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Six Poems from *Cargo of Stars* — *Coolitude* by Khal Torabully

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Nancy Naomi Carlson
Six Poems from *Cargo of Stars* — *Coolitude*

Khal Torabully

I refuse

Je refuse

I refuse
to leave for a dream that takes too long—
the schooner falters
and I've neither sky nor vertigo.

But I speak to the void.

We're from an ancient home
where goldsmiths hoarded their loot
in a large ebony trunk.
Their eyes, narrow caskets for jewels,
parried dubious suns.

A cutlass at their back,
bearers of waves with each backwash,
they refused
to leave on your boats of spume—
and leaving and nevertheless
our only fate
leaving is all at once
the balance owed by our roots.

Nancy Naomi Carlson

Khal Torabully

I have faith in the rhythm of waves Je crois au rythme des vagues

for Nazila

I have faith in the rhythm of waves,
in canticles of salt, *qawal* of ocean froth;
the sea will claim that her dancing alone
will make seashells sprout feet.
The land will claim that incense and praise
will generate legs on a seahorse.
I have faith in the tabla of swells
in the storms' strong *ravannes*.
For the cosmic cadence
of midnight poems,
the ocean turns sega, flow's motion is crazed
when shuddering blue ignites:
the wave was a woman of fingers and soul.

Nancy Naomi Carlson

Khal Torabully

I know the echo

Je connais l'écho

for Jeanne and Edmond Masson

I know the echo, I in-grave the sea,
I chase after dazzle, I spellcast algae.
And I don't know, I no longer know
if the horizon absents flesh.

I absurd the burden, I squander silence,
I cover skins, I square white stars.

I lose the spume, I lose the loam,
and all the moorings of scents
are only loosed for the skins of our love.

Nancy Naomi Carlson

Khal Torabully

No grammar can express

Pas de grammaire pour dire

No grammar can express
the blood of men.

I chew my syllables of flesh
which splash the sea.

Even the thunder has turned
beguiling and sealed
like the mouth of the sky.

And I far-fling the spice
annoyed by the lookout-less night
and fervor the mouth
which kisses me until midnight words,
but I keep the sun to rub out
the stars on musty maps,

for it's blood that my temple pounds.

Nancy Naomi Carlson

Khal Torabully

My cargo of mother-of-pearl

Mes tonnages de nacre

My cargo of mother-of-pearl decks out the sand
to seep in deeper than light
and erupt as dust.

Without banning my banners
and breaking wave after wave
I'll ascend again for as long as God.

*Night will shower the
hidden flowers*

*La nuit comblera les
fleurs cachées*

Night will shower the hidden flowers
with shade's long embrace:
what gathering place for exploded stars
among endangered spaces?

So our hearts may be exposed
a bit further than our senses,
I'll go myself to spill your blood
as far as the Gorgons' magnificent eyes.

Commentary

It is hard to imagine the suffering of indentured laborers, yet Khal Torabully, a prize-winning francophone writer from Mauritius, has devoted his entire career to giving voice to these workers. Torabully has re-visioned, re-imagined, and re-defined the derogatory term “coolie” to encompass the richness of transcultural exchanges (geographical, biological, and cultural) that enrich the world. He coined the term “coolitude” in much the same way that Aimé Césaire coined the term “négritude,” imbuing the term with dignity and pride, as well as a strong and resilient cultural identity and language. Author of some 25 books, including more than a thousand poems that constitute his “poetics of coolitude,” the overwhelming majority of these works are unknown to the English-speaking world.

Born in 1956, Khal Torabully is a poet, essayist, film director, and semiologist. His father was a sailor from Trinidad, and his mother came from a long line of migrants who came to Mauritius from India and Malaysia. Mauritius is considered part of Africa, located off its southeast coast in the Indian Ocean. Originally a Dutch colony, it passed into the hands of the French, then the British, before finally becoming independent in 1968. Half a million Indian indentured workers passed through the Aapravasi Ghat (immigration depot) in Port Louis in the years between 1849 to 1923, with many staying to work in the sugar cane fields as a cheap source of labor, since slavery was abolished in 1834, and others being shipped off to former British colonies around the globe. What is particularly horrifying is that these indentured workers were transported in the same ships that had once carried slaves. In 2014, UNESCO officially approved the International Indentured Labour Route Project, and Torabully is a key player in this project that offers a new paradigm for the encounter of “memories and imaginaries,” which UNESCO has recognized as “vectors of peace.”

Torabully’s knowledge of Mauritian Creole (his native language, though he likes to say poetry is his mother tongue), French, English, as well as some Urdu, Arabic, and Chinese, contributes to the vibrancy, playfulness, and inventiveness of his language. Khal invented his “poetics of coolitude” because

he felt ordinary language could not do justice to describing the suffering of indentured workers whose indomitable spirit could not be dampened by the harsh conditions of transoceanic travel and indenture. Humor found in Torabully's language serves to underscore the tragedy that pervades the texts. Even the word *cale* (ship's cargo hold) in the French title of the book from which these poems come (*Cale d'étoiles*) is wordplay for his name, "Khal," pronounced the same way. Indeed, the greatest challenge in translating Torabully is dealing with the word play and neologisms that are found on almost every page of his work. It is fun to let these difficult passages and words have the run of my unconscious mind, and it is truly a thrill each time I solve one of these puzzles. For example, in "I know the echo," Torabully takes nouns and uses them as verbs. *Gravure* (engraving) becomes *je gravure*. I could not translate this phrase as "I engrave," because it would have sounded perfectly normal in English and would have lost the strangeness of the French. I ended up inventing the verb "I in-grave" to highlight the wordplay, with a wink to "engrave." In the same poem, Torabully converts the noun (and sometimes adjective) *absurd* (absurd) into "j'absurde le poids" (a verb), which I rendered in English as "I absurd the burden." Using the same technique, Torabully transforms the adjective *lointaine* (distant/remote) into the verb phrase *je lointaine l'épice* which I translated as "I far-fling the spice."

Music is deeply ingrained in the richness of Torabully's language. One of the translation challenges I have faced is to honor this music without sacrificing meaning. Using my ear and my knowledge of linguistics, I map the rhythm and sounds of the original text (assonance and alliteration), looking for the most salient patterns that most characterize a particular poem. I find it hard to ignore rhymes (slant or pure) at the end of lines, and I also pay attention to Torabully's predilection for ending each poem with a sound that echoes one from the same line, or one or two above. I try to approximate sounds (though not necessarily exact sounds, as some do not exist in English) in my translations. For example, in "I refuse," I noticed that six of the French lines ended in the same stressed French vowel of *i* (which doesn't quite exist in English), with the *i* of the last line echoing the ones that came before, as follows: *partir, hésite,*

vertige, *vide*, *partir*, and *racines*. My translation maintains a pattern of the sound **oo** with the following words: “refuse,” “loot,” “jewels,” “refused,” “spume,” and the final “roots.”

One of my favorite aspects of translation is learning about cultures and customs unlike my own. For example, from “I have faith in the rhythm of waves,” I learned that a *qawal* is a popular Indian song, and *ravanne* refers to a large tambourine-like drum made from goat skin, used to play Mauritian Segga music. I chose to keep these non-French words in the original, to add a Mauritian flavor to the text.

Source text:

Torabully, Khal. *Cale d'étoiles—Coolitude*. Éditions Azalées, 1992, pp. 56, 64, 84, 96, 100, 103.