

Hospitalitea: *Tastes of Palestine I*

I.

Sweeter than sweet, amber tea poured into a small glass. Too hot to hold the glass without a sleeve or a clean hankie in the palm of my hand. Scent of sugar carried on the sage leaves dancing in the cup.

Sahim picked the sage, boiled the water and made this cup of tea and Abu Azzam poured it. They will have been married for fifty years next month. They have spent their whole lives together living under a military occupation, and still they take the time to sit down with family, with friends, with visitors, and drink tea.

II.

Homemade bread, baked the traditional way on an upside down wok-shaped pan over an open fire. Big and fleshy for flatbread, dappled with dark spots, soft, almost floury, and bigger even than a large pizza base. Dipped in olive oil and za'atar, a mixture of thyme, salt and sesame, and devoured before it gets cold.

“My mother made this bread,” a young woman tells us. I don’t remember her name, though I remember her two children, not yet grown to knee height and nervous of the strangers passing through. I remember her mother’s hands, the kind of hands that tell the story of her life, always working – mother’s hands, farmer’s hands, wise hands. Mother picks the vine leaves growing over our heads and shows us how to wrap a rice mixture into the leaves with deft fingers. Her hands are swift and nimble, evidence of the same folds made a thousand times before, and still she takes the time to wrap more vine leaves for us, strangers on the doorstep.

III.

A thimbleful of dark, cardamom-ground coffee poured by a young man clinking his prayer beads absentmindedly. A small copper coffee pot, singed black on the outside from boiling thousands of cups of coffee before this one. Great big stones line the ground of the old city, worn shiny from two thousand years of feet walking, millions of peoples' lives passed over. The stone is hard, and yet the stone is soft.

IV.

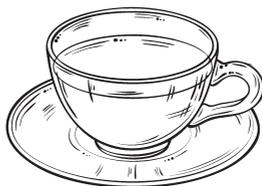
Dibs. Thicker than cough medicine, sweeter than sweet. Grapes are stamped barefoot and crushed until the juice runs into a pan, then the juice is simmered and simmered and simmered down over a great big open fire pit. Hours later, we have dibs. They say it works like spinach does for Popeye, take a wee dibs-dram and you'll have energy and strength for a week. It's pretty strong stuff, and although it's not alcoholic, it tastes like it might be.

Abu Dia makes dibs on his farm. As well as grapes he grows olive, almond and fig trees with their silver-green leaves, great big cabbages, broad beans and tomatoes. He grows wheat and thyme and parsley. The dark red-brown soil is full of rocks, it must have taken untold hours of strength and patience to till this ground. Abu Dia's next-door neighbours are illegal Israeli settlers. They have already taken some of his land, and some of his Palestinian neighbours' lands as well. They try to intimidate him and sometimes destroy his crops. But he keeps digging, keeps sowing, keeps nursing the seedlings and harvesting his crops. Good job he has his dibs-dram to keep him farming!

Hospitalitea: *Tastes of Palestine II*

I.

Amber tea, sweeter than,
Sweeter than everything,
Sweeter than life.



II.

Warm, fluffy, flatbread,
Olive oil and thyme,
Mother's Hands Made.
Again.



III.

Coffee and cardamom,
Bitter and rich,
Hard stone soft.



IV.

Feet stamping,
Grape juicing,
Fire burning,
Thick, sweet, Dibs.

Strength for tomorrow.



Penny Stone