

TIME Beirut
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**MAHMOUD
DARWISH**

Memory for forgetfulness
Translated from
the Arabic by
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The aroma of coffee is a return to and a bringing back of first things

because it is the offspring of the primordial. It is a journey begun thousands of years ago, which still returns. Coffee is a place. Coffee is pores that let the inside seep through to the outside. A parting that unites what cannot be united except through it. Coffee is not for weaning. On the contrary, it's a breast that suckles men far. A morning born of a bitter taste. It is the milk of manhood. Coffee is a geography.

Who is that rising out of my dream?

Did she really speak with me before dawn, or was I delirious, dreaming while waking?

We met only twice. The first time, she learned my name; and the second, I learned hers. The third time, we never met at all. Why then is she calling me now, out of a dream in

which I was sleeping on her knee! I did not say to her that first time, "I love you." And the second time, she did not say to me, "I love you." And we did not drink coffee together.

Out of one dream, another is born.

Are you well! I mean, are you alive!

How did you know I was just laying my head on your knee to sleep!

Because you woke me up when you stirred in my belly. I realised I was your coffin. Are you alive! Do you hear me well!

Does it often happen that I'm awakened from one dream by another dream, the interpretation of the dream itself!

It's happening now to me and you. Are you alive!

Almost.

Have the devils touched you with evil!

I don't know, but in time, there is room for death.

Don't die totally.

I'll try not to.

Don't die at all.

I'll try not to.

Tell me, when did it happen! I mean, when did we meet! When did we part!

Thirteen years ago.

Did we often get together!

Twice: once in the rain, and again in the rain. The third time, we didn't meet. I went away and forgot you. And a while ago I remembered. I remembered I'd forgotten you. I was dreaming.

The same thing is happening to me. I too was dreaming. I got your telephone number from a Swedish friend who had met you in Beirut. Good night! Don't forget not to die. I still want you. And when you come to life again, I want you to call me. How the time flies! Thirteen years! No. It all happened last night. Good night!

Three o'clock in the morning. A dawn riding on fire. A nightmare coming from the sea. Roosters made of metal. And a dawn that flares up in all the senses before it appears. A roaring that chases me out of bed and throws me into this narrow hallway. I want nothing, and I hope for nothing. Nor can I direct my limbs in this all-encompassing confusion. No time for caution, and no time for time. If I only knew—if I knew how to organise the crush of this death that keeps pouring forth. If only I knew how to liberate the screams held back in a body that no longer feels like mine from the sheer effort it has exerted, trying to save itself in this uninterrupted chaos of shells. "Enough!" "Enough!" I whisper, just to find out if I can still do anything to guide me to myself and point to the location of the abyss opening out in six directions. I cannot surrender to this fate, nor can I resist it. Iron that howls, only to have other iron bark back. The fever of metal is the song of this dawn.

What if this inferno were to take a five-minute break, and then let come what may? Just five minutes. I almost say: five minutes in which to arrange my affairs and consider life and death? Will five minutes be enough? Yes. Long enough for me to sneak out of this narrow hallway, open to the bedroom, the study, and the bathroom in which there is no water; open to the kitchen which I have been ready to leap into for the last hour but haven't been able to move.

Two hours ago I went to sleep. I plugged my ears with cotton wool and went to sleep after listening to the last newscast. It did not announce I was dead. That means I am still alive. I inspect the parts of my body and find them all there. Two eyes, two ears, a large nose, ten toes below, ten fingers above, and a finger in the middle. As for the heart, it cannot be seen, and I find nothing that can prove its existence except my extraordinary ability to take note of my limbs and a handgun lying on a book shelf in the study. An elegant pistol—clean, sparkling, small, and empty. With the pistol they also made me a present of a box of bullets which I hid I don't know where two years ago, fearing folly, fearing a stray outburst of anger, fearing a stray bullet. The conclusion is, I am alive; or,

more accurately, I exist.

No one is paying attention to the request I sent up with the rising smoke: I need five minutes to place this dawn, or my share of it, on its feet and to prepare to launch into this day born of howling. Are we in August? Yes. We are in August. The war has turned into a siege. I search the airwaves on the radio, which has become a third hand, for news of the hour, but I find no one there and no news. The radio, then, is asleep.

I no longer question when the steely howling of the sea will stop. I live on the tenth floor of a building that would have tempted any sniper, to say nothing of a fleet that has turned the sea into one of the sources of hell. The northern face of the building is glass, allowing its dwellers the pleasure of a view over the wrinkled roof of the sea. But now it has turned into the nakedness of murder. Why did I choose to live here? What a stupid question! For the last ten years I have lived here without complaining about the scandal of glass.

But how to reach the kitchen?

I want the aroma of coffee. I want nothing more than the aroma of coffee. And I want nothing more from the passing days than the aroma of coffee. The aroma of coffee so I can pull myself together, stand on my feet and be changed from something that crawls, into a human being. The aroma of coffee so I can stand my share of this dawn upon its feet. So that we can go together, this day and I, down into the street in search of another place.

How am I to diffuse the aroma of coffee through my cells, while shells from the sea swoop down on the sea-facing kitchen to spread the stink of gunpowder and the taste of nothingness? I have begun to measure the period between two shells. One second. One second—that is shorter than the time between exhaling and inhaling, between two beats of a heart. One second is not long enough for me to stand in front of the stove by the glass facade overlooking the sea. One second is not long enough for me to open the water bottle, or to pour the water into the coffee pot. One second is not long enough to light a match. But one second is long enough for me to burn.

I turn off the radio. I no longer wonder if the wall of the

narrow hallway will actually protect me from the rain of rockets. What concerns me is that there be a wall veiling the air fused into metal aimed at human flesh—hitting it directly, or scattering shrapnel, or choking its breath. In such cases a mere dark screen can provide an imaginary shield of safety. For death is to see death.

I want the aroma of coffee. I need five minutes. I want a truce for five minutes for the sake of coffee. I have no other personal wish than to make a cup of coffee. With this madness I define my task and my aim. All my senses are on their marks, ready in one call to spring my thirst in the direction of the goal: coffee.

Coffee, for an addict like me, is the key to the day.

And coffee, for one who knows it as I do, means to make it with your own hands, not have it come to you on a tray. For the bearer of the tray is also the bearer of talk, and the first coffee is spoiled by the first words because it is the virgin of the silent morning. Dawn, I mean my dawn, is antithetical to talk. The aroma of coffee can absorb sounds even if they consist of nothing more than a gentle "Good morning!" The coffee will be spoiled.

Coffee is the morning silence, early and unhurried. It is the only silence during which you can be alone in a creative peace with self and things, with water you reach for in lazy solitude and pour into a small copper pôt with a mysterious shine—yellow turning to brown—that you place over a low flame. Oh, that it were a wood fire!

Stand away from the fire a little to observe a street waking to search for its bread, the way it has since the ape got entangled with leaving the trees and walking on his feet. A street carried on vegetable and fruit carts, and on vendors' cries distinguished only by inadequate praise for the product, which they turn into a mere attribute of the price. Stand away a little, and breathe an air sent by the cool night, then back to your low flame (If only it were a wood fire!) and watch with love and patience the relationship of the two elements—the flame taking colours of green and blue, and the water wrinkling and breathing out tiny white granules that turn into a fine film and

then grow. Slowly they expand, then quickly swell into bubbles that become larger and larger, and break. Swelling and breaking, they are thirsty and ready to swallow two spoonfuls of coarse sugar, which no sooner penetrates than they calm down to a quiet hiss, only to sizzle again in a cry for another substance which is none other than the coffee itself—a flashy rooster of aroma and Eastern masculinity.

