



SAMAR YAZBEK

Crossing into the void, Samar Yazbek

Translated by Nashwa Gowanlock & Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp

The first crossing

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The barbed wire lacerates my back. Constant trembling, even right inside my head. A tiny burrow has been dug out under the wire fence marking the line of the border, just big enough for one person. I squeeze through, then I run. Fast.

Half an hour at a sprint -- that's the distance you have to cover before you've safely crossed the border between the two countries. We're alone, not with a convoy of strangers.

At the time I didn't know if I would ever write about this; somehow I just assumed that I would perish in the crush of death when I returned to my homeland.

My feet sink into the soil, the barbs maul my back, and I crawl across this line of separation between the two countries. After all these long hours of waiting for nightfall, to avoid attracting the attention of the Turkish soldiers, this is the moment I raise my head for the first time and gaze up at the distant sky, darkening to black.

This is the moment I take a deep breath, arch my back and sprint, just as they told me to. I run and run until we're out of the danger zone. The ground is treacherous and rocky, but my feet feel light as I run. The beat of my heart carries me, lifts me into the air. I'm back! I'm here. I'm back!

Panting, I mutter to myself under my heavy breath: I'm back! This isn't a scene from a film, this is real. I run and run, my lips chanting, I'm back... I'm back.

Behind us we hear gunshots and military vehicles moving around on the Turkish side, but we've done it: we're through and we're running. Everything feels like it was predestined long ago. I've put on a headscarf especially, and a long jacket and loose-fitting trousers.

We have a steep hill to climb, up and over, before we hurtle down the other side to find a car waiting for us. Darkness settles in for the night and everything seems normal, as expected, or so it seems.

Later on, after doing this crossing multiple times, things become very different: the state of the airport alone will be ample evidence of what has happened to Syria over the year and a half that I make these journeys.

For now, I'm stowing it all in the back of my mind, along with everything else that testifies to the rapid and profound changes taking place in my country. For now, I am ignorant of what is to come, as I scramble down the hill for the first time, my legs throbbing with pain.

Reaching the bottom, I crouch down and pause for at least ten minutes, wheezing and gasping for breath, trying to calm my pounding heart. The guys accompanying me think I'm emotional at seeing my homeland again.

In fact, that's the last thing on my mind. We've been running for so long, I feel like my lungs are being wrenched from my body. I can't stand up.

Finally, we reach the car and I start to get my breath back a little. Our driver is a young guy. There are three of us in the back, two in the front. My guides, Maisra and Mohammed, are from the family I'll be living with for the duration of my stay in the north.

Later, they become a very important part of my world. Both are engaged in the struggle. Mohammed is twenty and becomes an enduring friend. We work together and he accompanies me on my trips. Maisra is in his forties and he is the father of Aala.

We're in Idlib province, only partially liberated from the control of Assad's forces. Apart from the endless roadblocks set up by the Free Syrian Army, we speed along the road lined by olive groves. This is my first crossing into the void.



FARAJ BAYRAKDAR

Tashriqa:

Prayer for Homs

I will go to Homs shortly.

I will enter it safely, protected by its people and  
my faith in them.

For almost twenty years, only  
Absence, obsession, delusion.

For twenty years,  
abandoned at its crossroads,  
the guards overwhelmed me with weapons  
I did not see,  
tore at me with weapons  
I did not see.

But I will come to the city  
any way she accepts me.  
Won't even a few herbs, spices,  
Buy me a welcome?

I will come to the city even as a refugee,  
if the meaning of 'refuge' has changed,

deleted from the old dictionary.

But how could I create  
a dictionary of Homs,  
when I have no *imam* whose prayers could  
remove my doubt?

Though I have a God  
to whom I recite His verses privately  
until dawn reveals the city's face,  
and tells us:

You are safe from whatever you say or don't say.  
believers and nonbelievers,  
all those who lit up the city's promises  
with candles in their fingers  
so it can see its tomorrow, our people.

Homs, whose mother is Syria,  
is above all suspicion.

I will go to Homs alone,  
I will come to her with love and affection.

It's Homs that baptized me  
and Islamised me.

It is only fitting I belong to her:  
A thousand loves, sorrows and a river of memories  
for her to recover and for me to heal.



GHAYATH ALMADHOUN

The Details

Translation: Catherine Cobham

I sold my white days on the black market, and bought a house overlooking the war, and the view was so wonderful that I could not resist its temptation, so my poem deviated from the shaykh's teachings, and my friends accused me of cutting myself off, I put kohl on my eyes and became more Arab, and drank camel's milk in a dream and woke up as a poet,

I was watching the war like lepers watch people's eyes, and had arrived at frightening truths about poetry and the white man, about the season of migration to Europe, and about cities that receive tourists in peacetime and mujahidin in wartime, about women who suffer too much in peacetime, and become fuel for the war in wartime.

In a reconstructed city like Berlin lies a secret that everyone knows, which is that the...

No, I will not repeat what is known, but I will tell you something you don't know: the problem with war is not those who die, but those who remain alive after the war.

It was the most beautiful war I've been in in my life, full of metaphors and poetic images, I remember how I used to sweat adrenalin and piss black smoke, how I used to eat my flesh and drink screams, death with his scrawny body leaned on the destruction committed by his poem, and wiped his knife clean of my salt, and the city rubbed my shoes with her evening and the street smiled and the city counted the fingers of my sorrow and dropped them on the road leading to her, death weeps and the city remembers the features of her killer and sends me a stabbing by post, threatening me with happiness, and hangs my heart out on her washing line strung

between two memories, and oblivion pulls me towards myself, deeply towards myself, deeply, so my language falls on morning, and balconies fall on songs, headscarves on kisses, back streets on women's bodies, the details of alleyways on history, the city falls on the cemeteries, dreams fall on the prisons, the poor on joy, and I fall on memory.

