

North Nicosia, 26th July 2005

It proved to be the hottest day to date - in the high 40's Celsius. As always my wanderings brought me back to the café outside the Saray Hotel, at the heart of the Old City. Deep under a canopy of trees the temperature dipped slightly, helped by a faint breeze that seemed to come down one of the roads leading into the square. I'd ordered my usual coffee and sat watching the street. My thoughts, however, drifted towards you and that time we'd gone up onto the hotel's roof to look across the dereliction of the 'Green Line' into Southern Nicosia. How long this half-reverie lasted I wasn't sure, but slowly I became aware of the events happening around me. A young Anatolian boy - about nine years old - with a scabby nose and tattered dusty clothes had appeared from nowhere. He was standing stock-still and utterly silent, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, with one of the café's other lunchtime customers. There was no verbal communication between them and yet a silent exchange was underway. Without lifting his eyes from his food the man, as if performing a ritual, pushed a small part of his meal to the side of his plate. In response the boy deftly popped the offering into his mouth and slipped away.

Glasgow, 10th August 2008

Today, over my morning coffee, I read the news of the death of Mahmoud Darwish. I found myself thinking of his writings, of his love of coffee and of the images that he wove around its substance. At the height of the terrible Israeli shelling of Beirut in the 1980's he wrote of his desire for both coffee and stillness, and of his yearnings to return to his homeland: "...for my mother's bread and my mother's coffee." I thought, too, of that time when you, I and I sat together at ease over coffee in the old Cypriot seaport city of Famagusta. Do you remember? Beirut was again under attack from Israel - the papers were full of the details and images - and the refugee ships were once more crossing the sea towards the relative safety of Cyprus. The café where we were seated was right by the Venetian city walls and their fifteen-metres height, whilst not blocking the sunlight, obscured any view of the harbour, the disembarking refugee ships and the open sea that lay between us and the Lebanon. With both the view and the horizon lost to us we seemed to be suspended in a timeless world (of coffee); one without a vanishing point, where the intense sunlight and the heat conspired with the ancient stones and azure sky to flatten space and render time and history into something unknowable.

Ipswich, 17th July 2015

A walk in the early evening sunlight back towards the city centre had brought me to a Turkish restaurant. Apart from a family group celebrating a birthday, the place was quiet. From my table I could observe both the family's intimacy and the locals going about their lives on the street. Originally a neighbourhood built for Ipswich's 19th century artisans, the area was now clearly also home to a diverse mix of cultures. As I sat with a coffee I found my thoughts drifting between the ghosts of my own family's past and the current odyssey of migrants from the Muslim world across the Mediterranean Sea and into Europe. You will remember that a part of my family had once travelled here to find employment and a better life, and I found myself reflecting on my day spent sifting through records trying to trace their movements. My forebears, it seems, had the fortune to settle and prosper here, much like the shop and restaurant owners in the locality now seem to be doing. Others, as my search revealed, were not so blessed. Without any livelihood they were forced to migrate between parishes seeking work, food and shelter until, as a "poore stranger, walking", they could go no further. Declining in health and will, some perished leaving little in the way of possessions or documents to link them to their family name or to any past.

Oxford, 11th November 2015

Sitting outside the café in Broad Street, I remembered the last time we were here. We came to see the sculpture collection in the Ashmolean's basement. The cool detachment of the casts contrasted with the warmth of the autumn sun up on the Museum's roof terrace. Over lunch we'd talked about *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley's tale of loss and loneliness written after the deaths of her husband, Shelley, and her friend Lord Byron. I told you how her hero, her *alter ego*, travelled across Europe fleeing a plague, losing all his companions along the way. He found himself to be the last man alive in Rome with only the company of statues who looked upon him "with unsympathizing complacency". Today, by coincidence, it was announced that a lost "poetical essay" by Percy Bysshe Shelley, written in 1811 while he was a student at Oxford, has "come to light" in a private collection. Banned for its seditious content, it raged against war, nationhood and the disdain of the wealthy for the poor. Shelley was sent down for expressing his longing for a better world and the print-run was destroyed. This one surviving copy has been returned to the city. This news drew me to visit Shelley's memorial in his old College. There, the tragedy of his drowning off the Mediterranean shores lives on in the form of a naked, seemingly dripping, white, marble effigy. How telling that only in death can a man so at odds with convention be safely embraced.