



## Translation Slam

**One text. Two translators. Many possibilities.**  
Translators **Adam Talib** and **Randa Aboubakr** discuss  
the challenges they faced and the choices they made  
translating a text from Yusuf Abu Rayya's novel 'Ashiq  
al-hayy

**Moderator: Neil Hewison, Associate Director for  
Editorial Programs, AUC Press**

**Friday 7 December 2012**

**3.30 p.m.**

**British Council Agouza**

**المجلس الثقافى البريطانى – العجوزة**

**This event is presented as part of:**

**Edinburgh World Writers' Conference: Cairo  
7-8 December 2012**

**For more information on the conference visit:**

**[www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org/countries/](http://www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org/countries/)**

## Biographies

**Randa Aboubakr** is professor of English and comparative literature at Cairo University. She has published a number of studies on English literature, Egyptian colloquial poetry, sub-Saharan African literature, comparative literature, cultural theory, and translation. She is the author of *The Conflict of Voices in the Poetry of Dennis Brutus and Maḥmūd Darwīsh*. (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004). Her most recent research is on “The Role of New Media in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011: Visuality as an Agent of Change,” in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (New York, Routledge, forthcoming 2012). She has published literary translations from and into English and Arabic, among which are a translation of Ahmad Bakhtiet’s *Laila: The Honey of Solitude* into English (published by Zaweil Publications, Cairo, 1999) and a translation of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* into Arabic (published by Azminah, Amman, Jordan, 2007). Randa has been fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany, and visiting Professor at Freie Universitaet zu Berlin-Germany and the Jagiellonian University of Krakow-Poland.

**Adam Talib** is assistant professor of classical Arabic literature at the American University in Cairo. He first came to Cairo as a graduate student in 2006 after having completed a BA in comparative literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. After receiving an MA in Arabic literature, he left for Oxford to pursue a DPhil under Prof. Geert Jan van Gelder in 2008 and also spent a year in Germany working with Prof. Thomas Bauer as part of his doctoral work in 2010–11. Adam is also a literary translator and has translated three novels from Arabic into English, with a fourth scheduled for 2013. These works are: *The Dove’s Necklace* by Raja Alem (co-translation with Katharine Halls), Overlook Press, 2013; *Sarmada* by Fadi Azzam, Swallow Editions, 2011; *The Hashish Waiter* by Khairy Shalaby, American University in Cairo Press, 2011; *Cairo Swan Song* by Mekkawi Said, American University in Cairo Press; Arabia Books, 2009.

**Neil Hewison** is Associate Director for Editorial Programs at the American University in Cairo Press. He is the author of *The Fayoum: History and Guide* (AUC Press, 4th edition 2008) and the translator of two modern Arabic novels, *City of Love and Ashes* by Yusuf Idris (AUC Press, 1998) and *Wedding Night* by Yusuf Abu Rayya (AUC Press, 2006).

## من رواية عاشق الحي ليوسف أبو رية دار الهلال 2004

قام عن المائدة ليغسل يده على الحوض، ذلك كفيه أكثر من مرة، ليزيل رائحة السمك المشوي، وحرك الفرشاة بالمعجون بين أسنانه ليسحب قنات الفجل والجرجير المتراكمة على ثناياه.

- يا ساتر على دي ريحة.

أشعل سيجارة كليوباترا، ولم يلق عود الثقاب في المنفضة التي سحبها معه إلى غرفة النوم، وضعها على الكومودينو، ومدد طوله على السرير، يشد نفس الدخان بشراهة، ويحرك عود الثقاب بين أسنانه ليخرج القنات. نادى على زوجته من الداخل: هات الشاي هنا يا زينب.

المرأة مذعورة منذ أخبرها بحكاية جاره الأستاذ دسوقي. كان قد دخل عليها فوجدها قد أعدت أطباق السمك المشوي، ووزعت الأربعة على الطاولة التي تعلق حولها الأولاد يعاركون جوعهم بانتظار الأب.

قالت له مستنكرة: تأخرت على غير العادة.

رمى لفة الفجل والجرجير، وقال ساخطاً: حاروح فين يعني؟ من الجامع للبيت.

- أنا سامعة الميكروفون وهو بيختم الصلاة.

- عديت على دسوقي .. الله ما يوريك.

- خير اللهم إجعله خير.

- الست سميرة خطفها القط منه.

فادار الأولاد وجوههم نحوه بحركة فجائية، وصرخوا بصوت واحد: إيه!!

