

'THE ROOTS' by YŪSUF AL-KHĀL

Prefatory Essay

The following is a translation of Yūsuf al-Khāl's "al-Judhūr" ("The Roots") which appeared in his 1958 collection *al-Bi'r al-Mahjūra* (*The Deserted Well*) out of Dār Majallat Shi'r.

Yūsuf al-Khāl was born in 1917 in Tripoli, Lebanon. He read literature and philosophy at the American University in Beirut and started teaching there in 1944. In 1948 he came to the United States to work for the United Nations and returned to the American University in 1955. In 1957 he founded *Shi'r* magazine and the press Dār Majallat Shi'r which published the works of poets associated with his magazine and movement, the most prominent of which were al-Khāl himself and Adonīs. He now runs an art gallery. In addition to *al-Bi'r* he has published these four collections of poetry:

*al-Hurriya* (*Freedom*), Beirut 1944

*al-Ard al-Kharāb* (*The Ruined Earth*), Beirut 1958

*Qasā'id fi'l-Araba'in* (*Poems in the Forties*), Beirut 1960

*al-A'māl ash-Shi'riyya al-Kāmila 1938-1968* (*Complete Poetic Works*), Beirut 1973

one play (poetry):

*Hirātīyā* (*Herod*), New York 1953

and the following translations:

*Diwān ash-Shi'r al-Amrīkī* (*An Anthology of American Poetry*), Beirut 1958

*Robert Frost*, Beirut 1962

*an-Nabī*, (*The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran), Beirut 1968

There are numerous articles on al-Khāl but only one good one in English, Joseph Zeidan's "Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adūnīs and Yūsuf al-Khāl", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, X, 70-94, though some of his translations leave a little to be desired.

THE ROOTS

41 In the summertime the roots ask about  
their fate, and the river answers not.

Roots so glorious,<sup>1</sup> and yet the river answers not:

<sup>1</sup> *Wāḥī*, *Wahān lahā* (interj.) with *ī* or *bi* to express admiration: how wonderful is (are)...<sup>12</sup> (Wehr, 1045). This construction sounds extremely strained so I have taken some liberty in order to retain to what I believe, or sense, to be the desired meaning.

it lies choked in the mountain springs or  
 usurped by the clay in the noonday heat.<sup>2</sup>  
 Who then shall answer these roots about  
 their fate? Who shall embrace and protect them in the autumntime,  
 who shall restrain from them the harshness of winter, I wonder?

- 42 The leaves that whimper<sup>3</sup> are a body  
 and the secret is in the roots.  
 And in the roots is our yesterday,  
 and in the roots is our tomorrow:  
 here the fruits are dates and oranges, and there,  
 grapes that the cupbearer presses into wine;  
 and where the locusts abound there is no fruit, just pebbles.  
 In vain do we scream like the winds, the hot winds  
 that come from their origin and just as hot depart.<sup>4</sup>  
 And we, stranger-friend, cultivate and restore the moist earth.  
 The soil is to us a home-womb and a shroud,  
 and in the earth the roots wither as they ascend,  
 and the earth is then a birthplace, a harvest.

Behold Nineveh!

- 43 The sign, screaming, took me by surprise: behold Nineveh!  
 I once made out in the engravings  
 the face of my friend. I touched it with the palm of my hand  
 saying: "here the echo is prolonged.  
 And the notion that endures is a droplet,  
 a droplet that the soil drinks,  
 that the torrents embrace, ceaseless.  
 What was does not become,  
 the owl does not screech in its dwelling  
 and the raven does not hover around it.  
 Every time is eternal,  
 and every journey is a return"  
 And wherever I turned were etchings

<sup>2</sup> These lines actually read  
 the springs in the mountains choke it or  
 the clay usurps it in the midday heat.

I have changed these lines, as with much of this stanza, for it to flow smoothly and in  
 order to better duplicate the cadence and rhythm of the Arabic.

<sup>3</sup> This verb has also the more aggressive meaning of "to growl".

<sup>4</sup> I was forced to rework this sentence to make it acceptable in English. It actually  
 reads:

In vain do we scream like the winds  
 that hot come from their place of origin and hot return

carved by time, ceaseless.  
Not a thing ceases in this place:

- 44 My grandmother says her grandson is like his grandfather:  
he walks about waving his hand in the air,  
and prefers to turn in early,  
and the dawn, when he awakens, is a forest  
of spears around his eyelids.<sup>5</sup>  
And in Damascus my eyes caught sight of Sennacherib  
cowering, death beneath his pavilions,  
on the way a thousand and one specters,  
and over here the faces are earthenware, long-necked bottles,  
and the obedient<sup>6</sup> seal-ring is rusty,  
and the carpets are winds transformed into a bird,<sup>7</sup>  
into a wheel that turns while time is solitary,  
and Shahrazad is still carrying on life  
here as a fairy tale. And Shahrazad is a body  
like the leaves that whimper, a body  
and the secret is in the roots.
- 45 And in vain we scream like the winds, the hot winds  
that come from their origin and just as hot depart.  
The soil is for us a home-womb and a shroud,  
and death alone is immortality.

My feet are in space and space  
is fleeing, and I have no wing.<sup>8</sup>  
The sun does not warm me, and the winds  
do not immerse my body.  
Would that the one who hanged me there had drawn tight  
around my neck, or rather would that he had nailed me.  
Or rather, when I was ungrateful to my brother, would that he had  
banished me.

- Here, here on the soil is my brow  
and in the soil is my step,  
46 and my step is temples<sup>9</sup> and cities

<sup>5</sup> The Arabic has 'eyelid' in the singular.

<sup>6</sup> A very difficult word to translate. This is the adjective from *labḥayk*, the chant uttered by the faithful upon arrival at Mecca for pilgrimage meaning 'here I am, obedient, at your service, as you summoned?'

<sup>7</sup> This can also mean "omen".

<sup>8</sup> *Janāh* means 'wing', as I have translated, but it also means 'protection, refuge' which is probably why al-Khāl used the singular and not the plural. Maybe he also wanted to have the word-play with *janāh*, 'sin'.

<sup>9</sup> Or 'altars'.

and a tear is sometimes the Euphrates  
 and sometimes it is oceans,  
 and my step is blood and a kiss  
 and my step is a prayer:  
 O Lord, summon me right here,  
 O Lord, summon me right here unto you, summon me  
 right here unto the soil: this star  
 that I fashioned is alien,  
 the lilies of the valley<sup>10</sup> do not want it  
 nor do the yearlings in my enclosure want it  
 nor I, nor do I want it,  
 and you, you who willed me of  
 the soil, do not want it.

When I ascended the first mountain, who  
 47 taught me ascent, who helped me  
 to descend, who returned me  
 forcibly to the starting-place? Who, I wonder, induced me?  
 O Lord, summon me right here  
 O Lord, summon me right here unto the soil,  
 and the soil for us is a home-womb, a shroud  
 and the earth alone is immortality.

O my stranger-friend, we are a body  
 like the leaves that whimper, a body  
 and the secret is in the roots.  
 And right here the roots ask the soil  
 about their fate, and the river answers not.  
 In the summer it does not answer.  
 Then who, I wonder, shall answer these  
 48 roots about their fate, embrace and protect them  
 in autumntime, restrain from them  
 the harshness of wintertime and the spring is coming,  
 inevitably coming  
 from the graves and the fields, coming,  
 and death and life are one  
 and the earth alone is immortality.

University of Pennsylvania

Translated by SHAWKAT M. TOORAWA

<sup>10</sup> "Fields" in the original.