1, 2, 3
Rayan Afif

List of Characters
(In order of Appearance)

**YOUNG ZEINAB.** 5, they/them, Arab-American.
**MIDDLE ZEINAB.** 17, they/them, Arab-American.
**OLDER ZEINAB.** 22, they/them, Arab-American.
**VOICE.** A voice in the void, watching all three ZEINABs. American.

Playwright’s Note
This play is written with the acting theory of Grotowski, Laban, and Artaud in mind. It is inspired by the concept of the panopticon, a surveillance system where there is one point of surveillance in the middle of a circular arena and the people that are being watched can’t see each other nor the surveillance (whether it be a camera or security officers). Additionally, the ending is inspired by the blackhole concept: to fit into a blackhole, humans must be stretched by the gravitational pull since they are too large to fit in as one.

Casting Note
The characters of ZEINAB can be played by actors of any gender, but they must all be exclusively Arab-American and should, preferably, look alike.
SCENE 1

(YOUNG ZEINAB, MIDDLE ZEINAB, and OLDER ZEINAB stand on separate parts of the stage. They can’t see each other and don’t know each other are there. They don’t know VOICE is there and can’t hear it.

YOUNG ZEINAB is drawing in a coloring book. They’re lying down. MIDDLE ZEINAB is standing in front of a microphone. OLDER ZEINAB is sitting in a chair with a table in front of them, there’s a laptop on the table.)

VOICE (V.O.)

Testing… testing… one, two, three.

(MIDDLE ZEINAB takes a deep breath and starts silently reciting a poem. OLDER ZEINAB continues to type. YOUNGER ZEINAB continues to draw.)

VOICE (V.O)

Testing. Subjects one, two, and three. (Beat.) 5. 1. (Spotlight on YOUNG ZEINAB.) 17. 2. (Spotlight on MIDDLE ZEINAB.) 22. 3. (Spotlight on OLDER ZEINAB.)

(Beat.)

VOICE (V.O.)

1 is drawing in a coloring book, they’re drawing a yellow cylinder. There are circular glasses on the cylinder. The cylinder wears blue overalls, but they are low, close to their stick-like legs. On the bottom of the legs are brown shoes. This appears to be… a minion from Despicable Me. (YOUNG ZEINAB starts to get up.) 1 starts to get up. (YOUNG ZEINAB looks around.) The subject looks around. It’s apparent that they are searching for something. (YOUNG ZEINAB turns around and picks up a crayon that they lost.) They achieved their goal: finding a crayon. A green one. 1 sits down. The subject starts coloring inside the glasses with the green crayon. They are just barely coloring inside the lines. (YOUNG ZEINAB stops. They touch their hand to their forehead. They rub it.) The subject stops. It appears their head hurts. From what? I don’t know. They have not hit their head.

MIDDLE ZEINAB

Ugh!

(MIDDLE ZEINAB throws their paper to the side.)
VOICE (V.O.)
2 grunts in frustration. They were reciting words from a paper. The paper they just threw down. (MIDDLE ZEINAB grabs their notebook from their back pocket and a pen.) Subject takes out their notebook and a pen. It’s a black pen. The notebook is small. It’s leatherbound – fake. Brown. Vegan. (MIDDLE ZEINAB writes something in the notebook down. They abruptly stop and fix their posture, putting their notebook away.) 2 starts writing something down. They stop–

MIDDLE ZEINAB
I know you’re watching me.

VOICE (V.O.)
“Well, I know you’re watching me,” they say. (MIDDLE ZEINAB looks around.) They look around. (MIDDLE ZEINAB stops, then runs around their area, searching for a way out.) They run, looking for something. A way out, it’s apparent. They can’t find one. (MIDDLE ZEINAB, hopeless, slumps down and sits.) They won’t find one.

3 is typing on the computer. (OLDER ZEINAB pushes their glasses up.) They push their glasses up. The subject stops typing. They hover over the keyboard. 3 sighs. It was quite a loud sigh.

OLDER ZEINAB
That was a loud sigh-- you probably said something about it, right? Yeah I bet you did. It’s okay. I’m okay with my loud sigh. Here, I’ll do it again. (OLDER ZEINAB sighs.)

VOICE (V.O.)
They sigh. Again. It was quite a loud sigh. Again.

(Beat.)

OLDER ZEINAB
I’m writing about-

VOICE (V.O.)
“I’m writing about-”

OLDER ZEINAB
Myself.

(Beat.)
OLDER ZEINAB
I’ve been here for (as OLDER ZEINAB says the number, MIDDLE ZEINAB starts to speak) 6205 days-

MIDDLE ZEINAB
(as MIDDLE ZEINAB speaks, YOUNG ZEINAB starts to speak.) 4380 days-

YOUNG ZEINAB
(Looking up:) Today is my first day here. (Beat.) Baba told me this would be a good experience. I’m learning a lot! Did you know yellow and blue makes green? I lost my green crayon for a little bit. So instead I used yellow and blue! It worked just fine. But then I found my green crayon. (YOUNG ZEINAB hugs the green crayon.) I like my green crayon.

