

UNFINISHED WORDS ABOUT  
OUR ARAB RULERS

by FAOUZIA ALOUI

*Translated from the Arabic by* ALI ZNAIDI

Today there is no room for uttering words outside history.  
Nothing forces me to language  
that conveys a portion of meaning  
and drops what remains so that wildfire ignites.  
No, I will not make allusions today,  
nor will I resort to metonymy.  
I will write down explicitly  
what the singer has said to his night  
and lie on the story.  
I will surround myself with all those who resorted to their figurative  
expressions, wrapped themselves in dull metaphors,  
and rested their heads on their dreams  
so that their virgin, that unbored pearl,  
comes to them at night.  
I will utter dry waterless words  
and make a miserable obituary in order to give birth to the poem.  
I will utter trivial words about our rulers.  
Ornate poetry about them doesn't work.  
I will turn honeyed words in their memory  
into stings of sterile bees.  
I will distrust their vision.  
There is nothing I desire from their treachery.  
I doubt that they see  
a passionate moon that glided along over the ground  
or a chrysanthemum.  
They were barefoot in the homelands  
despite the military boot.  
They saw no further than their noses.  
They don't see a dove  
that landed by mistake

in Tahrir Square  
or a flower that towered up accidentally here  
in the palm of the hand of a child standing  
under the shadow of a truck which stains the country with its salt.  
They were drivers of the wind  
and their clouds griefs of a grim time.  
They were castrated  
wrongly thinking that progeny is what their right hands possess,  
while their left ones are paralyzed.  
Despite military decorations that chronicled  
the cry of those who slept to the country's pain,  
they were the mourning coal of our days.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: 2011 was a turning point in contemporary Tunisian history. The popular upheavals in the interior regions of Tunisia following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17, 2010 led to the toppling of Ben Ali's regime. The Tunisian revolution, or whatever one wants to call it, was believed to be the ignition of the Arab Spring revolutions that took place in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

Before this event, the media was controlled, the people's voice was muted, and those with subversive ideas were put behind bars. Tunisian women writers and activists were prominently involved in the revolution. For example, activist and author of the blog *A Tunisian Girl* Lina Ben Mhenni (1983-2020), who had been censored under the Ben Ali regime, documented the revolution and fought ferociously for freedom and against dictatorship. Her militancy and struggle

were inspiring for many.

Faouzia Aloui, a prominent figure of the contemporary Tunisian literary and cultural scene, is also an illustrative example. She is famous for her politics-laden writing, which has been argued by many to be both semantically profound and vivid and, at the same time, bold and subversive.

This poem was written in the beginning of the Arab revolutions to express contempt with the injustices of the Arab rulers. It was published in her blog on June 10, 2011.<sup>1</sup>

In it Aloui uncovers the secrets of Arab dictators. She describes them as sterile and castrated and without any aesthetic taste. They are depicted living in darkness despite the glitter of their military decorations. She also depicts them as blind because "[t]hey saw no further than their noses." That's to say they see only themselves and care only for their interests, denouncing their short-sighted-

1. <https://fawzialouli.wordpress.com/2011/06/10/>

ness as both a sociopolitical and aesthetic flaw and how they can't see beauty exemplified in "a passionate moon that glided along over the ground / or a chrysanthemum." She also concentrates on language use and how poets and writers were cautious in using it in their era.

Although the poem doesn't refer to specific events related to the Tunisian Revolution, it refers to the Arab Spring more broadly through the reference to Tahrir Square. The whole poem operates as a denunciation or a critique to Arab dictatorship. Having recourse to vivid imagery and rich diction, Aloui draws the reader into a poem of denunciation without losing the poetic sap. This latter element is challenging in the translation process. I hope I have done justice to Aloui's poem. I tried my best to be faithful to the spirit of denunciation and at the same time let the translated poem whisper and utter its poeticity in the reader's ears.

FAOUZIA ALOUI is a Tunisian poet and fiction writer. She was born in Kasserine in 1957. She holds a BA in Arabic language from the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Tunis (ENS) in 1981 and an MA in Arabic literature from the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences of Sousse in 2009. Her poems and short stories have been published in numerous Tunisian and Arabic literary magazines in print and online. She is the author of several short story collections, including *Ali and the Foal of Wind* (1995), *The Dye* (1999), *Fire in the Utopian City* (2001), and *The Ceramic Bird* (2003), as well as five poetry collections titled respectively *A Flying Isthmus* (1997), *The Sacrifice of Absence* (2009), *Free* (2013), *Indifference* (2017), and *The Autumn Mistress* (2018).

ALI ZNAIDI (b. 1977) lives in Redeyef, Tunisia. He is the author of several chapbooks, including *Experimental Ruminations* (Fowlpox Press, 2012), *Moon's Cloth Embroidered with*

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