

*The Moon Did Not
Fall into the Well*



—What are you doing, father?

—I'm searching for my heart, which fell away that night.

—Do you think you'll find it here?

—Where else am I going to find it? I bend to the ground and pick it up piece by piece just as the women of the fellahin pick up olives in October, one olive at a time.

—But you're picking up pebbles!

—Doing that is a good exercise for memory and perception. Who knows? Maybe these pebbles are petrified pieces of my heart. And even if they're

not, I would still have gotten used to the effort of searching on my own for something that made me feel lost when it was lost. The mere act of searching is proof that I refuse to get lost in my loss. The other side of this effort is the proof that I am in fact lost as long as I have not found what I have lost.

—What else are you doing, father?

—When I chance upon pebbles that look like my heart, I transform them with my fingers on fire into words that put me in touch with the distant homeland. We then become a language that can turn into flesh.

—Is there something else you want to say?

—I do, but I don't understand the words, for the woman I'm talking to turns into another exile.

—When you were young, were you afraid of the moon?

—That's what they say. But it's not true that children are always afraid of the moon.

If it weren't for the moon, I would've become an orphan before my time. It hadn't yet fallen into the well. It was higher than my forehead and closer than the mulberry tree in the middle of my grandfather's yard. The dog used to bark when the full moon rose. When the first shots rang out, I was surprised that a wedding celebration should be taking place that evening. And when they led me away to join the long caravan, the moon was our

companion on a road that later I understood was the road of exile. And if it weren't for the moon – as I just said – I would've been separated from my father.

—What else do you remember?

—I remember I learned to travel on my own at an early age. My mother had gone to Acre, and I was angry because she had left me behind. How I loved Acre! It was the most remote place in the world years ago. And now – what a paradox! – it has become the most remote again. I carried my five years and walked in the asphalt street in the direction of Acre.

—Did you know the way?

—The paved road that went west meant only one thing: a trip to Acre. It was very hot, and I cried from the heat and thirst. Many times I sat down to rest, and thought of heading back but was ashamed to admit defeat.

—What did defeat mean to you?

—To seek, and not find. To start, and not finish. So I continued to Acre. I stopped near a crossroads at the entrance to the city. It did not occur to me to continue in the same direction. I went south instead, and it led me to a sand dune overlooking the sea. Mother wasn't there. So I went back to the crossroads and headed north. That way led to Beirut, and I knew Mother wasn't there. I went back to the crossroads again and headed west into the heart of the city. I went into a shop and asked for water. They asked me what I was looking for, and I said, "I'm looking for my mother."

—How does a village boy look for his mother in a crowded city?

—As I did. I was sure I would spot her among the thousands of faces. And if it weren't for my fear of the approaching evening, I wouldn't have gone back to the village without her, but a child of five must sometimes face defeat. I returned to the crossroads and headed back empty-handed. I was afraid of night approaching from the sea, and waited by the side of the road. A truck driver stopped and asked where I was going. I said, "Al-Birwa."

My mother was already in the house, but the rest of the family and the neighbors were out searching for me in all the wells of the village. When children got lost, it was assumed they had fallen into wells. My mother cried, and I cried with her. And when she had recovered from her joy, she gave me a beating. My grandfather then came and took me away, and gave me some sweets. That was the end of my first journey.

It was my first taste of Acre. I have always searched there for something I couldn't find. I looked for my mother but she had already returned to the village. Some years later, I searched for my sweetheart but she was getting married to another man. I searched for work but poverty was my lot. And I searched for my people but found a prison cell and a rude officer. Acre was the last border to the world, and the beginning of effort and failure. Its wall was eroding with time.

—Do you remember anything else about the beginning of the world?

—I remember an obscure shape that assisted me in calling for help from imagination and dream. Reality was subject to a process of interruption before it could achieve its budding form in my awareness. Later circum-

stances made it necessary for me to go back to the dream to safeguard my existence, for it completed what was missing. And that has left me in a dream that must always be justified by necessity, and not by flying on the wings of exuberant imagination. The earth thus takes the form of a bird and a rock at the same time. For the situation in its current state – even if it is not legitimate – cannot become a part of you without being tied to the dream, which then turns more solid than a rooted tree. And the dream in its general state – even if it is not luxuriant — will no longer serve as an incentive without being tied to a rock, no matter how the shape of this rock changes. True, things would not be so precious unless their condition served as a touchstone of your existence – unless they become an occasion for conflict. But if you were deprived of them, their value would not be the measure of your life, regardless of their price. Otherwise, how are we to explain why the poor, when forced out of their country, persist in facing death to return to a poverty they had left behind? There is something we forget in the rush to memorize the ringing slogans of the revolution: human dignity. My country is not always right, yet I cannot exercise genuine rights except in my homeland.

