

# THYME TRAVELLERS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF PALESTINIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

edited by Sonia Sulaiman



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*To past, present, and future Palestines.*

Excerpt

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# Preface

**SONIA SULAIMAN**

SOMEONE ONCE SAID THAT ALL PALESTINIAN FICTION IS SPECULATIVE; we are always grappling with the past and living in expectation of the future, while our fictions tell of alternate histories—being, by definition, histories told by the colonized. Others say that the definition of the speculative is itself a colonial imposition.

When I drafted the call for submissions to this anthology, I defined what I was looking for as “fiction that features a departure from consensus reality.” The majority of stories that came in were of a very high quality, which made my job as editor a pleasant and an easy one. It was also a great joy to come to know so many of my peers in the Palestinian diaspora.

Such were my thoughts as I prepared the manuscript in the summer of 2023. The fall of 2023 has now become the opening act of a monumental tragedy in the history of the Palestinian people. We hardly have the words to describe it, currently calling it a “Second Nakba.” As I write, we are still in the midst of a genocide in Palestine, with Israel’s relentless carpet bombing and ground invasion of Gaza.

Looking back, it is incredible that in such a short time, during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the ongoing genocide and colonization of Palestine, we have been able to imagine these new speculative stories. I feel honoured and humbled to have edited this

book you now hold in your hands. It is my hope that it is just the beginning of your journey. Whether you are a Palestinian or an ally, I welcome you to use this book as a stepping stone, to seek out the work of Palestinian writers and to take action to resist the oppression of Palestinians.

The sight of unprecedented solidarity around the world brings with it a fresh hope for change. The world as I know it will be a memory by the time you read these words. Know that these stories come from another time and place.



# Down Under

JUMAANA ABDU

I STARTED DIGGING MY WAY TO PALESTINE LATER THAN MOST, but I made good time. I had very little to carry.

A few things had set me back, but most difficult of all was finding a place to start. Once I was ready, I waited for my mother to leave for work one morning, then I got moving. The backyard of our house in the outskirts of Sydney had been cemented over in the 1980s. I tried getting through the foundation with a jackhammer, but I was only two metres deep before a councilman showed up saying a complaint had been made that I was disturbing the neighbourhood.

“That’s alright, I won’t be here long,” I told him. “I’m going to Palestine.”

“Oh, I heard about that trend,” he said, peering over my shoulder to eye the hole in the backyard. “Well, it’s too loud for these streets. You’re going to have to do it someplace else.”

“Please, I’m in a hurry,” I said.

“Why? Something I don’t know about Palestine? Does it disappear in the summer like the polar ice caps?”

“Yeah,” I tried.

The councilman gave a sympathetic shrug. I packed up and rushed to my grandmother’s house with a shovel.

Since my grandparents had died, another half Palestinian, half

North African family had moved into their old house, only this family's other half was from Fez, not Alexandria. Someone's car was in the driveway, so I hopped the fence and sped around the back of the shed where I could dig unnoticed. One metre down, I hit solid stone. I cleared off soil to gauge how big the obstruction was and whether I could haul it out, and then I began to see the stone was engraved. I flattened myself to the ground and hung my head down into the hole to make out the inscription in the shadows.

To God we belong, and to Him we return. In loving memory of Munira Abdullah. 1939–2015. Born in Jerusalem, Palestine.

The black marble shone with gilded engravings. It was a headstone. I lay there on my stomach in the dirt and reread my grandmother's name. There was no digging it out. There was no circumvention. I knew then if I tried another spot in this garden, I'd hit her headstone again. I knew it would be all under this house and it went all the way down.

"Why are you crying?" came a child's voice from behind me.

I flipped over and lay flat on my back. Through the blur of tears, I recognized the boy as Mustafa, the youngest of the family that lives in the house now. I made out his Moroccan soccer jersey, so baggy it reached midway down his pants. He had his little head cocked to one side while I dried my face on my sleeve.

Half-delirious, I said, "I'm going to Palestine."

"Haya's gone already," he told me, unfazed.

"Your sister?"

He said, "Come, look," and headed inside. I stumbled after him past the living room, where his mother stared blankly at an Arab cooking show playing on mute and his father sat by an open window nearby holding an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"Do they know she's gone? Do they know where she's going?" I whispered as we slipped down the hall.

“They don’t think about that place,” he said, and then we were in his sister’s room.

I knew Haya from a distance. We’d gone to the same university; I was in nursing, she was in arts/law. On those few instances my mother had allowed me to join a cross-city march for Palestine, it had been Haya at the lead, and her face splashed across social media, and her name co-signing public statements. Her bedroom looked as expected. She had Palestinian and anti-Zionist posters layered like wallpaper from floor to ceiling and hole-punched dinars hanging on gold necklace chains off her bed posts and three differently coloured keffiyehs tossed over a hat stand and postcards and envelopes with Palestinian stamps and addresses littering her desk and all the literature—everything people meant when they said Palestinian literature—stacked on mounted bookshelves and in piles on the floor.

