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## Fady Joudah and the Reintegration of the Disintegrated Bodies of Displacement

### Abstract

Raised by refugee parents in Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S., the phenomenon of migrating minds and bodies is deeply rooted in the biography of Palestinian-American physician and poet Fady Joudah (\*1971). In his literary work, Joudah places the potentially traumatic experiences of displacement in the very center of the reader's eye, this way getting those who all too often are deprived of words out of the margins. However, in poetic volumes such as *The Earth in the Attic* (2008) and *Footnotes on the order of Disappearance* (2018), 'displacement' is not only linked to forms of (forced) migration; rather, it is also the (patient's) body that time and again is shown as being displaced, dislocated, disintegrated. In the form of a close reading of selected poems, this article argues that by aesthetically suturing the wounds, Joudah's poetry turns into a re-placing remedy for the displaced.

Alef knows  
That a thread  
Of a story  
Stitches together  
A wound.  
(Barakat 2019: 107)

### 1 Introduction

Experiences of forced displacement may not only shake our sense of belonging but can also deprive us of our innermost core, forcing us to recalibrate our entire identity. By their very nature, transgressions – not only of borders but also of bodily boundaries – are transient and volatile. As such, they can become manifest in the identity of those who have experienced or witnessed them. The genre of poetry seems uniquely equipped to confront this experience as it can enunciate as well as problematize the ineffable and the transient. A vivid example of this is the writing of Palestinian-American physician and poet Fady Joudah (\*1971). In poetic volumes such as *The Earth in the Attic* (2008) and *Footnotes in the order of disappearance* (2018), in which Joudah also reflects on his work with the humanitarian aid organization *Doctors without borders / Médecins sans frontières* (MSF), the reader is confronted with experiences of displacement in all their brutality. All too often, the physical and mental traumata, caused by such inhuman transgressions of boundaries and borders, go beyond words – and this at a time when communication seems of utmost importance. In contrast to that, I understand Joudah's poetry as an aesthetic means to transgress the ineffable, helping both patient and physician to rebuild identity, and to establish a bond between them. Having in mind his background as a doctor as well as a writer, this article thus aims to analyze notions of displacement in Joudah's poetic work. As I will argue, the depictions of 'displacement' shown in his poetry do, however, not only refer to forms of (forced) migration but assume an additional meaning, as it is the patient's body itself that, due to illness, violence, and war, becomes displaced, dislocated, disintegrated. In the form of a close reading, I will argue that the poems do not only show but also suture the ruptures and wounds of transgressing bodies, minds, and identities. In so doing, the

poetic body ultimately can be understood as a re-placing remedy for the dis-placed body.

## 2 Transgressions

As a son of Palestinian refugees, who was born in the U.S., raised mostly in Libya and Saudi Arabia, and returned to the U.S. to attend medical school, the crossing of geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders forms an essential part of Joudah's biography. While only Joudah himself may answer whether he agrees with the following observation, I still want to quote Palestinian-American poet and scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj in this context, when she notes that "Palestinian-American writers bring to their work an extra dimension of exile, that is engendered by Palestinian experience" (Majaj 2008: 14). It is not by chance that Arab American literature is deeply grounded in the New York School of *Mahjar* (immigration) writers shaped by authors such as Khalil Gibran (1883–1931) or Ameen Rihani (1876–1940). Despite living "in a heavily assimilationist U.S. context," these writers "reacted to those pressures by attempting to bridge Eastern and Western cultures, Arab spirituality and American materialism" (Moqbel 2014: 8-9). Until today, Arab American literature is coined by a certain tendency to, as Amy L. George notes, "create new mosaic portraits" that "replace false representations" and "counter the experiences where immigrants have been subjected to stereotyping" (George 2020: 218). Joudah's recourse to the genre of poetry falls into line with a certain proneness of Arab American literature to this genre.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this affinity can be seen in the poetic genre's particular suitability to express experiences of celebration and mourning, affirmation and loss. Throughout the twentieth century, Arab Americans have been situated between an ethnicity defined through intense familial and communal relationships and an equally intense (if often unwilling) engagement with political events. These dual orientations are linked by the literary genre typically used to articulate intense emotion: that of the lyric. Defined as a poem that expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker, the lyric as a literary mode is particularly effective in articulating moments of intensity and illumination. It provides a ready vehicle not only for nostalgic celebrations of family and community but also for anguished depictions of war and suffering, both of which have played large roles in Arab American experiences (Majaj 2006: 127).

