



GIFTS
FROM AN
EMPTY
SUITCASE
AND OTHER
SHORT STORIES

AND TWENTY POEMS

GIFTS FROM AN EMPTY SUITCASE

***GIFTS FROM AN EMPTY
SUITCASE
And other short stories
AND TWENTY POEMS***

Aviva Butt



Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

Copyright © 2012.

All rights reserved by Aviva Butt

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, of the publisher.

Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507

Houston TX 77065

www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-62212-877-8

Contents

PART I

Short Stories

GIFTS FROM AN EMPTY SUITCASE **13**

In 1964, an Egyptian professor immersed in his work is faced with the realities of the sudden harsh censorship.

A NIGHTMARE IN AFGHANISTAN **22**

In 1978, Salim, a little boy in Afghanistan, suffers during his family's flight from the Communist takeover in Kabul.

AND SEEING THE MULTITUDE **36**

In the 1980s, a Hispanic gang up from Detroit, Michigan, spares a beautiful young woman walking alone to her bus stop in Ann Arbor.

AN ETHEREAL MISHAP **48**

In the 1990s, Lara finds happiness working in a Japanese trading company; her Japanese boss fights for ever more achievement.

LUNA **59**

In Queensland, Australia, Tara's bird Luna brings back childhood memories of an Aboriginal boy and birds; Ronny tries to save the birds dying in Iraq in the second Gulf War.

Notes **69**

Contents

PART II

TWENTY POEMS

Poems about birds on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia	74
Poems written while belonging to Colleen Campbell's Poetry Group on the Gold Coast from end 1999 to the start of 2001.	78
Poems written while in Ann Arbor, Michigan USA (1980s)	87
Poems written while in Dunedin, New Zealand (2009—)	92

Part I

Short Stories

Gifts from an Empty Suitcase

“Maher!” she screamed. She didn’t like my typewriter. Didn’t she want me to make a living? “Maher, did you forget we need to eat?”

“Oh, oh, darling,” I said. “I’ll go right away.” I set out for the market, the *Kasbah* off Ramesses Square. After all, she did have to eat. But, really I felt more like going to the train station and vanishing somewhere (anywhere), for good.

Now, in one of the many lanes of the market, I sniffed the aroma of spiced coffee issuing from my favorite coffee house. And lo and behold, my friend Ahmad was sitting there at one of the little round tables on the other side of the narrow lane facing the door of the coffee house. I sat down opposite him, and they brought me my coffee without a word having transpired. Ahmad was about fifty years old, a few years older than I, and like me, and indeed as with most poets of the day, he was leftist—in his case, a member of the Wahda Party.

“A bad year for us, 1964,” my friend said. “Have you heard the news?”

I knew that Ahmad was deeply concerned with the hardship and sickness in the Egyptian countryside. So I asked, "Another outbreak of plague?"

"You might call it that," he replied. "First the *Poetry Magazine*,¹ that most noble of publications, closed down in Beirut, and now . . ." He paused, sucked in his breath, took a sip of coffee. "And now," he went on, "the Board of Poetry² has published a manifesto directed against our Cairene journal *Poetry*?"³

"Would you believe that such a thing could happen in Egypt—the very heart of the Arab intellectual world!" I exclaimed.

"Apparently they object to our use of Christian symbols and what they see as Christian connotations," Ahmad moaned.

I sighed and said thoughtfully, "In the early stages of the development of free verse,⁴ the so-called Tammuz poets to a great extent borrowed symbols and images from the Mahjari poets.⁵ For example, they used the figure of Christ to symbolize the poet. However, the Tammuz poets, in the way they used their symbols, followed Boris Pasternak, Mayakovsky, and other Communist writers and T.S. Eliot! The poet of Arabic free verse is one who feels persecuted, alien to society. His efforts to reform society are in vain, his poems thus futile. Still he goes on writing, sacrificing himself for his people. The claim that Muslim poets writing modern poetry are in some way propagating Christianity is a total fallacy!"

Ahmad replied, "There are apparently more deep and widespread objections to leftist poets. Take for example al-Khal's statement in the last issue of the

Poetry Magazine.⁶ He says that in the main, grammatical Arabic is still used. But, he says, it's necessary to make colloquial speech the basis of the written literary language. Such poets have been accused of plotting along with imperialist nihilists against the Arabic language. They offend the nationalists! Moreover, on the immediate political scene, grammatical or any other changes to our present universal literary language would thwart pan-Arabism!"

