

Damascus, What are you doing to me?

By Nizar Qabbani

1

My voice rings out, this time, from Damascus
It rings out from the house of my mother and father
In Sham. The geography of my body changes.
The cells of my blood become green.
My alphabet is green.
In Sham. A new mouth emerges for my mouth
A new voice emerges for my voice
And my fingers
Become a tribe

2

I return to Damascus
Riding on the backs of clouds
Riding the two most beautiful horses in the world
The horse of passion.
The horse of poetry.
I return after sixty years
To search for my umbilical cord,
For the Damascene barber who circumcised me,
For the midwife who tossed me in the basin under the bed
And received a gold lira from my father,
She left our house
On that day in March of 1923
Her hands stained with the blood of the poem . . .

3

I return to the womb in which I was formed . . .
To the first book I read in it . . .
To the first woman who taught me
The geography of love . . .
And the geography of women . . .

4

I return
After my limbs have been strewn across all the continents
And my cough has been scattered in all the hotels
After my mother's sheets scented with laurel soap
I have found no other bed to sleep on . . .
And after the "bride" of oil and thyme

That she would roll up for me
No longer does any other "bride" in the world please me
And after the quince jam she would make with her own hands
I am no longer enthusiastic about breakfast in the morning
And after the blackberry drink that she would make
No other wine intoxicates me . . .

5

I enter the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque
And greet everyone in it
Corner to . . . corner
Tile to . . . tile
Dove to . . . dove
I wander in the gardens of Kufi script
And pluck beautiful flowers of God's words
And hear with my eye the voice of the mosaics
And the music of agate prayer beads
A state of revelation and rapture overtakes me,
So I climb the steps of the first minaret that encounters me
Calling:
"Come to the jasmine"
"Come to the jasmine"

6

Returning to you
Stained by the rains of my longing
Returning to fill my pockets
With nuts, green plums, and green almonds
Returning to my oyster shell
Returning to my birth bed
For the fountains of Versailles
Are no compensation for the Fountain Café
And Les Halles in Paris
Is no compensation for the Friday market
And Buckingham Palace in London
Is no compensation for Azem Palace
And the pigeons of San Marco in Venice
Are no more blessed than the doves in the Umayyad Mosque
And Napoleon's tomb in Les Invalides
Is no more glorious than the tomb of Salah al-Din Al-Ayyubi . . .

7

I wander in the narrow alleys of Damascus.
Behind the windows, honeyed eyes awake
And greet me . . .

The stars wear their gold bracelets
And greet me
And the pigeons alight from their towers
And greet me
And the clean Shami cats come out
Who were born with us . . .
Grew up with us . . .
And married with us . . .
To greet me . . .

8

I immerse myself in the Buzurriya Souq
Set a sail in a cloud of spices
Clouds of cloves
And cinnamon . . .
And camomile . . .
I perform ablutions in rose water once.
And in the water of passion many times . . .
And I forget-while in the Souq al-èAttarine-
All the concoctions of Nina Ricci . . .
And Coco Chanel . . .
What are you doing to me Damascus?
How have you changed my culture? My aesthetic taste?
For I have been made to forget the ringing of cups of licorice
The piano concerto of Rachmaninoff . . .
How do the gardens of Sham transform me?
For I have become the first conductor in the world
That leads an orchestra from a willow tree!!

9

I have come to you . . .
From the history of the Damascene rose
That condenses the history of perfume . . .
From the memory of al-Mutanabbi
That condenses the history of poetry . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the blossoms of bitter orange . . .
And the dahlia . . .
And the narcissus . . .
And the "nice boy" . . .
That first taught me drawing . . .
I have come to you . . .
From the laughter of Shami women
That first taught me music . . .
And the beginning of adolescence

From the spouts of our alley
That first taught me crying
And from my mother's prayer rug
That first taught me
The path to God . . .