I kind of want to play with cars. Let me try and find some!

(YOUNG ZEINAB looks around for some toy cars.)

VOICE (V.O.)
I is looking around for cars to play with. They look for some everywhere, but can’t find any. (Beat. YOUNG ZEINAB stops.) We don’t have cars.

YOUNG ZEINAB
I can’t find any cars… hm. Oh! I know! What if… what if these crayons are cars? Vroom, vroom! (YOUNG ZEINAB giggles.) I like my cars.

OLDER ZEINAB
You know, I’m really writing to myself. (Beat. OLDER ZEINAB starts typing.) “Dear…”

VOICE (V.O.)
(While OLDER ZEINAB is talking:) 3 starts reciting a letter to themself.

OLDER ZEINAB
It’s been 17 years – 6205 days – since you’ve been in isolation. Not much has changed. Your drawings are still up on the wall. Everyday I find a new nuance.

(YOUNG ZEINAB stands up.)

YOUNG ZEINAB and OLDER ZEINAB
Blue and yellow make green.
OLDER ZEINAB
When I made these, I must’ve been just learning that. There’s a minion on my wall made with--

YOUNG ZEINAB and OLDER ZEINAB
Blue and yellow--

OLDER ZEINAB
Next to it lies a poem, a collection of words, torn and crumpled. Why? (Beat. MIDDLE ZEINAB is reopening the paper they threw to the ground.) It’s not relevant now.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
3mry 5alas: Stop, my life--

OLDER ZEINAB
I’ve moved on.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
I know you’re watching me. I know there’s someone out there watching me. Why else would I be stuck here but to be watched? (Nothing.) ANSWER ME, YOU FOOL! (Nothing. Beat.)

VOICE (V.O.)
2 appears to be mad.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
(Writing down on the back of the paper:) My mind twists like that of the “7aa’”, an Arabic letter representing a flip of air. Except… that’s all I know. Baba only taught me the letters. “Alif”, “baa’”, “taa’”...

(YOUNG ZEINAB starts walking along imaginary lines on the floor.)

YOUNG ZEINAB

MIDDLE ZEINAB
And I can count to ten--

YOUNG ZEINAB
Wa7ed, ithnin, thalatta, arba, 5amsa, sitta, seb7a, tamanya, tissa, ashara! What’s after “ashara”?
MIDDLE ZEINAB
But no more than ten. Baba left me… stranded. I’m alone. Here. (Beat.) Well, no. I’m not alone. (MIDDLE ZEINAB looks up.) I’m with you. I guess I’ve always been with you.

OLDER ZEINAB
(Beat.) I miss Baba.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
I miss Baba.

YOUNG ZEINAB
I miss Baba.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
Baba used to call me something… it started with a “z”. It was a soft sound… I’m trying to remember it…

(OLDER ZEINAB starts typing on the computer.)

OLDER ZEINAB
Dear… (They stop typing.) I don’t remember my name…

MIDDLE ZEINAB
Zeinab! He used to call me Zeinab!

OLDER ZEINAB
…I don’t remember my name.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
I love “Zeinab”. It reminds me of home. But no one calls me that anymore… It almost feels like… they don’t want to.

(OLDER ZEINAB starts typing again. MIDDLE ZEINAB starts crossing things out in their poem and writing new lines.)

MIDDLE ZEINAB
I dream in Arabic,
My mind flows in Arabic,
But Arabic, I’ve lost.
It’s a distant memory. Trapped outside just like everything and everyone else in my life.

VOICE (V.O.)
2 recites noises. Noises they’ve heard before – not here, though. Not here…

MIDDLE ZEINAB
5alas…

VOICE (V.O.)
The sounds are unpleasant.

YOUNG ZEINAB
(Smiling:) Habibi…

VOICE (V.O.)
They’re rough.

OLDER ZEINAB
3mry.

VOICE (V.O.)
They’re aggressive.

(The lights flicker. Blackout.)

We don’t like those words.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
They don’t like those words. (Beat.) My name is Zeinab.

VOICE (V.O.)
No.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
Zeinab.

VOICE (V.O.)
NO.
SCENE 2
(The lights flicker on, it’s dim. YOUNG ZEINAB, MIDDLE ZEINAB, and OLDER ZEINAB have moved to different parts on the stage. They’re far from each other.

MIDDLE ZEINAB is in an abstract pose, frozen. YOUNG ZEINAB is drawing in their coloring book. OLDER ZEINAB is reading a book.

YOUNG ZEINAB starts humming a tune: “Zahgana” by Hala al-Turki.)

VOICE (V.O.)
Another day has gone by. 1 is on the floor, drawing in their coloring book. This time they are drawing a pot of flowers. They are wearing cargo shorts with an olive green t-shirt. They are wearing socks with sandals. They are humming a tune. It’s quiet.

