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Hide Your Water from the Sun A Performance for Spirited Waters

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ABSTRACT: This essay is an excerpt from Jumana Emil Abboud's ongoing journal, which she started keeping in 2010. With the help of photographer Issa Freij, the artist identified spirited water spots in the topography of Palestine, based on her childhood memories and a 1922 study on *Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine*. The text was written as part of a performance by Abboud at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in 2016.

KEYWORDS: Childhood memories; Palestine; Spirited water spots; Topography

Hide Your Water from the Sun

A Performance for Spirited Waters

JUMANA EMIL ABOUD

The following is a selection from an ongoing journal I began keeping in 2010. This particular selection was written as part of a performance I presented at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in 2016. Together with photographer Issa Freij, I sought to find the sites that were once believed to have been enchanted by supernatural beings — beings who possessed the natural springs, wells, and streams. Promising to guard the waters, the spirits inspired valuable practices around natural resources and harnessed a unique relationship with the land through unbounded time.¹

We are following them: their tracks are hard to find, often buried.

1 Some material used in this performance was originally published in Jumana Emil Abboud, *In aching agony and longing I wait for you by the Spring of Thieves*, ed. by Lara Khaldi (London: Black Dog Press, 2018). The folktales presented here are revised versions of those found in Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak Bird Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

There are sounds we do not recognize: wind howls, echoes of children calling out from a distance. The quietness of the landscape untouched by criminality.

Beit-Illu, Ein Zarqa, Kobar, deir Ghassana, Bir Zeit, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Eyun al-Haramiya, Deir Ibzi', Deir Dibwan, Ein Qiniya, Ein 'Arik, Ladjun, Shefa'amer, Bitunya, Sattaf, Lebban, Bir Naballah, Beit Iksa, Yabroud.

Many were off-limits, inaccessible, lost in gamble. Demarcation walls, military zones, Israeli settlements got there first.

Often only traces were found — or discovered. Stepping on bush-covered earth only to uncover the remains of stone; Palestinian homes. Graveyard. Stories were once told here. Now, it is the ironic intent of occupation to reduce the storytellers themselves into the myth.

At other times, we would find in place of water, a wasteland dry and infected. More than this however, we found a land torn apart and threatened, textile robes hanging in warning ever so gently upon olive branches. Signs of utility at one extreme and protection at another. Who do you need protection from? Do we need to ask? Were we witnessing memory deletions and present-tense paranoia? Despite the obvious wounds of trauma, she (the landscape) was fighting on, preserving and thinking herself a victorious bride. She is a wonder for sore eyes! Contra-dic-tions.

Every single time, returning to Jerusalem on the days we were scouting for the sacred locations, a feeling of great heaviness burdened me because here I was, back to the bustling city, with its machines and machine operators powered to make-you-forget. I longed to go back, because

in spite of their exile and their scarring, there remained a trueness.



Deir Dibwan/Deir Diwan waters are connected to northern Galilee — it is said the spirits that ensure this water source's life continue to do so because of a promise they made thousands of years ago.



In Bir Naballah, the well was once believed to be haunted by animal spirits, a fox, specifically, feared for taking the villagers' children. We find the well in the centre of the town; it is completely sealed off in concrete. Children use the concrete surface as their playground.

In the village of Ein Qiniya there are many springs, and one is believed to cure blindness. The water in this spring is still abundant and is used by Palestinian farmers to cultivate the land. It is one of the rare living springs that is still accessible to Palestinians.

There's a landscape that's suffering
 Desperately seeking our attention
 And we respond by living between extremes
 Neither in the past nor in the present — but between
 feasting and fasting.
 Hunger strike.
 I find a dandelion
 The kind ready for the wishing
 Growling

Roaring
Humming
And all the other sounds (and words to describe them)

~

Terms
Terms of the springs and the jinn that guard them
As camels disguised.
There are too many disguises to keep track of.
And the names keep changing
Words versing their myths
A man invites us for tea — or is it burnt water?
He aims at our senses

~

We learn to identify the signs of nature by sounds of her inhabitants.
A pigeon cooing signals early morning or approaching dawn,
Frogs geese buzzing bees
Each song followed us throughout and became a bookmark, reference; of equations perhaps and nothing more.

