



SEPARATION WALL IN BETHLEHEM, PALESTINE  
PHOTO BY MEENA ALEXANDER

*"Preparing for my journey I started dreaming of the separation wall. It invaded my dreams. All over the world walls were coming down, and here was one that was built to cut a people away from the earth."*

— Prof. Meena Alexander, Hunter College/CUNY



## Impossible Grace — Poems and a Journey

MEENA ALEXANDER

I.

IT KEPT RINGING IN MY HEAD: I am going to Jerusalem. I was a child again, sitting between my parents in the car, speeding past no man's land. The U.N. flag fluttering. I remember stones, dry earth, barbed wire. And in the city we had left behind, tiny streets, the glowing hunched buildings, donkeys with their burden, pilgrims stooped on Via Dolorosa, the misty darkness and glory of the church of the Holy Sepulchre. In those days with an Indian passport there were two countries one couldn't travel to: South Africa and Israel. So we came through Jordan. My parents wanted to attend Easter services in Jerusalem. After that came the Six-Day War. I left my childhood behind and moved on.

While Jerusalem remained with me in memory, I had no hope of going there. Then quite by chance, in May 2010, in the mountains of Shimla at the Indian Institute for Advanced Studies, I met the philosopher Sari Nusseibeh. We were all gathered there for a conference on History and Memory. I remember a group of us riding up in a minivan through the twisting mountain roads. Sari was sitting near me.

Do you know the poetry of Fadwa Touqan? I asked him. The memoir *Mountainous Journey* was vivid in my mind. Do you teach her work at your university?

I must find out he said, if we teach her work. Then he counseled me to read Al Khansa's

poetry. There is something mystical about it, he said. She had a very close relationship with her brother.

I would love to come to Palestine someday. I said this never thinking it could happen.

You will come as our guest, he said.

So it was that time opened up and with his kind invitation I was able to spend a month in Palestine — as Poet in Residence at Al-Quds University. And I was invited by my friend the Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif to join the Palestine Literary Festival which was to take place towards the end of my month in Palestine.

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Preparing for my journey I started dreaming of the separation wall. It invaded my dreams. All over the world walls were coming down, and here was one that was built to cut a people away from the earth.

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Sometimes poems have a life of their own. So it was with 'Impossible Grace.' On the night of April 4, 2011, just a few days after I arrived in Jerusalem, I wrote the poem. I wanted to evoke the many gates of the city of Jerusalem, and for each gate I wanted a flower, but in the end the poem turned out differently and there is only the wild iris in it, its color blue-mauve like the sky in the early morning above the hills of Jerusalem.

In some ways it's a love poem. I wrote it in the dead of night in the Indian Hospice where I was staying, my bedroom cut out of

Meena Alexander, Poet and Distinguished Professor, English and Women's Studies, Hunter College/CUNY and CUNY Graduate Center

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the rock face, right next to the hole where the thirteenth century mystic Baba Farid had lived for forty days and nights meditating on God. I wrote it in the city of golden stones and of many faiths, the city of countless gates.

In my notebook I wrote: *Why was the gate of Mercy sealed?*

That line did not make it into the poem which was composed in tight couplets. I heard music in my head as I wrote the poem. I read it the next morning to Sari when I saw him on campus. I had called him earlier before I started the poem to ask about the gates of Jerusalem. In the poem the old man who guides the speaker towards the fountain is a real person who sometimes takes visitors around the city. And Raimon's café, is a real place.

Later it troubled me to see the Israeli soldiers sitting on the parapet by the cafe, just inside Damascus gate, swinging their feet. How young the soldiers were, as two by two they patrolled the old city. I was often stopped and asked the question: Are you a Muslim? Sometimes the soldiers barred my way. I did not reply. I would instead try to tell them where I was going. Coming from a country founded on secular principles I felt my religion was no one's business but my own. No doubt it was not just the way I looked, but also the fact that I was wearing *churidar-kameez* with a *dupatta* that made them ask the question.

