

Foreword

Even before I read his poetry, I'd been introduced to Jawdat Haydar's reputation by friends living here in Lebanon. I heard how he had been honored with medals for humanitarian and poetic achievements from more than one national government and from the patriarchs of more than one religion, including one from Pope John XXIII.

I heard that he was considered an equal of his internationally known Anglophone predecessors, Rihani, Naimy, and Gibran, and that his poetry is studied in Lebanese high schools, in preparation for English baccalaureate examinations. I heard how he was instrumental in bringing poetry back to Lebanon after the civil war, by founding the group "Oasis of Literature in the Bekaa, and through powerful acts of symbolism, such as when he organized both the return of the statue of poet Khalil Moutran to Baalbeck and the international festival that celebrated that return. I heard how he had come from a family of intellectual landowners who had been exiled to Anatolia by the Ottomans, for their vocal criticism of the Ottoman reign in Lebanon, and how Jawdat, the youngest child in the family, was allowed to stay with his sick mother until she died, at which time (at the age of eight) he made the long journey to be reunited with the rest of his family, alone. I heard how he started learning English by talking to British soldiers stationed in Baalbeck, on the eve of World War I, and how, after finishing high school from, the

I.C. in Beirut, he went to Lyon, France, to study, in the hopes of getting a visa to continue his education in America, and how, in a movie theater, he picked a handkerchief from the floor and returned it to its owner, a woman who turned out to be the wife of the consul at the American Embassy,. His reward was a visa to study at Texas A & M. On his return from the States, in 1928, holding a B.S. degree in education from North Texas State University in Denton, he worked throughout the Middle East, during the most turbulent of years, in a startling array of fields, ranging from education to being an industrial advisor for the Iraq Petroleum Company, from personnel management to being the general manager of the Mid-East Auto Trading Company, and finally, to farming. In all honesty, the more I heard, the more Jawdat Haydar sounded like a character out of legend than a being of flesh and blood.

And then I met him . . . last month, on March 18th, to be precise. Imagine a young man from Wisconsin sitting down for a chat with the folkloric figure described above. One could easily imagine the conversation being awkward, as I had nervously imagined it beforehand. However, I hadn't taken into consideration two rather obvious oversights—that Jawdat Haydar and I are both poets, and that his poetic vision is as broad and ecumenical as his life has been. Despite the temporal and cultural distances between us, the moment he began expounding on the marriage of sound and sense in poetry, we were contemporaries, communicating across the distances as if they were nothing more than a couple feet of air. We were suddenly sitting in a room outside of time, talking in that seemingly timeless language of ideas that is shared by practitioners of one of the oldest of human arts.

Ironically, it is the universality of Haydar's vision that makes his poetry some of the most unique that I've

read. He boldly fuses the poetic styles and sentiments of the Romantic, Victorian, and Modern periods of Anglophone Literature, while exploring issues of common interest to people living in regions as far apart as Texas and Iraq. He shifts effortlessly from pastoral lyricism (“Drugged by the beauty of the plain / East by the forested hills pent / West by the ocean restrained”) to gritty, vernacular innovation (“I rock and roll in a frenzy of shout”), and in the process produces lines that can be ranked with the most beautiful in the language—consider: “Life is but steel and flint brushed together / Twinkling dimming slowly gone forever” or “Ah! There the sun in sky a glowing vein / A volcano of molten melodies.” Though Haydar is best known for such contributions to the Anglophone modes of lyric and ode, in the course of studying his oeuvre, I have also found a number of fascinating dream narratives, most of which are untitled, but which have been selected for inclusion in this current collection.

Having conversed with the man himself, I can confirm that he is not an imaginary character from legend. He is something greater—a legendary being of flesh and blood—a living, writing representative of a hundred years of our shared history. He told me, when I last met with him, on the eve of his 100th birthday, that his greatest wish was for humanity to one day learn to be at peace with itself and with its environment, for violence and pollution to come to an end. Everything he said was articulated with the acumen of a man half his age, and it revealed that, though he is a man from before our time, he is also a man far ahead of our time.

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