

## Frontlines and Faultlines

*Emma Kast\**

I arrive from Ithaca at my uncle Benjamin's house on Thanksgiving afternoon. My father's family is already there and happy to see me. Within just moments I am basking in the warmth of their presence. My younger brother is eager to play a game of chess though we both know he will win easily, even if he plays absent a rook and queen. My older brother is cracking jokes and teasing me with his sharp wit. My eldest cousin wants an update on my plans for the future. My father asks me about school.

Conspicuously absent is my mother. My father and his family always encourage her to attend all the family gatherings but in recent years she has declined, always gracefully providing excuses. This Thanksgiving, she has indicated that she would prefer to spend it in Vermont with her ailing mother. Her quiet and gentle disposition has always provoked hostility from most of my father's side of the family—a family of doctors and strong-willed matriarchs, organized around a love for Judaism and its rituals. My mother has opted to avoid all interactions with them rather than stand up for herself or be silenced by the pushback she receives when she does speak. 'Maybe they resent me for not being Jewish,' she has speculated to me. Perhaps there is some truth in this; she is resented for her Catholicism. But perhaps more significantly, she is resented for her constant repentance and her unapologetic attachment to her role as a submissive, self-sacrificing mother and wife.

Like the rest of my family, my uncle Benjamin seems pleased to see me. But there is something different in his demeanor. While everyone else is relaxed, he is on edge. No one seems to notice, but his kind eyes are pleading when he asks me if we can chat briefly. Something about his urgency causes me to bypass the rest of my family's demands for my attention and follow him to his desk in the living room. There is a cluttered organization to his desk, which is strewn with papers buried amidst at least five different Apple devices.

We exchange the usual opening ritual: 'I'm sorry your mom couldn't make it this year,' he says. 'Me too,' I reply.

Already pulled up on the largest monitor is an article I had sent him a couple of weeks earlier by anthropologist Ghassan Hage, which attempts to humanize Palestinian suicide bombers<sup>1</sup>. On another monitor is a page of his notes. Hage coins the term 'exiphobia' as the

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<sup>1</sup>Ghassan Hage, "Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm": Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exiphobia." *Public Culture* 15(1) 2003: 65–89.

fear that such explanations will seem to justify acts that we wish to condemn. He suggests that what is at stake in our resistance to humanizing the other is opening space for the possibility that we would be capable of performing the same acts if we found ourselves in a similar situation – similar social conditions, living conditions and history. We do not want to understand because we fear this implication.

Uncle Benjamin is a good member of the Jewish Left. He reads literature from Palestinian authors as often as he reads Israelis. He would never utter anything outwardly racist. He is *just* the right degree of critical toward Netanyahu's policies.

I feel the weight of Hage's presence as I am faced with the sudden juxtaposition of my emotional-intellectual life in Ithaca and my family's political orientation. By introducing this article, I have undoubtedly disturbed the peace.

When my father asks me how school is going, I am rarely able to articulate an answer. What I can do is send an article, an occasional paper I have written, something that hints at my constant imperative to resist a comfortable unity with my family's beliefs – a process that at once frees me and holds me captive. Under the gaze of my family I perform my anger, demonstrating the discordance between the colonial resistance I support so strongly and the love of Jewish culture – which for them is inextricably tied to a love of Israel – that orients my father's family. Repeatedly, I use my uncle as an outlet for and a shield against my anger.

And yet, through some naïve hope or maybe blind idealism, part of me had also thought Hage might finally bridge the gap between my family's mainstream democratic leftism and my more radical inclinations. In my fantasy, I win the battle. My mother, my father and my uncle become inspired to join me. They *feel* why I sympathize with the Palestinian cause, despite having no familial connections to Palestine and an abundance of such connections to Israel.

