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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “the poems for our distracted, balkanized, and lonely time.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

ELEMENTAL MEDICINE

In his debut collection, poet Fady Joudah combines rich imagery with his experiences working for Doctors Without Borders.

By Averill Curdy

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The Earth in the Attic, by Fady Joudah. Yale University Press. \$16.00.

Fady Joudah’s book, *The Earth in the Attic*, won the 2007 Yale Series of Younger Poets prize. While reliance upon image is rooted in early traditions of Arabic poetry, the use of image in Joudah’s work feels reminiscent of the Deep Image poetry of the ’60s, where it acted as an enlarging gesture intended to resonate from the silence of the pages’ white spaces. Similarly, his images can be tinged with surrealism, which is apt given that the landscapes he writes about are those of exile, loss, and peril, in which the experience is one of disorientation and displacement.

Though never specifically named, the poems’ landscapes suggest Darfur, where Joudah practiced medicine as a member of Doctors Without Borders, and the landscapes of his own exile as a Palestinian American, whether nostalgic or alienating. Sometimes this refusal registers as a kind of frustrating decorum, but when combined with his gift for image (which can also be read as a form of tact), Joudah’s best poems reach for and achieve a mythic quality in which the elemental is revealed below the ordinary details, as in these lines from “Atlas”:

Let me tell you a fable:

Why the road is lunar
Goes back to the days when strangers

Sealed a bid from the despot to build
The only path that courses through
The desert of the people.

The tyrant secretly sent
His men to mix hand grenades
With asphalt and gravel,
Then hid the button
That would detonate the road.

These are villages and these are trees
A thousand years old,
Or the souls of trees,
Their high branches axed and dangled

Like lynched men flanking the wadis.

The poem concludes: “If you believe the hoopoe / Is good omen, // The driver says, /
Then you are one of us.”

As admirable as these poems are, they can feel circumscribed in their technical means. Even reading the book for the first time, I found myself longing for greater variety of tone, music, rhythm, and syntax. What some readers will call incantatory began to feel, at times, somewhat repetitive, making me appreciate those moments when a more colloquial voice, usually another speaker, was introduced in a poem, as in “An Idea of Return.” This juxtaposition provides a revivifying counterpoint to the more interior, lyrical voice of the poet. I also found that the dreamlike quality of Joudah’s images can seem random or obscure, the associative link lost through imprecise grammar or syntax, as in these lines, also from “Atlas”:

the dust gnaws
At your nostrils like a locust cloud
Or a helicopter thrashing the earth,
Wheat grains peppering the sky.

I sorted it out, but my first couple of reads left me with the image of nostrils thrashed by a helicopter.

My intention here isn’t to nitpick—neither dream nor myth necessarily release their meanings easily. At times, however, I felt abruptly thrust from the world of the poem when, rather than deepening the experience, an image called attention to itself and to the poet’s image-generating capacity. And while no language is off-limits to poetry, Joudah sometimes makes use of a medical lexicon that is natural to him as a doctor, but that doesn’t always feel fully naturalized to the poems. These occlusions reduce the power of his work, which needs to be received whole and unadulterated, viscerally, relying as it does on the sensuous and intuitive mode of image rather than, say, argument.

Joudah's poetry—courageous, yet constricted by limits either real or imagined—reveals the difficulties of writing poetry during a time when the imagination and its works are opposed by various fundamentalisms: economic, which reduces art to what it earns; political, which scorns its lack of utility; and religious, which fears its ambiguities. And while the poet finds a way around these challenges, the significant sacrifices—of intensity, of rhetorical flexibility and depth—suggest that these are indeed the poems for our distracted, balkanized, and lonely time.

The poems of 2007 NEA Grant recipient Averill Curdy have been published widely, including in *Pushcart Prizes 2007*. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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