Conclusion

A Postmortem

People demand the overthrow of the regime!

—The chief slogan of the Arab Spring

Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) did not live to see the Arab Spring. Is the Arab Spring the opening horizon toward which his emancipatory poetry always looked—with hope, and in desperation?

The death by suicide of the young Tunisian man Mohamed Bouazizi resembles the bodies of the Arab and the Muslim for a renewed pact with history. In less than a year after the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, in late October 2011, hundreds of Yemeni women burned their veils in angry defiance against their government’s suppression of their democratic uprising. “The women, among the most conservatively dressed in the Arab world,” reports indicated, “hurled their black, full-body garments into a pile in the capital Sanaa, doused them with oil and set them ablaze, crying: ‘Who protects Yemeni women from the crimes of thugs?’”1 By that time the Yemenis had been actively pursuing their democratic aspirations for some ten months, having suffered many casualties and much hardship, but their ruling regime, headed by Ali Abdullah Saleh, was unrelenting. “It was a highly symbolic act,” the reports said of the burning of the veils, “that reflected the fury of many Yemenis at President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s harsh handling of anti-regime protests that have escalated from peaceful street demonstrations calling for reform into bloody clashes for dominance between rival elites and the government.”

The public spectacle of burning veils had far more serious implications than just calling attention to a particular tyranny. The act was not in defiance of voluntary veiling as such, when and if people had opted to wear it voluntarily. Tawakkol Karman, a leading revolutionary woman challenging the power of the regime in Yemen, was arrested in Paris and fined because of her veiling. (The fact that the Norwegians had given her the Nobel Peace Prize was more to their credit than to hers.) The symbolic burning of the veils signaled not a gesture against veiling as such but the liberation of the corpus anarchicum from a politics of despair, flexing its muscles in the inaugural moments of a global uprising.
Between the suicide of Mohammad Bouazizi and the burning of the Yemeni women’s veils, the bodies of the Arab and Muslim had been liberated from domestic tyranny and foreign domination alike. The corpus anarchicum had remained the same, but instead of just resisting the ruling regime, denying it a site of legitimacy, it was now dismantling it. At the writing of this conclusion late in 2011, the Arab Spring has challenged the status quo, dismantled the ruling regimes of three Arab states (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya), and endangered the survival of the rest. The globalized condition of the posthuman body remains amorphous in correspondence with the amorphous capital and the postmodern state that continues to claim it as the sole site of its self-legitimizing violence. But the Arab Spring had announced the end of the condition of postcoloniality as far as the production of ideologies of resistance was concerned. The self-exploding body, the corpus anarchicum, had remained in defiance of the postmodern state and yet (and here is the rub) it had been liberated from its delusion of postcoloniality. The body of Bouazizi self-immolated in defiance of its state of being, still the ultimate, very last, sign of a whole new countermetaphysics of the posthuman body, the end of Enlightenment modernity and its glorification of the human body as the site of its imagined liberations.

In the span of a decade, between 2001 and 2011, as Mohamed Atta was denounced, Mohammad Bouazizi was valorized, credited with an emancipatory moment of a world on the verge of a global uprising. This was not just the year of the Arab Spring. It also brought the European Summer and an American Fall—season after season of revolt against the status quo, whereby the Tahrir Square in Cairo had assumed iconic significance for what was now called the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, echoed around the globe. Though happening in multiple contexts, something about these uprisings resonated globally. “Dear young man who died on the fourth day of this turbulent 2011, dear Mohammed Bouazizi,” began a letter by Rebecca Solnit, an American Occupy Wall Street activist, addressing the diseased Tunisian peddler, “I want to write you about an astonishing year— with three months yet to run. I want to tell you about the power of despair and the margins of hope and the bonds of civil society.” From a politics of despair to a politics of hope, the corpus anarchicum had transmigrated from a site of resistance to a site of defiance—now seeking to dismantle the ruling regime altogether. From the ashes of Mohamed Atta’s politics of despair had come memorabilia for Japanese tourists, but from the ashes of Mohamed Bouazizi’s defiant politics of hope sprouted the Arab Spring, which branched out around the globe. Hope had come home to roost; corpus anarchicum was at home in the world.

I wish you could see the way that your small life and large death became a catalyst for the fall of so many dictators in what is known as the Arab Spring. We are now in some sort of an American Fall. Civil society here has suddenly hit the ground running, and we are all headed toward a future no one imagined when you, a young Tunisian vegetable seller capable of giving so much, who instead had so much taken from you, burned yourself to death to protest your