

**EMPEDOCLES'S SANDAL**

**HABIB TENGOUR**

**TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY  
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**DP**

A PORTION OF THIS POEM ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN *POEMS FOR THE MILLENNIUM: THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BOOK OF MODERN & POSTMODERN POETRY, VOLUME TWO*, EDITED BY JEROME ROTHENBERG & PIERRE JORIS

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY DURATION PRESS IN 1999 AS DURATION NUMBER 7.

DURATION PRESS  
JERROLD SHIROMA, EDITOR  
[HTTP://WWW.DURATIONPRESS.COM](http://www.durationpress.com)

## EMPEDOCLES'S SANDAL

*Das Land, wo sonst die Purpurtraube gern  
Dem bessern Volke wuchs und goldene Frucht  
Im dunkeln Hain, und edles Korn, und fragen  
Wird einst der Fremde, wenn er auf den Schutt  
Von euern Tempeln tritt, ob da die Stadt  
Gestanden?...*

Hölderlin, *Der Tod des Empedokles*

Traces/ Renown/ Shades/ Urns/ Life(s)/ Epoch/ Zenith  
Lucid/ Strangely/ Suspended

Stop

a pause of short duration      the closed  
space      compelled remembrances tears  
they are not necessary  
the dictionary tempers the banality of the stereotype  
a nostalgia emerges in the description of the place

like a circumscribed exile  
like the eye dimming after the junction

handicap of the code  
unusual names at night fall  
despite the invocation's depth  
the usages intermingle on the asphalt  
the trace vainly sought    there effaced  
it is visible

o heart you weaver  
the times don't change that fast their duration  
nor the embrace that follows where a soul decyphers itself











the poem carries along since the art of weaving  
the assembly settles there as if around a fire  
each one dreams of his kin left with no worries  
the rhythms are favorable for enjoyable meetings  
but sometimes the poet strains to blur  
the narration's weft through an excess of figures

the bird that takes its flight at midnight is blind

Interpreter,  
the lexicon at work  
far in the abyss the wandering gait  
no care taken  
with the staging neither obscure rhetoric  
nor this imperious vanity of surging forth  
sun  
the instant contains its light — cursive resonance  
it dazzles the cantankerous audience you  
undecided your gear  
slung across your back chains  
the house is narrow  
you declaim what you know onto a canvas  
a sorting out occurs invisible  
scattered traces  
to describe the table the luminous circle  
it is possible to forget oneself in the description of objects while  
carefully watching  
the precision of the study time  
that one's not sparing with embellishments  
you enhance the declamation at the risk of perturbing the reception  
to catch depends on the baited trap  
the chant doesn't harmonize with the voice  
something you no longer doubt

urns preserved the spirits of the ancestors  
dogs for the circumstance  
the occurrence demands vagueness to the detriment of  
urgency the celebration in fireworks  
one by one

all

tutelary deities

praise consecrates them at the vault's summit  
once the tower has been abolished

obsession

from quarrel to break  
the argument contracts then loses itself  
in the blackness of the invoked night  
system of control  
ineffectual despite the forces deployed  
the warning shots  
the blade

I was walking

up Boulevard Mohamed V. Kalachnikovs firing. The city safe  
no longer for night wanderings.

The moon exposes the flaneur to danger.

life hangs on a thread

but the needle and the hand and the freezing lover  
at the gate of the labyrinth  
fear of the worst hastens the cadence  
a breath missing to calm the grief  
from the announcements to the road crossings

the blue-gray mysteries of the travelling show

Letters

*bricolage* of symbols gathered in neighboring  
countries

the golden thread imprints on the memory

the one I question answers to no

demand

rigid it invents for itself

a republic in which reading commands

summary hierarchy

in the scenery

a hidden laser

*modern* he said

to tread territories made to measure

where the places knot into a tight rope

to live truly

to be god

to claim it loudly

reckless pride

you the Impeder-of-wind with bronze sandals

you the Obscure who loves to disguise yourself

and I all alone tracking you

lives a concise inventory the detail

adorns the gathering

the fragments are classified

to observe a usage

just as white milk curdles

was it in Heidelberg on a road in Sicily

in Evry or in Mostaganem by the seaside

ill-used infinite

few words carry when the tension increases

alternation of the forms does not resolve much

nor do the *rivets of love* assemble

I remain an orphan







by hate or by love

invention

that which retains the guest in the house  
that which terrorizes the virgins of Tamim  
that which persuades the number

