Tarek ELTAYEB
Poems, prose and an essay

Poverty's Terror

They gave him a hoe,
planting him among African women farmers,
portraying him as if he were a harvest deity.
He smiled, having no idea
what a palm tree was.

He held a child in rags in his arms
and wanted to take its picture,
not knowing anything about the child's situation.
He seemed to be kind to the poor,
like some compassionate, merciful god.

He was taken from one poverty to the next,
being content with this game
that finally took him back north,
into the pleasant,
where the difference was cruel,
where the poverty that had not yet arrived
would be much more cruel.

[Novi Sad; September 2nd,2006]

Translated from the German by Wolfgang Astelbauer

No Colors

"Without colors,"
they said here,
"sorry, no colors,"
they said there,
referring to photos here
and to TV there.

I still don't understand
why black and white
are not seen as colors.

[Weitersfeld; May 1st, 2006]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

Black

I crossed the river,
and when I reached the other side
I was black.
I called out to my companion on the shore:
"The water is wonderful. Come!"
Yet my color frightened him,
and he did not say a word.
I told him
to cross the river.
He murmured something,
and the wind just carried
fragments of his words.
I called out to him
to come nearer.
But my companion was afraid
of my color
and did not listen to me any longer,
forgetting our past.

Every year I go down to the river,
call out to him among all those people,
I'm on the point of returning to him.
But I am afraid of losing
my true color
and my senses.

[Weitersfeld; April 15th, 2006]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

A Large Blot on the White Page
For Gerhard Kofler

I wanted to write
for you
about you.
The pen hesitating for a long time
before the first letter.

The letter
turned into a large blot
on the white page,
including many words
for you
about you.

[Dornbirn; November 11th, 2005]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

The Eagle's Wish

The eagle spread on the flag –
flapping its wings, captured, and fixed –
wishes
it were the tiny, inconspicuous midge
that had alighted on its eye,
landed on his gigantic beak
for a short time,
and is now taking off with a buzz,
leaving.

[Vienna; June 6th, 2003]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

Laa

After more than forty years,
it occurred to me for the first time
that in my mother tongue
the mouth is closed
at the end of "yes"
and remains open
when you say "no."

[Vienna; December 2nd, 2002]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

First Kisses

From a distance, I stopped and gazed at them
In the garden:
A girl and a boy
She was kissing him
And each time she kissed him he'd wipe his mouth
After the final kiss, she took his hand
He laughed
And this time *he* kissed *her*
While their hands were intertwined
My heart sung
A cry of joy just about
Escaped from me; it nearly ruined
A resplendent ritual

[*Vienna; May 21st, 2001*]

Translated from the Arabic by Kareem James Abu Zeid

My Lot in the Days of the Lord

I divide the days of the lord
Into sunlit and sunless
I found joy in the first of these
Delight and peace of mind

Yet the sun has been gone for months
And I have no veil to delude me
No memory of rites to inspire me
Nor even the remnants of a dream
To take my mind off this

My days without a shadow
Persist
And persist
Until I'm worn out by my lot
By my division of the days of the lord

Now I divide the days of the lord
Into ordinary and others that are also ordinary
With time I grow used to being
The same in the one and the other

[*Weitersfeld, Austria; December 24th, 2000*]

Translated by Kareem James Abu Zeid

Caught in his Shadow

I walk behind him,
caught
in his shadow.
I do not try to escape,
as he would like me to.
I do not see
who comes the other way
and greets us.

Furtively, I step out
from the carpet of his shadow.
The sun burns me,
and I resume my place.

But now I have seen
what he has hidden,
what he, walking along with me,
has not mentioned
despite his many words.
He has prevented me
from recognizing my sun.

I rebel against
the coldness of his shadow,
against the darkness.
I step out into the sun.
I stay there
until he disappears
with his shadow.

I walk alone
with my shadow,

a loose shawl, in front of me.
I throw it
across my shoulders,
afraid
a passer-by might
step on it
and get caught in it.

I turn into a street
that is wide and open.
Here, nobody walks
behind somebody else.

[*Vienna; May 9th, 2000*]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

City Gate

Ancient, immobile,
aslant, and half-open,
deep in the ground,
with drawings on it,
withered letters,
notches and scratches,
with dust,
and faded colors
sunk in the wood.

I stood there,
crossed its threshold,
stepped out again,
walked up and down in front of it,
reading its inscriptions,
studying its drawings,
touching its marks,
I stayed
like an old pilgrim.

An old woman appeared
and said: "Come!"
I was glad to enter the city.
There were some camels in a remote courtyard,
and I saw a house and a wall
of palm leaves and clay.
I stepped into an ancient time,
immersing myself,
bewitched by it.

The shrill tooting of a horn,
the cars, the crowds,
and the noise,

the tinny din,
the aggressive pounding convoys
rolling past,
the rattling cafés,
the screaming radio,
a voice
dropping bad luck, bit by bit,
frightening me;

far off, a man prayed all alone,
nearby, a woman called into the void,
and the whole place started to shake.

