

Mohamad Nassereddine

Love starts from the Hand

The day before I scheduled this panel with Nataša, due to the 8-hours' time difference between Iowa City and Beirut, I woke up to find 12 missed calls from Mahdi, a remarkable 14-year-old boy, followed by a WhatsApp Message:

Dad, we have a school assignment on researching love's meaning. I found this scientific definition on a website: 'According to a team of scientists led by Dr. Helen Fisher at Rutgers, romantic love can be broken down into three categories: lust, attraction, and attachment. Each category is characterized by its own set of hormones stemming from the brain.' It's testosterone and estrogen for lust, dopamine and norepinephrine for attraction, oxytocin and vasopressin for attachment. Dad, since you are involved in that strange thing called Medical Physics, could you explain to me these strange names looking like the names of those politicians involved in the war between Russia and Ukraine?

Mahdi's questions are always taking me far back, to my childhood in my village Sojod, where I grew up playing in the sand and jumping on rocks in the river. When my teacher Ilham asked us to write a small paragraph about love, I asked my own dad for help. He sent me to our extensive library to find the book *Tawk Al Hamama (The Ring of the Dove, 1244)*, a book by Ibn Hazm:

For my part I consider love as a conjunction between scattered parts of souls that have become divided in this physical universe, a union effected within the substance of their original sublime element. Love has certain signs, which the intelligent man quickly detects, and the shrewd man readily recognizes. Of these the first is the brooding gaze: the eye is the wide gateway of the soul, the scrutinizer of its secrets, conveying its most private thoughts, and giving expression to its deepest-hid feelings (*Translated from Arabic by A. J. Arberry's, 1951*).

I liked Ibn Hazm's definition a lot. Still, it was too complicated and intellectual for a young boy looking to see the world as simple as the clouds traveling from the mountain of Sojod in south Lebanon to the Mediterranean and for words closer to the small and graceful frogs on the rocks of the river and singing *wak wak wak*. I closed *Tawk al Hamama* and suddenly remembered a paragraph I read in a hidden notebook in which my mother kept her "KGB secrets":

She was a communist, he was praying five times a day, she was obsessed by mountains and flowers, he was obsessed by theaters and café, she has photographs with a Kalashnikov in her arms, he has photographs with a pen and an elegant notebook, she was emotional like a ferocious mare, he was wise like the fox in *Le Petit Prince*, she was an Aries, he was a Capricorn, they didn't know each other when they broke the glass bottle during 'truth or dare' and his friend brought him to the little clinic where she worked as a nurse who sutured his wounded hand. Love starts from the hand. It is a poet's hand; it isn't harsh like those of peasants and fighters. His hand is vulnerable like a butterfly, like a flower without thorns.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 14, 2022: Does Anyone Write About Love Anymore?
Cherie Jones (Barbados), Mohamed Nassereddine (Lebanon), Edson Incopté (Guinea-Bissau),
Mashiul Alam (Bangladesh), Carey Baraka (Kenya)

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I wrote this story for teacher Elham and didn't expect the highest grade, but this sensual definition of love accompanied me all my life. The flower and thorns resonated with one of my poems

You can't describe a flower without betraying your unspoken secrets, abstraction is the hardest thing for you. What if the flower wanted to speak to you by its own glossary? The poet was quiet for a long time and thought over all his words. Nothing his lips could say can resist the metaphor a flower spreads through its garden. Land is jail of the poet and kingdom of the flower. Can you smooth yourself like a needle and penetrate the gaps that flowers arrange among themselves? Can you stand at the edge of the center? Could you describe the flower through her language, alone? Under the stars, you will become the sole spectator when thorns arise from its stem, you will close your eyes for one glimpse and you will reopen them to recognize the miracle in front of you... a complete flower. The miracle takes you, and suddenly someone is dozing at the doors of autumn, removing you from the notebook by his thumb or eraser. But what's the point if after today the land grabs us by our legs or hands us to the wind? What's the point if our ten fingers agree or disagree when we join them? What's the point if purple and silver debate over daybreak and evening? The point is this flower alone. Put it tenderly on the breast of your beloved.

The butterfly did so in another poem

I got close to the most beautiful poet at the party and slipped a paper in her coat: What if a male butterfly is dating you tomorrow? Do you change your coat? She rolls her eyes: if men disappear...then butterflies. What coat could I choose? What about my perfume? This fantasy is worthless to me. But still, I imagined her hurrying out of the party and standing in front of her mirror, choosing the most transparent dress -- one that makes her light, ready to fly like pollen to her date. I forget about the party and the butterflies, even though the most beautiful poet left for Amsterdam with a secondhand poet. Standing on the threshold of my house, something lands on me. I'm a butterfly who's found her date. This feminine creature, the transparent and light dress calls while standing on my mirror, admiring the pollen, more beautiful than the one in Amsterdam (*Translated from Arabic by Jean Paul Cacioppo*).

I wanted to send those two poems to Mahdi, but he would rather spend hours watching Lionel Messi's YouTube videos than listening to his father's boring poems for two minutes. I also remember how hard he laughed when I once told him that the great composer Rossini said he would leave any of his performances for a fancy feast.

A WhatsApp message appeared suddenly on my phone screen:

Dad, I don't give a damn about the meaning of the hormones! I found the definition ;-). She is Zeina, he is Mahdi, she is Saudi-Arabian, he is Lebanese, she is black, he is blond, she likes Real Madrid, he likes FC. Barcelona, she likes Arabic oud music, he likes heavy metal, she likes Arabian (1001) Nights, he likes Harry Potter, she likes your poems, he finds them boring. Still, when they sit next to each other in the classroom, they hold their pencils in their two extremities and their fingers almost touch: love starts from the hand.

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