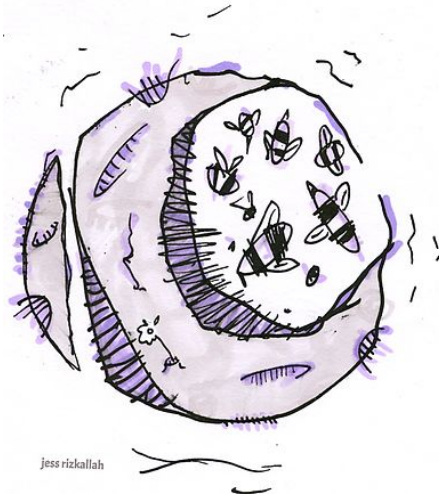


# JESS RIZKALLAH

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Jess Rizkallah is a Lebanese-American writer and illustrator. She is a New York University MFA graduate, Kundiman fellow, and founding editor at Pizza Pi Press. Her full-length collection *THE MAGIC MY BODY BECOMES* was a 2018 finalist for The Believer's Poetry Award and won the 2017 Etel Adnan Poetry Prize awarded by the Radius of Arab American Writers and University of Arkansas Press. Find her at [jessrizkallah.com](http://jessrizkallah.com).

In the *magic my body becomes*, Jess Rizkallah seeks a vernacular for the inescapable middle ground of being Arab American—a space that she finds, at times, to be too Arab for America and too American for her Lebanese elders.

The voice here freely asserts gender, sexuality, and religious beliefs, while at the same time it respects a generational divide: the younger's privilege gained by the sacrifice of the older, the impossibility of separating what is wholly hers from what is hers second-hand.

In exploring family history, civil war, trauma, and Lebanon itself, Rizkallah draws from the spirits of canonical Arab and Middle Eastern poets, and the reader feels these spirits exorcising the grief of those who are still alive. Throughout, there is the body, a reclamation and pushback against cultures that simultaneously sexualize and shame women. And there is a softness as inherent as rage, a resisting of stereotypes that too often speak louder than the complexities of a colonized, yet resilient, cultural identity.

Rizkallah's *the magic my body becomes* is an exciting new book from an exciting young poet, a love letter to a people as well as a fist in the air. It is the first book in the Etel Adnan Poetry Series, publishing first or second books of poetry in English by writers of Arab heritage.

**ETEL ADNAN  
POETRY SERIES**

Edited by Hayan Charara and Fady Joudah

## published:

THE MAGIC MY BODY BECOMES (full length collection, University of Arkansas Press) (Winner of the Etel Adnan Poetry Prize), (Finalist for The Believer's 2017 Poetry Award), *Greater Boston Intercollegiate Poetry 2014*, *Word Riot*, *Voicemail Poems*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Drunk in a Midnight Choir* (Pushcart Nomination), *Welcome To The New Hallelujah*, *Words Dance*, *The Qahwa Project*, *Electric Cereal*, *NAILED*, *Artscope Magazine*, *Ant vs. Whale*, *Alien Mouth*, *Button Poetry*, *SlamFind*, *Inferior Planets*, *Wyvern Lit*, *Jaffat el Aqlam*, *HEArt Online*, *Sukoon*, *Rattle*, *Beech Street Review*, *Mizna*, *The Margins*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Big Lucks*, *Hobart Pulp*, *Crab Fat*, *Rabbit Catastrophe* (2017 Real Good Poem Prize Finalist), *Bettering American Poetry 2018*, *Cosmonaut's Avenue*, *Apercus Lit*

more: <https://www.jessrizkallah.com/published>

## features, performances, and workshops:

Boston Poetry Slam, Woman of The World Poetry Slam 2016 (internationally ranked #30), VOX POP: Northeast Regional Poetry Slam 2016 (2nd Place), Spoken & Sung Sessions, Port Veritas Poetry, Slam Free or Die, KGB Bar, Berl's Brooklyn, Bowery Poetry Club, Feminine Empowerment Movement Slam 2017-2018, Harvard Book Store, Asian American Writer's Workshop, Massachusetts Independent Comics Expo, Boston Hassle Zine Fest, Whale Prom Small Press Expo, Radius of Arab American Writers (Panelist), Association of Writers & Poets (Panelist), and more venues, including colleges in Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania.

