

A State of Siege

Mahmoud Darwish

Translated by Sarah Maguire and Sabry Hafez

**Here, at the mercy of time,
on these foothills at sunset
near ripped-up orchards stripped of their shadows,
we do what prisoners do,
we do what the unemployed do:
we cultivate hope.**

*** * ***

**In a land preparing for its dawn,
we grew stupid
once we stared victory straight in the face.
There is no night in our long nights starred by explosions.
Our enemies stay up all night.
Our enemies light up the lights
in the dark pit of our caves.**

*** * ***

**Here, after the poetry of Job,
there's no one to wait for.**

*** * ***

**Here, 'I' is annihilated.
Here, Adam remembers
the clay from which he was formed.**

*** * ***

**This siege will endure
till we can teach our enemies
odes of our Canaanite poetry.**

*** * ***

Late morning, the sky is like lead.

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**At night it bursts into flames.
And our hearts are like roses trained on a fence.**

*** * ***

**Here, under siege, life serves time -
a time between remembering its beginning,
and forgetting its end.**

*** * ***

**Life -life lived to the full or a life thrown away -
still harbours the neighbouring stars,
still gathers the timeless, migrating clouds.
But here, life begs the question:
How can we bring it back to life?**

*** * ***

**At the Brink of Death, He Says:
I have nothing to lose -
I am free, I am close to the ultimate freedom,
my fortune's in my hands.
Soon, I'll give birth to my life -
born free, with neither father nor mother,
I'll choose sky-blue letters to write my name.**

*** * ***

**Here, under hills wreathed with smoke,
on the threshold of home,
there's no time for time -
we do what those who've given up the ghost do,
we forget about pain.**

*** * ***

**Pain is: the housewife who can't hang out the laundry,
who has nothing to do but launder the flag.**

*** * ***

**Here, there's no echo of Homer.
Myths come banging on the door whenever we need them.
There's nothing Homeric found here.
Only a general exhuming the rubble
of a state fast asleep
slumped in the ruins of a future Troy.**

*** * ***

**Soldiers gauge the gap between being
and nothingness
through the crosshairs of a tanksight.**

*** * ***

**We gauge the gap between ourselves
and the shells
through our instincts' sixth-sense.**

*** * ***

**Hey, you, on the doorstep - come in,
and drink Arab coffee with us,
then maybe you'll feel you are human, like us.
You on the doorstep -
please get out of our mornings,
then maybe we'll feel we are human, like you.**

*** * ***

**We need time to relax, make art,
play cards, read the paper -
we need to catch up with our wounds
in yesterday's news,
we need to look up our star signs
in the year two-thousand-and-two
- the camera will smile on those who are born
under the Sign of the Siege.**

*** * ***

**Whenever yesterday sneaks up, I tell it
Not yet! Go,**

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and come back tomorrow.

*** * ***

A satirist told me:

**'Had I known how this would end from the very beginning,
I'd never have written a word'.**

*** * ***

**Every single death,
even if waited for,
is the very first death.
How can I imagine a moon
slumbering under each stone?**

*** * ***

**I wrack my brains, uselessly.
What could someone like me
dug into the opposite hillside
for three-thousand years
come up with at this juncture?
The very thought is agony -
but it sharpens my memory.**

*** * ***

**When the planes fly off
the doves fly back -
doves white as chalk,
cleansing the skyline
with their freewheeling wings,
reclaiming the light,
restoring the joyful, free-flowing air,
swooping higher and higher,
doves white as cotton-wool.
'If only that sky up there were real',
a man said to me as he walked past my house,
between two explosions.**

*** * ***

What's the difference between
the heavens on fire, my mind lit up, and a bolt from the blue?
Soon I'll know if this poem is inspired
- or my friends will know if the poet's expired.

* * *

To the Critic:

Do not measure out my words with coffee spoons,
do not pin them, wriggling on a wall.
Words besiege me in the night.
Words I never uttered write me down.
Then leave me rummaging through sleep
for the bitter dregs, the scrap-ends of my dreams.

