

I Write to You from Damascus

by Khaled Khalifa (translated from the Arabic by Leri Price)

A few months ago, in April, a general amnesty of political prisoners was announced. A few days later, a very few of the detained were released and left to their fate in the town of Saydnaya, whose principal square is only a few kilometres from the notorious prison that bears its name. Men with ragged clothing and sunken eyes, men who had crossed the river of Hell (a true description of them), with emaciated bodies and disbelieving gazes, found themselves face to face with impossible life once more. Passers-by and the inhabitants of the town couldn't believe what they were seeing; they offered the men whatever help they could in reaching their families who were scattered across the country. The most astonishing thing took place the following day: in every Syrian city, people began to circulate the next releases on social media. One site in Damascus, "Under President's Bridge", as it was known, was discussed as a location where prisoners would be set free. In less than two hours, the city turned into an arena of anticipation. Tens of thousands of people came flocking from other cities in old, dilapidated buses. They slept in the streets, under bridges, and on pavements, waiting for their loved ones. Agonised mothers were carrying photographs of their children and showing them to the small number of released prisoners, whose faces showed signs of mental confusion, the loss of memory and reason. "*The sum total of those released does not exceed a few hundred.*" The released man would look at the thousands of photographs that were shown to him, and then carry on his way after making sure that the person holding the picture was not a member of his family. They were looking for news of their children, and he was looking for his family or for anyone who could help him reach them. The city carried on like this for a few days, waiting for the release of two hundred thousand of the lost, or for news of their fate. It is impossible to forget that scene; it will remain lodged in the history of a city that boasts of being the oldest continually inhabited site on the face of the earth. The pain of the people of Syria's loss cannot be summarised. After several days, gathering under the bridge was forbidden and people understood that the decree of amnesty was a lie, like all the other decrees that scrape the scab off their wound and heighten rage.

Grieving, bruised, and despairing, the city went back to sleep. In its cold houses, the city babbled about the fate of the missing who left and never came back. Every

morning, the city prepares to bid goodbye to new waves of young men and women, the lucky ones who have obtained university places or job opportunities or family reunifications, in Germany and other European states; obtaining their visas is next to impossible for ordinary people. The rest of Syria's young people are smuggled out by their families after selling their possessions or racking up debts, to Erbil or Beirut or anywhere that accepts Syrians, with exhortations not to return to Syria. This country has turned into a genuine wasteland; the lament of T. S. Eliot is incapable of expressing this hellscape.

I write to you to tell you that I am living in the middle of these ruins, in the middle of this hell. I don't know if I am happy or sad, furious or content. All I know is that I have no time here to think about happiness as the rest of humanity does; it has been some time since I have been invited to a friend's wedding, or to a party.

I constantly see long queues, four or five hours long on cold winter nights, just to get hold of bread – and double that time for petrol. The last time I was in standing in line for petrol, I made some fun preparations: I woke up at six, and I brought my sketchbook – I wanted to draw – and two books. And a thermos full of coffee. I shared the morning and various conversations with the poverty-stricken of my city: conversations about rising prices, the best routes out of the country. I thought in the morning that the poor are the most tolerant and hopeful. I sketched and I read and, after four hours, I managed to get hold of twenty litres of petrol. I made four sketches, including one of a man who had urged me not to abandon my place in the queue to someone who wanted it. He was working as a porter and a driver of a small and battered old Suzuki pickup truck. I told him to stand up so I could draw him while we were waiting; he liked the idea and stood up, smiling. Afterwards, he told me about his family and rebuked me for not being married – he even offered to help me search for a suitable bride. (I chuckled and thanked him.) Afterwards, I discovered that I had drawn the Messiah. I wondered who else today is carrying their own cross other than the Syrians, now that every Syrian has become a Messiah. I liked this idea, but in waiting there is a humiliation that cannot be denied, and it is only possible to invoke the Messiah as a saviour who is powerless to help us, even to overcome humiliation.

I write to you from Damascus, a city of lines where war has not stopped despite announcements to the contrary; the city which lives atop invisible layers of grief. Nine years ago, for the first time, I saw Damascus in total darkness. It only lasted a few hours, but it was stupefying. Back then, I wrote that the sight of the blacked-out city forged a true statement of despair without limits. For me, at that time, the scene was utterly bewildering. I travelled through the streets in my car. With others, I waited at the checkpoints that cut through the city's junctions. I wanted to take hold of the darkness with my own hands; I couldn't believe I was living through such a moment. A few hours later, when I arrived at my house looking out over the south-eastern part of Damascus from an elevated position, I simply couldn't believe the scene below.

Today, and for the last four years, the blackouts increase every day. The image of darkness is no longer astonishing; it has become a fact of life. I no longer want to take hold of the dark – my only desire is to take care so I don't trip into a pothole and break my leg. That is no laughing matter: my friend, Bashar Al-Meer Ali, one of the best-known orthopaedic doctors in Damascus, tells me that last February there wasn't a single empty bed in any of the city's hospitals – the result of the breaks that people had sustained while walking in darkness.

I imagined the meaning of clinics crammed with people bearing broken bones, looking for a doctor or a hospital bed. Living has new meanings in Damascus, from where I write to tell you that the flavour of everything has changed, that we use the fridges in our homes only for useless storage. Every Syrian has gone back to drying vegetables for winter. We no longer dream of cold water, and every electrical appliance has become so much scrap metal. In the best case of rationing, the electricity comes on for two hours and then cuts out for four, but two hours can just as easily become one hour, or even thirty minutes. And other cities envy Damascus. In Lattakia, the electricity comes on for half an hour or an hour every six hours; in other places, such as Aleppo, there is no electricity at all in houses or in the streets. Here, I paraphrase the title of my novel "No Knives in the Kitchens of This City" and I say, "No electricity in the houses of this city."

I write to you from Damascus to tell you that the queues for those wishing to obtain a passport are the longest of all. Hundreds of thousands want to get hold of a passport

and go, even if it is to hell. These staggering numbers have confounded the authorities, and for two years they have not known what to do. Charges bubble up so that the Syrian passport, which occupies the tail-end of any list of global passports, is the most expensive in the world. You may not believe that the cost of obtaining one ranges from 20 to 800 dollars, according to various circumstances. Every day, I grow more amazed at people's capacity for endurance, and from my own ability (I, the most fragile of all) to learn patience and to adapt to primitive living.

I write to you from Damascus to tell you that we are living in a place that is forgotten, harsh, afraid of the future, and of the past; afraid of arrest, of disappearing, of dying from starvation and thirst and cold; afraid of vanishing. Yes – we are terrified of vanishing, of disappearing into nothingness.