

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Zein El-Amine. He is a Lebanese born poet and writer who teaches Arab language and film at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. He is also an adjunct professor of Arabic Literature and History at American University, and he teaches Arabic Media and International affairs at George Washington University. After growing up in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Zein moved to the U.S. in 1987 and now lives in the Ella Joe Baker Intentional Community cooperative in Washington D.C. He has facilitated many studies abroad programs and taken his classes to have immersive experiences in Morocco, Egypt and Ireland. Zein's poems have appeared in the Wild River Review, Folio, Betway Quarterly, Foreign Policy, In Focus, City lit and many other publications. His latest poetry manuscript entitled A travel Guide for the Exiled was recently shortlisted for the Bergman Prize. His short stories have appeared in Uno Mas, Jedelia, Middle East Report, Wild River Review, About Place Journal, Boundoff and many others. He was recently awarded the Megaphone Prize for his latest collection of short stories entitled, [Is This How You Eat a Watermelon?](#) which will be published in October 2022. Zein has also been a long time political activist around causes ranging from Palestinian liberation to local community organizing campaigns in Washington, DC. Shortly after the 1999 uprising at the WTO meeting in Seattle, Washington, he co-founded [Left Turn Magazine](#), a pivotal activist publication that ran for 10 years in the 2000s and had significant impact on helping to advance struggles for justice around the world. Zein currently hosts the weekly show [Shay Wah Nana](#) which airs locally on D.C. public radio and is syndicated around the world on Apple Podcast.

Zein, welcome to the show.

Zein El-Amine: Thank you, Matt. I'm so excited to be here.

Matt Bowles: Habibi, I am so excited that you are here. And it is really an honor and a pleasure of mine. That I can call you a personal friend of mine for over 20 years is absolutely amazing. And not just you, but the rest of your family as well. Your brothers Rami, I probably saw him multiple times a week for five or six years in a row because of the activist work we were doing together in the D.C. area. And then your other brothers, Bilal and Rayan, I actually saw them in Beirut in 2016. They hosted me when I went to Beirut. And so, wherever I go around the world, I feel like the El Amins are sort of an extended family of mine. And so, good to have you on the show, Habibi.

Zein El-Amine: Fantastic. Those were the best years when you were here, Matt.

Matt Bowles: I was just reflecting on that, man. In terms of how long you and I have known each other. I mean, it's been since probably the late 90s, early 2000s, right around the uprising in Seattle. And then shortly after that was the second Palestinian Intifada. And a whole bunch of just extraordinary people started to coming together in this milieu around that time in the early 2000s, and really incredible things started to happen. So, we're definitely going to dive into that. But I want to just start off first by setting the scene and talking about where we are doing this interview from today and the fact that we have agreed to make this a wine night. So, let's talk about what we're drinking, because I have gone out and bought a very special wine just for this particular interview because Zein El-Amine was coming on the show. So, I am recording this from Asheville, North Carolina. I am in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and I went out just today and I bought a bottle of Chateau Musar from Lebanon.

Zein El-Amine: Wow, look at you. When I first moved into this country in 1987, I was looking for Lebanese wine, and they told me that I can find Chateau Musar in Old Town Alexandria. And I went there, and they

told me you'd have to come in when the case comes in because it goes out like this. So, yeah, you're very lucky to find it in Nashville. That's great.

Matt Bowles: It's a very special wine. And we have one incredible wine store here that consistently stocks it, and I know where to get it.

Zein El-Amine: Fantastic.

Matt Bowles: And for folks that have never had this, this is really a premium wine. I mean, we're talking about probably starting around \$40 a bottle for this wine. It's a red blend from Lebanon, and it is absolutely spectacular. If you've never tried it, it is a special occasion wine for sure, but absolutely worth it to go and get a bottle.

Zein El-Amine: Absolutely. And for those of you who are not familiar with the terrain in Lebanon, the whole Bekaa Valley is basically wine country. And that's the area, the flat area between Lebanon on the east side of Lebanon that borders Syria. And that's where you find great wines like this. I'm almost embarrassed. At least it's a Pinot Noir that I'm drinking. It's Ballard Road Pinot Noir from Oregon.

Matt Bowles: Nice. I was just out in Oregon about a year ago, and I did a wine tour of the Willamette Valley in Oregon. And a lot of people don't know Oregon wines because they associate Northern California as really being the preeminent west coast wine region. But the Willamette Valley in Oregon has some unbelievable wines, especially Pinot Noir. So that's an excellent choice.

Zein El-Amine: Excellent.

Matt Bowles: And where are you based today?

Zein El-Amine: I'm in Washington, D.C. I'm in an apartment that I've lived in for 20 years. As you mentioned earlier, Matt. It's part of the Ella Jo Baker Housing Cooperative, which is the housing cooperative that was established over 20 years ago by activist women of color for activist women of color. I was made an honorary activist woman of color because of my work in the community. I had the pleasure of being here with 14 other members who, at the start, were all activist women of color. And to this day, I'm the only man in this housing cooperative. But we bought these buildings, basically, we renovated crack houses in the wake of the crack epidemic in Washington, D.C. we bought these buildings for a dollar each. Believe it or not, man, right now they're, like, worth a million. And some, of course, we don't sell them because this is a housing cooperative. And we've created basically an affordable housing Oasis for 99 years now by agreeing with D.C. government that we won't speculate on these properties if you don't tax us according to the value of the properties.