—Why are you avoiding me? Are you trying to put a distance between yourself and the past?

—To make it clear to you that I do not defend a past happiness, exactly as I do not celebrate a past misery. Perhaps it is due only to our high opinion of it that our homeland is justice and beauty. Yet it did not become so beautiful merely from projection caused by deprivation. It is a dream in its actuality, and an actuality in its dream. We do not long for a wasteland, but for a paradise. We long to practice our humanity in a place of our own.

—Take this further.

—The lives of thousands of victims and martyrs are now gone. They were not deceived. Some of them never saw the homeland, and died from the virus of love. Yet the map is not always wrong; neither is history. Why has there been such a consensus among prophets, conquerors, and the poor to be in love with history to the point of killing? The erotic dance that the Mediterranean Sea performs with the waist of Mount Carmel ends in the birth of the Sea of Galilee. And there is a sea they call the “Dead Sea” because something must die in this paradise, so that life will not be boring. Further, to counter the crowding of the Upper Galilee with forests, Jerusalem had to prove that rocks possess the power of living language. This is my homeland. My father’s friend, who lived in Beirut, was not exaggerating when he said he could smell the lemon trees in Jaffa when they blossomed in season. Then he died.

—Is it the lost paradise then?

—Beware of this expression, because to believe it would be to surrender to a state of being that has reached its legal and existential limits. The difference between a lost paradise in its absolute sense and the lost paradise in its Palestinian meaning is that the former understanding would keep the condition of longing, and psychological and rightful belonging, out of the sphere of the conflict. As long as the struggle continues, the paradise is not lost but remains occupied and subject to being regained. I’m not basing my thought here on the notion of “losing the battle but not losing the war,” which rests upon justifying oneself in facing up to the lost battle. But I do mean that Palestinians cannot look at their homeland from the perspective of the lost paradise, as the Arabs look back on Andalusia or as the faithful

look forward to their reward in Paradise. Between Palestine and Andalusia there is a difference that resembles death. Some well-intentioned tourists in the revolution, taking as their point of departure only the beauty of form and the control of solidarity, see a similarity that can lead only to bad consequences. They will cry even more than you if you accept this similarity, placing your rights under siege and your existence behind a wall of inspired longing. But when longing resorts to the gun as an expression of the distance between Palestine and Andalusia, you will find that these tourists, who adore the lamentations of ancient peoples, will protest because the beauty of historical symmetry has been violated. The idea of the lost paradise is tempting to those who are not possessed by a pressing question, but inflicts upon the Palestinian condition an accumulation of tears and weakness in the blood. This is how my homeland surpasses Paradise: it is like Paradise, but it is also attainable.

—Didn't you stand at this edge one day when you were no longer a child?

—Not so fast! The mere fact of birth does not lay claim to a place. The place in which you are born is not always your homeland, unless your birth takes place in the natural course of events within a historical community. If the birth is not part of a natural community, the place of birth is accidental. What a difference between the birth of Mahmoud and that of Yisrael, which both occurred in the same place! That conquerors should reproduce themselves in another people's land does not guarantee for them the right to call it a homeland. But when a people reproduce naturally in their homeland – *that* is the continuity of the nation and the source of its legitimacy. The fact that forced exile has made it impossible for this continuity to emerge does not bring about a decisive change in the order

of things. What I'm saying is that the equation does not emerge unless it comes about as a result of the marriage of a people to their rightful land. The hostile birth taking place now is the result of a relationship between conquerors, a sword, and the Torah. Therefore, we do not fear the dictates of justice in this matter.

The meaning of all this is that I did not simply find myself outside the realm of childhood. My departure was not voluntary. It was not a journey, but expulsion and exile. The circumstances of my life had come to an abrupt end but remained alive in my awareness. The confrontation in that exile with extremely harsh conditions that could not be negated or resisted on their own terms but only by returning to my roots helped me not to feel the loss of my childhood so intensely. We are more mature now, and can object to the practice of laying the blame for Palestinian misery solely on the condition of exile itself. That would be a victory for exile and for those who brought it about, and would allow the criminal to sow the seeds of discord between the wounded and the hospital administration. I do not say this to praise the administration or the soundness of its management, but to remind us that the conquerors must never be far from our awareness when we indulge in internal squabbles.

