

# Purple Sea Essay

## The Purple Sea

An essay by Merle Kröger with Amel Alzakout

You are from the mountains, I come from the sea. Our first encounter, in this respect, a compromise: Istanbul. I follow you up and down steep alleys, at the end a clear view of the Bosphorus. A man sells tea from the trunk of his golden Mercedes dating back to the last millennium. My soul rejoices, yours is heavy. "I can't stand the sea", you say. The silence spreads out and descends upon us like a shroud, the city, the cars, the people, the cats, the water, which instantly loses its blue colour. The old man looks up bemused, his Mercedes now just ochre.

We're groping around the questions that are between us. Why is Khaled in my city, and not you? Why is it that I can take his stuff with me in my suitcase, and not you? One last look back: You and your cat, a tiny, furry body forming a flowing passage to your wild hair, you hug it tightly to your chest. Later, even the cat will board an airplane to Berlin, as the hand luggage of a stranger.

You are from the mountains. You share your village with a famous resistance fighter against the French, when Syria was still a colony. Syria too, that's right, I'd almost forgotten, or did I ever know? Are we supposed to forget? Supposed to believe that the Middle East is a powder keg that self ignites time and again. Until nobody asks any more who laid the fuses deep beneath the sand. Photos on your laptop. Last memories for who knows how long. They appear to fade, although that's not possible. While we look at them.

What you do with colours is beyond me.

USA, Germany. Rejected. Application for admission: rejected. Application for family reunification: rejected. Khaled gone. His things gone. The cat gone. You live on Skype. You work out your body in the gym, while your head stays on a leased line connection. This can't go on, Medusa, it's no Perseus who beheaded you, but the conditions in the world. You need a service provider, the best one. The agencies are sprouting wildly, likewise the rumours: Price-performance-ratio, security, quality, delivery time – supply and demand. Nothing is for free. Overcapitalised world from the mall to the Mediterranean.

Internal exile. Your parent's home, museum of your childhood. A life not lived, not even before the war, ever since your parents separated. Quite trivial, things like this happen in Syria too. Your father's house. Overgrown garden. Furniture. A house, which he checks once in a while to see if all is okay, as if to make sure he still exists. Your father: Idealist, genius. Your love, a daughter's love, unconditional and eternal, he takes as he does everything that deters him from taking his own life. Yet impeding him from it only makes him volatile.

You are from the mountains. You took your village with you; it's a tiny metal strongbox to which only you have a key. You are addicted to the contents of this indestructible box. It needs only the moment when the pomegranate seed explodes and the juice hits your taste buds, the moment of inhaling in passing the scent of a jasmine shrub, a single word in a conversation that is about something else entirely.

And you are gone.

You are five. All of you run through the village. Your feet feel the black stone of the Druze Mountains, warm from the sun, unmistakable. You want to go to the Wadi, the stones retain water, it is entirely flat, only in the centre there is a deep point. There, shortly afterwards, they see your long hair curling like water snakes. Did you fight against drowning? Or did you give yourself up to the water? You glided toward silence, forgot the children's voices, the roaring of the wind in the tall trees surrounding the Wadi? The dark basalt, no light, no sound. The return to glistening sunlight, cries pierce your eardrums, painful air fills your lungs. Since this day, perhaps, the velvet silence is part of you, locked deep within you.

You need a travelling companion, the best one. Another photo: Group of friends, they are seated together, smoking, drinking, maybe there is something to celebrate. They are young, the future is written all over their faces. You say, the memory of your youth is erased. Gone completely. "Is that

a generation problem?”, you ask me. There is no link between the places from back then and the places of today, the places of war:

I can't imagine that it is the same place that is bombed.

There he is. He is laughing into the camera. Carefree, I don't know him like this. You in Istanbul, him still in Damascus, the last one from your old clique. You call him.

Facebook. You are 24. You write. You scream. Louder than the others. You write against the paralysis that gripped the country a long time ago. The revolution is polyphonic, your voice is one of many. You hear them all, each one of them. You are connected – on Facebook, in the streets – a current, a stream. You don't feel alone. The silence is muted. A wink of history, for a brief second. Then it's back, with a vengeance. The war is loud? We imagine it, but those who are there experience it differently. The war makes people deaf and dumb. Like a film without sound, tremulous life on a two dimensional screen, a spark is enough for it to go up in flames.

