Summer of the Sabra Cactus: The Body, Landscape, and Numbed Tourism

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“They say there is a country / A land that flows with sunlight / Where is that country? / Where is that sunlight?” – Saul Tchemikovsky

When we travel, we are entering another person’s land, and hence another person’s pain. After customs, holding up passports as the security scans our belongings and our bodies, we penetrate a land and pain we don’t know.

Cacti grow in Israel, like they do in any desert climate. The cactus is covered in thorns to protect itself from predators. Its thorns cause pain onto others, yet protects itself from pain.

In June 2014, I opened a newspaper that described an airplane and people falling from the sky down to the earth. Pictures of metal debris crunched up and black in a field.

I don’t remember where, when or why this happened – just the matte photograph on newsprint. I imagine that the blackness of the page resembled ash – soft and chalky, it could rub off onto my finger if I pressed down.

I touch the ink with my finger, but these events are too far away to feel me, for me to feel them. The image of the plane, a dead black bird, shocked me – I stared at it for a long time. And I was shocked by how little I felt for it.
The summer of 2014 seemed like a riddle or a test of grief and sometimes the absence of grief.

The year 2014 was the year I decided I was obsessed with cacti. I used the cactus as a frequent motif in my poetry and it was an aesthetic symbol that pleased me. To me, the plant defined my personal survival of recent heartbreak – reclaiming my body after it was deserted.

The cactus suggests a climate of pain, a climate of borders and deep memories. In its belly, old water is stored for surviving. The cactus does not sway much in the wind. The cactus takes a very long time to grow tall.

I visited Israel on a Birthright trip from May 25th – June 6th 2014, only days before three Israeli students were kidnapped and murdered, before the war of bombs and rockets broke out between the Israeli Army and the Gaza-based Palestinian military groups.

Out of mere coincidence, my touring group of 19-22 year-old Jewish young people finished our itinerary just in time to come home and read these events as black print on a newspaper, as headlines on a laptop screen.

I want to say what happened to me, which is that nothing happened to me.
I want to say that there were bloody faces and war and deaths, but I didn’t know.

Even when I knew, I couldn’t feel it. I was sitting in a galaxy-patterned tour bus seat, watching the desert hills and the tiny shriveled seas, and also the cities of normalcy, all passing by me through a window that I could easily cover with a thin navy curtain.

The definition of diaspora: Jews living outside Israel. • the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel. • the dispersion of any people from their original homeland.

In my dreams, I see nothing but apricot trees and mountains of earth, swirling in sand layers, and then there’s me, watching them.

In Arabic, the word for cactus is sabr – the sabra cactus.

In the English dictionary, the word sabra means “a Jew born in Israel (or before 1948 in Palestine.)”

In Arabic, sabr also means ‘patience’ and ‘perseverance.’

In Palestinian poetry, sabr is often rhymed with qabr – ‘tomb.’

We were led through tours of many important Israeli sites on Birthright, including the national cemetery in Jerusalem: Mount Herzl, meaning Mount of Remembrance.
The cemetery is organized of hills with steps, a grid of small graves that look like individual gardens. Mediterranean ferns, ghost plants, everywhere.

It was very quiet. Many of the soldiers’ graves had photographs of faces on them, printed onto the stone or some just a water-damaged piece of paper taped down. Empathy for the dead. Some of the graves said nothing – empty, for the missing.

In Mount Herzl, our tour guide handed out laminated funeral statements and biographies of important Israeli figures for us to read. In the section of fallen soldiers, I volunteered to read a statement from a mother who had lost her 18 year-old son, a soldier, to Hamas kidnappers. I stood in the gardens, the hot height of the hill, and I read her words about suffering and strength.

I have a very loud and convincing voice. A friend said my performance made her cry. During the mother’s story, I wanted to cry, too. I wanted to.

In November 2013, I was dumped by my longtime boyfriend. We’ll call him “the poet.”

In January 2014, I started a project where I wrote a poem every day and posted them on a blog, in attempts to become a better artist but also to get the long-time-boyfriend to love me again. It didn’t work, though.
I’m not really sure what I learned. From that year, I have 365 poems, mostly explorations on my own emotions. For many months, all the poems were about the poet’s departure, and then suddenly, they weren’t.

As we document our lives, we document how much grief we are feeling at different times. Grief vessels, a grief scale. I found that as my breakup’s pain diminished, I felt utterly empty. I longed for my painful body. All summer, I searched for remnants of my grief, frantically, writing poems about wanting to write poems about the poet again. The question kept emerging: How can I be sad about not being sad?

Sometimes, as a woman, I feel like my body is armor. I have to be so strong – I have to communicate my hurt in limited, graceful ways. My pain becomes sheltered inside of me. No one wants the burden of a woman in grief.

In Jewish tradition, we place rocks on the head of the grave to show the dead we are thinking of them. It’s because flowers don’t last forever, but rocks do. Israel is proof of this – the place is built up around old rocks that have lasted forever, Biblical rocks. I never thought of Earth as a truly old place until I visited Israel.