10

I open the drawers of memory
One . . . then another
I remember my father . . .
Coming out of his workshop on Mu'awiya Alley
I remember the horse-drawn carts . . .
And the sellers of prickly pears . . .
And the cafés of al-Rubwa
That nearly-after five flasks of èaraq-
Fall into the river
I remember the colored towels
As they dance on the door of Hammam al-Khayyatin
As if they were celebrating their national holiday.
I remember the Damascene houses
With their copper doorknobs
And their ceilings decorated with glazed tiles
And their interior courtyards
That remind you of descriptions of heaven . . .

11

The Damascene House
Is beyond the architectural text
The design of our homes . . .
Is based on an emotional foundation
For every house leans . . . on the hip of another
And every balcony . . .
Extends its hand to another facing it
Damascene houses are loving houses . . .
They greet one another in the morning . . .
And exchange visits . . .
Secretly-at night . . .

12

When I was a diplomat in Britain
Thirty years ago
My mother would send letters at the beginning of Spring
Inside each letter . . .
A bundle of tarragon . . .
And when the English suspected my letters

They took them to the laboratory
And turned them over to Scotland Yard
And explosives experts.
And when they grew weary of me . . . and my tarragon
They would ask: Tell us, by god . . .
What is the name of this magical herb that has made us dizzy?
Is it a talisman?
Medicine?
A secret code?
What is it called in English?
I said to them: It's difficult for me to explain . . .
For tarragon is a language that only the gardens of Sham speak
It is our sacred herb . . .
Our perfumed eloquence
And if your great poet Shakespeare had known of tarragon
His plays would have been better . . .
In brief . . .
My mother is a wonderful woman . . . she loves me greatly . . .
And whenever she missed me
She would send me a bunch of tarragon . . .
Because for her, tarragon is the emotional equivalent
To the words: my darling . . .
And when the English didn't understand one word of my poetic argument . . .
They gave me back my tarragon and closed the investigation . . .

13

From Khan Asad Basha
Abu Khalil al-Qabbani emerges . . .
In his damask robe . . .
And his brocaded turban . . .
And his eyes haunted with questions . . .
Like Hamlet's
He attempts to present an avant-garde play
But they demand Karagoz's tent . . .
He tries to present a text from Shakespeare
They ask him about the news of al-Zir . . .
He tries to find a single female voice
To sing with him . . .
"Oh That of Sham"
They load up their Ottoman rifles,
And fire into every rose tree
That sings professionally . . .
He tries to find a single woman
To repeat after him:
"Oh bird of birds, oh dove"
They unsheathe their knives

And slaughter all the descendents of doves . . .
And all the descendents of women . . .
After a hundred years . . .
Damascus apologized to Abu Khalil al-Qabbani
And they erected a magnificent theater in his name.

14

I put on the jubbah of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-Arabi
I descend from the peak of Mt. Qassiun
Carrying for the children of the city . . .
Peaches
Pomegranates
And sesame halawa . . .
And for its women . . .
Necklaces of turquoise . . .
And poems of love . . .
I enter . . .
A long tunnel of sparrows
Gillyflowers . . .
Hibiscus . . .
Clustered jasmine . . .
And I enter the questions of perfume . . .
And my schoolbag is lost from me
And the copper lunch case . . .
In which I used to carry my food . . .
And the blue beads
That my mother used to hang on my chest
So People of Sham
He among you who finds me . . .
let him return me to Umm Mu'ataz
And God's reward will be his
I am your green sparrow . . . People of Sham
So he among you who finds me . . .
let him feed me a grain of wheat . . .
I am your Damascene rose . . . People of Sham
So he among you who finds me . . .
let him place me in the first vase . . .
I am your mad poet . . . People of Sham
So he among you who sees me . . .
let him take a souvenir photograph of me
Before I recover from my enchanting insanity . . .
I am your fugitive moon . . . People of Sham
So he among you who sees me . . .
Let him donate to me a bed . . . and a wool blanket . . .
Because I haven't slept for centuries