~

How are we atoned? What is relegated? Promised? Compensated?

We once let our lives be ruled by tales and their metaphors.
The playground today is monitored by armed bodies claiming
defence, rather than by spirits guarding sanctities.



A sequence of events in the lives of the dormant.
Can you say dormant to reference water? Life? Spirit, jinn,
words?
Words that speak like magic cure or poison — to bewitch
into sleep-fullness or numbness
Words that speak like chanting mumbling cures to awaken.
Just like a kiss from the deep dark 100-year-after.



Infinite fingers in the breeze, tall grasses
And ripples
Infinite song of birds
And frogs and bees
And barking dogs
And the quiet tapestried stillness
Of gazelles
That follow in a row
And fox that cut across the winding.



It is only much later that I realize one of the deer's antlers
is broken, the second deer that treks in light hops behind

the first, following faithfully, following in memory of the wound and fearing the return of its injury.

This canvas vast

Kneaded

Baked smoked

Cut eaten

Alive

Crumbs preserved for travels to unknown places —

For fear of loss.

I learn that all human beings share two fears at birth —

Fear of falling

and fear of loud noises



Name-change

The wells in Nablus are numerous, and their names have been changed numerous throughout time. In one location the site of the well of the old city of Nablus has today transformed into a martyr's square commemorating Palestinians who died in clashes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such is the tragedy of war, I think to myself. The living — now dead — become heroes in the eyes of the nation and are claimed by the land (as well as the people) as a legacy of the land's identity. They are given more rights in death: knighted as a form of death-right. We once sought a cure in water, but the water cannot bring back our dead, and so we now turn to concrete tales for comfort.

We have Raja's birthday party this same night, and return to the market to take his favourite sweet, *knafeh* (sweet cheese pastry). Nearby we meet a young man, a shoe-shop owner;

learning of our search, he takes us to a hidden shop that he now uses as his storage room, opens the door, points to the ceiling's concave centre and tells us in pure conviction of its passageway to Paradise. 'Do you see this dome? It is the secret doorway to the other world.'

Eyun al-Haramiya (Springs of Thieves), so named for being famously known for thievery as it was situated along the caravanserai. It is a secret mountainous hideaway Issa leads me to. The mountain has had five secret rooms carved out of it, each room entered through a colossal gateway as though built with giants in mind.

Ein al-Lebban: Here we meet a man so obsessed with his home territory that he denies anyone access — gating himself and his house, wife, and children inside. The water spring is abundant — literally gushing forth — delicious, sweet liquid blessing called water. The site of his home is an archaeological site (Khan Illiban), thus explaining his tight control. Issa and I take a liking to this dark soul and mutually agree that if we were casting for a movie in which we were looking for someone to play the part of the ghoul, this man would unquestionably get the part.

He has caged himself inside his own paradise, denying the share of wealth of the place. His overprotection of his diamond home has made him go blind.



Entering Beit Iksa checkpoint from Biddu village during Friday morning prayers, we meet a man standing with the young patrolling soldier. We are in search of Bir esh-Shami, a spring once believed to have been inhabited by

bad spirits taking the form of any black animal. He investigates our car: 'A rental?' 'Yes.' The unknown man is awaiting a wedding party and he is standing at the checkpoint with the soldier in order to identify the wedding guests who have permits to enter the village between Israeli- and Palestinian-controlled land. He is eager to head into the village and to the wedding, but discovering the purpose of our quest, and taking an apparent liking to the adventure (a day full of adventures for him!), he diverts and leads us to a folk-taled spring that is now buried under a newly built mosque with a sealed-off water well at its footpath. It is semi-sealed off in fact. The echo of our voices reverberates into the hollowness of its belly. 'Do you want to go in?' he asks.

