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50 Years on and Stones in an Unfinished Wall

Lisa Suhair Majaj

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For Palestine

Lisa Suhair Majaj

1.
Fifty years on
I am trying to tell the story
of what was lost
before my birth
the story of what was there
before the stone house fell
mortar blasted loose
rocks carted away for new purposes, or smashed
the land declared clean, empty
before the oranges bowed in grief
blossoms sifting to the ground like snow
quickly melting
before my father clamped his teeth
    hard
    on the pit of exile
slammed shut the door to his eyes
before tears turned to disbelief
disbelief to anguish
anguish to helplessness
helplessness to rage
rage to despair
before the cup was filled
raised forcibly to our lips
fifty years on
    I am trying to tell the story
    of what we are still losing

2.
I am trying to find a home in history
but there is no more space in the books
for exiles
the arbiters of justice
have no time
for the dispossessed
without credentials

and what good are words
when there is no page
for the story?

3.
the aftersong filters down
like memory
   echo of ash

history erased the names
of four hundred eighteen villages
emptied, razed

but cactus still rims the perimeters
emblem of what will not stay hidden

In the Jaffa district alone:

   Al-‘Abbasiyya
   Abu Kishk
   Bayt Dajan
   Biyar ‘Adas
   Fajja
   Al-Haram
   Ijlil al-Qibliyya
   Ijlil al-Shamaliyya
   al-Jammasin al-Gharbi
   al-Jammasin al-Sharqi
   Jarisha
   Kafir ‘Ana
   al-Khayriyya
   al-Mas‘udiyya
   al-Mirr
   al-Muwaylih
   Raniyya
   al-Safiriyya
   Salama
   Saqiya
   al-Sawalima
   al-Shaykh Muwannis
   Yazur

all that remains
   a scattering of stones and rubble
   across a forgotten landscape

fifty years on
the words push through

   a splintered song
   forced out one note
   at a time
4.
The immensity of loss
shrouds everything

in despair
we seek the particular

light angling gently
in single rays

*the houses of Dayr Yasin*
*were built of stone, strongly built*
*with thick walls*

*a girls' school  a boys' school  a bakery*
*two guest-houses  a social club  a thrift fund*
*three shops  four wells  two mosques*

a village of stone cutters
a village of teachers and shopkeepers

an ordinary village
with a peaceful reputation

until the massacre

*carried out without discriminating*
*among men and women*
*children and old people*

in the aftermath
light remembers

light searches out the hidden places
fills every crevice

light peers through windows
slides across neatly swept doorsteps
finds the hiding places of the children

light slips into every place
where the villagers were killed
  the houses, the streets, the doorways
light traces the bloodstains

light glints off the trucks
that carried the men through the streets
like sheep before butchering

light pours into the wells
where they threw the bodies

light seeks out the places where sound
was silenced
light streams across stone
light stops at the quarry

5.
near Qisraya, circa 1938
a fisherman leans forward,
flings his net
across a sea slightly stirred
by wind
to his left
land tumbles
rocky blurred
to his right
sky is hemmed
by an unclear
horizon

(ten years
before the Nakbeh --
the future
already closing
down)

6.
fifty years later
shock still hollows the throats
of those driven out

without water, we stumbled into the hills
a small child lay beside the road
sucking the breast of its dead mother
outside Lydda
soldiers ordered everyone
to throw all valuables onto a blanket
one young man refused
almost casually,
the soldier pulled up his rifle
shot the man
he fell, bleeding and dying
his bride screamed and cried

he fell to the earth
they fell in despair to the earth

the earth held them
the earth soaked up their cries
their cries sank into the soil
filtered into underground streams

fifty springs on
t heir voices still rise from the earth

fierce as the poppies
that cry from the hills each spring

in remembrance

7.
some stories are told in passing
barely heard in the larger anguish

among those forced out
was a mother with two babies

one named Yasmine
and another
whose name no one remembers
her life so short
even its echo
is forgotten

the nameless child died on the march

it was a time of panic
no one could save a small girl

and so her face crumpled
lost beneath the weight of earth

I know only that she loved the moon
that lying ill on her mother's lap
she cried inconsolably
wanted to hold it in her hands

a child
she didn't know Palestine
would soon shine
unreachable
as the moon

8.
the river floods its banks
littering the troubled landscape

we pick our way amid shards
heir to a generation

that broke their teeth on the bread of exile
that cracked their hearts on the stone of exile
necks bent beneath iron keys to absent doors
their lamentations
an unhealed wound

I was forced to leave my village
but the village refused to abandon me
my blood is there
my soul is flying in the sky over the old streets

fifty years on

soul still seeks a sky

9.
the walls were torn down long ago
homes demolished
rebuilding forbidden

but the stones remain

someone dug them from the soil
with bare hands
carried them across the fields

someone set the stones
in place on the terraced slope

someone planted trees,
dug wells

someone still waits in the fields all night
humming the old songs quietly

someone watches stars chip darkness
into dawn

someone remembers
how stone holds dew through the summer night

how stone
waits for the thirsty birds

The italicized sections of this poem are taken,
in most cases verbatim, from historical and journalistic sources.
The listing of destroyed villages and the passage beginning "All that remains" in section 3 is taken from Walid Khalidi's 
All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948
The description of Deir Yassin in section 4 is taken from
the Deir Yassin OnLine Information Center http://www.deiryassin.org/).
Section 5 refers to a photo in All That Remains.
The description of refugees leaving Lydda in section 6
is taken from Father Audeh Rantisi's Blessed are the Peacemakers:
The History of a Palestinian Christian
The passage beginning "I was forced to leave my village"
in section 8 is taken from a Reuters report by Nidal al-Mughrabi, April 14, 1998.