Matt Bowles: Wow, that's amazing. And can you share a little bit about who Ella Baker was and why it's named after her?

Zein El-Amine: Yeah. So, it was named after the civil rights activist Ella Joe Baker. And because the founding members were all black women that were involved in affordable housing and also the civil rights movement, and some of them were involved also in the Black Panther Party and other things, and that's why we named it after the civil rights leader.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing, man. Well, what I would love to do to start off this conversation and just give it a little bit more context, Zein. Let's go all the way back to the beginning and talk a little bit about your

path getting to D.C. for that we need to start in Lebanon. Can you talk about where in Lebanon you were born and can you talk about what it was like growing up there at that time, basically in the lead up to the Lebanese civil war, what your experience was like as a kid there?

Zein El-Amine: Sure. So, I was born and raised in Lebanon and while my father worked in Saudi Arabia, I went to boarding school basically until I was 12, till the civil war started. But we were basically, me and my brother Bilal, another person that you know very well, me and Bilal, we basically were going for nine months at a time to boarding school away from our parents. For the first few years there was so much turmoil, and we were at this private school in South Lebanon and it's called the Evangelical School of Sidon and it was established by the Ford family, believe it or not, in South Lebanon. And we went to boarding school for three years there after going to boarding school for one year in Beirut. But there was so much turmoil in South Lebanon especially the last straw was when the Lebanese army got in a fight with Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp Palestinians and we were caught in between them. This is a story that repeats itself by the way. Everywhere we go we get caught in these firefights.

And finally our parents said, and they said this in 1975 at the start of the civil war. Oh, we have to move our children to safety. We must move them north to Beirut, to Achrafieh, to the place basically between Talizata refugee camp and the Phalangists, the right wing fascists that wanted to exterminate the Palestinians. It was right in between those two factions, the school, it was called the Good Shepherd School. And they moved us there and they also added my third brother Rayan there. And talking about going from the frying pan into the fire rather, they basically moved us to the birthplace of the civil war. On the birth date of the civil war. On the birth year of the civil war.

So here we are, we spend the first semester and then come April 1975, we get caught. The civil war starts right there where our school lies, in between those two factions. And what happens is that me, Bilal and Rayan are trapped for 43 days along with a dozen other students. Those were students whose guardians couldn't get them in time. All of those students had parents like us who were overseas, whether it was in the Gulf or Africa or Brazil or whatever. And so, my uncle, who was my guardian, he couldn't get in because, as you know, Matt, they set up all these checkpoints, right? And if you're at the wrong checkpoint, they'll kill you according to the ID. Because the IDs in Lebanon will show not only your religion, but also what sect you belong to. It says Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Maronite, etc.

So, we got caught up there. And that's actually the basis for one of the stories that's going to be published in the collection you mentioned, the Birds of Achrafie. It's based on what happened there. And basically, the problem also not only being caught in that and not being able to leave, but also, we didn't have food, we only had staples. And at some point, the president, whose son joined the phalanges, joined the fascists, basically asked the Phalangists if they can give us some food. And they had confiscated a truck full of zucchini from a Palestinian merchant. And they basically gave us the zucchini. So, for 43 days we were eating fried zucchini, stuffed zucchini with rice, zucchini scrambled with eggs, boiled zucchini, all kinds of zucchini. I didn't eat zucchini for three years after that. And there was a ceasefire after 43 days, and my uncle managed to take us out and send us to Saudi Arabia to our parents.

Matt Bowles: Wow. So, what was that like for you at the time? I mean, during those 43 days when you were trapped there, what do you remember thinking when you were that young?

Zein El-Amine: Yeah, people would just assume that we were frightened. But you have to realize that boarding school in Lebanon at the time was a very hard place in a sense that you had dorm counselors that

are very sadistic, very derisive. They would hit you; they would punish you. You had to wake up and stand in line with your hands out so that you can spec your nails. And if one nail has dirt underneath it, they will smack your knuckles with a ruler. This is the first thing this is before having breakfast. So, it was a very tough place to be. And to us, the war, when it started, we had no idea that it was going to go on for 15 years. We thought it'd end any day. And it also felt like wore a snowy day.

So instead of children here might wake up and look out of the window and see snow and just turn around and go back to sleep and say, oh, no school today. We would Wake up. And if it was dark, we would see the tracer bullets. Or later in the morning, we would hear the gunfire. And we'd say, oh, no school today. Good night. And we would go to sleep and we would play soccer in the underground garage. And we would do all kinds of things. We would play. And also, there was no divide between the girls and the boys. We were intermixing. And I was very much in love with one of the girls, and I got to spend a lot of time with her. At one point, I risked my life trying to get wildflowers from outside the school for her so that she could string a necklace together of wildflowers. And I had to sneak behind the checkpoint for the phalanges to get the wildflowers and sneak over. And at that point, when I was in the field, I got stung by a bee. Then I got caught by the phalanges, and I ended up without any flowers and being basically pushed over the wall back into the school.

