Habibi

حببي

(my beloved)

THE DIWAN OF ALIM MAGHREBI
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THE DIWAN OF ALIM MAGHREBI
Translated from the Arabic

DAVID SOLWAY

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Note on the Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habibi</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My love, why do you</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dearest one, were I there</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>There is a bowl of oranges on the table</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Kite</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After Reading Dov Ben-Zamir</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Rival Writes to My Love</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I have listened to the Weather</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Birthday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I cut you a spray of roses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I have just ordered</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lord of the Opening, portrayed</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Dream</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is always</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One Day</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When I enter you</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Like the reservoir at the city gates</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I'm not good with clocks and calendars</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is because</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maa'ak Lilnihaya</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Names</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Do not for a moment think</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To love another truly</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I picked up the little black portable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Garden of Perfumed Delights</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did you know</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habibi, / I want only what is best for you</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I accompanied you to the terminal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>He was wearing a black galabieh</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alim Maghrebi was born in Casablanca in 1959, the son of Munir Maghrebi, one of Morocco's most celebrated musical composers and an oud master of international stature. Alim was educated at the Sorbonne and did post-doctoral work at the University of London, acquiring degrees in Philosophy and Economics. Fluent in French and English, he is currently a Special Counsellor in the Morocco Bureau of Communications and Culture in Rabat.

The fact that he was educated largely in Europe will account for his evident familiarity with Western thought and expression. But his roots run deep into the rich tradition of Moroccan poetry and it is from these roots that he draws his inspiration as well as the confidence to develop the contemporary idiom in which his oeuvre is decanted. He writes in the spirit of the “New Arabic” — a poetic alloy which consists of ancestral themes and preoccupations modulated in the language of the street, the newspaper, movies, technology and the Internet.

Accompanied by such respected poets as Mohamed Bentalha and Salah Boussrif, Maghrebi was instrumental in founding the House of Poetry in 1996. Established in Casablanca, its mission was to offer hospitality to both local dissidents and foreign visitors and “to assert the poetic word within Arab and world horizons.” Its purpose was to transcend the divisiveness introduced into social and intellectual life by political compulsions and, from a technical perspective, to break with the strict metrical poetry of the 1940s and develop the practice of free verse (šîr hurr). If Maghrebi’s work is any indication, the program has to some extent succeeded,
although he has nevertheless retained some of the elements of the metrical unit (ِتَفْیِلْه), making frequent use of nunation and the chant cadence.

There is for the Western mind a certain sentimentality in these poems, but it is entirely unabashed and, we might say, authorized by the long history of Arabic poetry. I should emphasize that, although Maghrebi is steeped in Islamic theology and reflection owing to his upbringing and early education, he is an avowed secularist and very much a citizen of the modern world. This is clear from the stance toward love, relationships and politics conspicuous in his lines and from the facetious humour and self-irony he occasionally indulges. (When queried in a Radio Morocco interview about the various registers he deploys, he replied: “The oud has many strings.”) There is also the fact that he does not shy away from alluding to a contemporary Israeli poet of whose work he obviously approves. He is, to my knowledge, the only poet in the Arabic cultural domain capable of so risky and unprecedented a gesture. Along with Boujema El Aoufi and Mohamed Bachkar, he is now recognized as one of the chief practitioners of the “New Poetry,” a movement which gathered momentum in the late eighties and which, in the words of Norddine Zoutini, editor of the journal Moroccan Poetry, sought to create a poetry “which contains the present, yet exceeds it, and is different from it.” Their work, she continues, “reveals a strong commitment to the act of writing, and their deep visionary sense of the future.” What Maghrebi has added to both the style and substance of the movement is an equally strong commitment to the individual, the sense of intimacy which grounds one’s connection to the world. In the turmoil and vehemence that seems native to Islamic public life, so profound an immersion in the stream of personal emotion is to be applauded.