Far from understanding, I see immediately that my uncle is defensive, as if the very act of sending him the article was a declaration of battle. I smile in recognition of this familiar feeling. Uncle Benjamin and I have discussed Israel and Palestine on countless occasions. Our discussions always leave me feeling deeply frustrated. They seem to me to be circuits of futility. Sometimes they aren't even discussions. Our engagement frequently takes the form of what I call an 'article war', where we send each other commentary that aligns with our respective viewpoints on the conflict. He always focuses on direct action. I always focus on what I see as a more insidious, structural violence. Again, we had agreed to a peace treaty – no more articles. Again one of us had broken it. This time he is the infringer – he had sent me a news clip about Palestinian militants firing a missile towards a densely populated area in Israeli territory. I had responded with Hage's article.

So here we are.

This time, Uncle Benjamin has loaded extra ammunition. He is determined to finally convince me that Israel's militancy must be defended. I know what he is up to, and I smile again, trying to coax him away from a discussion I know will end in mutual exasperation. My uncle is normally sensitive and emotionally aware, but he ignores my attempt at ending this conversation. I remind him that we both have strong emotional commitments and there is no use trying to fight each other in this way. But as I utter these words, I feel as though I am admitting defeat already, and the last thing I want to do is surrender to him. I think of my mother, with her powerful

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intuition that there is something wrong at the core of the family scene. Yet, I cannot let myself follow her into avoidance and retreat.

Uncle Benjamin fires facts at me about Palestinian terror against Israelis: names, dates, wars, broken resolutions. I become furious at him and at myself when I realize that I am playing his game, firing counter-facts back at him: Israelis' unprovoked assault, economic blockades, continued illegal settlements. I am even armed with personal stories from speaking to Israeli soldiers who have admitted to bursting into Palestinian homes, terrorizing families, and arresting fathers for questioning, even when they have very little evidence that someone has committed a crime. Nonetheless my anxiety grows when I am reminded that he is more knowledgeable than me.

Despite my anxiety, or perhaps because of it, the scene suddenly strikes me as humorous and I laugh. Why does my uncle consider me a threat when it is obvious he is far more studied? Why engage me at all? Inversely, why do I fight him when I am certain he is wrong? Why is my family's approval so crucial to my utopian vision? I recognize in this moment that we share the same reckless rage. Perhaps also we share an undeniable love for what we refuse to let go—our opposing ideas of a just world.

My laughter galvanizes my uncle's anger.

Hage has a section on leftist Israelis in his article. Using Baruch Kimmerling's term, he claims that even the Left is *politicidal*<sup>2</sup> towards Palestinians, because it views violent anticolonial resistance as purely disappointing and destructive. 'The sooner Palestinians swap the bombs for bottles of whiskey and gin, the better. Then, the radical leftists can become truly radical and outraged about the conditions of the Palestinian people without anyone violently disrupting their leftism,'<sup>3</sup> Hage says sardonically, contrasting the current threat of Palestinians to the existing order with that of American Indians and Australian Indigenous. He suggests that as long as Palestinians still have a will to fight, they will be considered a threat that must be repressed.

In a moment of lucidity, I recognize my fear staring me straight in the face. It is the implicit message I receive from my uncle: *I can love you so long as you are compliant and submissive when it comes to this issue.*

My uncle and I are committed to battle now. Our rational minds abandon us and our bodies speak. We violate our past agreements that we would not discuss this. Uncle Benjamin starts to lecture in an uncharacteristically authoritative voice. My voice rises to match his. I don't even know exactly what we are saying. But I do know that I am livid when he demands I agree that Palestinians who walk into a room full of innocent mothers and children to detonate an explosive are simply disgusting human beings, end of story. He interrupts me, and talks over me when I try to interrupt him.

The rest of the family is alarmed by the growing tension. Intrigued, they slowly congregate into the living room. Uncle Benjamin and I barely notice.

I feel the storm coming. Sometimes, violence begets violence. I slowly lose my ability to think as my rage grasps a tighter hold on me, and I can feel myself alienating my family. There is a brief falter in our speech – Uncle Benjamin and I are both stumbling over our words. I take advantage of this pause to steal a glance at my family-spectators. A vague realization sets in of how absurd I must appear and this compounds my frustration. They seem puzzled, perhaps

<sup>2</sup> Hage, 'Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm,' p. 81

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 82

unsure as to why I cannot agree on the simple fact that terrorists are evil. Where does my allegiance lie? I can feel myself searching for the tipping point, probing its boundaries. I wonder where I will fall once I have reached it. Will I be a martyr in this situation, defending my beliefs at the cost of my family's love? Or, will I become my mother, concealing my anger until it fades and I've convinced myself it was never there at all?

