

Zakariya Amataya

I am traveling in poetry,
Poetry is traveling in me,
We are heading for the same destination.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF POEMS
No Women in Poetry

Knowledge

One book.
How many millions of letters does it require?
How many hundreds of thousands of feelings?
How many uncountable reasons?
How many thousands of hours of research?
How many hundreds of drafts of refinement?
How many nights of contemplation?
How many thousands of pages to turn?
How many hundreds of trees must be felled?
How many drops of sweat must be shed?
To capture one's emptiness.

Journey of a poem

Poetry journeys alone
I once said that to myself
Roaming thoughts
The travel of poetry.

From the twists and turns of the brain
Sliding down the arm
Like a demon craving
To be free from entrapment
Shaking the pen in the hand
Across scrap paper
Into a keyboard
Onto the monitor screen
Down the cable
Into the pages of newspapers,
Magazines and journals

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Poetry journeys alone,
To the eyes, the lips, the heart,
Through the wrinkles in the brain

Poetry journeys alone,
Inspiring me to reach out to the people
Travelling the road of life
Where hope remains high
Even when my poetry is sad and full of darkness

Epitaph for my revered *Sidi**

1

In the hour when the sun bathed the village replete
My heart brushed the white road strewn with gravel and rocks
From the grass that grew along the walkway
To the smell of tobacco burning in the ancient *nypa* leaves,
Smoke rising from the coal burners
In the much beloved cottage sheltered by a thatched roof
Distant childhood shimmering with stars
My heart torn from my chest
With mourning over your absence

2

I proceeded to light an American cigarette
My spirit recalled an ancestor –
Whose body lay marked by a stick in the local cemetery
The old *sidi*, whom I highly revered and adored
Who has traveled far towards bliss,
Snug in the heart of the earth

3

On a nameless tomb
Nestled into a rippled knoll
The village *sidi* rested at the foot of the hill
His mortal remains disintegrating into primordial earth

4

The day he vanished from the world
I, his descendant, was absent from the thronging crowd
Until tonight when I returned to visit him
Our spirits met in the graveyard night
I witnessed his immortal spirit,
Rejoining the past, present and future

5

The smell of his tobacco rose in my memory
The *nypa* leaves burning in his moribund mouth
Thick smoke flowed towards the sky
His mellow face with creased on the brow
Constantly engaged in pensive thought
The Arabic sounds of *alif... baa... taa...* ** echoed...
The sounds overheard
Were the deep-rooted memories that remained

6

I brewed my hundredth cup of coffee
Lit my thousandth cigarette
The sound of war drums rapidly pounding
The era, the age of killing
My cherished motherland,
Gone, vanquished again
The vast courtyard before the mosque,
Where we would no longer assemble

7

Dear, ancestor's soul
Sidi, if you were still here like the day before
Speaking of the things that our people and I
Should and should not do,
To stay or go; these are the questions we must contemplate
I am now lost in the woods
Of illusion and fantasy
With the demons that haunt me in perpetual pursuit
And tyrannical dictators that steal our lives
Leaving no trace of peace

8

The footsteps of the parade continued stomping
 Under the moon glowing in the sky
 The howl of dogs on the hill
 The train that escaped from the scene
 The sultry wind in the blackened night
 With voracious desire
 Greedy for power;
 But for the breathing of poetry
 The descendants who transmit culture
 Will record a legend to be shared,
 Perpetually

**Sidi* (سيدي) is derived from *Sayidey* - a term used to call a respected elder of the tribe. *Sayid* (master) + *ey* (of mine) are combined as *Sayidey*. When spoken, the word becomes *Sidi*.

***Alif, baa, taa* are the first three letters in the Arabic alphabet.

The Missing

There must be something in this universe
 That has strayed from the dimension of time
 Something Columbus and Ulysses missed in their explorations
 Something Greek and Arabian astronomers failed to discover
 Something the world's prophets forgot to preach
 Something that vanished between the black holes of space

Some mistake must have occurred
 Between the seams of the human race
 That went missing at the time of the Flood
 Something that failed to board Noah's Ark
 Something unrecorded in the ancient Holy Book
 Something Nostradamus forgot to predict

There must be some misunderstanding on this earth
 That has been lost from the archives of humanity
 Something Plato did not anticipate
 Something Nietzsche failed to mention
 Something Einstein could not calculate
 Something is missing...