The woman to whom the poet addresses his diwan is obviously sourced in personal experience but there is little doubt that she assumes emblematic importance as a capricious and teasing Muse figure. The two poems in which Maghrebi invokes the Israeli poet, Dov Ben-Zamir, who in his own work struggles to come to terms with a mysterious woman called, significantly, “Rosa,” would suggest that Maghrebi is operating with a symbolic distillate of experience, if the entire drift of the collection did not already make it amply clear. His plea for the love of a woman who at times resists and at others accepts his suit inflames his imagination as it mirrors the poetic quest. Readers familiar with Arabic poetry would also recognize a pervasive allusion to the Meccan poet َُأَرْمَيْنَرْبَيْا (644-721), cued in one of Maghrebi’s initial epigraphs, who was famed for his lyrics lamenting the melancholy transience of love and the whimsical nature of the inamorata as well as the comic aspects of an overweening passion—tendencies which we detect in Maghrebi’s work. َُأَرْمَيْنَرْبَيْا’s obsession with a mercurial and hard-hearted beauty by the name of Thurayya has resonated in the Arabic romantic tradition from the eighth century to the present moment. Though Maghrebi refers in his text to the enigmatic Thurayya figure only as “habibi” (my love, my darling), she is plainly a modern incarnation of her fickle predecessor and an avatar of the unpredictable Muse while at the same time the vulnerable and loveable recipient of his heartfelt devotion.
A Note on The Title

In sum, here is an Arabic poet who recognizes the incunabulum of his precursors but who would, at the same time, find himself at home in any Western capital.

— DAVID SOLWAY

Deriving from the adjective *habib*, or “beloved,” the word *habibi* technically refers to the male recipient of the endearment, the female form being *habibati* or *habibti*. But it is commonly used to apply to either gender. In the Arabic hit song *Habibi Ya Nour Al Ain*, which the poet clearly has in mind, the term signifies a lovely young woman.
It happens that towards you
Sweeping nostalgia transports me
So to your lantern-lit boulevards I run
— Amina El Bakouri, “Visionary Eulogy (1)"

Instead of assaulting you like a wolf in the forest
I licked your hand like a dog wishing for love
— Abdel-Ilah Salhi,
“There Are Stories that End before Starting”

But my desire was unfulfilled, for she had sent me no reply,
Had she done so, she would have been excused, for speech persuades.
— 'Umar ibn Abi Rami'a
***

Habibi
you are the palm from which the date grows
drawing the sun to its tender flesh

Habibi
you are the date which glorifies the palm
and makes it burn with sweetness

Habibi
you are the sun itself
which touches the palm with light
and kisses the date with longing

Habibi
you are the palm, the date, the sun,
an oasis in the heart of the desert

and also the desert itself
whose dunes undulate in my heart
where no oasis is
Lord of the Opening, portrayed as a beautiful naked woman, lascivious and Moabitish.

Hell's ambassador to France, our conqueror and ally who bequeathed us a language.

Sent to earth by the Satan to test the rumour of married happiness. The rumour was groundless.

His name is Belphegor. He seduces men to perversity through invention and delight. And he is the source of your power.

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I am sitting in a café by an open window, waiting for you to appear. The walls are rich hues of brown: mahogany, oak, teak, burnt umber. I am reading a glossy magazine, waiting for you. I am waiting for you. Finally you arrive with your crown of black hair, with your breasts like the fruit of Paradise, with your walk of a young girl like Spring entering the room, your dress billowing with the wind's sweetness, you pass my table without a glance and leave with the handsome man sitting against the wall where there is no window. I scribble some notes in the margin of the glossy magazine, pretending indifference, preserving my dignity. Through the open window a fruit vendor offers me a ripe pomegranate, opulent reds and greens fill the room that you have left suddenly barren. I shake my head, I have no use for the fruit, it cannot restore me to the sunlight. I continue writing in the margins. Perhaps it is a poem. Perhaps it is this poem. I am still waiting for you.
I picked up the little black portable
to call you
but my fingers froze above the buttons
and would not obey my will
anymore than you respond
to my firmans and fatwas,
my feeble imperatives.
Sometimes I grow fearful, love,
reluctant and afraid
to hear the distance in the voice
that is more than a nuba in my ears,
to hear the unseasonable silence.
Then I am less than nothing
before the woman
who is more than everything
I have ever known and loved.
The phone rests in my palm
like a dead cicada.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Alim Maghrebi for his patience in replying to my frequent inquiries and for elucidating many of the nuances and subtleties in the original which I would otherwise have missed. I am equally grateful to Yolande Amzallag for introducing me to the world of Moroccan lore. My thanks go out as well to the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for a project grant which provided me with the time to complete the translation.
“Habibi”: As noted in the Introduction, the term is a standard endearment in speech and song. Colloquially, it can refer to either a man or a woman.

