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NICOLE BALL

TAHAR BEN JELLOUN. *THE RISING OF THE ASHES*. TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH WITH A FOREWORD BY CULLEN GOLDBLATT. CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, SAN FRANCISCO, 2010. ISBN 978-0-87286-526-6.
 BILINGUAL EDITION; (FRENCH TITLE: LA REMONTÉE DES CENDRES, ÉDITIONS DU SEUIL, 1991)

In 1991, when the two long poems that compose *La remontée des Cendres* came out in a bilingual French and Arabic edition, Tahar Ben Jelloun had already published an impressive body of work encompassing many different literary genres (poetry, theater, novel, essays) and had been awarded the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, for his novel *La Nuit Sacrée* (1987). Born in Morocco in 1944, he emigrated to France in 1971 and chose to write in French. He is a widely celebrated post-colonial writer and a tireless spokesperson for the voiceless immigrant workers of France and the French youth “issus de l’immigration” of the housing projects around France’s major cities.

The Rising of the Ashes is apparently the first book of his poetry to come out in English. Large excerpts of an earlier version of Cullen Goldblatt’s translation have appeared in May 2006 in *Words Without Borders: The Online Magazine for International Literature*.

Cullen Goldblatt, a South African native, is a poet and a translator of Francophone African poetry. He lives in New York. His translations of African francophone poetry have appeared in *Guernica*, an online magazine, and *Chimurenga*, a South African journal. His translation of the book-length poem, *elobi*, by Cameroonian author Patrice Nganang, was published by Africa World Press in 2006.

The first of the two poems gives the book its title. It ends with the date February-April 1991, shortly after the end of the Gulf war. It is a tribute to the dead of that largely forgotten conflict, a lament over the destruction it brought upon that part of the world, and, through the power of words, an attempt to have them rise from their ashes and bring them back to life. Here is what Tahar Ben Jelloun writes in his preface:

Officially, the Gulf war is over. Kuwait is no longer occupied, Iraq is in large part destroyed. And the dead are buried. But not all the dead. The Westerners counted their dead and repatriated them. Exiting, they left behind thousand of victims. We will perhaps never know how many people, troops and civilians, were killed by the tons of bombs dropped on Iraq. It is to these anonymous bodies, bodies burnt to ashes seen briefly in television images, that this text intends to give homage. It would give them names and inscribe them on a gravestone for remembrance. Without hatred. With dignity. In their mass grave, the bodies will form a kind of anonymous face, containing and evoking all the dead.

The mission of the poet is to keep memory alive even if

words pale when the wound is deep, when the well-panned chaos is brutal and irreversible. Against that, words. (...) The poet shouts or murmurs; knows silence could be akin to an offense, a crime.

All the dead who become “this body that was a body”, “this body that was a soul, a name and a face”, are not just abstract casualties of war; their ashes must rise from a very specific soil and time to be carried away by the rising wind and “go settle on the eyes of the living.” The images are often drawn (or born) from an “afflicted desert”, a “land of sand”, “avid for water” that “was given only blood to irrigate the great silence”, “a silence that keeps a few grains of sand”. The ashes are those of a body in a “black plastic bag” with “a gaze slowly uprooted from the face”, with eyes that are “holes where flies live”, of a body which is a “wrecked house. / There is neither door nor window / just a lacerated mattress, a cooking pot, a stale loaf of bread, a coat on a hook, gutted wall, grey dust and the previous year’s calendar.”

But they also carry the memory of a body filled with a simple, happy life “with a garden, a fountain and some books”, that was

once “a word”, “a dream” and “a laugh”.

Then, about one third into the poem “a voice” replaces the poet’s voice and the “the body” becomes “us”, the dead:

Though we may wish to stay anonymous, it is
our destiny at stake.
The land draws us in; swallows us then gives us to the brackish river water.
We float on our backs, stomachs swollen
eyes staring at the sun
we no longer have eyes, only sockets imprisoning
images.
Our skin is no longer our skin.
They have pulled it off us like a stolen cloak
a borrowed shroud.

Then “another voice” takes over, then a third one, then a fourth, and they each become “I”, individual dead engaged with each other in a mournful conversation from the different pits they were thrown into:

(...) I no longer have a stomach
I no longer have a body
I am a bag
a burlap sack full of earth
I am a field above a cliff
I am a field of stones where snakes sleep
My dismembered limbs are cold
Is this hell
to be cold in a phantom body?
Who speaks from the bottom of this grave?

But these phantom voices aren’t just mournful. They are bitter and angry because “the portrait of the dictator is intact”, because “the portrait of the gravedigger remains untouched.”

