

Qalandia: An Autopsy

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Prologue

Like a person reappearing without forewarning in a place she lived long ago – not quite a tourist, not quite a native; streets seem familiar, many buildings don't – I simply utter the words “to the checkpoint” when the taxi dispatcher asks me where I am heading. He jokes to his colleague “take her to the cemetery.” In the din of downtown, that's what I heard: *ma'bara*. Perhaps I was anticipating mourning; love had already opened the wound. But he had said *mah'fara*. Indeed, I remembered the quarry, that dust-producing, noise-polluting hole in the ground that some had no choice but to trek through, attempting to avoid the soldiers, swerving between trucks and bulldozers, emerging on the other side with dusty shoes and clothes marking them as ‘paperless.’

I was quiet, nervous, and still the entire ride. I had loved Qalandia – if one can love something as oppressive, sad and bleak as a checkpoint. Years earlier, I had found in Qalandia a dynamic engagement and renegotiation against out-right brutality, I had found creative responses to the pain of displacement, I had found the ecstasy of furtive cross-overs, I had found a contested history unfolding in every passing minute. It was harsh, but vigorous. As we swayed and bobbed over pot-holes, my mind drifted to the past: the way the dust settled and cemented my hair after spending a long day there, how the strong sun dried and tanned my skin, the way the smell of the fumes from the idling cars clung to my pores and clothes, how the aftertaste of too many cups of bitter Arabic coffee and cheap cigarettes shared with merchants and cab drivers made me light-headed. As if foraging secretly, and also fearfully, for an old lover – wondering



Qalandia from inside a taxi, 2010. *Photograph by the author.*

whether he will remember me, whether he's even thought of me through the distance, whether he ever forgave me for leaving, wondering whether he's perhaps turned grey – I'm not sure what awaits me. Maybe a burial site of sorts; what's the difference between a cemetery and a quarry anyway, they both contain underground riches.

Obituary

Like the lover that is not to be found, Qalandia is dead.

Do not misunderstand me. The checkpoint is still there, much more so than before. But I find it impossible to describe. I can tell you about the concrete blocks and slabs, the wall on one side, the wall on the other side, walls on every side; about the roundabout, the watch towers, the layers of fences, the paved walkways, the gates, the metal tire piercers to stop one from reversing his car; and those automated turnstiles, the x-ray machines, the biometric scanners, the glass behind which sit soldiers, the loudspeakers, the flashing lights, more automated turnstiles... But no! I do not want to describe it, for to describe it would be to deny that the Qalandia I love is dead, and that this 'thing' before me today – 'the Qalandia terminal' as the Israeli military calls it – is what constituted its death.

Instead, I offer a post-mortem adieu to Qalandia, an autopsy. But my autopsy is not like that of a forensic architect's who tries to understand the layered history of a building, looking for visible symptoms and changes to ensure a building's structural and aesthetic health, as would a doctor trying to assess the medical history and well being of a human. I have no interest in helping this 'thing' have a long healthy life! My autopsy is based on my confrontation with this terminal, here and now, through which my lover doesn't simply whisper but wails that the future is utterly bleak.

Qalandia is dead. But so too is Palestine.

I am neither fetishizing Qalandia of yesteryear, nor the checkpoint of today. All things are congealed moments in a longer social history and trajectory, repositories of meanings, properties, motion.¹ When I first encountered my Palestinian lover, whose sights, smells, tastes, and sounds linger with me – Qalandia as it used to be years ago – it stood for more than just a checkpoint. I saw in it the universal predicament of Palestine and Palestinians: a microcosm of the conflict, a peculiar place of tension over spatiality and mobility, a space of multiple meanings and structures of feeling. Qalandia was a dimension of social life, a material expression of a contested – but lived and dynamic – place.² Qalandia communicated our shared experience of the loss and on-going search for temporal stability, for the freedom of mobility, for the security of geography. A shared collective not simply for those around Qalandia itself, but everywhere, from the quagmires of refugee camps to the trajectory of exile. Whether in the search of our old houses that no longer exist, in our constant sense of unbelonging in our host countries, or the continued forced exile in our own backyards, in Rafah, in Nablus, in Jerusalem, in Haifa, in Beirut, in London, in Sydney, in Brooklyn, Qalandia was Palestine. The relationship was a tormentful one to be sure, but productive too, with glimpses of hope, sometimes subversion, even revolution.

