

Ahmed Abdel Mu'ti Hijazi

As If A Voice Were Calling

Translated from the Arabic by Omnia Amin and Rick London

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One of the most influential poets of 20th century Arabic avant-garde literature, Ahmed Abdel Mu'ti Hijazi was born in June of 1935 in Tala, a province of Monoufia in the western delta of Egypt. He moved to France in 1955 to pursue graduate studies at the Sorbonne. Upon returning to Egypt a year later, he worked as a contributing editor of the magazine Sabah El-Keir, before becoming editorial director of the cultural and literary journal Rose al-Yusuf in Cairo.

In 1974, Hijazi returned to France to teach Arab literature at the University of Vincennes in Saint-Denis, where he was a faculty member until 1990. In 1991 he returned again to Egypt and began writing a weekly cultural affairs column for Al Ahran, which continues today. As the author of seven major books of poetry, and seventeen books of literary and cultural criticism, Hijazi has participated in literary gatherings throughout the Arab world, and western and eastern Europe — where he has been widely translated — and, more recently, in Asia. The recipient of numerous prizes and awards, Hijazi lives in Cairo.

The publication in 1959 of Hijazi's first poetry collection, *City Without A Heart*, was a provocative event in the Arabic speaking world. With this collection, Hijazi began his exploration of a new kind of poetry: spare, intimate, empathic, fierce, dark.

Hijazi's poetry naturally shape-shifts, alternately taking on the voice of an assassin, of a young boy, of a soldier far from home. This poetry may inhabit a small moment or a tumultuous time in history. It will enter the everyday play of light and shadow on the street or describe exile in a strange shadowland where one nevertheless finds a moment of illumination. It affirms the chance of solidarity but is often bleak about our ultimate prospects, animating kindness and corruption in the space of a breath.

Throughout this tour of opposing possibilities, Hijazi's poetry retains the quality of an overheard thought. It confronts the reader with something intimately perceived. The stakes here are personal.

Drawn from nearly a half century of published poetry, the selection of translations included here attempts to give the reader some sense of the range of Hijazi's work.

Early in his career, the controversy around Hijazi's poetry led several times to his arrest and to restrictions on his travel. He persevered in advancing his unique and uncompromising vision and today he is a permanent member of the Egyptian High Council for Culture, and director of House of Poetry, one of Cairo's most prominent literary venues.

Rick London

A Basket Of Lemons

A basket of lemons!

Under the bright rays of the sun

a boy's sad voice calls out:

Twenty for one Piaster,

for one piaster, twenty!

A basket of lemons left the village at dawn,

green until this accursed moment,

they'd been wet with dew,

swimming in the waves of a shadow,

the brides of birds in their green sleep

O how magnificent!

What hungry hand plucked them at dawn

and carried them at morning's first light

through suffocating streets

crowded with unstoping feet and cars?

Ferried by burning fuel,

poor things . . .

no one smells you, lemons!

The sun is drying your dew, O lemons . . .

and the tanned boy runs, unable to catch up to the cars:

Twenty for one Piaster

for one piaster, twenty!

A Round of Return

*When the body of the martyr rests in
the ground of his homeland, the martial
music of A Round of Return plays.*

As if a voice of some kind were calling

So the loft of pigeons returned from beyond the horizon

They circle once under the setting sun

then fly off

As if a voice of some kind were calling

The earth takes off its scorched blouse

Shadows suddenly turn green, and shoots sprout,

their fragrant vapors in the heart of the heat

As if a voice of some kind were calling

The imprisoned wind rises

pushing against wheat fields, songs, flocks of sheep . . .

As if a voice of some kind were calling

So the flag fluttered and loneliness and sorrow, longing and tranquility

rained down upon the school balcony where all sound

had died out, the courtyard now deserted,

the green trees inlaid with unripe birds

As if a voice of some kind were calling

So we disappear for a while and the landmarks rise up

We are astonished by our love for this city

and in secret have discovered buried artifacts

among its crouching buildings

and that it has a woman, one who swaggers in her nightdress,

and a cat that meows on the stairs . . .