More bullets coming. Uncle Benjamin mentions that families of Palestinian martyrs hold celebrations in their homes and neighbors come over to commend them on how many Israelis their dead son had killed. 'Imagine that kind of celebration when you get together with your family,' he says, 'instead of celebrating and praying for peace, like our family is doing now.' With this statement, I can no longer contain myself. Something about it hurts deeply and tears flood my eyes. I am surprised by their sudden and uncontrollable onset. But I continue arguing. I must make him see that his disdain toward how other families organize their desires could just as easily be applied to our family. But my words fall short, feeling only like a resignation to relativism.

My family does not know what to do. They avert their gaze awkwardly, attempt to start new conversations with each other. My uncle, realizing he has made me cry, suddenly backs down. I sense his fear. Perhaps he thinks the rest of the family will be angry with him for making me so upset. Desperate to appease me, he quickly draws my attention over to the computer screen again, where he pulls up the home page of an organization called *The Peace Factory*. Two movements are of particular interest to him: 'Israel Loves Palestine' and 'Palestine Loves Israel.' Supposedly, these movements promote a platform where ordinary citizens of Israel and Palestine can share the trauma of war and images of friendship and peace across borders, despite political animosity. The idea, I believe, is to invite a separation between politics and the humanity of those affected by politics, implying of course that the latter is more important. What could possibly be wrong with wanting to promote such a thing?

My uncle cannot see that for me, this is another jab. How am I to trust that peace is the goal when I feel as though the Israelis who began the organization could just as easily have called it *The Pacification Factory*? Perhaps it has something to do with the industrial connotation of that word, 'factory'. As if violence is a raw material that enters some machine that through a technical, apolitical process produces seamless peace. What is the nature of the process? I am suspicious. For these reasons or perhaps others, *The Peace Factory* page feels like a personal violation.<sup>4</sup> My tears continue. 'That is bullshit,' I declare. 'Those people don't want peace. You don't want peace.' Now, Uncle Benjamin looks as puzzled as the rest of my family. I think I am just as confused as he is, but I can't let him know that. 'I thought that would make you feel better,' he says. 'I'm sorry, Emma. I'm sorry.'

My balance returns. Fuming at my uncle and ashamed of my inability to express myself coherently, I grab a box of tissues and leave the room. I head up to the attic to collect myself. Even there, alone, the silent scream inside of me rings in my head, thrashes in my chest, continues to propel the tears from my eyes. My rational self will not emerge. I am still not sure of the source of my overflowing emotional well. Who am I defending and why? Palestinians? Myself? It is a strange thing to admire someone's conviction but hate his argument. Does my fury stem from a feeling that my uncle is trying to rob me of my anger? That he is trying to monopolize not only anger and violence, but also truth and love? He had made me feel weak and

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<sup>4</sup> <http://peacefactory.org>

slighted, as though my problem is simply an ignorance of facts. How can I begin to explain that if peace means pacification then maybe I fear peace? I am grateful that no one is coming up to try to comfort me. About twenty minutes later my phone beeps. It is a text from my uncle:

*Emma, I respect you a great deal as well as love you and I'm very sorry that I made you so upset today. I meant to make it dry, dispassionate discussion. I'm sorry I didn't succeed. I hope you'll still keep talking with me, arguing with me, and teaching me. I'd lose a lot if tonight's talk made you less comfortable discussing things with me.*

Still on the defense, I wonder what on Earth sounds appealing about a dry and dispassionate discussion. Is that not the type of discussion we are perpetually trying to avoid? *Keep fighting me*, he now seems to be saying. *I will only respect you if you stand up to me.*

