Refuge in a Moving World

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena

Published by University College London


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81874
Introduction

This chapter consists of a brief introduction to what I refer to as ‘writing the camp’ and ‘writing the camp archive’, followed by a series of poems or fragments that I have written in my capacity as the writer-in-residence of a research project examining experiences of and responses to displacement from Syria.¹ Through particular reference to Baddawi refugee camp (my place of birth) in North Lebanon,² this chapter assesses the ways in which refugees write the camp into their own multiple narratives vis-à-vis markers (and beings) of temporality, permanence and liminality.³ Important, I note from the outset that writing (in) the camp is not assigned a specific outcome as such, so much as it is a response to the very presence of the camp itself.

Writing the camp archive⁴

Who writes the camp? Who traces the camp’s evolution into (a) space? Who demarcates its limbs as they retreat internally in order to accommodate more refugees? The camp has never been entirely a place, but a multiplicity of entwined histories and times (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). These times bear witness to the construction as well as the dissolution of refugee communities. Baddawi camp in North Lebanon is my home camp and has, since its birth in the 1950s, become home to refugees
from across the Middle East at different times – including, most recently, refugees from Syria since 2011. It has become urgent to document the lives of its residents in both life and death through processes that privilege the ordinary and the everyday at the expense of the extraordinary and the unique, which rarely belong to the community itself but to those who claim its representation.

This entails maintaining a healthy distance between ‘writing’ as a determination to exist despite all the renewed adversities in such places, and as an act of continuous archiving whereby refugees themselves (consciously) narrate the camp in their daily presences in ways that not only instate their solitude but are also essential to remember who they are. Such a practice poignantly resonates with Jacques Derrida’s conceptualization of the archive as a creation towards the future and as a domain in which people are its mere agents (Derrida, 1996). We might say that such processes are the only processes that remind the camp’s inhabitants that it is their right to write what is deemed theirs in the spatial and territorial sense, even though such markers are never conspicuous, nor are they markers of permanence as such.

In ‘Writing the Camp’, a series of responses and engagements with and around the camp, its battles with itself, its people and its surroundings, which have appeared periodically on the ‘Refugee Hosts’ platform (www.refugeehosts.org), I have attempted to turn my sight on the camp in two manners (see Qasmiyeh, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d). First, as a site where the holy and the profane amalgamate, for it is their marriage, forced or otherwise, that keeps inviting as well as shunning people. Second, it is through documenting the camp’s innards that we witness what will never be witnessed again, through transforming the relationship between the writer of the camp and the camp itself into a form of unbreakable bond, not in the tribal sense but as a memory that is there simply to keep both the camp and its inhabitants alive. To return to Derrida’s notion of the archive (1996: 20–1), it is the body – the body of the refugee, her skin – that becomes the parchment, the very piece of paper or skin, that holds the specificities of being a refugee, of being an outcast in a space that will never go away or stay. As such, the refugee’s existence becomes solely contingent on an archive that is ‘an impression associated with a word’ (ibid.: 29), which is in the process of being written by the refugee herself.

Derrida’s engagement with bodily markers as essential components of the archive, those that incise as well as circumcise, appears to presuppose difference on behalf of those who intend to write the archive or those whose ‘writing’ ought to play a role in reclaiming the age(ing) of
the camp by tracing the event therein. Writing in this context becomes an act of bearing witness, simultaneously a testimony to/for the individual and the camp. While it is essential for me to write what is worthy of writing, without delving deeply into the personal but hovering above it, writing emerges as a memory hunting down more memories. So, who is the witness in a refugee camp? Who is the owner of the testimony? Is it the refugee herself or those who (are able to) come and go? As it is the camp itself that validates and corroborates what is going to be narrated, the writer becomes a witness-agent, a gatherer of details, details that continuously refer the refugee to the camp through cumulative memories and sounds.

In the camp, we bear witness to ourselves first and foremost, to our multiple lives and deaths in this space of containment. We do so as if it were our ‘duty’ to leave something behind, a palpable thing upon which our names are inscribed – the names that tie us to those who have borne us while also giving the latter the opportunity to bear witness to the creation of more refugees as time passes. The trace that we normally leave, intentionally or otherwise, in spaces and through journeys that we, at times, attempt by force to normalize, is what keeps us attached to this state of tentativeness: we are neither fully en route or in an actual place, nor are we promised an arrival. As I have argued elsewhere (Qasmiyeh, 2016c), in documenting the trace – in bearing witness to its presence in the shape of the static, animate or otherwise – we forge a linkage between all the tenses at work (also see Hoffman et al., in this volume). In other words, remembering the camp becomes the prerequisite for remembering ourselves in/outside the camp.

