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Peter McMullin Centre
on Statelessness

Oral Histories of Statelessness

Interview with Hasib Hourani

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Interviewed by Jordana Silverstein

Q: Jordana Silverstein here with Hasib Hourani, in Naarm, in Melbourne. It's the 3rd of March 2023. Thank you so much for speaking with me today, Hasib.

A: Thanks for having me.

Q: I guess maybe let's start with where and when were you born?

A: I was born in 1996, in September, in Awali, which is a small suburb in Bahrain, which is an island near Saudi Arabia. My dad had grown up there; he spent the majority of his life there, went away for university, came back ultimately and then met my mum there, had me and my sister, both in Bahrain. But as is the case with a lot of Gulf states, they don't grant citizenship by virtue of birth. My mum – my dad is stateless, or was stateless at the time – and my mum was not; she had the Lebanese citizenship. But to this day, you can't actually inherit Lebanese citizenship matriarchally. So my sister and I were both born stateless, inheriting the status from my dad.

Q: Tell me more about your parents.

A: My mum is a teacher trainer at the moment, so she works in education, but when I was younger what I knew her as was just a high school history teacher; and that's actually how she met my dad. My parents – my dad's three sisters include in-laws and his blood sisters, had all worked at the same high school as my mum, and so Mum was actually friends with my aunties before she had met my dad. And then my aunty was having a house party and she invited my mum, and I think was trying to do a bit of matchmaking actually, and set them up. So that's Mum. And then Dad was just working at a bank, doing IT at a bank for – that was what he was doing for the majority of my life, and then slowly, as tech developed, tried to keep up with things changing. But they've been – they've had pretty solid career paths in that there's never really been anything radically shifting.

It was always – Mum was a teacher and Dad worked in – he was a project manager, I think was his consistent title throughout my life. But Dad's now retired and living in Cyprus, in our family home. It's beautiful, he just tends to the garden all day. He finds hard rubbish on the street and cleans it up and then puts it back out. He doesn't even clean it up for us to keep; he just gets joy out of polishing it up and redoing the wood, and then puts it back out on the street for anyone to take. And then, Mum's working in Bahrain at the moment, as our younger brother is still going through uni and they just want to make sure that they can support him if they need to. So she's working for a few more months, and then she's ready; she's going to retire as well and join my dad in Cyprus.

Q: So your mum was born in Lebanon, or – how did she get to –

A: Yes, she was born in Beirut. She was consistently just – both parents from Beirut and she was born in Beirut, spent all of her life there and then studied at the American University. And then did her undergrad and her Masters there. Her undergrad was in sociology and anthropology; she did a double major. And then – I can't remember what her Masters was on,

actually, but that was when she started going down that path of education. And then she started teaching at – I think it was the American school in Beirut. And interestingly, I can't actually remember why it is she chose to move to the Gulf, and that was – she moved for work, but I think it – I'm not sure what the incentive was. Maybe she just –

Q: Was her family there already?

A: No. She was in – she moved on her own. My mum has three siblings, two brothers and one sister, and she's the middle child. She was 24, I think, when she – she finished her Masters, worked for a little bit in Beirut and then moved to Bahrain and worked there for a few years. And I think it was just her moving to try and build up her CV. I think actually a friend of hers from Lebanon had moved there, and then she was like, "Okay, I'll give it a go." My aunty, my mum's sister, for a while also moved to Bahrain at a similar time, because she was also a teacher. There was a period of time where the faculty at IKNS, at that school, was made up of a lot of my family. And then she – I'm trying to remember the specifics – but she, I don't think had originally settled on Bahrain as the place that she wanted to go to, but then – yeah, with the Gulf War escalating, it seemed like the best place to be, just – it's a smaller country, and there wasn't as much activity and it felt more like a small town than a city.

Q: That's what it felt like for you living there as well?

A: Yeah, yeah. I haven't been back for a while, but even now when I go, it feels little comparatively, because I grew up in the UAE, and so I was very used to Dubai and Abu Dhabi as the two cities that I had close proximity to, growing up, consistently. And then, when I would visit Bahrain it always felt – well, I suppose it felt like what Abu Dhabi felt like when I moved there originally, when I was eight, seven or eight, before the boom of them trying to build this big expat community. So Bahrain was a little bit more involved in terms of different – there wasn't as much of a hierarchy of your cultural background dictating where it was you fell in socioeconomically in the country, which was the case in the UAE when I was living there, or at least later on when I was living there.

Interestingly, friends of mine, who I met when I first moved there, who were UAE nationals – in hindsight, looking back and registering the growth of their wealth over those 10 years that I was living there, just by virtue of the country becoming more globalised. But Bahrain was a little bit – I think the pacing was a little bit slower, and so there wasn't this assumption that because someone was a national, that they were particularly well off, or they weren't just working a middle class job. Which is the charm, that's why I like Bahrain, I think, it feels a lot more communal for that reason; there's not as much separation between the different kinds of sub-communities. Having said that, it is a lot more – I feel like I'm definitely diluting it – it is a lot more complicated than that. But less so than other parts of the Gulf that I've seen.

Q: What about your dad's family? How did they get there?

A: Dad was – actually, maybe I'll start with my grandparents. My grandma, my dad's mum, is from Tarshiha in Palestine, which was occupied in 1948, and she was, I think maybe eight years old when that started happening. So they fled to Syria on foot, and then so did my grandfather, my dad's dad. They went from Jish, also on foot to Syria. And then my

respective grandparents met at Neirab refugee camp in Syria. So my dad was born in Damascus; he's one of the younger children, I think he's the second youngest of five. But my older aunts and uncles were born in the refugee camp. So my grandparents, my granddad was working as a teacher in the refugee camp, and then they moved to Damascus, where he was working, I think at a university. So yeah, Dad was born in Damascus; they lived there for a few years and then, when he was around four years old, they moved to Bahrain, to the Gulf. I think it was an economic choice.

So then my dad and his siblings were all – that was home to them. It's not impossible to get Bahraini citizenship, but you have to be there for a really long time. So my dad was well into his 20s and still hadn't been naturalised. And he could have stayed for – I think it was like five more years that they needed to get it – and this was when he and my mum were together. And they processed it and thought, "Well, five more years, it's not a great nationality to have in terms of mobility anyway, so let's figure out if we can do something else that feels a little bit more sustainable." So they were tossing up between Canada and Australia, and Australia was working on that points – even for refugees – was working on a points system. And it just so happened that the fields that my parents were working in were in demand at the time. And I think we had one other family friend that had moved here recently, and so there was that connection. Whereas Canada, we didn't really know anybody. And so those two factors ended up with us here.

And then my parents – my dad's siblings, his oldest brother moved to the States, so he and his children have American citizenships. Yeah, I think all of those cousins from that uncle and aunt, they were born in the States, so they just, by virtue of being born there, got the citizenship. And then the majority of my other cousins from my dad's side have the Bahraini citizenship, but are trying to – are in the process of seeking other nationalities as well, that open more doors for them, because it's still not the easiest one to move through the world with. But none of us are Palestinians on paper. We just – at the moment me and my siblings have Australian citizenship. We've got a few cousins who have American, or are working on Green Cards as well. And then, one of my cousins is working on getting his Canadian. And then another is in Germany at the moment, and she's got a permanent residency, in the process of getting a citizenship. And then cousins whose parents – I've also got a couple of cousins who have Jordanian citizenships through their other parents.

Q: What does it feel like to have all of you having different citizenships?

A: It's strange. I think – well, we all grew up together. We all grew up in Bahrain before I moved. So I was living there for a few years before I moved to the UAE. And because we all grew up together in the same place, I really did consider the cousins – more so the cousins than aunts and uncles, because that was the generation that we all spent time together – as being on the same plain. And now, as we're getting older and we're ending up in different places, it's becoming a lot harder to even visualise us reconvening. Like, so Jeanine's getting married in September – that's my sister – and just trying to figure out the visas, which cousins can come and which ones can't – and this is happening in Cyprus, in our family home – is, it's a bit jarring, considering that my memory of me and the cousins hanging out has all just been the ease of going to a single house and spending time there.

I don't think we're ever going to get that back. There have just been multiple visa complications with a lot of the cousins the past few years, and it just means that Bahrain isn't an option anymore either. And my grandma's passed away, and so that home isn't there anymore. So the ephemerality of us going to my grandma's house on a Friday is really – really sunk in when she passed away a couple of years ago.

