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Writing Sample

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Alice YOUSEF

Non-fiction and poetry

In Search of the Pan Flutes

*“A River is the most human of all inanimate things,
and so the life story of any river
is a biography, as
much as if it were an account
of a man.” Robert Saint John.*

I can still remember the loud gasp that escaped me when I stood for the very first time in my life across from a waterfall. I was thirteen years old, a lean child, taller than my peers with a sharp tendency to daydreaming and an inadequate curiosity for details. To date memory never failed me. It was the torrid July, the time of year when air becomes sticky with unneeded mosquitoes and the days stretch longer. The road finally winded up with the family car parking under an ash tree. My siblings and I could not wait any longer; two hours of driving were enough. As soon as we parked across the Baniyas Fall and springs, we sped out to look on nature unfolding.

While we raced to where the tree-lined parking lot ended, in matching caps and wild Disney t-shirts, my parents handled ticketing to the natural reserve. The scene unfolded before our young eyes. First came the gigantic fig tree, perched near a few Roman pillars, some broken, a little grayish and others finely sculpted, aging gracefully. Then it came onto me, the continuous gurgling like a broken down television, its sound rose to my ears. Its surface shimmered; it was a river that rushed bursting its heart out. On the river's banks ran reeds, a few leafy trees, dry grass and three pools from which springs competed to fall, right to where their next turn took them. The gasp escaped me and could not return, it was my earliest memory of a waterfall. A long overdue reaction for a young teenager. My gasp went unnoticed, as it got muffled by my sister's cry 'Maa-maa. Come see. It's beautiful, just like you said it would be.'

Earlier that day my mother took it upon herself to complete the task of getting the five of us, the children out of the water. Quiet restless we insistently refused to leave the hotel's spacious swimming pool. It was not a valid option to quit on a fun exercise in the midst of July's sizzling heat just to go walk under some trees in a new place we've never been called Baniyas, the place my father tempted us to believe had 'the biggest waterfall you'll see.' Reluctantly and before receiving further reprimands we dragged ourselves in dripping swimsuits to the bedrooms and were promised a fun day out amid our rush to get the best seats in the car. We had seen a miserable prison like summer the year before; we'd seen too many bicycle rides in closed garages for reasons beyond our total comprehension.

Three times we drove the same street earlier. On the third lap we took towards Baniyas we were drenched in the middle of a story. An argument must have broke somehow as habit or chances had it on our long car rides. My father's hand-drawn napkin map drove us a little too close to the border with Lebanon, a bit too far from where we were going, we found ourselves in areas of landmines and warnings. Instead of calming down to let my parents focus on directions, my brothers decided to throw their own party-like eight year olds did- in the backseat. As we turned

to the main road, my mother managed to hush them by starting a story. Storytelling was something we overgrew simply because we were too busy saving lives on game consoles. For my mother, faith in a story was still an option so she told of how king Midas got his donkey ears after judging a musical duel between Pan and Apollo. She said it was near a cave that we'd see as soon as we've found our way. Bizarrely, we were all quiet as we listened. The story was the only exit possible till further directions to the point of destination miraculously showed up, for the first while as ever- they did not.

It was true, the ride took an extra hour but when I stepped out of the car, the smell of fresh air rose to greet me like succulent grass and meadows after rain. The world was alive, the trees and the springs beamed with busy little bees and sunshine. I was alive and budding into a new shape, a new me that was washed out from the past year, scarred on the left elbow from running for my life, a little bruised but still a happy child. In front of me was water at its best, a waterfall splashing my face. The icy water ran over my fingers as I stooped to feel the river's rhythm before it fell off the rocks and marched again.

'Careful don't stoop too close I don't want your brothers to mimic your moves.' 'I'm careful mama.' I answered her, full of certainty that I was my own person at the time. The frigid water against my fingers was unbearable so I asked 'why is the water freezing? The Jordan isn't this cold.'

'The water comes from *Jabal Al Sheik*¹ it is melted from the snowy peaks that's why it's cold. When the waters become the Jordan they run too far losing some of their heat.' My father interjected as my mother rushed to pull my brother away from a tiny fish he tried to chase. We were to have a less frantic day but my mother worried too much.