It is after all how ‘[The archive] opens out of the future’ (Derrida, 1996: 68) and the way in which its engagement with the past and the present defines and reconfigures its nature – be it that of the individual or that of the collective. In the same vein, it is the unity between witnessing and archiving in the refugee camp that maintains the momentum of writing, as an overarching means through which details are captured as soon as they leave their source. Such an immediacy is that of the future, the future that is yet to be defined as an upcoming event and yet it is its promise that keeps the camp afloat. Indeed, according to Derrida:

The question of the archive is not ... a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility.
of tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. (Derrida, 1996: 36, emphasis in the original)

Since it is the archive of the refugee that will (might) be gathered, it is worth briefly stopping at the question of performativity. The refugee has never assigned herself the role of the initiator of the archive. It is a role that has been bestowed upon her by a series of instants: these are the instants of the camp. We might argue that sensing that there should be an archive of/for the camp is what keeps the camp alive for the time being, as it transfers both the person and the place towards the future. Thus, the ‘camp archive’ ties the refugee, the camp and time together in an insoluble chain, in which in order for the archive to survive its own destiny it should survive its writing:

The camp is a passing human, a book, a manuscript, an archive … Bury it; smother it with its own dust, so it might return as a holy text devoid of intentions. (Qasmiyeh, 2017b – Writing the Camp Archive)

The same question, however elliptical it is, keeps returning: Who writes the archive:

Only refugees can forever write the archive.
The camp owns the archive, not God.
For the archive not to fall apart, it weds the camp unceremoniously.
The question of a camp archive is also the question of the camp’s survival beyond speech.
Circumcising the body can indicate the survival of the place.
Blessed are the pending places that are called camps. (Qasmiyeh, 2017b – Writing the Camp Archive)

Although it is the writing that reminds us of the value of what we write, it seems that a clear distinction between the divine and the human in writing is urgently needed. Such a distinction would not only equate the status of the camp with that of the ‘owner’ of the archive, but it would also delineate a total synergy between the ‘pending’ in the camp and the ‘pending’ in the archive.

The lack of clarity vis-à-vis what the archive really is, and realizing that ‘nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word “archive”’ (Derrida, 1996: 90) should undoubtedly not diminish the archive’s capacity to privilege the written at the expense of what is already
there. In the end, ‘the structure of the archive is spectral. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent “in the flesh”, neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another … ’ (ibid.: 84). For it is what can be archived that is worthy of the name ‘archive’; it is thus essential to consider the language that is employed in such records. More importantly, as we are seeking to write ‘the then’, transcending the rhetoric of empathy towards refugees becomes some sort of a ‘minor’ language – a language that is ‘the instrument *par excellence* of that destratification’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2012: xvi). In ‘writing the camp’, this ‘destratification’ manifests itself in two different (and yet entwined) ways: in writing the camp and in order to write with the intention of continuity, the means, the language in this context, recoils into itself – not to disappear or shrink, but to reinstate its conditions from within. Finally, inviting an act of writing from within does not necessarily imply a uni-writing, which is based upon one ‘narrative’ or on a language that claims absolute entitlement to the future by virtue of having been born in/to the camp. On the contrary, it is the direct opposite of such an archival monopoly. To put it simply, the writing that we are putting forward is the one that ‘deals with the acknowledged doubt of an explicit division … of the impossibility of one’s own place’ (De Certeau, 1975: 327, cited in Bensmaïa, 2012: ix). This ‘division’, or fragmentariness, inherent within these narratives, is exactly what enables us to ‘re-gather’ from different sites (whether it is the camp or its (de) placement) and ‘write’ at the same time as we write the camp.