As if a voice of some kind were calling

So we answer: *Yes*

We feel the bite of longing and pain

and memory pulsates with the names of countries

and comrades and seasons

As if a voice of some kind were calling

Men crowd at the doors of the villages

in clouds of dust and twilight

Drops of sweat and ablution fall from their foreheads

and the night surges with the sounds of beasts

As if a voice of some kind were calling

Weddings and funerals pour forth

As if a voice of some kind were calling

And so we answer: *O My country! O My country! O My country!*

Elegy For A Circus Performer

In a world full of mistakes
you alone are asked not to err
because your frail body,
if it speeds or slows once,
will fall, and cover the earth
with its dismemberment

In what night do you think this mistake lies?
This night! or any other
when the lamplights dim and go out
and people raise their shouting voices
at your arrival drenched in light,
when you appear like a knight who roams his city
with sight set upon his farewell

Asking for people's love, in noble silence,
before you move toward the first rope,
gesturing on high
as drums beat to the rhythm of your stepping
and fill the spacious arena with sound
And then say: Begin!

I wonder in what night this mistake lies?

And the body becomes a spur to fear and risk

and the legs and arms are alive,
reaching out on their own
And they recover themselves from the underside of death
as if they were coiling snakes,
cats that grew wild, black-white,
that fought and disappeared upon the face of the circle
And you show your frightful art's blessing upon a blessing
You restrain the crowd at the moment of ruin
You are in the house of death while,
amid the clamor of play and daring,
you loosen one rope from another
You've left one shelter and not yet gained another
So fear is embedded in the faces, as joy and pity and concentration
until you return settled and quiet
You raise your palms above the crowd

I wonder in what night this mistake lies?
Spread out before you in the dark,
dragging his heavy waiting
as if he were a mythical beast untamed by the human hand
So he is beautiful like a peacock,
lovely like a snake,
lithe like a tiger!
He is magnificent
and deceitful
like the motionless lion in the predatory hour

appearing to sleep
while he prepares himself for the fiery leap,
hidden, unseen
Below you he chews on stones
waiting for your awaited fall
in that moment when you lose the mindful care of your step
or lose wisdom's gambit
when memory is displayed
and so covers her sudden nakedness

Now alone and apologetic,
conceit crowns you like a bird
You've had your fill
Intoxicated by silence and amazed by the incline of the swing
as the circle goes round
The rope quivers under you like an archer's bowstring quivers
. . . the scream enters the night
like a thief's dagger hurled
as the circle goes round

Now the light is dazed on your helpless fallen body,
on your dangling and broken arms and legs
And you smile!
As if you'd heard tell of this
and believed what you had heard

We Sing Along the Way

We waited for him at the southern gate,
shoulder to shoulder we huddled together over the breadth of his passing
and when he appeared and his neighing went the plain
we took hold of him
and subdued him behind the walls of the dam . . .

We are peasants here . . . without land and without sons
Together we walk in the sun
Our shadows shorten and lengthen . . . shorten and lengthen
We walk among God's countries searching for a country of our own
We sleep in the shadow of His mosque
and drink our tea at the door of His café,
we carry our axes on our backs
from the cradle to the grave!

Our numbers swelled in the sun and the desert filled with us
Are all people unknown peasants
without land or sons, do all await news
from the Sudan?
What answer is carried in the folds of the wind?
He neighs along the expanse of the horizon, checks his course,
then bolts with surging shank and shoulders
His mane streams scoured by the heat

and he paws at the foreheads of things . . .

Sweat pours hotly from our dark bodies

and from the body of the outraged

and unruly horse

As we press our ribs against its red chiseled ribs

and we walk against wind and tide,

we cry out with beastly intoxication in the sun and the desert,

as if our absent soul had awakened in us:

Pivot here and clamber over our proud shoulders

and cover our heads with grass and trample them,

for we will come back riding you,

our hands will be on the wheel

of a ship that carries wares:

brides from the lakes of the south, with tinted legs

and breasts

And birds from the forests

And colored rain

And trees and fragrances from the lands of India

and Sindh . . .

The eastern moon comes back in May

to build its silver nest atop our barren hills

and we come back just as we were,

sons from villages grown too narrow for their fathers,

sons sent away on packhorses,

given staffs to negotiate
the winding roads, the names of their fathers and grandfathers
inscribed on their arms
And given proverbs about lovely patience
and some songs:
a song about love,
a song about separation,
a song about prison,
a song about repentance,
a song about promise
So we sing on our way home, looking back on abandoned dwellings
We sing when we inherit the evening
and when, from far off, we see the walls of our city
We sing when we look from the windows of our transport
over our green land . . .

Portrait

Who is this drunken man,
the one who tilts his cup to savor the last drop
His face is in the light
asking forgiveness of the dark
The redness of his eyes pours over the walls
He pleads for another cup
He bows down intoxicated, singing like a bird,
as if, nightly, he were acting out the debt of his fate
for a creditor behind the veil . . .

