

Sedek

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Towards return
of Palestinian refugees

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A LONGING FOR THE GOOD LAND

M a h m o u d a l - R i m a w i

From the Arabic: Olive Kenny and Thomas G. Ezzy

This translation of *A Longing for the Good Land* was first published in *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi.

Mahmoud al-Rimawi was born in 1948. He spent most of his childhood years in Jericho, which he left in 1967. For a decade he moved between Beirut, Cairo, and Kuwait, working as a journalist. Since 1978 he has been living in Amman, where he writes a daily column at the Jordanian daily "Alrai". Rimawy has published several collections of short stories, among them *Nakedness in a Night Desert* (1972), *Northern Wound*, (1980), *Planet of Apple and Salt*, (1987), *Slowly Beating on a Small Drum* (1991), *Strangers* (1993), *The Train* (1996) and *Family Reunion* (2000). The story "A Longing for the Good Land" was first published in Arabic in the *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi. (موسوعة الادب الفلسطيني المعاصر / انطولوجيا. تحرير: د. سلمى الخضراء الجيوسي.)

Removing the kufiyya and iqal from his grey head, Abu al-'Abd tossed them onto the dirty blanket beside him.

He heaved a deep sigh, for the heat was unbearable and he did not dare to strip the Agency uniform off his thin body. The tent had no door, and there were girls and women across the way. Undoing the laces of his heavy boots, he flung them into a corner; then, stretching out his legs in extreme exhaustion, he lay on an old coat, carelessly folded under his head, resting it on the palm of his dry, chapped hand. Of necessity, he tried to rest from the weariness of the ten hours he'd spent in construction work on the neighboring mountain. His wife, Imm al-'Abed, was at the neighbors' in the tent opposite, talking about the water being perpetually shut off and a life that was more than half spent.

Abu al-'Abd's hapless daughter Khadijeh was out learning to be a seamstress. But his son Hassan, a young fellow of twenty who had finally learned to curse people for no reason, was at this moment smoking and drinking tea while winning and losing at cards.

"Or he may be somewhere else. Who knows?..." Abu al "Abd" yawned and wiped off the bead of sweat that hung from the tip of his nose. His ears, which were filled with thick hairs, picked up the sounds of a song about Jerusalem coming from a radio whose batteries seemed new. Unable to sort out his true feelings about it, he turned over onto his other side. He felt a pain like a hammer striking the sides of his head, and he said to himself, "life be damned." His eyes were heavy with sleep; and so, there being nothing to prevent him, he surrendered himself completely to it.

Ever since leaving the Nuweimeh Camp, where he'd lived for twenty long years, he had been sleepy all the time. Hasan had been born there, and there he had built a three room house with dahlias and a white poplar tree in the courtyard. Some of the wise men in the crowd he spent his evenings with told him that this was an evil and unfortunate disease. Others told him frankly that it would lead to the final sleep. Why,

The Agency uniform. الوكالة, in Arabic. This refers to the clothes received from refugee agencies such as UNRWA, established by the UN to aid 1948 Palestinian refugees.

Ever since leaving the Nuweimeh Camp. The Nuweimeh refugee camp (مخيم النويمة), located about five kilometers north of Jericho, received some of the 1948 Palestinian refugees living around Beisan. Most male residents of the camp earned their living growing bananas and citrus trees. Nuweimeh is one of three refugee camps built around Jericho, along with Ein Alsultan and Ikbat Jaber. Before June 1967, the camp's size was approximately 276 dunam and some 25 thousand people were living in it. This was half the number of refugees residing in the three camps.

however, should this matter to Abu al-'Abed?...

Little by little, drowsiness overcame his consciousness, so he closed his eyelids while the scorching, dusty breeze played with the things in the tent and sticky sweat covered his haggard face. He heard the clamor of the children outside like a buzzing noise. The air on his face made him imagine he was traveling endlessly, exhaustingly; traveling, but never arriving at his destination. The palm of his hand under his head was soaking wet. He withdrew it. The coat was coarse, made of camel hair; he felt as though he were sleeping on thorns, alone in an unknown land, cut off from the world. The cheese and tobacco had left his mouth so dry that he could not swallow his saliva. Rising sluggishly for a drink, he looked around hopefully for the water jar, afraid that he wouldn't be able to find it. He finally discovered it near the entrance to the tent, but the water, drained almost to the bottom, was warm. Tipping the jar straight up into his mouth, he greedily swallowed the few meager drops. A small pebble scraped his teeth and spoiled his enjoyment of the water. He spit it out, then spit again, but the taste of dust was still in his mouth.

