



**HABIB TENGOUR**

**Empedocles's Sandal**



Das Land, wo sonst the Purpurtraube gern  
Dem bessern Volke wuchs und goldene Frucht  
Im dunkeln Hain, und edles Korn, und fragen  
Wird einst der Fremde, wenn er auf den Schutt  
Von euern Tempeln tritt, ob da die Stadt  
Gestanden?...

Hölderlin, *Der Tod des Empedokles*

Traces/ Renown/ Shades/ Urns/ Life(s)/ Epoch/ Zenith  
Lucid/ Strangely/ Suspended





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Paris november rue Saint-Antoine Constantine  
cité du 20 août Paris again  
examine each of these addresses

a small light rift whips the clouds

Itinerary  
of precise annotations the return therein  
envisaged I know  
the tracings the dwellings and the hunger  
the hesiattion to take to the road is real

renown by auction  
victims interrogate who kills and reason

pomp makes sense only if sustained  
a hollow word illusions  
charisma is not a copyright trademark  
danger metamorphoses the limbs  
there is nothing to brag about today

the days have become flat right after the exchange  
the rivers advance in error in the moonlight  
I hesitated a long time before coming  
what is man without the praise that precedes him

you he; me for a long time tightly in your arms  
without a word

the eyes closed I believed

passion an outburst of eloquence      ah  
how to get rid of that one      there      image  
to put fire to the house      what an adventure  
country or metaphor causes prejudice  
the brothels have five stars

the city rejects you as you step off the bus



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it fears the look devoured by exile  
the limitless pretension of the accomplished witness  
he knows how bitter all food is  
the quick incendiary glance at the sidewalk cafés

elsewhere

there are bars where the name imposes itself  
the throat forges a name  
customers attentive to the mordant killer wit  
beauties day envies their black stockings

neither the bus nor the town hall square have doubts  
the lover's glory when the glasses clink  
nor the play of mirrors where friendship melts

trajectory    fixed  
meeting    inevitable

there is no sales point nor waiting room  
where you didn't exercise your gifts in pure loss  
fascinated by the tenebrous beauty of forgetting  
that grabs the sonorous cohorts in the city  
a short-circuit

Lemurs  
night escapades  
to watch your secretive ways of appearing  
from the  
bird  
in the tumult the thirst  
my head will roll at the edge of the river

the bits of green become visibly rarer  
the raised walls

jostle



the talk of lovers  
the hands unlock at the call of the setting ?

black blood revives chthonic speech  
it upholds the enterprise of chimerical periplos  
that quest loudly proclaimed in public  
companions perished

far from the atavistic  
pains of the libations  
that punctuate mourning  
from memory to question these dear beings

I accosted my father in the thick of so many dead  
unable -- did I dare -- to deliver my message  
I had fortified myself with lion's blood as  
the bar flies call red wine

I lost my way along the boundaries of the two worlds

in my pocket the right to enter  
your coins barely buy one round  
the soul of things can you put a price on it  
how much the assessment

moribund rituals

reference points

dissolving formulas

windows giving on roofs  
open on an ancient canvas that challenges you  
access to the sky's colors jealously closed off

to conform to the roads' tracings  
giving to the prescribed charities

here lies choice  
in the programmed debris  
lush spectacle  
smiles and congratulations  
facade

the complaints of those who are not dead reach you



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you know burning hate a secret remedy

...

the long sliding night introduces to the telling  
of adventures the magnanimous outlaw hero  
the poem carries along since the art of weaving  
the assembly settles there as if around a fire  
each one dreams of his kin left with no worries  
the rhythms are favorable for enjoyable meetings  
but sometimes the poet strains to blur  
the narration's weft through an excess of figures

the bird that takes its flight at midnight is blind

Interpreter,  
the lexicon at work  
far in the abyss the wandering gait  
no care taken  
with the staging neither obscure rhetoric  
nor this imperious vanity of surging forth

sun

the instant contains its light — cursive resonance  
it dazzles the cantankerous audience you  
undecided your gear  
slung across your back chains  
the house is narrow  
you declaim what you know onto a canvas  
a sorting out occurs invisible  
scattered traces  
to describe the table the luminous circle  
it is possible to forget oneself in the description of objects while  
carefully watching  
the precision of the study time  
that one's not sparing with embellishments  
you enhance the declamation at the risk of perturbing the reception  
to catch depends on to the baited trap  
the chant doesn't harmonize with the voice  
something you no longer doubt



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urns preserved the spirits of the ancestors  
dogs for the circumstance  
the occurrence demands vagueness to the detriment of  
urgency the celebration in fireworks  
one by one

all

tutelary deities

praise consecrates them at the vault's summit  
once the tower has been abolished

obsession

from quarrel to break

the argument contracts then loses itself

in the blackness of the invoked night

system of control

ineffectual despite the forces deployed

the warning shots

the blade

I was walking

up Boulevard Mohamed V. Kalachnikovs firing. The city safe

no longer for night wanderings.