Who will return a name to my wife and a face to
our past?
Who will recall the masked mornings
when a metal arm snatched the children?
“It is for the front”
“For the Nation” they said.
It is an image that falls
trodden by the adolescents’ bare feet.

“This is for Victory”, open stomach,
 from which wounded sparrows flee.
 The Mother of Victories is an immense cemetery
 without gravestones and prayers
 without trees and without cats
 a great expanse where the blood of words and of
 people
 mingle in the sand.

Another voice:

And me
 I refuse the prayer for the dead
 the posthumous glory and the rose made of soil
 I am neither soldier nor martyr
 I am a shoemaker and I have forgotten my name
 I am an artisan and I like love songs
 I love honey and olive oil
 I like arak and orange blossoms.
 (...)

Tahar Ben Jelloun’s anger is not just aimed at the
 “gravedigger”. “They”, as the poet calls them, or “The world of
 the powerful” do not forget their dead.

“They” counted their dead.
 Delicate hands
 white-gloved hands pulled them from the sand
 strong arms set them in coffins.
 Official mourning lifted them covered with flags
 and myth.
 The day accompanied them as far as the cemetery.

They named their dead
 whole bodies and ennobled souls
 gift to green prairies
 for memory under glass
 and gentle shadows
 and heaven’s grace.

(Who has not seen at the end of the evening news the
 name and face of the fallen American troops of the day and
 heard how many had died at that point? Who knows how many
 Iraqi civilians or troops have died then and now and will we ever
 know?)

But back to the poet’s foreword:

The United States of America has developed the habit of washing its hands
 and soothing its conscience after having caused death and destruction. After declaring
 the logic of war, this world takes up, with complete equanimity, the logic of the gravedig-
 ger.

Once one has covered thousands of anonymous corpses with a blanket of
 ashes and sand, one cultivates forgetting.

Which is exactly what one of the ghost’s poetic voices in
 its burlap or black plastic bag says from the bottom of its pit:

Who will count our dead?
 Heap of ashes forgotten by the roadside
 Limbs scattered among abandoned carcasses.

Again, it is the “word”, the poem’s mission never to forget. The poet must name, de-
 nounce, and ultimately, revive:

This is a voice forgetful of nothing
 brushing against innocent hands
 rummaging inside peaceable sleep
 giving way beneath the liquid fire of words
 and becoming a face
 a word
 a life.

Ben Jelloun concludes on a positive, hopeful note, on
 the notion that war, death and destruction can never be the end
 of man, for “he does not cease to be reborn.” The dead of that
 very specific war and of all wars rise from their ashes to become
 “man” again, “all men.”

* * *

The second part of the book consists in a series of po-
 ems of unequal length collected under the title *Unidentified*
 (*Non identifiés*). It is about different conflicts that took place on
 different soils a few years before the Gulf War: the war in Leba-
 non and the killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.
 Although the form is different, the intention is the same: to re-

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member the dead by giving an identity to those “unidentified decomposing men” with their “face and name obliterated”

The dead of the *Rising of the Ashes* were actually more symbolic. Here the specific dates (some days in 1983, later in 1988), the naming—of specific places (cities like Saïda in Southern Lebanon or Palestinian refugee camps where massacres took place), and of people, are particularly poignant. We learn from Ben Jelloun’s footnote at the very end that

From 1981 to 2008, the *Revue d'études palestiniennes* published a chronology of resistance and repression in the occupied territories. It is in this catalogue of everyday hardship that some of these faces were named.

Even if the Arabic names of the titles were invented, they have the power of creating an immediate poetic effect as well as a sense of reality. Each poem ends with the death of the bearer of the name. Here is a short, simple one in both languages:

IYÂD RÂDI JANAJARA

20 décembre 1988
 A Naplouse
 après les blessures
 la mort s'est glissée dans la douceur des mots
 et le ciel a dépêché une prière
 calme et sereine.
 Elle s'est posée, précise, sur un corps fondu dans
 l'argile.
 Il avait vingt et ans
 et venait de Tallûza

December 20, 1988
 In Naplouse
 after the wounds
 death slipped between the softness of the words
 and the sky sent a calm
 serene prayer.
 Death set itself down precisely upon a body cast in
 clay.
 He was twenty-one years old
 and came from Tallûza.

