

## Iver Arnegard

### "The Fourth World"

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**Iver Arnegard** is a professor in the Department of English at Colorado State University–Pueblo, where he teaches creative writing. He has had fiction, nonfiction, and poetry published in several journals, and Gold Line Press recently published his short fiction collection *Whip and Spur*. In "The Fourth World," originally published by the creative writing journal *High Contrast Review* in 2012, Arnegard describes his experience teaching English in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. As you read, consider how his personal narrative exposes both the reality of the lives of the refugees and Arnegard's own fears about being an American male in the camp.

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They call Borj al Barajneh the fourth world but that doesn't begin to describe the place. From a distance this Palestinian refugee camp could be another rundown part of Beirut, but as we draw near I see that Borj makes even the poorest parts of the city look wealthy. I am visiting this camp with my new friend, Nick, whom I just met a few hours ago. I told him I'd help him teach his English class. After the last bus stop it was almost a full kilometer's walk down the Airport Road where we took a left beneath an overpass. There, we began our trek down a nameless street bordered on one side by a razor wire fence and on the other by an empty lot that's been converted to an impromptu dump. Men and women in ragged clothing dig through trash for anything they can salvage.

The entrance to Borj al Barajneh leads into a labyrinth of concrete, plywood and twisted metal, and now I see why Nick calls it "The Maze." Alleyways shoot off in all directions, and as we pass the threshold of this walled-in camp the intense sunlight of the day fades to a dim, dusky hue, as if we've entered some kind of otherworldly canyon. Refugees have built skeletal wooden shacks on top of cracked concrete dwellings. In places, above the wooden shacks, faded canvas tents have been propped up with two by fours, branches or sticks.

The stench is overwhelming and I wonder how much shit is mixed in with the dirt and grime everywhere. Bundles of exposed wires sag between buildings and at times we have to walk around them or duck underneath.

Nick sighs and scratches his thick white beard. "Last week a boy was electrocuted here."

I turn to him. "Really?" I am trying to imagine a worse death.

"Yeah." Nick looks around. His voice is softer since we entered the camp. "It happened in another part of Borj. They lose a couple kids a year that way. All over the camp."

Arabic graffiti covers many of the walls here. In places posters of Arafat and Kadafy hang loosely from tacks and as we weave our way through the refugees I avoid eye contact though I feel the hard stares. They know I'm Western and probably sense that I'm American at that. I hope that dirty looks are all I'm met with today. When I told friends I was coming, most of them tried to talk me out of it. Camps are known for violence and some refugees blame their problems on the West. The Lebanese government lets Palestinians carry guns for protection and most of them do. This might be why Nick keeps his head down now and has scarcely said a word to me since we entered Borj.

I follow him through alleys, narrow as hallways, turning right, then left, then right again. Corridors without names or landmarks. Sometimes it feels like our path is just looping back on itself. Other times side alleys shoot off in different directions and dead end for no apparent reason. Earlier Nick told me that on his first visit he had to draw himself a map and bring it with him for weeks before remembering his way. And now I understand why.

We take one more left and reach a twisted set of concrete stairs. I follow Nick upward and through a sagging wooden doorway. There, at a cluttered desk, sits a beautiful veiled woman with olive skin and pale green eyes.

"Marhaba, Mariam," Nick says. He tells her something in Arabic and gestures toward me. "Iver," he explains.

Mariam turns and puts her palm across her chest to let me know she's orthodox and does not shake hands.

I smile. "Nice to meet you."

This has to be the center Nick described to me. Funded by the U.N., the place is run mostly by Mariam, who organizes classes and events here. As Nick speaks with her I look around the room to see Palestinian flags, beadwork and art hanging from the walls. In the corner sits a bookshelf littered with artifacts and knickknacks, carvings and colorful embroidery. I don't understand the meaning behind the art or the symbols on the flags and think how impossible it is to process everything I've seen in the last half an hour.

"Well," Nick says, turning to me. "We better get ready for class."

I've almost forgotten the reason I came and suddenly feel nervous to meet twenty Palestinian teenagers whose language I still don't understand.

"Follow me," Nick says. "It's down here."

We leave Mariam's office through a door on the left and walk along a tight corridor until we come to another threshold. Nick turns the knob and there are his students, waiting for him around a cluster of small, dilapidated tables.

As we enter the room they all turn to me and stare. Nick fires a few phrases at them in Arabic, points at me and yells: "Iver!"

Before moving to Lebanon to teach Creative Writing at the American University of Beirut I didn't realize how widespread these refugee camps were. I thought they all lay west of the Jordan. But actually camps stretch across the Middle East. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq. Over three million refugees struggling to live without citizenship or a country of their own.

I told Nick I came to help teach and that I was interested in doing some volunteer work of my own. But I'm mostly here to learn. I've only heard of these camps on TV or in newspapers and I want to try to understand the Palestinian condition for myself.

