



[Plague Lands and other poems](#) by Fawzi Karim

Versions by Anthony Howell after translations by Abbas Kadhim

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Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) July 2012

Poetry does not deal with history but with myth . . . A poet has to neglect historical time and go beyond it.

[Fawzi Karim]

A few years ago I came across a handful of Fawzi Karim's poems which had been translated into English by Saadi Simawe and Melissa Brown (in [Banipal No 19](#) , 2006) and Michael Glover (in [The International Literary Quarterly](#) , May 2009). I was immediately struck by the voice of the poems. There was no attempt at protest but the works captured a feeling of a world being torn apart, much more so than Owen or Sassoon or even the works of the early Modernists. So this first collection in English of Karim's poetry is most welcome.

The poem that seemed to capture the essence of this collection is a short poem, ***A Reader In Darkness*** :

*Before you go to bed you insist on switching the lights off
And checking, by touch, in the darkness, that you locked the door
And that you pulled down the blinds.
You leap like a cat up the stairs
And slip into your bed,
And dream -*

*That the book you were reading at your desk
Is being opened again in the darkness:
Other fingers are turning its pages;
Other eyes rest their gaze
On the absence that repeats between the lines. . .*

Each line seems to call for a sharp intake of breath, as if one were reading a list of things to do. But the instruction is never clear about its intent. This could be a simple case of taking precaution about one's work: the realisation that comes with rest; the meditation on a sudden outpouring of emotion, from the predominance of higher pitched vowels in the first stanza -

seeming to emphasise panic - to the dominance of lower-pitched, brooding, vowels in the second stanza: How will others understand this?

The collection seems to expect us, not just to experience the poems, but to live through them. **Letters** opens with a question that seems more like a demand:

*Why is it only me who writes letters every month?
I try to respond to your silence*

We are not invited to empathise – in fact the shrillness of the question seems to suggest that we, as readers, are guilty of rejecting the gift from the poet of his work and that the work / poet has a right to be offended. **The Scent Of Mulberry** also opens with a question: *Which of us knows to whom we belong?*
- somewhat less accusatory, but making a demand on us nonetheless.

If the poetry doesn't unsettle us with its accusations and questions, then it does so by shifting around the narration, reinforcing the statement above. In the three poems about the river Tigris, the first, **The Cliff** invites us to view what the poet is seeing (*The waves wash back from the bank* / *And there's my father's shadow in his skiff*) and then the vision is disrupted, and it is as if we are no longer allowed to watch (*Villages blurred by their moss*), and the scene is washed away as *the waves swing back to wash against the bank.*

In the second poem, **A Vision**, we are left to ask, yet again, if we can trust what is told:

This is my youth,
□□□□□□□□ *or delusion. . .*
□□□□□□□□ *or memory's clamour.*

And again in **Or Because I Am Far away**

*If I were not a desire – like your waves that never settle,
Or an apparition, behind the veil, on both of your banks,
What else could I be?*

These opening lines act as a riddle, but one that seems to contain the answer: it is as if the physical distance negates our, and the poet's, presence. There are only 20 short poems in this collection but they show a great deal of inventiveness. It is as if we are dealing with a modern-day Laforgue (*Au cabistan de l'incurable/POURQUOI! – Pourquoi?*) although a far more travelled poet.

On the face of it, there seems to be a greater audience for poetry than at any time. Developments in technology that have led to mass publication are, perhaps, the major contribution factor. But whilst sales for 'classic' poetry has gradually increased, especially since the 1960s, sales for contemporary 'serious' poetry represent only 4% of total sales (see [Popula](#)

[rising poetry in the UK](#)

,
Tim Love). Much contemporary poetry is overlooked, not just by the public but also by critics.

As such, an important poet or poem may well get overlooked. It would be quite tragic if that were the case for this particular collection. The long sequence poem, *Plague Lands*, is one of the most important pieces that I have come across over the past few decades. It is no exaggeration to say that this is as important an addition to the canon as Eliot's

Wasteland

, whose ambition this poem shares, but there is none of the fatalism that one finds in Eliot's sequence

The opening lines of *Plague Lands*:

Channels maintained by the rain . . .

Houses as precarious as stacked-up disks of bread

Their window-nets like tattered sieves;

Their doors holding their breath in case there's a call in the night.

invite us into a world of change. Though nothing is definite and there is a hesitant feel to this invite, it has none of the monophonic melancholy or pessimistic determinism that permeates Elliot's poem (*April is the cruellest month*). Contrary to the impression one may get from the title,

Plague Lands has a celebratory feel that introduces us

to family, friends and places, where sometimes there is tragedy (

My sufferings had me in knots. . .)

, humour (

But now we've caught the world with its trousers down

) or simple down-right decency (

I shall come back/ To sing of those who drank with me
).

Nothing in the *Plague Lands* sequence contains the needless referencing of the obscure, intended to confound the masses: that those early Modernists feared so much (see *The Intellectuals And The Masses* . John Carey). In fact the style represents that of Walt Whitman. Whilst there is no political message,

Plague Lands
captures a level of humanity few works have done since
Drum-Taps

. *It's Time to Deepen the Gulf Left by the Roots*
is a prime example:

*I am obsessed by the alleys between the stacked dwellings in a neglected land,
Obsessed by the mud on the foot of a boy,
Obsessed by the shards of corpses fluttering like blackened angels,
And by my good intensions and . . . by the touch of your glove.*



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