

كفاني أموت على أرضها
وأدفن فيها
وتحت ثراها أدوب وأفنى
وأبعث عشباً على أرضها
وأبعث زهره
تعيث بها كف طفلٍ نمته بلادي
كفاني أظل بحضن بلادي
تراياً
وعشباً

فدوى طوقان, الليل و الفرسان

Enough for me to lie in the earth,
to be buried in her,
to sink meltingly into her fecund soil, to vanish...
only to spring forth like a flower
brightening the play of my countrymen's children.
Enough for me to remain
in my native soil's embrace,
to be as close as a handful of dirt,
a sprig of grass,
a wildflower.

The Night and the Knights by Fadwa Tuqan

Once Upon
a Time in
Palestine

Saed Zboun

As someone who lives in a place filled with the pungent aroma of coffee and a taboon bread, I have never believed that an alarm was necessary to start my day. Like clockwork, I heard the customary shout of the Kaa'k vendor, “Kaeceeeeee’ak” who was trying to push his cart up the hill to sell what he brought from Jerusalem. I leaped out the window in hopes of catching him before he disappeared so I could buy us breakfast. As I wandered back home, I saw Kefah, an old woman whose wrinkles held a rich history and a lasting legacy. She came from a distant village with a heavy basket of fresh vegetables and bread on her head, which she would give to anyone she met. Hearing the children's excited tweets as they crowded around her in their ripped jeans to get a piece of bread made my heart sing. As I rounded the corner of the street, my eye caught Hasaan, the widowed man whose whole family migrated to the states back in the 1940's, and the only old man living in my neighborhood. He was reading the newspaper, looking for a sign of serenity within its ripped pages, while a classical song by Umm Kulthum played in the background that went on to say:

♪ Pluck with heart the roses of life, so long as your love matches its love. Remain sincere to it, seek its satisfaction, and fulfill your dreams with the beloved.♪

Hasan addressed me by my given name, saying, "Naji, Mashallah you woke up early today."

I greeted him, and I gave him one piece of Kaa'k and said, "Did you find any good news?"

He said affirmatively, "I found it on the death page," before bursting into sad laughter. A sour smile was all I could muster as comfort for his distress.

The serenity was shattered by a loud explosion that almost shook the earth beneath us. A young guy ran frantically towards us. After that, he yelled with a cracked voice. "*JEISH, JEISH, JEISH.*" The IOF opened fire. Everyone started running the second they heard that, except me. I froze. I froze, because I was weary of constantly running away.

In my twenty-four years here, I have never experienced a day that was not interrupted in some way by Israeli occupation forces. I gave up! I've narrowly escaped DEATH several times in this place, and I've seen it in all of its forms, from rage to calmness to ravenousness. Death is now part of our identity, and justice is a missing word in the Palestinian dictionary.

Another enormous explosion brought me out of my stupor. When I saw the Israeli occupation forces approaching, I whistled to alert the camp's inhabitants and urged them to

take up defensive positions. Within a matter of minutes, hundreds of young men and children had swarmed the rooftops and crowded into the tight alleys like a swarm of wasps.

In an instant, time stood still, and for the first time in my life, I was acutely aware of every kilogram I weighed. In that split second, my soul departed my body. One of my halves was trapped in outer space, and the other was sunk to the ground. The tents, buildings, and the carob tree all gradually disappeared from my sight. There was something blurry in my vision that was not a cloud or steam, and I was convinced that everything I saw was a mirage. Then, everything seemed black.

Drops of blood began to creep down my face. An odd bullet settled in my head, odd like the person who fired it. My memories were charred scraps of newspaper, with some appearing as blurry images of incomplete faces and others as fragments of sentences I recognized. In the midst of all this, I felt a warm hand lead me in the direction of safety; but soon that hand became stiff and frigid. I was desperately seeking my mother, like a lost little boy. Like someone suffering from delirium, I crawled around looking for her. Only she could have been my final destination. My mother was like the hand of God, she used to mend anything she touched. With her flimsy sewing machine, she used to fashion for us, out of the camp's iron, warm clothing to wear against the icy grip of winter. At that moment, my entire body was trembling, but she still had not arrived.

