

SOME KIND OF BEAUTIFUL SIGNAL

*Edited by Natasha Wimmer
and Jeffrey Yang*

TWO LINES WORLD WRITING IN TRANSLATION XVII

Tongue

Ibrahim al-Koni | Translated by Elliott Colla from Arabic (Libya)

Nearly a century ago, Max Weber described modernity as “the disenchantment of the world.” Apparently the message was never delivered to Ibrahim al-Koni. Born in 1948 into the Kel Ajjer (Twareg) of southern Libya, al-Koni did not learn Arabic until the age of twelve. A few years later, al-Koni was sent to the Soviet Union to study at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute. After working as a journalist in Moscow and Warsaw for many years, al-Koni finally turned to writing fiction. Though his first language is Tamahaq, al-Koni writes mainly in Arabic, and since the 1970s he has published dozens of novels, short-story collections, as well as books of aphorisms, critical studies and cultural histories. For his accomplish-

ments, he is regarded as one of the most inventive and enigmatic writers of the contemporary Arab world.

Al-Koni is *sui generis*, most at home treating stark themes from Twareg life in the desert—a nomadic environment marked by intense scarcity, reliance on one’s self and one’s mount, and the persistence of human slavery. Because these are also the themes of the oldest, pre-Islamic works of Arabic literature, the *Mu’allaqat* (or “hanging poems”), al-Koni has been praised for his classicism. Al-Koni’s language is similarly classical. Yet his mannered, lyrical style can only be accomplished by someone, like al-Koni, who chooses to write in something other than his mother tongue. At the same time,

al-Koni is a promiscuous reader, and his is an eclectic library of citations. Throughout his works, one encounters reworkings of Twareg folklore, *Moby Dick*, and *Gilgamesh*, alongside references to Russian realism, medieval Sufism, or the postmodern Latin American novel.

For the past three years, I’ve been working on translations of two of al-Koni’s novels, *al-Tibr* (published as *Gold Dust*, 2008, runner-up for the 2009 Saif Ghobash-Banipal Translation Prize), and *al-Majus* (forthcoming as *The Animists*, 2010). I was originally drawn to al-Koni for two reasons: his insistence on telling a compelling story; and his rarified language. This last aspect is perhaps why his prose renders so easily into English—it’s as if al-Koni’s language is not embedded in contemporary Arabic but rather hovers over it as a study.

While working on *al-Majus*, an epic of more than

six hundred pages, I needed a distraction and discovered *Kharif al-darwish* (Autumn of the Dervish), a collection of short stories from roughly the same period of the author’s career. The stories of this collection present the harrowing scenarios of al-Koni’s encyclopedic novels—the fragility of life in the deep desert and the haunted character of the world itself—in a concentrated form. Many of the stories in this collection focus on those organs of the body—eyes, ears, and tongues—where human power and frailty, dignity and violation intersect. “Tongue” is a distilled example of al-Koni’s writing style and, in particular, shows off his abilities to set a scene.

Original text: Ibrahim al-Koni, *Kharif al-darwish*. Beirut: Al-Mu’assasat al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1994).

Tongue

Each night when he came back from the meeting of tribal elders the nobleman would sit down and talk with his slave.

Years ago, disease had taken his wife from him and there was no one in the tribe as fit for sitting with—and confiding in—as the slave he'd inherited from his father. Returning completely exhausted from the evening council sessions, he would take off his blue robes, exchanging them for white ones. Taking his place next to the tent pole, he would lean back into it and stretch his feet parallel with the tent's entrance. Then, loosening the veil around his face, he would call out to the slave, ordering the man to stoke a fire and make a thick tea of wild green herbs. As soon as the tongues of the flame began to lick at the kindling, the night shadows began to dispel and the mood of the scene changed. And the nobleman's tongue would also begin to flicker and race like the fire itself.

During those first years, he spoke to his companion of the desert, of the ways of women, sharing as well poems of invective, reports of passionate lovers, and the schemes of eldest sons. The wise old men of the tribe had not hesitated when they chose him to replace his father as a member of their council. As he devoted himself to attending the illustrious convocation, he witnessed the sheikhs setting traps for one another and planning schemes against neighboring tribes. Though it seemed to him that the chief was adept at putting an end to disputes among members of the council, in the end, he realized that the most influential and powerful in the group were simply those who were the wiliest and most conniving.

This lesson was a blow to his heart and made his head spin.

