

CULTURE

DRUM SOLO

by Nizar Qabbani

The ruler beats the drum
All the ministries of information beat on the very same drum
All the media services amplify the sound of the drum
Newspapers, both large and small, also work as dancers in a nightclub owned by the state
There is nothing uglier in music than the voice of the state

The official entertainment is sold from carts in the street
like sardines
like bread
like tea
like birth control pills
like blood pressure pills
and like spare parts
The official lying is broadcast on all frequencies
The words of the authority sparkle like the dresses of dancers

No one escapes from the prescriptions of the government
And the medication of the authority
Three teaspoons before eating
And three teaspoons after eating
Three teaspoons before the purification prayer
Three teaspoons following the afternoon prayer
Three teaspoons before the funeral ceremonies
And before the laying to rest

Has there ever been subjugation in history like this subjugation
The drum penetrates the nerves
Oh, Lord!
Grant us patience!

The state has mastered well the art of words
And knows well how to vowel a text*
And knows well how to flex its muscles

There is no worse poetry than the poetry of the state
newspapers
news
commentaries
soldiers
officers
airplanes
radars

A homeland hanged over the antenna lines
A homeland that knows nothing of the technology of warfare but the words
A homeland which still broadcasts the songs of victory about the dead

The state, since the beginning of this century, repeats the drumming
Justice is the basis of rule
Consultation with the populace is the basis of rule
The people, as the constitution stipulated, are the basis of rule

Nizar Qabbani, a reputed Arab poet from Syria, currently lives in Geneva. He is the author of many collections of poems.

Oh, Lord of the Universe!
We've had our fill of the beating of the drum
No one dances to words, except the state
No one commits incest with words except the state
Repression is the basis of rule
The hanging of people is the basis of rule
Police power is the basis of rule
The deification of the individual is the basis of rule
Renewal of allegiance to the ruler is the basis of rule
The putting of words on the post is the basis of rule

Drum, drum

The state displays its charm and ornaments on the wholesale market
No nakedness is uglier than the nakedness of the state

Drum, drum

An Arab homeland
What brings it together since the day of its birth is a drum
What divides its tribes is a drum
Members of the band
the scientists
the intellectuals
the celebrities
and the town judge
Move in rhythm to the drum

The official entertainment comes with suddenness from everywhere
The oil entertainment tries to market the human being
The price of the barrel is higher than the price of the human being
The official entertainment gets repeated like the devil's song
We must move if the Sultan sings
And we must shout in front of the policemen

Ah... Ah...

Entertainment imposed by coercion
Joy imposed by coercion
Death imposed by coercion

Oh... Oh...

Has the singing of the ruler become holy like the singing of God!

* Here Qabbani employs three terms found in Arabic grammar. The first is *nasb* which means the pronunciation of a final consonant with a, the putting of a noun in the accusative, or a verb in the subjunctive. The second is *kasr* which means to provide a word with the vowel i. The third is *jarr* which means to pronounce the final consonant with i, to put a word into the genitive.