

# A Taste of Today's Gulf Literature

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## Foreword

Today's world increasingly faces a wide-range of intensifying challenges; economic crises and austerity measures, global nationalist movements and political polarisation, extremist ideologies and violence are hallmarks of a rapidly transforming World. Consequently, inter-cultural understanding, peaceful co-existence and tolerance are suffering.

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Since its establishment in 2008, as one of the priority projects of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) has always played a significant role beyond only that of a conventional University. It is a network of cooperating education and research institutes across the 43 members of the UfM, a driver for students and staff mobility across the shores of the Mediterranean and a platform for inter-cultural dialogue and understanding. EMUNI is an enabler of all those values that require vigorous effort but bring infinite benefits.

With the launch of our Centre for Arab, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in 2015, EMUNI has been delivering its stated mission even beyond the Euro-Mediterranean region. Accommodating the global transformations, where borders are porous and challenges are shared, the Centre orients itself not only towards its neighbours, but also neighbours of the neighbours.

In this special supplement of the International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies (IJEMS), EMUNI and its Centre for Arab, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies are proud to partner with the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Banipal Magazine, who made a careful selection of the pieces of contemporary literature from the Arab States of the Gulf. The literary culture of the Gulf is rich and diverse, yet too concealed to be appreciated. We aim to cast light on these works and believe that collectively they will be able to gain even more prominence.

The content of this supplement is different from the academic nature of the articles in the Journal's issues. While scholarly work advances our knowledge, literature has the ability to touch the hearts and minds. The power of literary work to address everyone and at different levels is what makes this publication much more



than a “supplement” for our usual readership. We trust that as such this publication will make its way to an even wider audience and allow a genuine inter-cultural exchange to take place.

I have enjoyed discovering the literary voice of the region and I am sure our readers will find this fine selection as stimulating and engaging as much as it is entertaining.

Abdelhamid El-Zoheiry  
President, EMUNI  
Editor-in-Chief, IJEMS

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Današnji svet je postavljen pred širok nabor čedalje težjih izzivov. Gospodarska kriza in varčevalni ukrepi, nacionalistična gibanja po svetu in politična polarizacija, skrajne ideologije in nasilje so značilnosti hitro spreminjajočega se sveta, v katerem je vse manj prostora za razumevanje med kulturami, mirno sožitje in strpnost.

Evro-sredozemska univerza (EMUNI) že vse od ustanovitve v letu 2008 kot eden prednostnih projektov Unije za Sredozemlje prevzema pomembno vlogo poleg tiste, ki jo imajo tradicionalne univerze. EMUNI je mreža izobraževalnih in raziskovalnih ustanov 43 članic Unije za Sredozemlje, gibalno mobilnosti študentov in profesorjev z obeh strani Sredozemskega morja in prostor za medkulturni dialog in razumevanje. EMUNI spodbuja vse tiste vrednote, za katere se je treba truditi na vso moč in ki prinašajo neskončne koristi.

Z ustanovitvijo Centra za arabske, islamske in bližnjevzhodne študije v letu 2015 se poslanstvo EMUNI širi onkraj Evro-sredozemske regije. Center se zaradi sprememb v svetu, kjer ni več trdno začrtanih meja in so izzivi skupni, usmerja ne le na sosede, pač pa tudi na sosede sosedov.

EMUNI in njen Center za arabske, islamske in bližnjevzhodne študije sta ponosna, da sta pri tej posebni prilogi Mednarodne revije za Evro-sredozemske študije sodelovala z Ministrstvom za zunanje zadeve Republike Slovenije in revijo Banipal, ki je opravila skrben izbor sodobne literature avtorjev iz arabskih zalivskih držav. Tamkajšnja književna kultura je bogata in raznolika, a preveč skrita, da bi jo ustrezno cenili. Z izdajo te zbirke jo



želimo približati bralcem in verjamemo, da bo s predstavljenim izborom pridobila še več zaslužene pozornosti.

Vsebina tega dodatka se razlikuje od akademske narave člankov v običajnih številkah revije. Medtem ko znanstvena dela prinašajo znanstveni napredek, ima literatura sposobnost, da se dotakne srca in uma. Moč literarnih del, da nagovorijo vse, in to na različnih ravneh, je tisto, zaradi česar je ta publikacija veliko več kot "priloga" za naše običajne bralce. Verjamemo, da bo s tem našla pot v še širšo javnost in omogočila pristno medkulturno izmenjavo.

Odkrivanje literarnega glasu te regije mi je bilo v velik užitek in prepričan sem, da bo ta pretanjeni izbor za naše bralce hkrati privlačno in spodbudno kot prijetno branje.

Abdelhamid El-Zoheiry  
Predsednik EMUNI  
Urednik IJEMS

#### مقدمة

يواجه العالم اليوم على نطاق واسع تحديات متقادمة بداية من أزمات اقتصادية وإجراءات تشفوية إلى انتشار حركات قومية عالمية واستقطاب سياسي ووصولاً إلى الأيديولوجيات المتطرفة والعنف، كلها سمات عالم سريع التقلب ونتيجة إلى ذلك تعاني كثير من المفاهيم مثل التفاهم بين الثقافات والتواجد السلمي والتسامح.

من نشأتها، تعد الجامعة الأورومتوسطية من المشاريع ذات الأولوية لمنظمة الاتحاد من أجل المتوسط وتلعب دور أهم وأبعد من كونها مجرد جامعة تقليدية فهي شبكة للتعاون بين الجامعات والهيئات التعليمية والبحثية بالدول الثلاث و أربعون الأعضاء في الاتحاد من أجل المتوسط ومنصة للحوار والفهم متعدد الثقافات و دافع لتبادل الطلبة وأعضاء هيئة التدريس عبر سواحل البحر المتوسط.

ومنذ افتتاح مركز الدراسات العربية والإسلامية والشرق أوسطية بالجامعة في عام ٢٠١٥، تواصل الجامعة الأورومتوسطية تلبية مهمتها المعلنة إلى ما بعد المنطقة الأورومتوسطية استيعاباً للتحويلات العالمية، حيث أصبحت الحدود نفاذة والتحديات مشتركة فإن المركز يقوم بخدمة ليس دول الجوار فحسب، بل أيضاً الدول المجاورة لدول الجوار.

في هذا الملحق الخاص من المجلة الدولية للدراسات الأورومتوسطية، تعزز الجامعة الأورومتوسطية ومركزها للدراسات العربية والإسلامية والشرق أوسطية بتكوين شراكة مع وزارة الشؤون الخارجية لجمهورية سلوفاكيا ومجلة "بينالي" التي لها الفضل في الاختيار المتأني لبعض أهم أعمال مؤلفي الخليج العربي من الأدب المعاصر. تتميز الثقافة الخليجية العربية بالنقل والتنوع إلا أنها لا تأخذ مكانتها المستحقة في التقدير. أننا نسعى إلى تسليط الضوء على هذه الأعمال ونؤمن بأننا سوف نكتسب أهمية أكثر.

يختلف محتوى هذا الملحق عن الطبيعة الأكاديمية التي تتميز بها المقالات المنشورة في أعداد المجلة. فبينما تسعى الأعمال العلمية إلى التقدم والوصول إلى المعرفة، فإن الأدب يستطيع التأثير على القلوب والعقول. أن قوة الأعمال الأدبية في مخاطبة الجميع على كل المستويات المختلفة هي ما تجعل هذا المنشور أكثر من مجرد ملحق لقرائنا التقليديين. نحن على أتم ثقة من وصول هذا المنشور إلى قاعدة جمهور أوسع محققاً تبادل حقيقي متعدد الثقافات.

أود أن أعبّر عن سعادتني البالغة لاكتشاف هذا الصوت الأدبي البليغ لمنطقة الخليج العربي وثقتي بأن هذه المختارات الرائعة سوف تحظى باهتمام و إعجاب القراء.

عبد الحميد الزهيري  
رئيس الجامعة الأورومتوسطية  
رئيس تحرير المجلة الدولية للدراسات الأورومتوسطية



Slovenia is proud to be part of the Euro-Mediterranean region, and its historical and cultural heritage, which shaped our society. It is therefore of special importance for us that the seat of the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI), one of the first and key initiatives of the Union for the Mediterranean, is located on our coast. In the light of the unprecedented phenomena that are disturbing our societies across the region – unemployment, radicalisation, conflict and migration – EMUNI's mission to empower the young is more relevant than ever.

| 6 | To our great satisfaction, EMUNI's recently inaugurated Centre for Arab, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (AIMES) expands EMUNI's scope and increases its outreach in the MENA region. By inviting our neighbours' neighbours to join initiatives and actions, it builds new cultural bridges and channels of cooperation, also with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, to which we jointly dedicate this literary publication.

Each country and each nation is unique in its culture, art and tradition. Today's world is closely connected and interlinked, but somehow we often fail to listen to each other. In this regard, it is of immense importance to know, appreciate and respect everything that makes us different and special.

Therefore, we warmly welcome this publication's contribution to intercultural understanding and dialogue between cultures. The "Translation for Dialogue" conference, which we co-organised with the Anna Lindh Foundation and EMUNI in Piran this year, confirmed the importance of translation as a central tool for intercultural dialogue. "Without translation, books and other works become cultural left luggage," says the Conference's Manifesto.

In these turbulent times, when we face so many new challenges, the creation of new platforms for dialogue – political, economic and cultural – is of the utmost importance. We are therefore particularly glad to give a new boost to our relations with the Gulf countries, to stimulate our cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. We are fully convinced that the Gulf Day International Conference will be a firm basis for mutually beneficial and inspiring cooperation in the years to come.

Karl Erjavec  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia

Slovenija je ponosna, da je del evro-sredozemskega prostora, njegove zgodovinske in kulturne dediščine, na podlagi katere se je oblikovala naša družba. Zato je za nas posebnega pomena, da je na slovenski obali sedež Evro-sredozemske univerze – EMUNI, enega prvih in ključnih projektov Unije za Sredozemlje. Ob izzivih popolnoma novih razsežnosti, s katerimi se spoprijemajo družbe v regiji – brezposelnosti, radikalizaciji, konfliktih in migracijah – pridobivajo prizadevanja EMUNI-ja za opolnomočenje mladih še dodaten pomen.

V posebno zadovoljstvo nam je, da nedavno odprti Center za arabske, islamske in bližnjevzhodne študije – AIMES širi področje delovanja EMUNI-ja in njegov domet v Severni Afriki in na Bližnjem vzhodu. Z vključevanjem sosedov naših sosedov v skupne pobude in dejavnosti gradi AIMES nove kulturne mostove in poti sodelovanja, tudi z državami Sveta za sodelovanje v Zalivu, ki jim skupaj posvečamo to publikacijo.

Vsaka država, vsak narod je edinstven v svoji kulturi, umetnosti in tradiciji. Današnji svet je tesno povezan in prepleten, toda nekako nam še vedno ne uspeva, da bi se poslušali in slišali. Ključnega pomena je namreč, da poznamo, cenimo in spoštujemo, kar vsakega od nas dela drugačnega in posebnega.

Zato me srčno veseli izid te publikacije, ki je prispevek k boljšemu medkulturnemu razumevanju in dialogu med kulturami. Konferenca Prevajanje za dialog, ki smo jo letos v Piranu organizirali skupaj s Fundacijo Anne Lindh in EMUNI-jem, potrjuje pomen prevajanja kot gibala medkulturnega dialoga. "Tudi dela potujejo, z več ali manj prtljage. Neprevedene knjige pa obtičijo nekje na poti," navaja manifest konference.

V teh nemirnih časih, ko smo se znašli pred številnimi novimi izzivi, je vzpostavljanje novih platform za dialog – politični, gospodarski in kulturni – posebnega pomena. Zato me posebno veselijo nov zagon v naših odnosih z zalivskimi državami, spodbude kulturnim izmenjavam in stikom na medčloveški ravni. Prepričan sem, da bo mednarodna konferenca Dan zalivskih držav postavila trdno osnovo za medsebojno koristno in spodbudno sodelovanje v prihodnosti.

Karl Erjavec,  
minister za zunanje zadeve Republike Slovenije



تعتز سلوفينيا بكونها جزء من المنطقة الأرومتوسطية، حيث يشكل تاريخها وثقافتها وتراثها مجتمعنا. ومن ثم يعتبر وجود الجامعة الأرومتوسطية على ساحلها شأنا ذو أهمية خاصة لكونها أول وأهم مبادرات الإتحاد من أجل المتوسط. وفي ظل الظواهر الغير مسبوقه التي تواجه مجتمعاتنا في المنطقة من البطالة والتطرف، النزاعات والهجرة، تبلغ مهمة الجامعة الأرومتوسطية بالعمل على تمكين الشباب أكثر أهمية من أي وقت مضى.

يسرنا أنه تم مؤخرا إفتتاح مركز الدراسات العربية والإسلامية والشرق أوسطية بواسطة الجامعة الأرومتوسطية تحقيقا لامتداد و زيادة نطاق انتشار الجامعة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط. أن بناء جسور ثقافية وسبل للتعاون يتم عن طريق دعوة الدول المجاورة لدول الجوار، ولاسيما دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي التي نهدي إليها هذا المنشور الأدبي، إلى المساهمة في مبادرات وأفعال مشتركة.

تتفرد كل دولة ويختلف كل شعب في ثقافته وفنه وتقاليدته. اليوم ومع زيادة تواصل وإرتباط العالم بعبعضه ببعض، تخاذلنا في الإستماع للأخر وذلك وفي هذا الصدد فإن معرفة وتقدير واحترام ما يجعلنا مختلفين ومتميزين أمرا في غاية الأهمية.

لذلك فأننا نرحب اليوم بمشاركة هذا المنشور الأدبي في خلق الفهم متعدد الثقافات والحوار بين الثقافات المختلفة. إن مؤتمر "الترجمة من أجل الحوار"، الذي نظمته الجامعة الأرومتوسطية بالتعاون مع مؤسسة أنا ليند في بيران هذا العام يأتي تأكيدا على أهمية الترجمة كوسيلة أساسية من أجل وجود حوار متعدد الثقافات. ووفقا للبيان العام للمؤتمر "ولولا الترجمة لقيت الكتب والمصنفات في حجر ثقافي"

إن إنشاء منصات للحوار السياسي والاقتصادي والثقافي أمر بالغ الأهمية خاصة في ظل هذه الأوقات العصيبة التي نواجه فيها العديد من التحديات الجديدة. لذلك يطيب لنا في هذا الصدد أن نعزز العلاقات بين دول الخليج بهدف دفع التبادل الثقافي والتواصل الانساني المباشر. نحن على أتم ثقة أن المؤتمر الدولي ليوم الخليج سيكون ركن راسخ لتحقيق منفعة متبادلة وتعاون ملهم في السنوات المقبلة.

كارل إيرياقتس

وزير الشؤون الخارجية لجمهورية سلوفينيا



# Introduction

## *A Taste of Today's Gulf Literature*

This special supplement of the IJEMS journal focuses on today's modernist literature of the Arab States of the Gulf and is a collaboration between Banipal magazine and IJEMS. Over the 19 years since Banipal was founded, the magazine has published many commissioned translations of literary works by authors from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – short stories, excerpts of novels, poetry, and also essays by authors on their literary influences. There have been dedicated features on particular countries, notably *Fiction from Kuwait* (No 47), *The Novel in Saudi Arabia* (No 20) and *New Writing from the Emirates* (No 42), which include specially commissioned essays on the poetry, fiction and the development of modern literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in those countries.

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The modernist literary scene today in the Gulf area is rich and varied in poetry, short stories and novels. In this special supplement we bring you a selection of texts by authors from all six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that will give you a taste of its vibrant literature, that was originally published in Arabic, has been read throughout the Arab world and beyond, and which Banipal makes available in English translation to its subscribers and readers, and now to readers of this special supplement. The authors of these texts represent some of the best of Arab literary creativity at this time, in both fiction and poetry.

The twenty-nine male and female authors in this supplement are all well-known in the region and most throughout the Arab world too, while a number are internationally known, but they are now only a small selection of the creative literary talent that abounds in the Gulf countries today. Over the last three decades in particular modernist forms of literature have been developing at a rapid pace, in part the influence of the older and pioneering modernist literary scenes of Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt on the relatively young countries of the Gulf, in part a



response to the development of international communication, the internet and travel, in part a response to the equally rapid pace of economic and societal change in the region, and in part a move in tandem with the increasing global reach of cultural exchange in general. Women writers come into their own in this supplement, making as they do powerful and important contributions to the development of a dynamic literary scene in the region.

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The authors of short stories and excerpts from novels write eloquently and passionately on issues that can be recognised around the world as central to human life and experience, representing both the particular, being deeply embedded in and reflecting their own country's character and customs, and the universal – involving issues such as love, loss and grief, identity and personal awakening and questioning, travelling and working, being different within a society and challenging social norms, dealing with discrimination, inequality, tradition and modernity, country and town, new and old customs, and relations between different generations in families. Particularly powerful works weaving their stories around these themes are Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*, Sara al-Jarwan's *Letters to my Lord the Sultan*, and Bothayna al-Essa's *A Soundless Collision*. Such works allow the reader to explore impressively creative scenarios that mingle imagination, history, memory and true-to-life settings, producing much food for thought.

Through dialogue and finely described background scenes a number of the works explore romantic fantasy, the pain and joy of love and the anguish of betrayal between a husband and wife, between parents and daughter, and the reality of arranged marriage, as in Laila al-Othman's *The Eid Bisht*, Badriya al-Bishr's *Love Stories from al-A'sha Street* and Jokha Alharthi's *Women of the Moon*. Complex issues of love, taboo, skin colour, and tradition in conflict, are discussed in both Laila Aljohani's *Time of Ignorance* and Huda Hamad's *Things are not in their Place* while Ahmed Alrahbi's *Cat's Eyes* deals with unyielding officialdom and bureaucracy in an unusual way. While most of the works are realistic portrayals of deeply human, social situations, such as Ebtisam al-Mualla's *A Fading Light* – about a young woman



losing her sight because of diabetes – only a couple of authors move into the realm of magic realism, as in Rawdha al-Belushi's *Resurrection Bus* and in Taleb Alrefai's short stories.

The prose poem, or free verse, is now the preferred form of poetry being written by most poets across the Arab world, with those from Gulf countries being no exception, although the traditional, colloquial and oral forms, with metre and rime, are still widely found in Gulf media, TV and cultural festivals. The influence of the free verse prose poem format, pioneered by the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, spread widely, and allowed poets to experiment with language, metaphor and rhythm, while vastly increasing the range of subjects and themes to reflect on and discuss and observe. Poetry, it can be said, is a unique way of commenting on life in any and all its dimensions. Many of the poems below describe particular elements of daily life, moments that challenge perception, that can engage and merge the past, present and future, and in some ways mirror thought processes and even dreams “smelling of eternity” (Zahir al-Ghafri). Sometimes, poems are calls for help, sometimes calm statements on the “high walls of fate”, sometimes soliloquys of disappointment and dismay at life's sharp turns; “I think bewilderment erased our footsteps / to deceive our hearts or exploit our innocence, / I think it caused our paths to vanish”, writes Nujoom Al-Ghanem.

Some poems describe in lyrical tones a family scene, the loss of a very dear relative, while others portray fantastical yet poignant images, such as the evening being compared to a widow spending her night sipping coffee, or relate a life of friends who are likened to “waves churning salt and luring vessels” (Qassim Haddad). There is an experimental ballad about life as a failed car mechanic, Mohamed Al-Harthy writing: “I will not become a mechanic like you, Hassoon, I will be a poet instead, singing like the *siskin* in the acacia tree.” Khulood Al-Mu'alla's very individual and thoughtful poems examine her own relation with the world around her. Saadiah Mufarreh's poem of short stanzas is a list of splendidly hopeful dreams – one of them simply wanting “a long, full day / with the smell of the sand and sea”, while Fawziyya al-Sindi's poem is a powerful declaration against fear.



Ahmed al-Mualla writes a dramatic elegy to loss in the family, of the “souls that had left their mark in the dust, in the hollow of the chairs, the stain on the pillow and the imagination of the wood!”. The poems of Saif al-Rahbi and Maisoon Saqr, both renowned masters of the art, need no introduction.

We hope the poetry and fiction texts below give you a taste of the present literary scene of the Arab States of the Gulf. Many authors are unfortunately not included as this is but a selection of what is available. However, the selection shows clearly an impressive range of writings by different generations of authors, both men and women, from all six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

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Margaret Obank  
November 2016



## An excerpt from the essay *My Literary Influences*

RAJA ALEM

My father was a *mitwaf*, a spiritual guide for the pilgrims, and recently, my siblings and I inherited this appointment. He would host pilgrims in our home, and put up tents for them on Arafat and Mina, and lead them in the holy rites. The day at Arafat is the most dramatic. From noon, pilgrims of every guise gather in the barren desert, remaining until the afternoon turns to evening. One man's ancient stand has forever coloured that day, which has now been named the *waqfa* – the stand. During it, thousands of bare heads are raised before a sky shimmering with chants that are more like anthems until God emerges, hidden by clouds, and with the sun kneeling as it sets, the white-clothed pilgrims set off towards the horizon, a crowd of thousands moving to gather stones to chase away the devil, whom we believe is standing between us and God. If you stone the devil, you unburden yourself of your sins. Pilgrims also perform sacrifices, cleansing themselves with blood in order to lighten their load.

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This script that humanity has followed since antiquity, and which is repeated with crowds that renew themselves each year, was fundamental to my psychological formation, tied as that is to textual ablutions, and the strength of the narrative that could dictate the behaviour of people for centuries. I remember the lightness that followed the climb and the sacrifice, I remember that we lived within the Mina camp, an open-walled camp facing volcanic peaks from whose bottom torches and tents rose towards us. The male and female pilgrims were like a sea of whiteness that spread out underneath our doorstep. Suddenly one night, all this whiteness vanishes at once, replaced by clothes of colours so bright they compete with the sunshine. With the passing of the whiteness, stories are released and tales from all parts of the world emerge to infuse our imaginations. Yes, all sorts would bring their stories to Mecca and release them at



night-time around their tents, as the lanterns made people and gestures seem like giant shadows.

| 14 | In stark contrast to the dynamism of this oral tradition and its sense of drama, was the stagnant school curriculum. I began trying to escape on my first day of school, trying to outwit the guard and flee into the street; or, by disobeying the strict rules and smuggling in my schoolbag, swollen with forbidden books: translated tomes from East and West. Our school curriculum never wandered further than routine, flat texts, and presented no challenges of any kind until we reached Uqad. Uqad, whose genius (the genius of Mohammad, Abu Bakr and Omar) was to present the human in these men, whom the religious curriculum transforms into strict models, denuded of their humanity and their steady connection to life. By contemplating Uqad's philosophical interpretation of these Islamic characters, and their behavioural representation of the spirituality of faith, these texts liberated religion in my mind, transforming it from a tool of punishment and terror, into a tool for controlling the self and rising to the pinnacle of human capability. Despite Uqad's formidable prose – perhaps because of it – I became obsessed with the text, learned it by heart from my unconscious need to hold onto its linguistic intricacies, and its rational, dialectical attempts to prove a phenomenon he describes as psychological. I think he was the foundation for all my intellectual resources, whether Eastern or Western.

How can one have a window on the world from Mecca, with its dearth of bookshops? My narrow opening onto the world came in the form of a series of books I stole from my brother's schoolbag, Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* and some Arsène Lupin books. Perhaps this theft itself was a re-writing of the reality around me; after that, I continued to filch from his bag until I was shocked to find *The 120 Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade, which I never admitted to stealing and didn't even dare read at the time. But the true opening came with Maxim Gorky's *The Mother*, which I found by accident in my maternal grandfather's drawer. Gorky's revolution roared through my mind, and forged my vision of the role I had to play as an agent of change in the world around me. Because my mother is of Russian origin,



Russian literature, whether Gorky's *The Mother* or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, is my way of connecting to my roots, which are spread out across the surface of the Earth, and that pass through the iron curtains put up by political organizations. I read lying down, like one confident of my mother's connection to the land her father had left behind when he emigrated, escaping to the house of God in Mecca. Russian literature left me with impressions of the harsh climate, the snow that annihilates all signs of life and the struggle of the individual – against climate and regimes – to bring about political change.

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At the time, we were not concerned with political matters, which seemed to us luxuries enjoyed by developed countries, exercises to prove the intellectual dynamism of these nations. After a history filled with wars and invasions, freedom was not an imperative for most of the inhabitants of the peninsula. As a society, we were perhaps preoccupied with our sudden wealth, and with investing the oil revenues into building modern cities and infrastructure of all sorts, including the economic and scientific. Meanwhile, as individuals, the educational curriculum spiritually and physically trained us to be content, and to praise the general, untouchable situation as it was, which helped to programme us both as individuals and as a society to be complacent and free of rebellious, freedom-seeking tendencies.

The shock of knowledge and literature in translation became the medium in which I moved from a young age.

I'm trying now to reimagine the assault that the adolescent girl I was faced from books, and their captivating worlds that transformed her psychologically and physically at the same time. I began writing not by choice, but because I had been kidnapped, and I had grown to identify with my captors. I was not yet 14 when I was called by Maxim Gorky's *The Mother*, and I couldn't stop, consumed by a desire to connect with the exciting, different Other, who filled my head with positions and countries that became a part of my visions and positions. I would try them on and they would make me more beautiful, more dangerous, giving me access to peoples who, in turn, did not have access to a forbidden place like Mecca. My readings led me to study for and complete an undergraduate degree in English literature;



and academic study introduced me to the development of writing in the West, from Homer and Sophocles to the impossible work of James Joyce and the absurdity of Samuel Beckett, with a particular pause by Shakespeare, whose plays we drank in during summer open-air performances in British parks. My father sent us away each summer to learn English, and I soaked up the theatre and English poetry.

16 | From English literature, I set off on adventures with Rimbaud in Africa, fought windmills with *Don Quixote*, followed Marquez into one hundred years of solitude, and stopped by Borges' universal library. I was baffled by Miguel Angel Asturias' brevity in *El Alhajadito*, and sank into the Japanese rituals described in Yasunari Kawabata's writings. I believe that whenever we write, we are trying to rewrite what we have read, in an attempt to unknot our need for more, and to uncover what those writers who came before us couldn't: the cavity of human desire for a lost world, or an ideal world that we lost at some moment in our formation. I think that I continue to write and rewrite Marco Polo's stand in Kubla Khan's palace, as depicted in Coleridge's poem, with his attempts to capture towns and wondrous worlds in the things he brought back from them. I am still searching for witnesses, as I dive alongside D H Lawrence into the alchemy of human relationships, and his autopsies of their complicated balances, which transform each action and each glance into a concoction writhing with contradictions, but which the mind tries to reconcile with itself despite these myriad contradictions. Lawrence's books are a blind fumbling in the cavern of the human soul at the moment of love mixed with hatred, of instinct confronted with the rational mind's attempts to hide it, and the crushing transcendence in all of this, which we avoid publicizing except in literary texts. This openness led to him being described as an erotic writer, and led him into voluntary exile, which he called a "savage pilgrimage" and into which we voluntarily enter when we choose to write and we become bold enough to announce this. Lawrence's *Women in Love* return and are made flesh in my novel *The Dove's Necklace*, and Marco Polo is reborn in Italo Calvino's poetic *Invisible Cities*, just as the *1001 Nights* re-emerge in Borges' work.





When I look at the pyramid of my reading, I realise that no matter how much we read, we are cognisant of the universal text, which artists clash over, or try with all their might to integrate into their cultural products. Like other writers, I will continue to be compelled to try and incorporate this into my writings.

The 1.5 million words of *In Search of Lost Time*, which Marcel Proust worked on until his death, deepened my understanding of literature as a time capsule, or a tool to recreate the everyday and deepen it by connecting it to the past and the present. It was inevitable that *In Search of Lost Time* would be rejected by every publisher, including André Gide, because it was challenging, endless, continuing to chase the endless memories of a man who described a life that passed by as he spent his days in bed. In one form or another, I see literature not as documentation of the passing of days as much as a challenge, a call to renewal and to once more search for the moment or the event, and the fugitive nature of place. In fact, this book rewrites the role played by the Bedouin women of the Srat mountains in its proposal that people are just holes in time; or, in other words, shows that they occupy a certain chunk of time with their experiences. Literature, music and art are attempts to enter these capsules, to decipher them and the contents of the universal library in order to arrive at absolute truths about being, and to transmit them to others.

As much as one reads, one feels the need for serious content in writing, as well as lightness. A true revolution on my journey towards combining the serious with adventure happened with the novel *Atlas Shrugged*, which introduced me to the Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand. One may wonder where Rand's philosophy is placed in the context of my spiritual background, since this philosophy calls for individualism, and for exalting reason as the only way to reach knowledge. But I was captivated by this novel that mixes philosophy, science fiction and mystery. The title refers to Atlas, who in Greek mythology is a Titan, a giant who holds the weight of the world on his shoulders. Ayn Rand explores a dystopian United States where she invites Atlas, symbolising the country's leading innovators, industrialists and artists, to shrug, refusing to be exploited by society. A call by the charismatic John Galt to stop the "mind" or



“motor” of the world thrilled me as a teenager, because a world in which the individual is not free to create is doomed. I, innocently, then considered myself one of those people of the Mind, or mind of the world, and assimilated Rand's Objectivist Ethics into my writing: rationality, honesty, justice, independence, integrity, productiveness and pride.

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On the other hand, my reading did not create an intellectual haven for me, or bring me into the folds of my intellectual tribe; in fact, it made me believe that genius consists of a few moments of intense solitude, moments of soaring high in a private kingdom where we cannot allow society to hold a prisoner or govern. This viewpoint continues to extend over my own being and the world as a whole: if we give the moment of writing or artistic expression this particular sanctity, then we should also give it to the living moment, allowing for freedom of expression in body and soul simultaneously. And from there emerged my vision of the body, this monster that they scare us into not approaching. The mask was torn off, and my attitude to the physical was revised through an active, silent construction that meant I deliberated over each book that invoked spiritual or physical love, beginning with the platonic love that emerges from listening to evening recitals of the *1001 Nights*, to the love in Lawrence's novels, which is closer to a heightening of the soul and body in order to become one with the Other and with the universe as a whole. It was inevitable that I would be drawn to this exaltation of the physical act at its most physical, when an author like Rand describes it – i.e. sex – as the highest celebration of human values, a physical response to intellectual and spiritual values that gives concrete expression to what could otherwise be experienced only in the abstract.