Nedhal Saleh Mohsen Moqbel argues that modern Arab American poets

have found the genre well-suited to any sharp argument and to being the battlefield for their literary defiance of the status quo. Furthermore, since the political crises witnessed by contemporary Arab Americans have been ceaseless and immediate, poetry has allowed them to produce prompt, human poetic responses that are both empowering and healing. (Moqbel 2014: 5-6)

In the case of Joudah, notions of cultural crossings are reflected in a poetic fusion of different cultures and languages, which becomes, for example, evident in the integration of Arabic expressions into the poems' original language of English. In poems like "National Park," "The Living are the Minority," or "Maqam of Palm Trees," lines such as "I am a terra rist a maqam of earth" (Joudah 2018: 11-12) deconstruct words, notions, and stereotypes commonly associated with the Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> See also Majaj, when she notes that "[a]lthough at the moment we are seeing a surge of fiction and memoirs as well as forays into relatively new genres, as drama and comedy, poetry remains the predominant Arab American literary genre" (Majaj 2006: 126).

world. According to American poet and Nobel laureate Louise Glück, Joudah's complex transgressions of different borders and boundaries may cause a feeling of displacement in itself: "As an Arab in the West, as a doctor who practices emergency medicine, as a poet writing in English: for a number of reasons, in a variety of situations, Joudah finds himself not at home, not among his people" (Glück 2008: x-xi).<sup>2</sup>

As already alluded to in this quotation, Joudah is not only a poet and translator of Arabian poetry into English<sup>3</sup> but also a physician. Due to his profession as an emergency room doctor doing voluntary work for MSF – leading him to Zambia (2002) and Darfur (2004) –, Joudah has managed to defy the reputed boundaries between the healing and the liberal arts,<sup>4</sup> and, moreover, has time and again been surrounded by migrating minds and bodies. Once asked about the correlations between his work as a physician and a poet, he noted:

The questions of compassion and suffering, beyond their clichéd, hackneyed consumption, seem endless. I rarely, in my practice in the U.S., seek medical narratives as source for my poems. But the overarching reality of suffering and living is a different matter. I am not sure what my poetry gives to my medicine or takes away from it. We live in an intensely administered world and we are automatons half the time, it seems. Obviously I am somewhat uncomfortable talking about it. Similarly I am just as uncomfortable these days talking about my experiences with Doctors Without Borders. [...] All I can say about that experience is that the horror of this hierarchy of suffering in which we live our daily lives rarely leaves me. It is maddening at times. Especially when I ask myself, as a doctor, as one with power, how I partake in it, and how I have partaken in it. I am the one who "returns" from these sojourns into "suffering," and I get congratulated on it, as if it weren't just a simple act of private common decency, but a heroism that the society to which I return wants to claim as its own (as one once told me: "thanks for doing this in our name"). And to top it all, I make art out of it. (Baker 2012: 46-47)

Poetry and medicine thus do not form separated worlds in Joudah's work. Instead, his literary writings also reveal the view of a physician, which is emphasized by a constant recourse to medical language and imagery. Time and again, medical terms are used to point to experiences of illness or sickness (e.g. "anemic / from so much loss giving birth" in the poem "After", Joudah 2013: 7). Next to that, the terminology of the medical field is also used to direct the reader's attention to human bodies injured by violence, terror or acts of utmost inhumanity (e.g. "His cracked skull"; "Where the rebels came and went / [...] / Her girl's femur the size of the bullet," in the poem "After", Joudah 2013: 6, 8; "a bullet through / his temple, a final prayer," in the poem "Progress notes", Joudah 2018: 6). In spite of the at times almost relentless gaze of the lyrical I – merging with its homophone 'eye' –, which also expresses the experience of loss (of a patient, relative, friend; of hope, temper, faith;

