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January 29, 2019

If I Lose My Voice

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

If I Lose My Voice

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*If I Lose My Voice* is my attempt at navigating the space between what it means to be American and Syrian, specifically in the midst of the Syrian war. This space is abstract and isolating, so these poems work to ground my identity in things that are more concrete: the body, food, music, flowers...and that do not fall under the clichéd images of Arab culture (i.e. the desert, tea, and the call to prayer). Materializing the gap between two countries creates a home of the things around me rather than a specific location. This, in turn, helps me answer the following questions: What does it mean to live between two cultures? Has language helped to bridge that gap or widen it? Is there a culture I identify more with? How can I actively engage with a culture to ensure it won't be lost over time? How can I be nationalistic for a country I've only visited, and what does it mean to lose that country to war? What is my place in mourning for that country when I am in the privileged position of not being physically hurt by that war? To help me write through those questions, I turn to a variety of writers who are exclusively Arab (i.e. Adonis), American (i.e. Carolyn Forché), and Arab-American (i.e. Fady Joudah).

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## Small Talk

Let the air hang down  
between crossed legs.

I am wearing frill  
and eating citrus iron

wrapped in a grape leaf.  
There is so much I want

to say, but the oxygen  
vibrating my vocal cords

is thin and frail in Arabic,  
my tongue choreographing

letters like a newborn deer.  
I can recall *gazelle* in English

and pronounce *ghazal* in Arabic,  
but I cannot express either

in a different language.  
These are the letters I use

to write about pastries-  
filled-with-spinach. Or

wind-like-the-initial-  
attraction-you-feel-for-

someone in one word.  
With one word, I default

to images of a country  
I've never lived in.

What is the difference  
between using a culture

and belonging to it?

If I swallow enough sumac,

will my tongue bend the way

the tongue is meant to bend?

### When They Ask You: How Do You Speak English So Good?

I am bad at vacuuming  
in straight lines, swimming  
long distance, walking  
across a balance beam.  
Tip too much to one side,  
and the reaction will shift  
to the other. I learned Arabic first.  
If I lose my voice, release doves;  
let the sky develop fenestrations  
in their outlines. With my melted-cheese,  
mashed-potato, Midwest tongue,  
I am a semi-translated Basho poem  
where the cranes float beyond  
their lakes and settle, songless.  
*Mangle* does not mean murder  
always; it might mean ingenuity.  
I am good, too, at other things.

## Remedy

Before my grandmother became  
my grandmother, she was a girl with a country.  
She passed down her uncle's notebook filled with calligraphy  
of medicine tablets, prophets, and grocery lists.

My grandmother, a woman with no country, taught me  
to smell caraway when a baby is born, cardamom at a funeral.  
Medicine tablets, prophets, and grocery lists  
are no cure for those who yearn to come from somewhere.

To smell caraway when a baby is born and cardamom at a funeral  
is to know that stars make a country:  
the only cure for those who yearn to come from somewhere.  
Dilution is what we default to when we lack that cure.

To know what stars make your country is instinctive  
as reading Arabic from right to left.  
Dilution is what we default to when we can do neither.  
Borders make my face what it is.

Arabic is read from right to left  
in an uncle's notebook filled with calligraphy.  
Borders made my face what it is, even  
before my grandmother was born.

## When They Ask You: How Do You Pronounce Your Name?

Fatigue fertilizes into flower gardens I imagine

my mother grew before I existed.  
They are composed of *helianthus*,  
*jasminums*, and *gypsophilas*.

The back of my throat scratches, tongue curls  
heavily, when I introduce myself.

I do not correct it. What I want to say is:  
the tip of your tongue should graze  
the spot behind your teeth, then scatter like light

waves in water. In fifth grade, I decided  
what I wanted to be called for the rest of my life  
when I pronounced "a" and "l" as if biting an apple.

Flowers are crushed and distilled  
to transform into perfume. We use *mentha spicata*  
as a remedy for bad breath. *Talah* means little

palm tree. Does a lie become truth  
if I enunciate it enough? I dream in English  
of a heaven with no apples.

## Ghazal to the Heart

In Arabic, the verb *to turn* (*qalb*) is the root-word for *heart*.  
In English, we call this a *change of heart*.

