



**Cahit KOYTAK**

## **Despatches to my Gazan Son**

*translated from the Turkish by **Mevlut Ceylan and Rogan Wolf***

**To Prof Ahmet Davutoglu**

*The architect and virtuoso practitioner of the “new world” politics of Turkey,  
which stands almost alone in having the courage and foresight  
to shoulder the burden of the conscience of humankind  
in face of the tragedy of Gaza.*

**Translators’ note :**

*The original of this poem was written in Turkish in 2008  
during the events in Palestine of that year.  
Cahit Koytak began writing the poem on the tenth day of the conflict.*

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**Published by :**

*Yunus Emre Institute  
in association with Core Publications*

# I

Yusuf, my Gazan son,  
I belong in the company  
of old Palestinian poets.  
No matter that I write my poems in Turkish.  
Since ten days ago  
along with every other poet in the world  
awake and warm-blooded,  
I have been Palestinian too.  
All of a sudden  
my songs and qasidahs of the past 40 years  
have begun to smell of Palestinian soil.

Not blood, gun powder, tears, no,  
nor rage, hatred, vengefulness -  
Don't get me wrong -  
for ten days now  
it is Jacob and Joseph  
Moses and David  
Jesus and Muhammad  
who have filled  
my mind, my heart and all my being,  
as if I too were made  
of Palestinian soil.

Reality is knowledge compatible with its object,  
say the philosophers,  
and intuition, they say,  
is emotion which embraces reality.  
Joseph, my son,  
if these definitions are correct,  
my intuition tells me that  
since ten days ago  
the only information, the only news  
that is true and trustworthy  
is carried on the wind like an inspiration  
to poets and to pregnant mothers.

Yes, every day in Palestine,  
the murderers of the prophets  
kill a thousand times ;  
every day they kill  
Moses a thousand times,  
Jesus a thousand times,  
Muhammad a thousand times ;  
every day they burn Abraham with phosphorus bombs ;  
yet still in Palestine  
and all over the world  
every day  
since ten days ago  
hundreds and thousands  
have been born...

## II

Yusuf, my Gazan son, grief speaks  
the same language all over of the world  
but so too hope is a language spoken  
across the globe.  
Just so, hate speaks the language of death  
and love the language of life,  
all over the world  
in every epoch of human history.

I belong in the company  
of the world's old poets.  
I thought I could decipher  
the language of the grass, the birds, the stones.  
(What presumption ! What disappointment!)  
Yet whenever I try to speak  
in human words  
of the children of Gaza,  
my voice begins to tremble  
and grows hoarse.  
If you only knew  
how I have struggled  
to draw forth words  
from my mouth  
that can serve  
the pure and perfect voice  
of the human heart  
in face of the bombed schools  
and the bombed homes and the hospitals -  
this ruination of human conscience.

If I could only give true voice  
to that fine and fragile sound, that delicate chord  
that connects humanity to God !  
Delivering it to my tongue's tip  
is like placing a thread in the eye of a needle.  
And even if I found the words that fit  
I cannot achieve the tone required,  
the precise timbre, and my words emerge  
like any old patchwork of rags  
to be grabbed at, to staunch the wounds of Gaza.

And more even than that, I find it hard  
to reach with my poetry's voice  
the children who live elsewhere on the Earth.  
I fail because so many wear headphones in their ears,  
I don't know which rock songs they listen to,  
praising freedom, democracy and songs against war.  
Let them just keep listening, you will say.  
It's ironic, isn't it? Maybe it belongs.

Some herd sheep and goats  
to graze in the mountains.  
Let them carry on – it belongs.  
Some are at the theatre or in amusement parks,  
some at school.  
And some are begging in the streets.  
And some sell handkerchiefs  
some *simit*,  
and some are singing hymns in the temple.

But so many children  
are just sitting at computers,  
only a few in quest of knowledge and skills etc.  
All of this is ironic, isn't it ?  
But maybe it belongs.  
Perhaps it is necessary  
that a game remains just a game.

But while they occupy themselves  
with their studies and works and games,  
I think of you, Yusuf, you and your brothers,  
and of the child-murderers  
and the mother-murderers in Gaza,  
your poor country,  
who do not let you study and work and play  
and I, as poet of the grief of the world,  
I want to ask myself :

We the whole of humanity  
and the Earth's population of *djinns* and angels  
and Satan the rebel and the oppressor,  
and Almighty God,  
what play are we performing in this theatre,  
what play, through the centuries ?  
What is this play, besmirched all over in blood?

All these dead babies  
all these dead children  
all these dead mothers  
and all these audiences  
watching in silence.

This silence which fills the heavens  
and besmirches paradise  
and Hell beneath the earth,  
and purgatory between  
underground and overground -  
with blood.

In which play are we performing?  
In which play, again and again?  
In which play written in hell?

### III

Yusuf, my son,  
I am an old poet of Asia Minor.  
Yet, as I have said,  
I couldn't make my voice heard  
even among the world's children  
even among the kids of my own neighbourhood.

Yes, my poems could not make themselves heard  
among our kids,  
these poems which seek to climb  
through the highlands of language  
to its very summit,  
carrying dreams as huge as mountains  
and ideas hanging over me like avalanches  
and always climbing doubled up,  
always short of breath.



