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(*my beloved*)

THE DIWAN OF ALIM MAGHREBI

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Translated from the Arabic

DAVID SOLWAY



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for Eric Ormsby

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INTRODUCTION



Alim Maghrebi was born in Casablanca in 1959, the son of Munir Maghrebi, one of Morocco's most celebrated musical composers and an oud master of international stature. Alim was educated at the Sorbonne and did post-doctoral work at the University of London, acquiring degrees in Philosophy and Economics. Fluent in French and English, he is currently a Special Counsellor in the Morocco Bureau of Communications and Culture in Rabat.

The fact that he was educated largely in Europe will account for his evident familiarity with Western thought and expression. But his roots run deep into the rich tradition of Moroccan poetry and it is from these roots that he draws his inspiration as well as the confidence to develop the contemporary idiom in which his oeuvre is decanted. He writes in the spirit of the "New Arabic" — a poetic alloy which consists of ancestral themes and preoccupations modulated in the language of the street, the newspaper, movies, technology and the Internet.

Accompanied by such respected poets as Mohamed Bentalha and Salah Boussrif, Maghrebi was instrumental in founding the House of Poetry in 1996. Established in Casablanca, its mission was to offer hospitality to both local dissidents and foreign visitors and "to assert the poetic word within Arab and world horizons." Its purpose was to transcend the divisiveness introduced into social and intellectual life by political compulsions and, from a technical perspective, to break with the strict metrical poetry of the 1940s and develop the practice of free verse (*shi'r hurr*). If Maghrebi's work is any indication, the program has to some extent succeeded,

although he has nevertheless retained some of the elements of the metrical unit (*taf'ilah*), making frequent use of nunation and the chant cadence.

There is for the Western mind a certain sentimentality in these poems, but it is entirely unabashed and, we might say, authorized by the long history of Arabic poetry. I should emphasize that, although Maghrebi is steeped in Islamic theology and reflection owing to his upbringing and early education, he is an avowed secularist and very much a citizen of the modern world. This is clear from the stance toward love, relationships and politics conspicuous in his lines and from the facetious humour and self-irony he occasionally indulges. (When queried in a Radio Morocco interview about the various registers he deploys, he replied: "The oud has many strings.") There is also the fact that he does not shy away from alluding to a contemporary Israeli poet of whose work he obviously approves. He is, to my knowledge, the only poet in the Arabic cultural domain capable of so risky and unprecedented a gesture. Along with Boujema El Aoufi and Mohamed Bachkar, he is now recognized as one of the chief practitioners of the "New Poetry," a movement which gathered momentum in the late eighties and which, in the words of Norddine Zoutini, editor of the journal *Moroccan Poetry*, sought to create a poetry "which contains the present, yet exceeds it, and is different from it." Their work, she continues, "reveals a strong commitment to the act of writing, and their deep visionary sense of the future." What Maghrebi has added to both the style and substance of the movement is an equally strong commitment to the individual, the sense of intimacy which grounds one's connection to the

world. In the turmoil and vehemence that seems native to Islamic public life, so profound an immersion in the stream of personal emotion is to be applauded.

The woman to whom the poet addresses his diwan is obviously sourced in personal experience but there is little doubt that she assumes emblematic importance as a capricious and teasing Muse figure. The two poems in which Maghrebi invokes the Israeli poet, Dov Ben-Zamir, who in his own work struggles to come to terms with a mysterious woman called, significantly, “Rosa,” would suggest that Maghrebi is operating with a symbolic distillate of experience, if the entire drift of the collection did not already make it amply clear. His plea for the love of a woman who at times resists and at others accepts his suit inflames his imagination as it mirrors the poetic quest. Readers familiar with Arabic poetry would also recognize a pervasive allusion to the Meccan poet ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi’a (644-721), cued in one of Maghrebi’s initial epigraphs, who was famed for his lyrics lamenting the melancholy transience of love and the whimsical nature of the inamorata as well as the comic aspects of an overweening passion—tendencies which we detect in Maghrebi’s work. Abi Rabi’a’s obsession with a mercurial and hard-hearted beauty by the name of Thurayya has resonated in the Arabic romantic tradition from the eighth century to the present moment. Though Maghrebi refers in his text to the enigmatic Thurayya figure only as “habibi” (my love, my darling), she is plainly a modern incarnation of her fickle predecessor and an avatar of the unpredictable Muse while at the same time the vulnerable and loveable recipient of his heartfelt devotion.