Ibn al-Nafis was the first to describe pulmonary circulation.  
The left lung curves inward to make room for the heart.

I read about French princesses before hearing the name Scheherazade.  
Cinderella's stepsister cut her heel like an onion to win the prince's heart.

The Quran teaches that God created humans and landscapes  
in pairs, that corruption is a malady of the heart.

Withdrawal can be explained by chemicals in the blood.  
fMRIs visualize the physiological effects of a broken heart.

I first learned guilt when I read Poe's story of a murderer  
who hallucinates the sound of his victim's heart.

Even when the Englishmen have guns, I do not side with the gorillas.  
Phil Collins won a Golden Globe for his song, "You'll Be in My Heart."

If I am to be a physician, I will one day dissect a cadaver.  
As children, we learn how to cut a rectangle into a heart.

Science has proven that, even after the organ is severed  
from the body, a beat is generated by the heart.

Initials carved onto tables and walls resemble permanence.  
Banksy paints a young girl losing a balloon in the shape of a heart.

For every wound, there is a regeneration of cells. Touch  
an expectant mother's belly, and your hand looks for the heart.

God has 99 names, but in one specific supplication,  
He is referred to as *The Turner of Hearts*.

Say *Talah* in English, and it starts in the throat.  
Say it again in Arabic; let it pull towards the heart.

## Arabic Music Videos

It's not the immaculate woman staring out the window, her lover's arms like a scarf around her waist, and not the man with the gel-slicked hair singing of heartbreak but my father's white undershirts hanging from clothes-lines on balconies, the prickly pear sold on carts, and the guitar in the background, reminding me why I watch these to begin with. A song about a beloved's eyes can fill this space: not the void of dancing down alleyways with someone but of recognizing the doors and vines of those narrow roads. Even then, the women dye their hair blonde to look like someone, and an American rapper, weighed down by chains, makes a cameo only to stumble on a single word: *habibi*.

## Tabbouleh

My mother chops  
parsley. It sparks

forward from her  
hands and the knife

like the spiraled  
embers of spring

for my throat, which craves  
the sour memory of

tomato, onion, lemon,  
parsley, taking me to

the sea, the stripe  
on a flag, my father's

eyes. This silent  
promise of swollen

knucklebones: her refusal  
of the food processor.

I am grateful for  
the salted edges

that scratch my tongue –  
something my mother

and her mother raised me  
to want. The coasts

and mountains we made  
our beds on are no longer

ours. These women  
who know taste scattered,

bound only by a rhythm,  
the green becoming a little

lighter, the tabbouleh  
a little less sour.

**Jasmine**

*After Rita Dove*

## I. Hama

It is not yet spring. We were born with teeth  
clasped to our tongues, leaving imprints  
the shape of stars. White jasmines bloom in March.  
Our city is green; our flag is red. How do we remember  
the taste of mint when mastic gum only mimics it?

The palace in the capital prepares for spring. The Doctor  
is an ophthalmologist. His gaze traces cities. A face  
on billboards and menus is a face one will not forget.  
Now televisions remind us we exist. His irises  
sharpen like burnt grass when you stare at them.  
Bruises shift in color – from purple to blue to green.

Boys' graffiti announce a new spring:  
*It's your turn, Doctor.* Ancient alleyways  
echo whether we shout or whisper in them.  
We have no names but that of our city.  
The scent of plucked jasmine lingers in the streets.

## II. Damascus

In the garden, The President orders generals to look  
for spring. Flowers grow from green buds  
resembling those that dangled over him  
at fifteen, knocked to the ground, brother's fist  
against his cheek. His father's frown was dirt and blood.  
"The Doctor's eyes are soft," his brother said.  
"They know only his books, nothing of strength."

In his closet, green boots lie beneath a white coat.  
He once dissected bodies, cutting bulbs of pink.  
He remembers their teeth, glistening like marble  
as his father's did, even in mourning.

He stares at the boots when a man informs him  
of the message on the wall. He imagines the Arabic  
calligraphy swirling like weeds. The abstraction of  
one pain leaves a bullet-shaped hole in its place.

### III. Daraa

How could I know my body  
would morph into an ashtray  
for soldiers drinking tea or that chemical  
toxins extend beyond breath?

