

Household Names

By: Hasheemah Afaneh

That day, we didn't lift our eyes. At least I didn't. How do you lift your eyes off the ground he once walked on- like the rest of us do on an almost daily basis - to confront the inevitable, to confront death, his death? Many students knew him, and many others, like myself, did not. What we all did know, regardless of whether or not we knew him, was the injustice that took his life. We all experienced it at different levels - the night raids, the hours waiting in crowds at checkpoints, the arrests, the home demolitions, the protests, the injuries, the exile, and and and... He became one of the tens of thousands before him that was dealt the worst of it: death.

There's a sentiment a professor at Birzeit University always relays to foreign exchange students. "There's not a single Palestinian household that does not know arrest, injury, or death by the occupation," he'd say with anger in his voice. And now, we were here on university grounds, our very own household, if you will, for four to five years depending on one's course of study, bearing witness to death. Saji Darwish's death. And even if I couldn't bear to lift my eyes off the ground as his friends carried his wrapped body through campus so that this household bid him a final farewell, my ears will never forget how the silence was broken when one of our professors finally let go of the sob she was holding in, a sob that seemed to carry our collective heartbreak.

Some of us walked back to our respective colleges. Some had stayed home. Some went to the cemetery to bury Saji. None of us knew what to do. We didn't gather in conference rooms to speak about how we were feeling. I think we knew that if we started, we wouldn't know where to end, and if we didn't know where to end, we were at risk of being broken records.

Saji became a household name after that. It seemed that all households knew Saji or invoked Saji, whether they knew him while he was amongst the living or not. To this day, I come across announcements on Facebook with parents naming their children after him. I even know one parent that did this, to keep his memory alive, as if to say to the unjust occupation that 'you can take Saji to his death, but we'll find a way to keep him amongst the living.' Children, in various ways, help keep the past alive.

Saji became a household name the way Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others before them and after them became household names in the year of the pandemic, six years after Saji's death. Many of us do not know them, but those that knew them tell us about them. We know Saji loved to ride and care for horses, and when he died, the horse he owned went to his grave and bowed its head in mourning. We know that George Floyd called for his late mother between the last breaths he was taking. We know that Breonna Taylor wished to be a mother in the year that claimed her life.

These intricate and intimate details relayed by family, friends, and loved ones are a reminder of the extent of these injustices. When we have thoughts of what a beautiful horse that is, or I miss my mother, or I want to become a mother one day, we remember that the struggle for justice continues. Saji, George, Breonna, and and and are not just household names that remind us of what injustices took place; they also serve as a reminder that this is what happens if justice is not served.

Hasheemah Afaneh, MPH is a Palestinian-American writer and public health professional based in New Orleans. You can find her work in the Fair Observer, HuffPost, Shado Magazine, Rusted Radishes, The Markaz Review, Sinking City Literary Magazine among others. Her website is norestrictionsonwords.wordpress.com. She tweets @its_hashie.