* * *

Cypress trees behind the soldiers,
like minarets, prop up the sky.
Soldiers piss behind barbedwire,
protected by a tank.
The perfect autumn afternoon
completes its golden promenade
in streets as quiet as a church
after the end of Sunday Mass.

* * *

In a land preparing for its dawn,
there'll be no dispute
about the graves of the dead:
here, everyone is equal -
they'll sow the grass evenly
so we walk together in harmony.

* * *

We are in love with tomorrow,
and when it arrives
we shall love life just as it comes -
straightforward or complex,
dull or colourful.

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**No need for resurrection,
the Day of Judgement is done.
And let our celebrations be
light enlightening body and soul.
Once bitten by joy is never twice shy.**

*** * ***

**To a Killer:
If you had looked your victim in the eye,
perhaps you'd have remembered your mother in the gas chamber,
perhaps you'd have changed your mind
and set yourself free from the logic of the gun.
This is no way to claim your 'real identity'.**

*** * ***

**To another Killer:
If you'd left that unborn child
thirty more days in his mother's womb
just think what could have happened:
the occupation over, this child
would have forgotten the siege,
would grow up healthy and strong,
studying Asia's ancient history
next to one of your daughters at college,
where maybe they'd fall in love,
and have a little girl, a Jewess by birth.
Look what you've done!
You've made your own daughter a widow,
you've turned your own granddaughter into an orphan!
See how you've ruined your family-to-come!
Look how you've killed three birds with one bullet!**

*** * ***

**Rhyme is redundant
when the tune can't be tuned
and pain is beyond measure.**

*** * ***

**Gunpowder so thick it's pitch dark:
a darkness peeled back only by oranges
and a promising woman.**

* * *

**Stocious with loneliness,
we'd drink isolation right down to the dregs -
if that rainbow never dropped by.**

* * *

**Do we hurt a single soul, do we harm a single country
if - even from a distance, even only briefly -
we are surprised by joy?**

* * *

**The siege is waiting,
like a ladder propped against a storm.**

* * *

**We have brothers over the hills,
good brothers, who love us very dearly,
who look at us and weep,
who tell themselves, in secret:
'If we were under siege, we would... we would...'
but then they give up, crying
'Please don't leave us alone here,
Please don't abandon us!'**

* * *

**Tribes no longer call on Cyrus,
nor render unto Caesar,
nor bicker about the Caliphate.
Nowadays, it's all in the family,
a family seduced by modernity
who have exchanged all their camels
for a jet.**

* * *

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**I cry out with loneliness,
not to wake those who are dead to the world,
but to prod myself out of my solitary confinement.**

*** * ***

**I'm the last of those poets
troubled by the troubles of their enemies.
Maybe the world is too small
for all of the people and all of their gods.**

*** * ***

**Here, history converges in us,
good history, bad history, all kinds of history.
Without all the sins
the Bible would have been shorter.
Without all those temptations
the progress of the prophets on the road to redemption
would have been swifter.
Let eternity get on with its business.
Me, I'll carry on telling the shadows:
If the history of this place were less crowded,
our odes to the poplar would be very famous.**

*** * ***

**The tally of our losses every day:
two to eight victims are slaughtered,
ten more are wounded,
twenty houses bulldozed,
fifty olive trees uprooted.
Not forgetting the whole place is out of kilter -
skewing the poem, the play and the unfinished picture.**

*** * ***

**We seal our grief up in urns,
so the soldiers can't use it
to toast the occupation.
We put it away for a rainy day,**

a keepsake for that time
when something comes out of the blue.
When life's back to normal
we'll grieve like everyone else,
we'll weep over personal misfortunes,
those things left out of the headlines.
Tomorrow, when everything is mended,
our own small wounds will open at last.

* * *

In an alleyway lit by the light of exile
a tent is pitched at the crossroad of the winds.
The wind never blows from the south.
The east is a west turned to Sufism.
The west blows a murderous truce
as it forges the currency of peace.
As for the far northern home of the winds,
there the gods talk among themselves,
letting the winds lose their direction.

