

THE
PARACHUTE
PARADOX

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One day, a wise man showed me a different path—difficult, long, but well worth embarking upon. I met Kamal Boullata during an interview by the jury of an art competition in Palestine. The title of the work I entered was *Identity*. When the jury asked about my photos, I said,

This is the way I see Jerusalem.

Kamal provoked me,

You speak of Jerusalem all the time, but I do not see it anywhere in your work. Where is it?

Agitated, I replied,

Do I need to photograph Jerusalem to address it? Do I really need to depict the Dome of the Rock or the city gates to show the viewer that I'm referring to Jerusalem? Jerusalem is just a perception.

He liked my answer and congratulated me. I won Kamal in that competition, and it felt like the first prize.

In interviews, I was often asked,

Which artists inspire you?

For many years I answered: Kamal Boullata. He radiates light, although some people perceive his brightness as a threat. I see it instead as an invitation. The initial spark between us didn't only flare up when I saw his magnificent artist book *Twelve Lanterns for Granada*. Rather, Kamal inspired me with his words. They rang in my ears for years, and with each echo, they struck new meaning within me. His words interrogated me—pushed me to my limits. He compared me to hermits who move to the desert to live in seclusion, and even gave me a book about them, which he signed,

To Steve—Journey to the Unknown.

When I met Kamal, he knew my story without me telling him. I lived in mental exile in Jerusalem. Kamal lived in real exile, and it pained him to see me suffer, living in our city of birth, Jerusalem, a city to which he

was denied the Right of Return. We became friends in exile. At first, our connection was a bond of solidarity, which evolved into mentor-ship and gradually became familial—unconditional.

Once, Francesca and I visited Kamal and his wife Lily at their home in the South of France. Driving on the winding roads of Menton, I sighed as I told Francesca how upset I was for them, living there, far from major cities in a dull town, alone, in exile. We drove uphill, looking out for their waving hands.

We entered their house and found ourselves in the living room. It looked down-to-earth; but more than that, it was a retreat, a hermit-age, a place for introspection and inspiration. When they opened the windows, I was treated to a view of an endless sea mirrored by a clear blue sky—as if imagined by a painter. Kamal's home stood at the center of the mountainside, overlooking almost every other house. His balcony was an extension of my rooftop in the Old City—a platform, a vehicle to unseen worlds. For Kamal, maybe the sea view looked like that of Haifa or Beirut, and the trees like those in Palestine, resilient. The air must have smelled like Jaffa's, infused with the scent of oranges, and the houses built with golden stones easily recalled those in Jerusalem. Kamal was not in exile. He had found a home—a mental space—that enabled him to live in all of Palestine, with borders reaching to infinity. I felt sorry for myself. His words echoed in my ears again. He had invited me to embark on the rewarding path into the unknown. I had accepted. But I still hadn't found a way out. I was living in a permanent state of exile, while Kamal had found a way to live free, on top of the world.

As we descended from the balcony toward the seashore of the Côte d'Azur, Kamal pointed to delusory house windows that overlooked the sea. He explained to me how Italians had mastered this painting technique to give the illusion that some houses had more windows than they actually did. This is how Kamal affected me; he painted windows in my mind overlooking free lands. It was up to me to figure out how and when to open my windows of exile and see a real path toward liberation.