

POLITICS

D'ici / From Here

A recently completed collaboration between Magnum Photos and Maison des Journalistes created a free publication, pairing writers in exile with photographers

Stuart Franklin



Stuart Franklin Sweeping leaves. The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris, France. 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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***La Maison des Journalistes** (MDJ), an NGO and, in a more literal sense a building, in Paris offers accommodation to journalists in exile while they pursue refugee status. MDJ also offer financial and technical support, training, French lessons, and cultural visits to places of note in their new country of residence to these writers. The program allows these journalists to continue working and providing an informed perspective upon international issues, conflict, politics, and of course, the plight of displaced persons.*

Today, World Press Freedom day 2019, sees the completion of a project in which MDJ and Magnum Photos collaborated to create a print publication in both French and

English: D'ici / From Here. The publication features writing from eight residents of the house on varied topics, and in varied formats, that are presented alongside images from the Magnum archive as well as photographs created expressly for the project. D'ici / From Here is on display at Paris' Hôtel de Ville until the 31st of May, and is also available as a [PDF](#) in English and French.

Here, we share one of the eight articles from D'ici / From Here, by Syrian exile Hani Al Zeitani who dwells upon grief and dislocation while looking over Paris' Grenelle Cemetery from a window of the Maison des Journalistes' building. Zeitani's words are accompanied by photographs by Magnum Photographer [Stuart Franklin](#), who travelled to Paris to photograph Zeitani and the nearby Père Lachaise Cemetery. The English and French language PDFs of D'ici / From Here, can be found [here](#). You can read an interview with Christophe Calais – Content Director at Magnum Paris on the Newspaper Club's site, [here](#).



Stuart Franklin The cemetery of Père Lachaise, Paris, France, 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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I still remember the moment I heard my name being called to be released from my second grave. It was the morning of November 14, 2012. I went up a long flight of stairs dressed in nothing except for a brown linen jacket that my wife had given me the day I had been buried in my first grave; and a piece of green cotton cloth, green as the fig tree's leaves, covering my privates. My legs were incapable of carrying the weight

of my skeletal body, they were completely numb from not being used to walk for eight whole months. On that day, I did not know my destination. I was headed towards the unknown, blindfolded and handcuffed in a long chain with other people. I did not know how many they were, but I could feel that we shared the same fate. We were kicked into a bus by a man who had an unbearable voice and considered himself to be our God. We were then dropped in a small square that I found out later was the entrance to my new grave in Qaboun on the outskirts of Damascus.

Somebody removed my blindfold before burying me in my third grave. The sun was too bright, I couldn't open my eyes. I wished that this person would put the blindfold back on my eyes. It was obvious that my eyes would fail to endure the bright light. I was no different from a caveman who stayed in a dark cave afraid to leave and go outside in the light. Yet this was my one and only wish after nine months of complete darkness inside two of the graves of the Air Force Intelligence Directory in our country. I tried to look at the sun again but I couldn't. I tried over and over again, but each time my eyelids would twitch and tears would start running down my face. My eyes teared, not from the pain caused by the truncheons battering my worn-out body nor from the electric shocks stunning it, but because of what they were witnessing. I was afraid of this beaming light, yet my soul longed and looked for it. Since then, I developed the habit of looking directly to the sun, especially after having been moved to my fourth grave where I was allowed a few hours a day of fresh air. I was constantly looking for it, not to feel its warmth or enjoy its rays but to contemplate its clarity. It was a solar disc fixed in the heart of the sky woven from golden threads. Its beauty exceeded even the lunar splendour in a way that melts your heart, yet it's hidden behind a great halo of light. A disc that despite being only visible to the naked eye after much gazing, reveals to the soul that what hinders the divulgence of truths is their prodigious clarity, not their mystery.



Stuart Franklin The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris. France. 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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"Today, I am a refugee standing in front of his window feeling bitter at the sight of flower-decorated tombs. I look at the view and I hear mothers wailing from "our dear nation", demanding to know where their kids were buried and wives looking for the remains of their loved ones to decorate their tombs with flowers"

- Hani Al Zeitani

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Stuart Franklin Grave of Modigliani. The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris. France. 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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Stuart Franklin The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris. France. 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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Today, six years after that incident, I stand in the window of my house which overlooks the cemetery of Grenelle in the fifteenth district in Paris. I observe the

wreaths decorating the tombstones, each one clearly identified by a name, under a sky that has no horizon. Sadly, the sky today is overcast and raindrops are starting to tap on my window. It would seem peculiar to say that I have grown fond of this view. I love watching those tombs from my balcony in the Maison de Journalistes, after becoming a refugee exiled from his own country, and this odd emotion could be a source of comfort for me. In our distant country which ancestors used to call “the noble land”, my sky was without horizon, it was square-shaped and limited by the high walls of Adra prison where I was buried alive for more than two years. From my grave, I could see a sky covered with missiles instead of clouds. From my grave, cell 303, I could hear missile launchers instead of raindrops.