<sup>2</sup> Background information on the equally dense and diverse history of Arab American (prose) literature can be found in Majaj's introduction to respective literature written from the late 1800s until today (Majaj 2008) as well as Fadda-Conrey's overview of the historical, political, geographical, religious, and cultural dimensions of Arab American identity and literature (in particular Fadda-Conrey 2014: chapter 1). For scientific approaches to Arab American poetry, see Majaj 2006; Abushihab 2020; Moqbel 2014. The voices of Arab American writers are, among others, collected by Orfalea/Elmusa 1988; Mattawa/Akash 1999; Darraj 2004; Kaldas/Mattawa 2009; Charara 2008; Atefat-Peckham 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Note in particular Joudah's translations of Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish's poetic volume *The Butterfly's Burden* (2007) as well as of *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me* (2012) and *The Silence That Remains* (2017) by Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan.

<sup>4</sup> For biographical information on the author, see "Fady Joudah" 2014.

of culture, homeland, home), the poems are nevertheless marked by a tone of compassion – both for those injured and those responsible for this suffering (e.g. "His rage is from not killing anyone at close range, not seeing the brain splatter. [...] He is a professional failure. I empathize," in the poem "Listening", (Joudah 2013: 13)). By approaching the complexities of human suffering in the form of literature, Joudah makes use of a form of expression that displays certain advantages over sober, descriptive reports. To quote Margareta Jolly in this regard:

Indeed, the life story as a human rights story cries out for emotional recognition and mourning, the compensation of public remembrance and education. Here testimony merges with other aesthetic forms to take the audience far beyond the courtroom. Dramatic art, photography, and creative writing, in other words, open up forms of witnessing that create alternative juridical spaces, rendering judgments without issuing punishments. And in these more complex genres and arenas, they can also do what legal and campaign testimony often cannot, in acknowledging the moral complexities of human rights abuse. Creative play with life stories can show that the world is never neatly divided into perpetrators and victims, that people can change sides as victims find themselves complicit or perpetrators fall from power. Creative imaginations also give the lie to simplistic statements about silence and speech. (Jolly 2014: 5)

In Joudah's literary work, experiences of inhumanity are most noticeable in the topic of displacement. In this regard, the poetic refugees<sup>5</sup> quest for a – protective and sheltering – place, anchoring and defining the self, is connected with the imagery of a disintegrated human body, mind, and soul. However, as will be shown in the following, by transcending bridges – between cultures, languages, and regions, between the healing and the liberal arts, between bodies and minds, and not least between the human(e) and the inhuman(e) –, the poems eventually lead to a re-integration of what has become disintegrated in the various courses of human displacement – both with regard to geographical and bodily dislocations.

### 3 Displacements

According to Stan Smith, the 'displaced person' is a paradigmatic figure of twentieth-century history (Smith 2007: 2). As Smith points out, the concept of displacement

emerged from the vast demographic migrations, deportations, purges and 'ethnic cleansings' that accompanied two world wars, and the destruction and reconstruction of nation-states and the reconfigurations of the global order which those wars occasioned. The term itself was first formulated at the end of the Second World War, and institutionalized in United States law by the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. In July 1948, the US Immigration Bureau announced that 205,000 DPs (displaced persons) and 17,000 orphans would be permitted entry into the country under the terms of the

