



WALKING
THE
EARTH

Amina
Saïd

NOVA, ET INTEGRA VNI



SEPTÉ TRJO

HERMANNVS
ad Let
En tibi Candide
hactenus non usam,
Orontius Fines Del
offert, quæ quidem e
formamq; obtinet (&
atq; etiam Prouincia
mina, Montes hacten
lomeo, neq; Eudoxo
Macrobio cognita, i
hunc usq; diem iacu
ferat. Tu igitur hoc
ambabus uisus suscip
Anno

PARS BO REALIS



SYENRAED
 lozem.
 Lector Geographiam
 accuratèq; impressam
 phinates lepro uultu
 ordi humani faciem
 proinde tibi cordi fiti
 i, Insulas, Maria, Flu
 us non uisa, neq; Pro
 neq; Eratolenti, aut
 ed que in tenebris in
 erunt, tuo obtutu pi e
 munusculum: si sapias
 ito boniq; consulto.
 1631.

MERIDIES.

PARS AVSTRALIS

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EARTH

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Translated by Peter Thompson

Preface by Hédi Abdel Jaouad



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

Walking the Earth
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First Contra Mundum Press
edition 2024.

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Library of Congress
Cataloguing-in-Publication
Data

Saïd, Amina, 1953-
Walking the Earth /
Amina Saïd

—1st Contra Mundum Press
Edition

144 pp., 5×8 in.

ISBN 9781940625683

- I. Saïd, Amina.
- II. Title & Note
- III. Thompson, Peter.
- IV. Translator.
- V. Jaouad, Hédi Abdel.
- VI. Preface.

2024937639

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PREFACE

Errancy as Revolt & Freedom
On Amina Saïd's *Walking the Earth*

HÉDI ABDEL JAOUAD

Amina Saïd is the most potent — and prolific — poetic voice in Tunisia today, if not in the whole of Francophone Africa. She has so far authored some twenty collections of poetry. Her poems have been translated into several languages, and have received overwhelming positive critical attention. Yet, for some unfathomable reason no one has attempted to translate a complete volume of her poetry, and not for lack of choice or merit. Peter Thompson, a poet in his own right, and an indefatigable and talented translator of Francophone literature (especially Maghrebian) has with *Marcher sur la terre* (*Walking the Earth*), her seventh volume, finally remedied this jarring oversight.

Saïd's poetry is instantly recognizable: at once simple, crystalline, and opaque, the quintessence of the proverbial "complexity beneath a simple surface." Typically, her poems are fashioned from a few simple, everyday, elemental words and images, constituting her basic creative materials, her essential lexicon, and her singular poetic signature: sky, earth, sun, star, exile, light, darkness, night, day,

desert, stone, absence, shadow, silence, sea — and an occasional horizon that lingers “patient” for the unhurried traveler, for “stilled walkers / keeping to the beat of their excesses.” Such walkers are so rare that, oddly enough — in our modern world beset by frenetic speed & instant reactivity — they have become almost exotic.

With this elemental toolkit Saïd constructs a precise and concise language, distinctively visual and concrete, stripped of all rhetorical frills or ponderous thought, because the essential is in understatement, situated in the confines of silence.

From the unvarnished reality rises the poem: a poignant voice that often speaks aphoristically, resonant with strong yet subdued emotions, in a yin and yang dynamic movement of opposites and mutualization, which range from anguish and despair to ecstatic vision, suffusing the whole volume with a meditative, reflective halo, akin to the spirituality of mystical dervishes and Sufis, reminiscent of Rumi: “I am the place where I’ve fallen / I am the place I come from / and where I’m going.”

Paradoxically, rendering Saïd’s simple, everyday language in English is no easy task, beginning with the seemingly “pedestrian” title *Marcher sur la terre*, which literally means “Walking [on the surface of] the Earth.” The overall meaning of the collection seems to hinge on these two words: “Marcher” and

“terre,” so pregnant with meaning and symbolism, requiring thus careful and vigilant contextual nuancing and difficult editorial choices, not to mention the deployment of the rich English lexicon of movement and mobility. “Marcher” and “terre” are thus consubstantial with each other, coextensive. Within the seemingly firm and stable sound of “terre” (earth/land/landscape/territory/turf/country, etc.), lurks, to the native ear, the resounding command “*erre!*,” that primordial call for wandering and “errancy,” which has been the human lot/condition since the beginning of times, and is a recurring leitmotiv in Saïd’s writings.

The idiomatic expression *Walking the Earth* captures precisely and felicitously (more than the original title) the essence of this collection: Saïd’s unwavering celebration of errancy as the highest expression of revolt and freedom. “Walking the Earth” is a journey, a way of life unburdened by material attachments, tantamount to a spiritual quest, often fraught with risk, hardship, and even terrible “ancient terrors [that] whistle through us.”

The title invites us to reflect on the relation between walking the earth and the creative act. Inevitably, the act of walking leads us to the archetypal figure of *peripatētikós*, “he/she who likes to walk,” and to think—to ancient philosophy and beyond—all the way back to the earliest records of thought.

More than any other of Saïd's collections of poems, *Walking the Earth* is steeped in archetypal, ancient images & founding myths. We embark on "a nomad night," on a journey that walks us back to the beginning, to the infancy of the earth, of the world, precisely at that liminal moment, between darkness and light, rupture and birth, to the moment that sets forth the creation of the sky & later the earth, & all life thereon: "all around / night and dream reigned / in primal form / from an up-rooted sky / sun and moon were born / shadow light / and sap..."

