Do Not Wrong the Dead!

al-Nida, 20 April 1948

He was not, that morning, in any mood for backgammon, as he usually was whenever he met his own usual rivals at their club, once the forenoon light had risen. He was normally quick to respond, whenever one of these rivals invited him to a game; he might well be the one to issue the invitation himself, singling out this or that friend, challenging him to one of those countless rounds idle men waste some of their own heavy hours on; or he might wake up owed a score, or owing one, and challenge his own opponent to a rematch, or be challenged to one, to settle whatever defeat had parted them the evening before, when night fell, and the business of work, or the business of leisure, drew them away from the game.

But that morning he had no mood for the game at all... he invited no one, and answered no one's own invitation, preferring, instead, to sit and talk, and listen, without much real effort, light or heavy. His own friends noticed this listlessness in him, noticed he was listening to their own conversation with only one ear, hearing at times, and not hearing at others, understanding a little, and failing to understand a great deal — taking part in whatever they were discussing only faintly, distractedly, as though he had brought only his own body to their gathering, sending his own self elsewhere, or having his own self drawn away from him toward some genuinely pressing matter, sought out in some unknown corner of the sky, or some distant corner of the earth!

Once this had gone on long enough, one of his own friends finally called out to him, half laughing: "What's the matter with you?! You've been preoccupied with something genuinely serious all day today." He answered, his own self gradually returning to him, his own tongue turning slowly in his mouth as he spoke: "I am preoccupied with nothing light, nor anything serious — I am simply exhausted, worn out. I spent a sleepless night, or very nearly one, tasting sleep only in the briefest snatches — and you yourself were the very source of that same sleeplessness I suffered through the night, and the very source of this same distress I have been suffering all day today!"

His own friend answered, half laughing: "Me?! How on earth was that?" One of the group, dissolving into laughter, recalling their own secondary-school days, added: "They say that..." — and the whole group

then turned to the exhausted, worn-out Pasha, wanting to know his own story, to understand why he had gone sleepless through the night, and miserable through the day...

But the Pasha remained genuinely distracted, his own tongue tied, a pale smile fixed upon his own lips, one straining to affect cheerfulness while never quite escaping its own gloom. When the group finally pressed him for an answer, he said to his own friend, in a listless voice: "Do you not recall that line you recited yesterday, when we were discussing something we had read in the papers?" His own friend answered, smiling:

Do not wrong the dead, however long the interval —
for I fear, on your own behalf, that you may yet meet them.

The Pasha said: "That very line. Know, then, if it pleases you at all, that I met some of the dead this very night." At this, the whole group dissolved into continuous laughter, and the Pasha grew genuinely uncomfortable with it, nearly leaving the gathering entirely, had some measure of calm not returned to the group. Some of them, though, went on saying to one another: "How did he meet Death this very night? The living never meet the dead while they themselves remain alive — one can only meet them in the world to come, once one has departed this present life. That is exactly what Abu al-'Ala' himself meant, nothing else."

The Pasha said: "I do not know what Abu al-'Ala' himself meant — but I met some of the dead this very night, and not once, nor twice, but several times over, Abu al-'Ala' himself among them. I grew so genuinely uncomfortable with meeting them that I leapt from my own bed, fled my own bedroom, and forced myself into whatever work would keep sleep at bay until the night finally passed, and morning came. I left my own house this morning genuinely uncomfortable with both sleep and wakefulness alike — finding, in my own exhaustion and fatigue, enough to make sleep genuinely appealing to me, and finding, in my own anxiety and fear, enough to make sleep genuinely repellent to me."

One of the group said: "A mere confusion of dreams." Another said: "Why not consult a doctor, then?" A third, drawing a small box from his own pocket, said: "Take one of these tablets — once you lie down after lunch, you'll find yourself drifting into a calm, restful sleep that will lift the weight of your own sleeplessness, and the weight of whatever exhaustion you feel now."

The one who had recited the line said: "But tell us your dream — who knows, we might well find an interpretation for it, and that same interpretation might well prove better than consulting a doctor, or taking medicine."

The Pasha said: "I heard this same line, and I do not know why it settled itself so firmly in my own heart, refusing to leave me, and I refusing to leave it, for the rest of that evening — refusing to leave me, and I refusing to leave it, from the moment we parted until I reached my own house and lay down to sleep. It kept spinning in my own heart, exactly as a spinning top a boy has set going keeps spinning. Had I not resisted with real, determined effort, it would have kept recurring on my own tongue, continuously — but I forced myself to bear with it, tied my own tongue against uttering it, and tried to turn myself away from it, toward some other poetry, some other passing thought, but could not manage it. I simply found myself drifting into sleep, having already forgotten one of its two hemistichs, while its other hemistich kept recurring within me:

...for I fear, on your own behalf, that you may yet meet them... may... may... may yet meet them...

