

6.

BOILING COFFEE,
BURNING BEIRUT

Deepa Bhasthi



A war. The war. A war never ends you know. Even when it does, it remains. On bodies. In hearts. In past economies and future histories. War. Mine. Yours. Theirs. Yet, all of ours, this war.

From a to be or not to be to this or that to choices and clichéd existentialism this conflict within and without is a wake-up call. It rings at 6 every morning, precise, on the dot, like the cheap plastic clock beside your bed - a discard from an old love affair. I - the 'I' being you, being all of others - wake up to a bugle that announces the day's war. Toast vs cereal. Idli vs Uppittu. Red vs blue. Lover vs spouse. Living vs existing. Mundane vs mundane.

I don an armor, a different one every day, to suit what battle has been called for that day. You have to prioritize you know. A city can be unforgiving at times like this. The metal in these buildings, the skies, in these roars is what kills you on the frontline. Even when it keeps you alive, it takes you away. The metal, garnished with your dreams and individual minds, *preparing a feast for metal the master*. But before I am battle ready - they

don't leave me a choice - let me have five minutes please. That is all Mahmoud Darwish asks for. That is all I need too, just five minutes, to do that one thing that matters. After that, I don't care - they don't leave me a choice - I will battle the day, the world, you.

I need five minutes to place this dawn, or my share of it, on its feet and prepare to launch into this day born of howling. I was born in a coffee estate. I grew up on the way it smelled. And right now I want the aroma of coffee. For it is only the aroma of coffee that I have between this morning and the chaos that will soon take over on the streets and in the nerves of my mind. *The aroma of coffee so I can hold myself together, stand on my feet, and be transformed from something that crawls, into a human being.* After that coffee, we can go, the day and I, looking down the streets for another place, a safe place. A safe place where someone else will fight my biggest wars for me, wear my armor and keep me safe.

For this, I need five minutes. *I have no personal wish other than to make a cup of coffee.* I know coffee well, just in the

way I know instant coffee is not coffee, it is just branded, stamped and sold as coffee. When you know coffee, you also know that you have to make it with your own hands. It is solitary, silent. The day's first coffee, *the virgin of the silent morning* will absorb any words a bearer of your cup on a tray will utter. It could be a simple greeting, yet, words burn the coffee. When you know your coffee, you know you don't want it to burn.

Coffee is the morning silence, early and unhurried. When a war is waging outside your window, waiting for the five minutes to be up, waiting for you to pick up your gun, your mind open the front door and let it in, the silence is all you have. Don't be greedy now. Five minutes is more than what most people can ever fantasize about. These five minutes devoid of the shelling, the screams, the roughing up of your naked body comes with a privilege that you have acquired. Let's not examine by what means you came upon this luxury.

In the only silence in [1] which you can be creative, be yourself, in these five minutes, you get to pour some water into a small copper pot with a mysterious shine - *yellow turning*

brown - and you place that over a fire. It is not a wood fire. Even with your privileges you are not allowed that. Not here, not in the midst of your wars.

The street is outside. Some wars have begun long before you were



up. Peep down and you see them. Fruits and vegetables are being sold from carts by vendors; they lavish praise on the pathetic wares they peddle, hoping you,



or someone like you, will pay a few coins extra. The reality of the street can wait. By now, two elements, *fire coloured green*

but for the man still lying across my bed by the window, fast asleep and snoring, I would add two spoons of coarse sugar.

The bubbles in the pan settle down when the granules fall through, but spring up again. Only one substance will settle them now, coffee - a *flashy rooster of aroma and Eastern masculinity*.

Remove the pot away. The way you orchestrate the dialogue between hand and liquid will tell you the flavor of the day. Maybe you will get to stay in and escape it all, maybe you'll have to walk into the streets, ready for life, prepared for death. They say that the hand that makes the coffee reveals the person that stirs it.

Therefore, coffee is the public reading of the open book of the soul.

Is history not bribable? Asks Darwish. The history we know is



and blue and water roiling and breathing out tiny white granules that turn into a fine film and grow, have made contact. I do not take my coffee with sugar,

full of bigger wars, of big kings
and big armies and bombs that
efficiently obliterate my personal
history, your personal history.
Who documents our wars? *No one
wants to forget. More accurately,
no one wants to be forgotten.*
Some build forts to last longer
than the name that will be
forgotten. Some give birth,
burdening children with the task
of carrying a name forward. But
what if one wants to forget?
Forget an old identity, an old
name, an old mistake?

*Is there enough forgetfulness
for them to forget?*

But enough of this talk of the
coffee shops of Beirut where
identities are measured with
pieces of paper. I will make my
coffee now. Conquerors of my soul
and my body cannot deny me the
aroma of coffee, at least not the
memory of it.

Take a spoon of ground coffee
from the blue jar you bought, on a
whim - it cost you a day's wage -
and let it fall on the spluttering
surface of the boiling water.
Stir, clockwise, up, down. Add
another spoonful. Stir, up, down,
counterclockwise. Add another
spoonful. Remove the pot from the
low fire between these spoonfuls,
bring it back. Dip the spoon, lift
up the dissolving powder, let it
fall back. Smoothly.

If only wars could be melted
away in a spoon of hot water.

Repeat the above. Water will
begin to boil again, your *blond*

coffee buoys on the surface,
threatening to sink. Turn off the
heat, let the metal scream and
be crushed outside, the vegetable
vendors can wait too. Pour the
coffee into a little white cup:
*dark-coloured cups spoil the
freedom of the coffee.*

Then a first cigarette, flavoured
with existence itself, with this
first coffee.

*No coffee is like another, and
my defense of coffee is a plea
for difference itself.* There is
no flavor called coffee, just like
textbooks in school describe how
water has no taste. Coffee is
not a concept. *Every house has
its coffee, and every hand too,
because no soul is like another.*
Like water it meanders and bends
and sighs and runs over many
surfaces. It wraps itself around
me and melts with longing to go up
the mountain, the way I long for
you. *It does go up the mountain as
it disperses in the gossamer of a
shepherd's pipe taking it back to
its first home.*

Like the sound of drums that a
dying fire carries into the faraway
hills, the aroma of coffee is the
offspring of the primordial. Its
journey began thousands of years
ago, like yours and mine.

*Coffee is a place. Coffee is a
breast that nourishes men deeply.
A morning born of a bitter taste.
The milk of manhood. Coffee is
geography.*

I have made my coffee. I have no
other excuse now.



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The war slipped through the
creak in the window panel and has
come into my bedroom now.

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In these times of war, in Syria,
Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere
within each of us, this piece pins
down to the making of coffee that
small sense of normalcy we all
seek to move on from one day to the
next. The writing has been derived
from Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for
Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*.
The sentences in italics are direct
quotes from the book.

Deepa Bhasthi is a writer based in Bangalore, India. Her
works are available at www.dbhasthi.blogspot.com.

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[1]. *Sujith S N*, Stains of Stimuli, watercolor on paper, 44 x 58in, 2014

Sujith S N is an artist living and working in Mumbai, India