But there was all kinds of misadventures. There was one point also where me and this kid, his name was Jaguar, his real name was George, but we called him Jaguar because he always made car sounds like vroom, vroom, vroom. And his ears were aerodynamic. They were pointed down. And he would put his head down and he would go, vroom, vroom. Even when he's playing soccer and he's dribbling, he would go, vroom, vroom. So, we called him Jaguar. So, Jaguar and I basically went to this bakery. We snuck out also behind the checkpoint on the other side, and we went into this bakery that was closed and basically stuffed our shirts with dough and came back and, you know, those kiwi shoe polish cans? We stuffed those kiwi shoe polish cans with dough. And there was nobody in the classes. So, we broke a chair in one of the classrooms and set a fire in the classroom, a little campfire, and cooked these little kiwi shoe things stuffed with dough on top of that fire. And what the result was, well, it was delicious at the time, but actually, it really didn't bake it. It was charred dough, which was enough for us. It was the illusion of bread, something other than zucchini.

Matt Bowles: And how old were you when this was happening?

Zein El-Amine: Twelve. And Bilal was 10 and Rianne was 8.

Matt Bowles: And so, when you finally got out of there, you relocated to Saudi Arabia. Can you talk about that transition and what that was like when you got there?

Zein El-Amine: Sure. So, for those of you who don't know, there are no schools in Saudi Arabia for foreigners. My father worked for the U.S. Military as a civilian, and he was a manager of this restaurant that served expats and military folks, both Saudi and American. And so, dad had to ask special permission from the American Consulate for us to be enrolled in the American Consulate School, which goes up to ninth grade. And the reason why he had to ask special permission because the Saudi government forbids Arabs of the Muslim faith especially, or anybody of the Muslim faith to be enrolled in that school, because otherwise they'll be corrupted by the infidels, God forbid. So, dad asked for special permission, he pulled some strings, and he got us into the American Consulate School. So basically, I spent junior high in the American Consulate school, and that was the first time I went to American school.

Matt Bowles: And then you ended up doing high school in Bahrain. Can you talk about that transition, why you went there and what that was like going from Saudi to Bahrain?

Zein El-Amine: Sure. So, if you worked with one of the major American companies or worked for U.S. government, you had a choice after 9th grade because there were no high schools that can take you American high schools. You can go to any, what's called Department of Defense, DoD approved high school. And you had the choice of Rome, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, England and Bahrain. Me being the oldest and what I call the minefield walker. My father sets me off in the field and if something blows up, he doesn't send my brothers there. He insisted that I don't have a choice schools, that I must go to the closest one and to this Arab country next to us.

For those of you who don't know the geography, basically Bahrain right now, it's across the causeway. You can drive on a bridge for a few minutes and get to Bahrain. At the time, there was no causeway, so you had to fly. And the flight was hilarious because it was a 15-minute flight. Fasten your seat belts and a minute later fasten your seatbelts again, we're about to land. So, he said, you must go to Bahrain and be near us. Later, my brothers went to England, two of them, and one went to Rome when they finished junior high. So, I went to Bahrain high school from 10th to 12th grade. And that was my actual Americanization, in a sense, being introduced to beer and pot and hash and getting in trouble and getting suspended for possession of hash. It was a really interesting year. I'm writing a novel about that 10th grade year titled the House of the Rising sun.

Because what happened is that when I was sent to Bahrain to boarding school, it so happened that the year before, the building that housed 250 dormitory students was condemned. And there was only space for 15 students. And because there was only space for 15 students, they only allowed boys. So, I was there with 14 other boys in this little rectangular building. And we were the only dormies. Everybody else was a day student, but the dormies were from all over the world. It was one of the greatest years of my life because the variety was amazing. I had two Japanese, American friends, one Mexican. There were two Cuban brothers, one Lebanese from Dearborn, one Palestinian from Nablus, one Italian American, and so on, so forth. And we were very close. We became like brothers. It was a very exciting year. It was a great year. And later that dorm even closed and I got to stay with the family. It was an awful experience after that because my father insisted that I stay in Bahrain and stay closed. So even the dorm closed. Dad had put out the word there that if somebody wants to take in my two sons, Zein and Bilal, into their home, we'll pay you monthly payment for their housing, for their food and so on.

And it so happens that lieutenant commander from the Navy volunteered to do this. And he was one of the biggest misers and one of the biggest assholes you've ever met. And he treated us awfully, including taking out the fuse for the air conditioning during some really hot days so as not to have a high electricity bill. He was trying to make as much money off of us as possible. What happened at some point is there was the Iranian Revolution in 1978, and all non-essential personnel had to leave. And so finally I was actually handed over to an elementary school teacher who lived in a beach house in Bahrain. And he was a really cool guy. That time was much more pleasant. There's a whole novel you could write about the times me and Bilal spent with that Lieutenant Commander and his family. It was the craziest, most bizarre experience.

So, we get to 12th grade and I graduate from there. My parents, Matt, could not attend the graduation because of this. And the reason why is. Because what happened is that he heard that my father has managed to get on a private plane for his boss, who was an American general, to travel with my mother and

my brothers to watch the graduation in Bahrain. So that way he doesn't have to get a visa or anything. So, once he heard about it, he reported to the authorities that my father's coming in and they stopped him at the airport when he landed, and they turned them around. So, my parents couldn't even watch my graduation. But in general, my life in Bahrain was really wonderful.