* * *

He tells her:
'Wait for me at the edge of the abyss!'
She tells him:
'Come over here - I am the abyss!'

* * *

A woman said to a cloud: 'Please shelter my beloved,
for my clothes are drenched with his blood.'

* * *

'If you can't be the rain, my love,
please be a tree,
a tree lush and green, be a tree.
And if you can't be a tree, my love,
please be a rock,
a rock wet with dew, be a rock.
And if you can't be a rock, my love,
please be the moon,

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**the moon dreamt by a lover, be the moon.'
So said a mother to her son
at his funeral.**

*** * ***

To Night:

**However much you may claim to be fair,
'All of you is for all of them'.
For the dreamers, and the guards who imprison their dreams,
all that's left is a broken moon.
Blood will never change the colour of your shirt.**

*** * ***

**We offer a father our condolences
for his slaughtered son -
'The victim is honoured in heaven' etc.
A while later,
we offer our congratulations
on his son, newly-born.**

*** * ***

To Death:

**We know the tank that sent you.
We know exactly what you want.
So get back to where you came from
with just one wedding ring less.
Say sorry to the soldiers, say sorry to the officers;
tell them the newly-wed couple
caught you in the act of looking them over,
so you faltered -
then escorted the lonely bride back home to her family - weeping!**

*** * ***

**My God, My God,
Why hast Thou forsaken me!
While still I am a child
and yet to be tested?**

* * *

The Mother Said:

**I never noticed him wet with his own blood.
I never noticed the blood on the floor.
He lent against the wall drinking camomile tea
planning what to do tomorrow.**

* * *

The Mother Said:

**At first it didn't make sense.
They told me: 'He's just got married!'
So I ululated joyfully,
I danced all night till everyone had gone,
and there was nothing left behind
but the flower arrangements.
Then I asked,
'So where's the happy couple?'
I was told, 'They're in heaven,
two angels who've just exchanged their vows.'
So I ululated again,
I danced till I was lame
and I sang myself hoarse.
So tell me, my son,
when will this honeymoon come to an end?**

* * *

**The siege will drag on
till the besieging, like the besieged,
discover that to be bored is to be human.**

* * *

**You, up burning the midnight oil,
aren't you fed up with watching us pass round the salt?
Haven't you seen enough roses bloom from our wounds?
Aren't you worn out yet?
You on night-watch,
haven't you had your fill?**

* * *

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**We stand here. We sit here. We are here. We're always here.
With one aim in life: just to be!
Apart from that, we disagree about everything:
the national flag, for example
[you'd do well, my people, to chose a donkey for your mascot],
or the words of the national anthem
[you'd do well to sing about two doves in love],
or the position of women
[you'd do well to have a woman as head of security].
We disagree about percentages,
about what's public and what's private.
We disagree about the lot.
But we have one aim in common:
just to be.
After that,
there'll be more than enough time
to savour our squabbles.**

*** * ***

**Deep underground
the unfinished verb
will continue to conjugate
till the end of this sentence.**

*** * ***

**He told me, on his way to prison:
'When I'm free again I hope to appreciate
that praising the homeland, like satirising the homeland,
is a job just like any other'.**

*** * ***

**In a land preparing for its dawn
come, saddle your horse
ascend the far mountain
take care as you climb
to catch up with your dream
then rest for awhile
if the sky lets you down**

on a gently rocking stone.

* * *

**How can I live with my freedom?
And can my freedom live with me?
Where shall we live when we're married?
What should I ask her in the morning?
Did you sleep alright, asleep at my side?
Did you dream of elysian fields?
Did you like what you did in your dreams?
Did you wake up on the right side of the bed?
Would you like a cup of tea?
Or coffee with cream?
Would you like fruit juice or kisses?
[How do I set my freedom free?]
O strange woman!
Maybe I'm not your kind of man!
Please make yourself at home in my bed,
and make yourself free with yourself.
Blow me away, rose petal by petal.
Dear freedom!
Let me adjust to your smile.
Take me beyond metaphysics
till we merge to become two-in-one.
How can I bear her?
How can she bear me?
How can I master my freedom
when my freedom so enthrals me?
How can I set my freedom free
without being left all alone?**

* * *

**One drop of infinite blueness
suffices
to make light of this time,
to purge all the sickness from this place.**

* * *

**The siege will drag on
till our doctors and priests**

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are all turned into tree surgeons.

