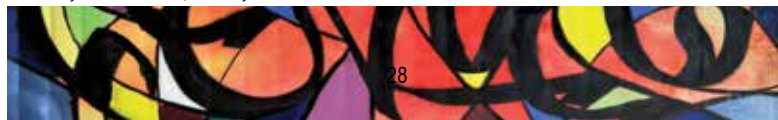


# Nathalie Handal



Nathalie Handal is from Bethlehem. She earned an MFA in poetry from Bennington College and an MPhil in Drama and English from the University of London. She is the author of the poetry collections *The Neverfield* (1999), *The Lives of Rain* (2005), and *Love and Strange Horses* (2010), winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award, which the *New York Times* called “a book that trembles with belonging (and longing).” *Poet in Andalucía* (2012) includes, as Alice Walker wrote, “poems of depth and weight and the sorrowing song of longing and resolve.” *The Invisible Star* (2014) is the first contemporary collection of poetry that explores the city of Bethlehem and the lives of its exiles in the wider diaspora. Her recent book is the flash collection *The Republics* (2015), lauded as “one of the most inventive books by one of today’s most diverse writers,” and winning both the Virginia Faulkner Award for Excellence in Writing and the Arab American Book Award. Handal’s poetry draws on her experiences of dislocation, home, travel, and exile. Critic Catherine Fletcher writes, “While alternating stylistically between the narrative – tinged by the Romantic tradition – and the slightly surreal, much of Handal’s work is also marked by various forms of fragmentation. She has worked on more than 20 theatrical productions either as a playwright, director, or producer. Plays she has authored have been performed at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Bush Theatre, and Westminster Abbey in London.

Artwork by Shareef Sarhan, courtesy of Filistin Ashabab.



Handal is a professor at Columbia University, and writes the literary travel column “The City and the Writer” for *Words without Borders*.

## **Echoes: A Historical Afterward**

The reason is they’ve been killed  
The truth is you’ve been too  
The truth is you are now without a home  
The reason is they’re in your home  
The reason is they’ve convinced themselves you left  
The truth is you only went to safety  
The truth is they never let you back  
The reason is they needed to protect their tribe  
The truth is you are part of the same tribe  
But no one speaks about that  
The reasons is it’s easier to be a threat  
How else can they justify the killing

***The Missing Slate:*** Many of your poems echo images of home — for example, in “Echoes: A Historical Afterward,” you speak of the loss of home and loss of the tribe. What informs your idea of displacement in poetry?

**Nathalie Handal:** Exile and its interminable twists. A life trying to arrive at a resolution that displacement will never entirely grant. Being torn and scattered is an eternal wound that some of us manage, and others don’t. Return is an illusion. Yet with poetry, I’ve been able to reconstruct my destroyed city, my lost country, my family, my memories, my heart, and my return. That’s the power of the imagination and of the word. It resists structures of power and injustice in the most essential ways, giving voice to the ruins, and assuring they are discovered, seen and heard.!

## **The Record Keeper**

He carried a black wing.  
He parted the curtains after a bomb fell on a loaded song.  
He asked a comrade if there’s a long-distance between  
what we disarrange and need instructions for,  
he disassembled fire to overhear history whisper to  
history.  
He said on his tongue lies a ruin  
and there are commas all over his body.  
He said there is no perfect exit,  
there is only absence falling into absence  
and there’s also a high window  
and there is always evening prayer.  
He said clues don’t belong with the dead,  
dim the lights  
the other country isn’t close.



*Nathalie Handal Introduced by Katy Lewis Hood*

Handal's poem tells of a man – a record keeper – living amongst the devastations of the war in Afghanistan. A bomb begins the poem, but it is soon accompanied by other, quieter sounds: whispers of history, prayer, speech, song. These sounds echo in the poem's many gaps, long distances, and absences, allowing it to convey a sense of intimacy between land, body, and language, even if all three are close to ruin. Handal's lines are evocative yet measured, inviting close attention and deliberation, wherever that is possible as the terrifying record of war runs on both within and beyond the poem. It is within such brief moments of rumination that the "high window" appears, as a source of light and potential escape, but far from a "perfect exit." In this sense, "The Record Keeper" leaves us conflicted. But it also asks us to listen, and when we do we find fleeting glimmers of hope. Such a careful negotiation of subjectivity and archive resonates in a world that again and again threatens disconnection.<sup>ii</sup>

### Talhamiyeh

I heard  
I'm an Armenian  
who believes that stars  
are the pieces of lightening  
history left to space,  
I heard  
I have Roman blood  
and my brother is Turkish  
and Greek,  
I heard  
my heart is  
by the Mosque of Omar  
by the Nativity  
beside a talisman  
and an old man  
without teeth or keys,  
I heard  
my poems turned into stones  
with Aramaic letters,  
I heard  
that here  
invaders push natives aside  
natives hand their names to trees  
and trees rehearse the verses  
freedom left,  
I heard  
I was a house  
made of Mediterranean light  
except I only heard this in Springtime  
and Spring might not exist here anymore—  
they took all of our trees—  
perhaps Jesus can explain what happened  
or perhaps all I need to remember  
is that  
I heard—but this I know—  
I'm an Arab,  
the seven quarters  
of the old city  
has left me seven keys  
so I can always enter.



### Here

The Old Port of Jaffa  
is here  
the sunlight poised  
on our memories  
here  
the old stones houses  
with our tiles tiles tiles  
evidence of homes buried  
in different names  
here  
the years we never defined  
here  
the echoes we collected  
in each other  
here  
the shivering breeze  
against our skin  
the dark paradise  
under our eyes  
here  
but you were not here  
and I was not here  
they say  
but we were here  
we are here  
we are here

### Country of Torn Men

Here, men don't lie  
or lean on their beds and  
pray;  
they sit on stools, sing by  
a wall,  
wonder if jagged lines  
glisten  
when divided hearts break  
the law,  
and miles of giant

afternoons,  
when the hesitation on lips  
slides further into doubt  
the way the desert does  
when language is sealed  
to keep breaths  
from dividing the mirror.  
Or is it the nation?

### The Oranges

They were all around me  
but grew heavier and heavier  
until I couldn't carry them  
anymore—  
who can live with such weight  
around the heart  
who can carry a bent flame  
across the night  
where pieces of a moon  
keep trying to declare something  
to each other  
but never do  
who can see anything  
when light is displaced  
when the oranges have been taken  
far away from where they belong  
*To Sami, Jaffa*



*Artwork by Samia Halaby, courtesy of Bank of Palestine.*

### Even in Love

I try to tell you  
there isn't a part of you missing  
that even if war  
has damaged you  
I want to be close  
to your wound  
it's your heart that undresses me

when you don't touch me  
it's your noise that blows open  
my darkness  
and maybe, I ask  
(but never ask you)  
the hole you fell into  
is nothing  
it's what remains around it  
that matters  
But even in love  
war inhabits me

The poems in this feature have been published in various journals and magazines.

Nathalie Handal says that "the aches of exile are unremitting," and "such sadness finds relief in words":

I am seven  
it is the day before our departure,  
the day my father  
gives me a notebook,  
and I tell him,  
this is where I'll keep my country.

*The poems in this feature have been published in various journals and magazines.*

<sup>i</sup> Prayuka Pratash, "Poet of the Month: Nathalie Handal," *The Missing Slate*, available at <http://themissingplate.com/2016/10/31/poet-month-nathalie-handal/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Pushcart Prize Nominations 2017, *The Missing Slate*, available at <http://themissingplate.com/2016/11/16/pushcart-prize-2017-nominations/>.