the titration is deceptive

Igneous

the soul in its crystal

the way constellated waves deploy themselves  
harnessing

ONE engenders destroys yet alternates

he keeps me captive

corruptible

the sweet water in the sea on which the fish feed is not  
an irrefutable argument against the establishment of paradise on  
earth other elements of a subtle nature enter into  
the composition of the air man breathes which inserts the  
human species into a specific animal category  
man is like a weathervane at the heart of the whirlwind

the sky attracts him

Aristotle's disciples debated physics meteorology

natural science

then one did not consider armed struggle in the  
cities in order to impose a thesis a phenomenon that  
keeps spreading as does repression the system has seized up  
to analyze sea water or to examine the conditions of the ground can  
in no way unscramble the mechanism does that mean that in  
this process it is necessary to sink with the logic of the ancients  
the trace of the poem in fragments initiates formal audacities  
a rhythm pursues you this is no longer the time to evade  
meaning the words order themselves

the year ends white  
wishes crackle on all sides  
from the orient to the occident is it but a reflection  
light effluvia when the moon scatters

hail-stones

what remains accessible in the face to face  
*this country where the violet grape once loved  
to grow for a better people, and the golden fruit  
in the dark thicket, and noble wheat, and some day  
the stranger will ask, treading through the rubble  
of your temples, if that's where the city  
rose...*

this sovereign generosity  
this evil which hardens in the apple of the eye  
these complaints without notification  
a salute to the dead friends

Ochre

maturity, it ends with the day  
the questions left hanging

you observe the flight of a flock of starlings  
bad news is spreading  
from the palms of Bahrain to the villages of Iraq

a tenacious worry  
the long crossing from deserts to cities  
these buried peoples with strange languages

there are only scattered signs  
truth surprises you  
at a metro gate

this visible and invisible world is decomposing  
science assures the poet of his wording



the risks hidden in the hands' palms  
let's leave tears and blood  
our friends are everywhere  
the voyage completes itself  
by day as by night  
all things astounded

Parcelled  
out they glitter under the moon  
motionless

the white armed virgin flies over the offerings

Paris-Constatine, November 1992 - January 1993  
Évry, February 8, 1993

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1947 in Mostaganem, Eastern Algeria, raised on the Arab and Berber voices of marketplace storytellers, Habib Tengour has lived between Algeria and Paris ever since. Trained as an anthropologist and sociologist, he has taught at universities in both countries, while emerging over the years as one of the Maghreb's most forceful and visionary francophone poetic voices of the post-colonial era. The work has the desire and intelligence to be epic, or at least to invent narrative possibilities beyond the strictures of the Western / French lyric tradition, in which his colonial childhood had schooled him. Core to it is thus the ongoing invention of a Maghrebian space for and of writing, the ongoing quest for the identification of such a space and self. For, as another Maghrebian, Jacques Derrida put it: "Autobiographical anamnesis presupposes identification. And precisely not identity. No, an identity is never given, received or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures." Or, Tengour in a kind of manifesto piece, "Maghrebian Surrealism," that situates the tradition of French Surrealism as a late local variation of a much older and wider practice:

Who is this Maghrebian? How to define him?

"The woods are white or black "despite the hidden presence of nuances.

Today definition fascinates because of its implications. A domain that misleads. Political jealousy far from the exploded sense of the real.

Indeed there exists a divided space called the Maghreb but the Maghrebian is always elsewhere. And that's where he makes himself come true.

Jugurtha lacked money to buy Rome.

Tariq gave his name to a Spanish mountain.

Ibn Khaldûn found himself obliged to give his steed to Tamerlaine.

Abd El Krim corresponded with the Third International...

The core achievement of the poetics thus the successful relay between modernist Euro-American experiments and local traditions of sociopolitical and spiritual narrative explorations: “It is, finally, in Maghrebian Sufism that surrealist subversion inserts itself: ‘pure psychic automatism,’ ‘amour fou,’ revolt, unexpected encounters, etc.... There always resides a spark of un(?) conscious Sufism in those Maghrebian writers who are not simply smart operators – go reread Kateb or Khair-Eddine.” Or read, now here in the US for the first time in book form, Habib Tengour.

Besides a range of lyrical works – works that always stretch the imagination of what the lyrical can be – such as *Schistes de Tahmad 2* (1983), Tengour’s main books are the narratives *Le Vieux de la Montagne* (called a “Relation,” 1983), the retelling of the story of that most famous Arab triumvirate of Omar Khayyam, Hassan as-Sabbah and Nizam al-Mulk, Sultan Galiev, (1985) and two prose narratives, *L’Epreuve d l’arc* (1990) and *Gens de Mosta* (1997). His work has been translated into German and Italian.

Pierre Joris