

So What



Taha Muhammad Ali

# So What

New & Selected Poems  
(with a story)

1971–2005

TRANSLATED BY

Peter Cole

Yahya Hijazi

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## On Taha Muhammad Ali

Having found Taha Muhammad Ali's store on Casanova Street in the old quarter of Nazareth empty, I sat on one of the low, wicker-topped stools and let my eyes roam about the shop. The shelves running up to the vaulted ceiling were crammed with imitation pearl-studded scabbards, ceramic bowls of various shapes and sizes, colorful kaffiyehs, olive-wood camels, inlaid boxes, narghiles, post-cards of the legendary church rising above the shops at the end of the narrow street.

This wasn't exactly what I had expected. Some months earlier, when I'd first tried to translate two of Taha Muhammad Ali's poems, I had been told by a friend, who was then editing an anthology of Palestinian poetry, that the poet was a dealer in antiquities. Muhammad Ali was born and raised, my friend had explained, in the village of Saffuriyya, located on the site of what had once been the ancient town of Sepphoris, and at the age of seventeen was forced to leave with his family for Lebanon, after his village was attacked by the Israeli army in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. A year later he and his family slipped back across the border and, finding the village destroyed, eventually settled in Nazareth.

Muhammad Ali, I now realized, was the proud owner of a souvenir shop. The only objects that might have passed for antiquities were some old farming implements and, leaning against the wall in one corner of the room, the waist-high jug once used by villagers for storing grain.

A slim young man entered the shop and introduced himself as Nizar, the poet's son. Taha would soon arrive, he announced. For some time now he and his younger brother had run the store. Their

father, Nizar added, would show up on occasion only to disappear into the nearby shops to sip Turkish coffee with his old friends. I wondered whether one of the shopkeepers wasn't the friend Muhammad Ali had spoken of several weeks earlier in Jerusalem, at the city's third international poetry festival. The poet had prefaced the reading of his poems by telling us, in halting Hebrew, "a little story." Many years ago, he said, he had started up a stand along the street leading into the Old City market in Nazareth where he would display small lacquered camels made of olive wood and sell them to tourists who came from all parts of the world to visit the Church of the Annunciation. A certain friend of his used to visit him at the end of his workday and sit on the wooden stool he'd set out for him, so he could enjoy looking at the foreign passersby. "I would ask him to listen to a poem I had written the previous night," Muhammad Ali told us,

and he would refuse loudly: "I don't want to hear it! I'm tired and I want to rest." One day it occurred to me that I might "bribe" him, by offering him one of the small wooden camels in exchange for his listening to my new poem. When I stretched out my hand to offer him the camel, a not unmysterious smile came across his face, and he took the camel, put it in his pocket, and offered me—of his two ears—only half an ear, with which he listened to my poem, all the while directing his eyes and his other ear-and-a-half to the people who were coming and going on the street before him, without there appearing on his face any indication that he was listening to me at all.

Time passed, and I continued to give my friend camels in exchange for his listening to each new poem that I wrote. On one of these afternoons, wanting to save myself a camel, I announced to my friend that Jean-Paul Sartre had visited Nazareth, and that the city council had invited me to participate in a reception for him where I met and spoke with him

at length. My friend cut me off abruptly and said: "I know all about it, and I read in the paper that you talked to him about his play *The Respectful Prostitute*. I've also been told that the municipality asked you to participate in the reception for Arthur Miller... But what has this got to do with our topic? Sartre isn't a poet. Arthur Miller has absolutely nothing to do with poetry and poets. And even if this French existentialist had been a poet, and the late Marilyn Monroe's husband had written poetry, what has that got to do with listening to your nonsense? I've come here to forget about my troubles and rest after a hard day's work... My friend, I don't feel like listening! But let's get it over with..."

I paid him his lacquered wooden camel and he put it in his pocket and listened grudgingly as I read him my latest poem.

One day I said to my friend: "OK... And what do you have to say about the Hebrew poet Natan Zach and his splendid beard? He came here with a writer-friend of his from Paris and bought a camel from me to give to his French guest..." My friend cut me off and said: "I don't see any connection between a great poet like Zach and you." And I quickly shut him up with the usual camel... which he put in his pocket, and then, without looking at me or offering any visible sign that he was paying attention to the words, he listened to the new poem I'd written the previous night.

Mostly I was afraid that the ongoing blackmail would use up all of my "capital" and one day empty the store, and I'd end up with neither camels to sell to the tourists nor anyone to listen to my poems.

Last week, to my great surprise, I was sent a Spanish literary journal with poems by Natan Zach and Taha Muhammad Ali on facing pages. And that same week I also received an invitation to participate in the international poetry festival in Jerusalem. I took the Spanish journal and the invitation, and went to my friend and told him: What do

## عَبْدِ الْهَادِي يُصَارِعُ دَوْلَةَ عُظْمَى

فِي حَيَاتِهِ  
مَا قَرَأَ وَلَا كَتَبَ .

