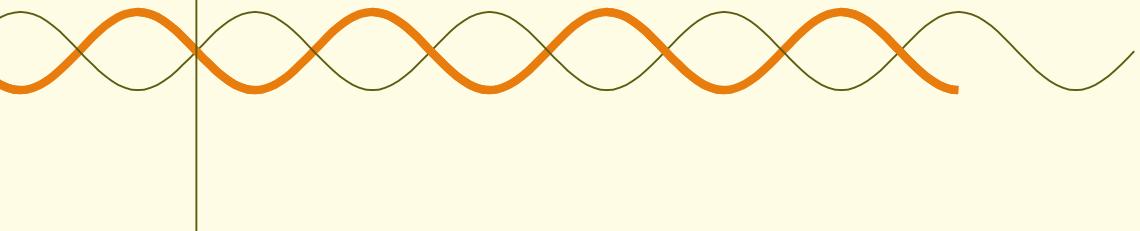


International Journal *of* Euro-Mediterranean Studies

VOLUME 4 | 2011 | SPECIAL ISSUE

*Challenging the Odds: 27 Women Authors
from the Mediterranean Arab World*

- Latifa Baqa · Najwa Binshatwan
- Wafa al-Bueissa · Rachida el-Charni
- Alexandra Chreiteh · Mansoura Ez-Eldin
- Joumana Haddad · Nathalie Handal
- Huzamah Habayeb · Inaya Jaber
- Rachida Lamrabet · Wafa Malih
- Maram al-Massri · Iman Mersal
- Nacera Mohammedi · Amel Moussa
- Rasha Omran · Rabia Raihane
- Azza Rashad · Amina Saïd
- Adania Shibli · Alawiya Sobh
- Miral al-Tahawy · Rana al-Tonsi
- Dima Wannous · Samar Yazbek
- Fawzia Zouari · *Selected and Introduced by
Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon*



International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies

ISSN 1855-3362

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Financial support for the publication of this Special Issue
was provided by the EMUNI Foundation



IJEMS

Challenging the Odds

27 Women Authors from the Mediterranean Arab World

Selected and Introduced by

Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon

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Challenging the Odds is a selection of works by 27 women authors from issues of *Banipal* magazine. The women – 17 fiction writers and 10 poets – come from the eight Arab countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. *Banipal* is a pan-Arab magazine and looks at literature not from national points of view but across the Arab world as a whole; producing this feature has revealed certain gaps in our presentation of fiction and poetry by women authors from these Mediterranean countries, which we will seek to remedy in future. All 27 authors are daring, original, imaginative, taboo-breaking and forthright, making significant contributions to opening up the literary scene in the globalised 21st century, and adopting topics and styles that challenge, are thought-provoking and take as a first premiss the author's right to freedom of expression; and six of them have already been selected as among the best 39 young Arab authors under the age of 40 (for the Beirut39 project). All these authors write freely, going where their subjects take them, and thereby contributing greatly to the questioning of backward attitudes, of repressive social norms and stereotypes, bringing a freshness, humour, honesty and openness to the ongoing discussion and dialogue about eternal human predicaments and individual freedoms.

INTRODUCTION

Banipal magazine presents authors from all Arab countries; it is pan-Arab and does not look at literature from any national point of view, but from the Arab world as a whole. For this special issue of the *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, we present a selection of works by authors from the countries of the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea that have been published in past issues of Banipal magazine. When we started looking at the authors in the issues of Banipal to date – 42 issues over 14 years – and discovered

[4] we had published over 200 authors from the eight countries of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, we realised that we had to have strict criteria. On what basis could we make the selection? Were they to be renowned authors? Should they be fiction writers or poets? Should they already have works fully translated and published in English, in French, in Italian, for instance? Should they be young, emerging authors? Should they be male or female?

In concentrating on the eight countries with shores on the Mediterranean Sea, we have discovered gaps in our previous presentations, both in genre and gender. For instance, there has been a severe lack of Algerian women authors in the issues, as well as a dearth of women fiction writers from Tunisia. In Lebanon, novels seem to have taken precedence over short stories and poetry with few young poets coming to prominence. In Morocco and Syria, women's fiction-writing is very strong, while in Egypt, it seems that writing poetry is more popular among young women authors (with the opposite being true for young male Egyptian authors). Concerning Palestine, however, many of the women authors grew up and live in the diaspora and write in English, such as Nathalie Handal (included in this selection), Naomi Shihab Nye, Suheir Hamad, Susan Abulhawa and Randa Jarrar, but we plan to remedy this situation in 2012 after a visit to Palestine this year when we met many new emerging authors.

The interest in translating contemporary Arab literature, and bringing it into the world literature fold, so to speak, has been transformed over the last fifteen years, both within the Arab world and on a wider scale. In 1998 the establishment of *Banipal* magazine as a window on that literary scene was unprecedented. Our direct contacts with Arab authors and knowledge of the scene made it 'the best current encyclopaedia of this literature,' according the Lebanese poet Abbas Beydoun. Then came 9/11, with the upsurge in western interest in Arabic literature bringing more interest in translation. Another important factor has been the establishment in 2007 of the annual International Prize for Arabic Fiction, known in the Arab world as the Arabic Booker. As the first-ever, independently judged Arabic literary prize, all works submitted by the publishers have a chance to be long-listed, short-listed or become the winner, since the judges as-



sess the individual novels, not the authors. The list of translated titles from these works grows ever year. Finally, we must include our guest editing of this special issue of the *Journal* as another important step in opening the window of the world ever wider onto the rich tapestry of contemporary Arab literature.

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After much discussion we decided to select women authors who have made, and are making, a significant contribution to opening up the literary scene for all authors, and are adopting subject matter and styles that are original and daring, that challenge taboos, that take as a first premiss the author's right to freedom of expression. These authors write freely and fearlessly, going where their subjects take them, and thereby contributing to the questioning of attitudes, social 'norms' and stereotypes, bringing a freshness, humour, honesty and openness to the ongoing discussion and dialogue of eternal human predicaments and opportunities. Until relatively recently, and even up to today, authors writing fiction – and particularly women authors and those who write in the first person, as many do – were accused of writing autobiographically, it was assumed that they must have lived what they were writing about. All these women authors have struggled against and ignored that prejudice, and stood firm, to be free to write what they want, whether or not there is any relation to their own lives. It is a sign of their influence that this prejudice is being consigned more and more to history.

Arranged alphabetically by family name, the 27 authors comprise ten poets and seventeen fiction writers, the fiction including both short stories and excerpts from novels. The poets comprise one Algerian and one Palestinian, two each Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian and Tunisian. And there are four fiction writers from Morocco, three from Egypt, two each from Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. The selection reflects the fact that over the last five to ten years fiction-writing has been gaining ground as a chosen genre of expression in many Arab countries. We hope to return to this subject at another time and place.

After selecting the authors from past issues of Banipal we realized that six had already been independently selected by a panel of judges to join the group of Beirut39 authors, that is, the 39 best young Arab authors under the age of 40. They comprise all the authors under 40

from our selection of 27 – Najwa Binshatwan, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Joumana Haddad, Adania Shibli, Dima Wannous, and Samar Yazbek.

Now we present the authors and their works: beginning with the poets, and going on to the fiction writers.

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THE POETS

Some of the poets below, though different and individual in their treatments, take up similar subject matters as well as personal, first-person voices: their main subject is the male counterpart, the lover, or ex-lover, his absence or his presence, woman's relation to man. For Joumana Haddad, Maram al-Massri and Inaya Jaber, the male counterpart is very present, with the roles of woman and man set out as per tradition, but usually inverted. Their works are timeless and universal. In Joumana's poem 'I don't Remember' the I-woman poet 'conquered a man like a storm,' 'I knew men's bodies as travel/ and my body as arrival and easy farewell.' In 'Then I Lost Him,' the I-poet 'drew him, carved him, made him in my imagination' – Eve becomes Adam. For Inaya Jaber the male counterpart in her love poem 'My Body Moves like the Sea' is present only as steps to follow from a distance – the man and woman have their 'respective solitudes,' and her main subject becomes the woman's body. In her other poems featured below the woman who is loved is strong, forthright, demanding and confident. Maram al-Massri brings a witty, comedic humour to the perennial battle of the sexes and the traditional position of woman as the weaker, fairer sex, in her short, direct poems that are often erotic in their simplicity even as the woman dreams ... of freedom.

On the other hand, Nacera Mohammedi, Rasha Omran, Amel Moussa and Rana al-Tonsi, while also concerned at times with the presence or absence of the male counterpart, write poems that reach into the imagination and across real life, questioning relentlessly and seeking to understand an individual's place on earth in relation to others, poems that make a proposition or a suggestion, and are more rooted in day to day life experiences.

Nacera Mohammedi's protagonist in 'Diving into a Woman's Sorrow' refuses to 'perish by drowning or force' though surrounded by images of the ocean and waves, the 'sands of exile,' 'love that straddles



death' and 'the wind's fury,' while the 'Desert Widow' sings a sad song 'exhaling into the flute of pain/her long sigh.' Amel Moussa's poems are stories of imagination fused with Tunisian reality, glimpses into another world we might call home.

Rasha Omran is a well-known Syrian poet, and her poems, 'the flood of my soul,' are powerful declarations of humanity and individual freedom, such as in the poem 'A Place for Me, Perhaps' – 'there is a place in the world for an eternal woman like me,' not to be questioned. She is a philosophical poet of quiet determination and writes almost prose poetry. Rana al-Tonsi is a young Egyptian poet, already with four collections. She writes in the first person, as many other poets do, but unlike others she writes about her life and power as an individual, not love poems. In a recent interview she spoke of the good fortune of being born into a family that gave her the gift of 'complete freedom to experience life and write as I see.'

Palestinian poet Nathalie Handal writes poems that speak of displacement, diaspora and exile but are physically rooted in the divided global world, often featuring words in different languages such as Arabic, English, Spanish and French. In the three poems below she travels from Washington D.C., to Palestine/Israel and to Tehran, each poem called into being by its own English, Arabic and Farsi song.

Iman Mersal, from Egypt, started writing poetry when still a high school student, publishing in local magazines. Later at University studying Arabic literature she was also co-editing an independent magazine *Bint al-Ard* (Daughter of the Earth) that published the works of young women authors. Since 1990 she has published four poetry collections, her second (1995) bringing her much critical acclaim and many reviews in the Arab press. In this collection she turned to prose poetry, and after polls conducted in Egyptian magazines such as the weekly *Akkbar al-Adab* the collection was voted 1995's Best Book of Poetry. Since then she has experimented with style and subject matter but always with the prose form. Below we reproduce four poems which show her variety of subject and style as well as her meticulous thought and detail.

Amina Saïd writes in French. Her poems reflect her Tunisian heritage, its different landscape and culture, the sea, the sun and the

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light. She transports the reader into a world far away from European metropolitan chaos, into a quiet calmness and ‘inconsequential weight of memory’ – even though her poem ‘The Mothers’ embraces death and solitude as ‘mothers wander/among the graves of the departed.’

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THE FICTION WRITERS

Latifa Baqa’s story ‘Bad Soup!’ attracts attention from the start with its unusual title. The protagonist’s day goes from bad to worse after her sister-in-law’s awful soup the previous evening. And in the end she does not tell her sister-in-law what the problem is! The rapid-fire descriptions and sudden changes of perspective give a vivid picture of a character twisting and turning, seething with inner dissatisfaction and frustration at her lot in life – with no happy ending in sight.

Najwa Binshatwan has published three collections of short stories and a novel since 2004. The story below, ‘His Excellency the Eminence of the Void,’ satirises the corruption within the regime as a retired officer gets his well-educated niece to write his complaint to the Supreme Leader so that he may be better rewarded for his past services. The niece’s visit to the family to celebrate Eid and to check on her aunt’s health is turned on its head in a manner quite out of her control.

Wafa al-Bueissa, also from Libya, was forced to leave her country in the face of mounting hate campaigns in mosques calling for her to be declared an apostate, following the publication of her first novel *Hunger has Other Faces*, excerpted below. In this chapter the main character is a well-brought up girl of 15, who is thoroughly bored staying at home in Alexandria, Egypt, watching television, so she goes for a walk by the sea. Al-Bueissa captures well the girl’s discontent and her readiness to try anything to relieve her emptiness. When a handsome young man, who turns out to be Turkish not Egyptian or Libyan, says ‘Good morning,’ the girl begins an adventure into another way of life....

Rachida el-Charni is from Tunisia. She is a serious and outspoken author, whose central characters are strong women – mothers, daughters and working women – who have no power in society, who are looked down on and who still find a way to struggle for justice and their rights. In the story below, ‘The Way to Poppy Street,’ a young woman is mugged in broad daylight, and according to the onlookers



who stand and watch, she should keep her place and be content with being a victim. Instead, the young woman runs after her assailant, but after seizing hold of him, she is punched to the ground and threatened with a knife. For Rachida, the crux of the story is not the mugging and the assault but the pitiful and cowardly reactions of the onlookers – it is a moving story of social mores and the struggle for dignity and respect. Her first novel (*Hymns for her Pain*), completed in 2007 but only published this year, 2011, after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, narrates the plight of the families of Tunisia's political prisoners, in particular the role of the mothers, through the tragic experiences of one family.

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Alexandra Chreiteh, born in Lebanon to a Russian mother and a Lebanese father, came to prominence in 2009 with her first novel *Always Coca Cola*. She started writing it while studying English literature and creative writing at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, and received encouragement from her tutor, the well-known Lebanese authof Rachid al-Daif. Excerpted below, the novel is about three young women, all from different backgrounds and cultures: Yana is Romanian, living and working in Lebanon, Abeer is from a traditional Lebanese family, and Yasmine is half German, half Lebanese. As the characters face difficult social dilemmas Alexandra mingles cultures, traditions and daily life with a feisty and often droll humour that is thoroughly modern and possibly shocking for her readers.

Mansoura Ez-Eldin is an award-winning author from the new generation of young Egyptian writers whose works over the last 10 years have signalled a major change in both Egyptian and wider Arab fiction-writing towards a focus on the individual in society. Her works include short stories and two novels. The two stories below are narrated by a daughter and son respectively, and in each there is a troubled relationship with the father. After the death of her father, the daughter in 'Conspiracy of Shadows' relives, everywhere she goes, a ghoulish scenario about her father that hovers between dream, nightmare and reality. In 'Headache' the narrator, who is the son, talks to himself, admonishes and argues with himself after waking up, sprawled on a wooden bench, with a gigantic hangover. He had not dared go home and face his father, but trying to find his way, he recalls other goings-on at home, and how a unmarried neighbour, Aunt Amal, had enticed

him into her bedroom. In each story Mansoura seeks to uncover the narrator's personal dilemmas and examine the relation of the individual to himself or herself.

Huzamah Habayeb is an award-winning Palestinian short story writer whose stories often begin with an apparently normal scenario, such as friends meeting at a local coffeehouse. In 'One Afternoon,' the story below, Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah is sitting on his sofa 'just like every afternoon.' A man of habit, married with three sons and a daughter, his thoughts wander to problems with his brother when his attention is distracted by the local crazy woman Zuhur wailing loudly. Has somebody died? What has happened... Huzamah leads the reader into a ghostly scene where the reader is not sure what is real and what is imagined.

An author who spans cultures is the award-winning Rachida Lamrabet. Although coming from Morocco, Rachida writes in Flemish, having moved to Belgium with her family when she was a child. Her first novel (*Womanland*), excerpted below, was received with great acclaim by Flemish and Dutch readers and critics. In a very modern style and language (including a smattering of Arabic and Tamazight words), it describes a woman's struggle to make peace with her multicultural character, that is, her western identity and her Moroccan origins. Rachida is a keen observer of small details and moves the story deftly forward with bursts of sharp humour and pithy comments by some of the many colourful characters.

Also from Morocco is Wafa Malih, five years younger than Rachida. Her short story is unusual in that its main character is a disabled girl whom the father treats in a traditionally dismissive way – all she is good for is to serve him. The girl, who is beautiful and has a mischievous sense of humour, refuses to give in to despair or be cowed and bullied, and persuades her mother to tell her what happened before her birth.

Rabia Raihane is a short story writer from Morocco. Her protagonists are generally daughters who come into conflict with social conventions through actions of the mother or older family members. The daughter characters want independence and freedom and are determined to change convention; they move the stories to their denouement.



ment through questioning and insistence on being right. In 'A Red Spot,' below, Rabia Raihane movingly describes the reaction of the 14-year-old daughter to learning that her beaming mother wants to 'marry her off as tradition demands.' The girl visualises in terrible detail what happened to the local policeman's daughter Mariam, who turned out not to be a virgin when she was married off. She is determined not to end up 'anybody's slave.'

Azza Rashad, from Egypt, encourages readers to reflect and ponder on the possibilities and certainties in life. Below are two stories from her first collection, which uncover the feelings and emotions within a family, the love and longing of a daughter for her father. In the first, the narrator daughter recounts how her beloved and hugely missed father seemed to be having an affair with a woman neighbour, and then abandoned her and her mother and grandmother. All the while the daughter addresses her father, blaming him and calling him to account. In the second, a daughter experiences awkward alternating feelings of love and hate after she marries as she revels in the smell of honeycomb, a smell that had forever filled her father's room in the family household. Azza's second collection, (*Half Light*) is a compelling mix of fantasy, myth and reality with elements of humour and tragedy about rural communities, the relation between man and woman, the status of women in society, and school girls with differing ambitions.

Adania Shibli is a Palestinian author with two award-winning novels. The excerpt below is from her second novel *We Are All Equally Far From Love* (due out in an English edition). A narrative meditation on the romantic expectations of falling in love and the emotional pain and sadness of falling out of love, the main character of this excerpt is a young woman who examines every tiny detail of what happens to her and the husband she once loved, and the friendly male doctor who treats her, unwittingly, for wounds left by her husband's beatings.

Alawiya Sobh is an original and inspiring novelist who, while not a feminist, explores and uncovers the major relationships in a woman's life. Her debut novel (*The Slumber of Days*), 1986, was acclaimed by critics for its innovative 'open text.' Her second novel (*Dunya*) was also a success, and in 2002 her novel (*Maryam of the Stories*), excerpted in *Banipal* 17, was hailed as an epic narrative that dealt with Lebanon's struggle

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during the 20th century with civil war, colonialism and its own patriarchal society. Narrated by three generations of women, weaving stories within stories in which the author herself was present, Sobh introduces a new way for an author to interact with characters, events and memories. Women's memory is central for Sobh and in a recent interview she explained how she tries in her work 'to uncover it and its hidden languages, without replicating literature's dominant patriarchal values Uncovering female memories is perhaps an interrogation of patriarchal memory, and an undermining of its discourse.'

(*It's Called Love*) is her fourth novel, highly acclaimed and reprinted a number of times. In her sensitive treatment of the intricate complexities of the 'triangle' of a married middle-aged woman with a lover, Sobh tackles the past, present and future lives of a mature Beirut woman, Nahla, who relishes life and freedom and who, in the excerpt below, meets up with her former non-Muslim lover. In the West this might not raise an eyebrow, nor probably in the more open Lebanon but in many Arab countries the non-Muslim lover would be a greater taboo than the triangle. Sobh continues to shatter taboos with intimate scenes of love and lovemaking, although taboo-breaking is not her goal, and she explains that what motivates her is 'the freedom and artistry of writing.' 'My technique of narrating a story makes me narrate an event candidly, without any censorship or reactionary force or claims of courage,' she wrote in an interview in *Banipal* 40.

Miral al-Tahawy's novels are filled with characters whose backgrounds are among the Bedouin tribes of Egypt from where she herself hails. *Gazelle Tracks* is her third novel, and in the excerpt below, the heroine Muhra uncovers the story of her family and her mother from an old family photograph. From the two-dimensional figures the reader is drawn swiftly into their lives – their habits, superstitions and anxieties of their hard, often unhappy, lives, and into atmospheric and gripping tales of affection, love and fear that combine dreams, myths and legends. This excerpt describes Inshirah, whose mother had been bought as a slave by Grandfather Munazi, and who stayed with the family all her life and became indispensable through taking responsibility for the disabled daughter, Hind. Miral al-Tahawy started writing while studying Arabic literature at Cairo University, her first short stories



being based on memories of her childhood in a traditional, conservative Bedouin family, and her grandmother's story-telling. In 2000 she became the first woman author to be awarded Egypt's National Award for Excellence in Literature for her second novel *Blue Aubergine*, which now has English, French, German, Spanish and Italian editions.

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Dima Wannous, from Syria, grew up in a literary household, her father being the late Saadallah Wannous, the pioneering playwright. Her story 'Sahar,' looks at how a woman can find her own space within the everyday details of home life that her senses uncover. It is a glimpse into a private world and private space, whose fulcrum is the conundrum that occurs every Thursday evening – Sahar dressing up and dancing in front of her husband – is this being a coquette for one's husband or a prostitute, she wonders. Other young fiction writers to come to the fore in Syria are Rosa Yassin Hassan (born in 1974) whose debut novel (*Ebony*), 2004, won the Hanna Mina Prize for the Novel; and Manhal Alsarraj, originally from Hama, Syria, and now living in Sweden, with three novels, the first of which (*As the River Must*) won a prize in Sharjah, UAE, but was banned in Syria because it refers to the Hama massacre of 1982.

Samar Yazbek is a daring and prolific young Syrian writer. Her works are notable for themes dealing with different aspects of repression within society – explicitly Syrian society. The background to her first novel (*Child of the Sky*), is how family and religion become repressive social institutions. Her second novel (*Clay*), excerpted below, concerns the wider relationship between citizens and the ever-powerful military. Her third centres on a lesbian love affair that is doomed on account of attitudes towards social rank and status. Also a cinema and television critic, her fourth novel (*In her Mirrors*), is a love story between a military officer close to the president and an actress. It has been described as 'a novel with a great linguistic wealth, a seductive plot and a humanistic vision.' Her latest work is (*The Mountain of Lilies*), 2008, in which a woman recounts 77 dreams in a way that allows the author to merge styles from different literary genres.

In 'Time's Running out for Scheherazade' Fawzia Zouari reflects on the inheritance passed down to Arab women by the legendary heroine Scheherazade and how it did not allow for relations between man

and woman to develop or the status of women in society to change. Scheherazade took on the position of spokesperson for all women, successfully outwitting the ploys of men with words, and committing the generations of women that came after her to silent submission and silence. Zouari asserts that for her ‘storytelling is no longer bound up with the extreme urgency of any one moment It has no longer to do with living at any cost, but with living fully.’ More a poetic reflection than an essay, Zouari’s first-person text follows the fault line of Scheherazade’s legacy to Arab women to show the deprivation, the emptiness and interminable silence behind locked doors that has lasted till present times.

Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon

Publisher, Editor, Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature

editor@banipal.co.uk

www.banipal.co.uk

London, November 2011

© this selection and introduction Banipal Publishing, 2011



Latifa Baqa

A Short Story

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Bad Soup!

Last night's soup was very bad. I thought of telling Fatima about it before leaving the house; she might make better soup next time around. I quickly put on my coat and burst through the door, almost treading on the child. I bang the door behind me; the child is crying. My eyes slam into the sun outside. At the bus-station, the sunrays are slowly petting the faces. The bus arrives at last, crawling under the weight of a people of a special ilk, all of whom agree that it is Monday – the beginning of a new week.

'Ouch!' I scream; someone has trampled on my foot. What a morning! I'll start with the lady who owns the electric appliances store. She's promised to look into the matter, and to receive me at 9.00 a.m.

I stand in front of the shop window to quickly tidy my dishevelled hair ruffled by the bus passengers. Everything is in good order!

'I have an appointment with the lady who owns this store. She said she'd receive me at 9 o'clock.' (I glance at my plastic watch; it is 9.00 a.m. sharp.)

The doorman is fat and unfriendly, 'The Madam is not here!' he says.

'But she's promised to help me, and she gave me an appointment at ...'

'Come back in an hour,' he says, cutting me short.

The thought of going for a walk around town to discover its morning crosses my mind. I burst out laughing – What morning and what evening! What a lousy day! I remember my cousin who is a 'zeffat' in Lille – France. 'Zeffat' means that he returns to Morocco in the summer, clad in an old suit, ironed immaculately to hide any traces of its former French owner, and that he brings cheap presents for all the members of the family. My cousin cannot stop talking about France, what a paradise it is, and how life there is a dream made real. 'There are plenty of jobs,' he would say. 'The salary you get is in proportion to

the work you do; work is available in abundance; you can work twenty hours a day if you so wish; you're paid full salary up to the last minute you have worked; just picture with me'

[16] But who is spoiling my stroll around the city? I glance at him; a silly smile animated his face. I stop and start walking the other way. He does not say anything. He looks like the boy who, along with the other boys, was involved in the 'rape' of Si al-Hadj's she-ass. Poor guy! His looks, which appeared so insolent just a moment ago, are now gradually fading away before the now derisive impression glistening in my eyes.

'Haven't you found any other she-ass to rape, except Si al-Hadj's?' I ask him, keeling over with laughter.

Si al-Hadj is the tribal leader; he owns a black she-ass with bright eyes. It was harvest season; when the men went out to the fields, the wretched youngsters had already decided on their programme for the evening.

In her eyewitness account of the she-ass scene, Aisha, the snub-nosed little girl, said that when the boys were penetrating the animal with their little things, the she-ass was grinning and its eyes were brighter than usual. Later on, Mmi Iada,¹ who enjoys these kinds of things, related that there was a very strange glow in the animal's eyes. Every time she walked past a group of men who included Si-al-Hadj among them, the owner of the she-ass, Mmi Iada, would say: 'Some problems are of my own making; others are caused for me by my she-ass.'

Enraged, Si al-Hadj would heap words of abuse on her: 'Away with you, ugly crone!'

Still strolling, I walk by a bookstore window where I see many books that I haven't read yet. I remember the hungry character in *Days of Lentils*. He would walk into a bookstore, purchase all the books he wanted and leave. Can I do the same? I go straight to the shelves on the right: history books, novels, science books, and books on religion. I turn to the opposite side: science books in all fields. I pick up a book by Barthes, a copy of which I had seen in the window of the bookstore. I read the back cover. My big handbag is open.

'I'll just let the book slide quietly into the handbag. I look at the



cashier. He's busy with one of the customers. No problem at all. This is great! Ah, the upper floor! Why is that guy looking at me? He's smiling too?

I pretend to be busy in the hope that he will get bored and look the other way. At that very moment, the bookstore assistant walks toward me and asks me if I am planning to purchase the book. I raise my head and level a glance at the man on the upper floor. I return the book to its place and storm out of the bookstore.

'Is the Madam back?'

The doorman flings me a scornful look as if he owns the place and says that she is not.

'Even though it's half past ten!' I remark.

'I said the Madam is not here yet; she may not come at all; besides, we have no vacancies. We have two cleaners who do the daily cleaning.'

Daily cleaning! What's there to explain to this Devil? Shall I tell him what the Madam told me? Shall I tell him that I'm fed up with the soup of my brother's wife and of the screams of the brood which my brother and she have begotten over a period of nine years at a rate of one child a year? Or shall I inform him that I didn't come here to be a cleaner, that I am clean, that the situation has become unbearable for me, and that I hold a BA in that real fable they call 'sociology'? The fat doorman is busy with some clients.

'Come back tomorrow!' he says.

'I certainly will! I'll ask my boss at the bakery for yet another morning off. And I might find the Madam in her office!'

At home, I forget to tell Fatima what I thought about the last night's soup – that was no different from all other the soups she has made. What is this idea of mine that she should improve her soups, which has been growing in my mind since I don't know when? My brother does not notice that the soup is bad; that the screams of his pack of children are getting worse; that the price of his cigarettes has increased threefold in two years; that he hasn't laughed in a long time. Fatima, who finds all this quite natural, never stops peeling carrots and turnips with to make soup every night. What about me, what is it exactly that I want to change? Is it the fact that I work at a modern bakery for a monthly salary of three hundred dirhams?² Ah, I remem-

ber! There is my cousin, the zeffat, who has spoken to Fatima about his wish to get hitched to me, in spite of what has been said about me and my being thirty-one years old, of what he has heard about my ‘masculinity’ and my immeasurable self-conceit. My cousin also says that he will return to the country once and for all for this very purpose, that he will rent a house for us, and that I won’t have to work.

‘This is the solution!’ he says. ‘You’ll be the lady of the house, just like all married women. You’ll sweep the floor, wash clothes, have children (the most important thing is to be able to procreate, so that he won’t reconsider the matter) and cook.’

Cook! Cook soup every day! The kind of soup that Fatima makes? ‘Fatima, your soup last night was horrible!’ I scream.

‘Really?’ she says, ‘So what! Your brother gulps down anything.’

My cousin must be ready to swallow anything, too: the soup, the increase of the prices of sugar, bread and cigarettes, and the never-ending screams of his kids.

‘To hell with you, bald Cousin!’ I shout.

My shout startles Fatima, who is sitting beside me changing her son’s clothes.

‘What! What! What did you say?’ she asks.

‘Nothing! Nothing at all.’

Translated by Ali Azeriah

NOTES

1 Mmi means ‘mother,’ like Umm.

2 Around \$30 or £18.



Najwa Binshatwan

A Short Story

[19]

His Excellency the Eminence of the Void

I visited my paternal aunt's house a little after noon to check on her health. I had brought a monitor with me to record her blood pressure, as I did on every visit I made to one of my blood relatives. My aunt had gone for an appointment outside the family, with another doctor, to whom she would go on complaining and moaning until he became almost one of the family, while she would still not be cured of that obscure ache that moved from place to place and appeared every time in a new guise.

