

A SONG FOR SEAWEED

By Haytham El-Wardany

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A SONG FOR SEAWEED, 2026

Herausgegeben von Kunstraum Memphis

im Rahmen der Ausstellung „We are telling all of you, but we are not telling anyone else“
mit Noor Abuarafeh. © 2026

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Do you know the tale of the turtle who drank the sea? The story goes that there was once a little turtle who possessed a strange power: her shell would heat up whenever any danger came near, the sudden sensation causing her to abruptly switch course and swim off in another direction. The older turtles, knowing nothing of this shell and its powers, put it down to stubbornness, that the little turtle simply wanted to swim where and how she pleased. And because food was scarce and swimming was often long and arduous, these elders had no time at all for anyone who held them up. Each time the little turtle went off course, impelled by a sudden heat that even the seawater couldn't cool, they wouldn't wait for her, would swim straight on. "Drink from the sea!" they'd say as they left her behind, and she would get frightened and paddle as fast as should to catch them up and keep diving down into the depths. Then things got trickier: the shell's reaction was no longer confined to imminent threats, now it could be triggered any time she took the wrong route, by every misplaced word that came her way, and every time she tried to bolt, to escape that heat, the same reproach would ring in her ears: "Drink from the sea!"

Time passed, and the poor little turtle was unable to understand why no one paid any heed to her shell's warnings, almost constant now as the world went from bad from worse: less food by the day, the air tainted, the water poisoned, the passing seasons and compass points gone haywire. She learned to uncomplainingly endure the growing heat of her shell, chewing silently on whatever sustenance she found, until one day, overwhelmed, she rocketed to the surface and, opening her mouth, gulp-gulp-gulped until she'd drunk the whole salt sea down to the last drop. Maybe this, at last, might put out the fire in her shell. Turtles old and young were revealed, staggering across the seabed; schools of fish and pods of whales and smacks of jellyfish trembled and writhed in search of water. When they caught sight of the little turtle they asked her where the sea had gone. She told them she had drunk it. They were stunned. "You lunatic, what have you done?" they roared, but the little turtle just turned her back and held her tongue. So they started to plead with her that she do something, and quickly, too, or else all of them would die. They pleaded and pleaded until at last she agreed and went to join the rest of the creatures, a motley throng ringed by the petrified branches of coral, by barren plains of sand and rock and piles of sun-dried seaweed.

And they started to think.

What is to be done? Restore an ocean? Of course not: that vast sea has been vaporised forever by the genocide in Gaza. My friends call this sea "liberalism" and they say that it was never really that vast, its waters were just thick and sticky. And I think that they are right, that the supposed vastness of that sea was only ever a way to capture the dizziness you felt

as you pushed effortfully across it, through those institutions that would claim that they were serious in their quest for an end to a world without genocide. The institution of speech, the institution of the image, the institution of justice, the institution of labour, the institution of accommodation, the institution of medicine, the institution of food... the institutions of suffering through which we cycle each day with the smell of burning in our nostrils, even as they reassure us by assuring us that nothing's burning. These aren't institutions, but enclosures, managing the processes of segregation and isolation. Why don't we do as the little turtle did, and drink them all down in one gulp, right here and now, then vomit up their burning poisons in the face of those who built them around us? In the vast institutional sea there is no life beside that which draws sustenance from the ongoing genocide. Not that this was much of a secret, once the water had lost any ability to put out the fires and the living had become just numbers, a surplus now redundant and required to burn in silence. Well, not all the living... Both of us know which have been stripped of their names and which are snuggled in the bellies of those institutions. We both know who is being eradicated and who is justifying their eradication. When it is my turn, when the little turtle comes to me, I will tell her that the poet has been murdered, that we must gather up the pulverised names and the shattered fragments of the stars that fell to the arid seabed, and make them into something new: fresh assemblages, alternative institutions that can restore the cycle of life. For instance? The Shark Foundation for preying on capital. The Elephant Cooperative for crushing the foot soldiers of occupation underfoot. The Whale Central Kitchens. The Children's Eyes Housing Charity. The Donkey Shelter for the animals set alight even as they trudged the streets

transporting Gazans back and forth. Down in the seabed the pop and crackle of bones and the roaring deluge of bombs still echoes out. There are thousands of glances scattered like seeds, left behind by eyes that have been burned away.