You are 13. Lately you have been playing the drums for Assad. You beat the drums as loud as you can. Long live the Ba'ath party! You play the drums, you talk a lot now, lecture the others in your class. You agitate for the system with the same fervour with which you will hate it later. It is hard to escape from you and your one hundred percent. Your inquisitorial gaze. It petrifies them, the undecided, the hesitant.

The guy from the agency thinks you're a friend of those who put you through as client. You are not, but he seems to like you. You have booked two passages for Wednesday. Wednesday? He enquires casually, not preferably on Friday, with him, in a smaller boat? You decline. A decision's a decision. The one hundred percent you drowns out the dark foreboding of the silent. On your last evening in Istanbul, you visit a friend and suddenly break down in tears.

Later you will ask yourself time and time again if he knew what would happen. If it wasn't all a coincidence. The memory bores into your consciousness, doesn't let you sleep, becomes a loop.

Repeat. Play. Repeat.

Your father is interrogated by the secret service. He is urged to resign from the communist party. Or else his name will be published in the newspapers. Either way a traitor for the comrades. He, the teacher, moves to Lebanon and works as floor tiler. Traitor. Loser. He succeeds at nothing. He breeds chicken. Animals all over the house. On his grandfather's property, he searches for antique coins from ancient Rome. The chicken die. The antiques disappear. You are silent. You look at him. “Medusa“, your father calls you. You are 13.

Figures in the darkness, hurrying through the city. Boarding, quicker. A small bus, grey curtains, shirred prettily, drawn. The only connection to the outside world is your GPS. Connected to Khaled. Connected to a group of friends spread out over the world. You send GPS coordinates. You write. Police control. You see the blue light flicker through the curtains. The driver turns around. The police want money. You pay. You don't dare breathe. You close your eyes, transform yourself into a small spot on Khaled's display in Berlin. That's me. As long as this spot exists, I exist. Open your eyes, keep going.

You are 17. Out of Syria. Exit. A shopping mall opens in Qatar. You straightened your hair. Perfectly styled, smile for the photographers beside some sheikh. Just a photo, no sound. And still I hear: It's not easy for you, the small talk, trailing off in the splashing acoustic design under the mall's dome. You're enacting a life here, which doesn't exist. Like the village of your childhood, you become a fake, a gentle breath of wind from the air conditioner, which mollifies the anxious propertied class and dries up their sweat. They go to the Gulf, make money, return and build villas. Golden pillars. Gated communities. On billboards, the promise of a life in green and blue.

You live at your siblings' place in Qatar. You have lost your curls. To test if your heart still beats, you go to demonstrations, collect donations and do a bit of PR for the revolution. Until someone surreptitiously tells you about a liberated zone in the heart of Syria, a nucleus from where the future shall be conquered. Entry via Istanbul. Your brother refuses to let you go. You provoke your own eviction, force him to buy your ticket. You are 24. A master of manipulation.

You climb. The sun burns. The earth is brown and hard after a long summer. The sea clings to your left like an intrusive relative, it irritates you, deep blue. Another silly promise of holidays on white beaches. You gaze into the distance. Mountains in the mist. The other side, within easy

reach. A child cries. Now, in the harsh light of the day, you see the others. The child in a waterproof suit. Can barely walk alone.

Istanbul feels like a trap. The time window has closed. No liberated Syria, no nucleus for the future anymore to nurture your hate for the system. Facebook. You read. The radio station for which you write shuts down. You don't write anymore. You don't scream anymore. You sit in your apartment, the neighbours are conservative and look curiously through the window at the one who lives alone, who doesn't wear a headscarf, who no one knows. "You want male visitors: no problem!", says the landlord, a bearded man around 60. "I would be happy to stop by anytime".