A storm of faceless people engulfed me. I felt them picking me up and hauling me away like the wind. Then, amongst the crowds and the chaos, silence prevailed.

I overheard medics say, “we cannot do more than this. He doesn’t respond anymore.” I tried to let out a wail that shattered my vocal chords, but it was as ineffectual as a water drop that rolls back into the sink. All my senses were working beyond normal, except my sight—or this is what I thought. I didn’t see a bright light or anything tangible, but I did feel a void within my body devouring me and replacing my body with another. Voices were all around me. It seemed like they were coming from everywhere—inside and outside of me. I thought that it was unfair that my life ended like this. I could not believe I was struggling to stay alive in the camp where I was nothing more than a number on the United Nations’ refugee list and a news item for the media. This camp has always served as a sort of experimental platform for our suffering and our lofty aspirations, as well as a factory for illness, and faith. This is the precise refugee camp where I did not know what a childhood is because we were born old. My siblings and I had to raise ourselves since my father spent most of his life behind bars searching for the meaning of freedom.

I seemed neither living nor dead but rather trapped between the ground and the sky like some sort of jinx. I ran, fell, stumbled, and crawled till I reached a place eerily similar to our world. It was as if nothing had changed, I wore the same

torn clothes, had the same long hair, and the same gaping wound on my head. Yet it was gloomier and paler, and there was one thing missing from me in this place: my father's watch, which he gave me when I once went to see him in jail six years ago. It came back to memory again of what he said about the watch in the prison during that visit. He said that despite the watch's excellent clockwise functionality, it was useless inside the prison. I never forgot his words. When he said, in a voice that is similar to the consciousness, "in the prison we are in another dimension, and we don't utilize the same time system as you. Behind bars, time stands still, but on a visit, it flies by at the speed of light because it represents a collision of two realities." Those words have always been with me, but I never understood them until I was stuck in this Purgatory place that seemed like a prison where time doesn't exist.

Unlike our world, in this realm, like the scent of blossoming orchards, I was free. I could move, I could fly, and I didn't have to deal with a soldier who came from a distant country with a nauseating Hebrew accent standing in my way while trying to get home. I was longing to return to the camp, where the homes lean on one another like stout sisters. I was peeking out from the top of the camp like a bird, trying to locate my home.

The more I approached it, the more I realized that I was getting further away from the place that I once knew. The alleys were not the same as where we spent our days and nights, nor were these the same cramped quarters that seemed like the

vastest part of the cosmos to us. There was no place for our daily chat about the fedayeen, falafel Rabah, or chrysanthemum flower. My crush Carmel was not present, the one who had always drawn me in with her courageous presence and the hymns of her voice, which could transport me to the old neighborhoods of Jerusalem, to which I had been denied access.

There was no tea on the windows; and no children were playing football with cans. No thyme or taboon scents were carried and wafted by the breeze. I was terrified by all of this, yet I kept moving toward home. I ignored the wind when it struck my back and tried to drag me away. I didn't pay attention to the poppy anemone calls nor to the olive tree behind me that moved stealthily from its place to prevent me from reaching my home. I opened my palms repeatedly, saw the lines that eventually formed a road map for me, and followed them until I got there.

Except for myself and my mother's comforting voice, everything else in the home remained intact, even the kitchen utensils, my L&M cigarettes, my phone, and my scarf. I passed by my things, but nothing appeared to notice me. Everything was no longer mine! I was devastated, like a cloud that had an unexpected outburst of tears.

A boy materialized out of thin air and remarked, "this is a haunted house. Overnight, ten fedayeen were killed in it."