Beloved

I went to the black market selling weapons
To buy a nuclear bomb
For you,
Beloved

~

I went to the lumber market
To buy a coffin
For you,
Beloved

~

I went to the flower market
To buy some flowers
For you,
Beloved

~

I went to the peace market
To buy peace
For you,
Beloved.

~

But peace is never for sale!

*Inspired by a poem by Jacques Prévert

I wish I were a sniper

It would be nice if I were a sniper
I would annihilate invaders
One after another, coldly
One bullet at a time
Bodies falling like autumn leaves.
I would crouch down without a sound
Press the gun-stock firmly to my shoulder
One eye focused through the front sight
Aiming precisely
Peeping through a miniscule hole
Eyeing the invader's brow

I would be a bit confused
Selecting the most lethal point:
Should I shoot the heart in his chest
Or the brain inside his skull?
I choose the middle of the forehead

Between his courageous arching eyebrows
To cause the least torment, knowing,
If I pulled the trigger,
My subconscious would backlash in turmoil,
Struggling with doubts whether or not to kill

Why must the victim thrash and die
By my hand?
Oh, God,
What right have I
To declare the sentence of their death?
No, no, I have no justifiable right
At the end I conquered my moral dilemma
Because they have no right to invade our motherland
I pulled the trigger from in ambush, taking out an American soldier
His face twisted towards the grotesque
Tormented with pain and fear
Distinct symptoms of approaching his mortal end
Bleeding, writhing
His body fell in a violent spasm

The world plummeted into silence
I am not a hunter who enjoys homicide
If I did, I would swear with joy:
I got him! I got him!
And leap like a child
Receiving a brand a new toy
Instead, I whispered in my conscience,
Lord, forgive me
For taking the life you have created
May you deliver his soul
To eternal bliss

But I am not a sniper
I have no gun; I have no bullets
Just a pencil and paper
I merely scribble and arrange characters
That stream forth from emotions
But I have already laid to waste the infantry
In countless numbers; countless indeed
If you don't believe it, count their corpses
Piled high in my heart
Many may wonder
How brutal and ruthless I must be
Without the slightest mercy
But I swear

I don't enjoy depriving anyone of life
Yet I wish I were a sniper

Will bombs fall on my playground?

Oh, mother dear,
Are those blazing yellow and ruddy things
Falling on our land
Demolition bombs?
Will the grapes in our winery be burnt to ashes?
Will our fruitful orange groves
Ripen in time for Ramadan?
Will the indigo weaver birds in our olive trees die?
Will the holy fountain in our garden run dry?
Will our red cactus flowers wilt?
Will our school be destroyed?
Will our teachers be offering moral lessons tomorrow?
Will our sky still display this red hot flame?

Oh, mother dear,
Will bombs fall on my playground?
Will the Ferris wheel be torpedoed by tanks?
Will the library where we shelve tales of *1001 Nights*,
The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,
And my friends' drawing books,
Be crushed to the ground?
Tomorrow, will Uncle Hassan open his sweet shop?
Will we smell the coffee from *Al-fijar*, dad's favourite coffee shop?
Tomorrow morning, will I have fresh milk with bread?

Oh, mother,
I read in the Holy Quran,
God will be with those who endure
Must we give way to those who are trampling
Our beloved land?
Must we tolerate invaders who are taking over our country?

Oh, father,
Please extinguish the fires scorching our land
Take all the water buckets we have and pour them
On those cherry seeds so they might be revived
From the ashes and remains of the city
Then, butterflies will hover throughout our woodland again
If water won't smother the blaze
Father, take my tears and bestow them on the fire

See if the fires will wither
 If the sky will reveal its tint once again
 If rose buds will prosper on earth
 In Spring.