After I read the story of the mother’s loss and her perseverance at Mount Herzl, I picked up a rock from the desert and placed it on her son’s grave where we stood. By reading her words, I did feel connected to a body that was not mine – a woman
who lost a part of herself. Her pain was hot in my forehead, for one moment. We moved on.

On Mike Brown's murder site in Ferguson, Missouri, 15 minutes from my parents’ house, the news channels showed his body’s outline on the asphalt as a body of roses. Piles of teddy bears and letters on crinkled notebook paper. In the coming days, someone set this memorial on fire. The black poster stood – “hands up, don’t shoot” – with tiny colorful hands glued on it, out of construction paper.

In Israel, people exist and then they don’t. Thousands of Palestinian children were killed in one year, but who were they and who did they want to be? A suicide bomber enters a bus and then that bus and its people are erased. What’s left is a tragedy and sometimes a commemorative plaque is stabbed into the dirt.

As a kid, I ignored Israel in the news. It just didn't interest me, as far as I can remember. As an adult, even after visiting, I shy away from the newspaper articles. I don't understand the smoke spooking the outlines of Old Jerusalem. I have convinced myself that I am not educated enough on the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that it has nothing to do with me, and therefore, I cannot speak.

In Israel, ancient archeological ruins are dug up everyday in people’s backyards, underneath houses. We toured through many archeological sites, and most of them exhibited tile floors from rich people’s houses and holy sites.
The tinier the colored tiles were, the clearer the image. Some of the images were of animals and ferns, but I remembered the bodies of people the most – A woman’s face, haloed in broken clay. How strange it was that the color could stay, after thousands of years? I break my body into fragments to understand my body. I will keep the colors for a long, long time.

I am not the only one obsessed with cacti. How could I be? I am possessive in my thoughts, but I am not unique. We do not own what we love.

‘Asim Abu Shakra was obsessed with cacti. Kamal Boullata wrote the distinguished essay, ‘Asim Abu Shakra: The Artist’s Eye and the Cactus Tree, discussing the famous Palestinian-Israeli artist and the importance of the sabra cactus for Palestinians, relating to their forced exodus from Israel. ‘Asim Abu Shakra was a painter and he only painted one image: A lone cactus, sitting in a pot or a tin can.

The story of ‘Asim is a sad one. He grew up in a Palestinian peasant village and moved to Tel Aviv to go to art school. He moved to Tel Aviv in the early 1980’s, around the same time Israel attacked Lebanon and its refugee camps. A respected figure at his school and Israeli arts community, ‘Asim died of leukemia in 1990. He was 28.
'Asim wasn’t allowed to live in most apartments because he was Arab. His subject was a real cactus that he would look at from the window of his shabby studio on Nahami Street. The cactus sat, domestic and uprooted, on the ledge. ‘Asim knew he was dying.

_The Artist’s Eye_ related, “the more he painted it, the more he began to identify with his subject.” Someone once asked him why he kept painting the cactus – “because its amazing ability to flower out of death.”

This is an essay about wanting bodies to be recognized and kept. This is an essay about the unresolved, empty container.

Recently, my friend visited the desert in New Mexico on a hiking trip and came home amazed by the sand’s ability to cover up our steps so there’s no trace.

Palestinians used to be natives of Israel and now they are not. Back when their villages still resided on Israel’s land before 1948, the prickly pear hedge distinguished territorial boundaries in the countryside – a natural border of one village to the next. Early photographs of Palestine from the 19th and 20th century show the cactus hedges freckled throughout the land – a homeland code.

Here’s how cacti reproduce:
“Cactus seeds are scattered by birds, wind, and rain. A cactus plant may produce about a million seeds during its life, but only one or two seeds live long enough to produce a new cactus. Some cactuses reproduce both sexually and asexually; reproduce without seeds and flowers.”

Before the plane ride to Israel, I remember security made me empty out my Nalgene and I spent the entire 12 hours so thirsty that I had an anxiety attack, thinking I was dying. Looking back on this, it’s embarrassing - I could’ve asked the flight attendant to fill my water bottle. I suffered in that dark cavity over the ocean, for no reason. Maybe I was preparing myself for the desert, I don’t know.

I didn’t have my computer with me in Israel so I wrote all my poems in my journal by hand, with a pen. I haven’t shared them with anyone, whereas all my other poems are on my public blog. For the first poem I drew little pictures below the words, out of boredom. I liked this so much, and ended up drawing an image for every poem:

Black crows sitting on a wall. A camel. A girl crying a cactus-shaped tear. A giant cactus guarding the entrance to our kibbutz.

In actuality, the kibbutz was guarded by barbed wire that lined the outer edges – cactus-like protection.
Of 'Asim Abu Shakra’s work, some critics have related his cactus symbol to a symbol of Passion – the thorns of Christ, sacrifice, and resurrection. To me, the symbol is about loneliness. The contradiction of a dying plant that is supposed to live forever, of a man who became a stranger in his own land.

On the last day of 2014, I got a tattoo of one of my drawings, a symbol I made for myself. It’s a bear’s face, wearing a crown, with her eyes closed. It felt like a million thorns piercing my side over and over again. The tattoo had to be in a safe spot, on my ribs, so my mom can’t see. In Jewish culture, it’s seen as dishonorable to get tattoos because of those in the Holocaust who were tattooed in concentration camps, as numbers.

