Transference

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An Axe Falling on a Blind Statue by Mohamed Fouad

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An Axe Falling on a Blind Statue

Mohamed Fouad
تمثال أعمى يهوي عليه فأس

With the roots of earth
My veins entangled
And this death
Strips me of my youth
And I have roamed distant lands until
I was content with the spoils
Of return
—Imru' al-Qays[1]

And Sorrow
—before the departure of the soul—is weakness
And sorrow does not exist
After departure
—Al-Mutanabbi[2]

1
Would it have been enough
To pull away the curtain
So on the wall could spill
A darkness
And on the basin,
The ink of absence.

[1] A renowned pre-Islamic poet of the 6th century, credited with inventing the *qasida*, or Arabic ode.
[2] A prominent Arab poet in the literary canon, known for reviving the *qasida* in the 10th century.

There is no sorrow
—after you shut the door—
The heavy air in the room
The plant frozen near the glass
A boisterous laughter in black and white
Of dead ones emerging from photos

There is no sorrow
Your life squandered like a joke
Your life is not good enough
Like a stupid stain on a wall
Except that the spoils
Are a handful in the void
And it would be wise also
Not to repeat the game

2
From reeds we create our days
And with the same ease
We scatter pain
Hesitating
Despite that, love captures us
Our souls
Feathers suspended in the air
Descending
Like a two-winged angel
On a school notebook.

3
We had nothing to reveal, in the beginning
We sketched a fissure in the wall
And we did not pass through it
And we were on the verge of crying
And on our heads alighted the bird
Outside, someone is judging our lightness
We are worthier
—we know—
Of our swift dead.

4
We laugh from foolishness
To deceive defeat
And nothing falls against which to retaliate
We have nothing to lose
Or weep over
No angels to protect our sleep
No body to gasp from pleasure
A blind man leads our life
With a severed thread
A wax statue on the edge
A wooden bench
On which
Falls
An Axe.

5
What disgrace dragged us, just like that,
Openly
What hairdresser engraved us
With black henna
And sprinkled salt in our eyes.
Leech offspring
On empty dinner tables
And it was a losing deal from the start
We will cease being raging bulls
In calcareous wastelands
And the blade in the neck
Gave us a pretext to fall.

6
We will confess, sometimes,
That we were not worthy
As becoming of vanquished kings
Who left their keys on the doorframe
We peep through fissures we created
To lament what we lost and what followed
We weave anguish after anguish
With the thread of regret
Vagabonds
On wooden horses
Humming a mysterious melody
And from our hands
Falls the ball of wool
And rolls away.

Commentary

Walter Benjamin posits that "[u]nlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (258–259). In undertaking this translation, it was this echo of Mohamed Fouad's poetry that I sought in English. In addition, I was intrigued by Benjamin's assertion that "[a] real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light," requiring "a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator" (260). Reading Fouad's poetry in the original Arabic, one is struck by the accessibility of the language and the scarcity of convoluted expressions or allusions. Hence, in this translation, I was guided by the individual words and their intention whenever possible. This freed me from forcing the translation into a distinctly English mold by embracing all the blemishes of the echo.

Mohamed Fouad is a Syrian doctor and poet. He was born in Aleppo where he practiced his medical profession for many years. He has published several acclaimed poetry collections, and this translation appears in his second collection, *Al-Matruk Janiban* (*Cast Aside*), published in 1998. Fouad was forced to leave Aleppo in the wake of the Syrian civil war and currently resides in Lebanon, working as an Assistant Professor of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut.

The epigraphs at the beginning of the poem usher in the subject as depicted by two of the most important poets in the Arabic canon, Imru' al-Qays and Al-Mutanabbi, who were celebrated for developing and reviving the classical *qasida*, respectively. Translating these few lines was a feat of its own, and I had to read various interpretations to understand their meaning. In the first epigraph, an elegy by Imru' al-Qays mourning his father, death reminds the poet that life is but a distraction and an illusion. Despite all his wanderings and gained glories, it (death) will ultimately claim him and return him to the "roots of the earth." Conversely, Al-Mutanabbi praises living boldly and pronounces fear of death as nothing but cowardice or weakness. If death is

certain, then there is no point in wallowing in sadness while one is still alive, and one cannot be sad after perishing.

Fouad's poem is an answer to his two classical predecessors, a subjective depiction of life and death in modern landscapes. Fouad is a master of words—each one serves to intensify the poetic image while maintaining fluidity and unity through association and repetition. For this reason, I favored literalness whenever possible in order to do justice to the poem, and I found that Fouad's language easily lent itself to translation because of its clarity and sheer force. Furthermore, the Arabic poem is filled with bleak and absurd visions, like a surrealist dream, which reinforce Fouad's experience of life in the 20th century—futile, solitary, and aimless. Any attempt to bring a logical organization to the poem would have inevitably resulted in the distortion of its ethos. I have also opted to remain faithful to Fouad's scarce punctuation and the recurring ,و ("and") at the beginning of a line to mimic the paradoxical languid urgency produced by the poem. Various static images such as the blind statue of the title, walls, and wooden horses yield a sense of inertia. There is an urgency, however, in the imminent falling axe, the darkness filling the room at the beginning of the poem, and the ball of wool unravelling as it rolls away at the end.

Experimenting with literal translation, as every translator knows, has its limits. Sacrificing comprehensibility for literalness was not my mission, and I rarely had to choose one or the other. I did, however, make occasional creative choices by changing the syntax, simply in favor of better flow rather than a desire to explain the poem to the English reader. It is my belief that Mohammad Fouad's poem is powerful enough to traverse language barriers and speak to our universal loneliness in this modern wasteland.

Source text:

Fouad, Mohamed. *Al-Matruk Janiban (Cast Aside)*. Publications of the Ministry of Culture, 1998, pp. 29–38.

Work cited:

Walter, Benjamin. "The Task of the Translator." *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*. Harvard University Press, 1996. pp. 253–263.