What will you raise in our meeting? In the meeting of the living dead, a motley throng of angry lovers and smiling labourers, the vast sea's drowned who dig the tunnels and speak poetry? You will say nothing, I think; just sit in a great silence. You imagine Heba Abu Nada, smelling her own burning flesh before she dies and screaming out, in a voice no one will hear, "We shall not forgive!" Or you think of Harun Farocki, stubbing out a cigarette on his left forearm in protest at the war in Vietnam, and you ask yourself whether, were he were still alive, he would defend the ongoing genocide the way so many others of his generation have done? I imagine you tracing that terrible smell to its source to learn what can be learned from this hell. And before this hell, the others. I imagine all that because you no longer talk with me. Nor with anyone else. One day, the seagulls might return to where the sea once was and shriek, hearts to their bodies and begin to beat. With that day in mind, our task is to craft names from the wreckage, to give to this endless weariness, this endless heartbreak; to the smell that we cannot get out of our nostrils. But to achieve that, we must first bare our feet, that our soles may touch the heat of this parched ground.

We are dear friends, you and I, standing wordlessly over the ruins at the opening of a qasida that will never be written, because the poet has been killed. In your hand there is a camera, in mine a stone. We shall remain here alone,

suspended between our lament over the ruins and fond recall of our lost love in the lines to come. It is there, between ruin and love song, that the poem returns constantly to the land, to begin its journey over again. We, meanwhile, are stuck here with the unfinished poem in the ruins of a deserted seabed, with no land to which we might return: the witness has been killed and the crime endures. There is an unbreakable bond here that the children of cities do not comprehend (and yet they must) between love and the land. This is not romantic nonsense but an ancient poetic truth. Those who lived on the fringes of the ancient empires knew it well. It is only when the mourning rites are done that another love erupts. It is like a tenderness, a flirtatiousness, a remembering; it is a love like the scent of a lemon that lives on in your palm. For without that shared existence on a land that no one owns—a love the ancients called khaleet: a mixed gathering, a serendipitous and motley assembly—the qasida would have neither atlaal nor nasib, would never move from ruins to lyric remembrance of love. The khaleet is preserved within the poem; you cannot have one without the other. But the qasida has fallen silent and its words have fled and we are left here, our shared dream turned to a mirage, turned from our weariness to drink. No one speaks to us, my friend, or asks that we stop or turn aside, yet you know there is a boundary line, that there is a voice. There is a line between the water and dry land, between life and death, that we must cross if we are to speak again, just like the little turtle crossed before us. And there is a voice, sounding in the wordless void that the poem left behind. Slowly but surely it will fill with our rage, transform into keenest clarity, cutting down through the layers of sea and rock until it reaches the knot that has bound our tongues and our souls and left us turning and turning through the cycle of never-ending misery,

then slowly but surely picks it apart to release the shout that was muffled deep inside us, a cry that shall shock the killers and be heard by those squatting in the cracks of the arid seabed, and then at last that quick-witted little turtle shall speak and say, "No, all of that is not enough. We must keep on, must scrape down through the earth as well until we reach those buried there, we must pluck out the fences and palings by their roots."

So maybe the thing our poem must return to is not the land but the crime interred within it, where open-eyed the poet lies. And if we do that, then maybe we will have taken one pace closer to our nasib, and at last be as one with those who lived on this land before us, when there was no property or possession. And then, maybe, the poem will rise again, will remember itself and resume its course. And then, maybe, new boughs will spring from our severed trunks, will reach out and reconnect with the shell, that long-invisible carapace, and it shall become our shared and common sense, unknown to all till now.