I found her husband and children at home; the children were doing their homework while her husband, a retired colonel, was watching television (a new patriotic song by Nancy Ajram about scribbles and scrawls was playing). When I arrived, he turned it off and asked me to rewrite his letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Temporary Armed Forces, as if the song had provoked in him a patriotic fervour that had been on the verge of dying down.

He put his cards on the table, saying that I would be writing the most important letter of his life for him; that good handwriting made the truth clearer; and that my handwriting was good and my sentence constructions elegant and effective. It was as if he did not want to admit to the weakness in reading and writing that his sons suffered from, which was constantly reinforced by their results at school.

However, what the retired colonel said about my handwriting did justice to the ongoing perseverance that had allowed me to finish medical school; this fine handwriting that was said to make the truth clearer was nothing but the fruit of years of reading and writing during which I had used up thousands of pens and sheets of paper that my father would buy for my siblings and me. Even though our father was not well off or highly paid, he still made it possible for us to get an education by sitting on the pavements of the old city and displaying his wares to passers-by, wares that our chamber of commerce had recognised as being too simple to need a shop or store.

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I acceded to the request of my aunt's husband, and put my bag and blood pressure monitor aside to begin checking a previously written draft of the letter. The draft was poorly written; the tone was dominated by begging and beseeching. The import was that the retired colonel insisted that the state honour him and grant him a plot of land, a car and a farm in respect of services rendered to the army for 33 years, since the outbreak of the Glorious Revolution, as if he were a spy and not a soldier ranked as colonel.

I began writing, as he spoke haughtily of his accomplishments, while his eldest daughter served him a cup of cold water in between each surge of anger, advising him to avoid an attack of high blood pressure or diabetes, hereditary diseases in the family.

'This is a state only for despicable or wretched people. He who has no morals gets what he needs, and he who is a self-made, decent man like you dies in the shadows.'

The daughter's expressions soothed him, even if they contained something about his death; he tugged at his leg and tucked it under the other and it seemed as if he was affected by being a self-made man, so he eased up on his orders for me to write such and such hoped-for requests and desires, many of whose details were hilarious.

'Did you write "you did not give me anything after the war"?'

'I did.'

'Tell him: Your Excellency, Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, I have not received anything from Your Highness as my colleagues have done – the officers upon whom You have bestowed medals and grants, and given farms, cars, plots of land and free Hajj and Umra trips.'

'Just a moment, Haj, I wrote that already on page 5 when you told the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, about the lands that formerly belonged to the Armoured Encampment and later to the Missile Base.'

'Then write about the Fateh Barracks that the senior officers split between themselves and sold to a bunch of thieves in Customs. Tell him: "Look, you will not believe your eyes how it has been transformed into a neighbourhood that looks like America in the Middle East, even though its name is still Middle Eastern." Write in parentheses "The Thieves Quarter."



'Ha ha – I wrote that in block letters.'

He turned his head and his eyes scanned the paper in search of the thieves. When he happened upon them and their neighbourhood, he complimented me for the way in which I had documented them in his letter addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, and said to his wife and children:

[21]

'How funny for them – you have written about them in a way that really makes them appear as thieves. Subhanallah, my God, clear handwriting makes the truth clearer!'

My aunt intervened when she felt that her husband was drifting away from the essential point of the petition, while sifting through a bag of medicines that she had brought back from her doctor:

'Haj, what do these two things have to do with each other? Stick to talking about your needs, and that's it.'

'You think so, Hajja?'

He turned to me, running his fingers through his hair, and said: 'Do as your aunt says.'

The petition continued to be written the way my aunt wished for about an hour and a half, and consumed along the way a pile of white paper and two pens; the first was the pen of Salem, the sixth-grade pupil who reclaimed it at six o'clock and put it in his satchel before going to sleep, for fear that he would go to school without a pen. The second resembled the first but belonged to Najla, an eighth-grade pupil in her second year of preparatory school, who had stopped finishing her assignments because of lending her pen to her father – for the sake of the car, the farm and a plot of land strategically located with regard to the Fateh Barracks, where they would have a villa, and in the villa she would have her own room to protect her privacy later on.

On my way back home after the end of the Eid visit whose meaning had changed, I thought about the retired colonel's joy the moment he put his signature on the petition. He was confident of its acceptance and that God would influence the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, on his behalf and explain to him the love within his cherished petition; he would immediately sign his approval. The time between the writing of the petition and its approval would not be more

than dozens of years, especially after the mediation of the divine powers.

[22] The retired colonel's agitation had subsided and he calmed down after the petition had been written and signed. His daughter brought him a glass half-filled with water and a pill that he swallowed quietly, withdrawing to a far corner, away from the television that no longer broadcast anything but a torrent of speeches by people who intruded upon our lives every day. And the way in which he withdrew made it possible for one to find excuses for someone who had held a rank that bore down heavily upon his shoulders; when he was relieved of it, the weighty past compelled him to regard his ministry as if it were an agriculture or housing ministry and not a ministry of war.

In spite of the effort expended by my handwriting in increasing the clarity of the truth, my conviction was that the Commander-in-Chief, Supreme Leader, would not pay any attention to the overwhelming quantities of petitions presented to him from the officers of his retired army. If this was not the case, why did the Supreme Leader himself resort to buying land in various cities and turning it into shopping centres or commercial establishments if he, as the temporary Supreme Leader (in theory) truly intended to ensure the Armed People were armed?

While I was writing the petition, the Supreme Leader could have been sleeping in opulent comfort, or waiting for dates to ripen, or talking about his lookalike, the commander of the US forces in Iraq. It was the same joke that was told about him during the war with the Sahara separatists, whose nebulousness required all sorts of Russian armaments, including military submarines, which he insisted on buying in order to crush the Sahrawi army in its own backyard, even though the inhabitants of the cold lands pointed out that there was no use for these submarines in the desert, even if he had men who had been trained to embark upon the seas of peril and were not afraid of drowning.

He did indeed buy the submarines, despite his demographic cognizance of the territory, only for them to be eaten by the rust of the sea and for algae to develop on their backs, along with the elite ruling class's illusions, while men drowned without them in inch-deep sewage



water. It was as if he had bought them just to distinguish one kind of algae from another.

I looked at my hand, which had written the petition, resting on the steering wheel while I was held up at a traffic light. Someone buried deep down inside me – the one who protects and respects the laws of our country – wondered how many matters of true significance this hand had carried out that it truly believed in.

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But in any case, it was still a very small hand with very little might, even if matched with an eye with true insight that could see past the present hour.

I turned to look towards the corner of the pavement where my father had spent most of his life and it seemed to me that tearing up the sheets of the petition, that would be transformed without being destroyed, was not like disposing of sheets of toilet paper because they were still usable by a fellow citizen of lesser standing in the eyes of those he was writing to.

The traffic signal turned green. I murmured to God to have mercy on my father's soul and left my spectres on the pavement of an age-old street in a city whose roots dripped with the sweat of ages.

Translated by Suneela Mubayi

Wafa al-Bueissa

A Chapter from the Novel

[24]

Hunger Has Other Faces

Time passes slowly, heavily, heightening the sense of oppression, of torture, of isolation. I watch the clock with the constant feeling that the second hand is stinging me each time it moves with the unvarying monotony that is driving me out of my mind. Night draws me to day and day hands me to night, where I am tormented by sleep as lonely as a life that slips away from me, empty and pointless.

Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness, ennui, discontent. Every day like all the others. Today like yesterday, like the day before yesterday, like tomorrow, as I – asleep, awake, sitting in front of the television – squirm and fidget.

I wander the house. I explore the rooms. I peer out of the high windows at the people scurrying beneath me and am irritated. Sometimes I talk to myself or pull faces in the mirror; I scratch things onto paper – fantasy love letters, vile abuse directed at myself, at Najla, at Mother, at Father – and that's all I do until I can bear it no longer.

I leave the house with permission (or without) and keep walking, walking, walking. I go out and make for the opposite side of the street, where the sea seems to meet the dockside walkways and, for a while, look out at the scene. Other times I descend barefoot to the rocks that rim the tongue of the ocean, holding my course until I come to the place where fishermen and holidaymakers sit scattered here and there, and I hunt about for the rock closest to the sea. I dip my foot in the water, swirling it about as I scatter droplets with my hand.

There, on a rock that I used to visit and on which I had carved the first letter of my name, someone was observing me. From a distance he looked a slender young man with a handsome face. When he drew closer I immediately realized that he wasn't Egyptian. He had foreign features and he was tall, with thick hair and pale eyes, the muscles proud on his athletic frame. He came towards me and hailed me in a Western accent: 'Good morning.'



‘Morning,’ I answered him shyly.

‘The sea’s calm today.’

‘Yes.’

He was clearly making an effort to speak a bit of Arabic.

‘You don’t look like an Arab,’ I said. ‘Where are you from?’

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‘I’m Turkish.’

‘Really?’

‘Turkish-Cypriot.’

‘What are you doing here in Alexandria?’

‘Relaxing.’

‘Here? You’ve left Cyprus to come and relax here?’

‘Perhaps you’re not aware of the conflict in Cyprus between Turkey and Greece.’

I shook my head and he changed the subject: ‘You’re Egyptian?’

That was one of the questions that was bound to annoy me. I had never felt any sense of attachment to any geographical area. What did Libya mean to me? What did Egypt represent? Nothing, the pair of them: mere motherlands that had perfected the art of dishonesty and slow death. Rejected and out of place is how they made me feel, but I replied nonetheless: ‘Yes.’

‘You’ve been out here for some time. What are you doing?’

‘I just love the sea. I come for a walk here every morning.’

He was dangerously attractive and spoke English fluently.

‘My name’s Dogan. I’m a Muslim; Turkish-Cypriot. I’m staying in a little furnished flat in Sidi Gaber.’

Why did he say he was a Muslim, I asked myself? Was it because he had noticed the cross on my chest?

We were strolling along the shore towards the Zanqat al-Sittat market when he abruptly inquired: ‘How old are you?’

‘Nearly seventeen.’

I gave myself an extra year to appear more mature in his eyes.

‘Great. You’re a woman, then.’

A pause.

‘May I invite you to join me somewhere quiet where we can sit?’

I didn’t hesitate for a second.

Two days later I was with him at a nightclub. Just before sunset I got ready to go out. I was waiting for him where we'd met the first time, and from there we took a cab. I found myself outside a cheap joint in Sayala. Raucous with music and staggering patrons, the surfaces of its ancient tables etched with wrinkles, the establishment's dun palette lent it a faint gloom that made it seem even more cramped. In a distant corner, hard by one of the toilets, where there were long queues inside and out, I found myself by his side, clinging to him. He ordered beer and it came in tall glasses topped with foam, along with mezze.

The beer was sharp and extremely bitter and made my throat burn, but I soon grew used to the taste and slowly but surely relaxed in my chair until I found myself swaying to the music. He asked me to dance with him and hauled me roughly from my chair, shouting: 'Come on!'

On a small uneven wooden dance floor he spun me around and enveloped me in his powerful arms. He began carrying me around, caressing my body and running his hard fingers across my back. A faint dizziness passed over me and I started to stumble, panting and moaning from his rough touch and the hot breath that seared my neck and cheek. He was bold to the point of insolence, coarse and insensitive, groping me with unrelenting lechery.

After a while we returned to sit at our table. I was panting from exhaustion and exhilaration. I looked around me and noticed large groups of young men and women wearing the strangest outfits: some tatty, some hardly decent. I was the only well-dressed person in the place, but nobody paid any attention to me apart from my companion, whose fondling was growing ever bolder. He offered me a cigarette and I began to examine it, turning it between my fingers then raising it to my nose and sniffing.

'Do you smoke?' he asked delightedly.

'No. It's the first time that I've been to a place like this or tried any of this stuff.'

He was astonished: 'The way you held that cigarette made me think otherwise. Fine, so try it.'

He sparked a flame that danced before me. My uncertainty didn't last long. I had never felt courageous before now, though the reason



for this may have been the strong beer I had drunk, which had left me elated.

I placed the cigarette between my lips and took a powerful drag that quickly set me coughing.

He looked closely at me and said: 'Let me teach you how to smoke a cigarette and drink a beer. These things should be done with a sense of occasion. Watch.'

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He took the cigarette from me and dragged it slowly over his lips, then as though kissing it, clamped them together. He took a deep pull into his lungs, his head thrown back, trapped it briefly in his chest, then expelled the smoke. Next he raised the glass of beer, briefly inspected it, then sipped with relish, licking his lips in what seemed to me a strange manner, like someone wooing beer rather than drinking it.

'Now copy me,' he said.

I took the cigarette and did as he had done, but I coughed heavily. The cigarette was searing and inflamed my chest yet I savoured the sensation that followed a couple of drags. It felt as though I was on a swing, the world around me swaying as I alone stood still. Then he passed me the glass of beer.

'Sip it slowly. Enjoy yourself. Give it a chance express itself.'

I took a number of small sips from the glass then a huge gulp, thereafter alternating between drinking beer and smoking. I don't know what to say: I was drunk that day, but I was as conscious as can be. How? I don't know how. I don't know.

That evening with Dogan: Ah! In that atmosphere soiled with filth and every conceivable form of vile abuse, with the raucous beat, the music that bit into the mind, and cigarettes filled with who-knows-what, a feeling I didn't understand passed suddenly and powerfully through me. Something was sweeping me on, something that made me lose control and left me weeping quietly and continuously. Gently and with a strange passion, I wept. I began to sob, my tears falling onto my lap as I sat hunched over myself, clutching my glass and my smoke and refusing to part with them despite the tremor coursing through me.

I was fully conscious of my condition, aware of myself and the totality of what was happening to me. I wasn't crying from sadness, nor from pain, nor regret, nor revulsion: I wanted to cry and cry and

[28]

cry and cry. I just wanted to cry, more than anything else in the world.

He came closer and, clasping me roughly, began to kiss me. I pushed him away. Fire flared in my body. I rose to my feet, the glass of beer in one hand and the cigarette in the other. Suddenly I wanted to laugh. I began to laugh and laugh and laugh, cackling in a high-pitched voice that attracted attention. I laughed until my laughter became a screech. What had come over me? I felt aroused, as though fingers were stroking my hips. I sat down in Dogan's chair, rocking to prevent the hysteria that had possessed me from sending me to the floor.

I looked at the beer glass and cigarette I was holding.

Crazily, I thought: 'Will I laugh more if I mix the two? Will taking them both at once heighten the delicious sensation that's enveloped me but which I've no idea how to prolong?'

Without missing a beat I stubbed the cigarette out in the glass, licked the outside clean, then began gulping it down until it spilled onto my chest and clothes. Dogan cackled as he got up to take the empty glass away.

'You wild child! I can't believe you've never done that before.'

He was determined to cling on to me and I let him. As though he were mauling me or carrying me off in a raid, he tortured me, letting me go to inspect me, before returning to his ferocious kisses.

Exhaustion exercised its tyranny and I asked if we could go. After much insistence he relented and before we left I went to the toilets. I washed my face, straightened my hair, brushed down my clothes and walked out.

That day I returned home not nearly late enough. I felt that I could face whatever lay in store. The moment I got to my room I sprawled on the bed, fighting an acute headache and violent trembling. To my amazement I fell asleep instantly, fully dressed.

With Dogan by my side I entered a phase of enjoyable delinquency. The liquor I drank with him furnished me with a unique blend of new sensations. The rocking sensation I experienced entering a state of drunkenness delighted me. The delicious dizziness that enveloped my mind, leaving me lurching around, though motionless, never left my thoughts for an instant: like a swing that rocked me back and forth,



now shaking, now spinning me around. Then there was the sensation that crept like a column of ants into the base of my skull, ticklish and uplifting: a euphoria and a joy that afflicted me after no more than a couple of beers taken with hashish-filled cigarettes. I felt my senses come alive, my desires kindle. I was ecstatic with a heavenly delirium. I saw things around me bundled in wrapping paper and proffered to me as gifts. At times my surroundings would take on unusual colours, as if I were watching rainbows drift through the room. Once I stood on a table at that same bar and tried to grab one, at which Dogan, and some of his friends who were sitting with us, laughingly hauled me down. Then he poured iced water over my head and I screamed at him.

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How beautiful it was to fashion my own bliss for myself, there in my private world with wine and smokes stuffed with inferior hashish. I would escape to this world of mine, a world where I fantasized that I alone was queen, free to expel or welcome whomever I desired. It transformed me into a different person: more dazzling and courageous, and perhaps more insolent, too.

With time I taught myself how to drink. To avoid violent hangovers and vomiting at dawn I controlled the amount I drank. Naturally, expensive drinks like Martini, brandy, vodka and fine wine weren't for sale at our bar; it offered beer and whisky in addition to a vile local distillation that I would mix with water, juice or cola. It still managed to carry me off to the world I loved.

After Dogan's departure I felt an intense emptiness envelop me, and a loss that cast its shadow over my life. With him I had spent my time at play, capering about, escaping all I despised in my life. I was a frequent visitor to the bar. Many times I sat there alone, though to avoid the embarrassment of having to order things I was unable to pay for I fell in with the lowlives and loafers from the poor and marginalised neighbourhoods. But they weren't Turks. They were Arabs and gypsies of any number of nationalities.

The gypsies enjoy a poor reputation in Egypt. They specialize in gambling with cards, fortune-telling, black magic and female circumcision, and wear ridiculous costumes held together with large, crudely worked stitches. They always gave off an impression of profane vulgarity and how agreeable I found it! Their world was new to a girl like me,

raised amidst worldly comforts, wealth, affectation and social pretension, eternally surrounded by aspiring ambassadors and consuls, scions of a vacuous social elite with their hateful rituals for eating, drinking and making love.

[30] My companions belonged to a bohemian world. They hated everybody, proclaimed revolution against everything. They felt no shame in speaking freely, no matter how obscene or unfeeling their words, and thought nothing of their vulgar and immodest winks and gestures. Some of them lived in spontaneously formed groups that might specialize in theft or prostitution.

Some tried it on with me. One of them once pinched my breast; another scraped a calloused hand across my naked thigh. Others weren't attracted to me, or that is what they would claim. I was always the wealthiest and most cultured person at the table and I may have represented to these individuals the social classes that treated them so dismissively. Yet in the eyes of many I spied open desire.

I drank with them, I smoked hashish. Their world gave me pleasure, embodied all the desire and rebellion I lacked in my own, but in their company I encountered a problem of identity. I resembled them in my rootlessness and indifference, but my well turned-out appearance, my education and the mannered politesse I had absorbed from my own world set me apart.

Translated by Robin Moger



Rachida el-Charni

A Short Story

[31]

The Way to Poppy Street

She saw him coming towards her, whistling and humming. He stopped in front of her to ask politely if she knew the way to Poppy Street. Not for a moment did she imagine that he would use the second she took to think to snatch her gold necklace and take to his heels.

He had come down the same side of the street that she had been walking on, absorbed in her thoughts. Nothing in his appearance suggested any need for doubt or caution; rather, his elegance aroused respect, peace of mind and even suggested he was well-off. His hand struck her and she felt as if her breastbone had been shaken loose. For a moment she was paralysed but quickly recovered from the shock and turned to him, screaming furiously: 'Stop thief! My necklace, my necklace!'

Rage fuelled her anger. She started after him, all the while continuing her anguished cry. People came out from the shops, houses and workshops that lined both sides of the street. They stood there not moving, watching the scene in dismay.

She was quicker than he could have imagined and in just a few moments was able to catch up with him and hinder his way. Perhaps he had not calculated that a woman could chase a thief with such persistence. He began to zigzag. The sun came out and blazed down on people's heads. The light cascaded over his sweating face, making the necklace wrapped around his crooked fingers glitter. It had a dangling gold pendant, with the Tower of Babel on one side and the Dome of the Rock on the other. Throughout her life she had repeatedly mislaid her jewellery without being sad for long, or even concerned about the value of what she had lost. This time, however, she felt as if her soul had suddenly been wrenched from her body.

Teeth clenched, she caught up with the thief and stretched out her hand towards him, her fingers almost managing to grab him. He turned to her, his body spiralling but his right leg bent behind him, making

him lose his balance and enabling her to grab the hem of his shirt. She seized hold of him, thwarting his movements as the shirt rode up across his dark back. He tried to escape her powerful grasp but was unable to do so.

[32] People swarmed around them like bees, but no-one made a move to help her. They stood there dazed as if they had lost their minds. She broke into another wave of anguished cries, as if imploring help: ‘Thief! Let me have my necklace!’

Suddenly he drew a knife from a hidden pocket in his trousers and turned towards her, brandishing it in her face. She became aware of the scuffle of feet as the people backed away. Voices raised around her, warning her what to do:

‘Move back, he’s armed!’

‘Fool! He’ll slash your face!’

‘You’re weaker, how do you dare?’

‘Stubborn woman!’

Her face became more hard-set, as if some mighty devil dwelt in the depths of that young woman who always seemed so calm. She possessed great courage. Not for an instant did she experience real fear. Nor was she going to back down. A youth from one of the workshops moved to help her, but the men held him back, saying in a tone that revealed more violence than wisdom:

‘Do you want to die? Leave her to it, she and no-one else is responsible for her stubbornness.’

Their whining voices, full of fear, insinuated their way into her heart and wounded her. Again, she became aware of them hopping around her like little birds. ‘There’s no point in resisting, the man has a deadly weapon!’ said some, in their defeatism.

Their submissiveness only increased her stubbornness. A blind ferocity exploded inside her. She attempted to make her fingernails a force equal to the knife he was waving before her. She moved them deftly around, seeking an opening through which to get at his face, at the same time whispering determinedly under her breath: ‘Had he all the weapons of the world, I would not give up my necklace!’

In that instant he turned towards her, glaring, his lips drawn back with malice. She saw her tense face reflected in the pupils of his yellow eyes as he snarled through clenched white teeth:



‘You stubborn little savage!’

He took her by surprise with a number of brutal punches aimed at her temples and face. She lost her balance and her body slid under his. The punches continued, causing her grip on his shirt to slacken and finally he managed to free himself. The pig then kicked her in full view of all who stood there, terror gnawing at their faces, paralysed in their cowardice. He kicked her once more, violently, then ran off.

[33]

Immediately she gathered herself together and got up to continue the chase, her hair dishevelled, blood running from her nose and her clothes covered in dust.

With all her strength she ran screaming ‘My necklace!’ By then he had reached his companion who was waiting on a motorbike at the street corner. He sprang on behind his mate and the bike took off, cutting its way through the crowds. At that moment she realised that everything had been planned in advance.

She fell to her knees, her strength and resolve slipping away. She began crying hot stinging tears. A tremor of shame ran through her body, shame at being an inhabitant of that street: the submissiveness of her neighbours was a harder blow than the stranger’s aggression. As her sadness reached its height she remembered the girl who had been raped by a number of youths in a Cairo street with not a single passer-by moving to help her. Their hearts were closed and they were content to follow the scene as if watching some entertaining and exciting film.

Her imagination raced to times past, when an attack against a she-camel had caused two Arab tribes to fight a fierce war lasting forty years. She felt the people’s shame and heaved a heavy groan as something deep inside her became cold and hard. Just then, the call to noon prayer broke out in the air, the voice of the muezzin accompanying her inner grief and the purity of his voice pouring balm onto her soul.

The people crowded around her, comforting her yet avoiding her gaze.

‘We’re sorry for what happened.’

‘You shouldn’t have put yourself in danger.’

‘How could you seek your own destruction with such determination?’

‘You warded off the danger; now live and hope for better things.’

‘You should keep your possessions concealed, not put them on display.’

[34] With her wounded pride she gazed at the people’s faces and felt as if a wall stood silently between her and them. Then, as she raised herself up, still covered in the dust of battle, she heard a quiet, hateful voice say:

‘Shame on you! You’ve made yourself a laughing stock. Wretched!’

She swung round, looking for the owner of the voice. She stared fixedly at their faces then shouted: ‘Gutless, spineless cowards! Since when has standing up for yourself ever been something to laugh about?’

The words were spoken harshly and painfully. The violence emerging from her mouth held a ferocious sway over everyone present.

She continued alone towards her parents’ house at the end of the street, feeling as if her mind had been divested of weighty illusions. She tried to walk steadily under the sun which, having banished the veil of clouds, had begun to blaze down, breathing its blind malice upon her.

Translated by Piers Amodia



Alexandra Chreiteh

An Excerpt from the Novel

[35]

Always Coca-Cola

When my mother was pregnant with me, she had only one craving. That craving was for Coca-Cola. Her burning desire for Coca-Cola was all the more powerful because it was forbidden. In addition to the fact that my father prevented her from buying it – because in his opinion it was inseparable from American policies that he opposed – he also monitored my mother's food intake with the severity of a school headmaster. He wrote down the foods and drinks forbidden to her and Coca-Cola was at the top of the list. As her pregnancy progressed, the pressure he exerted on her about the particulars of her nutritional intake increased until it had transformed into something of an obsession – he especially used to scrutinize the specific type of water that she would drink; tap water was completely off limits because it was polluted. He was afraid that dirt in the tap water would travel to the foetus in her belly and leave behind a residue, and so he started buying her purified, bottled water from a man who passed through the neighbourhood once a week, even though it was really expensive because this was during the war. He wanted this baby to be born clean and pure – completely flawless – exactly like the water that he paid dearly for.

He had a subconscious philosophy about all of this: pure water guarantees that a baby will be naturally predisposed to cleanliness and this will remain part of the child's innate nature after birth. The mother's nourishment profoundly affects the foetus! The months spent in the womb are a decisive period in a human being's existence! Any error a mother commits during this time affects a child's psychological and physical constitution forever.

Therefore, my father wanted to ensure that I would have a natural, and permanent, predisposition for cleanliness.

One hot summer's day, around noon, the sun was beating down on the eastern side of our house and my mother was craving Coca-

Cola. There was an electricity cut and this meant that all of the air conditioners shut off; the intense heat turned my mother's face red and beads of sweat were forming on her upper lip. She was exhausted, nearly at the end of her pregnancy. The heat was unbearable and my mother felt the baby moving inside her with a force she wasn't used to, so she sat down on a low chair, leaning back to relieve the pressure from her belly that was swollen with me. Then she opened her legs, lifting up the hem of her dress to expose her scorching thighs, in an attempt to cool them off, saying to my father with a sigh: 'I want Coca-Cola. Bring me Coca-Cola.'

My father didn't answer because he too was feeling the stifling heat and when she insistently repeated her request, he shouted right in her face: 'Where can I get you a Coke now? Drink water!'

'I'm so thirsty ... Bring me a Coke!'

There's no doubt that the thirst that overtook my mother at that moment was seriously strong. No, there's no doubt that it shook her entire being beyond what she could endure, because this craving of hers left an indelible imprint on me: I was born with a small birthmark that looks like a little Coca-Cola bottle, on my upper back, right between my shoulder blades. My mother sees this birthmark whenever I get undressed in front of her; it is a reminder of her unquenched thirst.

I remembered this incident because I had been searching for a company to take me on as a trainee for a short period of time and my friend Yana volunteered to ask her boyfriend, the manager of the Coca-Cola factory, if he could help. It's really very difficult to get work at this company, but the manager can't refuse any request of hers.

Yana's plan of action was as follows: to visit her boyfriend at his office and then to come to my house and tell me the answer at exactly five in the evening; this was the best time for her to come since no one in my family would be home then, meaning that we could feel free to do as we please. I was really hoping my friend would have the influence to get this job for me because it's one of the prerequisites of my degree and I cannot graduate from university this year without it.

But Yana was very late for our appointment – it got to be five-thirty and she hadn't come yet, which was strange since she's not usually late for her appointments. I started worrying about her, especially after I



called her a bunch of times, first on her mobile phone and then on her landline, and she didn't answer. I wondered what could have made her so late and I started to get anxious.

I decided to occupy myself with something, so I took a cardboard box full of women's magazines out from under my bed, picked one out and started flipping through it. A short article about how important it is for women to use lip balm caught my attention. In it, the writer claimed that fashion models don't ever leave home without using a high-SPF lip balm to protect them from harmful outdoor elements like sun and dust. It's extremely important for models to protect their lips because lips are the most important symbol of a woman's femininity and attractiveness. Lip balm helps them protect their lips from dryness and chafing and thereby also protects their femininity. But reading the article didn't put a stop to my worrying. I had to find something else to do until Yana came, so I decided to pop out to the pharmacy near my house and buy lip balm.

[37]

I left my house, crossed Mar Elias Street and went into the pharmacy right next door to my father's flower shop. The pharmacist knows my father very well and knows that I'm his daughter, so he smiled at me when I entered and sold me the balm at a discount. I put some on my lips and as I left, wondering as I did so whether Yana uses the very same balm to protect her lips.

Outside, a sandstorm had begun to gather speed, but I walked confidently into the dusty wind, believing that my lips were well protected by this balm. But the balm didn't protect my lips, on the contrary, dust started to build up on them! Even worse, I licked my lips in an attempt to remove the dust but it stuck to my tongue, forcing me to swallow it because girls don't spit in the street.

When I returned to my building's entrance, I was surprised to see Yana. She had arrived while I was at the pharmacy and our friend Yasmine was with her. I wondered why Yasmine was there, but Yana sidetracked me by telling me two crucially important pieces of information: the first was that she had lost her passport. And the second was ... that she might be pregnant ... but she's not sure yet.

