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Like a Dream, Disintegrated, and The Alchemist by Abd Al Malik

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Siobhan Meï
Like a Dream

Abd Al Malik
Comme dans un rêve

I don't dream in Arabic or Lingala
not in Wolof or Bambara
I don't dream in Spanish or English
but I speak, love and dream in French
and because they're not in my head
and even less in my heart
they say this is still not my home

so I dream wide awake

that they may understand me.

Disintegrated

Désintégré

it hurts
not to see your face when you look in the mirror
it hurts to see yourself as other
unable to recognize yourself
the sickness of indifference hurts in the beginning
the virus of non-recognition is so aggressive
in the end you don't give a damn
about the other guy's face or your own
as anonymous as a résumé
'cause they'll laugh at you just the same
not just laugh, but straight up rip on you
'cause you seriously don't look like the guy for the job
I mean, your face doesn't look so square so
you're probably not square yourself

but they'll still put your face in a square
and from the beginning you're the only one out
of the loop

even though we give you what you need
to feed the big mouthed fatty lie
a lie that's lookin' real fine
go ahead and try, nigger,
and we'll make excuses to your face
too bad we just rented it to someone else
oh I'm sorry you're just a little too qualified
when there's one it's ok but when there's
more than one you know how it is
it's true that you're pretty different from
the rest of your kind

and I could keep going on like that—
brother,
it's true, you were born here
but that doesn't change a thing
it's 'cause of your face
and what's more you won't shut your face
'cause you know, your parents said nothin'
not to you, not to anybody
they threw punches
and when they finally had somethin' to say
they said you should keep your mouth shut
'cause we were lucky to be here
and you said to yourself
but where do you want me to be?
and you said nothin' on the outside
you let your fists fly

and looked around with wide eyes
at all the guys who had the same face
and the same problems as you

you wanted to see somethin' beyond—
to really see faces reflected back in the big mirror
in the middle of the living room
where the whole family sat
pretendin' to recognize one another
and you finally saw in them
who you were supposed to be

or should become
you smiled at them
they said Beat it
you opened your arms
they said Go home
you said to yourself:
Even if it means bein' alone

you let your fists fly
in their faces
it really hurts, doesn't it
not to see your face when you look
in the mirror.

Siobhan Meï
The Alchemist

Abd Al Malik
L'Alchimiste

I was nothin,' or somethin' close to nothin'
I was vain and, well, that's what was linin' my pockets
I was full of hate and ill at ease— a hate mixed with fear, ignorance
I cried in pain, from this imbalance in my own existence
I was dead and, hey, you brought me back to life
I said "I have" or "I don't have" and you taught me to say "I am"
You told me "Black Arab White Jewish is to man what flowers are to water" ah

Oh, you, the one I love, and, hey, you, the one I love
I've crossed so many avenues, waitin,' waitin' for you
That when I saw you, I didn't know if it was you, if it was me, if it was you
Oh, you, the one I love, I create your name
In the desert of the cities I've known
'Cause, I was sure of your existence, knew you'd hear me
Hey, you, the one I love, Oh, you, the one I love

I was nothin,' or somethin' close to nothin'
I was vain and, well, that's what was linin' my pockets
I was full of hate and ill at ease— a hate mixed with fear, ignorance
I cried in pain, from this imbalance in my own existence
I was dead and, hey, you brought me back to life
I said "I have" or "I don't have" and you taught me to say "I am"
You told me "Black Arab White Jewish is to man what flowers are to water" ah

Oh, you, the one I love, and, hey, you, the one I love
Neither street nor struggle blocked me from your view
Even at my lowest moment
When I told myself all was lost
I loved you as if I saw you
'Cause even though I didn't see you
I knew you were seein' me.
Hey, you the one I love,
You are a lion and your heart is a sun
The ultimate savior of those lost in sleep
And, hey, you, the one I love, Oh, you, the one I love

I was nothin', or somethin' close to nothin'
I was vain and well, that's what was linin' my pockets
I was full of hate and ill at ease— a hate mixed with fear, ignorance
I cried in pain, from this imbalance in my own existence
You are, you are the alchemist of my heart
And, hey, you, the one I love, Oh you, the one I love
And, hey, you, the one I love...¹

¹ Malik has performed *The Alchemist* on numerous television shows and at several music and spoken word festivals in France. My translation of *L'Alchimiste* locates itself at the crossroads of the textualized and performative versions of this piece.

The music video for this poem is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLCg_yXQcDE

Commentary

Abd Al Malik (born Régis Fayette-Mikano) is a French rapper, poet, novelist, filmmaker, and spoken word artist, whose writing and music address issues of religion, nationalism, and race. Born in 1975 in Paris, Malik's family briefly returned to the Congo before settling in Strasbourg in the housing project of Neuhof, which serves as the backdrop for much of his earlier writing. In 1999 after founding the spoken word group, The New African Poets, Malik converted to Islam, a conversion that marked the beginning of a lifetime of advocacy for peace and unity among the diverse populations of France. His film *Qu'Allah bénisse la France* (based on his autobiography by the same title) was released in 2014.

It is the performative nature of Malik's work that formally poses the greatest challenge to the translator. Much of Malik's poetry rings with an oral quality native to rap and spoken word—hesitations, silences, murmurs come together textually without losing their original connection to the microphone. In so many of the poems and short pieces in this collection, the texture of Malik's voice is present; the rhythm with which he speaks, performs, belongs to the streets in Strasbourg he grew up on, his words come together as quickly and softly as they do violently. Though he doesn't completely ignore grammatical conventions he does bend them, as we often do when we speak, revealing to what extent language becomes but one tool among many for telling one's story.

As a translator the oral quality of Malik's poems proved difficult to capture. Not simply because I struggled to identify the relationship between utterance and text, but because of Malik's awareness of the ideological implications of language. Though Malik does not hesitate to use the language and expressions of the immigrant and primarily black community he grew up in, he has made a name for himself in using this language to resist any kind of closed or permanent understanding of who he is. He doesn't hesitate to quote Deleuze and Jay Z in the same sentence, to find poetry in the eyes of the dogs that roam his neighborhood. Malik's work reveals that there are no rules in language nor in literature, but that disenfranchisement, racism, political corruption, and despair continue to diminish the voices of young, marginalized writers.