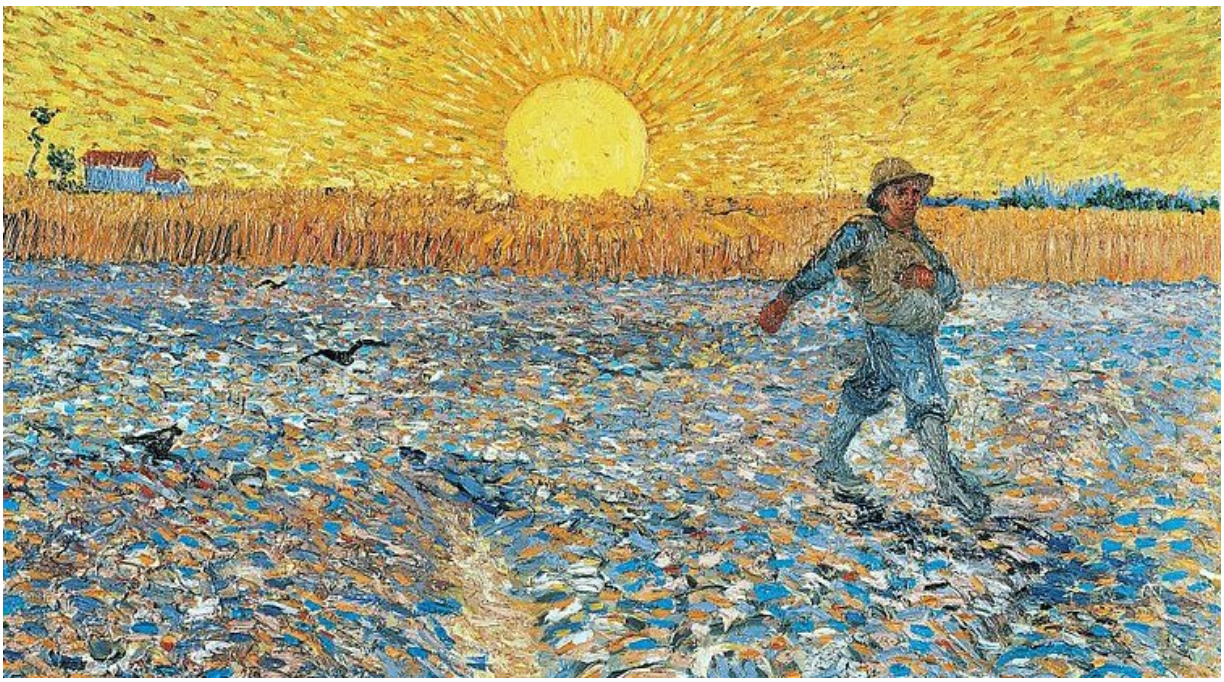
18-04-2018

My name is Sun

My name is Sun

Wa'el Abd al-Hamid
ترجمة: فانيسا بريدينغ



A military defector recounts his remarkable journey from the Assad regime’s army to a rebel brigade in Homs—via Palmyra prison—to exile in Idlib and, finally, menial labor in Turkey, where he still searches for the dignified life he hoped the revolution would bring him.

[Editor's note: The below article was produced as part of Al-Jumhuriya's 2017 Fellowship for Young Writers. It was written by Wa'el Abd al-Hamid based on the testimony of a man named Shams al-Din. It was originally published in Arabic on 19 April, 2018.]

(1)

My name is Shams. I'm fifteen years old, and I really hate my name. I don't know why my parents decided to name me after my grandfather. It goes against convention, seeing as I'm the youngest son in the family, not the eldest.

Actually, my grandfather's name isn't just Shams, it's Shams al-Din. That's how my name is written on my ID and birth certificate, but most of the time I don't go by anything but Shams. If I had to choose between Shams al-Din and Shams I'd choose the first, but I regard that name's meaning as a responsibility I wouldn't be able to live up to. Therefore, I prefer people to simply call me Shams. That relieves me, at least, from the responsibility of the full name's meaning [lit. "the Sun of Religion"], even if it doesn't relieve me of anxiety.

I am beleaguered by both names: the full version burdens me with a responsibility, while the short version's symbolism worries me. What's more, most people consider Shams to be more appropriate as a girl's name, not a boy's. This was especially true in elementary school, which I entered seven or eight years ago. It caused me a lot of pain then, but not anymore; now anxiety alone bothers me with regards to my name. The sun, you see, emits light without deriving it from someplace else, whereas I emit no light but search for it. I move towards it whenever I see it on the

horizon, but it always moves away. The closer I get, the further it moves away, until finally it vanishes.