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<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to refugee literature, see Stonebridge 2018; Nyman 2017; Bakara 2020. A recent anthology of refugee poetry has been edited by Thompson/Bseiso 2019. A personal note on the sidelines: Having no biographical experience of (forced) displacement myself, my use of the word "refugee" may be perceived as negative, potentially stigmatizing to some readers. When I deploy this term, it is in explicit reference to the vocabulary used in the poems by an author who is highly aware of the possible connotations that may accompany such terms and who himself once noted that he "struggle[s] with and against the classification of suffering, which often perpetuates further dehumanization of victims, through justification of violence or of silence" (Baker 2012: 37). For a critical approach to labeling terms such as "refugee," "migrant," "asylum-seeker," "exiled person," or "illegals" see Gunes' note that "labeling is a kind of categorization, derogatory, and at same time exclusion – "us" and "them", always causing refugees to feel themselves "Other" in social, cultural, social, political and economic life in the host country" (Gunes 2019: 20). For a more detailed overview of this issue, see also Gallien 2018: especially 738-40.

Act – mainly survivors of Hitler’s concentration camps or forced labour units, unwilling or unable to return home to the newly installed communist regimes in Eastern Europe, or actual refugees from those new regimes. The term soon became extended to cover any individual or collectivity dispossessed of a homeland, driven out by human violence or natural disasters, and seeking refuge elsewhere. Inevitably, it rapidly became, too, a metaphoric term for any individual displaced from his or her origins, whether by choice or necessity. (Smith 2007: 2)

In contemporary poetry, experiences of physical and demographic displacements have been repeatedly transformed into a ‘poetics of exile,’ (Smith 2007: 9) which understands displacement “not simply [as] an external, geopolitical phenomenon. It is also an internal process, in which the subject is cast out from its own history and culture, sometimes from the very language in which it has been constituted” (Smith 2007: 10).<sup>6</sup>

In Joudah’s literary work, the complex phenomenon of displacement is primarily linked with experiences of (forced) migration. In so doing, the poems time and again emphasize the feature of flight as a form of volatility, an abrogation of once-familiar laws of place and time. In the poetic volume *The Earth in the Attic*, this notion of the ephemeral marking of the moment of flight is poetically mirrored by a loose concatenation of brief snapshots, which, according to Glück, “seem analogues for photographs” that perform “a critical psychological (as opposed to aesthetic) function: each image makes a stable referent, an iconic substitute for what is lost” (Glück 2008: xiii). An example of this (photograph-like) ephemerality of Joudah’s poetry can be found in “Travel Documents,” in which the lyrical speaker’s gaze – almost as if by chance – falls on a woman, “Who’s worn the wrong size / Shoes, all her life in flight, her toes “now crooked” (Joudah 2008: 39). Where does she come from, where is she going? As in most of the book’s poems, the details of what or who is shown remain hidden in the dark. The impression the reader gets from the woman is thus as volatile as her flight. Even her name remains unspoken as if anonymity has become the displaced person’s core identity.<sup>7</sup> The lyrical speaker – and with them the reader – catches only a brief glimpse of the woman’s outer appearance, while her inner life, her thoughts, dreams and fears can only be speculated about. Having become displaced, the names of people, countries, regions, cities, and villages have turned into a hollow sequence of letters. They are signs robbed of their (physical) tangibility and transformed into a mere (imaginary or: metaphysical) idea, deprived of a possible former static consistency. Due to the anonymity surrounding the woman and the places and circumstances of her flight, the poem shifts away from a clear focus on an individual fate and opens up to shared experiences of flight and displacement. This way it blurs individual lives together into one overarching collective biography. It is not by chance that Arwa Hussein Aldoory and Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi note that Joudah’s poetry “resists cultural categorization and focuses instead on the collective human experience beyond the boundaries of hyphenation” (Aldoory / Alkurdi 2019: 1156).<sup>8</sup> Displacement leads to replacement – an at first glance almost inhuman causality, which does, however,

<sup>6</sup> For a critical stance towards Smith see Kinsella 2017, who takes a rather different approach to the interconnections of poetry and displacement. For a poet’s view on this topic, see Heaney’s lecture on *Place and Displacement* (1992).

<sup>7</sup> As Metres notes in this context, such a “refusal of names” can also be seen as a refusal of “the gradations of suffering—that some events are tragedies, others atrocities, that some policies are civil wars, others genocides” (Metres 2018: 48).

