Perpetual Motion Machine: Refugee Experience in Zeyn Joukhadar's Fantasy Adventure, *The Map of Salt and Stars*

Noah Bogdonoff

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What place does imagination have in the midst of a harrowing refugee story? Zeyn Joukhadar asks this surprising—and surprisingly difficult—question over and over in his debut novel, *The Map of Salt and Stars*. There is no single answer; the book, laced as it is with wisdom, does not reduce itself to a single moral or a straightforward conclusion. Instead, it calls upon the reader to look head-on at the emotional realities of growing up in the thrall of senseless violence.

The novel tells two stories. In one narrative, we follow Nour, a young Syrian American woman, as she moves with her family to Homs, Syria after her father's death and is subsequently hurled into a world of violence and displacement when her new home is destroyed in the Syrian Civil War. In the other, we witness the mythic adventure of Rawiya, another young woman, as she leaves her home on the Strait of Gibraltar and disguises herself as a boy in order to seek her fortune by helping the legendary cartographer Abu Abd Muhammad Allah al-Idrisi assemble the largest, most accurate map in the world.

Technically, the latter narrative is framed within the former—Nour knows the story of Rawiya from her father and recounts it as a way of keeping his memory alive. In this way, Rawiya's adventure is subordinate to Nour's forced migration; it functions most obviously as a metaphor and a coping mechanism. But as Nour and Rawiya make their way across the exact same landscapes, marveling at the same constellations, each facing their own elemental dangers, a wonderful leveling begins to occur. One has the sense that these women, separated by time alone, are in fact acting upon each other. Rawiya teaches Nour how to hold tightly to her sense of self as the world grows more and more dangerous around her. And Nour, as the teller of the tale, ushers Rawiya into adulthood. Indeed, as the story progresses, we are introduced to elements that seem more likely to have sprung from Nour's sensibilities rather than her father's—the subtleties and sensations of Rawiya's growing crush on the poet Khaldoun, for example, or the emotional burden of hiding her gender as a means of self-protection. In this way, *The Map of Salt and Stars* asks us to consider the impact of *who* tells stories. What is gained, what is elided?

Still, one could be forgiven for raising an eyebrow at the idea of a novel which invites comparisons between a horrific refugee experience and a rollicking fantasy-adventure story. In Joukhadar's hands, however, the juxtaposition does not denigrate nor commodify the pain of displacement, but rather asks us to look directly at it through the eyes of a child. The legend of Rawiya is not an analogy; it is a lodestar, a guide that Nour can turn to when she needs the sort of courage and resourcefulness that no child should ever be asked to demonstrate. This is not, ultimately, a children's story; it is a *child's* story, and it encompasses the capaciousness of that child's perspective.

The Map of Salt and Stars is an exquisitely constructed novel, and Joukhadar's meticulous work is evident in almost every aspect of the story. Parallels between the two narratives, both large and small, abound: Both protagonists are fatherless, and both protect themselves with their fathers' parting gifts (Rawiya's is literal—a slingshot which serves over and over as a protective force—and Nour's is metaphorical—the legend of Rawiya itself). Both protagonists are guided by mapmakers, and both mapmakers must eventually trust their charges to find

their own ways home. Bakr, al-Idrisi's other apprentice, struggles to overcome his self-centeredness and materialism; Zahra, Nour's sister, struggles with the same. These overlaps never feel forced, however—rather, they infuse the text with a crackling symmetry. They need each other. As Eric Dean Wilson says in his essay "Regarding Diptychs," "Each panel haunts the other, and they throw energy back and forth like a perpetual motion machine."

What do we do with a book that is equal parts bedtime story and living nightmare? On its face, *The Map of Salt and Stars* may seem too adult for children and too childish for adults. But Joukhadar insists on the juxtaposition, and maybe that's the point. *The Map of Salt and Stars* dares us to believe that all people—bereaved families, survivors of trauma, refugees—move through the world with rich inner lives, that awe and grief can exist within the same body, and that these dualities are not contradictions but rather companions—that the telling of one story does not stop when another begins.