

Trees of Flame Grow: Three Syrian Poets in Translation

Today, we're excited to share with you the new translations of works by three accomplished Syrian poets living in exile: Akram Al-Katreb, Osama Esber, and Firas Sulaiman. Their poems have in common the voice of the suffering in the ancient lands of the Middle East and the longing of the exiled poet. We loved these fiery new works, their live language, and the love the poets show for their native war-torn country. We hope you'll like them, too.

And remember, in September and beyond: the world lies open. Take time to explore it. Read and share your favorite translations.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Akram Al-Katreb

Translated by Osama Esber

The Voices

Oh skies, cultivated by the voices of my loved ones,
I want to walk in the cities
that I forgot to say goodbye to,
the cities I left carelessly,
like a shirt tossed on a chair.
All the clouds of the earth are not enough for my heart.

How can I open one of its doors,
then go to sleep?

Do You Know How Much We Love You

We, your sons, are now leaving the world.
Do you know how much we love you,
while you are dying?
For ten thousands years, your body was hanging in the air.

Are you still alive?
Maybe we can meet, by chance, in a history textbook
that praises the kings of the Stone Age.
You are losing birds, soul, trees, and mother tongue.

Do you know how much we love you?

At 1 pm

Who will call you at 1 pm,
and say: I'm here, at Al-Yater bar
will you stop by?

The Balconies

Balconies are higher than the walnut trees.
No word or price can describe it.
The clothes of your sons are graffiti on the walls.
They eat mythical fruits.

You still have the painting with frame broken in Bab Sharqi
near the house of your family,
but the books and laughter
will never be returned to me.

My Friend Who Lives By the Mediterranean Sea

The world is not what you believe,
even if you are holding the alarm clock in your hand
explaining the form of the stars hanging like palm fronds
in front of the house.

Friendship is the psalm that God left in the desert
so the blind and exiled and wolves can find it,
a rock on which your face is inscribed.
Your face,
more than 5000 years old.

Cancer's Lesson

Who saves your mythical face from drowning,
from the chemistry lessons?

You run behind poetry in vain,
Find it in asylums –
blood thinners,
needles with serum,
white sheets,
and the odor of penicillin
in the critical care room.

The Cost of Beauty

What we have been doing for all these years
waiting for you, barefoot
crying, with the poison leaking out of our hearts :

It's the cost of beauty.

Berry Tree

The corn field where we used to play would disappear
and that backyard berry tree would turn into a ladder
thrown atop the roof of the house.

Goodbye

You say goodbye to the same place forever,
the place you've secretly kept on your shoulders
with stones and clouds,
strays away like a prey.

Syria

Syria once only a few miles away,
now thousands apart.
The door ajar, the alleyways,
and the bird breasts glimmering on coals
like the planet Venus.



Akram Alkatreb was born in Salamiah, an ancient city near Hama, in western in Syria. Salamiah is known in the Arab world as the "city of poets" because in almost every household there lives a poet or two. Alkatreb wrote his first poem when he was fourteen.

He has worked as an art critic and journalist since 1996, contributing to major Middle Eastern publications.

Poet, journalist and writer, he has written for many major Arabic-speaking newspapers in Lebanon, London and Syria, including *As-Safir-Al-Hayat*, *Almustaqbal*, *An-Nahar* and *Al-Quds al Arabi*.

He is a leading figure in what critics have called the “new wave” of Syrian poetry. Alkatreb has been living in the United States since 2001.