

كَلِمَات

Kalimat

Hadia Said

and the wonderland of words

Number 22, September 2005

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Kalimat

Kalimat is a fully independent periodical aiming at celebrating creativity and enhancing access among English and Arabic speaking people worldwide.

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SNOWFLAKES

We would like this section of this issue to be a celebration of the achievements of a few people who have been making a real difference to *Kalimat*. We congratulate them and thank them whole-heartedly for their gifts.

Eva Sallis

The Marsh Birds

Eva Sallis, one of our advisers and sponsors, continues her relentless effort to promote the cause of refugees and asylum seekers through both political and literary means. After her participation in editing “Dark Dreams,”¹ her novel “The Marsh Birds” is her latest work, published by Allen & Unwin in 2005. This is her fifth novel, described by J. M. Coetzee as ‘memorable’ and as an ‘indictment of the heartless refugee system’, in reference to the Australian system that destroyed the hero of the story, an Iraqi boy who fled to Syria on the hope of reuniting with his family who had to flee using different means. Unable to find his family, Dhurgham travels to Indonesia and seeks asylum in Australia where he faces detention. His fate lingering in the hands of red-tape officials, he finds his way to New Zealand for a brief respite, but gets caught in the intricacy of the system again.

Eva Sallis writes about a boy making his way into adulthood through a perplexed, confused and dangerous path. She writes with mature sentiment and a sense of understanding and support. She aptly dedicates this work to ‘The boys I love, especially Roger and Rafael.’ The passion with which Eva writes about Dhurgham, the hero of the Marsh Birds, adds him to the list of the boys she loves. Reading about him, I feel Eva briefing me on her work on refugees and her encounters with a number of young people like Dhurgham. Dhurgham the fiction is the reality of the situations of many of those who sought asylum in Australia.

But the book is full of scenes that demonstrate the writer’s appreciation of the fine details of the the culture and situations she is dealing with. The following is a

¹ Dechian S., Millar H. & E. Sallis (Eds.) 2004. *Dark Dreams*, Australian refugee stories. Wakefield Press. South Australia.

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scene from the mosque where Dhurgham is hoping to be the meeting place where he would be reunited with his family in Damascus.

He felt very pleased for a while. He prayed too when the adhan² rang out and the great hall of pillars on the far side filled with rustling, sniffing, coughing, sweating people. He flowed in with them, washed and knelt with them on the carpet. He flowed out again into the marble expanse as if that great monument were living, breathing them all in and out in huge, measured breaths.

(p7)

Another scene in a detention centre depicts some aspects of the procedures used, but also the dilemma facing Dhurgham in explaining himself to officials, and indeed to himself as well.

His first interview was very brief. There was an interpreter, a middle-aged Lebanese man who looked at him in an unfriendly way, and a blank-faced official seated at a white table with a computer on it. Dhurgham told them who he was, his real name falling off his lips with a sweet sound and a bright inner pleasure. He stated that he was fourteen, from Iraq, and that he sought the protection of Australia from the certain horrible death that would await him in Iraq if he were returned; and he asked for their personal benevolence and indulgence in considering his youth and circumstances. He said that he could see that they were men of honour and that Australia was a land of peace and happiness. He was glad that they did not ask many details, for he realised in that moment that he really didn't know anything about why it was dangerous for him in Iraq. He had heard many terrible stories from his fellow passengers and knew their reasons for fleeing, but had no idea about his own.

(p77)

There is also the dilemma of the immigration officers. When Durgham escapes to New Zealand and after an interview with a Mr. Johns, Johns contemplates referring Durgham to have his case for refugee status considered. However, he reflects on the consequences:

He could suddenly see himself losing his job, Janine quiet and bitter, furious and drawn with worry. The mortgage and Carrie's education. (p181)

² The call for prayer (Editor's note).

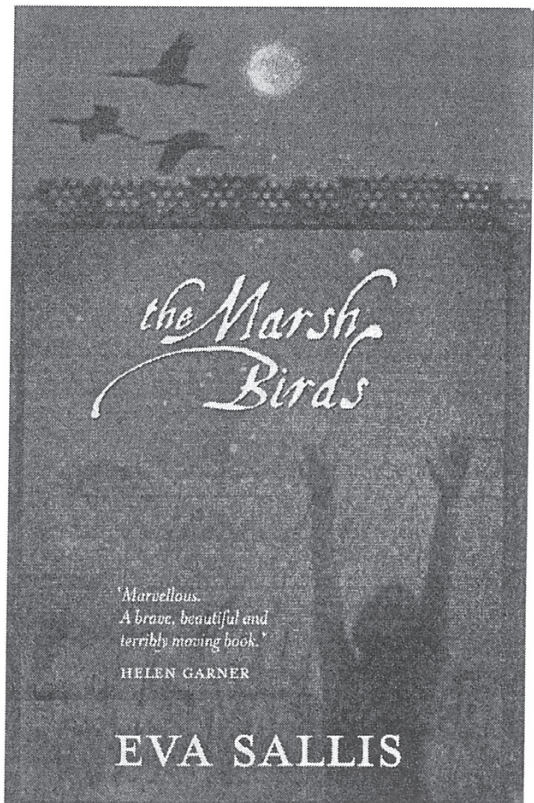
Mr. Johns feels at heart that Durgham is a genuine refugee, but he also employs reason in his follow up of the matter.

But Mr. Johns knew that Durgham was right in one thing at least. He had never been tried or convicted. That was not what Australia, or New Zealand for that matter, spent tax payers' money on in handling convention claimants. Dhurgham was a boy imprisoned without trial indefinitely in Australia and would be immediately imprisoned if he were deported back there... (p181)

Eva Sallis skilfully deploys dreams not only to reveal memories and events, but also to expose us to human behaviour and the landscape. Towards the end of the novel, we read about one of Dhurgham's dreams where we are taken back to the beginning of the escape from Iraq and the passage through the marshes.

His sleep was stalked by nightmares, each beginning and then peeling away to one that lay underneath it, until, after several layers, a dream of the red desert parted like a rotten fruit and, as if rising from dark water to become visible at the last moment, the marshes appeared, threaded with mists and long slugs of thin cloud. He was wading

with his family in high rushes and reeds. He could hear his mother's asthmatic breathing loud in the night. She was a dark shadow behind him with a huge bundle held high and balanced on her head, giving her a grotesque silhouette.



(pp190-191)

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Sallis continues to describe the rest of the family during the passage through the marshes then we read:

...And there were birds in the marshes. Now and then he disturbed one and it went whirring up into the night air. He would be the first across, leading the family in a great V behind him. He was humming, lifting his legs high and squelching his sneakers vigorously into the sucking mud. He could see the darker shapes of a low rolling land ahead. He was first! He turned to Nura to say that he was going to catch the next bird that whirled away from the sedge at his feet, but Nura wasn't there. Then he heard many small noises as he faced the way they had come, noises that seemed weirdly intimate, noises of an interior, not a wide open marsh. He stood still and peered into the darkness in which nothing stood out, nothing shone. He could see nothing, and a muddy, hammering panic rose to drown him. Then he heard it, clear as a bird cry in a still night. *Run Dhurgham! Darling run!*

He woke up.

(pp191-192)

The significance of the marsh passage is breathtaking in depicting the plight of a person longing for freedom. Here is the open space, the wings, the flight, but also the sucking mud, the darkness and the loss. And always the voice of the concerned mother wanting him to escape.

To have flashbacks on this scene whilst in Australia or New Zealand adds to its significance, because these two countries supposedly represent freedom and justice. They are supposed to be the light, space, wings and flight as opposed to the mud, darkness and loss. However, red-tape prevails and Dhurgham loses his appeal for freedom. Once again he has to cross the marshes, but to a point of no return. After deportation from New Zealand back to Australia, Dhurgham runs away again as soon as he disembarks from the plane and some guard attempts to flick a handcuff onto his wrist. He does not go far. The last lines of the story are:

...Then he heard his mother's voice, clear and close. He felt her breath on his neck, her kiss on her earlobe: Be the first! Run, Dhurgham darling, run!

And, completely happy, he ran.

(p246)

Eva Sallis was the subject of the Landmark article for the Arabic issue of *Kalimat* in June 2004.

Manfred Jurgensen The Eyes of the Tiger

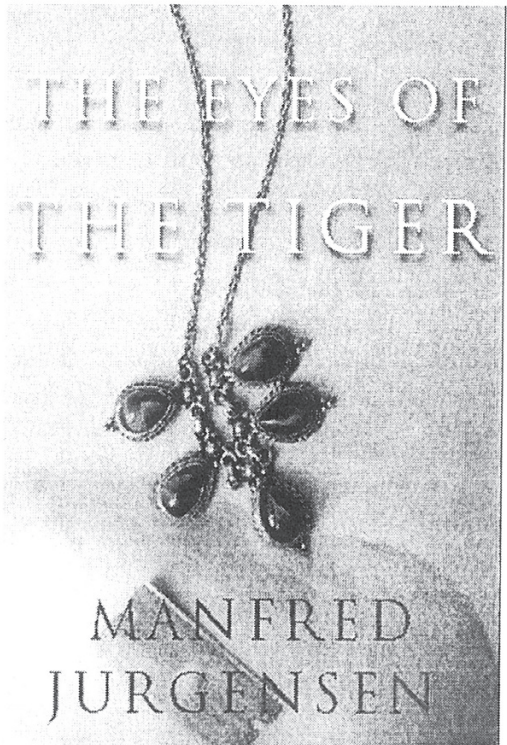
For one timeless moment the majestic tiger had looked at Sannes with an intensity which made everything else disappear... In that instant, in the glory of that omniscient pair of eyes, Sannes recognised the image of God. (p128.)

It is with great pleasure that we have received the latest novel by **Manfred Jurgensen**, one of our advisers. Professor Jurgensen was the subject of our Landmark article for the Arabic issue of *Kalimat*, No. 20, in December 2004, when we introduced the wealth of gift this prolific writer has to our Arabic-speaking readers.

The novel is published by Indra Publishing, Melbourne. The publisher eloquently sums it up thus: ‘*The Eyes of the Tiger* is a novel of friendship, love and corruption. Set in Brisbane during the disastrous 1974 flood, two very different men, the immunologist Mark and the charismatic ‘Prince of Spice’ Sannes, struggle for the affection of the high-spirited, fiercely independent lawyer Jessica. In a highly charged, profoundly disturbing relationship, betrayal of friendship and violation of love interact and collide with the ever-increasing moral deterioration of “the Moonlight State”.’

Jurgensen effectively uses the first chapter as a “launching pad” to subsequent events. We know that it is a funeral service for Sannes, but the glamour and mystery surrounding this drug dealer accompanies us throughout the text. For example, towards the end of the story on page 377, Jessie and Mark listen to Sannes charming them with one of his talks:

So, too, good and evil are living spiritual energies determining each other.



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Arguing over right and wrong seemed to me part of a western game of relativity, power and intellectual self-righteousness. I began to understand why many of my native friends kept a laughing face even in the most heated exchanges. Over the years these ordinary village people taught me how to keep myself alive, the passionate knowledge of being a part of everything.

The past history of this colourful character is revealed to us in more than one way and on more than one occasion. We read on page 42:

For as long as he could remember Sannes was told to consider himself lucky because he was suffering from a life-threatening blood disease. It seemed a rather perverse, incongruous logic. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, he'd been mostly surrounded by hired domestic staff, private teachers and doctors. It was only on rare occasions that he saw his mother or his father. Because of his parents' business overseas it was extremely rare for them to spend time together with their son. They would not have been able to raise him on an isolated tropical plantation. The worst part of his hereditary disease was loneliness.

There is a philosophical touch in this last statement, but throughout the novel Jurgensen provides us with such quality with which he delves deeply into the human psyche with its glory and failings. The above paragraph is followed by a direct explanation of Sannes attitude:

In his isolation he felt guilty about his very existence. It seemed he wasn't meant to be. During early adolescence, after years of apologising for being alive, Sannes began to see himself as some kind of a fraud. Spurred on by anger and resentment, he decided to adopt the role of a trickster. He would survive by cheating and deceiving.

Jurgensen returns with us to the funeral scene every now and then to elaborate on the different aspects of the rich life of Sannes and others. On page 79 we read:

...His dead friend had been moved by the spirit of life. Only now did Mark begin to understand that much of Sannes' theatrical image may have been an attempt to capture that spirit, to force it to reveal itself in all its luxurious splendour and reckless brutality.

And on life we read on page 93:

Yet in his infatuation with what he called the generic language of life Mark

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sometimes failed to recognise that the one thing the patients wanted was to live. Here, in the wards, the need was not to explain but to heal. His personal dealings with the living and the dying were a constant reminder that the language he'd discovered under the microscope was that of the lives of other people. It was the patients who owned his research. Mark was forever reading other lives.

Watching one of his dying young patients, Mark remembers the loss of his first sweetheart due to illness. This makes him contemplate deeply.

It made Mark wonder whether there was such a thing as a physiology of the past. Did the human body cope with digestion only by excretion? Certainly the brain did not. If the living organism retained everything that was, perhaps even vitally, important, still capable of being used, how, then, did the mind decide which experience to discard and which to keep alive? The thought was a strong reminder that it wasn't just immunology which had developed antidotes to human memory. A healthy body possessed its own means of protection against potentially deadly recollections. In order to survive, the physiology of the human body even had an inherent power to negate time and knowledge. (p163.)

The combination of the scientist, lawyer and the "student of life" has been brilliant in serving Jurgensen's narration to extend beyond the telling of experiences and events to revealing the innermost of human emotions in an integrative manner. Not only does he delve into the philosophy of science in some cases, but also he adopts a logical approach to his narration by posing a series of questions followed by other questions implying the answers or their possibilities.

There is hardly any passage that does not contain some highly intellectual reflection on human behaviour and thinking, yet the narration is straightforward, simple and engaging. Here are some examples.

Uncertain whether it might be haunted, they entered the house of love as invited guests, not to claim it. Yet in its unfamiliar intimacy they felt at home. Their bodies were busy building and rebuilding it... (p62.)

Even love could be experienced primarily as a disturbance of the mind, ultimately expressing itself in the desire to extinguish the beloved. (p110.)

We don't own the world, the world owns us. (p149.)

He'd become more and more convinced that everything in human life,

including the logic of expression, was by nature analogous. He'd discovered the one reason why, in the end, he'd been unable to truly be like Sannes, to become one with him. For all the love and friendship, he couldn't give himself away. It would have meant he'd lost himself. Friendship could only mean one thing – the expression of a most glorious and intimate human analogy. (p348.)

Sophie Masson

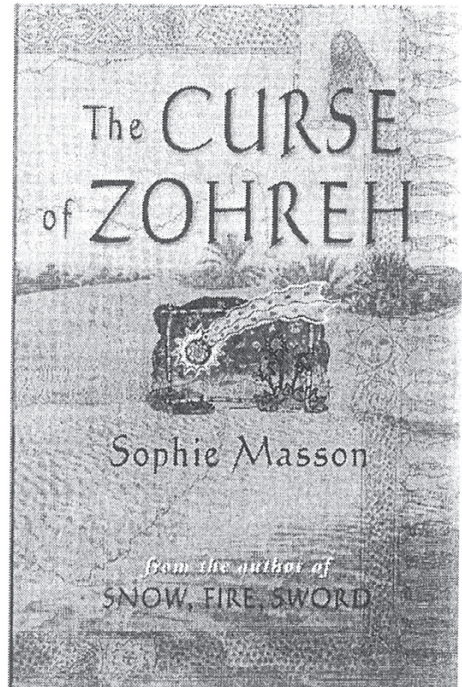
The Curse of Zohreh

Another gift we recently received is *The Curse of Zohreh*, by our adviser Sophie Masson (published by Random House Australia, 2005).

Masson is often described as a writer of fiction for adults and young adults. I feel that Masson writes for “young spirits”, or those who are young at heart. At least this is what I felt reading this novel.

Not since reading *Thousand and One Nights* have I been so captivated, feeling that Masson has taken me on a magic carpet to hover over markets, towns, rivers, ships, libraries as events unfold and people and jinns exercise their daily concerns or plan their next move.

Masson starts the novel by a “Prologue” where we get the shock of absorbing a sequence of many events leading to the tragic murder of Zohreh, but here the real story begins and Zohreh never leaves it. The plot revolves around a curse Zohreh made against her murderer and his male



descendents. Whenever a child reaches his fifteenth birthday, it is likely that he would die by the curse.

One enlightened descendent of Zohreh's enemy musters the support of humans and jinns to undo the curse as he was approaching his fifteenth birthday. At the same time, disguised as a boy, a female descendent of Zohreh's penetrates enemy lines to avenge the death of her forebear. The consequence is a struggle between good and evil, reason and madness. At the end the two enemies are united by their realised quest for making reason prevail and the vengeful spirit is tamed and put to rest by an abundance of goodness over the will of evil.

Masson puts her experience with eastern culture and places at the service of her great talent of imagination and art of narration to provide us with an engaging fairy tale which is full of wisdom and has bearings on real life and human morality. This is a story where time loses its usual boundaries. The flying carpet and other ancient relics exist side by side with planes and phones. And who needs a camera when images are summoned on the face of a watch and ancient voices are heard by mobile phones. These modern items are introduced gradually in the story and manage to cause some shock, because the reader is initially put in a "medieval" atmosphere and then suddenly taken to the twentieth century:

'...Husam had to earn his living as a swordsman, and eventually he became the Chief Executioner for the Sultan of Jatangan, way across the eastern ocean. I have kept in touch with him over the years, and I know he is now retired. I will get a message to him at once.' He picked up the telephone on Khaled's bedside table, and dialed. 'This is Shayk Abdullah al-Farouk. I want a telegram sent immediately to an address in Jayangam. Mark it extremely urgent...'

(pp21-22)

The narration is not only that of adventure, but it is also full of drama garnished by comic sketches and caricatures:

In the shadows, a strange little man was crouching. He was almost a dwarf, with a large head on a thin neck and a short, squat body. He had weathered skin the colour and consistency of old leather, and the biggest, thickest pepper-and-salt moustache they'd ever seen, which ate up half his face. He wore a dirty brown turban on his head; his trousers and shirt had clearly seen better days; and his dusty feet were thrust into clumsy rubber sandals of the kind only the poor wore. In one gnarled hand, he clutched a hessian

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bag. He beckoned to them. In his singsong Alhindi voice, he whispered, 'Come closer, come closer. There is something you must hear. You must not go to Mr. Harir's shop.'

(p104)

The fantasy Masson creates is a combination of imagination, science fiction and commonplace superstition. But in this engaging atmosphere, it is not difficult to see how relevant events are to our modern times of renewed fanaticism, racism and tyranny. At the end, however, hope returns to the story.

...Now there was hope where there had been despair, and sweet delight where once there had been endless night. Her tears for Zohreh's cruel fate would not end, but they would not be tears of bitterness any more. The future would not forget the past, but the future would not be held hostage to the past, or nothing could ever change.

(p247)

Greg Bogaerts **Black Diamonds and Dust**

Nathan Hollier, the editor of *Overland*, launched Greg Bogaerts' novel *Black Diamond and Dust* in Melbourne on 7 May 2005. The following is his speech.

I'd like to begin by thanking Ian and Greg for giving me the honour of launching this book, which I believe is an important new addition to Australian literature.

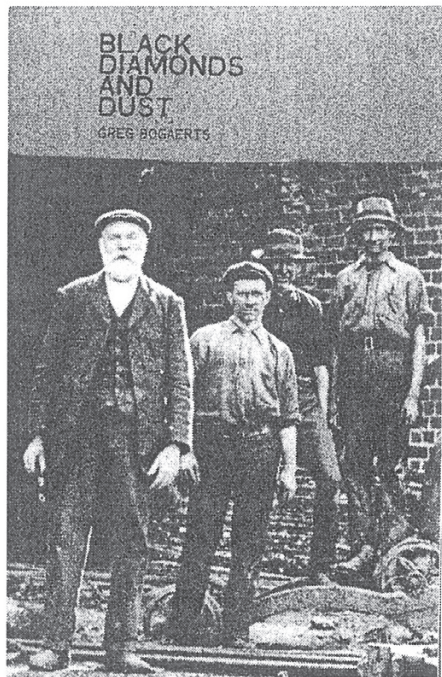
Black Diamonds and Dust is an historical novel, dealing with a very significant period in Australian history: from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, during which time of course the nation of Australia came into existence and certain features of Australian culture which came to be thought of as characteristic of the nation as a whole, were formed. The art of the "Heidelberg school", for instance, that group who created arguably the first distinctively Australian depiction of the landscape and its people, forms part of the backdrop against which the events of this novel take place.

I have long been of the view that we as Australians don't know enough about our own history. "History", for most of us, sits in our head as the sum total of "great figures" (usually men), great events (like wars), and set of official dates and numbers, that happened before we were born and that we and perhaps our parents can't remember. Most of the time, learning about history means learning such things as how many boats there were in the "first fleet", when they arrived and who was the fleet's leader. Encountering history of this kind, and learning about history in this way, is an experience on a par with watching infomercials at four in the morning. It's not very interesting.

Black Diamonds and Dust tells a different history. It is a history of "ordinary" working people, a history of the real forebears of most of us. The novel tells us about the actual conditions in which people of the Newcastle area in New South Wales, lived (for people from that area, this is a particularly special book), it tells us about the kind of people these were – the work they did, the way they related to each other, the problems they had, the pleasures they enjoyed and the pain they felt – and in telling us about these social conditions, and the beliefs, feelings and psychology of the individuals of the time, the author has told us something about how history actually happens, about the process of change. When history becomes a living story about the process of change, it can become an experience on a par with listening to your best friend tell you about their first sexual encounter, with the school PE teacher, and how this has affected the rest of her life; that is, interesting.

The characters of this novel – Edmund, Mary and Clarence Shearer and their family, friends and neighbours – are products, and to a certain extent victims, of their environment:

Edward for example works in the Devonside colliery. He is a hard worker but is frightened of the mine, and with good reason. Serious accidents are not uncommon, death is not unheard of. At the beginning of the novel Edmund's life revolves almost solely around his work. He eats only to get energy to work. His entertainment is



largely that of wiping himself out through alcohol. He has no real friends. He does not speak to his wife. He is a brutal and brutalising person, a machine for cutting coal. His whole frame of mind and way of life is determined by the nature of his working conditions. The author describes a number of times how the characters live so close to coal that it actually finds its way into their bodies.

