

## **Salah BADIS**

Poetry and non-fiction

### **Pirates of the Sea**

The pirates have been straggling in Algiers  
for three centuries.

You can see them with their tattooed arms,  
and their skin burnt by the sun  
standing by the beach  
wetting their feet  
to keep them from growing roots on land.

Their swords were taken away from them and their ships destroyed  
their castles became museums haunted by the wind  
and their cannons were placed  
in the plazas of dull French towns.

People forgot their names  
denied their right to ride the seas  
they dispersed in harbours and on beaches:  
porters, gamblers, and beggars  
dancing in street weddings  
and sleeping in the open

A damned lineage that neither dies nor breeds.

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**Running away**

The drowned of the sea aren't the only ones  
wishing to reach the beach.

We, too, who live in Algiers,  
wrestle with waves of people and vehicles  
looking for shade  
spending our money on bottled water  
distilling our time on the asphalt  
looking for a parking spot  
as radio announcers spew in our ears  
and our knees crumble from all that driving.

We spend our days dreaming of the beach  
onto which we can heave the fatigue  
collecting under our eyelids, in our pockets,  
in our shoes and on our foreheads.  
We dream of escaping the heat of the asphalt  
in the coolness of the water  
like those whales who attempt suicide and fail each time.

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## The Summer of all Dangers

"Summer is a pleasure in Algiers"

We used to say.

The calm mornings' breeze

the rare cars on the road

sandwiches, bottles of cold water

and off to the beach

before the sun ignites and burns

swimming till midday.

The sun is an orange of fire

That a hidden hand squeezes all day long,

onto our backs.

Now the summer stretches

Beyond three months,

Hotel Aurassi, which we used to call

"the city's air conditioner"

is not the most prominent landmark any longer

not making our summers less hot in any way.

The city's features are changing

and you haven't come back yet.

You spend your summer in a faraway place

where there is no sea.

We still are impressed by the sea

we spend our days watching it

from the terraces of our houses

as if holding eternity

as if nothing is happening here anyway.

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**The Highest Man in the City**

You haven't returned yet from your exodus  
And the minaret being built on the corniche  
for two years now is still "under construction."  
They say it will be the highest minaret in the world.  
I don't know whether that's true  
but I'm sure that the highest man in the city today  
Is the operator of the crane building that minaret.  
He oversees everything from his booth  
can even wave to the bored boats  
anchored in the Marseille harbour,  
on the other shore.

I don't know when the mosque will open,  
nor do I know when you'll come back  
but people here  
doubt that they'll be able to hear the muezzin's voice  
when he calls to prayer.

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**A Monster**

My daily rhythm changes;  
I set my biological clock  
according to your time settings.  
And when you are busy  
I lie down on the vast expanse of time differences  
arising in time zones  
and sleep.

Between us: a continent and an ocean,  
books and gossip  
and love that depends on internet coverage  
on and off  
that lives as long as  
our phones' batteries  
And when technology's power dies,  
our flesh surrender to the monster  
you call yearning.

The parcel of books you had sent me  
hasn't arrived yet.  
The postman says:  
it could be resting in the heart of one of those boats  
anchored in the middle of the sea.

The boat hasn't reached the harbour yet,  
And we are not pirates, any longer,  
to go and seize it back.

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### Home? Where things do not happen.

During the second half of the 19th century, the French colonial powers in Algeria drove away dozens of tribes and hundreds of families, destroying entire ruling lineages in the process, with the goal of weakening them after a number of small popular uprisings, stealing and appropriating their land.

It is said that my great-great-grandfather and his brother killed a man who worked with the French and had refused to give back a sum of money. In the middle of the ensuing chaos, they gathered their women and headed east to Tunisia, where they settled in a small agricultural town halfway between the capital Tunis and the coastal city of Bizerte, a peaceful hamlet outside time, where almost nothing happened. They acquired a few small plots of land to work and from which to live, and there they remained for three generations.

Among the Berbers, *tammurt*, meaning land, is a sacred word. It is not the fertile land that yields harvests, but the entire landscape to which a person belongs and whose name he carries even if he does not carry the official papers and deeds to prove it. The land itself carries the name of its first keeper, and his descendants then carry on both his name and his land. Even the rocks and stones in the rugged mountainous regions, dug up and trucked from their place to be used for building homes hundreds of kilometers away from the sea, even these rocks—which can neither be worked nor bought or sold—bear the name *tammurt*.

The relationship between the peoples of North Africa and their land has always been one of longing, a longing rooted not only in place but in time. They yearn for the land even if they have never set foot outside its bounds, even if they have never been forced out of it; they are still nostalgic for the primeval nature of the earth's existence.

My father's generation, born in Tunisia between late 1930s and late 1940s, were the first to begin returning to the land in the mid-1950s. They returned to take part in the revolution that began in November of 1954, or were like my father, who returned alone a few months before independence in 1962, a secondary school student not yet turned 17.

