

The Tragedy of the Elephant

Adrian Grima

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Contemporary Maltese Literature in Translation
Inizjamed – Midsea Books
2005

Other Publications by Inizjamed

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Bliet (u Miti) (2002)
F'Kull Belt Hemm Kantuniera (2003)
Ktieb għall-Ħruq (2005)

Contemporary Maltese Literature in Translation
Published by Inizjamed and Midsea Books
November 2005
Series Editor: Adrian Grima
Concept and design: Pierre Portelli
Comment by Ronny Someck translated from Hebrew by
Shlomit Anbar
Printed in Malta at Gutenberg Press, Tarxien
ISBN: 99932-620-9-9

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***It-Traġedja ta' l-Iljunfant
Li Ried Jidhol f'Gaġġa ta' l-Ghasafar***

*Smajt grajja mhux tas-soltu,
tingħad mix-xjuħ kultant,
li f'gaġġa ta' l-għasafar,
ried jidhol iljunfant.*

*Allura dan qatagħha
li jfettaħ naqra l-bieb.
U ħareġ mus għall-gaġġa,
u bih fetaħha ktieb.*

*Kuntent dan hejja ruħu
biex fiha jmidd riġlejh;
'zda f'daqqa waħda 'nduna
bi ħsieb li daħal ħdejh.*

*Dil-gaġġa kienet gaġġa
imm' issa żgur m'għadhiex.
għax gaġġa tkun tingħalaq,
u din ma tagħlaqhiex.*

*X'gost fiha tidhol f'gaġġa,
qagħad jhewden l-iljunfant,
jekk din m'għadhiex li kienet,
jekk tkun fettaħtha tant?*

*Bix-xewqa baqa' mwebbel,
iljieli ma jorqodx;
u ħassu qisu f'gaġġa
li minnha ma toħroġx.*

The Tragedy of the Elephant Who Dreamed of Entering a Bird's Cage

I heard this unusual story
sometimes told by the aged
about an elephant whose dream
was to enter a bird's cage.

So the elephant decided
to widen out the door
and with a little pen-knife
at the front bars he tore.

He happily prepared
to set a foot inside
but was suddenly halted
by a thought that crossed his mind.

This cage had been a cage,
but a cage it was no more
for a cage is something you can close
and this had lost its door.

What fun is entering a cage,
he brooded in a huff,
if it isn't what it once had been,
having been widened so much?

His dream went on to haunt him
robbing his nights of sleep,
he felt he was inside a cage
and could never break free.

Translated by Antoine Cassar

Spring Awakens

Spring awakens with the sound of death
thumping the ground,
and the killers rejoice with their long barrel
held firmly in their hands.

Birds are hunted in Malta in Spring

Translated by Antoine Cassar

If I Had a Motorboat

If I had a motorboat
I would take it out to sea
Perhaps some immigrants would chance
To pass in the vicinity...
I would give them all they needed
To set them on their way
Towards our united Europe
of solidarity...

I would tell them of some contacts
So that when they reach their goal
They would find my friends there waiting
Who to put them at their ease
Would instruct them in their language,
Maybe also some Maltese.

But if I should chance upon
a group of immigrants in fear
in a boat that's not seaworthy
I would take them up with me,
sail them to their destination –
a good compass, a good engine –
what more should one need to sail
towards a silent bay and shore
and to land them amongst children
armed with swimbands, and canoes
skimming water just like angels,
and the ice cream kiosks you see
in the ads, and the sun that beams like Europe
full of solidarity.

If you read this little letter
of a most burning desire
and should chance upon a boat
which should meet what I require,
you could send me a small email
and I'm sure that the Good Lord

would know who it was who gave me
just the motorboat I need
and will hand them their reward.

Let me have that little craft
Which I'd take right out to sea
Perhaps some immigrants would chance
To pass in the vicinity...
I would give them all they needed
To set them on their way
Towards our united Europe
of solidarity...

Translated by Christine Gixti and Maria Grech Ganado

An Asefru for a People

to my friend Samir, an Algerian Berber, during a civil war

His eyes disclose a continent that's struggling and
victorious,
cultures which wait impatiently for the great moment,
silent mountains preparing for the sea,
memories fixed here and there like beacons.