**Writing Baddawi refugee camp into literature**

Against this backdrop, writing Baddawi refugee camp into literature inevitably means writing both those who have continued life and living in this place – and, I would argue, in this camp-time – since the 1950s and also the newcomers who have perceived the camp, in its ontological and existential sense, as their only place, into narratives that are yet to be complete(d). This writing reasserts these people’s belonging to and clashes with a continuum of refugeedom and displacement that has escaped its boundaries into a life (or lives) whose writing presupposes the intimate in the national. In writing the camp, we write the intimate, or what is deemed as such, in its absolute rawness and translucence: the place shredding its innards to assume a new place; the wall that defines the prior to and the post of an event; the gravedigger and his hands handling life and death in equal measures; old, new and green cemeteries; the call to prayer disrupting the void but also echoing it at once; the father, the mother, the brothers and the sisters being discerned
diurnally and written (probably despite themselves) into fragments and epithets of time; old and new refugees fighting with time, each other and no one; traces as artefacts; tilted memories as the sun in May; dialects contra dialects; pictures as recurrent pasts, framed or imposed on frames; UNRWA; ‘God and the neighbour, Palestinian or otherwise; daily jobs practised, like their prayers, mainly indoors; migratory birds flying or being lost above the camp; young people drowning en route to an abstract Europe; weddings and funerals passing the scene hand-in-hand; other camps but also other people; names and proper nouns baiting a never-happening future; the same illnesses occurring and reoccurring; the camp as a future; the camp as an archive.

We shall write the concrete in the camp. We shall write the camp as a time beneath time but, above all, as its own time suspended from the edges of history and intention. We shall write in anticipation of what is to come – that is, to come, to witness, to write the archive.

But what is the archive in a camp named to bear a name – its name, the name that is at once the history and geography of a name beyond a name? The archive only begins in the camp. It begins in the hope that the camp will return to its cycle safely, with a well-recited text, that of the immediate and the intimate. From my mother drying the life out of vegetables to make them edible in the future, to my father hammering a handcrafted wooden table with uneven legs, with innumerable nails to fix a crack, an invisible crack, a crack, nonetheless – therein lies the archive.

My mother’s food jars, her dried vegetables – prepared with the intention of using them at a later date, whenever this date happens – compounded with my father’s curses as he remembers a life marked by constant precarity since his flight from Palestine in 1948 as a young boy through multiple places until the creation of Baddawi camp, are not mere transient proclivities but a necessary engagement with the ‘then’ in a setting that is the closest to a text and a canon.

Could there be, after all, an archival writing or a writing of an archive by and for the refugee in a time when neither the camp nor its inhabitants, as always suggested, are born to remain in their writing?

The camp, the archive, shall remain above memory overseeing the daily and the wild odd plants in the cracks …

Writing as an eye beyond eyes

The following fragments were composed as part of my project, ‘Writing the Camp: Writing the Camp Archive’, with the intention of co-seeing in
writing what would otherwise reach its end without being remembered as the lived.

**Writing the camp: Vis-à-vis or a camp**

To experience is to advance by navigating, to walk by traversing. (Derrida, 1996: 373)

What makes a camp a camp? And what is the beginning of a camp if there is any? And do camps exist in order to die or exist forever?

Baddawi is my home camp, a small camp compared to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon. For many residents, it comprises two subcamps: the lower and the upper camps that converge at the old cemetery. As I was growing up, it was common for children to know their midwife. Ours, perhaps one of only two in the entire camp, was an elderly woman, who died tragically when a wall collapsed on top of her fragile body during a stormy day in the camp. The midwife was the woman who cut our umbilical cords and washed us for the first time. She lived by the main mosque – Masjid al-Quds – that overlooked the cemetery. She would always wait by the cemetery to stop those who she delivered en route to school, to give them a kiss and remind them that she was the one who made them.

The camp is never the same albeit with roughly the same area. New faces, new dialects, narrower alleys, newly-constructed and ever-expanding thresholds and doorsteps, intertwined clothing lines and electrical cables, well-shielded balconies, little oxygen and impenetrable silences are all amassed in this space. The shibboleth has never been clearer and more poignant than it is now.

Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds share
the camp, the same-different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet.

V

Now, in the camp, there are more mosques, more houses of God, while people continue to come and go, like the calls to prayer emanating at slightly varied times from all these mosques, supplementing, interrupting, transmuting, and augmenting the voice and the noise simultaneously.

VI

Baddawi is a camp that lives and dies in our sight. It is destined to remain (not necessarily as itself) so long as time continues to be killed in its corners.

Writing the camp archive

The camp is a passing human, a book, a manuscript, an archive … Bury it; smother it with its own dust, so it might return as a holy text devoid of intentions.