In sum, here is an Arabic poet who recognizes the incubulum of his precursors but who would, at the same time, find himself at home in any Western capital.

— DAVID SOLWAY

A NOTE ON THE TITLE



Deriving from the adjective *habib*, or “beloved,” the word *habibi* technically refers to the male recipient of the endearment, the female form being *habibati* or *habibti*. But it is commonly used to apply to either gender. In the Arabic hit song *Habibi Ya Nour Al Ain*, which the poet clearly has in mind, the term signifies a lovely young woman.

*It happens that towards you
Sweeping nostalgia transports me
So to your lantern-lit boulevards I run*

— Amina El Bakouri, “Visionary Eulogy (1)”

*Instead of assaulting you like a wolf in the forest
I licked your hand like a dog wishing for love*

— Abdel-Ilah Salhi,
“There Are Stories that End before Starting”

*But my desire was unfulfilled, for she had sent
me no reply,
Had she done so, she would have been excused,
for speech persuades.*

— ‘Umar ibn Abi Rami’a

Habibi

*you are the palm from which the date grows
drawing the sun to its tender flesh*

Habibi

*you are the date which glorifies the palm
and makes it burn with sweetness*

Habibi

*you are the sun itself
which touches the palm with light
and kisses the date with longing*

Habibi

*you are the palm, the date, the sun,
an oasis in the heart of the desert*

*and also the desert itself
whose dunes undulate in my heart
where no oasis is*

*My love, why do you
no longer write to me?
Why are you silent as the desert rose?
Why have you despoiled me of prophecy?
Why do you strike me with the hands of time?
Why have you plucked the mimosas from my field?
Why are your photo albums scoured of memory?
Why have you crushed my gangster's fedora?
Why have you taken me from myself
and dispersed the remnants like ashes from an urn?
Why have you sent me beyond the common earth
so that I lay the dust of Mars with my tears?
Why have you shattered the diadem of lights?
Why have you burdened me with miracles?
Why do you slake my need with thirst?
Why have you filled my belly with hunger?
Why do you flaunt me with my very words?
Why do you strip me of the Caliphate?
Why do you turn my lips to stone?
Why do you turn my heart to bone?
Why do you feed me to the wind?
Why, my love, why
do you no longer write to me?*

THE KITE

*Habibi,
let us say
for the sake of argument
the kite string snaps,
the kite dwindles into the sky
like a snowflake going the wrong way
and it vanishes from your sight.
I would still love you.
Or let us say
the string holds firm,
made of the toughest nylon or camel sinew,
only you decide
to let it slip from your hand
and give it to the wind's cold revolutions.
I would still love you.
Let us say,
to think the impossible,
the kite tears away of its own accord,
possessed by the devil's sudden whim,
refusing to be subordinate
to the taut, restraining cord
or the hand that wisely guides it.
Even then, habibi,
I would still love you.
Even then.*

* * *

*Lord of the Opening, portrayed
as a beautiful naked woman,
lascivious and Moabitish.*

*Hell's ambassador to France,
our conqueror and ally
who bequeathed us a language.*

*Sent to earth by the Satan
to test the rumour of married happiness.
The rumour was groundless.*

*His name is Belphegor.
He seduces men to perversity through invention and
delight.
And he is the source of your power.*

A DREAM

*I am sitting in a café
by an open window,
waiting for you to appear.
The walls are rich hues of brown:
mahogany, oak, teak, burnt umber.
I am reading a glossy magazine,
waiting for you.
I am waiting for you.
Finally you arrive with your crown of black hair,
with your breasts like the fruit of Paradise,
with your walk of a young girl
like Spring entering the room,
your dress billowing with the wind's sweetness,
you pass my table without a glance
and leave with the handsome man
sitting against the wall where
there is no window.
I scribble some notes in the margin
of the glossy magazine,
pretending indifference,
preserving my dignity.
Through the open window a fruit vendor
offers me a ripe pomegranate,
opulent reds and greens fill the room
that you have left suddenly barren.
I shake my head,
I have no use for the fruit,
it cannot restore me to the sunlight.
I continue writing in the margins.
Perhaps it is a poem.
Perhaps it is this poem.
I am still waiting for you.*

