

Broken Epistles

Sufian Al Aswad



Broken Epistles
by Sufian Al Aswad

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I Dream of Alice

Dancing with my shadow to a blue tune, the room was filled with sweet old memories.

Laughter, tears and strong coffee swirled as we danced. An outline of you, particles of dust, enhanced.

Dressed like the month June, silk skin, you warmed my January. A prison no more, this is a sanctuary.

In an eternal trance, I fell, gazing at your face. Blue eyes, I need saving, never, please, leave this place.

Elegant and bare footed you breezed by me, my eyes fixed. Your hand caressed my face, intoxicated I kissed.

Vanishing into the air you went and in agony there I was sent. Longing for the whiff of your neck, my home ... to be left again ... all alone.

I've dreamed of Alice

The Letter

It's only a flesh wound; my mind assured me as I panicked, after receiving a sore paper cut while holding the letter. It felt more like twinges of conscience, yet I had to suck the poor thumb. And doing so, I risked another attack by picking up the letter. I do not remember the number of times I have spent reading it aloud to myself, or to an audience of a flickering lamp and a loyal cup of coffee. Nor do I recall the days spent in writing and editing. For it is not easy to organise the contents of a jumbled mind onto a single sheet of paper. Having to sort through mingled emotions is hard enough. Anyway, it was my 33rd attempt, and I was able to muster a single line;

I dream of hope, as hope itself dreams of reality...

I was confident that she would not understand it, I on the other hand ... did! Feeling accomplished, I turned the light off, wishing the lamp and the cup a much needed good night's sleep, and then I went to bed.

Cracked Actor

A slippery step greeted him...

It was dark and the rain fell at a steady pace outside. He walked towards the counter with his wet grey coat still on, hiding his face. He checked the menu: all the doughnuts had names that sounded like prostitutes; he ordered discreetly. He searched the place for a secluded table while the urge to hide burned hot within him. It was fine in purgatory, but not anymore. The seat would have been more comfortable if café lights were dimmer. In a nicotine cloud he sat fidgeting until the coffee finally arrived. A drag from his cigarette followed each sip. It was a tar-like liqueur which tasted bitter and tangy.

Rubbing the back of his neck he noticed a girl seated to his right. She wore a tattooed tear; "He'll come ... I am sure." He imagined her reply. Poor girls, they turn up every time it rains. He studied her a little further. Pretty face, sad green eyes and lush lips, a crumbling beauty. He shied away once their eyes met; *Need to fix myself!* It has been showing signs all week, of wearing off. He ignored them until this morning when it ... cracked. He placed his trembling hands on the table, circling his cup of tar. Concentrating, he closed his eyes. Patch it up before it's all revealed, he thought to himself. It took effort and time to mend. Moments later, his eyes reopened slowly taking the light in as if it was born into his world for the first time. A heavy smile formed on a new face. Gathering his still damp coat, the pseudo stood up and left.

A taxi turned on a still wet corner, until he was gone. Under a sad, grapefruit moon with wet stars, a red neon light buzzed on and off stirring up the air outside the theatre.

Lullaby

Creepy and cold was our old attic, it was the home of abandoned and forgotten things. Protesting like an old man, it often creaked on windy nights. I recall the night when I heard a different sound; faint, wispy and hard to ignore. I gathered myself and stood under the entrance. As I peeked into the attic, among the gathering dust and through a maze of cobwebs I saw her. Dressed in silver that lit the entire garret. The Moon was upstairs in my attic... crying. With depressed and breath-taking eyes she looked upon my astonished face. Collecting myself I approached, carefully seating myself a few feet away from her. Her silver eyes never left mine. I managed to ask why she had been crying. She answered in a melodic susurrations speaking of many reasons: of being surrounded by cold floating boxes and orbiters that restricted her movement. Whispered of how mankind had forgotten about her. How they had stopped talking to her. Softly whispered of the time when she was asked to convey forbidden messages between secret lovers, of the songs that were once written about her. And how her tears fell with the rain, but no one had noticed. I asked if she had received any of my letters. She gave me a mesmerising smile as she spoke the word, 'Alice'. She told me that it was the only letter she had received in ages, and because of it she came to hide in my attic, and with that she started to cry again. I could not think of anything to say, so I hugged her and sang her a peaceful lullaby that my mother used to sing to me as a child. As she fell asleep, I carried her down and tucked her into a warm comfy bed and closed the door on the lonely sleeping Moon.

