

SHAHEED, MUQAWAMA
(Martyr/Witness, Resistance*)

The morning after the wedding, we came to him with our quiet goodbyes. No one wanted to make a scene and make it harder. When Ghassan went to his mother she whispered, *We all must eventually go, and shouldn't we be happy for our death to mean something?* But then she wept and had to be pulled from him.

In the end, we were left with the memory of Ghassan as he stood on the back of Abu Yasser's truck. I had decorated the truck with flowers that morning. Ghassan waved as the truck slowly made its way through the dust and rubble. The rest of the village gathered in the street. The uncles beat tablas to the sound of wedding music till their hands pulsed, and the women clapped with their henna covered hands. Haja Aziza sang the zaghareed. People streamed past the school, the one with the gaping wound in its side. Someone had spray-painted above the blackboard the letters-- *muqawama*.

We knew there would be no bride, no children, and yet, the wedding party made a certain kind of sense. *I am marrying the resistance after all* he had said laughing.

We held the celebration in the square, since there was no building left standing that was big enough to hold the attendants of the hafli for Ghassan. Everyone had come, every family in the village, even those who did not believe in what he was doing. The sacrifice demanded a certain respect which no one denied.

Ahmo Walid brought all the tables from his restaurant and Abu Asma (who, technically speaking, was still not on speaking terms with Ahmo Walid) had put matters aside and brought more tables from his coffee shop. The flowers came from Sitt Aida, a few stems on each table. Legs of lamb lay on three of the larger tables, surrounded by warrah dawali (each grape leaf turned round the rice-- neither too tight nor too loose), kibbe, and of course, Haja Aziza's mansaf. Afterwards there would be sweet kinafeh, with cheese from Ahmo Ahmad's goats. The people gave no indication of the sacrifice involved, though Ghassan knew what this type of celebration would mean for the weeks to come. The scarcity that followed any wedding or funeral was known to all. Ghassan, always practical and not prone to sentiment, had made it clear that we should save the food, but once his decision had been made to go, no one listened to him. The hafli took on a life of its own. Children from the UNRWA school came dressed in their taupes to dabka. We all clapped and danced till the sweat dripped from our faces.

The hafli ended earlier than usual. There was an unspoken agreement among us that goodbyes would wait, and yet, the days to come weighed heavily on us. Ghassan shrugged off our seriousness with laughter. *Not yet, not yet.*

I'm not sure what I intended to say besides goodnight, but when I stood before him, my lips became numb. I just stared at him, willing myself not to cry. He raised his eyebrows in protest and motioned to Youssef and my cousins Nidal, Mohammed, and Maha. *We're going to*

the beach, cousin. Come, the night is not over yet. I nodded, relieved to be included despite the four years between us. I took more kinafeh from the table and put it on a platter along with a handful of figs for us to eat on the shore, then covered it. I looked at my mother. She would be busy helping to clear the square for at least another one or two hours. I wouldn't be missed.

We walked quietly, unable to give words to the feeling of loss that had already taken hold. I didn't know what to do as the clock ticked down. The minutes were pieces of him I wanted to gather together. That was the part that bothered me the most, that he wouldn't just be gone, but that his body would forever be separated from itself.

The moon was full. When we reached the beach, still no one said a word. We all stared out at the sea.

Ghassan lit a cigarette, then looked at me. *You haven't asked me how I am.*

I shrugged. *What would be the point?*

Everyone asks. I'm glad you didn't.

He stared back at the water, touched his finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose, then covered his mouth with his hand. I had only seen him cry once before.

We had lived through at least three full scale invasions, but the last had been the worst. The first explosion hit just after the call to prayer. This explosion had been much closer than the ones in times past. Our house shook, and we heard someone scream that Ahmo Saber's house had been hit. We ran to where our uncle's home once stood to find only smoke and rubble. Ghassan and I reached the house at the same moment and, like everyone there, immediately started digging with our hands. We knew they hadn't been given enough time to leave, that even if they'd been given minutes instead of seconds, it still wouldn't have been

time for Ahmo Saber to get down the stairs, his back crooked, his legs feeble. But still we dug through the rubble till our hands bled. We knew there were three girls in the house: Ghada, ten, Siham, eight, and Amal, five, as well as Amti Sabah. I had just seen Amal in the garden that morning.