The summer of 2003 was a relief for my family; it was our summer of becoming normal again, of saving what was left of our childhood. Armed with conviction and sunscreen we kicked off to newer spots on road trips, our epitome of freedom. For almost a year up until a few weeks ahead of that summer, we had seen the best of what Palestine, had to offer in the category of danger; shelling, human shields, curfews and being at home under gunfire. We've seen a lot of bleeding papers and recounted information we didn't need either as children, or as adults. We survived all these with massive side effects, insomnia for me and bedwetting for my younger siblings. Up to that point my physician father had enough with the stressful lead of days. He cleared his usual overload of work, the schedule that kept him busy while we grew up, then we all headed north, to the Galilee.² It was the ultimate need of a natural therapeutic recluse.

As we marched down near the river, five children hand in hand. My father turned to me and asked, 'do you know that if you throw a whole water melon here it would end up splattered into pieces because of the cold waters?'. I lost focus from then onwards; each time I glanced over the rocks on the fire spirited river all I could envision was red watermelon pieces floating everywhere,

¹ Jabal Al Sheik: Arabic, literally the Mountain of the Elder/Religious Leader. It refers to Mount Hermon, where the Baniyas/Hermon stream water melts. It is called Jabal Al Sheik because of its snowy peak, which looks like an old man's hair or a religious leader's white hat. (personal interview)

² The Galilee is the north most area within Palestine containing the upper Jordan Basin, Lake Tiberias and a few rivers.

fish nibbling at their ends.

Apart from the floating watermelons I imagined, the Baniyas stream impressed me there and then. It was the sort of place that haunted me because I had read about woods and rivers in Astrid Lindgren's and Kenneth Grahame's children books, the river made my books real. The place also offered the whole family a chance to breathe: beer for my parents and a bit of free time to run around the waterfalls for us as children, it was all that we'd needed to forget the intense months that had once passed by in heavy hours. The place was our most treasured find, the most memorable find in a time of big losses.

When we were to leave, I glanced back at the river; it was my first visit but I knew it wouldn't be my last. That riverside would never leave me. I just hoped it would keep running the way it was, till I would be back. The places we loved waited for us, the places we loved remained intact, that was all I had power to believe at thirteen.

*

Nine Hundred

This morning, I shower with cold water the sea-salt
slaps my face, strikes me without knowledge,
It smells of fish, iodine and a tangible, salty sore
that hangs low on my cheek, stinging with the shame of the tide I cannot
swim here

there's an opposite shoreline, an offing of faint hills, unaware,
probably asleep with the sea
sandwiched in the middle, Another
horizon cast off for those fortunate to
slumber under
the luxury of beaches and youth

I turn my back, bile rising in my stomach nine
hundred and thirty times
to those loved too much by water fireworks burn
the cerise under my chest, it claims the nighttime,
in the small hours, water claims
oysters for its bed, nine hundred at once frozen
fingers make this morning mist shy
turn the mist into morning prayers as they arrive kneeling,
gravely,
timely, duly on the opposite shoreline washing out
from last night's sail-

some arrivals are bitter, some frigid-
lapped between the wave, the sail and smugglers in vain of
promised starts and promised lands
arms will open, arms will close, arms will lose grip
the same way these arms slipped out of land, lovers and luggage on the
road to the seabed

some are fished out, fluttering hands and
legs detached
since when was water
a natural habitat for bodies; cold, salty and diluted ? sleepers rise
to extract the living,
clothed in sharkskin and slipping
by touch. Leave them to crumple up forsaken clothes, glued to
bodies raising little fingers that now feed the fish that feeds bigger
fish
that lays fat, scotching onto your plate
I will no longer eat fish, nor participate in the ceremony of

feeding by running from fires

This morning I shower with cold
seawater, but sand still sticks to the soles of my feet as I wade
to where my white towel lies,
crisp from sunshine, warm with a maternal smell how can
earth still be warm, facing
floatation on the surface of water?

Published in *Refugees Welcome Anthology*.

Triumph walk

You know you exist when you hear the words you say
You feel that you exist when you hear yourself walk,
When I was younger than commercialism for innocence,
easier than heels to make up, I dragged my feet behind me.

I enjoyed the sound of friction:
Rub the sole against the tarmac and cause fire,
Squeal with the bottoms of your shoes and cause tension
For my ear, each drag was a cheer note of myself -
I walked, dragged, ran to make sure I was valid,
I made known my existence with the balls of my feet.