You are finally at the top of the hill. You, your travel companion, your fellow travellers. You stand together in groups. Whispered questions that remain unanswered linger like clouds of smoke in the air. When will we continue? Why are we waiting here? You disengage yourself, sit down, drink from your water bottle, take out your camera and film a little. As if you were really on a trip that you'll tell Khaled about later. Khaled. You send GPS coordinates. I'm the spot on your map. Do you see me? Whatsapp group. Can you guys hear me? The reception is poor. You stare at the display of your camera. Only now, in the framed, captured reality do you see why this place is so disturbing: Things are lying around everywhere, forgotten, lost, left behind in the rush of departure by those who were here before you.

Graveyard of things.

You are 25. Only when you lost your way did you notice the others stranded around you. Istanbul is filled with them. Distraught beings, still so young and yet already disembodied, allowed to live here, but not much more. Khaled is one of them. He touches your heart, it beats again. Finally.

At night. You sit at the foot of the Galata Tower. A boy arrives and asks for a cigarette. Then your hand bag is gone. Slow motion: You scream. The guy runs away. Fast forward: The cops, a Syrian passport, worth a lot on the black market, they want it back. You give chase through the city in a police car, hunt down teenagers all night long. Jump out. Gun pointed to the head. Is he the one? Is he the one? They force you to look at 500 photos. Is he the one? You shake your head. With the new day, a light, shimmering feeling rises within you: Your passport is gone. You have to go back.

Home.

Quickly now. Downhill, quickly, the ones ahead of you are almost running. You speed up and try to hold the camera still. Now that it's too late for Whatsapp, no time, no reception, and now as you've started looking at the thing on the display, you need the certainty of the recording. I record, something remains. I don't lose myself. Orange, up and down in your camera. The people, you as well, you must put on your life vests as you walk. Orange vests, blue sea. Excruciatingly beautiful colours.

You are 26. You are home again. Entry from Beirut across the green border, in a taxi. You are at your mother's. You are at your father's. Back in the village, the house, the land, the olive trees, high winding grapevines. The war is elsewhere, people here live as if in a fairy tale, they don't want to see what is happening around them. Even in Damascus, you visit an old friend, yes precisely, the one who will accompany you later. You go for dinner, people are dancing, flirting. The thunder of battle can be heard in the distance. Reality hits you in the interior ministry where you apply for your passport. A crowd of people like a swarm buzzing between resignation and hope. Everyone wants a passport, everyone wants to get out of here, as quickly as possible.

Wherever, just away.

The boat is two-storey. It is so old you could have found it romantic at another place, at another time, in another life. Here and now, it's just old. It grunts under the feet of the many people who push on board. More and more are arriving, you doubled along the way, multiplied. A sea of orange vests. The people from the agency are nervous, forcing you to hurry up. A guy is taking photos on his mobile, they take it away from him. You focus on your camera, it's utter nonsense but you can't think of anything but your wish to record the passage. As if it were a guarantee that nothing would happen to you. You fasten the camera to your arm and press the red record button.

Off we go.

You delay your departure. Spend a lot of time in the village, on the land of your ancestors, a restless spirit in the house that hasn't been inhabited since long. The secret service calls. Once a week. Twice a week. You are frightened. They summon you. They interrogate you. They don't imprison you. Why not? One of them is from the same district as you. They don't want trouble with the Druze, they're so susceptible when it comes to their women. "Our girls", he says. You ask if you can leave. "Yes", he says with emphasis. You go home, pack up your cat and get into a taxi. Exit.

Beirut airport. You hesitate. Khaled is waiting in Istanbul. You hesitate. Out of fear, your cat has shit his litter box full. You hesitate. A loudspeaker crackles. You hear your own name. You start walking without thinking. Again. You continue to walk, faster now. You pass the first control. The second. All are waving you past. You board the airplane. Only now it becomes clear to you, there is no return. They want you to leave. You leave. You are 26.

Shaky recordings. Replace your memory. Become your recollection, which from this moment on is fragmentary.

Stop.

Single images. The men from the agency leave the boat. They have shown an Iraqi how to hold the wheel. A speedboat, alongside. They take off. Hardly a minute later the boat has begun to break. Rucksacks fly into the water disappearing into the blue nothingness. People didn't want to let go of their things, you say later. The first one jumps overboard. And disappears. A lifebuoy! Quick!