(2)

I am Shams. Now I'm twenty years old. I live in Homs and I work at a computer repair shop. I consider it a temporary job while I wait either to serve in the military or to emigrate; I don't think this will be my job for the rest of my life. I can't think of any other work right now, however. Who has the luxury of thinking about a future they don't own?

I'm trapped between two choices, shackled from this moment until I am able to reach a decision. Emigration means fleeing; leaving country and family. Thus I chose the "mandatory" honor of serving the flag of the nation.

I took the decision, but at the same time I decided to break the barrier of their forced imposition in my life, even if only symbolically. I decided to shave my head to number zero before they had a chance to. From day one, I won't give them the chance to get their hands on my head.

(3)

A long time has passed since the mandatory portion of my service ended. I'm the Sun who couldn't avoid the prison of serving the "flag." I'm now twenty-three years old. I didn't start a new job with which to build my future, as I had planned. They decided to keep us. The revolution in this country began a year ago and it needs to be extinguished. We, the military, are the fuel the regime will use to extinguish it.

Once again, I'm in a state of siege, and not due to my name

this time. Instead, I'm besieged by the only two choices available to me: I can either defect, or I can stay and work on behalf of the revolution from my humble position. The third option, believed by some to exist, which is to fight the "terrorist gangs," never occurred to me. Fighting one's family isn't an option.

I was able to smuggle some ammunition to one of the small brigades in Ghouta, in cahoots with a Damascene military man, by virtue of my work as the ammunition warehouse's quartermaster in the regiment in which I served. We weren't able to smuggle out a large amount, but I do think it was enough to make a difference. These days, those who carry weapons in defense of the demonstrations are few, and a rebel needs every bullet they can get.

I was very careful not to give myself away, but in the end, I was found out. Impulsiveness is blinding. My Damascene friend was apprehended, the warehouse was searched, and the shortage in ammunition was discovered. They carried out an internal investigation in the regiment, and I tried to explain the shortfall, but it was a ridiculous excuse, believable by no one, especially coming from a person whose city and all its inhabitants were yelling hoarsely in the face of the regime. The price I paid was multiplied.

(4)

My name is Shams, and I'm now in the terrifying Tadmor (Palmyra) prison. As I stand here at the prison door, I have conflicted feelings. On the one hand I'm terrified of the prison and its name, which has been etched into the hearts of all Syrians as a place of unforgettable pain. On the other hand, I am hoping to receive treatment for the boils that

covered my entire body at the military police branch, and later at the military security branch in Aleppo. It got to the point where my clothes were completely stuck to my body. When we all got undressed for the inspection I peeled off not only the boils, but also my skin. I was completely exposed, stripped of both my clothes and my skin.

I faced only a light beating here, one that doesn't compare with what happened to me at the military police and military security branches. The psychological torture was greater, however, when, on my way into the prison, I saw the people being flogged in front of me.

Perhaps I wasn't tortured again because of the jailer's disgust at seeing a body covered with pus… perhaps!

I underwent a medical examination, and the prison doctor decided to put me in solitary confinement until I was cured. Twelve days passed before I was taken to dormitory No. 17, located in the third courtyard. The prison is divided into courtyards, each of which is dedicated to a certain type of crime, each of which in turn is divided into dormitories.

I felt great psychological comfort when I learned from the prisoners I had been placed in a section called "the dormitory of various crimes," which in Tadmor prison custom means misdemeanors, but non-codified misdemeanors—unless the security branches have their own special laws that no one else knows about.

On arrival to the dormitory, I was received by a person called al-Asaasi ("the Chief"), the manager of the dormitory; an old prisoner appointed by the officer. I didn't sleep at all on my first night there. Nor did I think about anything. My mind was swimming in jelly.

Each dormitory had an unlocked door that opened into the shared courtyard, but moving between them was forbidden except for those with prison status, such as al-Asaasi; al-Madkhal (“the Entrance”), who stands at the door of each courtyard; and al-Bukhshi (“the Asshole-related”), in charge of the toilets.

With each sunset the laws of Tadmor were recited to us, the laws informing us what was forbidden. It is forbidden to lean on the wall. It’s forbidden for one blanket to be used by two people. “Sodomy” is forbidden. Sleeping on one’s back is forbidden. Extending one’s feet is forbidden. Speaking is forbidden. Staying up late is forbidden.