Q: What was that like, going there on a Friday? Tell me about it.

A: It was – I mean my siblings and I were really younger – on the younger side of the siblings, or the younger side of the cousins – so, we were always mocked a little bit more than the others. But I think that was just the dynamic that we had. It was parents, aunties, uncles, all in the formal living room. And then the kids would be in the casual living room, because culturally, you've got the two, one for guests and one for, yeah. And so we would just spend all day there; we'd go right after morning prayer on the Friday, or the midday prayer. And then have lunch, and then just stay well into the evening. And so it was like a whole day affair. But I also think, because I left Bahrain – me and my siblings left when we were still quite young – I don't know how far that routine would have continued as we all went into adolescence anyway, just in terms of having other plans and commitments. Whereas when you're a kid, yeah.

It was a – in hindsight, I don't understand how my grandma had the energy and stamina for this to be a weekly thing. We're a big family; it was five siblings, and each family had between two to three or four – two to three kids. So feeding that many people every week, and then hosting. It was very special.

Q: This is your dad's family?

A: Yes.

Q: And what would you eat?

A: I loved my – we have a kind of dish, or a category of dish in the Levant that is cooked yoghurt – it's a stew and the sauce is yoghurt based. And so, one of the yoghurt based dishes is zucchini hollowed out, stuffed with pine nuts and meat. And then fried, and then stewed in the yoghurt. And you have it with rice on the side. That was my favourite. That was my grandma's favourite – that was my favourite dish that my grandma would make. But everyone had their favourites; that was just mine. She cooked with ghee, which I think just added that depth of flavour. And when I talk about – I can very strongly compare my paternal and maternal grandmothers' cookings based on the kind of meat that they used and the kind of fat. My mum's mum cooked with olive oil and beef, and my dad's mum cooked with lamb and ghee. And so the kind of palates that those differences created meant that I knew – I could associate one flavour with each side of the family.

Q: Is that a Lebanese and Palestinian thing? Or it's just a these women thing?

A: To some extent, yes. I think it's also – the kind of meat you use, I think, is more a family preference, but olive oil versus ghee, I do think of Palestine versus Lebanon. And then there's also a kind of category of dish, which I guess translates to with oil, or in oil, b'zeit, which

means a lot of the stews that you make, like a bean stew, the normal one would be a meat and it would be cooked with some kind of fat, and then the b'zeit, the with oil version would be vegetarian, and the fat that they would use to cook would be olive oil. And those dishes, b'zeits, I always ate more in Lebanon, with my Lebanese family, than I did with my Palestinian family.

Q: Tell me a bit more about your grandmothers. What were they like?

A: Very different. Very, very different, actually. My dad's mum, her name was Inaam which translates to some conjugation of the word 'blessing' in Arabic. And she was really staunch, quite hard-headed, stubborn. She had a lot of love for us, but I think she wasn't someone that would warm to people easily. But then when she was warmed up to you, that was it. I played cards recently and I remembered an anecdote about my grandmother that my dad told me, that she and my grandfather used to play this game called Fourteen, which me and my family all play as well. It's a staple in a lot of Arabic households. And my grandma was really good at it, better than my granddad. And the two of them would play together, and she would always win and he would get upset about it, because it was not fun losing all the time.

So what she started doing was, they would play sitting opposite one another and she would get a couple of cushions – and she was quite short – so she would get a couple of cushions so that she could sit higher than him and have a better vantage point and look over at his cards, so that she could purposefully lose, to not make him feel bad. And then, when he found out about that, he got really angry. Like, "I'm not even – it doesn't even count. I'm not even winning." So that's what I mean when I – yeah she was real staunch, but also very loving at the same time. That was her. And then, my mum's mum, Ibtisam, which – she was actually born under a different name – she was born with the name Sara, which – the translation of that in English, or the meaning, would be something like the one who left, the one who leaves, she left.

So my great grandmother, Rida, which my mum was named after, she named my teita Sara, and then a couple of years later, processed the meaning of the name and realised that actually she didn't like what that meant for her daughter; changed her name to Ibtisam, which means some conjugation of the word 'smile'. I just think it's so funny for that to go from the one who leaves, to smiling one. But she was very metropolitan, born and raised in Beirut. She was also a teacher, an academic. She was very elegant. I only ever knew her as – in her elderly years, but my mum always tells me stories of what she was like when they were younger, and that she wasn't – so my dad's mum was very stereotypical maternal, just loved taking care of the house, in a traditional sense. And then my mum's mum was more about throwing tasteful dinner parties and bringing adults into conversations together. So it wasn't as – She was very good with her hands; she would design her own clothes.

It felt – the most productive way to compare my two grandparents – or my grandmothers – is that dad's mum was like the traditional image of a grandmother, and then my mum's mum was like the metro, modern woman. And it's so funny, just taking both of those lives in, and seeing how it influenced my parents, and then how it influenced us. It feels nice; it feels well rounded to have those two kinds of maternal influences in our lives.

Q: Do they know each other? Do the two –

A: Yeah, they met a few times. There was always one – like, mutual visits and things like that, but it wasn't – we didn't spend a lot of extended time together, the different family units. But there was still connection between the two.

Q: And your grandfathers?

A: My grandfathers – I never – well, I did meet my mum's dad, but don't really remember him. He passed away right after we moved, we left Australia to go back to the Gulf. So I was only four. But he was a contractor, and the building that my grandma – and now my aunty's living in in Lebanon is this five-storey or six-storey building in Beirut with beautiful ochre-coloured tiles on the outside – that was a project that my grandfather and his business partner had built together, with the intention of splitting it up between – so it was like a 50-50 split between him and his business partner. And he was a body builder; he won – there was a – just a national competition, Mr Lebanon, which he'd won a couple of times.

Q: That's amazing.

A: I've got photos of him flexing on the rocks on the beach. It's incredible. But I don't – everything I know of my maternal granddad is through stories told to me. Should I stop because of the airplane?

Q: I guess. It's quite loud.

A: It really is. We're not even near the airport. But everything that I know of my maternal grandfather is through stories and photos. I don't really have my own memories of him. Jeanine, my sister, does. I feel really jealous of her for that. But I think, just in terms of – I was so young that the memories didn't quite retain. And my dad's dad was very loving, very gentle; he loved to garden, specifically tend to flowers. Growing up, I don't think that we really – my grandparents' house didn't really have fruit trees or anything, but the garden that they had, which also had this beautiful tiled fountain, was just surrounded by blossoms. And he was often just taking care of the garden, or reading the newspaper. Again, I don't know how much of this is me projecting, but I did see him as quite a quiet man, especially in comparison to my grandmother, who was the really staunch one. He just liked to sit and listen. His name was Ali, which is – then my brother was named after him.

Q: You said you have a family house in Cyprus. When did you live in Cyprus?

A: I've never lived in Cyprus.

Q: Ah! How did the family get a house in Cyprus?

A: Yes, great question. A few years ago my parents realised that in terms of being anywhere long term, the only place that they really had access to was Australia, which is ultimately very far away from the rest of our lives, especially considering – even though we hold the nationality, it's not – we didn't really spend the majority of our upbringing here. And so my parents don't have the same kind of network, and maybe familial and cultural connections that other Lebanese and Palestinian migrants might, here. And so they – and at the time, two of my grandparents were still alive, my two grandmothers were still alive. And so my parents

had also realised that they just did not want to be so far away from where their parents were. And my mum had a couple – a few of our family friends were living in Cyprus, Lebanese family friends who had moved over in the early 2000s.

And there is quite a – as of recently – a very fast growing Arab presence in Cyprus, but even back then there was a significant presence, because of the sociopolitics and the geopolitics of the region, where, we call it the fertile crescent, which is that coast of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, in that crescent shape, and then Cyprus, which is an island off of the coast of that, they call the star of the fertile crescent. And so culturally it's very similar, and historically there's just lots of shared experience and mutual understanding. And so it's a very organic place to think of going, when you're thinking of finding somewhere to end up. And so, yeah, my parents had thought about there, versus a couple of other countries in Europe. Like, I think they were actually considering Spain. And then, with the shared culture and geopolitics, and the fact that they already had people that they knew there, it seemed like the right choice.

And at the time, houses were affordable, versus other parts of Europe that were not realistic. So they bought the house back in 2015 and then – but they were still living in the UAE at the time. I had just finished high school, that was my last year of high school. And we – because it was also so close to – it was like a three- or four-hour flight, just a direct flight, that they could go back every year and fix the house up and bit by bit bring our furniture over. So that's what they did. I've never lived in Cyprus, but because my mum, more so than my dad, has a very specific relationship to material items, almost like they function as talismans – so we moved around a lot growing up, but we often took furniture and trinkets with us from place to place. We didn't do the big cull and the re-buying, just so that there was some sense of stability as we moved between countries.

So there are objects in that house in Cyprus that I've known for the 26 years that I've been alive, and so it definitely – it is very much a family home, regardless of whether or not I've ever lived in Cyprus before. I went back for the first time last year, for the first time in, I think, four years, last year. It had just been a pretty chaotic few years in terms of travel, with lockdowns; but then, even before that. And I had forgotten how at home I felt in that space. It was also a nice reminder of the kind of home-building practices that I'd built, inspired by my mum, or informed by the way my mum does it, in that I have also moved around a lot from house to house and country to country, independently, and make a point to bring certain items. I'm now learning which items to buy that transport easily.

So I'm not going to get attached to a piece of furniture, but I got really into tapestry making a few years ago, because it so easily rolls up; it's not like a frame with glass, that you have to worry about padding and putting into a suitcase. And small coffee cups and things like that, that just – they're objects that I will use and see frequently enough to really anchor the house, but they don't have that big physical presence that I need to worry about when moving. But it's interesting being in this place now, in these share houses. This is the most transient I've been in a while, because I'm leaving the country in July to go away on a residency to Palestine and to Lebanon for a few months, which is really exciting. But I didn't want to have to worry about packing my things up right before I left.

So I packed my apartment up in January and everything in my current room in this share house, they're things I'm getting rid of. And so all of my talismans, my ceramics, my prints, my tapestries, they're wrapped in bubble wrap actually, in a box just in the shed. And it's strange, I think it's the first time in my life that I've not really had these objects around me that typically would ground me, because I've been collecting them since I was a teenager.

Q: How does that feel?

A: I don't know. At first it was really jarring. Now I feel a little bit liberated by it, because I know that if I need to get up and go, everything's ready. And I know where they are; it's not like I've lost them. So this feels like a really reassured sense of transience, because I don't really know what my next move is, but I know that once I've figured it out, I can just pick up the things that I need and take them where I need to go. Which is more reassuring than the idea of having set my roots down and knowing that it's only temporary, and then thinking constantly in the back of my mind, that humming, knowing that I was going to have to be packing up and moving, and not knowing where. So yeah it's a lot easier than I thought it would be, actually.

Q: So you imagine your future is in constant movement around?

A: No. I actually don't. It's interesting doing this interview now, because this is probably the most flux I've felt in my life, in that I know I want to feel geographically stable. I have no idea what that would be and what the prospects are for that. So part of the reason I'm going on this residency is almost to do a little bit of a reccy for my life and trial run Lebanon and Palestine for an extended period of time, because I'm going for a month to each place. And more recently, last year when I was in Cyprus I did the same thing, where I was just visiting my parents – I was there for two months, but really intentionally taking in the space and thinking whether I could superimpose myself onto it. So at the moment, I think I'm going to spend the next few years just trial running places. I don't know, I don't know where it would be.

I was thinking – because I do speak Spanish and for a long period of my life had been – and the reason I speak Spanish is because I was trying to facilitate a life in which I could live in the Hispanic world, because my long term partner, at the time, was from Mexico, and so we had tentative plans to live in a Spanish-speaking country. And so that's come back into my mind again, I think one of the reasons being that because it's been a – it had been a possibility before, that I didn't really have to lay that much groundwork to imagine a life in Spain, because I'd done that imagining in my late teens. So that's – and Spain was also – one of the reasons I'm thinking Spain is because it's close enough to Cyprus. I know that I don't want to stay in Melbourne because it's so far from my parents. But it's now a matter of just managing the bureaucracy of where to go.

I can't really live in Palestine; I can't really live in Lebanon either, without a work visa. Cyprus, I don't want to live there unless I – I don't want to live there unless I speak Greek, even though you can get by without it. I don't feel ready in my life to start learning and becoming fluent in a new language. So, there are all these variables that I feel like I'm negotiating constantly, to be like, "Well, which one is just the easiest option that suits both my personal and practical life?"

Q: Does it feel freeing and exciting? Does it feel stressful?

A: It's a combination of the two. It feels stressful more from a place of resentment that I need to do this negotiating. I was talking to my dad when he was in town earlier this year and staying with me, and he was talking about this friend that he had in Cyprus, who – she was saying how she hates how privileged Cypriots are because they only ever live in Cyprus, close to their parents and their family. It's just – how boring a life that is. And then, so when Dad was relaying the story to me, he was like – “I just – I was so mad because I was like, ‘Yeah, okay, that's a privilege, but I would love for that to be something that I had access to, to just live down the road from my parents and from my siblings, and to only have known this one town and the consistency of place.’”

So, we talked about that and just how the kind of frustration that I feel is – and the stress that I feel is – is that I'm not sure if I even want that life, but knowing that I don't have access to it regardless, feels like such a shame and such a loss. Because even when I do find a place, my next stop, my next long-term stop it's still – in my brain it's still going to be somewhat transient. And so then that's where the excitement comes from as well, where there's not the pressure, I suppose, to find this place that's the perfect place, because I don't necessarily think that that exists subjectively anyway.

Q: Do you have anywhere that feels like home?

A: Cyprus. But that's because of – it's because of the home itself. Yeah, it's objects and people that really make me feel at home. Melbourne feels like home. It does. My brother lives here as well; we see each other pretty often. And I've been here for enough years now that I don't feel like that company is specifically social. Whereas when I first moved to Melbourne, I think I was struggling because there was no way to be around people and not feel social pressure. Friends hadn't yet become chosen family, I suppose. Whereas now, I can very easily just reach out to one of my loved ones who's in Melbourne and tell them I need – just to be home for a night with someone. And that's such a privilege, and that's something that I only really started getting access to, honestly, this past year or two. And I've been here for six, now.

Q: So tell me, what year did your family first come to Australia?

A: 1997. I was a few months – I was born in September '96, and then we moved in February '97, so I was a few months old. And then we stayed for four years. My brother – the youngest between the three of us – was born here. So he was the first one to get the Australian citizenship, and then we were all – my parents and sister and I were naturalised two years later. So my brother, Ali was born in 1999, and we were naturalised in 2001. And we left shortly after.

Q: So it was very much a come here, get the citizenship -

A: Actually, no. When my parents moved here, when they brought us here, it was with the intention of it being long term. And then, as my siblings and I started getting older, growing and speaking, my parents started realising how far away we were from grandparents and from cousins. And I think they did realise, in hindsight, that they didn't want us to grow up

deprived or far away from extended family, even if we had siblings and parents. And my mum's dad, Saadeddine had – he was getting quite old and quite sickly. And so we moved so that we could be close to our grandparents while they were still alive. And I remember this – my grandad Saad, my mum's dad, was getting quite sick, and we moved in 2001. And he passed away the week after we left Australia. And so my mum had missed the last few years of his life.

And when we left Australia, I was devastated about it, as a kid. And I remember driving to the airport and Dad was like, "Five years max; we're just going to be out of the country for five years max and then we'll come back." And that obviously wasn't the case. I do think that part of that is just that timing of getting there and having our granddad pass away so immediately after, that they didn't want a repeat of that. So then I ended up spending all of my schooling in the Gulf, and seeing my extended family pretty consistently. And same goes for my sister and my brother. So the three of us all spent our schooling in the Gulf, and then Jeanine, older sister, finished high school and moved to Melbourne, and then I did three years later, and then our brother did three years later.

So Australia, and Melbourne more specifically, I suppose, was always in our minds, growing up the home base that we would return to after high school, as adults; our adult lives would be spent in Melbourne. And I think only recently, as my siblings and I realised how much of a cognitive effort it takes to maintain closeness with family, we're starting to distance ourselves, or to maybe create more proximity back to the Levant, because I think it's unrealistic for us to maintain that closeness with family that we had growing up, while being in Australia. It's the reason our parents left.

Q: Why was Australia held as the place to come back to for you kids? Because you were all quite young when you left.