Thus, physical love was constructed in my consciousness as an act of complete becoming, and in this sense, we can find its deep ramifications in the idea, which exists even in Islam, that we will be reborn in our bodies, not only our souls, on Judgment Day, and that our bodies will be returned after they have wasted away through death. We have not stopped asking: “Why resuscitate the body that we struggle against and fear?” Unconsciously, perhaps my writing seeks to answer this question and leave the body to achieve its everyday mission – not just the final mission



of Judgment Day. For this reason, the most important impression on the structure of my books has come from my reading, which has not been confined to realism but also includes literary works that propose a vision of the world and of humanity with their composed artistic narratives – epic, historical, philosophical and existential. From Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, which follows a historical humanist moment, to the epics of the contemporary Italian author Roberto Calasso, who dedicates volumes to rewriting the classics of Greek and Hindu mythology and understanding human psychology, as well as to the works of the British writer John Berger. An art critic, novelist and writer, Berger's writings are the ideal combination for the contemporary intellectual collapsing the boundaries between artistic genres, mixing painting with novels and music in an unabashed manner in works such as *Ways of Seeing*, which is about how to see and how to read art and thought. Berger has never stopped painting and in his writing he allows his characters to move dynamically between life and death without placing limitations between those two worlds as he searches for new ways to narrate – whether through cinema or books, such as *Another Way of Telling*, produced in collaboration with his friend the photographer Jean Mohr, and where they use both photography and the written word to document and understand the intimate experiences of farmers, as well as global issues.

Writing holds me because it is the act of eternal revisiting. This is a continuation, or the necessary result of literature's early grasp on me, where my reading began as an act of salvation that I undertook in an environment like that of Mecca, as a person who immersed themselves in genius, in soul after soul, endlessly. What was unique was that I was following a line that came from the cover of each book, under the phrase "By the same author". I would follow that thread and read everything by that author, as if there were a spiritual guide invisibly leading my steps towards more of what was happening in the minds of the innovators of the world.

Translated by Ghenwa Hayek and published in *Banipal* 42, 2011



## A chapter from the novel *Women of the Moon*

JOKHA ALHARTHI

### *The Butterfly Sewing Machine*

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Mayya, who had lost herself over her black Butterfly sewing machine, had lost herself in the ardour of love. A mute love, yet one that would shake her thin body every night in waves of weeping and sighs. There were many moments when she felt she would die from the sheer force of her desire to see him, and in her dawn prayer she took an oath: "I swear by God Almighty, I don't ask for anything, only to see him ... I swear by God Almighty, I don't want him to notice me, just to see him." Her mother believed that pale, silent Mayya had no other thought in the world beyond her fabrics and her threads, and that the only thing her ears were tuned to was the sound of the sewing machine. But Mayya heard all the sounds in the world and saw all the colours, as she sat chained to her wooden chair opposite the machine the whole day long and part of the night, hardly raising her head except to reach for the scissors or to bring out some more thread from the plastic basket she kept inside the chest. The mother felt guiltily thankful for how little she ate, and she hoped in secret that someone would come along who would appreciate her flair for sewing and her sparing appetite and take her for a wife; and he came.

She was sitting on her wooden chair behind the sewing machine at the end of the long corridor when her mother came to her with a jubilant face and placed her hand on her shoulder: "Mayya – my daughter – the son of the merchant Sulayman has come asking for your hand." Mayya's body convulsed, and her mother's hand became heavy as lead on her shoulder. Her throat dried up and she saw her sewing threads winding around her neck like a noose. The mother smiled: "I thought you were past the age of blushing like girls do." And the matter was closed. Nobody mentioned it again after that point. Her mother busied



herself preparing the wedding clothes, the incense mixes and the upholstery, and spreading the news among the relatives. Her sisters fell quiet and her father put everything in the hands of her mother, for they were her daughters after all and matters of marriage are matters for women.

Mayya secretly gave up praying, saying in a low voice: "My God, I swore to you I wasn't asking for anything, I just wanted to see him ... I swore to you I would do nothing wrong and I would keep my feelings to myself. I swore to you by everything. So why did you send this son of Sulayman to our house? To punish me for my love? But I let nothing show to him, I didn't even let anything show to my sisters. Why did you send Sulayman's son to our house? Why?"

Khawla said: "Are you leaving us, Mayya?" Mayya said nothing. Asma said: "Are you ready?" And she laughed: "Do you remember the admonition a Bedouin woman gave to her bride-to-be daughter, which we found in the book *The Most Exquisite Elements* in the storeroom?" Mayya replied: "It wasn't in the *The Most Exquisite Elements*." Asma flared up: "And what would you know about books? The admonition was in the book *The Most Exquisite Elements from Every Elegant Art*, the book with the red cover on the second shelf. The Bedouin woman admonished the bride to use water and kohl and give her attention to food and drink." Mayya said darkly: "Yes, and to laugh if he laughs and cry if he cries and be pleased if he's pleased." Khawla stepped in: "What's the matter with you, Mayya? The Bedouin woman didn't say that. You mean, to rejoice at his joy and to grieve over his grief." Mayya's voice grew fainter: "And who will grieve over my own grief?" The word "grief" had a strange ring and spread a jarring spirit among the sisters.

When Mayya first noticed Ali bin Khalaf, he had been in London studying for years and had come home without a degree. But Mayya was thunderstruck the very moment she laid eyes on him. He was so tall he touched against a swift cloud that was scudding across the sky, and so thin Mayya wished she could lend him support against the wind that drove the cloud into the distant horizon. He was noble. He was a saint. He was nothing like those ordinary people who sweat and sleep and curse.



"I swear to you, God, I just want to see him one more time." And she saw him, during the time of the date harvest, leaning against a date palm, with his skullcap off because of the intense heat. She saw him and wept, and she turned aside at the first waterwheel and burst into sobs.

Then she concentrated her mind on his spirit; she gathered together every living particle of her existence and focused it intently on his existence. She concentrated so hard she stopped breathing and her heart almost ceased to beat. She directed her spirit toward his with all the force available to her. The material world had disappeared around her as she sent her spirit out; her body shook convulsively and came close to collapsing as she transmitted that tremendous amount of energy to him. And she waited for a sign from him, any sign that would let her know her message had been received, but no sign came.

"I swear to you, God, I only want to see him, with sweat on his brow once more, with his hand resting on the date palm, with the date between his teeth as he chews it. I swear to you, my God, I won't tell anyone about the floodwaters swelling inside me. I swear to you, my God, I don't want him to notice me. Who am I, to be worth anyone's notice? I'm just a girl who knows how to sew and that's all. I'm not clever like Asma and pretty like Khawla. I swear to you, God, I can wait a whole month, will you let me see him after a month is over? And I swear to you, God, I won't forget a single prayer, neither the obligatory nor the supererogatory ones, and I won't dream about things that make you angry. I swear to you, God, I don't want to touch his hand or his hair. I swear to you, God, I don't want to wipe the sweat from his brow under the date palm."

And she wept, she wept for a long time, and when Sulayman's son came to their house, she stopped praying, and then when the wedding was over she started back again. She told herself these were her just desserts; God had known she hadn't meant a single word she had sworn, and had punished her for her sin.

When she became pregnant a month later, she wished the birth would turn out to be as easy as her mother's. She recollected her mother's words: "I was chasing a chicken around the courtyard to slaughter it for lunch because my uncle had come



by unexpectedly to visit, when suddenly I felt like I had burst and I fell to the ground rolling from pain. Your father fetched the midwife Mariyah, and the moment she laid eyes on me she said: 'It's time!' I leaned against her for support till we made it into the room and then she shut the door and made me stand on my feet and she lifted my hands so I could hold onto the stake that was fixed to the wall with all my strength. When my legs gave way beneath me, midwife Mariyah cried out, God bless her: 'For shame, for shame, the daughter of the sheikh Mas'ud will give birth lying down, she couldn't stand up on her own two feet.' And I stood up pulling tight on the stake until you slid out into my pants, Mayya, and you would have choked to death if the midwife Mariyah hadn't loosed my hands and pulled you out. God be my witness, nothing was revealed and not a living soul saw me. The rest of you can go to the hospitals of Musgad if that's what you like and have the Indians and the Christians make a spectacle of you. God be my witness, Mayya, I gave birth to you and your sisters standing up like a mare. God have mercy on your soul, midwife Mariyah – I was holding on to the stake with both hands and she was yelling at me: 'Not a peep from you, you hear? Women give birth the world over. A single cry from you and you're disgraced. You're disgraced, you, the sheikh's daughter ...' And the only word that escaped my lips was: 'Oh my God.' And nowadays they give birth lying down and the men can hear their screams from the other side of the hospital. No shame left in the world, by God ..."

When her belly had grown so round she could no longer sleep, Mayya said to the son of the merchant Sulayman: "Listen to me, I'm not going to give birth here among the midwives. I want you to take me to Musgad." He interrupted her: "I've told you a thousand times, it's called 'Muscat'." She continued as if she hadn't heard him: "I want to give birth at the hospital al-Sa'ada." He said: "And have my child fall into the hands of Christians?" Mayya said nothing, and when she entered her ninth month, her husband took her to his uncle's house at Wadi Adi in Muscat until she gave birth, in the Mission Hospital al-Sa'ada, to a diminutive girl.

Mayya opened her eyes and saw her daughter in her mother's hands. She fell asleep and when she opened her eyes again, the





girl was feeding at her breast. And when the son of the merchant Sulayman came to see the child, Mayya told him she'd like to call her "London". He thought she was worn out from the birth and was raving. On the next day she came back to his uncle's house with the girl and her mother, and informed his relatives that the baby's name was London. His aunt made her fresh chicken broth, baked her flatbread and gave her fenugreek tonic with honey to drink, then she helped her wash her hands and sat by her bedside. "Mayya, my girl." Mayya replied: "What is it?" The woman stroked her arms and said: "Are you still set on giving the child that strange name? What kind of person calls their child 'London'? That's the name of a town, my girl – a Christian town. All of us are at a loss what to say, and I think you're now well enough to have another think about a name for the girl. Call her after your mother, Salema." The mother was in the room, and got angry. "Why do you want to call her after me when I'm still alive and well, my dear – are you trying to hasten my death? So that the girl can take my place?" The aunt quickly corrected herself: "God forbid, that wasn't what I meant; many people name their kids after their parents while they're still brimming with health – far be such evils from you, Salema. Call her Miryam or Zaynab or Safiya – anything but London." Mayya took her daughter between her hands and raised her in the air. "What's wrong with 'London'? There's a woman in Ja'lan called London." The aunt said impatiently: "You know that's not her name. It's just a nickname people gave her because her skin is so white. And this girl – I mean ..." Mayya brought the girl down to her lap. "She's not white like the family of the merchant's son but she belongs to them and her name is London."

Salema decided the time had come for her daughter and granddaughter to return home to al-Awafi to complete the forty days of confinement at her mother's house and under her supervision. She said to her daughter's husband: "Listen here, Abdullah, my boy. Your wife here has been given a daughter for her firstborn, and daughters are a blessing to the house; they help their mother out and they bring up their siblings. We want forty live chickens for her, a jar of real mountain honey, and a jar of local cow ghee, and when London is a week old, shave her





head and give its weight in silver in alms, and slaughter a sheep for her and distribute the meat to the poor.” She pronounced the word “London” with distinct emphasis. Abdullah’s face changed colour, but he nodded and took his small family and his mother-in-law back to al-Awafi.

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## An excerpt from the novel *Time of Ignorance*

LAILA ALJOHANI

### *Falling sky*

#### **Three a.m.**

“Was he dead?” That night, as the excitement washed over him, he heard a sound that made him shudder, and when he looked at Malik’s body curled up on the worn asphalt – alone and defenceless, struck down without warning – he knew that all the water on earth would not be enough to wash away the sin he had committed.

As the mental image came back to him, he cried, sobbing like a lost child. Many years ago Sahar had cried, yet her tears had not moved him at all. At the time he had thought his unconcern was due to his strength, and anyway he had done nothing wrong to feel responsible for. Everything had happened as she had wanted. Yet now he understood that it had had nothing to do with strength, only with cruelty. He had been cruel, with that little devil’s heart that had continued to lead him on until it brought him to this abyss.

Was Malik dead? How could he know whether he was dead? Lina? When she looked at him that night as his mother bathed his head with water, praying to God and weeping, he was afraid she might understand, and escaped to his room. How could he ask her, plead with her even, to tell him whether Malik was alive or dead?

If Malik died, he would die too. Likely enough they would take revenge on him; and when the news got out people would spread rumours and add the evil of scandal and disgrace to the evil he had already committed.

“Oh God! Oh God!”

He broke into tears. The weight on his chest became heavier and heavier, a burning lump was choking him and for a moment



he felt as if he couldn't breathe. He didn't notice his mother coming in, all he could feel was the pain in his head where he had beaten it against the wall. Then he saw her, her face buried in her hands, crying and rolling her eyes up to the ceiling with a look of burning rebuke.

If he died his mother would die too, for she had made him the pillar upon which her life rested, and no sooner would it break than the sky would come crashing down on her head. She still did not know what he had done, yet even if she found out she would understand why he had done it and forgive him.

He looked at her as she sat in front of him, paralysed and helpless. He wanted to curl up, to go back to being a foetus in her womb. Did she have to give birth to him? Couldn't she have miscarried him as she had miscarried others before him? He smelt the fragrance of her body mixed with her perfume. She smelt like a mother. Then an idea leapt to his mind, he didn't know how it came but come it did, and it devastated him: perhaps Malik had not died, perhaps he had a mother weeping for him as he lay there, unconscious, unable even to realise that she was weeping over his head.

#### **Four thirty a.m. (her room)**

Lina started backwards in her chair. She had spent the whole night reviewing the details of her existence, only to see it now collapse before her eyes while she was incapable of lifting a finger. Even crying was beyond her. All she could think of was Malik's face in the Dar Al-Iman Intercontinental Hotel, with his unkempt features and sad beauty. She remembered how she hadn't told him that his unkemptness gave his face a certain air, an air she couldn't define but found attractive.

What harm would it have been to tell him? To have kissed him so he could know what her touch was like? Yet she had not kissed him but gone to cry in the bathroom alone. Now her brother had told her he had hit Malik, and perhaps he was dead, and she was unable even to shed a tear.

"If you don't want to hurt me, then you mustn't die," she had told Malik, so how could he die now without telling her



beforehand? He had called her the afternoon of the day Hashim hit him, and he hadn't said he was about to die! They had chatted a little and he had told her he was going to reopen the subject of their engagement with her father.

"Look after yourself," he told her, as he always did.

And so he had said goodbye, yet she hadn't told him to look after himself, because it wasn't her habit to do so. And even if she had said it, would her words have interposed themselves between him and death?

Death?

Death!

She had seen death many times. Death had no need to make any appointments. How could she have imagined that Malik would call her to inform her he was going to die today or tomorrow? Or that he had died yesterday but had only found the opportunity to tell her today?

"Oh my God!" She saw her father's face and remembered she was in her own room. She didn't know when Hashim had left, or when her mother had followed him, though she could make out the sound of her crying and muttering. And she, why wasn't she crying?

"Lina, are you all right?" She looked into her father's face and saw there everything he had told her in the past.

Had she made a mistake in loving a black man? Had she committed a sin against God or mankind? She had loved a man, a man with a heart of gold, and hadn't even looked at his colour. Her brother, however, hadn't looked at anything but his colour, and punished her for it.

"People will only look at his colour; they'll punish you and I don't want you to suffer," her father had said, unaware that her brother would be the first to inflict that punishment. She hadn't known it, either. The right side of her head began to throb with pain. How many times had she complained to Malik of her constant migraine, and he would tell her to stop hurting herself? Yet, she had been hurt and not inflicted pain on herself.

"Lina."

She considered the tone of her father's voice and realised he was almost prostrate with concern. She looked at him, hoping her face wouldn't betray her inner commotion, then switched



off the computer she had been working on, stretched out on the bed and drew up the cover, a strange coldness closing around her heart. Then she looked into her father's eyes and said: "Dad, I want to sleep for a while."

He knew she would not sleep, just as he knew that she would not speak. He withdrew softly, switching off the light and closing the door behind him.

How kind the darkness was to her when it brought her Malik! She saw his face in the shadows engulfing the room: his delicate eyebrows, the yellowish hue of his wide-set eyes with their thick curling lashes. She saw his broad nose and his generous lips, and that deep scar an old wound had left on his chin. The scar had always fascinated her. It was so deeeeeep, she could have stretched out there and slept her fill without anyone waking her to say: "You're disturbing the dead, look for somewhere else to lounge about."

Did she now have to think of him as a corpse lying in the back streets of Medina in order to understand all of a sudden that her love for him had become partially buried under heaps of grief, although in fact he was not dead? Was it necessary for someone to kill him for her to be sure that love was alive and beating in the depths of her heart, and that she had simply lost the way to get there?

When had she stopped telling him she loved him? And why had she stopped? Something inside her had abated since he had surprised her with the story of Sakk al-Ghufran. Her yearning, tenderness and passion had all abated. She fell ill and did not recover quickly. Then this shock had come to make her understand just how much she had given up. She had surrendered to the silence stretching cold and broad between them; she'd surrendered to the birds of ill omen pecking at her words and sending them back whence they had come; she had surrendered to the growing distance between them. And she was unable to resist the painful feeling that he had disappointed her.

He had called her often since the middle of the month of Shaaban<sup>1</sup>. He would ask after her and tell her he loved her. He

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1 Shaaban is the eighth month of Islamic lunar calendar and immediately precedes the fasting month of Ramadan.



would tell her that he missed her, that he missed their being together to laugh and chat about the sordidness of the world. He wanted her to go back to being as she used to be, because he was still the same as before. He wanted her to try – just to try – and forgive. But she did not go back as she had been, and she did not forgive.

30 | She talked to him listlessly. Even when he broached the subject of their engagement with her father she felt no joy. It had become a duty, neither more nor less than a duty. She convinced herself that she wanted to be with him for the sake of the past and not for the future. She was faithful to everything that had developed between them and for that reason – and no other – she could accept their union. It seemed strange to her that their motivations for their relationship were so patently different: on his part, so they could be together as he had always dreamed; on hers, to give meaning to everything that had happened, because the future – everything that was to come – no longer concerned her, it was no longer hers. She had refused to let him touch her in the Dar Al-Iman Intercontinental, and that was enough to convince her that something inside her had broken, that it was no longer as it had been and perhaps never would be.

“Oh God!”

How could she remember that and overlook the fact that death is capable of resolving what, under normal circumstances, seem to be the most irremovable and stubborn opinions? Death unsettled her every time it had crossed her path, and here in the darkness of her room she realised she may never recover from the terrible sensation of having been so cruel and stupid.

Since mid-Shaaban she had been wondering what Hashim might do. She did not tell Malik that Hashim had seen her as she was leaving the Kaamirii, or that she had found him going through her things and reading the letters she and Malik had exchanged over the years. She hadn't even thought of telling him. Why should she? She believed that Hashim would take out his anger on her. Yet her own cleverness betrayed her, as it had quite slipped her mind that her brother was a coward who, unable to confront her directly, would look for circuitous paths by which to punish (or educate) her.



If only Hashim knew that he had not merely hurt her, but broken her to such an extent that she could no longer weep. Her eyes were dry, her heart full of grief, and her soul restless as she prayed: "Look upon me, God. I implore you, O God, save me from this situation. Lift this heavy burden from me and protect me from the lurking evil that might make me reject your justice. Take my hand, O God."

She closed her eyes, but darkness had descended into her soul. A sharp pain began throbbing in the right side of her head and when her stomach started churning she realised the migraine was going to be particularly strong this time. Yet no stronger than death, which had come so unexpectedly, as it always did.

### Seven p.m. (the hospital)

"Is he going to die?"

Lina was walking bemusedly along the corridor while her father sat in a white chair, head bent and muttering "*la hawla wa la quwata illa billah*, there is no power and no strength save in God". In her anguish, she kept walking in and out of the room, without it occurring to him to lead her out of the hospital before she went mad before his eyes. Yet she would have gone mad, her entire life would have collapsed if she hadn't gone to the hospital.

Every time her father had visited the hospital over the last two days he had refused to enter the room where Malik was lying. She could see a profound sadness in his eyes but did not grasp that he was afraid, afraid of her reaction, afraid of the moment in which she realised that there was no hope.

Was hell looking at Malik as he drifted unconscious in a world she knew nothing about? Why did they say he was in a coma? He was not in a coma. He was tired. So tired that he had dozed off and no sooner had he rested than he would open his eyes again. All she had to do was sit by his bed and wait for him to come round, then help him become his old self while her father sat on the cold white chair waiting and praying that she wouldn't lose her mind.



“Lina, Lina, Liiinnnaaa, how beautiful your name sounds! How did your father come to choose it? Lina, Lina.”

Yet her name had died since Malik stopped calling it; and his name was going to die too, shrouded in a white coma. Who said comas are white? Colour! Oh colour! What have you done?

“Is he going to die?”

The doctor pressed her painfully on the elbow. “Stop worrying,” he said.

She looked at him sorrowfully and replied: “But you don’t know him!”

Translated by Piers Amodia for *Banipal* 34, 2009, from the novel *Jahiliya* (Time of Ignorance), Dar al-Adaab, Beirut, 2007. The full book was published by Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing as *Days of Ignorance* in 2014, translated by Nancy Roberts





## A Short Story

AHMED ALRAHBI

### *Cat's Eyes*

It all happens on a summer day. The heat is merciless; the blazing sun at its fullest. There is plenty of dust, too. My wife is sitting next to me as I drive, gasping for air. I stop the car and rush over to the policeman who has blocked the only access to the main road with his big black car.

"Excuse me, Sir!" I said, tapping on the glass, which he lowered to allow just his striped cap to show and a hazy look to gleam from his eyes.

"What?"

"Would you kindly let me through? I have a sick person in the car."

"Sorry, no one's allowed through," he said in a rough manner, while raising the window to keep the conditioned air from reaching me.

"Forgive me, Sir." I tapped again on the glass, which he lowered this time to the middle of his cap. "My wife is gasping for air, she cannot breathe – no one save God knows what's hit her. I've raced here, taken a short cut, and driven on a dirt road for twenty kilometres just to get here faster."

"This is no concern of the police. Entry is prohibited." He uttered the last phrase emphasizing every consonant, and closed the window again. My obstinacy seemed to irritate him to the extreme, while the heat had me boiling with rage.

I tapped again. Only the rim of his cap showed.

"Look! I'm perfectly well aware this is not the police's concern. I also know that no one is allowed to enter; I equally know that the matter falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, and that the police usually arrive far too late, long after a patient has lost the fight. You're not telling me anything new. Now, officer, enlighten me if you please! Which in your opinion is a better solution: me driving back all twenty kilometers on the dirt road or you letting me through before the poor woman draws her last breath?"



“NNNNNNNOOOOOOO Entry! It is FORBIDDEN!” His words rode on the cool air that streamed from his window. Before he had a chance to close it, I placed a sneaky thumb on the edge, leaving just a small gap between the two of us.

“All right, go ahead, give me a ticket. But let me go through. I’ll be OK with that.”

“No ENTRY!” Now move it, do as the law says, or else ...”

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“Don’t worry! Take it easy! I’m going, sure I am. But before I do, would you lower the window a little more so I can read the name tag on your jacket? Yup ... that’s it ... Ali Ben Salem. Now, listen Mr Ali! Listen pretty carefully, for what I am about to say is of considerable importance to you.

“You seem to be a stranger to this place and so maybe you don’t know who I am. Never mind. You can make enquiries and someone will surely tell you who Abou Raas is. This Abou Raas, who is standing right in front of you sweltering in the fierceness of the sun, drenched in his sweat, knows a lot. Want a preview of what he knows? Now, you’re sitting in your car enjoying the cool breeze coming from your AC. It’s all very natural and I would have done exactly the same had I been in your boots. But do you have any idea of what will happen to you within an hour?

“Listen here! You will receive a call from headquarters, and you will be told to report immediately to another spot, where an accident has taken place. You will be asked to assess the situation. It is fate alone that you, and no one else, have been selected for this mission. You will hurry off to the scene, driving your car enthusiastically as is your wont. Duty calls. However, it won’t be the only thing that calls. There is something much greater than you or anything else. Torrents of water will submerge the road ahead of you and people will warn you not to cross the valley. But you will turn a deaf ear to their pleas and you will go through the gushing water like a sleep-walker. And then you’ll suddenly wake from your daze; but it’ll be too late. An enormous raging torrent will wash your car away, pulling it towards the bottom of the valley. You know what happens next: The car will spin a hundred times and hit thousands of rocks until it gets stuck against the trunk of a tree. When the torrent subsides,



your friends will come searching for you. They will find you and will start pulling you out ... piece ... by piece.

“Of course, someone will be holding a black body bag. He will be stricken with grief and not able to find it in his heart to lay his former colleague on the ground; so he will hang the bag on a branch and join fellow policemen attending to the wreckage. When their job is done, they will leave, and forget all about the black bag hanging from the tree. Don't be surprised or shocked by this. Life is full of even stranger stories.

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“But I have to finish your story, having already started it. You could have stayed hanging on the branch for ever had someone not approached the tree. It is a poor man in rags, who is looking for anything that can sustain him and his family. He carries a bulging sack and he will stuff it with scraps of metal from the car wreck. He will then put the sack in the black body bag and carry the whole thing to the smelter at the iron mill. There, the worker will not bother to check newly arrived goods and will dump them straight in the furnace. There is nothing easier than smelting metal and reshaping it afterwards. You put the scrap metal in at one end, and it comes out like dough at the other, thus allowing you to produce any shape you want to. The soft mass is poured into road stud moulds that are flat and wide. You know the ones; they're those reflective cat's eyes that shine in the middle of the road or on the hard shoulder, to guide passing vehicles. One of these studs will be you. The sun will scorch you the way it is scorching me right now, and you will be run over by cars every day, every hour, forever and ever.”

I left him drowning in his stupor. I turned around and went back to my car. I drove off hurriedly, leaving a big, fat cloud of dust behind me.

Translated by Layla Almaleh for *Banipal* 49, 2014,  
from the author's collection *Aqfal* (Padlock), published by  
Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Muscat, Oman 2006



## Two Short Stories

TALEB ALREFAI

### *Smiles*

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I love my friend Jum'a's calm smile, which never leaves his face, and the goodness of his heart. Three months ago, while we were playing cards with our group at our regular evening session and the other guys were yelling at each other, he whispered to me: "I have a new project."

"Congrats in advance." Then I added as a joke: "Stop kidding around."

I observed a look on his face that was partly entreating and partly earnest. I withdrew from the card game and stepped aside with him.

He said: "You're a government employee and understand this matter better than I do."

He proceeded to gaze at me while I waited to hear what he would say.

"I've decided to open a shop and would like you to be my partner."

"I agree unconditionally." For some reason I can't put my finger on, my heart rather than my tongue remarked: "We'll succeed, with God's help."

As satisfaction spread a good-hearted smile across his face, he replied: "I'll begin the official process to apply for the permit tomorrow."

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That night, as soon as Jum'a started to explain his idea, I felt even more enthusiastic about it than he was. "We'll open a store to buy and sell the smiles of top government officials and celebrities," he said with typical composure as I listened carefully.

"No one smiles for free. Everyone is chasing after the smile of some government official. Everyone wants one for his own personal reasons."



I gestured for him to pause for a few seconds. In my line of work I have witnessed many situations, experienced different types of smiles, and know firsthand the amount of hardship, waiting, and discomfort some people endure to attend a reception, conference or exhibition merely to afford a government official the opportunity of seeing their faces and possibly of favouring them by casting a partial smile their way.

Jum'a continued: "An official's smile demands a high price, and we'll supply it to customers who want one."

His familiar smile floated across his face as he remarked: "Many people hate government officials and perhaps wish they would disappear. All the same, they scheme in a thousand different ways to win a single smile from them."

"Agreed."

I shook his hand warmly, and during the next few days we looked eagerly for a suitable shop. We had decided that it should be located in a modern, up-market mall. The interior would be tastefully decorated and the catalogue carefully edited. Finally the advertising blitz would ensure the gala opening was a social event that caused waves.

Once we discovered the shop and made the necessary down payment, we hired an architectural firm to design an original décor. To save time, we worked with an American firm that reached out to the world via their website to prepare our catalogue in more than one language, composing explanations, descriptions, categories, and prices, and posting fine quality photographs of our merchandise that corresponded with the status and influence of the person smiling and the need and request of every customer.

\* \* \*

On the evening of the opening, which Jum'a had scheduled according to astrological calculations that he believed in and trusted, I took care to show up three hours ahead of time. Jum'a had dyed his hair and moustache and donned a formal abaya that looked official. The shop girls were wearing their special uniforms.



I was preoccupied with ensuring that every detail small or great was in order: checking the bouquets of roses had arrived, adjusting the lighting in an ideal way, carefully siting the incense burners, and arranging the buffet with the caterer from the hotel. Finally Jum'a and I went outside with one of the beautiful girls to wait at the mall's outer entrance to welcome the motorcade of His Excellency the Official who had deigned to accept our invitation to the opening and the store's request to market his captivating smile.

For the opening gala, in addition to the shop's cameras, which worked automatically in different degrees of light, I had furnished the shop girls with special, supersensitive digital cameras and had stationed them throughout the premises to observe and track down anyone who showed his teeth, in hopes of bagging a smile from His Excellency the high-ranking Official – with the aim of charging each one for it, because nothing was gratis.

The party began with the arrival of the men and women of the press and of low-ranking bureaucrats. Then some government officials arrived, followed by statesmen, government ministers, ambassadors, and the chief of staff of His Excellency the Official.

The shop, resplendent with all the velvet gowns and formal attire, filled with a wide assortment of free smiles as melodious music mingled with whispers here and there, and the fragrances of female guests blended with the aroma of incense.

With the arrival of the entourage of His Excellency the Official, who was surrounded by his office staff and preceded by his captivating smile, which had been negotiated in advance, the place came alive with a mysterious spirit. Our customers hastened to greet him, shoving each other aside and baring gleaming teeth. Some sported newly smiling faces, and others tilted their heads to telegraph their smiles and greetings: "Good evening, Your Excellency."