I thought life would have been easier in this prison if they’d told us what we were allowed to do. Nonetheless, it was easier than expected, or easier than what I’d imagined when entering, at least. I learned finally that the terrifying Tadmor prison was a different prison; another one sharing nothing but its name with the prison I am in now. Rather than making me feel more comfortable, knowing this made my situation worse. The prison I’m in now is for losers, then; for those who did nothing of any significance, nothing constituting an actual blow to the regime. I had failed; I’m a failure.

(5)

Visits are allowed, but no one visits me. I know that what happened to me left no possibility for my family to trace me. There’s no doubt they’re asking about me, but nevertheless I have my doubts. I sent them messages through the visitors who came to see my prison mates, but to no avail. No one has visited me yet. It’s impossible that

they don’t know I’m here. They must be afraid of visiting me. They abandoned me. I feel a lot of pain, I feel lonely and lost. I sent them one last message and promised myself I’d forget them afterwards: “If you remember that you have a son, he’s still alive.”

Eventually I found out they never received any of my messages. This was confirmed when I saw my brother standing outside the prison waiting for me after securing my release, having gone through major mediations and spending even bigger sums of money. I scrutinized his face for a long time, just as I scrutinized the faces of the people of Palmyra, and the houses, the traffic, the many cars and motorcycles out on the streets of the city. They gave me 48 hours of leave until I had to resume my military service anew. I don’t know the outcome of my judgment because I was never put before a judge in the first place. They just listened to my statements. The money paid by my family took care of the rest.

The permit for the leave is in my left-hand pants-pocket. The prayer beads I made for my mother while in prison are in my right-hand pocket. I made double-sure they were there before boarding the bus to Homs.

(6)

I was able to get to al-Wa’r neighborhood. I am now 25 years old, and it is 2013. I chose al-Wa’r because I couldn’t enter the Old City after it became completely blockaded, and the last open road connecting it to al-Wa’r was closed. I also chose not to move to the countryside of Homs; they advised me not to: the countryside belongs to its people, people suspicious of military men, even if they’re defectors.

Al-Wa’r was the best choice for a place to rethink what should be, and what I should be.

(7)

I am Shams, and I am 29 years old. I’m on the threshold of my thirties. I didn’t expect to stay in al-Wa’r all this time. I didn’t expect the siege; I didn’t expect to find myself besieged once again. Al-Wa’r was an appropriate place for me to do some thinking until I could find out what my options were. Again they surrounded me completely. Again they imprisoned me, but this time the prison was a little bigger, made up of a few streets watched over by many, many snipers. They left me no choice but to wait for a miracle; one that would give me more than one choice.

I spent almost four years in al-Wa’r, in which I did take up arms. I took part in the two main battles of al-Wa’r; the first and second battles of the orchards. Neither of these battles yielded their desired fruits, especially not the second one, which was intended to open the road to Old Homs. We failed. So what’s the use of weapons now?

I discovered that the goal in al-Wa’r was not to liberate an area, or to break prisoners out of their confinement, as I’d dreamed when I was at the military security branch in Aleppo and in Tadmor prison. More than anything else, it was about protecting the area.

During one of my guard shifts, my sister sent me pictures of her wedding. She will be married to her new house, to her groom. At the time, I knew it was the rifle that kept me away from her that night, and so I left the rifle behind there and then, and I’ve remained in waiting ever since; waiting to emerge from the siege into freedom.

(8)

I am Shams. I live currently in a wood factory. I work twelve hours a day. I sleep in the same factory, for there are no houses nearby. The nearest village is a ten-minute drive away, near the city of Ankara.

I arrived in Turkey a few months ago. I left al-Wa'r in April 2017 after the neighborhood's inhabitants were evacuated and forcibly displaced. I didn't wait long in Idlib; just one day after I arrived there I tried to enter Turkey by the smuggling routes. I succeeded on my first attempt. I fancied at the time that I would turn a page and open a new one on which I'd start a real life. I tried to travel to Europe, but I couldn't. I searched for work in Antakya and Istanbul, looking for a job that would give me a chance at a dignified, normal human life, free of exploitation, but all I found was this job.

Work reminds me of military service, imprisonment, and the siege. Everything here reminds me of that, in fact: the specific times for eating; the way food is served; the narrow space in which I live; the monotony of life; the lack of a horizon.

As I was leaving the besieged neighborhood of al-Wa'r, while I was sitting in the green bus, I imagined a certain light on the horizon. The light would get closer and closer, until I was nearer to it than ever before. Now, there was nothing entrapping me anymore; not mandatory service, not a holding cell, not prison or the siege.

But my name is Sun, a name with which I have nothing in common. I emit no light, but I will keep searching for it. I will wait to take it in, even if only for a day; a day in which

I’ll attain all that can be hoped for in this life: love and freedom.