And for those of you who don't know. Bahrain, it's like the playground of the Gulf nations. So, Saudis come there and get drunk and all that. We had no drinking age. So, at the age of 14, I would go to the Anchor Inn, to the local pub, and have a double scotch before the school dance. I could pull up to the bar and order a double Scotch. And my best friend, Diana Davidson, was from Singapore. She would order these huge pints, and we would drink before the school dance. So, we had a lot of fun, but we had no idea about what's happening behind the props, that there is this tension, that there is this majority Shia population that's living in poverty and underrepresented, that there's constant surveillance and all that. We weren't very aware of that stuff. We were, like, driving every day with a gauntlet of swinging palm trees and it's a happy little island. And we'd go to the beach and everything, and never we got a glimpse of what's behind the props and what's going on until later.

Matt Bowles: So, after Bahrain High School, you went back to Saudi Arabia for college. Can you talk about why that decision was made and then how that experience was as a young adult in college in Saudi Arabia? What was your experience and what are your reflections on that period?

Zein El-Amine: So, my father says, I'm going to get you at the University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which is an engineering school. Later it would be named King Fahad University of Petroleum Minerals, because when King Fahd took the throne, he basically named everything after him. So, what happened is that in order to get in there, you basically have to pull some strings, right? So, dad contacts this millionaire who contacts some prince and who's supposed to write a letter on my behalf to get me into the school. Now, I didn't want to go there, and I was fully prepared to go be with my best friends, Waseem and Bassam. Who are these Palestinians that were my best friends in high school and were now living in West Covina, California, were going to Citrus Community College, and I wanted to be with them. I haven't decided on any major or anything. I was supposed to go to school with them. And they had the lovely home in West Covina with a pool and a hot tub and everything. We were going to have the best time.

And so, this prince writes a letter, but they make a mistake, and I get admitted because he mistakes my name instead of Zein for Zeina. He thinks I'm a woman. So, I hold the record for the only man to be admitted to the King Fahd Medical School for Women. I got actually an approval to go there. And my father was reading the letter. He was excited. He says, oh, here's the letter from them. And he starts to read it. And I said, whoa, go back. What school Again? And he says, oh, damn, you know, it's the wrong school. You got approved of the wrong school after all that trouble. So, I said, okay, I'm going to California now. So I went to California, and school hasn't started. And me and Basseem and Waseem are having this lovely time in West Covina. We enroll in school and everything. And just as I was about to start in the first week, my father called me back and says, we made the corrections and you need to come back here, and you need to go to King Fahd University Petroleum and Minerals, and you need to do civil engineering.

By the way, I hated math. I hated science. You know, if anything, I only thought about literature and teaching and those types of things. So, I was forced both to return to Saudi Arabia and. And also, to take a major that wasn't anywhere in my area of expertise or my area of desire. So, I'm pulled back, and to this day, dad feels bad about this. And if you ask him, what is the worst you've seen, Zein, when have you seen him in the

worst state possible? He says it was the day I picked him at the Dhahran International Airport, picked him up to take him back home. I've never seen him so miserable in my life because he knows he extracted me from heaven to hell. And I call those five years I spent in engineering school there my prison years. I call it doing time. Because as you know, there is no social life. I always joke that you can get arrested for premarital dining at Hardee's, meaning you could be sitting at Hardee's with somebody, a member of the opposite sex, and it could be your wife and religious police can come in and say, produce your marriage license, and if you can't produce it, you'll be arrested as the man taken to jail. The woman would be taken to her guardian or her father and taken back home, and the father or the guardian would be arrested. And not to mention all the laws that were there that controlled every aspect of life. Those were very hard times. And part of that hard time was when I tried to visit my friends in the first year of college, and that's when I landed in prison in Bahrain.

Matt Bowles: What happened?

Zein El-Amine: So, in the first year, I told dad that during the break the first break I get, I want to go back to Bahrain to visit my high school friends. A Bahraini friend of mine got me a visa to come visit Bahrain. And so, I go and I'm staying with Bassam and Waseem, my Palestinian friends, but I'm also staying with my friend Diana Davidson, who I mentioned earlier, who's from Singapore, who was there. So, I'm going back and forth between them. On the third day that I was there, I was walking from Bassam's house to go play tennis with Diana. And I don't know if you've heard of Ocean Pacific clothing. Of course, I had baby blue Ocean Pacific shorts. I was holding them, and Diana had the tennis courts, and she was waiting for me at my school, high school, to play tennis. Well, I took a shortcut through a compound, and I was stopped by a Pakistani guard. For those of you who don't know, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia hire a lot of mercenaries or guards, and the policemen and all this, they hire them from other countries because the locals are too rich to serve in those kinds of jobs. And they're not about to hire the poor Shia as security guards because they're supposed to keep an eye on the Shia.

And so, I was passing through this compound, and I was exiting from it. It had two big gates that were wide open. And I was exiting from it when I saw a Pakistani guard run around from the front to the back. And he said, what are you doing? And I said, I'm going to play tennis with my friend. And he had a problem with his English and his Arabic. So, we were communicating practically by sign language. And I started to explain to him going to play tennis and all this with hand motions and all that. And finally, he let me go, or so I thought. Next thing I know, a jeep pulls in front of me, a military jeep. And he's in there. He's in the back seat, and he goes, that's him. And they grab me, and they put me in. And they put two Bahraini guards on both sides of me in the jeep, and they take me away. And what I found out later is that one of the houses in that compound was the Minister of Interior's house. And it was a day when the government declared a state of emergency in Bahrain. They don't announce it to the people. It's a state of emergency among the security forces and the military. So, you don't even know about it. So that morning they had said to the security forces, we think that there's going to be an attempt at a coup against the government aided by the Shia in Saudi Arabia that have come on recently on planes to do this.

