

## A Soldier Dreams Of White Lilies

By Mahmoud Darwish (1967)  
(From *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* (2003). Translated  
and edited by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché)

(Please note: When you compare this transcript with the poem in *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* you will notice that the title has been changed from 'A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips' to 'A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies'. This is a change that Darwish has requested.)

He dreams of white lilies, an olive branch, her breasts in evening blossom.

He dreams of a bird, he tells me, of lemon flowers.

He does not intellectualize about his dream. He understands things as he  
senses and smells them.

Homeland for him, he tells me, *is to drink my mother's coffee, to return  
at nightfall.*

And the land? *I don't know the land*, he said.

*I don't feel it in my flesh and blood, as they say in the poems.*

Suddenly I saw the land as one sees a grocery store, a street, newspapers.

I asked him, but don't you love the land? *My love is a picnic*, he said, *a glass  
of wine, a love affair.*

- *Would you die for the land?*

- *No!*

*All my attachment to the land is no more than a story or a fiery speech!*

*They taught me to love it, but I never felt it in my heart.*

*I never knew its roots and branches, or the scent of its grass.*

- *And what about its love? Did it burn like suns and desire?*

He looked straight at me and said: *I love it with my gun.*

*And by unearthing feasts in the garbage of the past  
and a deaf-mute idol whose age and meaning are unknown.*

He told me about the moment of departure, how his mother  
silently wept when they led him to the front,  
how her anguished voice gave birth to a new hope in his flesh  
that doves might flock through the Ministry of War.

He drew on his cigarette. He said, as if fleeing from a swamp of blood,  
*I dreamt of white lilies, an olive branch, a bird embracing the dawn in a  
lemon tree.*

- *And what did you see?*

- *I saw what I did:*

*a blood-red boxthorn.*

*I blasted them in the sand...in their chests...in their bellies.*

- *How many did you kill?*

- *It's impossible to tell. I only got one medal.*

Pained, I asked him to tell me about one of the dead.

He shifted in his seat, fiddled with the folded newspaper,

then said, as if breaking into song:

*He collapsed like a tent on stones, embracing shattered planets.*

*His high forehead was crowned with blood. His chest was empty of medals.*

*He was not a well-trained fighter, but seemed instead to be a peasant, a  
worker or a peddler.*

*Like a tent he collapsed and died, his arms stretched out like dry creek-beds.*

*When I searched his pockets for a name, I found two photographs, one of his  
wife, the other of his daughter.*

*Did you feel sad?* I asked.

Cutting me off, he said, *Mahmoud, my friend,*

*sadness is a white bird that does not come near a battlefield.*

*Soldiers commit a sin when they feel sad.*

*I was there like a machine spitting hellfire and death,*

*turning space into a black bird.*

He told me about his first love, and later, about distant streets,

about reactions to the war in the heroic radio and the press.

As he hid a cough in his handkerchief I asked him:

*Shall we meet again?*

*Yes, but in a city far away.*

When I filled his fourth glass, I asked jokingly:

*Are you off? What about the homeland?*

*Give me a break, he replied.*

*I dream of white lilies, streets of song, a house of light.*

*I need a kind heart, not a bullet.*

*I need a bright day, not a mad, fascist moment of triumph.*

*I need a child to cherish a day of laughter, not a weapon of war.*

*I came to live for rising suns, not to witness their setting.*

He said goodbye and went looking for white lilies,

a bird welcoming the dawn on an olive branch.

He understands things only as he senses and smells them.

Homeland for him, he said, *is to drink my mother's coffee, to return safely,*

*at nightfall.*