Open Mind

I decided to organise my thoughts. I pulled the curtains and the shutters open to allow for the daylight to enter, and started to gently place every thought, whim and notion down on the floor. As I went on I realised that I didn't have the space for such an operation so I set out to remove all the furniture from the room and soon the house was empty. I resumed my work, carefully laying every thought, whim and notion down until the entire house was covered with thoughts of all sizes; little and large.

I needed a breather, for this work was tiring. I stood beside the window in order to look at the progressing work in front of me. With that, a furtive piece of paper floated through the open window. I seized it before it slipped deeper into the room away from my grasp. At first I was a little cautious but couldn't stop myself from reading its content. After I was done reading, I contemplated for some time and decided to add this new idea to my vault of thoughts. I searched for an appropriate place for it, and squatted as I placed it beside another and felt accomplished as I stood, having annexed another idea to my wealth of thoughts.

To my horror, I saw how this small idea began to grow, engulfing the others around it. Its movement was faster than mine; I panicked and jumped in an attempt to stop the infection. Even then, I was careful not to trot or stomp over any of the uninfected thoughts. I managed to contain the situation; by throwing the vile-paper from the window, and quickly closing the shutters and curtains behind it. I turned to face the carnage, counting my losses for half of the room was singed. I shall never forget that day, the day I tolerated an open mind.

Morning

The eye opened into light.

Not the apologetic light of other mornings. This came full and certain through white gauze curtains that stirred and settled like breathing. One wall the colour of a bruise at the yellowing. Three walls white. The world at first sight.

Outside, the autumn leaves were conducting something. I followed the coffee through a woodlot that had been expecting me. The young sun lay across the path the way a loving hand rests on a shoulder, warm, without demand. The trees stood in their slow undressing, dropping leaves the colour of old letters never sent. I found my seat.

I found Alice.

She was already smiling. One of the particular ones, the kind that makes you feel you have arrived somewhere you didn't know you were going.

I made love to her with my eyes.

We walked without direction through the mizzle, so fine it was less weather than atmosphere, a tenderness that made no distinctions — falling on bark, on stone, on the sealed quiet of those already gone. Even to them the leaves were singing. At the doorway she kissed me, light as a question with no intention of being answered. I walked back to the room. The white, the gauze, the breathing curtains. I closed my eyes. I was smiling.

The eye opened into light.

Thank heavens. Morning again.

Roman Baths

He hunched down as he walked through the yellow-lit cobbled avenue, wearing an oversized uniform, and his worries for memories long gone. His shadow crawled along trying to escape a playful kitten. It was 2:48 am and the night breeze smelled insulted by youth and their drunken babel. His old knees ached, from the long rounds around the deserted Roman Baths. He sat on a new-factory-aged bench. A brown mackerel tabby coloured kitten sat beside him anticipating her dinner as he brought out a small bag, lebneh and olive sandwich; a light meal his loving wife had made earlier. They ate in turns; gently handing small pieces to his young companion, he enjoyed her company, for she was his new best friend. He walked these cobbles for over 40 years now, during which he often pondered about it, a particular notion that revisits his mind during these desolate hours. *'History is dying'* his tone was of agreement.

Above him, navy blue clouds raced each other in an attempt to escape the impending dawn, yet the city was still awake; its tumult hadn't died out. He stood up, folding the brown bag in one of his pockets to be used for tomorrow's snack. He smiled at the kitten as they both returned to their meditation rounds of the site.

The calls for the Morning Prayer came from all around. Different, but none the less the answer came; few awoke to supplicate, while others took it for a reminder that it was time to go to bed.

Scarecrow

... Inside a broken clock, the arrow poked at 4 am.