Guests jostled for new positions to be within range of His Excellency's smile.

Everyone seemed preoccupied with hunting for a smile. Our advertising had attracted dozens of buyers. And so the store's cameras began photographing the faces of those searching for a



smile from His Excellency, and just carried on taking more and more pictures.

Translated by William M Hutchins  
from the author's collection *Sariqat Saghira* (Minor Thefts),  
Dar El Shouruk, Cairo, 2011. Translated for *Banipal* 49, 2014

## *The statue*

In his white clothes, stained with paint and oil, his yellowy smoke-stained moustache and dishevelled hair, Mr Zahi was always busy, forever occupied with his drawing project and his regrets, forever heedless of our presence. Repeatedly he would spit out in a splintered and grating tone: "You are jackasses or what?"

But we knew his kind heart and his whimsical ways and so would not bother to reply. Instead, we would explode into laughter that scattered in all directions. Each one of us thought that Mr Zahi's rebuke was not addressed to him. We simply ignored him, turning our attention to the work that lay before us.

Early last month, Mr Zahi was in one of his rages; he repeated over and over: "You will be the death of me. Why don't you understand? Where are your brains, you dimwits? Are your fingers paralysed? What is it that allows their drawings to hang in the school's corridors?"

Mr Zahi had just one cause in life: his competition with the other art teacher who taught sketching and drawing. How to defeat this enemy, to get rid of him and rid the school's corridors of the decorative drawings made by his students – these were the thoughts that haunted Mr Zahi.

"I shall not lose this year's contest. This time I must defeat him."

We were so used to Mr Zahi's outbursts of rage, and he was used to our apathy.



“This time the winning figure will be placed in the very office of the Ministry’s under-secretary. It will be the talk of the Ministry of Education.”

We remained occupied with our merriment, and he remained absorbed in his worries, his bewilderment and bitterness. As usual, he chose sculptural materials for his new figure carefully: stiff cardboard, bottles of glue, tubes of oil paint, copper wire and nylon thread. He chose the best quality. He asked us to gather round him, and stiffening his resolve, spewed out his words as if he were blowing his rage right into our apathetic hearts.

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“I will destroy that damn fool.” Mr Zahi would never bring himself to utter the name of his adversary, the other art teacher. “When we win, this class will become famous. Perhaps the under-secretary will visit our studio. Everyone of you will be proud of this sculpture in the round.” His words poured out without cease, piling one on top of the other. They momentarily struck the walls of our frivolous minds.

He continued talking to us about the form that he wanted for the sculpture. Our noisy chattering grew noisier: some students suggested that its form should signify the sea; some proposed that it should symbolise the power of trees; some proposed other forms – a woman, a tent, a lion, a sword ... our voices grew even louder. Our laughter bounced back and forth while our teacher implored us to calm down. At last, it was agreed that the form would symbolise the idea of the bond between the student and the book. We, the seekers of knowledge and the book, the means to conquer. For a week Mr Zahi worked on sketching out the form of the sculpture.

We intruded on his solitude – we provoked him, teased him, jeered at his serious demeanour, telling him: “This is not permitted. The contest is for students, not teachers. A teacher must be honest. You cannot cheat the school’s administration, especially when the under-secretary is supervising the contest in person.”

He erupted into a boiling rage; he seethed with anger: “You are useless. If only you would devote a little time to your work, even just a fraction of what you devote to your incessant gibberish.”

When the sketch was complete, he held up the paper, examined it meticulously, then frowning, he looked at it from a





distance. Suddenly he shivered. In his paint-spotted coat, he seemed to us possessed, his flashing eyes gleaming mysteriously. "Excellent! Excellent! This will be the best statue ever constructed! We will win! I will finish him off!" Mr Zahi became totally oblivious of our presence; he was utterly preoccupied with the creation of his figure.

Under our skin we felt that something was throbbing with life. The red flame of resolution was ignited in Mr Zahi's eyes and in his fingers. He explained to us: "Marking in the eye will be the final touch. The look in the eyes will bestow on the figure's face a most singular expression; this look in the eyes will be a most revealing sign."

As the figure began to materialise, an eerie silence began to spread over us, a mysterious spirit seemed to dominate us.

"The moment we draw in the eyes is the moment we breathe soul into the figure."

As if by magic, the physical attributes of the sculpture began to seem real. We watched entranced, scarcely breathing. We saw a young man with bulging muscles almost breaking through the constraints of his powerful stride, whose right hand clasped a leather-bound book. While Mr Zahi was busily rummaging through one of his office drawers, a hand stealthily grasped the paint brush and painted in the eyes. The statue began to take on life like a djinn, its eyes blinking as it turned its head.

Right and left, its fiery glare surveyed our faces that were already yellow with fear. It stretched out its limbs and started to stand up. Its arms and legs grew longer. Within minutes it stood erect in front of us, a terrible young man towering there. We cringed, gazing in the direction of Mr Zahi, our breathing quick and fearful. Mr Zahi was so horror-stricken that he appeared to have shrunk from his normal size. Bewilderment filled his eyes and kept his tongue tied.

The statue strode up to Mr Zahi's chair, sat down and with these words addressed us: "I cannot bear people whispering. Sit down in your proper places. Do not utter a single word. You have been warned. If I hear a single sound ..." He pointed to Mr Zahi: "Leave this room. You no longer belong here."



Mr Zahi stumbled, flabbergasted, he was unable to walk out of the room. A tin box of oil paints flew at him, cutting his forehead and staining his face.

And so the figure installed itself as our art teacher. We no longer spoke in loud voices in the studio. We no longer whispered. It soon fired the other art teacher and removed all his students' artwork from the corridors. It locked up all the art studios of our school. It locked up the music hall, and the gymnasium.

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Finally, it took over the principal's position and began to administer the school as its inclination dictated.

(The Statue), translated by Zahra Hussein Ali, is from the author's collection of short stories *Hakaya ramliya* (Tales of Sand), Dar al-Mada, Damascus, 1999. Published in *Banipal* 10/11, 2001



## An excerpt from the novel *The Bamboo Stalk*

SAUD ALSANOUSI

My mother came to this place to work, knowing nothing of its culture. The people here were not like the people there: the faces, the features, the language, even the looks they gave had different meanings, which she did not understand. Nature here resembled nothing of nature there, save the rising of the sun each day and the appearance of the moon at night. "Even the sun," my mother would say, "at first I wasn't sure if it was the same sun I knew."

My mother worked in a big house, where a widow in her mid-fifties lived with her son and three daughters. This widow was later to become my grandmother. My grandmother, Ghanima, or the old lady, as my mother used to call her, was stubborn and very nervous most of the time. Despite her seriousness and the strength of her personality, she was highly superstitious. She had absolute belief in what she saw in her dreams. In every dream, no matter how insignificant or unintelligible, she saw a message that could not be ignored. She spent a great deal of time trying to interpret her dreams. If she could not fathom the meaning of a dream by herself, she usually resorted to the dream interpreters. Because of the differing opinions she received from them she sometimes ended up with a total contradiction. Yet despite this, she believed every word those dream interpreters said, and looked for anything that would prove what she saw in her dreams was real. Along with this belief in her dreams, she would consider any occurrence, no matter how innocuous, as a sign that was not to be taken lightly.

Once, while my aunt Aida and I were sat with my mother in the small sitting room of our house there, she said: "I don't know how this woman lived, scrutinising every happening and coincidence. One day she and her daughters were invited to a wedding party. They set off only to return home just half an hour later. I said to her: 'The party was over quickly, Ma'am!' but the old lady ignored me and made her way upstairs."



"Hind, the youngest daughter, answered for her: 'The car broke down halfway along the road.'

"I thought of all the cars parked in front of the house, and asked her: 'What about the other cars?'

'My mother believes that if the car hadn't broken down halfway along the road, then our souls would have been reaped before its end!' she answered, wiping the red off her lips with a handkerchief.

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'How come?' I asked her, my face full of surprise.

'She'd foreseen that something terrible was waiting for us!' Hind had replied bending down to take off her shoes."

Compared to the houses there, the house my mother worked in was huge. In fact, a single house here is big enough to fit the house my mother came from ten times over or more. My mother arrived in Kuwait at a critical moment. My grandmother had been very pessimistic about her arrival, which showed in her face whenever she saw my mother. My father would apologise, explaining: "You came to our home, Josephine, at the same time the Emir's convoy was bombed. But for the grace of God, the explosion would have claimed his life. My mother sees your arrival as a bad omen!"

My father was four years older than my mother. My grandmother treated her poorly, and my aunts likewise, except the youngest, who was prone to mood swings. My father alone was always kind to her. He argued many times with my grandmother and my aunts over their treatment of Josephine, my mother, the maid.

I had only just turned ten when my mother began to tell me about the things that happened before I was born; she was preparing the way for my departure [to Kuwait]. While I was there, sat by her side in the sitting room of our little house, she read me some of my father's letters. She told me everything about her relationship with him, before I returned as he'd promised her. Sometimes, she liked to remind me that I belonged to another, better place. After I started to talk, she taught me some Arabic words: "*salam 'alaikum* ... peace be upon you ... *wahid, ithnain, thalatha* ... one, two, three ... *ma' salama* ... goodbye ... *ana, anta* ... I, you ... *habibi* ... my love ... *chai, gahwa* ... tea, coffee." She was



adamant that when I grew up I would love my father, the man I hadn't even set eyes on.

In our house there, I sat at my mother's feet, listening to her as she told me about my father, while my aunt sighed, as was her custom whenever my mother spoke of him. My mother said: "I loved him and still do. I don't know why or how. Perhaps because he was kind to me when everyone else treated me badly? Or because he was the only one who spoke to me in the old lady's house, other than to give me orders? Maybe it was because he was handsome? Or because he was a cultured young writer, who dreamed of finishing his first novel, and I was addicted to reading novels?"

How strange. She smiled as she spoke, tears almost spilling from her eyes, as though what she described had happened only yesterday.

"He was happy with me, as he'd say, because like him I loved to read. He'd tell me about his novel. Every time he sat down to begin writing it something would come up, dragging him into the fray of the region's politics. He wrote a weekly article for one of the newspapers, although they were rarely published because of the censorship there at that time. He was one of a few writers opposed to their government's position during the First Persian Gulf War. Imagine how crazy your father was! He would talk to the maid about literature, art and his country's politics, when no one talked to the servants except in the language of 'Bring! Wash! Sweep! Wipe! Prepare! Come!'

Despite aunt Aida's constant sighing and fidgeting, my mother continued:

"I'd wash, sweep and wipe all day long so I could be free for the night's talk with your father in his study, after the ladies of the house had gone to bed. I'd try to keep up with him as he talked about politics, to hold his attention and demonstrate my own scant knowledge of the subject. One day, I told him how thrilled I was by Corazon Aquino's<sup>1</sup> victory in the presidential elections, making her the Philippines' first female leader. She

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1 Corazon Aquino: the 11th president of the Philippines (Translator).



restored democracy after leading the opposition that brought down the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos.<sup>2</sup>

“Your father seemed unusually interested in what I had to say. ‘You brought a woman to power then!’ he said, and I answered him proudly: ‘Five months ago, on 25th February.’ He burst out laughing and then, regaining control of himself so as not to wake his mother and sisters, he exclaimed: ‘On the same day we celebrated my country’s 24th National Day!’ Drumming his fingers on his desk, he said as though to himself: ‘Who has the right to be the other’s master?’ I didn’t understand then, what he was getting at. He talked to me about women’s stolen rights, as he put it, since women in your father’s country do not have the right to vote. He seemed suddenly very sad and began to talk at length about their parliament, which was suspended at the time. I continued to follow his voice and his expressions closely, even though what he said didn’t interest me.”

I interrupted her: “Why did he talk to you about these things, Mum?”

“Perhaps because his surroundings refused his ideas ...” she replied quickly, but without conviction.

She described my father: “I thought he was the ideal man; I’m sure that’s how everyone saw him. His mother doted on him. He was, as she would say, the man of the house. He was calm and rarely raised his voice. Most of his time was spent between reading and writing in his study. These were his interests, along with fishing and travelling with his friends. Of your father’s friends, only Ghasan and Waleed used to visit him, either in the library to discuss some book or to talk about literature, art and politics, or, when Ghasan brought his oud, in the little diwaniyya that adjoined the house. Ghasan was an artist and a poet. He was very sensitive, even though he was a soldier.

“At that time, East Asia, Thailand to be precise, was at the height of its renown among Kuwait’s young men. Your father talked a lot about his travels there with his two friends. One day, while he was talking to me about Thailand, he looked me

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2 Ferdinand Marcos: the 10th president of the Philippines. He was brought down by the opposition (Translator).



straight in the eye and said: "You look like a young Thai girl!" Did I really or was he getting at something else? I wasn't sure.

"When he was away travelling with his friends, the old lady's house was made miserable by his absence. I'd count the days until his return, for the house or the diwaniyya to be filled again with the racket he and his friends made whenever they got together."

Suddenly my mother paused, and looking at the floor, she said: "I used to watch them from the kitchen window. Their laughter would ring out in the courtyard as they got their fishing equipment ready before heading to the sea. I'd wait hours for your father's return, when I'd take the fish and put them in the freezer and wash their smell from his clothes."

My mother turned her head to look at me: "José, when you return to Kuwait, I want you to have friends like Ghasan and Waleed."

"Tell me more, Mother. What about my grandmother?"

"Because of your father's pastimes the old lady was afraid for him. How often had she said to him: 'I'm scared the books are going to carry away your mind, and that the sea is going to carry away your body.' Many times she had gone into the study and begged him to stop reading and writing, to occupy himself with things that would benefit him. But he was insistent that he was only good for writing. Next to his love for his library was his passion for the sea. He was intoxicated by the scent of fish in the same way his mother was intoxicated by Arabic perfumes or the scent of incense."

My mother closed her eyes, and drew a deep breath, as though to inhale the scent of her loved ones.

"Your grandmother fretted constantly over your father. Not only was he her only son, he was also the last man in the family. Many of his male ancestors had disappeared at sea along with their boats a long time before, and some in other circumstances. As for those who remained, their offspring were limited to girls. The old lady blamed this situation on the witchcraft of an envious woman from a lowly family, who many years before had cursed the family with the survival of its girls over its boys. Your father didn't believe in such things, but your grandmother was



absolutely convinced of it. In those distant days, your grandfather Issa and his brother Shaheen were the last of the family's remaining men. Shaheen died young without marrying, and Issa married Ghanima late in life. She gave birth to your father, Rashid, who after his father's death became the only man in the family."

As she spoke images came to my mind: men perishing at sea, sail boats struggling against fierce waves, a woman casting a spell in a darkened room, the extinction of the males, one after the other, as a result of witchcraft. Through my mother's words, my family took on a mythical aura, capturing my imagination. My mother continued to talk about my father:

"He was the only thing that made being in the old lady's house bearable. He was powerless to do anything except offer a few kind words at night, when everyone was sleeping. He'd reach into his pocket, pull out some cash and hand it to me: one, two or three dinars. Then he'd leave, and I'd have no sense of the value of the money in my hand."

"All men are scoundrels!" interrupted Aida.

My mother and I both looked at her.

"No matter how nice they seem."

My mother replied with two words: "Except Rashid."

She continued:

"One evening, in the kitchen his hand brushed against mine and he whispered in my ear: 'Don't be angry with my mother. She's an old lady and doesn't mean what she says. She's highly strung but has a good heart.' I wished he'd never take his hand away. I forgot all the old lady's insults. After that I would, from time to time, deliberately set out to make the old lady mad: dropping a glass so it smashed on the kitchen floor, and leaving the fragments scattered here and there until the morning; turning on a tap so that water gushed loudly all night; or leaving a window open on a day when the air was full of dust, allowing it to settle on the floors and furniture. By morning the old lady would be furious. She'd wake everyone in the house, screaming 'Josa!' – the name she had given me, as according to her Josephine was too hard to pronounce. She'd swear and curse, and I'd sweep up the glass from the kitchen floor and spend an entire day cleaning





up the dust, waiting for the night to come, bringing with it your father's gentle hand to brush against mine."

My mother took a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyelashes, which had become heavy with tears, and continued:

"One day, in the study, he was writing his weekly article, resting his left elbow on a large file that contained the notes for his first novel. I placed a cup of coffee in front of him and said: 'Sir, I love to see you write!'

'Can't you call me anything other than "sir"?' | 49 |

"I said nothing. Not for a moment did I imagine calling him by his name, Rashid, as his mother and sisters did.

"'And don't you love anything other than to see me write?' he said.

'Is there something else?' I answered. He put his pen down on the desk, laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them. 'Something, or perhaps someone ...' he said.

"After that, I knew I loved him, or almost did," my mother continued, "even though for him I was nothing more than a listener who he could express his ideas and beliefs to without encountering any opposition. Because I was certain he had not and would not fall in love with me, I made do with my love for him in exchange for his attention and his kindness."

Translated by Thomas Aplin for *Banipal* 46, 2013, from *Saq al-Bamboo* (English edition *The Bamboo Stalk*, 2015, translated by Jonathan Wright). This is the author's second novel: it won the Kuwait State Prize for Letters in 2012 and the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction



## A short story

MOHAMMED HASSAN ALWAN

### *Statistics*

| 50 |

According to statistics, the average life expectancy in Saudi Arabia is around seventy-five years. This means that my father can die any time; and after I graduate from the university five years from now, it is very probable that my mother, my two paternal aunts and my grandfather will all be dead, which in turn means that by the time I graduate, I will be an orphan, and with only half a family.

Even if each member of my family outlives his life expectancy, there will be no doubt – and this I must take into consideration from now on – that in the year 2015 many faces that greet me every day in the family will have disappeared. After dividing up my father's inheritance, which is supposed to be between six and seven million, among myself and my five brothers, my share will be at least one million. The probability that my father might lose all his money before he dies is not a strong one, due to my Dad's belt-tightening policy; likewise, the probability that the country's economy will slow down and that the rial will drop is a remote one because this has not happened in recent times. Moreover, the forecasts of economic analysts on some US websites and the stability of oil prices are very comforting. I think I need not worry too much about finding a job when I graduate, which is why I see no reason why I should study engineering. I will therefore study the field I like most – painting.

Committing one's thoughts to paper can sometimes be a bad idea, for these lines have triggered a great deal of arguing, anger and blame on the part of my older brother who is suspicious of this corrupt, materialistic view of my future as well as of the rigour with which I am building my hypotheses and plans for the distant future. What is strange, though, is that I had never heard the word "materialistic" when he was urging me to study the engineering which would later enable me to earn a fat salary; nor did I hear it during my silent listening to my brothers' discussions



with my father on any of their joint projects. My father, having recruited all my brothers into his company, was certain that I would join them and that I would not break away from the rule that had successfully enticed all five of my brothers before me.

My father, who will die in about five years, is a great man! I cannot but appreciate his intelligence, and his intuition which is right most of the time, and his wisdom in running this large male-dominated house. I have a feeling I will be grief-stricken when he passes away, but I am unlikely be mourning his death for very long as the rate of those whose mourning turns into a long pathological depression after the death of their loved ones is still low, and limited to widowhood and bereavement. It seems that the thought of losing one's parents has always haunted children's expectations, and I am certain that my older brother shares this feeling, too, no matter how hard he tries to conceal it in our squabbles with one of those ancient human masks, accusing me of materialism, harshness and emotional recalcitrance.

I also believe that my older brother will die in about thirty years' time.

I do not deny that the worst decision I have ever made in my life was to take up painting. I have been deceived by this fleeting passion which came upon me when I was in high school, imagining myself as that handsome artist whose beautiful love looks over his shoulder to contemplate her face drawn with utmost precision on the white canvas. It took only three or four such fantasy images to reach the decision that would affect my whole future. I had forgotten to look for statistics on the number of those who had taken up painting as an area of specialization with ardent zeal, and who after a while had lost this passion. This mistake has cost me two years so far, and if I decide to change my specialization now, it will cost me, in addition to the two wasted years, the trouble of having to endure hearing twenty or thirty expressions of the kind "I told you so?" uttered in various moods and tones and with meaningful glances from my five brothers. How stressful this is!

I must find a statistic on the number of those who, half way through their specialization, lost heart and decided to give up, and those who discovered, when they graduated, that it had



all been a mistake. I believe this statistic will greatly inform my decision. The two years to graduation mean that I could be awarded a degree in painting a full year before my father passes away; and if I cannot find a good job, I would have to work in my father's company for sure, which would also give me the pain of having to hear many expressions like "Didn't we tell you so?" Furthermore, my father, who has only three years to live, does not seem to suffer from any illness; nor does he display symptoms of any disease. This means working many years in the company alongside my brothers with only a degree in painting. This is impossible!

A new plan must be found, but this time with utmost accuracy.

If I graduate from arts college two years from now, I can afford to waste a whole year on the pretext that I am looking for a job. I might even claim that I have had some job offers which I turned down because I did not like them. Then I will sell my car. Some of my savings and the money from the car will be enough to travel for a year or two to America or Europe on the pretext of pursuing higher studies. I will, of course, say that the university has sent me there to study. Once there, I will try to remain jobless and out of the university because I will not be able to pay for my education. Then I will return to my country. I believe faking a degree that will convince my brothers, who might be curious to see it, will not be too difficult for an artist like me. I can then hang on for another year on the pretext that I am tired of studying abroad and am looking around for a job to suit me. By then six years will have elapsed and my father must have died, because by then he would have outlived the average life expectancy by a whole three years.

The million I will inherit from my father will be enough to live a reasonably comfortable life for twenty years without having to work. I believe that twenty years will enable me to collect enough statistics to make an informed decision once the million has been spent. I must not forget an important point, though: at the end of the twenty years, my older brother will be seventy-three years old, and he will then have only two years more to live, or maybe less because he is a smoker. If I calculate my part of the inheritance, which I will share with his wife and two daughters,



assuming that by then his wealth would not be less than several million and that his wife will have gone through the menopause, I will pocket a sum of money no less than two hundred thousand riyals, which is enough to live on for four years. As for the rest of my brothers, I cannot inherit from them, of course, because they have sons. Although that day is twenty-eight years from now, I believe that due to a mixed set of demographic, ideological and historical statistics, the Islamic inheritance system will remain unchanged until my brother dies.

When the money I inherit from my brother twenty-eight years from now is all gone, I will be fifty-two years old, broke, an orphan, and without an older brother, and I will have to live for a further twenty-three years as I do not smoke and do not suffer from any ailments, which is very frightening! Twenty-three years of senility, poverty, misery and useless statistics! I cannot find any other scenarios that I can take into consideration; and even if all my calculations sound too optimistic and if I am too tight-fisted, I will still live for a few more years, which may not alleviate the systematic and expected misery I will be living in for a quarter of a century.

I believe I must show some courage and opt for one of these two choices: I will either start smoking, or switch to engineering.

Translated by Ali Azeriah for *Banipal* 30, 2007



## A short story

RAWDHA AL-BELUSHI

### *Resurrection Bus*

| 54 |

I looked into those wretched faces whose bodies slouched apathetically in the dark seats and whom nothing stirred. I didn't remember boarding this bus that was as silent as an isolation cell, and I didn't remember where I was heading before I got on. It travelled along a straight, endless road. There was no sign of life outside. I felt I was seeing these faces for the first time; and, in fact, it was the first time I had caught a bus!

One of the female passengers grumbled listlessly: "Humph, boring." I looked toward the source of the voice. I didn't see a single female face at the back of the bus; only four men, varying in age and appearance, and even in the way they sat ... One of them noticed me and began to shoot me cocky, wolfish looks. The smoothness of his features and his large bald patch, which shone from the sunlight reflecting off the darkened window, made me feel nauseous.

He then sent a smile my way, which I immediately shrunk from and looked in the opposite direction.

A woman in her late forties sat directly opposite me. She looked very much like a well-known television presenter, who appeared in all her gravitas on one of the news channels, but who didn't wear spectacles like this woman. I noticed that she avoided looking anywhere in particular. She sat, striking a pose, and read a medium-size book that had a smooth, crimson dust jacket.

I tried hard to read the title but failed.

A handsome boy sat beside her. The colour of his grey eyes reminded me of my sister's little boy and I felt a sort of affection and familiarity towards him. He was absorbed in playing with his coloured paper airplane. I wished he'd raise his handsome face and give me a smile full of sweetness and tenderness. But he didn't.



I was sitting right behind the huge driver and I asked him, in a tone that was not without a little curiosity: "Sorry sir, I won't keep you. I only want to know something about where we're going."

"To the Resurrection," he said coldly and without looking round at me or paying the slightest attention to the gasps of the woman in her late thirties, who had thrown her medium-size book to one side and got up from her place, trembling, and then wiped the glass of her spectacles with a gleaming white handkerchief.

"You're joking, right? We're not dead yet, are we?" she said, shocked. He replied with the same coldness: "No miss, I'm not joking ... We should arrive in less than an hour. So you should all be ready."

The expression of stupefied horror on the woman's face failed to infect the other faces. A strange feeling caused me to accept the situation as though it were perfectly ordinary, as though I were on my way to visit some relatives.

After that, the man with the smooth features got up to change his place and went to sit in one of the front seats, very close to mine. Then the bus began to swarm with movement. Everyone found something to distract themselves from the waiting. The man who sat in the last seat, and who looked like a businessman, took a small notebook and pen from his pocket and began writing down some observations, suggestions and figures. Then he violently tore up the page and started again.

The lady in her thirties took a ball of yellow wool and knitting needles from her bag and busied herself knitting what looked to me like a scarf. The vile bald man produced a make-up bag and began to apply powder and bright red lipstick to his face. He stopped to look at me every time he added a new colour to his dome-shaped head, and smiled!

I felt my little finger for the engagement ring, but it wasn't there!

I searched my handbag and every seat but couldn't find it.

I asked for a ring, any ring, even a brass one. But no one paid me the slightest attention.

I began to blame myself. What if I were to meet my late fiancé there and he asked me about the ring? What a disaster!



The handsome boy alone remained engrossed in playing with his paper airplane as though unconcerned by the situation.

After a short while the man who'd been jotting down his observations stood up and asked: "A pen ... A pen ... I need a pen ... Quickly. Mine's run out of ink."

The woman in her thirties threw aside what looked like a scarf and burst into tears, saying: "Damn it. I'm no good at knitting. I'm no good at anything ... urgh! God, where's the book ... I want my book. I want it."

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The driver roared in anger: "Please calm yourselves a little, ladies and gentlemen. We're almost there."

Fumes of fear began to rise from deep inside me. I got up to look under the seats for the ring when the man with the smooth features came so close his make-up almost touched my face, and said: "There's no point in getting ready, my beauty ... Time's up and now we're arriving. So let's arrive in style."

I felt an intense nausea grip my insides. I spat my revilement in his face that was smudged with garish colours and pushed him away with all my strength, while I screamed at the driver: "Stop, I beg you. Stop. Let me off here. I have to find my ring, and then I'll come back."

"..."

"Hey you, can't you hear me? I said, let me off now."

"..."

I stood directly in front of him trying to get his attention but I became terrified when I discovered the huge driver didn't have a face like ours!

I almost stumbled and fell. I grabbed hold of the nearest metal railing. Then I noticed a red button beside the steering wheel.

I lunged forward and pressed the button although the driver almost managed to stop me.

The moment the door opened a violent wind swept in and everyone shrunk back terrified while a cry of horror rose from the back.

I couldn't tell if it was the cry of a man or a woman and I didn't care.

Before I got off I looked round for the handsome boy. He was still in his place amusing himself with the coloured airplane,





that beautiful sparkle never fading from his eyes.  
I threw my trembling body through the doorway.  
It didn't hurt ... and no ground met my fall.  
I was falling through a bottomless abyss.

Translated by Thomas Aplin for *Banipal* 42, 2011,  
from the author's short story collection *Bass el-Qayama*,  
published in Arabic by Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture &  
Heritage, Cultural Foundation, 2008



## A chapter from the novel *Love stories from al-A'sha Street*

BADRIYA AL-BISHR

| 58 |

“Go up to the roof and make the beds,” my mother told us after she was done with her prayers at sunset. Awatif and I raced up the staircase. She filled a bucket with cold water and sprinkled it on the concrete floor of the roof. The water caused heat to rise from the floor like a warm breath from an old chest. She threw water on my face, so I turned away laughing. Then I dashed towards her, grabbed the bucket, and emptied it over her head. Our clothes were wet through. The concrete floor laughed along, swallowed up the water, and gave us back a cool breeze that invigorated us.

“Let’s make the beds,” Awatif said when she was tired of playing.

By the time we dragged all the rugs, sheets, and cushions out of the storage room on the rooftop, the last drop of water had evaporated from the floor. My energy was back and I wanted to play more so I put my foot on the edge of the rug Awatif was carrying. She stumbled forward and I fell on top of her. “Let go of me, you little devil,” she yelled.

We distributed the bedding over the three parts of the roof in stages. First, we laid down the cotton mattresses; next, we covered them with sheets and cushions; and, finally, we spread out the quilts. A short wall separated each part from the other. My father’s bed was on the farthest one over the kitchen. All four of us girls slept over the family room. My brother Fawwaz’s bed was over the men’s living room. Only my brother Ibrahim’s bed remained tucked away, since he had left for Egypt about a year ago.

We filled a small container my mother used for her ablutions with more water and sprinkled the beds one last time so that they would feel cool when they dried out.

Awatif and I lay down next to each other on our father’s bed. We listened carefully to the noises coming from the neighbors’



rooftops. There were birds flying in infinite space, a muffled car horn somewhere, and echoes of children yelling and screaming at each other. Then all the noises died down and we focused our attention on the white clouds. We followed the way they seemed to be pulling each other forward and felt they were taking us along into an unknown universe filled with secret planets. Their bright stars lit up our inner worlds. Awatif probably thought about her studies, her future husband, and her future children. I dreamed about another world bigger than this rooftop and this house and this entire neighborhood, a world where I could be with the people who fascinated me even if they were wicked or mischievous.

I caught a glimpse of the world I envisioned in the Egyptian movies we watched every Thursday night on our black and white TV. These movies were my only window to the outside world. I imagined myself in the place of each movie star as she rode a bus, ate corn on the cob along the Nile, or took a walk by the seashore. I, too, heard the street vendors calling their wares. I would buy some candy and, with my face unveiled, eat it exactly the way they did in the movies. Then I would run into someone I knew and we would chat casually.