Your camera goes under. You go under. The boat literally sinks under your feet. Screams. Whistles. Someone holds up a mobile phone in a plastic sheet. It rings. The keys cannot be operated. The blue sky. The sun shines. It rings.

It rings.

The water was 6 degrees, you say later. It looks warmer. The blue here below is more a blurred green, contrasting with the sharp colours we brought down with us. We are now merged, you and I, in the recording of your camera, which does not turn off and continues mercilessly to record. The orange of the life vest, pushing jarringly time after time into the image as your right hand clutches at the lifebuoy because the left one can't do it anymore. Your greyish-white hand, like dead, reminds of disposed plastic.

A red cigarette packet floats past.

A blue chocolate bar.

Feet in colourful sneakers.

Legs in jeans.

Little feet in white trainers.

Butterflies on a dark blue blouse.

Surface. Screams. Whistles. Sunlight, glaring bright. Please. I don't want this.

Let us go.

Down below again.

I recognise all of you. The colourful sneakers. Jeans. Butterflies on the blouse. A hand with rings. We are floating in space. All of us together are performing a bizarre dance, a dance with death. All connections severed. We're drifting through weightlessness.

Your travel companion outdid himself, you say later. He didn't let any of you give up. He talked, held, soothed, he screamed at you when you didn't want to fight for your life any longer. Until he couldn't feel his legs any more.

You experienced another truth, you say later.

You remember the baby that died in its mother's arms.

You don't remember the father and daughter with whom you shared your lifebuoy.

You remember wanting to let go and to swim ashore.

You remember wanting only to let go.

To sink.

Into nothingness.

I've had enough.

Boats. A helicopter. The water swirls. That makes you furious. And your senses are activated again. Why is it taking so long? Why are you leaving us here to die?

You reject the recollection of a rescue, you say later. You even reject the memory of your friend, who wants to make the story your hero's journey. We are only numbers, that's how we are seen here, you say. We are two, we are 70, 300, 5000. 5000 individual truths in front of us, behind us, day after day. Under water, you say later, there is no "we".

Okay.

I ask you about your first memory of Europe.

You are on board a ship. You were rescued after almost five hours in the water. Others died. You have to throw up. A hand grabs you by the hair and pushes you toward the railing. A big man, he is bald, he does not talk to you. Only this brutal gesture.

Not on my boat.

28. October 2015, Patrol Nr. 68, Frontex Joint Operation "Poseidon".

*Aim: to implement coordinated operational activities at the external sea borders of the Eastern Mediterranean Region in order to control irregular migration flows towards the territory of the Member States of EU and to tackle cross-border crime.*

*Participating Country: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom/Albania, Ukraine*

*Budget: € 19,960,291.22*

*Realisation: From 2015-02-01 to 2015-12-27*

Greek mythology, revisited: The god of the seas, Poseidon, according to feminist reading, rapes the beautiful Medusa in the temple of goddess Athena. The furious goddess transforms Medusa into a monster with serpent hair. Her gaze turns to stone those who dare to look at her.

You are 28. Your hair is back in curls. You sleep for long hours. Back then, at the village you were an early riser, you loved the mornings when the house slowly awakened. Today you sleep longer, delay waking up. Whenever possible you dream away back into your childhood. Yet this time something else happens with you.

You dream.

You lie on your back in the water, under the surface. The sea is purple. You can see the sunlight, how brightly it shines into the water. You feel the purple water encircling your body to every pore. You are alone. You are not afraid anymore.

Transformation.

Europe. We're walking on an island. The high shore, you say, reminds you of Lesbos. The previous night you shared your recordings with friends for the first time. You cried for the first time. No sorrow, but outrage at what happened to you, what happens to you anew every day and what will happen forever. Your fury flares up at this image of yourself.

Not shareable.

No „us“.

Yet a part of you, a part of me and all the others who will ever see this, remains back there. Under water, caught in the unbelievable beauty of the abominable. You are Medusa. Those touched by your images turn to stone.

Poseidon is an old man, his days are numbered.

You are just 28.

You wait.

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*The text is based on numerous, not recorded conversations in Istanbul and Berlin, which we had during long walks through the city.*

Quote: Frontex Archive of Operations;

<https://frontex.europa.eu/operations/roles-responsibilities/>