Paint hisses as it tattoos  
the school wall in red. Adrenaline springs  
from our organs into sweat glands,  
our palms leaving imprints  
on a metal can. A doctor would know  
the chemistry behind this, just as he knows  
how fumes disseminate past their containers,  
how rust can take years to develop.

I cut my finger. Is pressing a valve  
worth it if, after eight years,  
my art will be painted over  
in the name of rebuilding a country?  
Only the scent of aerosol is temporary.

#### IV. Wichita

Imagine your summers televised.  
I dismiss my friends with, "No, not there,"  
before seeing the obsidian projection  
of my street's balconies on a screen,  
the deluge of men and a translation:  
*the people want the fall of the regime.*  
I knew nothing of distortion then.

"No, not serious," until the silence  
between me and my father  
expands in the car like sarin  
along a skyline, with a clear-throated  
radio host announcing death tolls  
as if they are a new art  
exhibit premiering in D.C.

This is the year I get braces and  
a new pair of glasses, rearrange color  
and star, and learn to distill polite rage  
at a man I've only seen in photos,  
never here. "Yes, but temporary."  
Summers spent in Kansas, how little  
then my lungs craved the strange  
mix of jasmine and gasoline.

## Myopic

Shine a flashlight through a diffraction  
grating and ask where the light is.  
The light comes from somewhere  
between your clavicles and pectorals.  
I am 5'6. I have my father's eyes.  
The retina clings to light  
like a permanent migrant. Vision is  
what our brains want it to be. Of the moon  
I demand a certain hue of yellow to hit  
my bedroom window, to bend,  
disperse, disappear into candlelight.  
Cut your finger on paper and ask  
what we are made of. You do not recognize  
yourself in a mirror. Regenerative,  
we are made of chemicals,  
of little photons of light.

## Summer Every Winter

When I first heard *melancholy*,  
I tasted watermelon. Every July,  
my brothers and I spat seeds of fat  
fruit into grass hoping to grow  
a tree in the middle of Kansas.

There was one thing we learned in summer:  
glass shards. If we dropped the cup of water  
our mother asked us for on the concrete  
outside, her face would redden and hollow  
whether she yelled or not. It's human nature

to think back two-hundred years and hear  
rockets. My brothers and I wished for  
summer every winter, sweat stains on  
white shirts fading. We would not tell you  
about the lack of trees or the friend  
who tried growing pineapples

on this barren flatland but describe to you  
their golden flesh. Now, when one of us drops  
a glass on the ground, we wonder how  
we stand there, blood running down our legs,  
with an aftertaste of watermelon.

## Dive

Between my body and the lake, I see my shadow  
spread across the water; ripples mold my outline  
into glass art. The force of gravity  
depends on two masses and the  
distance of atoms between them.  
I stare at my jump the same way  
my throat shakes in front of an audience.  
I am superfluous with thoughts.  
I wish for designs in the water, mosaics  
on this American lake to remind me  
of the Mediterranean. Magic is my brother  
wearing his unwashed socks in hopes the Bulls win  
or my grandmother tightening grape leaves  
with three rolls. The water curls the way  
my voice moves. My tongue speaks a language  
not quite one or the other. Atoms have orbitals  
that mix to overlap better. My hands are inches above  
the water, my toes milliseconds  
away from the ground. I am frozen like this,  
like the stream of a waterfall beyond direction.

### **When They Ask You: Do You Shower in That?**

Soak your head in lukewarm water for two minutes, not too hot or the scarf will shrink.

Take a quarter of shampoo in your hand, and work into lather. Be gentle: circular motions. Dig your fingers into the folds, so you don't miss a spot. I recommend a shampoo with keratin; there is nothing worse than an unruly hijab.

Rinse in cool water to lock in moisture. Your scarf will keep you warm.

Apply a dime of conditioner to the ends. Rinse with cold water, and comb out any tangles or excess. Only apply to the ends. Otherwise, your hijab will be greasy at your scalp and lose volume.

Pat dry, and squeeze the water out. If you find your hearing is worse, that is normal. You have a tight wet cloth wrapping your ears.

(Optional) Apply oil, hair butter, or cream to the ends in order to control frizz. I recommend argon oil for those of you with naturally viscose scarves.

Air-dry to prevent damage. Then sleep in that, wake up in that, leave home in that, answer questions in that, get hot in that, repeat in that, in that, in that, in that...