'I'm not sure yet!' she said, with artificial calm.

'Let's go to the pharmacy right now and buy you a pregnancy test,

so that you can be sure,' responded Yasmine, whose face betrayed no sign of shock.

[38] I stopped at the corner of the building's entrance and pretended to be busy tying my shoelace so that they would go to the pharmacy without me. I was afraid that the pharmacist would tell my father that I had bought a pregnancy test, even though the test wasn't for me. I knew my father well enough to know that if he learned about this he would cut my throat with the pregnancy test before he would even let me tell him the whole story. So I couldn't risk going into the pharmacy; instead, I hid myself completely while keeping an eye out for my father, for fear that he would decide to visit his friend the pharmacist at this very moment. If he entered the pharmacy and saw my friends doing what they were doing, it would be me who would feel his anger. Isn't he the one who always says: 'Tell me who your closest friends are, and I will tell you who you are!'

But I felt reassured when I saw him busily putting the flowers displayed outside for sale back inside his shop, afraid that the wind, heavy with dust, would kill them. I also noticed the new sign above the shop's entrance that my father had hung yesterday in place of the old one, which had been eaten by rust, completely obliterating the name of the shop. He rewrote the same old name on the new sign, though I had asked – and even begged – him to change it. He had refused my request, however, insisting on keeping the name that I hate so much!

This name is: Abeer Ward. Fragrant Rose.

My father thought up the name of his shop when he opened it twenty-five years ago and he was so thrilled with it that when I was born he named me Abeer (fragrance), so that the shop and I had the very same name: Abeer Ward – our family name is also Ward (rose). It seems that this name was bestowed on my father's grandfather a long time ago because he sold flowers. This profession was passed down in the family through the generations until it arrived at my father, who transformed it from a profession into a whole life philosophy.

I always ask him: how could you name your only daughter after your shop?

So I don't like my name and I believe that it doesn't suit me in the least. For my whole life, I've been waiting to reach legal age so that



I could change it. But when I finally turned eighteen, I realized that I had neither enough money to cover the full cost of court fees, nor enough patience to undertake all of the required legal proceedings. In all of this, the most important thing is that my father, the moment I let him know about my plan, forbade me unequivocally from changing it because my name is the most beautiful name that a young lady could possibly have, in his opinion.

[39]

And thus I lost hope that I could exchange Abeer Ward, Fragrant Rose, for another name. I surrendered myself to this reality, thinking that whenever I get married I can exchange my family name for my husband's. Then I started constantly wondering, when it happens, what name will be my destiny? Will I turn into Abeer ... What? Abeer Helou, Sweet Fragrance? Abeer Zaki, Delightful Fragrance?

I don't know and I'm in no rush to get married. It's too soon!

I hadn't realized the extent to which I had surrendered myself to my own thoughts until my friends returned from the pharmacy and Yasmine surprised me with her question: 'Who are you hiding from in the corner?'

But I didn't answer, seeing that Yana was hurrying toward the elevator. She stopped in front of it and pushed the call button – I understood from this that she wanted to do her pregnancy test in my house, of all places! This made me nervous because I knew how dangerous this could be for me: someone from my family could come back unexpectedly, realize what was going on and we would be busted. But before I could formulate an objection and ask Yana to go anywhere other than my house, the elevator came, we got in it and it took us up without one word crossing my lips.

When we arrived at the third floor, where I live, I opened the apartment door reluctantly. Yana ran to the bathroom, slamming the door so loudly that it echoed in my head for a while. Yasmine hurried to follow her but I stopped her saying: 'Oof! Let her breathe a little!'

Yasmine did as I asked and left Yana to sort herself out in the bathroom alone. The two of us sat down on one of the sofas in the living room. With a mechanical movement, Yasmine turned on the television and asked: 'If she's really pregnant, who do you think the baby's father is?'

This question surprised me even though it was relevant – the father could be one of two people: either Yana's ex-husband, from whom she had been separated for a short time, or her boyfriend, the manager of the Coca-Cola factory. These are the only two men Yana knew in Lebanon.

(Yana never said, 'Lebanon,' but rather always referred to the country with the English expression 'the land flowing with milk and honey,' because that's what her illustrated tourist guide calls it.)

Yana is Romanian. She came to Lebanon with her ex-husband, who worked as an employee in a trade corporation that used to send him to Romania from time to time. He met her on one of these visits and they married a few months later and then moved together to Beirut. Yana was really enthusiastic about the move. She had always felt something inside her pulling her toward deserts, palm trees, and mirages and she was sure that she would find all that here. She came expecting to see naked women swaying to eastern melodies, with their heads and faces (except for the eyes) covered in ornamented castles with gold-plated bathrooms, in the depths of which dancing slave girls were hidden. She especially dreamed of her husband the prince's royal court, where he would sit on pillows made of fine silk and the softest feathers, and she would sit beside him.

But this prince of hers, in reality, lives in one of those 'old rental' apartments on Hamra Street, above none other than Starbucks. Yana didn't find the desert here, just a lot of dust that she had to wipe up every morning. As for the dancing slave girls, she only saw them in foreign films translated into Arabic. In their place (much to her surprise!), she saw women wearing bikinis at the beach, where she went only once because she found out that the soft, golden sand pictured in her travel guide was actually covered with the glass of broken bottles and used needles. As for the water in whose azure depths she had dreamed of swimming, it was full of jellyfish that looked like plastic bags or plastic bags that looked like jellyfish. To top it all, only minutes after arriving at the beach, a group of young men approached her and asked, in English: 'How much?'

Angered by this deflated hope, she burned the books of Omar Khayyam, the collections of Mutanabbi's poetry and the English trans-



lation of the *1001 Nights* – books that had been a gift from her husband when she came to Beirut to live with him there permanently.

That day, Yana realized that she did not love her husband, but merely had been enamoured with the idea of travelling to a faraway country – he had been nothing but a means to help her realize this dream. Their relationship quickly worsened, to the point that Yana was sure that she could no longer stay married to him. So she called a lawyer and asked for a divorce. She and her husband agreed that he would leave her the house and that he would move to another neighbourhood in Beirut – above a restaurant called ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Chickens.’

Many months had passed since their separation and she had not seen him since then, but she was still legally his wife because the divorce proceedings were not yet completed and were not progressing at the speed that Yana would have desired.

This separation had backed her into a corner, since she had become responsible for supporting herself and had to find work quickly. This was not as easy as she had imagined or hoped, since the heavens do not rain jobs down on Beirut. But the winds of fate were blowing in her direction and landed her on the doorstep of a modelling agency. She walked in and walked out shortly after with a contract in hand. The very next day, the agency called her and said that the Coca-Cola Company had chosen none other than her to appear in one of its advertisements. She met the company’s manager during the shoot for the ad; they clicked at this first meeting just like two pieces of a puzzle that complete each other, in perfect harmony.

That’s what Yana thought, at least.

At that moment, Yana became certain that everything that had happened to her – from her arrival in Lebanon to her marriage and even her divorce – had not one drop of coincidence about it, indeed all of this was ‘written for her’ long before she was even born.

This was her destiny: to cast down her anchor in Lebanon and live here forever.

For it was in Lebanon that she had met her great love, nay, her other half, the person for whom she was born and who was born for her, as she always declares. Her incomplete soul had been lost and miserable

for the entire twenty-four years of her life and finally fate had led her to him, as the winds guide ships at sea.

[42] Yana has never asked me for my opinion about her relationship. But if she ever does, I'll tell her that she needs to break up with him straight away and go back to her husband for sure; marriage is not underwear that you take on and off and change every day! I actually hoped that Yana would be pregnant – but by her husband – because this would perhaps be her last chance to save her marriage. When I related my wish to Yasmine, she replied: 'Who told you she wants that?'

Then she reminded me that Yana has not seen her husband since they separated, that is to say for almost six months, and she never even mentions him; it's as if he wasn't previously a part of her life. On the other hand, she talks about her boyfriend the manager every other minute as though he were the only man she knew!

I interrupted her angrily, saying: 'Let's wait for the results of the test first!'

To change the subject, I asked Yasmine if she knew anything about this pregnancy test and she explained to me how easy it was to use: it consists of a plastic stick about as long and wide as a finger, or a little bit longer. In the middle of this stick there's a white paper rectangle that changes colour when it reacts to the woman's urine, to let her know if she's pregnant or not. If she's not pregnant, the (–) symbol appears on the white paper, and if she is pregnant, a (+) symbol appears.

'It's really easy to use!' Yasmine assured me again and then added: 'But the results are not always accurate.'

I asked myself how she knew all this.

But I didn't dare ask her and she didn't volunteer an explanation, so the two of us stayed sitting silently in front of the television. Suddenly, a commercial for a condom came on and it caught my attention because I had never seen such a thing in all my life. I turned up the volume a little bit to hear it better, but a truck was passing at that same moment and honked its horn, drowning out the television so I didn't hear any of the commercial.

A few minutes later, I left Yasmine alone in the living room and headed toward the bathroom to check on Yana. I found her sitting on the toilet, head bowed, so that her black hair covered her face, like a



hijab. I found the resemblance between hair and hijab quite amusing because it was so incompatible with the sight of her naked legs. I would have laughed had I not been aware that this was no time for laughter.

It was hard for me to believe that things like this could happen in the lives of ordinary people, since I had only seen such things in films... or dreams! Bad dreams, of course. [43]

And I felt like I really was dreaming when the (+) symbol appeared on the paper rectangle, meaning that Yana was indeed pregnant. I felt suddenly nauseated by how strange this all was to me.

Or rather I felt like someone had slapped me hard across the face and roused me from a deluded deep slumber.

Yasmine entered the bathroom and asked about the result of the test. Yana answered that she was pregnant, just as she'd expected, and without anyone asking her, she added: 'I've decided to keep the baby'

Translated by Michelle Hartman

Mansoura Ez-Eldin

Two Short Stories

[44]

Conspiracy of Shadows

Always the same scene. Under a giant mango tree a man was digging the dark soil, while beside him lay the body of a young girl. Her hair, matted with congealed blood, was stuck to her long neck, and her clothes were torn in more than one place. The man wiped away the fine, burning threads of sweat that ran down his face and continued his task, totally absorbed.

When he had finished his work, he jumped down into the hole and began to stamp down the soft earth, flattening it with his boots. Then he went and dragged the body close to the hole and gently stripped it of its clothes, to reveal white skin that was now turning blue. He embraced the girl and stroked her hair and her back with hands that moved slowly over her body as he held her closer and closer. He carefully laid her out in the grave, then heaped earth over her until the hole was completely filled. Then he levelled the site, put a large granite slab over it and scattered some dry herbs.

I don't know why they appear in front of me, or where the man goes with his slow steps. I just take a long puff on my Gitanes before throwing it on the wooden floor and stamping it out with my shoe, as I stare at a horizon that promises nothing.

'Get yourself seen by a psychiatrist,' suggested my plump colleague at work, as she greedily munched a hamburger. And with that, she regarded the matter as closed. Meanwhile, I started to detach myself from life every time the scene unfolded in front of me, surrendering myself to it completely in order to see the girl's features more clearly, for example, or the face of the man who seemed to want to turn his back on me for ever. The scene, though, just kept repeating itself and I left it without being able to grasp anything definite.

* * *

It sometimes seems as though she is about to reveal something to me, but after suddenly raising her head and looking at me, she quickly pulls



back. I have got used to this gesture in the two weeks since she started working with us. A few minutes before she comes in, I can almost feel her hurrying along the winding, interconnecting corridors on her way to the large room where we work.

She throws open the door like someone fleeing an evil pursuer. [45] ‘Good moooorning,’ she says, in a theatrical way, deliberately drawing out the sound to attract attention. No one takes any notice of her, though, they are all bent over their desks behind piles of files covered with dust. She walks on between the two rows of desks facing each other until she reaches her own seat at the back. At once, the files pile up in front of her as if of their own accord. She tries to contain her drooling as she flicks through the yellowing papers, glancing at the other people bent over their desks before immersing herself in her own private world, careful the whole time not to look in my direction.

I know full well that she is completely unaware of my eyes following her, and even if she were, she would never realise what lies behind it. Something attracts me to her and makes me afraid of her at the same time. Something fills me with a burning desire to embrace her or give her a hard slap, or bang her head against the wall until the blood spills out. Every morning she does exactly the same things. If it weren’t for her changes of clothes and hair styles, I would think it was just one day going on for ever. She moves between the desks with a self-confidence that provokes me, her shrill voice bursting into song. After finishing work, she takes her things quickly and leaves as if she has important tasks to see to.

I have never discussed with her the strange things I see happening around me, or the girl and the man I feel are always with me. Once when I tried, she replied in an off-hand manner: ‘Get yourself seen by a psychiatrist.’

For some reason, I was almost certain that this woman had some connection with it, even though she didn’t realise it herself.

The first time the scene with the girl and her gravedigger unfolded before me, I rubbed my eyes hard, stretched my hand out towards them and touched space. But the scene wouldn’t go away.

I had just woken up. I told myself that what was happening was just the hallucination of a man not yet awake, but it wouldn’t stop.

[46]

The scene began to dog me, unfolding itself over and over again of its own accord. I also started to hear the sound of strange footsteps in the flat, where I live alone, footsteps that would become a lot louder, then suddenly stop. I have started to doubt my own existence. Sometimes I believe I am invisible and that my surroundings are unreal. I try to touch them to check that they are there. I managed to touch everything I came up against except for the man and the girl who had visited me for the first time, then I went to work and found a new colleague who reminded me of them. And something about her is like the girl lying beside the grave.

* * *

When I was ten, my father dragged me into the garden of our house, and stood in front of a tree with a thin black trunk and straight branches. He said it was a pear tree. He said it as if he was someone imparting an important secret, and gave a devilish laugh. I was gripped by fear.

The so-called pear tree could not prove it was a pear tree, even with a single fruit. It simply blossomed insatiably. It would be completely covered in fine white blossoms, then quickly shed them all in one fell swoop during the night, so that in the morning I would be surprised to find a bare tree and hundreds of dead flowers on the ground.

I watched him surreptitiously as he followed with care the tree's progress. I thought him inscrutable, but loaded with interpretations I had picked up from the horror movies he would force me to watch without saying a word.

As time went on, I transformed him into a ferocious mythical beast. I only really got to know him on that distant day when I had first to run my hand over his face to close his eye. I ignored the steps that are usually followed in this sort of situation, though, and put my ear to his chest. There was no trace of a heartbeat. I embraced the body that was laid out beside me, burying my face in it. Death penetrated me unmercifully, a pitch-black darkness took hold of the room and I imagined that the man lying beside me was shaking violently. I hurried away.

I went to check that the door was closed, then retraced my steps. I



sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the man's features, at his enormous nose and wide eyes. I noticed, perhaps for the first time, the handsome cut of his strong jawline.

I knew that it was my last and only chance to possess him, to find out his true nature as he lay alone, stripped of his authority, but I [47] didn't. Instead, I fell into a long faint.

* * *

A small brown sparrow came in through the half-open window and landed on the wooden floor. It took three steps, then flew to the top of the room and perched on the electric light cord that hung from the ceiling, watching us from above.

I hid my face in the ample breast of my plump colleague to avoid the eyes of the sparrow she had not noticed.

She was trying to help me, but I had completely lost the urge. I gave up trying, drew away from her and lay on my back watching the sparrow on the light cord. She did the same. She did stretch out her hand, though, to feel the bed between us. She wouldn't look me straight in the eye but made straight for her clothes that had been thrown carelessly on the armchair. She dressed herself lazily, lit a cigarette, and stood in front of the window, smoking with her eyes closed. She kept pretending to be looking at the sparrow while I was watching her out of the corner of my eye.

After she finished her cigarette, she picked up her bag and left the room without saying goodbye. I heard the sound of the front door being slammed hard and didn't see her again after that. I looked for her everywhere without success. When I asked about her at work, they gave me strange looks.

I discovered that I didn't know her address or telephone number. I hadn't realised that before as I'd been used to seeing her every day.

* * *

Things have started to distance themselves from me. I am aware of them like an oppressive, receding memory that I can't get a grip on. I have started almost never leaving my flat or speaking to anyone. I just stare at the walls, watching the pale shadows dancing there. I prick up

my ears to catch the obscure sounds and slow footsteps that wander around me.

[48] My father has become a distant phantom whose memory arouses no resentment in my soul. Nothing remains of my colleague at work who escaped through my fingers but a gold chain that she left behind when she walked out on me.

The man is still digging the earth with the girl lying quietly beside him. Before they disappear completely, I have started to notice a silver ring that I found among my father's things.

Headache

The sunlight hit you like a truth you were trying unsuccessfully to ignore. You woke to find yourself on the Corniche, sprawled out on a wooden bench that had stood for years fixed to the ground.

It was nearly seven in the morning and the cold air was searing you, while your head felt like a piece of ice shattering under a powerful hammer.

You remembered you'd been walking along drunk with your friend at three in the morning, when suddenly you decided to flop out like that until daybreak. You weren't ready to face a father who'd curse and scold you before throwing you out of the house, when his nose caught the smell of the vast quantities of whisky your friend had bought from the Free Zone for the two of you to swig. It was a drinking ritual that wasn't complete for either of you unless the other one was there.

He failed to persuade you that you shouldn't sleep in the street in this bitter wintry weather and after a heated argument, as always happens when the two of you get drunk, he abandoned you with a laugh. You could find no excuse for this when you sat down later. You were racking your brain to remember the details of what had happened since you took the first swig from the bottle of Red Label until he left you and got into the first taxi he could find. You let out a yawn as you struggled to move from a lying position to a sitting position on the wooden bench and smiled with the contentment of a man who has woken to find himself in his own warm bed. An old beggar was sleeping curled up a few yards away and a large cat crossed the street.



Meanwhile, you were busily trying to work out how many people had greeted the light of day sprawled out where you were now, since the time when someone had installed a number of benches – perhaps for passers-by like yourself to sleep on – and he too had passed on to God knows where.

[49]

But why should you bother about the number of these idiots with this headache that's practically splitting your head apart? It's a good thing you've decided to go home on foot. A walk in this foggy morning weather might help you wake up. Why are you rubbing your forehead like that?

You've forgotten the way to the tumbledown house with seven storeys. What a mess you're in now! You're sticking to the wooden bench more than before. You almost let out a mocking laugh, but it was nipped in the bud by the fear that suddenly swelled up.

You haven't lost your memory, as happens in those film melodramas with flimsy plots. You've just forgotten your way home, though apart from that you've been remembering everything in the smallest detail.

A thick fog was settling over a small part of your brain. The paths of memory began to expand for a short time, then quickly contracted in on themselves, leading you nowhere. You sat down cross-legged, ignoring the speeding cars, squatting like some ancient scribe, trying to advantage of the smallest details to recall the things that were eluding you. Dark steps with no precise colour, that you never succeeded in counting despite your unceasing attempts. You used to go up them backwards, with your hand over your eyes, perhaps to avoid looking at Aunt Amal, the daughter of Madame Jean, your neighbour on the upper floor who always walked in a hurry looking intensely serious and who never paid you any attention.

You often made fun of Amal – of the fact that she wasn't married and of how she looked at you. The look had slowly turned into a frown, and you had started to feel an obscure sadness whenever her eyes met yours because she had made you realise that the things that are lost to us are not lost like that, all at once and forever. Rather, they seep away slowly until we come up against their loss in a frowning look in place of the old sparkle in eyes we know well.

Her brother Samih had gone out to play in the street when your

[50]

mother asked you to bring her ‘two cloves of garlic from Aunt Jean.’ You prepared yourself for the shudder that would come over you when you entered their flat, which was in perpetual darkness. Aunt Amal opened the door for you with the mischievous look she used to have, and the young boy that was you turned his eyes from her breast which was visible through her flimsy nightdress. She closed the door and dragged you into the bedroom where another woman was lying on the bed, almost naked. Amal dragged you towards her and gave you a long, greedy kiss while the other girl clapped delightedly. You felt that you could hardly stand up, there was so much pleasure hidden in that magic thing, but you also felt extremely embarrassed. Your intuition told you that what had happened somehow or other concealed a deep mockery of you, and you became quite certain of it when her friend shouted in an insolent voice, ‘What’s up, son? Why don’t you grow up a bit?’ Before you realised, you were running down the stairs. You continued to avoid Aunt Amal for a long time, though you had meanwhile found your way to other women, while she became more and more of a confirmed spinster. No one was to blame. Suddenly, your friend’s laugh burst out in your head.... Why do you suppose he laughed at you like that? Try to guess! Have you forgotten the spectre of the woman that flitted before you in that rundown bar? – the ‘champagne lady’ as you called her.

She belonged to your friend originally, until he passed her on to you in a vague fit of boredom ... and you picked her up skilfully like a player receiving the ball. At first, you didn’t have any strong feelings for her, though you kept up your relationship with her for a whole year before he bet you (again, with no excuse) a bottle of champagne that he could take her back from you. If he failed, he’d pay for it, and if he succeeded you’d buy it. You had to pay a tidy sum from your wages for him to taste his success with champagne, and for some time he had to avoid mentioning anything to do with her in front of you, though later you began to talk about her again in passing if the occasion demanded. To ensure the friendship continued, you both persuaded yourselves that what had happened was just a passing distraction. A woman, no matter how important, would never make one of you lose the other. You pretended you had been wanting to



escape from her, while the part he played in this story – often repeated between you, though sometimes with roles reversed – was the part of the noble saviour who had rescued you from her before you were killed by boredom. A relative stability returned to the supposed friendship. But what was it that brought her spectre to dance between you again? [51]

Don't walk so fast, you hardly know where you're going, you've forgotten the way home.

Are you trying to run away from my nagging? Leave your head on the asphalt in the street, then, for the speeding cars to crush. Stop your evasions and tell me the truth about that woman. Don't make do with the few meagre lines you're trying to summarise your relationship with Amal with. Why have you stopped walking? What are these outbursts of raucous laughter from you? Here you are, still walking through the middle of the crowd. Your friend is staggering along beside you, the champagne lady's walking confidently between the two of you, and behind you Aunt Amal is hurrying along undisturbed, with her ridiculous spectacles. You can see yourself becoming detached from yourself, breaking away over and over again so that hundreds of little selves are formed out of you and disperse in the air. That way you can watch the scene far better ... and the variety of viewpoints will certainly assist you.

Translated by Paul Starkey

Joumana Haddad

Two Poems

[52]

I Don't Remember

I don't remember
that I undressed in daylight
for a man
whose eyes are closed.

I don't remember
that I was ever the running saliva,
he an unattainable desire
and I ravenous with hunger,
he an impossible bed
I the conqueror
he a resilient city

I don't remember, don't remember
that I conquered a man like a storm
and he was the open windows that faced my weakness,
that I pounced upon him like a fever
and his hallucinations swallowed my tongue

I knew men's bodies as travel
and my body as arrival and easy farewell.

I knew that men's hearts are pairs of hands,
and knew my heart was a promise of asphyxiation
that remains false even when it wins.

I knew that the arrival of me was a gentle flood
and their departure a temporary ruin.

I knew how to forget them even as they stormed the dust of
memory.

I had never known a man
whose heart professed rupture like a certain catastrophe.



I never knew a man
who could turn me
from an Eve into woman.

Then I Lost Him

[53]

He resembles no one:
I drew him,
carved him.
I made him
then lost him.

I carry his silhouette under my arm at sunset
and begin searching for him.

No one knows him.

I gave birth to him in an hour of desperate revelation
from a hand resting on my cheek.

I raised him on easy tears and choicest words.
He is the ruler of a cursed dam,
master of an impending earth slide,
savior of my old covenant and destroyer of all future
revelations.

I drew him, carved him, made him.
Then I lost him.

He has no adversary.
He has deferred women since the beginning of time,
singular and numerous like the sex of men,
but he resembles no one.

He rose from the angles of myth,
lifted on the wings of ancient disappointments.
He leaves a land that becomes nations.
He tosses shells and they become destiny.
He adorns pain.
He follows the body with a speechless mouth
and glories in every utterance.
He praises at times, and at times denigrates,

and the gap explodes in tension,
the shifting sands revolt
and everything, and everyone that hides under them.

[54] An unhurried predator,
he knows he'll win.

He seals hunger, seals it with one hand,
and his other hands rove
deeper than the wellsprings of pleasure,
further than a defeated desire.

He is the regret that never appears in mirrors
and the rescue that always arrives late.

Ah, how much pain,
how much more waiting,
how many more lying faces
of a lover who resembles no one!

I drew him, carved him, made him in my imagination
then lost him between two slumbers.

Translated by Khaled Mattawa



Nathalie Handal

Song Posts

[55]

At Last¹

JANUARY IN WASHINGTON, DC

There's the snow holding winter light,
the streets emptying themselves of whispers.

There's the day, unread,
the voices saying, here he is,
saying, here we are.

The world watches him walk
across the horizon
while a rainbow bows to light.

Farmers with clocks in their pockets,
memorize the wind – a new history;
soldiers unite under a sky split
between ash and glow.

Someone's beating a drum,
someone's climbing a tree,
someone saying she loves his name,
like lightning on the tongue,
someone counting the wishes unearthed.

Rivers cry in their throats –
there's a shiver in a white house
that knows everything becomes song
when there is no music.

Now the mirror is no longer broken noise –
it's a hum spreading across the glass.

The Ruins

PALESTINE / ISRAEL

[56]

Maybe I loved you too long, held you too long; maybe that's why you slapped me and took my hearing. I decided then to be devoted to something; maybe those who listen don't hear, or is it those who hear don't listen? Now the holy places are burnt. The boy I knew gone. My mother won't tell me where. Ummi, I scream, why is something shaking inside? She looks at me, knows the trembling she carried inside all of her life has become mine. I held on to the song they told me would never be mine. No one ever asked who burnt the flag, drank the wine, and refused to explain the word forgiveness to a child. The cry was too hot beneath the asphalt – is this death? Is this January? Is it rivers folding as the wind holds hard to its home? What is the sound silence makes when it departs? I hear 'Arouh li meen'² playing, try to remember his face, fading as my eyes close shut, but I know the Arabic and Hebrew words we've learned will knit themselves and one day the sea dividing us will no longer be a curtain but the remains of what refused to hang, and we will look at one another and ask, Do you want some coffee?

Cry Out Nightingale³

SUMMER IN TEHRAN

Is God the secret you hide?
Is silence held captive between the wall
and the voices echoing under water?

Are the bells soundless,
the birds dying where
the children sleep.
Is something bleeding in our hands?
Twenty hours.

The men sit up from
old recliners, discover



they haven't moved,
but they've collected books
even if there is nothing
they've been allowed
to keep long enough.

[57]

The clouds cross rooftops,
a young girl watches water-drops
fall from a pomegranate
as another girl is killed.
The world watches.

The lights go off,
no one stands by the window
but the sentences they've memorized
are longer than conquering.

It's not what was taken away
from us that matters now
but what we know how to keep,
a young man says, as he sings
'Morgh-e sahar nale sar kon.'
What we open might fall
but the fire pales
as we march towards it.

NOTES

- 1 From the Etta James's song 'At Last.'
- 2 Translation from Arabic: 'Whom should I go to,' the title of a work by the Egyptian singer, Umm Kulthum.
- 3 Translation from Farsi: 'Cry out, nightingale,' the title of a song sung by Shajarian, the Persian vocalist.

Huzamah Habayeb

A Short Story

[58]

One Afternoon

Just like every afternoon, he was sitting on the large sofa in the corner of the narrow balcony. He was the one who had insisted on keeping it – a remnant of an old suite the family had exchanged three years earlier for a newer model half the size. The sofa's spongy filling was perfect, as was its hard back and broad arm rests which allowed him to spread out comfortably.

Afternoons acquired a unique flavour on that ancient sofa with its faded print, his daily cup of coffee on the small table and the newspaper meticulously folded, while the sounds of people from the street slowly reached the second floor balcony. Afternoons were special, delicately balancing noon and sunset by catching the light of the first with the tender breeze of the second.

Afternoons were when he did a lot of things on his own. He would begin by reading through the paper carefully and slowly, starting with the regular columns, then the political analysis, the news briefs and economic reports, then the interviews and finally the obituaries. Often he felt distracted; he did not know how to be selective in the sense of forming his own opinions. Nonetheless, amongst his colleagues he took pride in his knowledge of current political events, dropping the names of well-known foreign dignitaries, political concepts or passing comments on events. This showmanship required a lot of work on his part which explains why he underlined some words or names with a red pen, then wrote them in the margins of the newspaper before pronouncing them several times out aloud to gauge how they sounded to him.

When he was finished with the paper, he would watch the people go about their daily business, amazed at the number who congregated at the centre of the town, some walking briskly, others sitting, standing, talking, laughing, screaming ... people, people, people ... and when he felt tired he would spend the rest of the afternoon doing what he



loved best, ‘suspending thought.’ This was difficult and arduous at first, taking him years to master. He would pick a distant spot, like a cloud or light or perhaps nothing at all, and focus on it, never allowing any irrelevant thoughts to distract him, almost as if his mind were absent. He would meditate like this for about an hour until the sun set.