A: I don't know. I think, we had the passport, it was kind of – My mum, she had done her PhD at Melbourne Uni, and so in our minds, we were all like, "Well, we'll go to Melbourne for university, just like Mum did." And at the time, I think our parents also had the idea that they were going to be retiring here as well. And then, as Cyprus materialised, they realised – that wasn't really an option to them when we were growing up; they didn't even think about Cyprus – and so once that materialised, the idea of Melbourne being our future home base really started to dim. And I think there were a few years of – not necessarily denial, but I think my siblings and I were still holding our breath for our parents eventually moving here. And then the more time they spent building up that family home and renovating it and settling into it, and Dad's working on his little – he's building a cast iron fireplace to go in the sunroom – we're all like, "Oh, that's the house; they're not coming back."

So now, with this acclimation of Melbourne being just for me and my siblings, yeah, I'm planning on – I'm mapping out what the next plan is for me and my brother, who's currently doing his Masters. He's also like, "I'll finish my studies here and then," – I think he's going to live back in the Gulf. I think out of the three of us – because he's the one who, from Prep all the way up until the end of high school, went to the same school. And he's the only one out of the three of us that went to the same school his whole life. I think he has a really stable

sense of home in that region, naturally, that I didn't feel, and that Jeanine didn't feel either. So I think that's where he's going to be.

I think Jeanine is either going to be in Cyprus or in Palestine, so she – because her partner is Palestinian as well, he has the West Bank ID – and so, by virtue of their – through spousal connections, Jeanine can then also get a West Bank ID and live in Palestine, which opens that up for her. And there are hourly flights between Palestine and Cyprus. And so then, I feel like I'm just that last missing piece of, "Well, where do I fit into the Gulf, Cyprus, Palestine triangle?" I'm not sure.

Q: Did it create a particular bond between you and your siblings, that the three of you came here?

A: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I think it's funny growing – I'm the middle child, and so I think it's only natural that I was close with Jeanine and then, when she left – she and I were really close as a unit – and then she went away to university, and then me and Ali became really close, and then we became a unit. And then, when the three of us were all here, I think that was the first time, as adults, with our own independent personalities and lives, that we were in the same space again. And so it was the first time that I felt like the three of us were hanging out as a unit, versus siblings where there was a duo, a kind of duo.

Q: Was that cool?

A: It was cool, yeah. During lockdown, the three of us were all living alone, and so we built a bubble and were having sleepovers every week, every Friday. I think that was actually – because Ali had moved here and then had his first year of university, which I think meant that he was distracted building his social life. Fair enough, we all – that's what I did as well. And then, right after that first year was when the lockdowns started, and so that was the time where we all came together and started building this dynamic between the three of us. We took a few trips, just the three – like, road trips, the three of us, and went away. And when – more recently, in the middle of last year, my brother and I both went and visited Jeanine in Britain, in London, where she was living at the time, which was also nice to have a sibling - specific holiday.

Q: Was the Friday sleepover the conscious repetition of your grandmother?

A: No, actually, not at all. But it's funny, it was a very similar kind of atmosphere, where there was no pressure to do anything. We were just in each other's presence, eating a meal and then sitting together on the couch, and the next morning having breakfast together. It was just very slow activity, which is how it felt at my grandma's place as well.

Q: With getting naturalised, or "naturalised", as an Australian, is that – do you remember the ceremony? You were way too young.

A: Not at all, but I recently changed – went through the process of changing my name legally and needed access to all of those documents. And it was surreal seeing it all in writing, because I hadn't really. All of these different details that had gone right over my head as a child –

Q: Like what?

A: Like just the specific dates, the kinds of signatures, who was involved in the process, just the bureaucracy of it, I think. It was when I was getting my name changed legally, there were all of these specific forms, like the citizenship certificate, that were only required for people who weren't born as Australians. And so I think just a reminder of how precarious this all is, and the month or so where I was basically living without any identification. I was just – I think it was a strange phenomenon. I don't want to give it more weight than it needs, but living without any kind of record of – physical record of who I was – was really strange.

Q: You mean like when you had to send in stuff, or when there was nothing in your name?

A: There was nothing in my name because I'd sent in everything, but then they'd taken – it was strange, they'd taken my old driver's licence, my current passport was inactive, my Medicare was – just nothing systemically was actually valid. It was strange, and it maybe reminded me of the conversations I would have with my parents, as a kid, just about ID and belonging. Because as a kid it was really like 'Australia –'. I haven't fully formed what it was bringing back for me, but it just made me very on edge that there was nothing really to show for who I was on paper, for that month or so.

Q: What do you think is the power of these official documents? What is that, do you think?

A: I think it's this validity on paper. It wasn't that I'd felt like I'd lost myself. It definitely wasn't this idea of I don't know who I am because I don't have an ID in my name. But I feel like proof is something that's so ingrained in this state, being able to prove who you are, because face value means nothing. And so not having that was what I found really jarring. That if someone were to ask me, it's basically my word for theirs. And that's what I experienced, just going – like, I recently moved to this suburb and going to get a library card. I just couldn't get a library card because they didn't believe that that was my new -. So, lots of small things that – it meant that without this physical record of who I was, my positioning within the infrastructure wasn't really justified.

Q: You said you'd talked about these kinds of things when you were young, with your parents. So papers and documents has always been present in your lives?

A: Yeah. I had a box – since I was a kid, I've always had access to all of my old passports, and just looking through them. I remember being, in my adolescence, as a pre-teen, looking through the travel documents, pre-passports, that I had, like the refugee papers. It was strange. It didn't make me feel stressed or sad or anything. I thought it was quite cool to look back and see how much they've changed. And also, just something as – I feel as well, generationally, there was so much change, document to document, because it was also with the introduction of technology into the ID systems. And so, looking back at my first ever travel document, it was a pink piece of paper that was handwritten in blue; printed out, but then the details were handwritten in blue ink. And then the photo of me as a baby was stapled on. And then cross-referencing that to my most recent passport, obviously with the E- –

Q: The thick middle, yeah.

A: – with the E gate, yeah. So, looking through that incrementally as kid was what I found really interesting. And then also looking back at my parents' ones, where there was a typo and then they'd scribbled it out and written it again. The rigidity that, I suppose, has been introduced to ID systems in recent years was always really fascinating.

Q: Yeah, it's been such a shift. So when you first travelled, when you first came to – was that the first time you'd travelled internationally, when you came to Australia?

A: I don't think so, actually. I'm trying to remember. That's a good question. It was the first time I'd flown, but I don't know if it was the first time I'd left the country, because we might have driven, for example, across a border. But in a very early draft of a book that has since been scrapped, I was looking back on my paternal migration pattern, and it was like me, my dad, my paternal grandfather, and then great grandfather also, tracing paternally. And it was – I can't remember the exact numbers, but it was like, great grandfather had travelled X amount of kilometres the first time that he travelled; and then granddad was this other amount; and then my dad was the same amount as my great granddad; and I was the same as my granddad. And so it felt like this oscillating between figures.

This was in the book that I'd written, it then became like a speculative piece around where – drawing a radius around where I would be and then figuring out, "Well, if I were to have a child, what would their location be?" And then trying to conceptualise a future based off of that figure. So I think those kinds of numbers, it's so organically how my brain processes things, with numbers and figures. So thinking about the first time I came to Australia, I was this many months old, and it was this many kilometres, and my child will – I like that repetition, I like that pattern. As frustrating as it is that it's a part of the way that I see my past and my future, I think now it comes quite naturally to the way that I think.

Q: And your future involves having kids?

A: Yes. I don't know – again, it's one of those things where bureaucratically, I don't really know what it looks like. But for the longest time – and I've talked to my mother about this, actually. Mum was at first surprised by it, but then realised she was on board that I really liked the idea of just being a single parent, and then having my parents help me raise the kid, because I didn't want that future plan to be contingent on whether or not I had a partner in my life. But adopting as a single parent is really tricky. And then, adopting as a trans single parent is really tricky. And then, adopting as a trans single parent who wants to adopt a child from Palestine is also really tricky. So I'm kind of like – I do wish that I had the privilege of a child entering my life, kind of serendipitously. But it's only ever going to be something that I put the planning and effort into, for it to materialise, which is fine. But because it takes – there's no way for me to flippantly have a child in my life; I have no idea when or where, how it's going to happen.