They sent a note of warning to his home... or else...
from that moment he became outlawed by time;
and wherever he roamed
he was far from home
which he both spurned,
and missed.

His eyes disclose a new, quaking conviction,
a shadow hides the armed robber within;
a register of ambiguous faces, cancelled,
battles a sun that wants him to forget.
Inside him there's a lit city, planning, bubbling,
upon which only spent aliens descend;
and all that he lacked
in the midst of this black
was the daring to go,
and he did.

In the commotion
he left forever half a person behind;
he only took with him the hope
that he'd collect some essence,
and some bits.

Asefru is a Berber word for poem

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

The Sea Swell

to Abder

How do you force that large heart in that thin soul.

In your eyes is the Mediterranean sea,
the silent struggle between hard-headed people
and a mean environment.

Your arms hug very quickly Abder,
but you won't sell your soul.

Not for a hug, nor for a bit of food.

But that hug will wear you out Abder,
and this sea is ruining itself.

At the end of the day,
these martyrdoms, small and large, in Algeria,
everywhere,
will not be enough

and I will meet you in France
with the devilish memories in your hands
and you will tell me, in French,
that you cannot forget the memories
that you hugged with
a heart that used to be,
and was,
big.

That strong beat has no place here, Abder,
Loath as you are to accept this.

This sly sea promised you the world
in the palms of your hands.

And you stayed with your hands open
ignoring taunting smiles
ignoring blows.

That big heart shouldn't be here Abder.

You don't know it has another place,
elsewhere,
saved just for it.

In your eyes there's the little house by the sea
where you saw great dreams.

But that house is someone else's now,
and your place is here,
on this side.
Feeling the swell of the sea in your thin chest.
listening to the waves rise
from the other side
of the Mediterranean.

Translated by Maria Aristomedou and Adrian Grima

Distances

To Zing and his 10-year-old nephew Jean

He's six foot four
but before the screen,
while he reads the names and consonants –
especially the consonants –
he's as small as childhood watching cartoons;
and he wants to taste each word – complete –
like a rough bit of wood or a clove of garlic,
like a memory crushed against the sides,
and before,
giving a lasting tang to words.

"Congo deux mille," he says.
"Here you'll find all you want."
And for a moment he seals his eyes.
Then he resumes hanging on every sound
of every word in French,
of every Congolese name,
and I recall a country of solid values,
the last bastion of Right in a world of vice,
and the welcome he got from the army and police
with a white handkerchief across their mouths
and an improvised cell for a hundred men
jailed for nine months
in the name of Right.

Bukavu, Uvira, Lubumbashi,
Bunia, Kisangani.

To write my poetry
I will buy these names,
so that when you read them
they can jingle like coins in your head,
or be saved in the cell of your gaze.

"L'Etat exerce-t-il aujourd'hui
sa souveraineté sur l'ensemble du territoire?"

asks *Le Monde*.

"Oui et non, reponde le chef de l'Etat congolais."

Neither yes nor no.

Click.

Perhaps Bukavu's no longer in the hands of rebel
Rwandans.

Click.

Perhaps you can stop this projector.

click,

and sleep,
and survive.

Click.

And that's not your father gunned down,

click,

and your mother's not underground.

click,

and you didn't lose Jean in Bunia.

Click.

Somewhere there's ten years
between familiar uniforms,
between silence and a laden rifle.

"Now it's three weeks since I've spoken to her, to my
sister."

And the distance is spread out in his eyes,
I think.

His knees touch the dashboard.
"If I died I'm afraid it wouldn't solve anything."

In this small space
I don't know what to do with my eyes and my words.

And there's a petrified silence around us.

Click.

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

Fifteen Minutes Away

*Throughout the negotiations our aim would be to
bring the Greeks up against the Turkish refusal to
accept enosis and so condition them to accept a
solution which would leave sovereignty in our hands.*

*British Defence Minister Lloyd, 1955**

Fifteen minutes away from the Classic Hotel
there are shells in Ledra Palace.
But that is nothing.
I walk slowly.
The air on its guard here,
Like the rooms, open and complicated.
Amongst them placards of people shot
or tortured.

In the buffer zone
the call to prayer sounds near.
The war as well.
And the speed limit is 15.
Beyond the crescent on its white and red,
there is an old Mercedes waiting for foreigners,
the driver chats, the guards joke
with each other.
My name enters the PC
and the rubber stamps down heavily
like a pig's trotter.