<sup>8</sup> Hyphenation in the sense of categories such as ‘Arab-American’ or ‘poet-physician’ (see Aldoory / Alkurdi 2019: 1156).

not lack a certain ethical component, as the steady stream of anonymous lives crossing the book's pages makes one aware of the sheer quantity of those sharing these kind of experiences. After all, focusing solely on a single – allegedly representative – story can create "stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story [...]. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie 2009, 00:13:05).

While there are still singular faces that can be detected in the ephemeral snapshots of "Travel Documents," in the poem "Along Came a Spider," the individual completely dissolves in the collective:

On mornings of this refugee settlement,  
After the rain falls in stalks  
Of mushroom clouds,  
The spiders bloom anywhere there's a web-hold  
And the earth is like an attic.

By noon, the webs melt from sun or starvation. (Joudah 2008: 57)

Vicariously encapsulating the heterogeneous conglomeration of the lives it contains, the refugee settlement may at least grant a temporary place for the displaced. In times when living conditions have become nearly inhuman – a state that appears to have turned into something almost quotidian, as it is emphasized by the poem's peripherally interspersed reference to the danger of dying from heat or starvation –<sup>9</sup> nature takes over. It almost seems as if the circumstances of the settlement are so unbearable that the eye must escape to a vanishing point that does not even lose its beauty when framed by the ugliness of human living conditions. However, it does not take long until the vaguely romantic mood of the poetically captured snapshot – the damp morning haze after the life-giving downpour that allows everything around it to bloom and grow – abruptly collapses in itself. On closer inspection, it turns out that it is after all not flowers that bloom, but spiders whose webs evoke memories of the homes that once provided the refugees with a protective roof over their heads. However, like these former homes as well as the makeshift shelter of the refugee settlement, the spiders' webs are almost defenseless against the attacks from the outside world. In its instability, volatility, fragility, the spiders' doom – in symbolic allusion to the refugees' potential fate – is already sealed, and not even the rain can protect it from the fatal power of the sun, withering everything that had just begun to germinate so tentatively, bringing deadly heat and hunger to the settlement of the refugees.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding the notion of everydayness, Joudah argues that "[t]he multiplicity of my experience deals directly and indirectly with what I believe to be a defining facet of our times: the nation-state (and its harrowing litany of victims, refugees, massacred, dehumanized, and exiles, et cetera). But one cannot simply write about this and be content. It has its pitfalls. One must, naturally, turn his/her gaze to one's private, shared humanity in the daily and the quotidian; just as much as one should turn toward the natural (pomegranate or the sea) and juxtapose it to the categorical or what we sometimes call the specific" (Baker 2012: 40).

<sup>10</sup> The poem's somber depiction of an (un-)sheltering home is representative of poetic approaches to refuge; as Kamal Sbiri notes, "the refugee identity is in a state of becoming. It is in constant flux and changing in a dialogic relationship with the points of their transit/ion. As a result, home and belonging become problematic constructs in refugee poetry and therefore constitute important features in the construction of refugee identities" (Sbiri 2011).

It is, however, not only nature that puts itself in the way of the fleeing but also other people. In "The Tea and Sage Poem," the search of the displaced for a new place in life is brought to a halt by airport officers:

In a glass walled-room  
[...]

An officer asked  
My father for fingerprints,  
And my father refused,

So another offered him tea  
And he sipped it. The teacup  
Template for fingerprints. (Joudah 2008: 28)

The juxtaposition of the airport and the glass-walled room confronts the reader with a paradox simultaneity of mobility and immobility. The possibility of leaving is almost tangible; ways and means are right in front of the father's eyes, but nevertheless remain inaccessibly hidden behind the transparent and yet impenetrable walls. Like picture frames, the glass walls shift what is seen into the static unreality of an artificial snapshot and turn the migrating traveler's hope to re- or new-place himself into a mere idea detached from the spaces of his own scope of action. The displaced is forced into the role of a spectator having to watch his dream become fulfilled by others. His spatial freedom of choice is further restricted in the encounter with the officers offering him a cup of tea. This seemingly attentive gesture, suggesting concern for the well-being of the man, is only abused to collect his refused fingerprints. In this scenario, the tea, in its symbolic reminiscence of a home left behind, becomes converted - almost perverted - into yet another breach of the displaced's autonomy.

