



From Mansour Street to Rashid High School

The first time I ever found myself in conflict with my visual memory image bank was when, as a secondary school pupil, I went back to visit my primary school and discovered that it was much smaller than I had been picturing it. Of course there's nothing particularly weird about that: to experience a disparity between the scale of things in our childhood memories and how they are in reality is a pretty universal human trait. Although I was struck that day by the difference between real life and the version of it that I had remembered, I never imagined that years later I would go on to live through an overwhelming crisis of memory, emotion, and self, a crisis in which a succession of personal life phases overlapped with a painful reality at the public level.

This text is a journey through my recollections of the three streets in Raqqa that made up my route from home to my primary and secondary schools. It is a subjective – and not entirely unselfish – attempt to examine the conflict between memory and reality, and the distance that lies between them and runs

alongside them.

Mansour Street

The Mongol invasion of the Raqqa area in the thirteenth century destroyed the city: it was emptied of inhabitants, its houses reduced to rubble, and the city's two mosques and its ancient wall left in ruins. After this Raqqa remained uninhabited until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Ottomans built an outpost in the southern quarter of the present city (the building is now the city museum). After the Ottoman outpost was established, clans and families – first Arab and then Cicassian – settled in the area immediately around it, forming the nucleus of the modern city. The city expanded massively after this, with numerous waves of new residents arriving from the nearby rural areas at the end of the Ottoman era and during the French mandate. These early settlers were followed by others from the towns and villages in the eastern part of Aleppo province (Tedef, al-Bab, As-Safira), beginning in the 1940s. The final wave of migration to the city consisted of the so-called 'Government Migration,' beginning in the mid-fifties, when the administrative and economic presence of the state in the city and in the Euphrates Valley expanded, bringing thousands of employees in all sectors from various parts of Syria. This last wave began in response to the demand for employees of the regional administration and the courts, a significant part of which work was taken up by those arriving from the city of Deir ez-Zor. The flow of migrants grew in volume with the establishment of major agricultural projects such as land reclamation and development in the Euphrates Basin, and the founding of companies and public institutions such as Technical Services, Military Housing, and the Syrian Roads Company. This agricultural and industrial development brought thousands of families from across Syria to the city.



Because these major successive waves of migration hit the city over a relatively short period of time, and as it was a city being formed anew after centuries of death, we find that the difference between a 'Raqqawi' (someone from Raqqa) and a 'Gherbatli' (someone from elsewhere) is nebulous in the extreme – there might be no more than a decade or two between when they each arrived in the city. This is the difference between my family, which arrived in the 1920s from our village of Jazra al-Bouhamid on the 'eastern line' between Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and any of the first families to arrive from al-Bab or Tedef. But there is another difference, more pronounced than that delineated by the question of who arrived in the city first, which we can observe in the relationship with place: in Raqqa there are families who have been living in the city for four generations, but are still Aleppan or Deir ez-Zorian in terms of their dialect, their social relations with other migrants from the same area, and their relationship with their home turf. This does not only apply to people from other cities or provinces – the disparity is also noticeable among those whose roots lie in the nearby rural areas. There are

families who maintain a strong connection with their original town or village, especially if they own agricultural land there, and other families whose relationship with their villages of origin has weakened or has even ended altogether. The latter are found especially in those social milieu no are longer involved in agriculture, whose socio-economic lives have shifted to the entrepreneurial or service sectors, or are connected to government departments.

