

## “FIRST DAY”

**FOR LESSON**

*Growing Up  
and Fitting In*

**NARRATOR** **Suheir Hammad**



**ALI** So you lived in Jordan, and when did you move to, to Brooklyn?

RUN TIME **1:28**

**HAMMAD** Seventy-nine. So I turned six here, I'd imagine, and I started, you know, like kindergarten —

**ALI** Yeah.

**HAMMAD** — I had like ESL, although both of my h— parents spoke really good English; they went through the primary refugee education, which was British-based, not American-based. So they pro— they pretty much spoke better English than a lot of people who taught me. That's the truth. And I went to PS 29, which actually Spike Lee went to PS 29.

**ALI** Is that right?

**HAMMAD** Yes. A bunch of people went to PS 29.

**ALI** Do you remember what your first day of school was like? Or what it was like to prepare —

**HAMMAD** I remember my mom —

**ALI** — for your first day?

**HAMMAD** — taking me to school; I do, 'cause you know, first of all, like, you just remember your mom as, like, this queen goddess, like, angel type, and now when I think about it it's even more so. I remember her, like, holding my hand and taking me to school, and be— I, because I had to have, I had a bit of a speech impediment, I had to have these rehabilitation courses, so I think that somehow like softened my entry, because I was given special attention for

my stuttering and that went hand in hand with acclimating me to the language. But at that age, you know, you pick it up, and then everybody wishes you'd shut up. In every language. [laughter]

**BIO** Suheir Hammad was born in 1973 in Amman, Jordan. Her family immigrated to the United States in 1979 and settled in Sunset Park. She started writing poetry as a teenager, often drawing on her family's history and her own experiences as a Palestinian Muslim woman in New York City. Her poetry collections *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black* and *Drops of This Story* were published in 1996. She gained additional recognition for her poem “First Writing Since,” which was centered around the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Hammad performed it for the pilot of the Peabody Award-winning HBO show *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* and in the Tony Award-winning play *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*. Additional collections of her poetry include *ZaatarDiva* (2006) and *Breaking Poems* (2008), as well as an updated edition of *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (2010). Her work has been featured in various anthologies, magazines, plays, and films.

**CITATION** Hammad, Suheir, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, September 13, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.38; Brooklyn Historical Society.