



AT HOME IN BERLIN  
SINAN ANTOON

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In 2008/09, I was a post-doctoral fellow with the Europe in the Middle East/Middle East in Europe program (EUME), an offshoot of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Back then I was delighted to have time away from my teaching responsibilities to work on turning my doctoral dissertation into a book. Being in Berlin was quite energizing and inspiring. I

had ample time and considerable mental space to make progress on several other projects and fronts as well, including a novel and a collection of poems (both of which were published in Arabic a year later). That year I came to know more about Wiko and the exceptional environment and resources it provides for scholars, writers, and artists. I envied the Fellows and fantasized about being one myself some day. It took almost a decade for that fantasy to be fulfilled.

I was ecstatic about returning to Berlin once again in 2016. It is always therapeutic and necessary, for me at least, to occasionally leave the United States for various reasons, even before Trumpism. At Wiko I was a nomad of sorts at first. I spent a few weeks in the studio on the top floor of the main building before moving to a bigger apartment in Villa Jaffé. The gain in space meant a loss in terms of light; it was a semi-basement apartment. Outside, autumn forced the trees to abandon their leaves, yet again, and it was a stunning sight. I was grateful for that, but autumn also deprived my apartment of the little light that remained. Perhaps the relative loss of light was perfect for the subject matter of the keynote lecture I was researching and preparing to deliver at Heidelberg in October: “The Inheritance of Loss: Collective Memory, Collateral Damage, and the Ruins of Ruins.”

The wonderful Wiko staff were incredibly helpful and accommodating, and by Christmas we (my wife had joined me) moved to an apartment that had become vacant in Villa Walther. With generous windows and a balcony overlooking the lake, I was “at home”. Not unlike most, I had arrived with ambitious plans, but with some baggage: late and unfinished projects. I finished the last few chapters of a novel I had been translating from Arabic to English (*The Book of Disappearance* by Ibtisam Azem). I had two late articles that I had to finish and that I did. The first, “Sargon Boulus and Tu Fu’s Ghost(s)”, was for a special issue of the *Journal of World Literature*; the second, “Difficult Variations: Saadi Youssef’s Impossible Return”, was for the *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*. The first will become a chapter in a book on Boulus I have been working on intermittently.

In addition to writing my weekly opinion column for the pan-Arab Lebanese daily *As-Safir*, I managed to write seven poems (in Arabic) and translated them into English. These were added to the poems I had been working on in recent years and will be published in Arabic as *Kama fi’ l-Sama* (As It is in Heaven) in spring 2018 by Al-Jamal (Beirut). The English version is under consideration by Princeton University Press.

I was also able to write a good chunk of my fifth novel, *Intersections*, which is concerned with the damaged bodies and psyches of subjects who lived through the violence

of dictatorship and wars. The narrative alternates between two main characters. Both are Iraqi refugees, but from different generations. Omar is a young man who deserted the military in Iraq in 1995 and was arrested and tortured, leaving him physically and psychologically scarred. After his release, he escapes to neighboring Jordan and applies there for asylum in the United States through the UNHCR. When he arrives in 1997, he is placed in Detroit, Michigan, home to the largest Iraqi-American community in North America. But he is hell-bent on erasing the past and severing any and all bonds to his background and home country. Adnan, who is in his late sixties, was a very successful surgeon in Baghdad, with his own private practice. Following the outbreak of the sectarian civil war in 2006, he is kidnapped by a militia for belonging to the other sect and allegedly being loyal to the previous regime. The militia later occupies his house and his family is displaced. After a brief stay in Abu Dhabi with his daughter, he goes to New York City to live with his son who had settled there fifteen years earlier. Adnan cannot acclimate to his new “home”. He longs for and clings to a space that survives intact only in his memory. The two characters’ lives intersect in New York City.

Whether sitting in my office, on the balcony, or taking long walks in the forest, I got to know these two characters very well. I listened attentively and wrote down what they thought and said. I was not always there for them. I was tempted by social outings in Berlin with other Fellows and friends, and I succumbed.

My interlocutors in Berlin were not only fictional characters. The class of Fellows included a spectrum of characters, some of whom became close friends I will sorely miss.

The administration and staff are incredibly supportive and welcoming. I have one major complaint: ten months is too short. Future Fellows beware! You will be pampered, but weaned prematurely and thrust back into reality. So savor every day.