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## Binti: Daughter of Arab America

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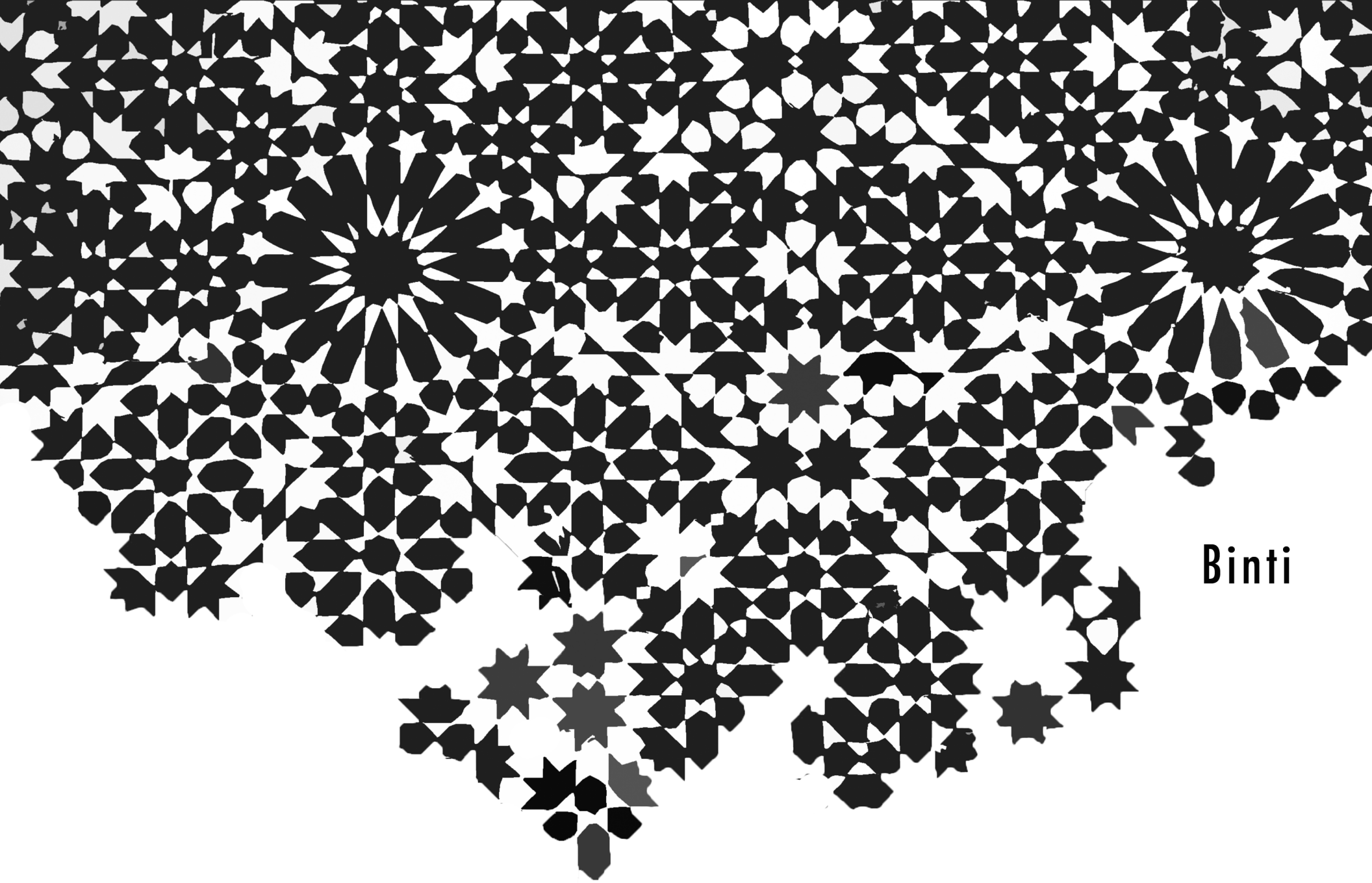
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Binti