My friend, Jeff, from the university, used to volunteer at Borj and a week ago I asked if he could help get me in to see the camp. He made some calls and later said his friend Nick would bring me. Three days ago I talked briefly with Nick on the phone, and he told me to meet him at Younes—a Beirut coffee shop—at 8:45 on Saturday.

It was only four blocks from the café to the bus stop. And a forty minute ride, criss-crossing Beirut, while my new friend explained how he'd come to work at Borj.

The son of diplomats, he'd spent a few of his formative years in Lebanon, though growing up he'd moved all over the world from China to Brazil. After earning a college degree at Berkeley and a Masters in History from UVA, he'd spent much of his time in the Peace Corps, though he's quick to point out that not all of his motives were altruistic. "It was that," he told me. "Or get my head blown off in Viet Nam."

After the Peace Corps Nick spent most of his time in Vermont where he taught at various universities and eventually met his wife, Mary, a Unitarian minister. By the passionate way he talks about the problems of the Middle East, flinging around his wild mane of white hair with each gesture, it's clear that he's never lost the idealism of youth. Or his sense of adventure.

After the war of 2006 Nick and his wife decided to move back to Beirut where he would teach English and she would try to start a church. Nick took a job at the American Community School of Beirut, and began volunteering at Borj al Barajneh on weekends.

We both gaze out the window for a moment. Since the bus left Hamra ten minutes ago the passing neighborhoods have gradually deteriorated and some of the worst living conditions I've ever seen reel by in a blur: A block of gray apartment buildings riddled with bullet holes. Another block piled high with concrete rubble and twisted rebar. Then suddenly a beautiful blue mosque. Looming above the rundown cityscape. Rich, ornate designs completely out of place amidst the squalor.

Nick turns back to me. "You know, the political implications of what we do at these camps are huge." He scratches his beard. "Refugees see that some Westerners actually do care and, who knows, maybe one of them won't grow up to be a suicide bomber. Maybe years from now an embassy will be spared an attack." He shrugs. "There's no way to know. And on the other hand, you should take some time to seriously consider whether or not you want to come back and volunteer on your own. What we do here can be extremely dangerous. A lot of these kids' parents don't want them learning English—the language of the evil doers."

Over the phone Nick had briefly explained that he teaches a class of about twenty teenage Palestinian girls who dream of becoming secretaries. "The sad thing is," he told me, "probably none of them will ever get the chance. They're not allowed to work in Lebanon, so any job they get is never on record and their employers can pay them as little as they want. Or nothing at all. That's if they even get a job to begin with. Most of them will be married off by their parents, and they can only hope their husbands turn out to be somewhat decent men." Nick sighs. "These will probably be the poorest people you ever meet. But still, they're just *girls*. Some are popular. Some are socially awkward. I even have class clowns. Like Sarwat. When anyone from the outside comes in to try to teach them anything, those are some of the few moments in their lives that they actually have hope. And some of the few times that they can simply be themselves. *Girls*."

That's all I knew about Nick's students or what he does at this camp before today. And now here I am. Fidgeting in front of his class. Awkward. Out of place. I look around the room, smiling, and the girls smile back. Some wear shawls and veils, traditional Palestinian robes. But just as many

are dressed like modern Lebanese teenagers. Jeans. T-shirts. One girl's top says, "I Love New York."

"Take a seat over there." Nick points to the far end of one of the tables, and I walk over and sit down. I try to get comfortable and pull out my notebook as Nick shuffles through some papers. He spouts a few Arabic phrases and passes his handouts around.

All Nick has as a textbook is an American travel guide to Lebanon, which he bought last minute before his first class this fall. The book mostly translates phrases between English and Arabic. And vice versa. Expressions that might come in handy for an American tourist in a coffee shop or restaurant.

The irony is not lost on Nick. These are situations his Palestinian students will probably never be fortunate enough to find themselves in. The refugees of Borj worry all the time about whether or not enough drinking water will reach their camp from week to week. For them, going to a restaurant would be like going to the moon. Even most of the vocabulary on household items is completely foreign and abstract to them.

And this is the first lesson Nick hands out. A photocopy from the travel guide, listing things you would find in your house. A picture of a sink with the English word beside it, next to the Arabic word, *majla*. An image of a door with the word *bab* beside it. There are about twenty terms in the list. Telephone, television, washer, dryer, microwave, window . . . He goes around the circle of girls.

"Okay, Mona, repeat after me. In my house I have a TV, a couch and a bed. Pick three things in your house and say, 'In my house I have . . .' Just choose three so you can practice."

It's obvious the girls aren't catching every word, but they're quick to imitate. Mona, a tall and slender Palestinian speaks the words slowly and with a heavy Arab accent: "In my house," she says. "I have a door, a window and a bed."

"Excellent Mona. Lina? Your turn." He nods to the next girl and she peers down at the handout.

"In mine house," she says. "I have a sink, a couch and a cupboard."

