

**NINA MOINI:** This evening, a community of writers will come together to break the Ramadan fast, also known as Iftar, and have a public reading. The event is held by Mizna, an organization that promotes the work of Arab and Southwest Asian and North African artists. The reading tonight will take place at Baba's Hummus House in Minneapolis. Joining me now is Nikki Luna, a Lebanese-American genderqueer poet and organizer of the event. Thanks for coming into the studio, Nikki.

**NIKKI LUNA:** Thank you so much.

**NINA MOINI:** And we're also thrilled to have Nader Helmy, a Cairo-born, Minnesota-raised writer who's also going to be sharing a reading at the event. Thanks for being with us, Nader.

**NADER HELMY:** Of course. Thank you.

**NINA MOINI:** Nikki, I'd love to start with you. These public readings, they include writers from Mizna's Writing Collective. Can you tell us about the writing collective and what it's all about?

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yeah, so the writing collective is essentially an informal group of writers that are connected to Mizna. And it's been going on for about over 10 years. And it started with a group of folks who did a series of workshops together who thought, let's just continue this. Let's build a writing community. And so I joined about six years ago. And over the years, there's various people who show up and various members, but there's also a through line of folks, too. And overall, it's just a great community of writers, and beyond just being a community of writers, a family, in a lot of ways.

**NINA MOINI:** Has it grown in that six years? Or what kind of keeps you coming back? Or what do you enjoy about it?

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yeah, I think that one of the most enjoyable things about it is just being able to be with like-minded writers, and also be in company with folks who understand very well how it is to be an immigrant in these times and to be in community in the sense of really needing a place to process and really needing a place to be in together, and, yeah, get through that together through writing, but also through community.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Nader, how do you feel as you listen to Nikki talking about this writing collective? What has it meant to you?

**NADER HELMY:** Yeah, I mean, it's an incredibly special space, I think, just to be able to show up. And kind of like Nikki was saying, just like a feeling that there's a like-minded nature there and just being able to connect with people on a human level, and also have space to process your feelings, it feels very unique in these times. So I'm very grateful for it.

**NINA MOINI:** Nikki, it's a relatively new event, I understand. Why did you want to create this space for writers to share their work? And what can people expect?

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yeah, I think that Bubba's-- Bubba's restaurant was looking to do some kind of programming like this and reached out to Mizna. And it just seemed natural to connect it to the writing collective, because we hadn't had a public-facing event in this way. But we had talked about it for many years, doing a showcase. And so it just worked to develop this series, because one of the things that is very wonderful about it is that it gives the opportunity to writers in the community who haven't got the opportunity to do a paid reading yet the ability to have that platform, and also writers who are more established and more used to having reading gigs the opportunity to, as well, read.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Yeah, I love that. OK, so I'm really excited that you both agreed to share a little bit about what you're going to be reading tonight. And I would love to start with you, Nader, if you could. Would you tell us kind of just what you're reading and then tell us about it?

**NADER HELMY:** Yeah, so I'm reading a poem called-- that's in a form called the Arabic, which is by a poet named Marwa Helal. It's a form that includes an Arabic letter with an Arabic footnote and an Arabic numeral. It's written in English, but written right to left, as Arabic language is. And the prompt of it is to essentially vehemently reject if you try to read it left to right. So I'll be reading it kind of in order today. So but on paper, it kind of-- yeah, it jumps out at you as being like a little bit subversive.

**NINA MOINI:** OK, go ahead.

**NADER HELMY:** Yes. "There is a history, but I do not know its name. There is a God, but I only know its names. The soldiers are the first line of defense, and these are mine, jagged, bent, misplaced. If I knew enough of math, I could tell you how we made it, the rules that govern its eternal, internal consistency. Every day at noon, I balance on this immaculate cemetery."

**NINA MOINI:** [SIGHS] Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing. Nikki, you also prepared a piece called "Reunion." Do you want to tell us a little bit about it and then share?

