

Galal El-Beairy  
From the Tora Prison in Cairo  
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Translated from Egyptian Colloquial Arabic.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Letter from Tora Prison**

*Opening.*

You, something  
in the heart, unspoken,  
something  
in the throat, the last wish  
of a man on the gallows  
when the hour of hanging comes,  
the great need  
for oblivion; you, prison  
and death, free of charge;  
you, the truest meaning of man,  
the word "no" —  
I kiss your hand  
and, preparing for the trial,  
put on a suit and pray  
for your Eid to come.  
I'm the one  
who escaped from the Mamluks,  
I'm the child  
whose father's name is Zahran,  
and I swim in your name, addiction.  
I'm the companion of outlawed poets.  
O my oblivion, I'm the clay  
that precedes the law of concrete.

In the heart of this night  
I own nothing  
but my smile.  
I take my country in my arms

and talk to her  
about all the prisoners' lives . . . out there  
beyond the prison's borders,  
beyond the jailer's grasp,  
and about man's need . . . for his fellow man,  
about a dream  
that was licit  
and possible,  
about a burden  
that could be borne  
if everyone took part in it.

I laugh at a song  
they call "criminal,"  
which provoked them  
to erect a hundred barricades.  
On our account, they block out the sun  
and the thoughts in the head.  
They want to hide the past  
behind locks and bolts,  
preventing him from whispering  
about how things once were.  
They want to hide him  
by appointing guards—  
weak-minded foreigners  
estranged from the people.  
But what wonder is this?  
His fate is written  
in all the prison cells.  
His cell has neither bricks  
nor steel,  
and he was not defeated  
within it.  
Outside . . . a squadron of slaves.  
Inside . . . a crucified messiah.  
The thorns above his brow  
are witnesses: You betrayed his revolution  
with your own hands.  
With shame in your eyes, you  
are the Judases of the past,  
whatever your religion, whatever  
miniscule vision you have.  
We've come back

and we see you.

You who imprisoned  
the light, that naked groaning.  
The light doesn't care  
how tall the fence is;  
it's not hemmed in  
by steel bars  
or officers' uniforms.  
It cannot be forgotten.  
You can take a public square away from us,  
but there are thousands and thousands of others,  
and I'll be there, waiting for you.  
Our land will not betray us.  
With each olive branch  
we're weaving your shrouds.  
And the young man you killed  
has come back, awake now  
and angry.  
He's got a bone to pick  
with his killer.  
He's got a bone to pick  
with the one who betrayed him,  
the one who, on that night of hope,  
acquiesced, fell silent, and slept.  
His wound has healed; he's come back,  
a knight  
without a bridle;  
he's setting up the trial  
while an imam prays among us  
and illumines the one who was blind;  
he's rolling up his sleeves, preparing  
for a fight;  
he was killed—yes, it's true—and yet  
he has his role in this epic;  
he stands there now  
and holds his ground.

We've returned  
to call on God  
and proclaim it: "We've come back,  
come back  
hand in hand."

Again we proclaim it: "We've come back,  
and we vow  
to spread the light,  
the new dawn,  
the keen-sighted conscience."  
We've come back, and we can smell  
the fear in in your veins;  
and our cheers tonight  
are the sweetest of all:  
"We are not afraid.  
We are not afraid."

We saw a country  
rise from sleep  
to trample a pharaoh  
and cleanse the age  
of the cane and cudgel.  
We saw a country sing:  
those were no slave songs,  
no harbingers of doom, rather  
songs fitting  
for a new kind of steel.  
We saw it.  
We saw a country  
where no one is oppressed.

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<sup>1</sup> *Due to the potential for political repercussions against himself and his family, the translator of this poem has chosen to remain anonymous.*