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An Ocean of Tears, The Chest, Between the Loss & the Delay, and How Do I Tell You I Love You? by Mariam Michtawi

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Jake Gordon
An Ocean of Tears

Mariam Michtawi
محيط من الدموع

Between my blame for you
And my desire to see your eyes
Lies an ocean of tears
In vain, I try to forge a way
But can only live, drowning every day

Jake Gordon
The Chest

Mariam Michtawi
الصندوق

I kept the treasure of the past
Inside a purple chest
The days and years whiled
I overcame every trial
And I am convinced that my chest was the champion of my victories
Then one stubborn, harsh, rebellious year
A tsunami swept away all that was mine
Everything
But the chest was left behind
The legacy of my love
I hastened to it
I began to contemplate it
With the love I held for my homeland
I wiped the dust from it
Showered it with kisses
Held it close

This chest of joy
Treasure of life
Love of the years
Friendship of childhood
Sweetness and perfume of days...
Gleefully, I danced upon it
Barefoot for hours
One of my daily rituals
And for the first time I resolved to open it
It was my one chance to live again
I opened it carefully, with great longing
As a lover longs for life
But the chest resisted me a little,
Concerned for my bliss upon feeling the shock
Its screeching shook me to my core
As though it wept for my inevitable misfortune
I did not yield to it
For my dreams slumbered inside
I fought back, opened it, and with it a great grave
My chest was empty...
Empty...
Empty...
I regarded it a while
A long while
I left it open
For the bats of time
Then softly, I turned my back and departed,
Stripped of everything, even my soul

Jake Gordon

Between the Loss & the Delay

Mariam Michtawi

بين الخسارة والتأجيل

Between the loss and the delay
This day
Is the beginning of the end
I feel compelled
To retreat from love
Retreat from writing
For my words have been choked
By your sandy, desert winds
I have lost and given up
And each day I delay the announcement of my loss to the next
The days, the weeks, and the months go by
And the delay transforms
Into an imaginary friend
I conceal his falseness
To conceal my pain,
My failure,
And my crippling loneliness
For a powerful bond of love has formed
Between the loss and the delay
My spirit is tired
Above your Bermudian land
Set it free
Let it glide
Through the sensual coral reefs
Let it float
Above the water on a leaf
If only it would teach you
The language of the sea
How it has longed to sail
Beyond the beauty
Beyond your secrets

Jake Gordon

How Do I Tell You I Love You?

Mariam Michtawi

كيف أصرخ "أحبك"؟

How do I tell you I love you?

While the fear and the shock

Turn my long hair white

While on the balcony

The scent of jasmine and the smell of bullets tear each other to pieces

While the dust

Rips apart my new dress

The shame chokes me

And amidst the truce, our lovers' meeting has been taken hostage

How do I tell you I love you?

How can I possibly say it?

While the blood digs trenches

In your innocent face

Come to me, and I will clean your wounds with my forehead

Come to me, and I will gather your sweat with my hands

Come to me, and I will take you in my arms

O love of my life...

Come to me...

I can scent the traces of a homeland in you still

My interest in the effects that the agency of interpretation and translation can have on an interactive performance of poetry is what led me to translate these four Arabic prose poems. They are taken from a collection entitled *Halloween Al-Firaaq Al-Abadei* by the Lebanese poet Mariam Michtawi.

I was struck by Mariam's very distinct performance style, a style typical of Arab poets and going back to the roots of Arabic poetry, which was performed in cultures of primary and secondary oral literature. Poems were read at tribal gatherings named *majālis*, which played an important role in village communities. These performances were tempered by mnemonic devices, including repetition, rhyme, epithet, and alliteration. Mariam's poetry is many times removed from this kind of oral culture, and yet her style of performance resembles it. She speaks slowly and clearly in a voice laden with emotion and stress. It is almost sermon-like which serves to create a mystical feeling, impressing the poem upon the audience. Furthermore, she does not shackle herself to the written form of her poem but rather departs from it, repeating lines to add power and emphasis and occasionally adding or omitting lines. From a translation perspective, this is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, one is obliged to attempt a faithful rendering of the original, and yet how to accomplish that for a poem that is different each time it is performed? On the other, the fluidity and creativity of this kind of poetry is both attractive and liberating.

My approach therefore has been two-fold. First, to reproduce to the best of my ability all rhythmic and mnemonic devices present in the source text, the translation reproduces the potential carried by the source text for transformative performance. I have purposefully given precedence to structural fidelity over semantic fidelity where appropriate, though no decision has been taken lightly. Second, to concurrently make sure that the translation is structured and punctuated in such a way that allows room for interpretative reading, not only by myself, but by anyone.

In terms of themes and content, Mariam states that Gibran Khalil Gibran has been an important influence on her work. Yet Mariam's style does not always reflect that of the Romantics. This is partly apparent in her treatment of death. The Romantics treated death in a mystical fashion, as a path to salvation. Gibran himself dealt with painful deaths with understanding and composure. Mariam, on the other hand, is consumed by her grief and rails against death, loss, and separation. The bitter, almost nihilistic undertones are an important aesthetic of Mariam's poetry, more representative of modern poets such as Khalil Hawi, and I attempted to recreate this emotion. Furthermore, romantic poetry is preoccupied with universal values of love, peace, humanity, and freedom, whereas Mariam's poetry is personal, introverted, and limited in its allegiance to ideas greater than itself. On the other hand, the Romantics' love of nature and the special significance that poets like Gibran and Al-Rihani invested in the natural imagery of the sea, the forest, and the night can be seen very clearly in Mariam's poems. For

Mariam, nature is symbolic of her struggles; the garden is her refuge, the sea is unpredictable love, and the night is the mystical source of dreams. In my translation I have attempted to carry across this treatment of natural imagery, and maintain consistency in reproducing terms for natural concepts.