

The Heron's Song: An Introduction to *Sard*

Khaldoun al-Mallah
(Abu al-Khuloud)

On the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, a country of ancient civilization, one fated to have a lengthy and varied history, eventually settled on its current name: Syria. On the outskirts of its capital, Damascus, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the history of the world, an area called Yarmouk Camp began squatting in 1957. The camp was the largest agglomeration of Palestinians in Syria. They were the children and grandchildren of Yarmouk's founding fathers and mothers, who left Palestine following the Nakba in 1948 and established settlements in the surrounding countries of refuge. Nearly 160,000 Palestinians, alongside tens of thousands of Syrians—they were the residents of Yarmouk. According to UNRWA, the UN agency established to deal solely with Palestinian refugees, Yarmouk was an “unofficial camp,” but for the rest of us it was a place so freighted with symbolism that it earned the moniker Capital of the Diaspora. In Yarmouk, every neighborhood, every street, every school, and every medical or cultural center had a Palestinian name. It was, in short, “the extended phenotype,” to borrow from Richard Dawkins's jargon, of the original body called Palestine.

Then, the Syrian revolution erupted in March 2011, and everything changed. And since it's not possible to discuss everything, and since what ends cannot exhaust what is endless, two knots in the fabric of space-time will hopefully suffice:

1. In December 2012, Russian storks, known by the commercial trademark MiG, delivered their payloads on a mosque and school sheltering a large number of people who had been displaced from areas neighboring Yarmouk at the beginning of the revolution. How many? Dozens of dead and wounded. The result? As with every

massacre, another wave of displacement; only a few thousand remained in the camp.

2. From July 2013, the camp, which had become a place of refuge for a variety of revolutionary factions, was subjected to total siege, a siege unbroken apart from small amounts of food aid allowed in every now and then to ensure that not everyone disintegrated. Hunger harvested with his scythe, reaping nearly two hundred of us. The digestive system developed a form of consciousness independent of the brain's. Space was tight, time spacious, and nature miserly. Disease, barrel bombs, hunger, and climate conspired to test us with trials and tribulations more adverse than anything Job ever had to suffer. No food, no medicine, no blood, no heat, no hope. It was our holocaust.

Years passed, and everything and everyone passed through Yarmouk. One armed faction followed another, culminating in ISIS. Throughout those years, my question remained constant: Is it decreed that history should remain the monopoly of the victors, who can write it as they see fit? My answer was always as clear as light and as burning as fire: Memory is an act of resistance. That's why I documented, wrote, and published on the blue-and-white pages of social media. Many others did the same. Nakba fever drove us. One evening, *Sard* declared its message:

Once upon a time, the Palestinians lost their land after a war. They simply hoped to return to that land a few days later, so they never bothered to preserve their memories of that place. The longer their absence, the more the past receded, transforming the details and features of their imaginations. All that remained of that land was their dream of it, and the sayings of those who lived on, whether real or imagined. Forced to settle outside their land, Palestinians adopted other homes, and rose once

again. But they were without any memories that measured up to the scale of their dreams for that land. The pirates destroyed everything; the victims chose silence.

Did you say *sard*, "narration"? *Sard* is like a novel with many authors. It's the memory of siege, war, place, refuge, personas, death, disease, and new exiles. Thus, it's a memory of the revolution, or one of its memories. And the novel, to borrow the words of György Lukács, "is the epic of a world abandoned by God," a world fallen in forgetfulness, devoid of justice, and strayed from meaning. What was the camp during those years? What was Syria? Does it not deserve its own epic, written by those who lived it in all its details? What lies dormant in the details? Most will answer without hesitation: the Devil. But that's a modern take on things, and if we were to investigate the history and genealogy of that saying, we'd reach a past that would confirm the fact that it's God who's in the details.

An organization donated to us a page on the World Wide Web. Its editorial policy was simple: complete freedom; no sectarianism. *Sard* summarized its goals in a slogan: "Let's write our stories! We have no other way to keep going." *Sard* got in touch with a number of writers. They weren't writers in the technical sense of the term. They weren't *professionals*; they were the custodians of their stories. Most of their work was voluntary. They came from various provinces throughout Syria, and from the various religious and ethnic groups for which the country is famous. And it was our happy luck to be born into this incredible technological age: we didn't have to write on papyrus, nor did we have to use carrier pigeons as our means of communication. And the editor never intervened apart from correcting grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. Because for some reason, we have a

chronic and innate weakness in our own mother tongue. But perhaps this state of affairs bestowed on *Sard* this unique voice. It's not the only voice, or the loudest, or even the most articulate. But it is original and authentic.

Once, Stefan Tarnowski asked me, "The texts are of such exceptionally high quality; how did you manage that?" I gave him the same reply I frequently give myself: Deprivation illuminates insight despite impeding sight. Total sensory deprivation. It's like becoming a Sufi mystic and spending countless nights in a dark cave, or Siddhartha under the Bodhi tree. Sensory deprivation has been scientifically proven to cause visions/hallucinations/awakenings/enlightenments/deepening consciousness/revelations—call it what you wish.

"Doctor, who taught you all this?"

"Suffering," came the immediate reply.

Didn't Camus write that in *The Plague*?

Suffering taught us many lessons. It taught us to burnish our language, to draw our pens, and not to allow memory to slip through our fingers. It taught us that "silence is the real crime against humanity," as Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote. For silence means that humans are no longer fighting for their beliefs or their own humanity. That's why there are stories, and why there was *Sard*. We hope that these three texts will convey a melody from our song.

Translated by Stefan Tarnowski