I was roused by a child's eyes
in the middle of the crowd,
a child dragging
a sullen old man.
The child laughed, cheerfully hurrying ahead,
the shadow in its tow,
the old man trudging along.
The child reached the old gate,
looked at it and stared in surprise
at the drawings, the scratches,
the notches, the letters.

The child stepped up to the gate,
leaned against it,
and the door bent.
I was far away,
lost in thought,
plodding on
like an old pilgrim,
and I bent too.

[Vienna, Café Eiles; January 17th, 1998]

Coffee and Water

A hundred times a day, he says,
"I'll have to return. Here, there is no mercy.
There, there is kindness and warmth and …"
Then he falls silent.

I ask him, "There?
Where is that?"
He points somewhere.
His face is expressionless,
and he does not say anything anymore.

I take his hand.
We go to a café
and sit down at a quiet corner table.
I order coffee for him
and water for me.

I speak to him in Arabic
and mix water into the coffee.
He is annoyed, "Are you crazy?"

He tries to remove the water
from the coffee.

He tries to.

He tries to get the water back
into the water.

[Vienna, Café Griensteidl; June 27th, 1997]

Translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer

The Image of God

Look. That is to say: think. Don't just run your eyes over the image and then leave. – T.T.

An image is like a giant book: the eye reads it in an instant and interprets it for a lifetime. – T.T.

When I was young and green they used to frighten me with talk of how God would punish those who slipped from his service. God's compassion, however, was hardly ever mentioned.

They said that God lives in the sky. They told me that He sees all things yet cannot Himself be seen. That didn't stop me from trying, though:

At first, I thought my father must be God, for he was called "lord" of the family. Moreover, he was a giant to one as small as I was, and had a rough and booming voice. Yet since he was good to us and always treated us with kindness, I stopped associating him with God.

Then there was the Imam from our Koran school, who terrorized us and ruthlessly beat us with his cane in the house of God. It was said that he was God's servant in that house, and so I imagined Him to be a rather harsh lord.

The Imam was succeeded by a cruel primary teacher who muddled my image of God by making Him a woman. For a while, she had me seeing a female God.

The image continued to vary from one person to another depending on their power until it finally arrived at Gamal Abdel Nasser, who I suspected at the time was the man closest to God. But his defeat led me to believe that God must be on the side of the enemy, and only served to confirm

the picture of cruelty in my mind.

Since all physical illustrations of God and the Prophets are expressly forbidden in our religion and are considered the failed imitations of man, my childhood images of God stayed with me for quite some time.

Over there, God cannot be seen, and that causes some confusion.

When I moved to Europe, the childhood images came back to me, though in a somewhat different light. I saw how the supervisors—those "lords" of the office—desired to be gods to us meek ones. I realized that a few of the lofty professors at the universities were seeking that very same divinity. And I knew that some of the "original" inhabitants here—who saw us as strangers and outsiders—wanted to look down on us like gods.

I saw many depictions of God in Europe's museums and churches, but no two were ever alike.

God can be seen here, yet He's greater than any single image, and that causes some confusion.

Some people over there would have me enrich their image of God—one that I can't even see—with those images that I *can* see here in the "land of unbelievers."

Some people here would have me endorse their multifarious images of God, which they assume I accept. They want me to hone my image (and my conduct) with their piety and then set it up as an ideal for the ones living in the "land of terror."

To some, I've abandoned the divine cause. To others, I'm a potential recruit for that cause.

No one wants to see the truth of my image. So many different spectacles rest on the nose of each spectator: they magnify the image or reduce it, they obscure or clarify, they polish and exaggerate, or sully and exacerbate, or alter and

distort… and so on and so forth.

Now then, who told you that this image you see is mine?

[Vienna; October 26th, 2005]

Translated from the Arabic by Kareem James Abu Zeid

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Sudanese, and yet They're Writers

During the final quarter of the past century and on into the beginning of this new one, Sudanese literature has not possessed any clear distinguishing characteristics. There are many reasons for this, both domestic and foreign. The domestic ones are more direct and have a much deeper influence, while the foreign ones simply confirm the effects of this absence of defining traits, if only indirectly. Sudan's unique geo-cultural makeup—its distinctive cultural diversity—should be taken advantage of. Yet perhaps it is this very diversity that has been so confused and misunderstood. Perhaps this is what has led to a certain fragmentation of the country's social and cultural structure, for Sudan brings together some 600 indigenous groups that comprise some 114 languages and dialects.

Sudan is considered African, yet not "pure" African. For it straddles the so-called North African line, and is thus sometimes included among the countries that comprise the

basin of the Mediterranean Sea. This "North Africa" is now struggling to free itself from any association with the African continent—it is being tempted by Europe and is clinging to her tail.

On the other hand, Sudan is considered Arab. Yet this attribution is also not a pure one, for its "Arab" people are mixed with deep-rooted African races. Sudan has thus adopted, at various times in its history, a superficial religious cover in order to rid itself of any pagan "Africanism."