*After Reading Dov Ben-Zamir:* Dov Ben-Zamir is an Israeli poet. His most recent book is *New Wine, Old Bottles.*

One Day: This is one of the more controversial of Maghrebi’s poems, in which he has been perceived as breaking several taboos that govern poetic expression in the Arab world: the allusion to a certain form of erotic intimacy, and the desecration implicit in using the holy book to complete a simile. In a subsequent poem, “Do not for a moment think,” Maghrebi tempts the laws against blasphemy by comparing his love to the “un-created text,” namely, the Koran.

“When I enter you”: The story of the cave of the seven sleepers in ancient folk tale, originating in a Syriac source, and represented in both the Christian literature and the Koran.

“I’m no good with clocks and calendars”: In talkbacks to the journal *Nichane* in which this poem appeared, several readers objected to the metaphor of the “tick” of eternity as inconsistent. Maghrebi replied to the effect that the lover brings another kind of time into the world, a “timeless time,” which starts with a single and paradoxical tick. *Ipse dixit.*

*Maa’ak Lilnihaya*: translates as “I will be with you to the end,” a phrase from the famous song of Amr Diab,
Habibi Ya Nour El Ain, which won the prize for the best Arabic song of 1996.

Names: The word “ulema” refers to the educated class of Muslim scholars and is etymologically related to “Alim.” Blue, of course, is the colour of the Virgin’s robe in Renaissance art and signifies innocence or purity.

“I picked up the little black portable”: A nuba is a two-movement musical suite in a single mode or maqam, an Arab system of pitch organization that allows for the construction of melodies and improvisations within a scale.

The Garden of Perfumed Delights: this is the title of a notorious diwan (alternately: The Perfumed Garden) by Abu Nuwas al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami (756-815), by common consent one of the greatest poets of Arabic literature, who flourished at the height of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Though he is justly celebrated, his poems urging the pleasures of homosexuality (mudhakkarat) are often censored or deplored. The phrase “scattered about me like Koranic pearls” derives from two passages of the Koran, 52:24 and 76:19, depicting the delights of the life after death for the noble and heroic among the faithful. These suras read, respectively: “Round about them will serve boys beautiful as pearls well-guarded” and “And round about them will serve boys of perpetual freshness; if thou seest them, thou would think them scattered pearls.”

“I accompanied you to the terminal”: The “gul” is a polygonal design motif. “Senneh” refers to the single knot of the Persian weave, as contrasted with the “ghiardes” or double knot of the Turkish rug. Isfahan rugs are the most finely knotted in the world, with up to 500 knots per square inch.

“He was wearing a black galabieh”: In Egyptian mythology, the ibis bird is associated with the Thoth, the god of judgment; it is also reputed to be the last form of wildlife to take shelter before a hurricane and the first to emerge afterward. “Sidi” is an Arabic honorific, meaning “Sir” or “Lord.”

“My nose quivers in anticipation”: The Moroccan flag consists of a red field with a black-bordered, green, five-pointed interlocking star.

“Too late”: The dirham is the Moroccan unit of currency.