- بعدين .. بعدين.

- قط إيه يا راجل.

فكت الربطتين، ودخلت بهما المطبخ لتفردهما على الطبق، قالت وهي تفتح عليهما ماء الصنبور.

- تعالى فهمني.

أطل عليها برأسه، وقال بصوت خفيض حتى لا يسمعه الأولاد.

- دا اللي حصل فعلاً .. كانوا بيتغدوا ودخل عليهم قط أسود ما رفعش عينه عن الست سميرة، ربنا ما هداش أخونا دسوقي قال له "عجباك؟ خدها." سمع كلامه في الحال وخدها.

نثرت الماء عن الطبق وعصرت العيدان الريانة، فاهتز ذراعها اللحيم، وترجرج ثدياها العامران البارزان كبلونتين كبيرتين مهياتين للفرقة عند التلامس.

- تستاهل.

- حرام عليك.

- قتلها أكثر من مرة شوفي علاج لحالتك .. ما هو الواحدة مننا ما تقدرش تعيش من غير ولد يونسها.

- ولد إيه وهباب إيه؟

- صاحبك دسوقي مالوش في الخلفة، والبنت يا نن عيني حتموت ع الواد، جالها اللي تستحقه.

- إحنا في إيه ولا في إيه؟

- هو ده أس الموضوع، كل المشايخ قالوها مافيكيش عيب خلي جوزك يشوف نفسه، وهي مصرّة "ما استغناش عنه أبداً .. دا مهيني" خليها قاعدة في الشقة قرد قطع.

- حرام عليك.

وعاد إلى الطاولة ليلتحق بالأولاد الذين نسوا جوعهم وظلت عيونهم محدقة في الفراغ، في رعب، لا يعرفون له سبباً. وقبل أن يمدوا أياديهم إلى الأربعة، صرخ الولد الصغير فجأة، وقام منتفضاً حتى سقط على السجادة مغشياً عليه .

كان القط قد دخل في غفلة من الباب الموارب، وتخفى تحت الطاولة، يتشمم رائحة السمك، ويتحين الفرصة للإيقض، ظل يدور بين الأرجل في حيرة حتى لامس ذيله ساق الولد الصغير.

لاحقه الأب قبل المروق إلى المطبخ، وظل يطارده حتى أخرجه من الشقة، وأغلق الباب بالترباس، ثم عاد إلى الولد يهدده: دا القط اللي بتشوفه كل يوم.

- رفعت الأم ذيل الجلباب لتمسح دموعه، وترفعه مرة أخرى إلى الكرسي: ماتخافش يا حبيبي .. إحنا معاك.

رشف الأستاذ علي الشاي بتأن، وأشعل سيجارته الثانية دون أن يرفع عينيه عن النافذة المسدل عليها ستارة قصيرة من الدانتيل الذي استخدم سابقاً كداير للسريير.

- يا عيني على مدرس اللغة العربية .. بقى دسوقي مايعرفش إن القطط دي حكمتنا في يوم من الأيام.

واستعاد – كأستاذ تاريخ – كل معلوماته عن عبادة القط التي عممت في الحقب الفرعونية المتأخرة.

## Adam Talib

He got up from the table and walked over to the sink to wash his hands. He had to scrub his palms a few times to get rid of the smell of grilled fish and then brush his teeth to get rid of the little pieces of radish and rocket stuck between them.

“Good lord. That smell!”

He lit a cigarette—a *Cleopatra*—but rather than toss the matchstick into the ashtray he’d brought to the bedroom with him, he set it down on the bedside table and lay back on the bed. He took deep drags of his cigarette and picked his teeth with the end of the matchstick. Then he called out to his wife, “Zeinab. Bring me my tea in here.” She’d been in a state ever since he’d told her the story of their neighbor Dessuqi.

That evening he’d come home to find she’d already finished grilling the fish and laying out the bread on the table where the kids were sat, restless with hunger, waiting for father to return home. “You’re late,” she said. “That’s not like you.”

He tossed a bundle of radish and rocket on the table. “Where do you think I’ve been? Mosque, then home.”

“Come on. I could hear when prayer ended from the loudspeaker.”

“I stopped by Dessuqi’s place. God spare you.”

“What? What happened?”

“His wife, Samira, was abducted by a cat.” The children all looked up at him at the same time and shouted in unison:

“What?!”

“I’ll explain later.”

“A cat? What are you talking about?” his wife asked. She undid the bunches and took them into the kitchen to put them on a plate. “Come here and tell me what happened,” she called to him as she started washing the bunches in the sink.