One such evening, after returning to his tent and

اللسان

اعتاد النبيل أن يجالس عبده كلما عاد من مجلس الحكماء. أخذ الوباء قرينته منذ سنوات, فلم يجد في القبيلة مخلوقاً يصلح للمجالسة, ويؤتمن على السر, مثل عبده الذي ورثه عن أبيه. يعود من المجلس الليلي منهكاً. ينزع ثيابه الزرقاء. يستبدلها بالثياب البيضاء. يأخذ مكانه بجوار الركيزة. يسند ظهره الى العمود. يمد رجليه بموازاة المدخل. يتحرر من التام. يستدعي العبد. يأمره بإشعال النار لإعداد رحيق «تيفوشكان» أو «تيريمت» أو الخليط من العشبين. وما أن ينطلق لسان النار من الموقد, وتتبدد الظلمة, حتى يتبدل الحال, وينطلق لسان النبيل أيضاً, كما انطلق لسان النار. في السنوات الأولى تحدث مع الجليس عن هموم الصحراء, وأحوال النساء, وأخبار العشاق, وأشعار الهجاء, ونوايا الأبيكار. ولكن العقلاء ما لبثوا أن اختاروه عضواً في مجلسهم, خلفاً لأبيه, فدأب على حضور المجمع الجليل, ورأى كيف تدبر المكائد بين الشيوخ

, وعرف النوايا الخفية ضد القبائل المجاورة, ووقف على أساليب الزعيم في أبعاد الخلافات, وأنهاء الخصومات بين أعضاء المجلس, وأدرك أخيراً, أن أكثر العقلاء نفوذاً وقدرًا هم أكثرهم دهاءً وقدرة على تدبير المؤامرات. فضاق صدره, وأصاب رأسه الدوار. في إحدى الليالي عاد الى الخباء واستدعى عبده العجوز. استبدل ثيابه. جرد سيفه من غمده. تألق النصل الشره في ضوء النار. خاطب العبد وهو يقلب في وجهه السلاح النهم: «الزعيم يجرد في وجوهنا سيفه ما أن ندخل خباء المجلس, ويتعمد أن يترك السيف خارج الغمد طوال الاجتماع. الزعيم يرى أن قوة القبيلة تقاس بقدرة عقلائها على كتمان سرها.

calling his old slave, he pulled his sword from its sheath. Its ravenous blade flashed in the light of the flame. The nobleman began speaking, all the while turning the weapon over and over in the slave's face, "The chief waves his sword in *our* faces as soon as we enter the council meeting and leaves it conspicuously unsheathed throughout. He thinks that the strength of the tribe is measured by the ability of its leaders to keep secrets. If one of them talks, then the whole tribe risks annihilation. He leaves his sword hanging over our necks until the meeting is done. Listen carefully. Consider the edge of *this* blade—its tongue burns with a gnawing hunger keener than fire. If you repeat anything I have confided in you, its thirst will be quenched only by the blood of your neck. And yours is not the only blood that will be spilt—if any of the council's secrets ever get out, the chief's sword will also be drinking my blood!"

The old slave smiled an ambiguous smile—the kind understood only by clever herdsmen or slaves who have spent long years serving their masters. He leaned forward until the bottom fringe of his veil touched the half-

charred acacia logs. The wood let out a plaintive sigh, and from it bubbled sticky, blood-colored sap.

The slave raised his head and murmured, "Never has it once occurred to me to dare to disobey an order from my master. But my master knows that his servant is no better than other creatures in the desert. The people of the desert have always suffered less from disease than they have from the poison of curiosity. I beseech you to forgive me for daring to ask you, Master, but spare me the misfortune of having to listen to the confidences of the illustrious council."

The nobleman watched the flame's tongue as it caressed the blade of the sword with threads of light and smiled. Soon, however, the smile darkened. Between them arose a deep silence, broken only by the moaning of the acacia wood. The nobleman finally said, "I am a widower. To whom then will I unburden myself? With no companion, with whom am I to sit and converse? Have you forgotten my father's instructions, which were the instructions of his father and grandfather before him? He warned me against mixing with the riff raff. You will

remember that he did not warn me against loud brag-garts simply because they are low creatures who know not loyalty. No. He warned me against them because their company is nothing but a trap that has already been set. Sitting and conversing with others is always a trap for the nobleman. When one sits with others, he has no choice but to surrender to the seduction. His tongue inevitably slips, and his mouth inevitably divulges something it ought not to, something detested by reason itself. I'm taking you as a sincere friend with whom I can converse so as to follow these instructions. I did not choose you as a vessel for storing my confidences because I've solved the mystery of the desert and discovered the hidden key of loyalty. No. I have chosen you because I have learned through experience that a slave who has faithfully served your father is better than the sincerest of friends. Bear with me as you bore with my father once upon a time. Incline your ears to me. And do not divulge any of my secrets lest it constrict my heart."