In a building not too far from Ledra Street
a woman of around 50 years
sells books about a Present that's been robbed
and stares into a Past of nights tight-sealed.

*Everywhere the dead send their messengers
But many turn their heads away in dread
We cannot show our passport
To cross the gate they say
Yet I have to take the road to find you.*

"That stamp is fake"

like an island being played backwards.
And she continues to narrate the silence
despite the time and its being Saturday.

Today you will send a stranger to tell me my story.

"We used to live well together"

Her eyes zigzag restlessly.

Once there were a Maltese, a Cypriot Turk
and two Turk nationals
in an automatic car
between Nicosia and a Maronite village.

The Cypriot told the Maltese,
These two are writing a Cypriot soap opera
to prepare people for peace.
And I will write its history.

And the Maltese replied
that this was nothing – for we in Malta...
But at that moment two trucks with fruit,
comfortable in their boxes trundled by,
and despite the gratified smile of the Maltese,
nobody in the car had heard a thing.

Meanwhile, square after square of military zones
zoomed past before my eyes,
like our "Buskett" back home,
but with soldiers clamped to the iron posts,
all rigid.

Somewhere, I think on the other side,
there are American and English bases
with similar rods.
Like history.

*I can't sleep my General
I'm afraid to have dreams
are you able to sleep?*

On our way back to the shells of Ledra Palace,
speeding,
I recall that Mehmet sitting next to me's a poet
and those seated behind needed soap operas for bread,
also perhaps for peace
and once there was a Cypriot
who sent clandestine letters to a Cypriot woman
which passed through buffer-zone and Ledra Palace and
the guards

*I kept going to the Turkish Quarter when
roadblocks were put up on each side. A young girl
on a bike, no one thought of stopping me.*

At the check point
my name comes up on the screen again
like an unsavoury memory
like a déjà vu,
and I run in the pinching cold of a pinched void
to the warm building across
without breaking the speed limit.

What would happen, should a shot blow me up
in this abandoned waste?

In the Classic Hotel I catch up with the void.
I am half an hour late
and Amal's gone drinking at the Holiday Inn.

*The first two quotes in italics are from Stephanos Stephanides,
"Sentience;" the others are from Mehmet Yashin, "Latest Tales
of Heroism," and Niki Marangou respectively.*

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

Ramallah

*for Khaled, Noora, Najeh, Husain and Maher of El-Funoun
who danced in Malta**

١

On the bridge on the river Jordan they humiliate her
they think
and she freezes and turns green and calms down
between her teeth
because she needs a stamp from them on a paper on a
morning
to dance upon their vacant heads sitting in a stamp
in a stamped room.
Like Noora, beautiful.

A lovely smile like Khaled
piercing,
this firm pressure
in his hands always silent
and keen.

He is telling how they are locked in a cell, standing,
how you pray that you'll die rather than betray your own
how your broken back bursts in your head and your neck
and your back
longs to lie on your back
but where? in a concrete coffin standing upright
for people who smile on their land.
Like you.

He is telling how armies close down halls
where they dance,
that amongst them are steps that could never take to
the rhythm;
he is telling how each dance, each chant, each painted
picture
bursts them alive – this, this is life, this wounded dance,
this dark pirouette;
he is telling there is no place for soldiers with stars

and no place for
dictators.

۲

On the bridge on the river Jordan
he smiles a subversive city;
and they shame him more than usual
they think.

But he has a wife at home
and children,
and he carries the story everywhere,
in his eyes, his hands, his skin,
like the taste of olives,
like the scent of mint,
like thyme.
He has a history carefully archived;
a distinctive imprint;
his verbs and nouns interflow like a river,
like cadences and consonants,
like echoes and vowels.

When you wish to, come over, he says,
and I know that now it is also my home.

۳

Noora waits for messages sent by her friends,
and she knows they will see them,
she wants them to read them,
they can't raise any fear
by spying, outside,
inside, or on top,
who are they? who brought them?
of what use are these emails?
are they forms of amusement?
what churns in their guts while they turn them over
like lifeless chewing gum,
like savourless kisses?

