

GHAZAL: *min al-hobbi ma khatal*

For Deema Shehabi

You, old friend, leave, but who releases me from the love that kills?
Can you tell the love that sets you free from the love that kills?

No mail again this morning. The retired diplomat
stifles in the day's complacency from the love that kills.

What once was home is across what once was a border
which exiles gaze at longingly from the love that kills.

The all-night dancer, the mother of four, the tired young doctor
all contracted HIV from the love that kills.

There is pleasure, too, in writing easy, dishonest verses.
Nothing protects your poetry from the love that kills.

The coloratura keens a triumphant swan-song
as if she sipped an elixir of glee from the love that kills.

We learn the maxim: "So fine the thread,
so sharp the necessity" from the love that kills.

The calligrapher went blind from his precision
and yet he claims he learned to see from the love that kills.

Spare me, she prays, from dreams of the town I grew up in,
from involuntary memory, from the love that kills.

Homesick soldier, do you sweat in the glare of the check-point
to guard the homesick refugee from the love that kills ?

GHAZAL: *dar al-harb*

For Fady Joudah and Wafa' Zeinalabidin

I might wish, like any citizen to celebrate my country
but millions have reason to fear and hate my country.

I might wish to write, like Virginia: as a woman, I have none,
but women and men are crushed beneath its weight: my country.

As English is my only mother tongue,
it's in English I must excoriate my country.

The good ideas of Marx or Benjamin Franklin
do not excuse the gulags, or vindicate my country.

Who trained the interrogators, bought the bulldozers?
— the paper trails all indicate my country.

It used to be enough to cross an ocean
and view, as a bemused expatriate, my country.

The June blue sky, the river's inviting meanders:
then a letter, a headline make me contemplate my country.

Is my only choice the stupid lies of empire
or the sophistry of apartheid: my country?

Walter Benjamin died in despair of a visa
permitting him to integrate my country.

Exiles, at least, have clarity of purpose:
can say my town, my mother and my fate, my country.

There used to be a face that looked like home,
my interlocutor or my mate, my country.

Plan your resistance, friends, I'll join you in the street,
but be circumspect, don't underestimate my country.

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

Where will justice and peace get the forged passports
it seems they'll need to infiltrate my country?

Eggplant and peppers, shallots, garlic and cumin:
let them be, married on my plate, my country.

© 2009 | The Massachusetts Review