Exiting the village, I see a slow black cat sort of wandering about.



She stands at the centre
without much to say
much to say
two stripes — one on each breast —
cloak her nudity.
She is primitive
Hairy
Ape woman
Her right foot bends backward
And rests casually as in an experienced stunt
In the grasp of her left hand
In the grasp of her lost land.
Tip-toed totem.



mirror mirror on the Wall
hear my testimony
located relocated dislocated
a foot and a leg
a heart.
there are no silver platters for our fragmented existence.



It is told that a ghoull will appreciate the feed of human liver and lung and I am not sure why. Let us suppose that a ghoull represents that which is monstrous within us — and within us all — albeit in various degrees of monstrosity — and let us also suppose that a ghoull has multiple forms. A ghoull as a country, for example. A ghoull as in an authority feared, a ghoull as in an Occupation, feeding. And let's insist on proposing that the liver and lungs are not necessarily the literal bodily organs, but the organs or mechanics of any operational body or system. Do you think a country without his liver is like a water without her lungs?

There is a careful strategy, a brutal operation — sometimes visible and other times unseen — unfolding over the course of ages. I live to see the slow and wicked demise. Its initiation sponsored long before I came into being — the dispossession of the vital life-giving organs of my home. Will I live to see a resurrection of sorts? Will I live to tell? Will ghoulls remain as ghoulls, and shall we frame our lungs with metal to fracture biting teeth; outsmart scratching claw?

Alright, enough with my seamed metaphors. I have learned that the ghoul of the Wondertale presents little danger in comparison to the ghoulishness of mankind. I have learned that I dislike eating liver because I am afraid of my imagination upon its taste. Yet my refusal to taste liver does not console my imagination. In a similar vein, I have made several attempts at not breathing, or at holding my breath (above the water). Those familiar with my performance experiment *Holding my Breath* know. I have been obeying the order 'not a breath out of you' for far too long. It's time to reclaim lungs. Lungs, I reclaim thee. It is time to say to the water, 'Disobey.'

Disobey.

mirror mirror standing tall
 tell me a story
 a story do tell
 comfort my spirit with the spirit of your word-memories

There was once a man who was married to a certain woman in the village of Demashq. The wife died, leaving behind a son and a daughter. One day the man married again. His new wife gave birth to two children. She fed her children only the best food, and the others she fed nothing.

The orphans would go play in the countryside and one day they found a cow, and she was not any old cow, but a magic cow! They would say to her, 'Open, O our cow!' The cow would open the space between her horns, meat and rice would come out of it, and the children would eat their fill.

When the children played together in the evening, the stepmother noticed the orphans were like red apples and thought it was peculiar since after all she was feeding them

nothing. She asked her son to spy on them: 'Follow them out to the countryside and find out what they eat!'

He saw them with the cow, he heard them say, 'Open, O cow! We want to eat', and he saw what the cow could do, and he told his mother.

She made herself ill and convinced her husband that no prescription would cure her, except if he slaughtered the orphans' cow.

So he caught the cow and sacrificed her, and they ate her, while the orphans cried and cried. They were so angry that they ran away.

After some time, they reached two springs, and the boy was the first to rush and drink from the upper one. He immediately turned into a gazelle. You see, a gazelle has pissed in this spring, and whoever drinks from it turns into a gazelle.

The girl cried and cried for her brother but there was nothing they could do...

She walked until she reached the next town of Fida.

Her brother, the gazelle, always one step behind her.

They arrived by the walls of a palace and sat down. The king saw the girl — she was so beautiful — and next thing you know, they were married; and the gazelle her brother always one step behind her.

Soon it was time for the king to go to the hajj, but before leaving he said to the housekeepers, 'Take good care of my beautiful wife.'

But after he left, the housekeepers dropped the girl into a well. They fed the gazelle a mouthful of bread; they wanted to fatten him up so they could slaughter and eat him, but the gazelle would take the piece of bread they gave him and drop it into the well.