"Are we poets really such a menace?" I said, bringing the discussion to an end. I still had to go shopping for the groceries.

"Have you seen Sylvana lately?" Ahmad had changed the subject.

"No," I said, "not since last time our poetry group met at her home."

Sylvana's father was Egyptian and her mother Italian. Her parents met during her father's student days in Italy. I'd known Sylvana for years as a teacher and intellectual. But only after her husband died did I notice that she was a beautiful woman.

Ahmad, rising to leave, broke in on my thoughts: "I wish I had your thick brown hair and handsome mustache!" He smiled at me and left.

That night I sat down to prepare my forthcoming lecture on Arabic literature. My students would be in for a surprise! I'd tell them about the work of the Syro-Lebanese poet Adonis, who with al-Khal had founded the *Poetry Magazine*. Here in Egypt, our modern poets were still, like my friend Ahmad, concerned with social

justice and poverty. But there in Lebanon, Adonis had carried this concern to a deeper concern with the spirituality of the nation, the more comprehensive aim of modernity. Standing before my students in a huge lecture hall at that oldest of educational institutions, al-Azhar University, I started talking on the poetic experience—what it means to be a poet:

“With Arabic free verse, modern poets throughout the Arab world express our hopes for the regeneration of the Arab peoples and our despair over the poverty we see around us. In Lebanon the poet Adonis has invented a genre even more recent than free verse. This is the Arabic *poème en prose*,⁷ the prose poem that he uses to express a new content. He sees the poetic experience as being close to the Sufi experience. Both strive to grasp the truth and get to the essence of things. The poet does not look upon things in the usual way. He has a special awareness of existence that stems from seeing beneath appearances to a deeper reality. His main objective as a poet-prophet is to reveal. He is a visionary . . .”

I noticed the stunned look on my students' faces and paused. “Are there any questions thus far?” I asked.

“Professor,” said Khalid, “isn't it the case that modern poets write secular poetry, tend to be leftist, and place greater emphasis on morality than on religious belief? Many in fact are known to be Freemasons! How is it then that they can be expected to be like a devout Muslim Sufi and have religious experiences?”

Khalid was so perceptive, such a brilliant student.

He understood the issue at stake in a flash. He reminded me of my son, my only son—my son who was killed in that cruel war of 1956 . . . Coming back to the present moment, I set about answering Khalid's question.

"It is true," I said, "that some of our modern poets have a very thorough knowledge of our religion, in Egypt some of them having studied at al-Azhar itself. The poet Adonis, who was born in Syria, comes from a family of practicing Sufis. However, an understanding of mysticism through direct experience is possible for anyone from any type of environment, even in the most secular of situations. The two basic techniques for achieving mystical visions are contemplation and renunciation. This may be done within a religious frame such as Sufism. However, people coming from secular environments may also have mystical visions when they cease to view things in an automatic way with learned responses. That is, anyone, anyone at all can attain a level of spirituality through the process of deautomatization of the psychological structures that interpret perceptual stimuli . . ." ⁸

Khalid appeared satisfied with my explanation, but I couldn't be sure if my students related my explanation of visions to the process of writing a poem. So I continued: "The poet, like the Sufi, is a visionary. He views the familiar anew. He has visions which are expressed in poetic language. In the early stages of the development of the new modern genre, Arabic free verse, the so-called Tammuz poets used symbols deriving from the Arabic Christian tradition of mainstream poetry. They used, for example, the figure of Christ to symbolize the poet. This poet was one who

bore the cross of suffering for his people, the Arab nation. Adonis recently in his new genre used the figure of the early Sufi ascetic-mystic, al-Hallaj, as a symbol.⁹ Al-Hallaj, as you all know, was both social reformer and poet, and so makes a most likely symbol.”

I paused, and again asked if there were any questions. There was a slight stir, and then one student at the back of the lecture hall—I couldn’t recall having seen him before—said, “Did you know that the Board of Poetry has issued a manifesto stating its disapproval of Christian symbols in Egyptian poetry?”

