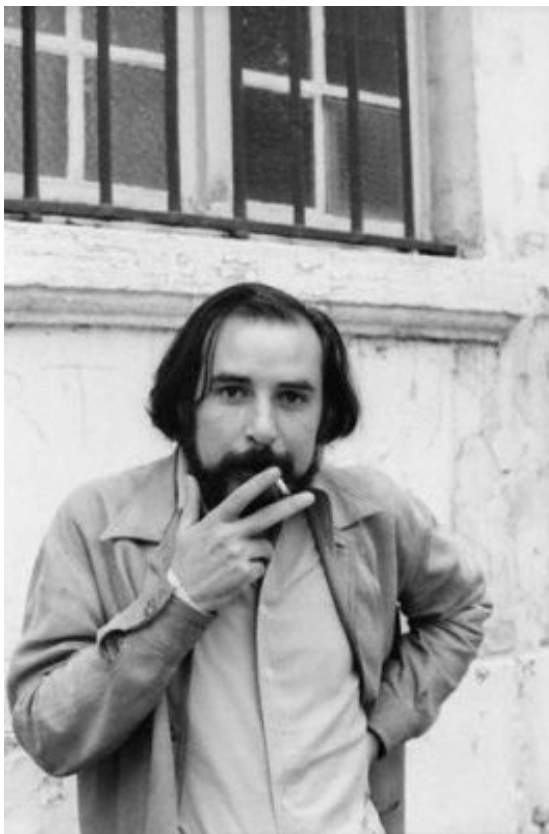


Poetry Written Out of Outrage: The Rising of the Ashes by Tahar Ben Jelloun

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on June 7, 2010

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The Rising of the Ashes by Tahar Ben Jelloun (trans. Cullen Goldblatt) City Lights Books, \$16.95, 128pp.



Tahar Ben Jelloun was born in the Moroccan city of Fez in 1944, but has lived since 1971 in France. One of the most accomplished writers of North Africa, his highly acclaimed novels include *The Sacred Night*, *The Sand Child*, and *Leaving Tangier*. He has also written short, lucid works of nonfiction such as *Islam Explained* and *Racism Explained to My Daughter*. *The Rising of the Ashes* is the first volume of his poetry to appear in English.

The book, which first appeared in 1991 in a bilingual French-Arabic edition, comprises two long poems of almost exactly the same length. The title poem, “The Rising of the Ashes,” describes the devastation of the first Gulf War. It is dated February-April 1991—that is, just as the war was ending. The second poem, “Unidentified,” is a memorial to Palestinian victims of repression during the intifada of the 1980s.

Almost twenty years later, the book is now available in a bilingual French-English edition, translated by Cullen Goldblatt. Poetry written out of anger or outrage, or to express political convictions, doesn’t often last as long as that, but this book remains raw, painful, and effective.

The book as a whole is about the dead, as the author makes clear from the first stanza of “The Rising of the Ashes.”

This body that was a body will no longer stroll
along the Tigris or Euphrates
lifted by a shovel that will not remember one
single pain
put in a black plastic bag
this body that was a soul, a name and face,
returns to the land of sand

detritus and absence.

Later, with a kind of grim humor, the poet imagines the state of the souls that have left their bodies behind in the desert.

In this country the dead travel
as statues and flames
They wear eyeglasses
and stretch out their scorched arms for flight.
We say they became invisible
left to offer the living the years that remained of
their lives.
Oh how many years litter the desert: a century,
more.
Lives for the taking, as jackals gorged on lives tremble to say:
“Death is not fatal just as night is the sun’s
shadow.”

Though Ben Jelloun is describing the aftermath of a modern war, those black plastic bags and those eyeglasses are among the few details that tell us we are reading about the 20th century and not about the ancient Middle East. Guns and tanks, airplanes and bulldozers are mentioned indirectly, if at all: “A blanket of sand was dumped on these black bags by a metal hand.” Some phrases suggest the King James Bible: “We are defeated by our own hand / and the abyss is our inheritance.” The only writer mentioned is the author of the *Iliad*:

This body which was once a word will no longer
look at the sea and think of Homer.

The dead of the Gulf War are like the spirits Odysseus found in the underworld: thin, shadowy, cold, unsatisfied. They miss their earthly existence, as this passage shows, where the pouring of blood might allude to the blood Odysseus poured out to give the shade of Teiresias the power to speak.

And me
I refuse the prayer for the dead
the posthumous glory and the rose made of soil
I am neither soldier nor martyr
I am a shoemaker and I have forgotten my name
I am an artisan and I like love songs
I like arak and orange blossoms
I am small on my street
I am small in life
and here I have no more blood to pour
I am no longer hungry nor thirsty
I am a little cold
and I have no more tears to hold back.

While mourning the victims of the Gulf War, Ben Jelloun also pauses to remember the victims of the Iraqi regime. In one passage he recalls Saddam Hussein’s gas attack on a Kurdish region of his country.

They covered two villages with a net of death
children and animals gone rigid in their sleep
a quiet death in Halabja and in Anap on this brief
night the sixteenth of March nineteen hundred and
eighty-eight.

* * *

In the second long poem, “Unidentified,” the dead take on names and personalities. They are, in fact, less “unidentified” than the dead in “The Rising of the Ashes.”

It is not immediately clear what these people have in common, but the dates and place-names gradually make it clear. Saïda, mentioned more than once, is the Arabic name for the city of Sidon in Lebanon. El Ansar, Borj El Shemali, Aïn El Helweh, and Tell Zaatar (meaning “hill of thyme”) are the sites of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, each of them the location of killings during the intifada. Ras En-Nabaa is a neighborhood in Beirut, and Al Shâtî the site of a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Naplouse is the French name (for some reason left untranslated) of the city of Nablus in the West Bank, and Tallûzâ is a nearby village. Two other names, Al Halaliyya and Ain Abi Lotf, I could not identify.

Most of the poem consists of short verses about individual men and women, the spare details of their existences gleaned from the pages of the *Revue d'études palestiniennes*, which from 1981 to 2008 “published a chronology of resistance and repression in the occupied territories.”

Abd al-Qader Hantach

April 8, 1983

He had a wife who loved to laugh three children and a donkey.
The eldest was gone
they had blindfolded his eyes and marked his shoulder with a cross.
Hassan and Nahla guarded
the house the day and the sorrowful tree of childhood.
They watched the sky unseemly host to misery.
Abd al-Qader Hantach sold sand.
They killed him on the shore with bullets
and spared the donkey.
He had known fifty-eight years and an immense season of statelessness.

As if stepping back from the details of blood and suffering, the book ends with eight numbered stanzas that replace immediate pain with lingering loss.

4.

Is it the tree or the infamy of long insomnia
that leans over to spell out the shredding of time?
A word falls slowly in a tomb where
the dawns accumulate.
This eternal body

is a shore that advances: the sea is here, at its feet.

6.

Neither lemon tree, nor absinthe, or night, but
absence:

a wet dress, set on a white stone bench;
this is the memory of hands separated from land
and face:

and the land is a face

the tree a voice

and the coat a sky washed of its clouds.

The verse in this section may be the most finely crafted in this book, but the fragmentary life stories that come before are perhaps the most affecting.

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He is currently editing an anthology of African memoirs.