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Carolyn Brown

FOUR POETS FROM THE WORLD

For the past thirty years, Iowa City has been a sought-after home address for writers from around the world. In recent years, visiting writers in The University of Iowa's International Writing Program have settled into their quarters each fall on the top floor of the Mayflower Residence Hall. They come to work on writing projects—novels, scripts, collections of poems, translations—but they also open their doors and venture forth, crossing borders of custom and language, religion and politics. They come to discover “America”—and each other. Three of the four poets from the world represented in this issue of *TIR* spent the fall of 1995 together: Eugenius Ališanka from Lithuania, Ranjit Hoskote from India, and Mohammad Sulaiman from Egypt. The fourth, Ambrose Massaquoi from Sierra Leone, was a program participant in 1994.

Eugenius Ališanka was born in Siberia in 1960. Although the family returned to Lithuania, their homeland, two years later, the experience of being born in exile and coming of age under Communist rule has clearly influenced Ališanka's poetry. Like others of his generation who began writing behind the Iron Curtain, he learned to express his resistance indirectly. Ališanka's training as a mathematician may have also imparted precision and objectivity to the quiet, enigmatic voice with which he interrogates issues of freedom and belief, and asks more private questions. In 1991, the year Lithuania attained full independence from the Soviet Union, Ališanka's *Equinox* won the Zigmās Gele, a prize for the year's best first book of poems. The poems I've chosen come from Ališanka's second collection, *City of Ash*, published in Lithuanian as *Peleus miestės* in 1995 and translated into English by H. L. Hix.

Ališanka's own city, Vilnius, is a centuries-old European center of culture. The map of his *City of Ash*, however, has become a “tabula rasa”; its history begins with the end in (hind)sight. If its solitary citizen has survived an apocalypse, the aftermath is not nuclear winter but

perpetual autumn, a season “when one leaps from the highest cliff / and never becomes present tense.” Two lines of a three-line poem establish the characteristic conditions: “the accent of time is over us / grammar of silence in us.” Words are now the only foothold on a vanishing precipice. The poems evolve through starkly juxtaposed images, opposed abstractions, oxymorons. “Alien home,” for instance, is a typical title, and its last two lines could serve as an epigraph to the volume: “I have no home, only brackets of love / in the desperate silence of dictionaries.” The poet has accepted the constraints on creation in this belated epoch:

days shorten. night will come,
indifferent to passions. the dream
of the demiurge will visit, ascetic.

already, were it not for the words
that trapped you in a block of silence,
I would have tried to escape.

(“antipygmalion”)

When we follow this pilgrim’s insomniac wanderings, we may be surprised by flashes of faith in the corners of these poems. Who knows, maybe the poet will really end up finding something “in the hollow of the vowel.” The initial bleakness is disrupted by a suspicion that for Ališanka there “could be,” after all, “something / more than the revelation of non-existence / incarnate in the rhetoric of nature.” Although we may not have understood its import, the poet admits at the very outset:

every autumn I forget history,
why should you need it, when the sun rises
portending another short day

Ališanka believes that poetry provides a way to “cross invisible borders,” to “return to the very beginning” of thinking and feeling, to create the world again through words.

Ranjit Hoskote, born in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1969, is the youngest of the four poets. Or would he want to argue that he is the oldest? In India, according to Hoskote, “the past is never really over.” To be Indian, he writes, means that “you live in several centuries simultaneously, shuttle among several subcultures, manage varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural attainment.” What he calls “nostalgia for a time before you were born” is itself part of his rich poetic inheritance. Hoskote is, of course, not just “the logbook / of [his] ancestors.” As an art critic for the *Times of India* and as a translator, he pursues a wide range of inquiry. His imagination moves with ease from Kabir to Garbo, Karna to Kipling, minotaurs to magnetos, Dutch teacups to pots of pickled mango. An American reader may at first simply savor the turmeric and kohl, silk and “cartloads of spices” as items in an exotic catalog. But in Hoskote’s poems, “objects are lessons.” The lessons, however, are not tidily explicated—or desiccated into “raisins of tact.” Rather, they are clues to the poet’s characters, hints of their “helical histories”—whether they are queens or grandmothers, unnamed he’s and she’s and we’s, or historical figures, such as Almaghir, doomed emperor of a declining Mughal empire and focus of an extended prose poem.