When with a poet's selflessness of soul  
I open my mouth  
and say 'great ideals of humanity,'  
the wind blows my words away,  
blows them away from the tanks,  
panzers and human safaris,  
away from prying eyes  
and missionary entrapments,  
to those happy days when Eve and Adam  
made love freely  
in the smell of each other  
and Heaven wandered,  
not in the sky but on the earth,  
and then the wind hurls my voice yet further,  
thousands and thousands of years beyond,  
until it is seeded  
with the melodies of the Tree of Knowledge.

And yet further the wind hurls my voice  
thousands and thousands more years into the future  
when humanity has divested itself  
of its tribal inheritances  
with their trails of blood  
and put away its once indestructible State  
with its impregnable castles, inviolate institutions,  
brave armies and ornamented flags  
(from the times of tales and legends  
on the other side of the mountain of Qaf),  
and reaches at last an ultimate maturity  
in which the world is one complete community  
and we are citizens of one world.

I say hundreds and maybe thousands of years  
but don't let this frighten you;  
in the halls of eternity, it is said,  
a thousand years are but a day  
and a hundred years, it has been said,  
are perhaps just a dawning moment.

And whatever a hundred years means  
in the halls of eternity,  
So Creation means the same.  
In God's eyes, in divine reckoning,  
God's quickening of Man's clay  
took less than a second.

And what the years have taught me  
you must learn too,  
that the great ideas, the great plans of Creation -  
so as not to fall on humanity like an avalanche -  
may come by ways unused and unforeseen,  
descending the hillsides from the far high mountains  
by roundabout paths.

## IV

You have suffered so much, Yusuf, my son,  
You've suffered too much.  
Palestine is too small for such suffering.  
Ask for the world, for all of the Earth  
to be without walls, without barbed wire, without mines  
and without guns, for all of us.

You have suffered so much, so be the first to sing this song !  
Lay your ear to the ribs of the future,  
be the first to announce this mighty ideal,  
this rhythm of the heart and of the mind,  
and transform it into a manifesto.

Say “a world, a world, a world without borders,”  
Say “the world without walls and free of arsenals,”  
Say “a world without guns, without guards,  
for all of humankind!”

You have suffered so much, yet you can do this -  
we let you suffer so much, yet you can transform  
everything you touch, all and everything  
into pure gold  
every idea, every thesis you published  
or never divulged,  
you can turn into a heavenly manifesto.

You have suffered so much, yet you can transform your agony -  
those tragic tunes on the lips  
of your brothers and sisters  
dying on the pavements or under the ruins,  
while asleep in their cradles  
or clustered round their skipping ropes  
or catapults,  
you can transform all this  
into the greatest oratorio of humankind.

You can transform the prayers of the poor  
chanted in all the houses of God,  
fermented in heart and throat like a storm  
growing wave upon wave,  
and sweeping as its goes

all the tanks and panzers  
the rockets and mortars  
and all those guns  
away from the mind, the heart  
and the tongue of Man,  
away from the warmongers, the arms-dealers, the gangs,  
states, castles, prisons and concentration camps,

Kings, emirs, long serving presidents  
yes, you can gather all of them  
into a hurricane of roses.  
You can transform all griefs,  
all prayers, all cries,  
into a flood of rose petals  
covering the dead of Gaza  
in their long unbroken sleep

and feeding the hungry, reconciling the wounded,  
sheltering the homeless, loving the unloved,  
unifying earth and sky in the hearts of Man,  
through a season of roses, a rose prosperity,  
a rose community, a rose people.

You have suffered so much, yet you can do this.  
We let you suffer so much,  
No one in the world more than you  
deserves in the name of all of us  
to talk both with God and the Dark Angel.

Speak out and yield no ground.  
Ask for the Earth  
in the name of all the children of the Earth.  
Speak out and yield no ground.  
Demand the Earth, Yusuf my Gazan son,  
don't settle for some new  
concentration camp  
with 'State of Palestine' inscribed above its gate.

This word 'State', this need for a 'Flag,'  
All these pastures of bones sprayed with blood,  
don't let them dazzle you  
don't let them deprive you  
of your dreams.

The long grass and thorns in the graveyards here  
are sustained by the blood of the young,  
Yusufs on one side, Josephs the other  
their lives surrendered each side of a fraught border  
but lying now side by side, in peace.  
Do not forget this!

And still at those borders  
where together the dead on either side  
sleep in peace,  
vast sums are spent on war each year  
to prevent embrace  
between the living.  
All those resources committed  
to damned guns  
and licensed murderers and assassins  
could feed the world's starving for ten years  
and reduce the world's suffering by half ;



could triple the resources of love  
and add to mercy five-fold  
could transform half the police stations  
into theatres  
and half into libraries,  
and could convert half the prisons  
into movie halls  
and half into workshops...

## VI

In the end, it makes no odds  
who holds the gun.  
Always, the only winner  
is the arms dealer.  
It is simply no use  
resorting to the gun  
again and again  
to realise your ideals and dreams.  
Force corrupts and rots  
and reduces everything  
to vicious and mean concerns  
and rusty instruments  
with nowhere to run to  
except the scrap yard.

It is the arms dealer and the hired killer who say  
“Attack, for instance,  
is the best form of defence”  
adding, from habit,  
“to the point of extermination, if possible.”  
They are only being logical  
and some say “realistic”.  
But let us expel them at last.

