

A Handful of Blue Earth

Poems by Vénus Khoury-Ghata

Translated from the French by Marilyn Hacker

Liverpool University Press (Liverpool University Press, UK 2017)

ISBN 978-1-78694-011-7

pp 55 £9.99

The French-Lebanese author Vénus Khoury-Ghata, now 80, with twenty-two novels and eighteen collections of poems to her credit, shows no sign of letting up. She has received the Académie Française prize in poetry and was named an Officer of the Légion d'Honneur. Her translator, Marilyn Hacker, is an accomplished poet in her own right, having won major awards for both her poetry and her translations. It's a reviewer's privilege to comment on this book, which draws on two recent collections by Khoury-Ghata.

Although writing almost entirely in French, Khoury-Ghata is much influenced by the Syrian/Lebanese/French poet, Adonis (pen name of Ali Ahmad Said Esber), seven years her senior, whose poems she has translated from Arabic to French. Adonis led the 20th century revolution in Arabic poetry, whose classical prosody is strictly metered, lineated and rhymed. He introduced experimental free verse (which Arab poets call 'prose poetry') using imagist and surreal tropes, though still informed by the oral traditions and cultural landscapes of the Arab world.

The book is divided into three parts: the collection, *The Lady of Syros*, portions from *The Book of Petitions*, and *The Mothers and the Mediterranean*, a section of the latter.

The Lady of Syros (a Greek island in the Cyclades) tells about an ancient statue by that name. Buried for thousands of years, and she relates her own story of being dug up by an archaeologist *cum* treasure hunter. His action is a form of violation:

*Dead yet desired by the man
who kept on digging
the archaeologist's laughter ripples down his chest
at the sight of my foot*

Though created as a statue, she gained her own agency:

The old sculptor of Syros carved me

according to his own needs
mute so as not to contradict him
arms crossed on my chest to avoid all embraces
thighs sealed shut to preserve my virginity
eyes were superfluous
the old sculptor of Syros was blind

The statue remains sentient all those centuries among the other dead, human and marble (*Woman or statue, what's the difference!*), crossing epochs and seas as she searches for her twin brother who had died mysteriously, his body missing. It is a self-imposed purgatory: *I walked in my death/ pacing its underside for thousands of years/ without going forward*. Her mother cries out, “*Come back! The death that carried off your brother/ doesn't want you!*”

The story ends badly. The greedy archaeologist, a Pygmalion manqué, wishes to add eyelashes, and glue hair to her skull, dress her like a doll in a tunic and sandals, so he can *announce his discovery to the four winds/ will describe me as a Cycladic idol/ possessed of great powers...* She can no longer return to her *space defined for all time*, her search terminated, making an ultimate violation.

The poem's dream-like narrative bears its own overarching metaphors, and the reader is free to choose among them: male predation on women, wanton destruction of heritage, family loyalties, among others. This multiplicity gives depth and richness to the work.

Where *The Lady of Styros* is written in short, unevenly spaced lines, *The Book of Petitions* is composed of long, irregularly lined stanzas, almost paragraph-like, one per page. The form entails jump-cut declarations, concrete and extended and, that may seem obvious when taken in isolation; but together they don't make a coherent narrative whole, even when almost seeming so. The juxtaposed images are rich in detail, sometimes even funny. John Ashbery would understand. Two examples from the twenty-two poems on offer will illustrate:

Must you be reminded that you are only what is said and
forgotten
brother of shadows calling out in the chestnut tree
sketched thought
silence chipped away by use
that the wind pushing you toward the pond is not the pond's

*friend, nor the friend of the washerwomen who wring
you out with the red linens of women in childbirth, who
complain of pebbles in their chests as their arms fall when
night does
when their arms drop with darkness*

*A handful of red earth for your shoulder that protected you
from the storm
a handful of blue earth for the one that bore your sorrows
a last one for the sparrow that announces your burial to the
trees in the forest...
This hole in the ground is incomprehensible to your
possessions
They are convinced that everything that breathes and sweats
ends up in the garbage dump.*

The Mothers and the Mediterranean is written in the same fashion, but now one finds a coherent, or I should say, cohering message. It is Beirut, murder stalks even children who must study maths from what they observe about them (*The children will play with the Sea/ they will learn addition from the corpses piled on the /sidewalks/ subtraction from decapitated trees*). Mothers and widows of the Mediterranean become crazed in their despair (*Only feathered creatures survive said the mothers/ who knitted wings for the children/ then pushed them off the balcony railings/ Fly, my child/ my love/ light of my eyes... fly through air and blood and you'll become sniper*). A gruesome normality pervades (*An eye plucked up from the dust for a pistachio ice cream/ cone for a glass of hibiscus juice —/ the merchant on the Corniche trades in everything that can/ be bought and sold*). Snipers enjoy erotic fantasies in their killings (*His machine gun has the soft skin of women with milky/ breasts*) and even take sardonic pleasure in their gratuitous marksmanship:

*The red hole in the forehead of the old woman looking for
her cat makes him fall down laughing
She got what she deserved
cats don't go to war*

Cats and old people indoors

killers outdoors

The country belongs to them

One sniper, finally, is appalled after picking off a girl through his gun-sights (*The explosion tore dress and chest apart/ The sniper will follow her funeral from his rooftop.../ Tomorrow/ the sniper will break his kalashnikov on his knee like a straw/ Tomorrow/ he'll exchange his life for a plate of lentils with cumin/ and a glass of arak*). The image reminds me of Esau surrendering his birthright for a mess of pottage.

While I marvel at the skill Khoury-Ghata has put into vitalising a myth, and engaging in wordplay, the potency of her poetry is best when railing against the horrors of war. It is why Picasso's cubist paintings and contorted portraits earn our admiration, but we will never forget his Guernica.

Published in London Grip, 2018: <https://londongrip.co.uk/2018/02/london-grip-poetry-review-khoury-ghata/>