

# Chalfont St Giles and Jordans Literary Festival Writing Competition

## An Essay by Izzy, LVI

4.12.19

Dear Reader,

It's hard to remember what silence is. Nowadays, the soundscape is punctuated by the chilling cacophony of blood-curdling screams and shells burying themselves just beneath the ground, sending thick, acrid smoke rolling tempestuously across the sky, swaddling Aleppo and falling back to Earth. The sporadic tufts of trees, acacia and baobab were barely rooted in the earthen crust, baked to clay in the heat; they were the only sight that seemed to remain constant, emerging from the red ashes unashamedly before the onslaught of bullets.

Mama was buried beneath those trees now, the weeping willows cradling her to glory. Sometimes, when I'm frightened, I still hear her voice, fading in and out of my consciousness - Fi-umman-Allah. I remember the hours we spent nestled in our pantry, amongst the tinned spices; she would braid sunflowers into my hair like silken gold thread and sing till my tears ceased and the thumping footsteps had quieted, she kept me safe.

I don't know whether you can die of a broken heart, but Papa hasn't learned to live without her yet and I don't know if he ever will. Nobody says much of anything anymore. I'm writing this blog so that you, dear reader, may know my story. Salam, my name is Amira Abboud.

Ella Al-leqaa x

25.12.19

Dear Reader,

£S300, that was all it cost. The smuggler had given me fake identification and Amira Abboud simply ceased to exist. Papa refused to say goodbye, said I was condemning myself, I couldn't make him see that staying here was true damnation.

So I walked alone, beneath the skeletal towers of Syria. The buildings were dilapidated and forlorn, looming over me like the Reaper's Scythe. Lecherous men prowled throughout the carcass of the city, bathed in silver by the pallid moon above, but I'd put my faith in Allah and He would protect me.

As the sun peaked from behind the horizon, I reached the Turkish coast, falling in line behind the legions of Syrians already gathered. A lifejacket was dropped at my feet, it felt like plasticine, I doubted it could keep me afloat. They herded us onto the boat like lambs to a slaughterhouse. The women and children sat criss-cross on the flood, whilst the men perched on the railings and rowed fiercely with makeshift paddles. The boat was scarcely big enough for ten, yet here we sat, a group of forty, being whisked away from our homes, leaving our very identities behind upon the Syrian shore, our legacy and memories drowned and lost amongst the treasures of the seabed. We lost our identity upon that ship, our shoes were stripped and abandoned to lighten the load of the ship and our hijabs were snatched from our heads, used to plug the holes of the helm.

We were the strangest and most haphazard mosaic of people, scarcely speaking the same dialect, yet entrusting our lives to one and other. The children cried themselves to sleep, cold and wet. They didn't understand a thing, didn't understand why they'd be torn from their warm beds. It was achingly cold, blackened ice seeped into my bones and curdled my blood.

The stench of death hung staunchly in the air; we got in the routine of silently throwing the deceased overboard, surrendering them to a nameless watery grave - there was more space that way.

Ella Al-leqaa x

### 14.3.20

Dear Reader,

We've been walking for days, carrying those who falter, ignoring the searing pain of our bare feet, grated by the tarmac and broken shards of glass underfoot. Every step sends dust billowing into the sky and the dust motes fading in and out of focus like wisps of life. A young toddler clung to me, his cracked lips suckle at my empty breast, tears carving rivulets into his sallow cheeks, I guess his mother never made it across the sea. We joined the legions of Syrians in the Idomeni refugee camp and rows of makeshift homes stretched further than the eye could see. They stood bravely, the tarpaulin and corrugated iron poles sagging beneath the weight of widow's tears and the howling winds of lost children. The solid ground beneath us had dissipated into muddied sleet, a mosaic of blood, faeces, urine and mire. Reckless men hurtled themselves at the barbed wire fence, scaling desperately upwards, until the Police Officers spurned them with tear gas and tasers. Nobody seems to hear our prayers; this is less than life. I tell my neighbours that I'm trying to seek asylum and they laugh at my naivety.

I lose track of the days, each bleeds into the next, an endless cycle of bartering for rice packets, begging volunteers for a musty blanket or extra tent pegs or tin-cans. Here, the cold seeps into my bones and the dampness of my soiled sleeping bag clings incessantly until my fingertips become numb. Then one day, as though simply tired of the listlessness, people start walking, an exodus of desperation and vulnerability, past the police officers who beat and bloodied us, through the gelid rivers and deserted alleys. They say we're headed for the towns, where we can seek legal aid; we'll be given a little home and an allowance. All we have to do is stay hidden, hidden from the predators who lie in wait, waiting to deport us back to Syria.

None of them seem to understand that there is no back, our home has been reduced to ashes, there is no life there, even the blossoming flowers are strangled before they can unfurl and greet the sun.

My next update will be when I am settled. I imagine a little house, with patchwork curtains and a white picket fence. Perhaps even an orange orchard that stain the air citrus, and red-breasted robins waltzing in the sky, the natural musicality of their song. I imagine the happy ache of a full stomach, the support of a bed and feather pillows and the warmth of functioning radiators that seeps into your bones and fortifies your soul against fears. I imagine a future, my future.

**Ella Al-leqaa x**

### 22.8.20

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NB: TRANSLATIONS:

- Fi-umman-Allah - May Allah protect you
- Salam - Hello
- Idomeni - Refugee camp in Greece

Ella Al-leqaa - Until next time