These are words without memory,
graphemes with no narrative...
And Noora revives
as she thinks of her friends
though the eyes of her spies
are vacant.

£

Maher spins the girl in the wheelchair
with a laugh in the room lit up by the morning
by the dabke, by the turning of shoes with her friends
in a tightening circle;
And Najeh smiles in the wake of paces of his wife and his
children,
of a village remote from the city of
Ramallah, in which they were born, they dance
with his mate Husain at the other end of the circle,
they close, they open every time he raises his hand.
And the centre's the girl in the wheelchair,
Maher swaying to the beat
and to the girl in her chair and dancing wheels.

•

You tell me the story of Najeh's wife,
the waters which burst after curfew that night,
the family voices ignored at the checkpoint,
the fear of damage, the frustrated anger,
the youths with their rifles obeying their superiors
as their superiors obey their superiors in a dark pyramid
of spleen.

You tell me of a night in 2002
afraid, disheartened,
of an adamant life in a spring that's been wrecked.
You tell me of Yamen, of a labour that's make-shift,
unstable,
of week after week in an incubator

of a critical state
of months.

٧

And you tell me a story
of a mother embroidering
on the porch of her home;
and the shots that came raining
without their explaining
and the distracted dance
of her daughter in trance
and her mother embroidered by guns.

"No pretence. No apology. No explanation."

٧

When you dance you look up at an opening sky;
you turn like a siren alight in an echoing night;
you defy the vacant eyes flitting through your Inbox.
Because your steps are mischievous,
taunting darkness and limits.

٨

Everytime she crosses the bridge on the river
she expects to find unguarded events
waiting to be burst.

Because there's a vacant night on the bridge,
and a birth announced in a stubborn ambulance.
There's a dabke alight in a shattered cell,
a hold, already silent and bold;
there's a soldier primed and a dance rehearsed;
and as soon as she crosses there's a stage installed
and a packed hall.

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

**Two of these stories were told by Omar Barghouti of El-Funoun in "Dancing Tragedies and Dreams" (The Daily Star, Lebanon, Wednesday, October 27, 2004)*

"During the spring of 2002, for instance, when Ramallah was under lockdown, the members of el-Funoun decided to challenge the curfew and go to the studio to rehearse. They were preparing for their latest production, "Haifa, Beirut & Beyond." During this "illegal" rehearsal, a dancer's phone rang. A ringing phone during a rehearsal at the time was usually a bad omen (mobile phones are strictly forbidden during rehearsals, except during times of turmoil and insecurity, meaning most of the time). The dancer picked up his phone with trembling hands. The rest of the troupe froze, trying to interpret the news through his gestures. His pregnant wife was in early labor and all the roads from their village home to the city hospital were blocked by military barricades. He was stuck in Ramallah as his wife was about to give birth a few kilometers away. Feeling totally helpless, he cried.

Though the dancer's relatives tried to drive his wife to a hospital, they were humiliated and threatened at two checkpoints, and turned back. She was forced to deliver at home with no medical supervision.

She gave birth to a premature, perilously stressed but charming boy. A relative finally succeeded in driving mother and child to a hospital in Nablus, and after weeks in an incubator, followed by months in critical condition, the baby recovered, and his father was able to smile again during dance rehearsals. He never quit dancing or hoping.

One of el-Funoun's choreographers was in the middle of making a dance about a massacre that took place during the nakba when she was interrupted with news of her mother's death. She was shot repeatedly by an Israeli soldier while she was embroidering on her front porch in Nablus. No pretence. No apology. No explanation. After a period of shock and mourning, the choreographer returned to finish her dance."

Joseph before a snapshot of his broken mate

Joseph: enstuttered by the midget consonants,
the cranial echo of void spaces wedged between them.
He says his uttered noises shame him,
like plates aclatter in nocturnal guilt.

Freeze-framed before him, a mate upon the ground.
Boot-trodden dust on twisted neck,
brutality's livid truncheon descent.
His arms outstretched and limp,
his face pillowed by gravel mouthing dust
whose taste he can't begin to feel.

*Bash that nigger's head some more.
The brigadier is watching.*

His ribs imploded in his chest,
his body's sinewed threads unravelled by
another boot roughshod along his back.
He hears concentric sound, a shout
wells up inside another in his head until
the truncheon slams into his broken bones.