Let us push aside these masters of death,  
let us cast from our minds these death dealers  
and before we ask of humankind, Yusuf, my son,  
don't you think that first we should ask  
the wolves and the birds, the stones and boulders,  
the trees, the waters and the mountains  
the mice and elephants, the ants and the long grass,  
and all the other occupants of the world,  
Nature herself,  
in short, the whole of Creation?

The guest who destroys  
and burns down the dwelling of his host  
leaving a bloodbath behind,  
commits a crime that has no place  
in Nature's law or in the laws of Heaven.  
It dishonours humankind and defies God's will.

Yusuf, my son,  
we must defend the way of civilised humanity !  
While there is still time, we must fling this savagery  
into the past, and clean from the mind of Man  
the definitions and terminologies of the gun,  
this primitive approach to making history  
this competition in the art of killing,  
these systems and institutions of weaponry and war.  
We must eliminate the evil guns and armed institutions,

the secret and dirty organisations,  
the professions and schools which teach how to kill,  
the gross ideals which honour death.

Let us turn death's tide  
and create a free zone  
demanding of friend and foe  
that they take part in a true way of human being !

For the pursuit, defence and treasuring of peace  
is our plain duty. The need for peace  
is so obvious, it almost blinds us.  
Yet it requires of us  
to be as pure as truth  
and to show high courage and absolute sincerity.

No doubt, people can die in this cause too ;  
but to die or to live ...  
to die today or in fifty years' time –  
of course they are not the same, the difference is real.

But each of those deaths can be forgotten with equal speed  
if they fail to add to the beauty of wholeness,  
the beauty of humankind,  
the beauty of life, the beauty of death.

## VII

Do not allow them to put their limits upon our dreams !  
Neither our dreams nor our ways of thought...  
What has befallen you now  
is an opportunity for you  
on behalf of all of us :  
do not assent to, do not allow  
the soul of Man to be besieged.

Do not acquiesce, do not let it envelop you  
either within your being  
or your life without !

Do not allow yourself to be sealed off  
as if in a coffin  
to be kept away from other souls, other lives,  
other plays, other scenes,  
from great dreams,  
great thoughts, great stories,  
great adventures!

Mankind has suffered so much at the hands of 'saviours.'  
Do not allow anyone to rescue you,  
do not allow them to turn you  
into some 'liberated' lamb  
and your land into some paddock  
of liberated lambs ;  
do not allow them to keep making you  
pay a price  
for dying at home and in your own bed.

Do not allow them to treat you as an object.  
Do not allow them to buy and sell you as their property,  
the saviour and his men,  
the president and his men,  
and other little caesars,  
small sized gods  
and their men made miniscule !

## VIII

You love the land of your birth, I understand this,  
the land which gives you suck until you die  
and will take you to her bosom past that end.  
Of course you must love her.  
It doesn't need saying.  
You must love her, of course,  
as much as you love your Mother,  
sometimes even more passionately,  
with even more ardour.  
I understand this.

And you may have to die  
to protect your Mother from abuse  
or to defend the honour of your motherland  
and the dignity of humankind.  
In doing so you will be  
defending who you are,  
your meaning, your blood ;  
And you must give your life for that,  
without hesitation.  
There is no need to ask why.

Love of mother, devotion to motherland  
pride in nation, respect for flag....  
that's fine, Yusuf, my son, that's all right.  
But everything has its measure and its limit,  
there's no place for frenzy or furore  
and everything deserves your respect  
and everything in its place has its own beauty.

But, if there are those  
who would want to make a charade of this  
then a religion,  
then a technique for herding people  
into a corral of servitude  
then, Yusuf, say this, say this :  
“Not I, gentlemen, count me out !  
I'll not be part of this show !”  
For we cover up our betrayal of ideals  
by making them holy  
or turning them into myths.



Let the whole Earth be your motherland,  
Yusuf the Gazan, oh my son,  
let the sky be your flag.  
And let your nation be  
all the children of Adam and Eve  
who know how to walk their road  
with heads held high  
like your ancestor Abraham.

## IX

So do not look back.  
Having crossed that sea, whose waves parted,  
having passed through that fire, whose flames drew back,  
do not now resort to some new golden calf  
or silk, linen or cotton icon  
or shoddy unicorn  
or phoney phoenix !

After all these sacrifices,  
ask for the whole world  
not just for Palestine  
but for a world without borders,  
for a world made solely of earth and sky,  
for all the world's children  
and for all the world's poor !

Perhaps it is my old age  
that makes me repeat my words.  
At my age people repeat the same  
old thing many times  
as if in spite of Herakleitos,  
like river water  
washing over the same stepping stone,  
always moving, yet always with the same sound.  
I shall repeat myself too, Yusuf from Gaza, my son.  
I shall say again to you :

ask for a world with no walls, no borders!  
for a world whose only weapons  
are the mind, heart and tongue  
and where rose petals are the only bullets fired ;  
ask for a world without exploitation of man by man  
ask for a world where man is not tyrannised !  
Ask for a world ruled not by tyrant and *Taghut*  
but by God.

For despite all, the heart of the present age  
may be large enough  
to hold this passion, this aspiration ;  
the spirit of the present age may yet have sensitivity  
enough to be crowned with this halo, this burden ;

the maturity and knowledge of good  
which Man can learn from our long history  
may yet be enough  
to realise this holy purpose.

I say “a world where no man dominates another” -  
this is important!