## press:

<https://news.uark.edu/articles/35664/jess-rizkallah-named-winner-of-inaugural-etel-adnan-poetry-prize>

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/there-is-a-country-to-be-built-a-conversation-with-jess-rizkallah-winner-of-the-etel-adnan-poetry-prize/>

<https://lesley.edu/news/jess-rizkallah-uncovers-whats-buried-beneath>

<https://lesley.edu/stories/jess-rizkallah>

<http://www.washingtonsquarereview.com/blog/2017/12/1/five-questions-with-jess-rizkallah>

<http://birdsthumb.org/interviews/2018/1/24/an-interview-with-jess-rizkallah>

<http://www.sukoonmag.com/responsive/sukoon-interviews-jess-rizkallah/>

<https://believermag.com/logger/believer-poetry-award-2018/>

videos:

**slamfind**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0nSzu9LUTg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlQA8uoxDfE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtBRs1lLJrY&t=23s>

**button poetry**

<https://youtu.be/5EZciCaPs0A>

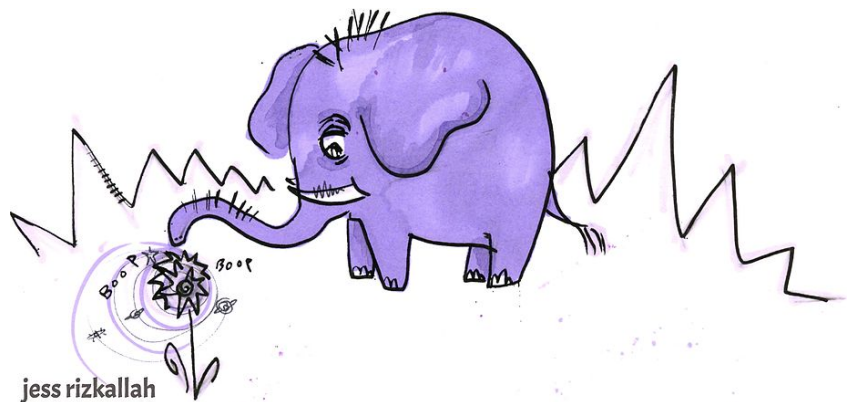
**spoken & sung sessions**

<https://youtu.be/bER562dDkJw>

**Asian American Writer's Workshop TV**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BS\\_rW\\_dA\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BS_rW_dA_I)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z\\_FtTZ2syk&t=2743s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z_FtTZ2syk&t=2743s)



## BLURBS

“I first say ‘playful’ and mean the way Jess Rizkallah commands language to dance on a page with both soft humor and sharp imagery. "I want to marriage / the tallest mountain on the planet / because it's the closest one to the moon" and just like that, the moon draws itself closer to you, reader. *The Magic My Body Becomes* is about family, but not only. About loneliness, but not only. About joy and home and celebration of the self, but not only. Rizkallah's best work in this debut is, in fact, the work of juggling all of who she is at once. And, even better, making room for all of us to join. This is a captivating, carefully crafted, brilliant book of poems that is a joy to experience.”

- Hanif Abdurraqib, author of *They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us*

“In this collection, Jess Rizkallah gives us profound tenderness, and mines from it the complexities of longing, inherited loss, and the histories that carry within them our belonging and unbelonging. Her landscapes are lush with birds and dogs and elephants, with trees and oceans and shrapnel; her speakers are tough and loving and filled with quiet humor. I cannot stress enough how important it feels, as children of parents whose worlds had to end so ours could begin, to have poets like Jess giving voice to the doubled identities we carry, the stories we grew up with and the stories we grow into. It is a joy to hold and be held by her work.”

- Safia Elhillo, author of *The January Children*

Jess Rizkallah's debut poetry collection is dazzling; it is cedar, resistance song, map to the winding forest of a woman's body; it is lemons and jam and knives, at once soft and firm; it is a book about familial longing, survival, love, burial, and yes, magic. So much magic. Rizkallah sings her arrival with an inner flute, and we cannot help but listen, mesmerized.