[59]

Mr Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah was married with three sons and a daughter. He had worked for the past twenty-two years as a teacher in the boys’ secondary school around the corner from his house. He taught History and Civics to the tenth grade; he knew the subject by heart (being conscious, of course, that this in itself was not a feat – even a donkey can learn from repetition). He discovered only recently that when he was teaching as if on auto-pilot, his mind became crowded with many unrelated thoughts. In spite of this, his teaching was good; he always managed to complete the curriculum a month before the end of the school year. He was the first to set his final exams (ten minutes in total); the questions were the same every year anyway. They never varied: explain, mention, enumerate and fill in the blanks. He was also the first to hand in his grades, having resorted to a simple, but smart method: on reading the first two or three words from the answer he could determine, from long experience, whether the student had got it right or wrong. Over the past years he had received the standard increments to his income.

Mr Abdul Karim did not depend solely on his salary. The flat he lived in was one of six in the building that he had inherited from his father in addition to eight shops on the main street. The income from the inheritance – like many other things – was not to be envied since the total did not exceed five hundred dinars per month. Anyway, from the start it was a mistake, something he only discovered later, like many other things in his life. He could never forget, for example, that History was the last thing he wanted to study, let alone to teach. Well, it was not the end of the world. Positive thinking had taught him to overlook such failures; at least he had a college degree and was a successful teacher. When his father had died, his brother offered him either the land and the unattended farm or the building with the eight shops. Without having to think very much, he knew that the value of the land was high, but he had no understanding of matters such as

buying and selling or agriculture. The five hundred dinars a month that he opted for would be better than the thousands promised from the unknown.

[60] But it was the thousands that became a reality. His brother Abdul Rahim sold the land and bought some more cheaper, constructing an apartment building of eight flats and four storage units on the street. Rent alone brought in his two thousand dinars a month, not to mention a lucrative income from the farm. In spite of this, Abdul Karim did not feel bitter. His brother visited regularly with eggs, milk, chickens, things that certainly alleviated but did not negate the bitterness of his wife who, on receiving the two cartons of eggs or the four chickens or the three litres of milk from the farm help, repeated the same mantra: 'All of that goodness could have been ours! What bad luck!'

Zuhur's voice snaps him out of his erratic thoughts. She was limping across the street with a bleeding foot, as though she were a wounded animal, wearing her short orange linen blouse that exposed a large section of her white stomach. Her brown trousers barely covered her ankles and she wore green plastic sandals. Unconsciously scratching her stomach, she placed her other hand on her hair to make sure the large red rose behind her ear was still there. Her fine, straight hair fell round her shoulders like thin untangled nylon strands revealing large patches of baldness.

No one knew anything about Zuhur except her name. She had arrived in the town ten years ago with her mother and her stepfather and always wore that short blouse which exposed her midriff. In the beginning the young men would pinch her stomach or tickle her on her waist. She would scream and spit, often succeeding in catching one of those 'rats' – as she used to call them – biting him in the neck or the shoulder until blood could be seen on her teeth. Zuhur was strong; yet people were unable to explain the source of her strength. Despite her slender build, she appeared sturdy when she ran quickly across the street or when she caught one of those 'rats' under her arm and dragged him to a rubbish heap before biting him in the neck, the shoulders or the ears. Gradually, people got accustomed to seeing Zuhur in the streets; she became a fixture, especially in the late af-



ternoons as the day was drifting towards nightfall as if in a delicious stupor.

It was said that Zuhur got married and divorced the same night, that her mother's husband had violated her and that when she and her twin brother were six years old she had drowned him in a well while they were playing. There were many stories but no one knew for certain the cause of her condition. No one objected to her colourful language. She would take any opportunity – like when a passer-by touched her breast or pinched her midriff, to give vent to the worst insults. The originality and strangeness of these curses aroused men's desires. They would tease her further just to hear more of her colourful insults. Zuhur would eventually reach her peak, that is the moment when her lexicon would be unleashed to the full before ripping her blouse right down the middle.

[61]

It was at that moment one was witness to the vision of a moving image that was difficult to freeze in the memory. Abdul Karim, like all the other men in the street, watched this moving image repeated daily without ever becoming bored. It acquired a sharpness, especially if it was of the two enormous and incredibly round, creamy breasts with their large pinkish nipples, squeezed together inside her blouse. It was this riveting image which the men, young and old, and even the women walking the streets were completely taken by, even to the point of admiration. Abdul Karim wondered at the strikingly incongruous vision of these two voluptuous, hot breasts full of desire and Zuhur's bald head. 'A real shame,' as one of the young men once commented.

One day Zuhur lets out a wail as if someone has died: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!'

Abdul Karim's erection subsides. He picks up the carefully folded newspaper, his coffee cooling. He loves the smell of hot coffee and inhales its rising aroma slowly. With a quick sip he breaks through the thick froth, then returns to reading the main headlines. He reads one, two, three, ten and then moves on to the usual features on the last page but one. He reads a few paragraphs from each. He ignores the articles on economics which he doesn't understand. Zuhur is laughing loudly. One of the streetsellers is announcing a sale of plastic jugs and plates. An interview with a member of the opposition party in parliament.

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He reads the first question. He reads the third question. He moves to the sixth question. Zuhur's voice now reaches a high pitch. He is unable to complete the interview. He decides to leave it to last, then skips the news and analysis as well. He jumps to the obituaries. Zuhur curses the lineage of the men in the street promising she will cut off the filthy penis of whoever comes near her, or tries to touch her, and stuff it in his mouth. She opens her mouth and grinds what is left of her teeth giving comic expression to her savagery. The laughter of the men grows louder and with it their ill-fated desire.

'O, you comforted soul, return to your Lord in peace, enter into my Worship, enter into my Garden.' With great sadness and sorrow the family of Abdul Ilah of al-Zarqa announce the death of Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah at the age of 45. Condolences will be received in the house of his brother Abdul Rahim Abdullah Abdul Ilah on Hijab Street next to the school of Riyad al-Salihin for three days starting today. 'We come from God and to Him we return.'

Abdul Karim puts down the newspaper, and looking up to see darkness fill the horizon takes a deep breath. He places his hand on his chest. His heart is beating fast. It is hot outside, hot and suffocating as if the air itself had perished. He tries to take a deep breath and finds nothing. There must be a mistake, maybe it's a joke but who would play a joke like this? Maybe it's no more than a coincidence with the name. But how? Is it possible that a name of that length ... Abdul Karim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah ... 45 years old, and then Abdul Rahim Abdullah Mustafa Abdul Ilah ... residing on Hijab street next to the Riyad al-Salihin school...? He wipes the sweat from his face with damp fingers. He re-reads the obituary two, three, four times. He imagines hearing his name for the first time and separating sound from image. Now it sounds strange to his ear. This is the first time he has read his name aloud with indifference and he discovers it has no meaning. A name that does not take or give anything. It was not distinct, strange, obnoxious, funny, ugly, old or new. A very ordinary name, ordinary to the extent of irrelevancy, a name that sounded as if one were saying 'Everything for a dinar.'

He felt the early evening's coolness on his skin. Zuhur's matchless insults are audible and clear. His body jerks, and he throws the news-



paper down on the table and goes to the living room. The three boys are in front of the telly. No one moves or talks. He looks at them as if for the first time. They don't resemble him. The oldest looks fifteen or a bit older. Because this is his home and the children are in front of the telly then they must be his family. He tries to remember their names and is unable to. He moves closer. They do not turn to him. He asks them the name of the show. They don't notice him around them. He screams at them, they cannot hear him. He approaches the older boy and peers into his face but his son doesn't move. Nervously, he waves his hand in front of the boy's face but he continues watching the show without batting an eyelid.

[63]

He runs to the bedroom. His wife is folding some clothes and putting them in the cupboard. He wants to talk to her and realises that he doesn't know her name either. At any rate, it is clear that she doesn't see him because she is moving around the room freely as if he were not there. He is taken by surprise by a cigarette in her hand. Since when did she start smoking? The coarse laughter of the men in the street reaches him. His wife leaves the room. He sees himself suddenly at the centre of a large circle made up of the men in the neighbourhood and obnoxious youths. One punches him in the stomach and they are all laughing non-stop. The circle narrows until they surround him. He suffocates. One of them – or something – chokes him. He runs to the cupboard like a madman. He opens the drawers one by one, hysterically rummaging through the clothes, looking for papers or something that will identify him. He holds up the birth certificates of the boys. Abdullah Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. Mustafa Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. Abdul Ilah Abdul Karim Abdullah Abdul Ilah. He reads the names aloud to himself. He looks for his own birth certificate, his own identity. He looks for the family's ration card, the marriage certificate – nothing!

The laughter in the street grows even louder. In terror, he closes the window, but is unable to completely shut out the guffaws. The laughter rises again, this time from within the house. He rushes to the family room. The boys, together with their mother, are laughing at a comedy show. He tries to share their laughter with them. But the sound of his own laugh seems like a solitary echo swallowed up by a vast desert.

He stands in front of the telly blocking the screen but they don't move; no one objects, no one says 'move away' – no one says anything. As they continue laughing, their hilarity acquires a hysterical edge. He raises his hand to his eyes and sees nothing. He looks down at his [64] stomach and legs – he's not there!

From the balcony off the living room, in the final throes of that unusual evening, Zuhur can be heard wailing: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!'

Translated by Mona Zaki



Inaya Jaber

Three Poems

[65]

My Body Moves Like the Sea

My body, and it's following your steps,
staggering, drunk

From such a distance you wouldn't make out
my excellent breathing or the dignity of my lungs

Are distances always like that?
Time's speechless daze?
Alarm, deep indifference?

And behind us, smooth memories stretch out
free of trees

The sun will do us part
so we won't see road's end
But
scant is the light of a distant room

The night of love and it's shrouded
by its black suit

Like two eggs spilled
onto two porcelain plates
we quiver in our respective solitudes.

Regret won't help you
as you have left your shell and that's all done
I shall close my eyes
confirming your albumen in me,
the incredible opportunity
for a great hope
that shouldn't be fried
all by itself

[66]

My heart that's partial
to death and night
Two unfamiliar eyes
whose kohl's from another world
from a disappointment
laid to rest on a Persian rug

My body moves like the sea.
It soars and glitters in the dark.
You come here! Come in the notes of that dust
in drawn-out tunes, wide open for the dusk

I'm busy with apprehension
with listening to your fingers' desire
with massaging the drunk side of my chest
with the singing colours of my blood
gilded, scarlet

Desire is so clear
it has no dregs

A whiff of soldiers' sweat
and air burning
Regardless of your brilliant legs
there's drizzle,
the freshness of body parts.

Come to My Room

Come to my room tonight
I have something to tell you

A happy evening
I plucked a flower
whose spirit was so strong
it could
lift up my room to its garden



If you touch it,
even with a feather,
my heart will scream in pain

Come to my room tonight
even if I no longer remember you
Come to my room tonight
I have ...
a window of looking
a simple darkness, which we witnessed
the soft wind
which hit my nose
your index finger, which prowled
the sun-bathed passage of memory
despite the pale moon
and its visible cracks.

[67]

Something That Can Be Postponed

You love me!
Isn't this something that can be
postponed
Besides
what's the fuss about and when you address me
enchanted and aroused, why doesn't it
occur to you that I might be pissed,
that my mood is bad and I don't want
to see anyone at all.

Translated by Anton Shammas

Rachida Lamrabet

Excerpt from the novel Womanland

[68]

Younes and the West: The Sea

The season of the chickens, that's what they called the holiday period. The chickens were the boys and girls who descended upon Morocco in the months of July and August.

They came from all over Europe.

France.

Those were the hard, no-nonsense youth, with the 'va te faire ..., fils de ... en crache ton venin, go-...-yourself, son-of-a-..., spit-your-poison' vocabulary.

Germany.

Lethargic and mostly whiter and fatter than the others. They usually didn't speak a word of Tamazight or Arabic. 'Come on, say "chicken" in Tamazight! Come on, say it!' Amid great hilarity.

The girls from 'Olanda.'

Sharp-tongued and the gift of the gab, verbal karate blows to your groin if you went too far.

The girls and boys from Belgium.

Introvert, a bit naïve, the most Moroccan of all. Every year the girls bought expensive new handmade takchitas to show off at wedding parties in Antwerp or Brussels.

Italy.

Shocked by modernity, these women returned home with short haircuts and sleeveless tops, only to be confused and shocked once again when they discovered that this form of modernity had not travelled with them to their villages.

Those from Spain.

'We're Spaniards.'

And they came too – though in much fewer numbers – from Denmark and Norway, the United Kingdom and even the United States.

There were many of them, more than you could count. The boys had made a sport of assigning them a country.



Cool Adidas training pants, black with white stripes? France!
Beige shorts and light-blue polo shirts? Germany!
Masses of curls, on both the boys and girls? Holland!
Pastel-coloured headscarves, skimpy T-shirts and tight-fitting jeans?
Belgium!

[69]

Moroccan leather jackets? Spain? Wrong! Beni Nsar!
Despite their differences they looked like each other, as if they had just rolled off the same assembly line.
Assembled in the great multinational known as Europe.

The ‘indigenous’ young people felt ill at ease for the first few days. Should they be condescending? Indifferent? Fake-friendly? They found it hard to conceal their envy. It was an injustice that they, who had had so much more education, found themselves left behind in the dust again when yet another of those chic automobiles took off with a screech.

But later they had reconciled themselves to the invasion of the *Marocains Résidents à l’Étranger*, the M.R.E.

They had the time of their lives during those months at the seaside. There was always something happening.

That summer there was Mariam.

He hadn’t noticed her at first. He had been more interested in her cousin. And he wasn’t alone. Everyone in Saidia wanted to win her favour. Her beautiful slender cousin, with the soft silky hair that gleamed in the sun like in the television ads. But after he had tried to have a normal conversation with her a few times, he had been hugely disappointed to discover she was no more than a giggly bird-brain. A very beautiful bird-brain, mind you. But that would only have charmed him for a day.

Mariam, on the other hand, was interesting. At the time he had even imagined the superwoman that Mariam’s intelligence and wit combined with her cousin’s beauty would have made.

Mariam’s beauty had only barely revealed itself. She was different, had a different kind of beauty.

At the end of the first week of that unforgettable summer he was

so much in love it was embarrassing. He had never been so happy before. After discovering what they had in common during the first week, they spent most of the second learning what the other thought of the crucial questions in life. He discovered she loved Kahlil Gibran.

[70]

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you, believe in him.

She had recited the verse in French, a language that didn't quite do the poem justice. It was so much more beautiful in Arabic, he had found out much later. But it sounded like music coming from her mouth.

And he believed every word that came from her mouth; she nodded, she whispered, and he was lost. He would have walked into the sea and kept on walking if she had asked him to.

'How many children do you want, Mariam?'

'What do you mean, how many children? Shouldn't you ask me first if I want children at all?'

'Oh, sorry, for a moment I forgot life isn't so self-evident in Europe. Everything is questionable. First, everything is questioned.'

'That has nothing to do with Europe, Younes. It has to do with the free, thinking individual, and that is universal.'

'Why would you question having children?'

'Because there are already so many of them, and because the world isn't a nice place for a child to be in, for example.'

'What's the point of everything then?'

'The point? You, of course. It's you.'

'Me?'

'That's the most important pronoun in Europe, Younes. M.E. If you get that, you can fly.'

Younes had thought about this conversation for a long time after.

'M.E, ANNA in Arabic, NECH in Tamazight.'

That was the secret of progress, of success. Of freedom, she had told him.



‘Nourdin, she’s just perfect.’

‘She’s just a little chicken, man. It won’t be long now and she’ll fly back to her roost.’

‘Oh God, I know you’re right!’

‘See, I knew you’d come to your senses. By the end of the summer, when all the hormones are gone, you’ll see everything in perspective again.’

[71]

‘No man, I’d completely forgotten she still has to go back. It’s like she’s from here. It’s like I’ve always known her. What should I do now?’

‘Try and get all you can out of it. Enjoy, man, enjoy the chickens from Europe. They’re so much more direct and adventurous than the birds from here, who chew gum and talk in veiled terms. It drives me mad sometimes. They never say whether they love you or not. They think love is full of mysteries. Half-mysteries then, because they never finish their sentences, you have to fill the rest in yourself. Before you’ve solved the mystery, they’re already married and have two kids. Just so much hassle.’

‘Should I dare ask it already?’

‘Ask what?’

‘If she’ll marry me, of course.’

Nourdin sat up and arched his brows in amusement. Abdelkader was walking towards him.

‘Wow! Younes wants to marry a little chicken and fly on her wings to Europe! Very ambitious, man.’

‘Him too?’ said Abdelkader disapprovingly, as he stretched out next to Nourdin. ‘Is he also prepared to give up his honour and pride for the sake of a residence permit?’

Nourdin lay back in the sand again. With his hands behind his head, he scanned the black sky for the star that shone the brightest, meanwhile continuing: ‘You know – at least I hope you do – that these chickens can only fly after you’ve coughed up a hefty dowry. You know how much Sadiq’s little chicken cost him? I hardly dare tell you because it will be such a shock. All I can say is he still sends his mother a huge amount every month to pay off the creditors. And that was three years ago, man.’

'Don't call her a chicken. And I couldn't care less about Europe. I'm graduating soon and I'll create my own Europe. I love her, man, she's the love of my life and I won't let her go. I'm going to ask her to marry me.'

[72] Abdelkader look at him in silence for a moment, then shook his head pityingly. 'What man accepts subservience? I'm serious now! So you're prepared to give up your dignity for the sake of Europe?'

'It's not about Europe, I keep telling you.'

'Oh yeah, that's what they all say. But I don't buy it. There's not a single bastard here who doesn't stare across to the other side drooling. It's not the girl you see, it's a walking European passport. And what do you think you'll find there? Paradise?' Abdelkader dug his heels angrily into the damp sand, and carved deep troughs with them. 'You'll go there and the first thing that girl will say is: 'This is my country, I brought you here, so be quiet and do as you're told, and if you dare protest I'll have your papers taken away and send you straight back where you came from.' You're not going to Belgium or Holland, you're going to Womanland. She's the boss there and you're the *schmet*, the loser.'

'*W'allah al'Adbim*, Allah the Almighty,' echoed Nourdin.

'I despise those guys who come here acting like kings and dressed like goons while they trail along behind their women.'

'It's impossible to talk with any of you.' Younes stood up and brushed the sand off his trousers, then left, waving dismissively. Abdelkader called after him that he had better keep something to hand for the fever. 'Chicken virus can be persistent and vicious!'

Younes heard them laughing.

Translated from the Dutch by Sherry Marx-Macdonald



Wafa Malih

A Short Story

[73]

No!

No. I do not like being the agonized target of sympathy, nor being wrapped in a cloak of compliance and surrender, she whispers to herself, attempting to smother the rebellion burning inside her.

She feels a cold draught of air wafting, with the echoes of songs, through the window of her room. The fresh breeze anoints her small body.

She strips off her clothes. After taking off her trousers, she contemplates her right leg and turns her face towards the closet, picking out a shirt and another pair of trousers. She scrutinizes them for a moment and then puts them on. Forcefully slamming the door behind her, she moves towards the living room with deliberate, stumbling steps. She collides with her father's gaze, so cruel and harsh. Lowering her eyes, she withdraws to a corner, knowing she can endure no more.

He yells at her gruffly: 'You, you crippl....'

This upsets her mother, sparking feelings of exasperation and anger, and she intervenes: 'Please, that's enough! What do you want from her?'

'I want her to prepare tea for me; I see she's not doing anything. She has not got anywhere with her studies, nor in any job. All her sisters, God bless them, advance along their professional paths, and she stays dependent on me. What shall I do with her?'

'You're just ruthless. She's your daughter. If you're not willing to show her compassion, then who will?'

She goes into her room and shuts the door, seeking shelter behind its walls and suppressing her inescapable anxiety and the silent harrowing sorrow in her chest that will almost certainly end with hot tears streaming down her cheeks. Something inside her forces out her question: 'Is my handicap my fault?'

As her insides boil with despair she contemplates

She divides her gaze between the corners and the walls, letting her

eyes rest here and there, searching for something that will connect her to the surrounding world and revive in her her buzz of fascination with life to free her from the interminable silence.

She opens her bag, taking from it a brush and white paper. She hugs them with tender indulgence and sets them down, seeking help from the imagination of her brush and its colours. She shakes off the weariness that welled up in the darkness within her, halting for a short while to examine her drawings. Her eyes gleam with pure, gentle elation, and she calls out to her mother and sisters to share in her pleasure. Her mother hastens to inquire what is going on.

'Good news, God willing,' her mother says as she looks at her daughter's drawings. Her face beams with joy to see them, but she adds: 'Daughter, this thing – will it buy you bread?'

'The important thing, Mother, is that I breath, I live,' she replies, trying to suppress her feelings of despair.

'By God, I don't understand anything,' says her mother, raising her voice and sitting beside her, running her fingers through the braids of her daughter, who lays her head on her mother's shoulder as a feeling of numbness washes over her and she stares into nothingness. Her face seems fatigued and sullen. She murmurs to her mother, turning to look directly at her: 'Please, Mother, tell me about when you were pregnant with me, and about my birth as well.'

She wants to reclaim the details of her first birth through the renewal of a second birth, through which she will be able to witness her emergence from her mother's womb and also from the womb of the world. Since there is a clear difference between the two cases, she will rely on moments of imagination to evoke her new birth.

Her mother's voice comes out trembling and slow as she relates stories about that time that well up in her memory, which happened so long ago but are still so fresh in her mind:

'When you were inside me, it was different from when I was pregnant with your sisters. You were like a stone, not moving. I felt burdened by you, as if what was in my belly was lifeless. I called to you and heard your voice, weak, whimpering, and I heard the thumps of your feet and hands on the walls of my belly playing a symphony of life. Your father and I quarrelled and he punched me in the stom-



ach. After that, doubts and fears seized me, until the day to give birth arrived one sultry summer morning. I felt sharp pains piercing the sides and walls of my belly. A bad smell came from my mouth. At that time, my neighbour was a midwife, and she helped me deliver you. She helped me bring you out into the light of life. The pain of labour was minor compared to the pain of giving birth to your sisters. However, afterwards I suffered greatly from pains that changed my body.'

[75]

As soon as her mother finishes speaking, she becomes contemplative and silent, quietly watching her daughter, who is still staring into nothingness, chanting: 'I am the daughter of an era that has burdened me with the weight of female infanticide.'

Within moments, relaxation grips her. She remains distracted for a short while, deceiving her memory and rousing it from light slumber. Then her childhood memories, shining with the colours of innocence, reveal themselves to her. She recalls how mischievous she was when the neighbourhood children called her crippled, and tried to drive her away from their play circles. She did not understand the meaning of the word and paid it no heed. Rather, she insisted on playing with them. She found a trick to attract their attention: storytelling. She told them about Hdidan, the Thief, and Aisha Qandisha, stories she had heard from her mother, that she wove with pitch-black threads of night. She entered the labyrinths of psychological torment when she began to take pride in her approach toward adolescence and the discovery of her ripening body. On the beach, she realised she was different as she watched the other girls skipping coquettishly into the water in their swimsuits while she was too embarrassed and encumbered by the weight of her handicap. She deliberately deflected all the eager, lovesick glances directed at her as she lay in the shadow of a tree. She spent days taking care of her body – after she had neglected it for long periods of time – examining it with fondness, pitying its smoothness. She would sigh: 'Why did God trouble me with this beauty and then give it a handicap?'

A feeling of intense compassion came over her and she became the silently weeping, delicate woman who treasures in her body the inability to feel pain. Stares of desire do not sustain this. Rather, she

yearns for an embrace of a different kind, an embrace that will calm the floods of emotions her senses continually radiate.

The recklessness of the days continues and she feels she is becoming bewildered. However, she collects herself together when something inside her emerges that yields hope and spreads warmth inside her, and pushes her to the beautiful discovery of life's flow.

[76]

Translated by Khaled Al-Masri



Maram al-Massri

Selected Poems

[77]

2

How foolish:
Whenever my heart
hears a knocking,
it opens its doors.

14

Women like me
do not know how to speak;
a word remains in their throats
like a thorn
they choose to swallow.
Women like me
know nothing except weeping,
impossible weeping
suddenly
pouring
like a severed artery.
Women like me
receive blows
and do not dare return them.
They shake with anger;
they subdue it.
Like a lion in a cage
women like me
dream ...
of freedom ...

2O

I killed my father
that night

[78] or the other day –
I don't remember.

I go escaping with a suitcase
filled with dreams
and amnesia,
and a picture of me
with him
when I was young
and when he carried me
on his forearm.

I buried my father
in a beautiful shell
in a deep ocean,
but he found me
hiding under the bed
shaking with fear
and loneliness

3O

Help me
my kind husband
close this porthole
that has opened
on the highest wall
of my chest.

Stop me
my wise husband
from climbing
the high-heels
of my femininity,
for there



at the crossroads
a young man
awaits me.

39

[79]

From time to time
he opened the windows,
and every now and then
he closed them.

His silhouette
betrayed him
behind his curtains
as he came and went,
his movements
far and near.

He turned up the radio
to fill his solitude
with music
deceiving the neighbors
that all was well.

We used to see him
passing by quickly,
his head downcast,
carrying his bread
and returning
to where
no one waited for him.

40

He wanted
no more than this:
a house, children
and a wife
who loves him.

But he woke up one day
and found that his spirit
had grown old.

[80] She wants
not more than this:
a house and children
and a husband who loves her.

She woke up
one day
and found
that her spirit
had opened a window
and fled.

52

He came to me
disguised in the body of a man
and I paid him no attention.

He told me
'Open!
I am the Holy Ghost.'
I feared disobeying him
and I let him kiss me.

He uncovered
my shy breasts
with his gaze
and turned me into
a beautiful woman.

Then he blew his spirit
into my body,
rumbling
thunder and lightning.
And I believed.



57

You should not
have touched my hand
and left it dreaming
of your touch.

[81]

You should not
have kissed my lips
and left them burning
for your crush.

You should have
remained quiet
so that I would not stop
hoping.

69

The new dresses
I bought
did not help,
nor the warm
looks
I tossed at him.
My loving words did not help
nor Ovid's counsel.
Not even my long black hair,
or my soft glowing skin.
My lust did not help
nor my sweetness
or my smiles and tears
to soften
the hard heart
of love.

103

Like grains of salt
they shone
then melted.

[82] This is how they disappeared
those men
who did not love me.

104

I am out
in the cold
and in the dark.
Why don't you
open
the door
of your shirt
to me.

Translated by Khaled Mattawa



Iman Mersal

Four Poems

Family Photo

[83]

A woman and a child, pale because the photo was not cleared of the fixer. The woman does not smile (even though she did not know she would die exactly forty-seven days later). The girl does not smile (even though she did not know what death was). The woman has the girl's lips and her brow (the girl has the nose of the man who will remain forever outside the frame). The woman's hand is on the child's shoulder, the child's hand is in a fist (not out of anger but to hold half a toffee). The woman's watch does not work, it has a wide strap (out of fashion in 1974), and the girl's dress is not of Egyptian cotton (Nasser, who manufactured everything from the needle to the rocket, died years ago). The shoes are imported from Gaza (and as you know Gaza is no longer a free zone at all).

A Drink with an Arab Nationalist

Thinking my courage would come in through the side door,
and appropriately muddled for passing an evening as I wait
under this colonial ceiling,

an Arab nationalist walks in.

Instantly white-haired, as if he came straight from battling the
invaders in Tahrir Square,

'The nation is burning,' he says, not 'Good evening.'

And suddenly enveloped in smoke, I am coughing.

At noon I had returned from a funeral.

Now a trainee surgeon awaits me in a room whose cleanliness is
exaggerated.

Yet my courage does not come through the door,
the despicable side door separating the ladies' from the urinals.

Love

A man decided to explain love to me. Leftover wine, and noon is crossing over to the other side. He was doing up the last button on his shirt as darkness edged into the corner.

[84]

Directionlessness, like the moment the screen fades out, and the viewer has to start looking for the exit. In this way he decided to explain love to me, placing the glasses firmly over his ears while I was still naked.

The room fogged up when he said, 'Love is the search for . . .' I opened my eyes to see hordes of Spaniards looking for gold in Chile. They were hungry and empty-handed, while a Red Indian hid, terrified, behind a rock. When he said, 'Love is being content with . . .', my fingers started caressing a mountain of dark chocolate, while Ella Fitzgerald's wailing slipped into my ears. 'And it is happiness . . .' Then I imagined absolutely nothing.

It must be that I never saw him again, because I don't remember ever asking him whether love was forgetting his watch by the bedside.

A Life

This never happened in my parents' house, definitely not among those I thought knew me.

My life, which I have always failed to touch, to find a picture that brings us together, is next to me on the same bed. It opens its eyes after a long coma, stretches like a princess confident that her father's palace is protected from thieves, that happiness is under the skin despite the wars which never sleep.

That life into which more than one father crammed his ambition, more than one mother her scissors, more than one doctor their sedatives, more than one freedom fighter their sword, more than one institution its stupidity, and more than one poetic school its conception of poetry. My life which I



dragged behind me from city to city, gasping for breath as I trailed it, running from school to library and from kitchen to bar, from the nai to the piano and from Marx to museums, from my memory of how a body smelled to the dream of an airport lounge, from all that I don't know to all that I don't know. My life, which I failed even to make sure existed, next to me on the same bed. It opens its eyes after a long coma, stretches like a princess confident that her father's palace is protected from thieves, that happiness is under the skin despite the wars which never sleep.

[85]

In this way I woke up in a strange land the morning I reached forty, and if not for the fact that God never sent women messengers, I would have thought it was the first sign of Prophecy; and if not for my own temperament, I would have cited the words of Mahmoud Darwish about a woman who enters her fortieth year in all of her 'apricotness,' or the words of Milosz about the door that opened inside him through which he entered.

