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Four Prose Poems by Ramy Al-Asheq

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Levi Thompson

Ramy Al-Asheq

Four Untitled Prose Poems by Ramy Al-Asheq

1.

هذه القصائد مدينةٌ لقسوتك

These poems are indebted to your cruelty
sprouted in my womb
they pained me alone
and I couldn't bury them
because they were crying with my voice and your features

These poems aren't about you
you can't brag about them
or hold them close to your chest
or even sing lullabies to them
You can only...
look at them from afar
while they sing their orphanhood
and dance with neutrality in the carnival of your grief

These poems won't die
they won't return to where they came from
no one returns to where he came from
this is just a nasty joke

These poems are faithful
they don't deny the favor someone's done for their existence
they weren't created from nothing
they breathe from a lonely lung
they drink from a creek called love
where strangers toss their garbage
wash their legs
and move on to other strangers

These poems
aren't about love
or war
aren't about abandonment
or death
aren't about fear
or distance
they aren't even about life
these poems... are life.

2. مهزومًا، كأنِّي لن أكتب قصيدةً بعد اليوم
Defeated, as if I won't write another poem after today
broken, as if a sad bird's stone had fallen on the glass of my eyes
bereavement eats me up, as if the world had swallowed its tongue... and died

And here you come
like an old wound
like a defeated god
coming out of your skin like a newborn
entering my skin, so I'm yet more defeated

How can you sleep while my sadness weighs down the walls of your cruelty?
My sadness tires me out
so I throw my head upon your thigh, and I forget it
I walk among people without sadness
I dance for them to songs I sing for you
I climb tall buildings without agitating my phobia
the swords cross over me
then I drown in the Mediterranean... and I don't die
this world needs bodies without heads

I open my eyes, my eyelids moisten, and I'm bleeding
I see you drowning in my blood
"I'm hungry," I tell you

and fear eats me up

O Goddess of Cold, O *Fellahah*, O Olive Tree of the Old Lands, O Door
of Unforgotten Guilt, if only Herta Müller knew you, she would deny her
mother tongue, for you are the mother of languages, and the saddest of
them all.

I close my eyes, you light up like firecrackers in the Berlin sky, and I light
up your body like a matchstick...

This world burns us up to celebrate our defeat

Your hand, drowned in the *zaatar* of my head—no one will save it
my hand, with which you washed away the tears of your sadness—no one
will wipe away its tears
your mouth, filled with perfume, poured out verses from a book composed
by no god

I don't remember what I said to you when I didn't kiss you
but I remember what I didn't say,
"I've made God in your image
a woman who eats her cold
a *fellahah* who doesn't read poetry, doesn't depend on linguistic charms
with a dialect full of music
who lifts up mountains of fire
and stretches out plains of love
she is not an individual
for she is all women
her voice the songs of the fields
her water turns dry lands green
and her skin is dirt
she kills no one but distance."

I knew that poetry had died
they all killed it
because they weren't able to treat its wounds
they threw its ashes into the Dead Sea

so it lived
poetry sleeps now under a lake
tourists seek it out, and it sticks to their bodies
the earth slurps it up and flies away
the birds carry poetry to the mountain peaks
and we all eat its flesh
we sprinkle its salt on our food
this is how the poets became cooks
and I was defeated
as if I won't write another poem after today.

3.

And the poets / only their sadness follows them

الشعراء

And the poets
only their sadness follows them

Sadness wakes up like a spark in the tips of the fingers
and sleeps
when someone wipes away
a tear
with the tips of his fingers

Sadness is born
pure
before language attacks
and names it

It comes in with the wind
and exits with the soul

Sadness grows old alone
like a hole that swallows its family

not spitting any of them back out
it sleeps in nightclothes
stays warm with memories
increases with loneliness
goes to school
gets into a relationship
lives in the bedroom
goes to work in the morning
takes vacations by the sea
draws a picture
settles down in a poem
travels without a passport

When man created sadness in his own image
he forgot to make it weeping and ephemeral

4.
I pity those miserable poets

أشفق على أولئك الشعراء التعساء

I pity those miserable poets
who waste their time searching for some image or other
kill their fathers
and then go with them to the gardens
and bury them in a wooden box
that's come to be called
a bookshelf

I pity them
the ones who use letters they didn't create
paper they didn't make
pens that came to them from far off countries

made by people who don't read poetry in foreign languages
I pity them
they die one after the other
without writing the final poem

They make their living on the pain of others
and their joys
they collect laughs from here
tears from there
love stories and elegies
so they can make from them
a dry hunk of bread

I pity them
because they think they are prophets
even though they are... just normal people
they discovered the lie of prophecy
and told the lie again

I pity those poets
who grasp hold of a mother's breasts and make a cloud out of them
they open a door for tomorrow to enter, and today exits through it without
returning
they look at a tree that doesn't look at them
they write about a war that doesn't write about them
they love cities that don't love them
they break fear's hand, so it breaks their necks
they run towards everything, so everything runs from them
I pity them
so I...
one day I tried to be a poet
before making it to the poem's waist
and stabbing it.