Oh, not again! How to go about un-welcomed guests? It's been a fortnight since Insomnia made herself all comfortable and at home. Reluctantly, but without much effort, I got out of bed: a reply to the persistent nagging coming from a cold kitchen kettle. I turned it on and sat waiting as it sang itself to boil. Milk, no sugar; the coffee came a treat as I savoured it, up until the mind demanded; *Shall we resume?* I ... agreed.

Tom Waits once said: "A diamond is just a piece of coal with patience" ... fascinating I know, and still, how I admire its persistence. To have the ability to wait for something while not knowing if it's worth waiting for, now that's ... faith! But does it matter? ... a dream of love, or the lie in dreams. We all have them, and aren't they the same? We all need to have faith, use it, to put it in something and drag it for as long as it takes ... to the end. Be it dulcet or painful. Otherwise ... we're the scarecrow, to the world we're visible, but to ourselves; on the inside ... we're stuffed with straw.

... Inside a broken clock, the arrow poked at 7 am.

Tempest

A moment was more than enough to bring the entire existence to a halt. There it stood, still. Elliptically encapsulated in tranquillity; so fragile ... it broke. Then it came...

A large dark wave crashed, locking the ship in a violent pelagic dance. Swaying to the collision, the under frame creaked in indignation. The sea cursed and the wind howled back. With each impact cold water slapped a pale face. Right at the helm, he stood in defiance against the storm. Like a combat between two mounted knights tilting against each other with blunted lances, the battle raged on. Through an ocean of probabilities the ship sailed, discovering new uncertainties, no sail, no oars, no compass point to guide it. This didn't shake his will, for a sole thought was all that was needed to steer the vessel through his jumbled mind.

Thunder roared on the horizon, so did a dark rising mountain of sea. He closed his tired eyes for a moment, reminding himself of that one thought. Though it may be a simple one ... he was prepared to die for it.

A New Word

My mind woke me up... Sounding annoyed as he rummaged through piles and piles of thoughts and ideas. I always hated his morning voice.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, looking at the clock. 5:03 am.

A NEW WORD he answered, throwing his reply at me in an effort to find something useful deep within the vaults of our vocabulary. “Can I be of help?” delivered with a yawn, I wasn’t really in the mood to assist but thought by offering, it might end his assault on my precious sleeping hours.

IF I DON’T HAVE IT, HOW WOULD YOU? He answered. Which was true, my mind is in charge of maintaining the vaults. He’d be the first to know the location of any particular word or thought, and under which category it was filed. “Can I ask what it is for?”

NO.

Awkward silence followed, though I can still hear him rooting. I tried to recall (without alerting him!) the previous day, checking the ledgers for entries and reminiscing about past conversations that might have initiated this early search: Is he drunk on Alice again? We haven’t seen her of late. Once he gets hold of that idea, he doesn’t let go that easily. Was he trying to write a new scene for the novel? Or is it something to do with life, work, politics ...faith? Or is it to do with the uncertain distant future? I searched but found nothing of significance. I looked at the clock: 5:36 am. I lay in my bed listening to my mind mumbling between rants and waited for him to shut up so I could return to my sleep.

Day Sleeper

Rain drops clutched a frozen window.

In a sleepless city where a nursery rhyme is performed by cars and vexed thoughts, a manic expressionist without a face roams a concrete labyrinth. Mute, save for a floating blend of his favourite melodies. Like a fugitive, always on the run when three people are a crowd. Coffee and cigarettes are his only friends. Committed to a lost battle; trying to balance the world on a thin rim of a fragile mind, he cries each night not knowing why. Haunted by a series of questions that would require a lifetime from most people. At night everywhere looks the same, but not to him. Passing a street corner, a dusty memory was retrieved and projected on his tired, smiling eyes as he took one last round, just before closing time.

Don't wake me when the sun comes up for I need to ... dream.

