

## Abu Jamil's House: Portraits of Gaza

Laura Kraftowitz

Some afternoons, I went with Noura, Nahed, and a few other women from Abu Jamil Street to a half-demolished home, the last thing standing before the sand, and we'd congregate in its shade. Next to it, a wheat field grew wild; no one would harvest the wheat because the field faced the military tower. Wearing airy dresses, we talked and picked molokhia leaves while their children drew pictures in the sand.

Sometimes a bulldozer or a tank would drive through, giant chunks of squeaking metal that always seemed about to collapse under their own weight. When we saw them coming, we moved from the shade to sit against the other remaining wall of the house, where we wouldn't be seen. We continued chatting and picking leaves from stems until the vehicle passed, then moved back to where we were before. Only sand, barbed wire, and military watchtowers had separated us from Egypt before the Wall came to Abu Jamil Street, a time when we could still see acacias reaching lazily for the sea. That town was once this town, and both towns were still called Rafah.

On my way to Abu Jamil Street, I'd often hear the chatter of people in and out of doorways as the sun passed into shadows, picking up vague meanings even when I didn't catch the words. I had enough language by then to relax when I ran into people I knew, to respond to their intention and not my own frustration at being misunderstood. I was moving past culture shock.

Almost every time I walked down Abu Jamil Street, Sara, an eight-year-old with a messy ponytail, would run over to hold my hand, followed by her crew of girls. She'd greet me in her

husky voice and demand to know where I'd been, which was always the same, either the office or the site of someone's disaster. If I left Abu Jamil Street to go write a report, she'd demand to know when I was coming back. If my friend Mohammed saw her, he'd yell at her to "itlai," but she'd mouth off at him and refuse to budge.

At the house of Noura and her husband, Abu Jamil, named after his grandfather who'd built the street which also bore his name's house at the end of the street, I avoided the rooms that faced the border. They'd told me no one could use the bedroom nearest the border despite its cozy queen bed, because of the tank that often parked by the house at night. Months later, when several journalists were visiting and Abu Jamil invited them to sleep in that room, I asked if it was no longer dangerous. Abu Jamil blinked, then doubled over in laughter. He laughed until he was almost in tears, exclaiming, "Inti fahemti ghalat!" *You misunderstood!* He said it was fine to sleep in that room, "as long as when you hear gunfire, you don't get scared and sit up like this." He lay down on the bed to demonstrate, curling into a sleeping position. "Takh!" he said, opening his eyes wide as if with fear, and sat up. He looked menacing and sliced his index finger across his neck, motioned to the bullet holes in the wall behind his head. "This way, you die." He curled back up in the fetal position, said "Takh!" again, and opened his eyes calmly, demonstratively, rolled out of the bed, and crawled from the room. "This way, you live."

One afternoon when the family and I were sitting in their living room, the floor vibrated gently, as if we were experiencing a low-grade earthquake. Abu Jamil said the army was collapsing tunnels at the border. A drill the size of a crane would dig a hole eight meters into the ground, drop dynamite, and a few nearby houses would lose their windows. He said when an Israeli soldier shows up for service, his commander removes his heart and replaces it with a hand

grenade. When he returns, the commander finds the heart waiting in a jar on a shelf, and gives it back to the soldier, who goes to see his family, his humanity intact. Salah al-Din Tower was shooting into the street past doorways where people were chatting as Noura sat next to us turning chicken parts over a metal box with sand and coal, since the kitchen was also a dangerous room with a splatter of bullet holes on one wall.

“Taalū asha,” she shouted mockingly, as if the snipers in the tower could hear her. *Come in for dinner.*

Summer stumbled by. Out of the disintegrating gray walls, sand and dead grass, fading graffiti and dirt roads, the city came into bloom. Jasmine and orange trees scattered fragrant blossoms along mangled asphalt, rosebushes pushed through cracks in concrete, and in front of our office, a loofah vine sprouted seemingly overnight, curling to scale the wall. School was out, and children were enjoying doing nothing now, sitting in shade and drinking cold things, or cutting holes in the tops of soft mangos and squeezing the pulp, or watching the smaller ones invent games from sand. Children built makeshift kites from plastic bags and popsicle sticks and string. Translucent tails circled the sky.

