

Poems by Saadi Youssef

Translated by Khaled Mattawa

Translator's Reflection

I dove into Saadi Youssef's work in the early nineties. Before then, his name had rung a bell that I did not know what to associate with. When I began to read Youssef's work attentively, my impression was that it was akin to a revelation, the sort of poetry that I was waiting for, a quieter, more engaging poetry whose only argument is the poet's experience of life. This is what I saw, this is how things smelled and felt and tasted. It was a disarming sort of poetry that I had not encountered in Arabic or anywhere else when I was just becoming interested in poetry. At that time, translation was the great siren beckoning and luring me toward Arabic poetry and, in the process, making me "practice" poetry more, in the same way that a violinist practices their instrument by playing the music of better and better composers.

Translating Youssef's work made us friends. He was hesitant at first but believed in the work because I was committed to it. I used to mail him snail-mail letters, to a PO Box in Jordan, to which he promptly replied. I used to also call a number in Amman when he seemed to disappear. It turned out to be a number at the Ministry of Tourism. I never figured out the connection. And despite becoming great friends once he settled in London, I never found out.

Youssef was easy to work with because, for one thing, he knew English well. But more importantly, he was also a translator, and he appreciated the effort of translation. He made very few comments on my translations and allowed me to choose what I liked from among his poems. I felt free and supported by a great poet. The poems in this selection are from Youssef's last decade of writing. I wanted to return to him to honor his work but also to share with the English-reading world the work of a true and diligent master of poetry.

Will We Learn?

What do you see from the window of a plane flying,
soaring higher than a star?

You know the clouds, you live among them.
And what appears as a reflection of the sea,
you understand as physics.
As for the games the trees play,
it's hard to tell from these heights.
Elevation has done its heinous act again.
If only you'd never soared,
never flown,
never had a pair of wings.

The clouds are beautiful
and the sea
and trees.
Understand, my son.
Get it into your head.
Don't wade far into blindness!

هل نتعلّم؟

ماذا ترى من كوّةٍ في جسمٍ طائرةٍ تُحلّقُ عالياً ، أعلى من النجم ؟

الغيومُ تكادُ تعرفُها لأنك ساكنٌ فيها
وما يبدو من البحرِ انعكاساً ، أنتَ تفهمُهُ من الفيزياءِ
أما لُعبَةُ الأشجارِ فهي من الأعالي غيرُ واضحةٍ . . .
لقد فعَل العُلُوّ الفِعلَةَ الشنعاءَ
ليتَّك لم تُحلِّقْ
لم تَطِرْ
لم تَمْتَلِكْ يوماً جناحَيْنِ . . .

الغيومُ جميلةٌ
والبحرُ
والأشجارُ .
فافهمْ يا بُنَيَّ . . .
افهمْ
ولا تذهبْ بعيداً في العماء!

Blissful Sleep

If I miss a country, I can fly to it
or even try to swim there.

But, to be honest, I am tired of longing
and remembrance.

Nostalgia is no longer my song.

The countries have become alike.

I know what I'll see here and there

as if I were traveling the lines of my palm,

as if I'm always on the same old bald plateau.

Year after year, I have walked streets I had walked before,
even as I realize that I had not been there before.

I look out now:

This street takes to the sea,

this street ends at a river,

and this street leads me to desolation?

What now?

I will pull the sheet over my head and, contented, will close my
eyes.

Then I will wander, all alone, to sleep.

نومُ الهناءِ

لو كنتُ مشتاقاً إلى بلدٍ لَطَرْتُ إليه
أو حاولتُ أن أمضي إليه سباحةً . . .
لكنني ، وأقولها صدقاً ، سئمتُ الشوقَ
والذكرى

ولم يعد الحنينُ لديّ أغنيَةً .

تشابهت البلادُ

وصرتُ أعرفُ ما سألقى ههنا أو ههنا

حتى كأني راحلٌ في راحتيّ . . .

كأنني في الهضبةِ الصلعاءِ إيّاها .

وعاماً بعدَ آخرَ ، صرتُ أمشي في شوارعَ قد مشيتُ بها

وإن أدركتُ أيّ لم أكنُ فيها ولو يوماً . . .

أُطلُّ الآنَ:

هذا شارعٌ يمضي إلى بحرٍ

وهذا شارعٌ يُفضي إلى نهرٍ . . .

وهذا شارعٌ قد كان طوّحَ بي إلى فقيرٍ

وماذا ؟

سوف ، أسحبُ ، هانئاً ، طرفَ الملاءِ

أغمضُ العينينِ

ثم أهيمُ ، وحدي ، كي أنام . . .

Word Games

Perhaps the sky you'd hoped for has abandoned you . . .
Perhaps!
Let's get the suitcase ready:
There's a heavenly sky (You've exhausted her talking about it so
much!)
And then there's a sky for people.
Tell me,
to which one are you returning?
Where do you feel most comfortable?
To which do you hand over your head, surrendering it, like a
pillow?
No!
Don't say: "Is this an interrogation now?"
I am your friend,
your image,
a copy of you.
Now, none of us will deceive the other.
Now we are equal
like the teeth of that famous man's comb.
We are equals
You haven't forgotten that I am a communist
(And you didn't forget that you were a communist too)
So let's agree!
Let's say, at least,
that transcendence has nothing to do with the sky.

