



Freedom; Radio Gaza; Morning in the Streets; A Drawing of Breathing; A Guide to Being Palestinian (5 Poems)

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Freedom

The Arab Revolt 2011

The story begins
with a song—
it's stubborn,
breaks air
into history;
for a minute
it's quiet
to allow everyone in,
and then it raises
to celebrate voices,
clears its throat,
says:

We will bury the smoke that blinds us,
plant our soul on every page,
we will divide our pain into towers
and fill our hands with rain,
we will arrive on time every day
to chase you away,
we will no longer be afraid
of what makes us shiver under the sun,
we will leave our names in every teahouse,
our messages at the bottom of every cup.

Light will no longer be illegal
nor will hope—
even the guards will count
the scars on their tongue
and prepare to heal,
even the children will keep
homeland in the mirror
and prepare to see,
even the women will turn
the fire inside the door
off, and prepare to live.

We will never whisper again.
There is evidence, there is evidence,
that now we can hear
the sounds that lift freedom
across a continent,
and say, Salaam to you,
welcome to my country.

Radio Gaza

Morning in the Streets

6:21 a.m.

When will we see what the sun can be,
when will the road not be closed,
when will winter turn snow into a river on the lips,
what secrets have they hidden in the webs,
what echoes open a fragile hour?
Is this the first time
I see a ghazel
or is it my reflection dying?

7:00 a.m.

I knew I was dying
when I heard his cry—
40 years ago—
nothing has changed,
except things got worse.
Holy water on my feet,
Music unable to distract the
noise in my mind.
Maybe when we ache
shadows
become a full moon.

8:17 a.m.

At the graveyard.
He was there.
But I couldn't find him,
his soul, or his tomb?
I sliced the fog
to make a river.

9:07 a.m.

I carve you inside my body,
try to tell the world
what I have seen
but all I find is what's empty,
my mouth unable to reveal the sin
you have left.

10:02 a.m.

I heard two gunshots.
A body crying.
I wanted to call for help
but my feet were under
the ruins of a building.
I shut my eyes for a second,
unable to distinguish
the pain in my body
with the guilt of not helping the baby—
you see, she was barely two, I am ten.
I closed my eyes again—
water filled my bed, and dreams too.
I didn't want to know
what was going to happen next.

I never found my house,
but home always has a way to find you,
I've learned.

10:30 a.m.

Souraya (about her husband, Kareem)

We practice war out loud.
He fights his breath,
wants it gone—
he can't stand the blood
around his bed,
the gunshots, the slamming gates.
He wants a judgment
but no one can explain
what we need—
maybe everyone's afraid.
He looks away.
I tell him anyway, ana bahebak.
Maybe time is to blame—
it tells us to wait
when our bodies can't
Maybe that's why we pray.

11:04 a.m.

He thought,
since a part of him
will never be found,
why wonder
if forever is a word,
if the heart is ready for the soul,
if music without instruments
is a way to starve,
if saints disagree
when they replace
regret with pleasure,
if forgiveness
is just a shadow split into two,
if being
is simply being,
believing
simply believing,
seeing
simply an illusion
to distract us from finding,

what takes history apart
to rearrange it
into myth?

Yes, that photo is graying, but it still holds the window open.

11:59 a.m.

When we can't distinguish
the field from the sea,
our voice from that of ghosts,
war will fill our body with ash
and death will be audacious.

A Drawing of Breathing

I draw a mouth,
draw lips;
I draw a forehead,
draw lines;
I draw eyes last—
there was nothing to see
behind the map of the heart
but a disfigured face.

I breathe
a child moves
breathe
a child cries
breathe
a mother kneels
breathe
a father hangs
breathe
an ocean splits into death camps
breathe
a house collapses
breathe
a tree is uprooted
breathe
a field is stolen

and on my last breath, I see
an old mattress,
mold and trash,
the roof caving in,

and there you are,
sitting on a chair.
Can you still see me love,
standing by the window?
The walls has fallen between us—
singing helps me chase away
the fear that have turned
wings into broken feathers.
They parted our cities—
history will crucify that myth,
but it was too early back then
to understand the form it would take,
too early to know that
the world we were entering
was darker than what we imagined
darkness could be.
Can they heal the gods
they have offended?
As for us,
should we blame the flame
that never came to save us, or kill us?

Guide to Being Palestinian

If you are darker than most,
have a beard or wear a hijab,
it's wise not to speak too loud
when you reach an airport
or any exit.

If your father begged for his house,
was dragged away,
and returned the next day
without his eyes or his honor,
don't judge him.

If your mother told you to watch
his humiliation,
it wasn't to hurt you
but to help you
understand where you are from.

If you are exiled
don't expect an open field,
a smile, a new home—

most likely you will always be a stranger.
Stand close enough to see their eyes,
far enough to protect your heart.

If you think you can write
about all the days you are missing
in your town or city,
think again—
it's another's myth now,
and if you are afraid of forgetfulness,
apathy is even more dangerous.

If you take your longing
everywhere you go,
keep the keys to your old house
even if it's inhabited by others—
it's a clue you should also keep everything else:
the photos, the art, the folklore, and even the stones.

If you laugh and feel guilty,
love and feel like you shouldn't,
remember all aching begins with desire.

If your ancestors gave you a map of your country
but didn't give you one for dispossession,
weave the distances with your history.

If our father calls you father—baba—
when you are his son or daughter,
asks you, you know the name of your birthplace?
answer in Arabic
even if you are told to speak it
only at home—for your safety.

And if the day comes
while far away
you are asked,
who gave you that name?
remember what matters
is that the land knows
your face, your voice,
the origin of your silence—
and that, what's holy is alive
in who you are,

not in who you are told
 you should be.

Nathalie Handal is an award-winning poet and playwright. She has lived in Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Arab world. She is the author of numerous books including *Love and Strange Horses*, winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award, and an Honorable Mention at the San Francisco Book Festival and the New England Book Festival. *The New York Times* says it is “a book that trembles with belonging (and longing).” She is the editor of the groundbreaking *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, an Academy of American Poets bestseller and winner of the Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Book Award, and the co-editor of the landmark anthology *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond*, called a “beautiful achievement for world literature” by Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer. She has been involved either as a writer, director or producer in over twenty theatrical or film productions worldwide, most recently her work was produced at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Bush Theatre and Westminster Abbey in London. Handal is a Lannan Foundation Fellow, a Fundación Aragonés Fellow, recipient of the Alejo Zuloaga Order in Literature 2011, and an

Honored Finalist for the Gift of Freedom Award. She was listed as one of the "100 Most Powerful Arab Women 2011" in a Special Report by ArabianBusiness.com. She has read her poetry worldwide, has been featured on PBS The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, NPR Radio as well as *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Reuters*, *Mail & Guardian*, *The Jordan Times* and *Il Piccolo*; and her work has been translated into more than fifteen languages. She teaches and lectures nationally and internationally, recently in Africa and as Picador Guest Professor, Leipzig University, Germany. She is currently a professor at Columbia University and part of the MFA Faculty at Sierra Nevada College. She writes the blog-column, *The City and The Writer* for *Words without Borders* magazine. Alice Walker says of Handal's forthcoming collection *Poet in Andalucía*: "Poems of depth and weight and the sorrowing song of longing and resolve."
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