

**Gayath ALMADHOUN**

Prose and poetry

**Évian**

Last year, to mention just one example, a boat carrying refugees died of a heart attack. When the first rescue ship arrived, the Mediterranean Sea had drowned. They found the water gasping for breath, the waves soaked through and the European Union trying to hang on to a piece of wreckage from the boat in order to survive. They didn't find the children.

Preliminary results of the investigation clearly indicated that satellite images showed the sunken boat didn't know how to swim.

On the eight o'clock news that evening, as the waters of the Mediterranean Sea flowed gently from the television on to the parquet floors of sitting rooms, upsetting happy families in safe countries and causing a minor disturbance to the sexual performance of the silent majority in Central and Northern Europe, suddenly, like mushrooms popping up in the woods, a middle class European woman asked why they'd come by sea and not by air after getting visas. Overwhelmed by this white innocence, the television committed suicide.

Commenting on the tragic incident by phone, the integration officer from the Department of Immigration said what shall we do now? The new load of refugees who were going to clean up European pensioners' shit have all died.

On the eight o'clock news that evening, a white female broadcaster who'd never had children, citing a Middle East specialist who'd never visited the Middle East, said that the children might have disappeared for postmodern reasons when they were playing hide and seek.

Jesus, son of Mary, was the sole survivor. They found him walking on the water.

**Footnote 1:**

They'll take our jobs and our houses, they'll seduce our women, they'll seize the resources we've allocated to the poor, they'll be infiltrated by criminals and spies, they'll pour in and destabilise society and lead to its breakup. They look bad, they carry diseases, their standards are different, their culture is different, their morals are strange, they'll never be able to integrate.

**Footnote 2:**

All the racist words in footnote 1 don't refer to the current refugee crisis, as they call it, meaning Syrian refugees these days. They were in fact widely used by the Western media to describe Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria who attempted to flee from the Nazis in the period before the Second World War.

**Footnote 3:**

In 1938, 32 countries met at the Évian Conference to discuss the crisis of Jewish refugees coming from Germany and Austria. The United States refused to increase its annual quota of refugees even before the start of the meeting. Britain made clear that the United Kingdom

was not a country of immigration. All countries present refused to take them in. On 13 July, the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* wrote triumphantly: 'Nobody wants them.' (I have the feeling that the writer of the article was Adolf Hitler in person.) Four months after the conference, the Nazis carried out the Kristallnacht pogrom, then gradually began to solve the Jewish problem in their own special way, that led, as we know, to the Final Solution.

**The Capital**

- What's the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo?
- Antwerp

In this city that is nourished on diamonds  
barbed wire grows in poets' verses  
appointments die on the calendar  
my hands stop touching your lips  
policemen no longer laugh  
a taxi stops when its driver is killed by a bullet from a sniper in Damascus  
in front of Antwerp Central Station  
terror stops on PlayStation  
and I take myself under my arm and stop stopping  
I think of the distance between my lips and your skin  
as if I wasn't born in Yarmouk camp for Palestinian refugees in Damascus in 1979  
as if you weren't born in the Milky Way

In this city where they clean blood off diamonds with the same care as  
doctors cleaning blood from the wound of an injured man whose life they've saved  
I pass lightly as a tank over asphalt  
carrying my verses like a street vendor  
every time I go towards the sea I am eaten up by the desert emerging from the suitcases of  
emigrants  
and from my passport recognised by nobody but you  
I am the writer of poems that talk of death as if they're talking of hope  
and of war as if God exists  
since my friends died I've become a lone wolf  
cornering joy and trampling on it as if it were a harmful insect  
my friends who were tortured to death sit next to me in their most elegant clothes as if we  
were at a reception  
and my mother searches for me down the phone lines  
to make sure that I'm still pissing on this planet

I've cleaned my room of any trace of death  
so you don't feel when I invite you for a glass of wine  
that despite the fact I'm in Stockholm  
I'm still in Damascus

