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Is Home Really Home?

A young girl opened her eyes in a beautiful city by the sea. Before stories of love were told to her, the story of her homeland was the most common tale she used to hear.

For as far back as I can remember, I never had a home to call my own. To explain this, I have to say that I was born in Gaza. Though that is the place of my birth, my birth certificate was marked with a special status: “refugee.” I began to know what it means to be a refugee when I was a girl. When I left for school in the morning, I always wondered: where are the girls in my neighborhood going, and why they are not going to school with me? And why are our school uniforms different? Later I learned that special schools were assigned to us, the refugees.

Because I was treated differently, I always suspected that my real home was someplace else. I never felt entirely at home when I was in Gaza. My family, too, would remind me that my home was elsewhere—not in Gaza but in Al-Kofakha, a Palestinian village located 18 kilometers to the east, which had been depopulated during the 1948 Israeli occupation, and the villagers forced to flee. I pictured Al-Kofakha as a paradise: the bananas hanging on the trees there were bigger and better, as was everything else. It was strange: I felt nostalgic for a place I’d never seen.

When half of Gaza was destroyed during the wars of 2008, 2012, and 2014, however, I was unable to recognize even this “home,” in which I’d been born and raised. The circumstances of the war changed the place utterly. Then I moved to Belgium, where, in the beginning, I lived in a refugee camp. This was a difficult transition; once I’d been a tv anchor, now I stood in line asking for food. When I finally got my legal papers and rented a flat, it was the first time I felt I had my own place.

Shortly after, in 2014, when PEN Vlaanderen supported publishing my book in Dutch, I found an alternative home-- in literature. I invited the members to my poetry salon--a dream come true. And it was the same when the Passaporta Institute nominated me to attend IWP. Today, I miss Belgium, since it is the only home that I have.

I became a Belgian citizen one year ago. But still I wonder: am I really Belgian? Some other Belgians look at me suspiciously: “what are you doing here?” “Working and paying taxes,” I answer. The problem is the language. I began learning Dutch from zero, but I am denied jobs because I can’t speak it fluently. But without a job, how will I ever improve? At the same time the government pushes me to find work, but when I apply for jobs, employers see that I am overqualified. And when I’ve tried to teach Arabic at a university, I was turned away to the advantage of locals who are able to speak Dutch! Even now, while participating in this program, my financial support was cut. So I ask: should I call Belgium my home when I am prevented from contributing to its society, to find a decent job proportional to my studies and to my work experiences, like any other regular citizen?

The concept of homeland goes beyond the idea of carrying a nationality, it is almost genetic, and that is why the Arabic language is also a home for me—it makes me turn around when I hear it on the street of strange country.

Who am I now? And how many homes do I have? Do I have real home? Is it Gaza, where I was born and grew up? Is it Al-Kofakha, my family's village, where I've never been? Or is it Antwerp, the city where I've lived for seven years now? Is my home in my memories, or in my reality? The only thing I am certain of is that when your home keeps shifting, you build your own home--one that nobody can take away, or pretend it is his. This is the home I found in poetry, the only home that never ever confuses me, the home I carry wherever I go.