I

Only refugees can forever write the archive. The camp owns the archive, not God. For the archive not to fall apart, it weds the camp unceremoniously. The question of a camp archive is also the question of the camp’s survival beyond speech. Circumcising the body can indicate the survival of the place. Blessed are the pending places that are called camps.

II

My father, who passed his stick on to me, lied to us all: I slaughtered your brother so you would grow sane and sound. My mother, always with the same knife, cuts herself and the vegetables. The eyes which live long are the ones whose sight is contingent upon the unseen.
III

God’s past is the road to the camp’s archive.
We strangle it, from its loose ends, so we can breathe its air.
Privileging death in the camp is the sacral of the refugee body.
Without its death, the archive will never exist.
In whose name is the camp a place?
It is the truth and nothing else that for the camp to survive it must kill itself.

IV

The transience of the face in a place where faces are bare signs of flesh can gather the intransience of the trace therein in its multiple and untraced forms.
The unseen – that is the field that is there despite the eye – can only be seen by the hand. After all, the hand and not the eye, is the intimate part.
The tense in our bones – the one that emerged in no time, but with the desire to be time – will always be ahead of us.

V

Green in the camp only belongs to the cemetery.
The veiled women crying at the grave are my mother and my sisters.
Once, my mother wanted to bring the grave home with her.
In the solemnity of the place, faces fall like depleted birds.
In belonging to the camp, senses premeditate their senses.

In mourning the refugee, we mourn God’s intention in the absolute

We repeat the repeated so we can see our features more clearly, the face as it is, the cracks in their transcendental rawness and for once we might consent to what we will never see.
They rarely return – those pigeons. The piece of wood that was meant to scare off the pigeons and entice them to return to their home landed by my feet. Not knowing what to do with it, I shut my eyes and threw it back in the direction of God …
The name is the loneliest of things.
What is recited is the voice and not the text.  
In my camp, women slap themselves in funerals to never let go of pain.  
Who can see it to say: it is? Who has the eyes to say: it definitely is?  
The eternal in the camp is the crack. ‘The crack also invites.’  
What is a camp? Is it not a happening beyond time?  
A camp, to survive its happening, must become almost a camp.  
The sublime in the camp, what it is? Can it not be the camp gestating with its impossible meaning?  
His feet were in water and the hands were by his side as flat as nothing.  
While the tea was brewing, he prodded his father’s shoulder to ask about the number of graves he dug today.  
Nothing can outlive Nothing when Nothing escapes not the idea of living, living like twigs left alone to decay under the sight of the mother tree.  
Does the camp not have a gender?  
What speaks in the camp is nothing but the foreskin.  
These are not headscarves but heads forever wrapped in themselves.  
In mourning the refugee, we mourn God’s intention in the absolute.

*The Camp is Time*11

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Who writes the camp and what is it that ought to be written in a time where the plurality of lives has traversed the place itself to become its own time.

||

How will the camp stare at itself in the coming time, look itself in the eye; the eye of time, the coming that is continually pending, but with a face – human or otherwise – that is defaced? The camp is a time more than it is a place. Upon and above its curves, time remembers its lapses to the extent that it is its time – the one whose time is one – that preys on a body that is yet to be born.

||

In crucifying time neither it nor we can recognise the crucified.
IV

God, incinerate the camp save the dialect. God, incinerate the camp, save the dialect.

V

The incinerator of time is the camp.

VI

What is it that makes a sight worth a sighting when the seer – the quasi-seer – can only use his only eyes for an enormity that no eyes can actually see? Is it the camp or is it its time that should be (re)turned to its body to (re)claim its body as a dead thing with multiple previous lives and none.

VII

I write for it knowing that this is the last time that I write for it, herein the time is last and the last, it may belong to a no-beginning-no-end, but what it definitely has is its camp. The camp is time and time is the camp.

VIII

The possessive is what possesses the guilt that transcends all guilt and yet co-exists with itself until it becomes an event in its own guilt. But is it, is it my camp?

IX

What am I saying right now, in this specific instant and under the false impression that the camp is mine? I say that it is the autobiography of the camp that is autobiographising the camp, suspended in time it is, while we deliberate the impossibility of narration in that context. In order to think of narration (not necessarily its narration), we follow it discreetly in the shape of ash.