Before me is a line of dead people who died perhaps because I loved them, houses in which to have insomnia that I kept cleaning devotedly on holidays, presents I did not open when they arrived, poems I was robbed of line by line, so much so that I doubt they belong to me, men I did not meet until the wrong time, and asylums of which I remember only the iron bars on the windows. Before me is my whole life, so much so I could hug it if I wanted to, I could even sit on its knees singing, or wailing.

Translated by Youssef Rakha

Nacera Mohammedi

Two Poems

[86]

Diving into a Woman's Sorrow

Who will dive into the sorrow of a woman
whose exile paints itself a shade of blue
whose gateways lead to seductions
the size of the Lord's eyes?
Who will steal away the homeland
tattooed into memory
extinguish the lamps of years
forgotten along the heart's way?
Who will break an Andalusian spell
and take me by storm?
Amazement shall blossom like roses
and my heart turn the colour of dreams –
dreams left behind by the prophets
Your face with lights, your face bathed by rain
let the rest of the world burn
The gypsy woman captures an old sailor's songs
and squanders them in the wind
So who said
'Never love a man who loves the sea
... you'll die, either by drowning or by force'
Who said so?
Listen a little to my pain
Weep over my weariness and kiss me
You surround my every pore
so wipe away the signs of my orphanhood
Between your silence and the lines of my palms
I am a wanted woman
Our time hurtles towards the cities of lights
O my forgotten homeland
Forgive me, Birayn
The wounds of the sea stole me away from you



The wind's fury assailed me an ocean ago
I trickle along the path of a tear
swaying with the sun's slant
and remembering that man of mine
Between his palms and my blood there are poems [87]
which sorrowful women desire
In my hair, on his chest
there are dreams to be shared by the miserable
dreams as blue as the Danube's sorrows
They compose the song of the future
They sketch in the sands of exile
seasons for love and longing
Ah ... Forgive me, Birayn
in my troubles I see your exiled face
You ask the waves about a fish
which flirts with travel
but cannot survive my yearning
for the soil's liberation, the trees' widowhood
You are surrounded by the alphabet of my pain
by the taste of bread dipped in my mother's blood
her willowy stature,
her dark complexion smuggled from the Fertile Crescent
her eyes, where the hardiest sailors plunge
her heart, which is a continent of tenderness if only you knew.
Ah ...
You are surrounded by the alphabet of my pain
by the shape of sorrow in my father's cloak
that wounded hawk inhabited by my grandfather's wisdom
They fought orphanhood with love sharp as a knife
Love which straddles death
shatters its stone and springs forth like a prophet
To all my hurt
will you listen?
Shall I open my windows to the sea, and fall silent?
Teach me to dissolve in the presence of joy
and be quiet ...
Lead me to the childhood in things

that I may find solitude and silence
Hold me in your sea eyes
Don't let me perish by drowning or force
Kiss this flame
[88] and draw me back, with your silken threads
to the warmth of Birayn
Oh, who said, 'Never love a man who loves the sea
... you'll die by drowning or by force?'
Who said so?
Who said so? Who said so?

Desert Widow

Time speaks and memory catches fire
telling of souls taking root
in the kingdom of astonishment
of poetry dying on a widow's lips
of a woman abandoned by the city's starry dreams
Snow surrounds her, encloses her aimless evenings
a widow who lives off her own blood
her blossoming body
the pellets of memory tucked into her clothes
her fingertips blaze with feeling
with the light of a dying kiss
a widow touching her breast
exhaling into the flute of pain her long sigh
Eyes pass her by
Barren is the earth
without poetry
without rhyme
What a lover you were desert widow
Final kiss of the gypsy
What a lover you were!

Translated by Seema Atalla



Amel Moussa

Five Poems

Creatures on the Inside

[89]

Inside every woman, there is a man.
Inside every man, there is a woman.
Inside every language, there is the female and the male.
Inside every lover, there is a god.
Inside every sinner, there is an innocent.
Inside every poet, there is a prophet.
Inside every prophet, there is a creator and a created.
Below, there is a sleeping animal.
Above, there is a caliph sitting cross-legged.
So, who are all those
stirring outside?

The First Life

In the countries
in whose lands roses thrive
while their creatures dwindle in number,
the people weep during the holiday seasons.
Roses remind them of those who have passed on,
and how each one's blood returned to its first life
as a rose.

Translated by Khaled al-Masri

Desires of a Mad Mind

Whenever these feet dance
my memory besieges me
and pants ahead of me
demanding my dowry

but my dowry
is a poem:
the impossible head of death.

[90] On every journey

I lose my ring;
the sapphire stone
falls

In every migration
solitude bites my nails,
and I return crawling.

My knees carry me
toward my island.
I ask the sailor for my ring.
I search in houses for a pillow
that holds my mind's desires.

Love Me

I carry me on my fingertips.
I carry me on the galloping of my vision.
I wrap myself with a swaddling of my skin.
I embrace me with longing for myself.
I bless my flowing, my gushing.
I cradle me in my chest.
I glove these budding hands with poetry.

I claim revelation,
my engravings are on stone.
My image carries water to thirst,
and bait to fishermen's nets.
I spend the tolling of evening bells
sculpting.
I sleep in my own shade.
I wear my Bedouin nature
to spite cities.



I stroll within me
when I weary myself.
I enter a garden
that does not entice myself against me.
I love my impossible self,
the one whose feet
the earth does not know.

[91]

Female of Water

Water did not rush our way
burning with the ferocity of thirst.

Why does water follow in my tracks
and forget its channels
and its flood plains?

Why do I not rest my face
at the edge of the water
to know
how it hid its colour from us,
how we made it lose its scent?

Why do I not become the secret of water?
Why do I not become female to its male,
and wait for him in the jug
until summer arrives.

Translated by Khaled Mattawa

Rasha Omran

Two Poems

[92]

A Place for Me, Perhaps

In the world, there is a place for a rebel like me
a rented apartment in some country
a narrow cellar, big enough for my suitcase
a forgotten inn, unfrequented by those who belong

In the world, there is a place for an insubordinate such as me
a street where the scent of jasmine lingers
a sidewalk trodden by different steps
or an abandoned door no one opens

In the world, there is a place for a dreamer just like me
a city, intimate with the sea every night
giving birth each morning to multi-coloured gulls
and at noon opening her legs to be impregnated by the sun

In the world, there is a place for an outcast I know
friends colour the minutes with their greetings
friends whose souls accommodate differences of opinion
friends unbothered by the mud of old shoes on the carpet of
their affection

There is a place in the world for an atheist who lives near me
a compassionate face for a nearby sky
angels who loan humans their peace and borrow anxiety in
return
a lonesome, insomniac god who visits the earth in search of his
woman
and finding her, sleeps in peace

There is a place in the world for a lover like me
a man bursting from his composure, emerging naked as the
wind to meet me



a mad man who always agrees with me when I say there is a
place in the world for her and me together
I mean his wife or any woman who knows to forget her fingers
on his table just as I do
a man seceding from his blackness, drawn to the pink colour [93]
on the shoes he buys for me
a man who thinks in the abstract, knowing that love is outside
time and above space
a man who resumes his poem in my body and who, when he
leaves me, takes from my skin some salt
so I won't forget him
one man only

There is a place in the world for an eternal woman like me
an ancient oak that shades a tightly sealed room
a room big enough for my body only when its waters dry up
and a vast void, big enough perhaps for the flood of my soul.

Hallucination and Free-Flowing Blue Rivers

This place has no name
no clear features
no trace of a touch or a tread
only emptiness with its gigantic grip
dragging me to him
seating me exactly in the middle,
a conspicuous stone sitting in the dust

Like this he has
a wild darkness on his shoulders
cities rolling soundlessly off his voice
as he tossed something like solitude between his fingers
and for no reason he stared at me

like someone waiting for an inscrutable sign
and when I signalled
he gathered in his fragmented parts, aggrandizing himself,
and embraced me

I could not fathom what happened to me
my body stretched itself like the whistle of a speeding train
from my head, clouds escaped, gleaming like bubbles of light,
and on my skin, circles of women grew by the thousand

[94]

I could not fathom what happened to me
I hallucinated in words that woke year after year
then I murmured the song of an ancient flute
while he stared at me
letting his many fingers peel the rolling cities off his voice
and put them in my mouth

There was something, then, that seduced me
into losing equilibrium
When his trembling touched me
I was nothing but a shadow revealing his blue riddles
and scattering them like free-flowing rivers
There was something on his shoulders that seduced me
abandoned thickets from a distant night,
birds improvising their rarity
spacious prairies with the last murmurs of fragile echoes
There were clouds, bolts of lightning and the illusion of
advancing winds
There, my stags had to leap
with darkened eyes or with eyes from which glinted
ancient days
There's no difference,
it's an open invitation to examine the strangeness
or side with astonishment as it swings the heart as if to
dancing music

But I, siding with myself,
concealed my features and bent down to
collect the memory of his fingers from my skin
He was the darkness of my kohl and I entered his proving
ground
I exit to enter again
then I exit and he enters me



then he exits and I enter him
then, with no resistance
I left the memory of his fingers on my skin
surrendering to the possibilities of delayed pleasure
while my body began to stretch
and stretch,
suddenly it was a tall tree.

[95]

Translated by Khaled al-Masri

Rabia Raihane

A Short Story

[96]

A Red Spot

To join the girls in their afternoon play means for me to change into a free bird, whose insides are bristling with a strong desire to fly here and there, or to hide just like a wild rabbit or a restless gazelle that knows how to enjoy being free in a wide open space.

While I was still a young girl of fourteen – an age at which I was supposed to show obedience to my parents as well as timidity – my mother decided she was going to marry me off. It happened because one of our distant relatives, who had visited us unexpectedly, could not lift her eyes off me when she saw me, head bowed and looking at my feet, carrying out to the letter my mother's commands and explicit instructions. Prompted by her intuition, which was never wrong, she told my mother that I'd make a good wife for her son.

Confused, I felt as though I had grown up fast into a full woman when my sister broke the news to me. My mother's face beamed with joy: I would have a husband, unlike my aunt's daughters. But when the subject was mentioned in the presence of my father I became very shy and embarrassed. However, by sunset, I had already completely forgotten about the matter. Halima had peeped round the door – our door which is never shut. 'Come and play!' she said. So I joined her, but after hopping for two squares, I stopped playing and withdrew to a corner. She called my name out several times, and when I did not respond, she walked away: 'May God strike you down, you rotten thing!'

What's happening to me? I remembered the policeman's daughter and her domineering mother. I also recalled the frightened women, some of whom had become spiteful and begun to rejoice at other people's misfortunes. A terrible thing had happened in the policeman's household: his beautiful daughter's handsome bridegroom left her. He just opened the window, in the dark, and jumped out. That gave our mothers a good excuse to call us all in and to reprimand us – from the youngest girl to the oldest one amongst us.



'You girls bring shame and disgrace upon us!' they said.

The policeman's daughter was not a virgin. Shocked senseless when he found out, the bridegroom, feeling betrayed, left her. Her mother retreated into a corner and began slapping her cheeks. Her father got on his motorbike and drove off. No amount of consolation was any help. As for the bride, she just sat there, helpless and vulnerable. Wicked tongues said it was a logical consequence of all the wrongs her parents had done other people: her father, the policeman, was rude and cruel and had a heart of stone, sparing no one with his belt or stick; her mother, emboldened by her husband, bubbled with evil and wickedness.

[97]

The women made fun of the policeman: 'He was too busy watching others,' they said, 'he should have been watching over his daughter's virginity!'

We girls grew even more anxious and worried. We'd meet and talk. We were wondering where all that astuteness had come from, all that wisdom which we discovered was our shield against losing our virginity: avoiding jumping too high, sitting on anything that had a sharp edge, and peeing where boys urinated.

My heart pounded from fear whenever older girls asked us younger ones to stick out our tongues – that was their way of taking revenge upon us: 'You're a virgin.' 'And so are you!' 'You're a virgin, too!' 'No, you're not!' they would tell each one of us as they 'examined' our tongues. Imagine the distress we had to endure from that disgusting way of telling who was a virgin from who was not, even if it was just a crazy game.

We had never experienced sex but we had thought about it a great deal. Our mothers' warnings against having sex, and their admonishments, were like the tolling of bells they rang without cease, which dampened our desire for it altogether.

Mariam lost her virginity behind an unfinished building.

I was not her friend. She was a little older than me, and she was too busy looking after herself and her siblings; maybe because she was the oldest, her mother shifted the burden of looking after them from her shoulder to her daughter's.

Mariam's brothers were keeping a low profile; they could no longer draw self-assurance from their father, the policeman, or from their own

physical strength. They knew that they were the talk of the town, reviled and condemned – the kind of response one attracts from people when one commits a sin.

[98] The idea that Mariam's family would not let this humiliation go unpunished was in the air; the women even brought to mind the father's pistol and the brothers' big knife. But due to a certain divine wisdom, the father and the brothers heeded the old women's talk and their good offices, and abided by the saying 'Fate and the Divine Decree – you want this, and I want that, but God does what He wills.'

The town revelled in the gossip about the policeman's daughter until people eventually lost interest in her story. Mariam kept herself out of sight, becoming meek and totally submissive. She was the household's very obedient slave.

When my mother broached the subject of my marriage to my cousin with me, her face radiant with joy, I stammered and burst into tears. Mariam's beautiful face loomed in my mind. I imagined her alone, kneeling, cleaning and scrubbing, being violently abused by everybody, and accepting it all.

I implored my mother: 'I don't want to get married. I really don't.' 'But I want,' she said.

'Then you marry him!' I retorted, feeling rather disconcerted. I held my head bowed for some time, and when I raised it to look at her, I saw her face had turned ashen at my response, but she soon regained her calm, saying: 'He's nice and rich.'

My face contorted with pain as I said, threatening: 'If you force me to marry, I'll run away.'

My answer seemed to stun her and she sat there brooding. Then I heard her say in an aggrieved voice: 'Why would you do that?'

'Because I don't want to be anybody's slave!' I said, full of anguish and staring hard at a red spot on the tiled floor.

Translated by Ali Azeriah



Azza Rashad

Two Short Stories

[99]

My Mother's Eyes

My grandmother's departing eyes fixed upon the vast heavenly expanse, and this was the last thing she said: 'Man sees what he wants to see.'

My mother gently lowered her eyelids without letting a single tear fall, but she burst into tears when your plate of broth spilt and burnt my thigh on the day of Ashura. Do you remember?

Mother spent the whole of that afternoon preparing food. The duck was killed and she prepared fattah with vinegar and garlic just as you like it, in the hope it that would bring back your lost appetite. You were struck by an illness which affected you after we moved to our new home and away from grandmother's house, which in spite of its size seemed to us too small, as Aunt was mistress of it and took every opportunity to torment Mother. She was submissive to start with, but then began to give back as good as she was given; and the sound of their voices raised in argument shook the heart of the house and radiated out into the neighbouring streets, to the point that we became the talk of the town.

You sold the two square measures of land that were your entire inheritance from your father in order to build a small, separate house for us. I still remember you standing beneath his picture, with your head lowered, crying soundlessly.

The picture of grandfather was the first thing we hung up in our new house, which exhausted the money before the final bricks were laid in its walls. You always said in response to the worry lurking in my eyes: 'It will be a balcony so we can look out onto the world.'

You spent most of your time on that balcony, drinking tea and grilling corncobs, which you used to like a lot before you gave them up, like most kinds of food, when you became ill.

You gave up sleeping, eating, and.... Mother, who had great success in performing miracles, making up her face with powders I had never seen before. I used to think she looked like an Easter egg with

her loud colours – I didn't imagine then that I would put them on my own face every day as I do now. She began to wear a strange dress with big holes in it that reminded me of a fishing net. That was on the day she cooked a fatted duck for us, and refused to give me the liver before we had all gathered around the table to eat together.

Frustrated, I went out into the world, and I saw her ... the woman who lived alone opposite us, the one whom I heard our neighbours talking about. They said she came to live in the safety of our land after being abandoned by a city scumbag; and then they made up their minds she had joined a wandering jinn who had caused her to scorn talking to people and wear a transparent dress – strange and shameless. There were also those who declared she was deranged, crazy, so everyone avoided her, even my mother.

My eyes were following her out of curiosity when I saw you at that same moment walking along with confused steps, head down. Were you following her shadow after she disappeared behind the door, left ajar? Her shadow – which seemed to me in that moment tall, wild, and likely to be one of the ghosts they used to frighten us with so we would stop crying. Or were you following a shadow far from her, hidden at that time from my view by my short stature?

One thing I will never forget is that when you reached the house you passed by me without saying a word – as though you hadn't seen me. And when Mother called us and lined us up around our banquet ... you choked at the first sip of the broth and the bowl fell from your hand, burning my thigh. My mother withdrew to her room, bewildered, crying; and after I swallowed my pain and followed her, I saw her tears falling, the colour of the broth. I felt at that moment as though the broth churning about inside me would be the last. It was as though I was afraid of something obscure, that I had not encountered before even in the most savage quarrels of my mother and aunt; but I didn't realise exactly what.

I saw my mother a little while later hugging the black veil of her own mother as though she had lost her that very minute. She cried a great deal, then dried her tears and came out in her black gilbab, in the company of our elderly neighbour. I heard them whispering strange



things about the Sheikh, who could open the Book and discover secret things.

After a while, her features brightened again. She took a folded paper which she hid under your pillow, and three incense sticks, which she burnt one after the other throughout the following three days. Then she gathered up the ash left over and on the morning of the fourth day threw it into the river. She kept on observing you from afar, as I was observing you, and her and our strange neighbour and the ghosts of distant space.

[101]

Gradually your lost appetite came back. My mother cried out for joy when she thought you were cured. She poured a cup of water outside the house and stood plaiting her wet hair in front of the window, receiving the congratulations of our good neighbours.

You finally got better ... you laughed, and chattered and slept. You ate so much that there wasn't enough left for us ... you laughed so we laughed, but your absences from the house increased after you got your new work. Apparently your absence was necessary for half the week on alternate weeks, so we just praised God for all things.

And as the days went by, it was as though we hardly saw you; until you cut us off altogether, and you left us.

I used to hang your picture up in front of me for many years. I would fill my mouth with saliva and spit it at you every evening, because you left us on a moonless night, without concerning yourself as to whether we would sink or swim.

I used to conjure you up in my sleep, and you came to me shrouded in a halo of mistrust. You tortured me for many years. Although I had no proof against her apart from a few half-words and snatches of sentences, I never dared say to Mother that I had heard our good neighbours whispering about your elopement with that woman.

You came to me in my sleep, and I slapped you until my hands were numb and you vanished; afterwards I began to cry. In the morning I wandered streets which led nowhere. They brought me from unknown boulevards to ones even stranger to me. I kept my eyes peeled for a face I resembled in the endless stream of faces flowing past until I lost my way, and lost myself, and I returned to my mother. I found her talking about you as though you had just come back to us.

I needed many years to forget the little girl I was ... I had to get rid of the black down which linked my eyebrows and kept growing back so I could obliterate the picture of you that was carved into me, and move on

[102] My colleague at work told me I didn't speak much – though she didn't confess that she was afraid of me because of that. And our new colleague complained he didn't know how to dodge the bullet aimed by my eyes every time I looked at him.

I look in the mirror and I see you, standing and clinging to my vocal chords, or a renewed fantasy of revenge straying through my eyes, unabated in its excess by the thoughts passing through my head that some misfortune had perhaps befallen you and made you leave us in that contemptible manner; even death would be no excuse for your long absence.

You alone know how much I needed you and how much I suffered in my battles with myself so I would stop waiting for you.

You alone made me see how I did not resemble my mother – whom, whenever I wanted to row with her, I would tell that you would not be coming back; and she would fly into a rage, insisting that someone had 'bewitched' you and that God was capable of healing you and bringing you back.

My mother, whose gaze never left the door, waiting for you, never omitted to set aside your portion of the fattah made with vinegar and garlic that you like, and always kept a tenderness for you in her heart – which, thanks to you, I would never know.

My mother, who, when I mocked her Sheikh who was no good at reading, closed her eyes for a long time, then muttered strange words and shouted furiously: 'Curse the devil and sleep.'

I close my eyes to the letters scratching at my eye, writing before me a bewildering question with no answer: 'Why does man see only what he wants?'

The Night ... When All Is Quiet

No sooner had her feet passed the door of the hospital than she began to divide the way to her house into three sections as she used to do,



taking pleasure in a game she had mastered in order to challenge the boredom of the fifteen minutes which must elapse before she reached home.

The first part began with the high wall, which ran along the half-destroyed pavement, and the distressing gloom; the gloominess was only dispelled by the fragments of conversation thrown out to her ears each night, between people of whom nothing appeared but their shadowy faces, made jagged by the iron bars over the small distant windows; and others who stood on the pavement to speak to them and then moved on afterwards, free like her, just like her.

[103]
Between the two sides of the wall, she would sometimes hear passionate, emotional conversations, and at other times quarrels which reached the top limits of verbal abuse and threats. But on no night did she stop to ask herself the question she dared not articulate: 'Who are the prisoners? And who are the free?'

A burst of light would rouse her from her thoughts on the second section of the way.

Here, when you were passing by the New Era Café, you would hear curses and ripostes, laughter and fear and negotiations, between young men and old, policemen and lawbreakers, breadwinners and market playboys, and thus the clamour would continue and then be swallowed up by the empty streets in the last section of the way, which was the least frightening for her as she knew it like the back of her hand.

In the vicinity of the low wall of the Bar'i house she would hear the mother cursing her sons as 'men in twisting their moustaches, and nothing else' – to quote her her mocking words – who had sold their fathers' workshop and frittered away the money.

A little later, the anxious voice of 'Good-name' Al-Shaji would come to her, nagging at his wife for the entire alleyway to hear in characteristic musical sentences, beginning with his pockets which she emptied every morning and ending with the Sheikh, who sat as the look-out at the threshhold of the house, disclosing precise details, which ought to be secret between any man and his wife; and thus the way ended quickly and she found herself in front of the door to her flat.

As soon as she put the key in the lock she heard the cries of her

children and the usual shouting of their father, and before the few minutes had passed in which she needed to catch her breath, her life-partner had put on his best clothes and gone out. Like every night.

[104] She quickly began to prepare dinner for the little ones and do the housework which bored their father. Finally the children were in their beds, ready to sleep after she kissed them and wished them sweet dreams.

Then her own time began ... no, it hadn't started yet! Hurriedly, she tidied the room which had become disordered, and while she was doing that put the radio on and began to sing. Then she remembered that her voice didn't agree with her troublesome neighbour, so she became quiet.

It was almost midnight when her own time began

With a hesitant hand, she drew a 'honeycomb' box, which she had bought from the shop next to the café, out of her bag and looked at it, then put it back in the bag, and once more took it out ... she thought for a moment, then began to undo the box, and undo the cellophane.

The picture of her father on the wall opposite her bed made her jump, and she saw his eyes fixed on her

Yes. She had loved him intensely, and detested him intensely also.

Ah ... the great father ... she slipped into his room, and into his heart, with the smile she made especially to soften his heart, when everyone said he had no heart ... except for her.

His room, perfumed with the scent of honeycomb, and his strong, probing eyes, detecting everything that came within his orbit, and his deep, decisive voice and his moustache 'I'm so proud of your moustache, father' All that gave him a majesty and splendour which awoke love in the heart and fear in the hand which stretched out timidly for school fees, which he gave generously, without hesitation.

She left his room and knew he had sent someone after her to follow her from a distance. Indeed, as opposed to her mother, he never refused her slightest request. Except in matrimony

'Is marriage a game?' She could still remember the voice of her mother, trying to convince her he was doing it all in her best interests.

She began to suck a piece of honeycomb, sighing ... now the sweet taste began, and the smell



The smell of honeycomb, which never left her father, until he was washed and wrapped in the shroud. Did she – after all these years – still look like him?

She began to laugh, until her hand – which was rooting about in the depths of her bag – hit upon the memorandum which the manager had signed that morning, and flung at her with his nose in the air, without saying a word.

[105]

He doubtless knew that all his decisions on regulations and systems were impossible to implement ... but what was it with his nose? She felt the taste of the honey flowing into her stomach ... and the bitter taste of smoke flowed onto her tongue ... she started to sigh and turn over on the bed....

She saw herself cutting the head off her father, the nose off the manager, and a leg off her husband, having forgotten her doubts about him, until they were renewed today this evening by her colleague with the small eyes and the sharp fingers

She saw herself rise and destroy everything ... the bed ... the hospital ... the prison, everything. She felt the bitterness of the smoke arriving suddenly in her stomach, and ran to be sick ... It hurt, and she felt her insides spewing from her mouth as she discharged them with resignation ... and when she realised she hadn't yet died, she returned to her bed, where a thick cloud of peacefulness enveloped her, relaxing the set of her face from within. A number of pictures were floating to the top of the pile of her thoughts ... the faces of her children, and the pleading eyes of the patients as her colleague, the nurse with the sharp fingers, pricked them with the needle; the stern faces of her father and her manager; the smile of her husband in the wedding picture ... ahhh ... why was he so handsome in that wedding photo.....

She sighed deeply, then cried to herself: 'I'm not the lamb they think I am, and they're not the wolves I think they are.'

She began to laugh to herself again, listening to the voice inside her which was still capable of putting up a fight: 'The game isn't over yet ... I'll beat them all.'

She folded the memorandum purposefully, and returned it to her bag. On her face, she sketched the smile with which she would face

the manager in the morning, and when she saw the time had passed, I am, the time her husband was due to return, she forgot the pain in her stomach that had not entirely ceased and rose to put on her red nightdress....

[106] She began to dab on perfume and take down her hair. She thought about him for a long time before he came....

He was very close, but in spite of that, she was powerless to see him, to see what was inside him....

The hardness of his features saddened her and her misgivings increased. Her eyes fled from his, which had been looking away from her for a long time, and she asked him: 'Who did you spend the evening with?'

He answered her with the same hardness: 'Nobody....'

She lifted the red nightdress slightly up her thighs, and said to herself: 'Now we'll see.'

Translated by Jenny Steel



Amina Saïd

Two Poems

The Mothers

[107]

From now on the mothers will sleep alone
among the portraits of the dead
only the mothers know where they've gone
and how the long labour of dying
had distanced them already from the living

alone from now on the mothers wander
among the graves of the departed
reciting down those avenues of death
prayers in unknown languages
telling the heavy beads of dispersed time

they no longer measure time
by nights that fall across the earth
nor by mornings rising on the world
they ask everyone where the territories
of death begin and where they end

the mothers discover solitude
the world contained by a square of hardened earth
they keep having the same dream that cracks darkness open
converse with the emptiness of mirrors
repeat the same prayer in which daylight is dying

from now on in the rumpled sheets of time
the mothers celebrate solitary weddings
in the deep silence of their houses
clocks without hands
mark the passage of the hours

from now on night will have eyes
tracking the mothers' sleeplessness
two angels inhabit them who one day

will ask for our accounts when our turn
comes to approach the doors of heaven
with the rosary's thread broken
the mothers pour the water of their tears
into the graves' crucible
they pay attention to the flight of birds
messages from the dead between their wings
our second home is built
in the avenue of death say the mothers
why have we given life
just to struggle with the shadow for it
until our own last breath
all we see of our kin is bleached bones
hands soiled with graveyard earth
we plant trees and bushes so those branches
will be the roof of their new dwelling
if only we had known say the mothers
we reread letters the dead once sent
and imagine different answers
everything becomes clear once it is too late
there is not enough thread of regret
left to string the shards of our night
our hands tremble the mothers keep saying
from looking into too much darkness
our eyes can barely see light
the suns have deserted our gardens
long rags of cloud hang from the trees
we all dance suspended like puppets
with time holding the strings
our movements replicate
ancient gestures and from now on no one
will hear our expropriated speech



what wouldn't we have done for our loved ones
plucked the splinters from life's thorny bouquet
then one by one the roses wilted
from now on through a window frame
we will watch the sea marry the horizon

[109]

our life a glimmer that flickers on shadow
slowly we divest ourselves of our backbones
hunched over further each day
with the inconsequential weight of memory
and with waiting for our own end.

you who are no longer in the world's present tense
but in an excess of night with hidden doorways
I create you in your own image caress your waters
we watch ourselves draw apart
and the dream shadows a never-indifferent night
then reemerges in all its weight of aerial pain

I keep you multiple
in the crucible of fecund breath
in the pollen-gathering corollas of silence
at the heart of a word made of shattered dawns
brought back to life in a prodigal day's shivering
more simply I'm taking a rest from your dream
from the suns in your eyes
it's that way with certain dreams
as with great happiness or great sorrow
for your silence lacking a voice
for the dream that you bear in your night
the flame must be fed the lamp protected

Translated from the French by Marilyn Hacker

Adania Shibli

An Excerpt from the Novel We Are All Equally Far From Love

[110]

The Second Degree

As if the beginning is an end

For no sooner than we begin does an end come

She forgot to chop the chicken; she had put it whole in the pot which had started to boil by now and it was too late to take it out, so she began to jump around in the kitchen, hitting herself, hating herself.

Then she started, with deep and deliberate contemplation, to look around herself slowly, searching for another mistake she might have committed while she had been thinking of him. She had put the vegetables in a pot that she needed for the rice, but this was a tolerable mistake. She pulled out the chair and sat down, her gaze fixed on the criminal pot while the flame under it rose up persistently and indifferently. At least no one was at home.