So Edmund and the other workers and their families are victims of these working conditions. But they also struggle to re-shape those working conditions and the social environment in which they live. The achievement of the characters of this novel is to rise above the brutalising effects of mining work, to turn themselves from extensions of the mine machine into more whole human beings. They do this variously through industrial struggle, a determination to attain education, and an indestructible capacity to love. Mothers try to find other jobs for their sons, men encourage each other not to use alcohol as a crutch and to avoid using violence in the home. A brass band gives the township a form of entertainment and the workers establish culturally enriching Mechanics' Institutes. In spite of broken marriages and family deaths, people give of themselves emotionally and become new lovers, brides and bridegrooms, and parents.

As an artistic form, the novel has I think an unmatched capacity to draw us into a different world and make us feel the emotions of others. *Black Diamonds and Dust* contains great human drama: there is physical conflict, love and sex both inside and outside of wedlock, there are shouting matches and subtle innuendo, mine cave-ins and a nature that both floods and burns. The physical texture of the life of these characters emerges: what they eat (porridge, roast beef, dripping, potatoes and pumpkins, onions, radishes, nutmeg, pastry etc.), and drink (mostly beer), how they clean themselves (with hot olive oil, to get rid of ear-wax, for your information), the houses and tents of whitewashed hessian they live in, the flora and fauna around them, from kangaroos and rabbits to yellow-crested cockatoos. The vernacular accents and turns of phrase are all specific to this time and place.

Our own time is not an age when Literature celebrates heroic struggle – by and large we're in the age of the satire – but this novel reminds us of the heroism of ordinary people.

Over the course of this novel, “history” changes from being that set of official “great” names, dates and events, to becoming a process that our own parents, grandparents and great-grandparents took part in and helped to shape. Through reading *Black Diamonds and Dust* we come to recognise our debt to these people, we feel a kinship with them, we feel a sympathy for them and also an admiration. Over the course of the novel, for instance, my feelings towards these people on the front cover

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changed; by the end of the book I felt I knew them and somehow I now look at them in a different way, with both more understanding and more respect.

In our society it is easy to forget where you came from. Perhaps the overriding message that is fed to us by the powers that be is that you owe no debt to history, that you can become whatever you like and attain whatever you like: we live in a land of opportunity and all you need to do is work hard, be creative and perhaps have a little luck. It's no coincidence that we treat old people the way we do. How many of us have a real sense of what life was like for our grandparents? How many of us even know anything about our great-grandparents?

As human beings we have a longing to know where we came from, who we really are. And of course the same people who feed us the bullshit about Australia the land of opportunity, also take time to fill us in on who we really are. At the moment, we're really ANZACs. We may look like ordinary people who do ordinary jobs and spend a fair bit of time watching TV, but we're actually, at heart, the greatest soldiers the world has ever seen. (It's interesting, as an aside, that our reverence for the ANZACs has increased as the soldiers themselves, in all their flawed humanity and ordinariness, have disappeared: now they're purely mythical creatures of sacrifice and heroism, an endless resource of mindless jingoistic nationalism.)

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera made an observation that I have often had cause to reflect upon: 'The struggle of people against oppression is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. In creating this historical novel, *Black Diamonds and Dust*, Greg Bogaerts has helped us remember who we really are – at least, many of us will identify with this history and take from the novel an expanded sense of our identity: we are the children of extraordinary, ordinary working people. Bogaerts has also told us who we're not: we're not the offspring of flawless beings of the type who stormed, or attempted to storm, a certain ridge in Turkey in 1915. The characters of *Black Diamonds and Dust* are nothing if not human, and as such they have the neuroses and occasional psychoses of you and me.

The author has put us back into history and put history back into our lives. He has demonstrated that history is an ongoing process that we're taking part in.

This is a significant and laudable achievement; I congratulate Greg and his far-sighted publisher, and declare *Black Diamonds and Dust* well and truly launched.

(Greg Bogarets was the subject of Kalimat's Landmark article for the Arabic issue of June 2001.)

**Friday, Sunday
Chapters from a
Biography of a City on
the Mediterranean**

By

Khaled Ziadé

Translated by

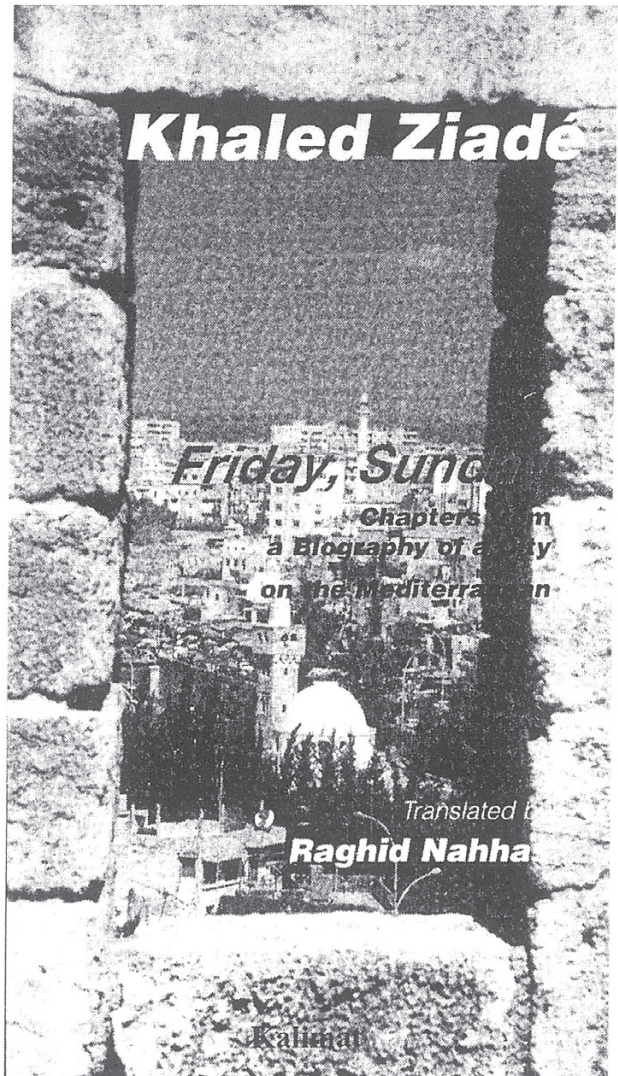
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YAHIA ASSAMAWI

Translated by Raghid Nahhas

Yahia Assamawi, an Iraqi-Australian poet who lives in Adelaide, wrote the following poem addressed to Eva Sallis with the dedication: 'To the poet and novelist Eva Sallis - a river of virtue and a garden of purity.'

Four Loaves from the Heart's Kiln

Oh lady of ladies
in the cities of doubts
Lady of ladies: you are a bridge of certainty
between the banks of the earth and the sky

When the glass is unfilled
and the garden becomes empty of its shade
when no water turns the norias
when the meaningful lilies depart the orchard of the text
I will fill them with copious heavenly wishes and
with praises flowing from my heart to my tongue

I have raised a minaret
in my imagination
and built a playground with swings
I have embroidered the deserts with springs
flowing into orange groves
and when I slumbered in the shade of my supplication
I saw that my tent is a garden
and that I was a cloud showering shadows
onto the wilderness of my alienation

With gestures, I painted a garden
and brushed on perfumes
with my phrases
I wrote down in the book of love:
everyone can reconcile
fire and water
and from darkness
make his day.

Yahia Assamawi and Raghid Nahhas have recently participated in *In Other Words*, a festival of poetry in Melbourne, Australia, organized by Lella Cariddi and Janna Hilbrink. Raghid Nahhas read his translations of Samawi's and those of Khalid al-Hilli who also participated. Nahhas also read translated poetry for the journalist/poet Antoine Kazzi, as well as participating in a session about publishing.

The festival was part of World Poetry. Here is some information from the organisers:

World Poetry was established in Melbourne in mid-2004 under the auspices of *Multicultural Arts Victoria* and works in partnership with the *Centre for Ideas* at the *Victorian College of the Arts*. It has also established close links with the *Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages*. Its primary objective is to establish the inaugural *In Other Words* festival of poetry in translation that will serve not only as a showcase and forum, but will also generate literary engagement and new opportunities among writers, translators, audiences, publishers and readers.

Rationale for establishing *World Poetry*

Our aim is to promote poetry in translation because, in spite of the much vaunted "multiculturalism" of Australian society, scant attention is being given to non-English language literature. Why poetry? Because it speaks to the heart and its themes are universal. *World Poetry* also aims to highlight the role of the literary translators without whose painstaking efforts the poetry would not have been available to us.

While getting the inaugural festival off the ground is our primary objective at this stage, we feel very strongly (judging by the positive reactions to our plans so far) that the processes of consultation and participation, including participation in the festival itself, will contribute to a greater awareness and concomitant appreciation of poetry from other cultures. We see this festival as opening a window on other worlds and any activities flowing from it as an essential ingredient in Australia's literary mix.

The *In Other Words* Festival will not only provide exposure to poetry from other countries, but will also create opportunities for poets in Australia who write in languages other than English and for translators who, through their work are intimately involved in other cultures, whether within or outside Australia, to participate in Australia's literary life.

KHALID AL-HILLI

Translated by **Raghid Nahhas**

Hadia Said and the wonderland of words

I feel I am Alice in Wonderland, still discovering writers, enjoying this bewilderment and continue to learn.

Words have voice, shape and life. I can only see the world through words.

I nominate the Syrian writer Ghada Samman for the Nobel Prize.

Hadia Said is a Lebanese writer and novelist who currently lives in London. Before that, she moved among three Arab countries, establishing strong links with their cultural and information media.

Her journey started in Beirut where she worked as a trainee journalist whilst completing her studies. She then moved with her husband to Baghdad where she worked in journalism during the nineteen seventies. She witnessed many political and social events that affected her creative works, and shaped her latest book *Sanawatul Khouf al-Iraqi* (The years of Iraqi Fear) that was warmly received by readers and critics alike, and was the subject of an important seminar in London.

Said did not stay long in Baghdad due to its restrictive political environment. She returned to Beirut in the nineteen eighties to witness part of the civil war that had

started in 1975. She worked at the renowned as-Safeer newspaper, but soon left Lebanon for Morocco where she worked for the two most important newspapers in that country.

She moved to London in 1995. There, she became a member of the editorial board of *Sayyideti* (My Lady) magazine, the most prominent Arabic women's magazine. She also headed its cultural section. She is a volunteer worker for a medical organisation dealing with victims of torture. She is a permanent weekly guest of the BBC Arabic programme *Awraq*, responsible for the selection of short stories by emerging talents. Every week, a story is selected, read and discussed on radio.

Hadia Said wrote stories, novels, TV drama, radio series and documentaries. She was awarded several prizes for some of her works. Her first story collection *Orjuhatul Mina'* (The Harbour Swing) was published in 1982. This was followed by four further collections and two novels. She was also asked by Amnesty International and Arabay Publishing to write a novella about the international agreement on the elimination of discrimination against women.

One of the novels is titled *Bostan Ahmar* (Red Grove), but her first novel *Bostan Aswad* (Black Grove) won her the *Al-Katiba* Magazine Award (a magazine used to be issued in London). The Egyptian novelist and critic Edward Kharrat said of this novel that it did not show any fear in dealing with the prohibitions and taboos of the relationship between man and woman. 'The writer knew how to intelligently and comprehensively observe the conflicting or harmonious love vibrations, and the changing mood of a complex love.'

Dr. Yomna al-Eid, a critic and Lebanese University academic, mentions that the novel adopts a modernist approach allowing the writer to move between narration and dialogue without the use of traditional tools of dialogue, and without disturbing the flow of narration. Furthermore, the novel explores the changes faced by women experiencing love and the challenges it poses on them.

The Syrian critic Dr. Khaldoun Shamaa classified the novel as 'post-modernist', a classification Said does not agree with, but she acknowledges that, otherwise, his analysis of her novel is the best.

These issues were part of our conversation with Hadia Said when we met at her house in Surrey, one of London's western suburbs. She mentioned that she chose that suburb for its quietness and country-like beauty. Her double-story house is simple but nicely coordinated in colour and style.

She usually writes in a place on the second floor, but admits that she often uses

the oval dining table at on corner of the lounge where we were talking.

After discussing her first novel, she expressed her delight at the fact that her collection *Dharbat Qamar* (Moon Strike) was received as a celebration of her style and language. She further revealed that comments on her novel “Red Grove” were mostly positive except for a few who considered it rather lengthy, but what surprised her was the general positive consensus despite that the novel depicts the shortcomings of the barriers that exist among the Arabs.

We follow this interview with Elizabeth Whitehouse’s translation of excerpts from “Black Grove”, a novel by Hadia Said.

Who is your favourite of those who you read in English?

I cannot say “favourite”. This would be very pretentious. I consider myself in a state of exploration. I also do not consider myself a reader of the “one and only”. I cannot say whether I prefer Virginia Woolf or Jane Austin. Some years ago, I participated in an intensive course about writers in the period between the two great wars. I learned of the richness and diversity of writings, and I am still training myself to appreciate the different creations of those writers.

There are books I like and others I don’t. One of my modern favourites is “The Gods of Small Things” by Arundhati Roy. This novel attracted me to the villages of India where I saw what resembled our own lives as old migrants from some Arab countries. I can give you a long list, but suffice it to say that I feel I am “Alice in Wonderland”, still discovering writers, enjoying this bewilderment and learning.

Please don’t get the impression that I am only attracted to what the media promotes. London has taught me the art of individual discovery. For example, I like “Not the End of the World”, a collection of short stories by Kate Atkinson. I found the collection on a shelf in a supermarket last year. No one I knew had heard of it. One of its stories included goods that used supermarket advertising, but what attracted me to the book was that the stories were about women of different ages, and it dealt with relationships and concerns these heroines had. I consider it one of the best books I have ever read.

I must also admit that the BBC Television, by its recent excellent productions of the best of international classical works, made me read or reread a lot of material.

You must have read books in their original language and their translation into Arabic. You also had some of your material translated into English. What are the most

prominent problems of translation you felt yourself?

I don't know, and I am not the one qualified to answer this question. However, I can say that some translations are excellent such as that of the novel "The Lover" (by Marguerite Duras) which I read in French and Arabic. I also enjoyed translations of novels by David Malouf and others.

The most important thing I discovered in the "continent" of translation was a lesson in accuracy. I found many of the material I read in French or English, translated from Arabic, to be as if completely rewritten. I also discovered how much deadwood our language can have. On the other hand, there are excellent translations into Arabic. I would like here to acknowledge *Kalimat's* experience in publishing excellent translations in both English and Arabic.

What is your impression of Arab women writers and who do you prefer and why?

In my association with creativity and literature I have never drawn borders between the writings of men and women. I am not of the mentality of classification or marginalization. It seems to me that this is an attitude of male critics who only remember women's creativity in what they term "female literature" where they put all such literary productivity in one basket, whereas they tend to distinguish the variations in quality among their male colleagues. This is why I would like to ask why is the female writer the one who is often asked this question about other female writers? I simply like some material regardless of gender. Furthermore, as I indicated before, just because I like a novel by a certain writer it does not mean that I would necessarily like other work by the same writer.

In general, I can point out some refreshing creativity in the work of a new generation of women writers from Morocco, Egypt, The Gulf and Lebanon. These are daring writings addressing fresh areas, such as the writings of Latifa Baqa and Afaf Assayyed. I also liked the novel *Toot Barri* (Wild Mulberry) by the "middle generation" writer Iman Humaydan Younos.

Here I must mention the magnificent Fadwa Toucan and the great Ghada Samman who opened the doors of freedom and instilled courage in the hearts of Arab women writers.

How did living in three different Arab countries, then in London affect your writing?

This departure and escape enriched my experience and outlook to life. I think it positively affected my writings. However, everything I thought as diversity, addition

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and bridge-building was viewed by Arab readers as increasing my isolation and exile. How do I explain that? I do carry some sorrow and sadness, and despite celebrating my novels, some critics deal with them as if they were without identity— strange or exiled.

I have lived through the details of some demarcation lines, conflict points and meeting places. My human experience has become wider in its horizon and I am no longer obsessed with tribal concerns or narrow environments. It is possible that as a result of my travels, I am no longer able to write “local” material. The human horizon, with its continuous integrative experience is what dominates my writings rather than the repeated slogans that inflict many writings.

What are you preoccupied with now, and what is the writing project you aspire to?

I am not aspiring to any particular project. Perhaps I hope to leave, through my writings, a truthful testimony of the age I lived in. I say this and feel inside me someone stretching a tongue of ridicule to say that the age of writing for generations and the future is long gone, and that we are now in the century of “disposable” products. Will we be producing such material? Would future generations only find in our product a material for recycling? Nevertheless, I am determined to write material that translates my guardianship of the value of peace, justice and goodness and to everything ideal, romantic and celebrating beauty, mercy and kindness. Everything that advocates the peace of difference, conflict and struggle. I mean using the tools of dreams to strive for a more understanding and less aggressive world.

How do you see the future of the printed book in this age of computer and website technologies?

The internet cannot replace the printed book. The book is the twin of time, and the relationship with the book goes beyond mere reading. We embrace the book, touch it and fold it to share with us our relaxation, or to accompany us to our waiting place or on our train journey. The West understands this and devotes television and the internet to the service of the printed book. The book remains the ultimate reference and the decisive witness. I don't think any of us is able to read a beautiful novel whilst sitting stiff on a chair in front of a dry, coarse screen. The book, creative or intellectual has a spirit we cannot breathe except through paper.

Naguib Mahfouz is the only Arab writer who won the Nobel prize. If you were asked

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to nominate another Arab writer, who would that be, and why?

I would nominate Ghada Samman, because she started a new era and wrote in all areas advocating hope and calling for freedom and love.

Do you have particular rituals in your writing? How long did it take you to write your first novel, and then the second?

I am a state of writing! My *self* often surprises me by writing. I can only see the world through words. Words for me possess voice, shape and life. I live in a continuous writing condition. I write on paper daily for several ours. After living my first novel between my eyes and in my memory for years, I wrote it in six months. The second novel took me two years, following four years of preparation and research.

What is your opinion of the idea that some readers started preferring to read novels over poetry, and that the Arabs are now living in the age of the novel? Have you read novels written by Arab poets, and what has your impression been?

I am not aware of any statistics to prove that, but I know that publishers welcome novels, have some reservations against short-story collections and avoid poetry altogether. I think this attitude of Arab publishers is behind the impression you mention.

I remember two novels by Saadi Youssef I read, but I felt that I preferred Youssef the poet to the novelist. I also read a novel by Ahlam Mustaghanmi with lengthy poetic segments that I did not like.

Do you have any “words” for Australian writers and readers who would read this article?

This question is humbling, but I can say that I feel I am placing a message in a bottle I throw in the sea... some of you might come across it by chance one day. Please read it. My writings are my voice that sees all humans, no matter how far apart they are, as neighbours worthy of mutual understanding, learning and the joy of love.

Khalid al-Hilli is a writer, journalist and poet of Iraqi origins. He is an adviser to *Kalimat* who lives in Melbourne, Australia.

HADIA SAID

Translated by **Elizabeth Whitehouse**

Excerpts from **Black Grove**

Synopsis

The novel Black Grove tells the story of Yara, who leaves her lover Amr for her lover Rita. But is this really what happened? What is Amr's relationship with Yara and with Rita? And what relationship do each of these women have with him?

The story begins when Amr, a prominent Palestinian-Lebanese businessman, announces that he is going to break off his relationship with Yara, a Lebanese woman living in London, whom he loves. The reason behind this decision is that he finds out about Yara's relationship with Rita and that she favours her over him. But who is Rita, and what is the secret of her relationship with Yara? Where does she live and how did Amr find out about their relationship? He discovers more - his beloved Yara only embarked on a love affair with him so that he could introduce her to Rita.

The story unfolds in London, where Amr comes on business trips and to visit Yara. Through a series of breathtaking events it is gradually revealed that Rita, who lives in France, was the lover of Yara's husband, who was killed during the civil war in Lebanon. Yara has spent her life searching for Rita in order to find out more about her husband's betrayal, why he loved Rita and how she is different to her. Amidst these events we also find out about the relations between the Lebanese who fought with the Palestinians during the civil war. Yara's husband had joined the Palestinian resistance in Beirut and Amr, involved in the arms trade, came across dens of corruption and embezzlement among the political parties and militia. Having found out about the widespread corruption in these circles, he helped Yara to discover the same, likewise Rita, and to distance themselves from the corruption and profiteering in the Lebanese and Palestinian militia.

Black Grove has been banned in some Arab countries because of its bold portrayal of the emotional and physical relationship between Yara and Amr, and the ambiguous nature of Yara's relationship with Rita. Is it the same type of relationship? Or is it the relationship of two women who discover real love and freedom far away from the captivity and oppression of men. Finally, Yara frees herself from Amr and leaves everything behind, even her memories and the money paid to her by a Palestinian organisation as compensation for the death of her husband. She discovers that freedom is what she wants and that it is through her union with Rita that she can be herself and grow stronger.

Yara's Door
Entrance ----- 1994

1

He finally appears. I can still remember the way he looked; how he'd changed. Even his build. My God, how our perceptions change. He looks shorter, slighter. This side of his face is wrinkled, his eyelid puffy. The distinct curl of his eyelashes, his broad temple, the fine bone of his nose... slightly curved, less attractive. He's pushing the luggage trolley along roughly as he comes out of customs. He's come from Beirut. His words came before him. His voice in my head. 'It's all over, finished. Everything that's between us.' I asked him why. I asked in dismay, bewildered, panicking. He said two words: 'Ask Rita'. He was silent for a long time. Then he spoke.

'A few things remain which I'll settle with you when I come. I'm coming for something in particular, something else. I'm not coming because of you. Don't think I'm coming for you. It's over, finished. Everything's over. I'm arriving at two in the afternoon. Thursday. I'll be in the hotel by about three thirty. I'll have half an hour in which we can settle everything, and after that I'll be tied up in meetings.'

'Don't you want me to meet you at the airport, as usual?' I asked.

'That's up to you. It makes no difference.'