We heard someone call to our right. Ahmo Saber was dead. Amti Sabah had been found, but was barely breathing. No one had found the girls yet. I don't know how long we dug in the rubble. It felt like days, but it couldn't have been more than a few hours. Finally my brother motioned for me to stop. I shook my head and kept digging, not looking up, but he grabbed my face and pointed. Ghassan was standing, head leaning back, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth curled into a scream. Nidal and Youssef stood behind him holding his body, weeping. They'd found Amal.

Ghassan held her, one arm under her neck, the other under her knees. It seemed the weight of her pushed him deeper into the land. She was still-- such stillness, how can I explain? It was as if, in that moment, we had all been plunged into the sea-- the shock of it, time slowing to silence, then the sudden cries of women as we emerged. The weight of things is different here. Time isn't what carries you to whatever comes next. Time, here, is what stands in your way, what you push through and against. Haja Aziza says it is our destiny.

We didn't find Ghada or Siham till two days later. When Amti Sabah heard the news, she screamed, tore her hair, hit her face over and over, and then as quickly as it all began, she stopped, said nothing. Ghassan joined the resistance that year as the blockade entered its seventh year.

He was still looking out on the water. *I've thought about what you told me.* He turned to me. *I've thought about it for a long time.*

The Shabah. I had told Ghassan about the Shabah once, that I had seen the ghosts of the dead. There was a time when I didn't believe in the Shabah at all, but Tete changed my mind. In those days before she died in her sleep, she would sometimes speak to them. They would come to her each night: her mother, her sister Salwa who had been killed in the Nakba, and her own Tete. At first she was frightened by them. I tried to reassure her they weren't there. She would insist, and I would say, *Tete, it is the wind, or Tete it is the sound of the branches against the window*, but soon I began to hear their whispers too.

We are here

they would say

here in the trees--

look!

Zaitoon,

the branch's fingers,

the twisted trunk

and its shadow,

the scent of zaahter

still in your palm,

and colonia blooms that mark the hour.

Yes

we are here.

When Tete left, the Shabah comforted me and soon she joined them. They come at night now, down by the sea. They talk of the fields or the harvest, but mostly of the world that came after: curfews, camps, homes toppled on families. Sometimes they weep. But sometimes they

sing-- sweet songs of love and marriage, the land, our resistance. And Tete smiles and says, *The land knows. The land knows who loves it.*

When I had told Ghassan, he had smiled. He had believed me. So I told him about the others. Some Shabah are not the ghosts of the dead, I explained. There are moments in your life that change everything. Some of the Shabah are born there, in that small space between who you were and who you become. The pieces of yourself that die while you still live-- those become the Shabah too. They are the witnesses.

I wonder sometimes how many Shabah have been birthed at the checkpoints. Mine was born there, the morning of tawjihi, as I stood waiting at a military checkpoint after the last ground invasion. It seems like I have spent half my life waiting, on a soldier's whim, at Erez trying to get to Al Quds, or in the UNRWA lines for food. Haja Aziza used to say waiting was our fate too, but I won't believe that anymore. Ghassan knew better, and now so do I. But back then I did wait, distracted by some math problem I couldn't solve the night before, when I heard a voice speaking in Hebrew, then broken Arabic.

Important day.

It was the same soldier I had seen every day for the past few weeks. I stared back at him.

Important day. Exams today.

I did not let the significance of what he'd said show on my face, so he went on. *I'd like to let you and your friends pass quickly. Could you just... turn for me please?*

At first I didn't understand what he meant. I thought maybe he wanted to search me. But then he smiled at the soldier standing next to him who grinned back. He repeated the question. *Could you... turn for me please?*

I didn't move. I looked at Maha, and her eyes fell to the ground.

What a shame for everyone to fail just because of one stubborn girl. He shook his head. *All that work.* I remained still.