#### 4 Transitions

Throughout the poems, tea is depicted as a symbolic representation of both the local and cultural homeland of displaced people.<sup>11</sup> In "Additional Notes on Tea," the – culturally anchored – status of tea as an essential element of human encounters is strikingly emphasized not only by its position in the poem's title but also by the incessant repetition of the word, here converted into a symbolic copula between life and death:

On the operating table in Solwezi a doctor watches a woman die.

Tea while the anesthetic wears off,

While the blade is waiting, tea.

The doctor says the woman knows god is sleeping

Outside heaven in a tent.

God is a refugee dreaming of tea. (Joudah 2008: 75)

As one of only a few poems, "Additional Notes on Tea" states where the poem takes place: Solwezi in Zambia, where Joudah himself once was on duty for *Doctors*

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<sup>11</sup> See in particular, "The Tea and Sage Poem," "Additional Notes on Tea," "The Name of the Place," "Along Came a Spider" (all: Joudah 2008: 28-29, 75-76, 48, 57-59).

*without borders*. This way, the poem at first glance suggests a spatial anchoring. On closer inspection, however, this impression does not sustain. Instead, the scene of the poem is again one of displacement – as patients, as Joudah once stated from the perspective of a physician, can themselves be regarded as being displaced (Lanham). That the patient is in fact dying confronts the reader with yet another form of displacement: the ultimate transgression from human immanence to transcendence. The image of earthly displacement is closely linked to the image of sleep, initially in the form of anesthesia, which eventually transitions into the eternal sleep of death.<sup>12</sup> By juxtaposing narcotic and deadly sleep, the poem opens up a dualistic opposition of the physician (as a representative of earthly life) and God (as a representative of eternal life). In this respect, "Additional Notes on Tea" shows the reader the increasing distancing between physician and patient. Visually emphasized by the empty void separating the singular lines of verse, the woman distances herself from the physician who only moments ago had tried to save her life in the operating room. Despite the patient still being physically present, the physician has now traded the original curative role for that of a mere observer, which not least allows them to let go of the patient while at the same time distancing themselves from the situation, this way protecting themselves from the painful feelings of impotence the loss of a patient may cause. However great the distance between the realm of the physical (cf. also the term 'physician' in this regard) and the metaphysical may be, the physician is nevertheless not entirely excluded from the implied heavenly world. After all, it is the physician himself who claims proximity between the woman and God ("The doctor says the woman knows god is sleeping").

This way, the woman's transgression into transcendence - aesthetically mirrored by the stanza break - is additionally underlined by the image of a God sharing the patient's unconscious state of sleep. However, it is not only the woman but also God who is depicted as having become displaced: The expulsion from Paradise has struck God himself, who now abides outside the heavenly home inside a "tent." Without foundations or fundament, this temporal surrogate for a home seems like the symbolic epitome of a refugee's volatile shelter, each night on the verge of having to be pitched in a different place. Without protecting masonry, the tent is as vulnerable as human skin, hardly apt to protect the sleeping from evil or harm. It is in this fragile shelter that God is now sleeping and dreaming of tea. Being a mere dream, the tea has turned from the physical into something metaphysical, which in the context of displacement and loss not least suggests that for the refugee even the most rudimentary things of life – a sip of hot water, a few plant leaves – have receded into inaccessible distance. The dreamed tea thus converts into a symbol for what has been lost, for the metaphorical uprooting of the displaced from an erstwhile home. In the image of a God, a refugee expelled from heaven, sleeping in a makeshift shelter, dreaming of tea, the poem thus unites the immanent smallest with the transcendent greatest, this way making aware in what way becoming displaced includes both the loss of the micro- and the macrocosm.