Five Songs For Something Forgotten

(1)

Maybe we'll escape with our skin,
carry along clothes when we leave,
carry money
But there's something we'll forget
Something we'll leave behind and bitterly mourn
And after it gives up on our return it will die for good
and then we too will fall dead
in our faraway exile . . .

(2)

I wonder who will carry the blame
we'll sing of over there,
carry the village and the dust
and the familiar narratives of the nets,
the intimate, friendly language,
the fecund cat,
the sounds of the prayer hall . . .

I wonder who will
carry the safety our parents gave to us
so we can go forward in the world renewed
as they lie in their graves
Who can offer a bridge and a door
to the ancestors
so they might cross over the mix of blood and exile
to their children,

to teach them the sacred text,
to call them home . . . ?

(3)

We seek a city that will give us safety,
give us bread and wine and refresh our faces
That gives happy times
to us and to our daughter
whose beauty has faded,
her face in shame sagging with dyes . . .

(4)

The earth's name has become Judas
So what are you called O moon?
Do you think Judas will heed us
if we ask her to be kind to the trees?

(5)

Palestine, I dream that I'm returning
I come alone, stealing home to you in the night
I walk under shining stars
on wet sands
And the sea comes in from afar
There is a sail and somewhere there's a ray of light
It flares a little, then fades out
And you're in a song of some kind,
my country, you're in some kind of song
resounding for your lonely child . . .

Murder

I'm his killer!

I put ten bullets in him

I wonder how the blood feels, this fiery rain

pouring over him in a dream

Maybe before I came he felt an instinctive fear

but brushed it aside after looking the place over,

and the guards had become alert,

and the cool of safety spread over his forehead

Then my first bullet echoed

I watched as the crowded hotel emptied except for the two of us

As if I were afraid of myself

I shot, I shot him

as he was pulled into a corner of fire,

as if he had brought himself to accept this fate when it rumbled

He did not escape me

He was pulled by an invisible rope

to inevitable death

He turned his silent body toward me

taking from me what he required of my spite

till he gained rest from this sullen meeting

O, whatever lay between the face's quiver before the shooting

and the fire coming to rest in the flesh,

I wonder what limp conversation

passed between us?

Did he ask: *Who are you?*

In that moment songs from my country
flashed in my memory
and the fiery rain rose and softly came down,
flowering in the rock of the inimical body,
reaching between the quiver in the body's mute blood
and the quiver on the trigger,
bringing us to an eternal reconciliation
As if I were a beast when I fell upon him,
drinking from a glass of his blood,
as if thirsty for something real like this blood
So I suckled on it
while death surrounded us . . . and spread out
Truly, who am I?
Was it fair
that I didn't answer his question,
that we didn't become partners?
Was it right for me in this encounter
to have seen my opponent's face
without allowing him to see mine?
He was an executioner!
Such was his face
as I entered the hall with my face veiled
He deserved death!
But the real justice is that I make him witness my attack
on his blood
I'm the other edge of the blade of his poisoned bloody dagger
Maybe if I had answered him he would have resisted
or escaped

or called for help
or appealed to me by confessing his sin
and asking my forgiveness
But he signaled to me mysteriously
and took refuge in death, surrounded by voices calling
as I fell and fell,
falling into a time before time . . .
bound to something breaking?

. . . O, my unspeaking love,
you came to me before it was my time,
breaking your own promise of time,
almost turning me old

I did not believe she'd given me everything undivided
Her driver dropped her off
and she slipped inside swaggering with a gentle nobility
She uncovered as if she were alone
The spring was a softness
on the ground
and words came after they'd lost their meaning
Sunlight came through the glass
pining and marking her body with patches of rainbow
that eluded me when I touched her
When I asked her: *Who are you?* She fled
without even giving me her name
O, for twenty springs

I've been waiting for the gentle tread of footsteps
and I carry on and dream
I hold what the days leave to lovers
in her touches in my flesh
I chase after what escapes from her picture
and I drive sleep and forgetfulness away from her
and I starve as I cross God's countries
I possess only one red rose
At the top of the bridge the inspector asked: *Who are you?*
I answered: *A lover!*
Has she passed by?
Unthinking, he turned me away from the bridge
I went into the hall
The secret inspector came running
So I threw the red rose
It became a bullet
It became fire
as he pursued me
I panted from exhaustion
I withered
and became lost . . .

