



Jumana Emil Abboud

# Where did the mountain go?

*A multi-authored folk tale in the future adapted from the Palestinian folk tale “Gazelle.”<sup>1</sup> Abboud channels her childhood memory, as well as the expansive community of women storytellers and a chatbot AI in the remaking of the original tale.<sup>2</sup>*

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Once there was ... once there was not  
A thing that grinds silver and gold; a fugitive transformer-robot-deer; three human hairs in a world of hair extinction and three brothers who lived not too far from here [or her].

The narrator of this tale consoled a friend in the orchestra of abandonment, in search of word companionship.  
Hisk, hiss. [A sound of flapping wings nearing surface water.]

Three brothers who lived not too far from here—or her—  
assembled as was their annual habit to go hunting. They liked to hunt. Before I tell you about the hunt, a few words about their mother, the great Queen. Their mother was a great Queen, but she knew her time would soon come to an end. She said to them, “Listen! I’m about to die. Promise me to care for your three sisters, and promise to rule as I have ruled, with fairness and equanimity.”

And sure enough, a day came, and a day went. Another day came, and another went—[interrupted by an innocent asking]:  
*Where did it go? Where does any day go,* is my response.  
Yes, and the Queen passed away.

They buried her alongside her fourth husband (a farmer in his boyhood, although I am not sure why this is relevant to my story). It was not the custom of this day, but such was her wish. They buried her at the foot of a faultless water spring in ‘Ein Qiniya. A day came and a day went, and an oak tree grew there, or here, where her body lay rested.

Just seven kilometers west of Ramallah, ‘Ein Qiniya village is inhabited by one-thousand humans—and over ten-thousand non-humans.

*Does this include spirits?*

*No one knows. It is considered bad luck to count spirits.*

In all these years, ‘Ein Qiniya has never aged, even when it was annexed into categorical, colonial divisions, during the time that once was. The land—and all that was living upon, below

1. See Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak Bird Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

2. The artist recounts: “My collaboration with the OpenAI chat was very curious and interesting (I was curious and ‘it’ tried to be interesting). I would feed it minimal parts from ‘Gazelle,’ not in any specific order, and it would write away. It wrote too much at every response—I felt like it was taking over the story. By this I mean when I work with human co-authors, we tend to leave the end of our individual part with space for extension, contribution, and exchange where the subsequent author can imagine from and write content into. But with the AI, it wanted to always end the story with its part and not give me or the story room for continuation.”



and above—was divided into areas “A,” “B,” and “C”. Because ‘Ein Qiniya was enclosed in area “C,” the development of its infrastructure was forbidden by the occupying regime of the time. The irony of such an aggressive law (and trust me in saying that it was aggressive), was that it would unintentionally serve to preserve the village agricultural areas.

*Are there only two distinct and contrasting directions? Either colonial hostility, or Indigenous preservation?*

*It is considered unlucky to ask such questions—the evil spirits of the time-that-once-was might be listening!*

*That was indeed a different time, the year 1993, it was Oslo, people gathered around tables and maps, where the animals were not invited, nor the waters invoked.*

*What about the illegal settlers? I heard they were handed plenty of what was cut from others, and in broad daylight too.*