He'll arrive and I'll have come like a mule. I wait for him, turn to greet him and he comes into view, a stern, scornful look in his eyes. He doesn't see me. He doesn't want to see me. His offhand greeting offends me. His icy palm is like a slap. The palm, whose roughness I had often touched with kisses. A piece of bark that scratched against my lips as I caressed it. 'I've been helping the workmen fix my uncle's house,' he used to say.

He's crossed the area fenced off by metal barriers behind which people waited to meet the arrivals. Some are carrying signs with names written on them in capitals; 'MICHAEL' and 'SANDRA'. Others are meeting beloveds or relatives. Amr goes past turning towards anyone. If only he'd catch sight of me like a sign, or hug me as if I were family. I run after him, like my son used to run after me. Eventually he turns. He doesn't know how to control himself, to be polite. He greets me with a scowl. 'My God,' he says. He's resisting, resisting me. 'I'm getting a taxi.' 'I'm', he says. Last time he smiled and said 'we'. Before that he'd hired a car at Heathrow. It was blue. Now, in the taxi, I steady my voice, straighten my skirt and prepare my words.

‘Carlos,’ I say finally, ‘They’ve arrested Carlos.’

‘It’s for the best,’ he says.

I switch to Taslima Nasrin to show him that despite my resignation, and having distanced myself from the committee, this hasn’t curbed my interest.

‘You know, I think the journalist twisted what Taslima Nasrin said.’

He doesn’t reply. I ask him about work. He says it’s fine. Then he takes a leaflet out of his bag. It’s about a lecture to be given by Francis Craig at which his new book, “Amazing Hypotheses”, is going to be launched.

‘This is what matters,’ he says, talking to himself so that I can hear. ‘If people listened to this man they would stop lying to themselves.’ He shows me a page and, pointing to a paragraph, starts to read.

‘Francis Craig explains how an image can be broken down into its elementary components in the brain and how nerve cells interact with them, of which one cluster is concerned with shape, a second with colour and a third with movement.’

I listen and follow with difficulty. I notice his derisive look, mocking voice, his distaste. The car takes us over bridges, busy roads and roundabouts. My eyes are misty. Amr has reserved himself a room in a hotel in the suburbs. Croydon. When we arrive, I continue to stare stupidly at the leaflet as Amr gets out and gives the driver his fare. He pushes his suitcase, with its smart handle and noiseless wheels, in front of him. I follow, and the heels of my shoes rap against my head like a gun.

2

Darkness. Yet it doesn’t resemble the darkness of our rooms before. It contracts and constricts like the muscle of the heart. Amr is a lion in a cage. If he roared, I’d relax. He turns slightly. Perhaps he’s looking for his cigarettes. I see them on the suitcase. The bed is far away, disappearing into the back of the room. Retreating. Distasteful. I stand in the passageway behind the door and hear him whisper, ‘I’ll hang up my clothes and we’ll go out’. I quickly stretch out my hand with the note. He takes it and looks away. Ignores it. He makes it clear that he isn’t keen or impatient to read it. At last, he sees his cigarette packet and lights a cigarette. I used to light them for him and he would blow out the flame of my lighter. I don’t carry a lighter now. I want him to know that as far as I’m concerned too, everything’s over. It’s finished for me as well. I wrote him the note and memorised what I’d written. I rewrote it twenty times. I searched for the right words and picked them.

Dear Amr,

Everything is clear now and I prefer to say this in such a way that my words cannot be misinterpreted or confused. Everything's over. I mean this special connection between us. I'm convinced it should end– in fact, it's what I want. I have to acknowledge that you did this before me. Besides this, I want your friendship, even if it's only from afar, or an intention. As for Rita, and your noble stand in approaching the organisation to reconsider Wathiq's compensation money and his son's – my son's – allowance and for taking it upon yourself to deliver what remains of my belongings in Beirut, especially the box of papers and items which were considered public property after Wathiq's martyrdom, I consider this a debt and maybe time will enable me to repay you. I will try to make this happen.

It remains for me to apologise for the words I said last Friday. I apologise for myself too, because I refuse to accept that I should be like this, yet it slipped out.

He reads it. I don't look at him. I feel scared. He folds the paper and puts it down on the dressing table. In front of the ashtray. Then he says, 'Let's go out.' As if I'd been waiting for him to rip it up and embrace me.

Elizabeth Whitehouse studied Arabic at St Andrews University and has an MA in Middle Eastern studies, with a specialisation in literary translation, from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. She teaches English and has contributed to Banipal, the UK's magazine of Modern Arab literature in translation.

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KENNEDY ESTEPHAN

A Bit of Sanity

She shifts in her seat, a pale figure under the fluorescent light. The mahogany desk stands between us, a constant reminder of the two different worlds we belong to. A doctor and a patient.

For three years she's been visiting the clinic, trying to conceive. A simple test much earlier on cleared her husband's seed, one less variable to worry about in the complicated formula of things. Even her own system looks healthy enough— ovaries ovulating on time, tubes neat and unobstructed, hormones all within acceptable levels. There have been no pathological causes behind her infertility. Strange, one might think at first. Then again, the human body is such a mysterious thing. I am a gynaecologist. I must know.

Three years of treating her, during which I followed all the recommended protocols: first administering fertility drugs for months on end, then with that option exhausted I had to suggest IVF as the last resort. So far the patient has had five cycles, without any success. This cycle, irrespective of the outcome, will have to be her last. There are only so many drugs a human body can take. So many needles.

Her eyes are averted; I am peripheral. I can sense her insecurity, the way she keeps tucking that invisible lock of hair behind one ear. Her husband has not accompanied her this time, and I gather she feels a little lost without him. He's a restless fellow, thirty two years old, from memory, nearly her age. I clearly remember the day when he vented his frustration at the whole process, ranting about all the 'sacrifices' that he had made. At times I wonder how he would have felt if he had been in his wife's shoes instead, if he had been the one who had to go through the hundred ultrasounds, the endless procedures. Flipping through a glossy magazine, producing a couple of CCs of semen! Not my idea of a sacrifice.

Her nervous cough brings me back to the present. I reach for her latest blood-test report and note how she's turned fidgety. Like my patients I also anticipate these moments, dread them even. Statistics, probability, all the uncertainties.

'Now what do we have here?' I say to no one in particular as my eyes search for the Endocrinology subheading then scan through a whole list of hormones and numbers. The summary at the bottom of the page confirms my inference. The gods have finally smiled at us.

'Congratulations. You're pregnant.' And I smile too.

'Are you... sure?'

'Your period is four weeks late, your progesterone level is way up, and the Lab

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report sums it up. Yes, you *are* pregnant.'

Her eyes glisten, her torso straightens. Of course I have seen it all before; that surge of inner strength, a barren woman's sudden awareness of a life that is now blooming within her, taking shape. *A mother has no need to justify her existence*, a verse from a book.

I sit back, give a little sigh. It's moments like this, I admit, that make my profession worth all the pain.

'Thank you.' Her words come as a whisper, and I feel that she is also addressing that part of me which has sympathised with her, shared that silent hope.

'I still need to carry out further tests,' I add. 'Nothing to worry about. Just to make sure everything is fine.'

'I know things will be. I just know.'

I nod but remain silent.

We both stand up, and I walk her to the receptionist to arrange for another appointment. After the polite farewell I return to the clinic and wait for another patient.

The interphone buzzes.

'Ms. A. Graeme,' the receptionist says.

'Please, let her in.'

I stretch in my chair and try to cherish a moment of rest. For a while my eyes linger on the porcelain plaque resting on my desk. It's a birthday gift from my teenage daughter, and the inscribed text reads: *At the end of a long day at work a gynaecologist knocks on the door of his place, waits for his wife to open the door, stares at her then says: 'At last, a face!'*

She's a funny girl. Her fourteenth birthday is on next Thursday. I still have to buy her a present.

There's a knock on the door.

As a typical clinician my examination begins the moment a patient steps in. Angela G. Early thirties. Healthy looking.

'Hello,' she acknowledges my presence with a faint smile and helps herself to the seat. I return the greeting and look up her file in the database: a couple of routine check-ups, one pap smear, a minor case of candidiasis. Nothing *challenging*, to put it in medical terms.

'What can I do to help, Ms Graeme?'

Her eyes show intelligence. For a moment they focus on an oil painting hung on the wall. In it, Hippocrates watches a group of his medical students bow their heads in acquiescence to an oath they have just made. Their solemn moment.

'A nice piece of art you've got there,' she says.

'Thanks. Now how can I help you?'

'I think I'm pregnant.'

'Yes.'

She looks in my direction. She is silent. The fading smile says it all.

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At 3.20 p.m., a case of gonorrhoea, a fingerprint from an affair. The patient is married. At 4.35, a case of uterine cancer. Hysterectomy! 'But I'm only thirty one. I still haven't got kids.' Her voice wavers with emotion. 'It could've been far worse,' I sympathise, to no avail. She sobs.

Joy, frustration, shame, fear. So many stories there, stirring in the womb of things.

All patients have been attended to; my day is finally over. On my way out of the clinic I pause by the window and look into the distance. For a while I gaze homeward, at the spill of suburbs blinking from across the Harbour. It's then, as I slowly take in the view, that I see *her*. Standing amidst family and friends, she wears her mischievous smile as she leans forward and blows her birthday candles. Fourteen of them!

It's a happy moment. A few days from now. And there, on the tired face in the glass, a smile...

Kennedy Estephan is an Australian writer who lives in Sydney.

Shawki Moslemani's poetry collection

Where the Wolf is

Translated by
Noel Abdulahad & Raghid Nahhas

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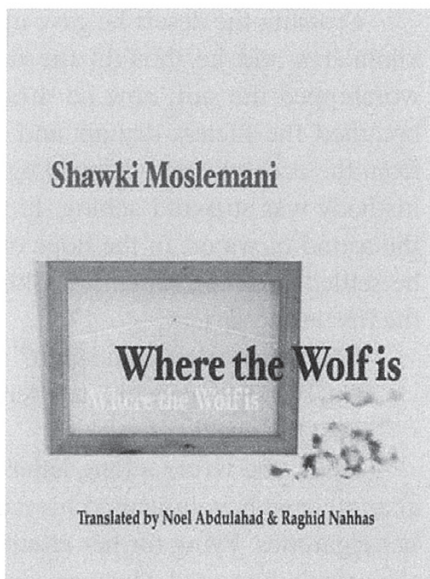
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L. E. SCOTT

*Black Family Letters from Boston***Sweetness**

It has been a long time since I slept with somebody on a first date. It's been a long time since I felt like going on somebody's date— I don't even buy clothes with that in mind any more. I wear underclothes for comfort now. The last man I met who made me twitch like that belonged to somebody else— and life had already taught me to leave that just where I saw it. I just kept on steppin', but the feeling was there! Sometimes you just have to let things live in an exchanged smile. But I know your head is elsewhere with these matters. You have an anniversary of sorts coming up and you know what they say about birthdays and anniversaries— they can be like funeral announcements.

Ten years is a long time. In her case a new husband and two babies. And where are you? I know that when you go down on your knees to pray before you go to bed, it's beside the same bed you shared with her. Well, it could be a money thing that you still have the same bed or it could be something else, but I would think after so many years her smell doesn't reside there any more. Pretty Child, people pray in all kinds of ways about all kinds of things and what you see with your eyes closed and what you see with them open may not be dressed in the same clothes— may not even be in the same church, as some folks may say when they get all up in your business.

I don't know how we find a way to live after we lose something that is so precious and vital to us. Some folks just self-clone and walk out to sea. And Baby Child, I don't know what it feels like for a man when his wife is impregnated by another man. That's a hard reality in anybody's kingdom. I do know the colour of pain and I feel for you. But that's not the only colour in the world. There are times when thoughts of yesterday will squeeze the guts out of your mind and spin your world into a tizzy.

So this anniversary of yours is a ghost dancing on your mind. Memories with personalities. There are many graveyards in a lifetime and love can be one of them. At the end of the day, what it comes down to is that people who choose to get married on their birthday have to kiss the fire twice if longevity is not seduced.

But even in the midst of that fog, Happy Birthday.

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The other day your letter arrived— you must have written it the moment you arrived back in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Let me tell you something, please. God has allowed me to live long enough to see all kinds of beauty and ugliness and sometimes the two dance to the same tune.

So let me get this right from Jump Street. You and your friend were having dinner at this nice little up-market joint in downtown Trenton, New Jersey, talking about the article you wrote on Amiri Baraka's poem where he had suggested some Jewish folks knew 9/11 was going down before it went down.

Doc was a little pissed off with you for publishing that picture of him and Baraka without asking him first. He felt you were unaware of the kind of heat that went down as a result of Baraka's poem. I'm pleased you and Doc made peace — friendships don't just come struttin' down the street every day of the week.

So there you Brothers were, having a sweet meal, a lovely golden chardonnay and good conversation at this up-market restaurant. On your right peripheral was a table of three late-twenties white women. They were not unattractive. The one who had a lovely Indian shawl wrapped around her shoulder liked what she saw, her smile opened the door, you and Doc acknowledged the smile. History was working against her.

On your left peripheral another table of three: two middle-aged white men and an equal-in-age white woman. All nondescript— and would have remained so except for one historical lynching word: 'nigger'.

Doc heard it, but his mind told him he didn't. You heard it, but your mind told you you didn't. Couldn't believe, didn't want to believe.

It was the man with his back to you and Doc who said it. 'The ghost' came out of his mouth. He was talking about having been at some function during the day and he said to his companions, 'there were a bunch of niggers there'.

It was only after these people left that you said to Doc what you thought you had heard and then Doc told you he thought he had heard it too. And there you'd both sat— Georgia-born men, African American poets — and done nothing. Said nothing. A silent conspiracy of self-flagellation.

Doc was trying to figure out why he hadn't said something at the time. And Lord, why didn't you say something at the time?

What you and Doc did do after the incident, 'the ghost' as Doc would later rename it and you would concur, was to express what you should have considered doing. 'Excuse me, I just want to confirm what I thought you said so I can eat your heart, motherfucker.' And you talked about what would have happened to this white

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man if he had said the word ‘nigger’ around some street Brothers. They would not have asked him for confirmation.

So all of this is to say what about the word? You and Doc are Georgia-born and given your age the two of you have no doubt picked cotton on some tobacco-chewing white man’s farm. And when he called you ‘nigger’ in the worst kind of way – dead to your face – the place and time would not let you do something to him. You had to eat that taste of history with all its humiliating, syphilitic, suffocating racism.

Reading your letter about “the incident”, this Black woman who has loved Black men all her life was painfully reminded that some men got beyond the hurt of that word and others drowned in it. I don’t know about Doc’s father, but I know about yours. He drowned a slow death in that word. You were old enough to know the kind of water he drowned in, but you discovered James Baldwin and his words saved you. God bless his sweet, beautiful soul.

In the coming days of your life, when you wake up at some odd hour of the night or walk down some city street and catch your reflection, just remember what James Baldwin told you/ Doc/me/us: ‘It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent.’

Well, every letter has its ending, every childhood its season, every night its day, every thought its reflection, every movement its neighbourhood, and surely I have told you this somewhere before: sometimes life is at the mercy of events.

Sweetness --

You are loved.

Lewis E. Scott is an African-American writer, poet and editor who made New Zealand his home. He is *Kalimat*’s adviser for New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

This is another one of a new series of “Black Family Letters From Boston”. The stories in the series cover a wide range of subjects that may be loosely grouped under the heading “the Black American Experience” and explore the relationships between family members and the way in which their lives are affected by their struggle in and with white America.

DAVE CAULDWELL

Tahrir (Liberation)

In the midst of a sweltering summer's day lies the earliest memory of my childhood. It's encapsulated in many grains of sand and lingers in heatwaves that crawl over the desert. The winds of time have scattered these grains and now my memory is confused. The first seven years of my life have been shrouded in a haze and before this day I cannot recall anything.

This tarnished memory is the only image I have of my homeland. My childhood is like a ball of plasticine that has been moulded into a distorted shape. All events before the day that melted my innocence with its searing heat have been confined to the annals of a time that no longer seems to exist. But this solitary memory I cannot shake; its vividness sticks in my mind like a bloodthirsty leech clings to skin.

Thirty years on I find myself standing at the point where this horrible memory was created. I have finally returned to my homeland in an attempt to regain what was lost here. Even now I can feel something loitering in the air. It touches the nape of my neck like a clammy hand, urging me to walk off the highway and back towards the town where I'm hoping to find answers. The parched track before me invites me to regress for the sake of my own progression.

How different life is nowadays. The valley in which I stand now seems like it's from a different era. As my feet throw up dust I realise that returning here is evoking much more than I expected. But there is no turning back.

Scents I haven't smelt for three decades fill my nostrils. People I haven't thought about in countless moments spring from the banks of my memory, leaking over into the present. A dusty wind makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I freeze. Suddenly I'm beginning to remember.

I'm standing in the Bekaa Valley, a fertile area settled in the middle of Lebanon and served by the Litany River. The land here is green and vibrant. Two commanding

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mountains watch over the tip of the Great Rift Valley that winds like a skulking snake down into the reaches of Africa. Ancient Phoenician inscriptions heralded this valley as a "*Place for the Gods.*"

My memory certainly didn't consider this place to be heavenly. What I was picking up on was altogether less angelic. Although the atmosphere in the Bekaa Valley is different now there are still traces of unease every time the wind blows humid air into my face. Dirt dances up around me and suddenly I disappear into a lucid flashback.

In the distance there was a rumbling, like the sky had indigestion. Before my young eyes could comprehend what was going on I was enveloped in a swirling cloud of hot dust. It invaded the air in my lungs, causing me to choke and cough. I was temporarily blinded.

The hazy whirlwind held me captive. Everyone had vanished and I was alone, although I could hear screaming that sounded like it was coming from another universe.

All of a sudden a hand penetrated the thick confusion and grabbed my wrist. I was urged to follow my father who dragged me across the ground to our ramshackle shelter.

"What's going on father?" I enquired as we darted in and out of a panic stricken crowd.

"They're attacking," he said bluntly.

"Who's attacking?" I asked as my knee scuffed on a sharp rock. My cry of pain was banished into the dust.

"The Israelis. They're bombing Lebanon. Now get inside."

We arrived at our house, a crudely constructed shelter made from plastic bags and wood. The bags flapped spasmodically in the gust. My mother was waiting, sobbing as she saw us return. My father asked her what the matter was but that soon became apparent.

In the middle of the room lay my younger brother. He was motionless and pallid. Stale drool had crusted onto the side of his mouth. My father sank to his knees in disbelief as my mother wept inconsolably. I stood still not knowing what to do.

Thirty years on and it seemed like I'd gone nowhere. I was standing in virtually the same spot but this time the tear ducts in my eyes knew what to do. Although the bombings had only lasted six days back in '67 there had been another menace to consider. Meat wasn't stored properly and bouts of deadly intestinal anthrax were common. In all, it had accounted for half of my family and after my brother's death I

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was the only child my mother had left.

Now I can recollect my uncle coming for me. He had a solemn look on his face as he carried me kicking and screaming out of my parent's house. They lived in uncertain times and wanted me to have a chance in life. They'd instructed my uncle to escort me to Beirut where I was to board a plane and leave for Australia.

On the Damascus to Beirut highway I was ushered onto a bus by my uncle. He kept perfectly calm as I bit and kicked him, dismissing looks he was getting off other passengers. As the door slammed shut I pressed my face against the glass, banging on it with my fists and crying into the windowpane. My parents had stayed in the house I stood in front of now, too saddened to watch me leave. Suddenly the wailing of my mother was restored in my memory. It had been the last time I'd seen my parents.

The bustling streets of Beirut lay at the end of the highway. I felt empty inside, hungry as well for I had not eaten for nearly a day. My uncle led me through a hyperactive crowd and over to where a bearded man was roasting lamb on a spit, belching vulgarly as he rotated it. My uncle ordered two shawarmas and told me to wait with the bearded man who was fiddling around in his beard. Eventually he picked something out, rolled it in his chubby fingers before dismissively flicking it to the ground. He reached over to a small table and picked up some Arab bread, proceeding to stuff it with fresh tomatoes, pickles, and mint. He handed it to me as my uncle returned.

I was hurried away once more, destined for the airport. Thirty years later when I'd touched down in Beirut I felt the same feelings resurfacing. Trepidation and sadness lumped in the back my throat as if trying to choke me, and an overwhelming fear made my skin tingle and my muscles rigid.

My uncle had given me a sheet of paper as he'd bundled me onto the plane. On it was the address of an aunty who had also recently left Lebanon. I was to stay with a woman I knew nothing of, until I was old enough to support myself.

My room in Australia was luxurious compared to the home I'd known in the Bekaa Valley. But curled up in bed every night it felt like the most uncomfortable place in the world. I wept into my saturated pillow, yearning to be back in the arms of my mother. All I could see when I closed my eyes was her teary face, my father's look of resignation, and my brother's tongue lolled to one side. Everything felt wrong and there was no place to go.

Without my aunty I wouldn't have made it through. She nurtured me as if I was her own son. She made me feel like I had something to live for.

She used to tell me great stories about Lebanon. In front of a crackling fire and a

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steaming mug of cocoa she expanded my imagination beyond the realms of elasticity, recounting stories of our ancestors who roamed the land thousands of years before. She led me away into territory covered only by the Great Explorers. She guided my young mind to the top of glacial peaks, swooping my senses onto valley floors that teemed vivaciously below. She carried me over the edge of perilous waterfalls and crystallised me in snowflakes. She inspired me, broadening my perspective and enabling me to view the world differently. This amazing woman hauled me away from the pain of my childhood.

Instead of crying into my pillow each night my mind was now away over the ocean, sailing with the Phoenicians across vast waters. I'd chase the sunset over the brim of the horizon and gaze up to blanketed night skies. I drifted on nocturnal waves and ventured to distant lands, using the North Star to guide me on my gentle voyage. I was a missionary of civilisation, spreading culture far across the globe.

Every time I spoke to my aunty it was like opening up a portal into history and stepping through it. Her knowledge could fill a hundred libraries and the pages of a million tomes. She'd lead me down the corridors of her mind, knocking on doors that contained vivid stories that thrilled and dumbfounded me.

When she died I was inconsolable. Nobody was capable of replacing her and for a few months afterwards my mind regressed back to the dark days when I first arrived in Australia.