Q: But there's something about that kind of intergenerational life – or what is it about having a child that –

A: I think so, yes. Just being able to share history. I became really – I realised – this is when I was 22, when I first started actually realising that I wanted a child, and not just because it was something that had been told to me as something that you should want – and when I would

picture spending time with my children, it was very much just being at home and having a conversation. And so I do like the idea of sharing histories and knowledge, and then also learning from younger generations as well. I feel like if I weren't going to have children, I'd still want some kind of heavy presence of children in my life, otherwise I'd feel really out of touch with what kinds of conversations were happening, around identity and culture. Just thinking back to what I talk to my parents about, yes, I learn from them to this day, still, but it's become a little bit more – the maybe equilibrium between how much we share with one another has evened out, compared to what it was at when I was even 18, for example.

Q: So you talk a lot with your parents?

A: Yeah, yeah. It's tricky, just with time difference and digital technology, I get really frustrated, but we've figured out a rhythm. Dad and I don't really do phone calls; we do voice notes, where I'll send a few in a row at a time, sometimes up to 20 or 30 minutes' worth of voice notes of what's happening in my life, and then he'll listen to them all in one go and then reply back, and he'll have his 20 or 30 minutes of voice notes. And then they'll wane off a little bit and when we're due for another catch-up, it'll happen. And then Mum's are actually a direct opposite of that, where we talk consistently on the phone, but shorter conversations, so that we've got stints, short stints of updates of each other's lives and a lot more text messages. But like I was saying to you earlier, something I really miss – I missed when I was living alone, but realised I missed when I was in Cyprus as well, visiting my parents, is that those incidental conversations that you just have by waking up and them being around is what I really miss. It's not just the life updates that they're getting, but more the, "I got a bad paper cut." I don't know. Or, "I had a strange dream last night."

Q: Yeah. Or how do you make your tea, or –

A: Yeah yeah. It's like something that's so simple. I don't want all of our conversations to be heavy and significant, so I do miss the little things. And partly, one of the reasons why I'm trying to build a life geographically closer to them is so that I can get that back, as opposed to feeling like when I go back to visit them for a few weeks at a time, we've got to make the most of it and have all of these serious conversations that we wouldn't otherwise have over the phone or on a video call.

Q: Do you feel Australian?

A: No. No. And I don't know if my answer would be different if I had grown up here, because in my mind, it's not just about statehood but also the kind of cultural experience of being Australian, which I did not have or get. And so people will bring up movies and popular culture figures and celebrities, and I just don't really know any of them. And so I'm Australian on paper, and it's there on my passport. And beyond that I don't really feel it at all. I feel like I've got access to Australia, but beyond that, it's not an identity. Like, access to the privilege that the state – access to the privileges that the state of Australia offers. So I'm bureaucratically Australian, but beyond that, no.

Q: I just had a sneeze stuck there, sorry [shared laugh]. Bureaucratically Australian is a – what does that feel like? Or what is your connection to that?

A: I think it's mainly the – logistically what does it mean. So I know that I have access to Medicare, for example. And I know that if I were to – when I leave the country for four months and I come back, I don't have to worry about what visa I'm going to enter on. But outside of that, I don't really know how else Australianism really infiltrates my personal life.

Q: Do you know how your dad felt about getting citizenship?

A: Yeah. My dad was actually really patriotic at the beginning. He just never – especially after having grown up in Bahrain and spent years and years there and still not being given any kind of citizenship or sense of belonging there, when we got the citizenship in Australia, and then I think we left the country to maybe visit family, and on the way back in, that was the first time entering the country with our Australian passports, and the passport officer had told my dad, "Welcome home," and my dad was really emotional about it. And he – I don't know if he would still tell the story in the same way – but when he told my siblings and I the story as a kid, he would tear up. He talked about how he did tear up at the passport office when it happened. And in recent years – and growing up, Dad was also the president of this community of Australians in the UAE, or in Abu Dhabi specifically, so they would organise events like when the Grand Final was on, or on Invasion Day, but it wasn't Invasion Day [laughs].

And then in recent years, with my siblings and I being here and going back and then realising how jarring it is that the conversations that are happening here versus what migrants, or I mean "expats", are talking about and experiencing as Australians abroad, the vast difference, we started then having conversations with Dad about it, and then drawing parallels between the occupation in Palestine and the colony here. And Dad has lost all sense of patriotism. When he was here most recently, I think we had plans to go to the Vic Markets, which we used to go to all the time when I was a kid. And then Jeanine had said to him, "Did you know that it's built over a mass grave?" And Dad was like disgusted in a way that I think it was coming from a place of him having felt duped, that even this place that he had a really positive memory of, because we used to go there as children and do our shopping and just browse the aisles together, realising that even that memory has been tainted by the colony, he's now, I think, renounced all of that patriotism.

But it's interesting, because it has obviously redirected towards the solidarity between Black and Palestinian struggles. So he's definitely not patriotic anymore, but he still feels really invested, I suppose, in the continent and the relationship that we hold to the continent.

Q: Do you feel invested in that too?

A: Yes, I do. That's actually one of the things that I feel really jarring about, in terms of leaving, is that I do really like the parallel here. And I don't think that the struggles are as interconnected, or that the ties are as strong as they could be. And I feel not necessarily onus, but I do feel this push to stay, to get that transnational solidarity where it needs, where it could be, where I see it going in the next few years.

Q: Do you feel Palestinian?

A: Yes, but – I think there's a but – and Jeanine words this in a really beautiful way, and I'm going to paraphrase her, and I think maybe do it a disservice – but I feel like at the moment nationalism is necessary for our liberation. It's like a tool that we need to use for our liberation. But culturally, with my mum being from Lebanon and my dad being from Palestine, from the Galilee, those respective hometowns are four hours away, a four-hour drive from one another. And right now, it does not take four hours to drive from one to the other; it takes closer to 12, because you have to go around in a U-shape through Jordan and Syria. So I feel this pride towards the region as a whole, that I think predates Palestinian nationalism. But anyway, back to what Jeanine says, which is that in the fight for Palestine, we're the first to raise the flag and once Palestine is liberated, we're going to be the first to tear it down.

Because once it's not a necessary tool, I just think that Palestinian nationalism is going to diminish completely. And it should. I think that we should – the drive would be more towards unifying the region, which I don't think you can do with strong, rigid nationalism in place.

Q: Yeah yeah, that's really interesting. I heard Lana Tatour speak recently, talking about migration to Palestine, and how, before '48 it was just – lots of people went there because it was a great place to live. And there's been a forgetting of all that migration that happened.

A: Yes. It's now just like Palestinians and Palestine, and that's it. Yeah there was so much movement between the region. I talked to Ashraf, who's Jeanine's fiancé, about this, about when we imagine radical futures of the region, there's a bullet train that moves between Jordan and Palestine and Jordan; and it's all interconnected in the way that you would envision the EU, for example. So you don't – you would be able to, for example, live in Beirut and commute to Palestine for work. It's not – I don't envision myself returning to a liberated Palestine with the intention of this stagnance in Palestine forever. Which is interesting, what Dad was saying, about feeling jealous of Cypriots who've been in the same place their whole lives, because I don't actually – I think it's quite a rural thing. And Jish, where my granddad's from, and Beirut, are big enough cities that you do move between them quite liberally. We'd be – I don't necessarily think that I wedge into rural – like, a rural liberated Palestine – just by nature of my own upbringing and my personhood as well.

Q: Do you feel like a migrant?

A: Yes, I do feel like a migrant. Yeah. Specifically, I feel like – and I think that first, second, third gen definers are really arbitrary – but I specifically feel like the first generation of migrants, and that it's just me and my brother here. And so, yes, the definers are arbitrary, but at the same time, I think there is such a specific experience to migrants who have yet to lay down roots that exist, regardless of whether or not they're putting the effort in. I'm never going to incidentally run into someone on the street that I've known for years, which I think is something that happens after multiple generations of a migrant family ending up here. But I do feel very much like a migrant.

Q: What are the kinds of feelings associated with that?

A: It's mainly – the way that I read it is connection, and access to people and to networks. Last year my brother and I got into an accident, a car accident, while my sister was out of

town, and we had no one to call. And we were in a suburb pretty far away from our house, at night time, in the rain, and we were like, “Oh, it is just the two of us.” And I know that’s not something that’s exclusively experienced by migrants, but I think that us going through that was because of the fact that we’re migrants. And so, that, to me, is maybe like the microcosm of what the experience of being a migrant is, for me, and for my brother as well. When we talk about it, it’s just that we’ve got each other and we can build chosen family, but until that’s really solidified, it is this independence that I think we did not choose.