Oh, dear brother,
 Why are you waiting?
 Wolves are storming our native land
 Our sheep have fled to the valleys
 Green grassland has burned to embers
 The Tigris has turned bloody red
 Mesopotamia in the Fertile Crescent has become a cemetery—
 A warehouse and hell on earth!

Oh dear Brother!
 Extinguish those fires burning our land
 Drive out those bloodthirsty wolves
 Tell them how we love peace
 Tell them we abhor killing our own kind!

Translated from Thai by Preeyaporn Charoenbutr and Sunida Supantamart

FROM THE COLLECTION OF POEMS
 But in us it is deep as the sea

Meaning

1
 Asleep for many centuries,
 awakened one night unable to distinguish
 reality from dream. Water rose, covered my face.
 I opened my eyes, knew
 the past lives of my soul, knew bliss,
 freedom from desire. Then doubt spoke:
 Alive or dead, it promised, whole or shattered,
 your freedom in this labyrinth
 is the freedom of an echo.

How can I escape this imprisonment?
 Awake, my six senses
 thirst for the carthen world.
 Everything on it
 cannot fill my rough heart.

Asleep, I am night's oracle; like a star, I desire nothing.
But morning comes, and I rise, singing new songs.

2

An ocean, a galaxy underneath the conscience.
We are reborn above, in this whirlpool maze,
into color, where every ship leads its own wake;
where we soar and dance, challenge the angry waves.
We dream our heavens, our nirvanas.
In the end though, without rudder, or compass, or beacon,
all of us enter the water alone. We slip below:
sink into the galaxy's depth.

3

Light the color of oranges shines above his head.
Alone, he moves through a city that doesn't move.
A city stifled, simmering in its own fear.
God set humans free: now we must face
fate on our own. Fate: the endless noon
that scorches our sacred faith.

Among the eyeless people, among those crippled with fear,
a sign-reader, a decoder wanders through the new century.
He shines his flashlight at the sun.
What can he hope to find?
Souls lost in the brutal expansion?
Does he search the rubble for love?
Or is it peace he seeks in this crumbling city?

4

A new century.
new inventions and innovations
that guarantee high speed connectivity.
People talk to each other more,
love and become angry at one another easier.

Meaning devolves, becomes
a meaning
which cannot be interpreted according to its sign.
So we will shamble in our lifeless rows, stagger
into the teeth of the city to be crushed and shattered,
swallowed and scattered.
We will become our false definitions.
There is no sentence or word
that will ever express this loss.

5

The voice of the decoder
echoes in my ears. Its emptiness lashes
like branches in a storm.

Falling to my knees, I grapple with arrogance.
For awhile, my eyes are ripped open, expanding
until they cover my mouth, my chest.

I hear a silent bell.
The sound is pure, but I can't comprehend it.

With only my hands

There's a deserted city, its gateway
spanned by a massive arch, walls
on either side crumbling, gray stucco
faking, breaking off-
everywhere bricks show through, foundations
exposed, fractured by ice in the air.
At the base of the arch, an old woman
in her elegant *vastra*, beautiful cloth
of flesh stretched tight over bones-
a scarecrow in repose: a soul, slowly
curling from its empty, ragged robes.
Her smile, her eyes: amber
fish flashing in the pits of her face.

I looked through, stepped
under
the crumbling gateway
for the second time.
And the smell of gunpowder was there,
spread over it all,
thickening every particle of the atmosphere.
And the smoke twisted as it does
from incense burning in a holy cathedral.
And the flies swarmed thick,
humming a prayer
over those bodies no longer running.

With only my hands, bared and naked I
gather, breathe in their despair.
Sieved, I send it back out: air into air.
Yes, the Persian rose tree grows in my body,

Its red blossom and its thorn
pierce the world from my eyes.
Two doves bearing an olive branch
once made a nest on my head.
I shook their home from my hair.
I stripped the rending thorns
from the rose tree within me
and stepped out, away from the city.
Silent, I unclench my fists, lift my hands,
palms bloody, bones bared.

