

# Introduction

I am sitting in the corner of a classroom at Oxford Spires Academy. In front of me, kids are grouped around a table; at the head of it stands the distinguished Iraqi poet Adnan al-Sayegh. He is speaking, with great dignity and emphasis, in a language, Arabic, which I do not understand. Later, I learn that he has been explaining how poetry can be about absolutely anything.

After a while he ceases, and a small commotion makes its way around the table. The children are reaching for pens and paper; there are ripples of chat; they are writing. Later (again), I learn how moved many of them have been, first to hear Arabic spoken formally in a school environment, and then to be helped to use it, by itself or in combination with English or sometimes French, as a medium for writing poems. I also get to read the very striking poems they have produced, which now, along with others written in follow-up workshops, are gathered for you to read in this anthology.

This project is funded by a government body, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), as part of a big investment in the value of languages called the Open World Research Initiative. The branch of this that is based at Oxford University is called 'Creative Multilingualism', and the twig of that branch

which connects to Oxford Spires is called 'Prismatic Translation', and is hosted by St Anne's College. The key ideas are: that languages are important; that they are important because they are creative; and that translation is part of that creativity. Moving back and forth between one language and another (even one you do not know well, or are just starting to learn) can help you come up with new forms of expression, and new ideas.

Though I didn't understand exactly what was happening, this was what I saw around that table, as the young writers rummaged among languages in search of the right words, sometimes asking for a nudge from the Oxford students Rawan Yaghi and Samuel Moss who had come to help out, as well as from the research assistant on the project, Rachel Dryden, who has also helped in the production of this volume. It has kept on happening in other workshops at the Oxford Spires Poetry Hub, which Linda Woodley has carefully choreographed and Kate Clanchy, with help from Shukria Rezaei, has inspirationally led. Already this year there has been work in Polish too, which has created another booklet; other languages will follow in the coming years.

Yet this volume has an especially startling punch. Here are stark poems of war and suffering; wrenching poems of homesickness and loss;

beautiful poems about nature and everyday life; poems of protest, hope, and rage. Perhaps there is something therapeutic in the act of writing, for young people who have experienced so much violence and dislocation. But the poems also have value in themselves. They are small acts of creation to hold against a fracturing world. Read them.

Professor Matthew Reynolds

## To Make a Homeland

man 'allamani  
kayfa u'assisu watanan  
sayuthibuhu shukru l-qalbi  
wa shukru shshiryani ttaji  
shukru l-'asfuri ddari  
shukru ttufahi shshami  
kuntu lahu aydan 'abdan

Can anyone teach me  
how to make a homeland?  
Heartfelt thanks if you can,  
heartiest thanks,  
from the house-sparrows,  
the apple-trees of Syria,  
and yours very sincerely.

*Amineh Abou Kerech (13)*

## A Homeland

وطن

tanghamu] hama'imuha fawqa ra'si  
wa tabki ma'adhinuha fi 'uyuni  
uhawilu rasma biladin takunu sharikata shi'ri  
wa la tatadhakhkhalu bayni wa bayna  
zununi  
wa la yatajawwalu fiha l-'asakiru fawqa  
jabini  
uhawilu rasma biladin  
tukafi'uni in katabtu qasidata shi'rin  
wa tasfahu 'anni idha afada jufuni  
uhawilu rasma madinati l-hubbi ssalamat  
tta'awuni l-khayri  
takunu muharraratan min min jami'i l-'uqadi  
wa l-harbi wa l-damari wa l-mata'ibi

Syrian doves croon above my head  
their call cries in my eyes.  
I'm trying to design a country  
that will go with my poetry  
and not get in the way when I'm thinking,  
where soldiers don't walk over my face.  
I'm trying to design a country  
which will be worthy of me if I'm ever a poet  
and make allowances if I burst into tears.  
I'm trying to design a City of Love, Peace,  
Concord and Virtue,  
free of mess, war, wreckage and misery

*Amineh Abou Kerech (13)*

## شعر عن سوريا

يا سوريا يا عشيق... وصوت أنين، كم اشتقت إليك يا حبيبتي  
سمعته صوت صراخ... فماذا أفعل من أجلك؟  
جناحي مكسور كجناحك ولا أستطيع أن أفعل شيء ، لأنك  
أنت بيتي الأول و الأخير...  
لكن الله معك في كل شيء  
ولو غادرت أرض وترابك الحنون، ورائحتك الياسمين،  
سوف أرجع مهما كان السبب ومهما بقيت الحرب و الدمار  
سوف تكوني جميلة بعيون الجميع، وإذا لم تكوني يا حبيبتي  
فلن اكتب شعر لأجل.

## A Poem About Syria

Oh Syria, my love  
You are moaning  
How I miss you  
Oh my love  
I heard your screaming cry.  
What can I do for you?  
My wing is broken like your wing.  
I can't do anything  
Forgive me.  
But Allah is with you in everything,  
Even though I left your land and merciful soil  
And your fragrance of jasmine  
I will come back.  
Nothing will stop me  
Because you are my first and last home  
Even after what the war has done to you  
And with all the demolished buildings,  
You will still be beautiful in our eyes.  
If you are not here, I will not write poetry for  
Anyone else  
May Allah protect my home  
And my people  
Amen  
Oh Lord of all the Worlds.

*Amineh Abou Kerech (13)*

## أنا من الشام

أنا من الشام

من أرض يرفع فيها الناس قطعة الخبز من الأرض

مشان ما بتنداس ....

من أرض بتعلم الأم ابنها لا يدعس على نملة آخر النهار....

من أرض بيخفي فيها المراهق سيكارتة عن أخوه الكبير

احتراما ....

من أرض يسقي فيها العجائز الياسمينه كل فجر ..

من أرض قهوة جيران في الصباح..

من أرض تفضلي يا خالة وأمرك عمو والسهر والضحكات..

من أرض تحملت كثير وصبرت مثير وعم تستنى الفرج...

يا رب تحمي الشام يا الله .

## I am from Syria

From a land where people pick up a discarded piece of bread

So that it does not get trampled on

From a place where a mother teaches her son not to step on an ant at the end of the day.

From a place where a teenager hides his cigarette from his old brother out of respect.

From a place where old ladies would water jasmine trees at dawn.

From the neighbours' coffee in the morning

From: after you, aunt; as you wish, uncle; with pleasure, sister...

From the land of innocent natures, kind hearts, good company and laughter...

From a place which endured, which waited, which is still waiting for relief.

Dear God. Oh God, please protect Syria!

*Amineh Abou Kerech (13)*