

## Exile: The Wandering Arab.

Take time out, read some Arab literature. Get reading; walk in the shoes of others

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"We go to a country not of our flesh. The chestnut trees are not of our bones ... We go to a country that does not hang a special sun over us." ("We go to a country", Mahmud Darwish.)

Washington, London and Tel Aviv again talk empty words, of a "two state solution", for the land Israel has appropriated and the remnants which remain, of Palestine. Tony Blair, arguably a war criminal, now "Kafkaesquely", Middle East 'peace envoy', having enjoined in destroying Mesopotamia, Afghanistan and the Balkans, establishes a "Faith Foundation" to "create understanding between religions" (not bombing them would be a good start.) However there is a vital route all involved should take.

Forget politics, "extremism", "terrorism", "moderates", "freedom", "democracy", "liberation", "road maps." Abandon "experts", "think tanks", "Institutes" and "Foundations" that study the Middle East - though seldom as areas of gut wrenching history, beauty, warmth; flesh and blood.

Take time out, read some Arab literature - all that is needed to understand.

In every letter, in every word of every sentence, of every paragraph, a soul on the page. A mourning for lands beloved, loves lost, for the departed, the exiled. For remembered scents, for homes now rubble or denied; for separation. They are songs of absence, yearning, displacement; of crushed olive, apricot and citrus groves, of dashed youthful dreams and hopes - yet a resilience to shame the reader.

They are unbearable yearnings, somehow borne, for family now fragmented; for the familiar. They are the key of the door, the only memento of the home left behind, the deeds of the house, bulldozed, bombed, looted, stolen; from which evicted

They are also birds without borders, a sun, once more without walls.

There are titles which haunt before a page has been turned: Raja Shehade's "Palestinian Walks - notes on a vanishing landscape"; Mai Ghoussoub's "Leaving Beirut"; Mourid Barghouti's searing "I saw Ramalla", his heartbreaking writings of his brief permitted return home after thirty years exile. Mahmoud Darwish - who returned finally to Ramallah after living in Moscow, Cairo, Beirut, Cyprus and Paris, who died abroad last August, treatment he needed being limited in Palestine, due to Israel's blockade. His titles include: "Unfortunately, It was Paradise", "Don't Apologise for What you've Done", "A State of Siege", and "The Butterfly's Burden."

Darwish also contributed, with Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said) and Samih al-Qasim, to the anthology 'Victims of a Map', whose title says it all, not alone for the Middle East but for souls in so many countries already in the eye of the storm, or threatened with one.

For the Middle East, the main modern historical threat, before the establishment of the State of Israel was the desire of (mainly) the West, to get their hands of the region's oil and natural gas (which has now been discovered off Gaza, which may possibly explain why Israel would like the Strip empty, with no troublesome Palestinians claiming it theirs.) The other, throughout history, as now, was the region's strategic placing.

Now a marauding, mendacious neighbour, a cuckoo in the nest, which usurps painstakingly created personal havens and hurls even embryonic life to infinity, has been added. The 'wandering Jew, has 'settled' – and created the 'wandering Arab.'

Palestinians are displaced by the previously displaced; dispossessed by the previously dispossessed; degraded by the formerly degraded; systematically erased, by those whose people were systematically erased; ghettoised by the previously ghettoised – and walled in by the previously walled in. Writing is injustices looking glass. Take Shehadeh in "Palestinian Walks". He quotes: "...the Israeli architects Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman perceptively (uncovering) a cruel paradox': 'the very thing that renders the landscape "biblical", its traditional habitation and cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone building ... is produced by the Palestinians (now) themselves excluded from the panorama." To accommodate three and a half million settlers in just thirty years, in just 5,900 square kilometres, writes Shehadeh "...enormous amounts of concrete were poured to build entire cities ...wadis, springs, cliffs and ancient ruins were destroyed by those who claim to have a superior love of the land... I hope to preserve, at least in words, what has been lost for ever." In "I Saw Ramallah" Mourid Barghouti too, writes of loss: "Displacement is like death. One thinks it only happens to other people. From the summer of '67 I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else."

Perhaps the poetry, above all, the economy, with no wasted word, illuminates the inhumanity which has befallen the people, rooted in the Middle East, especially since 1948.

In Barghouti's most recent volume of poetry, Muntasaf al-Layl ("Midnight", Arc Publications, 2008) he writes the reality ("Give me your boots", p226)

" ... I'll look for the remaining survivors  
The rest of your family I'll tell them how  
lonely you were I'll talk to them about you  
I'll give them your belongings  
If they haven't died in the massacre.

A heap of dead bodies A heap of hearts A heap of rubble A heap of yearnings  
A heap of dreams ... A heap of roofs ... A sandal in the yard A heap of screams  
A heap of silence ... A heap of toys A heap of weariness ... All now covered by  
Death's Silence-dotted white sheet.

In the 138 pages of prose from which the book takes its name, he writes of:

"... the hand that tames the thorny slopes ... the hand that opens in forgiveness  
the hand that closes on the candy with which he surprises his grandchildren  
the hand that was amputated many years ago."

And he ponders:

"Why are there more bullets-holes? In threadbare clothes?"

Unbearably: ... "a life in bare feet came out to blame death."

Barghouti: "four years older than the state of Israel", which rendered him stateless, as any Palestinian who was outside their country: "for tourism, education, medical treatment or any reason", when the 1967 war broke out. They were simply deemed "Not-Palestinian" and forbidden to return, even to Egypt, Syria and Jordan, of which Israel now occupied parts. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 (an incursion the invaders named, apparently with no irony, "Operation Peace for Galilee") he was not allowed there either. Finally permitted to return to his family home in the village of Deir Ghassanah in 1996. He is still stateless.