X

In time, the mask takes off its mask.
XI
The foot that treads is also time.

XII
In time we impregnate time with its time.

XIII
Time gives birth to nothing. The nothing that is raging nearby is our only time.

XIV
Time, tell us where your private parts are?

XV
Time is the acrogenous of the face. Whenever a face ages, it ages beyond time.

XVI
In the camp, time is hung like threads of dried okra.

A Sudden Utterance is the Stranger

I
The moon is the birthmark of the refugee. 
His birth equates to the mauling of his entire body. 
Nothing is anomalous about the wound. 
While waiting, we bite our nails and flesh. 
Once I dreamt in God's language. In my extreme ecstasy, I swallowed my tongue.
A dialect is a circumcised lip.
A sudden utterance is the stranger.
Only when tongues age, do dialects become old enough to leave.
An utterance en route is the utterance that can never promise.

In the camp, measuring air by hand by no means connotes the intimate.

As for time, it is an endeavour to the impossible in the impossibility of an existence devoid of it.

In the camp, directions are needles in time’s back.

The camp, to sustain its body, shrinks its limbs.
The camp has its own God.
The spectator is whoever cannot see his face.

Death, to carry a meaning, carries its offspring.

The camp is the tomb that has yet to find its dead.
Could it not be that the tomb is the name?
Only the dead lead us to the cemetery.

Flesh when mutilated called God\textsuperscript{13}

Time is God’s journey to his shadow.
An incomplete sentence is the place.
In the non-occurrence of birth, aborting the camp becomes the only possibility.
Might the dialects be the place that will be?
The hole is its hole, wailing and waiting for the green to sprout.
In a brass bowl with dangling rings as raw as young earlobes, my mother would pour us water whenever a plane broke the sound barrier, thinking that this would calm our fears and interrupt the deafening cries.
There, they interpret life as a sign of life, no more, no less.
When their old wall collapsed, they erected another using their house plants.
In betraying the static, we narrate water with water.
What we pour on ourselves is also called narration.
The neighbour’s tattoo inflicted by another neighbour still bears the faint name of another neighbour’s daughter.
Sometimes I wonder how a god would look like if he were to have my mother’s broken veins.
A god with broken veins is a god who has ultimately given birth.
The Lebanese shopkeeper on the edge of the camp who used to buy our UNRWA tomato paste tins, once said: I was sorry to hear about your father’s death. That was what my mother decided to tell the man to make him pay her on time.
The meaning of time is the meaning of what can and cannot move in time and at the same time.
The elderly woman by the mosque once claimed to have seen time in the flesh.
My camp’s gravedigger neither prays nor fasts, he is only capable of digging.
Skinning is separating the skin from the flesh, never the flesh from the skin.
My mother tells me that the butcher who sells her meat still swears on his daughter’s life that he slaughters his cows with his own hands.
The same butcher who still sells meat to my mother is, according to our distant relative who knew him from another camp, neither married nor does he have a daughter.
Eye, the orifice of oblivion, the camp is certainly before you.
Ageing in the camp is a rehearsal for ageing in heaven. Neither acts require proof to sustain their time.
Whose consciousness is more reliable: the animal that rarely kills or the man who rarely dies?
When the war ended, my father washed the blood off our threshold and gave us a bath.
And what shall we call a camp that is completely there? The camp’s genesis lies in its consciousness of itself. My mother used to bake us bread and deliver it to school so we could eat, so we could stop looking with envy at our friends holding their bread filled with things. On that day, the school gate was closed but a hole was there. Desperate to reach us, my mother’s hand got trapped clutching the bread. To this day, we do not know why my mother, to free her hand and alleviate the pain, did not let go of the bread.
The camp never ceases to exist. A place it is not, but time inhabited by time’s selfishness.
Is it not the visceral which binds us to the camp? The feeling in its rawness which drags us to it – to a breast or a lap so dry, as fossilised as our time? In our home, in the piles of books and notebooks left to their time, I spot my school book: half-faded letters, lines smudged by dampness and traces of rust, my name thinly written on its own on a line.
In total darkness, with no eyes to see me or faces to lament the non-presence of light, I held her hand tightly, thinking that, sooner or later, that light would be back and our eyes, open and shut, would once again return to guard our hands from our hands.
Nothing arrives in the camp. The neighbour with the prosthetic leg once said: I swear by God (pointing at the artificial limb), it feels like mine. The camp is grasped in its absence.
To kill time, the camp sheds its innards.
The inhabited and the inhabitant share the same limbs.
Once their sweat was the same. He would throw his jacket over the school wall so his brother would wear it after him. As siblings, their main arguments revolved around whose smell the jacket had kept.
My mother’s hands, distant as they are, would intertwine, the right above the left, to press the devil back into her tummy and pronounce the end.
In writing the archive we submit to the perishable in writing. Yet there is something to hold … The women in the long lines, above their invisible legs, outside the UNRWA distribution centres, with hair hurriedly tied up underneath the headscarves, cannot write. In anticipation of their names being called and their thumbs inked, they would tread slowly holding their hands as if cradling premature babies.
The teacher, who asked me to swear by God three times that my father did pray when he handed me a sealed envelope with a bit of money collected by the school for the poor, did not know that my father never accepted that money but instead returned it to the mosque, claiming that he had just found it.
She would always insist on giving me some. In her hands, she would gently rub the dry mint to softness. From lightness, to falling shades, to lightness again. A sighting of sublime dissipation: the leaf, a fragile wing, becoming its own fragility.