Just as if you are eating your beloved's fingers, or suckling from an electric cable, or being inoculated against shrapnel, just as if you are a memory thief, come, let's give up poetry, exchange the songs of summer for gauze dressings and harvest poems for surgical thread, leave your kitchen and the children's bedroom and follow me so that we can drink tea behind the sandbags, the massacre has room for everyone, put your dreams in the shed and give the plants on the balcony plenty of water, for the the discussion with iron may go on for a while, leave behind Rumi, Averroes and Hegel, and bring along Machiavelli and Huntington and Fukuyama, for we need them now, leave behind your laughter, your blue shirt and warm bed, and bring your teeth and nails and hunting knife, and come.

Throw away the Renaissance and bring on the inquisition,  
Throw away European civilization and bring on the Kristallnacht,  
Throw away socialism and bring on Joseph Stalin,  
Throw away Rimbaud's poems and bring on the slave trade,  
Throw away Michel Foucault and bring on the Aids virus,  
Throw away Heidegger's philosophy and bring on the purity of the Aryan race,  
Throw away Hemingway's sun that also rises and bring on the bullet in the head,  
Throw away Van Gogh's starry sky and bring on the severed ear,  
Throw away Picasso's Guernica and bring on the real Guernica with its smell of fresh blood,  
We need these things now, we need them to begin the celebration.



NIHAD SIREES

The Silence and The Roar

### Fragment 1

All of a sudden, a bodyguard came out onto the balcony holding a statue of the Leader high above his head, displaying it in all directions as the masses hollered relentlessly, their shouts reaching farther and farther, like the call of a bird as it flies away. This statue presentation lasted for five minutes until he disappeared and the wave of shouting died down bit by bit until it was nearly extinguished. But the Leader had no intention of letting the masses calm down. Just then his ghost appeared from behind the window and the shouting started back up all over again. With her arms wrapped round me Lama whispered that I was neglecting her.

### Fragment 2

At that moment they were lowering one of the Leader's uniforms with ropes so that the masses could touch it. Hands were outstretched and people started leaping up just to graze its edge. The shouting grew louder and a segment of the masses torqued in a terrifying manner. At one particular moment the uniform was quickly whisked away and as it vanished the Leader himself appeared. Madness reigned over all existence.

### Fragment 3

When he showed up for work the security forces were waiting for him in his cramped little office. They seized him and marched him in for questioning at one of



the security branches and he was not released until six months later, during which time he was beaten and tortured beyond what a human being can bear. He was accused of intentionally defacing pictures of the Leader that he had copied with his machine. The pictures were all splotted with black ink. It was his misfortune that those splottes appeared directly over one of the Leader's eyes, making him look like a one-eyed pirate with a patch.

#### Fragment 4

I got up and started to shake the dust from my trousers despite the fact that I couldn't see a thing in the pitch-black darkness. I had expected my legs to be in worse shape. Before I re-tucked my shirt into my trousers I had to undo the belt and the buttons; after re-cinching it I tried to make out the walls of the cell but in vain because of the utter blackness. After the goons marched back upstairs, outside the cell the silence was complete and I could no longer hear any voices or thumps or footsteps. I shuddered from a chill, a chill of terror, but the silence was appealing, the darkness quite pleasant and the coldness of the cell was comfortable enough after an entire day in which I had suffered through so much roaring and heat.



FARAJ BAYRAKDAR

Mirrors of Absence

Saydnaya Prison 1997-2000

These mirrors could have been  
pure rain

or pure silence

But things were made of stone

The clinking of time and space

was bloodied

with what resembles madness

or gods

O

How can I see myself

when I am always with me?

How do I know myself

Do not say no to the mirror!

Mirrors,

even the ones I write

can only enumerate me

or make me one

I am not like that

I am in no state

whatsoever

I hide inside the poem

search for myself outside

but we cheat at times

she invites me to her bed

I respond

she takes off her clothes

I, mine

she puts me on

and I remain naked



GHAYATH ALMADHOUN

4978 Nights and One Night

Translation: Fawaz Azem

To Faraj Bayrakdar

who spent 14 years in prison

4979.....

is not the number of a secret account,  
nor is it the result of a third degree equation.  
I assure you that it is not an arbitrary number,  
devoid of wisdom,  
or the result of a coincidence produced by  
lottery wheels.

It is a sticky number  
that does not resemble cell phone numbers  
or license plates.

4979....

Means the systematic intensification of pain,  
the essence of the wolf.

It means 119 thousand and 466 hours;  
it means seven million, 169 thousand  
and 760 minutes  
and it also means 430 million, 185 thousand

and 600 seconds.

To gain 4979 nights is to miss out on thirteen forbidden women,  
thirty seven casual relationships  
and two children who have not been born.

To gain these 4979 days  
means to lose 465 thousand and 328 steps  
in the alleys of old Damascus  
and miss 114 wakes held in your absence  
and 31 thousand and 712 bottles of beer,  
three of which are flat.

It means not to miss the bus 271 times,  
and not to win the price of a lottery ticket eleven times.

4979 means to miss the World Cup  
three and a half times,

New Year's Eve fourteen times,  
and the fall of the Soviet Union once:  
imagine only once.

4979 means 4978 nights and one night  
without Scheherazade;

4978 nights and one night only with Schehrazad,  
Schehrazad whose funeral you also missed.