In her will my aunty left me everything she had: her house and her life savings. Despite my new possessions I felt like her death had left me nothing but alone. I began to fear that I was destined to walk alone through the complicated undergrowth of life. It seemed like a jungle, a tangled mess I couldn't fathom. There was no justification for what was happening and the hours I spent rocking back and forth in her rocking chair failed to produce a reason why illness had struck her down before she had even reached forty.

Eventually I decided to sell the house. There were too many memories interweaved in the fabric of the carpet, painted into the bumpy ceiling, and planted with the flowers in the garden. I needed to get on with my life rather than dwell in a time that I was reluctant to let go of. My auntie was gone and her passing had taught me that I had to get on with things. Even in death she was still teaching me.

And so destiny played a part in the next phase of my life. It was so uncanny that in some perverse way it seemed like my auntie had planned it.

One day I was conducting viewings around the house when an angel landed on the doorstep. Her face was a fusion of a million intricate pixels, a coming together of a

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beauty so rare and exotic, so pure and invigorating. Heaven had paid me a visit and I fell in love instantly.

Within a year of our chance meeting we were married and my life was back on course. The road I was walking down was paved and unified rather than arbitrary and cracked. I had direction and purpose and my thirst for life had been replenished. My fountain was overflowing and I was basking in refreshing water that cleansed my soul. My upbringing was as far away as my love stretched for my wife and I began to forget where I came from.

For many years I lived in contentedly. My wife mothered two adorable souls from heaven and we lived in happiness, raising the blessings that God had given us. But as the years progressed, as my children grew up, I became more and more aware of something inside me. My children were curious as to why my wife and I looked different, and why my accent wasn't like that of other fathers at their school. They began to make feelings of my homeland resurface, and as the inquisitive minds of my children continued to probe it was an issue that slowly began to feed on me.

On the eve of my thirtieth anniversary in Australia I decided that something had to be done. I couldn't answer my children, or myself. Who exactly was I? I'd immersed myself so much in the present that I'd forgotten about my roots. Although it was going to be a painful regression it became clear that it was something I had to know. My children had a right to know who I was. More importantly, so did I.

Impetuosity took over and I found myself hurrying to the airport where I bought a ticket for the first plane to Beirut. I phoned my wife from the departure lounge to tell her about my crazy scheme. She vindicated my rash decision by giving me her full support. Such was her understanding that I felt compelled to board the plane and face what I'd run away from thirty years ago.

But now I wasn't sure if I'd made the right decision. Had my instinct deceived me? What was I looking for in returning here? By raking up the past I was attempting to identify what had been bugging me for all this time. Although my life in Australia was a peaceful and prosperous one, there was a piece of me that wasn't complete. Something felt out of place, fragmented and broken off. But was I really going to find out why I was feeling this way by searching the Bekaa Valley for something that might not even exist? So many grains of sand, crumbles of dirt, and leaves on crops there were to explore. Every part of the valley held its own mystery that mine seemed insignificant. History had scarred the earth and it held a million riddles, my missing piece muddled in barrage of secrets that were never going to be discovered.

I took a deep breath and sighed.

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The sun caressed my face with its warmness and I began to smile. Coming back here had taught me that there were some things I was destined not to know. It was impossible to know everything and sometimes that was for the best. Some things were meant to stay embedded in the soil and scattered as snow on the peaks of unclimbable mountains. My missing piece would never be found and I was slowly accepting the fact. I was never supposed to see a completed jigsaw.

My mind had blotted out things for a reason, and with the coming of each new dawn I realised that what gave me a purpose to live was hope; the hope that some day I might discover a little more about my parents. But it was not in my hands to find out what had happened. If I were destined to know then life would show me. The important thing for me now lay not in my past, but in my present and future. It lay with my beautiful children and adorable wife.

I turned to leave my old village. As I did so, a girl no older than three or four caught my eye. She regarded me curiously. I was drawn to her gaze; something about her captivated me and I felt compelled to stare back. She looked as deeply into my eyes as my wife had on our wedding day. I felt like I knew this child, like we'd been kindred spirits in another time. She had a familiarity that was unerring and a look that suggested she knew so much about me.

Her mother shouted from inside the house but the young girl didn't move. Our eyeballs were like magnets and neither of us could draw away. She stood motionless in the doorway, framed by wooden beams that made her look so small. I began to edge away as footsteps emerged from the darkness of the house. Facing forward for a second I headed back up the path to the highway, glancing back over my shoulder. The girl had vanished and all was quiet. Increasing my pace I faced forwards, not quite sure of what had just happened.

I gathered momentum until I reached the highway again. Aboard the bus, I stared at the village until it was merely a suggestive blip on the horizon. As dust rose up around the side of the bus I began to smile. Then I laughed. I felt liberated as I sped along the highway, chasing the dying embers of the sun as darkness loomed. Nothing loomed over me any more.

Closing my eyes I drifted away, rising up from the valley trough and up into the precipitation of the clouds, out over the Indian Ocean. I fell as rain over my new homeland, falling into the arms of my wife and children.

Dave Cauldwell has just immigrated to Melbourne from England, having spent the last four years travelling independently. His writing background consists of working on local newspapers, editing a college magazine, as well as writing numerous short stories and articles.

GREG BOGAERTS

Excerpts from a Novella

Avenue of Poplars in Autumn

Marcel, with his memories, is only half way down the avenue of poplars; it is a long walk for him now that he is old and the weight of the years with their incidents, their stories, seems to make the walk longer and longer. Sometimes, as he ponders his wife and stepdaughter, Marcel wonders whether he will reach the end of the avenue where the wooden bridge, he built over the stream, still survives. Sometimes the burden of the years causes his mind to wander and his footsteps follow his thoughts, the old man meandering amongst the black and golden shadows of the autumn afternoon.

He stops, makes himself think of the woman, now dead and the child, long gone from the farm and married to a public official and living in Paris. Sometimes, Marcel thinks it is as though the two women did not live on the farm with him all of those years; he thinks, sometimes, his memories are the mists of his imagination. That his wife and Cecile seemed to arrive and depart with such rapidity they could not have been real; Rosemary could not have been his wife for so many years.

Mumbling to himself he totters onwards towards the bridge but behind him, the house sits, brick and squat with two windows in the wall. The bottom larger window is where Madame sat looking down the avenue of poplars; it is where she sat for the first time on the day of her wedding wondering if she could go through with it. Marcel, for all his clumsiness, for all his simplicity was aware of the woman's doubts. He stood on the flagstones behind her while she wept at intervals and wrung her hands.

Such behaviour was foreign to the farmer; he'd seen one of his neighbours weep when he lost his best milking cow; that was understandable, the closeness between man and beast, especially when the animal gave gallons of milk day in and day out. But to cry over indecision regarding marriage was almost beyond Marcel. Yet he had no doubt the woman was upset for this very reason and so he struggled to crawl

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inside her milky white hide to see how she felt, to try to understand her anguish. But it was impossible for Marcel to do this so he placed his hand softly upon the weeping woman's shoulder.

Madame Rosemary leapt into the air as if she'd been stung by a swarm of bees from one of the hives in Marcel's bottom field. The farmer could not help but perceive her feelings of repulsion for him, her distrust of him, but, despite this, he still loved her, he was still entranced by her exotic air usually found only in the salons of Paris. He was always her slave ready to bear the lacerations of Madame Vert's looks, the bruises of her contemptuous and dismissive manner towards him.

The bride to be gathered her skirts and gathered up her courage and left the house when the cart arrived to take her to the church. Sitting stiff and rigid beside one of Marcel's farm hands driving the cart, with her daughter sitting behind, Madame stared stoically ahead and endeavoured to conjure up images of her creditors pursuing her through the streets of Paris, the sound of blood lust coming from deep in their gullets.

Through the fields of ripe corn and wheat the wagon swayed and Marcel, dressed in his Sunday finery of shiny black pantaloons, threadbare jacket and age-yellowed white shirt followed on foot. He kept his head down convinced he was unworthy to even behold the back of the exquisite creature from Paris. So he looked at his down-at-heel shoes with their tarnished brass buckles and his white stockings laddered long and holey.

His attention was drawn back to the cart when Madame began to cough and gag and her daughter burst into merry giggles. Marcel soon saw the problem. The horse's tail arched in the air like a flow of water coming from a fountain and big green and yellow steaming potatoes of horse shit fell out of the animal's arse.

Marcel ran to the front of the cart and stopped it, looked daggers at his farm hand as if to admonish him as somehow to blame for the horse's unseemly behaviour. But the farmer kept his wrath for his horse, wagging his finger at the animal and threatening him with the glue factory. The horse responded with a loud fart, the stench of which almost overpowered the woman sitting behind. But the recalcitrant beast of burden wasn't about to leave matters there and baring his brown-stained teeth gave a high-pitched shrill whinny that translated as: 'Go kiss my arse.' Something not likely to happen given what had just been discharged from that backside.

Madame Vert staggered from the vehicle and Marcel went to her aid, giving her his arm upon which to lean and this time Madame did not refuse so faint was she

from the prodigious amount of gas she'd experienced. Marcel and his bride-to-be walked the rest of the way to the church leaving the cantankerous carthorse to crop the grass beside the track and ponder upon the bizarre conduct of human beings.

All the inhabitants from the surrounding farms and the small village were waiting at the church when Marcel walked up with his future bride.

Marcel can still see it as he pauses in his journey along the avenue of poplars. The image of all those people waiting at the church for him and Madame Rosemary Vert to arrive is still clear but he hesitates to continue; shadows of the poplars loom large over him, the sun flares skyrockets of memory on the dark hills of the horizon. Marcel cannot go on, the memory is too painful; he thinks that he might stay where he is and the great wells of tree shadows might open and take him down into the rich humus of the earth where he will sleep happily amongst the earth worms.

But he knows there is no choice and he makes his arthritic legs respond; he feels the grit-and-sinew grind in his knee joints, the pain erupts along the nerves at the back of his legs. Anger rises in him like one of the fat carp in the pond in the garden, coming to the surface and grabbing a small frog on its jaws, thrashing its head from side to side until the frog is shredded by needle teeth and eaten in a gulp or two.

The small crowd began to whisper amongst themselves when they saw the couple. The voices were like the wind change breaking away across the English Channel and ripping through the countryside destroying barns and crops, killing the odd person foolish enough to be out and about in such weather. Marcel kept a firm hold on Madame's arm when he felt her falter under the stares and whispers of the onlookers. He guided her carefully through the opening in the high, stone fence and placed himself between the woman and the throng when laughter broke out.

It was then, on entering the church grounds that a change began in Marcel Saint Cloud; the reaction of the villagers to the Parisian woman, their whisperings and their snide laughter, did not surprise Marcel because he'd seen it all before. Anything or anyone even a little different would not be tolerated; any ideas foreign to the man on the land, the villager would be mocked until they were dust. Madame's gown of silk embroidered with lace and lined with white ribbon at the sleeves and neck was enough to make her an outsider on sight.

Marcel's love for the woman hardened something in him towards the people he'd known all of his life; their insults, their looks of derision for his bride were insults directed at the farmer and he took them personally. He made a mental note, as he entered the church with Madame, of all of those who had laughed, smirked, all of

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those who'd passed comment on the dress, the make-up, the very way the woman walked. Not bothering to whisper in the end but talking openly of the woman as if she were a specimen on a glass slide under the probing lens of a microscope.

In the days and weeks to come after the wedding, the women and men, who'd laughed and passed loud comment, found Marcel less accommodating when they called in to the farmhouse and requested his assistance. He refused to help them with reaping or pressing cider or helping with the breached birth of a horse or applying his unparalleled expertise when it came to the care of grapevines.

And the farmers and villagers responded with a dumb brute animal surliness ignoring Marcel when he came to town, crossing over to the other side of the street when they saw him coming. Not one of them was prepared to acknowledge their part in the change in the man; as far as they were concerned, it had nothing to do with them. If someone had confronted them with the fact of their discourteous behaviour at the wedding, they would have branded the accuser a mad bastard and would have threatened him with tarring and feathering.

So they blamed the new bride from Paris because they would not have it that such a change could be caused by themselves in someone who was one of their own, a man whom they'd known from birth. Madame was the sole cause of Marcel becoming uppity and aloof; the woman from Paris was the reason Marcel bestowed airs and graces upon himself they said to themselves, told each other over the dinner table or at the bar in the town's inn.

The coldness of the farmers and the villagers did not bother Marcel. At first he was uneasy, he felt like a man who'd sold all of his goods and chattels and taken the proceeds to a gaming table and bet the lot on one throw of the dice, one spin of the wheel. All or nothing, riches or ruin, but Marcel soon found he preferred the isolation; he came to enjoy the solitude and he was aware his new wife was more comfortable not having the prying eyes of visitors on her.

After the wedding that day, he walked with his wife back to his farm leaving the crowd standing around the church yard gossiping, expressing surprise and anger that they hadn't been invited back to Marcel's farm to celebrate with food and wine.

As Marcel continues to walk the avenue of poplars in autumn, as the tree shadows grow like bars around him, he feels light at heart because he still feels the first relenting in the woman towards him. It was on that walk back to the farm when she slid her arm easily through his and allowed him to show her the safe way along the rough track that was broken and treacherous in many places.

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As they rounded the top of the conical-shaped hill to take the path down to the farm, Madame stopped, turned and managed to find a small smile for her new husband. Admittedly there was a look of resignation on her face when she bestowed that smile upon Marcel but it was still a smile. And the farmer took heart by breaking out into song in his rich baritone voice that rang along the ridges and echoed through the hills of the countryside. Madame stood astonished at the sound of the voice that was every bit as good as many of the opera singers' voices she'd heard in the houses and theatres of Paris but there was more to it than that. It was the emotion of the man, the gladness, the happiness expressed so openly that made a pathway from him to her.

The man's openness, his lack of guile, his innocence stirred something in the woman she hadn't found with her first husband, who had been a man of fashion and leisure, a lounge lizard amongst the salons, villas and brothels of Paris. Her first husband had at first feigned, then believed in his attitude of supreme, bored indifference towards everything and everyone. Passion was a foreign land to be avoided or satirised as something provincial, something rather crude and rude and soiled.

The glassy lizard grin, the indolent slouch in a chair, the bored and drawled words over a game of cards, the immaculate red cravat and pearl-studded shirt studs, the merino wool trousers and vest and the shiny oiled hair of her first husband were in stark contrast to the rough-as-bags yokel, who sang his joy to the trees and the birds on the wing.



Greg Bogaerts is a writer from Newcastle, Australia. The above are excerpts from a novella inspired by Van Gogh's painting *Avenue of Poplars in Autumn*.

MOHAMMED BENNIS

Four Poems

Translated by **Issa J. Boullata**

I am not I

I'm the Andalusian living between the pleasures of lovers' reunion
And the rattles of separation.

I'm the Zahirite from Cordoba

Who has renounced all power and ministerial positions.

I'm the one who was brought up in women's laps

And grew up in their presence,

They're the ones who taught me poetry, calligraphy, and the Qur'an.

Of their secrets, I've learnt what hardly anyone else has learnt.

I'm the one who says: Death is easier than lovers' separation.

This is my law—

To reveal secrets to ardent lovers

In Baghdad and Fez,

In Cordoba and Qayrawan,

To accompany a tear to its burning anxieties,

To bless a rose on its way between a sweetheart and a lover,

And write to you

About this seed which is sufficient

For everyone who is

In the presence of madness

On the paths of hearing and seeing.

pp. 207-208.

Love is Supreme Ruler

In love, you yield and you're miserable.
In love, you die many times and you're pleased.
In love, you obey.
In love, the forbidden is abolished
Likewise, the despicable
The smutty,
The interdicted.

There are no alliances in love,
No choices.
Love is a lethal command.
So give way to the time of its conquest
And take a path
Prepared by your loss.
On the basis of experience, I tell you that in
my youth I loved a blond slave girl of mine,
and since then I have never deemed any
black-haired woman beautiful, and my father
was much the same.

pp. 224-225.

Love is a Miracle

With your eyes, man, sweep her eyes away
And enjoy them in isolation
In the pearly stillness.

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With your eyes, woman, burn his hands
And pour yourself out
Drop by drop
On his lips,
And wet his fringes
With an honest desire.
To me, my eyes are a language,
Watchtowers,
Obedience,
 Listening,
 Caution,
 Pleasure,
And the perplexities of a child
Who entrusted his yearning to me.

pp. 228-229.

Love is Eternity's River

Nothing but streams,
Continuous
In their nudity—
This is love.

I'm the one who says:
An analogue finds tranquility in his analogue,
An analogue is connected with his analogue.
I'm the one who says:
The elements of the souls are homogeneous,
And in equals

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There is congruence.
I'm the one who says:
I've experienced
And I've seen.
Take what I've learnt about myself and women—
Love is a mixer of similar souls.

The secret of the necklace is in you,
The secret of dissipation is in you,
O soul that is in possession of
The light worlds.
I'm the one who says:
What is firmly established in the soul
Will only perish at death.
Fly high, then,
Fly in the space of the tattoo,
Head for
The call of water.
With desire have I put a necklace
Around your neck, O dove,
And thus you're a cloud, O soul,
Urged on by another cloud.

pp. 233-235.

Translator's Note

Mohammed Bennis's *Kitab al-Hubb* (Book of Love) was first published in 1994 with illustrations by the Iraqi artist Diya' al-'Azzawi, a "Foreword" by the Syrian poet Adonis, and a subtitle saying: *Taqatu'at fi Diyafat Tawq al-Hamama li-Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi* (Intersections on Being a Guest of *The Dove's Necklace* by Ibn Hazm, the Andalusian). For a better understanding of Mohammed Bennis's book of love, it is helpful to know something about Ibn Hazm and his book, *The Dove's Necklace*.

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Ibn Hazm (994 -1064 AD), an Andalusian jurist, theologian, heresiographer, belletrist, and poet was born in Cordoba into a prominent and wealthy family. He witnessed the last days of Umayyad supremacy and prosperity in the Iberian peninsula, followed by the chaos and civil wars that resulted in the downfall of the Umayyad caliphate in 1031, when al-Andalus was fragmented into rival tiny Arab kingdoms and principalities.

As a boy, he grew up among the women of the court when his father was a vizier and, as a youth, he received the best education in the Islamic learning of his time. His pro-Umayyad leanings and attempts to re-establish the Umayyad dynasty often landed him in prison until he gave up political activity and devoted himself to intellectual pursuits, despite restrictions on his freedom to teach.

A prolific scholar, he wrote books in various fields including history, ethics, logic, Islamic law, legal theory, religions, and belles lettres. His encyclopaedic work, *Kitab al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, demonstrates his accurate knowledge of world religions, Islamic heresies, and philosophical systems, and aims to refute them all and establish the truth of Islam— as he understands it. He was opposed to the Maliki school of Islamic law prevalent in al-Andalus and championed the Shafi'i school for a while, before he finally adopted the Zahiri school, an extreme literalist school that accepts no analogical reasoning in developing precepts, and he became its major proponent.

His book, *Tawq al-Hamama fi al-Ulfa wa al-Ullaf* (The Dove's Necklace: On Love and Lovers), which he wrote when he was about thirty years old, is one of his best books of belles lettres. In thirty chapters, it is a systematic study of love relationships, analyzing the psychology of love in all varieties of situations, from love at first sight to proscribed love, and passing through the vicissitudes of love as it waxes and wanes, enjoys permanence or suffers unrequited feelings. What makes Ibn Hazm's book charming is that he draws on his own experiences and those of his Andalusian friends, citing his own poetry and theirs, relating anecdotes from his own life and theirs, and making the book very personal. Considered the most important book on the theory and practice of love in Arabic, it has been translated into several European languages: into English by A. R. Nykl as *A Book Containing the Risalah Known as the Dove's Neck-Ring about Love and Lovers* (Paris, 1931) and also by A. J. Arberry as *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love* (London, 1953); into German by M. Weisweiler as *Halsband der Taube uber die Liebe und die Liebenden* (Leiden, 1944); into French by L. Bercher [published with the Arabic text] as *Le collier du pigeon, ou, De l'amour et des amants* (Algiers, 1949); into Spanish by Emilio

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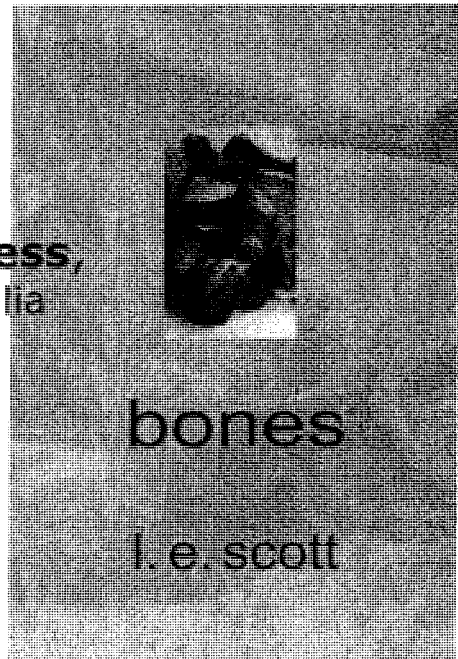
Garcia Gomez as *El collar de la paloma: Tratado sobre el amor y los amantes de Ibn Hazm de Cordoba* (Madrid: 1952, 2nd edition 1967). There are also translations into Russian by A. Salie (Moscow-Leningrad, 1933) and Italian by F. Gabrieli (Bari, 1949). The book's Arabic text has been published several times in the 20th century, the latest and perhaps the best edition being that of Ihsan 'Abbas (Beirut, 1993).

What Mohammed Bennis has done in his book is writing forty-two short poems speaking in his own voice about love as Ibn Hazm did, but in a forty-third longer poem, the last in the book, he sends him a poetic letter saying how, in the modern technological world with its violent wars and hostilities and inhumane relations, love has lost its essence, men and women have subsequently changed, and few can cope with the perverse situation.

