

# To my son Yacine

Abdellatif Laâbi

**A**bdellatif 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