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## Three Poems from *The Blind Glassblower* by Adam Fethi

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Hager Ben Driss  
Three Poems from  
*The Blind Glassblower*

Adam Fethi  
نافخ الزجاج الأعمى

*The Ship*

السفينة

A ship sailing to a faraway island, they said. Somewhere else. To where eyes have insight and the soul is unruined. This land, drained by vampires, has sapped us.

Let us go away before we expire, they said. Meanwhile, we are depleted breath after breath. Fighting wars unarmed, hungry, and thirsty. From port to port, trench to trench, we share a bunch of embers, bite on earth with our last breath.

A ship sailing to Maram,<sup>1</sup> to nowhere, they said.  
It takes us, goes round and round and never arrives.  
Perchance sometime later the ordeal will fade away.

A ship that appears to disappear like the sea's desire for fishermen's night conversations. It looms and disappears year after year, generation after generation.

As if it were a shipwreck. Draped in wonders as if it were empty. Full of ghosts as if it were haunted.

Nobody heeds the silent passengers, gesturing with agony each time stung by the smell of earth.

Year over year, the ordeal doesn't fade away. The ship never arrives. Its dwellers never return.

Some of them slipped into desolation, grew old in dreams, hid behind blindness or a joyless laughter.

<sup>1</sup> *Maram* is a disguised city living in the poets' fantasy. Perhaps it is a desired city; it may also be an undesirable one.

Some of them sank in their egos, as if their egos were a lifeline; as if drowning were the way home.

But when they came back, they had prolonged the ordeal.

## *The Missing Eye*

## العين الناقصة

She springs up your throat, the grandmother, the way a sob springs up the throat of a staggering drunk musician.

She falls down all the stairs. Goes up all volcanoes. Your grandmother, sleeping since forever yesterday. Your grandmother, ever tender since your cruel question: where did your eye go?

With an extinguished eye she looks inside herself, replete with frightened travelers, with trains aging long before they reach the north.

“He bestowed upon me the eye that sees the good. The one that sees evil, he took away. God is merciful,” she says while stroking your hair.

I, a piece of white lean frail chalk, love the winter getting warm in her warm lap.

I get transported by the spreading fire, drawing wings for my soul, furrows onto the room’s wall.

Why do you have a missing eye? You don’t say one-eyed? Just as the pot calls the kettle black, you, like everyone else, do not realize you too are one-eyed.

Cheerful, she meets you with the fragrance of amber rolling down her headscarf. She sows stories in your head:

Once upon a time, there was a star in the sea. How can I see the sky? Said she. Once upon a time, there was a fish in the sky. How can I see the sea?

said she. Once upon a time, there was a blind glassblower. How in the sea can I see the way to my star? Then my way to the fish in the sky? Said he.

—What happened next, grandmother?

—God is merciful, he took my missing eye so that stars can find their way at night. Fishes can see in water. The blind man can find his way.

Behold. Many a woman stands like me with a single eye; the other she uses to complete defective people.

The story takes you from inside out. You turn around, and you're in your fifties, afraid you'll be caught red-handed knocking on her chest; rummaging, with a child's irascibility, the chest of stories.

Your grandmother rests in peace now.

Your present absent grandmother, watchful in her last picture, with her amber necklace and silver earrings, hanging on the room wall like a crystal star.

Did ophthalmia damage her eye? was it eaten up by a termite? I've stopped asking, and yet how can I write without her now?

You spoke truly, O Fatima.

I locked your lies in the chest of my stories; I open it now, alone, in the solitude of dawn, earlier than the cockcrow, so that nobody can see where I bring my words from.

Blow your soul in this sand. If you want to see,  
look for your missing eye wake up your music  
sing the eulogy of light sing the eulogy of dim light  
drink a toast to the eye of loss. Remember:

the beautiful lies are alone. So let us wet the pen  
when truth dries up.

1

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the nearby hill) I'll put my cane in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a pen out of this cane.

Write to the general: "Don't make us drink another glass of blood even if it were your own blood. Don't bereave us of another soul even if it were your own soul. Don't commit a last perfect crime for us even if it were your own suicide ..."

2

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the city wall) I'll put a pen in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a cane out of this pen. Don't ever believe that war can bring peace. Say you killed the beast as you refused to go to war. I won't seal your lips. I won't serve fire instead of wine. I won't feed you stone instead of bread.

3

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the garden fence) I'll put a cane in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a flute out of this cane. Join the orchestra of the earth. Listen to it sing:

"The earth shall bare its arms for us to graze on  
love wheat and hope mallow.

The soldier's helmet shall grow into a nest  
and the policeman's baton a violin bow  
and let this be far from my home  
and let this be far from my time

4

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the door) I'll make children sit on the floor in a circle, safe, in each hand a citrus bee, listening to elements and dreams playing, pouring out from the magic flute. Meanwhile the drumbeats vanish behind the poem.