He didn't seem to be scared of me or to have any plans to

return, in stark contrast to my petrified state. My voice wavered as the question, "who are you?" finally left my lips. Without uttering a single letter, he pointed his finger at the endless hallways.

After I ventured into the empty hall, I was greeted by sporadic moaning. I had no choice; I followed the sound to know where I was until someone called me with a deep, wounded voice,

"I knew you would show up early, Naji." My spine tingled at the sound of this voice, which I recognized immediately. "Is that you, Hassan?" I uttered those words with skepticism. He smiled steadily and nodded his head as he walked toward me. I let out a sigh of relief upon seeing him and said, "finally, thank God." Then, without hesitating, I asked, "what is this place, what is all this about, and who is this child?"

"You are floating in the vastness of space, and everything you see is a microcosm of your daily existence on Earth," he answered as he held my hand, "Just let me explain this, and you'll pick up the gist of it afterwards." Then, he gestured toward the cosmos and added, "There is no past, no present, and no future out in this realm.

Here, you can find the hopes that have yet to materialize, the prayers strewn like pearls waiting for God's attention, and the voices that refuse to die." And he went on, "You can also hear any voice that was ever spoken on Earth. According to the physics law that matter does not decay,

therefore sounds and images persist inside the framework of the earth's sphere.”

I gaped at his words incredulously. I have often pondered where the voices end up after saying them! I have yearned to hear every voice on Earth—from the prophets to my mother's hymn before bedtime to my grandfather's final words before the Nakba—and I especially longed to hear Carmel's voice. Her voice has always hypnotized me, and it doesn't matter what she says, because it'll automatically transform into "I love you."

I was floating like a ship without a safe haven, with people's voices coming from all directions and images appearing before my eyes.

These voices were enough to ignite a war or change the course of history. I heard more than just voices; I saw feelings, grief, and bleak hope.

It was Hassan's mournful gasps that drew me out of my trancelike state at the sight of this unusual phenomenon. His eyes welled up with emotion as he pointed to a reflection of a young man holding a steady smile. “This is me at my wedding before the Nakba of one day, and that’s my home to my left.” After wiping the tears away from his eyes, he whispered, "my homeland was occupied twice, once when I was expelled from it and again when my wife was assassinated by a treacherous airstrike." Look at how intriguing my house was! Every time I give it any thought, I think of that strange settler who entered

my home, knocked on my door, took off my shoes, and enjoyed the freedom that God is meant to grant me.

He stopped talking for a while, then he faced me and sputtered. "Exile has always baffled me. It was like we were ripped out of a photo album from the past".

I tried to soften the blow by telling him that, "the positive side is that you have stayed in Palestine yet, built your home in Aida, and spread love to every nook and cranny of the camp."

He arched an eyebrow and stared at me intently because of what I said. He sat down and said, "we once believed that this camp lacks nothing as a home, but soon we understood that here children are born old, the sun has no yellow beams, and plants are not green as they seem." He carried on saying, "we committed a sin, when we complained that the tent was too small. We grew attached to our tents because of the warmth they provided, but in reality, they were the refugee's ultimate death trap."

I listened with awe to what he said. Just a handful of his sentences would set my mind reeling and take me to fantastical realms. Like a fine wine, his words soaked into my thoughts and left a great impression. I strongly believed that memory may not be our salvation, but all humiliation is languishing in oblivion. His reminiscences of the camp jogged my

recollection. I had a vision of what had transpired in the last few hours of my life prior to my arrival at this place that seems like a purgatory.

I stood like a tree rooted to the ground, and I had a vision of the aftermath that happened in the camp. There was a loud plea for aid that I heard, and I knew it was directed at God. I witnessed severed limbs and severed bodies flying through the air, as well as a child covered in blood imploring his father, "Who will lift this heavy cement off my chest?" while huddled under the wreckage. "God will come soon, so dress your blood and get ready to applaud for him," his father replied.

