

***No Faith At All* by Lahab Assef Al-Jundi**
Reviewed by Imene Bennani

Pecan Grove Press (2014)
ISBN-13: 978-1937302146

“This flame”: The Poetry of Lahab Assef Al-Jundi

This collection is a generous gift for the seekers and a thoughtful song for the listeners. With the perceptiveness of a philosopher, the calmness of a sage, and the precision of a scientist, Al-Jundi ponders timely issues and challenges what is taken for granted. Moving “between browns and greens”, contemplating “eccentricities”, “zooming” both in and “out”, Al-Jundi writes, expecting an active reader to “taste sweets, mind his garden”.

Al-Jundi was born and grew up, in Damascus, Syria, graduated from the University of Texas in Austin, and published his first collection *A Long Way* in 1985. His poetry has appeared in many anthologies including *In These Latitudes: Ten Contemporary Poets*, *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, and *Between Heaven and Texas*.

In “Exotic”, a poem relating the dilemma of belonging across space and memory, the poet confidently claims his origins. Visiting his native land, however, he ironically becomes a “peculiar tourist” asking “odd questions”. Similarly, “The night the Arab came out” describes the sadness emanating from that curious though inevitable sense of detachment:

Was it the gentle night's air?

Spices and incense in the souk's alleys?

Jagged peaks ringing the Old City?

The Arab came out beaming.

Soul in shoes.

My grief is an indigo ocean.

Here, the varied Oriental scents and the charm of the “Old City” fill the Arab with pride and joy: “beaming face”--as he recalls rich history and relishes in valuable heritage. Yet, the “Arab” also knows that the apogee of the Arab civilization in the past: “jagged peaks”/“Old City”, is sadly juxtaposed with the regretful decadence of the Arab world in the present. Despite the “gentle night’s air” and the lush mood that makes him inebriated: “soul in shoes”, the momentary transport steeped in nostalgia does not prevent the poet from feeling disappointed and inconsolable.

“Like Salt” is the poem where Al-Jundi addresses the issue of hyphenated identity most directly: a dream where the American part of him (himself in “blue suit”) is seen chased by the Arab part (“shepherd in a flowing tan gallabiya”). Facing this shepherd, he is shocked to realize it is the same person, the “Arab-American”. The poet asks: “does one end where the other begins...?” He wonders if it is not the same homogenous entity where both parts “merge like salt, silt and sand/River finding sea”. Dismissive of divisive frontiers and rigid labels, at the end of his poem, Al-Jundi remains uncertain whether the boundaries truly melt like salt in water or persist and stay like sediment in depths, albeit unconsciously.

As for the imagined boundaries between past, present, future, Al-Jundi is certain they have never existed: “A life that is-/always been-/does not-/never did-/require a beginning”. For him: “talk of beginnings and endings/is meaningless”. That is why he ironizes the discourse on creation, asking in innocent mischief: “why did He need six days?” The poet supposes there are “limits to His supremacy” before carrying on with questions: “How much of the original design/did He complete as envisioned?”, “Did He rest on the seventh day just/to marvel at His handiwork”, “Is He a sad God?”

Al-Jundi's approach to traditional religion reveals his skeptical mind and his distaste of dogma. In the title poem, "No Faith at All", he insists, quietly and confidently, on the need to "start from no faith at all". "Jesus was one of us", he says, science and dogmas "old news". Nothing is more valuable or authentic than the "innate, pure, expansive page". The poet calls on each individual to search deeper inside and look for what is genuine and precious, nourish it and explore it for further spiritual growth. Opening to the universe, inhaling its fragrance, and coming into "natural elements" are the advised steps; love, the ultimate alternative. The sage admonishes:

*Dip your love pen
into the inkwell of truth,
and with your own
holy hand
write.*

Love is the poet's truest book, smartest lesson. Having it, every other knowledge becomes superfluous: "I do not know/I do not need/or want to know/anything/but/love". Proud to be a "silly romantic", he unabashedly declares: "I am/a happy fool/and I don't care".

In his attractive love poem, "Until You Think of Me", the man, gallant and selfless, patiently waits until the woman thinks of him. Then, he takes her for a "spin", making sure he recognizes her creativity as he leaves her "giddy/in awe/ of what [her] thoughts/ can ignite".

Echoing the great Sufi poets, like Hafez and Rumi, Al-Jundi praises total surrender to love: "I went to love and pleaded/take me/do with me as you please", and sings ecstatic union as the "I" sweetly vanishes into the beloved: "I die into you/every sweet death/An ecstatic rebirth".