Ask, my son, for a world in which souls meet  
and talk to one another,  
and share their work  
and break bread together,  
where like flowers they share the sunlight  
the water and the moonlight,  
but make no attempt  
to dominate each other.

Do what the prophets did :  
speak with a low voice  
and say you don't want power!  
So that the value of power should fall  
through lack of a buyer  
in street and stock market,  
do not ask for power.

Do what the prophets did :  
if you have to die for the sake of freedom  
leave no heir behind you  
except God !  
Neither melik, lord, nor king,  
neither kaiser nor sultan...

You have suffered and we made you suffer.  
This is the test for all of us.  
But you, Yusuf, stand at the forefront.  
It is for you to start out  
on this great venture  
which faces the whole of humankind .

And if a mountain blocks your path -  
listen, this is important -  
do not seek to 'conquer' the mountain's crags like an enemy.  
Just walk around its feet,  
picking the flowers on its slopes !

X

It is better that you know in advance,  
that they will say, it is all a dream.  
It is all a fancy, they will say.  
It is all a Utopian fantasy.  
Listen to everyone until the end  
but don't say 'I hear you.'  
Just carry on dreaming!

First they'll make you an object of ridicule,  
then the madman of the village  
and then they will turn you into a black sheep.  
Don't worry.  
Carry on dreaming!

There are those who dream only at night  
and in their sleep  
and forget their dreams in the waking day.  
But beware of those who dream  
in the daytime.  
It is they who can change themselves,  
it is they who can change the world.

Humankind places its good dreams to the fore  
and its nightmares to the rear  
while walking the road  
that leads to the greatest dream of all,  
the most real  
the most rich of colour...

Did not God, the Great Artist,  
breathe His soul into the raw clay  
to create an apprentice, a disciple,  
to add his own high thoughts,  
their images and harmonies,  
to the great poem of the Earth ?

The High Master, He who created  
Life from Un-life,  
Light from Darkness,  
blew on the clay from his own soul  
and as that first cell he made  
began to lighten with life  
it started to dream.  
It grew, dreaming good dreams.  
It grew, it grew...  
and then divided,  
and divided and divided

and as it divided  
the dream  
grew and grew  
increasing so immensely  
that it couldn't be contained  
in the one heaven

and so descended to the Earth,  
and there, being now the greatest  
and the most exquisite and complex of dreams,  
it passed beyond the realms of growth  
and became Mind  
ready to enter Time.



## XI

Weeping with the many, lamenting,  
vowing revenge, Yusuf, my son,  
burning the photos and effigies and flags  
of the enemy  
in the public square...

I cannot say  
to those who want to share your pain,  
they should not do it.  
For it dishonours the name of all mankind  
that we leave the children to die in Gaza.  
To lead the most righteous and upright life  
is not enough  
so long as we leave the children  
to die in Gaza.

Reality is a burning coal. It scorches.  
Hands cannot bear it  
without burning.  
Only the surest mind can bear reality  
without burning away  
without letting go.

As soon as the embers kindle and begin to glow, right away  
most handlers drop reality  
to the ground  
then stamp on it  
clenching teeth and fist...

Sometimes, they allow  
the fiery, burning feelings  
the fiery, burning words,  
to pour away and scatter,  
which, had they only held on,  
might have resolved themselves into an idea,  
a solution, a panacea.

Their anguish is so great, I cannot say  
they shouldn't do it.  
Slaughter is unbearable.  
But that response may lead the murderers  
to see rather the helplessness of suffering  
than the strength that comes from being in the right.

And it may give more pleasure  
to Israeli civilians  
who with monitors and cameras  
go for picnics at night  
illuminated by the flames of Gaza  
under its bombardment.

And it may legitimise the silence  
of the more remote spectators  
as well as those close in,  
namely, the other sons of Yaqub's house,  
your step-brothers from Egypt, Jordan and Hejaz  
who look for water  
to douse the flames of their shame.

I think, Yusuf my son,  
that the real victory  
is not to curse or swear at your enemy  
or burn his image or his person  
whichever of these you find.

Real victory is to open the gate of time,  
open the gate to freedom and virtue,  
open it to everyone without discriminating,  
open it even to your enemy  
open it, if possible, *with* him...

Take life to your enemy, not death;  
this way, enmity will be the loser,  
not your enemy;  
not you, nor anyone else...  
Let amity be the victor,  
let concord resurrect the dead...

## XII

This wind that brings both grief and hope,  
let it bring my voice to you  
whispering and singing  
through the olive and the fig  
and the date trees!

This wind that carries heartbreak and hope,  
let it also bring my voice  
through the beautiful gardens  
where the children and the mothers of Gaza  
wander without fear or concern!

This wind, this wind, the soul of time,  
this wind, the breath of Moses, Jesus, Mohammad  
the breath of Abu Salma, Mahmud Darwish,  
Kafka, Roni and Edward Said,  
let it pass, let it pass through  
the hearts of the children of Palestine  
scattered around the world and the heavens  
and bring my voice to you !

This wind, passing through Yakup, Yusuf and Bünyamin,  
who were slaughtered in Sabra and Shatila,  
and passing through Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin  
who were burned in Auschwitz,  
let it bring my voice to you.

