

Ashur ETWEBI
POEMS

WRITING A POEM

I wish to write a poem which begins like this:

A fountain stops exactly at noon,
and the shade gathers its limbs to sit under the tree,
leaning with its arm on the edge of the water,
parting its legs, so the fat cows can pass through to the green lands on the horizon.

And ends like this:

Under the chair,
their hands tremble,
and their eyes
follow
the night's butterflies.

*

THE FEAST

I made sure everything is in its right place:
the chair is clean and shining with its red *katifa*,
the small carpet lying in the stillness of an ordinary evening,
the flowers covered with dewdrops near the eastern window,
the water in the jug has to stay
cold,
pure,
and sweet.

My hands tremble,
my eyes gaze out of the window

.....

.....

.....

Alone before the feast of the universe
and
silence.

*

A VISIT

Who came at this hour,
Whom the men in singles and groups went to meet?

The night hid its women,
and the glasses sparkled from far away.

Hey,
who is that, shouting my name in the drunken air?

Translated from the Arabic by the author

**

SAND GRASS

Is it true that the sea is far?
or that the salty water, like the horizon
riding night's back, is also a fugitive
terrified of:
a dream in black and white,
the beating of drums
that had been silent for ages,
of waves
falling into an abyss of loss,
of the traps of desires
that feed off the agitations on the surface.

Night's word is:
gushing water and air.
The sun's word:
Insects lie
between the thighs of roots
and the warmth of the soul.

Grass has a dominion of compromised secrets.
There, on the jutting shore
a naked woman rolls on flaming embers.
She drops her sighs for the tide that has escaped years ago,
and boasts of the root planted in the belly of the sand.

The bird has flown,
 flown.
 Its wings are shade;
 Its eyes are suns.
 On salt it sprinkles the eternal lust of genomes,
 and the leaves of grass twisted like a pendulum
 extending fragile throats to the water
 and to the sounds of words.

The bird has flown,
 flown,
 and the horizon is a rising exhale,
 upwards,
 and the sea sees
 what happens on the jutting shore.
 The bird flings nets into the sea crouching in the depths
 seeking a shell pregnant with lightning.
 The tide takes it to the desert of a depleted body,
 a banquet of poisoned air,
 and the silence there a country.

The bird has flown,
 flown,
 over the grass,
 over a sea that has been terrified for ages.

*

YOUR FRIENDS PASSED THIS WAY

Their hands filled with figs,
 Their eyes calm.

The date palms bend to whomever.
 The fronds are weighed with catastrophe
 And the sky has traveled with the travelers.

There, where the ship neared the shore,
 And an overturned flag floated,
 the soldiers were tired.
 They rode the ferry of their lives
 the way the *ghibli* winds cross the sky of poor country.
 A cloud approaches between two tired mountains.
 It lifts the lids of voices of a dead childhood,
 the voices of a dead adolescence,
 the voices of a dead old age,

voices that betrayed the heart many times
 and that had left on the crossroads of speech
 a depressed face,
 a saddened face.

The cloud says:
 The sun of North Africa loves to moan.
 Do not look behind you for darkness has descended.

*

PORTRAIT OF DEATH APPROACHING

A forest, and coal burning.
 Birds and foxes,
 fish and dinosaurs,
 bacteria and lions.
 Walls made of sadness and wailing.
 This can happen in a village of clouds.
 This can happen if we gather the horses in a bundle
 Of lightning and stone,
 If we eat the village with oil in the morning
 While the guard looks away.

*

FISH PORTRAIT

You open the pages of water:
 Water and flattened heads, and pointed heads.
 Sea moss large and small.
 Red flesh, white flesh, and lavender sperm
 and many waves shuddering.
 A breast whirls in the gills of the air,
 and a white face stretches its vision toward the naked fish.

*

DESIRE ALWAYS PREVAILS

On the mountain
 the pine forest bends,
 and the world is an almond about to break out of its shell.
 Behind the valleys
 the moon disappears.

The intimate moment has its distinct calm,
 has its distinct motion.
 Fire has its shivers,
 He knows that it catches the scent of pine,
 that it scatters the alphabet of tender grasses.
 It spreads its feminine odor to foxes and flowers.
 It braces its sighs to its chest
 the releases its sobs unto sadness.

He knows that dew is cool,
 that the wind is the history of a labyrinth,
 that words are small and wounded,
 that the distance between weeping and the moon
 is a silent lip.

*

ON THE SABRATHA THEATRE

When you pace through the tenth hour of night,
 when the lost sea breeze
 crosses the only electric pole,
 when the fishmonger counts in his hand
 how many fish he had flopped on the Aalalga Market scale,
 the great star of the sky approaches
 and leaves its light on the edge of balcony.

You say:
 What can I do with a failed star?
 You hear voices in a Roman tongue,
 you drag your feet on a cantankerous cement staircase.
 Who entered, ravishing your bolted gate tonight?
 Who came out tonight allowing his sadness to sleep in the rosemary bush?
 The Roman voices take you to Sabratha Theatre.
 You stand there gathering the remains of a tapestry.
 Here is the nose of the sleeping princess.

Here is the claw of a hawk with the blood of its prey still dripping.
Here is a line of poetry about an old honor.
Here is your name devoured by a ranging fire.
You may wish to weep,
but you are climbing a cantankerous staircase
to sleep on a clean bed
without dreams.

On the wall of massacred time
fugitive days return
raising their dry hands in the air.
The white chairs on the dead ground
are open-chested,
the men's legs below the scene
like forgotten reeds.

Sleep, beautiful boy,
dreams will not come your way tonight.
Words will not remain suspended in the crowd's eyes
and the saddened voices will take
their sighs to a patient patch of darkness.

Translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa
