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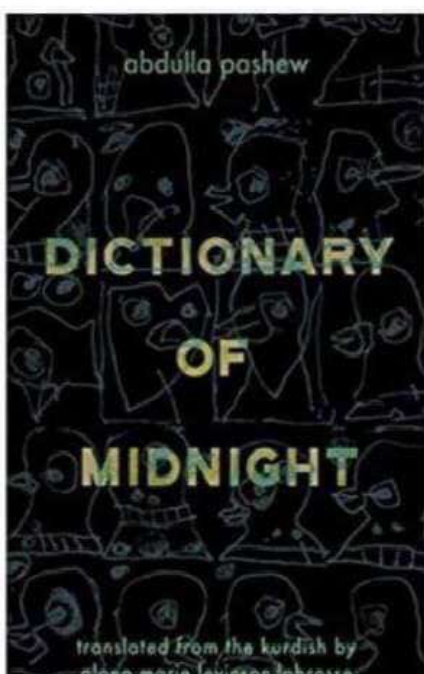
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Dictionary of Midnight by Abdulla Pashew

Translated from the Kurdish by Alana Marie Levinson-Labrosse
Phoneme Media, 2018

385 pages

£ 17.16

Poetry Review by Pippa Little

This substantial book collects almost fifty years' poetry by Abdulla Pashew, one of the most influential Kurdish poets of today: thousands attend his readings. Born in 1946 in Iraqi Kurdistan, Pashew studied in Russia and now lives in Finland. As the book jacket says, these poems form 'a personal cartography of exile'. However there are many love lyrics and meditations on desire here, too, and a wry celebration of our damaged and imperfect world.

Dictionary of Midnight is the first book-length selection of Pashew's poetry to appear in English, a labour of love by the poet, essayist and translator Alana Marie Levinson-Labrosse, who since living and working in Iraq has dedicated herself to bringing Kurdish poets to English-speaking audiences. And we are richer for Abdulla Pashew's voice. Always direct, spare, almost brutally honest, yet there is a beauty to his work, a turn of phrase, a completely unexpected image, which can catch at the reader's throat or raise a smile.

As you might expect with a selection of work covering such almost a lifetime, there is a mellowing: while opening poems are angry and anguished ('I am used to making ink from my own blood', 'I Cannot Write', p.31) later ones ruminate on his preoccupying themes of loss, grief, love and exile in gentler terms and contemplate older age, even death, with equanimity. Not that there is any reduction in the poetry's fierce life-force, but for a poet for whom colour is all-important, the shades and tones become more subtle.

It's impossible to share with you all the poems I have marked out but I hope to offer a sense of this book's richness. Firstly there is the beautiful, half-hidden (and unfamiliar) context of Kurdish culture, history and landscape which permeates every poem. There are many mentions of Kurdish melodies and dances, historical and mythic figures. These form a poignant counterpoint to the poems of exile written in cold northern countries where there is a lot of snow, and stars like 'pomegranate seeds'. In 'Snowstorm', written in Moscow, 1981, a snowflake melts to a water drop in the poet's palm which he recognises as being 'from a spring in Kurdistan'. (p. 151.)



Here is one of the poems which most struck me:

Graveyard

Why be afraid of the graveyard?
At least in that land,
in that land,
I can settle in a little house of my own
that will let me forget my migration from warren to warren,
a little house
I will never pay rent for,
where no one will ever ask me to return the key.

Helsinki 2010 (p. 331.)

Pashew's world, however dark this particular poem, is vivid and alive: everything possesses character, from trees to insects, the sea with its waves to his lovers' long dark hair. His poems of desire are sensual and fervent and he spans the sublime along with the quotidian. His sense of humour is mordant and unsparring: another very short poem, 'Soccer' (Helsinki 2004, p.313) depicts Kurdistan as a football pitch and Independence as the ball: 'from the very beginning of our existence/running has been our destiny'.

This book is a distillation of a life lived in difficult circumstances by a major poet committed to his craft and to speaking out against oppression. Included in that life are relationships, friendships, family ties and above all an overwhelming sense of love, in the face of exile in the cold. I'll quote in full the penultimate poem for its typically surprising and pleasing imagery, its relish for life itself:

The Sea

I don't know why
whenever I consider the sea, each time
it seems
the sky has stripped naked