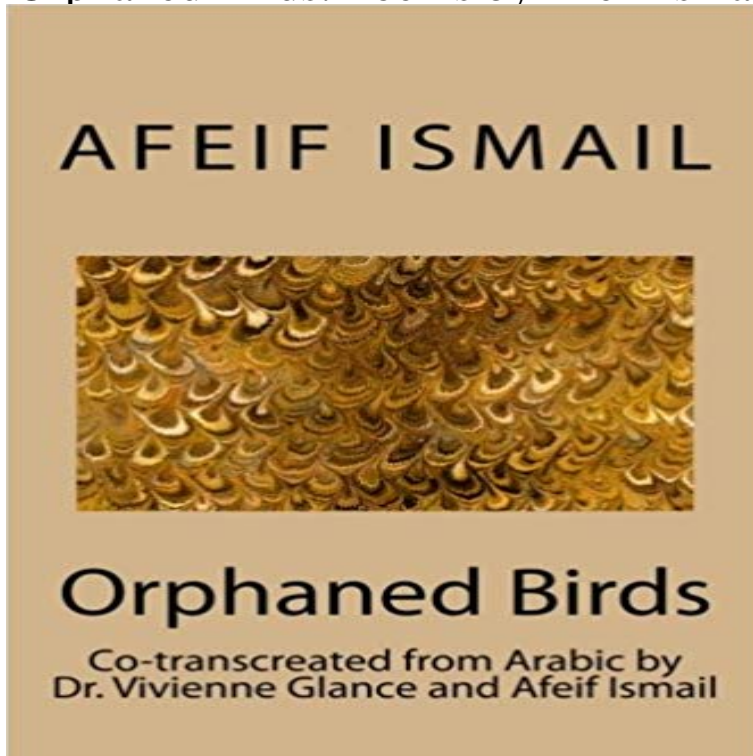


Orphaned Birds: Poems by Afeif Ismail



In this collection of poetry Afeif Ismail offers us a birds-eye view of the refugee experience, while helping us reflect upon how humanity could experience the world's-eye presence of birds. The metaphorical image of orphaned birds, learning to fly anew in unfamiliar territory, resonates throughout these poems in many ways. It is applied directly to the challenges faced by refugees in a new homeland, as well as more broadly to illuminate the challenges facing humanity in transcending militarism and the destruction of nature. It is the gift of birds to combine both a strong connection to place and a sense of direction reaching far away over the horizon of what can be seen. Such a dynamic combination of local connection and global direction is what humanity needs to realise its full potential as custodian of the biosphere, by developing what the Russian scientist, Vladimir Vernadsky, called a planetary perspective. This global perspective is strongly present in these poems. Even when the subject of a poem seems to be a specific image, such as a hunted bird in the poem *A Tooth for a Tooth*, there is always a broader perspective speaking the same lines. Afeif Ismail was forced to leave his homeland of Sudan as a political refugee who stood up for human rights and freedom. He endured torture at the hands of the military dictatorship because of his role as a photographer who documented human rights abuses, and as a poet. While imprisoned, his mind was bursting with poems, which he wrote secretly on scraps of soap paper. Eventually, after protests from human rights activists within Sudan and abroad, his close relatives were allowed to visit him. As his mother left the visit with the precious scraps, Afeif says he felt that now my poems were free like birds, prison had not been able to contain or isolate me. Many of those poems were published in his book *Bet of the Argil*. The

new poems in this collection were composed in Perth, where Afeif and his family have lived for seven years. The most recent poem, Wings, is typically multi-vocal, containing more than one image or voice. Its subject could be read variously as a caged bird, or as a political prisoner or detainee, or perhaps as humanity itself, trapped within its own cage. The moment of liberation is the same, when the subject flees the cage that separated it from other birds, other people, or nature. Liberation from a cage of isolation also features in a long, kaleidoscopic poem about a soulless meeting place in the centre of Perth, which is brought to life by a blind pianist who connects members of his audience with their souls. Connecting planetary perspectives across cultures and deepening our understanding of humanity's potential are central themes of Afeif Ismail's creative work. His poems challenge us to imagine and create a just and humane world, in which we can soar like birds far above the parochialism and prejudice towards others that still now remains prevalent. His voice speaks powerfully to us as a global citizen, exploring how we should feel as part of humanity and act as part of nature, while encouraging us to bridge cultural divides through mutual understanding, and helping us to expand our horizons through a journey of imagination. Dr. Roderic Pitty
The University of Western Australia

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