*It is always
the same little ritual:
first you make coffee.
As you grind the beans
you begin to remember me
and as you heat the water
I come to the surface of the present moment.
And when you pour the thick dark liquid
into the faience cups,
stirring sweetness in
with small circular motions,
I am brought to life,
I step into the room,
I grow familiar,
I turn with the world you have made.
It is always the same
little ritual:
first you make coffee.*

THE GARDEN OF PERFUMED DELIGHTS

*So now be sodomites, you Arabs
Turn not away from it*

— Abu Nuwas

*I do not care
to mount young boys
with kiss-curls twisting on their brows,
demure and silken in their bearing,
flesh smooth as a well-worn cliché,
and ride them to the pinnacle
where, dismounting like a horseman after plunder,
I sing my pleasure for posterity.
I do not care
to gaze upon tumescent youths
scattered about me like Koranic pearls
when I have visions that no holy book
would dare embrace or explicate
to fill a chapter with divinity.
If Abu Nuwas had but known my love
the garden of perfumed delights
would have wafted a sweeter scent
than any fragrance that might have pleased
the flaring nostrils of that sybarite
or teased the wine-drenched lyric from his quill.
O lady, you are the garden of perfumed delights
who would have put
an Abbasid voluptuary to shame
and been the source of a splendid, new tradition
as you are now
the taper that illuminates my page.*

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I wish to thank Alim Maghrebi for his patience in replying to my frequent inquiries and for elucidating many of the nuances and subtleties in the original which I would otherwise have missed. I am equally grateful to Yolande Amzallag for introducing me to the world of Moroccan lore. My thanks go out as well to the *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec* for a project grant which provided me with the time to complete the translation.

NOTES



“Habibi”: As noted in the Introduction, the term is a standard endearment in speech and song. Colloquially, it can refer to either a man or a woman.

After Reading Dov Ben-Zamir: Dov Ben-Zamir is an Israeli poet. His most recent book is *New Wine, Old Bottles*.

One Day: This is one of the more controversial of Maghrebi’s poems, in which he has been perceived as breaking several taboos that govern poetic expression in the Arab world: the allusion to a certain form of erotic intimacy, and the desecration implicit in using the holy book to complete a simile. In a subsequent poem, “Do not for a moment think,” Maghrebi tempts the laws against blasphemy by comparing his love to the “un-created text,” namely, the Koran.

“When I enter you”: The story of the cave of the seven sleepers in ancient folk tale, originating in a Syriac source, and represented in both the Christian literature and the Koran.

“I’m no good with clocks and calendars”: In talkbacks to the journal *Nichane* in which this poem appeared, several readers objected to the metaphor of the “tick” of eternity as inconsistent. Maghrebi replied to the effect that the lover brings another kind of time into the world, a “timeless time,” which starts with a single and paradoxical tick. *Ipse dixit*.

Maa’ak Lilnihaya: translates as “I will be with you to the end,” a phrase from the famous song of Amr Diab,

Habibi Ya Nour El Ain, which won the prize for the best Arabic song of 1996.

Names: The word “ulema” refers to the educated class of Muslim scholars and is etymologically related to “Alim.” Blue, of course, is the colour of the Virgin’s robe in Renaissance art and signifies innocence or purity.

“I picked up the little black portable”: A *nuba* is a two-movement musical suite in a single mode or *maqam*, an Arab system of pitch organization that allows for the construction of melodies and improvisations within a scale.

The Garden of Perfumed Delights: this is the title of a notorious diwan (alternately: *The Perfumed Garden*) by Abu Nuwas al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami (756-815), by common consent one of the greatest poets of Arabic literature, who flourished at the height of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Though he is justly celebrated, his poems urging the pleasures of homosexuality (*mudhakkarat*) are often censored or deplored. The phrase “scattered about me like Koranic pearls” derives from two passages of the Koran, 52:24 and 76:19, depicting the delights of the life after death for the noble and heroic among the faithful. These suras read, respectively: “Round about them will serve boys beautiful as pearls well-guarded” and “And round about them will serve boys of perpetual freshness; if thou seest them, thou would think them scattered pearls.”

“I accompanied you to the terminal”: The “gul” is a polygonal design motif. “Senneh” refers to the single knot of the Persian weave, as contrasted with the “ghiardes”

or double knot of the Turkish rug. Isfahan rugs are the most finely knotted in the world, with up to 500 knots per square inch.

