

“The Modular Elastic: The Poetry of Fady Joudah”  
Review of The Earth in the Attic, Poems by Fady Joudah  
reviewed by Doris Bittar for *Al Jadid*

Imagine bouncing a poem as though it were a ball, wrestling it to the ground, stretching it flat and dissecting it. Fady Joudah’s resilient poetry passes this “stress” test and returns to its original state further transformed and transforming us in the process. The slim and animated verses resemble ladders as they sit tentatively on the page. We may climb or float up from the bottom. We can slide or jump from the top. We are especially welcomed to slip and drift between the stanzas, the lines and words. Joudah's poems are minimal, malleable and modular; ready to challenge our notions of what it is to be human in an unforgiving and fragile world.

Fady Joudah’s first book of poems, The Earth in the Attic, is this year’s winner in the Yale Series of Younger Poets, the oldest literary prize in American poetry. Poet Louise Gluck selected the book and wrote the forward. Gluck states that Joudah’s poems “... resemble scientific proofs, but proofs written in an utterly direct and human language; in their implicit drivenness, their wish to change the reader as the poet has been changed...” Joudah, a Palestinian is a physician who works for Doctors Without Borders. Those experiences especially the tours in Darfur and Zambia add layers that inform the discourse on identity and power.

Joudah’s poems lure us into being complicit readers as we consider the depravities of war and the suspended anxiety of exile. We enter realms of cataclysmic misfortunes viewed from both a voyeuristic perch and one in the trenches. The enjoyment of sweet language and humorous incidents is coupled with the horror of human misery. The poems question our need to seek epiphany in skeletal humans and ascetic landscapes played against national/tribal loyalties.

“Pulse” is a poem in 15 parts and is among the epic anchors of the book along with “ Moon Grass Rain.” Both describe inhabitants during war in a village or villages in Zambia/Darfur/Palestine/anywhere. The references are ambiguous and layered enough to be transferred to any location.

When Joudah’s voice shifts there are noticeable small leaps between the incantations of stretchy threads that emerge and submerge between real or imagined ellipses, real or morphed realms. It is precisely at these junctions and drifting gaps of cinematic flow where we find the freeing impulse to test our will on the verses, to further probe the layers. Reading the lines or stanzas in an unorthodox way, perhaps backwards, illuminates the shifting voices and the rich visual renderings that Gluck

aptly points out as existing in the expansive realm of the psychic rather than political dogma. In the segment Pulse #2, Joudah coaxes us, consciously or subconsciously, to micro shift within the lines and stanzas. It begins:

Nothing holds ground in a poem.  
I was with a crane building its nest  
When a man from a grass-shrapnel village  
Handed me a note that a soldier  
Lay in my bed with a bullet  
In his thigh . . . I was in the middle...

The first two lines situate us with the doctor. “Nothing holds ground in a poem,” could be a concluding phrase, a punch line or it could be a hypothesis or a preamble. We may find ourselves going back to it as we read the parable/proofs that follow.

When interpreting a dream, each character, each segment is part of a facet of the dreamer. In Joudah’s poetry, and perhaps most poetry, the choice on the part of the reader to view from various angles is natural and desirable. Moreover, Joudah’s textured and elastic verses are parsed and sequenced to allow for sticky entanglements as well as smooth transitions. In Pulse #11 Joudah begins with “This child / Wears its skin like spandex on the bone.” With the simple phrase “This child,” spoken as a parent might speak, Joudah suggests that we take ownership: is it his child or is it our child? These raw lines stick to our own skin for weeks to come. After this introduction several voices follow, one pontificates upon and another elucidates “this” compounded human tragedy.

Fady Joudah’s voice(s) exists in layered dualities that are in a perpetual state of translation and mistranslation. The “translations/mistranslations” create intimacy with alien characters whether they are from the American south, Zambian refugee camp, his father’s memories of Palestine, or a spider, an observer of humans.

In “Along Came a Spider,” from which this book obtained its title, Joudah playfully compares the mission of a spider with that of a prophet. The spider lightly resonates, suspended in planes of historical and biblical references. To contrast a spider with a prophet teaches us that to be human is inescapably corrupting, perhaps to be sparingly rescued by small epiphanies and delicate humor.

Taken as a whole, The Earth in the Attic is a translucent parchment that maps our culpability in the world. Joudah’s verbal and sequencing choices

create an urge to enter a pact that deliberately instructs us to question our roles as witnesses. Our scrambled readings of the poems end and the poems are restored to their original elegance and place. However, we have become ineluctably transformed by the experience.