

Muhammad Diab
Diary of a Depressed
Syrian in Germany

Translated by Graham Liddell

Translator's Reflection

The two-part personal essay that I have translated as “Diary of a Depressed Syrian in Germany” was originally published as two separate pieces on the Lebanese website *Al Modon*. The Arabic title of the first piece, which I have somewhat altered and applied to both of them collectively here, is “*Yawmiyyāt Mukta’ib Sūrī fī ‘Almāniyā*.” In this original title, the adjective and noun take positions opposite to those they take in my English rendering. The Arabic title translates more literally as “Diaries of a Syrian Depressive in Germany”; “Syrian” becomes a mere adjective to describe the fixed noun—“Depressive”—by which the author defines himself. Diab’s narrativized version of himself, henceforth “the narrator,” is not a Syrian who happens to be depressed, but rather a depressed person who happens to be Syrian.

The narrator seems at once hesitant to embrace Syrian as a category to which he belongs and deeply nostalgic for the homeland that he feels guilty for abandoning. On the one hand, he despises “trivial” discussions in which cultural heritage is “incessantly glorified and bragged about.” The idea that members of the same ethnic group should essentially be alike is repulsive to him. On the other hand, his depression is deeply imbued with *al-ghurbah* in all senses of the word. *Al-ghurbah* is a place—“abroad, outside the Arab world”—but also an emotional experience—“alienation”—and a state of being—“strangerhood.” Thus, the narrator’s status as an outsider is always palpable to him.

Al-ghurbah manifests itself in the form of a lifestyle in which the narrator cordons himself off from others, at least emotionally. This isolation is in small part a reaction to his being made to feel unwelcome, especially in the face of a constant barrage of comments from Europeans about his beard. But his seclusion is largely intentional and self-imposed. It is a coping mechanism designed to prevent his wounds from being exposed and thus reopening. Of course, the narrator’s isolation also comes at a cost: he forgoes the nourishment of close personal relationships that might be essential for his hidden wounds to heal.

In one of the essay’s most poetic moments, the narrator gazes out

the window at an old brick wall in the distance. It seems almost as if it has been transported to the modern city from a bygone era. Its natural wear and haphazard appearance reminds him of his hometown in Syria, and its out-of-placeness reminds him of himself. Its very purpose as a wall is to separate and protect, just as the narrator hopes to keep his true feelings and thoughts set apart from his interactions with others.

By the end of the second part of the essay, this solitude shows its true colors: profound loneliness. The narrator finds himself craving human connection, despite the intensity of his judgmental attitude toward nearly everyone he encounters. The truth, he admits, is that he finds beauty in his negative thoughts, in their unabashed and naked truth. What if he could find beauty somewhere else—perhaps in another human being who was his equal in strangerhood? Perhaps the ensuing relationship would instill a craving for mutual care in place of his addiction to (self-)judgment.

Diary of a Depressed Syrian in Germany

Part I

In the silence of the depressed, there is something of the silence of death. When a depressed person keeps his distance from you, do not assume it is because he hates you. He who is depressed is incapable of hating, of wasting his emotional energy on violent feelings. He is angry, but his anger is silent and concealed. It is not others, primarily, at whom he is angry, but himself. He directs his anger back toward himself, and it convulses deep within him, down to the roots. He becomes distressed and burdened. Words, time, people, responsibilities, simple everyday tasks, even basic movement—all of these weigh him down.

The depressed person may not have the strength to prepare his own food, even when hunger bites. He may neglect to bathe and fail to change his sheets. Despite understanding the necessity of doing these things, he surrenders to distress and discontent, to the overwhelming desire to cry, or . . . to suicide.



In the past few weeks, I have completely separated myself from social media platforms, preferring to keep what I write to myself. I have gone back to writing on paper. I have been writing as prolifically as I used to—perhaps even more. Since I started writing, my aim has never been to publish my work. I like others to read my thoughts, and I know that usually, my writing is about things that remain buried in people's souls for their entire lives. But I don't like the true intentions of my writing to be understood. I despise narrow-mindedness, prejudices, empty jargon, lack of imagination, and stupid interpretations. That's why I stopped using social media.