Q: Do you think of yourself and describe yourself as having been stateless? Is that important in your sense of self?

A: I don’t necessarily think it’s integral identity-wise. But I do bring it up just because I feel like there are so many – there are so few images of what statelessness looks like. And so I do feel – it’s not even pride, but it’s just like, I do want to contribute to the breaking down of one homogenous stateless identity. Especially because I’ve – as someone who experienced statelessness, I’ve also moved around so much. And so I think that that’s an experience that – I meet other people who have similar circumstances to me, who are the same, where it’s like statelessness doesn’t necessarily dictate stagnance and not being able to move. It’s this constant motion. And that’s, at the moment, still very underrepresented.

Q: Do you think – is it mostly Palestinians you meet who had that experience? Or it’s other stateless people?

A: Palestinians. Recently, Syrians as well.

Q: Do you talk about statelessness much with friends, family?

A: Family, yes. But I come, luckily, from a family that we’re always talking about just politics and bureaucracy. And so it’s not something that we need to – it’ll come up organically, if we’re sitting at the dinner table. Friends, I feel like it comes up in conversation some time early on in the friendship if I’m talking about my background. But then, outside of that, I won’t really talk about it unless I’m frustrated about something in particular. So for example, with me having to change all of my legal details, I needed to vent to a friend about it. But yeah, I remember – and this is maybe testament to – this friendship was not a good one – but one of my early very good – one of my early friendships when I moved to Melbourne was with someone who – we were like two or three years into the friendship, and only then did she realise that I wasn’t an international student. And she was like my best friend.

And I think that was a moment where I was like, “Oh I do kind of have to disclose.” Like, how else is it going to come up in conversation? People are just going to make assumptions. So from that point on, I made more of an effort to tell – work my background into conversation, at least preliminary conversations when I was getting to know someone, just so that then everything else that they were building me up as was informed by that foundation, that foundational history, that I do think is relevant to my life experience. Because even though statelessness is not necessarily who I – it’s not how I identify now, but all of the run-on experiences that I’ve had since then were because of that beginning. So I think it’s relevant in that sense.

Q: Yep. So it feels like a useful sort of label or term for you in describing experiences?

A: It does. It does. Yep.

Q: Have you had people – how have people reacted when you’ve said that you –

A: It’s usually – I feel like the one response that comes up often, or consistently enough that I notice, is surprise. But I think maybe that speaks to what I had said earlier, about people not really knowing what statelessness can look like. It’s never been met with any kind of disrespect. It’s just people getting caught off guard and would not have assumed that I was – that that was my experience.

Q: Let’s change tack a little bit. Is there – you’ve been to Palestine?

A: Been once before.

Q: Once?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about going.

A: Because I grew up in the UAE, and because my mum is Lebanese and we would go to Lebanon often enough, and because of the boycotts put on the State of Israel by various countries in the Gulf – not so much anymore after the normalisation of 2019 – but because of that, and because of Lebanon’s boycotts as well, it meant that we could not really travel to Palestine, even as Australian tourists, which we legally can enter as, without it jeopardising our access to the country we were living in, and my mum’s country of birth, that we would visit frequently. And then, only in – it was around 2018 that we seriously sat down and were like, “No, we need to do this. There are ways to get around it. How can we?” So, what Palestinians had been doing in previous years, were getting temporary travel documents, temporary passports to use to enter Palestine, and then segregate that between the passport that they use to enter other countries.

But what we ended up doing was flying into Jordan and then crossing the border by car into Palestine, because they’re less likely to stamp your passport at the border crossing, the land crossing. They would just put a sticker on, which you could easily just take right off. So we planned to go for a very short trip – it was short when you think about how much we really wanted to do. So we were there for two weeks between the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019. It was – logistically, it was chaos to get there, in that me and Jeanine had flown over from Melbourne to Jordan, and the flight plan was crazy. One flight had been delayed, which then resulted in us missing our next flight. And then the transit and the airport was chaos. So then, when we finally got to Jordan 12 hours later than we had planned to, we only really had a few hours before we needed to – we were staying the night in Jordan and then leaving first thing in the morning. And it just felt very touch and go. And that never stopped.

That whole trip, that’s what that was like. At no point was I able to just sit down and process and breathe and think slow. Crossing the border took hours; they didn’t let us in. We were waiting around for six hours before they let us in. They were asking really invasive questions,

trying to gauge – trying to gauge our intentions for entering Palestine, but also, I think, just trying to put us off ever wanting to come back. I think it was more of a scare tactic, because there was nothing that they could have held to us back then, I think. Now the circumstances might be different when I go back this time, having done active BDS work, and written what I write. But back then I hadn't really done anything publicly yet. And then we stayed in an Airbnb in Jerusalem that my mum – because my mum had done her PhD on the history syllabus in occupied Palestine, and how they teach Palestine to –

Q: Oh, cool.

A: Yes, really interesting, so cool. So she'd done her fieldwork there, and out of all of us, she was the only one who'd been before. And so, when she was in Jerusalem, she'd stayed at this hotel called the King George Hotel in East Jerusalem, which is the Palestinian side, but right by the Old City. So when she was booking, she was like, "I know where we can stay. We'll stay at the same King George Hotel in East Jerusalem." But what she ends up booking, accidentally, is an Airbnb on King George Street in west Jerusalem, which is a really orthodox area. And that was our home base. We were in Jerusalem for the whole two weeks and then we would take day trips and return. So we were just stuck there, and it was – I think it was just off-putting to have these really intense experiences during the day, going back to Tarshiha, where my grandma's from, and meeting family that we didn't know we had, and driving back at the end of the day to this old, old Airbnb too, that was definitely built before 1948. We were renting it from an Israeli.

It was just – at no point did we feel like we were relaxed in the space, to decompress after each day. But we basically drove around everywhere that we could, because we were like – I think there was this anxiety to see all that we could, because we have no idea when next we're going to be able to go back. So we – I – it was a very eventful trip. And I had brought my journal with me, with the intention of documenting everything and writing down every day. And by the end of the day I was so exhausted. I think I took a new journal with me to Palestine that had maybe four pages in it. And I came back with another four written; that's all, over the whole two weeks. And I journal a lot. I'll write – now my practice is, I'll journal seven days a week. And each page is – each day is made up of four pages of what I've been up to.

So the fact that I just barely wrote in Palestine, I was not processing any of it. I felt like it wasn't – if I were to start writing down what was happening, it would have unravelled and I don't know if it was a safe enough space for that to happen in. So it was only once I got back to Melbourne that I was like, "Okay, wait a minute, I'm going to write this all down." And it's interesting, now that I'm going back for this writing residency in the middle of this coming year, I'm going to – well, I'm deciding at the moment where I'm going to end up actually. I'm between Ramallah and Haifa as where I want to be, but that's all I'm going to see. I want to just be stagnant for a little bit and not feel this pressure to see all there is to see, and to make up for lost time. I just want to see what it would be like to live day to day and have the mundanity of being in Palestine. And the privilege of that.

Q: How do you choose between Ramallah and Haifa?

A: I know. Well, Jeanine's actually going to do some fieldwork for her PhD at the same time as me. So we're talking now about what her preference might be. At the beginning, I was thinking Haifa just because I had a couple of connections there, and so I was like, "Well, at least I know where to start." But now that Jeanine's going to be there at the same time as me, I don't feel as much pressure to know people, because she actually is very well connected now. And Ramallah has – they both really have great archives for me to access, that's why I'm torn – but Ramallah has more of an active arts and social scene that it would be nice to explore, especially considering that the purpose of the trip is, yes, for the residency, but also just so that I can see what it would be like to live there and spend my time there recreationally, as well as profession- creatively.

Q: And how are you feeling about crossing the – yes, the border crossing?

A: I'm nervous. I'm going to do what Jeanine did. She disabled her website and reached out to journals and asked them to take her pieces down that were online. But I think it's going to be a bit trickier for me, just because my bibliography's a little bit longer. And my bio is in lots of places that aren't necessarily attached to pieces. So it would be – if I was speaking at an event, or if I'd won a prize, or even the residency itself – it's announced on Writers Victoria's website. So I don't know how much of my digital trail I can really delete. But I think that's the one thing that I'm concerned about. But I'm flying in, which I've heard is – I'm flying in this time, and I've heard that that's a lot easier to get through, especially because I'll be coming from – I'll be flying in from Cyprus, and the majority of the people on those flights are Israelis.

