

Write Your Heart Out!

Mona Kattawi

It's December, and I'm spending a few days at my parents' place in Mannheim. Today, I'm meeting with Ben for coffee. We always meet when I'm in Mannheim.

I call him to make sure he got my email. "Usual time, at our usual place," he says, even though he doesn't need to. Ben is very predictable, and we've been going to the same place for five years. He

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novelist, and I need his advice on an issue that has kept me busy lately: for weeks, I haven't been able

always orders Seltzer, and I always have a cup of tea. Even our conversations have a certain pattern. After the regular small talk, we talk about my family, about his son, about relationships, and in the end, we talk about my future. This time, I have something else on my mind though. Ben is a

to write a single poem. Even when I want to write emails, words don't come easily, and I find myself postponing the task. I start looking for excuses and I welcome every form of distraction that keeps me from writing.

"Writer's block," Ben says. "It's just writer's block, even though you haven't really published anything yet, have you?"

I just give him a shrug and listen lethargically. "Lock yourself up in a room and try to write for two hours. This is what Amos Oz used to do," he says.

"If you were on an island, with nothing but paper and ink, wouldn't you write? You have two choices, either you write, or you do nothing. I'm sure the first option sounds more tempting."

I nod in agreement, even though I'm actually thinking that I would do nothing. I'd probably lie on my back and look at the clouds in the sky, or maybe I'd just throw stones into the water and watch the ripples that form. But I'm too embarrassed to admit that. Ben has a rather high opinion of me, and I don't want to ruin this illusion just yet.

I tell him I lack inspiration.

"Inspiration is for amateurs," he insists.

"Professionals simply sit down and write. Do you like cafés?"

"I practically live in cafés," I say and laugh. "Well, that's a good start! You might as well sit in a café and jot down people's conversations. You can turn them into stories later on. Some of the things people say are actually very interesting!" Ben gives me a big grin, showing almost all his teeth. I nod, mumble something incomprehensible and decide to think about the issue later. I tell him I'd like to try something new, because so far I have

written poems only.

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"Mona. The form chooses you," he says in a warm, reassuring voice. He takes off his hat because it's getting a little warm inside the café, and I notice that his hair has

grown. He has long, white hair now; which reminds me of the Moses figure in the Biblical cartoons that were broadcasted on TV when I was a child. I used to think God looks like that. I wonder if that's a heavenly sign.

Ben's words ring through my ears. "The form chooses you." I feel that it's my destiny to write poems. I realize it's late, so I give him a hug and walk home with a big smile. I feel a strong urge to scribble something down on a scrap of paper, and I'm terribly excited because I'm confident I will be able to write again; poems, short stories, even entire novels!

Before going home, I make sure I have all the things I need to be motivated to write. I find a little oriental store and there I choose a lovely handmade notebook with a Chinese silk cover and recycled paper. It is virtually impossible to write on that paper, but never mind. Ben says he never uses a computer for writing, so maybe the slightly old fashioned trick will work for me too. I also get myself a Moleskin notebook from a stationary store, just in case the recycled paper gets in the way of writing. After all, Hemingway used Moleskin

notebooks and became one of the most influential writers of the last century.

At home, I take all the unnecessary things away from my desk. I play my Górecki CD, which, I am convinced, can make the most untalented people write heavenly poetry. I close the door so that my very spirited Bulgarian roommate does not interfere with the peace I created, and then I sit down with my newly purchased notebooks and my fountain pen.

Two hours pass, and I just sit there puffing smoke circles into the air. My eyes glaze over, and when I become aware of my surroundings again, the ashtray is already full, the room is foggy, but the sheet of paper in front of me is still empty. I realize that I'm facing a problem I have had for years: the thoughts form readily in my head, but as soon as I want to transform them into words, I lose them. I don't know which language to write in.

For a very long time, I used to write poems in English. As a teenager, I felt I couldn't identify with any of the languages I grew up with. German was not the language of my heart, even though we always spoke German at home. At the same time, Arabic seemed too intimidating and I realized I would never be able to write anything serious in Arabic. I grew up on the idea that the language of the Koran is the ideal language, and at an early age I also learned that classical Arabic poetry has a very high prestige in the Arab world. I knew it would be a tiresome, fruitless endeavor to try to write anything remotely similar to that language, and thus I felt that anything I wrote in Arabic was doomed to fall on deaf ears.

When I was 16, I went to an international school in Italy. English was the language of instruction, and since the instructors and the pupils all came from different parts of the world, it was the only language we were able to communicate in, although the English we spoke soon had a life of its own. It grew, developed, and at some point, it contained elements of French, German, Arabic, Italian, Norwegian – we even invented new words! But it was English nevertheless. I shared a room with an

Albanian girl and a girl from Hong Kong, and I had an Alaskan boyfriend. Naturally, I spoke English all the time, and at some point I even started dreaming in English. This is how I began writing in English. I started working for the college magazine, and I published some of my poems. It was a great sensation to be addressed by pupils from the Netherlands, from China, even from Israel, who told me they liked what I wrote. Once, on a trip to Padua, the Director of Studies sat close to me. Sandy was British, in her fifties, and so I was surprised when she told me she read one of the poems I had published and that she liked the imagery I used even though it was foreign to her. Maybe she was only trying to flatter the then 17 year old Palestinian girl, but I definitely felt I had found the key to universal poetry.

As I got older, writing got more difficult for me. My thoughts became more complex, and I became more aware of my origins and my identity. In Germany, where I moved after finishing high school, I became particularly aware of my minority status. People always asked me many questions about my background and what it is like to be an Arab woman. The more questions they asked, the more I felt I had been robbed of a language I can call my own. I opened my throat, but nothing came out. I wanted to express my alienation in poetry, but English was no longer suitable for my needs. The message I needed to carry to the world was no longer universal; it was about who I am, about my roots, my childhood memories and my homeland. For some time I thought I would only find the cure in the Arabic alphabet, but I soon realized that rediscovering Arabic was a rather internal healing process, and that I still hadn't found the right language to write in.

I stopped writing altogether at that point. Every now and then I produced a short poem in English, and I started experimenting with the German language too, but I was mainly trying to get in touch with my "Arab" self at that time. I started listening to Arabic music, I bought various Fairouz records – music which I found absolutely dreadful during my childhood – I tried to talk to my siblings in Arabic, and I devoured volumes of Arabic

literature. The voice I found inside of me seemed primitive, and I realized I either had to tame it or to find a new way of expressing myself.

Today, this phase is over, and I finally accepted the fact that, like many Palestinians who are dispersed in this world, I have a mixed identity, I speak more than one language, and I have more than one voice. Many months have passed since the talk with Ben, and I still sit here with the same questions going through my head. But my attitude towards them changed. When I write these days, I don't rack my brains about the language I write in. My poems are mostly in German, sometimes in English, and I also wrote a few poems in Arabic. The step I want to achieve next is mixing more than one language in a single poem. Like many people, I use more than one language when I talk, and I would like to reflect that in my poetry. After all, mixing genres in Art has become legitimate in our postmodern world. In literature, mixing genres is also legitimate. Why shouldn't mixing languages be?

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