The port was a home to us all
I said let me give the day a name
and the night a name,
I made the heart into two hearts,
I learned what makes my face an antidote and a poison

I learned words from among the languages of the earth
to seduce foreign women at night
and to capture tears!
So when I sang in the marketplace
things flew to me
or if I nodded to a beautiful woman in a club
she became a slave at my table
or . . . if the harbor police caught me they returned
with nothing but a nameless shadow!
What made me fall this time?
Was it the wine that gave me away
or the flower seller,
or did my mask suddenly fall away
revealing the impenetrable secret?

They were all my enemies,
the hall, the marble, the guards, the walls,
the hunger for security in the eyes of women and children
They shunned my coming,
all of them together in a friendly silence
They'd come and go till they spotted me
and panic afflicted the words in their mouths
and they averted their eyes
I asked: *How many bombs would be enough
to destroy this corrupt world?*
Inside, I laughed over this evil thought . . .
how many thousands of years would pass

before the earth would be renewed
and living returned?

. . . he asked: *Who are you?*

In that moment songs from my country
flashed in my memory
and the fiery rain rose and softly came down,
flowering in the rock of the inimical body,
reaching between the quiver in the body's mute blood
and the quiver on the trigger,
bringing us to an eternal reconciliation
As if I were a beast when I fell upon him,
drinking from a glass of his blood,
as if thirsty for something real . . . like this blood
So I suckled on it
while death surrounded us ... and spread out

Truly, who am I? I wonder if he knew
he'd posed a dangerous question
That he would've possibly defeated me had I answered
That he might have come back to me victorious . . .

The Room Of A Lonely Woman

There she is, pushing away the city,
closing her door behind her
and drawing the curtains

She lights her lamp in the morning

These are her things,
the animals of her loneliness
peeking out from the corners
of the ceiling or the walls,
or on the gas stove
or the washing machine
or the shelves in the pantry

Her exile is small

but deep enough

Then there's a bed

and a table,

stories to bring on sleep,

an ash tray

and votive candles

Each thing has its place

and a presence

Each gets bread and water from the steps of time

and naps in the cover of its swaying shadow

Each has desires and tears,
has the flavor of a body that contemplates itself,
used to loneliness
Each thing is a mirror
with its own face
that has its own intimacies and failings,
just like its other parts

Maybe she had found a similar place in her childhood
with a lamp
and a vase whose shadow
fell upon a bright tablecloth

Maybe with her dangling necklaces
and her candlesticks
she summons the spirit
that takes her back to escaped gardens,
to springs that tremble on the surfaces
under pure water
and smile in carafes . . .

It wasn't me - she was speaking
to someone else,
looking into his untrue face

Guernica, or The Fifth Hour

(1) Lucian's last words:

Lucian lies dead in the carpeted hallway
This was the first speech
in which he gloried the raised sword with his songs of truth,
but only after it was too late
The sword fell from the hand that fluttered many times
with wisdom over the crowd
At sixty, Lucian,
you'll not be able to master this new profession
even if you become a socialist
and share the bread and wine of Athena's slaves
Did you take the palace by sword
so you could annul it with the sword?
It's fine, then,
that the soldiers kill an orator
under the dome of the assembly . . .

(2) Magellan's sailors:

We were burned by the sun in Scorpio,
a flower blossoming
above the orbit of Capricorn

So this earth is not an apple
but a stone we lose in a calendar

whose difficult rhythms we've not discovered
Who can put a stop to this turning
for an hour in which to lay Magellan to rest
and to smell the wind?
Does it carry the flavor from other shores?
How far is Chile from New York?
From Moscow?
How many graves are there from one coast to another?
How many miles between a Kalashnikov and a hand,
how far are the warplanes
from the halls of parliament . . . ?

(3) Pablo Neruda:

The mythical ox rises now from Picasso's paintings
and from Lorca's poetry
and you've become an old man
unable to see his beastly virgin magnificence
and to meet him with equal violence
In the thirties that never ever came again,
you used to beckon to him,
tempting him, with a poke of the red arrow,
to come,
and you'd make him feel safe
standing with a guitar in the night of Granada
You sent out lavender from the window
and awakened the birds of the green cathedral
in those thirties that never came again . . .

Who will sing you the anthem now?
Who will bring you closer to the land of the Red Indians,
to the smell of nitrates
and bread
and the pastures at night
and the smell of fire in winter grass
and who will tell you the names of those
who were martyrs before you?
At sixty, the ox comes in his horrible modern form,
he comes in his yellow costume
while you are alone
in the bed of a fearsome disease

What?

