

**THE STORIES / HOMELAND(S) THAT SUBMERGE , SUBSUME & BUOY US:
A REVIEW OF LAILA MALIK'S DEBUT COLLECTION OF POETRY, *archipelago***

Laila Malik's debut collection of poetry, *archipelago*, was published by Book*hug Press on April 6, 2023.

Laila Malik describes herself as a "desisporic settler," a description that I identify with as well. Specifically, she grew up in the Arabian Gulf as a person of south asian heritage (same), and this is a specific type of "desi Gulfie" upbringing and lens that very few individuals in the Canadian writing community share (fewer still - women!). I do not know Malik, but after reading her collection, I do want to! Here is my review of her exemplary debut collection of poetry.

Heart-in-throat the whole time reading the poem, "just kids going home." How many of us have lived through this exact scene: "we are not babies, we are not mothers / not the first girls."

Ouf!

(Hint: Too many).

Flashes of humour in Malik's collection reward the careful reader, ex., "we will use forks / because we have forgotten how to use fingers, and also / because germs." (all your grandmothers have stopped cooking) "sand with a stopover snickertini" (the organic properties of sand) "no one has loved me / quite like you didn't" (the first gulf war) "I do not check the direction of her feet" (kafala)

From the publisher, Book*hug Press: "*The islands of an archipelago are isolated above sea level but attached underwater; connected yet separate.*" An apt and beautiful metaphor for a writer who has geographical and emotional connections to Canada, East Kashmir, the Arabian Gulf, and East Africa. Also of note, the title adds depth and heft to the

A quotation from Indian-born American poet, Agha Shahid Ali's collection, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, opens Malik's book. A self-proclaimed exile, Shahid was renowned for penning verses (and ghazals) that explored the trifecta of memory, nostalgia and longing for the "homeland." Shahid is a great choice for Malik, who pays him homage by focusing on similar themes

book's reflection on historical exile, ecological destruction and our interconnectedness with each other.

but in new and arresting ways.

"anyway what is east, out there in the multiverse?" (fajr is the loneliest number)

Malik's writing is sprinkled with words from multiple languages (Urdu (and Hindi), Punjabi & Arabic)), creating a cozy, intimate connection with readers who share a similar linguistic background/knowledge [but also there is a glossary under "notes" (appended in the back) which helpfully provides succinct, detailed definitions and context for the non-English words].

The poem "cutlery" strikingly and devastatingly holds up a mirror to a particular kind of racism + classism that almost all desis who grew up in the Arabian Gulf can relate to (12).

Note also that the lines "eating exhaust for another 100 fil theft" and "our stories may be buried / in unmarked graves under seven-star restaurants but" (crooked elbows) almost broke me. Haunting. Tender. Exquisite. Malik tenderly moves between rage and hope as she reveals and reflects on scenes of cruelty, racism and injustice.

Melancholic fragments on loss and grief float throughout (or perhaps they anchor) Malik's collection:

"then earth / in spades and fistfuls. A gift of a billion bacteria to greet you. / another life begins without a map" (rites)

Additionally, if the poems "Letter to my stardust sister" and "How to season a turkey" do not bring hot tears to one's eyes, one might want to check their pulse.

Malik's work has been published widely in literary magazines such as *CV2*, *Canthius*, *The New Quarterly*, *Ricepaper*, *Qwerty*, *Room*, *Sukoon*, *The Bangalore Review* and *Archetype*. She is currently at work on a novel, for which she was a Banff fellow in 2021. An exciting new writer to watch!

Malik's writing startles and delights word by word. She is playful with multiple languages, cultures and settings, and has created a collection of separate but inter-connected pieces which ruminate on the stories/homeland(s) we carry, bury and create.

A compassionate and hopeful collection of poems from an exciting

new #canlit voice
that one will want
to return to and
savour over and
over.