I am baffled by this schizophrenic demand for both my compliance and resistance. Even more amazing is the way I attempt to respond to his impossible demands: I desire to be the perfect scholar he is proud to call his niece. The one who can dazzle with facts and logical precision, whose effortless creativity and intellectual daring breathes vitality into her captivated onlookers so that they are moved to a place of certitude: that, yes, *this* is the cause they should be fighting for. But on the other hand, I desire to show my raw fury. I want to let loose the distilled emotion that alienates so coldly—the voice that says, *I don't exactly know why, but this is so important to me that you can't even touch it. Hell, you can't even come near it. So stay the fuck away.*

When I have composed myself, I return to my family downstairs. My older brother avoids eye contact and my younger brother smirks at me. 'What the hell was that all about?' he asks me, amused. I cannot provide a satisfactory answer because I am wondering the same thing myself. The best response I've got is, 'I hate Uncle Benjamin's style of arguing. He shuts out other voices entirely.'

My uncle enters the room, looking relieved. He apologizes again. I can see the sincerity in his eyes, though I sense that perhaps it is fear he feels more than remorse. I tell him not to worry about it, and we embrace. There is a thaw in my heart as the anger subsides; I cannot bear to spend the rest of the evening furious at those from whom I seek love. So I pack away the anger that was momentarily unleashed. Another ceasefire. Dinner is served.

On Black Friday, Uncle Benjamin buys me a brand new pair of expensive winter boots. I am not sure of the gift's meaning. Is it being offered as reparation or is it simply a spontaneous gesture of kindness? Either way, I feel satisfied, accepting it gratefully. I cannot help but feel that it signals some kind of fear and respect toward me, and I like that feeling. At the very least, I think it indicates an acknowledgment of my capacity and my right to be angry, and therefore my agency and power. In the moment, this is enough for me.

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*Did you feel scared this past summer in Israel?* My family's invocation of my trip arrests me momentarily. With this question, they challenge me to capture the moment of fear. Yet how to capture a moment when so much more than fear is contained within it? And how to capture fear when it encompasses far more than just a moment?

Simply put, *yes* I was scared, I think to myself as I mull over the question. In my mind, I travel back to last summer. I am a sheltered, clueless American in a daze, whose pale skin is unprepared for the painful 120-degree blaze of the unforgiving sun. For years my extended family had been encouraging me to go on a 'Birthright' trip. So I had finally signed up for this free ten-day trip, for which anyone aged 18 to 26 with at least one Jewish parent is eligible.

Birthright is a dream for many young Americans. It is an opportunity to travel for free, for one thing. But perhaps more significantly, it is a chance to be whisked away from the discontents of an alienating American cultural life and to feel connected to a different land, a different history, and a different people – an exotic otherness that one can claim, nevertheless, as one's own.

The design of the trip is brilliant, really. For the duration of our time in Israel, the staff, highly trained in the art of seduction, appeal to participants' wide range of sensual pleasures. With measured subtlety, they encourage us to trade our American identity for a cultural particularity that is ancient, mystical, and wonderfully other. They use the allure of food, music, nature, nightlife, and even sex as tactics to ensure that participants develop positive associations to specific places. The hope is, it seems, that we will form an almost otherworldly connection to the land itself. The 40 of us on the trip study the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, eat Lebanese falafel, visit holy baths called Mikveh, and listen to Klezmer music on the streets. We trek up mountains, swim in the Dead Sea, and haggle for jewelry at vibrant, bustling markets. As a standard part of the program, we pick up a group of Israeli soldiers at their base. When they enter the bus the leaders introduce them as though they are items to be sold at an auction, enthusiastically announcing each one's name, interests, and – the giveaway – height and ideal date.

We consume this blend of middle-eastern cultures as though it is our God-given mandate, indeed as the name of the program reminds us. I watch my peers attempt to forge some feeling of rootedness, crying atop Mount Masada, forming bonds with the soldiers, speaking with locals about making *aliyah*. I do not consider myself to be in a position to doubt the sincerity of their love and their tears. Yet, all the while, two other like-minded participants and I are feeling superior because of our critical posture toward each of the program's carefully thought-out activities. Enjoying our subversive role as fighters, we are also proud of ourselves for having Birthright all figured out.