After nearly a century in Tunisia, they who had never caught either a glimpse or the scent of Algeria returned, because there was something happening in this possible homeland. They wanted to follow it, be part of it, both of the land and the events revolving around it, transforming it: such was the idea of the nation that would be built, the republic that would be established—which would then be superseded by a second, which would wipe out the first, and a third that would wipe out the second, etc., etc.,—but none of that was really important.

They lived in Tunisia as strangers; instead of their real names, they were called *al-gharbi*, Westerners, foreigners, for they had hailed from the West. This reminds me of the symbolism of one of the potential definitions for the word *ghurbah*, that is, "exile" in the poetic sense, a word that for centuries has been vital to the daily experience of the people of North Africa. It is said the word come from « losing one's way to the West » during a journey. It seems that this « west » was a star in the sky that people used as a guide during their travels, and once they lost sight of it, they were lost. My family, however, lost not a mere star in the sky but the entire land they once had to the west, no matter its direction.

And yet, also, there is no word that captures the idea of Algeria as a homeland as well as that word *ghurbah* or, as they might also say, « banishment » — banishment being the enforced sort

of exile – for *ghurbah* is that state which cultivates national feeling ; *ghurbah* as the opposite of all the meanings carried by the concept of homeland, the homeland that was not, at the time, defined by borders—other than those drawn by France for its colonies. The original inhabitants of that land were not known to one another as such, and had no communal designation except as the « indigenous population, » as the French administrative bureaucracy would have it—a nomenclature that was not so far off from « the original inhabitants, » or those that lived on the land when my ancestors settled there in 1830. That's when the homeland became, for the Algerians living in exile, in *ghurbah*, both within and without the country—all that we did not possess and all that was possessed by the colonial powers.

Based on that, it became easy for my father, a teenager at the time, to identify home, to know where he could go to find fraternity with millions of people in a way that was both broad and deep, to form an imagined community, to form what is known as “a nation.”

Home expands to contain everyone who immerses themselves in this community and its narrative, and shrinks whenever one chooses to take a little distance from it. This is similar to what happened to my father as he moved from a « macro » to a « micro » viewpoint for several reasons, one among them his continuous uncovering of the fallacy of all the history he'd ever known. Or perhaps it was because he'd matured a little by then, and the masses did not hold the same appeal for him, until, in fact, he lost all trust in them—especially during the years of the Civil War in the 1990's. His nostalgia for his Tunisian childhood grew, and he grew tired of the State of Algeria.

It was then that I became aware of my father, and, just like him, my enthusiasm for masses barely survived past a few incidents in my teenage years before it faded. I do not want to get involved in that which is produced by the imagination of others; it is enough to deal with my own imagination and its ruins. The discovery that the masses consider the homeland as the place « where things happen » was enough to send me down another path. Even my father, when he ventured into Algeria by land, had only one goal in mind: to arrive in the capital, or, the place where things happen. Just like Houari Boumediene had done on the day he entered the country from its eastern borders and mounted a coup against the interim government in the summer of 1962 to install Ahmed Ben Bella as president, so that even those who lived in the north, pressed up against the coastline, knew the homeland as « the place where things happened. »

I too remember that phrase, to which I was initially alerted by a professor in my first year of university, and one always repeated by the news anchor when she was done with the weather forecast for the major cities in the north. Pointing at the desert, which covers more than four fifths of the country, and on whose sands, as millions of citizens were concerned, nothing ever happened, she would say : « In the rest of the country, sunny skies and clear weather. »

Deep in that desert, on the rocky slopes of the fabled Tassili mountains, there are paintings that date back more than 10,000 years, astonishing rock paintings depicting fishermen and animals grazing and drinking...yes indeed: plants and water in the middle of the desert. That was thousands of years ago, and the north was still unknown. It did not exist in the collective imagination of the groups that had settled in the south. Everything then happened in the desert, what is today known as the so-called « rest » of the country—that was at the time the homeland of the fisherman, the shepherd, and the artist.

Standing before those ancient paintings today resolves many contradictions and answers some questions, such as the fact that idea of homeland is a creation rooted in time, lasting for a certain period. That is why we have homelands arising from nothing, and others returning to that nothing. It is the journey of communities and individuals during that specific period of time that produces this idea. And it is time that perpetuates it, whether by rooting the idea of homeland in place, or through the nostalgia that resurrects it after it's been buried in dust. That is why the homeland is often trapped between the notions of « what it ought to be » and « what it was. » Its

location is a coincidence selected by nature and history for a particular group of people. That location is also given over to a cycle of « things happening, and then receding. » It becomes a homeland when things happen there, and a place of exile, of *ghurbah*, when they don't.

*Translated from the Arabic by Lina Mounzer*

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