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"Poem in Time of War, 2006"

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Poem in Time of War, 2006

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Lebanon, Palestine

1
She reaches in sleep
for her brother's hand
Her small fingers grasp his smaller fingers
She would crawl into the place
where he lies, so untroubled
His sleeping is deeper than hers,
His dreams are not shattered, like hers,
by planes that fly overhead,
exposions that go on
all night, all day.
He is too young to know
any pain but his own
and this, if he is safe,
keeps him safe

2
We used to sit on the roof
and watch stars
appear, one by one.
Stars
who are made of nothing
but burning

3
My father my cousin my aunt
Another cousin my neighbor my brother's friend
A man who used to sell chickens at the market
Another man who drove a taxi
Every day the list changes, who is alive
and who is dead
Like a bus: people get off, new people get on
And the bus keeps traveling
through ruined streets, taking its detours
And I still alive, I am
riding, riding

I did not know what to do with myself
when I could no longer leave my apartment
Those were the weeks of curfew
I spent hours setting things in order:
rows of plates, glasses.
I heard them rattle when bombers passed over
but the bombs that week and the next weeks
were not for me
Mine was the apartment with books
lined alphabetically on the bookshelves
Mine were the hands that chopped
garlic, parsley, sweet peppers
gathered from pots
that still stood on the terrace

We were going to the harbor to watch the boats
This was something we used to do on weekend afternoons
But that day we couldn’t find the street
we always walked, the narrow one that led,
winding past houses, gardens,
down to a place
where at last everything opened blue,
and you could see the water

One street had begun to resemble another

A dog who once belonged to someone
was eating garbage, and worse

Between naked rebar
we saw the sails of one boat
stiffening in the wind
The boat is going nowhere
And where it is anchored is also nowhere
War has made everything the same and nothing
Come into my dream, it’s quiet here
Do you remember a morning in April
Do you remember a conversation we had,
leaning over a café table? Music, sweet pastries,
our heads nearly touching

I am invited to dinner
though I belong quite possibly
to the legions of the enemy
The woman of the house
is stuffing zucchini, having cored
each one with a sharp, slender instrument
She is steaming rice
mixed with cashews, dates
I sit in another room talking with her daughters
listening to the sounds of cooking,
metal lids placed on metal pots,
long spoons slowly stirring.
One of the daughters leaves, returns in a moment
with kohl, dark red lipstick.
She takes my face in her hands
as if she could love me.

Let me make you beautiful, she says.

Think now
of this small boy
who has had so many seizures
he can’t walk or talk.
All day and all night his brain
is an occupied city, smoldering meanings.
His sisters carry him
as though he were a doll
or a broken kitten. 
One of them has found a plastic hairbrush 
split in half. She brushes 
his brother's hair 
with the pink half-brush 
and he smiles, smiles.

When the war is over, that's when 
the real war will begin. 
When everyone else has forgotten 
there was a war, when the news is talking 
about other wars. When the war is over 
there will be the war of remembering 
and forgetting, the war 
of trying to sleep and trying to awaken, the war 
of standing each morning at the window 
where sunlight still enters and floods the room,

and looking outside 
one more day at all

that is not there to return to.

She reaches in her sleep 
for her brother's hand 
His sleeping is deeper than hers 
He is one of thirty-six children 
killed in a single night in a building in Qana 

He is one of fifteen children 
killed in a week in Rafah, Gaza City, Balata 
He is one of a thousand children 
killed in any season 
in the first years of the twenty-first century 
She reaches in her sleep 
for the brother who always slept
next to her
She reaches for the brother and he
is not there, he is not even
under the earth
She reaches in her sleep
for the brother who used to throw
the covers off

So uncovered
So uncovered

11

Whom, what
do I propitiate here?
The god of chaos?
You who are sometimes called tragedy?
Are you asking me
to offer you my fires, my tamed birds, my firstborn?

12

Are you listening? Do you know
that the hands that carefully core the soft flesh
of the zucchini
may, at any moment,
even as the zucchini
simmer in their pot of oil,
be struck useless
by a history in which
they have no part?

13

So it was in my mother’s day
and in my mother’s mother’s.
My granddaughter’s friend
to my granddaughter
in the car
on a Wednesday afternoon in California
coming home from ballet class:
“Are there still wars going on?”
And my granddaughter, six, chewing her raspberry jelly candy, holding her bright pink baseball cap in her hands.
“There are always wars going on.”