Translated from the Thai by Cutter Streeby

FROM NEW POEMS

I See Myself

I see myself
And the apprehensive people
Amidst what appears to be the crossroads
of a labyrinth
We step forwards hesitantly
And anguish over other times
Haunted by prosperity
We stray into a deep hole
Snared by the history they, themselves,
unearthed
No one truly meant to dig
So that we might excavate their corpses
Even though no one reads the future
It is there in proximity
Like the reflection off a piece of glass
The shattered and fragmented whole
If there is some imagination left
Even without a discernible future
The lucid present emanates from our
eyes

I see myself
And those mired by cynicism and
disorder
An epidemic of doubt
Thought on the verge of collapse

Like a defiant horse from a fairy tale
Gallop through a sacred forest
A wooded canopy of fury in the shrieking
wind
A whistling reverberation throughout the
mountain pass
Some of us enter the trees to find
ourselves
But find neither we nor others
Some are transfixed by the luminous blur
of the city
Only to discover
Alienation inside the crowd
Of people with shattered hearts

I see myself
And the possession of the headless crowd
Shouldering the unbearable density of
doubt and interrogation
Comprised of sides and criticism
Mere expression, impression,
confinement
Within the fetters of fear, obscurity
An exquisite field of black envelops us
More terrifying than its guiding light
With a headless projection
The parade advances as thought retreats
In the same direction
To become an ordinary story
Who will dare to wander astray
Only to appear the abject delinquent
Cast out in bitterness for all eternity?

I see myself
And those who lack a spine of one's own
The ones who pack an idea and build a
boat around it
To float across the sea of eternity
With no spine
It's tiring to persevere in dignity
When every position is exhausted
What is the point of a victory without a
position
When the spirit is stained?
Lofty ideals tarnished by lowly tactics

I see myself
 And those who cling to their clan
 Ethnicity and established borders
 Are projecting walls across the horizon
 A religious vision fenced in barbed wire
 In the foreground, a mirror
 I try to forget it all
 The entirety of my education
 All of the words of Ustaz Ustazah
 Liberated into the blackness of the mind
 So I ask myself سیاف کامو؟
 เจ้าคือใคร คุณคือใคร เธอคือใคร
 Who are you? Who art thou? من أنت؟
 Everything still makes sense
 But you may not like the point
 All of the answers remain
 But you may not welcome the response

I see myself
 Like a blank page inserted into a book
 I desire, I want it filled with confessions
 Sentences, lyrical oratory, symbolism and
 various analogies
 But perhaps it's best to leave it blank
 I see myself
 And I see all of you watching me write this
 But looking into your own words would
 suit you better

Geography of Lights

In the eye's retina
 An inverted global image
 Like a surreal poem
 We look at the inverted world obliviously
 Do we see the world through our eyes
 Or through the refractions of light?
 The duration of imaginary travel
 Ever swifter than the truth
 Sometimes more real
 Until it becomes delusional
 Haunted in myth
 Swayed towards that which does not exist
 Bringing us to the castle in the sky
 The majestic kingdom

Is intoxicated, decadent, delirious
Towards prosperity
The imaginary world we create
Is safer than the one that exists
We dig, we dig, we dig into ourselves
To become bunkers
Wherever refuge might be had
Tranquility beyond disorder
Equal to our own bunkers

The geography of light
Is difficult to discover and possess
Many travellers and seekers
Try to engage the vast world
But no one can turn back to seize the light
The aesthetics of illumination
Might be discovered in darkness
Surrounding each one of us
Or inside of our own confusion
No matter how gloomy
No matter the proximity to the truth
There is the relationship between light
and colour
When light changes, colour changes
Truth changes
Beauty changes
When the sun sets
Everything breaks apart into blackness
Leaving only the bare truth
The desolate solitude
Precarious emotions
Born of silence from within
God hath bestowed darkness unto us
That He might also grant us vision

Translated from Thai by Noah Viernes