*** * ***

**This siege will drag on,
and my metaphorical siege will drag on,
until I have learnt the patience of a saint.
Before me: a lily-of-the-valley is weeping.
Behind me: a lily-of-the-valley is weeping.
And the place stares dumbstruck
while time marks time.**

*** * ***

**Let my soul slip down quietly
to walk softly by my side,
taking my hand, like old friends.
Let us break bread together, share a glass of wine,
then walk down the road side by side
till our paths fork off in different directions.
Mine leads out of the world.
As for the soul, she perches cross-legged
on the peak of a pinnacle.**

*** * ***

**To a Poet:
when absence abandons you,
find the bliss of solitude.
Be the essence of loss.
Be the subject of yourself.
Absence is the highest form of presence.**

*** * ***

**To Poetry:
besiege
your siege.**

*** * ***

**To Prose:
Bring all the evidence of centuries of book-learning**

**to bear on reality ground down by evidence
to bear witness from the dust!**

*** * ***

**To Poetry and Prose:
Fly off together
like the wings of a skylark
heralding the spring!**

*** * ***

**When I write twenty lines about love
I imagine this siege
has gone back twenty metres!**

*** * ***

**He Finds Time to Make Jokes:
The phone never rings,
the doorbell never rings -
so how do you know I'm not here?**

*** * ***

**He Finds Time for Song:
Waiting for you, I can't wait for you:
Dostoevsky's lost me,
and I can't bear Callas or the sighs of Umm Kalthoum.
Waiting for you, I can't wait for you:
the hands of my watch are turning anticlockwise
to a time without a place.
Waiting for you, I couldn't wait for you:
an eternity of waiting cannot wait.**

*** * ***

**He asks her:
What's your favourite flower?
She tells him:
Carnations, black carnations.
He asks her:
And where will you take me with those black carnations?**

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She tells him:

To the light deep inside me.

And then she tells him:

Deep inside me...deeper... and deeper... and deeper....

*** * ***

To Love:

O love, O bird of the unknown -

let's give up on the blueness of eternity,

please let's forget the fever of absence, just for once -

and why don't you come round for dinner instead?

I'll make the meal,

you can pour the wine and choose the music -

something easy-listening about the soul on fire.

If anyone ever said you were a demon -

yes, it's true!

If anyone ever said you're a sickness -

yes, it's true!

But I can see right through you!

Look, here you are in my kitchen,

quietly peeling the garlic.

And when we've had dinner,

please choose an old romantic film for us to watch,

then explain to me how those two lovers

would turn into victims over here.

*** * ***

On the morning after the siege has ended,

a girl will go off to meet with her lover

dressed in blue jeans and a floral-print shirt,

blithe and careless, like cherry trees in March.

This is our time now, my beloved, all of it,

so please don't be late! Get here before

the raven descends on my shoulder,

please get here before the apple is eaten.

She is waiting for hope as she waits for her lover,

and he may never, may never, arrive.

*** * ***

**'It's either me or him'
is how war starts.
And it ends with the painful recognition
of him and me, together.**

*** * ***

**'I'll be with her forever'
is how love starts.
And it ends with the painful tearing
of her and me, apart.**

*** * ***

**I neither love you nor hate you,
said the prisoner to the interrogator.
My heart is full of none of your business.
My heart is full of the scent of sage.
My heart is brimming with light and innocence.
There's no room in my heart for your questions.
You see, you're not really my type.
Who are you for me to get close to?
Are you part of my life?
Are you afternoon tea, or a flute playing harmony,
are you a song for me to admire?
I may hate being locked up, but I don't hate you!
said the prisoner to the interrogator.
My feelings are none of your business,
my feelings are mine,
my feelings are my freedom,
my feelings are free from reason and rhyme.**

*** * ***

**This siege will endure
till the gods on Olympus
rewrite the Iliad.**

*** * ***

**A child is born.
Here, in Death Street,**

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at one in the morning.

