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Something Fills the Soul, On the Threshold of Wishing, Time Utters It, and I Color My Name by Yousef el Qedra

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There he walks on two feet that he thinks
are his soul, not caring about the full-blown
clouds that shade his way. Shade took him by
surprise, so he took shelter in the fire.
He dried his name on a shriveled branch.
He sat down to rest and became ecstatic
as leaves were falling on him like kisses.

He portrayed his sleeping but never slept.
He shut his heart and lay down upon an
ancient perception which he boasted about.
The earth was revealed to him as an apple
in the hand of a child playing hopscotch.
There was a bluster in her laugh
he had never encountered before.
Horror invaded his blood, and a sigh
of agitation he wished had evaporated.
His hands were squeezing jasmine that
the wind forms as necklaces for transients.
Transients don't care about passing time
that dances by itself. And the duration
relaxes on a wise man's couch.

In a box, he's collected obscure things,
such as blue wind and two names flavored
ginger, and he passed by a sixth evening
on the fifth day of a week, which occurred
in a month that forgot to pass. He kept seeing
fickle people's changes, as he has mentioned:
like gravity that tired of attracting.
The country does not mature, its prisons
don't get built, for it is all one prison
whose jailer is a deformed history.

He usually pulls his shadows behind him

and passes the evening in a diffused echo.
His night is matches that don't ignite,
and his soul is full of all kinds of fuel.
He wishes he might burn like a butterfly
in a flame. The wood is insufficient
and the trees have declared their sadness
to the dew upon the darkness that is
tired of the curse of women who are
wet with heat and the humidity
of the nearby sea—all are tired.

A lonely park full of children
escaping fear and drowsiness
sprinkles them with its confusion,
rubs the rust of his memory
with something similar to flight.
He surrenders his imagination
to the windows illuminated
with an eagerness that still dreams.
He walks on his feet, assured that they
are his soul, and walks, losing his way,
walks happy with his shadow, he walks.

I ignite the city with morning roses
and a yearning that is about to scream.

I saw him teaching his steps confidence
along paths that bear no trace of footprints.
His eyes were drawing light out of his blood
to his eyes and spreading light as dancing tears,
released into the wind that washes
his face with what it carries of the scent
of the seas over which it has passed.
With his hands, he removes the heaviness
of air so as to lighten his heart,
and his heart begs for rain and its meaning.
That meaning emerges panting from his chest
and rain in the landings of other souls waits
for a take-off that would land in his soul.

I put out the flame of my sleeping
with questions and certain answers
that scream in the doorway of my heart.

I saw her shredding her grief into
tiny pieces at the threshold of wishing;
each time a smiling transient passed by,
she gave him a piece of her sadness.
So much that the whole city became sad;
as for herself, she rode her lust and struck
various poses that were most unlike her.
She offered her hair to the wind and taught
her breast constant vigilance and attention.

She culled whatever she desired from days
full of joy that is unaware of itself
till her waist adopted the poise of dancing
and the meaning of desire. When a very

quiet night arrived, the streets slept,
and silence closed the windows of houses
that were worn down by surprise. As for her,
she slept tired on a bed of tears.
She was visited only by nightmares
of her emptiness, and she awoke.

Tired, she raises her sad shadow
upon a wall; colors in that shadow
are saying goodbye to their radiance.
Blue alleys are engraved on the palm
of a hand. A tear often rolls down
in a red light anticipating
and questioning its own pulse. The heart
dances its way on two cups of amazement.
The road proceeds from ghosts of coal,
of fire that exhibits the power
of balance inside the body.
Smoke climbs over naked arms
wrapped around the neck of nothingness.
I'm not optimistic about the stories
of dew on the gossamer of wings.
I am not pessimistic about
the answers of days on the pavement.

I raise my shadow as a white rose
on a passing cloud. I train my
fingers to forget the aroma
and remember drowsiness. I mix tales
with water of passage and drink silence
that time utters as a quiet sadness
and a dance. Music is my favorite drowning;
in it starts a breath, clearly seen.
I steal all I can of avoidance.
Its night is crucified between eyelids
of wakefulness, and a string blinks
in pain at branches that are burdened
with what they carry. The air gets lighter
while my blood rushes. The world is
immense longing, and many memories
fly from their nests as a postponed
departure flurries. Stars also fall,
blanketed with unbearable haste.

I color my name, and an incomplete age
I color; I draw my heart on a discarded
newspaper and I color that too.
I sculpt my fingers on the wall
and I splash them with panting colors.
The lines on my palm I read in the language
of color and see in them a path
to myself disguised with a mask of extreme
sensitivity at the gate of autumn
that stares with sad eyes on tired trees.
I color the trees, autumn, those eyes,
and the sadness with writing; I color
the concrete crawling upon my soul,
and its dreary towers. I color
them with irrepressible insight
and the dances of parapets overlooking
the blue that is occasionally calm.

In my chest I carry lonely pavements
that are unaware of passersby,
exhausted by the absence of laughter
and the collapsed dreams of teenagers
replete with pulsation. I color
the sidewalks, loneliness, the passersby,
the dreams, and I kindle the pulse
with rhythm and playful imagination.
I color my name and the empty space
as a swing, and the young women
dancing as butterflies composed
by joy as songs made of gossamer.
Likewise I am composed by a shadow
that walks under skies, and by the moon
that winks at sleeping women, and I color
them with the femininity of absence.

Access to the author and his published work incurred one obstacle but was generally easy. Although the Israeli authorities severely restrict the mailing of letters and parcels into and out of Gaza, Yousef used the Internet and Skype to communicate with us translators. Yasmin Snounu and I spoke with him on Skype when we needed clarification of difficult or ambiguous passages in his poems. Yousef is typically more cheerful and upbeat in person than on the page.

Yousef uses both colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic in his poems. Yasmin is an expert in colloquial usage and Yasser Tabbaa adds additional capability in Modern Standard Arabic.

Yousef writes his poems in paragraphs—a prose-poem format now popular in the Middle East. His densely-textured, image-packed sentences can be difficult to read in Arabic, so in translating them I chose to break continuous passages into discrete lines, usually breaking a line at the end of a sentence, clause, or phrase. The length of these units in the original language lends itself to this adjustment, which increases readability.

Yousef shares the desire of all Palestinians for the restitution of their homeland. One distinction between him and the “Resistance Poets” of an earlier Palestinian generation is that his poems avoid militant fervor and instead express skepticism toward the cant of the contending parties claiming to speak for all Palestinians. He is sometimes inclined to blame himself more than anyone else for his deprivations. In an idiom that combines classical and colloquial Arabic, embracing imagism and surrealism, he practices an art which in itself gives him one reason for hope.

Here is Yousef el Qedra’s own description of his work: “As a human being living on this planet, I write to breathe the stolen freedom; I write to open windows in the walls that imprison me; I write to pull out the beauty from the dream that I fashion in life through words. I write because I believe that the word is free; it is the conduit between hearts and continents. Nothing can stop the word; neither occupation nor geography nor siege. I write because the scream of life is stuck in my throat. And when the text comes out from me to the public, it is attempting to search for a mysterious reader whom I know nothing about, neither his place or time; that is exactly the reader to whom I write! Isn’t that what the writing life expands and makes more beautiful? And with writing my passion overflows with the kind of gift that does not come twice.”