Rewind

My boots took me for a walk. It was nice of them to offer since I was feeling a little bored that afternoon. It was cold, and all I had was a photograph warming the inner pocket of my jacket and burning a hole in my mind. Together we strolled under the rain and through the dingy city, passing smoke infused cafés, swarming market stalls and abandoned shops with diamond encrusted price tags, while at the same time trying to evade deranged traffic of both cars and feet. My tired eyes drifted towards the sky, for they have seen it all and needed a change. I apologised sincerely to my boots as my mind slipped them off and floated towards the heavens, climbing each step at a time. I climbed higher, turning left, and right, down and over, dodging the sticky, cotton candy clouds that swam without a care in the world. From such height one cannot see the boundary lines between one country and the other, yet I felt pity that the creativity of mankind had managed to draw them. I climbed until I was above an equable sea of mist. There, was enough cotton to wipe clean the sins of man. Standing alone, I reflected on my past, meeting my memories once more as they fell over me like snow ... I thought about Alice, who had become more consuming than musing. Too soon the night arrived with a smile. I floated towards the Moon before my return to the world below, I did promise to visit her between dreams. Landing over grey ponds and puddles, my boots were there to welcome me. Along the dimly lit streets of the old city, the air was sleepy. The world slept to a lullaby sung by the smiling Moon, while the insomniac strolled. Echoes answered my steps as they bounced off the narrow, dim cobbled alleyways. Reciting an incantation of her name, I rewound the images and watched.

Heart of Stone

Just a thought...

Everyone meets the wall.

After the collision, when the dust settles, a thought arises, should I simply stop? There is a strange peace in that. The relief of not having to face it again; a soothing blend of respite and anguish. Many would feel right at home pressed against that wall of cold comfort, longing, in time, to become part of it. It numbs the rising cry of everything in us that refuses to be made of stone.

I think that is where the expression comes from. Not from cruelty. From those who could not resist the wall. Who stayed until the staying became them. It is not easy to peel away, to mend what is still tender and stand on uncertain legs.

To face the open world again. But who wants to be alone? No one.

No matter how hard you try to convince yourself otherwise, no matter how sweetly self-pity goes down on a quiet night. Each of us carries a bag of unsolved things and a private dream of what the answer looks like.

I keep coming back to her wall. Still hoping.

Then again, why am I writing this?

... It was just a thought.

Love Her

Alluring...

With the most elegant bare feet, she ambled towards me.

Confident...

Refined in her nudity, my eyes fixed on hers.

Devious...

She knows she has me captivated.

Beauteous...

Eyes light as the sky, and as deep as the ocean.

Incapacitated...

My mind, to her wile.

Impeccable...

Her lips kissed me.

Love me, don't you? ... she asked.

Honesty...

I do not.

Heartache Odyssey

A star fell out of the night screen as I was dancing on the rooftops
Hopping over chimneys, balconies and the still sizzling light of shops

Quietly crossing the occasional still lit room
Since October had silenced the night to a cold, empty tomb

A face ...I recall as so beautiful, so unique
Locked in endless hours roaming a dingy city, her I seek

This heartache Odyssey, this solitary quest
Forever wondering if I'll ever rest.

With the mocking dawn, the banal search suspended
Into the newly born shadows my torn face blended

Every night, I live again...to seek.

Obituary

Thirty-three wishes, like torn winged butterflies challenging a hurricane ... they held no chance. This constant state of horror, that inflicts itself repeatedly and predictably on me, this troubled sea of consciousness and dejected notions that storms through me. A desperate pain ... so vivid, tearing my limbs to create another self out of me. But ... I am drained, depleted and tired. Tired of wearing a face of duplicity, I'm tired of it all. Having a rabid mind frothing thoughts, figments and whims with no room to spare for a much-needed hysteria. How to curb, to restrain ... No! How to murder one's thoughts? I've tried everything: alcohol, narcotics and the sweet taste of apathy, but none could do it. Bleeding ideas from a self-destructive ego ... might that be the cure? What I need is the right kind of bullet. A single bullet, one with 'Alice' appropriately etched on its side.

A sage once said: 'Life is a fragment of our dreams.'

I shall step forward to take my place among the ranks of the awakened, leaving you with a silent pen and a load of burning pages.