In this city nourished on blood diamonds  
I remember a blood wedding  
I remember oblivion  
I stand in the middle of a black and black group photo of poets  
who have gone from here  
the notes you have left in the margins of my poems make me sad  
my heart becomes a wooden scarecrow to chase away Hitchcock's birds  
my innocent heart that cannot bear it  
becomes as harsh as honest words  
and the street becomes a notebook  
you are the only one who can change the street into a notebook  
innocently you take my hands so we can cut off the head of the year

then the World Bank collapses  
the middle class stands against the emigrants  
a security man armed with history stands to mark out a barrier between the suburbs and  
happiness  
skin colour stands like a checkpoint between us  
between the harbour that imports freedom  
and the street extending from the graveyard to the bedroom  
the war has not wearied me  
rather the poems that talk of the war  
the cold cities have not wearied me  
but these poems that talk of cold cities have eaten my fingers  
and I cannot dance without my fingers  
I cannot orient to the Orient without them  
a heart attack kills the wall clock  
and my friends bear false witness and say that life is wonderful  
this city is collapsing in on itself like a black hole  
I mean a green hole  
and the street runs scared  
this is the first time I've seen a street running in the street  
this is the last time I've seen a house leaning on a sad woman's laughter left behind in the  
kitchen  
in order to stay upright  
and on the smell of spices scattered by the shell in order to stay alive  
the neighbours fled without shutting the windows open on the massacre  
without shutting the cookery book open on page 73  
the birds on the nearby tree moved into the house  
they lived in the half-open kitchen cupboard  
a 120mm mortar shell manufactured in the Soviet Union in the year 1987  
to fight imperialism  
would kill them  
the canary died of starvation in the cage  
that's war  
canaries die of starvation in their cages when their jailers vanish  
their jailers who left home and never came back  
the home that collapsed on the poems of poets whose country betrayed them  
their country used to make them weep and now they weep for their country  
see how they recount their grief in front of strangers  
with their poems they kill time  
with their hands they ring bells  
but nobody has time to hear the echo except a few of those killed in the war  
and the barmaid starts a discussion with me about how Syrians have the right to die  
properly with the body whole  
in one piece  
and about loneliness  
about how people have the right to find somebody to sleep next to them in the evening  
and to leave them asleep when they go to work in the morning  
without asking them to move on  
fine  
let's take this sack of stones off our back  
and shout gently via the keyboard  
we the undersigned on the asphalt

announce that we are tired  
and that regardless of our different backgrounds  
we suffer from the same shit  
I too like you live alone in a flat with three windows  
two look out onto Antwerp  
but the third is my computer screen looking out onto Damascus  
- have you visited Damascus?  
- no  
- ok I'll try to describe it to you: the temperature in summer is 37°  
it's the city where the summer temperature corresponds to a person's body temperature  
- have you visited Antwerp?  
- no  
- ok I'll try to describe it to you: it's the blood diamond sparkling in the white light of shop  
windows  
its shine reflecting a black man who found it in Kinshasa then was himself found murdered  
by a bullet from his friend's gun  
in order that a woman from Montreal could wear a ring with a stone polished in Tel Aviv  
given to her by her husband born in Buenos Aires  
when they were on a trip to the Arizona desert  
so that she would forgive him for cheating on her with her South African friend  
when he was laundering his money in Dubai  
- do you know how the desert and money laundering differ and how they are similar?  
- no  
- the difference is that the desert needs water and money laundering doesn't  
- and the similarity?  
- the similarity is that money laundering is dry, dry as the desert in Arizona  
ok there's no denying that I float in you like a butterfly in magma  
and feed you my words so you grow slowly like the area of destruction that came into being  
when your sorrow collided with my life  
your presence in my life had a negative effect on postmodern poetry in the northern half of  
the globe  
and I have to confess to you that the shelf life of many of my poems expired with the sudden  
appearance in them of your metaphors  
and that you had a share in making holes in the tank where they store the Arabic language  
through your systematic campaigns to add marginal notes to my texts  
and that with premeditation and close observation you undertook to revive me  
and this is an offence punishable under the poets' constitution  
and that your details scattered around my house provoke a desire in me to throw the  
television set out of the window  
and to sit watching you instead when you are killing time  
I confess too that there are many dubious things that have begun to happen since I smelt  
the smell of your breasts  
for example:  
I've broken several wine glasses in the period since you moved in with me  
most of them committed suicide by jumping out of my hand as I tried to wash away the  
traces of your lipstick  
I stole some time in order to make my day last 25 hours  
I assumed a false expression to make myself look happy  
I loved you  
I said in a press interview after I met you that I had only lied twice in my life  
and that was the third time I'd lied

