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Book review

**THE RED HIJAB BY BONNIE BOLLING**
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In today’s polarized culture, people tend to view the world in dichotomies. You are either a native or a foreigner, good or evil, safe or unsafe. In *The Red Hijab*, Bonnie Bolling elevates the spaces in between, showing the humanity that lies in the places that are not quite one world or another.

The two most prominent spaces that Bolling inhabits in the collection are those between native and foreigner and safe and unsafe. As an American living in Diraz, Bahrain, the poems’ speaker spends much of the first part feeling at home neither in Bahrain nor America. In the second poem, “In Diraz,” the speaker goes out to the market wearing a hijab, but “even the woman, oh—there is no fooling her.” Despite the fact that no one can see who she is, she appears to the locals to be a foreigner. The speaker then goes on, “My home is not here / but I don’t think it is there ei-ther.” The speaker inhabits a space between two homes and two worlds, belonging fully in neither.

In most of this collection’s poems, Bolling also situates the speaker in a place that is neither safe nor unsafe. Violence is frequently shown around her, but never directly affects her. It is always a few blocks away or down the street. In her home, she is safe, even though her friends from America would certainly declare that she lives somewhere that is not safe. In “On a Balcony with the Lunch Poems,” she writes:

> They say someone's dying—
> right now and brutally,
> deep in the village.
> They carry up more wine.

There are violent acts being committed nearby, but the casual nature of the final line indicates that neither the narrator nor the people around her feel threatened by it. The violence is there, but not immediately threatening, far enough away to continue on with their lives. This does not ensure that it will always stay that far away, but, for now, it does and will.

In “Noon (Al Dhuhr),” readers move closer to the violence, as the poem moves into the mind of a terrorist about to blow himself up with a suicide vest. As he walks over to his target, he sees a one-armed man get on his bike and ride away. Instead of cursing the fact that a potential victim gets away, as we might expect from someone about to wreak havoc, he thinks, “Good for him.” Then, in the moment before he detonates himself, he thinks, “A pity that bus pulls over, stopping at the curb, / letting those people get off—.” This man does not have the heartless rage of someone about to murder swaths of people, but he commits the violent act nonetheless. Again, the reader experiences a person situated between two worlds, in this case those of empathy and evil.

The call to prayer, or *azan*, resonates throughout many of the poems. Much like the call to prayer can be, every so often the *azan* punctuates the life of the speaker, reminding her that she is not like the people around her. In “Grace, a Moment of,” she attempts to pray, but instead begins to think, “Poor American. / How guilty you are. / How the world despises you.” In spite of her mind wandering, she is able to say a small prayer at the end: “Save them, I say from the floor, save them all.”
Again, the speaker is in a place in between, within her prayer but not fully there, yet there enough to pray a bit. The *azan* adds a musicality to the collection, too, acting as a chorus to the verses of her poems. Every little while the same refrain returns.

Bonnie Bolling’s *The Red Hijab* is a wonderful collection that refuses to put people into neat boxes. It embraces the multiple lives and perspectives that exist for each of us, from mothers to terrorists. By embracing widely, Bolling creates a collection that hums with the tension of people pulled in different directions.