

( ( ( Stench

**Amir Zuabi**

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*Seven months after my father died my mother was hospitalized. They survived the war together. They survived the loss of family and friends. When the war tore their country to shreds, they and a few others were exiled in their own homes, foreign in their own country. A new name was given to all things but to the old pain they felt when they thought of the orange groves they lost, or a brother they would never see. That war was like a thick glue that cemented their love. It was two drowning people clinging to each other.*

*Then my father died. His heart stopped, at once and with no warning. She seemed lost. She had nothing left, so she drifted. After seven months I rushed her to hospital. She wouldn't eat anymore. She stopped talking and spent her days looking at the wall. She was there for a week and then she died.*

*When I was clearing the house after the ceremony of forty days, I moved some of her clothes and then it started. I could smell the layers of time drifting in the air. It gave me a terrible headache.*

*I sat there surrounded by my mother's clothes that had the smells of a life, her childhood and her old age. From that moment every time I walked in her city, in Jaffa, I could smell her life oozing off the walls, in the streets, dripping from the trees in the gardens.*

*I could smell her everywhere, especially near the sea in the new park they built on top of the dump. Ten years after they occupied the land they collected the walls, roofs,*

and insides of our deserted houses, blasted them, and made this mountain of debris. The city grew and the dump was closed. The stench was too strong. It became a no man's land. Years later they covered it with a thin layer of grass.

*But the smells were strongest there.* Through the thin coat I could still smell my mother and the city she loved. I used to sit on a bench for hours and sniff the air. Pursuing every molecule all the way to its origin, through the depth of the stench to the salty bedrock.

*I smell a dead whale beached on the shore.* The old prophet Jonah hiding in the darkness inside the slowly decomposing beast, protected from the others' mockery as he practices his doom prophesies with a mouth full of spit and eyes full of blood.

*I smell the crusaders arriving: the sea a forest of ships and their masts.* Wet legs and heavy swords and big furry horses stomping in the unbearable heat. I smell the wine they drink as they shout "Jerusalem!" and the silvery shiny chainmail on Richard protecting his lion heart.

*I smell the Turks chasing the rebel prince Al Daher Omar* down the coast. Sheep fur and leather whips, oiled moustaches, perfumed tobacco in pipes, and cruelty mixed with calm.

*I smell the short man and his triangle hat ordering* four thousand prisoners of war to pray their last prayer, the surge of fear as he gives the order to kill them all with

bayonets. Dead bodies up and down the shore, swollen by the salty sun. The sea chokes on air poisoned by this rotting flesh.

*I smell the Brits at the time of their mandate; they smell funny, like ice cubes and long-legged glass. Like leather boots and long coats. Like grass so green the green becomes solid. Of skin so white it hurts your eyes.*

*I smell a sky burning with rockets in a war that took our country and gave it to them. Twisted metal and broken glass contorts and fragments into nothing. The nothing comes into your mouth and gets stuck at the top of your throat and everything you eat and everything you drink and every breath you take and every word you say tastes of defeat.*

*And then a new scent. Foreigners boiling cabbage and vodka. Sour cheese and chicken liver, salty herrings, and pickled onions. They tickle your nose, like short shiny knives, and you look around in fear.*

*Then dry gardens and yellow days of sun. Mint and the hands of my mother when she held my cheeks; her headscarf, and oil frying filling the house when she does fish and parsley.*

*Boxes of jasmine plants and orange orchards.*

*The autumn after the war acres and acres of orchards were unpicked because there was no one to pick them. The skins of the fruit rotting on the trees whitening slowly and a*

strong acid spreading through the air until they fall off exploding, sending their fermenting juice everywhere.

*Everything had a smell of dispersion.*

*The things we said to the ones we loved mix into the mountain of industrial garbage — plastic bottles, rotting food, chemical barrels, and our deserted houses. Dead fish mixes with cheap perfume on damp shirts, the grease of Brilliantine and disco, guns tucked into belts and opium-fuelled nights, hands punctured by needles and backs with knife wounds, the cries of prostitutes and men dragged to the mountain to be shot. Anger mixes with the feeling that there's nothing to do.*

*Underneath the grass everything is bubbling. The pressure builds and builds and one day it will all burst and cover this land with a thick layer of dust. Nothing will smell of nothing. Until other people come and make more smells.*

Amir Zuabi is a playwright and director working in London and Palestine. He is artistic director of Shiberhur theatre company and has worked for the Young Vic theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Vlaamse Opera, and many others.

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