bahrani

Language: Arabi

Mode of Travel:

Decolonized Identity

زَاءُ يَاءُ نُونُ بَاءُ
وسكون

Anonymous

Two Islands

Two islands separated by bottomless seas
Drifting together by palms, pearls and English Tea
Two islands to which I'm supposed to belong
But I ask myself, where am I really from?

Can I affiliate myself with a نظام's constant violations?
Of our rights, our eternal 'Pearl' and our liberation
Hand in hand with perpetrators of annexation
Luring the desperate to bend the knee in prostration

Can I affiliate myself with an ice cold island that doesn't accept me,
Because I'm not intoxicated at the pub or indulging in afternoon tea?
An island flooded with masters filleting melanated hearts with precision of hands so pale
Their own hearts shrivelled perfused with venomous hatred and ginger ale

Can I sit in a فريج of people who disregard the oppression in their society?
Disregard a rejected and dejected majority, self-absorbed, drowning in their hypocrisy
With blinding adherence, "We want peace" they say
Attacking the liberated and shackled رموز in every way

Can I sit in a countryside of superficial ignorance and superiority?
Dismissing, demeaning those who reject white supremacy
Masters of policy, a political game that belittles equality
Constantly attacking our theories and philosophies

One day they will vanish like the transformation of a drop through evaporation
And made accountable for their hatred and discrimination
A demolished Pearl and a martyr blue from brutality
Will demand justice, standing free for eternity

Torn between cultural norms, ethics and ideologies
Trapped in a dichotomy between morals and reality
Two islands separated by bottomless seas
Drifting together by a hybrid identity

Zahra Shehabi

حوار دار بيني وبين زبيبة

أخذتُ حفنة من المكسرات بين بندق وكاجو وغيره ومن ضمنه زبيب
نظرتُ إلى الزبيبة ونظرتُ إلي ودار حوار بيني وبينها.
من أنتي يا عزيزتي؟
جمالِكِ خلاب ولونكِ يأسر القلب وشكلِكِ انسيابي وملمسكِ ناعم وطري
وأظن أن طعمكِ لذيذ ومفيد.
حدثيني عنكِ وعن رحلتكِ وكيف وصلتِ بين يدي؟

أجابت:

يقال عني زبيبة ولي فوائد جمّة وكنْتُ مليئة بالماء والسكر والمواد
الغذائية التي تعطي مذاق لذيذ.

سألتهَا:

ومن أين أتيتِ؟

قالت:

آه يا صديقتي.
شكراً لأنكِ أعطيتني الفرصة لأعرفكِ علي وعلى رحلتي الشاقة
سأبدأ حيث زرعتني واعتنى بي مزارع جميل ومكافح.
كنت ملتصقة بأخواتي في عدق وكان يطلق علينا العنب. لدينا ألوان
براقة الأصفر والأخضر والأحمر والأسود.
وبعد أن نضجنا أنا وأخواتي قطفنا المزارع وباعنا إلى تاجر الخضار.
وهكذا تنقلنا من تاجر إلى آخر ومن بلد إلى بلد.
وصلنا أنا وأخواتي العنبات إلى تاجر الزبيب الذي جففنا من الماء وأطلق
علينا أسم مختلف ومذاق مختلف عن ما كنا عليه.
وبعدها سَرنا في رحلة أخرى يبيعنا تاجر زبيب إلى تاجر آخر إلى أن
وصلتُ إلى أحد المتاجر ووصلت في آخر المطاف بين يديكِ.

أجبتها:

نعم يا عزيزتي الحوار معكِ ممتع.
وهل تسمحين لي أن استمتع بمذاقكِ؟

أجابت:

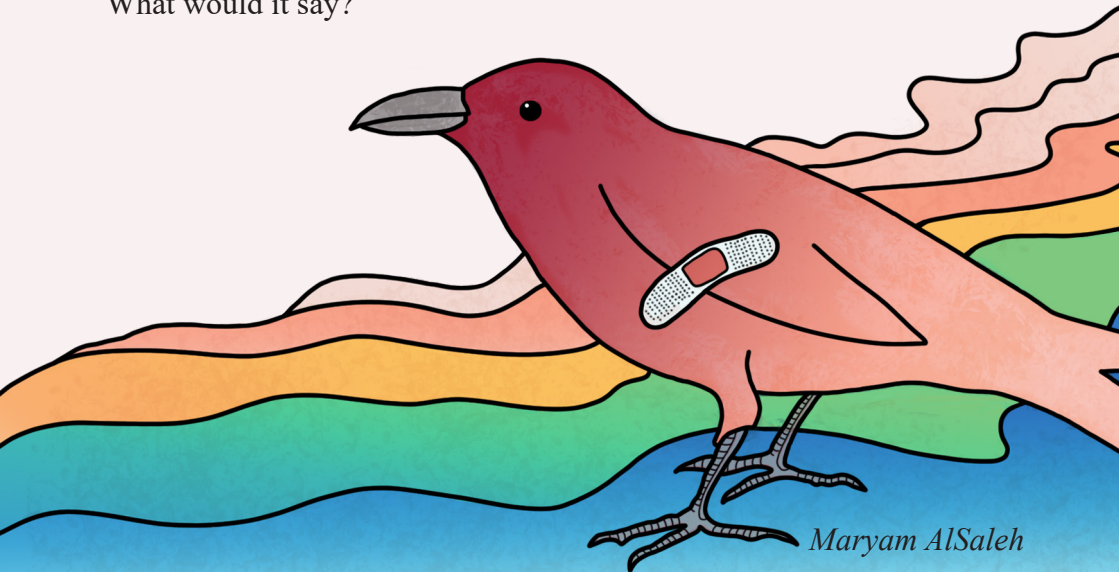
لكِ ذلك وعلى الرحب والسعة.

Bird

If a bird could speak
What would it say?
Would it tell me how much I missed?
Because unlike the bird
I am not blessed
With a pair of wings
Unlike the bird
I have yet to see
All the beauty
That this world has to offer

If a bird could speak
What would it say?
Would it tell me how pretty it is
From up above
Would it tell me how it feels
When it is free
When it spreads its wings

If a bird could speak
What would it say?



Maryam AlSaleh

Remember

Remember how it used to be?
We were filled with so much glee.
We'd always sit under that tree,
I'd hide and you'd count till three.
Then, you'd search everywhere for me.
Until I lost myself in the middle of the gulf sea,
And suddenly you stopped looking for me.
Why did you stop looking for me?

Maryam AlSaleh

Adrift Along the Moonbeam

(1)

Adrift between two islands,
my boat struggles against the sea.
I've been working the oars a lifetime
and I'm careening ceaselessly

 forth
and back, tossed
by the sea, shore
ever in sight,

Land,
 the horizon.
Lighthouses
spot me,
observing
objectively,
they assure.

“Help!”

I fire a flare, am airdropped a census.
I fill it in. Ethnicity: “Other _____”.
This Land at least asks.

That Land scorns:
Doesn't want to count me
 — I harm them by my birth and dreams.
Doesn't want to discount me
 — if I succeed they'll claim my body and deeds.

This Islander sails by, not in a dhow.
I wave him down,
he eyes the form, he whistles,
“These are gonna look great in aggregate,”
and he’s gone.
The lighthouses turn their gaze away.

Maybe—
I am jetsam.

My boat shunts in the darkness.
My oar arms tire.
My force has run its course.

I pull up the oars.
I lay on my back.
I see no horizon.
The sky and the sea melt into one ocean.

That’s when the moon sends his greeting
down a path of light.
Are there islands there too?
Tranquil shores for my boat to beach?
If so, take me, yes,
take me there.



(2)

It came as no surprise to me when my boat beached against the moonbeam, though I did not expect the splintering groan announcing its demise. With ease I abandoned the husk, pressing first my palms, then my feet, upon the silver path. When I did not fall, I turned my crawl into a walk. Ten steps in I looked back. Both the boat and lands I'd left slipped into the sea's blackness. Only the pearly reflection of the moon, a pastel blur on the canvas of the Earth. I turned my back to the waves and walked onwards to the solid thing, and

time expired. The road is long, but my legs did not tire, nor will my stomach ever rumble, nor exhaustion cause a falter. No sound has ever existed but the heart beat-beat of my heart, and the click-click of my heels against the light's sliver. I was alone until in the distance I see a figure. I will fall in beside him. He was like me, that is, unlike. He wears a casual grin and moved in a different skin. "May I...?" will soon puncture the silence. To which he replies, "The more the merrier." "How did you...?" "I dived up." We are onwards to the moon.