So suddenly I'm a suspected terrorist that I'm involved in the coup because I passed by the Minister of Interior's house which is completely unmarked. So, I get to this prison, I'm interrogated by a member of the Al Khalifa family who as you know, is the royal family there, he's the warden or something of the sort there. And I'm thrown in prison in a jail that's two arms width and twice the length and it has three people in it. One is a Pakistani who was accused of counterfeiting passports and a 16-year-old Bahraini kid who was

accused of passing out political leaflets in a Shia neighborhood. And he was handcuffed behind his back. This kid, Matt, was handcuffed the whole time, meaning they would only open release his handcuffs when he needed to eat. But even when he prayed, he would pray with his hands cuffed. He had been like that for six months. So, when I got there, I thought, oh, this is all going to be a joke. I'm not even going to last till, you know, sunset. Somebody's going to find out, they're going to tell. I didn't know that. They just take you away, they don't tell anybody, they basically disappear from you, they take you away, they don't tell anybody. And the 16-year-old kid says, I tell him, I'm just going to have such a laugh tomorrow about it with my friends about this thing, it's going to be an adventure, but don't worry about me, I'll be whisked away. And he says oh, you think so? And I said yeah, I think so. And he says well I thought so at first, in the first few days. And I said how long have you been here? And says six months.

So come at night. And I started to worry also that night I realized that I'm in prison with about 2:30 or so political prisoners and they're all from Shia and some of them were recently brought in. And the way I found this out is that the 16-year-old kid says they're going to bring dinner soon and you're not going to be able to eat it, but I can get you some food, some edible food from other prisoners. And I'm looking around like how the hell are you going to get food from other prisoners? And he says I can get it, don't worry about it, but you're not going to be able to eat the food. I said look, I spent most of my childhood in Boarding school, and we ate a lot of crap. I can eat anything. And he says, no, you're not going to be able to eat this. And sure enough, they bring this cauldron that has this black liquid in it that they stir because there's about 6 inches of grease on top of it. They stir it, and they put it in a bowl, and they give me this pita bread that's as hard as a Frisbee. And I take a whiff of that bowl, and I almost throw up. He looks at me, he says, don't worry. I'll get you something to eat.

And when everybody leaves, the people that were serving the food and the guard leaves, he says, give me a boost above the door. And I give him a boost above the door. And where there was an air conditioning system, an internal air conditioning system, it had been removed. So, they use it as an intercom system for the whole prison. So, as I'm giving this guy a boost and understand, Matt, that he has his hands behind his back while I'm doing this because he's handcuffed. So, he shouts into this vent. He says, there's a new prisoner. His name is Zein Muhammad Bakar Al Amin. And he is Shia. And you hear this, and I'm like, I have no idea what's going on. Like, they're either angry or very happy. I don't know. But he says, Sammy.

Apparently, Sammy was at the other end, about six or seven cells down on the same side as us. He says, Sammy, can you send us some food? I know you're allowed visitations now, and your parents brought you some food. And Sammy responds in the intercom system, yes, I'll send him some bread and cheese and an egg. I go, what the hell? How are they going to do this? So, my cellmate tells me, stand in the window, this metal door, and there's, like, bars in the window. He says, stand in there, and you will see the food coming through. And I said, how? I say, you'll see. And then what happened is that one prisoner after another was extending their hand from the windows. And Sammy swung a string with the lavashak laughing cow cheese, you know, like, tied to the end. You know how that slice with the aluminum cover. You've had those, Matt. I know. And so, he's got the string, and he would swing it, one hungry prisoner after another. Matt, pass that food to me.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Zein El-Amine: With by string, one after the other. And then bread and then egg, so I can eat the first day.

Matt Bowles: Wow.

Zein El-Amine: But anyway, after three or four days, I later heard that Diane. See, the confusion was that Basam thinks I'm at Diane's house, and Diane thinks I bailed out on her and that I'm at the Sam's house, and so they weren't looking at me. At the same third day, she calls Bassam. And it wasn't in the days of cell phones and stuff, obviously. This was in the days of landlines. So, she calls him, she finds out his number, she calls him, she says, where is Zein? What happened to him? I haven't seen him. And he says, I haven't seen him. I thought that he was with you. So, Diane goes to all the hospitals and the prisons, and she sweet talks one of the guards to say that he did say see somebody of that description. And what made me stick out, Matt, is that that day I was wearing a T shirt that had two cats reclining on a trash can drinking beer and smoking a joint. And it said above it, it says, that's right, we baaaaaad. And he had seen the shirt, and he told her that I saw somebody brought being brought into this prison. But I didn't tell you that, and so on, so forth. In fact, when that Al Khalifa guy said, you know, was interrogating me at one point, he approached me like he was squinting at my shirt. And he reads English, obviously. He said, that's right. We started laughing because I didn't know how serious the situation is. And he got mad at me. Before laughing at him, he sounded like a sheep. So, you're like, here I am in prison as a terrorist. I'm wearing this T-shirt. That's right. To be bad.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. So how long were you in there, and how did you eventually get out?

