Progress
By Neekoo Collett

Along the highway from Jericho to Eilat, cumin coloured sand ripples in the light. The sun beats down in arrows that pierce the tinted windows of the rental car and melt the backs of my thighs to the seat. A 2L water-bottle as tall as my knees sweats at my feet. The discomfort of the heat makes the moment memorable and I absorb it all: the Arabic top 40 beamed across the valley to us on a Jordanian radio station, the basin of sweat collecting in the nape of my ponytail, my uncle learning Hebrew from the GPS, and the high-up hum of Masada watching us as our grey car becomes invisible in the shadow of the desert.

“Ahar kakh smola,” the GPS tells us authoritatively. It is a woman’s voice, and I imagine her to be one of the mothers I saw in the Old City, patiently grabbing at her children’s hands, pulling them through the crowded corridors of a covered bazar.

“Ahar kakh smola!” my uncle enthusiastically repeats, turning right instead of left. When we pull in at a deserted gas station twenty minutes later to turn around, I add two words to my notebook – *smola* means left, *yamina* means right.

Past the window, the identical mounds of sand approach and fade away on either side of the road. In the desert it is hard to know how far you have come because the sand is unending. The sinking sun is the only indication of time passing, traveling across the sky in step with us as we speed across the desert.
Looking up at my ceiling, everything is beyond my grasp. All directions appear equally hopeless, and I am alone still with my unshakable sadness. I am tired of trying when things aren’t getting better. It’s hard to know how far you have come, or whether you’re moving at all, because the despair is unending. I have sympathy for the Israelites forced to wander for forty years.

The anxiety has become crushing; it’s asthmatic; a choking in the chest; a constant out-of-breath feeling. Gravity seems a constant weight, and it pulls and pulls like a dead force. I try not to sit; things seem simpler on the floor; but there’s the constant fear that I won’t be able to get back up.

I am at the bottom. I am on the floor of the library, again and again and again. I am sitting, my back is against the heater and my feet are stretched out in front of me so that I can feel the hardened immobility of the floor pressing against the backs of my legs. I am probably the only person on campus sitting on a library floor, looking into the florescence of the lights, and trying not to cry. There must be something wrong with this, because no one else is doing it.

I am afraid that there is something wrong with me, that there is something wrong inside of me like a shrunken black pit that makes me act like this and makes me feel this way. I’d cut it out, if I could. Unless it’s not just one singular spot; unless it is in every cell, every tissue, every system; unless I and it are inseparable. I don’t think that it’s normal to feel this way every single day.
We cruise past a sign marking sea level, continuing our descent into the lowest point on earth. In the rear view mirror, a smiling bedouin man in a black *keffiyeh* shrinks in the distance. He holds his camel’s bridle, leading it in the ditch, offering rides for 20 *shekels* to tourists. Far off in the distance, the Dead Sea reflects the desert’s waves of sand.

At the bottom of the hill, two Israeli officials block the road: check stop. We brake, and they approach the open driver’s window.

“Shalom,” the officer says. She is my age, most likely completing her mandatory time in the military. Her bodysuit belts at the waist and her shoulders display an emblem that I remember seeing on a train to Tel Aviv packed with young soldiers heading home for Shabbat. I wonder if her ponytail is wet with sweat like mine is, and in what other ways she is like me. Her partner remains in the shade of their booth, a semi-automatic gun carelessly dangling from one hand. The weapon shares its name with a desert: Nagev.

“Hi,” my uncle says, forgoing the opportunity to practice his Hebrew for the first time all day. He pauses for a minute and then adds, as if we need to explain ourselves, “We’re Canadian.” My alien nature seeps through like a sweat stain.

From inside the car, my uncle pops the trunk and the officer disappears behind it for a minute, long enough to confirm that it holds only two backpacks, six empty water bottles, and an empty CD case. My passport sticks to the waistband of my jeans as I pull it out and I begin to reconsider the necessity of
keeping my passport tucked into my pants, no matter how paranoid this country makes me feel. My uncle takes my passport, and hands both of ours to the girl who has reemerged at his window. I lean up toward her as she uninterestedly compares our photos to our faces, and waves us through. Before we can drive off she is already back in the booth, resuming her conversation with the man with the gun.

As we drive away, I feel an ache in my hand. My knuckles are white, balled into fists. I unclench, and my nails have left half-moon marks on the flesh of my palms.

Thinking about all of the places I would rather be than on the floor, in my room, at home, I decide to go to Israel. I choose Israel because it scares me. My ever non-partisan email subscriptions to Al Jazeera and CNN updates make my inbox a chronicle of bad things that happen in Israel – ‘Gaza pounded with air strikes’, ‘Fire linked to bombing’, ‘Clashes erupt after rockets fired’. I’m tired of being scared of everything; I’m tired of being afraid all the time. For once, I want to think that I am running towards something instead of away, that I am finally going to get close enough to the monster’s mouth to see if there is anything to be actually afraid of.

I am interested in the mechanisms through which conflict is managed. As a scholar of mass atrocity and violence, I study the ‘factors of restraint’ which inhibit the escalation of violence. These factors are increasingly relevant in theories of the ‘one state solution’ – the creation of a single state in which Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims, Christians, and Jews would live as equal citizens in
peace. Israel interests me as an example of a country in which mediation systems sit at the forefront of political stability. How can I make judgements and write essays pretending to know what is best for a place I had never been? How can I write honestly about the struggles faced by others from my safe Canadian nest?