We are pearls in the lock-jaw of an oyster and we were free. Others are to fall in amongst us, each with unshared reasons, and we came to number a mass. Silence but for the beat of our heart and the click of our heels. As the moon closed in around us, we are dots again. When we tumbled onto its grey surface, its dust shall embrace us.

We cannot recall which land we set sail from,
but a shipwreck is a shipwreck no matter the shore.

Ali Al-Jamri

تراكم الحمام في شطآن المنى

تراكم الحمام في شطآن المنى فتفكر الى اين يجول السننا
فالقارب المرمي بجانب فيه قبطان يجر المننا
ويوارىها الى حيث قَد يوجد الاغراب في بلد العنا
فلا يختلط عليك اليوم حُبِّي فلا انا انت و لا انت انا

من اين يا غربتي ابتي

من أين يا غربتي ابتي
هل شوق أمي ام ابي؟
او من حنين متعب لصبح الغد؟
او من مصير جرنى حيث انا
اشكي الهموم لصم جدران العنا
وابتلي واشتكي أو اغتدي؟
لا بل بالحب دوماً اقتدي
بعزي باولياي من مولدي
هم اهل بيت طهروا صاروا السننا
اذا جائهم سائلٌ قد نال المنى
وبهم قلب المحب دوماً يهتدي



The Future | المستقبل

في الورشة الخامسة (“المستقبل”) طلبنا من المشاركين أن يتخيلوا إنهم رحالين يعيشون في العام ٢١٢١ وانهم قرروا زيارة البحرين، وعندما وصلوا إليها وجدوها مهجورة ومفقودة تحت البحر. في هذا التمرين التخيلي، قرأ مدير الورشة النص التالي. والشعر “قاربي يستقرب الماضي مجالا” في الصفحات التالية كتب من وحي هذا التمرين.

In our fifth workshop, “Future”, we asked participants to imagine an abandoned, underwater Bahrain. In this visualisation exercise, the facilitator read a text and participants responded with their poetry. The Arabic poem by Mohamed Arab on the following page responds to it.

It is 2121. The sea levels have risen and swallowed the land. You are an adventurer returning to your ancestral lands. Your boat travels for a day on the green blue seas to reach the point where Bahrain once was. You know that this is where the islands used to be because you can see the tips of the ancient Financial Harbour poking out, the sky scrapers like icebergs.

You dive. The waters are clear. You swim to your ancestor’s house. What does the building look like? What state of decay is it in? What sea wildlife do you see? You enter the house. How do you enter? Through the front door? A side gate? A window? You are in a living space, perhaps a majlis. There is a spot here where your ancestor always sat. How do you know it was this spot?

Explore the house. In the room you’re in is a shelf, on it is a book. Pick it up. Is it thin? Thick? Describe it for me. The cover has faded. You cannot read the title. before you open it, what do you think its title was? Open it now. Miraculously, there is one page with undamaged ink. What is written?

Set the book down now. You are going to leave this house now, but before you do, open a drawer, or a hidden space. Look through shelves and under the beds. Take something important with you. An item that they always kept in their home. Spend a moment describing the item you’ve taken.

Now I want you to swim to a public place your ancestor used to visit often. Perhaps a souq, or a mosque, or a mall, or a restaurant, or a shrine. The area here is empty, deserted. Of course it is. You look around. Look at the signs around you. Shop names, street signs, the walls and their graffiti. What messages do you see?

The last time your ancestor was here, they left something. You discover that belonging on the ground. Where do you find it? This is something your ancestor always took with them in public that was meaningful. Spend a moment describing the item.

Finally, you travel to a small graveyard. Even under the sea, some of the gravestones are still sticking out above the sands. One of the graves belongs to someone you know. How do you recognise it?

Swim up to the grave. Who does it belong to? Does it belong to someone you respect, or someone you dislike? What do you say to the buried? Do you have a message for them? Or a question? Perhaps you just recite Al-Fatiha. Write down what you say.

As you finish this prayer, something catches your eye. Half-buried between the graves is an item. Pull it out. It belonged to the person whose grave you visited. Hold it up. What is it made of? What does it feel like? Look like?

Your diving suit beeps, telling you your oxygen levels are low and it's time to resurface. You've collected three items though, and you can only take one of them with you. The private item from the house, the item from the public place, the item from the grave.

Which one do you choose? Why? Justify this choice to yourself. This item, from 100 years ago or longer. What meaning does it hold for you in 2121?

