



IN BETWEEN

by ZAINAB AL-RUBAI'I

for the whole time i thought i belonged here. i moved through the world convinced that home was not a question i had to answer. but the older i grew, the more i realised that what stops me from fully belonging here is that my existence and identity will always be politicised. my being will always be simplified due the symbol i wear which becomes the lens through which i am seen. i will never be seen as the person i am – the symbol they see me in will always speak for me instead.

this simplification of my personhood deforms me. not just in how others see me, but in how I see myself. the pressure to explain, to justify, to shrink myself into something legible and unthreatening, is relentless. to protect myself from being hurt, i began to withdraw. i chose isolation over exposure. i chose jobs where i could disappear. i no longer entered spaces where i might become a surface of attack. my becoming contorted into survival.

out of spite, i turned towards my roots. but even this return has been a painful experience. while life unfolds around me continues *here*, i am stuck in the memories i made *there*. i never arrived in the life of *here* – instead, i retreat in delusions to shield my physical being from this foreign land. countless mornings, i yearn to walk the same streets my father walked when he was my age. countless nights i cry because the colonial project succeeded in tearing me away from my homeland.

the childhood *there*, that could have shaped me into the person i could have become, was taken from me. the most heartbreaking part is that i will never be fully able to reclaim *her* as my homeland. the distance has alienated me from the place i long for. i mourn the version of myself who never had the chance to exist. my only sense of homeland is the memories, fictions, paintings, and pictures i piece together to remember her. escaping into my own imaginary world becomes the way to survive the dissonance.

and here, i tried to reclaim home.

as i walked the same streets once my father did.

trying to trace the life i would have had, if it wasn't for imperialism.

this is an insight to my imaginary world, the place where my homeland lives on.