*** * ***

**A child plays with a four-coloured kite -
black and white, green and red -
before he explodes into stars.**

*** * ***

**We sit miles from our fate,
like birds building nests
in the cracks of statues,
in chimney pots,
or in tents pitched by the side of the road,
the road the prince rides along on his way to the hunt.**

*** * ***

**To a Guard:
I'll teach you about waiting
outside the door of a death deferred:
Calm down!
be patient...
In a while you'll get bored with me,
you'll lift your shadow from my back
and flit off into the night,
free of my ghost at last.**

*** * ***

**To another Guard:
I'll teach you about waiting
by the door of a café:
listen to your heart as it stops in its tracks
then suddenly thumps crazily
so you shake with fear, like me.
Calm down...
Join me in whistling a melancholy tune,
that's migrated via Persia all the way from Andalusia -
just so the scent of jasmine breaks your heart,
and then you'll walk away.**

* * *

To a Third Guard:

**I'll teach you about waiting
on a bench made of stone.
If we swapped names you'd discover
a certain resemblance between us -
you may have a 'mom',
but I have a mother,
we're soaked by identical rain,
we dream of only one moon,
and we're only a short distance away from the same table.**

* * *

**At dawn, the shadows are green,
and the lion lies down with the lamb -
dreaming, as I do, like my guardian angel,
that life is lived here, not there.**

* * *

**In spite of a minor disturbance,
the myths won't give an inch.
Ships may run aground
on a land without a people,
fantasy and reality may get muddled up,
but the plots won't budge.
Our facts on the ground
are bulldozed away.
But truth will walk naked one day.**

* * *

To a Quasi-Orientalist:

**Let's just assume you are right:
Let's assume I'm a dim, moronic, half-wit,
let's assume I'll never master golf,
or grasp advanced technology
or pilot an aeroplane -
does this permit you to colonise my life?
If I were someone else,**

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**if you were someone else,
we could have been friends,
both of us admitting how silly we are.
Don't be stupid, like Shylock,
have hearts, need sustenance,
have eyes filled with tears?**

*** * ***

**Under siege,
time is a place
put in its place.
Under siege,
place is a time
out of time.**

*** * ***

**Each place has its fragrance.
Whenever I remember my village,
my senses are infused with the heart of its aroma,
and I ache to go back home once again.**

*** * ***

**Whether high-land or low-land,
whether sacred or profane,
there's no point bothering with adjectives -
one day the heavens may open
and spread themselves into a map.**

*** * ***

**The victim badgers me
every single day, demanding,
Where have you been?
Send back to the dictionaries
all those words you once gave us,
their echoes trouble the dreams
of those who sleep here.**

*** * ***

**The victim tells me:
I didn't give a damn about
a paradise full of virgins
or bliss for all eternity -
I loved life on earth,
between the fig trees and the pine trees.
But that heaven was denied me.
Still I searched with all I had left:
to the last drop of blood in my veins.**

* * *

**The victim teaches me:
Art can't exist
without my freedom.**

* * *

**The victim warns me:
Don't believe their ululation at my funeral -
look instead at my father,
sobbing as he holds my photo to his chest:
How did we come to change places, my son?
I should have gone first! I should have been first!**

* * *

**The victim insists:
Nothing's changed
except my home
and my second-hand furniture.
Now, a gazelle lies curled on my bed;
and the crescent moon slipped onto my finger
eases all my agony.**

* * *

**The victim insists:
Don't show up at my funeral
unless you were a friend of mine -
I reject obsequious orations.**

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*** * ***

**This siege will tighten its grip
until we've been fully convinced
of the merits of abject enslavement -
from complete freedom of choice, of course!**

