

A Measure of Splendor in Tripoli



Jean Rattle shares some verse with his Measure of Splendor colleagues.



Readers share words that touch on some of the issues that mean the most to them.

Five-year-old group share poetry, both their own work and poems that are not

By Brooke Anderson
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MINA, Lebanon: On the edge of Tripoli is a bar called Cava. The host passes around a beer mug stuffed with pieces of paper and people take turns drawing names to see who will next read a poem.

It's dark and crowded this evening, with a storm brewing outside. Later on, as the evening is winding down, regulars will apologize for the small turnout, explaining that when the weather is better there's barely even room to stand.

The reading group calls itself A Measure of Splendor, taken from the title of a poem by Palestinian writer Ali Taha Mohammad – a work about oppression, simple pleasures and life without art or poetry.

Five years ago, a group of Balamand University professors – a Scotsman, an Italian and a Lebanese – wanted to bring their own discussions of literature to the public sphere.

"We used to read books and discuss them," explains Samer Annous, the Lebanese co-founder of A Measure of Splendor. "We decided to go public, and we wanted an informal place," a friendly atmosphere where people could feel at home.

Since then, these gatherings, on the first Wednesday of every month, have attracted enthusiasts to evenings of no-holds-bared poetry. Participants share their own poems, or else read work from their favorite writers – in Arabic, Farsi, Russian, French, Italian, Chinese and English.

This night all the reading is done in Arabic, accompanied by wine, beer and warm snacks. Readers share words that touch on some of the issues that mean the most to them – such as the humanitarian crisis in Syria, sectarianism, civil marriage and age-old questions of love.

The name of Motia Hallak is drawn first. A local journalist and lifelong resident of Tripoli, whose family hails from Homs, Hallak starts by saying

she doesn't like talking about politics. To the accompaniment of a thunderstorm's pouring rain, using a flashlight to offset the frequent power cuts, she takes up a newspaper and proceeds to read "The Bullet that Glanced at the Bruise," a poem by Syrian author Imad Eddine Mousa.

The set of three poems discuss the despair in Syria. "He throws his dreams like paper boats into the water," a line from the second poem reads. "What does the bullet say to the child standing in the dignity of the cold?"

As she wends her way through the third poem, Hallak concludes, "And I am like a blind orchard, ignoring the field of my life, and I bind it with a kiss."

In a second round of readings, Hallak reads "The Darkness of Prison Prevails," written in Hama in 1922 by another Syrian poet, Najib Rayess.

An Iraqi poet reads a verse of his about how he believes the Iraqi writers' union is selling out. And the man sitting next to him reads verses by Egyptian poet Ahmad Chawki.

Tripolitan Gaby Sarour reads a set of amusingly cynical poems he's written about sectarianism and civil society. "You say you want civil marriage?" he reads in a witty play on the Arabic words, "I'm with military marriage."

Toufic Hasan, a regular participant from Tripoli, reads one of his love poems, a piece he says he started eight years ago and only finished days before the reading.

"I reveal my feelings to you, everything I have inside," he reads. "In your arms, at your door, anywhere, just hold me or drop me. Hold me hostage in your eyes. We're so much alike it scares me. We're so close you cannot see me."

Hasan confides during a break that he was inspired to finish his poem when he ran into a friend who told him about a problem she was having with her boyfriend. Originally written to express a man's feelings for a woman, after this encounter he completed the piece from the woman's perspective.

As the cycle of readings comes to an end, the close-knit group of around 25 poets and literature lovers burst into song – singing old Arabic folk songs acappella, clapping the beat and raising their glasses.

Anous glances over his shoulder at the lively group of devotees as their song winds down. "The key to our success," he says, is "we're spontaneous."

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