
IN THE ENDLESS WAR

NASSER RABAH

Put your hearts under the beds—exhausted neglected shoes
not to be covered by the dust of war:

“and you shall not know.”

Put your hearts on the case of an old and broken clock,
so the raid won't shake them:

“and you shall not be sad.”

In war the heart expands, becoming a boat for the children, an hour of
clarity, and a sky for writing.

In war the heart chokes, words flee, and along its edge birds melt into
red dew.

It flutters on a tall post—a gasp called the homeland.

In war you leave your heart aside and you salvage a bundle of paper:
your old picture at the school gate, the deed of your demolished home,
your son's birth certificate.

Your heart doesn't matter now. The beloved will await war's end to
ask: did you remember me?

In war no one believes your grief-stricken heart. The rescuers scale
your arms to hold up the roof of sobbing, the planes land their
shadows around you, and your soul flies out like a flock of glass.

You are the time and nothing aims a piece of shrapnel at a soul but
you. Maybe you long to throw your heart at your children like a ball.
Maybe you long to open the window without the shot of a stray
woman. It's alright, it's war, another one and it will pass.

In war time commits suicide.
The day goes by before it's your turn for the bathroom. The hour is that space between a building embraced by a missile and another one opening its chest for the last person gasping on a street about to exit history instantaneously. As for the minute, no minutes in war, time is rather measured by martyrs: a hundred and a thousand. In war we sit, no legs to carry us and run. In war a missile follows you like a loyal dog and a boring neighbor exchanging greetings and bad jokes. You etch a tattoo shaped like home into memory. It was a beautiful home before the arrival of the missile. In war the children are embarrassed by their tantrums, they grow before us as if we're meeting old neighbors. How are you, son? I'm still running father, I'm still running, alone in the madness race. In war you brought me into the experience. You're the one who dragged the fairytale's ghouls to my door. You're the one who with premeditation forgot the barbecue on, and I'm screaming: it's my heart. You did not hear and you did not forgive. Of love, you left nothing; of hate, you left nothing for me to finish the poem. Then you, like a pale cloud of smoke, deceived me into safety. In war life envies you for life. Gangrene homes, windows of hysteria, and the eczema of streets, everything in the horrifying scene resents that you could see it all and not cry. In war you're not made of flesh and bones, you're someone else in the same clothes, bloodied, dirty, and lying—testifying that you're not dead yet.

Translated from the Arabic by the Brooklyn Translation Collective:
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BACKGROUND MUSIC FOR LIFE

NASSER RABAH

1.

May is knocking on doors, knocking on doors,
thick boredom rolls off the roofs,
and the plants are scabby cats scratching their backs at the wall,
pregnant windows fade with words in labor—my desire withers.
Only the May sun comes and goes,
nobody carries a forgotten oasis under their arm in the desert of my
heart.

Nobody carries an umbrella and accompanies a jasmine about to pass,
nobody asks why the cactus keeps silent.

May still knocks on the doors and no one cares.

The always heaping hall next to the good years died without anyone
noticing.

The patents forgotten in the pages of the book of doubt, which we
read only in our sleep,

fell from neglect,

the dead who yell throughout my dispute with life leave me alone,

the trees the neighbors climbed fishing for bad news, rained birds in
the form of other neighbors,

ghost houses extend their flames to the passersby of my memory
at noon, and feel the contentment of mirth,

nothing to cry over then, nothing merits joy.

Maybe if we were to break just one traffic sign,

just one for the sake of this listless poetry,
then a policeman would take us for a ride in a hearse just to kill time.

2.

Maybe death will be a piece of cake after a life like this; and there you are bored as the seasons, a void extending the desert of your bed, and underneath your pillow a lazy monster sleeps:

The book of your complete works.

That's why you're like Kafka, and you envy the dead. Throw the story out the window, and keep the narrator's details in your pocket: shred of clothes, dust of shoes, and blood of battle.

The story is the wood of the violin, and language is the funeral music of life. Here I am writing about death while peeling onions, and about sex while restoring the garden. What, oh what will become of me when I write poetry and look at a pretty face.

3.

A brown shoe with ornaments in front and a short neck loiters about in an abandoned home; between the bedrooms and the china cabinet, between the orderly beds and the chairs at the big table, it stretches its neck a little and walks, doesn't lose hope, doesn't feel lonely, doesn't complain, and walks an hour a day and no more just like the doctor ordered—advice no one listens to, except for the brown shoe with ornaments in front that squeaks softly every day while my neighbors nap.

4.

As the story goes, the quinine tree became a canoe when it desired the sea, and I, if I don't stop wanting you, perhaps I'll turn into a quinine tree. Alright then, there's room on the road for another tree as long as you'll pass by me every morning as it was before the story robbed me from you.

5.

I long for a musical instrument that plays a music other than those letters, without a voice that breaks like eggshells, without the air of students failing through memory. A musical instrument that whets its listeners leaving them drowned by the score. An instrument that greets me first, I line my nerves up in front of it all evening, then toss it out on the dawn screen, aghast, like an empty plate. A violin made out of the wood of silence, a reed pipe from the silk of tears, a woman that flows on me like rain on a windowpane.

6.

The waiter clears my table, and doesn't leave.
I said: I want one friend to break the silence—and not fly—I want a
 way out
for the aged moan in my pocket, and cigarettes.
The waiter clears my table, and doesn't leave.
I would like air to sit with and a country without remembrances, and
 words flowing out
my heart like a long long troop of ants.
The waiter clears my table, and doesn't leave.
I want my solitude complete, my choking complete, I tear it slowly so
 pictures of
the absent laugh.
The waiter sits with me, and death clears the table and doesn't leave.

7.

Why do the details of things cough at night?
My drowning ship awakes; the sea hurls it on the shores of my soul,
the names of the dead repeat like a national anthem.
I try not to be embarrassed if I'd hear them mentioning my name.
How do I now count my stars with the fingers of my soul stuck
in the book of history like an anchor?
No life buoy, no boat, and my country is being stolen by the high tide,
like my bed is being stolen by waking dreams.

Why do the details of things cough at night?
The rain of doubt climbing the neighbors' window curses at me, and I
 curse back—
the clock is still,
and I am charged with tilling the night's water,
while behind me the cough syrup is dripping.

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