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Spotted hyenas

ERIC ORMSBY

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MY HAPPINESS BEARS NO
RELATION TO HAPPINESS

A poet's life in the Palestinian century

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It might seem improbable that the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali, one of the most distinctive and original voices of his generation, should also be the enterprising proprietor of a well-stocked souvenir shop in Nazareth. In fact, the carved wooden camels, the hookahs, the oriental daggers and devotional pictures, not to mention the quirky handmade signs which festoon his crowded shelves – “A Thing of Beauty is a Joy For Ever”, “Cheaper Than You Expected!” – form solid analogues to his verse. Each of his poems is a kind of souvenir. If their accents are rough, if their line breaks have a jagged look – characteristics which dismayed his first readers, and still disturb some – that only adds to their hand-hewn authenticity.

As Adina Hoffman shows in her beautifully written biography, *My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness*, Taha Muhammad Ali's poems came to him late and were hard-won. With almost no formal education, he read every Arabic book he could borrow or buy – no easy matter in the cultural isolation of post-1948 Palestine, when links with the wider Arab world were severely limited. During lulls in business, he immersed himself in classical Arabic literature, not only the great pre-Islamic poets but whatever volumes of that vast medieval anthology *The Book of Songs* he could find. The chance acquisition of a run of the Egyptian literature journal *al-Risala* from the 1930s gave him a sense, inevitably outdated, of more recent developments. He wrote reviews and a few lacklustre tales in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe for short-lived local journals. He was well into middle age when he first sounded his own voice. The breakthrough came with “Crack in the Skull”, a poem which he dated August 1, 1971, shortly after his fortieth birthday.

“Crack in the Skull” had a distinctly convulsive effect, not only on its first few readers, some of whom doubted that it was poetry at all, but on the poet himself. With its abrupt yet elegiac cadences, its everyday words – not dialect but not quite full-flown classical Arabic either – and its homely yet fantastic images, it cracked open memories of the long-hidden world of his own childhood village. At the same time, the poem expanded traditional Arabic poetic form; gone were the intricate metres, the sonorous monorhymes, the rhetorical flourishes. This was plain, almost prosaic, verse, and yet somehow it sang. Ostensibly an elegy on the death of a local schoolmaster, the poem turned the hyperbole cherished by more conventional bards to gently ironic effect:

Even the owner of the cemetery
thought about death

once again: he spat at the world
and offered the grave free of charge.
The head guard fainted.

There's nothing like a catastrophe
to bring a graveyard attendant
back to his mother tongue.

The poor soul sobbed in Armenian:

“I'll protect you,

son of God's servant,

I'll protect you from the crows
and the spotted hyenas.”

The schoolmaster's death, caused by “a crack in the Byzantine inscriptions / lining the walls of the skull”, foreshadows the demise not only of a culture and a local tradition but of memory itself; the poem is less a lament than a sly rebuttal of oblivion. The translation appears in Taha Muhammad Ali's *So What: New and selected poems, 1971–2003*, translated by the poets Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi and Gabriel Levin, with the original Arabic on the facing page (Copper Canyon Press, 2006); this builds on an earlier, smaller selection brought out by Ibis Editions in Jerusalem in 2000. The two books have helped to bring Taha widespread recognition; he has since become a familiar, and much admired, figure at international poetry readings.

In tracing Taha's life from the old Galilean village of Saffuriyya, the ancient Sepphoris (now an Israeli settlement known as Zippori), where he was born in 1931 and from which he and his family fled under Israeli assault in 1948, Hoffman manages to illuminate the experience of an entire people. She is scrupulously even-handed. Her insight into the Israeli–Arab conflict goes beyond the merely political, as when she observes that the Palestinians “were also cursed to have found themselves, a basically oral people, wrestling rhetorically with perhaps the most print-obsessed people on the planet”. An American writer long resident in Jerusalem, fluent in Hebrew as well as written and spoken Arabic, Hoffman has conducted many interviews, trawled archives, and pored over family records in both languages – some of which, together with wonderful old photos, are reproduced. There are a few minor errors – the great prose author al-Jahiz lived in the ninth, not the eighth, century – but her skill in unravelling more tangled issues is impressive. Thus, faced by conflicting accounts of the attack on Saffuriyya, in which Taha and his neighbours insisted that an air raid had preceded the ground assault, while Dov Yirmiyya, the company commander of the assault (later to become one of Israel's fiercest internal critics), asserted emphatically that no air strike had occurred, Hoffman resorts to military archives at the Tel Hashomer army base outside Tel Aviv and uncovers the actual flight report, complete with names of pilots and types of bombs dropped. Yirmiyya, it turns out, was not lying; he was simply unaware of the air strike.

My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness is not only the biography of a remarkable man; it is an act of reclamation against the erosions of memory. This is Taha's great theme as well. The earliest Arab poets searched out the “traces” of vanished loves in the scattered stones of encampments. Taha Muhammad Ali pursues these traces too, often using the very words of the ancient odes, but for him it is the cancelled accents, the fading voices, of friends and neighbours which demand recovery. It is through such echoes, lovingly excavated, that the lost villages of childhood are restored to the listening ear.