One night, we share a phenomenal meal of rice, vegetables, chicken kebab and spicy-sweet tea under Bedouin tents in the Negev desert. Later that night, I venture out into the desert until I cannot see the tents and I am surrounded only by sand, stars and silence. The aloneness and its attendant fantasy of freedom feel exquisite yet profoundly unsettling. And then there is that moment of complete alienation. It strikes me suddenly, violently: *what the hell am I doing here?* I contemplate walking farther, but instead I just stand there until the chill of the wind and flood of emptiness goad me back to the tents to sleep.

In Tel Aviv we are asked to pray for three teenaged Israeli boys who have recently been kidnapped on the West Bank, allegedly by Hamas. Each morning on the bus, we are asked again to pray for their safe return and for their heartbroken families. What we are not told is that Israel is in the midst of Operation Brother's Keeper – searching for the teens, arresting hundreds of Palestinians. Meanwhile, I am assigned to room with one of the female soldiers on the trip. We are in the balcony of our room after dinner, marveling at how the auburn blaze of the sun setting over the Mediterranean envelops everything it touches in a soft and strange glow. She receives a

call. 'It's my commander,' she says before taking it. Some words are exchanged in Hebrew and she hangs up. 'Their bodies were found,' she tells me, stone-faced. 'But it is good that they are dead. It means we won't trade any terrorist prisoners for them.' I am struck by her words – by the way they stir something volatile within me. She seems to judge these lost lives tactically, in terms of their strategic implication, the way she has been conditioned to. Paradoxically, I reflect later, this same phenomenon is one of the most common accusations against Hamas – that they consider their own people mere instruments of a larger plan; for example, by sheltering missiles in public areas so as to make an attack more difficult for Israelis.

It is Ramadan and our bus driver, a Palestinian-Israeli, has been driving our group around all day. We are on our way to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem. The group is rambunctious and expressing a litany of complaints – hunger, the heat, walking too much, and being unable to plug in their iPods to play their music for the whole bus. One of the leaders announces to the group that the body of a Palestinian teenager was found in the Jerusalem forest this morning, allegedly murdered by Israelis in what was thought to be a revenge killing. He is incredulous. 'I don't believe an Israeli would do this,' he says. I think of the bus driver – growing delirious from hunger, bringing a group of insolent Americans to commemorate the wound of Europe's past when there is war and death occurring in the present. I feel his urgency, or at least the urgency that I project onto him. 'Why don't we say prayers for the family of the Palestinian boy?' I wonder aloud, with my ethically superior tone. My fellow resisters agree that this seems obviously unfair. But my own words sound fraudulent despite the fragment of truth they might reveal because I know very well that I do not want to pray. 'Let's pray for peace,' our tour guide responds.

Is the Israeli who took the life of that boy praying for peace as well? Is Hamas?

On one rare occasion the bus driver comes out for lunch with us and I attempt to engage him in conversation. He is the representation of the other, and I latch on to the promise of this much needed perspective. But in the face of language barriers, rushed schedules, and my failure to convey my need through eye contact, a half-hearted nod to his forbearance seems to be the best I can manage; I eventually resign to simply mumbling a *thank you* each time I exit the bus for our excursions.

I extend my stay for another two weeks after the program ends. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because I feel that my mind and heart have not yet traveled to where my body is physically. Maybe I simply want more chances to feel something other than the minute vacillations between mild amusement and bitter frustration.

But during these extra two weeks in Israel, I am still restless and agitated. I don't dress properly in Jerusalem and older men jeer at me. I get lost because I cannot read the street signs in Hebrew or Arabic.

I am still in a daze when, feeling free from the fetters of the Birthright itinerary and ideological agenda, I board a train to Ashdod, a town about 20 miles northeast of Gaza. This is despite my better judgment and despite an Israeli friend telling me that conflicts are about to heat up and that it is a bad idea to go anywhere near Gaza. Riots in Jerusalem have already begun. Rubber bullets and teargas are starting to be used unsparingly. An ominous energy is rising in the cities. I find myself probing boundaries, taking risks, toying with limits. Unsure of exactly why, or what I am seeking.

