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In memoriam: Hassan Abbas

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A friend remembers Hassan Abbas, a veteran Syrian opposition and civil society figure, who passed away aged 66 on 7 March 2021.

This is not a confession, dear Hassan, nor a eulogy. These are fragments of postponed conversations and letters. Your battle with illness held me back every time I wanted to send them to you. These are disorganized words, which you will

never read; perhaps this is why I share them publicly today.

These are words I swallowed many times over the last few months. They are difficult for me to put in order, and impossible to complete in one go. They are the story of two generations; mine and yours. It is a tale we still struggle to understand, as we try to gather up its pieces scattered by decades of oppression and proliferating defeats.

Where do I start? Perhaps with our first meeting. I was eighteen years old, and you were forty-three. It was the summer of 1998. I visited you in your home in Damascus' Mashrou Dummar neighborhood, with my childhood friend Aws. There, you entrusted me with a mission that would change my life: to tutor your children Yazan and Aram, while you and your wife Zahra were away at work in the evenings. Yazan was in first grade, Aram in fourth. I was about to start my first year at Damascus University, in the Department of English Literature. I was a teenager eager to take off my school uniform and enter university. I was still a child, in truth. You knew that, and later told me that was why you chose me for the task, because you wanted a friend for Aram and Yazan, not merely a tutor. And that is what we became. You made me a part of your family. Feelings of kinship developed between us; a kinship of our own choosing, not one of birth and lineage. A kinship that could not be broken... until death. I know this for certain today.

Ever since that first meeting, your huge library, teeming with books, magazines, films, and, music became my own library as well. In the long hours I would spend there over the next five years, I would read voraciously in a way I came to miss as I grew older, and whenever I (stupidly) felt

pride about knowing a lot. Between your library and that of your neighbors, Osama and Wafaa; the parents of my friends Aws and Mulham; I read everything that came into my hands, from Hegel and Marx to Foucault and Derrida, from Cervantes to Goethe, Thomas Mann, and William Faulkner. I probably misunderstood more than I understood at the time, but it felt nonetheless as though I had stumbled upon a treasure I would do everything in my power to preserve.

Between those two homes, my political consciousness was also formed, as was the case for many young men and women of my generation. In those two homes, separated by just a few meters, I met artists, writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and former political prisoners who had spent years in the Syrian regime's jails. The two homes became an expansive world, boundless in its knowledge and surprises. It was in Wafaa and Osama's home, with you, that I met the secretary-general of the Syrian Communist Party, [Riad al-Turk](#), after his release from lengthy imprisonment in 1998. It was also there that I first met the human rights lawyer [Razan Zaitouneh](#) and her husband Wael Hamade, both of whom were abducted by Islamists in 2013. New friendships were born to which I owe a great deal, such as those with the Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh and his wife [Samira al-Khalil](#), who was kidnapped alongside Razan and Wael.

What I most regret from those days was my repeated stupidity in conversation with you, when trying to show off my scant knowledge. How patient you were, Hassan. And how much your patience helped me understand cultural practice as an act of resistance, and how to create spaces for this resistance at the margins of a country ruled by fear of the military and its intelligence apparatus. Examples

range from the leaflet you asked me to distribute at Damascus University to gather signatures in support of Mamdouh Azzam's novel, *The Palace of Rain*, then under attack from certain Druze clerics for what they deemed blasphemy; to you inviting me to help you organize the "Cultural Fridays" at the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) in Damascus, where you held debates that were impossible to hold anywhere else in the city, in which you always made a point of giving a platform to independent writers, musicians, and filmmakers to showcase their work.

Then came your fervent involvement in the Damascus Spring of 2000, following the death of Hafez al-Assad; a dream that was quickly extinguished. I will never forget the anxious anticipation on your face after you signed the "[Statement of 99](#)," which sent many of your co-signatories to jail. Nor will your tireless work to establish the "Forum for Cultural Dialogue" in Mashrou Dummar be forgotten, where once again you invited me and other young women and men to take part in the organization, attendance, and discussion. Do you realize, dear Hassan, how inspiring that all was for youths in their early twenties? You were so very generous with us.

Do you recall the first film club we started? We had no resources at all. No official licenses, no approvals, no spaces suitable for the purpose. Once again, we turned to Osama and Wafaa's house, with you as our guide: a band of young adults flocking to a living room with a TV to watch the first screening put on by our small film club. You chose Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* as the club's first film. You had the only copy of it, with French subtitles. Of course, none of us could speak French, nor was there fast Internet or DVDs in Syria at the time. As usual, you came up with the

solution: you would dub the film yourself, translating live on the spot. We found it funny at first, but after ten minutes we were engrossed in Kurosawa's monochrome masterpiece, and your cheerful voice translating. Who else could do that but you, Hassan?

Do you remember who else was with us on that day? Shadi and Mulham.