Eventually Nick goes around the entire circle, asking each girl to practice the phrase. None of them ever uses words like *television*, *microwave*, *washer* or *dryer*.

Nick's next exercise is called *At The Coffee Shop* and lists phrases you would use to order coffee. There are translations for basic terms like *cream*

and *sugar*. This time, instead of circling the room in order, Nick picks students at random. "Sara," he says, pointing to an especially young-looking Palestinian. "What do you want in your coffee?"

She shakes her head and frowns.

Nick says, "In my coffee I want . . ."

And Sara mimics him, but she's obviously confused. "In my coffee I want . . ." There's a long pause and Nick gestures with his hands while pointing at the list.

Sara starts again. "In my coffee I want . . ." She looks down at the hand-out. "Sugar and bread."

Half the girls laugh. They know what bread means. The other girls are just as lost as Sara and look around nervously, wondering if they should also giggle. "La," Nick says. *No*. "Bread is . . ." He pretends to eat something with his hands and more of the girls laugh. "Okay," he says. "Sara. What do you want in your coffee?" Nick pulls an imaginary notebook and pencil out of his pocket and gets ready to write. A couple of the girls cover their mouths and snicker.

"In my coffee," Sara says, "I want cream and sugar."

"Bravo," Nick tells her. "Tamem." *Perfect*. He pretends to scribble something down on the palm of his hand. Then looks to Sarwat. "What do you want in *your* coffee?" he says.

She glances around at the rest of the class and smiles. "In my coffee," she says. "I want a washer, a dryer and a microwave."

The class cracks up, and Nick pretends he's been shot, clutching his chest and falling back in his chair. The girls laugh even harder.

"Okay," Nick says, standing up again. "Last exercise. We've done this one before. *Manager and secretary*. Mona and I will start. I'll be the manager."

Nick bends his three middle fingers and keeps his pinky and thumb pointed out to create an imaginary phone with his right hand. He dials a few numbers on his palm and puts his thumb to his ear, his pinky finger in front of his mouth. "Brrrrrring, brrrrrring." He rolls his r's and though the girls giggle Nick remains serious, looking intently at Mona, who makes her own pretend phone and answers.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mona. Has anyone called for me today?"

She pauses. "Yes. Mr. Abdul."

"Oh," Nick says. "What did he want?"

Mona is at a loss, but Sara whispers something in her ear. I can tell from the girl's new expression that she now remembers what she's supposed to say. "Ah. He wants you fax him paperwork."

"Great," Nick says. "I'll do that. Thank you so much, Mona. Bye." He pretends to hang up.

"Bye," Mona says, her hand dropping back down by her side. She's clearly proud that she could carry out the conversation and I am in awe of Nick as he continues around the circle, sometimes pretending to be manager, other times he's the secretary and the girls ask him about calls they've received from imaginary clients or business partners. Later, after his class is finished for the week, I'll follow him out of the camp, trying to remember my own way back to the Center for when I decide to return. I'll try to keep up with Nick as he hustles down the Airport Road toward our bus stop, gesturing wildly with his hands while he wonders aloud over the Palestinian problem. Strategizing possible solutions, though like *The Maze*, all paths seem to loop back on themselves. Or simply lead to dead ends.

For now I just sit and watch Nick teach. Amazed. As captivated as his students, I can't believe a man in his mid-sixties has three times the energy I could ever muster.

Nick finishes class with a pretend phone call to Sarwat. The only refugee who hasn't participated in the *Manager and Secretary* exercise.

"Okay," Nick says. "I'll be the manager, Sarwat. You be the secretary."

She looks around the room. All the faces of her Palestinian friends waiting for her next joke. But this time she doesn't smile.

"La," she says. *No*. "Today, I'll be the manager."

## Analyze

1. How does Arnegard "show" his readers what this refugee camp looks like?
2. What is the effect of comparing the different appearances of the female students—some wearing "shawls and veils, traditional Palestinian robes," whereas others are "dressed like modern Lebanese teenagers. Jeans. T-shirts. One girl's top says 'I Love New York'"? What do these descriptions tell us about these students?
3. Arnegard ends his narrative with Sarwat, who refuses to be the secretary and instead says, "Today, I'll be the manager." What are the implications of ending the narrative in this way?

## Explore

1. What does the story reveal about the position of women in the refugee camp? Is the fact that the class is composed of “teenage Palestinian girls who dream of becoming secretaries” surprising to you? If so, why?
2. What do you know about the situation of Palestinian refugees? Visit the website for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). What does this agency do, and how does it describe the realities of Palestinian refugees? How does understanding more about this crisis help you better understand Arnegard’s narrative?
3. Arnegard writes, “They know I’m Western and probably sense that I’m American at that. I hope that dirty looks are all I’m met with today. When I told friends I was coming, most of them tried to talk me out of it. Camps are known for violence and some refugees blame their problems on the West.” What accounts for these attitudes? How would you go about finding out? Create a researchable question and a list of keywords to find out why Arnegard is met with dirty looks.