She got up again to fetch a cigarette and smoke it in the kitchen. She would try to quit smoking.

* * *

When the drone of the refrigerator began to vie with the sound of the unchopped chicken as it boiled above the fire, she started to contemplate the ring placed on one of the fingers of her left hand, which had since swelled up around it.

Unbelievable, how she no longer loved him. How very long ago that was. She felt as if she was freed from suffering, the details of which she had now forgotten. All those night-time lectures that he used to give her, then lie down to sleep, while she would lay down to cry. All the wrong he had done her was enough for her not to feel guilty when she fell in love with another man; rather, she felt pity and nothing but pity. Even his appearance had changed, he had become more decrepit. He had thinned down as well and changed his hairstyle, which made him look more idiotic.



It was good for his health to be loved.

As for her, she could not believe that after what she had lived through all these years, she would fall in love with a man other than her husband, and completely erase the latter from her life, except for his one meal after he returned from work. And the left side of the bed.

[III]

Three months ago, she suffered spasms in her left shoulder. That shoulder was the one next to her husband and his malice on the night that he showered her with innumerable abuses, showing no restraint or mercy. She had been certain it would not anger him when she asked if he would not mind keeping open the children's savings account designated for their future university studies, as the conditions in the country were not comforting. Perhaps it would be better for them if they took out a loan from the bank. He wanted to buy a new car because he was sick and tired of spending all his weekends in garages.

She could not move it, her shoulder, any more, after that night's talk. The doctor, who did not know anything about the bitter soap opera that was her life, said it was due to a nervous shock that had struck her unexpectedly and recommended that she go for physiotherapy sessions immediately.

* * *

She went to the first session driving the car with one hand, because her husband was busy, and moreover, did not believe her.

She lay down on the narrow white bed, with her eyes shut, expecting him to begin at any moment.

When did love strike?

From the very beginning, when he asked her: 'Did I hurt you?'

That was like an ancient question that no longer would occur to anyone that she knew. And even if he had hurt her, this question had removed the effect of any pain, previous or forthcoming. But the answer choked in her throat and all that came out was a murmur that resembled a 'no' so he posed his question again. This time, she tried hard to say 'no' and raised her head. Just then, the spasms intensified and a small groan escaped from between her teeth. He apologized. She asked him not to.

From the beginning then, it seemed as if the treatment targeted not

only her crippled shoulder but also her shattered heart. And what she believed to be the worst that could have happened to her started to transform itself, how she did not know, into something beautiful that made her feel she was regaining her sense of humanity. Therefore, and after all this, she had no choice but to love him.

Then they went back to chatting about Phoenicians in the North and others in the East.

She was fascinated by everything related to ancient civilizations and the beginning of monotheistic religions. Such topics were well suited to the lifestyle of a frustrated woman in her forties, who worked outside during the day and at home at night; topics that drifted in and out of her life without changing any aspect of what she had been living for the past fifteen years. Except that she felt ashamed to openly declare these interests in front of anyone, let alone her husband, who did not even hear her asking him whether he wanted coffee. As for her children, they anyway had to live through enough terror on account of their homework.

And so, when she didn't find anything to say to the man with the hand that was passing over her, and she found that she had suddenly started to remember how her husband had barely touched her all these years even when they made listless love, she would start talking to him about the Phoenicians, and he would respond to her with the Assyrians.

He asked her if she knew King Solomon, so she asked him back: 'Personally?'

He burst out laughing.

This was the first time she heard him laugh. She had tried in the past few days to imagine his laugh, but she never imagined it the way it came out just now, as it surged into her ears and touched her very depths. At that moment, she spread a smile onto her face, a smile with no limits.

She never laughed with her husband and her husband did not laugh with her. If he did laugh, he laughed at her. He used to ridicule her. His laughing would stir up the pain in her shoulder, bring tears and a feeling of suffocation in her throat.

He used to make her stomach churn when he made her discover



yet again that she did not understand anything. She needed him, no, she had started to need him to be certain even of what she felt. Then, with time, she made mistakes no longer only in her opinions but also in her questions. Therefore, when 'he' asked her whether she knew King Solomon and she answered 'Personally?' she was asking in all seriousness.

[113]

But, luckily, he laughed.

She rushed out to the car and began to drive as fast as possible to reach home and read what was written in the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, as if King Solomon had just finished his two manuscripts and here they were, both hot off the press, and not three thousand years old.

Three thousand years since the King had loved that shepherdess; three thousand years since her heart had been stirred with a similar desire; since she had rushed home; since her heart had nearly slipped out from behind the steering wheel; since she had commanded all the traffic lights to turn green at once.

And sayeth King Solomon that there is nothing new under the sun.

But for her, even the sun itself was new. To love. To sleep, then wake up and still be in love. To bathe and be in love. To cook, and be in love. To drive the car, and be in love. And to love the sun.

Her mundane life was not equipped to take in all this energy, so she had to expend it in a small project, newly established behind the house. Three beds in which she planted mint, parsley and basil. With time, these three beds transformed themselves into a considerable break from the life that she had been living without respite for years.

At last, she was now able to be with herself, as she had been once before she metamorphosed into a wife, then a mother. She held the soil. She watered the beds. When the weather was hot and the sun was above her, beads of sweat would gather on her nose. Then she would rest in the shade and remember how he passed his hand over her, time after time.

And it was her husband who won the first bunch of mint, which ended up floating in a glass of tea in front of him, while they both forgot the harshness of his earlier ridicule of her 'agricultural project,'

accusing her yet again of feigning possessiveness. But how could she not give him the first bunch of mint?

[114] She sat at his left in the living room. He was smoking, she was smoking and he was talking. Everything he was saying was boring nonsense, but she nodded in agreement from time to time. Suddenly, he looked straight at her and in a sneering, threatening tone said: 'You've become stronger!'

She replied with a smile. He then added: 'You'll pay the price for this strength.'

He went out of the living room and she remained to the left of the void he left behind, thinking about this man whom she had spent her whole life with, and to whom she had given her love, all her love. She would not let tears find their way into her eyes, which were fixed on the door that he had just shut quietly.

* * *

She sat down to write a letter to him.

She held a pair of scissors and started to cut the jagged edges on the right side of the page she had torn out of her daughter's Arabic notebook, then began to look for a pen with a nice nib that was not too wide. After long hours, composed of five minutes here and five minutes there, which were given to her by a world jam-packed with duties and requirements, the letter was ready. Perhaps inadvertently, it was just in time for her last therapy session. It was a letter in which she had decided to be herself finally, even if she was quite scared of appearing like an idiot.

She folded it twice; each fold ran carefully parallel to a line on the page. Then she hid it under her husband's socks, this time on purpose, since normally he did not bother to give a single glance past the pair he was about to wear. If, in spite of this, his natural field of vision was forced to include a white sheet of paper, then he would not bother opening it, and even if he did open it and saw her handwriting, he would not bother reading it. And she relished the thought of his indifference and lack of interest in her. It amused her, for the first time in her life.



* * *

'I never believed that writing would be harder than speaking. Can you imagine? At any rate, I love you. You might be thinking: what was it that brought me to your path? Isn't life already hard enough without all this? But this is what really happened to me. This is not equivalent to a declaration of war or anything along those lines, but rather, of what is nice and what makes life worth living.'

[115]

'You must be nervous right now. In any case, life is very short, so why don't we live it day by day and enjoy the beauty of existence whenever we can? And I absolutely don't believe that social norms are stronger than emotions.'

'For that reason, I can't stop myself from imagining us together. I imagine that I am holding you very close, pressing my hand into you and feeling your breathing. I implore you, don't get angry with me for writing these words, or thinking of them. Just read them.'

He told her that she should not feel this way towards him.

She went out of the clinic, and since she could not bear to do anything else, started walking. She passed by her car, then by other cars, until she had crossed the whole parking lot to the other side. There, in a courtyard concealed behind some buildings, she found a wooden bench and sat down on it. She began to look at her elegant black clothes and the gold necklace dangling around her neck, to which some woollen threads from her sweater were clinging. She started to remove them carefully. After that, she proceeded to think about what she might possibly cook this evening.

Translated by Suneela Mubayi

Alawiya Sobh

A Chapter from the Novel

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It's Called Love

I turned off the light, stretched out on the bed and slipped off my panties. Closing my eyes, I surrendered to his kisses. He felt hot and sticky against me, his sweat was soft and dewy, shining on our bodies like stars in the night of the room. His warm caresses set the blood pulsing through my veins and his kisses ignited my passion. Welling up with desire, my body arched up toward him, as he lay on top of me, eyes shut, his large hands dancing up and down my limbs.

He had often visited my dreams, but now he was here in the flesh, kissing me all over, in my own room, and my marital bed. No Saleem, just him and me, alone, his hands and his mouth in turn exploring my body, teasing all my senses, making me soar to the sky.

The thought that I was cheating on Saleem didn't cross my mind. I had no thought of Saleem whatsoever.

His smell filled my nose, the rounded slant of his shoulder gleamed before my eyes. 'My pussy, my pussy,' I heard myself crying over and over again. 'It's yours, come, come inside me now,' I cried, just the way he used to tell me to, so that he could come. Waves of pleasurable contractions swept over me, flooding my pelvis, and then the storm of excitement slowly subsided.

When I opened my eyes, there was no one there: just the quiet stillness of the night – and my fingers down between my legs. Realizing that I had been masturbating, my eyes scanned the corners of the room.

Despite getting married and ending my relationship with Hani, my fantasies had not stopped. Sometimes, when I was alone, I would close my eyes, part my lips softly, and hold my breath. And as I released it slowly over whatever part of my body it reached, I would fantasize it was his breath, and the fingers of my right hand became his fingers. I would wet them slightly with my saliva, and touch my nipple, and feel it was him who was touching it, and that I was on top of him, or underneath, and then I no longer needed to keep my eyes shut. He



would be there. Directing my hot breath to my chest and with the help of my hand, I would feel his hot skin across my body.

How I always dreamt of a love child with him! Once, I dreamt that I had given birth to that child, and was stunned as I examined what he looked like as the doctor held him, fresh from my womb.

Another time, I dreamt that I had a little blond girl by him and that we lived together, in an unfamiliar house. Carrying the baby girl in my arms, I said to him: 'Look, Hani, it's your daughter.'

His presence permeated my whole being, giving me pleasure, but also paining me. When I realized that the feeling was just illusory, I decided to erase all my feelings for him. That had been impossible until our meeting again in the winter of 1978, when he came to Beirut to spend the Christmas and New Year holidays; after our relationship resumed with added intensity, he decided to spend the rest of the year in Lebanon.

That year, as we became physically close, each of our bodies found their repose in the other, and our mutual desire led us into a journey of self-discovery.

There are many things I try to remember but can't.

It's as if my memory is the top of a steep mountain, from which I fall every time I try to climb up. Over and over again, I set off on the ascent, but like a worm crawling across a branch, fall blindly and then start up again, to no avail.

Then the memories sometimes flood back, and I no longer remember anything else. I now recall that I wrote about that meeting in my diary, and read the entry to Su'ad. When she heard what I said about our second parting, her hand flew up to her chest, the way it always does when she is upset by something. She doesn't say anything, just recoils inwards, and seems at a loss for words, looking like someone straining to recall the entire alphabet, in vain.

That morning, I was on the balcony, sipping my coffee. It was raining, the droplets trickling down the skyward edge of the window like falling tears, or little percussive incantations, dancing on the breeze. Contemplating the rain – how it was wet, how it fell, how it was al-

ways there – I thought about the enduring mystery of life. As the rain abated and my eye caught the split-second gleam of another bolt of lightning, I was left with the same feeling I always had that it was the harbinger of a sudden and crushing event.

[118] That morning, Su'ad had come over and I'd read her a poem I had written the previous night. After I'd finished reading, she had looked at me with those still-sparkling black eyes and luminous smile of hers, and asked: 'Did you know Hani's in town?'

'What's that you're saying?' I answered, the colour draining from my cheeks.

'I saw him at the Rawdah Café yesterday, and said hello to him.'

'What was he doing? When did he get here? And who was he with?'

The questions reeled off my tongue before I fell into a stunned silence. Then I changed the subject, afraid that I would hear something unpleasant. I started telling her about my two children, but I think my words were all jumbled, just like my thoughts.

Within a couple of days, I got a call from Hani, who said he had tried not to contact me, but couldn't bear it: how could he be here in Beirut and not see me?

I went to meet him in a small café that none of our acquaintances frequented. Whenever I saw him after a long break, it was as if I had regained my spirit. And it was only when I sat across from him at the table that I felt the blood pumping in my heart. I could feel myself blushing, the pink flush colouring my cheeks, my ears and the tip of my nose. We talked about all sorts of things: his studies, my two children, the war; we steered clear of the subject of our relationship.

Later, we wandered aimlessly through the streets, without noticing much of anything – just meandering from place to place, avoiding the fact that we were both now married. I didn't have the slightest inclination or desire to go home. I imagined us holding hands as we walked, but we did nothing of the sort.

This was the first time I hadn't let my husband know that I would be late coming home. Before parting, Hani and I agreed to see each other again soon, or at least to be in touch, but we found all sorts of excuses to avoid doing so. At times, I used the pretext of one of



the children or my husband being sick, while he resorted to being tied up with obligations. Truth be told, over the course of our phone conversations, it was always he who was trying to avoid another encounter.

I knew he loved me just as I loved him, and never doubted it. But I sensed his fear regarding any resumption of our relationship, just as he was aware of similar apprehensions on my part. At times, I even asked myself if he would come back to me out of vindictiveness because I had married and turned my back on him when he had wanted me to wait for him. Besides the fact that he was constitutionally incapable of such a thing, what he explained later on was that he had never been certain whether his feelings for me were those of true love or a strong infatuation.

After several weeks of hesitation, he finally gave me the address of a house in Sanaye'h' that belonged to a friend of his living in Paris, who had given him the keys.

The first time I went there to see him, I pictured how he would open the door, where I would kiss him, and how I would nestle against his shoulder – and how in his heightened state of arousal, he would yield, without inhibition.

Sitting down in the living-room, I felt apprehensive. My body was taut with tension and my eyes darted around the walls, avoiding his gaze. When he came up to me and led me to the bedroom, I followed him like an automaton. However, no sooner had I sat on the edge of the bed that the blaze of all my pent-up yearning dissipated – my hands felt frozen solid, and despite the heat of the summer, I told him I felt cold, that I must be sick. I shied away from any sexual encounter, and left hurriedly saying I would be in touch with him. As I made my way home, it felt as if shards of glass lined my throat every time I swallowed. While my desire to go to bed with him was overwhelming, I had not done so: what would happen if I could never leave him again? What would happen to my family? And what if having sex with him was just a conditioned response, and nothing more?

The following week, we agreed to another rendez-vous, and when I went to see him, I did so without the little dramatization of our

meeting in my head, my only thought being that whatever happened between us would be spontaneous. My frame of mind was to be responsive and positive, and casting aside anxiety and nervousness, I was open to all possibilities, without any expectations.

[120] Opening the door for me, his eyes flashed fire – the intensity of his lust was such that it felt as if he were eating me with his gaze. His groin was swollen with desire as I stepped inside.

That was a year of tempestuous meetings.

Before going to see him, I would stand staring at myself naked before the mirror. I examined every inch of my taut, alabaster body, as if I meant to go to our meetings unclothed. During our trysts, he pointed out to me that he was completely unaware of what clothes I had on, and hardly even noticed my underwear. At times, I would smile to myself in the elevator wondering whether to take my clothes off there and then and go into the apartment naked. No sooner would I ring the doorbell than he would start undressing me, and I him. I'd be unbuttoning his shirt, while he unzipped the skirt or trousers I was wearing, our hands pursuing their mission so feverishly that we were unable to tell who was undressing whom. As soon as our clothes fell to the floor, we each took a step back to contemplate the other's nakedness before getting into bed.

It was the first time that we went all the way, and in the instant I surrendered my body to him, I felt as if I had entrusted him with my innermost self.

That first time, after our relationship resumed, I could not tell whether my tears – which he didn't notice lying on top of me – were for sheer joy or whether I was already sad at the prospect of another separation. Maybe it was both.

I didn't feel as if I were giving away my body to him or that he was taking anything from me. I felt as though he were acquainting me with my body, and I was acquainting him with his. Lying on top of me, he told me how his desire to penetrate me was driven by a raw longing to return to my womb; letting out a deep sigh, and smiling, I clutched him by the mop of hair over his forehead and pulled him to me.

Listening to him talk in bed, it felt to me as if his voice was made



flesh in all my senses, and that the whole world was contained in his caresses.

Running my fingers across his warm chest, I could feel the sparse hairs (now tinged with white) that he had sometimes shaved back in our university days, thinking that a hairier chest would be more appealing to me. To me, the pores of his skin were like windows that I heard opening up to the wind of love.

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With my exquisitely heightened senses during these encounters, my thought was that it was not possible for flowers to bloom in total silence, without making the slightest sound.

His body hair, which I had taken to be a sign of virility and one of the indicators of a man's masculinity, seemed to me like lilies of the valley – their flowering formations carpeting his slender body, shimmering across the expanse of his skin like a sheet of water that tenderly nurtured the flowers as they hummed into bloom. And for a moment, they seemed like tiny violins bowing a tuneful melody.

At such moments, I was overwhelmed by the musicality of our senses.

I knew that one's fingers could do many things, including playing musical instruments. But I didn't know that they could also produce a beautiful tune, as they played on our bodies. I used to think that the purpose of the eyes was to see, and that while the eyes could speak or be silent, I had never experienced their ability to sing and emit a melody. I used to think that the ears could hear love even through closed lips, but here were my ears discerning everything inside me, all the exultation and the trilling joy I felt.

Lying in bed that day, he told me of his desire to live inside my womb, a desire he had often expressed before. He told me something I will never forget: he said that when a man impregnated a woman, the womb was the vacant space for him to express the creative urge expressed in the art of building. The womb, he said, is the place a man comes out of and to which he returns, albeit in a different form, giving him meaning and purpose. He returns thus to the womb as a doer rather than a weakling, and in doing so, he reasserts his feeling of being in control and regains his sense of sovereignty. I remember him saying: 'Nahla, my sweet, human beings are driven to repetition,

and while that drive is deeply buried it seeks to recapture not only the experiences of the past, but also the place of their occurrence. The emptiness man leaves and is left with upon exiting the womb becomes his project to rebuild.'

[122] When he told me of his feelings about the womb, I said something to him that I hadn't even spoken of to my husband. I had only ever told Su'ad about it.

During my pregnancy with my daughter Faten, once the doctor told me the news, the rest of the world all but vanished for me. Even you, I told him, except that you continued to be there in my dreams. During my ob-gyn exam, I could see everything on the screen of the ultrasound, and to me my womb appeared like an inner space that enclosed the universe of my femininity and my most fundamental individuality: a constellation inside of me, with lightning and thunder, and gusts of wind, like when it's going to rain, and the sound of waves crashing against each other. I could hear all of that on the screen in front of me.

It made me wonder about the nature of this space inside me, and how it was like a sky, in which I could see clusters of clouds, or like the sea with that whooshing sound I could hear that was reminiscent of waves. And it made me wonder whether my baby felt safe and protected by the sounds it heard or whether it was disturbed by them, given that hearing is the most developed of the senses in vitro. My emotions were all aflutter as I thought of my baby enveloped in that closed and protective pouch of liquid.

He took me in his arms after that conversation, and told me again that he wanted a child by me.

All the way to my house that day, I felt I was going home stripped of body and soul. But as soon as I entered the door, my face took on its former contours, the one familiar to my husband and two children – the coping smile that I had fashioned out of my unhappiness, which vanished when I was with Hani, reappeared, and my joy in him disappeared. With Hani, it was a smile from the heart that adorned my face – far from him, that smile, like the rest of my features, had become strangers to me.

That full, beaming smile with him, slackened as soon as I got home. My eyes, which practically leapt out of my face in their embrace of the



world when I was with him, reverted to their inward gaze, and without my even noticing, disappeared inside me.

* * *

My joy in him transformed not only my features but the very pulse of [123] my body.

And the vision of his crushed face during our last encounter that year, remained etched before my eyes for a long, long time.

I was stunned when, after a long silence, he told me that he had met a Lebanese girl in Paris, whose name was Sawsan. A student at the university he attended, both she and her parents had adopted him and stood by him, and he was thinking of marrying her.

The news hit me like a blow on the head. The question flashed before my eyes, as my tongue intoned: 'If that is the case, why then did you contact me? What was the point of seeing me, and starting up our relationship again? I don't understand what's going on, Hani....' My voice trailed off as words failed me and I began choking up with tears.

'Oh Nahla,' he answered, 'be realistic, you're married. This girl is a good, decent person, I like her a lot, and I think I could live with her.'

'Well, if it's about decency, my husband too is a decent man, who is good to me and to my parents, and he certainly has a place in my heart. And in that sense, I love him, and certainly don't loathe him. But you represent something completely different, and I don't think I could continue like this with you if you got married. I couldn't bear the thought, it would drive me crazy. In any case, if she feels about you only one-tenth of the way I feel, your mother must have prayed very fervently during Lailatul Qadr.² You know, Hani, that your mother doesn't love you as much as I do. But if you like her, then it's up to you.'

'While it's true that I like her, you know that you are my dream, my very life. Would you turn your life upside down and make the drastic decision of leaving your husband and your children, and coming away with me? Think about it, I am up for it. But if your answer is no, then it will be the second time that you give up on me.'

That last sentence pierced my heart like a knife. I couldn't listen to any more. I left the apartment, got into the first cab I could find, and

in a strangled, barely audible voice, gave the driver the address of my home.

[124] It was only after the vehicle was in motion that the flood of tears erupted, a hot and salty stream that washed down my cheeks uncontrollably. I thought my tear ducts had burst and that I wouldn't be able to stop crying until their source ran dry. As a sob escaped me, the driver heard and he glanced back at me through the rear-view mirror, saying: 'Lady, please, what I can do to help you? It's a shame for such beautiful eyes to be crying like that! You're burning my heart up with your tears!'

'Do you have children? You know how they can drive you to distraction,' I replied tearfully.

He told me he had five children, but didn't say anything more about them. Instead, he complained about his problems with his wife, as he continued looking at me through the mirror.

'What can I say, lady, but oh the trouble I got! I have a wife who won't let me near her, forever complaining that she's sick whenever we get into bed. You know what I mean ... I'm not getting any! ... Not one little bit! Maybe once a year And even then it's like look, but don't touch ... when I sidle up to her, she's stiff as a board, damn her eyes'

I really wasn't following what he was saying, lost in the sound of my own thoughts. It was clear to me that I had to sever my relationship with Hani completely, because how could I leave my children? Was I even capable of such a thing?

I could remember every stage of my children's development, how would they ever go on growing, far from my gaze? And how would I still have two forearms, the one for Ahmad to slumber in and the other for Faten to fall asleep on, like two reveries resting in my arms. What would happen to my arms without them? The arms that they would continue to climb even after they had outgrown them, even after I had aged and begun sleeping alone, free of my husband's smell, and of all the other loathsome details of marital life.

How would I ever live without their baby smell?

Riding in the taxi, I recalled how I had become fully conscious of the meaning of fear only when my daughter took her first step. How I



felt as if I were steadyng her with my very eyes – as if my gaze were like a cushion, protecting her from falling.

I saw myself at their bedtime, listening to them breathe to ensure they were in good health. And then counting their breaths again once they were asleep, just to be certain they were all right.

Even if I were to allow myself to forget all of that, how could I forget the nightmare my son had recounted the previous week, when he'd come running from his bed and buried his head in my lap, crying. And how when I asked him why, he moaned and sobbed inconsolably until he finally calmed down enough to speak, and said:

'Mama, please don't go ... and, mama, you can't die without me. I'm frightened of being alone, how can I live by myself without you?'

For a moment, I was dumbfounded by what he said, but then asked him, almost urgently: 'Why are you saying such things?' He said he dreamt I was a candle, and that I was melting and finally the flame died out. And when he tried to grab the candle, there was nothing there. So he went searching for me around the house, but his hands came up empty. Everything he saw was just like a dream and he couldn't find me anywhere. His words were all jumbled as he told me this before bursting into tears again.

I had a vision of my son – now a married man – alone and sad. That day, I knew that if he and his sister lost me, they would always regard themselves as poor and weak, and unprotected.

And with that awareness came the realization that the ties that bind me to my children, while ineffably tender, were iron-clad, and had no rival in the love of my life.

With my tears redoubling as I realized that I would never see Hani again, in the same instant I longed with all my being that the wheels of the car would reverse their course and take me back to him. But as the car proceeded I asked myself: what if our hearts were the compass of one's life journey?

I got out of the cab and began walking away, when the driver yelled: 'Where's my fare, sister?' I went back and paid him.

Going upstairs to our apartment, I conjured up the sight of Hani unable to believe his ears as I told him that we would never see each other again. And as I walked away, he remembered the mountain when

he was a little boy with his father one day. It was a dark wintry night, and the wind howled like an angry giant. Looking at the mountain across from their village, and holding his father's hand, he wondered whether the blowing storm could bring the mountain crashing down.

[126] That night he dreamt that the mountain had cleaved, that a part of it had tumbled down, and that he had gone to it and poked his finger into a piece of limestone hanging off the edge. And that he felt it turn into the shape of a girl. Standing before me as I left, he was visited by the same feeling, that very same fear. Flashing a sardonic, sad smile as I walked away, he told himself it was nothing but the fear of a small child, and goodness knows his childhood fears weren't about to be realized now. But in that instant, he was gripped by the terror of the tumbling mountain, the difference now being that he himself was that mountain.

... That was what he came to tell me later.

Translated by Maia Tabet

NOTES

- 1 Sanaye'h is a residential district of Beirut.
- 2 Laylatul Qadr is the anniversary of the night Muslims believe the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Mohammad. It is the night they consider that their fate in the following year is decided and hence pray to God all night long, asking for mercy and salvation.



Miral al-Tahawy

An Excerpt from the Novel

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Gazelle Tracks

Inshirah is the one in Hind's photograph wearing the short dress and baggy trousers. She was a black woman, strapping and healthy with a voice that Al-Najdiyya could never quite manage to subdue. They say Grandfather Munazi bought her mother from a place called Wad Madani. He was on his way home with the caravans that bring gum and ostrich feathers and scented woods. A long line of men and women walked behind the caravan, their wrists bound to ropes that swing from the camels' backs, the hot sun beating down as young girls are force marched on tired swollen feet across trackless sands, void of any sign save the skeletons of camels, hyenas and humans who expired long ago on some journey along that same route. Every time they stop at a trading post they off-load some of their cargo so that they can reach the Red Sea with less loss of wares, and put the goods on sale for paltry prices. Grandfather Munazi brought back lots of slaves from the Upper Nile and settled them on his land at the bottom of the high hill. People called them the slaves of Clan Munazi. That's where Inshirah lived, where Mubarak the Slave built his house. Later he erected a spacious pavilion for his guests and acquired a Landrover, and whenever a circle of visitors gathered round the coffee pot he would proudly announce to all and sundry: 'Kuwaitis' or 'Saudis.' The guests would set off after him in more luxurious vehicles to chase the gazelles of Ayla and Al-Alaqi. On these hunting trips the slaves of Clan Munazi became faithful guides. When Amma Mizna visited them she didn't have the audacity to talk to them like she had before, when she used to call them: 'Our dear friends and servants.' But they still stood up the moment they saw her and when she held out her hand they would come up one after the other to kiss it, and address her as they always had: 'Our master's daughter.'

Inshirah still lives there now. Whenever Muhra walks past, Inshirah doesn't recognize her for she no longer remembers anyone, not even her

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own grandchildren who play around the house. From the day they took her out of the dark house her eyes have been filled with a sleepy redness, weary and exhausted, unable to focus unless she squeezes them almost shut. The children, who address Inshirah as 'ya Jidda,' eye Muhra cautiously when she crosses the dirt track behind the gently sloping hills. People say that in the past Inshirah used to tie the dirty old belt, where the keys to the grain store and the pantries hung, round her waist, but now her collar bone protrudes from the neck of her dress to reveal her skinny almost skeletal frame. The *shunnaf* hanging from her nose has stretched the flesh and it dangles so loosely that she's had to tie it round both sides of her head with a cord that lifts the heavy earrings and leaves a wide rut in her skin. This cord that takes the weight off her ears passes over her head beneath her scarf, though it sticks out in places and you can see it attached to her hair with coloured pins.

Inshirah used to be everywhere, always coming and going, making that racket with her huge anklets and the jangling of the keys and her voice bawling at the servants: 'Do this! Don't do that!' Al-Najdiyya had put her in charge of counting the sacks of flour, seeing to it that the rooms were properly cleaned and making sure the kitchens had all they needed. It was Inshirah who checked the eggs had hatched and the ducks had enough feed, and which animals' udders had dried out or filled up. And at the end of the day she was content to sit at the her mistress's feet and massage them with mustard oil and warm water.

'Ma'am,' she used to say, 'we've filled a jug of gee,' or 'Ma'am, we've opened a pot of cheese,' and 'Ma'am, how many kilos shall we bake tonight?'