I saw another kid lose his eyesight when shrapnel from a blind missile pierced the curtain he was hiding behind. "Why didn't we leave this camp?" He blamed his father! His grandfather's reply was tinged with regret as he breathed his last: "all this occurs to us because we were forced to leave our home in Jerusalem in 1948."

Fear gripped me when I saw myself towering up like a minaret with my mother at my side, tugging at my hand. It was as if she were grabbing me from death's grasp. She had been shot, and while she was soothing me and ululating to me. After seeing her lying on the ground, the sobs smothered me. I stood helpless, I gazed at the bullet and questioned it: "Why do you

kill mothers and children?" Before you murdered my mom, did you glance into her eyes? How dare you eliminate the first voice and the first shadow that guided me into the deepest recesses of the night? How could you take life away from the source of light!

The air was thick with the stench of death, so I peered around and looked for it. Once I encountered death, it didn't seem as scary as it was rumored about! I ordered it to take a seat, keep its voices down, and sleep on either side, but away from the children and their moms' hearts! Death was not a special guest because it is not seen as a noteworthy event in the reporting practices of war and massacres. Fifty martyrs died in my camp overnight, just like they did in KafirQasim in 1956. They were killed, and nothing was done the next morning except for some shy speeches expressing concern about what happened in the white west. I saw their burial, and they seemed like basil seeds sown in the ground, ready to sprout again.

What good will come from our land now? Who will bring its warmth back to us? And who will bring solace to this poor kid who's lost his entire family?

If the UNRWA succeeded in distributing wheat, who would distribute jasmine and love then? These are the questions that plagued me.

When my resolve gave out, I went to Hassan, who was watching me in a state of dread, and asked, "why do I have to

see this? After all this killing, what will we get: a nation or a mass grave? How many times must we perish in this land before we may finally rest easy and revel in paradise?"

Before he could say a word, thunder rolled in and shook the area violently, the vision began to fade, and everything appeared to burn! Where to turn next was a mystery to me. Hasan was fading away, and my efforts to revive him were unsuccessful; he rejected my help and proclaimed, "only the one who does not know his destiny becomes lost, and you are destined to flee from death." Then he added, "never stop being furious; it's your anger that keeps you alive."

I shouted, "I will die for the martyrs; they are constantly on my mind. I'm fed up with winging it and relying on luck to stay alive"

"Don't give your life for Palestine; instead, live for it. Who will keep fighting for Palestine if you have to die for it? You are the catalyst for the third Intifada, and history will be made." Hasan screamed with his raspy voice.

Clear.... Shock

Clear.... shock

A sigh of relief was released by the doctor after convincing the crew to try the last DC shock. Then, he added, "For someone with a name like Naji, I knew that he had to be miraculous."

The End

Glossary:

DC shock: what medics use in CPR

Fedayeen: Freedom fighters

FalalRabah; a famous falafel restaurant in the camp.

JEISH: *Soldiers*

Naji: Survivor

Poppy anemone: the national plant of Palestine

Taboon: is Levantine flatbread baked in a taboon or tannur
'tandoor' clay oven

On this Land

By Mahmoud Darwish

We have on this land that which makes life worth living
We have on this land all of that which makes life worth living

April's hesitation

The aroma of bread at dawn

A woman's beseeching of men

The writings of Aeschylus

Love's beginning

Moss on a stone

Mothers standing on a flute's thread

And the invader's fear of memories

We have on this land that which makes life worth living

September's end

A woman leaving 'forty' behind

with all of her apricots

The hour of sunlight in prison

A cloud reflecting a swarm of creatures

A people's applause for those who face their own erasure
with a smile

And the tyrant's fear of songs.

We have on this land all of that which makes life worth living

On this land

The lady of our land

The mother of all beginnings

And the mother of all ends

She was called Palestine

Her name later became Palestine

My lady....

Because you are my lady

I have all of that which makes life worth living.