**Daughter of Arab America**

**Melika Valentine Belhaj**



## Mama

Julie Ann Valentine  
b. April 19 1958  
Ohio, United States

In many ways I had a very idyllic childhood. Particularly, I remember Alpena. You know the freedom of life in the 60s and 70s in a small American town. I remember with friends going off on our bikes during the summer and not being home all day. I remember going to cemeteries and doing pressings on the grave stones; and collecting leaves and going to friends' houses and playing cards, we used to play Hearts at different people's houses. All my friends whose mothers worked, mind you. We never were at my house. We would make food or we would walk around, or we'd talk. I remember The Carpenter's "Close to You," that was a big part of 7th grade one summer. One year we painted the upper rooms in the garage at my friend Kris' house because we were going to make a place for us to hang out and her mother totally let us do it. I mean, you look back and you think would I let my kids do that? But it wasn't in front of the TV, it wasn't in front of a video game. It was very, very simple. And sleepovers, listening to Alice Cooper's "School's Out," all of the Jackson Five hits, music from the 70s. Those were the really happy parts.

Home, less so. My dad was a hugely positive influence for me in most ways as a kid. He was the one who read with us. He is the reason that I love literature so much. I remember when he'd take naps he'd always tell us stories, he'd all it "Another Piece of Apple Pie," and he'd tell me the story but it was really about you and half way you'd get oh, that's me you're talking about! At dinner time we had these little figurines, there was a fox and a skunk, and he'd hide them, and we'd play the game oh you're steaming hot, you're so so so close and then you're cold, oh you're so cold you're going to be in Alaska. It was just a game just to find something that was hidden, but it was very... clearly I remember it at 57. He could be a lot of fun. But, the relationship between my parents was always very difficult. I actually don't think I remember most of that. I think I blocked it out. Just very volatile. I think my Mom was stuck. She did not want to be the bottle washer and cleaner and cook, she didn't like doing any of that. She wanted to be somebody. In the 50s, being somebody was being an executive's wife. Once the teaching was taken away, and she had to be a full time caretaker, I think that there was a lot of resentment about her essentially being unimportant and Dad being important.

My take away from the family of origin is that I always felt really important, and smart, to my Dad. That was the vision I developed for myself, that I was smart, and that people liked me. You know that part, the home part, not so great. I spent most of my time away from home. I really built a world for myself with other people providing support because when my Dad wasn't around, home was not very pleasant. It's just interesting, my young adult, or my formative teen years, was finding people to mentor me. Even though home was not very happy, I had a fairly happy experience because I did not stay home. I went elsewhere, and elsewhere was usually a lot happier than home.

## Baba

Abdulwaheb Soulami Belhaj  
b. 1946  
Fez, Morocco

Our house was like a circus. We were so many people in the house, living basically four rooms with the patio in the middle and the terrace on the top of the house. Nothing was organized in terms of meals, you wake up whenever you wake up and you eat whatever you make for your breakfast or somebody will make your breakfast for you, your mom or sister. When we were going to school, that was different, we had breakfast before we left. But during the holidays we didn't have any organization, there was time to have the main meal, which is in the middle of the day, lunch, which is the most important meal, within a couple of hours between noon and two o'clock depending on how many people you have et cetera. My mother was always busy with the household, cooking, cleaning, mostly in the morning. In the afternoon they used to, the women, socialize and do some artisanal work, chatting and talking about anything. My father used to go in the morning to do all the shopping for the household, for both our family and my uncle's family since we lived together in the same house. He will get fresh fruit, meat, and everything by himself, and carry everything to the house. Then he will go and shop for the epicerie.

My father and my uncle owned a grocery store. My uncle used to go to open the store early in the morning, he was an early riser, and he will wake up before sunrise to say his prayer and go open the store while my father was sleeping until after nine. And, so they managed the store, my uncle will go in the morning and my father will go after lunch, after he did all the work of grocery shopping and getting stuff for the store and he will stay until late in the evening, 11 p.m. He will leave the store after a busy day and walk in the streets, the narrow streets of Fez, probably 10 to 15 minutes to get home and nobody ever bothered him or tried to steal anything from him. It was very safe. Myself, since my father and my uncle also had a business of a bakery - they made bread and they distributed it to different stores for resale - I used to go once a week to get paid for the bread that these stores owed, my father and my uncle the bread that they sold during the week. I used to go in the evening, probably for a couple hours going from store to store and people will pay me and everything was in cash, so I will put the money in my pockets and walk back home and nobody ever bothered me. It was very safe and people knew each other, it was like a big family.