Today, I am a refugee standing in front of his window feeling bitter at the sight of flower-decorated tombs. I look at the view and I hear mothers wailing from “our dear nation”, demanding to know where their kids were buried and wives looking for the remains of their loved ones to decorate their tombs with flowers. Yet no one listens to their demands and nobody feels their agony. What eulogy would soothe Ayham Ghazoul’s mother Mariam’s heart? Her son, Ayham, was a kind friend and a beautiful and helpful human being. She has been dreaming for five years of a grave where she can bury her son. A grave where she can go to visit her son whenever her longing for him is too immense to endure; where she can talk to her son and blame him for leaving too early. Five years have passed and Mariam hasn’t stopped looking for the remains of her son who was murdered and hidden by a dictatorial regime that has been ruling for 48 years. She only wished to give him a last kiss and to attend his funeral like all other grieving mothers. Is it true what they say that the soul remains wandering, lost among the living until it finds a grave where it can finally rest? Will my soul remain in agony until I find Ayham’s place and go to him? Is it not through burial that a person really dies? I couldn’t answer the questions I saw in Mariam’s eyes when I first met her three years ago in Beirut right after I was released from prison. Also, I am nothing like Mariam, I wasn’t born a mother who could feel pain and agony. And I have only known Ayham for four months, or maybe for four years, if we consider the pain we shared inside two of the graves we were interred in.



Stuart Franklin The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris. France. 2018. ©
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I met Ayham at the end of 2011 and we became fellow human rights and free speech activists in our country, Syria. However, in less than two months, on February 16, 2012, exactly, we became two bodies pressed together with the bodies of six of our fellow activists inside one of the graves of the investigation department of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, a grave under the name of Cell 16. The grave, in which eight living people were imprisoned, measured roughly three square metres. We had spent there almost one month before declaring a hunger strike, which lasted for five days, in protest against our dire situation. As a result, we were transferred to an even worse grave, where impending death was materialising before our eyes day and night. There was no other purpose to this grave but torture for the mere pleasure of it. It was an underground room that measured roughly thirty square metres and which was empty of everything but a hundred living people, who couldn't find enough space to sleep all together. We were united by one hope, the hope of leaving this dark grave to see the sun and to feel its daily warmth. We took advantage of the heat of the sun to forget, for a moment, the ordeal of the electric shocks which the jailers administered using an improvised device, made of a stick at the end of which a bare electrical wire was

remotely activated. One month later, Ayham left our grave, and I wish he hadn't, while I stayed there for eight more months before being transferred to a third, a fourth, a fifth and a sixth grave.

No lament would solace Noora's heart – our friend and the great lawyer – while she mourned her husband Bassel Al Safadi, whom she had married and lost in the same prison. The same hands that had been smeared with Ayham's blood executed Bassel, the genius software developer who had ranked 19th on *Foreign Policy's* list of Top 100 Global Thinkers of 2012, and refused to hand over his corpse to Noora, the bride of the revolution, as we used to call her. Two years had passed in Adra prison and the two love birds, Bassel and Noora, singing to us behind the bars of our grave melodies in the hope of a free tomorrow. I was transferred from Adra grave with two other friends to another grave, which measured roughly two square metres, inside the Air Force Intelligence Directorate. The hope hunters killed one of the two lovers and converted the other's hope of freedom into the despair of a world where justice would prevail.



Stuart Franklin The cemetery of Père Lachaise. Paris. France. 2018. ©
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In my faraway country, this story wasn't merely that of Noora and Maryam, but of

thousands of women who lost their loved ones and couldn't bid them farewell. During that month, the Syrian regime published and was still publishing hundreds of lists of the detainees whom it had tortured to death in its prisons. I have read throughout that month the names of fellow activists, who lost their voices inside those graves, in the death lists published successively by a murderous regime that had become confident that no power would punish it and that no international authority would summon it to answer for its crimes.

Today I am in exile. I stand before the window of my room, disregarding its space, while envying the inhabitants of these graves as I listen to the intimate memories of their loved ones. What lament would solace my being as I envy the dead! Seven years of my life have passed, half of which I spent moving alive between graves, and the other half moving between countries as a refugee, unable to visit the grave of the closest one to my heart, my beloved father. On his deathbed, my father was still hoping to see me for one last time, which would not have been possible, thus leaving me with the heartbreak of my involuntary absence during all those years. Today was an exception. It was the one-year anniversary of my father's passing. As I couldn't attend his memorial service, I found myself this morning wandering the streets without a destination until I reached the famous Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

I went and visited the tomb of Honoré de Balzac and thanked him for his unfinished human comedy. His story kept me company at the bottom of my tomb in the civil prison of Adra, in the heart of cruelty. I had a long exchange with the father of realism, but why was I so confused at the memory of Father Goriot, his best novel? I also visited Auguste Comte, the founding father of sociology, to tell him that total submission to power and blind trust in political positivism in no way protects society but, unfortunately, often ends up destroying it. Instilling a religion of humanity in hope to preserve it is only a myth.

What elegy would I say about the human rights situation in our country where the right to bury the dead has turned into a priority claim? What can be said about helpless international institutions turning their backs on the spectacle of our country; dead

without tombs and tombs without epitaphs, people living forgotten in the depths of their graves and others who can not even bid farewell to their dead!

In Syria, truths are obscured, not by their ambiguity but by their blinding clarity, just like the sun. This brilliant disc behind a dazzling light cannot be perceived by blind eyes.

This disc suspended in the firmament, woven with resplendent gold threads, surpasses the lunar star in splendour. The soul itself vanishes in its halo of light. And, although we struggle to observe it, the sun always reveals what prevents us from contemplating the truth.



Stuart Franklin Syrian journalist and refugee Hani El Zeitani at the Maison des Journalistes. Paris, France, 2018. © Stuart Franklin | Magnum Photos

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