Architecturally, there is no 'old city' and 'new city' in Raqqa. With the exception of the modern housing complex zones and the residential quarters for employees of the various government departments and institutions, there is no obvious architectural difference between the areas that were settled early on in the rebirth of the city and the areas that the city expanded into so as to shelter new arrivals and meet the needs of a growing population within those earlier residential neighborhoods. But the sociological difference between those older areas (which I will call in this article 'the neighborhoods') and the more modern residential areas is to be found in the pattern of population distribution. The first arrivals to Raqqa consisted of complete tribal blocs or large families, who set up home right next to each other. Their neighbors were their relations, who followed them to Raqqa over the years and joined their neighborhood. These first arrivals in the city often built large courtyards; there are now hardly any of these left in their original form, as they were divided up by their original owners and shared out among their children, who in turn further divided up their sections, or agreed to demolish them and erect buildings of several storeys in their place, to share out as flats. This dynamic has resulted in two things: first, the character of the streets and alleys of the neighborhoods tends to the familial, with many entire neighborhoods in which the majority population is from one extended family or clan (such as the Ajeeli, Bajiri and Beyatira neighborhoods). Second, the constant demolition and building and division of residential

plots has led to a lack of any architectural character to distinguish the neighborhoods from the newer residential areas, which are populated either by those descendants of the original families in the neighborhoods who have moved out, or by new arrivals in the city.

Mansour Street forms a cross section through the neighborhoods. It's the only route one can take to cross the entire city, North to South – which is to say to the river – without having to weave around or take any turnings. The name Mansour, however, is only used for the section of the street that connects the old city wall and the museum. In this article I will discuss only the southern half of Mansour Street, from the junction with 23 February Street as far as the museum. That section is the most commercially active zone of Mansour Street; it originally developed as the first 'urban' economic area, as distinct from Quwatli Street, which intersects Mansour Street near the museum. Quwatli Street is a market with a direct relationship to the nearby rural areas of Raqqa province: city folk go there to buy foodstuffs from the countryside, and rural folk shop there for the tools they need. In Mansour Street, by contrast, the first tailors and jewelers in the city were to be found, along with shops selling clothes and electrical goods. And because as we have seen Mansour Street cuts a cross section through the neighborhoods, many of the businesses that line the street are owned by brothers or cousins from these nearby areas, whether they work in them themselves or rent them out. So the successive stream of family names on shop signs forms an almost exact document of the names of the families inhabiting the smaller streets and alleys leading off Mansour Street. This is the case with my own family: the house I grew up in is in a neighborhood just east of Mansour Street. On both sides of the entrance to the neighborhood live my father's cousins, our house is next door to my grandfather and my uncle's house, and my other uncle lives in the neighborhood just opposite – and so on and so on. It's exactly the same case in other

families such as al-Sa'adu, al-Hajj Abu, al-Khouja, al-Sayaid Ahmed, al-Ramla, al-A'dad, al-'Utba, Qas Qaroush, and al-'Ajili, the eastern side of whose neighborhood reaches the south side of Mansour Street.

The family composition of Mansour Street is of course not exceptional compared to the rest of Raqqa, but it presents differently here because of the early commercial character of the street – groundbreaking, at the time – and because it is one of the oldest streets in the city. Therefore the street and its residents were exposed to all the various phases and changes of the last century as one bloc, to a certain extent, something that also imposed on them a different way of conducting relationships, whether between neighbors, business partners, or school friends. A kind of 'new kinship' arose, related not to blood kinship but to a feeling of neighborliness that often exceeded blood kinship ties – or overlapped with them when the ties of being neighbors, classmates or business partners were strengthened through marriage, as was the case between most families in the street.

My family owns several shops on Mansour Street, but they have always been rented out, as my grandfather's business was in Quwatli Street, near the junction with Mansour Street, as was my uncles' and cousins' trade after they took over from him. Starting off with general merchandise, they went on to specialise in stationary, selling it from a shop called 'Reliability.' Those premises were expropriated during the expansion of the square in front of the museum, and so in the mid-sixties they opened another stationers, this one called 'Granada,' run initially by my uncles and then by my cousins.