I recognize that it may seem absurd to mourn the death of a place that has itself managed to kill much around it. I recognize that Qalandia the checkpoint whether in 2000 or 2005 or 2010 is a theater of war, force, dispossession.³ To write an obituary of Qalandia should not be misconstrued as an exercise in absurdity, but a spatial-temporal claim of what it means to be Palestinian.

I am not being dramatic, like a wretch whose heart has been violently ripped out of its cage, squeezed by the surrounding concrete. Of course I know that the materiality of the checkpoint will continue to change, people will continue to try to resist in whatever ways, others will continue to hope. I'm not sure I will. This time the checkpoint is simply too overpowering.

What I see in front of me is not to be understood simply as the intrusion or progress of modernization. This is not a 'creative destruction' that all places share in common. This is the disappearance of a space all-together, the erasure of those traces of hope and revolution, one concrete slab at a time, one paved meter at a time until it no longer is. This is not simply the active killing of what was, what is, but also more dreadfully, because this is Palestine, of what will be. It's hard for me to run my fingers through its body. I could easily touch the concrete, the metal, the asphalt, the barbed wire, the dust, the plastic that makes up the materiality of the terminal, but I keep my hands to myself this time.

The cab driver may as well have taken me to a burial ground to grieve for the multiple threads and possibilities now foregone: from the checkpoint economies that had emerged years earlier to the contiguousness of Palestinian space, from the possibility of a resolution between the 'two sides' to the end of Israeli colonialism. If I had previously thought of Qalandia as the conflict in built form – a metaphor for the conflict's past, present, future – what is clear now is that it is not the conflict that is



Qalandia 2010. *Photograph by the author.*

dead, but its dissolution. Its collapse as impossible as a handicapped person fitting in the turnstiles. What I see in front of me now is not a conflict, for that would suggest an on-going tension, some form of resistance, some hope that the political battlefield can change, that justice can still be a possible goal. I do not see a conflict here: I see casualty, conquest, consummation, a conclusion.

The last time I had encountered my Palestinian lover, I had cried. I was with a friend. He went to stand in the men's line, and me the women's. It hadn't been like that before – we used to all stand together forced to smell and hear each other. I went through a turnstile, denying me, alienating me from the touch of others – something else that hadn't existed before. I walked through the path, looked back to see my friend waiting in the men's line, his head drooped. To my left soldiers, contractors, bulldozers, tractors, concrete mixers were busy building what I would eventually be standing by today. To my right the wall was half erect, a little opening in it still for cars and pedestrians to pass through. Tears welled and I couldn't stop them, just like I knew I couldn't stop the checkpoint from expanding. The sadness was momentary. As I was waiting for my friend I met Ahmed, a merchant I had known from years previous; we indulged in a bitter coffee and a cigarette. The shopping bustle around Qalandia still existed, Radwan had opened his new concrete-shack food stand, my cabby friends were doing well, Tawfiq still donned an upbeat smile on his young face.

The crowds of merchants, cab drivers, sellers, push cart owners, are all but gone. I am disoriented now. At first I think this is what happens to people when they return after a long time away. It can take some adjustment to find remnants hidden under the march of modernity, or capital, or progress, or in this case, colonialism. I stood amidst a noisy silence that could say nothing to me. I was lost. Where was the center? Where were the cabs? Where were the merchants?

I recognized a familiar face. He recognized me too. Abu Juma'a is now the un-

official traffic controller, replete with a neon yellow jersey and a rest area under which he can stand in the shade. We chatted a bit, and as I used to do in years before, I wandered off to photograph and film. I headed towards the quarry, by a main road, where the taxi stands used to be, where Radwan's food shack once stood. Now just a wall and an elongated garbage dump. I couldn't find my footing. As I headed east, I heard someone screaming my name. It was Ahmed, running over to me while screaming into his cell phone: "Yes it's her! It's her! I told you it was!" It didn't take long for news to travel that I was here again. One of my best friends from Qalandia, and eventually beyond it, was on the line. We agreed to meet later. Tawfiq wouldn't be able to make it as he had purposefully driven into oncoming traffic. But I chose not to hear that. My first order of business was to get re-acquainted with my lover, to pass through in both directions, to take pictures as if I were re-cementing old love letters, to gather enough dust on my shoes and hair, to have the taste of exhaust linger on my tongue, as in the old days.