I have always considered writing my only way to expel depression and restlessness from my chest, even if inadequately. But I have found that writing online, and all the silly and ridiculous judgments that spring from cyberspace onto whomever the writer may be, results in a great deal of fatigue, stress, depression, and sometimes regret.

I try to push away these negative, overwhelming feelings, to live life the way it was in the 1990s, which I much preferred to nowadays. I have long wished that the flow of time had stopped there forever, that the hands of the clock had broken at the end-of-the-century marker. I almost never reach for my cell phone except to answer very routine, work-related calls. I try to maintain a balanced daily schedule to make this life as tolerable as possible.



I get out of bed in the morning. I smoke a few cigarettes. I shower in lukewarm water. I brush my teeth. I trim my beard, because I can barely stand opposite a European without him or her talking about it, using the same tedious phrases. My beard still arouses suspicion, anxiety, and doubt in these cold, intolerant societies, which boast of openness and glorify personal freedoms at every possible occasion. I put on my clothes. I prepare my morning coffee. I finish it quickly with several cigarettes. I proceed on my way to my class, which is preparing me for a particular line of work. I spend approximately a third of my day there. I very rarely speak to anyone. Among the things I try to practice: destroying my ego completely, refraining from speaking to anyone about my personal thoughts, curtailing my ever-present anger by concealing it.

I know my thoughts are very critical and harsh. My mood is melancholic and tense to the point of illness. My tastes are almost impossible to satisfy. And the criteria of my judgments are immune to being tricked by appearances, whether of people or their actions.

I no longer show enthusiasm or emotional excitement. I don't talk about my personal life or my feelings about the outside world. I try to make do with casual, shallow conversation, often resorting to gestures to spare myself from speech.

I think that in the past I expended an enormous amount of energy, and to no avail whatsoever. Now I am completely resigned to a fact that has become clear to me: nothing is changeable. I have taken great pains, exerted many emotions, and sickened my heart and my nerves to explain and express and critique and discuss. Perhaps I have taken that too far. So here I am, killing my old habits one by one, as if destroying stones in some video game. I have become so drained and discontented that I can no longer maintain those habits.



In the classroom on the first floor, I sit near a window that looks out at some residential buildings that have a classical architectural style. Their walls stand erect, dividing the university from a residential neighborhood. I am dogged by the habit of letting my attention drift, recollecting the memories of my childhood there, in that country that I left. Suddenly, without my willing it, the memories attack my mind. I try to keep them under control, to focus on the lecture about the complicated laws in the constitutions of European Union countries, laws that create links between individual citizens, between the state and the citizen, and between the states of the Union.

In my distractedness I spend a long time contemplating those ordinary walls. Simple cement building blocks with bricks on top. Neglected soil gathering at the bottom, a result of time and wind. That moss that has the ability to grow on stone. Lines extending in many directions on one of the walls. Perhaps they were left behind by an old, now-uprooted tree that used to grow vines on that wall, tracing the way to an abandoned shop.

Absent-mindedly, I reflect on these things and am overwhelmed by grim, violent emotions that seem like a kind of nostalgia. They twist around my body and legs like the arms of an octopus, pulling me down to the darkness of the bottomless depths, where I drown. I suffocate and my body fills with salt water, then floats to the surface. Alone on the horizon, a roaring wave hurls it in the air.

This is what happens when the late-May sun bestows a tinge of age-old anguish onto the wall in the noonday calm. The wall seems out of place in this highly regulated section of a European city, like a dancer on a tightrope—at a funeral. The scene reminds me of Syria, of my coastal city, Latakia, in the land I left behind. That “good earth” that I love. The simple neighborhoods where I was brought up. The narrow streets. The random buildings tarnished by the smoke of car exhaust. The school I attended in childhood and adolescence.



During the break I go out and drink a cup of coffee or two from the automatic machine. With my coffee I smoke a few cigarettes

in the designated smoking area. At my side are a few smokers from my class. We exchange chatter, sometimes complaining about the instructor's poor teaching style, which I find rigid and idiotic, like that of an old Soviet army officer. But I keep that particular opinion to myself rather than sharing it with my classmates.

