



“Simply magnificent.”

—DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER

THYME TRAVELLERS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF PALESTINIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

edited by

Sonia Sulaiman

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To past, present, and future Palestines.

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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.

In the Future, We Can Go Back Home

SARA SOLARA

THE MOMENT I SET FOOT IN JERUSALEM FOR THE FIRST TIME, I remove my sandals and delve my toes deep into the tender earth. Pure air slips in and out of my lungs. Under the warm glow of the sun, a date palm towers over me, stretching high into the heavens in all its magnificent glory.

Hesitantly, I reach for the trunk and run my hands along its bark—as if in touching this lone tree, I can forever root myself in this precious place.

My heart thuds in my chest. *Palestine. Palestine. Palestine.*

For my whole life, I have ached to return to the ancestral homeland my grandmother spoke of with awe, and by some long-overdue miracle I am here. I thought I'd never make it. Only five years ago, Israeli officers turned me away at the airport for my news articles exposing their apartheid state, refusing to let me enter my own homeland. Because they fucking could. I had waited twenty-seven years of my life for that opportunity, storing up spare dollars and laying out precise plans, only to have it seized from me as soon as I arrived.

“You hate Israel,” the officer had said upon looking up my latest article about illegal Israeli settlement expansion in *The Intercept*. “Why would we let you in?”

“Because this is my home,” I said through gritted teeth, tamping down the rage burning inside. “This is my family’s native land. You took it from me.”

Wrong answer. Entry denied. With a scoff, he sent me away on the next flight. Colonizers love commanding every aspect of our lives, flaunting their power to exact the worst possible pain, robbing us of the simplest joys we fight for. Colonialism is cruel like that.

Now, it’s over. In a free Palestine, nobody can stop me from going back home.

My cousin Reem nudges my shoulder. “Come see the family, Nadia. The food is waiting for you.”

“Shokran.” I follow her in a dazed wonder, as each step on the earth buoys my stride.

The whole plane ride here, I questioned whether I would belong, and still that fear eats at me. It is my first time here in Palestine. I cannot speak the language of my ancestors. There is so much I do not yet know, as much as I have tried to learn, because I was barely raised in my own culture, because it was taken from me in the violence of colonialism that pressured my family to erase themselves. There is also the fact I am in love with a woman, and I cannot help but wonder: Will the land love me back in all my queerness? It all hangs heavy over my shoulders.

No matter what, I am here. I am present.

At the new house, my great-aunt, great-uncle, and all my cousins greet me with hugs and double kisses on both cheeks. They ask if I want to take a nap after the long flight, but I am so alert I could not dream of sleeping. Instead, I take a shower and we settle in for a feast, with maqluba, fattoush, falafel, and every sweet imaginable. “This is your home,” my great-aunt says. I am automatically included at their table, because I am family.

Aside from Reem, who visited me in the US on her occasional trips, I am meeting them all for the first time—my grandmother’s sister and her kids and grandkids. Yet in my bones I have always known

them, for we share the same blood, thicker than any force that could attempt to separate us. Their voices ring familiar in my ears.

Afterward we drink tea on the balcony over a lush vineyard lined with fig trees. I close my eyes and stretch out my arms, allowing the heat of the sun to tingle across my palms.

“Nadia, you remind me of your grandmother Zeina,” my great-aunt says. “She wanted to absorb everything like a sponge, baking in the sun and swimming in the springs. We grew up in this neighbourhood. I wish she could see her home village one last time.”

“I know,” I whisper. “Me too.”

When night falls, I slip out of the house into the cool air and walk the perimeter of the village in sacred silence. This is the village in West Jerusalem my grandmother was expelled from as a nineteen-year-old, when a Zionist militia violently invaded during the Nakba in 1948.

This is the village our family was barred from for eight decades, as Israeli colonizers took over and built their settlements on stolen land.

The ruins of our destroyed homes are still here. The collapsed stones of houses blown up by Israeli militias. The ancient caves and water wells. The cemetery where my ancestors are buried. I walk through as quietly as possible, as if the softest step on this hallowed ground could disturb the souls resting here. Before each headstone with my family’s surname, Rayan, I pause and bow my head. An ancestor.

A cool breeze whispers through the orange tree above, and I draw a deep breath. I keep walking. Up ahead, the ruins of a home beckon to me. Between the invasive pine trees the Israeli colonizers planted to hide the signs of our existence, there lies the remnants of a white stone house. With great care, I step over the edge of what looks like a decimated wall and into the centre, where I sit among the rubble.

As soon as my fingertips graze the stone, pink sunlight blooms on the horizon and blinds me. I gasp out, blinking away the little fuzzy flashes in my sight.

The rubble has rematerialized into a house again, with pale sunlight peeking through the window. Little kids are running around and playing with fabric dolls, shrieking in sheer delight. At the table, two young women—one who looks like the older sister—share a spread of *zeit* and *za'atar*. They're smiling and laughing, speaking words in Arabic I cannot understand. No one reacts to my presence. I am not really here, after all. It's impossible. Yet I can hear the ringing laughter, I can smell the rich baking bread wafting from the oven, and I can see the markings of a well-loved home, from the framed family photographs hung on the wall to the array of oranges, lemons, apricots, and figs decorating the table. I dip the tiniest piece of pita in the olive oil and *za'atar*, savouring the fresh spices on my tongue.

The young woman on the left is chatting enthusiastically in Arabic with a lilting cadence, her brown hair swept back in a braid. Her features—the long nose, the dimples in her smile—feel oddly familiar. When her companion cries out “*Zeina!*” it clicks. She is my grandmother, a bright-eyed, playful youth with an impish smile, before she knew the scars of catastrophe.

The way she giggles with a flicker of light dancing in her eyes, shouldering closer to the other young woman, sparks a fresh sense of recognition. Her companion squeezes her hand and plants a light kiss on her lips. Oh. She is queer—they are both queer—like me. And they are happy. They are infinitely, blissfully content, the precious peace of this simple moment undisturbed.

I wish I could freeze this snapshot in time for them. This moment where my grandmother can be young and free and fully herself, unbroken by the traumas fated to come. But before I can draw another breath, the sunlight in the window retreats and darkness descends.

Then I am sitting in the rubble again, as a breeze lifts and whispers through the trees. The heavy night presses against my chest. What a treasure I have been gifted, to glimpse this stolen memory from my grandmother's life. Was it real?

When I ease to my feet, the shattered stones roll away from me in a flurry. Stone by stone, the four walls reconstruct themselves all the way up to the roof and close it off. The hanging photographs jump back onto the wall, dead fruits grow ripe with colour as they spring onto the table, and the warm aroma of baking bread wafts from the oven. There's even zeit and za'atar on the table. Exactly as it was.

It's almost as if my grandmother and her loved ones are still here. Their near presence lingers in the walls of this place.

Under the moonlight, I stretch out my hand to touch the white stone wall, to test if it's really here. The rugged rock is solid against my palm. I lean against the wall, pressing my face to the rock, and breathe deeply. A force tugs on my spirit and roots me to the land. This is where I truly belong.

I am home. I am home at last.