

CHEZ L'ÉPICIER DU COIN

*Les boîtes de conserve qui tournent dans un espace transparent
sont belles comme la vie et la puissance de l'été..*

*Chaque main qui s'arrête évoque l'aile d'un papillon
sur le pollen de quelque fleur géante..*

*Et la vie des fleurs et des fruits rôde pour se mêler aux regards,
errer sur les poitrines et frémir dans les corsages..*

Les boîtes couvrant les murs font un tapis miraculeux..

L'épicerie est sonore comme un jardin au soleil..

*Des organismes végétaux où regorgent le sang de lourdes
saisons..*

Le poème charnel se spiritualise à son contact..

Qu'attendent les jeunes poètes pour chanter l'épicerie?

*Boîtes de conserve où l'émeraude de la sardine
se marie divinement avec le vert des haricots..*

*Boîtes de métal au ton subtil qui rappellent ces marées
où chantent les roseaux..*

*Pareilles à des nénuphars que le vent caresse,
les bouteilles de vin blanc se dressent
avec la virilité d'un élégant jet d'eau..*

*Bouteilles de sauces anglaises qui évoquez ces jardins embrasés
d'où les arbres semblent jaillir
comme des flammes souterraines,*

*vous ressemblez de loin à un champ pourpre d'œillets
où la terre et le ciel s'unissent dans l'or épandu..*

*Et vous, enivrantes bouteilles de liqueurs qui avez l'air grivois
des danseuses de music-hall,*

*pourquoi rendez vous si présente à ma mémoire
cette atmosphère de chair tendue par le sang,
par les gestes sinueux et par les hanches moites,
ainsi que par l'orgie de vos couleurs ailées?*

*Ahmed n'aime pas la pulpe de la pêche et il déteste les fruits
qui sentent la rose ambrée..*

Car Ahmed est pauvre et souffre de l'estomac.

*Il ne mangera plus de la viande de veau aux fèves,
à l'heure où le soleil se couche sur la mer..*

Poor
Zoumoul
went
into town
this
morning

to buy a spool of No. 40 thread.

The girl's my arm and my legs.

How can I ever reward her?

Don't forget her, if one day you become minister.

Did you see how your mother's friend looked at me?

As if I were going to eat her new dress! Bah! what does it matter!

If a stone is cast at you, cast back a piece of bread.

When the lion ages, he becomes the laughing-stock of the dogs.

He came this morning with a basket in his arms, the little servant of Dada Iladile.

I like the boy, for oddly enough he resembles one of your grandfather's wives who detested me.

We were ten.

I was the youngest. Was I seventeen then?

She called me a schemer because I was pretty, and she tried more than once to make me deaf by screaming at the top of her voice.

I never answered her because she was like my mother.

Her daughter, Ihsanne Hanem, is older than me.

Her eyes were divine: two emeralds; two raisins.

We were ten women, my child.

Thursdays, the Pasha spent the entire evening with us, laughing, for he was a jolly one.

We all adored him, for he was good, and just and strong.

I often stayed away Thursday evenings, in order not to trouble the others, pretending to have a headache.

I only saw the Pasha on the 7th and the 22nd, when he'd come and spend the night in my rooms.

One Thursday evening,

while I worked at the machine, a pretty sewing machine that he bought in Europe, for me, someone came and said:

"Hanem effendi, the Pasha asks for you."

Your grandfather was teasing the others.

After looking for a moment at my new blue dress, he asked me, smiling:

"Is it true, Rengigule, that you paint your eyes black, your lips red and your neck white?"

To which I answered:

"Didn't you buy me make-up like you did for my sisters?"

And since the others laughed gently, the Pasha said.

"But I'm certain that you don't make yourself up."

Then, he pulled out of his pockets a large green silk hanky and a white silk hanky which he dipped in a glass of water, and rubbed against my neck, and my lips and eyes.

And turning to the others, he asked:

"Where's the white? Where's the red? Where's the black?"

Since they didn't reply, he drew me close, and, looking at the others, placed a drawn-out kiss on my neck, a drawn-out kiss on my lips and on my eyes.

And the poor unfortunates, were pale as faded dresses.

And I wanted to tell them I was sorry.

Since I was looking at the door, the Pasha said to the African Tanssouf:

“Bring up hot water this evening to Rengigule.”

The poor unfortunates
were angrier than the Chatir Ahmed when he broke his foot
falling into the trap he was preparing for the young princess.

They were yellow as an old kiosk.

Cast a piece of bread at whomever casts a stone at you.

For he who does an atom's weight of good will feel it.

One of these evenings, I'll tell you all about princess Nazla.

*Ahmed Rassim was born in Alexandria in 1895. Working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs he was posted successively to Rome, Madrid and Prague, returning to Egypt in 1928. He went on to serve as Deputy-Governor of Cairo, Governor of Suez (during WWII), director of the Press Office, and Director-General of Tourism. Alongside his career as a civil servant, Rassim published three books of verse in Arabic, a dozen volumes of verse in French, an anthology of popular Arabic proverbs, and two volumes of journals. In 1954 he was awarded the Prix Capdeville by the Academie Française and made Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. He died in 1958. **Gabriel Levin** is a poet and translator presently living in Jerusalem.*

AHMED RASSIM

*Extracts from Drops
of Shadow*

Translated from French
by Gabriel Levin

*Tree branches provoke such
a gust even leaves seem
daft butterflies;
 they'd like to steal
into Samia's room to tell her the joy
of autumn expiring.*

*O wind singing tonight your sad
 recitative, Samia suffers;
Won't you stop moaning so hard
 at her window; you'll wake her up.*

*Dog-days of September.
Even the flowering branches
stick their tongues out painfully.*

*The sky's naked. A train passes...
to leave a wreath of smoke
in the azure.*

*For Samia to leave her blouse
gaping on summer nights,
all the apple trees extend their fruits
to her hands, white... as kisses.*