I gave a talk at Al-Quds and I spoke of Gandhi and how my mother's parents had been followers of his non-violent movement and the fierce belief they had that India would be freed from the yoke of British colonialism. I spoke of Palestine and how people all over the world hoped there would be a peaceful future.

I read out my poem 'Impossible Grace' on the last day of the Palestine Literary Festival. It happened quite by accident. It was not meant to be like that. The reading in the tent in Silwan — where settlers

were destroying Palestinian homes — was meant to be for the townspeople to read their own work and the members of Palfest would be their audience. That was the idea, but the evening had gone badly.

When we got there, after a reception at the American Colony Hotel, the street was filled with the acrid scent of tear gas. Earlier that evening, April 20, 2011 the Israeli army had lobbed tear gas at the tent, trying to get rid of the people in it. Close to Silwan the bus stopped. We left the bus and walked in a group. The dark was illuminated by lights from a few shops, and we could see the glowing lights in the houses nearby. A cluster of people stood there, as we figured out what to do. Onions helped, cut onions that were passed around, scarves, scraps of tissue, anything to ease the fumes of tear gas. There were broken stones on the road, and from the houses nearby the people were chanting *Allāh u Akbar*. Whistles came in the dark. There were soldiers on the hillside nearby, though we could not immediately see them.

How dark the tent was as we stumbled in. A cheer went up as the lights came on. Plastic chairs were rearranged quickly. The man from the Silwan Solidarity Committee who welcomed us spoke in very moving fashion. We had wanted to welcome you, he said, in our own way and with the poems of a thirteen-year-old poet, but see we now welcome you with tear gas. One of the signs in the tent read — 'Israel wants to demolish the houses of 1,500 years. We will not give up our houses — Bustan Committee.'

There was supposed to be an open mic so the people of Silwan could read and share their work, but because of the tear gas, the parents had taken their children to the relative safety of home.

Read something Meena, Ahdaf said to me.

All I had was my notebook. I pulled it out of my bag, opened it and found 'Impos-



sible Grace.' So that was how I came to read 'Impossible Grace' for the very first time in public. Ahdaf translated the poem, on the spot into Arabic, stanza by stanza. I was glad that the poem was composed in short, terse couplets, perhaps that would make her task easier, I thought. Then Gary Younge, the *Guardian* reporter read, as did several other writers. Some in our group who had delicate lung conditions were forced to leave — the tear gas was hurting them. Others stayed till the end and the Palestinian rap group DAM brought the house down with their songs. The first song was in English. It had lines about a man in an elevator with a beautiful woman who trained her sub-machine gun at him. The singer had on a T-shirt with a teddy bear with an eyepatch. Why the eyepatch? I asked. He looked straight at me, laughed and said — Just like that.

Six months later, I was in Delhi. My cell phone rang. It was Petra Klose calling

from Vienna to ask if I would give permission for the poem 'Impossible Grace' to be used as the lyric base for the First Al-Quds Music Prize. I remember us talking that evening in Delhi, over a really bad phone line. I heard music in my head as I was composing the poem, I told Petra.

In October 2012 I traveled from New York for the premiere performance. As the baritone Christian Oldenburg sang in the theater of Hind Hussein College, my eyes filled with tears. I seemed to smell again, the tear gas that had invaded our eyes, the first time that poem found its way into public space. And I thought of how we had stood on a terrace at Al-Quds, the separation wall was so very close, it stood there like a backdrop. Above it floated clouds.

One of these days that wall will dissolve away I had said out loud for anyone who was willing to listen — just like the clouds. It was what I believed and still do.



ROCK GARDEN COURTYARD IN INDIAN HOSPICE IN JERUSALEM, ISRAEL  
PHOTO COURTESY OF MEENA ALEXANDER



### Impossible Grace

At Herod's gate

I heap flowers in a crate

Poppies, moist lilies —

It's dusk, I wait.

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Wild iris —

The color of your eyes before you were born

That hard winter

And your mother brought you to Damascus gate.

