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Being ME (Middle Eastern)

By Ibtisam Barakat Art by Denise Duong

A Palestinian perspective

Francis Foster, the legendary children's book editor for Random House and later for Farrar, Straus and Giroux/ Macmillan, passed away last summer. She will always be part of my creative journey. When Francis and I talked about *Tasting the Sky*, my memoir about childhood and war in Palestine, she said, "The Middle East is always in the news, but that does not mean Americans know much about Middle Eastern people." She recalled the Native American proverb that one cannot empathize with the journey of another without walking in their moccasins. "Can the two sides of a notebook stand for a pair of moccasins?" I mused. She took a book that was on her desk, opened it, and put it on the floor like a pair of shoes. We both laughed.

From this empathy-encompassed proverb, and the expansive light of Frances' smiling blue eyes, I shall proceed by offering you my pair of moccasins. They are size ten medium, European size forty. They are sewn from memories and language and threaded with the string of a *rababah* instrument playing a Middle Eastern tune. I was often teased for the size of my feet, and I replied that I have big feet because I have a big journey.

I invite you to become me for the duration of this essay—take a walk in my moccasins as a person from the Middle East.

Identity

You are Palestinian, a woman, and a poet. Your language is Arabic. You write from right to left. Your religion is Islam. People in your culture pray to Allah, the Arabic word for God. They fast in Ramadan, a month in the Islamic calendar. Many of your female relatives wear the hijab. The color of your eyes is coffee brown. Your name means "a smile," but few people outside the Middle East know that or can say your name easily. Your IQ is high. IQ stands for *I Question everything*.

War and Words

You are three years old when war happens in your country. Your mother has cooked a lentil-and-rice meal. You and your siblings are waiting for your father to come home so that you can eat together. But when he arrives, his first words are, "Hurry. Tell your mother the war has started!" In the chaos that follows, you are separated from your family for a night. The war ends with Israeli military occupation of your city and other Palestinian cities.

So you blame lentils for how you feel. Without knowing it, you take out all the anger of the Middle East on one tiny lentil seed to make it understand how powerless and small you feel. The mention of lentils makes you unhappy. Luckily, a lentil is resilient, rolling away on the plate like a tiny planet in its orbit.

During the war you learn to write your first letters of the alphabet. Language becomes your family. You are certain that if another war happens, the letters will not leave you behind, nor will you leave them. You play with language. The chalk first, then the pencil, becomes almost one of your fingers, an integral part of your hand. The lines on the page become a ladder. You can climb out of anything in the presence of a pen. The lines of the page are sometimes made of barbed wire. You write anyway.

Letters to Freedom

You wake up every day dreaming of *al-hurriyya*, freedom. You do not want to live in the Middle East under a crushing military occupation that denies you so much, including the freedom to say the name of your country—Palestine. Saying the word *Falasteen* in Arabic, or *Palestine* in English, or writing either down can lead to prison. The Israeli army changes the Palestinian names of many towns and streets around you. All Palestinian ways of life have become occupied, and that makes your need to say the word even more desperate, because you live under conditions that deny you to belong to yourself.

The minute you learn about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, you copy it by hand and carry it in your pocket, until your mother washes your pants with the paper inside; all is pulp. But you have memorized your rights and personalize the Declaration to sing it with wishful joy to yourself:

> Tens of nations got together to agree,
> that Ibtisam Barakat the girl from Falasteen,
> has the right and has the left, has the up-yup-yup,
> and someday will have the dawn to be free.

You turn the word *down* to *dawn* and feel grateful for what one letter can do.

As an avid pen pal, you write letters to many people—and to freedom. You write replies from freedom to you. She asks: *Are you willing to pay the price?* You write back in big letters: *Dear Freedom, Whatever you take, even if it were my soul. I do not want to die before knowing what real freedom means. Please teach me all about how to be free.*

Allah's Promise

Sometimes, the news describes your people's desire for a homeland as something objectionable. You fight to hold onto hope. You want to believe that nations will not allow the plight of your people to go on forever, but you are not certain. Each time you are in that cage of despair, you hear your father's voice quoting teachings from the holy book of Islam, *The Qur'an*:

> *Fa inna ma'a al usri yusran*
> *Inna ma'a al usri yusran*
>
> After every hardship comes ease.
> Surely after every hardship comes ease.
> (*Al-Inshirah* 94.6)

Allah emphasizes the promise by repeating it twice. Your dad says that Allah is to be offered gratitude for the good—and for the pain and suffering. Without despair, he explains, a person forgets that people are limited; the spiritual journey is where answers are found. He makes despair sound like a gift.