I do not go with them to fast food restaurants near the university. I never eat meals like that. Alone in my room, I prepare my food in the evenings. For years, without any compelling reason, I have committed to a healthy diet that some might find austere. But I no longer see it that way. Rather, I have come to live a lifestyle that fits the type of exercise I have been doing since childhood.

I leave the group and return to the study hall. From my bag I take out something I prepared last night. I go to the kitchen on the upper floor. I heat my food in one of the microwaves lined up in a row on a slab of marble. I eat with students from different classes. None of us knows one another, so no conversation passes between us. I finish my food. I wash my lunchbox made of safe-use plastic. I wash my hands. I smoke a cigarette. I return to the hall. I take my place. I pull some novel out of my bag. With my back to the door and my face to the window, that wall stands directly across from me. That wall for which a strange sentimentality has emerged in my soul. And now an even stranger relationship is beginning to form between us. I sink in my seat. I read from my book as the lunch break comes to a close, waiting for the return of the remaining students and the loathsome instructor.

The final hours of class time tick away slowly. But they eventually pass.



I return to my apartment, change my clothes, and go to the gym. I stay there for approximately two hours, immersed in my daily exercises. I try to exhaust my body to the greatest extent possible in order to be able to sleep at night. This has been my method to win a years-long fight against insomnia. Exercise is the cornerstone of my strict daily routine, which keeps me at a distance from depression, even though this distance is unsafe and purely imaginary.

I finish my workout and go grocery shopping. I return to my

room. I shower in lukewarm water. I put my clothes in the washing machine. I cook enough meals to last me a week. Four varieties of meals. As I wait for the food to cook, I wash the pots and dishes. I straighten up the room. I eat a light meal. I wash the dishes again. I strive to keep everything in its right place, since clutter can afflict me with distress. I review the new information that came up in class. I take an antidepressant, and I end my day by writing or reading while listening to music. Or I fall asleep watching a Spanish or French film.



Despite my buried feelings, I believe that the way I have structured my life is not only healthy, but positive. It keeps me from a wearisome addiction to wasting time on social media websites, an epidemic that has ravished multitudes on this planet. My grades on the initial practice exams in general education have been good, even though I am the sole foreigner in a group of EU citizens.

I behave formally and courteously with people, despite my aversion to formalities, which I merely act out and wear as a mask in order to create distance between myself and others. I only speak with them when necessary. When I'm asked a question, I answer concisely, without commentary or elaboration.

In our cohort, students are descended from various cultures, and there is often talk of people's customs and the ways they differ. I despise these trivial and irritating conversations, in which *belonging* is incessantly glorified and bragged about. The only virtue of these conversations is that they immediately reveal the level of intelligence or stupidity of the speaker. I laugh when they laugh, and I ask questions as they do if I don't understand some idea clearly. But before long I stop talking, since I recognize that conversations like these consist only, for the most part, of surface-level naïveté and platitudes.

I put an enormous amount of energy into seeming like a normal person, to the extent that is possible. But the immense effort I exert to hide my personal feelings, to compel myself to engage with real life, goes to waste.

On the last day of class last week, the instructor approached me alone in the study hall during the break and asked if I was suffer-

ing from some kind of depression or mental disorder. His question caught me off guard, and I felt a cold tingling flow throughout my entire body. Managing to regain my composure and conceal what came over me, I held up my book, painted a phony smile on my face, and responded: “No, not at all! It’s just that this novel’s depressing vibes have rubbed off on me, but they’re just fleeting feelings.” A moment later I darted out of the hall, pretending to take a phone call.



And now I am thinking: depression is like a scar left by a wound on someone’s face. A wound that time cannot erase and that surgery cannot repair, no matter how skilled the doctor. It remains distinct and indelible in the features of depressed people, even the densest of simpletons among them.

The instructor’s question overwhelmed me with alarmingly destructive emotions, ruining what I had earnestly sought to create in the past few weeks. They are like the emotions of a child who spends all day building a sand castle on the beach, and no sooner does he finish and gaze upon it in wonder than, in a single instant, it comes crashing down under the stomping foot of a bully passing by on the seashore.

