

To my son Yacine

Abdellatif Laâbi

Abdellatif Laâbi is the major Francophone voice of Moroccan poetry today. Shaped by political struggle and the pain of prison and exile, Laâbi's expressive simplicity reflects a resilient, all-embracing spirit. This is a poetry of protest - internally tumultuous yet delicate verse that grapples with political and spiritual oppression.

A novelist and playwright as well as a poet, Laâbi is also the translator of some twenty mainly Maghrebi and Middle Eastern works from Arabic into French. Born in Fez in 1942, he was one of the founders of the magazine *Souffles* (1966-1972), a pathbreaking left-cultural journal that was eventually banned. (See the excellent anthology *Souffles-Anfa*, edited by Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, Stanford University Press 2016.) Most of the magazine's editors were thrown into prison and tortured in the years of repression under King Hassan II. Laâbi was released in 1980 and five years later moved to France. Deemed by Amnesty International a prisoner of conscience, while imprisoned he received the Prix de la Liberté and the Prix International de Poésie. He went on to receive the Prix Robert Ganzo de Poésie in 2008, the Prix Goncourt de la Poésie for his *Oeuvres complètes* in 2009, and the Grand Prix de la Francophonie from the Académie Française in 2011.

'To my son Yacine' is from the collection *In Praise of Defeat* published by Archipelago Books in 2016. The translation - which was a finalist for the 2017 Griffin Poetry Prize - is by Donald Nicholson-Smith, who won the 2015 French-American Foundation Translation Prize for his version of Jean-Patrick Manchette's *The Mad and the Bad*. The poem originally appeared in *Sous le baillon le poème* (Beneath the Gag, the Poem) 1972-1980.

Donald Nicholson Smith

Soundings

To my son Yacine

My darling son
I have received your letter
You already talk to me like a grown-up
you say how hard you try at school
and I feel your passion to understand
to chase away the shadows, the ugliness
to pierce the secrets of the great book of life
You are sure of yourself
And though not deliberately
you list your riches for me
you reassure me on your strengths
as if you were saying 'don't worry about me
see me walk
see where my steps lead
the horizon, the vast horizon there
it has no secrets for me'
And I picture you
your fine brow
so high and straight
I picture your great pride

My darling son
I have received your letter

To my son Yacine

You say
'I think of you
and I give my life to you'
without an inkling
of what you do to me in saying it
my crazy heart
my head in the clouds
and through this word from you
it is no longer hard for me to believe
that the great Feast Day will come
when children like you
now men
will walk with giant steps
far from the poverty of the shanty towns
far from hunger, ignorance and sadness

My darling son
I have received your letter
You wrote the address yourself
wrote it with confidence
you thought to yourself, if I put this
Papa will get my letter
and perhaps I'll have a reply
and you started to imagine the prison
a big house where people are locked up

Soundings

how many and why?
but then they can't see the sea
the forest
they can't work
to get their children enough to eat
You imagine something mean
something ugly
something that makes no sense
and makes you feel sad
or very angry
You think too
that those who made prisons
are certainly mad
and so very many other things
Yes my darling son
that is how one begins to think
to understand humans
to love life
to detest tyrants
and that is how
I love you
how I love to think of you
from the depths of my prison