In that enchanted world, life seemed far more glamorous and exciting and delightful. In my head, I invented many plots with twists and turns and I had more adventures than the heroes of folktales.

Every Thursday evening, the stage I set up on the rooftop attracted the girls of our neighborhood. I sat them in rows like an audience in a theater. Then I used a sheet hanging over the clothes line as a curtain through which new characters emerged. Once I wrapped a black veil around my body and walked seductively, swinging my hips right and left. Another time I tied a scarf around my waist and danced to a popular song. I even wept as I shouted famous lines from a tragic movie that I knew by heart. But what the girls loved most was the impression I did of a particular Egyptian comedian, which made them laugh like crazy.

Towards the end of every evening, they asked me to sing. "What would you like me to sing?" It was always a song by the



same pop star. I would do a fantastic impression of her, twirling, vigorously shaking my hips, and beating my head until they applauded and laughed and cried all at the same time. Sometimes they joined in and we ended up dancing and singing along.

Our daydreams were interrupted by the familiar singing of a certain bird. Awatif's heart instinctively quivered and danced to his song.

We both turned towards the wall behind us where the edge of a green prayer mat was perched like a small bird. The wall separated our roof from the neighbors, where Sa'ad's family lived. When Awatif jumped up, I did the same because we were used to mirroring each other's movements. Feeling both excited and nervous, I blurted out: "The bird has landed."

She tugged my hand and whispered: "Keep watch!"

The excitement coursed through my veins as I walked back and forth across the rooftop. I approached my task with the gravity of a soldier on the front line for the first time.

Despite the risk involved and the disaster implied, keeping watch was one of the highlights of my day. The sense of adventure excited and inspired me. Protecting their fledgling love made me feel larger than life. I alone was responsible for two lives and for two hearts. I felt like a mother watching over her children or a lioness protecting her cubs, surveying the land from the mountain top.

I had a hole in the wall of the rooftop to survey al-A'sha Street. I watched the outside world through this hole like a movie. I saw our neighbor's son riding his bike, holding a can of juice in one hand. He rang the bell on his bike and looked both ways before he crossed the street. I saw the head of Moda, our neighbor's daughter, peek out of the door. She dumped a bucket of dirty water on the sidewalk. Then she looked with curiosity right and left. But there was no one to see and she went back inside. Aunt Owaishah, Sa'ad's mother, stepped out of the house with a broom in her hand. She used it to sweep the dust out of her house. She covered her face to sweep the front steps before she went back in. Uncle Abu Falah drove his pickup truck almost through his front door. He stepped out of the car with his five sons. For a few moments, everything stood still. I looked



up at the sky and saw pigeons flying west. They were free to spread their wings. Then I looked down and noticed two heads emerging on the roof across from ours. One was Fatima, Imran's daughter. I saw her waving to a young man on a rooftop two houses away. This must be Salman, the young man she had told me about. There she was, vigorously waving to him while he was sending her kisses in the air.

Awatif stepped on a small wooden box to be tall enough to rest her elbows on the green prayer mat draped over the wall. She now timidly cast her eyes down. Sa'ad asked about her wet hair. "Aziza dumped water all over me," she told him. They both laughed. "I did not see Fawwaz at the sunset prayer," he said. "I did not see your mother this afternoon," she told him.

This was how their conversations went. They consisted of enquiring about others because their love was a mutual bond between two families.

"Time for prayer, Sa'ad." The voice of Sa'ad's father reached their ears. Sa'ad moved away from the wall. "I'll see you tomorrow before evening prayers," he told Awatif.

Awatif stepped down delicately from the wooden chest, feeling the same light-headedness that she felt after each such rendezvous. She put both her hands over her heart, which fluttered like a little bird. Then she flung herself on the bed, trying to hold for as long as she could to this lovely state of mind. But right at that moment, our sister Afaf appeared out of nowhere, yelling "Color! Color!" and disappeared as quickly as she had showed up.

We ran after her. Downstairs our father was taking a new TV out of a big box. It replaced the old, small one. "Give me that towel," he said to my mother. He wiped the screen and pressed the power button. For the first time we saw the picture in color!

A chubby host was holding a mike close to people's mouths. His sweater was red; a line of artificial trees behind him was green; and the people he interviewed were wearing white.

We all sat around the new TV open-mouthed, my dad, my mother, my sisters Awatif, Alia'a, and Afaf. We were spellbound as if carried by a magic carpet or a time machine to another world.



"Tonight we will watch the daily soap opera in color," I said to Awatif whose eyes were wide open. "Oh, how fabulous the colors are!" she said.

After the evening prayers, my mother herded my little sisters to the rooftop. She dragged Afaf who was half asleep, Alia's followed and, finally, my dad carrying his small radio. "This is London," the broadcaster announced in a melodious voice, which indicated the start of the news hour. The first news story was about the Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat.

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"Don't forget to wash the dishes and turn off the lights," we heard my mum say.

Awatif and I were still finishing dinner. She had a plate of cheese and jam and I only had slices of watermelon. Every time we saw a new color on the TV, she clapped her hands. "How marvelous," she exclaimed. I was transported into a world of elegance and leisure as new and exciting as entering a huge amusement park. My heart was beating fast and my hands were trembling. Yes, indeed, how marvelous!

Awatif took the empty dishes to the kitchen. I could hear her singing the lyrics of a popular Egyptian love song as she washed them. When the Egyptian soap opera started playing, I shouted at her to hurry up and come back. She ran back without even drying her hands. The soap opera now played in vivid color: a red skirt, a brown jacket, a green chair. However, we soon forgot about the colors as we followed the unfolding of a crisis in the life of the Egyptian family with trepidation. Here was the patron of the family, the epitome of patience and kindness. His wife, the matron, was dedicated to cooking, cleaning, and doing the laundry. Their two sons were college students. No one in our alley went to college except my brother, Ibrahim, who studied in Cairo. Everyone here took a job or went to a vocational college.

The patron now looked sad because his beautiful daughter was dating one of her poor classmates at college. When her brother saw her with him at the cafeteria, having juice, he scolded her in public and dragged her home. Had it not been for the mother's timely intervention, he would have hit her. "A brother should never humiliate his sister. Shame on you," she protested. The patron, too, did not want to see his daughter demeaned,



which he expressed by quietly withdrawing to his room. Now, the mother followed her daughter to her bedroom and asked her to respect tradition. To make her point, she invoked the most popular catch phrase of that time period: "A girl's honour is like a match; it strikes only once."

The daughter collapsed on her bed, proclaiming: "But I have not committed a crime. Love is not a crime."

With a deep sigh, my sister chimed in: "Yes, love is not a crime."

Translated by Sally Gomaa for *Banipal* 54, 2016,  
from the author's novel *Gharamiyat shai'a al-A'Sha* (Love stories  
from al-A'sha Street), published by Dar al-Saqi, Beirut, 2013

#### ABOUT THE BOOK

The events in *Love Stories on al-A'sha Street* take place in the 1970s, on al-A'sha Street in the populous district of Manfouha, Riyadh. Three heroines are searching for their freedom: Aziza hopes to find it through love and imitates Soad Hosny, the Cinderella of Arabic cinema, falling in love with an Egyptian doctor because he speaks the dialect of black and white films. Wadha, a Bedouin woman, flees from poverty through work in the women's market, becoming its most important trader. Atwa runs away from her tiny village, changing her name and fate, and finds independence in the new environment of Riyadh.

Their story begins in the romantic period of black and white films and lovers' trysts on the flat rooftops, where people sleep outside. However, with the advent of colour television comes a wave of religious extremism, opposing the social transformations which have changed the city. One of its first victims is Aziza's young neighbor, Sa'ad. Searching for his identity, he joins the radicals led by religious activist Juhayman al-Otaybi, who famously occupied Mecca's sacred Grand Mosque in 1979.

*Love Stories on al-A'sha Street* was longlisted for the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction



## An excerpt from the novel *A Soundless Collision*

BOTHAYNA AL-ESSA

### *An Unexpected Encounter in Uppsala*

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I cannot remember what happened that day. All I can recall is a sort of soundless collision. At the time, I was distracted, my mind was wandering absentmindedly over facts I needed to memorise, prayers my mother had taught me and the faces of friends, many miles away. I glanced around in search of my professor. After that, everything was a blur.

“Hey there!”

A voice ripped through my silence and a face loomed from nowhere, bearing a smile of hunger and rain. The prayers I had been muttering caught in my throat as I collided with a face that seemed to evade its own existence. I let out a startled yelp.

“*Bismillah!* In the name of God!”

“*Assalamu alaikum.* Peace be upon you.”

You smiled in a strange, inscrutable way. I stumbled backwards, eying you cautiously and swallowing nervously.

Peace be also upon you, stranger that you are. Peace and blessings ... deserts and talismans ... home and exile. May my longing and my curses also be upon you.

Thus you descended upon me, a vagabond, and, with your so-called peace, you kindled a war within me. Were those really your words ... *Assalamu alaikum?* You were a whispering from the devil, a paroxysm of incantations and chaos. May God grant me sanctuary from you! I gazed at you, unnerved by your incongruous presence in that foreign place. Your hair was smoothed with gel, scraped back as though by strips of glue. Silver chains hung provocatively against your chest and a small tattoo of a scythe adorned your upper arm. Everything about you defied the words that came from your mouth and yet everything about you reminded me of a country I knew so well.





You burst suddenly and thunderously upon me, a lithe, tanned, Bedouin apparition that left me reeling. I stumbled back, gazing at you in horror and examining you unashamedly: regular Bedouin features and the bronzed, sun-kissed skin bestowed only upon you and your kind. Although mussed with gel, your hair was indistinguishable from that of my brother's. On close inspection, even your fingers, with their long filed nails and silver rings, sent you back to the open desert, to milking camels and slaughtering beasts. Neither the chains, nor the rolled-up sleeves, nor the buttoned-down shirt, nor any of your other careful touches, could distract me from your long, sharp nose and the piercing intelligence that filled your eyes. Most conspicuous was your half-smile, a smile that has never reached completion on the face of any Bedouin throughout the ages.

You laughed at the marks of astonishment etched across my forehead. I floundered, lost in your features that were so stained with otherness. You repeated your greeting, your brown hand raised high.

*"Allah bil khair, Yuba."*<sup>1</sup>

Speaking in pure dialect, you resembled both everything and nothing as you stood there before me, a concentrated mix of home and exile. You seemed like a man split in half, divided in two by a rough red line, a modernist, multi-dimensional map stretching endlessly on ... Who were you?!

"Kuwaiti?" I asked with difficulty, swallowing again.

You pulled a strange half-smile, a smile that clearly testified to your churlish rejection of all identities and all things resembling an identity; a rejection that would have begun with your first gap-toothed smile and the first toy which you held in your arms.

"Dhary," you replied in your own, resolute language, denying all concept of nation and belonging. You had no need to be anything but yourself. You alone were worthy of your belonging. You were a Bedouin myth, narrated not in the desert but under

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1 Literally meaning "God with good", it is a traditional greeting similar to the Bavarian "Gruss Gott" instead of "Good Day".



the shade of a pine tree, in a city of light and water. And so you came to me, the most elusive and intangible of beings.

You pointed to the badge on your chest where your name was written in foreign letters: D-a-r-i-e.

“Darie,” I mispronounced.

Smiling, you shrugged your shoulders indifferently. “Call me Darie if you like.”

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Your rejection of everything, even your own name, was your first lesson to me. My cheeks blushed with embarrassment.

“Didn’t Nizar Qabbani say that ‘names are the most foolish thing we possess’?” you added with that same smile, your tone somewhat easing my consternation.

“I study biology. I don’t read much poetry.”

“But poetry is like the nation ... it’s for everyone.”

Cold shame swept over me. Although I hailed from the heart of Najd, the soul of poetry, I was not armed with enough rhymes to confront the strangeness of our encounter. And what need had you of poetry when the world around you was filled with such beauty, when you formed part of such a rich green landscape?

You read the letters of my name on the badge pinned to my chest: “Fara ... mouse!”

“No. Not Fara. It’s Farah, joy.”

You laughed. My eyes lit up with questions, but you cut in before I could utter a single word.

“The embassy told me you were coming.”

“And who are you?”

“Dhary!”

You had no other form of identification, nothing but two eyes that shone with longing, defying the indifference you feigned as you thrust your hands into your pockets to conceal their excited trembling.

“They asked me to be your guide. But they didn’t tell me you were a girl!”

“In that case, you’re not obliged to continue.”

“To be honest, this only makes it more exciting!”

I knotted my hands together, like two cats snuggling into one another. Your unexpected audacity had momentarily frozen my



senses. It was as though you were unaware that honesty topped the list of all forbidden things!

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You asked “How’s Kuwait?”, as though inquiring about a friend with whom you had lost touch. You may as well have asked: “Is she married? Or single and in love? Does she only receive unworthy suitors as always? Does she still hold her doors naïvely open for angels and demons alike? What’s she up to, this saintly sinner? Does she abuse you and love you all in one go?

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“Does she still push everyone away? Does she melt you down and fuse you together on a daily basis while you continue to love her more and more? Is she still full of contradictions and hypocrisies? Does she go nowhere and everywhere at the same time, advertising concerts while condemning musical instruments? Does she open her arms to all the world’s hungry but her own? Do her shoulders sink beneath endless, hungry bites and glorified lovers who excel only at reeling off their poetry? Perhaps she has simply remained herself, captivating but impossible. How is she, my dear Kuwait?”

“Great!” I replied, stubbornly matching your dialect as an initial expression of national pride before we launched into our first long debate, retracing our steps along the path which snaked its way back to the halls of residence.

Around me, the streets of Sweden hummed with a beautiful, incomprehensible gabble. The strangeness of the place seeped coldly around me, descending from the trees and clouds, and rising from the snail shells and pebbles which scattered the streets. It emanated from every corner, from the smallest details of the city, gently numbing everything around me. It imbued you with an inexplicable melancholy.

“Is Al-Aujairy’s bookstore still in front of the Nugra Shopping Centre?” you asked, your voice suspiciously curious.

“Sorry?”

“I remember that it used to be there ...”

“It’s still there.”

“I also remember a palm tree ...” you added after a long pause, “in the old Salmiya souk.”

“A palm tree? What palm tree?”



"Never mind," you stammered, looking uncomfortable. A long period of tranquility settled over us after that, stretching quietly and calmly on as though leading to the gates of heaven. Although swallowed in this listless silence, a strange sense of confusion rose within me. It felt wrong for us to be walking along the same street, chatting so casually.

"What would people say if they saw us together?" I wondered innocently.

"Why are you here on your own?"

"One of my friends was supposed to come with me but her family didn't let her."

You gave a wan smile whose meaning was quite clear: "Kuwait never changes!"

But then what about myself? Had I not spent a whole evening planting pleading kisses on my grandmother's forehead so that she would pressure my father into letting me go? How many times had I begged my mother to stop my brothers from scuppering my dreams? How much had I longed to participate in the Olympiad and proudly hold the Kuwaiti flag aloft? I stood before you, a lucky girl and no more!

"How old are you?" I asked.

"How old do you think I am?"

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-six."

You were too old to be an undergraduate. I immediately guessed that you must be in Sweden for your Masters, but, following my train of thought, you quickly put me right.

"I've lived here for eleven years."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"That's weird."

You smiled without commenting.

"But why?" I mumbled, fearing to raise such a loaded subject.

"What a question!" you laughed, scratching the back of your head.

"Isn't that an awfully long time?"

"Let's just say that, for me, Sweden beats Kuwait," you replied, clearly concealing other reasons behind this bland response.



From that moment on, I could not dispel the impression that I was, in fact, in the company of a madman.

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Peeping through a gap in the door, I followed the performance alongside the other inquisitive students. I was mesmerised by the Swedish country songs, my eyes fixed on the young girls flitting about the stage like petals falling from a pansy.

There were hordes of students outside the hall, awaiting their turn to enter and mount the stage to deliver their national anthems, enlivening the audience of academics who had flown in from all corners of the globe to give their blessings to the proceedings. The other delegations had at least three students each, and I was on the verge of collapse, not knowing how my lone voice could possibly do justice to little Kuwait. How could I communicate the soul of its sand, its blossoms and its seagulls, forcing my shaky voice into joyful ululations that would rise up to the heavens?

You were standing a few feet away from me, your arms folded. I could not but loathe you. Nothing concerned you, not the room, buzzing with national pride, not the sense of belonging among the other students, not the many, colourful flags ...

"Why didn't the embassy find someone a bit more enthusiastic to be my guide?" I asked, not bothering to conceal my exasperation.

"Sorry to disappoint."

You were not prepared to convey any more emotion than that, or to tone down the blatant indifference with which you responded to everything that mattered so deeply to me. I turned away. You took a cigarette from your pocket.

"If this were Stockholm, it would be different. But Uppsala is out of the way. You'd be hard pressed to meet any Arabic speakers here."

"I was only wondering. How much are they paying you?"

You smiled, the cigarette pressed firmly between your lips.

"Not a penny."

"So why did you agree?"



"You're certainly not short on questions ... but look out. You're on after the Koreans."

"Oh God!"

You smiled. Your hands were still buried in your pockets, signalling that you could not care less about anyone except yourself. My terrified eyes spoke volumes.

"Will you go on with me?"

"And sing on stage?"

"I'll pay you."

"Money costs dearer than national pride."

"I can't sing on my own."

"And what do you expect me to do about it?"

"Just stand next to me."

Your lips twisted into an enigmatic smile.

"Do you have a good voice?"

I cursed you inwardly, wondering why I bothered to put up with you.

The Iranian delegation entered the hall. My eyes fervently beseeched you, the terror in them more eloquent than words.

"I'm begging you!"

"Fine."

And then we were there, a pair of misfits, slouching awkwardly on the stage as we droned out our anthem with false emotion.

*Kuwait, my country, may you be safe and glorious!*

*May you always enjoy good fortune!*

*Kuwait, my country*

*Kuwait, my country*

*Kuwait, my country, may you be safe and glorious!*

Shyness oozed from me in beads of sweat that shone on my glowing cheeks. I stole a glance at you. Pasty and incongruous, the only thing that united us was our coffee-coloured skin and our eyes, gazing absently into space. Our jarring resemblance was laid bare for the audience who sat before us, mesmerised by that strangest of spectacles, that most modern, most blasphemously burdensome of poetic images. Discomfort multiplied within me, endlessly reproducing like cells in the body. Tears welled in my eyes as I heard you churning our anthem out robotically, as though it stirred no emotion in you. The hall was empty except



for you. You were concerned with no one. Nothing interested you, not even the words you were uttering. They meant nothing to you. You could have been singing simply for the pleasure of hearing your own voice, which happened to be rather pleasant. If I had asked you to perform the Nigerian or Norwegian anthem, you would not have hesitated. Shaking with nerves, I almost toppled over. I was on the point of clinging to you, cursing you and crying. What heinous crime had our country inflicted upon you that you treated it with such cold indifference?

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We stepped down from the stage. I longed for the ground to swallow me up. You smiled to the audience.

“You have a good voice,” you said, grinning.

Translated by Charis Bredin for *Banipal* 47, 2013,  
from the author's novel *Irtitam lam Yusma' Lahu Dawii* (A  
Soundless Collision), published by Dar al-Mada, Damascus 2004.



## A short story

NOURA MOHAMMAD FARAJ

### *Fiery Curses*

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I can say that I forgave my father each time he slapped me. Why do I forgive him? He is my father; if he didn't discipline me when I misbehave, who would?

I can still feel the heat of these blows fresh on my left cheek – but not on my right cheek, which didn't experience this type of suffering – it seems to be a secret mark that only I can detect. I must admit that a mark like this doesn't delight me but I am delighted that no one else knows about it, because this is a less than glorious event in my life story.

Right – anyone listening to my statements will think I had a miserable childhood – reeling from one slap to the next – but actually during my life they have been infrequent – till now – and perhaps almost non-existent, because I only recall one slap.

The story behind this slap was that once I picked up an illustrated magazine and felt inspired to don an outfit that made me look awe-inspiring and grand. Then I sat in the huge leather chair in my father's office and placed my feet on the desk with their soles facing a number of volumes that were lined up there.

I admit that this wasn't a comfortable position for reading. At any rate, I don't think I read or tried to read, because I was preoccupied by that pose and how to make it seem even more awe-inspiring, either by puffing out my chest or by smiling in a blasé fashion.

My father suddenly walked in on me and saw me in this pose. This was a calamity. All my awesomeness fled, leaving behind only fear. That slap landed on me, accompanied by a paternal command to conduct myself more respectfully.

I naturally became angry, and wept, and then felt ashamed; many other emotions also afflicted me in quick succession. Finally, inevitably, life returned to normal, but a question lingered in my heart: What should I respect? Should I show respect to my





father because this was his office, to the desk which was meant for hands not feet, or to the book that my foot had approached?

Some books were placed on high shelves, but only a single multi-volume title was lined up on the desk, and I had taken the liberty of raising my foot toward it. The book comprised nine or ten massive tomes. The sight of those bound volumes was associated in my childhood memory with veneration and arabesque decorations, and I could only decipher the title with difficulty. For a long time I continued to doubt whether I had read it accurately or not. It was a huge book with an elegant, thick leather binding. I scratched its surface inside and out and then reached a conviction, the gist of which was that this book was one of those read only by tall, broad-shouldered people with massive heads. Thus it would not be possible for me to read it when I was only as tall as Tom Thumb. The book's title was *Al-Marajim* or "Curses".

I think that "abuse" and "hot embers" became associated in my mind. For this reason I frequently saw myself in cartoon form, chased by my father, who was pelting me with flaming embers as I fled. Whether he actually hit me or not when he threw them at me did not cross my mind. The image remained embedded. Oh, how monstrously miserable childhood is! Whenever I sat at a desk, I would lean my elbow on it and rest my cheek in my palm. Where there was no desk, I would repeatedly rub this poor cheek with my palm as if caressing it. I would commiserate with the other cheek to reassure it that it would never know the pain its brother had suffered.

There was another slap that wasn't an actual blow. This time I experienced it in a dream. My father and I were standing before a spiral staircase. He was scolding me, and when his rage reached its peak, he slapped me because I had dared to descend the staircase!

Why do I remember the slaps and hot embers, the dreams and stairs, now? Because I have seen that stairway for real now – not in a dream – after growing up and learning to respect many things.

I entered the public library a few days ago to research an essay I am writing and asked the librarian for the room where the books I needed were shelved. He pointed me to a downstairs room accessed by a spiral staircase.



I could not believe my eyes, which opened wide. It was the very same staircase from my dream!

But my father wasn't there – was he? He certainly wasn't.

Even so, I did not descend the staircase; instead I left the library.

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I returned some days later, after convincing myself that I wouldn't find my father there and wouldn't receive another slap because I was no longer as short as Tom Thumb and it would embarrass both of us if he slapped me – naturally assuming he was there.

So I went down the stairway, which rocked with my steps and made a disturbing, grating sound every time I descended a step. I walked downstairs with extreme caution, because the stairway appeared to be fastened together with small, rusty screws, which did not seem strong enough to bear my weight. Worse still – my knees were trembling too.

When my foot touched the solid floor, I praised God for my safe arrival; I hadn't fallen nor had anything else. I glanced at the rows of books spread before me. They were dusty, imposing old books. I decided to start by examining the books systematically, beginning with the first row and continuing in sequence. Just as soon as I ran my eyes over the titles on the first row I found that this time my eyes – not my feet – were facing *Al-Marajim*.

My father wasn't there, and without any hesitation I pulled the book off the shelf and glanced inside it; perhaps my cultural literacy had improved by now. I finally established that my initial reading of the book's title, *Al-Marajim*, had been accurate.

Consider my astonishing courage: I took the first volume and the final one, which contained the indices, to a nearby table!

I was suffering from my fear of the earlier burning embers and imagined that I was holding a fiery book with its burning coals and that when I opened it I would proceed directly to the Resurrection. The abuse, however, wasn't with live coals but with invective. This abuse was verbal and referred to curses. (I was so disappointed!)



Why had the author chosen to write about curses? Had he really run out of other topics? The author, whose distinguished name was Abu al-Fadl al-Tashti, says in the book's introduction, where he discusses his methodology, that he chose this topic because it affects all people without exception. "No tongue is innocent of cursing and from it you will learn who is the abuser and who is being abused along with the traits of each group."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he devoted pages of his long book to mentioning the curse, the person cursing, the person cursed, and the occasion of the cursing. To book's message he added reports that had reached him about the curser and the cursed and the other curses they had uttered or been exposed to and their reactions to these curses. (May God reward al-Tashti!)

When I flipped through the book's indices – especially the index of proper names – I encountered everyone I had ever heard of from the time of our author: poets, philosophers, caliphs, and judges. Naturally there were people I hadn't heard of. Curiosity overwhelmed me – I wanted to learn the curses that had been applied to these worthy gentlemen. I found a large, diverse group of men whose families had been cursed, a section about those whose morals had been abused, a section for those whose lineages had been abused, and an especially interesting final chapter.

Al-Tashti was obviously proud of this chapter. "It is the broadest chapter and contains a variety of stories. If we had not reined in the tongue, ordering it to keep secrets, these pages would have harvested for us a fortune by narrating them, distinguishing their protagonists, and subsequently our heads would have been harvested, along with everything we hold dear, because every king and ruler has had his lineage insulted. For those who died a long time ago we mention reports of their abuse and lineage and what people remember about that. As for the people who have died more recently and have a family and children and zeal, whose brutality is to be feared, silence is better. With reference to a person still alive, know that a seemingly lineage is attributed to him in public and faulted in private and that reports

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1 Abu al-Fadl Hasan ibn Walid al-Tashti, *Al-Marajim*, (Published by Dar Al-Haqaiq Publishing House) IX, 15.



about him are whispered between two people but suppressed in the middle of a group. For this reason, we keep our silence out of respect for our heads until God executes a deed that has been done ... .”<sup>2</sup> (May God reward him with the greatest reward!)

I sat for some time reading the reports of cursing that were laid out before me. To tell the truth, I experienced many shocks as I read, because the tongues of emirs, poets, and muezzins were indistinguishable from those of barflies. In al-Tashti's opinion: “No one's tongue is innocent of cursing – neither the good man nor the bad man – because their ability to curse is equivalent.” I, here and now, am asked to accept and lend credence to what al-Tashti says or to call him a liar. How can I do that? I don't know. I wasn't present when these people uttered their curses.

I remembered my father's slap as I read words I thought were only written on the walls of stinky WCs or internet chat-rooms.

I closed the book and returned it to its place. Then I went back to my seat at the table. I visualized a dignified man with a turban and white beard sitting cross-legged in a corner of the market, his ears open to people's discussions, his heart leaping ecstatically at every offensive word he heard before leaning over his page to classify a new victim. What eyes, what a smile, what delight!

I picked up my papers and pens and climbed the spiral staircase. This time I enjoyed climbing it with quick steps that I deliberately took to cause the stairs to creak annoyingly.

On my way out, I asked the librarian if I could borrow the volumes of this book, but he said the book was considered an important reference work and was not for borrowing. I noticed that he was looking askance at me as if I were someone who didn't know the worth of a valuable book. I smiled and told him I hadn't finished with it and would return tomorrow to complete my work.

This title story from the author's collection of short stories *Al-Marajim*, Doha, Qatar, 2011, was translated by William M Hutchins and published in *Banipal* 54, 2015.

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2 Ibid., p. 22.



## An excerpt from the novel *Weeping Earth ... Laughing Saturn*

ABDULAZIZ AL FARSI

Khadeem brought out the coffee beans and cardamom and started a small fire in front of the open air assembly. He was totally absorbed in brewing the coffee, the smell of which aroused in me a host of memories and associations. He then stood up and fetched the small pitcher and cups. I contemplated his thick fingers, his sturdy frame and his dark complexion. When the coffee was ready he poured it from the pot and into the pitcher. He then proceeded to lovingly follow the familiar rituals of serving coffee. He handed me the first round. I lifted my eyes up toward him and said: "You've grown a moustache, Khadeem!" I then gave him back the cup and he served me the second round.

"Boy, please, sir."

Again, I gave him the cup and he poured me the third round.

"What are you saying?" I asked. "I didn't hear you well."

"Please address me as 'Boy', sir, as you have always called me from the beginning."

"But you're grown up. You've become a man, and your name is Khadeem!"

"I shall remain your boy as long as I live, sir," he replied.

I had taken hold of the cup while this conversation was going on. I shook it as a sign I was finished and handed it back to him. He took the pitcher back to the fire and busied himself washing the cups.

"What news of the village?" I asked. "Have you heard anything?"

"I have, sir," he replied. "Everyone's preoccupied with getting through tonight's meeting, and wondering what Zahir Bakheet intends to do. Hamdaan Tajreeb advised: 'Fear the patient man when he gets angry!' Saeed al-Dab'a said that he was burning up with fever and that he may not attend. Hameed al-Dahana rebuked him, saying: 'Why don't you send your wife in your place? At least she's more courageous and she doesn't use fever as an



excuse whenever there's a crisis.' Saeed took offence at that and replied that he would be going after all. Khalid Bakheet went off to the big city and brought back four new books. He told the worshippers during the dusk prayer: "The homeland has fallen asleep in one of these books. I'll look for it before I come. Maybe I'll bring the Saturn poet?" Suhayl al-Jamra al-Khabeetha said that he was coming to bestow his blessings on the congregation. Walad al-Saleemi spent the day in silence. Walad Shamshuum ..."

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Ubayd al-Deek chanted the call to prayer and Khadeem stopped speaking. We listened and then made our way to the mosque. We entered and found it nearly full of worshippers, each man whispering to the one he was following. The prayers were performed and the Imam Rashid recited two short chapters from the Quran, Morning Hours and Palm Fire. When the congregation finished praying they headed immediately for the assembly, where Saeed al-Dab'a and Walad Shamshuum had been waiting for them instead of attending the dusk prayers.

Not a peep could be heard as we gathered at the assembly. Only the rattle of the coffee cups broke the silence as Khadeem began to serve the coffee. When he had completed the customary three rounds, again silence prevailed. Walad al-Saleemi sat to my right, and to his right was Hameed al-Dahani. And on the far right sat al-Dab'a. To my left was Walad Shamshuum and next to him were al-Jamra al-Khabeetha and Hamdaan Tajreeb. Over to the far right, away from the congregation, Khalid Bakheet sat by himself. I inspected all the faces and some of the names escaped me. It seemed to me that some of the men I had never seen before. The younger men chose to sit on the far edges, typically, to make their escape if the assembly didn't interest them.