in spite of the whole happy tragedy that my life has been  
you refused to fire the mercy bullet when I begged you to  
and granted me a new life  
you accuse me of a lack of objectivity in my poems, fine, I've never been objective in my life  
I've always been biased and I have double standards  
I have been biased in favour of blacks against racism, in favour of the resistance against the  
occupiers, of militias against armies. I have taken the side of the Red Indians against the  
white men, the Jews against the Nazis, the Palestinians against the Israelis, the immigrants  
against the neo-Nazis, gipsies against borders, original inhabitants against colonialists,  
science against religion, the present against the past, feminism against patriarchy, women  
against men, your side against other women, Kafka's side against routine, poetry's side  
against physics  
physics  
God damn physics  
why do the immigrants drown then after they've breathed their last they float on the  
surface of the water?  
why doesn't the opposite happen?  
why don't people float when they're alive and drown when they're dead?

fine  
let's call things by their names  
books are the graveyards of poems  
houses are concrete tents  
dogs are wolves that have accepted humiliation  
prayer rugs remind me of flying carpets  
my room has fallen in love with your green shoes  
I drown in you as Syrians drown in the sea  
oh God  
look where the war has taken us  
even in my worst nightmares it never occurred to me  
that one day  
I would say in a poem  
I drown in you as Syrians drown in the sea

\*\*\*\*

every shell that falls on Damascus is just a page torn out of Descartes' book

when we were born  
life was coloured  
and photos were black and white  
now photos are coloured  
and life is black and white

### The Details

*Do you know why people die when they are pierced by a bullet?  
Because 70% of the human body is made up of water  
Just as if you made a hole in a water tank.*

*Was it a random clash dancing at the head of the alley when I passed  
Or was there a sniper watching me and counting my final steps?*

*Was it a stray bullet  
Or was I a stray man even though I'm a third of a century old?*

*Is it friendly fire?  
How can it be  
When I've never made friends with fire in my life?*

*Do you think I got in the way of the bullet  
Or it got in my way?  
So how am I supposed to know when it's passing and which way it will go?*

*Is an encounter with a bullet considered a crash in the conventional sense  
Like what happens between two cars?  
Will my body and my hard bones smash its ribs too  
And cause its death?  
Or will it survive?*

*Did it try to avoid me?  
Was my body soft?  
And did this little thing as small as a mulberry feel female in my maleness?*

*The sniper aimed at me without bothering to find out that I'm allergic to snipers' bullets  
And it's an allergy of a most serious kind, and can be fatal.*

*The sniper didn't ask my permission before he fired, an obvious example of the lack of civility  
that has become all too common these days.*

---

I was exploring the difference between revolution and war when a bullet passed through my body, and extinguished a torch lit by a primary school teacher from Syria acting in cooperation with a Palestinian refugee who had paid with his land to solve anti-Semitism in Europe and been forced to emigrate to a place where he met a woman who was like memories.

It was a wonderful feeling, like eating an ice cream in winter, or having unprotected sex with a woman you don't know in a city you don't know under the influence of cocaine, or...

A passerby tells me half of what he wants to tell me so I believe him then we stab each other like two lovers, a woman beckons to me to follow her so I do and we have a child who looks like betrayal, a sniper kills me so I die, the sky falls on the passersby so the tourists flee, the sky falls on the passersby and my heart doesn't flee, the sky falls upwards so a poet commits collective suicide in his room even though he was alone that evening.

That evening oblivion attacked me unawares, so I bought the memory of a soldier who hadn't returned from war, and when I noticed the flaw in the time, I couldn't find a place of exile appropriate to my wound so I decided not to die again.