Growing up I learned a lot of good values like to be trustworthy, to be clean, to do charity, to help the poor, to perform prayers, to go to the mosque on Fridays, et cetera. And to read the Qur'an. We were very well taken care of in terms of food and clothes. We never starved, we always had food on the table and we were taught to share things that we like with other people. For example, when we sit at the table, since we shared food from the same plate, big plate, if there is a piece of meat that is really good we will offer it either to our parents or to our brother or sister, or whoever is at the table. And they also do the same thing, they will offer us a piece of meat, or anything that they will rather give us than have it themselves. These are the values that we learned growing up, I don't feel that they have changed.



This was 1981? 82? I was pretty much ostracized for dating and moving in with your Dad. I was cut off entirely. I think the framework from the family was why are you doing this to us, why do you have to do these things to us, not realizing that you don't really choose who you're going to be with to piss people off. It's just interesting because I truly loved your Dad and to me he was the only person who I felt that way about. It was very, very hard.

I think that there is a lot with Dad and me that doesn't get said, particularly when we were first together. A lot of things that were just implicit that we both just believed. Dad and I are not high maintenance people and I think that we both really wanted a quiet meaningful existence. I think that was something that we both felt strongly about. I think that we both felt strongly about working hard and building something. I think that we both felt very strongly about home. Home was very important; having a base, a center, a place to be. Kids, definitely. We always knew we wanted at least one child and I think that there was this sense that the kids were really important. I mean, in your Dad's culture that just goes unsaid, and with me I always just knew I wanted at least one child. I wasn't sure how I'd do as a parent, I was a little concerned that I might not be good at it. A general sense of optimism, a sense of giving back, a sense of small things. Enjoying small things the way Dad enjoys his garden.

I think there was a lot of assumption on both our parts. In my part, my assumption was we would just meld both of our cultures. Kids would be exposed to Christian values, kids would be exposed to Muslim values, and we would find a way, that it would work itself out. Honestly, not brilliant. Those conversations need to be had. Those issues need to be clarified. They've had to be clarified obviously as we've gone along in the marriage, but that's an important thing to discuss up front. And we just didn't, I don't know why. I don't think I ever framed me raising you guys as I'm raising two multicultural children. I always saw it as I'm raising two children; I want them to be healthy, I want them to be happy, I want them to be responsible, I want them to be mindful, I want them to be respectful. Whether that was a fault or not, I can tell you quite honestly that's not how I framed it. I just didn't.

Mama



Raising a family, raising kids in a multicultural medium or household that was a very new thing for me. If you think about me growing up in a very traditional household, that had tradition, centuries of tradition, everybody doing the same thing and everything homogeneous, everybody comes from the same culture et cetera, having to raise kids in the States was very hard for me. But given that, considering that I am not a very verbal person, it was very hard for me to communicate my beliefs and my thoughts and everything to my kids. I always let the kids think whatever they think and thought about teaching them good values and watching me do my things, like prayers and behaviors. Since it was a mixed marriage, it was hard to impose a language and to speak other languages, especially Moroccan or French, because the kids were 80% of the time, or I'd say probably 50% of the time, or at least in the daylight time, with other kids in a different environment where everybody spoke English, where the culture is different and everything is different, and so it was very hard. But, I did my best to communicate to everybody, I mean communicate to my kids good values and a little bit of French, a little bit of Arabic.

Baba

LEAD

In Casablanca my cousin said:  
We are from Fez, our people.

We are from the valley.

Wherever you go, the valley will find you.

Baba packed dates and figs in empty yogurt containers  
and visited my classroom.

He stood short at the blackboard,  
writing my classmates names in Arabic,

Marcus Kyle Jon Shayna Nora Quinten

When it came my turn  
Baba wrote Molly from right to left,  
the chalk one lovely continuum along the board.  
He and Mama always thought I looked like a Molly.

On September 11  
my mother cried in our basement.  
The sun bright through a small window  
made her blue eyes glisten.

I don't know where Baba was.  
I wonder if she thought of him then.  
I wonder if her mother thought, I told you so.

Marcus Kyle Jon Shayna Nora Quinten

and I watched the smoke on the television that morning  
when our teacher interrupted his math lesson.