The slave breathed a sigh heavy with pain while his master leaned his back against the tent pole. From that

day, the nobleman began to confide the secrets of the council as well as his own.



Some months later, a scourge descended upon the nobleman's flock. At first, the malady struck the fierce camel he used to impregnate his she-camels. Huge and imposing, with a colossal hump that towered over his frame, the camel began to shrink and waste away until he was but skin and bones. In just a few months, the herders found the creature lying dead in the grazing pastures.

After that, a she-camel from a thoroughbred lineage was infected with the wasting disease and began to shrink and melt right in front of the herdsmen's eyes. They brought the matter to the nobleman's attention. He inspected her carefully, searching her body over for traces of the affliction, for symptoms of the malady, but could find no indications of what was wrong. When the she-camel also died, the nobleman decided to look for answers out in the pastures. He went around the various

grazing fields, and interrogated the tribe's herders about the sickness. They all agreed: for years, the pastures had been free of disease. The men would then thrust their hands into the dirt, and chant sayings to repel the malice of the world. Turning their eyes toward the heavens, they would utter words of grace.

He then traveled to the neighboring tribe and returned with a blind doctor who was famous for his knowledge of animal maladies and for treating herd diseases. The doctor inspected the entire herd, animal by animal. He did not miss any of the he- or she-camels, not even the newborn. He found no symptoms of external diseases, nor any of internal infirmities. In the end, the doctor told the nobleman, "You need to search for the contagion in another place. It does not lie in the bodies of your livestock."

The nobleman asked, "Could it be a curse?"
"Perhaps."

At that moment, the nobleman was not aware that the mysterious contagion was laying a trap that would strike his prized thoroughbred camel, the piebald.



This camel was very rare. The nobleman had received him as a gift from the chief of the Ifoghas tribes when he had been their guest. They were forming an alliance to stop one of the foreign invasions, and he had been carrying a message to their chief. He'd raised the animal himself, and cared for him as he'd never cared for his departed wife. The piebald had saved him from the trap set against him by the tribes of the southern jungles. When the water had run out in that labyrinth, that great sea of sand, the camel had carried him out alive. The dusty sands had blinded him, and he'd almost disappeared into the unknown. They'd shared a loyalty he'd never known among those false creatures who called themselves friends.

As the Mahri camel began to waste away, so did he. The camel rejected all food, and would not go out to the pastures. The nobleman also stopped eating, and refused to go out, even to the council meetings. He looked into the camel's kindly eyes and saw nothing there but sadness and worry. When his slave looked into his eyes, he saw

the same things.

Weeks later, the Mahri thoroughbred died. The nobleman came down with a burning fever, and fell into a coma. The tribe thought he wouldn't come out of it.

It was during his initial recovery that he finally sent for the witch doctor.

The two men sat alone in the tent for an entire evening. The witch doctor left, and no one ever knew what had transpired between them. The following evening, out in the pastures, the herdsman saw a shadow flitting about through the camels, but they assumed it was nothing more than a mischievous jinn, and paid it no attention.

Days later, the witch doctor paid him another visit. Again, the two conversed by themselves throughout the night. No one knew a thing about the strange man, of course. If people knew anything about him, he would not have been a witch doctor.



Around the tribe, people said that it was the evil eye that

had wiped out the nobleman's flock. It was envy, and none other, that had afflicted the piebald. The nobleman held his tongue. He slowly returned to attending the council of elders. He would sit next to the pole in his own tent and slide his sword from its sheath. And he made his faithful servant listen to the severe warning whenever he divulged the secrets of his heart and whenever he unburdened the weight of his soul. The loyal slave pleaded his case before his master time after time, urging the nobleman to spare him the burden of carrying his secrets. But suddenly, the old story took an unexpected turn.