I can't set word in there again, he says,
to hear my wordfalls' echoes.
How can I get my name erased
from Malta's register
or would that be too little and too late?
To fall wounded to the ground was mine
in reparation
for every other time I wasn't felled.
For every snapshot that I couldn't, wouldn't see.

In the consonantal wedge the truncheon's
dizzied silence now awaits the disarray
of snapshots rendered corpse-like.

Joseph: stuck fast in sequence after stuttered sequence

of consonants and photographs and vowels,
wedged between them.
He says he's got an early day tomorrow
a day like any other, almost.

*On January 13, 2005, officers from the army Riot Squad
stopped a peaceful demonstration staged by some 80
immigrants in the Hal Safi detention centre in Malta.
Photographs of the beatings were published by The Times and
other media. 27 immigrants and 2 officers were hospitalised.*

Translated by Albert Gatt

A Palestinian: After the Onslaught

In this handsome young man's eyes
I see the crutches
his broken body writhing with the onslaught of the
truncheons.
His leaden legs,
his crushed gums, his teeth deceived
his shoulders dragged, askew...

He listens with his eyes, replies to me, perhaps
hints at a smile.
I feel inclined to stop everyone else and make the
introductions,
recount what happened at Hal Safi, how
they smashed and drilled his body. But
the story isn't mine to tell
and I don't know if he'd oblige
and then again it won't be me beside
him
later.

Beneath that hinted smile he knows
there's nothing I will do for him, that in
the aftermath of truncheon-toted bile in Safi
the burst of gums
his busted thighs
he'll drag himself along on crutches
while life – ours that is – goes on.

Translated by Albert Gatt

The Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia

In this first open air school I've ever visited
there are desks and students who are quiet and diligent,
placed in rows that are almost perfect.
But the silence is no coincidence,
or passivity, or thanklessness for the teacher.
What they needed to learn they have learnt,
and they are silent now, so we can learn,
we who wander around these modern classrooms,
searching without a clue –
unless given one by our ancestors –
to how we found ourselves in the best possible school.

Some of the ex-alumni have a desk
that is larger than that of their classmates
but the majority seems to have noticed this discrepancy
in time
and had their desk cut down to size,
just big enough for a person's body
and some space to scribble on.

At Arlington they teach you everything at once
and after that, there's nothing left to ask.

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

The Shape of your Love

The next day I woke to the heavy rain of August
that comes and goes to mark a feast that needs no
marking.

You passed over me and left your heavy love
where you knew the soil could take its shape,
where I wouldn't wish for anything
and wouldn't ask a thing.

You walked on the tired soil
which was desirous of a form more beautiful
even if only for a few moments more.

When the rain poured over the shutters
and the balcony and the soil,
you'd passed already,
but the form of your love still lay on me,
fragrant
not as sweet as before,
but almost.

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

Moon?

Samwel, a year and a half later

Since, at all costs, you want the moon by day
and since I'm meant to grant your every wish,
I offer you a sun emerging from a cloud
but no! it's "that" you want; you don't want "this."

And so, despite the day, you still wait for the moon
and I know, in my heart, it can't appear.
I offer you some memory, a moon that's full,
but you want it right now, identical.

Because, even by day, you want to grasp the moon;
I don't know what to do to make you glad.
"There are days," I explain. "And there are days..."
But you don't want the whys and wherefores. You just
want "that!"

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

Seas swimming in your eyes

Samwel, 2 ½ years, Żejtun Beach

You always want to walk beside the sea,
observe the depths, the blue from everywhere
and you persist in jumping above the edge,
although you're old enough to have known fear.

A lover wishing to tease, with stone in hand
you want to see where it will sink, after it flies.
You long like it to meet the sea's beginning,
to walk bewitched, seas swimming in your eyes.

The tremulous water has now usurped the moon,
distance and silence no longer keep you content.
There's an entire sea splashing its waves around you,
and now new depths and the swish of a stone torment.

Translated by Maria Grech Ganado

Dormant Existence

I tread as slowly as I can,
in this dormant existence,
hoping that she will not notice me
silently leaving her room.
And I return without a sound,
wait for the room to empty,
so I myself can rest.
This existence needs quiet repose.

Translated by Antoine Cassar