It is quite revealing that in the beginning, there is no mention of earth, only of its mirror, an "up-rooted sky." The first *earthling* to walk the earth, Adam, whose name means "son of the *red Earth*," appears belatedly in the poem, in the wake of the Flood; he appears under the guise of his most famous descendant, Noah, sometimes called the New Adam, the one chosen to perpetuate the human race after his contemporaries had perished in the Flood. In Saïd's version, Noah's story is intertextually conflated with the story of Jonah and the Whale, and that of the Arabian Sinbad the Sailor, "helplessly swallowed / by an enormous whale" and "in the doubtful cavern of its body / he found his sons their wives / and Sinbad the Sailor / hand

WALKING THE EARTH

To G.

*all around
night and dream reigned
in primal form*

*from an uprooted sky
sun and moon were born
shadow light
and sap*

*and this desire to create
amid fire and tears*

*the uprooted sky
we were able you and I
to walk the earth*

the mot juste
strikes in the heart of hearts

the horizon is patient
for stilled walkers
keeping to the beat of their excesses

we abandoned villages
to settle in the space
of a lone cry

a circle of bare stones
someone recites
our sad fables

we rekindle our embers
in black water
brandish our severed hands
at the sky

what country are you from
someone asks
and where will your children be born

where will you be
when under the clouds'
bloody smile
they fumble for a fleshy breast

all paths
lead to the same place
journey is illusion's horseback

the world's embers
blacken its wanton footstep

they burn
our anxious tongues

within its form
the poem seeks itself

it's this black water
that dazzles us

when we give it back
the far glimmer of a star

night settles over the day
we gaze full-eyed
upon life

love invents us
and speaks the senses' language

aureole of silence
before our lips

bringing us the echo
of a childhood land

the memory ceremony

we regain the shore
of an unknown sea

waves in succession
dissemble the heaving

and we will gather always
the night falling within us
like a black nail
into flesh's very flesh

ringed on every side
the day wears down unknown to us

it sculpts on our secret face
a singular mask

my shadow recognizes yours
your shadow recognizes mine

their rebel fingers
rifle the dark

looks exchanged
can only belong to night

guardian shadows
lying in wait for mirrors

like scolding birds
they unfurl rumpled wings

their formal shares barely touch
on their doubled nature

the precursor bird
symbol of what is to be
brings together water earth
and fire

an angel in the garden

my father says
I'm in the suburbs of death
and the silence that follows
cannot still time

in his image-language
the angel knows different

from the heart of the obscure
he follows the metamorphoses
of light

and his visible form
continues to express
the clouds

whoever has kept the night in suspense
for light or for a star

while we were stealing words
from joy and its opposite

in this way day is torn from night
and shadow from our eyes

they open yet again
renewing the pillaged
miracle

thursday or wednesday
at the twilight hour
a stranger
message in hand
will knock at the door

he will dally a moment
splattering ink
on the blotter's rose

the stains will form other stains
(cultivating a circle)
a face under the lamp
will rapidly blink

a woman's body will emerge
the one you love
always the same one always
different

there might be this body of light
for learning how to keep
death at a distance

out of the sun's path
and the untouchable fire
new signs would be born

a mirror remembering itself
would rediscover in me
what even I don't know

spread on the laughing rock
the days would blend together

and no face out there
for me to go seeking

once again
we're surrounded by fire

the uprooted star
turns its clairvoyant face to us

like a fire
nourished by another fire

this new moment
something pulses in us with life desire

something dies in us
and stretches in the depths of a tomb

this new moment the dawn
in all its truth
takes our breath away

the world around us
exhausts its definition

in the night the absent
and the separated join again
(so says the proverb
of free men)

they expect from the tree
chance survivor of the day
a measure of fruit
nourished by its light

they have the undamaged voice
and the incomplete face
of the living

out of one horizon another
absence of sky

disfigured circle
somber noon

a being
haunted by transparent birds

behind our dreams
our familiar shadows
(have they ever seen the day)

share of the invisible
is slice of moon

in the light stretched forth
the sun bears fruit in the glance

earth is this round dream

in its heart
stones fusing

their fire tongues
gouge the pathways of blood
where another fire burns

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The translator is endlessly grateful to Amina Saïd for kind permission and for much support along the road. Gratitude is owed, and heartfully given, to Contra Mundum Press for its impact and promethean daring. Thanks also to the editors of *The Nation* and *Metamorphoses* for printing some of these versions.

COLOPHON



WALKING THE EARTH
was handset in InDesign CC.

The text font is *BC Figural*.

The display font is *BC Figural*.

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover design: CMP

Image credit: Orontius Finæus, *Nova, et Integra
Universi Orbis Descriptio* (Paris, 1571). Woodcut,
290 × 420 mm.

Cover image credit: Abdellatif Laâbi,
Untitled (2023).

WALKING THE EARTH
is published by Contra Mundum Press.



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

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CONTRA MUNDUM PRESS

is published by Rainer J. Hanshe

Typography & Design: Alessandro Segalini

Publicity & Marketing: Alexandra Gold

Fundraising & Grant Writing: Madeline Hausmann

Ebook Design: Carlie R. Houser

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This is a book of poems that cycles & repeats, it is an enigmatic road. Footsteps, paths, a vacuous sky, an elusive destiny. It could be the anomie of modern life, or even a post-apocalypse. To live, to keep walking, is the quiet exhortation: “Here begins the very hesitation / that obliges them to live.”

“A body separated from its soul.” Blankly denotative images, especially this one, nonetheless elicit a sound, a type of call. They posit a space, an emptiness — and this void is analogous to the emptiness this poetry fills. That is, in the bleakness, the hollowness, something rings. *Walking the Earth* is the various resonances of that most distilled, human, & enduring sound.



Translated by Peter Thompson

 Contra Mundum Press
ISBN 978-1-940625-68-3
 9 781940 625683
CONTRAMUNDUMPRESS.COM