Once again he threw himself down on the blanket, as though he wanted to escape from some unknown thing that was lying in wait for him. He was determined that he would sleep for a long time – even if it did lead to his final sleep. However, the fatigue in his legs thwarted his desire. He tried shifting his legs around into different positions to drive away the discomfort, but all he managed was to annoy and exasperate himself. Convinced that his efforts were fruitless and that he was going to remain suspended between the world of awareness and the world of blissful sleep, he became depressed, fearing that this might be the beginning of some ailment that would come between him and the half dinar he earned from the owner of the building on the nearby mountain. He cursed his son Hassan – that good-for-nothing who did not look for work and

was never at home. Mustapha, who'd been working in Kuwait for five years, bore them in mind only at the Two Feasts, when he would send a green banknote that Hasan would get his hands on and spend in any way he liked. Then the damn fool would say he was going to get married – when Khadijeh still didn't have a husband to provide for her yet!

Outside the tent the sun seemed to be on the verge of completing its daily journey, and he still hadn't been able to doze off for an hour or two. His mind was so weary and confused from too much thinking and remembering that he had now reached the point where he could no longer think of any one thing or bring any memories back into his mind. This state made him feel better, for usually it led to deep sleep and forgetfulness.

Within a few minutes Abu al-'Abd, and with him the chapters of his sad life, were in a sound sleep. The clearest indication of this was his high-pitched, staccato snores that sounded like an animal that had just been slaughtered. A huge, persistent fly flitted over his features, making him seem to be, to any observer, totally unwholesome...

The way from the Nuweimeh camp to the east bank of the river is long and thorny. And when a whole family travels it, on foot, in the middle of the summer, it becomes a much more painful hardship. There is more chance of dying than of living.

But he had actually covered this ground. There had been something driving them – specifically, from the rear – to move out. Imm al-'Abd wanting to rest for an hour every half hour had filled him with exasperation, while the way had been long, the planes had shown no mercy, and the shock had stripped his nerves bare and inflamed them.

Behind them, Jericho had been engulfed in billows of smoke, and his heart had been so full of grief that he could hardly speak, O God, what a cruel world! What cursed times! How had this happened?... Imm al-'Abd,

on the other side of fifty, had had vaguely dissatisfied questions in her eyes. Hasan, tense and high-strung, had not quite dared ask his father, why they weren't staying behind like others. Khadijeh had been afraid, and the blankets on her back were heavy; when she told her mother that she had forgotten the radio turned on at home, the latter had silenced her with an angry look. "Well, did Abu Haleemeh's family leave?... " Khadijeh had asked, but the weight of the blankets forced her to pay attention to where she was stepping. Despite Abu al-'Abd's disbelief at all that had happened, it seemed, as he hurried on his way, that he had been expecting this!

Agitated and grieving, the soldiers around them were slinking off, some toward the river and others to the east. In the fighting, life and death seemed to be the embodiment of two diverse energies that might fuse into each other. The battle was not over, and the chances of either dying or living were still strong. It left a peculiar taste in his mouth.

Abu al-'Abd had been afraid that the family might get separated – that he would lose Hasan, his youngest, for example, or poor, sad Khadijeh, or his spouse, with whom he had fallen in love one day in Bayt Dajan. In 1948 a bullet had ended the youth of his first-born al-'Abd. For how many years had he been grieving, tormented by nightmares and attacked by misgivings...

At the foothills of Suwaylih, a tractor had given them a lift. This was very lucky; the driver had been their neighbor in the camp. As he was getting up into the trailer behind the tractor, his trousers caught on the edge of the door, and he almost stumbled. With bitterness he thought of the gypsies, who never settle down in any home; he felt an instinctive sympathy for them, fearing greatly that in the end his destiny and theirs might be the same. Hot tears had risen in his eyes, but he had mastered himself as he hid them from Hasan's sight. His body was reeling from the effects of

the speed, the crowdedness, and the lack of a support; the constant up-and-down motion made him sick.