It was that very same Inshirah who was charged with taking Al-Najdiyya's gold far away from the prying eyes of the soldiers whenever they turned up. In their hands was a list of names whereby the Basha's land was turned into small holdings each no larger than two *feddans*. Then they built walls round them and dug irrigation ditches to water the land. Other soldiers carried off the horses, camels, ostriches and young gazelles and divided up the land which used to be called 'The Bedouin Estate' into a chess board, leaving the gardens of Clan Al-Basil completely empty; no birds of prey, no mares, no gazelles fenced



in their pens. Al-Najdiyya gathered up all the gold necklaces and ornaments that hung on her daughters' chests, and their thick braided anklets, and their brooches and pendants and wrapped them all up in a dirty old rag and tied it round Inshirah's waist so she could go and sit by the irrigation ditch under a tamarisk tree that spread its branches out over the water. Al-Najdiyya made Inshirah take her baby girl Nawwar with her too, to make her look even more inconspicuous. Inside the little one's tattered dress she hid some gold guineas wrapped up in a cloth. And as Inshirah hummed a lullaby to the little girl sat on her lap the soldiers would say to Al-Najdiyya: 'Slaves'll sell you just like you sell them.' But Inshirah would return in the evening bearing her cargo and there would not be a thing missing. And that's what she continued to do, every time an armoured car turned up.

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There was a time when you could hear Inshirah's voice from the other side of the field, and her vigorous movements made a racket all over the house. But then she stopped talking altogether. Some said it was the shock of losing Sahm, others sadness. It happened over time. She hadn't smelled the fire that caught in Sahm's clothes and burned the whole pavilion down with him inside it until it was too late. No one ever told her how the flames had burnt the body, or how the legs had been tied up. She wandered morosely from the bake house to the pantry to the threshing shed, but she didn't say a word until they bound Hind by the legs and tied her to the bed. Then she said: 'I will stay with my master's daughter until the end.'

Inshirah carried Hind to the building at the end of the garden path, lined with lemon trees and old tumbled down pigeon towers. There was loads of rubbish piled up inside and the remains of an old bed. I used to try and imagine what else was in there. It was an old two-roomed house made of mud and straw. In the ceiling of one of the rooms was a round opening between the wooden slats through which they lowered down the food basket and other items.

Inshirah, who is holding Hind in her lap in the picture, continued to hold her inside that closed house, in the room with that opening in the roof. There was a water pump there and Hind would sit under it every time her dress was soiled with urine or faeces. Inshirah pulled the pump and the water poured over Hind's body which curled up into

a wretched and submissive ball. The water that spilled onto the floor flowed down a little channel through a hole in the wall to drain out at the foot of the lemon trees. Through the opening in the roof they were able to tell the beginning and end of the day, the seasons of orange blossom, the humming of mosquitoes in summer, the dripping of rain on the roof, and the smell of stagnant water around the trees. The windows of the two rooms had been filled in with silt and straw and so it was eerily silent; not a sound was heard from within nor entered from without. Daylight alone came in through the opening in the roof. At the top of each room was a small aperture next to the wooden beams on the ceiling and they allowed the air to circulate a little. The mice knew about them, as did the cats and the little birds and some bats and spiders, but these holes let nothing in. Hind would curl up on the bed and peer towards them. She would weep, and succumb to fits of sobbing and wailing, and scratch the walls with her fingernails. Inshirah's firm hands would hold her during these convulsions until they passed. Then she would lay Hind's head to rest in her lap as she recited spells and incantations and rebraided the locks of her hair (chains of gold Al-Najdiyya used to call them) into one long plait. After a while Hind would quieten down once again to wallow in the torment and anguish of her state.

Inshirah said that towards the end Hind was like a gentle breeze. She stopped slapping her cheeks and banging her head against the wall and focused all her senses on what was going on outside. She would put her ear against the wall to listen to the steady thud of the pestle as it pounded coffee beans or sniff the smell of roasting lamb. Sometimes she would say to herself: 'They'll be in the kitchen now, lighting the fire under the large pans,' or 'Al-Najdiyya still keeps that box of snuff tucked inside the top of her gallabiyyah.' Through the opening in the roof she watched the Gazelle Tracks constellation as the few scattered stars running across the sky came into view. She knew when they moved into this position that another year had passed, while she still fingered the walls and listened out for any sound, a mewing cat, a bird's wings flapping in the trees, new leaves falling at the stir of an autumn breeze. She could not see the wrinkles on her face or the white hairs that had encroached suddenly upon her parting. Inshirah



saw them though, as she laid Hind's head in her lap to plait her hair, and sang:

*I've been patient so long I'm bored
And all that patience has done me no good;
The door of hope is closed.*

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Hind increasingly succumbed to abject despair, and that brought on her crying fits again. Then she would stare grave and wide-eyed at unknown things that moved about in the darkness, certain that the door of hope was closed like the taciturn walls around her, and that even if she were to get out, an impregnable barrier of isolation would be set up around her. There was nothing to do but gaze into space. They did not know if she was even aware that she had a child sitting submissively in Sahla's lap. Had she sent out her spirit to search for her? They would say they had seen her kneading dough with them and that, when they looked round, a cat miaowed and then ran away. Some of them saw her as she used to be, making the beds or drinking from the scented water on the edge of the terrace, then rub up against Sahla's legs and come out miaowing and clawing the carpets which were hung up for beating. And although they whispered to one another about the spirits of the living and the dead, every single one of them avoided mentioning her, or going to see her, even if only to peer through that small opening in the middle of the roof. For it seemed as if that would bring all kinds of pain to bear upon them. They simply made do with asking Nawwar: 'Is your mother well, girl?' They never asked about Hind, and it was enough for Nawwar to tilt her head for them to be assured.

This darkness into which she peered did not frighten her any more, nor did the dogs barking in distant fields. She sat huddled up in the fading light or the pitch black of night, piling up grains of sand on the floor of the room that they hadn't covered with wooden boards. They had left the earth for her to dig with her nails and make long furrows, like the intersecting lines she scratched on the walls that were also unpannelled and unpainted. The soil was such that it turned to sand when she scratched it. Armies of ants had constructed barracks in it and crawled hither and thither between their holes. She did not

try to count the days or to record their passing with marks. It was Inshirah who was able to associate definite signs with the hour and the seasons by the stars that passed over the opening in the roof and the smell of the orange blossom when it bloomed. Perhaps she waited for death but she did not attempt to bring it on. She had lost the ability to do anything except stare and she did not try to run away. She had surrendered completely. With her shoulders hunched over a pile of sand, she would gaze up at the tiny gap in the top of the wall or squat under the meagre portion of sky that rolled over the opening in the roof. She gave up her body to the night dew in a desperate attempt to inhale something other than the fetid air and the smell of stagnant water under the pump. Sores covered her legs from all that sitting on the floor but Inshirah was unable to cure them with onion skin and ashes. Each day new ulcers would appear weeping pus, and a hacking cough afflicted her. ‘Poor thing,’ they would say as they looked at her body and poured the last water of her death-ablution over it. As Hind neared death they did not place ‘the little girl’ who ran round Lamloum Basha’s house in her lap, not even once, because she would not have remembered it. But then again, perhaps she did remember, often, when she put her ear against the hard deaf walls and picked out no sound save a distant hubbub which she would try to interpret. It was some commotion over a woman with short hair whose waves and curls resembled the hair of Layla Murad and Esmahan. She had a long nose and was called Sahla. They were sewing her a wedding dress with a low-cut neck, so she could go to the same house that Hind had left.

‘Your nose belongs to you even if it is crooked.’ Lamloum Basha was declaring, over the sobbing of his youngest daughter. ‘A girl will marry her cousin even if it is the last thing she wants. An Arab girl’s like an obedient she camel: the place you tether her, that’s where she kneels, the place you lead her, that’s where she goes.’

When Sahla set off for Mutlig’s house, carrying the baby girl who’s in the photograph wearing a white crochet dress, no one said: ‘Poor thing’ about her, because that was not how she wanted things to turn out. No longer the little girl who went to Minazi’ Primary School carried on Nawwar’s shoulders, Muhra now held the end of the thread in her hand. The photographs were blurred images, and it was up to



her to fill in the details, as if there was a path she had to follow to the end, and a similar destiny she would be obliged to repeat. Hind came to her often, telling her to close the box, but she would not be swayed.

Translated by Anthony Calderbank

[133]

NOTES

Amma – Aunt.

Jidda – Grandmother.

Burgu' – long, enveloping garment worn by Bedouin women.

Thobe – sometimes written thawb. Name given in Arab Peninsula and among Bedouin to the ankle-length garment worn by men, in other areas similar garments are known as dishdasha, gallabiyyah.

Rana al-Tonsi

From A Rose for the Last Days

[134]

On one foot
like a humiliated beggar I limp
past all the swinging doors
and the flags that are taken down from their masts ...
The sidewalk was never my friend
but it embraced me those times
when the crying was tough and bitter

In my country
soldiers go to a war
where they never fight
In every coffeehouse or square
under the feet of the sick, the sad and insane
you can glimpse the trace of a rose
thrown into the arms of nurses
in lonely rooms inhabited by wailing,
a rose drawn in blood.

I cannot believe the car has yet to stop
that I fell out of it like a scream
I know the lift attendant
never jumps off the fences
and that rocks keep wounding me
even though I've roamed for too long.

On one foot death will come and raise its head
Facing it, I will embrace this man strongly
and strangle all the poems in his hands
I will crush my bones under his hot breaths
My lungs are becoming two tubes
my feet like a battlefield
my heart a noose.



Am I really dead?
Only a while ago I was smelling that homeland.

* * *

In those empty streets [135]
even dogs are afraid to cross
You will cross empty-handed
with a shadow that doesn't accompany you
and a backbreaking love
You will talk about your parents
the shock of sudden death
and the added light
which never lessens loneliness
When my eyes well up
and my pants are wet
as I stand before you
you will take a newspaper from your chest
and a mirror from your eyes
so that I may look into them
and know
that now I can go out.

* * *

Into one of those swamps
left by an old flood
the kind that drowns entire villages
I will jump like a bird with broken wings –
a bird's looking for a merciful killing

The bird which loved the behinds of every hen
can no longer fly
or spit
as is his wont every time he mounts
his eyes can neither close in sleep
nor let a tear fall

But all the birds agree
he does shut them every now and then
although no one knows for sure
if he does it out of pleasure or out of pain
for a sad bird like him
can only dream of a long darkness

* * *

Every time I think of my own death
someone else dies
and the poem keeps writing itself

* * *

I embrace no one
my steps pass without me
the hand of the house burns me
The one who sleeps in my history
never wakes
his steps crush me at night
In the morning
I wake up scared, on his chest
He tells me
what I was not

He smokes his cigarette
like a returnee from war
He knows the precise number of its victims
and I, between stolen looks
and the sounds of his breathing,
know there was a lost letter from him.

Translated by Sinan Antoon



Dima Wannous

A Short Story

[137]

Sahar

Following her usual Thursday morning routine, Sahar opens her bedroom window wide and begins to devour those of her neighbours. She lets her imagination wander through their curtains, wondering about lives she doesn't lead, until, transported by her imagination, she adds new stories to her already well-stocked store. The view from her window is perhaps the only corner truly Sahar's in the house. The house has grown on her, perhaps even more so than her husband Mahmoud. She knew its walls and its minuscule details. Even the tiles were imprinted on her memory, a bright marble page somewhat eaten away at the edges. Sahar can shut her green eyes and see the brown etchings upon the white marble. She can even describe the modest furniture in clear detail, without missing the couch in the corner near the window, whose colour has faded after a year of Mahmoud relaxing on it every evening.

Her passion for accumulating the details of everyday life has created an anxiety in her spirit that is no less important than any intellectual or national anxiety. The anxiety courses through her veins each Thursday morning. She drags her thin, svelte body soberly to the window, opens it, and pours all her energy into gazing and pondering until noon. She dedicates all her senses to entering a world that she knows nothing about, scooping up more intricate details. She smells the scent of food sneaking into her room like a transparent cloud. She breathes in the smell of sleep chased by women out of their homes with the opening of windows. She inhales the musk of bodies musty after long naps. She glimpses their neighbour who passes by every morning to sell milk, and who disappears on state events to sell posters, banners, flags and bunting. She peeks at him having coffee with his wife in the morning. His thick hair, white but bearing traces of red dye, is flattened by the imprint of the pillow. His flushed face is still crumpled, and his stomach just gets bigger with each passing day.

Sahar giggles to herself, then worries that God will punish her by turning Mahmoud into a belly filled out with fat and grease in a few years. She evokes his body in her mind's eye, and forces a belly onto it, just to see whether it will suit him. The truth of it is that it doesn't suit him one bit. Mahmoud is not only short, but his flabby body is also covered by such a layer of thick black hair that, even naked, he appears to be wearing a black woollen sweater. He knows very well that she is much more attractive than he is. Her lithe body is perfectly proportioned, and her tall, graceful figure is breathtaking. Her mouth is like a cherry, according to Mahmoud's mother. Her almond eyes are like raindrops, a sweet clear green. Her white skin is soft, tight and clear, untainted by darkness or spots.

For all her wide-eyed staring, Sahar has not once been able to take in her neighbour Sumayya's body in one go. Her pupils cannot accommodate the enormous body, only seeing either its left or its right half. As usual every Thursday, at noon to be precise, Sumayya ambles by in her long black silk robe which envelops a brown body throbbing with stories and folds. She climbs the long, tiring staircase and rings the doorbell, then enters Sahar's home like a whirlwind. Sumayya starts unbuttoning her robe as soon as she presses the doorbell, and by the time Sahar opens the door has often reached the last button. She strides into the room, liberating her body and letting her silk robe flutter behind her like a storm carrying dust and black smoke. Sahar sits back beneath the window preserving her morning memories, silent because she wants the new scenes that have penetrated her imagination to sink in. Sumayya quietens down, tacitly complicit with Sahar, allowing her to organize her thoughts calmly and carefully.

As usual every Thursday, hajja Maryam comes by to read verses from the Qur'an and drown both women in religious lessons and lectures. Maryam is described as a hajja in the main because she has performed the hajj, wears a veil and is devoutly religious. But when her veil is removed, or her talk strays from religion and the experience of hajj is removed from her life, the impression is completely different. These things intrigue Sahar and Sumayya into listening to her. With a passion for beauty, not religion, they are held fast by her shiny thick hair as she sneaks gracefully into their imaginations with a movement



of her thin, delicate hands, their senses sated by her confident, poised words – for three hundred lira each. At first, Mahmoud refused to pay the fee, but Sahar kept raising the threat of eternal damnation until he relented.

Maryam was a widow who had not remarried after her husband's passing. The religious lessons she gave ended her loneliness and provided her with food and the means for a modest life. The neighbours never hesitated to spin tales about Maryam's refusal to marry a second time. In one of the stories, Maryam was having a secret affair with a rich trader in the Hamidiyyah market and he refused to marry her because he didn't want to ruin his reputation, since his father-in-law was one of the most successful traders of Oriental trinkets. Another neighbour claimed that she had seen Maryam accompanying an officer in Bludan. Sahar always rejected the stories her neighbours told and constantly dusted off her imagination's portrait of an unblemished Maryam.

As usual, the hajja took three strings of prayer beads, made by her brother during his stay in prison, from her leather purse. The women begin to pray to the Almighty. Maryam recites the appropriate Qur'anic verses that Sahar and Sumayya repeat after her, *sadaqa Allah ul-'athim*. The water boils and whistles from the little kitchen. Sahar makes coffee and Sumayya prepares three plates of harissa that Mahmoud had brought back with him from a trip to Homs. Sahar loves the next part of the lesson. The women sip coffee, and after struggling with her guilt, Sahar takes one of Maryam's cigarettes, then rushes to the sink to erase what Mahmoud describes as the nasty stink of smoke. He smokes, but does not like Sahar to, considering it to be a male habit. After that, Sahar sits near the hajja and shyly opens up with questions. Haram and Halal. Heaven and Hell. Good and Evil. And all the contradictions she lives through at her window, in that one corner of the house that is truly Sahar's. The house has grown on her, perhaps even more so than her husband Mahmoud.

As usual every Thursday evening, Sahar spends a lot of time in front of the mirror. She puts kohl around her green eyes, and the green melts into a sea of seduction. Her blonde hair is invaded by a herringbone comb. Her cheeks are rouged scarlet, and her thick lips

coloured a brownish-red. She strips herself bare of the lessons of the morning and of the haram and halal, and gets down to business. She puts on her bright red dancing outfit, studded with tinkling gold ornaments and embroidered in blue thread that highlights her feminine curves. The outfit is finished off with transparent slippers that add nine centimetres to her height, and increases the authenticity of what is to come.

As usual every Thursday evening, Mahmoud stretches out on the conjugal bed, his body choking with desire. He smokes one cigarette after the other, with an excitement tarnished only by impatience. He chews slices of cucumber and tomato in his desiring mouth, anticipating the Thursday routine.

As usual every Thursday, he puts on a cassette tape of trashy Oriental music. Sahar's waist gyrates madly with choreographed movements. Her bosom heaves, flecked with sweat. She closes her eyes and is transported into a world of strangeness and eroticism. She opens them only when her husband's patience has worn out and the party is over.

'Is prostitution haram, hajja?'

'Not within marriage.'

Translated by Ghenwa Hayek



Samar Yazbek

An Excerpt from the Novel

[141]

Clay

Ali Hassan's men spread out all around the place. They were searching for the woman in the red car that had raced off at an insane speed from the old house, leaving a cloud of dust and astonishment in its wake. Their master had commanded them in no uncertain terms to investigate absolutely everything, no matter what it was, even if it meant shoving their noses up each others' backsides. They must look everywhere, circle one another, examine the very air in front of them. Their lives depended on their ability to carry out orders without thinking or questioning what they were doing and how and why they were doing it. They shuddered at the thought of Ali Hassan's raging eyes as he demanded they fetch Riham. There was no question of coming back without her. They could think of nothing else. Orders were orders; they couldn't return unless they had been carried out. The sad thing was that this time the prey was that remote palm tree, the bare-chested Riham. That same Riham, whom, after long hours standing before them, drenched in sorrow, dripping with temptation and red-nosed from crying, each of them secretly wanted to spread out on the ground and have their way with.

The search filled each one of them with joy and fear. They scurried around like rats, hopping keenly and nimbly from place to place. One of them stopped his car and crossed the road several times, peering at anything that moved. Another climbed the hill overlooking the old highway, hoping to spot the red car from overhead. A third chewed his fingers and spat angrily as he nervously questioned people, his eyes darting around in every direction. They reconvened and sped off in their cars once more. When they passed the area they had already covered they slowed down and reverted to scampering about all over the place, hunting out their prey. They noticed a light near a group of abandoned plastic greenhouses below some tall china trees between the railway track and the supply road the government had built a few

years before, robbing the coast of its best farm land. The light was faint and the men debated whether or not they should waste time traversing the rugged dirt path. The light probably belonged to one of the numerous houses scattered nearby of the poor peasants who had come from the coastal mountains to earn a living working in one of the plastic greenhouses. They passed by, convinced they were doing the right thing. This bought Riham some extra time to read the yellowing papers, and intensified the pain she sought but had not found until now. Where will you appear? Where are you? she asked herself. Why hadn't Haydar mentioned her in his papers, of which she understood very little anyway. She turned the pages with trembling hands, tears streaming down her face. Some of them were torn. She cursed her luck, then calmed herself and lit a cigarette. She pressed on with the difficult reading.

Upon returning from the other side, one of Ali Hassan's men decided to head for the light. Their master would kill them if they returned without the woman and he still had life left to live. They left their vehicles on the side of the road and leapt over the barrier separating the two streams of traffic. The four of them stole quietly across the ground. As they drew closer, they became convinced the light was none other than a headlamp. Their hearts rejoiced. Riham exhaled the smoke of her cigarette and read the next sentence. She read it again in a rasping whisper: I'm the last of this clay and being killed by its very elements. As she cast it aside to begin the next page, the car doors were suddenly flung open and four strangers descended on her. She found herself outside the car surrounded by men, gagged with a foul-tasting cloth. She clutched the papers to her chest. They formed a circle around her and touched her in a manner that made her feel she was dissolving in their hands. Delighting in their complicity, each tried to embrace her, to lose themselves in the degradation of her body. The forbidden fruit, the unattainable woman, whom they had never got anywhere near. She used to shake with laughter before them, oblivious to their existence, as though they were mere insects. The swinging of the hips they had grown accustomed to as she strutted past was no more, and she was within their reach. The groping could not last very long, yet even so lust enabled one of them to come in his trousers as he



rubbed himself against her and grabbed at her haughty breasts. They slid into a trance, forgetting all about Ali Hassan and the task at hand, until the cry of the most loyal member of the group rang out: 'You dogs! By God, Ali Hassan is going to kill us. Put her in the car!'

Only then did they recover their senses. They remembered they were on official business, not at one of the cabarets they had frequented since they left their villages and signed up for work under Ali Hassan and became 'real commanders,' as the announcement Dalla made demonstrated when she entered Haydar's room for the last time: 'A prince's dog is a prince.'

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When the men arrived at the vault they found Ali Hassan marching round in circles like a bull, trying to divide his thoughts up into manageable portions and make sense of what had happened. Where was Haydar now? What had happened to that devil Dalla, whom he had detested all his life? Had the two of them colluded as they used to back in the village? They would hide in the forest and he would spend endless hours looking for them only to return home at the end of the evening, exhausted, starving, covered with mud and dirt, and drenched in sweat. He passed from mirror to mirror, biting his lips and glaring at his various reflections.

'I'm the one. I'm the one who'll survive. He's gone at last! Gone never to return!' he shouted.

He paused and gazed at his face. He raised his hand high in the air then calmly brought it down onto his cheek. It was unnaturally quiet and for a moment he forgot he had covered the ceiling of the vault with sponge, timber and mirrors. Shouting to his men was pointless anyway as they would rather wait a few days for their master's usual ring of the bell, than go and tell him they had Riham, unconscious and barely breathing.

He tried to find to a possible cause for what had happened but could not even surmise a guess. He was most alarmed that Haydar's death was making him feel ill at ease; he grew anxious when he thought of his wretched damned disappearance. Could someone betray him? He was Ali Hassan himself. No one could turn on him. He had tamed an entire country. No woman could stand up to him. He was sure Riham had something to do with all this and tried to convince himself

she was Haydar al-Ali's daughter and belonged to a family that had always treated them like slaves – not the daughter of a great man like Ali Hassan, who had stood up to fate and who alone was the architect of his majesty. He was the only one of his kind. There would never be another like him. His progeny would not bring forth a man like him, for he was unique. He drew closer to the mirror, which was the same size as Haydar's. He stood upright, as he would have stood before his subordinates when he was a young officer in the army. He put one hand under his armpit and laughed, as he imagined the officials would. He spun round, trying to capture an image from the past ten hours that might provide the key to the problem. But he could not think of anything that could have inspired Haydar to leave the country. Why should he flee now? What did he hope to achieve by fleeing? Was he carrying any documents that would incriminate Ali? Had he gathered evidence on Ali that he would pass on? How was he going to escape? Ali began tapping his head. How was Haydar going to get away? He had sold all his father's land when he left Damascus and sent the proceeds to Sahar. Did he know something? Had the spells of madness returned that, according to Sahar, sent him to a mental hospital in Beirut from time to time? But that hadn't happened for thirty years. Had he and Riham ganged up against him? He wouldn't dare – he's a mouse!

'A mouse!' Ali Hassan screamed at the mirror.

Hearing the word mouse pleased him. He recalled how, with a single kiss, he had turned Sahar al-Nasur, the fairest of the fair, into a hungry lover and made her leave Haydar, who always got what he wanted. Ali Hassan's cheeks puffed up and filled with colour and he began massaging his moustache. The vodka had relaxed his muscles, glass by glass, and he momentarily forgot that, even on his own in his secret vault, it was inappropriate to swagger about like a young lady. Yet this was precisely what he did. He whispered to Sahar, recalling that fatal kiss and swelling with pleasure, and imitated her walking along swaying her hips, like an old man behaving like a child. Suddenly his cheeks contracted and he bent over double like a viper, clutching his stomach and bracing himself in pain. His stomach failed him for a moment and he was just about to scream when his reeling reflection in



the mirror struck him. He stopped for a minute, his head bowed, and stared at his bulging bloodshot eyes. He felt as if he'd been smacked in the face so slapped his cheek himself. He stood erect in front of the mirror for a second, as though he had just woken up from a nightmare. He clenched his fist and smashed it into the mirror to make sure it was real and not just another of the spectres dancing in front of him. It didn't break so he retreated, then fell. Haydar's image appeared in the mirrors. Ali Hassan stood up once more, aimed his clenched fist at another mirror and brought it down on the glass. He fell onto the floor and from where he was, lying down, looked around at the mirrors. Haydar had moved somewhere else and was standing quietly smoking an argila, staring into Ali Hassan's eyes, who lay where Haydar had been a few moments ago. He laughed loudly.

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'Have you come back?' he shouted.

He stopped in front of the calm and relaxed Haydar. He approached him, then pounced, but as he did so Haydar evaporated into thin air. He turned around: 'Come out, coward! Come out!'

Haydar came out from behind the shelf of bottles of wine. He leaned against its wooden edge with his elbow and it began to tremble, as did the bottles on it.

It is not easy to describe Ali Hassan at that moment nor explain what was happening. He wanted to escape from the spectres. He wanted the images of Haydar Ali mixed up all over the room to disappear. He turned round and round, throwing punches at everything in front of him, as though he was fending off an attack. He shut his eyes, a prisoner of the spectres, and was slowly collapsing to his knees as though dragged down by a river current when a hand seized him and pulled him up.

The scene before him consumed all his senses. Haydar grabbed a sack of straw, held it up and assured him nothing bad was going to happen to him. The hand transformed into another, tender, soft and deadly. It stroked his chest gently and crept down to his thighs, plunging him into an eternal fire. Sahar al-Nasur's lustreless moist eyes emerged out of the middle of the hand and then vanished. The tender hand returned and frisked his body, searing it with fire.

The fire was burning him.

It was going to destroy him.

He wanted to forget who he was. He wanted to go back to being the boy hanging about at the banks of the river, his face spattered with dirt and grass. He wanted to shout: 'How I loved you Haydar! How I hate you now!'

He wanted to weep over his friend, to scream, to beg his forgiveness for everything. He wanted all these things. But instead, Ali Hassan, the grown-up military man, hurled himself at the mirror once more. 'You're not weak!' he shouted. 'You're made of iron. He's dirt. You're the future. He's the past. You're the one who can change destiny and control fate. You've been around all this time and you're the one who'll survive!' Ali Hassan shouted at the top of his voice.

Eventually he stopped shouting. 'But he's dead! Dead! And I killed him slowly,' he sobbed.

He collapsed on the ground, wracked with tears. Uttering those words pleased him. He felt a huge weight lift off his shoulders, and struck the mirror once more. 'I survived! You're not weak. Crying is for weaklings. Throw your heart to the dogs...!'

He smiled calmly, tears streaming down his cheeks. A grin spread across his face and he started laughing. He chuckled and glanced around, assuming the posture he had adopted from a photograph of Napoleon Bonaparte he'd once admired. He bent over again, smothering the sound of pain. He started to step firmly and heavily towards the mirrors. He fell down and got up again. He stood yelling at the foot of the stairs. He tried to climb them but stumbled and fell. He shouted out several times but no one heard him, and even if they did none of his men would dare come down unless Ali Hassan opened the door himself. He felt a strange heaviness, which he couldn't place. Today it would all end and things would go back to how they were before. Everything would be different in the morning. Haydar and Riham would both be gone and he'd be the only one left. He and Sahar al-Nasur, the woman who'd entranced him all his life. Right now his beloved was resting peacefully in a quiet English hotel.

He tried to get up again. He climbed a few steps. As he reached the door he fell to the ground, though somehow managed to open it and call his men. The most loyal one lifted his master off the ground, sob-



bing, and, in spite of his weight, carried him back down the steps. Ali Hassan was muttering strangely. It was the first time the men had seen their master behaving like this. They had believed him to be exceptional, immune to weakness and tears, his head always held high. Indeed, he was superhuman. They had often asked themselves if there was any commander on earth who could match his might, so they were naturally aghast to find him in such a state. They whispered in bafflement between themselves. As the whispering grew louder Ali Hassan opened his eyes and looked into their faces sternly. They fell silent.

[147]

‘You sons of bitches!’

He got to his feet with difficulty and asked about Riham. One of them quickly ran up the steps and returned with Riham slung over his shoulders. He stood before his master. Ali Hassan poured a glass of vodka, added some of his favourite grapefruit juice and gulped it down in one go. He looked languidly at Riham and confirmed to himself she was not his daughter but his son’s lover and that he had no reason to be ashamed of what he was doing. This woman was not his daughter; she was simply someone under whose skin Haydar Ali’s blood flowed. He would be happy when that bloodline was extinguished once and for all.

‘Leave her here!’ he shouted at his men.

The men were perplexed. They stood motionless, glancing around. Where should they put the young girl?

‘Leave her on the floor and just get out,’ he shouted.

They stood staring at him in disbelief. The four of them had loyally served Ali Hassan for over twenty years and were able, through habit and natural instinct, to comprehend his various actions. But today he confounded them. They could not understand what was going on. They filed out one by one, leaving Riham on the floor of the vault with her hands tied up, clutching to her chest a bundle of old papers that looked like they’d come from a rubbish dump.

The last man looked at his master as he closed the door of the vault behind him. He was convinced things would never be the same again. He, Ali Hassan’s most loyal follower, was pretty sure something had changed to allow something like this and make this man weaken like

this. This man, whom he had believed was his protector, had turned feeble.

