



## The Afflicted With Safety

There are aircrafts swarming over the Syrian city of Aleppo as I write this; aircrafts that hail death and horror, and provide brief lessons in history; aircrafts that rain down erasure of all the writings and voices whispering glory to the dead and the wounded, and to their incomprehensible images; aircrafts that nightly propel the outcasts in front of their screens of all sizes, keeping them in suspense, with unspecified grief, unannounced rage, inexpressible despair, and complex pang of guilt for not being sufficiently equal to the victims.

This speech has to begin from the point at which it ends, in hope that it does end. There is no tale here, but a few glimpses. A tale has pillars, paramount over which is to not conclude, as when it eventually concludes, it amounts to no more than a detail or a scene in a broader tale.

Dreams were distributed amongst all, as fairly as to befit those deprived of their future and their past. It has been a fair distribution of absence, where suitcases take the shape of the departed, and where social media pages are tasked with uncovering the contents of these suitcases. It is the justice

with which horror is amassed; the justice of proportions.

We can interpret that guilt as a terrifying inclination towards justice for the victims. This entails reducing them to their horror, unyieldingly interning them within it, and regarding them with an innate shame at not being sufficiently equal. If we do, however, then this guilt becomes but a record of losses that is composed of rejection and acceptance: rejection of the daily Syrian carnage, which is open to gratuitous labeling; and acceptance of carrying on the initial struggle against the regime, which is the Revolution's struggle for dignity.

Our complex qualm is another battle with the regime. But how could witnesses such as ourselves adapt to a battle imposed by the regime and its founders, while their initial spaces have been destroyed?

## **Beginnings**

Whenever I try to recollect the details of the spark of the popular movement since March of 2011, the protest base stretching across the Syrian map, and the callings flooding the pages of social media, I feel as if I were an old man trying to remember a juncture in his life that has been past for over twenty years. At the same time, I feel curbed by the moments we have underwent, by their poignant deliberation and proximity, and by the frightening toll to which we have been witness, or even victims.

By "we" I mean the small group of youths who were bound in revolution at a meeting soirée. That soirée determined the destiny of our contribution and awareness of the revolution, each armed with the lens, eyes and observations of the other. The resultant scene was composed of our activity and testimony to the event. Scattered across the regions, each according to their place of study, we happened to joke about how all what we lacked was a reporter in Qamishli. Our reunions there, in

Tartous, were tantamount to group meetings, whereas we were often summoned to participate in this or that activity. A small cell of dreams was gathered by happenstance, nothing uniting them but one position; some of us deemed this position to be political, by virtue of their interests, while the rest considered it ultimately moral. Standing with the Revolution has been first and foremost a moral standpoint, even if opposing the regime stemmed from political alignment, which some inherited in their family milieus.

The acceleration of the events of the Revolution, and the development of its expressions made most of us work a lot harder to return to Damascus. I use the term "return" here, given the fact that the social environment of the Syrian coast has been opposed to the Revolution, nay, it is a reservoir of the instruments of its repression. This made going to Damascus equivalent to choosing the Syria we want, the Syria which is distinguished with its air you sense as soon as you enter it: massive and diverse groups of people united under one goal, one chant, one row of vowing hands and shoulders, one pant and one fate as they run from the security forces chasing protesters. Those moments were like replaying ideas and meanings that had been already recorded. We did not perceive them but as songs, theories and serious attractions that appealed to the ambition of an enthusiastic youth. One protest was entirely sufficient for these ideas to become a tangible substance; for these dreams to become a fully formed body that would advance in front of everybody to carve its entity and become a reality.

### **The departure home**

It wasn't possible for most of us to remain in Damascus, since not each one of us had specific business there such as studying. As the base of the mobilization expanded, until it eventually encompassed all the regions of Syrian land, each area was preoccupied, as well as content, with organizing, developing and escalating its own form of protest. Following

the brutal crackdown of security forces against the initial revolt incubators, each of these had to split and work on protecting itself, with minimal coordination to unify the form of protestation and response.

This transformation has converted the “incubator-less,” such as ourselves, into external contributors. We were welcomed by revolting masses, but only as supporting groups and not as participants. This rendered the majority of activists coming from outside the revolutionary regions mere proponents. To most of us, it was so painful that our participation in Barzeh, for example, started with the protest and ended before its actual end. The activists there, for fear of a berserk reaction from the security forces and thugs, were keen to protect us and secure our exit. Those who were shown out would continue their soirées, while Barzeh would fall prey to campaigns of detention, thuggery and devastation. This situation made it inevitable that most of us take a firm attitude against participating. It also posed an important issue: Are we mere proponents or an actual part of this movement?

Later on, the spaces of action began to diminish, as military action took over, Islamized slogans prevailed and activists suffered from more and more pursuits. Our space of action, as “incubator-less,” also diminished, while activities in our city was already limited and restricted due to the widespread loyalty to the regime. Most of us “departed” to their hometown, returning to observation and defiance merely on social media. They settled for awaiting news of the detention or release of friends, filling the record of losses and applying maintenance to memory, in an attempt to conserve the history of the event and to protect the sacrifices of the revolutionaries.

This departure home was equivalent to leaving Syria; the Syria that is there, in the east, the northern east and southern east. In the Syria that is there are the remnants of the

friends and faces, where struggles are active, and where the soil has become more solid under the dancing feet of the peaceful revolutionaries. In the Syria that is there are still these demonstrations, where the air is a reliable medium for their chants, and a conveyer of their rugged and merciless thunder.