Commentary

The four poems included here deal with poetry itself: the poem, the poet, the relationship between the two, and the relationship between the poem and the reader. Ramy Al-Asheq wrote these poems in Germany, where he has been living in exile ever since being released from prison in Syria only to be recaptured and imprisoned in Jordan. He escaped from jail and lived for two years with a fake name and passport there. During that time, he won a fellowship from the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, which allowed him to travel to Germany. While I generally try not to allow a poet's personal experiences to guide my understanding of the poetic persona in a poem, it is nearly impossible to ignore the part Al-Asheq's life story plays in these pieces.

We can see this in the first poem where the poetic persona laments that "no one returns to where he came from." And though Al-Asheq sent these to me with a description of them as "prose poems," the parallel syntax of a line like this and the one before it ("they won't return to where they came from") moves easily between Arabic and English to give the lines some poetic synergy. I therefore employed anaphora—the repetition of a word or phrase—to reflect both the repetitions of phrases throughout the poem ("these poems") and the similar syntax of lines throughout a section ("they don't"; "they weren't"; "they breathe"; etc.).

The second poem offers some more difficult issues in its inclusion of two words quite specific to the original Arabic context. The first of these is the *fellahah*, or the peasant woman, often invoked in Arabic literature as a stand-in for the nation: someone to be protected, someone to remind the reader of a pastoral idyll in danger of being lost, forgotten in the throes of modernity. Al-Asheq plays on this idea, throwing the *fellahah* in alongside memory, olive trees, and the Nobel Prize-winning German writer Herta Müller's mother tongue—Swabian German, not *Hochdeutsch*; an interesting story lies there as well.... The poetic persona's invocation of the *fellahah* teases us with these symbolic references to the "Old Lands," and the word itself is essential to the line due to its broader role in modern Arabic literature from the twentieth century until today. I thus decided

to leave it untranslated and italicized, though one could find it in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as it entered English from Arabic in the eighteenth century. The second word, *zaatar*, might be more familiar to any gourmands who have seen this mix of thyme, oregano, and other savory spices at the supermarket. Leaving this word as it sounds in Arabic serves a useful function of foreignizing the text at a crucial moment when the poetic persona situates himself as an outsider where he is now remembering the “*fellahah* who doesn’t read poetry, doesn’t depend on linguistic charms / with a dialect full of music.” Without the luxury of these explanatory notes, I might not have chosen to put these words in transliterated Arabic (which could inadvertently send the reader away from the text and off to Google). I might simply have gone with “peasant woman” and “spice.”

The poetic persona of the third and fourth poems takes up the sadness that follows poets and drives them to write (in the third) or that they exploit in their creations (in the fourth). The third poem begins with a distinct reference to the religious tradition of Islam, which I kept in mind as I translated the rest. “The poets / only their sadness follows them” is a play on a verse from the Quranic *surah* called “The Poets” which goes, “And the poets / only the deviators follow them.” In my translation, I retained the initial “And” and the ordering of the words as found in many English translations of the Quran (this version is from the *Sahih International* translation) in order to make it clear to anyone familiar with the verse that there is a similarity. Even readers who have not come across the reference might be left wondering why the poem starts with a conjunction (“And”), which indicates that something else lies before the beginning of the poem. And what does come before—or after? “Shall I inform you upon whom the devils descend? They descend upon every sinful liar. They pass on what is heard, and most of them are liars. And the poets—[only] the deviators follow them; Do you not see that in every valley they roam And that they say what they do not do (26:221-226)?” The *surah* “The Poets” tells us that poets are untrustworthy because they say what they do not do, unlike the Prophet Muhammad.

The truth in the verses of Quran he recites to the new Muslim community is thus distinguished from the lines of poetry that come out of poets’ mouths and minds. The poetic persona in Al-

Asheq's poems at first draws on this original distinction between human and Divine, extending it to the poet's inability to overcome sadness, a being of his own creation, "created [...] in his own image." Yet, unlike the perfect Quran—understood in mainstream Islamic philosophy as co-terminal with God and thus uncreated, eternal, and perfect—the poet's creation is riddled with imperfections. The poet is not omnipotent, and "he forgot to make [sadness] weeping and ephemeral," that is, true to its own form and possible to overcome. The Quranic reference in the third poem carries over into my translation of the fourth, in which I was sure to retain in English the link between the three letter Arabic root *nun – ba – wa* in "prophets" (*anbiya*) and "prophecy" (*nubuwwah*). The same poets with delusions of divine power from the previous poem are here subjects of the poetic persona's pity "because they think they are prophets / even though they are... just normal people." However, the persona adds, "they discovered the lie of prophecy / and told the lie again," thus subverting the Quranic verses quoted earlier and exposing prophecy itself as a poetic lie. So what about the Quran?

While these poems might initially strike the reader as somewhat simple to work with due to the lack of any regular form (or, we could say, an unruly form that congeals around the free-ranging conception of the prose poem), they still offer the translator a number of challenges. How can we retain the function of words specific to a local Arabic context when rendering the verse into English, a language that first came to sustained interaction with Arabic through the intermediary of the colonial and neo-colonial relationships of empire and nation states? How can we carry over the Quranic resonance that extends beyond the two lines of explicit intertextuality, or must we even do so? Is it enough to let the original poems' oblique references to Islam, poets, and prophecy speak for themselves? This is up to you.

Source texts personally provided to the translator by the author.