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Slow Jazz, Recklessness, Nightmares, and Void by Ashraf Zaghal

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Ghada Mourad
Slow Jazz

Ashraf Zaghal
جاز بطيء

The camel stopped at the old tavern's door
And asked for water and sand
We gave him a bucket of water and a tequila shot
And we recommended that he follow the Silk Road
Where the sands do not end
And where the she-camels are pure gold

The camel is a jovial animal
In some sense
He walks as if he is dancing
He moves his nose as if he has just swallowed a whole garden of cocaine
The camel is a respectable animal
You can see a bit of villainy in his eyes
And a bit of pain
But at the end of the day he is an esteemed and elegant
Animal
And a fitting theme for a poem written in an old tavern

Ghada Mourad
Recklessness

Ashraf Zaghal
نَزَقَ

-1-

I like tall women
I like streams
I like palm trees
I like cigars
I like trains
I like unending wine bottles
I like living for 1000 years
I do not like that those I love live for this long
Because I like short stories

-2-

The woman in her forties who visited me at midnight
Could not leave the bed
Her heart was tender
As a snail in early spring
My heart was dried up
Like a passing shoe

-3-

It was a few days
After Christmas
When I was thinking about what to do with the Christmas tree
And the Christmas things
Then this idea surprised me:
Why does Santa bring all this fun
But never comes back to collect his garbage?

Ghada Mourad
Nightmares

Ashraf Zaghal
كوابيس

Nightmare 1

Patriotic poets
Are eating a child
In my bedroom

Nightmare 2

The grass on the riverbanks
Ate the river's frogs
Not a single frog is left
The grass is now a big frog
That will devour me because I resemble the prophet's horse

Nightmare 3

There are five poems in my head
And on the highway there are
Five hundred cars
The five poems are now left on the edge of the road
Like squirrels with their stomachs ripped out

Nightmare 4

Jerusalem's demons
Play Hamlet
On the doorsteps of my house in Canada
I am Hamlet

Nightmare 5

Because the street is narrower than a girl's waist
I made love to the street

Nightmare 6

A date for dinner
At the Wailing Wall
With no salt
Or land

Nightmare 7

Blood on the grass
A crow on a tree
And prophets asleep in the virtuous city

Nightmare 8

My black coat
Turned into a cat
And my cat turned into a white lie

Nightmare 9

No wine today
Only a sermon

Nightmare 10

My neighbor's scarf
My tablecloth
And my dinner is
A dead prophet
Who fell out of the newspaper

Ghada Mourad
Void

Ashraf Zaghal
فراغ

What did you do yesterday?

Nothing.

What will you do tonight?

Nothing.

Why did you leave the bottle full? It's unlike you.

The bottle is empty, my friend!

The bottle is full!

Why don't I see anything in the bottle then?

I don't know.

I will walk a little.

Where will you go?

I will walk over there.

To your friends?

No. I will just walk

Over there.

I see them, yes, your friends are waiting for you on the corner.

I don't see them!

There, on the curb, your friends. Do you see them?

No...I don't see them!

You don't see them?

The bottle is empty—I told you!

Commentary

Ashraf Zaghal belongs to a generation of Palestinian poets that has decided to be a voice of everyday life with its ups and downs, away from the serious and combative tone of poetry of the previous generation. Zaghal's collection, *A Desert in the Metro*, brings many motifs from traditional Arabic poetry written in or about the desert into a modern city setting—symbolized in the title by *metro*. Hence, this collection mingles the ancient with the modern without claiming to root itself in the tradition of desert poetry. Rather, the presence of the traditional motifs signals at the same time a distance from them, afforded by the sarcastic tone as well as the playful, seemingly lighthearted diction. Furthermore, as Zaghal's poetry claims to—and in fact does—distance itself from the previous generation of politically committed poetry, Palestine seeps through the poems in the form of fragments or snippets that illustrate the irreducible presence of the experience of displacement and landlessness that cannot be ignored or repressed, as in "Nightmare 6," which represents one of the nightmares continually experienced by any Palestinian.

Zaghal's deceptively simple diction and his ironic tone constitute the main features of his poetry, and I tried to preserve the diction level as well as the irony. And of course the rhythm of the Arabic matches the tone and the themes. I did my best to maintain the rhythm in the poems.

For the most part, translating Ashraf Zaghal's poems has been a pleasurable process, particularly when felicitous alliterations or unexpected rhymes occur in the English, as in "Slow Jazz" where "sand, road, end, gold" have a slant rhyme that provides a kind of cohesion to the stanza. The main challenge for the translator comes from the fact that Zaghal's diction in Arabic can be easily distinguished from Darwish's or Zaptan's, but in English the distinction is much subtler, mainly because English does not allow as much space for this diversity as Arabic does. Hence, a translator needs to be aware of the necessity to bring to the Anglophone reader this peculiar aspect of Zaghal's poems.