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We will know nothing of the killers or the reasons for the killings. The anger is not obvious anymore but the grief is. The few images evoking simple elements of the land once stolen on that part of the earth, a piece of garment abandoned in the landscape somewhere, and the silence perceptible in the rhythms of the poems are all the more wrenching. Like in the first stanza of the last long poem:

Les jours éteints sont faits de silence:
 l'ombre muette d'un regard déterrante la pierre se
 pose;
 elle s'étale et retient la main lourde de l'hiver.
 Sur cette table: une saison, une forêt et le village
 qui descend vers la rivière.

The extinguished days are made of silence:
 the mute shadow of a gaze that unearths stone
 comes to rest;
 the shadow spreads and holds back winter's heavy
 hand.
 On this table: a season, a forest and the village
 which descends toward the stream.

Or later in the sixth one:

Ni le citronnier, ni l'absinthe, ni la nuit mais l'absence:
 une robe mouillée posée sur un banc de pierres
 blanches;

Neither lemon tree, nor absinthe, nor night, but
 absence:
 a wet dress, set on a white stone bench;

To remember the dead by giving the reader a small sense of what their lives had been like and to grieve for their absence is what the poet has assigned himself to do. The poem ends peacefully with a glimmer of hope:

7.
 A statue made of words has put blue on a square
 of sky dressed in white.
 Men do not talk anymore.
 They watch the sun grow distant.

Day, like a child, sits on their shoulders.
 Silence then laughter.
 Their country does not have wrinkles
 it has an immense forehead where children run
 barefoot.
 The moon unfurls its transparent dreams.
 Today no bullet has reached these dancing bodies.

8.
 (...)

Obstinée,
 la lueur descend l'escalier du temps.
 Et à chaque corps, elle donne le pain et le nom.

(...)
 Stubborn,
 the faint light descends time's staircase.
 And to each body, it gives bread and a name.

Faithfulness and humility are the main quality of Cullen Goldblatt's translation. I could point out a few negligible mistakes here and there but they never affect the general meaning of the lines. One might occasionally regret this faithfulness that keeps the translator too close to the French and sometimes prevents him from producing a harmonious English poem. But in a way this is unfair. What matters is the general impression: if I hadn't read the poems bilingually, as this edition invites you to do, I am sure I would have been just as moved by, for instance, the calm elegy of grief that permeates the second poem (my favorite) in both languages.

This is a necessary book, whose relevance for us, unfortunately, has nothing to do with poetry. Twenty years later, violence is still raging in the Middle East and contrary to what the poet says, hope, for the moment, seems to stay safely enclosed in the pages of *The Rising of the Ashes*.

But what the French call "poésie engagée" is still poetry. We have to be grateful to Tahar Ben Jelloun, Cullen Goldblatt and City Lights for having proven that the media do not always have the exclusive privilege of addressing problems that matter to us.

YVONNE FRECCERO

SAHAR KHALIFEH. *THE END OF SPRING*. TRANSLATED
 FROM THE ARABIC BY PAULA HAYDAR. NORTHAMPTON,
 MA: INTERLINK, 2008. ISBN 978-1-56656-681-0.

The End of Spring is a Palestinian coming-of-age novel enacted in the years leading up to the spring of 2002 and the siege of President Arafat's compound. The Palestinians' struggle for survival after the 1948 Nakba (literally "the disaster", refers to the plight of Palestinians after the occupation of Palestine in that year) has been described in many recently published memoirs but few have penetrated the minds of the younger generation born into the chaos and violence of Palestine today.

Sahar Khalifeh introduces us to three young Palestinians living in the Nablus/Ramallah area who are unwillingly but inevitably drawn into the resistance movement: Majid, the eldest, his younger brother Ahmad, and Suad, the young woman who loves him. Although Majid is the star, most of the story unfolds through the eyes of Ahmad, who becomes the central focus of *The End of Spring*.

Majid is a handsome, athletic teenager, very popular among his fellow students for his singing and guitar playing. His mother is dead and his father has remarried, Ahmad being the son of the father's second marriage. Majid's songs of patriotism attract large crowds among the youthful population who are starved for the pop culture of the west. His one desire is to become a famous singer and travel abroad. Even to his disapproving father "his voice came in warm waves, releasing the soul from its lodgings, freeing it to live the dream in all its details, young again, stronger, deeper, believing more than ever in freedom and humanity."(73)

Majid's accidental embroilment in the murder of a corrupt politician unleashes a chain of disastrous events. The resistance movement claims him as one of their own but "the only thing he knew about the revolution were the words he sang at parties and concerts."(107) Younger brother Ahmad is the complete opposite, always dreaming, head down, rarely talking, yet he idolizes his brother. Both father and teacher recognize Ahmad's artistic ability, and his father gives him a camera to encourage him to put his talents to work. One day, while taking