For me personally, Mansour Street is the sphere of Raqqa to which I feel a real sense of belonging – my feelings towards Raqqa all begin from Mansour Street. Not only because it's my neighborhood, where I grew up, but because a large chunk of my feelings is inherited from my father. My father has a ritualistic way of behaving towards this street: I cannot

remember a point in my childhood when my father was not busy with his work, and therefore he rarely went for walks on ordinary days. But I think that Walking the Street, as he called it, which he would do during the first few days of Eid and on certain Fridays in spring, was a ritual way of connecting with the place he grew up in, left for nearly two decades that he spent in Spain, and then returned to. My father would walk along Mansour Street, making innumerable stops along the way to greet his neighbors and the people of the street and the nearby area as if they were all cousins, one big group of relations. He would take notice of people, checking up on them – neighbors, school friends, associates – as well as buildings, as if he were making sure that everything was in its place and as it should be. My eldest uncle, the late Hamid al-Suwaiha, had a similar ritual. But in his case it was performed almost daily, and even after his retirement he persisted in it for as long as he remained in good health, diligently opening the stationery shop Granada at six o'clock every morning. He would stay there for an hour or two, until his son arrived, after which he would begin his journey up Mansour Street, dropping in to see his friends in their shops as if he were taking a roll call of them all. This journey may only have been a few hundred meters long, but it would keep him entertained until noon.

Mansour Street remained the most important commercial street in the city until the end of the eighties, when it began gradually losing ground to 23 February Street, the Complex, and White Hill Street. After the regime left the city Mansour Street turned into a street full of bureau de change and money transfer offices.

Mansour Street was always my route to school: in the beginning I used to go south down it towards Rashid Primary School, located to the west of Quwatli Street by the clock tower roundabout. After that my route changed, so that I began it by heading north up Mansour Street, towards 23 February Street,

then west towards Rashid High School.

23 February Street

23 February Street is a key axis of the city: it stretches from the old city wall, the corniche, and the beginning of the industrial area in the east, all the way to Rashid Park in the west. It has intersections with State Sword Street, Mansour Street, Valley Street, White Hill Street, and the Complex, all of which are in their own right major axes of the city. This text will begin its journey along 23 February Street at the junction with Mansour Street, following it as far as the junction with Complex Street, the last intersection before 23 February Streets leads into Rashid Park.

On leaving Mansour Street and turning left – which is to say west – along 23 February Street one finds oneself in front of a four-storey triangular building. Sometimes I remember it with four floors, and other times with just one, which is how it was when I was a child. In this building we find the first shop specialising in jeans: it's name is 'Dallas.' Next to Dallas is the entrance to the rest of the building. A black metal sign hanging in the doorway says 'Doctor Mohammed al-Swehat specialist in heart disease and blood vessels' – it's my father's clinic, or 'Number ten Downing Street' as I like to refer to it when I'm joking with him. This was in fact his clinic from the mid-eighties – when he came back from Spain and completed his military service – until 2009, when he moved to another clinic in White Hill Street. By chance the new clinic being ready for use and my father's move to it coincided with my last visit to Raqqa.

Next door to my father's clinic there was an aluminum workshop owned by a family originally from Aleppo. Coincidentally, I met one of the members of that family in Gaziantep a few months ago, while I was working on an article about the flea market. His name is Omar, and he didn't always live in Raqqa; he only stayed there for a short while before going back to

Aleppo and working in the same industry, in Bustan al-Qasar. I had never met him before, but when I began interviewing him and he heard my Raqqawi accent he asked my family name. As soon as I told him what it was he asked me 'What, are you related to the doctor?' That was the last question I had been expecting to hear on İnönü Street in Gaziantep.



Destruction in 23 February Street after the rocket attacks of November 2013

Heading west, we find a huge square, which is the old cardamon market, bounded on its south side by the al-Siahi bakery, facing out onto 23 February Street. A little further along, on the other side of the street, is the 23 February al-Ihtiati bakery. These two establishments are the biggest and most important bakeries in the city. This square suffered an egregious rocket attack (believed to be a scud missile) one dawn in late November 2013, which martyred more than forty people and injured tens of others, as well as causing huge destruction in the area.

