

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

When Daffodils Grow in Gaza

Joanna Chen · Wednesday, August 16th, 2017

If you were trapped on an island, what would you ask for? The answer is simple for Mosab abu Toha, a 24-year old living in the besieged Gaza Strip: he wants books. This is no hypothetical question for him—Abu Toha is presently building a library of English books in his home town of Bet Lahia. He is doing so with the help of people from all over the world who have responded to his call on social media, including a [Facebook page](#). So far he has 200 books, plus his own personal collection, and every week the library grows.

Mosab abu Toha was born and raised in Gaza. Due to the Israeli blockade on sea and land, and the Egyptian limitations on movements through its own border, Abu Toha cannot leave Gaza. As the poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, “Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room.” There is no possibility of hopping on a plane, or even a bus, to anywhere else in the world, something many of us take for granted. But, he tells me in one of many fractured conversations on Facebook, literature allows him to transcend borders: “Reading books gives us the opportunity to travel, at least in our imaginations,” he tells me. As salary cuts increase, and water and power shortages make life in Gaza increasingly difficult, Abu Toha knows this counts for something.

In a recent essay published in *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand asks if poetry can change lives. One of his conclusions is this:

Don't expect too much out of any one thing. For although the world is hard, words matter. Rock beats scissors. It may take a while, but paper beats rock. At least we hope so.

Perhaps, to take this idea further, the paper of books can transcend the rock of politics. Perhaps it can even transcend the world's apparent indifference to the plight of the people of Gaza. Perhaps a single poem can indeed change a life, even a little.

Ask Abu Toha. One of his favorite poems is William Wordsworth's “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, a classic work of the Romantic era that he likely came across in school. There are no daffodils in Gaza, Abu Toha tells me, but this particular poem consistently transports him to calmer shores, where he can breathe more easily and imagine the vast world around him. It gives a bit of hope.



A reader in the Library for Gaza. Photo courtesy Mosab abu Toha.

Call him overly optimistic if you like, but Abu Toha is realizing his dream in the most concrete way possible. A graduate in literature from the Islamic University of Gaza, he already raised enough money through crowdsourcing to rent a small apartment in which to house his library. It has a name: The Edward Said Library, after another favorite writer of his. He has built wooden shelves to house the books and hopes to officially open the library to others later this month. One of the reasons for collecting books is that reading electronically is simply not an option when there are only four hours of electricity a day, and it is impossible to know exactly when these four hours will be. Books, actual books printed on paper, can be read under almost any conditions, and they can be shared with others.

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Abu Toha hopes to eventually create what he calls a “cultural space” in Gaza. Over the past years, the heavy shelling Gaza has suffered from Israel has resulted in the destruction of several libraries and cultural institutions. Today, there are only a handful of libraries left in Gaza, and the selection of books is meager. Contributions toward this goal have been trickling through the postal service over the past months; it sometimes takes weeks for books to arrive, although a poet living close to Jerusalem told me that her gift of books arrived at Abu Toha’s apartment in a mere five days. These days, that feels like a bit of a miracle. Packages have been received from all over the world, including one containing copies of books signed by Noam Chomsky, and another containing five *Harry Potter* books. There is a wish list on the [library’s website](#), and it includes *Go Tell It On The Mountain* by James Baldwin, *The Collected Stories of Raymond Chandler*, *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf, and *A Tale of Love and Darkness* by Amos Oz. Books that open up worlds.

Until recently, Israel banned the delivery of packages to Gaza on the grounds that it was a security risk, and although the ban has been lifted, it’s still a dodgy business. For this reason, an event was held last month in Israel to raise money for the library. I participated in the evening, held at [The Peace Factory](#) in Tel Aviv, along with other poets reading in English. I jumped at the chance. It was not just an opportunity to contribute to Abu Toha’s library, nor was it just a way of showing that there are people in Israel who care, but also a way of highlighting the work of poets in Gaza.

Abu Toha, who appeared in a pre-recorded video, read some of his own poems in English, but this one particularly resonates for me:

*Whenever I see the sea,
I remember what life means:
To always keep moving
To never look back at those
Who hit the waves.*

Never looking back is brave. It would be so easy for Abu Toha to be bitter and defensive, but he is not. His face, as he sat in his makeshift library, shelves stacked with books behind him, a single light flickering in the room, remained projected on the screen as I stood up to speak at the event. My voice wobbled and cracked as I began reading. I was thinking of all the men, women and children in Gaza whose lives are continuously ruptured by war.

When I worked in foreign journalism for *Newsweek Magazine*, I entered and exited the Gaza Strip several times. I met Gazans from all walks of life, and they met me, too. But that was years ago,

and now this was the closest I could get, I thought to myself as I read. I was wrong.

The following week, a Palestinian journalist called Nuha Musleh was injured by shrapnel during a disturbance in the Old City of Jerusalem. She's a feisty, wise woman who I worked with back in the Newsweek days, and I went to visit her in the Al Makassad Hospital, perched on the top of the Mount of Olives, where she was recovering from surgery. In the bed next to her, a mother sat by her twelve-year old son, Mustafa, who was awaiting treatment for cancer. They are from Gaza, and had been allowed entrance to Israel for chemotherapy. I stumbled through a conversation with them, helped by Nuha. They clearly missed home. All I could offer were a smile and a few badly pronounced words in Arabic that made Mustafa laugh bashfully. When I left, he limped after me, called my name, and shook my hand. I hugged the mother. Peace will probably never come to this region, at least not in my lifetime, but there are these small encounters, and they are real, and they remind us that there is no substitute for dialogue, for the sharing of ideas, and for reading books. In an excerpt from another poem written by Abu Toha, he asks this:

*Why not dream big
when dreaming is
the only way?*

As I survey the photo of myself reading, Mosab Abu Toha's face projected behind me on a flickering screen, I know this is at least a start, a way of lifting the barrier between Gaza and the rest of the world.

Top image: Abu Toha in the library. Photo courtesy Mosab abu Toha.

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