

Alice YOUSEF

*My country is not a suitcase
I am not a traveler*

Mahmoud Darwish, "Diary of a Palestinian Wound"

Do we let the Strangers in?

All I remember of him now are his deep, grey-blue eyes and his stories. Before he passed away, my grandfather was my hero. He lived in an old house in Jerusalem, one he built between two wars that shaped his life, and were a defining marker in his stories. He was not too fond of Jerusalem: though it is one of the world's oldest, most religious, and most historic cities, it never suited him because he hoped that Jerusalem could be a temporary stop on his return to his mother city, *Yaffa*, known as Jaffa.

It was 1948 when the cord with Yaffa was cut for good. My grandfather was sixteen; he lost everything. It was in the wake of what many Palestinians today call the *Nakba*: the catastrophe, referred to in historic jargon as the Diaspora, where mass exodus or death awaited Palestinians. My grandfather was forced out of his city and as luck and circumstances had it, found himself on a boat headed to Beirut.

Luckier and happier than that of most refugees, my grandfather's life entailed a return to his home country, a marriage, a child, a line of grandchildren that starts with me. Not all refugees have that luck. I speak of luck as a saving grace, because when faced with dangers resulting from war, nothing is guaranteed, not even a chance at life.

In the past two years, the world has witnessed "alarming" images of refugees risking their lives to cross borders by land and sea in order to start somewhere new. This constant movement is raising new questions and shaping various dynamics globally, unveiling many insecurities as well as paving ground for violence, fear and discrimination. New terms have surfaced in the media, reflecting confusion about how to classify people, like my grandfather, who flee their countries in exchange for life. What rights are these refugees granted? How do we refer to them? And the main question: do we let the strangers in?

The final answer to the latter question is dependent on many factors, including political and personal circumstances such as the success of "making the cross." While I cannot begin to answer for others, I can safely say that through international conventions and treaties, namely the UN 1951 Refugee Status Convention, the answer is often a yes: refugees should ideally be given a safe space to live. Staying in one's country should not be a death sentence, nor should the option to start a life in another. In simpler terms, when one is not happy with one's house, he or she moves. Similarly, when circumstances in one place threaten the livelihood of families and communities at large, sheltering these individuals and communities becomes crucial, even if practically it is not as simple as one would like to imagine.

I've often read stories or novels based on the process of "making the cross" to the other side to begin a new life. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* helped me see how the threads between an old life and a new one come to be woven together for refugees and migrants. Despite not being a "refugee story," it helped me understand the fine line between refugee and migrant. Migration entails a return, like birds that move to warmer climates and return many times within the same year. Refugee, however, entails a finality of settlement elsewhere, altering the existing community by integrating new members. Fear of novelty is a part of human nature, but it shouldn't be a factor in hindering others from enjoying the right

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 2, 2016
Khaled Alkhamissi (Egypt), Ukamaka Olisakwe (Nigeria), Yaroslava Pulinovich (Russia), and Alice S. Yousef
(Palestinian Territories)

For electronic texts, please visit <http://iwip.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

to safety.

Earlier this summer, when I read that on the Olympic Refugee Team (the first team of this kind at the Olympics) was a Syrian swimmer named Yusra Maridini, who pushed a faulty boat with her sister for three hours to save twenty lives, I was in awe. I had a faint feeling of what my grandfather went through at sixteen: the fear, the waiting, the potential to lose one's life at sea, and then the story of a remarkable survival. When Maridini won the swimming heat in Rio, I stood in my living room staring at the T.V. as I cried.