فِي حَيَاتِهِ  
مَا قَطَعَ شَجَرَةً ،  
وَلَا طَعَنَ بَقْرَةً .

فِي حَيَاتِهِ ، مَا جَابَ سِيرَةَ النِّيُورُوكِ تَائِمَزْ ؛  
بِغِيَابِهَا .

فِي حَيَاتِهِ ،  
مَا رَفَعَ صَوْتَهُ عَلَى أَحَدٍ  
إِلَّا بِقَوْلِهِ :  
« تَفَضَّلْ ... »

وَاللَّهِ الْعَظِيمِ غَيْرِ تَتَفَضَّلْ ! »

وَمَعَ ذَلِكَ ،  
فَهُوَ بِحَيَا قَضِيَّةٍ خَاسِرَةٍ .  
حَالَتُهُ ، مَيُّووسٌ مِنْهَا ،  
وَحَقُّهُ دَرَّةٌ مِلْحٌ ،  
سَقَطَتْ فِي الْحَيْطِ .

أَيُّهَا السَّادَةُ !  
إِنَّ مُوَكَّلِي ، لَا يَعْرِفُ شَيْئًا عَنِ عَدُوِّهِ .

## Abd el-Hadi Fights a Superpower

In his life  
he neither wrote nor read.  
In his life he  
didn't cut down a single tree,  
didn't slit the throat  
of a single calf.  
In his life he did not speak  
of the *New York Times*  
behind its back,  
didn't raise  
his voice to a soul  
except in his saying:  
"Come in, please,  
by God, you can't refuse."

—

Nevertheless—  
his case is hopeless,  
his situation  
desperate.  
His God-given rights are a grain of salt  
tossed into the sea.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury:  
about his enemies  
my client knows not a thing.

وَأُوَكِّدُ لَكُمْ،  
أَنَّهُ لَوْ رَأَى بَحَارَةَ الْإِنْتِرَانِزِ  
لَقَدَّمَ لَهُمُ الْبَيْضَ الْمَقْلِيَّ،  
وَلَبَّنَ الْكَيْسِ!

تموز ١٩٧٣

And I can assure you,  
were he to encounter  
the entire crew  
of the aircraft carrier *Enterprise*,  
he'd serve them eggs  
sunny-side up,  
and labneh  
fresh from the bag.

VII.1973



## Notes

### A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION, PP. XXIII–XV

The poet Adonis has written about the etymology of the word *sha'ir* in *Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 57–58.

Shammas recently published a collection of Taha Muhammad Ali's work in Hebrew translation (Andalus, 2006).

The Tolstoy passage is from "What Is Art," trans. A. Maude, in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley (Penguin, 1978), p. 837.

### P. 5

labneh: A soft white cheese made from strained yoghurt.

### P. 77

*Sada'*: A legendary bird that rises from the skulls of the slain whose blood has not been avenged.

### P. 137

mihrab: The niche at the front of the mosque indicating the direction of Mecca, and thus the direction of prayer.

### P. 139

Badawy: A thirteenth-century Muslim saint, said to have performed miracles both while alive and from his Egyptian tomb.

### P. 143

fellah: Arabic for "peasant," which indicates an ethos.

P. 161

*kullahj*: A phyllo pastry filled with farmer cheese and doused with syrup.

P. 177

Shihab a-Din: Saladin's nephew, whom legend holds to be the liberator of Nazareth from the Crusaders.

P. 182

mukhtar: Official head of the village.

## About the Author and Translators

TAHA MUHAMMAD ALI is the author of four volumes of poetry in Arabic and a collection of short stories. He operates a souvenir shop in Nazareth.

PETER COLE'S most recent collection of poems is *What Is Doubled: Poems 1981–1998*. He has published many volumes of translations from medieval and contemporary Hebrew, and has received numerous awards for his work, including the PEN Translation Prize, a TLS Translation Prize, and fellowships from the NEA, the NEH, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

YAHYA HIJAZI was raised in Jerusalem's Old City. A project consultant at the Palestinian Counseling Center and lecturer in the Department of Education at the David Yellin College, he has also worked as a teacher of Arabic and as a facilitator on projects bringing together Arab and Jewish communities in Israel and Palestine.

GABRIEL LEVIN'S books include two collections of poems, *Sleepers of Beulah* and *Ostraca*, a prose work, *Hezekiah's Tunnel*, and translations from the Hebrew of Yehuda Halevi and S.Y. Agnon, and from the French of Ahmed Rassim. His work has appeared in the *TLS*, *PN Review*, *Agenda*, *Parnassus*, and many other journals.

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