Shadi was three years older than me, and was battling a severe depression he tried to hide from us. I used to sense his tendency towards isolation, and so would insist that he accompany me to events like the film club. He spoke about you and the film for months afterwards, by the way. Two years later, however, he declared defeat in his war against depression, and walked alone one night into the heart of Damascus, climbed an ugly, tall building still under construction, and threw his body down, liberating himself from a burden we could never share with him. You phoned me as soon as the news reached you. You said nothing except that you wanted to see me as soon as possible. I was surprised, even slightly irritated, by your insistence. When I arrived, you asked me, "How are you after the news about Shadi?" I feigned strength, and doubtless seemed insolent when I replied, "I respect his choice." I will never forget what you then told me: "It's okay to grieve, even to cry. It won't diminish your composure." I persisted in my insolence, and did not cry.

A few years later, Mulham—my close friend, the youngest son of your close friends Osama and Wafaa—passed away in his sleep. His heart simply stopped beating. This time, you heard the news from me. I held his girlfriend Sumu as she wept in the morning, while you were getting ready to

go to work. We bumped into you on the street. I told you what happened. Sumu was in floods of tears. You asked us to go up with you to your house, and we did. You sat and consoled Sumu, looking also at me, knowing I was still in shock. Once again, I didn't cry. Young Syrians at that time were dying of sheer gloom in a country steadily suffocating them.

We didn't know then that a revolution would erupt a few years later, followed by an all-out slaughter encompassing all possible forms of death; butchering adults, children, and the elderly alike, to the point that we would lose the ability to count and remember all who left us. No matter how horrific the situation became, however, there was always one thing about which I and those around me were adamant: we did not cry. I did not cry for my dear friend, the brave anarchist [Omar Aziz](#), when the news arrived of his death in Assad's jails. You didn't cry for him either, even though you loved him very much. I didn't cry for Khaled al-Issa, the photojournalist assassinated by Islamists; nor my childhood friend Anas al-Azmeh, whose starved, tortured body I came across in the [Caesar photos](#). Most Syrians around me—who lost much more than I did—were the same. They did not cry, or did so only briefly, as though hurriedly and somehow falsely.

You were one of them, incidentally. You were among those most careful to hide feelings of sorrow or weakness, and to refuse to pause in order to mourn. You always made sure to seem optimistic and hopeful for the better, even when it was clear it would not come. You did it because you felt it your duty to provide others with power and hope. This was a heavy and wholly unnecessary burden, dear Hassan, and I fear it may have brought the illness upon your body,

emaciated by its sorrows and refusal to stop and listen to its own whimpers, even if only a little. We would often say, "Others have it worse than us," and, "I'm ashamed to feel sorry for myself, when I see the pain so-and-so is going through." Never did we carry out the proper mourning rituals merited by the immense loss of our dead, nor even did we grieve adequately for the loss of our homes and cities, when we left them (or when they left us). We never stopped to give any time to grief and sadness. We were so busy the whole time keeping ourselves together, perhaps preparing for the inevitable next funeral. Faced with the deaths of our loved ones, we ran forwards breathlessly, fleeing from our tears for them, stifling our sorrows, which slowly ate us up from inside. The more abundant death became, the more we refused to weep and mourn.

Yet, hold on, why have I gone back to our first meeting? Perhaps I should have started from our final encounter.

It was in February 2019, in Beirut, only a short while before this damned disease colonized your body. More than twenty years had passed since our first meeting in Damascus, during which time our friendship had deepened. You had even become my teacher at one point, at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, where you taught literary criticism for ten years. At our final rendezvous, I was approaching forty, while you were a little over sixty. You lived alone in Beirut, while your wife Zahra was in Dubai; Aram was in Paris; and Yazan was in Brighton: a familiar Syrian story! It was my first visit to Beirut after I had been forced to leave it, when I thought I would never see it again.

Everything had changed. Our dream of change in Syria had

been pulverized, and our world had turned upside down. One thing had not changed, however: how hard you worked to create hope with your astonishing energy to launch new initiatives engaging with young people.

We were walking outside your office on the American University of Beirut campus. In my hand, I held a copy of your latest book, [Traditional Music in Syria](#), as you spoke passionately about a new book you were about to start on representations of the body in the Syrian war novel (which was eventually [published](#) six days before you died), as well as numerous other projects and initiatives, amazing me as always with your capacity for giving. We stopped in front of the new building on campus designed by the late Zaha Hadid. I didn't know how to feel about this bare concrete structure. "Do you not find Beirut suffocating?" I asked as we contemplated it. All our conversations over the previous days had been about the bleak prospects in Beirut, especially for Syrians, whose legal situation was becoming ever more difficult, while their job opportunities were next to nil. Many of your friends and students had already left Beirut, and you felt the weight of their growing absence all around you. Yet you told me, as you led me away from the new building down towards the seafront, "I'm so happy you all left, you're in a much better place now." I smiled, knowing you would never admit or even hint that the situation was bearing down on you.

How difficult it was, Hassan, for you to make us feel, even for once, that we could soothe or strengthen you! I wish you had given us just one chance to be the ones taking the initiative, even if only with a fraction of the love and care with which you surrounded us. Even in the final days of your illness, when the voice notes became fewer and

further between, you were always the first to ask me and others about our own wellbeing. This used to throw me off, and leave me struggling for words. I would swallow half my sentences, and keep them imprisoned inside.