You weren't able to hold back your anger in exile when your classmates reminded you that you were Palestinian and had no right to excel. Those insults were the first clues to an awareness that would take hold of you in a few years, when you realized that your situation was not simply a matter of asking for equal rights, or a question of getting hold of more bread in a crisis. Even at that early age you sensed instinctively that your deliverance from these insults consisted in getting rid of the circumstances that brought them about. And that was the beginning of your necessary (not accidental)

link with your first world. It was then that your vaguely remembered village, with its narrow alleys, sitting on a hill in the Plain of Acre was transformed into the solution to a problem you had not yet grasped. As a result the childhood things that you had left behind, and your return to reclaim them, became the means by which you could prove you were not different from the others: these were evidence that you did once possess the accessories of life, and need not be subject to insults. Your awareness of this evidence was particularly keen on holidays. The other children put on new clothes and spoke about feasts. And you stood alone with your father in a line of beggars to obtain clothing and a portion of food that came from anonymous sources.

—When did that happen?

—In 1949, after the exodus.

—And why didn't it take place in 1948, the year of the exodus?

—Ah! We were tourists then. My grandfather carried a big bag full of money, and it was like a picnic in Lebanon. He took us to the apple orchards so we could pick choice fruit from the trees. And every week he took us to Beirut, which was the first city I ever saw after Acre. It wasn't a flight; it was like a picnic. We were waiting for the Arab armies to defeat the conquerors in a few weeks, and we would then go back to al-Birwa. We didn't live in a refugee camp. We passed through Rmeish, then spent one night in Bint Jbeil, which was a tumultuous human pen teeming with the loud cries of exiles. That was the second night we spent away from home. The first we spent at a Bedouin camp, where scores of "guests" ate fried eggs from a single dish. In Jezzine – where we stayed a while – I saw the water running

in canals right through the houses, and I saw the waterfall. When it got very cold there we moved to Damur, where we wandered in the banana orchards, played on the shore, and swam in the sea. One day I crossed a wide street ahead of my brother, who followed and was hit by a car. There were no wounds, but he was in shock for a number of years before he snapped out of it. Grandfather was a good reader and read the newspapers, which assured us of a quick return. We sat around him in a circle as he read in a powerful voice, his eyeglasses nearly falling off. The newspaper took him from readiness to pack his bags, to a state of not hurrying, and from there to waiting, until we noticed a weakness beginning to creep into his voice, which became more subdued as his glasses started to move back up. On winter nights the brothers in exile and conversation would exchange opinions about the battles taking place in the land of Palestine, until it was announced that al-Birwa had fallen.

—Had it not fallen before?

—It was occupied for one night, then liberated by villagers with primitive weapons and help from neighboring villages. As soon as it was liberated they made ready to gather the harvest waiting for them on the threshing grounds, but the Arab Army of Salvation took it over, and we don't know how the Jews got it after that.

Twenty years later after many Arab cities had fallen, the thoughts I was sharing in Hebrew with a friend at a restaurant did not please a man sitting there, and he set to defending Israeli oppression with what he considered an irrefutable argument. He said you don't know these Arabs, and if you knew them, you wouldn't speak about justice in this manner. I asked him to tell me more. He knit his brow and said, "Have you heard of a village

called al-Birwa?” “No,” I answered. “Where is it?” “You won’t find it on this earth,” he said. “We blew it up, raked the stones out of its earth, then plowed it until it disappeared under the trees.”²² “To cover up the crime?” I asked. He corrected me, protesting, “No, it was to cover up *its* crime, that damned place.” “And what was its crime?” I asked. “It resisted us,” he answered. “They fought back, costing us many casualties, and we had to occupy it twice. The first time we were eating dinner, and the tea was hot. The villagers surprised us and took it back. How could we accept such an insult? You don’t know the Arabs, and now I’m telling you.” I told him I was Arab, and that it was my village. He apologized politely but awkwardly, talked of peace, then invited me to his shop, where he was auctioning off furnishings and household utensils plundered from the city of Quneitra.

A few days later two Jewish settlements celebrated the silver jubilee of their establishment on the lands of al-Birwa. I was speaking at a press conference that day and talked about the oppression of the Arab community, but a correspondent for a newspaper called *Settlements* interrupted me, and I mentioned the news of the celebration. He apologized politely but awkwardly, and talked of peace.

This is the way they are. They commit the crime, deny it, and when the victim confronts them they sidestep the question by talking of peace.

“I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.”²³

—Did you happen to visit al-Birwa after that?