We stared at the screen held up by a metal box  
in front of the blackboard my father formerly wrote our names on.  
Remnants of chalk from his calligraphy now elegant dust  
caught in the silver grate beneath the board.

I sat drawing on my desk with a number two pencil  
lead piling on either side,  
my little  
chrome valley.





## MONARCH

The sign read Aladdin's  
Al-a-deen's  
my father reminded me  
bells ringing against each other  
upon our entrance.

We walked to the back past refrigerators  
to a white counter with a swinging door  
behind it an industrial cutting machine  
the same color as the counter.

Allo my father called  
echoing beyond the machine.

I wandered away  
picking through bagged spices  
dried sage, cinnamon sticks  
turning glass jars of floating olives  
pinching date paste packed in plastic.

Allo Abdulwaheb Asalam

In the shadow of the aisle  
I watched the butcher tie his apron  
Walaikum salam I heard my father say,  
resting his wrinkled hand on the counter.

Aiwa binti qu'est ce que tu veux?

I blushed, passing through the shadows  
my rouge transparent beneath the florescent lights  
back towards the counter.

Ma fille, Melika, my father said  
in the colonist's tounge  
as I stared at the knot tied  
in the butcher's apron  
imagining untangling  
and retying it.

Qu'est ce que tu veux, Melika?  
the butcher asked.

My stomach fluttered,  
the monarchs ready to hatch  
batting and  
crawling and  
stretching and  
flying.

I thought of lamb cut for Harira and  
for tagine with prunes and  
ground with fat  
like my father said  
they make in the medina.

My mouth watered.

Chops, my father said.  
She likes them on the grill.

The butcher turned to the back  
where the lamb hung  
and I turned my head to follow.

The criss crossing strings of his apron  
at the bottom of his spine  
above the length of his legs  
moved as he walked.

I vanished to the glass case  
clear across the shop  
longingly looking at  
spinach pies and stewed aubergine  
kibbeh and baba and hommous.

My father greeted the woman  
who appeared from behind  
asking her for rice pudding.  
Shukran, he said, nodding his head.

The swinging door creaked, soft steps on the aisles shadow.

Lamb chops, I heard behind me.

Merci Monsieur my father said softly  
as they shook hands,  
kissing each others cheeks.

The thought of the butcher's palms  
pressed against mine  
released the monarchs and  
I breathed in and out and  
they batted  
around the butcher and my father  
and they rested on the glass counter  
they passed through the aisles  
ecstatic in the aroma of  
cardamom and fennel  
cumin and star anise  
in packages stained with my fingerprints.

I hoped one found its way towards the counter,  
batting its wings resting on the butcher's shoulder  
that moved untying an apron.

I found my father  
at the front counter.

Prayer beads reflecting afternoon sunlight  
making prisms on the cashier's hands as he punched numbers.

I thought about the lamb in the back  
the way the butcher's shoulders leaned forward  
as his arms wrapped to tie his apron.

My father stood in the door, the bells ringing,  
evil eyes watching me,  
royal blue.  
Yella, binti.

Through the door  
we stood on frosted concrete  
beneath the painted sign,  
Aladdin's,  
a grey Michigan sky.

In the front seat of my father's car  
he placed a double wrapped bag of lamb chops on my lap.

I rested my hands on the plastic,  
the lines of my palms hugged the bones,  
as we reversed over ice and gravel  
the Qur'an singing  
through the stereo.

## BABA

I remember my father in the morning. Sunlight sieved through the window's screen into the kitchen. He cleaned mint leaves from his jardin. His beige djilaba swayed as he passed between cupboards, searching for gunpowder tea and wildflower honey. His toes curled inside his house shoes, my father reached for our silver teapot. He and I carried it across the ocean from the northern Sahara; etched with patterns that mimic the sand. The mint had purple stalks which he pushed inside the silver, on top of the tea, the honey, and dried sage, making aromatic his sixth decade leather hands. The kitchen was a holy place. He poured simmering water from the kettle into the silver and the leaves and honey made whirlpools. The pilot on low the whirlpool bounced for its second, slow boil. A thousand times I watched, each the same: the mint, the cupboard, the pot, the pilot. And every morning as the gunpowder unraveled my father sat whispering suras from his red and gold Qur'an. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar. I can still hear the pilot switch off; gravity pulling the tea leaves to the bottom of the pot. The sunrise streamed through half opened blinds. My father poured tea, beginning low, raising his arm to make a long stream, and low again. I remember my father in the morning having tea with Allah.