It is outside a restaurant in Ashdod where my two allies from the trip, who have also extended their stay, decide to meet me. The evening air is calm and perfect when a loud alarm

interrupts our meal. The restaurant owner rushes out, motioning for all the guests to come inside. Herded like sheep, we all make our way into the restaurant and push back as far as we can go into the kitchen. People from the streets come running in as well. The owner explains to us that these are air-raid sirens, and that it should all be over in ten minutes or so. My fog remains, though a slow, sinking feeling starts to settle in my body. I think of my family. Loud explosions shake the ground. A missile from Hamas had just hit a car in the neighborhood, I would later find out. I chastise myself for succumbing to whatever perverse desire led me here in the first place. A panic-stricken Orthodox woman next to me begins to pray, her voice trembling. But as the owner had predicted, the siren stops within ten minutes and we are free to return to the streets.

After the initial shock, I am overcome with a simultaneous fear and its repudiation. I desperately try to deny my fear, rejecting it with all my might. I feel that its presence gives a bodily justification for Israeli retaliation. I am sure that my fear betrays my rational mind, which is obviously against a military incursion. In that moment, it is *imperative* for me to redirect my fear. So, to begin, I contemplate the repercussions of these missiles, which are described by a number of Western media sources as ‘bottle rockets’ compared to the IDF’s artillery. But this doesn’t work.

Then an inner voice begins attempts to rationalize the fear out of me. Its presence is thunderous. It goes something like this: *You are a fucking coward. Let’s not kid ourselves. We all know this attack will culminate in a massive incursion into Gaza. The IDF will decimate homes, schools, and thousands – yes thousands – of lives. The principle of proportionality will be grossly violated. But the powerful determine what is proportionate. This means there will be essentially no punishment for Israel. Now these are reasons to feel fear. Don’t lose sight of your convictions just because you’re shaken up by the very resistance you claim to understand. Don’t let Uncle Benjamin win.*

I consider that word, *proportionality*. Certainly my fear in this moment is disproportionately lower to the fear Gazans experience at this same moment, is it not?

It quickly becomes clear to me that I am not the only one who has succumbed to the fear/repudiation-of-fear maneuver. Those around me have too, but perhaps for different reasons. A young man with sad and tired eyes addresses me as we are leaving. Though I hadn’t spoken, something about my looks, my demeanor, most certainly indicates to him that I am a foreigner. I know this because he speaks to me in English. ‘Don’t be scared,’ he instructs me, but perhaps also himself. ‘If we are scared, we are giving Hamas what they want.’ I find the implication of his words troubling – that we should just go about our daily lives and ignore the rockets, the sirens, everything, the way a good parent stoically awaits the subsidence of her child’s tantrum. *But we are also giving Israel what they want – grounds for action*, I want to say. Fear can be instrumentalized all too conveniently in everyone’s favor.

Nausea, recoil, desperation to *just get out of this miserable place*. This is what I feel.

The moment passes quickly as recovery and sense-making ensue in the aftermath. My desire for continuity betrays me – I cannot consciously acknowledge my simultaneous fear of the present danger of Hamas and my fear of Israel’s overuse of military force. My inability to smooth over these contradictions makes me anxious. It makes me want to just go back home so I do not have to accept the truth of the madness in front of me. In fact my urge to leave becomes so strong that I almost do not consider that boarding the next plane home would amount to merely swapping fear with apathy and deferral. How rapidly I sense my mother’s impulses becoming



justified within me, working through me. So I wait, refusing to let fear or apathy govern my body.

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On my last night in Israel I find myself alone at a beach in Jaffa, strangely detached, as though in a lucid dream. I hear a distant siren from the next town over, a sound to which I have become accustomed. Emerging from the water, I leave the sandy area and make my way up to the street where people are glancing about anxiously. The sun is setting and there's that strange aura again. Sharing a horizon are the scene of a Jewish wedding with American pop music blasting and a mosque with the sound of a call to prayer rising from its speakers. Together they create the soundtrack of a distant suffering-turned-spectacle to which my gaze wanders: a cloud of smoke in the sky, the remnants of mortar fire. This exit music accompanies my return to the hostel. My flight is not until 3am. I have time to pass. I settle into a hammock on the balcony and close my eyes, drifting off. By the time I awake, the incessant bass from a nightclub down the street cuts the darkness. I imagine young Israelis dancing despite the possibility that in the morning they will be called to inflict and be afflicted by violence. *It's time to leave.*