*Indeed, these tales are not whispers.*

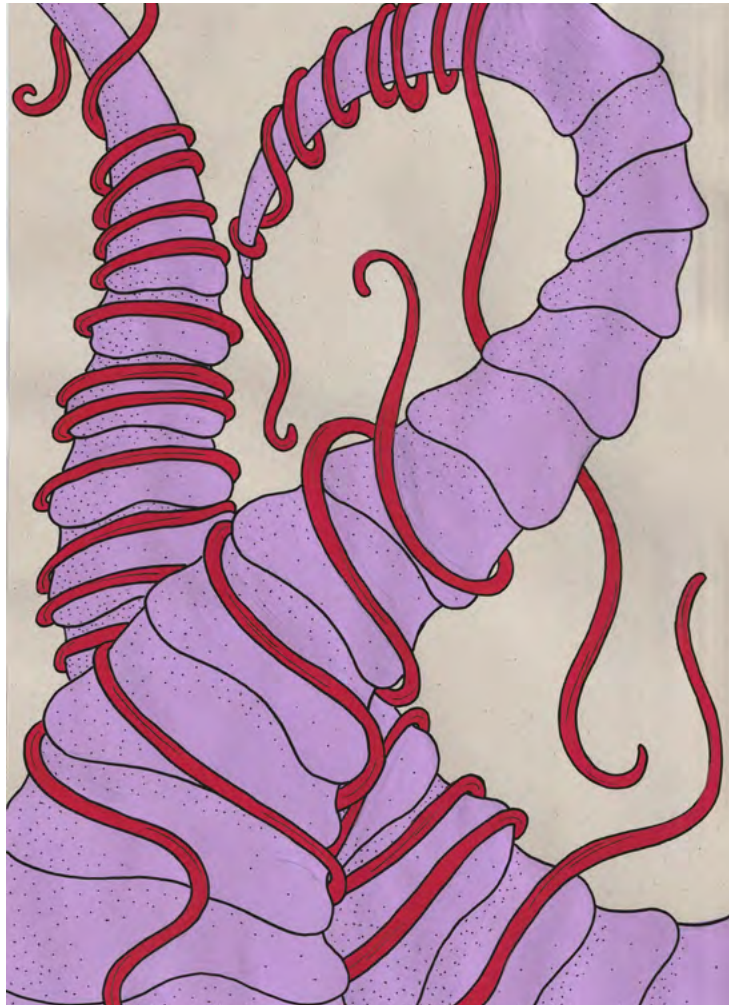
*Or,*

*these tales whisper. Historummr.<sup>3</sup> You must come close to the page to recall the odor trail long gone.*

*The oak tree stood, lived, and breathed, unaffected by storms that come and go as the day.*

*And the brothers, they went hunting.*

3. A new word among the new world languages meaning lies of our histories. Etymology from history + rumor.





A gazelle suddenly sprang before them and Oh!, how she filled their eyes!

*Is that another way of saying that their eyes were filled with desire for her?*

Yes.

All three brothers argued over who among them should hunt her. This one said, “She’s mine!” and that one said, “She’s mine!” While they were arguing, the gazelle passed one of the brothers, the youngest, and it became clear to them all that she had chosen him.

I must tell you that she was not really a gazelle. She was a transformer-robo-deer, and capable of transforming herself from animal to humanoid robot at will.

Ours is a story in a future of days long past, after all.

Gazelle chose the youngest brother, Hasan Alqaader [root word: destiny or fate] because she could sense—or scan—the goodness in his heart. In the future, our words of the past will be replaced by others, and *sense* will be entirely consumed by *scan*. She was as authentic as they—the artificial intelligentsia—came. Her scan was dead-on.

“All right, brothers,” Hasan Alqaader announced. “You must go back now. She’s mine.” And then the chase began! He chased the gazelle until she led Hasan to the town where his eldest sister now lived.

Upon entering the town—and losing sight of the gazelle—he saw his sister and could not believe the wonderful surprise for he had no idea where she lived after her marriage. The brothers had kept their promise to their Queen and cared for their sisters until marriage separated kin.

How happy they were to meet! They celebrated with singing and dancing.

“And what brought you this way, brother?” she asked.

“Gazelle brought me,” he answered. He proceeded to tell his sister the story of how he chased the gazelle who led him to his sister’s town. “No one is any match for the gazelle!” explained Alqaader’s eldest sister.

In the morning he moved on. Gazelle appeared and did as she had done before, slowing down, and then running away as soon as he came near, until she led him to the home of his second sister. They were happy to meet each other and celebrated with food and French 75 to honor the good old days. “Brother, what has brought you here?”

“Gazelle brought me, sister,” he answered.

“No one’s any match for the gazelle!”

The next day, it was the same, the robo-deer named Gazelle led Alqaader to his third sister’s town and again it was the same words and compassions exchanged.



