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# A WORLD

MANAL AL-SHEIKH

A couple of doves  
And a wall edge  
How extensive the world's heart is!

When I wrote this poem I was standing on the roof of the culture house in Stavanger, the Norwegian city that I had been living in since 2009. I remember, it was just a few days after my arrival to Norway as a guest writer and a political refugee.

There were two doves that were standing on a thin edge of a metal fence, which were slowly moving toward each other until they became so close and started kissing!

In that moment I remembered my writing corner in my family's old house in Nineveh. My corner, as my mother called it, was a place in our garden. I had a red plastic chair that nobody could use but me. Every afternoon, I used to take the chair and put it under my favorite citrus tree. There were around twenty citrus trees in the front garden, sixteen orange, two lemon, and two mandarin. In the backyard garden, there were three olive trees and one big grape tree that grew through the pergola and the branches and leaves covered the entire top. In the spring and summer, in the afternoon, the sun set gradually and the trees' shadows started growing from my corner. So I could have a breezy afternoon to start thinking and writing. In that corner I always dreamed

of writing about the sea. Since we don't have a sea in Iraq I could never write about it. All I wanted at that time was to smell the sea and touch its sand with my feet and hands, but it never happened.

In spite of having two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, I never felt that I was related to them as a writer.

From my corner I could see my world, a peace of the sky above me, a small area beneath me and few thoughts in my mind. Traveling abroad was almost impossible for me and for my family. For that reason, I could never see a sea until I traveled for the first time in my thirties, and it was to Algeria where the Mediterranean Sea and the golden beaches were.

I wrote my first book, which was a short story collection, under that orange tree and I published it in 1996. When I traveled to Algeria and saw the sea for the first time in my life, I started writing my first poetry collection. Poetry was my passion in writing and not my goal. For that reason, I never thought about publishing a poetry collection before then. Most of my early poems were lost, like many things in my life. Sometimes I think about that period of my life and how I could live or deal with the lack of life in my days! It was like a colored prison, a small green prison, a leafy breezy light prison. My corner in our garden was my prison, and my whole world at the same time. I could see whatever I wanted through a window of my imagination. I could

write dozens of short stories and start my first unfinished novel. But I never wrote a poetry book until I saw the sea and touched its sand.

The difference between writing a story and writing a poem is just like the difference between my corner and the two doves' edge. They could kiss in that edge because they chose it after seeing all the possibilities from above. I couldn't write a real poem from my corner because I had one choice: that was my imagination. In fiction, you can write anything you want and it will never be wrong or illogical, because the thing you need the most in writing fiction is a creative imagination. While what you need in poetry is a real experience and then the other elements. I can't agree more with the Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge (1908–94) when he said: "A good poem is not imagined. It's based on a personal experience."<sup>1</sup>

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/ Notes /

<sup>1</sup> Frode Grytten, "Picking Plums, Building Poetry. Fosse Meets Hauge," trans. Mari Skjerdal Lysne. *Hauge Tveitt* 08 (September 28, 1991), <http://eng.ht08.no/Default.aspx%3Fpageid=873.html>.

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**MANAL AL-SHEIKH** is an Iraqi poet and writer born in Nineveh in northern Iraq in 1971. She has a bachelors degree in English-Arabic translation from the College of Arts, Mosul University. She has worked as a freelance journalist, has published creative and critical texts in many Iraqi, Arab, and European newspapers and magazines, and participated in many cultural festivals within and outside her native country. Her poems and essays have been translated into several languages including English, French, Norwegian, Catalan, Spanish, and Italian. She currently resides in the city of Stavanger, Norway.

## SHADOWBOXING

EMMA RAMADAN

What if our poetry only exists as translation? What if our words only arrive in a global seep, smuggled in through the space between others' words, emerging sheepishly from the corridors of other countries? What if our phrases depend on foreign agents to bring them to the page? My way into poetry is through other lands and languages, my understanding comes in the process of pulling poetry into an idea that's English, and now my poetry has no mother tongue: poems written in the hush between me and someone else.

Translating poetry has taught me about patience, what readers of one language will tolerate better than readers of another. About punctuation: how we can do without it. Translating rhyme and rhythm has taught me a new cleverness, what experimentation can mean, how languages can be forced to accommodate creativity.

Maybe the way forward is to build our poetic language from the cracks in our translations, the places where what we write differs from what the author wrote, where something rings out to us and we decide that what we have written is better than what they had in mind, and we gift ourselves the authority to invent. The shadowboxing of different versions of poems, and we win every time. Those words that reach out to us because they are the start of our voice, pieced together over the course