“I saw the light”: the phrase “the mark of Zorro” refers to a visual infirmity called “teichopsia,” half-blindness accompanied by a zigzag pattern.

“It’s been about 1001 nights now”: Sharayar is the name of the Shah in The Book of One Thousand and One Nights, compiled not as many assume during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Haroun al-Rashid but much later in Mamluk Cairo. The phrase “endless accounts” is also an elliptical reference to the fact that Scheherazade’s nocturnal stories are left unfinished.

“When the screen goes dark”: This poem is an excellent example of the “New Arabic,” as described in the Preliminary Note, and the “New Poetry,” as defined by Nord-dine Zoutini.
Love Poem: Gazelle horns, or Kab El Ghzal, are a popular, crescent-shaped, Moroccan pastry, served at celebrations and in particular at wedding banquets.

“Some of its rivers bubble with pure water”: Maghrebi is once again playing with several famous Koranic verses describing the charm and glory of the Islamic Heaven, or Jannah.

Qasida: This poem is constructed on the model of a classical Qasida, with its first part echoing the nasib (nostalgic reflection), its second ringing ironic changes on the rahil (travel section) and its third referring explicitly to the hija (jokes), hikam (moral maxims) and fakhr (praise), with one of which the form often concludes. It should be read in the framework of the famous Qasida by Sayyid al-Imam Abdalla al-Alawi, praising the perfection and majesty of the Creation, several lines of which have been adapted to Maghrebi’s poetic intentions. There is also a hint of the celebrated Qasida Burda, the poem of the mantle or the scarf, which led to the cure from paralysis of its author, Sharafuddin Muhammed al-Busiri. But the latter allusion is ironically inflected, deliberately playing with what is called in the traditional commentary a “blatant shirk,” or misprision (technically: ascribing partners or associates to Allah). One such violation involves the length of the poem itself for the Qasida generally runs to one hundred lines or more.

Dajjal: In Arabic mythology, Dajjal is the name of the devil or “antichrist.”

David Solway is the author of many books of poetry including Modern Marriage, which received the QSPELL Prize for Poetry; Franklin’s Passage, winner of Le Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal and Reaching for Clear; awarded the A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry. His work has been anthologized in The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse; McClelland and Stewart’s New Canadian Poetry; Border Lines: Contemporary Poetry in English from Copp Clark; The Bedford Introduction to Literature from St. Martin’s Press; and Les Cent Plus Beaux Poèmes Québécois with Fides, among others.

Among his prose publications, Education Lost won the QSPELL Prize for Nonfiction and Random Walks was a finalist for Le Grand Prix du Livre de Montréal. A French translation of his writings on education, Le bon prof, was awarded Le Prix Spirale. He has also published several volumes on political subjects, of which The Big Lie: On Terror, Antisemitism, and Identity was a Canadian best-seller.

Solway’s essays and articles have appeared in journals and magazines such as The Atlantic Monthly; The Sewanee Review; PN Review (U.K.); Descent; Partisan Review; liberté; International Journal of Applied Semiotics; Policy Options: Institute on Research in Public Policy; and Journal of Modern Greek Studies. He is currently a regular contributor to FrontPage Magazine, Pajamas Media and Academic Questions in the U.S.
Praise for David Solway’s poetry

I have enjoyed David Solway’s poems for decades. Here, as always, Solway writes with a Gravesian dash and brio, taking (and giving) pleasure in a fine vocabulary, a gift for surprising figures, and a striking breadth of reference.

— Richard Wilbur

Some of the most sensual poems ever published in Canada ... Canadian poetry has not seen anything so ambitious, so intriguing, so intellectually and emotionally challenging, for decades.

— Canadian Book Review Annual

They are true poems, and their play releases powerful forces.

— Peter Davison (The Atlantic)
Other Books by Alim Maghrebi

Night without Stars (poetry)
The City in the Desert (poetry)
The House of Poetry (pamphlet)
Mended Nets (essays)