Remove the pot from the low fire to carry on the dialogue of a hand, innocent of the smell of tobacco and ink, with its first creative effort—a creation that as of this moment will determine the flavour of your day and the arch of the fortune, whether you are to work or avoid contact with anyone for the day. What emerges from this first motion and its rhythm, from what shakes it out of a world of sleep rising from the previous day, and from whatever mystery it will uncover in you, will form the identity of your new day. Because coffee, the first cup of coffee, is the mirror of the hand. And the hand that makes the coffee uncovers the person that stores it. Therefore, coffee is the public reading of the open book of the soul. And it is the enchantress that reveals whatever secrets the day will bring.

The dawn made of lead is still advancing from the direction of the sea, rising over sounds I had not heard before. The sea in its entirety has been stuffed into stray shells. The sea is altering its marine nature and turning into metal. Does death have all these names? We said we would leave. Why then does this red-black-gray rain keep pouring over whoever leaves or stays, be they people, trees, or stones? We said we would leave. "By sea," they said. "By sea," we said. Why then are they arming the foam and the waves with this heavy artillery? Is it to hasten our steps toward the sea? But first they must break the siege from the sea. They must clear the last road for the last thread of our blood. But as long as the siege is there, and it is, we will not leave. I will therefore make the coffee.

The neighbourhood birds awake at six in the morning. They have carried on the tradition of neutral song ever since they found themselves, all alone, with the first glimmerings of

light. For whom do they sing in the crush of these rockets? They sing to heal their nature of a night that has passed. They sing for themselves, not for us. Did we realise this before? The birds have opened up their own space in the smoke of the burning city. The zigzagging arrows of sound wrap themselves around the shells and point to an earth safe under the sky. It is for the killer to kill, the fighter to fight, and the bird to sing. As for me, I cease my quest for figurative language. I bring to a complete stop my search for hidden meaning because the nature of war is to debase symbols and bring human relations, space, time, and the elements back to their raw state, such that we rejoice over water gushing from a broken pipe in the road. Water under these conditions comes to us like a miracle. Who said water has no colour? Water does have a colour which reveals itself in the unfolding of thirst. Water has the colour of bird-sounds—the sparrow in particular—birds that pay no heed to this war approaching from the sea so long as their space is safe. And water has the flavour of water, and a fragrance which is the scent of the afternoon breeze blown from a field with full ears of wheat waving in an expanse of light strewn like flickering spots left by the wings of a small sparrow fluttering low. Not everything that flies is an airplane. Perhaps one of the worst Arabic words is *ta'irah* (airplane), which is the feminine form of *ta'ir* (bird). The birds persist in their song, asserting their voices in the midst of the naval artillery's roar. Who said water has no taste, no colour, or smell, and that this airplane is the feminine form of this bird?

But suddenly, the birds are still. They have stopped their chatter and routine soaring in the dawn air when the storm of flying metal started to blow. Have they fallen quiet because of its steely roar, or because of the imbalance between name and form? Two wings made of iron and silver, versus two feathered ones. A nose of electric steel against a beak made of song. A cargo of rockets; a grain of wheat and a straw. Their skies no longer safe, the birds stop singing and pay heed to the war.

The sky falls down like a cement roof collapsing. The sea approaches, changing into dry land. Sky and sea become

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one substance, making it difficult for me to breathe. I switch on the radio. Nothing. Time has frozen. It sits on me to choke me. The jets pass between my fingers. They pierce my lungs. How can I reach the aroma of coffee? Am I to shrivel up and die without the aroma of coffee? I don't want to... I don't want to... Where is my will?

It stopped there, on the other side of the street, the day we raised the call against the legend advancing on us from the south. The day human flesh clenched the muscles of its spirit and cried, "They will not pass, and we will not leave!" Flesh fought against metal, overcoming the difficult equation, and the conquerors were halted by the walls. There is time to bury the dead. There is time for weapons. And there is time to pass the time as we please, that the heroism may continue. We are now the masters of time.

Then, bread sprang from the soil and water gushed from the rocks. Their rockets dug wells for us, and the language of their killing tempted us to sing, "We will not leave!" Then, we saw our faces on foreign screens boiling with great promise and breaking through the siege with unwavering victory signs. And now we have nothing to lose, so long as Beirut is here and we are here in Beirut as addresses for a different homeland, where—in the middle of this sea and on the edge of this desert—meanings will find their words again. For here, where we are, is the tent for wandering meanings, for words gone astray, and for gathering the scattered light, orphaned and banished from the centre.

