

Note: This is my attempt at to translate an open letter from Tunisian human rights activist and journalist extraordinaire, Taoufik Ben Brik To Fahem Boukadous, now languishing in a prison in Gafsa Tunisia where he is serving a four year sentence on a number of spurious charges emanating from his reporting on a six month social uprising in the Gafsa Mining District of Tunisia, centered around the mining town of Redeyef in 2008.

Concerning the translation.

I got most of it, although the last paragraph had me stumped. Still, the spirit of the letter comes through – that although he is in prison, suffering from acute asthma, that despite the Tunisian government's efforts to silence him, Boukadous has emerged – especially in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe as a kind of new human rights super star, so much so that even the U.S. State Dept, known mostly for its stogy statements on Tunisian human rights violations, has had to acknowledge Boukadous' unfair treatment and openly complain to the Tunisian government of Zine Ben Ali.

My goal was *not* a word-for-word translation, but to try to give the spirit of Ben Brik's words, which in the French, are poetic in nature. Ben Brik himself has just been released from prison for publishing an article critical of the 2009 elections in Tunisia which he describes as essentially a sham. No surprise here.

The translation follows below

Ben Brik's Letter To Boukadous

It's been a long month, *such a long month* for you away from home

Too long – a month in prison.

- 30 days without Afef, your little woman with such a big heart
- 30 days from those narrow and dusty streets of Redeyef with their dirty white phosphate particles everywhere, irritating your asthma. It's awful, truly awful
- 30 days in prison for a free spirit! How do you spend your time there? Do you count the days as we - 'the prisoners on the outside' do?

Does Afef prepare those fine little meals that you share with the other prisoners, so many of them dirt poor?

When can you shower? Wednesdays? Saturdays? Who cleans your linen? How long do visits last – those brief moments with Afef, so that for a precious few moments you can reassure her, let her know, that you are alright, so that she can persevere...

How are you faring in prison? You're one of those rare birds. I bet the authorities are paying a lot of attention to you and that after only a month they'll have produced a ton of reports on your condition – on your morale, how you carry yourself in prison. All that is normal. They think of you as some kind of

oddity, like the first birth of a gorilla in the zoo, a fish out of water, a bird that doesn't lay eggs, a white tiger

What is like to be under their control, supervision 24/7? But how can they control what goes on inside your head? Can they buy your thoughts with a coin at the grocery store? You're a miner's son and have your own hidden resources. Keep your inner thoughts, hidden, deep inside, Only give them the smallest morsel of your soul as in any case, they can't understand your thoughts, your language,,, the language of a 'E.T.' (I think that refers to Tunisian student – etudiant tunisien – but I'm not sure)

You don't have to tell me, I *know* that your brain is always filled with rainbows (positive thoughts?)

Keep the following in mind... that during this long month, far from us, but near to you, the entire world is talking about you – both the French and American authorities, RSF (Reporters Sans Frontiers), CPJ, AI (Amnesty International), HRW (Human Rights Watch), FIDH (Federations International de Ligues des Droits de l'Homme), CRDHLT, FPCR, LTDH, CNLT, IFEX, Pen Club, Al Jazeera, FR 24, TV5, The Economist, Nouvel Observateur, Le Monde, Liberation, JDD, El Watan, Tel Quel, Al Mawquif, Tunizine, Kalima, Takriz, Mouatinoun,...even Tunis 7. What more needs to be said? Good work, my friend!

More than anything else your tireless Afef who, single handedly, is stirring up the whole planet on your behalf. Special acknowledgement of Mohieddine Cherbib, Tunisnews, that have forwarded much news and information.

Your incarceration is a blessing. A just cause will win in the end. The ONG (don't know what that means) refers to you as a 'good client'. Who could have thought that you could win the attention of the media, especially now in these summer months. You have succeeded where so many organizations have failed: to provoke the United States to criticize Ben Ali. Your name has been 'googled' more than any other Tunisian. And now your stature as a local, even small time journalist has ended. You have become a symbol to the world of the Tunisian tragedy, in its entirety. You frighten them (the Tunisian government). As long as you were a minor figure, you were viewed simply as a handsome and gentle soul. But you've 'sprouted' into something much bigger, a giant tree of sorts, so much so that others covet your situation in a way. Now it is you that has to manage the petty jealousies that are rife in our movement. 'Why *him* and not me?' they ask. 'Afterall, what has *he done, that I haven't*. Jealousy and pettiness. You have to deal with all this now, a sign of your new stature.

Yes, it's (life) like that. It's not enough to slave away planting seeds. One has to know when and where to act, how to steal the limelight and to have luck on one's side. Lady luck has chosen you. Happy are those who are born under a lucky star. Those that luck has overlooked remain forever in the shadows. The tragedy of the world's Salieri's (Salieri who lived in Mozart's shadow). There is only room for *one Mozart* in heaven. Resistance historians speak of a 'time before' and 'a time after'.

We are no longer powerless, paralyzed before Ben Ali. What is left to us to do about Ben Ali? Do a belly dance? For you all the world is dancing...many dances.

