

The Former Prime Minister

*I hate how these women hide themselves beneath head scarves, she says and for once I don't disagree, I don't try to understand, I don't try to see all sides, I just sip my diet Coke; I look at the woman two tables away, a few strands of her hair have fallen across her face; I want to tuck them in; in twelve hours, I will be at the airport, stamped and ready to leave for Thailand; I will be exhausted and sick. It is ironic: I will have a sore throat, not from my talking but from my silence in the face of the rhetoric of the former prime minister – he wants to incite opposition to the US war so he throws verbal red meat to this largely Muslim crowd. The Jews this; the Jews that. *The Jooosss control America; the Jooosss control all of the banks; the Jooosss control Hollywood.* Unoriginal. Misguided. Wrong. But I tell myself, there is not a leader of a Muslim country who doesn't serve up such pork fat to his people. I am uncomfortable, but I am silent; I get a massage, I buy a Turkoman carpet. The next afternoon he speaks in solidarity with the holocaust denier jailed in Austria, he asks, *Where is his freedom of speech?* Ironic from one who jailed many: children from Australia, his own deputy PM. He asks, *Why can we not question the number six million?* He asks, *What if it was 5,999,999?* He passes it off as a joke. It's not funny. Then he talks about Auschwitz. He says, *There was nothing found there after the war. No camp. No oven.* That evening, we boycott the final formal dinner; I stare at the hair of the woman two tables over. I will go to the airport early the next morning shrouded by darkness. I will keep thinking about the woman wearing a Donatella Versace scarf as a hajib; pink, grey and textured, made from the finest silk. I will wonder if she bought it in Italy. I will wonder if she spoke to the shop clerk with her perfect, British-accented English or if she spoke perfect Italian also with a British accent. I want to touch her scarf, her head, her hair. I don't. I study the lines beneath her scarf: her ears, her tied up hair, her skull. I imagine them as my own. I want to believe in some sort of transcendent feminist sisterhood: Donatella, Zarina, and me. I want to believe she isn't thinking about the final solution for the Jews. My throat hurts. I tie my hair back in a knot. I board the plane. I walk away.*

Julie R Enszer is a writer and activist living in Maryland. She has previously published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, the *Web Del Sol Review*, *Bridges*, and the *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*. In addition to writing poetry, she is currently writing a novel.