"But how can one be thankful for suffering, Dad?" you ask impatiently. "Nothing meaningful ever happened without overcoming

Table of Continents

Ibtisam Barakat

to Naomi Shihab Nye

The war broke me,
gave me a map of myself
like that of the continents of the planet –
separate . . .
calling each other foreign . . .
Arab identity, woman identity,
refugee, Muslim, immigrant, poor,
even beautiful . . .
identities . . . dent after dent . . .
the water separating my continents is not tears . . .
the sharks devouring my desires are not fish . . .
they are feelings with dropped jaws
hungry for the ordinary . . . not finding it . . .

water is wasted time . . .
water is wasted waves at good-byes
water is the sweat of crossing from here to there,
from there to there . . .
and from here to hearing . . .
I embrace my continents strongly . . .
I say if Atlas could carry the globe,
I can carry myself . . .
I embrace my world, hard
H and *Ard* . . . hard!
to push the continents closer together
but they stay far . . .
I think it is the gravity of the condition . . .
or maybe as a female facing the aftermath of war
I do not have enough upper-body strength . . .
to give the world a hug with my arms
after the armies were here . . .
each continent now has a climate,
a language, animals,
a shape in the distance, and a culture . . .
only poems are the native trees
on which birds put nests and eggs and write songs,
and only the migrant birds know that
all the continents are equally home . . .
so I feed the birds in the South
I feed them in the North . . .
I feed them wherever they sing of hunger for self
and of fear of flight . . . and fight,
and of frozen weather in the heart . . .
every season I count them as they return
to see if any had died along the journey
and to say hello to the new ones . . .
every spring, I count their feathers made of faith . . .
I dream of having all people on the planet
help me embrace the globe from all sides
and push the world back together

as one table – of continents . . .
and we sit around it and eat . . .
break bread, chains, barriers, and silences –
not worlds, not hearts, not meaning, not connections –
and tell stories and remember that love
can remind a stone that someday in the past
it was soft like muscles and skin tissue –
it can also remind the raging water that it was
only a drop of rain on the eyelashes
of a smiling child . . .
who loves to jump in puddles and
puts his tongue out to catch a drop of rain.

From the ongoing "Poetry Diary of a Palestinian Woman" and first published in *World Literature Today*. Bilingual note: The word *Ard* in Arabic means "land."

a hardship," he says, "not a child walking, not a mother giving birth, not a people becoming free." He advises that you remember this word *yusran*, ease. So you repeat it to yourself like a mantra. But you cannot wait; panic invades all aspects of your life. When an opportunity opens, you leave for America.

Ameri-*can*

On the nineteenth anniversary of the Six-Day War, the event that overwhelmed your childhood, you see the Statue of Liberty for the first time from the plane window. She is a woman! She has what looks like a book in her hand. *Al-ḥamdu Lillāh!* you say to yourself. *Thanks be to Allah; she must love reading!* She raises a torch and you see it as a symbol, a big pencil burning with desire for new knowledge.

A fellow passenger explains that the torch is held up so that immigrants can find their way to the shore. You hide your eyes and weep thinking that she is there to welcome you too. You, the one who has never felt truly safe or welcome as a Palestinian anywhere on Earth all of your life, not even in your mother's lap because your mother herself never felt safe. If you could embrace the Statue of Liberty, offer her a chair to rest while you carry her book and torch, as long as she desired, you would. The first thing you do in New York is buy a miniature statue and put it in your pocket. It is your first American passport.

You think of the word *American*, which you hope to become someday. American ends with *can*. You also see the *Am* in the beginning of American and instantly turn your name to Ibtisam-erican. Now you can do so much that you could not do before. As a Palestinian you come from a people obsessed with education as much as they are obsessed with liberation, so you know that you must do everything you can to enroll in graduate studies. The voices of your people are crammed in your heart, all waiting for you to breathe out and tell their stories.

Aloft

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Becoming Visible

You study journalism because you know it is a field where you can interview strangers and they will answer your questions. With the tools of this profession, you can find information about your new home and learn how far the *can* of American may reach. The invisibility, the fear of being shot at or harmed for resisting subjugation is reversed. You become visible. And there is democracy. It rests on freedom of speech, you are assured by many. You must learn a new language of responsibility, so you begin to conjugate new verbs: I decide. He chooses. They initiate. She leads. We vote. We have rights.

Still, it is a jungle of new experiences. Your conflicted realities are like predators that devour much of your day and night. The fireworks of the Fourth of July send you hiding under your bed with images of war. Stylish army boots in shop fronts unleash hours of trauma. A helicopter transporting someone to a hospital takes you back to where helicopters flew to drop bombs.

UN-*related*

You find that many people have never met a Palestinian, never knew that Palestinians have a story. They don't know that Palestinians were forced into diaspora to create the state of Israel on Palestinian lands. You explain that great numbers of Palestinians now live in refugee camps rented with assistance from the United Nations and its largest agency dedicated to this one uprooted people, the United Nations Refugee Works Agency. Without the UN, you would not have had the chance to go to school.

