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Two Poems by Nohad Salameh

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Susanna Lang
I Greet You, My Twin

Nohad Salameh
Je te salue, ma jumelle

Woman, you whose sins are exquisite
who are like the orchids in Purgatory
with your claws from an untamed panther
and the rusted harmonies of melancholy.

I greet you, my twin
my untouchable
my incandescent shadow
my determined one with your scent of flowing lava.

Woman of seven modulations
in the horizon's wounded ocher
my indestructible one
my imminent one
I see you, native ink in the palm of the hand
transparent like death
as far as silence can reach.

Dance of the One/the Moon

Danse de l'une

Upright
recumbent
walking on the waters of the air
rolling down the slopes of fury
torn from top to bottom
endless river crossed at the ford
woman of black or rose-colored stone
with your scent of books and grass.

Woman, you who are city and region
shutters opened and not fully closed
born of the first gestation
parallel with your death
vast as a morsel of bread
amorous birds perch on your hips
among the most vibrant almond trees.

Woman in the midst of risk and fire
your hands tender as a wound
you who are outraged/glorified
what magic lets you prolong
the indestructible memory of our voices?

*

Young gods take root
in your unchanging fingers
where so many seasons gather
kindling Time
till morning rises.

You do not say a word when
monsters stray inside you
and space dwindles for the rose.

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
in the terror that grips you:
that calm and disconsolate serpent.

Woman with the purity of grass
and the indecency of a statue
Earth fills you to the brim
ready to overflow your banks.

*

Woman, you who surge
furious sea
you swallow the poisonous algae
then retreat—may you spread out
among these many relics
in an unopened shell.

In your bridal dress
you carry your dead
all women
gloved in bees
toward scraggy islands
where you exchange open veins
birthmarks
despairing hands
and mail that has been left for you—
you have become one of them
daughter of the spark.

*

Gardener of infernos
or guardian of golden towers
you dance inside yourself
at the heart of the Invisible
for as long as childhood lasts.
Dance now inside the poem
on the verge of your birth:
multiple
inexhaustible
till you reach the blue of vertigo!

Dance with the force of your death
through the centuries to come
twin of the sun's hyenas
mandala of martyred women.
Dance halfway around
the hem of our dreams—offering and prayer
to wake the oracle of the dervishes.

*

Lady of fields or factories
woman and earthquake
thunderstruck/thundering
with your musical limbs
dance in a sign of transfiguration
at the estuary of precipices.

Visitor from the unspeakable
dance at close range
at the four corners of grief
from the other side of flesh

around the hearth of nativities
the territory of beginnings
inextinguishable
invisible and virile.

Dance, starry with breath—
so you can raze
the forests of bones
amid the indifference of men.

Commentary

Nohad Salameh, born in Baalbek, Lebanon in 1947 and a journalist in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, has lived in France since 1989. Though her poetry is not limited by her country's history or her own, it echoes with exile and the apprehension of violence. Still her poems sing, and this sequence of lyrics in particular reads like an invocation. In a 2014 conversation with Gwen Garnier-Duguy, Salameh said,

Quand on écrit, on s'écrit soi-même, devenant simultanément le moule et le contenu ; notre langage se développe alors au rythme d'une double pulsation: cérébrale et charnelle.

[When we write, we write our selves, becoming both mold and material; our language evolves to the rhythm of a double pulse, both cerebral and embodied.]

The cerebral is not new in French poetry, and Nohad Salameh is also drawn to the surreal, having been mentored by the Lebanese poet and playwright Georges Schehadé, himself close to the French Surrealist writers André Breton and Benjamin Péret. Abstraction and surrealism can be an uncomfortable fit in

American poetry. Sitting with the translations over time as I do with my own poems, reading them aloud to hear the rhythms, I have searched for that moment of balance where the translation is true to its roots as well as to its new home.

It can be a matter of the small connective words that hold a thought together, prepositions and demonstrative adjectives. In this stanza, the prepositional phrases and abstract terms pile up in a way that is much easier to navigate in French than in English:

*Dame de plusieurs univers
tu demeures seule dans l'ailleurs
de l'effroi qui t'enlace :
serpent calme et pathétique.*

My first and most literal translation made my ears hurt:

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
of the terror that embraces you:
calm and pathetic serpent.

Small shifts allowed me to create a structure in which the line break functions as a comma between parallel phrases, and to make the serpent more present:

Lady of several universes
you remain alone in the elsewhere
in the terror that grips you:
that calm and disconsolate serpent.

In addition, there is the distinction between *pathétique* in French, a word that Salameh returns to in other poems, and “pathetic” in English, which carries negative associations not attached to the French word. The poet and I have discussed that distinction, which isn’t easily accessible to a non-native speaker.

Salameh’s hymns to a woman come from the East extend her long-time interest in feminism, less as a political movement

than as a spiritual presence. Her most recent books are *Le Livre de Lilith* (*The Book of Lilith*, L'Atelier du Grand Tétrás, 2016) and a collection of essays on women writers, *Marcheuses au bord du gouffre* (*Women at the Edge of the Precipice*, Lettre volée, 2017). Hers is a prophetic voice in a global conversation about the power women bring to the world.

Source text:

Salameh, Nohad. *D'autres annonces: Poèmes 1980–2012*. Le Castor Astral, 2012, pp. 197, 199–202.