The city is older than the memories, the curse is fenced in by melancholy, time is late for its appointments, walls enclose time with monotony, death looks like my face, the poet leans on a woman in his poem, the general marries my wife, the city vomits its history and I swallow the streets and the crowd swallows me, I, who distribute my blood to strangers, and share a bottle of wine with my solitude, beg you, send my body by express mail, distribute my fingers equally between my friends.

This city is bigger than a poet's heart and smaller than his poem, but it is big enough for the dead to commit suicide without troubling anyone, for traffic lights to bloom in the suburbs, for a policeman to become part of the solution and the streets a mere background to truth.

That evening, when my heart stumbled, a woman from Damascus took hold of me and taught me the alphabet of her desire, I was lost between God whom the shaykh planted in my heart and God whom I touched in her bed,  
that evening,  
my mother was the only one who knew I would never return,  
my mother was the only one who knew,  
my mother was the only,  
my mother.

I sold my white days on the black market, and bought a house overlooking the war, and the view was so wonderful that I could not resist its temptation, so my poem deviated from the shaykh's teachings, and my friends accused me of cutting myself off, I put kohl on my eyes and became more Arab, and drank camel's milk in a dream and woke up as a poet, I was watching the war like lepers watch people's eyes, and had arrived at frightening truths about poetry and the white man, about the season of migration to Europe, and about cities that receive tourists in peacetime and mujahidin in wartime, about women who suffer too much in peacetime, and become fuel for the war in wartime.

In a reconstructed city like Berlin lies a secret that everyone knows, which is that the...  
No, I will not repeat what is known, but I will tell you something you don't know: the problem with war is not those who die, but those who remain alive after the war.

It was the most beautiful war I've been in in my life, full of metaphors and poetic images, I remember how I used to sweat adrenalin and piss black smoke, how I used to eat my flesh and drink screams, death with his scrawny body leaned on the destruction committed by his poem, and wiped his knife clean of my salt, and the city rubbed my shoes with her evening and the street smiled and the city counted the fingers of my sorrow and dropped them on the road leading to her, death weeps and the city remembers the features of her killer and sends me a stabbing by post, threatening me with happiness, and hangs my heart out on her washing line strung between two memories, and oblivion pulls me towards myself, deeply towards myself, deeply, so my language falls on morning, and balconies fall on songs, headscarves on kisses, back streets on women's bodies, the details of alleyways on history, the city falls on the cemeteries, dreams fall on the prisons, the poor on joy, and I fall on memory.

When I became a member of the Union of the Dead, my dreams improved and I began to practise yawning freely, and despite the drums of war singing close to my bloated body I had plenty of time to befriend a stray dog, who chose not to eat from my corpse despite his hunger, and was content to sleep by my feet.

A number of people tried to pull me out of the way, but the sniper argued with his gun so they changed their minds, he was an honourable sniper, worked honestly, and didn't waste time or people.

That little hole,  
Remaining after the bullet had passed through,  
Emptied me of my contents,  
Everything flowed out gently,  
Memories,  
Names of friends,  
Vitamin C,  
Wedding songs,  
The Arabic dictionary,  
The temperature of 37 degrees,  
Uric acid,  
The poems of Abu Nuwas,  
And my blood.

The moment the soul begins to escape through the little gate the bullet has opened, things become clearer, the theory of relativity turns into something self-evident, mathematical equations that used to be vague become a simple matter, the names of classmates we've forgotten come back to us, life is suddenly illuminated in perfect detail, the childhood bedroom, mother's milk, the first trembling orgasm, the streets of the camp, the portrait of Yasser Arafat, the smell of coffee with cardamom inside the house, the sound of the morning call to prayer, Maradona in Mexico in 1986, and you.

