Two poems by Mohamed Metwalli

Translated from Arabic by Gretchen McCullough and the author

The Old Coast Guard

Take me to the river
I want to sit by the bank
And sing

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We came from the river to the sea
Neither dressed as invaders nor tourists
We did not ponder the story of water
Nor the taste of its fish when turbid
Since we were roaming fishermen
Obsessed with the current

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We, river men, suspect that the sea would swallow us
And that it is treacherous, despite its sweet blueness
Since they, once, stripped us of our fishermen's garb
They dressed us in suits and fed us an alien lingo
Lest we remain bound to our post on the rocky shore
We understood nothing
And their waters did not have a catch

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A clove-flavored kiss
Stayed forgotten in the corridor for a few decades
Warming up the path to the study for visitors
In Cavafy's house in Alexandria
When I sensed its vibrations
I asked my beloved
To take me back to the river
So I'd sit by the bank and sing

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A fishing basket with a hole in the bottom
Floated boastfully without shame

Resembling my life
I grabbed it, as one seizes a dead moment
Faced it with its nudity
Then tossed it back into the water
—Maybe for a new life—
Where I sat by the banks
And sang

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I have a tom cat, a fishing line, a basket without holes
—And a bottle—whenever anyone visits me at my hermitage
In which they will find liquor
I catch fish, then throw them back
When I do not like their smell
Because they, perhaps, had contaminated the water
But I shall never abandon my post here
Since it is my only resort
—I'll stay garrisoned here—despite the nearby construction work
I'll stay over here, staggering with my glass by the banks
And sing

After Five Hundred Years of Wandering

A turtle on her back
Awaiting death
Sees her shell being transformed into a bed for a lethargic god
whose coquettish secretary and the leaking light
Fail to awaken him at least an hour before work
Or perhaps—one—she might be discovered by some paleontologist
In the rubble of a city whose people had turned into statues
About to make their last move
She wishes now to see the man who kept visiting her
In the last pet shop where she used to dwell
(that one overlooking the sea)
How it warmed her heart
.His looks admiring her wisdom
Let time wait a little
Until she inscribes her memoirs
And replace her old lenses
She will write something

About the recurring sound of doors
,Slammed in her face
About herself when she withdraws into her shell and weeps
and her nakedness now when she appears to the turtle lover
—from his faraway window—
Like a small dot on the sand
Rolled over slowly
By the waves of the beach