- Randa Jarrar, author of *HIM, ME, MUHAMMAD ALI*

In this debut, Jess Rizkallah explores the body, finding it a site of magic rather than memory. The speaker's body becomes magic, seemingly out of necessity to contain her multitudes, to remember that “softness is strength, unflinching / against the knife and it is also the knife.” Mystical transformation is rendered natural. *The Magic My Body Becomes* allows for no denial of truth: “Why are you closing the curtain... let them stare.”

**THE BELIEVER**  
LOGGER

## ETEL ADNAN SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Among the things the lyric attempts to address and negotiate is the contemporary state of diction, of language, both spoken and sung. In poetry, this manifests in registers that amalgamate the living history and the canon of a particular language. In this case, we mean English and the “minor” Englishes that inform, prop, and expand it. At its best the lyric elicits a new horizon for and within its medium. Jess Rizkallah’s ambitious dance between the spoken word, or oral poetics, and the exegesis of the written give her debut collection its remarkable sheen. In her lyric, it’s hard not to marvel at the balancing act, risky at times, between the intensity of abandon and that of silence. Her poems alternate between deliberate syntactical wildness (from which a delectable ephemerality results) and stunning precision. “I was born an arm with a hand at both ends/holding a knife.” In fact, the deeper one gets into the book, the more one encounters an archeology that the poet’s brushstrokes reveal: “my thighs meet each other like a prayer. I’ve got rosary beads/where bikes would have chains.” The memorable moments are plentiful yet the poet reminds us: “these are not gifts, they’re buried artifacts.” The shorter poems, the “Ghada says” sequence and the “aphorisms,” for example, illustrate these finds. But many of the longer poems, especially the prose poems, are prime examples of her full range. The title alone of “deir al qamar means convent of the moon and it’s all i think about” broadcasts the adventure. And the first few lines (and the entire poem, of course) continue it, surprising us with a humor driven to the bare teeth of sentimentality: “i wanna marriage aziz ansari / because he says clever things on the internet / and i want to marriage the tallest mountain on the planet because it’s the closest one to the moon.” Here and elsewhere, the result is a tug-of-war between restlessness and restraint, yes, but also the poet’s various tongues, senses, and modes of understanding: “things will get complicated,” the poet says, and they do. Quips and tenderness give way to violence and tragedy, to uncompromising realities that, in turn, revert to wisecracks and empathy. “I realized this at 23” gathers so much of the manuscript in a well-packed suitcase containing many of Rizkallah’s concerns: womanhood, in its Arabic and American dialogue; origins and roots (which clash in her last name, where even God for a Christian Arab doesn’t escape America’s flinch toward erasure); the insistence on objectivity through the world of things, the things in the world: toothpaste and a child’s crayons. There’s no skirting around this: all literature, if not all art, is a grappling with identity in its particular locale and private domain. Whether identity is the founder or disintegration of sovereignty, and whether a cat chases its tail in perpetuity or in spurts, the means and perception of the self in question are as singular and plural as they’re vetted by the congress of the multicultural. Or as Rizkallah aptly puts it: “this is how we compete/with the silence that wants to take us. In America, there is a default mode about what makes a poet “limited” to the political or to the “ethnic.” Often the default mode is a question of race but also of nationalism: our inverse Angel of History who looks away from the wreckage while flying full force into it. Rizkallah’s concern with her body as her own and as product of

“ways of seeing”; her struggle with god, her Christian god and her Arabic self as goddess; her struggle with the liminality of utterance; her specific Lebanese Maronite background and its recent history in Lebanon’s civil war, which marks her family narrative and her memory of the world; her insistence on resisting her own American violence in general and against a people she belongs to as a Christian; the power this delivers to a liberal conversation about Muslims in America; all this ruptures absence in the name of what’s better:

I was named a miracle still, they wait for something greater.

Literature is necessarily a grappling with expression, with what to reveal, what to bring attention to, which voices make agency possible. Some poets never really take this risk. Others have no choice. About this, Rizkallah has a “Ghada says,” which we want to imagine she kept close to her while writing these poems, if not posted on a wall or window where she writes, then in the back of her mind as a constant echo, kindling the fire:

why are you closing the curtain let them stare.

Hayan Charara Fady Joudah



photo by Valerie  
Jane Kwok



photo by  
Lip McDonald