

Postcard

Mazen Maarouf

I didn't think much of Gaza the first time I visited Palestine. I didn't know anybody there or where to start. My family is originally from the northern part of the occupied territories, and it was of personal importance to visit the village my grandparents were expelled from in 1948 but never talked much about. I travelled to every city I could. Towns, suburbs, squares and streets felt so familiar that I even managed to run away from the home of my Palestinian host in Galilee, who found my ideas about peace unacceptable and asked me to wash the dishes and iron the shirt of her teenage son who was graduating that day.

It was then that I met Naima at a post office in Bethlehem. I'd promised my father to send him a postcard from Palestine. Not any card, but one with particular significance: a photograph of the land where his family's house once stood. We knew that the house had been demolished, but he still wanted a photo of the plot.

He was six years old when he was forced to leave with his mother, father and elder siblings to Lebanon, and he's forbidden to return to his village. I managed to locate the position of the house and took the photo from a hill nearby using a polaroid camera I had brought for that purpose. I only took one shot, to give the picture uniqueness and the greatest possible personal value. Then I wrote on its back:

'From Deir Al-Qasi

Your home.

Salam,

Mazen'.

I'd totally forgotten that for obvious reasons the post doesn't work between Palestine and Lebanon. The clerk at the post office burst out laughing when he heard the destination, and then asked, 'Is this your first day as a Palestinian?'

I didn't know what to do but I had to fulfil my promise to my father. That's when Naima approached me. 'I can send it,' she said. The air was so still and dry that not a single leaf fluttered on a tree but she had the kindest smile – confident and tender. She refused to take any money and said, 'I'm going back to Gaza this evening. I'll never leave again.' I felt there was a story behind those words but didn't dare to ask,

besides she was in a hurry. Only after she left did I wonder how was someone able to leave Gaza in the first place? But another post office client told me she does that with strangers sometimes, then she disappears. 'You lost your postcard, brother,' he added.

Naima was a patient in the mental asylum in Bethlehem. The Palestinian government hadn't received its budget from the Israeli finance ministry that year, so they decided to shut down the asylum and send employees and patients home. All of them were from the West Bank, except for Naima whose relatives were all in Gaza, and nobody was given permission to come to the West Bank to pick her up. She lived on the streets and waited, sometimes claiming to random people that she would shortly be going back to Gaza.

Three weeks later, my father called saying that he got the postcard. I was then in Reykjavík and couldn't believe my ears. Moreover, the postcard arrived only a few days before my father had a stroke. He was 74 years old, and it was the first time he was ever admitted to a hospital.

I flew back to see him. He was half paralyzed but talked too much as usual, though with immense difficulty. When I asked him about the postcard, he said 'What ...

card?' 'The one I sent you from Palestine. Remember?' He didn't know what I was talking about. I looked everywhere in his room and couldn't find a trace of that photo.

Seven years passed during which I didn't think much about Naima, until I recently saw her on the news. It was a report about some refugees in a school in Gaza. My father was next to me watching the TV. He pointed to a girl in the background saying excitedly: 'I saw her in a dream. I remember as if it happened last night. She knocked on the door and handed me a postcard.' I asked him to describe it. It was the photo I had taken.

Naima was joyfully taking envelopes from a group of children in the playground of the school. One child rushed to the camera saying: 'We're writing letters to the world; envelopes is all what we found in the food storage facility. We write letters so we forget how hungry we are. Naima will deliver them. She sees addresses in her dreams. She knows by heart all the addresses in the world.' However, it was clear that neither the child nor the kids around him believed what he was saying. They were simply playing. I, unlike them, now had a reason to believe that was exactly what Naima was going to do.

The next morning, it was on the news that the school had been bombed. One of the kids held a shoe belonging to Naima, sobbing. He said they couldn't find her under the rubble, nor the envelopes. My father was sleeping and I felt upset, as if I'd just lost the only person able to make the world a better place. The only meaningful thing I could do at that moment was to go down and check my mailbox.

Mazen Maarouf

Mazen Marouf is a writer, poet, translator and journalist, born in Beirut to a family of Palestinian refugees who had to flee Tal El-Zaatar during the Lebanese civil war. He holds a bachelor degree in General Chemistry and worked for several years as a Chemistry and Physics teacher. After *Jokes for the Gunmen*, he published a second collection called *Rats that Licked the Karate Champion's Ear* and recently the interlinked stories *Sunshine on the Substitute bench*. His three poetry collections include *The Camera Doesn't Capture Birds*. In 2014 he won the Literaturlana Poetry Prize. Mazen has written for various Arabic publications including Al-Hayat (Beirut, London). He has translated several novels and short stories by international writers into Arabic.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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