Zein El-Amine: So, I was there for six days. And during those six days, my house in Dhahran was turned into a center of operation to get me released. And so, I had a green card at the time, and dad had a green card. So, dad was in contact with the American ambassador in Bahrain and through the U.S. Military and all that. And finally, after the sixth day, after many tries, the American ambassador started threatening, and they finally let me go, and they whisked me away. They came into the prison, said, grab your stuff. Grab your stuff. It was so funny. All I had was this ocean Pacific, like, okay, I'm ready. Grab your stuff. And they whisked me away. I was such a threat to the Bahraini state that when I arrived at the airport, the plane that they were going to put me on was pulling out of the gate, and they made one of the airline workers call it back into the gate so I can be put on there, because if I stay one more minute, I might cause havoc in that country.

And I was totally apolitical at that time. And it was one of the things that politicized me, of course, because they had told my parents that there were reports that they were taking out people to the desert, especially in the last sweep, and disappearing them. And human rights organizations were reporting about that. So, they had come to dad and told him, to prepare for the worse. And so, by the time I got home, mom was literally laid out in bed. She was sick from just the stress. It was really devastating because they thought, unbeknownst to me, that I might actually be executed.

Matt Bowles: What would you say was the impact of that experience on your political consciousness raising?

Zein El-Amine: It was tremendous because I missed something. I missed something in these three years, and I wasn't paying attention. And I need to pay more attention. Also, I started to lose fear. Instead of being traumatized, I became less fearful. When things happen, I would respond in a fearless way. One day, we were coming home from a movie theater in Alexandria, Virginia, and all my brothers were there. And just as we got into the door, some drunk driver came and hit all three of our cars and continued driving. And before I knew it, I was out the door chasing that car. And I was right behind that car. And what happened is that it lost its wheel. So, I'm chasing a car that's sparking on metal at me. I finally got it cornered in a Cul de sac,

and the neighbors there basically had grabbed the driver. I don't know, he had the walkie talkie or something. And they grabbed the guy, the drunk driver.

But the whole point is, when I walked back home, everybody was looking at me funny because I didn't really have that moment where, like, what happened? And walking outside and being shocked. My reaction was to go straight after the car, not even inspect my car or anything. So that's just a small example of there's something that was altered forever in that experience. But more importantly, I'm like, how did I spend three years? Well, I understand I'm very forgiving of my younger self. There is no other way to spend those three years. Those were good years. But how did I miss all of that? And I started to remember things like we'd be in downtown, in Bahrain, in downtown, in the shopping center, and suddenly all the shops would close. One day we were at a cafe, and they closed the metal doors and we hear a ruckus. And then when we got outside, there was the sting of tear gas and there were these. All these flip flops that were left.

And I realized that later that these were demonstrations where all the demonstrators were swept away. They were tear gassed and swept away. So, there was all this turmoil that was happening that was hidden and was being concealed. And I remember one time where our bus driver took us to avoid traffic. The one day we had traffic in Bahrain to avoid traffic. He took us through a poor Shia neighborhood, and we've never seen. It was during Ashura, during a Shia holiday where there was huge black draped buildings and poverty and open sewage. And I said, what is this? Where are we? You know, I've never seen this in Bahrain. So, I started to remember all of this stuff and I started to pay more attention of what's happening. But all that consciousness was interrupted in those intervening years in Saudi Arabia where you're doing time, you're in a vacuum, you're in a cultural, societal, political vacuum. And so, everything was put on hold basically until I came to the United States to live and work in 1987.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you about one more experience during that era that I have never heard of. I understand that you went to Barbados when you were living in Saudi Arabia. Can you share that experience?

Zein El-Amine: Sure. So, what happened is my brother Bilal had a girlfriend. He met when he was in England at London Central High School. And he told me that he was going to visit her one summer and asked if I wanted to go with him. And I did go with him. And there I met a local. They call them Bajans there. You know, people from Barbados, they're called Bajans. And I met this wonderful Bajan woman by the name of Cindy. And Cindy and I had a brief romantic interlude. And later on, the next year, she invited me to come to Barbados. At the time, she had a boyfriend, and they were both house sitting. Beautiful place called Breezy Hollow. This house was on the edge of a cliff. It's an artist's house. The artist was away, and we had our own access to this beach. Only three houses had an access to this beach that fills up when the tide comes in. That's how small the beach was. And it was marvelous.

Our next-door neighbor was a Rastafarian, or rather as he called himself, a faux Rastafarian, a fake one, FA Rastafarian. And he was a local, he was a Bajan. And he had the dreads, he had the whole look. And he was a windsurfer, and he was actually a champion windsurfer. So, he's the type that would wake up at the crack of dawn and listen out for the weather. And if the wind is right, he would, like, rush out and strap the windsurfer and go out to the beach, right? And what's funny, he had an English girlfriend who basically was teaching at this preppy British school, and one day, he didn't even have time to strap the things, and he saw his girlfriend leaving with the car, and he just threw the stuff on top of her car and sat on the equipment and held on to both sides of the car, on top of the car. So, here's this proper English teacher, or supposedly proper driving a car with this Rastafarian dreadlock flying, sitting on top of the car. And all those students

that are coming, the parents that are taking their kids that are passing by says, oh, there's our teacher. And the parents are looking, what's going on? His name was Russell. So that's the type of guy that Russell was.

