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Abdelkader Djemai

The city, that appeared from a distance to be peaceful and acquiescent, unfurled endlessly beneath Mahmoud's feet.

Imprisoned by his confusion, driven by his anxiety, he felt panic slithering through his exhausted limbs. Like an ill tempered and randy bitch, it sniffed at his heels and clung to him like a horrible fever, leaving him trembling and disoriented at the encounter.

At night, in the desolate wastes of his sleeplessness, he heard the city groan reluctantly, like a wounded beast at bay. And this cry, desperate and moving, struck him like a cruel blow, full in the chest.

The salty tang of the air, gift of the ocean, the coolness of the night sky perhaps they could heal the wounds, the ravages of war. But, inevitably, the sea, and the sky with its stars that seemed so close that he could almost touch them with his hand or lips, slipped away from him, through heedlessness, negligence.

I could only wish then that the city would take care, having abandoned her

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beliefs, to cultivate a less generous faith, a less rigid morality. So staunchly did she trust to her crumbling stones, her soil, her fate, that she did not let herself die more easily, and settle into dust.

Each time Mahmoud held firm, binding himself to the city, in the midst of gunfire and the howling sirens of the ambulances. He would tighten his laces and return repeatedly, short of breath and terrified, searching for the seemingly unattainable center, always aware of the panicked pulsing of his blood, the sound of footfalls hounding his own steps.

Drowned, dissolved, he would watch the walls explode like panes of glass, the sidewalks rise to meet him in a frantic dance of earth and other debris. Blindly, he felt his way along any walls that were still standing, the still warm corpse of the city, as if searching for a way out.

This futile madness which continued without pause to split the city apart, to grind it to powder, drove him at dawn to stop instinctively before one of the many city gates. A hesitation which perhaps could save him.

With the madness of desperation he let himself believe that this gate, if indeed it were real, might this time disclose a true and lasting peace. Behind it, he hoped that, as some sort of jealously guarded secret, another city, established in the hinterland might grow, shining with promise and brotherly love.

If he could gain entrance, he would be able to rediscover with joy the spring to his step, the smell of the sea, and the fabric of his memories. Transported by another form of madness he might briefly escape from the machinegun fire and the black terror which would eventually again catch up with him and effortlessly engulf him from all sides.

Walking there, Mahmoud might at last cast off his obsession with laces, his mania for choosing the strongest, pulling on them until they broke, and even of replacing them sometimes with strands of steel.

Unshackled, his stride would be wide, generous and bold. Returned to the everyday peace and quiet of familiar streets, he would wander happily along the piers of his childhood days, cheerfully he would salute the sea and the stars and the war torn city beneath his feet would live again in peaceful and trusting order. The city would embrace him, offering a peaceful harshness that tugs at the heart and brings with it a healthy state of clear-mindedness. And finally, allowing himself to sleep, he would nod off in his hidden city, lovingly moored to its port.

As he wheeled about from side to side in the midst of the crashing and crazed rumbling of war, I could only wish that he was able to be at one with his dream, secret and private. Strengthened by her resurrection, the city would rise again from the sea, virginal, indestructible, bathed in blood, and the dull sheen of silt. And this time, without fear or hesitation, she would confront the blinding nakedness of the heavens, and abandon herself to the

rhythm of time and respiration. Determined and free, she would soften her blunt and hostile corners and polish the shreds of her sorrows and dreams, so tarnished.

Refreshed by the ocean, she would help Mahmoud breathe again, to bestir himself and dissipate his madness. Cool and determined, he would be able to tame his fantasies and his ghosts.

Calmly retying his laces, he would be able to stride off in any direction he wished in complete freedom at an easy pace with lively, measured steps. The journey planned, the route boldly chosen, he would rediscover without hatred, the walls, the everyday sounds and the bright lights of the always familiar. With a fierce joy, he would resume his normal life, with the purple sea sparkling at the end of every street.

But this peace, which I believed to be uneasy and tenuous, might make him draw upon new puzzles, from ancient deadlock. A troubled lull would force him to flee, flee from himself. To hide from his own shadow, and rush, head lowered, into the snare of false perspectives, into the fearful trap of multiplying false doors set in a confusing succession of streets.

Without landmark or identification, without substance or a means of escape, the flayed city seemed to have torn up her roots, buried her history. Taking refuge in forgetfulness she was no more than a smear of blood, a fly-speck upon the map, a place filled with emptiness, crowded with ghosts, echoing with screams and hatred.

She continued to lose her hair and her teeth and never stopped trapping her young people against her walls, letting the boredom, the executions, the unemployment and the violence finish the task.

Sluggish, the city engenders a noisome proliferation of flies, lice, and other vermin. An indescribable stench rumbles unchecked from its underbelly, from its dark and gaping innards. A feral, loathsome odor mists the sea and pollutes the sky. Fetid and stubborn it penetrates to the very heart of the stones, to the core of all things and slips even between the grimy folds of shadows.

Each evening, before the madness erupted, Mahmoud would plunge his torn feet into boiling, salted water. He would watch as, little by little, they swelled until they resembled great, rotten slabs of flesh, grotesque with greenish ankles, and toes which looked like huge claws. These misshapen, monstrous feet that he fearfully withdrew before the bowl could overflow and began to climb the walls, to the ceiling. He wiped them dry with a taste of sawdust, of mud in his mouth. Long afterwards, they recovered their calm, their normalcy.

The heavy door was before him.

Eager to welcome this ultimate truce, he drummed frantically with his hands and feet. He felt a familiar and heady optimism suddenly flooding his

being. Gradually he became aware of a constant babbling, a barely detectable rippling of water. For what seemed like an eternity he had not heard the chirruping of birds, the inimitable and delicate rustling of flowers. These new, refreshing sounds caressed his ears with the softness of down. Forgetting his panic, his laces, he came back to life, deeply moved and content, in a state of profound tranquillity.

From behind the door the reedy murmur of water seemed to build, to blossom, to cascade into stars. As if a multitude of springs had set themselves bubbling and singing harmoniously to slake the dryness that eroded his reason. Gripped by a parching thirst, he saw, his heart pounding as if in full flight, the door swung slowly, gently open to disclose bodies still warm, intertwined one with the other, bathed in blood, mutilated.

Then, with a deathly calm, he untied his laces, quietly shook off his boots, removed his clothing piece by piece and set off running, naked and breathless into the streets of the war torn city.

Translated by Fran Devlin and revised by Carolyn Bryson