

Letter to Samih: Return to my homeland

by Mahmoud Darwish - 15/05/2018 17:06



My dear Samih:

...I remember the house's courtyard with a mulberry tree at its center, which pulled the houses together to form a home, my grandfather's home. We left everything as it was: the horse, sheep, bull, open doors, hot dinner, the adhan [call to prayer] of suppertime, and the lone radio—perhaps it has stayed on until now to broadcast the news of our victories. We went down into the valley that swerves and leads to the southeast, opening to a wellspring in a meadow that led us to the village of Sha`b—this is where my mother's relatives live and where her family members were arriving from the village of Damun, which fell to the occupation. There, after a few days, the farmers from the nearby villages gathered, those who sold their wives' gold, to buy French-made rifles to liberate al-Birweh.

They liberated it early in the evening. They drank the occupier's hot tea and slept the first night of victory. The next day, the "salvation army" took it over without interruption, then the Jews re-occupied it and destroyed it to the last stone. And now we wait on the heights of the homeland, we wait for the return.

You know the whole story, Samih. The “excursion” of the emigrants became too long and the war was shortened. You know how we “infiltrated” back from Lebanon when my grandfather realized that the journey would be a long one, and that he must get back to the land before it slipped away. When we arrived we found only destruction. We lost the right of residence and rights to the land.

When I performed the first pilgrimage ritual to my original village, al-Birweh, I found only the carob tree and the abandoned church, and a cowhand who spoke neither clear Arabic nor broken Hebrew.

“Who are you, sir?”

“I am from Kibbutz Yas`?r,” he answered.

I said, “Where is Kibbutz Yas`?r?”

“Here.”

“Here is al-Birweh,” I said.

“Where is al-Birweh?”

I said, “Here. Under us. Around us. Above us. Here and everywhere.”

He said, “But I don’t see anything, not even stones....”

“And this church...don’t you see it?”

He said, “This is not a church. It is a stable for cows. These are some Roman ruins.”

I said, “And from where did you come, sir?”

“From Yemen.”

“And what are you doing here?”

He said, “I am returning to my country.” Then he asked me, “And where are you from?”

I said, “I am from here...I am returning to my country.”

This, my dear Samih, is how the debate has flowed for almost forty years. Notice the contradictory, transformative, and absolute meanings of the words! In the best of times, we are guardians of Roman ruins. Therefore, we had to live in Dayr al-Asad, close to you, as refugees in a homeland that, by divine decree, was reserved for two thousand years for the return of a cowhand from Yemen!....

Your brother,

Mahmoud Darwish

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