



**Project  
Space**

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Yasmeen Nematt Alla

***In Colouring Grief***


March 5th – April 2nd, 2021

*Her purse was gone. At some point while making her way through the infamous crowds of one of Alexandria's metros, someone swiped it. People hurried along in every direction, the thief among them, perhaps somewhere near, or far — the crowd offered no answers. She made her way back home, devastated that the photograph she had of her daughter, which she kept in her purse for safekeeping, was gone with the chaos.*

*Later, she would tell her granddaughter of how one day she found the purse outside her doorstep, the thief had returned it and its belongings, with exception to the 100-pound bill. She would tell this story over and over again, perhaps to subtly teach her granddaughter that in grief and loss there is always love.*

*In Colouring Grief* is an exchange of grief between the artist, Yasmeen Nematt Alla, and an online audience. Over the course of a month, Nematt Alla asked audiences to share their stories of personal grief with her by completing a Google Form or by messaging her through social media. In response to stories, Nematt Alla wrote and mailed poems as an iteration of what was shared, or as Nematt Alla puts it, “a translation that has gone through her and then back to the audience.”

In confidence, Nematt Alla would read through the expressions of grief, giving care and attention to each of the stories shared with her. The stories varied: some took the shape of essays, and others were one-sentence long, some felt familiar, and others detailed grief Nematt Alla hadn't encountered before. A few of the submissions were written in anonymity and expected nothing in return. Regardless of what Nematt Alla received, the act of witnessing someone's truth was deeply connecting to her. *In Colouring Grief* was an invitation to hold and be held, in distance and in closeness, in silence and in exchanges of language.

Mirroring her experiences as a translator, Nematt Alla would write a poem as soon as she would receive a grievance. In this exchange, she would deconstruct one story and rebuild it again. Akin to using Google Translate to translate a text from one language to the next, and then back to the original language, the poem manifests the idea that it's impossible to tell the same story twice — some things may be added, missing, or simply make no sense. 

Neither the grievance nor Nematt Alla's poetry translations are static, rather through this exchange process, the stories are shaped by the way they are told and received. The audience and Nematt Alla were telling and retelling stories within the confines of their own ideas of what's "worth telling" and "worth hearing"<sup>1</sup>. For example, it felt *right* for Nematt Alla to translate descriptions of emotions in one of the poems into mythological references. She relied on the universality of mythological allusions to express the intended meaning, even though there was no guarantee that the audience would make the same connection or any connection at all.

As exemplified with *In Colouring Grief*, translation is at the root of Nematt Alla's practice and her attempt to translate the human experience into art that would resonate with others. Nematt Alla embraces and struggles with the ways translations and words can fail her, acknowledging that there is no such thing as a "perfect" translation. Even when her attempts seem futile, she asks herself, *what if you make something that once felt incomprehensible to someone and now suddenly makes some sort of sense?*

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<sup>1</sup> Polanyi, Livia. (1981). The Nature of Meaning of Stories in Conversation. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*. 6. 10.4148/2334-4415.1627.

Nematt Alla offered a gesture of care, a confidential space to share and hold grief, to whomever decided to respond to the invitation. In recognizing the importance of choice, the audience was left to determine the extent of their participation. The exchange was complete when the audience needed it to be.

These themes; language, experiences, care, grief, and community-building are inherent to all her work. As an artist, Nematt Alla wonders if her role is to highlight the unseen and forgotten gestures of care and empathy through recreating them in art spaces. Through *In Colouring Grief*, Nematt Alla is asserting that there is space for community grieving in art-making practice that is separate from institutionalized care. Nematt Alla sees value and comfort in artists and community members holding space for another, particularly for marginalized community members, such as herself, who don't see themselves in more categorical or fixative forms of care. 🔊

The raw, honest, and vulnerable responses Nematt Alla received speak to the notion of art experiences' potential to be a fulcrum of community care. When grief is shared, there's often a fixation on offering advice and solutions, even when we *know* we have very little or nothing to offer. *In Colouring Grief* offered respite from this pressure, acknowledging that sometimes all we want is to be heard. If we don't have spaces that acknowledge this truth, Nematt Alla asks, *how do we tell each other anything?* 🔊

*We don't*, instead we hold on until we can't anymore. Years later, when Nematt Alla's grandmother could no longer carry the grief, she told her that the purse, along with the picture of her daughter, was gone. It was never found by her doorstep. Nematt Alla writes, "you've given me your grief here and in it I have not found a reason for you to suffer. And yet here we are grieving and suffering."

For Nematt Alla, art mirrors life. Holding space is simply what she does and has always been an implied component of her work. This is most evident in her exhibit *Not Traumatic Enough for a Shock Blanket*, where she placed traumatic narratives on shock blankets and let the audience "bear witness to the truth of these experiences and by extension carry some of the weight of the

narratives.<sup>2</sup> During the opening, the narratives emotionally moved audience members who saw their own stories in the work but never thought they were worthy of saying out loud. Nematt Alla did what she knew she could, she listened to the audience with care and held them in warm embraces.

*In Colouring Grief*, however, demanded more of her. For the first time, Nematt Alla wouldn't be in a physical space with her audience. She felt immensely guilty at the thought of having someone share something precious with her and not being able to hold them in the ways she's used to. She is reminded of her daily conversations with her grandmother, who is alone in caring for her husband as his dementia worsens, and all the moments she wanted to hold her but couldn't.

In thinking about the intimate and whispered conversations over phone calls, Nematt Alla complemented her poems with a relational aesthetics<sup>3</sup> audio piece that guided participants through a step by step ritual of letting go. The audio piece is in six parts, of which the last part is a music composition titled "In Giving Sound A Name" and created in collaboration with artists Rana Nemat Allah and Tanishqa Sinha.

While intertwining narratives of her own grievances, Nematt Alla's gentle voice encouraged the audience to sit with their grief, read the poem she had mailed to them out loud, tear it apart, and place it in a glass filled with water. After some time, the poem, and in turn the grievances, dissolved in the glass. The water is left murky with remnants of the poem, it might not dissolve completely, but perhaps just enough.

After the poem has dissolved and the recording of Nematt Alla's gentle voice ends, the audience is left to play "In Giving Sound a Name", a musical composition of what grief could possibly sound like, to fill the silence should they choose to. As a final gesture, Nematt Alla invited audience members

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from Yasmeen Nematt Alla's portfolio: [yasmeennematt.com](http://yasmeennematt.com)

<sup>3</sup> Term created by curator Nicholas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe the tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context.



to respond to her poems (or to the experience) in a collaborative document shared with everyone who participated in the exchange.

Throughout her artistic process, Nematt Alla would ask herself, *is this enough, am I enough?* As she encountered the heaviness and heartbreak that was shared with her, doubt was replaced with faith and trust in the audience to take her for who she is as she took them for who they are. Perhaps it's not a matter of being enough, but simply being there: holding a place for grief that has nowhere else to go. 🗣️

-Razan Samara