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yeah, it was a piece I wrote while thinking about the ways in which I still try to connect to those who have passed and just thinking about being present with them physically, even if they can't be physically present with me.

"Today I need you here with me. Can you perch on my shoulder like the winged companion you now are? Witness the stories unfolding all around us with me. Did you expect this chapter? Today, I need you beside me. I'm so tired. Can you sit with me? I'm kneading into the tender part of my soul, and it's releasing so much ache from time spent standing on icy concrete.

Today I need you in my ribs. Can you protect my screaming heart? It's bursting and thrashing. I can't believe it's still beating when yours stopped. Today I need you on my tongue. I need to tell people that you existed and that you are loved. Today I need you at my fingertips. You can find some space under the nail. I'll be your bed. And your dreams can pour from my veins, dripping down my fingers onto a new canvas day.

Today I need you behind my eyes. Witness the lives unfolding all around us with me. Witness the magic on land you once knew when you were third-dimensional. Remember how it felt to witness eternity through the filter of time and space. Tonight I shut my eyes to beckon sleep. Can I join you in the liminal, the subconscious, the memories I have of you?"

**NINA MOINI:** Beautiful. Thank you both so much. I just think there's something about writing and then sharing that writing that is so healing. And I wonder, Nikki, if there are people who are like, I'm not a writer. Or I don't know. What can you share with people about just getting things out on paper and then trusting yourself to have your own words? What do you think about that?

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yeah, I think that it can be very challenging for all writers to get through the filters that we place upon ourselves in terms of others' expectations or how it will be received. And I think one of the best pieces of advice I have is to really just treat-- if you're going to write a piece that you feel very vulnerable about, really just treat the first several times of writing it as if it is just for you. And I think that that is a way that you can really get through the vulnerability of those filters. And then once it's out there, you can make the choice to share it. But it's a lot easier to share something that actually exists, you know? So--

**NINA MOINI:** Exactly. Anything you'd want to add to that, Nader?

**NADER HELMY:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's-- Nikki put it really perfectly, but it's about kind of having an honest conversation with yourself, first and foremost, about processing your thoughts and your ideas. So don't put the pressure on it that it has to be shared, or that it has to be perfect, or that it has to be great, even. I mean, it's really just about exploring your own thoughts.

And writing, in all of its forms, is just an excellent way to do that. So I encourage anybody, even if you're not a poet, not a writer, journal. Write down your thoughts. Write down lists of things that you are thinking of. It helps to center yourself and ground yourself to who you are.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah, and Nader, it is Ramadan, the holiest time of the year for Muslims. Can you talk about how you're thinking about your writing and being in community right now?

**NADER HELMY:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, Ramadan is extremely special, particularly because I think the spiritual practice of fasting-- in all of its forms, not just food and water, but abstaining from so many of life's distractions and indulgences-- it really kind of just removes a lot of the noise from everyday life and leaves you to have a much more sober, clear perspective on things.

And so every year, I appreciate the opportunity for that to regroup me, and especially this year, when it's been a crazy, crazy time, as we all know, and a scary time and a difficult time. So I mean, it's especially needed now. And I feel like it's almost like a respite, just a brief break in the madness to collect my breath and, again, recenter on the things that are important to me.

**NINA MOINI:** And Nikki, just before we have to go, tell us again about just the event tonight at Baba's. Can people still come? I understand it's a series, so there will be more events.

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yes, it's a quarterly series. And tonight, there's an Iftar at 6:00. So it's a special meal that is available for purchase from Baba's. And the reading will start at 7:00. It's about an hour, so until about 8:00 PM, and yeah.

**NINA MOINI:** And then more to come.

**NIKKI LUNA:** Yes, yeah.

**NINA MOINI:** All right. Thank you, both Nikki and Nader, so much for your time. Really appreciate you both.

**NIKKI LUNA:** Thank you so much.

**NADER HELMY:** Thank you.

**NINA MOINI:** Nikki Luna and Nader Helmy are part of the Mizna Writing Collective.