If a person's tears could run out, you would have run out of tears a long time ago on this journey to freedom. Because they have never lived under occupation, most Americans tell you that they cannot relate to what you say. Some call your people terrorists. "What?" you ask. "Have you seen our lives? We are prisoners in our home." You begin to expect discrimination from people with limited views of humanity and little knowledge of history, those who do not seek a broader perspective. You expect discrimination like you expect harsh winters in Missouri: one wears the right clothes and survives. Some insist that the word *Palestine* is controversial; others feel your sorrow, whisper that England considered George Washington a terrorist. You thank them for their empathy.

Over time, many of your Middle Eastern friends change their names to sound Italian or Greek or American. But you cannot do so. To change your name would be comparable to death. You would no longer recognize yourself. You could not say Palestine growing up and now you would not be able to say Ibtisam! *No*, a big shout from the depth of your soul declares to you, *Ibtisam I am, green cheese and lamb. Dr. Seuss can eat ham, but I am Muslim.*

Hardship

Your journalism education proves a big *yusran*—the word your dad emphasized, the word promised by Allah as the twin of all hardships. You seek friendships with people from varied backgrounds: Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. They too have stories of war and displacement and have suffered for religious beliefs. You hear about the legacies of slavery from African Americans, and the astonishing losses on the Trail of Tears from Native Americans. You speak with Italians, Mexicans, Irish, Asians, and others and they tell you about their history outside and inside America. The stories repeat one thing: there is a Trail of Fear we create for one another in all places on Earth. Freedom is often defined as freedom *from* others, not freedom *with* others.

You want to know why the Jews of Israel, who wanted freedom and have suffered much, put your people through captivity and exploitation in the name of God or in the name of their suffering. So you speak with Jews. You learn about the Holocaust and that Palestine mainly was given away by European nations as part of reparations. You hear a huge range of views. Your circle of understanding continually widens. You learn that there are some Jews who believe Israel has the right to displace Palestinians, and others who distance themselves from Israel and want to see Palestine and the Palestinians free. Still you ask: *Is the pain of millions erased by a treaty, a signature on a paper?* At times, you think that French philosopher Sartre was right to declare, “Hell is other people.” But you also know that *help*, much help is other people.

History that you memorized in school but never understood comes into focus: Britain, Italy, Portugal, Russia, and other powerful countries around the world, all violently occupying vast lands and peoples, drawing random lines to divide groups, leaving generations of trauma behind, before being forced to leave. You wonder: *What nations narrate the true violence of their history?* To you, it seems that the violence of the privileged is classified differently than the violence of the non-privileged.

You now see that the Judeo-Christian tradition is actually Judeo-Christian-Islamic, but Islam is being excluded. A hundred years ago, Judaism was the target of exclusion. The current attempts at exclusion of Islam are no less violent than previous attempts at excluding Judaism.

Ease

Gradually, you no longer feel alone and different as a Middle Eastern person. And you realize that there is nothing inherently wrong with the Middle East in the way many media point to that region as though everything is right with the rest of the world. It is simply a ravaged place acting ravaged. It is an injured person bleeding, a body beaten for decades, if not centuries, outraged and violent. The Middle East is shouting for help. Most of what it receives, however, is weapons and hostile stereotypes.

You see that there is something wounded in humanity as a collective, that people create massive suffering for one another. Nations do to other nations what was done to them. Families break under wars. Parents try to cope, but without help they often fail; they pass on the legacies of war to their children.

You ask without expecting answers: How can we heal generations of damage and centuries of emotional wounds? As more pieces of history are considered, you at least ask clearer questions. You see destructive conditions that must change, narrow perspectives that must open.

You close your eyes and see planet Earth as the Apollo astronauts saw it: “Earth Rising,” every inch of it loved as home.

Lentils Three Ways

You never stop working on healing the hurts of war in your life. You even succeed in eating lentils. It takes four decades to heal that taste, but you celebrate. You reshape the meaning of lentils by creating artwork with the seeds. You create hummus from them. At some point, you simply mix them with chocolate and ice cream.

You have heard that soldiers practice the command to kill-kill-kill to triumph over enemies. You see that to triumph in humanity you must tell-tell-tell, and you hope that the telling will help all of us heal-heal-heal. You now call those seeds *len-tells*.

You and ME

We’ve come to the end of our walk, so I’ll take back my moccasins. I wish you happy travels and will leave you *Fee Aman Allah*, in the gracious protection of God. I hope that being Middle Eastern (ME) for the space of this reading has enriched your experience, helped you see a bigger picture—one that includes *everyone* in the family of humanity.

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