As the tractor quickly covering ground bore him far away, his eyes had remained fixed on the west. He suffered a great and agonized hatred of those men who cut down trees. When the mountains of Amman came into view, he began imagining how his relatives would receive him, and this had given him feelings of embarrassment and regret. When the vehicle stopped he had jumped down to the ground and, absolutely done in with exhaustion, sprawled on the nearest sidewalk.

The shade of a towering building had given him a sense of great relaxation, mingled with a longing for some obscure thing that despair had taught him he would never attain.

No-one knew as Abu al-'Abd did the details of black days. Nor did anyone understand as he did the impact of the khamasin, and how he had wound up owning nothing but a cramped blue tent, symbolic vagrancy and a transient life...

"Hasan hasn't come yet."

"He'll come for sure."

"He may have gone to a movie. Or, he's just hanging around somewhere..."

"But he was determined to come! He was the most insistent one of us all..."

"He may be in the blue tent."

"I went there myself. His father's there, sound asleep".

"Only the one who is absent knows what his excuse is."

"He may need us."

"He may have lost his way..."

"No one knows how to get here better than Hasan."

"It's been half an hour... I'm worried about him."

"My God, when is he going to come? Where can he be?"

With whom he had fallen in love one day in Bayt Dajan. Bayt Dajan, (بيت دجن) is a Palestinian village that existed before 1948. It is located on the road between Jaffa and Ramallah, south of the railroad tracks between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Approximately 4000 residents lived in the village. It was conquered in April 1948, and since then four Jewish settlements have built on its lands: Beit Dagan, Mishmar Hashiv'a, Hemed and Ganot.

"Anything could have happened! Who knows?..."

"I say, maybe he's waiting for us now..."

"I'm sure that Hasan..."

"I dreamed that Hasan..."

Until they realized they were wasting their time. They agreed at once that their time was too limited to allow for idle speculation. As if carrying out a prior decision the three of them disbanded, each having in his mind an idea that was simultaneously both clear and obscure; an idea as translucently radiant as a dream. For one intense moment their eyes met, the language of their eyes voicing their agreement. They went on their separate ways, filled with the sensation of a promise that they would meet again.

Abu al-'Abd awoke as if he were climbing out of the bottom of a dark well. Darkness shrouded the confines of the narrow tent also, making it difficult for his veined fingers to find the box of tobacco. The fact that the tent was deserted, that no one was there, alarmed him. This total silence made him realize that something had happened. He got up sluggishly, began searching without much hope for the lamp, stumbled over the kerosene can, and fell to the dry dirt floor.

Again he surmised that there was something unsettling about all this. Ever since going out to work that morning he had been conscious of a bitterness in his mouth, and that he was depressed, not feeling like himself. . . Where was Imm al-'Abd? Hadn't she had her fill of talking yet? And Khadijeh – what was keeping her out until this hour? No doubt she was with her mother. As for Hasan, who could control him?...

They had never left him alone before, so what was going on? A sense of stifled sorrow, whose origin was obscure, arose from deep inside him, awakening dark apprehensions in his mind. He got up to go out and ask the neighbors.

Puzzled at seeing the whole camp quiet in sleep, he became aware that it was very late, and his fears increased.