## Thanksgiving

Always next to the too-dry, uncarved  
turkey is a plate of chicken stuffed with rice  
and a wife's defensive, "The one day a year we eat this..."  
to a sister visiting from overseas.  
There is always an eggplant dish  
from the stove of a Damascene family  
or the oven of an Aleppine one and the argument  
of which is more worthy to bless the crooked  
Wichita table. Pomegranate seeds stain my fingers.  
An uncle (who is not actually my uncle) arrives  
in a Ford pickup. Place a bowl of seawater  
on our table, and it will not spill. The vastness  
of land mutes foreign yells of women  
boasting about the USD 259 school  
their kids have conquered or disappointed  
men debating Pompeo's new policies. Always,  
after forged excitement, we speak  
back to forsaken home and its fresher vegetables,  
where zucchinis come already hollowed  
and the meat does not sit rigid in  
your mouth. A table's shape  
is defined not by its outline but by  
what it contains. Stories of pilgrims  
I know by heart. This is the half-chewed,  
cold, and lonely dream: sons rushing inside after soccer  
to ask, "When can we have dessert?" Always,  
next to the knafeh, a circle of Dillon's Grocery  
brand pumpkin pie still sits in its plastic.

**Ramadan**

The hairy centers of sunflowers all face the same direction,  
aligned in a field; a wave is generated  
by the varying heights of stems. Yellow petals reach out  
to each other,  
close enough to appear to touch, far enough  
to remind me they are lonesome. Their beams  
falter like the fluorescent bulbs that flicker light  
upon the wrinkles of women in the mosque,  
where a man cries for forgiveness before hundreds of other men,  
where the flowers outside bow  
slightly without enough water. People wilt  
across a patterned carpet that smells slightly of amber,  
slightly of skin.  
Hunger freshly relieved, the congregation presses  
their foreheads onto the ground in unison like dough  
beneath the hands of a child, and submits without knowing  
anything about the circumference of flowers.

## Genealogy

His hands were acrylic landscapes: peach  
sunset blotched with a purple cloud,  
venous peaks of Damascene mountain, hollow  
knucklebone sea, and freckles brown like cumin.

At the end of his life, he was hollowed  
to bone and skin, unrecognizable,  
except for his hands.

Would I cry when I heard the news?  
I once worried. Acrylic mistakes are harder  
to blur than watercolor ones.

I did cry. It was *fajr*. I lifted  
my hands, recognized a rocky shoal,  
and mourned the loss of something selfish.

**Duplex: Wedding Ululations**

This sound is a signal of sadness  
that begins at the tongue's edge.

When a sound begins at the tongue's edge,  
the muscle flexes then flattens.

Their muscles flexing and flattening,  
men hit drums with a passion for stage light.

This lonely passion hidden by stage light:  
flowers are thrown away by the end of the night.

Echoes erode your ear by the end of the night,  
but they are not hollow like echoes should be.

Parents cry over lost children as they should.  
No, the echoes are heavy and drenched with sea.

We drench our joys with trills from overseas.  
This sound is a signal of sadness.

## Love in Arabic

### I. Dark

*ya'el yomi abl yowmak /  
may my days be ended before yours*

I do not remember the face or name of my father's cousin until I see Baba, home early from work, sitting cross-legged on the floor like a young boy in school. Or, rather, I do not remember until I hear the name exit Baba's mouth as he speaks to relatives we haven't seen in years and reminds me how many children the man had, whose son he was, which woman's cheeks I once kissed are now sticky with widow tears. I make up stories for the dead I met once about five years ago at a dinner in our great uncle's backyard where they passed around tea and I looked for bugs in the dark. I am certain about only this much: that he has five kids and was in line for mail when the bomb hit, that I now possess a tragedy of a wife sobbing when her husband does not come home and the children ask where he is. What's the name for the hollowness in the space behind your sternum where you are supposed to feel pain? I am attached to a group of people whose faces are blurred by the dark of night in childhood, people I cannot miss.