There must be something to say about wanting to stamp my own art on my body, permanently.

I wrote 365 poems because I never wanted to forget my pain. When we write something down, it becomes something else. It changes form; it becomes the black words instead of the feeling in your body.

The desert is a solitary place. A place for thinking. The desert trip is stereotyped as a time for personal change, realizations – writers often describe this.
In Mary Ruefle’s book of lectures, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, there are a significant handful of descriptions of the desert as it relates to the lives of literary figures:

“There was an old story of Somerest Maugham reading Proust while crossing the desert by camel, and to lighten the load he tore out each page after reading both sides and let it fall behind him.”

“When Borges, visiting the Sahara, picked up a little bit of sand, carried it in his hand and let it fall someplace else, he said, “I am modifying the Sahara.”

Ruefle said that when we write a poem, we are “modifying the Sahara” of thousands of years of poetry. We can’t save it. But we are sincere and modest to even touch its vastness – an attempt to swirl the sand around.

It’s my hobby to collect these desert things, but it’s also a mystery to me – I want these clues, but for what?

Here’s a green body that lives without water, that lactates, that carries its spines like a gown.

After a while, friends started giving me cactus gifts. A t-shirt, a light-up ceramic figure. The friend who visited New Mexico texted me a picture of what appeared to
be a cactus field, with the caption – “Cacti say hi!” My bedroom window is closed with blinds, but strung with Christmas lights shaped like saguaro and prickly pear.

I don't own a real cactus, only plastic ones. Only words.

In her essay, *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf claimed that the English language has “no words for the shiver and the headache” – it's in “poverty” of words to describe pain.

In her essay, *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf describes writing as “telling the truth about my experiences as a body.”

Mary Ruefle wrote an essay about obsession in poetry: “We begin in admiration and we end by organizing our disappointment.”

The cactus obsession is like any other thing I've ever loved.

It can’t last forever. The love slowly melts out after a while. But if I write it down, will it stay? Solid on the page. This is not a question, but a plea.

When I came home from Israel, I wasn’t sad about the war. I was sad about love. I tried to write about Sasha, a boy on my Birthright trip who I thought I had fallen in love with. But really, I wasn’t in love with anyone. Not even the poet. As I tried to
clinging onto the thought of him, it was the memory of the pain he caused me that I found myself wanting to relive.

We were in the desert. Sasha and I listened to a sad song called ‘Siamese’ on headphones on the bus. We watched the fruit trees and then the cities on the hill, and then the dried up dirt.

I remember floating in the Dead Sea, and catching Sasha’s eye as he was doing the same – he was wearing sunglasses and a huge safari hat, but I could tell his eyebrows and lips were pinched in: A pained, disappointed face. We both hated it. The salt water entered every secret cavity of our body and we had to get out.

“Don’t fart in the Dead Sea – it will BURN!”

I felt satisfied in my pain when I knew Sasha was feeling it, too. I would look for his face throughout the trip, whenever I was feeling uncomfortable with our structured, controlled tourism. After a while we knew how to send each other knowing glances:

We are too cool for this shit.

We are too cool for the “buddy system” and 20 minute timed-visits to the beach.
The Dead Sea is a body of water that is so salty and dehydrated that it allows you to float. If you try to turn over on your side, the water keeps pushing you up – an invisible force. It’s one of the most anticipated Birthright activities, and everyone slathers their white bodies in brown-green mud, a ritual to later be posted on Instagram. No one tells you that this experience, based on vacation and relaxation stereotypes, may be no fun at all.

The mud does make your skin soft. You spend the rest of the day touching your face over and over again.

I only remember this next fragment because I wrote it down in my diary – it haunted me. As I walked down the Brooklyn Bridge with my cousin on a beautiful day in New York City, the day before my plane ride to Israel, we passed by a graffiti statement:

*I ALMOST EXIST!*

I remember being three years old and walking out into the shallow end of a man-made lake. I kept walking forward and forward, entering, until my entire small body was submerged in the green water.

My first memories as a child always contain water, plants, or pain.
During Thanksgiving this year, my Jewish liberal family only briefly brought up the murder of Mike Brown and the protests and pain that was happening to our city. We did not discuss the Israeli-Palestinian war that happened, that was still happening. It’s possible that we are a very passive family. It’s also possible that the war just never crossed our minds.

In Israel, you never forget that there is war. Everyone is a soldier. You never forget that you are Jewish because everything around you is Jewish. There it is – the blue star waving against the sky.

As a kid, I was always coloring in maps of Israel at Sunday School. There would be a day of Sunday School every year where they would bring in a giant inflatable map of Israel to the shul and we would all lay on it giggling, our legs stretched across different major cities and rivers.

At Jewish summer camp, we had a whole day devoted to celebrating Israel. We ate falafel and had different stations for kids to learn about Israeli sites. There was a camel station, with a camel from a petting zoo. As a counselor, I worked at the Western Wall, and helped kids write notes – their hopes and dreams – and stuff them into fake cardboard bricks.