[148] Ali Hassan was examining Riham's features, trying to find something to change his gut feeling. She was a curse that had never left him alone. He bent over Riham and scrutinised her face as she lay unconscious. Her breathing was uneven. For the first time, he caught a glimpse of Sahar al-Nasur. He suddenly noticed an astonishing likeness between Riham and Sahar. How come he hadn't seen it before? He conceded his son was right about his connection with this woman, and jumped back as though he'd been stung, muttering that it was impossible that this devil could be his daughter. Implausible. Otherwise, how come he was attracted to her?

He moved away and considered what he should do next. She would soon wake up and he would have to answer questions about Haydar's whereabouts. He was entirely convinced she was behind his disappearance, for Ali Hassan knew that she knew a number of influential people. He decided he should....

But why would she conceal Haydar? He was dead ... dead!

He was talking to himself, his confused mind racing against time on account of his imminent departure for London, where his paradise and only love was waiting for him on the edge of her seat.

He returned to Riham. He noticed the strange papers she was clutching and jumped. His heart pounded. Perhaps now he would understand what was going on. He broke open Riham's fetters, grabbed the yellowing bundle and went to his desk. He poured himself a glass of vodka, forgetting to add his favourite juice, as he gazed at his various images in the mirrors. He tossed Riham a cold look and, with heavy calm, began reading the faded papers in the light of his Victorian candelabra.

The silence was exaggerated.

Riham lay deep in sleep.

The men crept away from the door of the vault, sure that today had ended peacefully.

Translated by Christina Philips



Fawzia Zouari

A Reflection

[149]

Time's Running out for Scheherazade

For centuries, it was you who told stories in my stead. Your voice drowned out my own. You aroused admiration and astonishment. You fixed for all time the shape of the woman I must be – cunning yet frail, at once victim and tormentor.

As for me, I no longer feel that you and I share one fate, Scheherazade.

I cannot accept the legitimacy of a ploy which claims to save me from the vagaries of men merely by cunning, which can keep me alive only by staving off attention from what I am.

Yes, I am taking a stand against the woman who saved her life by constantly seeking to have herself forgotten. The one who traded the murmurs of shared love for a string of passions at one remove. The one for whom a woman's words were to serve simply to distract the male sex.

Since it seemed self-evident that my fate lay in a man's hands, and, ultimately, upon the altar of his pride, it was to Scheherazade that I owed my escape from a worse fate. I was to atone with my silence for her suffering. Each time I was tempted to speak, Scheherazade came up with a new story which bade me keep silent, for her stories never end, and there's the problem! But why should Scheherazade's sacrifice be my Calvary, the reminder that her life will have amounted to nothing more than amends for my initial faithfulness?!

It is when Scheherazade falls silent that I begin to speak.

My breaking into speech comes at the price of her conclusive silence.

There are nights when I intentionally lose the use of words. Dawn may come without my lips parting to issue promises. When I am enjoined to silence, I seek no escape. I agree to die.

I myself cannot be ordered to speak under duress, under the tyranny of outward necessity and dates in the calendar.

Because, from now on, all that counts are my own needs, and the

validity of words which will ring out beyond time. For me, story-telling is no longer bound up with the extreme urgency of any one moment, rather it concerns the meaning given to every moment of my existence. It no longer has to do with living at any cost, but with living fully. It is no longer the key to safeguarding the present moment, but to building for tomorrow.

My desire is no longer to live through the other but to settle myself anew in the depths of my being, quietly to survey the enigma which dwells within my body. I do not tell stories to outlive others. I do so the better to live with myself.

My problem is no longer what might happen to me tomorrow; it is how I might still exist, when I no longer have a tomorrow.

In the end, Scheherazade died, having never ceased fighting for life. In the end, I live because I have run the risk of dying. Dying, that is, being born for myself, existing through myself, beyond all coercion and open to all challenge. My freedom lies in battling for every moment. For me, there can be no daily break. I have chosen risk, real and potential, future and imminent. I have given myself over to my solitude and to my own judgement. I have cast off all reference points. It is in my gift whether I speak or remain silent, whether I beguile the world or turn it against me with my guilelessness. I have chosen no witness, no prompter. I agree to stay awake by day and to sleep at night, to remain silent for hours or years. I am giving myself over to the cause of writing, that hazardous and lonely enterprise. From now on, I am the author of a story which is its own wellspring, not a bid for reprieve.

I tell the world of what I am. I demand one-to-one confrontation. With words, with suffering, with men, with the world.

I want to counter Scheherazade's survival tactics with the vulnerability and lightness which are heedless of death, but which, in their own way, build up a sense of our own enduring essence within the heart of illusion itself.

If I had to tell another woman's story, I would tell the one Scheherazade never told: her own. The love or hatred that were in her heart. The desire which words – promised and endlessly delivered – caused to be confined deep within her body. The desire which defies words.



Because, when Scheherazade tells her stories, she does not act. When she saves her life, she loses claim to it. With her, words are a substitute for love. Her words blossom out of a death threat and know nothing of the lover's confessional register. Her words unwind the thread of remote fictions with the sole aim of concealing the tale of an incipient love.

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Scheherazade's nightly vigils bespeak the absence of love. Her days belong to the night of the unsaid. A thousand and one nights without a real night of love. Only the allusion to a joyless union, childbirth without love.

What would I do with so many stories, I whose only interest is in a woman's heart, in Scheherazade's desire?

Am I not right to hate Shehrayar, unworthy listener and mediocre lover? But is Shehrayar any better than the one I have deep inside myself, that intimate and invisible witness, that need, now so much part of me, to speak only under the spur of beauty and a life with dignity.

That truly modern listener, without whom the risk of a single death hangs over me: that of telling stories in order to live, like Scheherazade.

I am the future.

How would you deny me the right to say I? I who am speaking for the first time. Who no longer speaks by proxy. I who am discovering the freedom of words, the magic of their power, with wonder and surprise.

I have spent centuries in silence, barred from the circle of those who speak, stifled by the din of men's desires, of their commands. I have been able to express myself only through whispers, have drawn advantage only from collusion, and even that was mute.

I have walked from age to age, from one society, one generation to another, taking care never to raise my voice, to put my feet where they could raise no echoes, leave no trace. To buy my silence, men made me silken wings so that I would meet their resistance soundlessly. Then I was weighted down with gold, so that I should have no appetite for flight or would fall. I was pinned to the wall of their passing fancies, exposed to their looks of mingled scorn and adoration.

I was tempted to escape, I called for help. They heard me reluctantly and double-locked the door.

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For me, the useful gesture took the place of words. I organised, tended to, attended on, but I neither appeared nor spoke. I watched and listened, but had no right to interpose my point of view. I walked with lowered eyes, since I was not allowed to look the world in the eye. I heaped up everything in the depths of my memory, since it was not for me to judge things by my wits.

I had to slip through space and time, leaving no traces, no rough edges, without inconveniencing the well-ordered world of men with my desires or wants. I had to look on and die without one single opportunity to bear public witness.

Because, since time immemorial, public space has been empty of me. Streets have seen me pass by only in haste, a veiled and fleeting shadow, coming out of one door only to go in by the next.

I was deprived of nature from an early age. I knew nothing of the passing of the seasons, vast blue skies, soft winds. If my window looked out on one side only, I was doomed to either a life without sunsets, or without sunrises.

Now that I have emerged, I shall not be going back. Now that I have spoken, I shall not relapse into silence.

I have sworn to get my own back on silence. I have torn up the angel's wings and cast the precious weights which caged me with their brightness into the depths of the sea. I have turned my back upon centuries of oppression. Upon times which belonged to men alone.

I shall talk at length. To slake my thirst for words, to move down to the furthest of my depths, return from them and lay down all that rightfully belongs to me – all that they thought that they could take from me forever – in the full light of day, before them all.

And yet I have learned to love my fellows. So do not hasten to cry shame, and do not put on a show of indignation. You need to have lived like me, in silence, to understand the value of words. You need long experience as an observer before you can go on to judge. You need to have endured in order to be able to bear forceful witness.

Like me, you need to have had intimate contact with the apparently all-powerful man not to feel even the slightest temptation to betray him, to feel revulsion at the idea of denying him. For, unbeknown to them, you have observed those sly wolves desperately fighting their



corner. For you have seen those titans of willpower faltering; those men of anger, weeping; those hearts – touched, mortally but secretly, by tenderness – shedding blood.

Thus I have remained faithful in faithlessness, united in rupture, critical but not disparaging. In my arms I bear past and future. I have retained the key which opens other worlds. I have made presence my imperative.

Contrary to what we might believe, flying in the face of all images, all caricature, no Arab woman could hope to live through more fateful times. Today it is her turn to say: I am the future.

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Translated from the French by Judith Landry



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Acknowledgments and Sources

The *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies* (IJEAMS) is grateful to the authors, the translators, the publishers, and to *Banipal* for permission to reproduce the following short stories, excerpts from novels, and selected poems from *Banipal* issues.

[155]

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WAFA AL-BUEISSA: chapter, in *Banipal 40 – Libyan Fiction*, 2011, from the author's novel *Lil Ju'a Wujubun Ukhra* (Hunger has Other Faces), published by *Al-Mua'tamar* magazine publications, Libya 2006.

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[156] WAFA MALIH: ‘No!’ in *Banipal 29*, 2007, from the author’s collection of short stories *Itirafaat Rajul Waqib* (Confessions of an Impudent Man) published by Ifriqia al-Sharq lil-Nashr, 2004.

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Biographies of Authors

[158] LATIFA BAQA was born in Sale, Morocco. Her collection of short stories, *Ma alladbi nafalabu?* (What Do We Do?), won the 1992 Moroccan Union of Writers' Award for Best Young Writer. She is the author of several more short story collections.

NAJWA BINSHATWAN was born in 1970 in Ijdabla, Libya. She has an MA in educational sciences, and teaches at Garyounis University, Libya. After her first poetry collection (2002) she became an award-winning dramatist. She has three collections of short stories and one novel. In 2010 she was selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab writers – see the anthology *Beirut39*.

WAFA AL-BUEISSA was born in 1973 in Libya, but now lives in Holland after her debut novel, *Hunger has Other Faces*, (excerpted above and in *Banipal 40 – Libyan Fiction*) led to hate campaigns in Libyan mosques calling for her to be declared an unbeliever. She was obliged to leave the country and was given asylum in Holland. She has written three novels, her second, *Fursan al-Su'al*, (Knights of Coughing) was published in 2009 in Tunisia. Her third, a historical novel about Na'athal, a Jew from Medina in Mohammed's time, has been banned in Libya.

RACHIDA EL-CHARNI was born in Tunis in 1967. By 1981 she was studying law and also started publishing her short stories in Arab magazines and newspapers. Her first collection was published in 1997, winning her the prize of the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research in Tunis. Her second collection (2000) was awarded first prize for Arab Women's Creative Writing in Sharjah, but only after a ruling by censors that she change its title *God Loves Me, Credo* (the title story). In 2002, a new edition was published in Beirut, with the title *Sabeel al-Asaila* (The Neighing of Questions) and the inclusion of the censored story. Her first novel *Tarateel li-Alamiba* (Hymns for her Pain) was published in 2011 by Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut. Rachida lives in Tunis where she works as an inspector of primary schools.

ALEXANDRA CHREITEH began writing *Always Coca-Cola*, her debut novel, as an undergraduate at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. She is pursuing a PhD in comparative literature at Yale University.

MANSOURA EZ-ELDIN was born in 1976 in a small village in Delta Egypt. After graduating in journalism from Cairo, she started publishing short stories in the Arab press, with a first collection, *Daw' Muhtaz*, (Shaken Light)



published in 2001. She works as book review editor of the Egyptian literary weekly *Akkbar al-Adab* (Literature News). Her successful debut novel, *Maryam's Maze*, (Merit, 2004) was excerpted in *Banipal* 25, translated by Paul Starkey, and later published by AUC Press, Cairo. In 2006 she toured the UK with Banipal Live 2006, reading from some short stories in the small volume accompanying the tour, *Unbuttoning the Violin* (Banipal Books, 2006). Her second novel *Beyond Paradise* was short-listed for the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, the year she was also selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab authors.

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HUZAMAH HABAYEB is a Palestinian author and journalist. She was born in Kuwait, graduating from Kuwait University in English language and literature. She worked there as a journalist until 1990 and the Gulf War, when she was forced to leave. She settled in Jordan, establishing her reputation as a short story writer. In 1992 she published her first collection and in 1993 and 1994 won prizes for her work, with her fourth published in 2001. She works as a journalist for *Zahrat al-Khaleej* magazine, Abu Dhabi.

JOUMANA HADDAD was born in 1970 in Beirut, Lebanon, where she lives and works. A poet, translator and journalist, she is the cultural pages editor of *An-Nabar* daily newspaper, and founding editor of *Jasad* magazine. She served as administrator of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction for its first four years. She has several collections of poetry, including *Return to Lilith* (translated and published in *Banipal* 24, 2005) with some translations in other languages. In 2010 she was selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab writers.

NATHALIE HANDAL is an award-winning Palestinian poet, playwright, and writer, based in the USA. Her collections of poetry include *The NeverField*, *The Lives of Rain, Love and Strange Horses*, and, in February 2012, *Poet In Andalucia*. She has also edited the anthologies *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (Interlink, 2000) and *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond* (Norton, 2008). She travels widely and writes a blog-column for www.wordswithoutborders.com.

INAYA JABER is a Lebanese poet and has published six collections of poetry. She works as a journalist on the Lebanese daily paper *As-Safir*. She has read her poems at many festivals in Europe and the Middle East.

RACHIDA LAMRABET, born in Morocco in 1970, is a Belgian author of Moroccan origin. She works as a lawyer for the Centre for Equality of Opportunity and Opposition to Racism in Brussels. In 2006 her short story,

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Mercedes 207, won the Kif Kif literary prize and her successful debut novel, *Vrouwland* (Womanland), 2007, won the Flemish Debut Award. Her short story collection *Een kind van god* (A Child of God), 2008, won the 2011 BNG Literature Award for writers under 40.

[160] WAFA MALIH was born in 1975 in Bouzkarn, Morocco. In 2004 she published a collection of short stories and her first novel, *Indama yabki al-Rijal* (When the Men Cry). She lives and works in the Moroccan capital, Rabat.

MARAM AL-MASSRI is from Lattakia in Syria. She settled in Paris in 1982 after graduating in English Literature from Damascus University. She has six collections of poetry, with the second winning the Adonis Prize for Poetry in 1997. First published in English in *Banipal* magazine, she has a bilingual Arabic-English collection, *A Red Cherry on a White Tile Floor*, (USA and UK) which has also been published in a number of other languages.

IMAN MERSAL was born in 1966 in Mansourah, Egypt. She began publishing poetry when she was sixteen and has since published four collections: *Ittisafat* (Characterizations), 1990, *Mamar Mu'tim Yaslub li Ta'allum al-Raqqs* (A Dark Passageway is Suitable for Learning to Dance), 1995, and *al-Mashy Atwal Waqt Mumkin* (Walking As Long As Possible), 1997. Her latest is *Jugbrafa Badeela* (Alternative Geography), 2006. She lives and works in Alberta, Canada.

NACERA MOHAMMEDI is from Algeria and is a poet, journalist and radio broadcaster on cultural affairs. She has a Masters in Arabic Literature from the University of Algiers and is a founding member of the League of Alternative Writers (Ligue des écrivains différents). She publishes her poetry in newspapers and has two collections, with one, *Gypsy Woman*, also published in French translation.

AMEL MOUSSA is a poet and cultural journalist from Tunisia. She works as a journalist for *Al-Sharq Al-Aswat* newspaper, and with a Masters in sociology, also teaches media and communication and is a cultural consultant at the Tunisian Association for Arts and Sciences. She has received the country's National Creative Award for poetry and an award from the Arab Women's Organisation for her journalism in Tunisia. Her collections *Untha al-Ma'* (Female of Water), 1996 and *Khajal al-Ya'kout* (The Emerald's Bashfulness), 1998, have been published in Italian editions and some other poems in English, Spanish, French, Polish and Czech. She travels widely to festivals and literary events.

RASHA OMRAN was born in Tartus, Syria, in 1964. She has a degree in Ara-



bic literature from Damascus University. She is the director of the annual Al-Sindiyan festival of culture. Since 1997 she has published four collections of poetry as well as compiling an anthology of Syrian poetry. She has read her work at several festivals in the UK and other European countries.

RABIA RAIHANE is from Morocco. She has been a teacher of Arabic language and literature, and currently works for the Ministry of National Education. She has several collections of short stories, some have been translated into French, English, German, Spanish and Danish.

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AZZA RASHAD was born in Al-Sharqiya province of Egypt in 1961, and graduated in medicine and surgery, specialising in paediatrics and working in Health Ministry hospitals. Her debut novel, *Memory of Wilderness*, was published in 2003 (Merit). She has two short story collections, the latest *Half Light* and *I love Nura, I hate Nurhan*, (Sharqiyaat, 2005) excerpted above.

AMINA SAÏD was born in Tunisia in 1953 and has lived in Paris since 1979. A poet and translator, writing in French, she has 14 collections of poems, the most recent being *Les Saisons d'Aden*, Editions al-Manar, 2011, the second of a trilogy. In 1989 she was awarded the Jean Malrieu Prize and in 1994 the Charles Vildrac Prize. She has one bilingual collection, *The Present Tense of the World* (Black Widow Press, 2011), translated by Marilyn Hacker, with other translations in *Banipals* 2, 9, 35 and 39. Selected works have been published in Arabic, German, Turkish and Italian in journals or for literary festivals. She is the author of two collections of retold Tunisian folk tales.

ADANIA SHIBLI was born in Palestine in 1974 and has twice won the AM Qattan Foundation's annual Young Writer's Award. She has two novels, *Masas*, (Touch) also published in English, French and Italian editions, and, *We Are All Equally Far From Love*, excerpted in *Banipal* 34 (March 2009), with a US edition in 2011. Her short stories and essays have been published in Arabic literary magazines and some have been translated into English (see *Banipal* 15/16), French, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Korean. She has a PhD in media and cultural studies from the University of East London. In 2010 she was selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab writers.

ALAWIYA SOBH is a Lebanese novelist, journalist and editor-in-chief of *Snob Al-Hasnaa'* magazine, which she founded in 1994 and is the Arab world's best-selling women's cultural magazine. In 2006 she was awarded the Sultan Qaboos prize for her second novel (*Maryam of the Stories*), which has French (Gallimard), German (Suhrkamp) and Italian editions, but as yet no English. She participates regularly in cultural conferences throughout the Arab world

and on television programmes addressing issues related to women, war and modernity in Lebanon and the Arab world. In 2009–2010 she was a judge for the Beirut39 literary project.

[162] MIRAL AL-TAHAWY was born in 1968 and studied literature at Cairo University. She has one collection of short stories, but it was her debut novel, *The Tent*, that brought her to literary prominence. Two more followed, *Blue Aubergine*, and *Gazelle Tracks*, excerpted in *Banipals* 14 and 28, translated by Anthony Calderbank. Her fourth novel, *Brooklyn Heights*, won the 2010 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature and was short-listed for the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, with an English edition by AUC Press due to be published in 2012.

RANA AL-TONSI was born in Cairo in 1981. She graduated from the American University in Cairo with a degree in Arabic Studies and is currently completing her MA there. She has published four collections of poetry, *That House from which the Music Comes* (Cairo, 1999), *A Rose for the Last Days* (Merit, Cairo 2003), *A Country Called Desire* (Merit, Cairo, 2005) and *A Short History* (Dar El Nahda, Lebanon, 2006).

DIMA WANNOUS was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1982. She is a journalist, writer and translator. She studied French Literature at Damascus University and the Sorbonne and has a diploma in translation from the University of Leon, France. She came to the critics' attention with her first short story collection *Tafasil* (Details) in 2007. In 2008 she published her first novel, *Kursi* (Chair). She has worked as a translator, a French news announcer for Radio Damascus and a presenter of a satellite TV cultural show. She also writes on politics and culture for *Assafir*, *al-Akbar* and *Al-Hayat* newspapers. In 2010 she was selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab writers.

SAMAR YAZBEK was born in 1970 in Syria. She has a degree in Arabic literature, and is a cinema and television critic. She has published four novels and two collections of short stories. She has also written three film scripts, with one, *A Falling Sky*, awarded the prize for best literary scenario by Unicef in 2004. She has also scripted two TV dramas and a documentary on the life of the Syrian academic Anton Maqdesi. Her novel *Ra'ihat al-Qirfa* (The Smell of Cinnamom) has an Italian edition, and shortly a French one. She is active in literary, women's and human rights issues and has edited the e-zine, *Women of Syria*. In 2010 she was selected as one of the Beirut39 young Arab writers.

FAWZIA ZOUARI was born in Kef, Tunisia, and is a writer and journalist, with a PhD in French and comparative literature from the Sorbonne. She



settled in Paris in 1979. She worked for a number of years for the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, including editing *Qantara* magazine, and for *Jeune Afrique*. She has published several volumes of essays and two novels, *La Retournée*, Ramsay, 2002, which received the 2003 Francophonie Prize and *La Deuxième épouse* (The Second Wife), Ramsay, 2006.

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Biographies of Translators

[164] PIERS AMODIA studied Arabic at Edinburgh University. He translates from Arabic and Italian into English.

SINAN ANTOON is a poet, novelist, translator and academic. Born in Baghdad (1967) he moved to the USA in 1991 and now teaches at New York University. He has two poetry collections in Arabic, one in English and two novels. He is a contributing editor of *Banipal*.

SEEMA ATALLA is a poet and translator who grew up in Amman, Jordan, and later settled in California. Her poems and translations have appeared in a number of US journals and *Banipal*.

ALI AZERIAH is a retired professor of translation studies at the King Fahd Advanced School of Translation, Tangiers, Morocco. He is a regular translator for *Banipal*.

ANTHONY CALDERBANK studied Arabic and Persian at Manchester University and taught Arabic in Cairo and at Salford University, UK. He has translated a number of novels by contemporary Arab authors.

MARILYN HACKER (translator from the French) is the award-winning author of many poetry collections. She lives in New York and Paris, and is a contributing editor of *Banipal*. In 2008, she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

MICHELLE HARTMAN is an associate professor of Arabic and francophone literature at McGill University in Montreal. She has translated a number of novels by contemporary Arab authors.

GHENWA HAYEK has a PhD in Comparative Literature (Lebanese novels) from Brown University. She is a regular translator for *Banipal*, with other translations for the *Beirut39* anthology and in the press, including *The New York Times*.

JUDITH LANDRY (translator from the French) was educated at Somerville College, Oxford where she obtained a first class honours degree in French and Italian. She combines a career as a translator of works of fiction, art and architecture with part-time teaching.

SHERRY MARX-MACDONALD (translator from the Dutch) is a freelance Canadian editor and translator of Dutch fiction and non-fiction, and lives in Amsterdam.



KHALED AL-MASRI teaches Arabic at Harvard while completing his PhD. His translations of Arabic poetry and short stories have appeared in several literary magazines (he is a regular contributor to *Banipal*). He has published, in Arabic, a book on the pioneer Iraqi novelist Gha'ib Tu'mah Farman.

KHALED MATTAWA is an award-winning poet, academic and translator. Born in Benghazi, Libya, in 1964 he moved to the USA in 1979. He has four collections of his own poetry (he writes in English), and has published volumes of translations of major Arab poets, including Adonis, Saadi Youssef and Fadhil al-Azzawi. Also President of RAWI, the Arab-American writers organisation. He is a founding contributing editor of *Banipal*.

ROBIN MOGER is a translator of Arabic literature currently living in Cape Town, South Africa. He has a degree in Egyptology and Arabic (Oxford, 2001) before travelling to Cairo to work as a journalist for the *Cairo Times* magazine. Following its closure he became a full-time professional translator. He has translated a number of novels by contemporary Arab authors.

SUNEELA MUBAYI is a graduate student in Arabic literature at NYU, with a keen interest in literary translation of young and upcoming Arab writers.

CHRISTINA PHILIPS is translator and scholar, presently teaching at Exeter University. She has translated a number of novels by contemporary Arab authors.

YOUSSEF RAKHA is a writer, journalist and translator from Cairo, with a BA Hons in English and Philosophy (Hull University, UK, 1998), and is presently senior writer/copy editor for the English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly*. He is one of the 39 authors of the Beirut39 project.

ANTON SHAMMAS is a Palestinian poet, author, academic and translator of Arabic, Hebrew and English. His novel *Arabesques* was the first novel by a Palestinian to be written in Hebrew. He is Professor of Comparative Literature and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA and is a contributing editor of *Banipal*.

PAUL STARKEY is Professor of Arabic at Durham University, and a literary translator of several contemporary Arab authors. He is a contributing editor of *Banipal* and chair of the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature.

JENNY STEEL has a BA in Oriental Studies from Cambridge University and is fluent in Arabic, Farsi, and French.

MAIA TABET was born and raised in Beirut and is a journalist, editor and literary translator. Her first full-length book translation was *Little Mountain* by

Biographies of Translators

Elias Khoury. She has translated a number of novels by contemporary Arab authors.

MONA ZAKI is has a BA from the American University in Cairo in Middle Eastern History and a PhD from Princeton. She is a contributing editor of *Banipal* and a regular reviewer and translator.

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Résumé

Challenging the Odds est une sélection d'œuvres de 27 auteurs femmes dans les numéros du magazine Banipal. Les femmes participantes dans cet ouvrage, dont 17 auteurs de fiction et 10 poètes, proviennent de huit pays arabes du sud et de l'Est méditerranéens: Algérie, Maroc, Tunisie, Libye, Egypte, Palestine, Liban et Syrie. Banipal est un magazine Pan-Arabe qui s'occupe de la littérature non pas de points de vue nationaux, mais à travers le monde arabe dans son ensemble; produisant cette fonctionnalité pour révéler certaines lacunes dans notre présentation de la fiction et la poésie à travers ces auteurs femmes de ces Pays méditerranéens, où nous nous efforçons de remédier à l'avenir. Tous les 27 auteurs sont audacieux, originaux, imaginatifs, tabous-franchement, faisant des contributions significatives à l'ouverture du scène littéraire dans la mondialisation du 21^e siècle, et en prenant sur des sujets et les styles de ce défi, sont à réfléchir et à prendre comme une première prémissse un droit d'auteur à la liberté d'expression, six d'entre eux ont déjà été sélectionnés parmi les meilleurs 39 jeunes auteurs arabes sous l'âge de 40 ans (pour le projet Beirut39). Tous ces auteurs écrivent librement, vont là où leurs sujets les prennent, et ainsi contribuent à l'interrogatoire des attitudes rétrogrades, des normes sociales répressives et les stéréotypes, apportant une fraîcheur, d'humour, l'honnêteté et d'ouverture à la discussion et au dialogue sur les éternelles dilemmes humains et des libertés individuelles.

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Povzetek

Challenging the Odds je izbor del 27 avtoric iz različnih številk revije *Banipal*.

[168] Avtorice – 17 pisateljic in 10 pesnic – prihajajo iz osmih arabskih držav z južnih in vzhodnih obal Sredozemlja: Alžirije, Maroka, Tunizije, Libije, Egipta, Palestine, Libanona in Sirije. *Banipal* je vsearabska revija in literature ne predstavlja iz zornega kota enega ali drugega naroda, pač pa z vidika celotnega arabskega sveta; vendar pa je takšen pristop pokazal tudi določene vrzeli v naši predstavitvi avtoric iz teh sredozemskih držav, kar bomo skušali popraviti v prihodnje. Vseh 27 avtoric je drznih, izvirnih in domiselnih, podirajo tabuje in pomembno prispevajo k odpiranju literature v globaliziranem 21. stoletju. Izhajajoč temeljne pravice avtorja do svobodnega izražanja se lotijo izzivalnih tem, ob katerih se zamislimo; šest izmed predstavljenih avtoric je bilo uvrščenih tudi med 39 najboljših arabskih avtorjev, mlajših od 40 let (v okviru projekta Bejrut³⁹). Avtorice pišejo brez zadržkov in svobodno izbirajo teme ter tako postavljajo pod vprašaj nazadnjaštvo, omejevalna družbena pravila in stereotipe, prispevajo k stalni razpravi in dialogu o večnih človeških vprašanjih in osebnih svoboščinah ter prinašajo svežino, humor, iskrenost in odprtost.



Continued from the front inside cover

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PUBLISHED BY

Euro-Mediterranean University, Slovenia, and University of Nova Gorica, Slovenia



EDITORIAL OFFICE

Euro-Mediterranean University
Sončna pot 20
SI-6320 Portorož, Slovenia

Phone +386 59 25 00 50

Fax +386 59 25 00 54

www.ijems.emuni.si

ijems@emuni.si

English to French Translations

Mohamed Chatouani

Design and Typesetting

Alen Ježovnik

Print run: 500.

Printed in Slovenia

by Degraf, Koper.

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The project intends to sustain and support the development of academic mobility, tune the academic accreditation and validation processes of university and professional education within the Union for the Mediterranean and serve as a reference to future cooperation amongst academic and professional bodies within the region for Ministerial and Institutional cooperation in line with the external dimension of the Bologna Process and the parallel initiatives established on the international level in professional qualifications and academic mobility. It should also serve as a platform of possible cooperation with the European Research Area and the ancillary initiatives which bring together the world of work with the world of academia.

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