

Longing

By Alaa Sukari

Is it possible for a person to long for something they don't even know?

I don't know why this question always circles back to me whenever I hear my mother, my father, and my older siblings talk about our house in Syria. But the conversation that has most marked my memory is one that took place with a woman from the village of Lubyah in the jurisdiction of al-Tabariyyah. Her name was Aisha al-Zayn.¹

A journalist was interviewing her and asking her questions, and her eyes filled with shyness and embarrassment, the kind that befits a woman who grew up in a small village, who never went to school, and who probably learned everything she knew in her father's house and then in her husband's house.

How could a person, who never had anything on her list other than doing household chores and raising children, how could she face a camera for the first time?!

What caught my attention, in this situation, was that her answers and the awkward look in her eyes matched the intensity of his questions. Then he suddenly asked her: "Do you remember your house in Palestine?". He didn't need to probe further, her tongue suddenly became untied.

She described the house, the things that faced it, the two almond trees that her swing hung on, the room next to the house where her father stored the merchandise he traded, the well behind the house that collected rainwater for the livestock to drink from. She kept talking, and talking, and talking.

The words that made the journalist interrupt her, was when she said: "The house was just one single room, but it was big." When an entire house consists of only one room, yet it carries all that longing and brings a sparkle to the eyes when it is remembered, it means that the story is not about the number of rooms, or their size or the big garden or anything like that. The story rests in the concept... In the idea... In the sense of reassurance that the presence of a home creates in our lives. Most often, we call this belonging; yes, it is belonging.

Our house in Syria was a small house facing green fields that shimmered under the sun. Despite the circumstances that forced us to leave the house—I was very young at the time—I can imagine some of its details from what I hear in the stories of my father, my mother, and my older siblings.

¹ Aisha Muhammad al-Zayn, born in 1932, Lubyah - al-Tabariyyah - Palestine, Nakba Archive https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha-viewer/render.php?cachefile=nn_0433_aishah_zayn.xml

I can gather its details from their words and their descriptions only. As for how I feel towards the house, honestly, I don't feel anything, perhaps because the situation here is different from the idea of longing for the unknown homeland, which applies to my grandfather, for example.

When Hajj Hammudi al-Saeed² spoke about the solidarity and mutual support in his village, and the abundance of the land, suddenly, it seemed as if he was longing. Here, it is appropriate to say that he "longed", he said: "If you had a palace here (in his place of refuge outside Palestine) and a hut there (in his village in Palestine), the hut is better than the palace."

How strange is the paradox between here and there, and it strikes me how often it repeats itself with us Palestinians or Arabs in general. I'm remembering a phrase that was said in a Syrian series, about the events after 2012: the protagonist was meeting with her Syrian friends in Beirut, she said to them: "When we talk about Syria, we can't say 'there' because I feel that when I want to talk about Syria, I can only say 'here' ", and she cried.

Do I feel the same way today?! Maybe I've recently started feeling longing for our house in Syria. Because even if our displacement were to intersect with the displacement of the Syrians, the Palestinian always knows the origin and the historical reason for any catastrophe that befalls him, and it is the Nakba.

For example, my father lived his role as a Palestinian person, through the experience of displacement during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. I don't know how much I can compare or draw parallels between my experience in Syria, and my father's experience in our village in Palestine, and I call it our village because we still identify up to this day as Palestinians, but it is the repetition, or rather the continuity of the Nakba, that prevails. Perhaps, when it comes to my grandfather, he lived his exile from al-Tabariyyah, and my father paid the price of his Palestinian identity in '82 through displacement, and now it's my turn to pay, and here I am paying through the war in Syria, and maybe I lost the first of many battles that Palestinians go through, which is the battle of experiencing a normal childhood. Or maybe wherever a Palestinian lands, there is a constant account being deducted from, of his blood and of his efforts. My experience of displacement to Lebanon, and the humiliation I've been suffering from, are an extension of our ancestors' exile in '48.

As for how we left our house, according to what my family tells me, we headed to my uncle's house first, with our vagrancy on our faces, we reached the Jordanian borders, which prevented us from entering, even though my aunts, meaning my father's sisters, entered without any issues. After which, Lebanon was the final destination, or rather, the final destination for now. All of this is a script repeating itself. Going back to what Hajjeh Aisha al-Zayn said, and how she described her family's exit from Lubyah, it feels as if she's describing me and my family during that time.

² Hammudi Saeed Hasan, born in 1928, Lubyah - al-Tabariyyah - Palestine, Nakba Archive https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha-viewer/render.php?cachefile=nn_0238_hammudi_hasan.xml&translate=1&time=612&panel=1

She says "as soon as the bombing intensified, my father escaped to a village nearby called Nimreen, and we stayed there five nights. Then we returned to our town, but a week later, we left it (permanently)." Here, Hajjeh Aisha's expression changes, and her eyes fill with regret: "I swear, I still remember how my father stood, facing the town after he left, saying, 'Aaaakh aaakh, we have intended to travel, farewell our country, how impossible it is to return to you, oh Palestine... Oh Lubya, our return is a long way off'"

This posture was the same posture my father stood in, and all of us stood in, at the Lebanese-Syrian border. And of course, we said the same, if not with our tongues, then in secret and in our spirits, and our souls must have said: "How impossible, what a long way off you are, our home in Syria."

As for me, personally, and after the experiences I've been through here as a Palestinian-Syrian, I can say that I've just started longing for our home in Syria because I've just started to understand the feeling my father had toward the house he never saw in al-Tabariyyah. Difficult circumstances make us reconsider things. Explain to me, how is it that my Palestinian-Lebanese uncle has more privileges than my Palestinian-Syrian father, and those who have it even better than them are my two aunts who hold Jordanian citizenship, although they are their sisters.

Isn't it surprising that my friend and neighbor in al-Jalil camp, with whom I study and spend all day with, whose accent even resembles mine, can move freely with his ID, whereas I, as a Palestinian-Syrian, need to renew my residency every now and then. Who renews their residency in a refugee camp? People, refugee camps are supposed to be temporary in one's life, they're not an end goal, but a state of emergency.

But perhaps for us Palestinians, it is our destiny not to settle, and to live and die in a state of emergency.