Now, each of his sisters had given him a secret parting gift, a red hair, saying, “If you’re ever in a tight spot, just rub this hair, and before you know it, we’ll be there.” You see, this was a time when the red hair gene had vanished. In a world where there was no more hair on our human heads, red had prevailed, until it eventually reached extinction. It was believed now by the humanoid-Sayers to contain the most potent of magic.

On the fourth day, Gazelle appeared again, and they did as they had done before. She filled his eyes, scanned his heart for vital health signs pre-chase, and ran. Forgetting the world and the word behind him, Hasan Alqaader jumped and chased after her, until, on the fourth day, Gazelle led him into her own city. A city in the future with crystal flora and diamond fauna. You can switch from day to night and from the night to day simply by clapping a command. And with everyone chasing after their own desires—*man’s greed in the future is no different than today*—the land is inflicted with endless flickering lights. Existence is such that there is never one full minute of darkness or one of light. In the city of Gazelle’s home. A city called “Disco.”

This was part of the reason the transformer-robo-deer named Gazelle was a fugitive from her own home, opting to wander in the wild and into past worlds. She found her freedom inside a past that had never been hers. She was curious about the stories implanted in her transformer brain. The tales of ancient oak trees and enchanted springs. She wondered if she might understand “emotion” after exploring it in the heart of a human man.

*What is desire? And do not tell me it is considered unlucky to speak of it!*

*I will tell you, but first, let me finish the story.*

Now, Gazelle has suitors all over the world and across the multi-encased universe. Every time one of them comes asking for her hand, her father says, “I will not marry off my creation to a man/woman who will make of her a servant! S/he who can move this mountain from the foot of our town can have her hand; and whoever fails will find his/her soul entrapped inside a glass jar!”

By now, Alqaader realised the identity of his hunt-subject, but it was too late to reverse travel in time for he was already in love. He asked for my advice, but no words from a friend would console his aching heart. I could, however, within the very minimal power I possess, arrange for the two to meet. Their time had only known the urgency of the chase. In that meeting, Gazelle transformed into her humanoid form. Her mechanical hand she extended to hold his, cooling the perspiration from his skin. They observed the slowness of being together until she broke the silence to confess [speaking in Transformer tongue]: Sroith zheir shatuk twaiidh inah, enzheirs kashulil vurn. Dhwyn tael kashuwi bithil, dyrn zhiv tyndahl anilam.<sup>4</sup>

4. The artist recounts: “When I asked the Chatbot AI to generate a new language as part of our story-writing collaboration, there was a resistance at first from the AI, but eventually it summoned a few new words. I liked how it accounted for body sounds in the language-making.

When I asked for the name of the new language, the AI response was: ‘I did not assign a specific name to the new language I generated. However, the text has a few unique features, such as the use of certain letters and sounds, and the arrangement of words and phrases. If you would like to give it a name, you are free to do so!’”



The next morning, Alqaader searched for the hairs his sisters had gifted. He rubbed all three of them—and behold! Six-hundred hosts of jinn appeared. Gazelle also now understood human/non-human compassion—*was this love?*—and she too came to his aid. They all started on the mountain, and before day had risen or night had ascended [*for these two were one and the same, remember?*], Behold! it was—in the name of the galactic universal all-encompassing One—it was as if there was no mountain there at all.

*Where did the mountain go?*

It ran away with my story,  
where two lovers meet inside.

Desire is a spontaneous Splush! Plush! Ush!

Hisk, hisk. Drink, drink.

My thirst, my thirst.

My thirst my thirst is greater than yours.

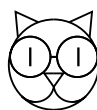
Only one destiny for me, he is heard singing.

Have you seen her; he screams away.

Have you seen her; not today.

## BIO

Jumana Emil Abboud works through drawing, workshopping, and wording to animate and support imaginaries of the oppressed, and her creative motives emphasize a time and place where human and non-human are dependent on story and water. She currently lives and works in Jerusalem and London where she is currently pursuing her practice-led PhD at Slade School of Fine Art, UCL.



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