

Letter from an unknown writer in Brussels in 2017
to an unknown writer in Brussels in 2117

Arash Chakeri

Dear friend,

I don't know whether you know what I am talking about. I don't know whether the word "friend" still means anything in the time you are living in. As I write these words at my desk, the word "friend" is being destroyed. Tell me, what is the future like? Is it a time when certain words have a deeper meaning or a time when only a few letters of these words remain? I am sure the word "hostility" still exists. It's a strange word that has different meanings in different times and places. For a long time, I pondered its meaning, and just before writing this, while I was looking for it elsewhere, I realized that it lives inside me as well.

I would like to describe the days when I put these sentences together in the chaos of my mind. I am breathing in a time when poetry can still be sold. I am writing about a time when poems come with different smells and tastes, like the flavours in a sweet shop. You know, I have seen poems that had the smell of politics and the taste of stupidity! I have seen poems that had the smell of stupidity and the taste of friendship! I have seen poems that had the smell of tears and the taste of tears! Do you know the smell and taste of tears?

You find yourself at a party in Brussels, smiling at your friends with the pleasant sound of classical music in your ears and the subdued lighting caressing your eyes. Then suddenly you somehow think of a woman in a hut whose husband only left her a gun and a barricade. Then, raising your champagne glass and staring at some vague point in

space, your smile falls down like an unripe fruit from a tree. At that very moment, each sip from your glass has the taste of tears.

On a foggy morning you feel like going for a walk. You put on your headphones and on your way you sit on a bench in a park and take out your pen to write a love song. Then suddenly, you don't know why, you write: "My friend, the poet, was hanged in Iran." You feel sad and this minute of sadness has the taste of tears.

I don't know what the taste and smell of tears are like in your times but I know that the taste and smell of tears differ from one person to another. One always has to experience the taste and smell of one's own tears.

In the light of my cigarette, while the ashes still consume me more than they consume themselves, I write about a time when the latest version of Windows is 10. And ten days ago, ten times I asked myself ten questions and ten times my answer was: "I don't know."

I still prefer the freedom of the wolf to the comfortable state of the domestic dog. And yet, every morning at breakfast, I spread the butter of socialism on the hard bread of the bourgeoisie. But what a shame! I am only a puppet the crows have already seen through. There is a smile on my face but my insides are already filled with straw.

This is Brussels, my friend. Brussels the grey. Sometimes the clouds come down without a warning; they get so near that you can breathe them.

I distinctly remember my first day here. All the trees were hidden behind the soldiers. The smile on my face was more bitter than the coffee in the cup I held in my hand. All the faces were covered with a mask of fear. The rotten fruit from the tree of terrorism had also been exported to Brussels, and the people were so alien to it. They feared the ones who followed the rules of life from a book and believed they were sent by God. As if He had told them that in order to turn life into hell, they needed to deliver a promise of heaven. To me, God looks like a woman who gives birth to deficient children who have to run after their missing parts all their lives. I don't remember how many times I was born. I may have been a worker in a Chinese mine, a monk in an Indian

temple, a prostitute in a nowhere place or a poet in Iran! I don't remember any of them but I do remember each time I was born deficient, yes I do remember that.

Sometimes you understand the truth but, like me, you cannot write it down despite your efforts. Sometimes the truth cannot be written in any language or any writing. Words come from your mind to your lips and there, you don't know why, they refuse to come out.

This is Brussels, my friend. Sometimes it's like nowhere else. I like the people; little things make them happy and sometimes they sympathise with you, if only with a few words.

I went past a street which tickled my curiosity. Go by that street. In order to see, close your eyes and listen. Can you hear? Marx and Engels are talking to each other! If you don't believe me, each cobblestone in Rue de l'Alliance will testify.

This is Brussels, my friend. Sometimes I miss the sun as much as I miss my mother. I don't know why you are in Brussels now but I can dissect myself to find this sentence: "I have come to beg freedom for my poems." Tell me, what do people beg for in your times?

I wish I knew what you are writing about. As for me, I always write about dreams that happen in the middle of nightmares. Every night, I fall from a tall tower and at the last minute a friendly hand catches my hand. I may seem a little mad to you! But most people in the past were mad, you know. Sometimes, in the middle of a dream, I am startled by the voice of a ticket inspector in a train. There is a lock on his lips but I can still hear his voice, I don't know how. He only says one word: "Ticket?" I automatically put my hand in my pocket and give him my ticket. When he returns the perforated ticket, I glance at it:

From: Brussels

To: End of the World Station

The person sitting next to me is calling me. When I turn around, he holds up a plate with two identical sandwiches. “What are these sandwiches?” I ask. “Cactus jam”, he answers. Lately, I often have this dream and I always wake up before getting off the train.

I know that you will read all this madness and that you will experience your own taste and smell of tears. At times, you put on a mask of fear and at times you are having a nightmare. You are falling from a tall building and at the last minute a friendly hand grabs your hand.

Try to find some information about me! Perhaps my body is resting somewhere in Brussels. This time I may have gotten off the train at the End of the World Station before dawn.

Translated from the Persian by Maryam Askari

Arash Chakeri (b. 1982) is an Iranian singer, writer and poet. He has been increasingly critical towards his country's government, also calling for freedom and democracy as an activist. During the last years he has been regularly attacked, arrested and threatened. In 2015 he decided to leave his country. He is currently relocated in Brussels with the accompaniment of Passa Porta International House of Literature as host organisation in the framework of ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network), with the support of the City of Brussels and of ProtectDefenders.eu.