I stood up and spoke: "This meeting has been called by Zahir Bakheet. Every one of us has the right to speak his mind. But let me remind you of the tradition of Muhyan's assembly. No one should raise his voice at anyone else, nor interrupt someone when he's speaking. No matter how fierce our disagreements become, bear in mind that we're still brothers. We have lived and survived hard times together. Do you remember the flood disaster and the mud houses? The history of our village provides us with examples of catastrophes far greater than what brings us



here tonight. It's not a very complicated matter, so let's proceed with whoever wishes to speak first."

They all looked at one another waiting to see who would start. When no one stood up to speak, I announced: "Very well, let's begin with you, Saeed al-Dab'a."

He took a deep breath and spoke: "Very well. The fact of the matter is that this case is much bigger than you imagine. It goes beyond being an inconvenience or a cry in the night, beyond the Saturn poet and the homeland. Every one of us has his place in the village, a place familiar to all of us. Muhyan is a builder and an elder to whom we appeal for legal advice; Walad al-Saleemi is a merchant; Walad Shamshuum is a farmer who grows dates, tomatoes and mangoes for us; Suhayl al-Jamra al-Khabeetha is a fisherman who brings us fish; Imam Rashid is a pious scholar who gives us advice in matters of faith, and who officiates at our religious holidays and ceremonies from birth to death; Ubayd al-Deek calls us to prayer, and Jam'aan as well. All of them have their jobs and their clear-cut roles which have served our village over the years. As for Khaled Bakheet, it's not clear. It's never been clear. He lived in our village until he finished high school. Then he vanished from us for eight years. We only saw him on rare occasions, perhaps a day or two every other month. Even now, he spends his time locked up in his room. Were it not for prayers, no-one would have an inkling that he was back amongst us. He passes by someone and doesn't even bother to greet him. The best of what he had to offer was for the big city. And all of a sudden he's come back to us. Things have developed and he's started to meet with the young people, offering them books with big white pages. What is exactly in these books? God only knows. But to be sure, what they contain is nothing like the knowledge of Imam Rashid. How many of you young men today know of the Feast of the Prophet's Birth, or the prayer of the opening verses of the Qu'ran? No one! What has Khalid Bakheet taught you! He preaches to you, 'The homeland, the homeland, the homeland!' He recites to you poems which he says are by a poet from Saturn. I've never visited Saturn but I know it's a city located somewhere to the north of the big city. My own father, God rest his soul, told me that. But I also know that I can go to





Saturn and ask after the poet himself, and that I can bring him back to prove there is no relation between him and the poems, and that all this is the scheming of Khalid Bakheet to poison the minds of our children. But I will not do that. However, we must agree, for what's the use in just proving it? The matter has reached the point of us being woken in the middle of the night to lament his lost homeland. I'll say no more. I'll let Walad Shamshuum take the floor since I see in his eyes much to be said. Please, come up, Walad Shamshuum."

Saeed al-Dab'a took his seat. He moistened his parched lips with his tongue. Walad Shamshuum cleared his throat and stroked his thick beard. He cast his eyes around the room then began to speak: "What do you want from us, Khalid Bakheet? This is the most important question. Let us all agree here and now that no one has the right to bother the rest of the villagers, no matter who he is. We've always lived our lives respecting each other. And what Khalid is doing is flouting the rules of the neighbourhood and disturbing our peace. This is not a question of disagreement. The dispute here concerns what Khalid Bakheet wants. This is really bewildering. What is he bringing to us that we're lacking? If we ask him that question, what will he say? He'll say, for example, 'Development'. And we say, 'Any progress that removes affection from among us and makes us like big city dwellers is not what we want.' The electricity that connects to our refrigerators and televisions is enough development for us. The more we develop the farther apart we grow from one another. Where are our youth today? The assembly of Muhyan used to be the destination for all men in this village. And then when television came here we no longer saw the crowds gather the way they used to, except in times of crises. Take tonight, for example. The young people are here only because we have a problem. Any other night we don't see them. Why is that? Because of development, isn't that so? We don't want it. You can take the big city, Khalid, but leave us this village."

He stopped to catch his breath and then stood silent.

All eyes turned toward Walad al-Saleemi who was sitting with his head lowered, staring at the ground. Then he raised his head and spoke: "Whoever was born and lived in this village



for seventeen years is no stranger to us. He's one of our people, even if he went away for eight years. What's important is that he lived his life between the valley and the sea. So, don't deceive yourselves and act rashly in depriving him of his rights. He's one of you, your kin, from your village. The big city will never be a mother to him. Maybe he did wake you up at this late hour of the night for no good reason. But I don't think any of this warrants what you're doing now. There have been many people who did you wrong, and more serious than what Khalid has done to you. So why all this commotion? The error he's committed against you doesn't deserve him being chased out and banished from the village, nor him being damned to hell. Do any of you think for one minute that you have been or will be above making mistakes, that you await death, assured a place in Paradise? He woke you up tonight in fear for his country. And you too, your book of deeds is blotched with sins, examples of which you are all aware of. I don't need to remind you. But I do say to you: He has erred, but do not be excessive in your punishment. Let's weigh his errors against those of all of us."

Walad al-Saleemi grew silent and Hameed al-Dahana spoke:

"We are not being over-zealous in our judgment. Nothing has happened so far to let us accuse him of excess. We want a commitment from this young man to safeguard our village's rights, and to keep pernicious ideas and books with 'white' pages away from our children. That's all. We don't wish to banish him from the village."

Many of the worshippers nodded in agreement.

Zahir Bakheet lifted up his head. Everyone in the assembly realised they were all sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation of what the old man would say. At his first move since the conversation had started, there was dead silence. "Have you finished your comments?" the grandfather asked. "Then let's speak about Alam al-Deen."

The congregation was taken by surprise and clear signs of shock flashed across their faces. My heart filled with rage. Who is this Alam al-Deen?

Zahir Bakheet continued speaking: "I met Shaykh Faraj and he told me he was going to send us a man named Alam al-Deen."



He's a man from the lands of Bengal, a pious ascetic who studied in his native country before coming here to serve God and educate the children of the Bengali community. Shaykh Faraj met him and got to know him well. Your Shaykh Faraj came to believe that Alam al-Deen would be the best assistant to Imam Rashid, who has often complained about how rarely our children attend religious festivals and ceremonies, and that he feared the disappearance of religious knowledge. And so he made an offer to Alam al-Deen, and he accepted. He will be here among us the day after tomorrow. And so we beg you to co-operate and offer him food, clothing and shelter. As for his salary, Shaykh Faraj will take care of that."

I swear to God, that old man is the scourge of our times. A real double-crosser, capable of pitting people against one another. He's distracted this anger-filled assembly from its mission by mentioning Alam al-Deen. Now all attention is focussed on clothing, food, and shelter, and only Imam Rashid sits despondent. Hameed al-Dahana tried to bring back the subject of Khalid by asking: "What is your response to what has been said about Khalid? And, why don't you defend him?" But Zahir only replied: "I've asked you to come here to say what's on your minds instead of polluting God's house with what isn't fit to be uttered. Have any of you heard me say I would respond or defend? Absolutely not. Now, you have all said what's on your minds."

The time came to leave and the assembly dissolved. But the question of Alam al-Deen still remained on our minds as a matter to be discussed. Khalid Bakheet went out chuckling. Khadeem began to wash the coffee pot and cups and put out the fire. I myself went home and found loneliness waiting for me.

Translated by William Granara and published in *Banipal* 32, 2008, from *Tabki al-Ardh Yadhhak Zuhul* (Weeping Earth, Laughing Saturn), Muassassat al-Intishar al-Arabi, Beirut 2007. The full English edition is entitled *Earth Weeps, Saturn Laughs*, AUC Press, 2013, translated by Nancy Roberts



## An excerpt from the novel *Clouds beneath a Bow String*

ALI HUSSAIN AL-FELKAWI

### *Traveller of the World*

They don't recognise me as the best tour operator because they don't understand the essence of what I do. I don't own a travel agency; I own the cities. Like the great conquerors I amass the world's heritage, from horses' hooves to computer monitors. Perhaps I exaggerate somewhat but who, before they were eighteen, has read works of those ancient travellers – the adventures of Ibn Battuta, the journeys of Ibn Jubayr, and the writings of Ibn Munqidh! Tour operators are not experts in anything. Some of them might own the plushiest, the most opulent offices, but they don't know the compass points, and they know nothing of the "great travellers". But I am different. As soon as a city catches sight of me she emerges, almost as one, and embraces me with her eyes lowered. Or it could be said that she's sweet on me because I know and understand her history. I've read Maqdisi's *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, and Ibn Duqmaq's *The Pleasure of Humankind in the History of Islam*. Does your average travel agent know Ibn Duqmaq? Duqmaq, such a beautiful and mysterious name. I've tried it with my own name, Ghanim. When said out aloud it has a musical ring to it – "Ghanim al-Duqmaqi". So many books, volumes, dictionaries, treatises and names. For example there's Nasir Khusraw's *The Book of Travels*, Ibn Fadlullah al-'Umari's *Major Roads to Different Lands*, al-Maqrizi's *Topographical Description and History of Egypt*, and naturally, Yaqut al-Hamawi's *Dictionary of Countries*. Tens of books, tens ... by geographers, travellers and historians moving through the imaginary time of historical events, who have observed vast expanses of time, have written them with their steps, and drawn them with their quaking breaths. I have walked the Silk Road with my bare feet in the footsteps of the first missionaries. On the same road I have hurried after the

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first mujahideen. Give me the name of one travel agent who has read and done all this. And even if you could count everything I've read, and all the distances I've travelled, I will never stop. I will continue to read and walk to the ends of the earth.

But never mind all that. I want those who refused to recognise me and held back their blessings to know that I have climbed the sand dunes of the first Orientalists, I have ridden the waves of those travellers who sailed the waters of the Arabian Gulf, and with the dust of caravans I have hastened to the Far East and into the depths of Africa. I became "westernized" until I happened across the books of the Orientalist Edward Said and concluded that Orientalism is also a form of tourism, but to the very depths of thought and the intellect. It is the joining of two opposites, or the intermingling of two foreign elements in storms of fire, kicked up by the hooves of a camel racing in the unknown. Except that I didn't really get Edward Said. Some will think me a second, or even third-rate intellectual. But never mind, I've delved deeply into contemporary travel literature; I'm even familiar with the work of the young Omani Mohamed Al-Harthy. Travel literature in Oman is as wide as the Arabian Sea. I've spent many an hour studying the contours of countries on Google Earth, and navigating the geography of the continents online. I've flayed the skin off my feet to walk hundreds of miles across thousands of gigabytes of web pages, wandering over rivers and steppe country; loitering in alleys and souks, beneath colossal bridges, and in metro tunnels. I've been to a million places in a single country, and in more than one era. A part of me grows in the places I visit, or a part of those places grows on my body.

\* \* \*

Wealthy customers are a pleasure and pay up without asking too many questions. Even with the spread of online booking sites and the decline of the travel agency, a small number of well-to-do customers allow my establishment to turn a neat profit. On the other hand, those customers with a limited income continue to badger my employees without a profit in sight. The younger ones burst into my glass cubicle and bombard me with



questions: Where is the best massage parlour in Bangkok? I want to go to Slovakia with my sick father. Where can I find a nightclub that's open at one in the morning? A week from now I'm going to see Barcelona play Athletic Madrid. Where are the best places to have a good time in Barcelona? How can I find Spanish women for company and dancing? Please don't get me wrong, but how many Euros is it a night? They often treat me as though I were a pimp! They don't value my love for the job, my professionalism. That's what really bothers me, although in the end I give them the answers they seek. What can I do? If one doesn't have a little bit of the pimp about him, then he won't only lose his customers, he'll lose his friends and maybe even his life too.

Business is good during the public holidays, especially the two Eids and the pilgrimage season. During those days, when the country is like a hot loaf draped in sheets of dust, business flourishes and sales rocket. This is especially so throughout July and August, when the entire population goes out and buys a suitcase the size of an airplane, a suitcase big enough for all. The people here travel together, they shop and they sleep together. It's as though they were born at the same time and will die at the same time. They are nothing more than carbon copies that merely transform themselves into more carbon copies. I, on the other hand, am transformed into an octopus. With one arm I give out forms, with another I answer the phone, and with tens of others I pick up fresh money. No sooner does September come around than business starts to quieten down and the tourists return to their roosts. Things pick up a little in October and November, and during December there's Christmas and New Year. Then there's the Spring break in February. After this, business is fairly steady until the summer migration begins anew. For me, my work is a little sacred. I like to see to my customers' every need. It's about more than tickets and hotel confirmations; I truly want them to have a good time. I dream, with them, of that magical step that will take them from the dream to the land where dreams are realised, so that they can return with beautiful memories. At a moment's notice, I can send them dollars via Western Union. I am their



portable embassy, their adopted family. I share their joy and sometimes I even dance with them. I never cut the cord that connects our souls.

Tourism is sacred – steps taken between the feet of Buddha and the endless road to wisdom. The Peripatetics froze the limits of idealism and in so doing raised a ceiling on their sky, while the great capitalists, at the peak of their expansion, established luxury resorts, gleaming hotels and floating cities. Except that the greatness and power of tourism becomes apparent in how it drinks the sap of anyone who has spent his years doing nothing but work and squirreling away his money in bank vaults so that, in the end, he can fill a glass and raise a toast to travel.

Why, I wonder, why did Buddha cross all those distances to attain spiritual transformation? Neither the philosophy of the Peripatetics nor the account books of the capitalists have ever interested me to the same extent that humankind's desire to travel has perplexed me. Is travel another face of freedom? A synonym for humankind! Or is it just a pleasant escape? Is travel a hidden room in which we live out our secret fantasies? Is travel an intrinsic part of human nature? Perhaps we are searching for ourselves at the ends of the earth, or for another life that we believe is for us, or a life that can only be realised by a movement through time. Paul Bowles and the like are no longer the custodians of a traveller's time. Cyberspace has annulled the old distances between the traveller and the tourist. It has made places familiar and given a sense of the flow of time in the arteries of humanity. Now we live a shared vision. Everyone is free to associate with the landmarks and names of cities. Everyone is free to listen to the world's hidden stories, to know its most intimate secrets, to live any event he chooses through the eyes of one its characters. Everyone is free to lay his head on the chest of the city that pleases him. Yes, you are all free to engrave your immortality in the bark of a tree on the open road and move on, without even waiting for time. In those fleeting moments, when the creative soul merges with the gleam of material things, foreign fingers touch the farthest atoms at a single stroke. The word sparks and fire ignites without the need for anyone's permission or a decree from any being.



I always send out one of my employees with the tour groups – either Amin or Mustafa, or I coordinate with local tour guides. I also retain a head of sales, Melvino. This man of Indian origin is the real money-spinner. Three years ago he opened a branch of the company in India under the care of his nephew Capi, along with two wonderful representatives, Ibtisam and Marwa. In the afternoons, when there are no customers and a gentle, languid throb has crept its way along the edges of the body – the long and the short, I imagine a chaos of sexual relationships between the office workers. I conjure up scandalous pictures, or short chaotic, dirty movies where roles and bodies are swapped.

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I wasn't expecting his visit, but naturally I was pleased to see him. Whenever his generous shoes trod my office floor it meant I would have no problem paying the rent or my employees' wages that month. I would be able to buy things that I had forgotten existed. Hamad Sultan Hamad was one of the middle-class well-to-do – his bank balance barely reached the four million dollar mark – but his generosity raised him to the ranks of the rich. I have tried to make him understand that I am the agency's proprietor, that I do not travel as a tour guide, and third, fourth and fifth, I do not like Europe. Specifically, I do not like the south of France, no matter how verdant it is, or how easy it is to lose oneself in its varied terrain. I like the cities of South East Asia: the riot of colours, the glitter and the sounds, and how the colour and the glitter reflects and is repeated upon the soul in a manifold concentration, lending the minute an extra age, and the age its serenity. If someone could weigh a minute in the resorts of Asia, such as Hua Hin and Sentosa, he would find it heavier by two days than a minute spent in the most luxurious European resorts. I wasn't going to agree to his proposition, of course I wasn't – until he handed me a cheque crowned with a figure that covered the office rent for two months and one hundred and fifty per cent of the workers' wages. I am not that materialistic, but it is my work and needs must. Who likes everything about his job? With these words I endorsed my almost complete



submission before a piece of paper. The child and the fool do only as they like. Everything has its price, I added. Also, I am providing a service for a price.

I spent the entire day making such additions to sweeten the airs of my dignity until I began to wonder what the word “dignity” actually means. I decided it is a word that doesn't point to a specific meaning. It is a loose word, loaded with abstractions and false connotations. A semantic con, with roots sunk in wine. It is an unreasonable word; it lacks balance. In the end I concluded that there was nothing undignified about the relationship between the shoe and the nose on the one hand, and between the desire to refuse and urgent need on the other.

I dropped off the suitcases and collected the boarding passes – there were seven besides my own. After I had counted them and checked the names were correct, I looked over the dates of birth. Hamad was 56 years old, and his wife Ibtihal, 54. Their daughter Mona was 19 and their son Sultan 17. Aunt Najwa was 49 and her two daughters Hind and Hinadi were 18 and 16 respectively. I spent the remaining time before take-off chatting to colleagues and old friends, ground staff and workers in the airport administration, while I observed the excitement that spilled out with the movement of people between Arrivals and Departures. An hour before take-off, Hamad arrived with his family. I said goodbye to my friends and jumped.

Translated by Thomas Aplin for *Banipal* 47, 2013, from the author's novel, *Ghuyoum tahta Watrin* (Clouds beneath a Bow String), published by Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut 2012





## Ten Poems

ZAHIR AL-GHAFRI

### *Herbs of the Past*

Thus ...

did an icy sun hurl you into the depths of the forest  
Now the song on the angel's lips is your guide to life  
but you will never look into its mirror  
for the way is awash with secrets  
and the burdensome years  
run away from you

Night – your mysterious twin – reflects in your face  
your fears of fate and adventure  
that your life is trivial and wanting,  
a window opening on an abyss  
Take, then, a rest under the tree,  
rest and remember the herbs of your past.  
Your sufferings will amply suffice  
as the light of childhood flees the river of your life.

The shepherd woman who lured you to the cave  
in a flash, with a single stroke,  
has snatched the pearl of your heart.

### *The Perplexity of the Poet*

The poet wakes,  
in his head a sentence heavy with darkness  
He hallucinates, he hallucinates a long while  
but still no door lets in a chink of light  
His perplexed expression is the message  
the last message, that will reach no one



The windows are shut  
and he has to leave for the land of his dreams  
to pick that poisoned flower he'd heard about but never seen.  
Like a prisoner rolling a rock  
his hallucination leads him  
to the wells of his childhood  
where he hears a far-off voice calling him:  
– You, madman!  
– You are possessed!  
– You will never recover!

## The Angel of Power

We sit on the bank of this river  
We, the prisoners of defeats, sit  
waiting for the angel of power  
to appear any moment now  
radiating rage

Our voices are lost in distant orbits  
There's no guide to lead us from the interminable waiting  
behind doors, ignored by the winds

And so we wait  
until the seven pillars of heaven turn white  
Perhaps one day, on a day like this,  
our wish will come, borne on wings  
that glint like knives  
and perhaps the sky will be filled with stars.



## *Crossing the North Sea*

You will get there, for sure,  
so ignore the storm tonight  
Even if your leaving is perilous  
you will get there, for sure  
Even if fate is watching  
like a wolf, waiting for your crossing  
in the temptation of the night  
on a sea guarded by pirates and demons  
you must cross the river of gossip  
from where the breaths of the drowned rise  
You will get there, for sure  
Even if the single candle you hold  
is snuffed out  
like the night of wilderness  
you will get there, for sure  
I have tried this. I tried it  
Even though I speak to you now  
from the bed of eternity  
do not be distracted by anything  
Even if the walls are high  
look around you only with confidence  
as if you have wings poised to soar  
And you will meet your other life,  
your childhood whose psalms you lost  
under Scorpio's constellation  
The storm will abate for you  
like a faithful mother forever waiting.

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## *A Room at the End of the World*

In a distant room, at the end of the world  
at the end of a stormy night  
I remember you now as a phantom  
accidentally passing near the fountain of my life



like a feather blown backwards  
onto a land I rarely visit

I listen to your absence at the window of truth  
The guests are gone  
There's no trace of living shadows  
nor flowers, either, left on the doorstep  
My glance toward you while you are absent  
is the repentance of the unfaithful  
The sands scatter my dreams on your bed  
and remorse perfumes you with the fragrance of water,  
white like the night,  
You and I are two banks between which my life  
passes as it floats on the glow of eternity  
Tonight your fruits are golden  
and music starts to play, a soft drizzle  
from a distant room at the end of the world

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## *The Balcony*

Calmly, from the balcony I watch  
a passing cloud  
then reflect on how my life stumbles on the high slopes.  
as I move on with no side arm,  
no gesture, even, from a stranger's hand  
When I sleep  
river waters flow into my dreams  
and I hear the cries of angels  
lost in the desert.



## *The Visitor*

Let me pass by,  
me, the strange visitor, carrying  
on my wings the dust of nights  
while within me lives an ember,  
the sun of long years.

None but me wishes to tell  
what happened in the past  
No one except me,  
I am the magpie of ages  
and the lord of fortresses.  
In my fiery gaze I gather  
facts and dreams.  
Between my claws I hear the snake's  
last breath.  
And yet, my heart is the heart of a compassionate angel.

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## *Flowers in a Well*

Here is the truth revealed to you at last:  
Once, your dreams smelled of eternity.  
I look at you as a man who begs a virgin stone  
I am your shadow that was.  
I am the mirror which reflected your flowers in a well.

I am the stranger now.  
How often did I cry over you, over the fruits of the night  
for your sake, for the sake of a fate  
that's like a poisoned paradise?  
Now I cannot sleep, forever on a knife-edge.



## *Those Years*

At times, I leave my life there with my comrades-in-pain  
at the high walls of fate and walk on calmly,  
a man wandering through an orchard  
filled with scents of the past  
I think I see, whenever I sit on river banks,  
a smile forged from the flare of night

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My dreams too, wave after wave of them, billow over the grass,  
gleaming like pure gold.  
I live in a city that meanders through my memory. My father  
guards time in deserted gardens. And my mother  
gathers wood in the wilderness.  
My life, in those years, was a journey  
bearing only grapes of loss.  
But in spite of that I knew  
how to climb fortresses in the midday heat of the sun.

## *Go and Bid Farewell*

That village, sleeping in the heart of the mountains  
That village, an illusion captive to the hand of fate  
its truths are but winds of sand  
its stones only icons, symbols.  
That cool slumber in the bed of the unknown  
That destiny which vanishes in the fog of the world.  
Go and bid farewell to that small village.

Selected and translated by Salih J. Altoma with Margaret  
Obank from the author's collection *Azhar fi bi'r* (Flowers in a  
Well), Manshurat al-Jamel/Al-Kamel Verlag, Germany, 2000



## Five Poems

NUJOOM AL-GHANEM

### *We Went into Absence*

We went, so as to be absent.  
The forgotten window in the wall  
– like a sky dirty for centuries –  
let in what it could of the threads of  
morning, after the light melted into darkness  
and sounds became blurred like our eyes.  
We went, so as to leave on our feet,  
and found sand opening its maw to our dreams,  
which were neither big nor lofty.  
Rather, they were how we stilled our fear of  
the crowd that immersed  
us in its fishbowl.  
We left the fishbowl for  
the desert, which was bare, like our intentions,  
ready to savour the saltiness of love,  
to create for us a book from our diaries.  
They said, this is a home for your tales,  
and we entered the courtyard,  
casting into each corner a prayer  
and throwing the flesh of our verses to the creatures  
to let us share their earth,  
and so we sought shelter in ourselves.  
Ah-ha! There, we found a ceiling and a rug  
for our love.  
We will consume kisses and wrap ourselves  
in the sweat of our bodies, so to sleep,  
and not to sleep, so our breathing  
stays open-eyed  
clutching at wakefulness like a raft  
that steers it in the water as it wishes.  
We will not let our eyes betray us by slipping

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into drowsiness.

We will cling to waves and pull our raft behind us,  
but the sea may devour us,  
God will moisten our souls with death  
and we will go together to His resurrection ...

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We went, so as to be absent,  
but delirium took us to its midday heat  
and scorched our hopes as the sun scorches  
our lips.  
I think we turned around  
or slowed down,  
I think bewilderment erased our footsteps  
to deceive our hearts or exploit our innocence,  
I think it caused our paths to vanish,  
and when the time arrived for us to return  
and we searched for the path that cast us  
here  
and there,  
we learned that there was nothing for us  
and we were not even meant for each other.

## *She Who Resembles Herself*

*To my aunt who lies on her bed waiting for Him*

Her soul roams around the house,  
and her voice echoes, also, wherever  
her eyes turn.  
She moves among the shadows,  
between the traces of tales  
and the ruins of histories.  
Her war against cruelty has not ended  
nor has she been freed from the alleys of her nightmares.  
She opens her shirt so the winter air  
will sting her bosom,





sever her fingers,  
shatter her bones.  
Her soul is prepared to ascend.  
She wants to leave swiftly  
and she wants her body  
to fall swiftly into coldness,  
but He makes her seem like a liar  
to herself, chasing her  
like a pirate, wanting her to drown  
in the ocean of life,  
drown without dying.  
Despair is her refuge  
and before the visitors come  
every evening – hoping it will be  
her last,  
her lips turn white  
her dignity fades away.  
The spirit, hanging like a fish  
on the hook of days,  
roams through the house,  
the wind shakes it and its top fins fall,  
its tail fins fall,  
its scales  
and its eyes.  
It is hanging in time,  
dancing with the wind,  
and forgetting whether death  
has won her  
or whether she will remain  
being punished by life.



## *I Deceived Myself*

I deceived myself through sleep, again,  
praying the bird would return to peck at my window  
or perch near my balcony, disturbing the quiet of the morning.  
This bird used to accompany our winters  
and knew at what hour to burst into song  
and announce its arrival.

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(Do you remember the bird with its long beak?)

I waited for a hand to reach out, stirring the silence of the room,  
but it was time that stretched forward,  
and the edges of the day caught fire from the first sting of  
cold of the rapidly approaching night.

Another day has gone by,  
the bed is empty,  
and the roofs are coated with the sands of the day's storm.  
The bird that recognizes us does not want to fly near  
our trees,

And silence too –  
I do not think it will budge  
from its place.

## *On the Surface*

The evening looks down like a widow  
spending her night  
sipping coffee  
and talking to the emptiness,  
but she does not sleep,  
fearing loneliness will grow  
upon her.



## *A Different Darkness*

I sit with them at the table  
but my soul is no longer there.  
The lone candle leaves its shadows  
on their faces  
and imprisons my eyes with its flame.  
The flame raises itself to its full height for the last time,  
leaving behind its elegant tragedy  
on the lantern glass.  
I observe the light, thinking it is for me  
to illuminate my thoughts with  
but it goes out –  
and I don't even notice.

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The first two poems, translated by Khaled al-Masri, are from the author's latest Arabic collection [A Night Heavy on the Night]. and the last three, translated by Allison Blecker, are from the Arabic collection [Angels of Distant Yearnings]; all published in *Banipal* 38, Summer 2010, in the feature "Four Emirati Poets".



## Three poems

QASSIM HADDAD

### *Stone*

No one knows stone like me.  
I seeded it in the fetus of the mountain,  
And I reared it on blossoms of metal.  
It grew like a walking child  
And I followed in its footsteps.  
Its silence is a listening heart  
And its solitude is an alphabet that teaches speech.,  
a burnishing that suffices for reassures  
and imprints itself on books and mirrors.  
I read in it the glass of paradise, and the amulets of passion,  
It rises lightly, and offers the wind the company of books,  
like me.

Solitary, and a companion to strangers.  
Its water is the wakefulness of pinnacles.  
It guards the sleep of trees, and bends.  
At every slope it has an envoy washed by snow  
so that it takes from the sea the messages of the waves.  
With eyes that exude yearning in a stranger's childhood,  
and chase like a tiger swinging in nets that dangle about me,  
it listens to the pulse in arteries  
It glows and lusts, roves  
and raves,  
like me.

It knows secrets and scandals,  
is well-versed in the unseen.  
The rose takes from its purpose and it gazes from the mountain  
as the sky discloses and dissolves its shapes.  
Like me  
its names are in metals  
and in the adversary's alibi.



Like me,  
a lover melting, its water is anxiety and the paradise of loss  
It endures love  
and is filled with travel and desire for ecstasy  
like me,  
It alone knows the history of my steps and my errors.  
It forgives and forgets  
like me.

## *The Friends*

Friends  
weave their new rags  
in a morning with a missing sun.  
Their bodies convulse, and their fingers are caught in a fever  
of work.  
They spin languages with the excitement of magicians and  
the confidence of artisans.  
They offer wool to summer and ice to winter.

Friends east of the water,  
they work well in solitude,

I stand on the shore.  
I watch their silhouettes outline the horizon.  
I send them books in bottles that expunge my words,  
and they are exceedingly gentle with them.  
They run on a bridge  
with flaming feet  
and there  
they climb, burdened with scrolls,  
a bridge that praises geography and disparages history  
and vigilantly watches against the written word.  
They hold texts under their arms  
and descend like goats decorating the road.



I embrace them.  
They cross through terror.  
Their memories are of blood,  
and their fingers, fastened to glass shards,  
are soiled with hacked hearts.  
We crash in the midst of love and death  
like waves churning salt and luring vessels.  
Naked bodies of young men,  
where a shirt is never woven for summer,  
and no feast is prepared for winter.  
The lonesome friends are there.

## *Poets*

Poet draw nature before it prefigures itself  
and they invent  
and build a hut abandoned by a gang of thugs

They sing sometimes  
and they form a road so water can take the shape of a river.  
They instil in mud the memory of the trees.  
A bird discovered its colours in the phrases of a poem,  
and picks its rare name.