ألعابٌ لُغويّةٌ

رَبِّمَا هَجَرْتَكِ السَّمَاءُ الَّتِي كُنْتَ تَرْجُو . . .
رَبِّمَا !

فَلْتَعُدِّي لِلْحَقِيبَةِ :

ثُمَّ سَمَاءٌ سَمَاوِيَّةٌ (أَنْتِ أَرْهَقْتَهَا بِالْحَدِيثِ طَوِيلًا !)
وَوَيْمَ السَّمَاءِ الَّتِي هِيَ لِلنَّاسِ .
قُلِّي لِي :

إِلَى أَيِّ وَاحِدَةٍ أَنْتِ تَرْجِعُ

أَوْ تَسْتَرِيحُ ؟

إِلَى أَيِّ وَاحِدَةٍ أَنْتِ تُسَلِّمُ رَأْسَكَ ، مُسْتَسْلِمًا ، كَالْوَسَادَةِ ؟
لَا !

لَا تَقُولِي لِي : أَمُسْتَنْطِقِي أَنْتِ ؟

إِنِّي صَدِيقُكَ

صَوْرَتُكَ

النَّسْخَةُ . . .

الآنَ ، لَنْ يَخْدَعَ الْوَاحِدُ ، الْآخَرَ .

الآنَ نَحْنُ سَوَاسِيَةٌ

مِثْلُ أَسْنَانِ مَشِطِّكَ ذَاكَ الْمُثَلَّمِ . . .

نَحْنُ سَوَاسِيَةٌ

أَنْتِ لَمْ تَنْسِ أَيْ الشِّيْعِيَّ

(لَمْ تَنْسِ أَنَّكَ كُنْتِ الشِّيْعِيَّةُ)

فَلِنَتَّفِقِي !

لِنَقُولِ ، فِي الْأَقْلَبِ ، بِأَنَّ التَّسَامِيَّ لَيْسَ السَّمَاءُ . . .

Training Plane Crosses the Window

The training plane returning to the flight school
flew past my window, waning, like a bird.

The sky is white
and trees bare.

And I, the poor one, shivering in my room
almost saw snow falling around me —

white meteors falling,
pages from books falling,
dresses of women I loved falling,
milk teeth falling,
the history of a country falling.

.....

.....

.....

What did the training plane do?

The freshman pilot
will enter another school
and soon he'll

happily
toss away his bombs
and kill the poor souls tending Basra's date palms.

طائرة تدريبٍ تعبرُ النافذة

طائرةُ التدريبِ العائدةُ الآنَ إلى مدرسةِ الطيرانِ
تَعَدَّتْ نافذتي ، متضائلةً ، كالطيرِ . . .

سماءَ بيضاءَ

وأشجارَ عاريةً

وأنا ، المسكينَ ، أقمقِفُ في الغرفةِ

حتى كدتُ أرى ثلجاً يساقطُ حولي ؛

شُهْباً بيضاً تساقطُ

أوراقاً من كُتُبِ تساقطُ

أثوابَ نساءٍ كنتُ عشفتُ ، قديماً ، تساقطُ

أسناناً لَبَناً تساقطُ

تاريخَ بلادٍ يساقطُ . . .

.....

.....

.....

ماذا فعلتُ طائرةُ التدريبِ العابرةُ ؟

الطيارُ الخُرُّ

سيدخلُ مدرسةً أخرى

وسيقذفُ كلَّ قنابلهِ

وهو سعيدٌ . . .

يقتلُ فلاحِي نخلِ البصرةِ !

Iraq Is Coming

A beautiful Iraq will come.
Iraq will come
after the American leaves
and the attendant Persian servant is gone.
This beautiful Iraq
is coming in the air we breathe,
in tea at the heights of the Euphrates,
in the bitter arak at the riverfront.
This beautiful Iraq
is coming in the cape of my mother, who passed away, while I knew
nothing of her
passing
(I was footing it through the alleys of Paris).
This wondrous Iraq
will bring us home from our hovels in countries we did not love
and whose people do not like our features
or the ferocity of our bodies.
We will be happy,
trembling,
barefoot,
light,
full of chastity
and horror.
We will say:
O Iraq, O nation,
the world has no room
for our endless separation.
O Iraq . . .

العراق آتِ

سوف يأتي العراق الجميل
سوف يأتي العراق
بعد أن يرحل الأمريكي
والخادم الفارسي المَعَمَّمُ . . .
هذا العراق الجميل
قادمٌ في الهواء الذي نتنفسُ
في الشاي عند أعالي الفرات
وفي العَرَقِ المُرِّ في جبهةِ النهرِ . . .
هذا العراق الجميل
قادمٌ في عباءةِ أُمِّي التي رحلتُ وأنا جاهلٌ أنها رحلتُ
(كنتُ أذرَعُ زُنُقَاتِ باريسِ) . . .
هذا العراق العجيب
سوف يأتي بنا من مَنابِذنا في الديارِ التي لم نُحِبْ
الديارِ التي لم تُحِبْ ملامحنا
وضراوةِ أجسادنا . . .
ولسوفُ نكونُ سعيدينَ
مرتجفينَ
حُفاهَ
خِفافاً
وممتملينَ عفافاً
ورُعباً . . .
وسوف نقولُ لهُ :
أيُّ هذا العراق
لم يَعدْ في الطبيعةِ مُتَّسِعُ
للفراقِ
أيُّ هذا العراقِ . . .