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T R A N S L A T E D P O E T R Y

SABAH KHARRAT ZWEIN

Translated by **Issa J. Boullata**

Tableau 55

I remember how we went up the stairs, and we were soaking and panting, and I remember when we entered the cold home and threw our suitcases on the floor, when we entered and were soaking, so we looked around, I looked at the wet window and at the door, and he, the other, looked at the watch on his wrist, it was evening, and he looked at the door too, I had a desire to stay awake, a desire to hide, a hunger for effacement, I had forgotten laughter and passion, I was at the end of the previous moment, the end of running and forgetting, and the other was standing, and we both were, I was then sitting in my suspicious way, on a wooden chair, in my sad way, and water was still dripping slowly from the top panes of the window, the edges of the nearby homes were wet, and the smell of the soil drifted toward me, diffused in the air, and I was wrapped up in my profound introversion, he was, I was enveloped in my deep wryness, bleeding, bleeding on the silent walls, on the body of the other, on his body dyed with memories, I bled until the wounds were empty, until the place was redolent of them, and I did not know that there would be a knock on the door, the outside door, by the silent sidewalk and the little street and the raindrops continuously falling, I was sitting in the kitchen, between the other and the walls, I also looked at the pictures on the walls, I was breaking up in the stillness of the home in my sad sitting, and violence appeared again, at the door and on his face, and when violence appeared I began to try to lean on any sort of firmness, to lean on the meaning of my existence in that home, and when violence appeared at the door, when and because there was a knock on it, I began to see my absence from that place, and little by little I began to fall into the terror of madness.

Al-Bayt al-Ma'il wal-Waqt wal-Judran
(Beirut: Dar Amwaj, 1995), pp 87-88.

Untitled

When time extended, when time accumulated, I remember when the rain fell that day and when I loitered in the streets of that quiet little village in the suburbs of the city, when it was cloudy and the sky was grey and sadness in my body was a killing pain and questions teemed in my head, and why had all this happened why, and I loafed under an umbrella I borrowed and began to walk aimlessly on the wet sidewalks, the empty sidewalks, today I look at the sun and I like this light and this blue and the cold outside, and from the window time comes in fragments of sorrow and crumbs of absent days, I remember when I went to the telephone as grief and loneliness nestled in all my limbs, the loneliness of my body and the loneliness of the place, my body that was broken and that was crushed, I remember when I realized the distance that separated me finally from that city, when I realized the distance and how far I had gone and how the place had slipped away from me and how the void had endlessly grown larger and the sadness in my depths that I cannot name, and I had to continue walking and going onward, and how I could, while pain was consuming me and sorrow enveloping me and hurting me, a sorrow which I cannot describe, how cloudy it has been and how long time has been since that day.

Li'anni wa Ka'anni wa Lastu

(Beirut: Dar al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2002), p 47.

Untitled

My radiant body remained on the sidewalks, it remained as a bright light between the houses and the sun in the sky, I remember it today and how deep was the sorrow through the glass of this window and the night, too, how deadly its sorrow, and why, why I surrendered to death and to passionate love, with this desire I was proceeding toward death, and I died and was almost finished, when hell was shining in my soul, then why I pushed myself to the craziness of places and the sorrow of time, how painful were those cities which saw me choke, or saw me hide behind the rational, I did not understand, I did not, I was unable and my whiteness resembled indescribable

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death, bent on its weakness and questioning, or it was pale and dense on the sloping sidewalks, and the mirrors saw me breaking into pieces among the many cities, which faded and swayed on my body, I saw my whiteness like a severe pain in the reflections of my face when the miracle of death and the trees overwhelmed me and I died because of the abundance of light.

Li'anni wa Ka'anni wa Lastu

(Beirut: Dar al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2002), p 69.



Sabah Kharrat Zwein is a Lebanese-Canadian poet who currently lives in Lebanon. Zwein holds a Master Degree in Sociology. She is fluent in Arabic, French, English and Spanish. Her poetry appeared in several languages and media. In addition to poetry she has published many articles and translations. She works as a literary and movie critic and translator.

Zwein writes "prose poetry". She is a modernist who is very innovative. The translator of the above pieces, Issa Boullata, notes: 'Her texts are punctuated by commas only and the full stop comes only at the end. She repeats words for poetic effect and often inverts grammatical order in the sentence. In my translation, I tried to reflect her style and, at the same time, make her meaning understandable to an English reader.'

KHALID AL-HILLI

Cloudy Cities

Translated by Raghid Nahhas

Down and Up

I climb down the ladder of my sorrows
wearing the faces of my happiness
I see a poet dying on every step
sucking, like a child, a doll...
The houses are sad with children and dolls.
I descend from the terraces of old grief...
where I once wept
Is this the land I sought?
Is this happiness?
I ask the silent ones,
no one answers
and The One and Only
witnesses all.
The other ladder becomes a straw
and the winds become lashes of ember
licking my wounds
a cigarette sealing my eye.
O' you who ascends to the unknown
let me, through my hand, release
the yearning of my arm
O' you who give the unseen whatever you desire
O' you the thief of poetry
you give away what you never have had
Let me hear a scream
hanging in the wind
strewn between day and night
Let me now scream,

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for this fizzling thirst
wants to say something
I ascend, my only garment is a shroud
I lose you
I lose the ladder of sadness and time
I climb up on a thread without roots
I descend to the roots
I become a soil for resurrection.

The Flight of Laughter

Echoes embalm my papers
and sleep near the night
They betray my voice
and wear my face
and disappear in the smoke of my exile.
I see them walk in daytime gardens
They pick a rose out of my eyes,
a nod out of my blood and
a waiting out of my mouth.
They see me lie in my estrangement
They watch me and walk away
wearing my garments
wrapped in the season of torment at night
they laugh and fly away

A Passing Return

My chest hoards death...
where things bear their names and shapes

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Things wilt at my touch
and the secret-suppressed seasons start
I carry rivers in my blood
I carry trees in my mouth
and the day starts
Your days start in the heart:
letters bearing names and demons and memories
and I only have my face—
a faint shadow walking through my fingers
I am middle-aged at midday
I see you split in half in my chest
In death, I see you a rose giving birth to love roses
In death I see my face disappear once...
and once return.
My darling, I see you roses in my mouth
I swim in the daylight
Night is a street that leaves me at the end of the world
alone to witness myself in my blood
and death swims...
I see my fingers become roses.

Years later, the rivers move themselves
The secrets move their secret
Years later, all the roses wilt,
But... I return.

Half-Lost in Water

You are the other half of my life
abandoned on the river bank
How do you see my life?
How do you see its beginning... its end?
My life lies beneath the sea

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I am naked without my life.

O' my half-life
you are sad like me,
but I ask what is there in the river...
and the sea? And I sing.
I ask you now...
as I see the furrows on the face die
I see you overwhelmed
Primordial poetry fills my heart
Unforgettable days fill the street
Blood that remembers my face flows in death
An anchor, used for turning off the lights,
lies in the street

Tears are in my heart
O' my half-life!
My life is extinguished...
My heart is a fallback
The heart's evenings are nights of thirst
The heart dies without love
and you die
I am unknown
thrown searching for my name
for the names of all the unknown
for your face and mine
Can my half-life be assured of
an unknown half mysteriously
departing without a mask
or crying near a mask?
O' half-loss I ask you
O' the half I am ignorant of
and of how you leave

O' half-sail
O' half
sail

Premonitions

Contemplations

I stick on the door the map of our planet as it revolves
Where are you revolving now...
and where do I revolve?
I look for you everywhere,
but desolate places are what I see.
I search for you on all the roads of this earth
I see nothing
I shred all this planet's maps
Then I see my face revolving in the mirror.

There are five continents on this planet
There are seas where the blueness of your eyes
is nowhere to be seen.
There are countless mountains
There are women increasing in number now
...and decreasing
There are billions whose
daily agenda is unknown to me
I know all of that, but
I have not seen a bit of your face
on the maps of this planet.

Do I see your face in the night's dreams?
Come closer now, for I don't know
what will become of my heartaches tomorrow.
Or how they would be if I were a prophet
on one of the five continents.
Come closer so I reveal my sorrows to you
in my day-dreaming.

JIHAD ELZEIN

The Poem of Istanbul
Translated by **Raghid Nahhas**

The Poem of Istanbul

The Ninth Ship

Granada:

I am dead indeed... absolutely
why then don't you die as I have;
a deserved, painful, multiple death?

Istanbul:

My recession is too deep for me to vanish
Your geography is mapped by lamentation
My geography is an outcome of change
My fight is over a heaven you shall never see...
How come you allowed your death to settle?

Granada:

I have Ibn Siraj,¹ the prince of fading,
hanging over the uninhibited veranda.

Istanbul:

I have been embroiled in this affair against you
Abdulhamid² is no longer generous
The commotion has made this despotic dreamer tremble
and the harem women lost their flirtation underneath the cover

¹ A knight from a distinguished family of knights in Andalusia. The story goes that he was accused with an affair with one of the wives of the caliph in Alhambra Palace. Consequently 36 knights from his family were executed at the same time in one of the palace's halls that became known as the Hall of Ibn Siraj.

² The Sultan

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Granada:

Then we are two waves of passion...

Istanbul:

And verily we both pant in defeat

Granada:

My body is my moment

How I wash it with my lover's mirrors
and come to it anointed with escape

I come to my body

I feared death before my arrival
and Ibn Siraj straddling the water

refusing to cry for help

I shall take refuge in him as he

gathers the peril of many nights on his shoulders...

Istanbul:

Why blame the caliph for his two desires?

There is killing in love and love in killing

Come to the bed of desire and it will strike you in either case!

His hands... and your chaotic silence in them

the bliss of these roses withered over the space of water

cut by the axes dwelling in his lungs

Granada:

Lorca shall shout: It is poetry, the land of the rebels...

and the land of syntax... and he shall extend his vision

al-Buhturi's³ White⁴ and his eyes

are fixed in The Palace⁵ burning my soul with poetry and

painting me with my own dewy redness

'Death is manifest, though it will stealthily creep'⁶

³ One of the most important Arab poets (820-897AD).

⁴ Described in the famous "S" poem by al-Buhturi, this is the palace of Khosrow Anūshirvan (531-579AD), the Persian king who ruled the Sasanian Empire. He was renowned for his justice and love for culture and the arts.

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his sadness shall catch up with him after his period of wandering
and he shall know the S of silence and the S of the sordid⁷

Istanbul:

Here we never die...

Our days have mastered the art of the last breath

We renew our sorrows every day

to stop glorifying them like the marble of palaces

to stop "marblizing" it in time

Statements of Gratitude to the Impressionists

La Cathédral de Rouen⁸

I. The Cathedral

I have never been tempted by a phantasm...

A bleeding skin tempts me.

This lofty stone siege

and the sobbing of blood being shed

set me free

A river of vision...

Jungles, banners, crosses and masses of men dragged by their necks

The tired tyrants used to bring them to the ground

Their rattles are so close and the night is unforgiving.

It was their church and they used to raise their submission

⁵ Alhambra in Granada

⁶ Adapted from the same "S" poem by al-Buhturi, referred to in 5 above.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *La Cathédral de Rouen* (à l'aube) by Claude Monet 1894.

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Stone upon stone...
Their voices persist in the wind...
I hear them
Their voices persist in the spirit...
I scoop from their sources and follow them
on a string of odd lineage pulling me
until I see a metallic neighing
faces that have sipped the dribble of toil
Their processions... Their sins...
Their confessions resounded with
an overbearing expanse and bells of secession

God versus God, you are not their affable one, but
you are the exulted vanishing moon

Monet paints in the mist... Have you seen a dreaming rock?
Halleluiah... Halleluiah... and the hymns are full of passion

Monet lights in the awesome silver blue
the splendour of the context
a river shining, meandering, delving into the eminent darkness
from which white supplication does it come
and from which embracement?

II. The Altar

And you followed me...as I probed the endless dusk
towards the end of the holy lobby, as if I was embracing
your feet trembling from the growling of the cellars below...
from their aged casks

Your slender fingers surrendered to my hand...
Your dress's swishing was faint
Your eyes sullen in the silence of the hallway

You walk...
What a pagan offering walking
And the hallway drinks her

III. The Painting

He feels for us in a rainy morning
as brittle as the colours of parting
His feathers are drowned in his inattention
He cries and swims in his own taste
Water flows out of our sorrows
and a star escapes
to build its intimate estrangement
in the sadness of the Seine
We had sought two yielding hands...
Birds spread arriving from four imprisoned corners
launching colours for the corners at the corners of colour
as if language is the inattention of languages,
or the spreading of inattention
We will now declare your vehemence within your bounds
Lessen your beautiful blaming to become bearable
We can't afford to give or shed any more joy.

Jihad Elzein, a leading Lebanese journalist, surprised the press and literary circles in Lebanon and Syria, and revealed his poetic talent by publishing his first poetry book *Qassidat Istanbul* (The Poem of Istanbul) in 2002. The book, published by *Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith* in Beirut, comprises three parts: a long poem that carries the same title as that of the collection, seven poems written as *Statements of Gratitude to the Impressionists* and five poems under the title *Women*. The poems are masterly in their style and content, modern with fine use of metre.

GRAHAM ROWLAND

Two Poems

S

He hears the voices of
friends say he's hearing voices &
his own voice say he's not

hearing voices who tell him to
tell his friends he's not, he's not
he's not hearing voices.

The Reddish Brick Flats

I'm walking towards them again
crossing two ways of the five-ways
to get to where I'll stand in front of
the first of the reddish brick walls
the one sheer out of the footpath
where I'll wait for the tram
that no longer runs along lines
that are no longer there
in a five-ways that might be
over & under & overpassed by now.
I never climbed the zigzag of steps
cut through retaining walls up
to the two or three storeys of
reddish brick flats high above the
wires & poles over a tarmac of bitumen.
The doors I never opened leading to
the windows I never looked through
aren't even where I wanted to go.

Nothing will turn my waiting into
more than a wait for a tram – not
even a forty-year wait for a tram
in front of the reddish brick flats
that might no longer be there.

Graham Rowlands is an Adelaide-based poet who has published widely in Australian magazines and newspapers since the late 1960s. He has been included in national anthologies and was awarded the Barbara Hanrahan Fellowship in 2002. He teaches creative writing at Flinders University.

NEVILLE ANDERSEN

The breeze comes with a whisper

Here the shallow waters flow
With summer's splintered glare
And rocks and pebbles shape ripples
Which laugh and gurgle,
Then the breeze takes the laughter away
To nearby fields where people
Hear only the breeze
That comes with a whisper
Through the long grass.

Dr. Neville Andersen began writing poetry after his retirement from medical practice. He published a small selection *The Crow's Threefold Amen* in 1998.

IAN C. SMITH

Two Poems

Those Fragrant Paddocks

Grass and native trees on these plains where
I raise my glass alone to a shadowed
Southern Cross, glitter in rain, greedy
to drink their fill before heat again.
They bring back to me fragrances
which fell beyond the bicycle sheds
that first, less than fair dinkum winter
when, although a pale interloper
I intended bronzing my Saxon skin
by setting out across deserts
a seeker scornful of harsh seasons
a migrant child of opportunity.

I'd take my chances with anyone brave
no matter what the weather, the silence.
This person would toss her thick hair
as she approached my crude bush hut
her people's mistakes redundant.
Together we would whip work, laugh
in the terrible face of loneliness.
I met my desert flame only in books
which served me better than my looks
and freckled tan, her disappointment spared.
Now I recall my brash promises
the siren call of those fragrant paddocks.

East

Dawn, the end of Daylight Saving
the sound of birds like scarred children
currawongs, black beaks bleak eyes
another night of portentous dreams.

Earlier light now, I yearn to recall
spent seasons of innocence
those dreams so slyly evasive
like government liars' language abuse

the selfish belief that youth
is inexhaustible unlike oil
its black desert wells bleeding dry
these cocks darkening the sky

above my sundered fence line
gorging on glistening poison berries
me silent while Iraq burns on TV
the looming sun reflecting red.

Ian C. Smith lives in East Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, with his wife and four sons. His fiction and poetry has been widely published (with recent work in *Best American Poetry*, 2004, *Eureka Street*, *Five Bells*, *The Red Room Co.*, *The Surface*, & *Zadok Perspectives*). His books, *These Fugitive Days* & *This is Serious* are published by the Ginninderra Press.

S O P H I E M A S S O N

Birthplace Jakarta

My passport says: Place of birth, Jakarta, Indonesia. It's a fact that always seems to earn me interest. Immigration Officers look at it, then at me, and then again at the photo of me. It's as if the very fact of being born outside the place of origin of your cultural group places you under suspicion. And perhaps it does, because once you've been outside the sureness, the rootedness of your family origins, you are forever a displaced person, whose reactions cannot be trusted, or even predicted. Migration does this to many people— never of one or the other any more, migrants can learn to live with it or spend their lives in futile regret for this or the other country. For me, the fact of my Indonesian birth simply adds another strand in the rich chain of story woven for me since I first drew breath. I find myself unable to decide, thrilling to the music of one culture after another, unable to make the choice that so many people seemed to want me to make. Although I don't remember my life in Indonesia – I was only nine months old when I was sent to live in France with my grandmother, and five years old when we moved to Australia – the sound of the gamelan, the smell of satay, the roar of a tiger, moves me deeply. I can remember standing in front of the tiger's cage at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, staring and staring, thinking of Blake's poem about the tiger and whispering, 'Burning bright, burning bright.'

My father, with his genius for stories, especially ones that would fill your soul with existential terror, would tell us stories about Indonesia – an Indonesia not only of the facts, but also of the mind and the spirit. He had three faded and worn exercise books, filled with the careful script of a Javanese scholar – the Ramayana retold in three languages: English, Bahasa and Javanese. He would read some of those stories, or tell us tales about tigers, and volcanoes, and white-robed funerals. He told us stories about the men who worked for him, the foreman of the building gang: about Saidjah, in particular, the educated, charming Communist guerilla who'd waited as peacefully as the tiger for the Dutch Army stragglers in the rice paddies of Independence. Told us about the men who came, with a smile on their faces, to tell him of a birth in the family, and then the next day, with the same smile, announce the

death of the new arrival. Told us of the great culture and delicacy of men who worked in the building gangs all day. He told us of seeing the great temples of Borobudur, before they were restored, while they were still hidden, forgotten, in the jungle. He told us stories of Sukarno: tales of fear, of love, of magic, tales worthy of the Ramayana. On weekends, he would light the barbecue, and cook satay, carefully marinated, bring out the Sambal Oelek and the Bombay Duck and dare any unwary visitor to try them.

That was long before Australians became adventurous eaters; it embarrassed me and my sister, something which pleased Dad even more, for the picaresque, the daring, the unconventional are things he aspires to.

And Mum would stir the strong-smelling satay sauce, and tell us about the women she worked with. Danisi, our nurse, who loved us and rocked us. 'She would stand there with you,' Mum said, 'Skinny, scrawny, weepy little thing that you were, and rock and rock, and you'd always smile, for her. You were so small, she could hold you in the palm of her hand.' And my sister, Camille, born at Surabaya, but, unlike me, robust, an easy baby. Suspicious of generalisations, my mother Gisele stayed away from the easy sentimentality of the other French expatriates' view of Indonesia and the Indonesians. She held firmly to the old-fashioned view that proper distance must be maintained, for the sake of all concerned, but never responded with platitudes when approached as an individual.

'You see,' she'd say, while we stood around, sniffing the delicious, slightly burnt smell of peanut butter and soya sauce and tomatoes clogging the bottom of the pan, 'You see, it's easy to talk. I like to see people really acting.' She said that one day, she had proposed that all the domestic servants' wages should be raised – a proposal met with horror by the other French women. 'They told me I was crazy, that 'these people' didn't know how to spend money, that it would only fuel inflation, that anyway, they were simple people, needing very little.' She laughs, shortly, her eyes on the past.

Sometimes, too, if I press her, she tells me about my birth, in a hospital where she was the only European. 'I could see those women,' she said, 'those Indonesian women, small and slight and often very young, having their babies, and there wasn't a word from them, not a peep, not a sound. It made me ashamed, and I determined that I wouldn't make a sound. So when you came – and oh, it wasn't easy – I said nothing, I had you in silence.' I smile a little nervously as I watch her face crinkle in the memory of pain, and feel loving and frightened all at once. What if that experience was all she saw when she looked at me? What if I have a baby one day, and that happens to me? What a terrible dare to put on yourself! 'Your mother's a stoic,' my father says,

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watching me. 'Not many like her.' He smiles with a roguish male air, and Mum snaps, 'No need to look so smug!'

In a cupboard, we had a woven red basket that my mother said had originally been intended as a snake basket. Opening it gave me a thrill of delicious terror, as if, somehow, one day I should find a snake coiled up in there. Instead, there was something as magical, if not as frightening – two Balinese dancing costumes, one red and gold, one green and gold, with pasteboard gold and glass crowns and bracelets and anklets. And in tissue paper, two wigs-long black plaits, made of real human hair, sold by people whose trade it was to cut hair off new corpses and make them into wigs. Those wigs terrified me, but I couldn't help putting them on, feeling them dangling stiffly and tightly, something I had no right to, something with which I could tempt fate. My sister and I dressed up in the ceremonial sarongs, the black plaits hanging over our own silky dark hair, and feel as if we'd been spellbound. We were no longer Sophie and Camille, awkward schoolgirls, called 'wog' by other children: we were princesses of mystery, of night, bathed in the smile of Asia. My father, who loves to pull out the rug from under your feet, would snort a little and call out, 'Hey, are you the Princesse de Cageroule?' It would break the spell – it's like saying Lady Muck – and we would revert to our clumsy everyday selves, stamping and shouting. Mum told us about our elder sister Dominique – almost a mythological creature herself, as she lived in France with our grandmother – all dressed up in her Indonesian finery, standing, posed for effect on the staircase. Her smile, Mum said with a kind of compassion, was full of her transformed self, a girl-child become legendary woman. She began to come down the stairs majestically, but on the second step tripped and went sprawling. Tightly wound in the green and gold, she couldn't stop and went bowling down to the bottom, where she lay crying, a thin little girl in finery that didn't belong to her...

'It was funny,' Dad said, but Mum sighed. 'Yes,' she said at last, and I knew she could still see that little girl, weeping, shorn of legend...