As for these young men, armed only with creative ignorance of the balance of forces and the opening bars of old songs; with hand grenades and explosive beer bottles; with the desire for young women in air raid shelters; with fragments of identity cards and the clear wish to take vengeance on wise parents; armed with the madness of wanting to be saved from the senility of the ageing idea and what they do not know of the sport of active death—do they realise that with their wounds and their inventive recklessness they are correcting the text of a language that has led the whole area east of the Mediterranean in the direction of a West whose only concern

with slavery, ever since the siege of Acre in the Middle Ages until the present siege of Beirut (whose purpose is to take revenge on all of medieval history), has been to relax the requirements for becoming a slave?

When they set about putting the siege under siege, did they know that in bringing the actual out of the marvellous into the ordinary they were supplanting the legend and revealing to the misguided prophet of doom the secrets of a heroism formed by the movement from the simple to the simple? As though a man were to be tested on his manhood, or a woman on her womanhood; as though it was for dignity to make a choice between defending itself and suicide, and for a lone knight singlehandedly to cleave his insolent space and clear a path to the secret motive within him, rather than accept that his personal valour and his moral and physical heroism must await the return of the official chivalry. As though a handful of human beings were to reel against the order of things so that this people, whose birth was tempered with stubborn force, should not be made equal to a flock of sheep herded over the fence of complicity by the shepherd of oppression conspiring with the guardian of the legend.

They will not pass as long as there is life in our bodies. Let them pass, if they can pass at all, over whatever corpses the spirit may leave behind.

Where, then, is my will?

It stood over there, on the other side of the collective voice. But now, I want nothing more than the aroma of coffee. I feel shame. I feel shamed by my fear, and by those defending the scent of the distant homeland—that fragrance which they have never smelled because they were not born there. Born apart from it, they study it continuously, without fatigue or boredom, and learn from it an overpowering memory from constant pursuit:

"You don't belong here," they said to them there.

"You don't belong here," they said to them here.

And between here and there they stretched their bodies like a vibrating bow until death celebrated itself through them. Their parents were driven out of "there" so that they could

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become guests "here", temporary guests, that the battlegrounds of the homeland be clear of civilians and the regular armies purge Arab land and honour of shame and disgrace. As the old song had it: "Brother, the oppressors have all limits dared to break/To battle then, of ourselves an offering make.../ Of a sudden upon them with death we came/ In vain their fight, and nothing they became." And to the degree that those songs were chasing the remnants of the invaders, liberating the country line by line, these were being born here in any old way, without a cradle, perhaps on a straw mat, banana leaves, or in baskets woven from bamboo, with no joy or feasting, and without birth certificate or name registry. They were burdens on their families and tent neighbours. In short, theirs was a surplus birth. They were without an identity.

And in the end what happened, happened. The regular armies retreated, and these were still being born without a reason, growing up for no reason, remembering for no reason and being put under siege for no reason. All of them knew the story—a story very much like a cosmic traffic accident or a natural catastrophe. But they read a great deal of the books in their bodies and their shacks. They read their segregation, and they read the pan-Arab nationalist speeches. They read the publications of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and they read the whips of the police. Yet they continued to grow up and go beyond the perimeters of refugee camp and detention centre. And they read the history of forts and citadels used by conquerors as signatures to keep alive their names in lands not theirs, or (for example) to falsify the identity of rocks and oranges. Is history not bribeable? Why else then should so many places—lakes, mountains, or cities—bear the names of military leaders for no reason other than that they had mouthed an impression when they first saw them, and their words became names used today? "Oh rid" (how beautiful!)—that's what a Roman general exclaimed when he first saw the lake in Macedonia—and his surprise has become its name. Add to this the hundreds of names we use to refer to places previously singled out by some victorious military man

where it has since become difficult to disentangle the identity from the defeat. Forts and citadels which are no more than attempts to preserve from forgetfulness a name that does not trust its immortality. Anti-forgetfulness rocks, and wars that negate oblivion. No one wants to forget. More accurately, no one wants to be forgotten, or, more peacefully, they bring children into the world to carry on their names, or to bear for them the burden of the name and its glory. It has had a long history—this double operation of searching for a place or a time on which to put a signature and of untying the knot of the name in facing the long caravans of oblivion.

