

AHMED SALEH SHAFIE

FROM AND OTHER POEMS

TRANSLATED BY ROBIN MOGER

In his other life Issa wished to be a white butterfly and when he had achieved that, wished to be a cherry blossom.

The cherry blossom remembered that Issa had never in his life picked a blossom, for which reason he was a fool.

It thought: that which wished to be a white butterfly was a fool and that which wished to be a cherry blossom was a fool.

The cherry blossom wished that somebody might pick it and did not know if this was a natural thing for cherry blossoms to feel.

I spent today beside a flower whose name I did not know and thought that it, too, did not know its name, and I saw its beautiful petals, so separate and distinct that I could see the grass between them, and I thought of other things, separate from one another and independent, and how they, too, might be like these petals. And I thought of a poem by John Ashberry in which a painter dips his brush into the sea. He never says what it is the painter wants to paint, but nothing blue, of course. And I thought that the sea, all the same, is blue, and that though the painter might have scooped up that which is without colour, no one will ever say that he scooped up the sea and did not find it blue. This is what I thought about as I sat with a flower and then afterwards, and do not make a poem of it, I beg you.

I did not find poetry where I left it and did not suddenly discover it as a raincloud hovering in my room or even as poems on my desk, but the room was, when I returned, waiting for me, and when it saw me it opened lids weighed down by drink and arms weighed down by drink and said, Imagine me. Imagine me, please.

In the collection I dream of every poem remains a world unto itself until the next one comes and something like a light rain falls across it bringing forth a low grass, washing walls, delighting eyes, and so with the next, and so on until the last poem comes and it is not an end but is instead like Ahmed from Saleh from Shafie* and then again like Basho then Pessoa then them all

* Ahmed's name in other words, which is his name, followed by his father's, followed by his grandfather/ancestor's: a nasab or chain of descent

naked beside her bicycle and no one is there except that she is weeping and now they imagine the sweep of the sea and the sweep of the sand and the sweep of the sky and something red, neglected, in one of these three

In the company of the air alone and my memories, too, maybe, I climb the darkened flight of stairs and I feel that between my hands is a lamp, its flame rocked by my breath, that I have said my piece and there is nothing to do but wait, that it will be a long time waiting for sure, that I will, at the turn in the stairs, find the stars in the sky, all shivering, all washed clean, as though the sky were remembering, say, seeing itself for the first time on the surface of the Nile by night, in summer, the full moon present like the print of a kiss on its cheek, that is, if the stairs turn, if my guess is correct

For a moment I did not feel your hand on my forehead and then it lifted as though it were a bird and there was I, as it receded, losing its touch, its scent, its colour, then its existence. But feverish perhaps, perhaps long dead, I saw it. I saw it. Your hand. There. On my forehead. There. Do not try to see it. Nor shall you reach it. Think of something else and forget this hand. Forget it.