

Exile II :

A Dense Fog at the Bridge

Mahmoud Darwish

Translated by Mustafa Adam

My friend said ,
As an impenetrable fog engulfs the bridge:
"Is it likely to know the one thing by its opposite?"
I said: " at dawn, the whole matter is divulged."
He said: "and there is no time, more
Bewildering than dawn,
So, abandon your imagination to the river./
At the blueness of dawn;
In the jail yard or by the pine thicket,
A young man, of victory he dreamt,
Is to be executed.
At the blueness of dawn,
The whiff of fresh bread draws a map of life,
With a spring-like summer. /
At the blueness of dawn, dreamers awaken,
Agile, sauntering on the fluid of dreams of their own,
Merrily they say: Where are we led to by this dawn?
And dawn is but a bridge;
Where does it take us?
My friend said:" I don't want a place for my burial;
I need a place to live in,
And perhaps curse at will"
I answered back, while the place passes by

Between the two of us, like a mere nod:

"What is a place?

He retorted:

**"It is where the senses stumble on a foothold,
for the obvious "**

And sighed:

**"Oh you narrow street that used to take me
In the spacious evening, to her dwelling,
At the suburbs of tranquility;
Do you still remember my heart by heart?
And forget the smoke of the city?"**

I said to him: "don't bet on what is real.

**You won't get the thing as lively as its portrayal ,
Awaiting you...**

**Time tames even mountains,
Appearing higher, appearing lower
Than what you have known; ever.**

Where does the bridge take us?'

He said: "Was the road too long to the bridge?

**I answered: "And was the fog so dense
At the dawn's staircase?**

For how many years did you resemble me?

He rejoined: "for how many years were you I?"

I said: "I don't recollect"

**He said: "And I don't remember that I ever remembered,
Anything other than the road"**

And he chanted:

[at the bridge , but in another country,
The saxophone confirms the end of winter,
At the bridge the strangers admit
Their slip-ups, when no one joins the chanter]

I said to him: "for how long did we lure,
The dove: flutter all the way,
To the farthest lote-tree* (Sidrat al muntaha)
Under our netting, oh dove fly, oh fly."
And he said: as though I had forgotten my senses
And said: in a moment we will mimic our voices,
When we were just children, lisping
Our Ss and our Ls.
We dose off like a pair of doves
On a vineyard wearing the house.
In a few moments, life shall come out to us,
As ever blatantly obvious;
The mountains remain as they used to be,
Behind their imagined portrayal
In my mind' eye. The ancient sky
As clear in colour and in mind as ever,
If I was not mistaken, remains,
As it was in my mind's eye,
The luscious, pure and glorious air,
Remains as it ever used to be, awaiting ... remains.

I said: Oh friend, the long stretched road has drained
Me off my body. I no longer feel its clay.
I'm no longer alert to its own affairs.

Every time I walked, I fly.

My footsteps are my visions. As for my "I"

It kept waving from the distance:

“If this road of yours

Proved too long to bear,

I’d better finish off what I had to do with myths”

A divine hand has trained us

How to carve our own names,

On the memoirs of a willow tree.

We were neither perceptible nor indistinct,

Yet our way of crossing streets of time,

The one leading into the other begged the question:

Who are they?

Those who, dead- silent ,stopped, before

A date palm tree,

And prostrate, under its shadow?

Who are those whose laughter

Disturbs others?

At the bridge, in another country, he went on:

Strangers are recognized, by their blinking gaze at water,

Or better still,

As introverts who stutter, in their stroll.

The homebred walks directly to his unmistakable goal,

The stranger goes bewildered in a circle.

He said : Each bridge is an encounter.... at
The bridge I enter into my exterior other
And resign my heart to a buzzing bee or a swallow.
I said: not altogether right. At the bridge I walk
Into my interior other, and subjugate myself
To be wary of its own affair.
Each bridge is a schism;
You are neither you, as used to be just a moment earlier ,
Nor beings are sum of all memories.

Am I two in one?
Or a one slivered into two?
Oh bridge, oh bridge
Which of the two splinters am I?

We've walked on the bridge for twenty years
We've walked on the bridge for twenty meters
To and fro,
And I said: we've to keep on for just a little more
He said: Keep on for just a little more.
Together, but each on his own, we chanted, dreamingly:

I shall gently walk, my footsteps on the wind,
A bow, titillating the land of the violin
I shall listen to my pulse on the gravel
And the veins of the place.
I'll rest my head against the trunk of a carob tree;
My mother for sure; even if she in denial rejects me.
I'll dose off for a moment,

**And two tiny birds will lift me up high and high
Onto a star that dislodged me.**

**I shall wake up my own soul unto a bygone pain ,
A looming pain, like a prophecy
Out of memory's balcony
I will shout loud: I'm still alive and kicking,
For I could feel the arrow jabbing.**

**I'll turn to my right, towards jasmine,
Where I've learned my first carnal poem.
I'll turn to my left, towards the sea,
Where I've learned how to fish for foam.**

**I'll tell lies like an adolescent: this stain of spelt milk,
On my pants, is but the dregs of a molesting dream,
That pestered me ... and went away.
I'll deny that I persist to replicate
The lengthy siesta of the pagan Arab poet
Amidst the eyes of the Oryx.**

**I'll drink a slurp of water off the garden's tap,
And remain thirsty, like water's yearning for itself
I'll ask the first passer-by: did you come across
A person in the air of an apparition, like myself,
Chasing his yesteryears?
I'll bear my home on my shoulder ... and walk
As a sluggish turtle would walk.
With a broomstick, I'll shoot a falcon
And then ask: was it a sin?**

**I'll look into mythology and archeology
And all the (G)s for my olden name or identity
One of the goddesses of ancient Ka'nan
Would go for me,
Then, swearing by the lightening, she would say:
That is my orphaned son.
I'll commend a woman
Who had a test-tube - baby-girl
Begotten,
Yet bearing no resemblance whatever.
I'll mourn for a man who died
The moment he was awakened.
I'll re-write al-Ma'rri's line of verse:
My body is but a rag of clay,
Oh tailor of the universe,
Darn me!
I'll write down: Oh creator of death,
Leave me for a little while...
To mind my own business!