He poked his head around the corner and, softly so the children couldn’t hear, he said, “That *is* what happened. They were sitting there, eating dinner, when a black cat came in and just started staring at Samira. It wouldn’t take its eyes off her. Dessuqi just wasn’t thinking so he says to it, ‘If you like her so much, why don’t you just take her?’ The cat did like it was told and snatched her away there and then.”

As she shook the plates dry and wrung out the supple, wet stems, her fleshy arms began to jiggle and her ample breasts—looking like massive balloons ready to pop at

the slightest touch—began to quiver.

“She had it coming,” she said.

“How can you say that?”

“How many times did I tell her to go find out how to fix the problem? I mean women like us can’t not have a boy in the house.”

“What does having a son have to do with anything?”

“Look, your buddy Dessuqi’s no good at making babies and that poor girl, dear me, she was dying to have a son. Now she’s getting what she deserves.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see that’s the whole point? All the sheikhs told her she was fine and she needed to tell her husband to go get checked out, but she just kept saying, ‘I could never live without my sweetheart.’ Fine. If she wants to be stuck in that empty nest all by her lonesome, what do I care?”

“You’re really something else,” he said as he walked back to the dining table, to the children who’d forgotten how hungry they’d just been and were now staring into space, terrified, though of what they didn’t know. Before the family had even take their first bite, the younger boy screamed and jumped out of his chair, and then fainted and fell to the ground.

A cat had snuck in through the front door and hidden under the dining table. It had smelled the grilled fish and was biding time, stalking beneath the table, waiting for its chance to pounce when its tail rubbed against the youngest boy’s leg.

The father cut the cat off as it was about to dart into the kitchen and then he chased it around the apartment until it ran out. He slammed the door behind it and bolted it shut. Then he went over and cradled his young son. “Come on now. That’s the same cat you see every day.”

The mother dried the boy’s tears with the hem of her gallabeya and set him back down on his chair. “There’s nothing to be scared of, honey. We’re here.”

He slowly sipped his tea and lit a second cigarette without taking his eyes off the window, which was covered by a short lace curtain that had once been a bed skirt.

“The poor bastard teaches Arabic. Dessuqi had no idea these cats used to rule over us back in the day,” he thought to himself and—consummate history teacher that he was—he thought back on all he’d read about the cult of cat worship, which had spread so widely in the later pharaonic period.

## **Randa Aboubakr**

He stood up from the table and went to wash his hands in the sink, repeatedly scrubbing them so as to rub out the smell of grilled fish. Then he moved the toothbrush, dipped in toothpaste, up and down his teeth, to remove bits of radish and rucola caught up between them.

—What a stink!

He took a cigarette out of his local cigarette pack and lit it up, but did not cast the match in the ashtray, which he took along to the bedroom. He put the ashtray on the nightstand and stretched out on the bed, voraciously drawing on the cigarette and picking his teeth with the match stick so as to remove yet more food crumbs. He then yelled at his wife from the bedroom: Bring the tea here, Zaynab!

The woman has been terrified since he told her the story of Mr. Desuqi, their neighbor. When he returned home, she had already laid down the plates of grilled fish and the pita bread on the table. The kids had already been seated there, fighting their hunger and waiting for the return of their Dad.

She said disapprovingly:

—You are unusually late.

He threw the sheaves of radish and rucola on the table, and said in exasperation:

—Didn't go nowhere. Come straight from the mosque.

—I heard it in the microphone when the prayers finished.

—I passed by Desuqi. Oh Lord! Freakish stuff!

—Bless us! What's up with him?

—It's Sitt Samira. The cat snatched her away from him.

The children suddenly turned their heads towards him, screaming in unison:

—What?!

—Later, later!

—What cat, man?

She untied the two sheaves of radish and rucola, and went into the kitchen to spread them out on a plate, shouting as she was running tap water through them:

—Come here and explain!

Sticking his head through the door, he whispered so that the children wouldn't hear him:

—This is really what happened. They were eating lunch when a black cat got in and kept his eyes fixed on Sitt Samira. Our brother Desuqi did not see God's guidance and said to the cat: "Take her if you like her." The beast obeyed and took her right away.

She sprinkled water on the plate and squeezed the fresh stalks, which caused her fleshy arm to sway, and her full swelling breasts to jiggle like two big balloons ready to burst on contact.

—Serves her right!

—You're mean!