## Commentary

Fathi Gasmi, better known by his pen name Adam Fethi, is one of the most celebrated dissident poets in Tunisia. Born in 1957 in southern Tunisia, his poetry of political engagement and protest was written under the political repression in the 1970s and 1990s. His support for freedom of thought and speech was channeled into songs that made him popular among students. His poems were set to music by several groups, including *al-Bahth al-Musiqi* (“Music Research”) and *Awled al-Manajim* (“Children of the Mines”). He also wrote songs for famous singers such as the Egyptian Cheikh Imam, the Tunisian Lotfi Bouchnak, and the Lebanese Marcel Khalifa. He is the author of *Ughniat al-Naqabi al-Fasih* (*Song of the Eloquent Unionist*, 1986), *Anachid li Zahrat al-Ghubar* (*Songs to the Dust Rose*, 1992) and *Nafikhu al-Zujaj al-A'maa* (*The Blind Glassblower*, 2011), which won the prestigious Abou Kacem Chebbi Prize. He is also the translator of several literary works including *Journaux intimes* by Charles Baudelaire and *Syllogismes de l'amertume* by Emil Cioran. Fethi received the Sargon Boulous Award in October 2019 as a tribute to his decades-long contribution to poetry and translation.

Fethi's latest collection *The Blind Glassblower* offers an interesting case of a poem sequence or poem cycle, which is similar in its conception and aesthetic orientations to the short-story cycle. The collection is energized by an intricate network of reverberations, cross-references, recurrent images, places, and themes. The blind glassblower is the major persona linking the collection which chronicles his life and work. While glassblowing symbolizes the act of writing poetry, blindness stands as a metaphor of dissidence. The poet refuses to take part in a corrupt world.

Fethi's consistent use of prose poetry shows a subversive aesthetic stand that confronts the traditional Arabic poem, *al-shi'r al-'amudi* (literally vertical poetry). His texts offer an interesting arrangement of the poetic textual space, wherein the reader's optic encounter with the poems stands as an ironic nod to the metaphor of blindness. Rhythm, traditionally created by a rhyming pattern, here is rather activated by the visual distri-

bution of lines on the page, the flow and hiatus of words, and a playful use of punctuation. Music and space coalesce in his poems; they yield a spatial rhythm rarely found in Arab poetry.

I maintained the layout of the three poems to preserve their aesthetic orientation. Being written in prose poetry, however, does not make them easy to translate. In “The Ship,” for instance, Fethi’s punctuation is quite challenging. The deliberately omitted full stop in the third sentence between *al-’uyun* and *al-ruh* creates an ebb of words that matches the liquid context of the poem. I added “and” to recreate a continuity in “To where eyes have insight and the soul is unrusted.” A similar encounter with a strong flow of words happens towards the end of “The Missing Eye.” This time I recreated the same stream-of-consciousness style in which punctuation is obliterated in order to create a free play of words.

Translating neologisms or concocted words is a particularly hard venture. *Maram* is an invented name that stands for an imaginary city. It is composed of two parts: *ma* and *ram*. *Ram* is from the verb *rama*, which means to seek, desire, or want. *Ma*, however, creates the undecided meaning in this word, for it refers both to “that which is desired” as well as its negation, that is “that which is not desired.” I opted to transliterate this word and add a note to explain it.

In “Amadeus Flute” the major challenge resides in translating the word *qasaba*, which is used frequently throughout *The Blind Glassblower*. Literally, *qasaba* means a blowpipe, the instrument used in blowing glass. Glassblowing refers to poetry as a craft, an idea found in ancient Arabic description of poetry as *sina’a* (craft, trade, profession). The act of blowing, however, is akin to the divine act of creation. The story of genesis in the Islamic tradition attributes to God the power of blowing: “I blow into him [Adam] from my own spirit” (*Surat al-Hajar*, or “Verse of the Stone”). The Romantic image of the poet-prophet, used in Tunisian Abu al-Qassim al-Shabi’s work, is displaced by a God-like figure who is able to blow spirit into words. Fethi, however, makes a playful use of this word, which changes according to the context. It can be a flute, a cane, reed, a walking stick etc. I opted for the word cane as it encompasses almost all of these meanings. It also refers to a glass cylinder used in glassmaking, and thus preserves the idea of glassblowing.

Tunisian poetry in English translation is rather rare. My translation stems from the urge to provide more visibility to Fethi's wonderful work, which is already translated into French and Spanish.

Source text:

Fethi, Adam. *Nafikhu al-Zujaj al-A'ma*. Manshurat al-Jamal, 2011, pp. 20–23, 69–70, 83–84.