*** * ***

**To resist means a check-up
to ensure that your balls and your heart are still ticking,
to make sure you're infected with a sickness called Hope.**

*** * ***

**In what remains of the dawn
I walk outside my body.
In what remains of the night
I hear my own footsteps pacing inside me.**

*** * ***

**If love gets sick, I'll heal it
with a course of jokes and wit.
If love falls ill, I'll cure it
by excising the singer from the song.**

*** * ***

**This siege has changed me
from a being a singer
into the violin's sixth string.**

*** * ***

**To a Reader:
Never trust a poem -
a true figment of nothingness,
neither fancy nor imagination,
but the sense of an ending.**

*** * ***

**Writing is a lapdog
barking at extinction.
Writing may wound,
but never draw blood.**

* * *

**My friends are planning my send off
with a comfortable grave in the shade of an oak
and a tombstone hewn from marble for eternity.
But I keep turning up first to the funeral,
wondering which one of my friends has preceded me, this time.**

* * *

**This murdered woman is:
the daughter of a murdered woman,
the granddaughter of a murdered man,
the sister of a murdered boy,
the aunt of a murdered girl,
the daughter-in-law of a grandmother whose son was murdered,
(who in turn is the granddaughter of another murdered woman),
and the next-door neighbour of the uncle of a victim....
But there's no reaction from Civilisation.
Barbarity has been and gone.
The good life continues.
The woman is no one.
And truth, after all, like this victim, is always relative.**

* * *

**Quiet! Quiet please!
The soldiers need to listen to the songs
the victims heard at the moment they died,
and which remain just as fresh
as the last cup of coffee on their breath.**

* * *

**A truce! A truce! So we can see if it's really true
that fighter-planes can be beaten into ploughshares!
We begged for a truce - just to test the waters,**

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**just to see if peace could seep back into the bloodstream,
just so we could fight our battles with poetry, for once.
But they told us: haven't you heard that peace begins at home?
What happens if your music brings our high walls tumbling down?
And we answered: So what's wrong with that? Why not?**

*** * ***

**Our freshly-brewed coffee, the squabbling sparrows,
the grass dappled with shadows by trees in full leaf,
the sun skipping walls just like a gazelle,
the scudding white clouds in what's left of our sky,
and everything else we remember and love
but are forced to forget for awhile
on this dazzling spring morning -
these small blessings make our lives worth living.**

*** * ***

**In a land preparing for its dawn,
in a while
the planets will sleep in the language of poetry.**

**In a while
we will bid this hard road farewell,
and ask: Where shall we begin?**

**In a while
we will warn the young mountain daffodils
their beauty will be eclipsed when our young women pass by.**

*** * ***

**I raise a glass
to those who share my vision
of a butterfly's joyful iridescence
in this interminable tunnel of night.**

*** * ***

**I raise a glass
to the one who shares a glass with me**

**in the pitch black of this night,
a night so thick we're both in the dark.
I raise a glass to my ghost.**

*** * ***

**Peace for the traveller on the other side
is to hear a traveller talking to himself.**

**Peace is the sound of a dove in flight
heard by two strangers standing together.**

*** * ***

**Peace is the longing of two enemies
to be left to themselves till they die of boredom.**

**Peace is two lovers
swimming in moonlight.**

*** * ***

**Peace is the apology of the strong
to the weak,
agreeing strength lies in vision.**

**Peace is the disarming of arms
before beauty -
iron turns to rust when left out in the dew.**

*** * ***

**Peace means a full and honest confession
of what was done to the ghost of the murdered.**

**Peace means returning to dig up the garden
to plan all the crops we will plant.**

*** * ***

**Peace is the anguish
in the music of Andalusia
weeping from the heart of a guitar.**

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*** * ***

**Peace is an elegy said over a young man
whose heart's been torn open
by neither bullet nor bomb,
but the beauty-spot of his beloved.**

*** * ***

**Peace sings of life -here, in the midst of life,
wind running free through fields ripe with wheat.**

Ramallah, 2002.