This wind, let it not reach and rest only with Palestinians,  
but pass through the Yusufs of Bosnia  
who were buried in their thousands in Srebrenica  
under the eyes of civilisation,  
even under the supervision of civilisation ;  
and pass through the Indians uprooted in the United States,  
and the Armenians lost on the roads of Asia Minor,  
let that wind pass through  
and hurl their ashes and their dust  
into the faces of the murderers , the instigators of crime,  
and those who cover it up and obscure the evidence ;  
let that wind pass through  
and bring my voice to you.

I rummage through the books, the pages of time,  
the archives of Earth and Heaven,  
the fingerprints of death on dusty shelves...  
to find a place in time that matches  
the mass murders in Gaza.

I cannot say these crimes, this savagery,  
have no precedent.  
Man's record is unending and most terrible !  
Since the misdeeds of Cain, his forefather,  
he has always slaughtered  
brethren, neighbours, partners,  
anyone who reminds him of his weakness,  
his injustices, his cowardice...

Only yesterday, one million, Yusuf,  
were killed in Iraq, I don't forget,  
how can I forget!  
Before that, one and a half million  
were slaughtered in Algeria.  
And I do not forget the Balkans,  
Vietnam, Chechnya, Hiroshima.  
How can I forget, how can we forget!  
Other Yusufs, those recently released  
from the bottom of the well,  
can I ever forget them !  
The ancestors of Malcom X,  
the ancestors of Martin Luther King,  
the forefathers of Obama,  
can I ever forget any of them !

(Even if I do forget, I shall be reminded straightaway  
by my grandson Mehmet Eren  
who became two years old last month  
to establish a freer world  
with his peers who live in Gaza.  
And if he can't find the words, his father or mother  
will remind me on his behalf  
of his friends who are black,  
of his friends sloe-eyed,  
or who come from the great western prairies,  
or far east, or far north).

Let it go through all of them,  
all of them, this crazy wind.  
And let it be sure to pass through President Obama  
and particularly, around his heart, forty times  
before it enters his mind.  
And then let it leave him and enter America  
to bring that nation to its senses.



And when it comes to its senses  
let the MGM lion shed its skin  
and like a stray cat, let it howl three times,  
crying out in its great pain  
on behalf of mankind  
as if in sorrow for all these happenings...

And let the wind pass on from that faraway celluloid  
wiping its eyes with the handkerchief of conscience  
and wander, moaning and weeping  
in the streets of Gaza, over the mass graves,  
and among the ruins of Fallujah, Darfur and Kabul,  
carrying my voice to you.

Carrying my voice among  
the unseasonable dead  
in their shrouds, their coffins and graveyards,  
carrying my voice among sound-minded madmen  
who do not recognise differences of flag and homeland,  
carrying my voice among the eternal wanderers,  
exiles and vagabonds,  
carrying my voice to you.

Miles away from mouldy books,  
mouldy mentalities, mouldy museums  
miles away from the mummies and the tombs,  
let the wind bring my voice to you !

Just as when a fire, or disaster,  
strikes the neighbourhood,  
you'll find poets jumping out  
into the streets in their pyjamas,  
having to share this agony,  
so now, this poetry-loving wind  
has taken a crazy old poet's heart for a walk  
in his slippers and pyjamas  
through the streets of Gaza.  
A wind that tries to make sense  
yet cannot hold back the tears  
as it wanders in and out  
of this plain song  
for plain people  
who also struggle  
inward and outward,  
let this wind  
bring my voice to you,  
Yusuf of Gaza, my son !

## ADDITIONS

### I

While death goes to work early in Gaza,  
here in Istanbul,  
this most beautifully named of all cities,  
this softest-hearted  
and most tearful city in the world,  
the eyes of the morning  
open like wounds made with a nail  
on the cross of this new day.

And when evening falls again  
after hours of distant shelling  
another twilight spreads like a scab  
on the dying conscience of Man.

In the places where Death still plies its trade  
with tanks, rockets and armoured masks,  
Life is rehearsing.  
It will prepare a way for righteousness  
and open highways to far horizons  
to make our venturing sure.

From fear of the wolf,  
the god of Zion  
hides his flocks of sheep in the barn  
and they huddle there, close and poky.  
When there is no violence left to commit,  
I fear the day will come  
when he'll grab and strangle  
the whole flock  
one by one  
and eat them there  
by the door.

Just so,  
the same Baal of Zion,  
god of this concentration camp  
which we call Israel,  
will one day declare  
that yet more protection is required,  
and he'll make them eat  
their own manure.

Show compassion for those sheep,  
Yusuf of Gaza, my son,  
and for the sake of the Almighty,  
the Shepherd of the world,  
try all the ins and outs of sorrow  
both known and unknown.  
Take pity on them.

Have mercy upon them,  
as Yusuf, son of Yakub, had mercy  
on his brothers who transgressed  
and gave them shelter -  
in that oldest and most beautiful of stories in the Quran,  
the story of Yusuf...

I'm not saying, "Let's shuffle the cards  
and share out the world all over again".

Of course not.

We need to say clearly what we mean.