Past the bakeries 23 February Street intersects Valley Street, then White Hill Street, at a crossroads popularly known as 'Junction of the Greens,' a reference to the Khadar Pharmacy situated right on the junction – the family name Khadar means

Greens. This intersection between two pivotal streets in the city was the prime location for demonstrations to mass at and set off from during the first two years of the revolution, and Ali al-Babnesi, the first of Raqqa's martyrs, was killed nearby. Al-Babnesi, born in 1996, was slain by a security forces bullet during an evening demo in White Hill Street on the first anniversary of the outbreak of the revolution. His death led to an uprising in the city the following day, when the [packed funeral procession](#) for the martyr turned into a [huge demo](#) that was met with bullets, martyring eighteen people.



The trees on 23 February Street before they were uprooted.

23 February Street ends in the west, where it forms a T-junction with Complex Street, on the other side of which is Rashid Park.

One of 23 February Street's distinctive features used to be its trees. A two-way street with separate traffic lanes, it had a broad central reservation in which trees had been planted about four decades ago. Once they had grown, these trees not only provided shade but a break from the dusty monotony of an environment not blessed with any other

greenery. Then, at the end of the last decade, these trees were uprooted, and the broad central reservation replaced with a narrower one made from ornate Syrian stone. This provoked resentment in the city at the time, and a group of citizens tried to lodge a complaint with a petition that demanded the conservation of existing trees, given their severe lack in the city. But the citizens' indignation was met with indifference: the only reaction was an article that appeared on one of the local websites, a site devoted to praising local officials. The author of the piece attacked those who had objected, describing them as a 'stumbling block' standing in the way of the city's development and modernization. As evidence for the importance of the lavish central reservation made from Syrian stone, the writer argued that the 'great civilizations' of Palmyra are known for their stones, not their trees, and finished his comments with praise for the governor's efforts to modernize and redecorate the city's streets and squares. Unfortunately that website is no longer online. As for the person who wrote the piece, a classmate of mine from school, he has been in one of the European refuge states for the last three years. No doubt he's upset by the abundance of trees and the scarcity of civilization around him there.

Complex Street

This street forms a T-junction with 23 February Street, extending from Evenings Junction and Naim Roundabout in the north down to the Church of the Martyrs in the south. Behind the Church of the Martyrs are the veterinarians' district and the Circassians' district.

The street takes its name from the old government complex overlooking it from beside Rashid Park. This government complex is like an idol in a shrine to Soviet brutalist architecture. It's a broad rectangle of six or seven storeys, austere and depressing, built in the seventies to house the bulk of the state administrations, the governor's office and the headquarters of the provincial council, as well as a

cultural center.

In reality, we can use the changes in governmental architecture to distinguish between two phases in Raqqa, and perhaps in Syria as a whole. On the one hand we find the Soviet model: big buildings, such as this complex, or the administrations for Land Reclamation and the Euphrates Basin on the west of the city. These are very ugly buildings that do not coexist with the city, and are not interested in being part of it. They appear instead to be menhirs or dolmens that fell to earth in Raqqa, not only in terms of their architectural form, but also as an approach to coexistence between the state and the society it rules over. There is no coexistence or interaction, just a heavy and bureaucratic vertical structure, dull and stifling of everything else – exactly as the government complex appears compared to everything around it. This is the preferred model of the Ba'ath Party years, and the mode of Hafez al-Assad.

As for Bashar al-Assad's era – or rather the era of 'development and modernization' that began with a rush to prepare the heir – it was a time of luxury in the construction process, of opulence for opulence's sake. Part of the monstrous government complex was replaced by a newly built lavish and luxurious 'Government House' in the south of the city which cost – officially – 332 million Syrian pounds (at a time when there was 46 Syrian pounds to the dollar); there was a total rebuild (yes, a rebuild) of a palace for hosting guests (that's right, in Raqqa!) that cost tens of millions of Syrian pounds; and a new official residence was built for the chief of police, and a new headquarters for the political security forces, in the style of villas made from Aleppan stone – villas that looked like they would have made good film sets for a television drams about drug dealers in remote rural Mexico.