I'll wake up my own dead:
We're one and the same you sleepers,
Do you still dream, like we do, of the hereafter?
I'll put back together what the wind has scattered ,
Of Córdoba's love songs
And finish off the incomplete "Touq Al-Hamamah" ¹

I'll pick from the most intimate of my memories,**

**What befits metaphors: the smell of the crumpled
Bed linen; after copulation, resembles
The fragrance of grass after a rain.
I'll bear witness
How the rock's face will turn green.**

**I'll be stung by the roses of March,
Where I was born for the first time
A pomegranate blossom will bear me
To be reborn out of it for the last time!**

**I'll abandon the past when I give it back
Its own legacy: memory.
I'll move on to the future, when I
Hunt for a cunning skylark-
There, I'll come to know I was late
For my appointed time.**

**It'll dawn upon me there and then,
That, like a cloud,
My tomorrow has just passed me by
And left me behind.
I could foresee, it was going to rain in a moment,
And that I was, bare, walking on the bridge./**

**Are we treading now on the land of the fable?
Perhaps it will not live up to what we envisage
"It was neither butter nor honey" and
The sky is soaked in grey, and dawn is still**

**Bewilderingly blue. What time is it now? A bridge
That appears longer and yet short..... a dawn
That gets deceitfully prolonged .What time is it now?/**

**The land doses off behind tourist-attractive castles.
Time drifts away on a star, that has just
burnt up a sentimental knight . Oh you sleepers
On memories' needles! Can't you feel the rumbling
Of earthquakes, on the hove of a deer?**

**I said to him: were you hit by fever?
He went after his nightmare: Oh sleepers? Can't you hear
The hissing of doomsday in a sand pebble?
I said : Are you talking to me or to yourself?
He said : I reached the end of my nightmare...
I saw myself : an old man there ,
I saw my barking heart chasing my dog ...
I saw my bedroom, guffawing:
Are you still alive and here?
Come on; let me relieve you of your burden of air
And your wooden staff studded with Moroccan shells!**

**How, then, would I reenact the beginning,
Oh my friend; who am I? What would I be
Without a dream and the company of a woman?**

**I said; we shall revisit the morsel of life,
Life as it is, and retrain ourselves to love things
That we used to possess, and to love**

things which are not, in one way, ours, but will be

If we together spot from high up,

Like the falling of snow on a mountain top

Mountains may remain as they were

The fields as they were

And life is but so obvious and communal ,

So, is it time to enter unto the land of the fable

Oh friend?

He said: I do not need a place for my burial,

I want a place to live in, and perhaps curse at will...

He glared at the bridge: this is the gate

The gate of truth. We cannot enter

And we can not depart

The one thing is not known by its opposite

Passageways are blocked

And the sky is narrow and grey-faced

And the hand of dawn is moving up, higher and higher,

The pants of a female soldier...

We languished at the bridge for twenty years

For twenty years we ate but canned food

We wore the garbs of seasons,

We listened to new beautiful songs

Pouring out of soldiers' barracks

We wedded our kids to princesses in exile

Who changed our sons' names,

We abandoned our destinies in the hands of loss- mongers

In the cinema.

**We read our footsteps written on the sand,
We were neither perceptible nor indistinct,
Like the image of a yawning dawn/**

**I said: does your wound still gashes, my friend?
He said: I feel nothing
For my idea has turned my body into a note pad of proves.
Nothing, other than a declared death at the bridge
Proves that I am what I am,
I stare at a rose in the distance
And the embers gutter
I stare at my hometown, behind the distance,
And the grave becomes wider.**

**I said: slow down and don't die right here;
Life at the bridge is manageable . And the metaphoric
Is vast in scope
Here is but a limbo between life and the hereafter
Between an exile and a neighboring country ...
He said to me as vultures hovered overhead:
Take my name for a companion
And chat about me
And live until the bridge takes you back
Alive tomorrow
Do not say: he lived in the shadows of life in vain!
But say: he looked on himself from high above
And saw it drabbed in trees, and was content
With a greeting nod/**

**“If this road of yours
Proved too long to bear,
I’d better finish off what I have to do with myths”**

**I was alone at the bridge
That day,
After Christ went into sanctuary
At a mountainous suburb of Jericho..
And before doomsday.
I press on, yet can neither go in nor walk out...
Like a sunflower, I turn around.
I wake up to the voice of the night's keeper
Singing to her lover:
Do not pledge a thing
And do not give me, for a present,
A rose from Jericho!**

* The farthest lote-tree: Sidrat al muntaha

**Mahmoud Darwish from his anthology of poetry “Like Almond
Flowers or Further”**

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