

## POETRY IN THE AGE OF EXILE

*Wherever I Lie is Your Bed*: Two Lines World Writing in Translation no. 16 (San Francisco: Center for the Art of Translation, 2009). Issue edited by Margaret Jull Costa (prose) and Marilyn Hacker (poetry). ISBN 978-1-931883-16-0. 275 pp.

Abdulkareem Kasid: *Cafés*. Translated by the poet with Sara Halub. (London: The Many Press, 2012.) ISBN 0 907326 39 0. 31 pp.

The Center for the Art of Translation, a non-profit organization, seeks to ‘broaden cultural understanding through international literature and translation’. Two Lines is a series of the Center’s anthologies that feature prose and poetry from around the world, translated into English with the original on the facing page. Issue 16 provides work from many European writers, and special sections of poetry: one by Adonis (five poems translated by Khaled Mattawa), and one a focus on a new generation of Palestinian poets. Marilyn Hacker says that the Palestinians, looking to Mahmoud Darwish for their inspiration, ‘go beyond a mythology of exile, of recreating a formerly promised land frozen in idealism and despair, to the expression of an internalized exile...an imagination of *al-wattan* [loosely, ‘homeland’] as also something internal, intimate, the apotheosis of daily life’. Much credit goes to the editor for presenting the arc of Palestinian poetry as written today. A paradox presents itself: It is easier to find these poems outside Palestine, given the anti-cultural policies of the occupation. Yet as Ghassan Zaqtan expressed it in a recent interview, this generation of poets is ‘freer’ because it ‘exists in the age of defeat...born amongst losses.’ (The Electric Intifada, 7 December 2012.)

Nine poets, the majority born in the 1970s, are presented in sequence: Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Zaqtan, Ayman Ghbarieh, Nasser Rabah, Ghada al-Shafi’i, Samir Abu Hawwash, Najwan Darwish, Hala al-Shrouf, and in an end paper, Ibrahim Nasrallah.

The section leads with Mahmoud Darwish’s ‘Rita’s Winter’ (tr. Fady Joudah). This work demonstrates the poet’s signature prosody, much emulated by younger poets, of mixed, often clashing imagery; one that is surely enriched by the sounds and rhythms of Arabic as shown in the opening lines: ‘Rita arranges our room’s night and says: This wine/ is little/ and these flowers are larger than my bed/ open the window for them to perfume the beautiful night/ and place, right here, a moon on the chair, and place/ there, on top, the lake around my handkerchief....’ Thus, the poetic preparation for a night of love is a *mélange* of words each bearing independent erotic weight. The love affair with Rita’, of ‘Rita and the Rifle’, will end, an early casualty of the strife between Arabs and Jews: ‘Rita will depart in a few hours and leave her shadow/ as a white prison cell.... And she broke the ceramic of the day against the iron windowpane/ she place her handgun on the poem’s draft.... Prison, broke, ceramic, iron, handgun. To read Darwish, much attention must be paid to nouns.

Fady Joudah, in his introduction to Ghassan Zaqtan’s selected ‘Like a Straw Bird it Follows Me and Other Poems (reviewed in this issue on page...), says of the poems that they invite the reader ‘to enter them, exit them, map and unmap them, code and decode them....’ Zaqtan’s language is less lush than Darwish’s, generally with shorter lines and more abrupt stanza breaks. The two poems represented here (‘Like One

Who Waits for Me', "He Thought Long of Going Back There', tr. Fady Joudah) are more accessible yet still highly lyrical. The spirit of the son dead father awaits the son's obeisance in the mourning tent, and perhaps it is for naught: 'O father/ no one prays for us in these corners/ we have no narrators in the books/ and no followers.' The man who thought long of returning 'there' is reminded of a horrific murder, a near-biblical honour killing, 'that night when the eleven brothers killed/ their only sister'; a memory and crime that cannot be covered over by a 'pampered' pot of bougainvillea, reminding one of the storied 'pot of basil' – from the Decameron by way of Keats.

The other poets represented show that the elliptical lyric isn't the only style coming from Palestinian poets today. Ayman Ghbarieh (tr. Fady Joudah) pulls no punches in his sardonic send-up of Israelis in 'Why Should We Teach Our Enemy How to Raise Pigeons?' 'Maybe/ Maybe the 'enemy might save us from himself/ if he understands we are a couple: murderer and murdered/ and that we must wait together for the earth to burst out of the orbit of blood.' But peace and reconciliation may be greater hazards for the Palestinian: 'Maybe/ when we teach him waiting like we wait/ he will refine his methods in luring us/ without his need for bullets to hunt us from a distance.... Maybe/ because we'd hate our enemy more when he resembles us.'

Existential despair that transcends metaphor for the local to the universal is found in Nasser Rabah's 'Absence', Ghadah al-Shafi'i's 'Fenced Solitude, and Samir Abu Hawwash's 'The Very Handsome Man. Hala al-Shrouf poignantly tells of the emotional clash of gender in 'She and He' where 'She brightens her night with a multicolored nightgown/ cheats her loneliness with worries/ abandons a bed meant for love/ to drowse between wishes and insomnia.'; while 'He.../ wants his night to drain away quickly... weary of his obsession from the past.'

Abdulkareem Kasid, Iraqi-born, writes from exile (Kuwait, Yemen, Syria, now London) where the café becomes a form of social and intellectual 'homeland'. Kasid, prolific poet, essayist and translator, is well known in the Arab world – this pamphlet is his first extensive publication in English. It comes in two sections: 'Cafés' and 'Windows'. Both are series of epigrammatic contemplations; the former numbered, the latter separated by ellipses. Cafés and Windows stand in for exile, isolation, and poetic observation ('Even a closed window/ opens/ when the loved one passes.' 'In the desert there is a window./ Why has no-one seen it/ but me?') The various cafés with their customers find themselves bombed; swept away by flood; visited by ghosts or the dead; or totally isolated. Magritte-like imagery abounds ('In a far away station/ There was a chair/ And a cup of tea,/ No sign of a train/ No travelers either/ Just the café, all by itself). Harold Bloom says a poem should surprise and delight. Kasid's poetry does both. We should have more from him.

Published in Banipal 46, April 2013