\*

My desire silent as a cloud,

It floats through New gate

Over the fists

Of the beardless boy-soldiers.

\*

You stopped for me at Lion's gate,

Feet wet with dew

From the torn flagstones

Of Jerusalem.

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Love, I was forced to approach you

Through Dung gate

My hands the color

Of the broken houses of Silwan.

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At Zion's gate I knelt and wept.

An old man, half lame —

He kept house in Raimon's café,

Led me to the fountain.

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At Golden gate,

Where rooftops ring with music

I glimpse your face.

You have a coat of many colors — impossible grace.





SEPARATION WALL IN BETHLEHEM, PALESTINE  
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II.

I was getting ready for my journey to Jerusalem. March 31, 2011, I stood in a cold ill-lit portion of the Rome airport. Behind me was a woman, young and pale, a baby on her back, another woman tugging her child along. Long skirts. One mother pulling a blue plastic truck. The men behind them, dark in Jewish skull caps.

Were they Indian? Were they from Kerala, my home state? With a start I realized they were speaking Hebrew, not Malayalam.

How time was looping in my head. What should I say when the immigration people faced me at the Tel Aviv airport? Friends had told me not to say that I was going to a Palestinian institution. I am going to Jerusalem. I am going to see my husband's Jewish cousins. I am going to give poetry readings. Perhaps if I said some of this they would not take my notes away from me, take away my computer. I had heard stories of friends who

were visiting Palestine losing so much in the Tel Aviv airport. I tucked my notebook away, tightly in my purse.

Pigeons distracted me. Pigeons inside Terminal H of Fiumicino Airport, swooping low by the D & G sign. Bird wings outstretched and fluttering over the neon signs: Dolce & Gabbana. Later in my notebook I wrote:

*"I am flying into my own fate."*

It was dark when the plane landed at Ben Gurion Airport. Navtej Sarna had graciously arranged for me to stay at the Indian Hospice in the old walled city of Jerusalem, just inside Herod's Gate. It was to be my home for many days to come. Outside the airport the driver was waiting for me. A burly middle-aged man, he engaged me in small talk and as we drove in the darkness. He pointed out, by the apartments built on



the hill, an ugly scarring thing, brightly lit, a concrete hulk.

The wall! He said. On this side Israel. On this side Palestine. He moved his right hand off the steering wheel and swiftly gestured back and forth.

Slowly we drove towards the ancient city of Jerusalem. Nazeer the son of Sheik Ansari, was waiting for me at Herod's Gate. It's called Baab al Zehra — the flower gate, he said. He had been waiting for me in the half-darkness a long time. I did not want you to arrive and no one to welcome you, he said. His great great grandfather came from India. For well over a hundred years his family had been there. They married Palestinian women. All this he told me as we walked through the ancient stones of Herod's Gate, up the steps towards a large green metal gate that he opened swiftly. There was a long pathway with tall thin trees on either side. I glanced at my watch. It was 2am.

Why was clock time so important? I jotted it down in my notebook. Time, something to hold onto.

My bedroom was cut out of Jerusalem rock. It was whitewashed, cool, and had a curved roof with two beds, a mirror and an attached bathroom. I felt safe in that room and woke to hear the muezzin from the Al Aqsa mosque calling the faithful to prayer. I walked out in my dressing gown in bare feet and made my way to a well made of golden stones. In a room just a few feet from mine were a set of steps leading down into the hole where Baba Farid the thirteenth century mystic had come all the way from India. It is said he stood in that hole for forty days and nights singing praises to God.

I sat by the well side. I felt as I had died and returned to where I was meant to be.

I made friends with the elder daughter of the house and she told me her story. As our friendship deepened she showed me her misshapen ankle — a bit of bone cut out. She explained how bombs fell on the Indian

Hospice in 1967 killing her grandmother, aunt, and aunt's seven-year-old son.