When I was tall enough to touch my nose to my father's knee, he took me to pray at the only mosque in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Women walked through an entrance against yellow brick walls on the other side of where my father lead me. Before the prayer began, men sat with one knee tucked in to their chests. Their heads nodded; conversation echoed off the low ceiling. Women leaned against the back wall, children paced over woven prayer rugs. The imam sang, Allahu Akbar. The skin beneath my father's hazel eyes is darker than the rest and when he move between recitations he closed his eyes, casting a shadow over his patchy visage. The men echoed; my father's eyes remained closed. Allahu Akbar, I whispered, my ears parallel with my father's knee. I watched the way the men surrounding me moved up and down, their foreheads and flat palms pressing against carpeted floor. I copied them, practicing prostrations. I wondered what my father heard in the imam's voice. Afterwards he kissed me, right cheek to left cheek and back again. My father held my petit hand and we walked into the day past plastic tables with plates of baklava and samosas.

Maghrib, sunset, is the name of a prayer said in the evening. Maghreb, Morocco, is the name of the country where the sun sets late on the African continent. The country where my father learned to speak and walk, the land where my father learned to pray. My father kept a prayer rug at his work place, carefully folding another over a chair in the living room of my childhood home. During Ramadan, the holy thirty days, we fasted together. When I was tall enough to meet my eyes with the countertops, I set a table for two before resting my head at night. Two plates, two sets of cutlery, two glasses for tea. In the morning my father filled the empty spaces with small plates of dried figs and dates, cured black olives and orange slices, boiled eggs with cumin and salt. He poured tea in the glasses; mint making its way through our small home as I woke for sahoor. Good morning, my father said. Mornin' Dad, sbah khir, I replied, blinking the blurry morning clear. We sopped tomato sauce and kefta and bread until the clock ticked time to stop.

When I was tall enough to have to lean down to kiss my father, I asked him if we could visit his home. We crossed the Atlantic. The imam's call to prayer came to us through brick alleyways, past lemon trees, from the tops of les minarets.

I watched my uncle and father slip on sandals. I stayed in the kitchen with my auntie, chopping parsley, the imam's voice pulsing off the concrete walls. I heard Allah in the sound of brochettes burning on charcoal grills, in wind passing over olives preserving in bathtubs. I heard Allah in the footsteps of my father, returning from maghrib.

The old city in my father's hometown, Fez, is cradled in the valley of northern Morocco's rolling hills. Looking fown from the outskirts, a sea of manila buildings stands still in the afternoon sunlight. Reflected rays bounce off of silver satellite dishes. Once, my father and I followed a shepherd, a young boy with an ashen staff, a flock of sheep swaying, through Roman ruins, the city at our backs. Binti, you see the holes? He pointed to the clay colored ruins and I nodded. When the Romans built a layer, they would begin at the bottom, and as the wall grew too high for them to reach, they punctured a hole in the clay with a wooden plank. This way, they had something to stand on top of to build higher. I closed my eyes, imagining toes curled over wooden planks, palms stained red with haut Atlas clay.

I followed my father through a maze of back streets in the ancienne medina until we reached a short wide door. His hand made a fist to knock. A woman appeared, tightening her scarf, salam walaikum, she said. Walaikum salam my father returned, using his unclenched hands to speak. He told her of his childhood in his home where she stood. He pointed at me, binti, and the woman smiled, marhaba. My father held my hand like we were entering the mosque and we walked through a hallway that lead into a square room with ceiling windows. Daylight brightened the home. My father pointed to a set of stairs and the woman nodded, vas-y. My father walked ahead of me, my eyes parallel with blue and white tiles that lined the staircase. At the top, to the left, was a small room, Mehdi, your uncle, you remember him binti, he and I shared this room, come here. My father and I walked past the room to the top of his home. From where we stood, an onlooker from the outskirts may have spotted us in the manila sea. Two silouettes paused on the terrace. In summer, we slept beneath the stars.