Q: Israelis.

A: Yes.

Q: Yes, it's a big place Israelis go to get married.

A: Is it?

Q: Because you can't get a secular Jewish marriage-

A: That's also why Lebanese people go to Cyprus to get married as well, for the same reason. But yes, I'll be – I'm not so nervous – naturally, I'll be on edge, but at this point I've become quite – I don't want to say defeatist; that's not it at all – but I'm kind of like, "Whatever happens, happens and I'll deal with it when it comes up." Because there is no way of preparing in advance. I have no idea who I'm going to – who's the passport officer that I'm going to get that day; I have no idea.

Q: Yes, it's so – yeah it comes down to who's in the library that day; who's doing the bureaucracy that day has so much power in people's lives. I had a next question lined up, but it's slipped my brain. So, Lebanon, you've been to Lebanon many times?

A: Yeah. We used to go every other summer, maybe, when I was growing up. And then later in my teen years, it became a consistent every summer thing.

Q: Visiting family?

A: Visiting family. Staying in Beirut at that building that I mentioned – my grandma’s apartment, that building that my granddad had built. And only in recent years have I started to gauge my own social circle in Beirut, because it was something – I would go, and I would go and I would see my family, and then the cousins who we grew up with, who also lived in Abu Dhabi with us, would also go at the same time, and so that was who I would spend my time with. And then a couple of family friends. And then – I think it must have been actually 10 years ago now – but one of my closest friends in Lebanon, his name’s Sam, he introduced me, just online, to his friend Milo, and then through that, I’ve been mapping my own social circle.

But I’ve not been back to Lebanon for – it’ll be five years when I go back. And so it’s changed a lot, for many different reasons, but I haven’t been since before the explosion, pre-lockdowns, pre-COVID, before the revolution. The last time I was there, my grandma was also alive. So I think it’s going to be jarring; I know it’s going to be jarring being back, which is part of the reason why I’ve postponed it. I had meant to go last year, and then – but it was only going to be for a week. And I was like, “I don’t want the same thing that happened in Palestine to happen in Lebanon, where I’m trying to cram too much into a short trip.” So this time when I go, I’m going for a month, and then it alleviates the pressure a little bit to just catch up, catch myself up to speed with where everything in the country is at.

Q: I remembered what I was going to ask you, which was about your journaling. What role does journaling play for you?

A: The two main reasons that I do it, the first one being, it’s a good memory aid, especially because I write poetry and non-fiction and have started now writing fiction, but it’s very much informed by my lens on life anyway. And so I find it a really useful reference tool to look back on and see what I was noticing or experiencing. But I’m not – it’s not something that I ever imagine sharing with anybody, except for myself; so it’s like a personal record. And then, secondly, it trains my brain to notice details, which I think is important to my writing practice, as well as being detail oriented as I’m taking things in. And then it also just keeps up the habit of writing as well. But I’ve consistently kept a journal since I was 14. I’d done it a little bit when I was younger than that as well, but it wasn’t as consistent. And then I – I’m so mad at myself for doing this – but when I was 18, right before I left to move to Melbourne, threw away all of the journals, all of my previous ones pre-18.

Q: Why?

A: I think I was just embarrassed. I think I hadn’t really – well, because when I was 18, right before moving to Melbourne, I knew that writing was something that I wanted to pursue, and journaling before that point, I didn’t have this identity as a writer. And so I wasn’t – so when I read back over them and I disliked the voice, I think I just couldn’t deal with that embarrassment. Which is like, of course the voice is going to be embarrassing, it’s a 14-year-old. But yeah, I regret it every day, and even now, looking back on my journal from when I was 18, that’s really embarrassing to me now as well, but I’m not going to make the same mistake. I’m just not going to re-read it for a while, until there’s enough distance where I feel okay. But I’ve still got – right now it’s eight years of journals in the box in the shed.

Q: So that’s – they’re something you carry with you as you move around?

A: Yes. I've got a friend who, after he's done with a journal, just throws it away, because he's like, "It's served its purpose. I only ever need it to process in the moment, and then I'm done with it." Which I – it's the complete opposite of why I do it.

Q: Why do you do it?

A: To look back with enough distance to remember my life with fresh eyes. Almost like this out-of-body third person experience of reading back over my experiences, which, I think, then allow me to write about them more objectively than when I'm in the moment and going through it.

Q: How often do you read back over them?

A: I read back over them when I'm looking for something specific. But I let a few years pass. I read back over my 21-year-old journal last year, when I was 25. So it had been four years. But it's not – I won't force myself to. It's kind of like if I get this inclination that I want to remember, I'm ready to reflect, then I'll go back into it. But I don't schedule or routinely look back in the same way that I routinely write in them.

Q: Do you have a particular time of day that you write?

A: Yes. Typically in the morning. And then, if I can't sleep, I'll write in the evenings as well. But I try not to, and the reason being that in the morning it's nice because then I can see, in this process of training my brain to pick up on details, it's good to notice what of the last day has been retained the morning after.

Q: And do you remember what made you start journaling at 14?

A: Yes, actually. When I was 13 – was it 13? – I went on a family holiday to Turkey and me and my best friend at the time had decided to keep respective travel journals and then swap them over at the end, so that we could – because we weren't talking to each other while we were on holiday – and then swap them back once the school year started again. And so I did that, and I really loved it. And then it just became a practice. But my dad was always very – he had assigned us, as kids, tasks to do during school holidays. So one of them was write something, so that we wouldn't just sit around doing nothing all day. And so I used to write stories as a kid, that I think my parents still have, but I haven't been able to access them at all. I think they're on a cloud somewhere. And so that was like – I was writing as early as that, just in my own time. And then, when I was doing the travel journal swap, it came quite naturally to me, because I'd written consistently every school holiday anyway.

Q: What other sorts of tasks did your dad give you?

A: There was mind games, like brain exercises, word puzzles and things like that. There's this Arabic cartoon channel that he made us watch an hour of every day during school holidays, to practise our Arabic.

Q: This is when you were living in –

A: In the UAE. Because I went to a British school, so all of my schooling was in English. It was also tricky to keep up our Arabic. We only really had one hour of Arabic classes – at school – one hour of Arabic classes a week, and then we had an Arabic tutor that would come over as well, to teach us independently. And then, during school holidays he'd make us watch Spacetoon, that was the channel. What else did we do? I think that was – it was mainly that. And limited how much time we were allowed online or watching TV. So it was like reading, writing, Spacetoon.

Q: That's great. What languages did you speak at home, growing up?

A: It was a mix of Arabic and English, but it was in a similar way to, you kind of hear people code switch, where the sentence itself is a hybrid of vocabulary. So that's what we would speak, growing up. And then – well, when I was a kid I spoke Arabic fluently – and then we were in Australia and then my parents gauged that, "Okay, well, this is going to get in the way of you acclimating to English schooling here." So then switched to only English, and then when we moved back to the Gulf, my Arabic was really weak, and it took a really long time for me to get comfortable enough, just even – it wasn't even in terms of knowledge – the comfort level of speaking Arabic again and not feeling self-conscious about it took a really long time. And then, it was only after I moved to Melbourne and I lost access to incidental Arabic that I really realised again that you have to make a cognitive effort, otherwise you lose language.

So when I talk to my mum, it's like, "I'm going to make sure that I'm not code switching into English every now and then," because otherwise I'll just lose it. And my Arabic, it fluctuates so much; when my parents are in town, within a few days it gets really good again; and then they're gone, and I've lost my words. I think my object permanence is just not great, in general, the way that my brain works, and so if I'm not constantly around Arabic, I'll lose it.

Q: Do you ever notice your accent that you speak with? Do you think about it?

A: I speak in Lebanese dialect. But it's so funny – and so has Jeanine, and Ali as well; both of my siblings, we all spoke Lebanese dialect, because my mum talked to us in Arabic more than my dad did. But then, in recent years with Jeanine's fiancé being Palestinian, and they're talking more, her accent is changing, slowly, but still. And I can hear it in my voice too. My vowel pronunciation is leaning more towards – or is starting to lean more Palestinian than it used to before. Even with the vocab that I have, is quite mixed as well, because growing up in the Gulf, I was picking up on little phrases for particular nouns, for example, that were specific to the Gulf. So I know that my accent is real messy, for that reason, just because it's a mix of Palestine, Lebanon, and then the Gulf itself is each country is different too. Like, I've got some Bahraini words and phrases, and then some Emirati ones.