When poets leave sleep behind  
the young thugs begin their rampage.  
They romp a little  
and they throng as if nature is ambushing them  
They storm and they thunder.  
And their limbs begin to thin as if the seasons  
were all about to start,  
as if childhood selected its shapes suddenly,  
and eyes  
gaze only at the perseverance of nature,



And the young thugs commit their sins  
sip by sip  
the way poems clash against the triumph of time.  
Creatures offer gifts  
and take their tempting shapes  
as if a tongue  
made creation. And people, still startled by their inception,  
face the thin ice adorning their mirrors to see  
what the poets have done to our feeble dreams.

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Poetry maligns speech  
and the young thugs commit forgivable sins  
the way an infant scratches a breast then weeps to it  
the way a text breaks its intentions.

Then the apple of love descends  
enamouring a women with a lost lover  
the way the wolf divulges the myth of the bloody shirt  
and innocent brothers confess their crime  
and nature forgives a careless creator  
then praises him.

Translated for *Banipal* 3, October 1998, by Khaled Mattawa  
from the author's collection *Qaber Qassim (Tomb of Qassim)*,  
published by Al-Kalima lil Nashr, Bahrain 1997



## An excerpt from the novel *Things are not in their Place*

HUDA HAMAD (AL-JAHOURI)

*The lie alone is what makes our lives possible*

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I stand now, before the mirror, passing the backs of my fingers over my soft cheek. My skin is brown, like the skin of most people in this country. My eyes are beautiful. My curly hair lies calm beneath the headscarf. My nose is straight as a sword. My bottom lip is thick, not much of a match with the one on top.

Yet, all in all, I am a beautiful woman. I am a half-breed.

Every door is open to me. I can go wherever I want without anyone being able to see the blackness inside me. I am not like the 'slave girls', but nor am I like Mona, 'free-born' and free in every little detail of the snares that lie across my path from time to time, that catch me out like someone who falls, to her great distress, between two stools.

I wept for a long time in my mother's arms when my friend Hanan told me to my face that I was not free. At the time, I was in my first year of primary school. There was no difference between my skin and hers, no difference between our noses, just my hair, resting beneath the white school headscarf, and my plump lower lip. I could almost swear that Hanan was a little darker than me, but during our break periods she and the rest of the girls in class freed themselves of their hijabs. Hanan would let her hair down at the back and a soft curl cascaded over her brow, like a waterfall of light.

My mother said to me: "You're no slave, Amal, but nor are you completely free."

Dear God, what could be more vicious than this vicious circle, this constant circling over red-hot coals of doubt, this crime for which we're held to account, without having committed it? Now, as I take my first steps into life, I discover that I am a female of partial qualities.





I tried hard to do well at school, but my academic records were always below average. My aunt Zayoun, who married a man from Zanzibar against the wishes of her family, acquired a large library just as she was coming to terms with losing the affections of my mother and other aunts. She conquered her own inner weakness when she joined fortunes with a man of another blood, who gave her the opportunity to learn and read. Though she began her education at a late stage, she soon excelled, and became a lover of books and of reading.

One day, she confided in me and told me the little secret she kept locked up inside. I remember gasping at the time, though I did not fully understand what she meant when she told me, quite contentedly: "I have rid myself of the woman's burden, Amal."

Now I understand her secret perfectly. What a burden it is! This load which pushes us to compare ourselves to others, leaving us feeling how costly the label is and how little it suits us.

This is what reading did for my aunt Zayoun. It made her see that life was less harsh than it had seemed in the village.

My mother and father took a more relaxed view and would always tell me that it was what God had decreed for us and we could not defy our God-given lot. But I was never able to believe them, nor could I accept that my fate should be so very bleak.

It was with considerable difficulty that I managed to visit Aunt Zayoun in the summer, when she would lend me beautiful books. With her help I was able to learn to read very well. Despite being darker skinned than me, her sons don't feel the same discontent and gloom that I do, a complicated balancing act that astonishes me. I try to free myself, to appear like a normal girl untroubled by such petty concerns, as if I were not full of insecurities, like lumps covering the surface of my soul. But it was in vain. I try to shrug off my unhappiness, but despite my efforts the pain would seek out any small chink through which it could devour me.

I remember the day Hanan got onto the bus and found a black girl sitting in the seat behind the driver. She flew into a rage, picked up the black girl's bag and threw it to the back, screaming: "When are you going to understand that slaves sit at the back?"



I felt a sharp pin pierce my breast, rising up slowly through my throat, like a thorn. I thanked God I wasn't so black as to be subject to such abuse. I thanked God too that, unlike all the others, I always chose to sit on the back row without having to be told to by anyone. Mona also liked sitting at the back. That wistful, naïve girl, good for nothing but daydreaming, yet who, despite all the nonsense she came out with, was nevertheless straightforward and kind. I was aware of how important retaining her friendship was, of sticking to her before she could flee and leave me to tumble into my fragile loneliness.

Mona was forever melancholy. Listless, sitting in her seat one row from the back to sketch the faces of boys from the alley. I would sit down beside her and tell her about the alternative existence I wanted us to discover together, feigning an assurance that made me seem like a girl who knew everything. I faked delight and affection for the world around us and Mona, hugely gullible, believed me. She defended me whenever Hanan tried goading me by raising the hateful subject of my being a "half-caste".

That word caused me more hurt than "slave". It doubled my losses: I am not free, nor am I a slave, but a mix that falls in the middle. The words would cut me up, coming from her gullet sharp as a scalpel, while her face remained as impassive as if she were telling a hollow joke. No one laughed and no one shared my tears. The other half-castes in the class treated the term with astonishing docility. They used it to refer to each other. They believed it to be true. They resembled my mother and father to a terrifying degree. I alone would dissolve where I sat, melting into tears as the word pricked my senses and fed on my frazzled nerves.

Visiting my aunt Zayoun's house was no easy matter, because my mother had not spoken to her since she had married the man from Zanzibar and fled to the neighbouring village. I would take advantage of my cousins visiting their fields in the village to collect the delicious ripe dates and water their crops, hopping on the pick-up and sitting at the back without my mother noticing.

My aunt was delighted when I came over. She would offer me the nicest things to eat and then make some reference to her

huge library. I used to ask myself how my aunt had shrugged off her sense of inferiority and a peculiar feeling would flare in my chest to think that it was the books she read that had done this to her.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first novel I began to read after the children's stories and young girls' tales we had at primary school. The book stayed in my mind for many years afterwards. I never managed to free myself from the sadness that consumed me after reading it.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Stowe was one of the most famous novels in American literature, my aunt informed me.

"Please, Aunt! I'll read it and give it back to you next time."

"But it's too advanced for you."

"Please!"

"All right, Amal. I promise that if you finish it and show you understand it I'll give you a reward, and whenever you return a book I will lend you another."

I hugged her tight. I felt as though she had thrown me a line to drag me out of a stinking swamp to the heavens, where the rays of light sparkled.

I hurried outside, unable to contain myself. I sat on the back of the pick-up and started to read the opening lines, even though I leapt in the air every time the tyres struck one of the stones that were scattered here and there. I tried hard to keep my eyes on the page.

When we arrived I slipped into the house the same way I had left it. My mother did not stop me going off to the distant village shop or staying out late in the fields, as Mona's father did with her, but she would have strung me up if she sensed that I had been visiting my aunt. One good thing was that she was always distracted and rarely kept an eye on me or paid me any attention.

I entered the room I shared with my eleven siblings and sat in a far corner to continue the pleasure of reading. I was extremely slow. I was not good at reading yet, but I tried hard. It took me a whole half hour to finish the first page. I didn't understand a lot of it. The novel was huge. A feeling of frustration grew inside me as I realized I would need an entire year to finish it.



Nevertheless, despair never entered my heart. I recalled my aunt's face, free of the burden of multiple disappointments. I must read! I am fortunate because I went to school and my aunt is fortunate because she married a man who taught her both to read and to love. I remember how my mother, speaking irritably about Zayoun, the sister who had broken the family's sacred laws, made me feel as if she were talking about my own thoughts and ambitions.

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My aunt, who had fled that hurtful phrase "half-caste" when she was young and had refused to work as a maid for the neighbours, or to demean herself by kissing their hands. My aunt, who refused to marry her cousin, so that her children would never peel the scab from her wound by asking her every day about that word – the one everyone around them was always repeating.

I sighed with relief. I had finished the second page faster than the first and I felt optimistic. The more I exerted myself, the better my results. As I got more caught up in the details, my eyes welled up. My heart went out to the man's wife who ran away and to Little Eva, who wanted emancipation for the slaves but died before she could free her friend Tom.

My mother came into the room as I rubbed my eyes over and over again, wiping away the streaming tears. I felt a searing sensation there, as though a thorn was sprouting in my eye.

"Amal," my mother said, upset. "Why are you sitting alone in your room? Why are you crying?"

I held myself in her arms for a long while and wept. I could not tell her about the thing that had been lodged in wretched Tom's gorge like a bone, because he was guilty simply of being a poor slave who did not even own himself. I could not tell her that I was much like Uncle Tom, since I could not defend myself before Hanan's bullying.

Translated by Robin Moger for *Banipal* 44, 2012, from the author's novel *Al-ashia's laysat fi Amakiniha* (Things are not in their Place), published by the Cultural Department, Sharjah, 2009



## A Poem

MOHAMED AL-HARTHY

### *A Failed Mechanic at the Onset of the Seventies*

*(A memoir retrieved from a teenage autobiography)*

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In my early teenage years, I busied myself with the innards of the Land Rovers of that time (the 1967 models and the ones that followed) ... With their enigmatic innards under the bonnets, I busied myself with the cacophony of their four-cylinder symphony, as well as mechanical defects with the ones that did not end up in Muscat, Calcutta or Zanzibar and on top of them a body speeding on four so I could dream of inventing the patent for the childhood of the age that was about to shed its skin anyway:

In the future, I will become a mechanic in the valley of al-Jardaa<sup>1</sup> fixing the defects of vehicles under the Muqaihfa acacia tree before reaching the mouth of Wadi al-'Aqq<sup>2</sup> which was rocky with the boulders of Imru` al-Qais and Abu Muslim al-Bahlani.

I started dreaming, after witnessing, in the midst of tiresome journeys in Bedford trucks, the mechanic Hassoon dismantling the innards of the vehicles of that time, piece by piece, with his simple tools in his improvised garage under that acacia tree. While he worked, he drank from a bottle in his dishdasha pocket, a liquid that he pretended was medicine for his chronic cough. He drank out of sight of the turbaned travelling sheikhs to whom he never paid much attention, with their calling for a

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1 A small desert village in the Sharqiya Region of Oman.

2 A rocky valley in the Sharqiya Region on the way to Al Jardaa.



decayed Imamate and the five prayers, which Hassoon did not pay much attention to, either, still busy repairing the innards of vehicles on those burning hot afternoons.

No, I did not become that mechanic, not in this garage of words, nor in the midst of his memoir that I retrieved, though once, on one of those journeys, I dared to ask:

“And what about the Land Rovers, Hassoon?”

Are they more complicated than the Arabiyya trucks?”

(the local nickname for Bedford trucks back then)

His response was as it always was in the darkness of memory under the acacia of his improvised garage:

Oh, don't bother yourself with it, my boy, don't bother. The English beat Hitler and the Axis powers while we were still suckling our mother's milk. So I think they can fix the defects of Bedford trucks and these Land Rovers. It is their craftsmanship, and we learned it from them, then mastered it in Baluchistan and in the garages of the Sultan's Special Forces, which would not have won over the imams if it hadn't been for those vehicles, despite their numerous defects.

This is something you might not comprehend, my boy, but I will tell you another secret that only an expert mechanic would know,

a secret that that even the Shah and the canny English never knew.

If you know it, my boy, you will gain high status in our world.

Do you know what it is?

It is the German cars with their meticulous craftsmanship and luxurious velvet seats,

their sandalwood, and their golden metal which I bashed with this screwdriver in the Sixties,

the Mercedes of Bahraini and Kuwaiti Sheikhs ...

This metal which, if you ever weighed it on the scales of a sheikh of mechanics, would, I'm sure, leave you dissatisfied with repairing Land Rovers; of course, this is if you'd want a noble job, my boy.



Memory is as treacherous in its straightness as enthusiasm is  
in the crookedness of the *falajs*<sup>3</sup>,

yet the boy, in the exuberance of that afternoon,  
who had fortunately missed the *siskin*<sup>4</sup> in the acacia with the  
pebble from his slingshot, said:

I will not become a mechanic like you, Hassoon, I will be a  
poet instead, singing like the *siskin* in the acacia tree ...

A poet, whose memory might serve him to write a poem in  
his fifties about the magic of a golden screwdriver, rusty Land  
Rovers and your days as a lucky mechanic in Sixties' Kuwait,  
buying seven sardines from your fishermen friends with your  
Indian rupees

(seven sardines, in which you wouldn't find any of the pearls  
of the Omani poor)

so you could have a lentil dinner with your fellow workers in  
the yard of the Kuwaiti oil refinery

No, I wouldn't become a mechanic like you, sheikh of  
mechanics,

because life might change in the blink of an eye.

I might stay home doing nothing, or travel around the world,  
the *siskin* of the acacia accompanying me to more than one  
chosen exile so that I could return to my bittersweet home  
land with a flute nobody can hear ...

I might sit on the patio entertaining myself  
by rewashing my already ironed dishdashas  
but I will not, like you, look for a pearl hidden in the sardines  
of my days

I will not be content, even with my geological knowledge of  
digging a well, with milking the oil's tears

There is enough wasteland, master of mechanics

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3 A system of water channels that were the main source of irrigation in  
Oman.

4 A species of finch. In Arabic, hassoon.



I will not become a mechanic like you  
but I might willingly let go of rhymed verse  
and willingly take the time to pen free verse

And who knows?

In the workshop of the future I might learn to make a bed for  
the “renaissance”  
so that it can wake from its years of somnolence  
in case it might want to clip a few wings of that crowd

And who knows?

I might eat fish not cooked with rice but steamed with what  
is there – seaweed, just to follow the Japanese tradition.

And who knows?

I might finally like sushi sometimes and hate it at others  
O Hassoon, you *siskin* of the sardines, dried with nostalgia  
for the 1960s.

I might be wrong if I ever tried to challenge their master  
poets with a haiku  
or a Zen poem  
but a poet follows the dusty road  
following it to the end like a grammarian monkey towards  
the certainty of doubt ...

A poet might not have, like al-Mutanabbi<sup>5</sup>, a luxurious  
Mercedes in his middle years  
and he might not have the nation rise up for law and order  
or have Sayf al-Dawla<sup>6</sup>, Hassoon,  
but he might pretend and show off in a Volkswagen  
Beetle, swanning off with a humming engine  
to the deserts of mankind and djinn-kind  
just so he can park it near the acacia tree,  
this acacia tree and no other.

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5 Al-Mutanabbi (c. 915–65 CE) was a famous Arab poet.

6 Sayf al-Dawla was a famous Hamdamid ruler of Aleppo who was the patron of al-Mutanabbi (948–957 CE).





When the bulldozer swept away that last rock in Wadi al-'Aqq,  
in the 1970s they built a road for God's worshippers,  
for the children riding their little bikes and  
picking the ripe and the bitter acacia fruit,  
for the donkey's master, ascending to his valley farms,  
praying, as it ate grass, to remember its piety,  
for the taxis, followed by other taxis,  
for the Volvo, the BMW and the popular Corolla,  
for the bus overcrowded at times with its human passengers  
and at other times with some djinn passengers,  
for brave soldiers waving at a reclining camel  
in the truck of a cheerful Bedouin as it passed through the  
valley,  
for the sun washing itself in what is left of light in the fort,  
for the taxis arriving after three days from Jalan and Sur<sup>7</sup>,  
for the Volkswagen dream  
and for the fuel trucks being raced by speeding cars

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I wonder:

“Did I tell him it was from that time?”

Selected from the author's latest collection (Back to Writing  
with a Pencil), Dar al-Intishar al-Arabi, Beirut, 2013  
and translated by Ibtihaj Al-Harhi for *Banipal* 46, 2013.

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7 Towns in the Sharqiya Region



## An excerpt from the novel *Letters to my Lord the Sultan*

SARA AL-JARWAN

### *A Ninth Letter: Hissa*

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My Lord and Master the Sultan – the Sultana wrote – the time for Amina to give birth had arrived, and so solicitous was Juma of her welfare that he had thought to take her to the hospital, the city of Al Ain's new – and indeed only – hospital; news of its construction had spread far and wide. It was, in actual fact, a cathedral, run by a group of Canadian Orientalists who had come to propagate the Christian faith and because it charged for its services it was sought out by well-off families. No sooner had Amina heard about it than she implored Juma to take her there to deliver the child, and so, when she felt the first twinges that herald the onset of labour her husband rushed her there, in the company of her mother and another of his wives, Ghaya.

And what an arduous journey it was that lay before them: by jeep down the as yet uncovered road from Oman to Al Ain. It took them an entire day, and the toll it exacted on an exhausted Amina was plain to see.

Arriving at the city they made straight for their destination and wheeled Amina towards the hospital on a trolley, supported on either side by Juma and Ghaya, while her mother, who was prone to nausea and headaches whenever she travelled by car, lagged behind them.

Juma had visited the hospital before and had little difficulty in finding his way there. To the women it seemed that he had an intimate knowledge of its layout for he had led them straight to a long low wall interrupted by a whitewashed building into which they rushed preceded by cries and moans. Amina was no longer able to hold herself back.

At the end of the hallway that they now found themselves in stood a steel desk, and behind it a woman who looked to them as if she might be Canadian, which seemed a fair assumption



given the place was known as the Canadian Hospital. She was busy writing in a broad, thick ledger, entering the details of the man in front of her, whose wife stood behind him, her huge belly hanging out while small children galloped around her. There were at least five of these children and they all appeared to be the same age with the exception of a baby girl no older than one who was being carried by a female companion.

On either side of the narrow hallway was a row of chairs where Juma seated his aunt and two wives. He approached the scribbling woman, and bestowed a greeting on the man. It was a habit of his to greet every man he met as though they were old acquaintances, thus compelling the recipient of his attentions to treat him with solemn respect. Sure enough, the man moved aside, allowing Juma to speak to the woman. Her Arabic was not good; indeed, she seemed to speak it with considerable difficulty, but what with Juma's explanations and Amina's tortured exhalations she had little difficulty in deducing that she was about to give birth. It looked to her as though Amina was stifling her cries out of modesty, something all the Arab women who attended the hospital seemed to do: in those days they believed that a woman's voice was a source of great dishonour and she must never give utterance to her pain, even if it was tearing her apart.

The woman jumped up and, grabbing the wheelchair beside her desk, trundled it over to Amina and asked her to sit in it. But Amina understood nothing and Juma took it upon himself to explain as he helped her settle in the chair. Then the woman shouted something in a foreign language and another woman appeared, dressed in the white robes and the two-piece black and white head covering that Juma recognised as the outfit of a nun. The two foreigners led Amina gently away, and one of them instructed Juma to wait where he was.

After a lengthy wait that left him both alarmed and unnerved Juma left the hospital and asked the way to the canteen outside. He had been there before but his present nerves made him forget his way and he took directions from a cleaner. He ordered the juice he observed some other men drinking and some biscuits of a type he had never tried before. They tasted delicious



and he told himself he would buy plenty for Amina to eat after the birth. The juice was pleasant, too.

Beside the canteen, a wooden shack, sat three rural types, their wares spread out before them on the ground. One sold pipes and rough-cut tobacco, another offered butter and white cheese, and the third had hot water bottles and pots and pans. Approaching the first man Juma bought a pipe and some tobacco. The tobacco was of a kind he had tried before and disliked, but he was in no state to care; plainly agitated and full of foreboding, he needed it. Juma crumbled the tobacco in his palm and pressed a lump into the bowl. The vendor lit it for him and Juma took a deep drag, expelling the smoke from his mouth and coughing violently. He caught his breath and began to derive some enjoyment from what he was doing. He took the matches from the tobacconist and lit a new plug, then another, and finally, after extensive haggling, he paid the man fifty *beesa*<sup>1</sup> and retraced his steps back into the building.

He found Ghaya sitting weeping on one of the chairs. Frightened, he went over, and pulling her by her right arm until she was sitting upright and facing him, he asked her what the matter was.

Amina had given birth to a boy, but the boy was dead.

He rushed to his wife's side. She was sleeping and he questioned her mother who confirmed what had happened, at which he lost his temper, shouting and muttering until the hospital management arrived and tried to calm him. Amina came to in a lather of fear and screamed at him that the child had been moving moments before they entered the hospital, so Juma began to cast aspersions on the hygiene of the building.

But all his anger could not reverse the divine decree that he was to lose Amina's firstborn. After she had spent a night under medical supervision, the four of them buried the boy in the cemeteries of Al-Ain and then made their way back to Al-Batina.

At that time Juma was expecting another child by his wife Afra and only a few days later he was blessed with a daughter

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1 Beesa: A unit of currency. There are 1,000 beesa to the riyal.



whom he named Mareefa. She brought him the greatest joy, especially after the loss of his son. Amina had been profoundly affected by the death of her child and her mother considered it best that she stay by Amina's side in the small house where she had lived with Juma before moving to Al-Farfara. Juma had consented, and then, not two months later, he received word that she had fallen pregnant a second time. His joy knew no bounds.

It was at that time, too, that Saqaa Shemmi's husband, the man she had married on the anniversary of Juma's departure from Al-Khadra, passed away. Juma travelled to Al-Khadra with his wives, Naema and Ghaya, returning a week later accompanied by Saqaa's son – his nephew Mohammed – who wanted to settle down near his uncle. So what could Juma do other than build him a house, buy him a small plot of land and find him a girl of satisfactory family and appearance. The girl he turned up was an orphan raised by her uncle and his wife, and though she was deaf, God had granted her great beauty and a wonderful figure, and Mohammed fell head over heels in love the moment he saw her. They were married and before long she too had fallen pregnant.

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As Amina's due date drew near she persuaded her mother to ask Juma to take her back to the hospital in Al Ain. This only made Juma angry and he rejected the suggestion out of hand. When he learnt that Amina's labour pains had begun he went straight to a village near Al-Farfara called Sur Al-Ibri. He had already taken his daughter Mareefa to the little clinic there, which had been set up by a Syrian doctor who worked in tandem with a female colleague who examined women. She was widely supposed to be a doctor, but the Syrian had told Juma that she was in fact a nurse and assistant, though an excellent one. It was in Juma's mind to bring her to his home in order to check on Amina, but the nurse refused to go back alone in the company of a man and he ended up returning with them both. Still, he was sure this was for the best: the doctor could examine the newly born child.

When they had climbed into the car the engine failed to start, shuffling off the ministrations of Juma's sweaty hands. After



he had tried and failed to get it going with the assistance of the doctor, some boys gathered around the car and pushed. The engine turned over and Juma drove away, wrenching the wheel around with all his strength in an effort to reach Amina in time.

They arrived at Amina's father's house to find that a little girl had been delivered in rude health. The mother, suffering from acute exhaustion and bleeding, was attended to by the doctor and his nurse, the latter keeping her company throughout the night. He called the child Hissa after Hissa Bint Al-Murr, a female divine of great repute, a name said to have been suggested to Juma by Sheikh Abdallah Bin Salem.

The next day, when Amina was feeling better, Juma handed a sizeable sum of money over to the nurse, who also received fabrics and food from Amina's mother as a gesture of gratitude for her assistance. Juma drove them back to their clinic and thanked them both. And then, when Amina had recovered her strength and emerged from her forty-day confinement, he took her back to her house in Al-Farfara.

By the time Hissa was two months old her father's adoration of her had reached fever pitch. Woe unto her mother if she let the child cry for a second more than necessary without sprinting to her side, and not just her mother: he imposed this obligation of care on all his wives, insisting that they call in on her daily and cautioning them that Amina was inexperienced and needed guidance in raising her child. Whenever he had to spend the night away from home, either with another of his women or on some fool's errand, he made Ghaya stay with Amina.

On one of Amina's visits to her father's house she found her father bedridden with a mysterious illness. The old man asked for his granddaughter and holding her in his arms he began reciting to her verses from the Holy Book, then he handed Hissa back to his daughter and instructed her to take care over her upbringing and ensure that she memorised the Qur'an. Not long after this Sheikh Nasir Bin Hamdan died. The illness that carried him off had lasted three or four months and he had suffered great agonies. It was said that he had spent each night swimming in a sea of blood, though the true extent of his distress was guessed



at by nobody since the power of speech had deserted him a full month before his passing, his only words a martyr uttered as his soul departed to join its creator. There was much talk of the blood that had dried the night before his death, and the smile that lit up his face when they gathered about his corpse to wash it and place it in the coffin.

Amina mourned her father with a sorrow deeper than she had ever known before, a sorrow that was shared by her husband and all who had known the man or heard of him. His death was an equally momentous event for the inhabitants of Balida who were greatly saddened to hear of his passing, not least when they realised it meant the loss of many things besides the man himself. First on this list was the sheikh's majlis, long the light by which they glimpsed an outside world of which they knew very little, and whose doors would now remain closed for evermore. Then there was the affection and sympathy that he bestowed upon every one of them, starting with the youngest and most needy, and which found its expression in his dedication to serving their interests and surmounting all obstacles laid in their path by the government or others.

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## A chapter from the novel *Time Spares No One*

ABDO KHAL

### *Memoirs of a Chief Constable*

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Dear Lord, save her! His prayer rang out, reverberating everywhere and breaking the eerie silence that ran deep in the minds of all and sundry. Everyone was troubled by a single question that kept nagging at them: "What has happened to her?"

We paced round her house like bees buzzing round a hidden flower. We could see nothing but gloom coming from the house, and we carried on walking feverishly. No one uttered a word. We swarmed about like ants, then set off down various alleyways, each on his own path. We all knew why we were hanging around the place, but we pretended otherwise.

"Dear Lord, save her!"

That scream had rung out two days after her disappearance, a disappearance which spawned so much speculation. One mysterious speculation, though, held sway among the residents of our neighbourhood, who kept repeating, both to themselves and openly: "Something must have happened to her."

Then an avalanche of speculation tumbled out:

"She's sick."

"She's been beaten."

"She's getting married."

"She has repented her sins."

Various thoughts raced through our heads. We raised up our hands, praying for God to save her from all evil.

Her absence weighed heavily on Al-Mukardis, who broke into prayer and swore he would slaughter a ram if she would only make an appearance. To make good his oath, he ran off and came back dragging a fat ram behind him, holding his butcher's knife over the bleating animal, which tried to break free both from its tether and the knife brandished overhead. It kept bleating until its voice gave out, whereupon it surrendered to the tether without further ado.





On the third day, its blood gushed forth and, with its hooves kicking in the air, its body jerking and convulsing, it finally gave up the ghost. Some passers-by gathered, waiting for their share to be doled out, but Al-Mukardis pushed them away from his sacrifice, promising to slaughter another ram for them. When he had skinned it and chopped it into small pieces, he swore three times over that no one would eat of this ram, and declared that this sacrifice was for cats and dogs, so that they know that theirs is a blessed spot of the earth that will never run out of provisions even when provisions seem scarce.

Youssef, the owner of the grocery shop facing the missing woman's roashan<sup>1</sup>, followed suit and slaughtered a ram for the passers-by and the poor. When the elders poured shame on him for acting so foolishly, he fell silent for a while, but when they continued to berate him, he rounded on them passionately:

"By God, if you knew what a blessing she was to shopkeepers, as well as to you, each one of you would have slaughtered a calf, not a scrawny ram that can't feed the hungry mouths in our neighbourhood. It is enough that she is the cause of this blessing."

"Shame on you, old man," said Al-Mujaljlil. "Provisions come from God."

Youssef was embarrassed by his emotional reply, and words spilled and spurted out: "Provisions do have a cause, and she is the cause of my provisions."

Some heads nodded in agreement, and he jumped at the chance to rid himself of embarrassment with another oath: "I swear to God that if she does not make an appearance I will go to Ka'aba and pray to God to lift her affliction."

Disapproving eyes and tongues stung him with their darts, but he was excused by many others whose eyes had themselves taken peeps at her.

For three nights, the young men of the neighbourhood kept watch on her house, hoping to catch a glimpse of those eyes

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1 A roashan, called mashrabiyya or shanashil in some other countries and found in old cities throughout the Arab world, is basically the same as an oriel window, plus a shielding woodwork lattice that allows the insider to look out without being seen by outsiders.



that had transformed their lives into lush dreams. As the days dragged on, their anxiety grew. Everyone began to show impatience, and some started to ask about her in the privacy of their own homes. When asked, mothers would purse their lips and frown, or even scold their sons harshly: "That girl is a hussy. Why do you ask about her?"

No one but Bandar al-Odayni could talk back to his blind mother when she remarked, terse and scathing: "I know I never bump into her when I go out for a walk."

"If you are so good at discerning what happens, why do you insist you are blind?" he replied. Then, feigning a laugh to sugar his anxious words, asked her affectionately: "Why don't you go and ask about her?"

"Me ask about someone like her, you rude boy?" she cried angrily and pushed him away.

"You are blind, through and through," he screamed back at her.

She ran towards him but tripped and fell on the floor; her curses rang in his ears. He ran from the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her eyes through the slits of the roashan.

The light of her eyes has never been eclipsed since the day she came to the neighborhood. She would look out and make the whole world bigger in the hearts of those young men in whose veins life clamored deeply and joyously. Even those past their youth would steal glances in her direction or sigh and even groan uninhibitedly.

When the light of her eyes shines in the street, our sleepy postures straighten, our necks crane inquisitively, and we spruce up our neglected appearances. Her eyes shine like an adolescent sun that warms our breasts, and each one of us swears that he alone has been chosen, and none but him.

It was hard to follow her eyes through the narrow peepholes of the roashan and when she noticed this she broke part of it off herself; and later on the young men helped her to break the rest. And so hers became the only window in the whole neighborhood that was without a roashan. Whenever she appeared in her window, many would praise the name of the Lord, their eyes glued to the spot where she stood like a sun that never set.



On the first day of her disappearance, the young men stood waiting in front of her house until midnight, at which time their fathers and mothers came to round them up and take them home.

Two of us were the most lovelorn, the most eager to see her eyes.

On the third day, before sunset, they glimpsed her hair flowing out of her window, and saw her pitch-black eyes. When her lips parted in a smile, everyone scrambled to smarten himself up, cries of joys rose to the heavens and the hot blood of sacrificial lambs ran like torrential rain.