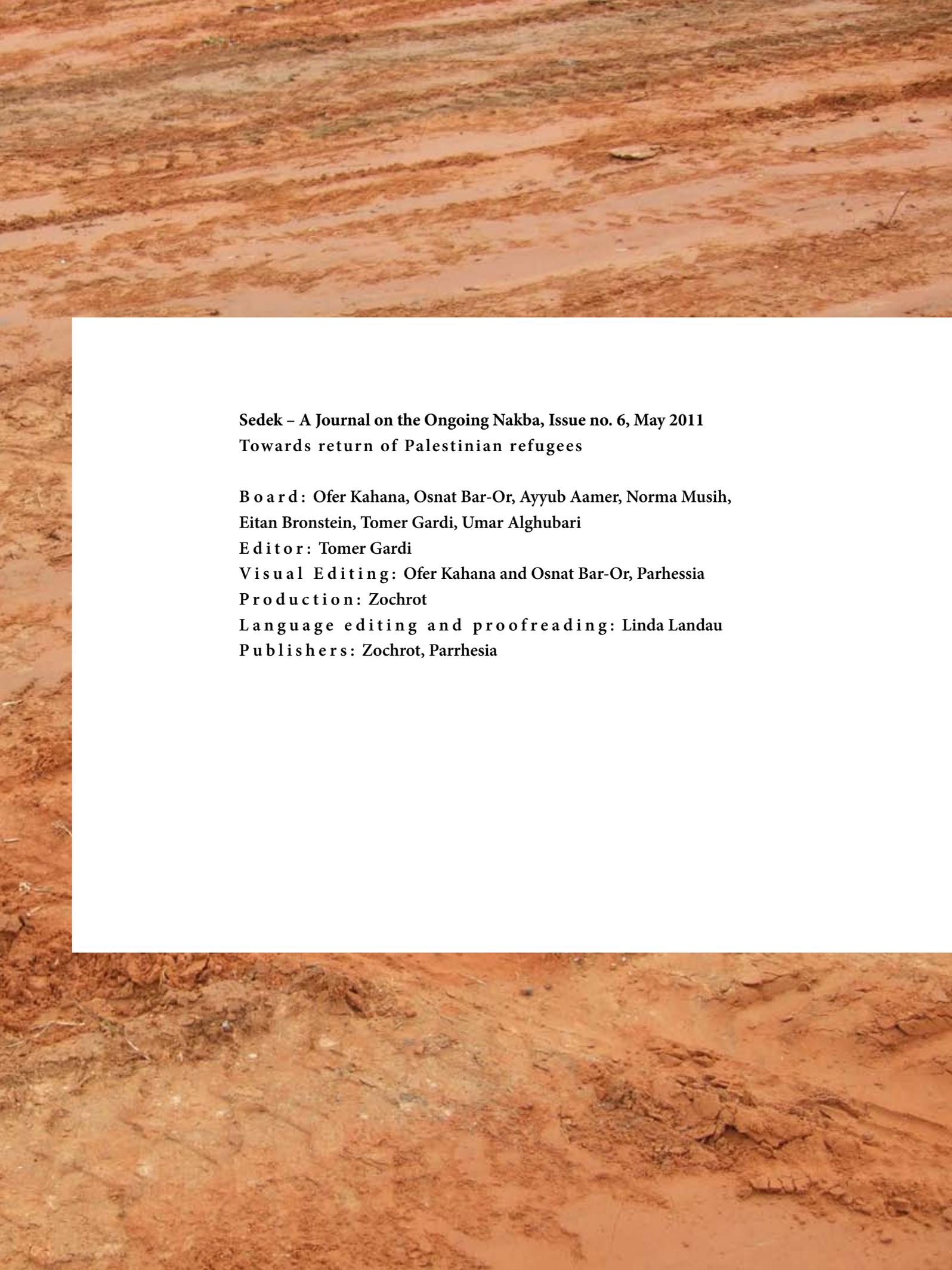
"Abu Yusuf! Abu Yusuf!..."

The man rose out of his bed in alarm. After a brief exchange of greetings Abu Yusuf said, "Why did you deprive us of your presence this evening?"

"Never mind that. Where are Imm al-'Abd and Khadijeh?"

"Ah yes... I saw them looking for Hasan. Someone says – I didn't see him, but someone else said that he'd been seen sauntering through the camp wearing the uniform of our young fighters with a weapon on his shoulders. Then, he went into town. Neither Imm al-'Abd nor Khadijeh believed this. Each insisted that he had had an accident, God forbid... Why do you find it strange, Abu al-'Abd? My son is with them. Don't you understand that yours is too?"

But Abu al-'Abd did seem to find it strange. Thoughts of al-'Abd, the son whose youth had been cut off by a bullet, and of the long years he had grieved for him came immediately into his mind. He was aware of a burning longing for al-'Abd, and the counters of Bayt Dajan appeared before him as though he were in the presence of a dream. His good land, in faraway Bayt Dajan... He was on the verge of tears, but he withdrew to his tent. This time, the overpowering darkness did not bother him for he was cut off from the place, gazing into his memories. It didn't occur to him to find out what time it was, but he was sure he had slept a long time, and that morning was near.



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