Why then should those whom the waves of oblivion have cast up on the shores of Beirut be expected to go against nature? Why should so much forgetfulness be expected of them? And who will be able to construct for them a new memory that will have no content other than the broken shadow of a distant life in a vessel made of sheet metal.

Is there enough forgetfulness for them to forget?

And who is going to help them forget in the midst of this grief, which never stops reminding them of their alienation from place and society? Who will accept them as citizens? Who will protect them against the whips of discrimination and pursuit: "You don't belong here!"

They show their identity cards, presented to signal the dangers of entry and exit (as if to quarantine a contagious disease), observing how expertly Palestinian identity is used to uplift Arab nationalist spirit. These forgotten ones, driven out of the social fabric, these outcasts, deprived of work and equal rights, are at the same time expected to applaud their oppression because it provides them with the blessings of memory. Thus, he who is expected to forget he is human is forced into accepting the denial of his human rights in order to train for his liberation from the disease of forgetting the homeland. He will have to catch tuberculosis in order not to forget he has lungs, and he must sleep in open country in order not to forget he has another sky. He will have to work as a servant in order not to forget he has a national duty. And he must be denied the privilege of settling in order not to forget

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Palestine. In short, he must remain the Other to his Arab brothers because he has vowed liberation.

Fine, fine. He knows his duty: my identity—my gun. Why then have countless accusations been levelled at him, such as making trouble, violating the rules of hospitality, creating problems, and spreading the contagion of arms? When he held his peace, his soul was taken out to the stray dogs; and when he moved towards the homeland, his body was dragged out to the dogs. The intellectuals, capable of trying on the latest models in theory, had convinced him he was the only alternative to the normal, but when the normal turned against him they demanded self-criticism because he had been excessive in his nationalism: he had gone so far as to put himself outside the fold of the normal. The conditions were not yet ripe. The conditions were not yet ripe. He had to wait. What then should he have done? Chatter his life away in the coffee shops of Beirut? He had prattled so long he was told Beirut had corrupted him.

Society ladies, armed with automatic weapons amidst the tinkle of their jewellery, gave speeches at gatherings for the defence of the national origins of *mujaddara*. Yet when he felt embarrassed by this and said something to the effect that the homeland was not a dish of rice and lentils, and when he took up arms for use outside, on the border, they said, "This is overstepping bounds." And when he used arms to defend himself inside, against the local agents of Zionism, they said, "This is interference in the affairs of our sects." What's to be done? What must he do to bring to an end the process of self-criticism except to apologise for an existence not yet born. You are not going there, and you don't belong here. Between these two negations was born this generation, defending for the spirit a bodily vessel to which they attached the fragrance of the country they did not know. They read what they read, and they saw what they saw, and did not believe defeat was inevitable. So they set out on the trail of that fragrance.

They shame me, without my knowing I feel shame in front of them. The enigmatic piles upon the enigmatic, that it may rub against itself and spark clarity. Conquerors can do

anything. They can aim sea, sky, and earth at me, but they cannot root the aroma of coffee out of me. I will make my coffee now. I will drink the coffee now. Right now, I will be satiated with the aroma of coffee so that I may at least distinguish myself from a sheep, that I may live one more day, or die, surrounded by the aroma of coffee.