## II. Dirt

*tu'breenee /  
may you bury me*

I wonder at times if my grandmother is conscious of what she says when she pinches my cheeks like shredded cheese to fill the *barak* with to tell me she loves me with the caveat that we will both make a bed out of soil one day. In Arabic, there are at least 11 words for love. Each has a different origin (the same origins for *ivy*, *wind*, *camel tar*...) and represents a different stage of love (*desire*, *attraction*, *passion*...). But the most common word, *hubb* – general love, representative of all its forms: familial, platonic, romantic – originates from the word *seed*, as it has the potential to grow into something beautiful, consumable, and half-underground, nurtured by damp, worm-filled shadow. *Hubb* is the word my Nana uses. I adorn myself only to hear her honeyed request of burial. What makes a mother's love for her child different from her love for any other child, except that she is hers? I am reminded of age five times a day when Nana sits to bow instead of leaning on her knees, but I forget it when we tell the same collagenic stories over again in the living room under the same dim lights.

### III. Seed

*inshallah amoot fee hawak /  
I pray to God to die in your love*

Seeds may germinate in the unlikeliest places. *Our destroyed buildings are a witness to our resistance and to your crimes.* In 2016, @iyad\_elbaghdadi posted a Twitter thread of graffiti left by citizens forcibly evacuating Aleppo. Each photo focuses on the black or red curling text with a date 15/12/16 but no context as to where in the city the wall belongs or who wrote it. *Under every building are families buried with their dreams.* This is except for one photo, in which the text becomes a backdrop for two individuals facing away from the camera. The man has his arm around the woman, who leans her head on his shoulder. *Once the siege is broken, I will come and propose.* His rifle, slung on his back, traces her arm, which is pressed against his side. Her free hand holds a can of spray paint. *We'll return, Aleppo.* These men do not make promises only to the bundled bodies of the women they love. *To her who spent this siege with me, I love you.* No, their promises extend beyond body to dirt itself, that velvet brown buried under a thin layer of gray spectral excrement. *We'll return, oh love.* As if pulse was a core of magma beneath their feet somehow linked to heaven. *Love me away from the land of oppression and repression, away from our city, which has had enough death.* As if lyrics were a tourniquet.

## IV. Okra

*bamoot feek /  
I die in you*

When Fairouz sings, “We’ll return, oh love,” she follows with the lines, “To the home of love, to the fire of love.” She both speaks to love and makes a place of it. Whether that place is warm or scalding, I cannot tell. All I know about love is what I’ve heard. Nassif Zeytoun interrogates the moon about beauty then commands it to come down to earth and make room for his beloved. Yet in another song he says, “I want her to course through my blood and be a part of me...I would hide her within my ribs...” Is love atmospheric or molecular? In *Layla and Majnoon*, the color black becomes beloved to Majnoon since Layla’s skin is dark. Here, love is made of night, the ink of scripture, and the fur of a dog. But Adonis places it in himself, asking, “What will love do if I, too, am gone?” Before my grandfather died, I did not think my grandparents loved one another. They spoke in small arguments: home-cooked food is better than restaurant food, shopping for clothes so frequently is unnecessary, the best way to stew okra is like this... In heaven, God will marry a woman to the husband she had on earth if that is who she would choose to be with eternally, even in this place where she can have anyone. After smelling the cardamom coffee that filled our house after the funeral, seeing grandmother poised alone in her room with the Quran on her lap, I learned that the bickering routine of existence is love. The fire Fairouz sings of is felt only in its absence.

## V. Letter

*darb al habib zbeeb /*  
*a hit from the beloved is like a raisin*

Damascus, I only dream of walking under your black and white archways and through your crowded souqs now that they have heard the emptiness of wind after a shelling. Detachment can metastasize if left untreated. Would I write about you as much as I do had you not seen the eyes of families, tortured? To be grateful for war is to be selfish. To be grateful for and hurt by it is to be hyphenated. Qabbani's poems about home were more beautiful when he left it. I have yet to write you a love letter without rubble.

## Photographs of Our Apartment, Destroyed

*Halayya, Damascus*

My father shows us photos of our pillaged mountain-house in the outskirts of Damascus on his iPhone 7 while we are at brunch.

The first image is the entrance: the display cabinet doors flayed open, china plates spilling the ground like expensive white sunlight, and bouquets of fake roses we used to decorate the now-missing table. What they could not take, they destroyed.

They stole the oven, the aroma of dough, cheese, za'atar, and smoke trapped inside. The sliding glass door is shattered, so wind now pushes the curtain into the kitchen, brushing the walls still smudged in our greasy finger prints.