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## **July 25**

The border is under assault again. Two a.m. gunfire is far enough away to be mistaken for thunderstorms. Other times, it sounds like retching. There is shooting along the border and celebratory shooting at weddings, and to the untrained ear it's hard to tell the difference. An uneasy stillness waits to break through the sweltering end of summer.

## **July 29**

To my left, a smattering of bullets breaks out, and tracer bullets slice the sky red.

## **September 13**

Once in a while, I'll stay overnight in the office, writing or talking with Mohammed until darkness eases and the open windows frame squares of brightening sky. Recordings of male voices rise from minarets and the roosters crow at fajr. Mohammed says roosters can see angels, and that every time we hear them crow, they are looking at angels. He says donkeys bray when they see the devil. I get up to shower, the tankless water heater spitting thin, scalding spokes of water, a flash of icy cold; I squeegee the shiny layer of soap into the drain, wrap a towel around myself, and feel my arms dry in the morning air. Once, Mohammed lay on the floor and balanced me on his upstretched hands and feet like an acrobat. As I rocked back and forth, he said, "Laura, I am so sad, I'm afraid you're the only Jew I'll ever know," and I tumbled down, laughing.

## **October 1**

Our friends singing old resistance songs as we amble through the streets of Brazil Camp under the one o'clock sun:

"These are the songs the men used to sing on nights when there was going to be an invasion, they used to sing them together outside Al-Awda Mosque before they went to defend the town.

“One group of guys used to sing ‘ya baharia,’ and the other group will respond with ‘hela, hela,’ you know this word, you are supposed to sing it from your soul and it should make you strong.”

Shid al-hym al-hym al-gowiyeh,

Merkab yindah al-baharieh

Ya baharieh

Hela, hela

Hela, hela

*Make my will strong*

*A ship against the sea*

*O ship*

*Hela, hela*

*Hela, hela*

We don’t know what’s coming, but the air is uneasy and the drones more insistent each day. You can’t walk beyond the last row of half-demolished houses into the sand. We walk through the streets between the children and the old men who sit all day on the corner, the taxis and the market filled with donkey carts at Saturday’s souk.

Yesterday, five people from Rafah died while they were spending an afternoon at the Gaza City beach in the north. A father was swimming with his two-year-old baby. The baby slipped out of his hands, and the riptide pulled her under. The father went in after his daughter.

He was pulled in after her, then three of his relatives drowned going after him, all of them gripped by the current.

When death is all around, staring back at you from the faces of martyr posters, reminding you of its presence with every bullet ripping through the air and every creak of a tank tread along the border—

What I mean to say is that here the beach represents freedom, a real and tangible sort of freedom, because the Rafah beach in the south is closed off to Palestinians. And until recently, no one went to the beach in the north because of the risks of the Abu Holy checkpoint—arrest or being stranded or detained. So now that Abu Holy is easier to get through, going to the beach means practicing an abbreviated list of half freedoms—

What I mean is it feels gratuitous for people to die in the sea.

## **October 6**

Death is so close I can smell it. The ambulance sirens blare most nights, and often in the morning. A sound that in some places conjures images of the elderly and midday traffic inconveniences, here means the border has claimed one more family.

Last night it didn't stop raining, sprays of bullets punctuated by thunderbolt explosions. We sat up most of the night, not knowing what to feel besides cold and dread. But the morning was calm, birds singing in the trees. For some reason, it's always like this in the morning after the army leaves. On this particular morning after, we learn a sixteen-year-old boy in Yibneh Camp has been shot in the head.

It's almost here, this thing we've been waiting for, hoping it will not happen.