—I told her again and again to find a cure for her problem. No woman can live without kids.

—Such crap!

—Your friend Desuqi can't have children, and the woman was dying for one. Now she has found what she's worth.

—And what has this got to do with anything?

—That *is* the whole thing. All the Sheiks told her she was OK and she should tell her man to go find a cure. But she kept saying: "I can't live without him. Am happy with my life." And there you go. She ended up alone in the house, like a lonesome monkey.

He went back to the table to join the kids who had already forgotten about their hunger, and kept staring at nothing. Before they started eating, the youngest boy suddenly screamed, got up, and then fell unconscious on the floor.

The cat had stealthily got through the door left ajar and hid under the table, sniffing around for fish, and waiting for a chance to jump. He moved confusedly around their feet until his tail brushed against the youngest boy's leg.

The father reached him before he could whisk into the kitchen, chasing him out of the flat and bolting the door. He then went back to the boy to comfort him.

—It's the cat you see every day.

The mother grabbed the end of her housedress to wipe the boy's tears

with, and then carried him back to the chair.

—Don't be scared, honey. We are all here.

Mr. Ali slowly sipped at the tea and lit up another cigarette, without taking his eyes off the window covered with a short lace curtain that formerly used to be the fringe of a bed cover.

—An Arabic teacher! Go figure! Didn't Desuqi know that those cats used to rule us one day?

As a history teacher, he recalled all he knew about cat worship which prevailed during the late pharaonic era.

**Adam Talib**

He got up from the table and walked over to the sink to wash his hands. He had to scrub his palms a few times to get rid of the smell of grilled fish and then brush his teeth to get rid of the little pieces of radish and rocket stuck between them.

“Good lord. That smell!”

He lit a cigarette—a *Cleopatra*—but rather than toss the matchstick into the ashtray he’d brought to the bedroom with him, he set it down on the bedside table and lay back on the bed. He took deep drags of his cigarette and picked his teeth with the end of the matchstick.

Then he called out to his wife, “Zeinab. Bring me my tea in here.”

She’d been in a state ever since he’d told her the story of their neighbor Dessuqi.

**Randa Aboubakr**

He stood up from the table and went to wash his hands in the sink, repeatedly scrubbing them so as to rub out the smell of grilled fish. Then he moved the toothbrush, dipped in toothpaste, up and down his teeth, to remove bits of radish and rucola caught up between them.

—What a stink!

He took a cigarette out of his local cigarette pack and lit it up, but did not cast the match in the ashtray, which he took along to the bedroom. He put the ashtray on the nightstand and stretched out on the bed, voraciously drawing on the cigarette and picking his teeth with the match stick so as to remove yet more food crumbs.

He then yelled at his wife from the bedroom: Bring the tea here, Zaynab!

The woman has been terrified since he told her the story of Mr. Desuqi, their neighbor.

That evening he'd come home to find she'd already finished grilling the fish and laying out the bread on the table where the kids were sat, restless with hunger, waiting for father to return home.

"You're late," she said. "That's not like you."

He tossed a bundle of radish and rocket on the table.

"Where do you think I've been? Mosque, then home."

"Come on. I could hear when prayer ended from the loudspeaker."

"I stopped by Dessuqi's place. God spare you."

"What? What happened?"

"His wife, Samira, was abducted by a cat."

The children all looked up at him at the same time and shouted in unison:

When he returned home, she had already laid down the plates of grilled fish and the pita bread on the table. The kids had already been seated there, fighting their hunger and waiting for the return of their Dad.

She said disapprovingly:

—You are unusually late.

He threw the sheaves of radish and rucola on the table, and said in exasperation:

—Didn't go nowhere. Come straight from the mosque.

—I heard it in the microphone when the prayers finished.

—I passed by Desuqi. Oh Lord! Freakish stuff!

—Bless us! What's up with him?

—It's Sitt Samira. The cat snatched her away from him.