Once, the summer breeze carried with it sounds of my mother, a
louder call than my self-assuring squeals
From the kitchen chair, leafing out lentils for lunch, she asked
why do you walk like this? My answers didn't heed her questionings. Those
who dragged their feet are the broken down, she said:
They are people munched then spit out by life,
torn down fighters: men with old years beyond them, relying
on a stick for directions and women in shackles,
roasting other people's lunches then washing up with their own sweat.

When you walk- she added- make sure your head is high,
Your foot will follow, easily and lightly. A woman's walk is a woman's grace.
That's the walk of someone who knows their place. Her mouth zipped tight, mother threw out a
deflated brown lentil with a broken edge.
I cannot ascertain I understood half of what she said
but since that evening, I have never been but light-footed.

Published in *Carers UK Anthology*

Seven Stones *

Skip the stench of the valley's moss fiddling we will
find the seven stones,
for the pillars of the future, the same we build and destroy, to rebuild
and watch the stones fall for fun, how cruel.

fiddling near the roots of the yew

you call on to me. My hair, boyish to the sound of fury tangles in the
branches, as I split two snails from a molten brick,
knives, these fingers are. The brick is in my hand but you have the corner stone

Skip the toads that croak in the pit, one we call the eye of the mountain

juggling oranges with a stolen fragrance we fiddle with hallowed turtles and sticks children of
drones, roam the valley for the seven stones
one atop the other, like pickles in a jar

for the perfect cut to finish the working of a pillar, strong we
rummage for the smoothest stone digging the cracks of
white sand, an early afternoon in the shades of the milky
almond

we meet a scorpion, venomous

you run towards me hurling poison onto the stone Here, I give
you a broken toothed rock,
one I searched the years for, in the grit that lines the valleys

on the roads I take alone

leaving the olives that dust the mountain and you to find the seventh stone Pillars have
risen, others from more basic format,
lime and stone, iron and mud are other options for the heights of Babylon

Skip the stench of the seven stones, the pillar
is made for our bones.

Forget the crack as the stones we collect slide, we will
build and rebuild and the city, ours, falls into cinder
overnight.

*Seven Stones is a children's game, not unlike cricket or dodgeball, played in many parts of the Middle East. In the game, seven stones are piled on top of one another and one team tries to knock them down while the other defends and rebuilds. It is a game of protecting the stones from falling or reassembling them, whilst trying to bowl players out. The game ends when either the tower falls, or all the attackers are out.

Published in *Gutter Magazine*,
Scotland-

To Journey Alone

The last clouds have been collected in a scrap book Dew drops
hung too loose for earrings
Between the fabric softened socks, you had tucked the compass The heart
in your pocket replaced the map
Zipped shut.

Now the fog wraps this city, carefully carving home on the edge You glance
behind, once, then once more
It is the imminent rain off the horizon , Seeping in
gold, tufted by strands of cloud It never failed you.
It is then the hour,

You are in your own head

You tell yourself I know how lone travelers feel;

They pinch the dirt, smell it, then transit to other platforms. The scenes
on the window flip, like an old photo reel.
Trees stretch into barren heaths, You
glare, eat, sleep, cry
Redo your hair, brush the leftover lipstick, Sleepers next to
you must lay
For they have the divine right of quiet- You are no
noise,
You are just a leaf Floating; green
and lean.

Wide awake, you hide from lonesomeness Like a
mouse chased into insanity
You escape it, bury it in a book You pause
to wonder-
These strange streets, it is your first time These
pavement cracks , it is your last time These vivid

shots on offer-
Wait

What makes cities, cities? Keep
that wonder,
For language is wonder, Midnight hostel
talks are wonder
And the cheap copy of Ray Ban glasses on your lap are a wonder Why are you
here? Lonesomeness knocks again
You hush it, it must not talk

Something called you, something better-

She disturbs you again with her puckering fingers Let her
knock for it is allowed to walk alone
Talk to your own shadow Randomness shall
not be your disease
For to journey alone means to get naked, Naked to
the flesh, or the core, or the bones You feel it when
you step out of the station February biting your face
You feel it when you step into a library

Serene, that's her middle name Loneliness
Serene of the Damned, Damned of serenity
and silence Faces greet you, new, fresh
Old and compact

The town- home- would be still asleep You are
wide awake
You are wide alone

So travel alone, for in loneliness the clouds clear and masks drop You just left
yours at the threshold
Welcome to the new city of lights, kid.

Published in Journeys: poetry and prose from the Stratford-upon-Avon Literary Festival contest