Q: And what about in English, do you ever notice your –

A: Yeah, all the time. I was at work a couple of weeks ago and I answered the phone. Someone was calling about some budget. But it's a new job, and so the guy was like, "Oh, hey, we've not met before." I said, "Yes, hi, I'm Hasib." And then he was like, "American?" And I said, "No, actually no. I went to an international school." He was like, "Okay. I'm British." I was like, "Yeah, okay." But it comes up often enough that now I've become

desensitised to it. I hear my accent when I speak, but I don't really register or get self-conscious about it in the way that I used to when I was first living in Melbourne. I think it impacted the way that I was even socialising; I was nervous to ask people for things. And I was just also objectively more anxious than I am now.

But I didn't want to draw attention to this difference, whereas now I just don't really care. If it comes up, it comes up and I'll know how to answer it, because I have almost pre-prepared responses to contextualise it really quickly. Whereas before, I would get a little bit flustered, and I'd say, "Well, my mum's Lebanese, dad's Palestinian; I was born here," and I had to give my whole life story, whereas I've since then realised that the quick code is just, "Yes, international school," and they don't ask any more questions [laughs].

Q: Yeah. Have you experienced racism and discrimination in Australia?

A: Yes. It's just, I think, people being confused and then asking questions that maybe they wouldn't normally ask other people. I've been really – I've spent the last few years though getting – vetting my social circles so that I very rarely experience adversity – I'm very rarely caught off guard. So, if I'm in a context where I think I might be running into someone who's bigoted or has something to say that I don't want to hear, I'll see it coming. Whereas when I first moved here, I think I hadn't quite gauged which social spaces to enter and avoid. And that's what was more jarring than anything, is not seeing it coming. I remember going on a camping trip back in 2019 with a friend of mine. It was her birthday and her boyfriend was just – he was a PEP, specifically like, I think had done Birthright. It was just – he was one of those.

And we were in the middle of the bush, and I was with people that I wasn't super close with, besides a couple of friends; all the others were new to me. And then when he started saying some Zionist stuff, that was probably the last time I've really felt winded, because I was in a situation where I wasn't expecting to feel unsafe. And that was, I think, the moment where I also started being a lot more cautious with what kinds of situations I enter, like, "I'm not going to go on a camping trip unless I feel comfortable with everybody that I'm with," because you can't really leave in that situation. So it's just become a process of mapping my entry points and exits.

Q: And what makes – why are you a writer?

A: Why am I a writer? Because I'm nosy. I don't know. Because I really like attaching meaning to things, I think. I remember – I'm doing it right now, I'm telling an anecdote – but when I was in Cyprus, I was putting on a playlist. I put on a playlist in the car with my dad and my brother, and every new track – and I hadn't made the playlist, a friend had made it for me – and every other track that came on, I was like, I had a story to tell about it. And my brother was like, "Life is not that deep. Why do you always have something to say about such small details? I just don't know what I would say if I had put on a playlist; nothing – doesn't have meaning?" So I think that lens that I view the world in, that attaches meaning on to very minute details, is the same lens that I use as a writer. I like making association between symbols and experiences, and what it says about dynamics or ethics or memory.

Q: Where do you think that urge comes from?

A: I don't know where I think the urge comes from. I think there's just such a – it's funny, I don't necessarily consider myself a curious person, in that I'm not trying to learn new things. But I do feel curious in that I want to figure out intentions and purpose all the time. So maybe I'm curious about the thematics of things, versus more tangible ideas. But I don't – I can't pinpoint at which point of my life I realised I wanted to be a writer, because I was so curious about the meaning of things, and before I was a writer, I was a visual artist for a while. So I think there was always me just wanting to pay attention to detail and give it purpose, or tell a story through a small – through a detail. Back then it was my textile practice, and now it's language.

Q: What did you study at uni?

A: Creative writing. I was – all through high school, really wanted to be – wanted to study – I wanted to go to art school. And I had spent those four years of high school really facilitating that life, where I could go to art school and become an artist and have my – very conventional trajectory of wanting a solo show. And then when I was applying for universities here, I applied for an arts degree as my back-up, but then I also applied to all of the art schools that I wanted to go to. I didn't get into my top choice, which was VCA, and I was really stubborn about it. I didn't want to go anywhere not VCA. So I was just like, "I'll do an arts degree and then transfer over or study art history, while also maintaining my creative practice." And then I took a creative writing subject my first year at uni, my first semester, and really enjoyed it, and remembered that my English teacher in high school had really urged me to pursue creative writing. She'd said it, and I'd obviously acknowledged it, but I didn't think anything of it until I got to uni and realised I really quite liked it. And so then that just ended up being what I followed right through to the end.

Q: Cool. And you work now – you're a full-time writer?

A: No. I wish. I wish I could – I wish that life had been set up to allow full-time writers to exist without generational wealth. But they don't. So I work three days a week at an arts organisation. Currently, it's the Emerging Writers Festival, but this is the kind of balance that I've had for a few years now, where it's like three days doing some kind of arts work admin office job that's still in the field slash space that I work in. And then, those other two days a week are my writing days, that I split up between writing creatively, but then I also teach workshops, writing workshops and public programs through different literary institutions.

Q: Do you think being stateless, having had that experience, do you think it has affected how you see the world?

A: I think so. I noticed it a few years ago when someone described the way that I write poetry as – the way that I write poetry is made up of fragments, stanza to stanza, but then there is repetitions that then you realise you can weave the concepts together in different patterns. When someone – when my friend had described it to me like that, in that moment I realised that was also how I associate space. And my relationship to space is very much about fragments with common threads. And so, I remember going to Vietnam a few years ago and obviously, the motifs of French colonialism were so strong and were drawing me back to Beirut, in a way that felt really transportative, and I ended up writing about it. I realised that these little details of space that I'm associating, that I think come from my background being

stateless and moving around, and being in flux so much, inform the way that I look at language.

And then also, when I was doing visual art, it was similar with the way that I would do textile work. It was very much about splitting things up and unpicking seams and then stitching them back together in new ways that there was still some kind of relationship between different parts of a piece of work. So I think – I just think if I'm going to reduce it to the basics, it's that my creative practice is so much about creating patterns between isolated fragments, or fragmenting something in the first place, and then using those fragments to create a pattern, which I think is also how I – my relationship to home and to space is very similar.

Q: One of the things I'm thinking about in this work around statelessness is – and I guess everybody who works in statelessness – is this idea of, we need to solve statelessness. What would your solution to statelessness be?

A: The issue with statelessness is how – or for me at least – is how much it dictates your life choices. You really – you lose access to mobility. And so I don't think that the solution to statelessness is stagnance, or finding your one place to be. I think that it's more being able to move liberally as often and as widely as you'd like. So, broadly, I just think that free motion, regardless of borders, is – that's the antithesis of statelessness, because it means that you can just – you have full autonomy over your life and your geography, in a way that statelessness strips you of.

Q: Is that part of – I guess it's so – thinking about the way you've been talking about making the decisions about where to live, it kind of compels you to be – to make decisions. You can't just be stagnant.

A: Yes. Yeah, yeah. But even then it's like, the decisions that I'm making are about constant negotiation of, what am I prioritising? How do I end up in Spain? How do I end up in Cyprus? I don't have permanent residency of either. And so I wonder what kind of choices I would be making if not for this factoring in of paperwork. That's all it is, it's paperwork. How would I exist if I wasn't reliant on my papers being accepted?

Q: Yeah. And it feels like we're in such a moment of paper – I think papers have always been important – but this particular moment is also, it's so heightened in this securitised moment.

A: Exactly. And going back to – looking back on those old passports, those travel documents that I have in a box in my bedroom in Cyprus – I just don't ever see us ever going back to that, where it's just a simple piece of paper. And you don't have an extensive record that says every single country you've ever entered. Everything is documented. So then there's also this insane paper trail of everywhere you've ever been. And that feels burdensome too, in some way.

Q: Yep. Yeah. I'm aware we've been talking for about two hours; that's a long time. Is there anything you think we've missed? Anything?

A: I think we've been really rigorous. In a good way; in a really good way.

Q: Any last insights into statelessness, or anything?

A: You've asked all the right questions.

Q: No, thank you so much. You've been so generous, and such richness. I feel honoured to sit with you today.

A: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me.

Q: Thank you so much. No, of course. I'll end it.