The moon exposes the flaneur to danger.

life hangs on a thread

but the needle and the hand and the freezing lover

at the gate of the labyrinth

fear of the worst hastens the cadence

a breath missing to calm the grief

from the announcements to the road crossings

the blue-gray mysteries of the travelling show

Letters

*bricolage* of symbols gathered in neighboring

countries

the golden thread imprints on the memory



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the one I question answers to no  
demand  
rigid it invents for itself  
a republic in which reading commands  
summary hierarchy  
in the scenery  
a hidden laser  
*modern* he said  
to tread territories made to measure  
where the places knot into a tight rope  
to live truly  
to be god  
to claim it loudly  
reckless pride

you the Impeder-of-wind with bronze sandals  
you the Obscure who loves to disguise yourself  
and I all alone tracking you  
lives a concise inventory the detail  
adorns the gathering  
the fragments are classified  
to observe a usage  
just as white milk curdles

was it in Heidelberg on a road in Sicily  
in Evry or in Mostaganem by the seaside  
ill-used infinite  
few words carry when the tension increases  
alternation of the forms does not resolve much  
nor do the *rivets of love* assemble  
I remain an orphan

neither wine of Anderin flowing freely nor bravado  
at the moment when the clan wobbles  
neither catalysing places a sequence of cast names  
nor beauties offering themselves along the way  
nor the poetic lineage you claim  
nor this hard to decipher manuscript nor  
any allegiance excluded  
rupture







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an illusory feast takes over custom  
blood transforms itself into a philter

waiting for day  
acting

above the headdeath the road is straight  
it is not vengeance of a wounded chest  
it is not surrender to decline  
audacity shatters at the descent of the verse  
the clamors feed on themselves  
to exalt oneself by your name the torment has ripened

the accent isn't new

to recognize

the grace of a flash  
when the soul shatters

happy  
in her kernel a poem constructs

to perish

the elements fuse

by hate or by love

invention

that which retains the guest in the house  
that which terrorizes the virgins of Tamim  
that which persuades the number

the titration is deceptive

Igneous  
the soul in its crystal  
the way constellated waves deploy themselves

harnessing

ONE engenders destroys yet alternates  
he keeps me captive  
corruptible

the sweet water in the sea on which the fish feed is not  
an irrefutable argument against the establishment of paradise on  
earth other elements of a subtle nature enter into



the composition of the air man breathes      which inserts the  
human species into a specific animal category  
man is like a weathervane at the heart of the whirlwind  
the sky attracts him

Aristotle's disciples debated physics    meteorology  
natural science

then one did not consider armed struggle in the  
cities in order to impose a thesis      a phenomenon that  
keeps spreading      as does repression    the system has seized up  
to analyze sea water    or to examine the conditions of the ground can  
in no way unscramble the mechanism      does that mean that in  
this process    it is necessary to sink with the logic of the ancients  
the trace of the poem in fragments initiates      formal audacities  
a rhythm pursues you      this is no longer the time to evade  
meaning      the words order themselves

the year ends white  
wishes crackle on all sides  
from the orient to the occident is it but a reflection  
light effluvia when the moon scatters

hail-stones

what remains accessible in the face to face  
*this country where the violet grape once loved  
to grow for a better people, and the golden fruit  
in the dark thicket, and noble wheat, and some day  
the stranger will ask, treading through the rubble  
of your temples, if that's where the city  
rose...*

this sovereign generosity  
this evil which hardens in the apple of the eye  
these complaints without notification  
a salute to the dead friends

Ochre  
maturity, it ends with the day  
the questions left hanging

you observe the flight of a flock of starlings  
bad news is spreading



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from the palms of Bahrain to the villages of Iraq

a tenacious worry  
the long crossing from deserts to cities  
these buried peoples with strange languages

there are only scattered signs  
truth surprises you  
at a metro gate

this visible and invisible world is decomposing  
science assures the poet of his wording  
the risks hidden in the hands' palms  
let's leave tears and blood

our friends are everywhere  
the voyage completes itself  
by day as by night  
all things astounded

Parcelled  
out they glitter under the moon  
motionless

the white armed virgin flies over the offerings

*Translated from the French by Pierre Joris*

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**Habib Tengour** was born in 1947 in Mostaganem, Eastern Algeria, raised on the Arab and Berber voices of marketplace storytellers, He has lived between Algeria and Paris ever since, both incarnating and, in his work, speaking to the nomadic & (post)-colonial condition of his countrymen. Trained as an anthropologist and sociologist, he has taught at universities in both countries, while emerging over the years as one of the Maghreb's most forceful and visionary francophone poetic voices of the post-colonial era. The work has the desire and intelligence to be epic, or at least to invent narrative possibilities beyond the strictures of the Western / French lyric tradition, in which his colonial childhood had



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schooled him. Core to it is thus the ongoing invention of a Maghrebian space for and of writing, the ongoing quest for the identification of such a space and self.

Besides a range of lyrical works ranging from *Schistes de Tahmad 2* (1983) to the recent *Traverser* and *Épreuve 2* (2002) — works that always stretch the imagination of what the lyrical can be —, Tengour’s main books are the poetic narratives *Le Vieux de la Montagne*, called a “Relation” (1983), *Sultan Galiev* (1985), *L’Epreuve de l’arc* (1990), *Gens de Mosta* (1997) and the novel *Le Poisson de Moïse* (2001).

**Pierre Joris** is a poet, translator and essayist. He is the author of over forty books. He is one of the foremost translators of avant-garde poetry into both French and English. His translations include *Exile is My Trade: A Habib Tengour Reader* (Black Widow Press, 2012); *Paul Celan: Selections* (University of California Press, 2005); *4X1: Works by Tristan Tzara, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean-Pierre Duprey, and Habib Tengour* (Inconundrum Press, 2003); and *Pppppp: Kurt Schwitters Poems, Performance, Pieces, Proses, Plays, Poetics* (Temple University Press, 1994). Of his translations of Paul Celan, poet Michael Palmer said: “Joris has dwelled during the better part of his life in Celan’s words and silences...he has journeyed through the work’s intricacies like very few others.”