Israel also fascinates me as a place of great history and culture. Beyond political science, I am a poet, and consider the Israeli writer Yehuda Amichai among my very favorites. In his poem ‘An Arab Shepherd Is Searching For His Goat On Mount Zion’, Amichai writes, “An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion / And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy. / An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father [...] / Searching for a goat or for a child has always been / The beginning of a new religion in these mountains”. I read this poem as the human aspect of Israel: a place in which people of different faiths and backgrounds try as best they can to co-exist and realize their shared humanity. This Israel – the one that exists outside of news broadcasts with solemn faces – is too often overlooked by academics, reporters, and the media. This is the Israel that I want to meet. I want to greet it with an open mind, take it to a futuristic café, buy it a thick black botz, and savour it in small sips. I want to take it to the Ein Gedi spa and exuberantly cover ourselves in mud, without inhibitions, without fear.

Floating on my back in the Dead Sea, I see three fighter jets slice the sky above. A thin white line divides Israel from Jordan. Salt stings a razor’s scratch on my leg. The Strike Eagles skim the horizon, separate themselves from the earth, and disappear. Despite its inauspicious name, the Dead Sea is the most peaceful place on earth. People lie like starfish, their limbs outstretched, and contemplate
their own part of the sky. A rotisserie approach works best so as not to burn one side of your body more than the other. I wonder what would happen if I tried to float into Jordan, and decide against finding out.

Along the bank children wave their *pala* and *secchio bucato*, piling sand into cathedrals like little Pontellis. A toddler carelessly releases a juice box straw wrapper from her chubby grasp into the breeze, and laughs as her mother chases it down the beach. Three orange lawn chairs sit empty with their legs in the water, vinyl seats leaving scorched strips on anyone who dares to sit on them. In the distance, an older American woman tentatively dips her hand into a basin of mud and rubs the greenish gunk across her arms while calculating the expense of ruining her new swimsuit against the anti-aging properties of the famed full-body mask. Her husband complains of the heat and takes refuge under an umbrella, while their two teenage children massage the mud into each other’s hair and faces.

Trying to dive in the Dead Sea is an exercise in resiliency. I suck in air and puff my cheeks, rocket forward into the water’s blue-white and… come sputtering back up to the surface. I dive down again, and again find myself pushed back upward by a salty alternative gravity. No matter how low I think I have sunk, I always resurface.

We are all tourists here, and I can’t help but think of the man in the gas station 50 kilometres away. When he saw me, he greeted me with *Shalom*, but changed to English upon hearing my pronunciation of his Hebrew greeting. That, and the fact that I was sweating like a meteorological catastrophe was occurring outside.
“Is it hot enough for you?” he asked, setting down his paperwork and laughing at my oversized India Jones hat and sluggish walk.

“Please tell me that that water is for sale,” I responded, pointing to a row of 2L bottles sitting smugly in the fridge behind the counter. “If I buy them all, can I stand in your fridge for ten minutes?”

As he rang through my purchase we exchanged not only 20 shekels, but the usual conversations that one has when they’re traveling. “I have a cousin in Canada,” he told me, “Toronto, I think? He said that the desert wasn’t for him, but the rest of us knew that he just wasn’t for the desert”.

I asked him about the Dead Sea. “How can you work when it’s so close? It’s like a magnet that’s intensity is magnified by the heat. I don’t think I could live here without being completely submerged the entire day”.

He laughed at my rush to get back on the road. “The Dead Sea has been here forever,” he said, “And it isn’t going anywhere.”

_When the angels told them to flee Sodom before disaster struck, Lot grabbed his wife’s hand and pulled her out of the city in his footsteps. The angels told them not to look back. But Lot’s wife could not so – the kitchenware that marked the different stages of her life as a wife and mother, her own mother’s treasures which she had hoped to pass on to her daughters, the left-leaning tree_
she had so carefully watched grow in tandem with her youngest son. She looked back, and turned to salt.

Without any claim to Biblical scholarship, there is, I think, a lesson here: Don’t look back. The worst part of chronic and reoccurring depression is trying to anticipate when and how hard it will strike next. Knowing that it moves like a snowstorm at high altitude – not there, and then suddenly all around you.

The truth is that I have all kinds of days. I have days that I make myself so busy that I don’t have time to think about anything but how busy I am. I have days that I get letters in the mail and I cuddle with my baby nephew and I am genuinely excited to be alive in a world where there are things as miraculous as the postal service or little boys who need to be tucked into bed. I have days that I can simply reach out and grab poems about dirt and matter and the arbitration of meaning in language that no one in my class will have anything bad to say about. I have days that I read something profound and have a really good idea and just want to sit and write and write and write until my mouth is dry and my head is empty. I have days when I hide and I stew about how nobody can be trusted, and people exist only to hurt other people. I have days that I walk and I talk and I sit and I answer questions, but I don’t feel anything. I have days that I walk and I talk and I sit and I answer questions, and I don’t mind not feel anything.

I try not to think about it in terms of ‘good days’ and ‘bad days’ anymore, because every day is different, and unlimited variety doesn’t conform to binaries. When days begin to sag, I break things into their smallest divisible parts: I breathe, and I open my eyes, and I sit up, and I wait, and I put both feet flat on the
ground, and I wait, and I push until I am not on the floor anymore. And once I’m up again, I order books on-line because I love books and I love getting things in the mail, and because tracking my order when I wake up in the middle of the night makes me feel part of a living system, and because days are better when I have something to look forward to.

As we pull out of the En Gedi Spa parking lot, we turn left back onto the highway. A salt pillar like unmelted ice winks from the far shore. The sun has sunk lower in the sky and we drive towards it, opening the windows and allowing the manufactured breeze to dry our wet hair.

Here, in the land of the Qumran tribes, I find the will to move forward. In every direction, sand mirrors sand mirrors sand like grains of gold. And, we go on, looking towards the setting sun, chasing progress through the Israeli desert. (2,562 words)