Your diving suit beeps again and you must go. You have to drop the other two items. Take a moment to describe the feeling of letting them go. Watch them fall to the sea floor. Will they be lost here forever? Or do you intend to come back for them one day?

Your diving suit beeps a third time. Your oxygen levels are critical. It's time to return. You swim up to the surface, arrive back at your boat, gasp for air. And you're back in the room with us now.

قاربي يستقرب الماضي مجالا

قاربي يَسْتَقْرِبُ الماضي مَجَالَا
يَنْهَادِي فَوْقَ أَمْوَاجِ جِبَالَا
إِنِّي فَوْقَ بَحْرِ كَانِ بِالِ
أَمْسِ بَحْرَيْنَا يَمِينَا وَشَمَالَا
حَرْقَةً، كَلًّا، شُعُورٌ قَاهِرٌ
أَيْنَ بَيْتِي، بَيْتُ أَجْدَادِي، أَزَالَا؟
فَنَزَلْتُ فِي مِيَاهِ قُدْسَتْ
لَنْ تَجِدَ أَقْدَسَ مِنْ أَرْضِي رِمَالَا
بِالْمُرُوءَاتِ نِسَاءً وَرِجَالَا
بُورِكَتْ بُنْيَانُهَا كَمْ عَمَرَتْ
أَيَّمَا حَلَّوْا كِرَامًا وَمِثَالَا
هَاجَرُوا كُلَّ أَطْرَافٍ وَهُمْ
كُونِهِمْ سَابِحَةٌ أَطْفَالٍ كُسَالَا
وَلِهَذَا وَأَنَا أَسْبَحُ فِي
وَخِيَالِي يَمْلَأُ الأَرْضَ كَمَالَا
يَتَمَشَّى نَاطِرِي مُبْتَهَلًا
وَكَأَنَّ النَّاسَ حَوْلِي فِي انْشِغَالَا
وَضَجِيجِ المَاءِ يَسْتَغْفِلُنِي
وَأَنَا أَسْأَلُهُمْ عَن نَسَبِي
وَهُمْ يَسْتَفْسِرُوا مِنِّي السُّؤَالَا
«كُنَّا مِنْ نَسَبٍ مُشْتَرِكٍ
أَصْلُكَ بِالْثَرَى مُخْتَلِطٌ
أَنْتَ مِنَّا، كُنَّا كُلُّ خِلَالَا
تَحْفِظُنَا فِي قَلْبِكَ أُغْنِيَهُ
وَدِمَاكَ سَطَرْتُ أَمْسًا نِضَالَا
عَنْ قُرَانَا، فِي سَوَاطِ وَتِلَالَا
سَوْفَ نَبْقَى فِي خِيَالِ الثَّوَرَى
نَتَعَنَّى، لَنْ يُشَارِكُنَا الزَّوَالَا»

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3	Mundane	-			
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13	And expiry.				
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15	Organised alphabetically,				
16	From				
17	Abbas		✓		
18	To				
19	Zuhair		✓		
20	Stains of blood				
21	For the	ones,	we couldn't save.		
22					
23	May you never click to				
24	Make neat green ticks				
25	Confirm				
26	Allegations of abuse.				
27	Torture	?	✓		
28					

	A	B	C	D	E
29	26				
30	Entered into				
31	A perpetual raffle,				
32	They didn't buy tickets for.				
33					
34	Treading water,				
35	Knowing they will drown				
36	When the next tsunami				
37	Is ordered to hit.				
38					
39	They struggle				
40	To stay	alive,			
41					
42	The futile fight to remain				
43	Confined.				
44					
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56					

An Island With the Sea as the Escape

We race to the beach, the gentle waves cool our feet
as the raging orange sun sears the loose black cloth on my head
We gaze ahead,
in the horizon boats bob up and down,
waves jostle us back and the light breeze puffs in aid
let's go and play

An Island With the sea as the escape

Children dance and sing 'fatahiya warda'
Mothers discuss their latest concoction of ebharat they add to emawash
Men from boats, with thobes rolled up and ghutras on their head sell samach safi

An Island With the sea as the escape

The smells of salt, humidity and fish drown the air
as we gallop across the shore towards the barada
for the cooling delight of ice cream sandwiches

An Island With the sea as the escape

I slowly walk back, the rough rocks scrape my feet
the sun slowly sets, quietly painting its rage
I gape ahead,
in the distance boats bob up and down,
the boys on them battle the waves and rebel the air
come back, let's play

