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SPEECH IN TRIBUTE

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Translated from Arabic by Mohamed-Salah Omri

My People:

As we both stand,
my shadow playing with another shadow it stumbled on

My eyes wander across the plain
And Sancho praises his master's fantasy
while the windmills turn in the breeze.

As Ibn Qutayba burns in candles
while striving to help the poets against clerics

And the scribes of our history lie about our yesterday, our today and our tomorrow.

While some females excite some horses,
And Amr kisses Hind
And Hind kisses the Prophet's tomb

While Achilles on the plain entreats the delegation:
“Helen. Or I will return to my homeland. I will not fight”

While Noah toils with the drowned beneath ships in Lampedusa.

While Adam,

from starvation, devours Eve, the branch and the tree.

.....

And I, amidst this,

Was surprised by love and the common illness.

As for the love:

It is you, Men

You, Women

And the medicine

The flowers

The Lute

The flute

The calligraphy

The painting

The ministers

The Presidential Palace

The politicians

The army

The Security

The National Guard

And the tears of women in love with poetry

at the time of killing in the name of the virgins in Paradise

As for what is more common than a common illness,

I treat it one day

I write one day

I scream one day

I joke one day

Feeling embarrassed that this will distract you from the fate of the country.

.....

Honoured Guests:

1. This tribute goes beyond my humble person to honour poetic discourse as such, as the nucleus of life. The life from which we have been distracted by closed discourse - religious, doctrinal and ideological – which operates in the pre- or the post -, unaware of the uniqueness and specificity of the moment along the scale of human life. As a whole, and by happy coincidence, this tribute coincides with honouring the Tunisian people with this year's Nobel Peace Prize as a reward for emerging undivided into two peoples and half-safe from the cave of myths filled with snakes, hyenas and ogres. Tunisia, which has been the only subject of my writing in poetry and in prose; of my talking, walking, dreaming and drinking, from the moment I began to write until today. Tunisia (Tunis) is also my mother's name. For in colonial times, our ancestors used to name their women after the country so that tribes would not forget the name of the nation.
2. At its formative beginnings, the Tunisian revolution found no ideological models, nor Koranic verses, prophetic sayings, Islamic legal interpretations or Ottoman fatwas on whose revolutionary nature it could rely and chant as slogans in public squares in order to speed up the end of dictatorship. For religion, as you will know, is the antithesis of revolution because it prescribes absolute and strict norms instead of proposing relative laws subject to updating and change. This is not specific to Islam but is true of all religions.

All the Tunisian revolution could find was poetry.

Poetry mixed with the torments of the nation.

Poetry: printed, read out and sang.

Each line of poetry, recited by the masses, in Tunisia and across the Arab map, used to extend the nation's belief in the certainty of victory and reduce her fear of freedom and emancipation, a fear she was accustomed to for centuries, not just since independence.

As for how was the Tunisian revolutions transformed, afterwards, into a linguistic nightmare, some of which was to do with canon law, some mythical, some constitutional, some ignorant, some sub-intellectual, some terrorist, the reason in my view resides in the high jacking of the revolution from a poetic/imaginative/creative

dream to a fundamentalist/reactionary/securitarian punishment, with no room for imagination and dream; a punishment ordered and inflicted by human beings like us who claim, openly in more than one forum and occasion, that Allah is their god alone, exclusively, and out of all the Tunisians and humanity as whole.

Fortunately, and contrary to what they expected, the belief of those whose revolution was betrayed in the status of the word and the position of poetry has increased. And the present official tribute, which was preceded by a wide popular one, is perhaps the best evidence that people prefer the openness of texts which sing the right to life to closed texts which sing the duty to day after life, and during life too.

3. With the hope that this tribute would open up a series of deserved tributes to Tunisian writers and artists, and that the status and rights of creative people are clarified in the proposed laws now under consideration by the government, I welcome you again, and declare, openly, that I love you, and that my love for you will increase proportionately to your capacity to preserve the entity of Tunisia:

Tunisia, which exists on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

Not a Tunisia located in the deserts of the Asian continent or inside some strange and dangerous imaginaries.