Any time my cousins and I finished eating, adults required we raise our hands until we washed them. The sink is ripped from the floor, bowl of the other sink smashed with a hole resembling hungry reptilian mouth. All the piping is missing. A clock that is not ours sprawls unbroken on the floor. Zoom in enough, beads of sweat condensed on porcelain.

In the living room, the chandelier lies mangled and dusted beside the foot of a couch flipped over. Ripped paint surrounds where the electric sockets used to be. The shelves are cleared of the PlayStation, UNO cards, and dominoes my cousin would construct

intricate rows of, begging us  
not to get too close. How easily  
something so solid can be destroyed  
by young breath.

Out the broken window,  
the backyard is verdant with a ceiling  
of grape vines tangled around  
pipe and wire, towering above  
tossed swing sets. It is not quite the season  
for apple, cherry, peach, and almond,  
but the mountains are just as we left them,  
like a green screen untampered.

The photos are taken a few hours before  
we tear scrambled eggs on whole china,  
where a waiter interrupts to ask:  
would you like coffee or tea?

## Recovery

Christmas lights adorn cities abandoned  
just last year. Fairouz's song of snow has replaced  
shellings. I cannot say whether this is good news

when the same face floats in the background  
and tongues stay pressed inside mouths  
like petals against glass. Home is a graveyard

with quaint buildings on top. Betrayal,  
I once thought, is something bitter and hot  
you grew accustomed to. Its sweetness: I know

now it stretches like mastic ice cream and melts  
in your mouth when anyone asks, *Do you want  
to go back?* Sin is easy; it carves the heart with guilt.

To stand in the middle is much more dizzying.  
What does it mean to label my country as nothing  
more than a grave? Immigrants hate the place

they want their children to love. To study a rut  
in empathy is to study the migration of birds  
without knowing where they started. I learned

the map of Syria after our estrangement. Damascenes  
all recognize *Bakdash* as the ice cream shop downtown  
I have never been to, my absence made permanent.

## Exits

Light shuts like a door. Our bodies create exits for other people. Stretch your fingers in the morning to relieve this tenderness. Probe the mirror for a speck of dust in the shimmer. Describe yourself in two words: *fluorescent* and *floral* or *opaque* and *gauche*. What you do with what is given says more about you than your sign (March, springtime, Aries). Typing spilled across a keyboard, a tumor removed from a woman's breast, this is what it means to be alive. Bring light above a child's teeth, and watch what they reflect: a tangerine dress at the edge of water in summer. This is what it means to die. I despise vulnerability; what then do I make of myself? I dispose all I know in screen light and letter clamor, bring a camera, make sure the flash is off, and write to a voice uncaptured.

**When They Ask You: Where Are You From?**

Your heart is attached to your tongue, the same way  
your first country is bound to your second  
by cells attached to other cells and other cells  
you are constantly shedding to form new ones  
in this place. A home is not a home until you make it,  
and the past exists only because you remember  
your parents telling stories on the balcony during Ramadan.

These facts cement your body to its place;  
let your body find its place everywhere.

The giraffe's neck expands with time, wrote Lamarck,  
from physical exhaustion. Our bodies hold memories  
our families experienced. Your fingertips and the walls  
you've touched become your genes –  
even the bedsheet you lie on becomes your country.

## Notes

**“When They Ask You: How Do You Pronounce Your Name?”**

Inspired by a quote from the children’s book *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes, “She loved the way it sounded when her mother woke her up...when her father called her for dinner...when she whispered it to herself in the bathroom mirror...”

**“Arabic Music Videos”**

One such video is Canadian-Lebanese rapper Massari’s collaboration with Lebanese singer Maya Diab and American-Moroccan rapper French Montana on a cover of a 1990s Arabic song “Nour El Ain.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tEbNOIPgxc>

**“Jasmine”**

In 2011, Bashar al-Assad, dictator of Syria, ordered at least 15 Syrian children arrested and tortured because of anti-regime graffiti. Mass protests demanding their release began in March.

**“Love in Arabic, III. Seed”**

See Twitter thread referenced:

[https://twitter.com/iyad\\_elbaghdadi/status/809482001313042434](https://twitter.com/iyad_elbaghdadi/status/809482001313042434)