

A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips

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MAHMOUD DARWISH

five poems

*translated, from the Arabic,
by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché*

A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips

He dreams of white tulips, an olive branch, her breasts
in evening blossom.
He dreams of a bird, he tells me, of lemon flowers.
He does not intellectualize about his dream. He understands things
as he senses and smells them.
Homeland for him, he tells me, *is to drink my mother's coffee
then return at nightfall.*

And the land? *I don't know the land*, he said.
I don't feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in the poems.
Suddenly I saw the land as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers.

I asked him, but don't you love the land? *My love is a picnic*, he said,
a glass of wine, a love affair.
— *Would you die for the land?*
— *No!*
All my attachment to the land is no more than a story or a fiery speech!
They taught me to love it, but I never felt it in my heart.
I never knew its roots and branches, or the scent of its grass.

— *And what about its love? Did it burn like suns and desire?*
He looked straight at me and said: *I love it with my gun.*
And by unearthing feasts in the garbage of the past
and a deaf-mute idol whose age and meaning are unknown.

He told me about the moment of departure, how his mother
silently wept when they led him to the front,
how her anguished voice gave birth to a new hope in her flesh
that doves might flock through the Ministry of War.

He drew on his cigarette. He said, as if fleeing from a swamp of blood,
*I dreamt of white tulips, an olive branch, a bird reveling
in the dawn on a lemon branch.*
— *And what did you see?*
— *I saw what I did:*
A blood-red boxthorn.
I blasted them in the sand . . . in their chests . . . in their bellies.
— *How many did you kill?*
— *It's impossible to tell.*
I only got one medal.

Pained, I asked him to tell me about one of the dead.

He shifted in his seat, played with folded paper,
then said, as if breaking into song:
He collapsed like a tent on stones, taking hot shrapnel in his arms.
His high forehead was crowned with blood. His chest was empty of medals.

*He was not a well-trained fighter, but seemed instead to be a peasant,
a worker, or a peddler.*
Like a tent he collapsed and died, his arms stretched out like dry creek-beds.
When I searched his pockets for a name, I found two photographs,
One of his wife, the other of his daughter.

Did you feel sad? I asked.
Cutting me off, he said, *Mahmoud, my friend,*
sadness is a white bird that does not come near a battlefield.
Soldiers commit a sin when they feel sad.
I was there like a machine spitting hellfire and death,
turning space into a black bird.



He told me about his first love, and later, about distant streets,
about reactions to the war in the heroic radio and the press.
As he hid a cough in his handkerchief I asked him:
Shall we meet again?
Yes, but in a city far away.

When I filled his fourth glass, I asked jokingly:
Are you off? What about the homeland?
Give me a break, he replied.
I dream of white tulips, streets of song, a house of light.
I need a kind heart, not a bullet.
I need a bright day, not a mad, fascist moment of triumph.
I need a child to cherish a day of laughter, not a weapon of war.
I came to live for rising suns, not to witness their death.

He said goodbye and went looking for white tulips,
a bird reveling in the dawn on an olive branch.
He understands things only as he senses and smells them.
Homeland for him, he said, *is to drink my mother's coffee*
And to return, safely, at nightfall.

We Have the Right to Love Autumn

And we, too, have the right to love the last days of autumn and ask
the grove:
Is there room now for a new autumn, so we may lie down like coals?
Like gold, autumn brings its leaves to half-staff.
If only we never said goodbye to the fundamentals
and questioned our fathers when they fled at knife-point.
May poetry and God's name have mercy on us!
We have the right to warm the nights of beautiful women, and talk about
what might shorten the night of two strangers waiting for North on the
compass.
It's autumn. We have the right to smell autumn's fragrances
and ask the night for a dream.
Does the dream, like the dreamers themselves, sicken? *Autumn. Autumn.*
Can a people be born on a guillotine?
We have the right to die any way we wish.
May the earth hide itself away in a blade of wheat!

Neighing at the Slope

Horses' neighing at the slope. Downward or upward.
I prepare my portrait for my woman to hang on a wall when I die.
She says: *Is there a wall to hang it on?*
I say: *We'll build a room for it. Where? In any house.*

Horses' neighing at the slope. Downward or upward.

Does a thirty-year-old woman need a homeland where she might make a life?

Can I reach the summit of this rugged mountain? The slope is either an abyss or a place of siege.

Midway it divides. It's a journey. Martyrs kill one another.

I prepare my portrait for my woman. When a new horse neighs in you, tear it up.

Horses' neighing at the slope. Upward, or upward.

Other Berbers Will Come

Other Berbers will come. The emperor's wife will be abducted. Drums will beat loudly.

Drums will beat so that horses will leap over human bodies from the Aegean Sea to the Dardanelles.

So why should we be concerned? What do our wives have to do with horse racing?

The emperor's wife will be abducted. Drums will beat loudly and other Berbers will come.

Berbers will fill the cities' emptiness, slightly higher than the sea, mightier than the sword in a time of madness.

So why should we be concerned? What do our children have to do with the children of this impudence?

Drums will beat loudly and other Berbers will come. The emperor's wife will be taken from his bedroom.

From his bedroom he will launch a military assault to return his bedmate to his bed.

Why should we be concerned? What do fifty thousand victims have to do with this brief marriage?

Can Homer be born after us . . . and myths open their doors to the throng?

They Would Love to See Me Dead

They would love to see me dead, so they say: *He belongs to us, he is ours.*
For twenty years I have heard their footsteps on the walls of the night.
They open no door, yet here they are now. I see three of them:

A poet, a killer, and a reader of books.

Will you have some wine? I asked.

Yes, they answered.

When do you plan to shoot me? I asked.

Take it easy, They answered.

They lined up their glasses all in a row and started singing for the people.

I asked: *When will you begin my assassination?*

Already done, they said . . . *Why did you send your shoes on ahead to your soul?*

So it can wander the face of the earth, I said.

The earth is wickedly dark, so why is your poem so white?

Because my heart is teeming with thirty seas, I answered.

They asked: *Why do you love French wine?*

Because I ought to love the most beautiful women, I answered.

They asked: *How would you like your death?*

Blue, like stars pouring from a window—would you like more wine?

Yes, we'll drink, they said.

Please take your time. I want you to kill me slowly so I can write my last poem to my heart's wife. They laughed, and took from me only the words dedicated to my heart's wife.

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MAHMOUD DARWISH is the winner of the 2001 Lannan Prize for Cultural Freedom. He has published more than twenty books, including *The Adam of Two Edens*, *Why Have You Left the Horse Alone*, and *Eleven Planets*. Mr. Darwish is also the author of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, written in 1988. In the fall of 2002, a new English translation of his *Selected Poems* will be published in the United States.

MUNIR AKASH is the author and editor of fourteen literary books and the recipient of the 1983 Targa Europa. A leading Arab critic, he is editor and publisher of *Jusoor (Bridges)*, *The Arab American Journal of Cultural Exchange*.

CAROLYN FORCHÉ's new volume of poetry, *Blue Hour*, is forthcoming from Harper-Collins in spring, 2003.