YOUNG ZEINAB
(Singing:)
Ta-ta-tafshana, tafshana, tafshana,
Za-za-zahgana, zahgana, zahgana!
Ta-ta-tafshana, tafshana, tafshana,
Za-za-zahgana, zahgana, zahgana!

(YOUNG ZEINAB giggles to themself, jamming to their humming.)

VOICE (V.O.)
It’s another series of rude words. (With a heavy American accent:) “Zahgana”. What even is… “zahgana”?

OLDER ZEINAB
There’s a tune I know, only a little bit though. “Zah…gana?”

YOUNG ZEINAB and OLDER ZEINAB
(Singing, OLDER ZEINAB starts unsure but gets more confident:) Za-za-zahgana, zahgana, zahgana!

OLDER ZEINAB
(Speaking:) Yeah! (OLDER ZEINAB laughs.) I think it means “bored”? I’m not entirely sure, though. Man, my dad used to play it all the time. It’s one of the few memories I have left with him. They all seem to be… fizzling out. I remember pieces. But not many. I feel as though I’m losing him, everyday. Everyday more and more. He seems to be blocked out just like his
language. *(Beat. The lights flicker. OLDER ZEINAB looks up.)* I don’t understand why they don’t like me talking about him. He’s my family. *(Quietly:) More than they’ll ever be.*

It’s the same with Arabic. I’m owed at least the opportunity to learn Arabic, it’s the words of life. The words of a life so close to mine. A gentle melody flowing through my veins. It’s a part of me. Apart…. Apart of me…

Or at least… it was? *(OLDER ZEINAB gets up and starts slowly pacing.)* There are days when it becomes so lost I begin to think it’s fake. A bunch of sounds. Ugly sounds. *(They stop.)* But that’s not what it is. *(The lights flicker.)* It’s a language of peace. *(The lights go out on one side of the stage.)* A language of connections. *(The lights go out on the other side of the stage. Only the center stage, where OLDER ZEINAB stands, is lit.)* A language of humanity. *(Blackout. Beat.)* And I’m not even allowed to speak of it.

**YOUNG ZEINAB**

… ana mish tafham…?

**SCENE 3**

*(The lights flicker on, it’s dim. MIDDLE ZEINAB and OLDER ZEINAB are in two contrasting abstract poses. YOUNG ZEINAB is looking around, a little closed off.)*

**YOUNG ZEINAB**

I think I’m a little lost. I don’t belong here. I need my baba. *(Beat. Calling out:) Baba? *(Pause.)* Baba? If you’re here, can you come out? I miss you. I need you.

I’m only 5 years old. I’ve been here for I think three days? And I feel like… everything is slowly becoming not real. Like it’s moving too fast? I feel… scared. And alone. And like… there’s no one here… but always someone? And that’s scary.

*(Beat.)*

Words are funny things. I feel like everything I’m saying is a little silly. But like there’s more. What if… what if there’s a whole world with more words? Well, come on… of course there are! Wa7ed doesn’t sound like one but they mean the same thing right? *(YOUNG ZEINAB holds up a finger.)* One! Wa7ed! Same thing! *(They giggle.)* I like wa7ed, it’s very different. I don’t think I like it more, but it reminds me of baba. Baba would always say “aint raqm wa7ed, habibi”! “You are number one, my love”! *(They smile.)* Wa inta, baba! Wa inta… He’d say “hashtuni!” and “hayati!” and it makes my heart smile. But now no one says that. And it feels like it’s slipping away. Like I won’t hear it again. *(Beat.)* Will I hear it again?
SCENE 4
(The lights come up dim, all we see are the silhouettes of each ZEINAB. They’re in abstract poses.)

MIDDLE ZEINAB
Trapped in the colonizer’s tongue. Where ours is too far apart.

(MIDDLE ZEINAB changes pose.)

MIDDLE ZEINAB
Gone.

(OLDER ZEINAB changes pose.)

OLDER ZEINAB
Gone.

(YOUNG ZEINAB changes pose.)

YOUNG ZEINAB
Gone.

OLDER ZEINAB
We lost our words, hidden from their heart. Their ever-so-lacking heart.

YOUNG ZEINAB
It’s cold.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
It’s deep.

OLDER ZEINAB
We can’t go back. It has been too long.

MIDDLE ZEINAB
And even the language we speak before you now… is drifting…
YOUNG ZEINAB

Away.

(YOUNG ZEINAB changes pose.)

OLDER ZEINAB

Away.

(OLDER ZEINAB changes pose.)

MIDDLE ZEINAB

Away.

(MIDDLE ZEINAB changes pose.)

ALL ZEINABS

We’re… (ALL ZEINABS stand neutrally) away.

(Fade to black. Beat. In blackout:)

VOICE

1, 2, 3.

(Beat. The lights abruptly come up on the three ZEINABs. Frozen.)

Zeinab. (We hear VOICE scratching something out and rewriting on a piece of paper. Beat.)

Well, now, Zoey.

(ALL ZEINABs power and bend down. A glitchy/lagging blackout. End of play.)