Let us summarise, Yusuf, my son,  
what it is we want to say to all humanity :

*Let everyone put back on the table  
those things which you have taken from the Earth  
and from Heaven.*

*or, let's say, taken for safe-keeping  
from Earth and Heaven,*

*the things with which you were entrusted  
the tasks which you were entrusted to fulfil.*

*Let's have everything on the table.*

*Whoever in existence has arms or wings,  
or eyes and eye-brows, or heart and soul,  
and especially whoever has lungs,  
let him replace them,  
let him return them to God's service.*

*And all together, in brotherhood, in company,  
let's sit down afresh at the table of existence  
whose generous and merciful host  
keeps offering his plenty  
to the feast of human life !*

*January 16, 2008*



## A LETTER TO JOSEPH

*To my dear brother Mehmet who suggested that  
“Despatches to my Gazan Son”  
are incomplete without a letter to Joseph.*

# I

For twenty days in Gaza  
we saw what you did, Joseph,  
we saw you burn and destroy  
houses, families...  
We saw children you made homeless,  
we saw children with no fathers and no mothers.  
Thus we witnessed your power  
and your skills, Joseph,  
we became aware of  
your knowledge, wisdom and art,  
but we couldn't see your face,  
we couldn't see your face.  
Where is it?  
What has happened, don't you have a face?

Where do you hide it?  
Do you hide behind an Israeli tourist  
coming to celebrate *Hanukah*?  
Or under the glare of the bombing of Gaza?  
Where do you hide your face?  
behind phosphorus bombs  
or your pleasure in 'setting the town alight'?

Do you hide it behind  
the philistine and arrogant politicians  
who haven't read Nelly Sachs in their lives,  
Kafka or Canetti,  
Buber or Rogan Wolf,  
who are professional killers?  
Do you hide behind media cover,  
these great satanic lie industries?  
Where do you hide your face?

Day by day we have seen what you did, Joseph,  
for twenty four hours  
under the command of death in Gaza.  
We have seen the wonderful things you did,  
the art of killing, the best examples since Auschwitz,  
implemented better, perhaps,  
than in the films of Oliver Stone, Spielberg..  
Such perfection only masters can achieve.

It was only your face, Joseph,  
only your face we couldn't see.  
Where is it, what happened to it?  
Don't you have a face?

Do you hide it behind  
the seven year old Teyyube  
who looks for her mother and father,  
her sisters and brothers,  
her red festive booties  
and rag doll among the ruins?  
do you hide it behind small Teyyubes  
and small Yusufs?

Where do you hide your face?  
Behind the children of Gaza?  
Behind those beautiful children  
wailing now,  
their faces better suited  
to smiling and laughing.  
More loyal, perhaps, than anyone in the world,  
they serve Him, they hold firm.

## II

The old men who sit in darkness  
put a mask upon your face,  
put a gun into your hand, Joseph,  
install you in tanks, and planes  
and send you to kill  
the children of Gaza.

The old men who sit in darkness  
with a secret knowledge  
in their hearts and souls  
that their sins are irredeemable,  
they turn to you as accomplice  
or to make you complicit.

With your Palestinian twin, sitting together  
in the same coffee house,  
the same university hall,  
in front of the same fire in the refugee camp,  
sitting and listening to each other,  
you, the two of you, Yusuf and Joseph,  
reflections of one another,  
you are two faces of one story  
which God wrote in God's own language.  
The old men do not wish it to be noticed.  
That's why they put a mask on your face  
arm you with guns  
install you in tanks and planes and send you to Gaza  
to kill kids.

The old men do not want  
Yusuf's brothers, Joseph's brothers,  
whistling to each other in play,  
flying kites on the same hill,  
in the same city, in the same square,  
singing freedom songs in shared joy.  
The old men do not want you to hear their voices  
and you do not see their faces,  
elders of Zion, trading death, who put your face in a mask.  
give you guns,  
install you in a tank and in a plane,  
and send you to Gaza to kill kids.

You, all the sons of Palestine,  
come together and remove  
all the borders,  
and all the observation towers along the borders  
and police stations, mines, concrete walls,  
and paper walls, oil walls, currency walls, media walls.

The old men, tribal elders whose mouths  
smell of graveyards,  
who do not want you  
to meet with other children of the world.  
Moloch and his Men,  
Moloch and the sorcerers,  
Moloch and the temple guards,  
they put a mask on your face, Joseph,  
arm you with guns  
instal you in tanks  
put you in planes  
and send you to Gaza to kill kids.



### III

In a refugee camp that is called Israel,  
to keep you, Joseph, my young friend,  
the old men who sit in the dark  
promise you the whole of the Middle East.  
Their voices you hear  
but alas, the faces  
of Moloch's sorcerers  
you do not see.

The wall of hate was built  
to keep you both captive  
trapped in further walls of hate and revenge  
with your Gazan peers.  
Perhaps the men in the dark  
promise you the whole of the east,  
the whole of the west  
the whole of the Earth and the heavens.

For a life which is already yours  
what a small price to pay,  
just think, what a small  
and disproportionate price.

Just think  
what an unjustifiable price this is  
for a heart already yours,  
for a soul that has to remain  
with you and is yours alone!

Such meaninglessness!  
Such vanity and tastelessness  
Just think:

The world is yours  
and no one respects you!  
The world is yours  
and no one trusts you,  
the world is yours  
and no one loves you!

The world is yours  
but in reality you are non-existent.  
Agent Smith creeps in and out of your skin,  
Agent Smith is alive  
instead of you!

Plastic and nickel,  
cables, cables, cables,  
digital nerve networks,  
wonders of electronics,  
unmanned satellites,  
a dream of humanity that excludes Man,  
the Promised Land without Man.

And the mind will return  
to a heaven without Man.