The Government House in Raqqa, construction of which cost 332 million Syrian pounds.

Apart from buildings, the Bashar al-Assad era witnessed huge spending on the 'beautification' of the main streets and squares in the city. Beautification in this context does not mean improving road surfaces, nor maintaining the crumbling infrastructure, nor creating one where it is lacking. What it means instead is millions being poured into sumptuous floor tiles for some of the central reservations and sidewalks (as was the case in 23 February Street) or in varieties of laser lighting; or razing mature trees and replacing them with palms that cost around 200,000 Syrian pounds each (as happened in the area around Naim Roundabout). All of this in a city that has, for example, a structural problem in the sewage system, an worsening issue with groundwater, and a huge number of streets that are not even paved at all.

But Raqqa lived through a time that was somehow an intermediate phase between the Soviet era and the era of so-called development and modernization: the period when Mohammed Salman, who later went on to become Minister of Information, was Raqqa's City Governor. This was in the eighties, and the

time he was in power was a time of terror in all senses of the word. In addition to his administrative powers as Governor, Mohammed Salman also had security powers, and his interference in every detail of the life of the city was extreme and was carried out with boorish and harsh security methods. This included interfering in the recruitment and employment of resident doctors and nurses at the government hospital. In addition to the painful legacy of memories of his arbitrary and unscrupulous rule, Mohammed Salman also left a majestic palace, whose grandeur provokes the passerby to this day. It's a lavishly luxurious palace, but it was designed to the same twisted Soviet taste that distinguishes the Military Housing Foundation – with a tennis court and basketball court, several swimming pools, and a garage full of luxury cars.

This palace is located opposite Rashid High School, which we'll be revisiting shortly.



The Governor's Palace, built during Mohammed Salman's tenure.

As noted at the beginning of this section, the Church of the Martyrs is on the southern side of Complex Street. The building is currently being used by Daesh as a propaganda office. On the western side of the church is an extension that used to be the kindergarten that I was sent to as a child by my parents. The square in front of the church witnessed [hundreds of Raqqa people welcoming Father Paolo the day he](#)

[arrived in Raqqa at the end of July 2013](#). The day after that evening demo Paolo Dall'Oglio was kidnapped during his attempt to mediate in order to discover the fate of the Raqqawi activists Menhim Ibrahim al-Ghazi and Firas al-Haj Salah, who had been kidnapped in the previous weeks. All three of the men are still missing.

One evening, out of a desire – neither voluntary nor conscious – to torture myself, I watched one of the propaganda films that Daesh release from time to time. This one had been shot inside the church, and it included scenes of a prize-giving ceremony that was held for children and adolescents who had memorized sections of the Quran and other texts during a certain period. The event took place in the little theatre in the church basement; I had trodden those same boards twice during my childhood, as a pupil of the church kindergarten, during the Mother's Day celebrations the kindergarten used to hold every year, attended by the children's parents. The children would sing rounds and hymns in Arabic and French, and also, of course, Ba'athist chants about the 'homeland.'



All I have left of that artistic journey these days is a single photo, in which I am holding the Ba'ath Party flag (I am on the far right of the picture, luckily not in a very clear shot) and my classmates are holding flags and pictures of Hafez al-Assad. That moment represented the peak of my career in the field of political art.

Incidentally, when I watched the Daesh production, I noticed – before the torrent of grotesque that ensued – that the church theatre was much smaller than I had remembered it.

The High School

Rashid High School – or just ‘the High School,’ as my father and many of his Raqqawi contemporaries call it – is on the western side of Rashid Park and the government complex. It was both the first primary and the first secondary school in Raqqa, and my father's year group were the first class to attend the primary school: it was they who planted the trees in the school yard. One of the distinctive features of Rashid School is that its trees are part of its courtyard, in an open area where the pupils spend part of their break times or whatever other opportunity arises; this is not a widespread phenomenon in the secondary schools of Raqqa, whose gardens, if they exist, are much smaller than this one and practically off limits to the pupils.