For the more than the twenty years I knew you, Hassan, you were always the most generous of us. You built so many bridges between my generation and yours; I don't know anyone else who persevered in quite the same way. Do you see those who bid you farewell today? They are not only your comrades and contemporaries; not only those of my generation who were your students, or who worked with you or under your supervision. They are also women and men twenty years younger than me, who talk at length about your noble character, and the paths to which you led them and walked with them along; as a friend first, before being their teacher. The world gives us few made from your metal, Hassan.

When I heard of your passing yesterday, I was silent for a long time. It terrified me that I didn't know what to do. What angered me most was that, once again, I did not cry. I exchanged a few written messages with our common friends, but refused to speak to any of them verbally. I scrolled to the phone numbers of Zahra, Aram, and Yazan on my phone, but didn't dare call any of them. I just sent them short messages. That was all I managed to do. My heart was heavy, and about to explode, but my eyes remained dry. Each time I looked in the mirror, they stared back at me lifelessly. My phone didn't stop ringing; it was the many people who loved you, Hassan. But I didn't answer. Thus passed the day: me walking in circles around the house; peering into the mirror to find my eyes still dry; waiting for the late-night hours to go outside without

bumping into anyone. These are the hours you know I like, Hassan. You used to joke that I was like the owls you adored, which you taught me to adore too, whose lifestyle I adopted.

The weather in Berlin befitted a strenuous funeral, like the funerals of all Syrians over the past decade. Dark clouds; rain; an icy wind. I walked my usual routes that night in Neukölln, avoiding the main streets. I went through the unlit parks, then walked beside the large green space of the old Tempelhof airport, also enshrouded in darkness. No one else was walking on that rainy night. I stepped through a hole in the wall of a cemetery I know well, next to the old airport. Sometimes, when lucky, I find owls here. I slowed down my footsteps, wandering around the place, seeking its silent tranquility. The rain fell harder, but somehow I was sweating profusely, as though in fever. Like an eruption of water from the belly of the earth, images of you flew suddenly into my head.

Scattered memories summoned one another from across the many years: your celebration of the food you were so excellent at making; the music you made us listen to on vinyl for the first time. It was from you that I learned to love jazz and Chet Baker. Suddenly, I could hear one of his songs loud in my mind. I kept walking, with no need to see where I was going on the wet grassy ground, for I was no longer in the cemetery near Tempelhof airport: I was crossing the park that separated my parents' house in Damascus, in Mashrou Dummar, from the street where your building was, where Aws' family also lived. I had made the exact journey almost twenty years previously, on a night when the pain of a first love made sleep impossible.

I approached your home, on the first floor, overlooking a side street, utterly calm at this time of night. I felt a sudden weakness in my knees, forcing me to sit in the garden of your house, facing the kitchen window. Here, I felt engulfed in serenity, close to my three homes: my parents' home, where I spent my childhood with my siblings; your home, with Zahra, Aram, and Yazan; and your neighbors' home, where Osama, Wafa, Aws, and Mulham lived. These were the homes I grew up in, where I experienced love and its loss; writing and its disappointments; for the first time. The sickly heaviness vanished from my body, along with my fever. Alone, at that moment, freed at last of every burden, my eyes dampened. I cried a lot, Hassan. I cried as much as you deserved. I cried for all those I was unable to cry for before.

Suddenly, a light came on through your kitchen window, and I saw you, just woken up, a little hungry. I knew you were about to make some shanklish, taking advantage of the fact everyone else was asleep to add some of the red chili that hurts your stomach but you love regardless. I watched you calmly as you prepared this favorite snack. Then you spotted me from the window, and took a step towards me, surprised, asking, "What are you doing here, young man?"

I quickly wiped away my tears so you wouldn't see them. "Nothing, I just happened to be passing by."

You didn't believe me, of course, but you smiled. "Good night, dear Hassan, good night," I said as I walked off. I hurried back home before my mother woke for her dawn prayers and saw my bed empty. I found myself back next to the Tempelhof in Berlin. The raindrops were lighter, but

the streets were still empty.

I came home and started writing these words to you. They came out without interruption or strain. I don't know how I started, but I was aware of writing for you, and about you, and that I would not stop even as the morning light grew stronger, and the rare rays of a Berlin sun shot through my window. It was a sunny day, Hassan, after a gloomy, rainy night; a day befitting a farewell in which the prohibition against mourning had been lifted at last. Befitting, too, a sorrow we require in order not to be destroyed by grief; a sorrow that allows love to overpower bitterness, and acceptance to overcome denial—a sorrow we need in order to return to life. This is my promise to you, Hassan: that I will give this great grief all the time it is due, and will declare myself in mourning for you, in the manner you deserve, while I picture you repeating the sweet words of Emily Dickinson:

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility.

[Editor's note: This article was originally published in [Arabic](#) on 8 March 2021.]