And Russell and I became friends. And one day I told him, I'm out of money and I need to leave, I need to go, and I'm dreading it because I have to go back to Saudi Arabia and all that. And he says, well, let's make some money. I said, how? He says, oh, you could just teach windsurfing with me. And I said, I barely can get on the windsurfer for two minutes. I can't wind surf. He says, oh, these are British tourists. You don't really need to. You don't really need to teach it in the sea. Just teach it on land. You know the basics. You know, you lean this way, you put your feet, or this is where you should. You put your feet, you lean this way, it turns this way, you lean that way. And just give them instructions on land and send them off, and they'll just watch them fall left and right. And then after half an hour, they get tired, and it's usually their kids that want to do this. They get tired of it. And you get paid for the full hour. I said, okay, so we go. And he usually just makes enough money to get himself enough gas to basically get back home to also buy fish ball sandwiches, which is a popular sandwich there on the beach, very cheap. And to be able to have enough gas to go out that night to the club and buy drinks and hang out, et cetera, et cetera.

And sometimes he wouldn't even have enough gas to get back to the beach. But most of the way to the beach was downhill. So, he would be rolling sometimes for some portions of that. So, he made just enough money to live the way he wanted to live and nothing more every day. And sure enough, so I did this with him. I would go to the beach, and we would walk back and forth and ask if anybody wants windsurfing lessons. And he would take a kid, and I would take a kid, and we would give him instructions on land, and then they would send them off and we'd sit there. At first, when I arrived at the beach, Matt, I said, there's no way they're going to buy this. They're going to want me to do this. He said, come here, I want to show you something. And he pulls me over to this guy. He says, what's this guy doing? He's a guy that's also a local guy with dreadlocks and everything. And he's sitting in front of a table and he's selling these jars of aloe vera for a really good price, a very high price. He says, what is this guy selling? And I said, he's selling aloe vera. And he says, why is he selling aloe vera? And I said, because all these British tourists, they need it because of the sunburn and what's behind this man. And I said, I look up this huge aloe vera tree. He says, that's the clientele we're dealing with. These guys can just pick the aloe vera and put it on his heel. It says, just go out there and do it.

So, I did it, and we would make enough money to go out that night and return. And I extended my stay for a few days just doing that. So later, when I switched careers and started writing more, I wrote a poem about that that was selected by the university to be an entry to the Best Place Poems of the year or something, a contest. The thing about it, the locals had so much fun with the British tourists because they looked at them as colonialists. So, for example, as you might imagine, as many Caribbean islands, the dance party would be out on the sand. The DJ would set up, right? And so, we would go to these dances, DJ and all these British tourists. And by the way, there were also American tourists, and a lot of them were at the medical school there. So if you can get in a medical school in the United States, you didn't have the grades or whatever, but if your parents were rich, they would send you to the medical school. Those students were called cadaver men. They were American medical students.

They were called cadaver men, as in dead bodies. It's because they. The Bajan government had told them they cannot bring cadavers to use in the medical school because they had put in a request for that. And when the Beijing government said no, they ended up actually sneaking cadavers in. And what happened is that they got caught basically sneaking dead bodies into the school. And ever since then, the locals called

them cadaver men. Like, this is bizarre. They're trying to sneak dead bodies into the country. So, we had the cadaver men and we had the Brits. And the Brits, they called them bees. Like a bee that stings, as in colonialism. That's what it does. It stings, right? So, they called them the bees. So, one day, Russell and I were at one of those dance parties. He says, oh, this is a hit song. The song was about actually British colonialism, but all the people that were dancing had no idea which were mostly British. And the song went, Jamie is a bee, Billy is a bee, and they're stinging everybody. Stinging left, stinging right, stinging morning through the night. And they're dancing. The Brits are dancing to it. Not knowing that this is a.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. Would you be willing to read the poem that you wrote about that experience?

Zein El-Amine: Sure, yeah. The poem is titled Bajan Rain, and it starts with little excerpt from one of your favorite writers and my favorite writers, James Joyce. And it goes; *'Her nocturnal predominance, her splendor when visible, her attraction when invisible. Even from here the tide tugs at me, sets me swaying above the marble of the balcony, then above the cliff's edge, above the balcony and above the private cove that emptied for our morning surf and filled for our evening swim. That summer, we had corn flakes and cannabis in the morning and scammed the Brits in the afternoon. I taught them windsurfing with a far Rastafarian who taught me that I don't need to know how to surf on water to teach it on land. You see, Jamie is a bee, Billy is a bee, and they're stinging everybody. Stinging left, stinging right, stinging morning through the night. We sent them out for hours, slapstick sailing until we had enough for a fish ball lunch, the gas home, and the gas back to the beach. In the afternoon, we sat on the balcony, stoned again, waiting for the Bayesian rain, watched it darken our cove, dimple our sea, then drop its shimmering curtains all around our sheltered perch. Cindy came slinking by us in her batik wrap, home from a day of work as a mermaid for The Caribbean Submarine company. We pretended to stare and smile out on the breezy hollow while the hollow's thunder rumbled with our hunger. You see, you think you're Michael Jackson. You go look for action. No, no, no, not tonight.'*

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. It's so awesome, man. When did you start writing poetry or short stories or putting things down on paper and getting into that?