Part II

Pain shocks you, shakes you to your core. It makes you purer on the inside, in the depths of your soul, and makes you more perceptive of others. Pain awakens your consciousness, and you reconsider things you used to believe in. It pushes you to be more honest with yourself, to become more resilient. To be smarter in your dealings with those you pity, so you won’t be deceived so easily, the way you were in the past.

But none of this lasts.

How agonizing it is to live in the turmoil of excessively exploring people’s cavernous inner worlds. Of recognizing their motivations and yours, along with the fact that life is absurd and humiliating, and everything in it is a mere wisp of smoke. A person can never learn

to live with such a mischievous, suffering consciousness, no matter how much it has hardened his heart.

Deep loneliness is the fate of wandering souls. Discerning eyes see further than they should. People who indulge in thinking and feeling more than necessary can be totally destroyed by the harsh, inescapable truth.

You wish you hadn't plumbed the dark, miserable depths—those that display the world, the words and deeds of humankind, all the more clearly in that darkness. You wish you weren't aware of those intentions, that you were incapable of uncovering the real hidden beneath the counterfeit. In fact, you wish there were no such thing as real or counterfeit but that the two were one and the same. You wish you could continue on in self-delusion, not thinking, not feeling, not remembering.

But you have to submerge yourself in the darkness of painful truths once in a while. Until, inevitably, you are deceived, and you begin to believe and trust and quit doubting yourself and others. You start trusting in them, in life, in yourself. You start believing in something. That you are a hero in one of their stories.

But no matter what you do or how hard you try, you'll never reclaim what pain took away from you, never rid yourself of what it introduced you to. There's absolutely no way to get something back when it was just an illusion in the first place. Is there?

Wouldn't it have been better to remain naïve, an oblivious spectator applauding with the masses?

But you've left the herd and won't be able to return to it.

What have you accomplished with all this thinking of yours, in the end? Philosophy? Writing? You are becoming a farce, a ridiculous joke that everyone loves to crack together. You've walked yourself into the abyss on your own two feet.

So to hell with reason, then. Right? Reason leads only to one place. A place where the world and everything in it are thrown into sharp, horrifying relief—and to no purpose. A place where life's naked facts are on full display. The fact that life is a shackle that makes reasonable people miserable, and all they want is to be freed from it. The fact that living is an endless succession of struggles and pains.



You start to regret every time you've opened your heart to others and spoken to them sincerely about yourself—about your thoughts, your past and your fantasies, your desires and your suffering.

You regret, no matter how much it had seemed to you that you wouldn't regret. It is best, therefore, upon feeling a sense of compatibility with some person, to choose cautiously and carefully what you share with him or her—what you express, driven by a sentimental impulse. To choose to share something that won't make you regretful for an extended period of time. Something that won't make you feel bitter or revolted, like you gushed too much to the person, especially since he or she will soon become a stranger to you. You'll both become strangers to one another, the way you were before you met.

There's no reason to feel bitter about the fact that you're naïve enough to fall in love with one of these people. There is nothing wrong or harmful in that. For this is the type of naïveté that eases the pain of life, just as deviance does. Love may be nothing but a type of deviance. But you always have to be cautious, even fearful, of getting so attached to someone that you accept becoming idiotic and pathetic.



I hate truisms. I hate the millions of people who are deeply in love with intellectual truisms. It is an absolute aversion, an utter disgust, that I have for truisms and their millions of adherents. They quite literally make me sick.

The myriad truisms that the Facebookites persist in typing up and posting have achieved a popularity that has helped turn basic romantics into celebrities, bolstering their delusions that they are geniuses, great authors, philosophers. A herd-mentality fame—such is the fame of Facebook's "poets."

It would make the world a lot better if we refrained from applying general, overarching standards for beauty. If we accepted the idea that some individuals among us are different from others in style, appearance, forms of expression, and mentality.



I just woke up after dozing off for a few minutes. While I was asleep, I had a strange dream that couldn't have lasted more than seconds. A dream light and sweet like the morning nap in which it visited me. I saw myself in that dream, sitting at my desk in the theater where I work.

