

Poems

Lisa Suheir Majaj

the coffin maker speaks

At first it was shocking – orders flooding in faster than I could meet. I worked through the nights, tried to ignore the sound of planes overhead, reverberations shaking my bones, acid fear, the jagged weeping of those who came to plead my services. I focused on the saw in my hands, burn of blisters, sweet smell of sawdust; hoped that fatigue would push aside my labor's purpose. Wood fell scarce as the pile of coffins grew. I sent my oldest son to scavenge more, but there was scant passage on the bombed out roads. And those who could made it through brought food for the living, not planks for the dead. So I economized, cut more carefully than ever, reworked the extra scraps. It helped that so many coffins were child-sized. I built the boxes well, nailed them strong, loaded them on the waiting trucks, did my job but could do no more. When they urged me to the gravesite – that long grieving gash in earth echoing the sky's torn warplane wound -- I turned away, busied myself with my tools. Let others lay the shrouded forms in new-cut wood, lower the lidded boxes one by one: stilled row of toppled dominos, long line of broken teeth. Let those who can bear it read the Fatiha over the crushed and broken dead.

If I am to go on making coffins, let me sleep without knowledge. But what sleep have we in this flattened city? My neighbors hung white flags on their cars as they fled. Now they lie still and cold, waiting to occupy my boxes. Tonight I'll pull the white sheet from my window. Better to save it for my shroud. One day, insha'allah, I'll return to woodwork for the living. I'll build doors for every home in town, smooth and strong and solid, doors that will open quickly in times of danger, let the desperate in for shelter. I'll use oak, cherry, anything but pine. For now, I do my work. Come to me and I'll build you what you need. Tell me the dimensions, the height or weight, and I'll meet your specifications. But keep the names and ages to yourself. Already my dreams are jagged. Let me not wake splintered from my sleep crying for Fatima, Rafik, Soha, Hassan, Dalia, or smoothing a newborn newdead infant's face. Later I too will weep. But if you wish me to house the homeless dead, let me keep my nightmares nameless.

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