Women jumped from behind their roashans to enquire the cause of that joyous hubbub but when they knew the cause they retreated to the sanctuary of their homes, cursing, and calling her a hussy.

I was the only one who knew what had happened and I tried to find a way of getting to her, but all my attempts were in vain. She and I were the only ones who knew the secret of her disappearance.

When she first appeared, she had shared out her looks to all and sundry, and I kept looking for her eyes. I pretended to be busy with many things – I joked, I fought, I quarrelled – and her eyes radiated on the faces of the young men, while mine was all gloomy and sought only a little light from her eyes. But when I saw her locking hands with Bandar, I realized how much I loved her.

She stole my life and I stole hers. I've carried this wound for too long, a wound she rekindles with her absence. What did that idiot do to her? What land did he carry her off to?

I want nothing from this world but to see her one more time, to apologize to her, to cry at her feet as she used to do with me.

Now I know that love is a rift that splits your life, turns you into something like a ruined house beyond repair. I want nothing else – not even my daughter.

I searched every nook and cranny for her. The more I asked about her, the further she slipped away from me. What idiocy we get ourselves into! Very often we run away from our own paradise thinking it is hell, and when we are free of it we spend our whole life searching for it.



Do I have to repeat over and again that I want nothing from this world but to see her one more time, to apologize to her, and to cry at her feet as she used to do with me?

\* \* \*

Every time I wanted to make love to a woman, I became frightened and just lay beside her like a tattered rag.

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Many women discovered what a spineless, impotent loser I was, while many herbalists tore my dignity to pieces as they slipped their medicines in my hand, their hearts fluttering with delight at the exclusive privilege of having seen the shame in my eyes. They had the nerve to thrust their foul-smelling mouths into my ear and confide: "This medicine will revive your withered virility."

I swallowed and sniffed all manner of medicines, and without fail my flagpole dutifully rose to the occasion just before commencement, searing me with a burning desire for a woman. But whenever I got ready and mustered my sapping energies to accomplish the task at hand, out leapt the image of Bandar toting his stick in the air and hitting me on the head with all the hatred there was in the world. So then I would scream and fall on the woman's chest, flooding her breasts with my impotence. And she would pick me off her as she would a rotten fruit from her two ripe apples.

Amina is a woman the likes of whom the earth has never begotten.

Many years passed, yet she was lodged indelibly in my memory, and my longing for her gnawed away at me. I loved her body, her playful spirit. She knew how to stir still waters. Since the first day I saw her, I felt a fire of lust and passion burning in my loins. I played with her, as everybody else did. I loved and hated her, adored and despised her. When I was on top of her, I would drink from her honey fountain as if she were the fountain of life itself. But as soon as I quenched my desire, I would leap off, leaving her thirst still un-quenched. She was like a water well – the deeper you went in search of the water, the more life she gave you.



She would always whisper: "I love you, Khalid."

It is I who drove her to that dimwit. I became brusque with her when, after I had unlocked her treasure chest, she cared for nothing but satisfying her own desire. Whenever she crossed my mind, I pined for her. I would approach her with a flood of desire, only to repulse her and leave. And I did the same thing with her, again and again. My relationship with her was one both of longing and of revulsion. Suddenly – after that night – she disappeared. I think that bull of a man carried her away to another city.

I visited her one night after she had forced her husband to go to work, but I hadn't expected her to surprise me with the wonderful words: "Khalid, I'm pregnant by you."

I felt dizzy and the earth began to spin under my feet. And before I knew it, my hand had landed on her cheek. I left hurriedly. That night I tried to sleep but her voice kept ringing deliciously in my head: "Khalid, I'm pregnant."

I was always promising to marry her – but not without setting in place so many obstacles. With every promise I sounded a new depth in her body until I had punctured her dammed-up floods – and then I ran out and left her to steer her ark alone.

And now the whole neighborhood had been shrouded in darkness for three nights. When she didn't appear in her window, we kept pacing round and round her house. The tongues of the young men kept batting worried questions back and forth. No one knew why she had dropped out of sight, and speculation was in no short supply: She's sick; She's getting married; She's been beaten; She's repenting her sins. I heard all this speculation, and I was the only one who knew the true reason for her disappearance: She was restoring the fortifications I had destroyed.

I failed to reach her during those three days, and I was frantic. I wanted to see her eyes, kiss her cheeks and apologize to her. She had closed all the paths that could lead me to her. And so I strolled round her house with those who were strolling, and made vows of sacrifice with those who were making such vows. Three nights later, she made her appearance and favoured everyone with a glance but left me searching for her eyes.



Her lovebirds landed on one young man after another, in whose hearts at once sprouted green hopes and lush dreams of becoming their permanent perch. But they finally settled on Bandar. I felt humiliated. I had picked a fight with him once and beaten the hell out of him. When I imagined him lodged implacably between her thighs I had felt a violent rage, and so had pounded him with my fists as though he was murdering me.

Not for a single moment could I remove her from my thoughts. Since the day her sun was eclipsed she began to occupy my whole being, and at the same time brought out the young and the old in our neighborhood to search for her eyes. She caused hands to be raised in prayer and sacrificial blood to run. Since that day, the seed of her love began to grow inside me and strike deep roots in my being. But I denied my feelings, standing on my dignity, scourged by pride. She's given herself to you! And so I cast her from my thoughts.

But whenever she crossed my mind, I answered her call. She tried to please me at any price. But the closer she came, the further away I ran. Oh God, where had that dog taken her?

I looked for them in every corner a man could reach, and asked many people to help me in my search, but all in vain. I abandoned my pride and humbly talked with ordinary people, mentioning her name on the off-chance, all in the hope that I might hear some news about her. But again in vain. I met countless women by the name of Amina or Maryam – very often through contrived means – and I can tell you that those women do not deserve the name of Amina, for none was like her.

Then by chance I saw Maha. I was stunned. She is Amina's seed. I shivered so much at seeing her. Is she Maryam?

I was watching out for her, I befriended her father and let him use my influence far enough to make his business prosper. I thought of marrying her, but then changed my mind. Maybe she's Maryam. But who knows? She occupied my thoughts a lot, then I hit on the idea of marrying her to my nephew. My nephew, mind you, is more trouble than pleasure. I don't even think he is an authentic shoot from our family tree. He is just a beast that walks the earth, with no motive for living but to eat, lie on his back and snore like a brute that so filled its belly with



water it couldn't move. After they were engaged, I regretted selling her so cheap. And when Abu Hayya stood bargaining with me over a secret he had, I knew that I had once again sold Amina so cheaply.

Oh God, this brute has killed me. I wish he hadn't told me. I could have lived with the hope of meeting Amina or the illusion that Maha was Maryam.

Every night I struggle with my rotten soul, and every night I fall ... screaming "Amina".

Translated by Musa al-Halool for *Banipal* 20, 2004, from the novel *al-Ayam la Tukhabi'a Ahadun* (Time Spares No One), al-Kamel Verlag, Germany, 2002



## Three poems

SU'AD AL-KUWARI

1

and I bear all orbits  
on the strong arms of my delusion  
I am a stain on runaway destiny,  
and the lightning flashes which challenge  
the cloak of my silence  
have yearned  
for the intoxication of the dream  
that always goes before me  
and clogs the space of eternity

In a small airport  
in some town  
I bid farewell to people I do not know  
and receive strangers.  
I bury my life in the ashtrays  
in a small airport  
in some city  
and the baggage stares up at me  
and sticks out its long tongue  
ridiculing my stupid smile  
as I bid farewell to strangers  
and I receive people I do not know.  
and I plug my ears up forcefully  
so I do not burst within  
from the roaring of the passing planes





2

The poet tries  
to mix his dreams with ink.  
Soft drops emerged  
from the terror of exile,  
and I slept with the sadness of the phrase.  
The poet tries  
to get out of his prison  
as it coils into the soul of his poem.  
and a poetess suffers  
so he embraces her  
violently  
uniting them  
in ritual writings.

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3

This evening belongs to us  
we will remain  
at its door, silent,  
observing things  
as they vanish  
into the mouth of the city  
while death gleams  
in every corner.  
Today we tell a new story,  
one that has not yet crumbled.  
The lust for interpretation  
summons me  
to contemplate  
the possibilities of setting out on the journey

Translated by Lael Harrison, with thanks to Bassam Frangieh,  
from the author's collection (A First Reading in the Halls of  
Existence), and published in *Banipal* 10//11, Spring/Summer 2001



## Ten Poems

KHULOOD AL-MU'ALLA

### *Our Home as We Knew it*

Time is time.  
In the sun, our truth disappears.  
Winter arrives and the house is as we knew it.  
We move anxiously, presumptuously.  
Waves come  
and we are here to follow the tracks despite the dust.  
Time passes,  
the seasons follow in succession,  
and at home we stay,  
accumulating an abundance of yawns.

### *We Must!*

To find ourselves, we must gaze long in mirrors.  
We must fill the cracks in our souls with the details of things.  
We must look at each other  
and exchange cups of love.  
We must seize those whom life has cast into the mouth of  
the sun,  
and seek a cloud  
for us  
and for them.  
We must fill our pores with liberation,  
open pathways in our homes for sighs,  
follow our hearts, and live.  
And to live again  
we must cry our first cry.



## *The Morning Paper*

This morning  
I could not bear the colour of the newspaper.  
The sharp pain in my heart gnaws at the soul's bones,  
the lines draw the body of disaster.  
I had forgotten my alphabet.  
The news is the face of my sorrow.  
I was not in the newspaper  
but I read my name in the obituaries  
and under a poem I did not write.

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I glimpsed a colour on the fourth page  
like the colour of my obsession.  
The words were written in a language that is like me.  
I did not understand myself  
nor did I understand the newspaper.  
My cup of coffee was replenished;  
I had drunk it yesterday  
and I remembered my face upside down in the cup,  
letters falling,  
and that I was reading the newspaper upside down  
just like my face in the coffee cup.

Translated by Allison Blecker and published in *Banipal* 42, 2011

## *An Ocean of Insomnia*

The night was still young,  
and to save myself from being constantly restless,  
I started practicing my night-time rituals.  
I counted the cracks in the wall I was leaning against.  
I pierced it with the needles of my virgin poems.  
I asked the heavens for help at that quiet hour.



I tried to protect my imagination.  
I opened the windows.  
The world seemed an ocean of insomnia,  
and without realising  
I began quarrying in the minutiae of things.  
shaping questions,  
people with no eyes,  
crowded cities that made me dizzy.  
Among these, I searched for meaning,  
for a healthy existence  
for a heart not separated from its essence.

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I began to gather my strength.  
I pondered on the Creation.  
I flirted with what was left of the night,  
spending time with what had gone before.  
I ran freely toward things that scared me,  
trying them out.

And when I realised what it all meant,  
I was free.  
Liberated, I continued my rituals.  
I rushed to my memories  
with open arms,  
I became certain that honesty was affection's jugular,  
and that it's people like me  
who can achieve this in life.

## *Identification*

The clamor has ended.  
My worries have slowly left me,  
their place taken by wild lilies.  
My soul is bathed in the sights and sounds of nature.  
Look at it flowing – like a stream – towards freedom!



## *Restless Memory*

I button up my poems,  
curl up in bed,  
snuggle into my nightgown  
and convince my heart I can sleep without images.  
Memories slowly flood my veins,  
swim in my ocean,  
do not settle,  
so, when will I sleep in all my loneliness?

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## *Every Year And I*

On the night of my birthday,  
I put on my loveliest nightgown.  
Made myself up.  
Read my diary.  
Recalled my wish.  
Lit a candle  
and waited  
so long,  
just as in the year that's passed.

## *Indifference*

I won't lie on a bed of emptiness  
I won't get hung up by what others arrange.  
I won't care what dishes luck serves up,  
won't accept my fortune.  
Today, I'll ride the crest of a wave,  
toward another shore.  
I'll sail through gales and thunder  
with indifference.  
I'll reveal and be revealed  
committing the act of rebirth.



And when the sun hugs its horizon,  
I'll sit beneath a flourishing palm tree.  
I'll cleanse my fate of signs of wasters  
and bloom like a glowing lilac,  
my heart overflowing  
in a country softened by affection,  
I'll be walking boldly.

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## *Discovery*

You and I  
have been alike for years.  
I used to catch a glimpse of myself in you ...  
time was without pulse  
the mirror was without reflection.  
One night,  
a hand sneaked in,  
lit a candle  
and I discovered that for years  
I had been seeing you in the dark.

## *Forever Blooming*

Fall has begun early.  
This year's unlike any other.  
Around me, the falling leaves scatter.  
I can't get away from this shrivelling season.  
One day, my trees will lose their leaves,  
but my heart will always stay in bloom.

Translated by Rasheeda Plenty and the author  
and published in *Banipal* 38, 2010.



## From the short story *A Fading Light*

EBTISAM AL-MUALLA

Isabel Allende's voice began to lose colour in the fourth chapter of the novel and the reading light couldn't bring it back, so I let the book slide off the bed and went to sleep.

In the morning, the fog had filled my room as well, driving me to frantic efforts to dispel it. I hurried to the bathroom sink and splashed my face with cold water. I returned to the room, drew back the curtain, and opened the window. My eyes wandered around the room in confusion, and when my left foot stumbled against the book lying on the floor I realised a visit to the doctor could no longer be postponed.

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Once there, I let him chatter on with all his medical knowledge concerning "the condition", strewing his words like glass on the floor. Shining a strong light into my eye for yet another time, he turned to where my father was standing.

"Come see for yourself. Don't you see the swelling over here and the transparent membrane lying across the left eye?"

He was addressing my father as if he wasn't talking about me but about someone else. As if my five senses didn't exist. As if the light had gone out and left me completely invisible in his shiny white room. As if my sitting there on his raised chair at that moment was a reverberation of my mother's untiring rebuke: "Who do you think you're rebelling against? Is it me? Your father? Who?"

And I wouldn't give in, I would only leap over to pinch her cheek as I made for the door: "Don't worry, I'm fine. Everything's begun to go away. You can even ask Mariam."

Standing waiting at the door, Mariam would smile, always and without fail, and she would shake her head in tune with my mother's mutterings: "I worry about this pig-headed girl."

It had been many years since I had felt like a child the way I did in the moments immediately after we left the room that was



scented with the smell of blindness, walking down the corridor with my father to where his car was parked.

I felt his fingers playing with his rosary beads as he walked beside me, while inside wishing that they might reach out to my head to talk openly about the things he was unable to say out loud, and then I would have shaken them off and wrested myself free in order to let him know how angry I was that I hadn't been able to live my life as I should have, that I'd made a losing bet, that all the self-help books I'd read had heaped nothing but scorn on my mad lust for life, that a world steeped in black stood in wait for me at one of the next turns of the road. Or wishing that he might bury them in the pockets of his jellabiya so I wouldn't have to see the conflict tearing him up inside: Should he say something? Should he hold his tongue? Should he reiterate the blunt words of advice the doctor had given: "Try to preserve your sight in the other eye for as long as possible – don't read too much, don't watch any TV, take care with the light and with your meals, also don't forget that it's dangerous for you to drive." And so on ...

On the way back I kept thinking that the very first thing I'd do as soon as I was home would be to kick everything away. I would kick the whole world away, and I would take up all the bad habits I had resisted for years.

I would sit on my bed and smoke away, hungrily, and when the smell escaped from beneath the door and people came to check up on it, I would blow it all in their faces. I would guzzle down the cans of Pepsi my brothers kept piling up in the fridge to test my powers of resistance, I would read all the books in small print which I'd stacked on the top shelf of my bookcase, I would put five cubes of sugar in my cappuccino and sip it with relish while staring into my computer screen, without once looking at my watch until my eyes watered.

When midday came, I would call up Mariam and propose to her with false enthusiasm that we go to the cinema to watch whatever film was playing and the one right after that, and afterwards when we were with our friends we wouldn't talk in a critical way but like movie-goers who can't tell bad films from good ones, and we'd spoil the plot of films for everyone who listened to us.





We'd go for pizza and I'd order anything I felt like off the desert menu, without having to read looks of guilt in the others' eyes because I'm the only one who can't eat what she wants and who puts on fake airs of cheerfulness to relieve them of their sense of guilt.

I would cut myself off from those friends whose friendship had become an unavoidable social must-do just because the high school walls had once contained us before releasing us into the university walls, when we were less aware of fundamental divergences and more attached to those appearances that gratify other peoples' tastes more than they do our own. I would yell into Khoula's face if she criticised my way of dressing or commented on my hair or my obsession with humming the songs I like. I would bring up the loudest voice ever from the bottom of my being and say to her that the two years in which she'd gone from the girl hooked on Nizar Qabbani's love poems and mad about the latest fashion, to the pious volunteer who'd come to us handing out pamphlets and admonishing us against wearing our favourite perfume when going out, who'd cite to us traditions of the Prophet we'd never heard of before in our lives, were not enough to turn her into an angel with the right to ruin the time we spend together. If she tried to argue back, I would tell her to go stuff her stuffy paradise because I had no time to waste the only remaining light in my life, and if anger got the better of me I might be forced to reveal her secret in front of the rest of our friends, who had never visited her room in a house dominated by male siblings. I would inform them that she kept a picture of Osama bin Laden, making his way through the mountains of Afghanistan with his walking stick, as her computer background, and I'd leave her to be the butt of their malicious laughter for the rest of the day. I would say everything I felt like saying even if I later regretted it and even if I envied Khoula for the bold way she expressed the transformations of her way of thinking and acting, and for the look of peace one could read in the features of her face.

We stopped at the gas station and the thin Indian hurried toward us, his face streaming with sweat in the midday sun, while my eyes roamed over the magazines stacked on the small



shelves outside the door of the gas station. My father's grumble came like clockwork: "Just look at this. There's a new magazine every single day, sleek and shiny from cover to cover and filled with nonsense to ruin the minds of young people."

I lowered the window and quickly said to the seller, while digging inside my handbag for money: "I'd like *The Whole Family*, *Gulf Flower*, and *The Echo*." I heard my father's sigh without looking at his face, and when the seller handed me the papers, I tore off their transparent wrappers and began leafing through the pages, deliberately ignoring my father's gaze exactly the way that that doctor had ignored me.

Paying no attention to the subject matter, the pictures appeared to me more beautiful than ever before. The pictures appeared further away than ever before. I shut my left eye, and they grew clearer. I shut my right eye, and the papers appeared like a Surrealist work of art whose colours were washing into my lap. I turned the pages over and I saw myself in them going into my room as soon as we were home, bringing out the small make-up kit from the drawer and trying on some mascara and eye-shadow for the very first time to take the measure of my charms in front of the mirror and to place my belief in the fact that my eyes are the most beautiful thing I possess.

The colours of the pictures faded away on the left side and the letters danced about.

Would I need extra effort in a few days' time to distinguish between black and dark blue? Or even green and black?

Would I be able to tell Mariam, while my fingers felt at my ear-lobe looking for an opening to slip on my earring, without looking at her directly, that it had become really difficult for me to tell the difference between darker colours and that I would need her help for doing many things from now on? And would I then be able to bear the feeling of her hand on my shoulder, without her being betrayed by the tremor of her voice? Would she be able to rein in her emotions, which I've often seen burst out to soak the pettiest things with tears, and would she now empty out into the open all the "if onlys" she had stored up?

If only you had not been so reckless with your health ...

If only you had kept to the schedule of your insulin injections ...



If only you had taken the doctor's words seriously from the start ...

These kinds of questions would have sounded stupid had I heard them from someone other than myself, but as I sat in the front seat next to my father, thinking not about tomorrow but about the few hours ahead, I felt that time was like a piece of ice that had suddenly been exposed to the blazing midday sun. I felt as if it were a hungry lion racing at top speed after a small gazelle running on lean legs.

When we arrived home, I was the first through the door and I went straight to my room, leaving him the task of notifying my mother in whatever manner he wished. I heard his voice asking me, as I turned the lock behind me: "Will you eat with us or are you going to sleep?"

"I'm going to sleep."

Did my father really think I was capable of sleeping? Just like that? So simply, to slip into my bed and sleep? To forget everything I had heard, and turning my back on the remaining light of day, to abandon myself to the sweetness of dreams?

My thoughts returned to the day I had passed my driving test, two years before, when I had come home beside myself with joy. My father had asked me the same question then: "Will you eat with us or are you going to sleep?"

On that day I had said to him: "How could I possibly sleep? I'm going to dance like Zorba. I'm going to drive up and down the whole of Sharjah in Waleed's car until you buy me a new car of my own." And when I entered my room I had danced before the mirror for the first time in my life and then I burst out laughing at myself, before collapsing on my bed and digging my teeth into the mattress.

Exactly one week later, my father had bought me my black BMW, and I twisted a colourful Japanese necklace around its small mirror, and moved all the Bryan Adams and Michael Bubl  CDs that were in my room into the glove compartment. Then I perfumed it like a bride, and Waleed's jokey mood – even that of my younger brothers – turned into genuine envy that I could read in their eyes, and at that time, perhaps for the first time ever, I felt they had always been right in thinking I was the one my father loved most.



\* \* \*

I felt for the wood of my desk drawer and then the little basket perched over it which contained my car keys, a few safety pins, my small pens, and some empty batteries. Everything seemed cold as I ran my hand over them. Do things lose their warmth and vitality when we cannot see them?

| 140 | My fingers fiddled among the contents of the basket and picked out the car key. I could remember the shape of its silver medal which was printed with my initial. It was a gift from Mariam on our first drive in the car. An impulse of anger made me prise the medal off the key, with my eyes still shut. It wasn't hard, and it gave me a small sense of pathetic triumph to tear the letter "M" off the keys.

I wouldn't hand over the keys to my father. I would slip into his room and drop them into the pocket of his jellabiya so he could discover my act of renunciation away from the eyes of everyone else. I continued on my rounds, and when my foot stumbled against the book once again, I opened my eyes and thought to myself that the grief I felt over my eyes was no less intense than Allende's grief over Paula's death.

Time was flying, and the thought came to me to rearrange the contents of my closet. The doctor hadn't said how long it would be before my remaining supplies of light ran out, but he knew that darkness would not be long in falling over the left eye. So I had a window of time in which to put everything in a place where I could easily reach it just by stretching out my hand. I didn't want the day to come when I'd have to ask for my mother's help to locate my underwear and all the minor little things I need, and I would give up wearing clothes that needed ironing. Ironing clothes is something I hated doing even in the full light of day.

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# My dreams often humble themselves

SAADIAH MUFARREH

1

I want nothing more than wings  
or my soul to cease yearning for flight.

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2

I want to cry out with all my might  
without waiting for any question.

3

I want to free myself from everything that keeps my tears  
from their deferred goal  
or their final dot on the line.

4

I want to sing  
without being obliged to compose words,  
improvise a tune,  
or raise my voice.

5

I want an earth  
whose map I can draw  
in accordance with the topography of my face,  
cleaving its rivers and seas  
by way of my tears.

6

I want another earth  
I can conceal in my chest  
whenever I want to leave the house  
without an abaya.



7

I want a tree that sings,  
a sparrow that makes a truce with the wind,  
a sea that writes its memoirs each dawn,  
and a passport that is accepted at all airports.

8

I want an umbrella adorned with a carnation,  
a book open to the index,  
and fingers skilled at tapping on the keyboard.

9

I want nothing more than a comfortable pillow  
and dreams whose events unfold  
in accordance with scenarios written in advance.

10

I want an old story with a happy ending  
to tell to the children  
while pointing at pictures of its heroes in the family album.

11

I want nothing more than a simple, beautiful frame  
for a primitive picture I drew in graphite  
and coloured pencils  
to give to a distant friend.

12

I want my room to expand  
to contain all my many books  
or for a fit of madness to strike me  
so I will burn them.

13

I want a sweet memory,  
a poetic certainty,  
and a new day.



14

I want a sliver of incense  
to put on a burning ember  
so the perfumed fragrance will spread  
while I drink my morning coffee  
without giving prior thought  
to the rest of the day.

15

I want a new temptation  
only for a few days.

| 143 |

16

I want a black and white film  
whose heroine I can sing along with;  
I imagine myself in her tight pullover  
and flowing skirt,  
wipe away my tears,  
and laugh at her naïveté,  
until I justify all of the naiveties of my past.

17

I want a soft song  
for a sleepless night.

18

I want a long, full day,  
with the smell of the sand and sea,  
car exhaust,  
and fewer missed calls  
on my cell phone.

19

I want a very short day,  
enough for writing a poem,  
composed as I desire,  
leisurely,  
unadorned,  
and without a draft.



20

I want a short night  
framed in tranquility,  
ending with a death  
that concerns no one.

21

I want a long night,  
I mean truly long.

22

I want to live  
without that being my eternal fate  
when alternatives are scarce.

23

Sometimes  
I want to die  
without having to do so.

24

I want only it.  
What is it?  
Who is it?  
I don't want an answer in any case.

25

"We are first among the peoples of the world,  
or we are in the grave"<sup>1</sup>  
Yes,  
all of the honour is inevitably for this modest man;  
let him leave me a grave  
with at least one window!

Translated by Allison Blecker for *Banipal* 43, 2012, from the author's selected works *Mashyatu al-Auza* (Walk of the Goose), Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, & Dar Masa'a, Kuwait, 2009.

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1 These lines are by the 10th-century Arab poet Abu Firas al-Hamdani.





## Two poems

AHMED AL-MULLA

### *The family*

The trumpet came in through the windows, blowing a pain that the mothers had parcelled and stored away, hiding it in cracks and on high shelves. What wind was it that frightened the curtains and tore to shreds their long anticipation? It moved the picture of the wall and stripped speech bare; the flute trembled, on the point of thirst, and the copper on the door shed tears. It was not the napkins at a banquet that fluttered on the roof, but an absence entrusted to a heartbeat that a farewell had suspended.

| 145 |

What souls were they that the room had once come to like and had not forgotten – souls that had left their mark in the dust, in the hollow of the chairs, the stain on the pillow and the imagination of the wood!

Souls gasping, their absence attested by the amber in the grandmother's hand, eyes closed. She smiled that the absent one should sing of her flower, her hollow cheeks flushed to hear her small, forgotten name. She had not opened her eyes, lest she see more absence.

It is not a bedtime call to the children but a longing that flows from the pitchers of the breast and from violins, a trembling moan begging the scream to lessen its effusiveness, and stones that plunge – plunge but do not fall.

The fire finishes its portion of the loaf, and the mother rushes to the balcony, her hands suspended in flour, seeking reassurance in the stored memory that hangs down to the horizon from the beam of her long gaze. She arranges it and spatters it with the water of her eye so that it does not dry, and the breeze does not scratch it. Sometimes she leaps from lack of sleep to lean over



the balcony, and returns with a downcast sigh, as if my father had pulled the rope from far away.

Sister, why did the visitor hesitate to give a knock, whose fingers you could count? Wasn't the dove enough for yearning? The air on the roof is needed to dry your eyes. Speech has dried up, and a small message retrieved by the birds is filled with the feathers of dreams, which you shake in the sun every dawn.

| 146 |

Farewell, my brother, our father died centuries ago and our mother is in the farewell bed. I could not sleep when the house was empty of her yet full of her touch. How did you dare open the door for my return?

Her voice, which we missed; her voice, which sought help from a slow gesture of her fingers, ringing in my ears whenever I drew near the hospital. I forgot her little songs in the morning of the grandchildren. I forgot the bitterness of a candle that threw a circle around her of shadows of cruelty.

I forgot the headache, bound around her head in a faraway house. I forgot the swelling in the neck that gathered grief. I forgot the tablets of incense which she secretly passed to the old. I forgot her cloak in the midday heat, gathering our loss. I forgot her tears from the leaf of the door when the visits ended. I forgot her finger tracing the air as a prayer for the one departing...

Farewell. Your brother has been betrayed, and in the middle of the rope there remains only a single thread to be broken for him to fall.

## *I Am Only a Messenger*

And because I  
am frailer than the call of the flute in the valleys,  
I was too slow to catch her voice. The candle of her chest caught



fire, honey flowed over the grass, and a wood trembled that by chance she had passed by. But I could find no feathers, nor any trace of a vanished dress, and of her lungs no shards of glass or lightning remained. Footsteps had gone before me, and a wind that had combed the valleys with fog, returning a trembling to the nests and the windows.

Where had she taken all its branches? What axe had emptied the air as it struck? As its obstinate firewood split the pebbles, it gave out the final death rattle of a soul.

| 147 |

Firewood dragged by its hair in a trembling of dust. The shepherds did not notice the sound. I called on the chariot of the sun to slow, on the cloak of the night to lighten its moons, the sigh of the mist. I sought from on high for the whistle of the fire and the gold of the caves, for the tinkle of flames in veins still green, and for the crests of the smoke.

I followed the ashes, I followed the filings and the shavings scattered in the wind. I asked the carpenters and implored the teeth of the saw.

I was not knocking on doors, you house dwellers! I did not leave my freshness in the window leaves to moisten the waiting. I do not seek a stray thorn on the road, supporting the barefooted, nor do I look between the covers of a book. I have come with a supplication known to the bereaved mother who appeared through the cracks in the wood, a supplication awaited by the young girl behind her window, a supplication that is soiled in the bosoms of the old in the patience of sheikhs and the memory of widows. Faces have darkened further the dark colour of its longing, and bereavement has thinned its cane.

I am only a messenger,  
the fields made me carry a fruit that has dried up while calling  
for what they had lost:  
Tree, where are you?

Translated by Paul Starkey and published in *Banipal* 56, 2016.



## A short story

LAILA AL-OTHMAN

### *The Eid Bisht*<sup>1</sup>

| 148 |

That afternoon, my father set off for his real estate office as usual. He always came home in the evenings after the evening prayer, but if he had errands to run, he would let my mother know beforehand so she would not worry. After carefully locking the door, soft echoes of her daily prayers would reach my ears: "May God save you and grant you great wealth and good fortune." Filled with contentment, she would turn and go back inside the house.

But that day she walked heavily, dark clouds circling her face. Maybe she had some reason to be upset with my father, I thought to myself. The words rushed out of my mouth: "What's wrong, Mother?"

She ran her tongue over dry lips. The edges of her words were dulled with apprehension. "Your father did not tell me where he was going tonight after the evening prayer." Despite sensing the fire burning within her, I pretended to blame her: "But you didn't ask him?!" She seemed genuinely puzzled for a second before responding: "I've never had to ask; he always told me. But why didn't he today?"