In certain analogy to "Along Came a Spider," "Additional Notes on Tea" remains silent about the circumstances that have led to the fate of both the woman and God:

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<sup>12</sup> For the ancient depiction of sleep and death as related states of existence, see in particular the Greek myth of the brothers Hynos (sleep) and Thanatos (death). One of world literature's most beautiful equations of death as a form of sleep can be found in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602): "To die, to sleep; / To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub: / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause: there's the respect / That makes calamity of so long life" (Shakespeare 1866: Act III, Scene 1).



Who was the patient, what did she die of, who is she leaving behind, was she a refugee herself? And what did God flee from, who or what caused the displacement of the heavenly home? In lieu of an answer, in lieu of even the question, their relevance is implicitly called into question. Instead, the poem shifts the focus to the universality coining refugees' experiences in all their various interplays of vulnerability and volatility.

### 5 Disintegrations

Be it in the context of geographical, cultural, or even existential displacement: The loss of an anchoring place can oftentimes hardly be separated from the experience of disintegration. Told from the perspective of a medical student, the poem "Beanstalk" confronts the reader with one of the gravest violations of (an all too often woman's) bodily integrity:

Two years earlier, while taking premed anatomy, when it was penis time, and the cloth was removed, I don't know why I uttered these words under my breath: "So small yet so many troubles." A classmate who was standing right behind me approached me after class to tell me she was moved by my remark. She had been a victim of rape. (Joudah 2018: 15)

As a literal disintegration, rape violates the body and leaves a throbbing wound both outside and inside. This assault on one's inviolability can destroy, disintegrate a previously holistic unity, splitting the physical and the psychological into equally injured components. In the poem, just hearing about the rape leaves the lyrical speaker speechless ("I was stunned," (Joudah 2018: 15)). The assault is inhuman, it is outside of what seems humanly graspable, and thus also outside of what is sayable.<sup>13</sup> In just two sentences, the poem expresses the seemingly irreconcilable opposition between the lack of words and the desire to speak about what has happened: "I was stunned. She wanted to talk" (Joudah 2018: 15). In the attack against bodily integrity, in the dis-integration of the human entity, language itself has become displaced, as it seems no longer able to provide a place for the inhuman that so brutally entered the sphere of the human(e).

In "Beanstalk", this physical disintegration is not only juxtaposed with a linguistic but also with a spatial displacement. When a classmate tells the lyrical speaker that she has been a victim of rape, her wish to talk is immediately followed by a remark on her living conditions: "She had been a victim of rape. I was stunned. She wanted to talk. She told me she lived in a house in the middle of Nowhere Road, in Athens, Georgia" (Joudah 2018: 15). At first glance, this focus on the violated woman's 'address' may come as a surprise. However, on closer inspection, violations of bodily integrity are closely intertwined with a person's general physical situatedness. When Martha Nussbaum defines bodily integrity as the ability "to move freely from place to place; [...] to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault, marital rape, and domestic violence," (Nussbaum 1999: 41) she explicitly links this central human functional capability with two forms of physical autonomy: the autonomy of geographical and of bodily (self-)placement. By stating neither the name nor the age nor any other identifying details of the woman, while at the same time pointing to her place of residence, the poem discloses a particular desire to hold on to a place anchoring those who have been most utterly shaken to their foundations.

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<sup>13</sup> As the lyrical speaker in the poem "After no language" puts it: "some cuts run deeper than speech: writing may exit the stage but the cage remains and grows" (Joudah 2018: 35).

However, the woman's home has also fallen victim to the assault: She lives in "Nowhere Road" – an address that has forfeited its former status as a home and has turned into meaningless naught. What once offered protection – the body, the house – has been lifted from the joints. Disintegration is thus shown as a form of displacement – like the home, the rape as a violation of physical integrity has left the assaulted in a place of both physical, psychological, and spatial displacement.