### **The afflicted with safety**

Public appearance in the squares became a risk fraught with death and devastation, with determination and tenacity. Since then, our actual role has become sharing the horror amongst ourselves, and attempting to understand it in its historical context. Initially, we had not considered political analysis, nor deconstructing the structure of the regime to understand its singular mentality, which would not bear a surprising outcome. We had been too eager to conceive of anything mightier than our voices pervading in the squares. What the regime has done to the Revolution was not so novel to it, but was rather abetted by preceding experiences.

We were destined to become polemic revolutionaries, standing shamefully before the victims, afflicted with safety in front of daily bleeding and nefarious destruction. We sought refuge in self-flagellation, ashamed of our very existence, of our belonging to the places we hail from, witnessing the criminals returning to their homes after oppressing and bombarding entire areas. Being sufficiently equal to the victims has become our most severe obsession.

Faced with strain in all forms of expression, and paralyzed by our meagre numbers and the lack of an revolutionary incubator, enthusiasm and hope eluded most of us. The detention of one person in the city would suffice to make everyone anxious. We had no time for fearing for ourselves, but we were rather concerned for each other. Most of us were not spared thuggery, intimidation or detention, so the fall of any of us would be a collapse of the steadfastness of all. After the survival of a

friend from detention, or from a harmful thuggery, we used to collude with ourselves by rejoicing for them. They have become victims! They are no longer afflicted with safety. Surviving the victim complex and wishing to be equal in victimization has become the demand of every Syrian in Assad's Syria.

Most of us, especially those who had to flee the country, took with them their affliction with safety, their shame of their origins, of an identity accused a priori of demolishing cities and killing and displacing their populations.

### **My friend is not a suitcase**

Eventually, everyone has been compelled to leave, and to be expelled from everything: the county, the dreams, the memory that renews itself on a daily basis, exponentially filled with pictures and devastation. They have also been expelled from each other, panting as they head towards infinite destinations, begging them to not close down. They were summed up by their suitcases. These have never been carried on backs and shoulders, but rather on dreams and hopelessness. These daughters of a choice of self-defence, of escaping the escaping, have been carried on bitterness.

I no longer remember the friends as much as I remember the shapes of their suitcases. Their last pictures were linked to an added organ in them, the suitcase; an organ that fashioned a memory for them, for me and for their families.

This memory you arrange and prepare, as it should fit a huge amount of tales, similarities, identities and smells. This memory forfeits its nature at inspection centers in airports, on borders or at checkpoints, and it is destined to be inspected. It is an immense memory that is insufficient to carry all the details, feelings, thoughts, dreams and disappointments; it is an intimate record for a well-arranged horror. This is how a suitcase is mobilized, and this is how it becomes a vast text with an ordinary footnote that is its

carrier.

I have evasively repeated the famous phrase, the brainchild of a previous generation "My homeland is not a suitcase [that I take with me when I leave]." But I contort it to befit my generation: "My friend is not a suitcase." My friend is not a record of cities, alleys, soirées, and glances evading the eyes in the times of helpless attempts at being, being anything: comical, lazy, wicked, rude... being nothing while casting nothingness in a cheap leather handle, carrying it on the shoulder or the back.

It is to hate the smell of cheap counterfeit nylon, which reminds you of suitcases, of your attire in the elementary school, or your khaki uniform in the secondary school – that which has the essential added course: military training.

You hate it at times and like it at others, because it reminds you of them. You are there, with them, exactly as they are here, with you. You check up on each other with recalling a whisper from a night of reminiscence, a soirée after a drink that may refresh the corpses of suitcases. Then you begin to release each other from the pockets and hidden compartments, sitting down one by one. Then you slumber alone, cursing alcohol and the its way of rubbing the lamp of yearning and fragile feelings.

How many of them were betrayed by the memory of a suitcase. How many of them gaped at an open mouth of a torn suitcase, screaming from the pains built up within it, from the painful failure at arranging its contradictory memories. The contents of suitcases ought to pledge themselves to suit the guards of borders and airport; they ought to follow the provisions of international security, and to be faithful to their own notions of safety. These notions are designed by naïve racism, which had been political and is now social, due to the consolidation of the systems ruling over them.

How many cities were displaced to the expansive metropolises, which are prepared with big white suitcases of blue logos, and which are experienced to arrange them in a neat manner that resembles the neat personal suitcases. Personal suitcases continue to hold a disarray of fates, dreams, disappointments, and attempts at escaping and at suffering, as well as petrifying contradictions you are asked to arrange and gather within a defined space.

The suitcases will not be faces, homes, aspirations or disappointments. They will remain a means of self-defense, which will be rejected as the upper hand dominating this miserable universe evolves. That hand is submissive to the power of the mightier, and it would develop means of aggression that suit the means of self-defense. That hand will not, however, keep pace with the accumulation of human grievances, which will remain resolute in the fight for dignity.

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*At the beginning of this year, Al Jumhuriya Collective, in collaboration with Asfari Foundation, launched a program titled 'Al Jumhuriya Fellowship for Young Writers'. The objective of the program is to work with a group of young Syrian men and women -both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries- who, due to the circumstances imposed by war, were not given a chance to specialize in fields of journalism and social sciences, and who have ambitions to develop their writing skills and to strengthen their knowledge in social journalism and the modern history of Syria, as well as critical thinking.*

*Towards the end of the first phase of the program, which revolves around read, the group began working on three writing axis: observations, testimonies and stories from the revolution; in-depth investigations and social observations of the Syrian society; and analytical and critical essays about*



*topics previously covered and attempting to deconstruct them.*

*This piece is the second addition to the series of works produced by our fellows to be published on a weekly basis. The first series of articles will cover the first axis: observations, testimonies and stories from the revolution.*