Legend. We saw legend in everything. In the pink sandstone head, one thousand years old, that my parents had brought back from Indonesia in the days when heritage was ignored; in the ornate Chinese mirror that sat on a table in the living room, all gold curls and red lacquer; in the long embroidered banners depicting scenes from Ramayana, that hung in the hall, in the long, silver-bladed kris with its ivory and gem-set handle. Like a wicked snake, like a silent tiger, it would insinuate out of its silver scabbard, the serpentine deadliness of its blade a source of fascination and repulsion. 'You see,' Dad would explain, 'It was specially made like this, so that if

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a person was wounded with it, they couldn't pull it out of the wound without doing irreparable damage to their insides.' The horror of this leaves me and my sister speechless, and we avoid the section of wall where it is hanging. That such a beautiful thing should be so evil! It is almost incomprehensible...

And yet, in the too-small cage at Taronga Zoo, the tiger is there, beautiful, deadly. I press my nose to the cage and murmur, 'Could he who made the lamb make thee?' But my mother says, simply, 'It's a not a big cage.' I haven't thought of that. I haven't really looked at the cage, at the pitiful space the tiger can control. All I can see are those burning, lamp-bright eyes, the legend of the tiger, the lord of the jungle. Carnivore incarnate, with a decisive fierceness in its very name. Tiger. Burning bright.

But now, I can see it with Mum's eyes. Not the eyes of a sentimentalist, of a lover of animals (a trait the French attribute to the English!), but the eyes of someone who sees, and accepts even pain. I don't want to see; it gives me a shivery, scalp-tingling feeling, as when I thought of Domi falling on the stairs; but it's too late. I can't help but see, and my tiger, burning bright, has changed. At least till the next time. It's not difficult to forget, if you really want to.

Sophie Masson's latest legend is *The Curse of Zohreh* (Random House Australia 2005).

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Adapted and Translated by **Raghid Nahhas**

Suqs in the Cities of *Thousand and One Nights*

Suqs (markets) are considered some of the most important environments in the cities of *Thousand and One Nights*. Narrators mention them in many tales and on many occasions, describing their commercial and human relationships. They constitute an exciting, attractive and familiar space open for the “others” with all their social and human values, norms, behaviour and feelings. The suqs attract and accommodate contrasting social specimens where strangers from different faraway cities meet to make acquaintances and familiarise themselves with the host city and its inhabitants. This is in contrast to the environments provided in the restricted, secretive and authoritarian confines of palaces and private rooms.

Thanks to the economical, cultural and literal openness of the Arab-Islamic city in *Thousand and One Nights* to other non-Islamic or non-Arab cities, The Arab-Islamic cities are inundated with people of different nationalities. The suqs of these cities witness an active commercial prosperity. People express, through these suqs, their aspirations, happiness and sorrows. They often celebrate, fight, fornicate and deceive women into a relationship either by legal marriage or by purchase. Many women are sold as slaves in these markets. The slave trade is one of the most prosperous trades of the commercial markets in *Thousand and One Nights*.

These markets vary, but they all practice selling, buying, brokerage and public auctioning. It is, however, possible to discuss them in two streams: 1. Commercial Suqs, and 2. Female-Slave Suqs.

1. The Commercial Suqs

The tales of *Thousand and One Nights* are the tales of the Arab-Islamic city and other real and imaginary cities. These tales are pictures of peoples’ life and aspirations, in their homes and travels. This is why they need vast spaces to allow for appropriate

extent of narration needed to convey the environments they are depicting. Commercial markets, lanes and shops are important environments in *Thousand and One Nights* where narration travels to and from, and the structure of the general narrative is established.

These suqs are varied and spread in all the cities of The Nights, and contain all what the inhabitants need from a range of widely available, easily purchased products and goods.

It seems that the openness of the suqs of the Islamic state during its Umayyad and Abbasid periods, to the suqs of the different Islamic states on the one hand and to those of other neighbouring countries on the other, allowed the facilitation of exchange of commercial goods, without subjecting them to taxes or tariffs as is the case in present day Arab cities. For example, in the tale of Aladdin Abu Shamah, Aladdin travels from Egypt to Baghdad with a load of sixty mules of clothing material, in addition to ten thousand dinars.¹

Suqs vary in *Thousand and One Nights*. These are spread in major cities such as Baghdad, Cairo and Basra. They include leather markets, perfume markets, cattle markets, cattle-feed markets, fruit and vegetable markets, sweet markets and jewellery markets.

The perfume market in Baghdad, for example, is full of rosewater, orange-flower water, olibanum, ambergris, musk and Alexandrian wax. The fruit and vegetable market in the same city is full of Damascene apples, Ottoman quince, Omani plums, Aleppo jasmine, Egyptian lemons, dates, anemones and violets.²

In addition to the historically known cities, imaginary cities also have their share of prosperous suqs. We encounter a model of these suqs in *Copper City* in the tale of "Abdulmalik bin Marwan and the Sulaymani Long-necked Bottles". The narrator describes this suq such:³

They encountered great suqs with high connected buildings. Shops were open, and the balances were set. Copper goods were arranged in rows and all corners were full... and unsheathed swords and suspended shields... They [then] went to the silk suq where the silk and silk garments varied, some were woven with red gold and white silver... They went to the suq of jewels, pearls and corundum... They went to the cambists' whose shops were full of gold and silver... They

¹ Anon. *Thousand and One Nights*. (In Arabic.) Dar al-Hayat, Beirut. P356.

² Ibid, pp. 15, 46, 47 130, 165, 348, , 355.

³ Ibid, p44.

went to the perfume suq, to find the shops full of all types of perfume, musk, ambergris, aloes wood, camphor and many others.

These imaginary suqs represent an important part of the suqs of the real cities known to the narrators of the tales of *The Nights*. The narrators based their descriptions on their knowledge of the real suqs in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Basra.

The suq in *Thousand and One Nights* forms a space for visual pleasure. It is an environment where anxiety and restlessness are easily alleviated. When the heroes of the tales feel melancholic, they soon leave the space of their homes and palaces to the space of the suq to free themselves of the burdens of life. It seems that watching people, participating in the clatter of the suq and engaging in contemplating the beauty of women and slaves passing by, contribute to reducing anxiety, boredom and loneliness. We read in the tale "Ali az-Zaybaq and Dalila the Cheat":⁴

Ali az-Zaybaq felt bored when he stayed in his room in Baghdad. He was tight in the chest and gloomy at heart. He told himself let me get up and wander in Baghdad to refresh my soul. He went out and walked from lane to lane. He spotted a shop where he had lunch and went out to wash his hands... When he returned to his room he was still refreshed and happy after meeting a beautiful woman, Zaynab, the daughter of Dalila the Cheat. When he asked her: 'What a beautiful woman you are, who do you belong to?', she replied by stressing that she would be to the handsome man he was.

The suqs in Cairo historically seem to provide a comfortable space for all those who frequent them. They are full of activity, and they go a step further to that of providing visual pleasure by providing other sensual pleasures, particularly smoking opium. They do this with complete freedom and with no interference. Even some of the perfume shops sell it. The narrators of the tales believe that this substance assists men in their sexual pleasures, a belief still held by some people in modern cities such as Cairo.

In general, spices, perfumes and incense are also regarded of importance in enhancing sexual abilities. Dr. Shawki Osman reminds us of their historical importance and the legends associated with them:⁵

⁴ *Thousand and One Nights*, p148.

⁵ S. Osman 1990. (In Arabic.) Trade in the Indian Ocean During the Islamic Dominance. Aalam al-Ma'rif Series, No. 151. National Council for Culture and the Arts, Kuwait. P214.

Spices, incense and perfumes were on top of the list in demand in the Middle Ages. This demand was behind the building of many armadas and the start of many wars in search and control of their sources. Many legends were associated with these materials, to the extent that it was rumoured in Egypt that the spices people saw in the market place were a gift from the earthly heavens, and people obtained them when the waters of the Nile rose. Fishermen would spread their nets during the evening, and in the morning they collect their nets where they find all sorts of spices. Many other stories were told. None is, of course, true.

Whoever reads *Thousand and One Nights* realises that perfumers have become experts in the art of sex and sexual excitement. They prepare spice recipes to enhance their sexual abilities. The tale “Aladdin Abu Shamah” tells about the Egyptian merchant Shamsuddine Shah who marries a woman and spends with her forty years without having a child. One of his assistants suggests that he consults with a perfumer, the one who sells hashish. The perfumer mixes the following ingredients: recycled Roman sugar, white pepper, mountain skink. Then he fries the mix in perfume oil... He takes the equivalent of a cup of black cumin seeds and soaks them... He uses bee honey to make a paste out of all the ingredients he has mixed. The narrator claims that when the merchant makes love to his wife the night of taking this prescription, she immediately becomes pregnant.

The smell of spices, cinnamon, henna, kohl, perfumes, garnish material, nuts and others provided the space of the perfumers' shops with a halo saturated with sexual connotations and hints, capable of exciting both males and females. This can be considered one category of the external stimuli of the sexual act.⁶

The presence of distinct suqs for every type of goods indicates some order. This order extends beyond presentation and arrangements. *Thousand and One Nights* tells us that the authorities in every city made sure that the suqs provided their services in an orderly manner, including organising the methods of buying and selling. The authorities appoint a merchant-in-charge, usually the richest and most successful, called “Shah Bandar at-Tujjar”, supervising all trades. In addition, the central business district is divided into branches, each for a particular trade. Each trade is headed by a chief called “Sheikh of the Suq”, responsible for the smooth coordination among the merchants or traders of the same profession.

⁶ To borrow from Freud.

The authorities protect the suqs against thieves, by punishing them severely. We read in the tale “The Christian and the King of China” that when someone was in a great need of money and goes in a suq in Cairo and puts his hand inside the pocket of a passer-by, he is soon captured by shoppers who take him to the city’s wali (governor) who orders his executioner to chop the hand of the thief immediately.

A sense of security is required to guarantee the success of commercial business and ensure the continuity of the other aspects of these suqs, mainly the social ones. People meet in the suqs and establish rapport. Men meet women inside shops. These meetings lead to the fulfilment of sexual goals. Love and sex bargains are struck in these shops. In the tale “The Highlander and the Foreign Woman”, the hero meets a beautiful western lady in the linen suq in Akka. He invites her to his home, and she agrees. In the tale “The Christian and the King of China”, a Baghdadi introduces himself to a beautiful Egyptian in a cloth suq. They quickly adore each other. She invites him to her home where they practice sex rituals. The story here becomes very explicit.

The branching suqs constitute excellent setting for story-telling where narration branches and continues for ever assuming the turns and bends of this intriguing environment. A beautiful woman appears suddenly. She looks at a handsome man and invites him by an eyewink. He responds positively. She invites herself to his place. This encounter becomes the basis for other stories.

Through the travel of narration between its suqs and shops, the Abbasid city of Baghdad becomes a space that gathers many characters of varying nature and behaviour, whether evil or good. The narrator does not forget, through describing the shops and the suqs, to add some ideological aspects to his narration, condemning the political system and the class structure in Baghdad. This is a system that survives, in part, on trickery, spying and daring adventures that undermines the fabric of social laws and ethics. The narration exposes the influence of some corrupt people and devious prostitutes. Failing to deal with these crimes, the political authorities showered these corrupt people with privileges to avoid their wrath and their acts of espionage that might destroy their regimes.

The suq has another important function, namely punishment and deterrence. It is about exposing those who dare violate the norms and laws of the city. The authorities use the suqs to impose their power on the citizens and spread fear in their hearts to deter them from committing crimes on the one hand, and to avoid their evils on the other. He who steals, will have his hand chopped off in the suq under the eyes of the public, so that he is a deterrent to others. If the authorities suspect someone of being a

traitor or disloyal, he is hanged in the suq. This way no one else would dare conspire or stand against the regime.

The suq is also used as a means of another type of exposure. One of the stories explains this. A group of women, daughters of some official, decide to have fun. They send an old woman to the suq to target a poor man. The old woman tempts the man by describing to him a beautiful house with excellent food and attractive women to flirt with from evening to morning. The man succumbs to the temptation and follows the woman who delivers him to the beautiful women. When he realises their wealth, he soon puts himself in a position of subservience. He starts serving the most beautiful one of them. She refuses his services and presents him with a drink instead. When he finishes his drink she slaps his face. He leaves angrily, but the old woman persuades him to return. The women continue telling him that he will eventually reach his goal if he is patient and accepts their conditions. They manage to make him undress and beat him. After a series of humiliations they trick him into the suq in his naked miserable condition.

This tale is also an indication of the class differences prevailing in the societies of *Thousand and One Nights*. There is a huge chasm between the rich and the poor both in money and authority. The ruling classes are not satisfied by their wealth, but often need to practice their sadistic pleasures by humiliating the simpletons and the poor.

2. The *Jawari* (Female-Slaves) Suqs

Some of the social classes during the Umayyad and Abbasid Islamic periods, particularly the ruling class and the merchants, enjoyed outrageous wealth. Two cities, Damascus during the Umayyad and Baghdad during the Abbasid period, were at the helm of wealth and affluence.

During the Abbasid reign, trade exchange brought luxuries such as fur, leather and amber from Russia. Arabic coins were discovered in as faraway places as Scandinavia. Abbasid wealth was enhanced by dealing in eastern silk products, gold and African slavery. This wealth assisted in obtaining slaves and slave-singers from all over the world. Music and singing enhanced the atmosphere of fun. The presence of too many slaves allowed the spreading of sexual liberation, particularly among the wealthy. The wealthy could buy any number of slaves they wanted, any type, at any time, because they were readily available in the slave markets like any other item could be found in its designated suq.

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Abu Hayyan at-Touhidi, along with some of his friends, calculated the number of female-slaves and free women in al-Karkh, a suburb of Baghdad, and found 460 slaves and 120 free women.⁷ The influence of these slave-women is obvious on the men of Baghdad. They were able to 'steal the minds and hearts of men and hurry their lovers to the grave' as at-Touhidi put it.

The Abbasid caliphs seemed extremely fond of owning many slaves who swarmed the royal palaces. The reign of ar-Rashid is described as the reign of female-slaves and songstresses. Ar-Rashid owned two thousand female slaves and three hundred female musicians and singers. He bought one female-slave for one hundred thousand dinars. The caliph al-Mutassem (847-861 AD) owned eight thousand female-slaves. His son, the caliph al-Mutawakkel owned four thousand.⁸

These slaves were used as maids, singers and above all the ultimate sexual toys in the hands of men who enjoyed this inevitable freedom created by an environment of sexual liberty and affluence.

The texts of *Thousand and One Nights* celebrate the female-slaves and their suqs by allocating them a large proportion of the narration. The Jawari suqs are places of active human gatherings during the evening. Women are exhibited as goods of beauty and sexual attraction. We learn how men, old and young, rush to obtain the jawari, how they go about it and the methods of the middlemen and auctioneers in dealing and wheeling.

The jawari suq is important for the narrative in the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*. From this meeting place, we are moved to the palace or the house of a wealthy man. We learn about the events, the type of people we encounter, their sexual habits, the way they treat their jawari, the conspiracies and the jealousies.

The jawari suq is also a place for the ritual of celebrating female beauty. The different jawari are presented in front of the masses of eager onlookers and buyers. The auctioneer calls on the jawari one by one. He starts by describing the attributes of a particular female-slave and calls upon those who have money to open the auction. One auctioneer, for example, 'waits until all the merchants gather in the suq which is full of all nationalities of jawari, such as Ethiopian, Turk, Roman, Circassian and Georgian. Then he stands up and says: Oh! Merchants, wealthy merchants... Not everything round is a walnut, not everything long is a banana, not everything red is meat, or white is fat, not every red liquid is wine, not everything brown is dates. Oh

⁷ Amin, A & A. Elzein (Eds.) (No date.) (In Arabic.) *Al-Imta' wal Muaanassa*. Vol.II, Dar al-Hayat Publications, Beirut. p183.

⁸ Khalil A. 1982. (In Arabic.) *Arab Women and Liberation Issues*. 2nd Edition. Dar at-Tali'a, Beirut. p70.

merchants! This unique pearl is priceless. How much would you like to start the bidding for?’ One man starts by 4500 dinars...

If the rules of the Auction require that the sale goes to the highest bidder, some jawari owners who had good relationships with their jawari allowed them to select their new buyer no matter how high someone else might bid. On one occasion (the tale of Ali Shar and Zumorod the Slave) we see Zumorod refuses an old man’s bid for her. She comments with poetry: ‘I don’t aim at white hair / do you expect me to / fill my mouth with cotton / whilst still alive?’ After her master allows her the freedom of choosing her buyer, the auctioneer tries to tempt her with some men who he knows will pay high prices, but she selects Ali Shar, a young handsome man and she recites more poetry: ‘They exposed your beautiful face / then put the blame on / the smitten one. If they wanted to protect me, / they would have covered your handsome face. / You are blamed for your wandering, / the moon⁹ can wander however he likes / with no blame.’

The relationship between free men and the jawari in *Thousand and One Nights* is not a relationship based on love and loyalty, nor is it ethically or spiritually clean. It is a despotic relationship that aims first and foremost at sexual relief in roisterous dissipated environments. For this relief to happen at the climax of pleasure, the partner must possess the ideal bodily beauty and exceptional means of sexual attraction.

When a slave-woman is extremely beautiful, men will fight over her by their vigorous bidding. Mostly, the winner is the one most powerful in the hierarchy of the political authority. Furthermore, some men in power have authority in the jawari suqs and leverage on some auctioneers. They take any slave they like and refuse to pay.

It seems that the customs in the jawari suqs allows the buyer to examine his merchandise. He can touch her body, expose part of it and make sure she is free of diseases. We read on one occasion the trader encouraging the buyer to do whatever he likes, including undressing the slave to look at her naked.

Of course, the slave traders have their ways of hiding some of the defects of the jawari. Expert slavers go at length to beautify slaves before exhibiting them in the suq. One face paste is soaked in watermelon water for six days, then in yoghurt for seven days with daily stirring. When applied to the face of a black woman, it becomes white. They also have pastes to produce golden or red colours for the cheeks. This is in addition to the different colour dyes used for the hair. Shabby parts are fattened by messaging by coarse cloths using hot ointments. Coarse limbs are smoothed by

⁹ “Moon” in Arabic is masculine.

applying wax, bitter almond, rosewater and violet ointment. Freckles and marks are covered by a paste made from canes, bitter almond, lentil vetch and the seeds of melon pasted in honey.¹⁰

The tales of *The Nights* indicate that there are other ways of selling jawari. Merchants take the most beautiful and distinguished jawari directly to the sultan or wali and offer to sell them without the interference of middlemen. This happens particularly when a slave woman is educated and has manners. If the sultan likes what he sees, it is more than likely that he offers more money than what the merchant asks for. The merchant has plenty to gain by this method, mainly the appreciation of the sultan who returns the favour by making the merchant one of his close acquaintances and eventually bestowing upon him gifts and awards.

Baghdad is not the only city in *Thousand and One Nights* where jawari suqs exist. Damascus is mentioned as well, particularly during the Crusades. With the continuation of war between the Crusaders and the Moslems, many people were taken captives on both sides. Some were kept to do menial jobs and others were sold as slaves. Those who become slaves seem to become part of the fabric of society, helping in enriching it.¹¹

The Jawari business in the tales of *The Nights* is a source of pleasure and comfort to the wealthy, but it enhances the misery of the less fortunate social classes. Instead of directing the treasury's monies to the welfare of society, they are spent on the desires of the sultan or the rulers. The poor of Baghdad are starving when the sultan spends ten thousand dinars on one woman he presents to the caliph in Damascus. This is a business that enhances the slavery of women and the corruption of rulers who become more alienated from their people.

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¹⁰ Almaliqi, A. *On the Ethics of Accounting* (In Arabic.) 1987 Edition by Hassan Elzein, Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith, Beirut. pp65-67.

¹¹ Qassim, Q. A. 1990. (In Arabic.) *The Essence of the Crusades*. Aalam al-Ma'rif Series, No. 149. National Council for Culture and the Arts, Kuwait. p204.

KAMEL EL-MURR

Adapted & translated by Raghid Nahhas

Naim Khoury: The Poet and the Human

Naim Khoury was born in the modest town of Betram in north Lebanon in 1930. When he was only six years old, his father died. The task of bringing him up, along with his brothers and sisters, was now the sole responsibility of his mother. Times were bad and the world was on the verge of World War II.

Naim Khoury grew up with a great hunger for knowledge, but was deprived of many life essentials. He felt a strong urge to scribble his ideas, but finding a piece of paper was not an easy task when food could hardly be secured. His elder sister Latifa came up with an idea when she felt her brother had something to offer. At the time, the rich of the town started replacing the mud roofs of their houses by cement. There were many empty cement bags ready for disposal. Latifa used to go around building sites collecting these bags, dusting them off, cutting them and sawing them in the shape of a notebook she presented to her brother to satisfy his desire in writing.

Deprived from descent education, Naim Khoury found his real education in reading books and in joining a secular national philosophy he was introduced to, namely the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. This led him to prison and torture after a coup attempt by this party on New Year's Eve 1960/61, despite himself having no previous knowledge of that coup as he often stressed.

In 1963 he met Victoria Deeb, a Lebanese migrant to Australia who was visiting Lebanon. They got married, and Naim Khoury started his new life in Australia in 1964. They opened a grocery shop in Sydney where Naim kept working for a few years until after the death of his wife in 1992.

In the midst of the long daily working hours, Naim Khoury used to steel a few minutes every now and then to write a poem, a lecture or an article to an Arabic newspaper in Sydney.

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In the early nineteen eighties, The Arabic Heritage League in Australia was established and Naim Khoury quickly became one of its pillars. The activities of this association were a fertile medium for exchanging ideas. This reflected positively on Naim's thinking, broadening and deepening its horizons.

Naim Khoury was able to establish himself as a leading poet, not only among Arab-Australians, but also all over the Arab world. He was a responsible writer. To him freedom was sacred, but "responsible"—it should not become chaos.

To Naim Khoury, poetry is poetry. It does not matter whether it is classical or modern, metred or free-style, as long as it is neither complicated nor too loose.

In the last years of his life, Naim Khoury had a chance to devote all his time for writing. He produced copiously, with depth, integrity and commitment to humanity. He saw that the meanest intellect is one that stubbornly supports falsehood and injustice. In one of his verses we read:

Allah is crucified and nations prostituted
So that legitimacy is given to the extorter.

Despite Naim's love to his Lebanese heritage, he never chained himself in the past. He was always an advocate of innovation and creativity:

I have learnt from life this:
you can't even talk of progress
without creativity
Choose, life is about choice, any style of poetry
as long as it is innovative.
Only then it can be forever.