In the Translators Preface to Mahmoud Darwish's "The Butterfly's Burden" (Bloodaxe Books, 2007) Fady Joudah explains how the family, with six year old Mahmoud, fled the 1948 bloodshed that was the founding of Israel, to Lebanon. Returning just months later, they were deemed "present-absentee" and could not be recognised as Israeli Arab." His long, exiled life began at twenty-two. He had already published four volumes of poems. He too was in Beirut In 1982. Yet another forced departure to: "...roam the Mediterranean (Greece, Cyprus, Tunisia.)Heart wrenching for Darwish, who seemed unable, outside his own writing, to survive to survive another glaring mirror of exile, of dispossession."

"My friends, do not die the way you used to die I beg you, do not die, wait another year for me One year."

And:

"... I hold this delicious air the Galilee air with both of my hands ... I will enter the mulberry trees where the silkworm makes me into a silk thread, then I'll enter a woman's needle in One of the myths And fly like a shawl with the wind ..."

The book includes his 2002 "State of Siege":

"... We measure the distance between our bodies And mortar shells ... with the sixth sense

... When the fighter planes disappear; the doves fly White, white, white. Washing the sky's cheek With free wings, reclaiming splendour and sovereignty Of air and play. Higher and higher The doves fly, white white. I wish the sky Were real (a man passing between two bombs told me.) ... I wrote twenty lines about love And imagined The siege Had withdrawn Twenty metres! ..."

In "Victims of a Map" (Saqi Books, 2005) Samih al-Qasim, born in 1939, from the village of Rama, in Galilee writes: "While I was still at Primary school, the 1948 Palestinian tragedy occurred. I regard that date, as the date of my birth, because the first images I can remember are of the 1948 events. My thoughts and images spring from the number 48.

“...I have chosen to remain in my own country not because I love myself less, but because I love my homeland more.”

Asked by his friend, Iraqi poet Buland al-Haidari: “if I had visited Baghdad, he said: “that I haven’t visited Baghdad or any Arab city. But I follow everything that goes on in those cities from my great prison.... I could walk through (their) streets as if I had been born and lived there for centuries.”

Slit Lips:

“I would have liked to tell you The story of a nightingale that died I would have liked to tell you The story Had they not slit my lips”

Travel Tickets

“On the day you kill me You’ll find in my pocket Travel tickets To peace, To the Fields and the rain, To people’s conscience. Don’t waste the tickets.”

Samih al-Qasim has been imprisoned many times for political activities, also put under house arrest:

End of a Discussion With a Jailor:

“From the window of my small cell I can see trees smiling at me, Roofs filled with my people, Windows weeping and praying for me. From the windows of my small cell I can see your large cell.”

Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said) was born in the village of Qassabin, Syria, in 1930. At fourteen, he wrote a poem that so impressed the President, that he was given a grant to continue his studies.

Enrolling at Damascus University in 1950, he began writing and publishing poems ... questioning the social and political structure of Syria.” That ended his honeymoon with the President; he was imprisoned and then went into exile in Lebanon. He subsequently founded, with Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal the publishing house Dar Majallat Shi’r and in 1968 the journal Mawaqif, an influential and widely circulated journal of Arab poetry.

He is credited with having “a far reaching influence” on Arab poetry and “revived and modified the classical Qit’a (short poem)

Also from “Victims of a Map”:

The Minaret:

A stranger arrived. The minaret wept: He bought it and topped it with a chimney.

Song: ... He never slept in a bed of myths He didn’t live his dreams. ... You angels, Pure ones, Liberators, Leaders, Wise men etc

At this moment all I ask of you is a miracle: Just for you to know how to say Goodbye

GOODBYE Just a miracle: a Goodbye

As distant as our souls As distant as a journey into the space of the soul.

The Desert (The Diary of Beirut Under Siege, 1982).

“... They found people in sacks: One without a head One without a tongue or hands One squashed The rest without names. Have you gone mad? Please, Do not write about these things ... They took him to a ditch and burnt him. He was not a murderer, he was a boy, He was not ... He was a voice Vibrating, scaling the steps of space. And now he’s fluting in the air. ... The earth’s trees have become tears on heaven’s cheeks. ... You do not die because you are created or because you have a body You die because you are the face of the future.

The flower that tempted the wind to carry its perfume Died yesterday.” ... By 1949, the United Nations had registered Palestinian 726,000 refugees, they have been haemorrhaging from their land ever since.

Another generation of Palestinians were displaced after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which had, since 1948, taken in approximately 35,000. Just ten thousand remain in Iraq, mostly, reportedly internally displaced. Other managed to flee, mainly to Jordan and Syria, having again lost everything. Hundreds have remained in limbo on the Jordanian-Iraqi border and the Syrian-Iraq border and only recently gradually found a welcome as far away as South America and Croatia. “Before I die, I would like to see Palestine for just three minutes”, said one of them. Born in Iraq, he was the grandson of a family who fled the founding of the State of Israel. He was just nineteen.

Since 2003, four million Iraqis have joined the Palestinians in the becoming the new ‘people without a land’, displaced near equally, internally and externally.

As the United States and British governments talk of the reason to remain in far away places being to prevent extremism on the streets at home, in the light of injustices of such enormity, one can only be humbled that there has been so little, in sixty one years of injustice in which the perpetrators have been Israel, backed by the US and UK – or the US and UK acting like – indeed often being trained by – Israel.

“The papers that love ink, The alphabet, the poets, say goodbye, And the poem says goodbye.”

(Samih al-Qasim, The Desert.)

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