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Excerpts from *The Clutter of Words* by Suzanne Alaywan

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Nina Youkhanna
Excerpts from *The Clutter of Words*

Suzanne Alaywan
كرايب الكلام

1

Who has broken the moon's lantern?
What rain is this that
Extinguishes the stars with its shoe?
Where is my window, O walls?
Who has made the willow cry on the shore of my soul?
And you, my hand,
Wherefrom did you get all this fearlessness?

2

Because the morning has lost its yearning.
Because I have outrun my desire
and emptied speech of all its clutter.
Because I am without friends.
My heart, a shadow rose.
My body, an absence tree.
Because ink is not blood.
Because my photographs do not resemble me
and the moon that hangs in the closet is not suitable to clothe my soul.
Because I loved with a worthless sincerity
and only when I was broken
did I realize the magnitude of the tragedy.
Because this city reminds me
of a woman's voice whose defeat I cannot forget.
Because God is singular and death is innumerable
And because we no longer exchange letters.

Because of all this,
the rain creates—
in the space between one drop and the next—
this colossal echo.

3

Clowns with their powders, without features.
Angels dead in the arcades.
The cafe of the past.
Cement squares and benches.
Music that leans towards the cry of the window.
A season of birds.
Disease. Hospital. Recurrent scenes of suffering every time.
Closed doors.
Our bitter tears on the doorknobs.
A school uniform suspended by its shredded wings.
Prostitutes embracing their umbrellas
In the frost of dawn
on distant sidewalks.
Overcoat wet like a handkerchief.
The woman whose hair used to laugh with the willows
and with the stars.
Her unknown place is in a cemetery somewhere.
Tattered posters on the remnants of walls.
The desolate city.
With its wrecked houses
and its children charred in the refugee camps.
Water and metal—that impossible equation.
Rain: the hammer and the nails,
our shattered mirrors.

Commentary

Suzanne Alaywan was born in Beirut in 1974 to a Lebanese father and an Iraqi mother. She graduated from the American University of Cairo in 1997 with a degree in journalism and media. During the Lebanese war, she spent the majority of her youth between Cairo, Paris and Spain. In addition to writing, she also paints and has previously published her artwork in, and as part of, her poetry collections. She currently resides in Beirut. She has a personal website where she publishes her poetry and her artwork, <http://www.suzanne-alaywan.com>.

The three translated poems appear in her 2006 collection titled *The Clutter of Words* (كراكيب الكلام), which, appearing as one long poem, consists of short segments. There are several reoccurring images in the long poem that link the shorter ones together, such as the heavy rain that provides the soundtrack to Alaywan's words. However, and as the title indicates, this collection is made up of words—scattered, incoherent, reverberating, pregnant. They appear together in (often peculiar yet organic) succession, and attempt to transmit profound emotions, unencumbered by syntax and grammatical regulations.

Perhaps it is this “clutter” that proved the most difficult to translate into English. The Arabic word Alaywan employs, *karakeeb* (كراكيب), refers to an array of old, worthless house items such as furniture—what is referred to in English as “junk.” However, I have opted for “clutter” instead because, in its implications of untidiness, it perfectly represents the chain of poetic images that permeate this collection. Alaywan emphasizes the simultaneous power and impotence of words, which, much like our feelings, can be conveyed in forceful ways, yet somehow remain ineffable.

I have attempted, to the best of my ability, to remain as true as possible to the text in my translation. Alaywan's use of free verse enables her to construct disarrayed verses outside the restrictions of rhyme and meter, and it was certainly a challenge to imitate that same structure in English because it often becomes strange and unintelligible. In these cases, I have privileged meaning over composition because, I believe, that is the essence of Alaywan's writing. For example, for the second poem I separated the last three lines and add a final “Because of

all this” in order to indicate to the reader that all the previous “Because’s” were intended to lead to the final image of the rain drops’ echo. Most of the punctuation was also added for the purpose of rendering, as closely as possible, the flow of the original Arabic.

My immeasurable love for Arabic poetry proved at times to be a frustrating obstacle in my search for the perfect rendition of Alaywan’s bewitching words. Nevertheless, the process was delightful in its own right because I had the support and guidance of my inspiring sister Nahrin, and my father Atalla whose love of poetry has nurtured my soul since birth.

Source text:

Alaywan, Suzanne. *The Clutter of Words*. Beirut, 2006, pp. 3, 8-9, 18-19.