

One of the greatest pains of my life is that of the split.

It is the coexistence of two selves: one performed for society, the other preserved from it. This condition is not unique to me. It is rooted in my Arabness (*ʿurūbah*, عروبة), and is a thread of suffering connecting millions of others; yet each of us carry it as though it were ours alone. In cultures governed by *ʿayb*, the social logic through which shame regulates behaviour, so much of our inner lives remain unspeakable; and what is never spoken cannot be recognised in one another. Our pains, then, read as solitary afflictions rather than a collective condition. The suffering this engenders can feel boundless.

The split does not emerge by accident. It is learned through years of observation: watching which lives our culture celebrates, tolerates, ridicules and punishes. From this, we internalise which desires may be expressed and which must remain hidden. We learn to perform an iteration of the self that society allows, and life becomes an exhausting performance in which everything—from happiness, ambition and piety to family devotion and desire—must conform to social expectation. Those whose performances fall beyond the boundaries of cultural acceptance become especially estranged, for belonging is contingent upon one's ability to sustain them.

Whilst the divided self is not unique to Arab societies, the intensity with which it is produced is. It is under this pressure that the split occurs. This process gives rise to two selves, where the public self becomes the mask we learn to construct under surveillance, disciplined by the anticipation of judgement and fashioned to move through the world without punishment. Behind it survives another self—remaining hidden because concealment has become a condition of survival—preserving desires, convictions and ways of being that exceed what society permits.

Once the split has formed, there is no simple path back to wholeness. Every available path demands a sacrifice. To remain behind the mask may preserve belonging, but often at the expense of the hidden self. To step beyond it may preserve the self, but can jeopardise family, community, livelihood, or even safety. Even those of us fortunate enough to find trusted spaces where the hidden self can briefly breathe must continue crossing between these worlds, performing one life while protecting another. For those afforded no such refuge, the self beneath the mask is never given the conditions in which to develop; it is suppressed before it can become fully known, even to the person who carries it.

You find, then, that there is no universal escape from the split. Only different ways of surviving it.

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If the split is the burden I carry through life, then Art has always been what has helped me carry it.

Long before I understood the language of shame, surveillance, or the divided self, I felt an instinctive pull towards Art, both in its creation and its consumption. I am the daughter of an artist who was the daughter of a poet. The women in my lineage undoubtedly cultivated my love of creative expression, yet I have never believed inheritance alone could account for the intensity of the impulse. It has always seemed as though the desire to make and seek Art was predetermined; woven into the fabric of my existence. By the age of five I had already written my first story, complete with colourful illustrations, and I have not stopped creating since. Yet creation was only one half of the impulse. The other was consumption.

Though my body remained beneath the sweltering Gulf sun, confined by the boundaries that regulated my existence as a young girl, my consciousness travelled elsewhere. For the duration of a novel, an album, or a film, my own life loosened its grip. I spent afternoons at Hogwarts, solved mysteries alongside the Baudelaire orphans, dissolved into the worlds of *The 1975*, wandered the white nights of nineteenth-century St Petersburg, found myself beneath Esther Greenwood's bell jar, drifted beneath the oppressive Riviera sun of *Bonjour Tristesse*, and, later, found companionship in the Los Angeles of Joan Didion and Eve Babitz. Each work offered another consciousness through which to inhabit the world.

Through this immersion, the obligations of performance receded. The mask was no longer mine to wear. For years, I believed this to be Art's greatest gift: escapism. Its capacity to dissolve the boundaries of my existence and, however briefly, restore the possibility of wholeness felt miraculous. I became consumed by the search for works that could transport me beyond myself. From this emerged the practice of curation, pursued with almost religious devotion. I became obsessive about collecting recommendations: novels to read, films to watch, poems to return to, albums that promised to leave me changed. Each new work carried the possibility of transport—a temporary release from the demands of performance, a chance to inhabit a world where the split did not exist, or at least where it belonged to somebody else. There has never been enough time to experience everything I long to experience, yet I continue accumulating possibilities with urgency, convinced that somewhere among them was another world waiting to take me in.