Just as if you are eating your beloved's fingers, or suckling from an electric cable, or being inoculated against shrapnel, just as if you are a memory thief, come, let's give up poetry, exchange the songs of summer for gauze dressings and harvest poems for surgical thread, leave your kitchen and the children's bedroom and follow me so that we can drink tea behind the sandbags, the massacre has room for everyone, put your dreams in the shed and give the plants on the balcony plenty of water, for the the discussion with iron may go on for a while, leave behind Rumi, Averroes and Hegel, and bring along Machiavelli and Huntington and Fukuyama, for we need them now, leave behind your laughter, your blue shirt and warm bed, and bring your teeth and nails and hunting knife, and come.

Throw away the Renaissance and bring on the inquisition,  
Throw away European civilization and bring on the Kristallnacht,  
Throw away socialism and bring on Joseph Stalin,  
Throw away Rimbaud's poems and bring on the slave trade,  
Throw away Michel Foucault and bring on the Aids virus,  
Throw away Heidegger's philosophy and bring on the purity of the Aryan race,  
Throw away Hemingway's sun that also rises and bring on the bullet in the head,  
Throw away Van Gogh's starry sky and bring on the severed ear,  
Throw away Picasso's Guernica and bring on the real Guernica with its smell of fresh blood,  
We need these things now, we need them to begin the celebration.

**How I became...**

Her grief fell from the balcony and broke into pieces, so she needed a new grief. When I went with her to the market the prices were unreal, so I advised her to buy a used grief. We found one in excellent condition although it was a bit big. As the vendor told us, it belonged to a young poet who had killed himself the previous summer. She liked this grief so we decided to take it. We argued with the vendor over the price and he said he'd give us an angst dating from the sixties as a free gift if we bought the grief. We agreed, and I was happy with this unexpected angst. She sensed this and said 'It's yours'. I took it and put it in my bag and we went off. In the evening I remembered it and took it out of the bag and examined it closely. It was high quality and in excellent condition despite half a century of use. The vendor must have been unaware of its value otherwise he wouldn't have given it to us in exchange for buying a young poet's low quality grief. The thing that pleased me most about it was that it was existentialist angst, meticulously crafted and containing details of extraordinary subtlety and beauty. It must have belonged to an intellectual with encyclopedic knowledge or a former prisoner. I began to use it and insomnia became my constant companion. I became an enthusiastic supporter of peace negotiations and stopped visiting relatives. There were increasing numbers of memoirs in my bookshelves and I no longer voiced my opinion, except on rare occasions. Human beings became more precious to me than nations and I began to feel a general ennui, but what I noticed most was that I had become a poet.

### Massacre

Massacre is a dead metaphor that is eating my friends, eating them without salt. They were poets and have become Reporters With Borders; they were already tired and now they're even more tired. *'They cross the bridge at daybreak fleet of foot'*<sup>1</sup> and die with no phone coverage. I see them through night vision goggles and follow the heat of their bodies in the darkness; there they are, fleeing from it even as they run towards it, surrendering to this huge massacre. Massacre is their true mother, while genocide is no more than a classical poem written by intellectual pensioned-off generals. Genocide isn't appropriate for my friends, as it's an organised collective action and organised collective actions remind them of the Left that let them down.

Massacre wakes up early, bathes my friends in cold water and blood, washes their underclothes and makes them bread and tea, then teaches them a little about the hunt. Massacre is more compassionate to my friends than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Massacre opened the door to them when other doors were closed, and called them by their names when news reports were looking for numbers. Massacre is the only one to grant them asylum regardless of their backgrounds; their economic circumstances don't bother Massacre, nor does Massacre care whether they are intellectuals or poets, Massacre looks at things from a neutral angle; Massacre has the same dead features as them, the same names as their widowed wives, passes like them through the countryside and the suburbs and appears suddenly like them in breaking news. Massacre resembles my friends, but always arrives before them in faraway villages and children's schools.

Massacre is a dead metaphor that comes out of the television and eats my friends without a single pinch of salt.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote from 'The Bridge' (*al-Jisr*), a poem by Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi.

### **If We Were In a Virtual World**

*Even though the window is virtual, the dead are real.  
Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry*

#### **1 - The war is over.**

The war is over. But the bombs are still falling inside my head.