An Island

With the sea as the escape

Silence

the smells of tarmac, fumes and humidity strangles the senses
cranes burying the sea, imposing land that sinks the view
the beach now further and further away

The sea is still the escape

ارض النخيل
أرض النخيل
في كل مسير وطريق
تبصق الرطب، تمنح الظل، وتهدي السعف

أمي صفية في وسط الدار المفتوح القديم
تجر وتشد الخوص
حركة رتيبة
إبداع فريد من نوعه

قفة موهوبة لماما
مسافره للندن
قليلاً من أرض الوطن
تهبط في الغربة

تجلس هناك
ضائعة
تبحث عن الوظيفة
تحلم بعودتها

تجاعيد

غربتي،

لا يدان مجعدتان فيهما

لا مشمرٌ ينضحُ عَبَقُ الملائكة وعرق الورد

أحفي فلا تصل جذوري الى التراب الأوحـد

أوكُلُ الترابَ وطن؟

غربتي غيمةٌ

لا أمان

مطرٌ لا يروي وظلٌ لا يدوم



Fatima Alhalwachi

لَعِب

من وحي <<ثلاثون سنة الى الوراء>> لنجوان درويش

أرحل في غيبة الكلمات ثلاثين سنةً الى الوراء
الى شجرة الرمان في بيتنا
والليمونة في الطرف القصي
رائحة طبخ أمي ومرسال... لمن شاكسوا الشمس
وصوتُ الأذان رنين الملائك

Here I am again
unravelling memory lane

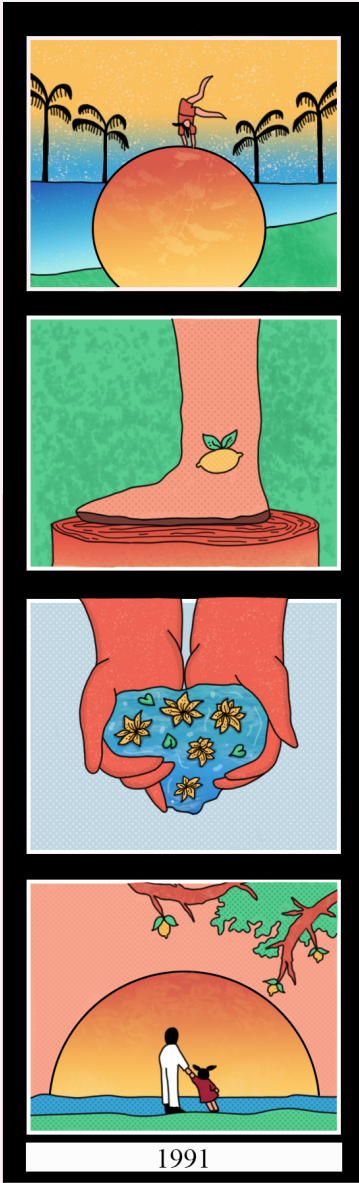
بين الليمونة والتوت
حافية القدمين
أصنع دوائر في التراب تأخذني لذات الكرّة
the blessing of returns
وأمي تسقي زراعتها
تسألهم الدعاء
تنشد النخلة العاقر أن تُشاركها الصلاة

متى يعود أبي؟

little girl, head up high
keen to see her father's smile
تفوح رائحة المرق الآن
والقدرُ يصفر عاشقاً شعلته الحنونة

ستغادرين الآن؟

سأعود يا أمي، سأعود
standing under the lemon tree



1991

Acknowledgements

I would like to give my personal thanks, in no particular order, to all the artists, mentors and friends who made *Between Two Islands* possible.

Thank you:

Amina Atiq, my co-facilitator

Fatema Al-Fanar, our illustrator

Eman M, layout designer

Shirley May, Nasima Begum and all my friends at Young Identity

Anahid Kassabian and Jack Welsh at Liverpool Arab Arts Festival

Amani Hassan and Becky Harrison at the Arab British Centre

Martin de Mello and Commonword

Arts Council England whose National Lottery Project Grant

made this possible

The Bahraini community in Britain

My fantastic workshop participants without whom there would be no poetry

All the friends and supporters who helped make this project a reality

Deep thanks and love to Aleksandra, my wife

and to my parents, for their enduring support

Ali Al-Jamri

Between Two Islands

ما بين جزيرتين

Poetry by Bahrainis in Britain

ISBN 978-0-9934460-4-7



9 780993 446047

£5

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**