Salah El Moncef, ***The Offering*.** Penelope Books, 2015. ISBN-1500859443. 407 pages.

In his famous collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), Salman Rushdie describes how a political exile, immigrant, or expatriate writer might be haunted by an overwhelming sense of loss, as well as an urge to reclaim a part of his or her past. He then goes on to compare the memory of such displaced individuals to a broken mirror, stressing how the fragmentation of memory might be advantageous because it makes trivial things acquire new meaning. With great loss or displacement comes the opportunity for self-renewal, a reclamation of one's past and identity through the creation of "imaginative truths" and alternative futures. But what happens when the immediate past is so painful that—in the words of Miroslav Volf—"the absence of the memory of wrongs suffered is desirable"? In such a case, might there be a type of salvation found in amnesia, or even in the creation of imaginary scenarios? These questions and many more haunt the pages of Kuwait-born author Salah El Moncef's second novel, *The Offering*.

Moncef's second literary offering is a tragic but beautiful story of loss, fractured identity, freedom, salvation, and the limits of imaginative truth in twenty-first century global society. Like a postmodern amalgam of Dalton Trumbo's war-ravaged protagonist in *Johnny Got His Gun* and Salman Rushdie's unreliable narrator Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, Moncef's protagonist Tariq Abbassi could best be described as a diasporic body-subject, reflecting back on his fractured life of traumatic losses and displacements, precipitating from his mental and eventual physical migration from Tunisia to the West, and culminating with unthinkable personal tragedy and bodily injury. Given the long history of Western interferences in the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as the growing challenges currently faced by male refugees from these regions, such a novel seems timely and appropriate, but what I found particularly appealing was how Moncef was able to use some familiar and perhaps more commonly held themes in a text that felt very fresh and specific to the diasporic experience of one *individual* Arab male. Subsequently, Tariq's story comes off as being very much his own, but also contains within it elements that are relatable to my own experience as an expat living in Europe, as well as the experiences of others who might share more similar experiences with Tariq.

Unfolding like an ambiguous meta-mystery worthy of Paul Auster, we are told from the outset that *The Offering* is reworked from a series of "diary excerpts and pictures and audios and videos sprawling endlessly in the recesses of a near-defunct laptop" (2). These excerpts—along with an introduction by professor of critical theory Mari Ruti, a foreword allegedly written by Tariq's friend and sous-chef Sami, and a touching letter, possibly written by Tariq's mother and found on his laptop—open up more questions than answers, but uncovering the real truth about Tariq's life is perhaps secondary to the feelings conjured up by Moncef's liminal prose and imagery, always towing the lines between sorrow and hope, loss and revelation.

Like the aftermath of a crime scene that can never be fully understood,

reconstructing the "true" events described in *The Offering* and separating them from Tariq's own fantasies requires some detective work, and this is ultimately constrained by how each individual reader experiences the text. As Maurice Blanchot reminds us, "the reader makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is the real author, he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing." With this quote in mind, what follows is one possible version of the "true" story, based on my own encounter with the text: Tariq Abbassi is a frustrated poet and restraunteur, desperately attempting to reconstruct his memory after a terrible head injury (this is assuming that Tariq is not actually Sami or someone else). As a pro-democracy activist in Tunisia, Tariq was often at odds with the authorities, as well as his father and brothers, who according to Tariq, "treated him like a freak" after he began straying from tradition (5). This marks the beginning of Tariq's many conflicts with male authority figures throughout his life, who, according to his closest friend Zoè, saw him as something "unthinkable to them as men: some sort of male mother—something they couldn't name or conceptualize" (7). This also puts Tariq at odds with his traditional North African culture, which eventually compounds his sense of displacement, culturally trapped between what is commonly described as East and West, yet never able to find refuge in either.

After traveling much of the Western world and earning a PhD in Philosophy from Sorbonne, Tariq fails to secure an academic position in France, so decides to borrow money from his mother to open a restaurant in Bordeaux. Unsatisfied with his career as a chef/restaurateur, as well as his inability to publish a novel, Tariq becomes emotionally detached from the people around him, which may partially explain why his wife Regina abruptly abandons him, taking their two sons with her. During their divorce hearings, Regina exploits the negative cultural stereotypes of Arab men to justify her actions, painting Tariq as an aggressive and abusive spouse. This vicious stereotyping, along with his inability to secure an academic or writing career, further alienates Tariq from his chosen Western society, which now sees him as an external threat and cliché, a lone Arab male who is simply "a vehicle of Arab culture and its values" (172).

Tariq eventually gains partial custody of his two sons and takes them to visit his family in Tunisia where he is once again reminded of his inadequacies as a man in the traditional culture of his homeland. Feeling rejected by his successful brothers and brother-in-laws, Tariq finds refuge in his mother, as well as his former lover Thouraya. Upon returning to France, Tariq begins another romance with a Parisian woman named Annaelle. One rainy night, while driving his children from Paris to Bordeaux to meet their mother, Tariq's car hydroplanes off the freeway and flips over, taking the lives of his two sons and leaving Tariq in an apparent state of amnesia and paranoia. Subsequently, he begins identifying his problems with the women in his life, even implicating Annaelle and Zoè in the deaths of his sons—who he now believes were sacrificed as blood offerings by a sinister Tantric cult with terroristic ties.

Despite his obsessive diary entries and apparent struggle to uncover the truth about his past, such a paranoid conspiracy theory leads me to believe that Tariq

never intended on recovering all the fragments from his past. Tariq confesses, "There is something oddly stark and unqualified about the memory of pain visited upon others: a feeling of guilt and unworthiness that is so pervasive it becomes an integral part of everything you are" (33). This guilt certainly permeates much of Moncef's prose; so much so that it never really mattered to me how accurately Tariq describes his last hours with his children, or how the true events surrounding their deaths really unfolded. Something terrible happened, beyond all words or objective truth. The spirit and emotional significance of this trauma lives on, even if the details are fuzzy or completely embellished.

In the letter attributed to her at the end, Tariq's mother describes his paranoid delusions as "imaginary scenarios"(397), which brings me back to the words of Maurice Blanchot. In his famous essay "Literature and the Right to Death," Blanchot describes literary language as "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it." In other words, the true thing-in-itself or fragment of memory can never fully be apprehended by language, but like Rushdie suggests, it can take on new meaning, while also marking the presence of something wonderful and perhaps even terrifying; or in words of Blanchot, the presence of "the being that protests against revelation." It only seems appropriate that a diasporic poet—who already uses the English language to create a distance from his past traumas (xix)—might use "imaginary scenarios" to capture the feelings associated with a traumatic event without revisiting the actual event itself. In doing so, such a poet is able to sustain a kind of life with the instruments of death, while locating an emotional truth with his or her imagination.

As suggested in the letter at the end, it is Tariq's mother's hope that he can somehow use his latest loss and transgressions as an opportunity to reinvent himself, but it is never quite clear whether or not she really wrote the letter, or if somebody else (maybe Tariq) is just appropriating her voice. We are also led to believe that Tariq committed suicide some time before the letter was retrieved from his laptop by his friend Sami. Could this be Tariq's final offering to the world before answering what Camus calls the one "fundamental question in philosophy," or was Tariq simply an elaborate artifice for Sami all along? Once again, the truth behind this mystery is secondary to the feelings of loss and hope that permeate Moncef's prose. Some questions are better left unanswered, for in the absence of the truth lies the potential for even greater revelations.

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