Sudanese literature of the recent past was, in fact, in a much better position than it is today. The writers, who commanded distinctive rhythmic styles, were influenced by many of the greats from English literature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Walter Scott and (from the later period) Jane Austen. The gems of Russian literature were also not unknown to them: Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev and Maxime Gorky, to say nothing of the influence of Arabic literature, particularly from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

In the period from 1930 until 1975, many weekly and bi-weekly literary journals appeared, and this resulted in an unprecedented circulation of literature, a high point that may not be attained again. This sentiment emerged at the beginning of the sixties with the advent of the traditional current of literature that bore the name "the forest and desert school." This school represented an attempt to delve into the subject of Sudanese identity, and its most prominent members were: An-Nour Othman Abbakar, Mohammad Al-Makki Ibrahim and Mohammad Abd Al-Hai.

Western culture did not digest the writings of this intelligent elite for its own good (as is sometimes said), but rather roused

up readings that feverishly sought authentic insight into both the oral and written Sudanese heritage in order to bring together a new stream within the literatures of the world. This happened in spite of the fact that Sudanese literature swayed between two contradictory poles: the popular conservative religious milieu, and the secular cultural milieu. The two managed to walk side by side for a time, yet this situation did not last very long. Sooner or later, political influences inevitably afflict literature. During the "May" era, i.e. the period of Jafar An-Nameeri's 16-year rule (from 1969 to 1984), which began as leftist and ended as right-wing, Sudan oscillated between the Eastern and Western military camps. In 1983, the government declared Islamic Sharia Law, suddenly and without any warning. Thus the larger project of uniting all elements of Sudanese society was done away with. The country was once again thrown into disorder, and embarked upon an uncertain path. Civil war was renewed, and with it the many problems that have proven so destructive in both natural and human terms. This lasted until the arrival of the National Islamic Front and the military coup of 1989, and its many consequences. And so literature disappeared into the shadows, and the features of the greater Sudan were lost within this narrower country incapable of diversity. Literature, theater and cinema all regressed, along with the rest of the arts. Many people were driven into exile, and their cultural projects died out or were abandoned.

The picture of Sudanese romanticism presents many names that bear witness to literary excellence, though at a time when only a handful of them were know outside of Sudan's borders. The most prominent ones are: the poet At-Tajani Yousef Bashir (1910 – 1937), the novelist Tayeb Saleh (b. 1927) and the poet Mohammad Al-Faytouri (b. 1936). They were the first Sudanese writers whose works enjoyed a wide welcome outside of their country.

As for my personal inclinations as an author, I find that much of the best Sudanese literature of the past two decades has been published beyond Sudan's borders, most notably in Egypt and some of the other Arab countries, as well as in Europe. In spite of the scattered nature of the cultural elite outside Sudan, good literature is still being produced, even if it is not gathered together in one country, and even if it is not found in the usual cultural vessels. (The facility of the internet, however, is now helping to gradually provide a cohesive image to this diaspora.) Yet most of Sudan's sons, as sons of a "confiscated" country, work for others rather than working for themselves. We can find them everywhere: they are the ones serving, not the ones being served. They participate in both Arab and non-Arab projects, yet benefit from neither one of them.

At the outset of the new century, and after the last Gulf War, Sudan appeared as one of the countries of the "Axis of Evil." Thus, through one mere sentence of the official international discourse, the adjective "Sudanese" came to be confusedly identified with terrorism, with all things evil and wicked. This was done without any differentiation between the "hostile" politicians and the unfortunate citizens of that country, for they all belonged to one single nationality. The might of the media was able to wreck the security of one small poor country merely by bestowing one or two adjectives upon it. And convention does not protect that which is read or heard except when it conforms to what is expected. The reader is thus delighted when he reads what was already in his mind, thereby confirming his prejudices. This is the way of human nature.

We are in need of a change that would truly bring about change. For we writers endure two bitter conditions: first, the

pain of a mother country that forbids the spread of our ideas of innovation and freedom, a country that does not grant us literary immunity; we also suffer the pain of the "unfriendly" nation that does not know us and that offers no cooperation and that will not treat us like human beings, in complete disregard to its adherence to what it calls "human rights."

Will the time come when it is possible for the ordinary reader to first read the text and then—afterwards—seek out (for example) the nationality of the writer, as something secondary to the rest of his curiosity, as a means of modifying and improving the overall picture of the text. Or at the very least, will the time come when this reader will possess a great enough faculty for research and knowledge to be able to read objectively and without prejudice? Or will the writer from the countries of "evil" remain perpetually accused, always attempting to rid himself of charges he knows nothing about? Will he always have to rush to follow the advice of his countrymen, to work incessantly for "the improvement of our image in the eyes of the other" until we finally appear like ordinary men, respected and free of guilt.

[Vienna; February 6th, 2006]

Translated from the Arabic by Kareem James Abu Zeid

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