The king returned from the hajj and asked about his wife; they told him she had died and that they had buried her right under the palace floor.

The king thought something was strange, especially when he saw the gazelle disappearing into the countryside with a piece of bread in his jaws. The king followed the gazelle in order to find out where he took this food [...] and what do you think he discovered?! He saw the gazelle go to the mouth of a well, drop the bread in, and cry out:

‘O sister O Bdur
For me they’ve sharpened the knives
And raised the pots over the fire.’

And she answered:

‘O my little brother, O Qdur
My hair’s so long it covers me,
In my lap sits the son of the king,
And the whale has swallowed me.’

The king went down into the well and brought her and her child up. Then she told the king what had taken place. He took her brother and made him drink from the same spring again, and the gazelle turned back into the boy. For you see, the very spring waters that poisoned you will also set you free.

And what of the wicked housekeepers? The king had them imprisoned within the town's isolated grounds.

This is my tale. I've told it, and in your hands, I leave it.

How many times have I told you this tale?
Do you remember?
We've been here before, hunting
I felt you present and waited

We were in Bir Nabala (the well of the tooth of God)
Perfume of Za'tar
All around us
And as far as I can see
And we spoke of Ma'ruf (the known)
al-hattab (the wood-cutter)
who spends his every day confronting ghouls (giants)

Once, just last Tuesday, in a land where thievery and barbarism were allowed, with no law against practicing either, a land where forgetfulness, too, was welcomed, there came, into the village of 'heal yourself', a man searching for a wife. Now this man's name is Ma'ruf. Soon after he entered the village, he came upon a young virgin whose name is Almaza, standing by the well across from El-Ein supermarket. Almaza was weeping and weeping her tears down the well. 'What is it that makes you cry?' he asked her. 'I weep for my lost brothers and cousins.' Ma'ruf soon learned that the village ghoul had imprisoned Almaza's brothers and cousins. Vowing to save them, Ma'ruf jumped into the well, and found the ghoul in his dwelling, sucking meat off bones.

'I will devour you next!' exclaimed the hungry ghoul.

'First, let me give you a gift I have brought you.'

‘Alright then, give me your gift and I will devour you after.’

‘First, tell me, what are these treasures of magic you have here on your shelf?’

‘This wooden bowl — whatever you tell it to fill with — for example: “wooden bowl, fill up with rice and meat” — it will fill, and you can eat until you can barely move! This stick — if you say to it: “O my stick, keep moving, on the side of my neighbour hitting!” The stick will keep on bashing your neighbours until they return your things.’

‘And these that sparkle, what are they?’ asked Ma’ruf

‘They are the eyes of brothers, kept in a jar. And they are the souls of cousins, kept in that jar.’

‘This jar stands alone, is it the same?’

‘In this jar, I keep my own soul’, replied the ghouL.

Taking the jar, Ma’ruf threw it on the ground and smashed it with the magic stick until all eyes and souls were returned to their rightful bodies, and all bodies were returned to their rightful homes.

With one last blow, Ma’ruf hit the ghouL (once), and the ghouL was dead.

Ma’ruf returned to Almaza and they married. All her brothers and cousins attended the large wedding festival lavished with love, compassion, and so much food! I should know because I was there!

Now my tale does not end here for you see, at Ma’ruf and Almaza’s wedding, I met a lady whose hands were made of

porcelain — well no, they were not made of porcelain, but they certainly looked as though they could be. I saw her dancing, moving her hands in precious gestures like this (*show audience*).

And her story, she told me, was that once —

Her father, broken-hearted from the death of his true love, passed away, leaving his daughter (the woman with porcelain-like hands) and her younger brother all alone.

They were children but they were strong and wise.

They had a hen that laid an egg every day, and every day they would eat the egg for breakfast and were content with their blessings. One day, when the hen strangely stopped laying eggs, the girl went to check the coop and (behold!) she discovered the place where her father (God rest his soul) had hidden all his treasure.

She did not tell her brother about the money, but she asked him: 'If someone were to show you money saved by your mother and father, what would you do with it?'

'I'd buy sheep and cattle,' he answered.

His answer made her realize that he was still too young. Time passed, and she asked again, 'If someone were to show you money saved by your mother and father, what would you do with it?'

'I'd get married,' he answered.

Pleased with his answer, she told him the story of the money she found, and they went searching in this world to find a bride.

Before long, they found a girl living all by herself, and he married her. She gave birth first to a girl. In the middle of the night, the woman got up, devoured her daughter, and smeared the lips of her sleeping sister-in-law with blood. When they woke up in the morning, she said to her husband, 'Your sister's a ghoul, and she has eaten our daughter. Come take a look at her lips.'

He went and asked his sister, 'Why did you eat the girl?'

'But I didn't eat her', she answered.

The following year, after his wife gave birth to a boy, she got up in the middle of the night and ate him, again smearing her sister-in-law's lips with blood. Believing his wife, the boy was convinced he had to kill his monster-sister.

So, he took his sister to the countryside for a walk, and, after travelling a great distance, he sat her down under a tree by a well, drew his axe, and cut off her hands and her feet. As she cried, she put a curse on him: 'Brother, may a thorn get stuck in your foot, a thorn that no one can pull out and may you roam the desert for forty years.'

Shama (the illuminated one)

Shama was with us (here, the audience sees an image of
the white horse named Shama in the field)

Dancing to

Dogs

Barking their bullets

Point blank pointing

Ring around the moon ring around the moon

White sheep black sheep black sheep white

(return to tale)

Maybe you are wondering: what happened to the brother? Leaving his sister by the well and returning home, he witnessed his wife chase after the rooster, catch him, and devour him whole. Seeing the truth before his eyes, he realized his wife was the monster all along, not his sister. The betrayal was unbearable, and he ran away (a self-imposed exile).

After six decades of roaming, he decided to return to his hometown of Al 'Arab. It was spring, and the almond trees were blossoming.

For years he had been looking for someone to pull the thorn from his foot, though without success. Then one day, by chance, he came to his sister's doorstep. However, he did not realize that it was his sister's house.

She asked her limping brother, 'What's your problem, uncle?'

'There's a thorn in my foot,' he answered, 'and nobody's been able to pull it out.'

'Come here and let me see,' she said, and the thorn jumped over there. Rising to his feet, he kissed her hands.

She invited him to stay and have dinner with them.

He sat down to eat, and the children said again and again, 'Mother, tell us the story of the man who cut off the hands and feet of his sister. Did a thorn get stuck in his foot? Did he become a lion?'

The mother began to tell the tale, and at the end she told them, 'I'm the one whose hands and feet were cut off, and this man here is your uncle.'

They all got up and hugged each other. The bird has flown,
and a good night to all!

You were born of loneliness, desertedness, darkness,
cracks, caves, canals, trees

Near Al-Lozeh (*almond tree*) where you used to live
I find Almaza (*diamond*)

Weeping her tears

Down the well

Of Bir Abu Sarris (*well of the father of the thorny bush*)

You wore a woven crimson gown

Haunted by devils

She was weeping and mourning

'This whole body is haunted by devils!'

x2

This limb dances in the breeze

This one drives away the pain

Despite every curse you throw at my face

I still remain

And no amount of trespassing will invade this gentle
heart

Inhabited or occupied or possessed

Despite every curse you throw at my face

I still remain

How many times have I told you this tale,
do you remember?

In Sataf, a spirit of a man with fiery red eyes, turned to me
to say,

I am the dead forest

I hear nothing under the branches of your trees

The songs are kept for your roots only

In a place without shadows

They silenced my song of water

Between Al-Zaitounah and Bir Zeit (*the olive and the well
of oil*)

The earth could not hold us as we moved,

Falling, I heard a voice say:

'Do not be afraid my child; soon you will be again in your
father's house.'