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CALLAHAN COUNTY STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

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Poetry Media Service

ELEMENTAL MEDICINE

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

By Averill Curdy
Poetry Media Services

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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Submissions sought to:

Star

P.O. Box 29
Eastland, TX 76448

email: thebairdspotlight@att.net

S.A.S.E. for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or libel material.

Words To Use:

Desinent: Something that is ending or terminating is this, especially written articles on obscure words that are closing until next issue.

Epitonic: This adjective can be applied to any noun, like a water dam, that is subjected to adverse strain that caused failure. It can even be used for words that pressure the mind for understanding.

Perihelion: This is a fake sun. It can be a light like a halo that is seen at a point opposite where the sun is. Don't look at the real sun, or a mock sun with your bare eyes.

Rapaceus: This is something that looks like a turnip, especially the shape of a turnip. Find a way to use this word in a novel, and you will get good at writing.

Scrutator: This is a person who investigates, They scrutinize. It has been used by people for those who canvas election results. It is not known here if there is a Farsi (Iran) language equivalent for this.

What The Matter Was

Perplexed I rose as on padded paws
Slipped outside to see what the matter was
Twas a tap tap tapping on my glass
A very rude invasion of my sash.

Through the light green sheers we saw a bird
His speckled wings so soft no sound was heard
'Twas not a tapping nor a rapping
But was a pecking that stirred my napping.

Retreating to a nearby tree there
Was made to feel uneasy to be there
Wood-outs or termites we suspected
We were found to be so misdirected.

He saw an incursion of his turf
And everything he did made matters worse
His reflection met inspection quick
Maybe we need to get the ole boy fixed.

- Weldon L. Smith

Threnos

Beauty, truth, and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed cindfrs lie.

Death is now the phoenix' nest;
And the turtle's loyal breast
To eternity doth rest,

Leaving no posterity:
'Twas not their infirmity,
It was married chasity.

Truth may seem, but cannot be;
Beauty brag, but'tis not she;
Truth and beauty buried be.
To this urn let those repair
Tht are either rue or fair;
For these dead birds sigh prayer.

-William Shakespeare
1564-1616

American Life In Poetry

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Coleman Barks, who lives in Georgia, is not only the English language's foremost translator of the poems of the 13th century poet, Rumi, but he's also a loving grandfather, and for me that's even more important. His poems about his granddaughter, Briny, are brim full of joy. Here's one:

Glad

In the glory of the gloaming-green soccer field her team, the Gladiators, is losing

ten to zip. She never loses interest in the roughhouse one-on-one that comes

every half a minute. She sticks her leg in danger and comes out the other side running.

Later a clump of opponents on the street is chanting, WE WON, WE WON, WE . . . She stands up

on the convertible seat holding to the windshield. WE LOST, WE LOST BIGTIME, TEN TO

NOTHING, WE LOST, WE LOST. Fist pumping air. The other team quiet, abashed, chastened.

Good losers don't laugh last; they laugh continuously, all the way home so glad.

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Rhymes To Use:

Peacekeeper
Beeper
Innkeeper
Cheaper
Zuchinni
Meanie
Beanie

Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

1. We ask for first-time publishing rights. All other rights will remain with the author.
2. There will be no payment, but you will get your works before the general public. We will

be sending sample copies to other organizations, the literary world and libraries for their archives and your notoriety.

3. Short stories should be brief. Poetry should be no longer than 24 lines.
4. Each submission should be typewritten, single spaced, with author's name and contact information in the top right hand corner. You must include a SASE for the return of the submission.

5. Please address all submissions to:
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