

The Bowl

My grandmother stirred the old metal pot on the stove as she sang “*Ya Zareef Altool*” – a story of a Palestinian folklore character who faces and passes through hardships to win his beloved wife. Zaref travels around Palestine collecting fruits and gifts to appease his lover’s parents. Similarly, my grandmother also gets her (gift plate) out of the wooden cabinet and places it on the table in the middle of the kitchen. As a boy, I knew I was waiting for the meal to finish so Teta (grandmother) could fill it with food so I could take it to our neighbours. My Teta would say this plate travels our village like Zaref travelled Palestine. As I watched the bowl sit empty on the table, I remembered how delicious the meal from our neighbours was last night. Our neighbours sent us my favourite meal *Dawali* – grape leaves. Teta would say, “My childhood is in this plate” as she came near me and kissed me on my forehead. The stories in this plate are like a laundry line full of colourful clothes. Each story has a piece of her *Thoab* – traditional dress. The meals she cooked over the years and sent to people as gifts were accompanied with stories of birth, the arrival of spring, the moment when poetry leaves you. Teta sang while cooking *Mftool*, adding the *kosa* – chopped zucchini – into the big pot on the stove, “My dreams are besieged by a checkpoint.” As I listened, watched, and carried the bowl with fresh food from home to home, my heart grew like a forest. When I arrived at a neighbour’s home and knocked on the door, a mother would answer the door and greet me saying, “Wait, let me make you a sandwich. You have a long walk back.”

In my village the pot was communal property, everyone used it to share food and stories. In my village, pain and trauma were revealed over a meal, an ancient remedy for belonging is sustained while exchanging the plate. My grandmother would advise me, “If you ever find yourself alone, cook a meal and share it with anyone.” The bowl was my grandmother’s

connection to her land and to the morning sun. She would pick saffron and lemons from our land and say this land is in the ink we use to write our stories. Now, as I knock on my neighbours' doors to share a meal, I remember her words and share my dreams with them. The meal and the stories are gifts. The long way to my neighbour's home was the journey to the gifts. The sandwich the mother made me was like a flock of pigeons that carried pieces of my stories and hung them from the minarets, so the passerby remembers my Teta.