I remembered being in the audience of a panel she was on at a writer’s festival featuring Palestinian essayists, and when the chair asked her how she always managed such eloquence and civility in debate, she stuttered when she took the mic. I saw her trawl for an appropriate response.

At first, she spoke in a measured way. “Oh...have I been civil? I mean, have I given the impression I see this as a civil debate? Or that...this question—which is the question of my life—is even up for ‘debate?’”

Then she grew possessed by a stillness, the way Arabs do when their emotions break through on a stage. She seized the crowd up in her intensity as she continued, “I-I don’t feel civil. My grief doesn’t feel eloquent or dignified. And I am in grief, and I can’t sleep, and I know it will be hell for me any time I want to see my family in Palestine until the day I die, and there is no civil feeling in my heart about that. I just want to go home to the place I was born. Can you understand how sick I feel from wanting to be back on that land? Wrath is the only response to an injustice God hates. Wrath is my birthright. And I won’t—I won’t have another single one of my

rights denied in this life.”

On this, she finished. Her body shut in on itself. The audience applauded her; I could see she felt nauseated. I remembered being afraid of all her love and her anger.

That was years before. In her bedroom, Mustafa grabbed hold of the underside of her bedframe. Towing on it with his bodyweight, he dragged the bed from the wall. Underneath it, instead of carpet, was a huge, unending hole in the earth.

“She dug that?” I was in awe. Mustafa nodded. “How long...?”

“Pretty quick,” Mustafa said. He crouched on the edge and peered down, then turned to me. “She said it was easy because she knew where she was going. Have you been?”

I shook my head.

“Me neither. Anyway, you can use her tunnel; she wouldn’t mind,” he said sweetly.

“Why didn’t you go with her?”

Mustafa stood and toed the carpet with his Nike socks. “I’m scared. From what I see on the news.”

There wasn’t much to say to that. I climbed over the edge and lowered myself down.

“Is that all you’re taking?” Mustafa called as an afterthought.

Other than a compass, I had my father’s wristwatch, my grandfather’s leather jacket, my mother’s shovel, and, on a yellowed piece of paper in a plastic sleeve, a drawing of the Jerusalem night sky my grandmother had made when she was a child.

“This is all I brought,” I hollered back, realizing I was mortifyingly unequipped.

Mustafa told me to wait for a moment, zipped off, then ran back to drop me a flashlight. With a final wave, he dragged the bedframe back into place and I was sealed in the earthen dark.

When word spread that Palestinians Down Under were digging their way to Jerusalem, the logistics baffled non-believers. But it wasn’t the first time Muslims had travelled to Palestine at a

supratemporal rate. The Prophet only took one night. Not being anywhere near prophethood myself, I was more realistic. I expected to arrive there by the end of the month.

Gradually, the tunnel's gradient flattened out. I followed Haya's path and kept steady re-excavation of the mounds she left in her wake. With engineering savvy, I turned my hijab into a head strap for Mustafa's flashlight so I could free up my hands. There were no strange men to see my hair down there. The only thought in my mind was, *Go fast*.

Precedent was everything. For sustenance, I relied on the same Hand that had delivered out-of-season fruits to a monastery for Mary of Nazareth. When Haya's tunnel veered up towards the crust, tubers and root vegetables hung from a thin ceiling of soil and I could tug them down, buff them with my leather jacket, and eat. Through the holes Haya and I left, where the vegetables had been, shone down increasingly foreign rays of sun or unfamiliar murmurs of night. Water trickled through the tunnel walls in places. I knew the more filtered the water tasted, the deeper down in the earth I was.

Closer to the surface, I could use my compass to determine the direction of prayer. But further down the arrow would spin, at first slowly and uncertainly, and then wildly, and in those horrible stretches I had the sense that I was slipping from heaven downward in a spiral so intense it was shearing the skin from my flesh. And then I was scared. Behind and before me stretched a blackness I could not comprehend. The weight of an obscure haunting pressed on my back all the way to Palestine. If I was sweating and panting and chasing after Haya, who was to say that there was not some blind, writhing creature salivating hot on my trail? Or that if I closed my eyes, my body would not think I was buried and instinctively die instead of just falling asleep?

