

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”**

1

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.

4

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*