But this checkpoint was not a witness to what had been. And I could no longer mediate and negotiate the materiality in front of me. I couldn't understand these objects anymore: the concrete, the wall, the watch towers, none of it. I wanted to stand in the same places as before: the taxi stand, Radwan's kitchen, Mohammad's sandwich cart, the coffee stalls, the open-air fountain, something. None of it was around. Not a trace of the past. Not even the structural engineer who can read history in ruins would be of use here.⁴ This is not a site of rubble, of ruin. This is not a palimpsest in which we can dig up the past. This is simply the end. This is why my love perished. Not because most merchants and cab drivers are gone. Not because Tawfiq tried to kill himself. Not because Abu Juma'a and Ahmed are merely ghosts. But because I only see concrete, metal, graffiti, garbage, torn pieces of clothing uselessly struggling to free themselves from the barbed wire. The thingness of the checkpoint has become all that much more impressive – indescribable – to the point of obfuscating, silencing and rendering invisible any humanity, whether of those who still have to pass through here, the handful of merchants who still loiter around but seem more like beggars, the bus drivers, even the soldiers behind their bullet-proof glass, mirrors, and databases.

Even a cemetery functions as a place of memorial, where we can hold on to the past, a place of haunting, of recollection, maybe even of anticipation as we contemplate our future by staring at the graves of those behind us. This checkpoint is not a cemetery: it denies me glancing backwards, it forbids me a connection to humanity (dead or alive), it prevents me from negotiating our future. And it's certainly not a quarry out of which we unearth and steal in order to build.

I used to find Qalandia beautiful, beautiful in that it compelled me to photograph and film it, wanting to capture its specificities as I would my lover's hands, eyes, or nape. Beautiful in the sense that Susan Sontag explains: "that a gory battlescape could be beautiful – in the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful [...] The landscape of devastation is still a landscape. There is a beauty in ruins."⁵ Qalandia used to be a series of logically and precisely – even if *ad-hoc* – placed and created ruins, a battlescape, a landscape. It was beautiful. But it is no longer.



Qalandia's garbage, concrete, and barbed wires, 2010. *Photograph by the author.*

Qalandia is dead because this time I find it impossible to photograph. I am paralyzed. Where do I stand? What do I document? Why am I even bothering? What am I supposed to do with a string of images? How will I put them back together to tell a story when there is no story to be told anymore? Photographing it, filming it, trying to write about it, only contradicts its very nature: a time-space of interruption, of suspension.⁶ The checkpoint disjoints, tears the limbs off of my body; to want to tell its 'story' is a form of re-con-joining. I cannot. It has taken that right away from us.

To document and photograph it is to believe in the movement of time and history, of a transition between times, between places. I thought I could retrieve the past, naïve to think that the past was waiting for me, as if sealed in an envelope or on a blank piece of Kodachrome paper, waiting for my touch to re-awaken it. I dreamt that I could keep alive the shadows, reflections and specters of the past, to mark our devotion on the surface of my photographs. I returned to try to prove that a passion existed. But I am impotent, here, now, to memorialize the presence of a place that no longer is. Any creative attempt to document the terminal only reinforces its crime. So that by writing about it, by photographing it, by filming it, I am not resisting it at all. If anything, I am acknowledging the impotency of all forms of documenting acts. Snapping a few photos, clicking on the 'record' button, writing this autopsy: I am expressing our powerlessness.

It is this that is absurd: that I feel compelled, despite these contradictions, to still want it to be a place, a moment, that will evoke tenderness.

I mourn with no tears. My eyes dried out from staring at this brutality. The absent, the ghostly, the speculative, the spectral and even the spectacular, all play their part in my mourning. I stop photographing, I throw out all those old love letters. I give up on theorizing or rationalizing: the checkpoint has beaten me. Check mate. My memories are the only acts of resistance possible.



Signs to Jerusalem, Qalandia, 2010. *Photograph by the author.*

Epilogue

I have a confession. I cheated on my Palestinian lover and went to visit one on the other side. It was a speedy affair, barely lasted half a day and we remained clothed – nothing like the years and intimacy at Qalandia. But the audacity, determination, confidence, and brute strength of my Israeli encounter was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It is with the knowledge that I ventured into the illicit that you should contextualize my obituary of Qalandia.

Seeing the ‘terminal’ as it was now was what struck the initial blow (as I said earlier, love had already paved the way for agony). But the loss, despair, hopelessness and bereavement was compounded and only fully settled after I flirted with Maale Adumim, after I gazed at the new police headquarters on the other side of Highway 1. It was then that the death of Qalandia seared and slashed my soul. I remained outside, snapped a picture furtively and I have no doubt the station took more than one glance or photograph or video of me.