Then I lost consciousness of myself entirely, and found myself in a place I recall nothing of, except that it stretched vast, its own limits sprawling far and wide, the eye reaching its farthest limit without ever meeting anything to halt or bound it. A light shimmered across this broad, open expanse — neither bright nor brilliant, but something pale, very nearly reaching darkness itself — a light that, all the same, spread through the heart a genuine sorrow, a genuine grief, a genuine anguish.

And I see scattered groups here and there, speaking among themselves only in whispers — I see them talking, but hear nothing whatsoever of what they say. Then I see our own friend, the very one who had recited Abu al-'Ala''s own line to us, after you had read us what the papers had published of it — I see him rushing toward me, exactly like a child fleeing headlong from some evil pressing close behind him, and, once he nearly reaches me, he makes a gesture toward me, one carrying a certain fear in it, as though seeking my own counsel — and I have scarcely thought to greet him, or ask him what troubles him, before I see him suddenly stop still, as though his own feet had become glued to the ground. I look, then, and see two figures I recognize, and you yourselves would recognize too, approaching calmly, a smile on their own lips carrying a little anger, and a great deal of mockery. One of them walked

until he reached our own friend, stood at his right side, and seized his own right ear; the other stood at his left side, and seized his own left ear — and the two of them began twisting his own ears, hard, while he writhed between them, wanting desperately to free himself, and finding no way to do so. One of them says to him: 'You have attributed to me words I never said.' The other says to him: 'You have attributed to me deeds I never did.' Then one of them says to him: 'You have spoken of my own heart with things you had no real knowledge of.' The other says to him: 'You have squandered whatever right to my own loyalty was owed you.'

He writhes and squirms, wanting to draw back, or step forward, but managing neither; wanting to shrink so small he might merge with the very ground, if only to free his own ears from their own grip, but cannot; wanting to complain, or apologize, or ease some part of his own pain by simply crying out, but cannot manage even that — nothing but genuinely alarming expressions playing across his own face, depicting a terror, a dread, and a pain beyond any real description. And a calm, dignified man, one we all recognize, stands not far off, watching, smiling quietly, saying nothing at all. I made to hurry toward our own friend, hoping I might turn some harm away from him — but then I heard a voice, and turned, and saw a blind old man seated on the ground, his own upper body bent down over his lower, his own fingers idly toying with the dust, reciting poetry I had never once heard before — poetry I woke from my own sleep, startled, still remembering entirely:

Whatever befalls you in your own worldly life, the moon and sun will never once abandon you —
its own end resembling its own beginning, and you rise and fall each day within its own wonders.
The arrival of the young, the passing of the grey-haired, the abandonment of a home, and the settling into a grave —
when I speak of the impossible, I raise my own voice; when I speak of certainty, I lengthen my own whisper.

One of the group made to speak, but the Pasha continued, saying: "I woke from my own sleep genuinely uncomfortable with this same dream, in no doubt whatsoever it was nothing but a nightmare — so I got out of my own bed, paced my own room back and forth, occupied myself with some reading, until I felt the need for sleep again, and lay down once more; and no sooner had I drifted off than I saw this very same scene again, jolting back to wakefulness, terrified, returning again to reading,

then to sleep, then to wakefulness again... I did this four times over, until I finally despaired of any real rest, left my own room, took refuge in my own study, and spent the rest of the night there. My own family asked why I had gone to my own study so early, before the usual hour for work, and I hid the whole matter from them, easing their own worry, claiming I had simply stayed up late over some work, and become so absorbed in it that I forgot the night, and sleep, entirely."

He then turned to the one who had recited the original line, saying: "Do you see now? You yourself are the very source of the sleeplessness I have suffered, and the distress I am suffering from even now." His own friend answered, a sly, mocking smile on his own lips: "From now on, I shall never recite you poetry again once night falls — but I do advise you to consult a neurologist, who might well restore your own calm, and to relate your own dream to Sidqi Pasha, who might well, on hearing it, think twice before speaking of the dead in his own memoirs:

Do not wrong the dead, however long the interval —
for I fear, on your own behalf, that you may yet meet them.