Just as he contributes to expanding the repertoire of contemporary Arab American poetry on the theme of love, Al-Jundi participates in filling a void in the literature as far as nature is concerned. Some of his poems fit in with the classical romantic tradition such as “Pastoral”, a vivacious celebration of spring: “Green is the million shades of love”. Attentive to motion and color, the poet foregrounds nature’s cycle and seasons’ dance, reminding his readers that every birth is a miracle, every breakthrough a joyous event. His “Tree” brings to mind Tennyson’s “Oak” and his passion for captivating details is revealed in a neat poem about “Seeds”. Like a devoted farmer, and with a Frostian air, he provides guidelines:

To hasten the birth of a mountain laurel,

Thin its kernel’s shell with a metal file.

Drop it in acid.

Anything to help water

infiltrate solid

crimson armor.

What is noticeable in these poems is the diction that beautifully introduces words from the register of science: “acid”, “crevice”, “limestone”, “decomposes”, “compact tube”, “egg and sperm”, “organism”, “atom”. His functional use of scientific imagery renews language and widens thematic scope. Whether contemplating “how a fish hatches from a tiny egg”, admiring “the tiny kernel split” or the “emerald leaf” as it “breaks through”, Al-Jundi’s communion with/in nature aims at an accurate representation of what is innately beautiful about the world, yielding a broader consciousness, a fresher state of “wakefulness”.

Sometimes, communion happens during the night. In this collection, the night is friend and witness, recurrent metaphor and central setting. Fresh and intense, ink is “like a dark blue night”; when hurried ones fail to catch the passion in the poetry, a watch’s hands start to “weep in the dark nights/of logic”, love undresses in “our hidden night”; the poet is a nomad

who prowls on “cold nights” to “converse” with the “birds” who “don’t know to keep quiet”. And “once upon a night” relates a story about the noble and patient will to liberate a trapped princess.

In “For the Night”, a tender poem about a poet’s commitment to exhale love, the writer problematizes the issue of communication: “I play the keyboard poorly” and ends the poem with a strong note love note:

Who, if not me,

Will make you a cup of tea?

Hold you

Till you cry?

The night is also where dreams happen. The poems where Al-Jundi shuffles layers of consciousness and explores the dream trope are truly a fun. In “I Am Earth”, for instance, the speaker is under an oak tree, welcoming “the world”. Finding a “purple door”, he steps into “your dream” where memory takes him to old selves, and visions about freedom and transcendence transform his present into rain and release: “a million acorns falling”. Curious scenes of passion and risk arouse the dreamer’s envy and challenge his wakefulness in “Slumber”: “how real was she?” providing a frank glimpse of the subconscious and inviting thoughts on sexuality and taboos: “Two young women passionately kissing goodnight/in the darkened back bedroom”.

Between fantasy and reverie, Al-Jundi’s dreams are also anchored in cherished hopes about a more serene future. In one of his arresting poems on peace, the refuge is in a dream about a planet covered with wild flowers and the outlet is in deciding to “grow some more”.

Despite the threats of aridness and the inclination towards brooding, Al-Jundi is not utterly Byronic. A “practical enough idealist/ sufficiently sad optimist”, he keeps valuing “the gift of a sensitive core”.

And how thoughtful of the poet to dedicate verse to praise poetry and speculate on its process and texture. With the spontaneity of the child and the seriousness of someone who cares, he asks: “*What is poetry?*”, “*What makes a poem sublime?*”, “*What gives rise to a dormant poet?*”

While he modestly claims that what he fashions is “Just words/keys, clues, seeds/bite-size portions/of baklava”, Al-Jundi is aware words have the power to change, enlighten, lead to revolutions. Forging “Landmine Poems”, the least of his concerns is that he stays intact. For the sake of truth, he persists, is willing to vanish, and is forever ready to:

Plant more mines

Shatter more false

Constructs

Till there is nothing left

Of me

But this pen and paper

Al-Jundi’s jewel, though, is “This poem is not controversial”: impossible not to fall in love with a poem like this: sensitive like skin, generous like earth, calm like a summer sea; a poem that “has no enemies/Does not want to argue/Defend one point/Or attack another”; a poem that “exists/Past opposites/ Beyond contradictions” and “has but love to offer/Feels no need/To name/The nameless”.

Al-Jundi's sincerity, inquisitive mind, limitlessness; his attentiveness to earthly particles and cosmic dimensions, his celebration of morning's songs and veneration of night's mysteries, his ability to challenge codes, precepts, and dogmas while worshipping a most pure and liberating version of faith—all these make him a daring and generous voice. His defiance is neat and his call is tender. His journey is brimful of questions that reflect depth and seek to linger in it. In "Exit", he throws "noise" and preserves what leads to the faith that is to become. There, he remains for us, tending keys:

Pray

in one of your pockets hides a door.