Mythical ox, you've come too late,
too late, you cowardly ox . . .

(4) from the last scene of Z:

The MPs from the provinces pulled the shadows of their black hats
over their eyes in laughable fear
and they slipped one by one into the night
These are their terrified cars passing like mice
through the snaking curves of the valley
The socialist president lies on the fine carpet in the hallway
clutching his glasses, a lone sheikh
abandoned by the glory of his station,
the guards around him dead,

their blood still warm,
and the henchmen of the coup with their solid faces
are arresting his corpse
They fall in line like hollow columns in the hall
In just a few days
the cleaning crew will come to wash away all this blood with water,
to scrub remnants of smoke
from the walls . . .

Utopia

Let's say we're here, Andalusians,
so we only ask of this earth what a pilgrim asks,
a wayfarer

We have words from God's language
which we write out on scattered rocks
to read along with the doves, coo by coo
We've converged in space and time,
so we no longer have a beginning, we no longer have an end

We have time's interval and the ascension is inside us
and when the bare foot touches seawater
or sand it's with love's infatuation

The deserts have redeemed their paradise
as the sea has from the flags of those
who pass by the archipelago

We discovered a home inside the oleander
and the pure time that graces the valleys
with the returning seasons
and then the face of God
and the universe that extends from Imru' al-Qays to Lorca,

from Delphi to the Prophet's grave

Let's say you are the master of time,
so rise, O honorable master,
it's time for the Andalusians to continue
on their way . . .

for Jacques Berque

In The Middle of Time

As if I were in the middle of time
slipping out of my shadow
and laid bare by the tempestuous void that encircles me,
birthing or dying in the middle of time
like a flower exulting in a torrential downpour

I tell the distant earth:
Don't call me
and don't hurry me,
my winds still blow,
I still have a cycle to complete
before the sun goes down,
or before midnight
Why should I hurry?
No crown arcs on my head,
no Penelope devotes herself to my loom . . .

A sea of darkness washes over my soul
and in the cities of absence
there are cities that have waded in their darkness
and ate manna and honey
and around me: the dust of time
Visitors from among my dead

Mummified lamps
Seagulls struggling to free themselves
from the fading distance, but unable
And around me bewitching virginal women gesture
So I cover them with my shadow
Each night I clothe them with a garment made from shadow
until, in the middle of time, I find myself erased

O sandgrouse , take me,
flutter in the acacia and tamarisk,
take me into your flocks once more
or annihilate me
Cut loose my tether . . .

I see a strange land,
I've never seen exile nor homeland like it,
don't know how a nation could inhabit it

I see a semblance of earth,
as if the earth perished
and now is a heap of green dung in the palm

I see a semblance of clouds
as if banners of colored wool are streaming from the past
or spiders along the horizon are weaving

a worn and blighted thread from the dust

I see time passing and not passing,
as if the sun, before it sets, eats the day it births at dawn
to return to the beginning, to a time that displaces time

I see a semblance of cities
Minarets appear,
chimneys like fins along stony black spines
And I see a trail of metal disgorging necks
and bestial faces
and I see a bleeding, viscous mass in the streets
shrieking in its yellowing, grainy shell

I clung to the ship's mast
as it fell into the whirling black depths of the sea
And the winds tossed me onto the island of idols

And he was there, no one but him, grinding up the silence,
howling like a wolf and spitting hatred
and glaring
He can see only one side of anything
so I ran to what's unseen
till I reached the house of the dead
and called my father . . .

I gave him back the treasure he left me
and I rested on his chest
Was it for one night?
Of for a year?
A storm spoke to me
and I knew its voice
The sandgrouse fluttered upon my forehead
A light reached down to me in the darkness of the coffin
and as I began to climb this strand
I saw time

I say to this distant earth:
Rise up from darkness . . .
Manifest from the word . . .
Become a wayfarer like me . . .

I tell her:
You've died with me, so start anew with me now,
You'll blossom like a flower in this place

I tell her:
Follow me . . .
do not call to me . . .
nor hurry me . . .
I go slowly
and my two realms will shine in you one day

and then my lost mast will appear,
white, at sundown
or at midnight
Why should I hurry?
No crown arcs on my head,
no Penelope devotes herself to my loom . . .

for Gamal El Din Bin El Sheikh