

MAHMOUD DARWISH

A PLAIN SONG ABOUT THE RED CROSS

Translated from Arabic by Salma Harland

Has everyone, everywhere,
Arms that bring forth bread, hope,
And a national anthem?
Why then, dad, do we eat oak twigs
And sing, in secret, our love poems?
Dad, we're safe and sound
In the arms of the Red Cross.

When the flour sacks are empty
The moon becomes a loaf in my eyes.
So why, dad, do we eat oak twigs
Dipped in crumbs and yellow cheese
In the stores of the Red Cross?

Dad, will the olive groves protect us
When it rains?
Will the trees make up for fire?
Will moonlight melt the snow
Or burn up the night's ghosts?
I ask a million questions
And see stony silence in your eyes.
Answer me, dad. Are you my dad
Or have I become a son of the Red Cross?

Dad, do flowers grow
In the shade of the Cross?
Does the nightingale sing?
Why did they raze my small house?
Why, dad, do you call for me and go on calling
Whenever I dream of the sweets and raisins
In the stores of the Red Cross?

They have denied me the swings of daytime,
They kneaded my bread with mud, my eyelashes with dust.
They took away my rocking horse,
They made me carry burdens from my father's back,
They made me carry the night like an eternity.
Oh, who has exploded me in an instant into a stream of fire?
Oh, who has robbed me of the dove's nature
Under the flags of the Red Cross?