Each night, after their conversation ended and after the last burning stick on the fire had gone out, the slave would leave the tent and disappear into the kingdom of shadow. His master never asked himself where the slave went. But that night, the nobleman waited for the slave to go off and, shortly after, prepared to follow him. The nobleman crept from the tent and walked into the dark. The slave went to the herd, and walked straight into their midst. He patted the head of one of the she-camels, then moved on. He kept walking, finally stopping in front of

a fat camel covered with a thick coat of hair that was ravenously munching on dry grass. The camel stopped grazing and pricked up his ears. The creature's eyes grew tense and lost their composure. A sudden anxiousness arose in them.

The nobleman hid himself behind a nearby she-camel and began to watch. He studied the slave as the man sat down on the ground in front of the hairy camel. The slave then began to speak to the beast. The master listened as the slave repeated all the confidences that had been spoken about at the council. The very things that he had confided to the slave during that evening's session.



The next morning, the nobleman examined the camel. He told the herders, "I don't need to be a fortune teller to tell you that this camel will be dead in a few weeks."

Only days later, the camel began to lose weight and waste away. Only a few weeks later, it died. The herders brought the news to him, their eyes filled with aston-

ishment. He simply told them, "Now we know what's behind the disease."

He asked one of them to bring a whip from his tent. He asked the others to tie up his loyal servant and bring him as well. He took the whip in one hand and struck at the air with it. The weapon traced a loop through the air and snapped sparks like the lightning of a winter storm cloud. The sharp tongue of the whip landed on the slave, ripping apart his robe, tugging at the man's flesh. It licked and licked at the slave's body, while with each blow the nobleman yelled, "I won't let you go until you tell me how your sorcery killed my friend, the piebald." The slave cried out long and hard. He howled until his cries woke the entire desert.

At last, he asked his master to stop—he had decided to confess it all. He cried and cried for an hour, then sat drinking hot water for another. Finally, he spoke. "I did what I did out of my loyalty to you, Master! And out of my fealty to your father who never, from the moment he took me captive from the jungles, mistreated me."

The nobleman flicked the whip across the air, and

terror descended over them. He spoke, choking back his rage, "You dare to speak of loyalty—you who have most betrayed it? You speak of honoring the remains of the dead after despoiling those of the noblest creature in the entire tribe?"

The slave wept loudly, "I would not have done what I did, Master, if not for my faithfulness to you, and for the respect I have for the memory of your father. I told you, Master, that I did not deserve to be entrusted with your secrets because I am no divine being. Master, you know that even free men are incapable of guarding confidences, so how am I—a slave—supposed to be any better? If I did not unburden myself and divulge your secrets to mute creatures, I would have perished like your piebald died. Admit it, Master—you yourself could not bear your own secrets, and so decided to confide in your loyal servant. Wasn't it better for me to divulge your secrets, and those of the council, to creatures with ears but no tongues? Or should I have talked with the herdsman who would have spread them from one to another around the tribe until they reached the ears of the chief? Despite the fact that

my stupid deed killed my master's piebald, didn't it also protect him from the wrath of the chief?"

The slave started to howl again. The nobleman thought about the matter and then reached a decision. He pronounced the punishment, "Then I will cut out your tongue, you wretch."

The old slave pleaded, "Have mercy, my Lord! I'd rather you slit my throat than cut out my tongue."

The nobleman answered, "A man can slit his own throat, but he cannot remove his own tongue. Your tongue is the only thing that concerns me."

The old slave pleaded once more, "If I were able to slit my own throat, I wouldn't be a slave, Master. Kill me—but do not take my tongue."

The nobleman cut out the man's tongue.

And each night, when he came back from the council, he went back to sitting and talking to his slave, telling him all the secrets of the tribe.



After his master removed his tongue, the slave began to change into something else. He began to lose weight and waste away. But his master, who'd lost his companion the piebald, never stopped filling the man's ears with the most dangerous secrets. On top of these confidences the nobleman deliberately heaped sensitive information and news from the lands of neighboring tribes, as well as other intimacies of his own invention. The nobleman watched the sparkle that had seized the eyes of his slave, he noticed the trembling in the man's body and hands, and he heard the baffling sounds the slave uttered whenever he walked

out of the tent following their evening session.

Some weeks later, the slave disappeared. The nobleman went to look for him in his tent and found him there leaning against the pole. Two empty eyes stared into the void. Swarms of flies covered his gaping mouth, as if trying to snatch from his lips a secret unspoken by the missing tongue. Even as he laid the body out on the ground and called for the herdsmen to prepare to shroud the body, the lips remained parted. And the empty tongueless mouth, a gaping wound.