Naim Khoury had published poetry collections before arriving in Australia, but his first collection in Australia, "Sannin Said", was published in Sydney in 1986. Sannin is a mountain in Lebanon, and it is often used in poetry and song as a symbol of the eternity and pride of the Lebanese spirit in the context of strength. The collection is an embodiment of the firmness of Sannin's rocks, the freshness of its atmosphere, the sweetness of its scents, the sacredness of the land of the cedars and the purity of its people. Khoury's poem starts by an opening line that might be considered a summary of his feelings about the greatness of his homeland, as well as his readiness to be effective wherever he goes around the globe:

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When Sannin talks, space stretches its neck
and becomes all ears listening to
the call that soars, along with our wounds
Half of Sannin embraces the sea,
the other half embraces the heights and the sky
I am a heart coming out of its ribs to roam this earth
and an arm with its sleeve rolled up ready to build.

Lebanon has been, throughout its history, a sublime cultural message carried by the Lebanese to the whole world with passion and dedication. This goes back to the days the alphabet was created and how the Lebanese spread their wisdom to the whole world in different ways. Khoury also mentions those who recognized the importance of these pioneering contributions to human culture:

My letters are my fate, and a shining glory
In my blood, and there is destiny in my wounds
Oh madness of the wind... you are part of our folly
Some sane people in faraway places
took the risk and adopted our scribbles
and built on them with pride.

Naim Khoury received the “Gibran International Prize” from the Arabic heritage League in Australia in 1989. His speech on that occasion sheds more light into his character. Here are some excerpts:

...From “Betram”, the enemies of freedom uprooted me in the name of freedom and threw me into my exile. Australia, thankfully, became my adopted country. I appreciate Australia, respect its order, laws, culture and its remarkable practice of rights and freedoms.

I will always love Lebanon, because it is my original home. It is the cradle of civilization. It has existed for ever, and it will forever be.

In Sydney, as in Beirut, I realize that poetry’s disaster is the lack of seriousness that inflicts some literary quarters.

They say I am the angry poet. They are wrong. I am anger itself. Its wings beat against the sky to bring back the hope of resurrection. Its eyes tear the darkness of the night in order to embrace the storm of the day.

I am as classical as classical poetry is able to translate noble visions into live

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human poetry. I am also innovative, because I have no complexes and I am not inflicted by the “elitist” ailment— the elite that attempts to eliminate the other, but end up being a prey to itself and to emptiness.

Literature is love. If it abandons love, it abandons ethics and faith— it abandons life! Life is only complete with love which gives it its sheen, depth and meaning.

My dearest wish before I die is to go back to Beirut and deliver a poem inspired by the resurrection of Lebanon...

The dearest poem to my heart and the closest to my conscience is a poem I have not yet written.

Naim’s wish was not fulfilled. Nevertheless, he did go back to Lebanon in 1999 for a period of two weeks only. There, he was invited to a festival where he delivered a poem which seems to me to carry the seeds of the Beirut poem he was dreaming of. His poem speaks to the town of Jubail.

I am the stranger whose echo is still here
And there is the growling sound of thunder
I am the stranger and in exile you find
the echo of my pain, and on your way
I wrap death in bewilderment.
Rise in my wide horizon, a shining face
eclipsing the night, extinguishing the strife
Nail me down to my land in my nation,
like Jesus - the messenger of love - was crucified.

“Moon Rage” is a collection of metred verses arranged in sextets, using both classical and modern styles. I consider this collection the poet’s statement that modernity can be achieved through modifying style if need be, but without destroying the integrity of the content and the poetic vision.

I am still waiting for the myth,
a sword is in my hand, and
my umbrella is the sun on
the shoulders of the wind
moaning the pain of the clouds and
the earth cries when I cry...

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In his collection “The lake of Light” we read:

I am the orphan, my notebooks and my ink
are the literature fighting the butcher’s knife
This is an orphaned literature, around its wounds
lie the greed of the fanatics and the merchants

In another part he contemplates the dishonoured Arab dignity after too much surrender to the West’s colonial projects:

Ask, if dignity’s sun went bankrupt
Would the Spaniards return the glory of its shine?
Would New York be its new dawn?
What a miscalculation!
With what ink do they write our peace
and on what documents do they base their decrees?

Naim Khoury, from 1987 till his death in 2000, dedicated a large part of this collection to The Arabic Heritage League. Some poems were specifically written in appreciation of the achievements of this League, particularly of its annual granting of the Gibran International Prize.

After the sudden death of his wife, Khoury wrote his collection “Silence at the Storm’s Beach”. However, this poetry is not about silence at all. It is an outlook on existence with all its contradictions, and a vision to beyond existence, written in a style of a sentimental intimate discourse about life, love, pain, the self, nature, dreams, death, hope and nation— expressed by twelve songs and a finale.

I visit your grave, squeezed in pain
carrying a lot of flowers in my hand
my blood floods your earth where
my heart kneels and my nerves break down.

Without you, I wouldn’t have had my yesterdays
and love wouldn’t have coloured my tomorrow

This colour seems to continue in Khoury’s heart for he continued to speak to his beloved after her death as if he is in a continuous state of day-dreaming:

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Come on... let us comb the hair of the stars
and uncover, for the birds, the light of the trees
Come, let me feel you, even if this was impossible
scribbling... drawing the face of the moon.

Then he often returns to his reality after remembering his homeland:

The homeland of my inspiration pulls me
away from my concerns
there are fires and pain in my wounds
Lebanon is alive in my return and exile
A Lebanon in the soul never dies.

His love for Lebanon was made very clear in his collection "The Journey of the Sad Pain". Despite acknowledging the greatness of his new country, he still longed for his country of origin:

Australia is my country: shimmering minarets
yet I am burning in it
If you give me perpetual paradise
only in Lebanon my hope blooms.

His nationalistic feelings dominate all of this collection in which he celebrates the cause of Lebanon and highlights the concerns of the Arabs and their failings.

Khoury's feelings never subside and we see again in his collection "There Was my Country" that he addresses his homeland with passion and devotion. After voicing the plight of Lebanon and how it is being exploited, he says:

We are its bread and garment
Our blood is its wine and
our flesh is its communion
We shall build it by the pain of light
In its hands time shall forever sing
It is limitless and the sun is our witness
In every span there is a Lebanon for us.

"The Shore of Fire" is a collection distinguished by revealing the humanity of Naim Khoury and his integrative outlook to life. He devotes most of this collection to the

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cause of women. In one poem he depicts a scene where some men are watching a naked dancer. This is not acceptable to him at all:

There are only rascals in this scene
Chewing on their mischief
They are serpents biting
the corpse of virtue
Even the dead fled the grave
shared by such living halfwits

He ends the poem by a few verses emphasizing the humanity of women and the dire consequences of not giving women their proper status and respect.

After the death of Naim Khoury in 2000, a collection titled “Images in the Mirrors of Rain” was published. It included samples of his works over the years, and we were keen on providing representative pieces of his ideas on God, humans, poetry and its classical and modern styles, poets, inspiration, life and death.

كامل المرّ

He said of death:

The day of my death is my day of celebration
Let no one feel sorry for me,
be sad or in despair
Death is not the end of the road
It is a fire that rests a while, only to flare

نعيم خوري
الشاعر والانسان

Cover of el-Murr's book *Naim Khoury: the Poet and the Human*, with a portrait of Khoury's in the background.

Kamel el-Murr is a writer, journalist and publisher of Lebanese origins. He is the President of The Arabic Heritage League in Australia, which he founded in 1981. He has been in Sydney, Australia since 1976. The above article is adapted from el-Murr's recent book, under the same title, commemorating his friend Naim Khoury.

I N M E M O R I A M

BENNY WALTER

Story

Hard Day's Work

Bill wears a blue woollen jumper. It's got patches on the elbows and a ritzy gold pen in the cloth holder on the upper left arm. The pen's got no ink and the nib's broken. Bill found it three weeks back on the side of the road leading up to the main face. Someone had done a bit of window dumping and Bill had smiled. He wasn't first to these things too often.

Right now it's morning, so Bill drops his backpack at the junction between the two filth roads. Tim sees him and wanders over, eyes scavenging the sides.

'G'day Bill,' he calls. 'All set?'

'Yeah,' he answers, kicking a small rock to the side of the road. 'I reckon.'

'Here all day?' Tim asks.

'Yeah.' Bill looks up for a moment at a car pretending to keep below fifteen kilometres per hour. He looks back at Tim.

'Find anything?'

'Nah, they did a pretty good sweep last night. First few cars'll have to come through for anything decent to turn up.'

'Yeah. Reckon so.'

The car is leaving the toll booth now, but Tim keeps speaking. 'Most of them dump it straight down at the shop now anyway, so really there's less call for...'

'Scuse me,' interrupts Bill. The car has come up to the junction, so Bill heads for the window, which drops quickly.

'Hey mate! You have any idea where I'm 'sposed to drop off these branches and all?'

'Yep,' says Bill. 'Just take the right turn. You see that pile over there? That's your spot.'

'Thanks mate.' The driver winds up his window and skids off through the chemical dirt.

Tim has started walking on. 'I'll catch you mate. Should get to it.'

'Righto.' Bill looks west through the hills. The clouds are building up— a change

is coming, but things should be right till evening at least. He stares back down the road. It's pretty quiet, so he walks down the left ditch to the main face and kicks the stray plastic bags off the car park. One splits open. Bill checks out the contents, cataloguing with his boot. Catfood tins. They don't recycle easy. A biro, a crappy old thirty cent biro. Bill scrunches his eyes slightly then crushes it into the dirt.

He looks up as a ute drives through the junction and confidently makes its way over. It backs up to the face, and a middle-aged bloke wearing jeans and a paint-splattered old weekend polarfleece pushes himself out of the driver's seat.

'G'day.'

'Yep,' says Bill. 'Wanna hand?'

'Oh, she's right mate. Don't worry yourself.'

'No trouble,' says Bill. 'That's what I'm here for.'

'Ah well, fair enough,' says the bloke. 'You could help us pull this cabinet out.'

'Yeah, righto.' Bill wanders over and takes hold of the end sticking out the rear. The man jumps on the tray and starts to push. 'Tim'll be after that,' Bill reminds him half-way through.

'Yeah?'

'Works down at the shop,' Bill explains.

'Oh yeah?' says the bloke. 'Should I just drop it there on the way out? That be easier?'

'Nah,' Bill answers. 'Tim wouldn't get it then. Gives him something nice to find.'

'Okay.'

They edge the cabinet off the ute and hoik it to the side of the pile.

'Thanks mate,' says the bloke, starting to heave garbage bags from the other side. 'Didn't know council was employing anyone so useful these days.'

'Oh no, mate, Council don't employ me.' Bill laughs.

The bloke looks surprised. 'What, this place gone private or something?'

Bill shakes his head. 'Nah, Council still runs it, I just don't work for 'em. I just help out round here. They can use me hands.'

'Yeah?' The man shrugs with his face. 'Fair enough. Thanks then.' He gets back into the ute and turns on the radio. 'Catch you later.'

'Righto,' says Bill. He waits till the ute's on the main road, then edges the garbage bags further onto the pile. He looks across— Tim's further over on the second face. He hasn't seen the cabinet yet and Bill decides not to call out about it. That way, Tim will be especially pleased when he stumbles across it later in the morning. Normally the Salvos would get first pick on this one.

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Bill wanders back to the junction. He pulls a pair of gloves from his pack, and a sandwich. He puts on the gloves, then unwraps the sandwich and starts to eat it. The ham is a bit old, but there's plenty of butter and it fills a hole. He slowly chews through it, then carefully folds up the glad-wrap, takes off the gloves and puts them both back in the pack. Then he pulls out a short list and checks through his other jobs for the day— he wrote them all down the night before with that gold pen he'd found three weeks back.

Another car pulls up at the toll booth. 'How much'll that be?' asks the driver.

Andy in the booth tells him. 'Four-eighty, thanks mate.'

The driver has exact change. It takes a minute to find. 'And where do I head to dump the green waste, cobber?'

'Just ask Bill, the old bloke over there on the corner,' says Andy. 'He'll sort you out.'

Benny Walter is a writer in the Orwellian tradition - he washes dishes to survive. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Tasmania, and his writing has been included in a variety of magazines, books and journals, including the recent bestseller *Tarkine* (Allen and Unwin, 2005). He was the Tasmanian finalist in the first national poetry slam on Radio National late in 2004, and was a winner in one of the competitions of the online journal "Cordite Poetry Journal".

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Y O U N G T A L E N T

M A R I E M Y S S Y

Nun on Leave

by

Marie Andari-Kalache

(Wynot Books, Spring, Texas, USA 2004)

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free
Gospel of St. John

Autobiography, an important field of writing, is also popular with readers who find it engaging and exciting their curiosity.

Publishing an autobiography is a matter of bravery and honesty. Many writers do not succeed in writing their autobiography because they often avoid negative aspects and attempt to depict themselves as idealists or leaders. Others opt for writing about one period of their life and ignore other periods.

My friend Marie Andari-Kalache's book "Nun on Leave", however, is a true story. It is very honest and brave. It contains details which are not usually exposed in a culture that has deep respect for tradition, as the writer comments. It is a book of a complete autobiography from early childhood, to the teen years, to adulthood and the fields of aspirations in life's long struggle at home and the different countries where the author moved to: Lebanon, Jordan, France, Spain, Britain, USA, Australia and finally back to Lebanon.

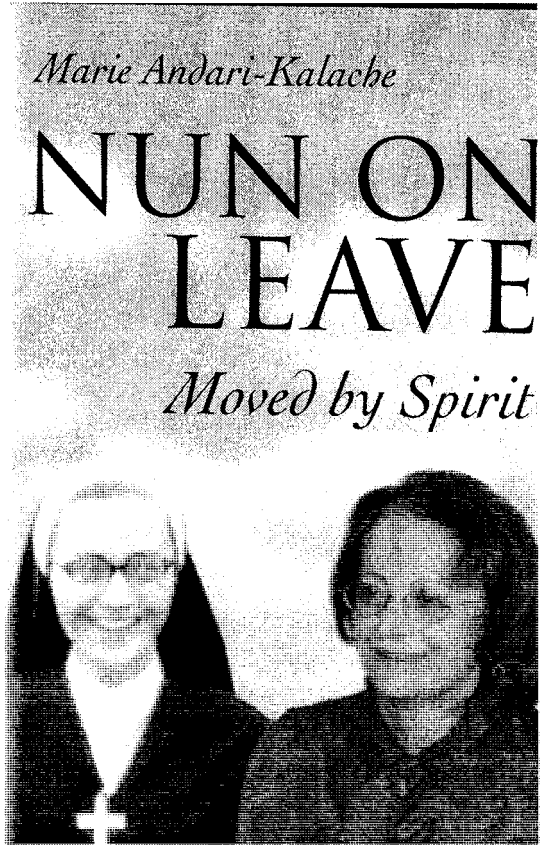
The heroine of the story is Mona Amin, the alias used for Marie Andari-Kalache. Mona is a girl who left her village when she was fourteen, to join the convent "Religieuses de Nazareth" in Beirut, where one of her sisters had already joined.

Mona spent fifteen years as a nun, seeking knowledge, searching for the truth and feverishly looking for perfection. However, when her scholarly ambitions

conflicted with her vows of obedience, she had to take a brave, difficult decision. She says: 'I was 34. I then took the most difficult decision of my life: to leave the convent and annul the vows I had committed myself to when I was a teenager. I had to face the world on my own, in order to fulfill my academic ambitions and attain my peace of mind.'

The book engages us to the end, due to the wealth of events it describes. These are simple events, but very telling—mainly because the heroine was going through life single-handedly, taking decisions without anyone to guide her, particularly in the remote places she chose to go to. The world encompassed by those places was a material world, challenging, demanding and competitive. Nevertheless, the book reinforces many values such as the following:

1. Faith. Believing in God and in human values is the axis around which Marie's life and actions revolve from the very beginning—nun or no nun. Faith, in Marie's view, is not simply about worship and belief in God, but about human actions depending on love, tolerance, helping the others and opening channels of understanding among all religions based on mutual respect. She says talking about her students: 'I wanted them to understand that faith and prayer are personal choices that accompany them all of their life. Jesus does not force anyone to follow him. He only teaches.'
2. The family. The family is the unit of society in Marie's book. The family



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needs guidance and protection. Members of a family constitute the primary society, on which the foundations of society and nations are built. This is why we see Marie preoccupied with her family members who are spread all over the world. She is also concerned with other human and international causes, assisting morally and materially whenever she is able to.

3. Learning. Marie Andari-Kalache believes that learning is the most important gate to the world of culture, civilization, progress and achievements. Lack of learning leads to isolation and failure to build a “complete” human being. She left the convent to complete her university degrees, not to secure work or earn money, but to be more effective in guiding the youth and serving society. Even when she decided to get married she hesitated and said: ‘I had often thought about all the complication this union would bring, including sacrificing my academic qualifications.’ Marie’s main ambition in this area was to attain a Ph.D., nevertheless she managed three master degrees in Islamic Sufism, Education and Family Leadership.
4. Women. Marie lived through the realistic stages of women’s right abuses in Arab societies. This situation created in her a condition that led her to all the places she sought. She was not only a defender of women’s rights, but always sought to change the popular views which considered women second-class citizens. She devoted a full chapter of the book for these issues and she requested men to stop looking at women’s legs and look at the light in their faces instead.
5. Order. Abiding by laws and regulations is the prime proof of civilization and human maturity. This theme is obvious throughout the book.
6. Searching for perfection. Marie says: ‘Throughout my life I have paid a high price because I believed I was perfect.’ She also says: ‘I have attempted many times to be perfect, but I could not avoid falling and making mistakes.’
7. Helping the needy. Reading the book, it gives you the feeling that it has a

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call to help the needy, particularly the mentally or physically disabled. It is worth mentioning here, that the proceeds of the book are dedicated to the Lebanese students and disabled children.

8. Honesty. From cover to cover, we feel that honesty is what dominates “Nun on Leave”.

Finally, the author chose from the Gospel of St. John the line *You will know the truth and the truth will set you free* as her motto. Has she found the truth, and has this truth set her free? Whatever the answer to this question might be, the book is engaging, informative and liberating.

The book can be purchased on line from
www.swanstonewynot.com

Marie Myssy is a journalist/broadcaster with the Arabic Programme of SBS Radio in Sydney.

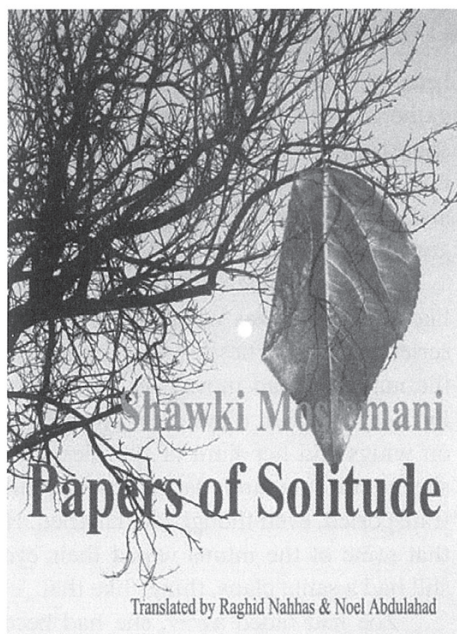
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RAGHID NAHHAS

Classical Poems by Arab Women

A Bilingual Anthology by

Abdullah al-Udhari

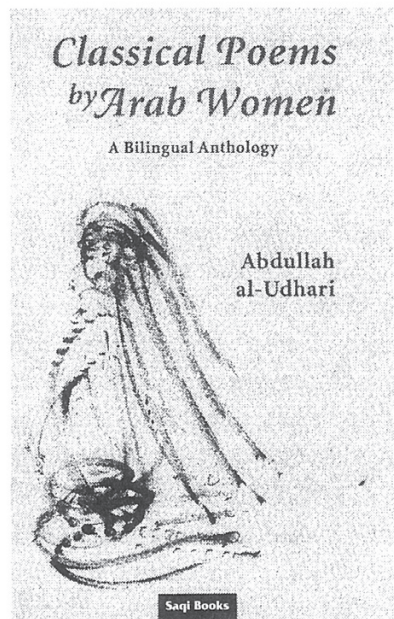
(Saqi Books, London 1999)

*Now let us listen to the women
telling their storypoems¹ and
discover a humanity blurred by
a manmade veil.*

This is how Abdullah al-Udhari ends his introduction to his book “Classical Poems by Arab Women”. It is a useful and fascinating book providing us with poetry written by Arab women from the pre-Islamic era to the Andalusian² period.

The editor of this anthology of poems printed with their English translations, is also the translator. Dr. Abdullah al-Udhari is a London academic of Yemeni origins. He is a poet, literary historian and a storyteller.

He starts the book by a dedication to a woman:



¹ Al-Udhari uses such term combinations throughout his book— very successfully.

² The Andalus was the name given by the Arabs to the Iberian peninsula they conquered in 711.

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Laura

1

One morning Allah visited the earth but
the sun was not in sight

2

Allah said: 'The earth is still dark?'

3

And he created you.

Al-Udhari is not only implying that women are a source of delight and enlightenment, but he also seems dedicated to exploring their importance and standing up for them. This is indicated from a saying of the Prophet Mohammad he cites in his introductory pages. The Prophet tells his followers: 'Do not approach your women like animals, but establish a link between you.' And when they ask about the nature of this link, the Prophet says: 'The kiss.'

The poems chosen for this anthology are a celebration of 'the triumph of feminine wit over the arrogance of muscle power' as the back cover of the book indicates. I agree, but it is possible that only daring women (some of them were daughters of caliphs) would have been able to write poetry in those times, or at least make it public. Judging from the richness of the works, many other women throughout history would have expressed their mind and soul through poetry that might not have seen the light.

Al-Udhari's collection is presented in a very straightforward manner. This includes his translations³ which are accurate and up to the point. There is no pretension in the book, rather the material is exposed as it is, leaving the poems to speak for themselves and to reveal something about the personality of the women who wrote them, despite the brief remarks of the translator next to each selection and his concise, but very rich and informative introduction to the book.