All week, I kept moving...moving. Only my father's wristwatch kept me oriented to time. *Go fast*. On the seventh day, I was shovelling like mad. My body burned. Haya can't be much further, I

told myself so I could flail the shovel out further and take longer strides. The dirt got in my mouth and ears. The dirt was my face. I had reached a stage where being alone was unbearable and being underground was unbearable, and those feelings combined to make me suddenly too claustrophobic to breathe. I collapsed and was sure I would die.

I stared up at the brown Underneath. Onto the roof over my body, the flashlight projected a halo of desperation, and I asked myself, what vision am I moving towards? How will it recognize me? Can it change my life? And if I am too estranged? I lay there in the dark until my breathing quietened down.

I became aware of a scratching sound from a few metres north-west. I shot up and listened. My heart was exploding. Then, like my life depended on it—and it did—I scooped up my scant belongings and sprinted towards the sound of digging. My headlamp caught glimpse first of the back of her calves and then, within a few frenzied steps, her whole being, wide-eyed and pressed up against the dirt wall behind her. Screaming, she dropped her shovel and whipped out a Swiss Army knife.

“Haya, Haya, wait!” I shouted over her. I let my shovel clatter to the ground and held my hands out in truce and self-defence. “It’s just me, it’s Nouran!”

She stopped short in incomprehension, then went limp with disbelief.

“Nouran...from the women’s soccer team at uni?”

Of all the associations to make, that one seemed the most random, but nothing about our situation was in the norm. I nodded and lowered my arms.

“I started a dig in my grandmother’s backyard,” I explained. “Couldn’t get through.”

“She’s dead,” Haya pointed out. “Allah yerhamha.”

“I didn’t know it worked like that. Your brother said I could use your dig instead.”

“Right,” she accepted, looking neither pleased nor displeased. Exhaustion overcame her. She put the knife away. “Sorry. For a second, I thought you were...I don’t know.”

“An animal?”

“The IDF.” She laughed at herself, miserable. She lifted the base of her shirt up from her grazed and shining abdomen to dry her eyes, leaving streaks of mud across her face, which was gaunter than I remembered but no less full of anger.

Then the long night of our isolation was over. We slumped against opposite walls of the tunnel and rested our elbows on bent-up knees. For a while we just stared at each other. We panted and frowned under the interrogation of two makeshift headlamps. Mirrored on our faces was the dirt-caked grit of coal miners unused to human warmth.

At last, Haya said, “I’m going to sleep. I haven’t been able to sleep.”

“Me neither,” I said.

We arranged ourselves to lie one after the other parallel with the tunnel, my head closest to the northwest and hers close to my feet. That she let me lie in front came as a relief; the terrible sense of being hounded by a creature coming in leaps and bounds from behind wouldn’t leave me.

“We won’t rest long. I just want to get there,” Haya spoke up as I closed my eyes. Her long breath was bleak. “Can you believe this is the easiest way?”

We slept like the People of the Cave; maybe years passed. When we awoke, Haya took out from her backpack radishes and onions that she had collected along the way. She split them with her knife and passed halves to me. Still rusty, we ate in silence, and in silence we continued on our way.

The first few days, Haya piped up frequently. “Why do you always check your compass?” she asked me once while we were in the middle of our first dig session of the day. She stuck her shovel in the ground and propped her forearms on the handle, breathing hard as she faced me.

“Just...to double check.”

“I know where we’re going,” she said, a tad indignant. “We don’t need that, you can put it away.”

Pushing my luck, I said, “We’re a few degrees off track.”

“That’s because I’m not heading there as the crow flies. I’m planning to join tunnels with some other Palestinian folks under the Maldives.”

“How do you know where their tunnels are?”

She tapped her forehead with two fingers. “We’re in communication.”

I had no idea what that meant. Outside my own family, I wasn’t in communication with any Palestinians. Even of my own family’s Palestinian-ness, I knew close to nil. It was not something my grandparents had wanted to pass down, or perhaps they had not been able to bear dredging it up, or perhaps they had convinced themselves that it was uninteresting. By the time I had grown conscious enough to wonder about the histories that had led to my life, they were dead.

To Haya, I said, “Oh, right,” and kept digging. I had my own pride to protect.

Weeks passed. All we did was dig, eat, pray, sleep, dig. Haya spoke to me less and less, maybe because I never initiated conversation. I was still nervous to be around her, more now than in the past. Labouring side by side made me more aware of the imbalance in our claims to Palestinian indigeneity. If we grew close, I thought she’d see I knew nothing.

In looks, also, we could not have been more unlike. It was difficult to make each other out except under direct torch light, so I had to take inventory of her in stolen throws of my beam in the dark. My eyes were browner, she was more tanned, her curls were looser than my Egyptian coils, and I had a squarer frame.

She never commented on it outright, but once, while we were resting, she said, out of the blue, “I never met two Palestinian Australians who look like they’re from the same country.”