She said: I had bone cut out of my foot. Mother would not let the doctors amputate the foot, though they wanted to. Why do I need a girl without a foot?, mother said. So they patched up the bone. They kept bombing from the sky, and when we ran to this other side of the courtyard, the bombs followed us. Where is Sheikh Ansari they asked — the soldiers who came to find him. They wanted to kill him. Don't kill him, mother cried out. My father was covered in burns. It was napalm they used. I hate war. O how I hate war!

Then she put out her hand and drew me forward. She led me down into the hole in Jerusalem rock where the saint Baba Farid stood for forty days and nights without food. How dark it was inside the hole. Bit by bit my eyes adjusted and I could make out rock and what felt like a spider's web. Surely there were tiny creatures of the earth scurrying there.

My friend had a parrot in a cage. She set the cage on the warm cobblestones of the courtyard. The parrot calls her Tutu. Tutu, Tutu, it cried. On and on it cried. There were other birds too in the courtyard of the Indian Hospice, and each morning I woke to their warbling. In the courtyard there was a lemon tree with golden fruit, an olive tree and pots of flowers, jasmine and a purple headed bloom whose name I did not know. Also the blood red flower, red anemone — Shaqqiq An-Numan (the wounds of Numan). One sees it everywhere in Palestine, amongst the rocks, in dry dark soil.

Once I saw a scarlet clump, right by the separation wall that cuts through the Al-Quds campus in Abu Dis. I was led there by two young women students who befriended me. Please tell our story to the world they said. We are dear friends and after the wall was built we could no longer visit each other. She has a blue card and I have a green one. We are not allowed to meet each other. How can this be?

Another young student said to me. We



have no freedom of movement. Why shouldn't we live our lives in freedom? He was escorting me through the museum of prisoners showing me the diaries, the fragile artwork that the political prisoners had made.

There came a moment when I could not bear what human beings were doing to others. So I turned to flowers.

The professor of botany at Al-Quds took me through the land around and showed me

so many flowers and shrubs and trees. It was there that I discovered the dark glory of the black iris, a regal, lonely flower. I knelt beside it on the stones and gazed at it for a long time.

There is a way in which beauty can heal. I put the black iris in my poem about Baba Farid. The poem which follows is called 'Indian Hospice.'

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*"There is a way in which beauty can heal."*

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ON THE AL-QUDS CAMPUS WITH TWO STUDENTS  
PHOTO COURTESY OF MEENA ALEXANDER



### Indian Hospice

Yesterday it rained so hard  
Lemons spilt from the lemon tree  
And rolled all over cobble stones in my Jerusalem courtyard.

I thought of Baba Farid  
Who came on a pilgrimage centuries ago.  
In a hole cut from rock by the room where I sleep

He stood for forty days and nights  
Without food or drink. Nothing for him was strange  
In the way his body slipped into a hole in the ground  
And nothing was not.  
Rust in the stones and blood at the rim of his tongue.  
In the humming dark

He heard bird beaks stitching webs of dew  
Sharp hiss of breath let out from a throat,  
Whose throat he did not know.

Was it his mother crying out O Farid, where are you now?  
She had done that when he swung  
Up and down, knees in a mango tree,

Head in the mouth of a well  
Singing praises to God.  
Crawling out of his hole there were welts on his cheeks

Underfoot in bedrock — visionary recalcitrance.  
A lemon tree shook in a high wind.  
Under it, glistening in its own musk, the black iris of Abu Dis.

Wild with the scents of iris and lemon he sang — O Farid  
This world is a muddy garden  
Stone, fruit and flesh all flaming with love.

#### Note

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the journals where these poems were first published. *TriQuarterly*: 'Impossible Grace'; *The Hindu Literary Supplement and Postcolonial Text*: 'Indian Hospice.' Both poems appeared in the limited edition chapbook 'Impossible Grace' (Jerusalem: Center for Jerusalem Studies, Al-Quds University, 2012). The poems will appear in Meena Alexander's, *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2013). The music for the poem 'Impossible Grace' was composed by Stefan Heckel, winner of the First Al-Quds Music Award.