

Inclined to Speak. An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry.
Edited by Hayan Charara. The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville 2008.
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Hayan Charara, a Lebanese-American poet and National Endowment of the Arts awardee, has assembled 160 poems from thirty-nine Arab-Americans (including three originally Canadian, one Anglo-Indian), arranged alphabetically. The criteria for inclusion were that the poems were written in English, that the poets reside in the US, and that each has a 'substantial publication record.' A selection process ensued, with the result – as Charara writes in the Introduction – that 'many fine young poets were not invited, or they were regretfully declined inclusion.' By this editor's rigour we are left, however, with a very fine anthology; nearly every poem compels the reader's attention and admiration, a far better result than seen in several recent UK anthologies.

Several of the poets will be familiar to UK readers: Sinan Antoon, Khaled Mattawa, Etel Adnan (the latter three contributing/consulting editors to Banipal), Nathalie Handal, Fady Joudah (whose recent translations of Mahmoud Darwish are among the finest), and Naomi Shihab Nye.

By my count twenty-one of the thirty-nine poets were born in North America, and about half of those are second generation. Thus the majority of the voices are often indistinguishable from 'American' style poetry (direct, first-person, free-verse, prose, performance) often reflecting the tensions between the generations, or sentimentally acknowledging parents and grandparents with their old country ways. Instead of Spanish or Yiddish phrases and remembrances of home-foods we have Arabic and such reminiscences as 'smells remembered from our/ childhood, the onions and garlic, the/ fresh tomatoes and lemons, the parsley,/ the smoke of fresh lamb...' (Sam Hamod, 'Dying with the Wrong Name').

Many of the poems protest the brittle prejudices against Arabs in the US, especially after 9/11, when even Sikhs and Puerto Ricans were targeted for 'looking Arab'. One poem, by Lawrence Joseph (third generation Syrian-Lebanese) is called 'Sand Nigger'. The Michigan-born poet remembers being called that, 'and the name fits: I am/ the light-skinned nigger/ with black eyes and the look difficult to figure.../ a Levantine nigger/ in the city on the strait/ between the great lakes Erie and St. Clair/ which has a reputation for violence.... The poet is 'nice enough to pass' [as 'white'] but prefers a defiant assertion of Arab pride with the traditional tribal formula, '...Lebanese enough/to be against his brother,/ with his brother against his cousin,/ with cousin and brother/ against the stranger', the 'stranger' being the rest of us. But if not a 'stranger, what then? Thus another poet asks plaintively, 'first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed,/ the plane's engine died.../ please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone/ who looks like my brothers.' (Suheir Hammad, 'First Writing Since.')

In prosodic terms, only a handful of poems capture the intensely lyrical, meta-associational, anaphoric qualities one finds in Mahmoud Darwish or Adonis. The exceptions include Deema K. Shehabi's, 'Migrant Earth', answering Darwish's

question, ‘So, tell me what you think of when the sky is ashen?’ with ‘...but what do I know of the migrant earth,/ as I enter a Gazan rooftop and perform ablutions in the ashen/ forehead of my skin, my soul journeying and wrinkling with/ homeland?’ Sinan Antoon expresses the outrage against the American wars in Iraq with these lines: ‘My heart is a stork/ perched on a distant dome/ in Baghdad/ its nest made of bones/ its sky/ of death.’

While there are ample ‘experimental’ and alternative styles of prosody – Charara’s eight-page, long-line, political protest monologue (‘Usage’); Etel Adnan’s ‘The Arab Apocalypse’ incorporating anaphorae with hand-scrawled spirals, circles, hatch-marks, Chinese letters and other symbols – there are only two poems in form, both fine ghazals (‘Ghazal’ by Saladin Ahmed, and ‘Ghazal: From Damascus to Donora’ by Eliot Khalil Wilson). Although avoidance of form is a post-modern style, the poets here may also be influenced by Adonis’s revolution in Arabic poetry where,

Traditional notions of the continuous, the coherent, the one, the complete, are replaced by the interrupted, the confused, the plural, the incomplete, implying that the relationship between words and things is constantly changing: that is, there is always a gap between them which saying or writing the words cannot fill. (Adonis. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. Saqi Books, London, 2003.)

Poetry dealing with the slippage of memory, dislocation, migration, identity, uncertainty, cannot be otherwise written. Knowledge and poetry are never complete, as this anthology so well reveals. Will someone bring together a similar anthology of Arab-British poets?

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