Judith Butler wrote an essay called The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique. She understands that there is a rise of anti-Israel sentiments
in the academic community. She quotes Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard, at the beginning of her piece, as he believes that to criticize Israel at this time is “taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.”

Butler points out the flaw in this: “one could conclude, on the basis of desire to refrain from strengthening anti-Semitic sentiment and belief, that certain actions of the Israeli state – acts of violence and murder against children and civilians – must not be objected to, must go unremarked and unprotested, for fear that any protest against them would be tantamount to anti-Semitism, if not anti-Semitism itself.”

After the 1917 Balfour Declaration, Britain’s acceptance of the Zionist movement and the first country to do so, the Palestinian villagers reacted with a protest dance song. They sang: "Ya’ayn kuni subbara - O eye, be a cactus tree!"

This translation could mean so many things. Is it a request for their eyes to become resistant and strong, cactus eyes? Is it a request to continue to see the prickly pear in their vision – the outlines of their villages?

Our tour guide for Birthright was a tiny man named Yonaton who is from the US. He is a gay man, but he never told us. One time he told us that everything about Israel is a harsh juxtaposition – contradictions, opposites.
The prickly pear is sweet and sharp. I hate pain, I love pain. Israel is beautiful, Israel is ugly.

Loving the cactus is masochistic. I have become obsessed with an image that can hurt me.

Because of the Holocaust, contemporary anti-Semitic happenings in Europe, and celebrating ancient holidays and stories like Passover, we have learned to victimize our past and present selves. Maybe my Jewish background accounts for how much I love to discuss my own suffering. Maybe it’s why I wanted to write a poem everyday about the poet.

Discussing pain is useful, though. By describing pain, I acknowledge that my body is real – the certainty that the events in the world, in my body, are actually happening. I name my experience and define my experience by speaking it. My feelings become vocabulary. I was once in the land of Israel, in the desert, and now I am not. I feel nothing, I feel nothing. My confusion becomes crucial to my articulation – as I mimic these sensations, I reject the humiliation of the body that feels too much or too little. We surrender to the unknown.

In Israel, the cigarette-smokers of our group met in the courtyard of the kibbutz every night. That’s how I met Sasha for the first time. Under a streetlamp, yellowed concrete bench, and the shadow pattern of big ancient trees. There were flowers at
night; fronds of ferns and palms, green serrated things that my eyes were not yet trained to see as my landscape.

That was the first night. We were jet-lagged and odd. Sasha was holding a burning incense rock – I sensed he must be an artist, and he was. It must have been almost 1 am as I asked to borrow a cigarette. Some boys ran off to the kibbutz’s tennis court to play basketball by streetlamp. I imagined their shirtless bodies moving in the green mesh around the court, like swimming in water. Voices in the dark. Sand lifting and stray cats weaving in and out of the bushes.

There is a book about Birthright called Ten Days of Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity by Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan. The book is basically propaganda about the Israel-Birthright trip, and proves to me that the trip is propaganda itself.

The writers suggest that the trip was created to end misconceptions and disconnectedness that young Jewish Americans feel about Israel. In vague terms, American Jewry historian Jonathan Saran says that American Jews “hold unrealistic views of Israel. Their view of Israel has been distorted by the lens that helped them cope with their own Jewish identity.”

Ten Days in Israel says: “given the particular context of Birthright Israel, we want to understand the role of travel – both as a way for individuals to appreciate their heritage and to comprehend the contemporary world.”
The program emphasizes peoplehood, not individualism.”

The Birthright trip participant is usually a young American white person, brought up in upper-middle class suburbs, on their way through or beyond college education. Are they a tourist or a pilgrim or both? The Birthright trip participant often has the goal of finding out where to place Israel in their Jewish identity, or how to define their Jewish identity at all.

Other goals include “hooking-up” with hot Jewish peers and Israeli soldiers placed in the group, secretly drinking large amounts of alcohol with said peers, and taking pictures for social media. The trip is about identity and education, and the trip is about creating an escapist oasis for young Jewish people, to learn that Israel is “fun,” not foreign.

The Israeli land felt different. On my feet. It was so old and tired, it was harder to the touch. So many feet – ancient feet and tourists alike – had walked on the stones on the staircase down from Masada that the golden-white stone became shiny and smooth from the friction.

Its pain glistened in the sun, like glass, hot and pulled tight, no more abrasions left.

Most Birthright groups walk down from Masada on these stone and earth stairs - it’s called the Snake Path. I remember my water bottle was almost empty the whole
time. We would pass by some outlier groups who were walking up – which seemed a lot harder – and we took pleasure in telling them “you are no where near close.”

It was very scary and horrible to walk on these rocks, downhill, in the summer. I remember the trek was supposed to be something I would “never forget” – it was “life changing” to feel that much pain. We walked down the steps in the heat for over one hour until we finally touched the earth again. The pain of this journey was supposed to be special. A crucial factor in “finding myself” and I say these things in a mocking way, but I also don’t deny them.

The rocks were so smooth, that I slipped on them. Almost tumbling, but never quite. My new athletic shoes were by now gauzed over in a layer of dust. By the end of the walk, our calf muscles wouldn’t stop quivering like seizures. Earthquake of the body.

There was one thing that bothered me so much about the Birthright boy I thought I loved. Everyday, he coated himself in sunscreen. Of course, we all had to wear sunscreen because the desert exposes you to direct sun more than other climates. But he put it on by the layer, so that the white stayed like wet paint on his skin.

I thought this was gross. So gross. Like lathering your skin in yogurt labani – sour and aromatic of dairy products, oozing in the heat. I’ve always hated sunscreen.

His reasoning was that he didn’t want to get any darker than he already was. The boy, like me, was naturally tan. Brown. Tied to the earth, old, “other,” better off in the desert than most.
He hated it. I remember him saying to me once, "Pale skin is so beautiful. That's why I love my girlfriend."

I find myself wanting to compare Sasha’s feelings with the situation of the Israelis who were killing the Palestinians on the land that we were standing on. (Standing on and treading until the steps were too shiny for traction.)

I don’t think that this is a war about being Jewish, this is a war about deserving bodies. Paler skin. It’s the layer of white, cakey yogurt. It’s - I don’t want to be darker than I already am.

Masada is mind-blowingly old. Its mound and its buildings were created and existing in the 1st century BC. It was excavated from 1963-1965.

An article called Heat, dust and history in the sand as the riddle of Masada was uncovered explains that Masada represents “the setting of one of the most powerful moments – or myths – in Jewish history. According to the account of the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, 960 Jewish rebels committed suicide at Masada rather than be captured by the Romans following a siege. The story of heroic resistance, and the choice of death over enslavement, became a powerful symbol in the nascent state of Israel.”

The work of the Masada excavators in the 60s was painful work, to put their story in vague terms. “It was physically very hard – an enormous amount of heavy rock lifting,” a former excavator told the Observer. “But we were young, and it was perfectly acceptable.”
Do we accept and celebrate pain if we know it will help us create something, keep someone around, reveal something important about ourselves?

The next suggested article, after reading *Heat, Dust*, was headlined and captioned: *Israel’s Masada myth: doubts cast over ancient symbol of heroism and sacrifice. Story of Jewish rebels taking their own lives while under siege in desert fortress was either exaggerated or untrue, say experts.*

Recently, I tried to describe my writing process to a friend. She was doodling on a post-it note at the time, and wrote down what I said: “in the middle of the night, for no reason.”

I think of saguaros from Arizona and their yellow and white flowers, almost neon in the moon’s wash. Night-bloomers. Pollinators. This is how we keep ourselves.

Have you ever touched a succulent with invisible hairs? They are sharp in a sticky way. Almost wet and nonexistent. On the green bodies of leaves and stems, they resemble tiny hairs on the cheeks of someone you know. They usually stick where you have touched – the pads of the fingers, the side of the hand, brushing. The invisible hairs, part of your body, transfer until they fall off. Usually, in hot water, you can soak yourself until you are free of them.

Sometimes I choose not to soak it out. I lay in the sun with the thorns still attached. I press my bruises with my thumb, like pushing into clay. Someone presents me with
a tweezer to pull out a splinter and I fuss him away with my hands in front of my face. No.

My strangest memory is this: As a child, I pushed a sewing needle into my finger all the way through. I watched as the end of it slowly disappeared inside of me and then came out the other side. I don't know if this actually happened. In fact, I'm pretty sure it didn't. But the image stays in me: I stood in my parents’ bedroom by their white summer blanket, stabbing a part of my body because I didn't know what would happen if I did. I don't remember pain, only intense realization.

“Pain cannot recollect when it began or if there were a time when it was not,” a poet once said, “It has no future – but itself. Its infinite contain its past – enlightened to perceive new periods – of pain.”

I used to go to his poetry readings and listen to him read about the bird as the girl in a cage – her feathers, her beak. A brass cage, maybe. It reminds me of a brass bed, a Bob Dylan song. In the morning, her bare back by the window. He called me a bird, but I have been called a bird my whole life.

For bats, it’s echolocation. Singing blindly, trying to find out where the vibrations hit. That’s how I’ll know where to go. I have been called a bird because I sing in the middle of the night for no reason.
Emily Dickinson also loved birds – she is the most well-known bird-girl I can think of. In *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, Mary Ruefle writes an essay called “My Emily Dickinson” and tears apart the quiet, submissive myth of the famous poet by juxtaposing Dickinson with a photograph of a woman, alone, walking through the desert in a gauzy gown.

When the poet decided he didn’t love me anymore, the bird category became painful. I wanted to create something else, so I did. My cactus obsession was a decision. I wanted to love something, and for it to love me, too. I wanted to write it down until it became me.

I wrote poems about a desert girl, alone and standing in the sand. She didn’t need anyone beside her in bed anymore. She had minimal needs. Her body, a cactus – dry, sharp.

Before I knew it, the cactus appeared and it has never left. It is still here.

Bees, birds and bats pollinate cacti flowers. For the Arizona saguaro, the birds have such pretty names: Gila woodpeckers, purple martins, house finches, and gilded flickers.

The birds live inside holes in the cactus’s body. These are deep nest cavities. When a bird pierces her sharp nose into the cactus’s skin, the cactus grows a protective
callus for its wound. It takes a whole year for the saguaro to heal its body into a home for the bird.

In the middle of the night for no reason. Long after we had come home from Israel, Sasha and I were texting about the war. Saying phrases like “so crazy” and “I don’t know.” I don’t know how I feel. He stayed a week longer than me, mostly hanging out on the beach with his Israeli cousins. He had been there when things were getting bad. Sasha texted: “I have been thinking about the war a lot.” I agreed, but I was lying.

“Cactus plugging is the practice of vandalizing or destroying a cactus, usually a saguaro, for fun. Typically, the cactus is cut open, drained, then packed with explosives and ignited. In another variation, the vandal simply shoots bullets into the cactus body until portions fall off or the entire cactus falls over. It is a particularly destructive form of vandalism, as saguaros require over 100 years to reach a substantial height.”

When I read about the IDF killing the Palestinians, and the Arab groups like Hamas killing Israelis, I feel so far away. I’m guilty, I’m not there, but I used to be so close.

Land rolls out from the pits of evaporating rivers. I see it in the corners of my eyes: The color of dusty earth, the oldest earth I’ve ever known, when the night sky hits the dark blue desert.
The dark blue cloth covering the ancient Torahs in the synagogue on a hill. Old books behind glass. Little alleys checkered with shops selling jewelry made out of Dead Sea salt, threaded challah covers, and watercolors of people praying.

In the market shuk, we bought bread and olives. Rushing past people using suitcases as grocery carts. We watched as bodies gathered around an older man lying flat on the cobblestones, passed out from the heat. He didn’t drink enough water. He wasn’t prepared.

My dreams, my bruises under my eyes. The final nights of Birthright were spent lying in a bunk bed in the Israeli university dormitory, not sleeping, thinking of apricots again. It was a Jewish holiday that day, one I don’t remember, and orthodox girls at the dorm next to ours were fasting and studying all night. I stayed up, too: Listening to the wails of their voices intermingled with the palm fronds rustling, my cheeks feeling hot and swollen.

On the last day, we all met in a classroom to hear a Jewish political science scholar lecture about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Before entering the room, we watched bodies gather around a body – this time it was an orthodox girl who had passed out from fasting for the holiday. Her painful ritual had drained her of the things she needed. I watched as her friends struggled to carry her limp twisted body out of the
classroom, and I realized my heart was beating so fast. I chugged my Nalgene. I stared at a pie graph of Middle Eastern countries.

Someday, the saguaro dies. The fleshy part of the cactus is eaten away, and then the stalks of infrastructure stand alone like a scarecrow. The scab from the bird’s wound hardens as the cactus body rots, and then falls off. The callus is often called a “cactus boot.” In the past, native people used the cactus boots to carry things with them, as vessels.

On my Birthright trip, I know we were shown the wall that corralled the Gaza Strip from Israel, but it’s hard to remember what it looked like or when or where. Our tour guide pointed out the water-storage-units on the roofs of the urban houses gridding Jerusalem – the white units belonged to Jewish homes, and the black ones were Arab.

All the information came at us constantly. We were hot and thirsty, always looking at walls and speaking of historical significance. I just wasn’t paying attention most of the time. Girls in my group took iPhone pictures of themselves standing on the top of Masada, their fingers holding up their sorority letters.

I don’t remember the names of the places where we stayed, where our tour guide showed us memorials for soldiers and bus bombings and old wartime forts. It wasn’t my language – how could the names stick? I remember in Old Jerusalem, a Christian
tour guide of a church group came up to us, a group of Jewish American kids, and said, “Welcome home!” But it wasn’t my home. If anything, it was the opposite.

That’s the point of Birthright: To get Jewish young people to feel like Israel’s land is their land, their right.

The colors of ‘Asim Abu Shakra’s art are often dark and slashing, and sometimes quiet stains. Mud green. Boullata describes ‘Asim’s cactus as a “rolled-up porcupine” or a “black fist of thorns.” I see them like fleshy arms in the dark.

By the end of the trip, Sasha cheated on his girlfriend with someone else, not me. They kissed on the bus and at the airport, saying goodbye. I thought these things would happen to me, but they didn’t. I learned not to mind, to exclude this pain.

The female, fragmented body has been denied many rights, and can deny itself the same. I can deny myself the right to mourn. I can deny the moment when we fell asleep on the bus together, driving past the olive groves, and our browned bodies fell into each other like dead weight and stayed.

The most painful moments of my life are always in the middle of the night, for no reason. I am lying in my bed in the dark and the morning is coming, choking my throat like a hot hand. The poet is all I want and I can’t have him. Wake up and hear someone wailing: *What now? What now? What now?* The streetlamp through the
blinds reminds me that the night has not yet passed. The pain puffs out my whole face – eye sockets push out into two pink moons on my face, holding all the water.

This is an urban legend about cacti called the exploding cactus: “A woman goes to buy a large cactus from a nursery, and brings it home. Later that day she notices something very odd. The cactus appears to be breathing! She calls the nursery she purchased the cactus from and says, "I know this sounds crazy, but I think my cactus is breathing." The woman she is speaking to tells her to immediately get out of the house, and that she (the nursery woman) is going to call the bomb squad. The bomb squad comes to the house and loads the cactus into a van. Just as they get it into the van, the cactus explodes and out come thousands of scorpions! It seems that several scorpions had laid their eggs in the cactus, and they all hatched at once.”

One time on our trip, everyone was sleeping on the bus after a long hike in the desert. The navy curtains were drawn down. I woke up a little because the bus stopped, at some sort of station by a border. The space between the curtains showed scenery only of sand mounds and army Jeeps. A soldier with a machine gun got on the bus, walked down the long isle of sleeping Americans, and then walked out the back bus exit. We drove on, as if nothing happened, and for some of us, nothing had.

We slept in three places for the ten days: the dormitory and two kibbutzim. Also once, at a simulated Bedouin tent community, perpetuating stereotypes of Arab culture for tourism pleasure, but I won’t count that.
Both kibbutzim were quiet and clean, like hotel resorts. The beds were soft and white.

At night at the kibbutz, we lied in hammocks and drank wine we stole from the kitchen. We played guitar in the grass and smoked cigarettes. Someone made Arabic espresso in little tin cups. We were in the country, so the air felt damper there, like it could wrap around me like a blanket.

The dormitory was a big blocky building in the city, holding us like the cactus pot. It was probably similar to the building ‘Asim Abu Shakra lived in. We stayed there on the last two nights, the only time we spent in Tel Aviv. The food in the dorm was horrible cafeteria food, whereas the food at the kibbutz was always an elaborate Mediterranean buffet. The campus was infested with apricot trees, and the tiny fruits dotted the sidewalk like land mines. I ate the ones that had fallen, the ones on the ground.

Other groups were staying at the dorm with us, including a group of international students who were working as English teachers in Israeli elementary schools. On the last night, I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t want to. I walked down the fire escape stairs to the floor below ours in the dorm, where the international group had been living for the past eight months. On the terrace, I sat against the concrete with a boy from Australia with a half-shaved head and a lip ring. I had never heard of Jewish people from Australia before.
He told me that it was funny we were talking because he and his friends actively hated Birthright kids. I told him that I hated us, too.

I remember there being so much graffiti on the terrace. I asked him if he was going to move to Israel someday when his program was over. “Fuck no,” he said, “It’s fucked up here.” I remember being surprised that he said this – why was he here if he didn’t want to be? At that point, I was still in Israel and I was still enamored by the land, numbed by it. The cactus was a pretty plant I enjoyed looking at. It wasn’t a plant covered in thorns, a complicated system of swollen water. When I came home and the war started, the pain flew into my vision. I didn’t want to go back there because I didn’t know what ‘there’ was anymore.

The Australian and I talked for so long, mostly about where we were from. Homelands, bodies, I don’t remember. The streetlamp squeezed around us, yellow and dry. When we kissed, he whispered in Spanish – “ojos bonitos.”

My group had our last “night-out” in Tel Aviv. It is one of my favorite memories: Sasha, my two best friends and I sat on a bench in an upper class, art-centric urban neighborhood, drinking big cans of Goldstar in public. The air was breezy, and we sat across the street from an independent bookstore and fancy wine shops. We felt like we were in Europe. We smoked cigarettes and talked about how much we would miss this – eventually we all split up trying to find different bars and I got
lost, walking up and down the street, peering in the gates of people’s private homes, slinking around like the cats.

The *Dictionary of Deserts* defines that “root systems of desert plants are often extremely deep, tapping supplies of water many feet beneath the surface to replenish their own lost water.” Where is my lost water? What did I lose?

I don’t know why I forgot, but I forgot the moment when I realized I needed to write a desert poem. I remember it now, and it seems like it’s important, but maybe it’s not.

It was more than two years ago. The poet and I were on our way to the McDonald’s drive-thru. For some reason, we were talking about when soldiers come back from Afghanistan and imagining having a conversation with them:

“Where have you been?”

“I’ve been in the desert.”

Where have you been?

I’ve been trying to understand where I’ve been and where I haven’t and where I wish I was. Often, there is a blurred border between these things.
Rachel Bluwstein, often called Rachel the poetess, is a famous Jewish poet who immigrated to Palestine in 1909, joining the Zionist pioneers and agricultural communities at the time. Like ‘Asim, Rachel died young of an incurable disease, living alone in Tel Aviv.

Rachel wrote a famous poem about the Golan Hills, now referred to as the Golan Heights – where the Six Day War took place, among other territorial claims and occupation compromises between Israel and Syria – the word Golan means “something surrounded.”

To me, these Israeli sites represent a need to claim land in an imperialist agenda, but also the insecurities of losing. Where would I be if I lost my past, if I couldn’t keep my deep thorn? The war, the Conflict – it causes deep pain onto others to insure that the history of one people’s pain lives forever.

I can imagine Rachel, haloed in prickly pear, writing this in her journal alone:

Over there are the hills of Golan, stretch out your hand and touch them.
In their stalwart stillness they give the command to halt.
In splendid isolation grandfather Hermon slumbers. A cool wind blows from the peak of whiteness.
Over there, on the seashore, a low-topped palm tree stands, disheveled like a mischievous infant that has slid down and splashes in the waters of Kinneret.
How abundant are the flowers in the winter, bunches of blood-red anemones, the orange of the crocus. These are the days when the greenery is sevenfold green and seventy-fold is the blue of the sky.
But even if I become poverty-stricken and walk bent over and my heart becomes the beacon for strangers, how can I betray you, how can I forget, how can I forget the grace of youth.

When my Birthright group visited the Western Wall, I stood by the stones stuffed with notes on the women’s side, surrounded by tearful girls in recognizable Birthright long skirts and orthodox women in headscarves with small children.

My mom and grandma had given me a plastic baggie of notes to put inside the wall. I peeked at what they said – my one moment to know something about my family’s dreams, a mother’s dreams. I think both notes read, “Please keep my family safe.” I smashed the paper into a long, vertical crack in the wall. As I did so, other notes came spilling out. Apparently, it’s someone’s job to sweep up the fallen ones every night.

After I gave my notes to the wall, before I walked backwards, as a tradition of never looking away from the direction of which I have always prayed, I decided to look up. The wall, the Kotel, is very old and sprouting with strange plants that look burnt – maybe not cacti, but definitely resilient, sharp. I looked up and I remember seeing two crows on the wall, their black bodies rustling and hooked together on a burnt shrub. They are fucking, I thought.

For some reason, I looked at the birds fucking and I tried so hard to place meaning on that moment. Maybe it was a symbol, or a “sign.” Maybe the birds fucking
symbolized life and love, the important codes of living on this earth. Maybe they recalled the bird with the olive branch – a sign of peace coming. Of course, they meant nothing. But I have so much power to think of things this way.

There is a desert cactus called the *tillandsia latifolia* from the Atacana desert. “It has stiff spiny leaves arranged in a star-like fashion, but no roots. The plant forms a ball that rolls across the desert, blown by the wind.” It has no direction, no home, it has no intentions of where its body extends.

Judith Butler makes a statement of conclusion: “Once the distinction between Israel and Jews is made, an intellectual discussion of both Zionism and anti-Semitism can begin – A progressive Jewish stance will pursue both directions, and will refuse to brand as anti-Semitic the critical impulse or to accept anti-Semitic discourse as a legitimate substitute for critique.”

There are spaces somewhere where we can talk without being deemed as “traitors” to our people. There are spaces where disappeared people appear again.

Most of the time when I think about Mike Brown, I think about pictures I have seen on the news. The first image that comes to my mind is his mother crying. There is someone consoling her in the picture, but she is lost in her grief. You can see her open mouth, not speaking, but producing non-words of communication. Cries of mourning: the single vocabulary for pain. I can’t imagine any words on a page to
describe how it feels to lose a child, and with no justice.

The summer of 2014 became a period of pain vocabulary, trying to describe oppressed bodies at war with a supremacy who wanted to kill them. History goes on and on: Who owns this land? My homelands are warzones. My only true homeland is my body.

On the first day, we went on a hike over hot sand and rocks. As we got to a creek to relieve our Teva-feet in the water, we watched a woman emerge from the water in a white see-through gown, along with a man in a suit. They were so beautiful, like mermaids. A cameraman appeared, and we immediately understood it was a wedding or engagement photo shoot. I will never forget her – the woman in the white dress sticking to her body, confused by us, surrounded by sand – we were so displaced from her. As they left, the rose petals from their photo shoot stayed, drifting down the rocks as tiny white fragments, like something exploded.

In an interview after his leukemia diagnosis, ‘Asim Abu Shakra said of the sabra cactus, “It’s got survival strength, this plant, it can live for many years even though it can be very easily injured: all of its fluids can be taken out of it with one long scratch on its leaf. There is also a social contradiction related to it, a double identity. It belongs to me, the village boy, and it also belongs to the Jew who was born here. I’m not a “sabra,” this sabra growing in the yard is not me.”
The cactus belonged to ‘Asim when he painted it – he hung his homeland on the wall, as a reminder. The village disappears, the artist dies, and the cactus stays hanging there.

In my poems, the painful landscape is mine, defining my body’s ability to make my grief useful. In reality, the painful landscape belongs to someone, not me, someone who I am not sure.

My body is my homeland, but my body is a warzone. The woman’s body wants to be strong all the time, but cannot. The woman’s body is a grief vessel, a prickling armor. Sometimes it is filled with water. Sometimes it is empty.

I couldn’t pierce the needle through the other side of my hand. It has no clarity. It does not represent an olive branch. The travelled landscape, through a window, brushes past me, and I will not be sad about not being sad.

When I saw the graffiti on the bridge in Brooklyn, the sun was shining on the water and on my skin. I was getting browner and browner. People were all around me, walking their dogs and grouped with friends, riding bikes. It was a time when no grief existed, except for maybe the thought of oncoming sunburn. When the hotness of pain creeps up as reddened shoulders, I feel reassured somehow. I will never be prepared.