The tree in your name, we will recite. The name chosen hurriedly by your father. You were barely a few hours old when he recited it to himself in front of curious strangers as a beginning for something which would never age to die or die to age. Then, neither of your parents knew how to read or write, it sufficed for them to utter the name for the name to be carried across the arid fields of May into the absolute. The letters are now long dead and the wailing, which has never ceased reverberating in those distant furrows, has come home.

What is it that is not a camp?

When the war ended and before leaving the bomb shelter, my mother asked us to check we had everything.

I am writing the fragment within me, the incompleteness I behold as a sense.

In the camp the barest attachment to earth becomes the ultimate survival on earth.

A pending mourning in the name. A pending mourning is the name.

For the concrete in it, for what is there for it from times past, the monumental speaks. It speaks to itself, in its own voice, to what once was. In the hope of an ageless silence, it speaks – a silence which is as imperceptible as time.

There, whenever time comes, we cross from age to intention.

We seize speech from behind our ears like overripe fruit, with care, and once caught we start again.

Flesh when mutilated called God.

In dying, flesh prefigures flesh.

As precise as the body is the wound.

On my uncle’s floor, the one who sells second-hand clothes to his Lebanese neighbours, I shook my tooth until it fell out, to make a window like my mother’s.

Crossing the threshold is to confess without speech.

In the camp, confessing occurs before knowing.

An avowal to an avowal is silence.

Tense as a tense, persuasive as a mask is the camp.

I once saw her imploring God to rid her of her husband while exposing her old breast to heaven.

In the camp, the foot which outlives the other is called a witness.
The Camp is the Reject of the Reject Par Excellence

It bears multiple meanings, depending on how it is said. For my mother, however, the meaning was clear enough to be taken from my father’s mouth to God’s and vice versa; without allowing it to pass through a limbo of any sort. They would normally fight over the mundane, the most mundane of the mundane, and those most mundane of things would remind us all that our voices really did exist and if they were to be given the opportunity to exercise noise again, they would do so to their hearts’ content. My mother would become silent and to reiterate her silence she would only request to be left alone and be allowed to see God’s face. Now, they are both old and frail; my father is still in the company of his voice while the woman, that woman, is still looking for her face and God’s.

Once, I asked my mother: Mother, in the absence of a place, who invites who? She looked at me and said with a concerned tone of voice: My son has gone mad! Hurry! Hurry up! Summon the imam to recite over him!

Madness is what accompanies us to the unpredictable, to the camp. The camp’s unpredictability lies only in the eyes of the dwellers.

It is the tremor in the hand that invites. My grandmother, in Nahr Al-Bared camp, used to squeeze our little hands whenever we appeared at her doorstep and say: How did you leave the camp? We never answered.

By intending to capture the face, the whole body becomes hostage to intention.
VI

In intention, the prevalent tense is the past.

VII

We never listened to my mother and always insisted on swallowing the chewing gum thinking that it might, one day, become a balloon that would transfer us to God.

VIII

Is the memory of the camp not the camp?

IX

Suddenly, our senile neighbour stuffed her memories in a plastic bag and left.

X

The abstract in the camp is the body.