The children suddenly turned their heads towards him, screaming in unison:

<p>“What?!”</p>	<p>—What?!</p>
<p>“I’ll explain later.”</p> <p>“A cat? What are you talking about?” his wife asked.</p> <p>She undid the bunches and took them into the kitchen to put them on a plate. “Come here and tell me what happened,” she called to him as she started washing the bunches in the sink.</p> <p>He poked his head around the corner and, softly so the children couldn’t hear, he said,</p> <p>“That <i>is</i> what happened.</p> <p>They were sitting there, eating dinner, when a black cat came in and just started staring at Samira. It wouldn’t take its eyes off her.</p> <p>Dessuqi just wasn’t thinking so he says to it, ‘If you like her so much, why don’t</p>	<p>—Later, later!</p> <p>—What cat, man?</p> <p>She untied the two sheaves of radish and rucola, and went into the kitchen to spread them out on a plate, shouting as she was running tap water through them:</p> <p>—Come here and explain!</p> <p>Sticking his head through the door, he whispered so that the children wouldn’t hear him:</p> <p>—This is really what happened.</p> <p>They were eating lunch when a black cat got in and kept his eyes fixed on Sitt Samira.</p> <p>Our brother Desuqi did not see God’s guidance and said to the cat:</p>

you just take her?’

The cat did like it was told and snatched her away there and then.”

As she shook the plates dry and wrung out the supple, wet stems, her fleshy arms began to jiggle and her ample breasts—looking like massive balloons ready to pop at the slightest touch—began to quiver.

“She had it coming,” she said.

“How can you say that?”

“How many times did I tell her to go find out how to fix the problem? I mean women like us can’t not have a boy in the house.”

“What does having a son have to do with anything?”

“Look, your buddy Dessuqi’s no good at making babies and that poor girl, dear me, she was dying to have a son. Now she’s getting what she deserves.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“Take her if you like her.”

The beast obeyed and took her right away.

She sprinkled water on the plate and squeezed the fresh stalks, which caused her fleshy arm to sway, and her full swelling breasts to jiggle like two big balloons ready to burst on contact.

—Serves her right!

—You’re mean!

—I told her again and again to find a cure for her problem. No woman can live without kids.

—Such crap!

—Your friend Desuqi can’t have children, and the woman was dying for one. Now she has found what she’s worth.

—And what has this got to do with anything?

“Don’t you see that’s the whole point?”

All the sheikhs told her she was fine and she needed to tell her husband to go get checked out, but she just kept saying, ‘I could never live without my sweetheart.’

Fine. If she wants to be stuck in that empty nest all by her lonesome, what do I care?”

“You’re really something else,” he said as he walked back to the dining table, to the children who’d forgotten how hungry they’d just been and were now staring into space, terrified, though of what they didn’t know.

Before the family had even take their first bite, the younger boy screamed and jumped out of his chair, and then fainted and fell to the ground.

A cat had snuck in through the front door and hidden under the dining table. It had smelled the grilled fish and was biding time, stalking beneath the table, waiting for its chance to pounce when its tail rubbed against the youngest boy’s leg.

—That *is* the whole thing.

All the Sheiks told her she was OK and she should tell her man to go find a cure. But she kept saying: “I can’t live without him. Am happy with my life.”

And there you go. She ended up alone in the house, like a lonesome monkey.

He went back to the table to join the kids who had already forgotten about their hunger, and kept staring at nothing.

Before they started eating, the youngest boy suddenly screamed, got up, and then fell unconscious on the floor.

The cat had stealthily got through the door left ajar and hid under the table, sniffing around for fish, and waiting for a chance to jump. He moved confusedly around their feet until his tail brushed against the youngest boy’s leg.

The father cut the cat off as it was about to dart into the kitchen and then he chased it around the apartment until it ran out. He slammed the door behind it and bolted it shut. Then he went over and cradled his young son. "Come on now. That's the same cat you see every day."

The mother dried the boy's tears with the hem of her gallabeya and set him back down on his chair. "There's nothing to be scared of, honey. We're here."

He slowly sipped his tea and lit a second cigarette without taking his eyes off the window, which was covered by a short lace curtain that had once been a bed skirt.

"The poor bastard teaches Arabic.

Dessuqi had no idea these cats used to rule over us back in the day," he thought to himself and—consummate history teacher that he was—he thought back on all he'd read about the cult of cat worship, which had spread so widely in the later pharaonic period.

The father reached him before he could whisk into the kitchen, chasing him out of the flat and bolting the door. He then went back to the boy to comfort him.

—It's the cat you see every day.

The mother grabbed the end of her housedress to wipe the boy's tears with, and then carried him back to the chair.

—Don't be scared, honey. We are all here.

Mr. Ali slowly sipped at the tea and lit up another cigarette, without taking his eyes off the window covered with a short lace curtain that formerly used to be the fringe of a bed cover.

—An Arabic teacher! Go figure!

Didn't Dessuqi know that those cats used to rule us one day? As a history teacher, he recalled all he knew about cat worship which prevailed during the late pharaonic era