It was a summer afternoon and the weather was calm. The sun was in the middle of the sky, and its light came down through the window behind me, extending its rays onto my back and my hair. With a wandering gaze, I looked out through the window at it, then down at the river, the bridge, and the trees to my right. At pedestrians and at children playing on the short grass that has become a napping site for addicts and vagrants. All the days of the summer they gather there, smoking hashish and sleeping on the grass with their dogs.

And there is the humble café on the bank of the river. A café that serves its cheerful patrons cold beer and basic snacks. Absent-mindedly, I observe these scenes from the window, scenes that alert me to the loneliness I've felt all these years I've lived here in Germany. As I am immersed in my roving thoughts, the sun from the window consoles me, caressing my arm and my beard. From the entrance of the theater opposite me, the warm sun sneaks in and casts its light upon my cold chest.

Yes, my chest is cold, haunted as it has been for years by the insecurity planted in my eyes, whose light has been extinguished by my indulgent loneliness.



No sooner had you entered the theater than suddenly the heart-rending silence of my loneliness shattered and dissipated in the clatter of your footsteps and in your smile. Your ever-present smile that you show while your lips move to begin speaking, while you look at people's faces . . .

You came into my office, and, as usual, you patted yourself on your own shoulders with a tragicomic smile, a sign for a hug, which the current circumstances have forced us to avoid. You were beautiful as usual, and I was delighted to see you, happy to be in your

presence. But we are strangers, just two colleagues who happen to work in one place. Maybe I've lost my emotional ability to take the initiative. I have no idea whether this interest is coming from one side or two.

I had told you the night before that I would soon be moving to work somewhere else. That upset you, and you said, "No, please stay here! I'd be sad if you left." Did you really mean that, or were you simply expressing a general, neutral kindness that is required by casual politeness when a colleague departs? I don't know. I could be mistaken. But from your eyes and the way you look at me when you're passing by and those simple conversations we have, the longest of which don't last more than five minutes or so, I have felt that you were interested in me.

But as you see, I may be mistaken. That's how I always am, immersed in my own world, in its details and in analyzing them: this world, where I am a complete stranger; that faraway world, from which I departed and distanced myself . . . I've become a stranger to that world, too, here in this cold country.

Has life—your life—ever deprived you of the emotional strength necessary to take the initiative and express your interest and your desire to get close to someone? I hope this hasn't afflicted you as it has me. I know how much this avoidance can trouble one's heart, one's life. I know how dreadful it can be.

Perhaps it is strange for you to be reading this letter of mine now. For me to be suddenly talking to you in this way about my feelings. For me to have developed such deep feelings for you in the first place, when we've only gotten to know each other the way a stranger gets to know another "stranger in a strange land" like him.

In these few months that we've known each other, whenever I noticed you passing by, whenever our eyes met in the theater, or while we were walking through hallways or between offices, for a moment I forgot what it was that was weighing on my mind.

In my short dream, you came into my office wearing a simple country dress. You were on your way to the makeup and costume room to prepare for the next theater performance. After our socially distanced embrace, in accordance with the preventative procedures of the pandemic, and after you smiled a sad, subtle smile, and after

we chatted for a few minutes, you said, “Oh, I almost forgot.” And suddenly you bent your head over your shoulder and pulled something from your ear, then from your other ear, and you put your earrings in my hand. You continued, “I’ll leave them with you now and come get them at the end of the performance. Is that alright?”

With childlike happiness, I replied, “Of course, of course. As a matter of fact, I can keep them with me always.”

At that particular moment, I felt emboldened and let my guard down. I loosened my grasp and looked at the two earrings. They were simple and sparkling, and in the center of each of them was a small stone that was the exact blue of the sky. I brought my hand to my face and smelled the earrings, your scent. In this position, in your presence, before your eyes, to which I hadn’t yet lifted my gaze . . . the dream came to an abrupt end. And before I awoke, a few words of yours, pronounced in your delicate tone, reached my ears: “What are you doing, you crazy man?”

Unfortunately, I was not able to look at you after that to gauge your reaction to my behavior. In my dream, I hadn’t been able to let that behavior remain a fantasy, and it escaped me despite myself. Could I find out your reaction now, if I told you, “I want to be immersed in you, and in your things, the way I was in my dream”?

What do you say, O familiar stranger close to my heart, you whose beauty is the beauty of pain?