Al-Udhari states: 'The standard history of classical Arab poetry begins and ends with a man, with the odd woman thrown in, who is either tearing her eyes out over the dead or tantalizing men's desire with song and lute. Women poets appear as incidentals and the biographical dictionaries devote minimal space to them, in spite of the fact that their contribution to the growth of the literary tradition is as significant

³ Al-Udhari adopts what he calls "paraline" (paragraph line) form for his translations. In other words, he does not try to translate poetry by poetry. He is mostly concerned with conveying the meaning.

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as that of men.’ Then Al-Udhari explains some of the reasons for marginalizing women and takes us through the history of Arab women poetry covering the *Jahiliyya* (the pre-Islam period 4000 BCE – 622 CE), the Islam Period (622-661), the Umayyad Period (661-750), the Abbasid Period (750-1258) and the Andalusian Period (711-1492).

In all, Al-Udhari uses 64 poets covering all these periods, but it is interesting to note that the Islam Period has two poets only; one of them anonymous who is complaining about a husband who leaves her to spend his time at the mosque, and the other is Fatima bint Muhammad (the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad). Fatima’s poetry is all about lamenting the loss of her father and describing the sadness of life after him.

According to al-Udhari, many women’s privileges enjoyed during the Jahiliyya were transferred to men after the establishment of Islam. This could explain the reason most women’s poetry during that period was ‘conventional elegies’.

In contrast, the Jahiliyya Period has twelve poets cited by al-Udhari. Al-Udhari confirms that the Arabs had a relaxed attitude to sex. ‘In the jahiliyya a woman had complete freedom to marry or go with any man of her choice. Although polygamy was practiced, it was up to the woman to join a polygamous household...’

An anonymous woman wrote this poem:

You don’t satisfy a girl with presents and flirting, unless knees bang
against knees and his locks into hers with a flushing thrust.

The Jahiliyya poetry, however, was rich in other types of feelings. Safiyya bint Khalid al-Bahiliyya wrote on the death of her brother (her husband according to other sources):

1

We were twinshoots sprouting beautifully on a tree.

2

When our branches spread, our shade stretched and our buds
flushed, time snapped my other shoot.

Al-Udhari cites nine women from the Umayyad Period and twenty from the Abbasid Period. He summarizes the state of society in these two periods such: ‘In Umayyad and Abbasid societies men and women mixed freely in mosques, taverns, markets, streets, and their own homes. Lovers met openly in their favourite haunts, and society ladies

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drew both sexes to their salons. The Prophet's great granddaughter Sukaina bint al-Husain (d.735) and Aa'isha bint Talha (d.719) vied with each other in attracting to their salons the leading poets, composers, singers, scholars and pleasure seekers of the day. Sukaina and Aa'isha even defied their jealous husbands by refusing to wear the veil, saying that Allah had made them beautiful for all to see. The husbands divorced Sukaina and Aa'isha, who married again without having to suffer the indignity of wearing the veil.⁷

One famous poem is by Maisun, the wife of the Caliph Mu'awiya,⁴ in which she expresses a preference for her past country life compared to the life of the palace. One verse tells it all:

I'd rather listen to the winds voicing through wallcracks than to the sounds of tambourines.

I remember when we were at school and whenever our Arabic teacher mentioned Maisun's poem, we would feel a sense of respect to this woman who preferred simple life to the life of royalty, particularly that she was married to one of the mightiest and most successful rulers in history.

Bint al-Hubab is a poet who wrote about her husband beating her— or rather about the reason behind the beating:

1

Why are you raving mad, husband, just because I love another man?

2

Go on, whip me, every scar on my body will show the pain I cause you.

Umm al-Ward al-Ajlaniyya has a different problem with her husband:

1

If you want to know how the old man fared with me, this is what went on.

2

He lolled me the whole night through, and when dawn flashed his private lips thundered rainlessly and his key wilted in my lock.

⁴The founder of the Umayyad Empire.

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One of the most distinguished women of the Abbasid Period, and indeed in Islamic history is Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (714-801). A role model for her Sufi successors, she is considered a saint by many and revered and loved for her piety, devotion and unique love of Allah. Effectively, al-Adawiyya's poems are love poems for God. She says:

1

I put you in my heart to keep me company and leave my body to whoever wants to sit with me.

2

My body is for the entertaining sitter, but the tenant of my heart is my true companion.

On the other hand, Ulayya bint al-Mahdi was the daughter of the Caliph al-Mahdi, and was herself a singer and a composer. 'Most of her poems were set to music and sung by her.' She was known to take lovers from slaves and this made the Caliph Harun Arrashid, who brought her up after the death of her father, forbid her from mentioning the names of her lovers in her poetry. In one of her verses she says:

Lord of the unknown, I have hidden the name I desire in a poem like a treasure in a pocket.

In another poem she expresses her frustration:

1

I held back my love's name and kept on repeating it to myself.

2

Oh how I long for an empty space to call out the name I love.

When Fadl Ashsha'ira was accused of not being a virgin by one poet who said he preferred virgins whom he compared to unpierced pearls, she had this to say:

1

Riding beasts are no joy to ride until they're bridled and mounted.

2

So pearls are useless unless they're pierced and threaded.

The Andalus Period has twenty-one poets cited by al-Udhari, and more poetry than the other periods. This period is historically unique. After the Abbasids overthrew the

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Umayyads in 750, they were able to extend their authority all over the Ummayyad domain except for Andalus which was separated from the power centres of the Islamic Empire by the Mediterranean sea. This proved vital for Andalusian society particularly towards the end of the Abbasid Period and after the rape of Damascene women (in the presence of their men) by the hordes of Tamerlane in 1400. Suddenly there was a need to protect women, and consequently 'women lost their freedom and their world was finally veiled and walled by their menfolk.' The women of Andalus escaped this dilemma, and the peak of liberty was reached in the eleventh century by the likes of Wallada who was the daughter of an Ummayyad caliph. She was famous for her literary salons and for verses of hers she embroidered on her dress effectively announcing her elegance and readiness to grant her kiss to whoever desires.

The pride and power of Andalusian women can be sensed in the following lines by Aa'isha bint Ahmad al-Qurtubiyya:

1

I am a lioness, and I will never be a man's woman.

2

If I had to choose a mate, why should I say yes to a dog when I am deaf to lions?

Women of that period had other interests. Umm al-Ala bint Yusuf wrote about her garden:

The dewy reeds in my garden, pennants swaying in the hands of the winds.

But mostly, their poetry was about longing, love and explicit sex. In one poem by I'timad Arrumaikiyya, she uses the term 'fucking', but the al-Udhari avoids it in his translation:

I urge you to come faster than the wind to mount my breast and firmly dig and plough my body, and don't let go until you've flushed me thrice.

The book is a rare example of a work combining academic integrity and popular interest.

Boy Meets Girl: Ae Fond Kiss

The relationship between a Muslim man and a Catholic woman forms the basis of British director, Ken Loach's new film, making for enticing as well as potentially explosive viewing.

The fact that *Ae Fond Kiss* is set in Glasgow and the open depiction of the physical relationship adds a fresh take to an emerging genre. Like *East is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, other films, which explore East-West cultural issues and relationships, the film looks at how this impacts on the second generation. The tone of Paul Laverty's script is bittersweet with a sprinkling of humour thrown in to decrease the seemingly doomed nature of their relationship.

Casim is a second generation Pakistani born and raised in Glasgow and from the opening of the film we get a sense of the outsider status of his family through his younger sister. Tahana gives a speech to her class about the West's negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam. This scene illustrates how Laverty was strongly influenced by hearing about the demonisation of Muslims in the aftermath of September 11 in the UK. Ironically, it's football rivalry not religion, which leads to Tahana's anger fuelled chase through her school.

The chase sets up the initial meeting between Casim and Roisin, an Irish music teacher at the local Catholic school. There are no burning eyes meeting across a room scenarios or declarations of love. Their connection is mutual and natural and is depicted realistically without resorting to all the trappings of a conventional love story. As Loach would vouch "It's two people who fancy each other, and want to be together, and get on - that's not romantic..." (Quote from *The Guardian*)

The escalation of their relationship inevitably leads to key questions of loyalty to

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religion, family and love for Casim. While Casim's responses and those of his family are at the core of the film, Roisin has her own career dilemma to deal with. This stems from the fanatical response of her local parish priest to signing her employment certificate on the grounds of her sinful private life. This provocative scene played by a real priest illustrates that's its not only Casim's faith that raises strong objections to their union.

Like many of the actors in Loach's films, the leads Attta Yaqub and Eva Birthistle are virtual unknowns, and carry the weight of the film with conviction and realism, drawing the audience into their plight. The actress playing Tahana, Shabana Bakhsh, is convincing as a willing collaborator in keeping Casim and Roisin together and acts as a sympathetic foil to her older sister. Like Casim, Tahana attempts to create her own destiny at the opposition of her father. Tariq, the father, has suffered a great deal of racist abuse from his adopted homeland and is portrayed compellingly by Ahmad Riaz.

While Loach's and Laverty's depictions of a Muslim family and Casim's plight may raise a few eyebrows as Non-Muslims, they deserve credit for their considered and unbiased handling of such sensitive subject matter. *Ae Fond Kiss* pinpoints through two individuals coming together the discrimination and racism that still exists in the west and at its closure these issues and others raised remain unanswered.

Gemma Creegan is originally from the U.K. but considers herself something of a modern nomad, having lived in six different countries including the Middle East and most recently Japan. Her travels have influenced her writing and she particularly enjoys discovering other cultures and watching foreign films. She is currently based in Melbourne, Australia.

STARTING OCTOBER 2005

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www.kalimatinternational.com

Tango para siempre

Returning from our dinner on the Spanish Riviera, my wife decided to have a rest before she joined me at our hotel's open-air nightclub where we would spend the rest of every evening of our stay there in August 2004.

Every night they would have a new show of music and dance, after which the stage is left to the audience to dance to the tunes of the live band playing until midnight.

I left her and followed the sound of music with its dancing tunes rising in my flesh as I approached the garden café where the night's patrons started filling the tables. It would be another half hour before the place was full.

The tables formed three sides of a rectangle around a yard that was used as an open-air stage. The fourth side comprised some trees, "stage entrance" and the side of a bar.

I had noticed some of our trip company gathered around one table, but I decided to sit alone, partly because my wife was not yet with me and partly because I cherish some aloneness to allow me some private contemplation to start with.

The front row of the side facing the stage directly was the best for seats. Most of the tables there were empty, because each of the tables in this row had two chairs only, and most patrons came in, or formed large groups to party. I was lucky the table was next to a table in the middle of the row where a man of about eighty sat every night. I had watched him during the previous few nights and I wanted to know him better by being closer to him, or even starting a conversation if the opportunity allowed.

As usual, the man sat with a large bottle of some cocktail drink, probably prepared for him at the local bar, on the table. There were two glasses, one full and one from which he was sipping his drink. The other chair on his table was empty, with its back against the back of the empty chair on the other side of my table. The latter, I knew for sure, would soon be occupied by my wife.

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An American and his wife, whom we had met during the trip, passed by. I indicated to them that I would join the group as soon as my wife arrived. When they were near the table where most of the rest of our group gathered, the American realized that he needed more chairs. He returned towards me, but knowing that my wife was going to join me made him ask my “neighbour’s” permission to take the empty chair. As usual in these cases, the American spontaneously asked his question at the same time he grabbed the chair wanting to remove it. The old man leapt nervously and bent over the table in an attempt to instantaneously hold on to the chair. The features on his face were a clear indication that he would never allow the chair to leave his table. I offered my other chair to the American.

The old man regained his composure and relaxed back on his chair with his right arm resting on the table, and his left almost shouldering the back of the chair. He started eying the place in all directions with piercing looks as if coming from the eyes of an eagle. He had a “gentleman’s” elegance in his moves— what looked like the remains of old glory! His appearance confirmed this. He still had thick hair; only its grayish colour and silken texture confirming the passage of years. His attire was casual, but clearly the result of an exquisite taste: a summer shirt with orange and navy blue stripes, brown trousers and leather belt and shoes. The clothes were not new, but in excellent condition. It was possible that the sizes of the shirt and trousers, that looked slightly larger than the man’s real sizes, were the result of weight loss. But the man looked in excellent health.

The music halted for a few moments then it suddenly rebounded with the tune of “Granada” signaling the start of the show by the entrance of three young female flamenco dancers wearing dark burgundy dresses. After a bit of flirtation and warming up, the star of the show entered the stage with vigor. He was a handsome tall man dressed in black. All of Spain seemed to shine through his strong features and fateful expressions. Was he the bull-fighter or the bull? Or was he a stallion? It was difficult to say, as the music and the movements seemed to be one, yet transferring consequent scenes touching the hearts, augmenting the passion and firing the memories.

My old neighbour watched, his fingers tapping the surface of the table, in concert with the music. His feet were dancing without leaving their place. His face was full of concern and anxiety, and every now and then he would fix his eyes on the empty chair facing him. He would lift his eyes, and they would catch mine, then he would direct his sight to the dancers once again.

My wife arrived with a perplexed smile as she tried to find her way amongst the

crowded tables to reach me. I remembered that there was no chair for her at my table. I rose like a madman as she started asking the permission of my neighbour to take the chair. I spoke to her in Arabic asking her to leave the empty chair and to take one I had in a flash grabbed from a table behind me after a quicker asking of permission. I felt my neighbour relaxed and noticeably happy at my tactfulness.

My wife sat facing me. Her position between me and the old man meant that it was easier for me now to observe him without embarrassment, under the pretext that I was looking at her naturally. I told her what had happened when the American attempted to take a chair. She responded indifferently by reminding me how strange this man had been, then added sarcastically, 'It seems it is going to be a busy night. Let us see what your man is up to, particularly that he has been your preoccupation since we started frequenting this place.'

The star of the night finished his show, leaving the dancers and the party to start descending from the climax he reached on our behalf, but the spectators were energized enough with an urgent need to reach their own climax and burst. However, only a few would dare come out on the stage immediately, except for the old man who would not wait for the dancers to leave, but share the stage with them, occupying his own corner, exhibiting a level of professionalism in direct challenge to theirs. No one objected to him.

He danced as if he was with a partner— a lady in his arms. He was so genuine, as if what we were looking at was a movie scene of a man and a woman dancing, but the woman was edited out afterwards.

He would continue dancing even though the dancers would stay for another half hour, and no other spectator would join the stage. That night, however, the wife of our American acquaintance, an American of Latin origins herself and the best dancer in our group, decided not to wait for the dancers to leave or depend on her husband who did not like to dance, and went straight to the stage dancing and advancing gradually in the direction of the old man who was startled at this initiative, but kept his composure, and even showed some courtesy by keeping close to her for a little while, without abandoning his imaginary partner. It did not take him long to dance away from the American lady.

I felt gratified by the actions of the American lady in her attempt to share the old man's passion, and I could not blame him for not responding appropriately. Something in him justified his behaviour, or this is what we convinced ourselves with, particularly that he was very skillful and did not exploit or interfere with anyone else.

I went to the lady and danced with her. I thanked her for her courtesy and

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wisdom. She continued a smile that never abandoned her face that evening. We did not need to discuss the old man or explain his behaviour. Was he once a famous dancer? Had he had a dear friend he lost and still suffered from this loss, or was he celebrating her love every day, despite her absence? Was he celebrating his own existence? Feelings? Whatever the answer, no one doubted that he was genuine. There was no fakery in what he was doing. Delusions? What did it matter if his delusions were his perfect truth?

The old man returned to his table after an eventful night in which his star shone with a brilliance not less than that of the flamenco dancer's.

The night was approaching its conclusion. The live band was replaced by recorded music, and some patrons started leaving. A few couples were left on the stage. Suddenly the flamenco dancer entered the stage heading straight towards the old man. When he was a metre away from the table he bowed and greeted the old man. They exchanged a few words in Spanish. When the dancer extended his hand to shake the old man's, the old man stood and patted the dancer's shoulder. The dancer bowed again and left.

The old man sat at his table sipping from his glass. In front of him, there was another glass not touched by a blazing lip, and a chair not warmed by the body of a woman, but the old man continued his dancing to the tune of every pulse in his spirit.

Raghid Nahhas started writing a series of articles concerned with social and political critique under the title "Clownish", when Hassan Moussa (Currently Chairman of the Arab Council Australia), in 1993, invited him to contribute material to "Al-Minbar", a newsletter published by the Council and ceased a few years later. The above story was first published in Arabic in *Kalimat 20* as part of a new series. The title (in Spanish) translates "Tango for Always".

STARTING OCTOBER 2005

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C L O W N I S H

SAMIH AL-BASSET

Four Paintings



Australia: Heritage and Modernity



A Face from Zabadani (Syria)



Rebellion

A R T S



Sydney: Natural and Human Challenges

Samih al-Basset is a Syrian artist who visited Australia for a while and was very impressed and inspired by it. He lives in Damascus, Syria.

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Poems for Gwen

Lewis E. Scot



L.E. Scott

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كلمات Kalimat

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ترحب كلمات بكل المساهمات الخلاقة، وترجو المساهمين إرسال أعمالهم قبل شهرين على الأقل من موعد صدور العدد الذي يمكن لموادهم أن تنشر فيه، مع إرفاقها بالعناوين ووسائل الاتصال كاملة، بما في ذلك أرقام الهواتف، ونسخة عن السيرة الذاتية للمؤلف/المؤلفة، أو بضعه أسطر تلخص منجزاته/منجزاتها.
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تنشر كلمات النثر والشعر والدراسات والقصة والفنون وفق طريقتين أساسين:
أولاً - المواد الأصلية التي لم يسبق نشرها مطلقاً بآية لغة.

ثانياً - المواد المترجمة، أو التي يتقدم بها المؤلف لتقوم كلمات بترجمتها. وهذه يجب أن تكون منشورة سابقاً بلغتها الأصلية، ولم تسبق ترجمتها. وتقدم كلمات خدمة الترجمة من العربية مجاناً للذين تقبل أعمالهم. (الأعمال التي تأتي مترجمة سلفاً قد يتوفر لها حظ أكبر بالنشر نظراً لضغط العمل لدينا). يجب تزويدنا بالمرجع الذي تم النشر فيه، بما في ذلك اسم الناشر، والسنة، ورقم المجلد، والعدد في حال الدوريات. جميع المواد المقدمة للنشر تخضع لتقييم قبل قبولها.

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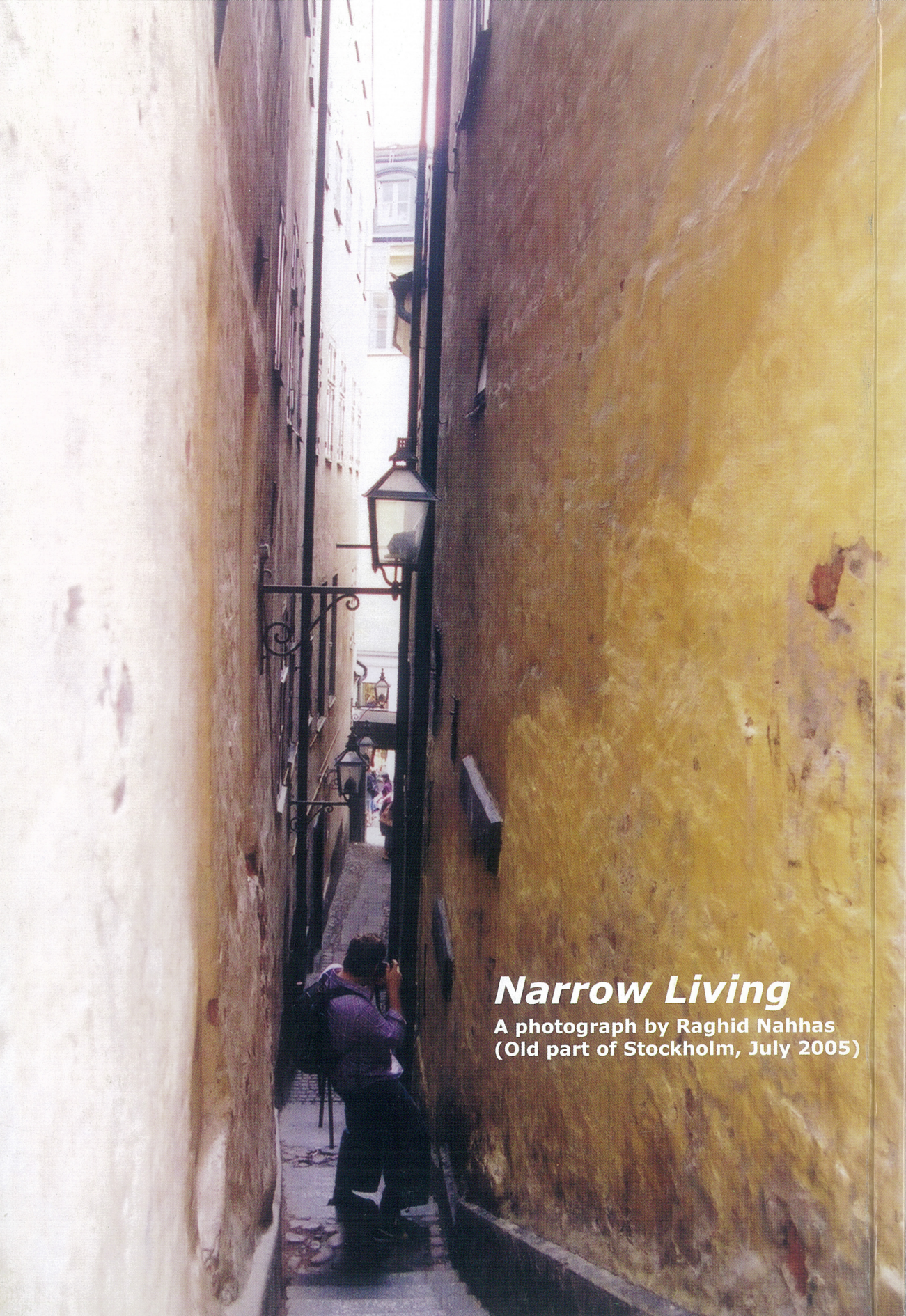
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المراسلات والاشتراكات إلى العنوان التالي: P.O. Box 242, Cherrybrook, NSW 2126, Australia.



Narrow Living

A photograph by Raghid Nahhas
(Old part of Stockholm, July 2005)