Zein El-Amine: Growing up, when you went down South Lebanon, there was no electricity or water, so you had to entertain yourself by storytelling and poetry and specific type of poetry slam called Zajal. It wasn't something that I was involved in. It was an oral tradition that I watched my relatives and friends be involved in. So, poetry is very important in Arab culture and South Lebanon was no exception. I think I wrote my first poem when I was in ninth grade and I started to write here and there, but nothing serious, especially during my college year, which was cultural void. I didn't really write much. But when I came to the United States, I was given at one point a gift of writing workshop in Arlington County. And there I started to take some half-formed poems and some stories that I was writing and started to write consistently for a while. And at the time I was a civil engineer, but I was writing after work or sometimes since I was quality control inspector. Inspector. I would have long periods of waiting and I would sit in my truck and write short stories.

I spent 20 years as an engineer. I was one of the 25 engineers that basically managed the construction of the Ronald Reagan national airport in D.C. from the ground up. And later on in your many travels, I'm sure you've taken the underground rail at Dulles Airport or been at the midfield B terminal. I worked on those from ground up too. So, I had a successful career. But I got to a point where I really need to do what I've always wanted to do. And I took sets of about a handful of poems and a handful of short stories. I took them to the head of the creative writing department at the University of Maryland, and I met with him. His

name is Michael Collier, and he used to be the poet laureate of Maryland. And I gave him these. And I said, I'm thinking of switching careers from engineering to pursuing my MFA in creative writing. And this is some of the work and some of it has been published already. And I told him that I'm already running a writing workshop for the community at the University of Maryland that included both the janitorial custodial staff and students. It was a really nice mix, and I was doing it for one of the departments there that was offering non credited workshops.

So, he read the material, and he wrote to me within 48 hours saying, you have great potential, and I will actually enroll you in the creative writing department, which was a very competitive department that usually accepts a dozen or so students. So, it's kind of worked backwards where I was admitted into the creative writing department and now, I had to apply to the University of Maryland to be accepted there. So, once I was accepted, Michael Collier, the same guy who helped me get in, he told me that the director of the writer's house, John Schmidt, God bless her, an amazing person, was heading up the writer's house and she was looking for an assistant director. And that would allow me to be a graduate assistant and to be enrolled for tuition free.

So, I went there and applied for the job, not knowing that there's 50 other graduate students that were applying for it. It's one of those things where you walk on the edge and you never look down on. You don't realize how much you had to lose. But miraculously, I got the job. And within a few months. This is while friends of mine were like on summer vacation or something. They come back and I'm like, what have you been up to? Oh, I'm enrolled in an MFA in poetry at the University of Maryland, and I teach creative writing at college level. And they go, yeah, right. So, it was quite a switch. It was scary, but I always say I was being paid a third of the salary, but I was three times as happy.

Matt Bowles: Can you elaborate a little bit just for folks that are not familiar about the significance of poetry historically in Arab culture and how that impacted you and played a part in all this. Now, you connected with that, right.

Zein El-Amine: So, if you grew up with my father's generation, we'd be driving to the beach on a Friday in Saudi Arabia, and dad would be reciting a poem off the top of his head. And people of his generation knew hundreds of poems, dozens at least, of poems that they knew by heart. And they would recite them, and they were passed on orally. This was not the exception. This was very common in my family and in my culture. And this goes back in Arab culture in general. Many people don't know, for example, the Kaaba in Mecca, that big black draped building with the black drapes and all that that the pilgrims walk around, that was a staging area before Islam for poetry slams. And the winning poet used to get his poem basically hung on that building. And when you want to talk about Islam and poetry and literature, the biggest miracle that's Assigned to the Prophet is the fact that he was illiterate and he went into a cave, and he came out with poetry of the same caliber as the height of poetry.

See, they call pre-Islamic times al Jahiliya, which means the age of ignorance. But the reality is they also respect Bedouin poetry in this age of ignorance. It was at the highest point, poetry was so important, everybody recited poetry, and poetry was so important to the culture, so central. And for this illiterate man to walk into the cave and walk out and deliver something that pricked up the ears of people that were used to the highest quality of literature and poetry and everything about it that he was speaking was of that caliber and if not higher. So even from those times you could see the importance of poetry and it was carried out in this oral tradition for so many years. So that's how important poetry is.

Matt Bowles: Zein, how do you think that all of the moving around that you did and living in different places, how did that impact your identity and your worldview and ultimately your writing?

Zein El-Amine: When my son was born, I made sure that he went back to Lebanon every year with me. It was very important for me later when I led all these studies abroad programs at the University of Maryland, it's because of the experience I had from traveling and from learning so much by traveling. And also it's the change in perspective, if nothing else, even if you're not having the best of times when you travel and when you move from one area to area, but your perception of the places you left or that you're far away, when you put a distance from there, not only do you gain insight into the country you're living in, but you gain insight from perspective about the countries you just left. So, I can't put more value on the importance of traveling for people. That's why I think study abroad programs and colleges are essential to the education of students, no matter what their major, whether it's in the sciences or the liberal arts. It's so important for people to travel. And I think part of the problems that we are having in the United States right now, where 60 million Americans vote for Trump, it's because when I think of the number of Americans who've never left the country, let alone their own state, it's mind boggling. And that's what has resulted in the close mindedness that exists here in the United States. So, travel is essential for the salvation of our planet.

Matt Bowles: All right, we are going to pause there and call this the end of part one. Be sure to tune in to the next episode for [part two](#) of my interview with Zein El-Amine. Good night, everybody.