In all its brevity, the poem confronts us with yet another form of human disintegration: the one of the male corpse. Following the anatomical student's line of gaze, the body is not shown in its entirety, but, again, split into individual components, mirroring once more the separation of the physical and the psychological. While it is the mind (ab-)using the (per se neutral) male body as a tool – or rather: weapon –, the poem does not highlight the psychological, but the physical. Although the male cadaver is not that of the rapist, the poem's focus on the body, or, to be more precise: the body part of the penis makes the assault immediately graspable and, also, assailable. Dislocated from both the rest of the body and mind, the penis of the anonymous corpse thus converts into a phallic symbol for the abuse of male violence.

In the amalgamation of female and male disintegration, the poem thus presents itself as a kind of aesthetic circle formation. Anchored in the dislocated space of the dissecting room, the reader's view is directed to the physical remains of the body, or, rather: the violated and violating genitals, and thus from the psychological to the immediately graspable physiological. Making both the act and its effects visible, the poem ultimately offers a means to overcome the ineffable accompanying acts of utmost inhumanity.

## 6 Re-integrations

In Joudah's "After Wine," forms of human disintegration are taken to yet another extreme. The poem confronts the reader with a terrorist attack that leaves human bodies shattered to death: "News of the explosion will hang around. The hell of pictures on the web. Faces of the dead on Facebook will wait for your walk home. A woman who awakened your first lust when you were a kid was killed in the morning while talking to her sister on the phone. First a blast then stillness" (Joudah 2018: 37). In the poem, acts of utmost inhumanity are expressed in a juxtaposition of sound and silence ("First a blast then stillness."). In its staccato-like brevity, the sentences remind of the chopped bodies left behind by the deadly explosions, bodies whose former integrity has been smashed into bits and pieces. In the poem, the lethal splinters of the bombs are, however, counteracted by poetic splinters of life: Even though the bodies remain, once again, anonymous, the poem nevertheless persistently surrounds the dead with glimpses of the lives they have lived. By intertwining different persons and times, lines such as "A woman who awakened your first lust when you were a kid was killed in the morning while talking to her sister on the phone" evoke the past and present of the dead and link them to friends and families for whom they will continue to live as if fighting death itself.<sup>14</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

By and large, the complex assemblage of splinters and fragments noticeable throughout Joudah's poetry appears like an aesthetic metaphor for the wounds

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<sup>14</sup> See also Metres claim that "[i]dentity is fluid, and what we believe and who we stand with can be as important as who we are or how others think of us" (Metres 2018: 48).

caused when a person's – physical and psychological – integrity as well as their – geographical, cultural, linguistic, spiritual, to name just a few – place in the world becomes assaulted. However, Joudah's poems do not only serve as mirrors of the complex shades of norm and abnormality. Instead, time and again, the poems find a way to re-integrate the dis-integrated, to re-place the dis-placed, to re-humanize the in-human. By opposing, e.g., the fatal bomb splinters with fragments of life, a poem such as "After Wine" prevents the dead from becoming quietly buried and forgotten under the smithereens their world has been blown to. As a form of resistance,<sup>15</sup> the poem instead reacts to the wounds of both the deceased and the bereaved by subtly re-integrating the literally dis-integrated back into both the lives they have lived and the social surroundings in whose memories they will live on. While death can be regarded as the most extreme form of human displacement, Joudah's poetic work thus also rejects the notion that the violated are deprived of the place they have occupied and will continue to occupy in the world. Due to their cautious juxtaposition of the human(e) and the inhuman(e), of integration and disintegration, of placement and displacement, the poems eventually present themselves as poetic sutures providing, as Joudah once put it, "humanitarian relief" (Lanham) in inhuman times.

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<sup>15</sup> As a form of resistance, poetry can itself become a sort of refuge, as Metres argues: "While I have always courted the idea of poetry as a rhetoric of resistance, I continue to return to the idea of poetry as fundamentally a kind of resistance itself—anti-rhetorical, a state anterior to positing. Poetry as the ground of opening into the possible. A refuge" (Metres 2018: 4).

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