She tried to swallow her question and her pain. But they stuck in my own throat like a thorn.

My father did not come home after the prayers and my heart-broken mother spent the whole evening in her usual spot on the cotton-covered sofa in the courtyard. I was watching her from my bedroom window. She would either lie down or try to keep busy by mending the loose hem of one of my dresses. Between her sighs, she implored God in a trembling voice: "Why didn't he tell me this time?" The question cut through her like a sharp knife.

---

1 A bisht is a ceremonial abaya worn by men on special occasions.



Then for a while, she turned quiet as if fast asleep. When she woke up, she started humming her favourite tune, the one she had learned on her wedding night long ago. Her voice was barely audible, remote as if coming from a deep well within her soul. My heart went out to her, seeing how tormented she was as she desperately tried to figure out a reason why my father was keeping secrets from her.

I went out to join her.

When I sat next to her, I noticed her cheeks glistening with tears. I looked at the hem of my dress and saw that it had not been mended. It was then that I began to fathom the depth of the sorrows that had engulfed her like bottomless seas.

I gently pulled the dress away from her. "Let me take it, Mother. I'll do it." She did not resist. She drew her legs to her bony chest, wrapped her arms around her knees, and let her head hang over them. Her thin braids fell, one on each side of her shoulders.

I started to sew, switching my eyes between the dress and my mother's pale face, which was distorted by the growing number of her unanswered questions. When the lamp in the *liwan*<sup>2</sup> cast its light over her face, the lines around her forehead and her chin looked deeper, making her look older than when my father had left in the afternoon.

To break the silence, I asked, trying to sound casual: "So where do you think my father is off to?" She sighed, and, raising her eyes to the sky, said in a tearful voice: "God knows. But I'm terribly worried about him." I tried to make up some excuse to calm her down: "Maybe he's having dinner at someone's house nearby." For a moment, her face lit up, but doubt quickly found its way back to her heart and she retorted crossly: "Why didn't he tell me, then?" "Maybe he forgot," I said to console her. "Maybe." But she sounded more resigned than convinced.

She remained quiet afterwards, assailed by fears if not by suspicions. I resumed my sewing, the needle piercing my finger every time I tried to steal a look at her.

---

2 *Liwan* is an ancient term meaning a central open space or courtyard in a traditional house.



Our silence was interrupted with a loud banging on the iron door. I sensed her cringing as if hit by something hard. We both panicked because my father always used his keys. Who could it be? Had something bad happened to my father?

With a gesture of her hand my mother urged me to open the door. I shook with anticipation as I ran to find out who the caller was.

It was Hassan from my father's office. I was relieved to see nothing alarming on his face: "What's up, Hassan?"

"Uncle needs his *bisht*," he said, looking down as he always did.

When I told my mother what Hassan wanted, it shocked me to see her gasp as if her throat had been cut open before she burst out crying. "Why did you have to do this?" she asked faintly between her tears.

She was only in her room for a moment before emerging with the *bisht* folded and wrapped in a white towel and held in her outstretched arms like the small body of a dead child at a funeral. She passed it to me and burst out crying again. When I held it, it smelt like stale perfume. As I handed it over to Hassan, I paused for a second. I wanted to ask him about my father's whereabouts. But he snatched the *bisht* out of my hands and left hurriedly to avoid any questions I might ask.

I went back to my mother. She was standing up, tense, eager to receive any information to calm her fears. When I did not utter a word, she fired questions at me all at once: "Did you ask him where your father was? Where was he eating? Why did he ask for the *bisht*?" I responded to her sheepishly, pretending to apologize: "Oh dear, it didn't cross my mind to ask, and Hassan was in such a hurry."

She fell to the floor as if pulled down by an invisible force. She rubbed her dry hands together. They made a hissing noise. Her voice was now stripped of confidence: "Lord, please do not destroy me. Please do not break my heart."

I did not understand the meaning of her urgent plea, or the reason behind my father's absence that night. I could not muster the courage to ask her for an explanation even when she asked me to sleep next to her in the same spot my father usually occupied.



She never fell asleep. She spent the night crying, vacant-eyed and broken-hearted.

On the following day, before noon prayers, my father showed up. He stood in the middle of the courtyard and called out for my mother. She walked out to meet him with small, hesitant steps.

Hiding behind my bedroom window, I saw him take a gold necklace from his pocket. He tried to put it around her neck. But she recoiled from his touch, sobbing wildly like a grief-stricken mother. He tried to hold her back and I heard him begging her to stop crying and calm down. But she escaped his grip and ran to her bedroom. She banged the door so hard behind her as if trying to break it.

My father left the house quickly, as if someone was chasing him.

I immediately went into my mother's room. Her hair was wild. Her dress was torn open down the middle, revealing two sagging breasts. She looked broken, bewildered, bereft, incessantly wailing and chattering incomprehensibly as if out of her mind.

Since that day, my father has been spending one night at our house, and one night at his new wife's house.

Selected from the author's collection *A'ba't al-Maqam* (Abaya of the Shrine) published by Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut 2012. Translated by Sally Gomaa and published in *Banipal* 47, 2013.



## Six Poems

SAIF AL-RAHBI

### *No Country we Headed to*

No woman we loved  
the enemy didn't conquer first.

No country we headed to  
fire didn't level down to the ground..

No wound we bandaged with our eyelids  
didn't fling wide open.

No arena  
No child we begat under horses hooves  
(What horses?)  
No horizon, or memory unbuttoning  
in the splendour of its hallway.

No childhood, even remote like Saturn  
No lion, as he left at dawn along with his lair  
The mountains' eternal foundations collapsed  
I don't hear the crows cawing in the arac trees  
Eagles were hanged by summits  
No echoes  
Nothing at all.

From *Rajul Min al-Rub' al-Khali*  
[A Man from the Empty Quarter], Beirut, 1994





## *Scream*

The scream that's sunk inside  
like an animal buried in a cave, prowls around  
sleepers, along with its foreign soldiers,  
forces them to go to  
uncharted, distant lands.

The scream that comes down from the age  
of enormous floods – my only  
travel guide  
my spoiled woman whom sometimes  
I watch duping hyenas in my bed  
then falling asleep in my etherized, tranquil  
arms.

| 153 |

At times it falls upon distant summits,  
wailing, like a primordial widow.

But tonight, as she abandons me,  
I see at the far end of the forest  
a wounded tigress watching me in admiration.

## *A Tramp Dreaming of Nothing*

And like a wave clawing  
a hurricane,  
I entered this world's wilderness  
throwing the treasures of my forefathers to the bottom  
of hell  
honing my limbs on an exile-forged  
blade.

And like a child who's always losing the game,  
I didn't expect much from my ilk  
I didn't expect anything



but the clamour of doors and windows  
being opened and shut near my head  
with the innocence of aimless  
storms.

But I exist and don't exist  
knowing I'm hallowed with emptiness  
A chronicle missing no detail  
lit with magical lanterns  
and you need to plough its  
heart for a  
single tear  
or confession.

You need to follow the moon of departure,  
stretched between water and land, land  
and grave,  
in order to see a shadow in a cave.

A genie trembling in awe of God,  
napping on the devil's  
thigh.  
But I am here ... Maybe now  
I'm in a café,  
watching the world from behind the glass  
The pale sunset,  
a hangover after yesterday's trip  
I'll extinguish with today's  
and not care about anything  
Let rivers dump their cities of garbage  
into the sea  
Let vagrants spit at the shrines of saints  
and soldiers crop the heads of their barracks,  
Let eagles soar high or low  
That's all.

It would be redundant to discuss  
the relation between mouth and spring



or a village delirious under  
the trap of the flood's ribs,  
or nice evenings of poets who dream of suicide aboard  
a boat slowly sinking into water's  
haze  
or by an axe suddenly plunging,  
with no mercy.  
You need to sell the furniture in your house  
for morning coffee  
(what house have you had?)  
except for a tattered shoe over which  
city nights stumble  
and rags bequeathed to you by a dead friend  
You remember (how could you forget?)  
being chased by the scarecrow of poverty and Pharisees  
and jackals  
in Cairo and Damascus, in Beirut  
and Algiers and Sophia and Paris and the rest  
You remember it all, with the brilliance of birth,  
the clarity of a crab crawling between  
rivers like a tourist enchanted by Bedouin  
tents.

O mother, sleeping on the bare  
concrete  
among the wreckage of hessian and scattered clothes  
like the ruins of a village  
razed by a thunderbolt.  
There's no field left for your anticipating  
visions  
We no longer listen to the crowing of roosters  
or bring fish from the beach  
There's no dawn left whose feathers you play with  
at the edge of the well  
where you bade me farewell for the first time  
seventeen years ago  
(Don't stay away for too long!)  
A single step blew up the orbit  
of miles  
and joined in the delirium of galaxies.



## *Arrival*

When I travel to a country  
rumours arrive before me  
I feel intoxicated  
like a wolf whose dreams beat him to the prey  
So I don't arrive.

| 156 |

## *Distant Waters*

In the murky mirrors of distant waters  
the bird of desire soars beyond a sealed horizon  
Faces split by the cawing of years  
Chariots bark behind the walls  
As if you came for a trip preceding birth  
you follow a grand funeral of reminiscences  
wearing a shirt stained with the blood of distances.

Struck with amnesia, camels  
are lost in the alleyways  
Dynasties crossing the desert  
all drowned in quicksand  
You walk with a lonely step  
leaving every place its private wound  
and every minaret a belt of howls.

Body smeared with departures,  
those who came from distant waters tell you to stop  
and watch your sin fleeing.

*From Mudia Wahidah la Takfi li-Dhabh Usfur*  
[One Penknife Isn't Enough to Slaughter a Bird], Oman, 1988



## *Under the Roofs of Morning*

My scream is still blossoming under  
the roofs of morning.  
Your city couldn't stifle it.  
My scream, on whose frost  
I built a lawn –  
a blind plunderer of the legacy of silence.  
The screams of shepherds when their herd is startled  
by a predatory animal  
The screams of saints and demons  
at the edge of doomsday  
She carried it from town to town  
like a nursing mother carries her child  
like a tribe carries its seeds of origin  
My only guide to the source of the river  
in the blind darkness  
in times of forgetfulness –  
my scream under the roofs of morning  
and night  
is the witness to my silence  
the witness of madness and pleasure.  
You can't take that away from me  
no matter how big the claws and weapons.

| 157 |

From *Al-Jundi al-Ladhi Ra'a al-Ta'ir fi Nawmih*  
[The Soldier who Saw the Bird in his Sleep], Cologne, 2000  
Translated by Anton Shammas for publication in *Banipal* 23,  
2005, in a feature on Saif al-Rahbi's work.



An excerpt from the poem  
*A mad man who does not love me*

MAISOON SAQR

| 158 |  
I am of you.  
You raise me with your means,  
and my spirit is steadfast in its love.  
Because of it I remain clinging to delusions,  
and in the shade I search for a twin  
to pair it with what has settled in the depths  
of this body's desire.  
But which body is it?

I hear music calling you.  
Your heart is wide enough to house me.  
As soon as I move further  
I only become a woman  
who is not content with the blame that lights her shade.  
I was never yours before,  
but even in space I do move about  
dispersing my being.

The fickle pace of the days grinds on  
and nothing settles except what peers from our windows.  
It gains strength with the wind that carries it on its back and  
spins it.  
And so the days have spun us too.  
Will you turn your head a bit to the back?  
Do you recall me  
then hold my hand and guide it toward farewell?  
I will not be alone,  
and you will not be – after this – alone.

The river of my affection rolls on,  
its tributaries are countless.  
Will it quench your thirst  
to walk further into your question?



I become the daughter of an un-lived time  
whenever I open the door for the word,  
and daughter of this night that muffles your secrets  
which I hold so that you would not reveal them.  
If you had uttered them, your longings would have scattered  
along the horizon.  
But no horizon will save you from this disbursement,  
and no death after the death that has wound our hearts together.  
How will we abbreviate the nations and the histories within us?  
I remain a stranger to you, I know,  
but closer than this blood that throbs in your veins.

I collapse into loss.  
I say: I will move on.  
Will you care for this sapling that wakes beside you?  
Will you proceed through love toward it?  
Which is your favourite, the henna flower or the lemon blossom,  
the soul that is of you,  
or am I born in the wink of your lips as they say "I love you"?  
Have you said such a thing,  
or do I hear it in dream?  
I dance on a hand span of earth.  
It will suffice me if ever I held this word  
that leaps from lips toward the heart  
and sleeps like a sparrow in the nest of its birth.  
I long for your hands,  
two doves that shade the blaze of my longing.  
Do you too miss me, or do you not remember  
the particulars of my voice?

I say: we have one outlet, no more,  
from this confusion, toward the sadness  
of this love that has dropped us in its abyss,  
toward this wide earth that is too narrow for us,  
toward the soul in which we mirror each other, toward that shape.  
We go on into the question  
like a cloud that rains whenever the winds tempt it.  
What wind can bind us,



and why do we enact our insistence on parting?  
Maybe our cruelty has ripened  
and now our wish for rupture has overpowered us.  
Maybe our worries have returned again.  
How do we muffle our love,  
and how can I hear your voice in this world  
when I hear nothing but it?  
You, who has fed me the bread of your love,  
I have sought refuge from you.  
I said: kill it inside you and save yourself?  
But have I spared myself one solitude  
only to live another where my language is shattered?

How did this fruit ripen so?  
My questions are in the sea.  
You arrive and I leave.  
You reveal nothing and I talk too much.  
I spend the day touching events as they pass.  
I speak to see myself.

Travel is hung on a hook.  
The seller of lies is on his daily tour.  
We walk behind him with our stories  
to keep busy,  
to acquire a calm mood  
without profound questions or fruit,  
without a heart that beats, not even once.

Like pebbles on the road,  
they tread upon us and we remain,  
stones that listen well  
and roll along.  
Time is in their hands,  
and in us constant dreams  
and images of that fruit.

Don't turn around.  
I insist on walking behind you.  
I adorn myself and I become,





always heading in an opposite direction.  
This is how I will betray my love.  
I will say: history moves me  
so that I immortalise my mouth in the motions of weeping,  
my hand in the saying goodbye.  
There is a sky turbulent with love.

I saw you.  
I said: I see you with my heart.  
My heart is the piece of flesh that beats,  
and my eyes only pile images ...  
I said: I'll be lying if I fled.  
How will I move through space alone?  
My hand will not lead me toward it.  
It cannot.  
There's a turbulent sky  
and nature is condemned because of me.

| 161 |

I said: There's a lightness to you that flows  
with the water I call "affection".  
I see you  
and I am quickly defeated  
whenever what I expect falls in my lap.

In daytime, the sadness of solitude leaves me.  
At night, I fly with the wings of my dreams  
hoping there is no end.  
I, who love to lose quickly,  
sometimes fever shakes me so that I waken,  
so that I am not defeated,  
so that I do not sleep stricken with delusions  
afraid of a turn that will break my bones.  
And with the ribs of love I make ropes  
and climb.  
As if I am balling up words and throwing them through a little  
hole ...  
And like a syringe shot into bone  
that enters with a tiny puncture,  
a quick surgery on emotions,



you drag my losses with you, and go.  
You said: you are not mine.  
I seek your face in the blood of genealogies.  
I said: you do not love me.  
And nothing remains in the body  
except this wan soul of mine.

| 162 |

I leave my hand held in your hands.  
Time takes me away.  
I disappear  
still holding on to your hands.  
I move on  
and my hand remains in yours.  
I sleep my last sleep, handless,  
and you are a lonely man,  
a man for coincidences,  
a spectator at this circus,  
a blind man watching blackness.

I will not exchange my body for a shadow  
that traverses a nearby sky.  
I will not leave the place,  
because the place is the essence of pain.

When you pass before me  
my shadow seeps through you.  
My reflection, shadowed by my affection  
hover over your euphoria,  
but you still do not love me.

Translated by Khaled Mattawa for *Banipal* 17, 2003, from the poetry collection *Rajulun Majnun la Yuhubbuni* (A mad man who does not love me), *Al-Haya'a al-Misriyya lil-Kitab*, Cairo, 2001



## From the poem

### *To the Room, to its ever hidden Door*

FAWZIYYA AL-SINDI

Who are you scared of?  
In a hurry, you kick the thresholds  
with feet smaller than their steps  
You roll the stairs down towards you  
to let the smell of sleep approach  
and ... steal away a body,  
bleeding like a sparrow's wing

| 163 |

For whom does this evening read the fog on the windows  
to see you crawled into yourself  
ascending the vacuum with lazy fingers  
sculpting the air with the difficulty of inhaling  
to cure it from the boredom of your only hideaway

For whom do you paint, splattered with the fire of words  
before a sheet of paper, rising and falling  
like an orphan butterfly that favours a rose  
but wavers at diffusing the nectar of fire

For whom do you lift your lids a little  
when the passages to drowsiness doze off  
at the despair of your door  
When you imagine that whispers,  
as gluttonous as love, are eating you up  
When the damned numbness works hard  
at holding your eyelids hostage  
When you wake up and close the night

For whom does your hair flow down, asleep,  
on two day-dreaming shoulders  
like a lover  
and they his lungs



For whom do you walk and fear and laugh  
and dream and cry and sink  
and fade and break  
For whom are all these ambushes  
that fear no one but you

...

| 164 |

I ask you, woman who melts me,  
Why are you glittering like a candle  
relishing the sea of tears  
Why are you a small halo accompanying the blessing of darkness  
to glance at others like snakes wandering away  
from the coals of their treachery heading towards you  
Snakes pouring forth like the beads of a rosary  
whose thread has been pulled out  
and they stare in your sleep  
Is a long sleep too much for you, or a little straying sleep  
I don't know ...

...

Ajar and heavy,  
This wood engraved in the coffin of the door  
You enter        it uproots the wall it is chained to  
You leave        it melts your perfume for a loss it has suffered  
Hidden and twined at a time  
A door no more  
And it tells you more than it keeps from you  
The guardian of your sleep protected with the anxiety of a child  
The collector of writing's animosity when it becomes defiant  
The worshipper of your cautious flow and your eloquent prohibition  
Afraid for you from the shock of its painful closing  
All anger is an illusion of the opponent's compassion  
It's the door, who else  
The guard of your safety and the key shaking hands with a mocking  
lock  
The one giving your virgin room the phantoms of the family



The coffin of your old day  
The monitor of your loneliness.

And alone, like someone deceased  
You don't look back at sickened trees  
at the entrances of your life  
You don't pay attention to thunder  
pulling the air away from you  
You don't forgive leaves prolonging the shivers of death  
You don't know your whereabouts.

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Do I know?

A woman erases life's indifference  
with the stones of words that do not listen  
to see the river of the soul widening  
in slow waters that never miss what they see.  
From whom are you scared?  
Are you?

Translated by Nay Hannawi for *Banipal 6*, Autumn 1999,  
excerpted from a long poem *Maladh al-Rouh* (Refuge of the Soul),  
published by Dar al-Kunooz al-Adabiyya, Beirut, 1999



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Raja Alem** is from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and has published ten novels, two plays, biographies, short stories, essays, and works for children. She has received many awards, including UNESCO's Arab Woman's Creative Writing Award, 2005 and she was joint winner of the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction for her novel *The Dove's Necklace*, which was published in English translation in June this year. She has some works published in English, Spanish and French.



**Jokha Alharthi** is an Oman author, and currently Professor of Literature at Sultan Qaboos University, with a PhD in Classical Arabic Literature (Edinburgh University, 2010). She has three collections of stories and two novels, *Sayyidat al-Qamar* (Women of the Moon, 2010), which won the Best Omani Novel Award, also a children's book that won the 2010 Best Omani Children's Book Award, and has published two works of literary criticism.



**Laila Aljohani** is from Tubuq, Saudi Arabia. She has a BA in English Literature, an MA in Foreign Languages, and a PhD in Education. She has won prizes for her short stories from the Medina Literary Club and the Tiaf Literary Club. She has four novels, of which *Jahiliyya* is excerpted above – it is now a book in English translation, *Days of Ignorance*; also *The Wasteland Paradise* (1998), excerpted in *Banipal 20* (2004), and later published in Italian translation.

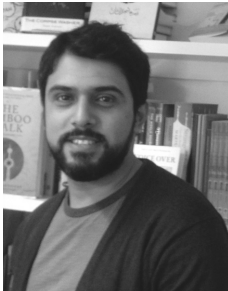




**Ahmed Alrahbi** is an Omani journalist and writer. He studied in Moscow and has translated many Russian short stories into Arabic. He has published one collection of short stories and one novel.



**Taleb Alrefai** is a Kuwaiti short story writer and novelist, with a degree in Civil Engineering from Kuwait University. He has seven short story collections, five novels and a play. In 2002, he won the Kuwait State Prize for Letters for his novel, *Ra'ihat al-Bahri* (*The Scent of the Sea*). He was Chair of Judges of the 2009/2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and founder of the fortnightly literary salon Al-Multaqa (Cultural Circle), which recently established the Multaqa Prize for the Arabic Short Story.



**Saud Alsanousi** is a Kuwaiti novelist and journalist, born in 1981. His *first novel* *Sijeen al-Maraya* (*Prisoner of Mirrors*, 2010) won the fourth Laila Al-Othman Award for Young Creative Talent in Fiction. His second novel, *Saq al-Bamboo* (*The Bamboo Stalk*), won the Kuwait State Prize for Letters in 2012 and the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.



**Mohammad Hassan Alwan** is from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He has four novels and a collection of short stories. He was one of the Beirut39 project's 39 best Arab authors under the age of 40. His novel *Al-Qundus* (*The Beaver*), was shortlisted for the 2013 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

**Rawdha al-Belushi** is from Al Ain, Abu Dhabi Emirate, UAE. She has been publishing her short stories in newspapers and online since 1983. *Bass al-Qiyama* (Resurrection Bus) is her first collection of stories, with the title story translated above.



**Badriya al-Bishr** is from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She is a writer, teacher and newspaper columnist, with a PhD (2005) in Arts and Sociology from the Lebanese University, and was an Assistant Professor at Al-Jazeera University, Dubai. She has three novels (2005, 2010 and 2013), the last of which, *Love Stories on al-A'sha Street* (excerpted above), was longlisted for the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. She also has three collections of short stories.



**Bothayna al-Essa** is a Kuwaiti writer with a Masters degree in Finance from the University of Kuwait. She has published five novels and a collection of essays. Her debut novel, *Irtitam la yusma' lahu dawii* (*A Soundless Collision*) is excerpted above. In 2013 her work was longlisted for the 2013 Sheikh Zayed Book Award.



**Noura Mohammad Faraj** is a Qatari author, and an Assistant Professor in Arabic Language at Carnegie Mellon University in Doha. She has published two collections of short stories and two academic works.



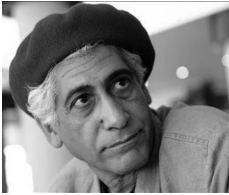


**Abdulaziz Al Farsi** is from Shinas, Oman and is an author and physician of oncology. He has four short story collections and a novel [*Weeping Earth ... Laughing Saturn*] excerpted above.



**Ali Hussain al-Felkawi** is a Kuwaiti author and poet. He has an MA in History from Saint Joseph University of Beirut, and has published four collections of poetry and one novel, *Ghuyoum tahta Watrin (Clouds beneath a Bow String)* which was published in 2012 and is excerpted above.

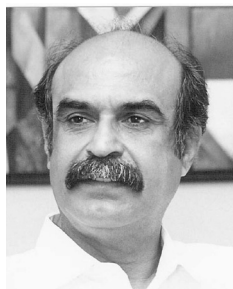
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**Zahir al-Ghafri** is a poet from Oman. He studied in Baghdad and Rabat and has a degree in Philosophy. He has published several volumes of poetry. He lives between Oman and Sweden.



**Nujoom Al-Ghanem** is from Dubai Emirate, UAE, and is a poet, writer and independent filmmaker, recognised as one of the main modernist Emirati poets. Since 1989 she has published seven collections of poetry and has directed a number of short films. At the Fifth Dubai International Film Festival in 2011 she was lauded for Best Documentary in the Gulf and named the most promising UAE film-maker.



**Qassim Haddad** is a Bahraini poet, well known throughout the Arab world. His first collection was published in 1970 and to date he has published more than sixteen books in Beirut, London, Bahrain, Morocco and Kuwait, including *Majnun Laila*, a book of poetry and paintings with Iraqi painter Azzawi.



**Huda Hamad (al-Jahouri)** is an Omani writer and journalist. She has two collections of short stories and a novel (*Things are not in their Place*), which won the 2009 Best Omani Novel Award, and is excerpted above.



**Mohammed Al-Harthy** is from al-Mudhayrib, Oman. He is a poet and travel writer, with a degree in Geology and Marine Sciences. He has five poetry collections, and some poems in English, French, German and Malabari translation. He writes on travel in the Arab press and in 2003 won the Ibn Battuta Award for Geographical Literature for his travel book *Ain wa Janah (Eye and Wing)*.



**Sara al-Jarwan** is from Ajman Emirate, UAE. She started writing at a young age, her first works being *Yawmiyaat Mujannada* (Diary of a Recruit) and a play on the role of women in the army. She has four novels, the first, *Shajan Bint Al-Qadar Al-Hazeen* (The melancholy daughter with a sad destiny) 1992, reputedly the first novel by a UAE woman author. *Turus ila Moulay al-Sultan* (Letters to My Lord The Sultan) in 2009 brought her acclaim and recognition in the wider Arab world, and is excerpted above. She also has a collection of short stories, and a collection of Emirati folk tales in both classical Arabic and Emirati dialect.

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**Abdo Khal** is a well-known author from Saudi Arabia. After gaining a degree in Political Science from King Abdel Aziz University, Jeddah, he started writing short stories and poetry. Since then he has published five short story collections, five novels and numerous short tales for children. He is a director of the Jeddah Literary Club and is a long-standing columnist of *Okaz* newspaper, writing a daily column. His novel *Throwing Sparks* won the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.



**Su'ad al-Kuwari** is a poet from Qatar, where she lives and works. She has two collections of poetry.



**Khulood Al-Mu'alla** is from Umm Al-Quwain Emirate, UAE and is one of the UAE's major poets. She was the first Gulf poet to win the Buland Al-Haidari Award for Young Arab Poets at the 30th Assilah International Cultural Festival in Morocco in 2008. Since 1997 she has published a number of poetry collections. She has participated in many international and local festivals and readings.

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**Ebtisam al-Mualla** is an author and translator from Sharjah Emirate, UAE. She has published her short stories in local newspapers, and in English translation the story "A Decision" in the anthology *In a Fertile Desert*. Her first collection *Dhow Yethhab lil-Nawm* (Light drifts into Slumber) was published in 2008 by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH); a story from it can be read above.



**Saadiah Mufarrah** as a Kuwaiti poet and critic, and arts editor of the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Qabas* newspaper, with a degree in Arabic Language and Education from Kuwait University. She has published several collections of poetry.



**Ahmed Al-Mulla** is a poet from Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, and has a BA from King Saud University. He has published eight collections of poetry and has written several plays and film scripts. He was a member of the Board of the Eastern Region Cultural Club, organised the first Saudi Short Films competition, and was director of the third Saudi Film Festival, held in Dammam this year.



**Laila al-Othman** is a prominent Kuwaiti author, her writings on social and literary issues first appearing in local newspapers in 1965. She has 14 collections of short stories and nine novels, her best known novel being her second, *Wasmiya takhruju min al-Bahr* (*Wasmiyya comes out of the Sea*). Published in 1986 and translated into Italian and Russian, it was on the Arab Writers' Union's list of the 100 best Arab novels of the 20th century. Some stories have been translated into French, Spanish, Yugoslavian, Polish, Russian, German and Albanian. In 2004, she founded the Laila al-Othman Award for Young Creative Talent in Fiction, a literary prize awarded biennially to young Kuwaiti men and women writers.



**Saif al-Rahbi** is a renowned poet and prose writer, from Sroor, Oman. He was sent to school in Cairo, beginning there his life-long passion for literature and poetry. He has lived and worked in Cairo, Damascus, Algeria, Paris for many years, London, and other Arab and European cities. He has published a number of volumes of poetry, prose and essays. After returning to Oman from Paris, he founded the quarterly magazine *Nizwa*, Oman's main cultural magazine and highly regarded throughout the Arab world. Today he is its editor-in-chief.



**Maisoon Saqr** is a poet and painter from Abu Dhabi Emirate, UAE. She has an MA in Economics and Political Science from Cairo University and has worked as Director of the Department of Culture in the UAE Ministry of Information and Culture. She

has published over twelve collections of poetry, with works appearing also in international anthologies. Her novel *Rihana* was published in 2003 by Dar al-Hilal, Cairo. She has held solo exhibitions of her paintings in Tunisia, Bahrain, Egypt, UAE and in Paris, France, and joined many group exhibitions, including in Washington DC, Amman, Jordan, and Abu Dhabi, UAE. She lives between Cairo and Abu Dhabi.

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**Fawziyya al-Sindi** is a poet from Bahrain. Since 1982 she has published five collections of poetry.

## ABOUT BANIPAL

**Banipal magazine for modern Arab literature** has pioneered the translation into English of modern literature, poetry and fiction, from all over the Arab world and from whatever language the author writes in if not Arabic. With its three issues a year, illustrated with photographs of most authors, and its independently commissioned translations of works by established and emerging authors, the magazine has transformed the accessibility of Arab authors to both non-Arab and pan-Arab audiences. 2017 will be its 20th year of continuous publication.

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**Samuel Shimon** is an Iraqi author who has been described as “a tireless missionary for literary matters”. He co-founded *Banipal* magazine of modern Arab literature in 1998, soon after settling in the UK, and is currently its editor-in-chief. He founded the popular literary website Kikah in Arabic in 2002, and in 2013 founded the Arabic-language Kikah magazine for international literature (see <http://www.kikahmagazine.com>). He is the author of the best-selling novel in Arabic, *An Iraqi in Paris*.

**Margaret Obank** is the co-founder and present publisher of *Banipal magazine* (<http://www.banipal.co.uk>). She also established the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature, which in turn set up the first prize in the world for published literary translations from Arabic to English, the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation, a lending library of modern Arab literature in English translation and original English, and a book club.

<http://www.banipal.co.uk>