Remove the pot from the low flame so that the hand may engage in its first creation of the day. Pay no heed to rockets, shells, or jets. This is what I want: to possess my dawn, I will broadcast the aroma of coffee. Don't look at the mountain spitting out masses of fire in the direction of your hand. But alas, you cannot forget that, over there, in Ashrafiyya, they are dancing in ecstasy. Yesterday's newspapers showed the carnation ladies throwing themselves on the invaders' tanks, their bosoms and thighs showing in summer nakedness and pleasure, ready to receive the saviours. Kiss me on the lips, Shlomo! O kiss me on the lips! What's your name, my love, so I can call you by your name, my darling? Shlomo, my heart has been passionately longing for you. Come in, Shlomo, come into my house, slowly or all at once so I can feel your strength. How I love strength, my darling! And, shell them, my love, slaughter them! Kill them with all the passion that's been waiting in us. May the blessed Lady of Lebanon protect you, Mr. Shlomo! Shell them, sweetheart, while I prepare a glass of arak and your lunch. In how many hours will you finish them off, my darling? How many hours will it take? But the operation has gone on too long, Shlomo, too long. Why are you so slow, my love? Two months! Why haven't you been advancing? And Shlomo, your body odours are offensive. Never mind! That's no doubt due to the heat and the sweat. I'll wash you in jasmine water, my love. But, why are you urinating in the street? Do you speak French? No? Where were you born? In Ta'ez? Where's this Ta'ez? In Yemen? No matter. No matter. I used to think you were different. It doesn't matter, Shlomo. Just shell them over there for my sake, over there!

Gently place one spoonful of the ground coffee, electrified with the aroma of cardamom, over the wrinkled

surface of the hot water, then stir slowly first with a clockwise motion, then up and down. Add the second spoonful and stir up and down, then counter-clockwise. Now add the third. Between spoonfuls, remove the pot from the flame and return it. For the final touch, dip the spoon in the melting powder, fill and raise it a little over the pot then let the powder drop back in. Repeat this motion several times until the water boils again and a small mass of blond coffee remains on the surface, rippling and ready to sink. Don't let it sink. Turn off the heat, and pay no heed to the rockets. Take the coffee to the narrow corridor and pour it lovingly and with a sure hand into a white demitasse: dark coloured cups spoil the freedom of the coffee. Observe the paths of the steam and the tent of rising aroma. Now light your first cigarette, made for this cup of coffee, the cigarette with the flavour of existence itself, unequalled by the taste of any other except that which follows love, as the woman smokes away the last sweat and the fading voice.

Now I am born. My veins are saturated with their stimulant drugs, having come into contact with the springs of their life, caffeine and nicotine, and the rite of their coming together as created by my hand. "How can a hand write?" I ask myself, "if it doesn't know how to be creative in making coffee?" How often have the heart specialists said, while smoking, "Don't smoke or drink coffee!" And how I've joked with them, "A donkey doesn't smoke or drink coffee. And it doesn't write."

I know my coffee, my mother's coffee, and the coffee of my friends, I recognise them from afar, and can tell the differences among them. No coffee is like another, and my defence of coffee is a defence of difference. There is no taste we might label 'the taste of coffee', because coffee is not a concept, or even a single substance. And it is not an absolute. Every person's coffee is special—so much so, I can tell taste and elegance of spirit by the flavour of one's coffee. There is coffee with the flavour of coriander. This means the woman's kitchen is badly organised. There is coffee with the flavour of carob juice. This means the host is stingy. There is coffee with the aroma of perfume. This means the lady is too concerned with

appearances. There is coffee that feels like moss in the mouth. This means its maker is an infantile leftist. There is coffee that tastes stale from too much turning over in the hot water. This means its maker is an extreme right-winger. And there is coffee with the overwhelming flavour of cardamom. This means the lady is newly rich.

No coffee is like another. Every house has its coffee, and every hand too, because no soul is like another. I recognise coffee from a distance: it moves in a straight line first, then zigzags winds, bends, sighs, and turns on flat rocky surfaces and slopes; it wraps itself around an oak, then releases itself and drops into a wadi, looks back and melts with longing to go up the mountain. It goes up the mountain as it disperses in the gossamer of the shepherd's pipe taking it back to its first home.

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