He placed his hand on his rifle and the smile faded from his lips. *Turn.* In that moment, I remembered the story about the woman at the checkpoint, the one who had been given the choice of taking off her hijab or having a rod put through her eye. This was a story I had heard many times. She had chosen the rod and lost her eye, the moral being that she lost her eye, but still had her dignity. I knew in that moment what I should do. I knew.

But instead, I pulled my book to my breast, walked in front of him and turned once.

Again.

I stared at him.

Again.

I turned again. He laughed, stepped aside, and silently, my friends and I passed through. I heard a loud rushing sound in my ears-- like the sound of the sea. Maha looked at me and said something to comfort me, but I couldn't hear anything.

Ghassan had said nothing. I was relieved. He had just looked at me and nodded in a way that let me know he understood.

But tonight, he was revisiting my shame. I wasn't sure why. He stared at me for a long time, and then looked back at the sea. *To stand like trees takes time and patience. There is no shame in being forced to bend in the beginning, because it will only make you stronger in the end.* He looked back at me again and then put out his cigarette.

That was the last thing he ever said to me. He looked back at the water. We sat like that for another thirty minutes. Then we all walked home in silence.

The next day I watched as everyone in the village lined up to say their goodbyes. I

couldn't bring myself to do it, so I wrote him a short note and sent it with Maha. He read it in front of her, then asked her something. She turned and pointed at me. He found me in the crowd, raised his hand, and smiled. And then he was gone.

Life resumed its slow, oppressive pace. We were all tense with waiting. Mama snapped at us for the smallest annoyance. Baba tended our small garden of tomatoes and said little.

When it finally happens, we rush to the news. This assault leaves no visible trace, no smoke, no blood.

We are prepared for the lies, the defamation that Ghassan will bear for us. We force ourselves to listen.

Terrorist,

murderer,

there will always be one more thing. But it's like Tete told me and what I told Ghassan in my note that last day.

The land knows who loves it--

knows the truth that lies beneath the fragments of stone.

And as for blood, she does not permit forgetting.

She stands with us and when we are too weak to stand alone,

lifts us, taking our shoulders in her hands.

Look, she whispers pointing, beneath the smoke,

beneath the dust and debris,

a thousand orchards fill the spaces,

a thousand villagers kneel to touch me,

a thousand fishermen ride the rush of the sea,

*as the mezhnooneh climb the stone wall,
as the scent of fulleh conquers the dust of tanks,
as the sun works its way
through twisted branches,
eyes navigating pain,
in the face of one it loves.*

They came last night, and took seven from the camp, Nidal and Mohammed among them. For a moment, I had forgotten, and worried about Ghassan too. But then I remembered.

When I dream of him now, it is not the man, but the boy in the gray hand me downs of the camps. He runs to the door, chest out, fist shaking the air, motions for us to follow. The teacher pulls him aside with a question. He answers. *They killed one of my brothers, the other prison, the third exile. What do you expect me to do?*

She opens her mouth to reply, thinks better of it, and says instead, *Next time, don't go alone.*

In the dream, we stand with him, facing them. We are scared, but it doesn't matter. In the dream, we understand that some deaths are better than others.

Sometimes I wait for his ghost down by the water. It seems as good a place as any for him to go. I wonder if he will come, like the others, with their songs, if he will talk of the world that waits for us when the price of dignity has been paid. Or maybe it won't be like that at all. For those who have given all they could, maybe there is nothing left to say. Yet we still wait for them, read the sighs of the land for their voices, and sometimes, under the right moon, we see them, in pieces of light shining on the sea.

*Notes:

Muqawama, in Arabic, means resistance. There is no single good English equivalent for the word *shaheed*. Its Islamic and Arabic meanings are debated. It can mean martyr, but also witness. I have chosen to use both meanings here.

The line in the first story, *there will always be one more thing*, is from Toni Morrison's Black Studies Center Public Dialogue, Portland State University, May 30, 1975. In this dialogue Ms. Morrison states, "The function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, so you spend twenty years proving that you do . . . None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing."

The names of the characters who appear in *Shaheed, Muqawama* were chosen based on the name's meaning and also inspired by the names of people who were killed in Gaza in 2014.