#### **If we were in a virtual world**

**I would have cleaned the window overlooking your house with an electronic newspaper  
And the plastic rose that I put on my brother's grave would have grown.**

The war is over, and the friends who went to the market to buy a fresh death were killed on the way.

#### **If we were in a virtual world**

**I would have recycled my friends  
For I need second-hand friends.**

The war is over, and the dead have returned to their families safe and sound, the martyrs have returned to their mothers in one piece, mothers have returned to their houses, houses, streets, mosques, eyes, legs have returned to their owners, fingers have returned to hands, rings to fingers, schools to children, washing lines to balconies, lovers to rooftops, my brother has returned to my mother, and I have returned to Damascus.

#### **If we were in a virtual world**

**I would have forgotten to remember the war  
And remembered to forget it, as the dead forget the general's features  
And the martyrs remember the way home.**

The war is over, and all those I knew are dead, or war criminals, or dead war criminals.

#### **If we were in a virtual world**

**I would have turned off the war like you turn off the television  
But we were born into a bitch of a world  
And when people are born into a bitch of a world  
Time changes into a typewriter  
And the dead become poems.**

#### **Comedy footnote:**

The genius of Dante lies in his description of Limbo, think about it a little, you'll realise immediately that we're living in the first circle of hell.

(Cut)

\* \* \*

## 2 - War

I tried to translate the war from a Semitic language to an Indo-European language for you, and you were hit by shrapnel. I tried to come to your aid and we were besieged by news bulletins. The Security Council tried to send us smart weapons, and security men of average intelligence confiscated them, we insulted the Red Cross and the Vatican objected, we ate the flesh of dogs whose owners had been killed and the environmentalists objected, we were saved from drowning and the European Right objected.

How can I describe to you how much this world resembles the beating of skinny hands on the thick walls of gas chambers in detention camps, without giving you PTSD? How can I explain the difference between house slaves and field slaves, without making you confuse Syria with surrealism? How can I say in the same poem my friends were tortured to death and you are more beautiful than New York, without Lorca laughing in his grave, or poetry being separated from reality?

### Tragedy footnote:

The problem with this world is not that a quarter of its inhabitants go to psychiatric clinics, the problem is that the rest don't go.

(Cut)

\* \* \*

## 3 - Chess

When the wind passed by, it couldn't find the tree and the axe was looking at me, while I was lost in translation, calm as a ceasefire, stuck in a blue planet in a remote suburb of the Milky Way. I saw a gazelle devouring a wolf, blood dripping from her teeth, I saw barren women suckling foetuses that were born dead, I saw electronic flies emerging from Twitter and hovering over my friends' corpses, I saw a country travelling in a fishing boat, and a man eating his dead brother's flesh, not metaphorically as in the Quran, but eating the flesh of his brother killed in a bombing raid, so as not to starve to death. The wind passed and didn't find the tree, or the city, or the country. The dogs didn't howl, the caravan didn't move on. My wife the widow looks at me, and the war is clean like a game of chess. Barrels of oil rise in price and barrel bombs of TNT fall on cities, planes lick school textbooks and suck children's fingers, while I am silent like a European citizen who enjoys the privileges of the first world and asks with the innocence of a domesticated wolf, which is harsher: the Swedish winter or the Arab spring?

### Absurd footnote:

The *New York Times* says milk is white, Paul Celan says milk is black, my mother says there is no milk!

(Cut)

\* \* \*

**4 - A metaphor from a virtual world**

Dante was right. This comedy that we are living is divine, or to be fair, let's say that it's at least 97% divine, otherwise how do you explain the fact that everything around us resembles a metaphor from a virtual world!

Flowers have sex via bees!

Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian!

We are happy because the USA hasn't dropped the atomic bomb on Tokyo!

A dictator's supporters demonstrate to demand the banning of demonstrations!

I love you!

God sells lands full of milk and honey!

Finland is the happiest country in the world according to the World Happiness Report!

The cross you wear round your neck is no more than a Roman instrument of torture!

**Tragicomedy footnote:**

Since everybody is going to die in the end, the death rate in Syria and Sweden is the same.

(Cut)

\* \* \*

*Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham*