

Blue Birds

A Story of Freedom from the Grip of War

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Dedication

To every child who still believes in love despite war.

To my family who supports me and teaches me

how to fill my life with colors

despite the surrounding darkness.



.Childhood.

Childhood

Drums are beating within.

Those sounds warn not of an imminent war,
yet call for a slumber, a deep sleep
in the arms of the light
and over the clouds in the sky.

I feel I am flying up without weights,
as if someone has given me a solid shelf
on which I could lay all my burdens.
I am soaring far beyond the black smoke,
deaf noise, blinding lights,
and earth's tall buildings too.

I am soaring towards a safe home
which remains with me wherever I go.
It is as if space has become my homeland,
and my home a sun in the day-lit sky
or a moon in the dead of the night.
How vast space is!
Neither buildings nor fences exist!

Childhood

I sense the light surrounding me
moving in and out of my palm,
and I feel that my soul has found itself.
My knees are implanted in the depth of the soil
like roots of an ancient olive tree,
and my palms lounged over them,
face up like a sunflower.
I close my eyes and recall what used to be.



Childhood

In the north of central Syria,
on the northern bank of the Euphrates River,
the city of Raqqa dances in the sunshine
and stands on the hazel land
sprinkled with some verdure,
which increases as we approach the generous river.
There, in a modest street
of a more modest neighbourhood,
I lived with my small family.

Perhaps my life was not perfect,
but it was satisfying for a child
who sailed with his imagination
and left his gleeful fingerprints all over his toys.
It was satisfying enough for a child
awakened by his mother's
tickling kisses on his cheek,
and the massage of her sweet words
to his ears every morning,
until he ended the day lying in bed,
tired because of the daily adventures with his father's marvels.

Childhood

It was an ordinary life with friends,
food, family, school, dreams and love.

Just like any other morning,
the day started as I went to school accompanied by my father.
I then rode my bicycle in the streets of our neighbourhood,
which grew narrower as I grew older.
The day ended with a family dinner
when I would tell my father all about my day.

My home used to be spacious and empty
when my father was at work;
then it would turn small
and crowded upon his return,
as if his presence created a silent noise,
dancing in the corners of the house.
The wooden living room windows
used to welcome the sun every morning
to join the aroma of my mother's cooking,
emerging from our small kitchen,
and falling in love with it.

Childhood

I suppose my father too fell in love with my mother
after smelling her cooking of irresistible savour.

My room was full of boxes of colourful toys
which were pushed aside so that our black TV
would take its place in the forefront.

I loved watching TV so much
and listening to my mother's stories
about the blue birds' freedom.

I always had the desire to fly
in order to feel that freedom she spoke of.

I recall once standing on my bed,
I could feel my feet touch the bed linen,
and I could observe the creases
on the sheets beneath my feet—
like tired wrinkles of an elderly,
bidding life farewell to have a rebirth.
At the same time, I heard a voice within.
It pushed me like a current
entering with no intent to exit



Childhood

before carrying me away.

It did not even enter.

I am certain it was formed inside— in my innermost parts.

I shut my eyes and threw myself in the air to fly,

but I ended up lying on the floor, screaming in pain

trudging up and down between my feet and hands.

My rising breaths rebuked the current;

nevertheless, despite the rebuke,

an unusual glimmer still dwelled in me.

I am confident of its capability

of forming another current.

My father was a magical giant!

I believed his muscular arms could protect me,

and his eyes were capable of knowing what I wanted,

and to get it immediately.

I frequently went with him

to a park in our neighbourhood,

where we took turns kicking the ball over the

scattered grass until we dripped with sweat.

We used to play and then sit on the park bench,

Childhood

painted in green, and have a fizzy drink.
My father was as refreshing as an ice cream
in the heat of the summer
after playing with my friends in the street.

I always sat with him to pray.
It was from him that I learnt to recite the words
of prayer, that God is in heaven,
and that we should do good
so as not to dishearten Him,
so that He will not grieve.
At night, I was sometimes afraid
God would appear to me to judge or blame me
for looking at my friend's paper in the exam,
or for putting a coin in the washing machine
behind my mother's back
to see whether it was going to explode.
But I always tried not to do wrong to keep Him pleased.
I constantly woke up in the night sweating
because of nightmares which blazed me
with orange flames.

Childhood

When I tried to visualize Him,
I looked at the ceiling of my room,
and imagined Him in white clothes,
holding a crooked staff,
standing on a path,
on whose left was blazing fire and shrieks,
and on its right a tree, lake and sun.

My mother's eyes were dark with curled lashes,
her lips were thin, and her hair dark and long
resembling that of a purebred stallion.
As for my father's arms, they had plenty of veins,
and those were what caught my eyes.
My mother's bosom was warm and cosy.
Its vastness I regarded as my city.

All I could recall was the narrow street
where my home was, with its small pavement,
which had no room except for my tiny feet,
stuck together.
I also remember the ground with many holes,

Childhood

which had me fall off my bike several times.
I do remember my school's street as well,
and the long and tree-lined street,
connecting my home and school.
I used to cross it, holding my father's hand
to safely penetrate the heavy car flow.
Yet I believe the most beautiful thing about Raqqa
is a castle whose name I struggled to memorize:
Qal'at Ja'bar.

This castle took Raqqa's land's hazel hue
and topped itself with extra sweet honey,
only to open my mouth every time I approached it.
It is a colossal castle and a small peninsula,
embraced by the water
of the River Euphrates from three sides.
It is encircled by two walls,
crowned with a large number of towers,
some polygonal and some semi-circular.

What caught my eye was that

Childhood

despite the different shapes of the towers,
together, they formed two great walls
and portrayed a symmetrical painting,
attracting visitors to watch and contemplate it.
My father once told me, when I was in wonder
of the greatness of the castle despite the demolished parts,
that this castle withstood a flood
before the erection of the Euphrates dam.

Not only were the streets and the blocks
engraved in my memory and etched on my heart,
but I also had memorable times with people there.
Those I loved the most
then were our neighbours' children.
Although they were much older than me,
I felt happy and amused when I played with them,
or when they would ring the doorbell
to ask after me.
Certainly, the love I felt
in the presence of my parents
was much greater than the love I felt

Childhood

in their presence when we played together,
even though I cherished their love
and found it so special.

We always gathered on the stairs
of our buildings to play cards,
or wage wars between my colourful,
rubber animals and their plastic, dark green soldiers.

I always told them about my father and his strength,
proudly recounting all the stories he used to tell me
about the heroic acts in his youth.

My father had told me one night
about attacking a thief
who tried to approach an elderly woman
walking in front of him in the street.
And so, the children enthusiastically
gathered around me,
and I would stand on one step of the stairs
higher than the one they sat on.
I made their eyes follow me

Childhood

when I glared as much as I could,
and raised my eyebrows while telling them
how fast my father ran as he chased the thief
until my father knocked him down.
I used to wave my hands to the right and left,
then clench my fists,
put them down and raise them in the air
while telling them
how my father saved the life of that old woman.

Those were beautiful days,
when events ran smoothly and naturally.
Then one day,
an extremely unbelievable
thing happened...

