

Mohamad NASSEREDDINE
Poems

Knives in the Stomach

The rhythm fades with time,
the breeze your heart lent her
has stilled.
Like an elegant widow,
Life pulls its knives gently from your stomach,
washes them well,
returns them one by one to their supple leather homes.
She sutures your wound
and apologizes like a repentant sinner.
The loneliness you trained like a dog
to leap from the heel to bite the throat
also wants to close the curtains early.
The rhythm fades with time
it abandons the towering tree
to inhabit the grass sprouting below.
Forgetting becomes solid enough.

Bells
to Ahmad al-Amin

There are bells that ring
to awaken a table engraved in stone,
there are other bells
that leave the church tower
when they tire of the height and the belfry
to dig up the heart of the earth like shovels.
The strangest of bells
are those that go quiet and ring out,
then ring, then quiet
then quiet, then ring
then ring, then quiet
and think that's a heartbeat.

What the Dead Do Down Below

Like ants the dead dig
entire cities below the ground.
They transform lost ambition
into silent wisdom
and wear their best clothes
smiling like boarding school children
in an old novel
when their families visit for Eid.
There are things of absolute seriousness
the dead do down below:
A song to quiet the volcano a little,
a breath to push a rose
from its roots up into the sky.
And when they are neglected,
those dead down there
raise their fists
and tear down the ceiling
of their enclosure.

A Fifth Season to Leave

After we are buried tomorrow
there will be groundskeepers
in our garden always,
when they bend over the earth
to assure the rose is strong-rooted
we too
feel the tug on our bones
and apologize profusely
for the thick layer of dust.
We evaporate
we arrange a fifth season for departure
and leave
the dirt to the rose.

from **“What the Hospitals Have to Say”**

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She examines our skulls
discovers ten differences
between the first and the second,
the second and the third, and so on,
arranges them according to sex,
emotional shortcomings,
and mailing address.
To calculate what time has destroyed
she studies the molars
and the metal implanted cruelly in the bones.
With her pens
she colors, green and brown and blue,
the hollows of the eyes,
sprinkles shoots of grass from the corners of her garage
onto the scalp.
She places a Beethoven CD in the stereo,
and perhaps a small signal
escapes the black box across from her,
the girl who arranges the X-ray films
in the hospital.
When she tires of the game,
she smiles at the machine
and places her head gently
between the heads.

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In the hospital
after the changing of white bedcovers
comes a white moment
in which the patients are seen
and in between,
inside the room, a secret door opens -
a rare chance to smuggle his things
damp streets,
a forest and its leaves,
Ovid's Metamorphoses,
the neck of Zaynab,
Surah of the Star,
a rare chance to enter a crag of the heart
to fill it for the last time -
and gently, that door closes,
and the patients sleep forever
beneath the white bedcovers.

An Exchange

3:00 A.M., before the sky lightens,
you check Facebook with a half-closed eye,
find a "like" from a friend who died two years ago.
He messages you about his watch
asking about life in its dial, and that monotonous sound:
tick - tick - tick -
and about his debts to the corner grocer:
fingernail clippers, two boxes of marlboros, inedible canned goods.
He asks you about a card table,
if you married the Queen of Spades,
the widow in a black chador carrying two roses,
and about the white-bearded red king
while he divulges the fates of Hussein and Lorca.
In turn, you ask your friend about your father
while snow piles up behind the mountains.
You ask about many other things behind the closed door:
the sex of angels in the distant heavens,
does Marx resemble God with his tangled beard,
how killed children stare into the eyes of their killers.
After that, a silence hangs over the small screen,
you exchange beds with your friend in the long sleep.

Translated from the Arabic by Kaylee Lockett