

Nora Parr reviews

## *A Blade of Grass*

### *New Palestinian Poetry*

edited by Naomi Foyle.

*Poems in English and Arabic.*

Smokestack Books (Ripon) 2017. Pbk. 180 pages £9.99.

In-between words:

### Palestinian poets redefine the struggle

'I am Arab!' Reads the first line of the first poem in Naomi Foyle's collection of new Palestinian poetry. It is the declaration that launches Marwan Makhoul's question-and-answer verses titled simply: 'An Arab at Ben Gurion Airport.' Provocative and pointed, the line is an accusation and reclamation at the same time that it is an inevitable gateway into the challenges facing contemporary Palestinian poets. In terms of politics and aesthetics, the writers in *A Blade of Grass: New Palestinian Poetry* are engaged in a fruitful struggle against the way we think politics.

Makhoul's opening line is a near copy of the profound start to an iconic piece from Palestine's preeminent (some would call him 'national') poet Mahmoud Darwish. 'ID card,' first published in 1964 begins: 'Record, I am Arab!/ and the number of my card is fifty thousand.' Where Darwish imagines a checkpoint where the poem's speaker is identified by his Israeli-issued identity card, Makhoul two generations later conjures the notorious Tel Aviv airport – where travellers are sorted into categories (numbers 1-6, where number one gets easy passage and number six is the drudging labyrinth of the back corridors of security assessment.

The poets – some fifty years apart – conjure the same type of encounter. Both respond to the ranking and categorisation of human life so characteristic of colonial contexts. They write scathing, poignant, and rich replies to this ordering that are far too long and nuanced to utter amid the rush to get back to life beyond the checkpoint or under the omnipresent gun. Makhoul's is not the only heavy reference to Darwish. Though he passed away in 2008, he continues to dominate the literary scene – usually with references to his works of the 60s and 70s, the heyday of Palestine as a global paradigm of resistance. His is such a heavy presence, however, that a reader is quite justified in

asking: what is it that's *new* in this poetry?

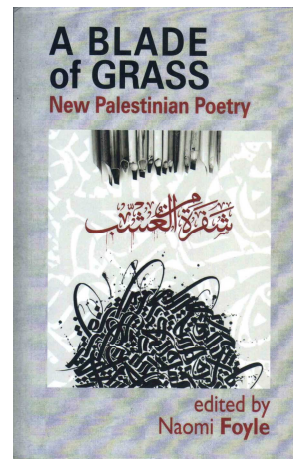
Foyle's collection of 12 poets (presented in English and Arabic) promises innovation and original ways into the

heart of Palestine. It doesn't deliver in the way you'd expect – but deliver it does.

While themes of steadfastness are of course present, to read the volume through the same old lens is to miss a vital point. Palestinian life and politics have changed since the 70s, and not for the better. Today, Palestine is 'filled with universes that will never again touch,' as one verse from Sarah Saleh pointedly puts it, while a later poem from Darwish laments poetry had become 'voices searching for words in the wilderness.' The words of the old resistance no longer spoke the same truth.

A Saudi prison, Sydney, Brooklyn, an Israeli detention centre, occupied Ramallah; this is where the poets of *A Blade of Grass* write from. These are all locations of Palestinian life. The poets also have different personal and political priorities, reflecting the different realities they live. As scholar of Palestinian literature Najat Rahman puts it, contemporary poets 're-articulate the political in their aesthetic in the absence of a true politics' (*In the wake of the poetic*, Syracuse, 2015). With no 'one politics' there is no single register that these poets speak, and the volume is notable for its sometimes-disorienting diversity of poetic aims. So what links these works?

As Foyle describes it, new Palestinian poetry teaches us 'that revolution is not an event, or even a process, but a state of mind.' The poetry within the volume nuances this even further. Ashraf Fayadh, a contributor currently jailed and sentenced to death awaiting appeal in a Saudi prison, reminds readers that: 'Freedom is a very relative thing.' In his poem 'Stroke,' readers explore the relationship between body and world, where the world is made up of concepts that the body does not understand. What is freedom for a wounded heart, for a Palestinian in a foreign jail cell accused of violating public norms with poetry that is both touching and visceral?



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Dareen Tatour, a young woman from Nazareth currently imprisoned by Israeli police for incitement, plainly acknowledges that she has 'Lived with every injustice' in her poem written from jail, but does not even bother to accuse a problematic justice system, going so far to ask 'self, what is your crime?' Fayadh's answer (far more provocative than any of his scatological references) is that 'Justice is exactly as meaningless as humanity.'

The poets' condemnation of the very notions – of justice, of freedom, of humanity – meant to liberate is the new iteration of a Palestinian call to arms.

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## Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit

Once they started invading us.  
Taking our houses and trees, drawing lines,  
pushing us into tiny places.  
It wasn't a bargain or deal or even a real war.  
To this day they pretend it was.  
But it was something else.  
We were sorry what happened to them but  
we had nothing to do with it.  
You don't think what a little plot of land means  
till someone takes it and you can't go back.  
Your feet still want to walk there.  
Now you are drifting worse  
than homeless dust, very lost feeling.  
I cried even to think of our hallway,  
cool stone passage inside the door.  
Nothing would fit for years.  
They came with guns, uniforms, declarations.  
*Life* magazine said,  
'It was surprising to find some Arabs still in their houses'  
Surprising? Where else would we be?  
Up on the hillsides?  
Conversing with mint and sheep, digging in dirt?  
Why was someone else's need for a home  
greater than our own need for our own homes  
we were already living in? No one has ever been able  
to explain this sufficiently. But they find  
a lot of other things to talk about.

Naomi Shihab Nye

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