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Over time, my devotion to curation revealed something I could no longer ignore. Across mediums, and regardless of where I found myself—raised in the Gulf and, in recent years, living in the West—I was

repeatedly directed towards the same endlessly recirculated works. The ‘must-read’, ‘must-watch’ and ‘essential’ lists I encountered remained overwhelmingly centred on Western production. The more closely I looked, the more obvious the pattern became. I realised I had inherited not merely a collection of recommendations, but a Eurocentric hierarchy that implicitly determined which stories were treated as universal and which remained peripheral.

Needless to say, this realisation unsettled me. I had always imagined my artistic life to be governed by curiosity, yet was struck by the stark realisation that even my curiosity had been curated. The routes by which I discovered books, films, music and art were never neutral; they carried assumptions about whose stories constituted culture itself and whose remained regional, elective or supplementary. The West’s disproportionate influence, I realised, does not end with politics, economics or military power. It extends into culture, shaping not only what circulates globally but what is perceived as valuable in the first place.

It was then that I began consciously reorienting my artistic life. I sought out artists from across the Global Majority whose work had rarely appeared on the lists I had trusted for so long, bringing them to the forefront of my attention. What I uncovered felt like a treasure trove hiding in plain sight. Yet it was in encountering the work of my own people—Arab writers, North African filmmakers, Persian poets and Kurdish voices—that I experienced Art differently. I had expected this reorientation to diversify what I consumed. I did not expect it to transform my understanding of what Art itself could do.

Until then, I had understood Art primarily as escape. What I discovered instead was recognition.

For the first time, I encountered artists who had acted against *‘ayb* rather than within it. They gave form to what I had only ever implied, creating works that spoke openly of displacement, fractured identities, impossible desires and divided selves. To encounter oneself within a work of Art is an altogether different experience from inhabiting somebody else’s world. It is to realise that your inner life has already been lived, articulated and made visible by another. Feelings that had long seemed private, shameful or inexpressible suddenly acquired language. Experiences I had mistaken for personal failures revealed themselves as shared conditions. And though recognition did not erase my suffering, it revealed it to be shared.

Works that had long remained outside the canon I had inherited quickly became central to my own: the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, the uncompromising writings of Nawal El Saadawi, *Chewing Gum* by Mansour Bushnaf, and the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, Solmaz Sharif and Aria Aber. Their work did not simply expand my understanding of SWANA Art and literature; it transformed my understanding

of myself. Until then, I had searched for Art that could transport me elsewhere. Instead, I found Art that finally brought me home.

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There is one work, however, that crystallised all of this for me: Aria Aber's *Good Girl*. The novel follows Nila, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Afghan immigrants in Berlin, as she moves between the expectations of family life and the freedoms of the city's nightlife. She, too, lives within the split, demonstrating the uneasy coexistence of multiple selves. Like so many of us, she moves continually between the self that can safely exist and the self that must remain concealed, crossing from one to the other with each change of setting, company and expectation.

For the first time, I encountered a consciousness shaped by tensions that felt startlingly close to my own: the negotiations between cultures, the fractured self, the constant awareness of performance. Seeing this rendered with such honesty was both confronting and profoundly consoling. It was difficult to believe that the split I had struggled for years to name was waiting for me inside its pages. Recognising myself in Nila did not resolve my suffering, but it rescued it from solitude. What had long felt like an incomprehensible private affliction suddenly became legible. Someone else had lived it, found language for it, and transformed it into Art.

In societies governed by *'ayb*, this recognition carries a particular force that is difficult to describe. There are wounds that cannot be healed in isolation. Sometimes another person's words accomplish what years of solitary reflection cannot. When culture leaves us unable to speak, Art speaks for us. It says aloud what shame demands remain silent. In doing so, it begins to undermine the isolation upon which shame depends. We discover that what we believed to be our secret life is, in fact, shared.

This, I realised, was another of Art's powers. It does not simply transport us away from ourselves; sometimes it *returns* us to ourselves. It reminds us that our fears, contradictions and griefs are not signs of personal failure, but part of a condition shared by countless others.

I often think of the younger version of myself, sitting alone in her bedroom beneath the Gulf sun with *The Bell Jar* in her hands. I wish I could gently prise it from her fingers and replace it with *Good Girl*. Not because Plath failed her, but because Aria Aber could offer something Plath never could: the recognition of a self shaped by the same inheritances of shame, performance and divided belonging. I wish I could have shown that younger girl the comfort of seeing herself reflected back. Perhaps she would have been relieved to know, years sooner than I did, that she was never carrying the pain of the split alone.