What narrow-mindedness!  
What foolishness!  
What brutes!  
Think for a moment, Joseph,  
Just think!

Inside the tanks and flying hells,  
under the steel shells and iron masks,  
as death enters Gaza,  
and descends upon the soil,  
you can feel you're  
the strongest, Joseph,  
amongst the ruins of love and humanity,  
amongst the ruins of Man,  
you can feel  
you are the warrior.

As death enters into Gaza  
descending on its soil,  
you may feel, Joseph,  
you are strong with endless power.  
With a clear conscience you may burn down and destroy.  
You may raze to the ground.

But while you inflict all this,  
it is only by chance that God gave this power to you  
and the power will not last long.  
What has more value than mortality, than life ?  
But this, your only life, is not the only life in the world.  
Can't you see?

You don't know, do you?  
There are power-hungry people  
who are zealots and .....out  
of their minds in Nazi camps, crematoriums.  
You'll be used; they will use your life,  
expend your life on your behalf,  
like scrap metal, an agent Smith.

Will you be dropped into the melting pot of conscience?  
You don't recognize, Joseph,  
you don't recognize, do you,  
that old god of revenge  
hiding behind a pile of Talmud papers  
and bales of money  
and behind those rows of old men  
who sit in the dark.

Sitting in the dark  
in the guilty knowledge  
of lost generations,  
manufacturing new war machines  
and the new golden calves  
of an old tribal God?

V

The lines written for the Palestinian  
Yusuf,  
the articles, the journals, the weighty books,  
and everywhere in the world  
- except in Israel -  
the people walk the walls of their cities  
and they mourn.

There are songs written for him  
and many dirges  
everywhere in the world  
- except Israel-  
in the hearts of the poor.

Let's ask this question now:  
has anyone written articles about you as well?  
Just think, Joseph,  
has anyone written about you?  
A poem, a story,  
or even just a line?

If, for example, a stone from the sling  
of a Gazan teenager  
hit you on the temple  
and you cried out “ten Palestinian lives  
for each drop of Israeli blood!”  
and bombed a school in Gaza,  
Joseph, think for a moment,  
would anyone  
anywhere in the world, including Israel,  
compose a song, a poem,  
or a single verse  
in praise of you?

If you are hit on the temple  
by another catapulted stone  
thrown by young Palestinians,  
and you collapse in a pool of blood,  
squadrons of aircraft will shout  
‘For one Israeli a hundred gentiles!’  
and take off to level Gaza.  
Ask yourself, Joseph, would anyone  
in any part of the world, including Israel,  
cry out in mourning for you,  
a dirge, a song, or even just a line?

Just think, Joseph, think on all these things  
and on the unerring scales of art  
weigh yourself  
and your deeds!

## VI

I must descend into your soul, Joseph,  
into two thousand years of hurt.  
From exile in Babylon to the Holocaust across Europe,  
Man's soul, from the beginning,  
has had to find its paths  
and your path was always through deserts,  
and the bitter places of the edge and the outside,  
the endless, lonely roads,  
the parched valleys and infertile hills.

I know.  
Because of this:  
you remained a stranger to other travellers  
on this journey in which you have been treated so ill.  
This is true.  
In the name of mercy,  
neither fountain nor brook  
revealed themselves to you.  
Until today, you have suffered all the ups and downs,  
with the result that your conscience,  
like your heart, is bruised and wounded.



I understand you, Joseph, I do understand,  
the ruins and hell all around you,  
you want to see a freed heaven in the midst of hell.  
I understand.  
To watch you is like watching in the mirror  
there, in flames,  
your soul's sufferings.  
It becomes a requirement  
to make others suffer in retaliation  
and to punish the stranger who lives outside your walls.

But it could have been so different:  
after all the sufferings  
of those two thousand years,  
your return to Palestine,  
your grandfather Abraham's homeland,  
should not have been  
with tanks, cannons and planes  
disgorging death,  
but camels loaded with knowledge  
and with wisdom.  
This could have been your return to the motherland,  
your heart purified  
more than everyone else's  
of lust for selfish ease.  
More than anyone else's  
your heart could have been beating  
trustingly, wisely, Joseph,  
in the name of all downtrodden people.

You could have emerged  
from all the misfortunes of your life  
honourably, as guide.

You could have come together with other  
Palestinian children, in common cause,  
for the benefit of all poor kids,  
like the Prophet Jacob's son Joseph  
in fulfilment of the dream to 'be a prince in Egypt!'  
with a clear and open face and conscience.

You could have returned, Joseph, like a Prince,  
a Messiah, an Elia, a summer's wheat harvest,  
returned like the waters of the Nile  
or like poetry flowing and gushing  
feeding and restoring  
the earth and the sky.

Have you thought, Joseph,  
that where the children are  
there is God.  
From within their eyes  
everything, but everything, they see.

Think of this, raise your head  
without removing your gaze.  
Look straight ahead.  
Let's see if you can look straight  
into the eyes of a Gazan child  
into the eyes of your own childhood  
then into the eyes of God?

Look, let's see if you can look,  
all the dead children in the eye,  
all the dead babies in the eye,  
all these dead mothers in the eye.

## VII

And talk in trust, truth and openness  
of the things that were done to you and the things you did  
and thus return hope to the fields of ruin.  
Here among these ruins  
I wanted to help you, Joseph,  
to find and raise your face again.

