



I have brought you a severed hand and Document

I have brought you a severed hand Ghayath Almadhoun. Translated by Catherine Cobham Divided Publishing, London 2025, pb, 144pp, £11.99 ISBN 9781739843120 | divided.online; Document Amelia Rosselli. Translated by Roberta Antognini and Deborah Woodard World Poetry Books, New York 2025, pb, 416pp, \$24.00 ISBN 9781954218291 | worldpoetrybooks.com

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by the riots. It shares a multivocality with the other two books. The subject matter in *The Lucky Ones* is often tragic to a nearly unfathomable degree, filled with stories of staggering hate. But there are also stories of unimpeachable love; its worldview is not cynical. Between tears, Chowdhary's book will open your eyes to the possibility of a truly pluralistic, interfaith society. Her descriptions of a multicultural 1990s India are just as moving as the scenes of the pogrom. Chowdhary shows us:

The India of Natasha and Nandini, of Snigdha and Rujuta, and a million Mansis and Priyankas, and Priyas, and Nehas, once even an Aplu ... This India of girls, with their neon-painted nails and bleached hair, who sat in groups based on the brand of car they carpooled to school in, taught us auto-rickshaw girls from the old city that there were ways we could also pass as something else in the world if we mimicked their plastic sheen. But most of us couldn't be bothered. We sat in our India, a huddle on the same shared, broken basketball court, the smells of our chicken samosas and mutton rolls drawing groans of disgust from the militantly vegetarian Jains and Gujaratis around. (184)

Chowdhary also tells the story of The Gulbarg Society, a group of interfaith Ahmedabadis who chose to keep living together in a utopian community as Gujarat swung towards segregation. After the 1969 Gujarat riots, Gulbarg was burnt down, but Ahsan Jafri, the founder of Gulbarg and a former member of parliament, told his family, 'Don't point at the shadow of a fallen wall. Let's see you build one. Yet again' (35).

Part of the power inherent in *The Lucky Ones* lies in the story's narration directly from the perspective of the harmed and, being non-fiction, in unshrouded truth. Chowdhary uses the weight of truth skilfully and creatively to deliver something that stuns in its full reality. Her form is perfectly tuned to her genre, just as Rege and Johal accomplish what they set out to write in their distinct ways.

Chowdhary's piece is somewhat unique amongst Indian storytelling in its uncompromising centring of the Muslim experience, even while staying multivocal. Meanwhile, Rege's and Johal's books showcase a different approach to pluralism. As non-Muslim writers engaging critically with Hindutva and Islamophobia, they invite Hindus and those of other religions

into the project. If it is true that only the oppressed can fully understand oppression, whether caste-based or religion-based, it might also be true that oppressors have the easier path to ending oppression. Perhaps the writers chose their approaches because modern India, between its immense size and inexhaustible diversity, cannot be understood from only one point of view.

Unfortunately, in 2002, the structure that housed The Gulbarg Society burned again under Modi's watch — this time with many residents inside. Indian political tectonics have shifted away from peace. Fights over borders, land, stories, histories, rights, and archaeological layers have intensified and concretised. In the face of that, these three formidable works together pose the question: do we dare try to rebuild the walls of multiplicity once again?

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I have brought you a severed hand

Ghayath Almadhoun. Translated by Catherine Cobham

Divided Publishing, London

2025, pb, 144pp, £11.99

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Document

Amelia Rosselli. Translated by Roberta Antognini and Deborah Woodard

World Poetry Books, New York

2025, pb, 416pp, \$24.00

ISBN 9781954218291 | worldpoetrybooks.com

Edward Said describes exile as a 'sorrow of estrangement' in his essay 'Reflections on Exile', highlighting the ways in which literature of exile utilises its own unique methods in order to depict experiences of estrangement and interruption. Haunted by the consequences of nationalist violence, Ghayath Almadhoun's *I have brought you a severed hand* and Amelia Rosselli's *Document* make strange conventional uses of form, direct address, and imagery.

In sharp, straightforward language, Almadhoun's book addresses exile, love, and systemic violence's

profound consequences on both an individual and a culture's life. Almadhoun, a Syrian Palestinian poet, lives in exile between Stockholm and Berlin, and his latest collection speaks to refugees' experience of displacement as a result of both European imperialism and Zionist occupation in the Middle East.

Almadhoun often nimbly employs a clipped and disconnected logic to reflect violence's refusal to adhere to typical narrative progression: 'Come, I am breathing drowning, like somebody breathing air from a bottle, but I am green as love' (104). In many cases, different sections of longer poems are split over several pages, their content suspended, separated from their titles. Consequently, the collection contains frequent stretches of empty pages, alongside the recurrent use of footnotes, many of which are punctuated with 'CUT', as if the filming of a scene has been ended, or incisions have been made into a fabric.