Our pilgrimage returned us to the Middle American land of my own youth. With me I carried the image of my father as a child, the voice of the imam, Allahu Akbar. From time to time I stood outside of my father's bedroom, listening to him whisper as the wood floor creaked during prayer. I made my way to the kitchen before he turned his head from side to side to complete his prostrations. Mint made its way to him as I poured tea for the two of us.

My father and I visited the mosque on occasion. Once, I wore a djilaba from the medina, hijab hung loose around my face. I smiled at my father as I entered with the women, brushing against the yellow brick wall. Inside I spotted him ahead of me, his grey hair combed. The imam sang and I stood closing my eyes, bending my head. Allahu Akbar. I thought of the way my amty peeled oranges in her cement home in Casablanca. I thought of the leather that dried on the hillsides of Fez, the shepherd walking as the sunlight poured through the holes in the walls. I thought of the flat sand and the desert and the silver teapot. Perhaps this is what my father heard in the imam's voice. Allahu Akbar. I turned my head side to side, gently draping my hijab onto my shoulders. Outside my father stood beside a plastic table, chewing baklava. I touched his shoulder, kissing him, right cheek to left cheek, and back again.





## WILDERLAND

Miss Molly B! Mol!

Driving past Dom's towards Depot Town Miss Molly  
Dimo's 8 a.m., noon thirty, three ten, cutting class, visiting home:

Molly! The half breed!

Dear Miss Molly, Good Golly Miss Molly, Ooo Miss Molly

Wooden spoons carved for making ma'amoul hung from the wall behind her uncle. Molly,  
habibti, I'm so proud of you. The far left spook crooked beyond his bearded face. Thank you  
ammy, shukran, she said.

Sweetie! Yella!

Toasted pinenuts stung her palms,  
I know you love them, Mol. Go sit with your uncle now.  
She brushed past a brass coffee pot towards ammy.  
Molly! Ramadan Mubarak!  
You want za'atar? Mol, more chicken? Olives? Carrots?  
Aiwa. Finish your plate habiba.

Mol, come here, look at me, listen to me, your eyebrows are beautiful never touch them  
okay?

Hey Mol, will you grab those albums?  
Mingus, Stevie, Herbie, Moanin',  
let's listen while we cook, c'est bien. How about Joni?

fear is like the wilderland  
stepping stones and  
sinking sand

I love her, Molly. I love Joni.  
Safi, safi, enough salt. Grab the pepper please Mol,  
the cumin, paprika, cinnamon, cayenne.

Molly! Come upstairs! Iftar! Yella!

Two minutes Dad! Blaha is saying something! It's like the Bad Boys 2004! she yelled.  
Mol, ca suffit, halas. Get the napkins. Don't you have homework?

You aren't eating? You're fasting? What does that mean? So you can't drink water? But we  
have a game tonight. Molly. Molly! Want some chips? Come on, Molly, just one. Molly can't  
eat! Can't even chew gum.

So, Melika or Molly? I hear people call you both.

Yeah, Melika is my given name.

Where are you from?

I'm from Michigan. The Rust Belt.

Oh, no, I mean, your name is so beautiful,  
like where are you from?

Your people?

My mother is American. My father is from Morocco.

Ohhh. I knew it! Knew it! Knew.

I was thinking, maybe she's Mediterranean.  
I've been trying to figure out your ethnicity.  
Morocco, dang. That's so exotic.

So your dad's Black?

No, he's Arab.

Morocco has an interesting history, you know, the borders are blurr -  
But he's African.

Yeah.

But you're not African American  
so what are you?

Miss Molly B! Mol!

Born beneath the grey sky half a mile from the tracks big maple muddy water Molly. Sitting  
with the men age 5 8 10. Tapping toes on taped carpeted floor. Practicing prostrations alone.

Quite alone, age 14 16 20.

Molly B!

But you're not a real Muslim. Muslim women wear scarves.  
Morocco? That's always been on my bucket list. Is it safe?  
Oh, you're Arab. Arabs are great people when they find Jesus.  
Oh, you're Moroccan. I hear Moroccans have great sex.  
Why can't they just find common ground in the Middle East?

Salam. Hi. Salut. Bonjour. Labass. My name is Melika Valentine Belhaj.

Before illustrating exotic  
the Homeland  
a Daughter of Arab America  
longs for,  
think twice.



Melika Belhaj is an Arab American Muslim artist living in Portland, Oregon.  
She loves basketball and does not belly dance.

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