XI

In the bomb shelter in Baddawi camp, in complete darkness, my mother, to ensure we were by her side, would count us, not knowing that, most of the time, the children she was tapping and uttering the number of belonged to other families.

XII

The man whose sister is also my sister once asked me: who is older, God or the camp?

XIII

The camp has its own sky. When people shoot in the air in happiness and in despair it is to kill the bird that is never there.
XIV

My father who has persisted in writing since a young age has not published a single thing. In his beige room, with eyes trying to see, he showed me one of the magazines with a poem of his that bore somebody else's name.

XV

We look at it to see what it is that is not ill.

XVI

The camp is the reject of the reject par excellence.

**Necessarily, the Camp is the Border**

There, the noise is also the religious …
On a day as chilly as the pulses of those who took away our things and left the door ajar, you gave birth to me in darkness: you, the midwife, two whitish towels patterned with dry blood, and a bowl of hot water. I, to my utter surprise, bore you from within, at once, with no pain. Now I know why you used to call me ‘my mother’ whenever I slipped away from my dialect and pretended I ate that which you served me and my siblings, of the cracked wheat you cooked. You said: Eat it. It’s good for you. It’s good for your memory. You never said that was what was left of our rations, of your undying walks to the distribution centres. Mother, allow me in your absence, while shrouded in the last sound of your sound, to call you: My mother. Mother, listen carefully, mother: I am your mother.
When we entered, the path was nothingness and nothingness was a path.
O Enterers, depart from yourselves to see in your naked eyes the offspring of the border …
The worst of fates is not to arrive in your place.
The place, to protect itself, surrounds its limbs with spears.
Instead of wheat they grind their memories.
Nobody knows for sure a refugee’s age.
The border is not bordered except by the coming death.
Only in the camp is the right age read through the hands.
In the archive everything begins and ends with the archive.
The archive whose writing is yet to happen is also called God.
Necessarily, the camp is the border. We wait before the place never to claim the seen but to count the eyes of which we dream. Come to the camp to remember what will never come. The definite is the shadow and not the owner. Those feet are the creator of time. The camp will always remember its birth as the question of the question which never ceases to return to its body. The singularity of the camp equates to the singularity of God whose existence is predicated on complete solitude. The body of the camp is the bearer of time. When the camp outlives time it outlives itself for itself. In other words, the camp is whatever is far from clarity but near itself. Smells in the camp are the body proper. They arrive in advance of everything including the body. Refugees to awaken themselves stomp their feet upon arrival. The obscurity of what a camp is is the obscurity of language whenever confronted by its nothingness. Even when it is approached, the word ‘camp’ will always be held at the frontier. We store our dialects in broken hearts in advance of death. Might we die without our dialects one day? You err. You recite verses upon which additions float. You say: the host is an addition. Your throat swells up as you squeeze words out of sounds and sounds out of words. You pray while water sweeps the intact point on your forehead. I enter with tentative feet. Past your mat tiptoeing: verses, like running water, fall from above rapidly as though something were to happen. As though I were brothering the devil in my silent whispers and my father’s spluttering in his room. You were hardly there, only a handful of words hanging from your long white dress. The promise contains the promise. When a promise is uttered language dies. A bird ploughing the air is the dialect. In the camp, we can only see the camp’s shadow. Dialects, too, get pregnant. What is still in the dialect is the name and nothing but the name.
Notes

1. ‘Local Community Experiences of and Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey’ (a.k.a. ‘Refugee Hosts’), funded by the AHRC-ESRC (Grant Agreement Number: AH/P005438/1); see www.refugeehosts.org
2. On dynamics within Baddawi camp, also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in this volume.
3. Hoffman, Steinberg and Garb also explore the role of literature and writing in relation to displacement (in this volume).
4. The following section has been adapted from Qasmiyeh (2019).
5. The term 'circumcision' is used here to shed light on how marking the body, the refugee body, can be segregational in nature as well as a sign of attesting to the legal and existential limbo that refugees commonly experience. It is precisely in the 'archival strata' (Derrida, 1996: 22) that the skin is centralized; this is the case both memorially and as a layer that exposes as well as conceals the writing that is taking place in the camp.
7. UNRWA: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East.

References


Qasmiyeh, Yousif. 2016c. ‘If This is My Face, So Be It’, Modern Poetry in Translation 1: 119–23.