If we looked down at the school from up in the sky we would see it laid out in the shape of a the letter E: two open and parallel blocks, the eastern one being the secondary school and the western the primary school, with a two-storey block linking them. The ground floor of this linking block is a gym, and the upper floor is a theatre. Opposite the gym is a science lab divided into two sections: one houses the work benches for experiments to be done on, and the other is a sort of amphitheater like the raked lecture theaters in universities.

Unlike all the other schools in Raqqa, with their dreary standardized geometry, Rashid school has a unique and cheerful design. It has a spacious courtyard, and every classroom has windows on at least two sides. Both structurally and in terms of decor it was better than the rest of the more modern secondary schools, even those built in the nineties, leading one to conclude that it was in fact an exemplary school design when it was built in the early sixties.

Beside the school is a full-size football pitch, with an athletics track around the edge. The pitch and the track are both clay, and they were part of the school when it was built, before the school was separated from the football pitch in the eighties by a narrow street leading to the police headquarters and the Palace of Justice. This was the first of two incursions that were made into the expanse of the school grounds. The other one was committed by Mohammed Salman, when he used part of the garden on the south of the school to widen the street in front of the north entrance to the Governor's Palace.



The Rashid High School football pitch in the seventies, with the Government Complex visible behind the players. (Photo courtesy of Raqqa Sport website)

In the south-eastern corner of the school there is a very large diesel-powered generator that makes a loud noise and produces thick smoke. This generator does not serve the school, but the Governor's Palace. There is nothing wrong with the sound of it deafening a few secondary school pupils when the need arises – that's preferable to it annoying the governor and his family and guests.

It seems that there was a library in the school when I was studying there, but I never visited it, and I don't remember any of my classmates using it either. What I am sure of is that there was a 'librarian,' who I saw just once when she stormed into our physics class in the second year of primary school to slap one of my classmates because he had quarreled with her son. She was the wife of the then minister of petroleum.

Rashid High School does not have any preferential status as an institution, it is just a school like any other. But the fact that it was the first to be established, and employed the most senior and experienced teachers, as well as being the first secondary school for generations – that is to say, the first secondary school in which children could follow in their parents' footsteps when they enrolled – gave it a certain prestigious aura. There was an idea that the best pupils in the province graduated from it each year, until the school for outstandingly gifted pupils was established in the late nineties. But as has happened across the whole educational sphere over the last few decades, the standards at Rashid school have deteriorated. The education process has now shifted away from school to such an extent that almost all of it takes place in private lessons outside of that institution, especially at the secondary level, with the school serving as virtually nothing more than an administrative structure.

In Conflict With Memory

The reader can disregard the whole of what was said in the

previous section if he/she wants to know about the reality of Rashid High School, not only during the years of the revolution but during those prior to it. Rashid High School has not been like I describe it here since at least the middle of the last decade. First the gym was scrapped in order to build extra classrooms, then the school theatre too was sacrificed for the same reason. Subsequently, two or three years after I finished secondary school and moved to Spain, the primary school was separated from the secondary school in order to construct two separate schools. Then the garden was destroyed – the one that had been planted by the pupils in the first ever year group, my father's class – so as to build the new school for outstandingly gifted pupils on the site. Somehow among all the vast empty sites in the city the education administration could not find a suitable location for the new school other than in the garden of the High School.

Part of the football pitch was also annexed, so that new headquarters for the mortgage bank could be built there.

This phenomenon – that the version of reality in Raqqa I remember is long gone – applies to most aspects of the city. But this clash between memory and reality did not begin with the revolution or with the post-revolutionary period, although of course huge changes have taken place over the last five years. It began during my last visits to Raqqa, when I felt alienated and estranged by the way the city was changing, and by my lack of familiarity with it as a city in its own right, other than within the framework of meeting up with family and friends. I did not once construct any kind of nostalgia or sentimentality about Raqqa – on the contrary, my feelings about the city were extremely pragmatic: I belong to this city, where I lived during my childhood and adolescence, my family are there, I have friends and relations there, but not much more than that.

