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To Roam a Borderless World
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by Rawi Hage

I am a fortunate man to join a great list of men and women of literature and be named the 2008 recipient of the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. After a long journey of war, displacement and separation, I certainly feel that I am one of the few wanderers privileged enough to have been rewarded, and for that I am very grateful.

Here I am reminded of the Cuban painter Marcelo Pogolotti, who said, "In an era as turbulent and painful as the one we are living through, art is bound to show its rough, bitter and violent side." And I would add, its inherently beautiful and humane side, as well.

To all those women and men of letters, and all artists who have gone beyond the aesthetics of the singular to represent the multiple and diverse, to all those men and women who have chosen the painful and costly portrayal of truth over tribal self-righteousness, I am grateful. We should all be grateful. To all those librarians who currently and historically have gathered and diffused knowledge, beauty and resistance, even as the waves of hatred and ignorance periodically cover words, burn books, and stifle thought, I say: I am an admirer and an ally.

My gratitude also extends to my father, who always surrounded me and my brothers with books and stories of travels and wonder, and to my mother, who hid me under the dining room table away from the falling bombs, and whose farewell tears on the day of my leaving my native Lebanon are printed in my memory.

Little did I know then that my departure would transform me into a creature who loathed borders and their violent winds that give importance to the flags of warriors marching to the battlefield; little did I know then that my journey would open and close doors until all doors and locks lost their meaning and made me seek the open squares instead. Consider these words from a poem by my friend and colleague, exiled Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef:

I left my keys in the sea.

I gave them to the night

and wind.

And when doors closed behind

me, I came to the square.

I am myself the product of divisions and mergers - my childhood was marked by the geographical and sectarian divide of a nation in war. It is ironic, familiar, and also reassuring that I am in Ireland for this award, a nation once war-driven, and now a peaceful and prosperous land; a nation with a history that parallels the history of my native Lebanon. I am also the product of many exposures to various civilizations, languages, and religious influences. Born as a Christian Arab, a group whose existence is an integral part of a great Arabic and Islamic civilization, I grew up learning two languages and different histories, and at 18 learned the English language and imbibed the canon of its great poets and writers. Later, as a traveler, a citizen, a worker, a reader and a writer, I was, fortunately, bound to become a global citizen.

The history of mankind is full of wars, divisions, the flow of blood, the flight of refugees and misery. I long for the day when an African child will be able to roam the world as if it is rightly his; I long for the day when Palestinian, Guatemalan, Iraqi and Afghan children will have homes to keep and build upon. I long for the day when we humans realize that we are all gatherers and wanderers, ever bound to cross each other's paths, and that these paths belong to us all.

Here is where Amin Maalouf's words in his novel *Leo Africanus* ring true:

"You will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin, and common Italian from my mouth because all languages and prayers belong to me. But I do not belong to any. I belong to God and to the earth, and one day, I will go back to them."

This was adapted from Rawi Hage's acceptance speech in Dublin last night.

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