

Mountain's shape inspires Vt.-Iraq poetry alliance

By DAVE GRAM, Associated Press

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BROWNSVILLE, Vt. (AP) — Mount Ascutney is unusual among Vermont's oddly shaped hills for its symmetry. From Peter Money's window, it looks like a pyramid.

Money, a published poet and teacher, says that's enough to establish a connection between his rural home on a Vermont hillside and the Middle East. It's a connection that has borne fruit in the form of a new volume of poetry, translated from Arabic: "Nostalgia, My Enemy," by the prize-winning Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef, published by Greywolf Press.

Money's interest in Youssef's work was kindled in the months after Sept. 11 as the United States prepared for war with Iraq. He was aware that Youssef had translated Walt Whitman into Arabic and that a volume of Youssef's work had been translated into English in 2002.

Through a friend in England, Money was put in touch with Youssef, who fled his native country in 1979 after Saddam Hussein's rise to power and now lives near London. The two began corresponding. Money also met Sinan Antoon, another poet born in Iraq, who was then teaching at Dartmouth College and now is at New York University.

The first time the three men met in person was at the annual PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature in New York in 2006. "We became good friends at the PEN meeting," Money recalled.

Money said he speaks "about three words of Arabic," yet he is listed with Antoon as two translators on the cover of "Nostalgia, My Enemy." Poetry is about more than words; it is also about music and logic, Money said.

Whatever the blend of words and sensibility, the result is a collection of poems rendered into English with the stark beauty of a Vermont hillside in December.

Some of the poems are about Iraq; more are about the world. A homeless man feeds crumbs from a crust of bread to a squirrel in New York's Washington Square park. There's a paean to an Egyptian shoeshine boy. Then there's this blend of grief and hope, titled simply, "Conversation."

"As fall winds wailed

in the surrounding hills

he said:

are we, my friend, two rocks?

How often have the winds wailed?

How often have we been struck

by cold and harm?

How often have we lost our bets?

Yet we stand here.

...

"I said: don't grieve.

We are the eye of time."

The poetic collaboration would begin with Antoon translating Youssef's words from Arabic into English.

"Sinan would forward groups of poems to me by email; we worked over the phone, by Google docs, by email, and once briefly in New York; and then the contents of the book were arranged right here at my table overlooking Mount Ascutney," Money said.

Youssef said in an email that he was happy with the results.

"You know, Peter and Sinan are poets both, so they worked in a fine way on my poems," Youssef wrote. "It isn't easy to translate from Arabic into English. But they surmounted this difficulty with flying banners!"

Money, who studied with the famous Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg and teaches poetry at Lebanon College in nearby New Hampshire, said he tried to add his own understanding to the words translated and forwarded to him by Antoon. He explained it this way in an email:

"We look for connection, for affinity, identity in others — don't we? We must begin in a place of empathy, which emerges, I think, from the points of entry in a poem as well as from line to line ... and between the lines as well. The poem's handling encourages an empathetic response, once a translator — or reader — has been 'liberated' to the moment the poem brings."

He added in another message that he, Youssef and Antoon used "one another as sounding boards, a way to keep in-check and to be alert to what existing together at the same time, in different locales, means for our individual and collective experience. I think we are better contributors to poetry for having been collaborators over the last decade. Maybe we have become better citizens of the world as well?"

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