In 'Évian' – alluding to the 1938 conference which acknowledged but failed to assist Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi Germany's persecution – Almadhoun writes:

Last year, to mention just one example, a boat carrying refugees died of a heart attack. When the first rescue ship arrived, the Mediterranean Sea had completely sunk. They found the water choked, the waves soaked through and the European Union trying to hang on to a piece of wreckage from the boat in order to survive. (31)



Almadhoun employs metaphor's ability to displace and estrange reality: the refugees' deaths are decentralised, mimicking how language – particularly journalistic – can be used to obfuscate fact. He parallels the treatment of Jewish refugees in pre-Holocaust Germany with Syrian refugees in the 2010s, and how media rhetoric perpetuates their alienation and dehumanisation. For Almadhoun, similes are a way to represent violence's irreversible impact on individual subjectivity, highlighting what is not equal: his 'heart' shatters 'like a car bomb exploding/near a popular cafe in Karrada in Baghdad' (65).

Significant portions of the collection are written in direct address, often to a lover. Even when sensual, Almadhoun's love poems are filtered through the lens of extreme adversity as the imagery of warfare infiltrates the intimate. In 'The butterfly bit me', he writes: 'whenever I find a city that resembles you the general/bombs it' (66).

Almadhoun has previously written about the effects of exile on his practice – in his essay 'The Exiled Palestinian Poet Fighting Censorship in Democracies' – explaining its influence on his style; in his 'new home' there is 'no longer' the 'need' to 'hide behind symbols and metaphors to avoid censorship and punishment'. Marked by a biting irony, the collection represents the effects of displacement, as he writes in the poem, 'How hope became green': 'I think there's some hope for some hope for some hope' (7).

While writing in a different political context – nationalist fascism as opposed to Almadhoun's experience of occupation – Amelia Rosselli, one of the preeminent Italian postmodernist poets, produced similarly uncompromising and variable work. Rosselli was raised in exile as the daughter of the Italian antifascist Carlo Rosselli and the British political activist Marion Cave. Violence shaped Rosselli's life from a young age: when she was seven, her father was assassinated by a fascist militant group. *Document*, written between 1966 and 1973, is influenced by Petrarch's *Canzoniere* – a collection of 366 poems, mostly sonnets addressed to a lover – and consequent discourses with the conventions of the Petriarchan sonnet, showing how conventional forms and reasoning are unable to contain the violence of fascist Italy and the world formed by the Second World War.



Much like Almadhoun's, many poems in *Document* are untitled — a reflection of exile. Thus, each poem must be met without an introductory toolkit for interpretation, liberating readers — since the language represents only itself — while also equally disorientating them. A rare few poems are titled, and clear in their addressing — 'to Renato' and 'for Gianfranco'. *Document* also regularly addresses a 'you', an unreachable other. However, unlike Almadhoun, there is a distinct ambiguity as to the nature of this addressee, who moves between a lover, a parent, and herself.

Rosselli's work is cognisant of violence's repercussions. Imagery of warfare, disorder, and public upheaval is sustained throughout: 'Corruption in yesterday's paper/one hundred twenty thousand snipers' (389). This disorder warps typical syntax, forcing readers to more actively parse and decode its unexpected sequencing:

A lump of dough to an unmuzzled dog
it's better than this writing in blank
verse of teargas jets, to herds
of people all without importance or muzzles

who write by winning and losing every
cause: while outside time enjoys
and explodes. (81)

The engines of images give Rosselli's poems a whiplash-like rapidity: the progression — 'dough', 'dog', 'teargas' — gives little respite to the reader. Vaulting between ideas

with an unrelenting thrust, Rosselli's abstraction is all-encompassing, operating in a world made strange by the unpredictability of political violence.

Recurrent use of tight repetition conjoins language with itself within the spheres of the poems — 'A color perhaps cold and tired together/together we are small and giant together' (49) — as individual words are forced to carry a heavier load, borne by the imagination of the reader.

Unfamiliar and dynamic, Rosselli's work unmakes standard poetics, the poems in *Document* like 'store-rooms' (49), requiring deliberate unloading to be best interpreted. Almadhoun's work favours direct address and imagery which expose the limitations of language to depict violence. Rosselli's project is similar, abstracting conventional uses of language and syntax in order to reach beyond typical forms of meaning-making. The alienation of exile — Almadhoun's from Palestine and Syria, Rosselli's from Italy — manifests in the singular styles of both collections as each poet represents related, but distinct, experiences of estrangement from a homeland.

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Dust Settles North

Deena ElGenaidi

Boundless Press, UK

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ISBN 9781964721163 | boundless.binderybooks.com

The Dissenters

Youssef Rakha

Graywolf Press, Minneapolis

2025, pb, 296pp, \$17

ISBN 9781644453193 | www.graywolfpress.org

There are many ways in which Deena ElGenaidi's *Dust Settles North* and Youssef Rakha's *The Dissenters* might be seen to cover cognate thematic ground. Both novels interlace personal stories with public stories or histories to do with the politics and mores of modern Egypt. ElGenaidi's tale is set predominantly from 2001 to 2013, while Rakha's covers Egypt from the incumbency of Nasser in