“I’m aware of that,” I answered, and then went on with my lecture, oblivious to his intrusion on my train of thought. “With the introduction of al-Hallaj and other Sufi poets as antecedents, Adonis and other modern Arabic poets have derived great benefit. Our modern poems have found roots in our own mystical tradition. And from here, having found a diachronic dimension, the modern poet is allowed full scope for a corresponding synchronic dimension. That is, if the poet believes in the universality of mystical doctrine, which is to say pantheism—this poet can include his visionary ideologies within the tradition of Arabic poetry.”

A few days later, I received a hand-delivered message from Sylvana. She asked me to visit her as soon as possible to discuss an urgent matter.

Sylvana’s apartment was in one of the better sections of the city. When I arrived, I knocked discreetly. No need to give the neighbors food for thought! She opened the door herself. It seemed that her servant was otherwise occupied or most likely out.

The apartment was spacious, well appointed. I'd always enjoyed the elegance of a European environment when we'd had our poetry meetings at her home. The chandeliers, gold-leafed table, hand-painted furniture, and heavy wooden pieces bespoke of her Italian heritage. She welcomed me with all the traditional greetings the Arabic language affords. And soon we were seated comfortably, facing each other on sofas on either side of a low coffee table. I lit a cigarette.

"You know," she said, "we academics usually stick to old stuff, like what happened when all was well in the good old days."

As she started speaking, her Arabic became deliberately slangy. She seemed determined to make both of us feel at ease so that we could talk freely.

I replied in a likewise casual vein. "You mean we should be talking about the days of Mohammed Ali Pasha, the modernization of Egypt, and Egypt's military successes?"

"Yes," she said. "And you might talk about that great scholar of the times Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi—perhaps dwelling on his patriotic poems!"

"What have I been talking about?" I asked, an inkling of what she had to say beginning to dawn on me.

"Unfortunately," she replied, "you seem to have been rather indiscreet. Don't you know that the present regime has its spies all over the place, especially in educational institutions such as al-Azhar?"

"How do you know?" I asked.

“I have a friend in the government, one who was concerned about my husband’s death. He has always tried to protect me since then. You see, my husband was a writer, and I never did know how he really died. Please, please, I must ask you, beg you, please be careful!”

“Sylvana,” I replied softly, “I thank you for your concern. I indeed shall take note of your warning. But I’m a poet. A poet has his own vision, and he must speak as he sees. He may become impoverished by way of material benefits from this truth. He may be ever on the run. But the gifts he brings from his empty suitcase exceed all other gifts in value. He writes poems. Poems that speak the truth.”

“What is your goal in life?” she said. “Don’t you want security and success as all of us do?”

“I, as a poet, have a metaphysical goal. I look below the surface of things. I see the present clearly and so am able to assess what the future holds for us. Our present government is so misleading the people with false hopes that a shock and awakening must occur with the first military defeat. I, as a poet, see beyond propaganda, the sickness of the Arab world at this time. And I must speak out! As a poet, I must, in the face of all propaganda, speak the truth and prepare the mentality of our nation to face the consequences of living in a modern world.”

“You’re determined to bear the burden of suffering for our people,” she exclaimed. “A poet is a man too! They’ll crucify you!”

“My dear Sylvana, I live without fear. I’m the happiest man alive. After a lifetime of devotion to my

studies, I've achieved a clarity of vision that brings me to a state of bliss."

Sylvana hesitated. She'd understood all that I'd told her. She knew that prospects of persecution for speaking the truth wouldn't deter me. She still pleaded with me once more: "Those of us who love you want to protect you. Please be careful!"

I stood up to leave. Her dark eyes glistened with tears of distress. She stood there so beautiful. Her long black hair caught the lights from her chandelier and glimmered. Her silvery gown shimmered over her slender body. I knew from Sylvana's words that I was in trouble, in deep trouble. It seemed to me most likely that I was about to be arrested. I bid her and the enchantment of her presence farewell, and left.

Once on the street, I was left alone to worry about what I'd do if I lost my meager but necessary income. How would I do the shopping for my poor wife? What would happen to her if I were put in jail? Perhaps I should pack my bag and leave while there was yet time? Maybe I should go to America. I could at least send her money from America!

Buy the B&N ePub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/gifts-from-an-empty-suitcase-and-other-short-stories-aviva-butt/1112258739?ean=2940015536867>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Gifts-Empty-Suitcase-Stories-ebook/dp/B009JQRCBQ/>