To tell these things to Yusuf of Gaza  
would be to say too much.  
He knows it well  
and it has all been said.  
Anyone can tell you  
that it's all been said.  
Even those talkative crows  
that spoke with Cain at length,  
they'll tell you.  
And now it's all been said.

ENDS

## Glossary of names and titles used in the poem

<b>Buber</b> , Martin (1878 – 1965)	Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher, religious thinker, political activist and educator. In 1923, Buber wrote his famous essay on existence, <i>Ich und Du</i> (later translated into English as <i>I and Thou</i> ). He also translated the Hebrew Bible into German.
<b>Bunyamin</b>	Benjamin, the prophet Joseph's younger brother.
<b>Canetti</b> , Elias (1905 – 1994)	A Jewish author who wrote in German. He was born in Bulgaria, and later became a British citizen. He was a modernist novelist, playwright, memoirist, and non-fiction writer. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981.
<b>Darwish</b> , Mahmud (1941 – 2008)	Palestinian poet, regarded as the Palestinian national poet.
<b>Djinn</b>	Supernatural creatures in Islamic mythology as well as pre-Islamic Arabian mythology. The title derives from a Persian word meaning "hidden from sight." In Islamic theology, <i>djinn</i> are said to be creatures with free will, made by Allah from smokeless fire, as humans were made from clay, among other things. The <i>djinn</i> , humans and angels make up the three sapient creations of God. According to the Quran, <i>djinn</i> have free will, and one of their number, <i>Iblīs</i> , abused this freedom in front of Allah by refusing to bow to Adam when Allah ordered angels and djinn to do so. For disobeying Allah, <i>Iblīs</i> was expelled from Paradise and called " <i>Shayṭān</i> " (Satan). <i>Djinn</i> are usually invisible to humans, but humans do appear clearly to <i>djinn</i> . Like humans, <i>djinn</i> will also be judged on the Day of Judgment and will be sent to Paradise or Hell, according to their deeds.
<b>Eid</b> ,	"Festival" or "holiday" in Arabic. The word can refer to a number of Muslim holidays, but without a full name is most likely to mean Eid al-Fitr, the feast which marks the end of the annual month-long fast of Ramadan.
<b>Hanukkah</b>	An eight-day Jewish holiday commemorating the re-dedication of the Holy Temple (the Second Temple) in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire of the 2nd century BCE. Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of Lights and Feast of Dedication. It is observed for eight nights and days between late November and late December.
<b>Hejaz</b>	A region in the west of Saudi Arabia.
<b>Heraclitus</b>	Greek Philosopher, c 535 – c 47 BC. He lived in Ephesus and is famous for his insistence on ever-present change in the universe, as stated in the famous saying, "No man ever steps in the same river twice."
<b>Ibrahim</b>	Abraham.
<b>Kafka</b> , Franz (1883 – 1924)	A Jewish German-language writer of novels and short stories, regarded by some as one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. He lived most of his life in Prague.
<b>Qaf Mountain</b>	Qaf (Jabal Qaf or Djebel Qaf) is a mysterious mountain of ancient Islamic tradition known as the "farthest point of the earth".
<b>Qasidahs</b>	A form of Perso-Arabic lyric poetry. It typically runs to more than fifty lines, and sometimes more than a hundred. The genre originated in Arabic poetry and was adopted by Persian poets.

<b>Margulies, Roni</b> (b. 1955)	Turkish poet, author and translator, friend of the author.
<b>Melik</b>	Prince or King. Originally a title used in Armenia, where it was an hereditary noble title.
<b>Moloch</b>	An ancient Ammonite god, Moloch was worshipped by the Canaanites, Phoenicians, and related cultures in North Africa and the Levant and has been associated with a particular kind of propitiatory child sacrifice. Moloch is connected also with Baal, another object of worship among Semitic peoples and rival of the God of the Israelites. Referred to in the Old Testament as a false god, his worship was seen as a form of idolatry.
<b>Sachs, Nelly</b> (1891 – 1970)	A Jewish German poet and playwright whose “experiences resulting from the rise of the Nazis in World War II Europe transformed her into a poignant spokeswoman for the grief and yearnings of her fellow Jews.”
<b>Said, Edward</b> (1935 –2003)	Palestinian American intellectual and literary theorist, who helped found the critical-theory field of post-colonialism.
<b>Salma, Abu</b> (1906 -1980)	Palestinian poet.
<b>Simit</b>	Turkish bagel, circular, typically encrusted with sesame seeds or, less commonly, poppy or sunflower seeds. It is found across the cuisines of the former Ottoman Empire, and the Middle East. The simit's size, crunchiness, chewiness, and other characteristics vary slightly by region.
<b>Taghut</b>	Arabic word meaning to "cross the limits, overstep boundaries," or "to rebel." In Islamic theology, the word refers to idolatry or the worship of anything except Allah. Taghut also denotes one who exceeds his/her limits, seeking to impose his/her rebellion against God upon others.
<b>Teyyube</b>	Arabic proper name.
<b>Wolf, Rogan</b> (b.1947)	English poet and co-translator of present poem into English. Runs a charity <i>Hyphen-21</i> inspired by Martin Buber’s ideas on the I-Thou relationship ; also a project called <i>Poems for...the wall</i>
<b>Yaqub, Yakub</b>	Jacob.
<b>Yusuf</b>	Joseph.