If Hoskote had been born in India a generation earlier, he might have been distracted by or defensive about the postcolonial politics of writing in English. But English is his gift and unquestioned medium—and among the Englishes of world literature, his has been hammered and polished into the finest coinage. Indeed, the sheer brilliance of Hoskote’s language might tempt us to view each poem solely as an “artefact”; the poet, however, would quickly remind us that it is also a “carrier of voice.” The poems in the selection that follows are in part transitional. Hoskote has been turning deliberately from the comparatively oracular voice and political domain of his first volume, *Zones of Assault* (1991), to a more intimate voice and a more inward world in his recent work. “Altamira” (a poem not included in these pages) makes a promise: “I won’t wear my minotaur mask again.”

Ambrose Massaquoi was born in 1964 in Sierra Leone, in the diamond-rich Tonga Fields that have recently been a site of violence in this politically volatile West African nation. He is one of a group of tal-

ented writers who have lived through a period in which their country has risked passing into a “twilight zone” beyond anarchy. Their response has been not despair but engagement and commitment. Massaquoi’s poetry is one aspect of a complex vocation that also includes performing in a gospel band and working as a Christian missionary. I’ve drawn the selection of poems that follows from Massaquoi’s manuscript collection, “A Blaze of Harlotry.” The title is drawn from Ezekiel 16; the stern voice belongs to Yahweh:

Because your lewdness was poured out and your nakedness uncovered through your harlotries with your lovers and with all your detestable idols, and because of the blood of your sons which you gave to idols, therefore, behold, I shall gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, even those whom you loved and all those whom you hated. So I shall gather them against you from every direction and expose your nakedness to them that they may see all your nakedness.

Massaquoi’s poems face alter egos and enemies, the powerless and the powerful, inherited and present danger. But even his most judgmental poems have a thoroughly human moral energy that derives from close attention to individual voices. He creates duets—playing, for instance, a peppery recitative over exploitation against the sweet-sugar pitch of a too-young vegetable-seller’s song. He hears the “witchgun-barrelled speeches” of politics, but he also tunes in on and “records” street talk. American readers should be aware that Sierra Leone’s low literacy rate and the virtual absence of publication outlets severely limits Massaquoi’s reading audience. Perhaps he attends to individual voices so closely because he also expects us to *listen* to him carefully. Massaquoi’s own delight in the music of language gives his Krio-inflected and reggae-rhythmed English a distinctive flavor and pulse. He invites us to put the words on the page in our mouths and to taste them on our tongues. He reminds us that if we forget how to celebrate, even the most righteous outrage will dehumanize us. Massaquoi’s poems, read aloud, are an invitation to join the circle of fellow listeners and dance.

Mohammad Sulaiman, born in 1948, spent his childhood in the Egyptian village of Menoufia. He now lives in Cairo but still regards himself as a “foreigner” there, even after many years, first studying pharmacology and then operating his own pharmacy. Sulaiman would argue that his two professions are entirely compatible. His work as a pharmacist places him, he says, in the midst of people’s problems and dreams, without which his poetry would be mere artifice. And when he writes, he is “mixing” words as if they were chemical compounds. Inevitably, important elements of this mix are diluted when we read Sulaiman’s poems in translation, for his own language is an amalgam of Arabics—classical and colloquial, official and domestic. The blend of age-old cadences from the Koran with modern urban inflections contributes to the central experience of his poetry, in which the past is always present. According to Sulaiman, we live in all times: “now” is past, present, and future, all at once.

The poems in the following selection come from *Solomon Rex*, first published as *Sulaiman al-Malik* in 1990. King Solomon, according to the Koran, lost his kingdom and was replaced by a double, who occupied the throne until Solomon asked forgiveness for his sins. In these poems, the poet is a contemporary double for his namesake: Solomon/Sulaiman “sees himself in the distance” as poet and protagonist trade places from line to line. The past is present—and the present is estranged. As soon as we think we’ve oriented ourselves in a modern metropolis with a “café” and “boutique,” we discover ourselves instead in a timeless landscape that has nevertheless aged into a realm of “dust” and “rust.” Although King Solomon may call out: “There have been no tales for a time / Speech is over,” Sulaiman’s kingdom has not yet reached “its limit at the end of speech.” Ferial Ghazoul’s translation renders vividly Sulaiman’s often visionary images. Even without the original Arabic, reading these poems can be like discovering an illuminated manuscript, in which we encounter a poet “gathering letters from a cavern / Putting the letter Nuun / Next to the letter Jeem” to create a *jinni* that is “still . . . searching” in the contemporary moment.

A few closing words: During my four years on the staff of the International Writing Program, I have met more than a hundred writers. Their individual voices and distinctive accents continue to speak in my memory.

For me, the world map has become, country by country, from Albania to Zimbabwe, a peopled landscape. Each of these writers has given me a new perspective on the world. I am grateful for the opportunity to open the shutters on four of these windows and share the view with readers of *TIR*.