In reality, I began to feel my relationship with Raqqa

complicating with the certainty that the strongest feeling I have for the city is impotent grief for her and her people: my people. This is a grief that masks any other type of feelings, crippling the capacity to even explore those other feelings. This grief also stifles any potential for Raqqa to be a topic for thought or work, as far as I am concerned. Over the last three years I have not written a single analytical article about the situation in Raqqa, or extrapolated the city's future. It has not been unusual for me to respond to the astonishment and curiosity shown by the non-Syrians I meet, on discovering that I am from Raqqa, with annoyance; I am not proud at all that my tension has reached such a point that I deliberately feigned stupidity with an 'expert' who was trying to engage me in a debate about the behavior of the international alliance against Daesh a few months ago.

What I mean by the 'conflict of memory' that I have about Raqqa is that I vacillate between considering the act of keeping hold of my memories of life in Raqqa as an act of resistance, on the one hand, and seeing it as a selfish act that is not entirely free of hypocrisy, on the other. I see it as an act of resistance when I think that the attempt to keep these memories fresh and vital for as long as possible is an effort that must be made, a way of confronting Daesh's colonist occupation. This occupation goes beyond military dominance and moves towards Orwellian forms of remodeling the place and its people after its new tyrants and their moods; towards forging a new reality for the city, stripped of its people and its past, along the lines of the Ministry of Truth in the novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. I confront this occupation – I convince myself – by holding onto my memories. But, on the other hand, I suspect myself sometimes of hypocrisy, as I consciously hold onto images of Raqqa both personal and public in the knowledge that they no longer exist in reality. The High School is no longer as it was when I was a child; my father's clinic is no longer 'Number ten Downing Street,' but is now somewhere else; most of the shops that I remember have

closed or changed function; even most of the buildings and streets that I remember from my childhood are no longer as they were. Raqqa in my memory is Raqqa before the year 2000, when I was sixteen years old, but it is not the nostalgic recollection of someone who wishes they were still an adolescent, it is a memory held in the knowledge that we are in the year 2016, and reconciled with the certainty that I am now thirty two years old. I am fully conscious of the presence of this surreal expanse of time.

I am doing here what thoughtless software users do, those who are accustomed to the structure and functionality of the first version of the program, and are averse to all updates that might appear. Tossed around in the white waters of self-torture I can get to the point of considering my behavior towards my memories of Raqqa as a form of complicity with the isolation of Raqqa from the outside world.

The basis of this conflict, perhaps, is my having been deprived of a natural relationship with the city as a part of my life. Deprived of the capacity to discover whether I miss it or not, what kind of relationship I want to have with it, how frequently I want to visit it, what kind of contribution I wish to make – or not – to the life of the city. Naturally, I am not the only one who is denied all this; more to the point, in comparison with most other Raqqa-wis I am not even deprived, as I have other worlds and different options available to me, in stark contrast with someone who is forced to leave the city and head into the unknown, or who is still living in a city reduced to nothing but a tattered nightmare version of what it once was. I feel an abashed solidarity towards those people, coming from someone who does not dare to talk about our situation as being the same, and who therefore feels helpless and guilty, and who flees this helplessness to seek refuge in the memories of the first version of the software. I flee in search of a firm foothold from which to observe – helplessly, once again – Raqqa in 2016.

I cannot see a clear solution to this conflict of memory. I mock these thoughts at times, and blame myself for them, and at other times I place them at the centre of my thinking about public affairs. In whichever case, what I am in no doubt about is that the return of the people of Raqqa to their city, and Raqqa's return to them, is the only way for me to remember the city of my childhood as I would like to. Only then will I be able to remember it without being concerned by the differences of scale between memory and reality, and – more importantly than anything else – without feeling impotent and useless, and without feeling guilt.