Standing atop that hill was an affront to any sense of hope I had ever felt. My roots cried. The first word to come to mind was ‘foresight’ for it was clear what was going to happen. The new *Samaria and Judea District Police Headquarters* in Mevasseret Adumim – as the police station is called whose entire activity concerns Palestinians in the West Bank – wasn’t so much itself the source of provocation and grief, as it seemed more like an inverted prison: elevated, gated, lined with surveillance cameras and loudspeakers that jolted my heart rate when I got too close. It was that the station sat atop an empty hill, at the end of a climbing clean and impeccable four-lane road, replete with straightened terraces, traffic circles, safety railings, street lights, electricity poles, water pipes, and scenic rest stops. The police station was the first kiss of what was one day going to be another settlement. My body, as Palestine’s, was consumed. Betrayed.



The new Samaria and Judea District Police headquarters in E1; a bench with a view of Maale Adumim in front of the police headquarters, 2010. *Photograph by the author.*

The views were scoping. Standing by a bench outside the station I could see Maale Adumim and the entire valley east towards the Dead Sea. A scenic bench outside a police station, atop a hill that has nothing else! I don't fathom that the bench was built for either the policemen or those Palestinians unfortunate enough to have to be brought here. The bench was built for the same people who will one day use that closed bridge back down the hill, above the highway, connecting Maale Adumim on the other side to where I was standing. Planned as another East Jerusalem 'neighborhood' by the Sharon government in 2004, Mevasseret Adumim, or in the more clinical jargon of the Zionist machine a sub-development of E1, is slated for almost 4,000 housing units.⁷ That's why the road is so large, the infrastructure so eager and ready. Save for this police fort, it's still empty. And for now, that bridge is closed. But... just as it was only a matter of time before Qalandia was buried, it is only a matter of time before this settlement ascends. I will not be surprised if the settlement's houses will be built out of the stone from the *mah'fara*.

Standing there I saw the process behind my own dispossession and that of all Palestinians face-to-face. This wasn't like staring at the house that my family had lived in and 'meeting' the Jewish-Israeli family who now lives in it. This wasn't about the past, it was about the future. What seduced and struck me about Maale Adumim, the police station, Mevasseret Adumim, E1, Highway 1, about the checkpoint, was their formidability. Formidable. Awe-inspiring really. Horrendous in their fundamental beauty of foresight, or beautiful in their fundamental horror of foresight, I can't tell. The weight of what I saw proved too heavy: I dropped my camera and sunk underground.

It was only later that I looked up the meaning of Mevasseret Adumim. (Maale Adumim means 'red heights.' Red – *adumim* in the plural form – denotes the land's red

bedrock, but perhaps also the settlement's red roofs. From where I was standing, red was the blood under the land that was once Palestinian: *adom, adama, dam* – red, land, blood in Hebrew – sound the same to me; just as love is said to make you blind, it can make you deaf too.) *Mevasseret* is translated into English as ‘harbinger,’ the noun. Perhaps it was not just serendipity then that the word that swam in my head initially was foresight; my soul must have sensed the danger of this immoral encounter before I did. There is only one way to interpret what this will mean for my true love, for Palestine. What is being forecast and foretold (harbinger, the verb) is a manifest omen:
the end.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (London: UCL Press, 1998).
- 2 See Helga Tawil-Souri, “New Palestinian Centers: An Ethnography of the ‘Checkpoint Economy’” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(3) (2009): 217-235.
- 3 See Rema Hammami, “On the Importance of Thugs: The Moral Economy of a Checkpoint.” *Middle East Report* 231 (2004): 26-34; Rema Hammami, “Qalandiya: Jerusalem’s Tora Bora and the Frontiers of Global Inequality.” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 41 (2010): 29-51; and Ariel Handel, “Where, Where To, and When in the Occupied Territories: An Introduction to Geography of Disaster” in *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*, eds. Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni, Sari Hanafi (New York: Zone Books, 2009) 179-222.
- 4 See Eyal Weizman, “Forensic Architecture and the Speech of Things: A Conversation” *OpenDemocracy*, September 13, 2010, accessed October 15, 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/eyal-weizman-rosemary-bechler/forensic-architecture-and-speech-of-things-conversation>
- 5 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).
- 6 See Handel, “Where, Where To, and When in the Occupied Territories.”
- 7 Uri Misgrav, “This Police Station is Brought to you by: A Right Wing NPO.” *Yedioth Arhonot*, January 22, 2010.