Because it is a Friday night – the Sabbath – only Palestinian-Israeli cab companies are operating. There is a cab waiting for me and I climb in, carrying with me a small suitcase and the smell of the sea. As it is the middle of the night, I am unprepared for the driver's cheerful mood. He wants to know why I have traveled here, and to where I am returning. I learn that he has been a Palestinian citizen of Israel his whole life. Inevitably, the discussion turns to Gaza as we note the sound of more rocket fire. Conflict never sleeps. As with the Birthright bus driver, I feel inclined to apologize somehow, to convey my anti-colonial solidarity. Again I am unprepared when he remarks with a gruff laugh, 'Israel will kick Hamas's ass. This will be over soon.' I am surprised by the obvious Americanism of 'ass-kicking.' But I am more perplexed by how he refrains from using pronouns, asserting a categorical distinction between two groups yet identifying with neither. Is this pessimism, transcendent detachment, or something else? We part ways cordially, but my uncanny feeling of distance grows stronger. I am left wondering what compels me so strongly to defend one side and apologize on behalf of another, when I, too, am a stranger here.

When I arrive home, I feel a profound relief to be physically far removed from the rising body count, but I cannot divest myself mentally from it. I follow Operation Protective Edge every day after my return, becoming addicted to the nightmarish soap opera of the constant news updates. The IDF continues an unrestrained destruction of homes, schools, water plants, hospitals, lives. Hamas builds underground tunnels into Israel, which Israel cites as justification to continue the incursion.

As if the waves of my radiating abhorrence reach him, Uncle Benjamin begins to wage a full-throttled article war; my inbox fills with articles lamenting the assault on Israel. I cannot help but retaliate. Beginning again as the quintessential proxy war, we both use the words of others to express what we cannot, or will not, say ourselves. Each of my responses announces the death count: one thousand Palestinians, one thousand five hundred, two thousand, two thousand one hundred. Uncle Benjamin doesn't want to hear it. He tells me the numbers are skewed to make Israel look bad. He adds, 'All Hamas has to do is stop firing missiles at Israel. It is really that simple. My move is to declare, What is simple is to understand that disarming means accepting a

constant state of economic warfare and rendering oneself even more powerless against a colonial aggressor...’

And there it is: that familiar feeling resurfacing, that fundamental antagonism. The circuit that seemingly cannot be deciphered.

The media drama lasts for fifty days until Egypt brokers a ceasefire. Shortly thereafter, the world’s attention on the summer series fades. The siege on Gaza is no longer trending.

As the Left once again throws around the familiar two-state solution trope, I contemplate the coexistence of my own warring loyalties. *A separate statehood, yes*, I muse with sarcastic cynicism. *That must be the ultimate solution. More borders, more division. Quarantine cultural difference and deny human sameness. Agree to disagree.*

The drive to continue fighting pulses through me, a drive I cannot even claim as entirely my own. Yet it is too easy to keep my distance from Birthright, to disassociate myself from an inappropriate use of Judaism that justifies violence, to disavow imperialism, and to claim that I identify with the Palestinian struggle. What is more difficult is to face how deeply the legacy of colonialism is woven into the fabric of family structures. I wonder how I might gain distance from this legacy even as it permeates bodies, dictates thought, and informs expression – when I am too intimately entwined within it to observe from afar.

Ultimately, I am still left to wonder what consistently brings me back to battle. Is it my desperation not to face the chasm that separates me from my family, even as I inch toward it? Is it an attempt to answer the all-consuming question of how to move forward in the face of resistance from those I love – a force that translates into my own desire not to understand, my own will not to think?

I still require my family’s blessing, their reassurance that my work is important even as I ardently resist them. Perhaps I believe – I *must* believe – that there is something to be gained in each of the jarring moments when this contradiction is unveiled.