“He was wearing a black galabieh”: In Egyptian mythology, the ibis bird is associated with the Thoth, the god of judgment; it is also reputed to be the last form of wildlife to take shelter before a hurricane and the first to emerge afterward. “Sidi” is an Arabic honorific, meaning “Sir” or “Lord.”

“My nose quivers in anticipation”: The Moroccan flag consists of a red field with a black-bordered, green, five-pointed interlocking star.

“Too late”: The dirham is the Moroccan unit of currency.

“I saw the light”: the phrase “the mark of Zorro” refers to a visual infirmity called “teichopsia,” half-blindness accompanied by a zigzag pattern.

“It’s been about 1001 nights now”: Sharayar is the name of the Shah in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, compiled not as many assume during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Haroun al-Rashid but much later in Mamluk Cairo. The phrase “endless accounts” is also an elliptical reference to the fact that Scheherazade’s nocturnal stories are left unfinished.

“When the screen goes dark”: This poem is an excellent example of the “New Arabic,” as described in the Preliminary Note, and the “New Poetry,” as defined by Nordine Zoutini.

Love Poem: Gazelle horns, or *Kab El Ghzal*, are a popular, crescent-shaped, Moroccan pastry, served at celebrations and in particular at wedding banquets.

“Some of its rivers bubble with pure water”: Maghrebi is once again playing with several famous Koranic verses describing the charm and glory of the Islamic Heaven, or *Jannah*.

Qasida: This poem is constructed on the model of a classical *Qasida*, with its first part echoing the *nasib* (nostalgic reflection), its second ringing ironic changes on the *rahil* (travel section) and its third referring explicitly to the *hija* (jokes), *hikam* (moral maxims) and *fakhr* (praise), with one of which the form often concludes. It should be read in the framework of the famous *Qasida* by Sayyid al-Imam Abdalla al-Alawi, praising the perfection and majesty of the Creation, several lines of which have been adapted to Maghrebi’s poetic intentions. There is also a hint of the celebrated *Qasida Burda*, the poem of the mantle or the scarf, which led to the cure from paralysis of its author, Sharafuddin Muhammed al-Busiri. But the latter allusion is ironically inflected, deliberately playing with what is called in the traditional commentary a “blatant shirk,” or misprision (technically: ascribing partners or associates to Allah). One such violation involves the length of the poem itself for the *Qasida* generally runs to one hundred lines or more.

Dajjal: In Arabic mythology, Dajjal is the name of the devil or “antichrist.”

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR



David Solway is the author of many books of poetry including *Modern Marriage*, which received the QSPELL Prize for Poetry; *Franklin's Passage*, winner of *Le Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal* and *Reaching for Clear*, awarded the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry. His work has been anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*; McClelland and Stewart's *New Canadian Poetry*; *Border Lines: Contemporary Poetry in English* from Copp Clark; *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* from St. Martin's Press; and *Les Cent Plus Beaux Poèmes Québécois* with Fides, among others.

Among his prose publications, *Education Lost* won the QSPELL Prize for Nonfiction and *Random Walks* was a finalist for *Le Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal*. A French translation of his writings on education, *Le bon prof*, was awarded *Le Prix Spirale*. He has also published several volumes on political subjects, of which *The Big Lie: On Terror, Antisemitism, and Identity* was a Canadian best-seller.

Solway's essays and articles have appeared in journals and magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*; *The Sewanee Review*; *PN Review* (U.K.); *Descant*; *Partisan Review*; *liberté*; *International Journal of Applied Semiotics*; *Policy Options: Institute on Research in Public Policy*; and *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*. He is currently a regular contributor to *FrontPage Magazine*, *Pajamas Media* and *Academic Questions* in the U.S.

PRAISE FOR DAVID SOLWAY'S POETRY



I have enjoyed David Solway's poems for decades. Here, as always, Solway writes with a Gravesian dash and brio, taking (and giving) pleasure in a fine vocabulary, a gift for surprising figures, and a striking breadth of reference.

— RICHARD WILBUR

Some of the most sensual poems ever published in Canada ... Canadian poetry has not seen anything so ambitious, so intriguing, so intellectually and emotionally challenging, for decades.

— CANADIAN BOOK REVIEW ANNUAL

They are true poems, and their play releases powerful forces.

— PETER DAVISON (THE ATLANTIC)

OTHER BOOKS BY ALIM MAGHREBI



Night without Stars (poetry)

The City in the Desert (poetry)

The House of Poetry (pamphlet)

Mended Nets (essays)